Bazin on the Margins of the Seventh Art

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André Bazin is known primarily as an advocate of realism, yet his admiration for animation, abstract film, and the essay-documentary belies a deeper mission: to advocate for cinema’s variety. Analyzing his criticism of films by the likes of Norman McLaren, Jean Mitry, and Chris Marker, we find a Bazin who shepherds filmmakers in marginal genres away from realistic representation. This unexpected perspective clarifies the social motive behind Bazin’s realist advocacy—the “popular vocation of cinema.” Bazin redefines “avant-garde” filmmaking in relation to this populist aim and relegates elitist works, such as hard-core surrealist films, to a decadent flanc-garde.

Animation and Abstraction

Bazin draws some sharp boundaries between painting and cinema in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” when he writes: “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.”¹ He would seem to segregate the arts, leaving abstraction to painting and reserving realistic representation for photography and cinema. Yet Bazin is content when a minor cinematographic genre trespasses into the territory of the plastic arts, as in the case of Norman McLaren [figure 25.1]. When 3D first appeared, Bazin gives special attention to McLaren’s hand-painted abstract films:

… in his small Canadian laboratory he is bringing about a poetic and brilliant revolution in the field of animation. I hardly get at this last aspect of his experiments by describing them as abstract painting in motion and in 3D. Years ago, Fernand Léger made Ballet Mécanique [1924] by transposing his painting practice into black and white photography of real objects. Today, 3D and color would offer him new tools that are completely pictorial although unimaginable in any format outside of 3D cinema: the painter can now create moving forms in space.³
Figure 25.1: Norman McLaren's postcard to Bazin (Florent Bazin collection)

Whereas in other contexts Bazin vilifies the '20s avant-garde for its elitism, here he exemplifies what film, starting with Ballet Mécanique, can achieve as painting. McLaren's 3D experiments open a new dimension of space for the artist; film also affords painting the fourth dimension of time, as Bazin argues in his review of Henri-Georges Clouzot's The Picasso Mystery (Le Mystère Picasso, 1956). Bazin dubs Picasso's performance "A Bergsonian Film" because painting becomes truly gestural, that is, painting, not something already done and painted:

What Clouzot at last reveals is the painting itself, i.e., a work that exists in time, that has its own duration, its own life, and sometimes—as at the end of the film—a death that precedes the extinction of the artist. . . . [O]nly film . . . could realize the passage from the gross approximations of the discontinuous to the temporal realism of a continuous vision; only film could make us see duration itself.  

That is, only film can reveal Picasso's genius, which happens through duration. "It is a germination, a budding; form engenders form without ever justifying its existence. That The Picasso Mystery reminds us of McLaren is therefore not surprising. . . . [H]ere is a kind of animated film or painting that owes nothing to the image in itself." In effect, Bazin implies that in a minor nonfiction genre, cinema can beat painting at its own game.

However, on the main stage of the feature film, Bazin gives little support to animation. He finds no painterly innovation in Walt Disney, who is hindered by the problem of realism. In his article "Animated Film Lives Again" Bazin defines animation as anything created frame by frame, from puppets to scratch films to Norman McLaren's puppeteering of real actors in Neighbors (1952). He tells the story of animation's renewal in 1956 as a consequence of, and a reaction to, Disney's success. Bazin describes Walt Disney's genius as more industrial than artistic:
The extraordinary complexity of work necessary for his animation’s technical perfection demands a veritable factory and a proportional market. It is not a question of underestimating the genius and the merits of Disney, but one is forced to acknowledge that the logic of his system and his style had led him, and with him all animation, to an impasse: realism. This is so true that Disney understood it himself and set out to produce documentaries and films with actors.6

Since its massive scale naturally led Disney’s productions in a realist and crowd-pleasing direction, Bazin saw competing animators turn toward artisanal modes of creation:

... the animated film, beginning with the cartoon, should reject the rubbery realism of the American style and invent its own stylization and conventions. In so freeing itself from the bulky equipment necessary for realism, animated film could again become artisanal and thereby rediscover the inventiveness and variety of individual creation.7

Thus Bazin seems neither for nor against animation in principle. Everything depends on the specific genres under consideration, and genres can be classified according to the degree that they aim (whether properly or improperly) at realism. Bazin reviews Jean Mitry’s abstract (but filmed) Images for Debussy (1951) to reinforce his conception of animation as unsuited for realist representation. Mitry’s aesthetic exhibits clear traces of late ‘20s “pure cinema,” which is better appreciated now that mainstream cinema has moved away from those techniques. Bazin criticizes the first half of the film for its “semi-realism” reminiscent of Kirsanoff’s Brumes d’automne (Autumn Mists, 1929). He then praises the latter half, a rhythmic montage composed from filmed sequences of water. Mitry achieves through editing what Oskar Fischinger, Len Lye and McLaren did with paint; Bazin even notes that one sequence reminds him of Fantasia (1940). Yet Mitry’s abstraction surpasses the animated film because its water sequences discover the fundamental rhythms of reality:

The revelation of this rhythmic nature of matter contributes the most to emptying it of its realism, expressing a sort of first, abstract principle in relation to which material reality can only be second. The reflections affirm themselves first and foremost as rhythm. In relation to this essence, water is but an accident. As with the image of the sky in water, the relationship between the idea and object finds itself inverted. The sensible world is but a reflection and epiphenomenon of an essential musicality.8

This comment reveals the complex nature of Bazin’s realism. His “Real” is Platonist in that its essence is abstract, with matter only secondary, that is, idea and mere appearance; yet Bazin is entirely modern in that this essence, rhythm, is fundamentally temporal. He does not appreciate Mitry’s abstraction as pure sensation, but as the revelation of a deeper essence. His review of Jean Painlevé’s scientific documentaries reinforces this perspective: “At the farthest reaches of interested and practical research, where the most absolute proscription against aesthetic intention as such reigns, cinematic beauty unfolds like a supernatural grace.”9 Only the modern invention of film could bring out the general essence of things from particular images; here Bazin recognizes the value of abstract filmmaking in a marginal context.
Documentary

As Bazin segregated animation from the feature narrative, he also differentiated documentary. This distinction is made evident in his advice for amateur filmmakers, and further supported by his reviews of Chris Marker's essay-documentary. Bazin discouraged amateurs from making fiction films. In his 1950 article "A la recherche d'une nouvelle avant-garde," he discounts the 16mm format as an amateur option, arguing that without expensive equipment like camera tracks and lights, the results are unrefined; and if one invests in such equipment, one ought to shoot in 35mm. "Amateurs with neither money, training nor actors are better off turning to so-called minor subjects for which their means are well suited. I'm talking about various types of documentary where camera mobility and a sound judgment: of what to shoot are the essential thing."

Jean Rouch offers a perfect example, whose early 16mm ethnographic films surpassed a bevy of artsy short films at the 1949 Biarritz festival, and even stand up against big budget documentaries on Africa. Les maîtres fous (1955) gained Bazin's admiration: "I ask who, alone with his wife, discovered and filmed in 16mm an event where the spirit of man burns us like a flame. I ask who is making real cinema?"

Bazin praises Chris Marker for inventing the essay-documentary, a form that deviates from realist depiction because it privileges text over image. He describes Marker's Lettre de Sibérie (Letter From Siberia, 1958) as "an essay documented by the film... an essay that is both historical and political as well as written by a poet." By organizing the film around the voice-over instead of the image, the filmmaker liberates documentary technique: "Chris Marker doesn't limit himself to using documentary footage filmed on site, but all film material that is apropos: still documents, naturally (engravings, photos, etc.), and also animation—not hesitating, by the way, just like McLaren, to say the most serious things in the most silly manner (the mammoth sequence)." Bazin is probably referring to Norman McLaren's 1936 film Hell Unlimited, a didactic indictment of the interwar military-industrial complex that employs crude animation. It might surprise us to see the author of "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" champion Chris Marker for having developed a new kind of documentary that privileges text over image. If we are to understand Bazin as a consistent, systematic thinker, we must conclude that he had different criteria for genres outside of fiction film. He does not describe Marker as an avant-garde pioneer for mainstream cinema but rather an essayist who has no pretensions that threaten the realist feature film's future. If Marker's new type of documentary poses any threat, it would be a threat to the traditional literary essay as the premiere medium for intellectual discourse. Here on the fringes of the seventh art we see what drives Bazin beyond his realist convictions—a desire for cinema to become the premiere cultural medium.

Two Avant-Gardes: Pioneers and Deserter

The '20s avant-garde might represent the antithesis of Renoir or Italian neorealism (Bazin's ideal), so his harsh criticism of the period should not surprise anyone. And yet, Bazin's argument against the 1920s avant-garde is not focused on its artificiality or lack of spiritual potency—that is, on aesthetic grounds. The main problem with the '20s avant-garde was its rejection of what Bazin calls "the popular vocation of cinema." Pursuing a military conceit, he characterizes '20s avant-garde filmmakers as deserters who should have been pioneers, that is,
scouts for a larger force. The role of the avant-garde is to take on new subjects and develop new forms of expression that ultimately strengthen popular cinema, a process like percolation. Bazin lists the crucial avant-garde directors: Méliès, Griffith, Stroheim, Bresson, and Renoir, downplaying the importance of Buñuel, Dulac, and Richter. He calls the latter a "flanc-garde," instead of an avant-garde, owing to their indifference to cinema’s popular audience in favor of fine art’s elitist circles. Bazin does not accept the satellite model of a purist mode circling above popular production. He specifically reproves thinking of cinema’s popular vocation as a commercial constraint on film art, and admonishes purist decadence: "It is an intellectualist and idealist conception of art to distinguish a priori its techniques and inspiration from its economic and social context." The foremost artists should keep their focus on a popular audience and not retreat into an ivory tower.

Bazin proposes the short film as the proper area for innovation. He defines the purpose of short films as twofold: "to constitute a valid element of the cinema spectacle, and to serve as a workshop for young filmmakers." Shorts can serve as hors d’oeuvres to the feature film and meanwhile fulfill an "experimental vocation." He points to Vigo’s experiments in A propos de Nice (1930) as a stepping stone to L’Atalante (1934). Within this avant-garde model, it is the job of the critic to distinguish among more esoteric experiments those innovations that the public may potentially accommodate. "It is not scandalous, insolent or particularly juvenile to think that good criticism in the Middle Ages would have instructed knights to be of their time." This chivalrous metaphor implies an artist’s responsibility to the public at large. The nature of film as a mass medium requires this ethic, whether one produces features or short subjects.

Conclusion

Bazin recognized innovation in many minor genres, and he promoted short film production that would foster an expansion of the medium. Exploring his reviews within minor genres refracts his realist arguments for the popular feature like a prism, differentiating its sociological and aesthetic components from a general aspiration for the medium.

From the unavoidable sociological perspective, Bazin had no doubt that realism is best suited for the center stage. He ultimately believed that “while all the traditional arts have evolved from the Renaissance toward forms of expression reserved for a narrow elite of the financially privileged, cinema is congenitally destined for the world’s masses.” Critics need to attend to the full gamut of films, but they should not let rarefied aesthetic concerns divert their attention from the cultural role cinema is destined to play in the mass society of the twentieth century. If the avant-garde has any importance, it should finally “advance” the level of popular cinema.

Notes


2. Bazin had high hopes for 3D films unlike his Cabiers colleagues, Rohmer and Rivette, who preferred Cinemascope because they believed that 3D distorted space and demanded a less classical mise-en-scène. Cf. Maurice Schérer [Eric Rohmer], "Vertus cardinales du Cinémascope," and Jacques Rivette, “L’Age des metteurs en scène,”
Cahiers du Cinéma, 31 (January 1954). Bazin embraced both formats because they equally participate in the myth of total cinema. Bazin, "La révolution par le relief n'a pas eu lieu," Radio, Cinéma, Télévision, 324 (April 1, 1956). All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.


7. Bazin, "Le cinéma d'animation revit."


13. Ibid.

14. Bazin, "Découverte du cinéma: Défense de l'avant-garde," Ecran français, 182 (December 21, 1948). Elsewhere, Bazin makes of the '20s avant-garde a historical artifact, arguing that the need for innovation of visual forms died with the coming of sound. "The era of grand discoveries was closed," he declared. Bazin, "De la forme et du fond; ou, la 'Crise' du cinéma," Almanach du théâtre et du cinéma (1951), 171. For more discussion on the necessity of the popular vocation of cinema, see Jeremi Szaniawski, infra.

15. Bazin, "À la recherche d'une nouvelle avant-garde," 150. Other critics like Rohmer dubbed it an "arrière-garde."


18. Bazin, "À la recherche d'une nouvelle avant-garde," 152.