



STUDYING FILM WITH ANDRÉ BAZIN

BLANDINE JORET



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Studying Film with André Bazin

Film Theory in Media History

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In loving memory of my parents,
Anne Eeckelaert and Paul Joret.

This book is the result of several years of research, first as a fellow at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, then as a lecturer in Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam. I'm grateful to my former supervisors as well as the members of my jury for their attentive reading and often argumentative comments on my work. My acknowledgments also go to the editors and reviewers at Amsterdam University Press. I thank my colleagues and students at the UvA, and my friends here in the Netherlands and abroad. Finally, I'm grateful to my brothers and sisters, and most of all to Thomas.

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Preface

This book is not so much a study on André Bazin as it is a study *with* him on film. Deceased in 1958 at the age of forty, his ideas and theories have been praised, criticized, defended and appropriated to the point where much scholarship on him is either antagonistic or apologetic. Whereas the following pages are invested in testing the relevance of his work for contemporary film and media studies, I do not aim to defend nor appropriate Bazin. Instead, I wish to make his criticism (the metaphors, the references, the paradoxes) reverberate with contemporary perspectives and thereby extend the potential of his lineage today.

Studying film... Bazin's time as a film critic in the 1940s and 1950s, spanning from the Nazi occupation of France into the post-war era in which film culture started to flourish in Paris, was marked not only by the gradual institutionalization of film studies at universities but also by the emergence of the first comprehensive film history books. Established at the Sorbonne right after the Second World War, the Filmology movement can be said to have initiated the 'serious' study of cinema, leaning on academic methodologies that were anthropological, sociological, psychological or philosophical in nature. With their laboratories set up to perform cognitive and behavioural experiments; their books, lectures, and conferences on cinema; and – let's not forget – a theater for screenings, the university embarked on a rigorous analysis of film. And, as the seventh art started to outgrow its critics, there was a real necessity to document its evolution in film histories. Bazin, though a passionate teacher and supportive of film books (historical or other), was not a film historian nor was he a scholar. As the other visionary French critic Serge Daney puts it, 'Bazin, educator, would never become professor. He became more than that: an initiator'.¹

... with Bazin. To him, education and cinema were inextricably linked, but rather than finding place in the sterile laboratories or lecture halls at the Sorbonne, his work was socially oriented. By the time of the Liberation, he had brought film clubs to factories, farming communities and literary as well as student societies, on a national and international level. Around 1945, along with the immense amount of written criticism he would produce for newspapers, weekly and monthly magazines, he became responsible for the film programs at *Travail et culture*, an organization involved in popular education. There, for Bazin, lay the potential of cinema: a popular

1 Daney, 1983a, p. 42.

art capable of educating and integrating the people. Reading through his notes on preparing film screenings and discussions, one could easily conclude that Bazin in fact invented film analysis as it is taught in every single film program today. The photograph on the cover of this book was taken during this time. He is in his office which had become a cinephile hub in Paris attracting, among others, Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, the experimental pedagogue Fernand Deligny, as well as François Truffaut, at that time a delinquent teenager whose life would be forever altered by Bazin and cinema.² In 1951, he co-founded *Cahiers du cinéma*, still associated with its famous yellow cover and with Bazin. An initiator he certainly was, and still is today.

After Bazin. Dedicated to the memory of Bazin, Truffaut's first feature film, *400 Blows* (1959), marks the beginning of Bazin's afterlife. In an interview at its premiere in Cannes, Truffaut implicitly describes the film's famous direct address and freeze frame: 'My film ends there, where I first met Bazin.'³ Without resolution, this shot must reverberate, expand and extend in the minds of whoever is watching: we, the spectators, are its reverse shot. The same principle applies to Bazin's texts, which are never set in stone but imply the reader's interpretation. Decades later, facing an entirely different film culture, Daney adds to this:

When we reread Bazin, it's something else that moves us. The quality of his style, his carefully phrased remarks, his measured tone, everything which qualified his work at the time as "constructive criticism" – something that has disappeared today.⁴

As he points to the many changes in the evolution of film, from Bazin's realist discourse to advertising aesthetics of the digital image, Daney continues: 'it is in this manner that Bazin, ad absurdum, remains present.'⁵ If not Bazin's most comprehensive interpreter, Daney is his most imaginative reader: he reinvents Bazin by putting his reasoning to work, to test it. Though the primary sources of this study are Bazin's texts, I occasionally return to these names – Truffaut, Deligny, Daney – as well as others, to include the influence

2 On Bazin's as well as Deligny's intimate connection with Truffaut, see Dudley Andrew's 'Every Teacher Needs a Truant: Bazin and *L'Enfant sauvage*' in *A Companion to François Truffaut* (2013). From their involvement in popular education, the chapter beautifully traces the triangular relation between cinephilia, education and rebellion.

3 Truffaut, 1959.

4 Daney, 1983a, p. 45.

5 Ibid.

they have had either on Bazin or his afterlife. As a scholar, furthermore, I hope this book contributes in its own way to an already established and still growing body of research on Bazin's role in film and media studies.

Intellectual Justification

Reading Bazin today almost certainly means testing him. As a cultural critic of his time, he was sensitive to the cultural/political/industrial landscape that both shapes and is shaped by the media (film in particular, but also TV, radio and advertising). In other words: flexibility, evolution and change are cornerstone themes in his work. About the dependency of film theory on the actual evolution of film techniques, for example, Bazin wrote:

There are great silent films and there are great sound films. We already know masterpieces in colour, and tomorrow we might have excellent ones in 3D. Let us not repeat the same mistake that film theorists of the silent period made, who spent all their time decrying the advent of sound, to no avail.⁶

His concepts, too, were not fixed but formed by specific film analyses. Of realism, Bazin had said during a film club debate that it is 'an empty concept, which we will try to fill up by analysing this film'.⁷ Bazin's way of thinking is pervaded by a need for flexibility, which is the benefit of being a film critic more than a theorist. That said, this flexibility resulted not only in an immensely diverse but also an inherently fragmented and ambiguous oeuvre, which complicates theoretical studies intending to either generalize or scrutinize his work.

The two very first posthumous studies on Bazin, published in the honorary issue of *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1959, already address these complementary premises. Eric Rohmer maintains that Bazin's so-called 'Summa' can be structured around basic principles ('ontology and language', 'film and other arts', 'film and sociology', 'neo-realism') that form 'an *a priori* plan rather than an arrangement after the fact'.⁸ Georges Sadoul argues that 'the thousands of pages he wrote and published have been, following a

6 Bazin, 1953c, EC p. 1238; Transl. Andrew, 2014, p. 289.

7 Bazin, 1947e, EC p. 310.

8 Rohmer, 1959, p. 37.

phrase he liked, an enormous *work in progress*.⁹ Whether or not there is a methodical coherence in Bazin's work has remained a much-debated topic up to this day. Jean Ungaro, for example, writes that: 'Bazin is inevitably a theoretician, he has the taste and the preoccupation for abstraction and generalization', yet continues with: 'I am not sure whether there is one theory of Bazin because these theorizations lack that which would unify them in a coherent system.'¹⁰ And in "The Structure of Bazin's Thought" (1972), Brian Henderson argues that Bazin's writing in fact develops around a dichotomous structure of critical historical work on the one hand, and an ahistorical ontological theory on the other: 'Despite its realist terminology, the history system is not assimilable to the ontology system.'¹¹ This statement in fact summarizes the major critiques on Bazin throughout the second half of the twentieth century: with an emphasis on the Ontology essay, his entire oeuvre would be deemed 'ahistorical', in other words outdated. The critiques are manifold, but generally run along these lines: if cinema is a realist art form, and this realism is grounded in the photographic image of film, then Bazin's 'theory' could never account for the many changes in technology, aesthetics or politics of the past decades.

Throughout this book, I maintain that Bazin's criticism surpasses the dichotomy between a realist theory and historical criticism. Like many previous comprehensive studies on Bazin, my starting point is his affirmation of cinema as a fundamentally realist art form; unlike many of them, however, I approach Bazin's realism from the perspective of myth rather than ontology. Notwithstanding the canonical importance of 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' (1945), Bazin's examination of ontology is more or less sparse, whereas the presence of myth in his work by far exceeds the scope of a single study like 'The Myth of Total Cinema' (1946). Theoretically speaking, myth in Bazin stands for a cinema that is 'not yet invented';¹² applied in his criticism, it functions as masquerade each time film shows one of its many faces, from Chaplin's comedy to Stalin's propaganda. This flexibility inherent in myth, then, comes closer to the open concept of realism itself, and ultimately to the immense variety in Bazin's critical work: Tom Gunning's detailed study of the Myth essay rightfully concludes that 'Bazin himself has not yet been invented.'¹³ If Bazin has been a "negative fetish,"

9 Sadoul, 1959, p. 51.

10 Ungaro, 2000, p. 223.

11 Henderson, 1972, p. 26.

12 Bazin, 1946/1958, EC p. 2559; Transl. Barnard, 2009, p.17.

13 Gunning, 2011, p. 125.

a *foil* reminiscent of the crucifix in a vampire movie, for a predominantly structuralist and semiotic film *theory* in the mid-sixties,¹⁴ today the tide has turned. With several scholars rereading his texts, first in archives and now finally published integrally, a multi-faceted Bazin capable of commenting on today's media landscape is slowly but surely surfacing. Some try to outline a Bazin 2.0 by moving beyond Bazin, while others provide new insights in previously unknown texts. The combination of realism (Bazin the theorist) and myth (Bazin the critic) in this book, then, enables me to do both simultaneously: to show that his most fundamental concept, realism, is and always had *to be continued*.

Each chapter in this book is centered on a specific theme: film criticism versus theory (Chapter 1: Studying Film), realism (Chapter 2: The Art of Reality), impurity (Chapter 3: Film and the Other Arts) and evolution (Chapter 4: A Matter of Form). Starting from such key topics in Bazin's discourse, I then work through a series of implied paradoxes, derived either from his own body of work or from the actualization of his criticism in a contemporary context: if one technique can change the foundations of film theory, can we still have theory? How much realism is too much? Can a painting, following Bazin's logic, be cinematographic? Are 3-D and Virtual Reality the negation of his discourse? Following Daney's directive, then, I paired my analyses of Bazin's texts with contemporary case studies that engage, either thematically or technically, with his discourse – many times *ad absurdum*. In doing so, I hope to preserve as much as possible this flexibility of the critic's thought which, as his friend and colleague Roger Leenhardt phrased it, 'allows for the pleasure, I would almost say the emotion, of reading Bazin'.¹⁵

Considering the size of Bazin's oeuvre, finally, this study is by no means exhaustive. With his *Écrits complets* amounting to 2,681 texts, I have read approximately a quarter and ended up including less than 55 in this book. My research owes a great deal, if not everything, to the Bazin archives.¹⁶ Published

14 Joubert-Laurencin, 2014, p. 8.

15 Leenhardt, 1959, p. 15.

16 Prior to this integral publication in 2018, Bazin's work was held in two archives: one compiled by Hervé Joubert-Laurencin located at the Institut national d'histoire de l'art in Paris and another held by Dudley Andrew at Yale University in New Haven. The analyses described in this book are based on archival research at Yale University, where I accessed many untranslated, original French texts. To increase coherence in Anglophone Bazin studies, wherever English translations of a particular text were available, I reference those and, in some cases, modify them slightly. All other translations, including those of francophone scholarship on Bazin, are my own.

The location references for the texts from Bazin in the *Écrits complets* are indicated in the bibliography with EC, followed by the section number and the index number of the specific text (e.g. 'EC I, 1' for section 1, text number 1). Specific page numbers from the *Ecrits complets*

originally in journals, newspapers, and monthly magazines rather than encyclopaedias or scholarly books, the two monolithic volumes published in 2018 restore an initial accessibility to Bazin's writing. At the same time, they emphasize a kind of 'archival' reading experience, which perhaps typifies Bazin's work today: with editorial montage kept to a minimum, the sheer amount of texts implies the reader's selection, ordering, interpretation and discovery. Already in 1958, collecting only the slightest fragment of his oeuvre, Bazin writes that:

It is true that we could have, and perhaps should have, fused these articles into a continuous essay. We have renounced doing so out of fear of falling into didactic artifice and preferred to trust the reader and leave it only to him or her to discover if this exists: namely, the intellectual justification for the reconciliation of these texts.¹⁷

'Editing prohibited!': Bazin's notorious aesthetic commandment applies to his texts as well, which turns reading Bazin today into an almost cinematic experience. In a preface to this new monumental publication, its editor Hervé Joubert-Laurencin takes on an attitude similar to that of Bazin. Rather than grouping these texts under pre-set thematic clusters, he stresses the necessity to:

leave it to the new reader, expert or novice, scholar or not, the chance to find his own reference points and to compose his own thoughts. Let's remind ourselves also that, for Bazin, 'all films are born free and with equal rights', and that we can therefore, without betraying it, apply this republican maxim onto his own texts.¹⁸

Bazin's reference here to Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a methodological statement and already hints at his looming stance against an upcoming approach to film analysis: auteur theory. By praising the distinctive style of certain auteur-filmmakers, Truffaut and the other young critics at *Cahiers* risked ignoring the possible importance of lesser-known filmmakers or surprising newcomers: to them, *some films were more equal than others*. Concluding his famed response to them and affirming the necessity of

have been added to all citations used in this book, indicated in footnote references as follows:
'EC p. 1.'

17 Bazin, 1958a, p.7/EC p. 2554.

18 Joubert-Laurencin, 2018, p. 31.

close film analysis, Bazin wrote: ‘author, yes, but *of what?*’¹⁹ And indeed, the same can be said of Bazin scholarship of the past decades: whether praising or disparaging Bazin, many scholars have indulged in ‘lazy and deceptive repetitions of arguments claimed to be Bazin’s’,²⁰ producing a distant, false memory of the texts, while others more recently have emphasized the necessity for closely analysing the ‘bazinian text’.²¹ With this book, I want to push this motto even further and show that there is no Bazin theory: Bazin, today, is *an empty concept that we should try to fill up by analysing his texts*.

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19 Bazin, 1957b, EC p. 2156.

20 Joubert-Laurencin, 2014, p. 16.

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Filmography

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