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Images about images: The criticism of Bazin and the philosophy of Rancière in confluence and conflict

André Bazin, in *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, seeks to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the affective properties of photography, and by extension, cinema. The cardinal issue at hand is the relationship of the photographic image to its subject – a relationship that is not mimetic, not figurative, and also not truly representational. Bazin argues in favor of strict causal relationship between subject and image. Because a photograph is mechanically produced – that is, the actual image is a result of chemical changes on film, with the artist serving merely as an instigator – Bazin saw photography as having a uniquely privileged position in the arts, since it possesses an unassailable realism. Since photography is not subject to the demands of representation and resemblance, the photograph, perhaps paradoxically, becomes an art object itself. Bazin nods to Plato, saying “the photography as such and the object in itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint. Wherefore, photography actually contributes something to the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it.” (Bazin 15)

It is worth noting here that this language of photography, and this idea of the photograph as necessarily being a distinct physical object have inevitably been corroded by the passage of time. And while Rancière would undoubtedly consider the proliferation of digital technology an advancement in the imaging of images, let us avoid the subject of digital photography; the digital photograph (along with the digital film) is one of the only visual media where the form of the

image and the perception of the image are wholly inconsonant. Theoreticians of music are accustomed to such a disparity, but throughout the history of representation, the physical form of the represented and its perceived image have always been immediately related. Nevertheless, a theory of the digital image has yet to be fully developed, and while these advances in technology complicate Bazin's ideas of mechanicity, they do not invalidate them.

Thus, it is still possible to agree with Bazin that photography engenders the presence of the represented in a more complete fashion than any other media. Furthermore, it does so in a way that expurgates the intentions of the artist, if only momentarily, to create what is arguably the purest form of image – the one that is totally divorced from human interference. This pure image-ness is what makes photography so compelling and powerful. More than the realism or literalism of the image, the connection that it forges between viewer and subject is more direct than that of any other art form. Roland Barthes' distinction is useful here; this directness, the affect that results from the purity of the image-ness is what Barthes calls the *punctum*. All other qualities of the image, the indexicals of the image: its content, its cultural implications, its time and place, the artist, the subject, etc, fall under the category of the *studium*. (Rancière 10-11)

If Bazin is correct, then photography has freed visual art from the limitations of mimesis. Hence, the aim of visual art is now more poetic: images must create presence; they must create something that the world has never seen before. Paradoxically, however, the specifics of Bazin's theory of cinema generally disdain experimentalism and extravagance in cinematic technique. This would appear to contradict the imperative of the perception of image as image; however, what Bazin is arguing against is not Rancière's meta-imagery, but rather the use of artifice for

the sake of artifice. Moreover, it would stand to reason that Bazin would object to gaudy expressivist techniques impinging on the realistic purity of the cinematic image. He championed a realist cinema that used deep-focus, wide shots, and long takes - this type of filmmaking would call more attention to the image than the style.

Concerning this purity of image, Bazin would say that photography is art solely by virtue of this fact; Rancière would say that photography can have an artistic impact because of its content and its formalistic properties. When it expresses these functions, Rancière would say that an image is ostensive, meaning that it conveys multiple levels of meaning. Here, again, is the *studium*, joined with the *punctum* at the surface of the image to convey the fact of the image, its very reality, as well as its substance.

In this context, it is as if a proto-image exists, outside the realm of perception. In traditional photography, this proto-image, invisibly embedded in the film, is called the latent image. It exists objectively, independently of the artist, independently of viewer, causally related only the chemical reaction, the apparatus, and the lens. So what is meant by 'objective'? Surely we are not accessing a Platonic idea or a Kantian noumenon. Rather, this sense of objective means free from artistic intentions, intellectual objectives, or political ideology. This is the pure image. However, once the photograph is developed, processed, and released into the vast index of images, signs and symbols, it is given context, culture, and meaning; it is given icon status; it ultimately becomes a representation of itself.

Given this framework of heightened realism and added objectivity, the usage of the photographic image is to both directly convey its referent and position that referent within the

context of the *studium*. Rancière's idea of the naked image, the ostensive image and the metaphorical image elaborates on this schema. Rancière's theoretical structure goes much further than Bazin's original photographic manifesto, and rightly so. The ultimate incarnation of the image, the metaphoric image, goes beyond conveying substance and conveying information; it expresses its relationship with other images, as well as the property of being an image, and the essence of image-ness. This conception of the image lies far outside Bazin's thinking, but at the same time it serves as a logical extension of the notion of photography as "satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer. The photographic image is an object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it." (Bazin 14)

How exactly does this function? Consider a simple example of the redoubling of the metaphoric image: what happens when the camera is focused on a painting or a print? Is this still a "pure" image if it is an image of an image? Are we experiencing a direct, immediate connection with the interior image? Yes and no; we see reality reiterated and repeated in images; we see our reality – which includes innumerable images, mirrored back to us in the form of more images. We see the image-within-the-image contextualized, historicized, laden with meaning; on top of it, the immediate photographic image in front of our eyes gives us access to this world of mirrors.

In Rancière's new regime of images, the photograph would not be taken to exclusively represent an object; it would not be understood as a representation of an object, but instead as a picture that can only be understood in terms of other pictures. A photograph does not only refer to an object; it refers to the very act of photography as well. The photographic image, insofar as

it is a 'new' image in the way Rancière intends, retains this steadfast object-ivity, and folds in on itself, oscillating between image-as-object and image-as-image. Rancière's poetics of cinema describes the multiplication of images; it is worth quoting at length:

These pure icons had themselves to be removed by the artifice of montage, diverted from their arrangement so as to be reintegrated into a pure kingdom of images by the fusing power of video superimposition...The visual production of iconic pure presence, claimed by the filmmaker's discourse, is itself only possible by virtue of the work of its opposite: the Schlegelian poetics of the witticism that invents between fragments of films, news strips, photos, reproductions of paintings and other things all the combinations, distances, or approximations capable of eliciting new forms and meanings. This assumes the existence of a boundless Shop/Library/Museum where all films, texts, photographs, and paintings coexist; and where they can all be broken up into elements each of which is endowed with a triple power: the power of the singularity (the punctum) of the obtuse image; the educational value (the studium) of the document bearing the trace of a history; and the cominatory capacity of the sign, open to being combined with any element from a different sequence to compose new sentence-images *ad infinitum*. (Rancière 30)

Seemingly, there does exist a fundamental tension between Bazin's insistence on a more monolithic cinematic style, and Rancière's apparent preference for a suffusion of elements throughout an image. This opposition is best exemplified by their respective attitudes towards the use of montage techniques in cinema. Rancière's position is essentially that the layering of meaning that results from the conjunction of images defines a reality outside that of ordinary imagery. The new image – the metaphorical image – composed of infinite cultural "fragments" take on an emphasized significance. Bazin, on the other hand, has extensive critical output on the

use and misuse of montage techniques. Although he says that a montage can serve as “an abstract creator of meaning, which preserves the state of unreality demanded by the spectacle,” (Bazin 45) he also warns that the over-use of montages will threaten the spatial and temporal cohesion of the film. “What is imaginary on the screen must have the spatial density of something real. You cannot therefore use montage here except within well-defined limits or you run the risk of threatening the very ontology of the cinematographic tale” (48). What Bazin is saying is that if a montage results in a proliferation of meanings that is unwarranted by the aesthetic act, then this technique will eventually send the various component images spiraling into meaninglessness.

However, it would be incorrect to dismiss the congruities of Bazin and Rancière’s critical frameworks based on divergent taste in stylistic approaches to film. The particulars of cinematic technique, though, do not fundamentally interfere with a broader theory of the visual perception of modern images. An excellent example of the confluence of the two modes of thought is two critical treatments of the film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann. Bazin, who died in 1958, never commented on *Shoah*, which was released in 1985. David Brubaker provides critical commentary on the formal properties of the film; he treats the objective lens of *Shoah* as paradigmatic of Bazin’s realism. Rancière, meanwhile, discusses the subject of the film, or rather, the absence of a subject where instead the film points to this absence.

For Brubaker, without the degree of photographic objectivity described by Bazin, a film like *Shoah* would not be coherent. In several shots, *Shoah* includes minimal causal interaction between film director and image – the interviewer and interviewee will stop talking or leave the frame, or the camera may linger without any action taking place (Brubaker 64). This objectivity

has a structural as well as a symbolic function. In terms of the form of the film, having a maximum amount of camera-objectivity emphasizes the sense of witnessing; it intensifies the effect for the viewer in that it magnifies the *punctum* aspect of the images. Symbolically, having subdued camera work that purports a maximum degree of objectivity, tellingly, objectifies its subjects. Subtly, the absence of human interface acts as a rhetorical device to depict impersonality. The mechanical observer functions as a metaphor for dehumanization; in this way, the message is mirrored in the very form of the film.

Rancière treats *Shoah* as a palimpsest, where the newly voiced stories of witnesses and survivors are shown layered over the voices of history. As an image, it serves as a cipher, always pointing in the direction of its subject, but never being able to name or depict it. The most palpable reason for this is the horror that is unrepresentable in its magnitude; the immensity of the Holocaust cannot be circumscribed by words or images.

But furthermore, Rancière elicits a second problem with representing the Holocaust, namely that it poses a double elimination that covers itself from visibility: “elimination of the Jews and the elimination of the traces of their elimination” (Rancière 127). Any attempt to represent the former will inevitably exclude the latter. Rancière claims that *Shoah* avoids this double bind by refusing to directly engage with the past. Lanzmann confronts the Holocaust as a living memory, rather than as a historical event. Consequently, the film does not show images that can be interpreted as replications of past events, rather, since the film also treats present-day Poland and Lanzmann himself as subject matter, it functions as an image-as-image, since it necessarily carries with it visual representation from the past into the present, even as the film functions as a continuation of the present.

The discrepancies and congruities of the thought of Bazin and Rancière speak to the ambivalence of the images of photography and film. They are silent, but also exploding with potential meaning; as soon as meaning expressed, the image then falls back upon itself to stand as pure ineffable witness. This incommunicable essence (Barthes' *punctum*, again) is indivisible, but the image is also a multiplicity, a heterogeneity of elements, and a component of itself. But this fragmentation does not disintegrate the reality of the image; it augments it. It intensifies and redoubles the reality.

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