



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

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

Joret, B.

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*.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Epilogue: Cinema Is Also a Language

“Il existe une critique littéraire qui est aussi une re-création, celle de Baudelaire sur Delacroix, celle de Valéry sur Baudelaire, celle de Malraux sur Greco. N’attribuons pas au cinéma la faiblesse et les péchés des hommes.”^{1, i}

Throughout this research, I have drawn on André Bazin’s critique of *Le Monde du silence* (Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Louis Malle, 1956) to discuss the further implications of “integral realism” as the synthesis of image and reality. His interpretation of this underwater documentary relies explicitly on Paul Valéry’s *Le Cimetière marin*, and his film criticism can in this instance be read as an exercise in “re-creation.” The myth of Icarus, which Bazin sees as the emblem of the myth of total cinema, is finally fulfilled under water. From beginning to end, Bazin incorporates Valéry’s symmetries pertaining to water and air: wings (*les colombes*) and feet (*marchent*), sails (*des focs*) and fins (*et non des phoques*). Following the rhythmic organization of this particular poem, ‘construit [...] sur la cadence d’un premier vers,’^{2, ii} the essays on the Icarian dream under-water ultimately bring about a reformulation of the critical categories of “form” and “content.” Integral realism, as I will conclude now, solidifies in Bazin’s approach to the evolution of film language that accompanies the ontological argument: ‘d’autre part,’ he writes, ‘le cinéma est un langage.’^{3, iii}

Eloquence (or the lack thereof) accompanies Bazin’s thoughts on myth and consequently his views on the evolution of film. Indeed, he often oscillates between the affirmation of speech on the one hand, and an acceptance of failures in direct communication on the other hand. From the perspective of speech impediments, I have elaborated on both harmony and disruption in the form-expression equation, throughout and beyond Bazin: e. g. Charles Baudelaire’s aphasia, as well as Bazin’s own stutter, Charlie’s gibberish and the Great Dictator speech, Serge Daney’s critique to an amnesiac cinema of forms without body,

¹ Bazin, André. “Peinture et cinéma.” *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* Paris: Éditions du Cerf (2008): p. 192

² Bazin, André. “De la forme et du fond ou la ‘crise’ du cinéma.” *Almanach du théâtre et du cinéma* (1951): p. 175

³ Bazin, André (1945). “Ontologie de l’image photographique.” *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* Paris: Éditions du Cerf (2008): p. 17

and the 3-D poetry of Jean-Luc Godard as well as Wim Wenders' realist grammar. Bazin's understanding of form and content thus presents a radically new approach to the evolution of film language, which runs alongside his equally original conception of integral realism. As I have demonstrated, Bazin understands cinema from a Newtonian perspective as no more and no less than reality. To now add a corollary to this: form and content are in his views *ultimately equal*. As Bazin writes, 'toute image doit être sentie comme objet et tout objet comme image.'^{4, iv} It is, furthermore, in semiotic terms that he envisions this equilibrium from a film critical point of view:

[...] où toute technique est pleinement responsable de ce qu'elle exprime, où toute forme est signe et où rien n'est vraiment dit qui n'ait conquis une forme nécessaire. La critique peut dès lors s'y exercer, du moins sur les meilleurs films comme elle le fait depuis un siècle en littérature par delà les catégories artificielles de la forme et du fond.^{5, v}

In "Le Mythe du cinéma total," Bazin initially defends the talking film as an imperative stage in the development toward integral realism: techniques such as sound, colour and ultimately relief all contribute to an increased realism, 'une recreation du monde à son image.'^{6, vi} By converting Valéry's *Le Cimetière marin*, Bazin thus ultimately claims his invested interest in "recreation" as an affirmation of *trans-forming* the world in its image, or a text in a text, or indeed film into criticism.

I have also explained the relevance of water in the Icarian analogy in Bazin: under water, meaning is *in-formed*, 'le poisson se fait oiseau.'^{7, vii} Water, especially in relation to its reservoir, further articulates Bazin's particular views on the evolution of film language. Arguing against his supposed formalist turn, Georges Sadoul wrote: 'Perdre de vue les sujets aboutit à classer les films d'après leur technique [...] ce qui est penser que le crû d'un vin se

⁴ Bazin, "Ontologie," p. 16

⁵ Bazin, "De la forme et du fond," p. 177

⁶ Bazin, André (1946). "Le Mythe du cinéma total." *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* Paris: Éditions du Cerf (2008): p. 23

⁷ Bazin, André (1956). "Un film bergsonien: *Le Mystère Picasso*." *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* Paris: Éditions du Cerf (2008): p. 194

détermine par la forme de la bouteille, Champenoise, Bordelaise ou Bourguignonne.^{8, viii} All the while pursuing the analogy with fluids, Bazin replies to this that: ‘Les rapports de la “forme” et du “fond” ne sont pas ceux du contenu, de la bouteille à la liqueur, mais bien plutôt du coquillage à sa coquille.’^{9, ix} He further develops the maritime reference to a symbiotic existence into his famed metaphor of the “equilibrium profile of a river flow [*profil d’équilibre d’un fleuve*],” by which he explains the evolution of film language:

Atteint son profil d’équilibre, le fleuve coule sans effort de sa source à son embouchure et cesse davantage son lit. Mais survienne quelque mouvement géologique qui surélève la pénélaine, modifie l’altitude de la source; l’eau de nouveau travaille, pénètre les terrains sous-jacents, s’enfoncé, mine et creuse. Parfois, s’il s’agit de couches calcaires, se dessine alors tout un nouveau relief en creux quasi invisible sur le plateau, mais complexe et tourmenté pourvu qu’on suive le chemin de l’eau.^{10, x}

The course of a river is determined by processes of erosion, transportation and deposition, which make it impossible to dissociate the water flow from its bed. Applied to the practice of criticism, then, the persistence of the myth of Icarus in Bazin’s oeuvre and beyond, going from Bruegel to Auden, Valéry, and from Cousteau to Daney, Besson and Godard (via Baudelaire back to Bazin), proves itself to be an exercise, against ‘une analyse superficielle ou partisane’^{11, xi} that categorically rejects the symbiosis of content and form, in favour of *in-depth* film criticism.

Today, Bazin’s myth as a critical method passes the litmus test of the ongoing discourse surrounding 3-D cinema: ‘I cannot imagine a serious drama, such as *Up In the Air* or *The Hurt Locker*, in 3-D,’¹² writes a confident critic of 3-D. But is rashly rejecting this technique, based on its previous abundant use in spectacular cinema, not precisely like

⁸ Sadoul, Georges (1948). “La Métaphysique de la profondeur de champ.” *1895: Revue d’histoire du cinéma*, No. 67 (Summer 2012): p. 135

⁹ Bazin, “De la forme et du fond,” p. 174

¹⁰ Bazin, André (1950-1955). “L’Évolution du langage cinématographique.” *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* Paris: Éditions du Cerf (2008): p. 71

¹¹ Bazin, André. “La ‘technique’ et le ‘sujet’ ne jouent pas au cinéma le même rôle que dans les autres arts: la forme et le fond.” *Radio cinéma télévision*, No. 45 (28/11/1950)

¹² Ebert, Roger. “Why I Hate 3D.” *Newsweek* (05/10/2010) <<http://www.newsweek.com/roger-ebert-why-i-hate-3d-movies-70247>>

discarding continuous soundtracks, colour or indeed movement on screen? From a more realist perspective, the imaginary image of 3-D does precisely that: integrating image and reality, turning every image into an object and every object into an image. Yet, there exists a convinced and ardent opposition to 3-D in today's critical discourse, which Thomas Elsaesser groups under the unheard voices of the "Cassandra's of 3-D:"

[...] despite such high-caliber interest and endorsement, another prestigious and reputable consensus holds that the wave has already peaked, that the revival is sputtering, and that the operation has never been a success, either economically or aesthetically.¹³

Admittedly, from an economic point of view, film industry is today again facing a real threat, not from television, as it did in the 1950s when 3-D first peaked, but from the internet: 3-D is 'reaching out of the screen [...] and robbing your wallet.'¹⁴ From the perspective of myth, however, such reasoning shows itself to be a speculative fallacy that is fundamentally distinct from aesthetics, and risks gagging cinema for a third time in history: first the talking film, then Besson's aphasic images as the highpoint of a crisis of scenarios, today the financial suicide attempt of an art form. The contemporary critiques of 3-D cinema, whether they emphasize its lack of content, portray it as unfit for regular storytelling or as an industrial gimmick, can in fact be understood as a repetition of this former discourse. The fact that cinema is a popular art, which Bazin so convincingly argues, does not imply a dictatorship of film- or indeed war industry. Instead, Bazin upholds that '[...] le cinéma n'est pas un Art et une Industrie, il est un Art industriel.'^{15, xii} As a socio-aesthetic fact, cinema cannot *exist* without social influence, which is fundamentally part of its aesthetics.

That being said, if it is André Malraux's famous line ('D'autre part, le cinéma est une *industrie*') which Bazin is parodying in conclusion to his Ontology-essay,^{16, xiii} then the message is clear. The critic who dismisses new technique (sound, colour, relief) because of

¹³ Elsaesser, Thomas. "The 'Return' of 3-D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 39 (Winter 2013): p. 218

¹⁴ Kirsten Thompson, cited in Elsaesser, "The Return," p. 219; see pp. 219-220 for a concise overview of recurring arguments against 3-D.

¹⁵ Bazin, André. "Le cinéma est-il mortel?" *France observateur* (13/08/1952): p. 23

¹⁶ See, for example, Andrew, Dudley & Steven Ungar. *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press (2008): p. 370

its popularity (*odi profanum vulgus*), ignores the most fundamental characteristic of cinema: ‘l’esthétique cinématographique sera sociale ou le cinéma se passera d’esthétique.’^{17, xiv} In conclusion, then, let us recall Bazin’s defence of sound cinema, facing critical rejection because of its “low realism:” ‘Les intellectuels sont gens qui n’aiment pas à être interrompus. Quand l’écran s’est mis à parler, ils se sont tus.’^{18, xv} Once again, a side of the critical discourse seems to take on René Barjavel’s sarcastic punch: ‘Coupez-lui la langue!’^{19, xvi} The innovative use of three-dimensionality in contemporary cinema, experimental in *Adieu au langage* and naturally realist in *Every Thing Will Be Fine*, affirms the poetic interdependence of content and form: integral realism — *the myth of total cinema*.

¹⁷ Bazin, André. “Pour une esthétique réaliste.” *L'Information universitaire*, No. 1168 (06/11/1943): n.pag.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Barjavel, René. *Cinéma total: essai sur les formes futures du cinéma*. Paris: Éditions Denoël (1944): n.pag. <<http://tomchin.voila.net/cinematotal.htm>>