"A modest fellow, sickly, slowly and prematurely dying, he it was who gave the patent of royalty to the cinema just as the poets of the past had crowned their kings." So wrote Jean Renoir of the great French critic and theorist André Bazin, nine years after he succumbed to leukaemia a few months past his fortieth birthday. The occasion was the 1967 publication of What Is Cinema?, the first selection of his articles and reviews to be translated into English, and Renoir added in his preface: "There is no doubt about the influence that Bazin will have in the years to come." The prophecy was amply fulfilled, though (as is often the case with prophecies) not quite in the way Renoir had imagined. It's no exaggeration to say that Bazin is the single thinker most responsible for bestowing on cinema the prestige both of an artform and of an object of knowledge. While scattered attempts had been made before to define the "essence" of cinema (most notably in the works of Rudolf Arnheim and Siegfried Kracauer), Bazin's ideas were to prove the decisive ones in establishing its credentials as a separate and legitimate field of intellectual inquiry. In one of his essays from the 40s Bazin projected that distant day when film studies would enter the university curriculum – and it was Bazin more than anyone else who played the role of midwife.

He was born on 18 April 1918 in Angers in north-west France. Having desired from an early age to be a teacher, he entered training college, finishing his studies in 1941 at the école normale supérieure at Saint-Cloud. Ultimately denied a teaching post because of his stammer, Bazin had the consolation of participating in the Maison des Lettres, an organisation founded to look after students whose schooling had been interrupted by the war. It was here, during the German occupation of Paris, that Bazin set up a ciné-club, regularly screening banned films in defiance of the Nazi authorities. Shortly after the liberation Bazin was appointed director of cultural services at the Institut des Hautes études Cinématographiques, where he first began to crystallise his ideas in oral presentations and debates. He was also employed as film reviewer for the daily newspaper Le Parisien libéré, where his official career as a critic began. Yet Bazin never entirely lost sight of his educational ambitions, evidenced in a heuristic style of argument that implies more than it states and forces readers to think for themselves.

Bazin's blend of the logical and the poetical drew the attention of Jean-Paul Sartre, who commissioned him to write essays for the distinguished philosophical journal Les Temps modernes. Thereafter his name became associated with a staggering array of popular and specialist magazines, the most notable being L'écran français, France-Observateur, Radio-Cinéma-Télévision, La Revue du cinéma, Critique and Esprit – and finally the historically momentous Cahiers du cinéma, which he founded with Jacques Doniol-Valcroze in 1951. In all Bazin is said to have penned some 2000 pieces (he needed to be prolific since by this time he had a family to support – his wife Janine and a small son Florent). The remainder of his life was an uneventful round of festivals, conferences and editorial meetings, progressively overshadowed by the illness with which he was diagnosed in 1954. He died at Nogent-sur-Marne on 11 November 1958. At the time he was completing a book-length study of Jean Renoir (later edited and arranged by his loyal
disciple François Truffaut) and working on the script for *Les églises romanes de Saintonge*, a short documentary about Romanesque churches which he planned to direct himself.

There was always something a little medieval and monkish about Bazin. Renoir compared him to one of the saints pictured in the stained-glass windows at Chartres; Truffaut went so far as to call him a creature from the time before original sin. Nearly everyone acquainted with him eulogised his wisdom alongside his personal goodness— and couched both in terms drawn from religious asceticism. While the merest rumour of the transcendental is enough to scandalise most film theorists, it helps to explain Bazin's enduring appeal among those at least open to the possibility. Reading Bazin, you never have the sense of a professional flogging his specialism in return for institutional preferment. Instead, you come into contact with a person—or more correctly, a soul—bound by a sacred charge to enquire after truth. The luminous quality of Bazin's writing can no doubt be attributed in part to his chronic frail health—reality stands out in colours all the more radiant for being contemplated under the shadow of death. But though it comprises the biggest stumbling block even for critics congenial to Bazin, there's no denying the primary source of his inspiration: faith.

At the heart of Bazin's strictures on cinematic realism lies the conviction that the movie camera, by the simple act of photographing the world, testifies to the miracle of God's creation. It is sanctioned to do so precisely because it is an invention of science. Throughout the ages, Bazin argues, mankind has dreamed of being able to see the surface of the world faithfully copied in art ('The Ontology of the Photographic Image', 1945). Bazin ascribes this wish to what he calls the "mummy complex"—an innate human need to halt the ceaseless flow of time by embalming it in an image. But it wasn't until the development of photography in the nineteenth century that this appetite for the real could be fully satisfied. For Bazin, a photograph holds an irrational power to persuade us of its truth because it results from a process of mechanical reproduction in which human agency plays no part. A painting, however lifelike, is still the obvious product of human craft and intention, whereas the photographic image is just what happens automatically when the light reflected from objects strikes a layer of sensitive chemical emulsion. "Photography affects like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty."

In Bazin's view, it's this objective quality of the photograph—the fact that it is first of all a sensory datum and only later perhaps a work of art—which gives the medium its privileged relationship with the real. It follows that both photography and its spawn, the motion picture, have a special obligation towards reality. Their principal responsibility is to document the world before attempting to interpret or criticise it. For Bazin, this moral duty is ultimately a sacred one—the photographic media are, in effect, preordained to bear endless witness to the beauty of the cosmos.

Predictably, Bazin's thesis has been assailed for placing the metaphysical cart before the materialist horse. And as if resolved to tweak the noses of his Marxist opponents, Bazin propounds the fanciful notion that technical change arises less as the outcome of economic and historical forces than from an ineffable something one can only call spiritual will (see 'The Myth of Total Cinema', 1946).
Photography and cinema, together with such innovations as colour stock, sound recording, anamorphic lenses and 3D, are successive responses to an obscurely planted desire for an ever more perfect approximation of the real. Although Bazin is generally too discreet a writer to let his theological slip show, it's clear that he conceives of such artistic and industrial gains as prompted by an esoteric design. Here his thought betrays its sizeable debt to the science-cum-mysticism of radical Catholic visionary Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who projected an evolutionary spiralling of human consciousness until it fuses with divine revelation. In more secular terms, there's also a tinge of Sartrean existentialism in Bazin's emphasis on a cinema of "becoming".

Still, Bazin sets a hypothetical limit to his "myth of total cinema". If cinema ever could succeed in becoming the exact double of reality, it would also fail – since it would cease to exist as cinema. Like a mathematical asymptote, filmic representation is always doomed to fall a little short of its goal. But if cinema never quite merges with life, that's what allows it to be an artform whose mission is to reveal life. Bazin concedes that there is no art without artifice and that one must surrender a measure of reality in the process of translating it on to celluloid. The cinematic staging of the real can be carried out in untold ways, so it would be more suitable to speak of "realisms" than of a single definitive realist mode. In this respect Bazin comes closer to endorsing the postmodern shibboleth of pluralism than his adversaries tend to realise – though he happily forgoes its nihilism. "Only the impassive lens," he writes in 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', "stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love."

Yet this pristine vision remains, strictly speaking, the inaccessible alpha and omega of the movie medium, since it is inevitably contaminated by human subjectivity. Individual films and film-makers carve up the unbroken plenitude of the real, imposing on it style and meaning. The crucial distinction for Bazin is (in an oft-quoted phrase from 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema', 1950-55) between, "Those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality." He took a notoriously dim view of Robert Wiene's The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919) and other films made in the German expressionist style because he judged their elaborate manipulations of lighting and decor a wilful attempt to bend reality out of shape and force it to reflect perverse states of mind. What Bazin objected to in the work of Sergei Eisenstein was how the Soviet director splintered reality into a series of isolated shots which he then reassembled through the art of montage.

Bazin distrusted montage on the grounds that its dynamic juxtaposition of images hurter the viewer along a predetermined path of attention, the aim being to construct a synthetic reality in support of a propagandist message. To Bazin this was a minor heresy – since it arrogated the power of God, who alone is entitled to confer meaning on the universe. But in as much as God absents himself from the world and leaves it up to us to detect the signs of his grace, Bazin valued those film artists who respected the mystery imbedded in creation. One such director was the Italian neorealist Vittorio De Sica, who in films such as Bicycle Thieves (1948) and Umberto D (1951) humbly renounced the hubristic display of authorial personality and thus enabled the audience to intuit the numinous significance of people and things. "The mise en scène seems to take shape after the fashion of a natural form in living matter," Bazin wrote in 1951 in 'De Sica:
Metteur en scène. Bazin recognised that film art always condenses, shapes and orders the reality it records, but what he looked for in film-makers was a kind of spiritual disposition towards reality – an intention to serve it by a scrupulous effacement of means and a corresponding unwillingness to do violence to it through ideological abstraction or self-aggrandising technique.

Given Bazin's passionate advocacy of this cinema of "transparency", it may seem puzzling that he is likewise remembered in film history as an architect of the celebrated politique des auteurs. Under his tutelage the younger journalists at Cahiers championed such previously patronised talents as Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks and Douglas Sirk, thereby shifting the critical goalposts forever. (Since many of Bazin's reviewing colleagues – Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol and Jacques Rivette among them – went on to direct their own films, he is also often regarded as the father of the nouvelle vague.) If Bazin's criticism constitutes a cine-theology, it might almost be said that the auteur fulfils the role of saint – an inspired intercessor with reality. Bazin's stake in the politique can probably be traced back to his involvement in the 30s Christian existential movement known as personalism, which posited the creative individual who takes risks, makes choices and exercises his or her God-given faculty of free will. However, it should be added that Bazin eventually distanced himself from the priestly cult of the director-author because he felt it ignored the commercial context in which most films were produced. A keen observer of Hollywood cinema (whose "classical" adaptability he was among the first to appreciate), he nonetheless set its geniuses on a lower rung than those masters who answered to his chaste and simple ideals: Renoir, Chaplin, De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, Carl Dreyer and Robert Bresson.

Despite differences in stylistic approach, these film artists converge on the same enigmatic reality like the radii of a mandala. If anything joins them more specifically, it's a concern to find the technical means for a concrete rendering of space and time. Another charge Bazin brought against montage was its sacrifice of the dimensional integrity of the photographed event. Though we live in duration and extension, montage can only cheat on our experience since it is an art of ellipsis. In the name of a higher realism, then, Bazin celebrated the long, uninterrupted take for its capacity to simulate the most elemental aspect of nature – its continuousness. Though Bazin knew, of course, that the camera must restrict itself to slicing out a tiny portion of space, he thought a tactful deployment of the mise en scène could sustain the illusion of life spilling over the borders of the frame. His great hero in this regard was Renoir, who, significantly for Bazin, combined long takes with the technique of deep-focus cinematography. Bazin considered this not just one aesthetic option among others but perhaps the very essence of modern cinematic realism. For him, the incalculable virtue of deep focus is its ambiguity. Since everything in the film frame can be seen with equal clarity, the audience has to decide for itself what is meaningful or interesting. While a director such as Orson Welles or William Wyler (to whose 1941 The Little Foxes Bazin would return again and again) may provide accents in the composition of the image, a possibility is nonetheless opened up that the viewer can, so to speak, do the editing in his or her own head. In short, deep-focus cinematography invites an awareness of both personal freedom and ethical responsibility. In cinema as in life, we must be free to choose our own salvation.

On his death an obituary notice in Esprit cited Bazin as predicting that: "The year 2000 will salute the advent of a cinema free of the artificialities of montage, renouncing the
role of an 'art of reality' so that it may climb to its final level on which it will become once and for all 'reality made art.' In this as in so much else, Bazin the jubilant millenarian has been proved exactly wrong. At no other period in its history has cinema been so enslaved by escapist fantasy — and never have we been less certain of the status of the real. Now the digitisation of the image threatens to cut the umbilical cord between photograph and referent on which Bazin founded his entire theory. Moreover, the particular forms of transparency that he admired have grown opaque in just a few decades. Italian neorealism increasingly yields up its melodrama and fakery while the mannered and rigid mise en scène of deep focus betrays its theatricality. In the end, every living realism petrifies — becomes a relic in the museum of obsolete artistic styles. But as Bazin might have said (of himself above all), the certainty of failure doesn’t rule out the necessity for each artist to strive to honour reality according to his or her own lights and to those of the time. All it requires is a leap of faith.

Though he didn’t live to see the first flowering of academic film theory in the late 60s, the pedagogic side of Bazin would doubtless have been gratified that cinema was no longer a trivial pursuit but henceforth a serious discipline calling for the most concentrated attention and rigour. Yet the poet in him — the fecund wielder of figure and metaphor, who drew on the fathomless well of his own intuitions — would just as surely have experienced a sense of loss. For the scholarly discourse of cinema soon developed a pomp and rigidity that increasingly excluded those dazzling imaginative leaps at the heart of Bazin’s style. It was his good fortune to write in the period just before film studies congealed into an institution. As a working critic, contributing irregularly and — so he thought — ephemerally to the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma*, Bazin could allow his mind free play in an atmosphere as yet unhampered by Jesuitical nit-picking. He enjoyed the privilege of a critic in being able to cut to the quick of an argument with no other justification than his own unerring instinct. In consequence, Bazin’s thought is infinitely more concrete, nimble and flexible than the lucubrations of those obliged to flag each theoretical move with a sheaf of footnotes.

Yet it was for these very virtues that Bazin came under attack by the budding generation of film pedants — and almost at the same moment as he was canonised as a classic. Bazin, it was claimed, refused to follow due process. His vaunted theory of realism amounted to little more than a loose patchwork of ideas that never coalesced into a stringent system but remained dangerously impressionistic and often flatly contradictory. But professional intellectuals who jumped on Bazin’s alleged incoherence also underrated the profoundly dialectical nature of his thinking. To put it another way, they were stone-blind to Bazin’s poetic genius — his ability to hold contrary terms in a state of paradoxical suspension that transcends mere theory and approaches mystical understanding.

But there was worse to come. For Bazin, a rhapsodist of cinema and a true believer in its perfectibility, had replied to his own sweeping question "what is cinema?" with a resounding affirmation — whereas the new breed of theorists answered it increasingly in the negative. In the wake of the 60s counterculture film-studies departments across Europe were transformed into hubs of self-styled revolutionary activity. Fuelled by the absolutist views of French structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser (who proclaimed the function of the mass media to be an endless replication of ruling-class values), radical academics came not to praise cinema but to bury it. It was perhaps impossible to avoid a head-on collision between Bazin’s meditative humanism and a dogmatism that saw
popular cinema as an ideological apparatus – an efficient machine for turning out docile citizens. As the most eminent critic of the preceding decade Bazin became a figurehead for the establishment and the militant new regime at Cahiers hammered him for his political complicity (an Oedipal rebellion if ever there was one). Crossing over to Britain by way of the influential theoretical journal Screen, the sport of Bazin-bashing proliferated throughout the 70s and 80s. How could anyone be fool enough to suppose that cinema was capable of recording reality directly when the reciprocal insights of semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis had demonstrated that human perception is always mediated by language? It might almost be said that the whole Byzantine edifice of contemporary film theory sprang out of an irresistible itch to prove Bazin wrong.

Nowadays, of course, it is a truth universally acknowledged that reality is a construction, and Bazin's reputed innocence on this score no longer raises sectarian hackles – more like a condescending smile. It must be admitted that his earnest belief in the intrinsically realist vocation of film puts him on the far side of postmodern relativism and doubt. Yet in so far as a compulsive scepticism and a jaded cynicism have become the orthodoxies of our age, this may be the moment to start rehabilitation reality – and André Bazin.