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Today, Icarus: On the persistence of André Bazin's myth of total cinema

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Publication date

2015

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Joret, B. (2015). *Today, Icarus: On the persistence of André Bazin's myth of total cinema*.

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PART I. Myth as Method

“Quelle influence sociale peut avoir ce gigantesque courant d’images et de mythes qui circulent à travers tous les peuples du monde! On peut dire, peut-être, que la diffusion du cinéma est le plus grand fait esthétique-social qui se soit produit depuis le moyen-âge.”^{1, i}

In his first cinema essay, "Peut-on s'intéresser au cinéma?" (1942), André Bazin initially brings together those elements that would continue to accompany his film critical work until the preface he prepared in 1958 for his collection *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*. More precisely, he combines cinema's fundamentally social character with its mythical appeal, eloquently placed in relation to the origins of the printing press. As rudimentary as the title of this early work might appear, it is this very question that carries the justification and relevance for his practice of film criticism, as it directly references an interview with the literary critic Paul Souday (1869-1929) held in 1928. To this question, Souday had answered: 'Non, ce n'est pas l'affaire d'un critique sérieux: le cinéma, c'est la sous-crotte de bique.'^{2, ii} The context for this particular interview was a fierce debate in France between cinephiles and cinephobes that dominated the critical discourse, questioning whether or not cinema, very much an "unknown art" at that time, could in fact be a means for artistic expression.³ More than a decade after this interview, Bazin, aged twenty-four and at the outset of his career as a film critic, blames Souday's contempt for cinema on old age and the reluctance to adapt his aesthetic preconceptions, especially the implied maxim "*odi profanum vulgus*," to the challenges of this new art form: 'Le cinéma avait quelques vingt ou trente ans de moins que

¹ Bazin, André and Jean-Pierre Chartier. "Peut-on s'intéresser au cinéma?" *Maison des lettres* (December 1942): p. 14

² Paul Souday (1928), cited in *Ibid.*

³ This critical discourse in France between 1910-1920 largely centred around two antagonists, both writing for the daily newspaper *Le Temps*: Souday, the cinephobic literary critic, and Émile Vuillermoz (1878-1960), cinephile and father of French film criticism.

For a collection of these critiques from both sides, see: Hue, Pascal Manuel. *Le Temps du cinéma: Émile Vuillermoz, père de la critique cinématographique 1910-1930*. Paris: L'Harmattan (2003)

Paul Souday, il ne faut pas être trop jeune pour plaire aux critiques vieux.^{4, iii} Such restrictedness which characterizes the old critics, Bazin maintains, derives from 'leur refus de croire à tout ce qui n'est pas consacré par une tradition livresque et universitaire.'^{5, iv} Naturally in complete disagreement with Souday, he then sets out to defend cinema's critical importance as "the greatest recurring aesthetico-social fact since the Middle Ages." Instead of condemning its popular and widespread character, as did Souday, Bazin not only considers this to be cinema's primary aesthetic value, but in doing so relates this social aesthetics to the very origins of any "bookish" tradition, i.e. the printing press; and this was accompanied by his first mentioning of cinema as a myth, several years before he would write "Le Mythe du cinéma total et les origines du cinématographe" (1946).

Bazin thus begins his roaring career as a film critic in the early forties with an essay that reminds the reader of the very birth of film criticism. These initial texts on cinema featured, first, in daily periodicals that quickly picked up on this popular art and published weekly or daily columns and film sections. Soon enough, the discussion spread to literary journals, followed by film journals and the first books on cinema. Alongside this rapid development of written accounts on film, the oral criticism in many ciné-clubs, where particular films were screened and discussed at length, joined this unfolding cinema culture in France, to which Bazin's contribution has been crucial and highly pioneering. As the reference to the printing press in his inaugural essay indicates, he was especially concerned with these developments, and indeed held particular views regarding the social potential of cinema: cinema, in Bazin's views, is the greatest "aesthetico-social" fact since the Middle Ages. The early defenders of cinema were primarily concerned with pinpointing essential features that made it an art: referencing the phenomenologist Henri Bergson, whose philosophy of *durée* was readily aligned with this new art of the moving image, the founding father of French film criticism Émile Vuillermoz, for example, writes that 'le cinéma sera bergsonnien ou ne sera pas!'^{6, v} As I will establish in this chapter, Bazin, from his side, takes

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Émile Vuillermoz, cited in Plasseraud, Emmanuel. *L'Art des foules: théories de réception filmique comme phénomène*. Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion (2011): p. 181

on a different orientation: rather than looking for the foundations of the seventh art either in philosophy or technology, he asserts its social character as the primary justification of cinema as art: ‘l’esthétique cinématographique sera sociale ou le cinéma se passera d’esthétique.’^{7, vi} As I will claim, this declaration functions as a warning sign against elitist film criticism and ultimately informs his institutional critique of the first academic study of film, explicitly targeting the newly established Filmologie in 1950. The foundation of cinema in “social aesthetics” runs through Bazin’s oeuvre from his very first essays to his last, and either explicitly or implicitly underscores his views on the mythic origins of cinema.

In this introductory chapter, I hope to show that the discrepancy between a young art form in its tender age and the rigidity of old critics is a recurring theme in Bazin that directly informs the methodological argument embedded in the myth of total cinema,⁸ as it develops alongside his particular stance towards books of cinema as its historical counterpart. In this manner, I understand Bazin’s myth of total cinema as carrying out a critical-historical agenda appropriate to an art form in its salad days, as it approaches cinema as an “unknown” art and in doing so enables its constant reinvention.

⁷ Bazin, André. “Pour une esthétique réaliste.” *L’Information universitaire*, No. 1168 (06/11/1943): n.pag.

⁸ Given the significance of the notion of “myth” in several structuralist works, primarily Ernst Cassirer’s *Language and Myth* (1925), Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957), and Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *The Structural Study of Myth* (1955), it is perhaps necessary to highlight Bazin’s original usage of the term. As I hope to demonstrate, he understands myth as the point where art and reality ultimately meet, and it is therefore inherently linked with his views on cinematographic realism. Though some overlaps between the structuralist views and Bazin’s may be found, I maintain that it is historically more accurate and theoretically more fruitful to adhere closely to his own texts (e.g. specific words, examples or theories he adopts in his film analyses), and through that to seek resonances with his coterie or with lines of thought he actively engaged in.