

André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker

American Cinema from Early
Chaplin to the Late 1950s

R. J. Cardullo (Transl. and Ed.)



SensePublishers

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Cover image: Courtesy of the late Janine Bazin

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ADVANCE PRAISE
ANDRÉ BAZIN, THE CRITIC AS THINKER

“R. J. Cardullo’s introduction to André Bazin’s life and work in *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s*, together with his collecting so many of this French author’s ‘fugitive’ writings on American cinema and packaging them, in one volume, with ample credits and a comprehensive bibliography, finally makes accessible to lovers of film—and the art of film—an important, but hitherto scattered, body of reflection, criticism, and theorizing.”

– **Chris Wagstaff, Senior Lecturer, School of Languages and European Studies, University of Reading, U.K.**

“Cardullo’s choice of texts in this volume vividly recaptures the immediacy and excitement of André Bazin’s contemporary ‘discovery’ and promotion of the American cinema, while reflecting the critical intelligence that ensures the lasting value of Bazin’s insights. *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* is of compelling interest not only to teachers and students of film but potentially to a wider public of movie enthusiasts.”

– **Keith Reader, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Glasgow, Scotland**

“Cardullo’s introduction to *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* offers a succinct biography of André Bazin along with a stimulating reassessment of the importance of his work, unabashedly embracing its transcendental and spiritual qualities. This book is a valuable resource for scholars of cinema and American culture alike.”

– **Douglas Smith, Senior Lecturer in Film Studies, School of Languages and Literature, University College of Dublin, Ireland**

“*André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* is a very significant contribution to the field of film criticism. It presents the writings of an extremely creative, passionate, and intelligent specialist of the cinema who, in the 1950s, founded two highly influential journals still in existence: *L’Esprit* and *Cahiers du Cinéma*. R. J. Cardullo has chosen excellent articles here and done a remarkable work of translation. The credits of the films discussed, the extensive bibliography of Bazin’s writings, as well as the references to studies about him, make this volume a valuable document that will spur further research. *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* is a serious work deserving of the utmost praise.”

– **Dina Scherzer, Professor Emerita of French and Italian, University of Texas at Austin, USA**

“André Bazin is probably the most well-known and influential critic-cum-theorist in the history of film study. Any increase in the availability of Bazin’s writings, especially in English translation, is accordingly a matter of some academic consequence. Cardullo’s *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* is eminently readable; it is also, for someone like me, who has an interest in cinema studies in general and Bazin’s work in particular, not a little exciting.”

– **Leighton Grist, Reader in Film Studies, University of Winchester, U.K.**

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André Bazin in the 1940s (above) and the 1950s (below)

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INTRODUCTION

André Bazin (1918–1958) may well be the most influential critic ever to have written about cinema. He is credited with almost single-handedly establishing the study of film as an accepted intellectual pursuit; and he can also be considered the principal instigator of the equally influential *auteur* theory: the idea that, since film is an art form, the director of a movie must be perceived as the chief creator of its unique cinematic style. Bazin contributed daily reviews to Paris’s largest-circulation newspaper, *Le Parisien libéré*, and wrote hundreds of essays for weeklies (*Le Nouvel observateur*, *Télérama*) as well as for such esteemed monthly journals as *L’Esprit* and *Cahiers du cinéma* (which he co-founded in 1951), the single most influential critical periodical in the history of the cinema. A social activist, he also directed ciné-clubs and, from 1945 to 1950, worked for the Communist outreach organization *Travail et Culture*. Moreover, Bazin befriended Jean Renoir, Roberto Rossellini, Orson Welles, and Luis Buñuel and was a father figure to the critics at *Cahiers* who would create the New Wave just after he died: François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, and Claude Chabrol. He even adopted the delinquent Truffaut, who dedicated *The 400 Blows* (1959) to him. Bazin’s influence spread to critics and filmmakers in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asia, where today, for instance, Jia Zhangke salutes Bazin as formative to his artistic approach.

One of Bazin’s first essays, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945), anchors much of what he would produce. It legitimates his taste for documentaries, for neorealism, and for directors who don’t use images rhetorically but instead to explore reality. Criticized by communists for writing “The Myth of Stalin in the Soviet Cinema” (1950), he would be posthumously attacked by Marxist academics for his presumed naïve faith in cinema’s ability to deliver true appearances transparently. Bazin was influenced, not by Marx, but by Bergson, Malraux, and Sartre. He specialized in literature as a brilliant student at the *École normale supérieure*, where he also was passionate about geology, geography, and psychology. Indeed, metaphors from the sciences frequently appear in his articles.

While many of Bazin’s acolytes are “humanists” or, in particular, devotees of the *auteur* theory, it is increasingly clear that Bazin attends equally in his published work to systems within which films are made and viewed, including technology, economics, and censorship. Of this published work—between 1943 and 1958, Bazin wrote around 2,600 articles and reviews—only 150 pieces or so are easy to access in anthologies or edited collections, be they in French, English, or another language. He personally collected sixty-four of his most significant pieces in the four-volume French version of *What Is Cinema?* (1958–62). Additional collections appeared later thanks to Truffaut, Éric Rohmer, and other devotees. Obviously, then, most of those who have written about Bazin have done so knowing only a fraction of his output.

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Still, that output is considered consistent, rich, and consequential. And Bazin's impact will undoubtedly grow as more of his writing becomes available.

When the idea of "truth" encounters that of "cinema," the first name that naturally comes to mind is that of Bazin. But over the past few decades, as pointed out above, this French film critic and theorist has generally been viewed as a naïve realist, someone for whom the essence of cinema lay in its mechanical, photographic ability to bring the "truth" to the screen without the all-too-partial and non-objective intervention of humans. As Noël Carroll wrote in 1996 in *Theorizing the Movie Image*, "Bazin held that the image from a film was an objective re-presentation of the past, a veritable slice of reality." Carroll was by no means alone in identifying Bazin as someone who believed in the objectivity of the imprint that empirical reality automatically leaves on film. Jean Mitry, Christian Metz, 1970s *Screen-magazine* theorists, and most scholars adhering to semiological or cognitivist approaches have all dismissed Bazin's ontological belief in film's immediate access to, and correspondence with, empirical reality. Casting a retrospective glance at this almost unanimous rejection of Bazin, Philip Rosen has more recently argued, in "*Change Mummified*": *Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (2001), that such a repudiation was a veritable collective obsession that allowed the then-new subject of film studies to be established as a consistent discipline in its own right. In other words, Bazin's rejection was itself a kind of founding act.

Nowadays, it is perhaps easier to look back and discover what the writings by the co-founder of *Cahiers du cinéma* were *really* about. Yet, to repeat, these writings are still basically little known to date. Not long ago, Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin revived scholarly interest in this huge amount of neglected work by organizing, on the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of Bazin's death in 2008, two international conferences on the topic of "unknown Bazin." One took place at Yale University ("Opening Bazin") and the other at the Université Paris VII-Diderot ("Ouvrir Bazin"); and two-and-a-half years later, an edited collection (*Opening Bazin*) was published that gathered most of the talks given at those venues.

Indeed, reading the large number of "unknown"—unanthologized or untranslated—articles by Bazin leaves no doubt: he was not a naïve theorist. His was not a shallow and simplistic faith in some magical transubstantiation of reality directly on screen. Indeed, much of his writing prefigures the very theoretical movements, from the 1970s and after, which—importing concepts from disciplines like psychoanalysis, gender studies, anthropology, literary theory, semiotics, and linguistics to fashion structuralist, post-structuralist, Marxist, and feminist film theories—opposed what they saw as Bazin's exclusively realist bias. Thus we can now dismiss the standard opinion according to which Bazin advocated cinema's photographic ability to reproduce reality—a dismissal that has in fact already been validly formulated in various places by several scholars. One of the most interesting attempts to do so is Daniel Morgan's "Rethinking Bazin" (2006), a careful review of all the excerpts in Bazin's written works that talk about cinema's photographic, replicative dimension. Morgan noticed that, on this subject, Bazin says different

things in different places. Whatever definition of cinema we can infer from Bazin's writings, photographic objectivity has no essential place in it.

What is perhaps more important is that Bazin himself repeatedly stigmatized the so-called "photographic objectivity" of the cinema. His articles are replete with warnings like the following: "It is not enough to shoot in the streets to 'make it real.' All in all, the script is more important than the fetishism of natural décor" (*Le Parisien libéré*, May 18, 1949); "Artifice and lie can walk down the streets as well as they can haunt the studios, because reality is not just in the appearance of things, but in man's heart. Ultimately, it is also a matter of the screenplay" (*Le Parisien libéré*, November 16, 1949); "The realist destiny of cinema—innate in photographic objectivity—is fundamentally equivocal, because it allows the 'realization' of the marvelous. Precisely like a dream. The oneiric character of cinema, linked to the illusory nature of its image as much as to its lightly hypnotic mode of operation, is no less crucial than its realism" (*Les Lettres françaises*, July 25, 1947).

In a word, cinema functions in such a way that we can believe (to some extent) that what we see on screen is true. But this does not mean that cinema can reproduce truth; on the contrary, its innate realism cannot be separated from its potential to create believable illusions. Hence, cinematic realism is not a naïve acknowledgement of what reality actually is; rather, it is dialectically linked to illusion—i.e., to its own fundamental condition. Indeed, in his one and only essay explicitly revolving around the subject of photography, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Bazin defines it as intrinsically surrealist because it is a hallucination that is also a fact.

Only ostensibly the ultimate realist, the author of *What Is Cinema?* has in fact often been accused of being an *idealist* critic. This is not incorrect: in many ways Bazin does share the philosophical perspective of idealism, according to which matter does not exist in its own right; it is in fact a product of mind, and therefore all objects are mental creations and the whole world itself—the sum of all objects—is a mental construction. But the view that Bazin is an idealist is not correct enough, either, since one should assume all due consequences from such a premise. The most obvious (but also the least negligible) of these is that, precisely as an idealist, Bazin's notion of reality is by no means simple. It is not limited simply to what can be found "out there," either in the "real" world or the world as the mind projects it. Indeed, Bazin's idealism quickly becomes a form of Catholic phenomenology, according to which any attempt at a faithful reflection of reality is really just a prerequisite—ultimately merely a pretext—for finding a transcendental or even theological truth that purportedly exists in reality and is "miraculously" revealed by the camera.

Despite common opinion from the 1960s through the 1980s—opinion that the 2008 Yale/Paris conferences, followed by the 2011 publication of their proceedings, have played a strong role in countering—Bazin paid a lot of attention to social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in his consideration of individual films, and the selections in *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* are meant to stress this component of his criticism. He frequently mentions in this volume, for example, the effect of the profit motive

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on the artistic quality of Hollywood productions and how, “despite its initially private character, filmmaking behaves, by reason of the target audience at which it ultimately aims, nearly like state radio” (*Almanach du théâtre et du cinéma*, 1951). Bazin also describes how technological developments change the expectations of audiences and how, as a result, one artistic form can become more convincing than another.

If cinema seems to be the quintessential realistic medium, according to Bazin, this is precisely because it can grasp economic, cultural, political, and psychological realities—every reality, in short, connected to the fact of human beings living together in one society. In other words, cinema’s ontological realism is not a matter of reproducing empirical reality as such; “reality” is much more than the sum of its empirical parts. As Bazin himself writes in “For a Realistic Aesthetic,” in *French Cinema of the Occupation and Resistance* (1975; English translation, 1981), “The cinematic aesthetic will be *social*, or else will do without an aesthetic.” Hence in the essay “Death on the Silver Screen” (1949), translated in my *Bazin on Global Cinema, 1948–58* (2014), one can read of being forced “into a state of consciousness and then responsibility” in the face of impending death—the origin, according to Bazin, of both time and life—and clearly perceive the social underpinnings of postwar Sartrean existentialism. And, also in *Bazin on Global Cinema*, the reader will find new relevance in Bazin’s humorous defense of a 1950, American-made version of the French classic *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897), so common has it become in the twenty-first century for the artists of one society or culture to recycle the artistic icons from another, sometimes quite different, one.

Related to this matter of cross-fertilization, and to return to a point I made earlier, Bazin loved to probe the system that brought films into being and sustained them in the cultural imagination, for as a daily critic he took in every sort of movie imaginable, if mainly mediocre features. Rather than try to filter from these a few crystals, he aimed to understand the entire process by which they got made, attained their shape, and achieved their value—whatever that might be. This meant genre study in the broadest sense. What psychological knot does each genre pick at? How have later variants grown out of earlier examples in the genre or drawn on contemporaneous types? What pre-cinematic avatars connect these films to longstanding cultural concerns? When, for example, in a 1951 article in *L’Esprit* titled “Marcel Carné and Disembodiment” (translated in my *French Cinema from the Liberation to the New Wave, 1945–58* [2012]), Bazin wrote about this *auteur* on the occasion of his forgettable film *Juliet, or the Key to Dreams* (1951), it was not as a transcendent artist whose themes and sensibility deserved deep reflection; instead he used Carné’s career to ponder how genres and styles move into and out of phase with history and with the public taste.

To Bazin the cinema was thus a vast ecological system that was endlessly interesting in its interdependencies and fluctuations. He was always ready to celebrate the creativity of the director, but “the genius of the system” he found even more fascinating. Only an interdisciplinary or comparative approach could begin

to understand why even modest directors made such satisfying films during the so-called classical period, a period that Bazin could sense was on its way out. His protégés might exercise an elitist *politique des auteurs*, but he shamed them with their obligation to keep in mind technology, economics, sociology, and, yes, actual politics, alongside the usual approaches to film criticism borrowed from literary studies and art history.

Bazin knew quite a lot about each of these subjects and methods, but his particular genius lay in identifying some revealing textual attributes of whatever film was before him, then using these to leverage a weighty understanding of the work as a whole, or the filmmaker, or the genre, or the general conditions of filmmaking and reception. In effect, he searched for the questions to which films appear to stand as answers, letting stylistic details in the pictures themselves call up his extraordinary range of knowledge. No one before him, and no one since, has ever written about film in quite the same way, or on quite the same level.

In sum, Bazin, unlike nearly all the other authors of major film theories, was a working or practical critic who wrote regularly about individual films. He based his criticism on the film actually made rather than on any preconceived aesthetic or sociological principles; and for the first time with him, film theory therefore became not a matter of pronouncement or prescription, but of description, analysis, and deduction. Indeed, Bazin can be regarded as the aesthetic link between film critics and film theorists. During his relatively short writing career, his primary concern, again, was not to answer questions but to raise them, not to establish cinema as an art but to ask, “What is art?” and “What is cinema?”

In this Bazin was the quintessential teacher, ever paying attention to pedagogy, as is shown by his 1948 “lecture” or “presentation” on Carné’s *Daybreak* (1939), translated in *Bazin on Global Cinema, 1948–58*. Himself having failed to pass the French state licensing exam, after which he would have become an actual classroom teacher, Bazin was nonetheless teacherly in his belief that film criticism should help audience members to form their own critical conscience, rather than providing a ready-made one for them or merely judging films in the audience’s place. Through a kind of sociological psychoanalysis as much as through critical analysis, the film critic should educate moviegoers to deal consciously and responsibly with the “dreams” on screen that are offered to them as their own. (As a rule, Bazin’s “social psychoanalyses” through film were generated by a relevant and enlightening but barely discernible detail detected in the film’s texture, which then stimulated a more general “diagnosis” on his part.) And this is possible only if viewers get to know how those dreams, with their secret reality, work—that is, how they are expressed through every formal, technical, social, and aesthetic aspect of the cinema.

In other words, film criticism should not simply unveil how a cinematic text and the grand cinematic machine work; it should investigate how social myths and ideological formulations are foreign and intimate to the viewer at the same time. Such myths and formulations, albeit illusory, are “real” or “true” because they concretely affect the life and feelings of people, who respond accordingly. Hence

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the aim of postwar film culture in general, according to Bazin, was “to defend the public against this form of abuse of consciousness, to wake the audience from its dream ... to render the public sensible to the needs or illusions that were created in it as a market, for the sole purpose of providing the opium sellers with an outlet for their drug” (*Les Lettres françaises*, July 25, 1947).

Regrettably, André Bazin, critic and teacher, died tragically young (he was only forty) of leukemia in 1958, an illness against which he fought bravely for years. Yet he left much material behind, in his seminal collection *What Is Cinema?* as well as in such magazines as *L'Écran français* and *Les Temps modernes*—some of the best of which I gathered in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews From the 1940s and 1950s* (1997), *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* (2011), *French Cinema from the Liberation to the New Wave, 1945–58*, and *Bazin on Global Cinema, 1948–58*. To these earlier collections, *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* may be considered a complement. This new book contains, for the first time in English in one volume, much if not all of Bazin’s writing on American cinema: on directors such as Orson Welles, Charles Chaplin, Preston Sturges, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, John Huston, Nicholas Ray, William Wyler, and Elia Kazan; and on films such as *High Noon*, *Citizen Kane*, *Rear Window*, *Limelight*, *Scarface*, *Baby Doll*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, and *Sullivan’s Travels*.

André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s also includes illustrative movie stills and features a sizable scholarly apparatus, including this contextual introduction to Bazin’s life and work, a complete bibliography of Bazin’s writings on American cinema, credits of the films discussed, and an extensive index. This volume thus represents a major contribution to the still growing academic disciplines of cinema studies and American studies, as well as a testament to the continuing influence of one of the world’s pre-eminent critical thinkers. Yet *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker* is aimed, as Bazin would want, not only at scholars, teachers, and critics of film, but also at educated or cultivated moviegoers and students of the cinema at all levels. In his modesty and simplicity André Bazin considered himself such a student, such an “interested” filmgoer, and it is to the spirit of his humility before the “saint” of cinema, as well as to the steadfastness of his courage in life, that this book is dedicated.

I

THEMES AND GENRES

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WESTERNS AND AMERICANS

Howard Hughes's *The Outlaw*



Figure 1. The Outlaw (1943); director: Howard Hughes

The Best of Women Is Not Worth a Good Horse

Even before it was shown in France, *The Outlaw* [Howard Hughes, 1943] had acquired a scandalous reputation that was bound to result in public disappointment and make it the subject of severe criticism. In the event, the film had a short run. The same people who had fought to get to see it during the first days of its run booed those sections from which they thought the most interesting scenes had been cut. They felt robbed. Reviewers for the most part adopted an indulgent and amused tone. It would have been undignified to show disappointment. One critic managed to see something else in it besides the absence of Jane Russell's breasts. After all, he knew beforehand what he was dealing with: it would have been naïve to expect more from the Americans. But even the more aggressive critics did not make out a particularly

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convincing case for seeing in the film yet another example of Hollywood's decline and homogenization. To argue against the hypocrisy of American moralizing was too easy. And too easy also to extol the good old French bosoms of Rabelais's nuns, Molière's servant girls, or even the amorous stories of the eighteenth century, as opposed to this canned eroticism, as deceptive and flavorless as those California fruits that are insipid even to the worms. Surely, no one saw here the sinister hand of the Marshall Plan intending to replace the real bosoms of Jacqueline Pierre or Dany Robin with the deceptive pneumaticism of a Jane Russell. Undeniably, *The Outlaw* foundered in a sea of general indifference.

I am inclined to see in this limited attention paid to the Howard Hughes film first an injustice and second a tacit conspiracy of silence. The careless way in which the picture was dismissed in no more than a line or two, the unmistakable absence of any passionate critical feeling, seemed to me more assumed than genuine. I am afraid the assets of Jane Russell have been treated like the sour grapes in Aesop's fable. If not, then how do we explain that one of the most erotic films ever made and one of the most sensational scripts ever filmed by Hollywood has been so little noticed?

The Outlaw is a western. It preserves the framework and the majority of the traditional themes of a western and some of the characteristic character types of the genre—particularly the lovable and devious sheriff whom we were so delighted to meet in William Wyler's *The Westerner* [1940]. In a film that has retained such a purity of form as the western, any originality is measured by the slight changes that have been made to the traditional ingredients, the skill with which the screenwriter and director have succeeded in simultaneously remaining faithful to the basic rules of the genre and still renewing our delight in what we see. Jules Furthman, Howard Hughes [1905–76], and Gregg Toland have concentrated their efforts here on the style and on an unexpected switch in the female element, which in the Far West has generally been represented by two types of heroine, reflecting two complementary aspects of the same myth. The prostitute with the heart of gold in *Stagecoach* [John Ford, 1939] is on a par in the spectator's judgment with the courageous virgin, rescued by the good cowboy from extreme danger, whom he will marry once he has proved himself and triumphed over evil. Frequently he takes the place in the girl's life of her father or brother killed in a fight.

Thus we see clearly drawn in the western not only the obvious quest for the Holy Grail, but also, and to a more precise sociological and aesthetic extent, the mythology of chivalry founded on the essential goodness of woman, even the sinful woman. It is man who is bad. Isn't he indeed the cause of her downfall, in spite of which the prostitute manages to preserve something of her original purity? It is the hero's role to redeem the evil in man by undergoing trials, in order to win back the respect of womankind and to offer the protection that the female demands of him. It is this mythology that Hughes attacks, with a violence that I have found nowhere in the American cinema except in Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* [1947].

The Outlaw is based on contempt for woman. In contrast to their counterparts elsewhere, its heroes strive to deny the heroine their protection. They scoff at

her endlessly, abandon her, and refuse to undergo any trials. In this unbelievable anti-quest for the Holy Grail it is the woman who needs them and who undergoes the severest tests before her master will bestow even a kind glance on her. From beginning to end Jack Buetel and Walter Huston share Jane Russell, and these two sympathetic and courageous men, capable of killing each other over a horse, absolutely refuse to fight over her. It is clear that Hughes has knowingly given a general significance to his heroine. Yet Rio McDonald (Jane Russell) is not a woman who particularly deserves such treatment. The absence of any other female character who might save the good name of her sex, reminding us that “they are not all like that” through some comparison unfavorable to the heroine, is also significant. After all, Rio is not at all antipathetic. A woman of courage, she has sworn to avenge her brother, and it is only after having conscientiously tried to kill her lover, first with a revolver and then with a pitchfork, that she is raped by him. Chimène [the heroine of Corneille’s *Cid* (1637)], after all, did no better. One cannot reproach Rio for renouncing her vengeance after this sexual encounter. She will henceforth love with as much fervor and fidelity as she once sought vengeance. The man will even owe her his life on the night when, ill and shivering and at his last gasp from a deathly chill, the Russell character presses her naked body against his (in a scene reminiscent of *The River* [1929], by Frank Borzage. The crow is replaced here by a starving rooster that gobbles up eyes.)

To tell the truth, this woman is no worse than any other. There is nothing about her to give moral justification to men’s cynicism and contempt for her. In the logic of the film *Rio McDonald* does not deserve any particular treatment; these men simply think women are always treated better than they deserve. It is no accident, in fact, that the real scenario of *The Outlaw* is the story of three jealous males. Two of them, Billy the Kid (Jack Buetel) and Doc Holliday (Walter Huston), sleep with the same woman (and we know who that is)—but, after all, they love the same horse. On several occasions they come close to killing each other over the horse, but in the end they retain their friendship. This provokes the jealousy of Sheriff Pat Garrett (Thomas Mitchell), who thinks he is Holliday’s only friend. So it is that these men are incapable of jealousy except over a horse or over one another. They constitute a Spartan group in which women have no emotional role. Women exist only to have sex with or to do the cooking.

It is understandable under such circumstances that this film was banned by the American censors for four years. The official complaint had to do with the daring of some scenes, but the real objection, which was more or less admitted, was to the basic idea of the script. For it is forbidden to despise women. Even the misogyny apparent in the American crime film some years earlier is a far cry from the cynicism of *The Outlaw*. The blonde murderess of those crime pictures is presented as a kind of female criminal; even the men are bad. In *The Outlaw* no one is antipathetic; it is the order of the universe that confers his preeminence on man and makes a domestic animal out of woman—pleasant but boring, not as interesting as a real animal.

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Still, *The Outlaw* should not disappoint a perceptive viewer, even on the level at which the censors tried to deal with it. I remarked earlier that those who were disappointed by the movie are either insincere or lacking in perception. Admittedly, one does not “see” very much. Objectively, if one sticks purely to what is offered for viewing, *The Outlaw* is quite the most prudish of American films. But it is precisely upon the spectator’s frustration that its eroticism is built. Suppose for a moment that the film had been made in some European country. The Swedes and Danes would have given us a front and side view of the heroine, naked; the French would have plunged the neckline of her dress to the navel and treated the spectator to some sensational kissing scenes; the Germans would have shown us just the breasts, but all of them; while the Italians would have put Jane Russell into a little black nightgown and there would have been some sizzling love scenes. Altogether it is Hollywood alone that is capable of making such a picture without showing us a thing. Yet whether in a Swedish, French, or Italian version, *The Outlaw* would have much less effect on the viewer’s imagination. If an erotic film is one that is capable of provoking the audience to desire the heroine sexually and of keeping that desire alive, the technique of provocation is here brought to the peak of perfection—to the point where we see nothing but the shadow of a breast.

I strongly suspect Howard Hughes and Gregg Toland of having played an outrageous trick on the censor. It is surely not an accident that the director of *The Outlaw* was an associate of the director of *Sullivan’s Travels* [1941]. Preston Sturges and Howard Hughes were made to understand each other. These two men knew how to structure their work on what for others would be a limitation. Preston Sturges understood that the mythology of the American comedy had arrived simultaneously at both the saturation point and the point of exhaustion. There was no way to make use of the genre other than to take its excesses as the subject of a scenario. Furthman [the chief screenwriter] and Hughes had fun here by forcing the censors into the realm of pornography. On reflection, the real director of *The Outlaw* was not Howard Hughes. It was Will H. Hays, of the infamous Hays Office and the Motion-Picture Production Code. If he had been as free as a novelist to use his medium, the director would not have been forced to proceed by way of hints, to suggest rape through noises in the dark and a woman’s body by the edge of a low-necked dress. In such a case the film would certainly have been improved aesthetically, but we would have been deprived of a delightful satire on censorship. Tartuffe’s handkerchief is placed on this particular bosom in so obvious a way that not even a three-year-old child could resist the temptation to pull it off. From unsatisfied desire to obsession, thus do we proceed . . .

And so it is that Mr. Hays caters to the erotic dreams of millions of citizens—all good fathers, good husbands, good fiancés. What leads me to believe that the makers of the film knew exactly what they were doing, is the staggering skill with which they were able to play along the fine edges of the censorship code and not overstep the authorized limits by a hair’s breadth, while constantly making us conscious of the moral prohibition that weighed on their undertaking. Otherwise *The Outlaw* would have been just a daring film, violent and realistic. It was the censorship code

that turned it into an erotic film. Gregg Toland, for his part, must have had great fun lighting the throat of Jane Russell, scrupulously focusing on that milk-white patch barely hollowed out by a shadow, whose mere presence had the frustrated spectators dithering with resentment. The critics themselves can perhaps be excused for not having understood *The Outlaw*. All they saw in the film, for the best of reasons, was what they did not see.

For those particularly interested in the phenomenology of Hollywood eroticism, I would like to draw attention to a curious shift of emphasis between the publicity for this film and the film itself. The posters for *The Outlaw* show Jane Russell with lifted skirt and generously low-cut dress. In reality it is only her bosom that counts in the movie. The fact is that in the past seven or eight years the center of eroticism in the American cinema has shifted from the thigh to the bosom, but the public is not yet sufficiently aware of this change of frontier to allow the publicity departments to dispense with their traditional sources of stimulation (*Revue du cinéma*, August 1948).

A Meta-Western: Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon*



Figure 2. *High Noon* (1952); director: Fred Zinnemann

Of all the discernible genres in the history of cinema, the western is the only one whose development can be followed without interruption from the very origins of

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cinema until the present day, without any indication of a decline in its favor with the public or, as a result, with the producers. Of the nearly 400 films produced every year by Hollywood, around ninety are westerns. It's a fact that the majority of this output is of highly inferior quality, shot over just a few days with almost laughable means, and featuring editing that is completed with stock footage. The infatuation of television with the western, as well as TV's consumption of cheap movies in general, is obviously bound to lower the already low bar of these cinematic productions, whose intellectual and formal level approaches that of the Sunday newsreels. But the proliferation of such mediocre films at least showcases the popularity of westerns, and their numbers do not exclude honorable products with sufficient stylistic means and accomplished actors—around twenty or thirty of which appear each year. It is in this latter category, which naturally has its own hierarchy of quality, where we find nearly all the westerns that make the rounds—however briefly—on the Parisian circuit.

What's most stunning, however, is not so much the permanence of the western genre but its fidelity to itself. Where comedy is concerned, for example, the burlesque style of Mack Sennett didn't survive at all beyond the mid-1920s. From that period only Chaplin managed to persevere up until *Limelight* [1952], yet at the cost of a series of radical evolutions to his style. But American film comedy hasn't shined too brightly now for more than ten years. The crime thriller, for its part, has changed its skin many times, from *Underworld* [Josef von Sternberg, 1927] to *Naked City* [Jules Dassin, 1948], paying homage to its "noir" ancestor along the way. In spite of the evolution of film technique, beyond even the matter of individual taste or the wider context of historical events, only the western has remained true to itself—to the essence of its dramatic or moral themes and formal style—without interruption for nearly forty years. The western can't be defined, then, only by the geographical or historical localization of its scenario. That is just the frame of an action whose limited variations are reduced in the final analysis to various combinations of intangible motifs given life by characters that exist only to fulfill their function.

Sometimes, it must be said, the unconsciously Corneillian side of westerns has been parodied. It's true that a lot of these movies contain manifest analogies to *The Cid* [1637]. But on both sides, seventeenth-century French drama and the twentieth-century western, an implicit conception of women in relationship to ethical imperative—in short, a sense of chivalry—may be found. Being ambiguous, then, the parody serves at the same time to underline the greatness of the western by virtue of its allusive subject and style. Indeed, it could well be said that in our day the western constitutes the only authentic refuge for tragedy and the epic. For in it we find the very kind of transcendent moral ethos that serves as the basis for Corneillian drama.

It may seem paradoxical to talk about the greatness and seriousness of a genre that passes more readily for something puerile and naïve. In the theater as in literature, naïveté and courage may not go hand in hand anymore after one or two centuries. But in film, one can still find, between 1925 and 1935, some admirable and important

westerns that are both naïve and courageous—and as anonymous as the eleventh-century *Song of Roland*. (I remember one of them that Henri Langlois was quite proud of presenting at the Cinématèque Française back in 1947.) Without a doubt, it is necessary to consider such naïveté as a constituent part of the western: it wouldn't be able to lose it without ceasing to be its courageous self, and this in fact has become the fundamental problem of the genre in the last fifteen years of its history.

We could consider *Stagecoach* [1939] as the high point in the evolution of quality westerns. What is wonderful about John Ford's film is that it combines the force of naïveté, of simplicity, with the advantages of intelligence. Admirably laid out, his scenario never overwhelms the themes that it introduces, just as the characters, in spite of their richness, never overwhelm the roles that they fill like eggs in their shells. From this classic point of equilibrium, it was surely inevitable that the crisis of the western would itself evolve. We owe to it a series of remarkable films between 1940 and 1946, among them William Wyler's *The Westerner* [1940], Howard Hughes's *The Outlaw* [1943], and Ford's *My Darling Clementine* [1946]. What these films have in common is precisely the avowal of the impossibility of naïveté. Each of them tries in its own way to surpass the traditional western, whether through irony, like *The Outlaw*, through psychology, like *The Westerner*, or by means of brilliant formal variations, like *My Darling Clementine*.

It is as if great directors were aiming here at reevaluating a genre that had reached the critical point, at least among mediocre practitioners, where oft-repeated tradition becomes tired convention. For the best artists, it's about staying on the same road but going in a slightly different direction. Just as we have been able to talk about the meta-novel, then, I'd readily call this type of film the meta-western.

The producer Stanley Kramer and the director Fred Zinnemann [1907–97] give us a great example of the meta-western today with *High Noon* [1952]. It certainly has been a long time since we saw—in the western or any other genre—an American film made with such vigor and intelligence. I would even say that the films of John Huston couldn't compare with it. The marshal of a small town has married a young Quaker woman; out of respect for the convictions of his wife, who opposes the violence that comes with his job, he plans to resign and leave the area. It's then that he learns about the imminent return, on the noon train, of a criminal he had captured five years ago and who has just been pardoned by the "Northern" authorities. Three members of his gang wait for him at the station, and they know that their first job will be to help their boss take revenge against the law officer who once jailed him. It's 10:30 in the morning. As of now, the marshal is no more: he's officially a civilian who has the right to leave this whole sordid affair to his successor. Even better, the entire town wants it that way: they'd like him to depart immediately with his wife, as intended.

However, the marshal *must* remain despite himself and his fear, against the will of his fellow townspeople and his wife, who rebukes her husband for breaking his promise to quit his post on the day of their marriage. At first the marshal doesn't doubt that he can find the help he needs to face the four bandits, but little by little he succumbs to the evidence that, whether because of cowardice, self-interest, or even

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fellow-feeling (on the part of those who encourage him to flee from a pointless fight), everybody shies away. He ends up completely isolated, abandoned by everyone to confront alone the four men sworn to kill him. Flight was still possible before the train arrived, but backing off now would mean running away and affirming the futility of any resistance on the marshal's part. The private and public reasons for sacrificing himself to the law then become revealed one after the other, and because of them there is no acceptable course of action except to go in vain to the death that awaits him on the noon train. The marshal is Gary Cooper, whose old and weary mask slowly becomes one of fear, loneliness, and despair. The man who played the eccentric but winning Longfellow Deeds in Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* [1936] is now just a long, vacillating silhouette in tall cowboy boots as he wanders down deserted streets.

What I will criticize about *High Noon*, in spite of its evident and even exceptional qualities, may be those qualities themselves. Without question, this is one of the three best westerns since *Stagecoach* (the other two being *The Westerner* and *My Darling Clementine*). But my admiration for it is not without qualification. More precisely, my admiration is for the film more than for its protagonist. I was certainly drawn in by the vigorous action, which respects the unities of time and place until it becomes a challenge to do so, but in the end my nerves and my intelligence were affected more than my heart. At no moment did I feel goosebumps because of any sincere, innocent attachment to the protagonist. Rather than as a "western in the shape of tragedy," as the critic Jacques Doniol-Valcroze described *High Noon*, I see this film as a tragedy in the shape of a western—a tragedy whose relationship to the traditional tragic themes of the western is similar to that of Jean Anouilh's 1944 play *Antigone* to Sophocles' classic drama of the same name [441 B.C.]. No doubt adroitly, Zinnemann detours from the genre's natural destination to arrive at a dramatic universe of which only the appearance and artifice remain.

I well understand that we could add such an asset to the film's capital. But only if we suppose that westerns couldn't survive as quality films except at the price of self-deception—which, in the case at hand, turns out to be nothing more than clever decadence. This is precisely what, in my opinion, is refuted by the twenty or thirty worthy westerns produced each year, of which I spoke above. I believe that, for the most part, the episode of the meta-western is ending and that we will see a return to the values of the classical western: that is, if the American studios don't sacrifice quality to quantity by reducing the budgets for all of these films.

The last few months in Paris, we have been able to see two westerns very characteristic of the type of film in which adherence to the rules of the genre is respected, but only through the first half, which naturally results in a reduction in quality. In both these pictures we find a subject similar, in dramatic as well as moral terms, to that of Zinnemann's *High Noon*. They are *The Gunfighter* [Henry King, 1950], with Gregory Peck, and *Along the Great Divide* [Raoul Walsh, 1951], with Kirk Douglas. In the first one, an aging gunfighter exposes himself during a three-