

P R E F A C E

What Is Sport? is the text of a short, intriguing Canadian documentary film called *Le Sport et les hommes*. The film is the product of a collaboration between two great writers, a French author whose reputation in 1960 was already established and a Québécois writer still finding his way. Roland Barthes had already published two texts capital in twentieth-century French cultural history—*Writing Degree Zero* (1953) and *Mythologies* (1957)—in the latter of which he specifically discussed wrestling (“In the Ring”) and bicycle racing (“The Tour de France as Epic”). Hubert Aquin was not yet the novelist of *Prochain épisode* (1965) or *Neige noire* (1974) and was known (exclusively in Québec) only as a contributor

to the periodical *Liberté*. Yet from the start Roland Barthes generously agreed to collaborate with Aquin on what was only, as yet, a project for a film, first by letter and then in person, in Paris but also in Montréal.

It was in the spring of 1960 that Aquin, then a producer at the National Film Board in Montréal, read *Mythologies*. Had the project of a documentary film about sports already occurred to him or was it the reading of Barthes's essays that gave him the idea? In a letter dated April 4, 1960, in which he proposes that the French critic write a commentary for his film (provisionally titled "Le Sport dans le monde"), Aquin suggests that it is more or less a coincidence, the fortuitous encounter of a reading and a desire. In any case, the encounter occurred and soon bore fruit.

Conditioned in part by the formula imposed by the series *Comparaisons*, in which the documentary would appear, Aquin's intention was to present five national sports as a "social and poetic phenomenon." He was thinking of bullfighting in Spain, car races in Italy, soccer in Hungary, hockey in Canada, and the Tour de France bicycle races. The choice of the countries represented was to change in the

course of production, but the lineup of sports was determined at this time. Barthes accepted the invitation—he would write the commentary which follows, and Aquin would be responsible for the visual editing; rather than photograph new sequences, he would construct his film from archival material and from newsreel sequences purchased from many sources.

Their collaboration continued by letter until two working meetings in the early 1960s. The first occurred in autumn 1960 in Paris; from September 27 to November 1, Aquin worked with Barthes on the realization of their project. He then invited Barthes to Québec in order to continue the work, meanwhile arranging a series of university lectures and television interviews for his distinguished guest. Barthes arrived in Montréal on January 16, 1961, for a stay of about two weeks that would familiarize him with a sport that figures in the background of the film's title sequences but which he knew only slightly: ice hockey. The artists' collaboration continued until April through the support of the studios of the National Film Board in London. The film was completed, as *Le Sport et les hommes*, and was shown June 1, 1961, as part of the series *Temps présent* on the

television network of Radio Canada. The following year it won the Producer's Prize at the Cortina d'Ampezzo Festival in Italy.

The correspondence between Barthes and Aquin affords information about how the project developed, specifically concerning the French critic's role in its orientation. We learn among other things that he is responsible for the final title. After proposing "something simple and direct like *Vive le sport*," and then a series of "hardly original" titles, two of which he prefers—*Sport, miroir des hommes* and *Sport, miroir de l'homme*—Aquin finally retained the fourth title on the list. The first title Barthes proposed, *Qu'est-ce que le sport?* (What is sport?), became the film's leitmotif, cited in both the prelude and the finale and implicit throughout the commentary.

It is thus a testimony both to sport and to man that we offer readers today, a testimony that must be read for what it claims to be: new mythologies. This text was not published in the Seuil editions of Barthes's *Oeuvres complètes*—neither the three-volume version of 1995 nor the five-volume edition of 2002. This short, haunting book will appeal to all lovers of Barthes's work curious enough to read

the mythologist's thoughts, some years after *Mythologies*, about sports as, or beyond, myth; to readers of Hubert Aquin's work who will recognize a creator already dealing with questions that would be the basis of his future texts: nationality and freedom; and to sports enthusiasts interested in a deeper, philosophical understanding of the role of sport in modern society.

The commentary of the film *Le Sport et les hommes* is the result of unanticipated but sustained exchanges that shed new light on the respective works of its two creators. It is, above all, one of the first contributions to a body of thought destined to occupy generations of commentators, concerning sport-as-spectacle ("spectator sports"). That is why it must be published.

GILLES DUPUIS

The correspondence exchanged between the collaborators—fifteen letters and one telegram—may be found today in the Fonds Andrée Yanacopoulo of the ÉDAQ archives in the University of Québec in Montréal. Our gratitude to Jacinthe Martel, in charge of the ARCHÈ project (Centre québécois de recherché sur l'archive littéraire) of the University of Québec in Montréal for permission to consult and reprint this correspondence.