

What Is Cinema?

A new translation for André Bazin's *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*

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Bien que publié il y a maintenant plus de cinquante ans, le célèbre *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* d'André Bazin n'a pas encore eu droit à une édition critique. C'est ce que propose cette nouvelle traduction en langue anglaise due au traducteur-éditeur-professeur de cinéma montréalais Timothy Barnard.

L'appareil critique (quelque 60 pages!) qui complète le texte de Bazin comprend aussi bien de brèves biographies que des textes théoriques, parfois polémiques, sur des questions aussi fondamentales que, par exemple, la différence entre *montage* et *découpage*.

Deux ajouts particulièrement importants de cette édition sont constitués par un essai sur Jean Painlevé, publié dans l'édition française originale de 1958, mais jamais traduit en anglais, et l'hypothèse, mise de l'avant par Barnard, que le Rosenkratz, mentionné par Bazin dans son article de 1937 « Théâtre et cinéma », ne serait nul autre que Siegfried Kracauer...

Voici donc la traduction de Bazin en langue anglaise la plus juste, la plus réfléchie et la plus inspirée à ce jour. Et la masse d'informations proposée par le texte de présentation et par l'appareil critique en font un ouvrage encore plus exceptionnel.

P.S. Contrepoint ironique : pour de mystérieuses raisons de droits d'auteur, ce livre que souhaitera posséder tout chercheur en cinéma ne peut être acheté, semble-t-il, que sur le territoire canadien...

More than 50 years since its first publication in 1958, there is still no critical edition of André Bazin's *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, one of the most widely recognized classics of film theory and criticism. This realization provides the rationale for a new English translation of the book, a bold editorial venture with virtually no precedent in the field. Timothy Barnard, a professional translator from Montréal with a strong background in film – he is the author of an outstanding essay on the role of the projectionist in early cinema, published in 2002 for the scholarly journal *Framework* – has taken the role of a film studies maverick by presenting his own annotated version of Bazin in a beautifully produced volume designed by himself and distributed by a publishing company of his own, Caboose Books.

Often regarded as a mere contracted worker for academic projects, the translator takes center stage and claims full responsibility for the interpretation of a creative work. This alone would make this version of *What Is Cinema?* a remarkable achievement, the long overdue vindication of an unsung hero of the printed word. But there is more: Barnard has taken up the multiple challenge of cleaning up the apparent mess created by previous English versions of Bazin's work, commenting upon a number of key passages and concepts, and making Bazin's prose more accessible and enjoyable than ever before. The result is a passionate, idiosyncratic mixture of scholarship and subjectivity, and – in a strange, fascinating way – a political statement on the uses and misuses of language.

Not many readers may be aware, for instance, that Canadian English is a language with its own distinctive features, "a modern and dynamic but at the same time traditional and elegant hybrid" of American style and vocabulary, and British punctuation and spellings. Barnard admits that Canadian English is "a fast-disappearing species", and it shows: the use of terms such as "present" ("the present volume", "the present translator") are likely to sound odd to the majority of English-speaking readers; similarly, one wonders how to treat Barnard's self-deprecating admission that his notes to the text should be taken as "a grab-bag of perfunctory remarks".

The truth of the matter is that the extensive notes compiled for this book are far from being "perfunctory" (in the English or American sense of the word). In more than 60 pages (almost one-fifth of the whole book) Barnard has covered a dazzling array of topics, from brief biographies of the people mentioned in Bazin's original to a breathtaking discussion – 22 pages in all – of the difference between *montage* and *découpage*, including a stern critique of Noël Burch, David Bordwell, and their definition of the term *découpage*. In a generous but ultimately perplexing move, Barnard has also decided to repeat some of the notes from one chapter to another, "in anticipation that [Bazin's] essays will sometimes be read separately"; which means, for instance, that we are treated with the very same definition of the *Commedia dell'arte* no less than five times within the notes section. Unfortunately, the same kind of user-friendly approach had not been adopted in the Index of Names, which covers Bazin's text but not the notes themselves.

Aunque el célebre libro de André Bazin *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* haya sido publicado hace más de cincuenta años, aún no ha sido objeto de una edición crítica. En cierto sentido, es lo que propone la nueva traducción inglesa de Timothy Barnard, traductor, editor y profesor de Montreal.

Un aparato crítico de alrededor de 60 páginas completa el texto de Bazin e incluye biografías y ensayos teóricos, a veces polémicos, sobre cuestiones tan fundamentales como, por ejemplo, la diferencia entre *montaje* y *guión definitivo*.

Dos elementos importantes de esta edición son un ensayo sobre Jean Painlevé, cuyo texto francés, publicado en 1958, nunca había sido traducido al inglés y la hipótesis, propuesta por Barnard, de que el Rosenkrantz mencionado por Bazin en su artículo «Théâtre et cinéma» (1937), sería nada menos que Siegfried Kracauer...

Es ésta, pues, la traducción inglesa más precisa, meditada e inspirada de Bazin. Y la cantidad de informaciones que figuran en el texto de presentación y el aparato crítico la convierte en una obra del todo excepcional.

PD. Contrapunto irónico: por razones misteriosas de derechos de autor, parece ser que este libro, que todo investigador de cine desearía poseer, puede ser comprado sólo en territorio canadiense ...

I hasten to add that getting accustomed to the translator's unusual methodology is amply rewarded by at least two important items. The first is Bazin's short essay "On Jean Painlevé", included in the first volume of *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* published in 1958 but never translated into English (another essay, on Jacques Tati, also reproduced in the book, had previously appeared in what Barnard calls "an obscure reference volume", Lucy Fischer's *Jacques Tati: A Guide to References and Resources*, published in Boston by G.K. Hall in 1983; translation by Walter Albert). The second item may constitute Barnard's most intriguing discovery. In the second part of Bazin's essay "Theatre and Film" there is a reference to an article on the same subject, allegedly published in 1937 in the journal *Esprit* and signed "M. Rosenkrantz". Barnard points out that the essay actually appeared in 1934; "M. Rosenkrantz" (Bazin had misspelled the name) was probably a pseudonym, but the real identity of the author is still unknown.

After having assumed that "M. Rosenkrantz" had something to do with Bertolt Brecht, or at least with his theory of "spectatorial 'alienation'", Barnard has come up with strong circumstantial evidence that the author of the *Esprit* essay may have been no less than Siegfried Kracauer. By the translator's own admission, this evidence surfaced only a few weeks before the book went to press, and it therefore requires a much closer and more extensive scrutiny; however, the arguments brought forward by Barnard are compelling indeed (with deadpan understatement, Barnard admits that his hypothesis may be "sheepishly stricken from future editions" of the book in the event that "M. Rosenkrantz" actually existed).

"Canadian" or not, this is the most accurate, thoughtful, and inspired translation of Bazin (or, for that matter, of any French film theorist) into English we have seen in a very long time. Barnard's own nationality and his bilingual status have given him the technical resources required to transfer Bazin's language in a faithful and yet transparent prose, a rather uncommon feature in the recent literature on film theory. What makes the book so unique, however, is the sheer mass of information contained in the foreword and in the book's critical apparatus. We will discover, among other things, that Bazin's quote from André Malraux in "Ontology of the Photographic Image" does not exist in any of Malraux's published works, hence raising many conjectures on its origins; speaking of Malraux, he is quoted as having written in 1940 that "the average shot length today is ten seconds" (Barnard, p. 255): an astonishingly precise estimate, given that Barry Salt had later determined – with a much more sophisticated set of analytical tools – that the average shot length of an American film of the period 1946-50 was 10.5 seconds (*ibid.*, p. 284)!

In an ironic twist of fate, due to the intricacies of current copyright laws (also exposed by Barnard in his foreword), this version of *Qu'est-ce le cinéma?* can apparently be bought only in Canada. Any serious film scholar interested in theory – and, for that matter, any film library – should make the extra effort necessary to obtain a copy of the book, as this edition of Bazin's *What Is Cinema?* is likely to be remembered for its unusual (and immensely enjoyable) critical apparatus as much as for its core text. Make no mistake: Timothy Barnard should be given a place of honor within the editorial team in charge of the comparative edition he so passionately advocates.

André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Translated by Timothy Barnard. Montréal: Caboose, 2009, 338 pages, hardbound. ISBN 978-0-981 1914-0-9; www.caboosebooks.net.