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Blandine Joret, *Studying Film with André Bazin*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019. Notes and index. €34.95 (pb.). ISBN 9789462989528; €0.00 (eb.). ISBN 9789048542086.

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It seems that no figure in the discipline of film studies has been re-read, re-considered, or re-thought as much as André Bazin, the postwar French film critic and theorist who co-founded the *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1951. Bazin is canonically associated with “realist film theory,” or the camp of film theoretical thought that privileges cinema’s medium-specific connection to material reality. Within this canonical view, Bazin is best known for his celebration of Italian Neorealist cinema, as well as directors associated with their use of long takes and deep-focus cinematography, such as Orson Welles and Jean Renoir. It has been suggested that his critical interest in such films stems from a belief that cinema, given its technological connection to material reality, best fulfills its aesthetic potential when it seems to correspond with our perception of material reality, i.e., when it mimics the spatiotemporal continuity of human perception. Bazin’s film theory was heavily critiqued in the 1960s and 1970s by the reigning intellectual fashion of the era that regarded aesthetic realism, or any unchecked invocation of a clear and objective “reality,” with ideological suspicion. Over the last twenty years, however, there’s been a resurgence of interest in Bazin, including countless articles and a handful of influential books, that do not simply redeem Bazin for the intellectual naiveté charged against him, but *reread* the established interpretations of his intellectual project.

Blandine Joret’s book-length rereading of this crucial figure thus confronts a double challenge: not only to offer a fresh reading of Bazin’s film theory, but to offer a fresh *rereading* amongst the flurry of similarly posed arguments. Each of the book’s four chapters offers an intervention in distinct sectors of Bazin’s critical and theoretical legacy: the tension between film criticism and film theory; cinematic realism; the relation between film and the other arts; and cinema’s technological evolution. The analyses in these chapters emerge from key paradoxes or conundrums that either come up in Bazin’s own writing or in the theoretical discourse surrounding Bazin’s work. In the chapter on realism, for example, Joret considers how the “realism” of a particular documentary film for Bazin stems not from its visual plenitude and detail but from its imperfection and incompleteness. Or, in the chapter on film and the other arts, Joret considers what it might mean for a painting to be cinematographic within Bazin’s conception of film. The analyses that emerge move freely and imaginatively across their subjects, integrating analyses of Bazin’s own writing, in-depth analyses of contemporary films, and a wide range of intellectual discourses, from existentialist philosophy to calculus to physics. One of the most

valuable contributions of the book is how liberally Joret draws from Bazin's vast archive of published work: some 2,000 articles, the majority of which have not been translated into English.

While each of the book's four chapters offers its own interventions, particular strains of argument emerge across them. One of the strongest and most compelling of these strains concerns an approach to Bazin's realism that emphasizes the perspective of *myth* over the "ontology"—i.e., the technological essence—of photographic images. As Joret reminds us, despite the overwhelming influence of Bazin's landmark essay, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," his interest in cinematic realism as a kind of myth is far more prevalent across his writings than his interest in the ontology of photography.[1] What this shift away from "ontology" entails is a corresponding shift away from familiar issues in the Bazin canon: the "indexical" power of photography to evidence the existence of material reality, the analogy between cinematic perception and human perception, and the cinematic techniques of long-take and deep-focus cinematography that secure such an analogy. In their place, Joret investigates the various ways that Bazin formulates cinematic realism as a culturally shared and historically changeable *ideal*. As Bazin suggests in his essay "The Myth of Total Cinema," the fantasy of cinema as a convincingly lifelike image of the world existed as an *idea* long before the invention of the cinematograph, just as the fantasy of flight "had dwelt in the soul of every man since he first thought about birds." [2]

Working from this emphasis, Joret examines various analogies in Bazin's writing that elucidate the notion of cinematic realism as myth. Consider, for example, Joret's reading of Bazin's oft-quoted claim about the ability of Italian Neorealist films to "make cinema the asymptote of reality." [3] Within Joret's reading of cinematic realism as an intangible ideal, Bazin's "asymptote" metaphor takes on new meaning and clarity, elucidating the notion that for Bazin, cinematic realism *approaches* reality but never reaches a point of intersection. What follows from this analysis of the asymptote metaphor is a deeper treatment of Bazin's realism in relation to foundational concepts in mathematics. Calculus offers a welcome analogy to cinematic realism in its concern with bundles of infinitesimal units that *approximate* areas and volumes without replicating them. Indeed, within Joret's analysis, it is difficult not to see the mathematical inflection within Bazin's famous reading of the strikingly undramatic kitchen scene in *Umberto D* (De Sica, 1952): "an attempt to divide the event up into still smaller events and these into events smaller still, to the extreme limits of our capacity to perceive them in time." [4]

Much of the book's originality concerns the depth with which Joret explores such cryptic metaphors, which have often complicated straightforward and systematic accounts of Bazin's film theory. Scholars have long puzzled over Bazin's metaphors for photographic and cinematographic images. In his famous "Ontology" essay alone, a litany of comparisons abound to capture the ontological strangeness of photographic media: a photograph is at once like a "flower," a "snowflake," and a "fingerprint." [5] In one of his essays on Italian Neorealism, Bazin writes of Rossellini's films that their sequencing of narrative events does not "mesh like a chain with the sprockets of a wheel," but rather compels the mind to jump from one event to another as when one "leaps from stone to stone in crossing a river." [6] The poetic density of these formulations provides a rich site for exegesis, of which Joret takes full advantage. In addition to unpacking such well-known metaphors and comparisons, Joret excavates a number of Bazin's lesser known metaphors, some of which are especially playful and provocative. Perhaps most memorably, Joret explores Bazin's repeated suggestion that a good film is like "mayonnaise": its individual parts either successfully "emulsify" or they do not. However farfetched they seem, such metaphors are not mere poetic indulgences. In Joret's reading, the unique status of mayonnaise

as a “colloidal dispersion,” a mixture of substances that do not naturally blend together, serves as a strikingly apt metaphor for a complex aesthetic object whose formal components are in harmony but are not themselves transfigured (p. 39).

Another of the book’s argumentative throughlines concerns Bazin’s theoretical relevance in the digital age. Some scholars have read Bazin’s canonized arguments about cinema’s relationship with reality as necessarily confined to analog media. Indeed, a major thread of contemporary film theory in the early 2000s argued that various aspects of digital cinematic technology—not only computer-generated imagery but also digital video recording—had severed analog cinema’s chemical bond with physical reality.[7] While such claims have sometimes confined Bazin’s relevance to the predigital era, Joret emphasizes the flexibility of Bazin’s thought, his openness to cinema’s technological change and the various formations that cinematic realism could take. In the final chapter, for example, Joret examines Bazin’s enthusiasm for the possibilities of 3D cinema, a fact that may surprise those who associate Bazin with the realist films he’s known for celebrating. Compounded by the view of realism as a changeable ideal rather than static technological property, Bazin’s interest in the “total cinema” of 3D leads Joret to speculate on the Bazinian possibilities of VR (pp. 169-175). When seen as a medium of perceptual freedom and discovery that relinquishes semiotic control to the wills of its users, VR can be productively conceived as a perhaps unanticipated extension of Bazin’s “myth of total cinema,” a necessarily incomplete and evolving approximation of reality.

Paired with this interest in digital media is the book’s argumentative strategy of analyzing contemporary films that, in Joret’s words, “engage, either thematically or technically, with [Bazin’s] discourse—many times *ad absurdum*” (p. 9). Though such readings are thoughtful and imaginative, and convincingly demonstrate the persistent relevance of Bazin’s insights in the age of digital cinema, they sometimes stray into associative leaps that risk diluting the force of Joret’s broader arguments. It seems at times that the symbolic gesture of placing Bazin in conversation with contemporary cinema matters more to the book’s central claims than the analyses of the films themselves. Still, though, the film readings provide new insights into teaching Bazin in the film studies classroom. Particularly useful here is Joret’s juxtaposition of *Kon-tiki* (Heyerdahl, 1950), the documentary of an expedition that Bazin celebrated for its sense of authenticity, with its 2011 fictionalized remake, in which the famously spontaneous shark attack of the original is transformed into an elaborate CGI spectacle.

Such juxtapositions of old and new encapsulate perhaps the central issue in *Studying Film with Bazin*: the tension between theory and history, between grand propositions about the medium of film and a sensitivity to its capacity for change. For Joret, much scholarship on Bazin has emphasized the former over the latter, but her book declares that the priority should be reversed. In her words, “Rather than gradually working out a preconceived essence linked to technology, or even hailing some kind of future cinema, the role of myth in Bazin’s film criticism is an attempt to reconcile artistic imagination with the history of technology” (p. 184). Framed as a theorist of cinema’s past and future evolution, the many “deaths” of cinema since its inception—synchronized sound, CGI, VR—become new beginnings. In Bazin’s words, it seems that in today’s media landscape, as ever, “cinema has not yet been invented.”[8]

NOTES

[1] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema, Vol 1.*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 9-16.

[2] André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in *What is Cinema, Vol. 1* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 22.

[3] André Bazin, "*Umberto D*: A Great Work," in *What is Cinema, Vol. 2* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 82.

[4] Bazin, "*Umberto D*," 81.

[5] Bazin, "Ontology," 13, 15.

[6] André Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality," *What is Cinema, Vol. 2* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 35.

[7] See, for example, D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[8] Bazin, "Total Cinema," 21.

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