Calling things by their right names: *découpage* and the caboose connection
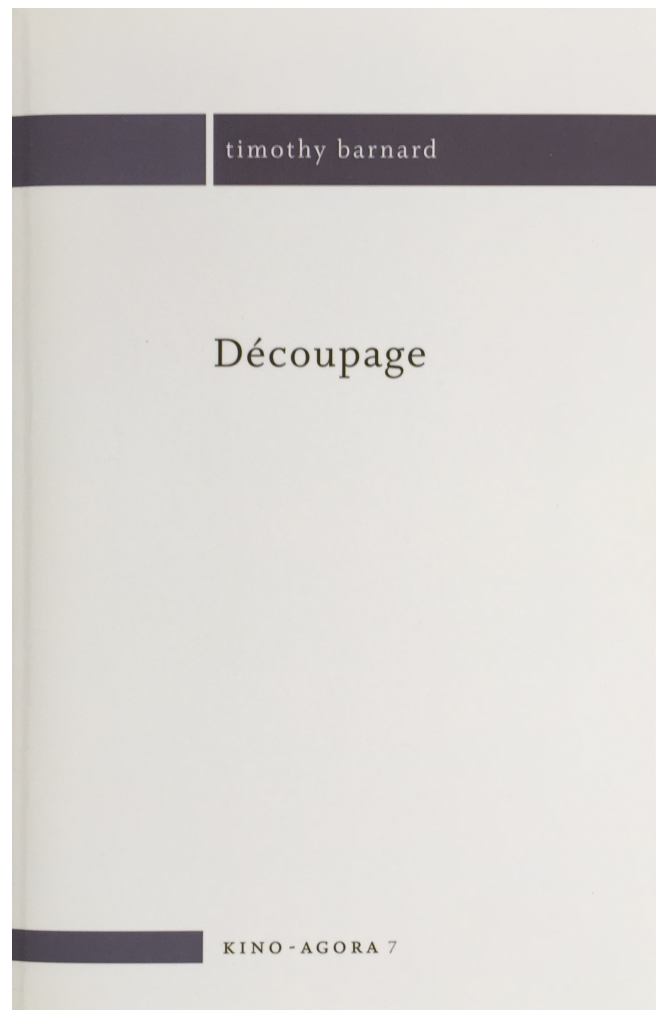
caboose is the Canadian independent publisher that in 2009 published Timothy Barnard's now widely celebrated translation of selected essays by André Bazin. Since then, the first eight titles in the innovative Kino-Agora series, described as essays in book form, have appeared. caboose has also published translations of Jean-Luc Godard's *Introduction to the True History of Film and Television* and of André Bazin's almost unknown article 'Découpage', the first version of perhaps his most famous work, translated by Barnard as 'The Evolution of Film Language'.

Unfortunately, for copyright reasons Barnard's translation is available for direct sale in very few countries outside Canada, but it has already become essential reading for anyone interested in Bazin and the central ideas that informed his work.[1] While celebrating the whole caboose enterprise, my focus here will be more limited. Three of the Kino-Agora titles in particular, linked by their concern with film form – *Montage* by Jacques Aumont (2013 and 2014),[2] *Mise en scène* by Frank Kessler (2014), and *Découpage* by Timothy Barnard (2014) (shortly to be collected in a single volume) – are of considerable interest for film criticism. Most striking, and most significant in terms of the central concerns of this journal, is Barnard's *Découpage*, which develops key aspects of his Bazin translation. His treatment of *découpage* in the two volumes both transforms the ways in which Bazin's ideas have been commonly understood in the English speaking world and offers new perspectives on the history of film theory.

In the Bazin translation *découpage* is elucidated in a remarkable twenty page note that arises from the first occurrence of the term in the essay 'William Wyler, the Jansenist of Mise en Scène'. Barnard explains that he will retain the word *découpage* in his translations, leaving it in French and italicised, in line with the practice of some previous Bazin translators – but notably not of Hugh Gray in the University of California volumes of *What is Cinema?* (1967 and 1971), through which many English language readers will first have encountered Bazin's work. Gray almost invariably translates *découpage* as 'editing' or 'cutting', with the result, Barnard argues, of hugely distorting Bazin's meaning. By retaining the French word, Barnard wants to stress the significance of the concept for Bazin and to avoid camouflaging it by translation.

In order to make clear its importance Barnard undertakes a kind of critical excavation of the term in French thought. Rooted in the verb *découper* ('to cut up, the way one would cut up a piece of paper' [Bazin [1958] 2009: 262]) *découpage* led in one direction to the term *découpage technique*, that could be translated as finished script, shooting script or even storyboard, and in the other to *découpage* as a process or plan. Here, Barnard explains that translation is more hazardous. 'Scene breakdown', 'scene conception' or 'scene construction' carry something of the term's significance but he argues that for Bazin, drawing on uses of the term that developed in the 1930s, it came to refer: 'to the process of organizing the *profilmic* and visualising a film's narrative and mise en scène […]' (264).

For readers of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, Christian Keathley, editor of the Kino-Agora series, has already provided an excellent guide to central aspects of *découpage* and an eloquent case for its potential role in style-based criticism (2012: 67-72). (Readers are referred to the article for important aspects of Bazin's use of

découpage that I do not engage with here.) Keathley, writing before the publication of Barnard's Kino-Agora essay, draws in particular on the most practical dimension of the term as Barnard describes it in his long note. In line with the quotation above, Keathley writes: '*Découpage* is a formal plan, prepared in advance of shooting, a visualisation that is designed in relationship to the narrative / dramatic material' (2012: 69). Similarly, but with a slightly different emphasis, Barnard writes a little later in the note: '*Découpage* involves the filmmaker, in tandem with the scriptwriter, cinematographer and other personnel (depending on one's attribution of film authorship and the production model and circumstances in play), deciding on the film's treatment before and during the film shoot' (265-6). *Découpage* may be both a formal plan 'prepared in advance of shooting' (perhaps alternatively a *découpage technique*?), and also the process of visualisation ('visualising a film's narrative and mise en scène') before *and during* the shoot. Or, as Barnard puts it earlier: '[…] – as always, before (or during) the shoot and thus quite apart from editing' (264). (I will return to this relationship to editing.)

As Barnard develops his argument, though, other dimensions of the term come into play. Keathley refers to Barnard's quotation from an article by Roger Leenhardt that influenced Bazin: 'I have recently defined editing as being carried out after the fact on the exposed film and *découpage* as being carried out in the filmmaker's mind, on the subject to be filmed' (266). (Here again is the decisive distinction between *découpage* and editing.) But Barnard then

observes: 'It would be hard to imagine a more succinct and, with the comment "in the filmmaker's mind", more suggestive definition of *découpage*' (266).

'Suggestive' is an interesting word in this context. Elsewhere, Barnard refers to the emergence of *découpage* in the 1930s as taking on 'general and nebulous meaning' (264), in contrast to the term *découpage technique* or shooting script. This seems to be part of the potency but also potentially the problem of *découpage* as a concept: it straddles the informing ideas and images of the film and the stages of practical decision-making that gives them material form. Used most suggestively, it holds together imagining, visualisation and practical implementation in a conceptual magnetic field that seems naturally to invoke an individual vision: 'in the [singular] filmmaker's mind', as Leenhardt puts it. This is a rather different emphasis to that in the quotation from Barnard above, in which he includes other major creative personnel in the process of *découpage*.

In his Kino-Agora study, Barnard reflects further on these matters. *Découpage* could in fact enable us to bypass questions of authorship: it 'could simply be the term for how cinema works, explained not by authorial agency or intention, and much less by simply reading its finished products, but by the resources of the medium itself. […]. Here the focus shifts from divining artistic intention to analysis' (2014:18). This seems a remarkable shift. *Découpage* becomes, from this perspective, in addition to its central meanings, a gateway to understanding (and here Barnard quotes Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie) 'the film's structure as a series of shots and scenes, such that an attentive viewer might perceive them' (18-19). And the qualities of *découpage* in this context again take on much more than functional meaning:

> To speak of *découpage* is to refer to a process, a nebulous, ineffable, diffuse creative process which in order to discern requires that we plunge deeper into the work (and into the work of creating the work) and adopt a greater critical distance so as to be able to explore […] in the way an archaeologist would. (19)

From this further perspective, *découpage* looks two ways: in one direction at the processes of creation and in the other at the analytical work of the attentive viewer or critic who digs into the work to uncover what the processes of creation involved and what their outcomes have been. This passage links to and helps to explain the considerable claim in Barnard's long note that

> *découpage* is […] the foundation for the entire discipline of close analysis as a critical and literary genre which Bazin and his cohorts pioneered. With filmmaker and viewer both involved in a process of creatively conceiving and perceiving the work's formal treatment, critics were able to develop close analyses of that treatment. (2009: 270)

If 'formal treatment' makes this sound a little dry, the image of the viewer/critic engaged in a creative process of 'conceiving and perceiving' that parallels that of the filmmaker(s), is an attractive one for style-based criticism.

The distinction between *découpage* and editing touched on above is central to Barnard's argument about Bazin's meaning: editing comes after the film is shot; *découpage* designates the processes of conceiving, planning and realising the look and flow of the film. It therefore incorporates all the elements that make up each individual shot, together with what Bazin calls in the Wyler essay 'the aesthetic of the relationship between shots' (2009: 59 and 264), something that is often thought of as the preserve of editing. For Bazin, however, it was a vital part of the way the film is conceived ('changes in camera set-up, not editing, create the sequence of shots' [2014: 7]); shots are not random units to be assembled in the editing but are planned in relationship to one another. Barnard goes on: 'Editing and *découpage* [...] while mirroring each other, belong to two different stages of the film production process and suggest two very different conceptions of film art.' (2009: 265).

The idea of two different conceptions of film art is familiar from Bazin's 'The Evolution of Film Language', where it is famously expressed in terms of the contrast between 'filmmakers who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality' (88). In the long note and more elaborately in the Kino-Agora essay, Barnard places *découpage* at the heart of his reinterpretation of Bazin. He writes: '*Découpage* […] was for Bazin a deliberate means of claiming from editing, or 'montage', the mantle of the essence of film art' (267) ; and in his essay, structured in thirty-nine sections, each introduced by a quotation, he pursues the 'Ariadne's thread' of *découpage* into many corners of film theory. Seen in these terms 'editing' or 'montage' (Barnard writes usefully about the possible confusion between these terms in his translator's note to Bazin's 'Découpage' article [(1952) 2015: 27-29]) refer to processes of creating meaning from the juxtaposition of shots ('the abstract joining up of bits and pieces of reality in the editing booth' [2009: 267]), rather than of articulating shots to maintain continuity in ways anticipated by the way the shots were designed. Thus 'continuity' or 'analytical' editing, as developed in the Hollywood studio period 'is […] in fact analytical *découpage*' (2014: 6). If these forms of analytical *découpage* 'had dispensed with the bogeyman montage' (2009: 267), Bazin found in Orson Welles, William Wyler, Jean Renoir and Italian neo-realism what Barnard describes as 'the possibility of writing a film visually with a minimum of cutting up, whether in the mise en scène or through editing. This, for Bazin, was *découpage* in its purest form' (2009: 267).[3]

Taken across both publications, Barnard's argument about *découpage* is subtle and multi-faceted. He is also scrupulous in unpicking for the reader the less than straightforward evolution of the term in French. But the claims he makes for the significance of the concept are very far-reaching. *Découpage* is 'essential to Bazin's thought and it is thus imperative that we take note of this and understand it in translation' (274). A largely invisible concept in previous translations, it now appears in thirteen of the essays in the caboose *What is Cinema?* and Barnard argues that 'Its avoidance until now has given rise to every possible deformation of [Bazin's] thought' (274).[4] The Kino-Agora study develops the thesis about Bazin but places it in broader perspectives through a remarkable selective tracing of *découpage* in French thought and of related concepts in both German and Russian. The structure, based on the (often brief) quotations is deliberately modest (this is not a history), but it represents a substantial challenge to reconsider received ideas about formative periods of film theory.

The central concept for a good deal of film criticism in the post-WWII period, however, both in France and Britain, was not *découpage* but mise-en-scène. In fact mise-en-scène is so woven into the history of detailed

analysis in film that the term 'mise-en-scène criticism' is often used to evoke a whole tradition of work focused on the significant organisation of the visual field, even when the concept itself is not always in evidence. Although the polemical force of *découpage* for Bazin may have been the means it offered, by incorporating the aesthetic of the relationship between shots, to claim 'from editing, or "montage", the mantle of the essence of film art' ([1958] 2009: 267), mise-en-scène was of course fundamental to the creative process it evoked. And yet, a later part of Barnard's narrative records the decline in Bazin's own use of the term and, very significantly for the future of film criticism, its almost total disappearance in the writings of 'the young turks', the future filmmakers of the Nouvelle Vague:

> What may seem remarkable, given the forceful case made for *découpage* by Astruc and Bazin […] is how systematically these younger critics shunned the term […] and how quickly it sank from view as this generation's mise en scène school of criticism took its place. (53)

As it happens, in addition to Frank Kessler's Kino-Agora essay, two major books have been recently published that also reflect in their markedly different ways on the history and current status of mise-en-scène in film criticism and theory. Kessler's very useful short study is largely concerned with uses of the term in French; he makes few references to work in English. John Gibbs traces a parallel history, the details of which remained little known even in Britain, of the initiatives in British journals of the post-WWII decades to establish film criticism based in detailed responses to film style (2013). Adrian Martin begins his ambitious journey 'From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art' in the words of his subtitle, (2014) by rooting his discussion in the history of the same period, citing ways in which, across several cultures, mise-en-scène as a concept was explored and practices of detailed criticism – sometimes referring to mise-en-scene and sometimes not – evolved.

Although *découpage* is marginal to the three writers (where it occurs at all) their work takes on additional interest in relation to the break Barnard identifies: the abandonment in French film criticism of *découpage* in favour of mise-en-scène. It is striking in this context, for instance, to read in Kessler's study this quotation from a 1967 interview with Francois Truffaut:

> what is mise en scene? It's the *putting together of the decisions made*, during the preparation, shooting and completion of a film. I think that all the options open to a director – of scripts, of what to leave out, of locations, actors, collaborators, camera angles, lenses, shot composition, sound, music – prompt him to make *decisions*, and what we call mise en scène is clearly the common denominator of all the thousands of *decisions* taken during those six, nine, twelve or sixteen months of work (quoted in 2014: 24, emphases in Kessler).

Coming to this after reading Barnard, what is striking is that Truffaut in effect claims for mise-en-scène much of the same ground as *découpage*, at least in the more functional sense discussed above. But what Barnard describes as the 'general and nebulous' qualities of the emergent *découpage* in the 1930s, associated particularly with the filmmaker's vision, were also strongly present in certain uses of mise-en-scène in France during the 1950s and early 1960s.

Kessler writes: 'the concept became increasingly charged with an almost mystical power or, to put it differently, mise en scène was supposed to convey a *je ne sais quoi*, going far beyond the purely technical aspects of directing a film.' (2014: 25). (A number of other references in the sections of Kessler's essay dealing particularly with *Cahiers du Cinema* writers, are also very reminiscent of *découpage*.)

What the terms shared, as their uses evolved, was the desire to hold under one conceptual banner all, or almost all, areas of significant decision-making in film production, especially (though not exclusively) envisaged as the work of the director. One key qualification is of course that for Bazin *découpage* designated processes including the relationship between shots (but opposed to editing). On the other hand, a potential problem with mise-en-scène as a term is that, logically, it doesn't incorporate the relationship between shots at all – it refers to what is put into the scene in theatre or the shot in film. This is an issue that runs through the varied mise-en-scène related work of the period, sometimes ignored, sometimes negotiated.

The term could at times also be stretched almost to breaking point. So, Robin Wood, in a 1961 definition quoted by John Gibbs in his previous book on mise-en-scène (2002: 56-7) and cited via Gibbs by Adrian Martin (15-16), simply ignores etymology and makes mise-en-scène embrace every area of directorial decision-making. In what is probably the boldest of all definitions, his approach is strikingly similar to Truffaut's, though even more expansive. Wood begins: 'A director is about to make a film. He has before him a script, camera, lights, décor, actors. What he does with them is mise-en-scène' (quoted in Gibbs 2002: 56-7). This will include: working with the actors to achieve appropriate performances; placing the actors within décor so that the décor also becomes significant; working with the cinematographer to compose and frame shots; regulating rhythm and tempo; determining the lighting of the scene. Beyond the single shot, however, mise-en-scène also encompasses for Wood the movement from shot to shot, the relation of one shot to another. It is also tone and atmosphere; visual metaphor; and crucially the relation of all the parts to the whole and what fuses them into an organic unity. This is a bald summary of Wood's eloquent evocation of what he takes mise-en-scène to involve. Like Truffaut's definition (and in common with much related work of the period) it is posed in terms of the director as the controlling figure – and Wood explicitly includes, as Truffaut does not, the relationship of shot to shot. In neither case, perhaps, do we quite have 'in the filmmaker's mind', as Leenhardt puts it (though Wood comes close), but again this feels extraordinarily like *découpage* under another name.

These definitions of mise-en-scène are extreme, and here they are also wrenched from context. These various books chart the highly charged but very different polemics that inform the uses of both terms: Bazin's use of *découpage* to claim from editing 'the mantle of the essence of film art'; and the claims for Hollywood, authorship and visual style that were fundamental to the emergence of mise-en-scène as a pivotal but endlessly inflected concept.

Barnard has done English language film studies a great service in setting the record straight by replacing *découpage* at the heart of Bazin's work as well as reintroducing an almost lost concept. Historically - and particularly given the hazards of translation - it can be vital, in the words of the Confucian proverb, 'to call things by their right names'. Yet often the right names are not just

waiting to be used. They may be invented or, perhaps more often, adapted to serve pressing needs. 'Découpage' evolved, and Bazin adopted and developed it to play a key role in his theory and practice. What did, does or should mise-en-scène mean? Between them, Gibbs, Kessler and Martin show how in various contexts it took on a range of associations, at times accumulating such semantic baggage that it was extended to bursting point. They also show how its uses – often imprecise and sometimes extravagant – mapped debates of great cultural significance in the 1950s and 1960s. These histories are important, even if (or perhaps especially when) the magnetic fields that surrounded mise-en-scène and *découpage* at their height have dissipated.

Do we need the terms? For Gibbs and Martin, though in very different ways, mise-en-scène has continuing significance, crucially informed by its histories and new contexts. Christian Keathley has shown that *découpage* has the considerable advantage for criticism that it is a more inclusive term than mise-en-scène for designating the complex shape of interlocking film-making decisions, including what Bazin called 'the relationship between shots', which logically mise-en-scène excludes. The histories warn us, though, not to fetishize the concepts or overwork them (the 'ineffable' dimensions of *découpage* touched on above may be 'suggestive' or even seductive, but may be best avoided). Adrian Martin actually begins his book with cautionary remarks about the '*faux* certainty' terms like mise-en-scène can seem to convey. And, in principle at least, the terms can be avoided altogether, although self-denying ordinances of that kind can be tricky to observe.

The caboose connection (and Barnard's work in particular) has already proved extremely energising. Adding the work by Gibbs and Martin on and around mise-en-scène, this group of publications offer mutually enriching perspectives, both historical and conceptual, to inform debates about and practices of detailed film criticism.

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[1] The caboose website http://www.caboosebooks.net provides details of all publications and links to reviews of the Bazin translation.

[2] An expanded and revised version was published in 2014, following the original publication in 2013.

[3] Jacques Aumont's *Montage* in the Kino-Agora series contains sections in which he discusses some of Bazin's ideas about editing and his concept of the *plan-sequence*. He also discusses various forms of the long take (25-32; 46ff.). The complementarity of the three essays will be usefully enhanced when they appear in a single volume.

[4] *Découpage* has had an intermittent presence in English-language film criticism and theory. Of the more extended uses, Barnard discusses Noel Burch (2014: 54-56) and David Bordwell (2009: 275-280). John Gibbs has pointed out to me that Christopher Williams both retained the term in his translation of 'William Wyler: the Jansenist of Mise en Scène' and also understood its significance (1980: 45, 47, 84 note).