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ANDRÉ BAZIN'S FILM THEORY: ART, SCIENCE, RELIGION

André Bazin's work on film theory, history and criticism is receiving an unprecedented degree of attention after the French film specialist, Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, published the critic's complete works in 2018, in two elegant and weighty volumes (2,848 pages).¹ Before this turning point, the principal Bazin resource was the André Bazin archive developed at Yale University by Dudley Andrew², which consisted of photocopies of some 2,600 essays and reviews written by the famous French film critic between 1941 and 1958.

In the wake of Joubert-Laurencin's publication, it has become possible to appreciate the comprehensive and systematic nature of Bazin's thought, with special attention to the role that art, science, and religion play in his film theory. Until now, only 15 percent of Bazin's work has been translated and published in English, and in the anglophone world, teaching Bazin meant essentially using Hugh Gray's translation of just 26 groundbreaking essays.³ This new level of access to Bazin means that scholars in other fields might become interested in his work.

Thus, it is necessary to provide some biographical information before launching into an overview of this thinker's ideas on photography, modernity, mass culture, the history of vision, the position of the spectator in the movie theater, and the relation between ethics and esthetics, high culture and popular media.⁴

¹ A. Bazin, *Ecrits complets*. 2 vols., compiled by H. Joubert-Laurencin, Paris 2018.

² The first and seminal book to bring attention to Bazin's work was Dudley Andrew's critical biography, first issued in 1978, *André Bazin*, New York 2013, rev. ed. The publication of an anthology, *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and its After-Life*, edited by D. Andrew with H. Joubert-Laurencin, New York 2011, was another crucial resource. See also: A. Dalle Vacche, *André Bazin's Film Theory: Art, Science, Religion*, New York 2020.

³ A. Bazin, *What is Cinema?* vols. 1 and 2, trans. Hugh Gray, Berkeley 2004.

⁴ This essay for *Artium Quaestiones* is an overview of my book, *André Bazin's Film Theory: Art, Science, Religion*, New York 2020. This text was discussed on January 20,

Born in Angers in 1918, André Bazin grew up in a Catholic, lower-middle-class family. He attended the *École Normale d'Instituteurs* in La Rochelle, where he experienced the French secular education system and proved to be a brilliant student in the sciences. His academic achievements enabled him to gain admission to the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure de Saint-Cloud*, near Paris, where he continued his education in literature and the arts.

During the 1950s, Bazin mentored the filmmakers who rose to the forefront of the French New Wave in the sixties: François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette. They all started out as cinephiles and all were Bazin's colleagues in film journalism. Besides the famous *Cahiers du Cinéma*, to whose founding he contributed, Bazin was a regular writer for the conservative *Parisien Libéré*, the socialist *France Observateur*, and the communist *Écran Français*. He also published in prestigious journals such as *Temps Modernes* and *Esprit*.

Due to Bazin's chronic bad health, he eventually became unable to go to the movies and turned to television and radio criticism, writing for *Radio, Cinema et Télévision*. He died of leukemia in 1958, leaving behind a groundbreaking body of work that influenced the cinemas of Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

Bazin's famous question What is cinema? hides another crucial question: What is a human? To ask what is a human is very different from asking what it means to be human. Indeed, to ask, through cinema, "What is a human?" implies that this question addresses the objectifying and indifferent impact of the camera lens on everything. Throughout his theory, Bazin maintains that a human is simultaneously an irrational being and a rational animal.⁵ Unless human irrationality becomes creativity through art, or spirituality through religion, it can result in cruelty and madness. Likewise, an excess of scientific rationality can reduce human beings to unfeeling machines or to exploitable objects. For Bazin, cinema's value consists in how it can decenter, objectify, and even destabilize the egotistical anthropocentrism of human behavior when the latter confronts all its Others. Its most frequent Other is other humans, who may not be treated as fellow humans.

2020, at the Columbia University Faculty Seminar, "Sites of Cinema," organized by professors Jane Gaines and Nico Baumbach. The respondent was Professor Sam Di Iorio (Hunter College, New York). Professors James Schamus and Richard Peña, both on the Film Studies Faculty of Columbia University, joined the discussion. I am most grateful to Dudley Andrew, Filip Lipinski, and Nadine Covert for their help in revising this essay.

⁵ D. Andrew, "Edgar Morin: Cinema, the very image of human complexity," in: *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, eds. P. Livingston and C. Plantinga, New York 2008, pp. 408–421.

While cinema questions human control through blind recording and unpredictable contingency, all of cinema's nonhuman Others share one feature: they are not consciously aware of time and death.⁶ Bazin's idea of the cinema cherishes a decentered and anti-anthropocentric stance which leads to displacement as well as to receptivity in relation to Otherness. An anti-anthropocentric handling of filmic narrative can remain compatible with a figurative approach. Applied to a popular medium, decentering does not necessarily mean abstraction. On the whole, Bazin's film theory concerns itself much more with relational ethics than with aesthetic achievement. For him social change and education are paramount.

Cinema's automatic and mechanical roots in photography justify how Bazin's film theory is anti-anthropocentric. Such an ethical orientation becomes explicit when Bazin states: "Man himself is just one fact among others, to whom no pride of place should be given *a priori*."⁷ This is not to say that, in comparison to all its Others, the human element does not enjoy a level of self-consciousness leading to the difference that moral responsibility makes. Indeed, Bazin's anti-anthropocentric postwar humanism is not only based on ethics over aesthetics, but also on the paradox of individuality within sameness. As unique as each one of us is, none of us is special enough to escape the larger process of birth and death.

Within this egalitarian framework of temporal finitude, "anti-anthropocentric" is my own term. I extrapolated this term from how the film theorist negatively and repeatedly uses the word *anthropocentric*. With this word, he describes a self-centered kind of subjectivity that enables writing and painting, but does not apply to photography. Bazin's anthropocentric model of the self refers back to Leonardo Da Vinci's idealized Vitruvian man, whose static measurements echo the geometric and mercantile formula of monocular perspective in early modern Europe.

Anthropocentrism emerges out of the Italian Renaissance, which Bazin's mentor Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950) reinvented in the light of his anti-utilitarian personalist philosophy.⁸ Wary of American individualism, French capitalism, and Soviet collectivism, Mounier advocated for the radically new political philosophy of personalism.⁹ In the guise of a Third Way, the latter was meant to bypass the extremes of bourgeois liberalism and pro-

⁶ E. Morin, *L'homme et la mort dans l'histoire*, Paris 1951.

⁷ A. Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality," in *What is Cinema?* vol. 2, p. 38. On the end of the anthropocentric with the advent of cinema, see: "Today the making of images no longer shares an anthropocentric, utilitarian purpose." *What is Cinema?* vol. 1, p. 10.

⁸ E. Mounier, *Refaire la Renaissance* (1932), Paris 1974.

⁹ E. Mounier, *Personalism* (1949), Notre Dame 1989.

letarian communism. Instead of greed or dogmatic ideologies as the measure of all things, Mounier's society of the future would cherish basic human rights, including art and ordinary creativity as self-expression outside any market value, celebrity status, or elitism. According to personalism, human rights must be broadly social and grounded in a universal acknowledgement of everybody's human dignity, regardless of any affiliations. Most likely, Bazin was aware that Mounier's personalism was a utopian, yet still productive term of reference.

ART

In contrast to photography's technological modernity, the traditional arts are inevitably egotistic. Based on the human hand working in synch with the eye and the mind, especially the plastic arts such as sculpture and painting are anthropocentric, because they stand up against the non-manual, automatic, mechanical ontology of a photographic tracing. In the history of image-making, photography stands out as the one and only incarnational exception. Already in the early twenties, the American surrealist Man Ray's "rayographs" called attention to their self-made status. Rayographs came into being without a camera, thanks to thumbtacks and coils of wire on a sheet of photosensitized paper exposed to light. A photograph is a natural image that makes itself by itself, through light and time. This is so even in the normal situation when someone is operating the camera.

Most importantly, in the case of photography, Bazin's term *ontology*¹⁰ means "a way of being otherwise," due to the way this incarnational kind of image is so irrationally believable that it blurs the difference between subject and object. Whether or not a photographic negative is accidental and illegible, it always bears witness to the "here and now" of a moment in time whose imprinting is never again repeatable in the very same way. After all, the fuzziest negative can make visible an infinitesimal trace of time passing that we could not see otherwise.

Alternatively, a photographic frozen moment never tells us a fully articulated story, the way any narrative does through development and change. Thus Bazin specifies that, in comparison to photography's physio-chemical record, cinema is a language-like medium. Being manual, the plastic arts depend on some degree of self-projection. On the contrary, outside of any hu-

¹⁰ A. Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema? vol. 1*, 10. As far as the intellectual development of Bazin's photographic ontology, see: J-P. Sartre, *The Imaginary: Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, London 2010.

man interference, photographic automatism is a non-anthropocentric and an objectifying source of fresh perceptions:

Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love.¹¹

Through photography, the freezing of time does not redeem a "stubborn," physical reality, hopelessly mired in decay the way Siegfried Kracauer would have it.¹² In clear opposition to Kracauer's quantitative rather than qualitative view of time in daily life, for Bazin, photography's aesthetic power derives from how it makes visible the reality of amorphous time.

Unlike the plastic arts, photography has a heuristic potential: it can function as an eye-opener questioning our most hidden biases. As a non-linguistic visual record, any photograph stores the spatiotemporal energy of a flux held in suspension. However, in any photograph, the iconic likeness of the image never tells the truth. Only through its indexical status, from direct contact between object and image within a process of molding, can a photograph derive the authority of a self-made record. A staged photograph may lie, but it does always document the analogical reality of a moment taken out of time.¹³

Sensitive to Bazin's respect for a space-time continuum that can become an autonomous narrative, French film historian Antoine De Baecque discusses the footage that Samuel Fuller shot near the Falkenau Nazi camp in 1945.¹⁴ To prove that the inhabitants of this small town lied when they denied any knowledge of the Holocaust, Fuller instinctively relied on the long take. Without superimposing disjunctive cuts, he allowed the camera movement to demonstrate the geographic proximity of village and camp. This matching of real space and real time with filmic space and filmic time, respectively, functions as an undeniable proof of moral complicity.

Within the shift from photography to filmmaking, Bazin considers German Caligarism to be the most negative example of anthropocentric cinemas. In the French film theorist's discussion of photography, there is no embar-

¹¹ Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, 15.

¹² S. Kracauer. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, New York 1960, p. 107.

¹³ On the concepts of index and icon, see: C. Sanders Peirce, "On the Algebra of Logic: A Contribution to the Philosophy of Notation (1885)," in *The Essential Peirce: Volume I: Selected Philosophical Writings (1867-1891)*, Bloomington 1992, pp. 225-228.

¹⁴ A. De Baecque, *Camera Historica: The Century in Cinema*, New York 2012.

rassment, no nostalgia, no fear of modernity, and no loss of any aura. Comparable to but different from human sight, the glass lens of the camera enjoys an equalizing perspective on everything it encounters. Through the French word *objectif* (lens), Bazin underlines the affinity between the photographic camera's non-anthropocentric eye, the egalitarian leveling of human behavior, and objects on screen.

Cinema's non-anthropocentric, equalizing process takes place at the level of recording, before a director's style de-emphasizes or underlines the fictional *mise-en-scène* with changes through cuts, focal length, angle, distance, duration, framing. Open to many different kinds of films, from Preston Sturges' socially conscious comedies to Jean Rouch's innovative ethnographies, to the avant-garde and to animation with Nicole Vedrez's archival experiments and Norman McLaren's drawings in motion, Bazin was especially intrigued by mainstream popular films, where the camera's non-anthropocentric, passive recording turns itself into a self-consciously anti-anthropocentric or non-intrusive, yet attentive narrative stance.¹⁵ Only such an ethical orientation of mutual respect between Self and Other could challenge the utilitarian, profit-oriented goals of contemporary life and the self-centered anthropocentrism of the traditional arts.

Since photographic imprinting involves direct contact with the material world, cinema's vocation is an exploratory kind of realism, sensitive to chance and epiphanies. Cinema's illusionist storytelling, however, can be used in manipulative ways. The more cinema is used in an anti-anthropocentric way (open to risk or improvisation), the more this medium enables staged and unstaged *mise-en-scènes* to tell their own stories. This means that these fictional and nonfictional narratives thrive on enough momentum that they look as if they were happening for the very first time. The point here is that even when staging and repetition occur, there has to be enough atmosphere and energy so that a living experience in process prevails over complete artificiality.¹⁶ Furthermore, granted that the human element – in front of or behind the camera – always participates in these anti-anthropocentric narratives, it can do so without faking contingency, as happens in today's digital cinema of special effects and CGI.

¹⁵ Bazin, "Ontology ...," in *What is Cinema? vol. 1*, 10. For a possible launching pad to reflect on the differences between André Bazin and Emmanuel Levinas in regard to the anti-anthropocentric and Levinas' sentence "face-to-face," see: J. Mai, "Lorna's Silence and Levinas's ethical alternative: form and viewer in the Dardenne Brothers," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 2011, 9(4), pp. 435–453.

¹⁶ On Re-enactment, see: J. McKay, "Montage under Suspicion: Bazin's Russo-Soviet Reception," in: *Opening Bazin*, pp. 291–297.

Perception, cognition, and hallucination are not only part of cinematic spectatorship, but they also point back to art, science, and religion as unavoidable frames of reference for the cinema. Art is relevant to perception, self-expression, and the imagination, while science strives for cognition and proof in the course of studying life and matter. All religions are fair game for anthropology, while they deal with origins and the afterlife. For Bazin, irrational belief or theology is more important than art or creativity, while science and cognition are at the bottom of his tripartite paradigm.

The relationship between cinema and the other arts dominates so many of Bazin's essays that I shall briefly explore the relationship between the screen and the stage. Regarding the screen, Bazin consistently avoided the metaphors of the window and the mirror. This is due to how Leonardo celebrated the imaginary window of perspective and denigrated the passive mirror inside the box of the *camera obscura*. On the contrary, Bazin conceptualized the screen in a way that does justice to cinema's two constitutive functions: the display of motion and the projection of recording. The window and the mirror are static objects and cannot accommodate changes in angle, scale, focal length and framing onto an invisible fixed surface. The borders of Bazin's screen are elastic, because the screen has to look as if the real world exists in a relationship of continuity with whatever the eye of the camera focuses on. Mobile framing demonstrates why the screen's two sides are unlike the stable wings of the stage. Everything on stage is, in principle, under control and sustained within a centripetal space. By contrast, cinema's screen centrifugally opens onto what is beyond itself.

SCIENCE

Besides its numerous references to the other arts, Bazin's film theory is filled with scientific metaphors based on his secular education between 1934 and 1937 at the École Normale d'Instituteurs in La Rochelle. There he studied evolutionary biology, quantum physics, chemistry, and the modern mathematics of calculus relevant to moving objects.¹⁷ With Bazin, for example, biology's leveling approach is comparable to the indifferent look of the camera lens. This comparison between biology and the glass eye of the camera is meant to invoke nature's amoral, egalitarian natural selection to preserve a widespread level of vitality.

¹⁷ C. B. Boyer and U. C. Merzbach, *A History of Mathematics*, Hoboken 2011; C. B. Boyer, *The History of the Calculus and its Conceptual Development*, New York 1959.

Charles Darwin's secular approach and Henri Bergson's self-healing creativity, or *élan vital*, shape Bazin's handling of biology in his film theory.¹⁸ Bazin's Darwinism is holistic, because he distinguishes between natural selection in nature and the struggle of the fittest in society. Considering that the science of ecology emerged in the 1920s, unsurprisingly Bazin disapproves of Herbert Spencer's (1820–1903) "survival of the fittest."¹⁹ In contrast to an holistic natural selection, such an expression stands for a social Darwinism and a utilitarian mindset that can be applied to the box office revenues of mainstream cinema and to the marginalization of whoever or whatever is unproductive, noncompetitive, and therefore weak within a framework of wild capitalism. For those who wonder why Bazin chose popular cinema, an industrial art form linked to profit, the answer is that he valued this medium's mass appeal and collective authorship. By contrast, he felt that, although avant-garde film-making is crucial, this approach was much more individualistic than mainstream cinema's authorial structure based on group interaction. In the case of animation, Bazin supported Disney's work at the beginning, but he withdrew his support when the latter turned away from his quasi-surreal experimentations with sound, shape, line and color, for the sake of trite narratives promoting the egotistical values of American capitalism.²⁰

Worth noting is that the scientific Bazin is anti-Platonic, and consistent with a holistic Darwin, in opposing Spencer, whose work was, instead, influenced by the very utilitarian Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Darwin's discoveries, discussed in *The Origin of Species* (1859), refute numerous Platonic typologies based on invariance. Most importantly, a static Euclidean geometry cannot fit into Darwin's, Bergson's, or Bazin's system. For the record, Bazin never refers to Adam Smith and Herbert Spencer, but their quantitative narratives of biological and economic survival strike a strong note of contrast with Bergson's qualitative and vitalistic sensibility in *Creative Evolution* (1907).

According to Euclid, for whom only numbers, proportions, and measurements count, all triangles have the same features. By contrast, Darwin rejects this kind of typological thinking based on uniform elements. Such a modular approach is not compatible with groups of diverse living organisms, including the human species. In fact, humans and animals belong to the same genus of mammals, as far as biological reproduction is concerned. Within each genus,

¹⁸ C. Darwin, *The Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), New York 1958; H. Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (1907), Mineola 1998.

¹⁹ H. Spencer, *Principles of Biology* (1864), Sacramento 2018.

²⁰ A. Bazin, "Walt Disney, Bambi [1942]," *Parisien Libéré* 1948, 1131 (May), n.p.

different groups become species. Each one of these species, in turn, consists of uniquely different individuals sharing a basic set of defining features, while holding on to their unrepeatable individuality. Interestingly, the latter speaks to many variables, including contingency.

Bazin's dislike of Euclidean geometry is evident in his "Ontology" essay, where he associates perspective with a timeless geometric ordering. On the contrary, Darwin's axiom declaring the uniqueness of anything alive resonates throughout Bazin's film theory. Each moment is different from any other moment within the flow of time, including the single photographic negative. Even if they are born in the same place and at the same time, no two instances within the same species can ever be absolutely identical to one another, the way two lifeless equilateral triangles are within a Platonic worldview. Darwin argues that the Bible's narrative of divine creation is a mythological fiction in conflict with his new science of evolutionary biology linking man to animal and celebrating nature's ingenuity.

As a dissident Catholic, Bazin fully embraced Darwin's secularism by replacing the concept of the human "soul" with cinema's intellectual and emotional potential to generate a symbiotic spark, to energize the relations between Self and Other. Darwin's emergent and empirical gradualism accepts the universality of contingency as much as Bazin's film theory does. To be sure, Bazin felt that contingency was intrinsic to the cinema, due to this medium's unavoidable dependency on the physical world that it records. In fact, in comparison to the other arts, cinema is the most difficult of media, as far as delivering aesthetic results is concerned. In this regard, the film theorist remarked: "the result [is] a thousand times more risky in cinema than in painting or literature."²¹

In contrast to classical mathematics before calculus – the modern mathematics of contingency – biology allows Bazin to place life with its risks and surprises above the self-contained, static equations of algebra and the interchangeable solids of Euclidean geometry. Interestingly, Bazin's familiarity with calculus helped him to theorize Italian neorealism, a postwar filmmaking approach marked by a quasi-documentary illusion of reality and openness to intuitive improvisation. The phenomenological realism of postwar Italian cinema is not a genre, not a formula, and not a style, while its attitude stands for what Bazin hopes the cinema can achieve with its future.²² Here, *phenom-*

²¹ A. Bazin, "De la politique des auteurs," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 1957, 70 (April), n.p.

²² For a negative view of Bazin's work, in regard to neorealism as a postwar liberalism, see: N. Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 398–99. Also in regard to lack of coherence in Bazin's work, see: N. Carroll, "Cinematic Representation and Real-

enological refers to the unfolding of a perceptual, subjective process based on change, displacement, and discovery in regard to one's own relations with others. Thus, objectification within neorealism means to bypass selfish subjectivity and to be able to evaluate human behavior in society from a relational and egalitarian stance.

In comparison to other formulaic realisms perpetuating so-called *déjà vu* (already seen) or a quantitative naturalism based on correct details²³, Italian neorealism proposes the *jamais vu* (never seen) of a perceptual displacement, namely the objectification of human behavior onto a self-critical and anti-anthropocentric moral choice. By centrifugally expanding our range of emotions and insights, the cinema can generate alternative perceptions of Otherness. Precisely because it concerns optical perception and ethical values, cinema can develop new ways of seeing inside of us. While this transformation is subjective and personal, a new attitude can make a difference in society as small as it may be. Nothing changes as far as the physical appearance of someone or something in the actual world. It is the inner relationship between Self and Other that acquires an unprecedented dimension.

Bazin's perceptual or phenomenological epiphany should not be confused with the concept of de-familiarization from Russian formalism. According to Russian formalism, the dominant point of view in a literary text can shift from a human being to an animal. Thus, in a page written by Tolstoy and discussed by Viktor Shklovsky, the reader can see the world nearby through the eyes of a horse. With Bazin, the point is not making the world look strange, but to develop an inner way of seeing differently. The latter may displace the human being from the center of a trite mental universe,²⁴ by opening this very same person to a new way of projecting himself or herself in the world through reciprocal transformation.

RELIGION

After art and science, the most important dimension of Bazin's film theory is religion. Neither an animist like Jean Epstein nor a pantheist like Jean Renoir, Bazin was no spiritualist. With Bazin, theology becomes political, because it focuses on the stories we tell ourselves about our nature as humans

ism: André Bazin and the Aesthetics of Sound Film," in *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory*. Princeton 1988, pp. 94–171.

²³ Kracauer, *Theory of Film*...

²⁴ On Leo Tolstoy's "Story of a Horse" (1863–1886), see V. Shklovskij, "Art as Technique," in: *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Maiden 2017, pp. 8–14.

in the light of the "sacred", which is what sustains and limits legitimate rule over our collective lives.

Equivalent to irrational belief, Bazin's definition of religion is comparable to the cinema, which, in turn, depends on a factual hallucination through a willful suspension of disbelief. As repositories of ethical rules, religions are sociologies of behavior which establish boundaries between the sacred and the profane. By relying on the paradox of a rational animal next to an irrational being, Bazin's answer to "What is a human?" points towards the possibility to engage the Other as a Neighbor instead of a rival or an enemy.

Bazin accepted the necessity of believing in God. For him, God is a form of theological grounding in an inexplicable world ruled by chance and suffering. Instead of being a transcendent entity or a personal being, God is a dimension which, just like time, only human beings can conceptualize, but neither control, nor understand. In keeping with his Darwinian views, Bazin argued that nature always exists outside of God's sphere of influence. Thus immanence, instead of transcendence, shapes Bazin's film theory from beginning to end. God needs to exist in order to provide an alternative or a possibility beyond fallible human institutions, such as the law and the police. In the case of the legal system, we have the right and the duty to use the law for the sake of civil society, but we can never presume to be our neighbor's infallible and sole judge.

Thus Bazin positions himself in disavowal of the empty office at the end of Kafka's *The Castle* (1926):

... one does not have to believe in a cruel God to feel the guilt of which Joseph K. is culpable. On the contrary, the drama lies in this: God does not exist, the last office in the castle is empty. Perhaps we have here the particular tragedy of today's world, the raising of a self-deifying social reality to a transcendental state.²⁵

In contrast to Kafka's pessimism, Bazin insists that only a theological grounding based on hope and compassion allows humankind to learn from its worst mistakes and horrors. Like his mentor Emmanuel Mounier, Bazin practises the paradox of a "tragic optimism."²⁶ By the same token, Bazin is the first to agree with Kafka that when bureaucracy becomes a "self-deifying" end in itself, it gives the whole system permission to reject any criticism of its cruel methods.

²⁵ A. Bazin, "De Sica: Metteur-en-scène," in *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 2, p. 73.

²⁶ L. D. Sawchenko, "The Concept of the Person: The Contributions of Gabriel Marcel and Emmanuel Mounier to the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur," M. A. Thesis, Department of Religious Studies, University of Calgary, Alberta, 2013, p. 48.

As a Catholic dissident, Bazin disliked dogmatic and rule-bound positions in all camps, hence his dislike of political membership and choice of cultural activism through the cinema. Granted that one can live perfectly well without party politics, religion or spirituality,²⁷ Bazin concluded that, as a conduit towards artistic creativity and self-expression, some degree of irrational belief defines human consciousness as much as a certain level of skepticism does. While showing that all humans are vulnerable, science can also fight the extremes of religious zeal, stand up against stubborn prejudices, and defeat hopelessness.

CINEMA AS MIND-MACHINE

Before cinema's invention with its dynamic engagement with the world, static media had always conveyed an author's subjectivity, even when the painter or the writer was striving to describe an object realistically. Literature, theater and painting posit a reader, a spectator and a viewer addressed by a work and its author. Although they can fulfill an anthropocentric need, as material objects, the book, the stage, and the canvas cannot independently look at an object or hear a sound. The cinema, on the other hand, can look and hear by showing to its audience the effects of sound and image through the characters on the screen.

To objectify oneself in an anti-anthropocentric way so as to see and hear the world through another human being's subjectivity is what characterizes the empathy of humankind and the orchestration of looking on the screen. At the cinema, we objectify ourselves, thanks to the eye of an invisible camera looking at the world by itself or aligning its point of view with a character through an eye-line match. Thanks to this displacement onto the Other's point of view, we can never see the camera as a movable machine and ourselves as motionless viewers sitting in the movie theater.

The camera and the sound recorder always combine into an audiovisual material ghost whose effects are visible (and audible) for the audience as a community of believers. The latter engage in a ritual comparable to sports, travel, and even shopping, due to the mass appeal of these practices. By arguing that time is cinema's fundamental preoccupation, Bazin asserts that this photographic medium makes visible objectivity in time through editing and camera movement.

²⁷ In his anthropology of religion, Régis Debray (1940–...) points out that the spirit of spirituality is comparable to breath. On this issue, see: Dalle Vacche, *André Bazin's Film Theory...*, p. 165.

By contrast, the literary and fine arts are based on the human hand. These art forms fall under the anthropocentric rubric of "subjectivity in space,"²⁸ through which all artists seek eternity. On the contrary, cinema's embodied, subjective and mass spectatorship contents itself with the duration of camera movement to record the world and the simultaneity of editing to elicit mental abstractions.

Bazin understood that the cinema-machine can produce the illusion of a parallel universe of beings and things. Yet cinema's energizing charge is grounded in immanent traces from the actual material world. The triggering of cinema's narrative spark requires the original vision put forth by a filmmaker with their team. Within Bazin's idea of the cinema, the emotional and intellectual energizing of the audience should derive from a mix of "freedom and necessity."²⁹ While a filmic narrative necessarily impacts viewers as a group, it should allow enough room for individual freedom of interpretation.

In experiencing a shared narrative, viewers interrogate themselves in relation to their own way of being, as they respond to lifelike characters and unfolding events on screen. By projecting recorded traces of the world onto a brainlike screen, and by stimulating the viewers' minds, the cinema can generate imaginary alter egos, or states of receptivity capable of self-interrogation and empathy toward Others.

Significantly, Bazin stated that, at its very best, cinema can be a form of anti-anthropocentric love or community, thus offering a source of inspirational energy.³⁰ On one hand, we need basic recording to preserve the appearances of changing worlds. On the other, we rely on cinema's editing and camera movement to make us expand outward in such a way that we encounter Otherness.

Precisely because it envisions a parallel world, Bazin's film theory has cosmological implications. Through editing and camera movement, cinema explores our belonging to a vast universe that extends from the microbes of the microscope to the stars of the telescope. The microscope and the telescope are, of course, two precursors of the cinema, for they enlarge the small and reach out towards the far away. The question, therefore, arises of how cinema can contribute to the development of relational ethics.

In my view, Bazin answers this question through his systematic use of metaphors from the arts and the sciences. Were we to track the bio-aesthetics of Bazin's metaphorical writing style, one could say that the framework of a natural

²⁸ Bazin, "Ontology ...," in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, pp. 14–16.

²⁹ The expression "freedom and necessity" comes from Bazin, "Le journal d'un curé de campagne and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson," in: *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, p. 134.

³⁰ Bazin, "Ontology ...," in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, p. 15.

history of media slowly emerges. When they sit in the dark, spectators become as motionless as plants, and, as such, they resemble the stillness of photography and painting. Spectators can also become animals in motion, to the extent that they respond to nervous stimuli triggered by moving elements on screen, enabling them to explore the world vicariously, through camera movement. Finally, spectators can also become gravity-defying machines, like an airplane during an aerial view that miniaturizes the world; or they can reduce themselves to an insect's size when they look at gigantic elements on the screen in close-up.

To be sure, Bazin's embodied spectatorship depends on how his ranking of the arts with time and literature is comparable to his "tree of the sciences."³¹ This "tree" branches out into interrelated disciplines, from biology all the way down to mathematics. As far as the ranking of arts, literature, editing, and the thinking mind are on top; theater, camera movement, and the world are in the middle; painting and the senses are at the bottom. Bazin's tree of the sciences reverses the arts' mind-world-body sequence. There, time, space, and the senses are ranked in such a way that language and thought have priority over the sensuality of pictorial images.

As soon as we further connect Bazin's "tree of the sciences" within the interfaces of contingency with biology and abstract logic with mathematics, we realize that within Bazin's system, biology sits at the top from which it points to the finite and inevitably frail organisms of all living entities. The chemistry and physics of interaction with the world are in the middle; while the mathematics of the rational, abstract mind sit at the bottom. This placement of human logic at the bottom of the "tree of sciences" is no denial of logic, but a sobering and anti-anthropocentric gesture that makes room for the inexplicable and the fortuitous, while balancing out the prominence of literature and thought in Bazin's system of the arts.

In the cinema, Bazin's system of the arts and the tree of the sciences complement each other in such a way that lifelike motion compensates for physical decay, while the blind spots of subjective perception prevail over the proofs of scientific knowledge. In the end, the medium of cinema mediates between the Self and the world, subject and object. This mediation, however, is a call to action rather than an abstract philosophical position. Neither an academic nor a politician, Bazin never claimed to be a philosopher. Besides working as a journalist, he made a living by travelling to cine-clubs and running film discussions. As a cultural activist, Bazin always embraced paradoxes. Thus he avoided both binary systems and Hegelian syntheses. For him, cinema's illu-

³¹ A. Bazin, "Un musée des ombres: magie blanche, magie noir," *Ecran Français* 1948, 182 (21 December), n.p.: "*l'arbre de science de la photographie.*"

sionism is as important as its realism, because some kind of irrational belief is indispensable to keep on living. This is why the irrational remains an unavoidable component of the human experience, which the cinema addresses by triggering insights and emotions. By so doing, it nurtures our memory of the past and our imagining of the future.

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ANDRÉ BAZIN'S FILM THEORY: ART, SCIENCE, RELIGION

Summary

Always keen on the spectators' freedom of interpretation, André Bazin's film theory not only asks the famous question "What is cinema?" but it also explores what is a human. By underlining the importance of personalist ethics, Angela Dalle Vacche is the first film specialist to identify Bazin's "anti-anthropocentric" ambition of the cinema in favor of a more compassionate society.

Influenced by the personalist philosophy of his mentor, Emmanuel Mounier, Bazin argued that the cinema is a mind-machine that interrogates its audiences on how humankind can engage in an egalitarian fashion towards other humans. According to Bazin, cinema's ethical interrogation places human spirituality or empathy on top of creativity and logic. Notwithstanding Bazin's emphasis on ethics, his film theory is rich with metaphors from art and science. The French film critic's metaphorical writing lyrically frames encounters between literary texts and filmmaking styles, while it illuminates the analogy between the *élan vital* of biology and cinema's life-like ontology.

A brilliant analyst of many kinds of films from Europe, Asia, and Latin America, ranging from fiction to documentary, from animation to the avant-garde, Bazin felt that the abstractions of editing were as important as the camera's fluidity of motion. Furthermore, he disliked films based on a thesis or on an *a priori* stance that would rule out the risks and surprises of life in motion. Neither a mystic nor an animist, Bazin was a dissident Catholic and a cultural activist without membership of a specific political party. Eager to dialogue with all kinds of communities, Bazin always disliked institutionalized religions based on dogmas.

Keywords:

André Bazin, cinema, theory, art, science, religion, anti-anthropocentric

