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***What Cinema Is! Bazin's Quest and its Charge,* Dudley Andrew. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010 (184 pages). ISBN-10: 140510760X.**

A Review by Kevin McDonald, Cal State Northridge

For some time now, cinema has stood on the threshold of extinction. The decline of theatrical exhibition, the rise of video and, later, digital technologies and the growing commercial pressures of an increasingly saturated media environment have all threatened to eclipse cinema in its most familiar form. Keenly aware of these circumstances, Dudley Andrew addresses cinema's current state of peril with poise and a deliberate measure of aplomb in his new, emphatically-titled *What Cinema Is!*. Guiding readers through the dynamic developments of post-war French film culture, Andrew provides a fresh and elucidating account of the period's greatest exegete, André Bazin. In so doing, Andrew effectively continues Bazin's legacy, firstly, by reiterating the medium's exemplary configuration and, secondly, by forcefully defending its continued social, aesthetic, and scholarly merit. Andrew's claims throughout are skilful and compelling; not surprisingly, he proves most perceptive in navigating the critical debates that have shaped Film Studies since Bazin's death. In this regard, the book demonstrates a clarity and focus well suited to deliver the answer so explicitly promised by the book's title. However, as Andrew lays claim to what cinema indeed is, he inevitably draws attention to the medium's inherently spectral qualities, emphasising its underlying affinity for dislocation, ambiguity and otherness. In a final paradoxical turn, that may very well have bemused Bazin, cinema proves fundamentally immune to ontological certainty, perpetually evolving even as it simultaneously fosters an identity as recognisable as it is debatable.

While Andrew remains steadfast in his commitment to cinema's conventional form, he also proves to be refreshingly agile in the unconventional twists and turns he employs to make his case. For instance, Andrew sets the stage for his project by insisting that cinema does not begin in 1895, as most histories have it, but instead after World War I with the establishment of certain technical and narrative conventions. Just as important as the emergence of Hollywood's classical narrative style is the rise of modern journalism and the public desire to engage with social and historical concerns on a daily basis. Together these developments facilitate the arrival of the feature film, a format best characterised as fictional narratives told through moving images that are anchored in the real world and addressed to a viewing public. It is in this guise, according to Andrew, that cinema hits its stride, serving as a locus of aesthetic, cultural and intellectual innovation (particularly in the two decades that followed World War II). While Andrew identifies these attributes as cinema's definitive criteria, he simultaneously avoids

espousing them in any kind of doctrinaire manner. Ultimately, cinema is more a measure of the ideas and attitudes manifest within a predetermined set of technical and material parameters than a matter of those specifications themselves. As keen and tactful as this may be, it is also a hedge that allows Andrew to occasionally waver. For example, he cites the recent films of Cristian Mungiu and Jia Zhang-ke to indicate that there is nothing to stop cinema from subsisting or even prospering in the digital age, even as he remains emphatically wary of most contemporary filmmaking. As a result, Andrew reserves his main focus and praise for the films that surfaced in the traumatic aftermath of World War II, extolling their "curiosity, spontaneity, and responsiveness", as well as their underlying commitment to the world as both "indefinitely enigmatic and worthy of our care" (94). The danger in this regard is that while the world remains violent and complex—perhaps even more so now than ever before—films today lack the gravity or magnitude of those produced by what he implicitly celebrates as cinema's greatest generation.

Throughout the book, Andrew provides a corollary for the importance of film theory, both in its own right and as a vital appendage necessary for cinema's survival. Not surprisingly, Andrew again turns to Bazin as the foremost figure in this endeavour, his indelible question—what is cinema?—a formative and haunting presence throughout. To this end, the book provides an authoritative reprisal in which Andrew navigates Bazin's wide ranging oeuvre, masterfully distilling nuanced insights while also correcting misguided assumptions that have long dominated the field of Film Studies. These efforts are noteworthy to the extent that Andrew brings an even-handed clarity to what have otherwise been highly convoluted and partisan debates. For instance, he plainly observes that Bazin was a modern theorist—a simple and straightforward distinction, but one that was nonetheless lost amid the heavily politicised debates of the 1970s and 1980s, in which Bazin was dismissed wholesale as a naïve realist. The importance of this observation is that Bazin's work, in contrast to earlier theorists' focus on the medium's formal specificity, embraced cinema's one truly modern attribute: its technological basis. And, in hindsight, his understanding of cinematic images as technologically mediated should have served as the first clue that his theoretical position was more sophisticated than most of his critics were willing to acknowledge.

In continuing the book's rehabilitation of Bazin, Andrew devotes a significant amount of space to the matter of cinematic realism. Bazin championed photographic realism not because it constituted a straightforward copy of reality, but rather, because it introduced a new and fundamentally different relationship between the image and the world that lay beyond it. Bazin seized upon this dialectical tension, enlisting a layered and often paradoxical prose that was provocative and perceptive precisely because it avoided broad, doctrinaire principles. Furthermore, he embraced porous binaries and celebrated the interface between absence and presence, noting, as Andrew puts it, that "the reality attained by a film is what precisely is not visible in its images" (8). Reality, in effect, always lingers as a spectral trace, and cinema, by rendering this trace visible, has the capacity to discern social and historical truth unlike any other modern aesthetic medium. Andrew further reiterates this general notion by introducing what he terms the *Cahiers* axiom. As elaborated by a subsequent editor of *Cahiers du cinéma*, the acclaimed journal Bazin helped start, the axiom asserts that cinema maintains a fundamental rapport with reality, precisely because it is not itself reality. In one of the book's most daring moves, Andrew goes on to link Bazin to loaded terms such as fissure, deferral and apparition. He

thereby draws a correlation between Bazin and the fashionable French theorists who followed in his wake, the very intellectuals who inspired the politicisation of Film Studies and effectively obscured Bazin's work for an entire generation of scholars.

Even while cherishing cinema's rudimentary bond with reality, Bazin understood it as historically determined. This is why he advocated for its continual development and prudently addressed new techniques as they emerged. Contrary to crude notions that he simply abhorred all editing, Bazin considered it a vital tool, one that was capable of illuminating otherwise impossible subject matter and therefore necessary in allowing viewers to grasp what was "too extensive in space and time to be conveniently presented completely to our eyes" (41). He further recognised the importance of editing in constructing classical narrative, and celebrated directors such as Jean Renoir and Orson Welles, both of whom balanced stylistic innovation with the demands of continuity and coherence. Following World War II, Bazin turned his attention, however, to the directors that were more aggressively experimenting with dramatic tempo, enlisting elliptical editing and more episodic storylines to disrupt classical patterns. As is well known, he declared his preference for directors such as Roberto Rossellini and Robert Bresson, filmmakers who remained open to chance and, more specifically, to the ineluctable otherness and layered ambiguity of the historical world. Less discussed, however, is how Bazin's understanding of such developments allowed him to subsequently assert tremendous influence on the young filmmakers of his era, particularly those who pioneered the French New Wave and its Left Bank corollary. Here, Andrew's analysis is especially captivating, as he foregrounds the linkages between Bazin and the work of Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Jean Rouch, and Agnès Varda. In each case, his nuanced interpretations further underscore the centrality of Bazin's role in the formation of modern cinema. While reiterating the dynamic exchange between critical and creative endeavours, Andrew also opens new avenues that cut against the grain of film theory's standard genealogy. He introduces the work of important precursors such as André Malraux, Roger Leenhardt, and Jean-Paul Sartre, situates Serge Daney and Gilles Deleuze as part of Bazin's theoretical legacy, and entertains a series of brief but incredibly intriguing overlaps between Bazin and Walter Benjamin. Together these components contribute to a new and stirring portrait of film theory. It is a portrait dramatically invigorated by Bazin's return, but one that is also full of strange and compelling questions that await future consideration.

While a renewed engagement with Bazin serves as one means of advancing cinema, Andrew simultaneously identifies several forces conspiring against the possibility of its forward progress. In the book's most sustained analysis, Andrew examines Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* (*Amélie*, 2001) and its aim to pleasure "spectators with an image filled to the brim with self-pleasure" (17). Although the film is discussed primarily in terms of the French "Cinéma du Look", it is clear that *Amélie* stands in for the shallow spectacles that epitomise contemporary Hollywood and commercial cinema all around the world. Unfortunately, Jeunet's film, like the vast array of visual media rapidly displacing Bazin's notion of cinema, functions as "a cinema without windows, where everything shown is just what we want to see (or have already seen), a TV version of cinema where we congratulate ourselves by recognizing what is already familiar" (18). Lacking any interest in discovery or revelation, the cinema that currently dominates the world exerts a suffocating control over the image,

manipulating its every element in order to elicit nothing more than a counterfeit psychological investment.

Though Andrew certainly makes a strong case against the likes of *Amélie*, some may question his broader selection of films, as well as the line he draws between a virtuous cinema and its impoverished, commercial counterpart. By design, the book focuses on French films made between 1945 and 1970. This may strike some readers as a nostalgic retreat, especially considering Andrew's call for a cinema that engages the world in all its present complexity. On a similar note, although filmmakers outside of France are discussed, the book runs the risk of perpetuating a disproportionate preference for European directors. Inadvertently, this focus may overshadow the non-Western filmmakers who are seemingly better situated, according to Andrew's own logic, to advance cinema in its true sense. Another practical concern revolves around the question of technology. Though Andrew allows that cinema is not necessarily technologically determined, he simultaneously indicates that new digital technologies have fundamentally transformed the way cinema is produced, distributed and received. Generally lamenting this transformation and its attendant technologies, television and video games, he then sends a mixed message when he advises cinema to incorporate the new media culture that surrounds it. In a related move, Andrew adamantly endorses cinema's impurity, exalting its ability, as in adaptation, to engage and enrich other arts. "Like any living form," he writes, "cinema must adapt to conditions around it, sacrificing its putative self-identity as it matures into the shape it takes on in history" (112). Throughout the book's final chapter Andrew explicitly develops this evolutionary rhetoric and devotes close attention to cinema's ontogeny or, rather, the idea that its existence precedes its essence. He insists that the medium, like all cultural phenomena, evolves in conjunction with the environment that surrounds it. However, considering Andrew's reservations regarding the negative impact of commercial interests and the technological innovations tied to them, it is difficult to imagine how cinema in the future might successfully negotiate such powerful and toxic forces.

The questions that intermittently arise over the course of the book do not detract from its main thrust, but instead ensure that its overall diligence is counterbalanced by a calculated effort to provoke ongoing debate. Indeed, the most controversial gesture in this self-proclaimed manifesto is neither its definition of cinema, as such, nor its spirited revival of Bazin; it is rather the critique Andrew directs back on the discipline of Film Studies, and his implicit claim that recent sub-fields have stunted its development as an intellectual endeavour. Taking issue with Cultural Studies, so-called new media, early cinema, and the appropriation of experimental cinema by the art establishment, Andrew's overtures are likely to elicit strong rebuttals. Some of these will be warranted, as it is not the case that theoretical work has completely languished or that these sub-fields are entirely without merit. However, the larger point of Andrew's critique is that in the course of vigorously expanding what counts as cinema, scholars have lost sight of its central identity, unnecessarily marginalising or obscuring its most significant features: its social and historical resonance, its aesthetic innovation, and its political potential. The one, perhaps significant, oversight in this challenge is that, in alternating between Bazin's writing in the 1940s and 1950s and more current scholarly approaches, Andrew omits a full account of the theoretical debates that separate the two eras. As in his discussion of various films, Andrew avoids dealing with the economic and material shifts that underlie the cultural and aesthetic consequences with

which he is largely preoccupied. Also missing in this regard is a sustained account of how the university system has developed over this same period. That is to say, Andrew never identifies the institutional pressures that have encouraged the sub-divisions that he generally condemns or the fact that higher education is increasingly beholden to the same economic imperatives that drive commercial cinema.

Finally, despite its declarative title, Andrew's book offers little in the way of easy or conclusive answers. It serves instead as a prelude, or, to use his description of cinema, as a kind of vestibule or entry point into further critical investigation. The real accomplishment is that, unlike many vestibules, *What Cinema Is!* never betrays its status as such. It never surrenders to the transitory or pragmatic nature of its function. As Andrew invites readers to continue the unending debate about what cinema is and what it may still yet become, there is an indispensable certainty and confidence in his invitation, a sureness that both comforts and impels readers forward, despite not knowing what exactly lies ahead.

Works Cited

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