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

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Chapter I: Talking Cinema: Cinephobia and Myth

“Alors? Alors peut-être dans vingt ans de "jeunes critiques" d'un nouveau spectacle que nous ne pouvons même pas imaginer et dont rien ne garantit qu'il soit "un art" liront-ils avec une condescendance souriante et émue nos critiques cinématographiques de 1953. Elles leurs apparaîtront sans doute plus naïves encore que nous apparaît à nous-mêmes le sectarisme esthétique de nos confrères des années 1930 qui s'indignaient à juste titre de l'agonie d'un art de l'image pure enfin parvenu à sa maturité. En attendant que faire d'autre que de jouer à la balle au chasseur, je veux dire d'aller au cinéma et de le traiter comme un art.”

The salient relevance of André Bazin’s defence against the literary critic’s dismissal of cinema as unworthy of critical attention resides in its anachronous, yet ironically concurrently prescient vision. Indeed, why would Bazin revisit Paul Souday's cinephobic statement fourteen years after the fact? And consequently, what should one derive from this first mention of a myth of cinema; are they related, cinephobia and myth? Bazin in fact sounds rather indifferent to the impertinence of Souday, and I do not consider his essay to be invested in proving Souday wrong. Instead, he is struck by a similar ignorance of cinema by the young critics in his day, due to a lack of historical knowledge, which he describes in an elaborated version of the first article, entitled "Redécouvrons le cinéma" (1943):

Cet art de quelques décades ne nous livre pourtant aucun document. […] La génération précédente ayant vécu l'histoire du film ne souffrait pas de cette lacune, sa mémoire lui servait de cinémathèque. La jeunesse d'aujourd'hui au contraire commence la série des générations qui connaîtront de moins en moins le cinéma, même si elles en consomment de plus en plus.

Again playing with the notion of aging, Bazin now points to the growing importance of a critical investment in cinema history, and ultimately calls for “an awareness of the cinematographic fact [une prise de conscience du fait cinématographique].” Since cinema had outlived its critics, the question of documenting its past would become increasingly vital

3 Ibid.
and essential for its future development. Bazin’s initial film essay thus formulates this inquiry into an indispensable history of cinema, and with this he was certainly not alone. However, his proposal for a myth of total cinema stands out among the various emerging film histories, as it implies a particularly perceptive analytical method, which prevents the critical rigidity and cinephobia that Souday came to embody.

The myth of total cinema follows a forethought that unties cinema from prescriptive categories, especially those which had prevented earlier film critics from accepting the talking film as cinema: ‘Ignorerons-nous, parce qu’il nous est contemporain, ce prodigieux événement? Serons-nous à ce point aveugle à notre temps? Continuerons-nous à limiter notre humanisme à la confondre avec la civilisation tout court?’4,iii To prevent history from repeating itself Bazin advances his critical method in a specific defence of talking cinema as an alternative to prescriptive and pre-established historical categories in an attempt to write film criticism, as I will argue, symbiotic with the evolution of cinema itself.

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4 Ibid.
1.1 Myth versus *Histoire générale*

Originally written as a book review of French film historian Georges Sadoul’s *L’Invention du cinéma* (1946), the first volume of his extensive and canonical *Histoire générale du cinéma*, Bazin’s “Le Mythe du cinéma total” offers insight into the ways in which he diverged from his colleague’s views on film history. Sadoul’s monumental work was written in response to the partisan approach of emerging film historians at the time, and ultimately upheld a strict division between film historical and film critical writing. Of all aspiring historians in his day, Bazin considered Sadoul to be “le premier historien du cinéma,” and appreciated the publication of his monumental *Histoire générale du cinéma* as enabling the birth of a true cinema history. But this initiative was not without reservations:

Une remarque s'impose quant à la condition de l'historien de cinéma. Elle est très différente de celle de l'historien tout court. […] L'importance de Sadoul, et qui lui impose des devoirs à la mesure de sa mission, c'est de contribuer pour une large part à la création de l'histoire du cinéma. Par son ampleur et l'appareil de recherche et de critique qu'elle suppose, son entreprise est la première qui mérite vraiment le nom d'histoire.

And yet, while he unambiguously defends Sadoul’s comprehensive and exhaustive work as outstanding the incomplete or incorrect publications of others, Bazin ultimately condemns the general tendency towards what he terms a “scientific criticism” as reaffirming an out-dated elitism in face of cinema’s development.

Ainsi se constitue depuis 4 ou 5 ans une situation partiellement comparable à celle de la littérature: un public d'élite pour une critique d'élite. Malheureusement ce n'est pas si simple parce qu'il n'existe pas de cinéma d'élite et que, tout "scientifiques" ou distingués qu'ils soient, les critiques sont bien obligés de parler des films indignes de cette attention. Voici donc la difficulté déplacée. Comment appliquer à l'ensemble de la production cinématographique une réflexion critique également valable? En d'autres termes et dans ses manifestations les plus élevées la critique souffre d'une crise de références.

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6 Ibid.

Additionally, in his review of Sadoul’s first volume, Bazin subtly reverses its historiographical method and builds his myth of total cinema on the antithesis of historical causality: ‘Tous les perfectionnements que s’adjoignent le cinéma ne peuvent donc paradoxalement que le rapprocher de ses origines. Le cinéma n’est pas encore inventé.’ By applying myth as a method for film criticism, which I will affirm throughout my analyses, Bazin propounds a film historical writing that counters prescriptive aesthetics and encyclopaedic cinema books. While Sadoul had initiated, one could say, the “bookish” tradition of cinema histories, which in its aftermath encouraged the emergence of an academic Filmologie study, which I discuss later on (cf. infra, 1.2.1 The Aseptic Study of Filmologie), cinema had become more or less established and possessed the attributes which should have pleased the stringency of older age. Ultimately, however, it seems to be the very form of the bookish tradition that Bazin considers ill-suited for a new art form still in development.

1.1.1 “You must speak!” Total Cinema and the Myth of Charlot

Bazin’s particular interest in books on cinema, especially history books, reflects a broader critical investment in revisiting, via the acceptance of talking cinema, the relation between image and language, and in extension, between cinematographic language and writing. Indeed, Bazin’s original mention of a myth in relation to the printing press and its importance in a subsequent book review is not coincidental: writing and language, as we will see, become central in Bazin’s reassessment of critical categories, as the myth of total cinema explicitly builds on a reversal of an image-oriented historical paradigm. Moreover, as I will argue, both his defence of sound cinema and his critique to the Filmologie movement find in an implicitly existentialist framework further support for the analogy proposed by Bazin between the evolution of film and a child’s development.

To begin with, Bazin’s inspiration for “Le Mythe du cinéma total,” more precisely his notion of “total cinema,” is strongly indebted to René Barjavel’s 1944 essay “Cinéma total: essai sur les formes futures du cinéma,” which in turn relies heavily on a defence of sound in film theory. Struck by a lack of serious attention given to sound cinema at the time, Barjavel

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writes:


According to him, talking cinema presented itself as a film theoretical problem, which he describes as ‘un exemple bien curieux de cette résistance au réel, de cette paresse mentale,’10, vii thereby pointing specifically to Jean Epstein, but also Abel Gance, Marcel L’Herbier, René Clair and Germaine Dulac among others. Barjavel’s defense of sound cinema is shared by Bazin’s mythical project for cinema, for instance when Bazin writes: ‘Le primat de l’image est historiquement et techniquement accidentel, la nostalgie qu’entretiennent encore certains pour le mutisme de l’écran ne remonte pas assez loin dans l’enfance du septième art [...]’.11, ix Elsewhere, Bazin, more radical than before, writes this nostalgia off as bare spitefulness:

Les intellectuels sont gens qui n'aiment pas à être interrompus. Quand l'écran s'est mis à parler, ils se sont tus. Ce n'était pas par politesse. Ils aimaient à laisser entendre que c'est plutôt par mépris ou par désespoir d'amour. Nous croyons, nous, que c'est par dépit. Convenons qu'une telle muflerie avait de quoi vexer nos esthéticiens. Tant d'audaces de pensée, tant d'articles et de discussions orageuses, tant de conseils prodigués, tant d'oracles sans appel pour en arriver à cette ingratitude. Le cinéma rejetant leur fèrule s'abandonnait à un réalisme de bas étage. C'en était fait, il finirait mal.12, x

Like Barjavel, whose notion of “total cinema” he borrows, Bazin aims at countering a theoretical tendency that nostalgically attributes the essence of cinema solely to the moving image. The talking film did not, as the silent film theorists had it, distance cinema from its


10 Ibid.

11 Bazin, “Mythe,” p. 23

vocation, but instead brought it closer to its origins: ‘le cinéma,’ Bazin writes in his myth-essay, ‘n’est pas encore inventé!’\(^{13, \text{xi}}\)

Incidentally, this shift in cinema's visual paradigm also surfaces in Bazin’s elaborate studies on Charles Spencer Chaplin (1889-1977, which develops from an almost nostalgic recollection of silent cinema through a “mythification” of his famed silent film persona The Tramp, into an ambiguous defense of talking cinema. It is therefore indispensable to relate the myth of total cinema to Bazin's critical work on Chaplin and its intrinsic relation to the introduction of sound in cinema history, from which I derive a more detailed meaning of "myth" as a critical methodology for writing film history.\(^{14}\) As Rochelle Fack argues:

[Bazin’s] defense of Chaplin’s talking films rests upon a premise that can be unsettling. It consists of determining the links that tie the characters in Chaplin’s talking films to the myth of Charlot. Charlot, the silent film character, acts as the seamark, the reference point that structures Bazin’s criticism. […] Bazin renders [Chaplin] as an evolving construction, an artistic phenomenon, and a myth that is converted into something else through a discursive use of speech.\(^{15, (\text{xn})}\)

Bazin indeed articulates his particular understanding of myth most clearly throughout his work on Chaplin. As I will argue now, the coincidence of Chaplin’s talking films with the film theoretical agenda, which accompanies Bazin’s work from the very first essay, unveils the critical historical implications embedded in the myth of total cinema.

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\(^{13}\) Bazin, “Mythe,” p. 23


\(^{15}\) Bazin also develops his notion of myth in “Le Cinéma soviétique et le mythe de Staline” (1950), where he criticizes the cinematic representation of Joseph Stalin for its lack of “historical distance [recol historique],” which unfolds subtly into a critique of historical determinism: ‘L’identification est désormais définitivement accomplie entre Staline et l’Histoire, que la contradiction de la subjectivité ne se pose plus à son propos.’ (“Le Cinéma soviétique et le mythe de Staline,” Esprit, No. 170 (1950): p. 222). This necessity for mythification in hindsight returns, for instance, in “Un Saint ne l’est qu’après” (1951): ‘Le problème qui se pose en cinéma comme en théologie est celui de la rétroactivité du salut éternel. Or de toute évidence un saint n’existe pas au présent, seulement un être qui le devient et qui d’ailleurs, jusqu’à sa mort risque de se damner’ (Bazin, André. “Un Saint ne l’est qu’après…” Cahiers du cinéma (May 1951): p. 48). Similarly, the notion of myth, which Bazin applies to Chaplin’s filmography as well as to the evolution of cinema in general, stands as an alternative method to the “eternal damnation” of prescriptive aesthetics of silent film theories.
Chaplin’s first sound film, *Modern Times* (1936), develops into a particular elegy for silent film, in which sounds often turns into a comic element, for instance in the growling stomach scene. During the entire film Charlie does not speak and at first sight the scenes in which he appears, give the impression of silent film. However, when Charlie finds a job as a singing waiter and rehearses his performance, he keeps forgetting the words to his song, as the inter-title reads. When his girlfriend writes down the lyrics on his cuff (Fig. 1) his rehearsal apparently goes smoothly (even though, as a spectator, we do not hear his voice but only see his gestures). Eventually, Charlie sings for the first time in cinema history, and his gibberish surely strengthens the comical effect of his characteristic gestures (Fig. 2). And again, in *The Great Dictator* (1940), when the Jewish barber is mistaken for dictator Hinkel and urged onto the stage, his inability to speak - ‘You must speak. / I can’t!’ - first appears as a straightforward reference to Chaplin’s silent film icon; but then a newfound eloquence takes over that turns his famous speech into an embrace of sound cinema, immediately marking the end of The Tramp and the beginning of a new type of cinema (Fig. 3). From a comparable point of view, Antoine de Baecque writes, ‘[With *The Great Dictator*] Chaplin inaugurated a new era of historical film, in which history speaks in the present tense of cinema and holds forth on the present tense of the world in which it is screened.’\(^\text{16}\) If Charlie in *Modern Times* is still unable to utter anything but mere gibberish in public, the Jewish barber’s speech conveys an orality that speaks directly to history. For Bazin, it is the face of the actor and the sound of his voice in the final scene of *The Great Dictator*, which motivate his critical application of the myth of Charlie:

> Le discours du Dicteur est précisément le seul passage du film qui m'ait profondément ému, non pour son texte que je n'ai à peu près pas écouté, mais pour la seule et unique raison qu'on y voit longuement le visage de Chaplin en gros plan et qu'on entend sa voix. Je dis bien Chaplin et non Charlot, car pour la première fois on assistait dans cette séquence du Dictateur à l'esquisse d'une métamorphose. La proximité de la caméra et plus encore peut-être, la gamme des gris de la panchromatique faisaient apparaître, comme en surimpression sous le masque du petit homme à moustache, le visage clairement lisible de Chaplin. [...] Je dois à ce gros plan, techniquement banal, et à ce discours, parfaitement superflu, l'une de mes plus pures émotions cinématographiques. Ce passage unanimement condamné par la critique au bénéfice de la danse avec la mappemonde, ou de la barbe rasée sur la valse de Brahms, est, au contraire, dans les perspectives d'une critique selon le mythe, l'un des plus parfaits. Le discours l'enveloppe dans ma mémoire d'une fumée transparente.

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et fugace qui laisse autour de l'image l'aura étourdissante de la voix.\textsuperscript{17}, xiii

While the notion of myth in relation to sound and speech is initially irrevocably related to youth and development (a child’s first words), Bazin ultimately transforms it into a critical-historical category that reconciles itself with the idea of aging (Chaplin the actor shows his face). In “Si Charlot ne meure” (1953), for example, Bazin further develops the myth of Charlot alongside two reference points: the mask of Charlot and the face of Chaplin, both combined in the famous peace speech in \textit{The Great Dictator}.

For The Tramp, an icon of the silent film era, talking cinema certainly posed itself as a challenge to the established persona. From this point of view, Bazin employs in his essay on \textit{Monsieur Verdoux} (1947), which is not surprisingly the first film in which Chaplin does not play the iconic Tramp, a metaphor of the river flow and its equilibrium profile:\textsuperscript{18}

\[\text{[...]}\text{une mystérieuse nécessité esthétique et, puisque je me suis lancé dans les images géographiques, de voir dans \textit{Monsieur Verdoux} l’œuvre la plus proche de ce profil d'équilibre où le mythe, comme un fleuve qui coule à la mer sans obstacles et sans efforts, ne dépose plus qu'un fin tapis de poussière et poudre d'or.}\textsuperscript{19, xiv}

Once Bazin's myth is understood, via Barjavel's notion of "total cinema,” as directed against image-oriented silent film theories that ignored talking cinema, his work on Chaplin and the film historical arguments from "Le Mythe du cinéma total" run remarkably parallel. In one of his most elaborate studies on Chaplin, Bazin writes:

\textbf{DU PERSONNAGE CHARLOT AU MYTHE:}

\textit{En moins de quinze ans, le petit homme à frac ridicule, à la petite moustache en trapèze, à la badine et au chapeau melon habitait la conscience de l'humanité. Jamais, depuis que le monde est monde, un mythe n'a reçu une adhésion aussi universelle. [\textellipsis]}\textit{ On ne peut rien comprendre au personnage de Charlot si l'on essaye de le faire selon des catégories qui ne sont pas les siennes. Charlot est un personnage mythique qui domine chacune des aventures auxquelles il est mêlé. [\textellipsis] Pour des centaines de}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Bazin, André. “Défense de Monsieur Verdoux.” \textit{Temps modernes}, No. 27 (1947): p. 1115
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Bazin reuses this metaphor a decade later in “L’Évolution du langage cinématographique” (1950-1955), and, as I will argue later on, this metaphor of a river flow comes to stand for Bazin’s critical investment to reformulate the relation between form and content.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Bazin, André. “Les Sources: Landru-Verdoux-Charlot.” \textit{D.O.C. éducation populaire} (January 1948): n.pag.
\end{itemize}
Charlot, whose most essential characteristics were based primarily on the absence of sound, has no choice but to reinvent himself and to accept sound as an integral element in his cinema. Thus, Bazin sees in Charlot the personification of a myth that is fundamentally concerned with the evolution of film.

There is a specific scene in Lisbon Story (Wim Wenders, 1994) that addresses the evolution of film in reference to Charlot. The film is set in Lisbon, where a filmmaker Friedrich intends to shoot the city “as if the whole history of cinema hadn't happened.” But his project fails and Friedrich sinks deeper and deeper into a depression. A persisting filmmaker’s block prevents him from finishing the film, so he writes his friend and sound engineer Philip Winter for help. When both friends finally reunite, Friedrich explains himself:

Images ain't what they used to be! They can't be trusted anymore. We all know that, you know that. When we grew up, images were telling stories and showing things. Now they're selling stories and things. They've changed under our very eyes. They don't know how to show anything anymore. They've plain forgotten. Images are selling the world, Winter, and at a big discount! When I came here to make this movie, I thought I could beat the drift. We talked about it, man, remember? I wanted to shoot in black and white on this hand-cranker, like Buster Keaton in The Cameraman. Cranking in the streets on my own, a man with a camera. E viva Dziga Vertov! Pretending that the whole history of cinema hadn't happened and that I could just start from scratch, one hundred years later. Well, it didn't work, Winter. That is, for a while it seemed to work, but then it all collapsed.

Lisbon Story supports Bazin’s myth of total cinema as the affirmation of a cinema not yet invented: Philipp's mike was needed to “pull the images out of the darkness” and bring them back to life, since a cinema without sound, for Friedrich, turned out to be “unbearable” and “hopeless.” The technological chronology continues when Friedrich appears to have found his salvation in the “unseen image” of a digital camera. In an ultimate attempt to bring Friedrich back to his senses and finish the film together, image with sound, Winter records a

\[20\] Ibid.
sequence featuring Portuguese filmmaker Manoel de Oliveira (1908-2015), impersonating the Tramp (Fig. 4). Incidentally, Oliveira is to this day the only filmmaker whose career spans from the silent film era into the digital; who else but Oliveira, playing the Tramp, could convince Friedrich of the value of filmmaking today?

Chaplin’s filmography develops alongside the evolution of film: from the silent gags, into noises and gibberish and fully established in Monsieur Verdoux, Bazin argues that ‘Charlot est par essence inadapté social; Verdoux un suradapté.’ Furthermore, in “Introduction à une symbolique de Charlot” (1948), Bazin elaborates on Chaplin’s “backwards kick” as acting out those qualities that turned Charlie into a mythical character, more precisely his capricious dismissal of the past:

[…] surtout quand il cesse d'avoir une utilité précise (fût-ce de simple vengeance), ce coup de pied en arrière exprime parfaitement le souci constant de Charlot de n'être pas rattaché au passé, de ne rien traîner après lui.  

His gestures and the situations he continuously encounters, around which his comedy is based, all stem from a resistance to anticipation. Consequently, the objects themselves resist being used by Charlie in a conventional manner: ‘La fonction utilitaire des objets,’ Bazin writes, ‘est constituée par rapport à un monde humain lui-même utilitaire et prévoyant de l'avenir,’ but not for Chaplin:

Mais si le provisoire lui suffit toujours, il fait preuve dans l'immédiat d'une ingéniosité prodigieuse. Aucune situation ne le laisse jamais désémparé. Il y a pour lui une solution à tout. Le monde autant et plus encore peut-être celui des objets que celui des hommes n'est pas fait pour lui.

The backwards kick, combined with the temporary solutions he invents to situations, demonstrates Charlie’s particular temporality as a resistance to anticipation. From this point of view, Ivone Margulies writes that ‘all of Bazin’s work on Chaplin is about a body constructed and ravaged by cinema. Interweaving the man’s ephemeral destiny with his

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23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.
Myth as Method

filmic corpus, and frequently using foreboding qualifiers, Bazin associates cinema with existential time. The emphasis on Charlie’s ironic relation to time and objects in Bazin’s essays invokes an existential experience of time, which, as I will maintain subsequently, directly ties in with his critical methodology.

Just as Bazin maintains that Chaplin cannot be understood using categories that are foreign to him, so too does he view the Filmologie movement, which I discuss subsequently, as unfit to offer an appropriate study of cinema. Instead, Bazin creates the notion of “myth” as a critical-historical category, which he applies in this specific case to the evolution of Chaplin’s filmography. Similarly, as I will argue, Bazin views the myth of total cinema as a specifically cinematographic critical method, which he develops against the Filmologie approach. Rather than adhering to prescriptive categories, Bazin implicitly relies on an existentialist mind-set, which maintains that cinema first exists before any theory can solidify an essence to film. From this premise, as I will argue, Bazin develops the myth of total cinema on an existentialist “methodology of prudence.”

Fig. 1 Lyrics on his cuff Fig. 2 Gibberish and mimicry

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**Fig. 3** Great Dictator peace speech

**Fig. 4** Manoel de Oliveira as Charlot
1.2 Methodological Prudence: Existence Precedes Essence

In “Pour un cinéma impur. Défense de l’adaptation” (1951) Bazin opposes Georges Altman’s 1931 exclamation, “this is cinema [ça, c’est du cinéma]!,” by which he glorified silent film. More broadly, he criticizes the idea that cinema is an art of the image and that cinema would evolve completely independent from other arts, like literature and theatre: according to Bazin, ‘c’était méconnaître les données essentielles de l’histoire du film.’

The advent of sound cinema, or rather its rejection by certain film theorists, is Bazin’s most referenced illustration of such misunderstanding of historical progression, from which he derives an existentialist methodological stance:

Le cinéma ne peut exister sans un minimum (et ce minimum est immense) d’audience immédiate. Même quand le cinéaste affronte le goût du public, son audace n’est valable qu’autant qu’il est possible d’admettre que c’est le spectateur qui se méprend sur ce qu’il devrait aimer et ce qu’il aimerait un jour. La seule comparaison contemporaine possible serait avec l’architecture, parce qu’une maison n’a de sens qu’habitable. Le cinéma, lui aussi, est un art fonctionnel. Selon un autre système de référence, il faudrait dire du cinéma que son existence précède son essence. C’est de cette existence que la critique doit partir, même dans ses explorations les plus aventureuses. Comme en histoire, et à peu près avec les mêmes réserves, la constatation d’un changement dépasse la réalité et pose déjà un jugement de valeur. C’est ce que n’ont pas voulu admettre ceux qui ont maudit le cinéma parlant à son origine, alors qu’il avait déjà sur l’art muet l’incomparable avantage de le remplacer. [my emphasis]

Bazin’s conviction that writing history often comes with a value judgment takes prudence, rather than totalization, as its methodological point of departure: ‘Même si ce pragmatisme critique ne paraît pas au lecteur suffisamment fondé, du moins admettra-t-on qu’il justifie l’humilité et la prudence méthodologique devant tout signe d’évolution du cinéma […]’

The direct reference to Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of existence, namely that existence precedes essence, proves to be a methodological guide in Bazin’s understanding of

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27 Ibid., p. 102

28 Ibid.
film history, as he consequently builds his method of prudence on an existentialist view of evolution. In his renowned lecture *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946), Sartre conceived of ‘a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it:’

What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.

Following from the assertion that identity is always in the making, this understanding of evolution requires a particularly pragmatic methodology when it comes to historical writing. In “Questions de méthode” (1957), for example, Sartre argues that:

The most rudimentary behavior must be determined both in relation to the real and present factors which condition it and in relation to a certain object, still to come, which it is trying to bring into being. This is what we call the project.

Bazin indirectly adopts the general premise of Sartre’s project in his film criticism. In so doing, his method of prudence speaks against the encyclopaedic paradigm as proposed by Sadoul in his *Histoire générale*, as it resulted in numerous articles, ranging from short periodicals to extensive essays. Bazin was well aware of the eclectic selection of the publication, and indeed considered its hiatus as productive rather than reductive. The 1958 introduction to *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?*, for instance, gives an interpretational directive

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29 While Sartre develops this maxim in a text in which he explicitly differentiates his views from the Christian existentialists, in particular Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), I will argue in a later chapter (cf. infra, 5.2.1 Debates on Contemporary Art: Bazin, Marcel and Portmann) that Bazin’s views on cinema history are perhaps more closely aligned with Marcel’s philosophy of existence. On Bazin’s disagreements with Sartre, see also Jean Ungaro’s chapter “Sartre et Bazin: l’antagonisme comme dénouement,” in André Bazin: généalogies d’une théorie. Paris: L’Harmattan (2000): pp. 129-142. About “La Technique de Citizen Kane” (1947), for example, Ungaro writes that ‘Bazin semble dire à Sartre qu’il ne comprend pas son discours sur le cinéma. Tout l’article est construit autour de ce reproche fait à Sartre d’oublier, lorsqu’il parle du cinéma, ce que lui-même disait à propos de la littérature américaine’ (p. 141).


regarding the compilation of articles:

Il est vrai que nous aurions pu et peut-être dû refonder ces articles dans la continuité d'un essai. Nous y avons renoncé par crainte de tomber dans l'artifice didactique, préférant faire confiance au lecteur et lui laisser le soin de découvrir tout seul, si elle existe, la justification intellectuelle au rapprochement de ces textes. Le titre de cette série Qu’est-ce que le cinéma? n’est pas tant la promesse d'une réponse que l'annonce d'une question l'auteur se posera à lui-même tout au long de ces pages.  

In that same introduction, Bazin defends the intentional “lacunae” that separate the essays as providing an interpretative freedom to the reader, which a conjunctive publication would have excluded. Rather than providing his reader with an answer, Bazin’s Qu’est-ce que le cinéma? deliberately remains an inquiry that compares to a somewhat incidental reading, rather than a perusable geography:

Ces livres ne prétendront donc point d’offrir une géologie et une géographie exhaustives du cinéma, mais seulement entraîner le lecteur dans une succession de coups de sonde, d’explorations, de survols pratiqués à l’occasion des films proposés à la réflexion quotidienne du critique.

With no less than two thousand five hundred critical articles and several authorial studies, Bazin’s oeuvre is characterized by an immense diversity that does not allow for any solidification into an intensive theory of film and, indeed deliberately, counters exhaustive histories as well as abstracted studies of film. Beyond being an unfinished or hastily preparation to a posthumous publication, such fragmentation reflects the underlying methodological premise by which Bazin intended to redirect cinephobic misunderstandings of film aesthetics, and subsequently of its history, towards an embrace of the film itself as a reference point for film criticism.

1.2.1 The Aseptic Study of Filmologie

Bazin’s existentialism surfaces, albeit it indirectly, in his scathing review of the

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33 Ibid., pp. 7-8
founding father of Filmologie Gilbert Cohen Seat's *Introduction générale: notions fondamentales et vocabulaire de la Filmologie* (1946), and his very tough critique of the movement in general, which prided itself for being the first academic study of cinema. It followed a method characterized by a fundamental schism between the film itself and its greater sociological relevance: ‘Le fait filmique - individuel - se distingue du fait cinématographique, beaucoup plus étendu, plus vague, en un mot “social”.’34, xxvi Bazin, from his side, denounced the newfound discipline as ‘ostentatoire de la généralisation “scientifique” et de l’abstraction philosophique.’35, xxvii

The satirical drawing included in his critique, ironically titled “Introduction à une Filmologie de la Filmologie” (1951), perfectly illustrates Bazin’s concerns (Fig. 5): proud peacocks, wise owls in suits and men with medals symbolize the institutionalization of a study of cinema that was itself anything but social. In this particular essay, which he wrote under his pseudonym Florent Kirsch (Florent being the name of his son and Kirsch his wife's maiden name), Bazin attacks the filmologist methodology full on as disinterested and unconcerned with films themselves:

Il ne sera pas besoin pour être un filmologue distingué d'avoir plus de familiarité avec les classiques de l'écran qu'un candidat au certificat d'étude avec les palimpsestes. Loin que cette ignorance soit ici un empêchement rédhibitoire, la filmologie lui en fait gloire. Certes il n'est pas interdit aux filmologues d'aller au cinéma, mais on ne saurait non plus le leur recommencer, ce bagage superflu risque plutôt d'obscurcir la science naissante. La filmologie est l'étude du cinéma-en-soi, accessoirement de son histoire et de ses œuvres. Rien ne prouve que Pavlov aimait les chiens.36, xxviii

A filmologist, so Bazin suggests, needs not be a devout cinephile, just as Pavlov was, given the torture-like setting of his experiments, probably not an animal lover; incidentally, Bazin himself was both.37, (xxix) In a presentation at the *Congrès international de Filmologie*, he


36 Ibid., p. 36

37 Bazin’s cinephilia is a given; his love for animals, too, is well known and has in fact been associated with his film criticism. In his biography of Bazin, Dudley Andrew writes that
eloquently relates this study of film, ‘dans l’absolu, par rapport au film en soi,’\textsuperscript{38, xxx} to the ignorance of progress as an irrevocable consequence of such abstractions:

Je ne veux pas plaider ici un pessimisme mais seulement un réalisme historique auquel mon métier de critique me rend particulièrement sensible. Je veux dire que les grands mouvements de l’évolution technique du cinéma échappent à notre initiative sinon à notre contrôle, il est plus fécond et plus intéressant de les considérer a priori comme des progrès que de les tenir pour des involutions au nom d’une critique a priori. C’est cette critique qui a presque unanimentemament condamné le cinéma parlant à sa naissance.\textsuperscript{39, xxi}

The foundation of "being" in existence, which Sartre succinctly expressed, thus proves to have been more to Bazin than a clever tongue-in-cheek reaction to, for instance, the abundant

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\textsuperscript{38} Bazin’s vocabulary in the critique to Filmologie’s methodology is reminiscent of Sartre’s distinction between “being in-itself” and “being for-itself.” ‘One may be reminded here of that convenient fiction by which certain popularisers are accustomed to illustrate the principle of the conservation of energy. If, they say, a single one of the atoms which constitute the universe were annihilated, there would result a catastrophe which would extend to the entire universe, and this would be, in particular, the end of the Earth and of the solar system. This metaphor can be of use to us here. The For-itself is like a tiny nihilation which has its origin at the heart of Being; and this nihilation is sufficient to cause a total upheaval to happen to the In-itself’ (Sartre, Jean-Paul (1943). \textit{Being and Nothingness: The Principal Text of Modern Existentialism}. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press (1984): p. 786). By adhering to this vocabulary, Bazin appears to reaffirm, again, the primacy of a particular film’s existence (\textit{pour-soi}) over a abstracted and prescriptive theory (\textit{en-soi}): each film holds the potential to alter the course of film history, and it is this potential, according to Bazin, that the critic should take as a point of departure.

philosophical references in Cohen Seat's book.

With only a few loose references, Bazin adheres to this existentialist framework in a remarkably casual fashion, which stands opposed to the detailed precision in his cinematographic analyses, and in doing so promotes a study of cinema which takes the film itself as a point of departure, rather than an abstracted, "aseptic" study propounded by Filmologie: 'la virginité cinématographique des savants dont on souhaite le haut patronage est un symbole de la science nouvelle: de la rigueur de sa méthode et de l'asepsie de ses laboratoires.' To take up on a less explicit Sartrian reference in Bazin’s vocabulary, one could say, in other words, that Bazin considers his criticism to be a study of cinema-for-itself; it is perhaps in this sense, too, that Bazin on numerous occasions argues for "an awareness of the cinematographic fact [une prise de conscience du fait cinématographique].” Again ironically playful with philosophical references, Bazin writes:

Je ne sais plus quel philosophe ou psychologue a soutenu que la conscience n'était qu'un épiphanème et qu'avec ou sans elle Descartes eut aussi bien écrit le "Discours de la méthode." Théorie fausse évidemment, mais dont je garderai seulement la valeur de métaphore. Avec ou sans critique, Chaplin, Griffith, Murnau, Stroheim, Dreyer eussent existé de la même façon: il n'y aurait pas un plan de changé dans leurs films. A leur égard, l'abondante critique suscitée n'est qu'un fait de conscience épiphénoménal dont la nécessite ne se mesure pas à l'utilité. Je crois pourtant que cette végétation parasite sur l'arbre majestueux entretient avec lui, a fortiori, des relations de symbiose nécessaire non point évidemment à sa croissance, mais sans doute à son heureux vieillissement. 42, xxxii

Indeed, Bazin’s reaction to Sadoul's determinism, as well as Cohen Seat's esoteric tone, can be traced back to this existentialist premise, which steps away from a prescriptive study of film by embracing instead, as Dudley Andrew described, the evolution of cinema as its prime motive:

Bazin’s existentialism kept him from trying to seek or formulate an essence which cinema ought to be or become. Instead, he hoped to do for cinema what Sartre had

40 Bazin, “Filmologie,” p. 36


42 Bazin, “Filmologie,” p. 92
Myth as Method

done for man: to make it aware of its freedom and possibilities, to unshackle it from old theories which tie it to particular self-conceptions or ideologies.43

Instead of adhering to philosophical or pre-established historical categories, Bazin enthusiastically promoted the ciné-club movement, and considered film criticism repeatedly as "useless but necessary:" ‘la principale satisfaction que me donne ce métier réside dans sa quasi-inutilité. Faire de la critique cinématographique, c'est à peu près cracher dans l'eau du haut d'un pont.’44, xxxiv As I will conclude now, Bazin propounded a form of critical writing that could be synergetic with the evolution of cinema, and which always takes the film itself as a point of departure. The overall essayist style of his criticism, resulting in the fragmented, counter-prescriptive structure of his oeuvre, follows a similar principle that counters any form of solidification and stands in stark opposition to the aseptic tone of Filmologie.


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Fig. 5 Satirical illustration to “Introduction à une Filmologie...”
1.3 Film and Criticism: Cinema Enters History

“Il est bon pour un art de s’enrichir de son passé à condition que ce ne soit point par impuissance à créer son avenir, c’est-à-dire le passé d’après-demain.” 45, xxxv

Bazin’s particular concern with cinema history becomes most tangible in his categorical support of the ciné-club movement, in which he saw potentially one of the most important developments of post-war cinema. Indeed, the presentation and discussions of films, and their retrospectives (but also its more commercial form: the remake), stand starkly opposed to the abstracted and distanced study of Filmologie. This pragmatism filters through his elaborate texts on the preparation and presentation of a film screening, 46, (xxxvi) as well as his extensive apology for film criticism. Most historians and philosophers had witnessed the birth of this new art form and could recall its evolution from memory, being a first person witness to the earnest signs of change. The historical importance of the ciné-clubs, according to Bazin, was inherently linked with the gradually waning access to a memory of cinema:

Le cinéma commence à rentrer dans l’histoire. Il y a vingt ans, il était possible d’avoir vu presque tout ce qui comptait dans le cinéma, aujourd’hui beaucoup de jeunes gens ignorent la plupart des films marquant de l’histoire cinématographique; il ne saurait donc plus y avoir de culture cinématographique qui ne commence par la connaissance des classiques du “septième art.” D’ailleurs, l’évolution du cinéma a été telle depuis vingt ans que les amateurs éclairés eux-mêmes auront le plus grand profit à réviser leur conceptions d’après une nouvelle vision des chefs-d’œuvre. 47, xxxvii

As I have argued, the aversion to prescriptive film theories indeed serves as the foundation for Bazin's myth of total cinema, as it is the silent film esthetes' refusal to hear of sound

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45 Bazin, André. “Quand le cinéma se penche sur son passé.” Parisien libéré (18/10/1950): n. pag.

46 See, for instance, Bazin, André. “Conseils aux animateurs de ciné-clubs: comment on prépare les débats au ciné-club d’Annecy.” D.O.C. éducation populaire (January 1948); Bazin, André. “Travail et culture: ce public,” Écran français (14/10/1947), in which he writes: ‘Ne renouvelons pas avec le cinéma les erreurs de la pédagogie universitaire dans l’enseignement de la littérature, par exemple, erreurs contre lesquelles l’Université elle-même réagit aujourd’hui. Pour être plus précis, il s’agira, par exemple, dans la présentation, le commentaire ou la discussion d’un film, de partir de la sensibilité normale des spectateurs’ (n. pag.).

cinema that alerted him to the application of the existentialist maxim onto cinema history. Stepping away from such perspective, Bazin quite literally develops a methodology that is intrinsically embedded in the language of cinema itself, rather than an a priori application of philosophical, or art historical paradigms. In this sense, Bazin's myth of total cinema in fact suggests that, as with Chaplin, cinema does not align itself with a “filmology.” Indeed, part of his dismissal of the Filmologie movement is their scientifically abstract language, and excessive references to frameworks that are foreign to cinema:

[Cohen Seat] a volontairement obscurci son travail en transposant les faits les plus concrets dans le vocabulaire et la rhétorique de la philosophie universitaire. Avec une préciosité calculée il a par exemple soigneusement éliminé tout titre de film, toute référence à un événement cinématographique précis, la moindre évocation d'un nom de vedette, même connu de tous; on se réfère à Platon, Bergson, Euripide, Shakespeare, Molière ou Tabarin, mais on contourne des épiphrases et d'allusions les noms de Lumière, de Méliès et de René Clair. [...] [L]e langage cinématographique, truchement (quand on y va voir) des plus puérils mélodrames, devient pour le filmologue (qui s'en dispense) un "logos aux sels d'argent."48, xxxviii

Bazin thus rejects a direct application of critical categories coming from disciplines foreign to cinema, which becomes most evident in his proposal for a new critical historical paradigm that could apply to sound cinema.

In "L’Évolution du langage cinématographique,” Bazin repeats this argument that the talking film diluted the image versus reality dichotomy, a dualism that characterized the film theories of the silent film era, and thereby annihilates the film theoretical “consternation” of those aesthetes Barjavel accused of intellectual laziness. Bazin writes:

Si l’on cesse de tenir le montage et la composition plastique de l’image pour l’essence même du langage cinématographique, l’apparition du son n’est plus la ligne de faille esthétique divisant deux aspects radicalement différents du septième art. Un certain cinéma a cru mourir de la bande sonore, ce n’était point du tout “le cinéma.”49, xxxix

With his myth of total cinema, Bazin thus inverts the prescriptive paradigm: the cinema, to use Sartre’s words, ‘will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of

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48 Bazin, “Filmologie,” pp. 36-37

Myth as Method

While Bazin preferred the oral film criticism in the ciné-clubs, as well as other more dynamic forms that he tentatively termed the “affective presentation of a film [la présentation affective du film],” he understood the importance for the film critic to speak as much as possible in the present tense:

La fonction du critique n'est pas d'apporter sur un plateau d'argent une vérité qui n'existe pas, mais de prolonger le plus loin possible dans l'intelligence et la sensibilité de ceux qui le lisent, le choc de l'œuvre d'art.

Thus, if film criticism cannot influence the artwork itself, as it did often during the silent film era when critics were also filmmakers, Bazin nevertheless considers his practice necessary: criticism creates an echo of the film that reverberates and extends its significance into the minds of the audience.

In “Rewriting the Image,” Hervé Joubert-Laurencin relates Bazin’s critical method to his famed stutter, when he writes that ‘to cause a stammer is a creative act.’ The oft-referenced biographical anecdote that Bazin stuttered heavily, so much that it would have prevented him from teaching at the university, might indeed illuminate his methodological approach to writing about film. Janine Chartier, former secretary at Travaux et Culture, recalls

50 Sartre, “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” p. 349

51 In Bazin’s formulation this would be ‘[...] une sorte de mise dans l'ambiance de la salle principalement par l'audition de disques ou la lecture de textes’ (Bazin, “Conseils aux animateurs,” n. pag.).

52 Bazin, “Réflexions sur la critique,” p. 94


54 On 3 October 1941, Bazin had written to his closest friend Guy Léger that ‘[...] a catastrophe has struck me. I was washed out at the oral of the professoriat. More precisely they failed me because I stuttered in my extended explication of a text’ (Bazin, cited in Andrew, André Bazin, p. 38). Incidentally, Bazin’s oral exam was in part on Charles Baudelaire, whose unfortunate speech impediment (aphasia, to be precise) did not leave Bazin indifferent (cf. infra, 1.4 Bazin’s Mayonnaise Theory). While it may have been the reason for failing the exam (alongside his harsh criticism of the educational system at St. Cloud), the stutter did not prevent Bazin from speaking publicly at the ciné-clubs, for example; it was an impediment, it seems, that he had grown to accept. Bazin’s stutter undoubtedly lingers, for example, in his essays on Chaplin (the Dictator’s speech in particular), and, as will become clear in this present study, the notion of “eloquence” (or the lack thereof) is a recurring theme in Bazin’s film criticism.
that Bazin’s stutter during his screening sessions was both “tragic and admirable,” and according to a family friend Françoise Burgaud, the stammer also interfered with Bazin’s capacity to read and write lengthy texts, all the while demonstrating a ‘fabulous memory of images [fabuleuse mémoire des images].” 55 In his analysis, Joubert-Laurencin furthermore develops a remarkable parallel between a specifically cinematographic language and the critic’s act of “rewriting [réécriture]” as a repetitive and revising method, and assigns to it the future perfect tense of cinema:

Roland Barthes dreamt of associating the perfect tense with photography: a photo always says, according to him, “it was;” in the cinema, I would argue that this becomes “it will have been.” To this idea, let me add a corollary: whenever you write about cinema, you are always already in the act of rewriting. [...] The film already existed. Once described, it is already both irreparably dead, transformed into the past, and always incomparably alive, constantly evolving, stretched towards the future in anticipation of a new screening which will overthrow what was written about it.56

This process of continued rewriting, characteristic of Bazin’s film criticism, allows for a “creative act,” or to use a more Bazinian term: a recreation, which counters the didactic artifice of encyclopaedic history books. In this manner, where his stutter had literally made it impossible for Bazin to teach at the university, this speech impediment functions within his methodology as a resistance to univocal criticism, and can be said to reflect his institutional critique. Within Bazin’s extensive body of work, many articles are in fact slightly modified versions of earlier essays, either published in another journal addressing a different audience, or a posteriori rewritten, modified after another screening, conference or reading. Or, he recycles metaphors, particular lines from poetry or theoretical and philosophical concepts, slightly altering their previous significance in light of new sources. This fragmentary critical method, then, both serves to safeguard against prescriptive aesthetics, as well as to enable a form of criticism that by its very nature does not solidify into an exhaustive film theory.


56 Joubert-Laurencin, “Rewriting the Image,” p. 200
1.4 Bazin’s Mayonnaise Theory

To conclude this introductory part, I would like to briefly elaborate on one of the many metaphors in Bazin’s referential framework, which appears to be a random example but after more careful consideration explains the counter-hegemonic structure of Bazin’s film theory: mayonnaise. In fact, if there exists an all-encompassing “theory” to which Bazin’s body of critical writing tends, perhaps this could be what François Truffaut (1932-1984) has termed “Bazin’s mayonnaise theory:”

When I was twenty, I argued with André Bazin for comparing films with mayonnaise - they either emulsified or did not. “Don’t you see,” I protested, “that all [Howard] Hawks’ films are good, and all [John] Huston’s are bad?” I later modified this harsh formula when I had become a working critic: “The worst Hawks film is more interesting than Huston’s best.” This will be remembered as la politique des auteurs. […] I feel we’ve all adopted Bazin’s mayonnaise theory because actually making films has taught us a lot: it is as much trouble to make a bad film as a good one. Our most sincere film can seem phony.58

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57 Whether or not there is, to use Bazin’s own words, an “intellectual justification” to the whole of his critical work is a much-debated topic. See, for example, Ungaro’s André Bazin: généalogies d’une théorie: ‘[…] Bazin est à coup sûr théoricien, il a le goût et le souci de l’abstraction et de la généralisation, il aime dessiner de vastes ensembles, embrasser de grandes catégories de films, en dégager des traits communs, les appliquer à d’autres films, etc. Je ne suis pas certain qu’il y ait une théorie de Bazin parce qu’il manque à ses théorisations ce qui aurait pu les unifier en un système cohérent’ (p. 223). And in “The Structure of Bazin’s Thought,” Brian Henderson argues that Bazin’s writing in fact develops around a dichotomous structure of critical historical work on the one hand, and an ahistorical ontological theory on the other: ‘Despite its realist terminology, the history system is not assimilable to the ontology system’ (“The Structure of Bazin’s Thought.” Film Quarterly, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Summer 1972): p. 26). Surprisingly, Henderson includes “Le Mythe du cinéma total” as part of Bazin’s “reality theory,” whereas, being a direct response to Sadoul’s Histoire générale, Bazin here explicitly builds on an historiographical account of cinema, which he then frames, as I will argue later on (cf. infra, 2.4 Integral Realism: Reality and Cinema “Ultimately Equal”), within a mythical conception of “integral realism.” Throughout this dissertation, I will from my side maintain that Bazin’s critical method of a myth of total cinema surpasses such a dichotomy.

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With the mayonnaise metaphor, Bazin thus opposed his views to what would develop into the *politique des auteurs*, which posited that ‘il n'y a pas d'œuvres, il n'y a que des auteurs.’59, xliii a phrase by the playwright and novelist Jean Giraudoux (1882-1944), frequently cited by Truffaut but which Bazin judged a ‘boutade polémique dont la portée me paraît finalement assez limitée.’60, xliv Instead, Bazin argues that, as with preparing mayonnaise, making a film involves combining different ingredients that either blend smoothly or not. A renowned filmmaker can definitely disappoint: ‘[…] il faut bien néanmoins rendre compte de certaines éclipses de décrépitudes frappant l’œuvre d’incontestables grands hommes,’61, xlv and conversely ‘[…] il doit exister et il existe effectivement des coups d’éclat dans la production par ailleurs médiocre d’un auteur.’62, xlv* From this point of view, he writes about *Les Jeux sont faits* (Jean Delannoy, 1947), of which he praises Sartre’s scenario but critiques the whole: ‘D'où vient que ce film soit totalement raté comme une mayonnaise qui aurait refusé de "prendre"? Tout y est bon, mais l'ensemble est immangeable.’63, xlvii And again: ‘*Agence matrimoniale* [Jean-Paul Le Chanois, 1952] me fait penser à une mayonnaise tournée. J'y distingue parfaitement l'huile du réalisme du jaune d'œuf des bonnes intentions.’64, xlviii At several instances in his writing, Bazin uses the image of mayonnaise that did not thicken to describe a failed attempt at combining different elements, such as vinegar, oil, egg yolk, sometimes mustard, lemon juice and a pinch of salt.

Bazin’s motivation for this particular metaphor builds on the fact that from a chemical point of view mayonnaise is a prime example of so-called oxymoronic “colloidal dispersions,” i.e. mixtures of substances that do not blend: vinegar (a water-based substance)

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61 Ibid., p. 9

62 Ibid., p. 6


combined with oil, which is hydrophobic. Water, or H₂O, is a polar molecule that will attach to its own kind but strongly repel the oil, which is itself non-polar: the oil is pushed away from the water, as to minimize the contact surface between both liquids (Fig. 6). In order to mix these two opposing ingredients, the egg yolk (together with the optional mustard) will act as an indispensable element for the mixture to thicken: it contains so-called “emulsifying molecules” (lecithin, to be precise), which are partly hydrophobic and partly hydrophilic. On one side, the yolk will coat the neutral oil droplets, and on the other side attract the water molecules (Fig. 7). The trick for mayonnaise to thicken, then, is to whisk vigorously and patiently to separate as many oil droplets as possible, slowly adding them to the yolk-vinegar mixture; the connection between the coated oil and the water will then be so strong that, even when left out at room temperature, the mayonnaise will not disperse.

Applied to cinema, the analogy suggests that all elements (such as the scenario, cinematography, performance, etc.) combined, the film will either “look good” as a whole, or feel stodgy. Furthermore, the emulsifying process of mayonnaise happens without changing the molecular composition of each ingredient: there is no need to boil or cook anything. All there is to mayonnaise is constant whisking to rearrange the ingredients into a new harmonious configuration, in which their individual structures remain nevertheless unaltered. From this, the mayonnaise metaphor in Bazin ranges from the argument around the politique des auteurs to a more general institutional critique, as he writes in his critique of Filmologie that:

Si la Filmologie a “pris,” c'est comme la mayonnaise. Tous les ingrédients existaient, méconnus, inconscient et dispersés depuis vingt ans. Il n'était, comme une bonne ménagère, que de penser à remettre un jaune d'œuf et de brasser d'une certaine façon.

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66 In French, the expression *la mayonnaise a “pris,”* figuratively also means that “things are looking good.”

67 Bazin, “Filmologie,” p. 38
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And in one of his more pragmatic texts on the organization of ciné-club debates, he again picks up the mayonnaise-metaphor in affirmation of the methodological principles he drew out against the abstracted and aseptic study of cinema:

Une dernière remarque: un débat, c'est comme la mayonnaise, ça peut rater même si tous les ingrédients y sont. Mais il n'y a pas lieu de s'en étonner. C'est la preuve qu'il ne s'agit pas d'une classe d'arithmétique, qu'il y faut autre chose que de la compétence: la complicité du hasard, quelques effluves impondérables, une certaine grâce qui parfois se refuse, parfois aussi fond sur vous à la minute du désespoir. J'ai vu des débats fourvoyés pendant trois quarts d'heure sauvés par le dernier et tout le monde partir content.

C'est qu'il n'est pas que le film qui soit œuvre d'art, la réflexion critique en est une aussi, elle exige de l'amour, de la sincérité, de l'inspiration. Il y a une muse des ciné-clubs. 68, 1

From these examples, it is clear that the image of mayonnaise as an oxymoronic emulsion of elements is instrumental to grasp Bazin’s counter-prescriptive method as a “whole,” whose existence is nevertheless granted only by the individual workings of its disparate elements: the myth of total cinema as the acknowledgement, first and foremost, of the existence of film.

Truffaut’s politique des auteurs announced a new critical orientation at Cahiers du cinéma, the influential film journal Bazin had cofounded in 1951 and where he himself was now viewed as a critic of the older generation. Though he considered this debate to be

nothing more than a “family struggle [une querelle de famille],” and he in fact preferred this new critical approach to the “naïve presuppositions” his younger colleagues were fighting, Bazin’s objections are indeed illuminating. As I will conclude now, the mayonnaise theory is fully in line with the methodological premise of a myth of total cinema. In his discussion of the final speech in The Great Dictator, Bazin defended Charlie’s adaptation of perfect eloquence and the wrinkles of Chaplin showing through the make-up in terms of a myth; so too does he frame his argument against the politique des auteurs with an appreciation of older age. Against Truffaut, he writes: ‘Le drame n’est pas dans le vieillissement des hommes, mais dans celui du cinéma: se laissent dépasser par son évolution, ceux qui ne savent pas vieillir avec lui.’ As in his essays on Chaplin, here again the notion of eloquence (when meaning is perfectly integrated in language) supports Bazin’s evolutionary argument. However, this time he approaches the question from the perspective of an apparent regression, as he invokes a poet’s tragic aphasia: “[Charles] Baudelaire paralysé et n’articulant que son “Cré nom” était-il moins baudelairien?” At the end of his life, Baudelaire suffered a series of strokes, which left him partially paralyzed and affected his speech to such an extent that the poet, once so well-versed, was forced to use the two only words he could pronounce, “Cré nom” most commonly understood to be a concocted abbreviation of the blasphemous oath “Sacre nom de Dieu,” to cover an entire array of emotions from pure frustration to immense joy. From a neurological point of view, there is no evidence that Baudelaire’s speech impediment was accompanied with a cognitive regression, as Sebastian Dieguez and Julien Bogousslavsky write:

What thought is without language is one of the oldest questions of philosophy, and it has received tremendous input through the study of aphasic patients. However as the specific case of Baudelaire is concerned, the question will forever remain unanswered.

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69 Bazin, “De la politique des auteurs,” p. 3

70 Ibid., p. 2

71 Ibid., p. 9

72 Ibid.

Bazin’s remark suggests that he accepts the dissociation between word and thought: the inability to speak does not make him less Baudelaire. By placing the emphasis on the author as the sole creator of the artwork, Truffaut and his cohorts ignored the integral share of the subject matter, the existence of the film itself: the cinematic equation, so Bazin claims, then becomes “auteur + subject (reduced to zero) = work,” which he immediately nuances by stating that ‘[…] j’admets que l’équation posée plus haut est artificielle, autant que la distinction scolaire de la forme et du fond.’ The existentialist premise, which as I have indicated earlier informs both Bazin’s notion of “myth” as well as “total cinema,” safeguards cinema’s fundamental socio-aesthetics:

[...] le cinéma est un art populaire et industriel. [...] Mais il s’ensuit que tout metteur en scène est embarqué sur ce flot puissant et que son itinéraire artistique doit

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74 In doing so, Bazin subtly positions himself against the argument that Baudelaire’s speech impediment was somehow the outcome he deserved or even wished for: ‘In these circles Baudelaire’s aphasia seems to almost make sense, in a way. This implies that Baudelaire’s life can be examined retrospectively so that one can fully see the ironies of fate at work. [...] It is almost as if Baudelaire’s ending as an aphasic was some sort of retribution for his dissolute lifestyle’ (Bogousslavsky and Dieguez, “Baudelaire’s Aphasia,” p. 146). This view was supported by Sartre in his study on the poet from 1947, in which he discusses Baudelaire’s misfortune as “bad faith.” ‘Sartre is notorious in his analysis of Baudelaire’s psyche for having rather exclusively focussed on the poet’s will (or rather the lack of it)’ (Ibid., p. 125).

Sartre’s essay was met with criticism, particularly from Auguste Angles in “Sartre contre Baudelaire” (1948), in which he criticises Sartre’s “biographic criticism:” “The only reproach one can level at Sartre is that [...] he forgets most of the time that Baudelaire wrote Flowers of Evil and several other quite admirable books. His quarrels with Ancelle, the way Baudelaire made or did not make love, his changes of residency, his discouragements, occupy in the essay a much more important place than his poems, his articles, his translations. Here again, Sartre uses new language to dress up an old ghost: biographic criticism. The concierge has become a psychoanalyst (existentialist, to be sure), but she is still a concierge’ (“Sartre versus Baudelaire.” Trans. Charles Messner. Yale French Studies, No. 2 (1948): p. 121). See also Georges Bataille’s critique of Sartre’s study in La Littérature et le mal. Paris: Gallimard (1957).

Interestingly, in his review of the biopic Van Gogh (1956) by Vincente Minnelli, one of the acclaimed auteurs under scrutiny in the essay against the politique des auteurs, Bazin will take up this exact argument against “biographic criticism” (cf. infra. 5.2.3 Van Gogh’s Ear: Mythic Reality Becomes Flesh). From this perspective, the anecdote of Baudelaire’s speech impediment as well as Bazin’s views on Van Gogh’s aesthetics, which I discuss later on, can be seen as a rejection of gossipy, concierge-like criticism, and affirms the existence of the subject (e.g. film, poem, painting) as integrally part of the artistic equation.

75 Bazin, “De la politique des auteurs,” p.10
naturellement se calculer en tenant compte du courant et non point comme s’il naviguait à sa guise sur un lac tranquille.\textsuperscript{76,iv}

Bazin’s initial aversion to image-oriented aesthetics that deemed the sound film as “low grade” cinema runs through his numerous historical and critical analyses and is firmly embedded in his general affirmation of ‘cinema as the art of reality [le cinéma comme art de la réalité].’\textsuperscript{77} As I will demonstrate in the subsequent part of this research, Bazin specifies these principles in his highly original conception of “integral realism [réalisme integral],” via which he attempts to overcome precisely this distinction between form and content.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., p. 5

\textsuperscript{77} Bazin, “Avant-propos,” p. 9