

The Art Documentary in the Postwar Period

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The artificial oppositions that are often set up a priori between the arts count decidedly less than the spirit of invention and novelty (Bazin 1956b, 23).²

In 1951 André Bazin, the French film critic and founder of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, reported that the film on art had “snowballed since the war ... becoming the most important development in the past twenty years in the history of documentary, maybe in the history of cinema itself.” (Andrew 2011, 153-166)³ Despite this enthusiastic statement, among painters and art historians, the encounter of painting and film triggered a wave of hostility due to the invasive nature of technology. As the critic himself recognized: “in order to make use of painting, cinema betrays it in all regards. The dramatic unity and logic of the film sets up chronologies or fictive links between works that are sometimes very distant in time and spirit.” (Bazin 1952, n.p.)⁴ How could the nonhuman lens of the camera have any respect for the touch of the painter’s hand? And how could the hand of the film editor be so daring as to cut up and rearrange art that had an internal logic of its own?

For the art world, non-manual film recording and editorial fragmentation were two mechanical, anti-humanist procedures. The first is too passive, while the second is too invasive. Together, these two filmic approaches would shatter the artist’s style. How to deal with the ontological differences of cinema and painting and how to find some symbiotic ground between these two media? This became Bazin’s challenge.⁵ By working outside the academic world, either the critic’s insights scattered themselves across different film reviews published in Parisian dailies; or they coalesced into specific arguments thanks to the more formal pieces on painting and cinema he wrote for intellectual journals.

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² “C’est que les oppositions artificielles qu’on veut souvent établir *a priori* entre les arts comptent en définitive bien moins que l’esprit d’invention et de nouveauté.” (All translations of quotations are the author’s.)

³ On the art documentary in general, see also: Frangne 2009.

⁴ “pour utiliser la peinture, le cinéma la trahit et cela sur tous les plans. L’unité dramatique et logique du film établit des chronologies ou des liens fictifs entre des oeuvres parfois très éloignées dans le temps et dans l’esprit.”

⁵ On cinema in relation to the arts and science, see: Dalle Vacche 2011, 142-152.

In focusing on Alain Resnais's *Van Gogh* (1948), my purpose is to deliver an overview of Bazin's key ideas on the postwar art documentary. I shall rely on little-known sources from the André Bazin Archive at Yale University. Some of these texts have not yet been translated, anthologized, or evaluated in English. My reading of these sources will show that, in the art documentary, the objects of still life can exchange themselves for the objectifying lens of the camera. As objectivity in time through recording, cinema can investigate any artist's subjectivity in space and its self-expression through different kinds of paintings, whether they are abstract or figurative or in between. In the shift from frame to screen, the artist's mind turns into an open-ended and kinetic world of psychological and cosmological mystery. Its unstable boundaries on the screen suggest the viewers' metaphysical projection of themselves into a personal as well as shared universe of ever-shifting interconnections for the sake of a deeper exploration of Oneself as Another.

Painting as Object and Cinema as Event

In contrast to painting, which tells us more about the painter and less about the world, cinema, for Bazin, was an anti-anthropocentric medium because it brought the world to the lens in ways much more unpredictable than the human eye can perceive by itself. By associating the art documentary with an avant-garde orientation, Bazin theorized the relation between cinema and painting with the hope that art and cinema together could generate a sensibility more open to the value of spirituality in daily life. Nothing could be less compatible than these two media, because painting is a handmade object, whereas cinema is based on events in process, subject to staging as well as contingency. To make things even more complicated, the painter's hand stands out as a pre-modern alternative to mechanical reproduction. Furthermore, in the context of André Bazin's film theory, the human hand speaks to an individual creativity that thrives on signature, uniqueness, portraiture, eternity, and anthropocentrism. This last category is relevant to one of Bazin's favorite philosophers, Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). Pascal associated painting with vanity in defiance of the beauty of nature: "How vain painting is, exciting admiration by its resemblance to things of which we do not admire the originals!"⁶

The postwar art documentary looked like a paradoxical genre, for it combined two incompatible definitions of creativity. In the case of the documentary film exploring the history of painting, art's subjective stance met the most allegedly "objective" of nonfictional

⁶ "Quelle vanité que la peinture, qui attire l'admiration par la ressemblance des choses dont on n'admire point les originaux." (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* II, 134 (1)) Bazin refers to Pascal in his essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (Bazin 2005a, 10).

genres. Art and subjectivity go together, because the value of art lies in its power to produce the most unique forms. In *Time and Free Will* (1889), Henri Bergson argued that many individuals live and die without ever experiencing the freedom of self-expression which art stands for. We are really free, Bergson believed, only when our actions are not based on need or cause. We are free only when our behavior begins to approximate our inner self. To achieve such an indeterminate affinity is so *rare and so difficult* that Bergson could think of only one example: the relationship which links an artist to the created work, as if the latter were a sort of self-portrait (Bergson 2001, 165-170).

Artmaking is so mysteriously intertwined with a person's unknowable depths that no logical explanation is possible concerning the sources or the processes of human creativity. Something spiritual is involved in art, while freedom needs spirituality to achieve existential authenticity. In dialogue with human art, the cinema can move humankind beyond art into a reflective dimension that anthropologist Edgar Morin has called "anthropo-cosmo-morphism" (Morin 2005, 113).⁷ Through the screen—a surface in principle as black as the cosmos beyond the earth—the cinema can help us to perceive emotionally and imaginatively our belonging in a universe that changes beyond our own framework of scientific knowledge.

Despite his Pascalian condemnation of classical academic painting as vanity in order to advocate for photography as an egalitarian medium, Bazin had great respect for the history of art in general and understood its value and function in society. Bazin saw the artist as a special kind of person who functions outside all utilitarian, anthropocentric behaviors. In 1949, in the journal *Esprit*, Bazin took issue with fellow critic Camille Bourniquel who faulted Resnais's *Van Gogh* for its emphasis on the drama of the artist's life and the "moroseness" of the black-and-white imagery:

...it's obvious that the screen will always distort the balance of the composition, the relationship of values and that it is moreover unavoidably weak on colors. But rather than focusing on these weaknesses, why not marvel instead that, beginning with a material radically modified in its specific structure, the film nevertheless returns to us a work that undoubtedly exists with its logic and unity? Can you imagine smashing a clock into tiny pieces, then putting it back together in another way? If the film, however bad one thinks it, exists nevertheless, it's because the work of art cannot be compared to a precision instrument and it will not cease to exist even when attacked in its elements and its structure (Bazin 1949d, 818).⁸

⁷ Bazin reviewed Morin's book and seems to have approved of the term "anthropo-cosmomorphism": see Bazin 1956a, 17-18.

⁸ "... il est évident que l'écran ne cesse de fausser l'équilibre de la composition, le rapport des valeurs et qu'il est au surplus irrémédiablement infirme des couleurs. Mais au lieu de lui imputer ces impuissances, ne peut-on au contraire s'étonner

Primarily trained in the sciences from 1933 to 1938 at l'École Normale d'Instituteurs of La Rochelle, once Bazin entered the prestigious École Normale of Saint Cloud in Paris, he learned a lot about art history. In 1949, to celebrate the postwar flourishing of the art documentary, the critic devoted a whole essay exclusively to "Le cinéma et la peinture"; it originally appeared in *La Revue du Cinéma*. Extremely interested in literature and theatre, Bazin never wrote extensively about music, sculpture, dance, and architecture in film. So interested was he in nature and in the sciences that he preferred to advocate for the art documentary based on painting, while he was also a staunch admirer of the scientific film genre. Especially when he discussed Jean Painlevé's surreal work in marine biology, Bazin celebrated how natural living forms display an expected degree of accidental beauty. The scientific documentary about nature could become a form of poetry whose creativity was so endless that biology stood out as the critic's favorite scientific discipline.

For Bazin and Pascal alike, nature is filled with wonder and mystery; art is based on human creativity, subjective perception, and the resilience of spirituality in front of the unknown. Next to art, science, too, is a necessary human endeavor: this unavoidable and necessary search for knowledge is based on logic, measurements, recordings, and experiments. Its value lies in its heuristic power to produce new knowledge. Art can reinvent perception to such a degree that its imagination can steer science towards the discovery of new dimensions of being. Bazin's implicit ranking of nature at the top, art in the middle, and science at the bottom explains why he relied on metaphors from and analogies to mineralogy, physics, and chemistry to discuss the encounter between film as science and painting as art in the art documentary.

Precisely because the cinema—as a photographic technology—is suspended between art and science, the critic was hoping that a new kind of independent and experimental genre made of documentary-like traces and imaginative leaps might be born through the art documentary. Much more concerned with the postwar atrophy of documentary after the great advances of Étienne-Jules Marey, Robert Flaherty, Alberto Cavalcanti, Jean Vigo, Joris Ivens, and Luis Buñuel (Bazin 1949a, 1). The French film critic regularly reviewed or mentioned screenings devoted to nonfiction films. These titles often paired the sciences with the arts. In contrast to all the other kinds of nonfiction films, the art documentary promised to have the special

qu'en partant d'une matière radicalement modifiée dans ses structures spécifiques le film nous restitue pourtant une oeuvre qui existe indubitablement avec sa logique et son unité? Imagine-t-on de casser une horloge en petits morceaux et de la remonter autrement? Si le film, quelque mal qu'on en pense, existe tout de même, c'est donc que l'oeuvre d'art ne saurait se comparer à une mécanique de précision et qu'elle ne cesse pas d'exister même lorsqu'elle est attaquée dans ses éléments ou dans sa structure."

ability to probe the unknown inside man, as well as in nature, with great spiritual force and openness to the unpredictable. Unlike other critics who might have dismissed the art documentary as derivative or subordinate, Bazin's hope was that this new genre might disclose how any individual or collective creative effort is a way to reinvent humankind as a whole in the light of Otherness. By recasting the old humanist framework of classical painting onto the screen of an unstable, yet shared world, could one's own awareness of interdependence on the earth grow in terms of moral responsibility?

A good art documentary, for Bazin, was meant to be autonomous rather than being based on a great artist as a topic: "One must not judge them solely in regard to the painting they use, but in regard to the anatomy and the biology of that aesthetic being newborn of the coupling of painting and cinema" (Bazin 1952, n.p.).⁹ The critic's words show how he was treating each new art documentary with a nurturing yet evaluative eye, the way a parent watches over a young child whose upbringing needs loving direction and reasonable boundaries. In other words, any director could do well or fail in the making of an art documentary, regardless of the style of painting championed or practiced by a particular artist. In defiance of individual celebrity and art historical canons, Bazin was interested in cross-media adaptations that could also become adoptions of Otherness in the sense of outreach across national boundaries: "The film of a painting is an aesthetic symbiosis of screen and painting, as is the lichen of the algae and mushroom" (Bazin 2005b, 168).

The critic's scientific vocabulary, here, is crucial: the lichen is the paramount example of organic or intermedial symbiosis. This means that two or more minuscule creatures living together are more successful in their partnership than they would be if they were living on their own. Symbiosis does not imply a passive life. Lichens are pioneers because their chemical processes made it possible for a succession of plants to grow on land. In fact, fossils of lichen-like organisms date to 500-600 million years ago, long before plants grew on land. Early lichens may have modified rocks and soil much as they do today, helping pave the way for plants (Reece 2011, 682-699).

Like the lichen, cinema is an impure and symbiotic medium, because it mediates between the human and the nonhuman, art and nature, and by doing so, it enhances both sides, as long as the two are willing to accept each other and celebrate their ontological differences. In the particular case of the art documentary about painting, the problem was to bypass painting's "object-hood." In fact, a painting is a thing to be hung on a wall, or a canvas which sits on an easel.

⁹ "Il ne les faut point juger seulement en référence à la peinture qu'ils utilisent mais par rapport à l'anatomie et à la biologie de cet être esthétique nouveau-né de la conjonction de la peinture et du cinéma."

By contrast, cinema's ontology is based on performance, recording, projection—namely, a series of events unfolding in time and space.

Bazin did not hesitate to either praise or condemn different art documentaries made by the very same director. For the critic, it was always a question of a two-way street encounter. Despite the beautiful text by Paul Éluard, read in voice-over by actress Maria Casarès, Bazin was quick to criticize Alain Resnais's *Guernica* (1950) for having mixed together different periods of the artist's work. He admired Resnais's *Van Gogh* (1948), but he was unhappy about Pierre Kast's film on Goya: *Les désastres de la guerre* (1951). The reason for this negative verdict was that, in order to pull off his montage, Kast introduced fragments from Goya's *Caprices*, a series of works whose lighter subject matter was the opposite of Goya's graphic depiction of the disasters of war. Likewise, Bazin considered Luciano Emmer's *Guerrieri* (Warriors, 1942) to be a failure, because the director had edited together details from battle scenes executed by different painters from completely unrelated historical periods. With these kinds of examples, Bazin was the first to understand the art historians' hostility towards the cinema. He knew all too well that, in these cases, the screen was destroying the integrity of pictorial space for the sake of a superficial *potpourri* (Bazin 1952, n.p.).

Bazin was interested in how the cinema can reorient art-making in an anti-anthropocentric and popular direction. If cinema or a mechanical recording becomes an event of "objectivity in time" (Bazin 2005a, 14), painting locks forever the artist's subjectivity in space through a frame. In addition, Bazin's interest in the art documentary was fueled by one question: what is it about cinema's way of looking that triggers this antibinary and antihierarchical reversal between human artistry and natural creativity? Closer to a lichen than to a human being, the art documentary's paramount topics were human creativity and spirituality, but, when this genre was successful, the moving images would shift from an art-historical to a quasi-scientific look. The latter could range from an exploration of mental processes to an unexpected witnessing of biological developments. It slowly became evident that cinema could reverse the anthropocentric Darwinian arrangement of living species, according to which lichens are at the bottom and human beings on top as the result of evolution at its highest level of complexity. Indeed, Bazin believed that, if used correctly, cinema could get inside the depth of the painting and deliver its mysteries to the largest audience possible.

On a broader level, what could be learned from this anti-anthropocentric reversal as far as the processes of art-making in general and the creativity of nature in particular? Bazin's project on the art documentary was comparable to a chapter in a new natural history of media, where painting and film exist within a diversified continuum of quasi-beings in constant flux. Painting could help cinema by stimulating the documentary genre, while the cinema could help

painting by “chemically” preserving the painted image, one as self-evident and ponderous as a “mineral specimen” (Bazin 1949, *Esprit*, 819). This is indeed what happened during the filming of Luciano Emmer’s *Picasso* (1954), a section of which unfolded in the Romanesque chapel of Vallauris, in Provence. There, the artist improvised on the walls preparatory work for a fresco on war and peace. Accidentally erased later on, these images survived only inside the Italian filmmaker’s footage.

In the gray zone between culture and nature, for Bazin, mineralogy wins in the end, because a photograph is comparable to a fossil, namely the preserved remains of an animal or a plant through a process of mineralization. Fossilization is a way of documenting the history of life on the earth, including artistic expression—and cinema is lifelike. The mineral record is based primarily on how fossils have accumulated sedimentary rock layers called *strata*. Since his childhood, Bazin had been familiar with various kinds of fossils, such as insects preserved in amber.¹⁰ Fossil, photography, biology, art: this was the red thread or metonymic chain of life-in-death and death-in-life which appealed to the naturalist and philosophical Bazin. Worth mentioning is also the way in which the postwar art works of Jean Dubuffet (1901–1989) and Jean Fautrier (1898–1964) included sculptures and canvases. The former’s structures were akin to monstrous genetic growths and the latter’s surfaces evoked fossils where the human remains could not be distinguished from zoological or botanical specimens. With these two artists, it is as if, after 1945, the deformities of Hiroshima and the traces of the Holocaust had taken on a new kind of abstract, surreal, grotesque biomorphism.

Frame and Screen

One of the first art documentaries from Belgium that Bazin pays homage to is *Rubens* (1948), by Henri Storck and Paul Haesaerts. This effort was one of the best examples of the educational film. As such, it achieved an unprecedented level of clarification through superimposed circular diagrams to explain the painter’s kinetic compositions. Bazin praised “a virtual movement, a space of rotation suspended in the immobility of the painting and which awaits the sensibility of the person contemplating the canvas, for an imaginary deliverance” (Bazin 1949c, 2).¹¹ Yet, one outstanding problem remained: the eye of the camera did not disclose the innermost core of Rubens’ work. Everything may have been explained, but nothing was shared in depth between the film spectator and the artwork. Depth was crucial for the film critic, because immanence and complexity—

¹⁰ On fossilization, see Reece et al. 2001, 556.

¹¹ “un mouvement virtuel, d’une espace de rotation suspendue dans l’immobilité de la peinture et qui attend de la sensibilité de celui qui contemple la toile une délivrance imaginaire.” On the art documentary in Belgium, see also: Jacobs 2013.

the mystery of psychological being—was at the very center of human creativity. Furthermore, the art documentary should be responsible for a sharing of spiritual energy between artist and filmmaker, and from the filmmaker to a popular audience.

After 1945, in order to avoid paralyzing pessimism and endless revenge, the hope and need for human outreach called for a communal effort towards good will, despite the echoes, the mistakes, and the loose ends from the past. Thus, previous aesthetic models could also be abandoned. For example, in the case of the art documentary, Bazin saw no irrecoverable loss of aura, in contrast to Walter Benjamin's famous essay written in 1935-36 (Benjamin 1969, 217-252). Furthermore, the dimension of kitsch theorized by Clement Greenberg in 1939 (Greenberg 1970, 116-126) was not necessarily relevant to every single art documentary that Bazin examined. In contrast to Benjamin and Greenberg, Bazin did not formulate an overarching theory based on the tension between politics and aesthetics. Well aware of social struggles, religious divisions, and cultural boundaries, he underlined cinema's universal and egalitarian address. After 1945, there was a feeling of urgency about peace on earth. He handled each film as an individual case, a new plant to be cultivated and protected. His hope was that well-made art documentaries could inspire audiences with new humanist, anti-anthropocentric values that would bring about a more tolerant, less greedy, and more self-critical mass culture.

Bazin believed in the living and spiritual energy of art. Thus, the achievement of depth in filmmaking was possible, albeit challenging. Likewise, the bridging of the gap between mass culture and an avant-garde sensibility became the special vocation of the art documentary,—a genre where an anti-elitist intuitive respect for creativity might call for mutual appreciation among fellow human beings. Needless to say, the humanity of humankind was in question after the horrors of World War II, so that a broad sharing of artistic creativity seemed the only antidote to recover from recent evils. The fossilization of Rubens' art through the photographic nature of film was not good enough. Useful in illustrating the artist's free will at the level of style, Storck and Haesaert's circular diagram was still too explanatory, hence superficial. Bazin looked for an art documentary that would bring to the surface of the screen a mutual process of profound exchange, rather than a graphic superimposition. After *Rubens*, the question was: what could be the next step in the evolution of the art documentary? What could a filmmaker do in order to tap the depth of artistic inspiration, while also conveying the ways in which cinema exceeds the human sphere through its evocation of an elusive universe, hence a cosmological orientation? Bazin began to find a viable answer, thanks to a stylistic choice carried out by the Italian Luciano Emmer. Emmer was the first to eliminate the frame around the canvas, making it disappear into the screen.

In atomic physics, it is an accepted principle that two objects (particles) cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Yet, in Emmer's case, the canvas had lost its object-hood and melted into the screen, as if a chemical experiment had taken place. Emmer bypassed the solids of physics by turning to the fluids of chemistry. Bazin concluded that, in reaction to the cinema, the spatial structures of painting had become "soluble" (Bazin 1949a, 8) into the present tense of "becoming." According to Bazin, Emmer's new chemical compound of canvas and screen gave birth to an independent entity "to the second degree," or a third new being with its own frail life (Bazin 1949a, 7). Most importantly, Emmer's successful symbiosis of canvas and screen involved cosmological implications: "photography and, *a fortiori*, the cinema always show us a fragment of the universe," (Bazin 1949b, 116)¹² Bazin reminded his readers. By coming into contact with painting, cinema reached back into its own ancestry, rooted in the telescope. Thus, the ambition of seeing beyond the earth into a parallel world on screen could intertwine itself with the cuts of editing and camera movement.

Notwithstanding the amount of motion and chance a painting may suggest on its surface, the canvas is a self-contained, centripetal object in a relation of discontinuity with the ever-changing and intricate life that surrounds it. The barrier of the frame (*cadre*) prevents its insertion into the natural world. In regard to the tension between frame and screen, and according to a late revision of his thoughts on "Painting and Cinema," Bazin explained:

The outer edges of the screen are not ... the frame of the film image. They are the edges of a piece of masking that shows only a portion of reality. The picture frame polarizes space inwards. On the contrary, what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe. A frame is centripetal, the screen centrifugal. Whence it follows that if we reverse the pictorial process and place the screen within the picture frame, that is if we show a section of a painting on a screen, the space of the painting loses its orientation and its limits and is presented to the imagination as without any boundaries (Bazin 2005b, 116).

With a frame around it, even an unfinished painting can claim to be complete. So dependent on motion and time is the cinema that its unfolding is constantly relational and open-ended. For Bazin, the screen, instead of being a *cadre*, is a *cache*, or a masking whose boundaries constantly change according to editing and camera movement. In the wake of Emmer's elimination of the fixed pictorial frame for the sake of the screen and its mobile framing, Bazin had even more to tell us about the latter. In fact, the screen becomes constantly Other in relation to itself, in order to welcome the viewer's kinetic way of seeing through the external lens of the camera, or

¹² "la photographie et *a fortiori* le cinéma nous montrent toujours un fragment de l'univers." (emphasis is Bazin's)

through a point of view inside the *mise-en-scène*. Whereas the canvas is characterized by plasticity, display, depth, and stasis, the screen can be boundary-less, secretive, transformative. The screen masks and reveals, while it absorbs chance, choice, change, desire, illusion, light, darkness.

Bazin appropriated Jean Cocteau's comparison of the screen to a rectangular keyhole from *Le sang d'un poète* (*The Blood of a Poet*, 1930). Free of gravity, the screen depends only on light, while its psychological impact comes from its rectangular absolute size, variable internal use of scale, and mobile framings. Cocteau's poet is constantly on the move along the corridor of the Hôtel Folie Dramatique. He is comparable to a film spectator viewing bits and pieces of many different films, the way the Surrealist artists used to do throughout their ambulatory nights in Paris. Since different narratives are relevant to a string of keyholes along one single corridor, it is likely that Cocteau, the cinephile, called attention to the cinema of the early days as a series of separate events or attractions.

Without a screen-like lit keyhole harnessing attention and visibility out of the darkness, a painting is a spatial and stable object. It openly makes a spectacle of itself, while it can change only inside the viewer's mind upon repeated examinations. Even when the painting's viewer moves and looks at different details, the latter do not change their placement in the overall composition. In cinema, instead, near and far alternate, just like large and small, darkness and light. Due to the pictorial frame, nothing can fall out into the real space of the off-screen. Even the apples of Cezanne—ready to topple beyond the table's edge—, in the end, move without moving. As precarious as it maybe, this stability alone limits multiple or alternative ways of seeing in comparison to the most banal motion of anonymous people walking in the street and looking into a static camera.

Neither a visionary nor a voyeuristic gaze is possible with painting. The spectators cannot radically transfigure the object in an irreversible way, nor can they look at it as if they were so secretive that nothing in a still life of apples would imply their arrival. By contrast, in the darkness of the movie theatre, these two options, separately or together, characterize cinema's spectatorship, even if the viewers are locked into their seats. This is the case because in cinema, there is more than one single set of eyes looking, as it happens in front of a canvas. The human eye can align itself with the camera lens or with a character's point of view, so that the orchestration of looking, at the level of the single spectator, complements the changing ways in which the world appears on screen. In addition, the light-bulb inside the projector is like a gigantic eye-ball looking for and with us. Cocteau's poet is both a voyeur and a visionary being. He wants to see more and better, but what he sees is so irrational or unbelievable that it might belong to his imagination.

Bazin writes: “the screen completely destroys the pictorial space. It substitutes its rectangular keyhole for the frame, real or conceptual, of the painting. Viewed not *within* but *through* the screen, ...” (Bazin 1952, n.p.).¹³ In his discussion of Cocteau’s film, Bazin juxtaposes two prepositions: “*dans*” and “*à travers*.” “*Dans*” (in, inside) means inside someone else’s space in a situation of voyeurism; while “*à travers*” (through) reads more like “thanks to”; it suggests that the screen can be a sounding board for the memory and imagination. These two human faculties are intertwined on the filmstrip rolling itself out in the projection booth. The filmstrip is an embodied perceptual record of memory traces and imaginative arrangements which project themselves into the human and nonhuman elements on the screen. Due to its motionless and handmade origin, painting cannot change itself over and over again.

The link between the painter’s hand and the human eye is radically different from the optical set-up of the cinematic apparatus. There, the nonhuman lens of the camera interacts with the director’s vision, the movements of the camera, the editor’s hand, and the orchestration of looking at the level of the audience, stretching across personal and collective responses. Most importantly, this overlapping of interactions is based on lifelike, illusionistic motion, leading to constant decentering and reevaluation of the way life is and could be. It is through this promise of rethinking the placement of the Self in relation to all kinds of Otherness that Bazin dreamed of a potential and universal renewal of consciousness through the art documentary after 1945.

There is a specific reason why Bazin turned to Cocteau’s analogy of the screen as a “keyhole.” The screen can enable a focusing of perception for the sake of either controlling voyeurism or freewheeling transfiguration. These two polarized ways of seeing relate to the historical development of different fiction film genres. The pictorial imaginary at the cinema can become a form of lifelike, illusionist, “real” perception. In this sense, Bazin remarks, cinema is not about hypnosis and total loss of agency, but it can be a source of stimulation for independent mental activity at different levels, ranging from embodied sensations to spiritual insights. In contrast to either the voyeuristic or visionary spectator, hypnosis involves the passivity of sleepwalking with one’s eyes open yet blind to everything, including oneself in space and time. In the special case of the art documentary, the cinema is a place where our sensorial and intellectual receptivity might increase through attention and immobility. Bazin’s allegiances were for a cinema of depth and complexity, but understandable by all. Thus, he praised the art documentary as a genre that could make us move out of ourselves into a framework of less self-centered per-

¹³ “l’écran détruit radicalement l’espace pictural. Il substitue au cadre, réel ou conceptuel, de la peinture son trou de serrure rectangulaire. Vue non pas *dans* mais *à travers* l’écran...”

ceptions and insights into alternative or even unthinkable ways of being.

The Objects of Still Life and the Camera Lens as Object

After Emmer's dissolution of the frame into the screen and Cocteau's surrealist, voyeuristic, and visionary definition of the keyhole-like screen, Bazin resolved the contrast between painting's object-hood and cinema's ontology of becoming by turning to the objects of still life. He did not spell out his approach, but, based on my careful analysis of all the essays he wrote on this topic, and the variations from one to the next, this seems to be the most reasonable conclusion. By eliminating altogether the human figure, still life is the humblest and the most anti-anthropocentric of all genres in painting.¹⁴ It is only through the framework of the still life that the brush controlled by the painter's hand and the glass lens of the camera become compatible. This is the case because they can release a de-centering impact on what they depict or see. In Bazin's argument, the still life of painting becomes the equivalent of the humble lichen in biology. All of a sudden, the cinema enables the objects of still life to become as important as events whose becoming is filled with suspense, discovery, adventure, and anxiety.

The paintbrush, for Bazin, behaves like a sort of "animistic" magic tool (Bazin 1949c, 2). It can get inside the hidden life of objects, in the same way that the filming camera gets inside a canvas and turns it inside out, like a "glove" (Bazin 1949d, 818). The lens of the camera intensifies the eloquent muteness of objects to the point that they acquire a storytelling power of their own. For Bazin, this turning inside out of the glove—one of the most analogical and, therefore, photographic pieces of clothing—amounts to the birth of a new being—the art documentary—out of an older origin: painting. What Bazin is after is not a respectful commentary by a young medium about an old one. He believed in the radical transformation that the cinema can set in motion inside painting, way down into the deepest tissues of the latter medium. In the wake of still life, the art documentary can displace the corporeal figure from the center, while objects still imply a human element behind their choice, arrangement, and function.

For Bazin, cinema was comparable to a new, egalitarian light, or an objectifying eye, transforming the canvas into a *mise-en-scène* of equal interaction between bodies and things, objects and words, objects and events. In contrast to the centrality of the human figure in academic historical painting, this awareness about the transformative impact of still life, landscape, and humble genre scenes is especially evident in some of van Gogh's paintings, such as *The Potato*

¹⁴ On still life and the cinema, see Dalle Vacche 1996, 221-247.

Eaters (1885) and *Vincent's Bedroom in Arles* (1888). In the genre scene of *The Potato Eaters*, five peasants and all the objects around them are so intertwined with their daily life that one can almost hear their conversation about labor, the soil, and the food they have produced. In discussing Resnais's editing in *Van Gogh* (1948), Dudley Andrew remarks that the director's approach is *deictic*: "here look at this" (Andrew 2011, 156). One could argue that this fragmentation of *The Potato Eaters* is overly didactic. Instead, Resnais's cuts do underline sharing the same light, the same tray, and the same beverage. The director's mobilization of looking in *The Potato Eaters* is an homage to the togetherness cinema finds with painting through the still life and the genre scene, in contrast to portraiture's vanity. Furthermore, as a *memento mori* or a *vanitas*, the areas of still life carved out by Resnais's editing, within the genre scene of *The Potato Eaters*, lend themselves automatically to the temporal aspect of eventfulness in the cinema. A coffee-like beverage flows out of a teapot, while the back view of one peasant woman sets into relief the eye-line matches between two pairs of characters, on each side of her.

In the *Bedroom in Arles*, objects such as clothing, two pillows, two chairs, two framed portraits on the wall function verbally. It is as if they were replacing one of Vincent's letters to his brother, Theo, in which he details his loneliness and search for a deep relationship with another person. In the case of Resnais's *Van Gogh*, the art documentary shifts from a pictorial and mute text into an introspective and live narrative unfolding in real time, because things disclose emotions and thoughts. The idea, here, is that the art documentary participates in an evolution of film language, in ways comparable to how a new living species emerges and changes our scientific understanding of an evolutionary history of media. Thus, for the critic, in comparison to previous art documentaries, Resnais's *Van Gogh* marked a clear step forward. In Resnais's documentary, van Gogh's works—with distant houses and little churches huddled under the starry sky, or the orchestration of looking in *The Potato Eaters*—are quite ready to become cinematic sequences, filled as they are with whispered voices, spiraling motions, and transitional moments. The painter's spiritual and centrifugal yearnings run up against painting's object-hood. Instead of being polarized into a center, his whole work wants to unravel itself into nature and the cosmos with no boundaries in between.

Despite Bazin's distinction between centripetal canvas and centrifugal screen, the still unresolved problem was: how could the art documentary negotiate between the external recording of photography and the inner exploration of the human mind? Without a doubt, Resnais's *Van Gogh* was the first truly mental and literary example of the art documentary. It is, perhaps, for this reason that Resnais's work is regularly punctuated by different self-portraits of van Gogh and by paintings where it is possible to see the artist with easel

and brushes. The painter's lonely figure spells out that this art documentary is a spiritual journey with no clear destination ever to be found.

Just like Rembrandt, van Gogh executed innumerable self-portraits. But this constant self-interrogation is not based on narcissism. It springs from the need to look at oneself from the outside, as happens in film where external recording can move beyond the surface, make visible the invisible, and become the measure of an existential search. The objectification of the camera lens counterpoints van Gogh's ever-changing, yet unyielding self-portraits which offered no relief to his chronic mental anguish. The difficulty of capturing temporal changes in nature through a static series of swiveling marks, and the impossibility of reaching into one's own depths, resonates against the painter's still life of his own shoes: his most eloquent example of self-portraiture about restlessness, interrogation and the impact of time.

Instead of having to worry about the destruction of pictorial space, Bazin praises Resnais's montage in *Van Gogh* for its subtle impact on the viewer:

The effectiveness of the film derives from the fact that Resnais never shows us a complete painting, frame included. Thanks to the editing, to cinema's mobile framing, to the subject of the painting, to the camera movements, and certain editing tricks that succeed in creating the perfect illusion of a third pictorial dimension by using two canvases that depict the same scene from two different points of view, the work of van Gogh ceases somewhat being a series of paintings to become a limitless universe, the result of the fusion of his entire oeuvre, and where the filmmaker leads us as freely as in reality (Bazin 1949d, 818).¹⁵

Considering that Resnais filmed drawings and paintings, the artificial and closed status of these objects does not compete with the documentary's subjective or perceptual realism applied to the film viewers' mobile way of seeing. Resnais's montage is so discreet that we believe that van Gogh's world can also be our world, were we to visit the same locations during the same seasons. We suspend our disbelief even in front of van Gogh's personal style. Shown in close-up, the painter's markings are abstract, thick, and whirling. Van Gogh is considered the founder of Expressionism, but during the first half of Resnais's film, his work becomes quasi-realist. Resnais relies on

¹⁵ "L'efficacité du film vient de ce que Resnais ne nous montre jamais un tableau dans son ensemble, cadre compris. Grâce au montage, au cadrage cinématographique, l'intérieur du tableau, aux mouvements de la caméra et à certaines astuces de montage qui parviennent à donner l'illusion parfaite d'une troisième dimension picturale par l'utilisation de deux tableaux traitant une même scène de deux points de vue différents, l'oeuvre de Van Gogh cesse en quelque sorte d'être une série de tableaux pour devenir un univers illimité, résultat de la fusion de toute son oeuvre, et où le cinéaste nous promène aussi librement que dans la réalité."

two principal camera movements: the horizontal pans of travel and the vertical tracking shots of mood swings. They signify respectively an inner voyage, geographical wandering, and an increasing a sense of vertigo. The voice-over narration was read by the actor Claude Dauphin, while the text was put together by art historians Gaston Diehl and Robert Hessens.

Resnais's film is an overview of van Gogh's life, filtered through a selected group of works which are not arranged in chronological order. During the second half of the documentary, we see van Gogh's black shadow cast on the ground. Resnais also intercuts religious imagery of Christ's passion with the artist's *Wheat Fields with Reaper at Sunrise* (1889), where the reaper's scythe in close-up anticipates the artist's suicide. For his project, Resnais avoided all period photographs dealing with van Gogh's social work in the slums of London. He transforms van Gogh's work into a mental landscape without using autobiographical sources, except for a brief citation at the very beginning of the film, from one of Vincent's hundreds of letters to his brother, Theo: "*Il me semble toujours être un voyageur qui va quelque part et à une destination.*" (I seem always to be a voyager who is going somewhere towards a destination.)

The more Resnais avoids the traditional biographical approach, the more the spectators can autonomously and universally appropriate the moving images, thus fulfilling the centrifugal power of the screen. We forget we are looking at art and we think about daily life. It is as if Resnais had shot a documentary on location with an ethnographic impulse. By using a telescope lens, Resnais pushes back an array of trees filled with flowers from an extreme close-up into a long shot. In true Pascalian fashion, Resnais's cinema wants the world's beauty to replace the act of painting itself. The documentary feeling of the film is also enhanced by the use of black-and-white cinematography. We situate spaces, bodies, and objects in relation to seasonal events, such as harvesting under the dazzling sun. During the documentary, the lighting on screen never changes and there is no color: the calibration of black-and-white works just as well by itself. More white suggests the summer, more grey the winter, and more black—until the screen becomes full of it by the end—is death. Bazin points out that the elimination of yellow brings to the surface a much more discernible anatomical chart of the painter's nervous system with its waves of energy, brushstroke after brushstroke, with a thickening of blackness even the camera lens cannot fully penetrate. We are looking at the eye of the hurricane inside a human mind which cannot be fully explained: how could so much anguish and suffering turn into so much creativity and sharing of the world where the artist felt so isolated?

Color in painting is geological and centripetal, hence even more alien to the centrifugal nature of film and its screen. This is the case because all the internal relations among the colors inside the

pictorial frame contribute to their respective individual tones. Even if Resnais had shot *Van Gogh* in color, any degree of fidelity to the original paintings by the artist would have been impossible. In 1945, for his essay on “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”, Bazin had observed: “photography will long remain the inferior of painting in the reproduction of color” (Bazin 2005, “Ontology”, 12). By the same token, the pictorial use of color can make a film look less believable and artificial (Bazin 1952, n.p.). This is indeed what happened in Vincente Minnelli’s *Lust for Life* (1956), an MGM biopic shot in CinemaScope and Metrocolor. The indoor sequences are crowded with actual paintings by van Gogh borrowed from museums and private collections credited at the very beginning of the film. Minnelli’s *mise-en-scènes* in the studio look like a storage room in comparison to Resnais’s transformation of art into a subjective and open landscape. The cinemascope format of the screen clashes with the size of most paintings. Long and stagy, Minnelli’s dialogues are based on Irving Stone’s novel, *Lust for Life*. Kirk Douglas’s passionate performance and physical resemblance enjoyed great acclaim at the time, but Bazin wrote that he preferred the more elliptical acting of Anthony Quinn in the role of Gauguin.

Resnais included a minimum amount of references to the artist’s colleagues, such as Matisse and Toulouse-Lautrec. By contrast, Minnelli detailed the breakup between van Gogh and Gauguin to further heighten the melodramatic side of his biopic. With Resnais, we see only portraits of some neighbors and friends without going into any anecdotal information. Strictly based on the painter’s works, the voice-over narration does not include details about the painter’s religious training and his family background, except for a still life in close-up of van Gogh’s father’s open Bible. Resnais also does not discuss the artist’s relations with women, his visits to the brothel, his rejection by cousin Kee, and his indulgence in absinthe. All information about financial hardship, art dealers, sales, is left out. To be sure, Minnelli’s *Lust for Life* wallows in all this background information, seeking to animate each famous painting through a correspondingly accurate filmic sequence. The worst mistake—which Bazin did not even comment on—takes place when we step into the kitchen of the potato eaters and a couple of them smile in the direction of the camera. The quasi-sacred concentration and severe atmosphere of the painting is lost and van Gogh’s palette of dark and smoky browns is not even there.

The strength of Resnais’s film rests in its geography of roads, fields, streets. Public places are anonymous, while van Gogh’s farmers and weavers acquire an anthropological valence: how the work is done, how much effort it requires, which tools or technologies are used; this becomes the topic of the painting. Resnais’s emphasis on thresholds such as windows and doors turns the screen into a thinking mind. It is as if the ambition of Resnais’s film was not to show the

artist's works as self-contained objects, but to articulate them as thoughts or actions in process. For example, Resnais's camera follows an old woman entering a house by first showing her back to us in medium shot, until a frontal shot enables us to see her face in close-up. Of course, Bazin was quick to remind his readers that this reverse angle framing is impossible in painting, but it works beautifully in film.

Even though Minnelli travelled to the real locations of van Gogh's life, the theatrical blocking and screen directions of actors made these places look stagy rather than authentic. While we keep up with the vicissitudes of van Gogh's tormented life in Provence, the French villagers spend life between the two extremes of picnicking in the shade or quarrelling about rent. The acting of the minor figures is so bad and exaggerated that it looks as if the iconography of French Impressionism was poorly competing with van Gogh's and Gauguin's new directions.

In Resnais's documentary, thanks to one more example of subtle montage, two separate paintings come together in four shots and produce an intensity of place that competes with shooting on location. In regard to Resnais's use of the little-known *Interior of a Restaurant* (1887), Bazin explains:

It is one of Alain Resnais's best travelling shots in *Van Gogh*. The camera moves precisely into the painter's universe. In the first image, we see the whole painting. In the second, we again approach the door. Then, in the same movement, without transition, we enter into the interior of the café: third image, which is from another painting. The camera continues its advance and stops before a table (fourth image). (Bazin 1949b, 119)¹⁶

During his documentary, Resnais never chooses one drawing or one painting because of its fame or art-historical importance. In *Interior of a Restaurant*, van Gogh imitated Seurat's pointillist technique to show that he knew Impressionism well enough and wanted to move beyond it. In Vincente Minnelli's *Lust for Life*, the very same painting appears in Theo's apartment, leaning against the easel while Vincent is working on it. Yet this canvas has no major purpose in the narrative, except for its minor role in stimulating one more argument between the two brothers. By contrast, in his documentary, Resnais uses the least known of van Gogh's canvases about leisure time to show what it felt like to wander around Paris. The same effect of lived experience is subtly achieved when Resnais's camera pans from van Gogh's *Moulin de la Galette* (1886) to a few Parisians shivering in

¹⁶ "Un des meilleurs travelling réalisés par Alain Resnais dans *Van Gogh*. La caméra se meut exactement dans l'univers du peintre. À la première image, on voit l'ensemble du tableau. À la seconde, on s'est réapproche de la porte. Puis, dans le même mouvement, sans transition, on pénètre à l'intérieur du café: troisième image, qui est celle d'un autre tableau. La caméra continue d'avancer pour s'arrêter devant une table (quatrième image)."

winter on the *Terrace in the Luxembourg Gardens* (1886). The cut is so lightly handled that the viewer has the impression of running into some acquaintances by accident. This effect of contingency, of course, speaks to the tension between frame and screen. Finally, *View of Paris from Vincent's Room in the Rue Lepic* (1887), where Vincent lived with Theo, acquires the flavor of a documentary photograph.

Working like a biologist who does not interfere with the present tense of his living art, Resnais did not need to worry about the historical accuracy of van Gogh's details. Since they all belong to the paintings, he accepts them *a priori* and does not transpose them into *a posteriori* theatrical reconstructions. The latter would inevitably compete with their pictorial origin. Resnais's deductive approach from the work to the artist's inner life stands against Minnelli's inductive search from the biography to the paintings. On these two antithetical ways of working, Bazin remarked:

It's not a question of explaining why van Gogh was 'crazy' and what was the relation necessarily between that insanity and his predilection for yellow, for example, but of making us approach closer to that point of spiritual incandescence where we will sense the transmutation by its radiance (Bazin 1957a, 25).¹⁷

Paradoxically, cinema's external recording of the surfaces painted by van Gogh can convey the artist's internal "incandescence." Just like irradiation, incandescence comes from physics, the history of light and electromagnetism. More specifically, incandescence refers to the white light of a filament inside a light-bulb or to a metal glowing brighter and brighter as the temperature increases. Once again this metaphor describes a process of becoming or an event, rather than an object caught in one single unchanging state.

Even if Bazin did prefer Resnais's modest, black-and-white short film, in the pages of *Éducation Nationale* he did not hesitate to praise Minnelli for some of his sequences: "In particular I'm thinking of the scenes of Dutch interiors, corresponding to the series of the potato eaters, or the décor of the café in Arles that inspired the haunting nocturnal painting" (Bazin 1957a, 25).¹⁸ Once again, the critic was open to nurturing the goodwill of cinema, while he did not hesitate to speak his mind in front of failure. Every film was a creature growing up in the light of a period highly eager for a break from the past, and conscious of its need for change after so much dehumanization. In a different review of *Lust for Life*, the critic adds:

¹⁷ "Il ne s'agit pas de nous expliquer pourquoi Van Gogh était 'fou' et quel était le rapport nécessaire entre cette folie et sa prédilection pour le jaune, par exemple, mais de nous faire approcher au plus près de ce point d'incandescence spirituelle où la transmutation nous sera rendue sensible par son rayonnement."

¹⁸ "Je pense surtout à des scènes d'intérieurs hollandais, correspondant à la série des mangeurs de pommes de terre, ou au décor du café d'Arles qui inspira l'hallucinant tableau nocturne."

Moreover, the film almost succeeds in its first part, which relates ... the extraordinary spiritual and human experience of the young suffragan pastor in the mines of the Borinage. Vincente Minnelli knew how to evoke the horrifying poverty of the miners, with a realism that sometimes calls to mind the lesson of early Soviet cinema (Bazin 1957b, n.p.).¹⁹

Despite Bazin's generosity towards Minnelli, the fundamental issue remains the incompatibility of painting's object-hood and cinema's way of becoming in the present tense. With Minnelli, van Gogh's figures are removed from their original surfaces and transplanted inside an artificial environment that does not belong to the paintings, but only to Minnelli's research department. This dislocation of historical detail from canvas to screen becomes especially apparent in regard to the hat van Gogh created in his portrait of père Tanguy, the well-known owner of an art shop in Paris. Bazin explains:

Thus, for example, père Tanguy is shown wearing his comical little round hat, as if that headgear was habitual, whereas it is more likely that van Gogh invented that amusing accessory. Likewise père Roulin and his son take a walk in the streets as if they had descended from the paintings. It's making nature resemble art, in the words of [Oscar] Wilde, which is only true *a posteriori*. Van Gogh transformed our vision of sunflowers, but before he painted them, the sunflowers were not yet 'Van Goghs' (Bazin 1957a, 25).²⁰

By betraying cinema's affinities with natural processes of preservation and recording through fossilization and photography, Vincente Minnelli is so eager to imitate art with a capital "A," that he sacrifices the living nature of his art-historical sources and underplays his own discovery of real locations. In *Lust for Life*, despite the sexual metaphor in the title, biography becomes stale. The director flattens his figures into cartoonish beings who wear accurate hats, but these imaginary accessories can only pretend to have a link with an historical context. Likewise, the actors' performances are not based on a personal engagement with the topic, but on masquerading inside a *tableau vivant*, which is neither painting, nor cinema. This is why the costumes of père Roulin and his son look like they have descended to street level from van Gogh's paintings and the museums

¹⁹ "Le film n'est d'ailleurs pas loin de la réussite dans sa première partie, celle qui nous relate ... l'extraordinaire expérience spirituelle et humaine du jeune pasteur suffragant dans les mines du Borinage. Vincente Minnelli a su avec un réalisme qui n'est pas sans rappeler parfois la leçon du premier cinéma soviétique, évoquer ... l'effroyable misère des mineurs."

²⁰ "C'est ainsi par exemple que le père Tanguy nous est montré surmonté de son comique petit chapeau rond comme si cette coiffure lui était habituelle, alors qu'il est plus probable que Van Gogh inventa cet accoutrement amusant. De même père Roulin et son fils se promènent dans les rues comme s'ils descendaient des tableaux. C'est faire ressembler la nature à l'art, selon le mot de Wilde, qui n'est vrai qu'*a posteriori*. Van Gogh a transformé notre vision des tournesols, mais avant qu'il ne les peigne les tournesols n'étaient pas encore 'des Van Gogh'."

to which they belong. In the meantime, the street itself does not trigger our suspension of disbelief. Thus, when these very same figures—père Tanguy and père Roulin—sell Japanese prints in Paris or walk around in Arles, they do not look alive but resemble animated cartoons.

To be fair to Minnelli, there are also some moments of fatigue in Resnais's documentary. As Bazin himself acknowledges, some failures are inevitable as soon as nature turns too much and too quickly into art. This happens with Resnais's close-up shots (perhaps too many) of torn sunflowers—a typical van Gogh topic that dwells dangerously on the theme of genius as madness. On the screen, these sunflowers become either kitsch or baroque, as they twist themselves into evil omens of mental torture. The director cannot help himself: the sunflower has become so iconic of the painter's existential struggle that to avoid the cliché becomes impossible, so he includes it, possibly out of a sheer sense of obligation. A van Gogh without yellows is an experimental gesture, but, unfortunately, a van Gogh with his torn sunflowers turns into a postage stamp.

Even if he was aware of other art documentaries about sculpture and architecture, Bazin wrote most extensively about more or less successful art documentaries based on painting. He chose this particular medium because it was the most elitist. Moving from mineralogy to biology and anatomy, Bazin's scientific metaphors suggest that a film can become a moving system of pictorial canvases, opening themselves up to the contingencies of a lifelike world of human beings, landscapes, and objects. A technology based on projection and a lit screen surrounded by darkness, cinema, through the art documentary, can also make visible inner energy. Creativity, however, is not only about art, but it is also about the mysterious origin of life in this world and in the universe at large. This is why, in contrast to other media, the cinema is unique for its cosmological probing into the unknown and for its anti-anthropocentric orientation based on movement and contingency to displace us and make us participate in multiple ways of being.

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