

FILM
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

THE RED YEARS OF
cahiers du
CINEMA
(1968-1973)

VOLUME II

Aesthetics
and
Ontology

DANIEL FAIRFAX

Amsterdam
University
Press

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(1968-1973)

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Part III

Questions of Aesthetics

In the first volume of *The Red Years of Cahiers du Cinéma*, my study of the film journal centered on matters of ideology and politics. With its central position in the history of film theory, this conceptual terrain has tended to monopolize considerations of *Cahiers'* post-1968 period. In the second volume, the focus will be expanded to incorporate questions of aesthetics (Part III) and, finally, the encounter with an ontological real engendered by the cinematic medium (Part IV), with the aim of producing a more rounded overview of the entirety of the critical output yielded by the *Cahiers* critics, both during and after their time with the journal. These represent the more neglected areas of *Cahiers'* critical praxis, but they are of undeniable importance for attaining a global understanding of the *Cahiers* project in the years 1968-1973. Frequently, too, an exploration of these elements of the critics' work produces a picture of their thinking that is far more conceptually diverse than the received wisdom of *Cahiers'* Marxist period usually allows.

We start, then, with matters of aesthetics. In comparison to the tumultuous nature of *Cahiers du cinéma's* political engagements in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the editorial team's artistic inclinations—their taste in films, their *goût*—remained remarkably stable throughout this period and to a large degree demonstrated a constancy with *Cahiers'* past. The classical Hollywood films deemed worthy of critical “re-readings” were invariably drawn from the *Cahiers* stable of auteurs, while many of the contemporary filmmakers whose work was championed, such as Godard, Rivette, Rohmer and Truffaut, had their own history as critics at the journal. For Daney, he and his colleagues' dogged defense of films such as *Nicht versöhnt* and *Vent d'est*—even in front of left-wing audiences scornful of such work—represented a fundamental “fidelity to their taste.”¹ Narboni, too, has emphasized the importance of this *goût* when defining the journal's legacy:

For me the criterion of taste has always been essential, taste in the strong sense of the term, as a “superior form of intelligence,” in the words of Lautréamont. And if something was the red thread for *Cahiers* from its beginnings, it is that we have had the right taste—not good taste, but pertinent taste. We made mistakes. We were wrong on certain filmmakers, we underestimated them, we let them pass us by, but on the whole I think that, on this level, *Cahiers* played an interesting role.²

1 Serge Daney, *La Rampe* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1983), p. 14.

2 Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.

It was an axiom for *Cahiers* during its Marxist period that aesthetics could not be divorced from politics and that the ideological nature of a film stemmed principally from its formal qualities. Experimentation in *mise en scène*, in editing, and in the use of sound, color and other technical properties in ways that departed from the norms of classical cinematic representation thus came to be seen by *Cahiers* as the primary guarantor of a film's political credentials. Situating themselves within the avant-gardist tradition of Marxist aesthetics, the journal's writers frequently had recourse to historical materialist predecessors to support their perspective. When discussing *L'Aveu*, for instance, Comolli invoked Walter Benjamin in a passage from "The Author as Producer" that is uncannily illustrative of *Cahiers'* critical program in the post-1968 period:

The tendency of a literary work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct. That is to say, the correct political tendency includes a literary tendency. [...] Instead of asking, "What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time? Does it accept them, is it reactionary—or does it aim at overthrowing them, is it revolutionary?"—instead of this question, or at any rate before it, I should like to propose another. Rather than ask: "What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?," I should like to ask: "What is its position in them?" This question directly concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of production of its time. It is concerned, in other words, directly with the literary *technique* of works.³

More succinctly, Brecht's maxim that "Lenin did not just say different things from Bismarck, he also spoke in a different way," was cited repeatedly by *Cahiers* in support of the notion that revolutionary content required the creation of revolutionary forms.⁴ In the case of Straub/Huillet, Godard and Kramer, or, earlier, the Soviet avant-gardes (the category (b) films

3 Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in idem., *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978), pp. 220-238, here pp. 221-222. Cited in Jean-Louis Comolli, "Film/Politique (2): *L'Aveu*: 15 propositions," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 224 (October 1970), pp. 48-51, here p. 48. Translated as "Film/Politics (2): *L'Aveu*: 15 Propositions," trans. Nancy Kline Piore, in Nick Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III: 1969-1972 The Politics of Representation* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 163-173.

4 See Bertolt Brecht, "Die Expressionismusdebatte," cited in Pascal Bonitzer, "Camarades (suite)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 228 (March-April 1971), pp. 61-62, here p. 62; Groupe Lou Sin d'intervention idéologique, "Le 'Groupe Dziga Vertov': Sur les films du 'groupe' (2)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 240 (July-August 1972), pp. 4-9, here p. 5; and Serge Toubiana, "Le ballon rouge (*Novocento*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 270 (September-October 1976), pp. 58-60, here p. 59.

in “Cinéma/idéologie/critique”), the relationship between revolutionary politics and radical aesthetics was an explicit, relatively straightforward one. In the negative sense, too, the inherently conservative nature of the work of Karmitz or Costa-Gavras could be apodictically proven by their opportunistic approach to film form, with these filmmakers’ use of “bourgeois” cinematic techniques to increase the mass appeal of their work denounced vociferously on the pages of the journal.

Between these opposing poles, however, a vast, formally and ideologically variegated field of aesthetic practice lay before the *Cahiers* critics. The international explosion of filmmaking in the late 1960s and early 1970s occurred in tandem with the era’s global outburst of political contestation, but it was not a straightforward artistic reflection of transformations in the socio-economic base. During this period, the *Cahiers* writers had to contend with the discrepancies and deferrals—the *décalages*—between Politics with a capital “P” and formal developments in the cinema, while also grappling with the question as to how much “fidelity” to the artistic hierarchies established by earlier incarnations of the review should be retained. The journal’s critical practice, therefore, was a concrete application of Badiou’s notion of the “autonomy of the aesthetic process.”⁵ Frequently, films deemed to be of interest as works of cinema were discussed at length, even if the political positions of the filmmakers were remote from those of *Cahiers* in the post-1968 period. Although *Cahiers* rejected formalism—that is, the discussion of film form at a remove from any and all political implications—its interest in matters of cinematic form resulted in the journal critically interrogating a wide range of films that other publications situating themselves on the revolutionary left (*Cinéthique*, for instance) disdained or summarily ignored.

This section therefore looks at those films that were subject to formal/political readings by the *Cahiers* writers. The political outlook of the directors of these films varied from the far-left orientations of Rocha, Oshima and Jancsó to the more conservative or apolitical sympathies of Fellini and Lewis. But these are all films that, as the “Cinéma/idéologique/critique” editorial termed it, were capable of resisting—“against the grain”—the dominant system of representation. In this line of reasoning, form and content were not to be seen as a straightforward binary but entered into a dynamic interplay with each other, one where form could dialectically *become* political content. Such a process, however, does not take place

5 See Alain Badiou, “L’autonomie du processus esthétique,” *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes* no. 12-13 (July-October 1966), pp. 77-89.

unaided in the film itself. Rather, it only fully comes about through the *act of critical analysis*, through the way in which the films are *read*. In their October 1969 editorial, Comolli and Narboni stress the importance of the “critical work” carried out on a film—that is, their own activity as film critics.⁶ By elevating the critic to the status of creator, this standpoint is also in line with Barthes’ 1968 article “La mort de l’auteur,” where the theorist argues that the “birth of the reader” comes at the expense of the “death of the author.”⁷ Although, as far as the cinema is concerned, *Cahiers* was the birthplace of the *politique des auteurs* in the 1950s, its editors in the late 1960s followed Barthes’ lead, arguing that the defense of the “problematic of expressivity, of ‘visionary’ creation” was incompatible with historical materialism and that the concept of “signifying practice” had destroyed “the notion of an ineffable kernel of genius within creative subjectivity.”⁸ Daney, indeed, would later characterize their viewpoint as a *politique des ôteurs* (an untranslatable pun that we could render as “stripper theory”). He and his fellow critics, after all, tended to promote filmmakers who sought to strip (*ôter*) the public of its illusions in the powers of the cinema.⁹ And yet in spite of this Barthes-inspired critique of authorial subjectivity, *Cahiers* in many ways remained rooted in an underlying auteurist approach. Even at the height of the journal’s Marxist-Leninist orientation, films were still almost exclusively understood as the work of a director rather than the output of a nation, a genre, an industry or a filmmaking team, and the careers of the journal’s preferred filmmakers were loyally followed, with the “name of the author” guaranteeing a sense of continuity from one film to the next.

Of course, *Cahiers* was interested in more than the mere critical evaluation of individual films. Since its foundation by Bazin in 1951, the journal had also been concerned with theoretical inquiries into the nature of the cinema as an art form, and this project continued under Comolli/Narboni’s editorship. The post-1968 *Cahiers* continued to ask the fundamental question

6 Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 216 (October 1969), pp. 11-15, here p. 14. Translated as “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” trans. Daniel Fairfax, in Jean-Louis Comolli, *Cinema against Spectacle: Technique and Ideology Revisited* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), pp. 251-259, here pp. 256-257.

7 Roland Barthes, “La mort de l’auteur,” *Manteia* no. 5 (1968). Translated as “The Death of the Author,” in idem., *Image-Music-Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 142-149, here p. 149.

8 La Rédaction, “Réponses à *Politique Hebdo*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 229 (May-June 1971), pp. 61-64, here p. 62.

9 Daney, *La Rampe*, p. 13.

posed by Bazin: what is cinema? Increasingly, they turned to semiological and structuralist theories to assist them in devising answers.¹⁰ The period between 1963 and 1969 was marked by a prolonged association between *Cahiers* and the proponents of film semiology—including Metz, Pasolini, Barthes and Raymond Bellour. Although this dialogue had a profound influence on the journal, *Cahiers* never unequivocally adopted a semiological approach to the analysis of cinema. As the decade came to a close, Saussurean vocabulary—including pairs of terms such as “signifier/signified,” “denotation/connotation” and “enunciation/énoncé (utterance),” as well as the “*langue/langage/parole* (language system/ language/speech)” triad—began to preponderate on the pages of *Cahiers*, but this was also the moment when literary theory in France began pushing against the limitations of the semiological approach, and *Cahiers*, with its close ties to *Tel Quel*, was immediately affected by this conceptual fault line. Under the influence of Sollers, Kristeva, Derrida and the later writings of Barthes, the journal came to see the cinema as a form of *écriture* (writing), or “signifying practice,” in which the very act of signification was to be radically interrogated, its structural binaries deconstructed.

The high point of the structuralist/post-structuralist influence on *Cahiers* came in the two to three years immediately following publication of “Cinéma/idéologie/critique.” This brief but critically fecund period in the history of *Cahiers* also saw it respond to a wide range of films and filmmakers: from revisiting key works from the silent era such as *Intolerance* to championing the early efforts of young directors such as Bene and Garrel. Thereafter, as was outlined in part II, the radicalization of the journal saw the progressive phasing out of theoretical and aesthetic concerns in favor of a purely political consideration of the cinema and a rarefaction in the number and aesthetic variety of films discussed by the journal. In the following chapters, a familiar chronological pattern emerges. A filmmaker’s work is stridently advocated in the years 1969–1971, only to be largely abandoned in the years 1972–1973 either as the result of a vocal denunciation or a silent but no less definitive rejection. As *Cahiers* recovered its “critical function” by the mid-1970s, however, interest in many (but not all) of these œuvres was revived, and the work of the filmmaker in question was once more subject to impassioned discussion by the journal.

10 French practice usually operates a distinction between *la sémiotique* and *la sémiologie*, with the latter more closely aligned with the tradition of Saussurean linguistics. I have retained this usage, using “semiology” to refer to the work of Barthes, Metz, Bellour and Pasolini in order to highlight this specific theoretical lineage.

The ensuing seven chapters in this section can be broken down into three distinct groupings. The first two chapters (14 and 15) take a look at the general theoretical questions that concerned *Cahiers'* aesthetic project: here, the influence of structuralism and semiology in the early to late 1960s will be outlined before the effects that the theoretical tumult of the end of the decade had on the journal are closely examined as it grappled with questions of montage, filmic space, duration and cinematic *écriture* in general. Chapters 16 to 18 look at the key films and filmmakers discussed by *Cahiers* in the years 1969-1972—beyond the totemic figures of Godard, Straub and Eisenstein, whose work has been dealt with in Parts I and II. Re-readings of classical Hollywood films such as *Morocco*, *Sylvia Scarlett* and *Intolerance*, modeled on the *Young Mr. Lincoln* analysis, were accompanied by a defense and critique of cinematic modernism as found in the work of, among others, Buñuel, Lewis, Bene, Garrel, Fellini, the Taviani brothers and Visconti. This period also represented an increasing geographical openness in *Cahiers'* interests as it took in work from Eastern Europe (Skolimowski, Chytilová, Jancsó), Latin America (Solanas, Rocha) and Japan (Yoshida, Masamura, Oshima). The last two chapters, meanwhile, look at the continuation of film aesthetics in the work of three former *Cahiers* writers. Aumont (Chapter 19) made the transition towards the university at a moment when film studies was being established as an academic field, and he sought to inscribe the study of the cinema within a broader tradition of aesthetic theory. In contrast, Daney and Kané (Chapter 20) eschewed an academic career and instead chose to question the cinema and their own cinephilia through the means of journalism and filmmaking respectively.

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———, *La Rampe* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1983).

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Serge Toubiana, "Le ballon rouge (*Novecento*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 270 (September-October 1976), pp. 58-60.

14. Encounters with Structuralism

Abstract

This chapter outlines *Cahiers du cinéma*'s relationship with structuralist theory in the 1960s and 1970s. The journal's encounter with structuralism first manifested itself in 1963, when then-editor Jacques Rivette arranged for a series of interviews with Roland Barthes, Pierre Boulez and Claude Lévi-Strauss. The dialogue with Barthes was by far the most stimulating of these interviews and initiated a relationship that lasted until the literary theorist's death in 1980. But fruitful exchanges were also had with the pioneer of film semiology, Christian Metz, and Pier Paolo Pasolini, who combined filmmaking with his own take on Saussurean linguistics. And yet, although *Cahiers* was often a venue for debates between different structuralist thinkers, its critics were never entirely satisfied with the semiological approach to film analysis and in the post-1968 era were concerned more with how a film's formal structures could subvert the cinema's status as a signifying practice.

Keywords: *Cahiers du cinéma*, structuralism, Roland Barthes, Christian Metz, Pier Paolo Pasolini

Three Interviews: Barthes, Boulez, Lévi-Strauss

Rivette's assumption to the position of editor-in-chief of *Cahiers* in the summer of 1963 marked the beginning of an openness towards new currents in critical theory and avant-garde artistic practice, after the conservative classicism and autarkic cinephilia of the Rohmer period. The most spectacular immediate result of this turn was a series of interviews with three "noteworthy witnesses of contemporary culture": Roland Barthes, Pierre Boulez and Claude Lévi-Strauss. A note at the beginning of the Barthes interview encapsulated the spirit in which these interviews were undertaken: "the cinema, always present, sometimes in the background, sometimes in the foreground, will, we hope, be situated in a broader perspective, one that

archivism and idolatry (which also have their role to play) sometimes risk forgetting.”¹ The interviews with Boulez and Lévi-Strauss, however, were of only limited value for the journal. Boulez was expansive on his musical activity but barely touched on the cinema.² Lévi-Strauss, meanwhile, spoke at length about film, but the dialogue was marked by a near total divergence between his cinematic proclivities and those of *Cahiers*. Expressing distaste for the modernism of Godard as well as most of Resnais, and Demy’s films, the anthropologist was disconcerted by “the manner in which the cinema is being ‘politicized’” and reproached Rouch’s ethnographic films for introducing fictional elements into *Moi, un noir* and *La Pyramide humaine*, facetiously noting that his ethnographic films would have been “better realized with professionals, a script and staging.”³

The Barthes interview, by contrast, was far more theoretically fecund and established an intermittent collaboration between the literary theorist and the film journal that lasted up to the former’s death in 1980. Barthes’ work had been cursorily referred to by *Cahiers* writers since 1958, when Truffaut used his notion of “neither-nor criticism” (*la critique ni-ni*) and his condemnation of *poujadisme* in *Mythologies* to attack *Positif*.⁴ In a round table on *Hiroshima mon amour* the following year, Godard evoked the opening line of Barthes’ review of Chabrol’s *Le Beau Serge* in which he had dispiritingly judged that “here in France, talent is with the right and truth with the left.”⁵ But it was with Rivette’s brief yet incisive text “Revoir *Verdoux*”—published a month before the interview with the theorist—that Barthes’ structuralism

1 Roland Barthes, interviewed by Michel Delahaye and Jacques Rivette, “Entretien avec Roland Barthes,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 147 (September 1963), pp. 20-30, here p. 21. This note is not included in the English translation of the interview.

2 While he regularly went to the cinémathèque in the years 1947-1949 and was impressed with films such as *October*, *Broken Blossoms* and *L’Espoir*, the composer admitted that his “‘cinematic culture’ was full of lacunae,” and he had been unable to watch the more recent films of Resnais and other *nouvelle vague* filmmakers. Pierre Boulez, interviewed by Jacques Rivette and François Weyergans, “Entretien avec Pierre Boulez,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 152 (February 1964), pp. 19-29, here p. 27.

3 Claude Lévi-Strauss, interviewed by Michel Delahaye and Jacques Rivette, “Entretien avec Claude Lévi-Strauss,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 156 (June 1964), pp. 19-29, here pp. 20-21, 26.

4 François Truffaut, “*Positif*: copie o,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 79 (January 1958), pp. 60-62, here p. 61. Poujadisme was an anti-intellectual, right-wing populist movement active in France in the 1950s, named after its founder Pierre Poujade.

5 Roland Barthes, “Cinéma, droit et gauche,” *Les Lettres nouvelles* no. 2 (March 1959). Translated as “Cinema Right and Left,” trans. Deborah Glassman, in Philip Watts, *Roland Barthes’ Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 121-124, here p. 121. See also Jean-Luc Godard, in Jean Domarchi, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Jean-Luc Godard, Pierre Kast, Jacques Rivette and Éric Rohmer, “Hiroshima, notre amour,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 97 (July 1959), pp. 1-18, here p. 14.

became a methodological touchstone for *Cahiers'* own critical practice. The piece was a response to a note by Comolli reporting on the opening of the Cinémathèque française at a new facility in the Palais de Chaillot, an event crowned by the projection of Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux*. For Comolli, the much anticipated screening of a long-unavailable masterpiece was a disappointment: Chaplin's film, it turned out, was little more than a "sterile game of a hero who refers to nothing other than himself or his double."⁶ Rivette felt compelled to respond to this severe judgement, but the eight short paragraphs of his rejoinder do more than rebut Comolli on the subject of *Monsieur Verdoux*, a film which the elder critic defended as the creation of a "free man." Shifting to the broader question of the cinema itself, "Revoir Verdoux" lucidly encapsulates a way of conceptualizing the contradictory, dialectical relationship between the cinema and the world that represents the essence of *Cahiers'* critical project. Here, Rivette argues that the goal of the cinema is that "the real world, such as it is offered on the screen, should also be an idea of the world."⁷ Two paths, then, are available for filmmakers, but both have their attendant risks: beginning with "the world" poses the danger of the filmmaker remaining content with a "pure gaze" that is little different from cows watching trains pass by—in thrall to their color and movement, but without any deeper understanding of what they have seen. Beginning with "the idea," meanwhile, tends to result in schematic works that do not allow the dense, confusing reality of the world to interfere with the initial conception.

Rivette insists, however, that there are filmmakers who are capable of achieving a dialectical balance between these two approaches. Here, the pre-existing idea of the film must not be a "skeleton" but a "dynamic figure" in which "the justness of its movement, of its internal dialectic, progressively recreates, before our eyes, a concrete world" that is "both an incarnated idea and the real penetrated with meaning."⁸ For Rivette, the "idea is already an idea of the world;" it is an "image-idea." With this notion, he combines two philosophical heritages: the film theory of Bazin, with its concern for the relationship between the cinema and the reality of the world it depicts, and the Hegelian conception of the relationship between the idea and concrete reality. Rivette treats the ontological realism of the cinema not as a frozen

6 Jean-Louis Comolli, "Coup double," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 146 (August 1963), pp. 41-42, here p. 42.

7 Jacques Rivette, "Revoir Verdoux," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 146 (August 1963), pp. 42-43, here p. 42.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

dogma but as a bidirectional dynamic, and in doing so retains the dialectical thrust inherent to Bazin's original ideas. Chaplin's value—and, indeed, his “genius”—is that he manifests “in clear light” a dialectic that was merely implicit in the work of other filmmakers. From this point, Rivette shifts the conceptual terrain towards the structuralist theory of Barthes. Assenting to Barthes' view that structuralist activity is the “reconstitution of an object ‘in such a way as to manifest the functions of this object,’” Rivette sees *Monsieur Verdoux* through a Barthesian lens as a “*simulacrum*, rigorously non-symbolic and without depth, but *formal*: ‘neither the real, nor the rational, but the functional.’”⁹ Chaplin is therefore something of an unwitting structuralist: the “multiplicity of significations” in *Monsieur Verdoux* is generated by the distanced, almost Brechtian relationship between his extra-filmic persona and the role he plays in the film.

The groundwork was laid, therefore, for a productive dialogue between Barthes and *Cahiers*, which first emerged in his September 1963 encounter with Rivette and Delahaye. As Narboni observes, this conversation has the distinction of being the “first important interview in the French language” given by Barthes.¹⁰ The discussion here focuses on the vexed question as to whether cinema constitutes a language: while the *Cahiers* interviewers are distinctly skeptical about the linguistic properties of cinematic signification, Barthes offers a nuanced view of the potential of a linguistic model for film analysis. This model should firstly discern “whether, in the filmic continuum, there are elements which are not analogical, or whose analogical character has been deformed, transposed or codified; elements which are structured in such a way that they can be treated as fragments of language.” Applying a structuralist methodology would then allow us to isolate filmic elements in order to pinpoint “linguistic units” from which “you could construct ‘classes,’ systems and declensions.”¹¹

But such an effort would still come up against the obstacle that “cinematic expression probably also belongs to this order of large-scale signifying units, corresponding to global, diffuse, latent signifieds, which are not in the same category as the isolated and discontinuous signifieds of articulated

9 Ibid. The quoted passage is from Roland Barthes' text “The Structuralist Activity,” published earlier that year.

10 Jean Narboni, *La nuit sera noire et blanche: Barthes, La Chambre claire, le cinéma* (Paris: Capricci, 2015), p. 21.

11 Barthes, “Entretien avec Roland Barthes,” p. 22. Translated as “Roland Barthes: ‘Towards a Semiotics of Cinema,’” trans. Annwyl Williams, in Jim Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. II: The 1960s: New Wave, New Cinema, Reevaluating Hollywood* (London: BFI, 1986), pp. 276-285, here pp. 277-278.

language.” Referring to Jakobsonian categories, Barthes therefore contends that the cinema can be considered a language only if it abandons the level of denotation and shifts to the level of connotation. While a common objection to such a position, and one raised by the interviewers, is that formal devices in the cinema (the high-angle shot, for instance) possess an inescapable semantic ambiguity, this does not pose a problem for Barthes, who claims that “Ambiguity of that kind is normal. [...] Signifiers are all ambiguous; the number of signifieds always exceeds the number of signifiers.”¹² Furthermore, Barthes insists that, in the cinema, “the story, the anecdote, the argument (with its major consequence, suspense) is never absent.” This results in cinematic narrative resembling a series of “syntagmatic *dispatchings*,” leading Barthes to the conclusion that “exchanges between linguistics and cinema are possible, provided you choose a linguistics of the syntagma rather than a linguistics of the sign.”¹³

From this general discussion, Barthes moves on to a more specific discussion of artistic modes and their political possibilities. The cinema, for Barthes, is closer to literature than it is to the theater. Whereas the latter is capable of polemical agitation for politically radical purposes, a “literature of the left” is impossible; instead, Barthes advocates a “problematic literature,” which “provokes answers, but which does not give them.”¹⁴ In the cinema, this can take the form of a “suspension of meaning,” which Barthes locates in Buñuel’s *El ángel exterminador*. While the Spanish director famously issued a disclaimer that “this film has no meaning,” Barthes refuses to see it as an absurd or nonsensical film. *El ángel exterminador* is a film “full of meaning,” but this is to be associated with the Lacanian notion of *signifiance*—that is, a signifying process that has a subversion or evacuation of meaning at its core. For Barthes, the future of the cinema thus lies in the direction of Buñuel’s film, which exemplifies a variant of cinematic modernism that would consist of “syntagmatic films, narrative films, ‘psychological’ films.”¹⁵

The recent deposit of Rivette’s archives at the Cinémathèque française has shed new light on the genesis of this landmark discussion, as three successive versions of the interview have been preserved, allowing us to closely chart the evolution of its content.¹⁶ In the published interview,

12 Ibid. [pp. 278-279].

13 Ibid., p. 26 [p. 280].

14 Ibid., p. 28 [p. 282].

15 Ibid., p. 30 [p. 284].

16 Of the three versions, the first and the second only have minor differences—the product, most likely, of a light revision of the transcript by Rivette and Delahaye themselves. The third version, by contrast, is the result of Barthes’ substantial revisions and was published without

Rivette and Delahaye thanked Barthes for “attentively reread[ing] the text of this conversation,”¹⁷ but this is a euphemistic description. In fact, Barthes discarded the majority of his interview, retaining only the questions and completely re-writing his answers, gluing the new, handwritten passages into place on top of the typed sheets of the transcript. In light of this discovery, the “dialogue” between *Cahiers* and Barthes takes on a surreal allure: a question posed orally receives a written response, before a new question, responding to a markedly different answer given by Barthes during the spoken interview, takes up the thread. The revisions also attest to the fluid, only partially thought-out conception that Barthes had of the cinema in 1963. In an excised passage, he confesses that “if I have not written anything on the cinema, this is because [I] have always been prevented by the sentiment that I do not possess sufficient culture, at the precise moment when culture appears to me not only as knowledge but as a refinement of analysis, necessary for embarking on criticism.”¹⁸

Whereas Barthes unambiguously insists in the final version of the interview that “the cinema is a metonymic art,” in the earlier transcription he divides the medium into a “cinema of metaphor and a cinema of metonymy, or, on the one hand a cinema that would invent symbolic substitutions for a signified, [...] and on the other hand a cinema of narrative and montage.”¹⁹ Discussions of the “Yale school” of syntagmatic linguistics and critical remarks on Antonioni are excised,²⁰ while lengthy passages on Brecht in the final version were *post factum* additions. In the initial interview, the German dramatist is treated in a markedly different manner but one that contains fascinating resonances for *Cahiers*’ critical practice in the late 1960s and 1970s. Here Barthes asks: “Have film critics tried to analyze film on a level equivalent, for example, to that of the scene in Brecht? What would this cinematic Brechtism produce? Why does the cinema seem incapable

any further changes. It is therefore the differences between the second and third versions of the text that are of interest for present scholarship. See Fonds Jacques Rivette, Espace chercheurs de la Cinémathèque française, RIVETTE86-B19.

17 Ibid., p. 21.

18 Roland Barthes, interviewed by Michel Delahaye and Jacques Rivette, “Entretien avec Roland Barthes [second version],” Fonds Jacques Rivette, Espace chercheurs de la Cinémathèque française, RIVETTE86-B19, p. 2.

19 Ibid., p. 7.

20 This step perhaps represented prudence on Barthes’ part. He evidently later warmed to the Italian filmmaker, as the final text he wrote was an appreciative letter to Antonioni, left unfinished but published by *Cahiers* after his death. See Roland Barthes, “Cher Antonioni,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 311 (May 1980), pp. 9-11.

of permitting an integral Brechtism?"²¹ Although Barthes is ambivalent about the likely results of such an endeavor, his answer appears to sketch out the later *Cahiers'* program half-a-decade in advance: "All this leads to the desire for a general aesthetics of the cinema; aesthetics not in the humanistic sense of the term, but in a polemical, or even Kantian sense (that is, discerning categories), perhaps by confronting the cinema with Brechtism and structuralism."²²

Christian Metz and Film Semiology

Alongside Barthes, Christian Metz represented the other wing of a prolonged dialogue between *Cahiers* and semiology in the 1960s. Whereas Barthes analyzed cultural discourse in a broad sense, Metz focused more singularly on the project of developing a semiological understanding of the cinema grounded in the work of Saussure and Hjelmslev. Metz's judicious, methodical approach is evident from his first published text on film semiology, "Le cinéma: langue ou langage?." Rejecting more grandiose attempts to elaborate the "language of cinema," he insisted that it could not be considered a *langue* (language system) analogous to spoken languages such as English and French but was better understood as a looser system of signification, a *langage* (language) that obeys the fundamental principles of general linguistics.²³ The *Cahiers* critics, for their part, never adopted Metz's outlook on the cinema outright. Indeed, once the journal was under the sway of Althusserian Marxism, the linguistic foundations of Metz's method were judged as too "empiricist," and he was critiqued for not taking the ideological aspect of signification into account. Metz was nonetheless a privileged interlocutor of *Cahiers* for more than a decade, and his work would have a lasting influence on the later writings of Aumont, Comolli and Bonitzer in particular. The dialogue with Metz was a product both of *Cahiers'* openness to new tendencies in film theory in the mid-1960s and of close personal ties, as Narboni grants. Metz, he notes, "was an adorable fellow, and extremely kind. I read his texts, they spoke to me less. The *grande*

21 Barthes, "Entretien avec Barthes [second version]," p. 16.

22 Ibid.

23 See Christian Metz, "Le cinéma: langue ou langage?," in idem. *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2013 [1968]), pp. 41-92. Translated as "Cinema: Language or Language System?," in idem. *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 31-91.

syntagmatique was not as close to me as Barthes and Pasolini were.”²⁴ This attitude notwithstanding, it is curious that unlike Barthes, Metz was never interviewed by *Cahiers*—even more so given that he did conduct interviews with other film journals at the time, including *Cinéthique* and *La Nouvelle Critique* in 1970 and *Ça-cinéma* in 1975.²⁵ Instead, Metz’s interventions in *Cahiers* took more varied forms and included letters to the editor, articles and excerpts from forthcoming books.

Metz’s first appearance on the pages of *Cahiers* was an inauspicious one. In February 1965, a review of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Une femme mariée* by Gérard Guégan had accused the semiologist of committing a “regrettable misconception” in “Le cinéma: langue ou langage?” by ostensibly refusing montage and “assimilating it with the manipulation of the real that Rossellini was so wary of.”²⁶ Metz hastily issued a retort published in the journal’s April issue, which insisted that Guégan had misunderstood his text. Metz had only intended to condemn “a certain form of montage (and ‘film syntax’) which the cinema has, in any case, already left behind,” and he specified that this *montage-roi* consisted of “the abuse of non-diegetic metaphors, superimpositions, rapid editing, etc.” In the work of Welles, Resnais and Godard, by contrast, a new form of montage has arisen, one which is no longer “a caricature of verbal structures,” and Metz concludes his missive with the statement that “only a certain form of montage is dead...”²⁷

This exchange may not have augured a propitious relationship between Metz and the journal—the theorist bluntly states that he has “very few opinions in common with *Cahiers*.”²⁸ Nonetheless, the next month the editors of *Cahiers* elected to publish a major article by Metz that would be of considerable importance for the journal’s later development, “À propos de l’impression de la réalité au cinéma.” Borrowing the concept of the “impression of reality” from Barthes’ discussion of photography in his article “Rhétorique de l’image,” Metz argues that it is thanks to the *movement* of images that the cinema is able to furnish “a higher degree of reality and the corporality of objects” than photography and thus impart a

24 Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.

25 See Christian Metz, *Conversations with Christian Metz: Selected Interviews on Film Theory (1970-1991)*, eds. Warren Buckland and Daniel Fairfax (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

26 Gérard Guégan, “Décollages,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 163 (February 1965), pp. 81-82.

27 Christian Metz, “Godard et le montage,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 165 (April 1965), p. 5.

28 *Ibid.*

sense of “presence” to the events depicted.²⁹ For Metz, moving images are not merely analogous to motion in real life; rather, they genuinely provide the spectator with the “real presence of movement.” The “secret” of the cinema therefore consists of “injecting in the irreality of the image the reality of movement, and thus making the imaginary real to an extent never before attained.”³⁰ A year later, Metz would publish a second major article with *Cahiers*, this time on the occasion of a special issue on “cinema and the novel.” “Le cinéma moderne et la narrativité” applauded the effervescence of cinematic modernism in the 1960s—with the rise of filmmakers such as Resnais, Godard and Antonioni—but claimed that, in contrast to Pasolini’s notion of the “cinema of poetry,” these films are marked above all by a tendency towards the novelistic and away from the abstractly poetic imagery of the silent era. Rather than a sweeping rejection of narrative, spectacle or drama, the specificity of modern cinema resides, for Metz, in “a vast and complex movement of renewal and enrichment” of film syntax.³¹

In the period after these texts appeared, *Cahiers* was divided between harnessing Metz’s theories for its own purposes and subjecting them to critique. In a 1969 intervention, Narboni broadly adhered to Metz’s position in “Problèmes de dénotation dans le film de fiction” that a shot in the cinema corresponds to a lexical sentence rather than a word (or, as in Metz’s famous example, to the phrase “Here is a revolver!” rather than the word “revolver”), but he noted that the film *Méditerranée* strives precisely to transform its constituent shots into lexical units approximating words by diminishing the oppositions Metz had established and by “effecting a perversion [...] of the actualization of shots and their quality of assertiveness.”³² From this point on, the sporadic critiques *Cahiers* made of Metzian semiology centered chiefly on the question of ideology, or, more precisely, the lack thereof in Metz’s theories. In 1971-1972, both Pascal Bonitzer (in “‘Réalité’ de la dénotation”) and Jean-Louis Comolli (in “Technique et idéologie”) offered harsh critiques of Jean Mitry, contrasting markedly with Metz’s favorable

29 Christian Metz, “À propos de l’impression de la réalité au cinéma,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 166-167 (May-June 1965), pp. 75-82, here pp. 76, 79. Translated as “On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema,” in idem., *Film Language*, pp. 3-15, here pp. 6-8.

30 Ibid., p. 82.

31 Christian Metz, “Le cinéma moderne et la narrativité,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 185 (December 1966), pp. 43-68, here p. 63.

32 Jean Narboni, Sylvie Pierre and Jacques Rivette, “Montage,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 210 (March 1969), pp. 17-34, here p. 24. Translated as “Montage,” trans. Tom Milne, in Jonathan Rosenbaum (ed.), *Rivette: Texts and Interviews* (London: BFI, 1977), pp. 69-88, here p. 77. This text is further discussed in Chapter 15.

stance towards him.³³ Bonitzer's text, for example, begins by insisting on the ideological nature of the "technical classification regarding the scale of the shot," which fundamentally rests, in the *Cahiers* critic's view, on a "metaphysical ordering from the part to the whole."³⁴ In adopting the system of shot categories established by Mitry, Metz's *grande syntagmatique* thus has an openly empiricist foundation, which "reaffirms the illusion of the text's autonomy by privileging linearity, 'lived experience,' the 'flow.'"³⁵ Metz's broader distinction between filmic denotation and connotation is similarly critiqued: denotation has the effect of "constraining the film and its reading to a transcendental semantic level that would be 'film language'" at the same time as condemning connotation "to the role of 'artistic' supplement, expressive redundancy."³⁶ Bonitzer is careful to clarify, however, that he is referring to arguments made in Metz's earlier works, which, he foreshadows, will be addressed in the semiologist's "upcoming book." The "upcoming book," which did indeed seek to integrate the question of ideology into Metz's film semiology, was *Langage et cinéma*, published later in the year, and the affinities between Metz's newer thinking and *Cahiers* were highlighted not only in Comolli's more positive comments towards Metz in the third installment of "Technique et idéologie"³⁷ but also in the journal's willingness to print Chapter 6 of Section XI of the book ("Cinéma et idéographie") in their March-April 1971 issue as well as the essay "Ponctuations et démarcations dans le film de diégèse" (included in vol. II of *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*) in early 1972.³⁸

This period also saw a more pointed intervention by Metz. In "Les enfants du paradigme," the *Positif* critic Robert Benayoun had counterposed the semiologist to *Cahiers*, praising him for avoiding the journal's "frivolous,

33 Metz writes at length on Mitry in *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, pp. 241-362.

34 Pascal Bonitzer, "'Réalité' de la dénotation," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 229 (May 1971), pp. 39-41, here p. 39. Translated as "'Reality' of Denotation," trans. Lindley Hanlon, in Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III*, pp. 248-253, here p. 249.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

36 *Ibid.*

37 See Jean-Louis Comolli, "Technique et idéologie (4)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 233 (November 1971), pp. 39-45, here p. 40. Translated as "Technique and Ideology," in *Cinema against Spectacle*, p. 211. In this passage, Comolli foreshadows a planned deeper analysis of Metz's ideas in a later installment of "Technique et idéologie," but this never materializes.

38 See Christian Metz, "Cinéma et idéographie," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 228 (March-April 1971), pp. 6-11; and Christian Metz, "Ponctuations et démarcations dans le film de diégèse," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 234-235 (December 1971, January-February 1972), pp. 63-78. Both texts are reprinted in *Langage et cinéma* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1971). Translated as *Language and Cinema*, trans. by Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1974).

autocratic and threatening attitude” and adopting a semiological lexicon that is “natural, restrained, devoid of coquetry and fatuity.”³⁹ As part of Comolli/Narboni’s vociferous reaction to Benayoun’s charges, Metz himself responded with a letter to *Positif* that attested to the fraternal relations between himself and *Cahiers*, writing:

It happens that I am in relations of work and discussion, more or less close depending on the case, with all those whom your collaborator assails, beginning with *Cahiers du cinéma*. [...] On the subject of cinema, the most serious effort at theoretical reflection, today, is located in my opinion on the side of those whom your journal attacks. To this extent—and beyond all the complex details one would like—I feel that I am on their side far more than on the side of *Positif*, in spite of the compliments Robert Benayon addresses to me.⁴⁰

A postscript to Metz’ collaboration with *Cahiers* came in 1977, in the wake of his shift towards a psychoanalytic paradigm of film theory in *Le Signifiant imaginaire*. Not only did this new allegiance bring Metz in yet closer proximity to the thinking of *Cahiers*, it also came at a moment when *Cahiers* had rejected its earlier political rigidity and was returning to a spirit of intellectual curiosity. Drawing significantly on Metz, Bonitzer’s 1977 text “Voici (La notion de plan et le sujet du cinéma)” attests to this alignment. The article is concerned with what Bonitzer dubs the “*effet de voici*”: if a close-up of a revolver conveys the message “here is a revolver,” then this “here is...” is not only an “actualization effect” (as Metz argues), it is also an effect produced by the cinematic gaze and is thus an “index of fiction” allowing the audience to grasp their own position as film spectators.⁴¹ Metz responded to this renewed interest by publishing an extract from *Le Signifiant imaginaire* (titled “L’incandescence et le code”) in the journal’s following issue (March 1977), despite the fact that the text barely touches on specifically cinematic questions.⁴² This was the last of Metz’s texts published in *Cahiers*, but a final, touching, epilogue to the relationship between the semiologist and the film journal came in 1994, when the former’s suicide

39 Robert Benayoun, “Les enfants du paradigme,” *Positif* no. 122 (December 1970), pp. 7-26, here p. 11.

40 Christian Metz, “Une lettre de Christian Metz,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 226-227 (January-February 1971), pp. 120-121, here p. 121. The letter is dated January 9, 1971.

41 Pascal Bonitzer, “Voici (La notion de plan et le sujet du cinéma),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 273 (January-February 1977), pp. 5-18, here p. 18.

42 Christian Metz, “L’incandescence et le code,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 274 (March 1977), pp. 5-22.

prompted Aumont to pen an *éloge* to a figure with whom he had had a long and productive relationship. "It is perhaps strange," he wrote:

that, having never been his pupil, having been his *protégé* a little (he helped every time he could), and having finally become his friend, I should now feel myself invested with the task of transmitting his thought. It's not that Christian Metz was my master (I'm not sure he wished to be a master). It's that deep down I believe less in the importance of individuals than in that of values, and from Christian I acquired many.⁴³

Pier Paolo Pasolini and the Cinema of Poetry

Pasolini was the third key figure of film semiology to entertain relations with *Cahiers*. His status as a filmmaker, however, meant that these ties were of a dual nature: the journal not only conducted a theoretical dialogue with Pasolini; its critics also responded to and appraised his films. Pasolini did not have an academic background, and his semiology-inspired texts represent the standpoint of a practicing artist, with both the strengths and weaknesses that this entails. Helped by former *Cahiers* critic Jean-Claude Biette in understanding the finer points of French semiology, Pasolini's experience as a filmmaker allowed him to have insights into the process of cinematic signification that had eluded the likes of Metz and Barthes. At the same time, his theoretical notions often attested to a dilettantish streak. While possessing a provocative value, they were incapable of yielding the kind of systematic application desired by his fellow semiologists.

Cahiers was early in identifying the exceptional nature of Pasolini's cinema: Labarthe lauded *Accatone*, seen out of competition at Venice in 1961, as evoking "the best of Visconti, the best of Fellini, perhaps the best of the Italian cinema."⁴⁴ Venice '64 saw Comolli treat *Il vangelo secondo Matteo* as the "remake" of "a film that has unfolded for the last two millennia on our inner screens and those screens at the altar."⁴⁵ It was in 1965, however, that *Cahiers'* interest in Pasolini exploded: in August, the journal ran reviews of four unreleased Pasolini films (*Mamma Roma*, *Comizi d'amore*, *La ricotta*

43 Jacques Aumont, "Christian Metz et l'amitié," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 472 (October 1993), p. 6.

44 André S. Labarthe, "La boîte à surprises," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 124 (October 1961), pp. 47-48, here p. 48.

45 Jean-Louis Comolli and François Weyergans, "Venise 64," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 159 (October 1964), pp. 16-31, here p. 24.

and *Sopraluoghi in Palestine*) as well as an interview with the filmmaker conducted by Comolli and Bertolucci; two months later, it published a French translation of his paper “Il cinema di poesia” (its first appearance in any language).⁴⁶ “Il cinema di poesia” differentiates the *im-sign* (the building block of “the world of meaningful images”) from its linguistic equivalent, the *lin-sign*, and it is the former’s “pregrammatical and even premorphological” nature that, for Pasolini, determines the “deeply oneiric quality of the cinema.”⁴⁷ If the dreamlike, pre-verbal nature of visual imagery suggests an innately poetic nature to cinematic language, Pasolini observes that film production has been dominated by a “specific and surreptitious” prosaic language—namely, the narrative conventions of the commercial film industry. The recent work of Antonioni, Bertolucci and Godard, however, saw the development of techniques such as the “free indirect point-of-view shot” (an image whose expressive qualities align with the psychology of a character in the film) and the broader practice of “making the camera felt” (Pasolini’s term for modernist self-reflexivity), which have recovered the cinema’s fundamentally oneiric, poetic nature. Pasolini insists that this is a purely modernist phenomenon: while the films of Chaplin and Mizoguchi had a poetic aspect to them, this did not derive from their cinematic technique, which resolutely remained “transparent.” He concludes, however, by conceding that the distinction between prose and poetry in the cinema is merely “a useful terminology, which is meaningless unless one proceeds subsequently to a comparative examination of this phenomenon in a vaster cultural, social and political context.”⁴⁸

Comolli and Bertolucci’s interview with Pasolini gave him the opportunity to expand on some of the key points of this seminal article: from the very start, he insists that his text poses a purely linguistic division, not one of value or content. Intriguingly, he applies the prose/poetry dichotomy to his own films. While his earliest films are “made according to classical syntax,” *Il Vangelo* belongs more to the poetic tendency of the cinema. “We feel the

46 See Pier Paolo Pasolini, interviewed by Bernardo Bertolucci and Jean-Louis Comolli, “Le cinéma selon Pasolini: Entretien avec Pier Paolo Pasolini,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 169 (August 1965), pp. 20-25, 76-77; and Jean-Louis Comolli, Maurizio Ponzi, Adriano Aprà and Eduardo Bruno, “Quatre films inédits de Pier Paolo Pasolini,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 169 (August 1965), pp. 27-29.

47 Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Le cinéma de poésie,” translated into French by Jacques Bontemps and Marianne di Vettimo, *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 171 (October 1965), pp. 55-64, here p. 55. Translated into English as “The Cinema of Poetry,” in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, trans. Louise K. Barnett and Ben Lawton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 167-186, here p. 169.

48 *Ibid.* [p. 184].

camera tremendously, there are a lot of zooms, deliberate jump-cuts; if you want, its technique is somewhat close to that of certain Godard films.” Moreover, Pasolini divulges that it was his experience making *Il Vangelo*—and more specifically, relating the story of Christ from the standpoint of a believer, in spite of his own atheism—that led to his conceptualization of “free indirect discourse” as a stylistic technique in the cinema. In the introduction to his interview with Pasolini, Comolli announced that the Italian’s communiqué at Pesaro in 1965, the source for the published version of “Il cinema di poesia,” discussed the problems of contemporary cinema “at such a level of lucidity and reflection” that it was “no longer possible for us to only interrogate the filmmaker in Pasolini; we have to reckon with the theorist.”⁴⁹ Indeed, a dialectic between filmmaker and theorist also marked the reception of Pasolini’s work in *Cahiers*. Another treatise, “Le scénario comme structure tendant vers une autre structure,” draws from the filmmaker’s own experience in transforming his written scripts into works of cinema. In discussing the relationship between the screenplay and the finished film, Pasolini’s taste for semiologically inspired neologisms is exacerbated: here the *im-sign* is reconceived as a *kineme*. *Kinemes* are the almost inexistent “visual monads” obeying semantic laws that are distinct from the habitual rules of linguistic discourse. The *sceno-text* (Pasolini’s term for film script), meanwhile, is defined by its dual, schizophrenic quality: it represents “two different languages characterized by different structures,” and the *lin-signs* that comprise it are marked by being a “form endowed with the will to become another structure”—that is, they *seek* to be transformed into *im-signs*.⁵⁰

The final text of Pasolini’s to appear in *Cahiers*, “Discours sur le plan séquence ou le cinéma comme sémiologie de la réalité,” sought to bring semiology into contact with questions of ontology by focusing on the question of the sequence-shot and in doing so brought Pasolini’s thinking into a close dialogue with the *Cahiers* tradition of reflection on cinema. In developing his notion of cinema as “the written language of reality,” Pasolini’s article draws a broad parallel between the long-take in a film and human life itself, which only obtains full meaning at the point of its completion—that is, the moment of one’s own death. In a celebrated turn of phrase, Pasolini thus

49 Comolli, “Le cinéma selon Pasolini,” p. 25.

50 Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Le scénario comme structure tendant vers une autre structure,” translated into French by Marianne di Vettimo, *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 185 (December 1966), pp. 77-82, here p. 82. Translated into English as “The Screenplay as a Structure That Wants to be Another Structure,” in Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, pp. 187-196, here p. 196.

remarks that “death effects an instantaneous montage of our lives” and elaborates on this point by explaining that “editing therefore performs on the material of the film [...] the operations that death performs on life.”⁵¹ Narboni’s introduction to the article points to “multiple affinities” between Pasolini’s ideas and those of Jean Cocteau, noting that “all of Cocteau’s films [...] could illustrate Pasolini’s description of film as a form of ‘putting to death’ [*mise à mort*], where the author would play the role of a conscious, terrified organizer of his own destruction.”⁵² Unmentioned by Narboni, however, is a still more resonant parallel: that between Pasolini’s views and Bazin’s reflections on the relationship between the machinery of the cinema and human mortality in texts such as “Mort tous les après-midi” and his review of Marc Allégret’s *Avec André Gide*.⁵³

In the same text, Narboni hailed Pasolini as “one of the rare contemporary filmmakers to attempt to draw from the acquisitions of ‘modern sciences’ in order to have a better grasp on his own creative activity.”⁵⁴ In the balance between Pasolini’s films and his semiological ideas, however, it was the former that tended to monopolize *Cahiers*’ interest, particularly as the 1960s drew to a close. In the space of little more than a year, between April 1969 and July 1970, the journal published no less than six reviews of Pasolini films. A divided attitude towards *Teorema* was symptomatic, however, of the uncertainty that his work now elicited: Bonitzer’s April 1969 response to the film attempted to square Pasolini’s theory with his aesthetic practice, but his assessment was an ambivalent one: in depicting the decomposition of the “bourgeois socio-familial structure,” Pasolini’s overt desire to “‘signify,’ to metaphorize beyond the constraints of the narrative,” reduces the film to a set of ideograms or concepts, thereby dooming it to “rigidity and confusion.”⁵⁵ This judgement was not unanimously shared in *Cahiers*. Daney, then in Italy after returning to Europe from a voyage to India, had also submitted a draft article on the film, handwritten in red capital letters and signed under the

51 Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Discours sur le plan séquence ou le cinéma comme sémiologie de la réalité,” translated into French by Marianne di Vettimo, *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 192 (July-August 1967), pp. 26-30, here p. 28. Translated into English as “Observations on the Sequence Shot,” and “Is Being Natural?,” in Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, pp. 233-243, here pp. 236-237. The text originated in a lecture given at the third Pesaro film festival in 1967.

52 Jean Narboni, “Situation du nouveau cinéma, 2,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 192 (July-August 1967), p. 26.

53 See André Bazin, “Mort tous les après-midi,” in idem., *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma? vol. I: Ontologie et langage* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958), pp. 65-70; and André Bazin, “Avec André Gide,” in idem., *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma? vol. I*, pp. 71-74.

54 Narboni, “Situation du nouveau cinéma, 2,” p. 26.

55 Pascal Bonitzer, “Le carré (*Teorema*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 211 (April 1969), p. 53.

pseudonym *Jean Bave*.⁵⁶ While Bonitzer's piece was the first to be published, he later recognized that Daney's review was patently superior to his own and possessed "the toughness and translucence that we simply call style."⁵⁷ Daney read the film as a tautological proposition that "shows nothing but the faces of those who watch it, while they are watching it." The eponymous theorem of the film is, in his analysis, the following: "The guest (T. Stamp) = the film (*Teorema*); the family = the public (you, me, etc.)." As a mirror of the audience, confronting it with its own voyeurism, *Teorema* attains a summit of self-reflexivity. Even the different reactions of the family members to Terence Stamp's abrupt departure program in advance the various critical responses the film will elicit among spectators—including, by implication, Bonitzer's unenthused appraisal. It is here, however, that the parallelism comes to an end. While the family is decisively dispersed at the end of the film, the film-going public will continue to reconstitute itself before the cinematic spectacle. *Teorema*, Daney concludes, "is not the last film," and in being "complicit in what he denounces," Pasolini is "condemned to please, even (and always) *for the last time*."⁵⁸

Porcile also met with multiple reviews (this time by Eisenschitz and Daney), while brief notices by Eisenschitz on *Uccellacci e uccellini* in April 1970 (released in France five years after its Italian premiere) and *Amore e rabbia* three months later were to be the last discussions of Pasolini's films in *Cahiers* during the filmmaker's lifetime. With his Marxism evidently too heterodox for *Cahiers* in its dogmatic period, *Medea* and the three "trilogy of life" films were all passed over in silence, and even Pasolini's spectacular death in November 1975 initially went unmentioned by the journal. It was only in the July-August 1976 issue (a dossier on "Images de marque") that *Cahiers* returned to the Italian filmmaker's work, with Daney penning a "Note sur *Saló*." Invoking Barthes' judgement that "no one can recuperate" Pasolini's Sade adaptation,⁵⁹ Daney's text is remote from the semiological concerns of the 1960s. Instead, he gives a quasi-Deleuzian take on the micropolitics of desire operating in Pasolini's last work: popular resistance in *Saló* is embodied not in "radical refusal" or the "demand for another politics" but in the "collection of little pleasures stolen from the despotic system of rules." And yet Pasolini's film is suffused with an "ultimate despair,"

56 The name is a pun on the idiomatic phrase *j'en bave*, "I'm having a hard time of it."

57 Pascal Bonitzer, "Calme bloc," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 458 (July-August 1992), pp. 10-11.

58 Serge Daney, "Le désert rose (*Teorema*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 212 (May 1969), pp. 61-62.

59 See Roland Barthes, "Sade-Pasolini," *Le Monde*, June 16, 1976. Translated as "Sade-Pasolini (On *Saló*)," trans. Deborah Glassman, in Watts, *Roland Barthes' Cinema*, pp. 138-140.

which comes from the generalization of bourgeois attitudes to all sections of society and which reaches the point that even sex has lost its subversive energy. For Daney, the Italian filmmaker is therefore a “defamed master” who is “condemned to a sort of irremediable *innocence*.”⁶⁰

Debates over Film Language: Moullet, Burch, Bellour

The ambivalent attitude of *Cahiers* towards the initial efforts of the film semiologists was reflected in a series of debates the journal hosted surrounding questions of film analysis and cinematic language. The most spectacular of these was undoubtedly former *Cahiers* critic Luc Moullet's strident denunciation of the “linguists” at Pesaro in 1966. A round table during the festival on the theme “Pour une nouvelle conscience critique du langage cinématographique” saw guests of honor Pasolini, Metz and Barthes attacked by Moullet in an impromptu intervention. The youngest member of the *nouvelle vague* generation of *Cahiers* critics (he was born in 1937), Moullet had just released his debut film *Brigitte et Brigitte*, an ode to Parisian cinephilia which Narboni had greeted in Barthesian terms as the “degree zero of cinema” for its radical renunciation of stylistic flourishes.⁶¹ In a philippic titled “De la nocivité du langage cinématographique, de son inutilité, ainsi que des moyens de lutter contre lui,” Moullet fulminated, with his typical sardonic provocation, against the “congenital artistic mediocrity of cinematic languages past, present and future” and argued that “there is a complete opposition between cinematic language and cinematic art, for cinematic language overwhelms art, invades it, stifles it.”⁶² Indeed, the perspective and tone of his intervention can be aptly summarized in its closing peroration: “Down with film language, so that film may live!”⁶³

60 Serge Daney, “Note sur *Saló*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 268-269 (July-August 1976), pp. 102-103.

61 “Between Moullet's film and us,” Narboni explained, “there is no cinema, or rather there is the empty space left by its disappearance.” Jean Narboni “Notre alpin quotidien (*Brigitte et Brigitte*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 180 (July 1966), pp. 58-60, here p. 60.

62 Long a mythical text known only from second-hand accounts, “De la nocivité” found its first publication in 2009 in an anthology of Moullet's critical writings. See Luc Moullet, “De la nocivité du langage cinématographique, ainsi que des moyens de lutter contre lui,” in idem., *Piges choisies (de Griffith à Ellroy)* (Paris: Capricci, 2009), pp. 233-241, here pp. 235, 236-237. The same collection gave Moullet's more recent mordant views on theoretical activity: “I wrote a few theoretical texts. Not too many. It's dangerous. Metz, Deleuze, Benjamin and Debord all committed suicide. Maybe they discovered that theory gets you nowhere, and the shock was too much (not to mention Althusser).” Ibid., p. 234.

63 Ibid., p. 241.

The other panelists at the session were scandalized at this caricature of their project. According to Narboni's account of the proceedings, Barthes accused the upstart Moullet of "incessantly confusing language and stereotypes" as well as pandering to "anti-intellectualism." Metz offered a more conciliatory stance, ascribing the difference to that between theorists and artists and arguing that "our task is not so much to say how films should be made, but to find out how they manage to be understood." Narboni, for his part, proffered the view that Moullet was right to note that "bad films [...] lend themselves more easily to studies of this type." He maintained, however, that his *Cahiers* colleague was wrong to treat the declarations of Metz and Barthes as describing a "normative language": "For them it is a matter of defining the intelligibility of a given film." At the same time, he also posed the question of the ineffability of certain cinematic masterpieces. Why is the conventional cross-cutting of *Strangers on Train* "magnificent" or the simple shot/reverse-shot structure of *Vivre sa vie* "fascinating," while the same techniques used in other films are banal or even ludicrous? This is a question that, in Narboni's view, has doggedly eluded film semiology.⁶⁴

Shortly afterwards, Godard issued a strident defense of Moullet in his text "Trois mille heures du cinéma," describing the Pesaro pronunciamento as "Moullet's sublime missive, Courtelinesque and Brechtian, screaming, in the face of the structuralists: 'language, my good sir, is theft.' Moullet is right. We are the children of film language. Our parents are Griffith, Hawks, Dreyer and Bazin, and Langlois, but not you, and in any case, without images and sounds, how can you speak of structures?"⁶⁵ Godard's 1967 interview with *Cahiers* extended the polemic. At this point, the director still retained a broadly phenomenological perspective, which can be seen in his citations of Merleau-Ponty in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* as well as his assent to Sartre's critique of Barthes' *Système de la mode* in the interview itself.⁶⁶ He continued to express solidarity with Moullet's outlook, telling his interviewers, "I view linguistics the way Leclerc might—or, even worse, Poujade. But I still have to agree with Moullet. At Pesaro he talked commonsense." Godard also recounted having spoken with Pasolini about his recent texts at the Venice film festival but criticized his colleague

64 The quotes from this paragraph are from Narboni, "Notre alpin quotidien," p. 60.

65 Jean-Luc Godard, "Trois mille heures du cinéma," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 184 (November 1966), pp. 47-48, here p. 48.

66 For more on this, see Marc Cerisuelo, "Pesaro 1966: Les fils aînés de Godard ont les yeux bleus (Moullet, Eustache, Straub)," in Jacques Aumont (ed.), *Pour un cinéma comparé: Influences et répétitions* (Paris: Cinémathèque française, 1996), pp. 147-160; and Marc Cerisuelo, "Tu n'as rien vu (à Pesaro)," *CinémAction* no. 52 (June 1989), pp. 192-198.

for falling into the normative errors of the earlier filmology movement. Persuasively, he contended that Pasolini's theory was really another form of poetic expression: "I read it because he's a poet and it talks about death; so, it's got to be beautiful. It's beautiful like Foucault's text on Velázquez. But I don't see the *necessity*." Metz, meanwhile, is judged to be a "peculiar case. He's the easiest to like of them all: because he actually goes to watch movies; he really likes movies. But I can't understand what he wants to do. He begins with film, all right. But then he goes off on a tangent."⁶⁷

In the same interview, Godard was distinctly more upbeat about the writings of Noël Burch, then a young American filmmaker and critic residing in Paris, who is praised for his "practical" approach to questions of film technique such as the match-on-action cut: "You have a feeling they're the views of a man who has done it himself, who's thought about what is involved in doing—a man who has come to certain conclusions on the basis of his physical handling of film."⁶⁸ The texts of Burch's pioneering work of formalist poetics, *Theory of Film Practice*, were originally published *en feuilleton* by *Cahiers* in ten installments between March 1966 and January 1968.⁶⁹ While distinct from the semiological project of Metz and Pasolini, Burch's approach rested on a close formal analysis of film sequences—the original version of his articles even included storyboard sketches illustrating idealized assemblages of shots—as he elaborated on notions of *découpage*, film space and the use of sound in films such as Renoir's *Nana*, *L'année dernière à Marienbad* and *Nicht versöhnt*. For Burch, the cinema's innately dialectical quality derives from the interaction between on- and off-screen space. A certain structuralist imperative can be seen in his attempts to catalogue the formal properties of the cinema, giving rise, for instance, to claims that there are precisely fifteen ways in which filmic space-time can be articulated (five temporal relations multiplied by three spatial relations). This "mathesis," however, was to be the target of the author's notorious self-disavowal of *Theory of Film Practice* in his foreword to the 1981 edition of the book, which

67 Jean-Luc Godard, interviewed by Jacques Bontemps, Jean-Louis Comolli, Michel Delahaye, Jean Narboni, "Lutter sur deux fronts: conversation avec Jean-Luc Godard," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 194 (October 1967), pp. 12-26, 66-70, here pp. 21-22. Translated as "Struggle on Two Fronts: A Conversation with Jean-Luc Godard," trans. D.C.D., *Film Quarterly*, vol. 22 no. 2 (Winter 1968-1969), pp. 20-35, here pp. 25-26.

68 *Ibid.* [p. 27].

69 See Noël Burch, *Praxis du cinéma* (Paris: Hachette, 1969). Translated as *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: Praeger, 1973). Burch also collaborated with Jean-André Fieschi in establishing an independent film school in 1968, dubbed the Institut de formation cinématographique, which regularly ran advertisements on the pages of *Cahiers*.

acknowledged that the schematic nature of such classificatory systems was symptomatic of his own lack of a “sound grasp of modern theoretical disciplines” and a mechanical formalism consisting of a “neurotic rejection of ‘content.’”⁷⁰ It is notable that much the same critique had already been issued by *Cahiers*. In developing his own theory of the *hors-champ*, Bonitzer took umbrage at Burch’s explanation of the concept (the term, in fact, was originally used by the American) and argued that it emanated from a standpoint of “idealist phenonemonology.”⁷¹ While recognizing that Burch was the first post-war film theorist to have dynamically conceptualized “spacing, the between-two-shots and the out-of-frame [*hors-cadre*],” Bonitzer nonetheless contended that “it is a pity that the empiricism and formalism of Burch’s method confines his analysis to a rapidly exhausted description of a few cases of the functioning of the ‘other space,’ to a rather short study of the effects of break and formal manipulations [...] allowed by the fiction of that latent ‘other space.’”⁷² Burch’s inadequate understanding of the ideologically charged nature of film technique is, for Bonitzer, the chief flaw in his study and is at the root of *Theory of Film Practice*’s overly schematic nature.

Raymond Bellour, at the time a pupil of Metz and a researcher at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique, was the third figure around whom polemics on questions of semiology and film analysis raged. Bellour published two articles with *Cahiers* during this period. The first, a 1967 book review of Truffaut’s interviews with Hitchcock, was an early testament to his interest in “the master of suspense”; in highlighting Hitchcock’s “rarely equaled expressive autonomy” and lauding Truffaut’s book as “the cinema in its naked truth,” his text was hardly prone to inciting dissent from the *Cahiers* editors.⁷³ The opposite was the case with his celebrated close analysis of the Bodega Bay sequence from *The Birds*, published in *Cahiers* in the same October 1969 issue in which “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” appeared. In his prefatory notes to the analysis, Bellour defines his project as an attempt

70 Noël Burch, “Foreword,” in idem., *Theory of Film Practice*, 2nd ed., trans. Helen R. Lane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. v-x, here p. vi.

71 This label was initially given in a footnote to Bonitzer’s review of *Eros + Massacre*, “Un film en plus,” *Cahiers du cinéma* (October 1970), pp. 6-9, here p. 9.

72 Pascal Bonitzer, “Hors-champ (un espace en défaut),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 234-235 (December 1971-January-February 1972), pp. 15-26, here p. 18. Translated as “Off-screen Space,” trans. Lindley Hanlon, in Nick Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol III: 1969-1972 The Politics of Representation* (London: BFI, 1990), pp. 291-305, here pp. 292-293.

73 Raymond Bellour, “Ce que savait Hitchcock,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 190 (May 1967), pp. 32-36, here pp. 35, 32.

at a “systematic analysis” that would “organize, on a limited segment, the greatest possible number of elements that constitute the cinematic ‘text.’” He nonetheless affirms the deliberate decision to avoid linguistic or semiological vocabulary in the analysis proper and concedes that *any* act of film analysis will be innately incomplete. As Bellour notes, “every temptation of this kind inevitably enters in the circle whose terms were admirably defined by Freud: ‘*die endliche und die unendliche Analyse*.’” Moreover, although the goal of the project is to show “how meaning is born in the narrative succession of images through the double constraint of repetition and variation, hierarchized according to the logical progression of symmetry and dissymmetry,” Bellour admits that the sequence—as “classical” as it is—does not conform to any of the eight syntagmatic structures outlined in Metz’s *grande syntagmatique*. If it is indeed a scene, Bellour intimates, then it is perhaps most appropriately viewed in the Freudian sense of the term, as the “primal scene” experienced in early childhood.⁷⁴

These gestures towards psychoanalytic theory failed to ingratiate Bellour with the *Cahiers* editors. The analysis of the Bodega Bay sequence was so far removed from *Cahiers*’ own critical methods—loathe to scrutinize a sequence of a film in isolation from the textual totality—that Narboni was moved to append a page-long disclaimer distancing the journal from Bellour’s approach. Narboni’s postscript, while admitting to the importance of the Bodega Bay analysis, counterposes Bellour’s procedure to Althusserian and Lacanian theories of overdetermination, which emphasize the “structural insufficiency of pulling apart an object and dismembering its elements.” Whereas Bellour remains ostensibly bound to a “phenomenological attempt to reduce the visible to the visible,” leaving the unseen as the “provisionally masked reverse-side” of what can be viewed in the film, Narboni advocates a method that articulates the visible with the *invisible*. In Althusserian terms, what is unseen in a given text is defined “through the visible, as *its* invisible, *its* prohibition from seeing”; it therefore exists as the “inner darkness of exclusion.” Such an approach would, in Narboni’s eyes, be particularly germane to studying the work of Hitchcock, given the game of “mirages, masks and obliterations” that characterizes his filmmaking style.⁷⁵ Bellour could not help but take this “correction” to his work as an affront, and he did

74 The above quotes are from Raymond Bellour, “*Les Oiseaux*: analyse d’une séquence,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 216 (October 1969), pp. 24–38, here pp. 24–25. Translated as “*The Birds*: Analysis of a Sequence,” trans. Ben Brewster, *Camera Obscura* no. 3–4 (Summer 1979), pp. 105–134, here pp. 105–106.

75 Jean Narboni, “À-propos,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 216 (October 1969), p. 39.

not pursue any further collaboration with *Cahiers*.⁷⁶ Indeed, even Narboni himself, while affirming that “there was something that bothered me in the extraction of a sequence as a metonym for the whole,” admits that his response to Bellour was “not the most pertinent thing I have done” and was “not a text I am proud of.”⁷⁷

Roland Barthes, Encore

Whereas *Cahiers* was equivocal about Metz, Pasolini and Bellour, its encounter with Barthes was—notwithstanding his self-avowed reservations about the moving image—of a long-lasting and fruitful nature, and the literary theorist stands alongside Althusser and Lacan in the pantheon of contemporary thinkers whose ideas most influenced *Cahiers*. The high point of this relationship came in 1970, when Barthes made a second appearance on the pages of *Cahiers*, seven years after his interview with Rivette and Delahaye. Avid attendees of his seminars at the *École pratique des hautes études*, the *Cahiers* editors initially conceived of publishing a second interview with the theorist, but Barthes found the resulting discussion unsatisfactory, and rather than repeat the 1963 experience of re-writing his responses, he elected instead to submit an article of his own to the journal.⁷⁸ “*Le troisième sens*,” published in July 1970, was the result.

Barthes’ text is chiefly framed by the films of Eisenstein, who was a privileged point of intersection between Barthes and *Cahiers*. The journal had published its “*Russie années vingt*” special issue the previous month, while Barthes had long harbored a fascination for Eisenstein. And yet “*Le troisième sens*” is distinguished by the fact that Barthes focuses his analysis not on the moving image in Eisenstein but on stills (*photogrammes*) extracted from his films. Sixteen numbered frame enlargements are reproduced in the margins of the text: fifteen from *Ivan the Terrible* and *Battleship Potemkin*, and one from Mikhail Romm’s archival film *Ordinary Fascism*. With particular reference to the first of these reproductions—a scene where two courtiers pour gold coins over the head of the newly crowned tsar—Barthes’ article differentiates between three “levels” of meaning in the filmic image: the communicative or informational level, the symbolic level and an additional level, in which Barthes detects the presence of a “third meaning,” one that

76 Interview with Raymond Bellour, May 2, 2014.

77 Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.

78 See Narboni, *La nuit sera noire et blanche*, p. 30.

is “evident, erratic, obstinate.”⁷⁹ Barthes recognizes the highly subjective nature of the “signifying accidents” that produce this third meaning: their elusiveness results in a difficulty in justifying, let alone generalizing, their validity. At this point, Barthes adopts new terminology: the difference between mere symbolism (the second meaning) and the *significance* of the third meaning is one between an “obvious meaning” and an “obtuse meaning.” The obvious meaning is “closed in its evidence, held in a complete system of destination.” The obtuse meaning, meanwhile, is the “one ‘too many,’ the supplement that my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive,” and it possesses “a kind of difficultly prehensible roundness, caus[ing] my reading to slip” and opens “the field of meaning totally, that is infinitely.”⁸⁰ It is here, however, that Barthes changes tack, focusing the rest of his text on why it is that “the filmic” can only be grasped by means of the *photogramme* rather than the film itself. Barthes counterintuitively argues that it is the third meaning rather than movement that constitutes the specificity of the film image and that this level of meaning is only accessible by means of stills. The still’s value lies in the fact that it can discard the constraints of filmic time (the relentless progression of the reel of film in a projector), and, by “scorn[ing] logical time,” it institutes “a reading that is at once instantaneous and vertical.”⁸¹

While proud of the coup achieved by publishing a Barthes article, *Cahiers* could not but be consternated by the implicit rejection of the cinematic image in favor of its static counterpart, the *photogramme*.⁸² Sylvie Pierre took it upon herself to craft *Cahiers*’ response, “Éléments pour une théorie du photogramme.” Rebutting Barthes was doubtless an intimidating task for a critic who was then only 26 years old, but Pierre was particularly well-armed for the task, having taken responsibility for *Cahiers*’ in-house *photothèque*. A major source of her dissatisfaction with Barthes’ article was his conflation of the *photogramme* and the production still (*photographie de tournage*), which in her view stemmed from his inexperience in concretely handling cinematic images.⁸³ Her article begins with a historical overview of the utilization of stills in film publicity, including their usage as graphic

79 Roland Barthes, “Le troisième sens,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 222 (July 1970), pp. 12-19, here p. 12. Translated as “The Third Meaning,” in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (London: Flamingo, 1984), pp. 52-68, here pp. 52-53.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 13 [pp. 54-55].

81 *Ibid.*, p. 18 [p. 65].

82 Aumont notes that the theorist was considered “a divinity of the Pantheon, so it was good that he wrote [for *Cahiers*].” Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 11, 2014.

83 Interview with Sylvie Pierre, March 7, 2014.

ornamentation in film magazines. Responsible for layout at *Cahiers*, she thus theorized her own practice in selecting images to “illustrate” the articles written by herself and her colleagues.⁸⁴ The production still, in Pierre’s analysis, offers an idealist reading of the “‘true’ interior” of the film, resulting in an “essentialist reduction of the filmic.” The critic argues that “any *unreflected* usage of production stills is complicit in a system of commercial exploitation which wants criticism to be reduced to the role of a publicity agent.”⁸⁵ In opposition to this state of affairs, the critic calls for a materialist deployment of the *photogramme*, which would marshal its (usually repressed) ability to unveil the side of “non-meaning” (*non-sens*) and “formlessness” (*l’informe*) in the cinematic image. Noting that “a gesture which, when in movement, we had believed to be precise becomes blurred and indistinct in a film still,” Pierre insists that this illegibility results in a “violently subversive power of the photogrammatic text” that is “far more radical than Barthes had foreseen.” Relying on testimony from Jay Leyda, she even insists that Eisenstein himself was dubious about the use of *photogrammes* and preferred production stills that represented “not a shot of the film, but a sort of synthesis of each sequence”; furthermore, Pierre traces the contradiction between Eisenstein’s fascination for the image in-itself (which presents the danger of “plastic solipsism”) and the intently political purposes for which it could be used (its “for-the-other” quality, or, in Barthes’ terms, its *obviation*).⁸⁶ Illustrating her text with a set of frame enlargements taken from the Odessa steps sequence of *Battleship Potemkin*, Pierre elaborates a broad opposition between Eisenstein’s account of his own films and Barthes’ reading of them in “Le troisième sens”: not only does she express skepticism towards the idea that the third meaning could arise independently of the articulation of film images through montage, Pierre also contests the notion that the obtuse meaning would have a “counter-narrative” effect, signaling instead its ability to constitute the “most solid foundation of the story.”⁸⁷ Far from taking offence at this

84 On occasion, her practice bordered on an avant-gardist text-image montage. For instance, Daney/Oudart’s article “Travail, lecture, jouissance” was accompanied by a series of stills from Buster Keaton’s *Seven Chances*, despite the fact that Keaton’s film is never mentioned in the text. These images are not included in the article’s English translation. See Serge Daney and Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Travail, lecture, jouissance,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 222 (July 1970), pp. 39-46. Translated as, “Work, Reading Pleasure,” trans. Diana Matias, in Nick Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III: 1969-1972 The Politics of Representation* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 115-136.

85 Sylvie Pierre, “Éléments pour une théorie du photogramme,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 226-227 (January-February 1971), pp. 75-83, here p. 76.

86 *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

rebuttal, Barthes sent the critic a note congratulating her on giving “a truly theoretical dimension to the problem.” And yet, while proud of having “resisted Barthes a little bit, in order to say that he did not know what a film still was,” Pierre now regrets that the article gave her what she considers to be an unearned reputation for being a theorist.⁸⁸

In spite of their differences with “Le troisième sens,” the *Cahiers* critics continued to be influenced by Barthes, even well into their Maoist phase. In an article written for the journal’s February–March 1974 issue, when *Cahiers* was still recovering from the Avignon debacle, Kané could affirm that, alongside Brechtian cinema, Barthes’ seminars form part of “the aesthetic and theoretical conjuncture that is important to us.”⁸⁹ Barthes’ short text “Opération Astra” from *Mythologies*, in which he used a margarine commercial as a metaphor for the political strategy of making a specific critique of the established order in order to produce a “paradoxical but incontrovertible means of exalting it,” was repeatedly invoked by *Cahiers* to attack *fictions de gauche* such as *Z* and Jacques Fansten’s *Le Petit Marcel*.⁹⁰ More broadly, the journal’s dialogue with Barthes had led it towards the critique of structuralist theory found in Kristeva and Derrida, which would be crucially important to *Cahiers* in the years 1970–71.

A decade after “Le troisième sens,” Barthes returned to a discussion of the visual image. *La chambre claire*, the theorist’s final book before his untimely death, was the first release in *Cahiers du cinéma*’s publishing arm, an endeavor spearheaded by Narboni.⁹¹ Resisting entreaties for a book on the cinema, Barthes oriented his work towards the subject of photography, and in the resulting text he even, infamously, confesses to liking photography “*in opposition to the cinema*.”⁹² *La Chambre claire* introduces Barthes’ concepts

88 Interview with Sylvie Pierre, March 7, 2014.

89 Pascal Kané, “Encore sur le naturalisme,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 249 (February–March 1974), pp. 34–38, here p. 34. Kané relates having wanted to make a film for the Institut national de l’audiovisuel centering on an interview with Barthes, but the project was canceled after a change of administration. Interview with Pascal Kané, March 12, 2014.

90 See, respectively, Pascal Bonitzer, “Film/politique,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 222 (July 1970), pp. 33–37, here p. 34; and Pascal Kané, “‘The legal eagle’ (*Le Petit Marcel*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 266–267 (May 1976), pp. 58–60, here p. 59. For the Barthes passage, see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), p. 42. Translated as *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 41.

91 Narboni had, in fact, proposed the project to Barthes as early as the autumn of 1977. Narboni, *La nuit sera noire at blanche*, p. 37.

92 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma/Seuil/Gallimard, 1980), p. 13. Translated as *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 3.

of the *studium* (the consciously produced and generally received aesthetic impact of a photograph) and the *punctum*, a more individualized response to certain inscrutable, unpredictable details in the photographic image, whose impact lies beyond the intentions of the image-producer. The *punctum* shares a number of characteristics with the “third meaning” earlier elucidated by Barthes, but it is notable that, between Barthes’ 1970 *Cahiers* article and *La Chambre claire*, the theorist had inverted the spatial dynamics of his chosen metaphor: whereas the obtuse meaning is blunted, rounded in comparison with the obvious meaning, the *punctum* has a sharp, penetrating quality. The *punctum*, according to Barthes, “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”⁹³

Part of a broader nexus posited between mortality and the mechanically reproduced image, the writing of *La Chambre claire* is haunted by the recent passing of Barthes’ mother. Encountering a photograph of her taken in a winter garden, which he treats as an example of pure *punctum*, Barthes evokes the dictum commonly ascribed to Godard, “Not a just image, just an image” but retorts that “my grief wanted a just image, an image which would be both justice and accuracy [*justesse*]: just an image, but a just image. Such, for me, was the Winter Garden Photograph.”⁹⁴ The pall of morbidity enshrouding *La Chambre claire* was inspissated when, a few weeks after the book’s publication in 1980, Barthes died after being struck by a laundry van. *Cahiers* opened its following issue with a tribute to the theorist, printing a letter Barthes had penned to Antonioni, as well as the Italian filmmaker’s moving response and a review of *La Chambre claire* by Pascal Bonitzer.⁹⁵ Thirty-six years later, Narboni returned to Barthes’ work with the short volume *La Nuit sera noire et blanche*. While much of the book gives a first-hand account of the process of editing *La Chambre claire*, its final section is dominated by the affinity between Barthes and Bazin. The founder of *Cahiers* is described as “the great absence of the book” who “haunts *La Chambre claire* like a specter,”⁹⁶ and the parallels between Bazin and Barthes’ ideas are sketched out at length by Narboni. His focus falls particularly on a question that had already been posed in Joubert-Laurencin’s *Le Sommeil paradoxal*: if Barthes has no reason to hide the influence of Bazin on his thinking, why does he give only a single

93 Ibid., p. 48 [p. 26].

94 Ibid., p. 109 [p. 70].

95 Barthes, “Cher Antonioni”; and Pascal Bonitzer, “Le hors-champ subtil,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 311 (May 1980), pp. 5-7.

96 Narboni, *La nuit sera noire et blanche*, p. 129.

mention of Bazin by name, without even granting him the privilege of an “elegant bibliographic signal” in the left-hand margin of the page? Is it because, as Joubert-Laurencin states, “Bazin is not *legendary* for Barthes”?⁹⁷ It is worth reproducing the Barthes passage in question here: “The cinema has a power which at first glance the Photograph does not have: the screen (as Bazin has remarked) is not a frame but a hideout [*cache*]; the man or woman who emerges from it continues living: a ‘blind field’ [*champ aveugle*] constantly doubles our partial vision.”⁹⁸ The *cadre/cache* dichotomy derives from Bazin’s article “Peinture et cinéma,” and Narboni expresses his regret at not having asked Barthes directly whether he had read this text or not.⁹⁹ Both Narboni and Philip Watts, meanwhile, suggest that the notion may have come via an indirect source, namely, Pascal Bonitzer.¹⁰⁰ Watts even produces a compelling piece of evidence for this surmise: the term *champ aveugle* is never pronounced as such by Bazin but is repeatedly deployed by Bonitzer in texts from the late 1970s and is used as the title for a 1982 anthology of his writings.

On this matter, it is possible to be more precise than the recent conjectures of Narboni and Watts: Barthes did indeed derive this segment of his text from Bonitzer and not directly from Bazin. This is the reason why Bazin is granted neither a mention of his name in the margin of the page in which he is cited nor a listing in the index of *Camera Lucida*. The Bonitzer paper that Barthes drew from, tellingly titled “La vision partielle,” was published in *Cahiers* in June 1979. In a key passage in this article, Bonitzer not only discusses his notion of the *champ aveugle*, he also quotes the *cadre/cache* passage from Bazin at length, albeit giving the text a loose citation.¹⁰¹ We can be confident that Barthes was familiar with Bonitzer’s text because, as a brief note at the beginning of the article informs us, it was originally delivered as a lecture in January 1979, at Roland Barthes’ own seminar in the Collège de France, a couple of months before the writing of *Camera Lucida*. Barthes was in the audience for Bonitzer’s address and in all likelihood discussed the subject matter with him. In a further twist, Bonitzer’s 1980

97 Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, *Le Sommeil paradoxal* (Paris: Éditions de l’œil, 2014), pp. 40-41.

98 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire*, p. 90 [pp. 55, 57]. In translations of Bazin, the word *cache* is usually given as “mask.”

99 Narboni, *La Nuit sera noire et blanche*, p. 135.

100 See *ibid.*, pp. 135-136; Watts, *Roland Barthes’ Cinema*, p. 47.

101 Pascal Bonitzer, “La vision partielle,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 301 (June 1979), pp. 35-43, here p. 37. The extract is given as being from *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?*, but no page number or even volume is specified, and Barthes evidently did not take the trouble to track down an exact reference.

review of Barthes' book for *Cahiers* quotes the passage on Bazin in its entirety, without making reference to his own role in the citation.¹⁰² Modesty, one assumes, prevents the critic from taking credit as an important conduit between two theorists who, in different ways, were of vital importance to the *Cahiers* project.

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15. Beyond Structuralism: Film Form and *Écriture*

Abstract

Dissatisfied with a purely semiological approach to the cinema, which would attempt to understand filmic signification using linguistic categories, *Cahiers du cinéma* instead drew on the notion of *écriture* developed by Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva as the theoretical touchstone for their response to films. This chapter highlights round-table discussions on elements of filmic writing—montage and film space (the latter unpublished until the 2010s)—before making a brief excursus looking at the criticism written by Jacques Rivette at the end of the 1960s. Finally, it broaches the relationship between *Cahiers* and the deconstructionist tradition of *Tel Quel* and Derrida, which sought to transcend the binaries of structuralist semiotics through a critical method that saw writing as an act not of creating meaning but of *undoing* signification itself.

Keywords: *Cahiers du cinéma*, *écriture*, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, montage, Jacques Rivette

Montage

Shortly after Barthes' death in 1981, Bonitzer's entry on him in *Cahiers' "Dictionnaire sans foi ni loi"* succinctly stated: "R.B. structured our desire."¹ Barthes' shift away from the dispassionate aridity of structuralist semiology in the late 1960s was indeed a vital influence on *Cahiers'* own distancing from this paradigm and its turn towards the ideas of theorists associated with *Tel Quel*: in particular, Derrida, Kristeva and Sollers. These figures are now often labelled with the term "post-structuralism," but this suggests a clear-cut

1 Pascal Bonitzer, "Barthes (Roland)" in "Dictionnaire sans foi ni loi," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 325 (June 1981), p. 114.

conceptual opposition which, at least in this early stage, was not in place. François Dosse's term "ultra-structuralism" thus seems more applicable to the critical work carried out by *Cahiers* in the years 1969-1972: the limits of structuralist theory were reached and, indeed, transcended, but a degree of continuity with the earlier mode of thinking was still apparent.² In the case of *Cahiers*, two central factors were at work in this movement beyond the parameters of the structuralist method. The first was the journal's interrogation, under the auspices of Rivette, of some of the key aspects of film poetics—namely, questions of montage, duration and filmic space. The second was the deconstructionist influence of the *Tel Quel* theorists, with their notions of *écriture* and signifying practice. Symptomatically, this influence could be felt not only on a conceptual level but also on the very *style* of the *Cahiers* critics' own writing.

We turn first, then, to the question of montage. The venue, in 1956, for Bazin's "prohibition" of editing in "Montage interdit" and a young Godard's response to him in "Montage, mon beau souci," *Cahiers* had long been associated with polemics over the articulation of cinematic images.³ In 1969, the inauguration of *Cahiers*' project to translate the writings of Eisenstein, combined with its attraction to the montage practices of modernist filmmakers such as Godard and Resnais, impelled the editorial team to return to the issue. An opportunity was provided in February when Antoine Bourseiller invited *Cahiers* to organize a thematic weekend at the Centre Dramatique du Sud-Est in Aix-en-Provence, where they screened films such as Eisenstein's *The General Line*, Godard's *Made in USA*, Pollet/Sollers' *Méditerranée*, Garrel's *Marie pour mémoire* and Solanas/Gettino's *La Hora de los hornos*. The discussions between screenings gave rise to a collective text simply titled "Montage," with contributions from Rivette, Narboni and Pierre. Specifying that the form of this piece was "neither a debate, nor a round-table, nor a collection of articles, nor a single discourse with several voices," introductory remarks defined the text itself as a "montage" of critical fragments: hence the body of the text was interspersed with shorter notes printed in adjacent columns, which expanded upon or clarified points

2 See François Dosse, *History of Structuralism vol. II: The Sign Sets, 1967-Present*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 17-31.

3 See André Bazin, "Montage interdit," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 65 (December 1956), pp. 32-41, repr. in idem., *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma? vol. I*, pp. 117-130. Translated as "Editing prohibited," in idem., *What is Cinema?*, trans. and ed. Timothy Barnard (Montreal: Caboose, 2011), pp. 73-86. Jean-Luc Godard, "Montage mon beau souci," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 65 (December 1956), pp. 30-31. Translated as "Montage, my fine care," in idem., *Godard on Godard*, trans. and ed. Tom Milne (New York: Da Capo, 1972), pp. 39-41.

brought up in the discussion, a layout that was adopted in order to encourage the reader to take “Montage” as an open, non-linear, unfinished document.⁴

Despite its avowedly fragmentary nature, a detailed argument about cinematic montage is articulated in Narboni/Pierre/Rivette’s text. Pointing to its resurgence in the decade leading up to 1969, the *Cahiers* critics suggest that this phenomenon is linked to the rise of “direct cinema” and has also spread into other art forms, with Sollers’ involvement in *Méditerranée* and the inaugural issue of the literary journal *Change* attesting to the interest in montage from literary currents. As Pierre puts it, this tendency represents the “metaphorical extension of cinematic montage into extra-cinematic domains.”⁵ She and her colleagues thus distinguish between “the idea of montage” and montage as a mere technique or effect. Montage is not to be confused with rapid cutting (*le montage court*), and in fact both “over-edited” (*hypermontés*) films, such as those of Eisenstein and Pollet, and “under-edited” (*hypomontés*) films, as with Dreyer and Mizoguchi, are seen as sites of montage practice—only those whose editing rhythms conform to the norms of what Bazin dubs “analytic *découpage*” appear not to find the *Cahiers* critics’ favor.

As a form of *écriture*, montage is seen as a signifying practice on par with—albeit distinct from—written language. Indeed, Rivette is adamant that montage can be understood as a form of “critical thinking.” In the case of the collage-style editing practiced by Godard in films such as *Made in USA*, the technique functions as the critique of a pre-existing work anterior to the film. For Rivette, the film results from the director experimenting with what happens if “one combines some lousy *serie noire* novel with the Ben Barka affair [...] hence, a montage of two ‘texts’ (but also, shredding of the pre-texts).”⁶ Despite the fact that Rivette openly comes out against the “theological mentality” implied in the “rejection or disregard of montage” by certain film theorists⁷ and aligns montage practices in the arts with critical theory, Douglas Morrey is nonetheless justified in pointing out the “residual transcendentalism” embodied in comments of his that Godard’s film “leaves the impression of an earlier film, rejected, contested, defaced, torn to shreds: destroyed as such, but still ‘subjacent.’”⁸ At no point, Morrey

4 Narboni et al., “Montage,” p. 17. [p. 21.]

5 Pierre, in *ibid.*, p. 18 [p. 22].

6 Rivette, in *ibid.*, p. 22 [pp. 25-26]. The Ben Barka affair concerned the abduction of left-wing Moroccan politician Mohammed Ben Barka by the French secret service on the streets of Paris in 1965.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 27 [p. 31].

8 *Ibid.*, p. 21 [p. 25].

argues, does Rivette “seem able to get past this idea of the ‘pre-existing text’ to admit the possibility that the text only comes into being through montage, that it has no existence prior to its assembly at the editing desk.”⁹ Rivette’s younger colleagues, by contrast, offer a more radical vision of montage. Narboni argues, for instance, that *La Chinoise* comprises “narrative fragments which themselves seem to search and designate the place suited to them within the global economy of the film,” a place where “no definitive intention pre-existed the disposition of the parts, where the logic of the narrative imposes its power more than it is imposed by the ‘author.’” Montage, in this case, is not “work on a pre-existing material, but the work of this material.”¹⁰ Registering his dissatisfaction with the ability of Metz’s *grande syntagmatique* to account for the montage structures of Godard or Pollet, Narboni finds it more profitable to turn to Lacan’s idea that “the unconscious is structured like a language.” Because film itself, in Narboni’s argument, is “structured like a language,” it, too, “acts like (mimes the action of) the unconscious.”¹¹

Having expounded a generalized theory of the “idea of montage,” *Cahiers* proceeds to elaborate a historical overview of the practical use of montage in the cinema. Adopting a dialectical schema, Rivette enumerates four “moments” in the evolution of montage: the initial period of its invention by Griffith and Eisenstein, its deviation towards propagandistic purposes by Pudovkin and in Hollywood, the refusal of propaganda through techniques such as the long-take, depth of field and direct sound, and, finally, the recuperation of montage in the 1960s, which consists of the attempt to “re-inject the spirit and theory of the first stage into contemporary practices, without rejecting the gains of the third stage, by trying to nourish the one with the other, by dialecticizing them, and, in a certain sense, by *editing* them together.”¹² Rivette, however, draws a key distinction between the first and fourth phases in this historical schema: whereas for Eisenstein the production of meaning has a progressive quality and is the goal of his montage activity, for Pollet (and by extension *Cahiers* itself), the production of meaning has become “reactionary” and must therefore be undermined, *détourné* or destroyed.¹³ Indeed, this distinction between an earlier moment of revolutionary cinema and contemporary avant-garde practice will play

9 Douglas Morrey and Alison Smith, *Jacques Rivette* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 20.

10 Narboni, in Narboni et al., “Montage,” p. 19 [p. 39].

11 Ibid., p. 32 [p. 43].

12 Rivette, in *ibid.*, p. 29 [pp. 32-33].

13 Ibid., p. 25 [p. 29].

a key role not only in Cahiers' considerations of montage but also, more broadly, in the modernist poetics pursued by the journal in the post-1968 period.

Aumont was inadvertently absent from the discussion on montage, but the critic contributed an article on the matter in the following issue of *Cahiers*, which he now drolly views as “the start of a beginning of a prolegomenon of a prologue of an introduction to a theoretical enterprise.”¹⁴ In “Le concept de montage,” he attempts to establish the rough outline of a typology of the different forms of cinematic montage. Contrasting with the fragmentary, avowedly non-linear discussion coming out of the Aix-en-Provence event, Aumont adopts a more “scientific” discursive style, structuring his thoughts on montage around sets of opposed terms such as Space (Juxtaposition), Order (Succession-Enchainment), and Time (Duration). But he recognizes that his text has an “essentially and knowingly peremptory, fragmentary and cursory character,”¹⁵ and while he glosses a series of conceptual approaches to montage, Aumont largely refrains from adopting a decisive standpoint on the issues raised. “Le concept de montage” thus comes across as a collection of questions to be answered rather than offering a perspective in its own right, although Aumont is firm on one matter in particular, and in this he was indicative of a more general stance at *Cahiers*: “an immediate temptation must undeniably be put aside: that of borrowing without remorse the concepts and vocabulary of semiology—that is, on a practical level, linguistics—even if such an appropriation may appear licit and advantageous.”¹⁶ Aumont closes “Le concept de montage” by phlegmatically pointing to the dearth of examples, insufficient rigor and residual errors of his text, insisting that they will be “subject to *rectification*.”¹⁷ Although a mooted follow-up text does not materialize on the pages of *Cahiers*, questions relating to montage in the cinema would be pursued by Aumont throughout his career as a film scholar. His doctoral dissertation, published as *Montage Eisenstein* in 1979, centered on the Soviet filmmaker's montage practice, and as recently as 2013, Aumont returned to the subject, composing a booklet dedicated to montage on a commission from the Canadian publisher Caboose. As these texts attest, the genealogy of Aumont's ideas on montage, which will

14 Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 11, 2014. Narboni recalls that Aumont was traveling at the time and thus was unable to participate in the original round table. See Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.

15 Jacques Aumont, “Le concept de montage,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 211 (April 1969), pp. 46-51, here p. 46.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

be further discussed in Chapter 19, can be conclusively traced back to the discussions held at *Cahiers* at the end of the 1960s.

The Space of the Film

The montage round table was judged to be fruitful enough that *Cahiers* sought to pursue the same practice in other domains of film technique, beginning with filmic space. At the initiative of Jacques Rivette, a “weekend of theoretical reflection” was organized with the title “L’Espace du film,” with film screenings and discussions taking place in the Maison de la Culture in Le Havre on December 13-14, 1969. The program devised by *Cahiers* consisted of a selection of films treating cinematic space, with examples from classical cinema (*Sunrise*, *Two Rode Together*, *Le Carrosse d’or*), modernist films (*Muriel*, *El angel exterminador*) and more recent experimental work (*Le Gai Savoir*, *Le Lit de la vierge*). In a brochure publicizing the event, Rivette provided an outline of the questions to be treated at Le Havre. Avowing that it was a “complementary reflection” to that already attempted on montage, he writes:

Every film, in a way, poses or postulates a place, of which it is subsequently the more or less systematic “exploration.” [...] For, at the same time as it effectuates this work of surveying and discovery, the film, by its very unfolding, creates *its own* space. [...] Space in the film / space through the film: the conjunction-confrontation of these two notions will permit us to approach that which these four words try to formulate: space *of* the film.¹⁸

Intended for publication in *Cahiers*, a round table on “L’espace” took place shortly after the weekend at Le Havre, in which Rivette was accompanied by Aumont, Bonitzer, Kané, Narboni and Pierre. The discussion was recorded and transcribed in preparation for its appearance in the journal, but this never materialized. The reasons for this absence can, today, only be speculated upon, but the fact that the journal was on a hiatus imposed by the ownership dispute with Filipacchi between November 1969 and March 1970 undoubtedly played a role. By the time *Cahiers* returned to the shelves, three months had elapsed since the round table, and the decision was made not to publish the transcription. For more than four decades, this discussion thus

18 Jacques Rivette, “L’espace du film,” brochure of the Maison de la Culture du Havre, Fonds Jacques Rivette, Espace chercheurs de la Cinémathèque française, dossier RIVETTE26-B10.

remained inaccessible and largely forgotten. Having re-emerged thanks to the deposit of Rivette's personal archives to the Cinémathèque française, the transcription was recently published by the film history journal *1895*.¹⁹

Although conceived as a complement to the discussion on montage, the round table on space nonetheless saw the *Cahiers* critics relativize the space-time dichotomy that this would imply. As Bonitzer observed, "the question of space [...] traverses the question of montage; montage articulates space, but it can also define it."²⁰ Beyond this, however, the discussion also attested to a certain difficulty the critics have in focusing on their chosen object. The question of space in the cinema is decidedly more diffuse, more indistinct and more delicate to articulate than that of montage. Whereas montage is almost inevitably the product of the conscious decision-making of the filmmaker, cinematic space is determined by external factors: on the one hand, the technical specifications of the camera, and on the other hand, the relationship with the pro-filmic referent. Indeed, as Kané noted, the "specific problem" addressed by the round table is the "passage from a real referent to an ideological space that would be the scene," while Narboni warned that "it is only ever on the basis of a reading of the film that we manage to reconstitute this 'denoted space,' and the referential space, which is that of the shoot, belongs to a fundamentally different order of knowledge."²¹

The round-table discussion proceeded to take in a range of issues relating to space, mobilizing structuralist terminology but in a way that interrogates some of its binaries. In this vein, Rivette affirmed that filmic space "functions through a system of *décalages* and differences" through which "the infinite succession of connotations [...] permits the spectator to construct in his own imaginary [...] a global *dénoté* with respect to which he will read the following connotations."²² Emphasizing the role of "reading" in the signification of a cinematic space, the *Cahiers* critics sprinkled their discussion with charged metaphors such as the "mythic space" of the Western and the "primal scene" proposed by Freud. In general, however, the round-table participants bemoaned the distinct *lack* of theorization of this aspect of film

19 See Jacques Aumont, Pascal Bonitzer, Pascal Kané, Jean Narboni, Sylvie Pierre and Jacques Rivette, "L'espace: table ronde autour de Jacques Rivette," *1895: revue de l'histoire du cinéma* no. 79 (Summer 2016), pp. 105-136. The original document can be found in the Fonds Jacques Rivette, Espace chercheurs de la Cinémathèque française, dossier RIVETTE91-B21. For a deeper discussion of this text, see Daniel Fairfax, "L'Espace: présentation," *1895: revue de l'histoire du cinéma* no. 79 (Summer 2016), pp. 95-103.

20 Bonitzer, in Aumont et al, "L'Espace," p. 107.

21 Kané and Narboni, in *ibid.*

22 Rivette, in *ibid.*, p. 111

form. Only Burch's *Theory of Film Practice* and a handful of recent articles by the novelist and occasional *Cahiers* writer Claude Ollier were productive precursors to their discussion, while the theories of Bazin and, drawing on him, Rohmer were also referred to.²³ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that conceptual differences arose among the *Cahiers* critics themselves. In particular, Rivette and Narboni were often at loggerheads. While Rivette insisted on a link between the space *in* the film and the site denoted *by* the film, Narboni was equally adamant that "there is not a pure level of denotation in the image; the analogical vocation does not exist."²⁴ Later, the two clashed over the relationship between filmic space and its temporal equivalent. Rivette maintained that the same problem is operative in both of these dimensions of film form: films that conform to classical convention depict a time that is "extremely discontinuous, but subjected to the rules of novelistic narration, that is, roughly speaking, to the rules of chronology and causality," while their spatial fields, even if they may be "extremely diverse, extremely rich," are "only connected with each other by following relations given in every case as being rational, causal and consequential."²⁵ Narboni, by contrast, insisted that "as much as time, in this cinema of continuity, is indeed as blank and as neutral as possible, this is false for space, which is very charged." For the critic, the crucial point of difference is between "films where the space is *semantically* very charged, and films where the space would be *structurally* determinant."²⁶

In discussing the use of space in classical cinema, *Cahiers* affirmed a distinction between the films of auteur-directors like Ford and more conventional work by lesser-known filmmakers. In an argument that anticipates the "re-readings" of Hollywood films such as *Young Mr. Lincoln*, the round-table participants maintained that, in the case of the former, there is a constant "play" (*jeu*) with formal characteristics of the Hollywood system such as framing and shot construction. Rivette, for instance, claimed that "*mise en scène*, for Ford, involves thinking about the interplay [*jeu*] of the elements of his film (characters, objects, etc.) in a concrete space, and, at the same time, rethinking them [...] in the successive fields determined by the different places of the camera-apparatus." For this reason, the former *Cahiers* editor took his distance from the claims made by Pleynet in his

23 This is prescient given that Rohmer would devote a doctoral study to the functioning of space in Murnau's *Faust*. See Éric Rohmer, *L'Organisation de l'espace dans le Faust de Murnau* (Paris: Ramsay, 1997).

24 Narboni, in Aumont et al., "L'Espace," pp. 110-111.

25 Rivette, in *ibid.*, p. 117.

26 Narboni, in *ibid.*

interview with *Cinéthique* concerning the ideological nature of the spatial system forced on filmmakers by the set-up of the camera. Ford, Renoir and Hitchcock, in Rivette's view, are among those filmmakers who "have in common the fact that they privilege, and, apart from exceptional cases, only ever utilize, non-deforming lenses, hence they use the camera purely as a so-called innocent apparatus; which does not mean—and this is Pleyne's error—that this 'transparent' usage of the camera prevents them from knowing that this usage determines the filmic fields."²⁷

From this analysis, the *Cahiers* critics shifted their focus to modernist filmmakers, whose play with the possibilities of filmic space is pushed into the foreground of their work. Whereas Ollier had argued that, in modern films, it is the place (*lieu*) that engenders the fiction, Aumont conceived of cinematic modernism as consisting of a "back-and-forth current between fiction and place."²⁸ *Cahiers* traced the intertwining of scenographic and thematic *closure* in a strand of modernist films that includes *Muriel*, *El angel exterminador* and Oshima's *Boy*, detecting in them a return of the aesthetic qualities of theatrical staging. The round table concluded with a discussion of Godard's *Le Gai Savoir*, made for television but shelved by the broadcaster. Filmed on a studio sound stage, the film's radical use of a black backdrop suggests a zero point of cinematic space, but the round table insisted on the "very complex space" at work in the film, which Narboni sees as deriving from the "presence of the absent field, which is what [Jean-Pierre Léaud and Juliet Berto] are watching, a television set which is left on all day."²⁹

Over the course of the discussion, *Cahiers* evince a tendency to equate Bazin with the notion of "transparency," thereby counterposing his ideas with the *larvatus prodeo* of Barthes' notion of "degree zero" writing (that is, the writer's self-designation through the very act of writing).³⁰ But Narboni provided an important nuance to this perspective: Bazin, he argued, "was very sensitive to the presence of the cinema, maybe not as a form of signifying opacity, but through the presence of the frame as a mask [*cache*], which leads not to 'I am here as a shot,' but 'I am here with four edges.'"³¹ It is this quality that is exercised by Godard's film, even with its radical scenographic emptiness and absolute negation of depth of field. For Narboni, the black backdrop is "truly the hyper-scene" and *Le Gai Savoir* is therefore "one of the

27 Rivette, in *ibid.*, p. 119.

28 Aumont, in *ibid.*, p. 126.

29 Narboni, in *ibid.*, p. 131.

30 See Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1953), p. 33. Translated as *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 40.

31 Narboni, in Aumont et al., "L'Espace," p. 131.

films that most produces a sense of scenic representation.”³² Furthermore, it is linked to the nascent theory of the *hors-champ*, which is seen by Rivette as coursing through the journal’s entire discussion of film space. Narboni, for his part, distinguished between two types of *hors-champ*, “a neutral, inert *hors-champ*, which is everything that is excluded from the film,” and another, more significant form of off-screen space, “the functional *hors-champ*, which is simply a possible future field.”³³ In introducing an analysis of the *hors-champ* into the theoretical framework employed by *Cahiers*, the round table on “L’Espace du film” is thus a crucial precursor to the later detailed theoretical exploration of this aspect of film form, particularly in Bonitzer’s “Réalité’ de la dénotation” series, which will be treated in Chapter 24.

A Second Wind: Jacques Rivette at *Cahiers du cinéma* in the late 1960s

Rivette’s importance for the theoretical direction of *Cahiers* in the late 1960s can hardly be overstated and goes well beyond his interventions in the two discussions on “Montage” and “L’Espace.” Having left his position as editor-in-chief in 1965 in order to film *La Religieuse*, Rivette enacted a subtle but important return to *Cahiers* in the years 1968 and 1969, which, as Bonitzer revealed, occurred after a “grave depression” suffered by the filmmaker.³⁴ His influence during this time took on multiple guises: as a director whose work was avidly discussed by his younger colleagues; as a critic in his own right, in a number of interventions on the pages of *Cahiers*, which took the form of his participation in the aforementioned round tables, dialogues with filmmakers and film reviews; and, more generally, as an interlocutor who discussed cinema with the cohort of *Cahiers* critics after cinémathèque screenings or other events and whose opinion was still crucial for shaping the journal’s tastes. Rivette’s influence reached a high point in 1968, a year in which one of *Cahiers*’ talismanic films was Rivette’s own *L’Amour fou*. Coverage of the film dominated the journal’s September issue, with Sylvie Pierre penning two notable texts dedicated to it. “Le film sans maître” focuses on the role of arbitrary chance in *L’Amour fou* and its subversion of

32 Ibid., p. 134.

33 Ibid.

34 Pascal Bonitzer, “L’authenticité était la marque et l’esprit de la Nouvelle Vague,” in Aldo Tassone (ed.), *Que reste-t-il de la Nouvelle Vague?* (Paris: Stock, 2003), pp. 35-41, here p. 38.

demiurgic notions of auteurism. *L'Amour fou* was, for Pierre, “a film where, for once, the director tried not to be god” and Rivette instead aimed to keep what the critic, citing Ponge, calls a “respectful distance” from the pro-filmic action, where “anything can emerge, and any gaze is permitted.” This respect for the reality of the signified did not derive, however, from an abstention from all acts of interventionist editing; rather it arose from the montage itself, which is seen as “a means to operate the only living conservation of life: a process of loving selection analogous to that of memory.”³⁵ Pierre’s second text, “Le dur désir de durer,” focused on the chief question that brought attention to *L'Amour fou*: its extended duration. Pierre had already insisted that the inordinate length of the film’s original version was justified by its concern for realism: “it does, in fact, take a long time to stage a play, or, when you love each other, to break up.” Against the identification of the “filmic object” with the “object of spectacle,” which mandates durational limitations primarily for economic reasons, the critic stridently calls for “the respect, for *all* films, of their proper duration,” which she understands as “one of the necessary conditions for demolishing the notion of the film as a pure object of consumption and spectacle.”³⁶ Labarthe’s statement on *Adieu Philippine* that “the length of the film is its very substance” therefore applies *a fortiori* to Rivette’s work, and Pierre could trumpet a small victory against the system of the spectacle when the 4-hour edit of *L'Amour fou* became a modest box office success, thus giving hope that films of an unconventional duration could find viable exhibition strategies.³⁷

Cahiers’ reception of *L'Amour fou* also included an interview Rivette gave to the journal for its September issue, aptly titled “Le temps déborde,” a long and fertile discussion between the filmmaker and his younger colleagues.³⁸ It is only natural that the film’s length should form a key part of the discussion, but more intriguing is the invocation of modernist music, with Rivette considering *L'Amour fou* to be a homage to Stravinsky and Stockhausen. He claims that “formally the great ambition of the film was to seek an equivalent, in the cinema, of Stockhausen’s recent research: this mixture of what is constructed and what is by chance, which also necessarily implies time and duration.” *Cahiers* questions Rivette on the possible existence of a “revolutionary cinema,” and his response would be of crucial importance

35 Sylvie Pierre, “Le film sans maître,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 204 (September 1968), p. 22.

36 Sylvie Pierre, “Le dur désir de durer,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 204 (September 1968), p. 55.

37 Sylvie Pierre, “*L'Amour fou*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 209 (February 1969), p. 62.

38 Curiously, Rivette has the singular honor of being both an interviewer and interviewee in the same issue of *Cahiers*, as he also conducted an interview with Philippe Garrel.

for the journal's subsequent political evolution. Speaking a few months after May '68, Rivette saw the need for overturning the "bourgeois aesthetic" which would conceive of the cinema as the expression of an auteur-figure, as a form of "personal creation." Citing Jacques Tati's *Playtime* as an example of a film that has "completely overshadowed the creator," Rivette contends that "what is important is the point where the film no longer has an auteur, where it has no more actors, no more story even, no more subject, nothing left but the film itself speaking and saying something that can't be translated: the point where it becomes the discourse of someone or something else, which cannot be said, precisely because it is beyond expression."³⁹

Pressed, however, on films with an explicitly political content, Rivette parries that "the role of the cinema is to destroy myths, to demobilize, to be pessimistic. It is to take people out of their cocoons and to plunge them into horror." In spite of his admiration for *La Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder*, Rivette concedes that it fails to mobilize people, arguing that "the only role for the cinema is to upset people, to contradict all preconceived ideas, and the mental schemas that pre-exist these ideas." Finally, he attacks militant films that are "depressingly comfortable" and contends that the political substance of films derives primarily from formal choices such as the use of direct sound and the duration of scenes. In a line of argumentation that directly stems from the logic of the article on *Kapò*, Rivette states: "I maintain that *L'Amour fou* is a deeply political film. It is political because the attitude we all had during the filming, and then during the editing, corresponds to moral choices, to ideas on human relationships, and therefore to political choices."⁴⁰

Interviews or discussions with Rivette were not his only forum for expression on the pages of *Cahiers*. He also returned to reviewing films, writing critical notes on several releases over the course of 1969. Curiously, despite Rivette's undisputed status as the journal's *éminence grise*, none of these articles were lengthy, conceptually deep essays on the key films of the era. Instead, they were short *notules* in the back section of the journal and were mostly written on obscure, instantly forgettable works that became the object of Rivette's caustic wit. Readers were advised, for instance, to watch the Czechoslovak film *Private Torment* in order to "better measure the abyss

39 Jacques Rivette, interviewed by Jacques Aumont, Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni and Sylvie Pierre, "Le temps déborde: Entretien avec Jacques Rivette," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 204 (September 1968), pp. 6-21, here p. 15. Translated as "Time Overflowing," trans. Amy Gateff, in Rosenbaum (ed.), *Rivette: Texts and Interviews*, pp. 9-38, here p. 26.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 20 [p. 35].

that separates Forman and Chytilová from their national production.⁴¹ Forman's own *Audition* was better received, with Rivette appreciating the filmmaker's "perverse genius" and comparing him to Lubitsch for making a film in which "each sequence changes the pre-conceived judgement created by its predecessor."⁴² Strangely, his longest review was reserved for *Dieu a choisi Paris*, a gimmicky compilation of *fin-de-siècle* archival footage: although the film itself is derided for its "incoherence" and "mental confusion," Rivette nonetheless highlights the presence of a "good hundred shots that we must call admirable, [...] where the old word *photogénie* recovers its mysterious sense (a 'mystery' which remains to be elucidated—but that is another story...)."⁴³

The close of the 1960s marked the end of Rivette's presence on the pages of *Cahiers*. Although he officially remained a member of the editorial committee until 1972, the interview with Marguerite Duras he and Narboni conducted for the November 1969 issue represented the last time Rivette's name was attached to an article in the journal. Work on *Out 1* no doubt monopolized his time from this point on, and Rivette may have felt the need to foster the self-sufficiency of the younger critics once they had gained financial independence. Certainly there was no violent, explicit rupture between Rivette and the journal, even as it turned towards an intransigently Maoist perspective. A fundamental difference in outlook, however, is suggested by the fact that, in its politicized period, *Cahiers* was categorically silent on Rivette's films. *Out 1*, *Céline et Julie vont en bateau*, *Noroît* and *Duelle* all screened during the 1970s, but none received any mention in *Cahiers*. In 1977, Serge Daney confessed that "We have been very unfair to Rivette," but he did not expand on this gnomic statement.⁴⁴ Even after reconciliations took place with other *Cahiers* alumni such as Truffaut and Rohmer, Rivette seemed to remain in something of a critical purgatory. Aside from the occasional cursory reference from 1978 onwards, it was not until the completion of *Pont du nord* in 1981 that Rivette would truly return to the pages of *Cahiers* with the appearance of two long interviews with the

41 Jacques Rivette, "Tempête sous les draps," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 208 (January 1969), p. 65.

42 Jacques Rivette, "Concours," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 208 (January 1969), p. 66.

43 Jacques Rivette, "Dieu a choisi Paris," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 216 (October 1969), p. 63.

44 Serge Daney, interviewed by Bill Krohn, "Les Cahiers du cinéma 1968-1977: Entretien avec Serge Daney par Bill Krohn," in Serge Daney, *La Maison cinéma et le monde vol. I: Les temps des Cahiers 1962-1981*, ed. Patrice Rollet (Paris: P.O.L., 2001), pp. 17-31, here p. 30. Translated as T.L. French [Bill Krohn], "Les Cahiers du Cinéma 1968-1977: Interview with Serge Daney," *The Thousand Eyes* no. 2 (1977), pp. 18-32, here p. 30.

filmmaker printed in the May and September issues.⁴⁵ In his introduction to the second of these dialogues, Narboni notes that even though Rivette remained suspicious of “forced injections of politics in the cinema and the facile endorsement that they provide,” his films have always been imprinted by the historical moment in which they were made. *Paris nous appartient*, for instance, was filmed at the dawn of the Fifth Republic, and *Out 1* explored the confused aftermath of May 1968. As for *Pont du nord*, it was in Narboni’s view a striking depiction of the capital at a point in time when the left had assumed political power for the first time since the Popular Front.⁴⁶

Despite the decade-long period of alienation, Rivette’s influence on his *Cahiers* colleagues was profound and enduring and extended well beyond the texts written in his own name. The fundamental importance he attached to the political nature of film form, its moral force, is most evident in the 1980s and 1990s, when Daney repeatedly evoked the “tracking shot in *Kapò*” in his critical writings. The affinity between Daney and Rivette is palpably on display in the Claire Denis documentary *Jacques Rivette: le veilleur* (1990), which consists of a long series of filmed dialogues between the two shortly before Daney’s death. Bonitzer, meanwhile, became a co-screenwriter for Rivette’s films from the early 1980s onwards and read a eulogy at his funeral in 2016.⁴⁷ Sylvie Pierre thus reflects a generalized sentiment when she states: “I can say that the greatest film teacher that I had, in the spontaneous discussions I had with him, was Rivette. It was Rivette who taught me to see. [...] Rivette was an extraordinary master for me.”⁴⁸ Indeed, it was Rivette’s presence in the *Cahiers* offices, and the fact that he regularly accompanied his younger colleagues to film viewings throughout the late 1960s, magisterially conducting long discussions after the screenings, that perhaps most determined the *Cahiers* line during this period, particularly when it came to its presiding taste in films. Kané recalls an example of Rivette’s legendary “intellectual terrorism” when a group of critics took in a viewing of *Mouchette*: “We left the screening overawed, in total silence, and then Jacques said ‘Oh, this film is intolerable! It’s odious!’ Everyone backed down completely. [...] Nobody said anything good about *Mouchette*. For *Cahiers*, it became Bresson’s *film maudit*, so greatly had

45 See Jacques Rivette, interviewed by Serge Daney and Jean Narboni, “Entretien avec Jacques Rivette,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 323-324 (May 1981), pp. 42-49; and “Entretien avec Jacques Rivette,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 327 (September 1981), pp. 8-21.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

47 See Pascal Bonitzer, “On écrivait sur le fil, sans filet,” *Le Monde*, January 30, 2016.

48 Interview with Sylvie Pierre, May 26, 2014.

Rivette marked us.⁴⁹ Beyond his written film criticism in the late 1960s, it is therefore Rivette's personal association with the *Cahiers* team during this period, his orally transmitted critical thinking, that forms the essence of his influence on their direction. This influence may be more covert than the landmark articles he wrote in the 1950s and early 1960s or the significant corpus of films he directed between the 1950s and the 2000s, but it is no less important an aspect of Rivette's legacy for *Cahiers*.

Écriture and Signification

Cahiers' interest in questions of montage, filmic space and duration was accompanied by the near-disappearance from the journal's pages of two terms that had marked its development of film aesthetics in the 1950s and early 1960s: *mise en scène* and *découpage*. As early as November 1967, André S. Labarthe unabashedly announced the "death" of *mise en scène*. Once ubiquitous in the critical tradition to which *Cahiers* belonged, the word, in Labarthe's view, had lost its utility when dealing with the work of young filmmakers such as Godard, Eustache and Skolimowski. Rather than try to twist its meaning by arguing that "*mise en scène* is not only *mise en scène*, but also the opposite of what we thought," it is preferable to "rid ourselves of this word, much as painting has rid itself of the figurative."⁵⁰ The term *découpage* similarly lost its pertinence for the journal: while Burch used it extensively in the series of articles that would become *Theory of Film Practice*, by 1970 *découpage* was of little interest to the *Cahiers* critics, and a re-printed article by Luis Buñuel from 1928 defending the French term was judged in an introductory note merely to "mirror the state of reflection on the cinema among French critics and intellectuals at the time," being of limited application for an understanding of Buñuel's later work.⁵¹

Whereas *mise en scène* and *découpage* had fallen out of use by the end of the 1960s, the concept of *écriture* became prominent during this period. Used in French to refer to the *process* of writing as opposed to the result of

49 Interview with Pascal Kané, March 12, 2014. A review of the film by André S. Labarthe reflected this line, concluding with the judgement: "It will be understood that I do not like *Mouchette* (the film)." André S. Labarthe, "La cybernétique de Robert Bresson," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 189 (April 1967), pp. 63-64, here p. 64.

50 André S. Labarthe, "Mort d'un mot," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 195 (November 1967), p. 66.

51 "Luis Buñuel: Textes 1927-1928," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 223 (August-September 1970), p. 18. A deeper history of the term *découpage* in French film criticism can be found in Timothy Barnard (ed.), *What is Cinema?*, pp. 261-281.

this proces (*écrit*), the multiple resonances of the word in the theoretical genealogy of *Cahiers* made it a particularly fertile concept for the critics of the post-1968 era. The term *écriture* has a venerable heritage in French film criticism: as early as the 1910s, it was deployed by Louis Delluc to refer to the capacity for films to generate meaning through the formal techniques of the director as opposed to the narrative devices of the screenwriter, and it was also used in this sense in the “classical” tradition of film theory from the 1930s-1950s, stretching from Jean-George Auriol to Rohmer via Roger Leenhardt and Bazin. In 1948, Alexandre Astruc had already called for a cinema of the *caméra-stylo*, in which “the author writes with his camera like a writer writes with a pen.”⁵² The following decade, the term became crucial for the development of the *politique des auteurs*: here, *écriture* represented an auteur-director’s individual style, their specific *handwriting*, and as such could even be detected in films made within the studio system, where the filmmaker had a limited command over the script or casting but *could* exert control over the film’s *mise en scène*, its formal system. Alongside its usage in film criticism, the notion of *écriture* had been taken up by critical theorists working within—and beyond—the framework of structuralist semiology. Barthes had already used the word in his seminal 1953 work, *Le degré zéro de l’écriture*, to posit a third term of literary production distinct from both the raw communication of language and the rhetorical embellishment of style, a zone in which the writer’s specific commitments are played out and which can be located in the radically neutral mode of writing found in modernist novelists such as Flaubert and Camus.⁵³

By the late 1960s, the framework in which terms such as language, style and writing were deployed had been sweepingly recast through a radical counter-reading of Saussurean semiology. *Tel Quel* was at the heart of this process. In addition to publishing the theoretical texts of Barthes and Derrida, members of the journal’s editorial board were engaged in their own project of constructing a revolutionary poetics of the sign. The importance of *Tel Quel* for *Cahiers*’ political evolution has already been discussed in Part II; here the focus will be on the influence its “ultra-structuralist” literary theory had on the film journal. Contact between the two periodicals initially came via the film *Méditerranée*. *Cahiers* was first exposed to Sollers’ collaboration with Jean-Daniel Pollet in 1964, when François Weyergans—present for its

52 Alexandre Astruc, “Naissance d’une nouvelle avant-garde,” *L’Écran français* no. 144, March 30, 1948. Translated as “The Birth of a New Avant-garde: La Caméra-stylo,” in Peter Graham (ed.), *The New Wave: Critical Landmarks* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), pp. 17-23.

53 Roland Barthes, *L’Écriture degré zéro*, p. 19 [p. 15].

projection at the Knokke-le-zoute experimental festival—defined *Méditerranée* as a “film where taste, the imagination and the unconscious have their roles” and forecast that “*Cahiers* will speak about it again, when a Parisian cinema is willing to program a Pollet show.”⁵⁴ Readers would have to wait some time for this promise to be fulfilled: it was not until February 1967 that *Cahiers* returned to *Méditerranée*, upon the film’s belated commercial release. The journal made up for lost time by publishing four texts on Pollet’s film, by Jean Ricardou, Jean-Pierre Faye, Sollers and Godard. Sollers himself cast the project in explicitly theoretical terms, referring to *Méditerranée* as a form of “writing [écriture] on the screen” and arguing that the film is founded on “a law of general analogy that appears to me to exactly overlap with certain contemporary literary experiments.”⁵⁵ In September 1968, Pollet was interviewed alongside *Tel Quel* editor Jean Thibaudeau for their collaboration on *Tu imagines, Robinson*, a film that coaxed the *Cahiers* critics into writing some of their most deliberately abstruse criticism.⁵⁶ Reviewing the film for *Cahiers*, Comolli linked it with *Méditerranée* as representing an attempt at “pure cinema” that could be drawn from the “materiality of the film or the text.” For Comolli, Pollet’s film “can no longer pass for the simple vehicle of a discourse that would exceed it, having come, in some original place, from the filmmaker, and reaching an illusory ‘later,’ the spectator.”⁵⁷ In the same issue, Aumont argued that the work of Pollet, Rivette and Garrel—all of them interviewed by *Cahiers* that month—exemplified the radically de-subjected quality of contemporary cinema. With the “purely functional” framing of Pollet’s films, or the “passivity” of Rivette’s camera, the author has become “absent from the work,” but this is not due to a surrealist-inspired faith in “chance.” Rather, such techniques constitute formal strategies for “coming as close as possible to a speech that is not mastered by us, that ceaselessly escapes from us.” They thus present the possibility for an encounter with the “unknown text that wants to be said: the text ‘enclosed in the secret of places’ that must be delivered.”⁵⁸

54 François Weyergans, “Knkk xprmntl,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 152 (February 1964), pp. 49-50, here p. 49.

55 Philippe Sollers, “Une autre logique,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 187 (February 1967), pp. 37-38, here p. 38.

56 Jean-Daniel Pollet and Jean Thibaudeau, interviewed by Jacques Aumont, Jean-Louis Comolli, André S. Labarthe and Jean Narboni, “La terre intérieure: entretien avec Jean-Daniel Pollet et Jean Thibaudeau,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 204 (September 1968), pp. 25-39.

57 Jean-Louis Comolli, “Objet parmi d’autres,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 204 (September 1968), p. 40.

58 Jacques Aumont, “Le caractère inépuisable du murmure,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 204 (September 1968), pp. 56-57, here p. 57. The citation is a reference to *L’espace littéraire* by Maurice

It was by dint of both his literary output and his editorial role at *Tel Quel*—not to mention his political positioning—that Sollers was an instrumental figure for *Cahiers*. His organizational proficiency and personal charisma drew the *Cahiers* editors towards the discussion circles of *Tel Quel's* “Groupe d'études théoriques” in the late 1960s, which had a decisive influence on the journal's film theory. As a theorist, however, Sollers' influence was surpassed by that of his wife and co-editor at *Tel Quel*, the young Bulgarian exile Julia Kristeva. In Kristeva's writings during this period, a radical interpretation of Saussure's semiology was combined with a Marxist understanding of ideology. As Kristeva wrote in the anthology *Théorie d'ensemble*, “semiology can only be performed as a *critique of semiology* which leads towards something other than semiology: namely, *ideology*.”⁵⁹ In her first book-length work, *Sémiotikè*, Kristeva baptized her approach “semanalysis.” Semanalysis redeploys the psychoanalytic method to focus on “signifying practices” such as writing and art, and Kristeva sees the radically open, polyvalent nature of textual work in certain privileged modernist texts (Mallarmé, Lautréamont, Joyce) as being capable of dismantling the unity between signifier and signified (what Kristeva calls “A Meaning”), creating instead a network of textual differences that produces *signifiance*, the very undoing of signification. Semanalysis, therefore, must “traverse the signifier with the subject and the sign, as well as the grammatical organization of the discourse, in order to attain this zone where the *germs* of what will *signify* are assembled in the presence of language.”⁶⁰ Here, Kristeva advocates the use of the term *écriture* to describe “a text seen as production, in order to differentiate it from the concepts of ‘literature’ and ‘speech.’”⁶¹

With its brew of semiology, psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism, Kristeva's notion of semanalysis could not fail to attract *Cahiers*. Already in late 1969, the second part of “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” stressed the importance of her work,⁶² and soon the cinema came to be invariably referred to as a “signifying practice” rather than an art form. Analysis of the *écriture* of modernist films—such as those of Buñuel, Jancsó and the

Blanchot, who along with Kristeva is the most important reference point for Aumont in this text.

59 Julia Kristeva, “La sémiologie: science critique et/ou critique de la science,” in Philippe Sollers (ed.), *Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 80-93, here p. 83.

60 Julia Kristeva, *Sémiotikè: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 9.

61 Julia Kristeva, “La sémiologie,” p. 92.

62 Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, “Cinéma/idéologie/critique (2): D'une critique à son point critique,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 217 (November 1969), pp. 7-13, here p. 11. Translated as “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism (II): On Criticism at Its Critical Point,” trans. Daniel Fairfax, in Comolli, *Cinema against Spectacle*, pp. 261-280, here p. 275.

Taviani brothers—was largely modeled on Kristeva’s conceptualization of the process of *signifiance* in literary modernism. The influence of the Russian formalists on her theories also contributed to *Cahiers’* own interest in this movement, which emerged in tandem with the journal’s work on 1920s Soviet cinema. The “Russie années 20” special issue included French translations of Yuri Tynyanov’s “The Fundamentals of Cinema” and Boris Eikhenbaum’s “Problems of Cine-stylistics,” which were early attempts to develop a formalist poetics of the cinema (both were written in 1927). Published in the same dossier, Narboni’s article “Introduction à *Poetika Kino*,” outlined the broader context for this theoretical movement’s relations with the cinema. Presenting the texts written by Eikhenbaum and Tynyanov as a major precursor to the film semiology of Metz, Narboni evaluated their pertinence for contemporary cinema. In Narboni’s argument, the encounter between the formalist critics and montage-practitioners such as Eisenstein and Vertov represented the first time that the cinema was grasped as a “signifying practice aware of its materiality.”⁶³ Such an approach could be profitably retained, Narboni claims, in the critical analysis of filmmakers such as Godard, Straub and Kramer. But he also warns against a mechanistic revival of the formalist school and notes that modern critical theory has integrated its conceptual acquisitions while tending to “surpass them and deconstruct their philosophical presuppositions,” pointing specifically to the work of Derrida and Kristeva as central to this project.⁶⁴ As Rodowick has cogently argued, this text represents something of a breakthrough moment for *Cahiers*, as the line of argument adopted by Narboni marks the point that the journal “opens out centrifugally to the external genetic ribbon where contemporary film theory rapidly takes shape in the context of a more general discursive transformation,” one in which the work of Derrida and Kristeva “displaces and refashions structuralism.”⁶⁵ In this sense, then, it represents a significant milestone in *Cahiers’* theoretical development.

On a more polemical level, Kristeva’s interview in issue no. 9-10 of *Ciné-thique* provided the occasion for *Cahiers* and *Cinéthique* to sustain their debates on film theory and politics. Although the latter was, at this point, organizationally closer to *Tel Quel*, *Cahiers* averred that Kristeva’s remarks were at odds with its rival journal’s more rigid perspectives. Most pointedly, the literary theorist doggedly maintained a distinction between ideology

63 Jean Narboni, “Introduction à *Poetika Kino*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 220-221 (May-June 1970), pp. 52-57, here p. 57.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

65 D.N. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 214.

and signifying practice. Considering art forms as signifying practices was purposefully undertaken to “allow them to be envisaged as socio-historical formations, at the same time as designating the specificity of the functioning of meaning and of the subject in them.” This also served to avoid the twin pitfalls of “reducing them to ideology” and “alienating them [...] as aesthetic experiences (sites of the pure imaginary and narcissistic *jouissance*).”⁶⁶ Moreover, Kristeva insisted that the “theoretical error” of substituting ideology for the signifier leads to a “blockage of the *work* specific to the cinema, which sees itself replaced by discourses on its ideological function.”⁶⁷ Comolli, having avowed the centrality of Kristeva’s concept of signifying practice for his history of film technology in “Technique et idéologie,” sees these comments as a tacit rebuke to *Cinéthique*, whose editors precisely *did* commit the error targeted by Kristeva of conflating ideology and signification.⁶⁸

Deconstruction in Theory and Practice

As Chapters 16 and 17 outline, *Cahiers*’ broader critical project consisted precisely of finding the ways in which the *écriture* of the films they discussed produced points of rupture with the dominant ideology, even when this was not entirely the conscious work of the filmmaker. As Daney later recognized, one of the key hallmarks of *Cahiers*’ methodology was its concern for locating the gaps between *écriture* and ideology: “We were very conscious then of the danger [...] of confounding ideology and writing [*écriture*]. Now, it’s quite simple, the cinema loved by *Cahiers*—from the beginning—is a *cinema haunted by writing*. This is the key which makes it possible to understand our successive tastes and choices.”⁶⁹ In the same interview, Daney further pursues the idea that *Cahiers* is interested in a cinema “haunted” by writing. He explains:

Writing implies spacing [*espacement*], a void between two words, two letters, a void that permits the breaching [*frayage*] of meaning. [...] So,

66 Julia Kristeva, “Cinéma: pratique analytique, pratique révolutionnaire,” *Cinéthique* no. 9-10 (c. early 1971), pp. 71-79, here p. 74

67 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

68 As Comolli wrote: “It seems that this remark [by Kristeva], which appeared in *Cinéthique*, no. 9-10, is also aimed at *Cinéthique*, no. 9-10, where the conflation of the signifier with ideology takes the form of a law. We can be assured that, on this precise point, our position is not new, as a re-reading of the programmatic text ‘Cinema/Ideology/Criticism’ [...] attests.” Comolli, “Technique et idéologie (3),” p. 44 [p. 196].

69 Daney, “Les *Cahiers du cinéma* 1968-1977: Entretien avec Serge Daney,” p. 19 [p. 20].

how does all this happen in film? There, too, there is spacing, but it isn't the invisible bond between frames; it's the *hors-champ*. Each frame secretes its *hors-champ*. [...] Today it may well be the case that with people like Godard and Straub we have reached an extreme limit of writing. These are filmmakers for whom the image is closer to an inscription on a tombstone than to an advertising billboard. And the cinema has no other choice than to be a billboard or an epitaph.⁷⁰

Bill Krohn has recognized that, in linking the notion of writing with *espacement*, this passage has resonances with the notion of *différance* developed by Derrida in the late 1960s: “crudely put, what Daney did was to graft this philosophical idea of writing onto the old idea of writing with images.”⁷¹ Indeed, in his contribution to *Théorie d'ensemble*, Derrida speaks of *différance* as having both a temporal aspect and a spatial aspect, which would be linked to “repetition, the interval, distance, spacing [*espacement*].”⁷² In the wake of his *annus mirabilis* in 1967, which saw the near-simultaneous publication of *L'Écriture et la différence*, *De la grammatologie* and *La Voix et le phénomène*, Derrida's intellectual prominence was such that it was difficult for *Cahiers* to avoid his influence, and, alongside Kristeva, the journal regularly mentioned his role in having “deconstructed” the formalist tradition “to its very foundations.”⁷³ The fact that “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” inscribed Derrida's notion of deconstruction into its program—defending films that operate a “critical de-construction of the system of representation”—would seem to confirm the centrality of Derrida's ideas to the journal.⁷⁴ We should not, however, exaggerate this influence. As of 1969, deconstructionism was still in a nascent state and had not yet congealed into the fixed set of “post-structuralist” ideas that would later characterize the method, especially in Anglo-American humanities departments. Comolli/Narbone thus employed the word in a looser sense than its later usage would suggest, a trait that is indicated by the telltale retention of the hyphen in their chosen orthography. “De-construction” was evidently still felt to be a neologism with which the *Cahiers* critics were not entirely at ease, and the term was incorporated into a text that was otherwise dominated by an Althusserian

70 Ibid., p. 20 [p. 21].

71 T.L. French [Bill Krohn], “The Tinkerers,” *The Thousand Eyes* no. 2 (1977), pp. 4-17, here p. 12.

72 Jacques Derrida, “La différence,” in Sollers (ed.), *Théorie d'ensemble*, pp. 41-66. Translated as “Différance,” in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 3-27.

73 Comolli/Narbone, “Cinéma/idéologie/critique (II),” p. 11 [p. 275].

74 Comolli/Narbone, “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” p. 13 [p. 256].

perspective. In 1969, while Derrida was collaborating with *Tel Quel* (which considered itself a Marxist journal, maintaining a détente with the PCF and party-aligned intellectuals such as Althusser at this time), these two hermeneutic frameworks could still be conceived of as complementary to one another. Within the space of a couple of years, however, this tenuous coalition would break apart.

Although the theories of Derrida were less central to the *Cahiers* project than those of Althusser, Barthes and Lacan and were only rarely mentioned on the pages of the journal after 1972, the years 1970 and 1971 saw a proliferation of texts making reference to the philosopher's ideas. The Derridean inspiration of Narboni's review of *Othon*, "La vicariance du pouvoir" from October 1970 has already been discussed at length in Chapter 4. A few months later, Narboni responded to *Positif's* attack on *Cahiers'* defense of Straub/Huillet by denouncing its "regression" to the "vulgar sociology" of Sartre, Lukàcs and Goldmann. Defining *Cahiers'* own critical practice as "a work of subversion and displacement" that could transform the "symbolic economy" of films by shedding light on their "unconsciously or knowingly dissimulated ideological determinations," Narboni facetiously remarked, "we urgently advise *Positif* to read the texts of Jacques Derrida."⁷⁵ Earlier, in "Sur Salador," a July 1970 text which Martin Jay has linked to Derrida's critique of "ocularcentrism," Daney specifically took aim at the "ideology of visibility."⁷⁶ While noting that recent film theory had begun to focus on the ideological status of the camera, Daney argues for the need to go even further in this direction by interrogating the hegemonic status of vision in Western metaphysics. In making this claim, he openly draws inspiration from Derrida's notion of photology in *L'Écriture et la différence*. For Daney, the cinema is "connected to the Western metaphysical tradition, a tradition of seeing and sight for which it fulfills the photological vocation."⁷⁷ Following Derrida, for whom "the entire history of our philosophy is a photology, the name given to a history of, or treatise on, light,"⁷⁸ Daney defines "photology" as "that obstinate will to confuse vision and cognition [*connaissance*], making the latter the compensation of the former and the

75 Jean Narboni, "Sur quelques contresens," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 226-227 (January-February 1971), pp. 116-118, here pp. 118, 116.

76 See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 470.

77 "Sur Salador" was Daney's contribution to the text jointly authored with Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Travail, lecture, jouissance," p. 39 [p. 116].

78 Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p. 45. Translated as *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 27.

former the guarantee of the latter, seeing in directness of vision [*immédiation*] a model of cognition.”⁷⁹

In the same issue of *Cahiers*, Daney and Oudart penned a binomial review of Truffaut’s *L’Enfant sauvage*, in which Derrida’s ideas on writing and language are never far from their concerns.⁸⁰ It was Bonitzer, however, whose criticism most palpably bore traces of Derrida’s deconstructionist method. He even recalls attending Derrida’s seminar with the former *Cahiers* writer Jacques Bontemps, who was then studying under the philosopher at the *École normale supérieure*.⁸¹ Part of a mix of theoretical influences on the critic that also included Lacan, Bataille, Barthes and Deleuze, the impact of Derrida’s ideas on Bonitzer’s writing could be felt from the start of his involvement with *Cahiers*: Bonitzer’s February 1969 review of Sembene’s *Le Mandat*, his first article for the journal, already argued that money in the film “functions exactly like the ‘*pharmakon*’ that Derrida describes in ‘*La pharmacie de Platon*.’”⁸² Many of the critic’s subsequent allusions to Derridean deconstruction surfaced in his reception of Japanese new wave cinema, particularly the films of Oshima and Yoshida. This work will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 18; here it will suffice to note that an early capsule review of *Eros + Massacre* in March 1970 (preceding by seven months the longer text Bonitzer devoted to the film) previews this critical approach by asserting that the “deconstruction of *consistency* (meaning as a monument) by the critical redoubling of the process of production is the modern rule of writing.”⁸³ For Bonitzer, this rule finds its counterpart in Yoshida’s cinema through the “‘oblique’ inscription” of the film’s ideological background—namely, its articulation of contemporary social and sexual revolutions with the “historico-mythical” scenes tracing the life of the early twentieth-century Japanese anarchist Osugi.

If deconstruction played a significant role in the development of *Cahiers*’ theory of cinematic *écriture*, it also had a more practical effect on the very

79 Daney/Oudart, “Travail, lecture, jouissance,” p. 39 [p. 116].

80 See Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Les aveux maîtrisés,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 222 (July 1970), pp. 27-31; and Serge Daney, “Amphisbetosis,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 222 (July 1970), pp. 31-32.

81 Interview with Pascal Bonitzer, April 30, 2014.

82 Pascal Bonitzer, “L’argent-fantôme (*Le Mandat*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 209 (February 1969), pp. 57-58, here p. 58. The immediacy with which the *Cahiers* critics were receiving and absorbing these texts is evident from the fact that Derrida’s article on the *pharmakon* only appeared in *Tel Quel* a few months before Bonitzer’s review. See Jacques Derrida, “*La pharmacie de Platon*,” *Tel Quel* no. 32 (Winter 1968), pp. 17-59, and no. 33 (Spring 1968), pp. 4-48. Translated as “*Plato’s Pharmacy*,” in Idem., *Dissemination*, trans. and ed. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 61-171.

83 Pascal Bonitzer, “*Eros + Gyakusatsu*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 218 (March 1970), pp. 66-67.

writing style of the critics. Derrida, of course, is legendary for the challenging, opaque nature of his writing, practically demonstrating the deconstructionist method by deploying a dense rhetorical patchwork of wordplay, allusion and the etymological unpacking of key terms and in the process achieving a stylistic register that at times approaches the symbolist poetry of Mallarmé or Lautréamont. In this sense, his writing technique parallels those of contemporary figures such as Foucault, Deleuze, Barthes and Lacan, all of whose texts possess profoundly literary qualities, which have enchanted their supporters and infuriated their antagonists in equal measure. This admixture of the writerly and the theoretical proved irresistible to the *Cahiers* critics, who sought to craft texts that were commensurable in style with those of their *maîtres à penser*. As Comolli later noted: “[What] differentiated us was the fact that we wanted *written* texts. This demand for writing was essential for us, above all to radically distinguish ourselves from *Positif*. They always had a manner of writing which we did not like. The great thinkers [...] cared about writing, they thought about writing. We labored on this: our texts had to be *written*.”⁸⁴ Bonitzer, in particular, was highly regarded within the journal for displaying considerable literary flair (modeled to a certain extent on the writings of Georges Bataille), although his texts were also menaced by the danger of sliding into a rhetorical simulation of the intellectual luminaries he admired.

A more serious issue was the very legibility of the texts that were produced during this period. Together with their conceptual density and lexical specialization, the articles written by the *Cahiers* critics were impregnated by the journal's theoretical leanings even on the level of their syntactic construction. The pages of *Cahiers*, during this period, were populated with labyrinthine sentences woven out of a multiplicity of parenthetical remarks and dependent clauses. Oudart's contributions were particularly notorious for their hermetic inscrutability, but all the writers at *Cahiers* flirted with forms of writing that markedly departed from the norms of compositional limpidity.⁸⁵ Given that the journal championed modernist films that interrogated and subverted the very basis of communicability, the

84 Jean-Louis Comolli, interviewed by Daniel Fairfax, “Yes, we were utopians; in a way, I still am...”: An Interview with Jean-Louis Comolli (Part 1), *Senses of Cinema* no. 62 (April 2012), sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/yes-we-were-utopians-in-a-way-i-still-am-an-interview-with-jean-louis-comolli-part-1/ (accessed January 1, 2021).

85 Oudart's texts posed challenges of comprehension even to his own colleagues. Pierre, for instance, has stated that “We always had a lot of trouble, when he wrote on a film, in understanding the literal relationship of the analysis that he had woven with the film.” Interview with Sylvie Pierre, May 26, 2014.

écriture of their own texts was of great importance for the *Cahiers* critics. The act of writing became a conscious component of their attempts to break with the dominant system of representation—even if this carried the risk of the journal becoming mired in unreadable obscurity.

Reynaud has noted that “the opacity of the *écriture* at *Cahiers* was an accurate rendering of the murky political climate, the social impasses, the muted anxiety of the time.”⁸⁶ In retrospect, Aumont is harsher still in his judgement of this aspect of their criticism:

The truth is that we did not clearly know what we thought, neither politically nor theoretically. And so there was a bit of a smokescreen. If we said things in a confused and rather obscure manner, then at least they remained ambiguous—we could always say that we hadn’t said what we said. If we had very clear ideas we would have expressed them in a much more didactic fashion.⁸⁷

At the time, however, the difficult nature of the journal’s writing style was doggedly defended by the editorial team. In the face of mockery from *Positif* and other journals, *Cahiers* responded by appealing to Barthes’ rebuttal of the opponents of contemporary literary theory in *Critique et vérité*, labeling the attacks from their rivals the “return of the Picards.”⁸⁸ Words of caution, however, also came from more sympathetic quarters. As the sliding subscription numbers demonstrated, many readers simply abandoned the journal in the face of its unfamiliar vocabulary and contorted syntax. Others corresponded with *Cahiers* in order to voice their concern. In May 1971, for instance, a subscriber by the name of Christian Oddos wrote to express his solidarity with *Cahiers* over their stance on *Othon*, noting, “I think you are right to wish to continue in the line that *Cahiers* had traced for itself, and to present a cinematic thinking, instead of a bundle of articles strung together.” And yet, he warned, “I subscribe to the rumor circulating that finds *Cahiers* to be unreadable; alongside articles that are complex but

86 Bérénice Reynaud, “Introduction: *Cahiers du Cinéma* 1973-1978,” in David Wilson (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. IV: 1973-1978 History, Ideology, Cultural Struggle* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1-44, here p. 12.

87 Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 11, 2014.

88 La Rédaction, “Notes sur un feu de bengale (rose),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 226-227 (January-February 1971), pp. 119-120, here p. 119. See also Roland Barthes, *Critique et vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1966). Translated as *Criticism and Truth*, trans. Katrine Pillcher Keuneman and Charles Stivale (New York: Continuum, 2004). This text was a polemic against the Racine scholar Raymond Picard, who had earlier criticized Barthes’ method for its supposedly pseudoscientific obscurantism.

quite well written, the result of a clarity of thought, one can find others whose muddled, recondite aspect is such that it is difficult to read past the first column.”⁸⁹ In their response to Oddos, the editors showed their appreciation for the reader’s “serenity and precision” and admitted that there were certain texts (particularly Oudart’s) “on which the good will of certain readers falters.” But they also insisted that “reading *Cahiers* requires work” and that the difficulty of these texts, their “refusal of a *certain* ‘fine style,’” was also a testament to their “theoretical contribution to the field of signifying practices.”⁹⁰ In response to a similar question from an interview with the magazine *Politique Hebdo* printed in the same issue of *Cahiers*, the editors were even more adamant in the defense of their textual methodology:

Firstly, there is no question of us ceding to the bourgeois conception of a reading that could be done *without work*. Reading is work. The accusations of “hermeticism,” “illegibility,” “jargon,” and so on have always been the weapons of obscurantist reaction when confronted with productive theoretical work. [...] Without losing sight of the specificity of each signifying practice, it is possible to think of the problem of a *general materialist writing* capable of articulating these practices and reflecting on their interpenetration, their interdependence.⁹¹

As a summation of the links between *Cahiers*’ writing style, the journal’s political perspective, and the influence of Kristeva and Derrida on its conceptualization of *écriture*, this passage can hardly be improved upon.

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16. Re-reading Classical Cinema

Abstract

As the *Young Mr. Lincoln* article discussed in Chapter 3 has already shown, an integral part of *Cahiers du cinéma*'s core project in the post-1968 era involved the act of re-reading works of classical cinema using the new tools of Marxist and psychoanalytic theory to which the *Cahiers* critics had been exposed. This chapter looks at four such undertakings: a dossier on Dreyer and analyses of the American films *Morocco* (Josef von Sternberg), *Sylvia Scarlett* (George Cukor) and *Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith), before focusing on the journal's increasingly jaundiced view of the latter output of Hollywood's old guard, including Howard Hawks, Joseph Losey and Elia Kazan.

Keywords: *Cahiers du cinéma*, classical cinema, Carl Theodor Dreyer, *Morocco*, *Sylvia Scarlett*, *Intolerance*

The Dreyer Dossier

Conceiving, as *Cahiers* did, of signification in the cinema as a form of *écriture* logically entails understanding the analysis of film as a process of reading, or *lecture*. In the case of works coming within the classical mode of film production—made under studio-based conditions between the 1910s and the beginning of the 1960s, in both Europe and the US—such analysis entailed a process of *re-reading* (*relecture*). It involved returning to the earlier critical consensus on the film under discussion—one marked, in the eyes of the *Cahiers* critics, by a predominantly metaphysical, idealist outlook—and transforming it, undoing it through an examination of the ideological fault lines created by the film's own formal structures. Looking back from the standpoint of 1981 at the approach adopted during the journal's Marxist phase, Narboni has stated that the concept of “re-reading” was “truly a dream term (that is to say both oneiric and ideal)” owing to the fact that “it allowed us to continue to mark our love for these films, and

to apply to them the ‘symptomatic’ distancing of an analysis that we saw as materialist.¹ The traditional *Cahiers* taste, its *goût*, thus continued to be transmitted, albeit now by means of a critical reading of films that had once been revered. The *Young Mr. Lincoln* analysis—discussed at length in Chapter 3—was the tutor text for this critical method and was followed by similar endeavors on historical works such as Josef von Sternberg’s *Morocco*, D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* and George Cukor’s *Sylvia Scarlett*, as well as contemporary Hollywood releases such as Howard Hawks’ *Rio Lobo*. All of these critical readings will be examined below, but the initial focus of this chapter will be on a set of texts that significantly contributed to laying the foundations for this approach.

The December 1968 issue of *Cahiers* was dominated by a dossier dedicated to Carl Theodor Dreyer. Although at the time, the collection of texts on Dreyer was not conceived as a symptomatic re-reading of classical cinema, its status as a forerunner to this project was made clear ten months after its publication: when discussing the category (e) films in “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” Comolli and Narboni explicitly point to Dreyer, alongside Ford and Rossellini, as a definitive example of directors whose films produce “effects of discrepancy [*décalage*] and rupture, which shatter, not the ideology which presides over the film (of course), but its reflection in the film, and the image which it gives of itself.”² Coming at the end of a year marked by the radical contestation of the political status quo by popular uprisings on multiple continents, the decision to devote so much of the review to a classical, even “archaic” filmmaker appears counter-intuitive to say the least. But Dreyer had long been the source of pitched battles within French critical circles, and *Cahiers* had steadfastly defended the Danish director since its founding: as early as issue no. 9 (from 1952), Joseph-Marie Lo Duca penned a tribute to “Dreyer’s mystic trilogy” (discussing *La Passion de Jeanne d’arc*, *Vampyr* and *Vredens Dag*).³ The metaphysical interpretation of Dreyer in Lo Duca’s and Rohmer’s texts, however, ceded in the mid-1960s to articles by Delahaye and Téchiné making the polemical case for Dreyer’s status as a modernist filmmaker.⁴ These were prompted by the release of *Gertrud*

1 Jean Narboni, “Relecture,” in “Dictionnaire sans foi ni loi,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 325 (June 1981), p. 119.

2 Comolli/Narboni, “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” p. 14 [p. 257].

3 Lo Duca, “Trilogie mystique de Dreyer (*La passion de Jean d’Arc*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 9 (February 1952), pp. 60-63. A selection of Dreyer’s critical writings was also published over the course of six installments in 1963-1964.

4 See Michel Delahaye, “Circulaire (*Gertrud*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 164 (March 1965), p. 72; André Téchiné, “La parole de la fin (*Gertrud*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 164 (March 1965), pp. 72-73;

in 1964, which incited a renewal of critical hostilities over Dreyer's work, as *Cahiers'* continued defense of the director vied with the ridicule his final film received from other quarters. As a result, the 1968 dossier had a broadly militant tone to it—appropriate, after all, to the political mood at the time—but this was not enough to mask the heterogeneity of the texts it included. In arguing that Dreyer's genius derived from the “simple presence, the simple relationship, calculated as precisely and as accurately as possible, between beings and things,” Delahaye's introduction to the dossier, “Un phare pilote,” evinced his growing alienation from the rest of the journal, which would lead to his departure in 1970, while former director of the Algiers cinémathèque Barthélémy Amengual, writing a guest article for *Cahiers'*, provided a lengthy account of Dreyer's work from a Marxist humanist perspective in “Les nuits blanches de l'âme.”⁵

Another guest writer, Jean-Marie Straub, gave a more agitational view of Dreyer's work, stridently declaiming, “What I particularly admire in the films of Dreyer that I have been able to watch or re-watch these last years, is their ferocity with respect to the bourgeois world,” and indeed the rigorous asceticism of the Dane's filmmaking style has been an evident influence on Straub/Huillet's own practice.⁶ It was in the articles contributed by Comolli, Narboni and Aumont to the dossier, however, that the germs of *Cahiers'* new approach to the critical understanding of cinematic *écriture* when tackling the work of the masters of classical cinema made its appearance. Comolli begins his piece, aptly titled “Rhétorique de la terreur,” by contesting the very idea of Dreyer as a classicist—“Dreyer a modern filmmaker? Absolutely”—and rejecting the “outdated hodgepodge of the discourse on the soul” that characterizes traditional spiritualist analyses of his work.⁷ Dreyer's career, in Comolli's understanding, is animated by a presiding tension between form and content in his films: late works such as *Gertrud* and *Vredens Dag* depict both “the repressive condition of every society” and the attempts by the main characters (“perfectly representative of all the banality of humanity”) to resist these mechanisms of power. But

and André Téchiné, “L'archaïsme nordique de Dreyer,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 170 (September 1965), pp. 36-37. The last text makes the paradoxical case that Dreyer's modernity is precisely due to his “rudimentary” and “archaic” qualities.

5 Michel Delahaye, “Un phare pilote,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 207 (December 1968), p. 10; and Barthélémy Amengual, “Les nuits blanches de l'âme,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 207 (December 1968), pp. 52-62.

6 Jean-Marie Straub, “Féroce,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 207 (December 1968), p. 35.

7 Jean-Louis Comolli, “Rhétorique de la terreur,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 207 (December 1968), pp. 42-44, here p. 42.

they also come up against the “totalitarian writing” of Dreyer’s formal system, which requires a “necessarily synthetic reading.” For Comolli, the signifying totality of Dreyer’s films *materializes* their thematic content: his films “bring into play a formal mechanism just as repressive, just as rigorously governed, with a functioning that is just as implacable, as that of the social orders denounced.”⁸

In highlighting the anachronism and “relative degree of illegibility” in Dreyer’s work, and taking umbrage at the “obscurantist” readings his films have aroused, Narboni followed in the logic of Comolli’s text, and he set out his argument by stating that, “among all filmmakers, even more so than Bergman, Dreyer today appears as the one whose feigned capacity to receive retrograde ideologies is the greatest, as the refuge of dubious, hackneyed metaphysical notions, [...] the pretext for all kinds of confusionism and verbal intemperance.”⁹ Narboni uses the lateral, reversing camera movements of *Gertrud* as a synecdoche for Dreyer’s cinema as a whole—with the pretext that his filmmaking has become an “asymptote of itself, as with every great œuvre”—and argues that the boustrophedon-like approach to *écriture* in his films illustrates a greater contradiction coursing through his work. Dreyer’s “limpid writing,” for Narboni, is in fact marked by a contrast between its component parts, which are “legible at every instant,” and the “abnormal whole”: “once a certain threshold of precision and clarity has been breached, the most assured self-evidence always engenders the densest mystery, the significations *fall*, literally, *below the meaning*.”¹⁰ As such, Narboni argues for a reinterpretation of Dreyer’s oft-cited phrase that “we must use the camera to drive away the camera.” Rather than suggesting that the cinema has a vocation towards “discretion, transparency, effacement before the themes, subjects and characters,” Narboni gives an alternative reading of the statement: “‘Using the camera to drive away the camera’ means [...] showing the medium whose presence we expected to be dissimulated by the figures that it animates.” The supreme example of this approach comes, in the *Cahiers* critic’s view, in those moments in *Gertrud* when there is a momentary pause in the movement of the camera, and when the gaze of the characters, neither crossing each other’s lines of sight nor meeting that of the spectator, coincide with our own gaze, so as to “stare at a blank fabric

8 Ibid., p. 44.

9 Jean Narboni, “La Mise en demeure,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 207 (December 1968), pp. 38-41, here p. 38.

10 Ibid., p. 41.

between them and us that, by dint of this ultimately emptied out work, has become visible, and almost palpable."¹¹

Aumont rounded out the dossier with a shorter text, which inflected the readings of Dreyer's work proffered by Comolli and Narboni with an aesthetic analysis of the spatial dynamics governing his films. Aumont's discussion of the "space-limit" in Dreyer draws on the French art historian Henri Focillon's discussion of Roman sculpture, and he claims that "Dreyerian perspective" is comparable to that of Gothic art by virtue of "plac[ing] the human figure in the foreground." It is noteworthy that Aumont's discussion does not proceed as radically as those of Comolli and Narboni in the direction of rejecting a humanist account of Dreyer's œuvre: here, he even accepts that the concentrated abstraction of Dreyer's style means that "everything, here, is related to what we indeed have to call 'man.'"¹² As an archetypal filmmaker straddling the classical/modern divide in film history, Dreyer would remain a central reference point in Aumont's later endeavor to develop an aesthetic theory of the cinema. As such, it was logical that he should return to the Danish auteur's work with a 1993 monograph on *Vampyr*, proffering a close analysis that reads the film through the prism of its notoriously labyrinthine form.¹³

Morocco by Josef von Sternberg

After the re-reading of *Young Mr. Lincoln* in August 1970, *Morocco* was the second product of the Hollywood studio system to be subject to *Cahiers'* new mode of film analysis, with an article on Sternberg's early talkie appearing at the end of the year. In the opening paragraph of this text, it was avowedly presented as a successor to the reading of Ford's film. Whereas *Young Mr. Lincoln* represented "the ethical-political face of the capitalist and theological field of Hollywood cinema," *Morocco* highlighted the "erotic face" of Hollywood and was a work produced by "the major site of production of the erotic (fetishistic) myths of bourgeois society."¹⁴ Like its predecessor, "*Morocco* de Josef von Sternberg" was billed as a "collective text" for which the entire editorial team took responsibility. In reality, as

11 Ibid., pp. 38, 41.

12 Jacques Aumont, "L'amour du foyer," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 207 (December 1968), p. 36.

13 Jacques Aumont, *Vampyr de Carl Th. Dreyer* (Crisnée: Yellow Now, 1993).

14 Texte collectif, "*Morocco* de Josef von Sternberg," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 225 (November-December 1970), pp. 5-13, here p. 6. Translated as "Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco*," trans. Diana Matias, in Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III*, pp. 174-188, here p. 174.

Aumont has divulged, the communal nature of the article's composition was more attenuated than that of its predecessor: "For *Morocco*, Oudart had written a text at the beginning, and this can be felt very strongly. In the end, it remains a text by Oudart. Corrected by the others a little, Bonitzer among others, who was very interested in Lacan."¹⁵ In comparison, then, with the predominantly political/ideological reading of Ford's film, *Cahiers'* analysis of Sternberg's collaboration with Marlene Dietrich was marked by an interpretative framework drawing primarily on psychoanalytic theory.

Alongside Lacan, Kristeva's semanalysis is also a key component of the methodological approach adopted for *Morocco*: the opening section of the text, titled "Method," includes an extensive discussion of Kristeva's article "Narration et transformation," in which the Bulgarian theorist mapped the passage from a "civilization of the symbol" to a "civilization of the sign" onto the historical transition from the epic poem to the novel in the late Middle Ages.¹⁶ For *Cahiers*, novelistic narrative is particularly dominant in Hollywood at the time that *Morocco* was made (1930). The film thus substantially conforms to the system of the sign ascribed by Kristeva to the literary model of the novel, which is structured by the opposition between "the Same" (the author, the man) and "the Other" (the woman) and marked by an exclusion of the latter and thus a non-recognition of sexual and social oppositions. Here, woman is a "pseudo-center, a mystificatory center, a blind spot whose value is invested in the Same, who gives himself the Other (the center) in order to live as one, single and unique."¹⁷ The devaluation of woman in this narrative schema is particularly apparent in the mythology of the classical Hollywood system, in which female roles are reduced to stereotypes such as the *ingénue*, the *vamp* or the *femme fatale*. Sternberg's film, meanwhile, is dominated by the role of the fetish, which the *Cahiers* critics equate with both the "pseudo-center" described by Kristeva and the functioning of the phallus as the unattainable object of desire in Lacanian theory.¹⁸ For *Cahiers*, the "reciprocal absorption of the Same and the Other (the Author and the Woman), within an effacement of sexual difference accounts for (and implies) the fact that the Masquerade, Virile Display and Inversion are the erotic paradigms of *Morocco*."¹⁹ Instantiated by Marlene Dietrich's notorious dance number wearing a suit and top hat, the notion of

15 Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 11, 2014.

16 See Julia Kristeva, "Narration et transformation," *Semiotica* vol. 1 no. 4 (1969), pp. 422-448.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 437. Cited in "*Morocco*," p. 6 [p. 175].

18 See Jacques Lacan, "La signification du phallus," in *idem.*, *Écrits vol. II*, pp. 685-695. Translated as "The Signification of the Phallus," in *idem.*, *Écrits*, trans. and ed. Bruce Fink, pp. 575-584.

19 "*Morocco*," p. 6 [p. 175].

masquerade is drawn from the work of Joan Rivière and Michèle Montrelay.²⁰ Here we have evidence, then, of an influence of contemporary feminist theory on the *Cahiers* writers. Along with Kané's reading of *Sylvia Scarlett*, the *Morocco* article thus constitutes an exception to the otherwise generalized disregard of a possible feminist approach to the study of cinema in *Cahiers* during its Marxist period.

From this outline of the theoretical method adopted for their analysis, the *Cahiers* critics proceed to a close reading of the film. Again, a distinction is drawn with the prior work on *Young Mr. Lincoln*. The "diegetic process" of Ford's film, in which "the fictional structures in it were transformed by the narration," called for a *diachronic* reading that closely followed the film's own chronological development. In the case of *Morocco*, by contrast, a *synchronic* reading is more appropriate, by dint of the fact that "the structures of the fiction" are "programmed from the outset and are simply repeated with variations in their successive relations."²¹ The fiction of *Morocco*, in *Cahiers'* view, is chiefly structured by the reciprocal interaction between the erotic and social relations of the individual characters. The two homologous love triangles around which the film is organized (La Bessière-Amy Jolly-Brown and, secondarily, Caesar-Mme Caesar-Brown) are overdetermined by the class positions of the film's main characters, but these in turn find themselves "perverted" by the erotic bonds the film depicts. *Morocco* is distinctive among Hollywood films for including within its narrative the entire spectrum of class society in a colonized nation: the characters range from members of the European haute-bourgeoisie (La Bessière), through intermediate layers to the lower strata: the working-class legionnaires (who are Western but miserably paid) and, beneath them, the sub-proletarian crowds of anonymous Moroccan "natives," cabaret singers and prostitutes. *Cahiers* makes a distinction, however, between the male characters, whose class status remains relatively fixed throughout the film, and their female counterparts, who are typified by the fluidity of their social position. The lives of both Amy Jolly and Mme Caesar are marked by precipitous rises and falls on the social ladder, determined principally by the class status of the men with whom they become sexually involved. Furthermore, *Cahiers* points out that in all of the erotic relations shown in the film, "the object of desire is of an inferior rank to the desiring subject," or, in other words, the

20 The *Cahiers* writers make reference, in a footnote, to Rivière's "La féminité en tant que mascarade," (*La Psychanalyse* no. 7) and Montrelay's "Recherches sur la féminité" (*Critique* no. 278). See *ibid.*, p. 6 [p. 186].

21 "Morocco," p. 7 [p. 176].

“movement of desire works from high to low.”²² In addition, then, to social and erotic determinations governing the film, a “topographical inscription” is operative and works along two axes: a vertical axis establishing a hierarchical opposition between the High (La Bessière’s penthouse apartment) and the Low (the subterranean cabaret), and a horizontal axis producing an opposition between the town and the surrounding desert. The interaction between these multiple sets of oppositional pairs thus produces a system of “constantly reduplicated batteries of signifiers.” In the rest of Sternberg’s œuvre, these proliferating rhymes and inversions are merely a “decorative supplement,” but *Morocco* stands out for the fact that, in this film, they are implicated in the structural relations of the film itself.²³

The third part of the article concerns itself with the relationship between the film and the mythological aspect of the Hollywood star system. *Morocco*, of course, is indelibly stamped with the star presence of Marlene Dietrich. Then one of the most recognizable actors in the cinema, her celebrity was nonetheless unusual in that it was closely tied to Sternberg’s direction. In a line of thinking that owes a tacit debt to Edgar Morin’s treatise on *Les Stars*, *Cahiers* note that the presence of an actress of Dietrich’s stature in a cinematic work leads to a transcending of the “filmic/extra-filmic opposition,” but the films themselves emerge as a “constant disavowal of this transcendence.”²⁴ In the case of *Morocco*, the fact that Dietrich plays the role of a cabaret singer points not only to her own biographical past but also to her preceding film, *Der blaue Engel* (also directed by Sternberg)—although here the class coding of the profession is inverted, and the fate of Amy Jolly is in fact more closely aligned with that of Professor Unrat in the earlier film. *Morocco* is totemic of the ambiguous position of the star in the narrative structure of Hollywood cinema, at once reinforcing narrative illusion and undermining it: Dietrich’s first appearance on screen is marked by a “narrative and iconographic break” from the rest of the film, and the “austerity” of her acting style is similarly at a remove from the performative codes prevailing in Hollywood. For *Cahiers*, the inscription of Dietrich’s star persona within the fiction of *Morocco* consists in a “*différance* of her signification (her ‘value’) as a star,” and in the “production of a *supplément*” which will subsequently be transferred back to her credit by virtue of the fact that the “fictional effects” produced by the film are required to

22 Ibid., p. 8 [p. 177].

23 Ibid., p. 9 [p. 179].

24 Ibid. See also Edgar Morin, *Les Stars* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), translated as *The Stars*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

valorize her own signification as a star. Sternberg's films, however, are distinguished from most Hollywood productions in that the auteur-director has been able to appropriate to himself the value of the star. In other words, Dietrich's on-screen presence has come to be recognized as one of the defining characteristics of Sternberg's work. Statements by the director to the effect that "Marlene, c'est moi" (quoted from a 1965 interview he gave to *Cahiers*) appear to "denigrate the star system," but in fact their violent disavowal of the fetish character of the star does "no more than reflect its ideology, while at the same time perverting it."²⁵

In the fourth section of the article, the *Cahiers* critics deliver an analysis of the *écriture* of *Morocco*, which consists of the film's "inscription of the signifiers of Westernness [*occidentalité*] and Easternness [*orientalité*]."²⁶ They provide a diagrammatic grid of the film's characters, placed according to their position along two axes: the high/low opposition of their social status, and the West/East opposition of their ethnic coding. While Amy Jolly and Caesar are Nordic Europeans (typifying the Old World), and Brown represents the New World of North America (also unambiguously "white" and "Western"), La Bessière, Mme Caesar and the cabaret owner Lo Tinto are all coded as racially intermediate characters, either of Mediterranean origin or mixed-race, while the Moroccans in the film constitute an indistinct mass. These categories, however, are muddled by the "exclusively feminine value" that is assigned to the East in the Western mythological tradition (which leads the female characters to "rejoin the Orient as their mythic locus") as well as the film's *inversion* of the "phallogocentric fantasy of bourgeois society"—in *Morocco*, it is the male, Brown, who is both socially inferior to Amy Jolly and the object of *her* desire.²⁷

Finally, the article analyzes the inscription of fetish objects in *Morocco*, an aspect of the film that is particularly fertile in theoretical resonances, given the role that the fetish has played in Marx's political economy, Lévi-Strauss's anthropology and Freudian psychoanalysis. The fetish objects present in *Morocco*—money, jewels, clothing and, above all, women themselves—play a contradictory role in the film's signifying system: they "function simultaneously as *both* bourgeois value *and* erotic signifiers; they are therefore inscribed both as inalienable values, incapable of being squandered, *and* as signifiers of that squandering."²⁸ The film's narrative would suggest a

25 "Morocco," p. 10 [pp. 180-181].

26 *Ibid.*, p. 11 [p. 182].

27 *Ibid.*, p. 11-12 [p. 183].

28 *Ibid.*, p. 12 [p. 184].

moralizing, idealist “critique of fetishism” (the idea of a return to nature and a renunciation of material objects marked by Amy Jolly’s flight from La Bessière), but *Morocco* is also marked by the *impossibility* for Sternberg of inscribing this critique into his fiction, owing to the inevitable presence of “fetish-objects which renew the chain of desire” in the aesthetic system of his films. Hence, the “closed economy” of *Morocco* is shaped by an interminable back-and-forth movement between Sternberg’s “formal fetishism” and his “anti-fetishist ideology,” which is illustrated in the film by the recurrent “flight-pursuit” between Amy Jolly and Brown. The only possible conclusion to the film, then, is a flight into an “impossible elsewhere—the Desert of *jouissance* and death.”²⁹ Again, an implicit opposition emerges with Ford, the unorthodox *écriture* of whose films belied his reputation as a reliably conventional director within the US film industry. Although Sternberg was often seen in Hollywood as an *artiste maudit* whose cinematic idiosyncrasies entered into antagonism with the commercial system of filmmaking, for *Cahiers* his marginalization is no more than a “false exterior.” In fact, the ideology of Sternberg’s films fits perfectly well within the framework of the novelistic narrative model that governed Hollywood in the classical era and is only superficially masked by the flaunting of certain stylistic flourishes, which, in the end, fail to undermine the classical system of representation.

Sylvia Scarlett by George Cukor

Already somewhat less of a purely collective endeavor than the *Young Mr. Lincoln* article, *Cahiers*’ analysis of *Morocco* proved to be the last group re-reading of a studio-era Hollywood film undertaken by the journal. Later studies of classical films carried out in 1972—on Cukor’s *Sylvia Scarlett* and Griffith’s *Intolerance*—carried the signatures of individual *Cahiers* critics (Kané and Baudry respectively). By this point, too, the journal was dominated by its Maoist political perspective. While in line with the work of 1970, the sentiment that Kané’s and Baudry’s articles were increasingly distant from the central prerogative of *Cahiers* was confirmed with the criticism of their texts in the November 1972 manifesto “Quelles sont nos tâches sur le front culturel?”³⁰ It is notable, too, that both these articles analyzed films that were, in various ways, aberrations within the Hollywood system.

29 Ibid., p. 13 [p. 185].

30 “Quelles sont nos tâches sur le front culturel?: Projet de plate-forme,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 242-243 (November-December 1972-January 1973), pp. 5-23, here p. 6.

Intolerance's inability to replicate the commercial success of *Birth of a Nation* is well-known, while Cukor's adaptation of Compton Mackenzie's 1918 novel was one of the most notorious box-office debacles of the 1930s and was a source of embarrassment for both the director and its titular lead, Katherine Hepburn. While French cinephiles in the post-war period resuscitated the film's reputation, Daney notes that, even in 1964, Cukor could not accept its merits. Visiting the director in California for a never-to-be-published interview, the *Cahiers* writer recalls:

It was a hot summer day in an amazing villa, among his courtship and minions, and everyone there seemed to be blossoming, except for us, drenched in sweat, saying how much we loved *Sylvia Scarlett*, which we just discovered in Paris. Cukor wasn't particularly flattered that we valorized one of his flops from the beginning of his career. [...] The law of showbiz is that a commercial failure *can't* be a good film. When I imagine the two of us with that old broken man, crafty as a monkey, and whose last film *Rich and Famous* proved that he never went senile, I am still astounded by the way we chose to love American cinema not by their norms but by our own.³¹

It was undeniably the film's aberrant quality that attracted *Cahiers* to it: like *Morocco*, *Sylvia Scarlett* prominently features cross-dressing and the phenomenon of masquerade more broadly. For Kané, although Cukor's film is an "exemplary classical narrative" due to the preponderance of the "erotic" level and the concomitant repression of other (social, ideological, cultural) determinations, it is the inscription of the "trajectory of the bodies" in *Sylvia Scarlett* resulting in "effects of transgression on the underlying classical narrative model" that is responsible for its potential subversion of Hollywood convention.³² The *écriture* of Cukor's film, then, is striated by the contradiction between the need to conform to the functioning of the standard narrative template of 1930s Hollywood cinema and the "displacement-perversion" of this structural model generated by the fact that Hepburn, one of Hollywood's biggest stars, adopts a disguise as a male throughout much of the film.

31 Serge Daney, *Persévérance* (Paris: P.O.L., 1993), p. 92. Translated as *Postcards from the Cinema*, trans. Paul Douglas Grant (Oxford: Berg, 2007), pp. 75-76.

32 Pascal Kané, "Relecture du cinéma hollywoodien: *Sylvia Scarlett*," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 238-239 (May-June 1972), pp. 84-90, here p. 85. Translated as "Re-reading Hollywood Cinema: *Sylvia Scarlett*," trans. David Wilson, in Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III*, pp. 325-333, here p. 326. The generic male pronouns from the existing translation have been retained.

Kané's study thus begins with an analysis of "the place and function of the hero" in *Sylvia Scarlett*. The Hollywood hero is generally marked by a contradiction between the "'natural' fixedness of the social roles attached to individuals" and the "trans-social course" they embark upon—that is, the tendency to essentialize class status is undermined by the ideology of class mobility and free enterprise, which finds itself embodied in a cinematic hero who, Kané maintains, is "generally excluded from any class antagonism." In *Sylvia Scarlett*, this "suturing" of the class determination of the hero is made clear in the film's prologue. Briskly establishing the death of Sylvia's mother, the financial ruination of her father and her decision to disguise herself as a boy in order to flee from Marseille to England, this segment presents the viewer with the basic conditions for the functioning of the classical narrative. Specifically, "the hero's obligation to define himself as being different from the community as a whole" is brought about by an "extraordinary" event that invests him with a "fictional density which immediately effaces the 'triviality' of their initial situation (class-being, family relations)." The film hero also fulfils a broader ideological function: that of "assigning the spectator his true place in the production process" (which is calqued onto the natural, fixed order that the film's narrative posits) at the same time as "denying that it is doing this."³³ In making this claim, Kané rests on the ideas of the Althusser-inspired theorist Michel Pêcheux, who, writing for *Cahiers pour l'analyse* under the pseudonym Thomas Herbert, elucidated the role of the displacement of signification through what he terms the "metaphorical effect" in ideology:

The economic law which assigns to the agent of production his position in the process of production is *repressed and disguised* [*travestie*] within other signifying chains whose effect is both to *signify* this position to the subject-agent of production without his being able to escape from it, *and* to hide from him the fact that the position is assigned to him. In other words, the metaphorical effect produces significations by displacing them.³⁴

For Kané, it is the "pseudo-difference" of the hero—here, Hepburn/Sylvia's ability to switch between gender roles—that has the paradoxical effect of guaranteeing the homogenization of the audience, thereby sealing (or

33 The above quotes are from *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87 [pp. 327-328].

34 Thomas Herbert [Michel Pêcheux], "Remarques pour une théorie générale des idéologies," *Cahiers pour l'analyse* no. 9 (September 1967), pp. 74-92, here p. 88. Cited in Kané, "Sylvia Scarlett," p. 87 [p. 328].

“suturing”) the targeted social group more closely together under the dominance of bourgeois ideology.

The second half of Kané’s text shifts its focus to a reading of the main sequences of the film. In order to denote the importance to his analysis of Lacan’s concepts of the “barred subject” (the notion that the subject is always divided from itself by the existence of a lack) and the *objet petit a* (the unattainable object of desire), Kané gives the title of this section the idiosyncratic orthography “\$ylvi(a).” The fact that *Sylvia Scarlett* opens with an avowal of the disappearance of the mother inscribes the film with an œdipal logic, but whereas at the start of the film the “phantasm of incestuous desire” comes close to being realized, it becomes progressively repressed through the work of *différance* governing the storyline. *Sylvia Scarlett* is marked, therefore, by a tendency to hypostasize desire as the principal motor of the signifying chain of the plot, which serves to exclude and repress a “social scene” that would otherwise play a determining role in narrative progression. In the same episode, however, Sylvia’s decision to pose as the son of her father (adopting the name “Sylvester”) is an act of foreclosing the œdipal fantasy through a “provisional castration,” symbolized here by her rash decision to cut off her plaits. While this is intended as a hoax to more convincingly disguise herself as a male, Kané insists that there is a substantive core to this act: “the plaits,” he proclaims, “are well and truly cut off.” Something in Sylvia’s body has been affected by her masquerade, and her transformations in speech, dress and gesture are not so easy to control. Even after she reverts to her original female status, certain ways of comporting herself remain ingrained in her demeanor (spreading her legs, for instance). The figure of Sylvia, therefore, is inscribed with an “initial excess,” a “discrepancy [*décalage*] between the character and her function” which Kané equates to a Derridean “supplement of writing” (*supplément d’écriture*) embodied in her act of transvestitism.³⁵

This supplement will end up perturbing the unfolding of the film’s narrative as a whole, leaving effects on even the most conventional elements of the plot. Kané gives the example of Sylvia’s meeting with the painter Michael Fane: due to the fact that the traces of the “supplement of writing” on Sylvia’s body will never be entirely dissipated, her relations with Fane remain, in the *Cahiers* critic’s analysis, rather “off-key” (*en porte-à-faux*) and only exist on the level of a “denial of desire,” even when they elope together at the conclusion of the film. Indeed, right up until this final scene, everything had been pointing to the consummation of Sylvia’s desire for the Cary

35 Ibid., pp. 88-89 [p. 33].

Grant character (Monkley) instead, as a “displacement/transformation” of her desire for her father. Instead, through the narrative *coup de force* of the countess’ suicide, the storyline of the film “deviates from a course whose ‘normality’ it re-marks in passing but access to which is forbidden by an excess, adhering closely to the character of Sylvia, that is not reducible to the pre-existing ideological model.” While the narrative codes operative in the film have the function of effacing this “scriptural trace,” Sylvia’s very body exists as a site of “erogenous-scriptural” resistance to the repressive return of such codes, and its preservation as an “aberrant’ supplement” thus represents a process that Kané, revealing here a certain debt to Derrida and Kristeva, dubs *désécriture* (unwriting)—that is, an unraveling of the scriptural economy of classical Hollywood cinema.³⁶

Intolerance by D.W. Griffith

If *Sylvia Scarlett* was marked by an aberrant supplement, then *Intolerance* is possibly the most aberrant film in the history of American cinema. Its apotheosis/transgression of the then nascent conventions of the Hollywood narrative system is legendary, and its attraction to the *Cahiers* team as an object of symptomatic reading is obvious. Since being placed on the “wrong side” of Bazin’s division between “filmmakers of the image” and “filmmakers of reality,” Griffith had never truly been a member of the *Cahiers* canon.³⁷ But when the journal took an interest in questions of montage, his work began to elicit interest from the *Cahiers* critics, particularly due to the role he played as a forerunner to Eisenstein’s practice. In 1971, the journal set up a research group on *Intolerance*, stemming from a seminar on the film that was run in conjunction with the Institut de Formation Cinématographique. This project yielded, over the course of four issues in 1971-72, a detailed, shot-by-shot run-down of Griffith’s monumental work, a document that was seen not as a “linguistic duplication” of the film but as “already almost a commentary, where the greatest possible quantity of signifying traits in the film are highlighted” and which had the intended purpose of giving the study group working on it “the means for

36 Ibid., p. 90 [pp. 331-332].

37 See André Bazin, “L’Évolution du langage cinématographique,” in idem., *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* vol. I, pp. 131-148, here p. 132. Translated as “The Evolution of Film Language,” in idem., *What is Cinema?*, trans. and ed. Timothy Barnard (Montreal: Caboose, 2009), pp. 87-107, here p. 88.

a more rigorous reading.”³⁸ At the same time, *Cahiers* published a French translation of Eisenstein’s article “Dickens, Griffith and Film Today,” a text which, in discussing the dialectical nexus between the formal technique of Griffithian montage and the filmmaker’s bourgeois-liberal ideological outlook, can be seen as one of the major predecessors to *Cahiers*’ own work in this area.³⁹

The introduction to this multifaceted project on Griffith explicitly noted that it was to be “inscribed in continuity with the studies that have already appeared on *Young Mr. Lincoln* and *Morocco*, in the same enterprise of reading or re-reading ‘classical’ cinema.” For *Cahiers*, there were several justifications for the importance of this work: a perceptible reduction in the resistance towards watching silent films had heightened the demand for re-releasing the “old masterpieces,” and a repertory program incorporating a dozen Griffith films was planned to run in Paris later that year. Studying his output thus constituted an active refutation of the tendency towards reducing it to an “archeological treasure” and instead involved analyzing its “specific place and mode of functioning in the intertextuality of signifying practices.” *Intolerance*, in particular, holds a paradoxical place in the received account of film history, at once embarrassingly archaic and precociously modern in its deployment of film style. Following Eisenstein, *Cahiers* sought to explore the relationship between Griffith’s “rhetorical inventions” and the ideologies that his films convey, thereby bringing formalist histories of film technique into a dialectical interplay with interpretations of the film’s content, as well as extending the field of analysis beyond montage and into other “heterogeneous levels of codage,” such as scenographic space, gesture, set design and costume. For *Cahiers*, then, an analysis of *Intolerance* should entail “try[ing] to define the *type* of ideologico-formal contradiction that Griffith’s œuvre constitutes, and the game of displacement that the work of Eisenstein has exerted on this contradiction, in order both to highlight bourgeois ideology and draw the most important theoretical lessons from it.”⁴⁰

38 “*Intolerance* de David Wark Griffith: Introduction,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 231 (August-September 1971), p. 15. The shot-by-shot description was established on the basis of an 8mm print of the film borrowed from the IFC as part of this research project.

39 For the English version of this text, see Sergei Eisenstein, “Dickens, Griffith and Film Today,” in *idem.*, *Film Form*, trans. and ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1949), pp. 195-255. *Cahiers*’ French translation was published as “Dickens, Griffith et nous,” in *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 231 (August-September 1971), pp. 16-22; no. 232 (October 1971), pp. 24-26; no. 233 (November 1971), pp. 11-26; and no. 234-235 (December 1971-January-February 1972), pp. 27-42.

40 The quotes in this paragraph are from “*Intolerance* de David Wark Griffith: Introduction,” p. 15.

While the initial research was presented as a group project, it was a single writer, Pierre Baudry, who was credited with the theoretical text that crowned this endeavor. “Les aventures de l’idée” was published in two installments in the July-August and September-October 1972 issues of *Cahiers* but was left unfinished when the journal’s Maoist turn had negated the political need for such work. Although Baudry inscribes his text, with its self-consciously Hegelian title, within the lineage of *Cahiers*’ re-readings of classical cinema, he also notes a key distinction of his own project: up to now the focus had been on 1930s Hollywood films, a period when synchronized sound had been firmly established and the formal system of classical cinema had reached what Bazin termed its “equilibrium profile.”⁴¹ *Intolerance*, filmed at the very beginning of the studio era, is not only a product of the silent cinema (itself a term Baudry will interrogate), it also dramatically departs from the formal principles that would later become cast-iron laws of filmmaking in the studio system. This, precisely, is at the core of what Baudry terms the film’s “monstrous” nature: economically and aesthetically “excessive,” it has retained a status as residing “at the extreme limits of ‘the possibilities of the cinema.’”⁴² In devoting a text to the ways in which the *écriture* of *Intolerance* is capable of “both revealing and subverting its ideological project,” Baudry also seeks to address a gap: in 1972 there was almost no French literature on Griffith’s work, despite his titanic status in film history. While he wishes to avoid contributing to the construction of a cinematic pantheon, Baudry nonetheless sees the necessity of highlighting the “nodal role” Griffith’s films have had in the history of the cinema.⁴³ In using Marxism and psychoanalysis to define this role, his study is a significant precursor to later scholarship on Griffith, although the debt to Baudry’s pioneering text is not always fully acknowledged.⁴⁴

Baudry begins his analysis by interrogating the three “blinding self-evidences” with which *Intolerance* is associated: namely, that it is a silent film, that it is an American film, and that it is a film by D.W. Griffith. Of these three terms, it is the last that is of most interest. Following Comolli’s

41 Bazin, “L’évolution du langage cinématographique,” p. 139 [p. 95].

42 Pierre Baudry, “Les aventures de l’Idée (sur *Intolérance*), 1,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 240 (July-August 1972), pp. 51-58, here p. 51.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

44 Miriam Hansen’s chapters on *Intolerance* in *Babel & Babylon*, for instance, reiterate many of the arguments made in “Les aventures de l’Idée,” but Baudry’s text earns only a couple of dismissive mentions from the scholar, including the peculiar claim that his analysis reverts to the model of interpretative closure practiced by New Criticism. Miriam Hansen, *Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 203.

“Technique et idéologie” articles, Baudry rejects a teleological vision that would seek to construct the “cinema as an Essence whose history would be its progressive realization and perfection, with each filmmaker bringing their brick to the edifice.” Instead, he argues that Griffith’s films brought about a transformation of the cinematic fiction consisting of “a displacement (which is in no way a ‘withdrawal’) of its intertextual status,” and he notes that the “rhetorical battery” formed by his work creates effects that are analogous to those of the novel. Pointing to the “lack of equilibrium” between form and content in Griffith, Baudry therefore determines that *Intolerance* represents neither “a ‘masterpiece encompassing all of Griffith’s art, then at its apogee,’ nor a formal primitivism, but a contradiction between ideology and textuality.”⁴⁵

Griffith’s radical formal gesture in *Intolerance* was to interlace the film’s four episodes with one another, despite their chronologically disparate nature. In charting the relations between these narrative strands, Baudry adopts Metz’s distinction between *montage alterné* and *montage parallèle*. In the first case, the “syntagmatic chains” produced by crosscutting are governed by relations of temporality and causality (as in the paradigmatic “race-to-the-rescue” ending), and thus mostly occur within each episode; in the latter, by contrast, the montage elements “do not possess any *a priori* relationship of succession, contemporaneity or causality.”⁴⁶ In alternating between totally independent realities, often separated by many centuries of historical time, Griffithian montage creates both effects of rupture (jolting the spectator between historical epochs) and effects of continuity or resonance: “the interlacing organizes ‘déjà-vu’ effects in the situations that are mingled together, effects which, far from being attenuated by the ruptures marking the passage from one era to another, are, on the contrary, augmented by them; parallel montage thus tends to make the narrative relatively linear.”⁴⁷ The imbrication of the episodes through montage causes a degree of cross-diegetic interference, leading to a narrative interdependence that is reinforced by the broad analogies that exist between the “networks of characters” in each of the episodes, defined according to generalized principles such as the Couple, the Law, Power and Religion.

Baudry provisionally concludes his text with a discussion of the film’s rapturous apotheosis: a textual supplement in the Derridean sense (appended

45 Baudry, “Les aventures de l’Idée, 1,” p. 53.

46 Pierre Baudry, “Les aventures de l’Idée (sur *Intolérance*), 2,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 241 (September-October 1972), pp. 31-45, here p. 31.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

to the film as a whole, it is a climax that is otherwise divorced from the rest of the text), this scene is also a moment of spectatorial *jouissance* in the Lacanian sense, denoting the signifying lack in the imaginary experience of death. But the apotheosis of *Intolerance* also highlights the contradiction that governs the entire film. This emphatic coda is symptomatically needed in order to establish the synthetic message of historical progress that the episodes, by themselves, are unable to impart, overpowered as they are by their own “*photogénie* of atrocity.” Thus the tension between the “ideological” and the “textual” is demonstrated by the fact that Griffith’s twin goals of entertainment and instruction (a classical artistic mission that can be traced back to Horace’s *Ars poetica*) enter into a profound contradiction, or as Baudry puts it: “to render instruction entertaining: it is the very didactic intention of the film that subverts its own thesis.”⁴⁸

The Aging of the Same: Reading Contemporary Hollywood

Four articles—on *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *Morocco*, *Sylvia Scarlett* and *Intolerance*—thus comprised the *Cahiers* project to re-read classical Hollywood cinema. The critics did have ambitions for more work in this vein: for several issues between March 1970 and March 1971, the journal advertised upcoming articles on *Once Upon a Honeymoon* by Leo McCarey and *Under Capricorn* by Alfred Hitchcock, as well as dossiers on F.W. Murnau and, in a different cinematic mode, Jean Rouch.⁴⁹ Of these projects, the McCarey text was in the most advanced state: the film was screened and discussed by *Cahiers* at Avignon in August 1970 (alongside *Moonfleet*, one of Daney’s fetish films).⁵⁰ All these articles would remain unpublished, however, and they now belong to the phantom realm of *Cahiers*’ numerous planned but unrealized texts. The symptomatic analysis of classical Hollywood did, however, filter through to another area of *Cahiers*’ critical work: their reception of contemporary releases of commercial American films. The overriding consensus within the journal was that US cinema had entered into a state of irreversible decline, succumbing to academic mannerism on the aesthetic level and experiencing plummeting audience numbers on the economic level at the same time as the nation’s political order was

48 Ibid., p. 45.

49 See advertising notices in *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 216, p. 5; no. 218, p. 70; no. 220-221, p. 125; and no. 228, p. 4.

50 See La Rédaction, “Les *Cahiers* à Avignon,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 224 (October 1970), pp. 57-58.

itself in a deep existential crisis under the effects of the Vietnam War, student unrest and the pending unraveling of the Nixon administration. In a flagrant example of willed critical blindness, *Cahiers* was oblivious to the rise of the New Hollywood filmmakers: the early work of Brian De Palma, Martin Scorsese and Robert Altman was barely touched on, and the movement would not be given substantial coverage until much later in the 1970s. In mainstream American cinema, then, the only contemporary films that were deemed to be of interest were the final works of a senescent generation of classical auteurs (Hawks, Boetticher, Losey, Kazan), which were primarily read by *Cahiers* as symptoms of the moribund state of the studio system. To the extent that these films were worth discussing, it was for the way they shed light on the struggles experienced by these filmmakers to orient themselves to a situation in which many of the pre-established codes of Hollywood classicism—the “rules of the game” that had governed the institution for five decades—were no longer operative.

Daney played a privileged role in the continued discussion of the above-mentioned auteurs in *Cahiers*, and his analysis of Hawks' *Rio Lobo*, “Vieillesse du même,” is a moving response to the last gasp of a director who had been of fundamental importance for the journal's critical appreciation of the cinema since the early 1950s. A loose remake of *Rio Bravo* starring John Wayne, himself visibly aged and (for *Cahiers*, at any rate) tarred by his increasingly right-wing political views, *Rio Lobo* is undeniably inscribed with the trope of *old age*. Daney makes the connection between aging and writing: in Hawks' work, the refusal “to inscribe age on faces” and “to write with images” amounts to “*one and the same operation*.”⁵¹ *Rio Lobo* is therefore marked, in the critic's analysis, by “the most obstinate refusal to write,” but this does not involve a renunciation of all forms of expression. Instead, it entails:

retaining nothing of what remains, liking the traces only in the form of indices, in Peirce's sense [...]: smoke and fire, blood, the coffin and the murderer, the look and that which is looked at. The index is still the best mode of articulation because “presence” is only denied there, “lost from sight” for an instant, ready to re-emerge at the end of a tracking shot or in the reverse-shot, re-valORIZED after having been momentarily forgotten.⁵²

51 Serge Daney, “Vieillesse du même (*Rio Lobo*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 230 (July 1971), pp. 22–27, here p. 22.

52 Ibid.

In line with the Peircean notion of the indexical trace, and under the unmistakable influence of Derrida, Daney draws an analogy between cinematic writing and the presence, in Hawks' film, of acts of cutting or slicing. Such a metaphor derives from a deconstructed etymology of the word *écrire* itself—the Latin verb *scribere* can mean both “to write” and “to cut with a sharp implement.” In this optic, Hawks' framing is understood as a form of castration, and *Rio Lobo* is presented as the site where “the Same is narrowed and, within the interstices, the Other begins to be *written*.” The most glaring locus of a symbolic confluence between writing and inscription is the “monstrous scar” on the cheek of the prostitute Amelita, the indelible nature of which means that “anybody can read, at all moments (any time), something (anything) on this face.” From *Scarface* to *Rio Lobo*, then, Hawks' longevous oeuvre is the story of a scar—the only change between the two films is the fact that the scar “has switched cheeks,” from that of the male protagonist to the female side-character. The message Daney takes from Hawks' last film, therefore, is that “from now on, it is women who carry, written onto their faces, the proof that men do not love them.”⁵³

“Vieillesse du même” featured in the July 1971 issue of *Cahiers*, and in the succeeding months the journal published a handful of reviews of the latter-day works of aged Hollywood filmmakers that mined similar terrain as Daney's article. Daney himself covered Losey's *The Go-Between* in the August-September number, based on a screenplay by Harold Pinter and made in the UK due to the filmmaker's McCarthyism-imposed exile from the nation of his birth. Despite receiving the 1971 *Palme d'or* at Cannes, the film failed to excite the *Cahiers* critic, who saw it as an “academic” work encumbered by a “bric-a-brac of realist notations and factual truths destined to prove that a social analysis is being undertaken.”⁵⁴ Eduardo de Gregorio tackled Boetticher's *A Time for Dying* but saw its “perversion” of the rules of classical cinema as being too self-consciously aware to have any productive effect, a fate shared, in Kané's judgement, by the younger filmmaker John Schlesinger's *Sunday, Bloody Sunday*, defined as “one of the possible ‘arrangements’ by which contemporary filmmakers accommodate themselves (for better or for worse) to the form of classical narrative.”⁵⁵

53 The above quotes are from *ibid.*, p. 27

54 Serge Daney, “*Le Messager*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 231 (August-September 1971), pp. 52-53, here p. 52.

55 Eduardo de Gregorio, “*A Time for Dying*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 233 (November 1971), pp. 57-61, here p. 61; and Pascal Kané, “*Sunday, Bloody Sunday*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 233 (November 1971), p. 61.

The harshest response to the late work of one of classical Hollywood's "old masters" came, however, in the form of Daney's blistering review of Kazan's *The Visitors* in July-August 1972. Even by *Cahiers'* standards, prone as the journal has always been to critical zealotry, the text is of a rare violence, with liberal journalists in France just as much of a target of Daney's fury as Kazan's film. For the *Cahiers* writer, these critical circles—including PCF-aligned reviewers—were blinded by Kazan's superficial departures from Hollywood's conventional *dispositif* (his use of 16mm, most notably) and were thereby lured into believing that *The Visitors* was a progressive work, when its politics are in fact deeply reactionary. Provocatively, Daney even draws an analogy between the rape depicted in the film and Kazan's deception of French film critics: "During a rape, the woman forgets her convictions; during a screening, critics forget that they are 'on the left.'"⁵⁶ Far from being an independent production innovatively dealing with a taboo subject matter (the traumatic effects of the Vietnam war on American soldiers after their return home), *The Visitors*, as Daney's diatribe has it:

renounces essentially nothing of what constitutes the Hollywood model, nothing of what still ensures its ideological efficacy. Tackling a hot topic, filming with minimal equipment, and suddenly adopting a position as a marginal figure allows Kazan to do what had never truly been successfully achieved before: using the formal apparatus of Hollywood cinema (and the ideology it conveys), while knowingly proposing to us a reduced, efficient economic model of what no longer functions very well elsewhere (above all in Hollywood).⁵⁷

Whereas *Cahiers'* earlier critical re-readings of classical cinema sought to discern the gap or discrepancy between the ideological purpose of a film and the work of its formal *écriture*, capable of undoing or undermining the initial conception of the project, Daney sees Kazan's fetishization of the "ambiguity of the real" in *The Visitors* as itself being an ideological ruse, serving only to obfuscate the film's true nature as a work of racist, misogynistic reaction that "mobilizes all the major ideologemes of fascistic petty-bourgeois ideology."⁵⁸ Moreover, the insidious nature of Kazan's film lies in its strategy of placing the spectator in the position of a complicit voyeur of the gruesome events

56 Serge Daney, "Les Visiteurs," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 240 (July-August 1972), pp. 60-64, here p. 60.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

depicted on screen, thus leading the audience to the conclusion that the victim of the brutal rape not only deserved her fate but even enjoyed it: “*The Visitors* is constructed in such a manner that the spectator must sooner or later abandon his solidarity for the ‘positive’ characters (the couple), and vaguely desire what appears to be inevitable, the rape. In short, the spectator, too, must *disavow* himself over the course of the screening.”⁵⁹ Appearing in the last issue before the journal’s change to the more austere format of its Front culturel period, this review provided ample proof that the Maoist orientation adopted by *Cahiers* had forestalled the possibility for the continued productive reading of cinematic *écriture* in the Hollywood tradition of filmmaking. What remained was sheer, unadulterated vitriol, directed towards an object that was reductively seen as the cultural product of the class enemy.

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17. The Defense and Critique of Cinematic Modernism

Abstract

This chapter shifts the focus from *Cahiers'* re-reading of classical films to the journal's response to works of cinematic modernism. As in the earlier chapter, the theoretical framework used to treat these films involves a combination of Althusserian Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis, but whereas the analysis of commercially produced classical cinema entailed "symptomatic" readings, the critical reception of modernist films had to acknowledge the director's own awareness of the possibility of critical counter-interpretations. This optic was used on an array of filmmakers, including Luis Buñuel, Jerry Lewis, Federico Fellini, the Taviani Brothers and young filmmakers such as Philippe Garrel, Carmelo Bene and Bernardo Bertolucci. Finally, Jean-Pierre Oudart and Serge Daney's major, Lacan-inspired critique of Luchino Visconti's *Morte a Venezia*, "Le Nom de l'auteur" is discussed.

Keywords: *Cahiers du cinéma*, modernist cinema, Luis Buñuel, Jerry Lewis, Luchino Visconti

Luis Buñuel: Between Myth and Utopia

Cahiers' project of re-reading classical cinema was also accompanied by its critical reception of modernist films, which for the most part consisted of contemporary releases by the auteurs historically favored by the journal. Although the theoretical arsenal deployed in this aspect of its critical work—structuralist Marxism and psychoanalysis—remained by and large the same as that used for interpreting American films from the classical era, the methodology adopted for analyzing works of cinematic modernism was markedly different. Whereas Hollywood films made under the strict control of profit-oriented studios presented the opportunity for

“symptomatic” readings outlining those zones in which the ideological project of the *énoncé* (the film’s explicit message) found itself circumvented by the subterranean work of cinematic enunciation (its system of *écriture*), auteurist films made in the rubric of cinematic modernism presented a very different dynamic between these two levels of signification. In the case of such works, the director was, as a rule, highly attuned to the possibility of critical counter-readings and the potential for a pluralized interpretation of their work in which multiple levels of analysis were in operation. In a sense, such readings were already consciously programmed into the formal and narrative framework governing these films. This was perhaps no more the case than in the oeuvre of Luis Buñuel, whose films during this period both inspired and mockingly undercut the kinds of reading proposed by critical organs such as *Cahiers*. Himself a former critic with close ties to the artistic avant-garde of the 1920s, Buñuel’s cinema was almost too perfect for the *Cahiers* critics of the post-1968 era. Propitiously, this was also the period when the Spanish filmmaker had reached a creative apogee. *La Voie lactée* in 1969 and *Tristana* in 1970 counted among the most important releases of these years for the journal, and both were subject to dossiers that presented multiple points of view on the films—underpinning the notion that a univocal critical response could not possibly do justice to the wealth of contradictory meanings present in Buñuel’s work. Indeed, the conscious awareness with which the Spanish filmmaker created the conditions for such hermeneutic heterogeneity inexorably led the *Cahiers* critics, in each of their responses, to interrogate the very notion of what it means to carry out a critical reading of a film. In reviewing Buñuel’s films, then, *Cahiers* was not just reading the director’s work, they were also querying the process of cinematic *écriture* itself.

This twin methodological concern was already present in the opening entry in the *Voie lactée* dossier, penned by Oudart. For Oudart, the latent polyvalency of *La Voie lactée* stems from the “dual relation of possible opposition and association” between the three levels of its narrative: the scenes from the life of Christ, sequences relating to the history of organized Christianity, and the contemporary storyline following an implausible pair of pilgrims. The reversibility of these relations and the scenographic collisions between diegetic realms that ought, by the standards of narrative realism, to remain rigidly divorced from one another leads in Oudart’s view to a “perpetual tipping over of all the markers of cinematic fiction,” which presents the spectator with “the absolutely free choice of the level of fiction he desires.” No reading, in this understanding of the film, can thus be understood as the “correct” interpretation. Instead, it is the task of the

critic to comprehend that *La Voie lactée* is the “imaginary site of a series of possible readings, discourses and meanings,” the selection of which reveals the desires and inclinations of the spectators themselves.¹

Pierre’s contribution to the dossier follows Oudart’s lead in its focus on the mode of reading appropriate to Buñuel’s work but reaches markedly different conclusions. Drawing on Narboni’s 1967 text “Vers l’impertinence,” Pierre argues that both *La Voie lactée* and the 1965 film *Simon del desierto* invite an “impertinent critical mode” that frees itself from “slavery to the ‘content’ of cinematic works.”² But she also warns against the dangers of this approach, which can lead to a “radical pulverization of everything that constitutes the thematic consistency of the work.” It was indeed important, in her opinion, to point out that “a film only speaks about itself,” but limiting the critic’s work to this observation runs the risk of solipsism and presents the danger of ignoring the social critique issued by the filmmaker on the thematic level. In the case of Buñuel’s two releases—which “so manifestly speak ‘about the same thing’”—this theme consists principally in a scabrous assault on the hypocrisies of Catholicism. It is only by taking account of the content of its ideological critique that the critic can locate the “subversive ferment” in a film that is otherwise “written in a strangely classical and tranquil manner.”³ For Pierre, therefore, “it would be false to *merely* say that Buñuel’s cinema only speaks about itself—for, speaking about itself, it speaks about blasphemy, that is, a speech that is not only irreverent, but harmful.”⁴

Pierre’s article, defending the validity of addressing the content of a film even in the case of a paragon of cinematic modernism such as Buñuel, provoked a response from Narboni. In his rejoinder, Narboni maintains that *La Voie lactée* does not concern itself with Christianity *per se* but with the “vanity and futility” of any act of interpretation that did not reflect on itself and attempt to theorize its own functioning. Buñuel’s films are distinguished by placing at their center, on the denotative level, the problem of their reading, rather than leaving this question to the margins of the connotative level. The very theme of *La Voie lactée* is the contradictory, and even abusive, interpretations to which the filmmaker has been subject throughout his career. But to reduce the film to this operation would, in Narboni’s view,

1 Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Le mythe et l’utopie,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 212 (May 1969), p. 35.

2 Sylvie Pierre, “Les deux colonnes,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 212 (May 1969), pp. 37–40, here p. 37. See also Jean Narboni, “Vers l’impertinence,” *Cahiers du cinéma* 196 (December 1967), p. 4. Translated as “Towards Impertinence,” trans. Norman King, in Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. II*, pp. 300–302.

3 Pierre, “Les deux colonnes,” p. 39.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

“naïvely lessen its importance.” Instead, its truly radical nature stems from its “fundamental inquisition [*mise au supplice*] of the cinema’s apparently constitutive analogy.”⁵

The multiple and even conflicting readings that *La Voie lactée* kindled in *Cahiers* were continued the following year in the journal’s response to *Tristana*. Again, Buñuel provoked a range of reactions from the editorial team, and the dossier collated on his 1970 film incorporated texts by Bonitzer, Aumont, Pierre and Oudart, as well as the reprinting of examples of Buñuel’s own film criticism from the late 1920s and a collection of press clippings relating to *Tristana* collated by Baudry, who sought to establish the existence of an “aesthetic class reading” determining considerations of the film within the bourgeois media.⁶ In comparison with the more conjectural viewpoints aired in the dossier on *La Voie lactée*, the articles on *Tristana*—which appear in the same issue as the “Young Mr. Lincoln de John Ford” text—attest to an increasing comfort on the part of the *Cahiers* writers with deploying their elected theoretical framework to the critical analysis of modernist cinema. Bonitzer, for instance, unabashedly begins his article by comparing Buñuel’s approach to narrative with the qualities of the dream as defined by Freud—“parsimonious, indifferent, laconic”—and contends that his films can therefore be deciphered in much the same way that psychoanalysis interprets the dream-work.⁷ While declaring the discourse of *Tristana* to be “rigorously Marxist” in its analysis of the relationship between Don Lope’s libertarian ideology and his socio-economic status, Bonitzer’s text is dominated by a psychoanalytic interpretation of the film’s “symbolic writing.” In particular, he highlights the presence in the film of a pair of slippers which functions as a Lacanian “object of desire” that plays “no ‘active,’ positive role” in the film’s narrative, instead constituting “a signifier of castration without the slightest equivocation.”⁸ The dream-effect caused by the presence of such objects in the film, however, does not negate its narrative: following Bataille, who saw the superiority of *Un chien andalou* over comparable avant-garde works as deriving from the “predominance” of its script, Bonitzer concludes that “the cinema is only a language to the extent that a fiction, and above all the repetition of this

5 Jean Narboni, “Le nom,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 212 (May 1969), pp. 40-42, here p. 42.

6 Pierre Baudry, “*Tristana*: Notes sur son dossier de presse,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 223 (August 1970), pp. 24-27.

7 Pascal Bonitzer, “Le curé de la guillotine,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 223 (August 1970), pp. 5-7, here p. 5.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

fiction, constitute it as such."⁹ In his contribution to the dossier, Aumont takes issue with the standard surrealist reading of Buñuel, as proffered by *Positif*'s Robert Benayoun, and the concomitant will among critics to see *Tristana* as a "reduced model" of Buñuel's filmmaking system or a "condensation (purification)" of the "typical Buñuel film."¹⁰ Instead, Aumont argues, Buñuel's late films offer an "ever more accusatory self-designation" of his own authorial status and revolve around the fundamental question of "the recognition, which it will thus be necessary to theorize, of the limits of their reading."¹¹

It was, however, Jean-Pierre Oudart's text on *Tristana*, "Jeux de mots, jeux de maître," that offered the most theoretically stringent reading of Buñuel's film. While *Tristana* deals with obsession, for Oudart it differs from other films that do so by virtue of the fact that it is *not* an "obsessional film." Unlike Lang's films, for instance, the obsessions it presents are not embedded in the structural causality of the film's *écriture*. Nor, in Oudart's analysis, is *Tristana* a "psychoanalytic film." Buñuel offers no diagnosis or theory about the obsessive symptoms present in the film, such as the symbolic castration of the two protagonists (Don Lope's impotence and Tristana's amputated leg). Instead, the Spanish filmmaker "admits to knowing no more about what he is saying than what the assembly of these clichés reveals to him and allows him to say about them."¹² For Oudart, the "confession of this non-knowledge" is both the film's great strength and its chief impasse. *Tristana* is marked at one and the same time by "absolute opacity" and "total transparency," and Oudart even goes so far as to claim that the entire film is a "gigantic play on words" through which the signifier is liberated from its tethering to the signified.¹³ He stresses, however, that *Tristana*'s textual play is derived not from Buñuel's own individual unconscious but from the twin social unconsciouses of Catholicism and capitalism, which produce the "scriptural drive" of the film's fiction. Finally, Oudart rejects "the idea that *Tristana* deconstructs anything at all about bourgeois ideology, about theology, or about the 'neurosis' of the modern era"; rather, in an implicit reversal of Pierre's claims for *La Voie lactée*, he insists that the subversive

9 Ibid., p. 7.

10 Jacques Aumont, "Le plaisir et le jeu," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 223 (August 1970), pp. 7-10, here p. 7.

11 Ibid., p. 10.

12 Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Jeux de mots, jeux de maîtres," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 223 (August 1970), pp. 13-17, here p. 15. Translated as "Word Play, Master Play," trans. Joseph Karmel, in Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du cinéma vol. III*, pp. 137-145, here p. 139.

13 Ibid., p. 16 [p. 142].

nature of Buñuel's *écriture* exists purely within the field of "an ideology and an aesthetics of the text."¹⁴

A Modernist of Comedy: Jerry Lewis

Whereas Buñuel's films are almost universally recognized as an acme of cinematic modernism, the status of Jerry Lewis's œuvre has been much more vividly contested. Operating within the "lowbrow" register of physical comedy, his films were—and to a large degree continue to be—looked down on or derided in intellectual circles as vulgar buffoonery. Stereotypes in the English-speaking world about France's supposedly inexplicable love for Lewis notwithstanding, an appreciation of his films from French critics was far from widespread. *Cahiers*, however, was a site of unconditional support for Lewis, and, in an almost unparalleled case of consensus between the rival journals, it was joined in this estimation by *Positif*. Most intriguingly, Lewis' 1960 directorial debut *The Bellboy* was included alongside *Méditerranée* and *Persona* as a textbook example of a "category (c)" film in "Cinéma/idéologie/critique."¹⁵ It is tempting to read this set of films as a cinephilic in-joke or a gesture of eclectic one-upmanship, but in fact *Cahiers'* admiration of Lewis' work was longstanding and shared by all members of the journal, who dutifully greeted the release of each of his films with acclamation. As early as 1957, Godard had written that Lewis' part in Frank Tashlin's *Hollywood or Bust* had blended "the height of artifice" with "the nobility of true documentary," while the comedian's last film as director, 1983's *Smorgasbord*, was hailed by Daney—who was perhaps the most steadfast of the *Cahiers* critics in his defense of Lewis—as a "tragically funny" film.¹⁶ In this text, Daney explicitly articulated the idea that had governed all of *Cahiers'* reception of Lewis' work—that he was a modern filmmaker. More specifically, the body of Jerry Lewis, in Daney's view, was one that had passed "entirely into the code where language has become a war machine."¹⁷ For *Cahiers*, Lewis was essentially a modernist of comedy whose radical deconstruction of the visual gag was comparable to the efforts of avant-garde pioneers in other

14 Ibid., p. 17 [p. 144].

15 Comolli/Narboni, "Cinéma/idéologie/critique," p. 13 [p. 256].

16 Jean-Luc Godard, "Hollywood ou mourir (*Hollywood or Bust*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 73 (July 1957), pp. 44-46, here p. 45. Translated as "Hollywood or Bust," in idem., *Godard on Godard*, pp. 57-59, here p. 59; and Serge Daney, "Non réconciliés (*Smorgasbord*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 347 (May 1983), pp. 20-22, here p. 22.

17 Ibid.

artistic practices, such as Picasso in painting and Stravinsky in music. If his films were repellent to received bourgeois tastes, then this was only further proof of their innate modernism and their profound experimentation with the very syntactic mechanisms of the cinema.

The fervor surrounding Lewis' work among the *Cahiers* team was at its most intense in the years following 1964. Daney had the rare privilege of encountering the comedian during his sojourn in Hollywood, and the resulting conversation was published by *Cahiers* in November 1964. Having been shown the biographical notice on him in the December 1963-January 1964 special issue on American cinema, in which Labarthe declared that the "key" to Lewis' universe is the motif of the double, Lewis exultantly replied, "You see, this is what I was telling you, he saw hidden things, even unconscious things."¹⁸ In June 1964, Daney had spoken of Lewis' "anarchic comportment" in Tashlin's *Who's Minding the Store?*, while also presenting the film as a battle between director and star, in which the viewer can "pinpoint the moment when Lewis began to reign over Tashlin."¹⁹ By the time of *The Family Jewels*, however, the central problematic has shifted: now, it is the maturing Lewis' inability to continue playing the "Kid" character that forms the motor for the film's narrative, and the seven characters he adopts in this film-parable offer a choice for the public (incarnated by the young girl Donna) to select the desired metamorphosis that Lewis should enact. Although the final choice will be a Jerry Lewis *without* the mask of the characters he plays, Daney notes one caveat: Lewis "only wins over his public on the condition of refusing, for at least a minute (but this minute is crucial), to make himself up as a clown."²⁰

1967 was a turning point in Lewis' career, with that year's release of *The Big Mouth* bringing his prolific run of popular successes since *The Bellboy* to an end. The year also saw *Cahiers*' most concerted effort at Lewis exegesis, bookended by a review of *Three on a Couch* in January by Comolli—who saw the film as occupying a "vagabond frontier" between "the logic of the dream

18 Jerry Lewis, interviewed by Serge Daney and Jean-Louis Noames, "Rencontre entre l'ordre et le désordre," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 160 (November 1964), pp. 24-26, here p. 24. For Labarthe's text, see André S. Labarthe, "Lewis, Jerry," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 150-151 (December 1963-January 1964), p. 142.

19 Serge Daney, "Frank et Jerry (*Who's Minding the Store?*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 156 (June 1964), pp. 56-58, here p. 57.

20 Serge Daney, "Un rien sur fond de musique douce," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 175 (February 1966), pp. 36-37. Translated as "A Nothing on a Ground of Soft Music," *Cahiers du Cinéma in English* no. 4 (1966), p. 33.

and the logic of the spectacle"²¹—and a 45-page dossier in the Christmas issue. The latter included a long-form interview with Lewis conducted by Labarthe and *Positif* critic Robert Benayoun, a “Petit lexique des termes lewisiens” and critical texts by Narboni and Comolli.²² Here it was almost as if the lowbrow reputation of Lewis’ films prompted an inordinately elevated, even literary critical register. Narboni, for instance, in expatiating on the “interrupted, incomplete, floating narrative” of *The Big Mouth*, writes of the film:

Once *The Big Mouth* is over, it is hard to prevent oneself from sensing that what we have been shown was only a tiny part of a vast maritime myth, the most superficial foam of a tale from the deep, the flotsam of an ancient shipwreck momentarily tossed out, then swallowed again, or the vestiges of a city that had been submerged millennia ago but has now returned to the surface. The film is an Atlantis bereft of a story, whose essence has been unveiled to us. It is a poem, fleetingly and incompletely sung (the iceberg only lets a fifth-part of its dangers appear). [...] It is tempting [...] to refer back to a mythological figure who could well constitute the point of origin from which is animated this game of doubles, masks, lookalikes, transformations and disguises: Proteus, son of Neptune, god of metamorphoses.²³

Comolli, meanwhile, gives a broad overview of Lewis’ œuvre, treating his films as exemplary modernist texts, since they include within them “their own analysis, their own framework and references, their own system of comparison and critique.” The theme of the double, for instance, is accentuated and varied from film to film, progressively sliding “from the outside of the work to the inside: shifting from the free zone which is on this side of the camera to the occupied zone which is in front of it.” The duplication between the off-screen and on-screen Lewises is thus replicated within the film itself, beginning notably with *The Nutty Professor*. The dramatic construction of his narratives, meanwhile, increasingly comes to resemble a relay race, a process that finds its summit in *The Big Mouth*, with its “metaphysical typhoon” of “tangential races, roundabout pursuits, superpositions and

21 Jean-Louis Comolli, “Le médecin malgré lui (*Three on a Couch*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 186 (January 1967), pp. 67-68, here p. 68. Translated as “Le médecin malgré lui (*Three on a Couch*),” *Cahiers du Cinéma in English* no. 11 (July 1967), pp. 57-59.

22 See “Spécial Jerry Lewis,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 197 (Christmas 1967/January 1968), pp. 26-69.

23 Jean Narboni, “Le récit empêché (*The Big Mouth*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 197 (Christmas 1967-January 1968), p. 57.

interferences” which end up “blurring all meaning and perturbing, through its waves and counter-waves, space, time, coherence and even comedy, to the point where we do not know whether to be entertained or terrified.”²⁴

Lewis’ next release would not be until 1970’s *Which Way to the Front?*, an independently funded World War II-themed comedy that remains one of his most neglected films. *Cahiers*, even deep into its Marxist phase, remained loyal to the filmmaker. Writing in March 1971, Daney admitted that it was a “particularly strident and not very pleasant film, where nothing subsists of [Lewis’] past tendernesses,” but dedicated himself to an analysis centering around the analogy between the preparations for war carried out by the protagonist Byers (played by Lewis) and the preparations for the shoot that Lewis, now his own producer, had to carry out. The film also, as Daney recognized, marked a new stage in the comedian’s career: having found himself rejected by the Hollywood system, no longer willing to finance his projects, “the Lewis of this latest film is reduced to a word, a brand-image, a Name,” and this, for Daney, represents the “decisive novelty of *Which Way to the Front?* in Lewis’ problematic.”²⁵ At the same time as Daney’s article, Eisenschitz, who was then still nominally a member of the *Cahiers* team, reviewed the film for *La Nouvelle Critique* and within the short space allotted to his notice sought to convince the journal’s PCF-aligned readership, not particularly well-disposed towards the American, of the merits of Lewis’ film. Beginning his article by declaring that Lewis was “one of the rare filmmakers [...] to make courageous and effective films in Hollywood,” Eisenschitz associated Lewis’ use of anachronisms with the work of Brecht and Pirandello and ascribed to them a tacit identification of Nazi militarism with its American counterpart. For Eisenschitz, however, the true subversive force of the film comes from the fact that Lewis “once again questions, from inside Hollywood, the formal principles on which, for 70 years, the world’s foremost cinema has been founded, and this says volumes about just how remote his filmmaking is from the innocence and spontaneity that we have long ascribed to him.”²⁶

24 Jean-Louis Comolli, “Chacun son soi (*The Big Mouth*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 197 (Christmas 1967-January 1967), pp. 51-54, here pp. 53-54.

25 Serge Daney, “*Which Way to the Front*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 228 (March-April 1971), pp. 60-61.

26 Bernard Eisenschitz, “*Which Way to the Front (Ya ya mon général)*,” *La Nouvelle Critique* no. 40 (January 1971), p. 72. Translated as “*Which Way to the Front (1970)*,” trans. Daniel Fairfax, *Senses of Cinema* no. 79 (July 2016), sensesofcinema.com/2016/jerry-lewis/which-way-to-the-front/ (accessed January 1, 2021).

A New Generation: Garrel, Bene, Bertolucci

Buñuel's involvement in the cinema, as perennially subversive as it was, dated back to the 1920s, while Lewis too had been working in film since the late 1940s. But the late 1960s also saw the rise of a much younger crop of film artists in countries such as France and Italy whose work drew from and fed into the youth uprisings in these two countries. Generational contemporaries of the *Cahiers* critics, their films married radically anti-capitalist politics with a taste for, at times outrageous, formal experimentation. Combined with the youthful effervescence of the filmmakers and their actors, this work could not fail to kindle the interest of the journal, particularly in the period immediately following May 1968, when its outlook was marked by an eclectic attraction towards political, social and artistic revolts of all shades.

The youngest and most precocious of this new generation was Philippe Garrel, who was not yet twenty years old when he completed his first feature film, *Anémone* in 1967, and quickly followed it up with *Marie pour mémoire*, *La Concentration* and *Le Révélateur* in a prolific burst of energy lasting until June 1968. Alongside Henri Langlois, who saw the young director as a successor to the French avant-garde cinema of the silent era, *Cahiers* was one of the earliest defenders of Garrel's work, which was derided in other quarters as senseless juvenilia.²⁷ A short note by Comolli in the Christmas 1967 issue of *Cahiers*—probably the first critical mention of Garrel anywhere—extolled *Anémone* as “the most remarkable work of young French cinema since *Pop Game* and *Le Père Noël a les yeux bleus*.” Highlighting the film's “saturated, obsessive” 16mm colors, Comolli foreshadowed that “if only so we can speak about it at greater length, we will do everything to ensure that the film can soon be seen.”²⁸ Appropriately, for a filmmaker whose work so directly embodied the spirit of the May protests, the April-May 1968 issue of *Cahiers* was sprinkled with references to Garrel. The “Petit Journal” featured a notice written by the filmmaker ironically describing *Marie pour mémoire* as a film made “by an impatient impostor protected by his status as an artist,” and his response to a questionnaire on the state of the French film industry contained scandalous provocations such as “those people seated on the commissions charged with delivering money

27 For instance, a satirical article in *Positif* by “Abner Lepetit” (a pseudonym for Robert Benayoun) mocked both Garrel's films and Sylvie Pierre's critical response to them. See Abner Lepetit, “Chut!,” *Positif* no. 104 (April 1969), p. 51.

28 Jean-Louis Comolli, “Le Petit Journal,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 197 (Christmas 1967-January 1968), p. 21.

to filmmakers mostly belong to parasitic sectors who are totally ignorant of the cinema."²⁹ At the same time, *Cahiers* alumnus Pierre Kast compared Garrel's precocious ability to skip directly to directing without making his way through the intermediate stages of the film industry with the ambitions of "colonized peoples who would make the leap to socialism without passing through bourgeois democracy," and he described the emergence of young filmmakers such as Garrel as "the most exalting phenomenon of the year."³⁰ The euphoria around Garrel's meteoric ascent continued the next month in Narboni and Delahaye's *compte-rendu* of the 1968 Semaine de la Critique at Cannes, titled "C'est la révolution." In speaking of "the extreme power of the film, its impact and its disturbing force," the critics placed *Anémone* alongside the work of Moulet, Straub and Kramer as being situated at a historical juncture when "decidedly, in the cinema as elsewhere, there is indeed a revolution."³¹

The most considered response to Garrel's work came in September 1968, when an 11-page interview with the filmmaker was accompanied by Narboni's text "Le lieu dit." The former contained a detailed discussion of Garrel's improvisational filmmaking method,³² while, in his critical-poetic response to Garrel's œuvre, Narboni stressed the filmmaker's capacity to relativize the very dimensions of space and time. The screen, in Garrel's hands, no longer conforms to the frame/mask distinction posed by Bazin, but "its very boundaries, its limits, seem to belong to the film, to proceed from it. The procession of sounds and images imposes the sentiment that it creates the means of its own enclosure." With their fleeting, flash-like quality, giving the impression that the film consumes itself in flames the instant it passes through the projector, Garrel's images are comparable to the type of theater desired by Mallarmé ("a mental milieu linking the stage with the auditorium") in that they produce a cinematic screen that is no longer "a neutral surface gathering forms that exist outside of it and before

29 Philippe Garrel, in "Le Petit Journal," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 200-201 (April-May 1968), p. 103; and Philippe Garrel, "Vers un livre blanc du cinéma français," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 200-201 (April-May 1968), pp. 73-93, here p. 81.

30 Pierre Kast, "A Farewell to the Movies," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 200-201 (April-May 1968), pp. 13-18, here p. 17.

31 Michel Delahaye and Jean Narboni, "C'est la révolution, ou l'année en huit jours," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 202 (June-July 1968), pp. 56-65, here pp. 59, 56.

32 Philippe Garrel, interviewed by Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni and Jacques Rivette, "Cerclé sous vide: entretien avec Philippe Garrel," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 204 (September 1968), pp. 44-54, 63.

it” but is returned to its “primary function”: “the materialization of these forms, without which they would dissipate into the distance.”³³

Cahiers' enthusiasm for Garrel, however, was far from unanimously shared, even among circles of radical film criticism. His films were routinely derided by *Cinéthique*, with Leblanc belittling them as “desperate efforts by the intellectual petty-bourgeoisie to sublimate its condition in ‘noble’ values,” and the journal preferred the superficially comparable work of Jean-Pierre Lajournade to that of Garrel.³⁴ *Cahiers* returned fire in the second installment of “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” arguing that Lajournade’s *Le joueur de quilles* was “the acme of complaisant, petty-bourgeois cinema” and that, “in spite of his messianic positions, and in opposition to them (exhaustingly at work in his films), Garrel’s filmmaking is infinitely less idealist.”³⁵ Although a promised “return to Garrel” never materialized, the preference for his work over that of Lajournade is, if nothing else, proof of the reliable acuity of the critical *goût* cultivated by *Cahiers*: whereas Lajournade has gone down as a minor footnote in the history of avant-garde cinema, Garrel has pursued a directorial career up to the present day, which now stands as one of the most important bodies of artistic work in post-war France.

In the same passage, *Cahiers* compares Garrel’s work to that of Bene—and not only because they were both considered by *Cinéthique* to be “idealist buffoons.” Indeed, the frenetic psychedelia of Bene’s Artaudian cinema of cruelty has profound affinities with Garrel’s work: both filmmakers push against the signifying limits of the cinema and open the medium up to a more primeval realm of delirious hallucination. Like Garrel, Bene first turned to filmmaking in the late 1960s: an acting role in Pasolini’s *Oedipus Rex* in 1967 was followed by directorial efforts, with *Nostra Signora dei Turchi* in 1968 and *Capricci* in 1969. In contrast to his French counterpart, however, Bene already had nearly a decade’s experience in experimental theater behind him. As Aumont later admitted, however, this background was unknown to the *Cahiers* critics at the time. He even recalls understanding very little of Bene’s debut film when it screened without subtitles at the Venice film festival in September 1968, but that did not hamper the journal’s immediate enthusiasm for Bene’s “explosive, coruscant, splendid, immodest, ferocious, generous” work.³⁶ Aumont and Pierre’s report on Venice paired *Nostra*

33 Jean Narboni, “Le lieu dit,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 204 (September 1968), p. 42.

34 Gérard Leblanc, “Direction,” *Cinéthique* no. 5 (September-October 1969), pp. 1-8, here p. 2. Translated as “Direction,” trans. Susan Bennett, *Screen* vol. 12 no. 3 (Autumn 1972), pp. 121-130, here p. 122.

35 Comolli/Narboni, “Cinéma/idéologie/critique (II),” p. 13 [p. 267].

36 Jacques Aumont, *Notre Dame des Turcs* (Lyons: Aléas, 2010), p. 7.

Signora dei Turchi with Moullet's *Les Contrebandières* as "two psychedelic films" and described Bene's film as a "phantasmal" work centering around questions of "consumption, delirium and subjectivity."³⁷ In the same issue, Narboni conducted an explosive interview with the filmmaker. Bene opened proceedings by declaring, "In general, I detest journalists"—to which Narboni responded, with sangfroid, "But we aren't journalists." Noting resemblances with the work of Eisenstein, Welles and Godard, Narboni highlights the contrast between the fervor of the film's protagonist and the fact that its framing and editing are "calm, rigorous, precise, considered." He thus sees *Nostra Signora dei Turchi* as an antithesis of those films which "give the impression of a complete confusion between the disorder that the directors want to film and the way in which they film it," an aspect of his work which Bene justifies by stating: "Even with my delirium, at the same moment that I am being delirious, I contest it. I try not to be complicit in it. This is the only complete liberty."³⁸

Making its bow at Cannes the following year, *Capricci* earned a similar reception from *Cahiers* in June 1969: Moullet's festival report included it in the category of films "dedicat[ing] themselves to the exploration of new cinematic planets" and dubbed Bene's film "cinema in a pure state, such as there has never been before. There is absolutely nothing but the cinema, nothing but ideas of the cinema, and without any relation to the tried and tested ideas of cinema."³⁹ *Cahiers* also published another interview with Bene, this one conducted by Noël Simsolo, where the filmmaker continued his attacks on Italian culture and defined *Capricci* as "total nothingness in art, in life, in love, passion, everything. Complete nothingness. Everything is false. In my films, you mustn't believe in the characters, or in anything at all."⁴⁰ Featuring on the cover of this issue and later giving its name to a publishing house with close ties to the journal, *Capricci* was evidently a talismanic film for *Cahiers*.⁴¹ Bene and Narboni later became close friends thanks to the intermediary of Deleuze, but at the time his films were released,

37 Jacques Aumont and Sylvie Pierre, "Huit fois deux," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 206 (November 1968), pp. 30-34, here p. 31.

38 Carmelo Bene, interviewed by Jean Narboni, "Carmelo Bene: *Nostra Signora dei Turchi*," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 206 (November 1968), pp. 25-26, here p. 25.

39 Luc Moullet, "Le Congrès de Cannes," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 213 (June 1969), pp. 31-35, here p. 34.

40 Carmelo Bene, interviewed by Noël Simsolo, "Entretiens: Carmelo Bene: *Capricci*," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 213 (June 1969), pp. 18-19, here p. 18.

41 The *Capricci* publishing imprint was founded in 1999 by former *Cahiers* editors Emmanuel Burdeau and Thierry Lounas and has published a significant number of works by Narboni, Aumont, Bonitzer and others.

Cahiers' rapturous reception of Bene's work was not accompanied by any sustained attempts at critical exegesis, something Narboni retrospectively regrets.⁴² The lacuna would, belatedly, be filled by Aumont, who published a monograph on Bene's first film in 2010.

Bertolucci's work was a natural point of comparison for that of his countryman, and in a review of *Partner*, Oudart indeed classes the film with *Nostra Signora dei Turchi*. Each of the two films, in the *Cahiers* critic's eyes, produces "*its myth* (the Artist) and *its paranoia* (the Actor) on *its scene*," and both filmmakers represent a "modern cinema *de bon ton*" in which "the only subversive discourse permissible" is a self-reflexive consideration of cinematic signification itself through a scenographic return of the theater.⁴³ Thanks to his earlier films *La commare secca* and *Prima della rivoluzione*, Bertolucci had been an integral figure in the "new cinema" championed by *Cahiers* in the mid-1960s, and his status as a contemporary auteur capable of producing films as "condensations, concretions of a kind of diffuse general text" was recognized.⁴⁴ Bertolucci's following release, however, incited a *volte-face* in attitudes. The May 1971 issue had foreshadowed the imminent appearance of an interview with Bertolucci on the subject of *Il conformista*, but as Eisenschitz relates, his and Narboni's conversation with the filmmaker revealed such irreconcilable political differences that the proceedings were never published, and the journal's low estimation of the film forestalled any deeper critical response.⁴⁵ Only a few brief paragraphs in an article by Oudart, "Un discours en défaut," were dedicated to *Il conformista*, which was attacked, in a line of argument foreshadowing the critique of "retro" cinema later in the 1970s, for participating in "the 'artistic' recuperation," by the dominant, bourgeois mode of representation, of the signifying production of "filmmakers who have made an ideological, political and aesthetic break with classical cinema."⁴⁶ From this point on, *Cahiers* would firmly align Bertolucci's cinema with the cynical aesthetics of the *fiction de gauche*, and his strategy of working within the structures of the mainstream film

42 Interview with Jean Narboni, April 2, 2014.

43 Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Les privilèges du maître (*Partner*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 222 (July 1970), pp. 55-56, here p. 56.

44 Jean Narboni, "*Partner* (Bernardo Bertolucci, Italie)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 206 (November 1968), p. 33.

45 Interview with Bernard Eisenschitz, April 1, 2014.

46 Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Un discours en défaut," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 232 (October 1971), pp. 4-12, here p. 11. Translated as "A Lacking Discourse," trans. Joseph Karmel, in Nick Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III: 1969-1972 The Politics of Representation* (London: BFI, 1990), pp. 276-286, here p. 285.

industry for *Ultimo tango a Parigi* and *Novecento* led to these films meeting with an unambiguously hostile reaction from the journal.⁴⁷

Discourse and Power: The Taviani Brothers and Federico Fellini

While Bertolucci was placed in a critical purgatory, other Italian auteurs found a more welcoming reception in *Cahiers*. There is little that unites the aesthetic of the Taviani brothers with that of Federico Fellini, but the fact that their 1971 releases were given high-profile coverage in successive issues of *Cahiers*—with *Sotto il segno dello scorpione* covered in March-April and *I clowns* in May—and the parallels between the approaches *Cahiers* took to their respective films authorize a discussion of them in tandem with one another. With their avowed Marxist politics and the interest their films evinced for questions of language, communication and ideology, Vittorio and Paolo Taviani were a natural fit for the critical project being developed by *Cahiers*, and indeed they were regularly evoked in the years 1970 and 1971 as models of contemporary political cinema. The journal even organized screenings of *Sotto il segno dello scorpione* at a number of its public events, including the Avignon festival in August 1970 and a conference on “Cinéma et idéologie” at Le Havre in December the same year.⁴⁸

The film’s Parisian *exclusivité* the following year prompted *Cahiers* to run an interview with the brothers, which addressed a wide range of aesthetic and political issues. Against what they called “consumerist-subversive cinema,” the Tavianis conceived of their cinema as a political struggle consisting of “robbery operations” that would “pass off as commercial, contraband-style operations that are not commercial at all.”⁴⁹ Although their films are open to directly political readings, the Tavianis insist that the real point of contestation in their filmmaking comes at the level of cinematic *language*, which is precisely the most obstinate point of blockage in the commercial cinema: “It is always the enemy that shows us where the true centers of conflict are. In this case it has pinpointed the real danger of

47 See Pascal Bonitzer, “L’expérience en intérieur (*Dernier Tango à Paris, La Grande Bouffe, La Maman et la Putain*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 247 (July-August 1973), pp. 33-36; and Serge Toubiana, “Le ballon rouge (*Novecento*).”

48 The program for the latter event can be found in *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 225 (November-December 1970), p. 43.

49 Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, interviewed by Pascal Bonitzer, Bernard Eisenschitz and Jean Narboni, “Entretien avec Paolo et Vittorio Taviani,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 228 (March-April 1971), pp. 28-42, here pp. 28-29.

the cinema: its specificity, its language.”⁵⁰ The argument was a compelling one for *Cahiers*, and Kané’s two-part discussion of the Tavianis addressed precisely this aspect of their film.

Sotto il segno dello scorpione is an abstract, quasi-mythological fable.⁵¹ After a volcanic eruption, a group of men seeks refuge with another, mixed-gender society on the island they both inhabit. In order to escape from the dangers posed by the volcano, they seek to persuade their hosts to flee with them to the continent. While Kané resists the temptation to give a straightforward reading of this narrative premise as an allegory for contemporary political struggle in Italy, he nonetheless acknowledges its status as a deliberately conceived “scale model” of class-divided societies. As Macherey observes in *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*, authors of the modern bourgeois era such as Marivaux, Rousseau, Verne and Defoe used the literary device of the island as an “ideal fiction” for didactically proposing historical analogies.⁵² Even Marx and Engels frequently evoked *Robinson Crusoe* in their analysis of capitalist political economy, albeit often to critique the limitations of what they dubbed “robinsonnades”—bourgeois fairytales of asocial self-sufficiency and individual ingenuity.⁵³ For Kané, the dichotomy between the island and the continent that structures the Tavianis’ film implies a number of other dualities: most notably, the island is equated to a pre-historical, cyclical existence and is thus an element of signifying openness and infinitude, while the continent denotes the closed linearity of history.

Beyond this socially metonymic function, however, the focus of Kané’s text lies on the question of discursivity in the film, and in this area his analysis ties into contemporaneous theories of language and signification in the work of Barthes, Foucault, Kristeva and Derrida. In their attempt to persuade their hosts of the necessity of leaving the island, the group of men come up against what Barthes calls “endoxal” speech (that is, the dominant

50 Ibid., p. 31.

51 Even the title, as de Gregorio had earlier reported, has a purely arbitrary relationship with the content of the film. Eduardo de Gregorio, “*Sous le signe du scorpion*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 212 (May 1969), p. 7.

52 See Pierre Macherey, *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*, (Paris: Maspéro, 1966), pp. 224-228. Translated as *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 268-277. Cited in Pascal Kané, “*Sous le signe du scorpion*: présentation (suite et fin),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 230 (June 1971), pp. 46-50, here p. 48.

53 Kané evokes Engels’ discussion of Friday’s enslavement by Robinson in *Anti-Dühring*. See Pascal Kané, “*Sous le signe du scorpion*: présentation,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 228 (March-April 1971), pp. 43-45, here p. 45.

discourse, based on an analogous relationship with perceived reality).⁵⁴ A range of rhetorical strategies are deployed: from a “true discourse,” the men shift to an exaggerated yet “verisimilar” mode of address before finally crossing over the threshold into outright lying. This new rhetorical system, however, has a major drawback: in “substitut[ing] a new mystification for the old one,” it reduces itself to the level of irony, a “metasystem” that would exist as a “critical variation of the first system, whose proliferation it blocks by encirclement.” And yet it still succeeds in winning over a segment of the autochthonous population. In order to defend themselves from the “irrational” discourse of the newcomers (with their deployment of magical forms of causality), the autochthonous group ends up resorting to a violent resolution of the social imbalance caused by the latter’s arrival. But it is this very gesture that allows the island’s inhabitants to make their way to the continent—a passage that Kané reads as “the rupture of circularity which makes History possible.”⁵⁵ Here it is evident that Kané reads the Taviani brothers’ film as an allegory for their own filmmaking method, proposing to the spectator a discourse drawing on tropes borrowed from folklore and parable in order to produce a historical materialist analysis of society. In doing so, their conception of Marxist cinema is remote from that of Godard, Straub/Huillet and other filmmakers who tended to be favored by *Cahiers*, and indeed Kané’s analysis is not followed up, in *Cahiers*, by any deeper work on the Taviani brothers in the same vein.

In contrast to the Taviani brothers, Fellini’s political views—or, more accurately, his professed lack of them—were at a distinct remove from those of *Cahiers*. The journal never had a straightforward relationship with the Italian filmmaker: while his early films found favor with Bazin, the much-lauded works of the 1960s—*La Dolce Vita*, *Otto e mezzo* and *Giulietta degli spiriti*—tended to leave *Cahiers* cold. Surprisingly, the journal’s political radicalization in the years 1969–1971 coincided with a more receptive stance towards Fellini’s œuvre. Aumont had signaled the change with his review of Fellini’s contribution to the Poe-adaptation omnibus *Histoires extraordinaires*, judging that “the Nordic, abstract fantasies of Poe are integrally restituted here for us by their encounter with the concrete, Mediterranean obsessions of Fellini.”⁵⁶ In his review of *Satyricon*, which focused on the role of castration as a structuring element of the film, Baudry nonetheless

54 Kané draws the term from a seminar Barthes gave at the Collège de France on “la bêtise.”

55 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

56 Jacques Aumont, “*Tobie et le diable (Histoires extraordinaires)*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 203 (August 1968), pp. 62–63, here p. 62.

rejects the use of the term “obsession” as a critical cliché when treating Fellini’s work. “Certainly these themes are obsessive for the spectator, to the extent that he keeps on finding them from one film to another, but, far from operating a blockage [...] in the fiction, they play, on the contrary, a nodal role, a role of resolution.” Baudry instead argues that the adaptation of Petronius’ epic poem is structured around “effects of repetition,” which are at the root of the public’s dissatisfaction with the film: “*Fellini Satyricon* is a film whose very purpose is to disappoint and *deplete*.”⁵⁷

Baudry’s positive appraisal was at odds with one of *Cahiers*’ most prominent *maîtres à penser*. Kristeva, as Bonitzer later noted, denounced the “ideological inoffensiveness” of the film in her preface to the French edition of Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*.⁵⁸ And yet this difference of opinion did not inhibit the *Cahiers* critics, who dedicated two significant texts to Fellini’s following film, the relatively unheralded *I clowns*. Writing in *La Quinzaine littéraire*, Comolli rejected the idea that *I clowns* marks a reversion to sentimental humanism after the “monstrous fantasies” of *Satyricon*, arguing that “such a reading is entirely refuted by the film,” which in his view is an interrogation of the nature of the cinema as spectacle, with the visible signs of the reportage carried out on the circus intimating an equation between the big top and the movie theater. Moreover, the first scene of *I clowns*, depicting a young boy waking from his sleep and furtively witnessing the preparations for a circus performance, cannot fail to evoke Freud’s primal scene. Indeed, this opening is symptomatic of the fact that the entire film is structured around representations of sex and death. With their intolerable and irrational nature, scenes such as this lead Comolli to conclude that “It is not a question here of sorrow towards the ‘death of clowns,’ but of the representation—the simulacrum—by these clowns of death itself, as that which centers all representation, all spectacle.”⁵⁹

Writing for *Cahiers*, Pierre built on Comolli’s identification of the film’s opening sequence with Freud’s primal scene and followed Baudry’s footsteps in analyzing Fellini’s work through the framework of castration: in this reading, the open window stands in for representation-as-gaze, while the erection of the tent denotes the phallus, and the spectacle of the circus is

57 Pierre Baudry, “Un avatar du sens (*Fellini-Satyricon*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 219 (April 1970), pp. 56-57, here p. 57.

58 See Pascal Bonitzer, “Mémoire de l’œil (*Amarcord*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 251-252 (July-August 1974), pp. 75-76, here p. 75. For Kristeva’s views on *Fellini Satyricon*, see Julia Kristeva, “Une poétique ruinée,” in Mikhail Bakhtin, *La Poétique de Dostoïevski* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), pp. 5-27, here p. 20.

59 Jean-Louis Comolli, “La mort-clown,” *La Quinzaine littéraire* no. 115 (April 1-15, 1971), p. 28.

seen as a “metaphorical representation of castration.”⁶⁰ The child witnessing the spectacle is thus the neurotic subject—in other words, Fellini himself. If this interpretation can appear forced, Pierre supports her argument by pointing to the overtly autobiographical elements present in *I clowns* and Fellini’s own familiarity with psychoanalytic theory. After a brief excursus on the role of the grotesque exaggeration of physical features in Fellini’s films, the critic returns to the question of castration, focusing on the existence of a “clown couple” consisting of Auguste, the castrated male, and the White Clown, a castrating female. In Pierre’s view, however, this dichotomy only highlights the “entirely feminine passivity” (and hence castration) of clowns *in general* due to their “quality as an object of the spectacle, fetishized by their accessories.”⁶¹ In a later interview, Pierre expressed mild embarrassment at this article, admitting to the “comical pretension of the intellectual proving her intelligence about the theory with an utter and therefore laughable seriousness.” She insists, however, that the text touched on “something not too false” about “what is sublime in Fellini’s poetry,” namely, its profoundly feminine quality, and she also recalls Daney telling her that “everything we write is ‘true,’ but in the autobiographical sense. And the last phrase of the Fellini paper was ‘Woman as fetish should not work.’”⁶² Appropriately enough, the text was Pierre’s last for *Cahiers* before her departure to Brazil in November 1971.

Pierre’s admiration for Fellini was far from being universally shared within *Cahiers*.⁶³ After her departure from *Cahiers*, Bonitzer doggedly defended Fellini’s work, penning responses to all his major releases between *Amarcord* in 1974 and *Ginger e Fred* in 1986 and pursuing the focus on psychoanalytic themes and the role of the carnivalesque in Fellini’s oeuvre. But he has admitted that “Fellini is above all a personal taste, almost against the modernity otherwise demanded in the journal, and against the affirmed taste of other editors.” The critic yields that Fellini may well be an “antimodern” filmmaker but affirms that that the Italian’s “baroque excess, woven from dreams, fleshy eroticism and crepuscular nostalgia, was like an

60 Sylvie Pierre, “L’homme aux clowns,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 229 (June 1971), pp. 48–51, here p. 48.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

62 Sylvie Pierre, in Bill Krohn, “Interview with Sylvie Pierre,” *Senses of Cinema* no. 23 (December 2002), sensesofcinema.com/2002/feature-articles/pierre/ (accessed January 1, 2021).

63 This is indicated by the publication in the same issue as Pierre’s review of a letter from Dominique Païni, then a young communist cinephile, who labeled Fellini an “ideologue of the liberal bourgeoisie” producing apologies for the decadence of the modern world.” See Dominique Païni, “Lettre sur *Les Clowns*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 229 (June 1971), pp. 64–65.

antidote for me to so many anorexic films that we had to defend no matter what, at the price of boredom.”⁶⁴ The critical dissension within *Cahiers* on the question of Fellini came out into the open upon the release of *E la nave va* in 1984: Olivier Assayas’s rebarbative rejection of Fellini’s œuvre drew a stinging reply from Bonitzer, who defined the comic aspect of Fellini’s film as “the universal laughter, the universal parody of the carnival.”⁶⁵ Exceptionally, therefore, the Italian director’s work was not a terrain on which *Cahiers* waged skirmishes against its critical rivals; rather, it was an enduring battleground inside the journal itself.

Visconti and the Decadence of European Modernism

In tandem with its turn to Maoism and adoption of a more rigidly politicized approach to film aesthetics in late 1971, *Cahiers*’ view of the post-war European modernist tradition embodied by an older generation of auteurs—the likes of Buñuel, Fellini and Bergman—underwent a discernible shift. For the most part, this consisted of their exclusion from the field of critical study, now largely monopolized by more politically and formally radical work. An exception came, however, with the journal’s response to Visconti’s *Morte a Venezia*, which took the form of Daney and Oudart’s co-authored article “Le Nom-de-l’Auteur: à propos de la ‘place’ de *Mort à Venise*,” a text that Nick Browne considers to be “*Cahiers*’ most comprehensive restatement of the modernist problematic.”⁶⁶ Visconti’s œuvre, of course, was impregnated by the director’s avowed identification as a Marxist. Nonetheless, his privileged class origins, the anchoring of his stylistics in nineteenth-century artistic modes (the bourgeois novel, opera, the Romantic music of Wagner and Mahler) and the unflinching setting—after an early neorealist period—of his fictions in decadent aristocratic settings all distanced Visconti’s work from the militant aesthetic that *Cahiers* came to advocate. The Italian’s thematic obsession with the historical obsolescence of his own class, the European haute-bourgeoisie, along with his decision to adapt Thomas Mann’s 1912 novella, would seem to place his films firmly in the category of “critical realism” as elaborated by Georg Lukács, who saw such literary works as the

64 Pascal Bonitzer, *La Vision partielle* (Paris: Capricci, 2015), p. 11.

65 See Olivier Assayas, “Sic transit Gloria N.,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 355 (January 1981), pp. 20-25; and Pascal Bonitzer, “Le rhinoceros et la voix,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 356 (February 1984), pp. 14-17, here p. 17.

66 Browne, “Introduction,” in idem. (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III*, p. 18.

only viable artistic strategy for bourgeois authors to pursue in the period of capitalism's phase of terminal decline.⁶⁷ In one of the only occasions in which the Hungarian Marxist is explicitly discussed on the pages of *Cahiers*, however, Daney/Oudart rejected Lukács' aesthetic theory, labeling it a form of idealism in which historical materialism is "'read,' recuperated and 'totalized.'" They also dismissed Visconti's claims to Marxism with the contention that the filmmaker "is obviously completely unversed in dialectical materialism, since it would put his very practice in question." To Visconti's "defensive" critical realism, then, Daney/Oudart oppose a "dialectical materialist writing practice," which, following the aesthetic theories of Brecht and Mao, would "think through both the process of destruction and the process of revolutionary construction, and the unity of these opposites."⁶⁸ Ironically, the *Cahiers* critics tacitly retain Lukács' notion of modern capitalist decadence in their analysis of twentieth-century bourgeois realism, even while contending that the "ambiguous ideological recourse to historical materialism" in writers such as Mann is absent from Visconti's adaptation. As a symptomatic work of the fate of a historically outmoded class, the filmed adaptation of *Der Tod in Venedig* is therefore subject to a reading whose methodology—with Daney/Oudart mobilizing the ideas of Bataille, Lacan and Derrida—is drawn from the parallel efforts at analyzing classical Hollywood earlier undertaken by the journal.

In this reading, Visconti's work is inscribed in the lineage of the European "classical cinema" of Renoir, Rossellini and Carné, which presented itself as a "reiteration/transformation" of the Hollywood studio system during its golden age. While this mode of filmmaking reproduces the narrative transitivity and stylistic transparency of Hollywood's dominant aesthetic, it also yields a "supplement" (in the twin Derridean sense of substitution and addition) through the production of *mise en scène* effects antagonistic to the directorial "neutrality" mandated by the US studio system, such as baroque compositions, extended tracking shots and a proliferation of zooms. When these effects become widely recognized as the formal "signature" of a particular author (such as long takes in Renoir or zooms in late Rossellini), the de-subjected anonymity of studio production is replaced by what Daney/Oudart, borrowing from Lacan's notion of the *Nom-du-Père* (the

67 See Georg Lukács, *Essays on Thomas Mann*, trans. Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1964).

68 Serge Daney and Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Le Nom-de-l'Auteur: à propos de la 'place' de *Mort à Venise*," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 234-235 (December 1971-January-February 1972), pp. 79-92, here p. 80. Translated as "The Name of the Author: On the 'Place' of Death in Venice," trans. Joseph Karmel, in Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III*, pp. 306-324, here pp. 306-307.

name or the *no* of the father) term the *Nom-de-l'Auteur*. Here, the cinephilic discourse surrounding auteur filmmakers results in the “cinephile phantasmally tak[ing] the place of the director” as the “fictive other of classical cinema.”⁶⁹ In contrast to Hollywood’s “absent articulation,” the cinema of the *Nom-de-l'Auteur* fetishizes the frame as the “materiality of the camera’s displacement” and therefore politicizes and eroticizes the “real-fictive” of the cinema while at the same time assuming the function of the “agents producing the filmic inscription.”⁷⁰ In *Morte a Venezia*, Visconti exhibits a dual relationship with the function of the *Nom-de-l'Auteur*: at the same time as his film sets up a classical constellation of characters, consisting of an erotic subject with whom the spectator identifies (the aristocratic artist Gustav von Aschenbach) and the object of his desire (the attractive young boy Tadzio), Visconti’s arabesque camera movements insist on the presence of an Author. Thus, in spite of Visconti’s “denial of the erotic relationship between the author and his actor” (that is, Tadzio remains a peripheral character), the film nonetheless comes to be viewed as “the erotic relationship between the real agent of the filming [Visconti] and his actor, rather than the erotic relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio.”⁷¹

In Visconti’s work, therefore, the will to provide a Marxist discourse which gives primacy to economic determination—analyzing the decadence of the ruling class as a sign of its historically outmoded nature—is upended by the “irruption of sexuality on to the social scene as the symptom, the secret, the truth of the *mise en scène*.”⁷² This contradiction was already apparent in earlier films such as *Vaghe stelle dell'orsa* and *Die Verdamnten*, but in *Morte a Venezia* the determination of the double articulation of class and erotic relations through Visconti’s own obsessional neurosis becomes flagrant. Drawing on Bataille’s statement that “for the bourgeoisie, the communist workers are as ugly and dirty as the sexual, hairy, lower parts of the body,” Daney/Oudart determine that this neurosis can be represented by the expression: “I, a clean bourgeois, am in love with a dirty proletarian.”⁷³ Although this proposition makes intermittent appearances in the film (the scenes where Tadzio is spattered with mud, for instance), for the most part it is disavowed by the filmmaker through the presentation of Tadzio as asexual and immaculate and Aschenbach as lacking in social power and virility.

69 Ibid., p. 89 [p. 320].

70 Ibid., p. 90 [p. 320].

71 Ibid., p. 91 [p. 321].

72 Ibid., p. 85 [p. 313].

73 Ibid., pp. 79, 88 [pp. 306, 317]. For the Bataille quote, see Georges Bataille, *L'Anus solaire* (Paris: Éditions de la Galerie Simon, 1931).

Aschenbach's repression of the doubly obscene nature of his desire can take two potential forms: firstly, he can deny that the boy is a proletarian and fantasize that he is instead an aristocrat; secondly, and more predominantly, he can ascribe the boy's "dirty" nature to himself, given that, "in line with Visconti's 'Marxist' ideology, Aschenbach represents the bourgeoisie as a corrupted class." The true "barred question" of the film, therefore, is not the homosexuality of the protagonist nor that of the director but rather "how can the bourgeoisie, being unable to escape from itself, fail to fantasize the proletariat, the lost (but also dirty, shameful) part of the social body, whose return and emergence it can only desire in an erotic manner?"⁷⁴

It is here, in the concluding passages to their text, that Daney/Oudart posit a psychoanalytic recasting of Hegel's master/slave dialectic: Visconti's film is structured by the active yet censored articulation of economic and sexual desires, which the *Cahiers* critics read as "the symptom of the repression of the bourgeois economic system: in its phantasms, the neurotic bourgeoisie desires the agents of economic production, since they produce the thing that supports the bourgeoisie's real mastery (surplus-value)." But inscribing this desire into the formal structure of the film, its *écriture*, produces a transgression of "the image of the master" which an analytical deconstruction of the dominant system of representation is capable of revealing. Hence, while Visconti's film itself remains at the level of "bourgeois obscenity," which in fact "compromises only the specular identification, the narcissism of the bourgeois spectator," its deconstructionist reading can produce a dialectical reversal of bourgeois ideology. The political function of the analysis undertaken by Daney/Oudart is thus here overtly stated: "in a bourgeois society which has not accomplished its economic/political revolution, the analytical description of this symptomatic production constitutes the only *outside/real* of its ideology."⁷⁵

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75 Ibid. [pp. 323-324].

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18. Encountering the World Through Cinema

Abstract

As with Chapter 17, this chapter looks at works of contemporary modernist cinema, but the geographical focus is shifted from Western Europe to other parts of the world: the Eastern bloc, Latin America and Japan. While a certain degree of cultural alienation is unavoidable in their consideration of films from these regions, certain directors also became key points of reference for *Cahiers* during this period. The years 1968-1970 saw an intense interest in the work of Miklós Jancsó, with Jean-Louis Comolli and others writing at length on its thematization of Hungarian history and its formal rooting in direct cinema techniques, while Glauber Rocha and the *cinema novo* of Brazil was heralded (especially by Sylvie Pierre) as a highly politicized and visually exhilarating movement. But it was Japanese cinema, and most notably the films of Nagisa Oshima, that was of most interest, captivating *Cahiers* critics such as Pascal Bonitzer with their combination of political radicalism and psychoanalytic symbolism.

Keywords: *Cahiers du cinéma*, Miklós Jancsó, Third Cinema, Glauber Rocha, Japanese cinema, Nagisa Oshima

The Cinema of Eastern Europe

Daney/Oudart's text marked the definitive statement of the Marxist-Leninist *Cahiers'* views on the modern cinema of the major Western European nations, with France and Italy serving as the pre-eminent sites for this mode of film production. The journal's interest in modernist and avant-garde filmmaking, however, extended beyond the cinematic "First World" of Western Europe and North America and into many other geographical areas. This interest was not quite global in nature; *Cahiers* was indisputably prone to territorial blind spots. Despite being one of the most prolific film industries in the

world, South Asian cinema, for instance, was never adequately addressed by the journal. Apart from sporadic articles such as Bonitzer's review of Sembene's *Le Mandat*, African and Middle Eastern cinema only appeared on the critics' radar later in the 1970s, while the complications of *Cahiers'* approach towards Chinese cinema in its Maoist and post-Maoist periods has already been discussed in Part II. Three non-Western regions nonetheless featured prominently in the journal's coverage of contemporary cinema during its Marxist period: Eastern Europe, Latin America and Japan. In all three cases, the journal emphasized the work of selected filmmakers—for the most part belonging to the generation beginning their careers in the 1960s—rather than the national productions of these areas more broadly. Indeed, such films were largely discussed not in terms of their national specificity but as part of a global movement contesting the cinematic status quo. In the case of films from the Eastern bloc, of course, the political dynamic was the reverse of that which obtained in the West: there, radical filmmakers were not resisting against a capitalist order but bristled at the stifling nature of communist rule. While *Cahiers* had a complex, shifting relationship with the French Communist Party, it had a consistently negative attitude towards the regimes of Eastern Europe and frequently defended the work of “dissident” filmmakers in these countries.

The 1960s was a fertile period for “new cinema” in countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Hungary. The *Cahiers* writers were quick to engage with the output of emerging filmmakers from these nations, focusing in particular on the work of Jerzy Skolimowski, Věra Chytilová, Dušan Makavejev and, above all, Miklós Jancsó. The critical engagement with these filmmakers began in 1966, when Narboni's programmatic text “Les trois âges” included Skolimowski alongside Groulx, Bertolucci and Bellochio as major figures in the “new cinema,” which was judged to be a global inheritor of the legacy of Italian neorealism and the French *nouvelle vague*. The oneiric universe of the Polish director's early films was compared by Narboni, in consummate *Cahiers* fashion, to both the novels of Kafka and the films of Howard Hawks, with the critic claiming that “we have rarely felt ourselves to be pressed with so much force towards the limits of the screen by the recollections of lost time, the sarabande of memories, of progressive renunciations, of Eurydices lost, found and lost once more.” For Narboni, the “kaleidoscopic succession of strange, unexplained, incoherent characters” that populates Skolimowski's films enters into a productive tension with the filmmaker's will to “adhere to surrounding reality” through a camera technique that “responds to the continuity of a space maintained in its

integrality, never broken up, but constantly moving, fluid, compromised, subjected to brusque dilations and amplifications.”¹

Narboni's text served to ignite the journal's passionate interest in the Pole, to the extent that 1967 can almost be seen as the year of Skolimowski at *Cahiers*. In the July-August issue, *Cahiers* published an interview with the filmmaker, while Comolli and Daney reviewed his films *Barrier* and *Le Départ* respectively. Comolli followed Narboni's line of analysis by asserting that “everything happens as if the realist dimension of *Barrier* was none other than its oneirism,” a dialectic achieved through the film's “metamorphosis of space and its play with white and black leader.”² Shot in Belgium with Jean-Pierre Léaud in a starring role, *Le Départ* finds a more lukewarm response from Daney, who ascribes some of its weaknesses to the shift in the filming location.³ After his following production *Hands Up!* was banned in Poland later that year, Skolimowski was forced into permanent exile, and for a time he failed to elicit the same degree of enthusiasm from *Cahiers*. At the 1982 Cannes film festival, however, Skolimowski made a lightning-bolt-like return to *Cahiers'* critical consciousness with *Moonlighting*, a film whose political immediacy and cinematic deftness left a deep impression on the journal's critics. Bonitzer had no hesitation in declaring it to be “undoubtedly the most perfect, and perhaps the most profound, film presented at Cannes,” one whose “strange intersection of immigrant and British humor” placed it in the “great vein of Chaplin.”⁴ Writing for *Libération*, Daney similarly pointed to Skolimowski's “Tatiesque taste for the full-frame gag” while also pointing to the film's affinities with another genre: “[Skolimowski] has above all invented a genre that was lacking in the panoply of modern fictions: the socialist crime film. What one wouldn't do for ‘a few zlotys more!’”⁵ It was Narboni, however, for whom Skolimowski's work would leave the most indelible mark. Narboni's retrospective look at the “new cinema” of the 1960s for *Les années pop* gives Skolimowski's films, and *Walkover* in particular, a

1 Jean Narboni, “Les trois âges,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 178 (May 1966), pp. 58-59, here p. 59.

2 Jean-Louis Comolli, “La remontée d'Orphée: à propos de *La Barrière*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 192 (July-August 1967), p. 41.

3 Serge Daney, “Moins par moins égale plus: à propos du *Départ*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 192 (July-August 1967), p. 42.

4 Pascal Bonitzer, “Notes sur quelques films de Cannes qui ont marqué. Et sur d'autres qui ont moins marqué,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 337 (June 1982), pp. 11-16, here p. 13.

5 Serge Daney, “Pour quelques zlotys de plus...,” *Libération*, May 21, 1982, Repr. in idem., *La Maison cinéma et le monde vol. II: Les Années Libé 1981-1985*, ed. Patrice Rollet (Paris: P.O.L., 2005), pp. 623-625, here pp. 624-625.

prominent place in the movement,⁶ while a text providing an overview of Skolimowski's career published the same year tackled the question of the national status of a filmmaker who has spent much of his working life in exile from his native country:

So what nationality is Skolimowski? A nomad, a stateless person, a cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world, a wandering non-Jew, an exile everywhere he is? We can propose the hypothesis that he is irreducibly Polish, but perhaps in the sense in which Jarry understood it in his introduction to *Ubu* (the points the two artists have in common are considerable), when he described Poland as a "land legendary enough to be nowhere, or at least far off, an interrogative somewhere," clarifying that this "nowhere is everywhere, and the country where one finds oneself first of all."

In Narboni's view, "it would be difficult to find a better description" for Skolimowski's relationship to Poland than this passage from Jarry.⁷

The work of Vera Chytilová came to the attention of *Cahiers* in near simultaneity with that of Skolimowski. Indeed, occasional *Cahiers* contributor Paul-Louis Martin's 1966 review of *Something Different* even spoke of an "Eastern" school consisting principally of these two filmmakers, Forman and Szabo: "Although different in their style, these directors have in common an exigency which takes root in the respect for film art. The 'Eastern' cinema has the courage and the merit of being beautiful to the first degree without losing anything in depth."⁸ The journal's exposure to *Daisies*—which screened at international festivals despite domestic difficulties with the Czechoslovak censors—led to Daney sketching out a comparison between it and Chytilová's first film in the September 1967 issue: to the grey austerity and rigor of *Something Different* is contrasted the "orgy of colors" and arbitrary madness of her new film, with Daney also ascribing the "incoherencies of the story and the strangeness of the situations" in *Daisies* to Chytilová's modernist aesthetics.⁹ The critical response to her films, however, mostly took the form of interviews. Daney himself spoke with Chytilová for an interview

6 See Jean Narboni, "Les futurs antérieurs," in Jean-Louis Comolli, Gérard Leblanc and Jean Narboni, *Les années pop: Cinéma et politique: 1956-1970* (Paris: BPI/Centre Pompidou, 2001), pp. 9-20.

7 Jean Narboni, "Jerzy Skolimowski et la fuite impossible," *Cinéma 03* (2002), pp. 61-73, here p. 63.

8 Paul-Louis Martin, "De la gymnastique au cinéma (*O nece jinem*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 181 (August 1966), p. 64.

9 Serge Daney, "À propos de Vera Chytilová," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 193 (September 1967), p. 59.

accompanying his piece on her film,¹⁰ a dialogue that was continued in February 1969, this time in a conversation with Chytilová conducted by Michel Delahaye and Jacques Rivette. Rivette's exchanges with Chytilová are particularly fascinating for documenting an encounter of ideas between two filmmakers whose respective styles bore striking parallels with each other. Rivette's admiration for the Czechoslovak's work is palpable, but the legacy of the Hegelian philosophical outlook that defined his earlier criticism for *Cahiers* is also on view, as he reads Chytilová's work through the lens of an overriding logic of contradiction. Rivette tells Chytilová, for instance, that "the idea of transformation and metamorphosis, which is the central idea of [*Something Different*] is also true for reality" and that it is this "contradiction that pushes you to act, and thus to go in a certain direction."¹¹ Similarly, he praises *Daisies* for refusing "the schematic and theoretical side that it could have had" and instead being an "interrogation" where the spectator questions the very nature of truth: "In the beginning we have a principle that would risk being a pure clockwork system, but by the end it has become literally incarnated, it has become something organic, living, with this spontaneous and mysterious side that something living always has."¹² More particularly, Rivette notes the lack of individuation given to the two main characters, and, following Chytilová's claim that "the number two, which is the smallest quantity, is that which allows us to say the most things," Rivette responds that the theme of the couple in her work is present in order to "lead people, if they initially thought that the two women are different, to discover that they are in fact very close to each other, and if they initially thought that they were similar, to make them discover that they are different." With a suitably dialectical locution, he concludes that Chytilová's "manner of showing things" results in the spectator "thinking, by the end, in an opposite way to how they thought in the beginning."¹³

In a short notice the same year, Rivette also gave expression to *Cahiers'* enthusiasm for the cinema of Titoist Yugoslavia, but while he affirmed that "(almost) every Yugoslavian film interests us *a priori*," he lamented that the French distribution system saw fit to release three films by the inauspicious Aleksandar Petrovic while withholding the latest Makavejev

10 Vera Chytilová, interviewed by Serge Daney, "Entretien avec Vera Chytilová," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 193 (September 1967), pp. 60-62.

11 Michel Delahaye and Jacques Rivette, "Entretien avec Vera Chytilová," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 198 (February 1968), pp. 46-57, here p. 49.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

from view.¹⁴ The years 1966-1969 had seen solid critical support from *Cahiers* for the Belgrade-born director's early films. Aumont, for instance, viewed the *écriture* of *Switchboard Operator* as being "emblematic" of the young cinema, comparing the "profound modernity" of its narrative openness to the work of Skolimowski and Chytilová, as well as Bergman, Godard and Lewis.¹⁵ Even the found-footage curio *Innocence Unprotected* elicited a panegyric from *Cahiers*, with Dominique Noguez comparing the modernist gesture embodied in his paracinematic "re-vision" of a 1940s Serbo-Croatian melodrama to the discovery of the Douanier Rousseau by Apollinaire or the defense of *art brut* by Dubuffet.¹⁶ By the time, however, that Makavejev's most celebrated film, *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*, was released in France, *Cahiers* had turned its back on the Yugoslavian filmmaker. Writing from the Maoist perspective of 1972, Bonitzer and Narboni delivered a stinging rebuke of *W.R.*: not only was it "anti-communist," "anti-Marxist" and—perhaps most unforgivably—"anti-Freudian," it was also "an incredibly dumb film." The *Cahiers* writers even feigned wonder at seeing "the delirious enthusiasm that this consumer by-product aimed at the 'enlightened' bourgeoisie has unanimously inspired in the press," a phenomenon that was ascribed to "bourgeois critical gossip [having] warmly received its purgative petty-bourgeois anarchist complement."¹⁷

Developments in the Jancsó Line

The Eastern European filmmaker of most interest to *Cahiers* in its Marxist period was indisputably Miklós Jancsó. Combining an *énoncé* steeped in a materialist analysis of Hungarian history with the systematic deployment of a formal method that was at a distinct remove from the "transparency" of classical cinema, Jancsó's films had an irresistible appeal for the journal. As with Makavajev, an initial period of fervent support for the Hungarian's *œuvre* was followed by a moment of robust critique—although in Jancsó's case, the strictures were far more considered and theoretically rigorous

14 Jacques Rivette, "Bice skoro propešt Sveta," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 213 (June 1969), p. 65.

15 Jacques Aumont, "Lecture à plusieurs voies (*Une affaire de cœur*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 197 (Christmas 1967-January 1968), pp. 88-89, here p. 88. Translated as "Several Routes to a Reading: *Switchboard Operator*," trans. Diana Matias, in Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. II*, pp. 303-306, here p. 304.

16 Dominique Noguez, "Le cinéma (re)trouvé," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 211 (April 1969), pp. 23-24.

17 Pascal Bonitzer and Jean Narboni, "*W.R., les mystères de l'organisme*," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 240 (July-August 1972), p. 66.

than they were in the disparagement of *W.R.* The journal's first in-depth response to Jancsó, Pierre's review of *The Round-Up* (which was also her first published article for *Cahiers*) already pointed to the "absolutism" of the formal system established by Jancsó, with its extended long takes, circular camera movements and carefully choreographed on-screen action, which the budding critic saw as "not only the subject but the very principal of his film." While commending Jancsó's technical mastery, Pierre also had reservations about it, expressing her concern that such a system could prove to exhibit an "unpleasant complaisance" and a "somewhat sober closure onto itself."¹⁸ These qualms were swept aside in *Cahiers'* subsequent embrace of Jancsó's work, spearheaded by Comolli. On the basis of personally witnessing Jancsó's shooting method, having visited the set of *Silence and Cry* for an episode he directed of André S. Labarthe's series *Cinéma de notre temps*, Comolli linked the Hungarian's work to the "direct" approach of documentary filmmakers in part two of his article "Le détour par le direct." Certainly, Comolli acknowledges, there would seem to be little trace of any "interference by the *direct cinema*" in Jancsó's filming method, with its use of professional actors, post-synchronized dialogues, elaborate staging and camerawork and the predominance of plastic elements such as framing and chiaroscuro effects. But the critic contends that this opposition is negated by the modalities of Jancsó's shooting method, and more particularly the relation of the camera to the action it films: "We know that, most of the time and in the essential moments in the film, Jancsó does not *prepare*, nor does he *pre-envisage*, *pre-design* (or, with all the more reason, *pre-destine*) his shots. He shoots them. In other words, the action that is to be filmed does not have an existence prior to its filming but is strictly contemporaneous with it: the question ceases to be one of action *to be filmed* and becomes *filmed action*." The script for a Jancsó film, in Comolli's telling, is only a short treatment of several pages giving a rough outline of the narrative; it is only upon the selection of a scene and the setting up of the camera rails that the sequence comes to be "*executed* like a ballet," with the use of post-synchronized sound allowing Jancsó to shout orders to his cast and crew while the camera is rolling. In such a filming system, "there is no 'pre-filmic world' [...] before which the cinema would place itself and from which it would draw the film, but very exclusively a filmic world,

18 Sylvie Pierre, "L'ordre et l'ordinateur (*Les Sans-espoir*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 187 (February 1967), pp. 67-68, here p. 68.

produced by the film, and in the film, simultaneously and conjointly with the making of the film.”¹⁹

The following month (May 1969), much of *Cahiers* was given over to a discussion of Jancsó’s work. The journal published an extended interview with the filmmaker in which Jancsó, while taking great pains to explain the historical and political context of his films, equally insists that “what interests me the most is [their] form” and further clarifies that if he seeks “the greatest simplicity and the greatest sobriety in the form, then this is an attempt to eliminate the sentimental romanticism that we have so often utilized in the past, in order to pull the public along by the nose.”²⁰ This discussion was accompanied by Comolli’s text “Développements de la ligne Jancsó,” which addresses Jancsó’s adaptation of his system for his newer films, *The Confrontation* and *Sirocco*. Comolli rejects the idea that Jancsó is simply applying a pre-constituted, thematically neutral style to new narrative material. Rather, it is the filming method itself that creates the subject matter of these works: “Not only is it the subject of the film that adapts itself to [...] the method, which is bent towards it, but, more than this, [...] it flows from it, it is the effect of the method, as if inscribed in it and written by it.”²¹ More than a mere style, then, Jancsó’s formal system is a “working method” and acts as a “political reading” of the subject matter even before his films are “read” by viewers and critics. In a reversal of the traditional signifier/signified nexus, the meaning of Jancsó’s films thus primarily emanates from their formal operations rather than their content—a content that, in any case, presents a highly abstracted depiction of power relations. This system is nonetheless nuanced in Jancsó’s more recent films, invested as they are in more historically proximate, politically charged events. Both *The Confrontation*, which charts the formation of a People’s College immediately after the establishment of communist rule in 1945, and *Sirocco*, with its focus on a right-wing anarchist group in the 1930s, address the often vexatious group dynamics present in political movements, a theme that is represented on-screen by the intricate criss-crossing movements of the camera and the actors.

The claims Comolli made for the relationship between Jancsó’s filming method and the political signified of his films nonetheless came under

19 The above quotes are from Jean-Louis Comolli, “Le détour par le direct (2),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 211 (April 1969), pp. 40-45, here pp. 41-42 [p. 237].

20 Miklós Jancsó, interviewed by Michel Delahaye and Jean-Louis Comolli, “Entretiens avec Miklós Jancsó,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 212 (May 1969), pp. 17-31, here p. 18.

21 Jean-Louis Comolli, “Développements de la ligne Jancsó,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 212 (May 1969), p. 32.

scrutiny by his colleagues the following year. A dossier tellingly titled “Lectures de Jancsó, hier aujourd’hui,” with contributions by Oudart, Pierre, Kané, Narboni and Comolli, dominated the journal’s April 1970 issue, and the polyphonic nature of this set of texts was a manifest reflection of the diverse viewpoints on Jancsó within the ranks of the journal’s editorial board. Pierre and Kané continued to give a guarded defense of the filmmaker, with the former defining the paradoxical nature of his work as both a “cinema of the individual and of everything opposed to the individual,” a dialectic that allows the Hungarian to reach heights of both abstraction and realism.²² Oudart, however, was far more antipathetic in his appraisal of the Hungarian, defining Jancsó’s cinema as a “technique of re-presentation” which functions as a “reduced model” of thinking on historical and political questions. His films, rather than questioning their status as aesthetic objects, content themselves with “displaying the mechanism of [their] functioning” and thus persist as an “(absolutely naïve) representation of an almost linear model of *écriture*.” The filmmaker’s sinuous camera movements serve merely as *lures* of a materialist dialectic, masking the fact that his œuvre is actually governed by an “indefinitely displaced Manichaeism” which is part of a representational model that “passes off as complexity what is merely mechanical complication.” The task of the critic seeking a dismantling of cinematic creation is therefore to interrogate the seductive nature of these films—their “permanent and dazzling” mobility that masks from the spectator “the poverty of the grid that Jancsó applies”—and their phantasmal production of “a kind of reduced model allowing us to hypostatize at leisure a knowledge (structuralist, Marxist), a method of reading, and a representation of reality and of the cinematic object as we ourselves produce it by means of these aids.”²³

In this internal polemic, Narboni opted to side with Oudart’s stringent stance on Jancsó while also placing the debates around the methods adopted by the filmmaker within their underlying philosophical context. In Narboni’s view, while Jancsó’s films can be considered “prototypes of a modern *écriture*,” the filmmaker’s claims about their potential cognitive effect on the spectator, their capacity to teach the public about the dynamics of history from an ostensibly materialist standpoint, align them with “structuralist

22 Sylvie Pierre, “Chacun son chemin,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 219 (April 1970), pp. 33-35, here p. 34. See also Pascal Kané, “Discours, pouvoir, scène,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 219 (April 1970), pp. 35-37.

23 Jean-Pierre Oudart, “La place,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 219 (April 1970), pp. 30-33, here p. 32. Translated as “The Place,” trans. Joseph Karmel, in Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III*, pp. 89-95, here pp. 92-93.

activity,” which has “defined itself in recent years as the construction of a ‘simulacrum’ of the object, and the simulacrum itself as simply ‘intellect added to the object.’”²⁴ The structuralist approach has the drawback of offering a static, mechanistic and “thoroughly positivist” model that “separates structure from its very determination,” and Narboni argues that such a notion has been rejected and superseded by contemporary Marxist and psychoanalytic theories, in particular Lacan protégé Jacques-Alain Miller’s notion of metonymic causality.²⁵ The result is that Jancsó’s films in fact remain beholden to an outmoded, pre-Marxist concept of history, in which the political superstructure rests on an “abstract, transcendental, universal law” that reduces historical analysis to a series of solipsistic questions and answers. Like Oudart, Narboni thus reads Jancsó’s formal system as a lure, and only a “mystified” critical discourse can misconceive its closed cyclicity as the “suspension of meaning” typical of an “open work.”²⁶

It was natural that Comolli should respond to these critiques of Jancsó, which by implication also targeted his earlier, far more positive considerations of the filmmaker’s work. In his “Autocritique,” the *Cahiers* editor assents to many of these animadversions, admitting that “attempts at criticism (mine among them) confined themselves almost without exception to what immediately struck the eye.” What “critics” (that is, Comolli himself) found “fascinating” and “reassuring” in Jancsó’s work was “what it sought to grasp in the modern cinema: filmic functioning.” In doing so, however, his reading “could settle rather naïvely for a simple *description* of that functioning in place of its analysis,” which was the result of a “too perfect equation of critical discourse with the discourse of the films.”²⁷ In his new text, therefore, Comolli refuses a “mirror-like circularity of film system/reading system” and concomitantly questions the “status of the referent” in Jancsó’s work.²⁸ All of Jancsó’s films, for Comolli, are marked by a “double referent.” They depict both the historical moment that they purport to describe and the

24 Jean Narboni, “Comment faire,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 219 (April 1970), pp. 38-40, here pp. 38-39. Translated as “How to,” trans. Leigh Hafrey, in Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III*, pp. 95-99, here p. 95.

25 See Alain Badiou, *Le Concept de modèle: Introduction à une épistémologie matérialiste des mathématiques* (Paris: Maspero, 1969). The origins of the concept of “metonymic causality” are open to dispute, but in *Lire le Capital*, Althusser credits it to a seminar given by Miller. See Althusser et al., *Lire le Capital*, p. ix.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40 [pp. 97, 99].

27 Jean-Louis Comolli, “Autocritique,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 219 (April 1970), pp. 40-45, here pp. 40-41. Translated as “Autocritique,” trans. Nancy Kline Piore, in Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III*, pp. 99-111, here p. 99-100.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 42 [p. 102].

contemporary reality of Hungary, which is marked above all by the major “non-said” in Jancsó’s work: Stalinism. Jancsó’s films are symptomatic of the lack of a theoretical account of the phenomenon of Stalinism within the communist movement, foreclosed by the superficial de-Stalinization of the Khrushchev era; instead, the filmmaker replaces this absent analysis with an abstract equation between power and repression. In Comolli’s view, however, this dynamic changes with *The Confrontation*. Here, for the first time in Jancsó’s oeuvre, the question of the bureaucratic degeneration of the communist movement is directly addressed without the need for allegorical circumlocution, and such a shift in the status of the referent leads to the dismantling and transformation of Jancsó’s formal system: “The difference is striking. For the first time, the characters speak and conduct a discourse; they are no longer the echoes of the filmmaker’s orders to his actors. Political arguments, tactical ideas confront each other, but in the words and conduct of the characters. They are no longer reduced and paired according to absence/presence in the field, they are not interchangeable or equivalent.” From now on, Jancsó’s system “no longer exists [...] except in a residual form.”²⁹

In spite of his defense of *The Confrontation*, it is no overstatement to see Comolli’s assent to the critiques of Jancsó made by Oudart and Narboni as a turning point in the evolution of *Cahiers*. Not only did the internal debate reflect, as Narboni recognized, the journal’s turn away from the structuralist paradigm of the 1960s towards the “post-structuralist” or “ultra-structuralist” theoretical framework of Althusser, Lacan and Kristeva, it was also indicative of a broader shift in attitudes within *Cahiers*. From the eclecticism and openness that marked the period between 1963 and 1969, in which the critics conceived of their task as the militant defense of films that broadly shared their vision of the cinema, *Cahiers* became increasingly critical, even censorious, and this tendency saw the field of cinematic works that found the journal’s support become ever narrower, leading to the “commissar-style” condemnations of the Maoist period. As for Jancsó, his work went from being the center of impassioned debate in 1970 to being summarily forgotten about. Unlike other filmmakers, the Hungarian received no critical rehabilitation later in the 1970s—his turn away from the sober modernism of the 1960s to the hedonistic erotica of films such as *Vizi privati, pubbliche virtù* singularly failed to arouse the journal’s interest. Years later, Daney would lament, “Indeed, who remembers Jancsó’s films? [...] We had thought of everything but this: these films could

29 Ibid., p. 45 [pp. 107-108].

disappear.”³⁰ But this oblivion was one in which *Cahiers*, from 1971 on, was complicit. All the same, Jancsó’s work has had an enduring impact on one *Cahiers* critic: Comolli, precisely, whose films, with their propensity for structured long takes, bear stylistic traces of the interest that he had taken in the Hungarian’s films as a critic.

Latin American Cinema: Pierre’s Paeon to Glauber Rocha

As with Eastern Europe, the political situation in Latin America was remote from that of France. In this case, however, it was not the Iron Curtain that was the source of this distance but the divide between the First and the Third Worlds. Latin American cinema was thus unavoidably read through the lens of the continent’s struggle against Western imperialism. And yet the most thoroughgoing attempt to conceive of the cinema of Third World nations as part of the anti-imperialist political movement—the notion of a militant “third cinema” espoused by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino in their manifesto “Toward a Third Cinema”—found little resonance in *Cahiers*. In March 1969, an interview with Solanas appeared, accompanied by an article by *Le Monde* critic and occasional *Cahiers* collaborator Louis Marcorelles, who, more susceptible to the appeal of third cinema, hailed *La Hora de los hornos* as “probably the greatest historical film made to this day.”³¹ But this enthusiasm did not extend to the core editorial team at *Cahiers*: as noted in Chapter 8, Bonitzer had a much more muted—although far from dismissive—reaction to the Argentine essay film in his text “Film/politique.” In contrast, the Brazilian *cinema novo* had a profound and lasting impact on the *Cahiers* writers, above all Sylvie Pierre, who after moving to Brazil in 1971 fostered deep ties of friendship with many of the most prominent figures in the movement.

As with the work of Solanas/Gettino, it was Marcorelles, a significant advocate of Latin American cinema in France, who introduced the young filmmakers of Brazil to *Cahiers*: in 1966, he was responsible, along with the Rio de Janeiro-based critic Gustavo Dahl, for a dossier on the *cinema novo*, which included an introductory text by Marco Bellochio, who spoke of the “violent necessity” of a political cinema in an underdeveloped nation like Brazil, a historical overview of the movement by Dahl, and a round-table

30 Serge Daney, *L’Exercice a été profitable, Monsieur* (Paris: P.O.L., 1993), p. 300.

31 Louis Marcorelles, “L’épreuve du direct,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 210 (March 1969), pp. 37-39, here p. 38.

discussion with Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, Carlos Diegues, Leon Hirszman, Paulo Cezar Saraceni and Glauber Rocha.³² Of this group, it was Rocha, the most high-profile member of the *cinema novo*, who proved to be of greatest importance to *Cahiers*, to the extent that he came to stand in metonymically for the cinema of the entire continent. The *Cahiers* critics' appreciation of his work was not without reservations: reporting on the 1967 Cannes festival, Daney objected to the "aestheticism, complaisance and preciousness" of *Terra em transe* and felt it was a "succession of bravura pieces 'for nothing' (or to illustrate this nothing, which amounts to the same thing)."³³ The film was nonetheless programmed in the second "Semaine des *Cahiers*" later that year, and space in the journal was given to Rocha himself, with the publication of the text "Cela s'appelle l'aurore" in November 1967, where he defined himself as a "tricontinental filmmaker" who intervenes at a point in history when "the camera opens up the occupied land of the Third World" and delivers "a discourse that may be imprecise, diffuse, barbaric and irrational, but whose refusals are all significant."³⁴ In the same text, Rocha advocated an "epic-didactic" approach to film aesthetics that would follow the lead of Godard, a filmmaker who has opened up "a guerrilla front in the cinema" and who "goes on the attack, brusquely, unexpectedly, with merciless films."³⁵ The dialogue was continued with the release of *Antonio das Mortes* in 1969, which occasioned Aumont to hail the "controlled lyricism" of the film, deriving from its "global organization founded on plenitude and saturation, *and* on distance and rarefaction."³⁶ In the same issue, *Cahiers* published a long-form interview with Rocha, which broached both his own radical aesthetics—based, according to the filmmaker, on the combined influence of Eisenstein, Brecht and traditional Brazilian folk culture—and the more pragmatic project of building up an endogenous film industry in

32 See *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 176 (March 1966), pp. 43-56. The Bellochio quote is on p. 43.

33 Serge Daney, "Terra em transe," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 191 (June 1967), p. 48.

34 Glauber Rocha, "Cela s'appelle l'aurore," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 195 (November 1967), pp. 39-41, here p. 39. The term "tricontinental" was used in anti-imperialist literature in the 1960s to refer to the three landmasses of the Third World: Asia, Africa and Latin America. Sylvie Pierre gives an account of this text's genesis and her key role in its publication in *Cahiers* in "Un texte dans ses histoires," *Trafic* no. 100 (Winter 2016), pp. 93-98.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 41. Pierre recalls that the text was written in a kind of "interlanguage" between French and Portuguese and that she was tasked with transforming it into standard French. See Sylvie Pierre, "Glauber Rocha par cœur, de tête et dans un corps," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 329 (November 1981), pp. 9-13, here p. 9.

36 Jacques Aumont, "Berlin 69," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 215 (September 1969), pp. 41-46, here p. 45.

Latin America to supplant the domination of Hollywood.³⁷ Godard was once again a major reference point in the discussion, which is accompanied by a “post-script” composed by Rocha. Here, the Brazilian recounts, in a delirious monologue, his experience of the shoot of Godard/Gorin’s *Vent d’est*, in which Rocha featured in a key scene of the film where, arms wide open, he stood at the crossroads of revolutionary film aesthetics and pointed forward to a cinema where “everything is dangerous, divine, wondrous.”³⁸

While at *Cahiers*, Pierre only devoted two short texts to Rocha, but her *notules* on *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* and *Terra em Transe* foreshadowed, in the briefest of passages, her later, more expansive writings on the filmmaker. The former film, for Pierre, “affirmed the mastery of a lyrical poet, a rare phenomenon in the modern cinema,”³⁹ while the latter was “constructed on three essential themes: agitation, confusion and élan,” which are present in the form of “gesticulations, the proliferation and magnification of the characters, and even, between the shots, through the effect of a montage founded on these three dynamics.”⁴⁰ Pierre was, already in the 1960s, a confirmed “Brazilomaniac.” Indeed, one of her first major articles for *Cahiers* addressed the relationship between poetics and politics in Ruy Guerra’s *Oz fusis*.⁴¹ As her marriage with Aumont broke down and she became alienated from the increasingly sectarian politics of her *Cahiers* colleagues, the South American nation was a natural magnet, and she later recognized that the reason behind her decision to leave for Brazil was “because of cinema, of course. So you could say that the decision arose, in a certain roundabout way, from being a film critic, since I went towards a country whose cinema interested me.”⁴² In the end, Pierre stayed in Brazil from 1971 to 1976, and she has since made regular returns to the country. Ironically, her refuge from the oppressive atmosphere of the politicized *Cahiers* was a nation under the grip of Médici’s brutal military regime, which imprisoned and tortured left-wing activists and strictly censored all forms of public expression, the cinema included. While fêted within cinephile circles as a writer from the prestigious *Cahiers du cinéma*, Pierre recalls the shock of being directly exposed to the violent dictatorship after coming from the politically agitated

37 Glauber Rocha, interviewed by Michel Delahaye, Pierre Kast and Jean Narboni, “Entretien avec Glauber Rocha,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 214 (July-August 1969), pp. 23-40.

38 Glauber Rocha, “Post-scriptum,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 214 (July-August 1969), p. 40.

39 Sylvie Pierre, “*Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 196 (December 1967), p. 74.

40 Sylvie Pierre, “*Terra em transe*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 199 (March 1968), p. 74.

41 Sylvie Pierre, “Poétique et politique (*Oz fusis*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 190 (May 1967), p. 66.

42 Pierre, “Interview with Sylvie Pierre.”

but broadly liberal-democratic conditions of France. At a screening of *Strike* during a course she gave on Eisenstein in Rio de Janeiro, she was alerted by an usher to the presence of the secret police in the auditorium: “A shiver of intense physical terror shot up my spine. I can still feel it in my back, an absolutely violent sensation.”⁴³

Pierre refrained from writing film criticism during her time in Brazil, but the ties she forged in the country have had a major impact on the intermittent texts she has written since her return to France, for both *Cahiers* and, later, *Trafic*. At times, these pieces have been prompted by misfortune: Rocha’s dramatic death in 1981, at the age of 42, affected the critic profoundly. According to Pierre’s necrological meditation, Rocha’s life and work was dominated by a single, overarching question: “Brazilian filmmakers, who are we? What is the specificity of our message and in what conditions can we produce, diffuse, reflect, sell, impose on the world an unprecedented film culture whose character as an authentic expression of a people nothing can crush, alter, banalize or corrupt, whether from within or without?”⁴⁴ In the same text, Pierre also warned that any book on Rocha would necessarily have to incorporate “the whole history of these twenty years of [Brazilian] cinema, of which Glauber has been both the main protagonist and the principal historian,” as well as accounting for the unique psychological condition, dubbed “Glauberophrenia,” that both gave his films their frenzied verve and was at the root of the unending chaos of his life.⁴⁵ After making a film on Rocha, *L’homme aux cheveux bleus*, co-directed with her husband Georges Ulmann in 1986 and featuring interviews with Aumont, Bonitzer and Narboni, Pierre did indeed publish a book on the Brazilian filmmaker in 1987 as part of the *Cahiers du cinéma*’s publishing enterprise overseen by Narboni.

Pierre’s monograph could not possibly have fulfilled the conditions laid out for a book on Rocha in her earlier article; all the same, it is a passionate monument to a filmmaker who was both an immensely important figure in the history of the cinema and a close personal friend of the author. Rocha had even jokingly urged Pierre, as Narboni recalls, to be his Marie Seton.⁴⁶ The volume contains a general introduction to Rocha’s work and a biographical overview of his life, as well as a selection of Rocha’s own critical texts and

43 Ibid.

44 Sylvie Pierre, “Glauber Rocha par cœur, de tête et dans un corps,” p. 12.

45 Ibid., p. 13.

46 Jean Narboni, “Préface,” in Sylvie Pierre, *Glauber Rocha* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1987), pp. 6-7, here p. 7.

manifestoes, testimonials from his fellow Brazilian cinéastes Carlos Diegues, Paolo Rocha and Arnaldo Carrilho, and—perhaps most surprisingly—an homage from then Brazilian president José Sarney Costa, who was an acquaintance of Rocha's in the 1960s. *Glauber Rocha*, Pierre's first and, until 2014, only book-length work, does more than provide a critical overview of the filmmaker's œuvre—a task for which Pierre admits to being “one of the most poorly placed people in the world” on account of her close bond with Rocha.⁴⁷ Rather, it seeks to account for the shared vision of the cinema that underpins the affinity the critic felt for the filmmaker. Rocha's work is governed, in Pierre's view, by a dialectic between two conceptions of the cinema—the political and the poetic. The first consists of “making cinema ‘such as it should be,’ for the Third World, for Latin America in revolt”; the second, meanwhile, corresponds more to “a passion for the cinema such as it is for the poet, and which regards only him, without ceasing, however, to reveal the specific contradictions of an oppressed culture.”⁴⁸ The high point of this dialectic can be found in *Terra em transe*, aptly described by Jean-Louis Bory as a “machine-gun opera.” Confessing to having discovered the film “with the emotion of an ecstatic cinephile,” Pierre pronounces: “I like it when, sensually, the cinema dances, when it takes off, musically, with the beating of its wings. And this is what *Terra em transe* does, from the beginning to the end. No cinematic work is as close to Stravinsky. Its flight is frenetic, euphoric, despite its gravity, its suffering, and its grotesquery. It is beautiful and bad-tempered, like the greatest work of Orson Welles.”⁴⁹

The Empire of Signs: Japanese New Wave Cinema

The reception of Japanese cinema by *Cahiers* was determined by an overriding contradiction: that between the political and economic traits shared in common by the Japanese and French nations and the yawning cultural differences that distanced the two societies from one another. Like France, Japan had an advanced industrial economy coming to the end of a long post-war boom, possessed a bourgeois-democratic political system, and despite a powerful communist party and the rise of a radical student left movement in the 1960s, was resolutely on the side of the West during the Cold War. Like its French counterpart, the Japanese film industry had been

47 Pierre, *Glauber Rocha*, p. 11.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

49 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

a continuously viable concern since the silent era, capable of contesting the economic domination of Hollywood within the nation's borders, and as in France, the country saw the rise of a "new wave" of young filmmakers debuting their work in the late 1950s and early 1960s. While to a certain degree this movement took inspiration from the *nouvelle vague*, in other aspects it was in advance of its French "model." On the political level, for instance, many of these films were far more engaged than the relatively apolitical early works of the "right-bank" filmmakers in France and anticipated the more radical work of Godard, Rivette and Straub/Huillet later in the 1960s.

Nonetheless, it took time for the Japanese new wave to have an impact on *Cahiers*: the cultural insularity of the Japanese studios and the vagaries of the international distribution circuit conspired to severely hamper the visibility of these films in France. Once the journal took a vivid interest in this movement, its knowledge of new Japanese cinema was necessarily piecemeal: Nagisa Oshima's *Night and Fog in Japan*, for instance, did not screen in Paris until 1980, twenty years after it was made, while pertinent works such as *Three Resurrected Drunkards* (1968) and *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* (1970) were not discussed by the *Cahiers* critics for the simple reason that they never received a French release. *Cahiers'* occasional Tokyo correspondent Koichi Yamada endeavored to fill the information gap and was responsible for a dossier on the cinema of Japan in 1965,⁵⁰ but it was only in 1969 that the journal's writers, prompted by the release of a swathe of films by the key filmmakers of the Japanese new wave, truly latched onto a movement that would come to have a prominent place on the pages of *Cahiers*.

The pinnacle of this fascination came with *Cahiers'* special issue on Japanese cinema in October 1970. The theoretical tenor of the dossier was established in the editors' introduction, which situated the ensuing collection of texts within a twin theoretical framework. Firstly, there was Derrida's critique of ethnocentrism in *De la grammatologie*, wherein the philosopher observed the ways in which the "non-phonetic" writing systems of Asia have "functioned as a sort of European hallucination."⁵¹ Secondly, there were Barthes' notes on Japan in *L'Empire des signes*, in which both the Orient and the Occident are treated not as "'realities' to be compared and contrasted

50 See "Présent et passé du cinéma nippon," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 166-167 (May-June 1965), pp. 11-49.

51 Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit 1967), p. 119. Translated as *On Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 80.

historically, philosophically, culturally, politically” but as “symbolic systems,” the differences between which open up a “fissure” in the symbolic itself, resulting in an “*emptiness of language*.”⁵² The editors also find significant precursors to their activity in the fascination held by Brecht, Eisenstein and Artaud for East Asian artistic practices such as theater and calligraphy.⁵³ In turning their critical eye to a cinema characterized by its radical alterity from European culture, *Cahiers* was acutely aware of the twin pitfalls that this endeavor risked: the first, in line with the notions of the “pure” cinema of Mizoguchi and Ozu developed by *Cahiers* writers in the 1950s, was the universalizing gesture of valorizing the immediately accessible “humanism” of Japanese filmmakers, while the second took the shape of an Orientalism that exoticized these films as impenetrably mysterious cultural objects. Against these skewed approaches, the *Cahiers* editors saw their critical task as one of “avoiding ethnocentric, reductionist gestures that consist simply of hypostasizing pure *scriptural effects*” and examining Japanese cinema “as a signifying practice, that is as a body of codified practices, acts of *écriture* possessing their own logic.”⁵⁴

The *Cahiers* editors freely admitted to the fragmentary and unreliable nature of their knowledge of the cinema of Japan, let alone its culture more broadly, and they were open about their ignorance of the relations that the filmmakers they examined—Susumu Hani, Yasuzo Masamura and Yoshishige Yoshida—entertained with the Japanese studio system. They thus insist that the texts in the dossier should be seen as “a first, fragmentary evaluation of the way in which a certain number of films are important to us—and put questions to us.” But this admission does not prevent the *Cahiers* editors from making some general observations on the subject. Japanese cinema is understood as being marked by a dual cultural heritage. Its adoption of a technological apparatus invented and developed in Europe and North America means that it is subject to the same analogical codes of representation and narration as those prevailing in the West. At the same time, however, certain formal techniques deployed by Japanese films—the use they make, for instance, of a “partitioned” space, distinct from the “naturalistic duplication” of Western scenography—not only have a subversive value when placed in the context of their reception by European

52 Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des signes* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), pp. 11, 14. Translated as *The Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 3-4.

53 See La Rédaction, “Cinéma japonais (1),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 224 (October 1970), pp. 4-5, here p. 5. Translated as “Japanese Cinema (1),” trans. Alan Williamson, in Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III*, pp. 146-149, here p. 148.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 4 [p. 146].

audiences but also possess a “close relationship with a general problematic of the sign.”⁵⁵ With this in mind, the editors point to three cultural specificities that overdetermine Japanese cinema: firstly, the preponderant place of the Father Figure (formerly embodied by the Emperor, now by a more generalized repressive state apparatus); secondly, the absence of a monotheistic notion of God and, concomitantly, of the Western notion of the subject; finally, a “sexual configuration which is not regulated by the phallus as principal signifier” and which thus finds itself decentered and disseminated in the films in question.

All three of these elements are focal points of the three articles that—alongside interviews with Yoshida, Masumura and Hani and filmographies of the latter two directors – comprise the October 1970 dossier. The very title of Pierre’s text on Masumura, “Japon/castration,” is an indication of the theoretical optic through which these filmmakers were examined. The critic begins, however, by highlighting the fragmentary knowledge of Masumura’s work in France: of the 44 films he had directed at the time of writing, only two had been commercially distributed in France: *The Red Angel* and *Love for an Idiot*. While these two films necessarily form the center of Pierre’s discussion, the extent to which they are representative of Masumura’s broader œuvre must remain an open question. The filmmaker’s prolific record was partly enabled by his continued association with the Daiei studio, a commercial strategy which, for Pierre, made for both his “originality” and his “aberration.”⁵⁶ While *Cahiers* tended to denounce this industrial entryism when practiced in Europe, Pierre argued that the mass-audience imperatives of the studio system and its ideology of national *amour-propre* meant that “at Daiei, where Masumura is employed, it is Japan that speaks to itself.”⁵⁷ Masumura’s relationship to the commercial mode of filmmaking would seem to place his work in line with the classical Hollywood films analyzed elsewhere by *Cahiers*, and Pierre even notes that his relationship with the actress Ayako Wakao has deep affinities with that between Sternberg and Dietrich. In both cases, the actress repeatedly adopts the on-screen role of a “castrator.” But whereas films such as *Morocco* and *Dishonored* functioned as an “obsessional discourse” on the purported “battle of the sexes” (represented through covert, implied allusions to castration), Masumura’s work, determined by the political situation of post-war Japan

55 Ibid., p. 5 [p. 148].

56 Sylvie Pierre, “Japon/castration,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 224 (October 1970), pp. 20-22, here p. 20.

57 Ibid., p. 21.

and the national sense of impotence brought about by the country's military defeat, is distinguished by conveying a "literal discourse" on the theme, and it provides the film critic with a "theoretical goldmine" that allows for "the possibility of recognizing—in the order of a logic of the symbolic—the direct spelling out of that which, everywhere else, we have to laboriously put back together again [...] through a labyrinth of occultations and displacements."⁵⁸

Baudry's treatment of Hani's *Nanami, The Inferno of First Love* also relies heavily on a psychoanalytic approach: indeed, he opens his text by claiming that, like Wilhelm Jensen's novella *Gradiva*, the film is based on an "exemplary Freudian fiction" in that it recounts "the history of a denial (*Verleugnung*) of castration." For Baudry, however, recognizing the psychoanalytically legible nature of the narrative is of nugatory critical value; what counts is, instead, to find out "what kind of cinematography results from it." In the case of *Nanami*, it is not the film's narrative but its montage structure—persistently alternating between mundane melodrama and graphic sexual violence—that eliminates the distinction between dream and reality and consequently produces a "general floating of signification." The "continual irruption of the corporeality of the characters" nonetheless gives the critic the opportunity to pinpoint a thesis governing the film as a whole: namely, that "eroticism is the violence of the visible."⁵⁹

Bonitzer's text on Yoshida's *Eros + Massacre* continues the policy of adopting a psychoanalytic framework to discuss contemporary Japanese cinema, but here it is combined with a Derridean deconstructionist approach. Expressing himself in a highly literary voice that frequently addresses the reader directly in the second-person plural, Bonitzer's "Un film en +" revolves around the grapheme "+" of the film's title, which is seen as a motif of the *différance* operative in Yoshida's film.⁶⁰ *Eros + Massacre* is marked above all by intersections: thematically, between the sexual and the political, narratively, between the two parallel timeframes of the fiction (the 1920s and the 1960s), and even graphically, with the horizontality of the décor traversed by the vertical movements of the camera. Indeed, the entire film, in Bonitzer's view, is determined by the "*division en (+)* [surplus division]" between its narrative movement and its plastic work. Totemic of this situation is the interaction that takes place between the two couples, despite

58 Ibid., pp. 21-22.

59 Pierre Baudry, "Premier amour, version infernale," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 224 (October 1970), pp. 35-36, here p. 35.

60 Pascal Bonitzer, "Un film en +," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 224 (October 1970), pp. 6-9, here pp. 6-7.

the temporal gulf that separates them: not only does this transgression of the norms of narrative logic open up a “vertical space where the two heterogeneous temporalities intersect;” Yoshida’s film is also distinguished by the fact that he provides no narrative justification for this chronological infraction, which is instead directly inscribed onto the symbolic logic of the film. What is more, in Bonitzer’s view it is “precisely verisimilitude [...] which permits this transgression, that is, a productive writing, one that has not submitted to representation. Cinematic verisimilitude, coded on the diegetic level by the nineteenth-century novel and on the technical level by American cinema, constitutes the norm or the bar of prohibition that the play of the film, the film as play, discontinues.”⁶¹

Body Languages: Bonitzer and Oshima

Among the directors of the Japanese new wave, it was Oshima who most manifestly spoke to the *Cahiers* critics. Indeed, his formally challenging, highly politicized work, with a thematic concern for sexual and familial neurosis, seemed tailor-made for the journal’s Freud-Marxian critical prism, even if, as Aumont has noted, “Oshima ceaselessly varies the angle of attack of these obsessions” and is therefore distinct from “monothematic” filmmakers such as Rocha and Jancsó.⁶² Within *Cahiers*, it was Bonitzer more than anyone else who took upon himself the task of responding to Oshima’s work. The critic has related the powerful effect that his first exposure to the Japanese director’s work had: “I took a new intellectual pleasure upon viewing the first Oshima films that we saw. [...] What interested me was the use of signs and symbols, and at the same time a kind of violence, energy and strangeness. There was a very particular usage of the *film fantastique*, there was something that exceeded realism.”⁶³ The impact Oshima had on Bonitzer immediately expressed itself: two articles on *Death by Hanging* were written in quick succession in November 1969 and March 1970, thereby inaugurating an enduring critical dialogue between the filmmaker and the *Cahiers* writer. Over the course of fourteen years, Bonitzer dedicated a total of seven texts to Oshima’s films, which accompanied each of the director’s major releases in France, and his writings on Oshima have been

61 Ibid.

62 Jacques Aumont, “À propos de *Petit Garçon*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 218 (March 1970), pp. 35-37, here p. 37.

63 Interview with Pascal Bonitzer, April 30, 2014.

influential for later studies on the Japanese director.⁶⁴ Only Bonitzer's series of articles on Fellini even came close to the prolonged nature of this preoccupation with a single filmmaker, and indeed the two directors were given a privileged position in his 2016 anthology *La Vision partielle*. Inversely to Bonitzer's regard for the "antimodern" cinema of the Italian, the critic highlights Oshima's "erotically and politically aggressive modernity, marked by the cruelty of Japan and the revolt of its youth at the time" and reminisces that his initial exposure to Oshima's films was contemporaneous with his fixation with the writings of Bataille, an author whose perceived affinities with Oshima were such that Bonitzer could cheekily ask "do we not rediscover the egg from *Histoire de l'Œil* in the vagina of the heroine in *In the Realm of the Senses*?"⁶⁵

Bataille's influence on Bonitzer's consideration of Oshima's work was apparent from his first article on the filmmaker. In its opening sentences, the November 1969 review of *Death by Hanging* established the pertinence of the dialectic between the erotic and the political. Here the critic claims that the French critical consensus on the film had occluded the former aspect in favor of an exclusive focus on its political theme, which tended to reduce Oshima's film to a partisan pamphlet against the death penalty. For Bonitzer, by contrast, the signified of *Death by Hanging* is primarily erotic, and its political ramifications lie predominantly on the level of the signifier: "If Oshima's film is exciting, it is not because his theses contribute evidence to the dossier on the death penalty, racism and the crimes of Japanese imperialism, but because his discourse, if it is indeed a discourse, is deployed on the screen in a never-before-seen manner." The critic is further persuaded that "Oshima could not care less about the death penalty in general;" instead, it is the fact that executions are carried out by *hanging* that is of interest to Oshima. The noose in which the condemned man R's neck is placed is a graphical zero sign, which Bonitzer reads as "the place and the sign of Lack (of Desire), the place and the sign of the Crevice, of Difference (of Death)."⁶⁶ The "zeromorphic" rope in *Death by Hanging* is also a graphic depiction of the state of R's amnesiac unconscious as well as the eternal return to zero he suffers through the persistent re-enactment of his crime by his executioners.

64 See, for instance, Maureen Turim, *The Films of Oshima Nagisa: Images of a Japanese Iconoclast* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Bonitzer's critical response to Oshima is discussed on pp. 70, 138-139 and 180-183.

65 Bonitzer, *La Vision partielle*, p. 11.

66 Pascal Bonitzer, "La pendaison," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 217 (November 1969), pp. 59-60, here p. 59.

This argument is developed further a few months later in “Oshima et les corps-langages,” which took inspiration from Deleuze’s discussion of Pierre Klossowski in *Logique du sens*.⁶⁷ Here, again, Bonitzer’s reading centers on the figure of the noose, which the critic reads as “a functional element of the narration, like a simple machine to separate R from himself.” But Bonitzer pivots his second text towards the divided subjectivity of R: the purpose of the executioners is to impel the condemned man to remember his crime—or, in other words, to impel R’s unconscious psyche to become a consciousness. This “fictive, fictional division of the subject R” is thus to be read allegorically on a number of levels. Firstly, it is an expression of the “juridico(-politico)-religious division between innocent and guilty.”⁶⁸ Secondly, the split between the id and the ego in R is an analogy for the disjuncture between the political and the erotic in the film. Thirdly, the cleavage in R’s own personality produces a gap in the narrative logic of the film itself, which never finds an adequate resolution, a unified narrative closure. Finally, in an argument that substantially anticipates the later influential analysis made of Oshima’s film by Stephen Heath, R’s split subjectivity is an allegory for the situation of the cinema spectators themselves, divided between their own subjective position and their identification with the on-screen action.⁶⁹ In this last reading, the film *Death by Hanging* is itself the crime, its writing practice an infraction of the laws governing the dominant system of representation.

This mode of reading Oshima’s work is deepened by Bonitzer in his 1971 article on *The Ceremony*, “Cinéma/théâtre/idéologie/écriture.” As with Narboni’s treatment of *Othon*, the relationship between theater and modern cinema dominates Bonitzer’s discussion of *The Ceremony*, which regards the film as a symptom of the crisis of *mise en scène* in modern cinema.⁷⁰ In the centerpiece sequence of Oshima’s film, the lack that, for Lacan, is at the center of any ceremony is inscribed in literal fashion, with the continuation of nuptial rituals in spite of the bride’s disappearance. The supremely

67 See the chapter titled “Pierre Klossowski ou les corps-langages” in Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), pp. 325-349. Translated as *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 280-301.

68 Pascal Bonitzer, “Oshima et les corps-langages,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 218 (March 1970), pp. 31-34, here p. 31.

69 See Stephen Heath, “Narrative Space,” *Screen* vol. 17 no. 3 (Autumn 1976), pp. 68-112, especially pp. 109-112.

70 The very title of the film, in Bonitzer’s view, designates both a “referential place” and “the symbolic scene (the scene of the dream).” See Pascal Bonitzer, “Cinéma/théâtre/idéologie/écriture: à propos de *La Cérémonie*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 231 (August-September 1971), pp. 5-12, here p. 5.

ironic nature of this scene is such that the foreclosure of representation is openly avowed by the film, with its overt “absenting of the absent one.” Concomitantly, *The Ceremony* is marked by a “double mutilation of classic filmic space”: not only is its narrative strikingly elliptical but the closed spatial construction of the film stands in opposition to the “centrifugal” nature of filmic representation as understood by Bazin. Bonitzer quotes at length from Bazin’s “Théâtre et cinéma”—including the crucial passage arguing that “the screen is not a frame as in a painting, but a mask which only lets us perceive a part of the event”—but he critiques his elder for his “misrecognition” of the “historico-ideological character of the structures and effects he describes” and ascribes to Bazin’s text a teleological, technocratic perspective that sees the cinema as the inevitable Hegelian *Aufhebung* of the theater.⁷¹

As opposed to this viewpoint, Bonitzer sees the presence of theatrical closure in modernist cinema as a Derridean supplement to the scenography produced by the cinematic apparatus (one that both adds to cinematic representation as a reduplicated scene and substitutes itself *for* the cinematic scene), at the same time as it produces an act of signifying castration, which has effects on the Oedipal narrative of the film. Indeed, an act of incest between Terumichi and his mother Setsuko does take place in *The Ceremony*, but the nature of their relationship is portrayed in such a lacunary manner that it must be inferred rather than directly witnessed by the spectator. The film’s narrative thus functions as a lure whose principle is analogous to that governing *Young Mr. Lincoln*: “we see everything but we *know* nothing.” In contrast with Ford’s film, however, which produces an idealist reading within the film itself by substituting the percipient character of Lincoln for the spectator, in *The Ceremony* no such exchange takes place, and thus “we will know nothing—apart from a supplement of writing. To write this reading, the enunciation of its *énoncé*, is what the film incites us to do.”⁷²

Bonitzer’s subsequent responses to Oshima’s films tended to revert to a more critical/evaluative, less theoretical mode of receiving his work, although psychoanalytic themes retained their pertinence for the critic. *In the Realm of the Senses*, for instance, is marked by the excess of *joy*—and not pleasure or *jouissance*—accompanying Sada’s literal castration of Kichi, a sensation that produces an “unavowable unease” in the spectator. The stark depiction of violent sexuality paradoxically discourages spectatorial voyeurism, and Bonitzer concludes that “by seducing too much, [the film]

71 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

almost disappoints, as Oshima often does. Sometimes we would like, before this breathtaking *corrida* of the scene and the real, less virtuosity, and more fear.⁷³ *Night and Fog in Japan*, belatedly reviewed in 1980, was analyzed primarily through the circular structure characterizing both its narrative and its closed scenography. The repetition across two different timeframes of the same “boy meets girl” narrative within the paranoiac Cold War mentality of the Japanese communist milieu is, for the Bonitzer of 1980, “ferociously anti-dialectical” and instead evokes a Nietzschean “eternal return of the same.” Although the critic retrospectively sees profound similarities between Oshima’s 1960 film and *The Ceremony*, he avers his satisfaction that the earlier work was not shown in France at the time *The Ceremony* was released: “if we had seen the film back then, we would have lacked the sense of humor necessary to appreciate it.” For the Bonitzer of 1980, it is in fact the “histrionic style” of French communist leaders such as Georges Marchais that constitutes “the ideal sounding board for this film.”⁷⁴

Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence was the final film of Oshima’s examined by Bonitzer. While the film’s neo-classical *mise en scène* recalls Ford at certain moments and even invites comparisons with the fascist Japanese writer Yukio Mishima, this is offset by an “obliquity” of technique” that produces a “displacement of sense” and even a Barthesian “third meaning” through such disruptively symbolic markers as the humped back of Major Celliers’ deformed younger brother. Just as, in Bonitzer’s analysis, the scenes of Anglican ceremonial worship in the prisoner-of-war camp are watched by a “Japanese eye” (that of the camp guards), so too is the film’s superficially classical *mise en scène* surveilled by Oshima’s “modern aesthetic consciousness.” *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*—in a judgement that can apply to Oshima’s œuvre as a whole—thus belongs to “the most acute modernity.”⁷⁵

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74 Pascal Bonitzer, “Le cercle de famille (*Nuit et brouillard au Japon*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 309 (March 1980), pp. 4-8, here p. 4.

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19. The Film Aesthetics of Jacques Aumont

Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of Jacques Aumont's life and writings since leaving *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1974. While many former *Cahiers* critics of the post-1968 era have taken teaching roles, Aumont was the only one to fully pursue an academic career. Writing his doctoral dissertation on the films of Eisenstein (published as *Montage Eisenstein* in 1979), he became a key figure in the formation of film studies in France in the 1970s and 1980s. In his prolific writings since that time (including major works such as *L'Œil interminable*, *À quoi pensent les films* and *Matière d'images*), Aumont has attempted to produce a scholarly account of the cinema that would place it within a broader system of the arts (with an emphasis on the relationship between cinema and painting) as well as devoting monographs to individual filmmakers such as Ingmar Bergman and Jean-Luc Godard.

Keywords: Jacques Aumont, film studies, Sergei Eisenstein, aesthetic theory, film phenomenology, cinema and painting

From *Cahiers* to the University

On the level of film aesthetics, one of the most consequential legacies of *Cahiers'* post-1968 period has taken the form of the university career pursued by Aumont after his 1974 departure from the journal. The only member of the editorial team to fully dedicate himself to academia upon leaving *Cahiers*, Aumont played a fundamental role in the consolidation of film studies in France in the 1970s and 1980s, and over the course of four decades of teaching and research—which, with stints at Paris-III, Lyon-II and the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, extends to the present day—he has supervised the work of some of the most important film scholars working today, including Fabrice Revault d'Allonnes, Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, Luc Vancheri and Dork Zabunyan. Aumont's time in academia has been

particularly prolific, with the publication of 28 book-length works, 22 edited volumes and well over a hundred journal articles. In contrast to the national isolation of many of his *Cahiers* colleagues, whose more recent activity has found limited recognition beyond the borders of France, Aumont's scholarship has also had a profound global impact: translations of his writings have appeared in at least twenty languages, while the institutional framework of the university has enabled him to establish direct contact with those studying the cinema in other nations. In particular, Aumont has engaged in collaboration and debate with his North American contemporaries, including David Bordwell, Dudley Andrew, Rick Altman, Noël Carroll and Tom Gunning, and his work thus constitutes the most tangible conduit between the *Cahiers* tradition of critical reflection on the cinema and the contemporary treatment of visual media in anglophone academia.

Throughout this activity, Aumont has developed and honed a theoretical apprehension of the cinema in which questions of aesthetics are of absolute centrality. Taking his distance at an early stage from the semiological framework which, under the influence of Metz, was dominant in French film studies in the 1970s and early 1980s, Aumont has instead focused his theoretical considerations of the cinema on its status as an art form, on its specificity as an aesthetic medium, and on its relations with other modes of artistic practice, particularly those such as painting, photography and music that relate closely to the sensorial elements of the cinema. That his research program has been averse to comparisons between film and *literature* is perhaps best summed up by remarks he made for Pierre's 1988 documentary *L'Homme aux cheveux bleus* in which Aumont, stressing the importance of the films of Glauber Rocha in the broader history of art (and not just the history of the cinema), stated: "I am interested in the problem of the filmmaker as an artist, not as an auteur." Such an outlook notably informs some of Aumont's key works of film theory, including *L'Œil interminable* (1989), *À quoi pensent les films* (1997) and *Matière d'images* (2005), as well as more specialized texts such as *Du visage au cinéma* (1992), *L'Attrait de la lumière* (2010) and *Le Montreur de l'ombre* (2012). In recent years, it has also received a corrective in certain auteur-focused studies published by Aumont, such as his Ingmar Bergman monograph, as well as one of his latest works of film theory, *Limites de la fiction* (2014).

In this sense, Aumont's scholarship can be seen as one of the most fecund offshoots of the *Cahiers* project, particularly since many of his later concerns were already present, *in nuce*, in the texts he wrote for the journal in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Filmmakers whose work was encountered during this period—including Godard, Garrel, Bene, Bergman, Dreyer and, above

all, Eisenstein—have continued to be at the core of his reflections on the cinema. Conversely, however, Aumont's film theory often seems remote from the conceptual configuration adopted by *Cahiers*, and he himself tends to minimize the importance of his time at the journal for his later thinking on the cinema.¹ On the occasions in which Aumont discusses *Cahiers* in his later writings, it is usually in a highly critical manner—a stance that applies as much to the Bazin era as it does to the period in which Aumont himself was involved with the journal. With respect to the Althusserian Marxism that dominated *Cahiers* in the post-1968 period, Aumont is prone to adopting a tone of withering derision, seeing it as outdated, too confused to have constituted a theory of the cinema properly speaking and, by the 2000s, largely neglected by contemporary researchers in the field of film studies. In spite of these reservations, which could be read as disavowals of his past, a residual effect of the *Cahiers* tradition on Aumont's later work in film studies can nonetheless be detected. Aumont's more explicit theoretical framework may have decisively changed since his time at the journal. But on a subtler, more intangible level, a certain *ethics* of film analysis espoused by Aumont is distinctly influenced by the legacy of *Cahiers*. Indeed, this is the aspect of the journal that Aumont himself emphasizes, arguing:

Honestly I do not see what remains [of *Cahiers*] as a theoretical construction. There was a great intellectual agitation, which is undeniable, which I do not disown, and of which I have kept an emotional, pleasant recollection, but as an intellectual construction I don't see anything. On the other hand, [...] there are ethical values. As an ethical content I would say that it is something that is worth continuing to be considered.²

As an academic discipline within the university system, film studies in France began in earnest after the reorganization of higher education after the student unrest of 1968, which split the Sorbonne into 13 autonomous universities.³ Departments of *études cinématographiques* were established in Paris-I, Paris-III and Paris-VIII, and with a dire need for instructors capable of knowledgeably lecturing on the cinema, film journals such as *Cahiers*

1 This was a recurrent theme in the interviews conducted with Aumont. He has stated, for instance, "The problem is that *Cahiers* played a minuscule role in academic practice, almost nothing." Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 11, 2014.

2 Interview with Jacques Aumont, May 5, 2014.

3 Metz, who at the time was the only film studies academic qualified to supervise research, taught at the *École de Hautes-Études de Sciences Sociales*, which was organizationally distinct from the university system.

were an obvious source of personnel, despite the fact that most of the critics had little academic record to speak of. Narboni began lecturing at Paris-VIII in Vincennes, succeeding Rivette, who had spent the 1969-1970 academic year in the position. Other *Cahiers* editors, on the initiative of the literature professor and Artaud specialist Alain Virmaux, gravitated towards Paris-III.⁴ In addition to Aumont, Bonitzer, Kané and Baudry all taught regularly in the nascent film studies department at the Censier campus, while Comolli and Daney lectured there intermittently. Research into the early period of French film studies is at present very limited, with no equivalents as yet to the work done on its North American counterpart, such as Grieveson/Wasson's *Inventing Film Studies* or Polan's *Scenes of Instruction*.⁵ Aumont nonetheless recalls that the four *Cahiers* editors at Paris-III lectured on a collective basis, continuing in the vein of the journal's communal ethos, and recalls that they gave "farcical [*croquignolesques*] courses in packed auditoriums, where the students came down and shouted at us: 'Who are you to talk? What are you doing for the working masses?'"⁶ He has described this time as one in which the instruction of cinema was carried out in "unbelievable conditions," particularly when it came to screening films (usually with imported 16mm prints from the US), but also emphasized the "heroic side" of this early period in academic film studies in France: "everyone knew that we were pioneers, that the teaching of cinema in the university took place due to our stubbornness, that we had to hold firm. Even if there was no material, we could still see films. We were really devoted to the cause of cinema."⁷

An idea of the type of courses given by the *Cahiers* editors at Paris-III can be discerned from an article for *Screen* by George Lellis, a graduate student at the University of Texas-Austin who provided a synoptic account of classes taught during an exchange year at the Centre d'études universitaires américain du cinéma in Paris in 1974-1975. Alongside Metz, Mitry, Thierry Kuntzel and Michel Marie, Aumont, Baudry and Kané led seminars as part of this program, run in conjunction with Paris-III but intended for American students. As this account has it, Aumont's "Initiation to Film" course

4 See Jacques Aumont, interviewed by Nicole Vulser, "Jacques Aumont, le cinéma né sous X," *Le Monde*, September 29, 2003.

5 See Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (eds.), *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); and Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the US Study of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

6 Jacques Aumont, interviewed by Patrice Blouin and Jean-Marc Lalanne, "Le gai savoir," *Les Inrockuptibles*, April 27, 2005, pp. 36-38, here p. 38.

7 Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 20, 2014.

incorporated screenings of *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *Only Angels Have Wings*, *Roma città aperta*, *Intolerance*, *Gertrud*, *Les Carabiniers*, *Nicht versöhnt*, *Antonio das Mortes*, *La Pyramide humaine*, *Au hasard*, *Balthazar* and *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* and included discussions of “film as a medium reflecting historical, political and economic realities,” “cinema as a dream medium, the presentation of different levels of reality,” “formalism and idealism in the cinema,” and “films which break with the classic model.” Baudry, meanwhile, conducted a seminar on “Film as Commodity” involving an economic analysis of recent commercial cinema, and Kané taught on “The American Narrative Model and Its Variations” using the theories of Brecht and Lacan to produce a close analysis of *Dr Mabuse, der Spieler* and films by Ford and Welles.⁸

Most of the *Cahiers* figures to teach in a university context, however, did not embark upon a full-fledged academic career. Kané, Bonitzer and Baudry all stopped teaching in the 1970s, while Narboni held a lecturing position at Paris-VIII until his retirement in 2003 but never conducted research sufficient to gain a professorial position.⁹ Only Aumont would complete a doctorate and eventually become a professor at Paris-III.¹⁰ His professional ascension was not without its obstacles, however: in an article for *Trafic*, Aumont claimed that his prospective appointment to a position at Lyon-II in 1975 was prevented by the education ministry after a letter denouncing him as an “apostle of intolerance” and a member of a “semiotico-Marxist conspiracy” was sent to the minister by Henri Agel—a Catholic academic who was, ironically, Daney’s former high school teacher.¹¹ The next year, however, Aumont was successful in his bid for the post at Lyon, where he taught alongside Jean-Louis Leutrat until returning to Paris-III in 1980.

Montage Eisenstein

At the same time as teaching in Lyon, Aumont pursued his doctorate in Paris-I. The institutional support for this endeavor, however, was minimal:

8 See George Lellis, “A Year of Film Study in Paris,” *Screen* vol. 16 no. 4 (Winter 1975), pp. 133-139.

9 Comolli has also taught intermittently in France and other countries, but his efforts have been more focused on filmmaking.

10 Of the *Cahiers* critics from other generations, Éric Rohmer received a doctorate in the late 1970s for a study on space in Murnau’s *Faust* and periodically taught cinema at university level. See Éric Rohmer, *L’Organisation de l’espace dans le Faust de Murnau* (Paris: U.G.E., 1977).

11 Jacques Aumont, “Mon très cher objet,” *Trafic* no. 6 (Spring 1993), pp. 53-69, here p. 55. Aumont now cautions, however, that he has no direct proof that Agel wrote this letter and regrets having made the accusation in a public forum.

preferring not to work under Metz at the EHESS, Aumont instead took the art historian Bernard Teyssède as his supervisor. One of approximately 150 doctoral students studying under Teyssède, Aumont was content to prepare his thesis “all alone in my corner” and only met Teyssède for the first time on the day of his *viva voce* defense.¹² The resulting work, published virtually unchanged as *Montage Eisenstein* in 1979, was a landmark text in French film studies and remains a reference work for scholars of the Soviet filmmaker. Aumont, of course, was particularly well-positioned for this undertaking. He was the key figure overseeing the translation of Eisenstein texts for *Cahiers* in the years 1969-1971 (in addition to writing articles on the filmmaker such as “Eisenstein avec Freud: Notes sur ‘Le Mal voltairien’”¹³) and continued this work throughout the 1970s, translating and editing a series of six volumes of Eisenstein’s writings, published by Christian Bourgois between 1974 and 1985.¹⁴ This project enabled Aumont to familiarize himself with Eisenstein’s film theory to an unparalleled degree and served as important preparatory work for his doctoral thesis. In his introduction to the first volume, Aumont stressed that Eisenstein’s importance to the history of cinema was just as much due to his writings as his films, stating: “Eisenstein the ‘writer’ is thus, to say the least, as diverse and as variable as E. the filmmaker. In his theoretical reflection, he is an ‘all-rounder’ who does not forbid himself from any intellectual domain, even the most unknown and the most hazardous.”¹⁵

The ties forged through the Eisenstein translation project, however, did little to impinge on what Aumont has described as the “deliberate intellectual isolation” in which *Montage Eisenstein* was written. In his preface to the 1987 English translation of this work, Aumont baldly states: “I am acquainted with practically all the books of any importance—and a significant number of articles—on Eisenstein in English, French, German, Italian, and Russian, and I hope I will not sound too immodest if I say that

12 Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 20, 2014.

13 Jacques Aumont, “Eisenstein avec Freud: Notes sur ‘Le Mal voltairien,’” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 226-227 (January-February 1971), pp. 68-74.

14 The six volumes were: *Au delà des étoiles* (1974), *La Non indifférente Nature vol.1* (1975) *Mémoires vol. 1* (1977), *La Non indifférente Nature vol. 2* (1978), *Mémoires vol. 2* (1979) and *Mémoires vol. 3* (1985). A seventh volume was also prepared but was never published. Aumont discusses the project in a 1975 dialogue with Bellour; see Jacques Aumont and Raymond Bellour, “Eisenstein: Écrits sur le cinéma,” *Magazine littéraire* no. 99 (April 1975), pp. 52-53.

15 Jacques Aumont, “Présentation,” in S.M. Eisenstein, *Au-delà des étoiles*, ed. Jacques Aumont (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1974), pp. 7-17, here pp. 14-15.

this book is indebted to none of them. In fact, what I found in most, even the better ones, tended to obscure rather than illuminate my understanding of Eisenstein's work."¹⁶ *Montage Eisenstein* nonetheless bears a major debt to one figure: Roland Barthes. For a start, the first chapter exhibits clear influences of Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. A biographical overview of Eisenstein's life, it was seen by Aumont as a necessary prelude to his study given the "imbrication of [Eisenstein's] life (itself mediated by his autobiographical texts) with his cinematic production."¹⁷ Similarly, the close reading of sequences from *The General Line* and *Ivan the Terrible* consciously draws on the methodology—and even the terminology—of the literary theorist's analysis of Balzac's *Sarrasine* in Barthes' influential study *S/Z*, a factor that links *Montage Eisenstein* with Cahiers' collective reading of *Young Mr. Lincoln*. In 2004, Aumont admitted that *S/Z* was "my great model," despite the fact that it owed "rather more to a talent for interpretation than to a generalizable method" and despite Aumont's retrospective judgement that "my own analysis, alas, does not have the charm of Barthes' analysis."¹⁸

An additional influence, this one in the negative sense, came from Bordwell: in an article for *Screen*, the American scholar used Bachelard's notion of the epistemological break as a metaphor for what he perceived to be a significant turning point in Eisenstein's conception of film form: that between the "dialectical epistemology" of the 1920s, with its revolutionary aesthetics placing the emphasis on conflicts and ruptures, and the "behaviorist epistemology" of the 1930s and 1940s, which inclined, under the more artistically conservative climate of Stalin's rule, towards an organicist concept of montage, stressing unity and totality.¹⁹ Bordwell's article represented, in Aumont's eyes, a lucid articulation of a more general attitude towards the relationship between Eisenstein's silent films and his later work. In contrast to this schematic division, *Montage Eisenstein* argues for a more dialectical understanding of the evolution of the Soviet filmmaker's montage practice, one that would highlight both the ruptures *and* the continuities in his work and theory. For Aumont, Eisenstein's activity in the cinema is marked by the "ongoing and even somewhat systematic

16 Jacques Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*, trans. Lee Hildreth, Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. vii.

17 *Ibid.*, p. viii.

18 Jacques Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Images modernes, 2005 [1979]), p. 11.

19 David Bordwell, "Eisenstein's Epistemological Shift," *Screen* vol. 15 no. 4 (Winter 1974), pp. 29-46.

study of the principal of montage.”²⁰ The tension between an aesthetics of conflict and an aesthetics of organic unity, transposed by Bordwell onto two distinct chronological moments in Eisenstein’s life, should be understood as operating *throughout* Eisenstein’s time as a filmmaker. Or as Aumont puts it: “There is not a revolutionary Eisenstein, the Eisenstein of the twenties, who supposedly thought in terms of struggle of opposites (and their dialectical unity), and then another, idealistic Eisenstein, the Eisenstein of the thirties and forties, in pursuit of the chimerical ‘total and synthetic art.’” Instead, there is, in his view, “an Eisensteinian system (which is indeed constantly evolving), which constantly attempts to adjust itself to various theoretical and/or philosophical discourses, in particular, to ‘dialectical materialism.’”²¹ Aumont’s choice to carry out a close reading of the functioning of montage in two films that are frequently understood to represent distinct periods in Eisenstein’s œuvre—*The General Line* and *Ivan the Terrible*—is thus a gesture towards relativizing this oppositional dichotomy. Despite their significant differences in film technique, the same fundamental principles of montage—resting on the dialectical “law” of the unity of opposites in struggle—are in operation in both films.

It is the *failure* of Eisenstein’s montage practice to adequately serve as an analogy for the theoretical propositions of dialectical materialism, however, which in Aumont’s understanding provides the motor for his restless evolution as a thinker and artistic practitioner. For this reason, Eisenstein’s notes on his project to make a film adaptation of Marx’s *Capital* are of particular interest. They represented one of the most concerted efforts by the filmmaker to conceptualize his notion of a “montage of intellectual attractions,” but the foundering of this project highlights the irreducible *gap* between written language and cinematic enunciation. For Aumont, the notion of “film-language” (*ciné-langue*) is an “unfortunate metaphor” and does an injustice to the suppleness of Eisenstein’s understanding of the signifying resources of film. At the same time, he rejects the commonplace notion, favored by more “humanistic” approaches to the cinema, that the aesthetic exuberance of Eisenstein’s filmmaking countervailed the arid sterility of his theoretical concepts. Instead, Eisenstein’s theory and practice should be understood as two distinct modes of writing (or *écriture*) that relate both to the cinema and to more fundamental concerns about politics, art and nature and that are marked by the contradiction between the “ecstatic” and

20 Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*, p. 207 [p. 146]. For the Aumont of 2005, this standpoint still seems to be a “credible” one. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 91 [p. 67].

“conceptual” sides of Eisenstein’s praxis. Thus it was the “principal wager” of *Montage Eisenstein*, as Aumont declared in 2005, to “take Eisenstein seriously as a writer,” and this is one of the major legacies of the book.²²

Here again, therefore, the concept of *écriture* as developed by *Cahiers* in the 1970s, borrowing heavily from Barthes and Kristeva, comes to the fore. Although Aumont had broken with his *Cahiers* colleagues, the theoretical apparatus behind *Montage Eisenstein* was still in broad continuity with the journal’s project in its post-1968 period. The book represented, as Aumont later noted with a bittersweet chagrin, “an apprehension of Eisenstein dating from a certain era, when Marx, Freud and Saussure still meant something.”²³ Indeed, the influence of *Cahiers* on the work is palpable: texts by Bonitzer, Oudart, Narboni, Pierre and Comolli are all referenced, and the close analysis of the two Eisenstein films are in continuity with the re-readings the journal carried out on *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *La vie est à nous* and *The New Babylon*. Moreover, the early stages of Aumont’s doctoral work saw a momentary renewal of ties with *Cahiers*. A preliminary version of the chapter on *The General Line* was published in the journal’s November 1976 issue, with an introductory note by Aumont cautioning the reader about the “strictly academic” nature of the text and attesting already to an expository method grounded in Barthes’ literary theory.²⁴ A translation by Aumont of “The Filmic Fourth Dimension” was also published by *Cahiers* in this period, and the renewed interest in Eisenstein inspired articles by Bonitzer on the Soviet filmmaker’s concept of *extasis* (also an important notion in *Montage Eisenstein*) and Narboni on the “mechanical delirium” of *The General Line*, which, he argued, combined propagandistic goals with the aesthetics of modern advertising.²⁵

The Interminable Eye: Aumont’s Film Aesthetics in the 1980s

In an academic context dominated by the semiology-inspired “textual analysis” of Metz and Bellour, Aumont’s work on Eisenstein thus presented

22 Ibid., p. 9.

23 Ibid., p. 10.

24 Jacques Aumont, “Un rêve soviétique,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 271 (November 1976), pp. 26-44, here p. 26.

25 See Sergei Eisenstein, “La quatrième dimension du cinéma,” translated into French by Jacques Aumont, *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 270 (September-October 1976), pp. 5-28; Pascal Bonitzer, “Les machines e(x)tatiques (Macroscopie et signification),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 271 (November 1976), pp. 22-25; and Jean Narboni, “Le hors-cadre décide de tout,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 271 (November 1976), pp. 14-21.

an alternative model of structuralist film analysis, one grounded not in Saussurean linguistics but in a theory of cinematic *écriture*, which was combined with the dialectical materialist approach to film form espoused, at the time, by both the subject and the author of *Montage Eisenstein*. This approach was honed in other, shorter texts from the late 1970s and early 1980s. A sequence analysis of *La Chinoise* published in the journal *Linguistique et Sémiologie* (which appeared in English in *Camera Obscura* under the symptomatic title “This Is Not a Textual Analysis”) was, Aumont confesses, his only article that was “vaguely of semio-linguistic inspiration.”²⁶ But the same theoretical mixture also impregnated *L'Esthétique du film* (co-authored with Alain Bergala, Michel Marie and Marc Vernet), which was conceived of as an introductory primer to film analysis for a field that had by this point entered a period of institutional consolidation.²⁷

The 1980s, however, was a period of confusion and intellectual mutation for film studies, as the previously hegemonic theoretical configuration of semiology, psychoanalytic theory and structuralist Marxism rapidly evaporated. Aumont gives a vivid account of this moment:

It was very disorienting as a period, because we perceived that there was no more impetus, there was no more momentum. There was no more movement. But we didn't know why. And we did not have the necessary distance to understand. We were on the inside and we could not see from the outside why it wasn't working. It wasn't working because there were too many aporias. There were two factors. There was the internal factor: it was an approach that had exhausted itself because it was too aporetic. It led to impasses. It was the moment when structural linguistics completely disappeared. [...] Then there was the death of Barthes, the death of Foucault. The founding fathers perished. All that is symbolic, but it also had real effects.²⁸

The result was a widespread sense of dispersal as the discipline fractured into a multiplicity of new perspectives. In France, the publication of Deleuze's *Cinéma* diptych in 1983 and 1985 had a dramatic effect. Again, Aumont

26 Interview with Jacques Aumont, May 8, 2015. See Jacques Aumont, “Notes sur un fragment de *La Chinoise* de Godard,” *Linguistique et Sémiologie*, no. 6 (1978), 55-91. Translated as “This Is Not A Textual Analysis,” *Camera Obscura*, no. 8-9-10 (Spring-Summer-Fall 1982), 131-160.

27 See Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie and Marc Vernet, *Esthétique du film* (Paris: Nathan, 1982). Translated as *The Aesthetics of Film*, trans. Richard Neupert (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

28 Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 20, 2014.

evocatively relays of the impact this work had on him and his colleagues: “There is this great philosopher who has landed on the cinema and says things that have nothing to do with what we were doing, and who we don’t understand. It was a difficult moment, which, I believe, destabilized film studies for a very long time.”²⁹ Scholars in the field reacted to this disciplinary transformation in a variety of ways, and the debates of the period can now be tracked in scholarly journals with which Aumont was involved, such as *Hors-cadre* and the Franco-American quarterly *Iris*. His own approach was to shift focus towards more purely aesthetic questions in a concerted attempt to generate a globally coherent—if not totalizing—aesthetic theory of the cinema. No longer were Barthes, Althusser and Saussure the *ne plus ultra* of theoretical influence. Instead, Aumont’s research has probed the vast constellation of art history and theory, taking succor from the writings of twentieth-century figures such as Arnheim, Panofsky, Warburg, Gombrich, Francastel and Auerbach, reacquainting himself with the more venerable ideas of Alberti, Lessing, Kant and Hegel, and becoming conversant in contemporary scholarship and practice in other artistic fields—above all, at this point in his career, painting.

The fruits of this work were borne in the 1989 monograph *L’Œil interminable*, which Aumont regards as his first “real” book after *Montage Eisenstein*.³⁰ In tracing the relationship between the cinema and painting, an affinity stretching from the Lumière brothers to Godard’s late work, *L’Œil interminable* spoke closely to Aumont’s own research interests. The book had a tortured publication process: initially commissioned by Patrice Rollet for Macula, the manuscript suffered an unfavorable reception from the series editor Jean Clay, and Aumont instead published it with Séguier. In his preface to the 2007 re-edition to the work, Aumont gives a succinct encapsulation of the thesis guiding the work, which, he admits, was only presented *en creux* in the original version: “the cinema, for nearly a century, has interminably been a matter of the eye. It has always been a question of seeing and showing the world, as Vertov’s old program put it.”³¹ The cinema’s contribution to visual representation, beyond the achievements of painting, was to introduce movement to the eye and thus create the “variable eye” that lends its title to one of the

29 Ibid.

30 While not renouncing them in any way, Aumont considers *L’Esthétique du film* and the 1988 text *L’Analyse des films* to be reference works without any “personal ideas” in them. See Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie, *L’Analyse des films* (Paris: Nathan, 1988). For the remarks, see interview with Jacques Aumont, March 20, 2014.

31 Jacques Aumont, *L’Œil interminable*, 3rd ed. (Paris: La Différence, 2007), pp. 9-10.

book's key chapters. While accepting Bazin's definition of the cinema as "change mummified," Aumont does not see a contradiction between the cinema's impetus towards "preservation and embalmment" and its concern for "fabricating images" and thus refuses the "old opposition" between Lumière and Méliès, or Stroheim and Eisenstein. Whereas painting has a natural tendency toward allegory and metaphor, cinema "is in a relationship of interpretation with the world," and Aumont inscribes his own work in the lineage of those thinkers—Schefer, Epstein, Balázs, Bazin, Pasolini and Godard—who have understood the cinema as "the invention of new, indispensable manners of interpreting the world by continuing the enterprise of images."³²

Aumont's consideration of the relationship between the plastic arts and cinema largely avoids the superficial presence of paintings in films, such as citations of artistic works or "painterly" approaches to the creation of cinematic imagery. Instead, his focus lies on the common concern both mediums manifest for elementary formal questions such as the shot (*plan*), the frame, the scene, the experience of temporality and the perception of reality. These factors are already present in the *vues* produced by Lumière, who Aumont, echoing Godard's declaration uttered by Jean-Pierre Léaud in a direct-to-camera address in *La Chinoise*, describes as the "last impressionist painter." This claim has a provocative element to it—the Lumière brothers, pragmatically minded factory owners, in no way conceived of themselves as artists—but Aumont categorically points to the "flagrant absence" of any of the visual tics of nineteenth-century academic painting in the corpus of films created by the Lumières. There are no allegorical scenes, abstract landscapes or female nudes in their work, nor do they attempt to recreate fictional episodes from literature and mythology. Instead, the Lumière films constitute "a veritable iconography of the ascendant bourgeoisie," and their formal concerns are derived from the aesthetics of impressionism, whose major representatives shared their class background.³³ Two principal problematics are operative in both impressionism and the earliest works of cinema: the production of "effects of reality" (the famous ripple of leaves blowing in the wind, which outdoes even Théodore Rousseau in its detailed rendering of the natural world) and the role of framing in defining the bounds of the image, assigning to it a point of view and articulating the field of the visible with its external *hors-champ*—even if, in the case of the

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 21.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Lumière films, the boundaries between these two domains are “permeable,” “supple” and “porous.”³⁴

This discussion leads into the chapter on the “variable eye,” which, partly because of its translation into English, is the most widely known section of the book. For Charles O’Brien, indeed, the genealogy of cinematic representation given in this text “anticipated what has become a major shift of focus in contemporary film theory, away from the disembodied gaze attributed to the classical spectator and toward a post-classical, corporeal glance.”³⁵ In this chapter, Aumont follows the American art historian Peter Galassi’s distinction between the *ébauche* and the *étude* in Western painting in the period 1780-1820 (that is, directly before the invention of photography). Whereas the *ébauche* was conceived of as “an attempt to register a reality predetermined by the project of a future painting,” the *étude* is “an attempt to register reality just as it is.”³⁶ The chief distinguishing trait of the *étude* is thus not exactitude but *rapidity*, and in this sense it lays the groundwork for the advent of photography later in the century. While Aumont avers his dissatisfaction with the notion that the figurative techniques of modern painting have been defined by bourgeois ideology, he nonetheless unambiguously sides with Comolli’s “Technique et idéologie” when it comes to his *Cahiers* colleague’s notion of a socially determined “deferral” in the invention and subsequent technological development of the cinema.³⁷ The instantaneity and mobility that form the ideological basis of photographic media find themselves already present in techniques of visual representation honed well before the advent of the mechanically reproduced image. Two further events in the 1800s contribute, in Aumont’s account, to the rise of the “variable eye”: the spread of the railroads and the popularity of the panorama. Both entail a mobile gaze, even while the spectator is corporeally motionless, and both thus prepared Western populations for the phenomenological conditions of film viewing that were to come by the end of the century.

Subsequent chapters in *L’Œil interminable* interrogate the role of time in cinema and painting, the use of framing and its negative counterpart, the

34 Ibid, p. 43.

35 Charles O’Brien, “The End of Cinema?: An Afterword to Jacques Aumont’s “The Variable Eye,” in Dudley Andrew (ed.), *The Image in Dispute* (Austin: University of Texas, 1997), pp. 259-262, here p. 259.

36 Aumont, *L’Œil interminable*, p. 52. For the English translation, see Jacques Aumont, “The Variable Eye, or the Mobilization of the Gaze,” trans. Charles O’Brien and Sally Shafto, in Dudley Andrew (ed.), *The Image in Dispute*, pp. 231-258, here p. 232.

37 Ibid., p. 51 [p. 231].

function of “deframing” (drawn from Bonitzer’s notion of *décadrage*) in the two mediums, the relationship they entertained with theatrical scenography, and their utilization of plastic elements such as lighting and color. Perhaps the most controversial section of the book, however, was the chapter “Forme et déformation: expression et expressionnisme.” Having aligned the cinema with impressionist painting, Aumont refuses any relationship with the expressionist movement and categorically states that “expressionism in the cinema, whether German or otherwise, does not exist, and never did exist.”³⁸ As an appellation to describe films such as *Caligari* and *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, let alone *Die Nibelungen* or *Tartuffe*, it is vague at best and misleading at worst and “serves the discourse of science less than it does that of love, or hatred.”³⁹ At most, Aumont accepts that the cinema retains a certain reserve of expressivity—which can be seen in the films of Welles, Renoir and Hitchcock—but he insists that “the film image, decidedly, is not a graphism.”⁴⁰ For a scholar partial to filmmakers such as Eisenstein and Epstein, who vocally detested “Caligarism” in the cinema, such a stance is perhaps not surprising, but it is a position that Aumont later nuanced. A footnote in the 2007 edition of *L’Œil interminable* signals that he has now adopted “a more pragmatic position,”⁴¹ and in his preface to the 2008 anthology *Le Cinéma expressionniste: De Caligari à Tim Burton*, Aumont accepts that, while expressionism in the cinema is a “secondary phenomenon” compared to its role in other art forms, “the word ‘expressionism,’ along with certain of the visual characters through which it was translated in films, has had a real and durable fortune in film criticism.”⁴² Nonetheless, Aumont insists, even at this stage, that “contrary to the other ‘-isms’ of the early twentieth century, [expressionism] is not a modern movement” and that, if anything, the value of expressionist cinema has been to reveal the “anomaly” of a tendency that “does not comfortably enter into the history of artistic movements.”⁴³

A broader retrospective account of *L’Œil interminable* is undertaken in a postscript to the work’s second edition, dubbed “P.S., P.S., P.S.” Here, Aumont admits to a strain of sentimentalism that came with charting

38 Ibid., p. 255.

39 Ibid., p. 261

40 Ibid., p. 279.

41 Ibid., p. 255

42 Jacques Aumont, “Où commence, où finit l’expressionnisme?,” in Jacques Aumont and Bernard Benoliel (eds.), *Le Cinéma expressionniste: De Caligari à Tim Burton* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008), pp. 13-28, here p. 14.

43 Ibid., p. 28.

the development of modernism in art at a juncture when it was ceding to postmodernist aesthetics. A certain historical despondence is indeed discernible in his work, itself symptomatic of the broader mood of the 1980s, bookended by Lyotard's declaration of the end of "grand narratives" and the collapse of the political realities of the post-war order with the fall of the Berlin Wall. As for the prevalent discourse surrounding the "death of cinema" during this period, Aumont insists: "deep down, we did not believe in it: it was a game, perhaps an exorcism, a superstition."⁴⁴ The cinema, evidently, did not perish, but it did undergo significant transformations in the two decades separating the book's first edition from its second, and its relations with other art forms have concomitantly changed. The cinematic eye, Aumont affirms, continues to see, but it has irrevocably lost its "variability." Between death and transfiguration, however, Aumont recognizes that "the cinema (and, doubtless, the other arts of the image) has very fortunately chosen the latter,"⁴⁵ and the consequences of these mutations will form the subject of much of his writing on the cinema in the 2000s and 2010s.

A Phenomenology of the Image?

Having opened up the relationship between cinema and the other arts at the end of the 1980s, Aumont's work in the 1990s covered more general conceptual terrain, comprehending the cinema within a broader framework of aesthetics and human perception. This often took the guise of texts intended as reference works and thus written in a more neutral, ostensibly objective register. Nevertheless, the theoretical questions preoccupying Aumont during this period are abundantly apparent in these works, and his personal perspective on the subject matter under discussion is also fitfully visible. It is notable, here, that a palpable distance emerges between the framework of his initial critical practice at *Cahiers* (and the early period of his academic scholarship) and the outlook adopted in his writings dating from the 1990s on.

In *L'Image* (first published in 1990), for instance, the perceived need to incorporate questions of visual perception and optical geometry into his study of the visual image leads Aumont towards a distinctly phenomenological orientation. For someone whose intellectual formation was in Althusserian Marxism's theories of the ideologically constructed nature

44 Aumont, *L'Œil interminable*, p. 317.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 345.

of humanity's perceptual relationship with the world, this move may be surprising. When interviewed, Aumont nonetheless affirmed that "I remain attached to phenomenology, and have been so even before I realized it. I was already a phenomenologist without knowing it." Although he stresses that he is not, strictly speaking, a philosopher, a phenomenological outlook is nonetheless the "state of mind" that Aumont finds closest to his own viewpoint: "The only reference that I can find is in phenomenology—and Merleau-Ponty more than Husserl, incidentally."⁴⁶ Symptomatic of Aumont's predilection for substantially revising his texts when they are republished, *L'Image* has undergone sweeping transformations over the course of the three editions released between 1990 and 2011, both in order to remain up-to-date with current developments in the field and to reflect the shifts in his own thinking on the subject.⁴⁷ It is notable, however, that a concern for the nature of visual perception and a phenomenological account of this field of investigation remain in place throughout all three editions of *L'Image*; if anything, the references to Merleau-Ponty and Sartre become more prevalent in the more recent renderings of the text.

The motivation for a study of the visual image in the broader sense—discussing "what all visual images have in common, whatever their nature, form, use and mode of production, and whatever their significant differences"—is motivated in Aumont's introduction to the original version of *L'Image*. In this account, his project emerges from two key observations made while teaching the theory and aesthetics of film. Firstly, "film theory cannot develop in splendid isolation"; instead, it must be "historically and theoretically articulated with other forms of concrete visual imagery, such as painting, photography and video." Secondly, although Aumont is dubious about banal evocations of a modern-day "civilization of the image," he nonetheless accepts that "we all, to some extent, have experienced living in a world where images are not only proliferating but becoming increasingly varied and interchangeable," with the result that "no single category of the image could be studied in isolation without taking into account

46 Interview with Jacques Aumont, May 8, 2015.

47 In fact, publishing updated editions to his work was something Aumont regularly carried out: *Montage Eisenstein* has had two editions; *Esthétique du film* five; *L'Analyse des films*, three; *L'Œil interminable*, three; *L'Image*, three; *Dictionnaire théorique et critique du cinéma*, two; *Les Théories des cinéastes*, two; *Matière d'images*, two; and *Le Cinéma et la mise en scène*, two. Often the texts underwent widespread revision for their re-publication. Of this practice, Aumont made the tongue-in-cheek remark: "All you have to do is throw out the first version. By definition, the second is better." Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 20, 2014.

all the others.⁴⁸ As such, *L'Image* remains on a general conceptual level, and the first edition of the book is structured around five broad areas of inquiry: visual perception; the psychological and cognitive functioning of spectatorship; the *dispositif* (that is, the social, institutional and ideological contexts of viewing an image); representation and signification; and, finally, the image as produced for artistic purposes.⁴⁹

It is primarily in the first section that a detailed discussion of human vision drawing on phenomenological accounts of perception is in evidence. Here, Aumont discusses the functioning of the eye, the nature of light and the perception of space, depth and movement, the “double perceptual reality” of images (which are perceived both as two-dimensional surfaces and as representations of a three-dimensional field), optical illusions and the figure-ground duality. In his conclusion to this section, Aumont is categorical: “there is no image that is not the perception of an image.” Whereas images are cultural and historical objects, the eye is “the most universal of instruments,” and Aumont resists a cultural relativist account of vision, instead insisting on its inherently human quality. He admits that studies of the perception of images should be on guard about ethnocentrism and of extrapolating experiments carried out in Western, industrialized societies, and yet “the intercultural study of visual perception has provided us with ample evidence that subjects who have never seen an image have an innate capacity to see the objects represented in an image along with their compositional organization.” Aumont concludes that the *perception* of images, as opposed to their *interpretation*, is “a process which is characteristic of the human species and which has simply become more cultivated in some societies than in others. The part played by the eye is common to everyone and should not be underestimated.”⁵⁰

Notwithstanding the importance of the “part played by the eye” in the perception of images, Aumont devotes ample space to a discussion of the *dispositif* of the visual image, substantially drawing on the “apparatus theory” debates of the 1970s, towards which he was far from taking a hostile stance. Here it is notable that Comolli’s “Technique et idéologie” is granted a privileged position and considered to be among “the most important texts rehearsing these questions.”⁵¹ Aumont makes minor criticisms of certain

48 Jacques Aumont, *L'Image*, 1st ed. (Paris: Nathan, 1990), pp. 3-4. Translated as *The Image*, trans. Claire Pajackowska (London: BFI, 1997), p. 1.

49 The two later editions of the book would modify this structure substantially.

50 The quotes in this paragraph are from *ibid.*, p. 52 [p. 50].

51 *Ibid.*, p. 139 [p. 135].

points in Comolli's discussion, including his outdated invocation of the "persistence of vision," his tendency to conflate the ideology of realism with the ideology of the visible, and his propensity to be carried away by his own polemics on the relationship between the "ideological" and "scientific" aspects of the cinematic apparatus. "Technique et idéologie" nonetheless has the merit of presenting, in Aumont's view, "a systematic account of the way we conceive of the relations between the image (especially the photographic image), its technique, its *dispositif* and the ideology that convey the latter to the spectator."⁵² Moreover, while the Aumont of 1990 acknowledges that the debates on the cinematic apparatus in which Comolli intervened have lost the central position they had in the field of film studies during the 1970s, he does so with a palpable sense of remorse:

After having been the object of innumerable discussions for a whole decade, these theses are today rather forgotten, mainly because of the generalized (and wrongful) neglect of their Althusserian and Marxist frames of reference. The debate on history may still be very contemporary, but the concept of ideology as defined fairly precisely by Marxist criticism has fallen into disuse. Despite the aporias in any definition of ideology, there are good reasons to regret this abandonment: the theoretical void it left has been rapidly filled by a smug empiricism based on statistics, quantitative studies and crude "common sense."⁵³

By the time of the 2011 edition of *L'Image*, this perception of distance from the 1970s debates on the cinematic apparatus has grown all the greater, while any sense of regret on Aumont's part has been minimized. The chapter on the *dispositif* is now subsumed into a broader discussion on "The Image, the Medium, the *Dispositif*," with Aumont arguing that "theorizations of the *dispositif*, belonging to the vocabulary and concepts of the psychoanalysis-inspired semiology of the 1970s, [...] today have everything to gain from being put into perspective through a more contemporary consideration of the medium of the image."⁵⁴ The passages on "Technique et idéologie" have here been radically pared back, and the terms in which they are discussed are more perfunctory: Comolli's text is now merely "an interesting testament to this quarrel" and "proposes some interesting ideas for a reflection on the link between the history of the sciences, that of technical inventions, and

52 Ibid., p. 140 [p. 136].

53 Ibid., p. 141 [p. 137].

54 Jacques Aumont, *L'Image*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), p. 5.

that of artistic ideas.” The “Marxo-Freudian” framework in which Comolli wrote “Technique et idéologie,” meanwhile, is “today forgotten, for better or for worse,” and the study of the “ideological” determination of film technique is principally “the domain of historians.”⁵⁵

If *L'Image* sees Aumont enact a significant turn towards phenomenology, this nonetheless does not entail a fresh preoccupation with Bazin's film theory, itself inspired by certain ideas of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. Indeed, of all the *Cahiers* critics of the post-1968 generation, Aumont probably remains the most impervious to Bazinian ontology. Aumont now admits that the polemical assimilation of Bazin's ideas with those of cinematic “transparency” in his 1979 article “Griffith, le cadre et la figure” represents “one of the botched aspects of this text” and that “the Bazin treated in this article is a rather imaginary Bazin.”⁵⁶ And yet his more recent film theory has remained reasonably unconcerned with that of the founder of *Cahiers*, as is evident in the 2005 book *Matière d'images*. In this collection of texts dealing with the “materiality” of the cinematic image, Aumont explicitly avoids any discussion of an ontological relationship between the film image and the profilmic reality, a form of “presence” that he ascribes to the “essentialism” of Bazin.⁵⁷ Despite noting his admiration for the Bazinian tradition, Aumont avers that it paid “little heed to the matter of the image” and avows an influence from two other, quite distinct sources: Jean Epstein's theories of *cinégénie* (the “intelligence” of the cinematic machine) and Jean Louis Schefer's notion that images are not “pre-formed vehicles for signification” but “tools for thinking.”⁵⁸ Hence, the “matter of images” that is of most interest to Aumont consists neither of its ontological relationship with the model—the conception of which, he yields, can be of a perfectly materialist nature (as in Straub/Huillet)—nor of the physical existence of the celluloid strip, subject to productive aesthetic treatment by experimental filmmakers such as Brakhage or the “structuralist-materialist” movement. Rather, it entails such components of the cinematic image as lighting, shadow, grain, color, montage effects, framing and visual composition. Aumont aligns these elements with Lyotard's notion of the figural, defined as “that which in the image exceeds (or subverts) the figurative and the figured, that which can be

55 Ibid., pp. 142-143.

56 Interview with Jacques Aumont, May 5, 2014.

57 Jacques Aumont, *Matière d'images, redux* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 2009), p. 14. This is an augmented second edition of *Matière d'images* (Paris: Images Modernes, 2005).

58 Ibid., pp. 10-11. Aumont also oversaw an edited collection on Epstein, which was an early contribution to the recent renaissance of scholarship on the French filmmaker. See *Jean Epstein: Cinéaste, poète, philosophe* (Paris: Cinémathèque française, 1998).

seen neither as mimesis nor as metaphor, but which participates in a dynamic specific to the image (or to the figure in the image)."⁵⁹ That these aspects of film form have been a central preoccupation for Aumont is evident not only in the articles reproduced in *Matière d'images*, which discuss the role of mirrors in the films of Rivette, Bergman and Cassavetes, the relationship of Hitchcock to painting, Kubrick's use of color, or the presence of "phantom materials" in the found-footage films of Bruce Conner. It is also apparent in Aumont's other book-length studies from the 1990s and 2000s, the very titles of which are an indication of their more prolonged exploration of particular manifestations of cinematic materiality: *Du visage au cinéma* (1992), *Introduction à la couleur: des discours aux images* (1994), *L'Attrait de la lumière* (2010) and *Le Montreur d'ombre* (2012).

Film Analysis Analyzed

Aumont's interest in the idea, derived from Schefer, that artistic objects are "forms that think" also informs his most important text of the 1990s, *À quoi pensent les films* (1996). Here, the very act of film analysis itself is placed under analysis. Indeed, the presiding question of Aumont's book is posed in its very first sentence: "How to understand a film?" For a figure who has dedicated his life to the critical scrutiny of films, the query is evidently a crucial one. With the advent of film studies as a university discipline, film criticism has been transformed into film analysis, a far more methodologically rigorous mode of interpretation. But Aumont still insists that cinematic images "have generally been poorly evaluated."⁶⁰ The goal of Aumont's text is therefore to "explore the powers of film analysis (and, virtually, by extension, the analysis of moving images)." He specifies that the object under examination in *À quoi pensent les films* is not the cinema as a whole but specific films, sequences or shots, and it is due to this "voluntary reduction in the quantitative ambition" of his study that Aumont feels equipped to "understand the reason or reasons for each of these singular events which compose what we call films."⁶¹ It is precisely due to these "singular events" that a film, in Aumont's view, can be a "site of ideation" or an "instrument of thought," and not through the cinematic regurgitation of preconceived discourses formulated outside of the act of

59 Ibid., pp. 25-26. See also Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971).

60 Jacques Aumont, *À quoi pensent les films* (Paris: Séguier, 1997), pp. 5-6.

61 Ibid., pp. 8-9.

filmmaking itself. The cinema “thinks,” therefore, in a way that is specific to the medium and distinct from the thinking that occurs in literature, philosophy, science or even painting. It is, as Aumont will explain later in the book, a “non-verbal” mode of thought dependent on the formal procedures that underpin the production and articulation of cinematic images: “The image *presents* mental processes which, without it, would not have a form. It *transports* elements of symbolization or elements already symbolized, and does so while rearranging them, which *transforms* them. It is, in sum, on this double postulate that rests [...] the possibility of analyzing every film as the site of meaning.”⁶²

The resulting structure of Aumont’s study of film analysis was the product of circumstance: the scholar had at that time published a number of analyses of individual films, while he had also composed an incomplete text treating the question of film analysis in a more abstract fashion, and *À quoi pensent les films* alternates between these two modes of writing in a sort of “parallel montage.” But this structure is appropriate to the subject matter, itself concerned with formal combinations, alternations and contradictions. Although he wanted to avoid a text that would be a heteroclitite “grab-bag” of pre-existing articles, Aumont was aware of the lacunary nature of his project: “That, in any case, this book is not *finished*, is clear to me, and is only acceptable on the condition (and not only as an intention) of genuinely taking it to be one moment in an almost interminable work, that of defining film analysis.”⁶³

A provisional tone, then, dominates Aumont’s study. His discussion nonetheless progresses step by step though the different stages of film analysis: beginning with a historical overview of the “powers of analysis,” he proceeds to highlight the importance of two acts without which analysis would be impossible: firstly, the “reductive” gesture of assignation (giving an image its technical, historical or stylistic context) and secondly, the “inventive” gesture of interpretation, that is, grasping the meaning or significance of an image.⁶⁴ Subsequently, in a chapter given the Malrucian title “L’Enfance de l’art,” Aumont argues that the act of analysis should leave the last word to the image itself and not to the analyst, and he warns against “a dangerous conception of immanentism” in critical interpretation, which can take two opposing forms: “either it has absolute confidence in descriptions, considering them as self-justifying because objective, estimating that analysis

62 Ibid., pp. 156-157.

63 Ibid., p. 11.

64 Ibid., pp. 88-89.

ends with them; [...] or it transforms the immanent into the systematic, at least virtually, as the majority of structural analyses have the tendency to do.”⁶⁵ Again, Aumont returns to the idea that the goal of film analysis is to highlight the act of thought contained within the image itself, but here he qualifies the proposition: “if the image is a solution,” he writes, it is a solution not to a precise, unambiguously circumscribed problem but rather to “a figurative or formal enigma.”⁶⁶ By the same token, however, Aumont refuses a formalist account of film analysis. Although politics is, in this period, mostly absent from his writings on the cinema, the former *Cahiers* critic makes an unexpected return to his militant roots by insisting that:

The analysis of the image [...] only has meaning, importance and, in the end, value, if it targets the relationship of the cinema with thought and with politics: in this way, its strategic ambition is to contradict all enterprises whose common characteristic is to reduce analysis to what a film “means,” either by assuming creative intentions, or, worse and more dangerously, by locating in its surface *énoncé* the trace of pre-fabricated “ideological” *énoncés*. But, symmetrically, it is also essential to refuse an absolutely immanentist practice. The reproach made about the formalists, that they evade ideology, is often unwarranted, but crucial nonetheless.⁶⁷

Following the model of the “*par ailleurs...*” (then again...) of Bazin and Malraux, which uses this phrase to reverse the thrust of a text’s argument in its concluding sentence,⁶⁸ Aumont concludes his study with a series of “*par ailleurs*.” “Then again,” he admits, “films tell stories.”⁶⁹ They are also impregnated with a specific rhythm, which, in its qualitative rather than quantitative sense, is notoriously difficult to subject to analytic interpretation. Finally, and most crucially, film analysis is a fundamentally aleatory, arbitrary and erratic practice. For Aumont, viewing images is, “*par ailleurs, par ailleurs, par ailleurs,*” the “provocation of an encounter.”⁷⁰

65 Ibid., p. 244.

66 Ibid., p. 246.

67 Ibid., p. 258. A footnote in Aumont’s text nonetheless critiqued the “*Young Mr. Lincoln*” article for univocally assigning a “castrating function” to the gaze of Henry Fonda in the film.

68 See André Malraux, *Esquisse d’une psychologie du cinéma* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2003 [1939]), p. 77; and André Bazin, “L’Ontologie de l’image photographique,” in idem., *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma? vol. I*, pp. 11-19, here p. 19. Translated as “Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in idem., *What is Cinema?*, trans. and ed. Barnard, pp. 3-12, here p. 10. Bazin actually uses the synonymous phrase “d’autre part” when writing “Then again, the cinema is a language.”

69 Aumont, *À quoi pensent les films*, p. 259.

70 Ibid., p. 262.

Earlier in *À quoi pensent les films*, Aumont makes the intriguing claim that there is “a certain amphibology” between the object of analysis and the analysis that is carried out on it (as well as, by extension, the individual making the analysis), as if a process of mimesis had taken place between them. The examples he highlights, indeed, are those of figures close to him, such that Aumont even sounds a warning about the possibility of indiscretion: Raymond Bellour’s analysis of *The Birds* is as masterfully meticulous as Hitchcock’s film, Marie-Claire Ropars develops her notion of a “divided text” on the model of Duras’ *India Song*, Stephen Heath’s analysis of *Touch of Evil* replicates the complex, meandering intricacy of its model. Thus, the object of analysis is, to borrow Eisenstein’s terminology, “non-indifferent” to the analyst. More specifically, both the object (if it is worthy of analysis) and the analyst (if they prove to be equal to the task) are marked by a common quality, that of inventiveness. “The work that matters for analysis is that which invents something. And, since a signifying practice, a language or an art can only invent new conceptual content by also inventing new modes of expression, the work is that which poses a problem of expression—or, better, which gives a solution to this problem.”⁷¹

The temptation, of course, is to ask if the same amphibology is operative in the analyses of specific films carried out by Aumont. At issue here is not the presence of biographical analogies but whether Aumont’s critical analysis itself parallels the textual models of the films he analyzes. *À quoi pensent les films* includes close discussions of *Che cosa sono le nuvole?* by Pasolini, *Man with a Movie Camera* by Vertov, *La Chute de la maison Usher* by Epstein, *La Naissance de l’amour* by Garrel, *Moses und Aron* by Straub/Huillet and *Nouvelle Vague* by Godard. Certainly, the blend of visual sensitivity and theoretical erudition present in Aumont’s writing finds echoes in this corpus of films. Moreover, the filmmakers Aumont discusses all, undeniably, form part of the *Cahiers* canon dominant during the time he wrote for the journal. While Aumont’s theoretical and ideological points of reference have markedly changed since his time at *Cahiers*, his taste in cinema—his *goût*—has remained remarkably constant across the decades. This fidelity to the cinematic corpus encountered while at *Cahiers* is also represented in the book-length studies Aumont has dedicated to individual filmmakers in the 1990s and 2000s. *Amnésies* (1997) focused on Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, while *Ingmar Bergman: mes films sont l’explication de mes images* (2003)

71 Ibid., p. 124.

covered the œuvre of the Swedish cinéaste, and *Notre-Dame des Turcs* (2010) centered on Carmelo Bene's incendiary debut film. All three, it should be recalled, are filmmakers who were central to Aumont's critical maturation at *Cahiers* in the late 1960s.

Of the three books, *Amnésies*, with its detailed discussion of the modalities of montage in Godard's 4½-hour video essay, is methodologically closest to the concerns of *À quoi pensent les films*. Indeed, Aumont had the privilege of watching, over the course of a decade, various provisional versions of the work as it was being completed by Godard, and he penned a number of articles on *Histoire(s)* during these years.⁷² His argument that film analysis is concerned with "images that think" is undoubtedly inspired by Godard's own phrase, invoked as a mantra in *Histoire(s)*, that the cinema consists of "forms that think." The Bergman monograph, by contrast, perceptibly shifts the coordinates of Aumontian analysis. If his project in the 1980s and 1990s privileged the "filmmaker as artist" over the "filmmaker as author," *Ingmar Bergman* reverses the dualism, evincing a concern for thematic traits in the narratives of Bergman's films that fulfil the "*par ailleurs*" of *À quoi pensent les films* as well as anticipating the later study *Limites de la fiction*, which returns to the issue of narrative fiction in the cinema after a long period during which this question had been bracketed off by Aumont.⁷³

The growing concern for fiction in Aumont's film aesthetics, after questions of narrative had been largely evacuated from his conceptual framework, was only one of the changes that his theory would undergo in the early years of the twenty-first century. From this point on, issues relating to more recent manifestations of image culture—digital imagery, video art, television, the Internet, even video games—would assume a central position in his thinking. For this reason, the thread of Aumont's film theory will be momentarily dropped, to be picked up again later: the work he carried out in the 2000s and 2010s, equally as prolific as in earlier decades, will be discussed in the final chapter of this book.

72 See Jacques Aumont, "Leçon de ténèbres," *Cinémathèque* no. 10 (Autumn 1996), pp. 5-11; Jacques Aumont, "Beauté, fatal souci. Note sur un épisode des *Histoire(s) du cinéma* de Jean-Luc Godard," *Cinémathèque* no. 12 (Autumn 1997), pp. 17-24; and Jacques Aumont, "La Mort de Dante," *CINÉMAS* vol. 8 no. 1-2 (Autumn 1997), pp. 125-145. When interviewed, Aumont divulged that his partner Anne-Marie Faux, who worked as an assistant for Godard, between 1989 and 1993, provided him with copies of provisional versions of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*.

73 Jacques Aumont, *Limites de la fiction: Considérations actuelles sur l'état du cinéma* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2014).

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20. Two *Ciné-fils*: Pascal Kané and Serge Daney

Abstract

This chapter examines the phenomenon of cinephilia through the work of two *Cahiers du cinéma* critics: Pascal Kané and Serge Daney. To reckon with the affective, deeply personal role that his relationship with film played in his life, Serge Daney coined the word *ciné-fils* (“cine-son”) as a pun on the more usual *cinéphile*, a term with which Kané has also identified. But their cinephilia has manifested itself in different ways since their time at *Cahiers*: for Kané, critical writing has taken a back seat to his efforts as a filmmaker, while Daney joined the newspaper *Libération* in 1981, where he wrote prolifically on contemporary cinema over the following decade. These writings now form a touchstone for understanding the transformations that the cinema underwent during a period of defeat and disorientation for the left-wing cultural milieu with which Daney and *Libération* were associated.

Keywords: *Cahiers du cinéma*, Pascal Kané, Serge Daney, cinephilia, *Libération*, mannerism

A Genealogy of Inspiration: Pascal Kané’s Film Criticism

While Aumont imported the theoretical legacy of the *Cahiers* project into the purportedly objective or even “scientific” discursive field of academic scholarship, two of his former colleagues took their relationship with the cinema into more subjective, affective realms. After leaving *Cahiers* in the early 1980s, Pascal Kané and Serge Daney went in different professional directions, with Kané turning to filmmaking and Daney practicing criticism in a new guise, as a reviewer for the left-wing daily *Libération*. Both, however, profoundly remained “amateurs” of the cinema, and their work has been marked by a deep interrogation of the phenomenon of cinephilia—that is,

of the emotional attachment, or even love, that they and their generation of Parisian film obsessives have had with the cinema. Of course, this mode of film appreciation had suffered a bracing critique by none other than *Cahiers* itself during its Marxist period, when the journal came perilously close to a “cinophobic” attitude towards film spectatorship. Later, the rise of television threatened to kill off the cultural practice of cinephilia altogether, as film attendance dropped precipitously throughout the 1970s and 1980s and large numbers of movie theaters closed their doors. A combination of nostalgia for and critique of their cinephilic past, therefore, was central to the activities of Kané and Daney, both during their time at *Cahiers* and after they left the journal.

Daney, for his part, devised a term for the quasi-familial relationship he enjoyed with the cinema, the role it played as a kind of surrogate father during his formative years: he famously claimed to be not merely a cinephile but a *ciné-fils* (film son). The same could be said of Kané, who has persistently explored the links between cinephilia and childhood in both his criticism and his filmmaking. More recently, Kané has used an anecdotal event the two close friends shared to describe the qualities that unite their outlooks. Riding together on a train from Aix-en-Provence back to Paris one evening, they struck upon “the correct way to formulate a question that had, in our opinion, been poorly framed until then: that of know-how [*savoir-faire*] and intended meaning [*vouloir-dire*], two false values in art, which have nonetheless encumbered critical discourse.” Film criticism would profit, they wagered, if these two notions were replaced by the more “operative” values of *vouloir-faire* (wanting to do) and *savoir-dire* (knowing how to say), “two aleatory concepts issued from our own critical practice.”¹ This chapter will thus look at the ways in which these two *ciné-fils* integrated the principles of *vouloir-faire* and *savoir-dire* into their reflection on the cinema, which took the various guises of criticism, journalism and filmmaking.

In Kané’s initial writings on the cinema, from his early years at *Cahiers* in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this critical approach was channeled above all in his appraisal of the work of Roman Polanski, even if the Polish-born filmmaker was not an obvious target for the journal’s approbation. Kané’s first published piece of criticism was, fittingly, an article on Polanski’s French production *Cul-de-sac*: here, already, he remarked that the filmmaker “continues to work in a cinema that is lightly anachronistic (the timelessness of the problems), traditional (the direction of the actors, the choice

1 Pascal Kané, *Savoir dire pour vouloir faire* (Crisnée: Yellow Now, 2015), pp. 18-20.

of the scripts, his 'style') and theatrical (a restricted number of typecast characters, a single place of action).² From the perspective of the present day, Kané affirms that his attraction to Polanski's works stems from the director's capacity to "affirm an originality by means of generic codes,"³ and indeed the tension in Polanski's cinema between the cultivation of an individual filmmaking style and an interest in working within the structures of commercial genre cinema was already discerned in Kané's writings at the time. A December 1968 review of *Rosemary's Baby*, for example, notes "the seriousness with which this very gifted director treats rather naïve, musty genres like horror, vampire movies or the supernatural thriller."⁴ Here, the "abundance of signs" that the film is invested with leads critics to read it in multiple ways: on the level of its surface narrative (a coven of witches in contemporary New York), on a "critical level" that would question the sanity of Mia Farrow's character, and on a third level that arises from the combination of the two prior readings, one that interrogates the status of the spectator and recognizes that it is in the mechanisms governing the interaction of these interpretative modes that the viewer's "fascination" for the film is produced.

This critical discussion is deepened in Kané's monograph on Polanski, published in the "7eme Art" collection by the Éditions du Cerf in 1970 and one of the first book-length studies undertaken by the post-1968 generation of *Cahiers* critics. As with his two critical pieces on Polanski, Kané's longer essay centers on Polanski's relationship with film genres and the problematic of the artistic corpus that this practice raises. If a filmmaker works across multiple genres in varying registers (from earnest sincerity to parodic farce) and with starkly different stylistic hallmarks, how can we speak of their work as constituting a cohesive corpus? In the case of Polanski, Kané argues, the director's œuvre is united by the fact that everything he makes, regardless of the genre it occupies, is a "theoretical" film, whereby the genre is knowingly chosen in order precisely to highlight the period of nostalgic decadence that Hollywood cinema had entered by the late 1960s.⁵ If all of Polanski's films are characterized by the "opposition between a neutral, objective universe and a world or rather a mental milieu in perpetual transformation that gives rise to phantasms," then this recurrent trope

2 Pascal Kané, "Le château vide (*Cul-de-sac*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 187 (February 1967), p. 70.

3 Interview with Pascal Kané, March 12, 2014.

4 Pascal Kané, "Everybody loves my baby (*Rosemary's Baby*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 207 (December 1968), pp. 81-82, here p. 81.

5 Pascal Kané, *Roman Polanski* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1970), pp. 20-21.

can also be seen as proposing a “metaphor of the cinema,” which is most profitably to be seen not as an “analogous world” to our own but as a universe with its own laws and logic.⁶

From this provisional judgement, Kané shifts to a discussion of the role of fascination and ideology in Polanski’s cinema. For Kané, Polanski’s work is part of a broader rupture with the traditional model of the spectator as possessing a naïve, depoliticized fascination for film. The cinema of the 1960s bears witness to the acquisition of “ideological awareness” among the audience, for whom “the cinema has definitively lost its innocence.”⁷ But Polanski’s cinema is distinct from the work of Godard or Straub/Huillet by dint of occupying a central place *within* the cinematic mainstream. In essence, Polanski critiques and demystifies the spectacle of Hollywood cinema from inside the spectacle itself. In order to do so, the director demands a “complex reading” of his films, which are exceptional in their ability to provoke multiple and contradictory interpretations. For Kané, the basis of this divided reading is the irreducible contradiction between the two components of the image: signification and expressivity. The “principal lesson” of Polanski’s films, therefore, is that the cinematic image can be reduced neither to its “message” (a “pure ‘signification’”) nor to its “expressivity” (its auteurist style) but arises from the interaction between these two signifying levels.⁸

The publication of Kané’s book, importing concepts drawn from the literary theory of Barthes, Genette and Todorov into a cultural format that had hitherto been the preserve of a more Romantic strain of cinephilia, incited resistance from other critical quarters. In *Le Monde*, for instance, Patrick Séry condescendingly estimated the monograph to be “a little adolescent” and said of its ostensibly obtuse writing style, “the fact that the author is a critic for *Cahiers du cinéma* leaps out at you.” The *Cahiers* editors took umbrage at this “disdainful dispatch,” penning a letter responding to Séry’s criticisms, which *Le Monde* declined to publish.⁹ *Cahiers*’ own review of Kané’s book was, as could be expected, far more positive, with Baudry highlighting the value of his impulse to highlight “the *modernity* of a cinema such as that

6 Ibid., p. 27

7 Ibid., p. 38.

8 Ibid., p. 52.

9 Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, “Lettre au *Monde*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 226-227 (January-February 1971), p. 121. This letter, dated January 10, 1971, quotes at length from Séry’s original article, which appeared in the January 7 edition of *Le Monde*.

practiced by Polanski; a modernity all the more difficult to clarify for the fact that these films ‘mime’ classicism.”¹⁰

In his response to Polanski’s later films, Kané extended the critical apparatus he had established in his monograph, and in 1979, upon the release of *Tess*, Kané finally had the opportunity to interview the director.¹¹ Furthermore, Kané’s enduring appreciation for Polanski’s work enabled him to identify the merits of New Hollywood cinema at a time when his fellow *Cahiers* critics were slow to give it recognition. While he judged Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* to be a “mediocre product” whose only value was the “privileged symptom” of the economic and political crisis of the Western bourgeoisie posed by its extraordinary popular success, *Taxi Driver* and *Dog Day Afternoon* were received far more positively.¹² But it was the work of Brian De Palma that elicited Kané’s most considered critical response: beyond superficial resemblances with Hitchcock, De Palma’s representation of monstrosity is infused with a “passion for difference” that critiques not only the racism of American society but also a certain *bien-pensant* humanist anti-racism that “represses the idea of difference.” It is this attitude that is at the root of the “violent, impossible, mortal passions” in De Palma’s films, which are “destined to failure in that they aim only to preserve the *worst* of their object: the return to the norm, to recognition, to *indifference*.”¹³

In one of his last articles for *Cahiers*, Kané returned his critical focus to classical cinema, analyzing the contradictions between the three incarnations of the Mabuse figure in the films of Fritz Lang, a symptomatic reflection both of the evolution of the cinema and of the historical changes in Germany between 1920, 1933 and 1959. He concludes here that “it is not the search for and affirmation of mastery that renders Lang’s cinema so remarkable, but, on the contrary, the terror before the realization of this

10 Pierre Baudry, “Un livre,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 228 (March-April 1971), pp. 64-65, here p. 64. Baudry nonetheless cautions that “the process of designation-critique engaged by Polanski of certain codes and genres is in no way sufficient to legitimately subvert their problematic.”

11 See Pascal Kané, “La ville des feintes (*Chinatown*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 256 (February-March 1975), pp. 63-64; and Roman Polanski, interviewed by Serge Daney, Pascal Kané and Serge Toubiana, “Entretien avec Roman Polanski,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 306 (December 1979), pp. 4-11. *Cahiers* had previously interviewed Polanski in 1969, but Kané was not involved in that conversation.

12 Pascal Kané, “Le secret derrière la peur (*L’Exorciste*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 253 (October-November 1974), p. 41. See also Pascal Kané, “*Taxi Driver*; *Un après-midi de chien*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 268-269 (July-August 1976), p. 99.

13 Pascal Kané, “Note sur le cinéma de Brian de Palma,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 277 (June 1977), pp. 59-60, here p. 60.

mastery.”¹⁴ After departing from *Cahiers* in the early 1980s, Kané only made rare forays into film criticism, preferring to concentrate his energies on filmmaking instead. One major exception is the text “Généalogie de l’inspiration,” presented as a lecture at the Cinémathèque française in 1995 and first published in 2000. Here, Kané reclaims the “unloved” concept of aesthetic inspiration and discloses that “what has particularly inspired me are the forms of classical Hollywood cinema” that are capable of “visually concretiz[ing], through their *mise en scène*, the themes of their authors.”¹⁵ As such, Kané finds himself drawn principally to “narrator-filmmakers” (rather than “artist-filmmakers” or “poet-filmmakers”), and he discusses the work of Elia Kazan, Joseph L. Mankiewicz and Nicholas Ray through this optic. From the radical deconstruction of “narrative transitivity” dominant during *Cahiers*’ “Freudo-Marxist” period, then, Kané has embarked on a critical return to the classical aesthetics of American cinema, with its traditional approach to storytelling and *mise en scène*, even if the thematic concerns of all three of the filmmakers he treats push against the ideological boundaries of the Hollywood system. Such a reversal can also be detected in Kané’s own filmmaking, which takes inspiration from the likes of Polanski and Mankiewicz in attempting to use the tropes of genre cinema in order to undo its ideological codification.

Cinephilia and Childhood in Kané’s Cinema

Cinephilia was at the center of one of the last great polemics on the pages of *Cahiers*. Between October 1977 and February 1978, Louis Skorecki, who had written on and off for the journal since 1963, penned the incendiary text “Contre la nouvelle cinéphilie.” The article was slated to appear in the April 1978 issue but, as Skorecki himself pointed out in a prefatory note to the text, caused a “problem” within the editorial committee, and publication was delayed until October 1978. In the text, Skorecki both delivers a paean to the obsessive, fetishistic nature of early 1960s cinephilia—seen as a purely masculine, even homosexual affair—and vituperates against the cultivated, consensual nature of post-1968 film culture, a “barring” of cinephilia in which even *Cahiers* played a role. Consequently, Skorecki violently rails

14 Pascal Kané, “Revoir Mabuse,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 309 (March 1980), pp. 48-51, here p. 51.

15 Pascal Kané, “Généalogie de l’inspiration,” in Jacques Aumont (ed.), *La Mise en scène* (Brussels: De Boeck, 2000), pp. 167-175, here p. 168. The text is reprinted, in revised form, in Kané, *Savoir dire pour vouloir faire*, pp. 229-253.

against the privileged position given to Godard and Straub by his *Cahiers* confrères and instead insists that Jacques Tourneur is “the greatest of all filmmakers.”¹⁶ If the traditional cinephilia of the cinémathèques and repertory movie theaters is dead, Skorecki nonetheless perceives a place where it can be preserved. Television, for the *Cahiers* critic and future TV reviewer at *Libération*, is now the “last place where something of the hallucinatory lucidity of yesterday’s cinephilia is still possible.”¹⁷ It was apt that Kané would be tasked with the editorial right-of-reply to Skorecki’s broadside. Assimilating Skorecki’s positions with the acritical fascination for the cinema in the *macmahonisme* of Michel Mourlet’s “Sur un art ignoré,” Kané argued that only a politically contextualized cinephilia could allow it to become “a critical school, a school for filmmakers.”¹⁸

The nexus between cinephilia and filmmaking was evidently a central preoccupation for Kané at the time: his just completed feature film debut, *Dora et la lanterne magique*, had thematically grappled with the cinephilic fascination for the film image and its parallels with the child’s captivated gaze upon the world. *Dora et la lanterne magique* was not Kané’s first experience in filmmaking: he had already directed two shorts, *La Mort de Janis Joplin* in 1973 and *À propos de Pierre Rivière* (a filmed interview with Foucault) in 1975 and was an assistant on the set of *La Cecilia*. He nonetheless recalls having to grapple with the “taboo” surrounding the desire to become a filmmaker within the *Cahiers* team in the years after 1968, which impelled “a certain discretion,” even in spite of the journal’s notable history of incubating new generations of filmmakers.¹⁹ Co-written with Raúl Ruiz, *Dora et la lanterne magique* has a fairy-tale quality to it, as the young Dora is transported to exotic lands by means of her magical apparatus (the titular lantern). The storyline’s status as an allegory for cinema spectatorship is self-evident, while the premise also allows Kané to develop what he sees as a heteroclite approach to film form, creating a kaleidoscopic collage that incorporates a wide range of image formats. Newsreel footage (of the May ’68 protests, notably), photography, graphic novels, home movies, rear projections and even pre-cinematic moving images such as shadow plays all feature in the film. While Kané contends that his film relates to “the reflection on the media that we are proposing

16 Louis Skorecki, “Contre la nouvelle cinéphilie,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 293 (October 1978), pp. 31-52, here p. 38.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

18 Pascal Kané, “Réponse à ‘C.N.C.’,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 293 (October 1978), pp. 52-54, here p. 54.

19 Kané, *Savoir dire pour vouloir faire*, p. 15.

in the new format of *Cahiers du cinéma*,²⁰ the dominant aesthetic of *Dora et la lanterne magique*, with its ample use of Méliès-like trick effects, places it in opposition to the Lumièrism closely associated with the *Cahiers* critical line. As with *La Cecilia* and *L'Olivier*, however, the journal did not hesitate to promote Kané's film, running reviews of it by Bonitzer and Bergala, as well as a long interview with Kané himself.²¹ In this dialogue, Kané distances himself from Brechtian aesthetics, despite the deeply self-reflexive quality of his film, and instead contends that "what interests me is when elements of magic, the supernatural, enchantment and fascination are in play. It's the opposite of the cinema as an instrument of knowledge."²² While he admits to the importance of Godard and Straub/Huillet for his critical understanding of the cinema, Kané states that "the only filmmaker with whom I would find a proximity on the choice of subjects" is Jacques Demy—a stance that would have been scandalous in the *Cahiers* of 1973 but passes without comment in 1977.²³ As Kané insists, *Dora et la lanterne magique* is above all a film about childhood, and one of the most engrossing parts of the filmmaking process for the fledgling director was the work required to coax a performance out of the young actress playing Dora, which, he reveals, necessarily took on a "ludic dimension" that quickly extended to the other actors on the set. As Kané later explained: "Playing a role [*le jeu*] is linked with childhood. And shooting a film is like playing. Shooting a film is a game. It's not a profession, it's not work, it's a game."²⁴

Dora et la lanterne magique had a mixed critical reception—although Kané later noted with satisfaction that the film had enduring success at children-oriented matinée screenings, thereby fulfilling his goal of making a film that could please young and old alike.²⁵ Bergala ascribed this critical bemusement to the "serene liberty" with which Kané's film thwarted the twin presuppositions of the press. Firstly, by being a film for children, *Dora et la lanterne magique* disrupted the expectation that a "*Cahiers* film" must be "theoretical, difficult and boring, intelligent but oh so austere, in any

20 Pascal Kané, "Pour un cinéma hétéroclite," *Libération*, March 1, 1978.

21 See Pascal Bonitzer, "Dora et la lanterne magique (P. Kané)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 276 (May 1977), pp. 41-42; Alain Bergala, "Dora et la lanterne magique (Pascal Kané)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 287 (April 1978), pp. 52-54; and Pascal Kané, interviewed by Pascal Bonitzer and Serge Daney, "Entretien avec Pascal Kané," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 279-280 (August-September 1977), pp. 67-80. The film itself features a scene where Daney, Narboni, Toubiana and Bonitzer play a band of Mexican rancheros.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 73

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

24 Interview with Pascal Kané, March 12, 2014.

25 Interview with Pascal Kané, May 12, 2014.

case a film of non-pleasure.” In tandem with this, however, its parodic, even deconstructive aspect also subverted the received notion of a children’s film, and the resulting confusion among reviewers led them to miss “what is principally in play in the film—to wit, the spectator’s relationship with belief.”²⁶

In Kané’s sophomore feature—1983’s *Liberty Belle*, which remains his best-known work—the thematic preoccupation with cinematic spectatorship is thrust to the fore. Although, in the 1970s, *Cahiers* fulminated against the retro mode, *Liberty Belle* was not without its own retro effects: the film takes place in 1960, at the height of the tensions surrounding the Algerian independence movement. Julien (Jerôme Zucca) is a student sent to Paris after the death of his communist father and finds himself torn between the lure of his wealthy classmate Gilles, a sympathizer with the neo-fascist *Algérie française* cause, and his philosophy teacher Vidal, a Sartrean and collaborator with Algeria’s independence movement, who enlists Julien to help him in a smuggling operation. In addition to this political intrigue, the film is also concerned with the cinema itself. *Liberty Belle*’s protagonist is an ardent filmgoer during the high watermark of Parisian cinephilia and is initially enamored with the modernism of Bergman and Antonioni. Julien’s encounter with Gilles also introduces him to the *macmahoniens*.²⁷ Early on in their friendship, Gilles expresses his distaste for the cerebral nature of *L’Avventura*, declaring with gleeful defiance that he would happily exchange “all of Antonioni’s cinema for a single shot from Raoul Walsh.” Several years later, in the film’s epilogue, Julien and Gilles seem to find a reconciliation in their cinematic predilections when they bump into each other at a screening of *Pierrot le fou*.

Alongside Luc Moullet’s *Brigitte et Brigitte* and *Les Sièges de l’Alcazar*, *Liberty Belle* is one of the most evocative depictions of the post-war film-going sub-culture in Paris. As *Libération* critic Olivier Séguret writes:

Here, cinephilia is not represented as a zone of shadows, cooped up in a complicit territory or magnified like a secret garden. Treated seriously but without any superfluous gravity, the cinema functions in *Liberty Belle* like a system of thought, with a history now rich enough for one or more dialectical or physical laws to be extracted from it. The film’s

²⁶ Bergala, “Dora et la lanterne magique,” p. 52.

²⁷ Although the *macmahoniens* were indisputably on the far right, the claim that they were also active in the movement against Algerian independence is historically contentious but remains implied rather than explicitly stated in Kané’s film.

density doubtless derives from this institution of a symbolic formula where the cinema is not just a privileged reference, but occupies an essential function.²⁸

The title of Kané's film was taken from a pinball machine that was popular at the time, and Séguret concludes his review by expressing his wish, in gaming parlance, that the "same player shoots again." Unfortunately, however, Kané's subsequent career was marked by a series of professional frustrations and obstacles, which prevented him from realizing a sustainable career as a filmmaker up until his recent death in August 2020, at the age of 74.²⁹ Shortly after *Liberty Belle* he shot the spontaneous mid-length film *Nouvelle suite vénitienne*, in which, inspired by a performance piece by the artist Sophie Calle, the actress Anne Alvaro follows a stranger around the canals of Venice. A mooted venture in Hollywood involving Ava Gardner (and, after Gardner withdrew, Cyd Charisse) never got off the ground, and Kané lamented losing four years to the project. Other proposals have fallen victim to the vagaries of the French film funding system. Over the last three decades, therefore, Kané was only able to work on a sporadic basis, but he nevertheless built up a sizable body of work, which includes three feature films (*La Fête des mères* in 1991, *L'Éducatrice* in 1995 and *Je ne vous oublierai jamais* in 2010) and numerous television projects, as well as a radio play based on the literary couple Marcel and Élise Jouhandeau (*Mésalliance*, 2012). Paradoxically, it is Kané's work for television that speaks to the thematic concerns that are personally closest to him: the 1998 telefilm *Le Monde d'Angelo*, for instance, returns to the twin themes of childhood and cinephilia that had been developed in *Dora et la lanterne magique*, while *Rêves en France* (2003) updates *Liberty Belle* by exploring the world of Parisian youth in the early twenty-first century. Kané is at his most unabashedly autobiographical in the 2001 documentary *La Théorie du fantôme*, in which, incited by the discovery of his dead father's papers, the filmmaker explores his family's tragic history. The elder Kané had migrated to France in 1925 in order to pursue studies in medicine, leaving his mother and sisters in Poland, where, during World War II, they were sent to Auschwitz and murdered. The film follows Pascal's voyage to Poland to trace his family's origins in Lodz and the village of Zgierz, his trip to Florida to meet an aging relative who survived the war, and the consecration of a ceremonial tombstone in a Jewish cemetery

28 Olivier Séguret, "Liberty Belle fait tilt," *Libération*, September 17, 1983.

29 *Cahiers* published an obituary on Kané in its October 2020 issue. See Pierre Eugène, "Pascal Kané, à l'école du cinema," *Cahiers du cinema* no. 769 (October 2020), pp. 62-63.

for his grandmother and two aunts. Having been generally absent from his critical writings, it is only in the medium of film that Kané felt able to give expression to this aspect of his personal life.

Serge Daney: From *Cahiers* to *Libération*

Unlike Kané, Daney harbored little desire to “pass ‘to the other side’ of the camera.” Soon before his death, the critic recalled a single, fruitless attempt to become a filmmaker: in 1967, he made a “masochistic” short called *Une (très) mauvaise journée*, which was never finished and which now lingers as “a bad memory, a sort of ignoble nightmare” revealing “the certainty of being led onto the wrong stage, or at least not my stage.”³⁰ The experience was never repeated, but Daney’s decision to remain faithful to his vocation as a film critic proved to be eminently justifiable. Despite his tragically premature death from AIDS on June 12, 1992 at the age of only 48, Daney’s contribution to French cinema could hardly have been more profound, and he is now generally ranked alongside André Bazin as the greatest film critic the nation has produced. This renown is above all due to the decade Daney spent as a reviewer for *Libération*, between 1981 and 1991, which was both his most quantitatively prolific period as a writer and the era in which his ideas about the cinema reached their broadest public. The impact Daney had during this period is such that his own prolific output has come to be matched by a surge in writings *on* Daney. More than any of his contemporaries at *Cahiers*, Daney’s lifework has been discussed, analyzed and championed by his peers and followers. Although, shortly before his death, Daney would lament the fact that he never wrote a “real” book, the critic published four collections of his critical writings during his own lifetime: *La Rampe* (a selection of his writings for *Cahiers* from 1964 to 1981), *Ciné journal* (featuring film reviews for *Libération* in the years 1981-1986), *Le Salaire du zappeur* (collecting the texts he wrote for a column on television in 1987) and *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sac à main* (containing articles written in the last years of his life, from 1988 to 1991). After Daney’s death, this corpus has been bolstered by the testimonial interview books *Persévérance* (with Serge Toubiana) and *Itinéraire d’un ciné-fils* (with Régis Debray). Posthumous publications also include *L’exercice a été profitable, Monsieur* (which published the notes left on Daney’s computer at the time of his death, composed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, partly as preparation

30 Daney, *Persévérance*, p. 56 [pp. 48-49].

for the “real” book he intended to write), *L'Amateur de tennis* (a selection of articles for *Libération* on tennis, Daney's second great passion), and the mammoth four-volume anthology *La Maison cinéma et le monde*, published between 2000 and 2016, which contains nearly all of the texts credited to Daney that had not been published in the aforementioned books.³¹

To this vast textual corpus can be added the swelling body of work inspired by Daney's thinking. Special issues of *Cahiers* (no. 458) and *Trafic* (no. 37) have been dedicated to the critic, along with a monograph by Jean-François Pigoullié (*Serge Daney, ou La morale d'un ciné-fils*), several academic conferences and numerous doctoral studies.³² Uniquely, Daney's life has even been the subject of a one-man play, *La Loi du Marcheur* by Nicolas Bouchaud, drawn from the critic's dialogue with Debray and first staged in 2010.³³ There are some limitations to this outpouring of exegesis, however. Much of it is consumed by personal recollections of Daney, often by his fellow *Cahiers* critics, and takes the form of a mourning work for a cherished friend. A tendency towards hagiography and a sanctification of Daney's persona at the expense of a rigorous analysis of his critical concepts are the inevitable results. In the hands of Pigoullié and his *Esprit* colleagues, meanwhile, Daney's work is infused with a quasi-theological worldview that the critic himself would have great difficulty recognizing. Daney's criticism may well rank alongside that of Bazin, but his thinking has always been more protean than that of his elder and less rooted in a consistent, underlying philosophy of the cinema. In the case of Daney, the value of his writings on film comes from the trenchancy of his critical judgements and the relations he sought to draw between the cinema and broader cultural and political questions, as well as in his interrogation of the phenomenon of cinephilia itself. It is this quality, perhaps, which has ensured that, while Daney is clamorously acclaimed in France, a familiarity with his critical ideas has remained confined to the Hexagon. Notoriously, his work has garnered little interest in the English-speaking world. Rosenbaum has

31 Not included in these meticulously compiled volumes are texts written collectively for *Cahiers*, or published under a pseudonym, as well as interviews in which Daney took part as an interviewer. For publication details of the books mentioned in this paragraph, see the list of works cited at the end of this chapter.

32 See *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 458 (July-August 1992); *Trafic* no. 37 (Spring 2001); and Jean-François Pigoullié, *Serge Daney, ou La morale d'un ciné-fils* (Lyons: Aléas, 2006). For an overview of a 2004 conference dedicated to Daney at Harvard University, see Paul Grant, “One More Effort, Americans...: A Report on ‘Beyond Film Criticism: A Symposium in Homage to Serge Daney,’” *Senses of Cinema* no. 31 (April 2004), sensesofcinema.com/2004/feature-articles/serge_daney_symposium/ (accessed January 1, 2021).

33 Nicolas Bouchaud, *La Loi du Marcheur* (Besançon: Les Solitaires intempestis, 2011).

lamented this deficiency while suggesting a reason behind it: “the fact that Daney was more of a journalist than Bazin, but also less of a theorist, has placed him in an alien zone: too theoretical for Anglo-American film journalism, yet also too journalistic for the academy.”³⁴ As of 2017, only one of the thirteen volumes credited to Daney has been translated into English: *Persévérance*, as *Postcards from the Cinema* in 2007.³⁵ Notwithstanding the exiguous proportion of Daney’s work available in English, the vast size of his critical corpus means that it can only be cursorily treated here, and to properly do it justice would require a stand-alone study. In the last chapter of this volume, I will discuss Daney’s writings on newer forms of audiovisual media, which became a particular concern for him in the latter half of the 1980s. Here, after an overview of Daney’s transition from *Cahiers* editor to *Libération* journalist, I will focus on two aspects of his film writing: the critical practice he exercised in the early 1980s, a time of major changes in film production and consumption; and the interrogation he carried out on the ties between cinephilia and history in the final years of his life, a period when he willingly saw himself as an inter-generational *porteur* (smuggler) of the cinema’s historical legacy.

There is no small irony in the fact that the figure involved with *Cahiers* in its Marxist phase who has gone on to garner the greatest reputation as a critic was also the one whose link to the journal during this time was the most tenuous and intermittent. Although it yielded articles of lasting value such as “Sur Salador,” “Vieillesse du même” and “L’Écran du fantasme,” Daney’s output between 1968 and 1973 was sporadic, and the period was marked by bouts of illness and stints where he was both intellectually and geographically distant from his colleagues. Travels to India, Africa and the Caribbean in these years interrupted his participation in the day-to-day affairs of *Cahiers* for months on end, and his views were, concomitantly, often at a tangent to the dominant voices within the editorial team. In later years, Daney not only vigorously distanced himself from the Marxism

34 Jonathan Rosenbaum, “The Missing Image,” *New Left Review* no. 34 (July-August 2005), pp. 145-151.

35 In an article for *Trafic*, whose original English version was published in *Senses of Cinema*, Rosenbaum highlighted the existence of a manuscript for a collection of Daney writings in English, provisionally titled *Cinema in Transit*. The prospective publisher declined the proposal, and it remains unpublished. See Jonathan Rosenbaum, “Daney in English: A Letter to *Trafic*,” *Senses of Cinema* no. 13 (April 2001), sensesofcinema.com/2001/film-critics/daney/ (accessed January 1, 2021). Scattered articles by Daney do exist in English, the bulk of which have been collated by Laurent Kretzschmar on the useful website *Serge Daney in English* (sergedaney.blogspot.com, accessed January 1, 2021).

espoused by *Cahiers*, he also sought to minimize the extent of his earlier political engagement, cautioning that he “had absolutely no sort of political culture” before joining *Cahiers* and that he was never attracted to “the eschatological part of Marxism, that is to say, the brighter tomorrows, and the liberation of humanity.”³⁶ If Marxist theory did interest Daney, then it was in its “absolutely tragic and living sense of history” as well as the “air of romanticism” that this outlook brought about, and if he relished his involvement with *Cahiers* at the time of its Maoist turn, then this was primarily motivated by the “will to be a part of a counter-society that would have all the benefits of a society, with its friendships, its passions, and its ruptures.” Both *Cahiers* and the communist movement were precisely such counter-societies, and the latter shared with the cinema the fact that it “is not of the realm of society”: “the two, which make the history of a century, in a terrible way have that in common.”³⁷

In its post-*gauchiste* period, of course, Daney was more central to *Cahiers*, and the journal itself gradually retrieved its prominent position in French film culture. As a result, his critical profile rose considerably, but this tendency stood in contrast to the increasingly pessimistic outlook Daney held on the state of the cinema. This downcast mood was exemplified in his contribution to the February 1980 text “Les films marquants de la décennie,” a collective look back on the cinema of the 1970s. The films that marked the decade for Daney—*Tristana*, *Ici et ailleurs*, *Milestones*, *Saló* and *La Région centrale* among them—were all characterized by their “difficult, marginal, sometimes paradoxical” production histories, proof that the “cinema-machine” had begun to malfunction. The ever-increasing chatter about a “crisis” in the cinema had the ring of a “plaintive and bitter, nostalgic and vengeful cry: what have we done to our toy? Have we broken it?” Above all, however, Daney laments what he sees as the “embourgeoisement” of the cinema, and the “inadequacy of the old specialized journals (including *Cahiers*), which no longer know how to carry out the work that no longer seems needed.” In a final knife to the heart, Daney feels compelled to concede that “it is the *Positif*-taste that has won out.”³⁸

This reflection was continued the following year in “Le cru et le cuit,” a testimonial article of sorts in which Daney, with unparalleled lucidity, focuses on the situation of contemporary French cinema. The 1970s, in his

36 Daney, *Persévérance*, pp. 140-141 [pp. 117-118].

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144 [pp. 119-120].

38 Serge Daney, “Les films marquants de la décennie (1970-1980),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 308 (February 1980), pp. 45-46, here p. 45.

view, was “the ‘post-’ decade *par excellence*: post-*nouvelle vague*, post-68, post-modern.” In the absence of any coherent artistic movements or formal schools, it came close to being an “aesthetic desert.” And yet French cinema remained unique in the world, albeit for the conservative reason that “it was in France that the old seventh art, the cinema-art-of-the-twentieth-century, had retreated the least, or the least quickly.”³⁹ This was above all due to the pre-eminence given in France to the figure of the auteur, which has been the most tenacious point of resistance against the forces threatening the continued vitality of French cinema. But this has come at the price of auteurs—in the case of figures like Rohmer, Godard and Vecchiali—needing to become their own producers, constrained to developing personal “micro-systems” in order to sustainably fund their work. If the cinema is a “radiography of the times,” then these auteur-machines, with their catch-cry of “small is beautiful,” reflect the disenchantment and minoritarian outlook of the post-*gauchiste* era in France. The utopia of transforming society may have evaporated, but a “minor cinema” can continue to be made within the margins of the industry.⁴⁰ Filmmakers like Truffaut, Resnais or Demy have fared worse in this decade because they represent the “just middle” that has, precisely, become impossible. Instead, French cinema has become “bifacial,” cloven between “the document and the fictive, the rough and the coded, the random and the *dispositif*, in short between *the raw and the cooked*.” And yet, Daney insists that French cinema “appears better armed than others to tackle the future while remaining a site of aesthetic work,” and the critic retains a belief in the ability of French cinema to “short-circuit” the duality between “raw” and “cooked” cinema and create “documentaries on the state of the material to be filmed.”⁴¹

“Le cru et le cuit,” however, represented Daney’s swansong with *Cahiers*, his final article for the journal before leaving for *Libération*. For several years already, Daney had been courted to join *Libération* by editor Serge July—who, in Daney’s mind, “simply wanted there to be a film column so that people could see a *Libération* review displayed out the front of movie-theaters”⁴²—and in the 1970s he had written occasional articles for the newspaper. In 1981, Daney finally took up July’s offer and became the newspaper’s chief film reviewer for the next decade. *Libération* had been founded in 1973 by former leftist militants, and although it had entered the

39 Serge Daney, “Le cru et le cuit,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 323-324 (May 1981), pp. 11-14, here p. 11.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

42 Serge Daney, *Itinéraire d'un ciné-fils* (Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1999), p. 108.

cultural mainstream by the early 1980s, it still retained an identity that was politically to the left of center and culturally daring. For Daney, the marriage proved to be a particularly fertile one.

A Critical Liberation

Having often referred to *Cahiers* as a family, with its attendant constraints and psychological pressures, where the importance of the group weighed heavily on the individual, Daney considered his move to *Libération* as a form of personal “liberation,” taking the promise offered by the newspaper’s moniker in the literal sense. The passage from the monthly journal—where, as a rule, “writing ‘at *Cahiers*’ has always meant writing ‘for *Cahiers*’”⁴³—to *Libération* was also a passage from “saying ‘we’” to being able to “say ‘I’” and even, by the end of his life, “me, myself.”⁴⁴ Paradoxically, then, publishing his work in the comparatively anonymous, impermanent format of a daily paper allowed Daney to develop a more personal, individualized approach to writing on the cinema, where he could continue the legacy of the *Cahiers* critical tradition without being encumbered by the journal’s manifold historical baggage. As such, writing for *Libération* was, in Daney’s words, “a sort of coming out.”⁴⁵ This turn of phrase (Daney uses the English term) can also be understood in the stricter sense: the film team Daney recruited for *Libération* was “80% homosexual” and included fellow queer *Cahiers* alumni such as Jean-Claude Biette and Louis Skorecki. Daney also recalls the sensation of pleasure he felt in the work rhythms of a daily production schedule, which entailed “spending the night [writing an article], bringing it to the newspaper the next day, following it to the printing press and leaving at 1am after seeing the layout, even helping the compositor add a title or a caption.”⁴⁶ It is perhaps no wonder, then, that Daney has spoken of his time at *Libération*, especially the years 1981-1986, when his mental energies were squarely focused on the cinema, as a personal “golden age.”⁴⁷ In like fashion, the texts he produced during this period represent one of the high points of French film criticism. On a near daily basis, Daney wrote on the cinema, but the critical practice he developed in these years was not confined to the

43 Serge Daney, *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sac à mains* (Lyons: Aléas, 1991), p. 93.

44 Daney, *Persévérance*, p. 103 [p. 84].

45 *Ibid.*, p. 150 [p. 125].

46 Daney, *Itinéraire d'un ciné-fils*, p. 108.

47 *Ibid.*

mundane acts of film reviewing, of mere evaluation or publicity. Instead, each of his texts, no matter how brief, is centered on a fundamental *idea* of the cinema and its place in the world. Daney's *Libération* articles attest to the encounter of a critical intelligence with the output of the medium in the early to mid-1980s, and, taken in their totality, they present an encyclopedic overview of the state of cinema at the time he was writing.

Despite the breadth and undeniable diversity of his textual output in the first half of the 1980s, several through-lines in Daney's treatment of film are readily apparent. The first is a general concern with a regressive tendency in the cinematic mainstream, which Daney variously gives the name "mannerism," "academicism," the "baroque age of cinema" or, most caustically, "filmed cinema" and which was often the result of the corrosive effects of television on film aesthetics. The fears raised in *Cahiers* about the prospects for the cinema in the 1980s, therefore, seemed to have been realized. Here, it was not so much the hegemonic rise of the Hollywood blockbuster that was of the most concern. When faced with a box office hit such as *E.T.*, for instance, Daney responded to the enthusiasm his former *Cahiers* colleagues expressed towards the film with wry detachment, remarking on its global popularity: "We still don't have the box office figures from Uranus. On Mars, the film was a hit and the (reputedly demanding) audiences on the rings of Saturn crowned the film a triumph. Neptune wants it for a festival of Earthling cinema and Pluto has already snapped up the rights for it."⁴⁸

More troubling, for Daney, were those films which, despite being made within the auteurist production model, appeared to resurrect what Truffaut famously labeled the "*tradition de qualité*." Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Iron* was critiqued both for its "'ideological' project" of "*reconciling* the maximum number of people" and for its "academic" importation of the forms of the American docudrama, leading Daney to dub the Pole "a great *téléaste*."⁴⁹ From Germany, Ulrich Edel's *Wir kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo* was labeled an "audiovisual simulation," while *Die Fälschung* was criticized for the manner in which the "empty and grandiloquent gesture with which Volker Schlöndorff makes us a witness to the horrors of war and the pornographic nature of

48 Serge Daney, "Spielberg: On ne peut pas être et avoir *E.T.*," *Libération*, December 1, 1982, repr. in idem., *Ciné journal vol. I: 1981-1982* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1998 [1986]), pp. 204-207, here p. 204. The title of his article clearly signals it as a reply to a review for *Cahiers* by Narboni, who had described it as "an intelligent, inventive, moving and funny film, the best one, to my mind, to which Spielberg [...] has lent his name." See Jean Narboni, "Peut-on être et avoir *E.T.*?" *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 342 (December 1982), pp. 25-29, here p. 25.

49 Serge Daney, "*L'homme de fer* (Andrzej Wajda)," *Libération*, August 19, 1981, repr. in *Ciné journal vol. I*, pp. 48-54, here pp. 51, 53.

the media ends up becoming a part of this same pornography.”⁵⁰ Unsurprisingly, a high point of academicism can be found in English cinema.⁵¹ Michael Radford’s adaptation of Orwell’s *1984* was seen as “overpowering in its *academicism*,” a tendency that is defined as the “aesthetics of nihilism” and the “disabused seriousness with which one adopts the most traditional, the most worn out form in order to signify that no content calls for being exercised by the concern for a new form.”⁵² Made the same year, Julian Mitchell’s *Another Country* was even understood as a site for the *infiltration* of cinema by television, a process whereby filmmakers are reduced to “serious managers of important subjects, pretexts for film-debates and cumbersome refrains.” The cinema, in contrast to the “world ‘seen in mid-shot’ of the televisual gaze,” is an “adventure in *perception*,” a “manner of seeing the world from too far away or too closely, an art of accommodating the gaze, inventing the distances needed to find its subject.” In a nutshell, the cinema is never “on” a given subject, it is “with” it, and this is precisely, in Daney’s view, what escaped the makers of *Another Country*.⁵³

It is in response to Coppola’s work, however, that Daney most lucidly interrogates the mannerist, academicist trend in the cinema of the 1980s. Reviewing the director’s 1984 film *The Cotton Club*, he has no hesitation in labeling it a case of “filmed cinema.” The term is drawn from Jean-Claude Biette, who in a 1979 article for *Cahiers* defined this “new genre” as a “veritable corned-beef of culture” and a “synthetic soup served on a platter.”⁵⁴ Just as the term “filmed theater” is disdainfully used with respect to uninspired adaptations of theatrical works, “filmed cinema” applies to works of cinema that refer exclusively to other, pre-existing films and that have lost any sense of originality or anchoring in the real. The term was immediately appropriated by Daney, who cited it in the same issue of *Cahiers*.⁵⁵ In *Libération*, he claims that “our time is that of filmed cinema,” and this tendency even affects a figure such as Coppola, whom he considers

50 Serge Daney, “Moi, Christiane F., 13 ans droguée, prostituée (Ulrich Edel),” *Libération*, July 24, 1981, repr. in *Ciné journal vol. I*, pp. 32-35, here p. 35; and Serge Daney, “Le Faussaire (Volker Schlöndorff),” *Libération*, October 29, 1981, repr. in *Ciné journal vol. I*, pp. 65-70

51 In this regard, Daney shares the low esteem *Cahiers* traditionally held for UK filmmaking.

52 Serge Daney, “1984 (Michael Radford),” *Libération*, November 15, 1984. Repr. in idem., *Ciné journal vol. II: 1983-1986* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1998 [1986]), pp. 177-181, here p. 179.

53 Serge Daney, “La télé anglaise fait du cinéma,” *Libération*, May 14, 1984. Repr. in idem. *Ciné journal vol. II*, pp. 100-103, here p. 102.

54 Jean-Claude Biette “Gibier de passage (R.W. Fassbinder),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 301 (June 1979), pp. 49-51, here p. 51.

55 Serge Daney, “Manoel de Oliveira et *Amour de perdition*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 301 (June 1979), p. 71.

to be one of the most stimulating filmmakers working in the 1980s. Filmed cinema, for Daney, “is neither the copy nor the imitation of the old cinema, it is more like its ‘reading.’ The cinephiles who dallianced with the university (UCLA) learnt to ‘read’ the films they loved, word by word, effect by effect. Thanks to television, they did not re-watch films, they re-read them.”⁵⁶ In contrast with the classical era, there is no longer an organic link between the writing (*écriture*) of a film and the contents of its script, and the result is that Coppola swings back and forth between contemporary cinema’s two “complicit ills”: academicism and mannerism.

Within this dismal state of affairs, Daney is nonetheless able to locate certain zones of resistance, certain works that continue to attest to a vitality in the cinema. For the most part, however, the filmmakers responsible for such works are long-established members of the *Cahiers* canon. Daney remains an intransigent supporter of the work of Straub/Huillet, Godard, Rohmer, Rivette and Garrel. Other filmmakers are viewed in more ambiguous terms: Truffaut has a “Jekyll-and-Hyde” quality to him, the films of Fassbinder and Wenders bear traces of the dreaded malady of mannerism, while *Fanny and Alexander* unites within it the “three states of the cinema: classical cinema, modern cinema and baroque cinema.”⁵⁷ Certainly, Daney expanded the field of films in which he took an interest well beyond the traditional inner circle of *Cahiers* favorites, showing appreciation for the work of Lino Brocka, Theo Angelopoulos or Sergei Paradjanov. Andrei Tarkovsky, for instance, a filmmaker to whom *Cahiers* had never truly warmed, found a more rapturous reception in Daney’s *Libération* column, with *Stalker* hailed for being both a “metaphysical fable” and a “realist film” about a nation that was capable of producing the gulags.⁵⁸

Above all, however, the group of directors championed by Daney are notable for an absence: the near total lack of new, emerging filmmakers capable of speaking to the present era. Whereas the late 1960s saw a flourishing of “young cinema,” the 1980s appears to be the preserve of the old. To the extent that there are exceptions—such as Leos Carax, who had attended Daney’s lectures at Paris-III when still a teenager—these are few and far between and are precisely exceptions to the rule. If there is any film that truly typifies the decade, it is not a work in the vein of *Boy Meets Girl*, despite

56 Serge Daney, “Le chant du coton (*Cotton Club*),” *Libération*, January 3, 1985. Repr. in *La Maison cinéma et le monde vol. II*, pp. 252-256, here p. 253.

57 Serge Daney, “*Fanny et Alexandre* (Ingmar Bergman),” *Libération*, September 26, 1983. Repr. in *Ciné journal vol II*, pp. 46-50, here p. 49.

58 Serge Daney, “*Stalker* (Andrei Tarkovski),” *Libération*, February 20, 1982. Repr. in *Ciné journal vol. I*, pp. 86-90, here p. 90.

Daney's admiration for Carax's debut feature,⁵⁹ but *Ginger e Fred*, a film that is aptly described by Daney as "the new 'last Fellini.'"⁶⁰ More than a nostalgic eulogy for a lost age of cinematic spectacle, *Ginger e Fred* is, for Daney, part of a broader œuvre which, since *La dolce vita*, can be seen as "an ironic, even cynical, anticipation" of what television programming will end up becoming in the age of privatization and Berlusconi. In Daney's view, Fellini's vivid disgust for television is ironic, given that the new medium has realized the desire for a "universal spectacle" so evident in his films, which are the "polite, slightly apologetic form of what TV and advertising have transformed into a categorical imperative: *nothing exists that is not already an image.*"⁶¹

As such discussions attest, writing on the cinema could no longer be hermetically sealed off from a broader discussion of the contemporary media landscape, in which television had relegated cinema to a marginal position. Often, Daney's treatment of films meditated on their refraction through the prism of televisual aesthetics. In the latter half of the 1980s, in texts for *Libération* collected in *Le Salaire du zappeur* and *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sac à main*, this area came to dominate Daney's thinking, leading him to develop his concept of the "visual." These writings will be further discussed in Chapter 26. But already in the early 1980s, germs of this line of thought were present in Daney's writings. In an article with the indicative title, "Comme tous les vieux couples, cinéma et télévision ont fini par se ressembler," Daney argued that the institutional divorce between the two domains of the audiovisual has only resulted in the "colonization" of the cinema by the forms of the telemovie. Elements of *mise en scène* such as depth and distance have thus disappeared from film aesthetics, and, while the cinema had traditionally developed the art of the *hors-champ*, it is now being led by television towards a sovereign contempt for the frame. The modern film viewer is now presented with the latently totalitarian "reign of the single space [*champ unique*]."⁶² This assessment did not, however, prevent Daney from making aesthetic judgements of television broadcasts. He relished, for instance, the notorious "ritual of disappearance" unintentionally produced by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing when the departing president

59 See Serge Daney, "Leos Carax, première fois," *Libération*, May 17, 1984. Repr. in *La Maison cinéma et le monde vol. II*, pp. 738-740.

60 Serge Daney, "*Ginger et Fred* (Federico Fellini)," *Libération*, January 24, 1986. Repr. in *Ciné journal vol. II*, pp. 244-250, here p. 244.

61 Ibid., pp. 248-249.

62 Serge Daney, "Comme tous les vieux couples, cinéma et télévision ont fini par se ressembler," *Libération*, January 18, 1982. Repr. in *Ciné journal vol. I*, pp. 104-112, here p. 111.

exited the frame after his final televised address to the nation. The camera, embarrassingly, continued to transmit the vacant scene he left behind, yielding “an enduring void, a silence” that was “horrifying, an abomination.” With this production of an “empty shot,” the ex-president, in Daney’s eyes, at least managed to demolish, albeit inadvertently, “something of the false good health of television.”⁶³

The *Passeur*

Faced with a media situation in which cinema not only had to compete against but was also insidiously infected with the aesthetics of television and advertising, Daney was not averse to sounding notes of defiance, insisting at one point that “there is a *single* world of images” that contains both Godard’s *Passion* and a mediocre product of the entertainment industry such as *Le Choc*.⁶⁴ In later years, however, he offered a more resigned outlook to the fragmented state of image culture, stating:

The kind of cinema I defended was a single plane where you could find Straub on the one hand, and Hawks or Hitchcock on the other. This situation does not exist anymore, audiences are parcelized, the people who go and see Hollywood films have never heard of Straub, the people who like Dreyer despise Hollywood, and it’s no longer interesting to write for either of them.⁶⁵

By the beginning of the 1990s, Daney’s position became more despondent, his writing more severe. After excoriating high-profile *nouveau philosophe* Bernard Henri-Lévy and denouncing the *cinéma du look* of Jean-Jacques Beineix and Luc Besson, Daney’s withering review of Claude Berri’s retro film *Uranus* brought about the end of his employment with *Libération*.⁶⁶ The filmmaker, incensed at the take-down, won a right-of-reply after two

63 Serge Daney, “Un rituel de disparition (Giscard),” *Libération*, May 21, 1981. Repr. in *Ciné journal vol. I*, pp. 39-42, here, pp. 40-41. This moment is also discussed in the introduction to Jacques Aumont’s *Le Cinéma et la mise en scène*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), pp. 3-5.

64 Serge Daney, “*Le Choc* (avec Alain Delon),” *Libération*, June 28, 1982. Repr. in *Ciné journal vol. I*, pp. 156-160, here p. 160.

65 Serge Daney, cited from a private conversation in Reynaud, “Introduction,” p. 39.

66 For the review, see Serge Daney, “Uranus, le deuil du deuil,” *Libération*, January 8, 1991, repr. in *idem., Devant la recrudescence des vols de sacs à main*, pp. 153-156.

court cases, which he utilized to make homophobic remarks.⁶⁷ Daney felt betrayed by the perceived lack of support over the affair, stating: “I hoped that, just like in the movies, friends would come out from everywhere, with everything stopping, and saying, ‘What the hell is goin’ on here? We’re gonna pummel the guy that’s hassling our friend.’ It wasn’t all that serious in itself, but no one came out.”⁶⁸ Editor Serge July’s unfulfilled promise to write a text accompanying Berri’s reply defending his employee was particularly hurtful for Daney, and it is a failure about which July was later self-critical:

Claude Berri took *Libération* to court, a tribunal decided in his favor and forced us to publish his right-of-reply, despite my stubborn refusals. But my hands were tied. The tribunal chose the date. It coincided with the most dramatic moments of the Gulf War. Berri’s text appeared without me publicly coming to Serge Daney’s defense. That day, I wrote about the war. He would never pardon me for being absent from a battle that he judged to be fundamental. I had let Berri “pass”—as we used to say. He was right.⁶⁹

In the wake of this affair, Daney embarked on a new project, founding the quarterly periodical *Trafic*, but he was also aware of his rapidly advancing illness, from which he would die the following year, and the last twelve months of his life were marked by a concerted mission to leave behind a testament in the public domain. To this end, Daney carried out filmed dialogues with Debray, Kané and Sanbar, as well as a conversation, intended for publication, with his old *Cahiers* co-editor Toubiana, and he also spoke at length on other occasions, such as at the launch of *Trafic* in the Jeu de Paume gallery in Paris.⁷⁰ In all these forums, Daney dedicated himself to the project of exploring the multiple links between cinema, history and his own biography. It is here that his notion of the *ciné-fils* was developed, fostered by the critic’s recollections of his childhood growing up with a single mother who let the local movie-theaters function as a surrogate parent. The attachment Daney developed in these years for certain film characters—John Mohune in *Moonfleet*, the children in *Night of the Hunter*—remained a

67 Berri signed off on his text with the remark, “So long, babe!” (*Allez, salut ma poule!*). For more on this dispute, see Laurent Kretzschmar, “The ‘Berri Affair’ 3,” in *Serge Daney in English*, January 25, 2014, sergedaney.blogspot.com.au/2014/01/the-berri-affair-3-berri-affair.html (accessed January 1, 2021).

68 Daney, *Persévérance*, p. 148 [p. 124].

69 Serge July, “Serge Daney, dis voir...,” *Libération*, June 13, 1992.

70 The transcript of this speech was published as Serge Daney, “*Trafic* au Jeu de Paume,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 458 (July-August 1992), pp. 60-71.

lifelong identification, and although his first article for *Visages du cinéma* was titled “Un art adulte,” it has always been the parallels between the cinema and childhood that have fascinated the critic. At the same time, there is a tragic element to this affinity. As Daney mused in the notes that became *L'Exercice a été profitable, monsieur*: “Thesis: the cinema is childhood. An old thesis. But then: two suicides of children in Rossellini, between '45 and '51. The suicide of the cinema?”⁷¹ In a hypothesis that was developed in synchronicity with Godard and Deleuze and which will be discussed further in Chapter 25, Daney came to acknowledge that the birth of cinematic modernism, in the shadow of the horrors of World War II, represented the art form’s passage to adulthood, a loss of innocence and naïveté that would culminate in the disabused cynicism of the 1980s. Paradoxically, writing for a daily newspaper afforded Daney the opportunity to write more frequently on film history, as he covered films by Lang, Hitchcock, Dreyer and others when they were re-released in cinemas or screened on television. By the same token, the critic also came to closely identify his own life trajectory with that of the cinema, in a form of “cinephilic egocentrism.”⁷² Born the same year as *Roma città aperta*, he came of age with films such as *Nuit et brouillard* and *Hiroshima mon amour*, which represented the maturation of the art form. As Daney stated: “It took me a while to develop this idea that ‘modern’ cinema, born the same time I was, was the cinema of a kind of knowledge of the camps, a knowledge that changed the ways of making cinema.”⁷³ More morbidly, Daney even entertained the idea that his own impending death would be synchronous with that of the cinema, or at least its modernist moment: “this part of cinema I was contemporaneous with will disappear with me: the thirty glorious years of modern cinema.”⁷⁴

Daney’s retrospective account of his biography and its relationship with the cinema also led him to interrogate the role of travel in his life, his perennial fascination for distant lands. From a young age, he was fascinated with maps of the world and committed the names of capital cities to memory: “I can’t remember a time in my life when I didn’t know with certainty that Tegucigalpa was the capital of Honduras or Windhoek that of old South West Africa.”⁷⁵ Reaching adulthood, he traveled compulsively, first at his own initiative, and

71 Daney, *L'Exercice a été profitable, monsieur*, p. 234.

72 Daney, *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sacs à main*, p. 92.

73 Daney, *Persévérance*, p. 54 [p. 47].

74 *Ibid.*, p. 57 [p. 50]. The “thirty glorious years” (*trente glorieuses*) usually refers to the long post-war economic boom in France, which lasted from the *libération* in 1944 to the oil crisis of 1973.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 69 [p. 59].

then later as part of his duties at *Cahiers* and *Libération*. A trip to Haiti in 1973 even prompted Daney to write his first—and only—book-length work, a political screed against the Duvalier regime titled *Procès à Baby Doc (Duvalier, père & fils)*, published under the pseudonym Raymond Sapène.⁷⁶ Evidently, there was a common impulse behind Daney's *Wanderlust* and his cinephilia: the urge to discover the world, to encounter its geographical and cultural diversity, and to report back on these points of contact. This, indeed, is directly thematized in the mid-length documentary *Le cinéphile et le village*. Directed by Pascal Kané, who interviews Daney at length, the film now stands as one of the most penetrating dialogues between the two former *Cahiers* critics and friends, with Daney castigating television precisely for failing in its vocation as a “concrete apprenticeship of democracy,” instead becoming the communication medium for a “global village” that is notable only for its mediocrity.⁷⁷ Daney never directed his own film, but the thousands of postcards he sent back to friends and family from all over the world together constitute a sort of personalized documentary of his life, as the critic himself recognized:

One day, having a very confused understanding of the chronological unfolding of my life, I realized that the only line I could lay out to establish my trajectory year by year was the some fifteen hundred postcards I sent to my mother, which she was accustomed to conspicuously leave on a piece of furniture, so that upon returning I would find them and right away put them with the others.⁷⁸

Daney's willingness, in his last months, to speak of the cinema and his life evinced a concern for transmitting a cultural knowledge—and more pointedly, a way of seeing the world through the cinema—that was in danger of being lost with the emergence of new media *dispositifs* at the twilight of the twentieth century. In this mission, Daney saw himself as a *porteur*, a smuggler clandestinely trafficking illicit goods across frontiers.

76 See Raymond Sapène [Serge Daney], *Procès à Baby Doc (Duvalier, père & fils)* (Paris: Société encyclopédia française, 1973). There has been some speculation as to whether this book was written by Daney or not, but the question now seems settled in favor of the hypothesis. In this case, the publication by *Cahiers* of an interview with Haitian director Arnold Antonin in 1976, with the questions credited to Daney, Thérèse Giraud and Raymond Sapène, may have been an in-joke within the journal pointing to the identity of the author of *Procès à Baby Doc*. See Arnold Antonin, interviewed by Serge Daney, Thérèse Giraud and Raymond Sapène, “Entretien avec Arnold Antonin (Haïti, le chemin de la liberté),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 262-263 (January 1976), pp. 109-113.

77 *Le cinéphile et le village*, dir. Pascal Kané, 1989.

78 Daney, *Persévérance*, p. 72 [p. 61].

The term itself, Daney acknowledged, came from an article Comolli had written on Eric Dolphy for *Jazz Magazine* in 1965, in which he labeled the saxophonist an “exemplary smuggler,” channeling earlier musical forms to the free jazz of later decades.⁷⁹ Daney had already used the term in 1983 to speak of Bazin;⁸⁰ later, in a 1991 interview with Philippe Roger, he assumed the word *passeur* for himself. *Passeurs*, Daney asserts, “are strange: they need frontiers, for the sole purpose of contesting them. They have no wish to find themselves alone with their ‘hoard,’ and, at the same time, they are not too preoccupied with those to whom they ‘pass’ something on.”⁸¹ The *passeur* is “someone who remembers that true communication, of the sort that leaves traces in your life, is not what is imposed on you (by school, religious services, advertising, everything that is ‘edifying’) but that which takes place in a furtive, transversal, anonymous fashion.”⁸²

Moreover, the texts written by the *passeur* are conceived of as a part of an intergenerational communication process, fueled by the hope that future cohorts of cinephiles will receive the lessons learnt by one’s own age group. Instead of writing for his peers and contemporaries, therefore, Daney, at the end of his life, understood his critical practice as being aimed at “that part of the readership of *Libération* that is twenty years old, people who I don’t know and to whom I would like to transmit the sentiment that all *this* had a tremendous existence for other people, before they were around.”⁸³ For the cinephiles of today, Daney’s writings on the cinema are akin to messages in a bottle, set forth in the vast ocean of information that characterizes the contemporary world in the forlorn hope that, sometime in the future, in a distant land, a kindred spirit will receive the missive and take succor from its words.

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79 Jean-Louis Comolli, “Éric Dolphy... le passeur,” *Jazz Magazine* no. 119 (June 1965), pp. 42-48.

80 See Serge Daney, “André Bazin,” *Libération*, August 19, 1983. Repr. in idem., *Ciné journal* vol. II, pp. 41-46, here p. 45.

81 Daney, *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sacs à main*, p. 91.

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Part IV

Encounters with Ontology

Fairfax, D., *The Red Years of Cahiers du Cinéma (1968-1973). Volume II: Ideology and Politics.*

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As we saw in Part III, the *Cahiers* critics' preoccupation with questions of aesthetics in the cinema manifested itself in diverse, heterogeneous ways and covered the output of a vast number of filmmakers. There was an overarching question at the center of their critical output, however, a question that reached to the heart of the cinema: namely, the unique nature of the relationship that the cinematographic image entertains with reality.¹ Since the publication of Bazin's 1945 text, "Ontologie de l'image photographique," this relationship has gone by the name of "ontological realism."² Discerning the ontological nature of the cinema was *the* key theoretical issue that exercised *Cahiers* from its founding by Bazin in 1951 until, at the very least, the end of Daney's tenure as editor thirty years later, and the journal's Marxist period is no exception to this rule. Indeed, Daney himself would come to define the "*Cahiers* axiom" as being, precisely, the idea "that the cinema has a fundamental relationship with the real and that the real is not what is represented—and that's final."³ This quote, dating from 1990, has been marshaled by contemporary Bazin scholars such as Hervé Joubert-Laurencin and Dudley Andrew to argue for a continuity between Bazin and the later writings of Daney.⁴ But it is worth noting that, immediately prior to this passage, Daney himself specifically ascribes this outlook to the "non-legendary years" of *Cahiers*, between the late 1960s and the late 1970s: "The cinema is the art of the present—as, broadly speaking, Bazin said—and axioms of this kind can be found in *Cahiers*, during these ten years, under all kinds of signatures, within all kinds of theoretical straitjackets, in all kinds of editorials, dressed up in all kinds of garb, whether this be the tattered rags of militant film or the unisex uniform of contemporary television."⁵

In this vein, it is important to note that *Cahiers* never, strictly speaking, repudiated cinematic realism *per se*. It was only elsewhere, in *Screen*

1 The term "cinematographic" is here used to denote moving images with a photographic basis and thus excludes films whose images derive from non-photographic sources, such as animation, digitally generated imagery or the direct manipulation of celluloid (as practiced in certain experimental films). In one sense, *Cahiers* under Comolli/Narboni's editorship was more dogmatically committed to the photographic nature of the cinema than even Bazin: whereas the founder of *Cahiers* was not averse to writing about animated films, this sector of the cinema was an absolute lacuna in the journal during the late 1960s and 1970s.

2 See Bazin, "Ontologie de l'image photographique." The term itself, however, does not actually appear in this article.

3 Daney, *L'Exercice était profitable, Monsieur*, p. 301.

4 See Joubert-Laurencin, *Le Sommeil paradoxal*, p. 33; and Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 5.

5 Daney, *L'Exercice était profitable, Monsieur*, p. 301.

for instance, that an antithesis between realism and modernism was proposed.⁶ *Cahiers* itself never saw the two as being opposed. Instead, it followed Brecht in arguing for a form of realism in art that was both founded in a historical materialist outlook and drew from the formal experimentation of aesthetic modernism. As the editors argued in an interview with *Politique Hebdo*:

Brecht demanded of realism that it unveil “the complexity of social causality,” that, when addressing a concrete situation, it take into account *all* of its aspects, and the dialectical relations between these aspects, insisting on the fact that, since realism was neither a question of form nor a question of content, a film, a play or a novel could claim to be realist, socialist, etc., could even privilege the social content at the expense of the formal work, and be no less *formalist*, through infidelity to the social reality, exposed in a unilateral, static and superficial manner. For this restitution of the social causality is neither a brief overview, nor a mechanistic description of the events, but the reconstruction of the power relations that demand of the filmmaker a practice, *in his film*, of contradiction, struggles and history.⁷

In the same passage, the *Cahiers* editors cited Brecht to the effect that “the simple ‘reproduction of reality’ says nothing at all about this reality. A photograph of the Krupp factories or the AEG works teaches us almost nothing about these institutions. [...] For whoever only gives of reality that which can be directly experienced does not reproduce reality.”⁸ Hence realism, for *Cahiers*, was not to be conflated with aesthetic mimesis or the superficial reproduction of perceived reality. In Daney’s terms, “the real” in the cinema is not “what is represented.” Instead, the true site in which a relationship with the real can be determined was within the process of cinematic representation itself.

6 See, in particular, Colin MacCabe, “Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses,” *Screen* vol. 15 no. 2 (Summer 1974), pp. 7-27. MacCabe has since renounced his earlier position and adopted a far more favorable stance towards Bazin. See Colin MacCabe, “Bazin as Modernist,” in Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin (eds.), *Opening Bazin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 66-76.

7 “Réponses à *Politique Hebdo*,” p. 62.

8 *Ibid.* The Brecht quotation is from Bertolt Brecht, *Der Dreigroschenprozeß*, in *idem.*, *Werke* vol. XXI, ed. Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf and Werner Mittenzwei (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), p. 469.

The conceptual machinery marshaled by the *Cahiers* writers in order to explore this relationship was, however, drawn less from the historical materialism of Marx and Engels than it was from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Given the fusion between psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism in the strand of “apparatus theory” developed by *Cahiers*, neatly divorcing these two aspects of the journal’s theoretical arsenal would undoubtedly be an unjustifiable abstraction. And yet it is notable that those *Cahiers* texts that most squarely addressed the question of the cinema’s ontological realism did so from a predominantly Freudian/Lacanian perspective. Moreover, the influence of psychoanalysis represented one of the points of difference within the *Cahiers* team itself. The journal was evenly divided between those for whom Lacan and his followers were of major importance in their own theoretical scrutiny of the cinema—notably, Oudart, Bonitzer and Pierre Baudry, and to a lesser degree Daney and Kané—and those for whom a reference to psychoanalytic theory was either intermittent or minimal: Comolli, Narboni, Aumont, Pierre and Eisenschitz. In contrast with *Screen*, whose editorial board ended up acrimoniously splitting on this question, the contradiction between the Lacanians and the non-Lacanians in *Cahiers* never became an antagonistic one, but it did produce a certain distinction in the output of the different writers for the journal. As Aumont has recognized, “there was a cleavage in the *Cahiers* group between a psychological point of view, which was a relatively ‘normal’ point of view, I would say, [...] and an ideologico-politico-social point of view, which was, by contrast, much more rigid and dogmatic.”⁹

It was a Lacanian framework that determined many of the theoretical concepts from which the post-1968 *Cahiers* has gained its renown—including Oudart’s notion of suture, the concept of the *hors-champ* worked on by Bonitzer, the pertinence of the phrase “*je sais bien..., mais quand même...*” (I know very well..., but all the same...) for spectatorial identification with the cinematic image, and broader discussions of cinematic illusion, the lure and the “impression of reality.” All these areas of theoretical investigation refer back to the core question of the cinema’s relationship with the real, but they also raise an underlying question. What, exactly, is the nature of the real itself? For this, the *Cahiers* critics turned directly to Lacan and in particular his three mutually dependent registers of the psyche: the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary, which Lacan would later characterize as relating to each other in the manner of a Borromean knot.¹⁰ For Lacan,

9 Interview with Jacques Aumont, May 5, 2014.

10 See Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XXII: RSI, Ornicar* no. 2-5 (1975).

the Imaginary is the realm of sensorial perception, the idea we have of the universe based on what we perceive around us, while the Symbolic is the realm of language, laws, rituals and social structures, the organization of meaning through symbols or language. In semiological terms, these two realms are therefore analogous to the relationship between the signified and the signifier. But Lacan introduces a third term—that of the Real—to the Saussurean dyad. The Real in Lacanian theory is a notoriously thorny concept, and it underwent shifts in meaning over the course of Lacan's life, but this befits its innately elusive nature. The Real is distinct from reality in the everyday sense of the term; in fact, it can never be truly perceived or grasped. It is a state of absolute plenitude but also an "impossibility" that can only be caught in glimpses, at points in which the nexus holding the Imaginary and the Symbolic together breaks down. It occurs as a momentary, fleeting, "unassimilable" trauma from which the subject either quickly recovers or slides into psychosis. In his *Séminaire XI*—whose discussion of the gaze, the image and anamorphosis was of profound importance to the *Cahiers* writers¹¹—Lacan dubs this encounter with the real *tyché*, defining it as "the essentially missed encounter," and sees an example of this missed encounter with the Real, the *tychic*, in the transitory juncture that separates the dream state from wakefulness.¹² In the cinema, therefore, the Real can only be punctually arrived at in those moments when the bonds between the signified and the cinematic signifier are sundered, when the conventions of figurative representation are undone, subverted or dismantled, jolting the spectator out of their acceptance of the "lure" of the cinematographic image. It is for this reason that many of the texts dealing with the cinema's relationship with the real also interrogate the system of representation upon which filmic signification is based, including, most notably, the *perspectiva artificialis* method developed by Renaissance painting. As such, the *Cahiers*

11 Both Comolli and Bonitzer single out the transcription of this seminar as having been of particular importance to *Cahiers'* adoption of Lacanian precepts. *Séminaire XI*, based on lectures from 1963-64, was not published by Seuil until 1973, but they both claim to have been exposed to its contents as early as 1971. See Comolli, "Yes, we were utopians (Part 1)"; Pascal Bonitzer, interviewed by Stéphane Bouquet, Emmanuel Burdeau and François Ramone, "Nos années non-légendaires: Entretien avec Pascal Bonitzer," in Emmanuel Burdeau (ed.), *Cinéma 68* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2008 [1998]), pp. 143-156, here p. 151. It is possible that the *Cahiers* critics were privy to the material of these lectures before they were released in published form.

12 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 58. Translated as *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), p. 54.

critics' theoretical preoccupation with the figural genesis of cinematic verisimilitude draws heavily on the work in this area carried out by Schefer, Francastel and Foucault.

The psychoanalytic basis of *Cahiers'* approach to the relationship between the cinema and the real had its flipside in the continued preoccupation the journal entertained with Bazin's ideas on the ontological realism of the cinema. The argument that the *Cahiers* of the 1968-1973 period was influenced by Bazin in anything other than a purely negative fashion is, perhaps, a highly contentious one. Bazin's key ideas in this area are widely seen as representing the polar opposite to psychoanalysis-influenced theories of cinema such as that of the post-1968 *Cahiers*. In contrast to the Freudo-Lacanian notion of the impossibility of encountering the Real stands Bazin's "naïve" belief in the cinema's ability to objectively reproduce existing reality. This was the perspective adopted by *Screen* and other proponents of "1970s theory" in the anglophone world, and even now textbooks in the field usually set the two theoretical tendencies in opposition to each other. The *Cahiers* critics, for their part, were not averse to critiquing the ideas of its founder. But we have already seen that articles such as "Technique et idéologie" by Comolli and "La vicariance du pouvoir" by Narboni took a far more favorable stance towards Bazin than is often assumed, and even those texts where the tone taken was more polemical—such as the journal's 1970 interview with Rohmer, or Bonitzer/Daney's analysis of Bazinian film theory in "L'écran du fantasme"—consisted, in Narboni's words, of "amorous polemics" directed towards a figure who could not but weigh heavily on those who wrote for *Cahiers*.¹³ Such a critical grappling with Bazin's ideas had a crucial influence on the film theory developed by the *Cahiers* critics of the post-1968 era, and his importance increasingly came to be recognized by these writers after the *Sturm und Drang* of the journal's Marxist period had subsided. As Joubert-Laurencin has noted, the late 1970s and early 1980s represented a "return to Bazin" by figures such as Bonitzer, Daney, Narboni and Comolli, who would acknowledge the full extent of their debt to their elder, and even came to unequivocally identify as Bazinians.¹⁴

It should be recognized, however, that *Cahiers* never fully "departed" from Bazin in the first place. Moreover, his ideas share important traits with a Lacanian framework and, by extension, the perspective underpinning theories of the cinematic "apparatus." As with the post-1968 *Cahiers*, Bazin's notion of cinematic realism was distinct from a conception of the film image

13 Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.

14 Joubert-Laurencin, *Le sommeil paradoxal*, p. 32.

as superficially analogous with everyday perception and instead sought to uncover a deeper relationship between the cinema and the real. Often, his examples of ontological realism in the cinema were singular, fulgurant events, encounters with the real that furtively captured extraordinary events outside of quotidian reality such as death or trauma, at the precise moment when the conventional formal structures of the cinema were disrupted or abandoned. Bazin's ideas on the image were substantially drawn from the phenomenological tradition of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, but this was also the case with Lacan, whose discussion of the gaze in *Séminaire XI* evinces a significant debt to these two philosophers. And while Bazin himself may well have been an "idealist" in the narrow sense of the term (retaining a belief in a divine, spiritual realm), the logic of his thinking on the cinema could be utilized for materialist ends, whether in film practice, in the work of directors such as Straub/Huillet, Godard and Rivette, or in film theory, with the critical use to which they were put by the post-1968 *Cahiers*. Indeed, Narboni himself now sees Bazin's film theory as fundamentally materialist in nature, stating: "We must revisit Bazin, in light of Joubert-Laurencin, for whom he is a materialist thinker. This is true. We can say that the ontology of the cinematic image is materialist."¹⁵

Narboni was quick, however, to add the kicker, "but it's complicated." Indeed, the relationship between Bazin's ontological realism and the film theory espoused by *Cahiers* in the years between 1968 and 1973 was, to say the least, complex and shifting. In "L'écran du fantasme," Bonitzer and Daney argued that Freud's concept of *Verleugnung* (denial)—denoted by the symptomatic phrase "I know very well..., but all the same..."—applied to Bazin's understanding of the relationship between the cinematographic image and the event represented.¹⁶ But the same rhetorical structure can also be used to describe the post-1968 *Cahiers'* understanding of cinematic ontology. Far from contenting themselves with a denunciation of cinematic illusion à la *Cinéthique*, the *Cahiers* critics' investigation of the mechanisms behind this illusion led them towards paradoxical conclusions. "I know very well," they said to themselves, that the image in a film is a mere illusion, a lure, an ideological construction. "But all the same," there *is* something of the real embedded in it. It was this overriding aporia—between a Lacanian "I know very well..." and a Bazinian "but all the same..."—that characterized

¹⁵ Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.

¹⁶ For the origins of the "I know very well..., but all the same..." formulation, see Octave Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), especially pp. 9-33.

the theory developed by *Cahiers*. Indeed, this was explicitly admitted to by Daney, who explained:

Writing for *Cahiers* meant inheriting, even without knowing it, Bazin's *idée fixe*, from which it was not easy to detach ourselves: the cinema is a view [*regard*] of the world. [...] And so we inherited the aporia that resulted from this. For what allowed the gaze [*regard*] to be posed—the screen—became an impossible object. Both mask [*cache*] and window, orifice and hymen. Invisible, it renders things visible; seen, it renders things invisible.¹⁷

The challenge for *Cahiers* was to transform this aporia of cinematic ontology into a functioning dialectic, one that was able to account for the fact that the cinematographic image is *both* an illusory lure *and* its opposite, a mechanical reproduction of the pro-filmic reality.

In truth, this project never reached fruition, and the dialectic was instead displaced onto the volatile convulsions of the *Cahiers* team's own conceptualization of the cinema, with the ramifications this had for the organizational history of the journal itself. The following chapters will therefore concern themselves with charting these theoretical vicissitudes. An initial chapter will take a look at the sinuous relationship the post-1968 generation of critics had with Bazin's theory, their "impossible rejection of Bazinism,"¹⁸ followed by the later "return" to the ideas of the journal's founding father. This will be followed by discussions of the development of psychoanalytically inflected film theory in three of the *Cahiers* critics: Oudart, with his notion of suture and other related concepts; Baudry, with his critical reflection on realism, psychoanalysis and film genres; and Bonitzer, with his deployment of Lacan, Bataille, Schefer and others in a decades-long theoretical preoccupation with the cinema, and his later turn to fiction filmmaking as both screenwriter and director. The focus will then shift to look at the mutual influence governing *Cahiers'* relationship with Deleuze's philosophical diptych *Cinéma*, with special attention given to the post-structuralist philosopher's relations with Narboni, Bonitzer and Daney. The final chapter, meanwhile, will address

¹⁷ Daney, *La Rampe*, p. 15.

¹⁸ The quoted remark comes from Serge Daney, "Le travelling de *Kapò*," *Trafic* no. 4 (Autumn 1992), pp. 5-19. Repr. in idem., *Persévérance*, pp. 15-39, here p. 33 [p. 30]. Translated as "The Tracking Shot in *Kapò*," in idem., *Postcards from the Cinema*, trans. Paul Douglas Grant (Oxford: Berg, 2007), pp. 17-35.

the changed nature of the audiovisual image in the contemporary world. Its permutations in the last three decades, Daney, Comolli and Aumont have all argued, are profoundly rooted in the transformation of social practices brought about by the global dominance of neoliberal capitalism. New forms of reality, as the *Cahiers* axiom would have it, inevitably call for new forms of the image.

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21. The Bazinian Legacy

Abstract

The focus of this chapter is the existence of a “Bazinian legacy” for *Cahiers du cinéma* in its post-1968 guise. Whereas many have considered the era of the journal under Jean-Louis Comolli/Jean Narboni’s editorship as one in which André Bazin’s ideas were rejected, I argue that their relationship with the journal’s founder is far more complex than that. While vocally distancing themselves from his ideas, the critical thinking of this period was profoundly indebted to Bazin’s notion of the cinema’s “ontological” realism at the same time as it was combined with other strands of thought from contemporary French critical theory and psychoanalysis. In charting *Cahiers*’ “impossible rejection” of Bazin (as Serge Daney dubbed it), their encounters with Éric Rohmer (who embodied a more traditional understanding of Bazin’s thinking) are also traced.

Keywords: *Cahiers du cinéma*, André Bazin, ontological realism, Éric Rohmer, Serge Daney, transparency

An Impossible Rejection: Bazin’s Film Theory and *Cahiers du cinéma*

The foundations of Bazin’s film theory were established very early in his career. In 1945, at the age of 27, he published the landmark article “Ontologie de l’image photographique.” In one of the first overviews of Bazin’s theoretical as a whole, Rohmer labeled this text a “Copernican revolution” in the history of film theory, in which a “new dimension” was introduced into the critical analysis of the cinematographic image, one that is “*metaphysical* [...] or, if you prefer, *phenomenological*” in nature.¹ The “Ontologie” essay is now one of *the* canonical texts of film studies, widely anthologized and universally known in the field. And yet it is curious that the argument of Bazin in the text itself has so often been overlooked or misread and his position equated to a naïve (and thus easily dismissed) credence in a straightforward reproduction of perceptual reality through the process of photography. Partly, Rohmer’s summation of Bazinian theory has contributed to this

¹ Éric Rohmer, “La somme d’André Bazin,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 91 (November 1958), pp. 36-45, here p. 38.

reduction of the complex, at times contradictory set of ideas espoused by Bazin to a simplified position that Joubert-Laurencin has, with caustic irony, dubbed *bazinisme*. Bazin's successor as editor-in-chief at *Cahiers* insisted on the centrality of "cinematic objectivity" to his predecessor's theory, and this has often been used to tar Bazin with a willful neglect or obfuscation of the illusory nature of the cinema. In the "Ontologie" essay, however, it is clear that when Bazin refers to the "essential objectivity" that is at the heart of photography's distinction from painting, he uses the term not in the everyday sense (to mean impartiality, neutrality or fidelity) but with its philosophical meaning in mind, to denote the absence of the subject in the production of a photographic image. As Bazin explains:

For the first time, the only thing to come between an object and its representation is another object. For the first time, an image of the outside world takes shape automatically, without creative human intervention, following a strict determinism. The photographer's personality is at work only in the selection, orientation and pedagogical approach to the phenomenon: as evident as this personality may be in the final product, it is not present in the same way as a painter's. All art is founded upon human agency, but in photography alone can we celebrate [*jouissons de*] its absence.²

Bazin stresses objectivity as a de-subjected process: it is the "automatic genesis" of the photographic image that gives it a "power of credibility" lacking in other manmade images. But Bazin is careful to clarify that this "transfer of reality" is something that defies our critical faculties and conquers our belief through its "irrational power." The camera lens (or *objectif* in French) produces an image that, in Bazin's words, is capable of "relieving [*défouler*], out of the depths of our unconscious, our need to substitute for the object something more than approximation."³ It is notable, here, that the modes of expression he adopts when addressing the ontological nature of the photographic image—treating our relationship to the photograph as a form of *jouissance* or *défoulement*, produced by the irrational power of credibility it exerts over our unconscious—anticipates the psychoanalytic vocabulary deployed in *Cahiers'* later film theory and departs significantly from the received understanding of Bazin's "idealist" metaphysics, which conceived of the cinema as a transparent "window onto the world."

2 Bazin, "L'ontologie de l'image photographique," p. 15 [p. 7].

3 *Ibid.*, p. 16 [p. 8].

Moreover, the photograph's ontological realism has little to do with any visual verisimilitude with the "model" represented by the image. In this respect, as Bazin points out, the blurry black-and-white images of Niépce and the Lumières had much to envy the lifelike refinement of nineteenth-century figurative painting. When, in one of the most oft-cited passages of the "Ontologie" essay, he avers that the photographic image "proceeds through genesis from the ontology of the model; it is the model," he takes pains to preface this claim by noting that this is the case even if the image in question is "out of focus, distorted, devoid of color and without documentary value"—that is, if its visual qualities depart markedly from those the viewer would associate with the image's referent.⁴ The metaphors Bazin uses to describe the photographic image—as a trace, an imprint or an embalment—are of a categorically different order to the question of its superficially "realistic" nature. Other theoretical categories are necessary to understand his position. In this vein, Peter Wollen notably equated Bazin's thinking with the notion of indexicality in Peircean semiotics; more recently, Louis-George Schwartz has drawn links with Derridean deconstruction—as indeed, Narboni had already done in "La vicariance du pouvoir."⁵ In psychoanalytic terms, meanwhile, the ontology of the photographic image can be understood as an *encounter* with the real. It is noteworthy that, when discussing the relationship of the mechanically produced image with twentieth-century art more broadly, Bazin does not evoke naturalist aesthetic movements but rather turns to surrealism, whose "aesthetic goal was inseparable from the machine-like impact of the image on our minds." In both photography and surrealist art, Bazin notes in a passage that presages the different orders of being established by Lacan, "the logical distinction between the imaginary and the real tends to be abolished." In a single, two-word phrase, Bazin encapsulates the paradoxical nature of the photographic image (and *a fortiori* its cinematographic counterpart), its status as both an irrationally produced illusion and an object sharing in the being of the model, by defining it as a "true hallucination."⁶

That the ontological realism of the cinema is in Bazin's theory founded on impossibly brief encounters with the real is evident in the examples he selects as privileged instances of reality making itself felt on the screen.

4 Ibid.

5 See Peter Wollen, "'Ontology' and 'Materialism' in Film," *Screen* vol. 17 no. 1 (Spring 1976), pp. 7-25; and Louis-George Schwartz, "Deconstruction *avant la lettre*: Jacques Derrida Before André Bazin," in Andrew/Joubert-Laurencin (eds.), *Opening Bazin*, pp. 95-106.

6 Bazin, "Ontologie de l'image photographique," p. 18 [p. 9].

When discussing a documentary on the Kon-Tiki voyage (a sublime film that “does not exist”), it was the “trembling, blurred images” captured during the sea journey itself that captivated Bazin, as they denoted the “absolute” identification between the conditions of filming and the nature of what was being filmed. The barely distinguishable images of sharks in this film, for instance, fascinated Bazin for being “not so much a photograph of the shark but that of danger.”⁷ A similar sentiment governed his response, in “Mort tous les après-midi,” to the 1948 newsreel footage of Chinese communists executed by Chiang Kai-Shek’s ruling nationalist forces.⁸ In “Montage interdit,” meanwhile, Bazin’s notorious prohibition on editing was principally concerned with moments of mortal risk: the hunting of the seal in *Nanook of the North*, a sequence shot of a crocodile catching a heron in *Louisiana Story*, Chaplin placed in a cage with a lion in *The Circus*.⁹ If the film theorist prized sequence shots and deep focus in fiction cinema, it was because this aesthetic allowed filmmakers to take stock of the complex, contradictory, “ambiguous” nature of social reality and capture events that the conventions of “invisible” editing usually elided: the maid grinding coffee in *Umberto D*, the disconnected *images-faits* of *Paisà*, the cruelty and ugliness revealed in Stroheim’s films.¹⁰ In this sense, a later text by Rohmer perhaps more adequately sums up Bazin’s understanding of the deeper, more complex relationship between cinema and the real than the former’s remarks on “cinematic objectivity” did in 1958. In 1995, writing for *Le Monde*, Rohmer argued that, in spite of the fact that Bazin had at best second-hand knowledge of Heidegger, his theory of ontological realism had discernible roots in the German philosopher’s ideas in *Sein und Zeit*: “At the risk of shocking philosophers, I would even say that the word ‘ontological’ is to be understood [in Bazin] in the strong sense of the term given to it by Heidegger, in opposition to the ‘ontic’—that is, in relation to Being [*l’être*] and not merely the ‘being’ [*l’étant*].”¹¹ The cinema, in this reading, is not a device

7 André Bazin, “Le cinéma et l’exploration,” in idem., *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma vol. I*, pp. 45-54, here p. 52. Translated as “Cinema and Exploration,” in idem., *What is Cinema? vol III*, trans. and ed. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 154-163, here p. 161.

8 Bazin, “Mort tous les après-midi,” p. 70.

9 Bazin, “Montage interdit,” p. 129 [p. 84]

10 Bazin was far from being unambiguously in favor of the long take and hostile to montage, however. See in particular André Bazin, “Le réalisme cinématographique et l’école italienne de la Libération,” in idem., *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma? vol. IV: Une esthétique de la réalité: le néo-réalisme* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1962), pp. 9-37. Translated as “Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation,” in idem., *What is Cinema?*, trans. and ed. Barnard, pp. 215-249.

11 Éric Rohmer, “La révolution Bazin: Le mystère de l’existence,” *Le Monde*, hors-série *Le siècle du cinéma* (January 1995), p. xi.

for visually replicating the universe as we see it around us but a privileged instrument for granting the viewer access to the nature of being itself.

This same problematic was a major determinant of the theoretical work on the cinema carried out by the *Cahiers* critics in the journal's Marxist phase, but the extent to which their conceptual debt to Bazin was acknowledged is an especially vexatious question. Certainly, the tone that was adopted towards Bazin's ideas was often a negative one. Two watchwords, in particular, were deployed in almost talismanic fashion to ward off any possible association with the journal's father-figure. Bazin's texts were marked by their metaphysical *idealism*, which stood in stark opposition to the historical materialism with which the *Cahiers* critics identified during this period. In addition, his understanding of the cinema was seen to be based on a notion of *transparency*, understanding the film image as a "window onto the world."¹² Neither of these reproaches, it must be avowed, were justifiable. The charge of idealism discounts the latent materialist logic to Bazin's ontological realism. Comolli himself is now highly critical of his own past in this regard, confessing that "the epithet 'idealist,' which was a kind of bogeyman for us, took precedence. When we said, 'Bazin is an idealist,' it was an overly simplistic manner of distancing ourselves from his thought, of course. I am very critical about this."¹³ Reproaching Bazin for espousing cinematic transparency, meanwhile, is similarly off-target. In fact, Bazin himself rarely used the term, and it instead served to assimilate his thinking with the *macmahonien* tendency of right-wing film criticism in the early 1960s—from which Bazin was, in fact, both politically and theoretically divorced. Indeed, Daney would later admit that the main goal of *Cahiers'* polemical stance was actually to "liquidate" this "dogmatic, far-right off-shoot of *bazinisme*" rather than Bazin's own thinking.¹⁴

In the texts that were most dominated by a grappling with the Bazinian legacy—notably, the April 1970 interview with Éric Rohmer and the 1972 article "L'écran du fantasme"—an outwardly hostile stance critical of the "idealism" ostensibly at the heart of Bazin's supposed notion of "transparency" does indeed dominate the tenor of discussion. At times, particularly in the latter text, this discourse can border on a hysterical excess that could almost call for its own psychoanalytic interpretation (one to which

12 See André Bazin, "Théâtre et cinéma," in idem., *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma? vol. II: Le Cinéma et les autres arts* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1959), pp. 69–118, here p. 106. Translated as "Theatre and Film," in idem., *What is Cinema?*, trans and ed. Barnard, pp. 161–214, here p. 201.

13 Comolli, "Yes, were utopians (Part 1)."

14 Daney, *La Rampe*, p. 15.

those who have viewed the post-1968 *Cahiers* as an Œdipal rejection of the “law of the father” have not hesitated to articulate). But no critique is entirely negative in nature. The very act of honoring a peer with a critical analysis implies a recognition of the value of their ideas. The recurrence with which the *Cahiers* critics turned to the writings of Bazin in the years 1968-1973, as well as the complex nature of their response to his ideas—in stark contrast with the unambiguous invective directed at *Cinéthique* and *Positif*—further underscores the affinity the critics had with the journal’s progenitor. Narboni’s enigmatic statement in “La vicariance du pouvoir” that “almost nothing” separates Bazin’s thinking (“idealism, in one of its most coherent manifestations”) from the materialist film theory *Cahiers* sought is thus an astute appraisal of the relationship he and his colleagues had with Bazin. Comolli may well have strenuously argued against Bazin’s conception of depth of field in the cinema, but he too, as outlined earlier, ends up more favorable to Bazin than to Mitry or Leblanc on the matter. Writing together in “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” Comolli and Narboni typified Bazin’s film theory as the first steps in “a necessary stage—but one that it was necessary to overcome—of returning more closely to film in the materiality of its elements, in its signifying structures, its formal organization.”¹⁵ Indeed, much of the theoretical activity of the *Cahiers* critics consisted in a process of dialectically superseding Bazin’s original notions, which required an alternating series of critiques and reappraisals. The rest of this chapter will therefore chart the zigzagging contours of this engagement with Bazin’s ideas (and those of his successors such as Rohmer) as the *Cahiers* critics followed Bazin’s lead in grappling with the cinema’s encounters with the real.

An Interview with **Éric Rohmer**

Perhaps the most notable forum where the *Cahiers* critics teased out their relationship with the Bazinian theoretical tradition came in the shape of a 10,000-word interview conducted with **Éric Rohmer** in April 1970. The former editor-in-chief of *Cahiers*, having assumed the position upon the death of Bazin, saw himself as something of a keeper of the flame for Bazinian film theory, despite the fact that his conservative political views were at a remove from Bazin’s liberal-left inclinations. Moreover, his transmission of Bazin’s central ideas in texts such as “La somme de Bazin” played a determining role

15 Comolli/Narboni, “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” p. 16 [p. 259].

in their reception during this period. Though initially retaining a measure of bitterness at his removal from *Cahiers*, Rohmer proved not to be averse to being interviewed by his erstwhile colleagues. The 1970 discussion was, in fact, the second time Rohmer had entered into dialogue with the younger generation of *Cahiers* critics. In November 1965, the journal had already published an interview with him, tellingly titled “L’ancien et le nouveau.” Although Rohmer had, at this point, only completed a single feature film (1960’s *Le Signe de lion*), the prefatory remarks to the exchange insisted that his shift from criticism to filmmaking merely represented “the abandonment of one form of writing for another, [...] for, by leaving behind the marble of *Cahiers*, has he not written his finest criticism on celluloid?”¹⁶

In comparison with the later interview, the 1965 discussion took place in relatively calm, respectful conditions. This did not prevent Rohmer from engaging in spirited polemics in “L’ancien et le nouveau,” such as his critique of Pasolini’s “Il cinema di poesia,” published in *Cahiers* in the previous issue.¹⁷ For Rohmer, if the cinema can indeed be “a means for allowing us to discover poetry,” then this is principally the “poetry of the world” rather than that of the filmmaker: “it is not the cinema but the object shown that is poetic.” Rohmer is adamant that what makes the cinema interesting is its capacity for being an “instrument of discovery,” and he sketches out an opposition between cinematic representation and the signifying nature of language: “the image is not made to signify, but to show.”¹⁸ Evidently, the influence of Bazin on Rohmer’s conception of the cinema is never far, but when he discusses the theorist by name Rohmer is surprisingly equivocal. While accepting the value of his theory, Rohmer is more mitigated when it comes to Bazin’s critical tastes, especially in comparison with the critical *jeunes turcs* writing for *Cahiers* in the 1950s:

I think that Bazin had ideas, and that we had tastes. The ideas of Bazin are all good; his tastes are very contestable. Bazin’s judgements have not been ratified by posterity. [...] We did not say much of any importance on film theory, we merely developed Bazin’s ideas. But I do think that we found the right values, and the people who came after us ratified our tastes.

16 Éric Rohmer, interviewed by Jean-Claude Biette, Jacques Bontemps and Jean-Louis Comolli, “L’ancien et le nouveau: Entretien avec Éric Rohmer,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 172 (November 1965), pp. 33-42, 56-59, here p. 33.

17 For a deeper discussion of Pasolini’s text, see Chapter 14.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Furthermore, Rohmer reveals himself to be rather averse to Bazin's emphasis on deep-focus photography, arguing that it was the weakest component of his theory. Although as a critic Rohmer had accepted a privileging of a deep-focus, long-take aesthetic over a montage-based cinema, his turn to filmmaking significantly altered his outlook: "I was led to act against my theories (if I ever had any). What were they? The long-take and *découpage* rather than montage. [...] And yet, I have made films that are above all works of montage."¹⁹ Finally, Rohmer is vocal about his political views in the interview: although he expresses a certain regret for the right-wing standpoint of his early articles, he nonetheless relishes playing the provocateur: "I don't know if I am on the right, but one thing I am sure of, at least, is that *I am not on the left*. Yes, why should I be on the left? [...] Everyone knows that these old categories of right and left are meaningless today."²⁰

Such remarks went uncontested in 1965, but in the heightened conditions of 1970, the political and theoretical differences between Rohmer and *Cahiers* could not but lead to a more combative encounter. The *Cahiers* critics approached Rohmer after the critical and popular success of *Ma nuit chez Maud*. Bonitzer had already reviewed the film for the July-August 1969 issue of *Cahiers*, and his remarks give a taste of the contretemps to come. While the critic lauds *Ma nuit chez Maud* as a film of "admirable poetry," with an "exceptional erotic richness" and "astounding writing," he cautions that it is a "deliberately ideological" work and is "the first of Rohmer's 'moral tales' to allow its signs, its mechanisms and its concepts to come across [*transparaître*] as such." For Bonitzer, the film's narrative—structured around oppositions between love and desire, religious belief and Marxist atheism—allows for a "double reading" depending on the spectator's political tendencies: "In the inevitable game of preferences, the left-wing spectator will choose Maud in the name of desire and liberty, while the right-wing spectator will choose Françoise in the name of love and conjugality." In the end, the narrative had preordained at least one loser, "Vidal, the communist intellectual reading Marx via Pascal," whose discourse is "neutralized and recuperated by the Rohmerian order."²¹

Bonitzer's text signaled the potential for an ideological clash between *Cahiers* and its former editor-in-chief but, as their reception of Bergman and Fellini showed, in 1970 the critics were still willing to engage in dialogue

19 Ibid., p. 41.

20 Ibid., p. 58.

21 The quotes in this paragraph are from Pascal Bonitzer, "Maud et les phagocytes (*Ma nuit chez Maud*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 214 (July-August 1969), p. 59.

with filmmakers who were politically at odds with them and to enact counter-analyses of the films they made, reading them “against the grain.” That the *Cahiers* team was fully aware of the extremity of their political distance from the director of *Ma nuit chez Maud* was made clear in the preface to the interview that Bonitzer, Comolli, Daney and Narboni carried out with Rohmer. “Everything in this interview with Éric Rohmer,” they write, “opposes us to him. So what is the point of these ten pages?” Their answer is not only that “Rohmer’s films interest us *against* his declarations” but also that “it is the impurity and complexity of our differences that have retained our interest. [...] In effect, we will see that in this second interview, bitterer than the first, the mechanism of *disavowal*, so frequently and essentially practiced by the characters, and especially the narrators, of the “Moral Tales,” is far from being absent in the discourse of their author.”²² The resulting interview is one of the only published instances of a direct, in-depth dialogue between adherents of a “Freudo-Marxist” approach to film theory and the more conventionally Bazinian outlook that characterizes Rohmer’s conception of the cinema. When discussion turns to more directly political or ideological matters, the sense of an impasse between these two viewpoints is palpable.²³ In response to *Cahiers*’ question as to how the “events” of May 1968 have affected his filmmaking, Rohmer is blunt: “My ‘Moral Tales’ don’t seek their inspiration in the ‘event’ but I don’t claim that you can’t take inspiration from the event, nor even that I won’t take inspiration from it one day.”²⁴

As the discussion turns to questions of film theory and more particularly the relationship between the cinema and reality, the proceedings become more enlightening. Rohmer is adamant, throughout, that “the cinema shows real things,” explaining, “If I show a house, it’s a real, coherent house, not something made out of cardboard.”²⁵ When *Cahiers* insists on the historically and ideologically determined nature of films, Rohmer parries by asking for greater precision from his questioners. Returning to his claim in the earlier interview that the cinema represents the “poetry of the world,” the filmmaker

22 Éric Rohmer, interviewed by Pascal Bonitzer, Jean-Louis Comolli, Serge Daney and Jean Narboni, “Nouvel entretien avec Éric Rohmer,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 219 (April 1970), pp. 46-55, here p. 46. Translated as “New Interview with Éric Rohmer,” trans. Daniel Fairfax, *Senses of Cinema* no. 54 (April 2010), sensesofcinema.com/2010/feature-articles/new-interview-with-eric-rohmer (accessed January 1, 2021). As was often the case, the questions were presented as coming from “*Cahiers*,” so it is impossible to know which individual posed which question.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

is unapologetic, asserting that “a film never allows us to admire a translation of the world, but to admire, through this translation, the world itself. The cinema is an instrument of discovery, even in fictional films. Because it is poetry, it is revelatory and, from the fact that it is revelatory, it is poetry.” It is here that the theoretical opposition sharpens. The *Cahiers* critics voice their view that understanding the cinema as a window open to the world is a position that “all of us are totally against” but that Rohmer’s films interest them precisely as instances of cinematic “opacification.” Sensing that his mentor is under attack, Rohmer comes to the defense of Bazin, pointing to his “put[ting] the finger on what was *unique* about the art of cinema in relation to all the other forms of art.” He clarifies, however, that Bazin’s discussion of the cinema as a “window” should lead one to think less of “transparency” than of “opening.” As Rohmer puts it: “‘Transparency’ is too static. And I take ‘opening’ in its active sense: the act of opening and not only the fact of being open. The art of cinema takes us back to the world.”²⁶

For *Cahiers*, however, speaking of the cinema as a means for admiring the world implies “an essential conception of the world as Beauty, as Order, wherein the ‘concrete real,’ the ‘appearances,’ would be its visible manifestations.” That is, it belies a strictly idealist philosophical viewpoint and masks the fact that the “objectivity” Rohmer seeks is always historically situated and ideologically determined. They thus query the filmmaker as to whether “joining the objective world entail[s] rediscovering *your* idea of the world, *your* idea of the objectivity of the world.” Rohmer not only sticks to his guns at this point but even heightens the polemical stakes, admitting to the cardinal sins of idealism and teleology: “Seeing as you are pushing me there, I will go further. Not only is there beauty and order in the world, but beauty and order are only *in the world*. For how could art, a human product, be the equal of nature, a divine work? At best, it is only the revelation, in the universe, of the hand of the Creator. I’ll admit: there is no position more teleological, more theological, than my own.” *Everything*, in Rohmer’s eyes, has a miraculous nature, at which we humans can only wonder. In one of his only conciliatory notes, the filmmaker nonetheless accepts that his discussion with *Cahiers* represents “two fundamentally different attitudes towards the cinema, and both are justified. I think that back in our time, our attitude was justified, I hope that today your attitude is.”²⁷ And yet, when his interlocutors close the interview by asking for Rohmer’s thoughts on Eisenstein’s declaration that “absolute realism” is “simply a function of a

26 The above quotes are from *ibid.*, p. 51.

27 The above quotes are from *ibid.*, p. 52.

certain form of social structure,” Rohmer’s response is categorically blunt: “Nothing. Nothing at all. It’s completely outside of my preoccupations.”²⁸

The Rohmer Case

As stimulating as this discussion was, it nonetheless confined the two strands of film theory represented on each side of the microphone to a static, polarized dichotomy, exacerbated by the political gulf between *Cahiers* and Rohmer and a certain theoretical rigidity from both parties. For a more dialectical grappling with the productive *contradictions* within the texts written by Bazin, we will have to turn to Daney/Bonitzer’s “L’Écran du fantasme,” which appeared two years after the Rohmer interview, when the influence of both Lacanian psychoanalysis and the French Maoist movement had made themselves much more powerfully felt within the journal. But first I will take a detour, exploring the peripeteia of *Cahiers*’ relationship with Rohmer, the fourth, alongside Godard, Truffaut and Rivette, of the quartet of *nouvelle vague* filmmakers and former critics at the journal whose ties to and influence on the post-1968 *Cahiers* warrant a closer focus. In a familiar trajectory, the discussions surrounding *Ma nuit chez Maud* led not to a continued preoccupation with Rohmer’s work but rather to a period of critical silence, as the journal’s political engagements of the early 1970s thwarted the potential reception of films such as *Le Genou de Claire* and *L’Amour, l’après-midi*. This reticence was broken with Bonitzer’s review of *La Marquise d’O...* in November 1976. Out of all the *Cahiers* writers, it was Bonitzer who has shown by far the greatest level of interest in Rohmer’s work, and the critical dialogue formed by the series of articles with which he greeted each new film by Rohmer was crowned by the 1991 monograph *Éric Rohmer*, the last significant work of theoretical reflection on the cinema completed by Bonitzer before filmmaking came to monopolize his activities.

Having come out of the other side of *Cahiers*’ Maoist adventure, the Bonitzer of 1976 still retains a political judgement of Rohmer’s films, admitting that the morality of his tales is undoubtedly “reactionary.” But this is overshadowed, in *La Marquise d’O...*, by the fact that “Rohmer is one of today’s rare filmmakers to consciously, explicitly film *bourgeois being*.” In his Kleist adaptation, the documentary eye of Rohmer’s camera trains itself on “the very body of the Christian, bourgeois woman,” and this leads the

²⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

new film to be “indecent” to an unprecedented degree in Rohmer’s œuvre.²⁹ Despite the fact that Rohmer had asserted that the governing principle of his adaptation was “to follow, word by word, Kleist’s text,”³⁰ Bonitzer focuses on those significant moments in which the filmmaker departed from his literary source. Here the influence of Bazin is palpable. Significantly, however, it is not his theory of cinematic ontology but his views on adaptation that are pertinent. Both the critic and the director evince a deep concern for the “dialectical fidelity” of filmed versions of literary works, in which a filmmaker is most “faithful” to the source by respecting the innate resistance that the text possesses to being transferred to the screen.³¹ Thus Bonitzer highlights the deliberate citation of Füssli’s “Nightmare” during the scene of the Marquise’s inferred rape by the Graf, albeit one in which the monsters depicted by the painter are visually absent. For Bonitzer, this citation is not simply a case of “a simple visual flirtation, a note of pure aestheticism: in Füssli’s painting, the terrifying dream of the sleeping woman is represented not only by a mare (‘nightmare’), his horrible muzzle protruding between the curtains of the alcove, but also by an incubus demon squatting on the chest of the recumbent beauty. It is this incubus, this demon, that the shot allusively evokes.”³² Discussing the same shot in his later book *Décadrages*, Bonitzer is more specific about the role the citation plays:

Is the allusion, one that is not necessarily made to be understood, simply a case of cultural verisimilitude, or does it contain a necessity? [...] Its signification is at the very least complex, if we consider that the incubus, present in the painting referred to, finds itself elided from the image—from the shot—much as the rape is from the narrative. The nightmare is an erotic nightmare, and, through this ellipsis *in* the image which refers back to that of the narrative, the shot can be considered not only as the metonym of the rape which follows, but also as the metaphor of its ellipsis.³³

29 Pascal Bonitzer, “Glorieuses bassesses (*La Marquise d’O...*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 272 (December 1976), pp. 26-30, here p. 27.

30 Éric Rohmer, “Notes pour la mise en scène,” *L’Avant-scène du cinéma* no. 173 (October 1976), pp. 5-6, here p. 5.

31 See André Bazin, “*Le Journal d’un curé de campagne* et la stylistique de Robert Bresson,” in idem., *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* vol. II, pp. 33-53. Translated as “*Diary of a Country Priest* and the Robert Bresson Style,” in idem., *What is Cinema?*, trans. and ed. Barnard, pp. 139-159.

32 Bonitzer, “Glorieuses bassesses,” p. 28.

33 Pascal Bonitzer, *Décadrages: peinture et cinéma* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), pp. 31-32.

Although Bonitzer does not explicitly credit the influence, it is clear, here, that he is using Bazin's concept of "dialectical fidelity" with reference to Rohmer's film. An exact cinematic equivalent to Kleist's use of an ellipsis to denote the rape of the Marquise is impossible. To create the same effect, Rohmer had recourse to the citation of a well-known painting depicting forbidden erotic desire, while, at the same time, excising a crucial component of the painting. The absent incubus occupies the position of the ellipsis in Kleist, more subtly yet effectively than a more direct transposition of the grammatical sign could have achieved.

Bonitzer highlights a further jarring insertion into the text: in an early scene taking place in the Russian military headquarters, as the Graf is pressed by a general on the details of the attack on the Marquise, three soldiers stand in the background, one of whom, without any lines of dialogue, is played by Rohmer himself. For a filmmaker who doggedly refused to give himself a visible profile inside or outside of his films, the appearance is unnerving. Neither before nor since has Rohmer ever appeared in one of his fiction films. Why should he feel the need to do so here? Bonitzer proffers a suggested reason: "At the beginning of the film, after the ellipsis of the rape, Rohmer himself, disguised as an officer, casts a judge's stern look on his guilty hero. In front of the Graf, embarrassed at denouncing his troops, he slowly crosses his arms in a terrifying manner, as if in a secret confession."³⁴ As the critic describes it, the characters in the film "evolve under the gaze of a judge—an absent judge to whom the Author has lent his countenance, but whose position outside of the game, outside of the field (the absolute *hors-champ*) no less secretly adjudicates the drama."³⁵

In the 1980s, Bonitzer continued his critical dialogue with Rohmer by penning reviews for *Cahiers* of *La Femme de l'aviateur*, *Pauline à la plage* and *Le Rayon vert*, while an article in the psychoanalytic journal *L'Âne* in 1987 tackled "Le cas Rohmer" in *Quatre aventures de Reinette et Mirabelle*.³⁶ The first of these articles summed up the point of view governing them all: Rohmer's "Comédies et proverbes" series rekindled the spirit of the *nouvelle vague* by providing a twin lesson on the cinema: the reduced budgets of these

34 Bonitzer, "Glorieuses bassesses," p. 29.

35 Ibid.

36 Pascal Bonitzer, "La carte cachée ou les absents ont toujours raison (*La Femme de l'aviateur*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 322 (April 1981), pp. 4-9; Pascal Bonitzer, "Une image peut en cacher une autre (*Pauline à la plage*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 346 (April 1983), pp. 44-46; Pascal Bonitzer, "Le dernier venu (*Le Rayon vert*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 387 (September 1986), pp. 30-31; and Pascal Bonitzer, "Le cas Rohmer (*Quatre aventures de Reinette et Mirabelle*)," *L'Âne: magazine freudien* no. 31 (Summer 1987), pp. 20-21.

films hinted at a new economic strategy for filmmakers while proving that this need not come at the expense of narrative complexity and innovative *mise en scène*.

The 1980s also saw collaboration between the filmmaker and *Cahiers*: under Narboni's auspices, the journal's publishing arm released a collection of Rohmer's critical writings under the title *Le Goût de la beauté* in 1984. The interview with Narboni that served as a preface to the book reprised many of the terms under discussion in 1970, albeit in more amicable circumstances. Here Rohmer, without resistance from his interlocutor, elucidates his view that the cinema not only says things *differently* than the other arts but in its essence says *different* things—a perspective he ascribes to having “systematize[d] something from Bazin.” This, he insists, is the reason why he was “quite opposed to the whole structuralist, linguistic tendency of the 1960s. For me, in the cinema, what was important was ontology—to use Bazin's terms—rather than language. Ontologically, the cinema says something that the other arts do not say.”³⁷

The most significant homage *Cahiers* made to Rohmer, however, came with the publication of Bonitzer's monograph on the filmmaker in 1991. Alerting the reader that he was attempting a “diagonal” analysis of Rohmer's œuvre, Bonitzer refuses the commonplace view that his films are Marivaudesque comedies and instead interprets them as crime films, or whodunnits: “Their plots are always ordered around a secret. We might even say that they are *mysteries*.”³⁸ For Bonitzer, the key to understanding Rohmer's work comes in a passage from his preface to the written collection of the *Six Contes moraux*: “My intention was not to film raw events, but the story someone made of them. [...] Everything happens in the head of the narrator. Told by someone else, the plot would have been different, or would not have existed at all.”³⁹ In Bonitzer's view, all of Rohmer's films are structured around this paradox: he strives to film both the world in its documentary reality and a story that exists purely in the mind of a narrator figure, a character prone to seeking refuge in their own dream world. As Bonitzer puts it, “the cinema participates ‘ontologically’ in this dual nature of dream and reality.”⁴⁰ Hence the denial process that is at the heart of *all* films—the “I know very well..., but all the same...” of the viewer faced with the cinematographic image—is of particular resonance for Rohmer's

37 Éric Rohmer, *Le Goût de la beauté* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2004 [1984]), p. 25.

38 Pascal Bonitzer, *Éric Rohmer* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1991), p. 7.

39 Éric Rohmer, *Six Contes moraux* (Paris: Herne, 1974), cited in Bonitzer, *Éric Rohmer*, p. 11.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

films, which are caught between the “truth” of reality and the “lie” of the narrator. This lie occurs less through the “active deformation of the facts” and more through acts of omission: the idea of the screen as a *cache*, dear to Bazin’s theory, is thus crucial to Rohmer’s films; in them, the absent field concealed by the screen, the *hors-champ*, activates the narrative to a degree rarely attained elsewhere.

In an argument that picks up the train of thought developed in his 1969 review of *Ma nuit chez Maud*, Bonitzer thus argues that Rohmer’s films are susceptible to a “double reading,” one based on the dialectic, in the cinema, between showing and signifying: “It is indeed in the articulation between these two heterogeneous operations that the dramatic system of Rohmer’s films is constructed, since there is as much spoken in them as there is shown—in fact, what is shown is, in a way, the act of speaking.”⁴¹ All Rohmer’s films are, in a sense, literary adaptations whether the source text exists or not, and his artistic activity, caught between literature and cinema, can thus be typified by the paradox: “Why film a story, when you can write it? Why write it, when you will film it?” This “falsely ingenuous debate,” in Bonitzer’s view, highlights the fact that Rohmer’s work “speaks precisely of the chiasm and the conflict between seeing and doing, between telling and showing.”⁴² As a writer who himself was on the cusp of a transition to filmmaking, Bonitzer’s words are prescient of the contradictions he himself would face, and indeed, Rohmer’s work would prove to be a major point of inspiration for Bonitzer’s own films.

The Screen of the Phantasm

While *Cahiers’* reactions to Rohmer’s films and theoretical views constituted a significant—albeit indirect—aspect of the journal’s engagement with the Bazinian legacy, the critics also directly grappled with Bazin’s ideas even during their most militant, Marxist-Leninist period. The most notable instance of this confrontation came in the March-April 1972 issue with the publication of the binomial article “L’écran du fantasme.” Co-authored by Bonitzer and Daney, the piece consists of two columns of text, each penned by one of the two critics (who engage in a dialogue not only with Bazin but with each other), as well as a photo montage of stills from films by Buñuel, Flaherty, Hawks, Renoir and Rouch. The sub-heading of Bonitzer/

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Daney's text given in the issue's table of contents, "Les théories idéalistes du cinéma: André Bazin," certainly gives an indication of the oppositional stance towards the journal's founder that the *Cahiers* team had, outwardly, adopted by this time, but the resulting text is far from the unambiguous denunciation of Bazin's ideas that it has usually been taken to be. Joubert-Laurencin, for instance, writes that "L'écran du fantasme" exhibits "a rather ferocious will to block out Bazin," but he also acknowledges that "the leftist struggle against 'idealism' is the pretext for a quite precise return to the metaphorical network of Bazin's writings."⁴³

Indeed, a close reading of "L'écran du fantasme" reveals it to be far from the invective-laden diatribe against *Cahiers'* own *Nom-du-Père* that it has often been depicted as. Instead, Bonitzer/Daney's dual texts enact a *symptomatic* reading of Bazin, reproducing the mode of analysis adopted for Hollywood films such as *Young Mr. Lincoln* and *Morocco* and using it to analyze a corpus of film theory texts that can be productively mined at their ideological fault lines. While Bonitzer and Daney demarcate points of opposition to Bazin's ideas, the fact of dedicating such a detailed reading denotes an ambivalent attitude to his views that is analogous to *Cahiers'* treatment of the classical Hollywood filmmakers whose work the journal interrogated. As with Ford, Sternberg and Griffith, Bazin incited both homage and reproof, attraction and resistance at one and the same time. This, at any rate, is Daney's later view: "Critique was evidently an ultimate form of homage, more or less avowed, that we paid to those whom we had always loved. We wanted to re-read Ford, and not Huston, to dissect Bresson and not René Clair, to psychoanalyze Bazin and not Pauline Kael. Critique was always this: an eternal return to a fundamental *jouissance*."⁴⁴ In subjecting Bazin to an analysis inspired by Freud and Lacan, Bonitzer/Daney essentially read him as a hysteric, one whose writings manifest a neurotic obsession for those "encounters with the real" that highlight, with unrivalled intensity, the ontological stakes of the cinema: our relationship with death and the Other.

Daney opens his contribution to the text with the articulation of a two-part strategy for dealing with "idealist" film theory founded on the twin themes of *continuity* and *transparency*. Rather than being satisfied with merely protesting against these notions, he feels that it is incumbent upon contemporary theorists to both "denounce them as myths and

43 Joubert-Laurencin, *Le sommeil paradoxal*, p. 103.

44 Daney, "Les *Cahiers du cinéma* 1968-1977: Entretien avec Serge Daney," p. 19 [p. 20].

denials” and allow for “the reading of that which has thus been denied.”⁴⁵ In the case of Bazin, recognized as both the most coherent *and* the most phantasmal of the representatives of “idealist” discourse on the cinema, Daney highlights one of the most palpably symptomatic elements of his theory. When Bazin interrogates the nature of the cinema, he finds his answers above all in *minor* film genres: documentaries, scientific films, reportages or “poetic” films whose marginalized status allows for the clearest possible positing of the fundamental problematic of the cinema: namely, the possible coexistence of two “heterogeneous” elements within a single frame. Often, these two elements involve members of the animal world, such that Daney is drawn to surmise that, in Bazin’s writings, “the essence of the cinema becomes a history of beasts.” Daney thus recognizes that Bazin’s infamous prohibition on montage is not an absolute law of the cinema but rather is derived from the nature of what is being filmed. The “fight to the death” between two violently incompatible beings—such as, in the paradigmatic example, Chaplin and the lion in *The Circus* (a scene that Daney likens to the figure of castration in Freud)—requires representational continuity. Thus, for Daney it is “the possibility of filming death that ‘in certain cases’ prohibits editing,” since the cut deprives the obsessive of the fantasy of being able to seize the passage from life to death as a kind of eternal present.⁴⁶

The cinema, then, has a strangely self-negating quality in Bazin’s conceptualization: its teleological horizon is its own disappearance, the vanishing of all differences between film and reality, or, as Bazin described the goal of the neorealist filmmakers, “no more actors, no more story, no more *mise en scène*, that is to say finally the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality: no more cinema.”⁴⁷ But Daney also recognizes that Bazin, who was more astute than some of the more naïve proponents of *cinéma-vérité*, has a tendency to oscillate between the “all the same...” and the “I know very well...” phases of denial. While arguing that the cinema has a “realist vocation,” for instance, Bazin also recognizes that “some aspect of reality will always have to be

45 Pascal Bonitzer and Serge Daney, “L’Écran du fantasme,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 236-237 (March-April 1972), pp. 30-40, here p. 31. Daney’s section of the text, although not the passage cited here, has been translated as “The Screen of Fantasy (Bazin and Animals),” trans. Mark A. Cohen, in Ivone Margulies (ed.), *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 32-41.

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32. [p. 33]

47 André Bazin, “Voleur de bicyclette,” in *idem.*, *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma? vol. IV*, pp. 45-59, here p. 59. Translated as “*Bicycle Thief*,” *What is Cinema? vol. II*, trans. and ed. Hugh Gray pp. 47-60, here p. 60. Cited in Bonitzer/Daney, “L’Écran du fantasme,” p. 32 [p. 34].

sacrificed to reality.⁴⁸ What is sacrificed, in Daney's reading, is the skin, the hymen of the virgin,⁴⁹ the screen on which the phantasmal images of the cinema are projected. The cinema championed by Bazin's film theory is thus, as Daney frames it, marked by an antinomy between the thematic depiction of struggles, ruptures and differences and the "homogeneous, continuous backdrop" on which these conflicts are represented. Daney proceeds to elaborate a typology of these contradictions, grouped under the two categories of, firstly, a "spatial" struggle between the One and the Other (whether Man or Beast) and, secondly, a "temporal" transformation between Before and After (exemplified by the passage from life to death). The possible political conclusions Daney can draw from this classification, however, remain in the form of tentative conundrums: "How to 'film' the class struggle?" "How to film the 'coming into consciousness?" The questions he poses go unanswered.⁵⁰

For Bonitzer, whose text responds to and comments on Daney's, the act of viewing a film is a "simulacrum of coitus" between the "living eye" of the viewer on the one side and the "dead, photochemical memory of the celluloid, traversed by the projector's luminous rays" on the other.⁵¹ And yet it is equally a "fantasy of incorporation." If idealists such as Bazin and "declared materialists" such as Jean-Louis Baudry both believe that "the cinema, before anything else, technically, is concerned with the real," then they both logically envision that the real, that which is "totally heterogeneous to the tissue of the dream, film or text," can be swallowed up by the mouth of the camera, captured in a box. But this fantasy of keeping the real encased, of ingesting the Other, means that the violence that the cinema does to the outside world not only occurs at the editing stage (which involves "cutting and fragmenting the ribbon of visible reality") but also intervenes during the filming itself, which is characterized by fantasies of "devouring/disrobing the real" or, in the case of the ethnographic cinema that fascinated Bazin, being devoured in turn. Thus, in Bonitzer's view, "the cinema/reality pairing, which has nourished all the idealist obsessions in film theory and criticism,

48 Bazin, "Le réalisme cinématographique et l'école italienne de la Libération," p. 25 [p. 232]. Cited in Bonitzer/Daney, "L'écran du fantôme," p. 33 [p. 34].

49 Daney highlights Bazin's dubious comment that "A violated woman remains beautiful, but she is no longer the same woman" and argues that his view that the "fundamental ambiguity of the real" is akin to the "doubt about virginity: this little almost nothing that changes everything." See *ibid.*, p. 33 p. 35].

50 *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 40 [pp. 38, 40].

51 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

contains a death-fantasy.”⁵² Noting Bazin’s proclivity for metaphors of the cinema involving embalment and mummification, Bonitzer highlights the paradoxical nature of this analogy, revelatory of the neurotic nature of attempts to comprehend cinematic ontology: “to seize and to hold onto this unnameable thing, or rather the barely nameable phantom of this thing (the real itself) which surges and immediately disappears, is eclipsed between the stitches of the text, the uneven grains of the celluloid: this is the structure of the obsessional phantasm, which is also the form of the metaphysical dream.” The prohibition on montage thus stems from the need to inscribe this mummified change onto the “reality” registered by the film rather than the “tissue” of the film itself, which must be effaced in order to conserve “the ‘reality’ fallen onto the celluloid, peeled off, suppressed in its living presence by the implacable, mechanical devouring of the camera.” The reason why the wild animal is the “major paradigm” of the problematic uncovered by Bazin is that, filmed in continuity, the “gain of reality” it lends a film derives from the risk of death presented by the moment of filming. In such scenes, the act of devouring can work both ways: either the cinema captures the animal or the beast swallows up the cameraman. The spectator, meanwhile, takes pleasure in the dialectical *Aufhebung* of this struggle to the death, but only on condition that he forget the “transparent veil of the screen.”⁵³

The essence of the cinema in Bazin’s theory can therefore be reduced to a combination of filming in continuity, the “effacement of technique” and the “epiphany of the sensorial real.” Bazin’s “gain of reality” comes at the price of the incorporation (or devouring) of the Other. Intriguingly, however, this dynamic also provides the basis, in Bonitzer’s argument, for the possibility of a truly political cinema. In the work of Straub/Huillet, for instance, Bazin’s problematic is displaced onto more “radical,” more politicized stakes. Instead of the audience taking pleasure in the resolution of a struggle to the death, the spectator is inscribed into the active contradictions of the class struggle. Taking from the metaphor of the mummy the vivid imagery of the fraying bandages wrapped around its head (a metaphor for the “tissue” of the celluloid), Bonitzer closes his text with a rousing address to militant filmmakers, which serves, at least provisionally, to respond to the political questions raised by Daney:

The struggle to the death is not only a phantasm of the filmmaker. Comrade filmmakers, do not suffocate it under the bandages of representation.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

[...] A film is produced on the divided scene of the class struggle, and not *vice versa*. You must not draw the 'class struggle' onto the screen, a homogeneous scene of *jouissance*, in order to discharge militant energies. Do not turn the struggle into an object, but turn your films into an object of struggle.⁵⁴

And yet there is something incongruous about this peroration, with its sudden infusion of revolutionary politics into Bonitzer/Daney's ruminations on death, the real and the cinematographic image. The jarring shift in registers at this point in the text is itself symptomatic of the contradictions and disjunctions of *Cahiers'* theoretical project as a whole, which was, in the end, never fully able to reconcile politics and ontology.

The Return to Bazin

That *Cahiers'* confrontation with Bazin was not as thoroughly antagonistic as is often portrayed is abundantly evident in the fact that, from the late 1970s onwards, virtually all of the critics of the post-1968 generation—independently, but as if in lock-step with one another—enacted their own “returns” to Bazin. In reality, as I have argued, the journal never really left Bazin in the first place, as it was unstintingly preoccupied with the fundamental problematic laid out by the theorist—that is, the cinema's relationship with the real. At the beginning of the 1970s, this attachment to Bazin took the contradictory form of a vacillation between affirmation and denial, alternating between praising his coherence and quasi-materialism on the one hand and denigrating him on the other hand as an idealist captivated by obsessive neuroses.⁵⁵ But as the decade progressed, the appraisal of Bazin's work grew more emphatically positive. The shift in attitudes towards *bazinisme* was first made explicit in a deceptively brief and unassuming text: a half-page review by Narboni of Rossellini's *Germania anno zero*, on re-release in Paris in mid-1978. Here, Narboni affirms that *Cahiers* had, for some time, been trapped by the alternative “between a cinema of transparency, conserving no trace of its process of production, and a cinema inscribing in itself the

54 Ibid., pp. 38, 40.

55 Serge Daney himself would claim that, “I think *Cahiers* oscillated several times between several different ways of inheriting Bazin.” Serge Daney, interviewed by Michel Crépu, Gilles Delavaud, Michel Mesnil and Olivier Mongin, “Passion de l'image: Des *Cahiers du cinéma* à *Libération*: Entretien avec Serge Daney,” *Esprit* vol. 83 no. 11 (November 1983) pp. 111-133. Repr. in Daney, *La Maison cinéma et le monde vol. II*, pp. 7-31, here p. 16.

mark of its formative work." The achievement of Rossellini's film, made two decades before the outbreak of the apparatus theory debates, was that it "rendered vain or transcended this opposition, for, while it indeed does not conserve a trace of anything, this is because it is, bit by bit, *the act of canceling out the traces of its passage*." The aesthetic radicalism of *Germania anno zero*, its "extreme modernity," allowed Narboni to discern the false opposition at work in the polemics against cinematic transparency and instead conceive of a unified stance towards the cinema common to *Cahiers* throughout its history, one based on a film's "inscription" of the real: "What cinema have we not ceased to defend, and against what other cinema? A cinema of true inscription, of the cruel stamp of the letter, of the ordeal of the passage to the act and the seizing of the word, against the implicit and the implied, the allusion and the metaphor."⁵⁶

This text professing its defense of "a cinema of true inscription" can now be read as something of a clarion call for the *Cahiers* writers to unabashedly avow their affinities for Bazin, and indeed this cry was heeded in the following years. In 1983, Narboni himself arranged for Dudley Andrew's 1978 English-language biography of Bazin to appear in a revised French edition under his *Cahiers du cinéma* imprint.⁵⁷ The same year, *Cahiers* published an "Hommage à André Bazin" on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of his death, which contained a moving tribute to Bazin penned by Narboni, who related the "violent pendulum effect of time, between proximity and distance," upon being reminded by Truffaut that Bazin was younger than Renoir, Rossellini and Buñuel. Evoking Proust's ruminations on temporality, Narboni reveals his own "pain upon realizing that so much time has passed [since Bazin's death], so close does he remain to us, and pain upon realizing that more time has not passed, so greatly has the landscape changed."⁵⁸ Other *Cahiers* writers followed Narboni's lead and pursued the "return to Bazin" in a more theoretically developed direction. Here, the goal was not simply to regurgitate his major ideas in a mechanical fashion nor to pursue the necessary task of scholarly exegesis but to critically utilize the underlying logic of his reflection on film in order to elaborate new, original theories taking into account the contemporary situation of the

56 Jean Narboni, "Allemagne année zéro (R. Rossellini)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 290-291 (July-August 1978), p. 47.

57 See Dudley Andrew, *André Bazin*, translated into French by Serge Grünberg (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1983). Narboni has noted the role Truffaut played as an intermediary in this venture: "Truffaut encouraged me to look at Bazin's texts, and he let me know about Dudley Andrew's book." Interview with Jean Narboni, April 2, 2014.

58 Jean Narboni, "À André Bazin," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 347 (May 1983), p. 53.

cinema. In this context, the two authors of “L'écran du fantasme” played a key role. Bonitzer's ideas on the cinema, evolving over the course of an intermittent series of theoretically inclined articles published in *Cahiers* and then reproduced in the books *Le Regard et la voix* and *Le Champ aveugle*, gave increasing prominence to Bazin's ideas as he interrogated notions of the shot, the screen, the visual field and the position of the spectator in the cinema. This work will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 24.

It is Daney, however, whose direct engagement with Bazin's legacy was the most enduring and the most thoroughgoing, to the point that he is now invariably seen in France as the major heir to the critical method promulgated by Bazin. Godard notably included them both in his genealogy of French criticism in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*,⁵⁹ while the reception of Daney's work in *Esprit*, a journal for which Bazin had written, focused on the affinities between the two figures.⁶⁰ While he had progressively moved closer to Bazin's thinking throughout the 1970s, it was the publication of *La Rampe* in 1983 that allowed Daney to show his hand, explicitly framing his approach to the cinema as well as the *Cahiers* project more generally as a form of “inheriting” Bazin's legacy.⁶¹ The same year, a review of Andrew's Bazin biography for *Libération* gave Daney the forum to expand on his relationship with his critical forefather. Following on from the discussion of death and preservation in Bazinian film theory in “L'écran du fantasme,” Daney proceeds to explain that Bazin's “*idée fixe*” was to show that “the cinema conserved the real, and that before signifying it, before resembling it, the cinema *embalmed* it. He did not have metaphors beautiful enough nor macabre enough to say it: death-mask, mold, mummy, footprint, fossil, mirror—but a singular mirror ‘whose silvering retains the image.’ André Bazin was, in a way, ‘in search of the lost silvering.’”⁶² While taking care to outline the importance of Bazin and using Andrew's biography as a guide to place him in the historical context of post-war French culture, Daney

59 For more on the “Diderot to Daney” critical tradition, see Jean-Luc Godard, *The Future(s) of Film: Three Interviews 2000/01* (Bern: Gachnang & Springer, 2001), p. 21. The parallels between Bazin and Daney extend from their criticism to their biographies: both died from illness relatively young, and both were subject to a certain outpouring of hagiography from their friends and followers following their deaths. In Joubert-Laurencin's words: “We can probably say that [Daney] was the new Bazin, right up to the suffering body and premature death that seem, in their two fates, to be identified with the major themes of their own theory: a theory that took on a body.” Joubert-Laurencin, *Le Sommeil paradoxal*, p. 103.

60 See Michel Mesnil, “De Bazin à Daney: itinéraires,” *Esprit* no. 83 (November 1983), pp. 134-135.

61 Daney, *La Rampe*, p. 15.

62 Serge Daney, “André Bazin,” *Libération*, August 19, 1983. Repr. in idem., *Ciné journal vol. II*, pp. 41-46, here p. 41.

nonetheless also closes his review with a pessimistic take on the major differences between Bazin's time and his own. In contrast to the political and cultural ebullience directly after the Libération, the 1980s in Daney's eyes was a decade marked by reaction and despair. The theoretical tumult of the ciné-club debates of earlier times had, for Daney, definitively become a "thing of the past," as cinephilic culture has been largely annihilated by television, the media and the ideology of neoliberal capitalism. The "constructive criticism" that Bazin practiced, patiently testing hypotheses about the art form against the available evidence of contemporary cinema, has equally disappeared, leaving behind a conceptually impoverished, debased critical discourse against whose omnipotence Daney was fighting an increasingly solitary rearguard action. Still more crucially, the nature of the cinematic image itself has changed since Bazin's time: "What intrigues us is that Bazin's vision [...] is today confronted with a state of the cinema where the image is no longer necessarily extracted from the real. The electronic image knows no silvering."⁶³

From this point on, Bazin's legacy became increasingly prominent for Daney, reaching a high point in his posthumous works *Persévérance* and *L'Exercice a été profitable, Monsieur*, where he openly and unequivocally identified as a "Bazinian." As Daney wrote in the notes left on his computer at the time of his death, the legacy of Bazin's thinking for his own views on the cinema came in the shape of two key ideas: firstly, the demand to "respect a certain solidarity of beings and objects plunged in a space-time continuum," and secondly, the "decidedly lively belief" that there is "something 'behind' the image."⁶⁴ But Daney's discussions of his "absent father" were increasingly colored by a recognition that, as percipient as they were for the period when the cinema played a dominant role in image culture, some key aspects of Bazin's theories were being rendered void by the technological and sociological transformations taking place in image culture as the twentieth century drew to a close. Daney would express this sentiment when interviewed by Toubiana for *Persévérance*, stating: "I am not even sure of what this idea of impure art means in Bazin, but I know what it means for me: the truth of cinema is recording; moving away from it is moving away from cinema."⁶⁵ The reality of the new world of the "visual," as Daney termed it, which became dominant from the 1980s on, was one where the relationship between the cinematographic image and the real

63 Ibid.

64 Daney, *L'Exercice a été profitable, monsieur*, pp. 84, 53.

65 Daney, *Persévérance*, p. 159 [p. 132].

was severed. In a supreme historical irony, Daney's full recognition of the validity of Bazin's theory of ontological realism came at the same time that, as he was one of the first to discern, the foundations of this theory were becoming outmoded. The conditions for an "irrational belief" in the identity of image and model were fast being eroded, and this also meant that many of Bazin's observations on film style and technique were in need of overturning. The full consequences of this epochal shift will be further explored in Chapter 26.

The same dynamic of a renewed interest in Bazin's ideas, at the same time as recognizing the ways in which the contemporary media landscape has altered many of their givens, can be detected in Comolli's more recent film theory. As his former colleagues were "returning" to a Bazin they had never truly left in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Comolli himself was on a self-imposed hiatus from film theory, writing little on the subject of the cinema as he attempted to forge a path as a filmmaker. We have already seen that his approach to documentary cinema, which has dominated his activity since the 1980s, had a strongly Bazinian sense for a "respect of the real." From the late 1980s onwards, this was also evinced in his reflections on the cinema: Comolli's return to film theory was equally a return to Bazin. Although Comolli has not abandoned the historical materialist outlook of his younger days, the Bazinian color of his more recent theories shines through, above all in his discussion of spectatorial *belief* in cinematic representation, which he dialectically intertwines with the idea of the image as *lure* espoused by psychoanalytic film theory: "At bottom, it is a matter of belief. I think the question of the belief of the spectator is absolutely crucial. If there is no belief, there is no lure. The lure only functions if there is belief. Belief and the lure are fundamentally linked, if not identical."⁶⁶

When faced with the forcefulness of this recognition of the value of Bazinian film theory, two potential interpretations of the thinking of the *Cahiers* critics of the post-1968 era are possible. In one reading, the "rediscovery" of Bazin, as Joubert-Laurencin puts it, was a spectacular *volte-face* by his "amorous ex-despisers," an acceptance of the wisdom of the "father" after the concerted effort to overthrow him had failed.⁶⁷ A far more credible explanation, however, is that the *Cahiers* critics were always,

66 Daniel Fairfax, "Yes, we were utopians; in a way, I still am...: An Interview with Jean-Louis Comolli (part 2)," *Senses of Cinema* 64 (September 2012). sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/yes-we-were-utopians-in-a-way-i-still-am-interview-with-jean-louis-comolli-part-2/ (accessed January 1, 2021).

67 Joubert-Laurencin, *Le sommeil paradoxal*, p. 10.

on a fundamental level, indebted to Bazin's thinking in their attempts to theoretically account for the cinema's relationship with the real and that this profound influence manifested itself in shifting ways, reflected in the oscillations between disavowal and identification that marked their responses to his work. *Cahiers'* fidelity to Bazin's ontological realism was, therefore, a dialectical one, which was both tempered and dynamized by being brought into relation with the critical theory of Althusser, Barthes and Lacan. In the chapters that follow, it will be the last of the aforementioned figures—Lacan and his variant of psychoanalysis—that will be of greatest importance as the relationship between cinema and the real in the theory and criticism of Oudart, Baudry and Bonitzer is discussed.

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22. Jean-Pierre Oudart and Suture

Abstract

This chapter focuses on the life and critical practice of *Cahiers du cinéma* critic Jean-Pierre Oudart. Oudart has long been associated with the notion of suture, which he imported into film theory in his groundbreaking 1969 text. But the success of this term in film studies has obscured a larger body of writings produced by Oudart while at *Cahiers* between 1969 and 1980 and stands in stark contrast to the mystery of his personal fate. With a background more in psychoanalysis than cinephilia, Oudart was chief among the *Cahiers* critics responsible for introducing Lacanian theory to the film journal, but his texts were also marked by a stylistic inscrutability and idiosyncratic critical judgement that was remarked upon by readers and his fellow critics alike, tendencies that only became more exacerbated later in his tenure at *Cahiers*. With a particular interest in the work of Fritz Lang, Robert Kramer, Stanley Kubrick and, above all, Robert Bresson, his writings nonetheless form a fascinating corpus of film criticism.

Keywords: Jean-Pierre Oudart, *Cahiers du cinéma*, suture, Jacques Lacan, Robert Bresson, Stanley Kubrick

Cinema and Suture (1)

Within the theoretical constellation produced by *Cahiers* in the post-1968 era, Jean-Pierre Oudart's writings represent a point that is both central and peripheral. Central, because his attempts to import psychoanalytic concepts into film theory were a core component of the *Cahiers* project and gave rise to the concept of suture, one of the journal's key legacies for film theory. Peripheral, due to the thoroughly idiosyncratic nature of his textual output, which invariably left his colleagues torn between admiration and bewilderment. At times, he appeared to be the most theoretically confident of the team: a note in the "Journal de la rédaction" dated July 23, 1971 even remarked that Oudart was "currently the only one capable of

quickly producing applied theoretical texts without disrupting the rest of his work for the journal.”¹ But the conceptual opacity and stylistic abstruseness of his writing ensured that his work would always remain somewhat apart from that of his fellow critics. Sylvie Pierre, for instance, considered him a “kooky oddball” (*drôle de zigoto*) whose texts were intriguing and baffling in equal measure.² While Oudart signed his name to more than 80 articles for the journal between 1969 and 1980, he never published elsewhere, and after 1980 the silence from the critic is total. Whereas his colleagues all forged public identities beyond their status as *Cahiers* critics, Oudart is singularly unknown outside of the context of the film journal—to the extent that, apart from a single appearance in Eisenschitz’s film on *Une partie de campagne* in 1969, no photographs of Oudart or recordings of his voice exist in the public domain. Out of all the individuals under study in this book, the case of Jean-Pierre Oudart is by far the most mysterious. Even the determined researcher will find little information about Oudart’s biographical details outside of his contributions to *Cahiers*, and his status today is the subject only of speculative hearsay. The contrast with the renown garnered by his concept of suture, with which his name is now indelibly linked, could not be more glaring. It is as if there is a strange nexus between one and the other; as if, in like fashion to the model in Poe’s *The Oval Portrait*, the theoretical creation had gained its vitality at the expense of the theorist who devised it and finished by devouring him.

First emerging in a pair of articles for *Cahiers* published in April and May 1969, Oudart’s notion of suture represents the inaugural attempt to apply Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory to an interrogation of the basic functioning of the cinema. The precocity of Oudart’s article is underscored both by the fact that it predates virtually all of the other landmark texts in “apparatus theory”—albeit by a matter of months rather than years—and that it was only the critic’s fourth piece for *Cahiers*, appearing a mere three months after his first published item of film criticism. Oudart’s suture theory also jumpstarted a deeper concern for Lacan in *Cahiers*, whose thinking become indispensable to the journal during its “Freudo-Marxist” phase. The after-effects of Oudart’s signal text have resonated well after this period, but with each iteration of the notion of suture, from Oudart to

1 Cited in Antoine de Baecque, *Les Cahiers du cinéma: histoire d'une revue vol. II: Cinéma, tours détours 1959-1981* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1991), p. 230.

2 Interview with Sylvie Pierre, May 26, 2014. Bonitzer likewise said of Oudart that he wrote “articles that were fascinating and totally opaque. But fascinating all the same, for me. Perhaps not for everyone, and not for the readers.” Interview with Pascal Bonitzer, April 30, 2014.

Daniel Dayan, Stephen Heath, Kaja Silverman and Slavoj Žižek, a conceptual slippage takes place and the original terms in which it was discussed have been progressively displaced, such that Oudart's original text has become increasingly dispensed with, his contribution forgotten. Today, "suture" is an indisputably influential notion in the field of film studies, having been adopted widely and in diverse ways, to the extent that it has even acquired a certain banality. But, as this chapter will outline, the spectacular fame of the concept is in inverse proportion to the far more ignominious fate of the individual who introduced it into film theory.

Suture has its origins in Lacanian theory, but it was never expounded upon in detail by Lacan himself, appearing in an off-hand manner in his 1964 seminar when he describes the "moment of seeing" as "a suture, a conjunction of the imaginary and the symbolic," which "is taken up again in a dialectic, that sort of temporal progress that is called haste, thrust, forward movement."³ Instead, it was left to the psychoanalyst's principal acolyte, Jacques-Alain Miller, to flesh out the notion in his 1966 article for the psychoanalytic journal *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, "Suture (éléments de la logique du signifiant)." For Miller, the concept of suture is key to understanding Lacanian theory and is "constantly present in his system."⁴ In Lacan's conception, the logic of the signifier is a general logic concerned with the very relation of the subject to the "chain of discourse." This relation, the "point of least resistance" in the signifying chain, is characterized by Miller as a form of suture. Drawing on Gottlob Frege's discussion of the zero in arithmetic, he describes suture as the moment in which "you can see articulated the structure of the subject as a 'flickering in eclipses,' like the movement which opens and closes the number, and delivers up the lack in the form of the 1 in order to abolish it in the successor."⁵ It is this sense of the suture—as a permeable, frangible point of connection between the subject and the logic of the signifier—that will be of importance for Oudart's importation of the concept of suture to the signifying processes at work in the cinema.

This move was far from a self-evident one: as Rodowick notes, "the silence of Miller's essay on the question of aesthetic uses of language is deafening."⁶ The opportunity to relate the notion of suture to an artistic medium was

3 Lacan, *Séminaire XI*, p. 107 [p. 118].

4 Jacques-Alain Miller, "Suture (éléments de la logique du signifiant)," *Cahiers pour l'analyse* no. 1 (January-April 1966), pp. 37-49, here p. 39. Translated as "Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)," *Screen* vol. 18, no. 4 (Winter 1977-1978), pp. 24-34, here p. 26.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 49 [p. 34].

6 D.N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 193.

nonetheless open for Oudart, and there is evidence that he had harbored this idea before the publication of his seminal text. One month before the appearance of “La Suture,” for instance, his review of *L’Enfance nue* speaks of Pialat’s cinema as being “deliberately non-sutured, yawning open” and as “excavating between each shot a void that the imaginary of the spectator is never authorized to fill.”⁷ After this sneak preview of the term, Oudart subsequently devoted a pair of theoretically substantial articles to the concept of suture. The fact that “La Suture” was originally two pieces rather than a single text is often overlooked in discussions of the concept—no least due to the fact that its otherwise generally reliable English translation by Kari Hanet is usually published with the two articles merged together. Far from being complementary halves of a harmoniously integrated whole, however, the two installments of “La Suture” in fact exhibit an uneasy tension with one another. From one part to the next, Oudart reiterates his argument, repeating the main points while at the same time introducing variations in their exposition.

Following Lacan and Miller, Oudart’s considerations on suture in the cinema center on the absorption of the subject into a signifying discourse. For Oudart, this subject is the spectator in the movie theater watching images on the screen, whom he dubs the “filmic subject,” in contrast with the “filmed subject” (the on-screen character with whom the viewer may come to identify). He opens the first installment of his article on suture by defining it as “the closure of the cinematic *énoncé* in line with its relationship with its subject [...] which is recognized, and then put in its place as the spectator.”⁸ It is the suturing function that allows the viewing subject to “read” a succession of filmic images not as isolated, atomized spatio-temporal units but as articulated with one other, as operating within the same imaginary field. For Oudart, every “filmic field” (the ensemble of objects captured in the camera’s viewfinder and subsequently projected onto the screen) is echoed by its counterpart, an “absent field,” which, produced by the sense of lack in the spectator when confronted with the boundaries of the filmic image, embraces everything outside of its frame. This absent field is a phantomic presence, a spectral double of the spectator produced by their imaginary, which Oudart dubs *l’Absent*. Oudart’s term is usually

7 Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Au hasard Pialat (*L’Enfance nue*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 210 (March 1969), pp. 55-56, here p. 56.

8 Jean-Pierre Oudart, “La Suture (1),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 211 (April 1969), pp. 36-39, here p. 36. Both this text and part 2 of “La Suture” are translated as “Cinema and Suture,” trans. Kari Hanet, in Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III*, pp. 45-56, here p. 45.

rendered in the English translation as the “Absent One,” but care should be taken to keep away from an excessive reification of *l’Absent*, a trap that some of Oudart’s exegetes fall into, or from too closely identifying *l’Absent* with on-screen characters.⁹

The floating nature of cinematic signification allows for multiple ways for films to utilize or relate to the suture, three of which are proposed by Oudart. In the first and most preponderant category, which the writer labels “subjective cinema” (evidently referring to the products of the Hollywood studio system in the classical era), suture is present but remains “undefined theoretically,” having only been produced by the intuitive experiments of filmmakers who were beholden to a “confusion of the filmic subject with the filmed subject.” In these films, shots initially tend to remain as “autonomous cells” and are primarily sutured with one another through extra-cinematic means, such as a linguistic *énoncé* (a voiceover, for instance) or through the presence of “common signifying elements” in each shot of a sequence. The formation of a cinematic syntagm out of the juxtaposition of independent shots thus requires a degree of redundancy in the signified, which results in “a substantial loss of ‘information’ and a real fissure between the elements forming the chain of the discourse and those unarticulated, excessive elements which end up forming a magma which paralyzes the film by its inertia.”¹⁰

Against this dominant mode of cinematic suture, reliant on extraneous mechanisms in order to create a signifying chain, Oudart posits two potential alternatives, both of which are represented by European modernist filmmakers. In the first possibility, typified by films of Godard such as *La Chinoise*, the fissure between what Oudart tentatively calls “the ‘thing’ of the image” and its “fragile and precious signs” is “poetically exasperated.”¹¹ What we could thus call “films of the fissure,” however, are purely negative in nature. In challenging and dismantling the suturing mechanisms developed by the “subjective” cinema, they also end up repressing the properties of the cinematic image revealed by these mechanisms and therefore dishabituate the viewer from the practice of “reading” a film as a signifying chain. Contrasted to the work of Godard are the films of Bresson, who has no less

9 Although Bordwell is generally antipathetic to the theoretical tendency that gives rise to the suture, he is correct to note that “the shot does not suggest a perspectival point of vision, only an off-screen field or zone. The shot is not the record of a glance but the sign of an absence. The Absent One is not a character, only an off-screen presence constructed by the viewer.” David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 113.

10 Oudart, “La Suture (1),” p. 36-37 [pp. 45-46].

11 *Ibid.*, p. 37 [p. 47].

radically “put the filmed subject back in its place as signifying object” but, in doing so “gives more than he took away.”¹² Oudart goes so far as to credit Bresson with the “discovery” of suture, initially foreshadowed in *Pickpocket* and then fully deployed in a theoretically aware fashion for the first time in *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*. In the latter film, shots are articulated with each other purely through the suturing mechanism of the cinema, which Bresson himself describes in uncannily Marxist terms as the “exchange value” between two shots.¹³

While many later commentators have equated cinematic suture with the shot/reverse-shot sequence in the system of continuity editing, Oudart argues that a true shot/reverse-shot sequence, in which the camera angles are perfectly aligned with the perspective of the on-screen characters, only occurs rarely in the classical era of the cinema, appearing in “aberrant” works such as Lang’s *Kriemhilds Rache*. In order to forestall an avowal of the fictional character of the filmic signified, a more standard approach in “subjective” cinema is to introduce a slight *décalage* or obliquity between the point of view of the character and the position of the camera (and, by extension, the viewpoint of the spectator). The innovation of *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* is that, for the first time, the camera’s obliquity is “openly admitted and established as a system.” The combination of a radical alterity between the spatial fields of the film (including the complete absence of establishing shots), the syncopation produced by the slight temporal disjunctions in the transitions between images, a tendency towards abstraction precipitated by the director’s fondness for fragmented, isolated images, and the use of excessively skewed camera angles enables the syntax of Bresson’s film to be aligned with “the cinema’s necessary representation of the subject’s relation to its discourse,” thereby revealing “by and for whom the operation of suture works: the filmic subject, the spectator.” It is at this point, concluding part one of his article on cinematic suture, that Oudart explicitly turns to Miller’s evocation of a “flickering in eclipses” that defines the structure of the subject, which “delivers up the lack in the form of the 1 in order to abolish it in the successor.” For Oudart, it is the eclipse of *l’Absent* as “the direct demand of the signifier to be represented in an *énoncé* subjected to its order” that ensures “the suturing function of the subject of the discourse.”¹⁴

12 Ibid., p. 36 [p. 45].

13 Ibid., p. 38 [p. 47].

14 The quotes in this paragraph are from *ibid.*, pp. 38-39 [pp. 47-50].

Cinema and Suture (2)

At the end of his initial article, Oudart explicitly declares that the transition from the first to the second part of his commentary on cinematic suture will consist of a shift away from casting light on “the truly scenic play of the cinematic signifier” and towards an examination of its “effects of signification.”¹⁵ In reality, however, the relationship between the two installments of “La suture” is not so clear-cut. To a large degree, the second part consists of a *replay* of the first, where the same broad argument is cast but in different terms, using new examples and enacting a subtle but perceptible displacement in the text’s frame of reference. It thus does not seem intemperate to claim that there is a performative aspect to Oudart’s article, and, more specifically, that the two sections of the text, published in a diachronically fragmented manner (a month apart from each other, in succeeding issues of *Cahiers*), function in analogous fashion to a film sequence where two images, taken from divergent camera angles, capture the same signified but do so in an oblique relationship with one another. Those who have treated the two articles as seamless segments of a single discursive act have thus operated their own suture on Oudart’s text, eliding the *différance* that exists at its heart. Moreover, there is every possibility that this was the author’s intention, thereby highlighting the nature of the phenomenon he describes through his very act of writing. It is thus profitable to reproduce, here, the disjunction at play in Oudart’s text and treat the second half in relative isolation from the first, in order to register the shifting nature of his discussion of suture.

The second text begins with a description of a brief moment from Buster Keaton’s *The General*, the formal qualities of which allow it to function as a metaphorical place-holder for the spectator’s response to the cinematic image, unveiling the nature of image as if in slow-motion. In the shot under question, a group of Unionist soldiers can initially be seen in a high-angle long shot crossing a river. At this stage, however, as Oudart describes it, the spectator “does not perceive either the framing, or the distance, or the camera’s position” and instead takes the images to be no more than an animated photograph. All of a sudden, Confederate troops emerge from the bottom frame of the image, appearing inordinately larger than their adversaries. Compared by Oudart to a Poe character who mistakenly sees a butterfly as large as a ship, the spectator’s recognition that the soldiers are standing on a rise overhanging the riverbank is momentarily delayed. For an

15 Ibid., p. 39 [p. 50]

instant, the viewer experiences a sense of *jouissance*, of “vertiginous delight,” at the “unreal space” presented on the screen, and they feel themselves to be “fluid, elastic and expanding.” Before long, however, the boundaries of the image, the presence of a screen and its frame, are sensed by the spectator, who then questions its existence. It is this questioning, Oudart argues, that “will radically transform the spectator’s mode of participation.” In quasi-Heideggerian terms, he outlines the transfiguration of the image from a “being-there” (*être-là*) to a “being-there-for” (*être-là-pour*). The objects on the screen have come to form a unified, closed, indivisible signifying Sum, but the “haunting presence” of the absent field remains, and it is the revelation of this absence to the spectator that inducts the film image into the order of the signifier.¹⁶

Oudart is careful to signal, however, that the moment of spectatorial *jouissance*, when the cinematic image is perceived as an inexhaustible plenitude, does not actually take place but is a “hypothetical and purely mythical period.”¹⁷ The vacillation of the spectator’s attitude towards the image between the *jouissance* of an open field and the reading of a delimited sign should thus not be understood as a temporal phenomenon but as taking place on a purely logical plane, in the “always-already” time of mythic structures (such as Lacan’s mirror-stage). Moreover, the image itself is ineluctably unstable, ungraspable and composed of “structurally opposite and mutually eclipsing elements.”¹⁸ The suturing of the “present field” of the cinematic image with its absent field brought about by this vacillation leads to cinematic discourse being “enveloped” within the Imaginary order of Lacanian theory, and it is the production of this totalizing imaginary field that, in the final instance, differentiates a truly cinematic mode of signification from a mere moving image. As in part I of “La Suture,” Oudart broaches a range of possible strategies that filmmakers have deployed when faced with the suturing mechanism embedded in the articulation of shots: either the cinematic signification produced by the suture can manifest itself as a “frozen letter” or it can become a “terroristic and subversive speech” by directly penetrating the spectator. Again, a distinction between Bresson’s *Le Procès de Jeanne d’Arc* and *Au hasard, Balthazar* is made by Oudart, leading him to dub Bresson “without doubt the most ambiguous figure in

16 The quotes in this paragraph are from Jean-Pierre Oudart, “La Suture (2),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 212 (May 1969), pp. 50-55, here p. 50 [p. 50-51].

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., p. 51 [p. 52].

modern cinema.”¹⁹ For the most part, *Au hasard, Balthazar* is marked by a “continually noticeable decomposition of syntagmas” which prevents the spectator’s imaginary from suturing the film’s discourse.²⁰ By contrast, *Le Procès de Jeanne d’Arc* remains the model of a cinematic practice that allows a deliberately syncopated discursive structure to be sutured, and the infinite modulation of the camera angles the film deploys (from frontal images of the on-screen characters to highly oblique angles) gestures towards the possibility of a formally emancipated cinema, one “free of subjective illusion.” This is the utopian element of Oudart’s text, which posits that in such a putative cinema—nascent elements of which the writer also detects in a shot/reverse-shot sequence from Rouch’s *La Chasse au lion à l’arc* showing a group of hunters who, having pursued a lioness, now stand in prayer before the dying beast—suture would take place purely through the exchange of visual fields on the level of the signifier rather than the signified. Outside of exceptional cases, such as the work of Hitchcock, Lang, Mizoguchi and Bresson, the cinema has hitherto predominantly existed as a “privileged means of embodying a fiction.”²¹ In the cinema Oudart dreams of, by contrast, filmic speech would be based first and foremost on the formal properties of the images themselves. In Lacanian terms, such a cinema would witness the emergence of the Symbolic order and its detachment from any anchoring in the Imaginary.

Oudart’s recourse to Lacan’s notions of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, at this point, suggests the possibility of an ontological reading of the suturing mechanism that most, if not all, of the later commentators on the concept of suture have studiously avoided. For Lacan, as was noted earlier, an encounter with the order of the Real was only possible in those fleeting moments when the Symbolic slips away from the Imaginary, as in dreams, jokes or parapraxes. As a weak link in the chain of discourse, suture is thus also a potential site for an encounter with the Real. The threads that bind images together in the imagination of the spectator, encompassing them in the signifying chain, are also the sites where the Imaginary order breaks down, allowing flickering chinks of the Real to shine through. Far from being, as the received understanding of suture in later “apparatus theory” would have it, an elaboration of the innately illusionistic nature of the cinematic *dispositif*, Oudart’s notion of suture is implicitly a theory of cinematic ontology, albeit one that, rooted in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, can only conceive of

19 Ibid., p. 52 [p. 53].

20 Ibid., p. 53 [p. 53].

21 Ibid., p. 54 [p. 55].

the Real as a traumatic encounter that is impossible to render into communicative language. Indeed, this aspect of his argument is made explicit by Oudart at the conclusion of his text when he speaks of the eroticism at the center of the films of Bresson and Lang. This eroticism, one of the most tangible sites of an encounter with the real, is produced to a large degree by their conscious articulation of the limits of the cinema's signifying power. In the "subjective" cinema, the erotic had existed merely on the level of the signified. In the suturing mechanisms developed by Bresson and Lang, by contrast, it passes to the level of the signifier and thus incorporates the spectators themselves within the field of the erotic. As Oudart puts it, the recognition that "the cinema, in speaking itself, speaks of eroticism, and is the privileged space where eroticism can always be signified" is a discovery that "engages the whole cinema."²²

Suture after Oudart

In the above outline of Oudart's account of suture in the cinema, it must be admitted that a concern for intelligibility has sometimes entailed a smoothing over of the contradictions of Oudart's text, an extrapolation from the gaps in his argument and an elision of the points at which the terms of his arguments shift. "La suture" remains an inescapably enigmatic text whose paradoxes and mysteries cannot, in the end, be eliminated or explained away. Even an advocate of the concept like Stephen Heath concedes that there is "a certain slide in the terms of the article" and a "wavering mesh of formulations."²³ Many of the claims contained within are contestable if not impossibly abstruse, and the value judgements made on specific films are, to say the least, peculiar. The privileged position, for instance, given to *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*—which has otherwise gone down as a minor entry in Bresson's œuvre and had received a rather more muted response from *Cahiers* when Comolli had initially reviewed the film²⁴—is difficult to credit, while the stark opposition registered between this film and *Au hasard, Balthazar* is a judgement unique to Oudart. These are only the most overt signs that Oudart's text was too idiosyncratic, too conceptually recondite for his notion of suture to truly be useful to others. And yet, once

²² Ibid., p. 55 [p. 56].

²³ Stephen Heath, "Notes on Suture," *Screen* vol. 18 no. 4 (Winter 1977-1978), pp. 48-76, here pp. 59, 61.

²⁴ Jean-Louis Comolli, "L'autre ailleurs (*Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 143 (May 1963), pp. 42-49.

freed from the clutches of the writer who first gave voice to it, the concept at the core of his article would embark on a life of its own. The success of the notion, however, led to a certain betrayal of Oudart's thinking; its dissemination—to the point where it has become more widespread than any other single concept produced by *Cahiers* in the post-1968 era—has come at the expense of a taming of the moments of theoretical wildness in Oudart's original article.

The key text responsible both for the popularity of suture within film studies and its transformation into a serviceable theoretical object at a remove from Oudart's original exposition is Daniel Dayan's article "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema." Even today, Dayan's piece—more straightforward, more accessible, and less rhetorically daunting than Oudart's—is invariably used as an introduction to the notion of suture. Dayan presents his text as an introductory gloss to Oudart's writings on suture, but this is fundamentally misleading. In fact, the French-Israeli scholar operates a major transformation of Oudart's original argument, one which, in the end, reduces it to a Manichaean opposition between "sutured" and "non-sutured" cinema that Oudart is generally careful to avoid. There *is* a significant theoretical value to Dayan's text in its own right, but when reading him, we should not assimilate his views to those of Oudart. Rather, we should read Dayan *contra* Oudart, taking care to pinpoint those moments when his text departs from or distorts the argument of its predecessor.

The first such deviation is an excessive emphasis on the role of point-of-view in classical cinema and, concomitantly, the importance of the shot/reverse-shot procedure in the functioning of suture. Although Dayan is careful to stress the necessity, in narrative cinema, of obliquity between the camera angle and the perspective of the diegetic characters in the transformation of a vision of film into a reading of its discourse, he overplays the degree to which narrative film can be reduced to a series of point-of-view shots. While accepting that "there are also moments when the image does not represent anyone's point of view," Dayan insists that "in the classical narrative cinema, these are relatively exceptional" and "soon enough, the image is reasserted as somebody's point of view."²⁵ The oblique distance between the character's viewpoint and the camera angle adopted in classical filming methods is thus akin to the novel's use of third-person prose for the central character's experiences—the intended perspective to be adopted by the reader/viewer is still abundantly clear. Similarly, whereas Oudart

25 Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema," *Film Quarterly* vol. 28, no. 1 (Autumn 1974), pp. 22-31, here p. 29.

uses the shot/reverse-shot sequence in a broadly metaphorical sense, Dayan makes a more straightforward equation between the editing technique and the process of spectatorial immersion in the visual field of the film. Despite a footnote cautioning that “shot/reverse-shot is itself merely one figure in the system(s) of classical cinema,”²⁶ it comes to play an outsized role in his understanding of normative editing practices such as those observed by Hollywood in the studio era. As such, the vacillation between *jouissance* and reading observed by Oudart is ascribed to a more literally chronological process in Dayan, with the first image in a shot/reverse-shot sequence giving rise to spectatorial pleasure, only for shot two to produce a suture effect.

A further distinction between Dayan’s and Oudart’s presentations of suture is in the ideological value given respectively to sutured and non-sutured modes of cinematic enunciation. For Dayan, suture is explicitly identified with the narrative closure of classical cinema. It is thus essentially illusionistic and laden with the ideology of bourgeois representation. While he notes that there are a multiplicity of other signifying systems in the cinema besides that based on the suturing mechanism, Dayan only gives one example: the films of the Groupe Dziga Vertov, and more particularly, *Vent d’est*. In this radically non-sutured film, the shot itself tends to constitute a complete statement, the spectator is made to be perpetually aware of the existence of the “absent-one,” and the reading of the shot is no longer “suspended” but “contemporary” to the shot itself; it is “immediate, its temporality is the present.”²⁷ In contrast to Dayan’s binary model of the cinema, Oudart’s article does not tar suture *per se* with the brush of bourgeois ideology but merely its untheorized deployment by conventional commercial cinema.²⁸ Dayan may well attack the classical cinema for being a “ventriloquist of ideology,” but in “The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema” he becomes a ventriloquist of Oudart, claiming to speak on behalf of the *Cahiers* writer but instead twisting the argument of the original text in order to present a simplified account of suture that can more easily be inserted into a dualistic vision of the cinema, bifurcating the medium into bourgeois and revolutionary modes of film practice. In importing the concept of suture into English-language academia, Dayan is principally responsible for its wider fame, but this dissemination came at the cost of straitjacketing the

26 Ibid., p. 31.

27 Ibid.

28 It is notable that, whereas Oudart places the greatest value on the theoretically aware usage of the suturing mechanism in films such as *Le Procès de Jeanne d’arc*, Dayan refrains from discussing Bresson’s films entirely.

elusive mercuriality of Oudart's original thinking. In the wake of Dayan's article, therefore, the concept of suture substantially gained a life of its own. Rarely referred to by Oudart himself in his own later texts, it migrated across linguistic and institutional boundaries and was central to many of the key debates in film studies in the 1970s and beyond.

"The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema" quickly incited rebuttals from those within the field such as William Rothman and Barry Salt, who, hostile to a psychoanalytic approach to cinema, espoused a more pragmatic analysis of film form. Here, however, Dayan was the main polemical target, and there is little evidence that either was directly familiar with Oudart's (then yet to be translated) text.²⁹ To counteract such admonitions, the editors of *Screen* came to the defense of the notion of suture. A 1977 dossier dedicated to the topic included English translations of Miller's and Oudart's articles, providing readers of English with access to previously unavailable material. At the same time, a series of articles penned by Stephen Heath—including "Narrative Space," "Anata mo" and "Notes on Suture"—dealt at length with the concept. By a large margin, Heath's remarks on suture represent the most conceptually fertile application of Oudart's thinking. His account of suture gives, for the first time, a retrospective overview of the evolution of the idea, tracing the process of conceptual displacement that characterized the passage from Miller to Dayan via Oudart and the "muddled state of the concept" that resulted. In contrast to Miller's strictly descriptive understanding of the functioning of suture within the logic of the signifier, Heath detects the germs of an evaluative stance towards suture in Oudart, who speaks of the phenomenon in terms of "tragedy" and "loss"—a trait that is accentuated in Dayan with his more straightforward identification between suture and bourgeois ideology. He writes: "In Miller and some Oudart, suture is descriptive of the very possibility of signification; in some Oudart and most Dayan, suture is an ideological operation, which the 'privileged example' of shot/reverse-shot demonstrates and resumes."³⁰ Heath, indeed, seeks to distance suture from a too close association with shot/reverse-shot, which he sees as an unfortunate side-effect of Dayan's article, and instead reaffirms its role in subject formation and the production of cinematic enunciation. Heath's chosen counter-model to classical narrative cinema, Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*, may share with Dayan's account of *Vent d'est* a status as a

29 See William Rothman, "Against 'The System of the Suture,'" *Film Quarterly* vol. 29, no. 1 (Autumn 1975), pp. 45-50; and Barry Salt, "Film Style and Technology in the Forties," *Film Quarterly* vol. 31, no. 1 (Autumn 1977), pp. 46-57.

30 Heath, "Notes on Suture," here p. 62.

work of political modernist cinema, but the *Screen* writer's defense of the film hews more closely to Oudart's outlook. What distinguishes *News from Home*, in Heath's understanding, is "not that the film did not suture but that it did not suture in the way of the system, that it posed differently—indeed posed the problem of—the functioning of suture."³¹

At the same time, the growth of a feminist strand of film studies derived from the *Screen* theory of the 1970s saw suture play a significant role in the early writings of many of the proponents of this tendency. Laura Mulvey's account of the "male gaze" in classical narrative cinema, although it does not make reference to Oudart by name, evinces many similarities with his notion of suture.³² This affinity is recognized by Kaja Silverman in her 1983 book *The Subject of Semiotics*, chapter 5 of which focuses on the concept of suture. Mulvey's argument, Silverman writes:

bears a striking resemblance to the suture theory. Both posit a cinematic adventure in which plenitude is fractured by difference and lack, only to be sealed over once again. For the theoreticians of suture, the salvage activity is carried out by means of the movement from one shot to the next. For Mulvey, as for the many feminist film theoreticians who have worked along similar lines, the lack which must be both dramatized and contained finds its locus in the female body.³³

Silverman seeks counter-models to suture not in the politically radical work of Godard or Akerman but in certain Hollywood films, most notably *Psycho* by Hitchcock. For Silverman, *Psycho* "deliberately exposes the negations upon which filmic plenitude is predicated" and "unabashedly foregrounds the voyeuristic dimensions of the cinematic experience, making constant references to the speaking subject, and forcing the viewer into oblique and uncomfortable positions vis-à-vis both the cinematic apparatuses and the spectacle which they produce."³⁴ In weaving a critical tapestry from psychoanalytic, semiotic and feminist concepts, the formal analysis Silverman produces of this film stands as one of the most assured deployments of suture theory.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

32 See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* vol. 16 no. 3 (Autumn 1975), pp. 6-18.

33 Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 222-223.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

In the following years, the notion of suture was widely disseminated throughout academia, spreading from film studies to other fields in the humanities such as literary theory and art history, but its organic development as a theoretical idea essentially halted with Silverman, as psychoanalytic film theory in general came to be sidelined in this era. In 2001's *The Fright of Real Tears*, Slavoj Žižek could even speak of “the case of the missing Lacanians,” claiming that, with the exception of Joan Copjec and a handful of fellow Slovenians, he knew of “no cinema theorist who effectively accepts Lacan as his or her ultimate background.”³⁵ In defending the honor of psychoanalytic film theory, Žižek also revives the concept of suture, most notably by relating it to the “function of the interface,” which arises “when the exchange of subjective and objective shots fails to produce the suturing effect.”³⁶ The paradigmatic example of this phenomenon is the electoral rally scene in *Citizen Kane*, when Welles is accompanied by his own image on a gigantic poster hanging behind his campaign stump: the reality of the event, here, is guaranteed by its own reduplicated image, and the “interface-screen field” thus emerges as “the direct stand-in for the ‘absent one’” of suture theory.³⁷ The effervescence of Žižek’s writing has contributed more than a little to the persistence, up to the present day, of scholarly interest in suture theory,³⁸ but this is not matched by interest in Oudart himself, whose fate has gone largely neglected by those who have reaped harvests from the theoretical terrain he first ploughed. It is through a return to his broader set of writings, however, that we can gain both a deeper understanding of the critic and give contextual “flesh” to the concept with which his name has been enduringly linked.

Theories of Representation

The contrast between the fame of the concept of suture initiated by Oudart, now able to be name-checked by any first-year film studies student, and the near-total anonymity of Oudart the individual could not be more glaring. While the suture debates were raging without any input from the concept’s progenitor, Oudart himself continued to produce critical and theoretical work for *Cahiers* over the course of more than a decade. These articles have

35 Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears* (London: BFI, 2001), p. 2.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

38 See, for instance, Seung-hoon Jeong, *Cinematic Interfaces: Film Theory After New Media* (London: Routledge, 2013); and Sulgi Lie, *Die Außenseite des Films: Zur politischen Filmästhetik* (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2012).

received nothing like the same level of attention that his suture text has. And yet the corpus of texts written by Oudart is particularly stimulating, his writing both rigorous and erratic, illuminating and opaque, attesting both to his precocious interest in contemporary theorists such as Lacan and Schefer and to his capricious critical judgements on contemporary films. Moreover, it is a serial body of work, with each new text building on its predecessors, producing both continuities and discontinuities with them. In exploring, in diverse ways, the relationship between psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity and the techniques of representation adopted by cinema and other visual mediums, it is a set of writings that unquestionably merits our attention.

Oudart's contribution to "Travail, lecture, jouissance," a collaborative text co-written with Daney, follows on from the questions raised in "La suture." Both his and Daney's sections focus on the "ideology of the visible" in the cinema, the nexus in the Western philosophical tradition between vision and belief, pleasure and meaning. In the case of the three segments penned by Oudart—titled "Phantasme," "Symptôme" and "Scènes"—the question of the cinema's relation with the Real, left at the level of a logical implication in "La suture," is explicitly tackled. Here, the starting point for Oudart is the recognition of the collapse of a representational system—classical narrative cinema—that had been both perfected and subverted by the "old masters" of Hollywood's studio era. This cinema was undeniably a popular art, but by the early 1960s it had "exhausted all its fantasies and all the resources of the imaginary hoard it had inherited from the nineteenth century." It had been able to speak about the world but only "between the lines" and for this reason was first and foremost a cinema of paranoia and neurosis, which originated, Oudart argues, in a "neurotic sublimation" of its aesthetic, erotic and political taboos. Thus, the classical cinema had a double character: it was both "an object dedicated to transmitting ideology" *and* a cultural artefact that "best pointed up its symptomatic fact," and it was thus the most compromised of all the modes of representation in successfully occluding its status as a vehicle of ideology.³⁹

This dual nature of the major works of classical narrative cinema is subtended by the paradoxical nature of the cinematographic image: it is both a visual object whose codes are modeled on the principles of verisimilitude in post-Renaissance painting *and* a fictional form, with narrative structures drawn from literary traditions. Thus, the spectator is irrevocably torn between experiencing the cinema as an "analogical representation," founded

39 Daney/Oudart, "Travail, lecture, jouissance," p. 44 [p. 124].

in the continuity of the projection, and as a mode of writing, or *écriture*, based on the discontinuity of montage. In order to occlude the aporetic nature of spectatorial experience, the cinema must invent a “prodigious apparatus”—the suturing mechanism. While this echoes the argument of Oudart’s earlier text on suture, “Travail, lecture, jouissance” introduces a new element: the phantasmal status of the figure of the director himself within the representative system. The director is granted the status of a “Master of the representation which society has always made for itself of the relation between the real and the representation (its imaginary),” and a link is thereby established between the “absolute mastery” of the director and the “limitless *jouissance*” enjoyed by the spectator.⁴⁰

It is here that Oudart turns more specifically to the work of Hitchcock and Lang. Far from being a cinema of transparency, the films of these two auteurs have held a ceaseless discourse on the question of the sign, which is not simply a visual reproduction of the profilmic object but the “signifier of something invisible, whose unmasking is delayed.” Moreover, because the cinema is produced within a representational system founded on the ideological equation between the real and the visible, this aberrant strand of Hollywood filmmaking is founded on “the most radical misrecognition” of “any relation between the real (the concrete reality) and the imaginary (the ‘world’ of representation, the concrete imaginary).”⁴¹ The aesthetic force of the cinema of Hitchcock and Lang comes from its anchoring in an “obsessional discourse,” which was not present at the level of theme or content but inscribed into the very formal practices of the films they made, a phenomenon particularly noticeable in late films such as *Moonfleet* or *Marnie*. The result is a breakdown in both the notion of filmic transparency and the system of *écriture* imposed in Hollywood (that is, continuity editing). In its place, modern cinema haplessly flounders between a poetics of suspicion and the “deceptive representation” of advertising imagery. Having lost, under the weight of its contradictory nature, any reference to the real, the image has become a pure sign, which “filmmakers no longer dare use except by designating it as belonging to an ‘other,’ to the cinema (culture, the common good), or to the enemy (the industry, bourgeois ideology).” Thus, Oudart concludes his text on a dispiriting note that goes against the grain of the optimism his colleagues held for formally radical cinema. Films such as *Méditerranée* pose as revolutionary, but they end up reducing “the practice of a revolutionary *écriture* to the internal deconstruction of

40 Ibid., p. 45 [p. 126].

41 Ibid., p. 48 [p. 131].

a myth," and the resulting "polysemic liberation" is merely a dead end that produces nothing but "suicidal specular reflection."⁴² If the revolutionary potential of such modernist cinema should indeed prove to be possible, it will come not in the form of deconstructionist *écriture* but in a symptomatic return of what the "obsessional cinema" of Lang and Hitchcock had sought to repress: the scene of the political.

While both "La suture" and "Travail, lecture, jouissance" were primarily concerned with the cinema, other texts by Oudart during this period offered a theoretical interrogation of representation more broadly and of the relationship between cinema and other figurative mediums, most notably post-Renaissance European painting. It was primarily the system of monocular perspective developed in Renaissance Italy that was the main prism through which Oudart and his *Cahiers* colleagues explored the influence of painting on the representational system that has dominated the cinema since the Lumières. In this area of theoretical investigation, the work of theorists such as Pierre Francastel (*Peinture et société*) and Jean Louis Schefer (*Scénographie d'un tableau*), on the function played by *quattrocento* art in the constitution of the modern bourgeois subject was of supreme importance and was relayed to *Cahiers* via *Tel Quel* and short-lived journals such as *VH 101* and *Peinture, Cahiers théoriques*.⁴³ In Oudart's writings, this work was combined with Lacanian theory, a synthesis that was most effectively crystallized in the series "Notes pour une théorie de la représentation," left unfinished after the publication of two installments in mid-1971. Here the inscription of the subject into the scenic structure of a visual object is explicitly linked to the notion of interpellation advanced by Althusser. Oudart characterizes the present-day film spectator as being prone to a specific form of interpellation in which the auteur-director plays the role of a phantasmal subject with whom the viewer is led to identify.⁴⁴ This specific transformation of cinematic *écriture* can be witnessed in European modernist cinema and forms the prism through which Oudart discussed the work of Visconti and Bresson in subsequent articles. Here, by contrast, he takes a longer view of the history of visual representation, outlining the persistence of ideological effects across diverse figurative systems. In attempting to do this, Oudart refutes in advance the later attacks

42 Ibid., p. 50 [pp. 134-135].

43 See Pierre Francastel, *Peinture et société* (Paris: Seuil, 1965); and Jean Louis Schefer, *Scénographie d'un tableau* (Paris: Seuil, 1969).

44 Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Notes pour une théorie de la représentation [1]," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 229 (May-June 1971), pp. 43-45, here p. 43. Translated as "Notes for a Theory of Representation," trans. Annwyl Williams, in Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. III*, pp. 203-212, here p. 203.

on “apparatus theory” for presenting bourgeois ideology as a monolithic entity bereft of historical determination; here, in fact, he speaks of “successive representational systems between the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century.”⁴⁵ Key, for the *Cahiers* critic, is the passage from the theological, feudal model of representation in the medieval era, typified by the paintings of Giotto, and the secular, bourgeois schema presented in Velázquez’s work, a product of the dawn of modern capitalism. At stake here is the class-determined ideological status of painting, which shifts from a strictly hierarchical *mise en scène* in the Middle Ages, addressed to an all-powerful God or Sovereign and structured around a symbolic debt owed by the Son to the Father, towards a visual system founded on the “egalitarian ideology of the bourgeoisie,” which represses “the discourse on the debt of the producer to the prince or divinity” and leaves only the controlling eye of the painter as the figure of the Master, thereby foreclosing the social and theological origins of bourgeois realist painting in medieval figurative systems.⁴⁶ With its “double play of signifiers,” which both preserves and subverts the central position of the king within the visual field, *Las Meninas* represents a key moment in this historically determined dialectical leap in the dominant mode of representation and is a potent augury of the figurative system that would determine film production in the twentieth century.

The *Hors-champ* of the Auteur: Oudart on Bresson

Oudart had intended to pursue the line of investigation opened in “Notes pour une théorie de la représentation” further, but it is at this point that his text is cut short, and in his subsequent writings a historical discussion of pre-cinematic representational systems would be largely secondary to the task of critically responding to contemporary films. As was suggested by the Olympian status of *Le Procès de Jeanne d’Arc* in “La suture,” Robert Bresson was by far the most important filmmaker for Oudart, whose interest in the author of *Notes sur le cinématographe* endured throughout the critic’s time at *Cahiers*. From his 1969 review of *Une femme douce* to his 1977 response to *Le Diable probablement*, “Modernité de Robert Bresson,” Oudart accompanied each of the filmmaker’s releases with probing critical responses. No doubt

45 Ibid. [p. 204].

46 Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Notes pour une théorie de la représentation [2],” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 230 (July 1971), pp. 43-45, here p. 45. Translated as “Notes for a Theory of Representation,” p. 211.

it was the enigmatic status of Bresson's unique approach to the cinema—at once classical and modernist, contemporary and archaic, traditional and radical, spiritualist in content and materialist in form—that appealed to a critic whose own thinking similarly refused such neat categorizations. At any rate, Oudart's articles on Bresson represent some of his most stimulating writing on the cinema and can now be seen as a coherent series marking the repeated encounter between a critic and a filmmaker's work.

After first responding to *Une femme douce* in the 1969 article "Bresson et la vérité," in which he argued that Bresson is the *only* filmmaker to have interrogated the ideological nature of "the Truth" first broached by Van Gogh and Gauguin in painting,⁴⁷ Oudart presents the film, in the 1971 piece "Un discours en défaut," within the context of a broader tendency in modern European cinema that has incommunicability and the impossibility of forming communities at its thematic and formal core. For Oudart, this wave of films represents the status of the contemporary (European) spectator, who is "in a position of ideological (not political) rupture in relation to bourgeois institutions, practices and ethics." Although these films do refer to contemporary social and political realities, they end up producing a discourse that the spectator receives merely as a "fantasy of rupture," which is produced in the "violent, irreducible antagonism" between a lone outsider figure and the other characters. As opposed to the narrative resolution of classical Hollywood, these films see no progression in the relations between characters and instead consist of "a repetitive series of equivalent scenes at the conclusion of which the child is still not integrated."⁴⁸ As such, they are explicitly made in order to produce an effect of trauma in the spectator, primarily through the lack of inscription of the situations depicted in a discourse that would repress the social contradictions they pose.

Having been one of the first of the post-war filmmakers to openly avow his practice as a rupture with Hollywood, Bresson's filming technique presents a possible scenographic model for this cinematic tendency. Films of his such as *Mouchette* and *Une femme douce* center on a solitary individual who "rejects communication, an economic relation, or a sexual relation, in the name of a categorical refusal to be defined in terms of social status by the other characters, or to be transformed into an object of desire."⁴⁹ Correspondingly, the formal representation of these characters is typified

47 Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Bresson et la vérité (*Une femme douce*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 216 (October 1969), pp. 53-56.

48 The above quotes are from Oudart, "Un discours en défaut," pp. 4-5 [pp. 276, 280].

49 *Ibid.*, p. 8 [pp. 280-281].

by the use of fragmented frames, with multiple characters barred from occupying the same shot, and the privileged figure at the center of the scenario is designated as the object of the gaze of another figure, thereby connoting them as an object of desire against which status they resist. Bressonian *mise en scène*, however, has the effect of obscuring the real references in which the fiction is placed (erotic desire and economic exchange, specifically) in favor of an ideological proposition concerning the irreducibility of the protagonist to the determinations of their social or sexual situation. Thus, while the ideological goal of Bresson's films differs from that of Hollywood, they are marked by the same effects of transparency (in their formal structure) and transitivity (in their discourse) as their North American counterparts.

This stance towards Bresson—showing, in equal measure, fascination towards their formal practice and suspicion about their ideological effects—is also evident in “Le hors-champ de l’Auteur,” a 1972 response to *Quatre nuits d’un rêveur*. For Oudart, Bresson’s 1972 film continues and accentuates the hystericized eroticism that has characterized the rest of his œuvre. As with “La suture,” Oudart highlights a turning point in Bresson’s work with *Au hasard Balthazar*: from this point on, the ideological writing effects that had marked Bresson’s films are progressively effaced, such that by the time of *Quatre nuits d’un rêveur* they have completely disappeared. The fictional system of Bresson’s latest film retains the triangle of petty-bourgeois erotic intrigues that operates in so much of classical narrative cinema and forecloses any inscription of the film into a broader economic or sexual context. Although it would appear to have an anchoring in contemporary politics, with its depiction of disaffected youth in a Paris marked by the aftermath of the 1968 uprising, this belated reference to social practice is “the last recourse of idealist cinema, its final attempt to give itself the semblance of a political position.” Since Bresson’s work no longer finds itself on the frontline of ideological struggle, he responds by giving a “live” relay of a “social practice that is deemed to actively reflect the contradictions of the filmmaker’s real milieu” (namely, the intellectual *haute-bourgeoisie*) but which in fact radically censors the real economic nature of class society. In addition to this censorship, the true *hors-champ* repressed by the film is the figure of the Auteur himself, and in particular the sadistic relationship between the filmmaker and his actresses, which is displaced onto the relations between the characters of the film. This relationship “overdetermines” Bresson’s narration and is “invariably inscribed in terms of the hysterical intrigue, in which a young girl is divided by the fact that her sexual desire and her need for love are not addressed to the same man.” The figure who receives the heroine’s non-erotic love is, in

Oudart's analysis, presented as psychotic and castrated by the disavowal of the sadistic relationship between Bresson and his actresses. Owing to the economic and sexual foreclosure of this character, the Sadian fantasy of *Quatre nuits d'un rêveur* thus represents an "extreme point of regression for the Bressonian ideological inscription."⁵⁰

Two articles published by Oudart later in the 1970s also responded to new releases by Bresson. A 1975 text compared *Lancelot du lac* with Herzog's *Aguirre der Zorn Gottes*, for their common use of the medieval era to serve as a referent for twentieth-century fascism. Here Oudart combines his traditional psychoanalytic approach with Deleuze's concept of the state apparatus as a "desiring machine." Although *Lancelot du lac* fascinates with its lure of revealing the "intimate 'truth' of the fascist pleasure machine [*machine à jouir*]," it is nonetheless marred by Bresson's blithe *je-m'en-foutisme* and right-wing dandyism, which ends up bringing him close to the "retro" aesthetic of Cavani and Malle, whose nihilistic ideology was decried by *Cahiers* at the time.⁵¹ 1977's "Modernité de Robert Bresson," meanwhile, compared *Le Diable probablement* to Claude Goretta's *La Dentellière* for their common obsession with an "adorable body." Whereas in Goretta's film, the physique of Isabelle Huppert, playing a hapless, innocent working-class girl, is a "photogenic incarnation" of the Platonic idea of the good, Bresson's film is emblemized by a bourgeois body fated to evil through its own sense of self-certainty. The modernity of Bresson comes from the fact that, rather than treating evil as the antinomy of good, *Le Diable probablement* twists such abstract ideas into a "tourniquet of non-sense," and as a consequence Oudart relates the "Bressonian body" to Barthes' notion of the "third meaning." The image of the body, in Bresson, is an "impossible semantic object," which undoes language, suspends meaning, subverts value systems and even effaces the distinction between being and non-being. In an assertion that could apply to the role that all of Bresson's films have had in the development of Oudart's film theory, the *Cahiers* critic thus maintains that *Le Diable probablement* is "a lesson of

50 Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Le hors-champ de l'Auteur: l'idéologie moderniste dans quelques films récents," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 236-237 (March-April 1972), pp. 86-89, here pp. 87-88. Translated as "The Absent Field of the Author," in John Caughie (ed.), *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 261-270, here pp. 265-266.

51 Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Un pouvoir qui ne pense, ne calcule, ni ne juge? (*Aguirre, Lancelot*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 258-259 (July-August 1975), pp. 36-41, here p. 38. For more on the retro mode, see Chapter 11.

écriture that echoes far and wide: do not adore images, do not appropriate the images of others to yourself, do not engage these vagabond angels.”⁵²

The Unknown

While Oudart’s writings on the cinema frequently broached questions of politics and ideology, they tended to do so only in a highly abstract sense. Concrete, day-to-day militant politics was remote from Oudart’s field of concerns. As a result, after his theoretical activity reached a high point in the years 1970-1971, publishing a series of influential articles and participating in the group analyses of *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *La vie est à nous*, *Morocco* and *New Babylon*, the years 1972-1973 witnessed a rarefaction in Oudart’s published output. During the Front culturel project, he refrained from playing a central role in organizational duties or the task of drafting its platforms and other communiqués.⁵³ Once Daney and Toubiana had pulled the journal back from the abyss to which its Maoist orientation had led it, however, Oudart returned to regularly writing for *Cahiers*. His critical texts of the latter half of the 1970s nonetheless attest to a distinct shift from earlier in the decade. While Lacanian psychoanalysis remains the dominant prism through which he reads films, Oudart’s writing style becomes less conceptually abstract and more lyrically expressive in nature.⁵⁴ Moreover, there is also a change in the filmmakers that find favor in Oudart’s eyes: Godard and Straub/Huillet are seen in an increasingly negative light, while the critic takes a vivid interest in the works of Kubrick, Kramer and Syberberg. The rejection of some of *Cahiers*’ totemic directors would come at a price, however. As the decade came to a close, Oudart found himself increasingly marginalized within the journal, a lone voice at odds with the critical consensus that otherwise prevailed.⁵⁵

52 The above quotes are from Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Modernité de Robert Bresson,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 279-280 (August-September 1977), pp. 27-30, here p. 30.

53 Between April 1972 and December 1974, he only published one article, a review of Loach’s *Family Life* co-written with Daney for the February-March 1973 issue. See Serge Daney and Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Sur *Family Life* (de Kenneth Loach),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 244 (February-March 1973), pp. 44-48. This article is discussed in Chapter 9.

54 Indeed, on two occasions, *Cahiers* published poems written by Oudart. See Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Milestones (poème),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 262-263 (January 1976), p. 99; and Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Mai 76,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 266-267 (May 1976), p. 100.

55 Toubiana noted that, during this period, “with Oudart it was more complicated. He was so ‘present-absent.’ He only functioned with objects unique to himself.” Interview with Serge Toubiana, April 29, 2014.

In the incendiary article “À propos d’*Orange mécanique*, Kubrick, Kramer et quelques autres,” the differences between Oudart and his colleagues came out in the open in spectacular fashion. While Robert Kramer’s work had won general approbation in the journal, Kubrick was far from being a *Cahiers* director.⁵⁶ With *Barry Lyndon*, however, Oudart became enamored of the American filmmaker, enthusing of Kubrick’s Thackeray adaptation that it is marked by “an excess of heterogeneity in its form,” with a hyperrealism that produces a “coefficient of (ethnographic) estrangement.”⁵⁷ Similar considerations governed Oudart’s response to *A Clockwork Orange*, which he re-watched several years after its initial release. The critic was relieved not to encounter, as he had feared, “a grand mythological parade of violence” but instead found it to be a “desperate meditation on violence and its modern repression” that attains the status of an “absolute anti-fiction de gauche.”⁵⁸ Comparing Kubrick’s film at length to Kramer’s *Milestones*, Oudart considers the two works to be exemplary alternative models to contemporary Hollywood cinema: the one through a surfeit of spectacle and visual splendor, the other through its radically pared-back documentary approach.

To have praised Kubrick so abundantly and associated his films with those of Kramer was an idiosyncratic position to hold within the editorial board of *Cahiers*, but if this had been the sole content of Oudart’s article, it may not have been as contentious as it was. It was his accompanying attacks on “Saint Jean-Marie” and “Saint Jean-Luc” that proved to be truly unacceptable. In insisting that Straub and Godard were “moralists of the imaginary,” Oudart also criticizes the theoretical practice of *Cahiers* in its post-1968 phase in terms that are distinctly more forceful than his fellow critics—despite their own processes of introspective auto-critique—were willing to allow:

For ten years, what has prevailed is a valorization—let us quickly say—of an *over-working* [*sur-travail*] of the signifier, [...] in the vertiginous iconoclasm of the deconstruction of the impression of reality. [...] There has been a politico-moralist fallout of the problematic of the filmer-filmed

56 On one of the few occasions in which the journal discussed his films, Eisenschitz referred to *2001: A Space Odyssey* as “a film without a message” whose main effect is to “send critical sense to sleep.” Bernard Eisenschitz, “La marge (*2001: A Space Odyssey*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 209 (February 1969), pp. 56-57, here p. 56.

57 Jean-Pierre Oudart, “*Barry Lyndon* (S. Kubrick),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 271 (November 1976), pp. 62-63, here p. 62.

58 Jean-Pierre Oudart, “À propos d’*Orange mécanique*, Kubrick, Kramer et quelques autres,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 293 (October 1978), pp. 55-60, here p. 55.

contract and its fetishism of the coulisses, without speaking of the old *materialist* sing-along on the semiotic productivity of montage. We were all part of this vogue, but it is high time we left it behind. Because it ended up costing us too much blindness.⁵⁹

In the following issue, Oudart continued his one-man war machine against “politico-semiological” film criticism with his article on Syberberg’s *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland*, again coming to focus on *Cahiers*’ legacy:

We are surveilled cinephiles, critics that keep watch on each other, theorists, to varying degrees, who became the guardians of a dogmatico-aesthetic temple. Syberberg has spoken of Hitler as a mourning which has not been done. In *Cahiers* too, there is a mourning which has not been done. *Hitler* is about the cinema of Godard, much like the images of fascism are about dogmatic *gauchisme*. This is why Syberberg’s film interpellates us too.⁶⁰

Against the terrorizing didacticism of Godard, Oudart calls for a cinema of “magic, dream, fascination,” which he finds in Syberberg’s rear projections and superimpositions, defined as an “interspace between dream-effects and media-effects, the novelistic and the televisual.”⁶¹

The sharply critical tenor of Oudart’s comments, bringing the entire *Cahiers* critical project into question at the same time as harshly rebuking the two filmmakers who were most important to the journal, incited a response defending Straub and Godard by the Dutch video artist Johan van der Keuken, which *Cahiers* ran in French translation after initial publication in *Skrien*.⁶² Given a right of reply, Oudart does not waver in his judgements: Kubrick and Kramer continue to be vaunted, while the critic is adamant that “the aesthetic of the ‘did-you-see-that, did-you-hear-that, admit that I caught you out’ is not to my taste.”⁶³ Only Straub/Huillet’s œuvre warrants nuancing, as Oudart ponders that a Straub film “disconnected from the dogmatic scenario that demands to see the work within it” could produce

59 Ibid., p. 58.

60 Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Notes de mémoire sur *Hitler*, de Syberberg,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 294 (November 1978), pp. 5-16, here p. 5.

61 Ibid., pp. 7, 9.

62 See Johan van der Keuken, “Tribune: une lettre de Johan van der Keuken,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 296 (January 1979), pp. 60-61.

63 Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Cinéma, fragments d’expérience,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 297 (February 1979), pp. 64-67, here p. 65.

a “qualitative difference in his *écriture*,” one where his “strident music and material violence would make of it a curious object.”⁶⁴

This pacifying gesture towards Straub/Huillet did nothing, however, to prevent Oudart’s increasing alienation from his fellow writers at *Cahiers*, nor, it seems, the deterioration in his mental health. His swan song at the journal came in the November 1980 issue, when Oudart’s last articles of any significance were published. His response to Kubrick’s *The Shining*, “Les inconnus dans la maison,” sheds the most light into Oudart’s critical views at the twilight of his involvement with *Cahiers* as well as, symptomatically, revealing his own parlous psychological condition. Oudart relays that he received *The Shining* as “a kind of video-film, a television broadcast that had escaped from the TV, a giant video that would be a horror film programming the story of a family escaping from social delirium,” and this explicitly determines the manner in which he speaks of it. Kubrick’s film is, in his reading, a “wild, schizo-psychoanalytic meditation on the family, society, the cinema and the media.” Each of the three main characters represent a different ingredient in a stew of mental disorders: the father Jack is paranoiac (“the ordinary paranoia of a white American male, with his delirium about America’s society, its power, and its racism”), the mother Wendy hysterical, and their young son Danny schizophrenic.⁶⁵ At many points throughout this extraordinary text, it is hard not to read it in a self-referential vein. Just as Oudart’s analysis of the film places an emphasis on the role of the written word in programming Jack’s murderous psychosis, so too does his film criticism begin to cross over the threshold of comprehensibility that he had always uneasily skirted: the film’s signature phrase “Work and no play make Jack a dull boy [*sic*]” appears repeatedly in Oudart’s article, written in bold majuscules at random moments in the piece, as if attesting to his own fragile state of mind. Kubrick’s genius, for Oudart, consists in turning the “writing-machine” into a “wild operator of the symbolic and sexual disjunction of the couple, of their lunacy, their hysteria, and the murder-program, in a simulation of an ordinary scenario, a ‘normal’ family scenario.”⁶⁶ Concluding his piece, Oudart recognizes that *The Shining* represents both a nostalgic “adieu to the old cinema” and a “flight towards a giant video-cinema” that will inexorably form the future of the medium.⁶⁷

64 Ibid., p. 67.

65 Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Les inconnus dans la maison (*Shining*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 317 (November 1980), pp. 4-11, here pp. 4-5.

66 Ibid., p. 8.

67 Ibid., p. 11.

Oudart's article on *The Shining*, where both the object of the text and its writing occupy a liminal zone between lucidity and mania, prefigured his departure from *Cahiers* after more than a decade with the journal. Sliding into paranoia, he violently broke with his colleagues, sending threatening letters to the *Cahiers* office.⁶⁸ A position organizing the Committee of Ethnographic Film at Jean Rouch's Musée de l'Homme was short-lived.⁶⁹ Later, according to Pierre, Oudart was interred at the Sainte-Anne psychiatric hospital. After this point, the trace goes cold. There are rumors that, upon the release of *L'Argent* in 1983, Oudart submitted an article to *Cahiers* on the film, which would have capped his long-running series of texts on Bresson's œuvre, but the article was refused by the *Cahiers* editors, and whether the manuscript still exists today is unknown.⁷⁰ In any case, after the early 1980s, Oudart never again published film criticism or any other writing.⁷¹ Today, Oudart's whereabouts are a mystery, and none of his former colleagues can even say with any certainty whether he is presently alive or dead. The critic was just one of many of those involved in post-1968 militant politics and radical theory to have succumbed to mental breakdowns, who now form the psychological debris of one of the most spectacular confrontations with state power in modern history. Oudart could even be seen as something of a modern-day Hölderlin, immured in his own Tübingen tower, blithe to the status that his most well-known texts have had in the field of film studies. Indeed, Louis Skorecki—a steadfast supporter of Oudart whose relationship with *Cahiers* was similarly fractious—speaks of him in these terms: “Let us pass quickly over the case of Jean-Pierre Oudart,” he writes, “heretical ex-theorist (‘La suture,’ ‘Milestones’) and isolated slanderer exiled from himself, no doubt unaware that he is one of the two or three greatest film theorists of the century.”⁷²

68 This was confirmed in interviews with both Serge Toubiana (April 29, 2014) and Sylvie Pierre (May 26, 2014).

69 Oudart's last published text of any kind was a brief notice publicizing an event on the Dogon people at the Musée de l'Homme. See Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Les Dogon à Paris,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 321 (March 1981), p. xvi.

70 This text was discussed by Louis Skorecki and Bill Krohn on Skorecki's blog. See Louis Skorecki, “Où es tu, JPO?,” [skorecki.blogspot.com.au /2012/07/ou-es-tu-jpo.html](http://skorecki.blogspot.com.au/2012/07/ou-es-tu-jpo.html) (accessed January 1, 2021).

71 Skorecki evoked a book by Oudart titled *Lettres sur le cinéma*, published by “Éditions du Tigre” in 2002, and even quotes a passage from it: “What I find rather annoying in the cinema is the automatic ‘miracle’ of the impression of reality. Most of the time, this magic bores me.” See Louis Skorecki, “Mon Oncle d'Amérique,” *Libération*, November 18, 2003, p. 28. There is, however, no other evidence for the existence of this book.

72 Louis Skorecki, “L'Ombre rouge de Jean-Louis Comolli,” *Libération*, October 1, 1997, p. 47.

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23. Realism and Psychoanalysis in Pierre Baudry

Abstract

This chapter highlights one of the more obscure critics of the post-1968 *Cahiers du cinéma*: Pierre Baudry. Although he only wrote for the journal for three years, quitting after its conversion to Maoism, his articles during this time attest to a theoretical precocity and critical acuity, which manifested themselves in articles including “Sur le réalisme,” “Figuratif, matériel, excrémental” and “L’Idéologie du western italien.” After departing *Cahiers*, Baudry made abortive attempts to become a director but only truly found his footing in his involvement in the Ateliers Varan filmmaking workshop and as editor of the journal *La Revue documentaires*, where he pursued his line of thinking on the question of realism in the cinema.

Keywords: Pierre Baudry, *Cahiers du cinéma*, psychoanalysis, documentary cinema, Spaghetti Western

On Realism

Although his fate was less tragic than that of his colleague, Pierre Baudry is, like Oudart, one of the less heralded of the post-1968 *Cahiers* critics. During his three-year stint in the editorial team, however, Baudry’s articles centered squarely on the presiding problematic of the journal: the cinema’s relationship with the real and the multiple theoretical perspectives through which this relationship was explored—whether in the legacy of Bazin’s film theory, the Marxism of Althusser and his contemporaries, or Lacanian psychoanalysis—and this was continued in his diverse activities after leaving the journal in 1973. As early as his second article for *Cahiers*, reviewing *Fellini Satyricon* in April 1970, Baudry not only made abundant use of psychoanalytic tools to offer an interpretation of the film, he contended in a *nota bene* appended to the article that “this reading of *Fellini*

Satyricon, with its psychoanalytic allures, has no other function than that of a hypothesis, since *Cahiers* has not yet defined the status of the concepts that they are importing from Freudian discourse.¹ Little more than a year later, at the same time as undertaking the mammoth project to produce a shot-by-shot description of *Intolerance*, Baudry embarked on a major theoretical text interrogating the nature of realism in the cinema. “Sur le réalisme,” appearing in the August-September 1971 issue, was intended as a series incorporating planned discussions of German realist cinema in the Weimar era and Italian post-war neorealism. In the end, however, only the first installment was published, treating Jacques Tati’s *Traffic*—a film whose talismanic status for the *Cahiers* writers was such that it later lent its name to the journal founded by Serge Daney in 1991. Tati had long been a filmmaker cherished by *Cahiers*: from Amengual’s article on “L’étrange comique de Monsieur Tati” in 1954 to the dossier on *Playtime* published in March 1968, the release of each Tati film was a major event for the journal.² Fieschi had already broached the subject of Tati’s relationship with the cinema’s ontological realism, arguing that although the “system of *écriture*” in his 1967 film was such that “Tati, instead of copying the world, *invented* it from scratch,” even the most hallucinatory formal variations in *Playtime* nonetheless required a “necessary ‘realist’ *anchoring*.”³ A recognition of the dialectic between artifice and realism similarly governed Baudry’s article, but his analysis of this dynamic was distinctly more grounded in critical theory than Fieschi’s ruminations.

Baudry begins his text by asserting that *Traffic* inscribes two fundamental and intimately linked problematics: on the one hand, the status of the real in representation, and on the other hand, the definition of cinematic realism. More lucidly than any other writer at *Cahiers*, however, he recognized that the journal had not yet rigorously defined concepts like “the real,” “reality” and “realism,” despite the theoretical advances it had made since its turn towards Marxism. Not only were the two areas of theory from which *Cahiers* was substantially drawing its conceptual armory (historical materialism and psychoanalysis) demarcated from the “metaphysical hypostasis” of the real in earlier, “idealist” approaches towards the cinema (such as that of Bazin), but there is also, even between these two theoretical

1 Baudry, “Un avatar du sens,” p. 57.

2 See Barthélemy Amengual, “L’étrange comique de Monsieur Tati,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 31 (February 1954), pp. 31-36. For the dossier on *Playtime*, see *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 199 (March 1968), pp. 6-31.

3 Jean-André Fieschi, “Le carrefour Tati,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 199 (March 1968), pp. 24-26, here p. 24.

currents, a discrepancy in the status of the real, which has ramifications for aesthetic production. Whereas Marxism had traditionally seen ideology as the “reflection of reality,” and more recent works on aesthetics such as that of Badiou have inverted this connection to describe art as “the reality of reflection,” Lacan’s tripartite schema of the Real/Imaginary/Symbolic substantially alters and complicates this nexus, while Freud’s writings on literature evince an understanding of art as “both the site of phantasmal work and the site of a knowledge of desire.” Despite the fact that Althusser’s writings on ideology attempted to produce a bridge between Marxism and psychoanalysis on this matter, Baudry asserts that it would be an error to elide or occlude the distinctions between the two philosophical systems on the status of the real or to believe that “between these two sciences the difference in the concepts of the *real* is only a matter of investment, a difference that an epistemological discourse would reduce to a unified origin.” Such a step would only serve to surreptitiously reintroduce a neo-Cartesian metaphysics. Instead, Baudry proposes a dual concept of the real, and this heterogeneity should not be nullified under the guise of a “unification” of diverse theoretical currents but understood as what Lacan himself calls a “governed relationship” (*relation réglée*).⁴

This conceptual heterogeneity is amplified by the recent theoretical discourse on questions of figuration and representation (Baudry namechecks Francastel, Schefer and Oudart in this context), which produces its own concept of the real, determined by its specific field of research. For Baudry, however, the critique of standard conceptions of realism produced by Francastel and company is only an “insufficient approximation” of the concrete functioning of realism in film and other visual mediums; the specific *ways* in which the system of cinematic realism is invested by ideologies (in the plural) must still be analyzed and defined. Although analyzing the nature of filmic realism as an artistic strategy may appear to be divorced from or secondary to the more underlying question of the status of “the real” in the cinema, in fact, films proclaiming themselves to be “realist” play a central role in the apparatus producing this sense of reality in the spectator. This question is further complicated, Baudry cautions, by the fact that “realist” film movements, and the notions of realism they tend to spawn, produce their own ideological discourse on the nature not only of the cinema but of reality itself, often falling back on idealist metaphysics when doing so. While Baudry acknowledges that, as with the real, a definition of realism will not

4 The quotes from this paragraph are from Pierre Baudry, “Sur le réalisme: I. *Trafic*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 231 (August-September 1971), pp. 35-41, here p. 35.

be found by “seeking out what these realist theories may have in common” (which would, at best, only produce a “*concept* of realism” consisting of the minimum basis of these multiple ideologies of realism), he argues that “the possibility of discrepancies [*décalages*] between the film practices in question and their theories and manifestoes” can be a productive avenue of research.⁵

It may therefore be a surprise that Baudry begins his study not with one of the canonical landmarks of realist cinema, such as *Paisà* or *La Règle du jeu*, but with *Trafic*, a film Baudry himself openly characterizes as a work of science fiction. But this is a deliberate move. As the critic asserts: “We have an interest, therefore, rather than initially working on one or several films that are recognized as realist, in choosing as our point of departure a film that has every chance of not being so.” Baudry agrees that Tati’s œuvre depicts a parallel universe that functions according to its own laws and principles. And yet the resulting films are far from being bereft of a relationship with the real. On the contrary, they have the potential to speak all the more clearly on this matter precisely because “the relations they entertain with the ‘real’ would be comparable to inversions or spectral duplicates, they would be like those of antimatter to matter.”⁶ Baudry finds an avatar of this relationship in the poster used to promote *Trafic*’s run at the Gaumont-Champs-Élysées theater in Paris, which consisted of a mirror tilted at such an angle as to reflect the traffic of the capital’s major thoroughfare to the viewers as they enter the auditorium. A “gag-object” that absorbs the street into the spectacle, the mirror misleads the spectator as to the nature of *Trafic*’s relationship with the real, a miscomprehension that would reduce the Tati universe to a reconstruction of “reality” founded on the director’s renowned “gifts of observation.” Rather, Baudry is interested in the film’s combination of two heterogeneous types of sequences, which consist of two “levels” of reality: a recognizable fictional plot centering on Monsieur Hulot’s exploits and a series of supposedly “documentary” scenes which in fact represent a “fiction of the documentary” and which, in provoking ruptures in the fictional continuity of the film as whole, reduce fiction to a “degree zero” state. Presented in alternation with each other, the two fictional orders nonetheless bear witness to a process of “interlacing and contamination,” in which “the passage from one to another is operated by the resumption of the themes of the latter in the ‘syntax’ of the former.”⁷

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 38.

While the ideological effect this achieves is to “lighten or reduce the fantasy-effects” of the main narrative, the result is a structural complexity that produces the stratified, spatially segmented long shots of Tati’s *mise en scène*, which themselves incorporate a multiplicity of discrete, simultaneous actions (as symbolized by the appearance of a multitude of Hulots in the final shot of the film). Baudry follows Comolli’s comments in “Technique et idéologie” that, *contra* Bazin, the use of depth of field should not be seen as producing a “gain of reality” in the cinematic image. In fact, he notes, it leads to a “false liberty” for the viewer, who is always constrained to a partial, selective vision of the film, privileging certain areas of the screen over others at a given point in time. In doing so, however, *Playtime* and *Traffic* gain a status as being “among the very rare films that demand genuine work of the spectator.” Tati’s films make clear to the audience that “what we see in them is not the world, but its *analogical reproduction*, of which each element belongs to a signifying chain.” Thus, rather than intensifying the illusion of reality engendered by the classical system of representation, the visual strategy adopted by Tati effectively undermines this system by converting it to a form of play and thereby producing knowledge in the spectator about the functioning of the system. As Baudry puts it: “By depriving, so to speak, the referents of its representation of their immediacy, *Traffic* ceaselessly subverts its effects of the real.”⁸

Figurative, Material, Excremental

Although projected as an ongoing series of texts, “Sur le réalisme” was not continued beyond its first installment. In the May-June 1972 issue, eight months after the original article appeared, Baudry nonetheless returned to the issue of the cinema’s relationship with the real in his article “Figuratif, matériel, excrémental.” He begins the new piece with a set of preliminary remarks that recall the problematic of his earlier analysis. The introduction of “Sur le réalisme,” Baudry retrospectively admits, foreshadowed an ambitious program that nonetheless had “the inconvenience of inscribing the examination of filmic realism as the end-point of a long analysis, preceded by numerous abstract generalities (on the *real* in ideology, the unconscious...).” Such an approach ran the risk of neglecting the stake of the work in question, namely: “what is the situation ‘in’ the cinema.” Without lapsing into the lure of an empiricist method based on “concrete reality,” it is this stake that will

8 The quotes in this paragraph are from *ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

form the center of Baudry's reflections in the latter text, even if he is aware that, in "Figuratif, matériel, excrémental," "the progressive extraction of these questions here will only be the mark of the difficulties this work has in determining the limits of its field."⁹ There is one way, however, that "Figuratif, matériel, excrémental" remains in keeping with his earlier article: as with "Sur le réalisme," Baudry's focus remains trained on the genre of physical comedy, with the baton passing here from Tati to Buster Keaton and Jerry Lewis.

Before analyzing the functioning of the gag in these filmmakers, Baudry gives a brief analysis of the "economy of the figure" in realist representation. For Baudry, realist schools are characterized by a parsimonious deployment of figured objects, a tendency that is particularly acute among avowedly Marxist artists such as, in the theater, Meyerhold and Brecht. The cinema, meanwhile, is marked by a dialectical opposition between two kinds of figures—the on-screen characters and the set—which in Hollywood and other classical modes of representation functions as a "system of the reciprocal guarantee of reality."¹⁰ When one or the other are shown in isolation, however, they tend to acquire the status of a rhetorical figure. The distinction between "bourgeois realist cinema" and a materialist film practice taking inspiration from Brechtian sources can be discerned in the antithetical status that camera movements such as pans and tracking shots over an empty set produce in each system. In the first case, they more forcefully assert the illusion of reality embedded in the objects figurally represented. By contrast, in films such as *Tout va bien* (with its "doll's house" tracking shot revealing the artifice of the factory set, itself inspired by a similar shot in *The Ladies Man*), the use of the technique serves to reveal the scenic character of the set, highlighting rather than occluding its materiality.

From here, Baudry undertakes an analysis of two gags in American slapstick cinema: the moment in *The Navigator* when Keaton shuffles a deck of wet cards, which transform into a disgusting magma of cardboard in his hands, and the moment in *The Ladies Man* when Lewis wipes the lipstick off the face of a portrait of boarding house mistress Mrs. Wellen-Mellon. Both of these gags play with the materiality of the on-screen objects. In the former, the handling of the cards "transforms them into something strictly

9 The quotes in this paragraph are from Pierre Baudry, "Figuratif, matériel, excrémental," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 238-239 (May-June 1972), pp. 75-82, here p. 75.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

unnameable, their character as a practical object is abolished.”¹¹ Lewis’ gag, meanwhile, with the shifting status of the portrait (a representation inside a representation) and the material supplementarity of the lipstick, is more structurally complex and overtly transgressive, but it too centers around a destruction of the “practicality” of the object. Baudry moves into more Bataillean territory when he shifts to another common element of the two gags. They both “highlight something in the order of *anal*ity: in them, the objects destroyed become, in a way, like excrement.”¹² In this sense, they bear similarities to recent arthouse films such as Pasolini’s *Decameron* and Widerberg’s *Joe Hill* which, breaking a nearly-universally observed prohibition in classical cinema, explicitly depict excrement on screen. With their resemblance to the cream-pie fights that form one of the tropes of slapstick cinema, the scenes in Widerberg’s film showing excrement thrown at the screen create a momentary disruption to the normal functioning of the cinematic apparatus. By violently interpellating the audience *qua* spectator, these scenes prevent them from believing in the “reality” of the representation and from denying its fictive nature. The “I know very well, but all the same...” mechanism of the cinema is thus disrupted, and, in a line of reasoning that borrows significantly from Oudart, Baudry argues that scenes such as this, apparently showing projectiles launched “towards” the screen (in reality, they are always “on” the screen from the first moment they are visible), highlight both the fictive nature of depth in the cinematic image and the limits of the filmic frame. But this transitory collapse of the “fourth wall” is eliminated (sutured, Oudart would say) by a cut that “re-replaces this limit in the representation and in the fiction; the match-cut shows us, in the image, the place where the projectile arrived.”¹³ Rather than the viewer themselves, it is an on-screen figure (an object or a character) who is shown to receive the missile launched at the screen. After a momentary spectatorial thrill at this vacillation in the status of the representation, the fiction is thus resumed, the spectators reassured as to the fictional status of what they are viewing.

A parallel effect takes place in the case of film styles founded on “dirty” images, particularly in the use of degraded film stock in *cinéma-vérité* works in the 1960s or neorealist films in the 1940s, which explicitly take a stance against the slick, “academic” glossiness of Hollywood or fascist cinema.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Here, the dirty image is produced as a sign of documentary veracity. It is a stylistic citation by which a “*gauge of reality*” is exhibited:

The filming, which can be fantasized as a *digestion* of the filmed real, is here the site of a dissociation: the dirtiness of the image is produced as a supplement of the figuration, and functions as its material guarantee. In the digestion of the filming, nothing of the real has been lost, the excremental remainder has not even been wiped away—the proof being that it is still there on the screen.¹⁴

Thus, representations that produce a “material effect” also result in difficulties in their viewing. In a turn of phrase that gives a scatological twist to one of Bazin’s favored metaphors for the cinema, Baudry states that a “thin veil of excrement” presents itself between the spectator and the filmed objects. By replacing the smooth patina of Hollywood with its repressed opposite (shit), these films may well prove to be “hard to swallow.” And yet, Baudry insists, we continue to “gobble” them up: “The excremental screen, as the transgression of a prohibition, presents this transgression—and the *jouissance* it implies—as a trace of the truth of its discourse, and naturalizes it.” The widespread use of a “dirty image” is only one part of a broader reversal of aesthetic hierarchies in modernist cinema—with the ignoble, the vulgar, the ugly and the sordid valorized at the expense of the noble, the beautiful and the pleasant. But this has the effect of displacing and occluding the real contradiction at the heart of representation in contemporary capitalism—just as, in Oudart’s “Un discours en défaut,” the erotic occupies the repressed site of the economic in classical American cinema. The limitations of modernist ideology thus derive from accepting the illusion that, “to repeat Bataille’s formula, since ‘the heads of the bourgeois’ are ‘noble and sexless,’ the intrusion of sexual organs as figures will certainly have a revolutionary sense.”¹⁵

Ideology of the Italian Western

If the burlesque film dominated Baudry’s considerations of the cinema’s relations with the real, his eye was also trained on another “lowbrow” film genre during his time at *Cahiers*: those Cinecittà-produced films by the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The above quotes are from *ibid.*, p. 82.

likes of Sergio Leone, Sergio Sollima and Sergio Corbucci from the late 1960s and early 1970s that adopted and subversively distorted the generic tropes of the Hollywood Western and which, having not yet acquired the slightly derogatory label “spaghetti Western,” *Cahiers* dubbed *le western italien*. While Baudry’s enduring concern for genre cinema was a distinguishing feature of his criticism for *Cahiers*, he was not quite a solitary figure when it came to an appreciation of Italian Western films, the critical analysis of which was inevitably colored by the approach the journal had taken to the American Westerns of Ford, Mann and Boetticher in the 1950s. In October 1969, Daney wrote of the “immense” interest of Leone’s cinema when reviewing *C’era una volta il West...*, primarily due to its status as “the first even remotely rigorous attempt at a critical cinema, that is to say no longer directly grappling with ‘reality’ [...] but with a genre, a film tradition, a global text, the only one that has known a worldwide circulation: the Western. That’s no small thing.”¹⁶ If *série B* films formed a kind of “*lumpencinema*,” which only found appreciation out of a kind of critical slumming or “cinophilic workerism,” the work of Leone and his compatriots represented its *prise de conscience*, effectuating a “euphoric work of deconstruction” in the process.¹⁷ But such work could only be continued if this strand of filmmaking retained its mass character and avoided being recuperated by the “cinema of quality”—a trap that, Daney was acutely aware, Leone risked falling into. Despite their variance with the dominant tendency within *Cahiers* at this time, which tended to neglect the subversive work of “low” genres in favor of a politically radicalized version of “high” modernism (embodied by Godard, Straub and Duras), Daney’s comments set the template for the journal’s considerations of Italian Westerns in the years to come. In March 1970, Pierre returned to *C’era una volta il West*. For Pierre, the Hollywood Western, whose own history was now closed, had been a privileged site for the “‘realist’ relations that cinema entertains with history and ideology” and represented “the trace of ideology’s work on history, with the former inventing a kind of moral justification for the latter by means of mythology.”¹⁸ If the Italian

16 Serge Daney, “Once Upon a Time in the West...,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 216 (October 1969), p. 64.

17 Ibid. *Lumpencinema* is a portmanteau of the word “cinema” with Marx’s notion of the *lumpenproletariat*, the class of beggars and petty criminals whose social standing was beneath even that of the industrial working class. Workerism (*ouvriérisme*) was a political strategy within the Marxist movement, criticized by Lenin, that advocated an exclusive focus on the proletariat and its political demands, to the exclusion of all other social groupings.

18 Sylvie Pierre, “Clio veille (*C’era una volta il West*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 218 (March 1970), pp. 53-55, here p. 53.

Western had borrowed the “rhetoric” of its American counterpart, Pierre argued, it reproduced neither the history nor the ideology embedded in it and thus deracinated the “tics and tropes” of the Western, allowing it to function freely as a “gratuitous code,” serving other ideological goals than those programmed by its original model.¹⁹ In the case of Leone, however, this consisted chiefly of a “shameless cinematic narcissism,” as his work is absorbed by the cinema’s own mythology and mired in a “masochistic contemplation” of the death of European cinema (itself symptomatic of a wider trend towards cynical introspection in the continent’s filmmaking).

Appearing in the same issue, Baudry’s first article for *Cahiers* subjected the more radical work of Sollima to analysis. While the Italian Western in general had achieved its formal autonomy from its Hollywood predecessor by “abandoning the Frontier ethic in order to produce a space that is just as moral, but transgressive,” Baudry here claimed that the displacements of meaning enacted by Sollima were even more sweeping.²⁰ In films such as *La resa dei conti*, the conflict between “civilization” and “savagery” that characterized the traditional Western is replaced by a conflict between two nations: Mexico and the United States. Moreover, while the figures of the heroic Gringo and the Mexican Bandit are retained, the processes of spectatorial identification and empathy are inverted, such that the Mexican characters (who are, for domestic Italian audiences, the “guarantors of latinity”) become central to the film, while the American characters, despite being connoted with virility, are reduced to amoral creatures concerned only with the acquisition of money. Sollima also, more overtly than other filmmakers in the genre, introduces the historical/political context into the discourse of his films: in the case of *La resa dei conti*, this consists of Benito Pablo Juarez’s revolutionary anti-monarchist movement, whose resonances for the contemporary political situation in Italy and Latin America are unmistakable. Although there are limits to the allegorical readings offered by Sollima’s films, Baudry comes to the conclusion that their discourse is far more politically charged than that of Leone’s work, in which “the characters traverse the storyline without changing or becoming aware of the political character of this traversal.”²¹

Baudry was the only one of the *Cahiers* critics to continue pursuing a critical reflection on the Italian Western beyond these early articles

19 Ibid., p. 55.

20 Pierre Baudry, “Trois films de Sollima,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 218 (March 1970), pp. 59-61, here p. 59.

21 Ibid., p. 61.

and did so even well into the journal's Maoist phase. A 1972 review of *Giulia testa* registered Leone's turn away from the vanguard of the Italian Western's critique of American cinema towards adopting a critical stance towards this *lumpencinema* itself. Not only is the formal structure of *Giulia testa* based on "a series of tableaux, a succession of 'strong moments'" each of which effects a re-organization of the totality of the film, but the film's relation with history has also shifted from that of *C'era una volta il West*. Here, the revolution is given as the "absent meaning" of the film and is the "impossible community" between the two protagonists. Thus, rather than being repressed as the "outside of the fiction" (as was the case with Leone's earlier work), history is the film's "unthinkable rationality."²² Before this review, however, Baudry had already dedicated a longer text to a more wide-ranging scrutiny of the ideological nature of the Italian Western, attempting a typology of its different variants on the basis of the Marxist film theory being developed by *Cahiers*. In this study, he not only distinguishes between the Italian Western (given the short-hand appellation IW) and the American Western (AW) but also between two classes of the Italian variant of the genre. Virtually all IWs are "constructed on the principle of the variation (borne by the names of the characters, the sets, the faces, the 'ruses of the script') of a topological schema distributing invariant symbolic-fictional places to groups of characters." But while Type A, the "first age" of the IW (typified by Leone), presented a constellation of characters consisting of "the Gringo/Mexican bandits/Mexican victims," a newer Type B, exemplified by the work of Corbucci, shifts this schema to a more politicized system consisting of "the Gringo/Mexican revolutionaries/Mexican counter-revolutionaries."²³ The ideological effects of this symptomatic introduction of the "discourse of Revolution" into a film genre are thus the object of Baudry's analysis. Following the argument of Pierre's earlier article, he identifies the relationship between the AW and the IW as one in which the "rhetorical *mechanics*" of the former have been appropriated by the latter in order to relay a discourse that re-inscribes a colonization process (the European settlement of North America) as a myth. A *déjà-vu* effect is thus created, as the IW presents itself as the "repetition or reduplication" of the AW, but at the same time, elements of the AW's rhetorical system (for instance, the status of the hero in the

22 Pierre Baudry, "Il était une fois... la révolution," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 238-239 (May-June 1972), pp. 93-95, here p. 93.

23 Pierre Baudry, "L'idéologie du western italien," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 233 (November 1971), pp. 55-56, here p. 55.

storyline) are transformed, and the “extra-cinematic ideological themes” that supported the AW as a genre—such as the myth of the “self-made man” or the polarity between “good” and “bad”—find themselves voided and made inoperable. Moreover, the liberty of the hero in the IW is not given as the result of a process; rather, from the very start of the fiction, he possesses an autonomy by dint of his extra-territoriality. A Gringo on Mexican soil, motivated by financial gain and thus free of the social or political determinations that govern the conflict structuring the film, the hero’s insertion into the narrative allows for a resolution of the conflict to take place. In Type B films such as Corbucci’s *Compañeros*, however, the coding of the protagonist as guided by revolutionary rather than merely pecuniary motivations produces an “investment of the conflict situation in Type A by political positions.”²⁴

And yet this insertion of a revolutionary discourse into the genre of the Western is far from having unambiguously positive effects. The irruption of “revolutionary speech” means that bourgeois ideology, rather than repressing this speech as it usually does, instead appropriates its vocabulary in order to produce a false likeness that, by miming the revolutionary discourse, in fact annuls it through a process of misrecognition. Thus, the opposition between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries in Corbucci’s film is calqued onto that between the “goodies” and the “baddies” in the traditional Western, and its political character is nullified through the reduction of the criterion of discrimination between the two to that of popular sentiment. Although *Compañeros* is replete with expressions of revolutionary idealism, these are devoid of substance, and the hero (Franco Nero) only engages in political struggle out of libidinal desire, in the absence of any mercenary outlet for his skills.²⁵ Thus the supposed opposition between the discourses of revolution and capitalist enterprise structuring the film in fact mask another opposition: that between revolutionary ideals and the *jouissance* of the mercenary. Given the vacuity of the former, the field is left open for the latter to produce the film’s meaning. More than any other Italian Western, *Compañeros* inscribes revolutionary themes into its rhetorical structure, but it does so, Baudry concludes, in such a way that the result is a “petty-bourgeois fantasy of mastery, which, in the last instance, has fascist tendencies.”²⁶

24 Ibid., p. 56.

25 Indeed, the role of erotic *jouissance* in the actions of Franco Nero is, as Baudry maintains, clearly enunciated in the long slow-motion shot closing Corbucci’s film.

26 Ibid.

Leaving *Cahiers*

Baudry's membership of the *Cahiers* team did not endure far beyond the moment in which his most important articles were written. Having always been lukewarm about the proposed Front culturel project and feeling himself targeted in certain comments in "Quelles sont nos tâches sur le front culturel?" he tendered his letter of resignation from the *Cahiers* editorial board on February 9, 1973, after nearly three years of involvement with the journal. Questions both of politics and theory were at issue for Baudry. While affirming his general adherence to a Marxist-Leninist outlook, he voiced his opposition to a strategy that effectively made the fight against the "revisionism" of the PCF the principal revolutionary activity at the expense of the struggle against capitalism. On the level of theory, Baudry was critical of the shift away from research into the specificity of the cinema and was wary of the tendency towards a dogmatic abandonment of theory *tout court*: "In the preceding phase of *Cahiers*' history, the general aspect of the 'theoretico-formal avant-garde' left the field open to a great deal of political omissions [*impensés*]. We should indeed place politics in the command post: but must this be done at the cost of such a regression (or deviation) of the journal on the role of theory?"²⁷ Baudry concluded his letter with the incisive observation and mordant humor that were characteristic of his writings for *Cahiers*. Aware, in the wake of the earlier departures of Delahaye, Pierre and Eisenschitz, that there existed "a phantasm of periodic exclusion that seems to me to govern the group that is *Cahiers*, with the excision of a member sanctioning the last transformation in order to provide an objective guarantee of it," Baudry signed off by wryly admitting, in a self-referential nod to one of his major texts for *Cahiers*, that "to play the role of the excrement in this anal castration does not disturb me."²⁸ Narboni's response remained firm in rebutting the criticisms issued by Baudry, but, in contrast to the more combative tone of other departures, he was almost apologetic when it came to the circumstances of Baudry's departure, regretting the fact that his letter entailed a rupture rather than the opportunity for positive debate and accepting that the *Cahiers* editors had their share of the responsibility for the situation coming to a head in this manner.²⁹

27 Pierre Baudry, "À propos de la démission de Pierre Baudry," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 245-246 (April-May-June 1973), pp. 88-89, here p. 89.

28 Ibid.

29 Jean Narboni, "Réponse à P.B.," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 245-246 (February-March 1973), pp. 89-92, here p. 89.

Baudry's letter had given a further reason for his resignation: having joined *Cahiers* due to his interest in "a writing practice that gives the intellectual tools for cinematic practice (filmmaking)," he confesses that "journalism as such has ceased to interest me" and that it had proven difficult to combine the practice with "other parallel activities (films, for example)."³⁰ This, indeed, would be the initial focus of his energies in the period after leaving *Cahiers*. Two short works, *Le Piège diabolique* and *Les Deux Cervelles*, were complemented by *La Loi du cœur*, a *moyen-métrage* that had its premiere on opening night at the 1974 Cannes film festival. From this point on, although Baudry bubbled with ideas for film projects, he generally had difficulty in realizing them, and a prospective career as an auteur director did not materialize. Only irregular assignments ensued, which included writing and acting for a Charles Bitsch television program on Jerry Lewis in 1974, writing and producing the France 3 series *Paris, clin d'œil* in 1981-82 (on the lives of migrants in the capital), and collaborating on the script for Angelopoulos' 1984 film *Voyage à Cythère*.

At the same time, Baudry intermittently returned to film criticism and, in doing so, further explored his interest in the industrial output of audiovisual media. The only work he published in *Cahiers* after his resignation consisted of a pair of articles in 1977 on TV gameshows. In these texts, Baudry, characterizes television through two types of speech: that of the "technicians" (announcers, anchors, interviewers) and that of the "authorities" (politicians, artists, experts). A possible third speech, that of the audience (the *vulgum pecus*) is excluded from the discourse of mass media, which—as Baudry, citing Baudrillard's *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, states—is "intransitive" and tasked with producing "non-communication."³¹ There is, however, an exception to this "monopolized speech," albeit a derisory one: the gameshow. The presence of the *vulgum pecus* in this format leads the public to believe in a "great democracy of speech in the media"—but this comes at a price. Speech is only "conceded" to the gameshow candidate if they systematically obey the rules of the *dispositif* established: they must answer the question posed to them, with the lure of financial gain forestalling any temptation for transgression. In the end, therefore, the opportunity to speak is only given to a simulation of the *place* of the common people rather than the public

30 Baudry, "À propos de la démission de Pierre Baudry," p. 89.

31 Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 208. Cited in Pierre Baudry, "Économiques sur les média: remarques sur la télévision, la radio et le cinéma [1]," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 274 (March 1977), pp. 48-54, here p. 49.

as it really exists, which remains subject to monopolized discourse. The agonistic relationship between the contestant and the gameshow host (an omniscient Master figure and a place-holder for the monopolized discourse of television) is thus subject to a *mise en scène* of confrontation which, in the end, is nothing but a lure whose function is to guarantee the adherence of the public to their status as spectators. The exchange of knowledge for a monetary prize or consumer good, meanwhile, gives televisual speech an economic status, thereby entrenching the stranglehold of free-market ideology. Thus, for Baudry, leftist intellectuals are misguided when they critique TV for its “dumbing-down” effect; in fact, the predominance of such “mindless dross” has the purpose of “mim[ing], within a program, the differences in use-value of which the market is the theater,” and this itself is merely a symptom of a broader development. With the dismantling of the ORTF state monopoly in 1975 and the rise of private television stations, we have now entered “an economistic age of the dominant ideology in the media.”³²

What Baudry termed an “economistic ideology” also informed his contribution to Raymond Bellour’s 1980 anthology *Le Cinéma américain*, which focused on the Hollywood super-production and its relationship with the real. In “Production de la réalité, réalité de la production,” Baudry argues that the status of these films as something of a meta-genre comes not from their thematic or formal unity but from the effects produced on the filmic text itself by the reference to the economic sphere. More specifically, the “indices of expenditure” in blockbuster films also serve as “the production of effects of the real: the ‘grand spectacle’ is, above all, the attempt to furnish, in film images, an equivalent to the density of the real world.”³³ Thus the work of these films consists of producing an equivalency between their economic discourse (on the reality of their cost) and their ontological discourse (film as a replica of the world), and it is notable that the super-production has traditionally been the site where technical advances aimed at conferring the cinema with a “gain of reality” have been pioneered. These films are also determined by the incommensurable relationship between the lavish sums expended on their production and the meagre amount spent by the spectator in order to witness the resulting spectacle, a discrepancy that not only leads the audience to take pleasure in this

32 Pierre Baudry, “Économiques sur les média: remarques sur la télévision, la radio et le cinéma [2],” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 277 (June 1977), pp. 15-28, here p. 28.

33 Pierre Baudry, “Production de la réalité, réalité de la production,” in Raymond Bellour (ed.), *Le Cinéma américain vol. II* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), pp. 261-274, here p. 266.

“imaginary profit” but also ties them into a ritual relationship with the cinema that has similarities with Bataille’s description of potlatch (the ritualistic destruction of signifiers of wealth) in primitive societies. While earlier forms of the super-production prized historical reconstitution (such as in the works of D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille), the 1970s saw the rise of the disaster movie (*film-catastrophe*), which Baudry reads as an allegory of the global economic downturn precipitated by the 1973 oil crisis and as a reaction by the film industry to the phenomenon of audience segmentation. Of particular interest for Baudry is John Guillermin’s 1976 remake of *King Kong*. Due to the pre-existing cultural awareness of the 1933 Schoedsack/Cooper original, the pleasure the spectator takes from the film lies not in its narrative suspense (we know that Kong will die) but in “witnessing the shattering of a machinery, the destruction of which we know about in advance,” and the death of the ape that concludes the film accomplishes “the metaphor of economic expenditure necessary for its *mise en scène*.”³⁴ The new wave of super-productions, therefore, is qualitatively different to that of classical Hollywood. It is no longer a copy of the world that the cinema produces but a copy of itself: with the remake of *King Kong*, “the cinema is authorized by itself, much like the twin towers of the World Trade Center reduplicate each other through their exact resemblance, in a closed system of equivalence. Representation gives way to the simulacrum.”³⁵

The Man of Varan

Despite the theoretical promise of these texts, the late 1970s and early 1980s were nonetheless years of uncertainty for Baudry, who lived mainly on irregular positions teaching film at various institutions in Paris. In 1983, he gained notoriety in the public eye, but for unwanted reasons. His address book, lost on the rue des Martyres, was discovered by Sophie Calle, who turned it into an art project: on a daily basis, *Libération* published Calle’s accounts of the contacts she made with the names included in the book, in order to create a portrait of its owner without ever meeting him.³⁶ In this column, Baudry’s name is given as “Pierre D.,” but for anyone in his social

34 Ibid., p. 273.

35 Ibid., p. 274.

36 The *Libération* column was published in book form in English in 2012. See Sophie Calle, *The Address Book* (Los Angeles: Siglio, 2012). The original texts appeared in the French newspaper between August 2 and September 4, 1983.

milieu his identity was unmistakable. His former colleagues Pierre (Sylvie B.), Bonitzer (Paul B.) and Narboni (Jacques O.) are easily recognizable in Calle's reports, while *Cahiers* itself is frequently mentioned, albeit simply as "the film journal." Baudry, who was in arctic Norway when the series ran, reacted with fury when he belatedly found out about this invasion of his privacy, and as a retributive act resorted to publishing a naked photograph Calle had sent him.³⁷ Indeed, the picture Calle paints of Baudry in "Le Carnet d'adresses" is not an overly flattering one: her Pierre D. is a whimsical yet solitary individual living in a cramped apartment in the migrant district of Barbès-Rochechouart, who has many acquaintances but few close friends and whose frustrated ambitions of making films mean that, at the age of 35, he is already something of a has-been, with his best days behind him.

In the same year, however, Baudry found a new purpose by joining, and eventually playing a leading role in, the Ateliers Varan, a micro-studio founded in 1981 with the support of Jean Rouch and Jean-Pierre Beauviala. Specializing in teaching filmmaking to those interested in documenting the cultures of Third World nations, Varan soon developed a network of satellite workshops, including one in Lapland, where Baudry taught for several years. Although documentary filmmaking was now the major focus of his activities, Baudry nonetheless adhered to one of the fundamental *Cahiers* axioms by refusing a clear distinction between fiction and non-fiction in the cinema and often analyzed narrative films such as *Strangers on a Train* with his students.³⁸ His predilection for the cinema's past led to an ongoing interest in the work of Flaherty, Vertov and Grierson, which resulted in historical analyses of the shift in conceptions of the documentary with the advent of direct sound in the 1960s.³⁹ Moreover, in keeping with his earlier interest in "low" genres, Baudry also incorporated home movies and other forms of "private cinema" into his theoretical discussions. In an interview on the Varan experience, Baudry insisted on its opposition to the "televisual ideology according to which you 'record' things. [...] When a student understands that making a film does not mean recording, but

37 For more on this series of events, see Yve-Alain Bois, "Character Study: Sophie Calle," *Artforum* vol. 38 no. 8 (April 2000), pp. 126-131; and Marina van Zuylen, *Monomania* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 188-189.

38 See the homage to Baudry's life and work, with testimonies from several of his friends and collaborators, published in *La Revue Documentaires* no. 19-20 (Summer 2005), pp. 157-169.

39 See, in particular, Pierre Baudry, "Quelques notions de base pour réfléchir sur le documentaire," in Pierre Baudry and Gilles Delavaud, *La Mise en scène documentaire: Robert Flaherty, L'Homme d'Aran et le documentaire* (Paris: Ministère de la Culture et de la francophonie, 1994), pp. 68-84.

directing, [...] you've won." For Baudry, "it is the approach towards reality that is under question, with everything that this implies in the ethical relationship towards the people you film, and in the political relationship towards people and their situations."⁴⁰

Baudry's time at Varan led to collaborations with Gilles Delavaud on a book and video project on Robert Flaherty as well as articles for *La Licorne* and *CinémAction*. In 1993, he became the editor-in-chief of the periodical *La Revue Documentaires*, a position Baudry would retain until his death. As well as giving him the opportunity to publish the work of Gérard Leblanc, Jean-Daniel Pollet, Noël Burch, Harun Farocki, François Niney and Christa Blümlinger, the role allowed Baudry to further develop his views on the documentary form and the cinema's relationship with the real. Resisting the vogue for using the phrase "cinema of the real" as a synonym for documentary (as in the Paris-based festival of the same name), Baudry recalled the Lacanian notion of the Real as "that which is unknowable and cannot be conceptualized; that which is not, and cannot be, articulated in a system of signs. From the moment that there is a representation, the Real is what is lacking. [...] If the 'real' does exist in a documentary, it is as an *effect*, as a *place* designated in a *dispositif*."⁴¹ The status of the real in the cinema evidently exercised Baudry on a long-term basis: in a later article for *La Revue Documentaires*, he gave the etymology of the word real as being "relating to the thing" (or *res*, in Latin), and while admitting that it had a "combative value" in discourse on documentary cinema, recalled the complications arising from the use of the term: "'real' admits of a quantity of antonyms: fictive, fictional, imaginary, virtual, illusionary, lying... The notion is very obscure and equivocal, but each one evokes it under the regime of evidence, as if, between us, it went without saying."⁴²

In the article "Se voir," a text in which Baudry distinguished home movies from commercial cinema on the basis of the status of the audience for which they were intended (whether consisting of people who were known or unknown to the filmmaker), he gave his most compelling definition of good documentary practice:

No matter what it seeks to show or explain, a film has every chance of being good if I have the impression of understanding it thanks to the

40 Pierre Baudry and Michael Hoare, "Apprendre à lire en apprenant à écrire: l'expérience Varan aujourd'hui: Interview de Leonardo di Costanzo," *La Revue Documentaires* no. 13 (August 1997), pp. 75-88, here p. 88.

41 Pierre Baudry, "Terrains et territoires," *La Licorne* no. 24 (1992), pp. 5-14, here p. 8.

42 Pierre Baudry, "Images des sciences: Le concept de chien," *La Revue Documentaires* no. 17 (January 2002), pp. 5-6, here p. 5.

connections between one image and another, or between one sound and another, rather than via the “divine” voice of an off-screen commentary. Books are excellent devices for captioning images, and certain bad films could have made for good books.⁴³

The 1995 article “Paroles inventives,” meanwhile, reproduced the distinctions between different forms of speech on television programs formulated in his 1977 *Cahiers* article when talking about the use made of the voice in the privatized, segmented media landscape of the 1990s. While this decade witnessed the “growing starification of the moderator” and a far more direct expression of the corporate basis of television, it also saw a fascinating counter-model in a weekly talk show on TV5 with the symptomatic name *Référence*. Here, a single guest is interviewed for 26 minutes about their life and work, and while the choice of guests is often refreshingly unconventional, it is the formal *dispositif* of the program that most fascinates Baudry. Each episode in the series is presented in a single, uninterrupted long take, capturing the interview in its unified totality. For Baudry, the use made by a television show of a sequence shot in this way cannot but incite “some memories in the cinephile,” and the program retains the effects that, as Bazin first reasoned, such shots have in the cinema: a gauge of reality, the production of dramatic tension, and the reinforcement of narrative unity. Still more importantly, Baudry notes that, through the use of such a format, “speech ceases to be a disincarnated object, and takes on a physical dimension.”⁴⁴ In particular, the everyday aleae of the TV interview, the pauses, stumbles and digressions that are usually elided in the editing process, are here retained, and although this occasionally has a detrimental effect, for the most part the filming technique adopted by *Référence* “makes us more intelligent and inventive” and provides the viewer with “a sort of living encyclopedia of the invention that it records.”⁴⁵

Having suffered from a debilitating heart condition for more than a decade, Pierre Baudry passed away on February 15, 2005, at the age of 57. His colleagues at *La Revue Documentaires* dedicated a dossier to his life and work in the following issue (no. 19-20), which, by a strange yet fitting coincidence, accompanied an obituary for Jean Rouch, who died the same

43 Pierre Baudry, “Se voir,” *La Revue Documentaires* no. 9 (September 1994), pp. 63-77, here p. 66.

44 Pierre Baudry, “Paroles inventives: La parole à la télévision,” *La Revue Documentaires* no. 11 (December 1995), pp. 5-17, here p. 12.

45 *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

year. Included in this necrological homage was a touching note by Comolli, who had originally introduced Baudry to *Cahiers* and who had renewed ties with him through their mutual involvement with the Ateliers Varan (which supports Comolli's filmmaking to this day). Recognizing the immense debt he owed to his old comrade who "guided me, perhaps without knowing it," Comolli described Baudry as a "discreet intellect" who was "disarming in his kindness and attentiveness." In the "years of fury and terror," as Comolli tells it, Baudry was a friend who "wished us well even in spite of ourselves, even beyond ourselves."⁴⁶

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24. Partial Vision: The Theory and Filmmaking of Pascal Bonitzer

Abstract

Pascal Bonitzer's work as a critic, theorist and, subsequently, filmmaker lies at the heart of this chapter. A precociously young critic when joining *Cahiers*, Bonitzer wrote with a literary flair and confidently deployed a range of thinkers as references in his texts, including Jacques Derrida, Georges Bataille, Roland Barthes, Jean Louis Schefer and, above all, Jacques Lacan. In the early 1970s, he penned a series of dense texts dealing with the impression of reality in cinema, the role of Renaissance perspective in this illusion, and the functioning of the *hors-champ* (off-screen space) in the filmic image. He continued this field of preoccupations in his later writings, introducing concepts such as "anamorphosis" and "deframing" into film theory, before becoming a director of feature films in the 1990s. While his films could have been dismissed as middle-class neurotic comedies, they in fact evince a fascinating relationship with his earlier theory in their narrative re-working of the concept of the *hors-champ*.

Keywords: Pascal Bonitzer, *Cahiers du cinéma*, *hors-champ*, psychoanalytic film theory, apparatus theory, deframing

The Reality of Denotation

The last of the trio of Lacan-influenced critics treated in this section, Bonitzer was also the one whose collaboration with *Cahiers* was the most enduring: he wrote regularly for the journal until 1989, albeit in increasing isolation from the rest of the editorial team after Daney's departure in 1981. His work on questions of film form, psychoanalysis and cinematic ontology was also the most prolific, eventually leading to several book-length studies in the late 1970s and 1980s, before he made the shift to filmmaking in the 1990s. Writing with a literary panache that was unmatched in the journal and

that presaged his later prowess as a screenwriter and director, Bonitzer was also something of an intellectual jackdaw, picking up strands of ideas developed by other figures and incorporating them into his film theory without necessarily devoting himself to the prolonged work of scholarly research that a more rigorous preoccupation with such concepts would have demanded. Nonetheless, in incorporating into his writings on the cinema a web of theoretical influences—consisting principally of the pentad formed by Lacan, Bazin, Schefer, Barthes and Bataille, to which could be periodically added the work of Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida and Metz—Bonitzer's contribution to film theory is considerable, and his treatment of the major problematics preoccupying the *Cahiers* tradition since the journal's founding is of inestimable value.

Chief among these was the role of Renaissance perspective in producing an “impression of reality” in the visual image, whether painted or photographic. Bonitzer joined Oudart and others at *Cahiers* in applying to the cinema the research carried out by Francastel and Schefer into the ideological implications of the development of *perspectiva artificialis* in fifteenth-century Italy. The monocular perspective of this visual system, which was hegemonic in Western art until the end of the nineteenth century, was both impregnated by and played a role in entrenching modern bourgeois subjectivity during capitalism's nascent period. Far from being a scientific technique aimed at the perfection of verisimilitude, the perspectival schema of post-Renaissance painting was charged with cultural and ideological effects. Schefer's work, in particular, explored the nexus between painting and ideology, and the theorist's ties with *Tel Quel* (he published there regularly) led to the incorporation of his ideas into film theory.¹ As noted in Part I, Marcelin Pleynet, in remarks in an interview with *Cinéthique*, was the first to argue that the cinema “produc[es] a perspectival code directly inherited from and constructed on the *quattrocento* model of scientific perspective,” while Jean-Louis Baudry explored this line of thinking more deeply in “Cinéma: effets idéologiques produits par l'appareil de base.”² For political as well as

1 See Jean Louis Schefer, “Note sur les systèmes représentatifs,” *Tel Quel* no. 40 (Spring 1970), pp. 44-71; and Jean Louis Schefer, “Saint Augustin,” *Tel Quel* no. 56 (Winter 1973), pp. 65-102. Schefer was also interviewed in the first issue of the *Tel Quel* “satellite” *Peinture, Cahiers théoriques*. See Jean Louis Schefer, “Sur la peinture,” *Peinture, Cahiers théoriques* no. 1 (May 1971).

2 Marcelin Pleynet and Jean Thibaudeau, interviewed by Gérard Leblanc, “Économique, idéologique, formel...” *Cinéthique* no. 3, pp. 7-14, here p. 10. Translated as, “Economic – ideological – formal,” trans. Elias Noujaim, in Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London: BFI, 1980), pp. 149-164, here p. 156; and Jean-Louis Baudry, “Cinéma: effets idéologiques produits

strategic reasons, the *Cahiers* editors were seduced by the *telquelien* line of thinking, but pieces by Comolli, Oudart and Bonitzer pushed back against the overly totalizing nature of Pleynet and Baudry's claims. In Bonitzer's case, this resulted in a series of four articles beginning with "Réalité' de la dénotation" in May 1971 and concluding with "Hors-champ (un espace en défaut)" at the end of the same year. Running in tandem with Comolli's multi-part text "Technique et idéologie," Bonitzer's writings pursued a similar problematic. Across these two series, the critics shared many of the same polemical targets—Mitry, Lebel, Bazin, Baudry—and recurrently referred to each other's work. Far from simply reinforcing the arguments aired by Comolli, however, Bonitzer brought to the discussion a distinct frame of references, which would have a lasting effect on his later writings on the cinema.

At the same time as *Cahiers* engaged in a sympathetic critique of Pleynet and Baudry, the journal's editors fostered close relations with Schefer and published two articles by the art theorist, "Les couleurs renversées/la buée" in July 1971 and "Sur le 'Déluge universel' d'Uccello" in March-April 1972.³ Later, in 1981, Schefer's monograph *L'Homme ordinaire du cinéma* was released under Narboni's *Cahiers du cinéma* imprint and had a significant impact on the *Cahiers* editors, with Bonitzer recognizing that "a whole theory and history of the catastrophes of perception is written in this book, or, to put it more knowingly and more indiscreetly: a sanguinary failure of the mirror-stage."⁴ Schefer's was also the starting point of Bonitzer's argument in "Réalité' de la dénotation," which opens with an epigraph citing him to the effect that "the operation which restores the third dimension in the 'camera obscura' occurs by means of an apparatus (a mechanism) which

par l'appareil de base," *Cinéthique* no. 7-8 (c. mid-late 1970), pp. 1-8. Translated as "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," trans. Alan Williams, in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 286-298.

3 See Jean Louis Schefer, "Les couleurs renversées/la buée," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 230 (July 1971), pp. 28-42; and Jean Louis Schefer, "Sur le 'Déluge universel' d'Uccello," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 236-237 (May-June 1972), pp. 42-66. The latter of these articles, published during the height of the journal's Marxist-Leninist period, now seems rather incongruously placed, as it appears in the same issue as attacks on the PCF and lengthy articles on the cinema of Maoist China. It nonetheless went on to form the center of Schefer's book *Le Déluge, la peste, Paolo Uccello* (Paris: Galilée, 1976).

4 Pascal Bonitzer, "L'être idéal et le criminel (Jean-Louis Schefer: *L'Homme ordinaire du cinéma*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 320 (February 1981), pp. 60-61, here p. 61. For Schefer's book, see Jean Louis Schefer, *L'Homme ordinaire du cinéma* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1981).

(1) produces results, and (2) vanishes from its product.”⁵ In his own opening remarks, Bonitzer accepts the broader idea that the “cinematic ideological apparatus” was “contrived, scientifically *and* ideologically, on the basis of the figurative system elaborated following the symbolic mutation of the Renaissance.” But he insists that it would be *erroneous* to conceive, with Jean-Louis Baudry, of filmic figuration as being a “prisoner” of the scenographic cube of *quattrocento* perspective. While it is true that the film camera, with its temporally diachronic nature and its ability to move through a given space, can be considered “a perfection of the imaginary freedom lavished by the screen-mirror on the ocular subject,” certain inventions in film technique, such as the close-up, produce “a plastic discontinuity that irreversibly fractures the *imaginary cube*.”⁶ With its capacity for fragmenting the scenographic unity of the filmic image, the close-up is thus one of the primary sites for Bonitzer to interrogate and contest the sweeping claims made about the ideological nature of cinematic representation by Baudry.

In seeking out a definition of the shot as a “theoretical unit of articulation,” however, Bonitzer insists on the decisive nature of the historical, political and formal contexts in which it is used. A close-up in Eisenstein, or in Godard, is *not* the same as a close-up in a classical Hollywood film. Like Comolli, therefore, Bonitzer formulates a critique of Mitry’s “normative classification” of shots as being founded on “ideological arbitrariness,” an empiricist shortcoming he also detects in the *grande syntagmatique* of Metzian semiology. Metz’s distinction between denotation (what an image shows) and connotation (how it shows) also comes in for critical assessment by Bonitzer. In being based on the “analogical lure” of the cinematographic image, a “cinema of denotation” would, in the *Cahiers* critic’s argument, have the effect of “constraining film and its reading to a transcendental semantic level which is ‘cinematic language’ articulated in its narrative function, and of ‘condemning’ connotation to the role of ‘artistic’ supplement, expressive redundancy.” For Bonitzer, both Metzian semiology and Bazinian ontology are characterized by a theoretical occlusion of “the symbolic/ideological reality of the ‘spontaneous’ recognition effect” in cinematic representation, which is produced by both the continuous reproduction of mobile figures and, in dominant film codes, by the “welding” of the diachronic articulation of images to narrative functions. Metz has the additional defect of attempting to bestow a degree of “scientificity” onto what is, in the end, a

5 Jean Louis Schefer, “L’image: le sens ‘investi,’ *Communications* no. 15 (1970), pp. 210-221, here p. 210. Cited in Pascal Bonitzer, “‘Réalité’ de la dénotation,” p. 39 [p. 248].

6 *Ibid.*

purely ideological effect. Bonitzer thus turns to Schefer's critique of "rigid Saussureanism," which refuses "an absolute reduction of the status of the image as a text" and argues that "denotation cannot be conceived as a simple designation, for [...] it necessarily *implicates* a systematic process of *definition*." The passage from designation to definition—from simply stating "here is a cat" to determining the meaning of the *énoncé* "cat"—is by definition a process of transformation, which redefines the signifying field of that which is designated. The meaning of the cinematic signifier is thus, for Bonitzer, *transversal* to the "designation effect."⁷

"Le Gros Orteil," explicitly following on from the earlier article, focuses more specifically on the status of the close-up in Mitry's formal system, arguing that his "historicist" discourse on the technique has the effect of resorbing the "fragmentation irreducible to all narrative totalization" and reinvesting the close-up into the "teleological history of filmic narrativity." Bonitzer nonetheless picks up on an off-hand comment from Mitry that the close-up is a "supplement" to the general narrative movement of a film, in order to relate the technique to Derrida's notion of supplementarity, a step that allows the *Cahiers* critic to surmise that "the close-up is the supplement of the filmic scene [...] and, in this sense, substitutes the mechanical eye of the camera for the 'living' eye of the theater spectator."⁸ Moreover, Bonitzer relates this notion to Jean Epstein's description, in *Bonjour cinéma*, of a near-shot of a telephone as "a monster, a tower and a character," phrasing that for Bonitzer had echoes of Bataille's description of the big toe—"always more or less defective and humiliating"—in the avant-garde journal *Documents*.⁹ As Epstein's reverie suggests, the close-up destroys the scale of shots and undoes the hierarchical formal systems based thereupon. It is for this reason that its transgressive potential must, in the formal practice of classical cinema, be minimized and, as much as possible, negated. The ideology subtending this occlusion of the close-up is, in Bonitzer's view, most coherently formulated by Bazin's film theory, and more specifically his insistence on a realist vocation of the cinema that finds its apogee in the depth-of-field technique of Welles and Renoir.

7 The quotes in this paragraph are from *ibid.*, pp. 40-41 [pp. 250-251].

8 Pascal Bonitzer, "Le Gros Orteil ('Réalité' de la dénotation, 2)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 232 (October 1971), pp. 15-22, here p. 16.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 19. See also Georges Bataille, "Le gros orteil," *Documents* no. 6 (November 1929), pp. 297-302; and Jean Epstein, *Bonjour cinéma* (Paris: Éditions de la Sirène, 1921). Epstein had earlier been discussed by *Cahiers* in a 1968 dossier on the "old avant-garde." See André S. Labarthe, "Epstein à l'état naissant," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 202 (June-July 1968), pp. 51-52.

The third installment of Bonitzer's series, "Fétichisme de la technique: la notion de plan," mainly consists of a rebarbative denunciation of the technicism and ahistoricism of Lebel's *Cinéma et idéologie*. Beyond this diatribe, his discussion of the "fetishism" at the basis of the notion of the shot prefigures the later, more detailed symptomatic reading of Bazin's theory in "L'écran du fantasme." Here Bonitzer understands the fetishism of the shot, in its psychoanalytic sense, as a *Verleugnung* (disavowal) of the castration produced by the scenographic limitations of the frame, which produces in the spectator the "I know very well... but all the same..." attitude described by Mannoni. Bonitzer finds this state of denial admirably intuited in Bazin's expression, from "Montage interdit," that: "What is needed [...] is for us to *believe* that the events are real even while we *know* them to be tricks."¹⁰ In Bonitzer's analysis, it is the incorporation within a single frame of two or more heterogeneous elements (Chaplin and the lion, in Bazin's paradigmatic example) that produces a "*pseudos* of reality whose illusory character is known to us, but to which our desire adheres." The cinema of classical scenography, since it prizes temporal continuity and spatial unity, is thus "obsessed with, or hallucinated by, castration, by all the possible figures of 'physical violence' [...] and death."¹¹ In doing so, it serves to mask the real violence—whether economic, political, ideological or sexual—of contemporary capitalist society.

The *Hors-champ*

In retrospect, the three articles discussed above can perhaps best be seen as preludes to the major theoretical advance achieved by Bonitzer during this period: namely, his notion of the *hors-champ*, as first elaborated in the December 1971-February 1972 article "Hors-champ (un espace en défaut)." While the term itself ("off-screen space" in English) is borrowed from Burch's *Theory of Film Practice*, Bonitzer's use of the concept is far more theoretically fecund and has had enduring resonances for his *Cahiers* colleagues, for whom it became one of the cornerstones of their reflection on the cinema.¹² Bonitzer himself now looks back on this text more favorably than many of his other articles. Whereas he admits that he "would not like to re-read"

10 Bazin, "Montage interdit," p. 124 [p. 80]. Cited in Pascal Bonitzer, "Fétichisme de la technique: la notion de plan," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 233 (November 1971), pp. 4-10, here p. 9.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

12 The more general utilization Bonitzer and his colleagues have made of this term, deploying it to refer to any repressed, masked or invisible aspect of thought or visual representation, thus legitimates here retaining the original French term (which literally means "outside-the-field").

the initial installments in the “Réalité’ de la dénotation” series, he finds “Hors-champ” to be “a more important text, because I tried to theorize (for myself, in a sense) the specificity of the cinematic *mise en scène* that motivated me and fascinated me.”¹³

Covering a wide range of film theory in the roughly 6000 words of his piece, Bonitzer’s “Hors-champ” is divided into four sections: “True, false,” “Screen-space, off-screen space [*hors-champ*],” “Instrument, work” and “The Divided Scene.” The first section recaps much of the argument made in Bonitzer’s preceding articles on the production of an “impression of reality” in the cinema, which he finds to be more imperative than in any other visual signifying practice. Channeling Schefer, Bonitzer asserts that “the automatic ideological gesture which inaugurates our viewing of a film, our experience of the projection, is to invest the surface of the screen with a fictive depth. This depth denotes the reality within the fiction, the reality of the fiction.”¹⁴ From the very beginning, then, the spectator is caught in an antinomic relationship with the cinematographic image, divided between the reality of its flatness and the illusory depth it presents. A cleavage of the subject is produced: when watching a film, we oscillate between being taken in by the “impression of reality” *and*, at any given moment, operating a critical “pulling-back” that allows us to “question the ‘authenticity’ of a costume, criticize the actor ‘behind’ the character, wonder whether a background is or is not a back-projection, ask ourselves about the cost of a production, and so on.”¹⁵ For Bonitzer, however, this is principally a defense mechanism against the formidable “power of assertion” produced by the cinema. Even when faced with a cinematographic representation, however, our demand for the real can never, by definition, be truly satisfied, and so, paradoxically, such moments of “distancing,” of contesting the authenticity of what we see, are necessary to maintain our credence in the film—both on the level of narrative verisimilitude and on the level of the “realism” of the figures presented on the screen. Thus, in Bonitzer’s words, “we never succumb absolutely, hypnotically, to the ‘reality’ of cinema. *The ‘impression of reality’ is from the start affected by a lack,*” and this lack is produced by the “material structure of the cinematic fiction.”¹⁶ The cinematographic image, of course, cannot show us everything. It is characterized—and even “haunted”—by the absence of what it conceals from our view, and it

13 Interview with Pascal Bonitzer, April 30, 2014.

14 Pascal Bonitzer, “Hors-champ (un espace en défaut),” p. 15 [p. 291].

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., p. 16 [p. 293].

is by working with this absence that the impression of reality is produced. Following Barthes in “Le troisième sens,” Bonitzer thus determines two levels of absence or lack in the filmic scene: a diachronic or temporal order (the *between-two-shots*, or *entre-deux-plans*) and a synchronic or spatial order (the *out-of-frame*, or *hors-cadre*).¹⁷

It is here that Burch’s notion of the *hors-champ* enters Bonitzer’s discussion. Bonitzer commends Burch for treating filmic space as a “divided” or “lacking” space while at the same time lamenting the confinement of his analysis to an empiricist and formally reductive approach.¹⁸ The *Cahiers* critic’s key move is to relate the Burchian notion of a dialectical relationship between screen space (the *champ*) and off-screen space (the *hors-champ*) to the theory of bourgeois representation founded on the “centered space” of the scenographic cube, as developed by Schefer and Francastel. In constituting the “extension and imaginary support” of the cinematic field, the *hors-champ*, in Bonitzer’s analysis, *displaces* the scene’s center of gravity, a displacement that itself represents a major resource in the classical system of shot construction. While other visual forms such as the theater and painting also have an “off” space, cinema is distinguished by the fact that this space is constantly subject to shifts and inversions due to the possibility of camera movement, and, even more strikingly, the editing together of shots taken from disparate camera angles. Thus the *hors-champ* of the cinema, even in its classical guise, “can be thought of as a dimension of time and movement; off-screen space [*le hors-champ*] (a particular off-screen space) becomes screen space, screen space is transformed into off-screen space.”¹⁹ The “real” space of the cinematic field and its “virtual” counterpart thus become interchangeable in a recurrent process of dialectical reversal. This process, moreover, has a clear ideological effect: to “confirm the ‘reality’ (the concreteness) of a scene from one ‘field’ to another via what is absent from it,” or, in Bazin’s terminology, to produce a “gain” in the “reality” of the cinematic scene.²⁰ Bonitzer, indeed, credits Bazin’s notion of the film screen as a *cache* (mask) that “unveils only a part of reality” rather than a *cadre* (frame) that contains it “in its entirety,” for prefiguring the notion of the *hors-champ*, even if Bazin remains ostensibly beholden to an “idealist” conception of the cinema’s relationship with reality.²¹ The impression of

17 Ibid., p. 18 [p. 293].

18 Ibid. [pp. 293-294].

19 Ibid., p. 20 [p. 295].

20 Ibid. [p. 296].

21 See Bazin, “Théâtre et cinéma,” p. 100 [p. 193].

reality produced by an alternation between a field and its *hors-champ* in classical filmic representation, however, relies on an adherence to two formal principles. The first is a foreclosing (or “suturing”) of the “gap” (*béance*) opened up between the shots through the establishment of a set of formal rules of editing that are governed by the principles of “continuity, intelligibility and homogeneity.”²² Secondly, the scenic *dispositif* of classical cinema must foreclose the existence of the true “other scene” of the filmic field, namely the technical instruments required to produce the image (the camera, lights, microphones, etc.) which are “literally within arm’s reach” on the set but which, on the pain of an unwelcome disruption to the spectator’s investment in the “reality” of the scene, must not be visible in the film image itself.

At this point, therefore, Bonitzer appears close to Jean-Louis Baudry’s position concerning the ideological nature of cinematic representation. The third section of “Hors-champ,” however, is dedicated to an extensive rebuttal of Baudry’s text. For Bonitzer, Baudry offers a “naïve” and “mechanistic” understanding of the cinema that ends up resembling the technician discourse of Lebel. Not only does he conflate “ideology” and “idealism” (leaping from a discussion of the ideological effects of the cinematic apparatus to an assertion of its fundamentally idealist nature), but the abstract nature of his discussion has the result of autonomizing the sphere of ideology and foreclosing the historically situated nature of filmic representation. For Bonitzer, therefore, the *Tel Quel* writer’s analysis is “standing on its head,” since:

by giving this field, the instrumental base, the main role, and refusing to analyze the actions of foreclosure, or of the “intervention” of the *instrument as signifier* in the fictional scene, as actions that are historically determined, Baudry inevitably falls into the formalism and hypostasis of an ideological effect; which is in the final analysis the hypostasis of the ideological ‘sphere’ conceived of as a closed system not worked on by history.²³

Bonitzer—widely and not unjustly seen as a major representative of “apparatus theory”—thus anticipates many of the arguments subsequently made against this theoretical current by forces hostile to it: namely, its ahistorical conception of the cinema, its confusion of ideology and idealist metaphysics,

²² Bonitzer, “Hors-champ,” p. 21 [p. 297].

²³ *Ibid.* [p. 301]

and its hypostasis of the ideological sphere as a closed system. Despite the availability of “Hors-champ” in English translation, these flaws have often, ironically, been ascribed to the *Cahiers* writers themselves, undeserved victims of later acts of conflation and confusion. Indeed, the major source of Bonitzer’s frustration with Baudry lies in the latter’s contention that it would “suffice” to “reveal the mechanism”—that is, to introduce the “elements of production” (such as the camera) into the cinematic scene—in order for bourgeois representation, and the spectatorial misrecognition at its heart, to “collapse.”²⁴ For Bonitzer, by contrast, it is far from certain that such a collapse would be assured by the “magic, providential, miraculous” apparition of the *signifier* of the camera in the scriptural work of the film.²⁵ Rather, the ideological investment of the cinematic image can only be deconstructed through an “inscription of the work” in the scene that would be the result of the patient labor of theoretically conscious experimentation with film form.

In all four of the texts in the “Réalité’ de la dénotation” series, Bonitzer does not limit himself to a purely descriptive account of “bourgeois” cinematic representation but offers an alternative model of “materialist” film practice, grounded mainly in the work carried out initially by the Soviet montage tradition of the 1920s (Eisenstein and Vertov) and, more recently, figures such as Straub/Huillet, Duras and the Godard of the “Groupe Dziga Vertov” era.²⁶ In “Fétichisme de la technique,” for instance, he declared that “only a cinema practicing a dialectical materialist approach to form [...] can claim to hold, with full knowledge of the facts, a political discourse (which, with full knowledge of the facts, can only be Marxist-Leninist, proletarian).”²⁷ In “Hors-champ,” Bonitzer is more specific about this approach. Whereas in bourgeois cinema the “principle of the material division of the scene” is obfuscated, a materialist scene should first of all define itself as “divided, marked by a signifying bar implying a productive broken, contradictory scenography, irreducible to the flat ‘realism’ of the specular scene.” Such a pluralized, heterogeneous scene can be found in films such as *Othon* and Duras’ *Jaune le soleil*, but it is only in the Groupe Dziga Vertov’s *Vent d’est* and *Luttes en Italie* that this formal work is accompanied by an explicit analysis of the “scenographic apparatus” as an “ideological apparatus.”

24 See Baudry, “Cinéma: Effets idéologiques produits par l’appareil de base,” p. 8 [p. 296].

25 Bonitzer, “Hors-champ,” p. 22 [p. 301].

26 Indeed, it is partly due to Bonitzer’s insistent advocacy of the Groupe Dziga Vertov that a reconciliation between Godard and *Cahiers* was brought about at this time, after a period of frosty relations in the years 1969-1971. See Chapter 10 for more on this link.

27 Bonitzer, “Fétichisme de la technique,” p. 10.

Moreover, it is only in these films that the true “other scene” of bourgeois representation is exposed: to wit, the class struggle between the capitalist class and the proletariat. In the absence of this political *hors-champ*, Bonitzer argues, “any questioning of the ‘place’ of the spectator, or the scenographic apparatus, would be meaningless, lacking a stake, or would have only the minor meaning of a game without risks or consequences.”²⁸

The Gaze and the Voice

In the wake of the demoralizing experience of the “Front culturel” project, the militant confidence that imbued the conclusion of “Hors-champ” largely disappeared from Bonitzer’s writings, but throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s he maintained an ongoing interest in questions of filmic representation, which was manifested across a wide range of the critical articles he wrote for *Cahiers* during this period. In 1976, Bonitzer was the first of his generation of *Cahiers* critics to publish a collection of his writings in book form, as part of the 10/18 series overseen by the publisher Christian Bourgois. This anthology was tellingly titled *Le Regard et la Voix*, and it is the interaction of these two elements—the gaze and the voice—that informs much of his criticism in the post-*gauchiste* years. *Le Regard et la Voix* opens with a re-worked version of Bonitzer’s article on the “Hors-champ”—now stripped of the more stridently Marxist-Leninist statements of the original piece and given the pluralist title “Des hors-champs”—which forms the theoretical foundation stone upon which many of the other articles included in *Le Regard et la voix* build. Central to his revamped problematic was an interrogation of the militant documentary, a format that had never received an overly favorable reception by *Cahiers*. Indeed, Bonitzer and his colleagues were particularly dubitative about the political and epistemological value of these films, which in their worst examples combined a theoretically naïve usage of the image with a hectoring voice-over delivering the political message the filmmakers wished to convey. While Godard’s *Ici et ailleurs* critically demolished many of the presuppositions operative in this mode of filmmaking, Bonitzer also finds counterexamples to the sterilities of much contemporary militant cinema in the work of other, less heralded figures.

Chilean filmmaker Miguel Littin, for instance, was appreciated for injecting *La tierra prometida* with grotesque, carnivalesque elements (descending from the literary tradition of Cervantes, Rabelais and Dostoyevsky, as

28 Bonitzer, “Hors-champ,” p. 26. [pp. 302-303].

analyzed by Bakhtin) which allowed him to achieve a “deeper realism” that has “no fear of encompassing fantastic forms, the multiple representations from which ‘the rich and vivid language of the masses’ is woven, and which subverts, by crudely parodying them, the language and representations of the dominant classes, their codes.”²⁹ Similarly, Béné Deswarte and Yann Le Masson’s *Kashima Paradise*, with its focus on the far-left movement in Japan, was hailed for leading the spectator into “a work of the eye and of thought,” most notably by virtue of possessing a voice-over commentary that “proclaims the side it takes, that thus avows the selection and editing of the images of the film.”³⁰ Although this approach presents the risk of falling into partisan dogmatism, a trap *Kashima Paradise* does not always avoid (such as when the image of a Japanese farmer is accompanied by an extract of the *Communist Manifesto* on the vacillating political position of the peasantry), for the most part the filmmakers use the voice-over to destroy the “false immediacy” of cinematic representation by “naming what is shown and by enunciating the knowledge that disposes of it (Marxism) and the reading that is made of it (political economy).”³¹

The considerations formulated in these responses to individual films were synthesized in Bonitzer’s contribution to a 1975 *Cahiers* dossier on militant cinema. “Les silences de la voix” was Bonitzer’s most in-depth article of this period and, thanks to its republication in English in Rosen’s *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, probably his most widely read piece. Incited by the release of the compilation film *Mai 68* by Gudie Lawaetz, the article expands in scope to cover a broad overview of documentary film practice—encompassing Antonioni’s *Chung-kuo China*, Marker’s *Lettre de Sibérie* and Buñuel’s *Las Hurdes*. As with the earlier text on *Kashima Paradise*, the question of the point of view of the filmmaker is a crucial one for Bonitzer. A common understanding of documentary film is that, unlike its fictional counterpart, it is inherently averse to signifying ambiguity and aims instead “to shed light on the real with which it deals” and “disengage from that real a readability and hence a point of view.”³² Ordinarily, the most preponderant manner in which a documentary filmmaker communicates

29 Pascal Bonitzer, “La voix veille (*La Terre promise*),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 253 (October–November 1974), pp. 37–38, here p. 37. Repr. in idem., *Le Regard et la Voix* (Paris: Union générale des éditions, 1976), pp. 132–134.

30 Pascal Bonitzer, “*Kashima Paradise*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 254–255 (December 1974–January 1975), pp. 44–45, here p. 45. Repr. in idem., *Le Regard et la Voix*, pp. 145–147.

31 Ibid.

32 Pascal Bonitzer, “Les silences de la voix,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 256 (February–March 1975), pp. 22–33, here p. 23. Repr. in idem., *Le Regard et la Voix*, pp. 25–49. Translated as “The Silences of

their message to the spectator is through the voice-over, laid over the top of the images in order to instill them with meaning and articulate them with the intended discourse of the film. But what happens, Bonitzer asks, when a film such as *Mai 68* presents a broad spectrum of viewpoints on a still-contentious historical event and does away with an authoritative voice-over guiding the spectator towards a specific political viewpoint? Is it simply a “free confrontation” of views that, as Lawaetz, quoting Sartre, suggests, lets the events “speak for themselves”? The *Cahiers* critic answers in the negative: a discourse still speaks in the film, but it does so in a silent fashion, through the voice’s absence. This discourse is therefore that of a “subject-supposed-to-know,” a term drawn from Lacanian theory to refer to the position of absolute mastery and knowledge that the analyst necessarily bestows upon the analyst (placed in the position of the “Big Other”) as a precondition of undergoing treatment. The formal system of *Mai 68* is therefore in apparent opposition to that which governs most militant cinema. Whereas the latter openly, if often dogmatically, avows its point of view in the form of an authoritative commentary directly addressed to the spectator, Lawaetz’s film conceals its own production of discourse and instead creates an “impression of knowledge” that elicits a form of spectatorial *jouissance*. While the means for conveying its point of view may be subtler and less obtrusive than those of the militant film’s voice-over, taking the form of editing structures, camera angles and the discourse of on-screen “talking heads,” the end result is the same. Both the militant film and the “no commentary” approach of *Mai ’68* share with television news a discursive structure in which an anonymous, de-subjected voice speaks. In all these audiovisual forms, therefore, the “burning voice of revolt” gives way to the “cold voice of order, normality and power.”³³ In a deft piece of wordplay, Bonitzer argues that commentary thus becomes *comment-taire* (how to be silent): it ensures a repression of those aspects of the subject matter that the filmmaker does not wish to enter into their discourse.³⁴

Bonitzer thereupon seeks out the possibility of a more productive utilization of voice-over in documentary films. The famous sequence from *Lettre de Sibérie* in which the same footage of roadwork in the Siberian city of Yakutsk is repeated with three different commentaries, each offering a different

the Voice,” trans. Philip Rosen, in Rosen (ed.) *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, pp. 319-334, here p. 320.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 27 [p. 325].

34 The English version of the text avoids Bonitzer’s untranslatable wordplay, which appears twice in the original text, thus markedly impoverishing the original’s rhetorical force.

political perspective (Stalinist, virulently anti-communist and a third, supposedly more nuanced and balanced position), is mentioned but is looked upon rather adversely as adhering to the practice of “minimal commentary” and, by extension, Bazin’s celebration of the ontological ambiguity of the film image.³⁵ *Las Hurdes* is found to be more promising for consciously working on and parodying an aspect of the voice-over technique found in old travelogues, pre-war newsreels and the worst examples of militant cinema. In these films, a comic effect is unintentionally produced by a certain shrillness, bombast or insufferable optimism that can be discerned in what Barthes would call the “grain” of the voice. The grain of the voice is an accent deriving not from a geographical region but from a “region of meaning” (an era, a class or a political regime). For Bonitzer, the detection of such an accent betrays to the spectator not only the heterogeneity of the voice to the images it accompanies but also the existence of the body bearing the voice of the commentary, and this undermines its potential for relaying an authoritative discourse that bestows meaning on the image track. An embodied voice is incapable of being the voice of the master, of the subject-supposed-to-know. The discursive strategy of “no commentary” is thus the response of contemporary cinema to the increasing ability of the spectator to perceive and therefore ridicule the embodied nature of the traditional off-screen commentary; the voice of the master, here, is retained by means of the silence of the voice-over.

As with his earlier theoretical texts from *Cahiers’* Marxist period, Bonitzer posits the work of Straub/Huillet, Duras and Godard as a productive site for “limit experiments” that would strive for “a tearing in the effect of the real of the image and in the effect of mastery of the voice.” But he also detects positive signs in certain militant documentaries that refuse an orthodox usage of voice-over. For instance, *Oser lutter* (a film made about striking workers in the town of Flins in May-June 1968) is noted for combining a “confused mixture of voices, over black leader, from which emerges in bits and pieces the ‘truth’ of the struggle” with intertitles that present “the clarity of revolutionary knowledge.” In a French Maoist film about the cultural revolution, *Shanghai au jour le jour*, an even more inventive technique is found: “there are two voices-off of women in dialogue, but they do not directly comment on the real which the image reflects; [...] rather they comment on the image track and clearly are speaking *in an editing room*.”³⁶ The act of presenting two women speaking *to* one another about the images

35 Ibid. [p. 326].

36 Ibid.

they see before them is thus an effective means of blocking the “terrorist indetermination of the voice-off” and re-investing the documentary form with a speaking subject that avows its own status as such. For Bonitzer, it points the way forward to a militant cinema that, rather than merely being “classical documentary plus rage and great, fine-sounding words,” has the potential to be “something else completely, something which organizes otherwise the relation to the real, the look, and the voice.”³⁷

The Blind Field

An interrogation of the relations between the cinema and the real is central to Bonitzer’s following book-length publication, 1982’s *Le Champ aveugle: Essais sur le réalisme*. The filmmakers that come under focus in this study consist largely of the key figures in the traditional *Cahiers* canon. As Bonitzer puts it in his introduction: “Some names punctuate this interrogation: Lumière, Griffith, Eisenstein, Bazin, Rossellini, Hitchcock, Godard. They represent the intense moments in the cinema’s play with reality, either in the form of a pitiless fragmentation—the avatars of montage and cinematic shots—or in the form of an equivocal respect. Much as *Le Regard et la Voix* assembled Bonitzer’s articles from the years 1971-1976, *Le Champ aveugle* drew on texts written in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Of particular relevance here was a two-part article from 1977, “La notion de plan et le sujet du cinéma,” and the text of Bonitzer’s January 1977 address to Barthes’ seminar at the Collège de France, “La vision partielle.” For the most part, however, *Le Champ aveugle* is much more loosely based on pre-existing work than *Le Regard et la Voix* and should be seen as an independent text in its own right. By 1982, too, the attitude Bonitzer takes towards Bazin is more overtly positive than in his earlier texts, which were vexed by the legacy of *Cahiers*’ founder. The presiding argument of *Le Champ aveugle* is that the cinema presents “at the level of reality, a kind of split [*schize*] that it must conjure from a disavowal: this is the root of fetishism.” This *schize* of reality, this persistent, vacillating process of belief and doubt in the ontological realism of the cinematographic image, is fundamentally intuited in many of Bazin’s texts, while Bonitzer also finds it metaphorically expressed in Roald Dahl’s short story *The Wish*, in which a child playfully imagines that

37 The passage from which these citations are drawn does not appear in the original version of “Les silences de la voix” but was added for its republication in *Le Regard et la Voix* (p. 46) and included in Rosen’s English translation (p. 331).

the intricate motifs of a carpet represent real dangers—burning fires, snakes, etc.—only for the fantasy to become menacingly real. Or, as Bonitzer describes it: “The ‘impression of reality’ reclaimed in order to assure the serious nature of the game became mortal. The motifs dissociated from the carpet were stripped of their reassuring form in order to become wild, intense forces.” There is, he suggests, “something like this that takes place, ‘primitively,’ in the cinema.” The “primary phenomenon” of the cinema is, it follows, “this movement that leaps out at the spectators, when the blank surface disappears, when the lights go out, far from the sun, in order to give way to the mobile play of light and shadow.”³⁸ As in his articles from a decade earlier, it is the functioning of phenomena such as the close-up, the deep-focus shot and the *hors-champ* that forms the center of Bonitzer’s reflections in *Le Champ aveugle*.

The first section of his book, therefore, focuses on the notion of the shot in the cinema. Bonitzer gives a condensed history of the development of the shot, from its existence *in potentia* in the Lumières’ *L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* to the development of montage under Griffith and, subsequently, the Soviet filmmakers such as Vertov and Eisenstein, who sought to take montage further in the direction of violence, terror and absolute sensation on the one hand (the montage of attractions) and abstraction, conceptual thought and political consciousness-raising on the other (intellectual montage), thereby liberating the cinema from its “realist debt” and “narrative fatality.” The rise of sound cinema in both Hollywood and the USSR, however, with its “systematic reduction, in accord with narrative metonymy, of the powers of the close-up and montage,” snuffed out this pathway and ensured the “reign of *découpage*.” For Bonitzer, Bazin best expressed this formal system when he described it as “doorknob *mise en scène*”: in a sequence where the fears of the protagonist are fixated on a character on the other side of a door, on the cusp of entering the room, the director is compelled to include a close-up of the doorknob being turned. Writing nearly 25 years after Bazin’s death, Bonitzer professes that “with a few exceptions, we are still there today.” The dominant system in film and television, analytic *découpage* is marked above all by formal closure: “the space is closed, the spectator thinks he knows where he is, at the center of the scenographic cube.” But Bazin’s evocation of the doorknob is revealing: the door is a limit point beyond which lies the realm of the unknown, the source of terror in the archetypal scene he describes. Behind the door,

38 The quotes in this paragraph are from Pascal Bonitzer, *Le Champ aveugle: essais sur le réalisme* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1982), p. 7.

therefore, there is the *hors-champ*. The close-up of the doorknob has the function of indicating the *menace* produced by the *hors-champ* and thereby generates a sense of suspense in the viewer. Hitchcock, renowned as “the master of suspense,” is also the Hollywood director to have most productively worked on the close-up to the point of creating its morbid, terrifying other: the mummified skull of Mrs. Bates in *Psycho* or the dead body with its eyes torn out in *The Birds*. Through the deployment of such intolerable images, Hitchcock’s “optical narrative vision” reaches the point where the cinema “collides with its real.”³⁹

The close-up has another quality, however. Even when used in classical systems of filmic representation, it tends to minimize the depth-of-field characteristic of the cinematic image and thereby annuls “perspectival realism.” Instead, it can be read by the viewer as a “pure surface” and bears a resemblance to the modernist experimentation in radically flattened or perspectively distorted images found in Godard, Syberberg and Duras, as well as, less propitiously, the video aesthetic characterizing the contemporary wave of science-fiction films and other blockbuster movies. Writing in what was still a nascent period for video production, Bonitzer sees the new technology as an “involution” rather than an evolution of film language. Bereft of grain, shadow, depth or perspective, susceptible to incrustation or decomposition, the videographic image is, by its nature, non-figurative, a pure surface. *Mise en scène* is replaced by *mise en pages*. The video image immediately saturates the attention of the spectator and is antithetical to cinematic narrative. At its best, it can be used to create short visual haikus such as Ed Emshwiller’s *Sunstone*, but Bonitzer is globally negative towards the technology. Celluloid may well have been, as George Lucas provocatively stated, a “stupid material typical of the nineteenth century,” and video could turn out to be the “sophisticated, reliable format worthy of the twentieth century,” but this only elicits a terse lament from the critic: “Poor twentieth century.”⁴⁰

Bonitzer thus returns, in the second half of *Le Champ aveugle*, to the cinematic *dispositif* and in particular to the “partial vision” that this visual form produces. The visual field of the cinema is doubled by what Bonitzer calls the “blind field,” a theoretical cognate of Oudart’s *l’Absent*. Again, it is an insight by Bazin that forms the point of departure for Bonitzer’s thinking on the issue: “When a character walks out of the camera’s field

39 Ibid., pp. 23-26. For the notion of “doorknob *mise en scène*,” see André Bazin, “Le réalisme cinématographique et l’école italienne de la Libération,” p. 23 [p. 242].

40 Ibid., p. 32.

of vision,” he writes in “Théâtre et cinéma,” “we know that he has left the visual field, but he continues to exist in an identical state somewhere else in a hidden part of the setting.”⁴¹ Bonitzer contests the idea that this is specific to the cinema: in fact, we can see the same phenomenon when a theatrical character leaves the scene. In Corneille’s *Horace*, for instance, the titular hero who kills Camille in the wings remains identical to the personage we see on the stage. What truly differentiates the cinema is that “what takes place in the contiguity of the *hors-champ* has just as much importance, from a dramatic point of view—and even, sometimes, more importance—as what takes place within the frame.”⁴² Moreover, the interplay of match cuts and camera movements provides a kind of “fictive proof” of the existence of the *hors-champ*: with each change of shot, a section of the blind field becomes the new visual field, albeit at the expense of consigning the previous visual field to the status of its absent other. In order for this system to work, however, a system of prohibitions must be established, forbidding the presence on the screen of the filmmaking instruments, the look-towards-the-camera, anachronistic details in a period film, or even the voices of the crew on the soundtrack. The artifice, in Bazin’s words, must be “materially perfect.” Bonitzer, however, in a return to the terrain of his “‘Réalité’ de la dénotation” series, is skeptical about the avant-garde films of the 1960s and 1970s which, seeing these constraints as “an effect of the dominant ideology,” sought to introduce images of the technological apparatus of the cinema into the film itself as a means of undoing this ideological stranglehold. In and of itself, he insists, such an approach did not serve to make filmic space more “materialist”; in fact, transforming the camera into a character by bestowing it with an on-screen existence was, if anything, even more “metaphysical” and “fantastic” than what the conventions of classical cinema allowed. What *does* find itself threatened by this technique—whether in Vertov or Godard, Keaton or Bergman—is the “cumbersome naturalism of technical realism.”⁴³

Indeed, it is in their common refusal of naturalism that Bonitzer finds a point of commonality between Bazin and Eisenstein. Because both figures, in spite of their undeniable differences, reject the “illusion of reality,” we would be wrong, the author of *Le Champ aveugle* insists, to “mechanically oppose Bazin’s theory of prohibited montage and depth-of-field to Eisenstein’s theory

41 Bazin, “Théâtre et cinéma,” p. 100 [p. 193].

42 Bonitzer, *Le Champ aveugle*, p. 69.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

of pathos and intellectual montage.⁴⁴ In the final analysis, there is little separating Eisenstein's notion of "montage within the frame" in *Ivan the Terrible* from Bazin's analysis of the multiple *plans* (*shots or planes*) present in the deep-focus image in Welles. What counts is not "laying bare the device" through unveiling the machinery used to make a film but experimenting with the assemblage of shots and the effects this can have on the status of the film as "an organic ensemble that organically captures pieces of reality." And yet the effects of such efforts by Godard, Syberberg or Ruiz are, Bonitzer concedes, ambivalent. While modernist film, by disjoining shots and inventing new relations between them, has cast off F. Scott Fitzgerald's notorious malediction on the cinema—cursed to be "an art incapable of expressing anything other than the most common sentiments"—it has done so only at the expense of a rarefaction of its potential audience. "It has defeated," Bonitzer writes, "organic emotions in order to work on subtler levels," but in doing so, modernism in film has "opened the cinema onto both bigger and smaller dimensions."⁴⁵

Anamorphoses and Deframings

Although Bonitzer began the 1980s with the publication of *Le Champ aveugle*, which can now be seen as the summa of his thinking on the cinema, the decade was an uncertain one for the critic. From 1977 onwards, his energies came to be divided between criticism and screenwriting, but he was yet to make the leap to direction that would come in 1996. At *Cahiers*, he continued to write reviews and festival reports on a semi-regular basis, but after Toubiana became sole editor-in-chief in 1981, Bonitzer was no longer centrally involved in the editorial direction of the journal. Indeed, while he recognized the necessity of the orientation advocated by Toubiana, he is critical of the fact that "the re-positioning of *Cahiers du cinéma* as a film magazine also coincided with an abandonment of film theory," and he describes this direction as representing the "banalization" of *Cahiers*.⁴⁶ At the same time, Bonitzer's own reputation as a theorist was growing, and he came to be something of an ambassador for Lacanian film theory. Already in 1978, he had contributed an overview of the relationship between psychoanalysis and cinema to *Ça cinéma*. In this text, Bonitzer is critical of

44 Ibid., p. 86.

45 The above quotes are from *ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

46 Interview with Pascal Bonitzer, April 30, 2014.

the tendency, particularly prevalent in academic discourse on film, to reduce the Freudian understanding of the cinema to a symptomatic analysis either of the filmmaker or the audience. Such approaches bear the risk of “freezing the multiple potential of the works, the films, as a symptom,” a risk that was even, Bonitzer concedes, the weakness of apparatus theory’s junction of Marxism and psychoanalysis, with its use of the “equivocal notion” of ideology to diagnosicize a given film or even the cinema as a whole.⁴⁷ His growing reputation would lead to Bonitzer taking on a regular assignment as the film columnist for *L’Âne: Le magazine freudien*, a psychoanalytic cultural journal published by the École de la cause freudienne. Between 1981 and 1987, he reviewed the work of filmmakers such as Godard, Oliveira, Ruiz, Skolimowski, Lewis and Rohmer for this publication. While few of these texts had the theoretical density of his writing for *Cahiers*,⁴⁸ the position did afford Bonitzer the opportunity to write for a non-cinephilic readership and helped him forge deeper ties with the psychoanalytic community, including Slavoj Žižek, who also wrote for *L’Âne* during this period. The encounter would prove to be a fertile one, as Žižek would end up re-printing two of Bonitzer’s texts on Hitchcock in his groundbreaking edited collection *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, both of which referred to the concept of anamorphosis to discuss the director of *Psycho*.

Under the influence of the art historian Jurgis Baltrušaitis, anamorphosis was introduced to psychoanalytic theory by Lacan in his *Séminaire XI*, in a lecture dedicated to the use of the technique in Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*. This painting initially appears to be a traditional portrait of two prosperous members of the early bourgeoisie. In the foreground, however, the representation is traversed by a “strange, suspended, oblique object,” which at first glance appears to be an inscrutable stain. When the viewer moves across the room, the stain is suddenly transformed into a skull, painted in a distorting, slanted perspective. For Lacan, the use of the anamorphic technique in Holbein’s painting, stretching the image of the skull to oblique excess, is more than a mere trick effect or *memento mori*. Rather, it reveals to us the nature of the gaze itself in its “pulsatile, dazzling and spread out function”: “This picture is simply what any picture is, a trap for the gaze. In

47 Pascal Bonitzer, “La psychanalyse avec le cinéma,” *Ça cinéma* no. 15 (c. 1978), pp. 2-7, here p. 4. It is clear here, however, that Bonitzer’s most explicit reference to this junction of Freud and Marx was less of a self-criticism and centered more on a critical stance towards Pleyner/Thibaudeau’s remarks in their interview with *Cinéthique*.

48 Bonitzer admits that, unlike *Cahiers*, writing for outlets such as this was “not inspiring, they did not motivate me.” Interview with Pascal Bonitzer, April 30, 2014.

any picture, it is precisely in seeking the gaze in each of its points that you will see it disappear.⁴⁹ The presence of similar effects in Hitchcock's films is discerned by Bonitzer in his articles for Žižek's anthology. In "The Skin and the Straw," the critic analyzes the "wholly specular" nature of the 1955 version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, whose continuous play of masks and mirrors, presenting ordinary people as disturbing (and vice versa), reveals the inherent structural reversibility of Hitchcock's films, akin to the fingers of a glove that can be turned inside and out. For Bonitzer, "it is because Hitchcock's films embrace this structure, which is that of the screen itself, so closely that they seem so often to epitomize the cinema, much as Holbein's *The Ambassadors* and Velázquez's *Las Meninas* seem to epitomize painting."⁵⁰ In a more far-reaching text on "Hitchcockian Suspense," derived from a chapter in *Le Champ aveugle*, Bonitzer traces the role of the gaze and anxiety in the suspense techniques developed by Hitchcock, as opposed to the idyllic innocence of early cinema's use of similar editing structures: "The cinema, which had been innocent, joyful and dirty, was to become obsessional, fetishistic and frozen. The dirtiness did not disappear but was interiorized and moralized, and passed over into the gaze—that is, into the register of desire."⁵¹ In Hitchcock, this manifests itself in the stain associated with the crime at the center of the film—the glass of milk in *Suspicion*, the red tip of the cigarette in *Rear Window*—which "precipitates a gaze and so brings about a fiction." The technique of suspense itself, with its capacity for stretching and distorting the duration of the film sequence, represents, in Bonitzer's view, an "anamorphosis of cinematic time, which shifts the audience towards that point of the picture where, in the oblong form of which the characters are unaware, it will recognize the death's-head."⁵² Whereas Griffithian suspense functions on the model of an accelerated cross-cutting between parallel actions, Hitchcock's variant "employs an

49 Lacan, *Séminaire XI*, p. 83 [p. 89].

50 Pascal Bonitzer, "La peau et la paille: Au-delà des apparences: Alfred Hitchcock I," *L'Âne: Le magazine freudien* no. 17 (Winter 1986), pp. 16-17. Translated as "The Skin and the Straw," in Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)* (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 178-184, here p. 184. This issue can in fact be seen as the starting point for the book project as a whole, as Bonitzer's piece was accompanied by a text on Hitchcock by Žižek, the first time the philosopher had published on the filmmaker. See Slavoj Žižek, "Double trilogie: Surmoi et idéal: Alfred Hitchcock II," *L'Âne: Le magazine freudien* no. 17 (Winter 1986), pp. 18-19.

51 Pascal Bonitzer, "Le suspense hitchcockien," in *Le Champ aveugle*, pp. 35-52, here p. 38. Translated as "Hitchcockian Suspense," in Žižek (ed.), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan*, pp. 15-30, here p. 17.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 41 [p. 20].

editing of convergent actions in a homogeneous space, which presupposes slow motion and is sustained by the gaze, itself evoked by a third element, a perverse object or a stain.”⁵³

The nexus between the cinema, painting and psychoanalysis, a concern of Bonitzer’s throughout his time as a film critic, also came to the fore in the 1987 book *Décadrages*. Although it is now closely associated with him, the term *décadrage* (which can be literally rendered as “deframing”) was not an invention of Bonitzer’s and in fact can already be found in Bazin’s writings. Bonitzer himself first uses the word in “Le Gros Orteil” when referring to the “trenchant deframing in the chain of close-ups” in the razor-blade sequence of *Un Chien andalou*,⁵⁴ but it emerges as a fleshed-out theoretical concept in his 1978 *Cahiers* article “Décadrages,” which, borrowing from Bazin and Foucault, speaks of the centrifugal effects operative in paintings such as *Las Meninas*, where the principal figures (the royal couple) are situated outside of the frame of the painting and only evoked by a mirror located at the vanishing point of the composition. Our gaze is thus guided outside of the frame of the painting, leading us to perceive the limits of the image and to interrogate the nature of visual representation itself. What takes place in painting only in exceptional works such as Velázquez’s masterpiece is, by contrast, a far more everyday occurrence in the cinema. While conventional filmmakers seek to downplay and minimize the extent to which these effects are felt by the spectator, others—such as Hitchcock, Eisenstein, Bresson and Eustache—work with the potential for a deframing effect in order to create a “space without a master” and an “*upsetting* [*basculement*] of the point of view of the situations which belong specifically to the cinema.” Used in this manner, deframing is not “divisive and fragmentary” but “a multiplier, a generator of assemblages.”⁵⁵

The 1987 book of the same title offers a more expansive discussion of the differences and points of conjunction between painting and cinema. In his introduction, Bonitzer specifies that his goal is *not* to interrogate the “direct confrontation” between the two art forms, as found in films such as Minnelli’s Van Gogh biopic *Lust for Life*, Resnais’ film on the same painter, or Clouzot’s *Le Mystère Picasso*. Rather, he seeks out a “less evident, more labile and more secretive relationship between cinema and painting” that

53 Ibid., p. 28.

54 Bonitzer, “Le Gros Orteil,” p. 20.

55 Pascal Bonitzer, “Décadrages,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 284 (January 1978), pp. 7-15, here p. 15. Translated as “Deframings,” trans. Chris Darke, in Wilson (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. IV*, pp. 197-202, here p. 201.

would consist of their respective treatment of the same artistic problems.⁵⁶ The presence or absence of movement in the image is not necessarily a dividing point between the two. Rather, the double hypothesis informing Bonitzer's study, itself the fruit of two decades of work on these questions, is that, firstly, "the cinema would be, technically speaking, the inheritor of the scientification of representation established in the *quattrocento* by the theories of *perspectiva artificialis*" and that, secondly, "film, being first of all an image, inescapably encounters the problems of painting, and, reciprocally, the cinema's solution to these problems cannot be without the influence of twentieth-century painting."⁵⁷ More specifically, the figures of anamorphosis and its reverse side, the *trompe l'œil*, represent privileged points of contact between the cinema and painting, and they will be a recurrent point of reference for Bonitzer throughout *Décadrages*. For the most part, it is in the work of auteur filmmakers—including Rohmer, Godard, Ruiz and Antonioni—that these techniques are most fruitfully exploited. In Dreyer's *Gertrud*, for instance, a lateral tracking shot in the film's central scene (a banquet honoring the titular character's former lover) that moves from the reception's toastmaster, past a migraine-addled Gertrud and finally into an adjoining room away from the supposed "action" of the scene, produces a cinematic re-working of the disconcerting scenic *dispositif* adopted by Holbein for *The Ambassadors*.⁵⁸

Perhaps the most important chapter of *Décadrages*, however, concerns what Bonitzer, following Bazin, terms the "grain of the real" in films. Here he returns to the debates surrounding the cinema's "base apparatus" that pitted Pleynet and Baudry, for whom it was "impossible for the camera to entertain any objective relationship with the real," against Lebel and Mitry, who argued that "the camera objectively conveys the real that it aims for."⁵⁹ It should be recalled, of course, that Bonitzer and his colleagues did not unequivocally side with either position, but in *Décadrages* the *Cahiers* critic argues that, while the two theses can appear "caricatural" and "the terms of the debate have aged," the *contretemps* nonetheless touches on "a problem that the cinema does not cease to pose again and again, that of the production of images in their relationship to the real."⁶⁰ The most profitable way forward, he argues, is not to take partisan sides in this dispute but to recognize that it

56 Pascal Bonitzer, *Décadrages* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1987), p. 7.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

58 See *ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

59 *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

is the contradictory nature of the cinema itself that can justifiably give rise to both positions. *Quattrocento* perspective does not create a “scientific” mode of vision, as ocular perception itself is structured around illusion; and yet, while it is certainly possible to consider the images in a film such as *North by Northwest* from a strictly plastic point of view, this does not negate the fact that “the real adheres to this image, and that it really is Cary Grant and Eva Marie-Saint kissing in the train.” The cinematographic image has both an “illusionistic function” (its “Méliès side”) and a “documentary function” (its “Lumière side”), and the two find themselves in constant interplay with one another. There is, Bonitzer concludes, “always a ‘grain of the real’ [...] in the photograph and in the cinema, which exceeds all figuration.”⁶¹ In this book, therefore, the *Cahiers* axiom as described by Daney—that “the cinema has a fundamental rapport with the real, and the real is not what is represented”—finds one of its most eloquent elucidations.

Narrativizing the *Hors-Champ*: Bonitzer as Filmmaker

Bonitzer did not entirely give up writing on film after *Décadrages*: still to come were his monograph on Rohmer and, in the early 1990s, a handful of pieces for *Trafic*.⁶² For *Cahiers*, one of his last articles, “Les images, le cinéma, l’audiovisuel” from 1988, gave a resoundingly pessimistic vision of the state of cinema, with a focus on the effects that technological mutation has had on the status of the image, producing contradictory effects of disparity and homogeneity, multiplicity and indifference.⁶³ 2016 did see the publication of a collection of his articles by Capricci under the title *La Vision partielle*, but apart from Bonitzer’s foreword this was purely a collection of older texts for *Cahiers*, providing an accessible overview of his critical practice in the 1970s and 1980s. Since the early 1990s, Bonitzer has largely abstained from criticism, with the making of films monopolizing his activity from this point on. In 1996, at the age of 50, Bonitzer made the leap into direction, taking the helm for the first time on a full-length work with *Encore*, which won the prestigious Prix Jean Vigo. In the two decades following this debut, Bonitzer has built up a corpus of eight feature films, leading up to the 2019 release *Les*

61 Ibid., p. 23.

62 See Pascal Bonitzer, “L’amour admirable,” *Trafic* no. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 19-26; Pascal Bonitzer, “Dieu, Godard, le zapping,” *Trafic* no. 8 (Autumn 1993), pp. 5-12; and Pascal Bonitzer, “De la distraction,” *Trafic* no. 13 (Winter 1994).

63 Pascal Bonitzer, “Les images, le cinéma, l’audiovisuel,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 404 (February 1988), pp. 16-21, here p. 20.

Envoûtés. Of all the *Cahiers* critics of his generation, Bonitzer is the only one to have become a critically recognized auteur, following in the vein of the *nouvelle vague* pioneers.⁶⁴ As the advanced age at which he made his first feature suggests, however, this transition was far from a straightforward one, as a two-decade-long apprenticeship in criticism, theory and screenwriting was felt to be necessary before Bonitzer had the confidence to step behind the camera. After his early involvement in *Moi, Pierre Rivière* (discussed in Chapter 11), Bonitzer co-wrote a screenplay with Benoît Jacquot on the Algerian war for the France 3 network (which was refused for political reasons⁶⁵) and penned the script for André Téchiné's 1977 film *Les Sœurs Brontë*. But it was his work with Rivette from the early 1980s onwards, which continued until the latter's final film, 2009's *36 vues sur le Pic Saint-Loup*, that confirmed him in the role of screenwriter. Beyond this collaboration, Bonitzer has become one of the most sought-after *scénaristes* in France, working on scripts for Barbet Schroeder, Raúl Ruiz, Chantal Akerman and Raoul Peck, as well as on more routine productions for television and mainstream cinema. In 1990, Bonitzer even wrote a screenwriting manual with Jean-Claude Carrière, *L'Exercice du scénario*. As could be expected, this text departs significantly from traditional screenplay how-to guides. Rather than issuing concrete rules of the craft, the duo offer more enigmatic guidelines for would-be writers, insisting for instance that the conclusion to a film may be "good or bad, 'happy' or 'dark,' open or shut," but that it must above all be "irrefutable."⁶⁶

Bonitzer describes his turn to directing as the product of chance. After making the short film *Les Sirènes*, he was solicited by producer Claude Kunez, the uncle of his then partner Sophie Fillières, to write a 10-page synopsis for a project titled *Encore*, which ended up drawing financing from the *avance sur recettes* fund. The storyline centers on a middle-aged male intellectual, Abel Vichac (Jackie Berroyer), who is temperamentally cantankerous and misanthropic, on the verge of an emotional crisis, and

64 André Téchiné and Jean-Claude Biette, of a similar age to Bonitzer, also successfully negotiated the transition from writing criticism for *Cahiers* to fiction filmmaking in the auteurist model, but neither were involved with the journal during its Marxist period. Comolli, as we have seen, eventually switched focus from fiction films to documentary, while Kané's work as a filmmaker has, perhaps unjustly, generally lacked the sufficient critical recognition necessary for the status of an auteur.

65 See Pascal Bonitzer, interviewed by Stephen Sarrazin, "Pascal Bonitzer et le courage/timide," *Mondes du cinéma* no. 8 (January 2016), pp. 9-23, here pp. 13-14.

66 Pascal Bonitzer and Jean-Claude Carrière, *L'Exercice du scénario* (Paris: La Fémis, 1990), p. 134.

romantically caught between his wife and a series of mistresses. The protagonist, as he would be in almost all of Bonitzer's films, was essentially a cipher for the director himself, although some details of *Encore's* plot were lifted from Althusser's autobiography. With its generous dose of neurotic comedy, the film set a template for Bonitzer's later work. In stylistic terms, Bonitzer's films since *Encore* appear on the surface to generally conform to the same conventions of narrative realism that he and his *Cahiers* colleagues had so extensively condemned in the post-1968 period, but there are features of his filmmaking that subtly depart from dominant filmmaking practice: surrealist touches, uncanny moments and a generally dreamlike quality to the intricate twists and turns of his storylines.

The widespread critical support and modest commercial success of *Encore* ensured that Bonitzer could quickly follow the film with a sophomore outing. February 1999, two-and-a-half years after his feature debut, saw the release of *Rien sur Robert*, a work that is still Bonitzer's best-known film, having screened widely both in France and internationally. Fabrice Luchini plays the role of Didier Temple, a film critic who reviews a Bosnian film without having seen it, thereby committing a "deontological fault" for which he is punished with a thundering tirade from the abrasive literary titan Ariel Chatwick-West while attending a nightmarish dinner party.⁶⁷ The soirée, however, is also the occasion for Didier to make the acquaintance of Aurélie, an enigmatic woman to whom he is magnetically drawn, despite his existing relationship with Juliette. The couple become estranged from each other as Juliette herself takes up with the television director Jérôme Sauveur, but although she leaves in a car with Jérôme in the final scene, she reassures the hapless Didier "I'm with you. Him, I hate!" Despite its status as a comedy, Bonitzer nonetheless describes *Rien sur Robert* as taking place in a "dark world" in which "people turn around in an implacable circle and come up against invisible barriers."⁶⁸

The themes and settings of his first two films were continued with *Petites coupures* (2003), *Je pense à vous* (2006) and *Le Grand Alibi* (2008). While the post-1968 *Cahiers* was unfavorable towards the concept of the *politique des auteurs* for fostering a "demiurgic" understanding of the artistic creator, today Bonitzer is comfortable with the auteur label this corpus has solicited, unabashedly stating: "I absolutely believe in the concept of the auteur as produced by the *nouvelle vague*. That is to say, the idea that the director is the true author of a film."⁶⁹ Moreover, he does not shy away from accepting

67 Didier Péron, "Rien sur Robert, ce que le quadra génère," *Libération*, February 24, 1999.

68 Pascal Bonitzer, *Rien sur Robert* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1999), p. 5.

69 Interview with Pascal Bonitzer, April 30, 2014.

an autobiographical reading of his films that has significantly contributed to the auteurist aura they have acquired and speaks of his protagonists as constituting an “altered self-portrait” of himself.⁷⁰ If Bonitzer seeks models in his filmmaking, these come from a surprisingly wide range of sources: he admits both to the obvious points of reference, such as Rohmer, Rivette and Ruiz, but also to more unexpected influences, including Lubitsch, Hawks, the later work of Woody Allen, and even Tarantino.⁷¹ Taken together, these qualities represent something of a “Bonitzer touch,” which has increasingly become recognized in the critical reception of his films. Alongside the autobiographical color of Bonitzer’s œuvre, the most striking common element to his films is the social milieu in which their stories take place. Without exception, the universe of Bonitzer’s films is that of the Parisian middle class, and, more particularly, its intellectual fringe. The characters of his films are professors, film critics, theater directors, journalists and publishers. Inhabiting chic apartments in the inner arrondissements of the capital, they are highly educated, liberal, cosmopolitan and financially well-off, and are inescapably divorced from the social existence of the country’s working class. In a word, they exemplify a sociological figure that twenty-first-century France has come to know as the *bobo*, the bourgeois-bohemian.

While Bonitzer insists that he resists consciously incorporating his longheld interest in psychoanalytic film theory into his films, he does not refuse the possibility that his background in film theory affects his directing on a deeper, more unconscious level. Notably, there is a recurrent role of the *hors-champ* in Bonitzer’s films, whether this be in the spatial construction of his *mise en scène* or, on a narrative level, in the passage of characters from spaces of familiarity and comfort to an external zone of disquiet and paranoia. While Bonitzer’s films tend to feature elaborate narratives with an intricate lattice of relations between the characters, there is also a sense in which the storylines have a nebulous quality to them, only loosely tethered to a realist narrative logic, with the improbable nature of so many of the encounters and turns in the plot requiring a considerable suspension of disbelief in the spectator. The dreamlike quality of Bonitzer’s approach to narrative, with sudden shifts in their tonality and unexpected diversions in the trajectory followed by the main characters, is reflected in the multiplicity of genres present in his films, which end up coming across as hybrid works that are uneasily slotted into any particular category.

70 Bonitzer, “Pascal Bonitzer et le courage/timide,” p. 19.

71 Stephen Sarrazin, “Pascal Bonitzer,” *Mondes du cinéma* no. 4 (October 2013), pp. 11-20, here p.17.

Politics, finally, is an ever-present feature of Bonitzer's cinema, even if his films are undeniably remote from the radical cinema that he defended as a critic at *Cahiers* and even if the political content of Bonitzer's films is distinctly secondary in prominence to his depiction of the romantic imbroglios of bourgeois intellectuals. Bonitzer's protagonists are, for the most part, not visibly involved in political activism—at best, they express wistful nostalgia about their youthful radicalism. His 2005 film *Petites coupures* is notable for the major characters being former communist militants, although this narrative element mainly forms the pretext for running jokes rather than a profound engagement with the legacy of the PCF. The reality of institutional power in contemporary France is more directly tackled in Bonitzer's later films. *Cherchez Hortense* (2011) prominently features the Conseil d'état, situated within the Palais Royal in the first arrondissement of Paris. One of the most powerful yet secretive legal bodies in the republic, the Conseil is tasked with providing legal advice to the executive branch of the government. One of the most fascinating aspects of the film is the fact that Bonitzer was able to film in the labyrinthine premises of the Conseil itself, giving the viewer access to one of France's really existing corridors of power. In *Tout de suite maintenant* (2016), which represented a point of departure by placing the narrative focus on a young woman, hedge fund employee Nora Sator (played by Agathe Bonitzer, the director's daughter), Bonitzer provides a satirical vision of the world of finance capital, with its amoral drive for profit and expansion but also its fundamental absurdity, manifested in the unnerving eccentricity of the firm's upper management, as well as in the alienating, Tatiesque glass-and-steel contemporary architecture of its corporate headquarters. And yet the distance between his present views and his political stances while at *Cahiers*, where he was one of the most uncompromising upholders of the journal's Maoist orientation, are glaringly apparent. Bonitzer is ambivalent about his political past: while not coming out against Marxism *per se*, he is critical of what he saw as the *gauchissement* of Marxist theory during the late 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, Bonitzer stresses the contrasts between contemporary politics and the militant engagement of the late 1960s: "In May 1968 the student movement started out from the idea that we needed to blow up bourgeois society. [...] Today, nobody, absolutely nobody, wants to blow up the Republic, except for the far-right and even they deny wanting to do so. On the contrary, it is in a republican spirit that people are mobilizing today."⁷² In terms of his own political views, Bonitzer declares: "I am a citizen. I am more or less interested in politics. [...]" Certainly, this infuses the films

72 Bonitzer, "Nos années non-légendaires," p. 154.

I make. But, to paraphrase Rose Sélavy, I tend to be more interested, by temperament, in the trances of confusion than the contusions of France.”⁷³

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25. The Brain is the Screen: *Cahiers du cinéma* and Gilles Deleuze

Abstract

This chapter follows the enduring relationship between the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the post-1968 critics at *Cahiers du cinéma*. While references to Deleuze were largely avoided during the journal's Marxist-Leninist phase, the period of openness after 1973 saw a fascinating pseudo-interview published with the philosopher in 1976, centering on a discussion of Jean-Luc Godard's television work. At the time, Jean Narboni taught alongside Deleuze at Paris-VIII, and their conversations helped shape Deleuze's magisterial diptych *Cinéma*, published in the early 1980s. Both volumes of this text are suffused with the influence of numerous *Cahiers* critics, but it is with Serge Daney that the most fruitful dialogue took place, as exemplified in Deleuze's preface to Daney's book *Ciné journal*, "Optimisme, pessimisme et voyage," where the state of contemporary cinema in the age of the electronic image is addressed.

Keywords: Gilles Deleuze, *Cahiers du cinéma*, Jean Narboni, Serge Daney, movement-image, time-image

A Community of Tastes

The next element in our exploration of the relationship between cinema and ontology in the thinking of the *Cahiers* critics swerves away from the theoretical optic that has dominated this section until now, which, stressing the cinema's status as an encounter with the real, has drawn on a combusive combination of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Bazinian film theory. From the mid-1970s onwards, a new interlocutor came to play an increasingly important role for the *Cahiers* critics: namely, the post-structuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze. The relationship between Deleuze and the film journal was far from a straightforward one. After all, *L'Anti-Cédipe*, his 1972

collaboration with Félix Guattari, had launched a lacerating assault on three of the central pillars of the *Cahiers* project in the 1968-1973 period: Marx, Freud and Saussure. Aside from some scattered early references to the philosopher, it was not until after the journal withdrew from its engagement in Maoist politics and began looking for alternative sources of guidance that Deleuze came to assume importance for *Cahiers*. In the same period that dialogues were opened up with contemporary thinkers such as Foucault, Rancière and Schefer, a collaboration with Deleuze was initiated with the publication of a supposed interview with the philosopher, “Trois questions sur *Six fois deux*,” in November 1976.

The dialogue that the *Cahiers* critics pursued with Deleuze, aided by the institutional links between the philosopher and Narboni at Paris-VIII, bore notable fruit upon the publication of Deleuze’s two *Cinéma* books in the mid-1980s, which evinces a considerable debt to the critical ideas of both Narboni himself and his colleagues at the journal. But Deleuze’s work on the cinema also significantly recasts the question of film ontology away from its Bazinian roots, which centered on the relation between the cinematic image and its referent, and towards other aspects of being such as movement, time, thought and perception—towards, that is, questions that had been treated by Henri Bergson, through whom Deleuze ventriloquizes much of his discussion of cinema. Bergson was never an important philosophical figure for *Cahiers* under Comolli/Narboni, whose references to his work are exceedingly rare.¹ And yet there are multiple points of intersection between Deleuze’s philosophy of the cinema and the core ideas of the film journal. Above all, these affinities come in the shape of a community of tastes, a shared predilection for the work of certain filmmakers—derived chiefly from the cinephilic canon established in the post-war period by Langlois and Bazin and updated by later generations of *Cahiers* critics—as well as an imperious disdain for what Deleuze called “the vast proportion of rubbish in film production.”² But of greater importance than Deleuze’s reproduction of the *Cahiers* pantheon is his adoption of a large number of the critical categories developed by the journal in order to speak of the filmmakers they fêted. Here, the philosopher was influenced above all by Daney’s expatiation of the historical metamorphoses undergone by the

1 Earlier generations of *Cahiers* writers were more susceptible to Bergson’s influence. Bazin, for instance, had ventured some possible relations between Bergson and the cinema in his article “Un film bergsonien: *Le Mystère Picasso*,” in idem., *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* vol. II, pp. 133-142.

2 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 1: L’Image-mouvement* (Paris: Minuit, 1983), p. 8. Translated as *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. xiv.

cinema, with a particular emphasis on the profound effect that the rupture of World War II had on the functioning of the cinematic image and the concomitant changes that were also taking place as the twentieth century drew to a close. This viewpoint was also shared by Godard, working on his mammoth *Histoire(s) du cinéma* project at the same time as Daney and Deleuze were writing on the cinema, a situation Bergala discerned as a “moment of impeccable synchronism” between the three figures:

It is very rare in the history of art that there should be, with strict simultaneity, an artist who invents forms, a philosopher in the midst of formulating the concepts for these forms at the moment of their emergence, and a great critic in the midst of watching and analyzing these exchanges, which, like communicating vases, instantaneously focus on what is taking place on the historical level, right before the end of the century.³

In the voluminous secondary literature that Deleuze's *Cinéma* books have inspired, however, precious few of his exegetes have paid attention to the influence that the post-1968 *Cahiers* critics had on the philosopher.⁴ This is despite the fact that his reliance on their ideas at certain key moments is patently obvious, as even a cursory examination of the footnotes to his diptych reveals, with a multitude of citations of the work of Daney, Bonitzer and company. The rest of this chapter, therefore, will chart the extended theoretical exchange between *Cahiers* and Deleuze, which has had a profound impact on contemporary film theory.

Deleuze's work was known to *Cahiers* long before he was first asked to participate in an interview with the journal: already in the early 1960s, Narboni recalls, “Barbet Schroeder entered our office and announced: ‘I'm currently reading an extraordinary book!’ It was *Marcel Proust et les signes*, which had just come out. Barbet spoke to me about it and I was excited by it. I bought the book, read it in one sitting, and found it magnificent, new and stimulating.”⁵ From this point on, however, *Cahiers'* encounters with

3 Alain Bergala, “Stratégie critique, tactique pédagogique,” in François Dosse and Jean-Michel Frodon (eds.), *Gilles Deleuze et les images* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2008), pp. 37-41, here p. 37.

4 As a symptomatic example, Rodowick explicitly signals in the preface to his monograph *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* that Deleuze's concepts seem “less anomalous” if his text is compared with the writings of figures such as Bonitzer and Daney—but studiously avoids making any further reference to them in the rest of his study. See D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), p. xii.

5 Jean Narboni, “...une aile de papillon,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 497 (December 1995), pp. 22-25, here p. 22. Later, Narboni's text “Visages d'Hitchcock” was an overt attempt to transpose the

Deleuze's ideas were intermittent at best, particularly when measured against the preponderant influence of Derrida, Barthes and Kristeva in the years 1968-1971, not to mention Althusser and Lacan. In 1970, Bonitzer used Deleuze's notion of the language-body in the chapter of his 1969 book *Logique du sens* on Pierre Klossowski to discuss Oshima's *Death by Hanging*,⁶ while Daney referred to the same work in his response to Truffaut's *L'Enfant sauvage*.⁷ As the journal's Marxism-Leninism became more rigidly dogmatic, however, its receptivity towards Deleuze correspondingly dwindled, and the *Cahiers* critics were singularly unresponsive to the release of *L'Anti-Œdipe* in 1972, despite the explosive effect the book had on the intellectual left in France, which was tiring from the period of furious militancy after May '68. Narboni is adamant that Deleuze and Guattari's text "did not exercise, at the moment of its release, any influence, at any level whatsoever, on the members of a journal then marked by Marxism (re-read by Louis Althusser), the work of Roland Barthes and the thinking of Lacan," even if he admits that "after the fact, among our circles of well-wishers, and even within the *Cahiers* editorial team of the time, certain people, carried away by a belatedly self-critical spirit of expiation, have deplored that at this point, ignorant and blind as we were, we chose not to prefer the liberty promised by *L'Anti-Œdipe* to the confinement of pro-Chinese dogmatism."⁸

The incendiary effect of this text, jubilantly demolishing the sacred cows of early 1970s *gauchisme*, evidently had a divisive effect on the *Cahiers* editors, torn between denouncing Deleuze/Guattari's ideas and embracing them. In a 1973 article treating *L'An 01* and *Themroc*, for instance, Kané relates the "anti-repressive discourse" found in these films to their cognate in *L'Anti-Œdipe*, but while he argues that "it is certainly correct, psychoanalytically and politically, to play, as [Deleuze/Guattari] do, the 'deterritorialized fluxes of desire' against the superego, the *schize* against the signifier, and to send Œdipus to the devil," the *Cahiers* critic insists that "this will never replace a political discourse (a Marxist discourse, for example), or the

methodology of Deleuze's Proust book to the cinema of Hitchcock. See Jean Narboni, "Visages d'Hitchcock," *Cahiers du cinéma hors série* "Spécial Hitchcock" (1980), pp. 30-37.

6 Bonitzer, "Oshima et les corps-langage." See Chapter 18 for more on this text. Bonitzer later noted that "I was very marked by the reading of *Logique du sens* upon its publication in 1969 [...] but when the Maoist turn came, we had nothing more to do with Deleuze." Bonitzer, "Nos années non-légendaires," p. 151.

7 See Daney, "Amphisbetesis."

8 Jean Narboni, "Du côté des noms," in Dosse/Frodon (eds.), *Gilles Deleuze et les images*, pp. 21-30, here p. 24.

concrete practices of struggle in society.⁹ Bonitzer even recalls writing a review of Rivette's *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* that interpreted the film through a schema inspired by *L'Anti-Cédipe*, but his article was refused by the editorial committee, the only time this happened during his period at *Cahiers*.¹⁰ Soon afterwards, however, Deleuze began to find a more positive response to his ideas on the pages of *Cahiers*, and articles by Bonitzer from 1975-1976 on *Portiere di notte*, *Histoire de Paul*, *Professione Reporter* and *Two-Lane Blacktop* all made approbatory references to the philosopher.¹¹ Retrospectively, Bonitzer has argued that Deleuze "helped us to exit" from the difficulties posed by the journal's Marxist-Leninist alignment:

Deleuze's philosophy rests entirely on affirmations, on active rather than reactive conceptions. His theory of machines [...] is entirely active: it is an affirmation. Faced with the stage or the screen he does not only have a radical critical analysis. The cinema is a movement-image, a time-image. There are planes of immanence, assemblages, concepts that were a breath of fresh air because it was a way of making this whole negative problematic of the deconstruction of representation terribly old-fashioned.¹²

As the *Cahiers* critics sought to re-establish a positive orientation towards the cinema, therefore, the affirmative spirit of Deleuze's philosophy served as a touchstone for the journal. Toubiana recalls that Deleuze was both a "fellow traveler" of *Cahiers* and, conversely, that *Cahiers* was a fellow traveler of Deleuze, while also underscoring that the journal's relationship with Deleuze was nourished by the philosopher's status as "truly a cinephile."¹³ Deleuze's cinephilic roots went deep: in an interview with

9 Pascal Kané, "Et c'est pas triste? (*L'An 01, Themroc*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 247 (July-August 1973), pp. 36-39, here p. 38.

10 Bonitzer, "Nos années non-légendaires," p. 152. Bonitzer confirmed this incident when interviewed, but the chronology gives us some reason to be skeptical about this claim: *Céline et Julie* premiered at Cannes in May 1974, by which time the editorial committee had passed into the hands of Daney and Toubiana and had moved beyond the hardline Maoism that marked the 1972-1973 period. It seems strange, therefore, that they would have been so intolerant of such an article written at that time.

11 See Pascal Bonitzer, "Le secret derrière la porte (*Portier de nuit*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 251-252 (July-August 1974), pp. 30-36; Pascal Bonitzer, "La bouche rit (*Histoire de Paul*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 262-263 (January 1976), pp. 66-68; Pascal Bonitzer, "Désir désert (*Profession reporter*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 262-263 (January 1976), pp. 96-98; and Pascal Bonitzer, "Lignes et voies (*Macadam à deux voies*)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 266-267 (May 1976), pp. 68-71.

12 Bonitzer, "Nos années non-légendaires," pp. 150-151.

13 Serge Toubiana, "Le cinéma est deleuzien," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 497 (December 1995), pp. 20-21, here p. 20.

Cahiers to accompany the publication of *L'Image-temps*, he recalls two primary periods of intense cinephilia: before World War II when, still a child, he went to the cinema frequently with his family, and in the post-war era, when he assiduously watched films in the Quartier Latin while studying philosophy.¹⁴ Later, in the 1970s, Deleuze was known to attend screenings organized as part of the “Semaine des *Cahiers*” at the Action-République cinema, a presence that instilled a “sentiment of pride” in Toubiana and his fellow critics.¹⁵ Narboni has insisted that the decision to invite Deleuze to contribute to *Cahiers* was motivated not simply by the fact that he was a philosopher “but above all because he was a philosopher *who admired Godard*.”¹⁶ Above all, then, the *Cahiers* critics were attracted by Deleuze’s ability to integrate his cinephilia into his philosophy or, as Toubiana put it, his concern for “thinking about the world with the cinema, and the cinema with the world.”¹⁷

Narboni and Deleuze: Intersecting Lives

François Dosse’s biography of Deleuze and Guattari fittingly speaks of their “intersecting lives,”¹⁸ but when it comes to the philosopher’s engagement with the cinema, the chief biographical intersection is with Jean Narboni. It was Narboni’s position lecturing at Paris-VIII, where Deleuze was a professor of philosophy, that proved to be the institutional bridgehead for *Cahiers* to forge contact with him. As he later related, Narboni had been struck by the frequency with which nods to the cinema appeared in Deleuze’s writings.¹⁹

14 Gilles Deleuze, interviewed by Alain Bergala, Pascal Bonitzer, Marc Chevré, Jean Narboni, Charles Tesson and Serge Toubiana, “Le cerveau, c’est l’écran: Entretien avec Gilles Deleuze,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 380 (February 1986), pp. 24-32, here p. 24.

15 Toubiana, “Le cinéma est deleuzien,” p. 20.

16 Narboni, “Du côté des noms,” p. 28. In this sense, Deleuze notably distinguished himself from Foucault, whose thinking piqued the interest of *Cahiers* in the 1970s but who vocally detested Godard’s films and preferred the work of Herzog or Tavernier. See Narboni, “...une aille de papillon,” p. 24.

17 Toubiana, “Le cinéma est deleuzien,” p. 20.,

18 See François Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari: Intersecting Lives*, trans. Deborah Glassman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). The original French title refers to a “*biographie croisée*.”

19 Narboni noted, for instance, that in March 1968 the philosopher spoke at length about Godard in an interview with *Les Lettres françaises*. Here Deleuze stated, in a passage that hints at the central argument of his future *Cinéma* diptych: “Godard has transformed the cinema, he has introduced thought into it. He does not think *about* the cinema, he does not put (good or bad) thinking *into* the cinema, he makes the cinema think—for the first time, I believe.” Gilles

When Godard's experimental television program *Six fois deux: sur et sous la communication* was broadcast in August 1976, Narboni thus thought of proposing an interview with Deleuze on Godard, having learnt through intermediaries at Vincennes that Deleuze was indeed fascinated with the series. Although at this point Narboni had only crossed paths a couple of times with Deleuze in the campus corridors, he telephoned his academic colleague to suggest an interview. Deleuze politely declined the proposal but instead offered to compose his own article on *Six fois deux*.²⁰ The resulting text, published in issue no. 271 of *Cahiers*, nonetheless took the form of a simulated interview, in which the questions, despite actually being penned by Deleuze, were presented as coming from *Cahiers*. As Narboni recalls, Deleuze took delight in "humorously miming the rhetorical back-and-forth style that prevails in such circumstances" by peppering the mock dialogue with the verbal tics of the interview format, along the lines of: "*Cahiers du cinéma* has asked you for an interview, because you're a 'philosopher' and we wanted to do something philosophical..." "You haven't answered our question. Say you had to give a 'course' on these programs..." and "Oh, come on, you know better than anyone it's not like that..."²¹ The ruse deceived the bulk of Deleuze's readers, who have predominantly treated the text as a genuine discussion with the *Cahiers* critics. As if to deepen the confusion, the title of Deleuze's article is perversely misleading on another level: "Trois questions sur *Six fois deux*" in fact contains four questions posed to Deleuze by the concocted interviewer.

There is more to Deleuze's subterfuge than a mere prank on unwitting readers, however. His text is concerned, precisely, with the question of cinematic multiplicity and seeks to move away from what the philosopher sees as the theoretically sterile arithmetic in dialectical schemas of cinematic montage, which has been challenged by Godard in his post-Groupe Dziga Vertov output, whose anti-dialectical, non-synthesizable binaries are evinced in the very titles of his works during this period (*Ici et ailleurs*, *Numéro deux*, *Six fois deux*). Deleuze's "interrogator" specifically asks "why does everything in Godard come in twos? You need two to get to three. Fine, but what are these twos and threes all about?" The answer is that "Godard's not a dialectician. What counts with him isn't two or three or however many,

Deleuze, *L'Île déserte et autres textes (1953-1974)*, ed. David Lapouajde (Paris: Minit, 2002), p. 187. Cited in Narboni, "Du côté des noms," p. 23.

²⁰ This information is given in Narboni, "...une aile de papillon," p. 24; and Narboni, "Du côté des noms," pp. 21-22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

it's AND, the conjunction AND."²² In Deleuze's conception, the "and" in Godardian montage runs counter to the "is" of syllogistic models upon which earlier editing practices had been based, and in place of the attempts to fashion a film language through the articulation of shots instead produces a form of "creative stammering."

The "interview" with Deleuze, which appeared shortly after the publication of Deleuze/Guattari's *Kafka: vers une littérature mineure*, also transplants many of the Kafka book's concepts onto Godard's filmmaking. The director is described here as a "foreigner in [his] own language" who follows "his own line, a line of active flight, a repeatedly broken zigzagging beneath the surface;" his cinema is one that is concerned with "a whole micropolitics of borders, countering the macropolitics of large groups."²³ As Narboni has recognized, Deleuze's text has served to open "lines of thought on Godard which, since then, have often been reiterated, cited, repeated and pillaged." On a broader level, however, Narboni has expressed skepticism about the sudden take-up of Deleuzian concepts by those who had only shortly before been under the sway of quite different theoretical and political tendencies: "I confess to having often been exasperated by sudden terminological changes of course, which, under the effect of *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, could be seen just about everywhere, and which substituted overnight 'desiring machines' for 'montage as pulsion,' and the movement of flux for the insistence on the signifier." If *Cahiers* struggled with its own doctrinaire history, this at least prevented it from "participating in opportunistic and buffoonish u-turns." Instead, in Narboni's view, the journal's critics were impelled to "take seriously the radical change of theoretical and political problematic operated by *L'Anti-Œdipe*, instead of acting as if it were enough to designate the *same concepts* with new terms."²⁴

Deleuze's intervention into *Cahiers*, therefore, contributed to a broader process of re-orientation for the journal, which was far from being the straightforward ideological *volte-face* that could be found in other ex-militant circles at the time. But his text also offered an initial exposition of the

22 Gilles Deleuze, "Trois questions sur *Six fois deux*," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 271 (November 1976), pp. 5-12, here p. 11. Translated as "Three Questions on *Six Times Two*," in idem., *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 37-45, here p. 44.

23 Ibid., p. 6 [p. 38]. See also Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Minuit, 1975). Translated as *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

24 The above quotes are from Narboni, "...une aile de papillon," p. 24.

conceptual apparatus that would be deployed in the *Cinéma* books. Rejecting the suggestion by the imagined questioner that the themes of labor and information in *Six fois deux* could correspond to the functioning of images and sounds in Godard's work, Deleuze instead argues that: "There are images, things are themselves images, because images aren't in our head, in our brain. The brain's just one image among others. Images are constantly acting and reacting on each other, producing and consuming. There's no difference at all between images, things and motion." Moreover, for the first time, Deleuze relates Bergsonian philosophy to the cinema, noting that "the first chapter of *Matière et Mémoire* develops an amazing conception of the relations between photography and cinematic motion, and things." While Deleuze yields that it would be inaccurate to characterize Godard as a Bergsonian, he contends that "it's more the other way around; Godard's not even reviving Bergson, but finding bits of Bergson along his way as he revivifies television."²⁵

In the wake of this "interview," the personal rapport between Deleuze and Narboni was further deepened. The film studies department at Vincennes in which Narboni taught was popular with students, but the professional inexperience of the faculty there (the department had only been set up in 1969) meant that it was unable to oversee the work of doctoral students, who were instead supervised by the philosophy faculty, including Deleuze. On a more individual level, timetable synchronies saw the two teachers giving courses at the same time on Tuesday mornings, which afforded them the opportunity to speak before the beginning of their lectures.²⁶ A mutual friendship with Carmelo Bene further solidified their ties, and in the early 1980s, after the Vincennes campus had been displaced to Saint-Denis in the northern suburbs of Paris, the trio formed a kind of *bande à trois* together. At the same time, Deleuze began a series of seminars on cinema, which he pursued in the three academic years leading up to the publication of *L'Image-Mouvement*. Narboni later revealed that in the course of Deleuze's research for the *Cinéma* books, the philosopher often turned to his friend for guidance on the selection of films and that in many cases the philosophical concepts were devised before films were found to instantiate them. "You even have the sentiment, sometimes," Narboni stated, "that the movement and the logic of his thought made him produce the place, or the

25 The quotes in this paragraph are from Deleuze, "Trois questions sur *Six fois deux*," pp. 9-10 [pp. 42-43].

26 See Dosse, *Intersecting Lives*, p. 398.

slot, before the object that would come to occupy it.” When Narboni relayed this thought to Deleuze himself, the philosopher’s response was to laugh in acknowledgement.²⁷

Narboni’s behind-the-scenes role in the construction of Deleuze’s film philosophy was exemplary of the function he has performed in French film culture since the *Sturm-und-Drang* years of *Cahiers’* Marxist period. For 33 years, until his retirement in 2003, he taught at Paris-VIII, but unlike Aumont he did not progress to the rank of professor and never completed a doctorate. Less concerned with the rigors of academic publishing, Narboni’s written output during this period has also been far less prolific than that of his former *Cahiers* colleague. Instead, from the late 1970s onwards, he divided his time between university lecturing and managing the publishing arm of *Cahiers du cinéma*. Realizing a long-cherished goal to publish works of film theory, he shepherded into existence key texts written by Barthes, Schefer, Oshima and Leutrat, as well as personally editing collections of writings by Bazin, Rohmer, Langlois and Fuller. As a result, Narboni became a specialist in preface writing as he penned the forewords of many of the Éditions des Cahiers du Cinéma publications he put out. It was only after his retirement from academia that Narboni turned to longer-form writing, composing monographs on Mikio Naruse (2006), Bergman’s *In the Presence of a Clown* (2007), Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (2010) and Samuel Fuller (2017), as well as a rumination on Barthes’ *La Chambre claire* in *La nuit sera noire et blanche* (2015).²⁸ The 2000s have thus seen something of a renaissance in Narboni’s critical practice, after years of relative taciturnity. When interviewed, however, he admits that his “major work” of film theory is still to be written and would, if it materializes, center on “the idea of musicality” in the cinema, in a project that would seek to bring to light the “deeper, albeit less visible, resemblances” between the two art forms.²⁹

27 Narboni, “...une aile de papillon,” p. 25.

28 See Jean Narboni, *Mikio Naruse: Les temps incertains* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2006); Jean Narboni, *En présence d'un clown de Ingmar Bergman* (Crisnée: Yellow Now, 2007); Jean Narboni, *Pourquoi les coiffeurs?: Notes actuelles sur Le Dictateur* (Paris: Capricci, 2010); Jean Narboni, *Samuel Fuller: Un homme à fables* (Paris: Capricci, 2017); and Narboni, *La Nuit sera noire et blanche*. The Barthes book is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 14.

29 Interview with Jean Narboni, April 2, 2014. A taste of the contents of this putative project can be found in Narboni’s discussion on music and cinema with the pianist Philippe Cassard. See Jean Narboni, Philippe Cassard and Marc Chévrier, *Deux temps, trois mouvements: Un pianiste au cinéma* (Paris: Capricci, 2012).

The Movement-Image and the *Hors-champ*

The two volumes of Deleuze's *Cinéma* constituted a major point of rupture for reflection on the medium around the world. In French academia, Deleuze's film philosophy initially caused consternation. His assault on the semiological approach to cinema met with resistance from Metz's followers, such as Michel Marie, Marc Vernet and François Jost, although Metz himself responded in a more sanguine manner.³⁰ Aumont, too, was at first skeptical towards the books: "I was terribly resistant. [...] I thought that [Deleuze] was saying the obvious: to tell us after three hundred very complicated pages that the image is moving, thanks we knew that."³¹ Aumont later became more receptive to Deleuze's ideas but even today he admits that he has trouble with the philosopher's "vitalist" approach, and asserts that "I prefer either his books of pure philosophy, or his books on the great philosophical systems, like his book on Spinoza."³² The reception of Deleuze's books by *Cahiers*, by contrast, was unreservedly and immediately positive. The journal celebrated the appearance of each tome by publishing an interview with the philosopher, in which he was able to summarize the account of the cinema presented at greater length in the two books. This collaboration continued even after the publication of *L'Image-mouvement*: in 1986, Bergala arranged for Deleuze to write the preface to Daney's collection of *Libération* articles in *Ciné-journal*,³³ while in 1987, *Cahiers* ran a text by the philosopher on Rivette, and Narboni invited him to speak at the La Fémis film school, with the resulting lecture on the work of Straub/Huillet published as "Avoir une idée en cinéma."³⁴ Of greater importance for us, however, is the influence that the film theory developed by the *Cahiers* critics of the post-1968 generation had on the conceptualization of the cinema developed by Deleuze in his two *Cinéma* books.

Deleuze's taxonomical breakdown of film forms has become so widely known within the field as to require only the most succinct of summaries here. The cinema, in his conception, is divided into two overarching categories: the movement-image and the time-image. Although the division

30 See Dosse, *Intersecting Lives*, p. 413.

31 Jacques Aumont, cited in *ibid.*, p. 412.

32 Interview with Jacques Aumont, May 8, 2015.

33 See Bergala, "Stratégie critique, tactique pédagogique," p. 38.

34 See Gilles Deleuze, "Les trois cercles de Rivette," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 416 (February 1989), pp. 20-21; and Gilles Deleuze, "Avoir une idée en cinéma: À propos du cinéma des Straub-Huillet," in Dominique Païni (ed.), *Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet, Hölderlin, Cézanne*. (Paris: Éditions Antigone, 1990), pp. 63-77.

between the two can be broadly mapped onto a historical turning point (the social rupture of World War II), the philosopher insists that his presentation is not a “history of the cinema” but rather an attempted “classification of images and signs,” which uses Bergson’s ontology and Peirce’s semiotics to create a cognate of Linnaeus’ categorization of animal and plant species or Mendeleev’s periodic table in chemistry.³⁵ Deleuze turns to the cinema in order to undertake this task because it “imposes new points of view on this problematic.”³⁶ The movement-image, which encompasses both classical Hollywood and the European cinema of the first half of the twentieth century, is structured around a cause-and-effect schema that passes in linear fashion from a given situation—by means of an action—to a new, changed situation. It is cinematically represented by montage-assemblages of long shots (dubbed perception-images), mid-shots (action-images) and close-ups (affection-images). After World War II, this “sensori-motor schema” disintegrates, and the modernist works of movements such as Italian neo-realism and the French *nouvelle vague* are instead marked by the existence of “pure optical and sonic situations,” which give rise to a “crystalline” articulation of shots capable of giving us a “direct image of time.”

While presented in a radically new lexicon, Deleuze’s account of cinematic form bears a distinct—and avowed—debt to the synopsis of film history given by Bazin in texts such as “L’Évolution du langage cinématographique,” with his emphasis on the fundamental break represented by the work of Welles, Renoir and Rossellini, a standpoint that was subsequently treated as axiomatic by successive waves of critics at *Cahiers*. The link with Bazin has long been recognized by Deleuze’s followers in the field of film studies, but they have generally been slower to acknowledge the philosopher’s reliance on the post-1968 generation of *Cahiers* writers for a sizable proportion of his critical concepts. In fact, the two *Cinéma* books are replete with references to these critics.³⁷ At one stage in *L’Image-temps*, Deleuze even discusses Comolli’s cinema, describing him as a “true political filmmaker” and pointing to resonances between films of his such as *L’Ombre rouge* and the literature of Kafka, for focusing on “a double impossibility, that of forming a group and that of not forming a group, ‘the impossibility of

35 Deleuze, *Cinéma 1*, p. 7 [p. xiv].

36 Ibid. This sentence is mysteriously absent from the English translation.

37 The format of the English translation of *Cinéma*, displacing the footnotes that appeared at the bottom of the page in the original version to the end of each volume, may well have served to mask the influence that the *Cahiers* critics had on Deleuze’s ideas, as the avowal of the provenance of his concepts is usually presented there rather than in the body of the text.

escaping from the group and the impossibility of being satisfied with it.”³⁸ But there are three key moments in Deleuze’s diptych where the influence of *Cahiers* becomes overwhelming. Two of these effectively bookend the work: early on in *L’Image-mouvement*, a chapter titled “Cadre et plan, cadrage et découpage” is dominated by the notion of the *hors-champ* as developed by Bonitzer; in the concluding chapter of *L’Image-temps*, Deleuze’s discussion of Straub/Huillet, Duras and Syberberg evinces a major debt to the critical writings of Bonitzer, Daney and Narboni on these filmmakers in the 1970s. In between, the dividing point cleaving *Cinéma* into two—the “breakdown in the sensori-motor schema” brought about by World War II—shows clear parallels with ideas developed by Daney in the years leading up to the publication of Deleuze’s books. This influence remained mostly unacknowledged in the relevant chapters of the *Cinéma* books but was affirmed by Deleuze in later texts.

Deleuze’s chapter on the role of framing in the filmic image is one of the fundamental building blocks in his philosophical account of the cinema, an aspect that makes the philosopher’s debt to Bonitzer’s discussion of framing, “deframing” and the *hors-champ* all the more crucial to his overall project. From the start of this chapter, Deleuze offers a provisional definition of the frame, described as “*the determination of a closed system, a relatively closed system which includes everything which is present in the image—sets, characters and props.*” While acknowledging that a frame can thus be a set (*ensemble*) containing within it a multiplicity of components or sub-sets, Deleuze immediately rejects a semiological approach to cinematic framing, arguing that “if the frame has an analogue, it is to be found in an information system rather than a linguistic one.”³⁹ This standpoint, indeed, reflects the more general position adopted in *Cinéma 1*, since Deleuze stridently insists that “it’s catastrophic to apply linguistics to the cinema”⁴⁰ and that “we must understand the cinema not as a language [*langage*], but as signaletic matter.”⁴¹ In this optic, the elements within a frame are understood to be data

38 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L’Image-temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), p. 286. Translated as *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 219. The quoted passage comes from Comolli in Bergala/Philippon, “Entretien avec Jean-Louis Comolli,” p. 23.

39 Deleuze, *Cinéma 1*, p. 23 [p. 12].

40 Gilles Deleuze, interviewed by Pascal Bonitzer and Jean Narboni, “La photographie est déjà tirée dans les choses: Entretien avec Gilles Deleuze,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 352 (October 1983), pp. 35-40, p. 38. Translated as “On *The Movement-Image*,” in Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*, trans. and ed. Martin Joughlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 46-56, here p. 52.

41 Deleuze, “Le cerveau, c’est l’écran,” p. 26.

(*données*) and can be subject to both saturation (in the deep-focus aesthetic of Wyler and Altman) or rarefaction (in Ozu's empty frames). The image itself, Deleuze argues, is a site for the recording of visual information and hence "legible" as much as it is "visible." Drawing implicitly at this stage on Daney's text "Le thérorisé (pédagogie godardienne)," Deleuze thus argues that "there is a pedagogy of the image, especially with Godard, when this function is made explicit, when the frame serves as an opaque surface of information, sometimes blurred by saturation, sometimes reduced to the empty set, to the white or black screen."⁴²

The inherently mobile, *dynamic* nature of the cinematic frame draws Deleuze towards Bonitzer's notion of deframing (*décadrage*). While Bonitzer was yet to publish *Décadrages* as a book, he had already developed the notion in his 1978 article for *Cahiers*, and the broader concept informs much of his film theory in the 1970s and early 1980s.⁴³ For Deleuze, deframing is a "very interesting concept" that allows us to "designate these abnormal points of view which [...] refer to another dimension of the image."⁴⁴ Examples of this phenomenon can be found in the close-ups of fragmented faces in Dreyer's *Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, the "dead zones" in Ozu or the "disconnected spaces" in Bresson, the last of which tend to "confirm that the visual image has a legible function beyond its visual function."⁴⁵ This discussion leads directly to Deleuze's more fundamental use of the notion of the *hors-champ*, as initially developed by Burch and Bonitzer. While resting on the ideas of these two film theorists (particularly Bonitzer), Deleuze nonetheless gives a fresh conceptualization of the functioning of the *hors-champ* in the cinema. For the philosopher, the *hors-champ* is "not a negation" and should not be defined as "the non-coincidence between two frames, one visual and the other sound"; rather, it refers to "what is neither seen nor heard, but is nevertheless perfectly present."⁴⁶

Reproducing Bazin's distinction between the frame and the *cache* (mask), itself frequently reiterated by Bonitzer, Deleuze ascribes a different variant of the *hors-champ* to each of these two types of framing. *Every* frame, he insists, implies an *hors-champ*—even the most closed, self-contained system can eliminate it in appearance only. Hence, "there are not two types of frame only one of which would refer to the *hors-champ*; there are rather

42 Deleuze, *Cinéma 1*, p. 24 [p. 13]. Daney's text is later explicitly cited in Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 322 [p. 247].

43 See Chapter 25.

44 Deleuze, *Cinéma 1*, pp. 27-28 [p. 15].

45 *Ibid.*, p. 28 [p. 15].

46 *Ibid.* [p. 16].

two very different aspects of the *hors-champ*, each of which refers to a mode of framing.⁴⁷ The *hors-champ* implies that any set presented for our view is actually only one component of a larger set, which has the potential to scale up to the entire universe. What begins, therefore, as a notion in film poetics is transformed in Deleuze's hands into an ontological concept. In Bonitzer's polemic with the "empiricism" of Burch's original exposition of the *hors-champ*, with its more pragmatic sense of "off-screen space," the *Cahiers* writer objected to the idea that there was a "becoming-field" (*devenir-champ*) of the *hors-champ*; instead, something always remains radically outside of the frame of the filmic image—the camera.⁴⁸ Deleuze notes that he finds these remarks to be "solidly based"; at the same time, however, he argues that there is an "internal duality" within the *hors-champ* that does not merely relate to the filming apparatus but to the existence of two qualitatively different forms of the *hors-champ*: a "relative aspect" that relates to a space that is momentarily excluded from the frame but that can be absorbed into the image through a change in camera position (by means of a cut or a camera movement), and an "absolute aspect" by means of which "the closed system opens onto a duration which is immanent to the whole universe."⁴⁹ In this latter case, which arises when deframing effects are used in a way that has no "pragmatic" justification, the *hors-champ* refers to "a more radical Elsewhere, outside homogeneous space and time" and introduces a "trans-spatial" or "spiritual" element into a system that can never be perfectly closed off.⁵⁰

From this specific discussion of the *hors-champ*, Deleuze moves to a broader treatment of the shot, intervening into debates around the status of the sequence shot, camera movement and the classification of shots in the work of Bazin, Mitry and Metz. Pushing against Mitry's refusal of the category of the sequence shot, Deleuze argues that the unity of a shot is based, precisely, on *movement*, and that it therefore "embraces a correlative multiplicity which does not contradict it."⁵¹ But this claim also leads him to distance himself from Bonitzer, who is nonetheless recognized as the contemporary critic "most interested in the notion of the shot and its

47 Ibid., p. 29 [p. 15].

48 In addition to the argument made in Bonitzer's original *Cahiers* article, "Hors-champ," this argument is made more clearly in its revised version, as published in Bonitzer, *Le Regard et la Voix* (see, especially, p. 17).

49 Deleuze, *Cinéma 1*, p. 30 [p. 17].

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., p. 43 [p. 27].

evolution.”⁵² While Bonitzer’s analyses of the different types of shot in *Le Champ aveugle* are “very rigorous,” Deleuze argues that they should have “brought him to a new conception of the shot as a consistent unity” and expresses disappointment that he instead “draws from it doubts about the consistency of the notion of the shot whose ‘composite, ambiguous and fundamentally fake character’ he condemns.” Of a figure who is one of the most frequently cited names in the *Cinéma* books, therefore, Deleuze writes that “it is only on this point that we cannot follow him.”⁵³

Components of the Time-Image

Whereas the references to the *Cahiers* critics in *Cinéma 1* were mostly confined to the use of Bonitzer’s ideas in the “Cadre et plan, cadrage et découpage” chapter, in *Cinéma 2* the influence of the journal on Deleuze’s thinking is spread across the text as a whole. To a large degree, this can be ascribed to the fact that, as opposed to the focus in the first volume on directors from pre-war cinema, the second volume deals with filmmakers whose work was contemporaneous with the critical practice of *Cahiers*. As such, it is perhaps no surprise that this cross-pollination of ideas should reach a crescendo in the closing chapter of *Cinéma 2*, “Les composantes de l’image,” given that it deals primarily with the cinema of the 1970s and focuses on the work of three filmmakers whose work was obsessively discussed by *Cahiers* during this time: Straub/Huillet, Duras and Syberberg.

“Les composantes de l’image” is a curious culmination of Deleuze’s 700-page study of the cinema: while discussing what was, at the time of writing, the latest works of modernist cinema, the chapter also operates a return to the very origins of the medium and, on the basis of the shifting relations of sound and vision, replays the historical schema of the cinema provided by the two volumes of *Cinéma*. Here, however, the binary division between the movement-image and the time-image is replaced with a tripartite organization, classifying the cinema into the silent period, the “first phase” of sound cinema and a third period in which the relationship between sound and image takes on a new guise. Whereas, with its use of intertitles to convey spoken information, the silent era operated a strict distinction between the “seen image” (*image vue*) and the “read image” (*image lue*), the first, classical era of sound cinema merged the visual

52 Ibid., p. 44 [pp. 221-222].

53 Ibid. [p. 222].

image with the spoken word by synchronizing the voices of on-screen figures with images of their bodies in the act of speaking. Subsequently, in the modernist “second phase” of sound cinema, the speech act comes to “extricate itself from its dependencies in relation to the visual image, and assume[s] a value for itself.”⁵⁴ Here, a thinker who was notoriously hostile to Hegelian logic adopts an uncannily dialectical approach to the evolution of the spoken word in the cinema. The opposition between the indirect use of speech in the silent era (whereby a title card has to report on the speech that goes unheard by the spectator) and the direct speech of the classical sound era (with its emphasis on the unity of image and sound) is superseded by a new form of speech in modern cinema, which Deleuze—following Pasolini and Rohmer—dubs “free indirect speech.” Furthermore, the modern cinema of Straub/Huillet and Godard harks back to the silent cinema through its re-introduction of *written* words into the visual image: in the form, this time, not only of intertitles but also on-screen notebooks, letters, street signs, plaques and so on.⁵⁵ Deleuze nonetheless cautions against understanding modern cinema as a return to the silent cinema: whereas the latter was characterized by the coexistence of two types of images (the seen and the read), in modern sound cinema, it is “the visual image in its entirety that must be read,” as both intertitles and “scriptural injections” are now merely the “stipplings” (*pointillés*) of a stratigraphically layered image.⁵⁶

Early signs of a modern approach to the interplay between sound and image in the cinema can be seen in Bresson, and in examining the use of sound in Bresson's films, Deleuze turns to Daney's discussion of *Le Diable probablement* in his August-September 1977 article “L'orgue et l'aspirateur (La voix off et quelques autres).” Invoking a scene in a church basement where the voices of young people attending a political meeting have to contend for supremacy on the soundtrack not only with the sacral music of an organ but also with the mundane hum of a vacuum cleaner running over a red carpet, Daney argues that this filmic fragment is held together by an “aleatory, heterogeneous sonic *dispositif*” bearing witness to Bresson's characteristic formal “heterology,” which contains the three terms of “the high (the organ), the low (the discussion), and that which ruins the simple

54 Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 314 [p. 242].

55 Deleuze credits both Narboni and Bonitzer for pointing out the presence of these “scriptural elements” in Straub/Huillet's work. See Jean Narboni, “Là,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 275 (April 1977), pp. 6-14, here p. 9; and Bonitzer, *Le Regard et la Voix*, p. 67.

56 Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 320 [p. 246].

high/low opposition: the trivial (the vacuum cleaner).⁵⁷ Following the lead of Bonitzer's discussion of voice-over in "Les silences de la voix," Daney proposes a fourfold classification of speech in the cinema: the standard *voix-off*, which remains permanently or provisionally off-screen, is accompanied by a *voix-in* (which speaks from the *hors-champ* to an on-screen figure) as well as a *voix-out* (a filmed body directs its speech towards the *hors-champ*), and finally a *voix-through*, which is "emitted in the image but outside of the spectacle of the mouth," for instance by showing a character speaking while their backs are filmed from behind.⁵⁸ As Daney explains, "of course, these backs are not 'true,' even though in Bresson (and Straub), the whole problem consists in displacing the direct-effect on a smooth and obtuse part of the body. Modernity (since Bresson, precisely) is translated through a large number of bodies filmed from behind. Direct *and* non-direct, here *and* elsewhere."⁵⁹

Deleuze, for his part, argues that in Bresson's films "it is not indirect discourse that is treated as direct, it was the opposite; it was the direct, the dialogue, which was treated as if it were reported by someone else: hence the famous Bressonian voice, the voice of the 'model' [...] where the character speaks as if he were listening to his own words reported by someone else."⁶⁰ The bulk of his discussion in this chapter, however, is concerned with the work of Straub/Huillet and is derived to a large extent from the decades-long critical appreciation of the duo's work by the *Cahiers* critics. Citing Narboni's discussion of the role of speech in *Othon*, Deleuze contends that the foremost aspect of Straub/Huillet's work is "the isolating of the pure speech act, the properly cinematic utterance [*énoncé*] or the sound image" and that this tearing away of the spoken voice from its textual support "presupposes a certain resistance of the text, and all the more respect for the text." In the case of Straub/Huillet's Corneille adaptation, Deleuze insists that "what they tear from the representation is a cinematic act, what they tear from the text is a rhythm or a tempo; what they tear from language is an 'aphasia.'" The same treatment of the speech act can be found across a wide range of Straub/Huillet's films, from *Nicht versöhnt* to *Klassenverhältnisse*, but Deleuze seems to locate its purest instantantiation in the one-word cry "*Hinaus!*" (Leave!) in the *Bach* film, which presages the use of *Sprechgesang* in *Moses und Aron*.

57 Serge Daney, "L'orgue et l'aspirateur (La voix off et quelques autres)," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 279-280 (August-September 1977), pp. 19-27, here p. 20.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 26. Daney uses the English preposition for all four of the terms used in his text.

59 *Ibid.*

60 Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 315 [p. 242].

On the basis of these examples, then, Deleuze declares that the speech act is “a struggle: it must be economical and sparse, infinitely patient, in order to impose itself on what resists it, but extremely violent in order to be itself a resistance, an act of resistance. Irresistibly, it rises.”⁶¹

Straub/Huillet’s use of the speech-act as a gesture of resistance is, in Deleuze’s analysis, mirrored in the treatment of landscapes in their films. Leaning on Narboni and Daney’s critical responses to works such as *Othon, Fortini/Cani* and *Dalla nube alla resistenza*, the philosopher defines the visual image in these films as presenting “empty and lacunary stratigraphic landscapes” where “the earth stands for what is buried in it”: the cache of partisan weapons in the grotto of *Othon* or the cornfields fertilized by the blood of sacrificial victims in *Dalla nube alla resistenza*.⁶² At the same time, he maintains that “empty” and “disconnected” are not the best words to describe these spaces. Instead, as Daney first recognized in “Le plan straubien,” their stratigraphic nature, which entails an “impossible coalescence of the perceived and the known, the content of a perception and the perception of a knowledge,” requires the visual image itself to be subject to reading.⁶³ We must, Deleuze notes, “read the visual as well as hear the speech-act in a new way.”⁶⁴ It is this new mode of reading and of listening that is at the root of the pedagogical nature of modern cinema, which manifests itself above all, as both Daney and Deleuze accept, in the work of the two filmmakers most fetishized by *Cahiers*: Godard and Straub/Huillet.⁶⁵ As Deleuze argues, a “new regime of the image” is constructed on this pedagogical basis, one that “consists of this: images and sequences are no longer linked by rational cuts, which end the first or begin the second, but are relinked on top of irrational cuts, which no longer belong to either of the two and are valid for themselves (interstices). Irrational cuts thus have a disjunctive, and no longer a conjunctive value.”⁶⁶ As Deleuze grants, the pedagogical aspect of modern filmmaking brings the cinema close to its rival medium, television—a bridge that actually is crossed by Godard in his 1970s television works. In the Deleuzian schema, then, the work of Godard and Straub/Huillet (and *a fortiori* that of Syberberg), represents

61 Ibid., pp. 330-331 [pp. 253-254].

62 Ibid., p. 318 [p. 244].

63 Daney, “Le plan straubien,” p. 6.

64 Ibid., p. 322 [p. 247].

65 For more on the role of pedagogy in the thinking of Deleuze and Daney, see Garin Dowd, “Pedagogies of the Image between Daney and Deleuze,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* vol. 8 no. 1 (2010), pp. 41-56.

66 Ibid., p. 324 [p. 248].

the end point of the evolution of the cinema and the moment at which it is superseded by television. But this is far from being a decisive step forward; instead, there is an oscillation between the two media in the “electronic age” of the image. As Deleuze circumspectly writes, the second, modernist stage of the sound cinema

would never have arisen without television; it is television which made it possible; but, because television abandoned most of its own creative possibilities, and did not even understand them, it needed cinema to give it a pedagogical lesson; it needed great cinema authors to show what it could do and what it would be able to do; if it is true that television kills cinema, cinema on the other hand is continually revitalizing television, not only because it feeds it with films, but because the great cinema authors invent the audio-visual image, which they are quite ready to ‘give back’ to television if it gives them the opportunity.⁶⁷

Optimism, Pessimism and Travel: Deleuze *avec* Daney

The elaborate classification system of images adopted by Deleuze is thus marked by not one but *two* major ruptures. The first, openly avowed and at the center of his study, is the transition from the movement-image to the time-image, correlative with the breakdown of the sensori-motor schema precipitated by the social collapse of World War II. The second, which remains in tacit form in the *Cinéma* books, only visible in select moments of the text and often overlooked by readers of Deleuze, is the transition from the cinematic image to a televisual or electronic image—that is, the putative supersession of the cinema itself, which was taking place in strict contemporaneity with the act of writing *Cinéma* and on which Deleuze, therefore, was unable to make anything more than the most tentative pronouncements. The idea of a second rupture *does*, however, assume a more central position in a subsequent text by Deleuze: “Optimisme, pessimisme et voyage,” the preface to Daney’s *Ciné journal*. Here, Deleuze avows that it was the critical intuitions of Daney that allowed both ruptures to be pinpointed and elaborated. In this sense, therefore, a case can be made that it is in fact Daney—more than Bergson, Peirce or Bazin—who is the true tutelary thinker for Deleuze’s philosophical exposition of the cinema.

67 Ibid., p. 328 [pp. 251-252].

The text of Daney's that best summarized his views in this regard, and which was manifestly influential for Deleuze, was the conclusion to his 1982 collection of critical writings, *La Rampe*. In "La rampe (bis)," Daney claims that the classical cinema, which existed in the three decades leading up to the cataclysm of World War II, was marked by its scenographic depth, a trait that was founded on a pact with the spectator based on the idea that "there is indeed something 'behind the door.'" This pact is fundamentally broken by the modern cinema, which "'took on' this non-depth of the image, which laid claim to it, and which thought to make of it—with humor or fury—a war machine against the illusionism of classical cinema." Daney offers a precise historical point of departure for this process: the modern, anti-illusionist cinema of radical non-depth was born—and "not by chance"—in "the destroyed and traumatized Europe of the post-war period, on the ruins of an annihilated, discredited cinema, on the basis of a fundamental refusal of simulation, of *mise en scène*." Concomitantly, the machinery of audiovisual propaganda had led to a disaster "in the real": "Behind this belligerent theater, as its reverse side and its shameful truth, there was another scene that has ceaselessly haunted our imaginations: that of the camps." Thus, for Daney, the great innovators of modern cinema—Rossellini, Godard, Bergman and others—radically disassociated their art from classical cinema's "theatrical-propagandistic model," and, furthermore, they shared the intuition that "they are no longer dealing with the same body as before—before the camps, before Hiroshima. And that this is irreversible." Modern cinema's "scenography of obscenity" is based not on the question "What is there to see behind?" but "Can my gaze withstand what, in any case, I see before me?"⁶⁸

Having traced out a historical mutation in the nature of the film image, the result of a geopolitical catastrophe, Daney turns his attention to the second mutation, unfolding in real time before the critic's eyes as the 1970s turned into the 1980s. If the modern cinema was born with the torture scene from *Roma città aperta*, it expires with the "eternal disavowal-question of Godard's latest films: why does the cinema always show the faces of victims and the backs of executioners?" Already, Daney contends, "it is possible today to venture this: the 'modern' cinema, its flat image and its scenography of the gaze, is receding into the distance." The reason? It has become generalized and automated by another medium, the "surveillance tool" of television. Television completes modern cinema but also betrays it: "The horror at indifference that confers on Godard's films the pathos of the

68 The quotes in this paragraph are from Daney, *La Rampe*, pp. 208-210.

moral recoil has become, on television, the pure and simple indifference towards horror.” Thus, the 1980s witnesses the rise of a third type of scenic construction, neither classical or modern but akin to a guided visit through the museum of scenography itself, and which can be found in the mannerist aesthetic of Ruiz, Syberberg and the “young cinephile-tycoons” of the New Hollywood cinema. In Syberberg’s Méliès-like aesthetic, for instance, the film image only ever reveals another film image: “from now on, the backdrop of the cinema is the cinema.”⁶⁹

The line of reasoning developed by Daney in this short but fundamental text finds a distinct echo in Deleuze’s *Cinéma* books. Already in *Cinéma 1*, which was published but months after *La Rampe*, Deleuze delivers a remarkably similar chronology to that expressed by Daney, in which “the great crisis of the image action” unfurled in Europe, beginning in Italy, where, “in the situation at the end of the war, Rossellini discovered a dispersive and lacunary reality.”⁷⁰ At the same time, the “American Dream” and the action-image it powered collapsed, and although the great genres of classical Hollywood continued to churn out films, the social rationale for them had dissipated. In the preface to the English edition of *Cinéma 2*, Deleuze is more specific about the political context surrounding the demise of the movement-image:

Why is the Second World War taken as a break? The fact is that, in Europe, the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe. These were “any spaces whatever,” deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction. And in these any-spaces-whatever a new race of characters was stirring, kind of mutant: they saw rather than acted, they were seers.⁷¹

In the body of *Cinéma 2*, Deleuze invokes *La Rampe* when stating that “what has brought the whole cinema of the movement-image into question are ‘the great political *mises-en-scène*, state propaganda turned tableaux vivants, the first mass deportations of human beings’ and their backdrop, the camps. This was the death knell for the ambitions of ‘the old cinema.’”⁷² The philosopher also praises Daney’s book for being “one of the few to take up the question

69 Ibid., pp. 211-212.

70 Deleuze, *Cinéma 1*, p. 285 [p. 212].

71 Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. xi.

72 Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, p. 214 [p. 164].

of cinema-thought relations, which were so common at the beginning of reflection on cinema, but later abandoned because of disenchantment. Daney restores the full weight to it, in relation to contemporary cinema."⁷³ In his conclusion to the volume, Deleuze also follows Daney in speaking of a "new regime of the image" succeeding that of the time-image. The "electronic image, that is, the tele and video image, the digital image coming into being, either had to transform cinema or to replace it, to mark its death."⁷⁴ Deleuze cautions that the dawning era of the televisual image will not form part of his study but comments that the "new images no longer have any exteriority (*hors-champ*), any more than they are internalized in a whole; rather, [...] they are the object of a perpetual reorganization, in which a new image can arise from any point whatever of the preceding image."⁷⁵ Like Daney, Deleuze sees the work of Syberberg—and more specifically what Oudart called the "media-effect" at work in his films, in which the "division of the visual and the sound" is "specifically entrusted with experiencing this complexity of informational space"⁷⁶—as occupying the threshold between cinematic modernism and its own supersession by the electronic image.

It is in "Optimisme, pessimisme et voyage," however, that the philosopher most expansively discusses the ideas of Daney, doing so in the form of an epistolary message directly addressing the critic in the second person singular. Here Deleuze places Daney squarely in the critical tradition of Bazin by dint of the fact that he still seeks "a fundamental link between cinema and thought" and still regards film criticism as a "poetic and aesthetic activity." Daney's thinking is marked by a deep irony, however: while his critical outlook has retained "the grand idea of cinema's first period: cinema as a new Art and a new Thought," his day-to-day practice as a critic involved charting the emergence of a "third period, a third function of the image, a third set of relations."⁷⁷ The new era is marked by the confrontation between cinema and television, but instead of producing refreshing attempts to develop the aesthetic specificities of the two mediums, this encounter has principally opened up new ways of operating political power and social control. The third state of the image thus leads, as Daney had noted, to the dominance of *mannerism* in the cinema, which Deleuze defines as a state

73 Ibid., p. 230 [p. 312].

74 Ibid., p. 346 [p. 265].

75 Ibid., pp. 346-347 [p. 265].

76 Ibid., p. 352 [p. 269]. See also Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Notes de mémoire sur *Hitler*, de Syberberg."

77 Gilles Deleuze, "Optimisme, pessimisme et voyage," in Serge Daney, *Ciné journal vol. I*, pp. 9-25, here p. 13. Translated as "Letter to Serge Daney: Optimism, Pessimism, and Travel," in Gilles Deleuze., *Negotiations*, pp. 68-79, here pp. 70-71.

where “there is nothing to see behind [the image], not much to see in it or on the surface, but just an image constantly slipping across pre-existing, presupposed images.” Reverting to his own inimitable lexical style, Deleuze argues that “the couple Nature-Body, or Landscape-Man, has given way to the couple City-Brain: the screen is no longer a window-door (behind which...) nor a frame-shot (in which), but a digital monitor [*table d'information*] on which images glide like ‘data’ points.”⁷⁸

Thus, for Deleuze, Daney’s thinking is striated by a deep contradiction between optimism and pessimism, between despair for the present and hope for the future. Television may well be a powerful means for formal and social consensus, but the path still lies open for the cinema to “invent the new resistance and combat the televisual function of surveillance and control.” The task of the critic, the filmmaker, and even the philosopher, therefore, is to “prevent television subverting or short-circuiting the extension of cinema into the new types of image” (whether magnetic, electronic or digital).⁷⁹ As Samuel Fuller declared in *Pierrot le fou*, “the cinema is a battleground.” From the mid-1980s onwards, Daney would increasingly play the role of frontline reporter in the ongoing skirmishes between the cinema and other audiovisual media, which he came to call “the visual.” In the final chapter, therefore, my discussion will center on the responses to this confrontation between the cinema and the visual in the contemporary era.

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26. Film Ontology in the Age of “New” Media

Abstract

In this, the final chapter of my study, I turn my attention to the response that *Cahiers du cinéma* critics have had to various forms of “new” media (television, advertising, digital imagery, etc.). Whether it was the collective analysis of the talk show “À armes égales” as a product of the “televisual state apparatus” by *Cahiers* in 1972, Serge Daney’s notion of “the visual” in his writings for *Libération* in the 1980s, Jacques Aumont’s wry polemics around the state of contemporary media culture in the twenty-first century, or Jean-Louis Comolli’s incendiary counterposition of “cinema” and “spectacle” in his recent texts, these critics have attempted to grapple with a situation in which the cinema has an increasingly marginalized position within the broader realm of visual imagery. But they do so by drawing on the same fundamental set of ideas that guided their film criticism: a distinctive blend of apparatus theory and Bazinian realism.

Keywords: *Cahiers du cinéma*, new media, ideological state apparatus, Serge Daney, Jacques Aumont, Jean-Louis Comolli

Cahiers du cinéma and the “televisual state apparatus”

Writing for *Libération* on October 8, 1987, Serge Daney turned his critical eye to the question of photojournalism, in particular the coverage of war zones and natural disasters. The critic was prompted to do so by a television program two nights earlier, *Dossiers de l'écran*, which presented a debate on the topic, and he used this pretext to explore the underlying *morality* of image production. Rejecting the self-exonerating argument of professional photographers that their work can save lives or popularize a worthy cause, Daney affirmed that in the case of such images of devastation and suffering, “nothing is less evident than [their] social utility.” Probing more

deeply, Daney's focus turned to one of the most acclaimed photographs of the decade: an image of Omayra Sánchez Garzón, a 13-year-old girl from the village of Armerio in Colombia, caught in a mudslide after a volcanic explosion in November 1985. Shortly before she died of hypothermia, French photographer Frank Fournier captured a snapshot of the girl, her hands already a chalky-white due to the chill, her eyes glazed as she slipped into deathly hallucinations. The resulting picture was emblazoned on the cover of newspapers and magazines and beamed around the world by television news broadcasts. The photo, it was hoped, would call attention to the lackluster response to the disaster by the Colombian authorities. Daney, however, was rather more dubious: "It would be abusive to claim that the shot of the little girl from Armerio [*sic*] helped to raise awareness of anything at all. And if the live broadcast of a little girl's death was needed for decent-minded people to look up Colombia in an atlas, this is a rather high price to pay for pedagogy."

Asking himself *why* contemporary societies have such an intense need for this "spectacle of *human impotence*," Daney argued that it is because they "screen off the real, [...] and because they are also the screen on which the reminder of something unforgettable is inscribed." He went on to note the exceptional role played by images of children in the media:

This is why our era is crisscrossed by images of children. Useless images of children uselessly killed. Images, even, of massacres. The Jewish child from the Warsaw ghetto with arms raised. The little naked girl on a Vietnamese highway. The girl from Armerio. These images, *because they are without any possible reverse-shot*, doubtless function as the only pious images left to us, and it is without any shame that we keep ahold of them in our memories.¹

Reading Daney's words today, it is hard not to think of the photograph of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy whose lifeless body was found washed up on the Turkish coastline in September 2015. As if by miracle, the distressing image seemingly changed Europe's attitudes to refugees from Syria overnight. As Daney would have said, however, Aylan's death was a high price to pay for this shift in public opinion.

The resonances between an article written in 1987 and an event from 2015 do not, of course, make Daney a visionary oracle of the present-day media-political landscape. Rather, this parallel is made to highlight the fact that, beyond his profound critical analysis of the cinema, Daney was

1 The above quotes are from Serge Daney, *Le Salaire du zappeur* (Paris: P.O.L., 1993), pp. 62-63.

also a perspicacious observer of other modes of audiovisual media production—television, video, print journalism, advertising—to which he gave the overarching term “the visual.”² In this, he is joined by other *Cahiers* alumni: in particular, Aumont and Comolli, who have also turned their attention to the thoroughgoing changes to the ways images function in the contemporary era and the effects these changes have had on the traditional “apparatus” of the cinema. This chapter will thus focus on the recent writings of these three figures concerning the ontological status of the image in the age of “new” media and link it to their earlier output at *Cahiers*, particularly those moments—such as the articles “Notes sur le nouveau spectateur” by Comolli, “Sur Salador” by Daney and the collective analysis of the political television program *À armes égales*—when the journal shifted its optic away from the cinema and toward other media forms such as television. Finally, my focus will turn to the journal *Trafic*, which, having been established by Daney three decades ago, has become a site of resistance against the dominance of the “visual” in contemporary culture and a place where former *Cahiers* critics and others have embarked on the ongoing project to develop a pluralist critical theory of the cinema.

It is true that the theoretical activity of *Cahiers* in the post-1968 era is—justifiably—not known for its preoccupation with “new” media. For the most part, the journal focused on providing an ideological analysis of the cinema as a relatively self-contained, unified cultural field. Sporadically, however, articles written by the *Cahiers* critics did show an interest in the aesthetics and politics of phenomena such as advertising and television broadcasting. Although the preoccupation is far from being as theoretically fleshed out as the intense concern for the cinema, these texts are fascinating precursors to the later writings of the *Cahiers* critics and point to the possible application of the journal’s variant of “apparatus theory” to media domains outside of the cinema.

An early text in this vein was Comolli’s “Notes sur le nouveau spectateur” from April 1966, a belated riposte to the humanist, phenomenological vision of the cinema in his 1963 article “Vivre le film.”³ In his 1966 text, the focus lies much more on the viewing conditions of what would soon afterwards be called the “cinematic apparatus.” In particular, Comolli points to the social and psychological function of the darkened movie theater and its innate kinship with the “cinema of consumption,” a set-up that induces a

2 Daney’s death in 1992, of course, prevented the critic from having insights into the world of online media, as the Internet only existed in very nascent form at the time.

3 For more on “Vivre le film,” see Chapter 2.

hypnotized, somnolent spectator prone to the “machinery of dreams.” By contrast, even a modest auteur film requires a “genuine effort to resist” from the spectator, precisely because it “does not conform to the vague norms fixed by the tradition of dark cinemas.”⁴ This antimony leads Comolli to call for “lighted theaters” (*salles claires*) which, by dint of not absorbing the brightness radiating from the screen, place the character and the spectator in a relationship of equality with each other. Admitting that this proposal amounts to little more than a pipe dream, Comolli finds a curious equivalent to his “lighted theaters” in the television set:

The major use television makes of *cinéma-vérité* is no accident: the small screen is often the only one that opens onto a lighted “theater.” Indeed, re-seeing the great works of cinema on television confirms this: if you are not obsessed with dark cinemas [and] if you re-view these films in a half-light that helps concentration, you see them differently and better than in the cinema.⁵

This positive appraisal of television viewing was, however, to remain an isolated case in *Cahiers*. For the most part, the newer medium was overlooked or discussed in desultory fashion. The next prominent article to focus specifically on television did not appear until 1972, by which time *Cahiers* was in the throes of its Maoist period. The 25-page article, “À armes égales: Analyse d’une émission télévisée,” penned by the “Groupe Lou Sin d’intervention idéologique,” sought to analyze television from the standpoint of Althusser’s newly devised concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). In the landmark 1970 article “Idéologie et Appareils idéologiques d’état,” the philosopher built on his earlier texts concerning the functioning of ideology by discussing the role played by a pluralized set of public and private institutions (including the church, the education system, the family, the media) in ideologically cementing a given state formation’s hegemony over its populace, which was deployed in tandem with the predominantly violent functioning of the Repressive State Apparatus (the police, the army, the prison system).⁶

4 Jean-Louis Comolli, “Notes sur le nouveau spectateur,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 177 (April 1966), pp. 66-67. Translated as “Notes on the New Spectator,” trans. Diana Matias, in Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. II*, pp. 210-215, here p. 213.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 67 [p. 214].

6 See Louis Althusser, “Idéologie et Appareils idéologiques d’état (Notes pour une recherche),” *La Pensée* no. 151 (June 1970), pp. 3-38. Translated as “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses:

Following Althusser, the Groupe Lou Sin's introductory remarks align television and the cinema as twin "information ISAs" that "support and maintain each other, reproducing the ideological conditions of each other's functioning, renewing the systems of ideological recognition that program them and that they, in turn, confirm."⁷ In addition to their common material basis (mechanically reproduced images and sounds), the cinematic and televisual apparatuses have a privileged relationship: television "institutionalizes and perpetuates the spectacular and distractive functions of the cinema such as they were defined by Hollywood."⁸ Moreover, with a national viewership of 30 million people a night in France, the "televisual apparatus" is, in fact, "more massive and more legible" than its cinematic counterpart, and the cinema has concomitantly been relegated to a "secondary front" in the contemporary struggle within the information ISA, a recognition of a changed media landscape that would increasingly come to agonize *Cahiers* later in the 1970s. By focusing their analysis on *À armes égales*, the Groupe Lou Sin specifically chose to highlight an alternative relationship: that between television and the political apparatus. *À armes égales* (the title means "on equal terms") was a political program that broadcast 33 two-hour episodes on a monthly basis on state broadcaster ORTF's main channel between February 1970 and March 1973.⁹ The novelty of the show was twofold: firstly, its format combined political debate with short films made under the auspices of the participants, and secondly, it specifically aimed to be the site for a confrontation between two contrasting views on the topic under focus. This was a strikingly new phenomenon for the ORTF, which, prior to 1968, was a monolithic mouthpiece for the Gaullist state. *À armes égales* was perhaps most notable for the frequent opportunities the program provided for prominent Communist Party figures to appear on the show—despite representing up to 30% of the electorate, they had previously been almost totally excluded from the airwaves. In the episode analyzed by *Cahiers* (broadcast on January 25, 1972), PCF representative

Notes towards an Investigation," in idem., *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Texts*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 85-132.

7 Groupe Lou Sin d'intervention idéologique, "À armes égales: Analyse d'une émission télévisée," *Cahiers du cinéma* 236-237 (March-April 1972), pp. 4-29, here p. 4. An abridged version of this text was translated as "On Equal Terms – Analysis of a Television Programme," in John Caughie (ed.), *Television: Ideology and Exchange* (London: BFI, 1978).

8 Ibid.

9 A number of these episodes—although not the one studied by *Cahiers*—are now available for viewing at the Institut national de l'audiovisuel's médiathèque, located in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

Roland Leroy faced off against Gaullist politician Michel Habib-Deloncle on the topic “Ideology and Culture in French Society.”

Given that the journal at the time considered the “revisionist” PCF to be entirely absorbed into the structures of bourgeois parliamentarism, this gesture to political ecumenism was far from convincing proof, for *Cahiers*, of the program’s much-vaunted “impartial” status.¹⁰ Rather, constructing a critical analysis of the ideological structures underpinning the format of *À armes égales* would reveal, in the Groupe Lou Sin’s view, the specific, “material” manner in which the show “marks the encounter [...] of two apparatuses: the political apparatus (the political debate) and the broadcasting-information apparatus (television).”¹¹ These two mutually reinforcing apparatuses have the same function: in both cases, they mask the *real* primary contradiction governing capitalist societies (the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat) through diversionary debates over “fictive stakes.” Moreover, the impression of neutrality in the two apparatuses, of giving equal time and consideration to each side of the debate, has a fundamentally repressive function, serving to obfuscate the real ideological fault lines in a given society. In the Leroy/Habib-Deloncle episode, for instance, both of the speakers, while vigorously disputing secondary differences, gave expression to a bourgeois-humanist concept of art and culture that was never contested or open to question within the parameters of the debate, thus excluding any globalizing alternatives to this ideological standpoint from being presented.

At this point, the Groupe Lou Sin’s analysis of *À armes égales* was a rather stock-standard Althusserian account of a cultural product. What sets their article apart, however, is the subsequent discussion of the scenic structure of the programme’s “basic *dispositif*.” In particular, by condensing political struggle into the staged representation of a duel between two sparring individuals, the show’s format is overdetermined by the “universal norms” of Hollywood cinema—and in particular, “the most universal of its genres, the Western.”¹² Not only does television re-broadcast American films *ad infinitum*, but Hollywood aesthetics impregnates even those programming categories that would at first glance appear remote from the cinema (news, sports, talk shows, etc.). Hence television, rather than being engaged in

10 The ideological limits of the program were ably demonstrated in its 16 May 1972 episode, soon after the *Cahiers* article was published. Dedicated to the theme of “*gauchisme*,” neither of the two participants on the show politically identified with the movement discussed, and they differed merely in whether to aggressively attack the far left or treat it with paternalistic condescension.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 5

12 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

a "struggle to the death" with cinema, can more usefully be seen as the "triumph, the apogee of Hollywood: the transparency of the world in one's home, the representation that abolishes class divisions, the 'universal family spectacle' *par excellence*."¹³ And yet, it would be no more correct to strictly classify television in the cultural ISA alongside cinema than it would be to unambiguously include it, as Althusser did, as part of the Information ISA. Instead, as the Groupe Lou Sin concludes their article, it lies in a space between these two fields. By dint of primarily serving to "*re-ideologize* ideological texts produced in the various ISAs," television thus acts as the "cement" unifying the different domains of the ISA. As such, the "televisual state apparatus" plays an analogous function to ideology itself and becomes the privileged means in contemporary societies for the continued hegemony of the dominant ideology.¹⁴

Daney: The Triumph of the Visual

Dating from July 1970, Serge Daney's short text "Sur Salador" (a section of the article "Travail, lecture, jouissance," co-authored by Jean-Pierre Oudart), took a more specific look at the role of advertising within what he called "the ideology of visibility." While noting that much of the ideological analysis of the cinema had focused on the status of the camera, Daney argues for the need to go even further in this direction and interrogate the hegemonic position of the eye in Western metaphysics, a phenomenon that he dubs "the blind trust in the visible."¹⁵ Taking inspiration from Derrida, Daney finds one of the most striking manifestations of this ideology of the visible in an unexpected source: TV commercials. In this branch of the film industry, "every truth is immediately verifiable," since "one clearly *sees* the irruption of the white tornado, the softness of Krema caramel, or the most obstinate stain yielding to K2R."¹⁶ While Daney argues that the vast majority of cinema, by valorizing pre-existing material, conforms to the twin aesthetics of advertising and propaganda, he also contends that the series of commercials for the Salador brand of olive oil has an "undeniable beauty." Here it should be noted that, far from being standard representatives of French television

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid, p. 28.

15 Daney/Oudart, "Travail, lecture, jouissance," p. 39 [p. 116]. This text is also discussed in Chapter 15.

16 Ibid., p. 40 [p. 117].

advertising at the dawn of the 1970s, the spots for K2R, Krema and Salador that Daney refers to were rapidly edited, slapstick affairs with a veneer of experimental cinema and a “pitch” that was so exaggerated as to be nearly parodic. All three campaigns were the work of the duo Pierre Grimblat and Gérard Pirès, who had long careers in television, radio and genre cinema.¹⁷ Noting that Grimblat/Pirès had taken a decisive “leap forward for advertising cinema in the extreme care and precision of [their] work,” Daney suggested that “capital” should not let comparable talents go to waste on “pseudo-films.” Instead of Lelouch “pretending to shoot a dramatic scene with Montand in the Congo,” the French director ought to sing the praises of a brand of khaki jeans, while Melville could, Daney proposes, profitably hawk a raincoat brand.¹⁸

It was not until the 1980s, however, that this subject would assume a central importance for Daney’s thinking. While a drolly ironic take on audiovisual culture had marked his writings since the “Sur Salador” text, Daney’s articles for *Libération* grew progressively more downcast in the second half of the 1980s. This tendency was primarily determined by the broader changes in the political and cultural landscape in these years. The hope incited by the election of François Mitterand as president in 1981 had been dissipated by his administration’s neoliberal turn soon after taking power. At the same time, the privatization and segmentation of French television had seen the emergence of new networks but led to an unadulterated focus on mass entertainment, a tendency that was shared, in the cinema, with the aesthetic hegemony of the Hollywood blockbuster and its “local” counterpart, the *cinéma du look*. Finally, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe at the end of the decade signaled the expiration of the global and national political binary that had predominated since the end of World War II. The new, unipolar world order, with the US enjoying an undisputed status as the world’s only remaining superpower, was brutally confirmed by the Gulf War in 1991.

Perhaps the key change of the decade for Daney, however, was his recognition of the marginalization of the cinema *in toto*: from an earlier position of cultural dominance, it had retreated to occupying a niche position within the more amorphous, totalizing entity of “the visual.” This realization had a couple of major consequences for the critic. Firstly, it entailed a greater

17 See Philippe Rège (ed.), *Encyclopedia of French Film Directors vol. I*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009), pp. 471, 823-824. Grimblat was friends with Boris Vian and Raymond Queneau and directed the Serge Gainsbourg vehicle *Slogan*. Pirès directed *Erotissimo* in 1968 and later made the first film in the *Taxi* franchise. A certain anarcho-surrealist heritage can be seen in the commercials they made together, many of which can now be viewed at the Inathèque.

18 Daney/Oudart, “Travail, lecture, jouissance,” p. 40 [p. 117].

acceptance of a much broader swathe of the cinema than that which Daney, or *Cahiers* more generally, had earlier defended. Secondly, the cultural dominance of television called for increased attention to the medium and a more nuanced theoretical account than was often produced by those who, steeped in the tradition of post-war French cinephilia, had looked derisively at the shortcomings of the medium. As with Comolli two decades earlier, Daney did not fetishize the *dispositif* of the movie theater, and his accounts of watching films on the small screen registered both the negative and positive mutations these works undergo in the new viewing environment.¹⁹ Resisting a Manichaean opposition between cinema and television, he instead adopted a theory of an "incestuous" relationship between the two mediums, exemplified by the television work of figures such as Rossellini and Godard. By 1987, however, Daney began to suspect that this theory had ceased to be true. To put his hypothesis to the test, for a period of three months (September to December 1987), the critic spent most of his waking hours in front of the television set, remote control in hand, recording his experiences in a regular column for *Libération*, which was later published in book form as *Le Salaire du zappeur*. The guidelines he set himself for systematically watching French television were to "observe, describe, and not laugh too much" as well as to write on a daily basis about "that continent, strangely little known and even less commented on, that is television."²⁰

A singular area of preoccupation for Daney was the practice of *zapping* (channel hopping), which had the potential to introduce acts of montage generated by the viewers themselves. This capability, however, had in Daney's eyes already been lost: the twin processes of privatization and "Americanization" had led to television programming becoming ever more homogenous and formally staid. Instead of "obtaining the ghost of *something different*, a lost real, a still possible encounter," the *zappeur* only had the possibility of flipping "from Charybdis to Scylla."²¹ Moreover, the act of channel hopping went hand in hand with the mode of programming innate to television:

It is not because the remote control has generalized zapping that it invented it. Zapping has always been an invention of television, it is inherent to it and, zapping like madmen, we only generalize its usage

19 For instance, Daney noted that watching Woody Allen's *Zelig* on Canal+ allowed him to find in it "a weight that it had less of in the darkened theater, faced with a public that was too self-aware, too in on the joke." Serge Daney, *Le Salaire du zappeur*, p. 58.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

and *realize* its concept. Now that the ball is in the TV viewer's court, he takes revenge for his ex-passivity by exaggerating the normal functioning of television.²²

Looking back at his experiment after bringing it to a close, Daney nonetheless avowed that he was reasonably optimistic about its results, and his concluding remarks were upbeat: whereas television may have become the "prose" of the modern world, cinema now had an unprecedented opportunity to be its poetry. After having become "industrially outmoded," film could embark on a second life as a minoritarian, artisanal practice such as could be found in the work of Straub/Huillet, Raúl Ruiz or Robert Kramer. If television had taken over the role of "transmitting culture," then the cinema could exclusively concern itself with "imparting experiences."²³

By the time Daney left *Libération* in 1991, however, he had become steadily disabused of this budding optimism, a shift that can be traced in the growing despondency of the texts he wrote in the period 1988-1991.²⁴ Here, Daney's discussion of television and other audiovisual media increasingly takes on the allure of "postmodern" thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard and Paolo Virilio—all of whom became explicit points of reference for Daney. The onset of the 1990s is marked above all by the omnipotence of what Daney calls "the visual" and its ascendance over "the image." In this line of thinking, the unremitting torrent of audiovisual imagery is specifically counterposed to the cinematic image, which requires a conceptual "reverse-shot" that is invariably lacking in television. Following Godard's phrase "always two for an image" (in other words, a true image requires the productive combination through montage of two distinct aesthetic elements), Daney insists on the importance of *alterity* for an image to exist: "Godard [...] would say: with which other image would you *show* this image in order to have the inception of an idea?"²⁵ By contrast, "the visual" is defined as being purely "connected to perception, the optic nerve, physiology: a pinball machine, a video game, on-screen text, a commercial, all this is

22 Ibid., p. 22.

23 Ibid., pp. 189-190. For more on Daney's account of the phenomenon of *zapping*, see James Tweedie, "Serge Daney, Zapper: Cinema, Television, and the Persistence of Media," *October* no. 157 (Summer 2016), pp. 107-127.

24 A number of these texts were collected in Daney, *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sacs à mains*, while the remainder have been included in Serge Daney, *La Maison cinéma et le monde, vol. III: Les Années Libé 1986-1991*, ed. Patrice Rollet (Paris: P.O.L., 2012).

25 Serge Daney, "La guerre, le visuel, l'image," in idem., *La Maison cinéma et le monde vol. III*, pp. 323-329, here p. 328.

part of the visual. [...] But the visual does not relate to seeing, it relates to all these words that are now so successful: viewing [*visionnage*], visioning [*visionnement*], vision."²⁶

Two geopolitical events were decisive for the development of Daney's ideas in this period. The first was the overthrow of the Ceausescu in Romania, the media coverage of which formed a prototype for the executions of latter-day dictators such as Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi. The Romanian "revolution" of 1989 was unique in its relation to television broadcasting: not only was the inciting event of the uprising, a rally planned in support of Ceausescu, transmitted live to the nation, but the headquarters of Romanian state television itself became a key stake in the struggle for power—occupied by insurgents, it was the ability to freely broadcast anti-government messages that truly heralded the end of the regime. Watching these moments relayed by French television, Daney not only saw "traces of the footsteps of Bazin, Rossellini and Godard" in the snowy streets of Bucharest, he also discerned a "democratization" of cinematic grammar: "It is as if everyone had suddenly become a 'film critic.' Not out of cinephilia, but because the need so tremendously made itself felt."²⁷ In particular, the live broadcast of the death by firing squad of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu, shown across the world, was the cause for "notions of the freeze-frame, slow-motion, the *hors-champ* and the ellipse" to be more than just "figures of style." Instead, they were elevated to the status of "information to be decrypted (with the possibilities of lying, trickery and omission)." Following on from Bazin's discussion of the "ontological obscenity" of newsreel footage showing the shooting of Chinese revolutionaries in 1947,²⁸ the "macabre feuilleton" of the executed couple and the "eternal return" of their dead bodies to the screen revealed for Daney the three key aspects of "truth regime" specific to television: "1. There is no other truth on television than that of the *live* broadcast [*le direct*]. 2. When it comes down to it, the only live broadcast that is worthwhile is *death*. 3. The only proof of death is the possibility of producing a *corpse*."²⁹

26 Ibid., p. 324.

27 Serge Daney, "Roumanie, année zéro," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 428 (February 1990), pp. 84-86, here p. 84.

28 See Bazin, "Mort tous les après-midi."

29 Serge Daney, *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sacs à main*, p. 144. The live transmission of these events on French television was also acerbically treated by Chris Marker in the short film *Détour Ceausescu*. Television footage of the overthrow of Ceausescu was also repurposed for Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică's essay-film *Videogramme einer Revolution*.

The rapturous events in Romania, however, were soon followed by the much more chastening experience of the 1991 Gulf War, the media coverage of which brought Daney in close proximity to the Baudrillard of *La guerre du golfe n'a pas eu lieu*.³⁰ Daney dedicated a series of articles for *Libération* to charting the obscene nightmare of watching a live broadcast of war as the conflict unfurled in January 1991. He took particular aim at the rolling CNN coverage of the combat, which transformed the reality of war into a Schwarzenegger action-hero movie.³¹ After the end of fighting, Daney would take a deeper, retrospective look at the war in the key text “Montage obligé,” written in April 1991. Returning to his opposition between the visual and the image, Daney noted that the “video-game”-style depiction of the war concealed the existence of “a true missing image, that of Baghdad under the bombs,” and it is this absent image that “obliged all of us to ‘imagine’ something, which would depend on our opinions, nightmares or memories of war-films.” Whereas Bazin spoke of a “prohibition” of montage, Daney insists on its necessity. But the montage he refers to is of an imaginary, purely mental nature: “I had the sentiment, euphoric in the beginning and onerous at the end, of having become an *editor [monteur] in my head*. A history of fabricating enough imaginary to struggle against the real threat of irrealization. Like a madman, I randomly edited what I saw with all the missing images, all the *hors-champs*.” In this context, the simple feats of seeing and showing had become “acts of resistance”; our own imagination—a “phantom of the image”—turned out to be the site of a “bitter victory.”³²

Aumont and the Twenty-First-Century Image

Serge Daney’s untimely death prevented him from continuing his work beyond the early 1990s, but the reflection on the contemporary status of the image, occasionally taking direct inspiration from Daney’s writings, has been continued by two other former *Cahiers* writers. Unlike Daney, Aumont and Comolli both left *Cahiers* on unequivocal terms in 1973, but from that moment on, their lives would take rather different trajectories. Despite these divergent paths, both figures have pursued a prolonged investigation of the cinema and its relationship with “new media” that has resulted in

30 See Jean Baudrillard, *La guerre du golfe n'a pas eu lieu* (Paris: Galilée, 1991). Translated as *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

31 Serge Daney, *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sacs à main*, p. 157.

32 The above quotes are from *ibid.*, p. 166.

a considerable arsenal of writings on the subject, which continues to the present day.

As discussed in Chapter 19, Aumont's scholarly output in the 1980s and 1990s mostly focused on a discussion of directors from the canon of film history—among them Eisenstein, Epstein, Dreyer, Bergman and Godard. Occasionally, however, he tackled audiovisual products that would seemingly be far less propitious as an object of aesthetic discourse. In 1983, for instance, Aumont offered a close analysis of the animated television program *Grendizer* (known as *Goldorak* in France), a precursor to series such as *Voltron* and *Transformers* that was produced by the Japanese firm Toei.³³ This show, a totally anonymous, industrial product made cheaply with the single goal of keeping children entertained, could hardly have been more remote from the auteurist cinema on which Aumont had otherwise concentrated his critical energies. And yet, even though there is a degree of playful irony in his discussion of the show, Aumont discerns a certain cinematic heritage in its visual elements, particularly when it comes to framing and editing. The frequent use of high-angled, low-angled and Dutch-angled shots recalls Welles ("a style in which we see not only what we see, but also the manner in which we see it"), while the fast-paced editing, in which "the change of shots never, or only very remotely, follows the rules of classic match-cuts, the passage from one shot to the next being effected according to a logic of minimal narrative implication" harkens back to the Soviet montage tradition.³⁴ Certain "shots," meanwhile, are so abstract as to approximate tachist painting, and Aumont is also struck by the show's stylistic *Japonité*, particularly parallels with the tradition of East Asian calligraphy. But the most unique aesthetic characteristic of the show, and the major source of its "strangeness," comes in its articulation of filmic rhythm and temporality: there is such a frequent alternation of shots that the resulting saccadic tempo leads to time in the show being *read* rather than *perceived*: "we see here the production of something like a temporal scintillation [...] whose reference to real time becomes more and more doubtful." Thus, of all the arts, that to which *Grendizer* is aesthetically closest is, surprisingly, music: "The film does not reproduce [...] a profilmic time; it produces time. Such an enigmatic utterance, so often used with respect to music, here assumes,

33 Aumont's article was first published in Italian as "Un' estetica industriale (a proposito di *Goldrake*)," in Francesco Casetti (ed.), *L'immagine al plurale* (Venice: Marsilio, 1984), pp. 233-47. The original French version was reprinted in Aumont's *À quoi pensent les films* (Paris: Séguier, 1996), pp. 174-95.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

with absolute tranquility, a self-evident meaning, even though it is, strictly speaking, incomprehensible.”³⁵

Although not discussed in these terms in the above article, the dissemination of stylistic techniques from Eisenstein and Welles to a mass-produced children’s cartoon follows the phenomenon described by German art historian Aby Warburg as the “migration” of aesthetic forms. Aumont explicitly adopted this concept in a three-part series of articles called “Migrations” from the late 1990s.³⁶ Here, he focuses more particularly on the mechanisms by which specific motifs from painting and silent cinema are transposed not just to modernist cinema through the conscious act of citation but also to more humble realms of audiovisual creation and through more enigmatic, indiscernible means. A notable example is the reproduction of imagery from Murnau’s adaptation of *Faust* in not only Éric Rohmer’s film *La Marquise d’O* (a film that intentionally cites a number of artistic predecessors) but also Disney’s *Fantasia*—with the processes by which such transferences take place remaining an enigma that, even if the scholar may attempt to find solutions, resists straightforward explanations.

In more recent years, Aumont has dedicated two short pamphlets to the question of contemporary cinema and its relations with the broader culture of image production in the twenty-first century. While more concise and informal than his scholarly works, these books nonetheless offer a more unmediated exposition of Aumont’s personal views, substantially freed from the expectations of “objective” academic writing. In the first of these works, *Moderne? (Comment le cinéma est devenu le plus singulier des arts)*, Aumont investigates the question of modernism in film, arguing for the existence of two strands of cinematic modernity in the post-war era: the Welles line (vaunting the freedom of the artist to experiment formally) and the Rossellini line (highlighting the filmmaker’s receptivity to his surrounding reality).³⁷ In more recent times, however, the situation becomes less clear. As with many of his *Cahiers* colleagues, Aumont pinpoints the

35 Ibid., p. 195.

36 See Jacques Aumont, “Migrations,” *Cinémathèque* no. 7 (Spring 1995), pp. 35-47; Jacques Aumont, “Vanités (Migrations, 2),” *Cinémathèque*, no. 16 (Fall 1999), pp. 7-21; and Jacques Aumont, “Annonciations (Migrations, 3),” *CINÉMAS* vol. 12 no. 3 (Spring 2002), pp. 53-71.

37 These two lines, of course, represent tendencies that dominated within *Cahiers* in the 1950s, especially in the writings of André Bazin and Jacques Rivette. The journal famously neglected avant-garde and experimental cinema and was actively hostile to most of the New York underground filmmakers—a prejudice for which Aumont issues a humble self-criticism. See Jacques Aumont, *Moderne? Comment le cinéma est devenu le plus singulier des arts* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2007), pp. 69-70.

end of cinematic modernism as taking place in the early 1980s (with the election of Mitterand in 1981 serving as a useful demarcation point), but this is the culmination of a process that, in his view, had already begun by the time of the student revolts of 1968. At the same time, the aesthetic specificity of cinema is also under threat. Whereas Daney located this threat in the cultural dominance of television and "the visual," Aumont highlights the absorption of the cinema's heritage by the contemporary art milieu—whether through the "museification" of filmmakers brought about by the increasing trend of galleries to dedicate exhibitions to canonized figures in film history (Hitchcock, Cocteau, Renoir, etc.) or through the reproduction of cinematic forms and tropes in the work of artists safely ensconced in the gallery world (Bill Viola, Douglas Gordon, Christian Marclay), not to mention the "migration" of filmmakers from the cinematic *dispositif* to installation work, to varying degrees of success (Weerasethakul, Egoyan, Farocki, Varda and, notoriously, Godard, whose 2006 Centre Pompidou exhibition provoked heated debate). In the end, however, Aumont refuses to accept the notion that the cinema has been assimilated into the broader *dispositif* of contemporary art; instead, it continues to possess the eternal quality of *contemporaneity* and has not ceased to invent forms that have both "effects of novelty and effects of actuality."³⁸ In other words, "the cinema has not changed; in the same evening, I can see a Ford and a Hitchcock, or a John Woo and a Kiarostami; I will have less of a sentiment of traveling in time than of traveling between styles."³⁹

These ruminations will be continued in *Que reste-t-il du cinéma?*, a pamphlet published in 2012. Here, Aumont confronts the purported "crisis" brought about by the rise of digital technology in the production and dissemination of audiovisual works, offering a polemical riposte to the theses on the "death" of the cinema that have been articulated since its centenary in 1995. In particular, Aumont spars with D.N. Rodowick's *The Virtual Life in Film*, in which the American academic argued that the advent of digital imagery represented the definitive end of the cinematic era and that "digital-native" works such as *Russian Ark* can no longer be considered films in the traditional sense of the word.⁴⁰ For Aumont, Sokurov's undertaking is "still a work of moving images, and this is what I call a film. In short, to my eyes, film is defined in spectatorial, not creational terms."⁴¹ Conversely,

38 Ibid., p. 101.

39 Ibid., p. 112.

40 See D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

41 Jacques Aumont, *Que reste-t-il du cinéma?* (Paris: Vrin, 2012), p. 18.

however, he also repudiates the advocates of “expanded cinema,” from Gene Youngblood to Philippe Dubois, who have argued that *all* forms of moving image culture belong to the same broad social practice, contending that the “segregation of milieux” separating cinema from video art is “far from having disappeared, even if it has shifted its frontiers.”⁴² Aumont’s avowedly pragmatic position is, as he concludes, that the cinema “remains, quite simply, the cinema.”⁴³ He nonetheless admits that there have been major metamorphoses in recent times, of which he points to two: firstly, that the cinema “no longer has the exclusivity of moving images,” sharing this role with television, the internet and the gallery; and secondly, that “mass cinema” (Hollywood and its international counterparts) has taken the “Méliès path,” abandoning Lumièreist (or Bazinian) realism in favor of the use of CGI imagery and spectacular special effects, which are devoid of any grounding in a worldly referent.⁴⁴

In other writings, however, Aumont is more circumspect about professing a continued faith in the vitality of the cinema. At one point in his recent short text on *Montage*, he claims that “Ours is not a theoretical age, no more so in the cinema than elsewhere,”⁴⁵ while his conclusion to *Les Théories des cinéastes* seems particularly pessimistic: not only does he confess to not being “absolutely sure, in the end, that the cinema is an art” but, noting that few of his chosen filmmaker-theorists are under the age of fifty, he also muses that “perhaps theory, like art, was a matter for the twentieth century.”⁴⁶ For a writer who devoted much to developing the foundations of an aesthetic theory of the cinema, this appears to be a particularly self-defeating verdict.

Comolli on Cinema and Spectacle

For a more militant standpoint on contemporary visual culture, we can instead turn to the work of Comolli. Out of all the ex-members of the *Cahiers* team from the late 1960s and early 1970s, Comolli is the most unrepentant

42 Ibid., p. 21.

43 Ibid., p. 116.

44 Ibid., pp. 55, 60. On a technical level, if there is one innovation from the late twentieth century that Aumont finds truly significant from an aesthetic point of view, it is, curiously enough, neither the digital image nor the proliferation of miniature, mobile screens but rather the “pause” button on video players, which produces “an image of a new nature,” a hybrid fusion of the still and moving images.

45 Jacques Aumont, *Montage*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: Caboose, 2014), p. 46.

46 Jacques Aumont, *Les Théories des cinéastes*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), p. 179.

when it comes to the journal's core political project, the tenets of which have been upheld, to a large degree, in his more recent writings. Comolli's critical/theoretical output has been collected in two anthologies, *Voir et pouvoir* (2003) and *Corps et cadre* (2010). Together, they total more than 1200 pages of text, little of which has been translated into English. His major work of this period, however, is the monograph *Cinéma contre spectacle* (2009), which combines a reprint of the six parts of "Technique et idéologie" with a new text tackling the same subject matter from the standpoint of the early twenty-first century. Comolli in no way retreats from his earlier line of argumentation adopted in the "Technique et idéologie" articles, with their insistence on the "reciprocal reinforcement" of ideological and economic demands in the invention and subsequent evolution of the cinema. Rather, he avows that "these six articles from 1971-1972 have not ceased to shape my work" and admits to still being "haunted" by his time with the journal.⁴⁷ In the intervening years, his field of reference had expanded from the strict Marxist-Leninist framework of the early 1970s, taking in theorists such as Rancière, Nancy, Deleuze, Stiegler and Adorno. It is, however, the work of Debord that is perhaps of greatest importance for the Comolli of 2009, and a central claim of his new text is that "The holy alliance of the spectacle and the commodity, foreseen and analyzed by Guy Debord from 1967 onwards, has now been realized. It governs our world. From pole to pole, across the tropics, capital in its current guise has found the ultimate weapon for its domination: images and sounds combined." The global economic crisis that had just begun at the time of his writing did nothing to significantly alter this fact: "The show must go on! The same screens show, on loop, the same audiovisual standards, the same commodified buttresses for the need to see and hear, the same forms and the same formulae." Comolli even suggests that the dominance of the spectacle in contemporary society and its inversion of the Marxist conception of the relationship between economics and ideology (today, the spectacle does not merely serve the commodity, it has become its "supreme form") has "gone far beyond what Debord was able to predict and announce."⁴⁸

In a historical irony, the cinema prepared the ground for the grip of the spectacle on our lives, but it is also its first victim, succumbing to "the overwhelming flux of audiovisual entertainment" and thereby losing its

47 Jean-Louis Comolli, *Cinéma contre spectacle* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2009), p. 18. Translated as *Cinema against Spectacle: Technique and Ideology Revisited*, trans. and ed. Daniel Fairfax (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), p. 57.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 8 [pp. 49-50].

aesthetic specificity. Unlike Debord, however, Comolli refuses the thesis of a totalitarian omnipotence of the spectacle that would render void any form of resistance to the status quo, and he retains a belief in the viability of the struggle to “salvage something of man’s human dimension.”⁴⁹ Here, Comolli references Rancière’s notion of the “emancipated spectator” but argues instead for a “critical spectator” capable of analyzing and critiquing the forms presented by the spectacle and welcoming the advent of new, liberated types of images.⁵⁰ Importantly, and in this area he follows directly in the line of his *Cahiers* heritage, Comolli insists that such a struggle cannot merely take place on the level of content, since contemporary media can assimilate practically any discourse that is presented in a consensual fashion. He even registers his dissatisfaction with the fact that those who are opposed to global capitalism too often “speak the language of the enemy.” Rather, “defeating or overcoming the existing order of things requires the invention of forms that are different to those serving to repress our consciousness and our movements.”⁵¹ On this basis, Comolli embarks on an extensive discussion of the political and theoretical implications of film *form*, but when it comes to specific modes of resistance in this domain, he perceives a second historical irony. Whereas fragmentary techniques such as the rapid montage of Vertov or the jump-cut of Godard’s *À bout de souffle* were initially developed as a means by which film form could be emancipated from the stifling conventions of narrative cinema, the same procedures have now been generalized by television’s “aesthetic of abbreviation,” which mandates a “frenetically agitated scopic drive in a kaleidoscope of visual effects.”⁵² The Pyrrhic victory of the montage-aesthetic in video clips and TV commercials means that, for Comolli, the “principle of fragmentation has switched sides in the battle” and it is “by entirely different formal means that the cinema today hopes to resurrect the vitality of Vertov’s utopia.”⁵³ Comolli, indeed, finds appropriate forms of resistance to the spectacle at the opposite end of the aesthetic spectrum to the rapid montage of the Soviet avant-garde. It is in the long-take aesthetic of contemporary “slow cinema,” and in particular the distinctly neo-Bazinian work of filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami, Jia Zhang-ke and Pedro Costa, that a true resistance to the media forms of neoliberal capitalism can be found. In Comolli’s view, this “*anti-spectacle*,

49 Ibid., p. 10 [p. 51].

50 Ibid., p. 11 [p. 52]. See also Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2009). Translated as *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011).

51 Comolli, *Cinéma contre spectacle*, p. 10 [p. 51]

52 Ibid., p. 95 [p. 118].

53 Ibid., p. 106 [p. 126-127].

capable of dis-alienating us from the dominant spectacular alienation," is the only viable means for the cinema to persist as an autonomous medium.⁵⁴

Two works by Comolli written in the years 2015-2016 have further developed the theoretical and political standpoint outlined in *Cinéma contre spectacle*. In *Cinéma, mode d'emploi: De l'argentique au numérique*, a handbook on filmmaking arranged around alphabetically ordered key terms and co-authored with the film technician Vincent Sorrel, Comolli focuses on the recent shift from celluloid to digital video in film production and distribution. Comolli/Sorrel use the handbook format in order to produce a theoretical interrogation of the digital transition. But the orientation informing this discussion is marked by a deep irony. For the most part, the emergence of computer-based imagery is treated in a negative light. The digital is a mere simulacrum of the film-based cinema-image, and its present dominance represents a technological victory for the forces of global capitalism. It is part of a broader trend towards "desolidarization, isolation, detachment"—in a word, digital cinema is a form of *dislocation*.⁵⁵ Whereas the world captured on film is characterized by an irrevocable interdependence of the "elements of the plastic composition," the digital is "like a new catechism that proclaims the era of delinking, the era of the irresponsibility of the components of the visible with respect to one another, and the irresponsibility of the engineers and artists who handle these components."⁵⁶ Key formal aspects of the cinema that have been integral to its functioning not only as an art form but as a tool for seeing the world—elements such as framing, *découpage*, the *hors-champ*, depth and duration—find themselves annihilated by the digital image. Even the dialectic between belief and doubt—the *entre-deux* state of the "*Je sais bien, mais quand même*" effect necessary for an engaged response to the cinematic image—is threatened with desuetude. And yet, Comolli himself, in his own cinematic practice, has resolutely turned to digital production. He does not call for a neo-Luddite refusal of the new tools available to filmmakers. Instead, he urges the cinéastes of today to follow the lead of Rouch and Godard, who both, in their own ways, combined groundbreaking technological innovation with restless formal experimentation, and whose artisanal, even amateur-like practice "never stopped reinventing techniques

54 Ibid., p. 117 [p. 136].

55 Jean-Louis Comolli and Vincent Sorrel, *Cinéma, mode d'emploi: De l'argentique au numérique* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2015), p. 18.

56 Ibid., p. 19.

for filming situations inaccessible to the ‘professionals.’”⁵⁷ Digital cinema, Comolli insists, is a practice that “is yet to be invented.”⁵⁸

The next year, a shorter, pamphlet-style text by Comolli tackled the contemporary usage of the digital image in one of its most horrifying guises. In *Daech, le cinéma et la mort*, Comolli turns his attention to the present-day phenomenon of the ISIS video clip, a genre of digital filmmaking in which atrocities carried out by the Islamic fundamentalist movement—murders, acts of torture, beheadings, drownings—are captured on smartphone cameras and relayed around the world on video-sharing websites, reaching a global audience within hours of these vicious deeds taking place. Given his youth in Algeria, where he directly witnessed human rights abuses committed by French colonial authorities, the phenomenon of the ISIS video could not avoid arousing deep personal resonances for Comolli. It would seem to be straightforward for Comolli to return to the binary couple he had established in his 2009 monograph and consign these clips to a status within the spectacle, in stark opposition to the cinema. But the theorist takes a different, more provocative line of argument: in fact, these audiovisual artefacts fulfil all the fundamental requirements of the cinema. Although they may never be projected in movie theaters, they are nonetheless produced for and shown on screens. Moreover, they are recordings of the real, which are inscribed within a defined frame and duration. They are acts of *mise en scène*, whether rudimentary or (increasingly) sophisticated, and they thus come within the category of the cinema. Comolli admits that this conclusion “shocks me, it overturns what remains in me of my young cinephilia.” But, he resolutely declares, “this is a fact.”⁵⁹ Indeed, Comolli will go further and register the close parallels between the aesthetic strategies of ISIS’s social media teams and those of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters: both seek to reduce the spectator to “a *montage of sensations*: fear, hallucination, stupefaction, fascination, shaking, trembling, horror... The effects and the forms used to produce them are pretty much the same.”⁶⁰ The complicity between ISIS’s video strategy and Hollywood, as well as the major tech corporations whose products are used to film and transmit these atrocities (Apple, Google, Facebook, etc.) is, for Comolli, a mirror image of the larger symbiotic relationship between the military

57 Ibid., p. 32.

58 Ibid., p. 67. That this was not to be Comolli’s last word on digital cinema proved to be the case when, in 2019, he published the short book *Cinema numérique, survie: L’Art du temps* (Lyons: ENS, 2019).

59 Jean-Louis Comolli, *Daech, le cinéma et la mort* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2016), p. 12.

60 Ibid., pp. 32-33.

machine of US imperialism and the radical Islamic movements active in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

The ISIS video is cinema because it exercises the same ethical and ontological stakes as films traditionally have, stakes that are made more acute when the cinematic image is the site for an encounter with death. The same ontological obscenity that Bazin had located in the newsreel footage of Shanghai communists executed by the Kuomintang in 1949 is on display when the spectator is confronted with one of the clips ISIS disseminates on sites such as YouTube. The question thus presents itself as to whether we, as spectators, should view this grisly footage. Comolli understands and respects the decision to refuse to do so, all the more legitimate for resisting the "doxa of the image market [...] *that everything should be showable and visible.*"⁶¹ But he baldly asserts that this choice is not his own:

On the contrary, I think that it is necessary to see with one's own eyes one or more of these little films, to tolerate the images of violent death made by an executioner and thrown up onto a screen, not only in order to observe that the ignominy of those who show such images can go beyond abjection [...] but, I will not deny it, in the hope of *saving* the cinema from what sullies it, condensable in the formula of the *all-visible*.⁶²

The fight against ISIS, therefore, is an intra-cinematic war: it involves cinema practitioners taking up the battle against *other* cinema practitioners, deploying cinematic forms against *other* cinematic forms. While Comolli discusses the ISIS media center Al-Hayat in great depth, he also points to positive counterexamples such as the Syrian collective Abounadarra, whose members, inspired by the legacy of Godard's militant period, are engaged in making video works aimed at combating the politics of Islamic fundamentalism in one of its most vicious guises. But this struggle also raises the need for film theory, for spectators to attain a level of critical awareness and embark on a reflection of the images they watch. If we must watch the ISIS videos that presently swash around the backwaters of the internet, then this should be not only to critique these image-forms but also to transform the society in which such images could be born and consumed. Film theory, therefore, is not a disinterested mode of

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 11

⁶² Ibid.

comprehending the world but a zone of resistance against the present social order.⁶³

A Zone of Resistance: *Trafic*

If, today, there is an organ where film theory can be exercised as an act of resistance, then it is the French film quarterly *Trafic*. Furthermore, if there is a site for continuing, in the present day, the *Cahiers* tradition of thinking on the cinema—a critical, theoretical approach with its origins in Bazin and which persisted through the editorships of Rohmer, Rivette, Comolli/Narboni and Daney/Toubiana, in spite of the considerable political vicissitudes the journal underwent—then it is also *Trafic*. Named after the 1972 Tati film, *Trafic* was founded by Daney in 1991 and continues to be published today. In the intervening years, it has regularly showcased the writing of his comrades from the post-1968 years, including Comolli, Narboni, Aumont, Eisenschitz and Bonitzer, as well as former *Cahiers* writers from other generations such as Jacques Bontemps, Jean-Claude Biette, Jean-André Fieschi, Luc Moullet and Jean Douchet. Fellow travelers of *Cahiers*, including Jacques Rancière, Jean Louis Schefer, Georges Didi-Huberman and Giorgio Agamben, have found a place on the pages of *Trafic*, as have “international correspondents” such as Jonathan Rosenbaum, Bill Krohn, Tag Gallagher and Adrian Martin. Today, *Trafic* is one of the rare publications to promote *writing* on the cinema—writing, that is, in a truly literary register, which escapes both the disposable consumerism of most film reviewing and the colorless insipidity of much academic scholarship. Articles can take the form of lengthy papers or shorter, more idiosyncratic pieces, as well as dialogues, correspondences and even poetry. Regardless of format, however, its editors, following Daney’s lead, insist on the primacy of original, independent thinking on the cinema.

Although the idea for a quarterly initially surfaced in conversations with producer Paolo Branco as far back as 1986, under the influence of Schefer’s short-lived review *Café* (for which Daney wrote occasional articles), Daney’s decision to found *Trafic* was precipitated by his alienation from *Libération* in 1991. After several years of writing predominantly on television and the

63 For a more detailed response to Comolli’s book, see Daniel Fairfax, “Cinema against cinema: *Daech, le cinéma et la mort*,” *Senses of Cinema* no. 83 (June 2017), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2017/book-reviews/cinema-against-cinema-daech-le-cinema-et-la-mort-by-jean-louis-comolli/attachment/fairfax-image-5-5/> (accessed January 1, 2021).

media, he felt the urge to return to the cinema. Bemoaning the fact that the only major decisions he had made in life had been negative ones—leaving *Cahiers* in 1981, and then, ten years later, departing *Libération*—Daney expressed pride at discovering that he “was capable of a positive act” such as founding a new journal, even if this decision took place both near the end of his life and at a historical juncture where the cinema seemed to have aesthetically exhausted itself.⁶⁴ While Daney’s work at *Cahiers* and *Libération* was perforce dominated by cinematic actuality, the format that *Trafic* offered allowed for a deeper grappling with film history: “Today, it’s about putting the cinema, and only the cinema, back into a history that will no longer be synchronic, but rather diachronic: from which came the idea of creating *Trafic*.”⁶⁵ As for his views on the world of “new images” as it constituted itself in the 1980s and 1990s, Daney came to make a striking transformation, coming full circle, as it were, to his past at *Cahiers*:

I have again become a Marxist: there is something called the market, and it has to be ready to welcome true and great new contributions, in terms of images and sounds, which can’t be reduced to the state of appliances and the rivalry between Sony and Phillips. That takes place at a purely economic level; there is a corporate battle with the possibilities of new images of which no one sees the ludic after-effects. [...] We don’t see the desire for a new *Train en gare de La Ciotat* anywhere.⁶⁶

Trafic, of course, did not reproduce the strictly defined Marxism-Leninism of the post-1968 period at *Cahiers*. Daney established the journal’s mission statement in the following terms: “*Trafic* seeks to rediscover, retrace, or invent the path that allow us to better know, today, ‘how to live with images.’ The journal is open to all those whose first passion is the image, who have the cinema in their cultural baggage, and whose second passion is writing.”⁶⁷ As opposed to the “general line” mentality of *Cahiers*, *Trafic* has been defined by its heterodoxy and its pluralistic openness to different modes of thinking about the cinema. And yet it has situated itself, within the cultural constellation of French letters, in a firmly socially critical position, distancing itself from the conservative consensus of the 1980s

64 Daney, *Persévérance*, p. 68 [p. 58].

65 *Ibid.*, p. 158 [p. 132].

66 *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163 [p. 135].

67 Serge Daney, “Comment vivre avec les images,” in *idem.*, *La Maison cinéma et le monde vol. IV: Le moment Trafic 1991-1992*, ed. Patrice Rollet (Paris: P.O.L., 2016), p. 23.

and early 1990s and unafraid, at times, to take a militant stance on the political issues of the day, a tendency that became all the more urgent in the early years of the twenty-first century, where global events such as the September 11 attacks, the Iraq War, and the global financial crisis of 2008 all called for the development of a critical theory of the image in combination with a renewed political militancy. In other ways, too, the profile of *Trafic* uncannily resembles that of *Cahiers* in its “red years”: at Daney’s behest, the journal is obstinately free of images, printed on rough paper, with an austere, brown cardboard cover. Its readership consists of a small band of loyalists, with a subscription base measuring in the hundreds, and it is maintained partly through the forbearance of the publisher P.O.L., which supports the project due largely to the prestige attached to publishing the “*revue de Daney*.”

Daney set the tone for *Trafic* with the articles he published in the first three issues of the journal, which took the form of diaristic accounts of his viewing habits and the thoughts that these daily encounters inspired in the critic. The questions that pursued him during this time were numerous: “Is the cinema an art? Will it be preserved, in whole or in part? What will become of what we loved about it? What will become of us, we who so unduly loved ourselves via the cinema? And what will become of the world that it promised us, whose citizens we were impelled to be?”⁶⁸ There must be a place, Daney insists, for writing about such questions, “in order for this oral tradition to continue. Before the old-timers shuffle off into retirement. There must be a journal, for example. A film journal.”⁶⁹ As fate would have it, Daney did not live to see *Trafic*’s first anniversary. If the journal has survived for another three decades, then this has in large measure been the result of the tireless efforts of the editors who have overseen it during this time, a team that has included Raymond Bellour, Jean-Claude Biette (until his death in 2003), Patrice Rollet, Marcos Uzal and Daney’s old colleague at *Cahiers*, Sylvie Pierre.

After returning to France from Brazil in 1976, Pierre chose not to resume film criticism in anything more than an occasional capacity, sporadically publishing articles with *Cahiers* on documentary film, Brazilian cinema and the American mini-series *Holocaust* in the late 1970s and 1980s but playing no further role in its editorial activities. Instead, she was employed full-time in the médiathèque of a government environment agency, where

68 Serge Daney, “Journal de l’an passé,” *Trafic* no. 1 (Winter 1991/1992), pp. 5-30, here p. 5. Repr. in idem., *La Maison cinéma et le monde* vol. IV, pp. 53-82.

69 Ibid.

she worked until her retirement in 2009. Daney's offer to become co-editor at *Trafic* presented Pierre with the opportunity to resume an ongoing role in film culture and to go back to writing criticism: she has published more than twenty articles for *Trafic* since its founding, becoming one of its most prolific contributors in the process. Pierre regards her work at *Trafic* as being "completely in continuity with the most intelligent things I did at *Cahiers* when I was there," adding that "carrying out an in-depth reflection on the cinema is not something that goes out of date." And yet she insists that contemporary reflection on the cinema must recognize that "the cinematic object itself has changed enormously these days. It is not at all the same. All the problematics have changed."⁷⁰ This dual imperative of fidelity to the legacy of the past and adaptation to the changed conditions of the present is eminently visible in her texts for *Trafic*, which cover not only the canon of filmmakers with which she and her colleagues have enduringly identified—Ford, Mizoguchi, Rohmer, Rivette—but also, precisely, newer problematics: the debate around *Schindler's List*, the media discourse surrounding France's World Cup final win in 1998, or the cable news coverage of the September 11 attacks.

The persistence with which Pierre and her co-editors at *Trafic* have taken this approach to the world of images was determined, perhaps more than anything, by the final text written by Daney, published in issue no. 4 of *Trafic*, the first to appear after his death and intended as the first chapter of the "real" book that his illness did not afford him the time to write. "Le travelling de *Kapò*," which was reprinted as a prologue to his conversation with Toubiana in *Persévérance*, is not only one of the most beautiful, most moving essays in the history of film criticism, it is also an incomparable encapsulation of the *Cahiers* "line," the morality of the image that exists as a fundamental conduit between the Bazin era and its Marxist period. Daney begins his text with the confession that, among the films he has never watched—a list that includes *October*, *Le jour se lève* and *Bambi*—there is one that he has nonetheless repeatedly invoked: *Kapò*. And yet, Daney maintains, he *has* seen *Kapò* because "someone showed it to me—with words."⁷¹ In Rivette's acerbic description of a single shot from the film in "De l'abjection," the former *Cahiers* editor insisted that the decision to dolly forward at the moment in the film when Emmanuelle Riva commits suicide by throwing herself on the electric fence "deserves only the most

70 Interview with Sylvie Pierre, May 26, 2014.

71 Serge Daney, "Le travelling de *Kapò*," p. 15 [p. 17].

profound contempt.”⁷² For Daney, this “abrupt and luminous” text became “my portable dogma, the axiom that wasn’t up for discussion, the breaking point in any debate. I would definitely have nothing to do or share with anyone who didn’t immediately feel the abjection of ‘the tracking shot in *Kapò*.’”⁷³ In contrast with the revulsion he felt at Pontecorvo’s film, Resnais’ *Nuit et brouillard* represented, in the young Daney’s eyes, a “just” treatment of the camps, while the implacable, absolutely modern cruelty of the panning shots of Mizoguchi’s *Tales of Ugetsu* are also “just moments,” freed of the “‘artistic’ pornography” with which Pontecorvo had imbued the movement of his camera. Daney admits that the “gravity” of his decision to opt “so early for the panoramic shot in *Ugetsu* instead of the tracking shot in *Kapò*” only dawned on him ten years later, “amidst the late and radical politicization of *Cahiers* after 1968.”⁷⁴ Pontecorvo, he admits, was a “courageous filmmaker” who shared Daney’s own political views, while Mizoguchi was a “political opportunist” who had managed to make films throughout the era of Japanese fascism. But the justness of the forms the filmmakers respectively use trumps the correctness of their political convictions.

Turning to his own time, Daney sees an echo of the “tracking shot in *Kapò*” in a charity music video by the group “USA for Africa” he glimpsed on television, which insouciantly mixed images of rich singers (belting out the refrain “We are the world, we are the children!”) with images of Third World inhabitants on the brink of starvation. But Daney was dismayed that this “present face of abjection” seemed not to perturb anyone at all. In television, he concluded, alterity has disappeared, and “there are no longer good or bad ways to manipulate images. There are no longer ‘images of the other’ but images among others on the market of brand images.”⁷⁵ It is only in the cinema that an encounter with the other could take place. As Daney recognized, what fundamentally distinguished him and his fellow *Cahiers* critics was their dogged “belief” in film. This was the reason why he had “adopted” cinema in the first place: “so it could adopt me in return and teach me to ceaselessly touch—with the gaze—that distance between myself and the place where the other begins.”⁷⁶

72 Rivette, “De l’abjection,” p. 55. Cited in Daney, “Le travelling de *Kapò*,” p. 16 [p. 17]. For more on Rivette’s text, see the introductory remarks to Part II.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 16 [pp. 17-18].

74 *Ibid.*, p. 28 [pp. 26].

75 *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38 [pp. 33-34].

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Conclusion

Serge Daney once declared that there is one quality, above all, that defines *Cahiers du cinéma*: it resembles its time.¹ This quality is embodied, perhaps more than any other generation of *Cahiers* critics, by Daney's own cohort, whose formative moments came in the years surrounding May '68. At that time, the journal was an avatar of the historical moment, a microcosm of the near-revolution's dramas, tensions and contradictions. The *Cahiers* critics felt, with full force, both the highs and the lows of these years, the giddy moments of utopian dreaming, followed by the crushing return of the political real. Comolli undoubtedly speaks for all of his comrades when he confesses that these *années terribles* still haunt him today, a half-century later.² For all of the *Cahiers* critics, this period left an indelible imprint on their lives, one that leaves them alternating between immense pride at their achievements in the arena of film criticism and theory and uneasy discomfort, even trauma, at the impasses they came up against, the infighting, dogmatism and cruel intransigence to which the journal's Marxist orientation led them.

And yet this resemblance to their time, this fundamental *contemporaneity* with the broader sweep of historical events, was not limited to the post-1968 era. After 1973, the *équipe* splintered, its members setting off on dispersed biographical pathways. But they have all retained a fidelity to the emancipatory kernel of the era of late 1960s-early 1970s militancy and its globally critical mode of thinking. None of them have unequivocally disavowed their past or beaten a path towards the political right, as so many of their peers were to do in the conservative wave of the late 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, they have all remained contemporary with their times and with the cinema of these times, throughout the decisive shifts and changes that have marked the decades since the radical years of their youth. Those *Cahiers* critics who are still alive have now entered their seventies. To their immense credit, however, they have not nostalgically wallowed in their own past or the past

1 Daney, *La Rampe*, p. 12.

2 Comolli, *Cinéma contre spectacle*, p. 18 [p. 58].

of the cinema. Rather, they have consistently engaged with (and made) new works and sought to re-read the films of old through the light of the present, its events, social phenomena and ideas. In spite of their advanced age, many of them are now more active in film culture than they ever have been, and none of them hesitated to articulate their views when I proposed to interview them. At the risk of seeing this book pass steadily into obsolescence, I can only hope that their present fecund output continues well into the future.

For this reason, restricting my study of the work that this generation of *Cahiers* critics produced to the years 1968-1973 was not an option—despite the fact that this has been the dominant approach adopted in earlier examinations of this moment in film criticism. Fundamental continuities link the later (and, in some cases, earlier) output of these writers with the texts they yielded when they were unified as a group. They simply demand to be read together. The result is that an intellectual universe has opened up—one that spreads out in myriad directions while still remaining centered on a series of core ideas relating to ideology, politics, aesthetics and ontology in the cinema. The length of these two volumes attests not only to the immense body of work that the figures under study have generated over the course of more than half a century of thinking about the cinema, it also points to the multiplicity of theoretical tendencies that exerted an influence on the journal and the daunting number of theorists, philosophers, filmmakers, artists and writers with whom the *Cahiers* critics have entered into dialogue.

As I have consistently argued, two intellectual traditions, above all, have distinguished the post-1968 generation of critics: the film theory of Bazin, which was further developed at *Cahiers* under the stewardship of Rohmer and Rivette before the baton was passed onto Comolli and Narboni; and the critical theory of Althusser, Lacan, Barthes and a panoply of other contemporary thinkers (Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Deleuze, Rancière, Macherey, Schefer and Metz, to name only a few). Throughout the shifting attitudes that the *Cahiers* critics had towards these two lineages, their critical project was consistently marked by attempts to synthesize them with each other. But the constituent elements were combustible when brought together, and the resulting theoretical fusion was highly unstable. If the volatile history of *Cahiers* in the years following 1968 was a reflection of broader historical paroxysms, it was also, we can posit, determined by the conceptual convulsions that the journal's mix of theoretical elements generated. And yet, while the answers the *Cahiers* critics came up with may have been constantly changing, a fundamental question was persistently posed: namely, what is *behind* images? What do they reveal about our ideological formations, our political structures, our artistic movements? What do they reveal about the real itself?

This is a question that is more pertinent than ever, even with the sweeping transformation of our media environment in the period since the apogee of “political modernism” in film studies. For this reason, my study is conceived not merely as a historical overview, taking stock of a distinct period that can be safely confined to the past. Rather it is intended as a clarion call for the present, prompting us to follow the lead of the *Cahiers* critics and think about the cinema, and society with the same radical rigor and critical insight that they adopted in the 1960s and 1970s. In his essay on “Le traveling de Kapò,” Daney recalls photocopying Rivette’s “De l’abjection” to disseminate among his pupils while teaching at Paris-III in the early 1970s—a “‘red’ period when some students were trying to glean a bit of the political radicalism of ’68 from their professors.” Already, he could feel the pertinence of the text fading for this younger generation of cinephiles: “the most motivated of them consented to see ‘De l’abjection’ as an interesting historical, but slightly dated document.” Writing in 1992, he imagines that, should he repeat the experiment with a newer crop of students, “I wouldn’t be so concerned as to whether or not they understood the tracking shot, but I would have my heart set on knowing that they saw *some* trace of abjection.” Daney’s fear, however, was that this would not happen, which he read as “a sign that not only are tracking shots no longer a moral issue, but that the cinema is even too weak to entertain such a question.”³ As students of *Cahiers*, of texts such as “Ontologie de l’image photographique,” “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français,” “De l’abjection,” “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” “Technique et idéologie,” “La suture,” *Le Champ aveugle*, “Le travelling de Kapò,” *Cinéma contre spectacle* and *tutti quanti*, it is imperative that we disprove Daney’s gloomy hypothesis and that we keep this theoretical legacy alive—not simply as a museum piece from a past era but as a living, organically evolving way of thinking about and practicing the cinema. As spectators, critics, scholars and filmmakers, we too must resemble our time. The survival of the cinema depends on it.

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3 Daney, “Le travelling de Kapò,” pp. 30-31 [p. 28].

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The Red Years of Cahiers du Cinéma (1968-1973) gives an overview of this period in the journal's history and its aftermath, combining biographical accounts of the critics who wrote for *Cahiers* in the post-1968 period with theoretical explorations of their key texts.

Daniel Fairfax is Assistant Professor of Film Studies at the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt and an editor of the online film journal *Senses of Cinema*.

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