

INTRODUCTION

By Hugh Gray

IT IS NEARLY nine years since André Bazin died, but the critical insight that illuminates his writings has not grown dim with the years. It continues to shine forth in its very personal way, and the arguments through which he diffused it offer a brilliant example of a combination of the critical spirit and the spirit of synthesis, each operating with equal force. Bazin's thought, while rooted in a rich cultural tradition, produces conclusions that at times are forcefully expressed in terms drawn from contemporary science—an ambivalence which contributes markedly to his style and as markedly to the problems of a translator. Scattered among allusions drawn from literature, poetry, philosophy, and religion are analogies from chemistry, electricity, geology, psychology, and physics. Indeed, there are moments when one pictures Bazin as a poet in dungarees. Then again there are moments when one is aware of the teacher he was trained to be, was denied the opportunity to be (inside the classroom), yet has succeeded in being both in France and abroad. Those who, so to speak, had the good fortune to sit at his feet, tell us that what remains on paper is but a fragment of his wondrous discourse.

What Is Cinema?

André Bazin was born on April 18, 1918, at Angers. He received his early schooling at La Rochelle, where he was taken at the age of five. Destined for the teaching profession, he entered training college first at La Rochelle and subsequently studied at Versailles. Then, in 1938, he transferred to the École Normale Supérieure at St. Cloud. He completed his studies there with a brilliant qualifying examination but, because of a stammer, was eventually refused a teaching post.

His intense interest in films seems to date from his early days in the army, to which he was called in 1939. Guy Leger, his then companion in arms, recounts that from the very outset Bazin tended to center his interest on speculative questions relating to film. "He was already attracted to the study of the true value of the cinematographic image as well as to the historical and social aspects of cinema. At that time, when the world seemed to be going to extremes in another direction, we turned to motion pictures as an escape from the 'phony war.'" What Guy Leger here says concerning their common interest is a foreshadowing of what was repeated constantly throughout the years by everyone who knew and shared his interest in the cinema. "What had been for me up to then only a pastime now began to appear, under the tutelage of André, a product of the age of the image, something that needed study if one was to savor its true flavor and understand its real significance; to make out its true language and to discover its objective laws."

Another friend, the critic P. A. Touchard, said of him early in their acquaintance that he found Bazin deeply impressive not only for his charm and his generosity of spirit but for his prodigious capacity for critical analysis as well as for an intense poetic sensibility. "No one," says Touchard, "had a greater command of words than this man who stammered when he spoke—and who had likewise a fantastic appetite for the consumption of scientific, philosophical, and abstract terms. Yet he was in no sense a pedant, remaining ever in command of the appropriate use of all these terms."

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During the war he was a member of an organization—the Maison des Lettres—which was founded to take care of young students whose regular scholastic routine the war had disturbed. There he founded a ciné-club which developed out of meetings at which he defied the Nazi forces of occupation and the Vichy government by showing films they had banned for political reasons. His passion for the cinema, we are told and can readily believe, was part of his passion for culture and truth, allied to a moral authority which gave him the command over others that he exercised over himself—not only throughout a long inner spiritual conflict but also throughout a lifelong heroic struggle with the disease that was to take him off at the height of his intellectual powers. It has indeed been said that he was something of a mystic, although one would rather incline to think of him instead as a poet very much of his time. Always too there was in him that capacity characteristic of great teachers to bring out what was best in others, well described by Touchard as a “Socratic capacity to make those who talked to him seem intelligent to themselves.” Indeed one might call him the Aristotle of the cinema and his writing its *Poetics*.

At the end of the occupation he was appointed film critic of *Le Parisien Libéré*. Thus began his formal life as a public critic and with it the development of a type of reviewing of films the like of which had not up to then existed. One of his singular achievements was to be able, without any concessions to popularizing, to make his insights understood on all levels. It was said of him at the time that in ten years he would become the outstanding French film critic. It took him less time than that. To us, his most commonly known association is with *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* which under his direction became one of the world's most distinguished film publications.

Meanwhile his other film activities multiplied, among them an appointment as director of cultural services at the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques. He was thus appointed to a school at last. At a time when the word *filmology*, now well estab-

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lished, did not exist, "by his own efforts Bazin created," says Jean-Louis Tellenay, "a cinematographic culture." Nor can one adequately estimate the actual effect of his work on the cinema itself. "André staggered me," Tellenay continues, "at this time by his knowledge of a subject which one day, all unsuspected by us, would become a veritable discipline to be admitted into the halls of the Sorbonne."

Tellenay is here referring to the Institute of Filmology, as it came to be known, the philosophy of which was first set forth by Cohen-Séat in his *Essai sur les principes d'une philosophie du cinéma* (1958).

To those who hold that the intellect, as represented in the works of Bazin, divides man from his fellows and separates him off from the world, one need only offer the verdict of a man who knew Bazin intimately—Alexandre Astruc. "This theoretician, this intellectual, this idealist, this believer, was considerably closer to the realities of life and to his fellow man than those who reject the approach to life of a Bazin." François Truffaut, whom he befriended and whom he helped "probably more than anyone else," found that even to be scolded by Bazin was a delight, "such a heat did he generate in his rare moments of indignation. When it was over, one never said, 'how wrong I was,' only 'how right he is! how terrific!'"

Robert Bresson, as usual highly perceptive, points out a marked characteristic of Bazin's method. "He had a curious way of taking off from what was false to arrive ultimately at what was true." In a sense he was following in this, possibly quite deliberately, the old scholastic method: to state the thesis and to follow the statement with a denial before proceeding to the proof. However you see it, each essay is virtually a scientific demonstration, as Eric Rohmer points out in his assessment of the first volume of *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* "These pages, each relating to an individual case, are nevertheless part of the unfolding of a methodical plan which is now revealed to us. Nor is there the slightest doubt but that it was so conceived from the beginning, rather than being the outcome of

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a series of afterthoughts. While logic in his unfolding rather than chronology is his aim, it is strangely significant that the volume opens with an article on *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, which is one of his earliest pieces. It is this scientific aspect of his work that I would like to dwell on without underestimating the art of it," Rohmer says. "Each essay and indeed the whole work itself fits perfectly into the pattern of a mathematical demonstration. Without any doubt, the whole body of Bazin's work is based on one central idea, an affirmation of the objectivity of the cinema in the same way as all geometry is centered on the properties of a straight line. Nor does he attempt to fit his basic principles at all costs into some alien system of aesthetics. They derive solely from his own thinking. The system followed by critics before him was, usually, to start with a definition of art and then to try and see how film fitted into it. Bazin rejects all the commonly accepted notions and proposes a radical change of perspective."

Many might expect that this "theoretician," this "intellectual" would be among those who deplore the passing of the silent film as the coming to an end of an art. Not so. For him, sound came not to destroy but to fulfill the testament of cinema. This is a position that follows directly from his central theme of the objectivity of cinema and leads him to reject, at least by implication, those who in the middle twenties were in search of pure cinema—or as Sadoul calls it, "the myth of pure cinema." Hence his preoccupation with adaptation as it relates both to theater and to the novel, and indeed to the relation between cinema and painting.

No one, to my knowledge, has challenged Bazin's stature as a critic but some other critics have had their moments of disagreement with him. Notable among these is Jean Mitry, another respected figure in the realm of film history and aesthetics, whose two-volume study *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* has recently appeared. Although throughout this work he praises Bazin more often than he condemns him, he does in fact challenge—and by no means altogether unjustifiably, it would seem to me—the central

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concept of Bazin's critical structure, namely the objective reality of the filmic image, as well as Bazin's arguments on deep-focus photography. The reader will see how often this use of the camera is referred to, and in how many contexts, from a discussion of the films of Renoir to an examination of the true role of montage.

In "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" Bazin speaks of the image as being evaluated not according to what it adds to reality but what it reveals of it. This Mitry challenges, refusing to accept the argument that because the camera automatically registers a given "reality" it gives us an objective and impartial image of that reality. What the camera reveals, Mitry argues, is not the reality in itself but a new appearance correlated to the world of things—what indeed one may call a camera-perception which, irrespective of the will of the cameraman, produces a certain "segregation of space," that is to say, a restructuring of the real so that it can no longer be considered "objective and immediate."

It is likewise on his theory of film objectivity that Bazin bases his refusal to agree that the essence of theater resides, as Henri Gouhier puts it, in the physical presence of the actor, thus setting it apart from cinema in one very basic respect. As a corollary of this famed argument, Bazin holds that the cinematic image is more than a reproduction, rather is it a thing in nature, a mold or masque. It is in this area that I myself find him difficult to follow. Here for once perhaps he goes beyond the realm of fact into the brilliantly created world of the "ben trovato."

Of his exuberant enthusiasm for the cinema, however, no better expression is to be found than his description of the film brought back from the Kon-Tiki expedition. The style of it is quintessential Bazin. But while there is the ubiquitous paradox, for once no scientific terms are pressed into service. One feels so clearly in reading it the vivid presence of the raft, the "flotsam" against which the fauna of the Pacific rub shoulders, their actions recorded in a film "snatched from the tempest"—a photographic record not so much

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of things but of the danger which the camera shared—a film whose very faults are witness to its authenticity.

If I were asked to name the most perfectly wrought piece of film criticism that I have ever read I would unhesitatingly name the essay on the style of Robert Bresson. Furthermore, this essay contains what for me is an unforgettable summing up of the adaptation of a novel to the screen. Concerning the way Bresson handled *Jacques le fataliste*, the novel from which *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* was derived, Bazin writes: "The sound of a windshield wiper against a page of Diderot is all it took to turn it into Racinian dialogue." To this phrase I would apply the one Bazin used to describe his own delight in the work of Charlie Chaplin. In reading it one experiences "the delight of . . . recognizing perfection."

Today at last, due in no small part to André Bazin, the cinema is being widely recognized as a serious and important field of study. Too many for too long, notably in the United States, have preferred to think of it simply as an avenue of escape *par excellence* from a high-pressure life, for which we are ever seeking—a new world, as it were, to live in. But such so-called paths of escape, pleasant as they are to wander in, are in reality each but a cul-de-sac. The more we see the screen as a mirror rather than an escape hatch, the more we will be prepared for what is to come. Automation, we are told, will wipe the sweat from the brow and straighten the back of an Adam hitherto condemned to labor. Then will come the ultimate confrontation that man has so long avoided on the grounds that he must first live before he can philosophize. The cinema is capable, in the right hands, of playing an increasingly important role in this confrontation. For helping us to understand how or why this can be so, André Bazin may rightly be acclaimed a true visionary and guide. Supremely he is one of the few who have genuinely helped to answer the question first asked by Canudo, Delluc, and the other pioneers of film aesthetics and filmology—What is cinema?

Those of us who in his footsteps are likewise concerned to an-

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swer this question and who must therefore reach out, as he did, beyond the screen to the realms of history, philosophy, literature, psychology, sociology in search of the answer, and in the process add another dimension to the humanities, are particularly in the debt of this preceptor.

And now I have certain other debts to pay, first of all to Madame Janine Bazin who in every negotiation concerned with this undertaking has been graciousness itself. In addition I wish to acknowledge that without the generous help of Jean Renoir, of whose genius Bazin was an ardent and outspoken admirer, and of my colleagues Drs. Madeleine Korol and Gabriel Bonno, I would not have been able to render many difficult passages into English. I am grateful also to one of my students, Señor Markowitz of the Argentine, who assisted me in comparing my English with the Spanish translation. Finally, I am also deeply indebted to the special number of *Cahiers du Cinéma* dedicated to André Bazin for the facts and impressions there recorded by his friends.