

# Mental Landscapes: Bazin, Deleuze, and Neorealism (Then and Now)

by JUSTIN HORTON

**Abstract:** Though often thought to advocate an “objective” cinema, Bazin instead proffered a “supernatural” conception of realism, one deeply invested in character interiority. This article brings together Bazin’s writings with Deleuze’s theorization of free indirect cinematic discourse to reconcile the hallucinatory ending of *George Washington* (David Gordon Green, 2000) with the neorealist paradigm.

The *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott claims that such recent American films as *Chop Shop* (Ramin Bahrani, 2007) and *Wendy and Lucy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2008) evince a new form of American realist cinema highly indebted to Italian neorealism. Noting a resemblance in style, tone, and subject matter, Scott labels this emerging trend “neo-neo-realism.”<sup>1</sup> Focusing on characters whose ascents up the American socioeconomic ladder have stalled on the very lowest rungs, these films share, Scott claims, a “common ancestry” with the celebrated postwar Italian cinema. Neorealism, he argues, sought to illuminate the lives of marginal characters through a radical shift in cinematic style that abandoned classical approaches by casting nonprofessional actors and depicting social injustices. The *New Yorker*’s Richard Brody promptly countered, claiming that neorealism, as a style, hit its limit in Italy by favoring the “outer life at the expense of the inner life.”<sup>2</sup> In embracing the neorealist aesthetic, these contemporary filmmakers, Brody suggests, fail to account for character interiority, instead latching on to an outdated model.

The critical reception of these films is instructive, for the debate it rekindled about the possibilities of cinematic realism emerged at a time when Film Studies,

- 1 A. O. Scott, “Neo-Neo Realism,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 17, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/magazine/22neorealism-t.html>.
- 2 Richard Brody, “About ‘Neo-Neo-Realism,’” *New Yorker*, March 20, 2009, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/movies/2009/03/in-re-neoneorea.html>.

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confronted with the ontological problem of the digital, was in the midst of reconsidering the work of André Bazin, a project that began in earnest with the publication of Philip Rosen's *Change Mummified* in 2001 and Mary Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* the following year.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Brody's claim about neorealism and its relation to interiority opens up the question of the legacies of both neorealism and its greatest advocate, Bazin, in provocative ways. The importance of neorealism to the development of the modern cinema cannot be overstated, and its historical significance is in no way contested,<sup>4</sup> yet the legacy of neorealism as a project remains the subject of debate. Assessments such as Scott's and Brody's reflect, I contend, a deeply entrenched conception of both neorealism and of Bazin that is prevalent within the popular press and the academy, and that has only begun to be redressed in the past decade.

For these reasons, in what follows, I examine *George Washington* (David Gordon Green, 2000), a work that Scott isolates as a precursor to this most recent emergence of a realist aesthetic in the contemporary American art house. Green's film adheres to the customary checklist of the neorealist inheritance: long takes, deep-focus cinematography, episodic narrative, a cast of nonprofessionals, and so forth. However, for all its surface similarities to postwar Italian cinema, *George Washington* presents a number of seeming contradictions. On the one hand, it squares with the neorealist tendency to depict the material realities of poverty by focusing on those who rarely receive such a sympathetic cinematic treatment: poor black children of the rural American South. On the other hand, late in the film, seemingly incongruent moments crop up, and, surprisingly, these have been ignored in most critical appraisals. To account for such deviations, I put into conversation the work of Bazin and that of Gilles Deleuze to show how the latter's radical reevaluation of neorealism and his elaboration of a free indirect cinematic discourse provide a framework with which we might reconcile the contradictions in Green's film while clarifying some of the stakes of Bazinian realism. Furthermore, I demonstrate how such a shift from a supposedly objective mode to character interiority can in no way be construed as an abandonment of political engagement in favor of psychological digression; rather, the interaction of filmmaker and subject within the free indirect mode of address is at the very heart of Deleuze's political undertaking. My analysis incorporates the elements of *George Washington* that frequently are dismissed—if, indeed, they are acknowledged at all—as departures from the neorealist prototype and instead frames them squarely within both Bazin's and Deleuze's projects.

In the article's first half, I consider how Bazin, read too often as a "naive literalist,"<sup>5</sup> provides us a remarkably nuanced and flexible theorization of realism, one for which, until recently, he was seldom given enough credit. In this regard, this study seeks to join

3 Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

4 For the centrality of neorealism to modern cinema, see András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950–1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi M. Wilson, eds., *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2007).

5 Adam Lowenstein, "The Surrealism of the Photographic Image: Bazin, Barthes, and the Digital *Sweet Hereafter*," *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 3 (2007): 54.

the growing body of literature that has expanded the parameters of Bazinian realism beyond the reductive account of his work that coalesced with 1970s psychoanalytic theory. Next, I pair this broadened Bazinian realism with Deleuze's film philosophy, particularly his recasting of neorealism in terms other than cinematic ontology and faithfulness to the profilmic event. Deleuze's and Bazin's conceptions of neorealism begin from different premises, yet they exhibit significant points of contact, and each illuminates the other. Through close analysis, we can see how Deleuze's notion of free indirect discourse allows us to reconcile the bulk of *George Washington's* "traditional" neorealist style with its confounding, hallucinatory ending, one which disturbs the notion of an unproblematic depiction of "objective" reality by shifting us into an intersubjective space. This blurring of the distinction between the subjective and the objective, I argue, is fully in line with the type of neorealism that Bazin once imagined and predicted.

**The Revival of Bazin.** Bazin's place within film theory is an unusual one: his writings on cinema were quickly canonized when Film Studies was solidifying itself as a discipline and then, following the psychoanalytic turn in the 1970s, were widely rejected, only to be returned to with renewed interest today. Although his prolific output as a critic, his cofounding of *Cahiers du cinéma*, and his fostering of the young critics who would later form the French New Wave are by themselves enough to secure Bazin's place in film history, his most enduring contribution is as a theorist of cinematic realism. Indeed, his "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" serves as perhaps the most important theoretical work on film realism.<sup>6</sup> In it, he argues that the cinema is an inherently realist medium in that the mechanical processes of the camera and its photochemical rendering of an image on a filmstrip effectively replace the artist's role as mediator between reality and the work of art. As Bazin famously proclaimed, "All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence."<sup>7</sup> Consequently, Bazin argues, the camera's ability to capture "objective" reality without having to be filtered first through the sensibility of the filmmaker frees the painter or the sculptor to pursue abstraction, leaving the camera to quell humankind's obsession with time and its fixation on death through the veracity of the photochemically rendered image.

Identifying many of the same qualities that Roland Barthes also would point to in *Camera Lucida*, Bazin does much to account for the appeal and allure of the photograph.<sup>8</sup> But cinema's alluring essence—and Bazin for touting it—came to be regarded with suspicion in the 1970s. The emerging influence of semiotics, the reinvigorated Marxism of Althusser, and the growing vogue of Lacanian psychoanalysis became braided together—most notably in the pages of *Screen*—in an effort to bring to light the ideological underpinnings of the medium. Hence, Bazin's statement that "the

6 André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 9–16. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from *What Is Cinema?* are from Gray's translation.

7 *Ibid.*, 13.

8 For the resonances between these two thinkers, see Lowenstein, "Surrealism."