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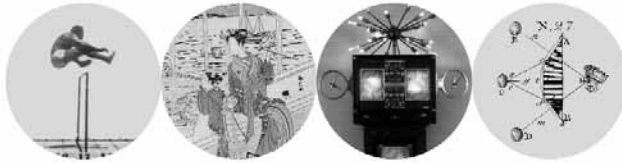
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# journal of visual culture



## Seeing/Loving Animals: André Bazin's Posthumanism

Jennifer Fay

### Abstract

French film theorist André Bazin was fascinated by films in which humans and animals are framed together, especially in circumstances in which the presence of one signals the endangerment of the other. By putting Bazin and two films he admired (*Kon Tiki* and *Umberto D*) in conversation with Jacques Derrida's writing on the animal and Walter Benjamin's inhuman optics, this article argues that Bazin's commitments to cinematic realism and the recurrence in his writing of human/animal propinquity signal a distinctly posthumanist ethics. Jacques Perrin's *Winged Migration* realizes Bazin's interest in a cinema that de-centers and even absents the human. It may also be a film that answers Derrida's call that we not just look *at* animals, but feel ourselves seen *by* them.

### Keywords

André Bazin • animals • Jacques Derrida • *Kon Tiki* • *Umberto D* • Walter Benjamin • *Winged Migration*

André Bazin loved animals. François Truffaut (1975) tells us that Bazin 'raised all sorts of creatures, from a chameleon to a parrot, to say nothing of a host of squirrels, turtles, a crocodile, and even a Brazilian iguana, which he himself fed with pieces of hardboiled egg impaled on a small stick' (p. 6). International film festivals were occasions for Bazin to visit foreign zoos and acquire exotic pets (Andrew, 1978: 206, 211–13). And as anyone who has read Bazin knows, films featuring animals figure prominently in his most seminal essays on film aesthetics and ontology. Looking for scenes that respect the spatial and temporal continuity of reality, and above all its complex ambiguity, Bazin directs his readers to the walrus and seal hunts in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), to the grazing horses in Lamorisse's

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*Crin-Blanc* (1952), and to the shot in *The Circus* (1928) which reveals Charlie Chaplin locked in a cage with a lion. These images are bound not only to the discourse of attention and love so central to Bazin's ethos, but to his surrealist attraction to films that momentarily showcase the objective co-presence of radically different entities. Noting the frequency of animals in Bazin's writing, Serge Daney rephrases the fundamental law underwriting Bazin's realism: 'whenever it is possible to enclose two heterogeneous objects in the same frame, editing is prohibited'. 'In that sense', Daney (2003) concludes, 'the essence of cinema becomes a story about animals' (p. 32). In Daney's essay, man together with the animal is the ultimate expression of heterogeneity as well as a paradigm for the vexed allure of cinematic violence. In many of the examples whose authenticity rests on the spatial proximity of humans and animals, Bazin is fascinated by the danger that may result from this screen cohabitation. It is perhaps little wonder that the cover of the third volume of *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* features an oft-reproduced photograph of Bazin gleefully embracing his cat since his theorizing of cinema was never far removed from his thoughts about animals.

This article revisits Bazin's film theory by way of his zoophilia. Daney seizes on examples of animals in Bazin's writing in order to unpack the theorist's obsession with cinema's capacity to record irreversible transformations, such as death and birth. I, however, am interested in what this shared enframement may reveal about the status of the human in relation to animals more generally. Bazin's attention to human/animal propinquity tells us that his humanism is more capacious and creaturely than is typically acknowledged. In fact, Bazin's work and sentiment is very much aligned with critical theory's unending project to unmoor the human as the center of knowledge and to question humanity's separation from and domination over the natural world. In working through crucial human-animal moments from his essays and films he admired, I argue that a recalibration of Bazin's humanist commitments is necessary if we are to truly understand his explanation of cinema as a technology that decenters and even absents the human. His realism, as reimagined through animals and nature, is not merely the replication or record of the world as we humans perceive it (nor is it merely the space humans and animals share); rather, it reveals the details of animate and inanimate life that are lost to anthropocentric attention and history. Bazin's description of indexicality dovetails with an iconicity that is not necessarily – certainly not definitionally – isomorphic with human apperception. Cinema, and its relationship to the photographic process in Bazin's account, can show us the limits of human vision and reveal a world in which humans exist equally with animals and things; it may even show us a world in which animals and things exist independent of humans altogether.

Much of the recent work on Bazin has complicated conventional wisdom on his supposedly naive realism, showing that his theory is more forward-looking and can, in fact, explain the power of images even in our post-cinematic age (Gunning, 2004; Lowenstein, 2007; Morgan, 2006). I take a different tack: by putting Bazin in conversation with Jacques Derrida's work on animality and Walter Benjamin's inhuman optics, I open Bazin's

aesthetics up to posthumanist ethics. I use posthumanism in this article to designate not the end of embodied human experience as we evolve into or are surpassed by cybernetic and other intelligent machines (Hayles, 1999: 1–13). Rather, I am speaking about a posthumanism that extends ethical regard, legal discourse, and fundamental rights beyond the human to include non-human animal life. Eroding notions of human uniqueness and structures of knowledge that privilege the human over all other forms of life, this posthumanist ethics, Cary Wolfe (2003) explains, is necessary if we are to be accountable to the social movements of civil rights, feminism, gay and lesbian rights, etc.

As long as this humanist and speciesist *structure* of subjectivization remains intact, and as long as it is institutionally taken for granted that it is all right to systematically exploit and kill nonhuman animals simply because of their species, then the humanist discourse of species will always be available for use by some humans against other humans. (p. 8)

Of course, Bazin was responding to the intellectual and film culture not of our contemporary posthumanist era, but of the Second World War and post-war Europe, a time when Auschwitz and the refugee crises alienated humans from their so-called inalienable rights, and when stateless, migrating humans were, in Hannah Arendt's (1968[1948]) phrasing, expelled from humanity altogether: 'No longer allowed to partake in the human artifice [the stateless] begin to belong to the human race in much the same way as animals belong to a specific animal species' (p. 279). Without human rights, 'a person becomes a human being in general – without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself' (p. 302). In other words, the refugee of the postwar era is a human become animal. Bazin's writing, though rarely so forthrightly engaged in the politics of his moment, is nonetheless responding to the precarious status of the human and the animal as staged in such films as *Kon Tiki* and *Umberto D*. By way of a conclusion, I consider how these theoretical positions converge in a more recent film made during a new age of global terror and disenfranchisement. Implicitly commenting on the life of the stateless, Jacques Perrin's *Winged Migration* offers an avifaunal perspective which defamiliarizes human patterns of looking and offers a mode of intersubjective spectatorship that may help to bridge the experiential gaps not only between human and non-human beings, but between and among humans themselves. Guided by Bazin's animal sympathies, I take seriously the proposition that the essence of cinema may well be a story of animals.

## Endangered and Endangering Animals

The prohibition on editing to which Daney (2003) alludes is, of course, an exaggeration of Bazin's proscription for cinematic realism. Never so dogmatic, Bazin, as Daniel Morgan (2006) persuasively argues, advocated for a multiplicity of realisms, each unique to the concrete and social truth of the

individual film (p. 463). When it comes to humans and animals, however, that social truth is best conveyed by the stylistic devices we tend to associate most with Bazin's theory. In 'The Virtues and Limitations of Montage', he explains the efficacy of the long shot and long take when he turns to a scene from the otherwise unremarkable *Where No Vultures Fly* (Watt, 1951). A boy and his father, who are in possession of a lion cub, are pursued, in the same shot, by the cub's mother:

Up to this point everything has been shown in parallel montage and the somewhat naïve attempt at suspense has seemed quite conventional. Then suddenly, to our horror, the director abandons his montage of separate shots that has kept the protagonists apart and gives us instead parents, child, and lioness all in the same full shot. This single frame in which trickery is out of the question gives immediate and retroactive authenticity to the very banal montage that has preceded it. From then on, and always in the same full shot, we see the father order his son to stand still – the lion has halted a few yards away – then to put the cub down on the ground and to start forward again without hurrying. Whereupon the lion comes quietly forward, picks up the cub and moves off into the bush while the overjoyed parents rush towards the child. (Bazin, 1967[1958–62]: 49, fn)

The choice to keep the actors in the frame with the lion, writes Bazin, enhances the 'dramatic and moral value of the episode' and 'carries us at once to the heights of cinematographic emotion' (p. 49). While parallel editing constructs a sense of danger for the boy and his parents, our horror emerges out of our recognition that this shared framing captures the real space and time of the encounter, and – more importantly – the real and imminent peril to the humans, even from a most likely trained, half-drugged lion. Earlier in this essay, Bazin posits the paradox of fiction film spectatorship: 'If the film is to fulfill itself aesthetically we need to believe in the reality of what is happening while knowing it to be tricked' (p. 48). Deep focus cinematography, long takes, and camera movement are, in this instance, necessary to authenticate the encounter; but it is the animal in this human fiction that provides the supplement of reality.<sup>1</sup> With trickery 'out of the question', this long shot fuses fiction and documentary, characters and actors, by bringing humans and animals into predatory relations.

In 'Cinema and Exploration', Bazin offers a subtle refinement of the camera's relationship to the life-threatening phenomena it records. At the center of this meditation is Thor Heyerdahl's exemplary documentary *Kon Tiki* (1951), the record of Heyerdahl's 4000-mile voyage across the Pacific on a primitive balsa raft which he undertook in order to prove that Polynesia, contrary to established anthropology, was populated by Peruvians who had migrated to the islands some 1500 years ago. Unlike fictionalized exploration films that include re-enactments of the most dangerous moments, *Kon Tiki* is enthralling because, writes Bazin (1967[1958–62]), 'the making of it is so totally identified with the action that it so imperfectly unfolds; because it is

itself an aspect of the adventure' (p. 161). Having always to attend to sails, ropes and unexpected emergencies, the men are only at leisure to roll the film during the journey's more sedate moments. Very often, the voice-over regales us with details of life-threatening crises that necessarily escape the cinematic record. We hear about ferocious gales while watching shots of sunny weather; we hear about whales storming the raft, but see mostly shots of Lorita, the pet parrot, as she perches on the sail above the men. These gaps or 'negative imprints' attest to the film as a real record of the expedition. Or, as Bazin explains: 'A cinematic witness to an event is what a man can seize of it on film while at the same time being part of it' (p. 162).

About halfway through the film, the men have an unexpected underwater visitor so large that they can film only a portion of it as it swims beneath the raft. Queries Bazin:

Does the killer whale [shark], that we can barely see refracted in the water interest us because of the rarity of the beast and of the glimpse we get of it, slight as it is? Or rather is it because the shot was taken at the very moment when a capricious movement of the monster might well have annihilated the raft and sent the camera and cameraman seven or eight thousand meters into the deep? (p. 161)

For Bazin, the answer is clear, 'It is not so much the photograph of the whale that interests us as the photograph of the *danger*' (p. 161). In this moment, *Kon Tiki* confronts us with the excitement that surfaces, like the barely visible shark, when we witness a cinematic record of risk and the potential for death this risk heralds, not only, in this case, for the men on the raft, but for the camera operator himself.<sup>2</sup> The film's hand-held, 'trembling' visual style and many gaps always remind us that there is a man behind this camera who is vulnerable to the events he records. The image of the whale shark is thus not an encounter with an endangered species but an endangering one, and this shot captures not so much an image *of* an animal (for we see very little of the shark), as a volatile relation *between* the man and animal.<sup>3</sup>

In both the fiction film and the documentary just described, we experience the 'cinematographic emotion' and 'moral value' of a scene when we realize that the profilmic event might have ended disastrously had the whale shark or lion attacked. As Daney (2003) remarks of Bazin's sado-aestheticism, 'You have to go to the point of dying for your images: That's Bazin's eroticism' (p. 37). In Daney's reading, Bazin's most cherished cinematic moments are those when singular, irreversible and inevitable transformations – above all death – are preserved unedited by the medium best suited to bring such events to our apprehension. But Daney finds that these kinds of events in-and-of themselves are rather empty of signification, particularly in the late films of Luis Buñuel in which transformations abound that tell us almost nothing about 'the nature of things, about their heterogeneity or the laws of their mutations' (p. 40). In Buñuel's work, Bazin's funeral aesthetic reaches its final and futile endpoints. Yet, I think there is something a bit more radical in Bazin's cinephilia, especially where animals are concerned. These shots of

the whale shark and the lion are not simply empty signifiers of *imminent* death and transformation; they are, above all, images of possibility. As Mary Ann Doane (2002) explains in more general terms, cinephilia 'is only a slightly illicit subset of a larger and ongoing structuring of the access to contingency' in the face of modernity's inexorable systematicity (p. 231). Cinephilic spectatorship fixes on those imagistic or sonic excesses that have not been absorbed in, or cannot be contained by, an otherwise rational, linear, inevitable plot. Such fastening on the unplanned event or un-designed image, explains Doane by way of Paul Willeman and Miriam Hansen, is 'an homage to cinema's historical dimension. The indexically inscribed contingency is not the embodiment of history as a mark of the real or referent but history as the mark of what could have been otherwise' (p. 231). Though Bazin does not describe scenes in exactly these terms, the 'might have been' of the lion and whale shark visitation signal this otherwise of history. Again, Bazin is emphatic that this is not an image of a shark so much as an image of *potential* danger augured by the shark's arrival. And we could add that *Kon Tiki's* double temporality heightens this sense of subjunctive history. For this film is the 'imperfect' account of Heyerdahl's journey across the Pacific which is itself a re-enactment of a prehistoric, mythological migration. These temporal registers – the modern and mythological, but also the historical and instantaneous – fuse when men and animals come into contact. These scenes of possibility, in turn, remind us that this particular journey and the human history it represents are contingent and might very well have unfolded differently.

This time before history is explicitly signaled in Heyerdahl's written memoir (1950) about the adventure. Recounting the Kon Tiki myth, as told to him by a village elder, Heyerdahl becomes obsessed with the white chief-god who brought his people to the Polynesian islands from the 'great country beyond the sea':

Old Tei Tetua's stories of Tiki and the islanders' old home beyond the sea continued to haunt my brain, accompanied by the muffled roar of the surf in the distance. It sounded like a voice from far-off times, which, it seemed had something it wanted to tell, out there in the night. I could not sleep. It was as though time no longer existed, and Tiki and his seafarers were just landing in the surf on the beach below.  
(p. 13)

This voice from a distant time temporally dislocates Heyerdahl, just as the raft would soon propel him into the flow of the natural world. Guided by artifacts left behind by the long-extinct civilizations of South America, the European crew reconstruct the primitive raft (a project, the film tells us, made more difficult because the balsa wood needed for the raft on the coast of Ecuador has been 'decimated for export purposes'). Following in Tiki's wake, the men are carried from Peru to Polynesia solely by sea currents and trade winds, and, in a sense, their journey to the islands is also a travel back in time. For even these modern men, long unshaven and browned by the sun, begin to resemble those technologically sophisticated but now vanished primitives



whose migration they re-enact. Far removed from speedometers, clocks, and calendars, the men are now beholden to an organic temporality dictated by the sun, water, and 'the eternal East wind', a planetary time that *Winged Migration*, as I discuss later, also signals from above.

In this aquatic and eternal arena, the men come into contact with the rare and unusual marine life that modern, motor-driven seafarers typically scare away or have hunted nearly out of existence. The raft is visited by whales, the rarely seen snake mackerel, and the cuttlefish whose bodies provide both the dish and ink for the crew's travel diary. Night after night 'succulent flying fish' leap aboard the deck, offering themselves up as breakfast for the men who, in this Edenic world, need not hunt to eat. Yet, in seeming betrayal of this hospitality, the men on the raft do hunt to pre-empt any reversal of the food chain. As Lorita watches on, the men lure and kill the sharks that follow the raft to ensure, as Heyerdahl puts it, 'that we got the shark before the shark got one of us should anyone fall overboard'. A brown shark violently flails on deck while the voiceover explains the process of catching and subduing the fish until, an estimated 45 minutes later, it finally dies of suffocation. As they accumulate up to nine sharks on the raft's small surface, Heyerdahl comments that 'it was often hard to distinguish between the dead ones and those alive'. With only six men on board, the sharks, dead and dying, outnumber the crew, and the shoals of pilot fish, with no sharks to lead, now swim at the raft's bow. Thus, in this sea of plenty, even the abundant brown shark may be harvested to oblivion. When the seventh honorary member of the crew, the parrot, Lorita, abandons the raft after 60 days, it becomes clear that human-animal cohabitation is almost always in passing, and is very often bad for the animal. It would seem that the beginning of human migration as enacted in this film signals the inevitable beginning of the end of animal life.

But the brown shark is small game compared to the whale shark, the largest and among the rarest fish known to man. The crew is understandably amazed and terrified by this unexpected guest whose body so overwhelms the tiny raft. The image that attracted Bazin captures the *mise-en-scène* of the whale shark's proximity, which in turn threatens the men with the *mise-en-abyme* of the ocean, the end of the journey, and the fragile coinherence of film and life. Like their Polynesian forbears, these men survive the whale shark that follows them (but never attacks) by plunging a harpoon into its sinewy head. Wounded, it disappears into the vast blue below. Yet, with just a capricious flick of its tail, the shark would strike from the record the transoceanic migration past and present. In this fleeting moment of contact, the inevitability of human history and migration is momentarily suspended, like the frozen, optically printed, image of the shark.

## Umberto's Dog

*Kon Tiki* is an amateur documentary in which the animal portrays a history of what might have been. Bazin is likewise attracted to Italian neorealist films because their plots hinge on accidental events that bear down on human



(and, as we will see later, animal) kind. It is in Bazin's neorealist writings that we find a more clearly articulated politics underwriting his realist aesthetics. In his review of Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), Bazin (1971) explains:

Few films have been more carefully put together, more pondered over, more meticulously elaborated, but all this labor by De Sica tends to give the illusion of chance, to result in giving dramatic necessity the character of something contingent. Better still, he has succeeded in making dramatic contingency the very stuff of drama. (p. 68)

'The marvelous aesthetic paradox' of this film about an impoverished worker, whose one opportunity of gainful employment is dashed when his bicycle is stolen, is that 'it has the relentless quality of tragedy while nothing happens in it except by chance' (p. 68). As such, it delivers a 'two-fold justice' by providing an 'irrefutable description of the wretched condition of the proletariat', while making an appeal to 'the human need that any society whatsoever must respect' (p. 74). This 'perfect illusion of reality' is achieved through the use of non-professional actors, on-location shooting, and the cinematographic techniques of long takes and camera movements that locate the fiction within Italy's very real postwar world. The effect is that through dramatic manipulation, De Sica manages to convey a certain social, materialist truth which offers an important rejoinder to *Kon Tiki's* chance encounters. In taking us into the timelessness of the natural world, *Kon Tiki* intimates how the larger arc of history could have been derailed. Neorealist films feature individuals whose accidental lives are beholden to seemingly immutable social forces and histories which they are utterly powerless to alter.

This attention to individual plight is what Bazin refers to as neorealism's 'revolutionary humanism', which, in describing the struggles of men, urges its viewers to 'change the order of things, preferably by persuading people . . . whom only blindness, prejudice, or ill-fortune has led to harm their fellow men' (p. 21). If compassion is first and foremost a matter of seeing people suffer, then these films may inspire responsible action in spectators who simply have not noticed the structural injustices that imperil human happiness. De Sica's special gift, however, is his 'latent', 'unavoidable pessimism': 'in it resides the appeal of the potential of man, the witness to his final and irrefutable humanity' (p. 74). By this, Bazin means that De Sica manages to distill human survival to the fragile condition of its possibility. To work and thus to feed his family, Bruno must find the stolen bicycle in the chaos of impoverished postwar Rome. De Sica's characters are forced into action 'from a necessity that is at once absurd and imperative' (p. 74).

According to Bazin, the apotheosis of neorealism is *Umberto D*, De Sica's 1952 feature which exceeds even *Ladri di biciclette* in its dramatic non-drama. Summarizing the film's virtually plotless theme, Bazin offers this sentence: 'a retired minor official reduced to penury decides against suicide because he can neither find someone to take care of his dog nor pluck up the

courage to kill it before he kills himself' (p. 80). The ethical charge and aesthetic conceit of this film is its elevation of the quotidian over the demands of dramatic structure. Though, over the course of the film, Umberto spirals from tenant to vagrant, no one incident causes his 'accidental misfortune'. Instead, the narrative is comprised of 'concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than the other, for their ontological equality destroys drama as its very basis' (p. 81). 'I have no hesitation in stating that cinema has rarely gone such a long way toward making us aware of what it is to be a man'. Parenthetically, Bazin adds: '(and also, for that matter, of what it is to be a dog)' (p. 78). Cryptically and without elaboration, Bazin muses that this film, exemplary of neorealist technique and revolutionary humanism, can tell us what it is to be a dog. Enticed by this aside, I consider how the absurd and wrenching imperative at the film's center – the event that convinces Umberto that he cannot kill himself until he can kill his dog – makes us aware of not just the fact of animal life, but the nature of human–animal being.

It is just past the mid-point of the film that Umberto, searching for his beloved pet, visits one of Rome's busy dog pounds – a scene, like most in the film, shot on location. As he waits in line, Umberto momentarily spies the gas ovens that exterminate strays and then overhears a conversation in which a man who cannot afford the release fee must condemn his dog to this fate. In a deep-space, shallow-focus, medium shot of the tortured pet owner, we can just make out the contours of the extermination room over his shoulders. When, next, an upper-class woman reclaims her pet, it is clear that only the well-off can afford to buy the disposable life of a dog. Umberto leaves this room hoping to find Flike in one of the endless rows of cages. He passes one dog after another and witnesses the cycle of operations at this working pound. By the truckful, dogs arrive; by the cageful, the unclaimed are taken to the ovens. While Umberto searches only for his mutt, we, through the gaze of a camera that sees so much more, must countenance (in the face of all dogs) the expendability of non-fictional canine life.

Umberto finds Flike when the next truck is unloaded, and for him this reunion resolves the drama of the pound, as signaled when De Sica frames the two creatures in a tight close-up that eliminates all of the other dogs, ovens and cages from view. But the rescue of a single dog does little to alleviate the suffering of the species. For even as Umberto embraces Flike, the other dogs we saw loaded into the ovens (ovens that would be visible over his shoulder in a wider framing) are already dead. This sequence critiques a ruthless postwar economy in which modernization and gentrification have produced an excess of dogs (and, for that matter, old men) whose very numbers cheapen their worth. Just as the famous hunt sequence in Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* (1939) anticipates the violence of war to come, this film – like Franju's 1949 *Le Sang des bêtes* – reminds us that the horrors of the Second World War have not ended so much as been redirected back on to non-human animal life. In the outskirts of the city, far from Rome's prosperous neighborhoods, a quiet war against dogs is being waged that is all but hidden behind the tall iron gate of the compound. Here it is not the animals we

barely glimpse, but the ovens that incinerate them. In 1952, this exterminating *mise-en-scène* is both the future of Italy's unwanted dogs as well as a specter of Italy's complicity with fascism and genocide of the recent past.

Yet, no sooner are man and dog reunited, than Umberto searches for other, more humane, ways of disposing himself of his pet. With nowhere to live and no-one to whom he may turn, Umberto can no more take care of this dog than he can take care of himself. Unable to find a good home for Flike, he resolves to kill them both by stepping in front of a moving train. In the final scene by the railroad crossing when Flike flees Umberto's murderous designs and thus saves his owner from suicide, the narrative economy of the film becomes clear: Flike, at the mercy of men, cannot live without Umberto, and Umberto, though possessing neither the means nor the will to live, cannot die with Flike in his charge. Man and dog, both victims of a new social order, are hostage to each other. In this film, at least, being a dog means being caught in the terrible grip of the human condition. Where *Kon Tiki* enframes humans and animals in predatory relations – capturing not just the heterogeneity, but paradox of this screen cohabitation – *Umberto D* dramatizes the impossibility of human–animal separation in both interpersonal and world-historical terms. Dudley Andrew (1978) remarks that Bazin's work was part of a larger project to manage the tension he felt between a feral and social existence. Bazin, writes Andrew, 'had to learn to think, to analyze, to write and speak so that he could feel at home among the animals he kept and feel free in the society of his day' (p. 235). This sentence wonderfully encapsulates the categorical slippages of *Umberto D* and *Kon Tiki*: to feel at home with animals – to embrace one's creaturely nature – may jeopardize one's freedom among men.

It is the recognition of the violence that underwrites the coexistence of humans and animals in a volatile horizon of experience and in mutually illuminating scenarios of imperilment that connects acts of seeing to loving. 'We might note', writes Bazin (1971) in his De Sica essay, 'how much the cinema owes to a love for living creatures' (p. 73), not only because it may represent a moment of danger or death in its singular finitude, but also, as he writes elsewhere, because it reveals those natural images 'of a world that we neither know nor can see' (Bazin, 1967[1958–62]: 15). As a time-embalming medium, cinema may represent the convergence of human and natural temporality, as well as human–animal mutuality when it shows the political truth which lies just beyond our powers of compassion. But cinema also produces a vision beyond anthropic ways of seeing. And here we may turn to his theory of cinema proper in order to learn more about the limits of the human.

## The Limits of Anthropocentric Attention: Bazin and Benjamin

Writing on what he takes to be the uniqueness of the photographic process in contrast to the other plastic arts, Bazin (1967[1958–62]) declares: 'For the first time between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man' (pp. 12–13).<sup>4</sup> While Bazin concedes that the photographer must select the when, where, and what of the image, it is in the moment of aleatoric abandon after he presses the shutter that man recedes from the process and nature imprints itself both photochemically and phenomenologically. As Peter Geimer (2007) notes, Bazin's 'extreme' definition posits a rather improbable 'photographer who acts without seeing, a mode of picture production in which the (human) actor is passive or even absent' (p. 19). The aesthetic yield of this process is a surplus of detail or a 'chance event' that the photographer could neither have anticipated nor orchestrated. Significantly, Geimer's key example is the presence of a fly in an Antonio Beato photograph of the Ciaro citadel taken in 1862, an insect that, unbeknownst to Beato, had found its way into the camera and inserted itself into an image of a landscape otherwise devoid of life. Hubertus von Amelunxen remarks that this fly 'determines the image, fixes it in time and removes it from its time. The fly is contemporary' (p. 12). To this, Geimer adds that the dated photograph likewise points to the historical existence of the fly. Here again, the animal (in this case, a fly) is both the marker of contingency and the signifier of complex temporality.

But I think Bazin's heterodox definition of photography connects his fascination with the contingent and the animal to a larger deficiency in human ways of looking. Indeed, as he famously writes:

It is not for me to separate off, in the complex fabric of the objective world, here a reflection of a damp sidewalk, there the gesture of a child. Only the impassive lens, stripping its objects of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love. By the power of photography, the natural image of a world that we neither know nor can see, nature at last does more than imitate art: she imitates the artist. (Bazin, 1967[1958–62]: 15)

Photographic images may not only repair vision by revealing those details disguised by preconceived grime; they put into relief, and may even help to redeem, the limitations of anthropocentric attention. Love is bound to an awareness that finds in human, animal, natural, and even inorganic, phenomena a shared, ephemeral singularity. Cinema, moreover, helps us to see that which we typically ignore because its image is beyond absolute human desire. Nature, not man, becomes the artist.

This presumed disparity between the world we see and the one cinema reveals also tells us something about the complexity of Bazin's realism. Tom Gunning (2004) notes that the photograph in Bazin's account neither copies nor replaces the world it captures. If we disentangle cinematic indexicality from resemblance – or differentiate the index from the sign – in Bazin's writing, we may appreciate that the photograph's relationship to the natural world need not, often does not, resemble what the *human* eye sees. On the one hand, the camera may fail to fix the details or scope of the event it films (such as the whale shark). On the other hand, the 'nearly inexhaustible visual richness' of photography, as Gunning phrases it, 'combined with a sense of the photograph's lack of selection' may mean that it captures in excess of what we can attend to (p. 47). Bazin's notion of indexicality, argues Gunning, means that the photograph 'opens up a passageway to its subject, not as a signification but as a world, multiple and complex' (p. 46). More than this, the absence of man in Bazin's formulation may place us in a world in which the human is marginalized or even absent, a case Bazin makes forcefully when he distinguishes cinema from theater.

In the theater, where the actor is physically present to the audience and where 'the human being is all-important', the sets, the lights, and costumes – the artifice of theater – are always in contrast to the world just beyond the stage (Bazin, 1967[1958–62]: 102): 'Theater of its very essence must not be confused with nature under penalty of being absorbed by her and ceasing to be' (p. 104). Because theater must conceal the real world beyond the stage, theatrical realism is never spatial, it is rather enfolded into the vicissitudes of the human soul:

Like the ocean in a sea shell the dramatic infinities of the human heart moan and beat between the enclosing walls of the theatrical sphere. This is why this dramaturgy is in its essence human. Man is at once its cause and its subject. (p. 106)

As Bazin writes, in reference to Olivier's *Hamlet*, the theater privileges the text and language; it is a medium 'conceived for the anthropocentric expression proper to the stage' (p. 111). In contrast, cinema is in essence 'a dramaturgy of Nature', in which the space of the drama is always situated as part of the natural universe rather than something apart from it. While most fiction films revolve around human characters, Bazin writes that in cinema 'man is no longer the focus of the drama, but will become eventually the center of the universe' – only cinema puts the actor within a décor, itself 'part of the solidity of the world'. 'For this reason the actor as such can be absent from it, because man in the world enjoys no a priori privilege over animals and things' (p. 106). If the human becomes the center, Bazin intimates that cinema may remind us that this centrality is the product, not of nature, but of drama. Through cinema we may recognize that this privilege could be otherwise.

Bazin's emphasis on human absenting merits further elaboration, particularly in light of Walter Benjamin's theory of the 'optical unconscious',

as is borne out in his 'Little History of Photography'. Like Bazin after him, Benjamin is drawn to the surplus of details the photograph exposes or makes available. And, like Bazin, Benjamin (1999[1931]) is fascinated with the photograph's indexical relationship to historicity, the 'here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject' (p. 510).<sup>5</sup> Photography, in Benjamin's account, reveals another nature to the eye, bringing into experience details and spaces which typically elude apperception. Likewise, cinema's use of close-ups, editing, slow motion, etc. present this nature to attention, 'if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man'.

Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person's posture during the fractional second of a stride. The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods . . . The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses. (Benjamin, 1968a[1936]: 236–7)

We may remark that Bazin (1967[1958–62]) also finds a dream-like valence to the photographic image – and perhaps an unconscious in Benjamin's sense – when, at the end of his 'Ontology' essay, he writes:

The surrealist does not consider his aesthetic purpose and the mechanical effect of the image on our imaginations as things apart. For him the logical distinction between what is imaginary and what is real tends to disappear . . . Hence photography ranks in the highest order of surrealist creativity because it produces an image that is a reality of nature, namely, an hallucination that is also a fact. (p. 16)

Benjamin and Bazin (at least in this moment of the 'Ontology' essay) might agree that the reality film captures is, to borrow Miriam Hansen's (1987) phrasing, 'no less phantasmagorical than the "natural" phenomenon of the commodity world it endlessly replicates' (p. 204). Or, as Bazin (2000) writes in praise of Jean Painlevé's microbiological science films: 'cinema reveals that which no other procedure of investigation, not even the eye, can perceive' (p. 145). In this short review, Bazin locates the origins of cinema's purest aesthetic in the work of Muybridge and Marey, whose proto-cinematic devices were initially trained on types of animal movement that exceed human sight. In later films made in the service of science, 'cinematic beauty develops as an additional supernatural gift' (p. 146). Rhapsodically, Bazin reflects:

What special effects could have produced the magical ballet of freshwater microorganisms, arranged miraculously under the eyepiece as if in a kaleidoscope? What brilliant choreographer, what delirious painter, what poet could have imagined these arrangements, these forms and images! The camera alone possesses the secret key to this

universe where supreme beauty is identified with nature and chance: that is, with all that a certain traditional aesthetic considers the opposite of art. (p. 146)

Here Bazin declares his affinity with the Surrealists, who 'alone foresaw the existence of this art that seeks in the almost impersonal automatism of their imagination a secret factory of images' (p. 147).<sup>6</sup>

Yet, for Benjamin (1999[1931]), the political possibilities of the optical unconscious are perhaps best expressed in Atget's photographs of Paris – images of places hidden and, importantly, empty of people:

The city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant. It is in these achievements that Surrealist photography sets the scene for a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings. It gives free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail. (p. 519)

Where the photograph in Bazin's account brings objects to attention and delirious love, for Benjamin the image invites the surgical, distanced gaze of the educated eye which may find in these de-humanized pictures of rows of empty boats, handcarts in serried ranks, the 'literalization of the conditions of life' (p. 527). Atget captures a world outside of human perception in which humans have no a priori privilege over things. This 'sense of the universal equality of things', Benjamin (1968a[1936]) writes in his 'Work of Art' essay, amounts to the destruction of aura 'to the degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction' (p. 223). Even the human actor in cinema, Benjamin asserts, is beholden to this auratic dissolution.

While cinema, like photography, destroys aura and confronts us with the conditions of human self-alienation, it is also the case, Hansen (1987) argues, that the auratic mode of experience may return 'through the backdoor of the "optical unconscious"' (p. 212). That second nature that film and photography reveal, notes Hansen, citing the work of Marleen Stoessel, 'is nothing but the material origin – and finality – that human beings share with non-human nature' (p. 212). Hansen clarifies that aura may not, as Adorno argued, be a placeholder for the human labor erased by the fetishized commodity, that 'forgotten human residue'. Rather, aura is exactly the uniqueness and transience common to humans, animals, art works, and things, all equally subject to contingency and decay. Beyond this shared materiality, aura is also a mode of looking that reproduction destroys but that the optical unconscious may restore. Auratic *perception* produces an intersubjectivity by investing what is seen with the capacity to return the gaze, even when the beholder looks at non-human nature. Benjamin (1968b[1939]) writes:

Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the



inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. (p. 188)

If auratic perception, like aura itself, may be reincorporated into experience via the optical unconscious, then we may invest in animals their capacity to return the gaze (even if only by looking at reproduced images of them) and thus feel ourselves seen. In this way, Benjamin's beholder has the capacity to become the object of a gaze returned – be it from a person, thing, or animal.<sup>7</sup> Though it is the human beholder who projects this intersubjectivity onto the world, that he feels himself looked at in return may help to address the philosophical impasse of looking at animals that, as I discuss later, so frustrates Derrida.

My point here is not to make a case that Benjamin and Bazin necessarily share a sense of cinema's redemptive power or even agree on the conditions of political life that limit perception. Nor do I think either offers a tidy reading of cinema that fully overcomes the human in image-making or viewing. Yet both theorize cinema as a medium that captures the limits of human perception by producing images we otherwise do not, or cannot, see. And insofar as the optical unconscious produces a reciprocal gaze, cinema and photography may also be technologies that facilitate human–animal intersubjectivity, and through this, a sense of obligation to change the order of things.

### Derrida's Cat

The animal politics of posthumanism may seem far afield from Bazin, cinema, and the historicity of an enframed human–animal meeting. Yet it is interesting, in the light of Bazin's writing, that Derrida posits 'the animal' problem as a visual phenomenon, one that hinges on the exchange of glances between men and animals in close proximity. We could well imagine a (surrealist/neorealist?) film based on the opening scenario of his essay 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)'. Here Derrida (2002) theorizes the history of human–animal relations through the *mise-en-scène* of an encounter with his pet cat. Every morning, after Derrida wakes up, his cat follows him into the bathroom wanting her breakfast, 'but she demands to be let out of that very room the moment as soon as it (she) sees me naked' (p. 382). In the bathroom, their gazes meet and Derrida finds himself naked and embarrassed before the cat. He is embarrassed knowing that only man may feel himself naked (the animal, he notes, does not experience its own nudity), and ashamed because his nudity before the cat recalls the epoch before original sin when man first was naked without shame. The cat's connection to mythic history, of course, echoes the temporal dislocation of *Kon Tiki*; the animals from both the raft and Derrida's bathroom are reminders and remainders of mythical history and the stories of man's

ascendancy. But, as Derrida also reminds us, his black cat is not metaphorical or mythical. This is a real cat of the here and now whose insistent gaze nonetheless makes him ponder the eschatology that brings them to the bathroom every morning. As Derrida recounts, it is in that 'awful tale of Genesis' that man, at God's behest, names the animals and marks his domination over them, over 'what is called animal life'. Man is created after the animals, and once naming them, follows, hunts and eats them at will. Presumed to be without language, without subjectivity, the animal is 'the absolute other' in human history. And, as Derrida writes, 'nothing will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbor than these moments when I see myself naked under the gaze of a cat' (p. 380). In a reversal of *Kon Tiki's* image world, Derrida is not looking at the animal, but contemplating himself as seen by his cat, from an animal's optical and, one might say, historical point of view.

Fittingly then, in the bathroom, naked in front of his cat, Derrida considers a 'taxonomy of the point of view of animals' which may describe the persistent resistance in western philosophy to account for animal subjectivity. In the first place, there are those treatises that have been written by philosophers (Derrida cites Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Lacan, Lévinas), who have seen and analyzed the animal, but who have never been seen *by* the animal: 'Their gaze has never intersected with that of an animal directed at them (forget about being naked)' (p. 382). These philosophers

neither wanted nor had the capacity to draw any systematic consequence from the fact that the animal could, facing them, look at them, clothed or unclothed, and, in a word, without a word, address them. They have taken no account of the fact that what they call animal could look at them and address them from down there, from a wholly other origin. (pp. 382–3)

Linking the philosophical problem of the animal to a phenomenal encounter with a cat, Derrida suggests that for these men the gaze and address of the animal has failed to produce an intersubjectivity and sense of mutual responsibility. In the shadow of his cat's gaze, Derrida seeks out, but does not find, a philosopher who might represent the other position – one who re-thinks the natural order in terms of being the object – a nude and passive object – of the animal's look.

Objectifying himself thus before his cat, Derrida poses two hypotheses. The first recasts the question of animal subjectivity from the terms of language to those of experience. Referencing Jeremy Bentham, Derrida asks not 'can the animal speak?' but 'can it suffer?' For the last 200 years, he claims, we have made animal subjugation and suffering a foundation of our own well-being by denying, or refusing to look at, the animal in pain. While philosophy debates the terms of animal language, no one can deny that animals suffer. And if we can acknowledge the capacity of animals to suffer, and see their mortal vulnerability, we engage

the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower, the possibility of this impossibility, the anguish of this vulnerability and the vulnerability of this anguish. (p. 396)

In other words, he proposes that we acknowledge the fragile biology and capacity for suffering we humans share with all living creatures and thus strip ourselves of our so-called God-given rights over animals. If we contemplate the possibility of our own complete disempowerment, if we can share with animals a fundamental non-power, then we may also imagine a politics that protects and empowers all (human included) animal life. But for such a radical rethinking to germinate, we must first look at the animal in pain and perceive that it suffers.

The second hypothesis is that the very categories within language of 'Animal' and 'Man' have created an illogical binarism out of a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living. He who speaks of 'the Animal', 'claiming thus to designate every living thing that is held not to be man . . . each time the subject of that statement . . . does that he utters an asininity'. In this word-play, the *asininity* is both a failure of reason and a statement that suggests the speaker is related to the ass. This asinine utterance 'confirms not only the animality he is disavowing but his complicit, continued and organized involvement in a veritable war of the species' (p. 400). Taken together, these two formulations argue that looking at the animal and bearing witness to the vulnerability that we share with all living creatures, restores a compassion that language has eviscerated. The challenge to western philosophy's animal violence thus centers on seeing the animal, seeing oneself as seen by the animal, and being open to the response that the animal offers through its gaze. If we take seriously the look of animals, then perhaps, Derrida muses, we may one day stand naked before animals and engage our nudity without shame.

Responding to this essay, David Wood (2004) notes that Derrida is not the first philosopher to ponder the phenomenology of the gaze. Despite Derrida's parenthetical dismissal, both Sartre and Lévinas are the forbears of a visual ethics theorized through the proximity to the (sometimes animal) other. While it is beyond the scope of this article to articulate fully the differences among these three thinkers, I do want to compare Derrida's feline scenario to Lévinas' famous encounter with a dog and explain briefly how the former opens up a human-animal recognition that the latter, finally, forecloses. 'In the Name of the Dog, Or Natural Rights' is Lévinas' short reflection on his experience as a prisoner of war in a Nazi camp for Jewish soldiers. Stripped of his citizenship, rights, and dignity, Lévinas along with the other prisoners is regarded as an animal by both his Nazi captors and the German civilians who happen by the prison gates: 'We were subhuman, a gang of apes . . . We were beings entrapped in their species: despite all their vocabulary, beings without language' (Lévinas, 2004: 48). But then one day a dog, whom the prisoners name Bobby, takes up temporary residence in the

camp before the Nazi soldiers banish him. With great excitement, Bobby greets the prisoners at the morning assembly and again at the end of the day when they return from their forced labor. 'For him', writes Lévinas, 'there was no doubt that we were men' (p. 49). Bobby's canine enthusiasm is an acknowledgement of the prisoners' dignity, and, as such, he is witness to the indignities of Nazism. Bobby thus enacts a philosophical paradox: 'This dog was the last Kantian in Nazi Germany, without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives' (p. 49). While Bobby compels Lévinas to reconsider the history of human domination over animals, and in particular the barbarism of flesh-eating, this reciprocating gesture of bearing witness to animal murder is short-circuited when Lévinas references Kant. On the one hand, Bobby is the last entity in Nazi Germany to accord respect for the human defined as a rational and free agent. Yet Bobby, a dog, is incapable of reason and thus incapable of according this status to Lévinas and the other men. Bobby lacks the brain power to universalize concepts. Summarizing the salutary effect of this impasse, David Clark (1997) explains that 'the dog is granted the power to be more than itself only insofar as it rigorously remains itself – *dans l'animal* – vis-à-vis "man"':

It may well be that as long as animals are quiet, as long as they remain speechless and stupid, they will be allowed into the neighborhood of the human – but always under the threat of deportation – to perform a certain supplemental witnessing work. If the animal speaks, it will speak only silence, in deference to those whose truly possess language and ethics. (p. 192)

At just the moment when a face-to-face encounter with a dog could produce a sense of mutual obligation, Lévinas reverts back to the Enlightenment tropes of human uniqueness (reason, language and, for Lévinas, the face) that sanction human over all other animal life.

But Derrida's encounter is routed through the visual registers of the look that circumvent the specifically *linguistic* markers of subjectivity and reason. More than this, in positing himself as the object of his cat's gaze, Derrida avoids what Wood (2004) identifies as the twin dangers of this scene: '(1) to declare the animal (the cat) unknowable, and (2) to appropriate the cat' (p. 132). Rather than shoring up his humanity, the cat, in addressing Derrida from a wholly other position, opens up a metaphysics that may itself be just beyond human comprehension. If Derrida's cat 'is given the role of determining who I am', writes Wood, 'this experience also serves as a cautionary brake on my own self-understanding' (p. 132). It is not that the cat is so completely unknowable as to be dismissed from philosophical inquiry, so much as the cat, through its gaze, intimates the limitations of the human cogito, or human thought itself.

In this sense, the animal in Derrida's post-Enlightenment thought bears some comparison to its place in the pre-Enlightenment writings of Montaigne who, based on his observation of animals – in particular, his cat – argued that animals might well have a language and a regard for humans (as

incomprehensible beasts) that is inaccessible to human intelligence. Hassan Melehy (2006) explains that in Montaigne's writing this inaccessibility is not unique to human–animal encounters:

For Montaigne, it is in our lack of understanding of the action of animals and the languages they may well use among themselves that the border between us and animals must lie. This border, however, is not a strictly discernible one: it is more of a limit that indicates a gap, an extension of the gap that often enough makes a human being incomprehensible to another and even to him/herself . . . As [Montaigne] puts it . . . 'There is more difference from a given man to a given man than from a given animal to a given man'. (pp. 275–6)

Where Lévinas concedes that men may be reduced to animals, he would refuse a formulation that places man and animal on the same side of a dividing line of mutuality. Derrida, on the other hand, echoes Montaigne's sentiment when he declares that feeling himself the object of his cat's gaze brings to light the absolute alterity of the neighbor. Here the politics of proximity and propinquity traverse the human–animal and human–human field. To be in the presence of an animal, to see oneself seen by the animal, and to acknowledge the limits of human perception and thus understanding; to participate in these visual turns is precisely what cinema may do in Bazin and Benjamin's account. But Derrida lends to this reciprocating visuality an ethical charge of responsibility to the non-human, animal subject, a responsibility implicit in Bazin's parenthetical aside.

### Perrin's Birds

The film that brought me back to Bazin and that made me think about the animal question through his theory is Jacques Perrin's *Le Peuple migrateur* (2001) – re-titled *Winged Migration* for the North American release – a lyrical tribute to birds in flight. Unlike those films discussed earlier, the struggle of animals in *Winged Migration* is not, putatively anyway, illuminated in comparison to the struggles of men, nor are humans the objects of sympathy or subjects of identification. I say 'putatively' because the French title literally translates to 'The Migrating People', but more on this in a moment. In this film, we (humans) exist on the periphery of bird life, literally visible on occasion at the edges of the film's frame. As an ornithological answer to *Kon Tiki*, *Winged Migration* is structured around prehistoric patterns of flight that signal a natural temporality outside human experience and history. But this film stresses that these patterns are also part of a contemporary world and temporality that humans and birds share. Using techniques that Bazin would have admired, the camera witnesses the migratory travel that is continually beset with danger and even death. We see, for example, the camera tilt up from a beleaguered bird's nest to the tractor-mower about to engulf it, and a long take captures numerous flying creatures against a backdrop of a massive iceberg tumbling into the sea. Then there is the goose whose 1000-mile

journey is abruptly ended when it is shot from an off-screen source below. Recalling the hunt from *La Règle du jeu*, the camera follows the goose without cutting as it flies, dies, and falls into a lake upon whose shore we now see crouching hunters silhouetted with their rifles.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to Heyerdahl's film, it is not the animals so much as threatening humans who are signifiers of contingency. These dramatic and often unforeseen episodes in the film, in which birds are framed together with their various predators and against sublime natural disturbances, find their counterbalance with the serene moments where we do not simply watch the birds fly, but fly with and among them. Using aviation technology developed expressly for this film, Perrin and his crew bring us into a seemingly unmediated relationship with these birds and reveal to us the body of the bird up close and in flight; we notice not just the aesthetics of this animal in motion, but the effort and strain each bird must endure in its migratory journey. Placed in the dazzling midst of flying formations, we see other birds and the world below from a distinctly ungrounded perspective: we are at once amazed by the technology that hides itself and, as film critic Charles Taylor (2003) notes, erases 'any recognizably *human* point of view' (p. 25, emphasis added).

It is worth noting that the difference between this and other nature films is its forsaking of a conspicuous pedagogical mode whereby a voiceover narration strains to make bird-life intelligible. Instead, Perrin privileges the patterns of flight over those of narrative, and lets these birds present (perhaps speak for) themselves through the visual address of cinema. In fact, his sporadic commentary in the film seems uncanny and intrusive. It is exactly the symptomatic awkwardness of the human voice in the film that cues us into *Winged Migration's* ethical project: to capture that which eludes human vision, language and explanation on behalf of those who subsequently exist outside of politics and law. By absenting the human as both the explicit subject and object of knowledge, *Winged Migration* retrains our eye to see the life outside the political. We see, for instance, the Great Wall of China as an instinctive landmark rather than a monument to containment, and in place of nations and trade routes, we may also see habitats and flyways. In other words, this film helps us to see ourselves and our creations from the gaze of a bird and in this way to acknowledge the limits of our own earth-bound, human, and political ways of thinking.

As these birds travel across continents and fly over vast oceans, we are nonetheless reminded of the terrestrial laws that ban humans from similar border crossings. Indeed the French translation of the title invites us to imagine these birds as migrating people;<sup>9</sup> the German title *Nomaden der Lüfte*, or *Nomads of the Air* similarly summons the image of the wandering human. Without going so far as to suggest that the migrating bird figures the nomadic life of the refugee, we should attend to the global implications of a film about birds whose life and thus survival is on display, and who know no borders nor claim any one state as home. If it compels us to notice the global and ecological precariousness of these stateless animals, the film may also provoke a more imaginative and compassionate relationship to those humans whose language, habits, or states of imperilment may be even more foreign to us.



With this in mind, I want to end by thinking through the implications of what now is surely a very poignant (perhaps, by now, even cliché) moment in the film. In autumn, the camera flies with red-breasted geese past the World Trade Center, a building whose absence from the skyline today summons a traumatic image of mechanical flight within the history of human violence. Noting that the film was cut before the disastrous events of 9/11, Perrin (2003) defends his decision to include this footage in the final print:

If freedom is represented by the birds, if hope is evident in the representation of the bird, then if the towers are not here now, we will always have the passage of the birds, and thus always have hope.

Even as the film captures the contingencies of presence, the specificity of time, the irreversibility of death, it also gestures to the *longue durée* of migration which exceeds the life and death of any single bird, and which may well exceed the life and death of human kind. There is the world and history we share with birds in which they flicker in and out of perception, and then, as Perrin reminds us, there is a world apart that only the camera, tracking the bird, can reveal to us. It is in this otherwise hidden domain where we see the community of birds in flight, or the hatching of an egg, that we may also discover not just the ways in which birds are like us, but the way that we, like them, are animals. For Bazin (1971), the meaning, value, and even end of cinematic realism is 'that it should ultimately be life itself that becomes spectacle, in order that life might in this perfect mirror be visible poetry, be the self into which film finally changes it' (p. 82). Through, and then after cinema, we can look at animals (including human animals) afresh and begin to imagine the look they return. We may see ourselves, mirrored, as it were, in an animal's gaze and find in the place of our reflection signs of inter-subjectivity, a communication between the living. In this exchange, we may embrace the politically denuded life we share as animals, in the spirit of humility and openness we share with the naked philosopher.

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### Notes

1. Though not in connection to Bazin's writing, Vivian Sobchack (2004) makes a similar point about the animal's documentary value. Citing the death of the rabbit in Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* (1939), she notes:

The rabbit's death, however, exceeds the narrative codes that communicate it. It ruptures and interrogates the boundaries (and license) of fictional representation and has a 'ferocious reality' that the character's death does not . . . The rabbit's death violently, abruptly, punctuates fictional space with documentary space. (p. 274)



2. Again, I am indebted to Sobchack (2004) who writes of the 'endangered gaze' in documentary which is 'coded in terms not of distance but of *proximity* to events of violence and death'. For Sobchack, such a gaze, marked by a shaky, hand-held camera and obstructed views, marks the ethical trade-off when the filmmaker risks his own life in order to capture the death of another (especially in war footage) (p. 251).
3. This notion of a 'relation' comes from Daniel Morgan's (2006) essay on Bazin. Morgan argues that Bazin's reality is not a matter of particular stylistic devices, but rather how, at the level of the shot, 'reality is presented and an attitude, an interpretation taken'. In Morgan's reading of Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia*, the camera is 'called to life' by Katherine (Ingrid Bergman) as she beholds statues in a museum. The camera, Morgan writes, 'does not so much replicate her look as articulate a specific relation between her and the stone figures' (pp. 464–5). Later in the essay, he notes how Rossellini constructs Katherine's response to the world around her through the camera, which does not replicate her point of view so much as enable us to infer her emotional disposition. 'On the basis of what we see, and how we see it, we grasp something internal to her' (p. 467). Later in this article, I consider how cinema can also enable our apprehension of the world from an animal's range of experience. As Morgan observes, the camera does not have to replicate, optically, how Katherine sees, but may help us to infer her psychological state.
4. In a related context, Akira Mizuta Lippit (2000) offers an interesting interpretation of this passage from Bazin in connection to Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. Lippit remarks: 'Looking at the photograph, one realizes that one is looking into a place without subjectivity and, moreover, that something like a nonsubject returns that look.' For Lippit 'the photographic look exhibits an attention without perception, a type of being without subjectivity' (p. 176). In this way the photograph is like an animal. But, in what follows I think about how this reciprocity may be read in terms of a shared subjectivity (one that might carry over to the animal) by connecting Bazin to Benjamin.
5. Philip Rosen (2001) makes this connection between Benjamin and Bazin in terms of their shared sense of the indexicality of film and photography to the real, and their shared interest in cinema as a 'document in vision, but a document achieved in relation to time, as preservation from a past, as widespread availability and exhibition of sights of past existents' (pp. 167–8).
6. Adam Lowenstein (2007) also pursues this connection between Bazin's interest in the phantasmatic reality the photograph lays bare and the surrealists' fascination with photography's ability to meld perception and imagination (pp. 55–9). For Lowenstein, Bazin's affinity with surrealism speaks to the ways that Bazin's work can help us to theorize spectatorship in relation to digital media and, in particular, the multi-layered viewing of DVD commentary.
7. Kaja Silverman (2000) writes of a similar reciprocity between the subject and object of vision when she discusses phenomenology's notion of 'intentionality'. Borrowing from Hannah Arendt and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Silverman theorizes a mode of world spectatorship according to which, 'every perceiving subject is at moments a perceptual object, and every perceptual object at times a perceiving subject' (p. 129). For Arendt, especially, anything that sees wants, in turn, to be seen. Though this desire may only inhere within the human psyche, it is nonetheless a mode of vision Arendt ascribes to even inanimate objects, and it is a model of perception that presumes a gaze returned (p. 130).
8. Perrin is frank in his DVD commentary that while these particular scenes show us birds who are genuinely and mortally imperiled, there are others in which the

conditions of danger have been simulated. For example, we find the red-breasted goose flying over an industrial sector of eastern Europe. When five of the birds land in a pond of oil, only four of the group are able to take flight. With its oil-saturated wings, the bird left behind will surely die. Perrin explains that the oil and its effects were simulated by dyeing baby formula black. The bird left behind was saved. But the point of this scene still speaks to the ethics of witnessing pain. While the oil may be fake, the suffering of the bird, knowing only that it cannot fly, is real. It's worth recalling that for Bazin the staged danger in *Where No Vultures Fly* is less a record of actual violence than a living occasion of a dangerous possibility. Even Bazin admits that trickery is often necessary to achieve authenticity.

9. I thank Oliver Gaycken for pointing out the anthropomorphizing nature of the French title.

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