



Bonjour Tristesse
and the expressive potential of *découpage*

Late in the second act of *Bonjour Tristesse* (Otto Preminger, 1958), there occurs a scene that risks implausibility. The teenaged Cecile (Jean Seberg) has hatched a plan to disrupt the intended marriage of her father, Raymond (David Niven), and her late mother's friend, Anne (Deborah Kerr), who is Raymond's guest at their summer vacation home on the coast of southern France. The first step in the plan is for Cecile to reignite Raymond's interest in Elsa Mackenbourg (Mylène Demengeot), a much younger woman who Raymond had also – unthinkingly – invited as his guest on the same vacation. Cecile leads her father on a walk in the woods along the rocky Mediterranean coast near their vacation home. As they walk, Cecile collects pinecones and describes to her father – in a calculatedly half-hearted tone – how much better their lives will be once he and Anne are married.

Their conversation builds until Cecile says, 'If you want to make [Anne] completely happy ...'

R: I do.

C: ... then you have to give up our old life completely.

R: (starting to show signs of having second thoughts)
But don't you think that, after a while, we can sort of gradually ease into a ...

At this point, something catches Raymond's eye – he looks down, mouth agape, at something he's discovered that is just beneath the frame and that we cannot see. Cecile pulls him away, and as they exit screen right, the camera tilts down to reveal Elsa and Philippe (Geoffrey Horne), Cecile's sometime boyfriend, stretched out on the ground, their sunbathing (and lovemaking?) having apparently turned into an afternoon nap. Once father and daughter are safely out of range, Elsa sits up and looks after them with a smile, certain that they have scored a success.



What is scarcely credible here is that Raymond would not have seen Elsa and Philippe until he is almost stepping on them. (Also implausible is that Raymond does not think it odd that the couple hasn't responded to his and Cecile's intrusion – but we understand that their non-response is part of the plan orchestrated by Cecile.) Preminger works to conceal the moment's implausibility with a formal device: for most of the scene, Cecile and Raymond are framed in a medium shot that prevents us from seeing much below their waists, and this restricted framing stands in for Raymond's own inability to see the pair until he is upon them.

While the scene may indeed be implausible, 'realistic' plausibility is not the (only) logic governing its construction. In fact, it is shaped according to a rigorous formal logic – one that extends beyond this scene to several others. Specifically, this is the first of three scenes that work variations on similar dramatic situations though similar formal issues, in particular, the dynamic between on and off-screen space and sound; the second of these three scenes, in turn, works variations on still two others, and extends the consideration of formal issues to Preminger's careful deployment of reverse-field shot construction. This subtle and complex formal plan is a key component of this film's eloquence.

The formal logic guiding the construction of the first scene will become clearer if we consider it alongside the second. Cecile knows that, following the earlier encounter, her father has once again contacted young Elsa, and has arranged a romantic tryst with her in the woods. In this scene, Cecile spies on Anne as the older woman goes out for a walk – coincidentally, in the same woods that Cecile and Raymond walked in earlier. Anne walks happily along the woods trail, twice stopping to pick flowers. Suddenly, however, she hears giggling – and the voices of Raymond and Elsa – and she stops and listens.

E: (laughing) I've got a brilliant tan now, haven't I?



R: Lovely.

E: Lovelier than Anne's?

R: Much. But then a young girl's skin is always much lovelier.

Nearby, Cecile hides behind a tree, listening and watching Anne's pained reaction. It soon becomes clear to us that, rather than being satisfied by this response, Cecile is instead made aware of the terrible pain that her own selfish attempt at manipulation is causing. She watches and listens as the conversation continues.



E: Then why were you ready to marry her?

R: Oh, with a woman like Anne you had to say things like that, and you know it.

Hearing these last lines from Raymond, Anne turns, deeply wounded, and moves back toward the house. She hurries up the hill, Cecile chasing after her and calling out, 'Anne! Anne!'. Cecile tries to stop her, begging desperately, but Anne jumps in her car and speeds away.

The similarities and contrasts (both narrative and formal) between these two scenes are particularly complex. In the first, Cecile and Raymond walk along together, talking continually about Anne, until they encounter another couple, withheld from our view, in a (pre-arranged) romantic outing. In the second scene, Cecile secretly follows Anne; the scene is devoid of dialogue until, once again, the first couple comes upon a second in a romantic outing – but here that off-screen couple does all the talking, though again, it is about Anne. Both scenes end with the primary couple exiting the scene, and both times the intimate couple does not

respond to or acknowledge those who have stumbled upon them. But while the first scene ends with the off-screen couple being revealed, the second does not, for several reasons: first, we have heard their voices and can tell that they are unaware of being overheard; second, keeping the couple concealed suggests a sexual encounter the first scene only hinted at (or it suggests the initiation of a sexual act that, in the first scene, had perhaps already concluded); and third, Preminger's focus on Anne and Cecile emphasises their respective reactions, the more dramatically relevant component of the scene. The companionship of Cecile and Raymond in the first scene, signaled by the *plan séquence*, is countered in the second scene by the three wide shots of Cecile following Anne, and then a series of intercut close-ups as Cecile watches Anne's reaction.

Like the first scene, this scene also risks implausibility. First, it seems somewhat unlikely that Anne would not see or hear Cecile following so closely behind her, but perhaps more important here is the dramatic implausibility: how could Cecile have known that Anne would go for a walk in the very spot where Raymond and Elsa are having their tryst, especially when Cecile herself doesn't know where they are (Elsa refused to tell her), and when Anne has stated that she intends to spend the afternoon working? This implausibility opens a key thematic element regarding Cecile's character, and her wishes and motivations. The scene alternates between Cecile's spiteful curiosity and her dreadful wish fulfillment – an alternation that mirrors Cecile's calculated ambivalence about Anne. When Raymond leaves for his rendezvous with Elsa, Cecile speaks in voice-over: 'It's gone too far. I must tell her [Anne] right away ... But how?'. Once Anne abandons her work and heads out, Cecile again voices her second thoughts: 'I can't let her go. I must stop her'. But moments later, Cecile changes her mind: 'No, maybe I won't stop her. I'd like to see what she'll do'. This ambivalence, communicated by Cecile's performed remarks in the earlier scene, gives way to a more complex emotional conflict in this second scene. Even as she watches and listens from behind the tree, Cecile's reaction suggests a mixture of stunned amazement that her plan is working, and horrible dread for what she is causing. Thus, the scene's dramatic 'implausibilities' seem a manifestation of Cecile's own experience: the realisation that she has not just planned for, but has somehow willed these events to occur. And that they happen is proof of her own malign power, one that she has selfishly unleashed but cannot control. Further, it should be remembered that this scene is a flashback – Cecile's recollection of the previous summer's events. Throughout Arthur Laurents' screenplay, the plot alternates between a present day Paris, filmed in black and white, where the numbed Cecile continues living 'the good life' with her bachelor father, and flashbacks to the events of the previous summer in the south of France, filmed in colour. Thus, the implausibilities in this scene may be read as a function of Cecile's unreliable narration, marked by her guilt-ridden present consciousness.

While the narrative and formal interrelatedness of these two scenes are clear, both are, in fact, anticipated by still another scene, one in which Anne intrudes on Cecile and Philippe in an intimate moment. This scene occurs just after the film's mid-point, after Raymond and Anne announce to Cecile that they are engaged. The young couple is at the dock, and Cecile is reassuring Philippe that Raymond and Anne's marriage will be a positive thing.

C: Raymond is happy with Anne. It's different than it was with Elsa, or with ... He loves Anne, and he does

want the kind of life she wants. You've seen them, you know.

Then, Cecile slips into a kind of reverie, idealising the older woman, and Anne and Raymond's love.

C: Anne is different too. She looks ... softer. She moves easier. In the morning, she seems ...

P: Seems how?

C: As if she had the most wonderful secret in the world. I wish I walked the way she walks now. I wish I had the look she has. I wish ...

Stirred by her thoughts, Cecile suddenly embraces Philippe in a kiss. Perhaps, she thinks, this is how Anne earned her happiness – through intimacy with Raymond. 'I thought you said we weren't to do this anymore', Philippe says. 'I don't care', she replies, throwing her arms around Philippe, who drops the deck umbrella as the couple collapses behind it in passionate embrace, the boy's body on top hers.



But Anne's voice calls out suddenly from off-screen: 'Cecile! The couple sits up to find Anne looming over them disapprovingly. She dismisses Philippe, and sternly informs Cecile that she should not see him any longer.



The variations on the already established situation should be clear. Here, as in the first scene with Cecile and Raymond, Cecile is describing how their lives will be better once Anne is a permanent part of them; but while Cecile's tone with her father was a performed half-heartedness, in this scene her sentiments are sincere. There is also the situational similarity: in all the scenes, a couple engaged in some

intimacy is intruded upon by another: here, the implied pre-coital actions of Cecile and Philippe, interrupted by Anne, are similar to those in the second scene where Anne comes upon Raymond and Elsa, and in contrast with the suggested post-coital dozing in the first scene where Cecile and Raymond come upon Elsa and Philippe. And again, the dynamic between the seen and the unseen, between on and off-screen space, is illuminated by sound: here, the intrusion comes from outside the frame in the form of Anne's harsh voice ('Cecile!'), just as in the second scene, Anne hears the voices of Raymond and Elsa from off-screen. It seems likely that Cecile's plan to disrupt her father's intended marriage is suggested to her by this event. Just as Anne's intrusion disrupted her idyll with Philippe, so will she stage similar schemes to disrupt Anne and Raymond. Also, it is after this incident that Cecile moves swiftly from her brief idealising of Anne to demonising her – not simply because Anne restricts Cecile's activities by insisting on certain rules of behavior, but because that insistence reveals a commitment to certain principles. Later, she states in voice-over, 'Anne made me look at myself for the first time in my life, and that turned me against her. Dead against her'.

The organisation of formal elements I want to foreground in these related scenes – such as the framing, editing, and the use of the on / off-screen dynamic – are part of an overall conception of the film that is not easily contained by that slippery term *mise-en-scène*. The better term for such a visual formal plan is *découpage*.

Quite unlike its corollary term *mise-en-scène*, the term *découpage* effectively does not exist in English language film studies. It was only when encountering it in Timothy Barnard's 2009 translation of André Bazin's *What is Cinema?* (1958-1962) that its definition was clarified for me and its importance made clear.¹ In a 20 page footnote to Bazin's essay, 'William Wyler, the Jansenist of *Mise en Scène*', Barnard explains not only how this concept is a crucial one in Bazin's critical system, he makes it equally clear that the term has been, almost without exception, either ignored or misinterpreted in English translations of Bazin's work and elsewhere. On the rare occasions when the term has been employed, Barnard explains, it has most often been misunderstood as referring to editing. This is the error Hugh Gray made in his original translations of *What is Cinema?* (1967 & 1971).² In a handful of other instances, the term has been left untranslated, but also not fully explained.

Like many other cinephiles in the English-speaking world, I first came across *découpage* years ago in my reading of Noël Burch's *Theory of Film Practice* (1973). As he explained it, the term is routinely used in French film criticism and has several meanings. At a practical level, it's what we commonly call a shooting script: a breakdown of the screenplay with details about how scenes and sequences are to be filmed, so that the shoot can be scheduled and the technical crew prepared for what is needed for each section of the script as it is to be filmed. Burch further offers a conceptual definition, one that has no precise equivalent in English: *découpage*, he insists, is to be understood as 'the underlying structure of the finished film' (1973: 4). But as virtually no other critics have used this term, and those who do haven't provided a full definition, my understanding of it has remained somewhat fuzzy.

Barnard's note gives a thorough accounting of the term, both historically and theoretically. *Découpage* is a formal plan, prepared in advance of shooting, a visualisation that is designed in relationship to the narrative / dramatic material.

In classical cinema, the relationship between script and *découpage* (even if they didn't call it that) was an intimate one, and we can understand first of all the practical necessity of such a plan. Motion pictures became costly to produce, and studio heads – always with a close eye on the balance sheets – demanded a plan in advance of shooting that would make scheduling easier and budgeting clearer. But for thoughtful filmmakers, this plan was not just practical, it also had an important expressive function, for conceiving a *découpage* was the director's first step in 'interpreting' and 'treating' the dramatic material. In an essay from 1928, Luis Buñuel defined *découpage* as 'an authentic moment of creation in film' ([1928] 2000: 132), one in which 'the ideas of the filmmaker are defined, roughly subdivided, cut up, regrouped, and organized' (133). *Découpage*, he argued, is what 'saves cinema from being merely the photography of animated images', for it is in this process that 'the script or written assemblage of visual ideas ceases to be literature and becomes cinema' (133). In 1936, Roger Leenhardt – an important precursor to Bazin and *Cahiers du Cinéma* – defined *découpage* as a process 'carried out before the fact [of shooting], in the filmmaker's mind, on the subject to be filmed' ([1936] cited in Barnard 2009: 266), and Bazin adopted Leenhardt's definition. A decade later, in his essay, 'Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation', we find Bazin writing, 'We can say that *découpage*, which foresees everything, has virtually created the film before the first day of shooting' ([1948] 2009: 233-234). Burch's insistence on *découpage* as 'the underlying structure of the finished film' is perhaps his corrective – that in most cases we have only the completed work against which to make assessments and evaluations. But either way, we can understand *découpage* first as a shooting script (purely practical); also as a visualisation that, in the hands of some directors, would be marked by a distinctive style; and finally, in some cases, not just style but also a formal plan that could be detailed and rigorous.

For purposes of clarification, it is necessary to say something about that corollary term, *mise-en-scène*. There are several possible definitions.

1. Because the term comes from the theater, its definition can be limited to only those elements of cinema that overlap with theater: lighting, sets, costumes and make-up, performance and staging.

2. Most film scholars, however, would typically expand their definition to include specifically cinematic elements such as framing, lens use, camera movement, etc.

3. For the critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950s – who effectively popularised the term – it designated something less concrete: style, tone, the attitude of the director toward the material.

We can see that definition 2 above includes, in some form, what we are calling *découpage* – so we can sort it out thus: *mise-en-scène* as I am using it here refers to definition 1 above, while *découpage* refers to the more properly cinematic elements of the overall formal plan that includes framing, lens use, editing, duration of takes, etc., in relation to the dramatic material. Definition 3 understands that directors employ both *découpage* and *mise-en-scène* in their interpretation and treatment of a script.³

But while the term *mise-en-scène* is commonplace in Anglo-American film studies, even in introductory textbooks, the term *découpage* is nowhere to be found. Of the half dozen introductory film textbooks I surveyed recently, all use the term *mise-en-scène* – sometimes devoting multiple chapters to it – while none uses the term *découpage*. As I noted, it would seem that *découpage* has been partly

absorbed by *mise-en-scène*, but only partly. What is most surprising is that these textbooks often do not account for anything like this process at all. Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art* ([1979] 2009), the textbook perhaps most attentive to matters of form, references 'stylistic patterning', 'formal structure', and 'form as system' (55), but those terms refer most commonly to patterns of narrative (e.g., plot structure) or of *mise-en-scène* (e.g., colour or lighting). Thus, English-language film studies has been left with a significant gap in its terminology. Like any specialised term, *découpage* references a specific concept, and without a term to reference it, we are inevitably less attentive to its practice.

In addition to referencing a formal plan, *découpage* had another importance for Bazin that is worth noting. As Barnard explains, *découpage* was for Bazin 'a deliberate means of claiming from montage the mantle of "the essence of film art"' (2009: 267). Montage here refers not simply to editing, but to a paradigm associated with the silent film of the 1920s as practiced especially (but not only) by the Soviets, one that had routinely been celebrated as the basis of cinematic art. When Bazin started writing in the 1940s, this montage practice was dead – but so was the cultural status of cinema as an art form. Bazin sought to rethink and reinvigorate cinema's status as art by replacing the emphasis that had been laid on the dynamics of discontinuity and the abstractions of montage, which was associated with metaphor, with one that privileged metonymy and continuity – as Barnard puts it, 'the joining of events directly through realistic ellipsis' in a 'visual writing of a logical narrative akin to the novel' (2009: 273).

Again, Bazin was not the first to note this distinction. In a 1945 essay, 'Les Intellectuels et le cinéma,' Alexandre Astruc noted that Pudovkin, in an essay penned in the 1930s, had described the difference between silent and sound cinema in precisely this way: the former was an art of montage, the latter, an art of narrative and *découpage* (Astruc [1945] 1992). It is important to understand here – as Timothy Barnard makes clear – that 'montage and *découpage* [...] do not designate two opposing styles of editing' (277); rather, *découpage* was 'a different way of conceiving and creating films' (278). As Bazin put it in the essay on Wyler, 'A film's "purity", or better yet, to my mind, its cinematic quotient should be calculated by the effectiveness of its *découpage*' ([1948] 2009: 67). Thus, the essence of cinema was no longer montage, but was now situated in the act of conceiving and 'writing' the film visually through *découpage*. A film's *découpage* can follow the norms of classical Hollywood's 'invisible', analytical style of editing; or it can be a *découpage* that resists and reduces cutting – Bazin's preferred style as practiced by his preferred directors, such as Orson Welles and William Wyler (directors whose *mise-en-scène* was radically different). But it is *découpage* as formal plan, as a visualisation cast in relation to narrative / dramatic material, that I want to emphasise here.

In the essay that occasioned Barnard's footnote, 'William Wyler, the Jansenist of *Mise en Scène*', Bazin argues that in this director's finest films – especially *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) – Wyler strives for a radical reduction in the expressive effects of *mise-en-scène*. The terms Bazin uses to describe Wyler's films – neutrality, objectivity – have also commonly been used to describe the cinematic style of Otto Preminger. Elsewhere in that essay, Bazin wrote that 'the greatest cinematic quotient can be obtained, paradoxically, with the minimum degree of *mise-en-scène*' ([1948] 2009: 49) – a statement that seems to confound the received idea of Bazin's theories. But indeed, in many of



Preminger's films – especially the films from his independent period – the expressive function is borne as much by their carefully constructed *découpage* as it is by their mise-en-scène. With this, we can return to *Bonjour Tristesse* to understand more fully how this film's *découpage* carries out this expressive function.

The scene of Cecile following Anne into the woods, concluding with Anne's departure, works variations not only on the earlier scene of Cecile and Raymond walking by the sea, but also on still another, much earlier scene: that of Anne's arrival. Just as Cecile followed Anne to her car in the later scene, calling out to her to wait, so the scene of Anne's arrival shows Cecile running up from the beach, calling out in greeting, 'Anne!', as she discovers the older woman standing beside her car.

The awkwardness of this arrival scene, wonderfully detailed by John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (2005), communicates Cecile's conflicted feelings: she seems to have respect and even some affection for Anne, but she is frightened of her, especially because she fears Anne will bring an uncomfortable discipline into her life. It is this kind of order and influence – this insistence on responsibility – that Cecile 'warns' Raymond about in their walk.

Like the walk in the woods, this scene of Anne's arrival begins with several wide shots, but then the two walk together, first from Anne's car to the balcony and then inside. Anne examines the accommodations and remarks on the fresh flowers that decorate the rooms; Cecile reports that Raymond picked them and arranged them himself in anticipation of her arrival. Anne is clearly pleased. But about halfway through this section of the scene, Preminger introduces a shot / reverse shot pattern that signals an emerging tension between the two, prompted by Anne's disapproval of Cecile's careless attitude to her studies and to her life. The cutting and framing intensify, shifting to a modified

pattern of intercut close-ups of the two, in anticipation of Cecile's revelation that Elsa Mackenbourg is also a guest in the house. Preminger cuts from a close-up of Cecile reporting that Elsa is also a guest, to a tight close-up of Anne reacting, her stunned gaze directed off-screen; then back to Cecile as we hear the crash of a vase of flowers on the floor; then to a shot of the broken vase at Anne's feet.

Gibbs & Pye note that this bedroom scene is 'one of three between Anne and Cecile (and only four in the film) in which Preminger uses versions of reverse field cutting' (2005:118). The pattern of intercut close-ups at this scene's climax – a modification of the straightforward shot / reverse shot – anticipates the similar formal approach in the scene I am highlighting as this scene's counterpart: the scene in the woods in which Cecile watches as Anne overhears Raymond and Elsa, and which ends with Anne's departure. In both scenes, we see Anne in a close shot as she reacts to the revelation of Raymond's involvement with Elsa. In both scenes, we see Cecile, also in a close shot, carefully watching Anne's reaction. In both scenes, Anne happily appreciates the flowers she is holding until the cruel truth is revealed, and in both, she drops the flowers in shock (much more dramatically in the arrival scene). This scene in the house (Anne's arrival; the news about Elsa) prefigures the later scene in the woods (the news about Elsa; Anne's departure) in its dramatic content, in elements of its mise-en-scène, and importantly, in its *découpage*.

The final shot / reverse shot scene (also the final scene in the film) is between Cecile and Raymond, and it takes place back in Paris, nearly a year after the events depicted in the main part of the film. Until this point, the shot / reverse shot pattern has been used exclusively in scenes between Cecile and Anne as a way to signify conflict and separateness. Superficially, the use of reverse-field cutting here can be understood in the same way – as cueing conflict, or at least lack of unity: spatial separation signifying emotional



separation. But because this cutting pattern has been used to this point only in scenes with Anne, its use here signifies, in some sense, the dead woman's influence, her presence – or her absent presence, as we might say. Cecile and Raymond's superficial, frivolous existence – and their selfishness in their desire to maintain it – prompted careless action that resulted in Anne's death. Raymond seems to have rationalised all this in some way, for his behavior and values here seem unchanged. (While Cecile earlier removed Anne's hat, her *memento mori*, from the bottom drawer of her dresser, Raymond seems oblivious to the possible significance of his action of removing his boutonniere and carelessly letting the flower petals fall to the floor.) But Cecile has been deeply affected by the previous summer's events. The film's carefully planned *découpage* enables this depth of meaning to be communicated in this final scene without being explicitly stated. Indeed, Bazin himself acknowledged that Preminger had achieved in this film a fullness of the meaning of the term: 'What matters is to detach film from *spectacle* so that it can at last approach *writing* [*l'écriture*]. From this point of view, works like [...] *Bonjour Tristesse* aren't stories that have been "staged" ["*mises-en-scènes*"] but works "written" with cameras and actors' ([1958] cited in Andrew 2010: 119).

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¹ Barnard's translation of *What is Cinema?* can only be purchased in Canada and other countries where the duration of copyright is 50 years. Full details are available on the publisher's website.

² This translation error is, for example, repeated by David Bordwell in his book *On the History of Film Style* (1998), and by Valerie Orpen in *Film Editing* (2003).

³ Why the younger critics at *Cahiers du Cinéma* dropped the term *découpage* in favour of *mise-en-scène*, or used that latter term to refer to both concepts together, is a curiosity worthy of serious scholarly investigation.