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

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Cahiers du cinéma and the Rapprochement with the PCF: 1969-1971

Abstract
Soon after the publication of “Cinéma/idiéologie/critique,” Cahiers du cinéma embarked on a concerted rapprochement with intellectuals aligned with the Parti communiste français, which would last until mid-1971. The timing was strange: in the eyes of much of the far left, the PCF had been thoroughly discredited by the role it played during the May ’68 protests. Looming large over the Cahiers critics, however, was the influence of Louis Althusser (who also advocated working within the nation's only mass working-class party), and they found the critics writing for the party's cultural journal La Nouvelle Critique to be promising interlocutors. This strategic orientation led to groundbreaking critical work on Soviet cinema, Jean Renoir's La vie est à nous, Robert Kramer's Ice and the fiction de gauche, while at the same time Pascal Kané, Jean-Pierre Oudart, Pascal Bonitzer and Pierre Baudry joined the fold at Cahiers. Soon, however, the contradictions of the journal's attempted dialogue with the PCF would emerge.

Keywords: Cahiers du cinéma, Parti communiste français, Soviet cinema, La vie est à nous, Robert Kramer, fiction de gauche

Cultural Politics and the PCF

No sooner had the Cahiers editors established their autonomy from the Filipacchi group than they sought out a new institutional partnership, this one in the political sphere. The first issue of the independent Cahiers coincided with the beginning of a concerted attempt at a rapprochement between the journal and the PCF, by far the largest party on the French
left at the time and the organizational umbrella for much of the country's industrial working class. This status notwithstanding, the journal's attraction to the party seems anomalous: not only had the Cahiers critical tradition contrasted itself with communist film criticism since Bazin's 1950 article for Esprit on “Le cinéma soviétique et le mythe de Staline” but the party also had a distinctly more negative attitude towards the May '68 uprising than the Cahiers editors.1 Denouncing the student protestors as petty-bourgeois provocateurs and participating eagerly in the Grenelle agreements that ended the strike wave, the party leadership essentially saw the revolt as a distraction from its favored electoral route to power.2 In the eyes of many on the far left, then, May '68 conclusively served to politically discredit the PCF. As the editors themselves would later emphasize, however, a sense of disorientation and political reflux after de Gaulle had quashed the protests (the June legislative elections had given a large parliamentary majority to the right) led the journal to view the communist party as “the only force with a coherent strategy vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie,” and its cultural policy contrasted favorably with what they saw as the “mechanistic anti-theoretical stance” of much of the era's gauchiste movement.3

When asked more recently about the choice to align with the PCF, both Comolli and Narboni have stressed the role of Althusser’s chosen political strategy of transforming the party into a genuinely revolutionary organization. Asked about the reasons for the PCF alignment, Narboni answered with one word: “Althusser.” Comolli, meanwhile, expanded on this: “Even while we criticized Althusser's logic, we had integrated it into our thinking. [...] His thesis was: 'Do not believe that the PCF has actually turned its back on the revolution. If we join the party, if we carry out entryism, we can push it towards more openness.' This was his logic: reform the party.”4 Although the Cahiers editors had little personal contact with Althusser, they moved in the same circles as students of his who had been involved with

4 Comolli, “Yes we were utopians (Part 1).”
the pre-1968 proto-Maoist grouping the Union des jeunesse communistes marxistes-léninistes (UJCM-L) such as Pierre Macherey, Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, and Comolli affirms the prolonged influence of Althusser on Cahiers’ political engagement: “We were Althusserians. Let’s say that among the different currents which took shape in the course of May ’68, we felt close to the Althusserians. Why? Because they were theorists. Later, we would still remain within this line—we did not end up orienting ourselves towards the Gauche prolétarienne, the ‘Mao-Spontex’ currents. We remained, in the end, neo-Althusserians or post-Althusserians.”

Althusser’s strategy, although it would end up in failure (the philosopher himself publicly broke with the party after the 1978 legislative elections), was not necessarily doomed from the outset. In the late 1960s, the PCF was a politically heterogeneous body, ranging from hardline Stalinists to “Eurocommunist” reformists, as well as those seeking to shift the party in a more left-wing direction, and the relative strength of these factions was in a perpetual state of flux. In the cultural arena, a period of openness had been initiated following the landmark Argenteuil central committee meeting of March 1966, in which party intellectuals and “fellow travelers” were given greater leeway to pursue reflection on cultural matters independently of the party’s political leadership. While this shift could be interpreted in a cynical vein, as a method to circumvent the attraction of more radical groups to the cultural left in the political climate of the late 1960s, concrete measures were nonetheless undertaken in line with the Argenteuil resolutions.

The most important of these was the re-founding of the party’s main cultural journal, the bi-monthly *La Nouvelle Critique*, in 1967, along politically and culturally heterodox lines, with a newer generation of critics including Émile Breton, Albert Cervoni and Jacques de Bonis taking over responsibility for the publication. A fault line had thus opened up within the party on questions of art and culture, with *La Nouvelle Critique*, *La Pensée* and Louis Aragon’s literary review *Les Lettres françaises* more favorable towards the artistic avant-gardes, while the party’s major newspapers such as *L’Humanité* pursued a more conservative line in cultural matters. Alongside

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5 Ibid.
7 *Les Lettres françaises* was relatively conservative during the Stalin era but became more receptive to the avant-garde in the 1960s. After Aragon vocally condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Eastern European governments canceled their subscriptions to the journal, and it ceased publication in 1972. This would not stop *Tel Quel*, notably, from attacking Aragon during its Maoist phase.
Althusser, then, *La Nouvelle Critique* was the most important influence on *Cahiers*’ turn towards the PCF. Narboni notes the close alignment in aesthetic opinions the *Cahiers* editors had with the PCF journal’s editors, which contrasted with their dissatisfaction regarding the less sophisticated cinematic tastes of Maoist and Trotskyist groups:

“There was a moment when, bizarrely, it was not the *gauchistes*, but the PCF members, the people from *La Nouvelle Critique*, who were the only people with whom we could speak about the cinema that we like. We could not hold a discussion on *Othon* in *La Cause du peuple* or *Rouge*, but we could do so in *La Nouvelle Critique*. When we presented Straub or Godard at universities with leftists and anarchists we were booed. These people were politically radical, but cinematically they were extremely conservative.”

The presence of Fieschi on the editorial committee of *La Nouvelle Critique* fostered collaboration between the two journals and gave rise not only to the joint round table on *Othon* but also to valuable work on *Ice* by Robert Kramer, Soviet silent cinema and Renoir’s Popular Front films. Within *La Nouvelle Critique*, however, there were theoretical and political tensions at play, and even when relations were warmest, *Cahiers*’ work was generally discussed by the PCF journal with a tone of mitigated benevolence. In the end, these tensions, combined with the difficulty of politically reconciling with Georges Marchais’ stewardship of the party, under whom denunciations of the far left became ever more vitriolic, would see *Cahiers* become increasingly alienated from the PCF over the course of 1971.

The final interlocutor determining *Cahiers* editors’ stance towards the PCF was *Tel Quel*. Like *Cahiers*, the literary journal equivocated in its attitudes towards the party, an ambivalence that was reflected in a division

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8 Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014. *La Cause du peuple* was a Maoist newspaper associated with the Gauche prolétarienne, while *Rouge* was the official newspaper of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, a Trotskyist organization.

9 Claude Prévost, for instance, while broadly defending *Cahiers*, wrote that the journal “risks sliding into ‘theoreticism’: the link between ‘theory’ and the ‘works’ to critique or make often appears as a mechanistic, cause-and-effect link, which is neither dialectical nor, consequently, Leninist.” Claude Prévost, “Dans le numéro de novembre des *Cahiers du cinéma,*” *La Nouvelle Critique* no. 30 (January 1970), p. 65.

10 Marchais became *de facto* leader of the PCF in 1970 when its aging General Secretary Waldeck Rochet succumbed to illness. He was officially elevated to the position in 1972, where he remained until 1994. His slightly buffoonish personal style and conservative leadership made him a figure of mockery for the far left.
within its editorial board. Jean Thibaudeau (a PCF member) and Marcelin Pleynet advocated fraternal relations with the party, while Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva leaned towards the gauchiste movement. The latter two were decisive in Tel Quel's violent rejection of the PCF in mid-1971 and its adoption of a Maoist orientation that would heavily influence Cahiers' own trajectory. Between 1967 and 1970, however, Tel Quel was open to collaboration with La Nouvelle Critique, earning a high-profile presence in several issues of the communist periodical and thereby exposing its wider readership to contemporary developments in literary theory.\footnote{See, in particular, La Nouvelle Critique no. 19 (December 1968), which published proceedings from a conference held by Tel Quel on "Linguistics and Literature," with interventions from Jean-Louis Baudry, Kristeva, Sollers and Pleynet.}


Cahiers' rapprochement with the PCF, while short-lived and never adequately theorized as a coherent political strategy,\footnote{A letter from Dominique Païni in the March-April 1971 issue requested an in-depth explanation from the Cahiers editors of their political alignment, but this was never produced, and the allegiance to the PCF was abandoned several months later. Dominique Païni, “Une lettre,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 228 (March-April 1971), p. 64. A sustained critique of this position was nonetheless produced at the inception of Cahiers' Maoist period.} was a genuine attempt to engage in dialogue with those intellectual layers attempting to think through questions relating to the cinema from a Marxist standpoint, who were judged at the time to be mostly gravitating around the party. Although this perspective led to ironic remarks from other journals about "Narboni and Marchais, hand in hand,"\footnote{Ibid., p. 64. Païni points to a text written by Jean Delmas in Jeune Cinéma no. 52 (February 1970).} and was ultimately abandoned as unworkable, it nevertheless coincided with one of the most theoretically fertile periods in the history of Cahiers. Indeed, from the standpoint of film theory, 1970, the high point of Cahiers' rapprochement with the PCF, can also be seen as something of an \textit{annus mirabilis} for the journal.
Expanding the Critical Ranks: Kané, Bonitzer, Baudry and Oudart

At the same time that Cahiers allied itself with the institutional muscle of the PCF’s cultural apparatus, its editors sought to expand the ranks of its writing team. Some figures who gravitated towards the journal at this time—Geneviève Reinach, Sebastien Roulet, Robert Alburni, Dominique Noguez and Eduardo de Gregorio among them—only wrote briefly for Cahiers. Others, most notably Pascal Kané, Pascal Bonitzer, Pierre Baudry and Jean-Pierre Oudart, became fully integrated into its editorial team, immersing themselves in the “adventure” of Cahiers during its politically radicalized period, up to the fiasco of the Front culturel and beyond. Of the four, Kané was the first to contribute to Cahiers, making his bow with a review of Polanski’s Cul-de-sac in February 1967. Born on January 21, 1946 into a Jewish family of Polish origin, Kané felt an obvious affinity for the work of Polanski, and when he became, after Eisenschitz, one of the first of his generation of Cahiers writers to publish a book-length work in 1970, it was natural that the monograph would be devoted to the Polish filmmaker. Raised in the 9th arrondissement, he took an interest in the cinema at the age of 14 and began reading Cahiers and attending the Cinémathèque in 1963, his last year of high school. Studying law and economics at university, he wrote his mémoire on the economics of the film industry, but this aspect of the cinema was of little lasting interest, and his writings for Cahiers attest above all to a cinephilic approach to film. Kané’s integration into Cahiers was not a smooth one: more than two years would elapse between his first published text and his acceptance as a full-fledged member of the editorial team in mid-1969. During this time he intermittently wrote short reviews, while a longer text offering a Sadean reading of Raoul Walsh’s œuvre (inspired by a special issue of Tel Quel on Sade) was rejected by Comolli as “not structural enough.” Later, an article he wrote on the Marx brothers

16 In 2001, Kané made the essayistic documentary La Théorie du fantôme about his family background. See Chapter 20 for more on this film.
18 The first issue of Cahiers Kané recalls reading was no. 150-151 (December 1963-January 1964), a special on American cinema. He also recalls driving a Citroën 2CV from Barcelona to Paris (and back) to watch the screening of Monsieur Verdoux for the opening of the Cinémathèque française’s new venue at the Palais de Chaillot. Interview with Pascal Kané, March 12, 2014.
19 Ibid. The dossier on Sade appeared in Tel Quel no. 28 (Winter 1967). Kané’s article centered mainly on the character played by Clark Gable in Band of Angels, but that text is now lost. Kané retrospectively admits that it was “too vague” and “too ambitious” for the debutant critic that he was in late 1967. Interview with Pascal Kané, March 12, 2014.
for Politique Hebdo was also criticized by the Cahiers editors: contributing to a newspaper of the non-communist left constituted “playing the game of anti-communism” in their eyes, and Kané desisted from writing for that publication.20 At the same time, he came to play a more high-profile role at Cahiers, contributing to its major collective texts and writing substantial articles on Chabrol, Allio’s Pierre et Paul and Borowczyk’s Goto, île d’amour in 1969.21 The Goto review read Borowczyk’s film through the prism of Barthes’ notion of the “effect of the real,” and the literary theorist was one of the key theoretical points of reference for Kané, who attended his Collège de France lectures and helped forge a close relationship between Barthes and Cahiers during this time. Kané was less comfortable, however, with the journal’s politicization, confessing that “I was hopeless on the political level. It is not at all my Eros.”22 Indeed, even at the height of Cahiers’ Marxism-Leninism, he continued to take an interest in contemporary Hollywood releases. Indicative here is the fact that Kané’s review of Hitchcock’s Topaz, in which he rejected the commonly held view of the film as a metaphor for Hitchcock’s “anti-communist” decision to work in the US, was published in an issue otherwise almost entirely devoted to “Russia in the 1920s.”23 Throughout the 1970s, Kané was virtually alone among the Cahiers critics to pursue a critical reading of contemporary Hollywood films.

Like Kané, Bonitzer (born February 1, 1946) read Cahiers for several years before stepping up as a writer for the journal: he vividly recalls discovering issue no. 120 in a family attic, which contained a transcription of the soundtrack to Le Petit Soldat, and became a subscriber from that moment on.24 Viewings of The Lady of Shanghai in his local 16th arrondissement cinema in 1959 and À bout de souffle in London in 1962 had already awoken his cinephilia, and he also dabbled in painting and fiction writing. But

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20 Interview with Pascal Kané, March 12, 2014.
22 Interview with Pascal Kané, March 12, 2014.
Bonitzer’s youth was profoundly shaped, above all, by politics. His father was a prominent member of the PCF, and much of the younger Bonitzer’s militant activity can be seen in an Œdipal light: enrolled in the philosophy department at Nanterre after failing the entrance exam to the IDHEC (the national film school), he was briefly a member of the Trotskyist youth group Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire before associating with the anarchist Mouvement de Mars 22, where he made the acquaintance of Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Anne Wiazemsky. Bonitzer joined them on the barricades during the May events, although he recalls being distinctly less excited by the protests than a friend who, teargas in his eyes, confided “Pascal, this is the most beautiful day of my life!”

It was through these circles that he crossed paths with *Cahiers*: meeting Delahaye over dinner one evening, Bonitzer confessed his desire to write for the journal, and the older critic, aware of the need for new writers, proposed a review of Sembene’s *Le Mandat*. After some hesitation, Bonitzer took up Delahaye’s offer, writing a precocious text published in the February 1969 issue that invoked Brecht and Derrida in arguing that money was the “true subject” of the film, and its “foreign, magic, maleficent element.”

More than Delahaye, however, it was the elegant writing style of Jacques Bontemps that most impressed the young Bonitzer, and in a strange turn of events, Bontemps was also friends with Bonitzer’s high school teacher, the Heideggerian philosopher Michel Deguy. Bontemps proved to be a useful model for the younger critic’s own development as a writer: throughout his twenty-year association with *Cahiers*, Bonitzer would always be distinguished by his unparalleled literary flair and a confident, if not always rigorous, deployment of post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theory. Unlike Kané, Bonitzer wasted no time in imposing himself at *Cahiers*: after writing reviews of *Teorema*, *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, *Break-Up* and *The Party* in 1969, he played a key role in the collective text on *La vie est à nous* in March 1970.

It was, however, his discovery of Japanese cinema in 1970, and in particular *Death by Hanging* by Oshima and *Eros + Massacre* by Yoshida, that truly saw Bonitzer develop his consummate critical voice.

25 Bonitzer’s response was “Ah, the fool.” See Bonitzer, “Comment j’ai rencontré Jacques Bontemps,” p. 111.


Jean-Pierre Oudart began writing for Cahiers at roughly the same time as Bonitzer and Kané. Very little, however, is known about his background before that point. No record exists of his date of birth or family background, although de Baecque relays that he worked at the municipal library in Orléans and had read Cahiers attentively since the early 1960s. From 1967 onwards, he dispatched hand-written letters to the journal, and after an in-person meeting with the editors, began to publish with Cahiers in January 1969. 29 In comparison with the rest of the editorial team, Oudart’s cinematic culture was slight, but he made up for this with his thorough grounding in Lacanian psychoanalysis. 30 Pierre recalls that he was initially treated by the rest of the team as a “literary madman” and not taken entirely seriously, with Narboni and Rivette the first to recognize the theoretical import of his writings. 31 After publishing three critical notices in early 1969, on Les Contrebandières by Moullet, Freaks by Browning and L’Enfance nue by Pialat, all of which centered around themes of aberration, monstrosity and madness, 32 Oudart sealed his place in the history of film theory with the two installments of “La Suture” (March and May 1969), an enormously influential article that merits its status as the origin-text of psychoanalytic film theory and which for Oudart initiated an idiosyncratic theoretical concern for the cinema that would endure throughout his association with Cahiers up to 1980.

Baudry was the last critic to join Cahiers before the onset of its Maoist period, contributing his first article, an overview of three Sergio Sollima films, in March 1970. 33 He was introduced to the journal by Comolli, who remained friends with Baudry until the latter’s death in 2005, 34 and was quickly given a high level of editorial responsibility. As early as July 1970, Baudry was tasked with the “Réponses aux lecteurs” rubric, clarifying the journal’s political positions for inquisitive readers. 35 Born in Reims on January 28, 1948, he moved to Paris in 1966 to take preparatory classes for the École normale supérieure, where he completed a maîtrise in philosophy with

30 Aumont joked that before joining the journal, Oudart “had seen twelve films, eleven of which were by Bresson.” Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 11, 2014.
31 Interview with Sylvie Pierre, May 26, 2014.
35 Baudry, “Réponses aux lecteurs.”
a thesis on St. Augustine. Thanks to his familiarity with psychoanalytic theory, Baudry rounded out the small team of Lacanians within Cahiers, alongside Oudart, Bonitzer, Kané and Daney. His taste in films, however, was decidedly eclectic. With a predilection for spaghetti Westerns and slapstick comedy, Baudry was virtually the only critic at Cahiers to write on genre cinema during this period, while he also contributed in-depth discussions on Alexander Nevsky, Trafic and Intolerance, as well as critical lacerations of Zabriskie Point and Le Chagrin et la Pitié. The youngest member of the Cahiers editorial team, Baudry’s association with the journal was also the briefest, and he was the least prolific of the ten writers under discussion here: only 23 articles appeared in his name before he resigned from the journal in 1973, having found himself unable to conform to the Maoist line of the Front culturel period.

Cahiers, Communism and Jean Renoir: La vie est à nous

The introduction of these new critics in the years 1969-1970 quickly made itself felt within the journal: in March 1970 already, Bonitzer and Oudart joined with Comolli, Narboni and Daney in composing an analysis of Jean Renoir’s La vie est à nous. A collective film made for the communist party’s propaganda arm during the anti-fascist Popular Front period in 1936, La vie est à nous represented an ideal opportunity for Cahiers to combine its cinephilic heritage with its new political strategy of liaising with the PCF. Given a re-release in the Studio Git-le-cœur in November 1969—as part of a retrospective on French cinema from the early sound era titled “29-36”—the film was widely covered in the communist press, with Michel Capdenac of Les Lettres françaises hailing it as “the first example in France of a militant cinema, a ‘parallel’ cinema.” Renoir, of course, has been one of the key filmmakers for Cahiers throughout its history: as early as issue no. 8 (January 1952), Bazin penned a 20-page article on “Renoir français”; a two-part interview with Rivette and Truffaut appeared in issues no. 34 and 35 (April-May 1954); and the August-September 1954 (no. 38) and Christmas 1957 (no. 78) numbers featured dossiers dedicated to Renoir’s œuvre. The

37 See Chapter 24 for more on this body of writing.
late 1960s, meanwhile, saw a renewed interest in Renoir on the part of Comolli/Narboni’s *Cahiers*: new interviews appeared in July 1966 (no. 180), January 1967 (no. 186) and December 1967 (no. 196), while, adventitiously, the script for the unmade film *C’est la révolution!* was published in the April-May 1968 issue (no. 200-201). Moreover, Comolli had analyzed *La Marseillaise* (a sister work to *La vie est à nous*, also supported by the PCF and made under the Popular Front) in a 1967 article, where he argued that the film opened up “the possibility for a political cinema to be intelligent, and for an intelligent cinema to take a political stance.” Far from *La Marseillaise* being a work of ecumenical humanism in tension with the project’s stated propagandistic goals, Comolli maintained that “propaganda, here, is propagated and diffused throughout the entire film, inscribed in the very forms it employs.” Moreover, the state of harmonious equilibrium that is supposedly Renoir’s stylistic hallmark is, in this film, subject to a perpetual process of construction and demolition. It is this “writing operation,” therefore, that makes manifest the notions of “difference, alterity and radical separation” governing the film.

An anti-humanist reading of Renoir is also on view in *Les Cahiers face au film: Une partie de campagne*, a pedagogical film shot by Eisenschitz on November 28, 1969. Here, the *Cahiers* team argues that the severe, dark and even malicious tone of Renoir’s unfinished short film runs counter to the “terribly human, humorous, pantheistic Renoir” that dominates critical understandings of his work. Far from being a naturalist work in the vein of the Maupassant story from which it is adapted (an interpretation bolstered by the mythology around the film crafted by Renoir), the formal structure of *Une partie de campagne* centers on modernist notions of theatricality, as evinced by the gaze of Sylvia Bataille directly into the camera, twenty years before Bergman would repeat the technique in *Summer with Monika*. Narboni here concludes that it is “masking effects” (*effets de masque*) such

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as this that result in the film becoming a “critical operation opposing the laborious, academic French cinema of the 1930s.”

This recurring interest in Renoir’s 1930s work provided the basis upon which the Cahiers critics embarked on a political/formal analysis of La vie est à nous, an endeavor that undoubtedly represented the most significant forerunner to the collective text on Young Mr. Lincoln. Unlike Ford’s film, however, La vie est à nous was governed by an ideological standpoint close to that held by Cahiers at the time the article was written. Indeed, the text was later criticized in the journal for “rehashing, word for word, in an uncritical manner, the thesis of the film (the theses of the PCF at the time of the Popular Front and, today, their theses on the Popular Front).” Moreover, while Young Mr. Lincoln was made for standard commercial release and conformed to the formal and narrative strictures of classical Hollywood, La vie est à nous was conceived from the start as a “militant film,” blending documentary and fiction elements, and was primarily intended for screenings at political meetings to convey to audiences the political line of the PCF. For this reason, Cahiers explicitly contrasted Renoir’s film with contemporary militant cinema, the vast majority of which was looked upon in a negative light.

Signed by Bonitzer, Comolli, Daney, Narboni and Oudart, “La vie est à nous, film militant” is divided into four sections, which respectively deal with the “situation” of the film, its “function,” its “political effectiveness,” and finally “problems of militant cinema.” As with the Young Mr. Lincoln article, the first part of the text, which in fact takes up nearly half of the entire article, begins by giving a historical overview of the broader political situation in which Renoir’s film was made. Europe in the mid-1930s was marked, the Cahiers critics note, by economic crisis and violent political struggles, which led to the consolidation of fascist regimes across much of the continent. This fascist wave was met with a tepid response by bourgeois democracies, fearful of giving support to communist forces, and the situation required the Soviet leadership to “provisionally subordinate the struggle against capitalism to the struggle against fascism” by adopting the “popular front”

44 La Rédaction, “Politique et lutte idéologique de classes, Intervention 1,” p. 6. They go on to say that it was “symptomatic that this text was practically the only Cahiers article—if recognized ‘cultural values’ such as Vertov, Eisenstein and Griffith are excepted—that was cited with praise by the party press.” Notably, there is no criticism in “La vie est à nous, film militant” of the Comintern’s disastrous “Third Period” policy of the early 1930s, which denounced social-democratic parties as “social-fascists” and hamstrung attempts to prevent Hitler’s rise to power.
tactic. Then PCF general secretary Maurice Thorez and Comintern head Georgi Dimitrov are at this point both quoted approvingly, the latter to the effect that, “At the present time the working masses can no longer choose between bourgeois democracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat; they can choose only between bourgeois democracy and fascism.”

Following on from the stance taken towards La Marseillaise and Une partie de campagne, Cahiers argues that this historical context is necessary to combat the dominant critical reception of La vie est à nous, the majority of which is “not concerned with the militant nature of the film—except in a nostalgic mode” and instead focuses on “what seemed to justify its interest in the film.” A piece by Claude Beylie (who organized the retrospective) is quoted as symptomatic of the attempt by “idealist criticism” to locate, within a work directly commissioned for the purposes of political agitation, the “Renoir touch”—namely, the filmmaker’s ineffable charm and humor, as well as certain signature formal techniques such as the use of deep-focus. Against this tendency, the Cahiers critics insist on emphasizing the collective nature of the project and its alignment with the political theses of the PCF at the time. They note, for instance, that a report by Maurice Thorez at the party’s 1936 congress formed the skeleton for the film’s structure and was quoted from at length in the schoolteacher’s opening monologue. And yet, while contesting the auteur-focused nature of the dominant critical response to the film, the Cahiers writers themselves become caught in an auteurist aporia from which they struggle to break free: collective filmmaking itself is recognized as one of the red threads in Renoir’s œuvre, and the discussion of La vie est à nous is often dominated by its relationship with other Renoir films. Cahiers assert, for instance, that: “Renoir has always had a taste for experimentation. [...] It was natural that at that time he would take propaganda as his material and tackle the problems of militant filmmaking.”

The functioning of La vie est à nous as a militant film is subject to a discussion that is at once richer and less problematic than the first section of the article. Here it is the dialectic between the documentary footage (edited with discernible Vertovian influences) and the fiction sequences (which possess similarities to the use of Gestus and typage in Brecht/Dudow’s Kuhle

46 Ibid., p. 45 (p. 69).
47 Ibid., p. 46 (pp. 71-72).
48 Ibid., p. 48 (p. 77).
Wampe⁴⁹) that allows the film to explore “not only what is said and in what way, but to whom it is being told.”⁵⁰ Paradoxically, Cahiers argues, in the France of 1936 it is the fiction sequences that have a greater epistemological credibility, given that “newsreels, documentaries and reportage were the privileged vehicle of the dominant ideology, as television may be today.”⁵¹ The techniques of fiction (not only in the explicitly fictional episodes but also in the staged speeches of the communist leaders that crown the film) are needed in order “to criticize the documentary, produce the political argumentation, and convey the militant message,” but to do so the fiction must present itself “as the evolution of the documentary—as the resolution of the contradiction between the documentary’s authenticity and its ideological use.”⁵² The political effectiveness of the third and most dramatically developed fictional episode is thus given a close analysis: in charting the consciousness-raising of an unemployed engineer (René, played by Julien Bertheau) who becomes a party member, the class-determined goal of the episode is clearly to win over middle-class voters to communist positions rather than confirming proletarian/peasant layers in their class convictions (as was the case in the earlier two fiction episodes). In Lacanian terms, René’s “sudden, unpremeditated swing” to join the party represents a recognition of the radical lack that defines his petty-bourgeois existence. At a moment of acute personal crisis, “only the Other can intervene—in the form of either death or rescue by the Party,” and René’s decision to take the latter path leads to “the transformation of the subject (of self-awareness) within the social collective.”⁵³

Through its dialectization of fiction and documentary and its awareness of the class nature of its audience, La vie est à nous thus “includes in its own process the question of its addressee,” thereby establishing its political/formal superiority over the vast majority of militant cinema, which tends to ignore this problematic and assume a viewing public consisting of “a motley collection of individuals, by definition incapable of any real action.”⁵⁴ The

⁴⁹ Cahiers notes that Kuhle Wampe screened in Paris in October 1932 and that Karl Koch worked on both films but cannot establish for certain that Renoir had seen Brecht/Dudow’s film before making La vie est à nous. A domestic scene in the third episode, showing René with his wife, nonetheless has distinct parallels with the “suicide scene” of Kuhle Wampe. The first episode, meanwhile, with its depiction of a strike in a metallurgy plant, may owe more to Eisenstein’s Strike.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 48 [p. 78].

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 50 [p. 82].

⁵² Ibid. [pp. 82-83].

⁵³ Ibid., p. 51 [p. 86].

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 51 [p. 87].
article concludes with a tantalizing “To be continued, then,” but Renoir’s films would be of little interest for Cahiers for most of the rest of the 1970s: it was not until 1977—with Comolli’s texts “Un corps en trop” and the three-part series “Deux fictions de la haine” (co-authored with historian François Géré)—that Renoir’s work would again be discussed by Cahiers.55 Comolli and Géré even planned to write a book on La Marseillaise; although this would never materialize, the articles that were published by Cahiers were significant for the development of Comolli’s later work in both filmmaking and film theory.

A Historical Precursor: The USSR in the 1920s

More than Renoir’s films, the most important historical precursor for the post-1968 Cahiers was indisputably the Soviet cinema of the 1920s. In the years 1969-1972, this school was the subject of sustained critical and historical work. Translations of Eisenstein’s writings were an ever-present feature of Cahiers between February 1969 and January-February 1971, reaching 16 installments in total. On two occasions, special issues relating to Soviet cinema were published: in May-June 1970 (“Russie années 20”) and January-February 1971 (“S.M. Eisenstein”). The pertinence of the post-revolutionary Soviet cinema for the critical/theoretical work that Cahiers was carrying out was freely acknowledged: in “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” Comolli and Narboni asserted that “the only possible direction for criticism is, it appears to us, to go back to the theoretical research of the Russian filmmakers of the 1920s (Eisenstein primarily) and to attempt the elaboration and application of a critical theory of the cinema [...] with direct reference to the method of dialectical materialism.”56 This prolonged preoccupation with the Soviet cinema of the pre-Stalin era had little to do with perceived parallels between the concrete political situation of Russia after 1917 and France after 1968. In the USSR, a mass revolutionary party had overthrown Tsarist rule and established a dictatorship of the proletariat, unleashing a wave of experimentation in the aesthetic sphere, while France was still firmly under bourgeois rule and its radically minded artists had to take an oppositional stance towards the political status quo. Instead, analogies

56 Comolli/Narboni, “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” p. 15 [p. 262].
were primarily found with those individual artists and theorists who sought to reconcile the needs of aesthetic production with a political worldview rooted in Marxism.

Broadly speaking, there were two aspects of Cahiers’ output on Soviet cinema: historical research (translation, documentation, interviews) and critical exegesis (analysis, interpretation and theoretical discussions). The two-year Eisenstein translation project, publishing French versions of texts such as “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram,” “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form” and Non-Indifferent Nature, all of which were drawn from the six-volume Russian edition of his selected writings,57 formed the core of the former category, and they were bolstered by translated texts and interviews by filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov, Grigori Kozintsev, Lev Kuleshov and Mikhail Romm, as well as figures writing on the cinema such as Boris Eikhenbaum, Yuri Tynyanov and even Lenin. The major figures involved in this “archeological” work (as Cahiers termed it) were Aumont and Eisenschitz: having learned Russian at the École polytechnique, Aumont oversaw the translation project, while Eisenschitz’s trip to Moscow in 1969 enabled him to establish a warm rapport with Soviet archivists, who provided a significant amount of logistical support for the endeavor. Eisenschitz even considers himself to have been, for all intents and purposes, “the editor-in-chief of ‘Russie années 20.’”58

A notice accompanying the original installment of the Eisenstein translations had already foreshadowed “a series of attempts to interrogate the texts, aiming to place them in their historical (and political/cultural) context and give them contemporary relevance in a cinematic and extra-cinematic theoretical problematic.”59 This promise was essentially fulfilled in the meticulously prepared “Russie années 20” issue. The “stellate and centrifugal structure” of this dossier was all the more necessary, in Cahiers’ eyes, to avoid the myth of the “solitary genius” frequently attached to Eisenstein as well as to avoid the theoretical error of “totalization” (that is, comprehending a historical moment on the sole basis of practices linked to the cinema); instead, the journal’s editors were at pains to understand the

57 Prior to this project, the only Eisenstein texts available in French were those included in a single, slim volume published in 1958. See Sergei Eisenstein, Réflexions d’un cinéaste, translated into French by Lucia Galinskaia and Jean Cathala (Moscow: Éditions Langues Étrangères, 1958). The two volumes in English translated and edited by Jay Leyda (Film Form and The Film Sense) were, however, widely known in French film circles.
58 Interview with Bernard Eisenschitz, April 1, 2014.
cinema as “a signifying practice non-hierarchically articulated with other practices.”60 Furthermore, they were conscious of the historiographical exigencies required in republishing texts dating from up to fifty years earlier. Drawing from the same Althusserian theories of historiography that would later inform Comolli’s “Technique et idéologie,” the editors rejected a “mechanistic conception of history as linear, as empirically given,” in favor of a “stratified history, yet to be constructed, articulated in blocs and series in complex ways.”61

The scholarly rigor and sophisticated historiographical methodology of this ambitious project earned the journal near universal plaudits from both the communist press and French cinephile circles.62 Given that the two figures are so often counterposed within film theory, it may be tempting to see the focus on Eisenstein as a repudiation of Bazin’s “idealism,” but it was rarely presented in such terms on the pages of Cahiers itself. It did, however, provide the basis for a sustained period of theoretical work on the question of montage in the cinema. Aumont recalls that the journal’s exposure to Eisenstein’s theoretical writings “opened a window for us,”63 and the filmmaker’s diverse influence can be seen in the later work of many of the Cahiers writers, including Aumont himself, Eisenschitz, Bonitzer and Comolli. One figure who was less satisfied with the project was Tel Quel’s Marcelin Pleynet, who criticized Cahiers in a Cinéthique article for ambiguities in their presentation of Eisenstein’s texts and for skirting over certain ideological infelicities in his writings, in particular his residual Hegelianism.64 Partly, this was condemnation by association: Jean-Pierre Faye’s journal Change had also published Eisenstein translations, in a less rigorous fashion than Cahiers but with the explicit approbation of the film journal,65 and Pleynet interpreted this collaboration as “the submission

61 Ibid., p. 4.
62 The special issue was hailed in La Nouvelle Critique. See Jean-André Fieschi, “Le cinéma soviétique des années 20,” La Nouvelle Critique no. 36 (September 1970), p. 61.
63 Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 11, 2014. At the same time, he cautions that while Eisenstein’s theories were “very idiosyncratic,” the Cahiers writers “did not have the means to see the extent to which it was idiosyncratic, because we knew very little of it.”
65 Cahiers had warmly welcomed the first issue of Change (appearing in December 1968), which was dedicated to the theme of montage and included extracts of Eisenstein texts. See Jean-Louis Comolli, “Le cahier des autres,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 209 (February 1969), p. 4.
of *Cahiers du cinéma* to the theories of the *Change* notebooks [cahiers]"—a
capital crime in the internecine world of French literary rivalries. Comolli
and Narboni rebutted Pleynet’s claims in the second installment of “Cinéma/
idéologie/critique,” accusing him of conflating the two journals, which earned
an equally strident rejoinder from the *Tel Quel* editor. As part of a broader
detente between the two journals, however, a reconciliation was effected, and
by the time of the special issue on Eisenstein in early 1971, Pleynet agreed to an
amicable interview with *Cahiers* which focused on the relationship between
the Bolsheviks and the artistic avant-gardes in post-revolutionary Russia.

The focus on Soviet montage cinema led to a number of articles analyzing
the films arising out of this movement, including Oudart on *Ivan the Terrible*,
Baudry on *Alexander Nevsky* and Bonitzer on *Strike*, as well as Eisenschitz on
the work of Mikhail Romm. The most detailed exegesis of Soviet cinema,
however, pertained to Kozintsev/Trauberg’s depiction of the Paris commune
in *The New Babylon*, whose script drew extensively from Marx’s *post festum*
overview of its rise and fall in *The Civil War in France.* In this two-part text,
published in July and October 1971, *Cahiers* defended the film against the
“naïve and dogmatic” criticisms made of it by the Stalin-era writer Nikolai
Lebedev and interpreted the film through its “double reference”: both to a past
revolutionary event (Paris in 1871) and to the political situation of Russia in 1929.
But this double ideological determination gives rise, in *Cahiers*’ analysis, to the
central contradiction of the film: that between the “inscription of the events in

67 See Comolli/Narboni, Cinéma/idéologie/critique (II); and Marcelin Pleynet, “Le point
68 Marcelin Pleynet, interviewed in Pascal Bonitzer and Jean Narboni, “Sur les avant-gardes
révolutionnaires: Entretien avec Marcelin Pleynet,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 226-227 (January-
pp. 15-23; Pierre Baudry, “Notes sur Alexandre Nevski,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 226-227 (January-
70 See Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*, in *The Collected Works of Marx and Engels* vol. XXII
(London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010).
71 Aumont, Bonitzer, Narboni and Oudart were responsible for the first part of the text, while
only Narboni and Oudart were credited with the second installment. Jacques Aumont, Pascal
Bonitzer, Jean Narboni and Jean-Pierre Oudart, “La métaphore ‘commune,’” *Cahiers du cinéma*
no. 230 (July 1971), pp. 15-21; and Jean Narboni and Jean-Pierre Oudart, “La nouvelle Babylone (La
métaphore ‘commune,’ 2),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 232 (October 1971), pp. 43-51. Both parts were
mythic terms” (as a representation of class struggle in general) and the political utilization of the subject matter in the context of the first five-year-plan, with its breakneck industrialization and collectivization of agriculture, and emphasis on questions of productivity. This contradiction is displaced and transformed by a supplementary third term in *The New Babylon*, namely the character of Jean, a peasant-soldier who ideologically floats between the bourgeois and proletarian sides of the conflict, thus metonymically standing in for the viewer—a narrative device that enables the film to “interpellate” (in the Althusserian sense) its own spectators. By inscribing the film’s signifying economy with overt “designation effects,” Kozintsev/Trauberg consciously sought to produce an analogy with the theatrical metaphors sprinkled throughout *The Civil War in France*. As *Cahiers* recognizes, Marx’s text “systematically inscribes his bourgeois figures in scenic terms, literally re-marking the stage effects of the political discourse of its representatives.”72 *The New Babylon* thus acts as a reinscription of Marx’s own writing effects. In the second installment of their analysis of the film, however, Narboni/Oudart critique the filmmakers for succumbing to a “mechanistic mode” of transposing Marx’s text to the screen, which results in the condensation of “scenic effects” that Marx carefully lodged within *The Civil War in France* being reduced to mere ornamentation in *The New Babylon* (the key example being the decadent party sequences). The antagonism between the bourgeoisie (denoted by artifice) and the proletariat (naturalness) that determines the film is concomitantly reduced to a “schematic, dualist flattening out” of class contradictions, and mere causality replaces a dialectical conception of history.73

While they commend Kozintsev/Trauberg’s attempt to make a political film from a historical materialist standpoint, the *Cahiers* critics ultimately judge *The New Babylon* to be a flawed example of Marxist filmmaking.

**Against the “fiction de gauche”**

While a historical concern for the political cinema of earlier eras was of major importance for *Cahiers* in the years 1969-1971, the critics also continued to focus on responding to contemporary cinema. Increasingly, this took the form of vigorously critiquing what the journal would later dub the “fiction de gauche.” The term itself only came into use later in the 1970s.74 It nonetheless

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72 Aumont et al., “La métaphore ‘commune,’” p. 21 [p. 263].
74 The term was forcefully introduced to *Cahiers* by Louis Skorecki in “Cinéma et histoire” à Valence,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 268-269 (July-August 1976), pp. 85-88.
adequately serves to denote the wave of films—including *Z* and *L'Aveu* by Costa-Gavras, *Le Temps de vivre* by Bernard Paul and *Camarades* by Marin Karmitz—that presented political themes from a broadly left-of-center perspective but did so, in *Cahiers*’ eyes, without “operating any veritable critique of the ideological system in which they are captured, as they adopt its language and modes of figuration without question.” These works, of course, comprised the “Cinéma/ïdéologie/critique” editorial’s category (d), and the negative appraisal of their ideological function led *Cahiers* to argue for the need to “question the transmission of the political critique desired by these films.”

*Cahiers*’ offensive against the *fiction de gauche* began in earnest with Narboni’s March 1969 review of *Z*. Costa-Gavras’ fictionalization of military rule in Greece initiated a wave of films with political themes and conventional narrative/formal structures. For Narboni, the very fact that *Z* gained such unanimous approbation was proof of its status as a “singular and massive process of imposture/recuperation,” which is impregnated by petty-bourgeois ideology “as much in the operation of the film as in its consumption.” Instead of offering a “concrete analysis of a concrete situation,” as the Leninist phrase demands, works such as *Z* merely provide the public with a spectacle centering on a bourgeois individual’s crisis of conscience, thereby reconstituting “the mythology at work in any number of American films, according to which a Good Man can always resist the pressures, influence and intrigue of the court-rooms or police stations.” Although Costa-Gavras’ use of types and caricatures could potentially lead to comparisons with Eisenstein, Narboni strenuously rejects such an analogy, arguing that, in contrast to the Soviet filmmaker’s abstraction, Costa-Gavras’ film hews closely to “analytic realism” and is hence a work, above all, of mystification.

Narboni’s line of argumentation patently rests in the tradition of Rivette’s famed excoriation of *Kapò* and followed Comolli’s vituperative response to *Un homme et une femme*, in which Lelouch’s film was condemned for “recuperating, without risk, the expressive ticks of modern cinema, the tattered rags of a modernity whose soul has been cast adrift.” Narboni’s *Z* review drew an indignant response from some readers, but Comolli

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defended his colleague by insisting on the necessity “of furiously attacking the pseudo-engaged cinema” and accused Costa-Gavras of disingenuously representing the true political nature of fascist regimes.\footnote{Jean-Louis Comolli, “Le cahier des lecteurs,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 215 (September 1969), pp. 4-9, here p. 6.} Over the course of the next year, similar lines of attack would be used against films such as Le Temps de vivre by Bernard Paul, Les Choses de la vie by Claude Sautet and The Liberation of L.B. Jones by William Wyler (the last of which was seen as a “vicarious defense of ‘engaged’ French commercial cinema”),\footnote{Jean Narboni, “Le temps de vivre,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 214 (July-August 1969), p. 63; Pierre Baudry, “Les choses de la vie,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 220-221 (May-June 1970), p. 126; and Bernard Eisenschitz and Jean Narboni, “The Liberation of L.B. Jones,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 223 (August-September 1970), pp. 62-63.} but the critique of such works was most comprehensively developed in two articles that took the lapidary title “Film/politique.” The first, by Pascal Bonitzer (in July 1970) focused on the “special question” of militant cinema, but in discussing the “Z effect” present in a number of these films, it addressed many of the same critical issues as Narboni’s article. Indeed, in the course of his text, Bonitzer specifically invokes the “Narbonian proposition” that “every shot is present twice”—that is, every film is a metaphor of its own work—which he sees as the point of departure for the political interpretation of cinema.\footnote{Pascal Bonitzer, “Film/politique,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 222 (July 1970), pp. 33-37, here p. 35. The “Narbonian proposition” was uttered at a 1969 round table on “L’Espace,” which remained unpublished until 2016. See Chapter 15.} Resting on Bourdieu/Passeron’s notion of the “power of symbolic violence” in contemporary bourgeois ideology, Bonitzer registers the recent, systematic emergence of political discourse in “the films of the dominant cinema,” which tends to take the form either of the open apologia of imperialism or, more preponderantly, of the communication of a “soi-disant progressive discourse.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 33. See also Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, La Réproduction: Éléments pour une théorie du système d’enseignement (Paris: Minuit, 1970). Translated as Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage Publications, 1977).} For Bonitzer, the present political balance of forces (namely, the rise of movements of social contestation in the advanced capitalist countries) has led to the “massive, inflationist injection of progressive and revolutionary themes in the film market.” Even militant films of the ilk of La Hora de los hornos by Solanas/Getino and Camarades by Marin Karmitz had been affected by this phenomenon. An interview with the latter for Cinéma 70, in which Karmitz expressed his desire to “touch the maximum number of people” is highlighted by Bonitzer as symptomatic of a “political” cinema that,
in wishing to “produce a ‘normal,’ that is, commercial, fiction,” is unable to question the “dominant mode of film viewing” and thus subjects the audience to a “mutilated double lecture” with the “inevitable political effect of separating what the spectator believes to be the ‘content’ (politics) of the film and what they believe to be the ‘form’ (aesthetics).” In contrast, Bonitzer insists that the aesthetic operation of a film is itself political. The critic is more charitable towards La Hora de les hornos, insisting on its status as a film from a Third World nation (Argentina), but he nonetheless censures Solanas/Getino for “oscillat[ing] perpetually between violence and meaning, between ‘enthusiasm’ without any rational foundation [...] and the channeled analysis of this violence (history, theory).” Bonitzer concludes that the discourse of their film suffers from a “fundamental voluntarism” which results in the “systematic reabsorption of real contradictions into the facticity of conflicts and events.”

Three months later, Comolli would pick up the baton from Bonitzer with “Film/politique (2).” At issue was another Costa-Gavras film, L’Aveu (1970), a far soberer affair than Z which focused on the experiences of Czechoslovak communist Artur London (played by Yves Montand) during the Stalinist show trials of the 1950s. Despite this, Comolli assimilates the two films with his claim that they “are not the site of cinematic work, of any signifying practice capable of subverting the aesthetic-cultural norms of the dominant ideology” and opposes Costa-Gavras’ work to films such as Othon, Sotto il segno dello Scorpione, Eros + Massacre and Ice. These are “unequivocally political films” because “they (we) are not satisfied with the pure and simple delivery of a ‘political message’”; rather, they operate “scriptural work” on their very materiality, which thus becomes a form of political work; by contrast, L’Aveu “contains no productive work at the level of its signifiers and thus [...] never calls into question the conditions production/writing/diffusion/reading of the film.” As with Z, then, it is the very accessibility of L’Aveu’s discourse, the unanimity of its critical reception, that seems to damn it in Comolli’s eyes. In line with Althusserian thinking, the critic is certain that the film will “reproduce the modes and through them the themes of the dominant ideology.” More specifically, Comolli analyzes the “ideology of the visible” which, while absent from London’s...

82 Bonitzer, “Film/politique,” pp. 34-35.
83 Ibid., p. 37.
original memoir, is operative in Costa-Gavras’ filming of the torture episodes described therein. These scenes are filmed in such an insistent manner, Comolli argues, that the spectator departs from the “place of the reader” and instead becomes the voyeur of a spectacle who responds to what they see with “repulsion-gratification,” thereby impeding the possibility of a political reading.\(^{85}\) Comolli is on firm ground in asserting that a change in “signifying system” (from book to film) can have the effect of transforming the political content of the signified; he is less convincing, however, in his attempts to claim that London’s rejection of Stalinism morphs into a blanket anti-communism in Costa-Gavras’ adaptation, and this line of argumentation seems determined more by *Cahiers*’ pro-PCF sympathies at the time than by a legitimate reading of the film.\(^{86}\)

Indeed, Narboni would later be highly critical of what he sees as the “dogmatic” and “uselessly violent” attacks made against Costa-Gavras, who “did not deserve them as a person or as a filmmaker.” He explains: “I wrote a very harsh article on Z, which I regret today. [...] It was not the right way to critique this film. I took it on a terrain which was not where the film itself was situated. [...] To rehash an old terminology, the contradiction with him was not antagonistic.”\(^{87}\) While *Cahiers*’ hostile stance towards these *fictions de gauche* is open to criticism, it did enable the journal to develop a more substantial understanding of the “writing operations” of those films that did combine political radicalism with formal experimentation. Moreover, when it came to questions of censorship (which was particularly heavy-handed in de Gaulle’s France), the journal unfailingly took a principled position condemning all forms of state repression, a stance that overrode any negative attitudes its writers may have had towards the film in question. Narboni, for instance, had critiqued the “absence of a broader political context” in *Battle of Algiers*, comparing it unfavorably to *Strike* and *Le Petit Soldat*.\(^{88}\)

Pontecorvo is, by any measure, certainly not a “*Cahiers* auteur.” And yet when the film’s 1970 theatrical release was threatened by *de facto* censorship following threats of violence by the far right, the *Cahiers* editors leapt to

\(^{85}\) Ibid., p. 50 [p. 168].

\(^{86}\) The question of Stalinist rule in Eastern Europe was a particularly difficult one for the communist movement in the West, particularly after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. While the PCF formally condemned the invasion, it still maintained fraternal relations with the CPSU. Ironically, the communist press tended to be more favorable towards the “Série Z” films than *Cahiers*. See Émile Breton and Jean-André Fieschi, “Cinéma: série Z,” *La Nouvelle Critique* no. 49 (January 1972), pp. 74-81.

\(^{87}\) Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.

its defense, unequivocally asserting that “demanding the release of Battle of Algiers [...] constitutes a prime political gesture.”

Cinema and Counter-Culture: Ice by Robert Kramer

Of the films defended by Cahiers in this period, Robert Kramer’s Ice spoke to the journal’s editors on the most multifaceted level, addressing not only theoretical questions of politics and film form but also, more intimately, the psychodramas associated with militant activity in small but closely knit groups. Indeed, for Cahiers during a significant part of the late 1960s and 1970s, Kramer’s work—despite its utterly marginal position within the broader film industry—stood in for contemporary American cinema as a whole, which suffered from a critical neglect exacerbated by the journal’s political opposition to US imperialism. Hollywood cinema, in an interim period between the demise of the classical studio system and the rise of “New Hollywood” auteurs, largely failed to interest Cahiers at this time, and its editors—perhaps due to a residual Bazinian concern for the photographic nature of the medium—were also impervious to the “underground” or experimental cinema coming out of New York, arguing that its techniques of “perceptual jamming” involved “alteration on the most superficial level of language, the immediate creation of a code of the impossible, which is then resolutely rejected, and not transgressive.”

Famously, the short-lived off-shoot Cahiers du Cinéma in English, edited by Andrew Sarris out of New York, had even been censured in 1967 for publishing a special issue on Warhol without its “parent” publication’s permission. 1968 saw Cahiers become more favorable to avant-garde tendencies in the US, with a dossier in its October issue featuring articles on and interviews with “four American filmmakers”—Warhol, Cassavetes, Clarke and Kramer. Kramer, however, was the only one of the quartet whose œuvre was closely followed by Cahiers in the years to come, and along with Straub and Godard he became one of the central filmmakers—and, indeed, dialogue partners—for the journal in its leftist period.

Kramer’s work was first discovered by Cahiers at the 1967 Pesaro festival. In 1968, Narboni described him as “combin[ing] the qualities of the ‘classicism’ of the great Hollywood cinema and the free-spirited nature of the New York independent filmmakers, at the same time as he testifies to a set of preoccupations [...] which, as Kramer himself declares, owes much to modern European cinema.” In an interview with Kramer that focused on his first two films, In the Country and The Edge, a common frame of cinephilic references was firmly established between the filmmaker and the journal, as they discussed the work of Rivette, Straub and Godard. Later that year, Kramer was interviewed again (by Delahaye) and Eisenschitz reviewed The Edge, noting that “if Kramer’s film is the reflection of a part of the New York left that has passed to militant action, it responds to something else, uncertainties, weaknesses, which put the filmmaker [...] out of step [en décalage] with his milieu.”

Cahiers’ interest in Kramer fully blossomed with the release of Ice in 1970. Bonitzer discussed the film in “Film/politique” in July that year, holding it up as a positive counter-model to Camarades for offering the possibility of a “‘free’ political reading” that was not “blocked by the ideological glazing of linear writing.” In December 1970, Cahiers dedicated a significant portion of that month’s issue to discussing Ice, with its coverage of the film including a recorded interview with Kramer, a review of the film by Eisenschitz, and an eleven-page round table discussing its political and cinematic ramifications, involving Narboni, Comolli, Bonitzer, Aumont, Pierre and, from La Nouvelle Critique, Fieschi. All these texts centered on the question of the film’s political discourse and the means with which such discourse should be read. While Ice is a fiction film depicting a group of far-left urban guerrillas in the midst of a future revolutionary struggle in the US (at a time when the nation is at war with Mexico), Kramer insisted that he sought to “find the means to make fiction films that give the impression of documentary reality” and expressed his hope that “the major lines of reality emerge in the film.” Indeed, he had been involved with the Newsreel documentary filmmaking group, which funded Ice but disavowed the

95 Bernard Eisenschitz, “En marche (The Edge),” Cahiers du cinéma no. 205 (October 1968), pp. 53-54.
96 Bonitzer, “Film/politique,” p. 36.
film and refused to distribute it upon completion. Eisenschitz, who also defended Kramer’s film in a review for La Nouvelle Critique, argued that Ice was a theorization of the “decentering between the historical real, ideology and the signifying process,” a decentering that was “projected into the very structure of the film,” and felt that its dialectization of its own political contradictions could provide for “the syntax of a filmic discourse.”

The round table was more contentious, centering around the question, as Narboni framed it in the discussion’s opening statement: “Is a work (a book, a film) reducible to the énoncés contained within it? Can the discourse of a film be boiled down to the discourses held in the film? And, in the negative, what treatment does the artistic process, with its specific laws of functioning and its relative autonomy, subject them to?”

Fieschi, while declining to simply label Ice an ultra-left film, preferred to read its political theme as a symptom of the political immaturity of the radical left in the US, which unlike France was bereft of a mass working-class party, and criticized its lack of any economic or political analysis of American capitalism. Warning against “dangerously retrograde” avant-gardist films, Fieschi felt that there was “a greater reflection in Kramer’s work on the cinema than on politics” and even conjectured that Cahiers suffered from “a rather suspect dread of recuperation,’ or, in any case, of a certain misrecognition of the processes of mediation.”

The other editors defended Kramer—and themselves—from these charges and emphasized the décalage between the propositions enunciated in the film and the stance taken by the filmmaker towards such perspectives. They argued that, while the actions and views of the characters in Ice can and should be critiqued, this critique is already carried out in the film, primarily through its formal system, its écriture. Comolli, for instance, asserted that “the debate on the political signifieds and the symptomatic character of Ice is not possible if we do not start out by posing the question of the level of

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100 In this, Fieschi broadly reflected the response to the film by PCF-aligned critics. L’Humanité’s François Maurin pointed to its “voluntarist temptation resulting in political confusion and an absence of political thinking” (“Phantasmes ‘révolutionnaires’: Ice de Robert Kramer,” L’Humanité, October 28, 1970), while Marcel Martin, writing for Les Lettres françaises, called it “demoralizing, demobilizing” but also a “fascinating work” (“Ice de Robert Kramer,” Les Lettres françaises, October 28, 1970).

engagement of the film” and that “the study of the film/politics relationship requires that we not confuse the political discourse(s) in the film with the discourse of the film itself.” Bonitzer, meanwhile, specified that “the film is formally constructed along two series of contradictory effects—a ‘realist’ series and a ‘fantasy’ series”—and outlined the undermining of the film’s documentary qualities by a combination of its syntax (the “frustrating discontinuity of the editing”) with the “unhinged, floating, oneiric character of certain episodes” and the insertion of quasi-Vertovian sequences that were “absolutely heterogeneous to the narrative.” Together, these effects served to “oblige the spectator to weave a reading, to tie the threads together, and to observe the lacunae, blanks and holes in the ideological and scriptural tapestry of Ice.”

Beyond its direct purpose of thrashing out differences of opinion on Kramer’s work, the round table on Ice served to highlight certain incompatible contradictions between the Cahiers editors and PCF intellectuals, even those, such as Fieschi, who shared a background with the journal. The end of 1970 and the beginning of 1971 represented the high point of Cahiers’ rapprochement with the party but also the moment at which the untenable nature of continued collaboration became more and more apparent to the editors. In the twelve months after Ice was discussed by Cahiers, the journal’s rupture with the PCF would take on a violent, acrimonious form, and it would adopt a Maoist political line broadly shared by Tel Quel, Cinéthique and a number of small but energetic political organizations. Cahiers’ interest in Kramer, however, was of greater longevity than its attraction to the PCF or Maoism. The filmmaker spoke, perhaps more than any other, to the critics’ own anxieties about the promises and pitfalls of political engagement: Milestones was subject to another round table in 1976, and films such as Route One USA and Berlin 10/90 also had a profound impact on former Cahiers writers such as Comolli. Eisenschitz, meanwhile, provided the greatest tribute to Kramer: shortly before the latter’s death, he conducted a series of long interviews with the director about his œuvre,

102 Comolli, in ibid., p. 18.
103 Bonitzer, in ibid., pp. 19-20.
104 The alliance was such that Cahiers was even accused of “censoring” remarks made by Kramer in his interview that were hostile to the orthodox communist movement, a charge they vigorously denied. See “À propos d’”une” lettre,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 230 (July 1971), pp. 60-62. For the original accusation, see La Rédaction, “Envoi,” Positif no. 124 (February 1971), pp. 79-80, here p. 80.
which, published in book form in 2001, constitute a valuable testimony to a filmmaker who, while always operating in the margins of the film industry, was steadfastly defended by Cahiers as a figure of central importance to contemporary cinema.106

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