

Blandine Joret, *Studying Film with André Bazin*. Film Theory in Media History. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019. Pp. 192. €34.95 (paper).

André Bazin (1918–58) was more of a critic than a theorist. But above all, he was a passionate advocate for film. As editor in chief of the authoritative magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Bazin wrote countless articles on film aesthetics. He turned out to be a major inspiration for a new generation of film critics and the *cinéastes* of the Nouvelle Vague. François Truffaut became one of his most devoted disciples. His widely acclaimed film *Les 400 coups* (1959) was dedicated to his mentor Bazin, who passed away at an early age. Both had found each other in their unfathomable cinephilia.

With her recent book *Studying Film with André Bazin*, Blandine Joret illustrates how Bazin continues to appeal to the imagination of contemporary film scholars. His theoretical legacy is not uncontroversial, but his ideas about cinema nevertheless echo through present-day debates. Joret rightly argues that Bazin still can be an inspiring and relevant source for film studies. Her approach, however, has an important disclaimer: “I do not aim to defend nor appropriate Bazin,” she writes in her foreword; “instead, I wish to make his criticism (the metaphors, the references, the paradoxes) reverberate with contemporary perspectives and thereby extend the potential of his lineage today” (9).

Studying film *with* Bazin it is, welcoming him as an inspiring travel companion along the windy roads of film history and theory. This approach is both sensible and inevitable. After all, Bazin’s fragmented legacy can better be considered as a hermeneutic toolbox than as a ready-made methodological guide. His insights are often too personal, metaphorical, or even whimsical to be directly implemented into any meaningful scholarly analysis of contemporary film. But in her thorough treatment, Joret shows that the Bazinian toolbox offers many fruitful leads to better understand the idiosyncrasies of film language. Bazin’s insights prove surprisingly suitable for a theoretical exploration of digital possibilities that are currently transforming film aesthetics.

The core of Joret’s argument lies in the observation that Bazin was averse to any prescriptive and essentialist approach to film. This did not mean that he had no ideas about what film should or, rather, could be. Joret systematically explains that Bazin aimed to interpret film as a medium of unlimited and unexplored possibilities. Its diffuse boundaries with other art disciplines (theater, literature, painting, and poetry) gave film, according to Bazin, a uniqueness and malleability that he proposed as the principle of “integral reality.” Joret demonstrates how Bazin embraced sound film and discussed the possibilities of 3D technology to create a perfect illusion of reality that would, hopefully, eliminate the dichotomy of form and content. This “myth of total cinema”—the

possibility of that which has not yet been invented—would become an important theme in his treatises on film theory.

Joret discusses how the concept of integral reality can be made productive to better understand unforeseen changes in film language and film history. Within that frame of reference, it makes sense that she focuses on contemporary developments in the field of virtual reality (VR) as well. Bazin's ideas about future developments that he outlined in the 1950s “reverberate,” as Joret puts it, with current technological transformations. As seen from this perspective, Alejandro González Iñárritu's impressive VR project *Carne y Arena* (2017) closely resembles what Bazin labeled a “total cinema.” The virtual environment allows the viewer's gaze to wander in an alternative reality in which form and content are one, representing an aesthetic of discovery to which Bazin attached such great importance.

As VR turns the classical conventions of film language upside down (what does editing still mean in a VR environment?), this equally requires a new theoretical approach toward film aesthetics. The strength of this book is that the author successfully turns to the classics for inspiration. Joret emphasizes the relevance of Bazin from different perspectives and does not shy away from a creative and meticulous reinterpretation of many of his concepts. Sometimes she seems to slightly overshoot this: we grasp the overall idea behind the “mayonnaise metaphor” without an extensive explanation of the chemistry of emulsions. The elaborate explanation of the fictitious experiment surrounding Schrödinger's cat to elucidate some aspect of Bazinian realism might seem somewhat overdone for hasty readers. At the same time, these examples are illustrative of the way Joret “tests” Bazinian tools with unexpected comparisons and intertextual references. After all, her transgressive analysis does justice to the way Bazin approached his research object.

There are more similarities in the way in which both authors deal with their subject. Bazin opposed both the clinical approach of filmology—the first attempt to study film within academia—and the rigid cult of *la politique des auteurs* of his fellow critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Furthermore, he opposed a film style that was disconnected from reality and social practice. His praise of Italian neorealism was therefore not surprising, nor was his aversion to any form of passive consumption of film. In Bazin's view, film had to be actively screened in the circuit of film clubs. As a critic, he felt obliged to make viewers rethink film again and again.

Joret did the same for Bazin's oeuvre. *Studying Film with André Bazin* is first and foremost a response to lazy readings of the Bazinian text and a powerful plea for actively interpreting it anew. At the same time, Joret emphasizes the importance of a contemporary film theory that does not rely on fixed assumptions about what film is now. Put this way, her promise to make Bazin's criticism “reverberate with contemporary

perspectives” has not turned out to be false. I should add that this short review does little justice to the richness of her argument. *Studying Film with André Bazin* is an intelligent, original exercise that provides useful insights for anyone interested in the key question of film theory: What is film actually, and what can it become? It is also an invitation to further explore Bazin’s extensive written oeuvre. His *Écrits Complets* (Éditions Macula, 2018) consists of 2,681 texts, of which Joret read a quarter, and “only” 55 made the cut for this book. This leaves plenty of possibilities for future theoretical endeavors into the Bazinian realm. Fortunately, his work is not yet a closed chapter.

Klaas de Zwaan

Zoe Hope Bulaitis, *Value and the Humanities: The Neoliberal University and Our Victorian Inheritance*. Palgrave Studies in Literature, Culture and Economics. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. Pp. 255. €53.49.

The last decade has seen a number of important studies on the value and impact of the humanities, several of which were prompted more or less directly by policy developments. Zoe Hope Bulaitis’s *Value and the Humanities* is therefore not the first attempt to undertake a historically informed scrutiny of the current state of the humanities. The volume, however, certainly deepens our understanding of several central issues. The author is a literary scholar with expertise in cultural and higher education policy, and her motivation for writing this book draws from her experiences as an undergraduate student in 2009–12. During that period, she claims, in the wake of the global financial crisis, the idea of the neoliberal university was fully realized in Britain. These years saw ideals of consumerism flourish along with a rise of tuition fees as the so-called Browne Report (2010) “confirmed the shift from a public to a private funding model for higher education” (8–9). As a consequence, arts and humanities courses lost financial support from the government, and there has been a strong emphasis on utility and indicators of impact, stimulated in particular by the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The study at hand challenges this economic discourse that seems to have been cemented.

Value and the Humanities is a truly well-written book that emphasizes the need for discussing university education in alternative terms to the prevalent focus on economic value through a neoliberal lens: “recent policy has overlooked the ways in which the humanities contribute to the wellbeing of society through their critically, culturally, and historically aware practices” (v). Bulaitis positions her approach within the field of “economic