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His rejection of classical ideals of beauty in favor of an aesthetic of fragments and ruins prepared the way for the postmodern “anti-aesthetic.” Benjamin’s ideas on allegory and the *trauerspiel*, meanwhile, had an impact on theorists of national allegory like Fredric Jameson and Ismail Xavier. The Frankfurt School, more generally, had a long-distance impact – via such thinkers as Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Alexander Kluge, John Berger, Miriam Hansen, Douglas Kellner, Rosewittta Muehler, Roberto Schwarz, Fredric Jameson, Anton Kaes, Gertrud Koch, Thomas Levin, Patrice Petro, Thomas Elsaesser, and many others – who later reworked its theories.

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Apart from debates within Marxism (such as that between Brecht and Lukács about “realism” and between Benjamin and Adorno about the progressive potential of the mass media), the decades following the advent of sound were dominated by arguments about the “essence of cinema,” and more specifically by the tensions between the “formative” theorists who thought the artistic specificity of cinema consisted in its radical differences from reality, and the “realists” who thought film’s artistic specificity (and its social *raison d’être*) was to relay truthful representations of everyday life. As already discussed, one current of film theory was dominated by “formative” theorists like Rudolf Arnheim (*Film as Art*) and Bela Bálázs (*Theory of the Film*), who insisted on film’s differences not only from “reality” but also *vis-à-vis* other arts such as theater and the novel. If some theorists, like Arnheim and Bálázs, favored an interventionist cinema which flaunted its differences from the “real,” other later theorists, partially under the impact of Italian neo-realism, favored a mimetic, revelatory, and realist cinema. The realist aesthetic predated the cinema, of course, and could trace its roots to the ethical stories of the Bible, to the Greek fascination with surface detail, to Hamlet’s “mirror up to nature,” or through the realist novel and Stendhal’s “un miroir que se promene le long de la rue.”

But in the 1940s, realism takes on a new urgency. In a sense, postwar film realism emerged from the smoke and ruins of European cities; the immediate trigger for the mimetic revival was the calamity of World War II. Surveys of film theory too often forget the essential contribution of Italian theorists, including filmmaker-theorists, to the debates about film realism. In the postwar period, Italy became a major scene not only of filmmaking but also of film-theoretical production, through film journals such as *Bianco e Nero, Cinema, La Revista del Cinema Italiano, Cinema Nouvo*, and *Filmcritica*, and through prestigious publication series like “Biblioteca Cinematografica.” In his film *Histoires du Cinema*, Godard suggests that there was a historical logic behind this filmic Renaissance. As a country which was formally part of the Axis powers, but which had also suffered under the Axis, Italy had lost its national identity and therefore had to reconstruct it through the cinema. With *Rome Open City*, Italy regained the right to look at itself in the mirror, hence the extraordinary harvest of Italian film. The war and the liberation, filmmaker–theorist Cesare Zavattini argued, had taught filmmakers to discover the value of the real. Against those like the Formalists, who saw art as inescapably conventional and inherently different from life, Zavattini called for annihilating the distance between art and life. The point was not to invent stories which resembled reality, but rather turn reality into a story. The goal was a cinema without apparent mediation, where facts dictated form, and events seemed to recount themselves. (Metz, basing himself on Benveniste’s categories, would later call this form of telling “histoire” [story] as opposed to “discours” [discourse].) Zavattini also called for a democratization of the cinema, both in terms of its human subjects and in terms of what kinds of events were worth talking about. For Zavattini, no subject was too banal for the cinema. Indeed, the cinema made it possible for ordinary people to know about each other’s lives, not in the name of voyeurism but in the name of solidarity.

Guido Aristarco, meanwhile, in his critical essays as well as in his *Storia delle Teorie del Film*, argued against Zavattini that realism, in the sense of registering daily life, was never simple or unproblematic. Inspired both by the work of Hungarian Marxist
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Theorist Georg Lukács and by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Aristarco called for a "critical realism" which would reveal the dynamic causes of social change through exemplary situations and figures. (For an excellent overview of neo-realist theory, see Casetti, 1999.) Partly inspired by the anti-fascist achievements of Italian neo-realism, theorists such as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer made the camera’s putatively intrinsic realism the cornerstone of a democratic and egalitarian aesthetic. The mechanical means of photographic reproduction, for these theorists, assured the essential objectivity of film. Here we find a converse ju-jitsu from Arnhem’s. For Arnhem the cinema’s defects (for example, the lack of a third dimension) were a trampoline for artistic excellence. But what Arnhem saw as something to be transcended—film’s mechanical reproduction of phenomenal appearances—was for Bazin and Kracauer the very key to its strength. As Bazin put it in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945), “the objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture making” (Bazin, 1967, pp. 13–14). For the first time, as Bazin put it, “an image of the world is framed automatically, without the creative intervention of man” (ibid., p. 13). For Bazin, the fact that the photographer, unlike the painter or poet, could work in the absence of a model guaranteed an ontological bond between the cinematographic representation and what it represents. Since photochemical processes entail a concrete link between the photographic analogon and its referent, the charismatic indexicality of photography was presumed to make possible unimpeachable witness to “things as they are.” It is this same “impersonality” that makes film comparable, for Bazin, to the process of embalming and “mummification.” The cinema instantiates a deeply rooted desire to replace the world by its double. The cinema combines static photographic mimesis with the reproduction of Time: “the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, changed, mummified as it were” (ibid., p. 15). In an overly veristic formulation subsequently critiqued by film semioticians, Bazin went so far as to claim that “the photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it” (ibid., p. 14).

The formative/realist dichotomy—Lumière vs. Méliès, mimesis vs. discourse—has often been overdrawn, obscuring what the two currents have in common. Both relied on an essentialist notion of the cinema—as being intrinsically good at certain things and not others—and both were normative and exclusivist: they thought that the cinema should follow a certain path. Both formalist and realist currents featured their own brand of “progressive” teleology of technique. For Arnhem, the advent of sound detailed what would have been the normal train-like progress toward a consciously artificial cinema, while for Bazin the “Old Testament” of silence, in a telling formula which reveals the religious-providential substratum to his thinking, prepared the way for its fulfillment in the “New Testament” of sound. Although Bazin did praise what he calls the “narratival dialectic” of opposing styles in Citizen Kane, stylistic counterpoint, or what Bakhtin called the “mutual relativization” of styles, was not generally seen as a viable option.

For Bazin, the valorization of realism had an ontological, apparitional, historical, and aesthetic dimension. In apparitional terms, realism was the mediumistic realization of what Bazin (1967) called the “myth of total cinema.” This myth animated the inventors of the medium: “In their imaginations they saw the cinema as a total and complete representation of reality; they saw in a trice the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief” (ibid., p. 20). Thus silent, black-and-white cinema gave way to cinema in sound and color, part of an inexorable technological progression toward an ever-more persuasive realism. (One discards an interesting tension in Bazin between the mimetic megalomania of the desire for a total simulacrum of life, and the quiet, self-effacing modesty of his stylistic preferences.) In 1963 Charles Barr extended Bazin’s myth to include the development of widescreen cinema, and the phrase “total cinema” obviously resonates with later innovations such as 3-D, IMAX, Dolby Sound, and Virtual Reality. (In a reverse chronology, Jean-Louis Baudry’s 1970s linking of the cinema to Plato’s allegory of the cave certainly has Bazin’s “myth of total cinema” as its dialogizing backdrop.)

Bazin also generated novel accounts of film history and aesthetics.
In his essay “The Evolution of Film Language” he postulated a kind of triumphal progress of realism in the cinema not unlike a telescoped version of Auerbach’s account in Mimesis of an ever-more verisimilar western literature. Bazin distinguished between those filmmakers who placed their faith in the “image” and those who placed their faith in “reality.” The “image” filmmakers, especially the German Expressionists and the Soviet montage filmmakers, dissected the integrity of the time–space continuum of the world, cutting it up into fragments. The “reality” directors, in contrast, deployed the duration of the long take in conjunction with staging in depth to create a multi-plane sense of reality in relief. Bazin’s annotated realist tradition began with Lumière, continued with Flaherty and Murnau, was strengthened by Welles and Wyler, and reached quasi-teleological fulfillment with Italian neo-realism. Bazin particularly valued the down-to-earth, relatively eventless plots, the unstable character motivations, and the relatively slow and viscous quotidian rhythms characteristic of early neo-realist films. He distinguished between a shallow Zola-like naturalism, which seeks superficial verisimilitude, and a profound realism which plumbs the depths of the real. For Bazin, realism had less to do with literal mimetic adequation between filmic representation and the “world out there” than with the testimonial honesty of mise-en-scène. Deleuze takes on certain aspects of Bazin’s historical teleology in his 1980s work, especially in terms of neo-realism as a crucial break.

According to Bazin, new approaches to editing and mise-en-scène, especially long-take cinematography and depth of field, allowed the filmmaker to respect the spatiotemporal integrity of the pro-filmic world. These advances facilitated a more thoroughgoing mimetic representation, one linked, in Bazin’s thinking, to a spiritual notion of “revelation,” a theory with theological overtones of the presence of the divine in all things. Indeed, Bazin’s critical language—real presence, revelation, faith in the image—often reverberates with religiosity. Cinema becomes a sacrament; an altar where a kind of transubstantiation takes place. At the same time, this in-depth conception was linked for Bazin to a political notion of the democratization of filmic perception, in that the spectator enjoyed the freedom to scan the multi-planar field of the image for its meaning. Although Bazin did speak in favor of “impure cinema,” i.e. a mixture of theater and film, in general Bazinian stylitics left little room for the self-conscious mixing of styles, and indeed Bazin played down the mixing of long takes and montage, of Expressionism and realism, that characterized the work even of some of his favorite directors, such as Orson Welles. Bazin’s favored techniques like the single-shot sequence, as Peter Wollen points out, could also be used for ends diametrically opposed to those endorsed by Bazin; for example, de-realization and reflexivity. At the same time, Bazin was never the “naive realist” that he is often caricatured as being; he was well aware of the artifice required to construct a realist image. The automatization of the cinematic apparatus is a necessary but not sufficient condition for realism. Indeed, Bazin is on some levels a formalist, in that he is less concerned with any specific “content” than with a style of mise-en-scène. Nor can Bazin be reduced to a theorist only of realism; his ideas about genre, authorship, and “classical cinema” also had immense impact.

Like Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer was also concerned with issues of realism, and like him he cannot be reduced to being a “naive realist.” As Thomas Levin points out, Kracauer is often made out to be a kind of anti-Benjamin, when in fact he had much in common with Benjamin. Indeed, it is ironic that 1970s film theoreticians, in their anti-veristic rage, often used Kracauer as a kind of whipping boy, when in many ways his views were aligned with theirs. Kracauer’s The Mass Ornament, dedicated as it was to topical analyses of ephemera such as street maps, hotel lobbies, and boredom, clearly anticipated Barthes’s Mythologies. Some of the confusion arises from the fact that Kracauer’s works in the 1920s and 1930s—especially the essays later collected in The Mass Ornament—only became available decades after they were written (1977 in Germany, 1995 in English).

In the background of Kracauer’s analysis was a concern with the democratic and anti-democratic potentialities of the mass media. In From Caligari to Hitler (1947), a study of German cinema from 1919 to 1933, Kracauer showed how a highly artificial Weimar cin-
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ema “really” reflected “profound psychological tendencies” and the institutionalized madness of German life. Films could reflect the national psyche because (1) they are not individual but collective productions and (2) they address and mobilize a mass audience, not through explicit themes or discourses but through the implicit, the unconscious, the hidden, the unsaid desires. Within Kracauer’s figural approach Weimar cinema foreshadowed the Caligaresque insanity of Nazism. Kracauer discerned a kind of morbid teleology in Expressionist masterpieces such as The Cabinet of Dr Caligari (1921) and M (1931), a movement toward Nazism evidenced in the authoritarian tendencies of the films themselves. In this sense, Kracauer explores another kind of social mimesis, to wit the historicity of form itself as figuring social situations. In aesthetic terms this cinema represented the “complete triumph of the ornamental over the human. Absolute authority asserts itself by arranging people under its domination in pleasing designs” (Kracauer, 1947, p. 93; Kracauer’s analysis indirectly enabled Susan Sontag in “Fascinating Fascism” to align the aesthetics of Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will with those of Busby Berkeley musicals). While not completely persuasive, and vitiated by a sense of post hoc ergo propter hoc, Kracauer’s overall argument interestingly displaces the question of realism onto another level, whereby films are seen as representing, in an allegorical manner, not literal history but rather the deep, roiling, unconscious obsessions of national desire and paranoia.

Much of the view of Kracauer as the ayatollah of realism is based on his magnum opus Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality (1960), which laid the foundations for what he called a “materialist aesthetics.” Kracauer spoke of the film medium’s “declared preference for nature in the raw” and its “natural vocation for realism.” For Kracauer, film was uniquely equipped to register what he variously called “material reality,” “visible reality,” “physical nature,” or simply “nature.” At times, Kracauer seems to posit a quasi-Platonic hierarchy of realities, running from the “sort of real” to the “really real,” with “natural reality” at the apex. Although everything which exists is hypothetically filmable, some subjects are inherently cinematic. Within a kind of romantic ecologism, Kracauer seems to want to keep nature “virginal” and “intact.” But a skeptic might ask why a film of a staged performance, or a shot of a computer screen, is less “real” than a shot of a forest. As usual, the implicit ontological claims of the word “real” lead into dead ends and aporias. Writing in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust, Kracauer was perfectly aware of the dystopian, Hitlerian potential of the mass media. Nevertheless, he maintained his faith in film as the artistic expression of a democratizing modernity, besieged but not yet overcome by barbarism and catastrophe. Central to Kracauer’s valorization of the cinema was its capacity to register the quotidian, the contingent, and the random, the world in its endless becoming. As Miriam Hansen puts it:

Kracauer’s investment in the photographic basis of film does not rest on the iconicity of the photographic sign, at least not in the narrow sense of a literal resemblance or analogy with a self-identical object. Nor, for that matter, does he conceive of the indexicality, the photochemical bond that links image and referent, in any positivist way as merely anchoring the analogical “truth” of the representation. Rather, the same indexicality that allows photographic film to record and figure the world also inscribes the image with moments of temporality and contingency.

Although Kracauer at times seems to confuse aesthetics with ontology, he was not ultimately the partisan of a single style such as neorealism. The anarchistic slapstick of a Mack Sennett, for Kracauer, could critically foreground the well-ordered abuses of instrumental reason. (Here Kracauer anticipates the later French radical deconstructionist embrace of the films of Jerry Lewis.)

Film for Kracauer stages a rendezvous with contingency, with the unpredictable and open-ended flux of everyday experience. It is no accident that Kracauer cites that other great theorist of democratic realism, Erich Auerbach, who speaks of the modern novel’s registering of “the random moment which is comparatively independent of the controversial and unstable orders over which men fight and despair; it passes unaffected by them, as daily life.”4 Perhaps in visceral recoil from the authoritarian certitudes and monumentalist hierar-
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chies of fascist aesthetics, Kracauer, like Auerbach, stresses the “ordinary business of living.” The vocation of the filmmaker, in this conception, was to initiate the spectator into the passionate knowledge and critical love of everyday existence. Speaking overall, Kracauer's work anticipates Metz's later emphasis on the analogy between film and daydream, Jameson's work on national allegory and the "political unconscious," and the cultural studies notion of culture as a "discursive continuum."

Theorists of this period were also concerned with the perennial issue of cinematic specificity, and whether this specificity was of a technical, stylistic, or thematic nature, or some combination of the three. Bazin asked the question in his title *What is Cinema?* and answered it by grounding cinema's essence in the charismatic indexicality of photography, with its existential link to the pro-filmic referent. Kracauer, similarly, saw cinema as rooted in photography and its registry of the indeterminate, random flow of everyday life. Film theory in the 1950s and 1960s also revisited the perennial question of cinema's relation to the other arts. Theorists quarreled, more specifically, about precisely *which* arts or media should be seen as allies or antecedents. Should cinema flee from theater or embrace it, see itself as analogous to painting or deny any relationship? Film theory is particularly haunted by its prestigious forebear, literature. A famous essay by Bazin was entitled "For an Impure Cinema: In Defense of Adaptation." Others were less interested in adaptation than in the fact that filmmakers should proceed like novelists, an idea implicit in Alexandre Astruc's metaphor of the "camera pen." Maurice Scherer (the future Eric Rohmer) once wrote: "Cinema should recognize the narrow dependence which links it, not to painting or to music, but to the very arts from which it has always tried to distance itself," literature and the theater (Clerc, 1993, p. 48). Cinema, in sum, need not give up its right to draw on or be inspired by other arts.

In postwar France film theory marched hand-in-hand with developments in philosophical phenomenology, the dominant movement of the period. Following up on Husserl, philosophers returned to "things themselves" and their relation to embodied, intentional consciousness. The leading phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, discerned a kind of "match" not only between the film medium and the postwar generation but also between film and philosophy. "The movies," he argued, "are peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and the world, and the expression of one in the other... The philosopher and the moviemaker share a certain way of being, a certain view of the world which belongs to a generation." Anticipating Derrida, Merleau-Ponty saw film and philosophy as cognate forms of intellectual labor. In "The Film and the New Psychology," based on a 1945 lecture, Merleau-Ponty discussed the phenomenological parameters of the cinema as a "temporal gestalt" whose palpable realism was even more exact than that of the real world itself. A film is not thought, Merleau-Ponty pointed out, "it is perceived." Applying an amalgam of Gestalt psychology and existential phenomenology to the cinema, Merleau-Ponty suggested, would provide a psychological basis for the basic structures of the cinematic experience as a mediated experience of being-in-the-world. A number of later theorists came to build on Merleau-Ponty-style phenomenology, for example Henri Agel in *Le Cinéma et le Sacré* (1961), Amadée Ayfre in *Conversion aux images* (1964), Albert Laffay in *Logique du cinéma* (1964), Jean-Pierre Meunier in his *Les Structures de l'expérience filmique* (1969), Jean Mitry in his two-volume *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (1963–5), and much later, Dudley Andrew in "The Neglected Tradition of Phenomenology in Film" (1978) and *Major Film Theories* (1976), and Alan Casebier in *Film and Psychology* (1991). In *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992) Vivian Sobchack used Merleau-Ponty's method of phenomenological interpretation to suggest that "the film experience not only represents and reflects upon the prior direct perceptual experience of the filmmaker by means of the modes and structures of direct and reflective perceptual experience, but also presents the direct and reflective experience of a perceptual and expressive existence as the film" (Sobchack, 1992, p. 9).

Concurrent with Merleau-Ponty's work, an academically based French movement called Filmology gave rise to a research institute (Association pour la Recherche Filmologique), an international jour-
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nal (La Revue internationale de filmologie), and a collective text (L’Univers filmique). The movement’s inaugural tome was Gilbert Cohen-Set’s Essai sur les principes d’une philosophie du cinéma (Essay on the Principles of a Philosophy of the Cinema, 1946). Partly inspired by phenomenology, the “filmologists” sought to organize various academic disciplines – sociology, psychology, aesthetics, linguistics, psychophysiology – around the project of a comprehensive and scientific theory of film. At their First International Congress, the filmologists defined five categories of interest: (1) Psychological and Experimental Research; (2) Research in the Development of Cinematic Empiricism; (3) Aesthetic, Sociological and General Philosophical Research; (4) Comparative Research on Film as a Means of Expression; and (5) Normative Research – application of studies of the filmic fact to problems of teaching, of medical psychology, etc. (Lowry, 1985, p. 50). In subsequent years Henri Agel wrote on “Cinematic Equivalences of Literary Composition and Language,” Anne Souriau wrote on “Filmic Functions of Costumes and Decor,” and Edgar Morin and Georges Friedman wrote on “Sociology of the Cinema.” In his paper “Filmologie et esthétique comparée,” Souriau argues, somewhat problematically, that four structural properties of the novel – time, tempo, space, and angle of approach – render it difficult to “translate” into film.

The filmology group undertook a systematic study of all aspects of the cinema, from the “cinematic situation” (theater, screen, and spectator) to the social rituals surrounding the cinema, to the phenomenology and even the physiology of spectatorship. The filmologists elaborated a number of concepts – “cinematic situation” (Cohen-Set), “diegesis” (Etienne Souriau), “cognitive mechanisms” (Rene and Bianka Zazzo) – which were subsequently deployed (and reworked) by both Metzian semiotics and, much later, cognitive theory. In Souriau’s proposal (in La Correspondance des arts, 1947) for a comparative study of the specifics of the various arts, for example, we see the partial source of Metz’s attempts to classify and differentiate media in terms of their “specificity,” just as Romano’s work on the “character of reality” provoked by film anticipates Metz’s work on “the impression of reality.” Filmology’s investigation of such issues as the perception of movement, the impression of depth, the role of immediate and deferred memory, motor reactions, empathic projections and the physiology of spectatorship, by the same token, prefigured many of the concerns of cognitive theory in the 1980s.

The Cult of the Auteur

In the late 1950s and early 1960s a movement called auterism came to dominate film criticism and theory. Auterism was in some ways the expression of an existentialist humanism inflected by phenomenology. Echoing Sartre’s pithy summary of existentialism – “existence precedes essence” – Bazin claimed that the cinema’s “existence precedes its essence.” Bazin’s vocabulary, moreover, as James Naremore points out, was a Sartrean one, fond of words like “freedom,” “fate,” and “authenticity” (Naremore, 1998, p. 25). Bazin’s essays “Ontology of the Photographic Image” and “Myth of Total Cinema” were roughly concurrent with Sartre’s essay entitled “Existentialism and Humanism.” Sartre and Bazin share a fundamental tenet: “the centrality of the activity of the philosophical subject, the premise of all phenomenologies” (Rosen, 1990, p. 8). Auterism was also the product of a cultural formation which included film magazines, ciné-clubs, the French cinémathèque, and film festivals, and it was fueled by the screening of newly available American films during the Liberation period.

Novelist and filmmaker Alexandre Astruc prepared the way for auterism with his 1948 essay “Birth of a New Avant-Garde: The Camera-Pen,” in which he argued that the cinema was becoming a new means of expression analogous to painting or the novel. The filmmaker, Astruc claimed, should be able to say “I” like the novelist or poet. The “camera-pen” formula valorized the act of filmmaking; the director was no longer merely the servant of a preexisting text (novel, screenplay) but a creative artist in his/her own right. François Truffaut also played an important role with his stra-