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## ANDRÉ ANTOINE

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*I'd had the idea for a film: the life of boatmen on the canals of Flanders. I sent Grillet ahead to scout for a setting. I then arrived with the artists. We left Antwerp on our barge and went up the Escaut. Magnificent... Since everything had been shot on the move, all the photos came in relief. Gripping. The story was hard, a very simple drama. It ended with a man getting stuck in the mud one night, and the next day, the barge was again calmly on its way in the light and silence. It was quite beautiful. Upon our return, we presented it at the factory, and I was told: 'But that's not a film'... And I answered, 'No, sir, it's not a film. But if you wish, we can add a diamond-cutting workshop in Amsterdam and a police raid in a London bar'. Voilà. And the film was never released.*

André Antoine, *La Revue Hebdomadaire*, June 1923

André Antoine, an important figure in French theatre and founder of the Théâtre-Libre, is ill-known as a filmmaker. Yet he made nine features (shot between 1914 and 1921) that enjoyed a certain public success, but the critical reception was sometimes mixed. His ambitions as a filmmaker were undermined by the constraints of production or censorship. Antoine thus declared in December 1919: 'The little evolution [in the theatre] of which I am said to be the author, consisted simply of looking at what was going on and trying, if possible, to be simpler and more logical. Alas, such good fortune will never happen to me in cinema...'

However, this 'little evolution' is quite notable in Antoine's filmography, especially in his last work, which is generally considered his poetic testament: *The Swallow and the Titmouse*.

This uncluttered drama was shot in Belgium in the late summer of 1920. It was Antoine's first film on an original script, written at his request by his playwright friend Gustave Grillet. Seeking a naturalistic effectiveness served by sober poetics, Antoine shot on location with actors recruited on site, except for three professionals whose acting was exceptionally dense and refined for the time. The singular aim of Antoine's cinema, which he envisaged as a spectacle of life recorded directly, led him to search for innovative shooting processes: using several cameras, covering a scene from multiple angles, and special effects (wipes, irises, dissolves, fades) during filming.

Nonetheless, this original approach earned him the incomprehension of the distributor. Alarmed by the 'documentary' nature of the rushes, they refused the final financing. Almost totally shot, the film was never finished and neither edited nor shown<sup>1</sup>.

The rediscovery of six hours of rushes, perfectly preserved by La Cinémathèque française, in 1982 allowed for giving a new life to the film: not only was it restored but literally 'reinvented' by the director's crew and editor in charge of the project, Henri Colpi. This work, unique in the history of French cinema, thus permitted offering a final form to Antoine's film.

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<sup>1</sup> Aside from a corporative projection initiated by the Club Français du Cinéma, on 5 June 1924, at the Colisée in Paris. That print has unfortunately disappeared.

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### The Swallow and the Titmouse / L'Hirondelle et la mésange (Reconstruction by Henri Colpi, 1984)

France, 1920 – 79 minutes

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**Direction:** André Antoine

**Script :** Gustave Grillet

**Assistant director :** Georges Denola

**Production :** Société Cinématographique des Auteurs et Gens de Lettres

**Photography:** René Guychard

**Cast :** Maguy Deliac, Jane Maylianes, Pierre Alcover, Lous Ravet, Georges Denola



Two barges, *The Swallow* and *The Titmouse*, are going down from Antwerp to France. Onboard, Pieter van Groot, his wife, Griet, and Griet's sister Marthe work and live peacefully. A new pilot upsets this equilibrium.

Towards the end of the last decade, La Cinémathèque française carried out the copying of a new duplicate and a new print from a master positive reproduced in 1984 (and the only edited master of the film, the negatives having been left as rushes). In 2012, the master positive was restored digitally with the help of Bruno Despas and the Digimage laboratory.

