4. **Open Bodies, Open Stories**

Evolution, Narration, and Spectatorship in Post-war Film Theory

In the post-war period, European film theory was dominated by approaches to film that incorporated post-catastrophic narrative forms and visual styles, especially those of Italian neorealism. Yet this period also saw a return of vitalist motifs in film theory. Even more so than in pre-war film theory, the vitality of the moving image was related to the question of the human being and its relationship to other forms of life, as well as questions of humanism. This novel combination of interest in life, realism, and modes of narration is especially evident in the work of André Bazin, but also seems to set Siegfried Kracauer’s belated *Theory of Film* (1960) apart from his pre-WWII writings. The resurgence of vitalist motifs in post-war film theory should surprise us, for classical accounts of vitalism see this as a movement that achieved its apotheosis when it merged with Nazi ideology in the Third Reich, where holism and the idea of the state as an organism served to justify an aggressive foreign policy and racial ideologies; it is not difficult to detect, for example, the chilling resonance between this political interest in holism and Uexküll’s idea of the *Umwelt* of the state.1 In the interwar period and during WWII, in other words, a politicized notion of life encouraged value distinctions between good and bad forms of life, and fueled the idea of ‘cleansing’ the state organism, a goal that was then used to justify radical measures against ‘harmful elements’ such as Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and handicapped people. From this perspective, the dangers of vitalism were thoroughly exposed by Nazism, and the Allies’ triumph over Nazism was also understood to be a triumph over vitalist thought.

At the same time, though, a different strand of vitalist thought persisted through the 1930s and 1940s, resurfacing after the war both in the work of a few singular individuals in disciplines such as philosophy (e.g., Maurice Merleau-Ponty) and the history of biology (Georges Canguilhem), but also, significantly, in film theory.2 Rather than concentrating on holistic notions of the body and, by extension, communities, authors such as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer insisted on the idea of a (vulnerable) open...

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1 Uexküll, *Staatsbiologie*. For such an account of vitalism, see Harrington, *Reenchanted Science*.
body; instead of the eternal duration of the Third Reich and the ecstatic era of its well-orchestrated mass festivals, they sought to define an open temporality of the everyday (exemplified for them by Italian neorealism). Their work, in quite different ways, provides us with an example of post-war film theory that continues the lineage of cinematic vitalism that this book has traced.

This chapter discusses the conceptions of nature, life, and evolution in Bazin’s essays on cinema and Kracauer’s early essays and in Theory of Film, and investigates the way in which these conceptions are linked to post-catastrophic narrative forms and visual styles in cinema. In contrast to earlier vitalist ideas in early texts on film and in the interwar avant-garde, this post-catastrophic cinematic vitalism is marked by a kind of quiet, passive urgency. For both Bazin and Kracauer, despite their theoretical and biographical differences, cinema is necessary in order to formulate a metaphysic of life that is able to work against the political catastrophe that took place in the name of life and by means of technology. The first part of the chapter turns to the way in which Bazin’s essays embed cinema within both a larger context of natural phenomena and the scientific investigation of such phenomena, by means of references and allusions that Bazin draws from fields such as biology and geology. Many of these references are to phenomena that capture, phenomenologically, change and force, and they point to a conception of vitality that runs through both the organic and the inorganic worlds. These ideas of nature, as I will show, present not only a discussion and modification of vitalist theories, but also parallel Merleau-Ponty’s nature lectures from the same period, in which the latter turned to Bergsonian vitalism, behaviorism, and Uexküll’s Umwelt theories. Bazin’s nature references also resonate in surprising ways with Eisenstein’s later texts on nature and history, in particular Nonindifferent Nature and Notes for a General History of Cinema (see Chapter 1). Such a contextualization of Bazin’s canonical texts allows us to understand how a vitalist notion of organic becoming shaped not only Bazin’s ontology of cinema, but also his notion of realism, especially as he articulated his understanding of realism with respect to Vittorio De Sica’s and Roberto Rossellini’s films.

The second part of the chapter looks at Kracauer’s Theory of Film and in particular the central notion of ‘the flow of life’ that Kracauer develops in

3 Antonio Somaini has pointed out some of the affinities between Bazin and Eisenstein, especially with respect to their shared references to cinema as mummification. See Somaini, “Cinema as "Dynamic Mummification,"” 80-84.
this text. In order to understand the implications of the role that life—both the life of the film and the life of the spectator—play in this text, I turn to Kracauer’s critical writings from the 1920s, especially his essays on vitalist biologist and philosopher Hans Driesch and the state of contemporary German philosophy, and his essay on ‘Photography’ and its augural discussion of the role of photographic media for the future of the human being. Both Kracauer and Bazin, as well as Merleau-Ponty, are interested in the conditions for emergence of the new as a condition of life and in the interaction between organism and environment; they sought the emergence of new possibilities that break habitual molds and allow for new connections between humans, between humans and nature, and between humans and technology. This search entails an insistence on humanism, on meaning and value, while nevertheless abandoning anthropocentrism, organicity, and the human. And as in the case of the path described by the previous two chapters, this path, and hence this chapter, also progresses from animal to human.

The Axolotl and Cinema: Bazin, Bergson, and Evolution

It was their quietness that made me lean toward them fascinated the first time I saw the axolotls. Obscurely I seemed to understand their secret will, to abolish space and time with an indifferent immobility. I knew better later; the gill contraction, the tentative reckoning of the delicate feet on the stones, the abrupt swimming (some of them swim with a simple undulation of the body) proved to me that they were capable of escaping that mineral lethargy in which they spent whole hours.

During one of his regular visits to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, the young man in Julio Cortázar’s short story from 1956, ‘The Axolotl’, becomes obsessed with the animal’s peculiar features and charisma. He wonders why it would be that this strange amphibian, of all animals, appeared to hold a secret for him, to communicate to him across the abyss that separated it from man. Its body seemed to speak of a different time and space: capable of suspending time, stretching it infinitely by seemingly abandoning movement and giving no signs of life; then suddenly moving with a pace and efficiency that presented a complete rupture with the previous state. The bond that is forming between the visitor to the aquarium and the axolotl catapults the man beyond the boundaries of human perception and worldview and into a new, foreign being and vision.
Above all else, their eyes obsessed me. In the standing tanks on either side of them, different fishes showed me the simple stupidity of their handsome eyes so similar to our own. The eyes of the axolotls spoke to me of the presence of a different life, of another way of seeing. Glueing my face to the glass (the guard would cough fussily once in a while), I tried to see better those diminutive golden points, that entrance to the infinitely slow and remote world of these rosy creatures. It was useless to tap with one finger on the glass directly in front of their faces; they never gave the least reaction. The golden eyes continued burning with their soft, terrible light; they continued looking at me from an unfathomable depth which made me dizzy.4

The encounter between man and axolotl in Cortázar’s story certainly has cinematic qualities: the animal itself takes on the qualities not of a recording apparatus, but a projecting apparatus. The axolotl’s movement and lack thereof, alternating between the stillness of death and rapid, isolated motion, is reminiscent of the projector’s pull of photograms on a filmstrip past the aperture. Separated by the thick glass of the aquarium, the observer is drawn in by the ‘soft, terrible light’ of the axolotl’s lidless eyes, which seem to devour him. Like a film image on a screen, the eyes do not seem to see him; yet the animal seems to address itself to him.

Cortázar’s story ends, however, with a more existential exchange: the narrator finds himself in the aquarium in the axolotl’s body, now possessing ‘insider’ knowledge of its human consciousness. This identity shift of the first-person narrator, however, also upsets our position as reader, and poses the question of what kind of interface this short story actually is; a short story the thinking axolotl hopes the man will some day write. The unsettling identity and the unsettled spatiotemporality of the axolotl now pervade our reading experience and turn our attention to the medium itself. What is it to be an axolotl, and what is it to read of someone’s experience? What does it mean to look as a non-human being, and what is the image of a film to us? These questions of an encounter with animality and how it bears on mediality have been posed by John Berger and Jacques Derrida in texts that are central to the rapidly expanding field of animal studies.5 However, pursuing the trace of the axolotl—itself an identity-shifting animal—across

media allows us to ask even more specific questions about life, mediation, aesthetics, and form.

Cortázar himself compared the metonymic quality of the short story to the photograph. The spatiotemporal cutout of photography is like ‘an explosion which fully opens a much more ample reality, like a dynamic vision which spiritually transcends the space reached by the camera’. The dynamic Cortázar attributes to photography and short story, namely an expansion outward, reflects the thoughts on film and photography expressed around the same time by film theorist André Bazin—who, not coincidentally, was also fascinated by animals, ranging from cats to birds to reptiles, and who, according to Dudley Andrew, spent hours with the family iguana, fascinated by a ‘different life, another way of seeing’ and the possibilities and limits of communication with a species so different—a sense that, as I have noted in the second chapter, both sustained Uexküll’s research on animal Umwelten and constitutes the basis for the affinity between animals and cinema. And in his essay on ‘Theater and Cinema’, which contains a reference to the axolotl, Bazin also conceives of the aesthetic of film as expanding from the center outward. He writes that, in contrast to the theater stage’s centripetal force, which relates everything to the human figure at the center of the drama, ‘the space of the [film] screen is centrifugal’. For Bazin, this means not only an expansion beyond onscreen space and an opening to transcendence, as for Cortázar; it also implies that the essence of cinema lies not in the human being (as is the case for theater), but rather in the way cinema mediates the world to us. This world is not ‘ours’—it is alien to us, and work is required to establish it as our environment and tie it to our physical and moral existence. It is in this sense that I postulate a connection between the axolotl and cinema, between development, evolution, behavior, and aesthetics,

6 Cortazar himself says about literary formats: ‘The novel and the short story can be compared analogically to the film and the photograph.’ Julio Cortazar, ‘Some Aspects of the Short Story’, 246. He further suggests that this genre functions as a metonymy, a ‘photography’ that is a fragment of reality which opens an ampler one: ‘an explosion which fully opens a much more ample reality, like a dynamic vision which spiritually transcends the space reached by the camera.’ See also Nataly Tcherepashenets, ‘Place and Displacement’.

7 Dudley Andrew, André Bazin, 8.


9 This has a both metaphysical and historical dimension. The film image can put us in touch with the ‘universe’, and thus present, and eventually restore, a world to us, a restoration that includes the potential of restoring the human being. For Bazin, cinema is able to formulate a metaphysic of life that works against the political catastrophe that took place in the name of life and by means of technology.
between organism-environment interaction and technological mediation. The axolotl will provide me with a literal lifeline for understanding certain aspects of French film aesthetics in the 1950s that are closely connected to questions of evolution, development, and behavior.

Bazin’s understanding of the arts in the context of dynamic vital processes and life-forms is part of a long tradition of French critical thought. Throughout the twentieth century, philosophy and cultural criticism in France have been deeply intertwined with the philosophy and history of life sciences, though this connection has not always been acknowledged or recognized, as Michel Foucault notes. Foucault argued that a central dividing line cuts through the various schools of the French intelligentsia of the post-war years:

[it] is the line that separates a philosophy of experience, of sense and of subject and a philosophy of knowledge, of rationality and of concept. On the one hand, one network is that of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty; and then another is that of Cavaillé, Bachelard and Canguilhem. In other words, we are dealing with two modalities according to which phenomenology was taken up in France.10

Bazin certainly belongs to the former camp in this model, and yet we find in his work a strong affinity to natural phenomena that points beyond a philosophy of the subject. In order to better grasp the peculiarities of Bazin’s thought, I am proposing a slightly different line alongside which to think about Bazin’s humanism, animalism, and materialism; namely, that of the divide caused by a Hegelianism (Alexandre Kojève, Jean Paul Sartre, etc.) that vehemently strove to distinguish itself from Bergsonism and neo-Kantianism. In Modern French Philosophy, Vincent Descombes presents Bergsonism as no more than an atavistic precursor to the neo-Hegelianism that was to dominate French philosophy from the 1930s onward; that is, Bergsonism was the ‘unmodern’ belief of an older generation that belonged more to the nineteenth century than to the twentieth century (until Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari raised the stakes once again in the 1970s).11 Yet a closer look at Bazin’s writing reveals that he cannot be clearly allocated to one side or the other of this split between Bergsonism and neo-Hegelianism—that is, the split between ‘old’ and ‘modern’ French

11 See Descombes, Modern French Philosophy, 9-54. This otherwise very insightful history of philosophy is thus itself part of the tradition it describes.
philosophy—but rather sits, with an existential discomfort appropriate to the post-war situation, on the dividing line, with an undercurrent of life-philosophical thought sustaining and informing his thinking throughout his writing career and increasingly during his later years. Merleau-Ponty might be said to occupy a similar position, for not only was his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1952 on Bergson, but he also turned to Bergson and nature-philosophy as he increasingly shifted his focus from phenomenology to ontology.

Bazin’s indebtedness to Bergson expresses itself in two realms, which more or less correspond to two of Bergson’s major works. On the one hand, and most importantly, one can trace the influence on Bazin of Bergson’s evolutionary theory, which the latter developed in *Creative Evolution*, and which emphasized notions of intellect, intuition, development, and sympathy. This work, corresponding to Bazin’s own interest in biology and the animal world, was highly influential for Bazin’s theory of the relationship between cinema and the other arts and his notion of an evolution of the cinematic image. On the other hand, Bazin was influenced by Bergson’s thesis that time must be understood as duration, a claim Bergson first articulated in *Matter and Memory*, and then took up again in *Creative Evolution*, arguing there that duration must be understood as intrinsic to the organism as such. Bazin applied these theories to cinema, which he understood as an expression of continuous duration. However, in addition to the direct reception of Bergson by Bazin, there are many Bergsonian and other vitalist elements in Bazin’s writings that might have been filtered through mediating figures such as Teilhard de Chardin, Proust, and Merleau-Ponty, as well as other French film theorists, such as Émile Vuillermoz. I suggest that we understand Bazin’s Bergsonism in the light of critical engagement with Bergson that grappled with the relationship of Bergson’s work to history and historical temporality, most notably Max Horkheimer’s critique of Bergson and Benjamin’s engagement with Bergson. This angle helps us

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13 Teilhard de Chardin was a Catholic priest, heavily influenced by Bergson, who not only formulated what came to be the Catholic Church’s official stance on evolution, but was also an active paleontologist and geologist. Proust functions, for his part, as a reference point in Bazin’s discussion of memory in a text such as Bazin, ‘De Sica: Metteur en Scène’.

to understand the transformations of vitalist ideas in the wake of, and subsequent to, the experience of WWII and the holocaust.

The role of vitality for Bazin is most evident in his understanding of art forms as dynamic, quasi-living entities that are governed by laws that also apply to natural phenomena. Bazin believes in the fundamental vitality of cinema, painting, theater, and literature. He attributes to art forms an organic capacity for evolution, development, and interaction with other art forms—a medium’s historical genesis is, in Bazin’s writings, comparable to the phylogenetic development of a species. Throughout his essays on cinema, for example, Bazin imbues the medium with the capacity to evolve, adapt, react to other entities in certain habitats; remain in a ‘larval’ or ‘embryonic’ state; and so forth. The number, consistency, and biological accuracy of Bazin’s attributions of life-like qualities to cinema make these more than mere metaphors; thinking of cinema as a living being guided Bazin’s approach to the question of realism, for example, cinema’s dependency on historical conditions, and its interaction with theater, painting, and literature. Additionally, Bazin’s understanding of films themselves, as experiential, time-based artworks, has vital connotations—he compares their effect to natural, growing phenomena (in his ‘Ontology’ essay) and ascribes to them an organic, dynamic temporality, rather than a mechanical one.

Readers of Bazin’s essays are often struck by the wealth of allusions and references to realms that seem to have little or no connection to an aesthetic inquiry into the nature of cinema and the stylistic particularities of specific films. For the most part, these references come from studies and observations in the natural sciences or from observations of nature itself. Bazin does not employ these natural facts as metaphors for cinema or a particular film; rather, they are presented alongside or parallel to the characteristics of cinema or a particular film, such that in his prose, descriptions of films are juxtaposed to those of natural phenomena, mutually reinforcing one narrative shape of truth.

Narrative Shape of Truth. See also Andrew and Joubert-Laurencin, eds., Opening Bazin, 65n.

15 In his famous essay on the ‘Ontology of the Photographic Image’, Bazin writes of photography that, since it does not entirely spring from man, it ‘affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty.’ Not only are the flower and the snowflake natural phenomena, but their appeal also comes from the fact that they are temporal; that is, subject to constant change. Moreover, their development is visible in their very form, both in the inorganic crystalline growth of the snowflake and the organic development of the flower from its bud. This understanding of evolutionary time, one that includes both organic and inorganic phenomena, underwrites not only Bazin’s understanding of the temporality of film(s), but also that of cinema as an art form. See Bazin, ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’, 13.
another not on the basis of a causal or metaphorical connection, but solely on the basis of their ‘proximity’ in the text. Films and natural phenomena exist on the same plane in Bazin's texts, such that the essays on cinema *embed* their subject in a larger context of natural phenomena and the scientific investigation of natural phenomena. Most frequently, Bazin's references and allusions belong to biology, especially evolutionary biology, geology, or behavioral psychology. Thus, Dudley Andrew, who describes Bazin as ‘organicist’, is only partially right, since Bazin's references include not only organic phenomena such as bees, dogs, and salamanders, but also non-organic phenomena such as bacteria, rivers, stones, and viruses. What unites all of these references is not organicism, but rather a phenomenological interest in change, expression or expressivity, and force—in short, a very broadly understood conception of vitality that encompasses both the organic and the inorganic.

Two texts express these two vitalist elements in Bazin most forcefully. The two-part essay on ‘Theater and Cinema’, published in 1951 in *Esprit*, provides an introduction to the relationship between Bergson's theories on evolutionary biology and Bazin's theory of the interrelationship of the arts. It also introduces the figure of the axolotl. Bazin's essay on cinema and painting—‘The Picasso Mystery: A Bergsonian Film’—picks up ideas about adaptation that he earlier developed and focuses on the question of temporality by fusing Bergsonism with existential phenomenology. These two articles provide several key ideas that allow for a deeper analysis of the precise nature of Bazin's realism.

In Bazin's two-part essay on ‘Theater and Cinema', included in the first volume of *What Is Cinema?*, the axolotl is used to illustrate the relation between the two art forms. The axolotl functions like a prism in the texts, focusing and concentrating ideas of development, evolution, and temporality by inscribing them onto an animal body and reflecting them back onto various films. In these essays, Bazin pursues two arguments. First, the comparison between cinema and theater allows him to distinguish the specificity of the cinematic image. In contrast to the theater, in which everything revolves around the dramatic presence of man and his fate, such that centripetally, everything serves to illustrate the human drama, film's aesthetic is centrifugal and spirals outward. This description of film seeks to capture certain qualities of the cinematic image, such as its openness, limitlessness, and the fact that it puts humans, animals, and environment on the same plane—everything in the image moves and is animated by

16 See Andrew, *André Bazin*. 
the same technological spirit. This argument seems in agreement with a classical position in film theory, namely that of the autonomy of cinema as an art form in its own right, one that needs to be ‘cleansed’ of the influences of theater as an established, bourgeois art form.

Yet in a second step, this distinction between theater and cinema for Bazin becomes the prerequisite for a mutual exchange between cinema and theater. By looking more closely at comedy, slapstick, and ‘filmed theater’, that is, theater plays adapted for cinema, Bazin introduces the idea of a co-evolution of theater and cinema in order to undo the idea that cinema has been developing autonomously and along a linear line of progress toward self-realization. Informing this point is the conviction that cinema, like any other art form (and any other living being, for that matter) does not come into its own and make use of its potentials through a process of isolation and purification, but rather by engaging in an ongoing exchange with its environment and other dynamic, ‘vital’ entities, including other forms of art such as theater. In the case of comedies like those of Chaplin, cinema ‘offers more than the theater but only by going beyond it, by relieving it of its imperfections’.17 While both the acting style and dramatic structure of early slapstick films come from a theatrical tradition, cinema is not restricted by time and space in the same way that theater is.18

In order to explain the relationship between theater and cinema in films like slapstick or filmed theater, Bazin describes the state of dramatic situations in the theater as a ‘larval stage’ of dramatic possibilities in cinema: ‘What makes it possible to believe that the cinema exists to discover or create a new set of dramatic facts is its capacity to transform theatrical situations that otherwise would never have reached their maturity.’ In order to explain this developmental allusion, Bazin turns to the axolotl (though not by name):

In Mexico there is a kind of salamander capable of reproduction at the larval stage and which develops no further. By injecting it with hormones, scientists have brought it to maturity. In like fashion we know that the

18 Two aspects of Bazin’s theater essay are thus critically important: first, his break with ‘myths’ and convenient (often simplified historical) reasoning in order to define an ontology of cinema against theater and other arts; and second, a definition of ‘realism’ in cinema that subsumes technology and materiality under an aesthetic ontology. It is especially the second point—which, in some ways, is the consequence of the former—that sheds light on Bazin’s notion of the difference between cinematic and theatrical realities. These realities have to be understood as the expression of the living beings he understands art forms to be.
continuity of animal evolution presented us with incomprehensible gaps until biologists discovered the laws of *paidomorphosis* from which they learnt not only to place embryonic forms in the line of evolution of the species but also to recognize that certain individuals, seemingly adult, have been halted in their evolutionary development.¹⁹

I am not sure to what extent Bazin knew of the popular scientific experiments with the axolotls; whether he had heard Merleau-Ponty talk about the astonishing amphibian in his lectures, or had read Aldous Huxley’s 1939 novel *After Many a Summer* (which was published in France in 1941), in which he recounts his brother Julian Huxley’s experiments and applies them to a human maturing into an ape. In any case, though, Bazin was tapping into a scientific reference with numerous reverberations among other cultural critics, poets, and philosophers.²⁰

The axolotl was first introduced to Europe when 34 specimens were brought from Mexico to Paris in 1863, and six of these ended up at the Jardin des Plantes. Under the hands of zoologist Auguste Duméril, they quickly spawned into the hundreds. The animal was initially believed to be a very large newt whose main characteristics were anthropomorphic hands with free digits and ‘three large appendages on each side of the back of the head, fringed with filaments which, in their fullest development, remind one of black ostrich feathers’ (Fig. 4.1).²¹ Yet some axolotl of the third generation at the Jardin des Plantes developed into salamanders, thus revealing the axolotl to be in fact a larval stage of the salamander, albeit a larval stage in which it was nevertheless able to reproduce. The ability to mature sexually in the larval stage is an example of biological heterochrony; that is, a kind of ‘untimeliness’ in the temporal relationship of different developmental processes to one another. This larval maturity is called paedomorphosis, and is thought to occur in order to provide living beings with the evolutionary option of regression in order to adapt to certain circumstances. In the case of the axolotl, for example, the ample lakes around Mexico City allowed the axolotl to remain more comfortably in water over the course of its entire lifespan, rather than spending its adult life on land. As a consequence, it retained its larval body in adulthood; or, to put it the other way around, it

²⁰ André Breton included the axolotl in surrealism’s ‘coat of arms.’ Other allusions to the axolotl include, for example, a reference at the end of René Daumal, *A Night of Serious Drinking*; and Giorgio Agamben, ‘The Idea of Infancy’.
acquired the capacity to reproduce prematurely. As Richard Dawkins points out, this heterochrony can be understood either as an acceleration of sexual maturity, or a slowing down of everything else relative to sexual maturity.\footnote{Richard Dawkins, ‘The Axolotl’s Tale’, 316.}

In 1913, Vilém Laufenberger in Germany injected an axolotl with a thyroid growth hormone and thus artificially induced the animal to develop into its ‘adult’ stage as a salamander. A few years later, Julian Huxley, Aldous Huxley’s brother, repeated the experiment in England.

Bazin’s reference to the axolotl emphasizes that theater and cinema developed along a path that was neither straightforward nor monochronological, nor was it a path that was ‘natural’ and predetermined. First, the example of the axolotl highlights cinema’s potentiality: just as the axolotl possesses \textit{in nuce} developmental potentials to evolve into different forms, so too are dramatic situations in cinema and in theater tied to one another as potentials. Second, it highlights the anti-determinist character of Bazin’s notion of development: just as the axolotl’s ‘evolutionary leap’ in the Jardin des Plantes was brought about by experimental intervention and interaction, so too is cinema’s development of expressive possibilities brought about by means of its incorporation of theater. (However, Bazin foregoes
the opportunity to comment on the colonialist implications of the forceful ‘progression’ of a Mexican animal that was imported into France as a consequence of French military occupation and repression in Mexico).\textsuperscript{23} And third, the animal reference highlights the necessity of seeing phenomena in context, as interconnected with other phenomena and reacting to a particular, changing environment. The organism in question is radically open: open to intervention, open in its potential, and open to environmental changes. Theater and cinema are, in this light, two expressions of the same animal Bazin calls ‘dramatic situations.’\textsuperscript{24}

The axolotl thus provides a model organism that enables us to understand better how the slapstick films Bazin initially cites, such as \textit{Onésime Horloger} (Jean Durand and Louis Feuillade, France 1912), rely on the interaction of theater and cinema. This film begins with a theatrical \textit{mise en scène} in which the main character (played by Ernest Bourbon) and his dilemma—an inheritance to which he will only gain access in twenty years—are introduced. Onésime addresses the audience first in hand-wringing despair and then, after reading a clock-making treatise, in resolute excitement: he will change the pneumatic regulating clock to make time faster. The central regulating clock office itself is a chaotic place full of apparatuses and criss-cross wiring. With a few crude mechanical manipulations using a big hammer, Onésime accomplishes his task and somersaults over the suspended wires in a last farewell of the theatrical body to technological power. As soon as he has exited the frame, time-lapse speeds up the fingers of the clock and the regime of ‘fast time’ begins—and thus, the cinematic regime of manipulated time that transfers the comic and uncanny from bodily performance to bodies subjected to technologically accelerated motion.

In this self-reflexive narrative, Onésime’s pounding hammer visualizes the injection that brings about the hormonal leap to a new state and therefore not only makes use of cinema’s exponentiation of the theater, but also makes it an integral part of the narrative, thus continuing in the tradition of George Méliès’ films. The majority of the film is concerned with the attraction of time-lapse photography and repeats, in fact, the

\textsuperscript{23} Christian Reiß has outlined the ways in which the history of the axolotl as a scientific subject is intertwined with histories of colonialization, and has tied this latter history to shifts of scientific paradigms (from natural history to taxonomy to biology and genetics). See Christian Reiß, ‘The Acclimatization of a Model Organism’.

\textsuperscript{24} Tom Conley also recently used the image of the axolotl to elucidate Bazin’s understanding of evolution. However, he misunderstands the biological image of neoteny and interprets cinema to be the hormone that is injected into theater. See Tom Conley, ‘Evolution and Event in \textit{Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?}’.
very scenes that formed the subject of the most popular early films by the Lumière brothers, Edison and others: street scenes, the execution of justice, family life, and construction. The comic effect of sped-up motion either simply makes movement look funny, as in the street scenes, or is amplified by additional tricks, as in the case of the rapid transformation of a baby joyously shaken by his mother into a man in baby clothes bouncing up and down, still held by his mother’s arms. Onésime Horloger conjoins the cinematic spectacle of time manipulation and surprising tricks with a meta-narrative that proclaims that real time is passing fast and movement is really faster—movement is determining time, but movement itself is determined by the cinematographic apparatus. The delight on the part of the spectator is doubled: it is not only pleasure in the spectacle, but also in the mind-bending reconciliation and disjuncture of fast movement and regular time. Onésime Horloger is not simply a film that thrives on the superior possibilities of film over theater and thus proves itself dominant; cinematic possibilities communicate with theatrical potential and expand the dramatic expression in the interaction.

Similarly, the representative ‘filmed theater’ films Bazin discusses in the main part of the essay—Laurence Olivier’s Henry V (1944) and Jean Cocteau’s Les Parents terribles (1948)—are not a ‘cinematization’ of theater, that is, they are not an adaptation, but instead constitute examples of films that enhance the theatrical intention with new cinematic means. Cinema does not occupy theatrical territory, but rather puts its potential with respect to time (durée), dramatic effect (words vs. camera), and décor (artificiality vs. realism) in the service of the dramatic situation expounded by the theatrical play. The dramatic situation is the organism, the axolotl, which might change its phenotype from newt to salamander, theater to cinema; a change that might result in new potential, environments, movement, and behavior, but it will remain the same living entity.

25 In science, model organisms (such as E. coli, mice, or fruit flies) are species that have become experimental defaults on the basis of their specific qualities, such as easy maintenance, quick generational turnover, hardiness, genetic makeup, or responsiveness to experimental treatments, and which often allow conclusions to be drawn about human biology. The axolotl has been a model organism since the early twentieth century and is especially interesting for researchers due to its regenerative capacities.

26 In that sense, Bazin’s reference to the axolotl presents one step further (phenotypical, rather than genotypical differences) from his discussion of mixing of the arts as ‘cross-breeding’ in his essay ‘In Defense of Mixed Cinema’: ‘There are fruitful cross-breedings which add to the qualities derived from the parents; there are attractive but barren hybrids and there are likewise hideous combinations that bring forth nothing but chimeras’. Bazin, ‘In Defense of Mixed Cinema’, 61.
This understanding of the relationship between theater and cinema casts aside both essentialist definitions of cinema and ontological pre-determinations. Films like *Henry V*, *Les Parents terribles*, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), William Wyler’s *The Little Foxes* (1941), Orson Welles *Macbeth* (1948), and Olivier's other productions such as *Hamlet* (1948) all highlight their theatrical origins and make use of cinematic means to push theater further, rather than push against theater. *Henry V* manages this balance by showing a theater performance of *Henry V* in Shakespeare’s day. (Cinematic) realism and (theatrical) illusion enhance rather than oppose one another, since filmic indexicality and mediated performance function as an exponentiation of theatrical presence and performance. Jean Cocteau’s *Les Parents terribles*, by comparison, uses camera and montage to increase the realism of the original stage melodrama by depicting cramped rooms and the fast rhythm of attention. Moreover, Cocteau translates the situation of the theatrical spectator into a cinematic equivalent by shooting from the perspective of an invisible observer—that is, employing a framing and focus dictated by spectatorial interest—and thus emphasizes the ‘quasi-obscenity’ of viewing. Cinema increases the theatricality by using its means in the service of theater. For Bazin, Cocteau’s film represents a trend of moving away from adaptation and toward ‘staging a play by means of cinema’.27 “‘Canned theater’ [...] has certainly taken on a new lease of life’ – like the axolotl who, thanks to a hormonal boost, leaves the water and crawls on land, moving just as elegantly in the air as it had in the water.

**Cinema’s Milieu**

Scientific inquiries into the axolotl’s capacities for transformation invariably reflected on the animal’s adaptability to the conditions in its environment, namely the water level in the lakes of Xochimilco in Mexico City, the axolotl’s natural habitat. While Xochimilco once provided so much water that the axolotl could comfortably remain in the water throughout its life cycle, the area had since been incorporated into the growing metropolis, its lakes had been drained to enable intensive agriculture, and artificial canals contained the last remains of the former water reservoir.28 Bazin’s example of artificial hormone injections to raise the thyroid hormones that regulate the axolotl’s metamorphosis are indicative of the artificiality that surrounds

28 Reiß, Uwe Hoßfeld and Lennart Olsson, ‘150 Jahre Axolotl’.
its modern life conditions: critically endangered, wild axolotls have not been found for years—yet as lab animal and aquarium pet, they are ubiquitous and can be bought for a few dollars. Even the import of the axolotl to Europe had been in the name of the Société Zoologique d’Acclimatation in Paris, one of many international acclimatization societies dedicated to studying the successful transfer of plants, animals, and humans from one area to another, in particular from non-European (colonial) regions to Europe.29

Just as the axolotl’s hybridity can serve to illustrate the dynamic conception of the interrelationship between the arts in Bazin’s work, the question raised by the axolotl’s organic development and behavioral patterns illuminates Bazin’s understanding of the internal development of a particular art form. Similar to scientific studies that analyzed the dependence of the axolotl’s development on its milieu, Bazin’s ‘The Evolution of the Language of Cinema’ engaged in a parallel inquiry into the dependence of film style on the political and cultural milieu. As I have noted in earlier chapters, milieu theory had been an important aspect of both biology and cultural theory in France, especially in the work of Auguste Comte, Hyppolite Taine, Claude

29 Ibid., 189; see also Iris Borowy, ‘Akklimatisierung’.
Bernard, and Émile Zola. During the 1940s and 1950s, Georges Canguilhem in particular—following Canguilhem, Merleau-Ponty, and others—turned to the concept of milieu and redefined it. In keeping with his conception of the coevolution of theater and cinema, Bazin views the evolution of the language of cinema itself not as a unilinear path toward perfection, but as the formal and technical coevolution of different impulses or forces, which seek ever-new (and in this sense always temporary) ‘well-balanced stage[s] of maturity’. The form and expression of both art and animal depend on the conditions of the environment: social, biological, and historical. If water becomes scarce, or living conditions too overcrowded, the axolotl adapts by changing its form.

For Bazin, the evolution of film style is dependent upon the interaction and interdependence of film’s milieu and film’s internal development. This development happens within a field defined by two poles, one of which may take precedence over the other in certain conditions: on the one hand, the impulse to privilege the image and, on the other, the impulse to privilege reality. The terms seem confusing—is cinema not made up of images? Yet Bazin restricts his notion of image to ‘everything that the representation on the screen adds to the object there represented’, namely ‘plasticity’—that is, arrangement, framing, performance, cinematography—and montage. Cinema, for him, is thus image plus reality; or, rather, cinema is a kind of image that is real, as in Bergson’s definition of objects as image in *Matter and Memory*. Interestingly, Bazin argues that the advent of sound did not constitute a major event that upset the equilibrium of forces. Rather, it was the introduction of a new ‘subject matter’ that brought about a change in style between 1940 and 1950. Bazin describes this subject matter as ‘self-effacement before reality’, which we might call, more precisely, a new attitude toward matter—one that allows form to free itself from its subservience to the film’s content or subject. The image Bazin uses to describe this dynamic development is the equilibrium-profile of a river.

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30 Canguilhem’s seminal essay ‘The Living and Its Milieu’, for example, was based on his lectures from 1946–7 and was published in French in 1952. See Canguilhem, ‘The Living and Its Milieu’.
32 Ibid., 24.
33 See Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 10-11: ‘[B]y “image” we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a *representation*, and less than that which the realist calls a *thing*. . . . the object exists in itself, and, on the other hand, the object is, in itself, pictorial, as we perceive it: image it is, but a self-existing image.’
The forces of the water and the resistance of the geological strata struggle against one another, thereby literally in-forming one another, until the river flows in a settled bed. Any changes in waterflow or geology will cause a change in the riverbed, until a new equilibrium is reached.

While Bazin equates cinema’s new subject matter with a ‘vast stirring of the geological bed of cinema’, he never hints at what caused the stirring.³⁵ It seems beyond question that this stir was created by the war and its political, social, physical, and psychological toll. It is, however, important to note that Bazin avoids direct ascriptions of cause and effect. In an essay on danger, suffering, and death entitled ‘Cinema and Exploration’, Bazin says of a film that ‘the camera is there like the veil of Veronica pressed to the face of human suffering’.³⁶ According to the medieval legend of St Veronica, she wiped the blood and sweat off Jesus’ face on the Via Dolorosa and her veil retained the image of Jesus’ face—an acheiropoieton (an image not made by human hands), like the photographic image. Similarly, the evolution of film style functions like a veil, or screen, pressed to the face of reality. This is the double function of the veil and the screen: simultaneously to reveal and to conceal. Stanley Cavell has described the screen’s function thus: it ‘screens me from the world it holds—that is, makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me—that is, screens its existence from me. That the projected world does not exist (now) is its only difference from reality’.³⁷ For Cavell, the screen introduces a separation between subject and world. Bazin, by contrast, emphasizes mediated contact. The form of a film mediates reality—reality can only become visible through mediation, and this is how film can bring us into contact with the world. Developing, living creatures are not isolated from the world, as in a skeptical worldview, but have the world inscribed into their bodies in the form of their development.

When Bazin returns to the image of the riverbed in ‘In Defense of Mixed Cinema’, he focuses on the complex (and contradictory) ways in which cinema interacts with its environment, namely other arts:

Like those rivers which have finally hollowed out their beds and have only the strength left to carry their waters to the sea, without adding one single grain of sand to their banks, the cinema approaches its equilibrium-profile. The days are gone when it was enough to ‘make cinema’ in order to deserve well of the seventh art. While we wait until color or

³⁶ Bazin, ‘Cinema and Exploration’, 163.
stereoscopy provisionally return its primacy to form and create a new cycle of aesthetic erosion, on the surface cinema has no longer anything to conquer. There remains for it only to irrigate its banks, to insinuate itself between the arts among which it has so swiftly carved out its valleys, subtly to invest them, to infiltrate the subsoil, in order to excavate invisible galleries. The time of resurgence of a cinema newly independent of novel and theater will return. But it may then be because novels will be written directly onto film. As it awaits the dialectic of the history of art which will restore to it this desirable and hypothetical autonomy, the cinema draws into itself the formidable resources of elaborated subjects amassed around it by neighboring arts during the course of the centuries. It will make them its own because it has need of them and we experience the desire to rediscover them by way of the cinema.38

Film theorists and historians often focus on ‘new cycle[s] of erosion’, that is, times in which the form of film draws attention to itself due to new advances in technology. But while nothing seems to happen on the surface during times of formal-technological stability, underground infiltration, and excavation continue the play of forces, changing the river’s structure almost imperceptibly. The river incorporates and makes use of the matter of other arts. The force of its water uncovers hidden structures in the geographical layers, and like a negative imprint, the water fills hollows it has carved out. Like the flow of the river, the axolotl’s development will respond to changes in its environment. The axolotl highlights what is slightly more diffuse in the image of the riverbed: that bodily expression, or form, or style, is a result of the interaction between the conditions of the environment and the potential, or potential futures, inherent in the present organism. The body in its manifest expression, as a phenotype, reflects, like the negative imprint on St Veronica’s veil, the environment. ‘Imprinting’, however, is not a determinist process that privileges nurture over nature; rather, the environment interacts with the organism, such that the latter takes certain paths and not others, privileging certain elements, strands, and futures. Similarly, in Bazin’s essay, there are a number of films such as Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941) or Rossellini’s Paisà (1946) that seize upon one of cinema’s innate potentials, namely its quality of ‘revealing’ reality. This potential had been there in nuce—and had appeared in the earlier work of F.W. Murnau, Erich Stroheim and Jean Renoir—but only now, in the new dynamic set in play between the

38 Bazin, ‘In Defense of Mixed Cinema’, 74-75
geopolitical stirrings of the war and cinematic style, does this realist tendency come to full expression. This development finds perfect expression in the axolotl, which reaches maturation as larval stage in sufficiently wet conditions, in a movement that is simultaneously regression and evolution, and thus the coming into being of something new by means of a ‘folding’.

Sergei Eisenstein, who was highly interested in regression, also picked up on the axolotl’s heterochrony. Eisenstein detects a ‘dialectic polarity’ between ‘regression’ and ‘progress’ in every work of art, linking artworks to both ‘the deepest layer of emotional thinking’ and ‘the highest peaks of consciousness.’ In the essays written for Metod, this ‘deepest layer’ encompasses for Eisenstein not only thinking-feeling, but extends to those organic, psychological and social states more generally that are characterized by a ‘synthetic, unified, undifferentiated state,’ including androgyny, prelogical thinking, protoplasmaticity, and archaic communism.

Throughout the history of the arts, traces of these ‘deepest layers’ can be detected. It is in this context that he references the axolotl in his Notes for a General History of Cinema. In a section guided by the heading “The Dynamic Panoptikum [German for ‘wax museum’ or ‘cabinet of curiosities’, I.P.]” — connection with Dionysia and Mystery plays — Eisenstein discusses the Oberammergau Passion Play, which strikes him as an original form of ‘the tradition of the guild plays of antiquity,’ in this case ‘still surviving in a (relatively) untouched form (like axolotl ambystoma – a phenomenon that lived into our own time, having preserved in one creature’s biography the transformation from the stage of branchia to the stage of lungs, i.e. to [the era] of its emergence from water).’

Similar to Bazin’s reference to the axolotl, Eisenstein views the animal as an embodiment of certain characteristics of artworks—in this case, not only the achronistic retainment of an ancient form into the current time, but also the

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39 In his essay on Bazin’s understanding of evolution, Conley convincingly links this understanding to Gilles Deleuze’s conception of the event in Deleuze, The Fold. Deleuze explains the event with the image of Napoleon’s soldiers being confronted with a pyramid in the Egyptian desert. As soon as they see the pyramid, with a shudder they realize that it has been there for a long time, and a different temporality cuts across their being, uprooting and questioning their endeavor. Likewise, for Bazin, through film, and facilitated by film’s long takes and deep focus, ‘one can move into the world and let the world enter the geography of one’s body: a feeling of space and being is grasped, and so also an intimation of an open-ended totality of things’. Both geological and aesthetic evolution ‘belong to a greater “life of forms” that includes those of the earth’s crust, the living organism, and also the seven arts’. See Conley, ‘Evolution and Event in Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?’, 39.

40 See Somaini, ‘Cinema as “Dynamic Mummification,”’ 44.

41 Eisenstein, ‘Dynamic Mummification,’ 175.
preservation in an individual body of a transformation that recapitulates species development. Eisenstein’s reference to the axolotl thus highlights his interest in the idea of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny; a popular idea in the late nineteenth century, thanks to Engels’ *Dialectics of Nature* and Ernst Haeckel’s *The Riddle of the Universe*, and which, as Antonio Somaini explains, had already been transferred to art history by Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin.42

While Eisenstein’s reference to the axolotl focuses less on environmental conditions and more on the embodiment of phylogenetic qualities, he nevertheless shares with Bazin an emphasis, *qua* axolotl, on cinema’s unfixed form and its interrelation with other arts, across time and space. Somaini’s summary of Eisenstein’s understanding of cinema as ‘synthesis of the arts’ resounds Bazin in many ways:

Eisenstein never considered cinema a medium that had reached a final and definitive form. Rather, cinema was for him a constantly evolving set of elements and techniques, each one of which opened up new ‘possibilities’ that needed to be explored in order to produce art forms increasingly capable of exerting a powerful influence on their spectators.43

In order to highlight the interesting confluence of the axolotl as organic emblem for a constantly evolving cinema for both Bazin and Eisenstein, the specificity of Bazin’s approach can further be usefully distinguished from Giorgio Agamben’s more recent use of the figure of the axolotl. Whereas for Bazin, the emergence of new expressions of an animal’s body or of an art form is historically and culturally specific, Giorgio Agamben has looked to the axolotl for universal ontological conditions of relating to the world. Bazin insists that one needs to tie the emergence of new organic expressions—that is, the emergence of meaning—to the organic and environmental circumstances in the animal’s case, and, in the case of cinema, to social, historical, and technological conditions, and to cinema’s interaction with other art forms. Agamben, by contrast, uses the axolotl in a short essay in *Ideas of Prose* to think about what distinguishes the human being from other living beings. Like Bazin, Agamben makes use of the axolotl’s paedomorphosis to think about time and development. Yet

43 Ibid., 50.
Agamben takes the axolotl’s eternal state of infancy as a starting point to imagine an infant that
does not merely keep to its larval environment and retain its own immature form, but is, as it were, so completely abandoned to its own state of infancy, and so little specialized and so totipotent that it rejects any specific destiny and any determined environment in order to hold on to its immaturity and helplessness.44

While other animals are attuned to a specific environment and are bound to the ‘Law’—that is, to what has been written in their genetic code—this axolotlian infant is able to remain open; rather than being cast into a specific environment, he is cast into a world.45 Agamben links the open potential of the axolotl to language, to the capacity for naming things, which precedes values and concepts. This potential and active engagement with the world seems to bear a close relationship to Bazin’s—and, as we will see, to Merleau-Ponty’s—reference to the axolotl’s active developmental response to environmental conditions. However, as will become clear from my reading of Bazin through Merleau-Ponty below, the openness of the axolotl’s body is exactly what makes it deviate not only from an anthropological machine—a mechanism that introduces the split between human and animal—that characterizes Agamben’s essay, but also simplistic distinctions between natural and unnatural, organic and inorganic. In fact, what the axolotl opens for Bazin and Merleau-Ponty is a separation between the organism and the unitary whole, a separation we can think of in two ways: either by saying that the axolotlian organism encompasses inorganic environmental influences and thus transcends traditional understandings of organicity, or by seeing the axolotlian organism as part of an assemblage that includes environmental factors. It is this latter sense that connects the thought figure (Denkfigur) of the axolotl not only to Uexküll’s Umwelt theory, but also to a Stimmung aesthetic that aspires to an open image—open to the off-screen, open to the spectator, and open to letting reality shimmer through the texture of the screen.

45 This essay is, in many ways, a precursor to Agamben’s The Open: Man and Animal, which was published seven years later. ‘The Idea of Infancy’ already draws upon the ideas that are foundational for Agamben’s discussion of the anthropological machine he develops in the later text, especially Heidegger’s distinction of Welt and Umwelt, which he in turn got from Uexküll. See Agamben, The Open: Man and Animal.
Life and the Temporalities of Film and Painting

So far, I have used the axolotl as an instantiation of Bazin's notion of cinema and art forms more generally. The axolotl's body and its bodily potential have served as a screen that makes visible how Bazin correlates the development of art with organic development. In what follows, I would like to pursue this constellation one step further. The axolotl's development and behavior also illuminate the properties of film in Bazin's work, and aspects of cinematic temporality in particular. How to map the animal onto art, and onto film in particular, becomes clearer in Merleau-Ponty's ‘Nature’ lectures from 1956-58, which were to comprise the final part of *The Visible and the Invisible*. In order to grasp the temporal implications of Bergson's philosophy of nature and Uexküll’s understanding of environment as part of life, Merleau-Ponty turns to studies of the successive evolution of the axolotl and the impact of this evolution on the step-by-step process of the animal’s learning how to swim. Bazin had referenced the axolotl to support his claim that ‘cinema exists to discover or create a new set of dramatic facts’; for Merleau-Ponty, the axolotl's behavioral development proves exactly this, the discovery of the new ‘out of itself’, as a quality inherent to the animal.

Merleau-Ponty is interested in the axolotl because the embryonic development of its organism seems to anticipate how it needs to behave in order to function in a changing environment. The development of nervous and sensuous tissue—that is, its innervation, to use a term central to Walter Benjamin’s theory of cinema—as well as the development of muscular tissue appear to happen in accord with the organism's need for certain types of movement in the water and on land.46 In the beginning, for example, the axolotl's legs can only move in accord with the trunk, which results in an S-shaped movement necessary for swimming; only then do the legs begin to move independently, enabling efficient movement on land – as though the organism as a whole foresaw the change in its milieu: ‘the maturation of the organism and the emergence of behavior are one and the same thing. For the axolotl, to exist from head to tail and to swim are the same thing’.47 There is thus a dynamic relationship between organic development, behavior, and environment that can be explained neither by the preformationist idea that all potential of the organism is already present in the embryo *in nuce*, nor by positivist, teleological interpretations that

46 On Walter Benjamin and innervation, see Hansen, ‘Benjamin and Cinema’.
see everything that happens in, with, and to the body as a consequence of goal-oriented behavior.

It is this open field constituted by the interaction between body and environment, at every step of the axolotl’s development, that for Merleau-Ponty has the quality of a kind of interrogative being. Merleau-Ponty speaks of the ‘problems’ that the axolotl solves: it “transfers” the solution from the problem posited by its displacement in water to the problem posited by its displacement on land.48 This dynamic understanding of organism and behavior allows Merleau-Ponty to apply a Bergsonian notion of time to the axolotl. According to Bergson, the organism—that is, the medium of life—is capable of bringing something new into being, since it does not just passively react to changing conditions, but rather carries within itself a ‘reference to the future’; in other words, it exists to produce the new. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty says about the axolotl that ‘there is the future in every present, because its present is in a state of imbalance’.49 There is an openness, or a negativity, that is part of organic life: in the present, there is an absence of meaning that is only yet to come. This meaning to come is the result of the organism’s temporality and evolution in the interaction with its environment. Any living being capable of complex reactions that go beyond a mere stimulus-response schema creates meaning by reacting to its Umwelt. Life, for Merleau-Ponty, is expression, that is why to live and to swim is the same thing for the axolotl.

With an instructive reference to the telephone, Merleau-Ponty transfers the axolotl’s behavior and developments to technology: “The organism is not just a telephone switchboard. In order to understand it, we must include in it the inventor or operator of the telephone: we could say that the axolotl is a telephone which invents and maneuvers itself.”50 An animal might be subject to mechanical, physico-chemical laws, but these are not sufficient to account for the dynamic whole. The axolotl thus provides us with a model for technological media according to which media have such mobility and self-direction that their content will always be subject to the medium’s own transformation—a transformation embedded in its historical and cultural environment.

From his discussion of the axolotl’s development, Merleau-Ponty draws conclusions for life in general and proposes an understanding of life as interrogative, negative force. In living beings,

48 Ibid., 144.
49 Ibid., 155.
50 Ibid., 145.
The directing principle is neither before nor behind; it’s a phantom, it is the axolotl, all the organs of which would be the trace; it’s the hollowed-out design of a certain style of action, which would be that of maturation; the arising of a need would be there before that which will fill it. It is not a positive being, but an interrogative being which defines life. . . From the moment when the animal swims, there will be life, a theater, on the condition that nothing interrupts this adhesion of the multiple. It is a dimension that will give meaning to its surroundings.51

Life creates needs, like hollows, which are then (ful-)filled by developmental exchange with the environment. Every need, every hollow, creates an opening that in turn adds a new possibility or reality to whatever is given in a behavior—or in an image.52 An organism (or a film) does not predetermine the function of the parts, as a teleological principle, but rather has to be understood as a project that outlines possible futures.

An understanding of the activity of life as outlining possible futures returns us not only to Bergson’s notion of duration, but also to Bazin’s discussion of film and Bergson. In Bazin’s 1956 essay on Henri-Georges Clouzot’s The Mystery of Picasso (a film that, incidentally, Merleau-Ponty also references in his lectures on the axolotl, Bergson, and time), Bazin links the evolution of cinema and painting to an ontology that encompasses both media, focusing on their inherent temporalities.53 The Mystery of Picasso is a film, Bazin writes, that does not ‘explain’ Picasso, but rather ‘shows’ him, in a description or exhibition that benefits from the translation of one medium, painting, onto another, film. Clouzot filmed Picasso in the process of painting; however, rather than depicting Picasso painting, the film screen is, with the exception of a few black-and-white interludes of conversation with Picasso, coincident with the canvas. This canvas, however, is transparent and filmed from behind, so that what we see are the lines and dots produced by Picasso’s pen or brush touching the canvas, without seeing the utensil or Picasso’s hand themselves. As a consequence of this visual strategy, what emerges from the film is not only the ‘creative evolution’ of a painting, but creative evolution as the temporal condition not only of painting and cinema, but life in general. For Bazin, this film thus brings

51 Ibid., 155-56.
52 Ibid., 151.
53 See ibid., 154: ‘Let’s take as an example the film on Picasso, or the one on Matisse. In the first case, we do not see the hand of the artist, so the effect of the miracle is quite superfluous because even without it, there is a miraculous character: there is a double impression, the impression of the unforeseeability of touch and an impression of logic.’
out one of cinema’s basic properties: to express duration as an ontological condition of life.

The temporal character of painting had already served Bergson as a model for the temporality of life:

The finished portrait is explained by the features of the model, by the nature of the artist, by the colors spread out on the palette; but, even with the knowledge of what explains it, no one, not even the artist, could have foreseen exactly what the portrait would be, for to predict it would have been to produce it before it was produced—an absurd hypothesis which is its own refutation. Even so with regard to the moments of our life, of which we are the artisans. Each of them is a kind of creation. And just as the talent of the painter is formed or deformed—in any case, is modified—under the very influence of the work he produces, so each of our states, at the moment of its issue, modifies our personality, being indeed the new form that we are just assuming.  

The finished artwork can be explained by its constitutive elements *a posteriori*; however, we have grasped nothing of its creation if we do not include the process of the painting’s becoming. Likewise, Bazin takes the ‘unpredictability’ of the next stroke due to Clouzot’s *mise en scène* (and to Picasso’s mode of painting)—that is, the ‘suspense’ of the film—as an index for two things. First, this unpredictability unites painting, film, and spectator in a temporality in which nothing is pre-determined, since every new brushstroke grows out of a whole which is in a constant state of becoming; ‘[e]ach of Picasso’s strokes is a creation that leads to further creation, not as a cause leads to an effect, but as one living thing engenders another […] What Clouzot at last reveals is the painting itself, i.e., a work that exists in time, that has its own duration, its own life.’ As in Merleau-Ponty’s description of the axolotl—and Bazin’s own image of the riverbed—each brushstroke appearing on the screen is a question with several possible answers, the formation of a problem to which there are a number of solutions, the definition of a hollow that can be filled in various ways.

Out of this open path of the painting’s creation, there follows a second point. Bazin also explains that this unpredictability ‘implies the inexplicability of the compound—in this case the composition—by the simple

55 Bazin, ‘A Bergsonian Film’, 212.
isolation of its elements’. He emphasizes the organic nature of the work, for which mechanical explanations of cause and effect are not sufficient and in which the whole is always of a different nature than the sum of its parts. By adding a stroke, the whole is changed and a new set of possible futures opens up. In ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence’, Merleau-Ponty takes up this point around the same time in a reference to François Campaux’s film *Henri Matisse* from 1946:

> There are two sides to the act of painting: the spot or line of color put on a point of the canvas, and its effect on the whole, which is incommensurable with it, since it is almost nothing yet suffices to change a portrait or a landscape [...] [Matisse] did not have in his mind’s eye all the gestures possible, and in making his choice he did not have to eliminate all but one. It is slow motion which enumerates the possibilities. Matisse, set within a man’s time and vision, looked at the still open whole of his work in progress and brought his brush toward the line which called for it in order that the painting might finally be that which it was in the process of becoming.57

The film’s slow motion made visible the possibilities, the freedom of choice, that preceded the actual stroke—the brush is seen in ‘a solemn and expanding time—the imminence of a world’s time’—as it tries ‘ten possible movements, dance[s] in front of the canvas, brush[es] it lightly several times, and crash[es] down finally like a lightning stroke upon the one line necessary’.

While Merleau-Ponty also uses a film about painting-as-process to think about the relationship between part and whole in duration (in order to improve our understanding of it with respect to expressive speech), he of course pays less attention to the consequences of his observations for the medium of cinema. Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty is interested in what it is the film reveals about the interaction between Matisse, ‘set within a man’s time and vision’ and equipped with human ‘perception and gesture’, and the painting. He does not conceive of film as having an intrinsic affinity to duration. Yet implicit in his argument is the idea—which he might have derived from an earlier essay by Bazin himself—that in cinematic slow-motion new possibilities appear, new choices become visible, broadening the spectrum of choices humans can see before them. This new wealth of

56 Ibid., 211.
choices, however, does not exceed the choices that are actually available to the human being (Matisse is not able to produce other strokes or paintings in slow-motion), but it brings these choices, which were previously invisible and imperceptible (even though executed by the body), into visibility and consciousness.58

For Bazin, by contrast, film is necessary to link the durational nature of painting to the duration of the spectator, and ‘only film could make us see duration itself’—duration as the creative temporality of becoming, which in *Matisse* became visible in the hand’s half-begun movements and hesitation, and in *The Picasso Mystery* in the suspense of the appearance of lines.59 By means of a co-evolutionary movement similar to that of theater and cinema in the theater essay, film becomes ‘pure’; that is, it comes into its own by means of submitting itself to another art form. *The Picasso Mystery* is (almost entirely) reduced to the temporality of creation, and receives its ‘dramatic’ impulses only from the uncertainty of what the next stroke will bring. The suspense of the next brushstroke, in other words, replaces any dramatic suspense and reduces it to the ‘pure waiting and uncertainty’ that is creation.60 Yet what this combination of painting with film reveals is that artistic creation is, in turn, essentially cinematic in its temporal nature; the spectacle of creation consists in ‘the appearance of free forms in a nascent state’ and thus places this film in a line with the animations of Émile Cohl and Norman McLaren.61

This contingency of free forms in a nascent state, where one form brings the next form into being along an undetermined path—that is, neither a teleological, nor a mechanist, but an organic-evolutionary conception that defies holism by emphasizing an openness to external impulses—also lies at the base of Bazin’s love of Italian neorealism. Indeed, love is a term he frequently uses to describe the treatment of people, things, and events in neorealist films, especially those of De Sica. ‘Love’ for Bazin is not a disavowal of analytic treatment, but itself a kind of critical category that describes an attitude that pervades most of Bazin’s concepts discussed in

58 In a recent essay, Dudley Andrew also connects Bazin’s texts on cinema and painting to Merleau-Ponty, as well as to André Malraux, and discusses the intellectual and biographical connection between their writings. Bazin wrote about *Matisse* in a 1948 essay in *Esprit* entitled ‘An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation’ (translated in Bazin, ‘An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation’). See Andrew, ‘Malraux, Bazin, and the Gesture of Picasso’, especially 159-65.


60 Ibid., 214.

61 Ibid., 214.
this chapter. In ‘Umberto D: A Great Work’, Bazin writes: ‘De Sica is one of those directors [...] whose entire talent derives from the love they have for their subject, from their ultimate understanding of it. The mise-en-scène seems to take shape after the fashion of a natural form in living matter.’ De Sica’s love for his subject, according to Bazin, allows him to create according to organic laws rather than logical laws that operate external to matter. Love, then, is the comprehensive sense of potential of a creature. As a general attitude, it constitutes the ethical impetus that follows from the aesthetic and scientific understandings of organic development outlined in this chapter.

The organic-environmental principles which for Bazin parallel the development of the narrative in a film such as Umberto D. connect his film theory to philosophers and theorists of biology of the time, yet in a way that emphasizes their indebtedness to Bergson. In Creative Evolution, Bergson presented an image that illustrates the narrative development of Umberto D. as much as the axolotl’s ‘interrogative being’. For Bergson, organization ‘works from the centre to the periphery’, whereas in manufacturing, ‘[t]he parts are arranged, so to speak, around the action as an ideal centre’, working from the periphery to the center. We can infer the working of organization only negatively, a fact Bergson seeks to illustrate with the image of an invisible hand passing through iron filings:

[T]here has been merely one indivisible act, that of the hand passing through the filings: the inexhaustible detail of movement of the grains, as well as the order of their final arrangement, expresses negatively, in a way, this undivided movement, being the unitary form of a resistance, and not a synthesis of positive elementary actions.

Similarly, the ‘order of the final arrangement’ of the gestures, incidents, and single objects in Umberto D. produces a unity without losing the contingent character of the individual parts, an idea for which Bazin also mobilizes the analogy of iron filings: ‘If [these elements] are set in order with an undeniable clarity on the spectrum of social tragedy, it is after the manner of the particles of iron filings on the spectrum of a magnet—that is to say, individually; but the result of this art in which nothing is necessary, where nothing has lost the fortuitous character of chance, is in effect to be doubly

63 Bergson, Creative Evolution, 92.
64 Ibid., 94.
convincing and conclusive.65 Just as we cannot see the hand that produces a certain arrangement of filings in Bergson’s image, social tragedy is not depicted directly in *Umberto D.* by a chain of dramatic actions whose direct cause is social misery.

‘Organic’ does not mean that Bazin understands the film as a closed-off, holistic organism composed of different organs. *Umberto D.* is by no means composed like a traditional organism—it is not a closed dramatic narrative, entitled ‘social tragedy’, that consists of a chain of dramatic actions which can be explained by, for example, the inequities of post-war society. Rather, the film consists of little units, contingent events such as Umberto’s cold, the ants in the kitchen, and the maid’s pregnancy. Every element is independent, or accidental, and at the same time partakes of a whole that cannot subsume the parts. The ‘natural form in living matter’, the phrase Bazin uses to describe *Umberto D.*, is thus like Merleau-Ponty’s axolotl, which develops the neck, leg and tail movements that constitute its behavior, yet this behavior is not determined by the organism’s development. Rather, the successive acquisition of swimming movements is concomitant with the rhythm of its maturation.

A better understanding of the Bergsonian discourse on organic evolution that informed Bazin’s view of cinema thus also helps us understand what, for him, it is that makes *Umberto D.* a realist film, an example of ‘a truly realist cinema of time […]. a cinema of “duration”’.66 In both essays on *Umberto D.*, Bazin emphasizes the contrast between the natural genesis of the events depicted in the film and the subordination of filmed material to abstract, logical principles that one finds in conventional dramatic films. Following Bergson’s division between an (intellectual) intuition that is able to grasp duration, and a purely intellectual approach that proceeds logically and can only cut out states in matter, Bazin ascribes to De Sica a method of filming that lets duration and organic, contingent evolution emerge from what is seen. ‘De Sica and Zavattini attempt to divide the event up into still smaller events and these into events smaller still, to the extreme limits of our capacity to perceive them in time’, rather than reconstructing ‘the event according to an artificial and abstract duration: dramatic duration’.67 Where others deal with events as basic dramatic units and isolated happenstances, De Sica breaks up the action into a stream of small activities that are played out in ‘real time’, which transforms them from events to lived experiences.

66 Ibid., 76.
67 Ibid., 81, 65.
Of course, these experiential units are carefully arranged—that is why Bazin changes Bergson’s image of randomly displaced iron filings into a graphic arrangement that indicates the force field of the magnet. But it is the iron filings we see, from which the tragedy can be inferred negatively. In this consists the ‘marvelous aesthetic paradox of this film’: ‘that it has the relentless quality of tragedy while nothing happens in it except by chance.’

Post-Apocalyptic Life: Kracauer’s Theory of Film

Like Bazin’s work, Kracauer’s Theory of Film provides an example of a theory that correlates film and life to explicate film’s aesthetic potential (and it even hints at possible redefinitions of life). Yet while Bazin was firmly situated within the leftist Parisian cultural intelligentsia, which, for the most part, shared with him the broader concept of a film culture that could do its part to facilitate a post-war reconstruction of human, social and cultural values, Kracauer’s background is much more disparate, vagrant and eclectic. His most famous writings fall into a period—the late 1920s—in which he was a central figure in Weimar culture, as a journalist for the important Frankfurter Zeitung. By contrast, the belated Theory of Film, which was published in 1960 but which Kracauer began to outline during the 1940s in Marseille, has the personal and historical experience of war atrocities, mass annihilation, and life-threatening exile in France and eventual emigration to the US written into it.

A highly-differentiated conception of life is central to both Bazin’s and Kracauer’s theories of film; both base cinema’s affinity for vitalist notions of life in its medium-specific combination of autonomous movement and an indexical image. This is true for Theory of Film to an even greater degree than for Bazin’s essays, not least because the former presents a more or less comprehensive and coherent theory that adopts ‘the flow of life’ as one of the medium’s basic elements. Yet for Kracauer, this emphasis on life came after decades of writing about film in a mode in which such notions of life, if they came up at all, were viewed extremely critically. In this section, I begin by discussing briefly the conception of life as it occurs in Theory of Film. I then turn to Kracauer’s early work, especially his essay on photography, to be able to get a better understanding of Kracauer’s intellectual and theoretical development: whence did this notion of life come; did it take the place of another critical constellation; and what do

68 Ibid., 68.
the differences between his early work and *Theory of Film* tell us about the latter’s ‘disposition’ and situatedness in a particular historical moment? As I will note in that part of the chapter, Kracauer’s earliest writings were not about film, but about (among other topics) vitalism and life-philosophy, and he turned to the analysis of film as part of a project begun there. Though some commentators have sought to separate off these early writings from Kracauer’s corpus, his late text *Theory of Film* establishes the continuity of key concepts, including life, throughout his work.

The writings of early commentators on the film experience that I cited in the introduction had already illustrated the use of the concept of life to account for the affective impact of a moving image. Kracauer’s *Theory of Film* provides a much more comprehensive elaboration of the relationship between film and life as an aesthetic concept. He ascribes to both photography and film an affinity for unstaged reality, for the fortuitous, for endlessness, and for the indeterminate. Additionally, film, as a consequence of its capacity for movement and temporality, has an affinity for ‘the flow of life’—the latter, in fact, is constitutive of the medium. Life, for Kracauer, ‘suggests itself as alternate expression’ for physical reality or nature.  

He describes the medium-specific affinity for life as flow:

[C]inematic films evoke a reality more inclusive than the one they actually picture. They point beyond the physical world to the extent that the shots or combinations of shots from which they are built carry multiple meanings. Due to the continuous influx of the psychophysical correspondences thus aroused, they suggest a reality which may fittingly be called ‘life.’ This term as used here denotes a kind of life which is still intimately connected, as if by an umbilical cord, with the material phenomena from which its emotional and intellectual contents emerge.

According to Kracauer, ‘life’ in film is the result of the open character of the cinematic image (as a result of movement, off-screen space, and montage). This open character creates a peculiar relationship between the physical, emotional, and intellectual contents of a film and the material by means of which they were achieved—whether this material base is a human, an animal, a landscape, or an inanimate object. Film images are capable of stirring up matter that has settled both temporally and spatially around that which they depict. On the basis of this capacity, cinema can make expressive

70  Ibid., 71.
use of the ‘psychophysical correspondences’ of material objects (as well as of psychological events, as he explains later in the same section), that is, of the ‘fringe of meanings’ that surrounds them. These correspondences run through the body of the spectator, so that not only cinematic image and material phenomena are connected ‘as if by an umbilical cord’, but the spectator is also part of this connection.

In Kracauer’s adaptation of vitalist ideas to the modern, technical medium of cinema, the notion of life comes to stand in for at once an embodied connection with and an estrangement from the world on the screen, an uncanny combination of familiarity and unfamiliarity. What becomes visible and capable of being experienced in cinema is (a) life that is not our own, that is not even human, and that is also not necessarily organic or holistic. Yet we feel ourselves responding ‘with skin and hair’; that is, existentially. Kracauer’s text thus provides an example of a film theory that defines film’s aesthetic potential by means of a vitalist notion of life, yet binds this notion to the properties of the revealing technological apparatus rather than locating it in nature.

In her introduction to Theory of Film—which introduces the historical genesis of the book, the historical and cultural context, and Kracauer’s theoretical concerns across the span of his work—Miriam Hansen successfully defends Theory of Film against the charge of being simply a belated case of a somewhat naïve realism. Instead, she chisels out its qualities as ‘a theory of a particular type of film experience, and of cinema as the aesthetic matrix of a particular historical experience’. She traces the historical dimensions of Theory of Film by linking its structure and main claims to both Kracauer’s first drafts, sketched in exile in Marseille in 1940/41, and his Weimar writings, and she correlates the main shift from Kracauer’s earlier to his later writings with the historical context of each. As a consequence, she explains, the view of history in Theory of Film ‘no longer ticks to the countdown of a self-destructing modernity but keeps time with an “open-ended limitless world,” the proverbial “flow of life.”’ However, Hansen’s qualifier ‘proverbial’ also seems to signal a certain discomfort with Kracauer’s suspiciously vitalist and holistic vocabulary. While my reading of Kracauer is deeply indebted to Hansen’s work, I take Kracauer’s references head-on as more or less covert indications of his affiliation with life-philosophical thought. Kracauer’s early work echoes his training with the philosopher of life and sociologist Georg Simmel, and his familiarity

71 Ibid., 68.
with Nietzsche, Bergson, and Dilthey. *Theory of Film*, I argue, revisits this philosophy of life, which has become much less of an enemy now that the political stakes of the debate have changed, and refines the definition of life, duration, and organic development.

For a number of key concepts and discussions in *Theory of Film*, vitalist ideas of life, of organicity and time (memory and history) are quite important, and they also take center stage in many of Kracauer’s essays from the early 1920s on life-philosophy, as well as in his philosophically and sociologically inflected essays from that time that seek to contribute to a political, social, and existential image of the present. These essays, which predate, but also establish the conditions for, Kracauer’s interest in the analysis of film, spell out Kracauer’s concern about the relationship between ‘Realität’ and ‘Wirklichkeit’: that is, between what we may translate as ‘existential reality’—that which appears to us, surrounds us and determines our social, political existence—and ‘essential reality’, that which lies behind appearances, which itself is unattainable, yet should be striven for. These essays address his account of the first decades of the twentieth century and the role of the first world war: ‘vital’ tendencies to break up the ossified structures of nineteenth-century monarchical and patriarchal bourgeois culture, a welcome uprising, turned, following the war, into constructive attempts to create new forms of social existence to counter the reality of rationalism and capitalism. Yet they also reveal how, as Kracauer discusses vitalism with his characteristic dialectical stylistics of literal turns of phrase, a deep concern with what constitutes life—a concern he pursues mostly via Simmel’s work (and Bergson’s via Simmel’s)—informs his arguments.

Kracauer seems to have been deeply impressed by Simmel’s analysis of the basic conflict of life, which Kracauer paraphrases as follows: ‘Life is after all always more than life, it wrenches itself free of itself and encounters itself as a sharply defined form. It is simultaneously the stream and the firm shore; it yields to the creations that have come from its own womb, and in turn liberates itself from their power.’ These expressive forms that are created by life and as forms, oppose it, are the material we

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73 While *Realität* and *Wirklichkeit* are often used synonymously, some philosophers have employed the terms to capture different aspects of reality. Edmund Husserl, in *Ideas*, refers to empirical reality as ‘Realität’, while ‘Wirklichkeit’ seems to be more general and inclusive (the reality of everything in the universe, whether empirically verifiable/perceptible or not), such that he also speaks of ‘realen und idealen Wirklichkeiten’ (§ 135). See Index, ‘Reality’, n.p., in Husserl, *Ideas*.

can read and interpret to attain a sense of the ground, the essential reality. Kracauer, however, criticizes Simmel and Bergson for confusing the flow of life with the absolute, with what for Kracauer himself is an unattainable Wirklichkeit. He does so in numerous essays, from ‘Those Who Wait’ to ‘Georg Simmel’ to ‘Philosophy of the Work’. In his essay ‘Those Who Wait’ from 1921, for example, Kracauer had criticized vitalist philosophy for its indifference:

‘[L]ife’ as the last absolute—life, which releases from its womb ideas and forms that subjugate life for a length of time but that are only to be in turn themselves devoured by life. But this doctrine recognized life-transcending norms and values only for the time being, so to speak, and destroyed the absolute in the very act of making the ebb and flow that is indifferent to value—in other words, the process of life—into an absolute.75

Kracauer, then, diagnoses an open, unresolved contradiction that differs from that which Simmel defines in his life-philosophy. For Simmel, life as flow and the forms (Gestalten) life creates (artistic, social, cultural, political) are in irresolvable conflict, since the latter are simultaneously based in life and oppose life, but to be true—wirklich—need to resolve back into life. For Kracauer, by contrast, an alienation from life has already taken place, such that the forms themselves do not refer back to an essentially real life, but rather to an unreal—unwirklich—reality. ‘As unreal (unwirklich) as today’s realities (Realitäten) may be, they exist nevertheless and continue to grow rampant.’ After the ‘beautiful’ early twentieth-century phase of a ‘naive-vital resistance’ against ossified forms that understood the flow of life as ‘Wirklichkeit’, the post-war phase of a ‘will toward formation’ (Wille zur Gestaltung), by aiming at the deeper sense, order and coherence Wirklichkeit promises, foregoes the ‘chaotic phenomena’ of current realities and neglects to grapple with them.76

Kracauer thus continues to subscribe to Simmel’s and Bergson’s philosophy of the essential movement and formative force of life, but cautions against absolutizing the flow of life and turning it into a final cause. Kracauer’s vitalism is intimately tied up with meaning and history, much like the work of Wilhelm Dilthey. In ‘Philosophy of the Work’, he issues another timely warning about Bergsonian vitalism: ‘Bergson’s panvitalism has quite

a bit in common with the indifference to values and the glorification of an aimlessly flowing energy on the part of the spirit of high capitalism.\footnote{Kracauer, ‘Philosophie des Werks’, 92 (translation mine).} The Kracauerian subject needs to sustain the tension between life-as-flow and a commitment to form, historical time, and value, without lapsing into either meaningless flow or premature form.

It is against the background of this modified vitalist position that we can better understand the surprising praise Kracauer has for vitalist biologist and philosopher Hans Driesch.\footnote{See also the discussion of Driesch in the Introduction.} In several reviews from 1925, Kracauer explains Driesch’s comprehensive philosophical works that were published a few years previously, namely Philosophy of the Organic (Philosophie des Organischen, 1921), Theory of Order (Ordnungslehre, 1923), and Theory of Reality (Wirklichkeitslehre, 1922). These reviews followed earlier positive references to Driesch that Kracauer included in other essays from the 1920s. Hans Driesch was a reputable biologist in the early 1900s, the student of Ernst Haeckel and August Weismann, and became famous for his experiments on sea urchin and polyp embryos at the Zoological Station in Naples. The organisms developed into complete animals even if part of the embryo was removed, a result that led Driesch to deduct the existence of a causality different from mechanic causality, namely, a unifying causality specific to life, which Driesch termed, following Aristotle, entelechy. Entelechy suspends the endless possible ways in which a given organism could develop, and then, by relaxing its suspension in a certain way, transforms these possibilities of homogenous matter into specific realities in heterogeneous matter.\footnote{See Driesch, The History and Theory of Vitalism, 203.} His talks and publications made Driesch the most prominent proponent of a ‘neo-vitalism’ and won him a chair in natural theology at the University of Aberdeen in 1906. Yet the relatively meager experimental foundation upon which Driesch founded his theory also illustrated—and Driesch admitted as much—that vitalists can only show that there is something that exceeds mechanical causality, but they cannot directly prove what, precisely, it is that distinguishes life from non-living matter. Following these experiments and his turn to vitalism, Driesch changed academic faculties and became professor of philosophy, first in Cologne and subsequently in Leipzig. His lifelong outspoken commitment to pacifism, democracy, and universal human rights explains his premature retirement enforced by the National Socialist party in 1933.
When Kracauer published his texts on Driesch in the early 1920s, Driesch had already been largely discredited as a biologist, and his main scientific ideas, such as the concept of entelechy, seemed ridiculous in the light of more recent discoveries in embryology and morphology. Driesch’s philosophical framework was met with skepticism from many contemporaries, and Driesch’s dabbling in parapsychology did not help the matter, either. Hence it is surprising and daring that Kracauer published a long review of Driesch’s work, especially one written in the context of the philosophical congress about which Kracauer had little positive to say. Kracauer emphasizes Driesch’s difference from other philosophers, arguing that Driesch is basically an extraterritorial philosopher located outside of any school; he is a biologist turning to philosophy, a position that affords Driesch ‘unbiased-ness and intellectual integrity’. This positionality allowed Driesch to think beyond the spiritual situation of the present and incorporate significant aspects of the essential reality of human existence. Driesch’s philosophy did so, Kracauer says, by developing a system which ‘stretches from zoology to theology, from the sea urchin to god’. He contends that

[i]n his endeavors to explain the concept of life, which he raised into independence, with flawless logic, Driesch easily could have followed in the footsteps of Bergson or Simmel and sunk life itself into the foundation of being. He is prevented from this revealing mistake—a mistake, however, which also opens up for the latter two thinkers some issues disregarded by Driesch—not so much because of his logical scrupulous-ness but rather because of the concreteness (Gegenständlichkeit) of his gaze and his belief in an overarching order and wholeness which enfolds both the living and the non-living.80

In Driesch, Kracauer finds the biological equivalent of his own vitalism, which likewise seeks to connect a vitalist understanding of life to something larger that, even though it maybe unreachable, nevertheless turns life into a part of a whole, rather than the foundation of being and the source of meaning.

Kracauer argues that, in contrast to the irrational position of life-philosophy (Simmel and Bergson), Driesch did not understand reason to be a product of a self-sufficient life. Instead, according to Kracauer, he insisted on the postulation of a wholeness in which life has its place, though human reason is not able to decipher the archetypal configuration of a ‘spiritual

reality which enters into matter and then frees itself from it again.\textsuperscript{81} For Kracauer, inherent in Driesch’s philosophy is an existential openness to the independent character and inherent essence of objects that is an antidote to philosophical idealism and moves Driesch closer to phenomenologists such as Husserl and Max Scheler. Yet, in contrast to the latter, Driesch insists on the inaccessibility for humans of the final truth; instead of truth claims, he posits final questions.

There is no doubt that Kracauer was in a sense ventriloquizing Driesch to formulate his own philosophy. The same arguments returned when, shortly after this essay, in a review of the German Congress of Philosophy in 1925, Kracauer specified his critique of phenomenology, which he nevertheless saw as the only worthwhile philosophical endeavor, especially when counterposed to the then-prominent Idealist and neo-Kantian movements. Kracauer’s primary critique of Husserl’s phenomenology is that it failed truly to allow concrete phenomena to speak for themselves; that is, to constitute a reality [\textit{Wirklichkeit}] or an essence [\textit{Wesen}] on their own accord, in their own right, beyond human capacities for comprehension or understanding. While Kracauer shares with Husserlian phenomenology the belief that one needs to proceed from the bottom upward, that is, from concrete phenomena to higher truths, he is also convinced of the existence of a higher truth outside ourselves, beyond human grasp, one we may participate in, without complete understanding or willful influence upon it. This belief of Kracauer’s lies at the base of his earlier writings, such as his treatise on the detective novel. This is the cultural-social, even moral dimension one often finds in Kracauer’s writings: there is a virtue to abandoning oneself to the concrete phenomena, in particular those on the outskirts and in the midst of popular culture. Doing so is not only a commitment to everyday life and to reality, but it is also a spiritual, a philosophical exercise, namely the only chance to glimpse a few pieces here and there of a larger truth, and to feel meaning—to feel human, even—in the tension toward these strewn-about pieces (\textit{Versprengsel}).

In the early- to mid-1920s, Kracauer discovered cinema as a privileged place in which to engage with the concrete phenomena of reality, in the hopes of glancing the \textit{Wirklichkeit} behind it. Kracauer hailed film, as Hansen put it, ‘as the perfect medium for a fallen world, an at once sensory and reflexive discourse uniquely suited to capturing the experience of a disintegrating world, a “life deprived of substance.”\textsuperscript{82} There is a direct

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 259.
\textsuperscript{82} Hansen, \textit{Cinema and Experience}, 5.
relation between the psycho-physical correspondences of which Kracauer speaks in *Theory of Film*, and the tension of ‘Those Who Wait’, or the tension (different from suspense) of the attentive reader of detective novels in *The Detective Novel*. In his ‘Photography’ essay from 1927, Kracauer applied his critical perspective on modernity most thoroughly to visual media, from illustrated magazines to photographs to film. For Hansen, the essay entwines a ‘lapsarian critique of modernity; phenomenological description of quotidian and ephemeral phenomena impelled by a gnostic-modernist materialism; avant-garde iconoclasm; and critique of ideology that resonates with the more immanent political approach his writings take from the mid-1920s on’. Her analysis attempts to chisel out the unique nexus of these strands in this text and with respect to Kracauer’s theoretical stance and methodology more generally. In doing so, she also has a vested interest in marking the difference between Kracauer and life-philosophy/vitalism. My understanding of the essay has a slightly different emphasis, since I read the essay as a hinge between the philosophical positions I outlined above and Kracauer’s theory of film, and I seek to restore a complexity and valuation to Kracauer’s life-philosophical roots that expands upon the ‘lapsarian layer of his earlier writings’ that Hansen describes, and that will also help us understand some of his positions in *Theory of Film*.84

Though Kracauer’s essay ‘Photography’, in which he defines the relationship between photography, memory and history (and thus also the relationship between organic temporality and photographic spatiality), is not ostensibly about ‘life’, it nevertheless introduces the main aspects of his theory of the spatiotemporality of the photographic—and, by extension, cinematic—image and its relationship to organic, lived time, space, and meaning-making. The development of Kracauer’s thought from ‘Photography’ to *Theory of Film* especially elucidates the extent to which the latter text is indebted to both an earlier life-philosophical tradition and a more contemporary post-war discourse on life. Kracauer’s essay on photography partakes in the ideology-critical work of his more programmatic essays, such as ‘Cult of Distraction’, ‘The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies’, or ‘The Mass Ornament’, but it simultaneously hints at the redemptive potential inherent in mass media that might enable a reformulation of the relationship between humans and technology.

The essay on ‘Photography’ proposes that there are three ways of archiving, retaining, and collecting the past, each with its own tendencies for

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83 Ibid., 27.
84 Ibid., 4.
investing their archives with meaning. These are photography, historicism, and memory—a technological invention, an intellectual endeavor, and a biological-physiological means. In contrast to historicism and photography, personal memory (and, along with it, an ‘organic’ history dependent upon memory-images) retains what is given only insofar as it has a larger meaning for the individual. Memory thus provides a counter-procedure to the other two means, photography and historicism, which are oriented toward an exhaustive temporal and spatial completeness; while photography and historicism ‘[grasp] what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum’, memory images ‘retain what is given only insofar as it has significance’.85 In contrast to the meaningful coherence of memory-images, which condense into a history of a life, the photograph presents the trash of history, the incoherent residues of meaning, in an arbitrary spatial configuration that threatens the integrity of the human individual. However, historicist and photographic archives also bear—precisely because of the arbitrariness, fragmentation, and disconnectedness of their elements—an unprecedented possibility for a confrontation with reality: ‘the images of the stock of nature disintegrated into its elements are offered up to consciousness to deal with as it pleases’. Photography and film therefore enable an active, playful engagement with historical configurations that have lost their natural givenness, so that in experimental, dream-like, and necessarily provisional new rearrangements, we might catch a glimpse of ‘the right order of the inventory of nature’.86

Kracauer’s argument is organized by what he describes as a conflicted relationship between photography and memory, a conflict illustrated by two very different photographs. The first photograph shows a young film diva and is printed on the cover of an illustrated magazine. All of the details, including her fashionable hallmark hairstyle and even her individual eyelashes, ‘are in their proper place—a flawless appearance’.87 The second photograph shows another 24-year-old girl, but in this case, it is a sixty-year-old photograph; the woman in the photograph has since died, and those who now behold the photograph are her grandchildren. Kracauer claims that two elements come into play when one beholds a portrait photograph, namely, recognition on the basis of memory and the

86 Ibid., 62.
87 A more precise translation would be: all details ‘have their right place in space, an appearance without gaps’. See Kracauer, ‘Die Photographie’, 21. Kracauer’s terms Raum (‘space’) and Lückenlosigkeit (‘gaplessness’) emphasize that photography establishes a spatial continuum that makes everything equal.
actual visual impression. In the case of the diva’s cover picture, these two elements reinforce one another seamlessly. However, Kracauer suggests that when the grandchildren of the second woman behold her portrait as a young woman, these two elements fall apart into seeming contradiction. While the grandchildren are told that the photograph shows the grandmother, they cannot identify her and reconcile the image with their own sparse memories of her. The photograph thus has an arbitrary aspect to it, and it cannot establish a continuum with either the real grandmother or the presence of the grandchildren. As a consequence of the disjunction between memory-image and photographic image, the grandchildren can only react to the portrait with uncomfortable laughter, since what they are witnessing at the breaking-point of memory, in the photograph whose meaning they cannot encompass, is a temporality located outside of them as well; in other words, a relentless, objective temporality that is not embodied, and that does not result in the accumulation of meaning.

The photograph of the grandmother thus presents an instance of a non-human technology that exceeds human capacities to retain, recollect, and invest with meaning; as such, it makes visible (or rather: palpable, with a ‘shudder’) an order of non-organic temporality that invests our perception with the fact of death. (For Kracauer, such an investment of our perception with death is only possible from the standpoint of a time external to human temporality, a point to which I will return with respect to Theory of Film).88 The photograph does not incorporate time into its representation, but rather only space. However, it is itself a (non-human) ‘representation of time’ that subjects to its spatial continuum whatever it captures, without distinguishing between humans, landscapes, or things:

A shudder runs through the viewer of old photographs. For they make visible not the knowledge of the original but the spatial configuration of a moment; what appears in the photograph is not the person but the sum of what can be subtracted from him or her. The photograph annihilates the person by portraying him or her, and were the person and portrayal to converge, the person would cease to exist.89

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88 The reading of the photograph of the diva, by contrast—a picture recently taken—is still reinforced by, and reinforcing, our memory of her (on the film screen), and it is in this dialectical relationship between these two orders of (re)cognition that the photography reveals the diva’s life.

So long as a living memory can cling to the photographed person, this memory can provide a historical context that reestablishes a human order and lifts the person who has been photographed from the picture's contingent spatial arrangement.\textsuperscript{90} Yet as soon as no living memory remains to invest the photograph in this way, the arbitrary elements of the photograph take over and begin their surrealist \textit{‘danse macabre’}.\textsuperscript{91} Photography becomes quite literally a medium in which residue, trash, is able to take on life in fantastic configurations: the crinoline of the grandmother becomes, in Kracauer’s description, a dancing zombie. A film that serves most wonderfully as an illustration of Kracauer’s claim that film is affiliated with magic, trash, and death is Ladislas Starevich’s \textit{The Mascot} (1933), a puppet animation created on the precipice of fascism, in which animated stuffed animals, dolls, and toy soldiers die in the gutters of the (real-life) streets of Paris, while at night, a devil’s ball reanimates the dead to engage in a murderous \textit{danse macabre}, including figures composed of trash paper and fish skeletons that emerge from trash cans and magically recompose themselves.

In Kracauer’s essay, memory thus takes on the role of the natural, anthropocentric temporal organization of meaning. The images created by memory are organized centripetally around the individual, and the arrangement of remembered scenes is determined by the meaning they have for the person remembering. They are retained ‘[i]m Hinblick auf das für ihn Gemeinte’: that is, with respect to that which is meant for the person, or with regard to the person.\textsuperscript{92} Even though we are at the center of meaning, the ordering principle of memory-images is inaccessible to us: the moment the principles of memory-selection became transparent to us, we would completely grasp ourselves. Just as photography finds its temporal equivalent in historicism—that is, the attempt at a complete account of history—memory finds its temporal equivalent in a human being’s personal history. Kracauer contends that the more a society is

\textsuperscript{90} Where Kracauer employs an ideological reading of photography’s contingent spatial continuum, Benjamin jumps directly to the complicated temporal implications of photography’s ‘representation of time’. Kracauer emphasized the uncanny aspect of the photographed person being devoured—‘annihilated’—by the environment of a moment past; an ‘unredeemed’, ‘ghost-like reality’. For Benjamin, by contrast, inanimate objects never take on such a threatening visage (and he never recedes as deeply into the shade of things as Kracauer). Rather, throughout his discussion of photographs, Benjamin undertakes detective work in order to unearth the relationship between the person and his or her environment. Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art’, 117.

\textsuperscript{91} In his Marseille notebooks, \textit{Danse Macabre} was one possible title Kracauer gave to his planned last chapter on Eisenstein’s \textit{Death Day} and some ‘ultimate conclusions’ of the book as a whole. See Hansen, ‘Introduction’, xxiv.

\textsuperscript{92} Kracauer, ‘Die Photographie’, 25.
governed by reason and liberated from the constraints of nature, the more memory-images reveal a higher truth. Complete transparency, however, is only possible in a gnostic ‘last image’. This last image is composed of memories with a truth content, which an individual was able to achieve as insights (Erkenntnisse) that liberated this individual from natural compulsions and the life of the drives. This last image constitutes a person’s actual history, which Kracauer compares to a monogram that contains only fragments of a person’s physical and psychological existence, namely those fragments that truly matter. However, as Kracauer had already established in his earlier writings, such as his treatise on the detective novel or his essay ‘Those Who Wait’, in which he claimed that contemporary man lives in a superficial, atomized, and in this sense, photographic space, he believed that modern human beings were currently quite far from a society in which the state of nature and reason would allow memory-images and artworks to stitch an organic ornament that would reflect human values. The idea of organic and holistic unity, community, and meaningfulness in the Weimar Republic was utopian, and the desire for it was dangerous, since it would only cover over the rational, atomized conditions of modernity.

Yet the photographic and historiographic principle of contingent inventorying also allowed for a different, albeit risky, possibility for cognition, or what Kracauer termed the ‘go-for-broke game of history’. He traces the history of images, from symbols to allegories, as one of an increasing separation of consciousness and nature: ‘[t]he more decisively consciousness frees itself from imprisonment in nature [Naturbefangenheit] in the course of the historical process, the more purely does its natural foundation present itself to consciousness.’93 With the advent of photography, ‘mere nature’, completely disconnected from human consciousness, finally becomes visible—the same nature that ‘flourishes in the reality of the society produced by this capitalist mode of production’.94 The severed tie between nature and consciousness provides both a danger and an opportunity, and this is the ‘go-for-broke game’ of history as it plays out in photography and film: either nature will overcome consciousness or consciousness will overcome nature, depending on whether society decides to

93 Ibid., 36 (translation mine). Naturbefangenheit (‘capture by nature’) is an important concept that Kracauer derives from Hegel’s aesthetics; it is also central to Adorno and Horkheimer. See, for example, Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I, 75: ‘By dissolving this unity [with nature] for man, art lifts him with gentle hands out of and above imprisonment in nature.’

confront the contingency, alienation, and deathliness in photographic images head-on, playing with them as real possibilities, or whether it decides to hide itself in its own ‘photographability’, becoming a photograph itself in order to try to evade temporality, consciousness, memory, and death.

The new constellation of human being, technology, nature, and social reality that film provided led Kracauer (as well as Benjamin) to a particular redefinition of reality. Kracauer had already argued that, in order to grasp our material base, our natural foundation, we need to evacuate the anthropocentric order from our images, so that the ‘warehousing of nature’ enabled by a technology such as photography and cinema could promote the confrontation of consciousness with nature (nature, as Hansen points out, ‘has a ferociously pejorative valence’ in this essay and is the ‘allegorical name for any reality that posits itself as given and immutable’). Thus, writes Kracauer, ‘[j]ust as consciousness finds itself confronting the unabashedly displayed mechanics of industrial society, it also faces, thanks to photographic technology, the reflection of reality that has slipped away from it’. Paralleling Kracauer’s argument that reality can become visible again only through the ability of photographic technology to reveal the profound separation of consciousness from nature, Benjamin, too, sees film’s total—what he calls ‘surgical’—penetration with technology as the prerequisite for making visible the ‘equipment-free aspect of reality’:

In the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of that reality, free of the foreign body of equipment, is the result of a special procedure—namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted photographic device and the assembly of that shot with others of the same kind.

For both Benjamin and Kracauer, reality is not immediately visible, but made visible, as sociopolitical reality with truth-content, in the inscription and disfiguration of the world by means of photographic imagery.

*Theory of Film* picks up several of the thoughts initially outlined in Kracauer’s ‘Photography’ essay, such as the revelatory function of photography (a function that is also important in Bazin’s understanding of photography’s and cinema’s relationship to reality), the importance of the inanimate world, and the affinity of film to the ephemeral and contingent. However,
in contrast to Kracauer’s early texts—and in even greater contrast to his critical-interventionist writings of the late 1920s—politicized notions of reality are subdued in *Theory of Film*. As a consequence, the book seems in many ways to be a tragic text. Yet rather than reading *Theory of Film* as a scholarly de-politicization of his earlier claims, I suggest we read it as a post-apocalyptic text, written after the go-for-broke game has been lost. *Theory of Film* is, in other words, the consequence of a complete severance: the nature that consciousness has failed to penetrate has sat down at the very table that consciousness abandoned.

The cinematic cosmos into which Kracauer is retreating in *Theory of Film* is a kind of mirror of the *Lebenswelt* that has been irretrievably lost for those who have survived the war; the extraterritorial status of these survivors, including Kracauer’s own, is absolute. Melancholy has become an ideal photographic disposition: ‘it favors self-estrangement, which on its part entails identification with all kinds of objects’.98 In contrast to classical phenomenology, for which intentionality provides the only means of access to the external world, Kracauer seeks to confront ‘intention with being’ in order to undercut an anthropocentric, let alone humanist, viewpoint that would impose upon phenomena human measures of action and projection.99 Kracauer aims at more or less the contrary: it is the material, non-human world in film which is supposed, in turn, to reinform the spectator and disintegrate her, her bodily senses, from the bottom up, engaging her ‘physiologically before [s]he is in a position to respond intellectually’.100 Film’s final redemptive potential, and the only chance we have of regaining access to the *Lebenswelt*, consists in this initial physiological overruling of consciousness by film’s address to the body. Continuing the line of thought begun in the photography essay, even involuntary memories—the individual-historical aspect of perception—are excluded from Kracauer’s rendering of the spectator; she is reduced to a physical being in a dream-like or hypnotic state that opens her up to new experiences. For this reason, the ‘formalist tendency’ of filmmakers needs to be kept in check by the ‘realistic tendency’: creative efforts must ‘benefit, in some way or other, the medium’s substantive concern with our visible world’.101

If there is a thesis that remains unchanged from the early essay on photography to *Theory of Film*, it is that of photography’s revelatory function,

98 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 17.
100 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 158.
101 Ibid., 39.
or what Benjamin termed the ‘optical unconscious’: an ‘other’ nature that reveals itself in photography.102 The optical unconscious persists with or without aura, prior to and following the catastrophe. The link the optical maintains with the human being, however, is reduced to a de-politicized, vitalist notion of ‘life’ in Theory of Film. The ‘absolute’, which was so central to Kracauer’s early thought, seems to have lost valence and meaning after the experience of technological warfare and mass annihilation. Theory of Film renounces any interest in ‘life-transcending values’ in favor of a notion of life that encompasses the reality of the material world in its ‘multiple meanings’. This reality, which is understood as equivalent to ‘life’, is ‘still intimately connected, as if by an umbilical cord, with the material phenomena from which its emotional and intellectual contents emerge’.103 Yet it is, like Bergson’s notion of duration, characterized by endlessness—a temporality we might understand not only as trans-individual, but also as post-apocalyptic.

In contrast to the essay on photography, what emerges from Theory of Film’s conception of life and the cinematic image is first, a shift of weight from consciousness, as a critical, rational, subjective, and human force, to a spectator’s ‘natural foundation’; second, the emergence of the idea that cinematic images provide the glasses through which the post-apocalyptic spectator—whose consciousness has proven itself, via the war, to be a

102 Benjamin, ‘Little History of Photography’, 511. In Benjamin’s essay on photography, the optical unconscious designates, as optical unconscious, an image-content that is not human, and as optical unconscious, an image-content that can only be brought to consciousness by ‘a tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject’ (510). The procedure by means of which we as spectators can grasp the optical unconscious is thus similar to the way in which we access what Proust, in reformulating Bergson, calls ‘involuntary memory’—i.e., a memory that is unconscious until it is conjured up by chance through a material object. Benjamin describes the change in the structure of experience as a consequence of urban modernity and a ‘perception conditioned by shock’ (Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, 328). Even though this latter essay features a rather pessimist outlook (it was written in 1939) and does not itself mention the optical unconscious, it can furnish us with a clue about the general role of the concept. If involuntary or pure memory consists of instances that are stored in memory (Gedächtnis rather than Erinnerung) and constitute lived experience (Erfahrung rather than Erlebnis), the optical unconscious could be said to provide a similar archive of experience—yet this would be a non-human experience. In ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, Benjamin develops the notion of the collective conscious and unconscious; film, as collectively perceived medium, can link the two and provide a collective memory device. This is what Benjamin hints at when, in the Artwork essay, he says that ‘thanks to the camera, therefore, the individual perception of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by collective perception’. Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art’, 118.

103 Kracauer, Theory of Film, 71.
(self-)destructive lens—can access the world; and third, a translation of cinematic time into ‘the flow of life’, which is characterized by endlessness and openness. These changes can be attributed to the crisis of life that separates the two texts. Ultimately, it is not so much Kracauer’s conception of the image that has changed, but rather his conception of the historical-political conditions surrounding the reception of these images. The changes thus run through the spectator, and it is not coincidental that his chapter on ‘The Spectator’ contains those claims in Theory of Film that contrast most with Kracauer’s earlier texts. Kracauer cites Michel Dard’s 1928 description of young moviegoers, a description that is itself cinematic in its evocative language: “passive, personal, as little humanistic or humanitarian as possible; diffuse, unorganized, and self-unconscious like an amoeba; deprived of an object or rather, attached to all [of them] like a fog, [and] penetrant like rain.”

This description of passionate film ‘addicts’—which is hardly a description of an ‘other’, but a description that Kracauer tacitly accepts for himself as well—highlights that spectatorship, for Kracauer, is a passive affair, but that it is an ‘active passivity’, as he puts it in History: Last Images Before the Last: an activity of surrendering to the power of film images. Film addicts crave ‘for once to be released from the grip of consciousness, lose their identity in the dark, and let sink in, with their senses ready to absorb them, the images as they happen to follow each other’. This spectator relinquishes control of the self and opens all of his bodily senses to the moving images on the screen. In this surrender, ‘subconscious and unconscious experiences, apprehensions and hopes tend to come out and take over’. The impact and lure of cinematic experience is thus a combination of a surrender on the part of the spectator, and a particular sensual, quasi-‘biological’ power inherent in the cinematic image, which ‘engag[es] [the spectator] physiologically before he is in a position to respond intellectually’. This power is grounded in film’s capacity to record physical reality and confront the spectator with raw material nature—its

104 Ibid., 165.
105 In History: Last Images Before the Last, Kracauer describes the attitude of the spectator thus: ‘Anybody looking at a picture, Schopenhauer claims, should behave as if he were in the presence of a prince and respectfully wait for what the picture may or may not wish to tell him; for were he to talk first he would only be listening to himself. Waiting in this sense amounts to a sort of active passivity on the historian’s part.’ Kracauer, History, 84.
106 Kracauer, Theory of Film, 159–60.
107 Ibid., 165.
108 This capacity of film to overcome perceptual barriers established by consciousness provides an interesting transformation of the concept of the ‘choc’, which was so important to Benjamin’s and Kracauer’s earlier media theory.
motion—that produces kinesthetic responses, as well as the flow of the images, which induce us to flow along with the film in order not to miss anything.

In this combination of the specific properties of the cinematic image and a particular attitude and capacity to respond on her part, the spectator gains an access to the material world that is not limited to that human (or even humanist) approach to the world that is characterized by a combination of rational, use- and market-value-oriented interests and habit. Rather than the human being grasping hold of the world, the world ‘reveals’ itself and stretches out its many tentacles in the direction of the spectator. She is able to experience aspects of the world—a side of things—she wasn’t able to see, hear, think and feel before, including things that are too small, big, fast, or slow for human perception, objects or body parts that in the isolation and magnification of the screen reveal new aspects and vistas that the screen releases from the blindness produced by familiarity. However, this list also includes ‘phenomena overwhelming consciousness’: in the combination of the spectator’s physical-unconscious opening to the screen and cinematic presentation of reality, we are able to behold things, such as war atrocities, that we had not been able to see and understand because of censors, or guards, that consciousness had put up to protect us from them.

In many ways, the ideas that Kracauer puts forward in *Theory of Film* resemble the film theories of the 1920s, in particular those writings of Jean Epstein, Louis Delluc, and Germaine Dulac that concerned film as a new form of vision. There is, however, something different at stake for Kracauer. For him, what is important is not a new vision of the world that is expressive of the new possibilities facing the human being in the light of modernity and technology, but rather the chance that film provides to forego human consciousness, values, and dispositions altogether in order to find reality, history, and meaning as they have settled in matter. As a photographic medium, Kracauer wrote, film has an affinity with unstaged reality, with the fortuitous and the random, with endlessness or infinity, and with the indeterminate, diffuse, unorganized, or unshaped. Its capacity for movement and temporality, however, enables film to reveal the world (not ‘our’ world, but rather the transitory world in which we live), which for him becomes equivalent to revealing life itself. For the post-apocalyptic spectator of *Theory of Film*, film becomes a means to construct, and reconstruct, past, present, and future. Film grants access to the past, since it reveals the history stored in the material world, especially in its neglected aspects and

its refuse. A teapot with a sealed crack can powerfully evoke the dramatic event that caused it to break; images of concentration camps, Kracauer believed, allowed spectators to behold a reality that their bodies and minds had previously refused.110 Film also grants access to the present, since the moviegoer, as Kracauer describes him, has an acute sense of isolation and alienation from the world and from life, and this alienation from life drives him to the movie theater; the movie spectator is a ‘being out of touch with the breathing world about him, that stream of things and events which, were it flowing through him, would render his existence more exciting and significant. He misses “life.”’111 And film grants access to the future, since it is able to point out new directions, or, to use a term that Kracauer employs repeatedly, film ‘[expands] the external world . . . in all directions’.112

110 On correspondences between mental life and physical life in the traces in objects, see Ibid., 68: ‘Natural objects, then, are surrounded with a fringe of meanings liable to touch off various moods, emotions, runs of inarticulate thoughts; in other words, they have a theoretically unlimited number of psychological and mental correspondences. Some such correspondences may have a real foundation in the traces which the life of the mind often leaves in material phenomena; human faces are molded by inner experiences, and the patina of old houses is a residue of what happened in them.’ Kracauer’s most beautiful texts from the 1920s—a time when he was still roaming real streets and not just movie theaters—were similar tracings of the mental condition of society in neglected material objects. See, for example, Kracauer, ‘Farewell to the Linden Arcade’; ‘Two Planes’; ‘Spuk im Vergnügungslokal’.

111 Kracauer, Theory of Film, 169. Interestingly, this is a point for which Kracauer derives much evidence from a 1940 German audience survey. While he never discusses the fact that these data represent moviegoers at a time of war (and in fact seems to de-historicize this material by applying it to contemporary international audiences), the fact that he does mention the study’s origin in Germany in 1940 seems to imply that he defines the isolated post-war attitude as a continuation of the condition of shell-shocked war audiences.

112 Kracauer, Theory of Film, 41.