The Festival Viewed as a Religious Order

ANDRÉ BAZIN in Cahiers du cinéma (June 1955)
(Translated by Emilie Bickerton)

In 1955, when this short article appeared in Cahiers du cinéma, 37-year-old André Bazin was one of the most influential and respected film critics of his generation, with an international reputation as formidable as his domestic one. He is best known today for co-founding Cahiers, but his prolific writing on the medium appeared in a variety of magazines, newspapers and journals. His book Qu’est ce que le cinéma? remains one of the canonical works of film criticism; his (incomplete but published) biographies of Orson Welles and Jean Renoir are very original accounts of these directors’ works. This legacy is even more formidable for the shortness of his life: he died three years after this article was published.

Bazin had worked in cinema since the early 1940s, living through as well as heavily influencing the next two explosive decades in the medium. Although the film festival circuit was relatively newly established — Venice (1932), Cannes (founded 1939, launched in 1946), Locarno (1946), Berlin (1951), Rotterdam (1972) — and retained an independence from producers and the industry that no longer exists in today’s hob-nobbing and glitz on the Croisette, the momentum was already moving in this direction. For Bazin these festivals were mostly humiliating spectacles, with
cinema decking itself out as a whore for two weeks. He had founded his own ‘anti-Cannes’ in 1948 and 1949, with the ‘Festival du Film Maudit’. In an earlier report Bazin had been far more direct in his condemnation of the pomp and ceremony that eclipsed the films being shown: ‘Why can’t we have a serious geology?’ of the cinematic art, he asked in 1953, rather than the ‘flashy geography’ on display at Cannes.

A topic Bazin typically weaved into his writing was reference to the natural world. His passion for animals was evident privately — his home was full of them, from cats to iguanas, and even a crocodile in the bathtub — and intellectually, with his early influences including evolutionary theorist Teilhard de Chardin. Nature and cinema were treated in similar ways: ‘He watched films as if they were animals temporarily captive’, Dudley Andrew has explained, ‘he gave to them the dignity of independent existence, yet he slipped himself inside that existence until, in his best moments, he approached the world of another conscience and was able to describe its structure and rules.’

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André Bazin (1918–1958)
The peculiar structure, rituals and rules of film festivals, particularly Cannes as experienced by the journalists in attendance, is perfectly captured in this lucid essay. Festivals function as highly regulated retreats where critics and artists adhere to the rules strictly, obsessively — and ultimately — futilely. The trappings of religion characterise the film festival, Bazin noted, but the spiritual centre was absent; sincerity and belief were discarded like empty shells before the walk onto the red carpet. You had, in other words, the strangeness of devout religious observance, without God or faith. Bazin partly mocked this, and mostly mourned it.

— Emilie Bickerton
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Viewed from the outside, a Festival, and in particular the one at Cannes, seems the very epitome of a worldly affair. But for what one might call the professional festivalgoer, namely the cinema critics, there is nothing that is more serious and also less ‘worldly’ (as Pascal would understand the word). Having ‘done’ almost all of them since 1946 I have witnessed first-hand the gradual perfecting of the Festival phenomenon, the practical creation of its rituals and its inevitable establishment of hierarchies. Its history is comparable, I would suggest, to the foundation of a religious Order; fully-fledged participation in the Festival is like being provisionally admitted to convent life. Indeed, the Palace which rises up on the Croisette is nothing less than the present-day monastery of the moviemaker.

Some may think that I’m trying to be paradoxical. Nothing is farther from the truth. This comparison struck me unprompted at the end of seventeen days of pious retreat and fully ‘regulated’ living. If an Order is something defined by its rules as well as being inseparable from a life of contemplation and meditation, in which people join in holy worship of a common transcendent reality, then the Festival is a religious Order. Film writers come together from all corners of the globe to spend two weeks living a life diametrically opposed to their everyday professional and private existence. In the first place they come as ‘invitees’, experiencing comfort but nevertheless a degree of austerity (the palaces are reserved for members of the jury, the stars and producers). Such a level of luxury is perfectly appropriate for the work they do, and I would swap many a monastic cell with
which I am acquainted for a room at the S. Hotel or M. Hotel, apart from
the wooden beds, of course! This being said, one member of the 1954 jury,
Luis Buñuel, was not slow to have his mattress at the Carlton replaced by the
wooden table he habitually sleeps upon.

The main feature of festival life lies in its moral obligations and the regu-
larity of all its activities. Journalists are woken around 9.00 a.m. The dai-
ly ritual is brought up with the breakfast, in the shape of the two Festival
newspapers, the bulletins from Cinémato and Film Français. These describe
the day’s offices. They are not called Lauds, Matins and Vespers but rather ‘Dawn’,
‘Matinée’ and ‘Evening’. Just in the same way that the ‘déjeuner’ (literally
‘breaking the fast’) has become the second meal of the day and that the ‘dîner’
has moved, in the space of two hundred years, to replace ‘supper’, so the Fes-
tival’s ‘matinées’ have become vesperal, and the ‘evening’ performances noc-
turnal. Whatever the lateness of the hour at which our Festivalgoer retires
to bed, he’s up in time for ‘dawn’, that is to say for the private screenings at
10.30 a.m. The service is held in one of the chapels in the town. One then re-
turns to the Motherhouse for the Cérémonie du casier. This consists of getting
from the Press Office the day’s articles, the press releases for the films being
shown, and the invites that haven’t been sent directly to the hotels. By now
it is 12.30, and usually time for a press conference which will provide mat-
ters to reflect upon during a late lunch. At 3.00 we’re on the go again for the
afternoon film in the Palace basilica. Since the rites at Vespers are none too
reliable I’ll describe the evening procedures. You go out at 6.00. Reporters
for the morning editions begin to ruminate on the piece they will phone in
at eight o’clock. The others are more relaxed and head for cocktails at around
6.30. Dinner at 8.30 ushers in the day’s most important ceremony: choice of
habit. The Festival Order has strict dress code for evening services, at least. I
am old enough to have been present when the rules were instituted and even
to have been subjected to them. For the first Festivals in Cannes and Ven-
ice the rules were not yet binding. Journalism’s young Turks, and to a lesser
extent some from pre-war days with working-class affinities, looked down
their noses at dinner jackets. Even a dark suit could cause them problems.
But I saw them all give way, one by one. First there was the year when they
begged or borrowed a friend’s rather tight tux with its outdated lapels, but
then they eventually succumbed and took their vows. Today the whole press
corps wears the uniform, and it all seems perfectly normal. Personally, and I can admit to it without any false embarrassment, tuxedos look good on me, especially white ones, although the bow tie still has me in knots!

But clothes don’t make the man, and membership in the Order is conferred by an electronic machine dispensing uncopiable cards, which will get you in. Once you’re standing on holy ground another hierarchy rises up – what might be called functional discrimination. The press have reserved seats in the orchestra between rows 6 and 10. And if left to themselves that’s exactly where their long experience would take them. They’ll have nothing to do with the balcony, which is too far from the screen and just about right for members of the jury and the stars. Everyone’s eyes are on the balcony, though. And it cannot be otherwise, since the design of the Palais is a challenge to the way people conduct themselves at the Festival. The rules require the show to take place in the auditorium, and to start even the moment people enter it. At Cannes the entrances are ridiculously narrow and lead to a terrible crush going in and out. In years when the weather is bad the trampling of guests in the rain sounds the death knell for evening gowns. At Venice they have understood the problem and built an enormous front canopy where people can spend as long as they want looking at each other. Cannes, on the other hand, disregarded the existence of open ground nearby in favour of jamming the Palais right up next to the Croisette, thereby rendering such idiocy permanent. As regards the interior, one must acknowledge a degree of harmony in the design and the colour scheme, but the position of the orchestra relative to the balcony denies paying spectators the very pleasure they have come in order to enjoy. A point which constantly enhances the sense of superiority felt by members of the press. With their blasé god-given eyeball-to-eyeball glances at Lollobrigida, journalists relish their distinction from the common horde who would do anything just to see their idol. We who know that religion needs such dramatic displays and gilded liturgy also know where to find the true God; if such demonstrations engender in us a sense of condescending or amused pity rather than the disgust that purifies, it is because we know that, when all is said and done, everything resounds to his greater glory.

At about half past midnight we find ourselves on the Croisette, and soon we are getting together in small groups in the nearby bars to discuss the day’s
films over a *citron pressé*. An hour later we head off to bed. At 9 o’clock there is a knock, and it is breakfast heralding the rites of the new day.

In addition to the programme I have described there are the parties. Normally there are three or four worth noting, two of which are important: the Trip to the Islands, with its spicy fish soup and traditional striptease by the starlet of the year standing on the rocks, and then the closing banquet. Additional items come in the form of receptions offered by Unifrance, Unitalia and sometimes the *Mexicaine* or the *Espagnole*. Each of these receptions gives rise to little Kafkaesque dramas since part of the press corps is inexplicably overlooked. Those chosen feign indignant compassion and join with those forgotten in railing against the poor quality of an organisation which can alone be responsible for such a clumsy oversight. Secretly, however, they are proud at being amongst the chosen, this time at least. A prime example occurred in the first year with the unforgettable Soviet reception where invitations were clearly pulled out of a hat. *Le Figaro* made it whereas Sadoul was left out. You can just imagine the politico-diplomatic interpretations that ran all afternoon.

Whilst from a liturgical standpoint the most important celebration is the Flower Fight which takes place halfway through the Festival, this largely represents an opportunity for the critics to relax for an afternoon and escape. This is because it marks a definite change to the daily rituals. Until then the pace of screenings and festivities has been relatively tranquil. Half-way through it suddenly accelerates. Private showings start about then, and most people with only five days or a week to spare for the Festival turn up for the second half in the knowledge that it is the most lively part. From this point on the daily ordeal is unrelenting and it is at this time above all that journalists live a monastic existence.

Some 15 or 18 days of such a regimen are enough to disorientate a Parisian critic, I can tell you. When he gets back to his home and everyday working life he feels as though he’s come back from far away, having spent a long spell in a world where order, rigour and necessity reign. It is more redolent by far of an amazing albeit hard-working retreat, with cinema as its unifying spiritual focus, than of the experience of a lucky winner of admission to a giant orgy, echoes of which he might find with incredulity in the pages of *Cinémonde* or *Paris Match*.
NOTES


2 This is an allusion to the journalists' routine of checking their 'casier' or mailboxes. Once an act that required a personal key bequeathed to each critic at the start of the festival that would be used daily to retrieve the information about every forthcoming event, screening, interview, party. It was so integral to the experience of the festival that Bazin felt it took on the attributes of a ceremonial ritual.
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FILM FESTIVALS: BETWEEN ART AND COMMERCE