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Bazin, Pro-Censorship?

by Marc Vernet

1. A complex political and legal situation

In Bazin's era, cinematic censorship revolved around two complications that started to loom large at the end of the Second World War. The first complication: the co-management of cinema in France by the government and the film profession. This situation resulted in the creation of the CNC (Centre National Cinématographique), a government entity autonomous of any Ministry (before Malraux, of course, cinema had been linked to various ministries: Information, Commerce and Industry, Fine Arts...). Second complication: the see-saw of censorship between the national and the municipal levels, since statutorily, the mayor of a city has the right to police his domain; this includes spectacles, along with attendant security issues (the so-called "public order" [*ordre public*]). Whenever national surveillance appears to weaken, allowing the distribution of films that might incite some fringe of the municipal electorate, the mayor may believe he has the right to intervene, under pretense of the police powers conferred on him. After several crises and numerous false steps, this issue would lead to the 1960-'61 reform of the 1945 arrangement: effectively Malraux--recognizing the ministerial exercise of censorship to be dangerous--lowered the guard at the national level; this provoked a wave of censorship at the local level. These two complications gave rise to others that together shook everything up: the relationship between the government and city mayors (for power), between Paris and the provinces (for morals), between the majority and the opposition (for reinforcing and undermining these respectively). In the midst of this, the film profession had to try to pull chestnuts out of the fire (with Autant-Lara in the lead, a man accustomed to turning the machinery of censorship administration to his advantage).

As we know, censorship always incubates on its own; a "Voltairean" country such as France flatly refuses the term "censorship." Censors speak of *contrôle* and *classement*, and never directly of *censure*. Nor do they ever actively censor, instead limiting themselves to an opinion or recommendation, and handing responsibility over to the producer or director who can choose whether to follow it or not so as to obtain the notorious certificate, which is not even technically a "censor's" certificate. In order to smooth over political responsibility in the case of the refusal of a certificate in a given case (this refusal must be publicly backed up and accorded the force of law under the jurisdiction of a political leader), the censors put into place a commission, that is, a censorship group, but under the rubric of "inspection" or "classification" and consisting of a large body representing all the entities presumed to be involved in the political as well as professional side. The profession would delegate the delicate task of any negative judgment to representatives of the audience.

In the postwar era, all this resulted in the formation of the "state-profession parity commission" (41 members, according to Bazin himself, who seems to be including the deputies, among whom are those from the ciné-clubs and from criticism, as stakeholders in the profession). It comprises a representative from each putatively pertinent ministry (the Interior, Foreign Affairs, National Education...) and from every related entity (the profession, which largely names representatives from criticism and ciné-clubs, who will then bring on board, in turn, representatives of constituencies, chiefly families). Censorship rests on two major official bases: good morals (what can be shown or implied in the movie theater) and public order (preventing demonstrations on the streets outside the theater).

2. Cinema as a major political tool

What we have to remember is that in the middle of the 50s, cinema, as a mass medium, was still a political tool in the broad sense, falling under the same heading as the journalistic press and radio. Television was still mainly a technological curiosity, a luxury that had not yet found its way into every home (Bazin watched television, and films on TV; one of his final articles on censorship deals precisely with the question of censorship on television as it relates to young audiences¹). And yet, compared to these two “rivals” (newspapers and radio), cinema benefited from an asset considered both unique and formidable: the image in movement. This confers it with a particularly emotional power, whether beneficial or harmful. Bazin believed in this power, believed in its reversibility, and thought it his duty to participate in channeling it in the direction of the good and the beautiful, and against its possible perversion. This is still the era of Catholic parish screening rooms, and of ciné-clubs run by Communist sympathizers and laymen. Recall that in the middle of the 50s the Communist party still believed its message could be heard via cinema, whether it be *Bel Ami* (1954) by Louis Daquin, made in Soviet-controlled Austria and East Germany, or Paul Carpita’s *Le Rendez-vous des quais* (1953-1955), made illegally in Marseille. In the case of Marcel Pagliero’s *Un homme marche dans la ville* (A Man Walks in the City, 1950) the party believed it had to defend itself and so had it outlawed in Communist municipalities in the major French ports (Sadoul would later issue his *mea culpa* for having successfully prosecuted this case). From this point of view, Carpita’s *Rendez-vous des quais* can be seen as an attempted recovery of the Pagliero film, a kind of censorship by substitution, a reformed film correcting “the poor image” given by Pagliero of the ports and the dockers.

3. Bazin’s involvement:

Surely it is for all of these reasons that André Bazin agreed to become a member of the *Commission de contrôle*, between 1953 and 1957, along with his friend Jacques Doniol-Valcroze. Their presence can be verified in the Commission’s screening files, which include all the films that sought to obtain a censor’s certificate, a notice with or without certain restrictions to minors and to particular districts of the French Empire. In several of Bazin’s articles he explicitly refers to the Commission’s work, breaking a promise of confidentiality.

We can consider the French censorship system to be in crisis starting in 1953, leading, after several aborted plans, to those reforms of 1960-1961, greatly advanced by Bazin’s analyses and reflections. The reasons for this crisis are numerous.

- The Cold War climate that took hold in France in 1947, and the last serious attempts by the Communist party to return to power in ‘53-’55.
- The dismemberment of France’s colonial empire and the end of the Indochina War, at the same time that the war in Algeria begins, following the independence of Tunisia and Morocco.
- The difficult winding down of the wartime economy (still felt in the consumer and housing markets -- the winter of 54 and Abbé Pierre’s famous “uprising of kindness”), and therefore a sort of *détente* in cinematic production, on the economic end, but also from a moral standpoint of what can be shown.

Here and there starting in 1953, these three elements can be found in the articles that Bazin devoted to censorship and its deployment, whether from a Communist or anti-Communist

standpoint; just note the titles of his articles on Resnais's *Les Statues meurent aussi* and Yves Allégret's *Méfiez-vous fillettes*: respectively "Encore la censure: les films meurent aussi" and "Les fillettes doivent-elles se méfier des censeurs?"²

Why did Bazin take part in this *Commission de Contrôle*? Because as noted, it comprised representatives from the profession and the public, and therefore critics. Bazin was the most distinguished of critics and so found himself in this position of responsibility. We could then say *prima facie* that Bazin defends three things: criticism (it must be practiced, it must stay vigilant and take responsibility for itself), youth (they have to be protected, yet encouraged to love cinema), and cinema itself (which must remain an art of very high standards, even while taking risks). Criticism, because he believes that it must fully play its role in the French system, including in the *Commission*. This legal role must not be abandoned (more practically, the *Commission* is also the ideal place for the viewing of films before their release in theaters). Youth, because cinema has the power to influence minds; this was a recognized and noble objective after World War Two, and one of the principles behind the foundation of the Institute of Filmology, since cinema had served too many questionable causes during the war. Lastly, cinema, because censorship can put pressure on producers who too readily aim at easy profits without thinking of the importance of art. His last two articles ("Les fillettes doivent-elles se méfier des censeurs", July 1957, and "Censeurs, sachez censurer", December 1957) devoted to censorship, and supported by the aggressive position of François Truffaut, are clearly centered on producers' lack of willingness to organize themselves, whether to manage self-censorship or to resist the blows of the censors when the issue seems to merit it.

4. The independence of Bazin:

For those who have read articles on cinema in the 50s or taken an interest in censorship problems in France, it is impossible not to be astonished by the absolute and nearly immediate position taken by Bazin. While everyone is in the midst of uproar, denunciation, and a call to basic principles and sentiments, (for increasingly varied but always noble and indisputable reasons-- which is to say quite disputable, but behind the mask of partisanship), Bazin respects complexity. His analyses, whether for or against his own views, stand at the crossroads of various perspectives—comparing points of view. He is able to maintain an uncompromising equilibrium that owes everything to his subtlety of intelligence, to his carefully laid out style of criticism, and perhaps foremost to the honesty of his remarks and the exactitude of his information. Bazin is one of the rare scrupulous writers that I have read on cinematic censorship, even in his journalism, writing with incontestable rigor. Only Alain Resnais is his equal in discussing censorship and appropriate responses to it. This is why Bazin seldom sparks controversy regarding censorship. He does not intervene except when the debate seems skewed, the controversy useless or poorly engaged; in short, when public opinion seems to be centered on biased ideas. He wanted not to be a "righter of wrongs," so much as a "righter of debates," since for him, from the start, the question of censorship is always an open one, always up in the air, always difficult, always complex, and his interventions aim to emphasize just that: things are even more complicated than whatever is said, and discussion can not validly proceed unless we take all of the (numerous) overlapping aspects into consideration. If censorship exists, if it should exist for cinema, this is never self-evident; for censorship comes neither from nature nor from right (*droit*).

5. The address to the politicians, then to the professionals

I have located twelve articles he wrote on the topic between 1950 and 1957; they imply both an evolution, and echoes of the past. An evolution, because the first two (1950 and 1953) portray Bazin as relatively unassuming (in the second, he devotes half his article to quotations) and opposed to censorship. But starting in 1954 and up to the end, he clearly becomes more engaged in a double-combat, both criticizing and defending the French system of censorship.

Some echoes can be heard, for example, between “Les films changent, la censure demeure” (*Cahiers du cinéma* n. 19, January 1953) and “Encore la censure: les films meurent aussi” (1957), as well between his article devoted to *La neige était sale* and *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (*Parisien libéré*, March 8, 1954) and the one written about Yves Allégret’s film *Méfiez-vous fillettes*, which Bazin deems, like the two just mentioned, overly dark. But note the accuracy of the title of his first article on the topic, coming out in *Le Parisien libéré* of November 13th, 1950: “Censure et censures au cinéma” (“Censorship and Censors in Cinema”), which must remain a constant reference point for his position. According to him, if we continue to talk about censorship, then we must talk about all of the various gears and levels where the interests of the French administration and those of cinematic production intersect.

Though the series of articles starts in 1950 with a condemnation of censorship (“a disgraceful constraint”), by 1957, producers are invited to clean up their own act and take charge; they know all the facts, so they may as well challenge the reigning system. This evolution also pertains to the scope of these articles’ publication: at first he writes within the framework of *Parisien libéré* (large print, not much space) while toward the end he has moved to *France Observateur* (very small print, nearly the entire page). These two journals are privileged due to their periodicity, the first being daily and the other weekly, since questions of censorship are current events—though for Bazin this topic should not call for haste --and they will not wait for the following month. This confirms Bazin’s double attitude regarding censorship, at once reflective and interventionist.

More precisely, in 1950 Bazin opened his file on censorship with a clearly negative prejudice, but straight away (this is very Bazin) it is corrected, or more exactly, relativized, with precisions and necessary distinctions. Censorship on the national level is a guarantee for the producer and the spectator because it saps strength from the more discreet and thus more efficient local censors. Though he does not say it here, we see that Bazin understood and was familiar with the American system,³ in a much more detailed sense than many of his contemporaries and many of his successors. In short, Bazin knows that in terms of cinema, one censorship always hides another. He therefore explicitly points to the municipal Communist censorship, especially in the major French port cities, in reference to *Un Homme marche dans la ville*, the example he would bring up again later for good reason. At the end of this initial censorship article, Bazin notes that one should not “attack the censorship of films one likes while blocking the distribution of those one doesn’t like.” This is a position and an argument that will remain constant throughout his analysis of the “censorship” phenomenon.

6. Beyond good conscience: a respect of complexity

The 1953 *Cahiers du cinéma* article, “Les films changent, la censure demeure,” may seem quite dialectical but, all told, it comes off rather “black and white,” both against (the restriction of

freedom of expression) and for (the still-living protagonists in the judicial affair). His final argument may be taken to be quasi “pro-life”: it is a grievous decision not to allow a film to be born (this concerned Antonioni’s episode in *Sans amour*, censored because of a rather sensational J3 case which, citing the breakdown of morals among postwar youth, declared that the French state should not permit the exportation to Italy of footage shot in France).

The least we can say is that Bazin’s position, while unchanging, at least stands as nuanced. He shows a concern for modernizing the gears of the complex and ambiguous mechanism of censorship; he takes care to dismiss back-to-back the declared adversaries of the day, the Communists and the anti-Communists ; and he offers an undisguised defense of the moral code system of the Catholic Church.⁴

Political censorship forms one of the more difficult areas of the topic. Sometimes Bazin seems to justify it,⁵ and sometimes he condemns it.⁶ Looking closely, we see that there is a pacifist side to Bazin (he hates the quarrels between left and right caused by cinema in the name of the Cold War), and so he disapproves of warmongering movies. He thus finds that political censorship can be justified. But then he condemns it (the case of the Resnais film) when it is Franco-French, linked to the personal or localized interests of politicians who operate from behind a mask. He would quite like to see censorship disappear, and wants the public to judge for itself (always a temptation in his articles; look at the text on the Allégret film that, according to him, does not deserve so much attention and publicity), but at the same time he recognizes that censorship gives birth to pre-censorship, which kills creativity; but creativity is killed only by cowardly producers who ought to have the courage of their craft.⁷ Here he explicitly revives a position maintained by François Truffaut on the cowards of the film profession.

In reality, the pro-censorship Bazin defends four things: peace (he does not appreciate fire-starters), youth (like everyone else), but also, and not so paradoxically after all, cinema both as work (oeuvre) and as risk. He attacks hypocrisy and the lowering moral standards (to him morals and “darkness” go hand in hand with a useless kind of despair that cinema should not exist to promote). Finally, in questioning his fellow critics (at *Humanité* and *Figaro*), he defends an idea of criticism based on its responsibility to provide honest and unbiased information, while upholding a vision of the profundity of cinema towards ends as unpartisan as possible. As for censors, producers, and critics: in the end Bazin invites them all to sweep up their own porches before attacking their neighbors.

In 1960, Henri Mercillon published three feature articles in *Le Monde* on the French censorship system -- its domains, its dysfunctions, and prospects for its reform.⁸ These articles mark the first big turning point on the subject since the Liberation; in the first article, Mercillon revives nearly word-for-word the analyses and arguments laid out by Bazin over the course of his final years. He came up with the following formula which could very well sum up one of the overarching aspects of Bazin’s perspective: when it comes to the censorship of cinema in France, we find a happy marriage of vice, hypocrisy, and *tartufferie*.

¹ André Bazin, “Censeurs, sachez censurer,” *Revue du cinéma*, 411 (December 1, 1957).

² Bazin, “*France Observateur*,” January 17, 1957, and *France Observateur*, January 11, 1957.

³ The Production Code is indeed a system defined and maintained by the profession (to protect its sectors of the market), and not a state- or religious-based system. It is the profession (and not some administrative authority) that

self-regulates nationally and internationally to avoid the backlash of local censors (thus treating a country of exportation to be one such local censor).

⁴ Bazin, "Le Vatican, l'Humanité et la censure," *Nouvel Observateur*, February 23, 1956.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ He condemns it in the article on *les Statues meurent aussi*, ridiculing the minister who declared while opening of the Cannes Festival that he was going to abolish censorship -- *Parisien libéré* May 26, 1955 ("Première bonne nouvelle: le ministre déclare souhaiter la disparition de la censure...").

⁷ Bazin *France Observateur* on July 11, 1957.

⁸ Henri Mercillon, "La réforme du contrôle des films," *Le Monde*, April 6, 7, and 8, 1960.