Filmic Representation and Realism in Bazin's Film Theory

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Renoir serves Bazin as a paradigm of those filmmakers who "put their faith in reality" instead of placing their "faith in the image".[1] In ascribing realism to Renoir's films, Bazin has several competing notions of film realism at work. Sometimes he describes Renoir as someone who is particularly successful in depicting social realities and suggests that this realism perhaps derives from Renoir's humanist inclinations. Bazin also analyzes the cinema of Renoir in terms of the psychological reality of viewing a film. But it is the notion of cinema as ontologically real that has priority in his analysis of Renoir's films and in Bazin's film theory more generally.

In this paper, I examine the nature of filmic representation that Bazin attributes to the films of Jean Renoir. Bazin locates cinematic realism in the capacity to represent what he believes to be the essential ambiguity of an event. In such devices as deep focus photography and sequence shots, Renoir has, according to Bazin, demonstrated the cinema's realistic possibilities. I argue that this account of Renoir depends on certain epistemological assumptions. For the central thesis about ambiguity entails a particular view about the nature of evidence for a belief. Bazin criticizes montage for implicitly holding that there is only one set of beliefs that correctly describes an event. In Renoir's films, Bazin finds no such presumption. The essential ambiguity of the world is reflected in that more than one set of beliefs equally well describes an event. Finally I suggest that there is a serious open problem about the realism that Bazin ascribes to Renoir's films. For it is difficult to reconcile these epistemic assumptions about the nature of evidence for a belief with realism about truth--namely, the thesis that the world uniquely determines what is true. Any view that does not accept the realist thesis about truth hardly merits the description of realist film theory, for arguably a minimal criterion of realism is that the cinema can represent the world in some way or other.

First, let us review several of Bazin's remarks in which he refers to Renoir's realism. In his discussion of film history during the thirties, Bazin attributes the legacy of the earlier silent realist cinema to Renoir:

> It is a fact that the talking film between 1930 and 1940 owes it [silent realism] virtually nothing save for the glorious and retrospectively prophetic exception of Jean Renoir. He alone in his searchings as a dirctor prior to_LA REGLE DU JEU forced himself to look back beyond the resources provided by montage and so uncovered the secret of a film form that would permit everything to be said without chopping the world up into little fragments,

that would reveal the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the unity natural to them.[2]

Renoir has accomplished this realist representation of the world through the use of deep focus photography and sequence shots:

> Jean Renoir had already clearly understood this [i.e., the connection between shallow focus and montage], as we see from a statement of his made in 1938 just after he had made LA BETE HUMAINE and LA GRAND ILLUSION and just prior to LA REGLE DU JEU: 'The more I learn about my trade the more I incline to direction in depth relative to the screen. The better it works, the less I use the line of set-up that shows two actors facing the camera like two well-behaved subjects posing for a still portrait. In his films, the search after composition in depth is, in effect, a partial replacement of montage by frequent panning shots and entrances. It is based on a respect for the continuity of dramatic space and, of course, of its duration.[3]

For Bazin, these features identify Renoir as someone who deliberately makes realist films.

In these texts, what is important is Bazin's analysis of the relation between film and reality. Realist filmmakers such as Renoir typically represent the real world in a particular way. Bazin says that "we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space."[4] I shall restrict my examination to this relation, although Bazin often speaks of the film spectator's psychological states and how he or she perceives film. It is the nature of filmic representation that is central to Bazin's film theory. There is a certain unavoidable distortion in reading Bazin this way since he is often an unsystematic film critic rather than someone who is developing a coherent theory about cinematic realism. By articulating a theory developed from Bazin's insights into the mimetic capacities of film, we ignore other passages that are apparently inconsistent with it. But this procedure is fair, first, because of the enormous import Bazin himself places on the nature of filmic representation, and, second, because most commentators generally formulate Bazin's view so that it is grounded in ontology. Bazin is said to be concerned with "cinema's relation to the real" or assume "the dependence of cinema on reality."[5]

So what precisely have Renoir and other realist filmmakers done in their work to represent features of reality? First, Renoir's "true cinematic realism" can be found in "the attention he pays to the importance of individual things in relation to one another."[6] For example, consider Bazin's analysis of LE CRIME DE M. LANGE. Not only does Bazin describe considerable use of depth of field in the film, but he also places this use within the context of an overall appreciation of mise en scene. Bazin says that this feature is especially true of the scene in which Lange kills Batala. The panning shot and camera movement emphasize the spatial relations

of the set. "It is," Bazin says, "the pure spatial expression of the entire *mise en scene*."[7] The realism here consists in properly representing actual spatial and temporal relations. Similarly in *LA REGLE DU JEU*, Renoir's sensitivity to the nature of actual events is said to be found in sequence shots and deep focus photography: "Never do we have this feeling [i.e., a belief that the image is artificial and preconceived] in *THE RULES OF THE GAME*, where the action plays hide-and-seek with the camera and the set, passing from pantry to the second floor, from the great salon to the smoking room, from the pantry to the corridors. In all this ceaseless action the slightest detail in this great complex of reality never ceases to be a living part of the rhythm..."[8] Bazin seems to be saying something like this. In his method of filmmaking, Renoir has respected the spatial and temporal relations of what is in front of the camera. In effect, the images in his film represent the space-time of events as whole and interdependent unities.

However, cinematic realism consists in more than representing the unity of events. It is important to see that Bazin also ascribes a particular thesis to events that are represented in realist cinema. He says that "depth of focus [and, we can assume, the other devices of realist cinema] reintroduced ambiguity into the structure of the image if not of necessity . . . at least as a possibility".[9] Taking Bazin literally, we can formulate the ambiguity thesis in the following rough way: a film representation is realist just in case the content of the representation is ambiguous. This ambiguity thesis commits Bazin to a stronger claim about filmic representation that is realist than simply a respect for the space-time integrity of actual events in the film image. An event can be coherent, continuous, and whole without, in principle, being ambiguous. As a matter of fact, even montage can represent the unity of events, despite Bazin's criticisms of this style. Bazin's discussion of Hollywood editing of the 1930s hints at his own recognition of this possibility. If a sufficient condition of film realism were the representation of the unity of real space-time, then montage could, in principle, be said to be realist. Since Bazin denies that montage filmmaking is realist, it follows that respecting space-time unity does not suffice for realism. Bazin is hardly clear himself on this matter, but there are enough texts discussing the ambiguity thesis so that it is plausible to attribute it to him. So we can characterize the necessary and sufficient conditions for realism in film for Bazin in terms of the ambiguity of the content of the representation.

Bazin's analysis of montage helps confirm the central role that the ambiguity thesis plays in his analysis. The representation of reality in montage assumes that events have "unity of meaning."[10] Of course, according to Bazin events do have unity at least in their spatial and temporal relations, so his criticism of montgage representation involves something other than a rejection of unity. Bazin says that "some other form of analysis [of dramatic events] is undoubtedly possible but then it would be another film."[11] He concludes that "montage by its very nature rules out

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ambiguity of expression."[12] What it seems that Bazin is rejecting about montage is the way in which events are represented as having a special kind of unity that they in fact do not have. By "unity" here, I read Bazin to be making a claim about the uniqueness of what we are warranted in believing about the event given the representation of it. Montage represents actual space-time in a way which requires only one and at most one description of an event. For a montage film to describe events differently demands a different series of shots. In his terms, it would be another film. This follows because in montage "the screen in fact presents us with a succession of tiny fragments called 'shots', whose choice, order, and length constitute precisely what we call the film *decoupage*."[13] But events, Bazin holds, are not really like this. We are perfectly well justified in describing them in different, perhaps even incompatible ways. Film representations that do not require that we rule out all but one description of the events that they depict in each case are more realistic. The ambiguity consists in what we are justified in accepting about the event that is represented. Realist cinema thus is ambiguous for Bazin because "the spectator perceives the ontological ambivalence of reality directly, in the very structure of its appearance."[14]

To recapitualte, Bazin's principal argument can be formulated in the following manner. Events are continuous and whole because of the nature of space-time. Their continuity, in particular, involves a certain type of ambiguity. Attention to *mise en scene* through such devices as deep focus photography and sequence shots enables film representations in realist cinema to preserve a similar ambiguity. So Renoir's films, at least those of the 1930s, are for Bazin clear instances of the realist cinema because of how they represent events. Renoir succeeds in respecting the ambiguity of nature.

By sketching Bazin's position in these terms, it is clear that the ambiguity thesis plays a central role in his understanding of realism. Moreover, we are now able to identify some of the assumptions that Bazin makes, because they ultimately derive from the ascription of ambiguity to realist representation. First, when Bazin states that events are ambiguous, he must mean that we are entitled to believe more than one possibility about individual events. *Ex hypothesi*, events themselves are unambiguous; otherwise, it would make little sense to speak of representing *the* event. Second, we also have already seen that this central point concerning realism is not about human psychology, although he occasionally speaks about psychological matters. So what I am proposing is the so-called ambiguity of events consists in how they properly represent the nature of evidential relations between persons and events. What is it about an event that justifies empirical propositions? Whatever it is, is preserved by the film representation of that event in realist cinema. Now the ambiguity thesis can be reformulated: a film representation is realist just in case the content of the representation justifies more than one set of empirical propositions

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and the event that is represented justifies the same set of propositions. The ambiguity thesis thus entails that at least two sets of beliefs about one event are equally warranted. It also follows that Bazin would not hold that all sets of beliefs are equally warranted. For all film representations would be equally good if any proposition about the event they represent were justified.

If the realism that Bazin finds in the cinema of Renoir depends on the preservation of certain evidential relations, then Bazin tacitly addresses epistemic questions. If asked about the nature of evidence for a particular set of empirical propositions describing an event, Bazin cannot specify the conditions under which a person would be justified in believing a proposition along Cartesian lines. A Cartesian epistemologist would explain why empirical beliefs are justified in terms of a foundational set of empirical propositions that are certain. All justified empirical beliefs are either members of the foundational set or derive their warrant from the foundational set. But because Bazin holds that events are ambiguous in the way that we have described, he cannot also hold that there is a set of absolutely certain propositions about the event. There must be at least one other radically different set of empirical propositions describing the event equally soundly, but incompatible with the first set. What justifies each empirical proposition about the event for Bazin must be its relationship with all the other members of the set of propositions describing the event. Whether or not a proposition is warranted on this view depends on whether it belongs to a set of propositions that is maximally comprehensive and coherent describing the event. Epistemologists call the second view about the nature of justification a coherence theory of evidence and contrast it with the Cartesian account. A coherentist accepts, at least in principle, the ambiguity thesis, because it is possible that there is more than one maximally comprehensive set of propositions about an event. There would be no way in terms of the event itself to adjudicate between two such incompatible descriptions. In short, what a person is justified in believing is, on this view, radically undetermined by the world.

Bazin locates in the style of filmmakers like Renoir a conception of filmic representation that is essentially realist. I have argued that the nature of Bazin's realism commits him to certain epistemological views about evidence. Finally, I want to indicate how his implicit views concerning evidence pose a serious difficulty for his realism. Realist art, according to the main tradition in Western aesthetics, represents nature or the world. Bazin's film realism falls within this tradition, for the basis of his theory is that film can represent events. Arguably, a minimal criterion for a theory about art to be called realism is that it somehow or other explains how works of art represent the world. The problem for Bazin can be formulated as follows. Is there any single event for a work of art to represent? Because of Bazin's assumptions about evidence and the nature of the ambiguity

thesis, there are at least two alternative descriptions of the event that are equally well justified. Which account then is *the* event? To put it somewhat cryptically, there are several event-descriptions, but no one event of which they are the description. To describe the event we have to use one of the incompatible versions of it. While not both of them can be true of the world, they are both equally justified by it. In other words, the world does not determine what is true of it, because there can be no reason on the basis of evidence to say one description is correct. Conceivably there might be extra-evidential criteria by which one or the other of the descriptions is selected to be true. But, given the coherence theory of evidence that Bazin holds, these criteria must either be unfounded or cohere with the maximally comprehensive set of propositions under consideration. If they are unfounded, why should we accept these criteria? If, on the other hand, we have some reason to believe them, they cannot be of assistance in selecting the true description of the event.[15] It seems then that the ambiguity thesis entails that Bazin must deny realism about truth; i.e., the view that he world uniquely determines empirical truths. But if he denies realism about truth, in what sense is there a world for film to represent? And if film does not tell us about *the* world on Bazin's view, why should we call it film realism at all? His epistemic assumptions thus lead to significant tensions for Bazin's film realism.[16]

NOTES

1. Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, I, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 24.
2. Bazin, p. 38.
3. Bazin, p. 34. For a nearly identical version of the same statement, see Andre Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, ed. Francois Truffaut (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 90.
4. Bazin, *Cinema*, pp. 13-14.
5. The first reference is to Brian Henderson, *A Critique of Film Theory* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980), p. 19; the second to J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories* (New York: Oxford Unversity Press), p. 137. But see James Monaco, *How to Read a Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 315, for a contrary view that Bazin's realism is "more a matter of psychology."
6. Bazin, *Renoir*, p. 84.
7. Bazin, *Renoir*, p. 46.
8. Bazin, *Renoir*, pp. 89-90.
9. Bazin, *Cinema*, p. 36.
10. Bazin, *Cinema*, p. 36.
11. Bazin, *Cinema*, p. 36.
12. Bazin, *Cinema*, p. 36.
13. Andre Bazin, *Orson Welles*, trans. Jonathan Rosenbaum (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 77.
14. Bazin, *Welles*, p. 80.
15. I have simplified matters somewhat so as to make clear the tension between a coherence theory of evidence and realism about truth. Some controversial attempts have been made to argue that coherentism does not commit one to denying realism about truth. See Nicholas Rescher, *The Coherence Therory of Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), ch. 3.
16. An interesting informal discussion of these tensions can be seen in W. V.

Quine, "Otherwordly," rev. of *Ways of Worldmaking*, by Nelson Goodman, *The New York Review of Books*, 23 November 1978, p. 25. Quine points out that Goodman argues for a plurality of worlds on the basis of his coherence theory of evidence. Hence Goodman denies realism about truth. On the other hand, Quine takes the position that the truth of physical theory is determined by the world.