

## **André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker**



# **André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker**

*American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s*

*Translated and Edited by*

**R. J. Cardullo**



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Cover image: Courtesy of the late Janine Bazin

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***ANDRÉ BAZIN, THE CRITIC AS THINKER***

“R. J. Cardullo’s introduction to André Bazin’s life and work in *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s*, together with his collecting so many of this French author’s ‘fugitive’ writings on American cinema and packaging them, in one volume, with ample credits and a comprehensive bibliography, finally makes accessible to lovers of film—and the art of film—an important, but hitherto scattered, body of reflection, criticism, and theorizing.”

– **Chris Wagstaff, Senior Lecturer, School of Languages and European Studies, University of Reading, U.K.**

“Cardullo’s choice of texts in this volume vividly recaptures the immediacy and excitement of André Bazin’s contemporary ‘discovery’ and promotion of the American cinema, while reflecting the critical intelligence that ensures the lasting value of Bazin’s insights. *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* is of compelling interest not only to teachers and students of film but potentially to a wider public of movie enthusiasts.”

– **Keith Reader, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Glasgow, Scotland**

“Cardullo’s introduction to *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* offers a succinct biography of André Bazin along with a stimulating reassessment of the importance of his work, unabashedly embracing its transcendental and spiritual qualities. This book is a valuable resource for scholars of cinema and American culture alike.”

– **Douglas Smith, Senior Lecturer in Film Studies, School of Languages and Literature, University College of Dublin, Ireland**

“*André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* is a very significant contribution to the field of film criticism. It presents the writings of an extremely creative, passionate, and intelligent specialist of the cinema who, in the 1950s, founded two highly influential journals still in existence: *L’Esprit* and *Cahiers du Cinéma*. R. J. Cardullo has chosen excellent articles here and done a remarkable work of translation. The credits of the films discussed, the extensive bibliography of Bazin’s writings, as well as the references to studies about him, make this volume a valuable document that will spur further research. *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* is a serious work deserving of the utmost praise.”

– **Dina Scherzer, Professor Emerita of French and Italian, University of Texas at Austin, USA**

“André Bazin is probably the most well-known and influential critic-cum-theorist in the history of film study. Any increase in the availability of Bazin’s writings, especially in English translation, is accordingly a matter of some academic consequence. Cardullo’s *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* is eminently readable; it is also, for someone like me, who has an interest in cinema studies in general and Bazin’s work in particular, not a little exciting.”

– **Leighton Grist, Reader in Film Studies, University of Winchester, U.K.**

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*André Bazin in the 1940s (above) and the 1950s (below)*



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## INTRODUCTION

André Bazin (1918–1958) may well be the most influential critic ever to have written about cinema. He is credited with almost single-handedly establishing the study of film as an accepted intellectual pursuit; and he can also be considered the principal instigator of the equally influential *auteur* theory: the idea that, since film is an art form, the director of a movie must be perceived as the chief creator of its unique cinematic style. Bazin contributed daily reviews to Paris’s largest-circulation newspaper, *Le Parisien libéré*, and wrote hundreds of essays for weeklies (*Le Nouvel observateur*, *Télérama*) as well as for such esteemed monthly journals as *L’Esprit* and *Cahiers du cinéma* (which he co-founded in 1951), the single most influential critical periodical in the history of the cinema. A social activist, he also directed ciné-clubs and, from 1945 to 1950, worked for the Communist outreach organization *Travail et Culture*. Moreover, Bazin befriended Jean Renoir, Roberto Rossellini, Orson Welles, and Luis Buñuel and was a father figure to the critics at *Cahiers* who would create the New Wave just after he died: François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, and Claude Chabrol. He even adopted the delinquent Truffaut, who dedicated *The 400 Blows* (1959) to him. Bazin’s influence spread to critics and filmmakers in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asia, where today, for instance, Jia Zhangke salutes Bazin as formative to his artistic approach.

One of Bazin’s first essays, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945), anchors much of what he would produce. It legitimates his taste for documentaries, for neorealism, and for directors who don’t use images rhetorically but instead to explore reality. Criticized by communists for writing “The Myth of Stalin in the Soviet Cinema” (1950), he would be posthumously attacked by Marxist academics for his presumed naïve faith in cinema’s ability to deliver true appearances transparently. Bazin was influenced, not by Marx, but by Bergson, Malraux, and Sartre. He specialized in literature as a brilliant student at the *École normale supérieure*, where he also was passionate about geology, geography, and psychology. Indeed, metaphors from the sciences frequently appear in his articles.

While many of Bazin’s acolytes are “humanists” or, in particular, devotees of the *auteur* theory, it is increasingly clear that Bazin attends equally in his published work to systems within which films are made and viewed, including technology, economics, and censorship. Of this published work—between 1943 and 1958, Bazin wrote around 2,600 articles and reviews—only 150 pieces or so are easy to access in anthologies or edited collections, be they in French, English, or another language. He personally collected sixty-four of his most significant pieces in the four-volume French version of *What Is Cinema?* (1958–62). Additional collections appeared later thanks to Truffaut, Éric Rohmer, and other devotees. Obviously, then, most of those who have written about Bazin have done so knowing only a fraction of his output.

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Still, that output is considered consistent, rich, and consequential. And Bazin's impact will undoubtedly grow as more of his writing becomes available.

When the idea of "truth" encounters that of "cinema," the first name that naturally comes to mind is that of Bazin. But over the past few decades, as pointed out above, this French film critic and theorist has generally been viewed as a naïve realist, someone for whom the essence of cinema lay in its mechanical, photographic ability to bring the "truth" to the screen without the all-too-partial and non-objective intervention of humans. As Noël Carroll wrote in 1996 in *Theorizing the Movie Image*, "Bazin held that the image from a film was an objective re-presentation of the past, a veritable slice of reality." Carroll was by no means alone in identifying Bazin as someone who believed in the objectivity of the imprint that empirical reality automatically leaves on film. Jean Mitry, Christian Metz, 1970s *Screen-magazine* theorists, and most scholars adhering to semiological or cognitivist approaches have all dismissed Bazin's ontological belief in film's immediate access to, and correspondence with, empirical reality. Casting a retrospective glance at this almost unanimous rejection of Bazin, Philip Rosen has more recently argued, in *"Change Mummified": Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (2001), that such a repudiation was a veritable collective obsession that allowed the then-new subject of film studies to be established as a consistent discipline in its own right. In other words, Bazin's rejection was itself a kind of founding act.

Nowadays, it is perhaps easier to look back and discover what the writings by the co-founder of *Cahiers du cinéma* were *really* about. Yet, to repeat, these writings are still basically little known to date. Not long ago, Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin revived scholarly interest in this huge amount of neglected work by organizing, on the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of Bazin's death in 2008, two international conferences on the topic of "unknown Bazin." One took place at Yale University ("Opening Bazin") and the other at the Université Paris VII-Diderot ("Ouvrir Bazin"); and two-and-a-half years later, an edited collection (*Opening Bazin*) was published that gathered most of the talks given at those venues.

Indeed, reading the large number of "unknown"—unanthologized or untranslated—articles by Bazin leaves no doubt: he was not a naïve theorist. His was not a shallow and simplistic faith in some magical transubstantiation of reality directly on screen. Indeed, much of his writing prefigures the very theoretical movements, from the 1970s and after, which—importing concepts from disciplines like psychoanalysis, gender studies, anthropology, literary theory, semiotics, and linguistics to fashion structuralist, post-structuralist, Marxist, and feminist film theories—opposed what they saw as Bazin's exclusively realist bias. Thus we can now dismiss the standard opinion according to which Bazin advocated cinema's photographic ability to reproduce reality—a dismissal that has in fact already been validly formulated in various places by several scholars. One of the most interesting attempts to do so is Daniel Morgan's "Rethinking Bazin" (2006), a careful review of all the excerpts in Bazin's written works that talk about cinema's photographic, replicative dimension. Morgan noticed that, on this subject, Bazin says different

things in different places. Whatever definition of cinema we can infer from Bazin's writings, photographic objectivity has no essential place in it.

What is perhaps more important is that Bazin himself repeatedly stigmatized the so-called "photographic objectivity" of the cinema. His articles are replete with warnings like the following: "It is not enough to shoot in the streets to 'make it real.' All in all, the script is more important than the fetishism of natural décor" (*Le Parisien libéré*, May 18, 1949); "Artifice and lie can walk down the streets as well as they can haunt the studios, because reality is not just in the appearance of things, but in man's heart. Ultimately, it is also a matter of the screenplay" (*Le Parisien libéré*, November 16, 1949); "The realist destiny of cinema—innate in photographic objectivity—is fundamentally equivocal, because it allows the 'realization' of the marvelous. Precisely like a dream. The oneiric character of cinema, linked to the illusory nature of its image as much as to its lightly hypnotic mode of operation, is no less crucial than its realism" (*Les Lettres françaises*, July 25, 1947).

In a word, cinema functions in such a way that we can believe (to some extent) that what we see on screen is true. But this does not mean that cinema can reproduce truth; on the contrary, its innate realism cannot be separated from its potential to create believable illusions. Hence, cinematic realism is not a naïve acknowledgement of what reality actually is; rather, it is dialectically linked to illusion—i.e., to its own fundamental condition. Indeed, in his one and only essay explicitly revolving around the subject of photography, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Bazin defines it as intrinsically surrealist because it is a hallucination that is also a fact.

Only ostensibly the ultimate realist, the author of *What Is Cinema?* has in fact often been accused of being an *idealist* critic. This is not incorrect: in many ways Bazin does share the philosophical perspective of idealism, according to which matter does not exist in its own right; it is in fact a product of mind, and therefore all objects are mental creations and the whole world itself—the sum of all objects—is a mental construction. But the view that Bazin is an idealist is not correct enough, either, since one should assume all due consequences from such a premise. The most obvious (but also the least negligible) of these is that, precisely as an idealist, Bazin's notion of reality is by no means simple. It is not limited simply to what can be found "out there," either in the "real" world or the world as the mind projects it. Indeed, Bazin's idealism quickly becomes a form of Catholic phenomenology, according to which any attempt at a faithful reflection of reality is really just a prerequisite—ultimately merely a pretext—for finding a transcendental or even theological truth that purportedly exists in reality and is "miraculously" revealed by the camera.

Despite common opinion from the 1960s through the 1980s—opinion that the 2008 Yale/Paris conferences, followed by the 2011 publication of their proceedings, have played a strong role in countering—Bazin paid a lot of attention to social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in his consideration of individual films, and the selections in *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* are meant to stress this component of his criticism. He frequently mentions in this volume, for example, the effect of the profit motive

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on the artistic quality of Hollywood productions and how, “despite its initially private character, filmmaking behaves, by reason of the target audience at which it ultimately aims, nearly like state radio” (*Almanach du théâtre et du cinéma*, 1951). Bazin also describes how technological developments change the expectations of audiences and how, as a result, one artistic form can become more convincing than another.

If cinema seems to be the quintessential realistic medium, according to Bazin, this is precisely because it can grasp economic, cultural, political, and psychological realities—every reality, in short, connected to the fact of human beings living together in one society. In other words, cinema’s ontological realism is not a matter of reproducing empirical reality as such; “reality” is much more than the sum of its empirical parts. As Bazin himself writes in “For a Realistic Aesthetic,” in *French Cinema of the Occupation and Resistance* (1975; English translation, 1981), “The cinematic aesthetic will be *social*, or else will do without an aesthetic.” Hence in the essay “Death on the Silver Screen” (1949), translated in my *Bazin on Global Cinema, 1948–58* (2014), one can read of being forced “into a state of consciousness and then responsibility” in the face of impending death—the origin, according to Bazin, of both time and life—and clearly perceive the social underpinnings of postwar Sartrean existentialism. And, also in *Bazin on Global Cinema*, the reader will find new relevance in Bazin’s humorous defense of a 1950, American-made version of the French classic *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897), so common has it become in the twenty-first century for the artists of one society or culture to recycle the artistic icons from another, sometimes quite different, one.

Related to this matter of cross-fertilization, and to return to a point I made earlier, Bazin loved to probe the system that brought films into being and sustained them in the cultural imagination, for as a daily critic he took in every sort of movie imaginable, if mainly mediocre features. Rather than try to filter from these a few crystals, he aimed to understand the entire process by which they got made, attained their shape, and achieved their value—whatever that might be. This meant genre study in the broadest sense. What psychological knot does each genre pick at? How have later variants grown out of earlier examples in the genre or drawn on contemporaneous types? What pre-cinematic avatars connect these films to longstanding cultural concerns? When, for example, in a 1951 article in *L’Esprit* titled “Marcel Carné and Disembodiment” (translated in my *French Cinema from the Liberation to the New Wave, 1945–58* [2012]), Bazin wrote about this *auteur* on the occasion of his forgettable film *Juliet, or the Key to Dreams* (1951), it was not as a transcendent artist whose themes and sensibility deserved deep reflection; instead he used Carné’s career to ponder how genres and styles move into and out of phase with history and with the public taste.

To Bazin the cinema was thus a vast ecological system that was endlessly interesting in its interdependencies and fluctuations. He was always ready to celebrate the creativity of the director, but “the genius of the system” he found even more fascinating. Only an interdisciplinary or comparative approach could begin

to understand why even modest directors made such satisfying films during the so-called classical period, a period that Bazin could sense was on its way out. His protégés might exercise an elitist *politique des auteurs*, but he shamed them with their obligation to keep in mind technology, economics, sociology, and, yes, actual politics, alongside the usual approaches to film criticism borrowed from literary studies and art history.

Bazin knew quite a lot about each of these subjects and methods, but his particular genius lay in identifying some revealing textual attributes of whatever film was before him, then using these to leverage a weighty understanding of the work as a whole, or the filmmaker, or the genre, or the general conditions of filmmaking and reception. In effect, he searched for the questions to which films appear to stand as answers, letting stylistic details in the pictures themselves call up his extraordinary range of knowledge. No one before him, and no one since, has ever written about film in quite the same way, or on quite the same level.

In sum, Bazin, unlike nearly all the other authors of major film theories, was a working or practical critic who wrote regularly about individual films. He based his criticism on the film actually made rather than on any preconceived aesthetic or sociological principles; and for the first time with him, film theory therefore became not a matter of pronouncement or prescription, but of description, analysis, and deduction. Indeed, Bazin can be regarded as the aesthetic link between film critics and film theorists. During his relatively short writing career, his primary concern, again, was not to answer questions but to raise them, not to establish cinema as an art but to ask, “What is art?” and “What is cinema?”

In this Bazin was the quintessential teacher, ever paying attention to pedagogy, as is shown by his 1948 “lecture” or “presentation” on Carné’s *Daybreak* (1939), translated in *Bazin on Global Cinema, 1948–58*. Himself having failed to pass the French state licensing exam, after which he would have become an actual classroom teacher, Bazin was nonetheless teacherly in his belief that film criticism should help audience members to form their own critical conscience, rather than providing a ready-made one for them or merely judging films in the audience’s place. Through a kind of sociological psychoanalysis as much as through critical analysis, the film critic should educate moviegoers to deal consciously and responsibly with the “dreams” on screen that are offered to them as their own. (As a rule, Bazin’s “social psychoanalyses” through film were generated by a relevant and enlightening but barely discernible detail detected in the film’s texture, which then stimulated a more general “diagnosis” on his part.) And this is possible only if viewers get to know how those dreams, with their secret reality, work—that is, how they are expressed through every formal, technical, social, and aesthetic aspect of the cinema.

In other words, film criticism should not simply unveil how a cinematic text and the grand cinematic machine work; it should investigate how social myths and ideological formulations are foreign and intimate to the viewer at the same time. Such myths and formulations, albeit illusory, are “real” or “true” because they concretely affect the life and feelings of people, who respond accordingly. Hence

## INTRODUCTION

the aim of postwar film culture in general, according to Bazin, was “to defend the public against this form of abuse of consciousness, to wake the audience from its dream ... to render the public sensible to the needs or illusions that were created in it as a market, for the sole purpose of providing the opium sellers with an outlet for their drug” (*Les Lettres françaises*, July 25, 1947).

Regrettably, André Bazin, critic and teacher, died tragically young (he was only forty) of leukemia in 1958, an illness against which he fought bravely for years. Yet he left much material behind, in his seminal collection *What Is Cinema?* as well as in such magazines as *L'Écran français* and *Les Temps modernes*—some of the best of which I gathered in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews From the 1940s and 1950s* (1997), *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* (2011), *French Cinema from the Liberation to the New Wave, 1945–58*, and *Bazin on Global Cinema, 1948–58*. To these earlier collections, *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* may be considered a complement. This new book contains, for the first time in English in one volume, much if not all of Bazin’s writing on American cinema: on directors such as Orson Welles, Charles Chaplin, Preston Sturges, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, John Huston, Nicholas Ray, William Wyler, and Elia Kazan; and on films such as *High Noon*, *Citizen Kane*, *Rear Window*, *Limelight*, *Scarface*, *Baby Doll*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, and *Sullivan’s Travels*.

*André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* also includes illustrative movie stills and features a sizable scholarly apparatus, including this contextual introduction to Bazin’s life and work, a complete bibliography of Bazin’s writings on American cinema, credits of the films discussed, and an extensive index. This volume thus represents a major contribution to the still growing academic disciplines of cinema studies and American studies, as well as a testament to the continuing influence of one of the world’s pre-eminent critical thinkers. Yet *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker* 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 “saint” of cinema, as well as to the steadfastness of his courage in life, that this book is dedicated.