

# Staring and Looking Back: A Reunderstanding of Bazin's Film Theory

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**Abstract:** Film, as a new art, is also the most comprehensive art existence at present. Nowadays, although film has achieved a certain degree of innovation and breakthrough in technology and theory, today's film theorists can always get new enlightenment and cognition when they suddenly look back and re-examine those early film theories. This paper will explore the practical significance of Bazin's film theory in contemporary film creation through in-depth interpretation of Bazin's film theory.

**Key words:** Film theory; Authenticity; Narrative structure

Film has been born for more than 120 years, and its technology and theory are still being enriched and perfected. The question "What is film" has been raised and discussed by scholars in different periods. In the 1950s, Bazin answered the question "What is film" from many aspects and constructed a set of pioneering film theory system. How to seek the "authenticity" of film through technology, film language and narrative logic is a question Bazin has been exploring and explaining.

## 1. Li: The contemporaneity of Bazin's film theory

After the end of the Second World War in 1945, French film ushered in a new stage of development in the difficult survival. At that time, the father of French "New wave" film Bazin objectively put forward the question of "what is film", revealing the essence of image from the source, studying the evolution of film language, and then explaining the film aesthetics he insisted on. Bazin believed that film is the asymptotic line of reality, and the film should be based on objective facts and play a powerful function of recording and reproducing reality.

### 1.1 Bazin's exploration of the origin and nature of film

Bazin's film theory is embodied in his book *What Is a Film?* He put forward the theory of "photography ontology" and "Psychology of the origin of film". First, he believed that the image and the subject maintained identity. Secondly, photography satisfies people's psychological needs of "fighting against time" since ancient Egypt, and reveals the motive force of film -- fantasy.

### 1.2 The core of Bazin's film theory

The core of Bazin's film theory is "authenticity". The "authenticity" he understands includes two meanings: one is objective recording reality; The second is the fictional reality based on the premise of objective existence.

He further refined "authenticity" into "three principles", namely the authenticity of the representation object, the authenticity of time and space, and the authenticity of narrative structure. These "three principles" became the cornerstone of the development of early film theory, and Bazin was also known as the "pioneer" of film theory.

First, the authenticity of the representation object

Bazin defines "image" as what is added when the subject is reproduced on the screen. "The image," he stressed, "does not appear first of all to add anything to reality, but to reveal reality."

Second, the reality of time and space

Bazin fully believes in the great charm of reality. He believes that the reality of time and space lies in the depth of the concrete process of real representation of time and the unity of space. Some movie situations are only allowed to exist when the spatial unity is expressed. For example, *Nanook of the North* proves Bazin's theory on the reality of time and space by using the highly coordinated long shot and panning shot.

Third, narrative structure

Although Bazin does not directly elaborate the relevant narrative theories, his thoughts and opinions on narrative can be seen from his comments on some films, such as: Bazin advocates accidental narrative mode; He proposed the "fact-image" narrative mode; He believes that movies should show the real time and space where events take place. Commenting on *The Earth Shakes*, Bazin wrote: "The fisherman is rolling a cigarette, and he lets us see the whole process, without any omissions."

## 2. Break: The development and beyond of film theory

Bazin is an important founder of film theory in France and even in the world. In the past decades, various factors such as technological progress, social changes and creative ideas have promoted the development of film theory. In today's digital technology era, does Bazin's film theory still have practical significance and guiding value?

### 2.1 Progress and transcendence of core theory

The concept and technology of film creation today are far different from those of Bazin's time, and the understanding of film authenticity has broken through the limitations of The Times. So, does this mean that Bazin's film theory of "authenticity" has been

challenged?

#### 2.1.1 The transcendence of the authenticity of the objects represented

Bazin realized that the “abstract” expression and symbolic meaning of the montage destroyed the sense of reality of the film, but ignored the strong effect of different image combinations to create the illusion of “more real”, so that the story moved toward “more real”. The film *Love Myth*, through the strange scenery, gorgeous colors and exaggerated character modeling, reached the height of “more real”.

#### 2.1.2 The storyboard transcends the unity of time and space

In Bazin’s time, or even earlier, documentary films focused on the complete recording of events. However, the integrity of narrative time in today’s films no longer requires the camera to record the whole process of events, but to construct the integrity of narrative time through mirror operation and field switching. The “complete process of time” pursued by Bazin has been greatly challenged.

Today’s film creators can carry out camera position change and Angle cutting skillfully, and complete image construction in virtual space, etc. Their expansion of space has exceeded the theory advocated by Bazin that “the subject is put into the same picture to achieve the real effect of spatial unity”. That is to say, the storyboard no longer fully follows Bazin’s principle of “based on objective facts”, but expects to fabricate facts.

#### 2.1.3 Transcendence of narrative style and narrative structure

After “narratology” was proposed, it gradually expanded from literature to image, film and other fields. Before that, related plot narration was collectively referred to as “narrative”, but narrative research is not a new thing.

In fact, Bazin had already begun to explore the “narrative” of films. He divided a certain paragraph in the story of *Guerrilla* into three facts and made an analysis of “perspective”. Bazin admires the *Bicycle Thief*’s fortuitous approach to storytelling, saying that “each image has a strong dramatic charm, yet each image can arouse our interest on its own, without the constraints of drama”. At the time, however, the discourse on narrative was still fragmented.

Nowadays, the construction of narratology makes the narrative mode and narrative structure have a clear definition. On the basis of the clear definition of relevant theories, the narrative structure and narrative mode also add new connotations on the basis of the original theories.

### 3. Reunderstanding: the core of Bazin’s film theory remains

Born decades ago, is Bazin’s film theory still relevant? The answer is obvious. The film language he advocated and the pursuit of film “authenticity” are still the principles followed by film creation and the objects studied by film theorists today, which to a large extent determines the necessity for us to reconstruct Bazin’s theory. After the new century, the rapid development of digital technology has extended and expanded the “authenticity” of film, and the image has moved from “truth” to “more truth”, instead of relying solely on technology to conceive and shoot film works, resulting in the loss of “more real” expression opportunities.

#### 3.1 The misinterpretation of Bazin’s film theory in *The Times*

Although with the development of digital technology, film creation ideas and methods are extremely diverse, today’s film creators and researchers are prone to the following misunderstandings when they look back on Bazin’s film theory: First, they think that the “authenticity” theory advocated by Bazin is naturalism or documentalism. Second, Bazin’s film theory will be directly simplified to “depth of field shot” and “long shot” and other audiovisual language. Third, it will misinterpret the “realistic” films Bazin supports. In fact, Bazin’s film theory is dialectically unified, and it is undoubtedly thin and one-sided to interpret Bazin’s film theory only from a certain Angle.

#### 3.2 The vitality of Bazin’s film theory

##### 3.2.1 The value of fantasy movers

Today, the development of film technology has reached a relatively mature stage, but people’s pursuit of “complete film myth” has not stopped. Film is essentially a tool used to record and express reality, and an important reason for its emergence is that “visionaries” expect to express their “fantasy” through film media. Therefore, the driving force for the development of film is still the “fantasy” advocated by Bazin.

##### 3.2.2 The preservation of film language

The meaning of the long shot has changed dramatically from the French New Wave to the present day. In Bazin’s time, long lenses were often used to record objective reality in its entirety, while today’s long lenses not only emphasize the length of transverse shooting time, but also have the function of expanding the depth of visual space, namely the effect of intramirror montage. At the beginning of the film *Lord of War*, the director uses the first Angle of view of a bullet to explain the entire ammunition production process with a long shot, which enriches Bazin’s definition of a long shot. It can be seen that the film language advocated by Bazin is like a gene seed, which is still in a state of development and evolution and retains strong vitality.

##### 3.2.3. The powerful ruling power of the “Three principles of authenticity”

Today, Bazin’s three principles of “authenticity” are sometimes questioned by some film researchers. Has this argument in Bazin’s film theory lost its value or is it still dominant? Or find resonant frequencies in the past and present.

##### 3.2.3.1 About the reality of the representation object

Bazin especially emphasizes the meaning and expression of a single shot itself. He believes that the authenticity of the object of expression can only be achieved by limiting the addition of image modeling and the use of montage, which is a way to defend the “authenticity” of film creation based on Bazin’s era. Today, with the widespread use of digital synthetic animation and special effects, even

a science fiction film about where humanity will be 50 years from now hopes to bring the audience's thoughts into a believable story of characters and environmental space. However, the "authenticity" of the objects expressed by film creators has not changed, which may be a new way to defend the "authenticity" of films in the current era.

### 3.2.3.2 The authenticity of time and space

Up to now, the time flow of today's film stories still needs to follow Bazin's requirements for the integrity of the story, regardless of the use of elevation and degradation or the segmentation of time through the storyboard, but the meaning of "integrity" has changed (meaning the interpretation of "integrity" from another level), but the original intention of the film to tell the story clearly and completely remains the same.

Not only that, Bazin's theoretical development of "cinematic space" is also forward-looking. He believes that the spatial differences between painting, drama and film are objective. By analogy and thinking about the essential difference between other arts and film in "space", and then clarifying the uniqueness of film in creating "space", it is still of great reference significance for the theoretical research of film space today. Up to now, spatial unity is still an important element affecting narration. The ingenious combination of spatial unity and montage segmentation to realize spatial expansion and innovation is also widely used in film and television works.

### 3.2.3.3 About narrative structure

Nowadays, the development of digital technology provides more diversified forms for film creation, but there are still a large number of films that over-pursue the sense of "blockbuster" while ignoring the exploration of the value of film narrative content. It can be seen that Bazin's emphasis on the "content" of film narrative still has retrospective value and significance for the creation of modern films.

Bazin was in the incubation era of narratology, he advocated the "contingency" in narration and opposed the "dramatic" plot setting. Nowadays, narratology is becoming more and more mature, and the narrative structure has been diversified. Although Bazin's views on narrative are questionable, the "narrative reality" he advocates is the pursuit of narratology all along. In addition, the essence of Bazin's film theory continues to this day and is reflected in the application of many films. Bazin once mentioned the principle of "mixing actors". The 2022 film "Hidden in the Dust" greatly enhances the authenticity of the work by mixing professional and non-professional actors. In "Into the Dust", many paintings are "Renaissance", which confirms Bazin's theoretical view of "not pure film differentiation". He believes that although film is an independent art, its germination and development cannot be separated from the nourishment of ancient arts such as literature and painting. "Hidden in the Dust" pays tribute to Bazin's film theory through the unique expression of images, and shows the charm of film as an independent art of The Times.

## Epilogue

Bazin's film theory is the cornerstone of the development of western film theory. The continuous development of film theory in recent decades has impacted Bazin's film theory. As a film scholar nearly a hundred years ago, Bazin was trapped by the limitations of The Times. However, Bazin is great, and the theory of "reality aesthetics" proposed by him is still an aesthetic topic for current film researchers to explore and pursue. His exploration spirit of "reality" is worth reviewing and drawing lessons from today's film creators. The essence of art lies in settling people's mind. It has been proved that no matter how the development of film can not be separated from the "reality" this cornerstone, creators and theoretical researchers should understand the realistic significance and value of Bazin's film theory to the development of today's film.

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