

## **Framing Reality: The Interplay of Photorealism and Encoding/Decoding**

### **The Double Lens: The Real and The Perceived**

“Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language” affirms Stuart Hall, emphasizing the impact interpretation has on media. The cinematic interpretation specifically, follows the interplay between objectivity and subjectivity which shapes the way we perceive visual media. Following the previously mentioned, André Bazin, a foundational figure in film theory, champions the concept of photorealism supporting the idea of objective reality within cinematic imagery. This paper revolves around the intersection of André Bazin’s perspective on the truthful representation of the photographic image and Stuart Hall’s model of communication. The encoding/decoding model of communication is placed in opposition to André Bazin’s photorealism as Stuart Hall’s model affirms that the meaning of a cinematic image is not fixed but actively constructed by the audience depending on the “whole range of social meanings, practices, and usages, power and interest ‘written in’ them” (Hall 1972, 123).

Furthermore, this paper aims to draw a parallel between the two concepts and argue the transformative and contested nature of cinematic meaning-making in contemporary visual culture. Although it will emphasize on the active role an audience has upon decoding a message and plead for Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, the essay will convey that the tension between visual objectivity and interpretative subjectivity complicates traditional notions of cinematic realism. To support the argument, additional authors will play a part of the theoretical framework. Insights from Susan Sontag’s book, *On Photography* (2008) provide a critical lens on how photography shapes our understanding of reality. She will complement Bazin’s photorealism as she also focuses on the objective nature of the photographic image suggesting that “photography inevitably entails a certain (...) reality” (Sontag 2008, 63).

However, in order to draw the parallel and support Hall’s inherently subjective argument on the interpretation of media, Cesare Cesarino will enhance the personal approach audiences have when watching a film or looking at a photography as he considers cinema “a mode of expression” (Cesarino 2017, 2). Cesarino’s work will be useful as he pleads for a similar philosophy to Gilles Deleuze’s on the complexity aspect of cinematic imagery and approaching the concept of “becoming” and “movement image” from his philosophy (Cesarino 2017, 2). Cesarino’s analysis on Deleuze’s philosophy of cinema will beautifully blend with Hall’s decoding model and the audience’s interpretation of media. In this way, I seek to bridge the gap between Bazin’s and Hall’s theories offering a nuanced perspective on how cinematic imagery is constructed and perceived, switching from ontological realism to interpretations that arise from individual, social, and cultural differences.

The film *Aftersun* (Wells, 2022) serves as a starting point for this essay as it inspired the purpose of this paper and exploration between photorealism and the encoding/decoding model. The visually rich narrative and shots, as well as the plot, juxtapose photorealistic imagery with deeply personal and subjective experiences. As the movie progresses, the plot conveys that everything within the film is recorded on a digital camera by one of the characters creating meaning for the other one and the audience itself. The film’s plot twist of showing how the meaningful moments from the character’s past impact the outside world made me recall Hall’s decoding model of cinematic messages and the interplay between his theory and Bazin’s belief in the objective nature of the photorealism.

Blurring the lines between photorealism and the decoding model offers a nuanced perspective on how cinematic meaning is constructed and understood: from films such as *Aftersun* (Wells, 2022), to images, to an artist’s vision, and to the broader discussions in the media studies. Thus, the balance between objective reality and subjective interpretation enriches the understanding of the multifaced nature of visual representation.

## **The Lens of Reality: Bazin's Objective Interpretation of Cinema**

André Bazin's theoretical contributions to film criticism profoundly shape the understanding of cinematic realism as he represents one of the milestone philosophers of photorealism. As part of his philosophy of realism he supports the unparalleled truthfulness of the photographic image due to its mechanical reproduction of reality. As part of his argument, he supports the idea that both the image and the artist, along with the camera, capture the reality as it is, constructing a direct representation that is less influenced by human subjectivity, and thus, "they do not cease thereby to have an influence on the effectiveness of the means" (Bazin 2005, 25).

Bazin's emphasis on the objective interpretation of cinematic imagery forms the foundation of his realistic philosophy as he argues that the essence of cinema lies in its ability to present an unmediated reality. Although his philosophy concentrates more on the Italian Neo-realism as he affirms that "the real like the imaginary in art is in the concern of the artist alone", the previously mentioned may be applied onto photographic images as its purpose, following Bazin's concept of photorealism, captures the true essence of an object (Bazin 2005, 25). In this sense, Sontag's work complements Bazin's view of photorealism as she affirms that "photographs have become the norm for what things appear to us, thereby changing the very idea of reality" (Sontag 2008, 67). In this regard, she supports the idea that photographs serve as evidence of time since they conserve the perception of reality in a visual form, marking Bazin's point on the camera's mechanical aspect whose elements "can magnify or neutralize the effectiveness (...) of reality" (Bazin 2005, 27).

Furthermore, Bazin touches upon the techniques and the mechanical process behind the camera which allows cinema to reveal the world in a manner that is close to reality, providing the external world with an objective and authentic understanding of the visual. As Sontag affirms, "the world comes to be 'inside' photographs" (Sontag 2008, 63). Following the camera's mechanical process of capturing reality, Bazin relates the ontology of the image to the superiority of other arts such as painting and literature which, unlike the photographic image, do not depict a direct relationship with reality as they "achieve an even greater illusion of verisimilitude [or] merely retinal" (Sontag 2008, 74). Therefore, film becomes a privileged medium for capturing and conveying reality.

Following upon the mechanical process behind the camera, Bazin introduces the concept of 'artifice' as he suggests that the filmmaker could be called a liar as "his art consists in lying" (Bazin 2005, 27). In this way, he emphasizes his opposition to special effects and editing as the two could manipulate the viewer's eye and disgrace the reality of cinema and thus, detract from the realism and the film's uniqueness. On the other hand, the classic cinematic techniques such as deep focus and long takes, which he exemplifies through Italian Neo-realism, are not considered artifice as they keep the viewer engaged with the raw material taken on camera. Notwithstanding, since he is against artifice, Bazin suggests that "a necessary illusion" is needed (Bazin 2005, 27) as they may enhance the objectivity and realism of the cinematic image.

Bazin's photorealism has had a significant impact on the understanding and value of cinematic realism as he emphasizes more on the reality captured by the raw camera and less on an artists' touch which would stain the objectivism. Although he pushes for a truthful representation of the world, a direct window to reality, "the real like the imaginary in art is the concern of the artist alone" (Bazin 2005, 27). Therefore, the inherent tension between realism and artistic vision inevitably shapes the outcome of each cinematic work as even the most realistic films are guided by the filmmaker's creative vision, making human subjectivity imminent.

## The Lens of Meaning: Hall's Decoding Model in Focus

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model represents a fundamental framework in the philosophy of humanities and media studies as it showcases how media messages are produced, disseminated, and hence reproduced by the audience. The concept elucidates the meaning-making process in media, particularly in the broadcast and 'television communicative' (Hall 1972, 118) and thus, he applies the two stages, encoding and decoding on the message a piece of media would transmit to its reader, involving the embedding of intended meanings and how those are interpreted by their individual contexts.

Throughout his theorizing of the encoding/decoding model, he identifies three possible encoding positions of messages: dominant/preferred, negotiated, and oppositional. Hall suggests that without the encoding process there would be "no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code" which translates into the meaning-making process that a media object such as a photography or film impacts the audience and thus, the way it is interpreted and therefore decoded by an individual (Hall 1972, 121). Within the preferred position, the message dominates the decoding process, the audience fully accepting the encoded message and having "the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings" (Hall 1972, 124). However, the negotiated and oppositional position emphasize more on the meaning-making created by the audience itself based on their particular social, cultural, and personal background. The negotiated position underlines the acceptance of the message media tries to imply, whilst the oppositional one involves decoding the message in a completely different manner by rejecting the intended meaning altogether (Hall 1972, 127).

A primary aspect of Hall's model of encoding/decoding is its emphasis on the subjective nature of the decoding process. Placed in opposition with Bazin's photorealism, Hall's decoding model affirms that individuals actively interpret media messages through their own lenses based on their social, cultural, and personal background. In this sense, Cesarino adds upon Hall's encoding/decoding model affirming that "cinema directly and unequivocally [is] a medium (*moyen*) of expression" (Cesarino 2017, 2). Although Hall applies his communication model on TV broadcasting, Cesarino emphasizes the interpretive nature cinema has on its audience, marking the numerous interpretation a single media message can have.

Furthermore, the intertwinement between the encoding and decoding processes are crucial to the creation of meaning of the media object as Hall affirms that "is a fundamental alignment and reciprocity", "an achieved equivalence" as both sides exchange meanings (Hall 1972, 121). In this regard, films often encode multiple meanings which may be decoded in different ways by the viewers depending on where they are watching the movie, when or even with who as their interpretations are shaped by both internal and external factors. However, Cesarino touches upon Deleuze's philosophy of film and 'the movement image' and thus, mentions his concept of expression. Based on Deleuze's philosophy, Cesarino affirms that through expression, "a whole world of representation is possible, in which representation would entertain intrinsic relations to its object such that it would let itself be mark by something unrepresentable in the object" (Cesarino 2017, 9). The latterly mentioned quote beautifully blends with Hall's encoding/decoding model as it delves into the making-of process of a media object and the meaning-making part of it. Through Deleuze's philosophy of film and image, Cesarino showcases the subjective understanding a media object can impact its audience complementing Hall's negotiated and opposed decoding model. Thus, Stuart Hall's model is particularly relevant in the realm of cinema, where visual and narrative codes and complex and layered, Cesarino and Deleuze's philosophy of cinema aligning with the dynamic nature of meaning-making in media.

Hall's encoding/decoding model emphasizes on the impact social, cultural, and personal backgrounds have on the interpretation of media objects and in this case, the cinematic representation and photographic images. His framework, well complemented by Cesarino and his analysis of Deleuze's philosophy, highlight the relevance of subjectivity and dynamic nature of meaning-making. Moreover, by understanding the complex interplay between media messages and audience interpretations, the meaning becomes more personal creating a stronger connection between the media object and its audience.

### **In The Frame: Where Photorealism Meets Decoding in Cinema**

The dynamic between André Bazin's photorealism and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model underlines the complexity of cinematic representation and the power visual media has on to the outside world. The two scholars attempt to detangle this complexity; Bazin through photorealism by insisting that the mechanical reproduction offers an objective window into reality and Hall through its communication model revealing the profound meanings media has upon its viewers. Although the two theorize opposite concepts, there is a potential middle ground which acknowledges the objective qualities of cinematic imagery while also recognizing the subjectivity each individual encounters due to its background.

Sontag suggest "the plurality of meanings that every photograph carries" through its complex composition as well as through its mechanical and technical aspects behind the camera depend on the viewer's eye (Sontag 2008, 84). As mentioned previously in this paper, she supports Bazin's photorealism, as they both suggest that "a necessary illusion" is needed (Bazin 2005, 27). In this sense, Bazin argues that "facts take on meaning" as they "follow one another, and the mind is forced to observe their resemblance; and thus (...) they end by meaning something which was inherent" (Bazin 2005, 36). He suggests that a narration is created through a sequence by juxtaposing multiple photographic images. This process aligns, on the one hand with his concept of photorealism, as the sequence presents the reality truthfully, whilst on the other hand enables viewers to perceive and interpret the inherent meanings themselves. In this case, the creation of meaning for the outside world is inevitable. Therefore, despite Bazin and Sontag's complex understanding of photorealism and objectivity of the image, when there is a narration, the meaning-making process is undeniable.

The tension between Bazin's photorealism and Hall's encoding/decoding model is essential to the understanding of how cinematic meaning is constructed and perceived. As Sontag mentions, "beauty is not inherent in anything: it is to be found, by another way of seeing", which manages to underline both Bazin's photorealism as well as Hall's model of perceiving media. Bazin touches upon the filmmaker's techniques when capturing a shot, disagreeing with the 'artifice' editing, but pleading for classic techniques such as long takes or deep focus. Those classic techniques preserve the authentic aspect of the image whilst emphasizing on certain aspects of it, which, as Hall suggests, "production (...) constructs the message" (Hall 1972, 118).

*Aftersun* (Wells, 2022) conveys the tension the two concepts interplay as it portrays a photorealistic approach due to its minimal editing and long takes whilst having a strong emphasis on the father-daughter relationship. The handheld camera and slow-paced action create a real set-up for the outside world, only for the audience to later understand the powerful meaning the videotape has for the daughter. The emotional and psychological depth of the characters challenges the audience for interpretations, who decode the film's messages based on their personal backgrounds. In this sense, Sontag affirms that "the more numerous the variations of something, the richer its possibilities of meaning" which is what occurs in each frame of every film (Sontag 2008, 135).

The blend between Bazin's photorealism and Hall's encoding/decoding model can and should be intergraded in order to understand the complex process of meaning-making in cinema as both the objective aspects of cinematic imagery, as well as the subjective interpretations of it, create this rich interplay. This nuanced perspective which Sontag approaches emphasizes the balance between the two concepts.

### **Out of The Frame and Into Perspective**

The interplay between André Bazin's photorealism and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model within the philosophy of humanities and media studies explores the dynamic of cinematic imagery and visuals. Both of them offer a complex but difficult understanding between the transformative and contested nature of cinematic meaning-making in contemporary visual culture. In this sense, Hall affirms that "if not meaning is taken, there can be no consumption" (Hall 1972, 117) emphasizing the relevance interpretation has on media and its impact on the masses. On the other hand, Bazin's concept of photorealism believes in the objective nature of photography as, through its mechanical process, the unparalleled truthfulness of it portrays the reality as it is, leaving no interpretation onto the viewer's eye.

This paper delves into the exploration of the two theoretical concepts and aims to offer insights into them underlining on a better understanding of what and how the photographic image as well as film underscore a multitude of meanings and interpretations, pleading for Stuart Hall's model. It offers insights of the two concepts, suggesting that every viewer's personal lens influences their understanding and emotional response to a piece of media, especially film. Furthermore, additional authors such as Susan Sontag and Cesare Cesarino constitute the framework and help create a better understanding of the two theories as each support one of the authors.

In the end, both Bazin's photorealism and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model come to a common point in what concerns the meaning-making of film: Bazin through the simple techniques that create a sequence and Hall's theory through the individual's backgrounds. As an insight of the latterly mentioned, Sontag, which supports Bazin in several matters highlighted before, adds upon the meaning-making of visual media suggesting that "the meaning is the use (...) for each photograph" (Sontag 2008, 82).

Hereinafter, André Bazin and Stuart Hall represent milestone philosophers in the media studies and film criticism, sharing opposing views on the meaning-making of the photographic image and its analysis whilst still meeting some common points in what concerns its impact on the large audiences. By stepping out of the frame and considering both objective and subjective dimensions, a deeper understanding of the power of film and visual media is conveyed which reflects and shapes the human experience.

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