

The Ontology of the Photographic Image: A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores André Bazin's seminal work, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, and its significance in film theory, particularly his emphasis on realism in photography and cinema. Bazin argues that photography and cinema represent a more authentic portrayal of reality compared to earlier art forms like painting, which are constrained by the artist's subjective interpretation. This paper not only examines Bazin's philosophical and aesthetic contributions to the understanding of film and photography but also connects these concepts to sociological themes. It examines how visual media, particularly cinema, play a pivotal role in shaping societal structures, cultural perceptions, and social identities. By examining Bazin's theory alongside contemporary sociological issues, this paper highlights the continuing relevance of realism in film and its power to influence social change.

Keywords

André Bazin, Realism, Neorealism, Film narrative, Social issues, Marginalized communities

Introduction

André Bazin's *Ontology of the Photographic Image* remains one of the most influential texts in the realm of film theory, as it explores the essence of photography and cinema from a philosophical and aesthetic standpoint. By emphasizing the objective nature of photography and the inherent realism in cinema, Bazin posits that these media offer a truer representation of reality compared to previous artistic forms like painting. His ideas have shaped our understanding of realism in film and photography, laying the groundwork for many contemporary film movements. However, in the context of today's society, Bazin's theories also open a broader sociological discussion about the role of media in shaping cultural perceptions, social identities, and societal structures.

This essay not only examines Bazin's theory of realism in photography and cinema but also extends the discussion by linking these concepts to sociological themes. As the media continues to evolve in the 21st century, it plays an increasingly powerful role in the way we understand and engage with the world [1]. Cinema, as an art form rooted in the capture of reality, reflects the societal values, ideologies, and power structures of its time. By exploring the intersection of Bazin's theories

with social theory, we can better understand the profound impact that photography and cinema have on both individual identity and collective social consciousness.

Plastic Arts and the Mummy Complex

Bazin argues that the plastic arts—such as painting and sculpture—originate from what he refers to as the “mummy complex”, a psychological desire to preserve life by fighting against time. Throughout history, humans have attempted to preserve their life forms and experiences through reproducing appearances. From the earliest depictions of human figures in Egyptian tombs to Renaissance paintings, artists have sought to create a semblance of immortality through their works. However, while the Renaissance enhanced painting's authenticity through perspective, painting remained a subjective representation of reality shaped by the artist's vision. This subjectivity in artistic production meant that art could never fully capture the reality it intended to represent.

From a sociological standpoint, this concept is significant because it reflects humanity's ongoing quest for permanence in a world that is constantly changing. The fear of death, the inevitable passage of time, and the

social desire to preserve culture and memory all play into this “mummy complex” that Bazin describes. For centuries, the preservation of life—both literally through mummification and metaphorically through artistic representation—were central to the way humans interacted with their environment [2]. The advent of photography shifted this narrative by offering an entirely new method of engagement.

Photography: The Breakthrough

The invention of photography, Bazin contends, broke free from the limitations of traditional painting. Unlike painting, which was bound by the artist’s subjective interpretation, photography, as an automatic process, records reality without human interference. It captures a moment in time and preserves it as a replica of reality. This shift was revolutionary not only for art but also for society. Photography gave rise to a new way of perceiving and engaging with the world. In the context of sociological analysis, the advent of photography can be seen as a reflection of an increasingly modern and industrialized world, where objective and accurate documentation of reality became essential.

Sociologically, the rise of photography marked a profound change in how individuals, communities, and societies viewed themselves and the world around them. Photography allowed for the representation of the mundane, the everyday, and the invisible aspects of life. It gave marginalized groups a voice, documented social struggles, and captured the complexities of life in a more egalitarian manner. As photography captured more aspects of human existence, it also revealed the power structures that were previously hidden or ignored. Photographs could expose the realities of poverty, war, and inequality, serving as a tool for social and political change. In this way, photography became more than just a medium for art; it became a mechanism for social commentary and activism.

The Evolution from Painting to Cinema: The Rise of Objectivity

Bazin argues that photography’s ability to capture reality objectively revolutionized the arts. With the rise of photography, painting shifted its focus away from representing the real world and instead concentrated on form, color, and emotion. This led to the development of

artistic movements, including Impressionism, Cubism, and Abstract Art. These movements flourished because photography assumed the responsibility of documenting reality, allowing artists to free themselves from the constraints of trying to replicate the real world.

From a sociological perspective, the shift from painting to photography - and subsequently to cinema - can be interpreted as part of a broader cultural and social transformation. As modernity and industrialization progressed, people became increasingly alienated from both the natural world and traditional forms of art. New art forms like photography and cinema allowed people to reconnect with reality, albeit in a mediated form. Cinema, as Bazin argues, became an art form that captured not just the appearance of reality but the passage of time itself. It allowed individuals to experience events as they unfolded, offering a dynamic representation of reality that was both temporal and spatial [3-5].

The development of cinema as an art form was also driven by social changes. The rise of cinema as a medium for mass entertainment coincided with the growth of the film industry and the rise of the working and middle classes in the early 20th century. Cinema offered an escape from these new social groups, providing a form of entertainment that was both accessible and affordable. As cinema became more widespread, it also began to reflect the social dynamics and issues of the time. Early films like *The Birth of a Nation* and later, *The Grapes of Wrath*, reflected and reinforced social narratives, yet also had the power to challenge and criticize the status quo. Cinema thus became a powerful tool for shaping societal values, norms, and ideologies.

Cinema and the Sociological Impact: The Realism Debate

Bazin’s concept of realism was deeply connected to his belief in cinema’s ability to present reality without distortion. However, this theory of realism has been challenged over time. The advent of modern filmmaking techniques, such as editing, special effects, and stylized cinematography, introduced a new era of subjective representations of reality. The theory of montage, developed by Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, argued that the power of cinema lies not in its ability to replicate reality but in its capacity to create new meaning through editing. The famous “Odessa

Steps" sequence in *Battleship Potemkin* exemplifies this idea, where rapid cuts and contrasting images generate intense emotional responses from the audience.

From a sociological standpoint, the debate between Bazin's realism and Eisenstein's montage reflects a larger conversation about the role of media in society. Bazin's realism champions the idea that film should reflect the world as it is, while Eisenstein's montage theory suggests that cinema has the power to manipulate reality to evoke specific emotions, attitudes, and ideas. This reflects a broader sociological concern about the power of media to influence public opinion, shape social behavior, and construct reality itself [6-8]. In a world where media increasingly dictates the way individuals understand the world, the tension between objective representation and subjective manipulation in cinema mirrors larger societal debates about truth, objectivity, and ideology.

Realism in Contemporary Cinema: A Sociological Reflection

Despite challenges to Bazin's realism, the power of realistic depictions in film remains significant. In the modern era, films such as *Capernaum* and *Shoplifters* continue to use realistic techniques to portray the struggles of marginalized communities. These films employ non-professional actors, real locations, and minimal editing to present the harsh realities of social life. From a sociological perspective, these films underscore the enduring relevance of realism in addressing social issues. By focusing on the lives of the oppressed, these films force audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about social inequality, economic disparity, and human suffering.

Moreover, films like *Parasite* and *Nomadland* employ realism to draw attention to issues such as wealth inequality and the collapse of the American Dream. These films allow viewers to empathize with the struggles of marginalized individuals, providing a platform for social critique and reflection [9-11].

Sociologically, these films challenge the prevailing neoliberal narratives of success and individualism, offering a more nuanced view of social reality that is often excluded from mainstream media. The use of

realism in these films underscores the role of cinema in shaping public awareness and promoting social change. In contrast, many contemporary blockbusters, particularly those from Hollywood, prioritize spectacle over realism. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), for example, relies heavily on special effects and CGI to create visually stunning worlds that often obscure the real-world issues they might otherwise address. The shift toward spectacle in mainstream cinema reflects a broader trend in society toward consumerism and entertainment at the expense of more meaningful engagement with social issues [12].

Conclusion

Bazin's theory of realism remains relevant in Today's world, particularly as cinema, continues to grapple with its role in representing social reality. Despite technological advancements in filmmaking, the value of realism in cinema lies in its ability to foster empathy, provoke thought, and inspire social change. The ongoing debate between objective realism and subjective manipulation in cinema is deeply connected to broader sociological concerns about the power of media to shape societal values and influence public discourse. As the world continues to face complex social issues, the role of cinema in documenting and reflecting reality remains an essential tool for fostering social awareness and driving change.

Through the lens of Bazin's realism, it becomes clear that cinema is not merely a form of entertainment but a powerful medium for social reflection, critique, and transformation. The future of cinema lies in its ability to balance the technical innovations of filmmaking with its foundational responsibility to represent reality—no matter how uncomfortable or difficult that reality may be.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funds.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to show sincere thanks to those techniques who have contributed to this research.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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