

-Research Article-

Revealing the Essence of Cinema: A Philosophical Inquiry into Paulo Sorrentino's The Hand of God*

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Abstract

Several philosophers, academics, and filmmakers have contributed to the long-debated subject of what cinema is, with the fields of ontology and hermeneutics playing significant roles in this discourse. The majority of the answers include the relationship between cinema and reality. Some correlate reality with the physical circumstances of an object and others emphasize the importance of human experience. Whatever the answer is, cinema is rooted in human existence. Therefore, while replying to the question of what cinema is, it is crucial to acknowledge the humanistic essence. Paolo Sorrentino's highly personal film, *The Hand of God* (2021) questions the essence of cinema by positioning the film-maker as a creator at its core. Through its plot, dialogues and cinematography, the film debates about what cinema is and who a director is. Hence, *The Hand of God* links the ontology of cinema to the presence of a creator blinking an eye to auteurism. This paper aims to analyze *The Hand of God* utilizing Bazin's and Cavell's insights on the ontology of moving image by using the hermeneutic analysis method. As a result of the analysis, it has been observed that the film gives central importance to the film director as a creator of emotions, thought and life experiences.

Keywords: André Bazin, Stanley Cavell, The Ontology of Cinema, Hermeneutics, The Hand of God

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Sinemanın Özünü Açığa Çıkarmak:

Paulo Sorrentino'nun Tanrı'nın Eli Filmi Üzerine Felsefi Bir İnceleme*

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Öz

Çok sayıda filozof, akademisyen ve film yapımcısı sinemanın ne olduğu konusunda yürütülen uzun süreli tartışmaya katkıda bulunmuştur. Bu tartışmada ontoloji ve hermenötik disiplinleri dâhilinde sorulan soruların büyük bir rolü vardır. Cevapların büyük çoğunluğu sinema ve gerçeklik arasındaki ilişkiyi içermektedir. Bazıları gerçekliği bir nesnenin fiziksel koşullarıyla ilişkilendirirken, diğerleri insan deneyiminin önemini vurgulamaktadır. Cevap ne olursa olsun, sinema, insan varoluşuna dayanmaktadır. Bu nedenle, sinemanın ne olduğu sorusuna yanıt verirken insani özünü kabul etmek önemlidir. Paulo Sorrentino'nun son derece kişisel filmi Tanrı'nın Eli (2021), yönetmeni sinema eserinin yaratıcısı olarak konumlandırarak sinemanın ontolojisini sorgulamaktadır. Film, konusu, diyalogları ve sinematografisi aracılığıyla sinemanın ne olduğu ve film yapımcısının kim olduğu hakkında bir tartışma açmaktadır. Dolayısıyla Tanrı'nın Eli, sinemanın ontolojisini bir yaratıcının varlığına bağlamakta ve auteurizme yakınlaşan bir anlamlandırmaya yol açmaktadır. Bu makale, Bazin ve Cavell'in hareketli görüntünün ontolojisine dair görüşlerinden yararlanarak Tanrı'nın Eli'ni hermenötik analiz yöntemiyle çözümlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Analiz sonucunda filmin, duygu, düşünce ve yaşam deneyimlerinin yaratıcısı olarak film yönetmenine merkezi bir önem verdiği gözlemlenmiştir.

Anahtar Kavramlar: André Bazin, Stanley Cavell, Sinema Ontolojisi, Hermenötik, Tanrı'nın Eli

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Introduction

The nature and essence of cinema have long been explored in the complex tapestry of cinematic discourse attracting the interest of numerous cinephiles, academics, philosophers, and filmmakers. This debate merely revolves around the relationship between cinema and reality. When considering one of the earliest films, *Arrival of the Train* (Lumière & Lumière, 1896), scholars emphasize cinema's capacity to capture and replay fleeting moments in time. It is widely believed that the spectators tried to evacuate the room when they saw the image of a train coming towards them. The reactions of the spectators who tried to leave the room out of fear showed that the film created a sense of reality (Andersen, 2019, p. 80). While this represents merely an audience response, it is evident that cinema is closely aligned with reality. In accordance with the audience response, the film scholars were very much interested in the relationship between cinema and reality. Indeed, spanning the decades from the 1930s to the 1970s, whether via the formative wave or the realist wave of theories, classical film theory sparked extensive and vibrant discourse regarding the intricate interplay between cinema and reality. Representing the formative wave of classical film theories, Rudolf Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein and others were very much interested in silent films from the beginning of cinema at the end of the 19th century to the 1930s. However, the realist wave associated with the works of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer among many others corresponds to films with synchronized sound and dialogue between the 1930s and 1960s. Despite the divergent approaches within these two waves, classical film theory posits the idea that cinema replicates the world as we perceive it (Easthope, 1999, pp. 1-2).

By participating in this continuous conversation, notable figures like Stanley Cavell and André Bazin have made a lasting impression on the discourse by putting forth concepts that go beyond simple visual depiction. Both writers wrote pieces in pursuit of the essence of cinema or, in other words, the ontology of cinema and concluded that cinema has its roots in the form. The formative qualities of cinema stem from the physical being of photographic image. Therefore, cinema is ontologically linked with reality (Hilsabeck, 2016, p. 26). Bazin associates cinematic image with the world and similarly Cavell considers that the photographic image is "of the world" (as cited in Jarvie, 1987, p. 102).

The way that images and reality interact and how a new reality is constituted through cinematic images have been seen as essential components of the philosophical inquiry into film. Badiou and Deleuze emphasize that film is an entity that releases thoughts and opens new doors to thinking. Badiou (2013, p. 18) declares that film has the "ability to think, to produce a truth". Deleuze (1997, p. viiii) thinks that cinema builds up its existence through images and signs; thus, it cannot be reduced to a narrative. Similarly, cinema cannot be equated with language, because it is composed of images that are "pre-verbal intelligible content". These images work as mediators to link reality with virtual concepts. Since Deleuze makes a definition of cinema about images, his statement also functions as a remarkable questioning of what cinema is.

Traditionally, it is considered that all the attempts to answer the question of "what cinema is" are associated with the research field of the ontology of cinema. However, contemporary theories of hermeneutics offers a valuable understanding of the ontology of things with a touch of interpretation. Hermeneutics can be defined as "the theory and practice of interpretation" (Rée & Urmsen, 2005, p. 159) and as a research method, its objective is to delve into the underlying essence that transcends surface-level appearances (Bal, 2016, p. 10). Heidegger is a pioneering thinker who highlights a hermeneutical view to understand the human existence. He blurs the boundaries between intuition and empiricism stating that our perception of the world is ingrained in our existence. Therefore, Heidegger offers a hermeneutic-ontological framework to understand existential structures (Farin, 2021, p. 375-377). This line of hermeneutics suggests that interpretation is the key element to understanding the circumstances of an object's being,

because there is no possible way one can intuitively reach the *“thing itself”* (as cited in Davis, 2014, p. 83). Badiou offers a similar mediatory approach between ontology and hermeneutics and orients his interest into cinema. He highlights the difficulty of speaking about film. While it is quite common to express one’s feelings about a film, it is challenging to make a true statement that would enable an opportunity for thinking without being subjectively judgmental. Irrespective of the philosopher’s opinion regarding film, art is inherently subjective and cannot be reduced to philosophy (Badiou, 2013, p. 95-96). In this case, this challenging task of grasping the essence of a work of art without disappointing the nature of the product ties the hands of the philosopher. To avoid this conundrum, Badiou (as cited in Davis, 2021, p. 42) suggests the concept of *“inaesthetics”* which *“attempts to say that philosophy doesn’t have to produce the thinking of the work of art because the work of art thinks all by itself and produces truth”* (Badiou, 2013, p. 18). With this in mind, it can be inferred that an objective thought about the ontology of cinema is unreachable knowledge. What Badiou (2013, p.18) offers instead is interpretation and *“the experience of viewing of the film”*. Therefore, Badiou’s interpretive understanding of what cinema is can be related to Heidegger’s hermeneutic-ontological point of view. Though Badiou never labels his approach as hermeneutics, Davis (2021, p. 50) proposes that Badiou’s approach which attributes cinema autonomy in terms of being an art that thinks all by itself is hermeneutic. Therefore, hermeneutics stands out as a way to interpret the essence of cinema.

As philosophy stems from questions related to existence and being, it may not be incorrect to say that philosophizing about cinema is fundamentally a hermeneutic endeavor. Viewed from this perspective, cinema has the potential to stimulate a questioning regarding its essence. To put it differently, if cinema is a medium that philosophizes, it has the ability to philosophize about its essence. Through an examination of Paolo Sorrentino’s *The Hand of God* (2021), this study explores the capability of cinema to create meanings about its circumstances of being. The main objective of this study is to analyze the fundamental dialogue on the essence of cinema presented in the sample film. In pursuit of this objective, the present study centers on the film *The Hand of God* (2021) and endeavors to uncover the film’s perspective on the essence of cinema. The following investigation seeks to clarify the film’s complex story, dialogues, and cinematography via the lens of hermeneutic analysis and question the film’s quest to answer the questions of what cinema is and who a film director is.

The Ontology of Cinema

Upon examining the philosophical perspectives of André Bazin and Stanley Cavell on the concept of cinema, it becomes evident that their views offer valuable insights into the ontology of film. Therefore, it is imperative to scrutinize their theories on the ontology of cinema in detail. However, prior to examining their insights about the subject matter, it is best to elucidate what is meant by the term *“ontology”* and its correlation with cinema.

The word ontology derives from *ontologia* in Modern Latin language. It is a combination of the words *“ontos”* which means being and *“logia”* which means theory (Online Etymology Dictionary). It is clearly observed that the early utilisation of the term *“ontology”* displayed a strong connection with existence and it was coined as a theory which made it a scientific entity. Taking its roots in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, ontology refers to *“the theory of being”*. Aristotle approached ontology as the metaphysical science to understand the nature and structure of being. His interest included simply everything that is in the world, so ontology extends to the interrogation of the substance in general (Kosman, 2013, pp. 1-2).

It is observed that the first utterances of Aristotle on ontology remained the dominant line of thought in the field until the end of Scholasticism. This period marks a bygone understanding of being and it may be called “the old ontology”. The old ontology asserts that there is a duality in the world and we as human beings can comprehend the world of things and phenomena. However, there is also another world that comprises “*timeless and immaterial*” essences. This world refers to a higher dimension, a body of perfection. As this line of thought cherishes the world that is incomprehensible with human senses over the material world and builds a theory on concepts rather than things, it is called “conceptual realism” by the Enlightenment philosophers (Hartmann, 1953, pp. 6-7).

In the 18th century, Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant presented a criticism against the metaphysical approach for being “*dogmatic*” and offered a new kind of metaphysics which can be called “*critical metaphysics*” (Friebe, 2022, p. 500). Within his approach, he correlates transcendental philosophy with ontology. These two fields concentrate on comprehending the rational conditions and limitations of cognition. Kant’s revolutionary philosophical approach redirected the focus of metaphysics from the inquiry into the nature of things beyond our experience to an emphasis on the conditions of appearance. According to Kant, knowing the intrinsic nature of things is impossible, so the emphasis should be solely on understanding the reality that manifests itself to us, rather than attempting to grasp an unknowable reality behind it. In essence, the shift is from speculating about what things might be in themselves to an examination of how they present themselves to us (Andersen, 2019, p. 113). In this sense, ontology, like critical metaphysics, is a preliminary field for the a priori¹ knowledge of objects in psychology, cosmology, rational physics, and theology (Olson, 2018, p. 120). According to Kant, a metaphysical proposition makes a claim about existence. That is, producing a claim or a proposition about something which exists is a part of the metaphysical way of knowing (Gram, 1968, p. 171). Further, Kant builds a connection between phenomena and time/space dualism which is an idealist assertion.

After the significant contributions of Enlightenment philosophers to the field of ontology, there appears to have been a scarcity of subsequent scholarly discourse on the subject in the following years. However, Latvian-born German philosopher Nicolai Hartmann revived the long-neglected subject of ontology in the first half of the 20th century. He constructed a systematic and realistic approach to critical ontology and followed a post-Kantian pattern (Peterson, 2012, p. 291). Hartmann (2019, p. 51) defines ontology as “*this side*” of metaphysical inquiries. The expression “*this side*” refers to an existential reasoning related to an “*empirical subject*” (Hartmann, 2019, p. 51). In the light of this commentary, it is abruptly seen that Hartmann builds a distinction between idealism and realism, differentiates ontology from metaphysics and positions it in a specific domain within the broader field of metaphysics. Hartmann clearly states that philosophy cannot arrive on a realistic conclusion based on metaphysics. Since reaching metaphysics requires undertaking a long journey and metaphysics cannot be approached until one departs from the point of departure, it becomes problematic to reach the knowledge of being. The actual discipline of a philosophical nature always sought to be established by diverging further and further away from metaphysics (Hartmann, 2021, p. 203). Therefore, relieved from the vagueness of metaphysics, ontology becomes a more

¹ The term “a priori” in Kantian philosophy exhibits a dichotomy with “a posteriori”. This distinction refers to two ways of epistemic justification. The former specifies a reasoning which does not depend at all on experience whereas a posteriori stands for a kind of empirical reasoning that depends on experience (Audi, 1999, p. 35)

absolute investigation of being and existence within the scope of phenomena. This leads to the presupposition that ontology is the term that a researcher must turn to when he/she needs to make an interrogation about the existence and essence of a material reality.

Hartmann's reintroduction of ontology to philosophy contributed to the way researchers approach the field. In modern philosophy, ontology, as an academic concept, is defined as "*theory as to what exists, or inquiry into the nature of being*" (Rée & Urmson, 2005, p. 272). As mentioned earlier, ontology means the essence of something. Hence, it is apparent that the core meaning of the term has remained almost unchanged since its early use. Ontology is concerned with the nature and structure of things in and of themselves, without reference to other factors. This is in contrast to the experimental sciences, which seek to understand and model reality from a particular viewpoint (Guarino, Oberle, & Staab, 2009, p. 1).

The inquiry regarding the ontology of cinema focuses on the circumstances that enable the existence or "*being*" of cinema (Lacey, 1996, p. 206). At first glance, when the circumstances or conditions that enable the being of cinema are in place, cinema becomes constrained within its physical and material existence (McGregor, 2013, p. 265). Cinema exists thanks to a chemical process that records an object and produces an image to be reflected on a screen. Hence, especially the earlier debates on the question of "*what cinema is*" were in line with the material existence of the moving image. In the 1930s, one of the first film theorists, Rudolph Arnheim (1957, p. 8-9) intended to categorize cinema as a distinct art form by juxtaposing it with other forms of art and some aspects of reality. In his pioneering theory, he compares painting to photography in terms of the interference of the human touch and he admits that photography is mechanical and it is an outcome of a chemical process whereas painting is a product of human creation and doesn't require an automated medium. However, he adds that this mechanical process of creation doesn't mean that photography and film are insufficient to be regarded as art forms. He distinguishes film from reality by stating the differences between real image and filmic image through six artistic resources that films embody. According to Arnheim (1957, p. 9-30), "*the projection of solids upon a plane surface*", "*reduction of depth*", "*lighting and the absence of color*", "*delimitation of the image and distance from the object*", "*absence of the space-time continuum*", "*absence of the nonvisual world of the senses*" are the artistic capabilities that filmic material encompass in contrast with reality. This distinction between cinema and reality has something to do with the discussion around the ontology of cinema. It both highlights the differences and represents a kind of bond between image and reality. As posited by Arnheim (1974, p. 150), photographic image has a close relationship with reality. In fact, the goal of visual arts is the "*representation of the lasting character of things and actions*" which draws attention to the aforementioned relationship. Therefore, from Arnheim's point of view, one might deduce that cinema arises from reality, but it differs from it in its journey of being. What distinguishes cinema from reality and enables it to rise as an art is its form as a medium.

A prominent theorist from the early days of cinema, Hungarian aesthetician and film critic Béla Balázs, made important contributions to the understanding of the essence of this art form. Balázs formulates his film theory by delineating the unique characteristics of cinema in contrast to other art forms, thereby justifying cinema as an art form. In his writings published in the 1930s, he declares that cinema differs from theatre in terms of reality and audience response. Theatre has a *double-layered* structure which gives the audience the sense that the play was actually constituted beforehand. Therefore, the relationship between theatre and reality is a loose one. Whereas cinema creates a world that lures the audience into its existence. The audience doesn't think about the production phase while observing the art. Thus, cinema represents a *single-layered* reality (Balázs, 2010, pp. 17-18). Balázs' notion about the intense association between cinema and reality gives an idea about the ontology of cinema because it invokes that the material existence of cinema shares a type of identity with realness.

André Bazin is one of the first and most well-known cinema researchers who questioned cinema within the context of its material essence. Before moving on to moving images, Bazin

emphasizes the material potentiality of photographic image. In his essay “The Ontology of Photographic Image” (1945), Bazin (2022, p. 21) declares that plastic arts serve as a tool for the mummification of the dead. Such arts like sculpture and painting aim to sustain the existence of things. All visual arts preserve objects from the decaying effect of time. In a way, they freeze the time and enable the object to live on. Photography practically does the same. However, there is a certain difference between plastic arts and photography. Arts like painting and sculpture embody an object to work on and an artist to generate an image. The artist filters the reality of the object and creates a work of art through their vision. On the other hand, photography needs an independent medium, an automated machine, camera. A camera detects the reality of an object the way it is. Even if the photographer has a creative effect on the photograph by selecting a chunk of reality and limiting it in a frame, the camera determines the image. The utilization of another medium between the object and its representation separates photography from other visual arts. Photograph and its object share a kind of essence, because there is a big resemblance between them (Bazin, 2022, p. 24). This resemblance is so big that no other art can precede this relationship. Surely, Bazin doesn’t equate a photograph and the object whose image it captures. However, we may say that this relationship is like a thumb and its fingerprint. A fingerprint is never the same with a thumb, but they surely share an essence.

Taking the aforementioned essay as a starting point, Bazin moves on to his examinations of the moving image in his essay “The Myth of Total Cinema” (1946). However, these two essays seem contradictory. While the first examines the medium-specific properties of photographic images that connect them to the material world, the latter examines the human desire to create an illusory depiction of the material world (Film & Media Studies, 2022). In this essay, Bazin (2022, p. 27-31) addresses a future ideal that cinema will develop itself with technology and mimic the material world more realistically. Building on this point, Bazin’s viewpoint highlights the importance of realism in film, viewing it as the essential quality that sets apart film as an art form. According to him, the fundamental quality of film is its capacity to depict reality in a way that is consistent with how people see it (Lowenstein, 2007, p. 54). To clarify, one of the functions of cinema is to show the world as it is, so cinema becomes a window that enables the audience to observe reality. As a consequence, realism provides Bazin with three fundamental components: a conceptual framework for film ontology, a justification for recognizing film as an art form, and a standard for critically evaluating films (Boardman, 2019, pp. 10-11).

Stanley Cavell is another important philosopher who explored the ontology of cinema extensively. Although Cavell admits his debt to Bazin in his book *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, he is also quick to refute what he believes to be Bazin’s hurried generalizations about the “essence” of film. According to Bazin and Cavell, the purpose of the cinematic object is to elicit contemplation regarding the interaction between viewers and their surroundings (Hilsabeck, 2016, p. 26). In other words, their main idea is that viewers tend to relate to their surroundings through films which means that films make people think about their subjective reality. Thus, films serve as a frame that builds a reality for viewers and this choice of reality evokes thought which is actually a familiar notion from Bazin’s conceptual framework. However, Cavell differs from Bazin in his concept of “skepticism”. Cavell argues that skepticism in modern philosophy extends beyond epistemological boundaries. According to Cavell, there are two distinct realities created around a film. First, there is the reality of the moving image and next, there is the reality of the audience. These two realities never collide, because neither the audience gets to change the reality of the film nor the film has something to do with the audience. Therefore, there is a certain skeptic situation in this dichotomy. He thinks that it becomes an expression of the desire to overcome this skepticism (Morkoç, 2021). He even thinks that “*film is a moving image of skepticism*” (Cavell, 1979, p. 188). In expressing this idea, he emphasizes that the transformative impact of photography on the history of visual representation lies not in the pursuit of exact resemblances between objects and their depictions, but rather in the heightened human fascination with reality. According to Cavell, the advent of

photography and moving images marked a pivotal moment, enabling individuals to engage with reality unprecedentedly, free from the constraints of subjective apparatus. In other words, Cavell thinks that photography and moving image are the ways that people utilize to access knowledge about the world without the limits of their subjectivity.

Critiquing Cinematic Ontology: From “What is Cinema?” to “Who is a Film-Maker?”

As stated before, “ontology” refers to the discipline that questions what there is in the world. When it comes to the case of cinema, this definition brings about a problematic way to understand the very circumstances that make cinema possible as a material. The classical film theory tends to treat film as a celluloid substance that is created through a chemical process. This builds a ground that lets theorists discuss film as a material. However, this technology seems far gone. The development of digital technologies for image production and manipulation has raised plenty of questions about traditional viewpoints regarding film and photography (Morgan, 2006, p. 443). Most of the critique against Bazin’s and Cavell’s theories on the ontology of cinema revolves around the focus on photographic nature of cinema and the digitalization process that changed cinema to a great extent.

One of the main negative appraisals towards Bazin centers on his insight that a photograph is automated and it shares an essence with the object. As previously mentioned, Bazin disregarded the role of the photographer as a creator and emphasized the power of the medium to record a reality. Nevertheless, one might advocate the view that a photograph can only be a photograph and nothing else. It is inadequate to capture the identity or essence of the subject. Jarvie (1987, p. 100) affirms that a photograph reflects an appearance and it shouldn’t be confused with reality. The realness of the object in the photograph may be misleading, because it may not reflect a shared identity. Seeing a photograph does not necessarily inform the viewer about the essence of the object, the person, or the image in the photograph. Moreover, Bazin’s omission of the photographer as a creator is widely criticized. There is always a person who chooses an image over the others and makes aesthetic choices as well as meaningful ones (Jarvie, 1987, p. 108).

The role of human intelligence makes photography an aesthetic material. The human factor also corresponds with the language of film. The cinematic apparatus, particularly the art of montage, establishes a mechanism akin to language, often overseen by an individual identified as a director, producer, or filmmaker. This individual typically creates and guides this cinematic language. In addition, there is a decoder who interprets the meanings created by the director. As Münsterberg, one of the first theorists on cinema, insists, the spectator perceives the language of the cinematic product and reshapes it in their mind (Langdale, 2002, p. 15). This is a notion that challenges Cavell’s passive audience whose presence is invalid for the existence of film (Jarvie, 1987, p. 110). Further, cinema is a medium that facilitates the spectator to connect the world by viewing it. Viewing the world is the outcome of individuals’ interactions with it, not just observation alone. This is how the spectator connects with the world (Jarvie, 1987, p. 113). Therefore, Cavell’s one-sided relationship between the audience and the film is condemned by contemporary film theories.

Another point worth mentioning regarding the topic of cinematic ontology is the digital transformation cinema has undergone in the last three decades. Digitalization of cinema refers to a technological change in which films are now produced, edited, and released using electronic and digital media. This includes modifications to the technological elements of filmmaking, like recording, editing, and distribution techniques, as well as adjustments to the character of cinema that have resulted from these changes. It highlights that the influence transcends technology and represents a change in perception. Not only are the new techniques for recording and editing sound and images technically different, but they also have a deeper meaning that alters the dynamic between a movie and its audience (Ganz & Khatib, 2006, p.

21). Digitalization of cinema is a new method that uses computer files and digital data instead of film, with very little physical resources needed which means that traditional celluloid technology is now out of date. This shift ignites an argument over the physical reality of a photographic image because what constitutes the core of Bazin's notion of cinematic ontology is the chemical process that captures the essence of an object. On the other hand, the digital revolution turns the debate on the topic of the manipulation of reality through the medium. Digitally converted live-action footage loses its connection to reality since the digital images are now just manipulation-ready raw materials. The lines between creation and modification, production and postproduction have become increasingly blurred due to digital technology, since all images, regardless of their source, undergo multiple computer program processing before being finalized (McGregor, 2013, p. 271).

This uncertainty of what is real and what is not makes an inquiry on the ontology of cinema problematic, because the whole field is based on the theory that the physical existence of the photographic image shares an identity with the object in the frame. According to Rodowick (2007, p. 175), digital media establishes a distinct ontology instead of negating traditional ontological theories. In other words, the new ontology of cinema builds a new understanding of information which is based on the acceptance of countless possibilities and realities. There is a general belief in the existence of other minds and alternative realities in the world of computers and the internet. The widespread adoption of digital media in culture indicates a change in perspective from confronting skepticism to embracing it. In the extremely dynamic communities that computer-mediated communications have enabled, the quest for understanding the world has become less ambiguous. Rather, there is an ongoing search for new ways to recognize the presence of other minds. Therefore, it could be argued that digitalization in cinema may function in revealing a plurality of realities and one of the outcomes of this process is that the validity of these realities is insignificant. What really counts in the digital world is the product itself and "*acknowledging other minds*".

Taking into account the key aspects highlighted above, it can be deduced that the debate over the ontology of cinema is in a process of transformation just like cinema itself. The skepticism over reality is now embraced by cinephiles. Therefore, there are some other questions arising apart from "what is cinema?" in the field of ontology. Cinema enthusiasts are also interested in what cinema has to say because it is a way to view the world. Further, viewing the world is regarded as "*an outcome of our processes of connecting with the world*" (Jarvie, 1987, p. 113). If cinema is a medium that mediates spectators' connection to the world and their experiences, then films tell some things about ourselves or the reality surrounding us. Examining what films have to say requires us to employ the creators of the meaning, namely directors, filmmakers, or the creative team. This notion adds other questions to understand the being of cinema: "Who is a director?" and "How does a director build an essence by controlling the meaning?".

The director is the main person involved in the production stage. They participate in the planning and choose the cast. The director works directly with the actors and collaborates with a cinematographer and a wide range of other technicians to carry out the plan developed during pre-production and shoot the film. On top of all that, a director represents the link between the film and reality as he is the head of the decision-making mechanism in the process of furnishing the film with a set of meanings. A stress on the director can be found in the study of auteurism. Auteur theory emphasizes the director as a creator of cinematic products and puts a great deal of responsibility on his or her shoulders. The distinctive qualities of a particular movie become more evident when compared to other movies made by the same "auteur" or "author" (Andersen, 2019, p. 45-46). Auteurism works against Bazin's highlight of the absent photographer and the automatic nature of recording because in auteur theory a director is a strong figure who controls all the processes in a film just like an author writes his or her novel. In this sense, a new question emerges in the case of the ontology of cinema;

“who is a film-maker / director?”. This question is quite related to the question of what cinema is since a director is a big part of the creation process. This makes films personal experiences for both spectators and creators. A dialogue in Godard’s 1965 film *Pierrot le Fou* illustrates the personal nature of perceiving the ontology of cinema. In a party scene, a character asks “what is film?” and the answer he gets is “*The film is like a battleground. Love, hate, action, violence, death. In one word, emotion.*” This quote shows that the ontology of cinema doesn’t depend on objective reality; on the contrary, it is quite subjective, personal and plural.

Analysis of Paolo Sorrentino’s *The Hand of God* (2021)

The Hand of God is an Italian autobiographical film directed by Paolo Sorrentino in 2021. The film can be defined as a coming-of-age drama that draws inspiration from Sorrentino’s own experiences growing up in Naples during the 1980s. The story revolves around a young boy named Fabietto Schisa, who is navigating the complexities of adolescence and family dynamics in Naples. Against the backdrop of a vibrant and sometimes chaotic city, the film explores themes of family, friendship, love, pain and the pursuit of one’s dreams. It captures the essence of a particular time and place in Italy while delving into the universal struggles of growing up.

The plot can be divided into two main parts: one before Fabietto’s parents’ death, and the other after. This tragic incident forces Fabietto to face reality and causes him to question life. This questioning about life and personal experiences also brings about an understanding of cinema. The hermeneutic analysis of *The Hand of God* aims to interpret the meanings created in the film about the essence of cinema in terms of reality, the role of the director as a creator and fantasy.

Subjective Reality and Director-driven Narrative

The Hand of God is an autobiographical piece telling the story of the director Paolo Sorrentino in his teenage years when he tragically lost his parents and forcefully went through a transition to adulthood. Sorrentino declares that the film is merely about his experiences when he was in the process of maturing and finding his target in life. He says in an interview that the film is “*based on the perception of pain and joy of a boy, and it’s narrated through the eyes of the grownup man he’s become*” and he makes it clear that the man is actually himself (Kohn, 2021). However, since the film is a personal narrative of a reminiscence of youth, it would be unrealistic to claim that everything that advances the plot is based on Sorrentino’s real-life experiences. Sorrentino consistently avoids compromising the authenticity of the film for the audience. For example, the main character’s name, Fabietto Schisa, doesn’t even bear a resemblance with the director’s name which gives the impression that this is slightly a different story. To elaborate further, the narrative is a reflection of Fabietto’s memory of himself in a certain place and time. Therefore, all the imagery, dialogue and tone of the movie are articulated in the way Fabietto recalls.

Drawing on the director-driven subjectivity, it is apparent that the film offers a personal view of the place and time. The film takes place in Naples, Italy in the 1980s. Thus, apart from the experiences of the director, the reality of a city and a time is also portrayed. The opening scene consists of a helicopter shot of the city of Naples. The camera moves slowly above the sea and gets closer to the city which projects a kind of promise that the film is initially about the city. However, the portrayal of the city is never objective. The spectators witness the remains of Fabietto’s memory and encounter a personal perception rather than an objective description. The city plays a crucial role in the development of the character. The audience has access to the city only through following Fabietto. The place is linked with Fabietto’s memory and a strong sense of nostalgia is created as he lingers in the streets and passages of the city. The same personal feeling reveals itself when the narrative time is examined. The time in which the

plot takes place is nostalgically illustrated. The audience is allowed to see only the moments that have importance for Fabietto's existence. The 1980s points out a time when global changes in the economy, culture and ideology took place. However, apart from some mise en scene elements like costume design and decor, the film depicts the time via an important event in the history of football which is of utmost importance for the character. Fabietto is delighted to have the football legend Maradona in the city football team which refers to a real-life event in the 1980s. Hence, the character's personal interest becomes the indicator of time.

This subjective tone of the film serves as a subtle example of Bazin's debate regarding the ontology of cinema. It is worth remembering that Bazin claims that the image and the object share an essence. Accordingly, in *The Hand of God*, the personal reality consisting of the director's life experiences and the image share a kind of identity. To illustrate, one cannot label the film as a total fictional endeavor nor can he/she claim that it is entirely real and this ambiguity builds a common ground for a dichotomy of reality and the image. The reality and the image mingle together and share an essence. The essence of the image here can be categorized into two distinctive features. One is the filmic creation and the other is the essence of a person which is the memory. All the images the film produces are the work of Fabietto's mind which is basically generated by Sorrentino. This three-way existence of the image, filmic diegesis and reality create a new existence that is ambiguous in nature.

In addition to Bazin's insight about the relationship between reality and image, Cavell highlights a similarity between a film-maker and a philosopher in terms of their quest for truth. According to Cavell, filmmakers and philosophers delve into the realities of human existence through the use of images and thought-provoking dialogue. Philosophy is all about what human beings "cannot help thinking about...such things, for example, as whether we can know the world as it is in itself". Likewise, "film... shows philosophy to be the often invisible accompaniment of the ordinary lives that film is so apt to capture" (as cited in Shaw, 2019, pp. 13-14). Thus, philosophizing is a way of searching for the essence of the world and the association between cinema and philosophy leads to an inquiry into ordinary human life. In light of this insight, *The Hand of God* can be considered as the director's attempt to make sense of life experiences. In the film, the protagonist tries to find the meaning of life and build a new reality for himself to seek shelter against the harsh process of growing up. This quest corresponds to a subjective construction of reality on the director's behalf. This notion can be exemplified in the visual content of the film. Especially in the first half of the film, when Fabietto cheerfully enjoys life, some images give the impression that they are conveyed the way they are recalled by Fabietto. In other words, the audience lingers in the protagonist's memory rather than witnessing the action objectively. To illustrate, all the characters are portrayed with intensified features to the extent of a caricature. Especially in the scene where Fabietto and his extended family share a day on a picnic, all the characters display exaggerated behaviours. The grandmother figure always utters bitter words and distances herself from the rest of her family. One of the little cousins laughs in a ridiculed way. Another relative who is thought to have passed the usual age for marriage arrives to the scene with a much older man with a speaking disability. This characterization is important because Fabietto tends to or prefers to remember them that way. Further, some images are expressed as the way Fabietto romanticizes them. For instance, when the father, Saverio, blows a whistle to his wife from a distance to express his love towards her, Fabietto stares at him like he is engraving the moment to his memory. Also, there is a scene where Fabietto shares a moment with his aunt, Patrizia. She looks at him for some time and it is a memorable image for Fabietto.

Reality vs. Fantasy: What is Cinema?

Fabietto embodies some personal traits characterized by a profound capacity for imaginative thinking. As the audience, we witness his insights about his experiences of his transition period to adulthood and they are almost always dreamlike, full of joy and

happiness. He communicates with the people around him through imagination. Therefore, one could argue that he is far from being a rigid rationalist. Fabietto's quest for confronting his imagination serves as a process that constructs the film's approach to cinema. In other words, as Fabietto finds his way into his imaginative being, he also constitutes a personal relationship with cinema. This creative process gives some hints about what cinema is and what cinema has to say.

The problematization of reality in the film starts at the very beginning with the character Patrizia, Fabietto's aunt. Patrizia is the first character the audience meets, so she is clearly an important figure in the narrative. The crucial point about this character is that she functions as a facilitator of the fantastic motives in the film. She can even be considered as the agent who mediates Fabietto's relationship with fantasy. Patrizia is believed to have a mental illness by all the characters except Fabietto. She desperately wants to be a mother, but she is unable to have kids which drives her into an illusion. In this illusion, she seeks some supernatural ways to get pregnant. For example, she dreams of a man approaching in a car towards her while she is waiting in a line at the bus stop. Both the cinematography and the content of the scene give the impression that it is all an illusion not reality. First of all, all the people in the line are in complete silence and they never move. When the man in the car gets close, nobody looks at him except Patrizia as if he never existed. The man introduces him as San Gennaro, the patron Saint of Naples, who is a mythical figure of great importance for the people of Naples. He offers a remedy for Patrizia's condition. They go to an abandoned place that resembles a church and another religious figure appears, the little monk. Little Monk is a legendary figure in the cultural identity of Naples. He usually appears at night and helps people in need although he is notoriously known for his misbehavior. After this scene, Patrizia returns to her reality and everyone thinks she is mentally ill. This incident is of great importance for Fabietto's character development, because he accepts fantasy over reality as he is the only one to believe Patrizia's unrealistic experiences.

Fabietto's tendency towards escaping from reality is also visible via the death of his parents. The plot starts to unfold when he meets the crashing reality upon his parents' death. After this downfall, he seeks a gateway from reality and he finds the remedy in film-making because he thinks that cinema is a way to build one's own alternative reality. The shift from reality to fantasy can be correlated with the ontology of cinema. As stated before, most critics in the field of the ontology of cinema are actually realists and they claim that cinema exists with its relation to reality. However, Fabietto's embracing fantasy and attaching it to his identity shapes his approach to cinema. He aims to make films in order to negate reality. At this point, the subjective contribution of the director in the process of building a new reality is opened up for discussion. As Fabietto questions what cinema is and extends his inquiry with the question of who a film-maker is, he starts to define cinema's relationship with reality.

Fabietto's quest for cinema develops when he meets the famous film director Antonio Capuano. The dialogue between the two gives plenty of clues about the meanings reproduced about the ontology of cinema in *The Hand of God*. Capuano utters some rules about the traits of a person who aims to make films. He thinks that only people who are free from any constraints are able to make films. In order to be free, one must be brave, too. In addition, Capuano emphasizes that imagination and creativity are not enough to make a film, a director should also have pain inside. When one has pain, he/she has a story to tell. Capuano advises Fabietto to not lose his control ever in life. When Fabietto hears this, he gets confused. He doesn't know what "control" means. Capuano says that he needs to find the meaning of control by his own means. In addition to all that, Capuano advises Fabietto to stay in Naples and not to move to Rome so that he can be true to his environment. He thinks that Fabietto should get inspired by Naples and develop stories from his own surroundings.

When we examine this dialogue, we encounter some keywords such as “freedom, courage and control”. These are the traits that a film director should have. These remind us the concept of auteurism in cinema. According to auteurism, a film director has absolute power over his story and the overall product of the film. Moreover, Capuano addresses an auteurism, a kind of subjective reality that is fed by the surroundings of the director. Hence, a director should get inspired from the ordinary life circumstances that he/she encounters.

This conflicting conversation enlightens Fabietto towards creating his ideas about what cinema is and who a film maker is. Fabietto turns to his inner vision and decides that cinema should be about irrationality and distortion instead of reality. He takes control of his life and moves to Rome. The audience witnesses the change in his character on the train journey he undertakes. The dialogue ends at this point and the meaning creation proceeds with images only. Fabietto is situated behind the glass window of the train and he sees the little monk at the train station. As the little monk is portrayed as a myth, the audience can never be sure if this scene is a part of reality or Fabietto’s imagination. These ambiguous images are the signs that indicate Fabietto’s vision of cinema. Behind the glass window, his face mingles with the reflection on the glass, and he seems absorbed by the reflection, blurring the boundaries between his physical presence and the cinematic realm. This reflection on the window can be associated with cinema, as it is often perceived as a mirror reflecting the complexities of the real world. In this image, his existence, in a way, is overtaken by the reflection, illustrating the symbiotic relationship between the director and the cinematic medium. Consequently, he becomes immersed in a new reality, one shaped by his own image, wherein his identity intertwines with the essence of cinema itself.

Conclusion

There is no doubt, cinema is a vibrant field where profound insights are developed and philosophy thrives. Philosophical investigation is not only welcomed but also greatly enhanced by the medium of film. Movies are thought-provoking mediums that are useful for delving into the complexity of human existence. People are given a chance to reflect on existential issues, examine their life experiences and navigate the complexities of the human condition through interacting with cinematic narratives and imagery. That is to say, movies serve as a catalyst for philosophical thought and encourage viewers to go on a voyage of self-discovery and intellectual inquiry.

In this study, different perspectives regarding the debate on the ontology of cinema has been examined and it is observed that the existential circumstances of cinema has traditionally been based on its material being. According to this view, cinema has an integral unity with the chemical process that forms its material existence. This material being constitutes the image which accomodates an object or reality. Therefore, cinema shares an identity with the object it records. This notion declares that cinema is existentially linked with material reality which makes the debate on what cinema is a technical issue. However, later discourse on the ontology of cinema declares that the classical view is now invalid thanks to the digitalization process. With the advent of digitalization, traditional celluloid film has become obsolete and the physical evidence of cinema is now transformed into digital codes. This transition has led to a transformation in the conceptualization of the ontology of cinema. To illustrate, new questions has emerged along with what cinema is. Film scholars are more interested in what cinema has to say and its potential to philosophize. This shift can also be defined as a transition from ontology to hermeneutics. Hermeneutics enables researchers to interpret the philosophical qualities inherent in a film. Thus, it possesses the capability to unveil multiple interpretations instead of reaching definitive conclusions.

Drawing upon the assumption that films philosophize and they can produce thought about their own circumstances of being, this study is an attempt to query what cinema has to

say about its fundamental nature. As a result of the hermeneutic analysis conducted through Paolo Sorrentino's film *The Hand of God* (2021), it is observed that the film displays a personal and subjective account of cinema. The film pictures the protagonist's experiences as a young man and his developing interest in cinema. Building this interest, Fabietto tries to understand the relationship between cinema and reality. This interrogation also reveals some authentic ideas about the essence of cinema. He finally decides that cinema is a means to build one's own reality. From this point onward, Fabietto's existence blends with cinema. He becomes a part of the cinematic process. As a conclusion, we might say that *The Hand of God* adds the human factor to Bazin's and Cavell's idea of the photographic image. The film director constitutes a new reality using images and makes these images a part of his own experiences.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author of the article declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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