Life-cycle of Cahiers du cinéma. The trajectory of the pre-eminent film journal, from cine-clubs of Liberated Paris to masterpieces of the New Wave, barricades to the pensée unique, tracked against broader changes in French intellectual culture.

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ADIEU TO CAHIERS

Life Cycle of a Cinema Journal

Whatever happened to Cahiers du cinéma? For decades the journal, modelled on the pages of a notebook, had published some of the most polemical and influential criticism ever to animate the world of film; it played a crucial role in establishing cinema as the ‘seventh art’. Founded in 1951 under the editorship of André Bazin, Cahiers quickly recruited a stellar group of young critics—Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol—who assured the review iconic status and international fame when, acting on their words, they took the camera onto the streets of Paris and created the New Wave. Subsequent generations of editors, including Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette and an initial joint team of Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana, brought distinctive developments in outlook and agenda—philosophy or the barricades; aestheticism or the tv channel-hopper—yet always retained the sense of a cinematic vanguard, as passionate as they were interventionist.

Cahiers still appears each month, now in a glossy magazine format indistinguishable from the ruck of mainstream cinema guides. Festival films, commercial offerings, educational angles, archives: the well-intentioned coverage is wider than ever, the style mannered, if curiously affectless; the overall effect—so much to choose from, so little at stake—has the mind-numbing quality of an upmarket consumer report. For thirty years, the journal’s interventions had helped shape the way cinema has been understood and experienced, popularly and theoretically. Cahiers both engaged and provoked film-makers into action, making it for a long time, to paraphrase Alexandre Astruc, the real stylo-caméra. Today it would seem little more stimulating than the inflight magazine on the plane to the next film festival. How did it come to this?

I. THE CRUCIBLE

In its original conception, Cahiers du cinéma was a product of the brilliant flourishing of radical intellectual culture in the Paris of the post-war era. The Left was enormously strengthened by its Resistance role, the dead-wood conservative elites correspondingly disparaged. Liberation was cultural and intellectual as much as political; literature and philosophy, politics and social theory, cinema, jazz, experimental theatre, high art and popular culture, combined and reacted upon each other to spectacular effect. Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir, Malraux, Duras, Lévi-Strauss, were producing their most powerful work. Journals of ideas—Les Temps Modernes, Esprit, Critique and many more—jostled in a crowded field, animated by sustained and hard-fought debates.
widening of horizons, after the claustrophobia of Nazi Occupation, opened up on pre-McCarthyite America and on the Italy of the neo-realists. At the same time, French cinema was producing the works of Renoir, Ophuls, Cocteau, Melville, Resnais, Bresson.

Film culture in France, after the Lumière brothers declared the medium had no future, had long proved fertile ground for a mix of styles; equally so for the interchange between criticism and practice. The first cine-club had opened in 1921, and a flurry of film magazines were published in the inter-war period. Driven into semi-clandestinity under the Occupation, this culture effloresced after 1945. A network of left-wing cine-clubs was set up in Paris. Henri Langlois re-established his Cinémathèque Française and screened (unsubtitled) Hawks, Hitchcock and film noir in the rue de Messine. [1] Among a spate of new film journals, L’Écran français had Sartre, Camus, Malraux, Becker and Langlois on its editorial board. It published such foundational texts as Astruc’s on the caméra-stylo, which invoked a notion of the film director as an individual artist comparable to a painter or an author, wielding his production unit as a novelist his fountain pen; and Roger Leenhardt’s call to choose between Ford or Wyler—early formulations of the politique des auteurs. [2] Maurice Schérer (soon to take the pseudonym Eric Rohmer, from Erich von Stroheim and Sax Rohmer, creator of Fu Manchu) was editing Gazette du cinéma, the bulletin of the Quartier Latin cine-club. In 1946, the bon-ivre cineophile Jean Georges Auriol refounded his pre-war Revue du cinéma, with a mission to challenge the golden ageism à propos the silent era and combat the nationalist praise heaped on the cinéma de qualité of Marcel Carné and René Clair. Convinced that criticism of cinema required a particular language of its own, Auriol looked to the avant-garde, to Italy, and to the work of Welles, Sturges and Wyler in the us. He published young critics such as Jacques Doniol-Valcroze (working at Cinémonde), Astruc, Pierre Kast, Bazin and Rohmer; Auriol’s own essays on cinema and painting remain seminal texts.

By 1950, the post-Liberation ebullience had begun to ebb as Cold War pressures set in; the pcf extended a more rigid control over L’Écran français and some of the cine-clubs. Divisions widened. The Party film historian Georges Sadoul represented the old-guard consensus: the silent era was to be treated with reverence, Hollywood with disdain and national products uncritically championed. By contrast, the group gathering around what was soon to become the Cahiers project was united not only by its passionate cinephilia—a new film would be reviewed by the critic who was most enthusiastic about it—but by its insistence on the need for a rupture with established cinematographic practice and theory. For them, as Peter Wollen has put it, ‘the complete overthrow of the existing regime of taste was a precondition for the triumph of new film-makers with new films, demanding to be judged on a different scale of values’. This paradigm shift could be seen as ‘the last of a series of twentieth-century critical revolutions in the name of “modernism”’ against an ancien régime of artistic convention. [3] In this struggle, the New World was seen as a cultural ally, a potent image-maker of modernity and the dynamic popular energies within it. The name Cahiers—giving their writings the suggested status of notes scribbled in school exercise-books—indicates the preliminary, if deeply serious, nature of the enterprise.

At the same time, the Cahiers constellation was exceptionally heterogenous in its range of tastes and approaches. Bazin was influenced by Sartre and the anti-colonial Catholicism of Emmanuel Mounier at Esprit; Rohmer was a high formalist; Lo Duca, more a generalist, author of Histoire du cinéma in the Que sais-je? series; Doniol-Valcroze an admirer of Buñuel. Kast was the only committed leftist of the group. Shortly to be added was the final ingredient: the polemical dynamism of a still younger group, Truffaut (Bazin’s protégé), Godard, Rivette, Chabrol. These young Turks congregated at cine-club screenings, or wrote for Schérer/Rohmer’s Gazette. They emerged as a concerted force at the Objectif 49 screenings in Biarritz in 1949, organized by Cocteau, Bresson, Queneau and others, where the 20-year-olds clashed with Sadoul over cinéma de qualité and Hollywood.

A catalyst was the sudden death of Auriol in a car crash in 1950; the Revue was over. In April 1951 a slim yellow-covered journal, Cahiers du cinéma, Revue mensuelle du cinéma et du télécinéma, was published from a cramped room at 146, avenue des Champs Elysées. Its opening manifesto denounced ‘the malevolent neutralism that would tolerate a mediocre cinema, a prudential criticism and a stupefied public’. Cited as examples of the cinema the new journal would champion were Bresson’s Diary of a Country Priest, Dmytryk’s Give Us This Day, Wilder’s
Sunset Boulevard and de Sica’s Miracle in Milan—all then on recent release in Paris.

II. 1950S—CAHIERS JAUNES

The elegant thirty-page magazine appeared each month, over A5 but under A4, its yellow cover adorned with a black-and-white still, signalling that issue’s most admired film. Four or five articles dominated the contents, and additional stills throughout contributed a further homage to the aesthetics of cinema. Financial backing came from the founder of Éditions de l’Étoile, Léonide Kiegel, and initial readership was inherited from Revue’s small number of subscribers. The first two editors were from the older generation. Bazin (b. 1918) and Rohmer (b. 1920) were both Catholics, both trained as school teachers; but otherwise quite different in formation and approach.

Bazin’s influence was pedagogic and paternal rather than polemical. Thirty-three when Cahiers was founded, he attended the École Normale Supérieure at Saint-Cloud but was refused a teaching post because of his stammer. In 1941 he joined the Maison des Lettres, working with students displaced by the war, and screening banned films in defiance of Nazi authorities. He was sympathetic to Mounier’s socially radical Catholicism, joining the editorial board of Esprit after Liberation, but also working with Les Temps Modernes. Sartre’s idea of the image-pensée—‘the image is a certain type of consciousness, an act and not a thing . . . it is the consciousness of some thing’ [4]—was an important influence on Bazin, who was fascinated by the nature of the moving image. The power of the camera lay ‘not in what it adds to reality but in what it reveals of it’—a recorder of the world that made manifest the providence of creation. [5] He saw this ‘realism’ in the work of Renoir, his favourite auteur, Rossellini and, as he argued in a Temps Modernes debate with Sartre, Welles. [6] He also wrote extensively on television, welcoming the mix of realism and imagination in the new ‘live tv dramas’ shot en direct; precursors to the fast filming of the early New Wave.

Rohmer’s initial orientation was more literary. By 1951 he had published a novel and written several screenplays, as well as presenting screenings at Parisian cine-clubs and editing the short-lived Gazette. In comparison to the eirenic Bazin, he was both more mannered and more conservative, writing for example of Hollywood:

for the talented and dedicated film-maker the California coast is not the den of iniquity that some would have us believe. It is rather that chosen land, that haven which Florence was for painters of the Quattrocento or Vienna for musicians in the nineteenth century . . . We should love America; and may I add, lest I be reproached with bias, we should love Italy: the Italy of the Roman and the Florentine legacy, but also the capital of futurist architecture and motor-racing. [7]

A major contribution to Cahiers was his five-part series on cinema theory, ‘Celluloid and Marble’, in which he elucidated an approach to film based on classical conceptions of art. Today only cinema, he argued, was flourishing creatively, whereas the other arts (he especially concentrated on painting) were in a period of decadence. [8]

Within a few years of its launch, however, it was the young Turks with their va-t-en guerre approach who were writing Cahiers’ manifestos. From the start, the journal’s critics had taken nostalgia as a target, François Chalais describing the old guard as ‘lovers of a dead sun . . . seeing ashes where a thousand phoenix are constantly reborn’. [9] But Truffaut’s polemic, ‘A Certain Tendency in French Cinema’, set a new critical tone when it appeared in January 1954—aggressive, urgent and personal. Attacking traditional cinema in favour of selected auteurs, Truffaut argued that the former, with its penchant for literary adaptations, never used the material to the advantage of film but subordinated it to an ‘equivalence principle’, producing work that was the antithesis of realism. Photographs of each guilty screenwriter or director, Jean Aurenche, Henri-Georges Clouzot and Jean Delannoy among them, were printed alongside the text like mug-shots, adding to the sense of exposure. It was a spirited attack, perhaps even boorish, Truffaut admitted; but it was either that or cowardice, and it was time
critics dispensed with drawing-room niceties.

‘A Certain Tendency’ now formulated the *politique des auteurs* into an axiomatic programme. Unlike a mere director, an *auteur* was a film-maker with a vision of the world that was made manifest through his *mise en scène*: it was not the particular subject but the way the author chose to treat it that was important; in the hands of a master, the film's most striking narrative could become a great work. Viewing therefore involved not a concentration on the content but on this cinematic staging, which was where the *auteur’s* ‘griffe’, or mark, could be grasped. Even—perhaps especially—the worst films of an *auteur* were to be appreciated in this fashion, in contrast to an oeuvre-by-oeuvre analysis. As Doniol-Valcroze would later put it, with Truffaut’s article ‘something bound us together. From then on it was known that we were for Renoir, Rossellini, Hitchcock... and against X, Y and Z’.

[10] Contents reflected the canon-building nature of this approach: major interviews explored in detail a particular director's work; the first was held in 1954. A ‘Council of Ten’ ratings list appeared from 1955, with each new release graded from blob (‘don’t bother’), one star (‘to be seen at a pinch’), two stars (‘to be seen’), three stars (‘must be seen’) to four stars (‘masterpiece’). An annual list of best directors and films was inaugurated that year. Initially, Bergman, Bresson, Mizoguchi, Nicholas Ray and Rossellini topped most critics’ nominations.

Yet in an association of such strong personalities, powerful differences would persist. A decade later Rohmer still affirmed his commitment to the *politique des auteurs and mise en scène*, understood as the art of cinema. [11] But in a ‘family quarrel’ of 1957 Bazin was already chiding his young colleagues about the shortcomings of this approach, provoked by Jean Domarchi’s glowing review of Vincente Minnelli’s pap Technicolor biopic of Van Gogh, *Lust for Life*. As an art, Bazin argued, cinema was also both popular and industrial, and these factors meant a more critical account was needed. More broadly, any artist could make better or worse works: ‘Voltaire was a horrible playwright when he thought he was Racine’s successor and a storyteller of genius when he made the parable a vehicle for the ideas that would shatter the eighteenth century’. Of the equation, ‘author + subject = work’, the *politique* perspective retained only the author. Bazin warned against the dangers of instituting ‘an aesthetic personality cult’.

[12] Among the youngTurks, too, each brought his own critical tools and concepts for viewing film. Rivette, ‘the soul of the group’, was unique in his grasp of *mise en scène*, this ‘architecture of relations, moving and yet suspended in space... [like a] diamond: transparent yet with ambiguous reflections, sharp and cutting edges’ that allowed critics to see beyond the constraints of studio demands, scenarios and budgets to distinguish an *auteur* from the rest. [13] Praise for Hitchcock was controversial, elevating him from a mere master of suspense to a genius. [14]Godard’s early contributions were vintage *politique des auteurs*. He showed a taste for the strange and paradoxical, and was particularly adept at analysing the ‘minor’ films of a director, their ‘revealing failures’. It was Godard who first reviewed Bergman’s work in the journal in 1958, while he could also write in praise of minor Westerns:

The Americans, who are much more stupid when it comes to analysis, instinctively bring off very complex scripts. They also have a gift for the kind of simplicity which brings depth—in a little Western like *Ride the High Country*, for instance. If one tries to do something like that in France, one looks like an intellectual. The Americans are real and natural, but this attitude has a meaning over there. We in France must find something that has a meaning—find the French attitude as they have found the American attitude. To do so, one must begin by talking about things one knows. [15]

Early contributions on Nicholas Ray bring out the distinctiveness of each critic. Rivette addressed his readers with a set of elegant imperatives: this must be loved, that must be recognized—a style of criticism always conscious of the spectator he had to convince. For Godard, with characteristically infectious grandeur, ‘*Bitter Victory*, like the sun, makes you close your eyes. Truth is blinding.’ [16] Truffaut was aggressive, prescriptive and darkly comical:
Those who [have not seen Ray’s films] will just have to trust me, and that will be their little punishment . . . You can refute Hawks in the name of Ray, but to anyone who would reject them both, I would just say this: Stop going to the cinema, don’t watch any more films, for you will never know the meaning . . . a frame, a shot, an idea, a good film, the cinema. [17]

Rohmer was always more sober, though no less enraptured. ‘May I be forgiven my favourite vice’, he asked readers, ‘of evoking the memory of the ancient Greeks’ to read Rebel Without a Cause as a ‘drama in five acts’. [18] The contrast was instructive: Godard and Rivette celebrated the unprecedented in Ray; Rohmer drew out the timeless issues of morality and tragedy.

Cinephile orphans

At first the magazine was much like a surrogate family for its young critics. Fathers, godfathers, adoptive sons—it is a story, as Serge Daney has described it, ‘of stubborn orphans and chosen families’, the young spectators weaving their own histories with those they saw on screen. [19] Truffaut, for example, born in 1932 to a ‘father unknown’ and brought up initially in a foster home and then by his grandmother, was arrested at the age of fifteen for running a cine-club on stolen funds. Bazin, having met the boy at the opening night of his illegal venture, intervened to rescue him from the juvenile detention centre and virtually adopted him. He would secure Truffaut’s release from prison again in 1951, when the teenager went awol from the army on the eve of embarkation for Vietnam.

Out of necessity or otherwise—parents lost in the war, an early departure from home, or simply missed classes at university—cinema replaced the family or academic studies. Both Rivette and Godard arrived in Paris to study at the Sorbonne but gravitated instead to the Cinémathèque and film journals, and found their education there. Cinephile culture had its own forms of erudition, its lectures, pupils and teachers: ‘in the cine-clubs [we found] our night classes . . . our books . . . wary of intellectuals, universities and politics, protected from all exterior intervention’. [20] Truffaut, who had seen La Règle du jeu at least twenty times, kept meticulous files on every film; close, repeated watching was intrinsic to his criticism. He was unequivocal: ‘Let us not respect, not follow, not read, not be interested by and not like anyone but the specialists’. [21]

The history of Cahiers involves blind-spots as well as spotlights. In its first decade other artistic movements were considered unimportant, with theatre and the nouveau roman ignored, although Brecht was an important discovery in 1960. Cinemas of the Third World and more avant-garde work entered the journal with delay. The animosity toward genre analysis also led to the near omission of fantasy, comedy and animation films, André Martin and Fereydoun Hoveyda texts aside. A larger absence was that of politics. Cahiers virtually ignored both Indo-China and the Algerian war. Godard’s self-description summed up the journal’s attitude at the time: ‘I have moral and psychological intentions which are defined through situations born of political events. That’s all.’ [22]

This was in strong contrast to the explicitly anti-colonial film journal Positif, founded in 1952. Initially associated with the pcf, it quickly developed a strong surrealist influence. [23] In the words of its editor, Positif was ‘very anti-aesthetic . . . We wanted cinema to express ideas that change society; we wanted it to be an engaged art form’. [24] Compared to Cahiers, there was less of Hollywood and more from Latin America and the Third World; less fixation on auteurs and more attention to genres, as well as an openness to surrealist work and experimental film-makers like Marker, Resnais and Varda. Positif and Cahiers oscillated between amicable relations, sharing contributors (Hoveyda, Kast) and common interests, to an outright guerre de papier. Rohmer considered the team ‘a sect who judge cinema using criteria totally alien to the seventh art’, [25] whilst those at Positif cast their counterparts as anything ranging from censors, metaphysical critics, imperialists, mystics or fascists.

With Bazin’s tragic death from cancer in 1958, at the age of forty, Rohmer stepped into the chief editor role. His judgements came under greater scrutiny, reaching their nadir for critical observers when he allowed the Mac-Mahon group to articulate their particular liturgy of the gaze in a series of articles between 1959–61. So called
after the cinema in Paris that showed only Hollywood films, the Mac-Mahonists celebrated *l’amour fou du cinéma* and took this notion of enchantment to its extreme. Man became God in the *mise en scène*. For many, including Doniol-Valcroze, publishing them was a step towards a right-wing politicization of the *Cahiers* pages. One effect, however, was to provoke an increasingly politically conscious discussion around cinema at the start of the sixties.

It was a time of change at the journal. *Cahiers* had become a place of passage, its old *chapelle* dispersed as members went off making films. It lacked a clear source of inspiration, too: the Mac-Mahonists had demonstrated the logic of a too-slavish approach to Hollywood, and *Cahiers*’ wider critical re-evaluation, from *maudit* to iconoclastic, seemed to have run its course. Alternative sources of innovation, including new cinema from Europe (Bertolucci, Visconti, the Polish ‘workshops’), Brazilian *cinema nôvo* and Direct Cinema from around the world, began to be addressed. Yet the economic and institutional status of *Cahiers* solidified just as its agenda began to waver. By 1960, 12,000 issues were sold a month, combined with a massive demand for numbers 1–100. Regular subscribers stood at 4,000, including 500 universities in the usa and Canada. The journal’s ideas were beginning to resonate—and be attacked—in the Anglophone world.

The main reason for this was the astonishing originality of the films its editors were now creating. ‘All of us at *Cahiers* thought of ourselves as future directors’, Godard would say in 1962. ‘Writing was already a way of making films.’ Between 1959 and 1963, the masterworks of the New Wave—Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows*, *Shoot the Pianist*, *Jules and Jim*; Godard’s *Breathless*, *A Woman is a Woman*; Rivette’s *Paris Belongs to Us*; Chabrol’s *The Cousins*—were made on shoe-string budgets. They combined dazzling formal innovation in framing shots and sound with a striking ethnography of contemporary France—while enacting the *Cahiers* dictum that ‘the only true criticism of a film is another film’. [26] In a sense, the very radicalism of these works demanded a new agenda at *Cahiers*.

Led by Rivette, a younger group increasingly clashed with Rohmer’s view that ‘the world doesn’t change, at least not much . . . what changes is art’. [27] They charged that a *confort de caste* was setting in that left *Cahiers* isolated from the dynamic present. Rejecting pure cinephilia, they wanted to open the journal to broader intellectual movements. After failed attempts by Truffaut and Doniol-Valcroze in 1962 to encourage Rohmer to reassess some of the old *Cahiers* tenets, Rivette mounted an alternative team. The denouement of Rohmer’s reign was a little undignified for a man of such elegance in writing and directing. He put together number 144 in parallel with Rivette’s competing team, wrapping up the issue in his pyjamas *after a nuit blanche* at the office. Rohmer’s was published, but it was to be his last. *Cahiers* 145 announced the change and Rivette confirmed the new editorial line in August 1963.

### III. 1960S—NEW WAVE

In this and other editorials, Rivette responded, in effect, to the problem Godard had raised in his 1962 interview—what had made *Cahiers* was ‘its position in the front line of battle’, but with everyone now agreed, ‘there isn’t so much to say’. Positions that had been high stakes in the fifties had become ‘dogma and system’, Rivette reiterated. Criticism had to evolve from the postures adopted ‘from a tactical point of view’, but which were now *caducs*—clapped out. [28] Later he would describe how the experience of watching his *Paris Belongs to Us* in a crowded cinema in 1960 had changed his notions of film criticism: it had to consider the context in which films were made and seen. The cinephile approach, too awe-struck by the screen, precluded this.

Such are the perils of the ‘pure gaze’ attitude that leads one to complete submission before a film . . . like cows in a field transfixed by the sight of trains passing by, but with little hope of ever understanding what makes them move. [29]

Engaging with the changing social landscape of which film was a part, both in its production and its reception,
meant a break with the old agenda. Cinema could not be understood in isolation and, most importantly, it needn’t be. The first ten years of *Cahiers* laid the foundation for taking film seriously; now criticism had to grasp the new points of tension.

The *ouverture* that characterized Rivette’s editorship between 1963–65 involved an opening, firstly, to other disciplines and intellectual currents: the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, the literary theory of Barthes and, later, the psychoanalysis of Lacan and concepts of ideology developed by Althusser, were brought to bear on understanding the nature of cinema as a properly twentieth-century art form. Bazin’s maxim, ‘cinema is a language’, was re-examined within the linguistic paradigms of structuralism. A long 1965 text by Pier Paolo Pasolini described a nascent ‘poetic cinema’ that would be the maturation of neo-realism; the rejection of conventional narrative ‘prose’ and the use of ellipses in the work of Antonioni or Resnais made interpretation essential, almost to the point of erasing the significance of the *auteur*. Interviewed by *Cahiers*, Barthes affirmed that ‘man is so fatally bound to meaning that freedom in art might seem to consist . . . not so much in creating meaning as suspending it’. [30]

Resnais’s *Last Year in Marienbad* had been a paradigmatic work for *Cahiers* critics; as with modernist painting, where ‘the task of the painter is no longer to paint a subject, but to make a canvas’, so with the camera: ‘the filmmaker’s job is no longer to tell a story, but simply to make a film in which the spectator will discover a story’. [31] The audience was now becoming ‘the hero of the film’. [32] Bresson’s *Au Hasard Balthazar* was celebrated for its economy of signification and subtractive quality:

> [he] wants each image to express only what he wants to make it express, after eliminating what one might call ‘noise’ . . . he is forced to resort to a style that eliminates inevitably ambiguous facial expressions, too loaded with meaning . . . Ellipsis becomes obligatory because he cannot dwell too long on any one face. [33]

A review of Buñuel’s *Belle de jour* was saturated with structuralist language: ‘the film is articulated through two formal series which must be read in abstraction from any “level” or “hierarchy”’. [34] Jean-Louis Comolli, in his first contribution to the journal, crystallized the transition from Rohmerian to Rivettian attitudes. Citing Blanchot, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Jung, he proposed a relationship between philosophy and cinema, a way of feeling the film by thinking it. New work should aim not to lull its audience with the comfort of ritual within the darkened auditorium, but to unsettle and provoke greater reflection. [35] Rivette, too, welcomed such disturbance: ‘the role of cinema is to destroy myths . . . to take people out of their cocoons’. [36]

By the early sixties a new generation of cinephiles had been drawn into the *Cahiers* orbit, bringing a broader range of theoretical interests. For the most part, these would be *critiques-critiques*, as opposed to the *critiques-cinéastes* of the previous cohort. Two medical students from Algeria would be among the most influential over the next decade. Comolli (b. 1937) and Jean Narboni (b. 1941) had cut their teeth at the Ciné-club d’Alger before coming to Paris to study in 1961. Serge Daney (b. 1944) had been a *Cahiers* reader since the age of fifteen, and while still a teenager had started his own short-lived film journal, *Visages du cinéma*, with his friend and fellow-cinephile Louis Skorecki. Unusually for *Cahiers* writers they were adventurous travellers, spending time in India, Africa and America as roving critics. Michel Delahaye was a student of Lévi-Strauss and admirer of Jean Rouch’s ethnographic cinema. *Nouveau roman* author Claude Ollier and critic Jean-André Fieschi embraced an avant-garde ethic that rejected the ‘illusory explication of beauty’ of the *mise en scène*; the time had come to conceive of a new ‘open cinema’. [37]

Intellectual shifts were marked by a visual redesign, in part imposed by the 1964 buyout of *Cahiers*’ publisher, Éditions de l’Étoile, by Daniel Filipacchi, best known as the entrepreneur behind the *yéyé* ‘Salut les copains’ pocketbook series. The famous yellow was replaced by a different colour each month, and by 1966 the black-and-white *coup de coeur* cover-still was also in colour. Whatever the qualms about Filipacchi, it is significant that the comfortable familiarity of the *Cahiers jaunes* was an immediate target for the new team. The refusal to allow its readers the recognizable symbol of cinephilia was an active expression of the growing critique of the culture
within the journal’s pages, an internal purging of golden ageism. Rivette’s takeover had been decisive, but Rohmer’s classicism had been followed by a series of questions, rather than a definable alternative line. To some extent the very diversity of the new editorial team reflected this: they were travellers, doctors, novelists, anthropologists. The form of the journal became protean, the size of the issues expanding to fifty, seventy, eighty, and even two hundred pages in December 1963; yet sales remained stable, at 15,000 copies a month throughout the sixties.

Cinema too was changing. The auteurs that Cahiers’ Hitchcocko-Hawksians had illuminated within the Hollywood system were growing old, and the studios were turning increasingly to biblical epics and the like, in a bid to maintain audiences in the television age. More interesting works were emerging, or now being recognized, from India (Satyajit Ray), Japan (Kurosawa), Brazil (Glauber Rocha); from Czechoslovakia (Forman, Svankmajer), Poland (Polanski, Wajda), the ussr (Tarkovsky); from Germany (Jean-Marie Straub), Sweden (Bergman), Italy (Antonioni, Fellini, Pasolini) and from France itself (Buñuel, Marker, Resnais, Rouch). Working with cine-clubs, in 1966 the journal introduced a new international section, covering the latest releases around the world. Comolli welcomed the advent of a new political cinema in which one could see ‘the sharp point of a struggle which is not only artistic but which involves a society, a morality, a civilization’. [38] Sylvie Pierre, the first female critic at Cahiers, wrote on Brazil’s cinema nôvo and what the journal called cinéma direct, inspired initially by Rivette’s L’Amour fou and Cassavetes’s Faces. Describing these as films ‘without a master’, Pierre saw a new kind of self-effacement of the auteur: ‘the director has aspired not to be God’; instead ‘he has tried to produce non-fiction—or rather, a fiction which aims to give such a faithful account of non-fiction modes that it ends up conforming to them’. [39]

The year 1966 proved a political turning point. With the growing impact of the Vietnam War, America no longer appeared an innocent ally in the depiction of the lights and shadows of modernity. National liberation struggles in Indo-China, Africa and Latin America; the Khrushchevite Thaw in Eastern Europe; the mass upsurge of the Cultural Revolution in China, where a Communist leader was beseeching the young to bombard governmental headquarters with their criticisms, to abolish the difference between manual and intellectual labour, between peasant and town-dweller, and to revitalize the revolution—all unleashed tremendous popular energies. With a nod to Che, Godard summed up the new cinematic relationship in his press release for La Chinoise the following year:

The American industry rules cinema the world over. There is nothing much to add to this statement of fact. Except that on our own modest level we too should provoke two or three Vietnams in the bosom of the vast Hollywood-Cinecittà-Mosfilm-Pinewood empire, and, both economically and aesthetically, struggling on two fronts as it were, create cinemas which are national, free, fraternal, comradely and bonded in friendship. [40]

At home, the chafing of an arrogant and authoritarian Gaullist state was becoming intolerable. French censorship had wielded the scissors on New Wave films before; footage of Eisenhower and de Gaulle had to be cut from Breathless, for example. But the banning of Rivette’s La Religieuse in 1966 for its anti-clericalism was a brutal awakening for the Cahiers team—as Anna Karina’s suffering face on the cover of 177 evoked. Comolli and Narboni, who had taken over the editorial direction when Rivette left to make La Religieuse in 1965, now tilted from structuralism towards a more declamatory militancy. Critics must banish excess reverence for past masters or traditional notions of cinema and ‘go down into the arena’. Their writing should be ‘compromised and implicated up to the neck in work being done now’; their task was not ‘to make the dead speak’ or ‘rifle the pockets of corpses’, but rather, ‘to finish off the dying in the field of battle’. As a result, criticism would become ‘more dangerous . . . more present’. [41]

A special issue on French cinema in 1965 had already marked the journal’s opposition to policies such as the avance sur recettes, initiated by André Malraux at the Centre National de la Cinématographie. In April 1966 a ‘Cahiers Week’ of screenings was launched in an attempt to break the cnc’s stranglehold on distribution. Held in two Parisian cinemas, the event attracted an audience of 10,000. It was followed by ‘Cahiers Days’ in Grenoble,
Lyon and Marseilles. [42] On the eve of May 68, the cnc’s attempt to sack the veteran Henri Langlois, in a bid to seize control of the juridically independent Cinémathèque, provoked large, angry demonstrations in Paris that—successfully—demanded his reinstatement. Swept up in the revolutionary euphoria of the May events, Cahiers’ editors played a leading role in the short-lived ‘Estates General of French Cinema’, established on May 17, 1968, which proposed the abolition of the cnc and brought together over 5,000 students and industry professionals to discuss the complete overhaul of national mechanisms of distribution, regulation and finance. After 68, as Daney would put it, ‘one could no longer make cinema or write about it in the same way’. [43] An editorial statement in August announced the end of the ‘Council of Ten’ ratings for new releases: ‘cinema has increasingly less resemblance to the image created by the kinds of films shown on the Champs Élysées, or even in the Latin Quarter.’ Henceforth, of the films released in Paris ‘we intend to discuss only those which merit attention—or stricture.’

IV. 1970s—RED CAHIERS

A new period of intense intellectual inquiry opened up by 1968 led initially to Althusser—though most of the editors engaged with his work à la sauvage, having little prior academic formation. [44] An editorial by Comolli and Narboni in October 1969 laid out their initial findings with programmatic clarity:

Scientific criticism has an obligation to define its field and methods. This implies awareness of its own historical and social situation, a rigorous analysis of the proposed field of study, the conditions which make the work necessary and those which make it possible, and the special function it intends to fulfil.

As a cinema magazine, ‘operating in a situation in which the majority of films are produced within the capitalist system and its dominant ideology’, the first question was to ask which films served simply to transmit that ideology and which attempted to intercept it, to reveal its mechanisms. They discerned seven categories altogether. The first and largest, whether ‘commercial’ or ‘art-house’, ‘modern’ or ‘traditional’, was of films ‘imbued through and through with the dominant ideology’, and gave no indication that their makers were even aware of the fact. In form, they ‘totally accept the established system of depicting reality: “bourgeois realism”…’. Nothing in these films jars against the ideology’. A second category—Straub’s Not Reconciled and Rocha’s Terra em Transe were cited—directly challenged the ideological system both through form and subject matter; or, category three, did so indirectly (Bergman’s Persona). Fourth, with Costa-Gavras singled out for criticism, were apparently political films that were in fact unremarkingly ideological. Fifth, apparently ideological films (Ford, Dreyer, Rossellini) which in fact reveal the ideology to be cracking under its internal tensions. Good (formally reflective) and bad (pseudo-realist) forms of grass-roots cinéma direct made up categories six and seven. [45]

Given these tasks, Cahiers texts became distinctly longer. Two landmark critiques in category five—Ford’s Young Mr Lincoln (‘the ethical-political face of the capitalist and theological field of Hollywood cinema’) and Sternberg’s Morocco (‘its erotic face’)—extended to over 6,000 words. The investigation of early Soviet cinema, Eisenstein in particular, was a major preoccupation over the next two years. A strong Althusserian–Lacanian influence was also making itself felt, and as the theory-laden approach deepened, or thickened, the Cahiers writing style increasingly reflected this. Analyses could become suffocating in their abstraction. Looking at Japanese cinema in 1970, for example, Comolli and Narboni explained:

our project is to identify and examine (1) a conception of the subject as ‘decentred’ and ‘diluted’… (2) a conception of figuration as a discrete form of coding and not as representation by analogy [and] (3) an explicit articulation of the symbolic domain. [46]

Also in Lacanian mode, Jean-Pierre Oudart analysed cinema’s attempt to create, by way of suture, an ‘illusion of the visible’, onto which the spectator projects the phantom of the Absent One. ‘The revelation of this absence is
the key moment in the fate of the image, since it introduces the image into the order of the signifier, and . . . cinema into the order of discourse’. [47] Traditionally the countershot eradicated this moment of terror and transformed it into a moment of elation.

Internationally, Cahiers’ influence was stronger than ever. In Britain, Screen had been established as the virtual mirror of its French counterpart in both content and appearance. Screen editors followed Cahiers avidly, and translated many of its texts, including Oudart’s article on suture and the collective deconstruction of Young Mr Lincoln — now one of Cahiers’ best-known pieces, included in film studies syllabuses around the world. Comolli and Narboni were applauded for their attempts to develop ‘a politics, not a poetics, of representation’. [48] At home, however, the situation was darkening. In the aftermath of 68, state repression of far-left militants was stepped up, particularly in the factories. The Maoist Gauche Prolétarienne group was banned in 1970, and within two years over a thousand activists had been sentenced to prison. While Althusser’s pcf, in negotiations with the Socialists on a common programme for a united left, distanced itself from what was going on, other left intellectuals — Sartre, de Beauvoir, Foucault — and even the scarcely political Truffaut rallied to the Maoists’ defence, distributing the gp paper, La Cause du peuple, on the streets.

Althusser’s personal openness to the Cultural Revolution had permitted a common intellectual front between his followers and maoissant elements, but this now came under increasing pressure. In January 1971 Cahiers had linked arms with Cinéthique and Tel Quel when all three of them had come under attack in an anti-Althusserian Positif editorial, ‘Les Enfants du paradigme’. Cahiers had announced with the others that ‘the ideological struggle waged by the three journals is determined by the recognition of the antagonistic contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat’, which should ‘serve as the starting point for considering all the contradictions that mobilize social processes in France today’. [49] By December 1971, Cahiers was publishing a full-blown auto-critique of its previous positions:

we repressed the cultural contradiction in the name of support for the avant-garde faction of the pcf, and we repressed the political contradiction by refusing to recognize a fundamental incompatibility between our passive approval of the Party’s politics and our consideration of the Chinese position. [50]

In July 1972 a Cahiers seminar at the Avignon Festival issued a manifesto of ‘tasks on the cultural front’. The editorial committee shrank as Bernard Eisenschitz, a Communist, was drummed off the board and Doniol-Valcroze, Truffaut and Kast removed their names from the masthead. Pierre also quit in 1973, in disagreement over the Maoist turn.

In their place came Serge Toubiana (b. 1949), a grenoblois Lou Sin Group militant studying at Censier where Pascal Bonitzer, Daney and others were teaching film; and a contact of Narboni’s, Philippe Pakradouni, who saw in Cahiers ‘a red base to take the offensive to the masses’ and a ‘tool of ideological cultural struggle’. [51] Editors were dispatched around the country to screen militant films and animate discussions. The journal itself was filled with reports of these initiatives, rather than carrying much critical analysis of film. Production costs had to be cut as sales plummeted from 14,000 in 1969 to 3,000 in 1973 (subscribers and universities generally remained faithful; the big drop was in shelf sales). In November 1972, Cahiers 241 appeared without photographs, on cheaper paper. Publication was at its most erratic in this period — only seven issues released in 1971, five in 1972 and 1973, four in 1974.

In fact, the Maoist movement was effectively over in France even before Cahiers had joined it. Pakradouni and the Cahiers editors planned to launch a ‘Revolutionary Cultural Front’ at the 1973 Avignon Festival, but the event proved a disaster: four days of sectarian squabbling, with a miserable turnout. ‘The artists were intimidated, inhibited by the weight of errors to be avoided and tasks to be undertaken, while the militants hid their lack of ideas behind generalizations’, Daney would recall. The reality of the Front had been to bring together ‘people like us, who wanted to politicize culture’, with groupuscules of former far-left militants, knowing they had been defeated politically but now seeking a second front where they could ‘carry on intimidating people while

http://www.newleftreview.org/lp.hscl.ufl.edu/?page=article&view=2645
negotiating their survival’—the most adept, such as André Glucksmann, re-inventing themselves within a few short years as the Reaganite liberals and *nouveaux philosophes* of anti-totalitarianism. [52]

**Reorientation**

The two Serges, Daney and Toubiana, now took over the direction. Without recanting previous commitments, their editorial of May 1974 recognized that *Cahiers* had become ‘a cadre school’ and ‘political bureau’, losing sight of its necessary character as a film journal: ‘in the interests of abstract politicism, we ran the risk of cutting ourselves off from the constituency of cinema . . . In the end our “right to be heard” was becoming ambiguous.’ [53] In a three-part text from the same period, ‘The Critical Function’, Daney proposed a criticism that was ‘neither a catalogue of what is beautiful (old-style cinephilia) nor an account of what is wrong (new-style dogmatism)’, but rather ‘something more heterogeneous . . . less settled’—in the name of ‘something which is not given, which exists in embryo, in the form of scattered elements’. A key article of 1975, ‘A Certain Tendency in French Cinema’, reprising Truffaut’s manifesto of twenty years before, was literally composed of notes and fragments by four *Cahiers* writers. [54]

Such restless multifariousness inevitably risked a certain incoherence: an opening to the carnivalesque combined with a continuing commitment to militant cinema, language-derived theorization—Daney drawing out the relationship between the *énoncé*, statement, and its *énonciation*, utterance—with investigations into racism or pornography and the radical *commedia dell’arte* of Dario Fo. *Cahiers* interviewed Foucault on the ‘false archaeologizing’ of the Nazi Occupation in such films as *The Sorrow and the Pity* and *Lacombe Lucien*, and Deleuze on Godard’s *Six Times Two*. [55] Jacques Rancière wrote on Althusser, the significance of ’68, and the traces of history and ideology behind documentary and fiction film images. The cinemas of the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa were explored. The paradigm shift in the image world accomplished by the triumph of television required a new language to register the relations between the media. [56]

Yet whatever its eclecticism, the *Cahiers* of the mid-seventies still held true to Doniol-Valcroze’s summary: ‘We are for A, B and C, and against X, Y and Z’. For included Godard, whose departure from the *Cahiers* board in 1968 in protest at Filipacchi’s ownership had not resulted in decreased coverage. [57] Indeed, throughout the period of the Red *Cahiers*, Godard was one of the few directors, along with Straub and early Soviet masters, to receive sustained attention. The journal had studied closely his plunge into the ultra-experimentalism of the Dziga Vertov Group, interrogating the possibilities of the art-form. ‘Is it possible to practice/are we capable of taking in an essentially critical, political cinema?’ *Cahiers* had asked. ‘Bourgeois ideology in art has made us accustomed to a particular kind of criticism: realist criticism, in which . . . reality itself “does the criticizing”’. [58] In 1976, as one in a series of discussions with the *Cahiers* New Wave directors, Daney and Toubiana interviewed Godard in Grenoble—opening the way for the special 300th issue that he and Anne-Marie Miéville would edit.

At this stage, too, *Cahiers* could still be adamant in what it was against. Of Altman: ‘what’s unpleasant about his films is that the only thing we’re asked to admire is the intelligence of the director’. Daney railed against films like *1900*, *Z* or *Illustrious Corpses* which, he argued, attempted to unite a ‘median left’ audience around ‘themes emptied of concrete history’ so as not to offend anyone—the anarchist peasant revolts of the Emilia-Romagna in 1900 becoming ‘a sort of anticipation of the pci’s Historic Compromise’. The process depended on a ‘willed amnesia, nourished with images of beauty’, like the red flags of the starving peasants. It produced films that were ‘vague, reformist, imprecise, unifying, well-intentioned’—but ‘cinema should divide’: what mattered was ‘the idea of risk’. Instead, a new sort of European *cinéma de qualité* would set Schlöndorff on Proust, or Losey on Mozart, and think that that’s enough’. [59]

But by 1977, at least, a majority of those centrally involved—Toubiana, Narboni, Bonitzer, Alain Bergala and others—were seeking a more comfortable model. ‘Why do we give ourselves such a hard time?’ Bonitzer asked. ‘There seems to be a suspicion of narrative, of the novelistic . . . Nowadays, if anything, it’s the lack of good stories that makes itself felt’. Bergala argued that *Cahiers* had to shed its reputation as a theoretical journal,
‘intelligent but austere, or at least not pleasure-giving’. [60] Toubiana undertook a professionalization of the outfit, driving up subscription figures. The involvement of the Gaumont media empire as an investor was mooted, although not followed through. [61]

An editorial in February 1978 presaged the turn away from theoretical articles. The new age of the ‘cultural consumer’, with cinema’s monopoly over mass imagination replaced by that of the *tout image* of the giant media and advertising corporations, demanded a discourse that aimed not simply to produce opinions and analyses but—the compromise evident in the vagueness of the formulation—‘slice it differently’: *découper différemment le cinéma*. [62] This might involve a reworked cinephilia, an examination of the film industry, or an increasing amount of information and reportage. Meanwhile, a redesign increased the journal to 72 pages and opened the way for colour photos inside. Antoine de Baecque, *Cahiers*’ official biographer, reports violent quarrels in the smoke-filled ‘end office’ over the direction of the journal at this time. [63] A regular ‘Letter from Hollywood’ was instituted from 1978. The July–August 1979 issue led with a shot of Martin Sheen in *Apocalypse Now* on the cover, while Toubiana’s editorial introduced, somewhat shamefacedly, a ‘scoop’ interview with Coppola of astonishing banality (his Oscars, etc.). [64] From January 1980 a slim newspaper, ‘*Journal des Cahiers du cinéma*’, was inserted into the pages of the review. The news section aimed to cover ‘a broader and more various selection of cinematic material’ in briefer form, with a column by Biette and Skorecki chronicling the screening of films on television: ‘the ghosts of permanence’. [65]

*Cahiers*’ turn towards the mainstream can only be understood in the context of the broader patterns of French intellectual culture at the time. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, Perry Anderson has anatomized the concerted ideological and institutional campaign, initially mobilized against the threat of a United Left victory, that was spearheaded by a phalanx of liberal intellectuals (François Furet, Pierre Nora, Pierre Rosanvallon et cie) at this time. Working through the media—*Débat*, *Nouvel Observateur*, *Esprit*—the academy, notably the Rockefeller-funded École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, and the Fondation Saint-Simon, gathering-place for business and political elites, this remade the country’s ideological landscape between the mid-70s and the bicentenary of 1789. [66] The ‘normalization’ of French culture in line with prevailing Atlanticist winds could draw in part on the new-found anti-Gulagism of former Maoists now influential in the media, such as Serge July at *Libération*. These post-sixties movers and shakers contributed their own feel-good style to the project—a sense that their embrace of the free-market system was the radicalism *du jour*. The ‘left’ was no longer to be defined by its critique of capitalism, but in terms of inoffensive values: justice, generosity. *Libé* pioneered the new ‘libertarian–neoliberal’ tone—‘plugged in’, flippant, eternally young—that, with Mitterrand’s victory in 1981, became the lingua franca of a post-socialism *chic et choc*. [67]

**V. 1980S AND 1990S—THE MAINSTREAM**

This was the logic at work behind the Toubiana years at *Cahiers*. The results, in terms of film culture, were a disaster. The embrace of Hollywood in the nadir of the Reagan era was accompanied by the abandonment of any critical trenchancy. After Coppola, Oudart welcomed Kubrick’s *The Shining* in 1980 as ‘a work of great culture—and a culture that is not dead’. Bonitzer was awed by the ‘Dostoevskyan sensibility’ of Scorsese’s *Raging Bull* in 1981. Narboni enthused over the ‘maturity’ of *E.T.* in 1982: ‘intelligent, inventive, moving, mischievous . . . this film should win Spielberg a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize’. [68]

*Cahiers* had always mixed populism and elitism, and from the start had been chastized for elevating ‘entertainers’ to geniuses. But the riches now discerned in the predictable narratives and merchandise-mountains of films such as *E.T.* were of a different character to the analyses of Hitchcocko-Hawksian *auteurs*. The new populism was an attempt at communication with a broader public which the journal was now anxious to reach. Rather than cutting through the advertising jargon, it reproduced it in a higher register, or replaced criticism with commentary in the Cultural Studies mould. Reviews were not without insight, but there was no longer any sense
of the urgency that had animated Cahiers from its inception, of conscious struggle against the existing state of things. The aim was consolidation, incorporation; a purely informational investigation of the world as it is.

By this stage Daney had quit Cahiers to write short pieces for Libération and elsewhere. ‘Toubiana has a very precise idea of what he wants to do with the journal: to relocate it at the cinematic centre. My idea is less clearly defined, more vagabond—but his has a future’. [69] In a 1983 interview with Esprit, Daney was more diplomatic: some had criticized Toubiana for ‘watering the wine’ as he moved to put the journal onto a more commercial footing; its current style was a marked retreat from the theoretical ambitions of earlier years. But ‘the times themselves have grown more feeble, in terms of thought’. [70] Under Toubiana’s direction, the foundations were set in place for much of what makes the journal what it is today: straddling mainstream and independent cinema in full-colour format. American blockbusters were given full coverage; Batman on the cover of Cahiers 423 in September 1989 was emblematic. Editorial choices were increasingly pragmatic and tied to the market.

The design was ‘aired’ in 1989 to make the review more ‘visible’ and ‘readable’, which meant more white spacing on the page, more film stills and large subheadings. It reflected a concept of the reader as a busy Parisian on the metro, wanting snappier prose and with little time to indulge in the kind of articles that required the ‘reading pace of a cruiseship’, in Toubiana’s disparaging terms. [71] With the switch to a standard magazine formula in November 1989, Cahiers acknowledged targets detached from cinema, namely attracting 50,000 readers per issue—the benchmark of a successful glossy. Toubiana was moulding the review to fit a marketing department’s notion of the public, seeking to please rather than to convince or to actively shape ideas on film.

Historically, generations of editors had renewed themselves every five or six years, and Daney continued the trend. Toubiana however would remain for two decades, seconded briefly by Thierry Jousse in 1992–95. This signalled a certain rigidification: an ebbing of the critical tide and, with it, the polarizing polemics that had split and reconstituted editorial boards in the past. Toubiana had arrived at Cahiers as a Maoist militant rather than a classic cinephile, and the team he inherited when he took full charge in 1980—among them Bergala, Pascale Kané, Olivier Assayas, Laurent Perrin, Léos Carax and Charles Tesson—was equally diverse. New contributors came mainly from the universities—Serge Le Péron from Vincennes, Carax and Tesson from Censier—or from current-affairs journals: Bergala and Ignacio Ramonet from Le Monde diplomatique, Jean-Paul Fargier from Tribune socialiste and Cinéthique.

By the time Toubiana left, officially in 2000, Cahiers was battling for sales against magazines such as Premiere and Studio, which shared a similar place in the market. A deal with the Le Monde publishing group came into effect in 1999, when Franck Nouchi and Charles Tesson arrived. Nouchi (an editor-in-chief at Le Monde) described it as an act ‘to save the world’s greatest film magazine’, an explanation striking for its vacuity and detachment from any critical project. The format altered again in 2000 with further coverage of television, video, DVD and industry news. Sales continued to fall, with circulation down to 12,000 in 2002, a drop of 13 per cent on the previous year, and a further drop of 11 per cent in 2003. Le Monde considered shutting the review down, but opted instead for editorial change, bringing in another of their own, Jean-Michel Frodon, as Director in Chief.

A standard issue today is nearly a hundred pages, a slightly over-sized magazine with four sections: the monthly ‘event’, usually a retrospective or a film festival; the ‘Cahiers critiques’, varying length reviews of the latest releases; the ‘Journal’, no longer a mini-newspaper, but functional events listing; and ‘Répliques’, a random collection of short articles on or around cinema, past and present, from a selection of theorists, critics or film specialists. Interesting writers, it should be said, continue to make occasional contributions. Yet as an intellectual project, Cahiers is finished—a victim of the same listless market realism on display in a 2000 interview with Toubiana in Débat. Only the American industry had been able to keep pace with the changing nature of audiences, the former editor insisted; it had far more money and was better at the re-invention of genres. In Europe, ‘what is there new to say?’. [72] Cahiers’ reception of Amélie soon after seemed to confirm his outlook: the salient critical comparisons were with Shrek and Tomb Raider’s Lara Croft. [73]
VI. ALTERNATIVES?

Did it have to be this way? In 1991 Daney set in motion a project he had been planning for ten years, and which his aids diagnosis forced him to realize at once, or never. Trafic appeared that winter, a small 144-page journal, without images and a simple brown paper cover, produced by a small literary publisher, pol. Trafic too had a strong relation to literature: the first issue included an epigraph from Ezra Pound, a poem by Godard and a letter from Rossellini. [74] It provided a space to reflect on cinema outside of market imperatives or academic norms, a time to watch the traffic of images, back and forth over the last century, or between the media of film, video and dvd. Bernard Eisenschitz’s Cinéma, set up in 2001, provides further proof that imaginative, incisive writing on film never disappeared in France.

Similarly, Cahiers’ ‘American turn’ from 1980 paradoxically served to block out much of the radical writing on film that was being produced in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. Fredric Jameson’s 1992 Geopolitical Aesthetic, for example, provided landmark comparative readings of Edward Yang’s Terrorizer, Sokurov’s Days of Eclipse, Godard’s Passion and American paranoid-conspiracy movies, within a global context of complex cultural and political inequalities. During the same period, Roberto Schwarz was writing to powerful effect on the experience of military dictatorship in Brazil exemplified in the mise en scène of Eduardo Coutinho’s A Man Marked Out to Die.

The cultural landscape in which such writing might now take place is, of course, very different from that which gave birth to Cahiers’ ‘last modernist revolution’ against an ancien régime of taste, half a century ago. The films of the New Wave served the coup de grâce on the conservative fare against which Truffaut and his colleagues polemicized. Cinema’s role has been downgraded by the dominance of television, and the ever-greater control by the mass media and advertising corporations over what is shown. A new and globalized image regime is now in place, further relativizing all other national film industries with regard to that of America, while mainstream Hollywood is little more than a canning factory for the spectacle. Technologically, film-making and film-watching have been democratized, with the availability of cheap dvd cameras, web-casting and the like; but at the expense of expanding monopolies over distribution, and the dissolution of cinema audiences into atomized viewers. Much contemporary writing on film, in English or French, is victim to this situation; ‘derivative and unclear about its aesthetic commitments’, [75] it panders to whatever is exotic under the name of ‘independent cinema’, or provides passive and at best symptomatic readings of Hollywood as though this were radical critique. The move of many cinephiles to the university has severed, rather than soldered, the link between writing on film and making it. Negative criticism is rare; the notion of being for or against anything in cinema seems out of place.

And yet. In the cinemas of the periphery—Iran, Korea, China, Taiwan—contemporary struggles with the contradictions of a belated modernity still find their most powerful expressions in film. Arguably, the very monopoly of the new world order over news and current affairs on tv is giving rise to countervailing documentary movements, producing work of striking quality in Latin America, China and the Middle East, in which mainstream footage is appropriated and subject to questioning. There are directors grappling with the changes, providing images to think with that are qualitatively different from past traditions of film-making. In these hands cinema continues to invent itself.

In Godard’s three-part exhibition at the Pompidou Centre in 2006, the model train of ‘cinema’ circulated between two rooms called ‘Yesterday’ and ‘The Day Before Yesterday’; but the track did not run into the third room, ‘Today’, where horizontal flat-screen tv monitors blocked visitors’ progress. There is a profound misapprehension here. Cinema has already entered its second century. Yet in order to flourish, it requires a broader critical culture around it, arguing, pushing, demanding more. The pockets of interest—an experimental initiative here, innovative festival there—all too often occur in isolation. Without a responsive audience around it, any film can...
only exist in the temporality of its own screening. What sustained Cahiers was its use of writing (with pen and camera), and later theory, as the means to grasp the unarticulated potentials and achievements of film. These tools remain essential for film criticism today. Recalling Bazin, Daney wrote, ‘Cinephilia was not just a relation to cinema, it was a relation to the world through cinema’. [76] Cahiers today may be a dead sun, but in its ashes a thousand phoenix are reborn.

[1] Born in Izmir in 1914, Langlois was forced to flee the country with his family in 1922, following the Turkish invasion against the Greek population that resulted in four-fifths of the city going up in flames. These dramatic events have been portrayed as foundational for Langlois’s own dedication to archival work, his family having lost everything in the city’s fires. (Edgardo Cozarinsky’s 1994 biographical film, Citizen Langlois, begins with a suitcase bursting into flames.) In Paris at the Cinémathèque that he founded in 1936, Langlois—who also set up the first French film archive—screened the great silent classics as well as the latest American releases. His programme played a major role in nurturing early cinephile tastes and shaping research in film history.


[9] Cahiers 1, April 1951.


[14] Chabrol and Truffaut’s attempt to interview Hitchcock in 1954 proved disappointing. The director was unforthcoming, playing on misunderstandings (good or God, evil or Devil). His two interviewers consoled each other that if, conscious of his genius, he was the greatest liar in the world, that still made him the most Hitchcockian character of them all.


[24] Robert Benayoun, cited in de Baecque, La cinéphilie, p. 231. Positif was closely involved in the Algerian struggle for independence, providing funds to the fln and signing the September 1960 ‘Manifesto 121’, the declaration of the right to refuse military service in the war. No Cahiers editors can be found on the original list, though Doniol-Valcroze, Truffaut and Kast joined a complementary one published by Le Monde in the same month.

1984 and briefly co-editor in the late nineties, de Baecque’s two-volume history of the journal is an invaluable factual resource, though inevitably controversial for those involved.

[27] *Cahiers* 172, November 1965. This said, he must be credited with bringing Brecht to the journal, publishing Bernard Dort’s ‘Pour une critique brechtienne du cinéma’, *Cahiers* 114, December 1960.
[29] *Cahiers* 146, August 1963.
[34] Jean Narboni, *Cahiers* 192, July–August 1967, p. 64.
[37] *Cahiers* 172, November 1965, p. 27.
[38] *Cahiers* 176, March 1966.
[40] Godard’s politicization came at the hands of his young girlfriend, Anne Wiazemsky, whom he had first seen as the 17-year-old star of Bresson’s *Au Hasard Balthazar*. Studying at Nanterre, she introduced him to student circles electrified by the discovery of Marx’s 1844 manuscripts, liberation psychology and the pill. Godard cast Wiazemsky as the lead in *La Chinoise*, an ambivalent portrayal of youth radicalization that both endorses a Maoist politics and predicts its decline. The young students, doing their exercises every morning while chanting party slogans, are right in their critique but fatally isolated from the world outside. See Colin MacCabe, *Goddard: A Portrait of the Artist at 70*, London 2003, chapter 4.
[42] This period of cultural activism marked a political and cinematic *rapprochement* between *Cahiers* and *Positif*, a ‘peace in the darkness of the Cinémathèque’ (*Cahiers* 184, November 1966). When *Positif* launched its own ‘Week’ in 1968, *Cahiers* encouraged readers to go along, believing their programmes would complement each other.
[52] Daney, *La Maison 1*, p. 22.
[57] Filipacchi put the journal up for sale in 1969 following Comolli and Narboni’s Althusserian editorial announcing their determination to fight the capitalist structures to which *Cahiers* was subject. Truffaut and Doniol-Valcroze intervened and invested the most significant sums to buy back the journal’s independence.
[70] Daney, Maison 2, p. 19.
[74] Trafic 1, Winter 1991. After Daney’s death in 1992, Raymond Bellour, Jean-Claude Biette, Sylvie Pierre and Patrice Rollet made up the Editorial Board, partially enlarged in 2003. The format has changed over its sixty issues to date, with the ‘letters from’ becoming more regular, footnotes finally allowed and the contents now grouped to delineate particular themes.
[76] Daney, Maison 1, p. 23.