

A tribute to André Bazin

Carlos A. Valle

Charlie Chaplin gazed out at me nostalgically and with unsettled eyes from the striking cover of a book that gathers together various articles devoted to him by André Bazin.¹ This slim volume had been republished after 30 years. Was nostalgia acquiring a new lease of life? Did Bazin still have anything to say today? Perhaps moved by Chaplin's yearning look that encouraged me to review rich memories, I re-read Bazin's perceptive, creative and admiring survey of the art of film.

A modest fellow, sickly, slowly and prematurely dying, he it was who gave the patent of royalty to the cinema, just as the poets of the past had crowned their kings.

Jean Renoir

The year 2003 marks 85 years since the birth of André Bazin and 45 since his early death. A native of northern France, he longed to be a teacher but was refused because of a stammer. His early passion for cinema led him to organise a film club in Paris during the German occupation and a little later he was named director of the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (Institute of Advanced Film Studies).

Bazin's comments on cinema became known to and appreciated by European film critics. Possibly his name is most widely associated with the creation in 1951, together with Jacques Daniol-Valcroze, of Cahiers du Cinéma, which came to have enormous influence on the history of film. It gave Bazin the support he needed to promote the development of new critics such as François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol, who were the cradle of la nouvelle vague (the New Wave).

At the dawn of this new movement in film, Bazin died at the age of 40. Four years earlier he had been diagnosed with the illness that was undermining his physical strength, but not his passion and dedication to getting film recognised for its genuine artistic and human worth. However much has been written and said about cinema, however many theories have struggled to impose themselves, and while commercial criteria have largely taken over film production, it is salutary to remember the pioneer who gave us such a clear vision and understanding of the world of film.

As is well-known, his understanding of cinema is intimately linked to his perceptive and revealing comments and reflections about a great many films, many of which achieve their importance through having been subjected to Bazin's lucid gaze. He was to develop in commentary after commentary a response to the ever present question: What is cinema?, which he used for the title of a collection of many of his writings.²

The art of the real

According to Bazin, cinema reaches its peak by being the art of the real. But what is the real? Cinema depends on visual and spatial reality: the real world of the physical. It's a question of the realism of space without which moving images cannot constitute cinema. To speak of realism is not so much to refer to the exactitude of reproduction as to the viewer's belief about the origin of that reproduction. In this sense, the image is not the real object, but what might be called the trace of its digital footprint. For this reason, cinema's primary material is not reality itself, but the traces that reality leaves on celluloid.

Cinema ends up looking like the world, which means that one cannot speak of reality, but what might be called the asymptote of reality.³ That is to say, cinema is like the curve that continually

approaches a straight line or another curve without ever reaching it. In this sense, the realistic aim of cinema can be defined as its readiness to seek out and present the meaning found in objects through the objects themselves and not in using those objects to incorporate an idea that is not already present.

Cinema is not a key to unknown universes. On the contrary, it makes sense of an empirical reality that would otherwise be inaccessible to us. In this way Bazin includes all the possibilities inherent in the simple and unstaged image.

The usher's torch

Bazin saw cinema as a window, 'like the tiny torch of the usher, moving like an unsteady comet in the night of our waking dreams, in the diffuse space without shape or boundaries that surrounds the screen.' But how is this expressed in film productions? Bazin has his problems with the idea of 'montage' when, for example, for Sergei Eisenstein it becomes central.⁴ On the contrary, Bazin leans towards the technique of depth-of-field, because he thought that this allows the action to develop in a longer time-frame at the same time as allowing it to be seen on different planes. So that he considers spatial reality as perceptive reality, because a realist style would show something that occurs in an integral space. This is destroyed as soon as we introduce montage. Yes, intellectual continuity is produced, but at the expense of perceptive continuity.

What is gained by a realist use of film? Bazin believed that the majority of films benefit when they respect the primary material. The same as they must do both at the moment of artistic creation and in the process of montage. In this sense the creator is not someone lacking art, but lacking artifice. The artist, as an attentive observer, selects those parts of an event that seem to express it most adequately. Cinema, by capturing an event and suggesting a meaning to us, reveals aspects of life that we did not get to see or that, simply, we did not wish to see.

Cinema ? the sixth sense

Cinema, as a privileged means of communication, has for Bazin the virtue of being able to share a common understanding lacking in ideology about the planet, on the basis of which human beings can begin to weave new and more lasting social relationships. For this reason, cinema is like a sixth sense that allows us to glimpse that understanding of the world's possibilities and of human relationships. Thus he came to affirm that 'cinema is an idealist phenomenon', the realisation of what already exists in human beings.

It could be argued that the development of cinema has been more closely linked to technological and economic developments imposed by the large production companies than to the aesthetic expression of an ideal. Without denying this commercial component, we cannot avoid the fact that cinema has been linked to our understanding of reality, to the nearness or strangeness of problems and dreams. For Bazin, this nearness ? in which many aspects of romanticism can be seen ? cinema manages to make us aware that in this encounter with reality we can experience freedom and its possibilities. A freedom that makes viewers choose their own interpretation but does not leave them lacking in choices, turning the encounter into a process that is always open and evolving.

The subsequent development of studies about film theory that flourished at the end of the 1960s revealed different degrees of rapprochement to Bazin's thinking. Among the structuralists and semioticians can be found his most bitter critics. Of course, some of them, rather than denying Bazin's contributions, disown cinema itself on ideological grounds. Peter Matthews thinks that one could almost say that 'the whole Byzantine edifice of contemporary film theory sprang out of

an irresistible itch to prove Bazin wrong.?5

The realism of technology?

Should we carry on reading Bazin with the rose-tinted spectacles of times past? Has his thinking ceased to have meaning for our understanding of cinema? Today?s film-making is immeasurably loaded down by technology. Ever more scenes, actions, sequences and even the drama itself are reduced to being created by computer. Images are built up like jigsaw puzzles that are put together by computer, which provides the raw materials for the content. All this seems very far from the vision and understanding that Bazin had of cinema.

It would be very difficult to talk about realism in this film world dominated by dazzling technology. In any case, one would have to ask if technology?s dominant presence were not questioning as well as calling for a new understanding of the world. In its time the industrial revolution meant not just economic and social changes, but also cultural and religious changes that shook up people?s lives. Today?s new technological world is producing a new revolution with effects that are both beneficial and devastating, whose end results are in the realm of the unpredictable.

Cinema is a product of technology ? a technology that has been invading modern life and creating artificial worlds but, at the same time, opening the door to the visible and almost palpable realisation of dreams and the imagination. It does so today, perhaps, in a chaotic manner, ignoring traditions, myths and customs, dominated by the commercial maelstrom, inflated by an ideology that is chauvinist, racist, and degrading to human beings. In its way, it reflects a world that is postmodern, thrown in to confusion, disorientated and, unfortunately, ever more lacking in goals.

Thinking about cinema today carries with it the need to take up André Bazin?s reflections once again and set them in a new dimension. He firmly believed that cinema had to be recognised as a way of expressing art and our understanding of human life. He did not predict what directions its development would take, but cinema would always offer new ways of expressing life.

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Notes

1. I am referring to Charles Chaplin, first published in French in 1972 and subsequently by Cahiers du Cinéma, Paris (2000) and in Spanish by Ediciones Paidós Ibérica, Barcelona (2002).

2. For further information about Bazin and his writings, visit an ?unofficial? page: unofficialbaziniantrib.com

3. An asymptote is ?a straight line that is closely approached by a curve so that the distance between them decreases to zero as the distance from the origin increases to infinity? (OED).

4. It is interesting to recall the influence that kabuki theatre had on Eisenstein?s film work and haiku poetry on his understanding of montage.

5. Peter Matthews, ?André Bazin ?Divining the real?, in *Sight and Sound*. www.bfi.org.uk