

Chapter One

Defining the Real: The Film Theory and Criticism of André Bazin

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“A modest fellow, sickly, slowly and prematurely dying, he it was who gave the patent of royalty to the cinema just as the poets of the past had crowned their kings.” So wrote Jean Renoir of the great French critic and theorist André Bazin, nine years after he had succumbed to leukemia a few months past his fortieth birthday. The occasion was the 1967 publication of volume one of *What Is Cinema?*, the first selection of his articles and reviews to be translated into English (volume two followed in 1971), and Renoir added the following in his preface: “There is no doubt about the influence that Bazin will have in the years to come.”

This prophecy was amply fulfilled, though (as is often the case with prophecies) not quite in the way Renoir had imagined. It’s no exaggeration to say that Bazin is the single thinker most responsible for bestowing on the cinema the prestige both of an object of knowledge and of an art form—what has become *the* art form of our visual age in that it incorporates all others and in that, more and more, via DVDs and the Internet, it is the most widely available one. While scattered attempts had been made before to define the “essence” of cinema (most notably in the works of Rudolf Arnheim and Siegfried Kracauer), Bazin’s ideas were to prove the decisive ones in establishing its credentials as a separate and legitimate field of intellectual inquiry, and one

that has become even more legitimate now that so many of us satisfy so much of our intellectual curiosity, let alone our aesthetic craving, through visual rather than print media. In one of his essays from the 1940s Bazin himself projected that distant day when film studies would enter the university curriculum—and it was Bazin more than anyone else who played the role of midwife.

André Bazin was born on April 18, 1918, in the city of Angers in northwest France, but moved with his family to the western seaport of La Rochelle when he was five years old. Since he had wanted from an early age to become a teacher, he studied first at the *École normale* of La Rochelle (1936) and the *École normale* of Versailles (1937–1938), then at the *École normale supérieure* of Saint-Cloud (1938–1941). Bazin graduated from Saint-Cloud with the highest honors (after he was called up for military service in 1939, then demobilized in mid-1940) but was disqualified from teaching in French schools because of a stutter. The failed teacher quickly turned into a missionary of the cinema, his passion for which was part of his general passion for culture, aesthetic truth, and moral or spiritual sensibility.

In 1942, during the German Occupation, Bazin became a member of an organization in Paris—the *Maison des Lettres*—that was founded to take care of young students whose regular scholastic routine had been interrupted by the war. There he founded a cinema club where he showed politically banned films in defiance of the Nazi authorities and the Vichy government. During World War II, in 1943, Bazin also worked at the *Institut des hautes études cinématographiques* (I.D.H.E.C.), the French film school; there he was appointed director of cultural services after the war; and there he first began to crystallize his ideas in oral presentations and debates.

Bazin came to film criticism by way of his collaboration with *Travail et Culture*, a semi-official body concerned with cultural activities among working-class people, for whom he organized innumerable screenings. After the Liberation, he was appointed film critic of a new daily newspaper, *Le Parisien libéré*—a large-circulation daily tabloid with lots of sports coverage and “human interest” stories but little politics. Thus began Bazin’s formal or official life as a public critic and with it the development of a new type of movie reviewing—one of his singular achievements being the ability to make his insights understood by readers on all levels without any concessions to popularizing. Yet Bazin never entirely lost sight of his educational ambitions, evidenced in an heuristic style of argument that implies more than it states and forces readers to think for themselves.

Bazin’s blend of the logical and the poetical (though never the political, despite the fact that he himself belonged to the left) drew the attention of Jean-Paul

Sartre, who commissioned him to write essays for the distinguished philosophical journal *Les temps modernes*. Thereafter his name became associated with a staggering array of popular and specialist magazines, the most notable being *L'Écran français*, *France-Observateur*, *Radio-Cinéma-Télévision*, *La Revue du cinéma*, *Critique*, *L'Education Nationale*, *Esprit*—and finally the historically momentous *Cahiers du cinéma*, which he founded with Lo Duca and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze in 1951. In all Bazin is said to have penned something approaching 1,500 pieces, including contributions to foreign magazines (mainly Italian) as well as French ones. (He needed to be prolific since by this time he had a family to support: his wife, Janine, and a small son, Florent.)



André Bazin.

The remainder of his life was an uneventful round of festivals, conferences, and association or editorial meetings, all of them progressively overshadowed by the illness with which he was diagnosed in 1954. Bazin died at Nogent-sur-Marne on November 11, 1958. At the time he was completing a book-length study of Jean Renoir (later edited for publication by his loyal disciple François Truffaut) and working on the script for *Les Églises romanes de Saintonge*, a short documentary about Romanesque churches that he planned to direct himself. Indeed, there was always something a little medieval and monkish about Bazin, who himself was a practicing Catholic. Renoir compared him to one of the saints pictured in the stained-glass windows at Chartres; Truffaut went so far as to call him a creature from the time before original sin. Nearly everyone acquainted with Bazin eulogized his wisdom together with his personal goodness—and couched both in terms drawn from religious asceticism.

While the merest rumor of the transcendent is enough to scandalize most film theorists, it helps to explain Bazin's enduring appeal among those at least open to the possibility of the divine. Reading Bazin, one never has the sense of a professional flogging his secular academic specialty in return for institutional preferment. Instead, one comes into contact with a person—or, more correctly, a soul—bound by a sacred charge to inquire after truth. The luminous quality of Bazin's writing can no doubt be attributed in part to his chronic frail health, for reality stands out in colors all the more radiant for being contemplated under the shadow of death. But, even though it comprises the biggest stumbling block even for critics otherwise congenial to Bazin, there is no denying the primary source of his inspiration: faith. I'd like to emphasize that in this introduction, because Bazin was an intellectual and a Christian—better, a Christian intellectual—when it was still possible publicly to be both and at the same time to be taken seriously. Obviously, I don't think this is true anymore—certainly not in the United States—and I lament that fact, for the sake of intellectuals as well as Christians.

At the heart of Bazin's strictures on cinematic realism lies the conviction that the movie camera, by the simple act of photographing the world, testifies to the miracle of God's creation. It is sanctioned to do so precisely—and paradoxically—because it is an invention of science. Throughout the ages, Bazin argues, mankind has dreamed of being able to see the surface of the world faithfully copied in art (see "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 1945). He ascribes this wish to what he calls the "mummy complex"—an innate human need to halt the ceaseless flow of time by embalming it in an image. But it was not until the development of photography in the nineteenth century that this appetite for the real could be fully satisfied. For Bazin, a

photograph holds an irrational power to persuade us of its truth because it results from a process of mechanical reproduction in which human agency plays no part. A painting, however lifelike, is still the obvious product of human craft and intention, whereas the photographic image is just what happens automatically when the light reflected from objects strikes a layer of sensitive chemical emulsion.

“Photography,” Bazin writes, “affects like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their supernal beauty.” In Bazin’s view, it’s this objective quality of the photograph—the fact that it is first of all a sensory datum and only later perhaps a work of art—which gives the medium its privileged relationship with the real. It follows that both photography and its spawn, the motion picture, have a special obligation toward reality. Their principal responsibility is to document the world before attempting to interpret or criticize it. And for Bazin, this moral duty is ultimately a sacred one—the photographic media being, in effect, preordained to bear endless witness to the beauty of the cosmos.

Bazin’s criticism is not remotely doctrinal in its Catholicism, however; it is fundamentally holistic, its source lying elsewhere than in aesthetic dissection. His true filmmaker attains power through “style,” which is not a thing to be expressed but an inner orientation enabling an outward search or quest. Such spiritual sensitivity and its enablement through film are central to Bazin’s view of film as obligated to God, to honor God’s universe by using film to render the reality of the universe and, through its reality, its mystery-cum-musicality. This view led Bazin to certain specific espousals—of Italian neorealism, the technique of deep focus, and more—but these were all secondary consequences for him of the way that film could best bear witness to the miracle of the creation. Éric Rohmer, who became a filmmaker in the Bazinian tradition but who in the 1950s was a critical-editorial colleague of Bazin’s, has said: “Without a doubt, the whole body of Bazin’s work is based on one central idea, an affirmation of the objectivity of the cinema.”

Since Bazin’s general idea was to discover in the nature of the photographic image an objectively realistic feature, the concept of objective reality as a fundamental quality of the cinematic shot in fact became the key to his theoretical and critical work. For him, the photographic origin of film explains the novelty of and fascination with the cinema. The picture is a kind of double of the world, a reflection petrified in time but brought back to life by cinematic projection; in other words, everything that is filmed once *was* in reality. A rapt Bazin thus speaks of the ontological realism of the cinema, and, according to him, the camera is naturally the objective tool with which to achieve it.

He granted this camera a purifying power and a superhuman impassiveness that could restore the virgin object in all its purity to the attention and love of the viewer. And he saw almost perfect examples of this “brute representation” of the cinema in documentary as well as scientific films, in which the filmmaker interferes or tampers very little with nature. Bazin saw such brute representation additionally in the deep-focus *mise en scène* of William Wyler’s films, which tended toward a neutrality or objectivity that was eminently moral and liberal, hence perfectly characteristic of American freedom and democracy. For him, only ontological realism of this type was capable of restoring to the object and its setting the spiritual density of their being.

Predictably, Bazin’s thesis has been assailed for placing the metaphysical cart before the materialist horse. And, as if resolved to tweak the noses of his Marxist opponents, Bazin propounds the fanciful notion that technical change arises less as the outcome of economic and historical forces than from an ineffable “something” one can only call spiritual will (see “The Myth of Total Cinema,” 1946). Photography and cinema, together with such innovations as color stock, sound recording, anamorphic lenses, and 3-D, are thus successive responses to an obscurely planted desire for an ever more perfect approximation of the real. Although Bazin is generally too discreet a writer to let his theological slip show, it’s clear that here he conceives of such artistic and industrial gains as prompted by an esoteric design. His thought in this instance betrays its sizeable debt to the science-cum-mysticism of the radical Catholic visionary Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who projected an evolutionary spiraling of human consciousness until it fuses with divine revelation. (In more secular terms, there’s also a tinge of Sartrean existentialism in Bazin’s emphasis on a cinema of “being” in the act or process of “becoming.”)

Still, Bazin sets a hypothetical limit to his “myth of total cinema.” If the cinema ever could succeed in becoming the exact double of reality, it would also fail—since it would then cease to exist as cinema. Like a mathematical asymptote, filmic representation is always doomed to fall a little short of its goal. But if cinema never quite merges with life, that’s what allows it to be an art form whose mission is to reveal life. Bazin concedes that there is no art without artifice and that one must therefore surrender a measure of reality in the process of translating it onto celluloid. The cinematic staging or rendering of the real can be carried out in untold ways, however, so it would be more suitable to speak of filmic “realisms” than of a single, definitive realist mode. And in this respect Bazin comes closer to endorsing the postmodern shibboleth of pluralism than his adversaries tend to realize—though he happily foregoes postmodernism’s nihilism.

Yet his pristine vision of an aesthetic reality remains, strictly speaking, the

inaccessible alpha and omega of the movie medium, since it is inevitably contaminated by human subjectivity. Individual films and filmmakers all carve up the unbroken plenitude of the real, imposing on it style and meaning. But the crucial distinction for Bazin is (in an oft-quoted phrase from “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” 1950–1955) between “those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality.” He took a notoriously dim view, for example, of Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and other films made in the German expressionist style, because he judged their elaborate manipulations of lighting and décor to be a willful attempt to bend reality out of shape and force it to reflect perverse states of mind. What Bazin objected to in the work of Sergei Eisenstein was precisely how the Soviet director splintered reality into a series of isolated shots, which he then reassembled through the art of *montage*.

Indeed, Bazin’s basic position cannot be understood except as a strong reaction against principles of filmmaking that had prevailed before then: of subjectivity, of an arrangement and interpretation of the world—what might be called Eisenstein-Pudovkin principles (different though those two men were) in editing. Bazin was opposed to such an approach as “self-willed” and “manipulative,” as the imposition of opinion where the filmmaker should try, in effect, to stand aside and reveal reality. By contrast, the first line of Pudovkin’s *Film Technique* (1929) is: “The foundation of film art is *editing*.” Bazin upheld *mise en scène* against editing or *montage* because, to him, the former represented “true continuity” and reproduced situations more realistically, leaving the interpretation of a particular scene to the viewer rather than to the director’s viewpoint through cutting. Consistent with this view, he argued in support of both the shot-in-depth and the long or uninterrupted take, and commended the switch from silent to talking pictures as one step toward the attainment of total realism on film.

The Russians themselves had derived their methods from American movies, especially those of D. W. Griffith, and American cinema had continued in the “editing” vein. In Hollywood pictures and, through their example, in most pictures everywhere, the guiding rule was to edit the film to conform to the flow of the viewer’s attention, to anticipate and control that attention. The director and editor or cutter chose the fraction of space that they thought the viewer would most want to see each fraction of a second: the hero’s face when he declares his love, then the heroine’s reaction, then the door when someone else enters, and so on, bit by bit. Now the Russians’ use of *montage* had much more complex aims, aesthetic and ideological, than presumed audience gratification of the Hollywood kind, but technically it, too, was a mosaic or discontinuous approach to reality.

Bazin disagreed strongly and, one can legitimately say, religiously. He distrusted *montage* on the ground that its dynamic juxtaposition of images hurtles the viewer along a predetermined path of attention, the aim being to construct a synthetic reality in support of a propagandist or partial (in both senses of the word) message. To Bazin this was a minor heresy, since it arrogated the power of God, who alone is entitled to confer meaning on the universe. But inasmuch as God absents himself from the world and leaves it up to us to detect the signs of his grace, Bazin valued those film artists who respected the mystery embedded in creation.

One such director was the Italian neorealist Vittorio De Sica, who in films such as *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *Umberto D.* (1952) humbly renounced the hubristic display of authorial personality and thus enabled his audience to intuit the numinous significance of people, things, and places. “The *mise en scène* seems to take shape after the fashion of a natural form in living matter,” Bazin wrote in 1951 in “De Sica: *Metteur en scène*.” He recognized that film art always condenses, shapes, and orders the reality it records, but what he looked for in filmmakers was what he found in De Sica’s work: a kind of spiritual disposition toward reality, an intention to serve it by a scrupulous effacement of means and a corresponding unwillingness to do violence to it through ideological abstraction or self-aggrandizing technique.

The best director, then—Orson Welles, Roberto Rossellini, Renoir, and F. W. Murnau also rank high for Bazin—is the one who mediates least, the one who exercises selectivity just sufficiently to put us in much the same relation of regard and choice toward the narrative as we are toward reality in life: a director who thus imitates (not arrogates), within his scale, the divine disposition toward man. Other than such an anomalous director as Miklós Jancsó, to whom one reel equals one shot, most modern movie directors, of course, use the reality of the held, “plumbed” shot as well as the mega-reality of *montage*. One need look no further than the work of Bazin’s venerator Truffaut for an example of this. And such a balance between *montage* and *mise en scène* in film practice doesn’t smugly patronize Bazin, since no one before him had spoken up so fully and influentially for his side of the question.

Given Bazin’s passionate advocacy of this cinema of “transparency,” it may seem puzzling that he is likewise remembered in film history as an architect of the celebrated *politique des auteurs*. Under his tutelage, the younger journalists at *Cahiers* championed such previously patronized talents as Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, and Douglas Sirk, thereby shifting the critical goalposts forever. (Since many of Bazin’s reviewing colleagues, Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, and Jacques Rivette among them, went on to direct their own films—and thus become the first generation of cineastes

whose work was thoroughly grounded in film history and theory—he is also often regarded as the spiritual father of the *nouvelle vague*.) If Bazin's criticism constitutes a cine-theology, it might almost be said that his ideal *auteur* fulfills the role of saint—an inspired intercessor in or with reality.

Bazin's stake in the *politique* can probably be traced back to his involvement in the 1930s Christian existential movement known as personalism, which posited the creative individual who takes risks, makes choices, and exercises his or her God-given faculty of free will. It should be added, however, that Bazin eventually distanced himself from the priestly cult of the director-author because he felt it ignored the commercial context in which most movies were produced—a context where the work of art is not necessarily stamped with the personality of its creator, in which the director may not be the one above all who gives a film its distinctive quality. A keen observer of Hollywood cinema (whose “classical” adaptability he was among the first to appreciate), he nonetheless set its gifted practitioners on a lower rung than those masters who answered to his chaste and simple ideals: Renoir, Charlie Chaplin, De Sica, Rossellini, Carl Dreyer, and Robert Bresson.

Despite differences in stylistic approach, these film artists converge on the same enigmatic reality like the radii of a mandala. If anything joins them more specifically, it's a concern to find the technical means for a concrete rendering of space and time. And this is another charge that Bazin brought against *montage*: its sacrifice of the dimensional integrity of the photographed event. Though we live in duration and extension, *montage* can only cheat on our experience since it is an art of ellipsis. In the name of a higher realism, then, Bazin celebrated the long, uninterrupted take for its capacity to simulate the most elemental aspect of nature—its continuousness. Though Bazin knew, of course, that the camera must restrict itself to slicing out a tiny portion of space, he thought a tactful deployment of the *mise en scène* could sustain the illusion of life spilling over the borders of the frame.

His great hero in this regard was Renoir, who, significantly for Bazin, combined long takes with the technique of deep-focus cinematography. Bazin considered this not just one aesthetic option among others but in fact the very essence of modern cinematic realism. For him, the incalculable virtue of deep focus is its ambiguity: since everything in the film frame can be seen with equal clarity, the audience has to decide for itself what is meaningful or interesting. While a director such as Welles or Wyler (to whose 1941 film *The Little Foxes* Bazin would return again and again) may provide accents or directions in the composition of the image, each nonetheless opens up the possibility that the viewer can, so to speak, do the editing in his or her own head. In short, deep-focus cinematography invites an awareness of both

personal freedom and ethical responsibility; in cinema as in life, we must be free to choose our own salvation.

Possibly the best example of Bazin's advocacy of the long take, photographed in depth, occurs in his essay "The Technique of *Citizen Kane*" (1947), in particular his analysis of the famous scene depicting Susan Alexander Kane's attempted suicide and its immediate aftermath—a scene that takes place entirely in one shot, in deep focus. Traditional editing, the five or six shots into which this scene could be divided, would give us, according to Bazin, "the illusion of being at real events unraveling before us in everyday reality. But this illusion conceals an essential bit of deceit because reality exists in continuous space and the screen presents us, by contrast, with a succession of fragments called "shots." Instead, Welles presents the experience whole, in order to give us the same privileges and responsibilities of choice that life itself affords. In "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," Bazin says further that "*Citizen Kane* is unthinkable shot in any other way than in depth. The uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to the spiritual key or the thematic interpretation we should put on the film is thus built into the very design of the image."

On his death, an obituary notice in *Esprit* cited Bazin as predicting that "the year 2000 will salute the advent of a cinema free of the artificialities of *montage*, renouncing the role of an 'art of reality' so that it may climb to its final level on which it will become once and for all 'reality made art.'" But in this as in so much else, Bazin the jubilant millenarian has been proved exactly wrong. At no other period in its history, in fact, has the cinema been so enslaved by escapist fantasy—and never have we been less certain of the status of the real. Now the digitalization of the image threatens to cut the umbilical cord between photograph and referent on which Bazin founded his entire theory.

Moreover, the particular forms of "transparency" that he admired have themselves grown opaque in just a few decades. Italian neorealism increasingly yields up its melodrama and fakery to all those who would look beneath its surface, while the mannered and rigid *mise en scène* of deep focus betrays the theatricality of its proscenium-like full shot. In the end, every living realism petrifies, to become a relic in the museum of obsolete artistic styles. Yet, as Bazin might have said (of himself above all), the certainty of failure doesn't rule out the necessity for each artist to strive to honor reality according to his or her own lights and those of the time. All it requires is a leap of faith.

Realist or not, unlike all the other authors of major film theories, Bazin was a working or practical critic who wrote regularly about individual films. He never left a systematic book of theory, instead preferring to have implicit theoretical dialogues with filmmakers and other critics through his critical

writing in a number of journals. Indeed, it has been suggested that the best of his criticism has been lost because it occurred in the form of oral presentations and debates at such places as I.D.H.E.C. That may be the case; however, the most important of his essays—some sixty of them culled from the many pieces he wrote for various magazines—were collected in the posthumously published *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (1958–1962). Then there are Bazin's books on Renoir, Welles, and Chaplin, all published after his death, like the four volumes of *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*.

Bazin based his criticism on the films actually made rather than on any preconceived aesthetic or sociological principles; and film theory for the first time became, with him, a matter not of pronouncement and prescription, but of description, analysis, and deduction. He tried to answer the question, not "Is the movie worth the money?" but rather, "If a film is worth seeing, why is it worth seeing as a *film*?" And while the fragmentary method of Bazin's writing may have prevented him from organizing a fully elaborated system like Kracauer's in *Theory of Film* (1960), it gives to his criticism a density of thought, as well as a constructive dependence on examples, that is absent from Kracauer's work.

Bazin's usual procedure was to watch a film closely—more than once, if possible—appreciating its special values and noting its difficulties or contradictions. Then he would imagine the kind of film it was or was trying to be, placing it within a genre or fabricating a new genre for it. He would then formulate the laws of this genre, constantly reverting to examples from this picture and others like it. Finally, these "laws" would be seen in the context of an entire theory of cinema. Thus Bazin begins with the most particular facts available in the individual movie before his eyes, and, through a process of logical yet imaginative reflection, he arrives at a general theory of film art.

In this he showed himself to be a college graduate accustomed to the rigors of scientific analysis, bringing to the study of motion pictures a mind of unremitting objectivity and going about his work very much in the manner of a geologist or zoologist in front of his microscope. Without forgetting the special quality of cinema as an art form, moreover, he never lost sight of film as a social document that reflects its times—not like a mere carbon copy, but more like an X-ray, penetrating the surface of reality so as to bring out the pattern that lies underneath.

Using only fair or mediocre works as a starting point—*The Battle of Stalingrad* (1949–1950) and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), for example—Bazin could write exemplary criticism about the insights they provided into the less familiar aspects of the Soviet and American ways of thinking. His long essay "The Myth of Stalin," which appeared in *Esprit* in the

summer of 1950, acquired a prophetic note in the light of Nikita Khrushchev's famous secret report; and Darryl F. Zanuck's lengthy, tedious super-production of Sloan Wilson's novel provided the occasion for a devastating analysis of the modern American obsession with success at any price.

Every movie, then, even a bad one, is an opportunity for Bazin to develop an historical or sociological hypothesis, or to postulate about the manner of artistic creation. Bazin founds his critical method on the fecundity of paradox—dialectically speaking, something true that seems false and is all the truer for seeming so. Starting from a film's most paradoxical aspect, he demonstrates its utter artistic necessity. Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) and Jean Cocteau's *Les Parents terribles* (1948), for instance, are all the more cinematic for the former's scrupulous faithfulness to its novelistic source and the latter's strict adherence to its dramatic antecedent; thus for Bazin they are instances of "impure" or "mixed" cinema. A special effect, for him, is most effectively fantastic when it is also the most realistic; films are most sacred when they mostly work against the medium's affinity for religious iconography; and a picture like Federico Fellini's *I vitelloni* (1953), Bazin argues, reveals most about the souls of its characters as it focuses most exclusively on appearances. He even anticipates deconstructive analysis by justifying the shortcomings or anomalies of so-called masterpieces, maintaining that they are as necessary to the success of these works as their aesthetic virtues.

Above all, one principle lies at the basis of every piece Bazin ever penned. It can be called "the tactful principle," and this for two reasons. First, he had a way of criticizing films that he did not like which was firm and without concessions, but which was also devoid of any bitterness or meanness. This made him appear to be the kind of man "you would love to be criticized by," to paraphrase an expression applied to Bazin by no less than Erich von Stroheim. Second, this principle of tact in fact characterizes a method of subtle analysis and differentiation applied to the complex and varied living organisms that were films to Bazin—organisms whose delicate mechanisms he tried to discern without losing sight of or even obscuring their general movement. His development of a critical argument, his caution and reservations, the frequent "granted," "to be sure," "you will object," "and yet"—none of these betray any negative spirit or mediocre taste, but instead a nuanced attitude bent on discovering purer and purer qualities and distinctions.

There is in Bazin's thought and writing no Byzantine attitude, no ornamental preciousness, no tendency to "split hair," for which some of his critical opponents reproached him (or if he did so, it was horizontally). There was only an artistic, even clinical inclination to deconstruct complex constructions, to join together separate lines here and there, or to disassociate those lines only

in order to reassemble them some place else. Henri Bergson's influence is implicit here and explicit in Bazin's famous essay on the ontology of the photographic image, as well as in his excellent article on Henri-Georges Clouzot's 1956 film *The Picasso Mystery* (a piece actually titled "A Bergsonian Film"). This influence is equally present everywhere in Bazin's work, it must be said, as when he contemplates the notions of time and memory or confronts the forces of change and flux.

If most of Bazin's articles—the long theoretical essays together with the short analytical ones—relentlessly pose the question "What is cinema?" it is not because motion pictures were for him the objects of a mechanical, secondary application of some pre-existing theory, but because he had first designed and refined a rigorous *method* consisting of a series of questions to put to the cinema, even if this meant that a picture forced him to change his initial hypothesis on account of its aesthetic novelty (as happened in the case of Renoir's American films). In an article from *Cahiers du cinéma* titled "The Sum of André Bazin," Éric Rohmer aptly noted the partial provenance of Bazin's method: the fields of geology, botany, zoology, physics, and chemistry, on which he leaned heavily for a series of splendid metaphors that recur throughout his writing.

That is to say, precisely the fields where the most powerful and transforming movement of time is the most obvious: slow, invisible ripenings that change the landscape or sudden, instantaneous transmutations that alter this or that state (like the crystallization of an oversaturated solution in response to a minor shock or jolt). The cinema is the field *par excellence* of such unstable balances, of fragile or even fatal symbioses. And Bazin waited with a simultaneously vexed and excited attention—almost a morbid anxiety—for the appearance of catalysts that could alter "the purity of filmic purity" at any particular moment or gradually, over the course of a movie's length.

And do I need to recall here Bazin's unfailing ability to detect, analyze, and of course admire new things? He supported Welles in his time against the resistance of puzzled technicians and the conservatism of his timorous fellow filmmakers; he supported neorealism, in its ideal form, against the advocates of "classical" moviemaking style; he supported Rossellini against those who, as of *Europe '51* (1952), were ready to burn him at the stake; he supported the ever resilient will of Chaplin against those who wanted to bury him with the character of the Tramp; and he supported Renoir's seemingly confused changes of direction against those who wanted merely to see *Toni* (1935) over and over again.

But Bazin also supported the marginal forms of cinema (scientific or geographical, touristic or travel, amateur or nonprofessional) against the harsh defenders of standard filmic formats; he supported the advent both of

CinemaScope and of television; finally, shortly before his death, he supported the emergence of filmmakers who were bringing with them a new artistic freedom (Astruc, Marker, Resnais, Rouch, Vadim, Varda, Chabrol, and Truffaut). To renew Bazin's legacy today, then, is not simply to write the umpteenth essay on this or that film, theory, or critic, but to apply some of his strength, sharpness, and humor to the chaos of composite, "impure" pictures that come out everywhere, every day. It is to distinguish original cinematic experiment from falsely inventive sham, in the way that Bazin did—could not help but do—with every fiber of his being.

Truly mourned by many—among them filmmakers such as Renoir, Truffaut, Visconti, and Bresson—André Bazin died just ahead of the movement that placed cinema in college classrooms. He did his teaching in film clubs, at conferences, and in published articles. Yet while many people now make their livings teaching film (and far better livings than Bazin ever enjoyed), some teachers look back with longing to that era when reflection about the movies took place in a natural arena rather than in the hothouse atmosphere common to universities. Film theory as well as criticism is for the most part now an acquired discipline, not a spontaneous activity, and the cinema is seen as a field of "research" rather than as an aesthetic activity—indeed, a human reality. Current film scholars, including those hostile to his views, look in wonder to Bazin, who in 1958 was in command of a complete, coherent, and thoroughly humanistic view of the cinema.

Though he didn't live to see the first flowering of academic film theory in the late 1960s, the pedagogic side of Bazin would doubtless have been gratified that cinema was no longer a trivial pursuit but henceforth would be a serious discipline calling for the most concentrated attention and rigor on the part of its adherents. Yet the poet in him—the fecund wielder of figure and metaphor, who drew on the fathomless well of his own imaginative intuition—would just as surely have experienced a sense of loss. For the scholarly discourse of cinema soon developed a pomp and rigidity that increasingly excluded those dazzling imaginative leaps that were at the heart of Bazin's prose style.

It was his good fortune, then, to write in the period just before film studies congealed into an institution. As a working critic, contributing irregularly and—so he thought—ephemerally to the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma*, Bazin could allow his mind free play in an atmosphere as yet unhampered by Jesuitical nit-picking. He enjoyed the privilege of being a critic able to cut to the quick of an argument with no other justification than his own unerring instinct. In consequence, Bazin's thought is infinitely more concrete, nimble, and flexible than the lucubrations of those obliged to flag each theoretical moved with a sheaf of footnotes.

Yet it was for his very virtues that Bazin came under attack by the budding generation of film pedants—and, ironically, almost at the same moment as he was being canonized as a classic. Bazin, it was claimed, refused to follow due process. His vaunted theory of realism amounted to little more than a loose patchwork of ideas that never coalesced into a stringent system, but instead remained dangerously impressionistic and often flatly contradictory. Professional intellectuals who jumped on Bazin's alleged incoherence, however, also underrated the profoundly dialectical nature of his thinking. To put it another way, they were stone-blind to Bazin's poetic genius—his ability to hold contrary terms in a state of paradoxical suspension that transcends mere theory and approaches mystical comprehension.

But there was worse to come. For Bazin, a rhapsodist of the cinema and a true believer in its perfectibility, had replied to his own sweeping question "What is cinema?" with a resoundingly affirmative answer—whereas the new breed of theorists responded to the same question increasingly in the negative. In the wake of the 1960s counterculture, film-studies departments across Europe as well as the United States were transformed into hubs of self-styled revolutionary activity. Fueled by the absolutist views of the French structuralist and Marxist Louis Althusser (who proclaimed the function of the mass media to be an endless endorsement of ruling-class values), radical academics came not to praise cinema but to bury it. And deconstructionists, structuralists, semioticians, Marxists, and other such fellow travelers of the left reductively reviled Bazin with lethal epithets like "bourgeois idealist," "mystical humanist," and "reactionary Catholic."

Perhaps it was impossible to avoid a head-on collision between Bazin's meditative humanism and a knee-jerk dogmatism that saw popular cinema as an ideological apparatus—an efficient mechanism for turning out docile citizens of oppressive nations. As the most eminent critic of the preceding decade of the 1950s in France, Bazin became a figurehead for the establishment, and the militant new regime at *Cahiers* hammered him for his supposed political complicity (an Oedipal rebellion if ever there was one). Crossing over to Great Britain by way of the influential theoretical journal *Screen*, the sport of Bazin-bashing proliferated throughout the 1970s and 1980s. How could anyone be fool enough to suppose that the cinema was capable of recording reality directly, when the reciprocal insights of semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis had demonstrated that human perception is always mediated by language? It might almost be said that the whole Byzantine edifice of contemporary theory sprang out of an irresistible desire to prove Bazin wrong.

Nowadays, of course, it is a truth universally acknowledged that reality is a construction, and Bazin's reputed innocence on this score no longer raises sectarian hackles—more like a condescending smile instead. Admittedly, his earnest belief in the intrinsically realist vocation of film puts him on the far side of postmodern relativism and doubt. Yet insofar as a compulsive skepticism and a jaded cynicism have become the orthodoxies of our age, this may be the moment to start rehabilitating reality—and André Bazin. All the more so because Bazin's formalist and spiritualist enterprise may have aimed, finally, less at discovering a conservative synthesis, communion, or unity in art as in life, than at freeing aesthetic pleasure from dramaturgical exigency alone, at implicating the viewer in an active relationship with the screen, and at freeing cinematic space and time from slavery to the anecdotal. As such, Bazin was, as if anything, a species of transcendentalist, a kind of cinematic Hegel, who proposed to discover the nature of filmic reality as much by investigating the process of critical thought as by examining the artistic objects of sensory experiences themselves, among which he would have welcomed digital film and web-movies, even as he welcomed the advent of television in the 1950s (in addition to writing about this then-new medium in his final years).

Despite Bazin's tragically premature death of leukemia in 1958, he left much material behind—in his four-volume *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* as well as in such magazines as *Esprit*, *L'Écran français*, and *France-Observateur*—some of the best of which I gathered in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the '40s and '50s* (Routledge, 1997). To this earlier work my *André Bazin and Italian Cinema* may be considered a complement. This new book contains, for the first time in English, all of Bazin's writing about neorealism (writing that he himself never collected in French), a movement that had a profound global impact on the evolution of cinematic style and subject matter during the post-World War II period. For this reason, *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* performs a scholarly, consolidating service of great benefit to students and teachers of film.

This new collection addresses such prominent directors as Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, Luchino Visconti, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Pietro Germi; lesser known but important films such as *The Roof*, *Forbidden Christ*, and *Love in the City*, as well as major works like *Umberto D.* and *Senso*; and vital topics like realism versus reality, film censorship, neorealism's eclipse amid postwar Italy's economic prosperity, and the relationship between neorealism and comedy, on the one hand, and neorealism and propaganda, on the other. *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* also features a sizable scholarly apparatus: including an extensive index, a contextual introduction to Bazin's life and work, a Bazin bibliography in French and English, a bibliography of

critical writings on Italian neorealism, and complete credits for the films of Italian neorealism (including precursors and successors). This volume thus represents a major contribution to the still growing academic discipline of cinema studies.

Yet *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* is aimed, as Bazin would want, not only at scholars, teachers, and critics of film, but also at educated or cultivated moviegoers and students of the cinema at all levels. In his modesty and simplicity André Bazin considered himself such a student, such an “interested” filmgoer, and it is to the spirit of his humility before the god of cinema, as well as to the steadfastness of his courage in life, that this book is dedicated.

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