Ontology of the Photographic Image

If we were to psychoanalyse the visual arts, the practice of embalming might be seen as fundamental to their birth. The origins of painting and sculpture would be found to lie in a 'mummy complex'. Egyptian religion, which was entirely devoted to surmounting death, saw survival as tied to the material preservation of the body. This belief satisfied one of human psychology's most fundamental needs: to defend against time. Death is nothing more than the victory of time. To make fast bodily appearance is to snatch it from the course of time, to stow it in the hold of life. It was natural to preserve this appearance in the very reality of death, in its flesh and bone. The first Egyptian statue was a mummy, tanned and encrusted in soda. Pyramids and labyrinthine passageways, however, did not provide sufficient assurance that the tomb would never be pillaged; further measures had to be taken to protect against chance and increase the likelihood of survival. Small terra-cotta statues, alongside wheat for the departed's sustenance, were thus placed near the sarcophagus. These statuettes were a sort of replacement mummy, ready to take the body's place if it was destroyed. And so, in the religious origins of statuary, we can see its primordial function: to save being through the appearance of being. No doubt we could also see the clay bear riddled with arrows in prehistoric caves as another expression of the same

enterprise, functioning as a magical substitute for the living beast to ensure the success of the hunt.

The parallel course of art and civilisation freed the visual arts from these magical functions (Louis XIV did not have himself embalmed, but merely had his portrait painted by Lebrun[a]). This parallel course, however, could only sublimate to rational thought the irrepressible need to exorcise time. We no longer believe in the ontological identity of model and portrait, but we recognise that the latter helps us to remember the former and thus to rescue it from a second death, spiritual this time. The production of images has even dispensed with any notion of anthropocentric usefulness. It is no longer a question of the individual's survival, but more generally of creating an ideal universe in the image of reality, endowed with an independent temporal destiny. What a strange vanity painting is[b] if we do not see, beneath our absurd admiration, a primitive need to vanquish time through the immortality of form! The history of the visual arts is not only an aesthetic history but, above all, a history of their psychology. It is also essentially the history of resemblance or, if you prefer, of realism.

Seen from this sociological perspective, film and photography naturally account for the great spiritual and technical crisis in modern painting beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century.

André Malraux, in his article in *Verve*, wrote that 'cinema is only the most advanced form of visual realism, a principle which first appeared in the Renaissance and then found its ultimate expression in Baroque painting.'[c]

True enough, world painting established various sorts of equilibrium between symbolism and realism. In the fifteenth

century, however, Western painting began to stray from a single, primordial concern for spiritual reality, expressed through the independent means at painting's disposal, and to combine expression with a relatively thorough imitation of the outside world. The decisive event was undoubtedly the invention of the first scientific and, in a sense, already mechanical system: perspective (with Leonardo's camera obscura prefiguring Niépce's[d] darkroom[e]). Perspective made it possible for artists to create the illusion of three-dimensional space in which objects could be placed the way they would if we perceived them directly.

From that point on, painting was torn between two aspirations. One was strictly aesthetic—the expression of spiritual realities in which the model was transcended by the symbolism of form—while the other was simply a psychological desire to replace the outside world with its double. This need for illusion, which grew rapidly the more it was met, gradually devoured the visual arts. Nevertheless, perspective had solved only the problem of form and not that of movement, and realism had to continue seeking the dramatic expression of the moment, a sort of psychic fourth dimension capable of suggesting the presence of life in the tortured immobility of Baroque art.[1]

Naturally, great artists have always achieved a synthesis of these two tendencies, establishing a hierarchy whereby reality was subordinated and reincorporated into their art. But the fact remains that we are in the presence of two essentially different phenomena, between which objective criticism must be able to distinguish if it is to understand painting's development. The need for illusion in painting has been a constant preoccupation since the sixteenth century. It is an entirely psychological need, inherently non-aesthetic, whose origins can only be traced to a

mind-set steeped in magic. But it is a powerful need, and its appeal has profoundly tipped the scales in the visual arts.

The dispute over realism in art derives from this misunderstanding, from the confusion between the aesthetic and the psychological—between true realism, which is a need to express the meaning of the world in its concrete aspects and in its essence, and the pseudo-realism of *trompe l'oeil* (or *trompe l'esprit*[f]), which is content with the illusion of form.[2] This is why the art of the Middle Ages, for example, appears immune to this conflict: both violently realist and highly spiritual, it did not know the upheaval that technical possibilities have since introduced. Perspective was the original sin of Western painting.

Niépce and Lumière were its redeemers. Photography, in fulfilling the aspirations of the Baroque, freed the visual arts from their obsession with resemblance. Painting had been vainly struggling to present us with an illusion. This illusion was enough to create art, while the discovery of photography and cinema satisfied once and for all, in their very essence, the obsession with realism. No matter how skilful the painter, his work was always seriously compromised by its inevitable subjectivity. Because of this human presence, a doubt about the image persisted. Moreover, the important thing about the passage from Baroque painting to photography is not mere material improvement (for a long time, photography was inferior to painting in recreating colour). It is, rather, psychological: photography completely satisfies our appetite for illusion by means of a process of mechanical reproduction in which there is no human agency at work. The solution lay not in the resulting work but rather in its genesis.[3]

This is why conflicts around style and resemblance are relatively modern phenomena; barely a trace of them can be found before the invention of the photographic plate. Clearly, the fascinating objectivity found in Chardin has nothing to do with photographic objectivity. The crisis in realism began in earnest in the nineteenth century, with Picasso as its mythic embodiment in the present day. This crisis called into question both the conditions of the visual arts' formal existence and their sociological underpinnings. Freed from the complex of resemblance, modern painters surrendered it to the people, who henceforth identified it with photography on the one hand and with the only kind of painting that applies itself to it on the other.[4]

Photography's originality compared to painting thus lies in its objective nature; in French the lenses of the photographic eye are called, precisely, *objectifs*. For the first time, the only thing to come between an object and its representation is another object. For the first time, an image of the outside world takes shape automatically, without creative human intervention, following a strict determinism. The photographer's personality is at work only in the selection, orientation and pedagogical approach to the phenomenon: as evident as this personality may be in the final product, it is not present in the same way as a painter's. All art is founded upon human agency, but in photography alone can we celebrate its absence. Photography has an effect upon us of a natural phenomenon, like a flower or snowflake whose beauty is inseparable from its earthly origin.

The automatic way in which photographs are produced has radically transformed the psychology of the image. Photography's

objectivity confers upon it a degree of credibility absent from any painting. Whatever the objections of our critical faculties, we are obliged to believe in the existence of the object represented: it truly is re-presented, made present in time and space. Photography transfers reality from the object depicted to its reproduction.[5] The most faithful drawing can give us more information about the model, but it will never, no matter what our critical faculties tell us, possess the irrational power of photography, in which we believe without reservation.

Painting thus suddenly became no more than an inferior technique for creating resemblance, an ersatz reproduction process. Only the photographic lens gives us an image of the object that is capable of relieving, out of the depths of our unconscious, our need to substitute for the object something more than an approximation. That something is the object itself, but liberated from its temporal contingencies. The image may be out of focus, distorted, devoid of colour and without documentary value; nevertheless, it has been created out of the ontology of the model. It is the model. Herein lies the charm of photo albums. Their grey and sepia shadows, ghost-like and almost indiscernible, are no longer traditional family portraits; they are the troubling presence of lives halted in time and liberated from their destiny, not through the prestige of art but by means of an impassive mechanical device. Photography, unlike art, does not create the eternal; it embalms time. It simply places time beyond the reach of its own decay.

Seen in this light, cinema appears to be the completion in time of photography's objectivity. A film is no longer limited to preserving the object sheathed in its moment, like the intact bodies of insects

from a bygone era preserved in amber. It frees Baroque art from its convulsive catalepsy. For the first time, the image of things is also the image of their duration, like a mummification of change.

The categories[6] of resemblance that define the photographic image thus also determine its aesthetic qualities with respect to painting. Photography's aesthetic potential resides in the way it reveals reality. A reflection on a rain-swept sidewalk, a child's gesture—these are things that do not depend upon me to perceive them in the fabric of the outside world. Only the impassive lens, in stripping the object of habits and preconceived notions, of all the spiritual detritus that my perception has wrapped it in, can offer it up unsullied to my attention and thus to my love. In the photograph, a natural image of a world we are no longer able to see, nature finally does more than imitate art: it imitates the artist.

Nature can surpass even the artist in creative power. The aesthetic world of the painter is of a different order from the outside world. The picture frame encloses a substantially and essentially different microcosm. The existence of the photographed object, on the contrary, shares in the existence of the model, like a fingerprint. In this way, photography plays a real part in natural creation, rather than substituting for it.

This is something that Surrealism foresaw when it turned to the gelatin of the photographic plate to create its visual teratology. The Surrealists' aesthetic goal was inseparable from the machine-like impact of the image on our minds. The logical distinction between the imaginary and the real was eliminated. Every image should be experienced as an object and every object as an image. Photography was thus a privileged technology for Surrealist practice because it produces an image which shares in the existence

of nature: a photograph is a really existing hallucination. This is proved by Surrealist painting's use of *trompe l'oeil* and its meticulous attention to detail.

Photography is thus manifestly the most important event in the history of the visual arts. Both deliverance and fulfilment, it enabled Western painting to rid itself once and for all of its obsession with realism and to rediscover its aesthetic autonomy. Despite its scientific pretexts, Impressionist realism is the opposite of *trompe l'oeil*. Colour, moreover, could not devour form until the latter no longer had an important imitative role to play. And when, with Cézanne, form took back the canvas, it was no longer in the service of perspective's illusionist geometry. The mechanical image, by providing painting with a rival which went beyond Baroque resemblance to achieve identity with the model, compelled painting to transform itself into an object.

Pascal's condemnation of painting as vanity has itself become vain, since photography allows us to admire in its reproduction an original for which our eyes would otherwise not have filled us with love, and to see in painting a pure object whose motive is no longer reference to nature.

Then again, film is a language.

Originally published as 'Ontologie de l'image photographique' in Les Problèmes de la peinture, *ed. Gaston Diehl (Lyon: Confluences, 1945) and reprinted with substantial modifications under the same title in volume one of* Qu'est-ce que le cinéma? *in 1958.*

Notes

1. It would be interesting, from this perspective, to examine the rivalry in the illustrated press in the period 1890–1910 between photographic reportage, which was still in its infancy, and drawings. The latter in particular satisfied the Baroque need for the dramatic (consider *Le Petit Journal illustré*). The sense of the photograph as a document emerged only gradually. Today there is a degree of saturation and a return to the dramatic drawing, as seen in *Radar*. (A French journal aimed at a working-class readership published in the 1940s—Trans.)

2. Communist critics in particular, before attaching so much importance to expressionist realism in painting, should perhaps stop speaking of it as it might have been discussed in the eighteenth century, before photography and cinema. It may be of little importance that Soviet Russia produces poor painting, as long as it makes good films: Eisenstein is its Tintoretto. But it is significant that Aragon would have us believe that its Tintoretto is, rather, Repin. (Ilya Repin [1844–1930], Russian painter seen as a model for the doctrine of socialist realism in art—Trans.)

3. It would be useful to study the psychology of minor visual genres such as the moulding of death masks, in which a degree of reproductive automatism is manifest. In this sense, we could see photography as a kind of moulding, taking an impression of an object through the use of light.

4. But are 'the people' as such really the cause of the divorce between style and resemblance we see today? Don't people identify, rather, with the bourgeois mentality born alongside industry that served as a foil for nineteenth-century artists—a mentality we could define as having reduced art to its psychological categories? Historically speaking, doesn't photography, moreover, take up the mantle of Baroque realism directly? In this sense, Malraux is quite right when he remarks that photography's first concern was only

to imitate art by naïvely copying painterly style. Niépce and most pioneer photographers used it to imitate engravings. They dreamt of creating works of art without being artists, through decalcomania. (A printmaking technique involving the direct transfer of an image from one sheet of paper to another—Trans.) It was typically and essentially a bourgeois project, but one which confirms my thesis, by multiplying it by a factor of two in a sense. At first, photographers naturally saw works of art as the model most worthy of imitation. In their eyes, art already imitated nature, 'but better'. Some time was needed before photographers, in becoming artists themselves, came to understand that they could copy only nature.

5. Here we should mention the psychology of the relic and the souvenir, which also benefit from a transfer of reality that is part and parcel of the mummy complex. I will remark only that the Holy Shroud of Turin achieves a synthesis of the relic and the photograph.

6. I use the term 'category' in the sense it is employed by Henri Gouhier in his book on the theatre (*L'Essence du théâtre* [Paris: Plon, 1943]—Trans.), in which he distinguishes between the dramatic and the aesthetic. Just as dramatic tension has no artistic value, the degree of the imitation's perfection has nothing to do with beauty; it is merely the raw material with which the artistic is fashioned.

The Myth of Total Cinema

Georges Sadoul's admirable new book[1] on the origins of cinema leaves us with the paradoxical sense that the relationship between economic and technological developments on the one hand and the imagination of cinema's inventors on the other has been inverted, despite the author's Marxist beliefs. It seems to me that in this instance we need to reverse historical causality, which proceeds from the economic substructure to the ideological superstructure, and view fundamental technological discoveries as fortunate and propitious accidents essentially secondary to the initial conceptions of cinema's inventors. Cinema is an idealist phenomenon; men's idea of it existed fully equipped in their brains, as in Plato's higher world, and the tenacious resistance of matter to the idea is more striking than technology's prompting of the inventor's imagination.

Cinema, moreover, owes practically nothing to the scientific mind. Its inventors were not at all scientists (with the exception of Marey,[a] and he was interested only in analysing movement and not in the inverse process of recreating it). Even Edison, in the end, was nothing more than a brilliant Jack-of-all-trades, a giant of the Concours Lépine.[b] Niépce,[c] Muybridge,[d] Leroy,[e] Joly,[f] Demenÿ[g] and Louis Lumière himself were obsessive eccentrics, handymen or, at best, clever industrialists. As for the marvellous and sublime

Translator's Notes

Ontology of the Photographic Image

a. Charles Lebrun (1616–1690), painter to the king from 1662.

b. Bazin is quoting Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), *Pensées* (1660).

c. Bazin is evidently referring to André Malraux's essay 'Esquisse pour une psychologie du cinéma,' originally published in *Verve* 8 (June 1940), in both the English- and French-language editions of the journal, and republished in French, in revised form, as a monograph of the same title in 1946, a year after the publication of Bazin's Ontology essay (bibliographical information for all publications mentioned in this note follows below). The quotation given here, however, is quite simply not to be found in Malraux's essay, nor is it in any of the three other essays on art he wrote for *Verve* in the late 1930s. The present translator has also consulted Malraux's speeches before 1945, his preface to a book on Indochina by Andrée Viollis (*Indochine S.O.S.* [Paris: Gallimard, 1935]) in which he mentions film, his novels *La Condition humaine* (*Man's Fate*, 1933), *Le Temps du mépris* (*Days of Wrath*, 1935) and *L'Espoir* (*Man's Hope*, 1937)—Malraux enjoyed including the occasional disquisition on matters art historical in his novels—and a detailed description of a draft manuscript of the *Esquisse* by the editors of Malraux's collected works, all to no avail.

It is tempting, but purely speculative, to conclude that Bazin has somehow garbled the only line in Malraux's essay that bears any similarity to this quotation, which reads as follows:

> Ce n'était pas une découverte 'artistique' qui devait permettre la possession du mouvement. Ce

> qu'appellent les gestes de noyés du monde baroque n'est pas une modification de l'image, c'est une succession d'images. Il n'est pas étonnant qu'un art tout de gestes et de sentiments, obsédé de théâtre, finisse dans le cinéma ... (Malraux 1940, p. 69. Slight modifications were made for the 1946 edition [n.p.], the basis of later editions and translations, including that found in volume four of the *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 7.)

This could be translated as:

> No 'artistic' discovery enabled artists to possess movement. What the Baroque called out for, like a drowning man, was not a modification of the image but rather a series of images. It is not surprising that an art of gesture and emotion, obsessed with theatricality, would end up in cinema ...

Compare this with the quotation found in Bazin's essay: 'Le cinéma n'est que l'aspect le plus évolué du réalisme plastique dont le principe est apparu avec la Renaissance, et a trouvé son expression limite dans la peinture Baroque' (Bazin 1958, p. 10), which has been translated here as 'cinema is only the most advanced form of visual realism, a principle which first appeared in the Renaissance and then found its ultimate expression in Baroque painting'.

Again, the source of Bazin's quotation of Malraux is a mystery to the present translator, who concludes, pending evidence to the contrary, that it was never written by Malraux. In any event, contrary to Bazin's assertion, it appears in no known version of the *Esquisse* or his other articles for *Verve*.

What is particularly curious about this matter, however, is that the

comment by Malraux about film and the Baroque quoted above was actually part of an argument by Malraux which Bazin, throughout the present essay, is at pains to refute—culminating in the final sentence, added by Bazin in 1958 for publication in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* and an echo of the one-sentence paragraph that concludes Malraux's essay. 'Par ailleurs, le cinéma est une industrie' ('Then again, film is an industry'), Malraux had declared; 'D'autre part le cinéma est un langage' ('But then, film is a language'), Bazin replies. One of Malraux's principal arguments in the *Esquisse* is that film is the culmination of a quest in visual art, which reached a fever pitch in the Baroque, for a method of depicting movement. Cinema's achievement, he claims, was the depiction not just of movement within the frame but of movement *between* frames. Cinema's artistry is the product not of the technology of the camera but of human agency. Malraux thus comes down firmly on the side of what Bazin, in his essay 'The Evolution of Film Language' included in the present volume, describes as 'those who put their faith in the image' as opposed to those, like himself, 'who put their faith in reality'. Hence Bazin's fundamental aversion to an argument such as the following by Malraux, which comes a few short paragraphs after the comment quoted above and seemingly misquoted by Bazin, if my hypothesis is correct, in a manner that distorts its true meaning and significance:

> Pour que se continuât le grand effort de représentation enlisé dans le baroque, il fallait arriver à l'indépendance de la caméra par rapport à la scène représentée. Le problème n'était pas dans le mouvement d'un personnage à l'intérieur d'une image, mais dans la succession des plans. Il ne devait pas être résolu techniquement par une transformation de l'appareil, mais artistiquement, par l'invention du découpage.

> Tant que le cinéma n'était que le moyen de reproduction des personnages en mouvement, il n'était ni plus ni moins un art que la phonographie ou la photo de reproduction. Dans un espace fixe, généralement une scène de théâtre véritable ou imaginaire, des acteurs évoluaient, représentaient une pièce ou une farce que l'appareil se borner à enregistrer. La naissance du cinéma en tant que moyen d'expression (et non de reproduction) date de la destruction de cet *espace fixe*; de l'époque où le découpeur imagina la division de son récit en plans.... Le moyen de reproduction du cinéma c'est la photo mobile [1946 edition: était la photo qui bougeait], mais son moyen d'expression, c'est la succession des plans. (Malraux [1940], p. 70; *Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 7–8; emphasis in the original.)

It should be noted that the existing English translation of this text, originally published in *Verve* with no translator credited, appears to be by Stuart Gilbert, Malraux's long-time translator; parts of it appear in Gilbert's later translations of Malraux's art history books. This version is the only known English translation and was reprinted in the 1950s and again in the 1960s, still uncredited, in a volume edited by Susanne Langer. It is, unfortunately, virtually worthless; it renders the French *plan* (shot), for example, as 'plane.' I thus provide my own translation of it here:

> For the great representational effort that had become bogged down in the Baroque to proceed, the camera had to be made independent of the scene being depicted. The problem was not the movement of characters within an image but rather in the series of shots. It was not resolved by technical means, through a transformation of the camera, but artistically, through the invention of *découpage*.
>
> As long as cinema was merely a means of depicting characters in motion, it was neither more nor less an art than phonograph records or photographs that copy nature. Actors moved about in an enclosed space, generally a real or imaginary theatre stage, performing a play or comedy sketch which the camera simply recorded. The birth of cinema as a means of expression (and not of reproduction) dates from the destruction of this *fixed space*, from the time when the *découpeur* imagined the story divided into shots.... Cinema's means of reproduction is the moving image, but its means of expression is the series of shots.

(It is interesting to note in passing, with respect to the discussion of the term *découpage* in Bazin's thought in translator's note [a] to the essay 'William Wyler, the Jansenist of Mise en Scène' included in the present volume, that Malraux uses the term here in a rather more prosaic sense than Bazin, as shot breakdown. In a footnote to the word 'shot' in the above passage, Malraux remarks that 'the shot is the unit of filmmaking. Shots change when the camera changes position. *Découpage* is creating a series of shots. The average shot length today is ten seconds' [*ibid.*]. As in Bazin, however, we find here the notion that shot changes in the finished film are a product of mise en scène—a change in camera position—and not editing.)

Malraux's declaration of faith in the shot as the 'unit of filmmaking' and in the primordial role of the movement between shots was inimical to everything Bazin believed. In the Ontology essay, he confronts it head-on a few paragraphs after 'quoting' Malraux when he states:

> Moreover, the important thing about the passage from Baroque painting to photography is not mere material improvement (for a long time, photography was inferior to painting in recreating colour). It is, rather, psychological: photography completely satisfies our appetite for illusion by means of a process of mechanical reproduction in which there is no human agency at work. The solution lay not in the resulting work but rather in its genesis.

Sources: Malraux's *Verve* essay was republished in revised form in 1946 by Gallimard in Paris. This monograph was reprinted in a facsimile edition (still with unnumbered pages) by the Festival International du Film de Cannes in 1976 on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the festival and of the essay's definitive form. An abridged version is available in Denis Marion, ed., *André Malraux* (Paris: Seghers, 1970), while two complete and annotated versions in French have recently been published: Jean-Claude Larrat, ed., *Esquisse pour une psychologie du cinéma* (Paris: Nouveau monde, 2003), and Jean-Yves Tadié, ed., *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 4, *Écrits sur l'art* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004). An uncredited and unreliable English translation can be found in Susanne K. Langer, ed., *Reflections on Art: A Source Book of Writings by Artists, Critics and Philosophers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968 [1958]). Fragments of the *Esquisse* recycled in Malraux's various art history books of the period, translated by the otherwise generally reliable Stuart Gilbert, the likely translator of the version found in the Langer volume above, are similarly unusable. See for example *The Voices of Silence* (New York: Doubleday, 1953 [1952]). For the French edition of the present essay, see André Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, vol. 1, *Ontologie et langage* (Paris: Cerf, 1958).

d. Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (1765–1833), French physician considered by many, with Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, to be the inventor of photography.

e. In French, the camera obscura and the darkroom share the same name, *chambre noire*.

f. *Trompe l'esprit*, tricking the mind rather than the eye (*trompe l'oeil*).

The Myth of Total Cinema

a. Étienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904), French physiologist who began producing 'chronophotographic' images of human and animal motion in 1883.

b. The Concours Lépine, named after Louis Lépine, is an annual fair for amateur inventors held in France since 1903.

c. Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (1765–1833), French physician considered by many, with Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, to be the inventor of photography.

d. Eadweard Muybridge (Edward James Muggeridge, 1830–1904), British photographer resident in the United States. In 1872 he began work on a system for creating a series of still photographs to record animal motion, sponsored by the wealthy patron Leland Stanford.

e. Jean Aimé Leroy (1854–1932?), American photographer. Leroy claimed to have organised public film screenings (using Kinetoscope and other films) in New York in early 1895.

f. Henri-Joseph Joly (1866–1945), French inventor who joined with Charles Pathé in 1895 to construct motion picture cameras for Pathé's new firm.

g. Georges Demenÿ (1850–1917), Étienne-Jules Marey's principal assistant. Demenÿ went on to use his own invention, the Phonoscope, to record close-up images of a person speaking in 1892.

h. Charles-Émile Reynaud (1844–1918), French professor of natural science. Reynaud began public exhibition of his Praxinoscope