In the aftermath of World War 2, André Bazin irrevocably changed both international film criticism and the cinema. Bazin’s profound influence was made possible by his constant efforts to build and reform cinematic institutions, efforts that supported the critical and philosophical power of his writings.

In 1941 Bazin started a film society housed in the Maison des Lettres, a cultural center aligned with the French resistance in Nazi occupied Paris. In order to do so he had to struggle against both Nazi censorship and the contempt for cinema still common among Parisian intellectuals. To make the series succeed, Bazin and his comrades had to build a film culture where none existed. After the war, he went on to found Cahiers du cinema, and had an abiding influence on the directors of the French New Wave, almost all of whom wrote for Cahiers during his tenure there.

Bazin’s writing fused criticism and theory into a strong amalgam. His criticism did not seek to either establish a cannon of good taste or cater to his readers’ prejudices. His evaluations of films were grounded in a set of philosophical principals that Eric Rohmer compared to the axioms of Euclidean geometry. Bazin began his career by laying out those axioms in an essay composed at the end of the Second World War. The title of that essay introduces its philosophical stakes. “Ontologie De L’image Photographique”, or “Ontology of the Photographic Image”, names the concept of “being” as Bazin’s central concern, for ontology is the branch of philosophy that studies being.

In European philosophy, a debate raged from the beginning of the twentieth century through the 1940s over whether ontology, epistemology, or ethics should come first in philosophy. Edmund Husserl argued that philosophy must begin by establishing a theory of knowledge, or an epistemology, since any claim about anything whatsoever assumes knowledge. Martin Heidegger countered that a first philosophy

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3 See Husserl's lectures 1923-4 lectures on first philosophy published as Edmund Husserl, Erste Philosophie (1923/24), ed. by Rudolf Boehm, Parts I and II, Husserliana VII and VIII. Nijhoff Den
could only be an ontology since any knowledge assumes existence. Emanuel Levinas thought of philosophy as always spoken or written, always addressed to another. He therefore believed that philosophy must start with ethics, which deals with the concept of others.

Bazin’s title expresses the difficulty of thinking through the concept of being and articulating that thought in language. Although one could understand Bazin’s title as announcing an analysis of the photographic image according to the categories of a pre-established theory of being, Bazin meant that his essay presents a new or revised ontology whose categories are established on the basis of photography and its way of being.

Strictly speaking, Bazin’s title makes an impossible claim, for the general concept of being ought not to be thinkable on the basis of any particular being. Nonetheless, the title should be read as if there were a colon after the first word, “Ontology: Of the Photographic Image,” as if the philosophy of being in the essay could not exist without photography – as if it were indistinguishable from photography. The essay begins:

“A psychoanalysis of the plastic arts might consider the practice of embalming as a fundamental factor in their genesis. At the origin of painting and sculpture it would find a mummy complex.” [Translation mine.] Bazin wrote the first two sentences in the conditional: “might” consider, “would find.” The grammatical mode of those sentences sets up the premises for the rest of the essay, like an axiom of axioms. Later in the essay, Bazin claims that the invention of photography was “the most important event in the history of the plastic arts,” which only makes sense in light of the potential “mummy complex” introduced in at the beginning. Bazin elaborates his entire argument within the state of virtual being indicated by the conditional, the “perhaps” with which he begins.

To write in the conditional is to think about being as otherwise than as full, present, and the contradiction of nonbeing. By beginning with the conditional the essay

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indicates that something other than naïve realism or even phenomenology will be at stake in what follows. After specifying that the being his ontology will be concerned with is virtual or potential being, Bazin again surprises his readers by suddenly imagining a potential psychoanalysis of the plastic arts. One expects ontological writings to start by bracketing off anything other than the problem of being or our apprehension of being. Logically, ontology must be prior to any psychology, because psychology, already assuming the existence of a psychological entity, implies knowledge of being. In the beginnings of modern phenomenology Husserl and Heidegger both exclude psychology from their respective ontological and epistemological investigations. Instead of generating a philosophy from certainties, the “Ontology” essay derives a theory of being from existents.

What would this psychoanalysis of the plastic arts be? It would certainly differ significantly from Freudian psychoanalysis. The mummy complex that it may reveal has no direct relation to sexuality. Unlike the Freudian death drive, the mummy complex aims at survival, not inertia. Bazin’s essay takes up a major theme of modern continental philosophy: human finitude.

Bazin understands the potential origin of the plastic arts as a complex and he calls embalming “a” (“un”) possible factor in their genesis. The indefinite article indicates the existence of other factors and that the mummy is not a simple fact, but a compound. Bazin’s conception of the mummy complex as one potential origin among others continues the Freudian understanding of origins as multiple, as complex rather than unified.

If Bazin has been read by some as a phenomenologist, perhaps the truth of such a reading can be found not only in his attention to cinematic perception, but also in his analysis of the photographic image as a relationship between humans and death. Heidegger organized much of Being and Time around such a relationship and one might fantasize that Bazin’s psychoanalysis might be part of the small tradition of das-i-enanalyze that emerged in Germany after the second world war.

The word mummy in the second sentence already directs us towards Egypt, the setting of the sentences that follow:

“The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death saw survival as depending on the continued existence [pérennité] of the corporeal body. Thus by providing a defense against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To artificially fix his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life. It was natural there-
fore, to save these appearances in the deceased’s very reality, in his flesh and his bone. The first Egyptian statue, then was a mummy, tanned and petrified in sodium.8” (9)

In invoking Egypt, Bazin defines the human experience of death as an agonistic relationship to time that the Egyptians sought to defend themselves from. On the outer wall of this crypt, Bazin inscribes a difference between the survival of the one who has died and the continued existence of his or her body. Bazin’s rhetoric describes life in terms of stasis and death in terms of flow and change. Thinking through the connection between the mummy and the being of the one who has died pushes Bazin’s language towards the rhetorical figure of paradox. He writes that embalming, or “fixing” (as in one of the final steps in printing a photograph), snatches the body from the “flow of time” and “stows it ... in the hold of life.”

But Bazin does not quite write about the “continued existence of the corporeal body.” Bazin actually writes about its “pérennité,” which Hugh Gray translates as “continued existence.” The sentence is « La religion égyptienne dirigée tout entière contre la mort, faisait dépendre la survie de la pérennité du corps. »” The Trésor de la Langue Française defines “pérennité” as “durability” “permanence” and/or “perpetuity” and notes that the word is used particularly to describe the continuity of a thing or a species across a series of individuals or organisms. While Gray’s translation conveys part of Bazin’s meaning in clear English, it loses Bazin’s rhetoric. For <<pérennité>> does not quite mean continuous physical endurance. The flower at the edge of the grave Bazin describes is not quite a perennial, as Anglophone gardeners call individual plants that last many seasons. Here, a corpse flowers and endures through generations and the rhetoric of the passage gives it a life that exceeds that of any individual. The undead condition of the one who was alive and whose body is the mummy exert pressure on the rhetorical level of the text, displacing the binary oppositions between life and death as well as the opposition between individual and species, producing the figure of paradox in Bazin’s sentence and setting up a more elaborate paradox in the group of sentences.

In Gray’s translation we read: “It was natural therefore to keep up appearances in the face of the reality of death by preserving flesh and bone.” It is hard to see how this translates “Il était naturel de sauver ces apparence charnelles de l’être dans la réalité même du mort dans sa chair et ses os.” A better translation would “It was natural there-

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fore, to save these appearances in the deceased’s very reality, in his flesh and his bone.” Because of Gray’s choices, Anglophone readers have understood that appearances are kept up in the face of the reality of death, that the survival is only an illusion and that death is real. The “natural” relation to death would seem to be to deny its reality by putting an appearance or an image in place of the dead being. For French readers, however, the passage is much more ambiguous. In French, the Egyptians preserve the appearance of the dead one in the medium of his reality, in what he was and continues to be, in his very mortal remains, so that reality and appearance are brought very close together and almost conflated.

Bazin calls the preservation of appearance in the medium of reality, the mummy, the first statue. The mummy is already a plastic art, already an image, already somehow an aesthetic production. Bazin’s supporters and detractors both tend to claim that in this essay, he conceives of the plastic arts as essentially indexical, yet the short sentence we have been reading invalidates that claim. That which an index expresses causes it or inscribes it, but the index and the expressed remain separate beings and unlike an icon, an index has no model. The mummy as image has an ontological connection to its model. It pre-figures the photograph which of which Bazin will write that it is its model. The mummy and the one who might survive are one being. Index describes neither mummy nor photograph. Bazin treats them as simulacra, ontologically connected entities without a simple origin. In passing, one might remark that this is why the advent of digital photography and cinema does not consign the Ontology essay to irrelevancy.

Setting the scene at the edge of a grave, in an embalming tent, and articulating it through paradox allow Bazin to develop the theme of images and models that share a common being. The conventions of paradox in writing about religion allow certain self-contradictory uses of the verb to appear in the text. It is through such rhetoric that Bazin rethinks being while performing his primary task of thinking through the photographic image. These themes and figures allow him to write what his language cannot express because it would be a radical impossibility. He continues:

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9 The strongest claim for Bazin as a theorist of the index can be found in Phillip Rosen, who revises a reading he traces across a series of texts to Peter Wollen.
10 Bazin offers his readers a series of such pre-figurations of the photograph. In addition to the mummy the series includes the shroud of Turin, the veil of Veronica, death masks and moulds. Scholars often understand this series as a set of metaphors, but perhaps it can more usefully be understood as a group of examples of pre-photographic and pre-cinematic technologies.
“Pyramids and labyrinthine corridors offered no certain guarantee against ultimate pillage. Other forms of insurance were therefore sought. So, near the sarcophagus, alongside the corn that was to feed the dead, the Egyptians placed small terra cotta statuettes, as substitute mummies which might replace the bodies if these were destroyed.” (9) [My emphasis.]

Now, the mummy has been put in its sarcophagus. This passage thereby underlines the mummy’s complexity. The mummy is not the corpse, it is the treated, embalmed corpse and thus not a simple entity, but one with parts. Furthermore, the mummy in the sarcophagus is a layered figure. The sarcophagus contains the mummy while bearing its image on its surface; it already reduplicates the mummy. From its introduction in the essay, the mummy has been a figure of difference. From the beginning, the mummy has been linked to that which survives the living being. It is not the same as the living being, but rather its “appearance.” It enables survival by virtue of a modicum of difference. In the sarcophagus, the mummy figures the possibility of spatial difference, its elements separating in a volume.

Next to this figure of potential spatial difference, we find terra cotta statues. Not the statuary jars in which the organs of the dead were preserved, but replicas of the mummy, “substitutes” for the it, in Bazin’s account, guarding against its possible destruction. The statues constitute a reserve, and the tomb becomes the site of an economy. If the mummy is a figure of spatial difference, the statuettes are figures of the possibility of temporal deferral. Their use is put off for the future. They are there just in case. If the mummy is despoiled they will come into play. They might be thought of as constituting a potential or conditional signifying chain.

With the invention of perspective, the plastic arts no longer re-present the being of the dead, they render the world as representation. Like a modern mummy, photography saves the arts from that lapse by establishing a more solid bond between the being of the copy and the being of the model. Bazin understands photography’s capacity to present shared being as independent of its fidelity as a reproduction:

“Hence the charm of family albums. Those grey or sepia shadows, phantom-like and almost undecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny; not however by prestige of art but by the power of an impassive mechanical process: for photography does not create eternity, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption.”

This complicated passages sets the basic capacity of the camera against art’s “prestige.” The crudest photographic images retain the being they share with their
models, even when the images become worn and faded. In “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” Bazin insists that in film and photography two entities can share the same being and that the image is a variation of the being of the model. He realizes that the photographic and cinematographic image restored and made us conscious of the mode of being implicit in ancient art which uses mummies to make the dead present again in the medium of their own flesh and bone. This existential identity between two separate existents ran counter to the modern understanding of being which holds that everything that exists, exists independently of the others.

Half a decade later, in his articles about Italian neo-realist films, Bazin confronted a crisis generated by his fundamental axiom. The development of neo-realism, a film movement that Bazin championed from its first films, quickly reached a point where their realism seemed to make it impossible to consider the films as works of art. Once again a photographic medium seemed to undermine the prestige of art, seeming to contradict his discovery of the new axiom of existence in the “mummy complex” at the very origin of works of art.

For Bazin, the early neo-realist films used technically crude means to express the being of the social situation from which they emerged as well as that of the models for the people and objects on screen. He wrote about them almost as if they were social versions of the “family albums” that provide an example of the camera’s fundamental capacity to extend the being of whatever was in front of it. The camera’s ability to embalm time, or to mummify change, set it apart from the other arts and from the traditional concept of art itself.

The articles about the new Italian cinema, Neo-realism, develop the axioms put forth in the ontology essay. In January of 1948 Bazin published an appraisal and analysis of the movement in Esprit. Bazin recognized that a few Italian films had invented a new form of realism and called for a revision of film aesthetics in order to account for them.

Restraint as well as lack of current equipment contributed to neo-realism’s simplicity of means. Bazin notes that “the travelling and panning shots do not have the same god-like character that the Hollywood crane has bestowed on them.” Instead of expressing the point of view of a transcendent being, neo-realism’s camera remains immanent to the film’s situation. Neo-realism also restrained its use of lighting, “be-

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cause lighting calls for a studio, and the greater part of the filming is done on exteriors, or in real-life settings ... [and] ... because documentary camera work is identified in our minds with the gray tones of news reels." (33)

Bazin compares the style of these films to that of sketches as opposed to fully rendered portraits. If neorealist films were less rendered than others, they were more ontologically connected to their subjects, just as in the Ontology essay, the family albums extended the being of those in them while drawing did not. In these films, shots stay at the level of bodies of characters or implied bodies of a viewer within the material circumstances of the scene. Bazin writes: “everything is shot from eye-level or from a concrete point of view, such as a roof top or a window.” (33) In this essay, the camera shares the being of a consciousness within the situations that a film depicts, as well as the being of the “models” in front of it.

Bazin’s grounded his revision of film aesthetics in the axioms he established in the ontology essay. He understood that the “basic narrative unit” of neorealist films such as *Paisà* consisted of “facts” rather than shots. For Bazin, a shot renders “an abstract view of the reality which is being analyzed” but an “image fact” is a “fragment of concrete reality in itself.” (33) Cinema’s capacity to gather fragments of reality comes from the camera’s ability to make images that share the being of whatever it photographs. “Image facts” extend this capacity from particular models to the situations in which the models are embedded, and it can do so without imposing either a meaning or an aesthetic on them.

From the point of view of traditional criticism, the apparent lack of meaning and artfulness in the first neo-realist films was a flaw, a result of their primitive technical means and the limitations of their directors. For Bazin the distance the films took from traditional aesthetics and meaning produced an ambiguity that allowed them to capture fragments in such a way as to re-present concrete historical situations and the factors that determined them.

The meaning of an “image fact” comes from its relation to other facts given by the film. A film made of shots might cut to a close up of a turning doorknob at the moment when a murderer enters the room where his victim sleeps. The meaning of the shoot of the doorknob depends on the shots around it, perhaps an establishing shot of the bedroom, a medium shot of the victim innocently slumbering, and a shot of the murderer lurking in a hallway. When isolated, the closeup is merely a doorknob. In the Ontology essay, the camera’s capacity to extend the being of the models in front of it both establishes its continuity with the plastic arts and sets photography and film at
the limit of art. In his writing on neo-realism, Bazin also sets this image axiom against the powers of art, but this time, Bazin sees a dialectic between them.

According to Bazin the new Italian realism replaced an older one that had derived its content from the “naturalism of novels” and its structure “from the theater.” By contrast, neorealism was a “phenomenological’ realism”\(^ {12} \) — it never adjusted to needs of psychology or plot, preferring to depict the being of the world. The old realism analyzed the constituent parts of reality and reassembled them into a world; neorealism filtered reality but left it whole. Neorealist films shared the being of a filtered, integral world. In neorealism, Appearance became a form of unique discovery and the events revealed their meanings without sacrificing any of their “ambiguity.” \(^ {87} \) Just as someone must use her freedom to interpret a lived situation, so too must the spectator of neo-realism use her freedom to find meaning in the facts that the films present.

Bazin expanded his understanding of the model from which the copy varies with his work on neorealism. Cinema now captured and shared being with a world, including perceptions of the world and the characters’ consciousness. Bazin called this the meaning and ambiguity of a world. For Bazin, Rossellini was able to see and show the process by which his characters emerged as themselves from their social and geographical settings.

All of Bazin’s writing should be understood as an elaboration of his initial claim that a photographic copy is its model re-produced as an ontological variation. His essay on Film and theater extends the axiom into a thesis that presence and absence are a polarity, rather than a philosophical opposition within which the middle ground between the two terms must be excluded. His various writings on death and on eroticism in the cinema develop a theory of obscenity in the cinema based on the being the image shares with the event it depicts. In order to see that the limits of Bazin’s thought extend the edge of action and militancy, we must first understand that he shares these limits with ontologies in general, for ontology can only define and describe being and it’s history.