More than forty years ago, I inadvertently put my foot into what Mary Ann Doane, soon to be a distinguished film scholar, warned me was the swamp of adaptation, when I composed an under-researched article that has kept me trudging intermittently onward ever since. That article has many problems, but it did properly stake out the two principal directions one could take in this unmapped zone: semiotics and sociology. The former avoids history and encompasses media specificity (including media overlap), narratology, comparative stylistics, registers of equivalence, and degrees of fidelity. The latter deals with periods and movements in multiple arts; the varied incarnations and remediations of overriding themes, situations, and characters; the national promotion or censorship of topics; comparative reception and the fluctuating force of fandom, etc. Both directions demand general reflection and specific case studies. In 1980, emerging from a decade of semiotics and narratology, I held the banner of the sociological alternative high so it could at least be recognized. Actually I was unknowingly contributing to
a wave that turned the leading edge of adaptation studies away from analyzing pairs of texts (novels into films) and toward cultural studies. I urged broad but controlled research into how literary texts and movements have been appropriated and exploited by producers and consumers in various times and places, and how, sometimes, there has been a reverse flow from film back to literature. The impact of the text, not its inviolability, counts for social history. Then cultural studies came to completely dominate the humanities, and I flinched to see original works of literature left unprotected from roving bands of critics who applauded while books and plays I considered masterworks were manhandled in ways alleged to be relevant, challenging, or simply postmodern. Eventually I published an about-face called “The Economies of Fidelity” in a collection neatly titled *True to the Spirit.* Fidelity, I argued, cannot be pushed brusquely aside. It may be overvalued, but it remains a value for all that, and one not to be dismissed even in cases when it is flagrantly traduced.

Evidently, I don’t know where I stand, apparently trudging in both directions. But I take heart, since André Bazin had done the same, though in his case with a plan and in full awareness. He knew that a social history of the arts alongside technological and stylistic knowledge of both literature and cinema must accompany, perhaps tacitly, any worthwhile examination and assessment of those many moments when these media collide in adaptation. Adaptations are not curiosities, constituting a niche genre. They are crucial for the health and growth of both fiction and film. They also open up for the critic and the public a glimpse into the (semiotic) workings of both forms and into the sociology of cultural production.

Bazin treated cinema’s rapport with literature, what I call its “literary imagination,” as the necessary complement to its rap-
port with reality. His most famous essay, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” anchoring his realism, appeared in print in 1945, a few months before his equally intricate piece on André Malraux’s *Espoir* came out in *Poésie*. There Bazin dared to suggest that Malraux’s film could be taken on a par with his novel, because, as he would state three years later in “Cinema as Digest,” it is effectively its twin and it doesn’t matter which was the first to come out of Malraux’s head. Even if they drift down different streams of cultural history—one literary, the other cinematic—they share the DNA of this auteur’s style. “Cinema as Digest” put the new medium in its place, that is, situated it among the arts as these have evolved in Western culture since the Middle Ages. This kind of historical-cultural investigation was essential to Bazin’s quest to discover “What is Cinema?,” just as were his ideas about the medium’s specificity in the essay on photography’s ontology. Certain that, *pace* Jean-Paul Sartre, “Cinema’s existence precedes its essence,” Bazin recognized the need for an ontogeny of the medium that would complement its ontology. Both types of investigation demand a scrutiny of cinema’s stylistic resources, such as he provided in the Malraux example and many of his film reviews. As those reviews intermittently demonstrate, cinema’s ontogeny involves an evolution in which it grew out of, and in symbiosis with, literature.

**COMPARING NOVELS AND FILMS VIA AESTHETICS AND SOCIOLOGY**

Generally considered a narrow concern by today’s “Film and Literature” scholars, fidelity stands out prominently in Bazin, because, in cases where the original work is well known, it has been prominent with film producers and audiences. Few care
about fidelity when the source is generic, as in a mystery novel, even a very good one by, say, Georges Simenon, since audiences and producers are looking for the novel to engender a film with equivalent suspense and cleverness, whether or not it departs from what Simenon wrote. Classic literature and best sellers are different. In a manner of speaking, they form a genre in which fidelity plays a role, just as spectacle plays a role in historical films. Not every historical film need be spectacular, just as not every adaptation need be faithful to the text, but audiences and producers will ask themselves about deviations from the norm. All things being equal, fidelity is a good norm, Bazin repeatedly argues, beneficial to both art forms; but it is not inviolable. Indeed, fidelity’s priority is historically relative once you look at adaptation as an endemic, unavoidable practice throughout Western civilization. Adopting Malraux’s art historical purview (The Museum Without Walls came out in 1947), Bazin goes back to the Middle Ages before fidelity was prized, when stories and images from the Bible and the lives of the saints funded works in many media, as these aimed to edify all classes in a homogeneously Christian society. He ventured that cinema finds itself in an analogous situation today, since it, likewise, addresses all classes with codified genres that repeat a limited range of stories and images. Just as medieval people seldom pointed to individual artists when encountering sculptures, stained-glass windows, illustrated manuscripts, or plays, most viewers do not take the films they watch to be the brainchildren of directors. Credits disperse “authority” for films beneath the studio logo. Audiences during the classic period—and still today—generally assume films come simply from some national or international entertainment industry, for which “Hollywood” often serves as a colloquial shorthand.
In the twentieth century, the audience for cinema, unlike for the other arts, except perhaps architecture, was massive and indiscriminate. The entranced crowds inside the picture palaces that were built between the two world wars thus resemble the faithful of the Middle Ages who filled cathedrals to listen to homilies, gaze at statues and stained glass, and worship together. Spectacle, stories, instruction, and communion (with their fellow beings as much as with Christ) constituted a weekly ritual for multitudes, then and now. Yet most critics talk about films as if they were modeled on nineteenth-century aesthetic notions of private contemplation of works, each produced by individual genius.

Of course, the arts have greatly changed since the thirteenth century. Anonymous mystery plays evolved into dramas published by playwrights with names like Shakespeare, Racine, Ibsen, and Cocteau. Paintings, which are now experienced mainly on the walls of museums rather than churches, carry the name of the artist, if not on the actual canvas, then on a label next to it. But cinema, the newest art, resembles the medieval situation; attention to the creator is less pervasive. From the 1920s to the 1960s, the French public to which Bazin belonged frequented what was known as “le cinéma du samedi soir,” often without knowing the title of the film they would see, let alone its auteur. They attended the movies in the way so many of them did Mass the following morning, perhaps ignorant of which priest was officiating. In any case, his name was incidental to the ritual, as were the names of those responsible for the weekly spectacle at the local movie theater. This suggests that, as Fredric Jameson might put it, films may be an essentially “modern” form of representation, but they carry residual aspects from the feudal mode of production.

By the same token, keeping Jameson’s view in mind, certain popular films in the classic era also point to, or contain in
embryo, indicators of the fictional arts of postmodern culture in late capitalism. Actually, Bazin prophesied in 1951 that cinema was mortal and could be expected to morph into something quite different before too long, so we can imagine that were he alive at the dawn of the twenty-first century (making him eighty-two had he lived), he would have written energetically about cinema’s somewhat diminished but still important place in “convergence culture,” where it is situated among anime, manga, and video games. Although he was writing about the classic era of cinema, Bazin could have had twenty-first-century digital culture in mind when he argued for “the birth of a new aesthetic middle ages whose cause is the masses’ rise to power (or at least their participation in it) and the emergence of an artistic technology corresponding to that rise.” Our historical myopia seldom keeps in view anything prior to the Romantic age, when individual genius was prized above all else. And this myopia has led to the distorted and “entirely modern notion of the inviolability of a work of art, for which the critics are largely responsible.”

Although he would not have known it, here Bazin edges close to Walter Benjamin. Benjamin demoted the creative writer by upholding the premodern storyteller, who performed traditional tales to attentive listeners in the public square, as opposed to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century cliché of the novelist scribbling in his garret or typing in his solitary office expecting to be read by individuals singly in their rooms. Both Bazin and Benjamin sense that the technological arts (this would include radio, cinema, and television, as well as new media) serve as today’s public square, where rosters of writers, adapters, producers, and show runners spin versions of familiar plots and characters that are adjusted to be relevant to their presumptive audience. Bazin found Hollywood vigorous because, unlike the
weaker French film industry, its studios spawned genres which, no matter who was responsible, continued to spew stories that audiences greeted familiarly. Indeed, familiar genres are best defined by family resemblance. Bazin went even further, believing that, at base, cinema has operated in the mode of ‘myth’ whenever it recycles, updates, combines, parodies, or modifies the fictional situations that a culture has found fertile. By definition, myths are fundamentally unauthored.

The adaptation of famous novels might be considered a genre of a special type, where the films resemble not one another, as is the norm in genres, but their accomplished older literary siblings. Even when this appears ludicrous (Bazin pointed often to the travesty of Ernest Hemingway in Sam Wood’s 1943 *For Whom the Bell Tolls*), he did not think this damaged the revered author—quite the reverse. Hemingway stands to gain readers and respect, which is just what Bazin, an ardent student of literature, was glad to see. And so he eagerly wrote about adaptations of novels he had read or had heard about, even though most were thin soup compared to the meaty novels on whose fame and inspiration they drew. When a film comes preadvertised as adapted from a noted book or author, fidelity is a topic one cannot avoid.

Should Bazin, then, be included among those critics he mentioned as responsible for the shortsighted, “modern” view of cultural history that stretches back only to the nineteenth century and its devotion to the author-as-genius? The nineteenth century was critical to cinema, he agreed, but in a most material way. When cinema was struggling to walk, it was lifted on the backs of literature and theater through adaptation and imitation, and propelled quickly toward maturity as an artistic force in culture. Cinema’s production practices and business protocols emulated those of theater, while its subject matter frequently came directly
from the novels and short stories of the past several generations. Adapting fiction was essential to cinema’s ontogenesis. Adaptation was not something to discredit or approve, because it was a fact of cinema’s existence. Rather, Bazin aimed to understand its chemistry, including what he called, after Sartre, the “chyle” produced by cinema’s digestion of masterpieces. Chyle may sound distasteful, but, as a kind of sap, it has great metabolic value!

Ontology and ontogeny: Bazin’s relentless pursuit of both kept him from dogmatism; it also kept him current and keeps him so. Hence the return in our digital age of his ruminations on cinema’s congenital realism. Hence also the pertinence of his ideas about adaptation for today’s convergence culture in which cinema is blending into a media stream. Just as Daniel Morgan argued that Bazin’s strict ontology of photography’s link to visible reality supported the various realisms he elaborated in his criticism, so I argue that his insistence on the value of fidelity in adaptation still permitted him numerous defensible attitudes toward its presence in all sorts of cultural productions. He promoted what he called “fidelité vivante.” In both domains, realism and adaptation, an axiom can fund several lines of reasoning and lead to arguments defending distinct, even opposed, cases in film history. The evolution of technology, genres, and styles, not to mention the unpredictability of sheer genius in certain filmmakers, has demonstrably delivered alternative types of adaptations and will inevitably do so in the future. Bazin’s chief ideas, however, remain relevant throughout. They helped him assess what he found in varied cases across a dozen years, and they can help us do the same. Fidelity takes on multiple values when placed within an ecology of cinema as comprehensive as is Bazin’s.

Such scope should feel refreshing to Anglophone students of film who first learned how to deal with adaptations from follow-
ners of George Bluestone’s 1957 Novels into Film. Of course, a concern with this topic predated Bluestone by half a century; it is effectively as old as cinema itself, and as popular. Émile Zola was still alive in 1902 and so probably saw the four-minute Les Victimes de l’alcoolisme that Ferdinand Zecca made from L’Assommoir. Just six years later, Albert Capellani directed a version ample enough at thirty-six minutes to boast that novel’s title. Before World War I, Capellani would go on to grander projects in this genre: Anna Karenina; Les Misérables (a serial in seven hourlong episodes); and the terrific Germinal, shown integrally at two and a half hours in 1913. I imagine that terms like “fidelity,” “propriety,” and perhaps even “equivalence” laced the conversations of spectators pouring out of the theaters and into cafés after seeing Germinal, and that newspaper reviews of the film’s literary ambition were debated. Decades later, Bluestone’s book, published by an academic press, lifted the topic out of the cafés and newspapers, making it something to interrogate in classrooms and at conferences. Books and anthologies on the subject have followed, encouraged by publishers who keep their eye on secondary school and college curricula. For the longest time, most textbooks followed Bluestone, with chapters dedicated to comparing the film versions of important literary works taught to undergraduates.

But as with food, fashion, and music, views about adaptation, including “theories” as well as tastes, are widespread, and we shouldn’t listen only to those whose expertise has been sanctioned by a PhD. Dedicated critics, writing about their regular encounters with adaptations, might tell us something more immediate and truer. Best of all would be the popular critic boasting a serious stake in literary creation or a background in its study. In the classical era, the models were James Agee in the
United States, Graham Greene in the United Kingdom, and in France, preeminently, André Bazin.

**LITERATURE: THERE AT THE OUTSET OF BAZIN’S APPROACH TO CINEMA**

Bazin became a daily critic writing for a huge public only when a stutter cost him the teaching post he anticipated after reaching a top level of literary study at an École normale supérieure. And so you might expect, and amply find, references to literary issues, to authors, and to adaptation throughout his corpus. I have argued that Bazin’s career might be split in about 1950, when tuberculosis took him out of circulation for fifteen months. The 1940s Bazin focused on realism, while the 1950s Bazin turned more toward cinema’s cultural relations, specifically its place among the arts. But having now read his complete works, I find this clear symmetry smudged. Starting out as a twenty-five-year-old critic, he was convinced that he was chronicling a crucial development from the classic era to a modern one, with Jean Renoir, Orson Welles, and the Italian neorealists spearheading change. If he were right, a modern drift should also be felt in many standard films as well. Why not look for changes in adaptations, for instance, generally a conservative, even reactionary genre? And, indeed, a number of the ideas about film’s relation to the novel that he formulated in his reviews of the 1940s contributed, I now believe, to his understanding of realism and the modernist moment, just as, in the 1950s, ideas about cinema’s ontological realism would continue to pollinate his discussions of adaptation.

Bazin was consistent, but he also kept learning from the films that he went to see week after week. Riffling through the first years of *Le Parisien libéré*, you find in August 1946 a brief piece,
“Roman et cinéma,” placed just beneath, so as to extend, his review of John Ford’s *How Green Was My Valley*, a beautiful film taken from Richard Llewellyn’s six-hundred-page best seller. Bazin tells his readers to expect more adaptations of well-known novels from Hollywood, where the “general tendency in American cinema” had begun to change. Rather than simply mining them for their characters, plots, and titles, Hollywood promised “to double the literary work with an equivalent cinematographic one by preserving the complexity and subtlety of the novelist’s art.” Whether or not they succeeded, this ambition shamed standard French adaptations such as the 1946 *L’Idiot*. Despite his prestidigitations, screenwriter Charles Spaak badly digested eight hundred pages of often philosophical prose into a ninety-three-minute period melodrama. Merely stringing together the novel’s famous scenes, the director, Christian-Jaque, evacuated Dostoevsky’s angst. Sets, costume, plot, and dialogue are not enough, Bazin lamented, as was made clear when, playing Prince Myshkin, Gérard Philipe, still a neophyte, struggled awkwardly to convey the novel’s depth with facial gestures.

Meanwhile, less than a month after Charles de Gaulle marched through the Arc de Triomphe, Bazin mentions that Lewis Milestone’s 1939 *Of Mice and Men* was on its way. Though it wouldn’t be until Christmas 1946 that he would see it, John Steinbeck’s name forecast a writers’ era, in which he, along with Erskine Caldwell, Hemingway, and William Faulkner, were putting pressure on Hollywood to do well by their novels. Bazin’s colleagues at *Esprit*, Roger Leenhardt and the brilliant Claude-Edmonde Magny, said the same. In what Magny called “The Age of the American Novel,” these writers, who had learned many literary techniques from cinema, might now be in a position to give back to Hollywood the kind of maturity in
subject matter and the suppleness of style that would, in the best prognosis, result in a more sophisticated public and ultimately a more discriminating, sensitive, and reflective citizenry.

This hope was both confirmed and deflated when *The Human Comedy* appeared in Paris just two months after the Germans had been driven out. On the one hand Bazin was disappointed that William Saroyan’s lightweight tale had to be the first work of literary cinema to reach Paris from Hollywood; he would have preferred an adaptation of a challenging story by Steinbeck, Faulkner, or Hemingway. He reasoned that the distributors were coddling the French who surely needed something uplifting after four years of Occupation, and Saroyan’s rather saccharine optimism served as a good will gesture from the liberators. What it contained was less like literature than like propaganda and public relations. On the other hand, *The Human Comedy* was unmistakably a writer’s film. Saroyan had published his novel in 1943, adapting it from his original screenplay that linked wholesome anecdotes of daily life in a small town during wartime. The novel came out as a Book of the Month club selection in March 1943, just as Clarence Brown’s film premiered with Mickey Rooney in the lead. While recognizing the director’s track record, Bazin could feel Saroyan in the voice-over narrating from beyond the grave and hovering benevolently above the town. The novelist’s omniscience dominates the limited perspectives of the camera, cinema benevolently acquiescing to literature rather than usurping it. Brown (plus what he would later call “the genius of the system”) helped a worthy writer express himself in two forms, prose and celluloid, reaching two different publics and gratifying those fans ready to relish their Saroyan twice over. Neither the novel nor (especially) the film may be exceptional; but that didn’t diminish Bazin’s enthusiasm for a growing trend:
Until now, the fidelity of an adaptation (when it was of any concern at all) was generally limited to the plot and to the characters’ psychology. At the very most, it extended to what is conventionally referred to as “atmosphere.” Fidelity tends to penetrate even further today, it seems, going so far as to give us a complete equivalent, in its form and substance, of the written novel. This was an entirely natural development from a sociological perspective. Roger Caillois perceived this very clearly when he pointed out that cinema is something of a functional relay of the novel. Clarence Brown’s art wasn’t applied only so that the **découpage** would retain Saroyan’s descriptive impressionism; in his selection and enhancement of the actors and through the plasticity of his cinematography, he was also able to recreate the novelist’s aesthetic universe.

Significantly, these observations were provoked by a current best seller rather than by a classic. Cinema had long ago found standard ways of bringing classic novels to the screen, but recent fiction, often featuring innovative narrative techniques like those in *The Human Comedy*, requires flexibility. Bazin’s review of Billy Wilder’s *The Lost Weekend* goes further, by noting at the outset that for once it was a film that made a book famous, occasioning a “Modern Library Edition” in 1948 and perhaps sparking the 1946 French translation that the publisher, René Julliard, astutely brought out just before the film’s Paris premiere. Bazin came to that premiere having read the book. This allowed him to appreciate Wilder’s achievement in turning an “anti-cinematic novel of interior monologue” into a film that he believed should forever dispel doubts about cinema’s capacity for subtlety. To probe his character, Wilder never considered facile effects like superimpositions but relied on his “icy skill in mise en scène.” Better than the novelist, “the camera makes it possible to deduce [the hero’s] feelings much as radar detects the position of an invisible transmitter…. The glass of liquor, the
wet rings it leaves on the counter, the typewriter, the hundred other objects present in Don Birnam’s mind, take on in the film a hallucinatory importance they do not have in the novel.” Bazin had claimed in his “ontology essay” that the photographic image “is a really existing hallucination,” so he applauds Wilder for accomplishing on film what the novelist only dreamed of doing.

Adaptations like this, being contemporaneous with their sources, have a chance to appear on equal footing with another form of the “same” story. *Of Mice and Men* alerted Bazin to this possibility. Although he abhorred the film’s music and sentimentality, he turns to it at the end of “Cinema as Digest.” Steinbeck’s title, he writes, could refer to three popular forms of a single subject: his 1937 novella, the stage production by George S. Kaufman that same year, and the film directed in 1939 by Milestone. Anyone looking up *Of Mice and Men* a hundred years hence, Bazin says, “would find himself in the presence not of a novel from which a film and a play were ‘drawn’ but of a single work in three art forms, a sort of three-sided artistic pyramid where nothing would sanction a preference for one or the other side.”

Bazin nails down this conclusion by citing *Espoir*, novel and film, those twins that gestated alongside one another. Twins being rare, he had made the most of this example in his early essay on Malraux’s style, which defined terms he would use again and again. First, he carefully distinguished Malraux’s *subject* (the solidarity of those who fight fascism) from the two artistic *forms* encasing it. These forms (film and prose-narrative) can be scrutinized for their differences, because a single *style*, one that belongs to Malraux alone, inhabits both. It is the latter term, style, that commands Bazin’s attention. The author and the auteur in this case being the same, any disparity we feel in experiencing these works is due to the forms in which they appear, their media. For instance,
Malraux’s famous ellipses make tremendous demands on viewers of the film who face the ineluctable progression of an experience that unrolls without interruption, whereas readers of his novel control the pace of their experience, even thumbing back through pages that were not well understood the first time. Metaphor functions differently, too, because cinema’s literalness opposes the abstraction of language. Bazin’s suspicion of both ellipsis and metaphor comes up intermittently throughout his writings and puts him out of step with other critics of the time and of today. He was ready, however, to grant Malraux whatever he liked, as this polymath was able to pull off a double success, being equally adept in both art forms, and because his particular style (elliptical, external, and concrete, yet replete with correspondences between man and nature) activated the resources of both.

As Malraux’s novel and film face each other like two hemispheres of a global object, there runs between them an axis of creation that reaches to the poles governing adaptation: the aesthetic or semiotic pole of equivalence in style and the sociological pole of artistic function. Malraux’s style might be paramount in Bazin’s 1945 essay in *Poésie*, but by the time he wrote “Cinema as Digest” in 1948, it was Malraux’s ambitious cultural reach that drew his attention. For the previous year when the novelist brought out *The Museum Without Walls*, he had spread out on its pages hundreds of reproductions of paintings, sculptures, and tapestries. Created in many forms throughout the ages and around the world, these are reproduced in equivalent size and laid out in black and white for comparison. Malraux made this “digest” of art history available to the masses who couldn’t afford to travel to museums. Genius and style remained paramount for Malraux and would always be in the back of Bazin’s mind, but in 1948 both men lobbied for cultural dissemination over artistic aura. Threads