

Title of the Course:

Film Studies

Week 02

Module 05

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Andre Bazin and “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”

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Andre Bazin and “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”

The French cinema theorist and critic, Andre Bazin’s major commentaries on cinema and its related aspects appeared in public circulation between the 1940s and 1950s. He was one of founders of the influential French film journal, *Cahiers du Cinema* (Notebooks of Cinema). Cahiers du Cinema was founded in 1951 jointly by Andre Bazin, Joseph-Marie Lo Duca and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze. Bazin remained the editor of this journal until his death in 1958, at the young age of 40 years. Andre Bazin was born in 1918 in Angers, a western France city on banks of the river Maine. Dudley Andrew opines that, Andre Bazin was “A social activist, he directed cine-clubs and, from 1945 to 1950, worked for the Communist outreach organization Travail et Culture [Work and Culture]. He 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. He adopted the delinquent François Truffaut, who dedicated *The 400 Blows* to him. Bazin’s influence spread to critics and filmmakers in Latin America, eastern Europe, and Asia, ...” (Oxford Bibliographies).

Learning Objectives

To enable the learner:

- a) to form a brief career profile of Andre Bazin

- b) to comprehend the major ideas of Andre Bazin vis-à-vis cinema
- c) to read and understand Andre Bazin's essay prescribed for study
- d) comprehend the influence of Andre Bazin in the different phases of the history of cinema
- e) to critically analyse and contextualize the theoretical insights provided by Andre Bazin.

The Soviet school of Cinema, especially in 1920s and 1930s, led by Dziga Vertov, Lev Kuleshov and Sergei Eisenstein, propounded that the core of the medium of cinema lies in the editorial practice of Montage. Montage simply means suturing together two or more disconnected images or sequences to bring an entirely new meaning to the post-edited cinema. On the contrary, Andre Bazin argued that such manipulative rearrangements force the spectators to embrace the intended meaning of the film. Bazin believed that Montage closes the possibility of independent and autonomous interpretation of a movie moment by the spectator.

Amongst the early film theorists, Andre Bazin represents the Realist School of Cinema. Realism in cinematic practices aims at producing an illusion of reality by inventing believable and credible characters and events. Realism is basically an artistic approach wherein a verisimilitude to real life is attempted to create in cinematic narrative, actor behaviour, setting, soundscape etc. To provide an example, close-up shots and extreme close-up shots work against the biological capacity of human eye. Therefore, such shots are normally avoided in realist cinema practices. Instead, realist cinema practitioners preferred deep-focus shots. Deep focus cinematographic technique is compatible with the anatomical feature of human eyes. In a deep focus shot, the foreground, midground and the background of a frame are given almost equal focus. A deep focus shot, contrary to a shallow-focus shot, provides a depth of field. Jean Renoir, Akira Kurosawa, Orson Welles were some of the major practitioners of deep focus shots. A deep focus shot provides the spectator the freedom of concentrating on any part of the frame or sequence; whereas, a close-up shot compels the spectator to concentrate only on a particular field in the frame of sequence. Andre Bazin's idea of cinematic realism was later reflected in different ways in major movements in cinema like the Italian Neorealist films of 1940s and 1950s, and the French New Wave cinemas of the 1950s and 1960s.

Andre Bazin's critical and analytical writings on cinema were in French language. The French title of his four-volume posthumously anthologized writings was *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (What is Cinema?). In 1967 Hugh Gray translated those writings into English and published in two volumes under the title *What is Cinema?*. The essay prescribed in this course is "The Ontology of the Photographic Image". This essay is actually the first chapter in Volume I of Hugh Gray's English translation of Andre Bazin's writings.

The Foreword to *What is Cinema?* was written by the French New Wave filmmaker Jean Renoir. In the Forward, Jean Renoir notes that, "There is no doubt about the influence that Bazin will have in the years to come. His writings will survive even if the cinema does not. Perhaps future generations will only know of its existence through his writings. Men will try to imagine a screen, with horses galloping across it, a close-up of a beautiful star, or the rolling eye of a dying

hero, and each will interpret these things in his own way. But they will all agree on one thing, namely, the high quality of *What is Cinema?*” (Bazin and Hugh Gray, vi).

In the introduction to *What is Cinema I*, Hugh Gray mentions that, “... the critical insight that illuminates his writings has not grown dim with the years. It continues to shine forth in its very personal way, and the arguments through which he diffused it offer a brilliant example of a combination of the critical spirit and the spirit of synthesis, each operating with equal force. Bazin's thought, while rooted in a rich cultural tradition, produces conclusions that at times are forcefully expressed in terms drawn from contemporary science...” (1).

Let's now look at some of the key-arguments of the essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” by Andre Bazin. The essay links various philosophical and artistic practices behind the creation of mummies, terracotta statuettes, painting, photography and cinema.

Andre Bazin begins the essay by trying to find out the core aim behind the creation of works of art. He says that, all art has its origin in particular psychological condition that ever haunts human beings. He terms this psychological condition as “Mummy Complex”. Mummy Complex is a human defense mechanism against the ultimate and unavoidable threat of Death. He elaborates this idea as, “If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation. The process might reveal that at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex. The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death, saw survival as depending on the continued existence of the corporeal body. Thus, by providing a defense against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life. It was natural, therefore, to keep up appearances in the face of the reality of death by preserving flesh and bone” (9).

The construction of the Pyramid, mummification of the corporeal remains, making of terra cotta statuettes etc. show human beings attempt at preservation of life by creating a representation of life against the ultimate pillage of Death. Sculpture, painting, photography, and cinema also have the same objective of preservation of life. If the earlier works of art were symbolic, with the inventions of perspective, works of art started going towards realism. The mechanical system of reproduction also helped artist in reaching closer to realism. The Camera Obscura of Leonardo da Vinci and photographic camera invented by Joseph Niepce enabled the artists to create an illusion of reality in a perceived three-dimensional space.

The term, ‘plastic art’, refers to all works of art where the artist is working with a plastic, or a malleable or flexible medium. Plastic art include: painting, sculpture, photography, film, ceramics etc. Pointing out the crisis in the field of plastic art, in relation with symbolism and realism, Bazin says that with the arrival of tools, for mechanical reproduction of reality, like the photographic camera, traditional forms of art, like sculpture and painting, are relieved of their

burden of representing reality. He explains that, "Perspective was the original sin of Western painting. It was redeemed from the sin by Niepce and Lumiere. In achieving the aims of baroque art, photography has freed the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness. Painting was forced, as it turned out, to offer us illusion and this illusion was reckoned sufficient unto art. Photography and the cinema on the other hand are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all, and in its very essence, our obsession with realism. No matter how skillful the painter, his work was always in fee to an inescapable subjectivity" (12).

Bazin further argues that, ultimately, with traditional arts like painting and sculpture, there is a high amount of subjectivity in representation. However, in photography and cinematography there is an undeniable element of objectivity, because the mechanical devices like camera cannot involve subjectively while capturing an object. He elaborates, "Originality in photography as distinct from originality in painting lies in the essentially objective character of photography... For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. The personality of the photographer enters into the proceedings only in his selection of the object to be photographed and by way of the purpose he has in mind" (13).

Psychologically, the automatically captured photography enjoys more credibility which is absent from all other resemblance making previous artistic practices. Bazin praises photography by saying, "The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model" (14).

In the concluding part of the essay, Bazin once again underlines the uniqueness of photography as, "So, photography is clearly the most important event in the history of plastic arts. Simultaneously, a liberation and a fulfillment, it has freed Western painting, once and for all, from its obsession with realism and allowed it to recover its aesthetic autonomy" (16).

The liberatory potential attributed to photography by Bazin is applicable to the cinematographic camera too. That means, like photography, cinema too takes us closer to realism. Of course, cinematographic decisions like the angle of the shot, fixing of frames, choice of lens etc. involve some amount of subjectivity. However, in comparison with other plastic arts, the element of objectivity is far higher in photography and cinematography.

But there is a note of caution: how would one support Andre Bazin praise of the objectivity of photography completely in the contemporary age of Adobe Photoshop and similar soft wares?

Andre Bazin concludes the essay with this final sentence:

“On the other hand, of course, cinema is also a language” (16). This statement does not completely negate the presence of subjectivity in all efforts at the mechanical reproduction of the illusion of realism, including photography and cinema.

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