

I ask this because, until the other day when faced with the task of writing this review of a new selection of Bazin's major writings, I realize that for many years I hadn't actually read him myself. The four volumes of the original *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (1958–65) have lain neglected on my bookshelf, occasionally disturbed when I needed to check them for some minor detail of translation, but certainly unread in any serious sense.

Reading him again has been a revelation. I always thought of him as a great thinker but a poor stylist, whether read in the original or in any of the existing translations. Now I am more forgiving. The clumsy sentences (and there are many) are almost all the fruit of an intense struggle not just to express some crucial thought but to communicate it, and a thought, moreover, whose communication was urgent. The things he was saying needed to be grasped in their entirety if people were to understand, not just what cinema was, but why it mattered.

What was cinema, then, for Bazin and his contemporaries? The past tense here is important. Bazin and his editors (Jacques Rivette and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze in particular) were asking a question of the present, that of a postwar France multiply divided between ex-resisters and ex-collaborators, between pro- and anti-Communists, between (as ever) Catholics and secularists. Divided too into those who went to the cinema for Saturday-night entertainment and those who felt that cinema was, or should be, something more than that—or not only that but something more as well. Bazin was mainly read by people who believed in cinema as something more as well, but he also wanted to coax out of their philistinism people who thought that either only art cinema was art or that cinema was not art at all. Moreover his situation was a conflicted one. He was temperamentally left-wing but in polemic with the Stalinist left, a Catholic but hostile to right-wing Catholic bigotry, and an avant-gardist but one who believed that the self-styled avant-gardes had been historically superseded.

All Bazin's essays are about what cinema shares with other more established art forms while being in some fundamental way different from all of them. And all in some way or other address the situation in which he found himself. They take as a starting point the idea that not just film culture but culture as a whole was being rebuilt on a new basis. American films were flowing back onto French screens. (*Citizen Kane*, released in the U.S. in 1941, did not make it to France until 1946.) Italy, with neorealism (or, as he calls it, "the Italian school of the Liberation"), was building a new cinema out of the ashes of Fascism and war. What might this all mean for film culture in France?

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***What is Cinema?*
by André Bazin**

Who actually reads Bazin these days—apart, that is, from university lecturers and their students, poring over PDFs or photocopies of "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" or "De Sica: Metteur en Scène"? And, above all, who reads him as a man of his time, rather than a purveyor of timeless truths—or non-truths, as the lecturer has more likely just told you?

One of the many merits of Timothy Barnard's new edition is that it puts Bazin back into history. The translation restores some of the urgency of the writing, while the copious footnotes supply much-needed context. Two of Barnard's footnotes are of particular interest. One, rather speculative, posits a possible indirect Brechtian influence on Bazin's ideas about the intrinsic differences between theater and cinema. And the other, which is trenchant and factual and speculative only on the margins, concerns the meaning of the French word *découpage*, often translated into English as "editing" or "cutting." *Découpage* in French means many things, from carving a fowl or joint to the shooting script for a film. What it does *not* mean is film editing (which is always *montage*). English translators, not just of Bazin, almost invariably get this wrong (Jonathan Rosenbaum and Tom Milne stand out as exceptions). What *découpage* really means is the way a film *in potentia*, as idea or as notated in a script, segments itself into scenes, sequences, shots, etc. The way Bazin uses it, the term *découpage* also embraces elements of *mise-en-scène*—at least to the extent that the visual content of a shot is already present in the filmmaker's mind, along with the inevitable need for shot transitions, prior to actual shooting. Failure to grasp this, Barnard argues, has led to serious misunderstanding of Bazin in the English-speaking world—as serious, I would add, as the mechanical assumption that there is something intrinsically "Bazinian" about the use of the long take (Warhol? Jancsó?). To understand quite how important this is, read Bazin's essay "William Wyler, or the Jansenist of *Mise en Scène*."

Barnard's selection of texts overlaps substantially with the first of the existing two volumes issued under the same title, *What Is Cinema?*, by University of California Press in 1967 and 1971, translated by Hugh Gray. It adds the Wyler essay and also contains Bazin's synoptic essay on neorealism, "Cinematic realism and the Italian School of the Liberation." It is far more scholarly than the existing edition, both in its annotations and in the quality of the translation, which is both elegant and accurate. (The publisher's website, www.caboosebooks.net, has testimonials to the qualities of the new edition from many leading scholars but to know just how error-strewn the original translation was, and has long been known to be, readers should go back to Richard Roud's excoriating review in *Sight and Sound*, spring 1968.)

For copyright reasons the new edition is only being offered for sale in Canada and a few other countries which did not sign up to the recent extension of copyright to seventy

years from an author's death. Bazin died in 1958, so in theory U.S., British, and Australian readers might have to wait until 2028 before finding it in a bookstore. This would be a pity and I hope that librarians will seek it out and thereby make it available to the students and scholars who rightly still read Bazin's seminal texts. © 2011 Geoffrey Nowell-Smith

GEOFFREY NOWELL-SMITH is the author of *Making Waves: New Cinemas of the 1960s* (Continuum, 2008).

BOOK DATA André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, ed. and trans. Timothy Barnard. Montreal: Caboose, 2009. \$CAN 50.00 cloth. 354 pages.