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Interstices and Impurities in the Cinema: Art and Science

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Abstract: *Through a close analysis of Alain Resnais's* Mon Oncle d'Amerique *(1980), Angela Dalle Vacche argues that the French filmmaker interrogates the "humanity" of humans through art, science, and religion in the light of Andre Bazin's film theory. On the scientific side, Resnais's film clarifies Bazin's modified Darwinian scheme about the history of the cinema. As far as the religious aspect is concerned, for Bazin and Resnais, the cinema is an illusionistic perpetual motion machine that aligns projection with a pseudo-resurrection of those who were in front of the camera. Finally, in contrast to all the arts and media that precede and follow the cinema, the references to interwoven textiles in* Mon Oncle d'Amerique *validate Bazin's claim that cinema is not characterised by medium specificity.*

Hitherto dramatic literature has provided us with a doubtless exact knowledge of the human soul, but one which stands in the same relation to man as classical physics to matter—what scientists call macrophysics, useful only for phenomena of considerable magnitude. ... The emotional physics of a Proust is microscopic. But the matter with which this microphysics is concerned is on the inside. It is memory. The cinema ... presents man only in the present—to the "time lost and found" of Proust there corresponds in a measure the "time discovered" of Zavattini. André Bazin ("De Sica" 78).

Even before its technological translation into a man-made machine, photography had always existed in nature. Traces of leaves left on a sensitive surface bear witness to how light can contour an object and generate a visual record of its shape. In the aftermath of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, French film theorist André Bazin understood this photographic tracing to be an incarnational or a Christological event. A photograph always involves a dual process because it is the meeting ground of nature's artistry as drawing, on one side, and physics in the guise of energy, on the other.

The dialogue between religion and science unfolds throughout Bazin's essays, in such a way as to produce important observations about the difference of cinema in relation to the other arts and media. Bazin was a theorist of the real, as that which is unknowable, but occasionally manifests itself through the paradoxically dual nature of photography. He was interested in the metaphysical and moral implications of cinema. The aesthetics of the moving image and the history of art receive plenty of attention in his writings, but they are much less important to him. Notwithstanding this metaphysical and ethical slant, Bazin was sensitive to the mnemonic value of plastic artefacts. Only the Italian neorealist cinema of Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica,

Luchino Visconti, and Federico Fellini approximated Bazin's search for a perceptual realism of reciprocity, one based on the bidirectionality of sight. While the revelations of the real are unpredictable, Bazin disliked the concept of the supernatural. He was much more intrigued by the way in which the Surrealist taste for the uncanny might drive a wedge between the opacity of daily life and the mystery of the cosmos.



Figure 1: André Bazin. Courtesy Film Society of Lincoln Center.

Bazin's understanding of cinema maintains that realism is no superhuman eye or prosthesis. Comparable to a sensitive antenna, the medium of cinema can operate at a very basic level of human intuition and vision. In fact, the lens of the camera matches natural perception, even if it does look at the world in an impassive and objectifying way. It is cinema's documentary and cosmological receptivity that sets this popular art apart from all previous and subsequent media of mass communication within an anti-anthropocentric, childlike or virginal orientation.[1] My own term, anti-anthropocentric, here means that only a cinema that is open to randomness without forgetting mise en scène can make us "see" in a fresh way, as if it were happening for the very first time. In this respect, there is also an intriguing and unresearched subtext about blindness in Bazin's essays that calls for further research. This buried theme concerns a humankind that gropes in the darkness of its own self-confidence. By opposing outdated humanistic models, Bazin's film theory proposes a neohumanism that relies on

decentering the human element, on creating a ground zero to enable the revelation of the real, which is an ultimate Other we cannot know, but in whose existence we can only believe. What Bazin perceives to be the essence of the real of existence is Henri Bergson's *élan vital,* namely an intrinsic vital impulse shared by light and matter alike and relevant to the cosmos at large (Montebello).

Besides physics and chemistry in relation to the photographic event, one of the biological frameworks that Bazin uses for an essay written in 1953 is his association between the history of film language and Darwinian evolution (*What is Cinema?* 23–40). Considering that an art historian and film theorist of the silent period like Élie Faure stood for a French biocentric tradition, it is possible to see Bazin's film theory as a continuation of this biocentric and anti-anthropocentric approach—mixing art and science in Faure, and religion and science in Bazin—that tries to account for the creative energy that propels Bergson's *élan vital*.

Impurity of Art and Science against Medium Specificity

In keeping with the antibinary nature of photographic dualism, Bazin chose impurity over specificity to explain the cinema. For the French film theorist, photography draws an advantage from the absence of man (*What is Cinema?* 13). This rejection of a self-centred authorship resonates in cinema's recording ability to intertwine the world's randomness within collective industrial creativity during the process of filmmaking. In the end, cinema's impurity is about a mix of intention and chance, automatism and staging. Even when a director plans lots of little details to produce an effect of authenticity, the unfolding of these seemingly spontaneous touches is never entirely contrived. During every single take, accidental and staged events happen inside a present tense or "time discovered" that cannot be reversed. Whereas a future of death or decay is unavoidable for all species, time never returns—except in relation to the moving images of the cinema. Only the filmstrip running through the sprockets of the projector can engineer a life-like pseudo-resurrection, projection after projection. The static images of photography preserve, but do not embalm the temporality of life in motion. By contrast, digital imaging, even when it is referential, is man-made, malleable, spatial and computational, while it does not record. Thus, it is not always possible to know for sure whether digital imaging documents whatever was staged or happened by chance in front of the filming camera or creates ex novo something added at the computer console later on.

Although the medium strives towards a death-defying *miraculum ex machina*, the possibility of perpetual motion is an irrational illusion.[2] Perpetual motion means that work is continuously done without an external supply of energy. Needless to say, the projector is hidden inside a booth to better trigger the illusion of an immanent or autonomous motion. Perpetual motion has basic material problems that Bazin was clearly aware of. Most notable is the fact that, to work, such a miraculous machine must violate the first law and the second law of thermodynamics, or both of them simultaneously. The first law states that the change in the internal energy of a system is equal to the heat added to the system minus the work done by that system. This law outlaws perpetual motion of the first kind, which produces the impossible miracle of work without energy. The second law says that, in any cyclic process, the entropy will either increase or remain the same. There are several definitions of entropy. The most applicable,

in this case, is that entropy is a measure of the amount of energy or charging that cannot be used later to do more work.

Any working machine must use some form of fuel or energy. This energy cannot be fully recovered and used to do more work, because that would be a direct violation of the second law of thermodynamics. Thus, an impossible machine that would be able to recover leftover energy would be called a perpetual motion machine of the second kind. There is also a third type of resurrection or perpetual motion machine, which is not expressly prohibited by the laws of thermodynamics, and which is most comparable to the irrational illusion of perpetual life in the cinema. This type of machine is designed in such a way that, once it is set in motion, it will continue moving forever due to the inertia present in its system.

Historically, this third type of machine took the form of the wheel, with some weighting system applied to it. As one segment of the weights is turning due to gravity, the opposing segment of the machine is being moved to a new position. In this new position, the opposition of the latter segment to the former is reduced to a minimum, while allowing it to still provide a rotational movement at the correct time. The analogy between the film reel and the moving wheel does not require any further explanation. Yet, it is electricity, instead of a system of weights that makes the film reel run until the full length of the celluloid strip has gone through the projector's shutter. This ancient idea of the ever-moving cycle of life hides inside the shape of the reel or the "wheel" of film.

Nevertheless, the construction of this machine without electricity is impossible, for neither a molecular organism nor a mechanical machine will ever be able to achieve the ideal of perpetual motion or everlasting life. Corrosion, decay and contingency rule over bodies and gadgets. Even in modernity, interconnectedness between the organic and the mechanical is fundamental to motion and survival. Whether an organism or a machine is involved, each one of these entities involves some imperfection. By combining the organic and the inorganic, the mechanical and the natural, cinema thrives on a symbiotic exchange to defeat stillness and death through perpetual motion.

The lifelike illusionism of the cinema feeds our irrational belief in the possibility that a photographically based medium might save us from disappearing forever. In other words, cinema is an "idealist" or "essentialist" medium, as Bazin explains in his 1946 essay "The Myth of Total Cinema". Its illusionism is rooted in the "mummy complex" of preserving appearances for the sake of memory's duration. This stress on how cinema is indispensable to the preservation of lived experience, in order to placate our fear of the void, is quite different from Plato's contempt for the moving shadows duping the chained slaves. Without ever citing Plato's myth of the cave throughout the entirety of his writings, Bazin concludes "The Myth of Total Cinema" with references to the myth of Icarus, the internal combustion engine, the second law of thermodynamics, and Newtonian gravity. Through science, Bazin demonstrates that cinema's technology fulfils a psychological need, in the face of the scientific impossibility of a perpetual motion machine (*What is Cinema?* 22).

Besides irrational belief, the cinema also involves a space-time duality or relational exchange producing motion. To edit means to inject Bergson's *élan vital* between the shots. Yet

editing is also about control, in the sense that the way it is carried out makes a difference in the sequencing of images and in cinema's analogical, albeit asymptotical relation to the elusive Real. It is in this particular field—film editing—where Alain Resnais received his training and started his career. A filmmaker famous for his careful planning, he has stated: "the film alone is the true director, because it makes itself" (qtd. in Thomas, "L'Atelier d'Alain Resnais").[3] In contrast to cinema, all the other art forms align human creativity with making, and with a controlling process. Keener on finding what already exists in the world than on constructing something out of nothing, the nonhuman lens of the filming camera intensifies presence. Akin to human perception, this optical assembly of lenses inside the camera intercepts the invisible, the intangible and the infinitesimal. The lens of the camera involves a radical way of seeing anew, not because it increases human vision or runs up against natural perception. It simply deflects subjective physiological perception into an objective, levelling and mechanical vision of centre and margin, high and low, creativity and automatism. For Bazin, cinema's objectification is ontologically central to the absence of the creative hand in photography, so that the concept of medium specificity in cinema cannot hold, because of this medium's equalising vocation and technological origin. Moving onto a larger scale, were we to use the lens of cinema to interrogate life on earth, where does the human fit in relation to the zoological or the botanical?

An attempt to answer this question runs through Alain Resnais's *Mon oncle d'Amérique* (1980). Resnais's film is explicitly about art and science, which also feature prominently in Bazin's *What is Cinema?* Well versed in the history of aesthetics, Bazin assigns specificity to all the arts, but he never does so with the cinema. For him, literature is the medium of introspection and time.[4] And theatre is the medium of performance in the present tense, with physical objects in real space. Halfway between a fictional melodrama about suffering and a scientific documentary on behaviour, Resnais's *Mon oncle d'Amérique* includes the nonfictional character of scientist Henri Laborit. This French Nobel Prize winner conducts experiments with electricity, while he trains rats to recognise danger signals. Laborit's animals live in little cages with internal, movable gates. This iconography of barriers extends to Resnais's handling of his own human characters in *Mon oncle d'Amérique*. Doorknobs, windows, tables and telephone chords are signs of disconnection or hostility. Laborit's verbal commentary about the behaviour of animals is authoritative, but also limited to the sterile environment of his laboratory.

In line with Laborit's Darwinian thesis that each being recapitulates the lineage of an organism, Resnais is humorous enough to play with surreal/grotesque images. He shows two humans with big rat heads fighting each other in an office. Obviously, the difference between the instinctive animal and the allegedly rational human being is based on the latter's sense of agency, language, and self-consciousness. But, as they strive for happiness, love, power and success, Resnais's human characters can be, by turns, irrational and thoughtful; most frequently, his characters are a mixture of the two. Notwithstanding agency and language, the film's title gives away the most profound and important difference between a human and an animal. It has to do with our awareness of life as suffering towards death, set against our unwillingness to give up our dreams—namely, the proverbial American uncle that solves all problems (Beylie 6).

Resnais's depiction of human behaviour is sufficiently multifaceted to undermine Laborit's distinction between what is an animal and what is a human. While these two living species are different from each other, they are nevertheless mutually related. Through his three

key concepts of natural selection, randomness and survival of the fittest, Darwin's groundbreaking positivism aims to explain change over time in a diversifying, yet mechanical way. Interested as he is in randomness, Bazin does embrace Darwin. Yet, as a Catholic thinker, he rejects the survival of the fittest for the sake of intersubjectivity with the Other, as long as this Other engages in the same level of effort within a dual, anti-anthropocentric approach. For Bazin, natural selection, applied to the human realm, is too utilitarian a notion, so that this Darwinian concept applies to the cinema only to the extent that this popular art form depends on profit at the box office.[5]

Inasmuch as Bazin upholds a modified version of a Darwinian evolutionary model, he can be open to the analysis of emerging or little-known film genres, such as the art documentary, experimental animation, animal and children's fairy-tales, exploration and medical documentaries. Darwin's model, however, is not sufficient to fully figure out what a human is, in contrast to plants and animals. Likewise, aesthetic models derived from the history of art fail to account for the hybrid and nonspecific nature of the cinema. Darwin's focus lies in anatomical form. As a nineteenth-century thinker, he was aware of the nervous system in animals, but his tools to analyse the difference between the animal brain and the human mind were limited.

In Resnais's film, Laborit argues that vegetative, animal and human forms are hierarchically arranged as far as the emergence of a motion-inclined nervous system leading to an animal brain and, through a neocortex, to a human mind. According to Laborit's linear sequence, humans and animals are more complex than vegetation. Plants are physiochemical beings, because they do not move by themselves; they have no nervous system, and they feel no pain. Water and air can make plants move, but they are grounded in the earth. Due to their congenital stillness, in *Mon oncle d'Amérique* Resnais turns his plants into pictorial photographs. Shot from the top down, these images look like abstract paintings.

Laborit's absolute rankings—with flora at the bottom, fauna in the middle, and humans at the top—contrast with Resnais's editing and Bazin's impurity; the scientist's model is too much based on cause and effect, and on conditioning with stimulus and response. Resnais's Bazinian definition of human impurity or moral complexity surfaces from the double title of his shooting script, published in 1981 in the pages of *L'Avant-scène Cinéma*: the first half of the title reads "1+1=3" (Beylie); this implies that human behaviour falls outside the abstract and symbolic conventions of mathematics. The other half of the title reads: "The Sleepwalkers" (Beylie 6–7). Indeed, this wording is about automatism and loss of self-consciousness, because Resnais's characters can also behave like Laborit's rats. Often, they repeat their choices according to deeply absorbed patterns of behaviour. These choices are based not only on the characters' nervous system, with sensations and memories, but also on the conditions of their birth, their upbringing, their religion, class, gender and profession. For Bazin, origins matter, but not to the point that they are forever binding. Daily experience and the cinema alike are nonspecific and unstable, because they are either alive or lifelike and, as such, they involve exception, chance, surprise, interruption and discovery.

In Resnais's *Mon oncle d'Amérique*, human characters are as important as the references to different media. By using Resnais's film as a testing ground, it is legitimate to ask: which kind of modified Darwinian evolutionary model does Bazin's impure cinema propose in contrast to

Laborit's? For Bazin, cinema is not only impure through its incorporation of literature and theatre, but it also situates itself in the interstices among living species such as the motionless plant, the animal's instinct to move and survive, and the human struggle to endure suffering. Were we to think beyond Resnais's film, one could argue that the ontogeny of the cinema recapitulates the phylogeny of these various living species through the multiple and architecturally nonlinear components of the cinematic apparatus.

To begin with, the screen of moving images, for example, functions as a nervous system. The movie theatre requires a plantlike grounding of motionless spectators. The projector's illumination of the screen and animation of still images produces motion—the pulsing heart of film—through an illusion of life and presence. Motion on screen becomes an emotional experience for the plantlike spectator. The latter, in turn, becomes an animal-plant hybrid, namely a carnivorous plant that brings back to mind the scientific references of F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*, 1922). But what is most remarkable is the way in which, through cinema, the animal-plant spectator evolves into a special kind of animal-human, and finally into a human with a critical mind of its own.



Figure 2: The pulsating heart. *Mon oncle d'Amérique* (Alain Resnais, 1980). New Yorker Video, 2000. Screenshot.

At the beginning of *Mon oncle d'Amérique*, a red plastic heart is pulsing away, while Laborit's voiceover explains that the one and only motive shared by all species in regard to existence is staying alive: namely, preserving one's own original structure. To say the least, Resnais's cardiac introduction is ironic, because, by aligning the motions of the heart with the repetition of life, he proposes an untenable combination. The corrosive impact of time passing on the human heart is unavoidable. Through Laborit's scientific authority, Resnais's preservationist ontology of the pulsing heart does depend on plastic, but it contains the seed of its own destruction. In the worlds of physics and biology, the perpetual motion of a plastic heart does not exist, whereas the plastic material is Resnais's equivalent of decomposing celluloid in film. Worth mentioning is that in 1958, three years after his controversial film about the Holocaust, *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1955), Resnais made a stunning industrial documentary, *Le Chant du styrène* (1959), about a plastics factory specialising in polystyrene. For this particular project, in contrast to Bazin's nonlinear evolution of film language, Resnais relied on a cyclical model in reverse, rather than Darwin's linear and teleological one. In fact, he started the film

with beautiful finished products and traced all these design objects back to their original raw material.

As we learn from his 1952 essay "In Defense of Mixed Cinema", originally published in a Swiss anthology, André Bazin never associated the cinema with aesthetic purity. In fact, Bazin's impurity stands for a nonhierarchical, antibinary dialogue with the other arts. This dialogue is evolutionary and nonlinear, because it can include new twigs, dead roots, detours, reversals, missing links and even the special case of the Hollywood "remake" as anti-evolutionary repetition.[6] Furthermore, for Bazin, the encounter between cinema and the arts is more intricate and surprising than the two paradigms which are relevant to twentieth-century modernity. These two models are: Richard Wagner's primitive fusion and loss of self through the *gesamtkunstwerk*, and G. E. Lessing's emphasis on isolation among the arts in his *Laocoön* (1776).[7] The concept of "specificity" comes from this second, foundational text. Lessing argues that poetry and painting must remain separate and self-referential in order to fulfil their respective vocations. Both approaches are clearly incompatible with the dual and anti-anthropocentric nature of photography. Lessing is all about artistic self-centredness while Wagner glorifies an irrational, primitive Other at the expense of critical self-consciousness.



Figure 3: Boy reading in a tree. *Mon oncle d'Amérique*.
New Yorker Video, 2000. Screenshot.

To return to *Mon oncle d'Amérique*, Bazin's and Resnais's nonlinear, antibinary and nonhierarchical evolutionary model emerges from the episode of the child-plant in *Mon oncle d'Amérique*. This surreal montage occurs when we see Jean, one of Resnais's protagonists, as a boy, reading his favourite comic book inside a plant, under the sun. The comic strip is a sort of motionless and, therefore, plantlike kind of cinema. For Laborit, animals are experimentally more interesting than plants. The child-plant, however, shows that a new form of impurity can defy the scientist's ranking. The point here is that, just like the concept of specificity, the idea of rank leads to separation. In other words, all living entities need each other, and interconnectedness is open to all combinations. Still, the difference of humans in contrast to the rest of nature lies in moral grounds. Much more autonomous than animals or plants, humans, according to Resnais, have choice or "free will" (Beylie 7). Humans are, thus, morally responsible or accountable as far as not repeating the injustices of the past.

Comparable to the rejuvenating impact of the cinematic lens, the child in Bazin's film theory and in Resnais's film stands for a new way of looking at things (see Dalle Vacche, "Directing Children"). By becoming plantlike and feeding his imagination off the sun, the little Jean joins the chemical process of photosynthesis, which Laborit describes earlier in the film. But what is the point of an analogy between photosynthesis and childhood? In principle, just as photosynthesis produces the oxygen that enables growth on the earth, a child's way of seeing is so unbiased that it releases a breath of fresh air. It is the nondiscriminating, but also amoral, receptivity of childhood that the cold lens of the cinema can match. Yet one could easily argue that Jean's childhood, or fresh start, is not aligned with photosynthesis or breathing oxygen into his parents' stale literary tastes through the boy's comic books. In his particular case, the rejuvenating impact of photosynthesis coincides with no fresh air or oxygen, but rather with an amoral longing for cruelty and a ground zero. The young boy is raised in an environment as secluded as Laborit's laboratory, where his grandfather teaches him to kill and eat crabs. The only inhabitant of his island, the old man despises the healing power of science and practices on a daily basis the most domineering version of Darwin's survival of the fittest. In the footsteps of his grandfather, Jean will turn Darwinism into a deadly hobby. As a young boy, he fantasises about killing his own father; he endangers a turtle by turning it upside down; and he reads a comic strip about an orphan child who becomes a millionaire and owes nothing to anybody. As a wealthy adult, Jean turns into a leisure hunter, appearing in a sequence that Resnais clearly wants to resonate with Jean Renoir's cruel hunting party from *The Rules of the Game* (*La Règle du jeu*, 1939).

The Difference of Impure Cinema in Relation to the Arts

The narrative structure of Resnais's *Mon oncle d'Amérique* is complex enough to require some description as far as the multiple connections between objects and humans, humans in relation to movie stars, humans and media, animals and humans. By standing, so to speak, with one foot inside the film and with another foot outside, Resnais oscillates between detached observation and creative self-investment. He promotes contingency, while ensuring absolute control by keeping the actors separate from his editing decisions. In addition, by making sure that he never writes his own films, Resnais disempowers himself by letting his actors' performances bring the film to life. His theatrical mise en scène parallels his love for literature, but his preference for custom-made musical scores imposes an abstract edge to his quasi-documentary use of natural locations in *Mon oncle d'Amérique*. To tease and facilitate his audience, Resnais signposts his narrative with static inserts of objects which, in turn, fulfil multiple functions. These shots of still objects may point to the characters' psychological roots, to their artistic and professional ambitions, or to a self-referential reading of the film itself.

In the film, a manual coffee grinder and a bicycle wheel refer to the reel of film, but the bicycle is also linked to a character whose difficult birth ties him down to the rural world he wishes to transcend. A set of Russian dolls summarises how, according to Darwinian evolution, for Laborit, Resnais and Bazin the human body contains different animal levels inside itself, from the reptile to the mammal. Alternatively, as soon as one big Russian doll becomes a series of smaller ones, this line-up spells out one character's need to gain approval from a group. A

sewing machine, a pair of scissors and a thistle refer to the opposition between the manual and the mechanical, on one side, and to the mechanical analogy between film editing and sewing, on the other. All these objects are also about the way in which the textile industry shapes the lives of two of the protagonists. Hardly anything could be more interstitial than fabric or cloth, while Resnais's interest in textiles might be due to the ways in which cinema—in textile-like fashion—occupies an intermediate space between the living and the dead, the human and the nonhuman, the body and the world, Self and Other. If for Bazin a photograph is comparable to a mummy, then, for Resnais, cinema's embalming of duration becomes a moving quilt of shots.

Besides using the same object in multiple ways, Resnais attaches a margin of unpredictability to his citation of film clips. He inserts black-and-white footage of film stars to show how cinema can model, but also reinvent human behaviour beyond biological origins and social conditioning. Indeed, Resnais's three protagonists fall into psychological patterns that mirror their favourite movie stars. First, Jean (Roger Pierre), who is wealthy but rather passive, does not rebel enough against his family background. He identifies with Danielle Darrieux, a French actress of the 1930s who was accused of collaborating with the enemy. Second, Janine (Nicole Garcia), who is adventurous and generous, thinks of herself as a female Jean Marais. Through him, she is always coming to the rescue of the poor and the weak, even when her impulsive generosity clashes with her romantic wishes. Finally, René (Gérard Depardieu) finds his alter ego in Jean Gabin, a mixture of the idealistic loner before the war and of the decent petit-bourgeois boss after the war. In contrast to the two male protagonists, Janine's attachment to Jean Marais is not her first love from the cinema. As a child, she adopts Sacha Guitry's protean screen persona, which her post-Second World War school system condemns due to this performer's alleged collaboration during the Occupation. Despite her teacher's disapproval of Guitry, Janine remains eager to perform at all costs. In fact, during family dinners, she masters Paul Éluard's lengthy poem *Liberté, j'écris ton nom* (1942), which her Jewish Communist father approves of.

While objects can refer to the characters as well as to the medium of film itself, the human alter egos generated by the film stars produce negative as well as positive effects. Again, cause and effect cannot hold up inside Resnais's maze of images. *Mon oncle d'Amérique* defies satisfying conclusions. The slippery status of signs and the proliferation of melodramatic coincidences suggest that human nature is a mystery—one called the soul or free will.

By contrast, for Laborit, human behaviour is the mathematical equation between the self and all its others. The latter assembly of alter egos vanishes when an individual dies. Whatever the case may be, all these concepts about the "humanity" of humans resist scientific explanation, while they find indirect forms of representation through art. In the attempt to help her lover, Jean, against a dishonest friend, Janine makes things worse and triggers a kidney crisis in her partner. Later on, however, it is Janine's timely phone call that rescues René from death after his suicide attempt. The point here is that human patterns of behaviour do not fit a simple binary opposition of positive and negative poles, analogous to the punishments and rewards Laborit deploys for his rats.

Resnais's three protagonists also cultivate different media: the wealthy Jean has literary ambitions, while he develops his career as the director of the national radio network. Sensitive to

the power of oral broadcasts, he shares the realm of spoken language with the beautiful Janine with whom he has an affair. The latter loves the theatre, achieving her best performance by reciting eighteenth-century letters about an ideal love that she will never find. In *Mon oncle d'Amérique*, painting is replaced by cooking. This is a hobby that the third protagonist, René, pursues with no waste and with elegant results. No matter how revolting the viscera of animals may be, René uses everything to make exquisite dishes. This conservative approach is odd, because René is the character who, in his business career, has rebelled the most against his rural background.

In contrast to Jean and Janine's placement in the written and spoken languages through literature and theatre, René seems to be all about the body, which he not only feeds but also has learned to clothe. Through self-education, he becomes the manager of a small country firm specialising in textiles. It is easy to see how Resnais's three characters amount to a human subject in constant danger due to its overly stubborn mind and its utterly frail body. Every time he breaks the rules, Jean suffers from kidney stones. Likewise, when he has to adjust to something new, René suffers from a chronic ulcer. When Janine learns that Jean's wife lied about her cancer to get her adulterous husband back, the only female protagonist of the film suffers from a temporary paralysis.

Returning for a moment to Janine's stifled admiration for Sacha Guitry's endless range of impersonations, she confronts suffering with a lot more personal resources than her two male counterparts. The hydra-like, quasi-monstrous configuration of eighteenth-century French aristocracy is, in fact, a foundational trope of Guitry's rotting body politic in his film *Royal Affairs in Versailles* (*Si Versailles m'était conté*, 1954). By oscillating between the nationalist celebration and the corporeal decay of the French court, Guitry's film is so suspended between aristocratic spectacle and the actor's display of aging that his allegiances to ideal values or to material loss are impossible to pinpoint. *Royal Affairs in Versailles* was Guitry's way of getting even with those who accused him of having been a collaborator. Through one film, the famous actor managed to celebrate and demystify the myth of Versailles (see Baecque). At first sight, Resnais's association of the Jewish and left-wing Janine with Guitry's multifaceted persona may seem provocative. The fact is that Janine's psychological plasticity runs against her parents' dogmatic attachment to the Soviet Union of Joseph Stalin.

More specifically, Resnais highlights the connection between Guitry and Janine through one poignant object in the décor: a multiheaded conglomeration of film stars' faces, comparable to Guitry's multiheaded aristocratic body at Versailles. This poster hangs above Janine's bed, in the family home. To underline Janine's antidogmatic stance, Resnais uses this poster to suggest her ability to reinvent herself through competing, yet genealogically related stars from cinema. This kind of analogical plasticity across roles and points of view provides Janine with her best defence against life's inevitable disappointments. Whereas neither Jean nor René goes to the movie theatre regularly, and they limit themselves to only one film star, Janine is the ultimate and relentless film spectator. She watches every cloak-and-dagger film that comes her way. According to her *cinéphile* poster, she is the only character in *Mon oncle d'Amérique* who has been exposed to the connections between the Poetic Realist films of the thirties, the surreal fables of Jean Cocteau, the French Nouvelle Vague of the fifties and the influence of American cinema

through Marilyn Monroe and Humphrey Bogart in *Cahiers du cinéma.* Needless to say, Janine's poster is all about Bazin and Resnais's generation.



Figure 4: Janine's poster in *Mon oncle d'Amérique*.
New Yorker Video, 2000. Screenshot.

The cinema is not only about impurity, but it is also about shifting relations. At the very end of *Mon oncle d'Amérique*, during a long take across the dishevelled Bronx in New York, Resnais's camera surveys a trompe l'œil: a blooming tree inside a small forest covers the façade of a tall building.[8] Created by the American artist Alan Sonfist, this optical illusion is nothing but a wall of painted bricks. In the midst of urban decay, a happy image of nature seems to fulfil the promise of a rich American uncle capable of solving all problems. Each brick is coloured in a different way. Just like any classical Hollywood film, the trompe l'œil grows out of a jigsaw puzzle, where all the pieces must click seamlessly with their neighbours. Despite their different sizes and positions, the building's bricks vanish behind the illusion of leaves, branches, shrubs and trunks. The deception of this mural depends on an inward movement comparable to the centripetal orientation of a pictorial frame.

The centripetal orientation of Sonfist's trompe l'œil does not apply to Resnais's fictional human characters, who constantly spin out of themselves. They clash, intersect, fall in and out of love, behave like animals, go against their background, become the psychological correlatives of objects, the alter egos of movie stars, regress into their class roots, or choose to change careers and reinvent themselves in line with different media. Painting, the trompe l'œil, photographic inserts and plants are all about stillness. Yet, for Resnais and Bazin, lived experience and cinema involve movement, exchanges, permutations and relationships.

Even Laborit, the scientist, seems to have trouble explaining human nature once and for all. Despite his stress on roots, the issue of religious origin does not derail his search for his own American uncle. Speaking about himself in the third person, Laborit briefly comments on his own family history in the Vendée region, a Catholic stronghold that was violently subdued by the French Revolution's rationalist and secular agenda. Born far away from France, in Indochina, Laborit is ironic about the revolutionary claim of *fraternité* towards Vendée after 1789. He has

chosen to forget bloodshed and regional differences for the sake of his international identity and his training through the secular French state. As a behaviourist who knows how to promote his own best interests, he underlines to what extent his cooperation with the system has strengthened his career and helped his quality of life. To cap it all, a disembodied female voiceover summarises his private life: married with five children, he enjoys sailing and horseback riding. In comparison to all the other characters proposed by Resnais, Laborit is the trompe-l'œil façade of success and happiness. It is as if he had succeeded in conditioning himself like a well-behaved rat.

In addition to the final deceiving trompe l'œil and Janine's devotional poster halfway through *Mon oncle d'Amérique*, at the very beginning of his film, Resnais offers a gridlike collage of 140 small, randomly arranged photographs—all of them originating in the footage from which he will edit his film. This incoherent, nonlinear grid of landscapes, people, objects, animals and plants collides with Sonfist's orderly trompe l'œil. Without a doubt, Resnais's photographic collage does stand for the amorphous Real that we cannot grasp, namely for a range of open possibilities that has not yet settled into a subjective experience. Different areas of Resnais's messy grid of still shots fall in and out of darkness. Possibly a metaphor for cinema itself in relation to our limited perception of the world, a cone-shaped flashlight illuminates one area, but it can do so only for a brief while. Inevitably, its subsequent move away darkens a whole region of this chaotic display, while another area will come to the fore and to our attention, thanks to the moving light.



Figure 5: Collage of film images. *Mon oncle d'Amérique*. New Yorker Video, 2000. Screenshot.

The intertwined, but also asynchronous, disembodied voiceovers of Resnais's three main characters produce the melodious confusion of three biographical narratives being told simultaneously, but with intervals and overlaps of voiceovers. It all sounds as if an imaginary set of subtitles had started talking by themselves, at slightly different speeds, thus further highlighting the interstices of an overall three-layered discourse: Jean's, Janine's and René's. Resnais's opening collage of random images demonstrates that the depiction of daily life on screen is neither a perfect trompe l'œil, nor a star-studded film. In comparison to the film poster, which Janine quickly crumples into a ball of paper, and Sonfist's brick-based trompe-l'œil,

Resnais's collage seems to be the strongest summary of his film's fourfold method with objects, film stars, animals and humans.

In comparison to Jean and René, Janine is the only protagonist who can reinvent herself and find solace in her ability to relate to other human beings. This is because she has been exposed to more films and through them she has learnt to avoid treating people as objects, even though material things have had a big impact on each character's development. Marked by Russian dolls functioning as an imaginary audience, her childhood has also been influenced by her mother's sewing machine. Thus, she decides to leave the theatre in order to become the manager of a textile company. More flexible than René and less conformist than Jean, Janine finds a sense of self by letting her creative sensibility evolve in multiple directions. She combines the art of theatre and the science of industrial production through a personal search into what she is and can become, experience after experience.

Much more enslaved by the power of wealth, Jean pretends to have found happiness as a successful writer who publishes about subjects unrelated to the history of the sun he always dreamt of. After attempting suicide, René lies in a hospital bed, unemployed and humiliated, but he is reunited with his loving wife and two daughters, who care for him as a person and not as a model of success. Nobody really gets what he or she wants in *Mon oncle d'Amérique*. One reason is that the proverbial American uncle does not exist for anyone. A second reason, which Laborit addresses, has to do with how the search for power leads to competition and mistrust. By finishing on Sonfist's trompe l'œil, Resnais's film intentionally challenges its audience with a false happy ending. A much more ambitious concept than pleasure, happiness does not exist for Jean, Janine and René.



Figure 6: Trompe l'œil by Alan Sonfist. *Mon oncle d'Amérique*. New Yorker Video, 2000. Screenshot.

Yet all human beings need the pursuit of an ideal goal in order to tolerate living. Resnais's photogenic intensity of objects and devotional deployment of film stars invokes Gabriel Marcel's rejection of an overly technological world devoid of spirituality and theology. The French playwright, in fact, wrote extensively about the distinction between being and having.[9] "Being", here, means the ability to relate to the *imago Dei* or soul of someone else, namely intersubjectivity, while "having" means a self-serving accumulation that eventually

reduces oneself and the other to material things. Through the relational qualities of cinephilia and the double nature of photography, Janine manages to compensate for the absence of love or duality in her life. In addition, she does manage to experience a moment of revelation or realisation inside Jean's private study: all of a sudden, Resnais transforms Janine's subjective point-of-view shot towards the room in front of her into a shared and highly objective awareness that Jean's world is based on owning things, and not on interpersonal exchange.

In the end, this film with no ending matches the way life (and cinema) may offer only temporary insights into the real, but no long-term solutions about anything. Whether or not the real of being is Bazin's Catholic soul remains a matter of personal religious orientation. By accommodating art and science, contingency and creativity, Bazin's Catholic framework celebrates photography and cinema as two stages within a process of Christological incarnation. This Catholic interpretation of the medium is flexible enough for all kinds of readers and film viewers. For the historical record, however, we must conclude by citing Bazin about the problem of medium specificity in the context of his review of Henri Agel's *Le Cinéma a-t-il une âme?* (Does Cinema Have a Soul?):

> Il est banal de dire que de tous les arts, le cinéma est le plus incarné. C'est de cette incarnation qu'il faut partir pour dégager la spiritualité spécifique du cinéma.
> It is commonplace to state that of all the arts, cinema is the most incarnate. One must start from that incarnation in order to release the specific spirituality of cinema. ("Livres de cinema" 23)

Put another way, were we to apply the category of specificity to cinema, the most we can say is that its medium specificity lies in its duality, namely a denial of self-contained uniqueness. This is the case because cinematic "specificity" includes the mutual exchange of time and space within editing, on one side, and the objectifying impact of the camera lens, on the other. More specifically, the camera constantly raises the ethical and open question of what might be valuable in the interchangeability between a subject and an object, a human and a thing, an animal and a moving shadow, a human and an animal, a plant and a photograph.

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Notes

[1] On all these issues and beyond, see Andrew.

[2] I owe this formulation to Michael Naas's *Miracle and Machine: Jacques Derrida and the Two Sources of Religion, Science and the Media* (1); and to Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank's *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*

[3] See also Thomas, *L'Atelier d'Alain Resnais*, 48–58.

[4] On medium specificity, see Carroll and Doane.

[5] On Bazin and Darwin, see Andrew.

[6] On the "Hollywood remake", see Bazin's "'M' le maudit remade in Hollywood". In this review, Bazin's words match American artist Alan Sonfist's use of bricks for his trompe l'œil included in Resnais's film: "le transport pierre par pierre d'un château hanté écossais dans la propriété d'un milliardaire californien" [the transport, stone by stone, of a haunted Scottish castle to the property of a California millionaire] (2).

[7] *Gesamtkunstwerk* is the integration of all the arts into a single medium of dramatic expression. This term was used by composer Richard Wagner (1813–83) to describe his vision of his later operas.

[8] On the trompe l'œil, see Dalle Vacche ("Surrealism in Art and Film").

[9] In relation to Janine's discovery that Jean is a man devoted to the accumulation of things, see Marcel. On the difference between "to be" and "to have" in the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel, see Charlton; and Copleston (336–7).

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