



**BAZIN**

**AT WORK**

**MAJOR ESSAYS  
& REVIEWS FROM  
THE FORTIES  
& FIFTIES**

**ANDRÉ BAZIN**

*Translated from the  
French by Alain Piette  
and Bert Cardullo*

*Edited by Bert Cardullo*

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# INTRODUCTION

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André Bazin was born on April 18, 1918, in the city of Angers in northwest France, but moved with his family to the western seaport of La Rochelle when he was five years old. Since he wanted to become a teacher, he studied first at the École normale of La Rochelle (1936) and the École normale of Versailles (1937–38), then at the École normale supérieure of Saint-Cloud (1938–41). Bazin graduated from Saint-Cloud with the highest honors (after he was called up for military service in 1939, then demobilized in mid-1940) but was disqualified from teaching in French schools because of a stutter. The failed teacher quickly turned into a missionary of the cinema, his passion for which was part of his general passion for culture, truth, and moral or spiritual sensibility.

In 1942, during the German Occupation, Bazin became a member of an organization in Paris—the Maison des Lettres—that was founded to take care of young students whose regular scholastic routine had been disturbed by the war. There he founded a cinema club where he showed politically banned films in defiance of the Nazi authorities and the Vichy government. During World War II, in 1943, Bazin also worked at the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (I.D.H.E.C.), the French film school, which he was appointed director of cultural services after the war. After the Liberation, he was in addition appointed film critic of a new daily newspaper, *Le Parisien libéré*. Thus began his formal life as a public critic and with it the development of a new type of movie reviewing—one of Bazin's singular achievements was his ability to make his insights understood to readers on all levels without any concessions to popularizing.

From the postwar period on, Bazin became a more or less permanent contributor to numerous French periodicals that covered most of the political spectrum: *L'Écran Français* (liberal), *France-Observateur* (socialist), *Esprit* (left-wing Catholic monthly), *Radio-Cinéma-Télévision* (Catholic and slightly left-wing; today called *Télérama*), *L'Éducation Nationale* (non-religious and state-run), and the more and more conservative *Le Parisien libéré*. In addition, he wrote for two notable, specialized monthlies: *La Revue du Cinéma*, which Bazin started in 1947 but which collapsed in 1949; and *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, which he founded in 1951 with Lo Duca and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and which grew under his direction into Europe's most influential, and one of the world's most distinguished, film publications. As all this writing and editing were not enough, Bazin contributed to foreign magazines (mainly Italian), was active in film societies and cultural associations (popular ones, like *Travail et Culture*), and attended film conferences and festivals (such as Venice and Cannes). He maintained all these activities (plus a family consisting of his wife, Janine, and a son, Laurent) despite a long and painful illness, leukemia, which he contracted in 1954 and from which he died at Bry-sur-Marne on November 11, 1958. Perhaps because of his fatigue, he grew attached toward the end of his life to television viewing, becoming one of that medium's first perceptive critics. At the time of his death, he was even working on a film script commissioned by the producer Pierre Braunberger, *Les Églises romanes de Saintonge*, which he probably would have directed himself had he lived.

As Bazin's biographer, Dudley Andrew, has argued, "André Bazin's impact on film art, as theorist and



critic, is widely considered to be greater than that of any single director, actor, or producer in the history of the cinema. He is credited with almost single-handedly establishing the study of film as an accepted intellectual pursuit," as well as with being the spiritual father of the French New Wave. Seeking a new and revived cinema, such men as François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, and Claude Chabrol wrote under Bazin's tutelage at *Cahiers du Cinéma*. As critics, these individuals contributed significantly to the development of theory, particularly the *auteur* theory, which was derived from Bazin's ideas and which argued that since a film is a work of art necessarily stamped with the personality of its creator, it is the director above all who gives the film its distinctive quality. As filmmakers, Truffaut and company comprised the first generation of cinéastes whose work was thoroughly grounded in film history and theory, and thus they contributed heavily to Bazin's effort to get the cinema recognized as a serious and important field of study rather than merely as an avenue of escape from the pressures of life.

Unlike nearly all the other authors of major film theories—and he was the realist among them—André Bazin was a working or practical critic who wrote regularly about individual films. He never left a systematic book of theory; instead he preferred to have implicit theoretical dialogues with filmmakers and other critics through his critical writing in a number of journals. It has been suggested that the best of his criticism has been lost because it occurred in the form of oral presentations and debates at such places as I.D.H.E.C. That may be the case; however, the most important of his essays—some sixty of them—were collected in the posthumously published *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (1958–62); the rest lie scattered in the various magazines enumerated above. Then there are his books on Jean Renoir, Orson Welles, and Charlie Chaplin, all published after his death, like the four volumes of *Qu'est-ce-que le cinéma?*. See the bibliography for details on these works and translations in addition to those contained here.

Bazin based his criticism on the films actually made rather than on any preconceived aesthetic or sociological principles; and film theory for the first time became a matter not of pronouncement and prescription, but of description, analysis, and deduction. "While the fragmentary method of his writing may have prevented him from organizing a fully elaborated system like Siegfried Kracauer's in *Theory of Film*," in the words of Andrew,

it gives to his criticism a density of thought and a constructive dependence on examples that are absent from Kracauer's work. Bazin's usual procedure was to watch a film closely, appreciating its special values and noting its difficulties or contradictions. Then he would imagine the kind of film it was or was trying to be, placing it within a genre or fabricating a new genre for it. He would formulate the laws of this genre, constantly reverting to examples taken from this film and others like it. Finally, these "laws" would be seen in the context of an entire theory of cinema. Thus Bazin begins with the most particular facts available, the film or films before his eyes, and through a process of logical and imaginative reflection, he arrives at a general theory.

Every movie, even a bad one, is an opportunity for him to develop an historical or sociological hypothesis, or to postulate about the manner of artistic creation. Bazin founds his critical method on the fecundity of paradox—dialectically speaking, something true that seems false and is all the truer for seeming so. Starting from the most paradoxical aspect of a film, he demonstrates its utter artistic necessity. Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* and Cocteau's *Les Parents terribles*, for example, are all the more cinematic for the former's scrupulous faithfulness to its novelistic source and the latter's to its dramatic antecedent; thus for Bazin they are ideal instances of "impure" or "mixed" cinema. He even anticipates deconstructive analysis by justifying the shortcomings or anomalies of so-called masterpieces by arguing that they are as necessary to the success of these works as their aesthetic qualities. The

deconstructionists, of course, like the structuralists, semioticians, Marxists, and other such fellow travelers of the left, are the ones who revile André Bazin today with lethal epithets like “bourgeois idealist,” “mystical humanist,” and “reactionary Catholic.” But their analysis is reductive and partial, for Bazin’s formalist and spiritualist enterprise aimed less at discovering a conservative synthesis, communion, or unity in art as in life than at freeing aesthetic pleasure from dramaturgical exigency alone, at implicating the viewer in an active relationship with the screen, and at freeing cinematic space and time from slavery to the anecdotal. As such, Bazin was, if anything, a species of transcendentalist, a kind of cinematic Hegel, who proposed to discover the nature of filmic reality as much by investigating the process of critical thought as by examining the artistic objects of sensory experience themselves.

Bazin’s criticism, then, is not remotely doctrinal in its Catholicism, but is fundamentally holistic; its source lies elsewhere than in aesthetic dissection. His true filmmaker attains his power through “style,” which is not a thing to be expressed but an inner orientation enabling an outward search. This spiritual sensitivity and its enablement through film are central to Bazin’s view of film as obligated to God, to honor God’s universe by using film to render the reality of the universe and, through its reality, its mystery-cum-musicality. This led Bazin to certain specific espousals—Italian neorealism, the technique of deep focus, and more—but these were all secondary consequences for him of the way that film could bear witness to the miracle of the creation. Éric Rohmer, who became a filmmaker in the Bazinian tradition but who was in the 1950s a critical-editorial colleague of Bazin’s, has said: “Without a doubt, the whole body of Bazin’s work is based on one central idea, an affirmation of the objectivity of the cinema.”

Bazin’s general idea was to discover in the nature of the photographic image an objectively realist feature, and, as Rohmer points out, the concept of objective reality as a fundamental quality of the cinematic shot in fact became the key to his theoretical and critical work. For Bazin, the photographic origin of film explains the novelty of and the fascination with the cinema. The picture is a kind of double of the world, a reflection petrified in time, brought back to life by cinematic projection; in other words, everything that is filmed once *was* in reality. A rapt Bazin thus speaks of the ontological realism of the cinema, and according to him, naturally, the camera is the objective tool with which to achieve it. He granted the camera a purifying power and an impassiveness that restored the virgin object to the attention and love of the viewer. He saw almost perfect examples of this “brute representation” of the cinema in documentary and scientific films, in which the filmmaker interferes or tampers very little with nature. Bazin saw such brute representation as well in the deep-focus *mise en scène* of William Wyler’s films, which tended toward a neutrality or objectivity that was eminently moral and liberal, hence perfectly characteristic of American freedom and democracy. For him, only ontological realism of this type was capable of restoring to the object and its setting the density of their being.

The critic Stanley Kauffmann has explained that Bazin’s basic position cannot be understood except as a strong reaction against principles of filmmaking that had prevailed before then: of subjectivity, of an arrangement and interpretation of the world—what might be called Eisenstein-Pudovkin principles (different though those two men were) in editing. Bazin was opposed to such an approach as “self-willed” and “manipulative,” as the imposition of opinion where the filmmaker should try, in effect, to stand aside and reveal reality. By contrast, the first line of Pudovkin’s *Film Technique* is: “The foundation of film art is *editing*.” Bazin upheld *mise en scène* against editing or *montage* because, for him, the former represented “true continuity” and reproduced situations more realistically, leaving the interpretation of a particular scene to the viewer rather than to the director’s viewpoint through cutting. Consistent with this view, he argued in support of both the shot-in-depth and the long or uninterrupted take, and commended the switch from silent to talking pictures as one step toward the attainment of total realism on film—to be followed by such additional steps as widescreen cinematography, color, and

3-D.

The Russians themselves had derived their methods from American films, especially those of D. W. Griffith, and American films had continued in the “editing” vein. In Hollywood pictures and, through their example, in most pictures everywhere, the guiding rule was to edit the film to conform to the flow of the viewer’s attention, to anticipate and control that attention. The director and editor chose the fraction of space that they thought the viewer would be most concerned with each fraction of a second: the hero’s face when he declares his love, then the heroine’s reaction, then the door when someone else enters, and so on, bit by bit. The Russians’ use of montage had much more complex aims, aesthetic and ideological, than presumed audience gratification, but technically it, too, was a mosaic or discontinuous approach to reality.

Bazin disagreed strongly and, one can legitimately say, religiously. Possibly the best example of his disagreement is in his essay “The Technique of *Citizen Kane*,” in particular his analysis of Susan Alexander Kane’s attempted suicide:

We get [the suicide attempt] in a single shot on a level with the bed. In the left-hand corner, on the night table, are the enormous glass and the teaspoon. A little farther back, in shadow, we sense rather than see the woman’s face. The presence of drama and its nature, already suggested by the glass, are revealed to us on the soundtrack: by a raspy groan and the snore of a drugged sleeper. Beyond the bed: the empty room, and completely in the background, even farther away because of the receding perspective created by the wide-angle lens: the locked door. Behind the door, we hear on the soundtrack Kane’s calls and his shoulder bumping against the wood.... The door gives way and Kane appears and rushes to the bed.

Again, all of this in one shot.

Traditional editing, the five or six shots into which all the above could be divided, would give us, according to Bazin, “the illusion of being at real events unraveling before us in everyday reality. But this illusion conceals an essential bit of deceit because reality exists in continuous space and the screen presents us in fact a succession of fragments called ‘shots.’” Instead, Welles presents the experience as a whole, in order to give us the same privileges and responsibilities of choice that life itself affords. In “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema” Bazin says further that “*Citizen Kane* is unthinkable shot in any other way but in depth. The uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to the spiritual key or the interpretation we should put on the film is built into the very design of the image.” The best director, then—Welles, Rossellini, Renoir, and Murnau rank high for Bazin—is the one who mediates least, the one who exercises selectivity just sufficiently to put us in much the same relation of regard and choice toward the narrative as we are toward reality in life: a director who thus imitates, within his scale, the divine disposition toward man.

The Eisenstein-Bazin “debate” is of course not decisively settled in film practice. Other than such an anomalous director as Miklós Jancsó, to whom one reel equals one shot, most good modern directors understand the reality of the held, “plumbed” shot as well as the mega-reality of montage. One need look no further than the work of Bazin’s venerator Truffaut for an example of this. And such a balance between montage and *mise en scène* doesn’t smugly patronize Bazin: no one before him had spoken up so fully and influentially for his side of the question.

Truly mourned by many—among them filmmakers like Renoir, Truffaut, Visconti, and Bresson—André Bazin died, as Dudley Andrew describes,

just ahead of the movement that placed cinema in university classrooms. He did his teaching in film clubs, at conferences, and in published articles. Yet while many people now make their livings—teaching film (and far better livings than Bazin ever enjoyed), some teachers look back with longing to that era when reflection about the movies took place in a natural arena rather than in the hothouse of the university. Film theory as well as criticism is for the most part now an acquired discipline, not a spontaneous activity, and the cinema is seen as a field of “research” rather than as a human reality. Current film scholars, including those hostile to his views, look in wonder at Bazin, who in 1958 was in command of a complete, coherent, and thoroughly humanistic view of cinema.

More than once he has been called the Aristotle of film for being the first to try to formulate principles in all regions of this then unexplored field. Today, however, the cinema is considered so large a subject that the critic-theorist can at best carve out for study only a small portion of it.

Bazin ambitiously and innocently tried to tackle all of it, and *Bazin at Work* presents some of the very best of his work from 1946 until his death in 1958. Included in this collection are previous untranslated essays and reviews from the four volumes of *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* as well as from such important periodicals as *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Esprit*, and *France-Observateur*. *Bazin at Work* addresses such significant subjects as the paradox of realism, filmic adaptation, CinemaScope, Stalinist cinema, and religious film; such prominent filmmakers as Rossellini, Eisenstein, Pagnol, De Sica, and Capra; and well-known films like *La Strada*, *Citizen Kane*, *Forbidden Games*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and *Scarface*. The book is extensively illustrated and, in addition to its faithful yet not literal translations—uniquely executed by a native speaker of French in collaboration with a working film critic, features explanatory notes, a helpful index, and a comprehensive Bazin bibliography. It is aimed, 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 god of cinema, as well as to the steadfastness of his courage in life, that this book is dedicated. Long may his work, and the memory of the man, live.

Bert Cardul

**BAZIN ON DIRECTORS AND ON CINEMA**

# William Wyler, or the Jansenist of Directing<sup>1</sup>

## THE REALISM OF WYLER

When studied in detail, William Wyler's directing style reveals obvious differences for each of his films both in the use of the camera and in the quality of the photography. Nothing is stranger to the form of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) than the form of *The Letter* (1940). When one recalls the major scenes in Wyler's films, one notices that their dramatic material is extremely varied and that the editing of it is very different from one film to another. When one considers the red gown at the ball in *Jezebel* (1938); the dialogue in the scene in *The Little Foxes* (1941) where Herbert Marshall gets a shave, or the dialogue in his death scene in the same film; the sheriff's death in *The Border Cavalier* (1927); the traveling shot at the plantation at the beginning of *The Letter*; or the scene in the out-of-use bomber in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, it becomes clear that there is no consistent motif in the work of Wyler. One can find such a motif, however, in the chase scenes of John Ford's westerns; the fist fights in Tarzan Garnett's films; or in the weddings or chases in René Clair's work. There are no favorite settings or landscapes for Wyler. At most, there is an evident fondness for psychological scenarios set against social backgrounds. Yet, even though Wyler has become a master at treating this kind of subject, adapted either from a novel like *Jezebel* or a play like *The Little Foxes*, even though his work as a whole leaves one with the piercing and rigorous impression of a psychological analysis, it does not call to mind the sumptuously eloquent images suggesting a formal beauty that would demand serious consideration. The style of a director cannot be defined, however, only in terms of his predilection for psychological analysis and social realism, even less so here since we are not dealing with original scripts.

And yet, I do not think that it is more difficult to recognize the signature of Wyler in just a few shots than it is to recognize the signatures of Ford, Fritz Lang, or Hitchcock. I would even go so far as to say that the director of *The Best Years of Our Lives* is among those who have least often employed the tricks of the trade at the expense of genuine style. Whereas Capra, Ford, or Lang occasionally indulges in self-parody, Wyler never does so: when he goes wrong, it is because he has made a bad choice. He has occasionally been inferior to himself, his taste is not absolutely to be trusted, and he seems to be capable sometimes of being a sincere admirer of Henry Bernstein<sup>2</sup> or the like, but he has never been caught in the act of cheating on the form. There is a John Ford style and a John Ford manner. Wyler has only one style. That is why he is proof against parody, even of himself. Imitation of Wyler by other directors would not pay off, because Wyler's style cannot be defined by any precise form, any lighting design, or any particular camera angle. The only way to imitate Wyler would be to espouse the kind of directing ethics to be found in its purest form in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Wyler cannot have imitators, only disciples.

If we were to attempt to define the directing in this film and if we took its form as a starting point, we would have to give a negative definition. The whole tendency of the *mise en scène* is to efface itself

The alternative, positive definition would be that, when this self-effacement is at its extreme, the story and the actors are at their clearest and most powerful. The aesthetic sense of this kind of asceticism will perhaps be clearer if we locate it in *The Little Foxes*, because it is seemingly pushed there to the point of paradox. Lillian Hellman's play has undergone almost no adaptation: the film respects the text almost completely. In this regard, one can easily understand why there are no exterior scenes of movement in the film—the sorts of scenes that most directors would have deemed necessary in order to introduce a little “cinema” into this theatrical mass. Indeed, a good adaptation usually consists of “transposing” into specifically cinematic terms everything that can be freed from the literary and technical restraints of the theater. If you were told that Mr. Berthomieu,<sup>3</sup> for instance, had just filmed the latest play by Mr. Henry Bernstein without changing a single line, you would start worrying. If the bringer of bad tidings added that nine-tenths of the film was set in the same living room that was used in the theater, you would think that you still had a lot to learn about the impudence of the makers of filmed theater. But if on top of all that the messenger announced that the film does not include more than ten different camera angles and that the camera is mostly stationary in front of the actors, your opinion of the film would be final. “Now you have seen everything!” Yet, it is upon these paradoxical premises that Wyler has built one of the most purely cinematic works ever.

The majority of the action takes place on the same, totally neutral set, the ground-floor living room of a huge colonial house. At the back, a staircase leads to the first-floor bedrooms: Bette Davis's and Herbert Marshall's, which adjoin each other. Nothing picturesque adds to the realism of this somber place, which is as impersonal as the setting of classical tragedy. The characters have a credible, conventional, reason for confronting one another in the living room, whether they come from outdoors or from their bedrooms. They can also linger there. The staircase at the back plays exactly the same role as it would in the theater: it is purely an element of dramatic architecture, which will be used to situate the characters in vertical space. Let's take as an example the central scene of the film, the death of Herbert Marshall, which indeed takes place both in the living room and on the staircase. An analysis of this scene will clearly reveal the essential secrets of Wyler's style.

Bette Davis is sitting in the middle ground facing the viewers, her head at the center of the screen. The very strong lighting further underlines the brightness of her heavily made-up face. In the foreground, Herbert Marshall is sitting in three-quarter profile. The ruthless exchanges between husband and wife take place without any cutting from one character to the other. Then comes the husband's heart attack: he begs his wife to get him his medicine from the bedroom. From this instant, the whole drama resides, as Denis Marion<sup>4</sup> has very aptly observed, in the immobility of Bette Davis and the camera. Marshall is obliged to stand up and go get the medicine himself. This effort will kill him on the first steps of the staircase.

In the theater, this scene would most likely have been staged in the same manner. A spotlight could also have been focused on Bette Davis, and the spectator would have had the same sense of horror regarding her criminal inaction, the same sense of anguish at the sight of her staggering victim. Yet, despite appearances, Wyler's *mise en scène* makes as extensive a use as possible of the means offered him by the camera and the frame. Bette Davis' position at the center of the screen endows her with a privilege in the geometry of the dramatic space. The whole scene revolves around her, but her frightening immobility takes its full impact only from Marshall's double exit from the frame, first in the foreground on the right, then on a third plane on the left. Instead of following him in this later movement, as any less intelligent eye would naturally have done, the camera remains imperturbably immobile. When Marshall finally enters the frame for the second time and climbs the stairs, the cinematographer Gregg Toland (acting at Wyler's request) is careful not to bring into focus the full depth of the image, so that Marshall's fall on the staircase and his death will not be perfectly visible to the



viewer. This artificial blurriness augments our feeling of anxiety: as if over the shoulder of Bette Davis who faces us and has her back toward her husband, we have to discern in the distance the outcome of a drama whose protagonist is nearly escaping us.

We can see here everything that the cinema adds to the means of the theater, and we can also see that paradoxically, the highest level of cinematic art coincides with the lowest level of *mise en scène*. Nothing could better heighten the dramatic power of this scene than the absolute immobility of the camera. The slightest movement, which a less skillful director would have deemed the right cinematic element to introduce, would have decreased the dramatic tension. Here, furthermore, the camera does not follow the path of the average viewer's eyes by cutting from one character to the other. It is the camera itself that organizes the action by means of the frame and the ideal coordinates of its dramatic geometry.

In my school days, when I was studying mineralogy, I remember being struck by the structure of certain fossil shells. Although the limestone was arranged in the living animal in thin parallel layers at the surface of the valves, a slow process in the dead animal had rearranged the molecules into thin crystals perpendicular to the initial direction of the layers. Apparently, the shell was intact; one could still discern perfectly the original stratification of the limestone. But, when the shell was cracked, the fracture revealed that the perpendicular external pattern was completely contradicted by the parallel interior architecture. I apologize for this comparison, but it illustrates well the invisible molecular process that affects the deep aesthetic structure of Lillian Hellman's play, and that at the same time respects with paradoxical fidelity its superficial theatrical appearance.

In *The Best Years of Our Lives* the problems were of a totally different order from those encountered in *The Little Foxes*. The film had an almost original script. The novel in [blank] verse by MacKinlay Kantor (*Glory for Me*), from which Robert Sherwood drew his screenplay, has certainly not been respected as Hellman's play was.<sup>5</sup> The nature of the subject, its relevance, its seriousness, its social usefulness, demanded first and foremost an extreme meticulousness, a quasi-documentary accuracy. Samuel Goldwyn and Wyler wanted to create a civic good work in this film as much as to create a work of art. The task was to expose through a story—romanticized, to be sure, but credible and even exemplary in its details—one of the most crucial and distressing social problems of postwar America, and to do so with the necessary breadth and subtlety. In a certain sense, *The Best Years of Our Lives* is still related to American wartime propaganda films, to the didactic mission of the film unit of the American army, from which unit Wyler had just been discharged. The war and the particular view of reality that it engendered have deeply influenced the European cinema, as we all know; the war's consequences were less strongly felt in Hollywood. Yet, several American filmmakers took part in the war, and some of the horror, some of the shocking truths, with which it overwhelmed the world, could be translated by them as well into an ethic of realism. "All three of us (Capra, Stevens, and Wyler) took part in the war. It had a very strong influence on each of us. Without that experience, I couldn't have made my film the way I did. We have learned to understand the world better.... I know that George Stevens has not been the same since he saw the corpses at Dachau. We were forced to realize that Hollywood has rarely reflected the world and the time in which people live." These few lines of Wyler's sufficiently illuminate his purpose in making *The Best Years of Our Lives*.

We know how much care he devoted to the making of this, the longest and probably the most expensive film in his career. Yet, if *The Best Years of Our Lives* were only a propaganda film, it would not deserve very much attention, no matter how skillful, well-intended, moving, and useful it was. For instance, the script of *Mrs. Miniver* (1942) is not so inferior to that of *The Best Years of Our Lives*: but *Mrs. Miniver* is marked by pedestrian direction and does not move toward any particular style. The



result is rather disappointing. By contrast, in *The Best Years of Our Lives* Wyler's ethical reverence for reality found its aesthetic transcription in the *mise en scène*. Indeed, nothing is more fallacious and absurd than to contrast "realism" and "aestheticism," as was frequently done in reference to the Russian or the Italian cinema. In the true sense of the word, there is no film more "aesthetic" than *Paisan* (1946). Reality is not art, but a truly "realistic" art can create an aesthetic that is incorporated in reality. Thank God, Wyler was not satisfied merely to be faithful to the psychological and social truth of the action (which truths, by the way, did not come off so well). He tried to find aesthetic equivalents for psychological and social truth in the *mise en scène*. I will mention these equivalents in the order of their importance.

First, there is the realism of the set, built in its entirety to realistic dimensions (which drastically complicated the shooting, as one might expect, since the walls had to be removed to give the camera mobility). The actors and actresses were wearing the same clothes that their characters would have worn in reality, and their faces were not made up more than they would have been in everyday life. Granted, this quasi-superstitious faithfulness to the truth of daily life is particularly strange in Hollywood, but its actual significance lies perhaps not so much in the guarantee of verisimilitude it gave to the viewer as in the revolution it unmistakably implied for the art of *mise en scène*: lighting, camera angle, the direction of the actors. It is not on the basis of meat hanging down onstage or on the basis of André Antoine's<sup>6</sup> red trees that realism defines itself, but through the means of expression that a realistic subject allows the artist to discover. The "realistic" tendency in the cinema has existed since Louis Lumière and even since Marey and Muybridge.<sup>7</sup> It has known diverse fates, but the forms it has taken have survived only in proportion to the aesthetic invention or discovery (conscious or not, calculated or naive) that it allowed. There is not one realism, but several realisms. Each period looks for its own, the technique and the aesthetics that will capture, retain, and render best what one wants from reality. On the screen, technique naturally plays a much more important role than in the novel because the written word is more or less stable, whereas the cinematic image has undergone deep modifications since its creation. Lighting, sound, and color have wrought true transformations of the image. The syntax that organizes the vocabulary of cinema has also undergone change. "Associational montage," which is identified mainly with the period of silent film, has been succeeded almost totally by the logic of cutting and by narrative editing. Changes are undoubtedly due in part to fashion, which exists in the cinema as it does everywhere else, but all the changes that have a real significance and that add to film heritage are closely connected with cinematographic technique: and such technique is the infrastructure of film.

To want one's film to look true, to show reality, the whole reality and nothing but reality, may be a honorable intention. As it stands, however, this does not go beyond the level of ethics. In the cinema such an intention can result only in a *representation* of reality. The aesthetic problem begins with the means of that representation. A dead child in close-up is not the same as a dead child in medium shot, not the same as a dead child in color. Indeed, our eyes, and consequently our minds, have a way of seeing a dead child in real life that is not the way of the camera, which places the image within the rectangle of the screen. "Realism" consists not only of showing us a corpse, but also of showing it to us under conditions that re-create certain physiological or mental givens of natural perception, or, more accurately, under conditions that seek equivalents for these givens. The classical approach to editing ("psychological montage"), which divides a scene into a certain number of elements (the hand on the telephone or the door knob that slowly turns), implicitly corresponds to a particular natural mental process that makes us accept the sequence of shots without being conscious of the cutter's hand at work. Indeed, in real life our eye, like a lens, focuses spatially on the aspects of an event that interest us most. The eye proceeds through successive investigations: in scanning the space in which an event takes place

it introduces a kind of additional temporalization to that event, which itself is occurring in time.

~~The first camera lenses were not varied. Their optical characteristics naturally created a large depth of field that suited the cutting, or rather the near absence of cutting, of the films of that time. It was absolutely out of the question back then to divide a scene into twenty-five camera placements and at the same time to keep the lens focused on the actors. Progress in optics is closely linked with the history of editing, being at the same time its cause and consequence.~~

To consider a different method of filming, the way Jean Renoir did as early as 1933 and Orson Welles did a little later, one had to have discovered that analytical cutting or classical editing was founded on the illusion of psychological realism. Although it is true that our eye changes its focus continually according to what interests or attracts it, this mental and psychological adjustment is done after the fact. The event exists continuously in its entirety, every part of it demands our undivided attention; we are the ones who decide to choose this or that aspect, to select this instead of that according to the bidding of our feelings or our thinking. Someone else, however, would perhaps make a different choice. In any case, we are *free* to create our own *mise en scène*: another “creation” or cutting is always possible that can radically modify the subjective aspect of reality. Now the director who does the cutting for us also does the selecting that we would do in real life. We unconsciously accept his choices, because they conform to the seeming laws of ocular attraction; but they deprive us of a privilege that is well grounded in psychology and that we give up without realizing it: the freedom, at least the potential one, to modify at each instant our method of selection, of “editing.”

The psychological, and in addition aesthetic, consequences of this are significant. The technique of analytical cutting tends<sup>8</sup> to destroy in particular the ambiguity inherent in reality. It “subjectivizes” the event to an extreme, since each shot is the product of the director’s bias. Analytical cutting implies not only a dramatic, emotional, or moral choice, but also, and more significantly, a judgment on reality itself. It is probably excessive to bring up the controversy over the “universals” in regard to Wyler. Even if the philosophical dispute over nominalism and realism (at the basis of which is the controversy over the definition of “universals” or abstract terms) has its equivalent in film in the opposition between formalism and realism, formalism and realism are not defined only on the basis of a director’s shooting and cutting method. It is certainly not a coincidence, however, that Renoir, André Malraux, Welles, Roberto Rossellini, and the Wyler of *The Best Years of Our Lives* come together in their frequent use of depth of field, or at least of “simultaneous” *mise en scène*, of action occurring simultaneously on different planes. It is not an accident that, from 1938 to 1946, their names are attached to everything that really matters in cinematic realism, the kind of realism that proceeds from an aesthetics of reality.

Thanks to depth of field, at times augmented by action taking place simultaneously on several planes, the viewer is at least given the opportunity in the end to edit the scene himself, to select the aspects of it to which he will attend. I quote Wyler:

I had long conversations with my cameraman, Gregg Toland. We decided to strive for a realism that would be as simple as possible. Gregg Toland’s talent for keeping the different planes of the image simultaneously in focus allowed me to develop my own style of directing. Thus I could follow an action to its end without cutting. The resulting continuity makes the shots more alive; more interesting for the viewer, who can choose of his own will to study a particular character and who can make his own cuts.

The terms used by Wyler above plainly show that his concern was drastically different from that of Welles or Renoir. Renoir used simultaneous, lateral *mise en scène* mostly to underline the connection

between plots, as is clearly visible in the feast at the castle in *The Rules of the Game* (1939).<sup>9</sup> Welles sometimes aims toward a tyrannical objectivity à la Dos Passos, sometimes toward a kind of systematic extension in depth of reality, as if that reality were sketched on a rubber band that he would take pleasure first in pulling back to scare us, second in letting go right into our faces. The receding perspectives and the low-angle shots of Welles are fully extended slingshots. Wyler's method is completely different from Welles's and Renoir's. We are still talking about integrating into the overall structure and the individual image a maximum of reality, about making the set and the actors totally and simultaneously present, so that action will never be an *abstraction*. But this constant accretion of events on the screen aims in Wyler at perfect neutrality. The sadism of Welles and the ironic anxiety of Renoir have no place in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. The purpose in this film is not to harass the viewer, to break him upon the wheel and to quarter him. Wyler wants only to allow him to: (1) see everything; (2) make choices "of his own will." This is an act of loyalty toward the viewer, a pledge of dramatic honesty. Wyler puts his cards on the table. Indeed, it seems that the use of classical editing in *The Best Years of Our Lives* would have been somewhat deceptive, like a never-ending magic trick. "Look at this," the camera would say, "and now at that." But what about in between shots? The frequency of depth-of-focus shots and the perfect sharpness of the backgrounds contribute enormously to reassuring the viewer and to giving him the opportunity to observe and to make a selection, and the length of the shots even leave him time to form an opinion, as we will see later. Depth of field in Wyler aims at being liberal and democratic, like the consciences both of the American viewers and of the characters in *The Best Years of Our Lives*.

## THE STYLELESS STYLE

The depth of field of Wyler is more or less the film equivalent of what André Gide and Roger Martin du Gard<sup>10</sup> have deemed the ideal of composition in the novel: the perfect neutrality and transparency of style, which must not interpose any filter, any refractive index, between the reader's mind and the story. In consonance with Wyler, then, Toland has used in *The Best Years of Our Lives* a technique distinctly different from the one he used in *Citizen Kane* (1941). First the lighting: Welles preferred chiaroscuro lighting, that is, lighting that is harsh and subtle at the same time; he wanted large areas of semidarkness penetrated by rays of light with which he and the actors could skillfully play. Wyler asked Toland only for lighting as neutral as possible, which would not be artistic or even dramatic, but simply honest lighting that would sufficiently illuminate the actors and the surrounding set. It is a comparison between the lenses Toland used, however, that will enable us to understand better the difference between the two techniques. The wide-angle lenses of *Citizen Kane*, on the one hand, strongly distort perspective, and Welles exploits the resulting receding quality of the set. The lenses used in *The Best Years of Our Lives* on the other hand, conform more to the optics of normal vision and tend because of deep focus to foreshorten the image, that is to say, to spread it out on the surface of the screen. Wyler thus deprived himself, once again, of certain technical means at his disposal so that he can respect reality better. The requirement of Wyler's seems, by the way, to have complicated Toland's task; deprived of optical means he had to "diaphragm" (to regulate the amount of light entering the lens of the camera) far more, it seems, than had ever been done on any film in the world.

Sets, costumes, lights, and above all photography, each of these tends now to neutrality. This *mise en scène* seems to define itself through its absence, at least in the aspects we have studied. Wyler's efforts systematically work toward the creation of a film universe that not only rigorously conforms to reality

but also is as little modified as possible by cinematic optics. Paradoxically, even though enormous technical skill was necessary to shoot scenery built to realistic dimensions and to “diaphragm” a long take, Wyler obtains (and wants) on the screen only a picture that resembles as closely as possible, despite the inevitable formal elements required to create it, the spectacle that an eye could see if it looked at reality through an empty framing device.<sup>11</sup>

This experiment could not take place without a change in editing as well. First, for rather evident technical reasons, the average number of shots in a film diminishes as a function of their realism, of the long take with its respect for continuous time and unfragmented space. We know that talking films have fewer shots than silent films. Color in turn further diminished the number of shots, and Rogan Leenhardt,<sup>12</sup> adopting one of Georges Neveux’s<sup>13</sup> hypotheses, could maintain with some credibility that the cutting of the 3-D film would naturally recover the number of scenes in Shakespeare’s plays: around fifty. One understands indeed that the more the image tends to resemble reality, the more complex the psycho-technical problem of editing becomes. Sound had already created problems for “associational montage,” which, in fact, was almost completely replaced by analytical editing; depth of field has made of each change in camera placement a technical *tour de force*. It is in this sense that we must understand Wyler’s esteem for his cameraman. Indeed, Toland’s talent does not lie in a particularly deep knowledge of the properties of the film stock itself, but above all in an ability to maintain a consistent flow from image to image, besides his sense of framing, about which I will speak again later. Toland maintains a consistent flow not only in the sense that he creates a sharp surface in the conventional shots, but also because he creates the same surface even when he must encompass the entire mass of set, lights, and actors within a virtually unlimited field.

But the determinism of this technique perfectly suited Wyler’s purposes. The composition of a scene into shots is an operation that is necessarily artificial. The same aesthetic calculation that made Wyler choose depth-of-focus shooting was bound to lead him in his mind to reduce to a minimum the number of shots necessary to convey the narrative clearly. As a matter of fact, *The Best Years of Our Lives* does not have more than 190 shots per hour, which is approximately 500 shots for a film of two hours and 40 minutes. Let us recall here that contemporary films have an average of 300 to 400 shots per hour, in other words, more or less double that of this film. Let us remember in addition *that Antoine and Antoinette* (1947, dir. Jacques Becker), which undoubtedly represents the absolute opposite in technique from Wyler’s film, has some 1,200 shots for one hour and 50 minutes of projection time. Shots of more than two minutes in duration are not infrequent in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, without even the slightest reframing to compensate for their stasis. In fact, there is no trace of “associational montage” in such *mise en scène*. Even classical editing, which is the aesthetic of the relationship between shots, is drastically reduced: the shot and the sequence tend to fuse. Many of the scenes in *The Best Years of Our Lives* have the unity or discreteness of a Shakespearean scene and are shot as a result in a single long take. Here again, a comparison of this film with the films of Welles clearly shows different aesthetic intentions, although these intentions are based upon techniques that are in part similar. Because of its realistic quality, depth-of-focus shooting was bound to lead the director of *Citizen Kane* to also identify shot with sequence. Remember, for instance, the scene where Susan takes poison, the scene of the falling out between Kane and Jed Leland, and, in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), the admirable long scene in the carriage with the endless tracking shot that the final reframing reveals to have been an actual one and not a traveling matte. Another example in the same film is the scene in the kitchen where young George stuffs himself with cake while talking with Aunt Fanny. But Welles uses depth of field for purposes of extreme contrast. The deep-focus shots correspond in his aesthetics to a certain way of rendering reality, to which other ways of rendering it are opposed, such as those of the “March of Time



newsreel<sup>14</sup> and, above all, the compressed time of the several series of lap dissolves that sum up long portions of the story. The rhythm and the structure of events are thus modified by the dialectics of Welles's narrative technique. Not so with Wyler. The aesthetic of each shot remains constant; the narrative method aims only at a maximum of clarity and, through this clarity, at a maximum of dramatic efficiency.

At this point in my analysis, the reader may wonder where the *mise en scène* is in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. It is true that all my analysis so far has attempted to demonstrate its absence. But before considering finally the concrete aspects of so paradoxical a technique, I would like to avoid another misunderstanding. Even though Wyler has systematically sought to create a perfectly neutral dramatic universe, sometimes creating in the process technical problems never before encountered in film, it would be naive to mistake this neutrality for an absence of art. Just as the respect for dramatic form and theatrical representation in the adaptation of *The Little Foxes* conceals subtle aesthetic modifications, the arduous yet skillful achievement of neutrality implies here the advance neutralization of numerous film conventions. Whether it be the nearly unavoidable technical devices (which also carry with them almost inevitably certain aesthetic conventions), or editing methods imposed by custom, courage and imagination were needed if the director wanted to do without them. It is rather common to praise a writer for the austerity of his style, and Stendhal is after all admired for writing in the unadorned manner of the French Civil Code: he is never suspected of intellectual laziness for doing so.<sup>15</sup> Earlier I compared Wyler's concern to achieve a perfect neutrality and transparency of style with Gide's and Martin de Gard's concern to define the ideal style for the novel. It is true that this preliminary "stripping away," in film as in the novel, takes its full meaning and value only from the artwork that it makes possible and for which it paradoxically provides the necessary grounding. But I still have to demonstrate this.

In the article from which I quoted above, Wyler did not hide the confidence he had in Toland to compose shots on the set. What is more, he confirmed this in person to me, and it is easy to believe him when we carefully examine the shots. The happy collaboration of the two men on this film, which would be exceptional in a French studio, can be accounted for by the fact that they had already made six films together. Consequently, since he relied on his cameraman's judgment and on their artistic concurrence, Wyler did not use a shooting script. Each scene had to find its technical solution on the set. A lot of preparatory work was done before the photographing of each scene, but this work had nothing to do with the actual shooting. The *mise en scène* in this film, then, concentrated wholly on the actors. The space filled by the individual actor, already cut off and limited by the frame of the screen, was additionally robbed by Wyler of significance in and of itself, so that the entire dramatic spectrum polarized by the actors would attract the focus. Almost all Wyler's shots are built like an equation, perhaps better, like a dramatic mechanism whose parallelogram of forces can almost be drawn with geometrical lines. This may not be an original discovery on my part: to be sure, every true director organizes the movement of his actors within the coordinates of the screen according to laws that are so obscure but whose spontaneous perception is part of his talent. Everyone knows, for instance, that the dominant character must be higher in the frame than the dominated one.

But, aside from the fact that Wyler knows how to give his implicit stagings an exceptional clarity and strength, his originality lies in the discovery of a few laws that are his own and, above all, in the use of depth of field as an additional coordinate. My analysis of Marshall's death in *The Little Foxes* clearly reveals how Wyler can make a whole scene revolve around one actor. Bette Davis at the center of the screen is paralyzed, like a hoot owl by a spotlight, and around her the staggering Marshall weaves as a second, this time mobile, pole, whose shift first out of the frame and then into the background, draws with it all the dramatic attention. In addition, this creates tremendous suspense because it is a doubt

disappearance from the frame and because the focus on the staircase at the back is imperfect. One can see here how Wyler uses depth of field. The intention in *The Best Years of Our Lives* was always to keep the depth of field continuous within the frame, but Wyler did not have the same reason for using the method of shooting in *The Little Foxes*. The director elected to have Toland envelop the character of the dying Marshall in a certain haziness, to have his cinematographer, as it were, befog the back of the frame. This was done to create additional anxiety in the viewer, so much anxiety that he would almost want to push the immobile Bette Davis aside to have a better look. The dramatic development of this scene does indeed follow that of the dialogue and of the action itself, but the scene's cinematic expression superimposes its own evolution upon the dramatic development: a second action that is the very story of the scene from the moment Marshall gets up from his chair to his collapse on the staircase.

Now here is, from *The Best Years of Our Lives*, a dramatic construction built around three characters: the scene of the falling out between Dana Andrews and Teresa Wright. This scene is set in a bar. Fredric March has just convinced Andrews to break off with his daughter and urges him to call her immediately. Andrews gets up and goes toward the telephone booth located near the door, at the back of the room. March leans on a piano in the foreground and pretends to get interested in the musical exercise that the crippled sailor (Harold Russell) is learning to play with his hooks. The field of the camera begins with the keyboard of the piano large in the foreground, includes March and Russell in an "American shot,"<sup>16</sup> encompasses the whole barroom, and distinctly shows in the background a tiny Andrews in the telephone booth. This shot is clearly built upon two dramatic poles and three characters. The action in the foreground is secondary, although interesting and peculiar enough to require our keen attention since it occupies a privileged place and surface on the screen. Paradoxically, the true action, the one that constitutes at this precise moment a turning point in the story, develops almost clandestinely in a tiny rectangle at the back of the room—in the left corner of the screen.

The link between these two dramatic areas is provided by March, who, with the viewer, is the only one that knows what is going on in the telephone booth and who, according to the logic of the scene, is impressed, like us, by the musical prowess of the crippled seaman. From time to time, March turns his head slightly and glances across the room, anxiously scrutinizing the behavior of Andrews. Finally, the latter hangs the telephone up and, without turning to the men at the piano, suddenly disappears into the street. If we reduce the real action of this scene to its essence, we are left with Andrews' telephone call. This telephone conversation is the only thing of immediate interest to us. The one character whose face we would like to see in close-up is precisely the person whom we cannot clearly discern because of his position in the background and because of the glass surrounding the booth. His words themselves are of course inaudible. The true drama occurs, then, far away in a kind of little aquarium that reveals only what appear to be the trivial and ritual gestures of an ordinary phone call. Depth of field is used here for the same purpose it was used in Marshall's death scene in *The Little Foxes*. The position of the camera is such that the laws of perspective produce the same effect created by the haziness enveloping the staircase in the background: even as we felt anxiety because we couldn't view the dying Marshall clearly on the stairs, we feel anxiety because we cannot distinctly see Andrews in the phone booth at the back, nor can we hear him.

The idea of situating the telephone booth at the back of the room, thereby obliging the viewer to figure out what is happening there and obliging him to participate in March's anxiety, was in itself an excellent directorial device. However, Wyler immediately felt that by itself it destroyed the spatial and temporal balance of the shot. He therefore set out at once to counterbalance and to reinforce the action in the phone booth. Hence the idea of a diverting action *in the foreground*, secondary in itself, whose spatial prominence would be conversely proportional to its dramatic significance. The action in the

foreground is secondary, not insignificant, and the viewer cannot ignore it because he is also interested in the fate of the crippled sailor and because he doesn't see someone play the piano with hooks every day. Forced to wait for Andrews to finish his call in the phone booth and unable to see him well, the viewer is obliged furthermore to divide his attention between this same booth and the scene at the piano. Thus Wyler killed two birds with one stone: first, the diversion of the piano allows him to extend as long as possible a shot that would otherwise have seemed endless and consequently monotonous; second, and more important, this parasitic pole of attraction organizes the image dramatically and spatially. The reaction at the phone booth is juxtaposed against the action at the piano, which directs the attention of the viewer almost against his will to itself, where it is supposed to be, for as long as it is supposed to be there. Thus the viewer is induced actively to participate in the drama planned by the director.

I should mention, for the sake of accuracy, that this scene is interrupted twice by close-ups of March glancing toward the phone booth. Wyler probably feared that the viewer might become too absorbed in the piano playing and gradually forget the action in the background. He therefore cautiously took a few "safety shots"—the close-ups of March—which focus completely on the main action: the dramatic link between March and Andrews. The editing process probably revealed that two interpolated shots were necessary and sufficient to recapture the diverted attention of the viewer. This degree of caution, by the way, is characteristic of Wyler's technique. Welles would have placed only the telephone booth in the frame, filmed it in deep focus, and would have let the booth forcefully call attention to itself through its position in the background; he would also have held the shot as long as necessary. The thing is that, for Welles, depth of field is in itself an aesthetic end; for Wyler, depth of field is subject to the dramatic demands of the *mise en scène*, and in particular to the clarity of the narrative. The two interpolated shots amount to a sort of attention-getter: a rerouting of the viewer's eye.

Wyler particularly likes to build his *mise en scène* on the tension created in a shot by the coexistence of two actions of unequal significance. This is clearly discernible once again in a shot from the last sequence of *The Best Years of Our Lives*. The characters grouped on the right, in the middle ground, apparently constitute the main dramatic pole, since nearly everyone is assembled here for the wedding of the crippled sailor and his long-time sweetheart. In fact, however, since their marriage is now to be taken for granted, the attention of the viewer focuses on Teresa Wright (in white in the third plane) and Dan Andrews (on the left in the foreground), who meet for the first time since their breakup. During the entire wedding scene, Wyler skillfully directs his actors in order gradually to isolate from the wedding party Andrews and Wright, who, the viewer feels, cannot stop thinking about each other. The still normally reproduced corresponds to the intermediary stage between the entrance of the wedding party into the room and the coming together of Andrews and Wright. These two characters have not yet reunited, but the shift of the wedding party to the right of the frame, which seems so natural but is actually contrived by Wyler, clearly reveals their connection. Wright's white dress, which is located almost in the middle of the image, constitutes a dramatic boundary between the two components of the action. The two lovers are the only ones in the scene to be spatially, and logically, set apart on the left side of the screen.

We should also notice in this shot the importance of the looks the characters direct at one another. These always constitute with Wyler the foundation of the *mise en scène*.<sup>17</sup> The viewer has only to follow these looks as if they were pointed index fingers in order to understand exactly the director's intentions. One could easily trace the paths of the characters' eyes on the screen and thereby make visible, as clearly as iron filings make visible the field of a magnet, the dramatic currents that flow across the image. All of Wyler's pre-production work consists, as I have suggested, of simplifying to a maximum the technical aspects of the *mise en scène*, so as to free him to compose each shot as clearly

and effectively as possible. In *The Best Years of Our Lives* he reaches an almost abstract austerity. A the dramatic joints are so conspicuous that a few degrees' shift in the angle of a glance would not only be clearly visible even to the most obtuse viewer, but would also be capable of causing an entire scene to lose its symmetry, as if this shift in the angle of glance were extra weight added to a perfectly balanced scale.

Perhaps one of the distinctive qualities of a skillful "scientist" of *mise en scène* is that he avoids proceeding from a preestablished aesthetics. Here again Wyler is at the opposite end from Welles, who came to the cinema with the declared intention of creating certain aesthetic effects out of it. For a long time Wyler labored on obscure Westerns whose titles nobody remembers. It is through this work on Westerns, work not as an aesthete but as a craftsman, that he became the recognized artist whose *Dodsworth* (1936) had already revealed. When he speaks of his directing, it is always in regard to the viewer: his one and only concern is to make the viewer understand the action as precisely and fully as possible. Wyler's immense talent lies in this "science of clarity" obtained through the austerity of the form as well as through equal humility toward his subject matter and his audience. There is in him a sort of genius about his profession, about all things cinematic, which allowed him to stretch an economy of means so far that, paradoxically, he invented one of the most personal styles in contemporary cinema. To attempt to describe this style, however, we had to pretend first that it was an absence of style.

Cinema is like poetry. It would be foolish to imagine cinema as an isolated element that one could capture on celluloid and project on a screen through a magnifying lens. Such pure cinema can be combined as much with a sentimental drama as with the colored cubes, i.e., the abstractions, of Fischinger.<sup>18</sup> The cinema is not any kind of independent matter, whose molecules have to be isolated at any cost. Rather, cinema is that matter once it has achieved an aesthetic state. It is a means for representing a narrative-spectacle. Experience proves sufficiently that one should be careful not to identify the cinema with any given aesthetic or, what is more, with any style, any concrete form that the director must absolutely use, as he would salt and pepper. Cinematic "purity" or values or, more accurately in my opinion, the cinematic "coefficient" of a film, must be calculated on the basis of the effectiveness of the *mise en scène*.

Paradoxically, insofar as Wyler has never attempted to hide the novelistic or theatrical nature of most of his scripts, he has made all the more apparent the cinematic phenomenon in its utmost purity. No director once has the *auteur* of *The Best Years of Our Lives* or *Jezebel* said to himself a priori that he had to have a "cinematic look"; still, nobody can tell a story in cinematic terms better than he. For him, the action is expressed first by the actor. Like a director in the theater, Wyler conceives of his job as enhancing the action as beginning with the actor. The set and the camera are there only to permit the actor to focus upon himself the maximum dramatic intensity; they are not there to create a meaning unto themselves. Even though Wyler's approach is also that of the theater director, the latter has at his disposal only the very limited means of the stage. He can manipulate his means, but no matter what he does, the text and the actor constitute the essence of theatrical production.

Film is not at all, as Marcel Pagnol naively would have it, magnified theater on screen, the stage viewed constantly through opera glasses. The size of the image or unity of time has nothing to do with it. Cinema begins when the frame of the screen and the placement of the camera are used to enhance the action and the actor. In *The Little Foxes*, Wyler has changed almost nothing of the drama, of the text, or even the set: one could say that he limited himself to directing the play in the way that a theater director would have directed it, and furthermore, that he used the frame of the screen to conceal certain parts of the set and used the camera to bring the viewer closer to the action. What actor would not dream of being able to play a scene, immobile on a chair, in front of 5,000 viewers who don't miss the slightest



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