Realism

In the 1850s, the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) condemned realism as a "war on imagination." In the 1960s, cinematic realism came under sustained attack for being an imaginary construct. This attack took several forms, all of which argue against the ontological realism of cinema. Realism, in these views, was nothing more than the product of what Roland Barthes called a "reality effect." The realist tendency may very well have been associated with leftist politics, but for all these critics and scholars its insistence upon the transparency of the cinematographic image was little more than a pernicious bourgeois illusion.

ANDRÉ BAZIN
b. Angers, France, 8 April 1918, d. 11 November 1958

Fifty years after his death, André Bazin remains the world's most important film critic and theorist. Bazin started writing about film in Paris in 1943 and went on to produce an extremely varied and prodigiously enthusiastic body of work. During his short career, he authored nearly 3,000 articles, published in a variety of journals, including, most famously, *Cahiers du cinéma* , which he cofounded in 1952. An indefatigable defender of filmmakers such as F. W. Murnau, Jean Renoir, Orson Welles, Charlie Chaplin, and Roberto Rossellini, Bazin also influenced a generation

of French filmmakers who cut their teeth as critics at *Cahiers du cinéma* and went on to become the French New Wave, including François Truffaut to whom he was mentor and adoptive father.

Bazin wrote about such varied topics as Hollywood westerns and musicals, theater, film, and animation, but he is best remembered for his spirited defense of realism. In his famous article, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1945), Bazin presented his core argument for cinematographic realism: photography and cinema allow a mechanical reproduction of reality unseen in any previous art form. Photography differs from painting in that it produces not a likeness, but the object itself snatched from "the conditions of time and space that govern it."

For Bazin, this realism was enhanced through certain stylistic techniques and choices, including its tendency toward on-location shooting, which helped confirm the existence of a world beyond the screen. Deep focus and minimal editing promoted an ambiguity of vision that more closely resembled the spectator's perception of reality. According to Bazin, films that use depth of focus allow the spectator's eye to wander around the picture and to determine the importance of each object on the screen. Starting in the late 1960s, theorists under the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Louis Althusser's Marxism argued that what Bazin called realism was nothing more than an illusion. More recently, the philosopher Noël Carroll has judged that Bazin's realism is based on

logically inconsistent assumptions about resemblance.

Throughout his essays, Bazin tied the films he loved most to a form of asceticism. This austerity was a way of cutting through the rhetorical artifice that had invaded commercial cinema and modern life itself. The cinematic image, for Bazin, allows just enough detachment for us to contemplate the mysteries of the world, whether they take the form of "a reflection on a damp sidewalk," the pockmarks on a character's face, or Ingrid Bergman walking through the ruins of Pompeii.

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Phil Watts

Perhaps the most systematic questioning of the premises of realism came from Christian Metz, a film scholar who had studied with Barthes. Metz argues that realism and its attendant belief in the transparency of the

Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami ties the techniques of realism to the process of filmmaking in Ta'm e guilass (Taste of Cherry , 1997).

photographic image is an illusion. Borrowing from semiotics and psychoanalysis, Metz sets out to show that the cinematic image brings together a series of visual, musical, and verbal codes that the spectator then deciphers in an attempt to make meaning. Film and the photographic image do not provide any type of direct access to the real, according to Metz, but are rather one instance of a symbolic system whose model is language. Resemblance, in this view, is based upon codes and conventions; the screen is not a window onto the world, but a mirror, reflecting back to spectators their own ideologies and sense of identity. Metz's radical reformulation of cinema spectatorship coincided with the writings of Marxists, working at *Cahiers du cinéma* and of feminist cinéphiles associated with the British journal *Screen* . For critics such as Jean-Louis Comolli, realism was simply a bourgeois ordering of the world that served

to maintain capitalist ideology, while for British feminist scholar Laura Mulvey realism, as all film forms, is structured by the unconscious of patriarchal society. Mulvey insists that film should not be understood as a record of reality, but rather as a reorganization of reality in a way that is fundamentally unjust to certain people, most particularly women and minorities because of its informing patriarchal ideology.

A more formalist questioning of the tenets of the realist tendency has been offered by theories of intertextuality. Basing themselves on the findings of Russian formalists and French theorists, proponents of an intertextual approach see film not as an opening on the world, but as a series of references to other films and other works of art. Michael Iampolski, for instance, describes films as a series of "quotes" that interrupt the narrative and send the spectator back to other texts. Spectators understand what they are watching by patching together all these references, not by referring to a world off-screen. For the analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman, realism is entirely relative to the culture from which it issues. "Realistic representation," writes Goodman, "depends not upon imitation or illusion or information but upon inculcation." Bazin's belief that cinema's ontological realism opened up the world as it is, reveals itself, in Goodman's argument, to be a culturally biased conception.

The most recent questioning of the realist tendency has come from cognitive film theory, in particular its

consideration of digital images. A strictly Bazinian approach would view computer-generated imagery (CGI) as a form of animation or painting. But for Stephen Prince, CGI poses new challenges to realism and the theories of resemblance on which it is based. For Prince, it no longer makes sense to think of an image or a sequence in a film as either realist or formalist. Whether they are watching documentaries, epics, or romantic comedies, individuals make meaning out of films in much the same way, basing their evaluations on the same set of assumptions, visual cues, and experiences.

All these critiques of realism have almost put the ideal of film out of reach as a threshold to the world. Still, certain movies have recently renewed with the realist tradition, while at the same time developing reflection on the status of the image. The American director Charles Burnett (b. 1944), whose works include *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and *To Sleep with Anger* (1990) claims that the films of Italian neorealism and the work of Renoir made possible his own filming of the stories of African Americans today. In films such as *Bread and Roses* (2000) and *Sweet Sixteen* (2002), Loach has maintained a fidelity to the political project and the stylistic innovation of British social realism, all the while foregrounding the politics of representation. In Belgium, the Dardenne brothers have made films such as *La Promesse* (*The Promise* , 1997) and *Rosetta* , effectively employing the hand-held camera, minimal makeup, relatively unknown actors, and the natural

lighting of cinéma vérité. Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991) is a series of seemingly random long takes offering both a portrait of Austin, Texas and a subtle reflection on how images organize the world around us. And in films such as *Nema-ye Nazdik* (*Close Up* , 1990) and *Ta'm e guilass* (*Taste of Cherry* , 1997), Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami (b. 1940) has tied realism's revelation of the world to a meditation upon the filmmaking process by which this world is framed, captured, and constructed.

SEE ALSO *[Expressionism](); [Ideology](); [Marxism](); [Narrative](); [Neorealism]()*

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