

**The Privileged Animal: The Myth of Childhood and the Myth of Realism
According to André Bazin**
by Marco Grosoli

The notion of "childhood" can easily come across several prejudices. One of them is the belief (probably nowadays not as widespread as it used to be though) that childhood is the age of unproblematic innocence, of the blossoming of natural and instinctual impulses untouched by civilization. Similarly, film theory has often encountered the opinion that the cinematic image, thanks to its photographic matrix, is capable to reproduce perceptual reality "naked", exactly as it presents itself in front of our eyes, untouched by artifice and by human intervention. The dismissal of these two similarly "ideological" stances can actually go together. Ironically enough, one of those who did dismiss both these "illusions of immediacy" at once was André Bazin, a film theorist often reputed to fall into the second of these two ideological mistakes.

One of the most renowned and important film critics and theorists ever, André Bazin (1918-1958) is also one of the most unknown and unread. Between 1943 and 1958, he wrote little less than 2600 articles (mostly published on daily newspapers, weekly reviews, film magazines and others), only 6% of which saw the light later on, through anthologies or edited essay collections. Only quite recently, Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin revived scholarly interest towards this huge amount of neglected publications. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Bazin's death in 2008, they organized two international congresses on the topic: one at Yale University (*Opening Bazin*) and the other at the Université Paris VII-Diderot (*Ouvrir Bazin*). Two and a half years later, an edited collection (*Opening Bazin*) has been released, gathering most of the lectures given at those venues.

The inaccurate and incomplete reception of Bazin's writings gave birth to a number of misunderstandings. Notably, Bazin was often reputed to be a naïve realist, someone for whom cinema is essentially a machine to grab unadulterated pieces of reality to be directly transposed onscreen without any kind of mediation (Carroll 78). Reading the "never-republished" 94% of his production allows one to discover a different, much more interesting and subtle thinker, whose ideas of realism and reality are much more poignant and disenchanting than they were generally thought.

There could be many ways to illustrate what his notion of "reality" and "realism" is really about. One of them would be to explore the peculiar affinity linking together *childhood* and the most authentic nature of cinema according to him. Bazin devoted several pieces to the way movies deal with children, and all of them are also precious indications concerning his often-misunderstood child-like innocence at the core of the cinematic medium. The following paper will analyze some of these essays ("Des cailloux du petit poucet au chemin de la vie. L'enfance et le cinéma;" "Forbidden Games;" "Un film au téléobjectif;" "Germany Year Zero") with a particular focus on how, in "bazinian" terms, the encounter between cinema and children has a lot to say about the essence of the realist medium *par excellence*.

Childhood as Myth

"Ontology of the Photographic Image" is probably the most famous essay Bazin has ever written. The version he left to posterity in 1958 (short before his death) in his self-edited anthology *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* slightly differs though from the 1945 original. Some words, and sometimes whole sentences, are changed. While the first version listed among those striking visual revelations

that only the non-human, non-intentional and impersonal eye of the camera could seize “a back-lighted thistle, a reflection on a damp sidewalk, the rustle of birch leaves” (“Ontologie” 410)¹, thirteen years later these words are replaced by “here a reflection on a damp sidewalk, there the gesture of a child” (“Ontology” 15).

Why did Bazin decide to add this mention to the gesture of a child? Perhaps, Bazin wanted to suggest that there is something profoundly innocent in the impassible objectivity of the inhuman eye of the camera. After all, between 1945 and 1958 *Italian neorealism* took place—that is, a cinematic phenomenon that famously employed many children, as both non professional actors and fictional characters. Bazin himself wrote extensively on Neorealism, praising the candid, innocent look it cast over a ravaged post-war reality.

However, the articles Bazin wrote on cinematic childhood between 1943 and 1958 prevent us to draw the simplistic conclusion that the camera's “child-like” gaze is innocent simply because it is unable to cheat and cannot help but grant perfect objectivity with regard to what it captures. It is not a matter of innocently providing an exact copy of reality. Innocence is indeed at stake in bazinian cinematic metaphysics, but it is a different, more complicated kind of innocence.

A first and important indication on it all comes from “Des cailloux du petit poucet au chemin de la vie. L'enfance et le cinéma,” written in 1949. Here, a substantial connection between childhood and the essence of cinema is openly affirmed.

The child finally ceases to be a little man to affirm itself before us in an almost inaccessible psychological dimension, of which we are nonetheless responsible. Inaccessible to our analysis, vitiated by our adult concepts, inaccessible to our memory incapable to get back to its own infancy. The child could only be known from the outside; it is the most mysterious, fascinating and troubling natural phenomenon ever. A sort of privileged animal that we guess inhabited by Gods. How could the novelist who uses the “words of the adult tribe”, or even the painter condemned to pin down this pure behavior and this changing duration, claim to reach what the camera has revealed to us: the enigmatic face of childhood. (“Des cailloux du petit poucet” 13)

The child is a mystery inaccessible to adult reason. This mystery has nothing to do with any abysmal depth whatsoever: it is a matter of surfaces instead. It is a radical exteriority gifted with non-intentionality. As such, only the movie camera can have access to this mystery (only the camera can show the impenetrable essence of children), since it *as well* consists of non-intentional (mechanic, automatic) appearances.

Yet, the strange inhumanity of the child is not that of the animal: it is, in Bazin's words, *a privileged* animal. In fact, its inhumanity is all the more relevant because the child obviously “still is” a human being. Bazin affirms very clearly that “we are nonetheless responsible” of the inaccessibility of the child. It is a stranger to adults, and yet it bears an inescapable connection with adult world. The purity of the child is but a projection of the no-longer-pure adult person, it is something that the latter postulates. Childhood is a kind of Otherness whose connection with the Self could not be stronger.

Here things get more complicated, but also more interesting. This dialectical bond ultimately stigmatizes the supposed capability by the camera to grasp empirical reality. “The usually thorough realism of children films should not deceive us. It is the necessary alibi of the elementary myths we have been led to need and believe in by religions, tales and legends” (“Des cailloux du petit poucet”

1 Throughout this paper, for all the quotations coming from an article by Bazin for which no English translation is disposable and as such mentioned in the “Works cited” section, the translation is mine. Otherwise, the published English translation will be quoted.

13). Far from being an unproblematic partisan of cinematic realism, Bazin invites us to *beware* realism. Because realism and myth are *one and the same thing*. The innocence of the supposedly objective gaze of the camera is ultimately a myth, as is the supposed purity of childhood itself. “Des cailloux du petit poucet” underlines that children films have become a veritable film genre. And like all film genres, “it takes the encounter between that cinematic value and a myth” (13). Children films have to meet the myth of childhood in order to become a genre: the supposed innocence of the cinematic eye cannot be enough.

And this is precisely what had occurred after the war according to Bazin, who splits the contemporary films belonging to this genre in two different categories, each corresponding to one basic kind of scenario (“Des cailloux du petit poucet” 13). One envisages childhood as an Eden-like paradise of purity opposed to adulthood's corruption. The other concerns the “troubled children” that adult people ultimately manage to address back on the rightful path. In a quasi-structuralist fashion then, Bazin underlines the *contradictory kernel* that makes the myth of childhood, precisely, a myth. Being myth an imaginary solution for an actual (social) contradiction, childhood narratives provide an inevitably *ambivalent* attempt to come to terms with the contradiction of an Otherness dialectically connected to the Self.

Now it is possible to better define the affinity between cinema and childhood: the point is not so much that the eye of the camera is as innocent (that is, truth-telling) as a child, as that cinema is capable to *embody the paradox of childhood*. It is a kind of inhuman purity that is but the projective reflection of humanity. Cinema does not attain the unmediated innocence of “the things as they are”, nor it partakes the corruption of adults, imprisoned in non-authenticity by that mediation that language is. *It rather exposes the dialectical bond between the two*.

“Unmasking” the myth of childhood is for Bazin the only way to go *beyond* that myth. More precisely, *nothing* strictly speaking lies beyond that myth (certainly not the elusive “child as such”, which is just a projection by adult people), so the only possible “beyond” would be the myth itself in all its contradictory nature, no more hidden. Indicatively, the article (published at the end of December) ends with a reference to Christmas: “This is why no other subject matter could suit this Christmas issue more. Christmas, or the birth of a Child-God, comes to promise the redemption of the world” (13). Notoriously, Christian incarnation is supposed to mark the overcoming of mythical logic, in that the (still mythical) alienation of the divine substance away from humanity is revoked. The Verb does not establish anymore a distance between men and gods (that is, between language and the supposed immediacy it points to), but is now made Flesh. The Holy Child is at the same time man and the divine Otherness it is supposed to represent. So the child is the only possible “beyond” of the myth of childhood, because it spreads open the contradictory elements it is made of. The innocence of children is dialectically linked to the adult world as much as the visual immediacy that cinema can provide is dialectically linked to the determinations it receives from the outside. This does not mean that cinematic and childish innocence is “false”, but that this dialectical bond as such *is true*, where the meaning of “true” here is the standard philosophical one: *not intentional*. It exceeds man's possibilities and control. In other words, the tendency to build myths (and to believe in some superior kind of innocence) is shown by cinema as something ontological rather than mythical, i.e. a contradiction pertaining to human nature as such, and not something arbitrary and “only” imaginary man could also do without if he wanted to. The “corrupted” adult world is innocent in that it is *compelled* to project outside of itself an innocence that cannot be its own. Sheer innocence is a myth, but to some extent myth itself (the fact itself that myths are imagined and constructed) is inherently innocent. Innocence and its opposite cannot help but be problematically, dialectically intertwined. By showing this very reciprocity, cinema can overcome it.

Childhood without Myths

One of the sections into which the third volume of *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* is subdivided is called, precisely, "L'enfance sans mythes" ("Childhood without myths"). One of the essays gathered in this section is about René Clément's *Jeux interdits* (*Forbidden Games*, 1951), and basically continues the meditations contained in "Des cailloux du petit poucet" three years before. It begins by introducing the very same dichotomy of the other article: the mythical kernel of childhood films is made of two possible contradictory kinds of scenarios, that is, the one glorifying the child's purity and the one willing to correct its moral insufficiency. Then, "Forbidden Games" points out that there *is* a substantial bond linking dialectically these two opposites: "fundamentally, they are all illustrations of a certain belief in the 'original innocence' of children" (132). The value of *Forbidden Games* is due to the fact that it *refuses* to project on its children such supposed innocence; hence, it *escapes* the mythical "double bind" of the myth of childhood.

He [Clément] wants to have these two children occupy a place, in a story whose protagonists they happen to be, that is essentially identical to the one adult characters might have occupied. Their actions, their manner, what we can grasp of their thought, are not at all the reflection of an a priori idea about childhood. Michel and Paulette are neither good nor bad children: their behavior, which is by no means absurd, has to do only with psychology, and not in the slightest with morality. It is the adults, to whom the logic of Michel and Paulette's games is foreign, who project upon them a moral significance. [...] When he discovers the theft of the crosses from the churchyard, Michel's father is scandalized not by the sacrilege of this act or its lack of respect for the dead, but by the offense it has supposedly caused the neighbors and by the material loss that it represents. By stealing all the crosses they can lay their hands on in order to build a cemetery for animals, Michel and Paulette totally appropriate a ritual from the grown-ups around them. That is to say, their appropriation reveals the ritualistic burials of dead human beings for the children's game that it is—the taming of death by means of harmless ceremony—despite the social seriousness it claims for itself. However, the confrontation between the children and the adults reveals that the seriousness is on the children's side, since the reasons they have for loving their game are in fact better. Paulette buries her dog, who died along with her parents at the hands of the Germans, because she doesn't want him to get wet in the rain. She then demands that Michel sacrifice an animal in order to give her dog some company, for he's bored. That is the origin of their cemetery, whose crosses are merely a nice decoration suggested by the crosses used in human cemeteries. (133-134)

Michel's and Paulette's are still innocent, but their innocence is all psychological, and not moral. They do not reflect adults' moral projections, but they reflect much more than this: they mirror *the psychological innocence and the amorality of grown-ups themselves*. The ritual burial of adult people is *itself* a childish game, and is revealed as such by the children appropriating it. And the reasons behind Michel's father condemnation of the cross-stealing are not moral but just interested and petty. *Forbidden Games* overcomes the myth of childhood, not because it depicts "the way children really are", but because it shows the mutual mirroring between children and grown-ups—which is why "even if Clément acknowledges a psychology of childhood, he gives to it only a negative description (the only one that's possible)" (134). Such interdependence is *the truth* of that myth: it shows the dialectical link that connects children and grown-ups. Such a truth was hiding behind the structural binary opposition at the core of the myth: "there is only one realism: the equal rejection of moral pessimism *and* optimism" (134). Instead of being the moral projection the adults would like them to be, children in the film send this projection *back* towards adult people, who are now obliged to see *themselves* in the children instead of the sweetened fantasies of moral innocence that they would need in order to hide to their own eyes what is like to be a grown-up. "If, on the other hand, we like to view childhood as if it were a mirror reflecting an image of us that is purged of all sin, cleansed of our adult strains, restored to innocence, then *Forbidden Games* refuses to play

along—not out of cruelty or pessimism, but out of a desire to tell the truth” (134). Children beyond the myth of childhood are no longer a mirror adult people can project their ideals onto; they rather *reflect both sides of the mirror at once*. The truth being not *beyond* myth, but rather the truth *of* myth—that is, of its contradictory nature.

A few pages before all this (131-132), we find a confirmation that this paradox at the core of the myth of childhood regards as well the essence of cinema itself. After a brief disquisition on the differences between literature and cinema, Bazin affirms that film is *less objective* than standard American behaviorist novel. The latter describes the perceptible surface of phenomena but still presupposes a self-sufficient immediacy for those same phenomena (in other words: they still exist in themselves outside of language), whereas the former focuses *directly* on the seemingly real appearances of phenomena like our eyes would ordinarily seize them, but it discovers on their skin countless unintentional determinations (an unconscious gesture, a fleeting and unwilling expression of the eye of an actor, and so on). Reality “as such” is by no means innocent, it is always/already entangled in language. Cinema is then less objective than literature because, the very moment it encounters a supposedly unmediated reality, it discovers it is over-determined linguistically, even if not necessarily by language itself in an intentional manner. The truth ascertained by the quintessentially realist medium is that reality is always/already mediated, just like the image of childhood is always/already implicated with adulthood.

This also explains why Bazin greeted enthusiastically *The Little Fugitive* (1953), the film Ray Ashley, Morris Engel and Ruth Orkin shot following 8-years-old non-professional actor Richie Andrusco on the basis of a predetermined screenplay “re-adapted” according to the situations that the young character encountered in the streets of New York while the film was made. The film's importance does not lie in the spontaneity of flagrant reality in the streets, nor in the fact that it has been pre-written and scripted, but *precisely in the interaction between the two*. The script and the live improvisation enrich each other. “A mixture between the dramatic order, with its *a priori* organization, and the spontaneity of life. Likely, the kid's initiatives have suggested several parts of the script, but, even if everything had been roughly predetermined, certainly not every shot and every take could be. It is essentially the awareness we have of this margin of indetermination that makes this film charming” (“Un film au téléobjectif” 51). The point is neither the innocence of improvised reality, nor the script, but precisely the margin of indetermination between the two, the dialectical bond that links them.

Quite tellingly, Bazin underlines that “This improvisation has nothing to do with the *Comoedia dell'arte*, which still belongs to the categories of theatrical acting” (“Un film au téléobjectif” 51). *Comoedia-dell'arte*-like kind of improvisation is simply a system of variations on the basis of an highly codified set of rules, where the variations are strictly *subordinated* to the rules, without any significant reciprocity between the two dimensions. On the contrary, in *The Little Fugitive*, improvisation is located at the border between the screenplay and the unpredictability of reality, between writing and the immediacy of things. In the case of *Comoedia dell'arte*, it is still a cultural matter, a refined game entirely inside the domain of language, while in the other case *it is the dialectical link itself between nature and culture that is given as ontological*. The truth captured by the camera is this vicious circle shown *as true*, as a reality in itself. The eye of the camera is not innocent in the sense that it can seize the immediacy of things, but because it can show the connection between immediacy and the mediation of language *itself as immediate*. Here we find once again the paradox of childhood, and the inversion it sets in place between the child and the adult person:

The prowess by the authors of this paradoxical film lies in knowing how to make any little gesture by some child a priceless spectacle, more captivating than the best refined detective story plot. On the other hand, they have not neglected a less rare, if less effective, picturesque trait: the one of the grown-ups, whose games seem to us very ridiculous, when

compared to the seriousness of the children's" ("Le petit fugitif" 2)

"Away with the terrorism of reality"

Not surprisingly, Bazin confirms the incompatibility between theater and children in another article revolving around a film whose main character is a child: Roberto Rossellini's *Germania anno zero* (*Germany Year Zero*, 1948).

Indeed, theater cannot employ children. Beside the kind of embarrassment troubling the spectator when he/she sees the child involved in this turbid adult game that still preserves something from its ancient damnation, the attempt is *a priori* technically impossible. Theater demands from the actors a skill whose acquisition is precisely contradictory with what constitutes childhood's peculiarity ("Allemagne année zéro" 686)²

Roughly speaking, "children" here would stand for "nature", whereas "theater" is traditionally conceived as the site where the perpetual renewal of the (mythical) distinction (here: the "ancient damnation") between "nature" and "culture" takes place again and again. Theater ritually confirms the distinction between nature and culture *from the cultural side of it*, that is, still conceiving this distinction as something pertaining to man, to his/her consciousness, to language. This is why it is a matter of *skills* that fatally banish the child away from these "adult games". On the contrary, cinema is for Bazin a unique occasion to conceive the dialectical bond between "nature" and "culture" *itself as natural*, that is, something that *exceeds* human intentions and control. In other words, this bond is not an instrument in the hands of men and women, but something that *subjugates* humanity, in the same way we could say, in Lacanian terms, that we "are spoken" by language. "It is especially because cinema is the art of appearances *par excellence* that it is specifically the art of childhood" ("Allemagne année zéro" 686). Cinema is not the art of reality "as such": it is the art of *appearances*, that is, of that minimum form of mediation with regard to reality making it something always/already mediated, just like childhood is paradoxically always/already implicated in adulthood. Cinema does not show reality, but shows that reality is *immediately signifying*, in its very sheer and meaningless appearing. Its innocence (like children's) is an *impure* innocence. Bazin had famously defined cinema something "impure" (*impur*), even though Hugh Gray, who translated *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma* in English, replaced "*cinéma impur*" with "mixed cinema" ("In Defense of Mixed Cinema").

We are still frightened by mystery, and we want to be reassured against it by the faces of children; we thoughtlessly ask of these faces that they reflect feelings we know very well because they are our own. We demand of them signs of complicity, and the audience quickly becomes enraptured and teary when children show feelings that are usually associated with grown-ups. We are thus seeking to contemplate ourselves in them: ourselves, plus the innocence, awkwardness, and naiveté we lost. This kind of cinema moves us, but aren't we in fact just feeling sorry for ourselves? ("Allemagne année zéro" 687)

Through childhood films, grown-ups *exorcize* the mystery of innocence, by projecting adult feelings on it. But this mystery returns with a vengeance, as already "Forbidden Games" has shown us, because the innocent ones in the end turn out to be the "corrupted" adults themselves. We seek for innocence and we find our own unconscious projections *thrown back at us*. Overcoming the myth of childhood does not mean to reach finally the absolute paradise of uncontaminated innocence without myths: it rather means to overtly expose the dual nature of the myth, its binary structure, its

2 Although it has been eventually collected in the *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* anthology, only the original version of the article (appeared on *Esprit* journal in 1949) will be considered, since it contains several paragraphs that will have been cut off in the version published in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*

inveterate vicious circle.

This is what Edmund, the young main character of *Germany Year Zero*, does. His cold indifference towards the ruins and towards the devastation of Berlin right after the war refuses to give us that “innocence, awkwardness, and naiveté we lost”.

Now, if we know something about what this child thinks and feels, it is never because of signs that are directly legible on his face, and not even because of his behavior, since we only understand it by means of collations and conjectures. [...] Rossellini could provide an interpretation only through a trick, by projecting his own explanation on the child so that the latter reflected it for our own benefit (“Allemagne année zéro” 687)

If one looked for “something a child would do” in Edmund's behavior, *nothing* would be found. No feelings, no expressions, not even in front of murders or of relentless black-marketing. Only an opaque surface, which resists any attempt by the adults to project something moral (*either* innocence *or* guilt) on him. On the contrary, innocence and guilt manifest their *dialectical homology*, hence they cancel each other: neither innocence, nor guilt. Edmund kills his father because he's persuaded to do so by his crazy pseudo-Nietzscheian teacher, *and* because he really loves his dad and does not want to see him sick and suffering. He is both innocent and guilty: as such, he *defuses* the dichotomy at the core of the myth of childhood (the child as purity or as a little devil the grown-ups have to lead back on the rightful path). His innocence consists precisely in having nothing to do with the false binary terms of the myth of innocence. “In Edmund's parricide, pure evil coincides with the most perfect childish innocence: in the very act of murdering his father, Edmund becomes a saint” (Žižek 36).

The point is not that Rossellini “shows us the children the way they really are”; the point is rather that, leaving Edmund devoid of any further determination, any adult moral prejudice literally *bangs against* Edmund's opacity and bounces back towards the grown-ups.

Our emotion is freed from any sentimentality, because it has been obliged to be reflected on our intelligence. It is not the actor or the event that moves us, but rather the meaning we are compelled to get out of it. By this way of staging, moral or dramatic meanings never appear on the surface of reality; nevertheless we cannot help but know what they are, if we do have a conscience. Isn't all this (that is, to oblige the spirit to take sides without cheating on beings and things) a solid definition of realism in art? (“Allemagne année zéro” 688)

It should be noticed that Bazin twice employs verbs indicating that the spirit is *obliged* to acknowledge some meaning. This means that, in front of someone or something (Edmund) refusing any determination, the viewer is compelled to realize which determinations he/she *unconsciously* tends to attribute to what he/she sees. The viewer's emotion does not find relief in an object that fulfills his/her expectations, but is literally reflected back towards our intelligence: away from the object, and back towards the viewing subject. The viewer faces his/her own thoughts and hidden presuppositions, which are themselves *innocent*, in that they are not consciously assumed. “Realism” is not a matter of providing an exact copy of reality: it is a matter of making the spirit face what it unconsciously tends to think. The opaque nature of cinematic appearances is dialectically linked to the mental prejudices it automatically inspires. Once again, the point of cinema (and of childhood) is that the bond tying together immediacy and mediation is rendered *itself immediate*.

A tram passing by, a rolling stone, the edge of some wall have rigorously the same formal importance as the detail providing the image its dramatic meaning. What is admirable, is the fact that the detail is thus all the more strong, since the author has compelled our spirit to discern the meaning out of it. [...] It is impossible to cry in front of Rossellini's films, because he never employs any practice directly involving affection, and he constantly

requires the use of the intelligence in order to inform the heart. The meaning of things and events is offered to us still locked inside the shapeless gangue of reality (“Allemagne année zéro. L'esquisse d'une grande oeuvre” 11)

The “shapeless gangue of reality” and the meaning that the viewer would detect within it, are fundamentally connected. “Brute reality” is not the aim of cinematic realism in itself, but only insofar as it compels the viewer to be aware of the meanings he/she would arbitrarily and unintentionally attribute to it. Which is why, just some years before, right after the first screening of Rossellini's *Paisà* (1946), Bazin wrote a short, surprising note: “Rossellini frees us. Away with the terrorism of reality. Here is finally a piece of art which is—as well—reality” (“Présentation” 173-174). *Realism is not necessarily a matter of reality at all*, it rather has a lot to do with appearances, conceived as that point where all the binary couples somehow derivable from the old dichotomy nature-and-culture show the mutual dependence of their opposite terms.

To conclude, it would be useful to remind that André Bazin has often (rightfully) been considered akin to the philosophical tradition of phenomenology (Andrew, “The Neglected Tradition”). Giorgio Agamben's *Infancy and History* (11-64) is an accurate overview on the crucial role of *infancy* (conceived approximately as “human experience beyond and/or before language”) for all the phenomenological line of thought. Here are his conclusions:

A primary experience, far from being subjective, could then only be what in human beings comes before the subject—that is, before language: a wordless experience in the literal sense of the term, a human *infancy* [*in-fancy*], whose boundary would be marked by language. A theory of experience could in this sense only be a theory of in-fancy, and its central question would have to be formulated thus: *is there such a thing as human in-fancy? How can in-fancy be humanly possible? And if it is possible, where it is sited?* But it is easy to see that this in-fancy is not something to be sought, anterior to and independent of language, in a psychic reality of which language would be the expression. There are no subjective psychic facts, “facts of consciousness”, that a science of the psyche can presume to attain, independent of and outside the subject, for the simple reason that consciousness is solely the subject of language and cannot be defined except as—to quote Bleuler—“the subjective attribute of psychic processes”. [...] The idea of infancy as a pre-subjective “psychic substance” is therefore shown to be as mythical as a pre-linguistic subject, with infancy and language seeming to refer back to one another in a circle in which infancy is the origin of language and language the origin of infancy. For the experience, the infancy at issue here, cannot merely be something which chronologically precedes language and which, at a certain point, ceases to exist in order to spill into speech. It is not a paradise which, at a certain moment, we leave for ever in order to speak; rather, it coexists in its origins with language. (Agamben 47-48)

Infancy is not an Eden-like state untouched by the alienation of language: it is *the threshold itself* that divides and connects language and “pure” experience. The simultaneous origin of both sides. “In terms of human infancy, experience is the simple difference between the human and the linguistic. The individual as not already speaking, as having been and still being an infant—this is experience” (50). Later on in the same chapter (56-59), Agamben confirms infancy as the threshold articulating “nature” and “culture” in a strictly *reciprocal* manner, without any possible precedence on the part of one of the two terms—a “zipper” between them, as it were.

“On the other hand, of course, cinema is also a language” (“Ontology” 16). These are the words that conclude Bazin's most famous essay. For the French critic, cinema is an unprecedented chance to grasp the dialectical relation connecting together the linguistic and the non-linguistic dimensions, in ways that are outstandingly consonant with the paradox at the core of the myth of childhood. Hence the special importance he attributed to children films: they are a particularly

useful occasion to seize that cinema's realism is not a matter of "showing reality the way it is", but rather of pointing at that ultimate reality which is the link itself between supposedly-innocent sheer reality and the determinations one would spontaneously attribute it. Between innocence and the fall from innocence.

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