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Retracing Bazin's Phenomenological Approach to Realism in Film

Abstract:

The essay is an introductory reexamination of the notion of realism in film by way of returning to the writings of André Bazin. In a moment when the relation between images and the physical world appears increasingly unstable, Bazin's phenomenologically inflected understanding of reality offers a productive framework for reconsidering how films engage with the world today. Cinema, as this article argues, can help preserve our contact with the real by enabling viewers to integrate the experiences of others into their own personal and social understanding. Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* serves as a key example of how narrative form and phenomenological insight converge to reveal cinema's capacity to generate knowledge and participate actively in the unfolding of lived reality.

Keywords:

realism, material trace, imaginary, drama, narrative, experience

Why Realism?

André Bazin's seminal text, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*,[1] is a work that not only illuminated subsequent film theory but can also be easily intertwined with a broader genealogy of French thinkers working within the field of phenomenology – most notably Jean-Paul Sartre, but also others orbiting around them, such as Gilles Deleuze. In doing so, one not only gains access to a better understanding of Bazin's theories and his concept of realism but also a clearer comprehension of the relationship between the self and the real. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to frame the notion of realism in film not so much as a mode of representing the world, but as a mode of being in the world, while exploring how this relationship (between the self and the real) can unfold within cinematic narrative.

In his book *Fábulas de lo visible*, Ángel Quintana lays the groundwork for a renewed appreciation of realist discourse in contemporary cinema. Published in 2004, the book directly confronts a dilemma that is at once ontological, moral, and even political: Can digital cinema be approached from a realist perspective, even when its material traces of connection to the physical world are lost during the filming process? Can a realist aesthetic still maintain relevance in contemporary filmmaking, considering that we live in a world that increasingly and conspicuously loses contact with the real? This question was already crucial at the time of the book's publication, yet revisiting the debate today seems even more pressing. Not only has digital processing come to dominate the production of films and audiovisual media, but we are now witnessing new phenomena – such as film festivals featuring works created entirely through artificial intelligence – that further complicate the very notion of realism in cinema.[2]

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1) Bazin, "Ontology of the Photographic Image."

2) The question of realism in cinema has also become the focus of recent scholarly work, such as volume 31 of *452F: Journal of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature*, dedicated to "New Realisms in Spanish Literature and Cinema from 2008" or volume 23 of *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, which includes articles like Kostas Karpouzis's "Where No Filmmaker Has Gone Before: The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on the Film Industry" (2025). Regarding AI and our relation with reality as a society, Miguel Benasayag's work could also be brought up. In 2017 he published *La Singularidad de lo Vivo*, where he sets forth a philosophy of organism that opposes algorithmic reductionism and the computationist model, defending the irreducibility of life to technological models.

In the first chapter of *Fábulas de lo visible*, Quintana draws upon several literary theorists whose concerns intersect with the relationship between phenomenology and narrative – a connection that can be traced as far back as Aristotle's reflections on the process of mimesis in classical Greek dramatic art. As Quintana concludes, channeling these theoretical discourses toward a redefinition of how cinema relates to the real in contemporary times may be useful not only on an aesthetic level but also on a political one. For this reason, the aim of this article is to show how approaching this issue from a phenomenological perspective can help us rethink not only the ways in which cinema is made, but also how knowledge is produced through cinema within a reality increasingly suffocated by the dynamics of the modern world.

Quintana starts by quoting Darío Villanueva, who offers a categorization of realist discourses in literature. For Villanueva, what he calls *genetic realism* "stems from an absolute confidence in the relationship that the writer establishes with the surrounding world, which will be filtered through observation and reproduced as faithfully as possible."[3] From the outset, this establishes the idea of artistic practice as mimesis of the world – an idea already present in Aristotelian poetics and most clearly exemplified in Greek tragedy. As Quintana explains, Aristotle, in turn, builds on Plato, who posits the existence of three levels of reality: the first, composed of ideal forms; the second, centered on visible objects and phenomena; and the third, centered on images. For Plato, art merely imitates this third level – the level of images – which is itself removed from what is truly real. He further concludes that the artist's aspiration should not be to imitate images with other images, but rather to transcend the material world and strive toward the essence of things.

As Panofsky points out,[4] this line of thought leads to a kind of condemnation, within Western philosophy, of the idea of visibility – since vision is limited to the realm of mere appearances and is incapable of accessing the ideal. It therefore stands in contrast to the Aristotelian view of mimesis as a natural human tendency. Moving beyond Platonic idealism, Aristotle ultimately proposes in his *Poetics* a set of reflections not only on the concept of imitation itself but also on how imitation

3) Quintana, *Fábulas de lo visible*, 37.

4) Ibid., 46.

unfolds within a temporal sequence during the creative act. Through the components of tragedy, this temporal sequence reveals not only the intention to imitate the visible world but also the desire to construct and organize human actions. It is precisely in action that Paul Ricoeur locates the heart of tragedy: plot. Based on the concept of plot, Ricoeur reinterprets the notion of mimesis as *mythos*, that is, the arrangement of the incidents. This is fundamentally important for the revitalization of realism as a system of knowledge and understanding of the world because, starting from literary theory, the concept of mimesis – redefined as *mythos* – "begins to approach the idea of verisimilitude, understood as a form that helps render believable a reality constructed through poetic discourse."[5] The reality constructed through the artwork ultimately leads to the concept of fiction, that is, the invention and organization of a story.

Thus, the value of Ricoeur's proposal in *Temps et récit* lies in his reinterpretation of Aristotelian poetics, which ultimately posits that the poet can adopt two attitudes in developing the internal logic of actions: either to speak by explaining what the characters do (narration) or to give them voice and allow them to speak directly, letting them perform the drama themselves. It is precisely at this juncture that Gilberto Pérez formulates one of his most significant arguments regarding the nature of the cinematic art form, an art "poised between drama and narrative, between enactment and mediation."[6] Pérez argues that although cinema is now widely understood as a narrative art, drama and narration are in fact two dimensions that should not be opposed, since they operate simultaneously, similar to how light behaves both as a particle and as a wave depending on how you observe it.[7]

The opposition becomes, rather, one between showing and telling, regardless of the artistic medium – on the written page or the stage, through words or through images. Pérez offers a brilliant analysis of the different ways cinema can alternate between modes of representation, exemplified by figures such as Edwin Porter and

5) Ibid., 50.

6) Pérez, *The Material Ghost*, 15.

7) This metaphor is also Perez's and it is very illuminating, if we take into account that cinema can always be considered perpetually in a juncture. Pérez emphasizes its nature between drama and narrative but it can also be considered an artform poised between absence and presence, between documentary and fiction, between the concrete and the abstract.

D. W. Griffith. In the early years of cinema, a film could be conceived almost as a theatrical representation (Porter, jumping from one stage to another in linear sequence, simply showing the events) or as a dramatization of the events (Griffith, altering the temporal perception of the story through parallel editing). In *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), the story unfolds one shot at a time, shots that function from the same point of view a theater spectator would have, hardly ever moving the camera. There is no attempt to manipulate time, simply the urge to present a plot – the robbery of a train by some outlaws – as directly as possible, cutting from one sequence to another (from the plotting of outlaws to the actual robbery, to the escape, and so on).[8] Meanwhile, Griffith's great innovation was to cut back and forth between the incidents of the plot while also changing the distance from which we see the actions (from medium shot to close up and back). It is well known that *Intolerance* (1916) presents four stories, set in four different periods of history that are not told consecutively but shown in parallel fashion. The ending of the movie sees all four parallel lines converge in a dramatic last-minute rescue scene, a sequence edited in a frantic way, jumping through vast periods of time. It is as if the narrative properties of the medium allowed Griffith to exploit its dramatic possibilities, a groundbreaking discovery that laid the foundations on how to tell a story through the editing and disposition of the shots.

In any way you want to look at it, cinema is both a dramatic and a narrative medium, with the particularity that the camera itself functions as the narrator. The key point, as Pérez notes, is that a film camera is an infinitely more immediate mediator than the words of a narrator. What happens on the screen is not occurring in front of us, but in front of a camera – and a camera grants no margin for mediation: "What is on the screen is a fact, not an account."[9]

Faith in Reality

What could also be considered a fact is that the most important figure in film theory is the one person who raised these questions for discussion in the first place: André

8) It is worth noting, as Perez recounts, that Porter began his career as a projectionist. A role that, back in the day, was supposed to arrange the sequence of short films – different views from different provenances, each allowed to run its course – that composed the program.

9) Pérez, *The Material Ghost*, 64.

Bazin. His writings have been subject to numerous reinterpretations over time, and his influence has persisted beyond his short lifetime, with many illustrious followers. It was Éric Rohmer who famously stated that all of Bazin's theoretical work revolved around "the affirmation of a single idea, that of cinematic objectivity, in the same way that geometry focuses on the properties of the straight line."[10] Reconsidering the importance of realism in contemporary cinema forces us, in a way, to take Bazin's thinking into account and update it, because, as Dudley Andrew pointed out, "culture follows laws that Bazin spoke of again and again as evolutionary."[11] It is not so much a question of thinking about which films can be considered realistic or not today (a task that is impossible and unscientific), but rather of bringing Bazin's philosophy back into the discussion, described by Andrew as follows: "Bazin's life philosophy, essentially hermeneutic, could be termed a project of understanding human processes that itself, in turn, contributes to those processes, since human knowledge is knowledge ever catching up with its object."[12]

Bazin's project was one that transcended the boundaries of film theory and directly confronted questions more closely related to humanism or even phenomenology. A project that aims at "helping his contemporaries regain their sense of reality."[13] When Bazin is reread in this light, beyond the historically superficial interpretations often attributed to him (depth of field and long takes are the defining marks of a realist film), one also finds a series of immensely valuable reflections on human existence and its modes of perception. It could be said that Bazin never arrived at a definitive answer to the ultimate question (What is cinema?), although it is equally fair to say that to find such an answer was never his intention. As Jean-Michel Frodon notes, Bazin did not establish doctrines; rather, his importance lies in "constantly reopening and reformulating the question of cinema's uniqueness in its relation to human beings, nature, society, other arts, and other forms of expression."[14]

10) Rohmer, *The Taste for Beauty*, 95.

11) Andrew, "Andre Bazin's 'Evolution,'" 86.

12) Ibid.

13) Renoir, "André Bazin's Little Beret," 11.

14) Frodon, "Film and Plaster," 78.

Not by chance, one of the subsections of Frodon's essay included in *Opening Bazin* is titled "a fundamental need," a need that refers to the way Bazin conceives cinema as a fundamental and psychological human necessity: the fundamental need to fulfill a specific relationship between human beings, reality, and imagination.[15] Frodon continues his argument by citing Georges Didi-Huberman's study *La ressemblance par contact*, which offers an extensive reflection on the various ways human beings have constructed systems of representation "without any break of continuity between what is shown and what does the showing."[16] Didi-Huberman is not speaking of cinema, but of the material transition of traces of the real in the creation of artworks – something that recalls the photographic nature of cinema so central to Bazin's writings, and even the concept of the mummy and death mask that Bazin discusses in one of his most influential texts.[17]

As Frodon notes, current research in neurobiology seeks to identify with precision the regions of the human brain that construct this relationship between the real and the imaginary – neural areas where "the recording of information transmitted by the senses is associated with specific systems put together by the brain … under the effects of inherited processes on the one hand and new developments that individuals are capable of on the other."[18] Although Frodon does not mention him, this mental process is obviously one that also concerns Sartre, as we can see in his book on the imaginary.[19] The relationship between Sartre and Bazin is well-known, as Andrew notes in his book on major film theories[20] and as Domnique Chateau also explores in *Sartre et le cinéma*. In *The Imaginary*, Sartre raises the question whether mental images (forms of consciousness) and the phys-

15) Ibid., 79.

16) Ibid.

17) See Bazin, "Ontology of the Photographic Image." Bazin begins his most famous essay with the following statement: "If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation. The process might reveal that at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex." He later states, on the art of photography, that it "affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty."

18) Frodon, "Film and Plaster," 81.

19) Sartre, *The Imaginary*.

20) Andrew, *The Major Film Theories*, 169.

ical objects we also call images (portraits, reflections in a mirror) are equivalent in terms of the attitude our consciousness adopts toward them. To do so, he offers the simple example of trying to recall a friend – Pierre – first by producing an imagined consciousness of him, then by looking at a photograph, and finally by examining a caricature. In all three cases, the intention remains the same: "to make the face of Pierre appear"[21] and from these situations Sartre attempts to determine how our perception of mental objects and our perception of physical objects might resemble one another. In this sense, after emphasizing that intention is always directed toward an absent object – a crucial nuance, since in cinema the spectator's gaze is likewise directed at something in a certain way absent, something not really there – Sartre later proposes:

> One could not study the mental image separately. There is not a world of images and a world of objects. Rather, every object, whether it is presented by external perception or it appears to inner sense, is susceptible to functioning as a present reality or as an image, depending on the center of reference that has been chosen. The two worlds, the imaginary and the real, are constituted by the same objects; only the grouping and the interpretation of these objects vary. What defines the imaginary world, as with the real universe, is an attitude of consciousness.[22]

Sartre is anticipating here a key notion in Deleuze's cinema books: that of the plane of immanence.[23] As will be discussed later, Deleuze's thoughts are not so distant from Bazin's. These are reflections that move beyond film theory and into the realm of the phenomenological, for the fundamental need that Frodon repeatedly emphasizes concerns physiological dispositions that are specific and distinctly human. This

21) Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 18.

22) Ibid., 20.

23) "My body is an image, hence a set of actions and reactions. My eye, my brain, are images, parts of my body. How could my brain contain images since it is one image among others? … This infinite set of all images constitutes a kind of plane of immanence. The image exists in itself, on this plane. This in-itself of the image is matter: not something hidden behind the image, but on the contrary the absolute identity of the image and movement." (Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, 58–59)

rereading aligns with Andrew's interpretation: cinema, for Bazin, is unique because of the special relationship it establishes with reality. This relationship is not static but dynamic, responding simultaneously to the changes occurring in the world. It must therefore be emphasized once again that Bazin's focus lies on reality rather than on any prescriptive notion of realist cinema.

Ways of Perceiving

One of the most stimulating Bazinian notes in this regard comes from Richard Rushton, who advocates for the dissolution of the distinction between reality and illusion in cinema, which, according to him, has monopolized film studies in what he calls the "politically modernist" approach.[24] For Rushton, this approach preaches a distinction between false or illusionist images and true and realistic images in a purely iconoclastic theory whose goal is to dismantle the illusionist fascination of orthodox film practices. That is, classic cinema, in its mode of representation, perpetuates the illusions of the capitalist world and "lulls" the viewer to sleep; while all cinema that departs from the standardized practice of classic narrative cinema (one might think of avant-garde cinema or, without going so far, the cinema of the *nouvelle vague*) "awakens" the viewer's consciousness through disruptive or anti-illusionist mechanisms.

Rushton's approach aims to go beyond the distinction between reality and illusion in film studies in order to define what he conceives as "filmic reality."[25] This "filmic reality" is defined more as an attitude than as a concept, an attitude that calls for films to be viewed as part of reality rather than as representations of it.[26] How, then, does Bazin fit into Rushton's reading when the vast majority of scholars pigeonhole his writings within a supposed theory of realistic representation? This is where the great innovation of Rushton's reading lies: reading Bazin through a phenomenological approach that goes beyond understanding cinema as a mecha-

24) Rushton, *The Reality of Film*, 41.

25) Ibid., 8.

26) This assertion is similar to the one Sartre makes in the earlier quote: "What defines the imaginary world, as with the real universe, is an attitude of consciousness."

nism of representation. Focusing on how, according to Bazin, humans perceive and define what is real through the collective, rather than focusing on supposed realistic cinematographic techniques (the famous notions of long shots and depth of field in filmmakers such as Welles or Renoir).

For human beings, as Rushton rightly points out, reality is not pure and immediate, but rather every process of perception requires transforming that reality in one way or another:

> In real or pure nature, so physics tells us, there are no such things as smells, sounds or colors; rather, there are only electromagnetic pulses, air waves, molecules, particles, and so on… . There is no red located in some pure reality; there is only a notion or thing that humans have invented, which is called "red."[27]

This reflection is similar to that of Jean-Michel Frodon and points to a conception of cinematic art based on a social understanding of reality. That is what realism means to Bazin: "an aesthetic by way of which humans might reach a set of shared judgments about what constitutes reality."[28] Rushton points out several times in his book that these concerns about the real (and those of the other theorists he analyzes) are very close to Kantian philosophy and the distinction between phenomena and noumena. Only through this set of considerations can we begin to understand what Rushton calls "filmic reality."

Rushton also draws on Deleuze to propose a great example of what can be understood as filmic reality through Jean Renoir's film *La carrosse d'or* (1952). In the film, Camilla (Anna Magnani), leader of a troupe of traveling actors who travel to the Americas at the end of the eighteenth century, becomes romantically involved with three men: Philippe, a fellow member of the troupe; Ramon, a local bullfighter; and the president of the colonial government. The entanglement in which Camilla finds herself, so well portrayed by Renoir, can be seen as that of an actress unable to separate the theatrical stage from reality. Camilla plays as many

27) Rushton, *The Reality of Film*, 47.

28) Ibid.

roles on stage as she shows different faces to her various lovers. The stage is not taken as a sphere independent of real life but is understood as part of it, in which experimentation and the interpretation of different roles are equivalent to the vital development of Camilla's character. What Deleuze interprets through Renoir's film is that cinema "synthesizes fragments of matter in such a way as to endow them with reality."[29] For Deleuze, *La carrosse d'or* is a powerful example of how reality and fiction become intertwined in cinema, for Camilla's role-playing extends far beyond her work as an actress; it becomes a mode through which she clarifies the reality she inhabits. This view stands in opposition to any claim that cinema's task is to represent the real, for, as has been noted, reality never appears in pure form – it exists only through experience.

Bazin has always been regarded as a realist theorist, but Deleuze has not historically been considered in this light. One of the innovations in Rushton's approach is his insistence that, in a certain sense, Deleuze takes Bazin's arguments about how cinema relates to the real and introduces important nuances by highlighting the ways in which human perception and the spectator's perception in cinema resemble one another. "We perceive the thing, minus that which does not interest us as a function of our needs"[30] – in other words, our perception of reality is limited, yet this limited perception is the only means through which we can access reality. Watching a film works in much the same way: we, as spectators, perceive a series of shots that imply an off-screen space, and through this construction we come into contact with the reality created by the film. But our attention is limited; we cannot apprehend every detail of the work. Some elements stand out above others, and we may even perform a form of mental editing, a kind of montage that takes place unconsciously in our everyday life.

Narrative and Perception

It is clear that perceptual processes can be likened to the intrinsic mechanism that is built into the process of making a film. As in Rushton's example in relation to

29) Ibid., 143.

30) Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 63; as quoted in Rushton, *The Reality of Film*, 138.

Deleuze and *The Golden Coach* – where the analogy between life, the theatrical stage, and performance is foregrounded – one can consider other ways of defining what Rushton himself terms filmic reality. Returning to the main concern of this article, the following example explores how the problem of limited human perception can be woven into a cinematic narrative.

Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* (2000) is a film that integrates all the aforementioned issues related to human perception into a fictional narrative that encompasses several universal dilemmas through the experiences of a family in the city of Taipei, in a more or less episodic and independent manner. This is evident from the very structure of the film (which begins with a wedding and ends with a funeral), and not only that, but Yang's genius is also evident in the fact that the perspective is not limited to one or two members of the family, but rather the view is kaleidoscopic: from the five-year-old boy (Yang-Yang) to the grandmother and matriarch of the family, including the parents (NJ and Min-Min) and the other teenage daughter (Ting-Ting), as well as several other relatives, friends, and even neighbors, who are the subject of the patient and distant gaze of the camera. Each of them seems to discover at their own pace the different setbacks that life throws at them, which seem to be triggered by the grandmother's sudden health problems in the early stages of the film.

In the film, the allusions to the problem of human perception appear both verbally, through the characters, and visually, through the *mise-en-scène*. From an adult perspective, it is refreshing to observe that the character who most clearly grasps the limitations of human experience is the youngest child, driven by an endless sense of curiosity. At one point in the film, Yang-Yang raises this issue when his teacher scolds the entire class while trying to find out who brought a condom to school. After a general reprimand, the teacher accuses Yang-Yang directly, to which the boy replies that the teacher merely heard someone else's accusation and did not actually see whether he was the one who brought the condom. The teacher responds by asking whether he really believes he must "see something in order to know it," a reply that leaves Yang-Yang visibly puzzled.

Moments later, at home, the mother tries to persuade Yang-Yang to speak to his grandmother, who lies in a coma after being hospitalized. After several unsuccessful attempts, Yang-Yang finally tells his mother that he does not see the point

– since his grandmother cannot "see what he is saying." Finally, in one of the film's most famous dialogues, Yang-Yang asks his father how can he know whether what he sees is the same as what his father sees, to which his father responds – through a playful metatextual gesture – that this is precisely what cameras are for.

Here, Edward Yang seems to speak through his own characters, expressing his concerns through little Yang-Yang, as if to say that the camera (cinema, at 24 frames per second) is an instrument designed to see reality, a device that can help little Yang-Yang access the truth of things. It had been said before, going back to Aristotle, that the poet could adopt two attitudes: narrate the actions of the plot or speak through his characters. Here, the characters enact the drama and, specifically, verbalize the problem of the limitations of human perception with striking emotional clarity.

The question of vision and of one's own lived experience is the central theme of the entire film, and as Gilberto Pérez would say, in *Yi Yi* cinema manifests itself not only in the form of drama (with characters acting as the director's interlocutors) but also in the form of narration (through *mise-en-scène*). In one of the film's early scenes, NJ, the father, encounters a former lover at his brother's wedding. The meeting is somewhat awkward and abrupt, and we learn that the ending of their romance was equally abrupt, for NJ eventually married another woman (the mother of his children), leaving his former lover waiting for an affection that never materialized. Nearly two hours later – by which point we have learned that NJ's wife has suffered a breakdown brought on by her suffocating personal circumstances and has had to leave the household for a time – we see that NJ has contacted his former lover and arranged to meet her again in Japan during a business trip. Meanwhile, Ting-Ting, the teenage daughter, has also become involved in a romantic entanglement between a friend and her ex-boyfriend, Pángzi, with whom she falls in love and begins secretly meeting.

In a gesture reminiscent of Griffith, Yang crosscuts NJ's reunion with his former lover and Ting-Ting's clandestine encounter with her romantic interest – two furtive meetings at two distinct stages of life that, when placed side by side, reveal cinema's ability to juxtapose different perspectives on the same kind of experience. NJ and Ting-Ting never speak directly in the film about their respective romantic (mis)adventures, but to echo Yang-Yang, the parallel editing lets us understand that

each will know full well what the other has seen and felt. *Yi Yi* is a perfect example of how cinema, through narration, allows us to access another's reality from within our own subjective consciousness.[31]

Cinema and Knowledge

Made at the very end of the twentieth century, *Yi Yi* seems to equally reflect on themes that are, in essence, modernist, such as miscommunication and life in the modern metropolis. As Gilberto Pérez aptly notes, "Modernism is an art of estrangement, in content and in form. It began with Baudelaire, Flaubert, Manet, citizens of the capital of the nineteenth century, painters of modern life who met its estrangement with their own."[32] This is particularly evident in *Yi Yi*, a film that, through its long, lingering wide shots, gradually constructs a distant and scrutinizing gaze. As has been previously noted, the most important value of rereading Bazin's texts today is their humanist and phenomenological character. It so happens that *Yi Yi* is a film that formally aligns closely with Bazinian *mise en scène*, that is, shots that for the most part do not impose anything on the viewer, allowing them to take their time in capturing various details of the broad composition. Yang constantly films the city of Taipei through reflections, from balconies or surrounded by buildings, trying to capture an enormity that escapes the edges of the frame. The encounters between Ting-Ting and Pángzi are often framed in front of a large bridge near where they live, and meetings in bars, restaurants, or hotels are also recurrent, as they are for NJ and his former lover. It is as if Yang thought that only a romantic connection could unite two people trapped in the abandonment of modern life, something that Gilberto Pérez also points out, quoting

31) In an interview given in 2000, Edward Yang explains that the original idea for *Yi Yi* emerged some fifteen years before its realization and that, instead of telling the story of a single person from birth to death, he ultimately decided to focus on an entire family: "This film is really about the spectrum of life from birth to death. At the time, 15 years ago, I knew I was too young to treat, especially the second half of the film, properly. So, I just let it sit and left it on the shelf… . With this film, I didn't have to write a big volume of work just to tell someone's life from birth to death. It's a good idea to focus just on one family where every age is represented by one member, and each member is intimately related to one another, almost like one person's life. And instead of writing a big book like *War and Peace*, you basically have this small family film that talks about a lot more than just the family." (Hollywood.com Staff, "*Yi Yi*: Edward Yang Interview")

32) Pérez, *The Material Ghost*, 376.

John Berger.[33] Yang likewise makes clear his view that the city itself is a participant in this process of estrangement, offering continuous references to the globalized condition of Taipei at the turn of the millennium. This becomes apparent in the wedding scene, when NJ takes young Yang-Yang to a McDonald's to console him after the girls mock him; in the deep conversation about cinema that Ting-Ting and Pángzi share in a place that serves New York bagels; or even in a scene in which NJ is seen listening to Bob Dylan's *Mr. Tambourine Man*, also invoked through a poster hanging in the hallway of the family home.

It is necessary to quote Gilberto Pérez once again, since even though the themes dealt with in *Yi Yi* are unquestionably modernist, it is not a modern film in the sense that Pérez relates to Clement Greenberg or Peter Burger (for whom modern art emphasizes its own means and has nothing to do with realism), but rather it is modernist precisely because it emphasizes those means in search of truth or contact with reality:

> Manet and the Impressionists were at once naturalistic and formalistic. They endeavored to paint actual appearances as they had never been painted, to render on canvas the way things really look to the eye that perceives them; and at the same time, as part of the same impulse, they made palpable to the viewer the means of their rendering, the paint they applied on canvas, and their way of applying it.[34]

Apart from painting and cinema, this can also be applied to the novel, as Pérez also points out that both Flaubert and Conrad "had one foot in naturalism and the other in modernism"[35] and that Joyce and Faulkner "kept strong ties with naturalism all the same."[36] *Yi Yi* is a film that appears to be shot in a very transparent way, but which constantly reflects on the very nature of cinema and human perception, as seen in

33) "Romantic love, in the modern sense, is a love uniting or hoping to unite two displaced persons, a love seeking to overcome the displacement, the homelessness, the abandonment of modern life." Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos,* 65–66 as quoted in Pérez, *The Material Ghost*, 391.

34) Ibid., 262.

35) Ibid.

36) Ibid.

several of the cases discussed above. This also brings us back to the reflections of Quintana, for whom the reality that has served as a reference "can end up giving rise to a strong presence of the effects of truth within fiction. In this case, realism ceases to be a merely formal aspect and ends up becoming the reflection of an ethical attitude towards reality."[37] In any case, what is clear is that cinema is a cultural object that allows those who approach it to reflect on and better understand their surroundings, and Yang's film is a clear fusion of form and content that manages to juxtapose personal and social experience in a realistic manner while also framing it within modernity. Made, as mentioned, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, *Yi Yi* prophesies the problem of losing touch with reality in modern society.

Oneself as Another

By situating Bazin within a broader phenomenological tradition, the article has sought to show that film's unique relation to reality lies in its capacity to sustain and reorganize experience rather than merely reproduce it. For Bazin, culture (and therefore cinema) followed an evolutionary logic, and as previously mentioned when quoting Dudley Andrew, Bazin spoke of cinema as a means to better understand the processes of human knowledge itself. As the scholars cited in the article point out, the influence of phenomenology on André Bazin's philosophy is undeniable, and it is perhaps Andrew himself who addresses a point that can be related to the film example used in the article.

Dudley Andrew traces the relationship between Paul Ricoeur and André Bazin (both colleagues at *Esprit* magazine), citing the title of one of Ricoeur's studies, *Oneself as Another*, which also served as the title for Andrew's own thesis. For Andrew, "cinema, like 'the oneself' of personal identity, will never be fixed; yet neither is it a phantom. It depends on encounters with 'another' (what is outside it)."[38] The English title for *Yi Yi* is *A One and a Two*. "Yi" in Chinese means "one" and is written with a horizontal bar. "Yi Yi," written with two bars on top of each other, should literally mean "one by one," but it still retains the additional meaning of "two." This, as Christopher Atkins

37) Quintana, *Fábulas de lo visible*, 107.

38) Andrew, *What Cinema Is*, 140.

points out, is clearly a *double entendre* that provides insight to the core themes of the film. As he notes, "'one by one' may suggest modern isolation and loneliness, but it can also be understood as 'one after another,' suggesting the cyclical nature of life. Furthermore, the 'two,' represented by two ones, also suggests that one is intimately linked to the other to form a whole."[39] It is easy to see how this relates to the very nature of cinema, and in that sense, Dudley Andrew continues:

> Identity accumulates; more than a chronological list of encounters, it is rather a narrative of discoveries, followed by promises (even if sometimes broken) and attitudes (even if sometimes evanescent). Just so, the cinema goes forward, encountering traces of a larger world, and it goes forward as a memory machine adjusting "itself" to what it has become in this process of discovery and engagement with another subject, whether person, culture, temporality.[40]

If our personal identity is constructed as a "narrative of discoveries," we can think of *Yi Yi* as one of the films that better illustrates this process of construction. Its very title suggests that subjective experience is always generated on the basis of something external to it (something changing, sometimes even invisible, such as the dynamics of a capitalist society) and that cinema can be used to reflect on this very process of perception and adaptation through the form of narrative. It has been the main aim of this essay to articulate how film affects this relationship between the real and the self by generating a new reading of Bazin's claims, one that tries to suppress the distinction between reality and illusion and emphasize the power that film can have in the construction of identity. His preoccupations remain relevant through the passage of time, and a critical perspective on these themes is needed in our current moment, where this relationship appears to be increasingly fragile.

39) Atkins, "Yi-Yi Yang's Analects."

40) Ibid.

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