Part I

Theories of Ideology
Comolli and Narboni’s October 1969 manifesto-editorial “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” marked one of the most significant turning points in the history of *Cahiers*. From its birth in 1951 until this watershed issue (no. 216), the journal had always been, officially at least, a politically neutral organ—even if, at times (during the Algerian crisis, most pointedly), its façade of apoliticism was hard to defend. As of Comolli/Narboni’s concise yet momentous text, *Cahiers* would now be placed under a revolutionary Marxist political outlook, with historical materialism as its theoretical bedrock. More spectacularly, the editorial so incensed its proprietor Daniel Filipacchi that *Cahiers* was shut down for four months—between November 1969 and March 1970—until a dispute over the journal’s ownership was resolved. Furthermore, “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” laid the groundwork for the future texts written by the *Cahiers* critics during its Marxist phase. It also represented one of the first contributions to what would come to be known as “apparatus theory,” which was developed in France through debates between *Cahiers*, Cinéthique, Tel Quel and La Nouvelle Critique and carried into the English-speaking domain by *Screen* and other politicized film journals in the UK and North America. Nonetheless, the notion of a clear rupture occurring with the appearance of “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” needs to be mitigated. Prior to its publication, the political vacillations masked behind *Cahiers*’ notional ecumenism were often sharp and acrimonious, particularly in the early 1960s when Comolli and Narboni were both starting out as critics. By the mid-1960s, however, it was abundantly clear that the journal under Rivette’s stewardship had been re-directed to an increasingly overt left-wing orientation, a tendency that found favor with the younger cohort of critics (and readers) and escalated with the events of May ’68. These political peripeteia, both within the journal and among French society more broadly, will be further discussed in Part II.

Here, by contrast, I will focus on the field of reflection concerning the ideological nature of the cinema that opened up in France in the late 1960s. It should be recalled that, far from being a relatively unified, homogeneous theoretical undertaking, as it often tends to be presented today, “apparatus theory” is an umbrella term that unites figures who engaged in long and often venomous debates with each other. To some degree, of course, this dissension can be ascribed to the taste for polemic prevalent among French film critics and the far left at the time. But this should not conceal the fact that trenchant points of difference are discernible within the barbed vitriol, and this is undeniably true in the debates conducted between *Cahiers* and its rival journals. Here, the key point of contention concerns the very nature of the relationship between cinema and ideology—with the latter term understood in its Althusserian Marxist sense—and, more specifically, the extent to
which the cinema is an innately “ideological” apparatus. Notably, between the time of the October 1969 editorial and Comolli’s later, equally pivotal text “Technique et idéologie” (published between May 1971 and October 1972), Cahiers’ editorial team unequivocally rejected the notion that the cinema by its very nature reproduces bourgeois ideology, a proposition put forth by Tel Quel’s Marcelin Pleynet, vocally supported by Cinéthique, and which finds echoes in later texts in Screen. Instead, their standpoint adheres more closely to Althusserian precepts: it is not the cinematic image that provides an ideological falsification of an otherwise undistorted reality. Rather, our very understanding of “the real” is structured by prevailing ideologies, which themselves, far from being static and monolithic, are multiple, contradictory and subject to transformation. Here, the cinema—and consequently the act of film analysis—can play a privileged role in gaining knowledge about the ideological nature of reality itself.

This hypothesis was exhaustively interrogated by the prolonged work of psychoanalytic film theory carried out in Cahiers during its Marxist period, a dynamic that will be discussed more thoroughly in Part IV. Intriguingly, such a standpoint brings the Cahiers of the post-1968 era in proximity to the thinking of Bazin—a trait recognized, and mocked, by the journal’s adversaries. For Bazin, the cinema is a privileged instrument for perceptually and conceptually gaining access to the reality of the world. The Cahiers of “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” assents to this viewpoint, as long as it is disburdened of Bazin’s supposed “idealism,” and is instead combined with an Althusserian understanding of the suffusion of this same reality by ideology. I thus begin this study with a close reading of the October 1969 editorial, one that situates the article within multiple contexts: Althusserian texts on the general question of ideology, and the relationship between ideology and art more specifically (these include works not only by the philosopher himself but also acolytes of his such as Badiou and Macherey); the potential liaison between such a reading and a Bazinian account of cinematic practice; and contemporaneous debates about the cinematic apparatus with Tel Quel and Cinéthique, which notably earned a 10,000-word direct reply from Cahiers in its following issue (November 1969). From this point, I will take a step back and look at Comolli and Narboni’s prior cinephilic and critical practice, which for both of them stretches back to their youth in French-occupied Algeria before they migrated to Paris in the early 1960s and began writing for Cahiers. This output, written between 1962 and 1969, is a rich offering in the critical appreciation of cinema at one of its key historical turning points: the demise of the classical Hollywood system and the rise of nouveaux cinémas on a
global level. Foreshadowing Comolli and Narboni’s later critical practice, these articles offer an additional angle from which “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” can be understood.

A pair of key interpretative texts from 1970, implicitly illustrating critical categories established in the 1969 editorial, form the central two chapters in this part of my study. The first is one of the most prominent textual readings in the history of film theory: the collective analysis “Young Mr. Lincoln de John Ford.” Comolli and Narboni played a key role in the composition of this 1970 text, whose methodology derives chiefly from Althusser’s *Lire le Capital*, Barthes’ *S/Z* (published the same year) and some concepts from Freud and Lacan, but they were joined in this communal endeavor by their team of younger collaborators. Its influence on film interpretation has been so widespread as to have almost rendered the original text banal, its novelty invisible. Nonetheless, I insist that a new reading of this supremely canonical text—one that places it in the context of the long and tumultuous history of Ford reception in *Cahiers*—is a profitable endeavor. As a pendant to the Hollywood classicism of Ford, meanwhile, Narboni’s treatment of Straub/Huillet’s *Othon* (1969) in “La vicariance du pouvoir” provides a template for the modernist poetics defended by *Cahiers* in terms of subject matter, theoretical reference points and even the critic’s own writing style. In the legendary “Battle of Othon” that pitched *Cahiers* and the PCF-aligned *Nouvelle Critique* against *Positif* and virtually the entire critical establishment, Narboni calls upon figures as diverse as Derrida, Lautréamont and Bazin to make his case in support of the film. Indeed, if a materialist reading of Bazin’s film theory can be authorized, its practical application may find no better exemplar than the work of Straub/Huillet, whose œuvre, along with that of Godard, was granted unstinting support by the journal.

A somewhat later text, stretched out over more than a year’s worth of issues and intervening into an increasingly divisive political environment, can be seen as the summation of *Cahiers*’ theoretical attempts to grapple head-on with the question of ideology and the cinematic apparatus. Comolli’s six-part “Technique et idéologie” is arguably the most prolonged, intensive theoretical engagement carried out under the auspices of *Cahiers du cinéma* during this time; it, too, has earned a certain canonical respectability. In arguing for the economic and ideological determination of the birth and early history of the cinema, following the model of plural historical temporalities sketched out by Althusser and Kristeva, Comolli also dealt a blow against what he called the “technicist ideology” apparent in the texts of Jean-Patrick Lebel and Jean Mitry. In many ways, the ambition surpassed the man: taxed with other commitments, Comolli left the series unfinished.
Its central ideas, however, would impregnate his later film theory, discussed in greater detail elsewhere in this book.

A final chapter will look at the “afterlives of the apparatus”—namely, the various ways in which the ideas developed and fostered on the pages of Cahiers, invariably in debate with other French critical traditions, disseminated into other, primarily academic approaches to the cinema. This overview will focus on the seminal status that “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” and “Young Mister Lincoln” de Jean Ford” had for a generation of anglophone scholars: from the excitement the texts generated on the pages of Screen, Wide Angle and Jump Cut to the positivist and formalist critiques offered by David Bordwell, Noël Carroll and Richard Allen in the 1980s, whose denunciations were so efficacious that even sympathizers with the tradition of “political modernism” such as Rodowick had to admit to the historical exhaustion of its productive potential.1 As a counterpoint to this elegiac position, dominant within the discipline since the 1980s, André Gaudreault has recently attested that the interrogation of film history in “Technique et idéologie” was an important precursor to the “new film history” movement beginning in the 1980s—just one example of the Cahiers writers exerting influence in diverse, and sometimes unexpected, quarters.2 As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, a more lasting, positive legacy for the strain of film theory developed by the journal in the post-1968 period can be found not simply by re-reading the well-thumbed Cahiers texts but also through an exploration of the multifarious theoretical and practical body of work these writers produced since that time.

There is nonetheless an irony in this part of my study: whereas I generally maintain the decisive importance of the group as a whole in Cahiers over any of its individual writers, here the focus lies squarely on two figures: Comolli and Narboni. This is not without justification: slightly older than their co-conspirators, the pair of critics joined Cahiers significantly earlier, in the early 1960s, and their collaboration stretches back to their youth in Algeria. Although the preeminence of their role within the journal would gradually give way to a more genuine collectivity, for a time (the time, precisely, of “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” and the initial turn to Marxism), Comolli and Narboni were effectively “first among equals” at Cahiers. It is for this reason that, in the next few chapters, the Comolli/Narboni couple largely stands in for the Cahiers group.

1 Rodowick, The Crisis of Political Modernism.
Works Cited


1. “Cinéma/Idéologie/Critique”: An Epistemological Break?

Abstract

This chapter focuses on Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni's groundbreaking 1969 text “Cinéma/idéologie/critique.” With its famous “seven categories” dividing films along political and formal criteria, this editorial established the critical line for the journal in the ensuing period and advocated a Marxist practice of film criticism that emphasized the political value of cinematic form, rather than the overt message of a film's content. Part of an ongoing polemic with the rival left-wing film journal Cinéthique, “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” also represented an opportunity for Comolli/Narboni to argue, in an Althusserian vein, that the cinema was an ideologically determined entity but that specific films were capable of creating gaps in or ruptures with the prevailing bourgeois ideology.

Keywords: Cahiers du cinéma, Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni, Cinéthique, Tel Quel, Louis Althusser

Genesis of a Manifesto

While “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” was undeniably a breakthrough moment for Cahiers, Marxism came gradually to the journal. Between the beginning of Jacques Rivette's tenure as editor in 1963 and the publication of “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” six years later, there is no single moment of transformation but an incremental, progressive evolution, precipitated by external events and differing in its temporal unfolding depending on the individual writers’ own personal developments. This process will be charted more closely in Part II, with its focus on Cahiers' various engagements with politics. As important as it was for emboldening and further radicalizing the Cahiers team, even the uprising of May 1968 was not a decisive turning point. Narboni, in fact, specifically rejects what he sees as the “widespread


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belief out there according to which Cahiers was politicized after May '68. This is absolutely false. The Cahiers folks were absolutely not political virgins beforehand. Firstly, Comolli and I were born in Algeria, so we knew a little something about the history of politics and war.”

“Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” then, is the culmination of a process of political evolution whose origins stretch back to the beginning of the 1960s, if not earlier. In the terms of materialist dialectics, it represented the point at which the quantitative leftwards evolution of the journal was transformed into a qualitative political “leap.” If the text is a moment of rupture, then this is for two major reasons: firstly, it makes Marxism the overt political and theoretical “line” of the journal; secondly, it opts for a particular variant of historical materialism, namely, one heavily influenced by Althusser’s thinking, which was even in late 1969 a relatively fresh point of reference for the journal. The need to establish such a “line” espousing a specific strain of Marxist theory as a programmatic imperative can at least in part be explained by two major contexts influencing the editors’ conduct at the time: the contemporary political environment, and Cahiers’ own history. In the first case, May 1968 heightened the perceived need amongst the French far left for clarity on political principles and theoretical fundamentals. The downside of this concern was a persistent, internecine sectarianism and often bilious political culture, even (or especially) between tendencies that were close to each other—and Cahiers, to say the least, was not immune to this narcissism of small differences. The journal’s own cultural tradition was equally imbued with a spirit of fierce polemic and the steadfast desire to establish an internal consensus, although here it was generally the choice of films more than political considerations that constituted the crucial point of demarcation. One of the journal’s co-founders, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, describes this disposition in eloquent fashion in a text that constitutes the first “history” of Cahiers, a retrospective account of its early years for the journal’s 100th issue in October 1959. Here Doniol-Valcroze notes that, whereas the initial conception for Cahiers was for a more inclusive publication, open to a broad range of approaches to the cinema, Truffaut’s philippic “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français” perceptibly changed the nature of the journal in a lasting fashion:

The publication of this article marks the real point of departure for what today, rightly or wrongly, Cahiers du cinéma represents. A threshold was crossed, a course of action was opened with which we were all in solidarity,

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1 Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014
this was something that brought us together. From now on, we knew that we were for Renoir, Rossellini, Hitchcock, Cocteau, Bresson… and against X, Y and Z. From now on, there was a doctrine.²

Indeed, this doctrinal orientation, this need for a critical “line,” is one of the most important of the red threads that unites the Cahiers of the 1950s with the journal’s later, more politicized guises.

A more pressing motivation for “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” came with the emergence of Cinéthique, whose first issue was published in January 1969. The journal, founded by filmmaker Marcel Hanoun, was soon placed under the editorial control of the neophyte critics Gérard Leblanc and Jean-Paul Fargier. Cinéthique was from the beginning an unabashedly gauchiste publication but was initially colored by a certain left-wing eclecticism—it did not adopt the rigid Marxism-Leninism it was later associated with until issue no. 5, which, dating from September-October 1969, was simultaneous with Cahiers’ own transformation. Cinéthique nonetheless found ways, in its first four issues, to assail Cahiers from the left. The inaugural issue featured an interview with Godard, who had already converted to Maoism by this point and had severed ties with Cahiers in the process.³ Seeing one of the journal’s most brilliant alumni speaking to an upstart rival publication was unquestionably a considerable embarrassment for the Cahiers team, one compounded by the harsh words Godard had for his critical alma mater. More pertinent to the theoretical orientation of Cahiers and its position within the “constellation” of French cultural politics was an interview in Cinéthique no. 3 (published in April 1969) with Tel Quel’s Marcelin Pleynet and Jean Thibaudeau, titled “Économie, idéologique, formel…”. Edited by Philippe Sollers, Tel Quel had been assiduously courted for several years by the Cahiers editors, who had invited writers associated with the literary journal to publish with the film magazine on several occasions.⁴ Comolli and Narboni, however, had also committed a faux pas by giving vocal support to the first issue of Change—a literary journal edited by former Tel Quel editor Jean-Pierre Faye, who was attacked mercilessly by his former comrades—and this may have

⁴ As early as December 1966, Tel Quel editors Philippe Sollers, Jean Thibaudeau and Jean Pierre Faye provided responses to questionnaires for a special issue on “Film et roman: problèmes du récit,” and shortly afterwards, Sollers, Faye and Marcelin Pleynet contributed to a dossier on Jean-Daniel Pollet’s film Méditerranée for the February 1967 issue of Cahiers.
contributed to the decision by Pleynet and Thibaudeau to give their backing to Cinéthique. Like Godard, the Tel Quel editors did not refrain from barbed comments aimed at Cahiers, with Pleynet announcing:

Look at what has happened to Cahiers du cinéma, which objectively speaking has never ceased to, as they say, “peddle the merchandise,” and which will end up disappearing without ever having been a film journal—or by only ever having been a film journal, as in just another one. It seems to me that, for a group that wants to establish a journal today, there are not a few lessons to be drawn from reading through Cahiers.5

Beyond the snide remarks made by Pleynet, “Économie, idéologique, formel...” can also be considered the urtext of apparatus theory in film studies. In a key passage earlier in the interview, Pleynet holds forth on his understanding of the ideological determination of the very mechanism of the cinema:

Have you noticed that all the discourses that can be held on a film, or on the cinema (and large quantities of them have been held), start off from the a priori non-signifying existence of an apparatus producing images, which can then be used indifferently for this or that purpose, on the right or on the left? Does it not seem to you that before interrogating themselves on their “militant function,” filmmakers ought to interrogate themselves on the ideology produced by the apparatus (the camera) that determines the cinema? The cinematic apparatus is a properly ideological apparatus, it is an apparatus which diffuses bourgeois ideology, even before diffusing anything else. Even before producing a film, the technical construction of the camera produces bourgeois ideology.6

The literary critic then proceeds to discuss the role of quattrocento perspective in the cinema, as well as the contemporaneity of Nièpce’s invention of photography with Hegel’s “closure” of the history of art. Pleynet’s remarks had an incendiary effect, and their reverberations in other texts and projects would irrevocably change the contours of film theory. For Cahiers, they were

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6 Ibid., p. 10 [p. 155].
of seminal importance, but it is important to recall that Cahiers never truly adhered to the propositions laid out by Pleynet. His notions provided grist for an intense period of theoretical investigation and invention lasting throughout Cahiers’ Marxist period (and, for some critics, well beyond this point), but this primarily took the form of a stringent critique of his propositions.

Similarly, while the Cinéthique editors often portrayed the “red turn” (virage rouge) of Cahiers as an act of suivisme, opportunistically following the impetus already established by the younger journal, this idea should also be tempered. Positif was only too happy to parrot such arguments in order to mock their rival journal, and some historians have also credited this viewpoint. But, for several years before the founding of Cinéthique, the Cahiers editors were already moving to these positions under their own logic, and other factors are just as decisive in their political transformation: the events of May; exposure to the theories of Althusser, Barthes, Lacan and Derrida; and the development of politically radical film practice on a global level in the 1960s, to name a few. Nonetheless, the existence of Cinéthique undeniably hardened the resolve within Cahiers to openly avow its Marxism, and it exacerbated the culture of virulent polemic (both internally and externally) that would dominate the journal. Comolli, indeed, readily admits to the irritation caused at Cahiers by Cinéthique’s far-left posture, saying: “We were attacked by the ultra-leftists. They were to the left of us and they considered us to be rather right-wing, which truly annoyed us. [...] At the same time we did not take refuge on the right. Quite the opposite, we went on the attack.”

This, then, is the context in which “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” came into existence. As for the actual writing of the text, Jean Narboni gives an illuminating account of this process: “One day, with Jean-Louis, we decided to write a manifesto. And so we wrote this text which said [...] that it’s not enough for there to be a good progressive content, it’s not enough for there to be pretty formal work, there needs to be real writing [écriture], a work on form, a configuration of meaning.” Intriguingly, the first person the article was shown to was Jacques Rivette, who played an instrumental role in having the article accepted by a supervisory conseil de rédaction that

7 For the “virage rouge” comment, see “Cinéthique,” “Du bon usage de la valeur d’échange (Les Cahiers du cinéma et le marxisme-léninisme),” Cinéthique no. 6 (January-February 1970), pp. 1-12, here p. 1.
9 Comolli, “Yes, we were utopians (Part 1).”
10 Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.
still included Doniol-Valcroze, Filipacchi, Truffaut and the critic-turned-filmmaker Pierre Kast: “The first person to have read it in the office was Rivette. Rivette was very in favor of it. I don’t know what he thought of it later, but Rivette supported us. Rivette was respected and at this moment he said, ‘Yes, I am entirely in agreement.’”

Althusser avec Bazin: Ideology and Reality

“Cinéma/idéologie/critique” is, even in its opening lines, presented as “a theorization of the criticism being practiced by us,” an attempt to systematically give a “global definition of the position we are in, and the direction we are taking.” While the text evidently has the air of a manifesto, Comolli/Narboni immediately set themselves a modest goal: the aim of their editorial is not, they maintain, that of tracing out “a ‘program’ for ourselves to proclaim, nor of clutching at ‘revolutionary’ declarations and projects.” Instead, it is to attempt “a reflection, not on what we ‘want’ (would like) to do, but on what we do and what we can do.” This prudence ushers in a defensive maneuver, namely, the justification of Cahiers’ status inside the “economic system of capitalist publishing”—the fact that it was still owned by the Filipacchi media group. Sensitive to Cinéthique’s persistent vaunting of its independent ownership structure, Comolli/Narboni caution against “the utopia of a ‘parallelism’ whose first—paradoxical—effect is to constitute, alongside the system from which it claims to escape, an illusory externality, a ‘neo-system,’ under the illusion that it is able to cancel out that which it is content to reject (idealist purism).”

The Cahiers editors likewise claim that all films made in a country such as France are inserted into the capitalist economic system and thus ineluctably act within the dominant ideological formation of the modern bourgeoisie. They refuse the viability of Godard’s declared wish to work

11 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 In a notice on the inside cover of issue no. 4 of Cinéthique, its editors trumpeted the fact that “the work that we have undertaken is in complete rupture with the official circuits of distribution” and insisted on the viability of establishing a “parallel circuit of distribution.”
16 When speaking of “capitalist ideology,” Comolli/Narboni take care, in a footnote, to explain that they are not referring to an “abstract essence” but a phenomenon that is “historically and socially determined, multiple according to place and time, and variable throughout history.”
outside “the system,” averring that this “will not prevent him from having to work in another system which is only ever a reflection of the initial one.” At the very limit, they note, all filmmakers have to use film stock, which means engaging with the Kodak monopoly of that particular industrial product. A truly “underground” cinema, working entirely outside of the structures of capitalism, is inconceivable without a broader social revolution. This standpoint does not, however, lead Comolli/Narboni to a position of economic determinism or one of cynical fatalism, a smug reassurance that revolutionary film practice is impossible or only credible in a distant future political conjuncture. Instead, the Cahiers editors insist that, while all films are “encompassed” within the “vast field” of the dominant ideology, the key factor in determining their political value from a Marxist standpoint is their reaction to this situation, which can markedly differ from filmmaker to filmmaker.

This leads Comolli/Narboni to one of their central statements and one of the lines for which their editorial is most remembered: “every film is political.” If this lapidary statement has something of an immutable validity to it, it was also made in reference to a very contemporary phenomenon in 1969. With the popular success of Z, France witnessed a wave of films taking politics as their subject matter, to the extent that, as Cahiers often wryly noted, even the listings guide Pariscope saw fit to devise the genre “film politique.” For the Cahiers critics, not only were these films—which the journal later dubbed “fictions de gauche”—in no way sufficient for a politically radical cinema, but politics itself was a much vaster terrain than the common tropes of elections, protests or strikes that were the material for these films. If “every film is political,” this is because politics permeates into all parts of human society. The phrase itself, however, was not original to Comolli/Narboni. Not only had Pleynet opened his Cinéthique interview by saying “all films are political,” on the pages of Cahiers itself, Rivette had also recently expressed the same sentiment when interviewed by his younger colleagues in 1968.

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Ibid., p. 15 [p. 253] This preemptively rebuts later criticisms of this text—and “apparatus theory” more generally—for adopting an essentialist, ahistorical understanding of ideology.

17 Ibid., p. 12 [p. 253].

18 Ibid.

In relating cinema to the domain of the ideological, Comolli/Narboni were entering into one of the thorniest questions of Marxist theory: the status of ideology. While this term was of major importance in the writings of Marx and Engels, the founders of Marxism did not dedicate a major text to elucidating the concept, and most of the key passages relating to the notion derive from Marx’s early period, in particular his posthumously published *Die deutsche Ideologie*. In this lacerating assault on Hegelian philosophy, Marx proclaimed that:

> We do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises.²⁰

In a passage that has had obvious attraction to film theorists, Marx would, a little earlier in the same work, memorably compare the function of ideology to the workings of a *camera obscura*, musing: “If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.”²¹

In later writings, Marx devised another well-known metaphor in order to discuss ideology’s relationship with the economy, this time a spatial one: here, the economic base (or substructure) stands at the foundations of the ideological superstructure. Despite only appearing fitfully in Marx’s own writings, these comparisons—presenting ideology as the reflex, echo, phantom or sublimate of reality, resulting in an “inversion” of historical life-processes or as an “upper level” of a strictly demarcated pyramid of social practices—were transformed into a catechistic dogma by the dominant Stalinist current within the communist movement.

Reacting against this orthodoxy and drawing on the ideas of the Italian communist theorist Antonio Gramsci, Althusser’s work of the 1960s revolutionized the Marxist concept of ideology. His insistence on returning to and closely reading the work of Marx would even lead him to make the claim that “The German Ideology does offer us [...] an explicit theory of ideology, but... it is not Marxist,” instead dubbing it a positivist and historicist thesis akin to the pre-Freudian understanding of dreams.\(^{22}\) Althusser’s own views on the matter were in a state of flux at the time that Comolli/Narboni’s editorial was written, and his most well-known text concerning ideology—“Idéologie et Appareils idéologiques d’état”—did not appear until after “Cinéma/Idéologie/Critique,” in June 1970.\(^{23}\) Already in Pour Marx, however, the French philosopher would seek to replace the base/superstructure “topography” of orthodox Marxism’s account of ideology with a relationship of “overdetermination,” drawing principally from Freud’s analysis of the dream-work in Die Traumdeutung.\(^{24}\) In the last article included in Pour Marx, “Marxisme et humanisme,” Althusser proceeds to define ideology as “a system (with its own logic and rigor) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society.” It is thus to be distinguished from science on the basis that, while both can be considered “systems of representation,” in ideology “the practico-social function is more important than the theoretical function (function as knowledge).” Importantly, ideology is considered to be “an organic part of


\(^{23}\) Draft copies of Althusser’s text circulated in militant circles before its publication in La Pensée, including to Jean-Pierre Gorin, who used it as the basis for the Groupe Dziga Vertov film Luttes en Italie. As Fargier recalls: “In a café one day, Gorin showed his hand. Shielding them as if had four aces in poker, he showed us the crumpled-up pages, underlined in red, black and green, of an unpublished text by Althusser, which would later appear under the famous title ‘Ideological State Apparatuses.’ We had the right to read the text, in the cafe, but not to take it with us.” Jean-Paul Fargier, “Ici et là-bas: Entretien avec Jean-Pierre Gorin,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 388 (October 1986), pp. 37-40, 42, here p. 37. Comolli confirms, however, that Cahiers’ first exposure to Althusser’s text came with its June 1970 publication and recalls that it was immediately discussed at length in the Cahiers office. Jean-Louis Comolli, private communication, September 5, 2013.

every social totality.” It is not an unfortunate by-product of class-divided societies but an ineradicable aspect of our social existence. Human societies, in Althusser’s view, “secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life.” Even a future classless society, free of social contradictions, could not be disembarrassed of ideology: “historical materialism cannot conceive that even a communist society could ever do without ideology, be it ethics, art or ‘world outlook.’”\textsuperscript{25} This is not, however, a politically pessimistic perspective belittling Marx’s projection of a communist society as an unfounded utopia. Instead, Althusser sees a possibility for transforming the role that ideology can play: “In a class society ideology is the relay whereby, and the element in which, the relation between men and their conditions of existence is settled to the profit of the ruling class. In a classless society ideology is the relay whereby, and the element in which, the relation between men and their conditions of existence is lived to the profit of all men.”\textsuperscript{26} From this foundation, Althusser argues that ideology chiefly concerns the “lived relation between men and their world,” as distinct from the “real relations” existing between the two (which, by contrast, are the subject of scientific inquiry, i.e. Marxist theory). In Althusser’s words: “In ideology, men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but the way they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an ‘imaginary,’ ‘lived’ relation.” Finally, he specifies that, as a “system of representations,” ideology can take the guise of images and occasionally concepts but that it is primarily as structures that ideologies impose themselves on individuals, in a process that is external to conscious awareness: such representations are “perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects and they act functionally on men via a process that escapes them.”\textsuperscript{27}

At an important stage in “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” the last two passages quoted above are also cited by Comolli/Narboni, who defend their claim that “every film is political” by arguing that each film is “determined by the given ideology which produces it (or in which it is produced, which amounts to the same thing).” Compared to other cultural products, the cinema’s ideological determination is particularly forceful, for two main reasons. Firstly, significant sums of capital are required for a film to be


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., pp. 242-243 [pp. 235-236].

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p. 240 [p. 233].
produced, even one on a modest budget—and this is before questions of distribution and marketing enter the equation. Secondly, and of greater theoretical importance, the technical equipment required to make a film is itself manufactured on an industrial basis by major corporations with ideological goals in mind: specifically, the “totally natural” reproduction of visual reality. It is at this point, however, that Comolli/Narboni’s argument departs from Pleynet’s claims and is instead closer to Althusser’s thinking. Even if reality could be “reproduced faithfully” by film equipment, this reality is itself “entirely ideological” in nature. For the Cahiers critics, “it is not the world in its ‘concrete reality’ which is ‘seized’ by (or, rather, impregnates) a non-interventionist instrument, but rather the vague, unformulated, untheorized, unthought world of the dominant ideology.” It is for this reason that Comolli/Narboni argue that “the cinema is burdened from the very beginning, from the very first meter of film processed, by the inevitability of reproducing things not as they are in their concrete reality, but as they are when refracted through ideology.”

This, then, is Althusser avec Bazin: the world presents itself to the camera’s “eye,” but this world is already permeated with and structured by ideology. Ideology is not a mask that hides the real existence of things; rather, it is the way we experience the real existence of things, and this goes for “direct” human perception just as much it applies to the images created by the mechanical tool of the cinema. It is for this reason that Comolli/Narboni are actually rather favorably disposed towards Bazin in this text, belying their reputation as Œdipal usurpers of the Bazinian legacy. They do, indeed, declare the “theory of ‘transparency’” to be “eminently reactionary”—but here they have in mind not Bazin (who rarely made reference to “transparent mise en scène”) but rather the classical Hollywood system and its most dogged defenders in French film criticism, the macmahoniens, who were indisputably on the political right. As for Bazin, his theories constituted, in the Cahiers critics’ eyes, a necessary stage of film theory—consisting of “returning more closely to film in the materiality of its elements, in its signifying structures, its formal organization”—that needed to be dialectically transcended. Although they do not hesitate to pronounce that Bazin’s approach suffered from the “major defect” of “phenomenological positivism,” they believe that the contradictions in his texts are easily pinpointed and fixed, and suggest that the path he had taken in film theory was continued by “the model of structural linguistics” (here they evidently mean Metz).

28 The quotes in this paragraph are from Comolli/Narboni, “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” p. 12 [p. 254].
For the “elaboration and application of a critical theory of the cinema [...] with direct reference to the method of dialectical materialism,” however, Comolli/Narboni propose the research and experimentation carried out by the Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s (particularly Eisenstein) as the primary historical precedent worthy of interest. Indeed, the years 1969-1971 will be marked by an intense theoretical interest in the heritage of the Soviet montage tradition, which will be discussed at length in Chapter 8.

### Form and Content in the Cinema: The Seven Categories

If Comolli/Narboni assert that it is in the nature of “the system” to turn the cinema into an instrument of ideology, they nonetheless do not proceed to a cynical or fatalistic stance towards aesthetic possibilities in filmmaking. Instead they argue that the “most important task of cinema” at present is precisely “to question the system of representation itself: to question itself as cinema, in order to provoke a discrepancy [décalage] or a rupture with its ideological function.” Already, the language here is interesting: what is demanded is not a sweeping rejection of the prevailing ideology (which would be impossible in any case) but the need for questioning such ideologies, for creating discrepancies or ruptures with them. On the basis of this demand, the Cahiers editors establish their now legendary seven categories of cinema. Despite the fact that the wide familiarity of these categories within film studies is such that they can be recited by heart in “Introduction to Film” classes the world over, it is worth detailing this classification schema.

The first category comprises the vast majority of films and consists of those productions that “everywhere bathe in ideology, express it, carry it forward without any gaps or distortions.” In accepting without reserve the governing “system of representation,” these films are marked by an ironclad “conformity” (adéquation) between social demand and the ideological “response” they generate. They are the “unconscious instruments of ideology,” and their status within the cinematic mainstream can be determined, even more than by their box office takings, by the “innocent absence at every stage

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29 Ibid., pp. 14-15 [p. 259].
30 Ibid., p. 12 [p. 254]
of their production of even the slightest questioning of the representative nature of the cinema.” Comolli/Narboni see little critical interest in these films. At best, Marxist film criticism should account for the success of popular “hits” by investigating “the conformity (at all levels) between the products of ideology and the ideological system.”

The following two categories differ from the first in that they enact a “double action” on the “ideological insertion” of cinema, operating on both the level of content (the signified) and filmic form (the signifier), thereby contributing to a “critical de-construction of the system of representation.” But they differ as to the manner in which this break with the dominant ideology is carried out. In category (b) films, it is a directly political action, expressly willed by the filmmaker. Comolli and Narboni include films such as *Nicht versöhn* by Straub/Huillet, *The Edge* by Robert Kramer and *Terra em transe* by Glauber Rocha in this class. In category (c) films, by contrast, this double action occurs “against the grain” (à rebours): neither the subject matter of the film nor the express intentions of the filmmaker are explicitly political, but they become so through the critical work performed on them. A more nebulous but potentially much more critically fertile category than category (b), this grouping includes *Méditerranée* by Pollet/Sollers, *Persona* by Ingmar Bergman and *The Bellboy* by Jerry Lewis. Although it is not spelled out as such, it appears that the key dividing line between these two categories is, essentially, whether the director openly identifies as a Marxist or not: if not, Marxist criticism must carry out a counter-reading of the film on the basis of its formal structures to find value in it (which *Cahiers* did, as we shall see, with both Lewis and Bergman). Implicitly, too, an “against the grain” reading of a film places the critic in a position of eminence in determining its signification, a hermeneutic strategy that puts the *Cahiers* of the Comolli/Narboni era in the critical lineage of the *politique des auteurs* espoused by the journal as early as the 1950s.

Together, these two categories constitute, for Comolli/Narboni, “the essence of the cinema and make up the essence of the journal.” The fourth category, by contrast, consists of the increasing number of films which, while

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32 The quotes from this paragraph are from Comolli/Narboni, “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” p. 13 [p. 255].
33 Ibid. [p. 256].
34 Although Godard is not expressly mentioned here, his increasingly politicized work is also an obvious exemplar of this tendency.
35 *Méditerranée* would be a more mixed case: the writer of the film’s voice-over, Philippe Sollers, did identify as a Marxist but wrote in a lyrical, poetic register that presented deliberate difficulties in conveying a “message” in the film. For more on the work of Lewis, see Chapter 17.
supposedly possessing a political content (and often one expressed from a left-wing, or at least left-liberal, point of view), unquestioningly conform to the norms of conventional film language, evidently out of a concern for reaching a mass audience. The paradigmatic example here would appear to be Z by Costa-Gavras, the target of vociferous critique from *Cahiers*, although Comolli/Narboni prefer to mention Bernard Paul's *Le Temps de vivre*. These films are generally worthy only of withering condemnation on the pages of *Cahiers*, since they find themselves “expressing, reinforcing and duplicating exactly what they think they denounce.” Of far greater critical interest is category (e): films from classical Hollywood (or the European canon), which enact an “internal dismantling” of the ideological system of representation they ostensibly exemplify, through the generation of “a discrepancy [décalage], a distortion, a rupture between the conditions of its appearance [...] and the end product.” Such effects of discrepancy and rupture are primarily produced by “the film’s deployment of a certain number of mechanisms of figuration” which allows for the “transformative self-designation of ideology.” *Cahiers* here proposes an “oblique, symptomatic reading” of these works, seizing on the “fault lines” that effectively undermine their intended ideological function, and give the films of John Ford, Carl Theodor Dreyer and Roberto Rossellini as key examples of this tendency.36

The final two categories relate to “direct cinema,” which is demarcated from the rest of filmmaking for reasons not clearly established (in any case the distinction will not be maintained in the future): a first group whereby the formal qualities of conventional cinema are largely reproduced, due to the filmmakers’ emphasis on “transparency,” “authenticity,” and “lived experience,” and a second, more promising cohort of films that “concentrate on the problem of representation in making the filmic material function,” the outstanding example of which was the 10-minute, single-shot 1968 film *La Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder*.37

On the basis of this seven-part classification system, Comolli/Narboni elaborate a fourfold set of guidelines for *Cahiers*’ future critical practice, consisting of the following procedures: firstly, highlighting the total ideological determination of category (a) films; secondly, operating a “double reading” of category (b), (c) and (g) films (on the level of “signifier” and “signified”);

36 Ibid., pp. 13-14 [p. 257].
37 Ibid. The Wonder film was frequently held up by *Cahiers* as a model of militant filmmaking and is treated at greater length in Comolli’s text “Le détour par le direct (i),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 209 (February 1969), pp. 48-54. Translated as “The Detour through the Direct,” trans. Christopher Williams, idem. (ed.), *Realism and the Cinema: A Reader* (London: BFI, 1980), pp. 224-244. The film and Comolli’s text will be further discussed in Chapter 2.
thirdly, pointing to the formal weaknesses of category (d) and (f) films; and finally, in the case of category (e) films, locating “the ideological gap produced by the work of the film.”38 Although they tend to use the language of semiotics, referring to “signifiers” and “signifieds,” it is clear that Comolli/Narboni have recourse, in devising their seven categories, to the form/content dichotomy, one of the oldest problems in the philosophy of aesthetics. In their perspective, form has primacy over content in determining a film’s ability to question and resist the dominant ideology. For all this, however, Comolli/Narboni are not formalists. If category (d) films are denounced for being content-without-form, then we can also ascribe a putative, unmentioned eighth category to the *Cahiers* editors: form-without-content films, which were also scorned. The experimentation of avant-garde filmmakers or the American underground movement largely left *Cahiers* cold. Indeed, Comolli/Narboni specifically critiqued films that consisted of pure formal exercises as operating “on the most superficial level of language” and thereby failing to be truly transgressive, pointing to the “failure” of the lettrists or the Zaum movement in support of their claim. Instead, the films defended by Comolli/Narboni are those in which—to borrow from Hegel, whose *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* are at the basis of the entire tradition of aesthetic theory from which the *Cahiers* editors drew—form becomes content.39 The form/content duality should thus be understood not as a mechanical opposition but as a dialectic. For Comolli/Narboni, this dialectic expresses itself in three productive ways: category (b), where it is the express political goal of the filmmaker; category (c), where it is achieved through the formal poetics of modernist filmmakers and the critical analysis made of them by their interpreters; and category (e), where it arises through the internal fissures opened up in otherwise formally classical films by the major auteurist directors, a process that needs to be pinpointed and theoretically elucidated by perceptive critics.

Finally, it is worth subjecting the viability of such a classification system—which divides up the entirety of cinematic production into defined, mutually exclusive groupings—to interrogation. Doing so has drawn accusations of offering a rigidly schematic, if not reductive, approach towards the plural, contradictory field of the cinema.40 A few things should be remembered here, however. The first is that these seven categories themselves,

40 See Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory*, p. 120.
as Rosen recognizes, are centered on “mixed cases and contradictions.”

Devising seven categories is a gesture towards complexity in the context of the prevailing Manicheism in the discourse of politically radical film criticism at the time, which tended to sweepingly divide film production into “revolutionary” and “bourgeois” cinema, usually on the basis of the film’s content. The second is that these categories were devised chiefly for the purposes of the editorial’s line of argument, and—although they clearly programmed much of the later critical work by Cahiers (to take only the most obvious example, Young Mister Lincoln is clearly a “category (e)” film)—they were never referred to as such in subsequent issues of the journal. When discussing films in the wake of “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” the Cahiers critics never aligned it with one of the editorial’s categories, nor did the journal entertain debates over how films should be classified—whether, for instance, a particular film corresponded to category (b) or (c). Ironically, this type of scholasticism would be far more prevalent in later academic discussions making use of Comolli/Narboni’s text than in anything that appeared in Cahiers itself.

Art and Ideology in the Althusserian Tradition

In producing a classification system of an art form on the basis of an individual work’s response to its own ideological insertion, it appears—at least at first glance—that Comolli/Narboni unequivocally ascribe the cinema, and by extension art more generally, a place within the sphere of the ideological. This, indeed, is forcefully put in the English translation of the text produced for Screen, which claims: “‘cinema’ and ‘art’ are branches of ideology.” But this line is a fabrication of the translator, misplacing a wholly different formulation from elsewhere in the original text which speaks, more vaguely, of “the vast field of ideology, one of whose names is ‘cinema’ or ‘art’.”

41 Philip Rosen, “Preface,” in Comolli, Cinema against Spectacle: Technique and Ideology Revisited, pp. 7-16, p. 11.
43 See Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni [sic], “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” trans. Susan Bennett, Screen vol. 12 no. 1 (Spring 1971), pp. 27-36, here p. 30. This is the most widely available English translation of the text and has been reprinted in numerous other outlets, but it is riddled with inaccuracies which render it fundamentally deficient. I discuss its deficiencies in greater detail in Comolli, Cinema against Spectacle, pp. 247-250.
the end, Comolli/Narboni give no clear guidance on this question in their editorial. In fact, the issue of art’s relationship to ideology was a vexatious one for Althusserian Marxism. Althusser had already established a clear distinction between scientific and ideological practice, but this raised an uncomfortable question: did artistic production, which is evidently remote from the former, thus fit unambiguously with the latter? In offhand comments in *Pour Marx*, Althusser seems to suggest as much. At several points in his text “Sur la dialectique matérialiste,” which was reproduced in this volume, he talks of “ideology, whether religious, political, moral, legal or artistic” or of “Marxist investigators working in avant-garde domains such as the theory of ideologies (law, ethics, religion, art, philosophy).” In “Marxisme et humanisme,” meanwhile, he categorically refutes the idea that “art could merge with knowledge or become ‘everyday life,’ etc.” and thereby attain a non-ideological status.

This stance, not the result of carefully elaborated reflection from Althusser, evidently left those of his pupils who took an interest in questions of aesthetics dissatisfied. Writing for *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes*, a young Alain Badiou began his article on “L’autonomie du processus esthétique” by explicitly asserting: “Art is not ideology. It is entirely impossible to explain it by the homologous relation that it would support with the historical real. The aesthetic process decenters the specular relation where ideology perpetuates its closed infinity. The aesthetic effect is indeed imaginary: but this imaginary is not the reflection of the real, since it is the real of this reflection.” Similarly, Pierre Macherey’s article “Lénine, critique de Tolstoï”—later included in his instrumental book *Théorie de la production littéraire*—points to the distinctions between textual production and ideology. For Macherey, “Tolstoy’s works cannot [...] be reduced to the ideology which they contain; they are more than that.” Instead, the function of the literary work is to “present ideology in a non-ideological form,” and Macherey thus concludes that “we can gauge the distance which separates the work of art from true knowledge (a scientific knowledge) but which also

46 Ibid., p. 239 [p. 232].
unites them in their common distance from ideology. Science does away with ideology, obliterates it; literature challenges ideology by using it.\textsuperscript{49}

Responding to these and other notes of concern, Althusser would produce two texts that more deeply explored his thoughts on the specific place of works of art within ideology. In “Lettre sur la connaissance de l’art (Réponse à André Daspre),” Althusser is categorical: “I do not rank real art among the ideologies, although art does have a quite particular and specific relationship with ideology.” Art does not substitute for knowledge in the scientific sense, but it does maintain a “specific relationship” with knowledge, one which consists of a form of perceptual sensitivity towards ideology itself: “What art makes us see, and therefore gives to us in the form of ‘seeing,’ ‘perceiving’ and ‘feeling’ (which is not the form of knowing), is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes.” Althusser is careful to clarify that he is only referring to “authentic art”—and not “works of an average or mediocre level.” He specifically mentions Balzac, Tolstoy and Solzhenitzyn as key novelists in this regard, precisely because of their ability to operate “an internal distantiation from the very ideology from which their novels emerged. They make us ‘perceive’ (but not know) in some sense from the inside, by an internal distance, the very ideology in which they are held.”\textsuperscript{50}

If art works produced a specific mode of knowledge about ideology (from within, as it were), Althusser also emphasizes the need for a scientific theory of the aesthetic, without which our understanding of art is likely to succumb to what he terms “latent humanist ideology.” In “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract,” written at roughly the same time as the response to André Daspre, Althusser nonetheless maintains that art has an intimate relation to ideology and suggests that art works therefore have a certain split status between their “cultural” and “aesthetic” aspects: “Every work of art is born of a project both aesthetic and ideological. When it exists as a work of art it produces as a work of art [...] an ideological effect.” As a purely aesthetic object, the work of art is, therefore, “no more part of ‘culture’ than instruments of production (a locomotive) or scientific knowledge are part of culture,” but by the same token, it can become an “element of the ideological” by being inserted into “the system of relations which constitute the ideological.” In fact, an art work, according to Althusser, has a privileged relation with ideology; despite its “internal distance” from the ideological

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 99 [p. 149].

\textsuperscript{50} This and the preceding quotes are from Louis Althusser, “Lettre sur la connaissance de l’art,” pp. 136-137 [pp. 151-152].
domain, it paradoxically “maintains far closer relations with ideology than any other object.”

It is this theoretical argument that allows Comolli/Narboni to make what would otherwise be some contradictory claims in their essay: they speak of all films being “encompassed by the dominant ideology,” but they also allow for discrepancies, gaps and breaking points within this ideology to arise through the formal-critical work of the artist. Hence, Rodowick’s claim, in The Crisis of Political Modernism, that Comolli/Narboni “privileged Althusser’s work on epistemology and ideology at the expense of his and Pierre Macherey’s writings on art” is unfair on the Cahiers editors. Not only were Macherey’s and Badiou’s texts on art and literature cited on multiple occasions on the pages of Cahiers during this time, but the main argument of “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” emphasizing the potential for a “critical de-construction” of the dominant system of representation, is in line with the writings of the Althusserian theorists on art in this period.

Devising seven categories of film practice was a point of departure from Althusserian theory in one sense, however. While Althusser and his followers highlighted the existence of a strain of bourgeois realist novelists (Balzac, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, etc.) whose work, as a form of “authentic art,” was elevated from that of average or mediocre works, he does not give us any criteria for being able to make this distinction. What is it that separates Balzac’s Père Goriot or Murnau’s Sunrise from the second-rate product of a hack writer or workhorse director? We are not to know. In contrast, Comolli/Narboni do provide such terms of demarcation. These come not strictly in terms of aesthetic quality (although it is not hard to read this is a factor in their text) but in the varying relations between form and content, signifier and signified, ideological effect and critical work. Rather than veering away

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52 Rodowick, The Crisis of Political Modernism, pp. 82-83.
from their Althusserian models, as Rodowick has suggested, Comolli/Narboni are here, in the specific case of the cinema, making an attempt to fill in a crucial gap in the theory of art that was being developed by Althusser and his followers.

The Debate with Cinéthique

Issue no. 5 of Cinéthique (dated September-October 1969) appeared virtually simultaneously with the release of the Cahiers number containing “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” (dated October 1969). As with its rival journal, this number was something of a watershed for Cinéthique: the publication ushered in a new, sober format, and it was now more single-mindedly devoted to writings that, in the eyes of the editors, contributed to developing a Marxist understanding of the cinema. Issue no. 5 was bountiful in this sense: the editorial by Gérard Leblanc (“Direction,” pp. 1-8) was followed by “La parenthèse et le détour” by Jean-Paul Fargier (pp. 15-21), Marcelin Pleynet’s “Le front ‘gauche’ de l’art: Eisenstein et les vieux ‘jeunes hégéliens’” (pp. 23-32) and Fargier’s review of Jean-Pierre Lajournade’s Joueur de quilles, “Discours – film (révolution) – mutisme” (pp. 37-40). Of these, the first two texts dealt most closely with the same set of concerns adumbrated by Comolli/Narboni’s editorial. In both Cahiers and Cinéthique, repeated reference is made to the writings of Louis Althusser, a discussion of the cinema’s determination by bourgeois ideology is held, and alternative modes of filmmaking—involving a “rupture” with dominant forms of ideology and a more “materialist” cinematic practice—are advocated. On multiple occasions, the same films are given similar evaluations: Le Temps de Vivre and Z are denounced, while Méditerranée and Perrault’s Le Regne du jour are lauded. The casual reader could be forgiven for thinking that the two journals were in remarkable theoretical and critical confluence with one another. This was not, however, how the editors on either side saw matters. Cahiers was the first to issue a polemical response, with Comolli/Narboni devoting a follow-up editorial in their next issue (November 1969) to a riposte to the texts in Cinéthique no. 5. The newer journal returned fire in their January-February 1970 issue (no. 6). Although this exchange was not without its disagreeable moments, often descending to petty personal attacks (in Cinéthique) or fastidious pedantry (in Cahiers), it is also valuable for allowing

54 The precise release dates of the two issues are uncertain, but it is evident that they were produced without knowledge of each other.
the participants to delve more deeply into some of the theoretical questions pertaining to ideology and cinema that, by now, had clearly become a central theoretical preoccupation in both corners.

Of greatest theoretical interest in Cinéthique no. 5 is Fargier’s “Parenthèse ou détour,” subtitled “Essai de définition théorique du rapport cinéma-politique.” Here, the Cinéthique editor argued that the cinema had a double ideological function: firstly, to reproduce or reflect existing ideologies, and secondly—and more fundamentally—to produce an ideology specific to itself: the “impression of reality” (which is far more forceful in the cinema than in other forms of representation such as painting). For Fargier, the primary way to avoid the cinema’s “natural” inscription into idealist ideology is by means of “theoretical practice”—understood as a historical materialist approach to film criticism—and he thus advocates a “break” [coupure] in filmmaking practice, allowing it to separate its “knowledge function” from its “recognition function.” Fargier sees two possibilities for a theoretical practice in the cinema: firstly, a film can reproduce knowledge already produced in the sciences (including historical materialism, but the critic also gives medicine, physics and geography as examples); secondly, and more importantly, a film can produce a specific knowledge about itself by allowing the audience “to see its social and physical materiality.”

Fargier finds examples of such a “materialist cinema” in the likes of Un film comme les autres by Godard, Octobre à Madrid by Marcel Hanoun, Sollers/Pollet’s Méditerranée and Le Joueur de quilles by Jean-Pierre Lajournade. The last title also drew a review from the critic in the same issue, which can be considered an extension of the argument of “Parenthèse ou détour.” Fargier sees the film’s “mutism”—that is, its negation of intelligible discourse—as marking a rupture in the ideological functioning of the cinema, one which allows it to “speak, by metaphor, of the historical role of the petty-bourgeoisie: to disappear.”

Cahiers’ long, detailed editorial response to Cinéthique was so punctilious as to focus, on two occasions, on typographical errors: a supernumerary accent in one case, and a comma instead of a semi-colon in the other. The text, “D’une critique à son point critique” (presented as a follow-up to “Cinéma/idéologie/critique”) can broadly be divided into two parts, with the second

focused on Pleynet’s discussion of the Soviet avant-gardes of the 1920s. It is
the first part, however, with its attention to the texts of the Cinéthique editors
themselves, that is of more considerable interest here. Comolli/Narboni begin
their missive by suggesting that while the “program” outlined by Cinéthique
of a Marxist approach to film criticism is to be broadly supported, this
program is devoid of theoretical substance, and the principles argued for
by Cinéthique end up playing the role of “the compensatory affirmation of
their necessity-lack.” Terms such as rupture, inscription, work, representation
and foreclosure are sprinkled throughout the issue, but in Cahiers’ view,
they are not subject to the necessary theorization that would authorize
their usage, and they thus remain at the level of “revolutionary verbiage,”
with “scientific pseudo-rigor rapidly being substituted for (and masking the
absence of) theoretical rigor.”

Particularly problematic for Cahiers is Cinéthique’s use of the term
“break” [coupure] and Fargier’s argument that it is possible for the cinema
to transcend its ideological status by producing theoretical knowledge. The
paradigm for this argument is clearly Althusser’s notion, itself drawn from
Bachelard, of an “epistemological break” between the writings of the young
Marx, which are still “ideological” in nature, and those of Marx’s maturity,
when he had established the theory of historical materialism as a practice
founded in a scientific approach to the analysis of human societies. To
transplant this notion to the cinema itself, as Fargier does, is in the eyes of
the Cahiers editors a dangerous act of theoretical confusion. Neither of the
two possibilities for theoretical practice to exist in the cinema as outlined
by Fargier are, for Comolli/Narboni, of any validity: the cinema can play a
role in the diffusion of scientific knowledge, even of Marxist theory, but
this does not change its nature as an “ideological product.” In this case, they
argue, “far from the film passing from ideology to science, the film enacts
a transformation of science into ideology.” Similarly, acts of cinematic
self-reflexiveness (as in Octobre à Madrid) or deliberate “mutism” (Le Joueur
de quilles) cannot be equated with the process of producing knowledge
about the cinema itself, Fargier’s second possibility for theoretical practice
in the cinema. As Cahiers notes, Hollywood abounds with films that take
the filmmaking process itself as their subject matter, in a manner little
different to that of Hanoun, without these films in any way producing

57 Comolli/Narboni, “Cinéma/ïdéologie/critique (II),” p. 8 [p. 264].
58 See Louis Althusser, “Sur le jeune Marx,” in idem., Pour Marx, pp. 45-83. Translated as “On
the Young Marx,” in idem., For Marx, pp. 49-86.
59 Comolli/Narboni, “Cinéma/ïdéologie/critique (II),” pp. 8 [p. 266].
theoretical knowledge per se. As for Lajournade, his film is nothing but a “monstrous metaphor of its own uselessness and impotence,” and the Cahiers critics derisively mock the idea that it could be ushered into the “camp of materialist cinema.”

Comolli/Narboni categorically reject, therefore, the possibility that the cinema could enact a break between ideological and theoretical practice and, provisionally putting to one side the question of the “autonomy of the aesthetic process,” squarely position the cinema within the field of ideology:

The cinema is an ideological product, its field of definition and practice is ideology, and not science. To put it simply, at present it is at the service of the dominant (bourgeois, capitalist) ideology, and we hope that in the future it will be in the service of another dominant ideology (a socialist one). But between now and the future, there will not be a transformation in the nature of the cinema. As an ideological instrument, it cannot become a science; instead, there will be a transformation of how it is used and the purposes for which it is used.

It is for this reason that the Cahiers editors, in their original manifesto, preferred to speak of filmmakers “questioning” or “interrogating” ideology, of producing discrepancies or gaps with the dominant systems of representation, rather than proclaiming a comprehensive rupture with the cinema’s very functioning as an ideological apparatus. They do not, however, refuse the possibility of a theoretical discourse on the cinema, even one that meets the status of “science” in Althusser’s understanding, claiming that it is “not so ridiculous to put into practice a scientific approach to film criticism.”

But in this case, too, an epistemological break cannot simply be abruptly declared. Rather, it can only come as the result of a long process of theoretical investigation, critique, self-interrogation and practical testing.

It is tempting to see “Cinéma/idéologie/critique” as a self-proclaimed Althusserian epistemological break with the “ideological” film criticism that marked Cahiers’ prior history. Again, the Screen translation of the text suggests that this is how Comolli/Narboni saw themselves, speaking in the text’s first paragraph of “scientific film criticism.” But this is another invention of the translator: the word the critics actually used was “conséquent” (“rigorous” or “systematic”) rather than the far more theoretically charged

60 Ibid., p. 9 [p. 269].
61 Ibid., p. 8 [p. 265].
62 Ibid., p. 9 [p. 269].
term “scientifique.” In fact, Comolli/Narboni were prudent and tentative in their claims and did not follow the practice of grand but flimsy declarations that they censured in Cinéthique. At best, they saw their text not as the arrival of a scientific approach to film criticism but as setting the foundation stones for the future realization of such an approach. Indeed, the entire Cahiers project over the following four years (from late 1969 to 1973) was one where film criticism sought to transcend its own epistemological status. While it would be overblown to refer to this practice as “scientific criticism,” it does not seem inappropriate to dub the critical approach following on from the publication of the October 1969 editorial “theoretical criticism,” a term that recognizes its complementary role with the “critical theory” (Althusser, Barthes, Lacan, Derrida) that constituted its conceptual basis. On the pages of Cahiers, throughout the early 1970s, criticism strove to become theory.

Works Cited


