

WHAT IS CINEMA?

ANDRÉ BAZIN

TRANSLATED BY TIMOTHY BARNARD

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*For an Impure Cinema: In Defence of Adaptation*

It thus seems as if cinema's themes have exhausted what it could expect to receive from technique. It is no longer enough to invent rapid editing or to alter one's film style in order to move the audience. Film has imperceptibly entered the age of the script. By this I mean that there has been a reversal in the relations between form and substance. Not to the point that form has become immaterial; on the contrary, it has never been more strictly determined by the material of film itself, never been more necessary or subtle. But the whole science around form has entered into a period of self-effacement and transparency in the face of subjects which we appreciate today for their own sake and towards which we are increasingly exacting. Like a river that has dug its bed as deep as it can and has the strength only to carry its water to the sea without taking a further grain of sand from its banks, film is approaching its equilibrium profile. The days are gone when it was enough to 'make cinema' to merit the status of art. While we wait for colour or three dimensions to restore, temporarily, the primacy of form and to set in motion a new cycle of aesthetic erosion, cinema has nothing left to achieve on its surface. It must irrigate its banks and encroach upon them insidiously; it must infiltrate the substratum and bore invisible galleries. The time may yet return for a resurgence, for a cinema independent of literature and theatre—possibly, however, because novels will be written directly onto film.

While we wait for the dialectic of art history to restore this desirable and hypothetical autonomy, film is assimilating the tremendous capital of the subjects developed and gathered around it by its neighbours over the course of hundreds of years. It borrows them because it needs them, and because we wish to rediscover them through it.

In doing so, it will not take their place; on the contrary, the success of filmed theatre serves the theatre, as literary adaptation serves literature. *Hamlet* on the screen can only broaden the readership for Shakespeare, and at least some of these readers will be inspired to go see him on the stage. Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* has increased the number of readers of Bernanos tenfold. In truth, there is no competition or replacement at work, only the addition of a new dimension, one gradually lost by the other arts since the Renaissance: an audience.

And who will complain about that?