The Red Years of Cahiers du cinéma (1968-1973)

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5. “Technique et Idéologie” by Jean-Louis Comolli

Abstract
This chapter outlines the six-part series of articles by Jean-Louis Comolli, “Technique et idéologie.” Perhaps the most theoretically in-depth text produced by Cahiers du cinéma during its Marxist phase, Comolli’s series interrogated questions concerning the ideologically determined nature of film technology, thereby intervening into debates between Cahiers, Tel Quel and La Nouvelle Critique. Here, he argued that the invention and subsequent technological evolution of the cinema is motivated by the interplay between economic and ideological factors. While film does rely on technologies grounded in scientific research, this does not grant it the status of an “objective” instrument, and its insertion into the sphere of ideology (for instance, through its use of Renaissance perspective) cannot be denied. From this point he moves onto a historical discussion of various developments in film technique—from depth of field to the close-up and the advent of sound cinema—and advocates a historiographic method based on Althusser’s notion of differential historical temporality.

Keywords: Cahiers du cinéma, Jean-Louis Comolli, apparatus theory, film history, depth of field, ideology

Debating the Cinematic Apparatus: Comolli, Lebel, Baudry

If the texts on Young Mr. Lincoln and Othon staked a claim to being “theoretical criticism,” film theory in the purer sense of the term was far from neglected in the period following the publication of “Cinéma/idéologie/critique.” Cahiers refrained from an official response to the pair of rebuttals to “D’une critique à son point critique” printed in issue no. 6 of Cinéthique. “Du bon usage de la valeur d'échange” by the Cinéthique editors had asserted that Cahiers fulfilled “an objective necessity: to represent petty-bourgeois
ideology in the field of the cinema,” and “Le point aveugle” by Marcelin Pleynet, which, on a more conciliatory note, wished that “this point, having been recognized and rectified, may permit them, and permit us, to be done with more serious blind spots.” Disregarding these broadsides, Cahiers pursued its project of theoretical reflection on the basis of the program sketched out in the journal’s 1969 editorial, with its focus on the ideological determination of the cinematic apparatus, and key texts during the years 1970-1971 included “Travail, lecture, jouissance” by Daney and Oudart, “L’effet de réel” and “Notes pour une théorie de la représentation” by Oudart, and the series of texts beginning with “Réalité de la dénotation” by Bonitzer, all of which will be discussed in the second volume. The most concerted theoretical undertaking of this period, however, and the Cahiers article that has arguably had the most resonance in the history of film theory was the six-part series “Technique et idéologie” by Jean-Louis Comolli, published between May 1971 and September-October 1972, and it is this text that will form the focus of the present chapter.

“Technique et idéologie” is a sprawling, dispersed undertaking, which retains noticeable traces of the condition in which it was written. Composed on a month-to-month basis while Comolli was also absorbed by the more mundane tasks of editing the journal, the series appeared at a moment when Cahiers’ own political and theoretical perspectives were rapidly changing. When “Technique et idéologie” was initiated, the journal was still in the midst of its brief alignment with the PCF, but by the time the sixth and final installment had been published, Cahiers had come under the grip of “anti-revisionist” Maoism. Despite the political shifting sands, however, the whole series orbits around the central hypothesis governing Comolli’s argument: the history of the cinema can be analyzed from a theoretical framework that takes into account the “reciprocal reinforcement” of the ideological and economic demands placed on the medium by the capitalist...
societies in which it was developed. Despite this theoretical through-line, “Technique et idéologie” is a protean, fluid text, a quality that is accentuated by the large number of interlocutors with whom Comolli engages, whether amicably or antagonistically: Jean-Patrick Lebel, Marcelin Pleynet, Jean-Louis Baudry, André Bazin, Jean Mitry, Georges Sadoul, Pierre Francastel, Jean Louis Schefer, Julia Kristeva and Louis Althusser all feature in Comolli's text. Of these, the key polemical sparring partners, at least in the first part of “Technique et idéologie,” were Baudry and Lebel. Between them, Comolli, Baudry and Lebel can thus stand in as synecdochic representatives of the three major tendencies of French Marxist film theory during this period as it was being developed on the pages of Cahiers du cinéma, Cinéthique (allied, until mid-1971, with Tel Quel) and La Nouvelle Critique.

“Technique et idéologie” is often seen as a rebuttal to Lebel's own series of articles titled “Cinéma et idéologie.” Indeed, Comolli opens proceedings with a stinging repudiation of Lebel and a defense of Cahiers' theoretical outlook against the PCF critic's attacks. By the same token, however, it should be noted that a projected article on the subject of “Technique et idéologie” was first openly mentioned in a March 1970 Cahiers advertisement, thereby predating Lebel's series by several months. Moreover, the polemical nature of Lebel's articles did not, initially, preclude collaborations between the two journals, such as the April 1971 round table on Othon discussed in the preceding chapter. In fact, “Technique et idéologie” did not appear until a full year after Lebel's first critique of Cahiers, a delay that suggests political considerations were involved in the decision to proceed with the writing of Comolli's text: it was only when Cahiers was ready to sever ties with the PCF that it could authorize going public with such a forceful repudiation of Lebel's party-sanctioned viewpoint.

The first part of Lebel's series offers a perspective on the ideological function of the cinema and formed the focal point of Comolli's response. After an opening passage that seeks to distinguish the positions of Cinéthique and Cahiers, Lebel nonetheless tends to treat their respective theoretical perspectives in a synthetic manner, critiquing what he terms the “ideological current" for its “mechanistic conception of ideology” and “essentialist conception of the cinema” and arguing that by “confusing the utilization of

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4 See Jean-Patrick Lebel “Cinéma et idéologie," La Nouvelle Critique no. 34 (May 1970), pp. 67-72; no. 35 (June 1970), pp. 60-67; no. 37 (October 1970), pp. 60-64; and no. 41 (February 1971), pp. 60-69. These texts were reprinted in expanded form as Jean-Patrick Lebel, Cinéma et idéologie (Paris: Éditions sociales, 1971). Lebel would go on to be a documentary filmmaker in the 1980s and 1990s and died in 2012.
the cinema by the dominant ideology with a ‘natural’ blemish of the cinema, cause and effect are inverted and the cinema is made into an ideological instrument ‘in itself.’\(^5\) Rejecting arguments that the ideological nature of the cinema derives from the film camera’s adoption of Renaissance perspective (itself a product of the nascent bourgeoisie), Lebel insists that the camera is a passive recording device that is “not constructed according to an ideology of representation (in the speculative sense of the term), but on [a] scientific basis.”\(^6\) Lebel is careful, however, not to divorce the cinema as such from ideology: he considers the cinema today to be overwhelmingly used as a “vehicle of ideology” but insists that this is due not to the inherently ideological nature of the cinematic apparatus but to the very dominance of the dominant ideology in contemporary culture. Such hegemony does not, Lebel argues, preclude the camera from being used for scientific purposes, nor does it invalidate a cinematic practice that could seek to produce a revolutionary alternative to bourgeois ideology. It is this latter possibility that is broached in the second part of Lebel’s text, focusing more particularly on the question of film form, where the critic schematically opposes the “deconstruction” proposed by *Cahiers* (and, to a lesser extent, *Cinéthique*) to a Brechtian approach that would rest, in his opinion, “more on an aesthetics of ‘transparency’ than on an aesthetics of ‘deconstruction.’”\(^7\) Although signification “only manifests itself through form(s),” Lebel asserts that no form can, in fact, “claim to have a significature in itself,” and he warns that the “valorization of esthetico-theoretical particularities” in avant-garde films can lead to the constitution of a “normative aesthetics that risks merely being the expression of formal snobbism.”\(^8\)

Lebel’s endeavor was clearly supported by the PCF membership and its organizational machinery.\(^9\) The party’s in-house publishing arm Éditions sociales released the series in an expanded format as the monograph *Cinéma et idéologie* in mid-1971. And yet Eisenschitz—who was aligned with both *Cahiers* and *La Nouvelle Critique* at the time and thus something of a neutral party in this debate—now feels that Lebel was “left to his own devices” by the party’s intellectuals and that “there were no real theoretical discussions surrounding his book or its positions. [...]” With Jean-Patrick, they abandoned

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5 Lebel, “Cinéma et idéologie (I),” p. 70.
6 Ibid., p. 72.
7 Lebel, “Cinéma et idéologie (II),” p. 62.
8 Ibid., p. 67.
9 *La Nouvelle Critique*, for instance, published a selection of readers’ letters on the debate, which were broadly supportive of Lebel and even more hostile towards *Cahiers* than Lebel had allowed himself to be. See *La Nouvelle Critique* no. 37 (October 1970), pp. 58-59.
him to his fate.” Moreover, while stressing Lebel’s “formidable erudition,” Eisenschitz found that his fellow critic did not have a “theoretical fiber” and considered his ideas to be “a little clumsy.”\textsuperscript{10} Indeed, Lebel’s recourse to spurious analogies and his reliance on “common sense” arguments, while perhaps ingratiating himself with the Party, made his texts an easy target for figures schooled in Althusserian Marxism.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Lebel’s effort has remained obscure and little-read and is generally now mainly known as a straw man for Comolli’s argument.\textsuperscript{11} The opposite can be said of Jean-Louis Baudry’s article for Cinéthique, “Cinéma: effets idéologiques produits par l’appareil de base,” perhaps the purest distillation of the notion that it is the camera itself that produces an ideological effect, and a polemical target for both Lebel and, as will be seen, Comolli. Although few have unconditionally adhered to its radical conclusions, Baudry’s article has, along with its later pendant, “Le dispositif: approches métapsychologiques de l’impression de réalité,” become a key text of film theory, despite the fact that Baudry himself was hardly a specialist in the area.\textsuperscript{12} Baudry even seems to directly address Lebel’s argument when asking, in his opening paragraph: “Does the technical nature of optical instruments, directly attached to scientific practice serve to conceal, not only their use in ideological products, but also the ideological effects which they may themselves provoke?” Invoking theorists of Renaissance painting, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Husserl’s views on Cartesian subjectivity, Baudry argues that “between ‘objective reality’ and the camera, site of inscription, and between the inscription and the projection are situated operations, a work which has as its result a finished product.”\textsuperscript{13} Notably, the Tel Quel critic finds the darkened theater and

\textsuperscript{10} Interview with Bernard Eisenschitz, April 7, 2014.

\textsuperscript{11} One of the chief exceptions here is James Spellerberg, “Technology and Ideology in the Cinema,” Quarterly Review of Film Studies vol. 2 no. 3 (1977), pp. 288-301. On numerous points, in fact, Spellerberg sides with Lebel over Comolli.


the screen framed with black to be “privileged conditions of effectiveness” for the cinematic apparatus to produce the ideologically charged effects of specularization and identification, and he develops a comparison between the condition of the spectator in a movie-theater and that of a child during Lacan’s mirror phase (roughly 6-18 months of age). This view leads him to infer that “the ‘reality’ mimed by the cinema is thus first of all that of an ‘ego’” and that the camera comes to stand in for the transcendent subject of Western metaphysics. For this reason, Baudry concludes that the cinema is an “apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology: creating a phantasmatization of the subject.” Only films that contain “disturbing cinematic elements”—such as Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*, which, with its intense auto-interrogation of the mechanisms of the cinematic apparatus, effectively theorizes its own status as a film—are able to avoid being absorbed into this innately idealist function of the cinema.14

The Ideology of Film Technology

Baudry’s text is thus a mirror-inversion of Lebel’s: the former’s naïve faith in the scientific nature of the camera is reflected and reversed in the latter’s quasi-paranoiac insistence on the idealist essence of the cinematic apparatus itself, which only the most formally advanced films are capable of escaping. In “Technique et idéologie,” Comolli refuses both points of view and seeks to carefully negotiate a path between the two theoretical extremes offered by Lebel and Baudry. Comolli’s article begins by taking a clear stance against what he calls “technicist ideology.” While he acknowledges that, as the “certain effect of a certain amount of pressure” (tacitly referring here to *Cahiers*’ own efforts), the majority of film critics have accepted the notion that “every film is an ideological product” and that the number of films explicitly asserting their political nature had dramatically risen in the period leading up to his article, Comolli nonetheless remarks on the continued existence of a “point of blockage” amongst film commentators. Surprisingly, this blockage comes in the shape of a demand not for the “autonomy of aesthetic processes” but rather for the “autonomy of technical processes.” In other words, the representatives of this tendency demand that “film technique be given a place off to one side, sheltered from ideology, outside of history, social procedures and signification processes. Film technique, they tell us, is precisely a neutral

14 Ibid., pp. 7-8 [pp. 294-295].
technique, capable of being used to say anything and everything, not saying anything in and of itself, and only saying what it is made to say (whether by the filmmaker or the technician).” Here it is not difficult to discern Lebel’s text as the principal point of reference for Comolli. Indeed, the Cahiers critic not only avows that “Cinéma et idéologie” has the dubious merit of “formulating the implications of this ‘discourse-of-the-technicians,’” he also spends much of the early section of “Technique et idéologie” debunking the key claim made by Lebel: that the technology of the cinema has a “scientific heritage” free of ideological determinations, a heritage that bestows the medium with the “twin virtues” of precision and neutrality.15

And yet the opposition between Comolli and Lebel is not as clear-cut as that between Lebel and Cinéthique. Comolli, in fact, states his agreement with Lebel that the cinema does not possess a “natural ideological blemish,” although he clarifies that this should not “conceal, behind an inconsistent ‘scientific basis,’ the fact that it is under the effects of an economic demand—that is, within ideology and as an instrument of ideology—that the cinema is progressively imagined, made and purchased.”16 By the same token, Comolli distances himself from the position of Baudry and Pleynet (whose interview in issue no. 3 of Cinéthique is quoted at length). He argues that the Tel Quel writers, while analyzing the ideological nature of the cinematic apparatus, hypostasize the camera as a metonymic substitute for the broader processes of film technique. While Comolli acknowledges that Lebel points out this tendency, he notes that the PCF critic “never shows the reader that he prevents himself from doing the same,” since Lebel’s argument as to the “objectivity” of the cinema rests largely on the scientific basis of camera technology.17 Despite targeting the “ideology of the visible linked to Western logocentrism” through their discussions of the role of quattrocento perspective in the ideological make-up of the film apparatus, Pleynet and Baudry succumb to what Comolli sees as a theoretical paradox: “It is by focusing on the domination of the camera (the visible) over the whole of film technique which it is supposed to represent, inform and program (through its function as model), that one intends to denounce the submission of this camera, in its conception and construction, to the dominant ideology of the visible.”18

15 The quotes from this paragraph are from Comolli, “Technique et idéologie (I),” p. 5 [pp. 143-145].
16 Ibid., p. 15 [p. 169].
17 Ibid., p. 7 [pp. 150-151].
18 Ibid., p. 8 [p. 153].
Against this privileging of what Comolli calls “the visible part of film technique,” which reinforces a cleavage that already exists in the technical practice of the cinema, the Cahiers critic advocates concentrating on the “invisible part” of the cinema, defined here as “the black space between the frames, chemistry, developing baths, laboratory work, negative copies, the cuts and ‘matches’ of the editing process, the soundtrack, the projector, etc.” For Comolli, these processes constitute the “unthought, ‘unconscious’ side” of the cinema, an aspect of film technique that is actively repressed by the emphasis, in film theory and criticism, on the act of shooting with a camera. In making this argument, Comolli echoes the critique of the “real = visible” equation earlier issued by Serge Daney in his article “Sur Salador.” Comolli thus ends his initial section of “Technique et idéologie” by calling for a discussion of two techniques in film practice that “reside within cinema’s hidden, unconscious realm”—namely, color grading and sound mixing. And yet, despite unequivocally stating that “this is what we will attempt,” the promised inquiry never really eventuates. Instead, Comolli makes a detour into film history from which his text never returns: his attention, over the course of the rest of his series of articles, falls more on a historical analysis of the economic and ideological determinations of the evolution of film as a “signifying practice,” discussing, in sequence, the series of technical advances leading up to the invention of the cinema, the use of deep-focus photography, the role of the close-up, and the advent of sound film, before the series is prematurely cut short.

Before turning to these sections, it is worth examining the question of ideology and the cinema in Comolli’s article and its roots in Althusserian theory. In refusing the clear-cut dichotomy presented by the respective stances of Lebel and Baudry, Comolli maintains that a “materialist theory of the cinema” should not see the cinema’s “ideological heritage” and its “scientific heritage” as being mutually exclusive of each other but rather as interacting with each other, entering into reciprocal relationships with one another. His line of thinking thus resonates with contemporaneous texts by Althusser such as “Lénine et la philosophie” and “Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’état” in which the philosopher moves away from his earlier binary opposition between the scientific and ideological domains. As

such, Comolli’s text can be clarified with recourse to two Althusserian concepts from this period. The first is the philosopher’s distinction between ideologies in the specific, historically determinate sense and ideology more generally as that which “human societies secrete […] as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life.”

The second, meanwhile, is Althusser’s notion of overdetermination: that is, the idea that any given situation is “complexly-structurally-unevenly determined” by the structural totality. Inspired by Freud’s attempts at unravelling the psychological determinations of the dream-work, Althusser sought to portray the complex, mutually intersecting dialectics at work in any historical process, which can lead, for instance, to the first proletarian revolution taking place in a nation where the relations of production had “matured” to a far lesser degree than other industrialized powers. So too, in Comolli’s understanding, does the history of the cinema unfold in a complex relation of structural determination with broader historical/social processes: it neither evolves in an autarkic fashion divorced from the social totality nor is it a direct reflection of these processes or the ideology that underpins them. Reading Comolli in the light of Althusser, then, we can comprehend the cinema as being historically overdetermined by bourgeois ideology (due primarily to the fact that its invention and technical development has largely taken place in modern capitalist societies), but this by no means entails that film is by its very nature an idealist phenomenon unwaveringly diffusing this selfsame ideology.

Utilizing these lessons from Althusser, Comolli’s insistence on the imbrication of the economic and ideological aspects of the development of the cinema and their mutual overdetermination may represent his key theoretical breakthrough. The theoretical maneuver allows his study to avoid the twin pitfalls that had beset other Marxist accounts of the evolution of cinema: a mechanistic economic determinism on the one hand, which would understand the cinema purely from the standpoint of the profit motive of the bourgeoisie, and an essentializing of ideology on the other hand, which can be found in Baudry’s claim that the very mechanism of the cinema propagates the idealist metaphysics of bourgeois ideology. Instead, it is the confluence of—and at times contradiction between—these two factors that animates the historical development of film technique.


“Birth = Deferral”: The Invention of the Cinema

The interplay between ideology and economics can perhaps best be seen in the long—and, as Comolli sees it, “deferred”—gestation of the cinema, culminating in its “birth” in the late nineteenth century. If, as film historians agree, the actual invention of the cinema significantly postdated the moment of its technical viability, what is it that explains this “deferral,” this chronological discrepancy, this décalage? An initial response is suggested by Bazin in “Le mythe du cinéma total,” his review of the Marxist (and PCF-aligned) film historian Georges Sadoul’s L’Invention du cinéma (1832-1897). Here Bazin asserts, in a passage quoted at length by Comolli, that:

In this instance we need to reverse historical causality, which proceeds from the economic infrastructure to the ideological superstructure, and view fundamental discoveries as fortunate and propitious accidents essentially secondary to the initial conceptions of cinema’s inventors. Cinema is an idealist phenomenon; men’s idea of it existed fully equipped in their brains, as in Plato’s higher world, and the tenacious resistance of matter to the idea is more striking than technology’s prompting of the inventor’s imagination.23

Writing for Cinéthique, Leblanc latches onto this passage—and Bazin’s subsequent argument that the key figures involved in the invention of the cinema in the nineteenth century were “obsessive eccentrics, handymen or, at best, clever industrialists”—in order to support his notion that the cinema has a fundamentally “idealist” nature. Bazin, Leblanc contends, “always underlined the idealism that presided over the invention of the camera, the artisanal, non-scientific character of its construction. The camera realized one of man’s ancestral dreams: to reproduce reality, to reproduce oneself.”24 The claim is easily refuted by Lebel, who notes that all technical inventions in the pre-modern era had an “artisanal character,” which does not necessarily negate their scientific status.25 On this point, Comolli is in agreement with the author of Cinéma et idéologie. He nonetheless insists that the question as to whether the discoveries leading up to the invention of the cinema as

a technological device were “scientific” or not is one whose importance is secondary to that of the cinema’s status as a “signifying practice” producing meaning and ideology. For Comolli, this is precisely the issue that eludes Lebel—a theoretical blind spot evinced by the latter’s notoriously maladroit analogy of the cinema with aviation (another realization of an “ancient dream of humanity”).

Comolli notes the problems historians have had in arriving at an original date for this prehistory (which is “lost in the dark night of ancient times and myths”) as well as the difficulties they have had in adequately accounting for the “brusque condensation of research and invention” in the second half of the nineteenth century, which resulted in near simultaneous technical developments occurring autonomously in several different industrialized nations. Rejecting the notion of a providential coincidence in the state of scientific research, Comolli accounts for this phenomenon by turning to “the sphere of ideology” and, more pointedly, highlighting “the rift opened up by photography in the figurative representations of the world, in the fresh questions it provoked […] on the central role of the human eye, its solar position, its intimate relationship with the world.” The photographic image, in Comolli’s view, not only perfects and reinforces the method of perspectiva artificialis developed by Renaissance painting, it also leads to a “crisis of confidence” in the human eye as an organ of vision, fostering a pronounced interest in optical illusions and the decomposition of visual perception—as exemplified by the experiments of Plateau, Marey and Muybridge, who were all notably unconcerned with realizing the “ancient dream” of visually reproducing the world such as we see it. And yet, for these experiments to transcend their status as scientific curiosities and become a socially widespread signifying practice, another aspect would be decisive, one that went beyond the mere technical advances made by Edison and the Lumières. This is the economic factor, the ability to derive financial profit from the invention of the cinematic apparatus. With reference to discussions by Deslandes and the British film historian Brian Coe concerning the importance of the profit motive in the development of the Lumières’ cinématographe and Edison’s kinetoscope, Comolli argues that this

26 Comolli, “Technique et idéologie (I),” p. 11 [pp. 158-159].
27 Ibid., pp. 11, 12 [pp. 159, 162]. For the pre-history of the cinema, Comolli largely relied on information provided in Jacques Deslandes’ Histoire comparée du cinéma and Bessy/Chardans’ Dictionnaire du cinéma et de la télévision, some of which is now outdated. See Jacques Deslandes, Histoire comparée du cinéma vol. I (Brussels: Casterman, 1966); and Maurice Bessy and Jean-Louis Chardans, Dictionnaire du cinéma et de la télévision (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1965).
28 Ibid., p. 12 [p. 162].
economic impetus is, in fact, the “principal determination in the constitution of film technique.”

It is the opening up of a social demand for moving images that leads to the frenetic technical advances of the 1890s, with the “simultaneous eruption onto the market of several, practically identical, recording-projecting devices.” Thus, Comolli concludes, the cinema “owes its existence to the reciprocal reinforcement of an ideological demand (‘to see life as it is’) and an economic demand (to make it a source of profits).” In this sense, the cinema is “no different to the majority of technologies, which tend toward the realization of an objective assigned by and constituted in both of these two demands.”

There are certainly questions left unresolved by Comolli’s account of the “deferred” birth of the cinema. Why, for instance, does the social/economic demand for the cinematic apparatus only open up in the 1890s and not earlier (or later)? What explains the uncanny simultaneity of near-identical inventions, independently developed, in countries as economically and culturally disparate as the US, France, Germany and Russia? On these and other matters, Comolli remains silent, and these gaps in his text evidently call for greater research—much of which has indeed been carried out by film historians in the decades since his articles appeared. There are empirical omissions and inaccuracies in “Technique et idéologie,” but these are of secondary consequence when compared to the capital importance of the broader perspective adopted by Comolli, which, in articulating economic and ideological factors, represents a clear advance over both empiricist and vulgar Marxist accounts of film history. All proportions guarded, the significance of his series in the realm of film history can thus be seen as analogous to that of Engels’ *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* in anthropology, a text which, while based on outmoded nineteenth-century conceptions of early human societies, is nonetheless still a valuable epistemological tool for Marxists in the field by virtue of its elucidation of methodological principles that retain a more generalized validity.

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30 Ibid., p. 15 [pp. 168-169].
31 It is for this reason that Joubert-Laurencin’s recent claim that Comolli’s text has “become anachronistic” should be resisted. See Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, *Le Sommeil paradoxal*, p. 204. In one particular area, however, Comolli now fully accepts the outdated nature of his text: whereas in 1971 he had spoken about the “persistence of vision” to explain the sensation of movement caused by the rapid succession of still images, he now accepts that this hypothesis is scientifically outmoded. See Comolli, *Cinéma contre spectacle*, p. 49-50 [pp. 82-83].
It is indisputably the stridently anti-teleological outlook that Comolli espouses in his article that has had the greatest impact in film historiography, and this stance will be of crucial importance in his discussion of the contradictory development of depth of field cinematography in the first half-century of the cinema’s existence. In a section of his text titled “For a materialist history of the cinema,” Comolli not only argues against understanding film history as the autonomous evolution of aesthetic forms divorced from broader historical currents, he also warns against conceiving of its relationship to society in general as “a system of direct causality—one that is overly simplistic, elementary, and, above all, convenient because it confirms the illusion of a homogenous, full, continuous historical temporality.”

Here, despite their differences, both Bazin’s and Lebel’s accounts of the cinema converge and lead to a teleological position that interprets the modification of techniques and styles as a process of increasing perfection, with the cinema in its current state the implied ideal to which all previous innovations had been striving. Against this tendency, Comolli invokes the notion of “differential historical temporality” found in Lire le Capital, a concept which, in Althusser’s words, “obliges us to [...] to think in its peculiar articulation, the function of such an element or such a level in the current configuration of the whole.”

Here, Comolli agrees with the standpoint articulated by Norbert Massa, a writer for the ephemeral film magazine Ciné-forum, who argued that “the constitution of a history of the cinema requires the determination of the historical moment where the filmic text appears in a reduplication designating it as such: this is the first scansion of history, and, for theory, it is the point of no return from history as science to the ideology of history.”

Following Massa, Comolli also insists on the centrality of Kristeva’s concept of the “signifying practice” in the development of a “materialist history of the cinema.” Kristeva devised the term primarily to relieve aesthetic theory of the burden of the “ideology” of artistic creativity, enabling...

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32 Comolli, “Technique et idéologie (II),” p. 55 [p. 189].
34 Cited in ibid., p. 56 [p.192]. Ciné-forum was a roneotyped bulletin published by the organizing committee of a film society in Poitiers. Apart from the favorable attitude Cahiers exhibited towards the magazine, however, little is known about it (or Norbert Massa) today. For more on Ciné-forum, see Pascal Bonitzer, “Ciné-forum,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 230 (July 1971), pp. 63-65.
art to instead be understood, precisely, as a practice, as a socio-historical formation. Understanding the cinema as a “signifying practice” will, Comolli hopes, allow future film historians to overcome some of the impasses reached by figures such as Brasillach, Sadoul and Mitry when contending with the development of new film techniques—in particular by distinguishing between the mass of films that, due to their “univocal signification,” merely embody the cinema as an ideological apparatus, and those “films of rupture” in which “the work in the signifier modifies the statute of meaning,” thereby creating a surplus exceeding the norms of communicative discourse (or, in Comolli’s words “the ideology of signification”). For Kristeva, the concept of signifying practice can lead to a “smashing” of “the conceptual mechanism which produces a historical linearity” and to a reading of “stratified history: with a discontinuous, recursive, dialectical temporality, irreducible to a singular meaning, but made up of types of signifying practices whose plural series remain without origin or endpoint.” It is on this basis that Comolli urges his readers to understand film technique as “a double scene of practice and signifying.” This reasoning also leads him to issue a challenge to disciplinary boundaries that even now, more than four decades later, remains pertinent: for Comolli, “it is no longer possible to keep film history and film theory hermetically sealed from one another.” Instead, we must recognize that theoretical questions in the cinema always imply problems of film history, and vice versa.

“For the first time…”: The Close-Up and Depth of Field Cinematography

Following the model of Althusser’s “symptomatic” reading method in Lire le Capital, Comolli finds a symptom of the inadequacies of the linear, teleological histories of the cinema in the frequency with which a “fixed syntagm” is uttered—namely, the phrase, “for the first time....” He writes:

The decisive operation of these “histories” is to evoke and give an overview of the greatest possible number of technical, stylistic and formal

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36 Comolli, “Technique et idéologie (III),” p. 44 [pp. 195-196]. Here, Comolli is distinctly following the argument of the earlier text “ Cinéma/ idéologie/ critique.”


38 Ibid. [p. 197].
innovations, each one of which is presented (and sought out) as the initiation of a succession of aesthetic developments (the “progress” of a “language”) whose finality, endpoint or perfection is the cinema such as it is practiced at the moment when each historian writes its history.39

Comolli locates one of the key examples of this tendency in the writings of Jean Mitry. Mitry, he asserts, represents an “a contrario demonstration” of the imperative to combine film history and film theory by dint of the fact that he had “scholastically” divided his study of the cinema into a History and an Aesthetics and Psychology.40 In an argument that is also articulated in Cahiers by Bonitzer’s parallel series of articles “La ‘Réalité’ de la dénotation,” Comolli maintains that it is Mitry’s contradictory reflection on the “first close-up” in the history of the cinema that betrays the limitations of his theoretical perspective and his conformity to the prevailing “technicist ideology.”41 In particular, Comolli points out the telltale notional vagueness of Mitry’s phrase “the close-up as we know it” (used with reference to Griffith’s 1913 film Judith of Bethulia), deploying it as evidence that the theorist remains beholden to an “empirical understanding of the ‘close-up.’” Comolli argues that “there is no kinship between the close-ups of 1913 and those of 1960 that would guarantee their equivalence, because the pertinent element of the opposition is not the parameter of the size of the shots, but the network of differences of determination between two moments of film practice, differences which, precisely, prohibit the constitution of an ahistorical chain of ‘close-ups’.”42 More generally, he sees the need for formal devices such as the close-up to be theoretically defined before the question of their first historical appearance can be broached. Such a theoretical definition, moreover, would perforce involve relating the technique in question to the broader signifying practices at work in the film.

In an article for Cahiers de la Cinémathèque, Mitry vigorously defended himself from the criticisms of his work made by Comolli. Averring that the Cahiers critic “incessantly conflates the noun that designates a technical fact and the qualifier that implies a signifying value,” Mitry insists that questions of technique are, in fact, secondary to aesthetic considerations in his study

39 Ibid., p. 45 [p. 197].
41 For a discussion of the series of articles by Bonitzer beginning with “La ‘Réalité’ de la dénotation,” see Chapter 24.
and are only addressed to the extent that they are considered “in the context of production, and for what [they] can signify in this production.” He also disputes the charge of a “teleological” approach to film history, describing his method as follows:

Historians observe present facts just as they observe facts from the past. They then research, discover and analyze the cause and effect chains that constitute and shape the past. But these continuous chains do not entail a linear development unfolding within a determinist, univocal logic, inevitably leading from a lesser to a higher degree of perfection. [...] There is progression but not necessarily “progress.” Progress is a value judgement imposed on these historical facts; it is not the facts themselves.

Mitry further develops his response to Cahiers (and other theorists of ideology in the cinema such as the Cinéthique editors) in the book-length study La Sémiologie en question. It is unfortunate, however, that Mitry fails to address Comolli’s remarks on another area of film technique, depth-of-field cinematography. Here, his younger colleague’s critique appears much more difficult to refute. Indeed, a large proportion of “Technique et idéologie” is consumed with discussions of depth of field and more particularly its place in the theories of Bazin and Mitry. The two French film theorists had notable differences with each other: most pointedly, Mitry registered his disapproval of Bazin’s “transcendental realism” and refused to countenance the existence of the plan-séquence, preferring to see such takes as a series of spatially contiguous yet distinct “shots.” Comolli, however, rebukes both theorists for the shared theoretical problems created by their teleological accounts of film history, considered autonomously both of other signifying practices (especially theater, photography and painting) and of broader social and historical processes. In particular, Comolli highlights a conceptual stumbling block that confronted the two theorists: the provisional abandonment of depth-of-field cinematography in the years after 1925 and its return, in an altered mode of signification, in the films of Renoir and Welles from the late 1930s onwards.

Resting largely on the articles “L’évolution du langage cinématographique” and “William Wyler ou le janseniste de la mise en scène,” Comolli’s précis

44 Ibid., p. 121.
46 In his Cinématographe article, Mitry foreshadows doing so in a follow-up text, but this never materializes. Mitry, “De quelques problèmes,” p. 141.
of Bazin’s views on the merits of a film aesthetic based on depth-of-field photography can be summarized in a couple of key points: by more closely approximating the norms of human perception and thereby revealing the “immanent ambiguity of reality” (or, as Comolli frames it, reinforcing the “reality effect” of the cinematic image), the deep-focus style practiced by filmmakers such as Welles and Wyler creates a “surplus realism” (the term is Bazin’s but self-consciously has echoes of Marx’s “surplus-value”) which, as opposed to the Soviet montage style and its implied authoritarianism, more adequately reflects both the cinema’s representational vocation and the liberal-democratic ideology of American society. Although Bazin’s last point is at least partly tongue-in-cheek, Comolli nonetheless notes that he requires not a few rhetorical coups de force in order to sustain his argument, including his perverse inclusion of Stroheim in the anti-montage school.

Whereas Bazin sees a relationship of analogy between the cinematic image and everyday perception, Mitry stresses the “mediatized nature” of film and more specifically the spatially and temporally fragmentary, delimited nature of the shot, which stands in stark contrast to the homogeneity and continuity of human vision. On this question, however, his position ends up approximating that of Bazin. For Mitry too, deep focus constitutes a form of “surplus realism,” although in his view it makes up for a lack of verisimilitude rather than adding to the cinema’s innate analogical power. Or, as Comolli puts it: “With the proviso that depth of field not be turned into an omnivalent principle, capable of being substituted for all other formulations of mise en scène, Mitry declares himself, in this matter, to be ‘perfectly in agreement with Bazin.’” More incongruously still, for Comolli, even Cinéthique’s Leblanc gives credence to the idea of a “surplus reality” arising from the deep-focus shot, unquestioningly accepting Bazin’s notion that “deep focus and the long-take assure the impression of reality.” Here, however, Leblanc’s argument comes not to extol the cinema’s realism but to damn its congenitally “illusionist” nature.

For Comolli, by contrast, nothing could be less certain than the notion that the image generated by deep-focus lenses yields a more “lifelike” visual


field than do other cinematic forms; rather, he argues that, in the films of Welles in particular, it “produces a space that is at once composite and composed, fragmentary and discontinuous, and distinctly coded.”\(^{50}\) Comolli even proposes that depth of field, “far from manifesting a ‘surplus reality,’ actually enables the filmmaker to show less of the real, to play around with masking effects and visual tricks, as well as with the division and distortion of space...”\(^{51}\) Intriguingly, however, of the three figures with whom he here polemicizes, Comolli ends up most sympathetic to Bazin. Leblanc, who is otherwise politically closest to Comolli, is taken to task for his “hurried” reading of Bazin, which failed to take into account his “place within ideology, the tangle of determinations which acted upon him, and even the insertion and effect of his discourse in the field of cinematic practice.”\(^{52}\) Mitry is critiqued for failing to apprehend the disavowal mechanisms that lead the spectator to accept the “illusion of homogeneity and continuity” created by cinematic signification, despite the fact that filmic space is carved up in a way that is alien to “natural” vision. His “formalism” is thereby considered by Comolli to be the flip side of Bazin’s “idealism.”\(^{53}\) As for Bazin himself, while Comolli repeatedly insists on his “idealist” worldview, his conceptual system nonetheless has—in comparison to those of Mitry and, \(a \textit{fortiori},\) Leblanc—the virtue of coherence and possesses a “certain theoretical force” to the extent that reading his work impels us to locate the “indices of contradiction” that end up subverting his own discourse.\(^{54}\) Comolli admits that such an approach may provide grist to the mill of figures such as Lebel and Leblanc—both of whom, in spite of their own far-reaching differences, insist on the kinship between Bazin and \textit{Cahiers} in its Marxist phase and do so in order, as Comolli puts it, “in the name of our ‘father’ to mark us with the indelible imprint of idealism.”\(^{55}\) But he is unafraid to run this risk, and, in a line that may well serve as an epigram for the post-1968 \textit{Cahiers}’ relationship with the journal’s founder, Comolli finds an analogy for his attitude towards Bazin in a quote from Lenin, speaking of Hegel, to the effect that “intelligent idealism is more intelligent than stupid materialism.”\(^{56}\)

\(^{50}\) Ibid., p. 20 [p. 180].

\(^{51}\) Ibid.

\(^{52}\) Comolli, “Technique et idéologie (II),” p. 53 [p. 186].

\(^{53}\) Comolli, “Technique et idéologie (I),” p. 21 [p. 179]; and “Technique et idéologie (II),” p. 53 [pp. 179, 186].

\(^{54}\) Comolli, “Technique et idéologie (II),” p. 52 [pp. 182-183].

\(^{55}\) Ibid. [p. 184]

\(^{56}\) Ibid. See footnote 16 to the Introduction.
Indeed, retrospectively, Comolli is even more conciliatory towards Bazin. He has recently stated: “I must admit that we were very Bazinian, but Bazin is more complex than people take him for. He wrote things which, if not contradictory, at least tended to be open. Bazin interested me much more as a theorist than as a critic.” He does not shy away, however, from acknowledging the paradoxical nature of his relationship with the film theorist. While readily admitting to an affinity with Bazin, Comolli clarifies that: “It is an affinity that comes from an opposition, that is what is interesting. In trying to critique Bazin I ended up very close to him.”

“Which Speech?”: Depth of Field and the Advent of Sound Cinema

Such contradictions again come through in Comolli’s treatment of the “almost total eclipse” of depth of field in filmmaking practice between 1925 and 1940, which evidently presents a problem for a putative teleological history of the cinema that would understand the medium as irresistibly tending towards a higher degree of “realism” through the increasing prevalence of a deep-focus, long-take aesthetic. If this tendency towards what Bazin called the “asymptote” of reality exists, then how can this hiatus be explained? If depth of field is already present in the films of the Lumière brothers, why should it disappear from screens for a decade-and-a-half? The question, indeed, is not ignored in Bazin’s essay on the evolution of film language. He ascribes the adoption of shallow focus to the rise of a montage aesthetic and lucidly insists on the functional difference between “primitive” depth of field and the technique as used by later filmmakers such as Welles, Renoir and Wyler. Mitry, by contrast, confidently gives an alternative explanation to resolve the enigma: the loss of depth of field can be attributed, he claims, to the adoption of panchromatic film stock in the mid-1920s, which required a different, less powerful lighting system and resulted in the inability to clearly represent deep visual fields.

For Comolli, however, the solution proffered by Mitry merely “explains technical changes through other technical changes, without for a moment envisaging that these changes are not ‘free,’ that they bring into play economic forces and forces of labor.” Mitry therefore unwittingly creates

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57 These three quotes all come from Comolli, “Yes, we were utopians, (Part I).”
an “(interminable) chain of ‘technical causes.’”\(^{60}\) Instead, the temporary “effacement” of depth can be accounted for, Comolli argues, through “the displacing of the codes of cinematic verisimilitude from the level of the mere impression of reality to the more complex levels of fictional logic (narrative codes), psychological verisimilitude, and the impression of homogeneity and continuity (the coherent space-time of classical drama).”\(^{61}\) More specifically, panchromatic stock brought about a more fine-grained gradation of color shades and thus represented a gain in the level of “\textit{fidelity} ‘to the colors of nature’” (while still remaining monochromatic); with the social spread of consumer photography, Comolli posits, the high-contrast images of early cinema were no longer found to satisfy the prevailing “codes of photographic realism,” and, momentarily at least, “in the production of ‘reality effects,’ depth (perspective) thus lost out in importance to shades, tones and colors.”\(^{62}\) For Comolli, therefore, it is the shift in the ideological requirements of the codes operative in film that determines, in the final instance, the cinema’s momentary “disaffection” for depth of field.

By critiquing Mitry’s “technicist” account, Comolli acknowledges that he could appear to be in proximity to Bazin’s thesis on depth of field, which also rejects a technical explanation for this stylistic phenomenon. But he insists that Bazin, too, errs in “determin[ing] the demise and rebirth of depth of field by turning it into the ‘will’ or ‘lack of will’ of a given filmmaker or technician.”\(^{63}\) It is here, moreover, that Comolli carries out another shift in his text’s focus, precipitated by the observation of a symptomatic absence in Mitry, who discusses the technical reasons for the abandonment of depth of field without mentioning what is indisputably the paramount technical transformation in the cinema in the second half of the 1920s: the advent of sound. Noting that the chain “panchromatic stock/shallow-focus lenses/sound cinema” functions better as a “technical causality” than Mitry’s account, Comolli nonetheless admits that this “better” explanation would only serve to re-mark the coincidence between the arrival of sound cinema and the ejection \textit{mise hors-jeu} of depth of field—and it would not provide us with an underlying reason.\(^{64}\) In fact, both phenomena were determined

\(^{60}\) Ibid., pp. 44-45 [pp. 218-219].
\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 43 [p. 216]
\(^{62}\) Ibid., p. 44 [p. 219]
\(^{63}\) Comolli, “Technique et idéologie (V),” p. 96 [pp. 225-226]. The reference is to Bazin’s statement, in “L’Évolution du langage cinématographique,” that when it came to the rise of depth-of-field photography in the late 1930s, “It was enough to want to do so” (“Il suffisait de vouloir”). See André Bazin, “L’Évolution du langage cinématographique,” p. 138 [p. 95].
\(^{64}\) Comolli, “Technique et idéologie (V),” p. 97 [p. 229].
by the intertwining of ideological and economic factors, which also explains the “delay” or “différance” between the technical viability of synchronized sound film (possible, Comolli notes, as early as 1912) and its widespread adoption by Hollywood in the years following 1927.65

This adoption of sound swiftly made the silent film image “intolerable” for spectators, but it also led to a “sharp decline” in the formal quality of Hollywood films, which ceded any reference to novelistic or even musical formal models in favor of a dependency on “bourgeois theater” (Broadway in particular). Latching onto a remark made by Benjamin, Comolli notes the historical paradox that the “nationalization” of cinemas brought about by the use of spoken language in place of linguistically interchangeable written intertitles entailed a process of “internationalization” both of the global film industry’s economic structures and of film language itself.66

Gone were the formal “schools” of the silent era, to be replaced by the “global hegemony” of “Hollywood and its epigones.”67 With a few notable exceptions (Vertov, Eisenstein, Chaplin), the question of which speech would be found in the talking cinema failed to be posed by the film industry; it was simply assumed that “life itself would speak” and that “all that had to be done was to ‘capture’ this speech in life in order to ‘put’ it in the film,” with the supposed “mimetic nature of the cinema” guaranteeing the success of the maneuver.68

In Comolli’s account, the Hollywood sound film, by more preponderantly handing the cinema over to the forces of spectacle (especially in the newly minted genre of the musical), played a vital role in ideologically insulating the American populace at a time when the US was facing one of the most serious economic and political crises in its history, the Great Depression. But it also had a transformative effect on the cinema’s formal structures: far from “bring[ing] editing back to realism,” as Bazin proposed, the advent of sound “utterly liquidated montage as a general principle of cinematic writing” in the cinemas of the capitalist nations, which instead adopted a rigidly codified form of “classical découpage” in order to attain “a certain realism determined by capitalist relations of production and the bourgeois conception of the world.”69

It is here that Comolli infers an additional motivation for the rise of sound cinema and, concomitantly, the “invisible” editing of classical découpage

65 Ibid., p. 99 [pp. 232-233]
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., p. 20 [p. 237]
69 Ibid., p. 23 [p. 241].
(one which, however stimulating, may not withstand sustained historical scrutiny): an industrial and political rivalry with Soviet montage cinema, which had reached its own apogee in the late 1920s—notably with the popular success in Western Europe and North America of Battleship Potemkin—at the precise moment that Hollywood made its turn to sound. Between an aesthetic based on montage and one based on analytic découpage, Comolli concludes, “there is not a harmonious evolution, an unobtrusive gradation, a transition through improvements and corrections, from a lesser to a greater degree of realism, but a rupture. There is an antagonism between the two systems, the latter is not an advance on, or the conclusion or transcendence of the former, but its refusal and its censorship.” The two different approaches to the articulation of images in the cinema thus stood in for two inimical ideological systems (capitalist and socialist), and although Comolli warns against making a hasty equation between montage/ découpage and materialism/idealism, he insists that it is “not for nothing that Eisenstein and Vertov conceived, practiced and defended montage as responding to the dialectical materialist conception of film writing and the filmic scene.” The découpage of the sound era in Hollywood, by contrast, insists on a “continuous, homogenous, oriented space” but does so through the “phantom machinery” of “invisible” editing procedures: the system requires both cuts and their perceptual effacement in order to reproduce and reveal the filmic scene as “an already-there.” The découpage of the sound era in Hollywood, by contrast, insists on a “continuous, homogenous, oriented space” but does so through the “phantom machinery” of “invisible” editing procedures: the system requires both cuts and their perceptual effacement in order to reproduce and reveal the filmic scene as “an already-there.” After the historical defeat of Soviet montage, due to a combination of Stalinist political repression and the industrial supremacy of Hollywood sound cinema, it is only in the 1960s—and particularly with the experiments made by Godard in films such as Vivre sa vie (1962) and Une femme mariée (1965)—that this system is again interrogated and disrupted and new formal pathways begin to be explored.

Despite the theoretical potency of Comolli’s discussion of sound, these passages are by far the least well-known section of “Technique et idéologie” and were only made publicly available in English translation in 2015. Moreover, they were left incomplete by Comolli himself, with a lapidary “à suivre” (“to be continued”) capping off the final installment, symptomatically promising a continuation of the text that would never be fulfilled. Indeed, a petering out of the series of articles that went by the name “Technique et idéologie” could already be discerned by this point: after the initial five installments appeared consecutively in almost every issue of Cahiers between no. 229 (May 1971) and no. 234-235 (December 1971-January-February 1972), the
sixth and final “episode” did not find publication until roughly nine months after the fifth, in issue no. 241 (September-October 1972). By this point, the journal’s political orientation had been transformed to a dogmatic variant of Maoism, and its energies were dedicated to forming a “cultural front” with other revolutionary activists in the arts. In this context, a theoretical reflection on technical developments in film history seemed rather out of place, and indeed a programmatic text in the following issue (likely written by Philippe Pakradouni) forcefully critiqued Comolli’s series for being a “purely theoretical” reflection that had lost its “power of intervention” and that represented a tendency within the journal to produce “theoretical articles without a concrete base of reference, and without a political and organizational articulation with the struggle.”

Comolli himself was, moreover, somewhat marginalized within the journal during this period: never entirely comfortable with the turn to Maoism, he was also preoccupied with other projects at the time. Together with Philippe Carles, Comolli wrote Free Jazz/Black Power in 1971, a book that articulates the development of free jazz by musicians such as John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor with the political awakening of the black population in the 1950s-1960s, as manifested in the civil rights movement and its more radical aftermath.

Comolli also spent the early 1970s making short films and working on early versions of the script for his debut feature La Cecilia, thus limiting the time he had available for film criticism. “Technique et idéologie” would, in fact, prove to be the last significant text Comolli wrote for Cahiers while still being centrally involved with the journal.

The thread that was dropped with the cessation of the series was picked up again, however, in 2009, when Comolli returned to the themes of “Technique et idéologie” with the publication of Cinéma contre spectacle (which included a reprint of the earlier series in full). In this book, Comolli insists on the continued pertinence of “Technique et idéologie,” confessing that the six articles published in 1971-1972 “have not ceased to shape my work”—despite the fact that he had not re-read them since their initial appearance. “Technique et idéologie” represents the “echo of an era” that still haunts him, “because this era is not dead, because I am caught in it like a rat in a trap.” Despite the sweeping transformations in cinema and the media in the intervening four decades, Comolli discerns the continued pertinence in

72 “Quelles sont nos tâches sur le front culturel?,” p. 6.
contemporary audiovisual culture of the themes and concepts adumbrated in "Technique et idéologie" and, in an observation that can only be assented to, remarks that the key ideas of this text resonate throughout his more recent theoretical and filmmaking practice. “Re-reading [‘Technique et idéologie’] today, I discover,” Comolli writes, “certain motifs maintained throughout the technological, economic and mediatic vicissitudes which have affected the place of the cinema in our societies and which, to a certain degree, have drowned it in the bath of the so-called ‘audiovisual’ flux—a development which could barely be discerned at the beginning of the 1970s.”74 Such resonances, and Comolli’s more recent practice in general, will be discussed at greater length in the rest of this study.

Works Cited


74 Comolli, Cinéma contre spectacle, p. 18 [pp. 57-58].


—, “Cinéma: pratique analytique, pratique révolutionnaire,” Cinéthique no. 9-10 (c. early 1971), pp. 71-79.


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