**BAZIN, André (born April 18, 1918, Angers, France—died November 11, 1958, Nogent-sur-Marne, France)**

André Bazin was a French film critic immensely influential in the development of postwar film theory. Directing cine-clubs during the Nazi Occupation, he co-founded the monthly film magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1951 with Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and Joseph-Marie Lo Duca, which he edited until his early death of leukaemia. Publishing 2,600 articles during his lifetime, he was preparing the four-volume collection of his writing, *Qu-est-ce que le cinéma?* (“What is Cinema?”), at the time of his death. A champion of Italian neorealism, Robert Flaherty, Jean Renoir, and Orson Welles, he helped launch filmmakers of the French New Wave (*Nouvelle vague*) who developed their formal convictions as writers at *Cahiers*, including Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, and his foster-son François Truffaut.

A progressive Catholic and lover of animals, Bazin’s philosophy is popularly reduced to a faith in the image, privileging documentary, long takes, and deep focus in stressing photography’s ability to capture reality over its rhetorical manipulation in film. Temporarily dismissed by French and Anglophone theorists in the 1970s and 1980s, Bazin’s work has since been the subject of theoretical reassessment, and his theory of realism is substantial and complex. Bazin’s axiomatic claim to the camera’s objectivity should be read through his influences in phenomenology and existentialism, in which reality is itself a source of mystery. His focus on “mise-en-scène” and “découpage” (two complex terms addressing the design of the film image, and a film’s storyboarding and execution, respectively) is a marked departure from Soviet theorists’ focus on montage in the 1920s and 1930s.

In his famous 1945 article, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”, he described the human impulse toward self-representation as a means of escaping death, from Egyptian mummification through painting. Like other critics of the time, he determines photography and cinema as long-awaited modern tools satisfying a growing obsession with realism in the plastic arts. Yet while he identifies photography as embalming time, Bazin finds cinema to be “change mummified”, and this inscription of the medium as an unparalleled chronicler of his tumultuous cultural moment should not be forgotten when approaching his debated prescriptions for cinematic practice (*What is Cinema?*, 14-15).

After labouring over the photographic image as the key to film, he ends this article by pronouncing that “On the other hand, of course, cinema is also a language” (Ibid., 16). Dudley Andrew situates this abrupt shift as indicating that visuality is always dependent on social meaning, since “What cinema *is* depends on the psychological power of photographic realism, but cinema’s actual *value* is historically constituted” (*André Bazin*, xxvi). Bazin would praise shots occupying the duration of entire scenes, with wide angle lenses allowing sharp focus on the scenery typified by Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941), while also admiring a culturally constituted literary work and its means of production. This adoption of film form as art can be appreciated through his students’ later definition of film as an act of personal expression in Truffaut's “la politique des auteurs” (reformulated as “auteur theory” by Andrew Sarris). However, while Bazin championed the genius of unique authorship, his concern was always for that of the medium itself, and his attention to technological change and politics continue to take on new meaning.

**References and further reading:**

Andrew, D. (2013) *André Bazin*.Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Andrew, D. with Joubert-Laurencin, H. (ed.) (2011) *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife*.Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Bazin, A. (1971) *What is Cinema?* Vol. 1 & 2. Berkeley: University of California Press. Gray, H. (tr./ed.)

Bazin, A. (1981) *French Cinema of the Occupation and Resistance: The Birth of a Critical Esthetic*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc. Hochman, S. (tr.)

Bazin, A. (1997) *Bazin at Work: Major Essays & Reviews from the Forties & Fifties*. New York and London: Routledge. Cardullo, B. (ed.) Piette, A. and Cardullo, B. (tr.)

Jeong, S. (2009) “André Bazin’s Ontological Other: The Animal in Adventure Films”, *Senses of Cinema* 51.

Margulies, I. (ed.) (2003) *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Rosen, P. (2001) *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Joel Neville Anderson

PhD Student, Visual and Cultural Studies, University of Rochester

—

**Paratextual material:**

**André Bazin and camera [https://www.dropbox.com/s/l4qpusbd2pagnt8/bazin\_camera.jpg, courtesy of Dudley Andrew/Florent Bazin, downloaded at http://www.filmcomment.com/article/auteur-theory-auteurism]**

**André Bazin and his wife Janine Bazin with “Coco” on the cover of the January 1959 memorial issue of *Cahiers du cinéma*, two months after his death, copyright *Cahiers du cinéma* [https://www.dropbox.com/s/1w8ykizvnpjvx5y/bazin\_tribute.JPG]**

**André Bazin with one of his many pets [https://www.dropbox.com/s/vb04a3g5difer2w/bazin\_cat.jpg]**

**Still from *The Bullfight* (1951, “Course de taureaux”), copyright Panthéon Productions [https://www.dropbox.com/s/bqtajvg1z4nm666/the\_bullfight.png]**

**Still from *Umberto D.* (1952), copyright Janus Films [https://www.dropbox.com/s/xd18dncxqhbr9ix/umberto\_d.png]**

**Clips from *Umberto D.* (1952) [33:30-37:15 in Criterion Collection release]**