9. **Cahiers du cinéma’s Turn to Maoism: 1971-1973**

**Abstract**

Over the course of 1971, the limitations of *Cahiers du cinéma’s* alignment with the PCF were keenly felt, and with the encouragement of *Cahiers* alumnus Jean-Luc Godard and the literary journal *Tel Quel*, the editors peremptorily switched allegiances to the Maoist movement. Although a curious phenomenon in retrospect, French Maoism was a thriving political force in the years following 1968, with thousands of students and intellectuals taking inspiration from events in China. The change in line had a convulsive impact on *Cahiers*: while initially the hyper-politicization it produced coexisted with a continued cultivation of film theory and criticism, by late 1972 the journal’s energies were focused on its project for a “Front culturel révolutionnaire.” In the end, the lukewarm results of this venture in 1973, combined with the general political climate in France at the time, plunged *Cahiers* into a near-fatal crisis.

**Keywords:** *Cahiers du cinéma*, Maoism, *Tel Quel*, Chinese cultural revolution, Front culturel révolutionnaire

**The Alliance with *Tel Quel*: Breaking with the PCF**

Difficulties in reconciling *Cahiers’* own theoretical, aesthetic and political perspectives with those of the PCF had already punctuated the year 1970. In August, for instance, *Cahiers’* presence at the Avignon festival (where films such as *La Vie est à nous*, *Othon*, *Sotto il segno del scorpione*, *Moonfleet* and *Once Upon a Honeymoon* were screened and discussed) was reviewed by *Nouvelle Critique* writer Albert Cervoni for *L’Humanité*: while broadly positive towards “this team whose research reclaims an ideology that is our own,” Cervoni critiqued *Cahiers* for their “somewhat mystical, mechanistic” variant of Marxism as well as their predilection for an “opacity determined
by a will to theorize which could have proceeded by other verbal means.”

The article was amicably but firmly rebuffed by the Cahiers editors, who argued that their work on the role of language in Straub, Godard and the Tavianis constituted a “holistic strategy” indebted to the materialist theories of Tel Quel and Jacques Lacan, which viewed language in the cinema “not as the vehicle of a pre-existing meaning, but as signification produced in the movement of language.” At the same time, Jean-Patrick Lebel had begun his “Cinéma et idéologie” series opposing the “ideologist” current of Cahiers and Cinéthique, and while Lebel himself took care to present his articles as fraternal critiques, this did not prevent him from distorting and conflating arguments made on the pages of the two journals. La Nouvelle Critique’s readers, meanwhile, did not evince the same care for tactful diplomacy: a reader identified as “A.L.” from Ivry, for instance, accused Cahiers of being an “opportunist journal” and “luminously eclectic” in its theoretical interests.

Cahiers protested against these claims in a letter published in La Nouvelle Critique, but a theoretical response to Lebel met with delays, the political coloring of which was evident by the change in language used to describe his ideas. When Lebel’s articles were first rebutted, beginning with the first installment of Comolli’s “Technique et idéologie” in May 1971, the refutation was confrontational but still broadly respectful. The same issue, however, saw the Cahiers editors make a cryptic reference to “eclectic social-democrats” in an interview given in Politique-Hebdo, which was later acknowledged to be a coded reference to the PCF. Indeed the January-February issue had already seen a guarded riposte to Lebel and other PCF critics appear in the joint statement on Positif’s ostensible anti-Marxism issued by Cahiers, Tel Quel and Cinéthique. In September, a notice in Cahiers expressed outright exasperation at the “allusive quotation marks” in a Humanité-Dimanche article by Samuel Lachize praising Lebel and opposing those who “attack his book, from the ‘left’ (see Cahiers du cinéma) and from the right.”

By November, Bonitzer upped

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5 See “Cinéma, littérature, politique.”
6 “Lu dans la presse,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 231 (September 1971), p. 53. At this time, too, the internal “Journal de la rédaction” was far less guarded in its reproaches, with the editors writing “We are sick of being the hard tendency of a soft party” and daubing the exercise book with Chinese ideograms. See De Baecque, Histoire d’une revue vol. II, p. 245, 248.
the ante, labeling Lebel’s standpoint “anti-Marxist, idealist and reaction-ary,” summing up his position with the watchword used by the Maoist movement to describe the pro-Soviet communist parties: “revisionist.”

In light of the vitriolic disputes between the PCF and the Maoist groups at the time, which frequently broke out into acts of physical violence, the ramifications of Bonitzer’s vocabulary (repeated in a statement at the Porretta-Terme festival appearing in the same issue) were unmistakable. From this point on, no functional relationship with the PCF or anyone aligned with it would be possible. Later, Bonitzer framed the rupture in the following terms: “At a certain point it became clear that the PCF was using us for reasons of pure political opportunism, that Eisenstein, Artaud, Bataille, etc., did not interest them in the slightest. An old story, that of the failed relations between the artistico-theoretical avant-gardes and the communist party.”

Cahiers’ turn towards the Maoist variant of “Marxism-Leninism” was determined, if not explicitly programmed, by the political evolution of Tel Quel. In addition to the charisma of editor Philippe Sollers, the quarterly was undoubtedly the center of gravity for avant-garde literary theory in France in the 1960s. Kristeva, Barthes, Derrida, Todorov and Schefer all regularly published with the journal. After a period of collaboration with the PCF, by 1970 Tel Quel was chafing against the theoretical inertia of the party’s intellectuals: its vocal calls for a “revolution of language” and its defense of the avant-gardism of Lautréamont, Mallarmé and Joyce were undoubtedly a mismatch for a party that still retained heavy traces of its Stalinist heritage. Combined with this tension was Sollers’ personal sinophilia and fascination for Mao Zedong: in the Winter 1970 issue, he had already translated and published ten of Mao’s poems, while the Spring 1971 issue featured a lengthy treatise by Sollers on the Chinese leader’s key philosophical text On Contradiction, in which the Frenchman claimed that Mao’s thinking represented a “considerable and completely original ‘leap forward’ in dialectical materialist theory.”

Such polemical disputes, the caustic tone of which was often pushed to parodic extremes (a quality

8 A note in Cahiers, for instance, reported on a meeting organized by Tel Quel in the Saint-Michel bookshop on December 10, 1971, which was subject to “violent aggression” organized by the Union des Étudiants Communistes. See Jacques Henric, “Une déclaration de J. Henric,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 236-237 (March-April 1972), p. 98.
10 Philippe Sollers, “De la contradiction,” Tel Quel no. 45 (Spring 1971), pp. 3-23, here p. 3.
accentuated by the insouciant rapidity with which Tel Quel shifted its
targets), were a perennial feature of the literary journal, and in June 1971,
the contradictions between Tel Quel and the party burst out into the open:
under Sollers’ initiative, the “pro-Chinese” faction of the journal’s editorial
board launched the “Mouvement de juin 1971” in support of the Italian
communist journalist Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi’s encomium to the
cultural revolution, De la Chine. When the PCF prevented Macciocchi’s
book from being sold at its annual Fête de l’Humanité in September, Sollers
and his fellow editors launched a high-profile media campaign against the
act of “anti-democratic repression.” The resulting position paper of the
“Mouvement de Juin 71”—complete with the sloganistic peroration “Down
with dogmatism, empiricism, opportunism and revisionism! Long live the
ture avant-garde! Long live the thought of Mao Zedong!”—set the tone for
much of Tel Quel’s writing from mid-1971 until Mao’s death in 1976. Despite
the fact that the journal’s flirtation with Maoism lasted far longer than
that of most other French intellectual currents, its political interventions
appeared at least partly to be tongue-in-cheek—as evinced by “dazibaos”
daubed on the walls of the journal’s office declaring, “Two conceptions of
the world, two lines, two paths: Aragon or Mao Zedong? Comrades, you
must choose!” Indeed, the jargon-heavy pronunciamentos appearing in
Tel Quel at this time had a strange co-existence with avant-garde literary
experiments such as Sollers’ multi-installment stream-of-consciousness
text Paradis, and it is tempting—and not entirely unreasonable—to read
them today as an elaborate literary satire of the textual production of the
far left.

For Cahiers, continuing to work with both Tel Quel and La Nouvelle Critique
had become impossible with the Macciocchi affair, and the journal promptly
sided with Sollers’ quarterly, although de Baecque notes an initial reluctance
to do so on the part of Aumont and Comolli. Suspicions about Sollers’

11 Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, De la Chine, translated into French by Louis Bonalumi (Paris:
Seuil, 1971). Tel Quel’s Maoist turn resulted in the expulsion of PCF member Jean Thibauden
from Tel Quel’s editorial board. Pleyert had also been a firm advocate of a pro-PCF position but
fell in behind the new Maoist position and remained with Tel Quel.
12 See “Déclaration sur l’hégémonie idéologique bourgeoisie/révolutionnisme,” Tel Quel no. 47
13 “Mouvement de juin 1971,” “Le dogmatisme à la rescousse du révisionnisme,” Tel Quel no. 48-49
(Spring 1972), pp. 175-190, here p. 190.
15 De Baecque also recounts a lunch attended by Sollers, Comolli, Narboni and Bonitzer on
September 29, 1971, just before the Porretta-Terme festival, where the Tel Quel writer incited the
Cahiers editors to break with the PCF. See de Baecque, Histoire d’une revue vol. II, p. 244-247.
motives were nonetheless later aired by Bonitzer, while Aumont is now unafraid to label the Tel Quel editor an “ambitious Rastignac” and a “total opportunist.” Narboni, by contrast, rejects such characterizations and states “I have always admired in him that he was a good writer and above all an excellent critic. And I also found him likable,” while cautioning: “I was never in the Tel Quel orbit, I was never a disciple of the journal. But the relations I had with the journal were always cordial relations. […] There were influences from Tel Quel on our comportment. But there was never any subordination to them.” In any case, Cahiers’ adoption of Maoism was taken far more seriously than that of Tel Quel, and it eventually broke with the literary journal on this basis. Whereas the Maoist adventure of Cahiers left deep, traumatic scars on its participants, Tel Quel’s renunciation of its pro-PRC position was swift and peremptory, its Maoism easily forgotten. Shortly after Mao’s death, a brief notice in the Winter 1976 issue proclaimed: “if Tel Quel indeed tried, for a while, to inform public opinion on China, above all to oppose the systematic deformations of the PCF, such is not the case today.”

On a political level, Cahiers’ ties with Tel Quel were most apparent in the dispute with Positif in early 1971 and, later that year, the two communiqués connected with Cahiers’ presence at the Porretta-Terme festival (where, on October 2-10, Cahiers screened Othon, Luttes en Italie, The Ceremony, La vie est à nous, New Babylon and A Sixth of the World). The first, which served as the program’s introductory text, clarified the journal’s understanding of the cinema/politics duality in the light of Althusser’s theory of the “Ideological State Apparatus.” Following the philosopher, the Cahiers editors understand the cinema as a “link” in the ISAs, which represent both “a stake and a locus of the class struggle” and are capable of absorbing progressive themes without

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16 In 1981, Bonitzer remarked that, “It appears today that all the positions it took […] were parodic. With hindsight, indeed, it is striking.” He also claimed that Cinéthique was essentially a “cover” for Tel Quel and compared Sollers’ journal to a “super-massive black hole” in its ability to “rigidify and sterilize everything that did not gravitate in its field.” Pascal Bonitzer, “Tel Quel,” in “Dictionnaire sans foi ni loi,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 325 (June 1981), p. 120.

17 Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 11, 2014.

18 Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.

19 See “Critique des positions du ‘Mouvement de Juin 71,’” Cahiers du cinéma no. 245-246 (April-May-June 1973), pp. 68-87. Earlier, the “Journal de la rédaction” had documented reservations about being aligned too closely with Tel Quel, with the editors writing, “We don’t care if we are considered to be the puppets of Tel Quel—it’s up to us to prove that we are something different, and better.” Cited in De Baecque, Histoire d’une revue, vol. II, p. 245.

20 “À propos du ‘Maoïsme,’” Tel Quel no. 68 (Winter 1976), p. 104. In a further sign of its ideological volte-face, the journal’s following issue was titled “Éloge de l’Amérique.”
putting the dominance of bourgeois ideology into question.\textsuperscript{21} And yet formal disruption alone is an insufficient criterion for the “work of ideological subversion and deconstruction required by the historical moment in which we live.”\textsuperscript{22} Rather, in a line of thought that responds to some of the arguments left open in “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” the Cahiers editors seek to dialectize the form/content distinction by asserting that the ideological work of the film can find itself displaced onto its apparently formal machinery. Hence, “what finds itself determined as ‘formal,’” they argue, “is not the external envelope, or the ‘expression,’ of which the ideological (or political) ‘content’ would be what is ‘expressed,’ the intentional kernel. What is presented as ‘formal’ is thoroughly ideological, and thus has secondary political effects.”\textsuperscript{23} Cahiers cautions, however, that these political effects may not take hold immediately. The ideological struggle, as opposed to the political struggle, is “long-term work” requiring an approach to filmmaking—such as that to be found in the work of Godard, Straub and Oshima—that “interrogates within its own production, in its very texture, the ideological role of the chain of images/sounds, playing with them dialectically.”\textsuperscript{24}

The second text, signed by Comolli, Narboni and Bonitzer and read out at Porretta-Terre on October 9, 1971, conclusively signaled the journal’s alignment with the French Maoist movement. Here, the Cahiers editors sought to defend their participation in an “event placed under the sign of the dubious, un-worked out notion of ‘political cinema,’” thereby differentiating themselves from the “eclecticism” otherwise prevailing in these discussions.\textsuperscript{25} Positif, Cinéma 71 and Lebel were mercilessly attacked, while Cinéthique was critiqued for its dogmatism but, in a gesture of reconciliation, deemed to be capable of potential collaboration due to its own adherence to Marxism-Leninism. The political transformation of Cahiers was made clear in the text’s final paragraph, which spoke in faultless Maoist jargon of “the Marxist and Leninist principle, taken up and developed in practice and theory by the Chinese Communist Party (which has been applied to great effect in the Great Cultural Proletarian Revolution) of placing \textit{politics in the command post}.”\textsuperscript{26}

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\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 55 [p. 289].
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. [p. 289-290].
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 47.
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Maoism in Theory

The public statement read out at Porretta-Terme thus openly avowed *Cahiers*’ new politics, which governed the journal’s activity up to the summer of 1973, a period of nearly two years. Beyond the aforementioned influence of *Tel Quel* within the sphere of French literary culture, the attraction of Maoism was determined by two political phenomena. The first, of course, was the Cultural Revolution in China, which took place between 1966 and 1976. Widely viewed today as an unmitigated catastrophe, the GRCPC (as it came to be known on the pages of *Cahiers*) was in fact a complex phenomenon whose legacy remains open to dispute. At the behest of Mao, students and workers rose up to overthrow what the Chinese leader claimed was an ossified bureaucratic caste intent on the restoration of capitalism. The early stages of the cultural revolution, in particular, saw an outpouring of emancipatory energy and experimentation in social organization on a mass scale (such as the establishment of a workers’ commune in Shanghai). But the cultural revolution also gave rise to widespread social disorder and political repression. Educational and health standards took a backwards step during this period, and, while a concrete number is difficult to establish, the toll of those imprisoned, tortured and killed during the time of the cultural revolution probably numbers in the hundreds of thousands.\(^{27}\)

In valorizing the notion of revolutionary social upheaval, Maoism nonetheless represented an attractive alternative to the sclerosis of Soviet communism for the international left. In the case of France, the Maoist movement at its height collected several thousand activists—mostly young, highly educated and from bourgeois backgrounds—into a large number of often ephemeral groupuscules, which coalesced around two main tendencies. The first, represented chiefly by the Parti communiste français marxiste-léniniste (PCFM-L), was a split from the PCF and developed a more dogmatic, Stalinized variant of Maoism. The latter tendency, by contrast, grew out of the remnants of the Union des jeunesse communistes marxistes-léninistes, a circle of Parisian students grouped around Althusser which had dissolved in 1968, and gave rise to more youthful organizations such as the

27 The first account in the West of the human cost of the cultural revolution was Simon Leys, *Les Habits neufs du président: Chronique de la “révolution culturelle”* (Paris: Éditions Champ Libre, 1971). Translated as *The Chairman’s New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*, trans. Carol Appleyard and Patrick Goode (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977). The veracity of Leys’ account was vigorously denied by Western Maoists at the time. Ironically, the subsequent economic development of China under Deng Xiaoping and his successors has seemingly verified Mao’s stance that the party itself had been infiltrated by “capitalist roaders.”
Prolétaire ligne rouge, Badiou’s “theoreticist” Union des communistes de France marxistes-léninistes (UCFM-L) and two “Mao-Spontex” (spontaneist) groupings, the anarchist-leaning Vive la révolution! (which evaporated in 1971) and, most prominently, the Gauche prolétarienne (GP). When the GP was banned by the Gaullist state in May 1970, selling its newspaper *La Cause du peuple* became a badge of honor for left-leaning intellectuals such as Sartre, Lanzmann, Godard and Truffaut. The Mao-Spontex current reached a zenith of activity in the period between 1970 and 1972, but in spite of its high media profile and the efforts of militants to “implant” themselves in factories, French Maoism had virtually no presence among the country’s industrial working class.

*Cahiers*, however, was substantially alienated from both of these political contexts. As far as Mao’s China was concerned, the journal, like many other Maoist sympathizers in France, remained largely ignorant of the concrete political situation in the country, partly out of willful blindness. Comolli notes that he and his colleagues had a purely “textual knowledge” of the cultural revolution: fascinated by Mao’s writings (particularly *On Contradiction*), they relied on copies of *Pékino-Information* bought at the Maspero bookshop for information on China. Both Comolli and Narboni have pointed to the pertinence of Jean-Claude Milner’s recent work *L’Arrogance du présent* for its account of the “completely distant vision we had of China.”

Moreover, *Cahiers’* relationship with the existing Maoist groups in France was generally lukewarm, primarily because of their regressive views on the cinema. As Narboni stated, “The number of gauchiste groupuscules which

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tried to have a relationship with Cahiers was large, and it was incessant. It was we who did not want to [foster links] because we found that their position on the cinema was very far from our own.” It was only during the “Front culturel” period (late 1972-1973), that Cahiers nourished ties with political organizations—especially Badiou’s UCFM-L. Instead of orienting towards actually existing groups, the Maoist Cahiers invariably invoked the phantom of a mass revolutionary party, which was understood to exist only in absentia and which needed to be constructed by the extant Marxist-Leninist forces in opposition to the “revisionism” of the PCF.

Cahiers’ political and theoretical rupture with the PCF and its adoption of an “anti-revisionist” line was consecrated in the issue following the Porretta-Terme statement in a long text titled “Politique et lutte idéologique de classes.” This piece affirmed that the accusation of “revisionism” against Lebel’s take on film theory extended well beyond the individual in question and took aim at the cultural politics of the PCF as a whole, of which Cinéma et idéologie was merely “a symptom and a reflection” and which itself was an expression of the party’s political revisionism. Much of “Politique et lutte idéologique de classes” was devoted to a critique of the PCF’s political line—judged to be founded on an “economistic” outlook (prioritizing campaigns for higher wages to the exclusion of other political/ideological struggles)—but the journal was also willing to issue a bracing autocritique of its prior perspectives. Due to an “overestimation of theoretical practice” flowing from the “dominance of Althusser’s positions,” Cahiers had, in this account, been led to “think that the progressive elements of the Party could win out in an internal struggle—despite our fundamental disagreement with the Party’s cultural positions (eclectic, liberal, reactionary) and despite our reservations (which never appeared in the magazine) concerning aspects of its political line.” Cahiers’ earlier, Althusser-influenced attitude was that the PCF was reformable, that its cultural line was “relatively autonomous” from its political perspectives, and that it was riven by internal struggles between “a faction favorable to the avant-garde and concerned about dialectical materialism, and a conservative, eclectic and reactionary wing.” Such a position was henceforth deemed to be a form of “political opportunism”

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32 Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014. He elaborated on this comment by saying: “The leftists were cinematically backwards. Either they had a myopic vision which said: ‘No, why are you speaking about Straub and Godard? We have to film the struggles.’ […] Or they were politically active during the day, and in the evening they went to see a Sergio Leone film.”

33 It was at this time, too, that Cahiers followed the French Maoist practice of writing the party’s abbreviation with quotation marks around the “C” (i.e. “P.C.’F.”) in order to convey the ostensible falsity of the PCF’s claim to being communist.
whose effect had been to produce a series of tactical silences and accommodations during Cahiers’ rapprochement with the PCF.\footnote{The quotes from this paragraph are from La Rédaction, “Politique et lutte idéologique des classes, Intervention 1,” pp. 6–7 [pp. 334–335]. Cahiers also noted its adherence to the party’s theses in the article on \textit{La vie est à nous} and confessed to the “prudent” absence of any mention of the PCF’s negative reception of \textit{Tristana} in the press dossier on Buñuel’s film published in issue no. 223 (August 1970, pp. 24–27), despite the divergence in views on the film.}

This statement was published alongside a correspondence with the editors of \textit{La Nouvelle Critique}, the tone of which was proof of the new state of political antagonism between the journals. In the area of film theory, however, a state of continuity with the work carried out while Cahiers was in the orbit of the PCF prevailed in the initial moments of its Maoist turn (late 1971–late 1972), and the journal persisted in making advances in this sphere. Installments of Comolli’s “Technique et idéologie” appeared up to the September-October 1972 issue, while Bonitzer’s series of theoretical texts beginning with “Réalité de la dénotation” also continued unabated. Kané dedicated an article to a “re-reading” of the classical Hollywood film \textit{Sylvia Scarlett}, while Baudry worked on \textit{Intolerance} and published the article “Figuratif, matériel, excrémentiel.” Daney and Oudart critiqued Visconti’s \textit{La morte in Venezia}, and collective texts on the work of the Groupe Dziga Vertov and the television show \textit{À armes égales} also appeared. All these texts had important repercussions for the field of film studies, and they are discussed more deeply elsewhere in this book. Even the work of figures such as Christian Metz and Jean Louis Schefer, remote from day-to-day political concerns, was published by Cahiers during this time. In none of these texts was Maoist aesthetic theory—as can be found in Mao’s Yenan lectures on art\footnote{See Mao Zedong, \textit{Talks at the Yenan Forum on Art and Literature} (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1956).}—of particular influence, apart from the occasional use of sloganistic formulae. Theorists such as Althusser (despite his ongoing membership in the “revisionist” PCF), Lacan and Barthes continued to be the journal’s presiding \textit{maîtres à penser}. For a time, then, theoretically dense writings co-existed with tracts denouncing the PCF and reprints of Chinese articles on the cinema of the cultural revolution.\footnote{See, in particular, “Le ballet chinois suit un brillant développement,” \textit{Cahiers du cinéma} no. 236–237 (March–April 1972), pp. 76–81, reprinted from \textit{Littérature chinoise} no. 1 (1971). Virtually the only PRC film known and appreciated by Cahiers at this time was \textit{The Red Detachment of Women} (Pan Wenzhan/Fu Jie, 1971), which had been praised by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing and graced the cover of issue no. 236-237, but the editors were reticent about issuing their own analysis of this film.} Prior to late 1972, politics may have been “in the command post” of the journal’s work, but this was not to the exclusion of film theory.
Changes in Format, Changes in Personnel

The sweeping turn from a pro-PCF to a Maoist political line ushered in a period of pronounced change for *Cahiers*. Most visibly, for the September-October 1972 issue, the journal altered its format for the first time since the abandonment of the “*Cahiers jaunes*” in 1964, adopting a far more austere layout in keeping with the far-left publications with which *Cahiers* was now in dialogue. An editorial noted that this transformation had been desired for several months, in order to “allow us to definitively abandon the ‘magazine’ format imposed by our ex-publisher,” and represented “a non-negligible diminution in the cost of producing *Cahiers*.”37 As has often been remarked, the new format was notable for its rarefied use of images, often considered a mark of the Maoist *Cahiers*’ intolerant disdain for the cinema as a whole. Even Comolli has admitted that this policy reflected the journal’s “new iconoclasm.”38 But the “banishment” of photographs and film stills from the pages of *Cahiers* as an official edict during its Marxist-Leninist period should not be exaggerated. In fact, only two non-consecutive issues (nos. 242-243 and 247) were entirely bereft of images, which when they did appear were utilized for functional/analytic rather than merely decorative purposes. Moreover, doing without images in a film journal is by no means automatically a reflection of hidebound political sectarianism, and the policy of a text-only film journal was notably resurrected by Daney—albeit for very different reasons—when he founded *Trafic* in 1991.

In addition to the new format, *Cahiers* moved its offices from the Rue Coquillière to a smaller site on the Rue des Petits-Champs (also in the 1st arrondissement), and its editorial composition was substantially modified. The journal had long been run on *de facto* collective lines, and changes made in time for the November-December 1972-January 1973 issue reflected this state of affairs: Comolli/Narboni’s position as editors-in-chief was done away with, and the virtually defunct *comité de rédaction* (comprising Doniol-Valcroze, Kast and Rivette) was abolished, replaced by a collective body including all the active contributors to the journal, with Aumont retaining his administrative duties. More crucial than these logistical transformations, the adoption of a Maoist outlook in 1971-1972 saw a number of changes in personnel at *Cahiers*, as Pierre and Eisenschitz left the journal, while two activists with Maoist backgrounds, Serge Toubiana and Philippe Pakradouni, joined as editors.

38 Comolli, *Cinéma contre spectacle*, p. 7 [p. 49].
Pierre’s departure in late 1971 was provoked above all by personal reasons: her marriage to Aumont had broken down, and the suicide of her friend Anne Thoraval had also had a traumatic effect on the critic. But she was also exasperated with the hothouse atmosphere of the post-1968 far left in France, which Pierre has described as “an enormous machine for excommunicating each other in the name of what was supposedly the purest left-wing ideology,” and felt that her Cahiers colleagues “were losing contact with reality, including with the cinema itself.” Pierre’s “search for the real” led her to Brazil, where she lived until 1976, and it was from here that she sealed her break from the journal, penning what she now describes as “the notorious letter” to Cahiers on March 8, 1972 protesting against the journal’s Maoist line, which led to her removal from the conseil de rédaction. Here, she wrote:

I read with consternation and I formally disapprove in principle of the text “Intervention 1” published last January. It is not for us to give lessons in Marxist-Leninist theory to the universe. [...] We should not abstain from taking sides, but rather, choose an option that above all orients our own practice, that is, the critique and analysis of film. Two things shocked me about this article. 1) One can feel how much you were driven, on the one hand, by your former missteps (the demand of love from the Party, from La Nouvelle Critique, etc. which had no real chance of being satisfied); and, on the other hand, by the pressure and initiatives of other journals. I mean, of course, Cinéthique and Tel Quel... 2) The “Chinese wall-poster” style you have suddenly adopted is completely grotesque. Who do you think you are? Totally disengaged from all practical politics, should you really adopt such a tone?

Between Pierre’s departure and the arrival of Thérèse Giraud in May 1974, Cahiers was once again a purely masculine affair, and the absence of Pierre’s tempering, common-sense disposition perhaps goes some way to explaining the immoderate nature of the journal’s Maoist years. She nonetheless remained friendly with her former colleagues upon returning to France in 1976 and wrote scattered articles for the journal in the late 1970s and 1980s before assisting Daney in the founding of Trafic in the early 1990s.

39 Thoraval was a filmmaker who before her death had completed the 16mm short film Un troisième, in which Aumont and Pierre acted alongside Michael Lonsdale and Patrice Leconte.
41 Cited in de Baecque, Histoire d’une revue vol II, p. 252. Pierre has disclosed that the letter was motivated by the brusque response she received from the Cahiers editors when she offered to write on the Brazilian film Os Inconfidentes. Interview with Sylvie Pierre, May 26, 2014.
Eisenschitz’s departure was more rancorous: having joined the PCF in 1970 (after Fieschi, the only one of the journal’s editors to do so) and remaining dubious about the merits of the cultural revolution, his position had become more and more tenuous once Cahiers had embarked on its Maoist turn. While his last article for the journal, an interview with the Taviani brothers, dates to March-April 1971, Eisenschitz remained on the conseil de rédaction until the beginning of 1972, when he and Eduardo de Gregorio (a communist critic from Argentina who had briefly written for Cahiers) were purged from the journal following a “show trial” on January 3. Alongside the putsch against Rohmer, this is one of the more contentious episodes in the history of Cahiers. The journal’s own public account of the ejection was limited to a succinct footnote: “After the majority of the Cahiers editorial board took up its anti-revisionist position, the only Communist Party member of the board, Bernard Eisenschitz, resigned from the magazine.” Eisenschitz himself is reticent about the event but is firm that he and de Gregorio were compelled to resign from Cahiers rather than leave of their own volition. Drawing on archival resources (the “Journal de la rédaction,” notably), de Baecque is more expansive about what he dubbed a “shameful moment” in the history of the journal, writing that Narboni had caught Eisenschitz leaving with a text written by Cahiers intended for publication in Le Monde, and, suspecting he was taking it to the PCF, inquired: “Who are you working for?” For his part, Narboni, while regretting the resulting hiatus in his friendship with Eisenschitz, rejects the notion that the January 3 meeting was a “trial” and contends that it merely sought to clarify whether Eisenschitz wanted to stay in the party or continue working for Cahiers, the two having become mutually incompatible. A page from the meeting’s minutes for the “Journal de la rédaction” reproduced by de Baecque nonetheless documents the paranoid and acrimonious tone of the proceedings: Narboni accuses

42 Eisenschitz has said, “For me, it was not the revelations of Simon Leys that convinced me on China (I did have a certain curiosity, all the same). It was the completely pro-Chinese book by Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, because the ‘pro-’ argumentation could only reveal the horror of the situation.” Interview with Bernard Eisenschitz, April 1, 2014.
44 La Rédaction, “Politique et lutte idéologique des classes, Intervention 1,” p. 5 [p. 340].
45 Interview with Bernard Eisenschitz, April 7, 2014.
47 Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.
Eisenschitz of “denigrating us in all of Paris,” while Bonitzer argues that “this practice (the theft of the article) is hardly that of someone who is in the journal.” The minute-taker even felt the need to note, at one point, that “the tone becomes heated.”\textsuperscript{48} In any case, as a result of these proceedings, Eisenschitz’s departure from the journal was definitive, and from this point on he would devote his critical energies to \textit{La Nouvelle Critique} and other publications.

The gap left by Pierre and Eisenschitz was soon filled by Serge Toubiana and Philippe Pakradouni, two militant students who came into contact through \textit{Cahiers} thanks to the journal’s activities teaching film on university campuses. Toubiana, born into a family of communist Sephardic Jews in Tunisia on August 15, 1949, had arrived in Paris from Grenoble in the summer of 1971, wishing to study cinema at Paris-III’s Censier-Daubenton campus. In his hometown, he had been a member of the PCF in the years 1966-1968 while also helping to run the city’s ciné-club.\textsuperscript{49} Following disagreements on Prague and May ’68, he was excluded from the party and became active with the Maoist group \textit{Vive la révolution!}. Ironically, his move to the capital was inspired by a wish to leave behind the world of political activism. In Toubiana’s words, “I went to Paris in 1971 to break with this militant blindness. The only exit, the only possible horizon in my eyes, was the cinema.”\textsuperscript{50} His contacts with Daney, Kané and Bonitzer at Censier led to Toubiana’s integration in the journal, which initially took the form of his participation in the “Groupe Lou Sin d’intervention idéologique,” a group consisting of Cahiers editors and students at Paris-III which, in addition to serving as a \textit{nom de plume} for several texts published in \textit{Cahiers}, also agitated against the university’s department chair, who had initially refused to extend the contract of the \textit{Cahiers} editors teaching in the cinema program. After participating in his first editorial meeting on September 29, 1972, Toubiana’s background as a Maoist activist enabled him to quickly become a central figure in the journal. Indeed, this marked the beginning of a 30-year association with \textit{Cahiers}, a large portion of which was spent as editor-in-chief.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} See De Baecque, \textit{Histoire d’une revue} vol. II, plate XXIII.

\textsuperscript{49} Interview with Serge Toubiana, April 29, 2014. See also Serge Toubiana, \textit{Les Fantômes du souvenir} (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2016), pp. 29-49. Toubiana recalls that, while at the lycée (where, incidentally, Jean-Louis Leutrat was one of his teachers), his taste in cinema was closer to \textit{Positif} than it was to \textit{Cahiers}.


\textsuperscript{51} Toubiana was initially co-editor-in-chief with Daney from 1974 to 1981, then held the position alone until 1992. From 1992 to 2000, he was the head of \textit{Cahiers’} publishing arm, leaving when
Unlike his colleagues, however, Toubiana never felt himself to be a natural writer. Ill at ease with film theory, he preferred to attend to the journal's administrative tasks, and this experience proved valuable for his later stint as director of the Cinémathèque française in the years 2003-2015.\textsuperscript{52}

In contrast with Toubiana's enduring tenure at Cahiers, Philippe Pakradouni's involvement with the journal was brief: a rapid rise in the journal's ranks in 1972 was soon followed by his marginalization before the year 1973 was out. Pakradouni was in fact the pseudonym adopted by Philippe Zarifian (born 1947), the younger brother of Cahiers fellow traveler Christian Zarifian. He attended Narboni's courses at Vincennes before being introduced by the Cahiers critic to the journal. Like Toubiana, Pakradouni brought with him experience as a Maoist activist—otherwise sorely lacking among the journal's editors—and his confidence with the language and organizational methods of the Marxist-Leninist tradition ensured his ascendency within an editorial team that had been battered by several years of political vacillations and internal disputes. While Pakradouni was a key figure in the “Front culturel révolutionnaire” project that dominated Cahiers in the months leading up to August 1973 and was involved in the drafting of lengthy but often supercilious political platforms such as “Quelles sont nos tâches sur le front culturel?,” his near-total lack of cinematic culture was also crushingly evident: in his time at the journal, he did not publish a single line that directly concerned the critical response to a film. Retrospective blame for the dogmatic excesses of the Maoist period is often solely laid at Pakradouni’s feet by his former colleagues. In this sense, he serves as a convenient proxy for the other critics’ denial of their own perceived misdeeds—a spectral status that is illustrated in the film À voir (absolument) si possible when Bonitzer refers to him as “Philippe Pakradouni, to not say his name.” Aumont, who refers to Pakradouni as a “Stalinist dictator,” has even gone on record as claiming that he was “an undercover agent from the CGT [who] arrived at Cahiers and almost killed it,” adding: “we were truly manipulated.”\textsuperscript{53} After the journal was bought out by Le Monde. He now states that he regrets having stayed on so long at the journal, preventing a younger generation of critics from truly establishing themselves in the journal. See Interview with Serge Toubiana, April 29, 2014.\textsuperscript{52} Toubiana was thus the only figure associated with Cahiers during its Marxist period who later became a “functionary” within the film industry.\textsuperscript{53} Aumont, “Le gai savoir,” p. 37. Asked about this claim, Aumont stands by it, although he admits he has no proof to back this accusation. His main piece of evidence is that Zarifian later re-surfaced as a CGT functionary, a move that was virtually impossible for a former Maoist. Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 11, 2014. The hypothesis is nonetheless dismissed by Comolli, Narboni and Eisenschitz.
leaving *Cahiers*, Pakradouni had no further contact with the journal or its editors, and, dropping his pseudonym, later became a sociologist specializing in labor issues at the Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée, his past at *Cahiers* expunged from his personal biography.\(^\text{54}\)

**The Front Culturel Révolutionnaire**

Despite this infusion of new blood into the editorial team, *Cahiers* was experiencing, in late 1972, another moment of crisis. At this stage it was still capable of producing theoretical texts of high quality, even if they were increasingly weighed down by the political *langue de bois* of the Maoist movement.\(^\text{55}\) But the journal was perennially beset with financial issues, and the threat of total collapse loomed. Its issues became more and more sporadic: six numbers were published in 1972, four in 1973, and five in 1974, and the idea of officially reverting to a bimonthly or quarterly publication frequency began to be discussed.\(^\text{56}\) *Cahiers* was also widely considered illegible by those uninitiated in the finer points of its *gauchiste* discourse and was precipitously losing its readership. A low point was reached with its February 1973 issue, which sold only 3403 copies (compared to 11,561 in April 1971), 2069 of which were overseas subscriptions, including a large number of North American universities.\(^\text{57}\) As Daney later disclosed: “If we had not been *Cahiers* but, let’s say, *Cinéthique*, a journal without an aura, without a past, without international subscriptions, I believe we would have gone under. Without even realizing it. We were saved by the title and by the people who were still attached to this title.”\(^\text{58}\) Going by remarks in the “Journal de la rédaction,” the mood within the offices became increasingly gloomy. A September 29, 1972 entry plaintively asked: “*Cahiers* is not going well. Why? Tired? Not only. Personal problems? Not only. What, then?”

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54 See philippe.zarifian.pagesperso-orange.fr (accessed January 1, 2021). Of the former editors contacted for this research project, Pakradouni/Zarifian was the only one who did not respond to enquiries.
55 As early as July 1971, however, the “Journal de la rédaction” lamented that “Oudart is currently the only one of us capable of producing applied theoretical texts, quickly, and without perturbing the rest of his work for the journal.” Cited in de Baecque, *Histoire d’une revue* vol. II, p. 230.
56 See Comolli, “Yes, we were utopians (Part 1).”
57 This information is provided by de Baecque in *Histoire d’une revue* vol. II, p. 225.
Narboni, who along with Bonitzer was the driving force behind the Maoist turn, attempted an answer: “Non-functioning due to the egoism of each of us, due to the lack of work. Why aren’t we working? [...] We no longer know what a journal called Cahiers du cinéma ought to do.”

It was in this void that the idea for a “Front culturel révolutionnaire” (nicknamed “Front Q” in the “Journal de la rédaction”) first aired by Pakradouni, took hold of Cahiers. The use of the term “cultural front” had a double meaning: it was both the sphere of social activity in which the journal was to intervene and the organizational form such an intervention was planned to take. Cahiers had already made an attempt at reaching out to broader political/cultural forces when it held a stage (workshop) entitled “Cinéma et luttes de classe” at the Avignon festival in July 20-27, 1972, which attracted around 60 participants and was considered by the journal to be “an important phase in the transformation of our practice of diffusion and of our conception of the ideological struggle on the cultural front.” Public debates at Avignon centered on the French militant film Soyons tout, the Chinese pedagogic film En renvoyant le dieu de la peste and the Groupe Dziga Vertov’s Vent d’Est. The journal’s compte-rendu of the event provided it with an opportunity to give a critical overview of its prior public interventions, stretching back to the “Montage” debate in Aix-en-provence in February 1969. For the Cahiers of late 1972, the period in which a “Marxist-Leninist” orientation was reclaimed can be divided into three phases. The first, “bourgeois-progressist” phase (1969) was dominated by an Althusser-influenced structuralism, which actually left the journal’s critical practice relatively unchanged: the same directors were defended as in Cahiers’ “idealist era,” and the “bourgeoisie-proletariat antagonism” was remote from the journal’s concerns. The second phase (1970-1971), promoting “materialist cinema,” saw the accent placed on the formal work of avant-garde

59 Cited in de Baecque, Histoire d’une revue vol. II, p. 257. Narboni himself, however, states: “I don’t know if things were sadder than usual. The links between us were still friendly.” Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.


61 Debates on the first two films were published in the following issue, along with an interview with Serge Le Péron, a Maoist militant and member of the Vincennes-based collective responsible for Soyons tout, who would later become a regular critic for Cahiers. The Vent d’Est discussion, potentially the most interesting of the three, was never published due to an error with the tape recording. See “Cinéma et luttes de classes, Intervention à Avignon, 2,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 242-243 (November-December 1972-January 1973), pp. 70-94. The Avignon workshop was attended by Jump Cut editors Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage, who were curious about but skeptical of the Maoist line promulgated by Cahiers. See Chuck Kleinhans, private communication, March 22, 2016.
filmmakers (Straub, Oshima, the Tavianis) and re-readings of Hollywood cinema but was judged to be erroneous for its understanding of “the ideological struggle in non-pertinent terms of opposition” (such as latent/manifest, visible/non-visible, full/empty) and its misplaced confidence that bourgeois ideology would crumble like a vampire once exposed to the light of critical theory. The third phase (1972), dominated by “anti-revisionism,” was viewed more favorably for recognizing that “politics also commands all cultural production and work.” Still, even this phase was said to have suffered from an “eclecticism” in the selection of films to be screened at Avignon and an empirical, untheorized approach to the debates surrounding these films.\(^{62}\)

Although they recognized that Avignon was used as a tool by the PCF to co-opt its “contestatory ‘outside,’” Cahiers viewed the proposal from festival head Jacques Robert to organize an eight-day workshop within the festival, with paid attendance, as a valuable opportunity to “work more seriously and systematically […] and above all to have a closer and more militant contact with the participants.”\(^{63}\) Gathering a collection of students, Marxist-Leninist activists and a handful of PCF members, the concrete results of the workshop were fragmentary, but the overall experience was deemed a positive one and paved the way for the planned establishment of the “Front culturel révolutionnaire” at the following Avignon festival, in 1973. The platform paper “Quelles sont nos tâches sur le front culturel?” was drawn up by Narboni and Pakradouni on November 22, 1972 and published in issue no. 242-243. A bracing critique of Cahiers’ critical practice up to that point, the platform argued for “a radical transformation of our conception of the relationship between theory and practice,” which would consist of “placing the journal in the service of all those comrades who intervene, in a direct relationship with the masses, on the cultural front.” Cultivating “the art of film criticism” had to be “definitively liquidat[ed],” and work such as the re-readings of Sylvia Scarlett and Intolerance was to be ceased immediately.\(^{64}\) Instead, the journal was to be transformed into an “instrument of the class struggle in the cultural domain” and would operate in the service of the Marxist-Leninist movement.

\(^{62}\) “Intervention à Avignon, 1” pp. 9-11.
\(^{63}\) Ibid., p. 12.
\(^{64}\) “Quelles sont nos tâches sur le front culturel?,” pp. 6, 12. A footnote savaged the articles appearing in the previous issue: part 6 of “Technique et idéologie” was judged “a purely theoretical reflection” that had lost its “force of intervention,” Kané’s review of two Italian films was attacked for remaining within “the framework of ‘film criticism,’” and Baudry’s analysis of Intolerance was derided for being “academic,” “structuralo-Freudian” and “not susceptible to any productive effect today.” Needless to say, these strictures do an injustice to the texts in question.
The sweeping demolition of Cahiers’ past activity was undertaken with a rare violence, and yet—officially at least—the entire editorial board swung behind the Front culturel project. Five working groups were set up to build ties with “relay-elements” (that is, militants active in the cultural sphere), while the editorial team followed the Leninist precepts of conceiving of itself as a “collective organizer.”\(^{65}\) The issues leading up to the 1973 Avignon festival were filled with position papers and reports on this work, to the near total exclusion of any discussion of cinema. These efforts were not entirely worthless, with the journal entering into discussions with Maoist groups such as the UCFM-L and the Prolétaire Ligne Rouge,\(^{66}\) as well as activists such as Serge Le Péron and Alain Bergala, both of whom would later become critics for Cahiers.\(^{67}\) Discussions were even held with Cinéthique on a prospective merger of the two publications, and Cahiers joined its erstwhile rival in denouncing the Tel Quel-aligned Mouvement de Juin 71, thereby breaking the influence that Sollers and his colleagues exerted over both film journals.\(^{68}\) Behind the scenes, however, the Cahiers editors were divided by the Front culturel even before its “founding congress” took place: Pakradouni, Narboni, Toubiana and Bonitzer were the main driving force behind the project, but even here the latter two editors harbored private reservations.\(^{69}\) Aumont, Kané, Oudart and Daney assented to the initiative but mainly played a

\(^{65}\) This is a reference to the Lenin quote that “A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organizer.” V.I. Lenin, “Where to begin?,” in The Collected Works of V.I. Lenin vol. V (Moscow: Progress, 1961), pp. 13-24, here p. 22.

\(^{66}\) According to the Cahiers editors, the contact with the UCFM-L was the most theoretically fruitful, but the only texts that evinced this collaboration was a later article by member Bernard Sichère, “La bête et le militant,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 251-252 (July-August 1974), pp. 19-30. The PLR was responsible for the manifesto “Vive le cinéma, arme de propagande communiste,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 245-246 (April-May-June 1973), pp. 31-42. This text ended with the bombastic peroration, “Down with bourgeois cinema! Down with the myth of counter-information! Long live the cinema, arm of political education! Long live the cinema, arm of communist propaganda!” (p. 42) and spoke of “China and Albania, red bases of world revolution” (p. 32). The empty sloganeering of this manifesto is often treated by historians as the nadir of Cahiers’ Marxist-Leninist turn, but it should be noted that in the editors’ introductory remarks, the text was already criticized on this basis. See Ibid., p. 31.

\(^{67}\) Bergala’s first article for Cahiers was written under the pseudonym “Alain Belbo.” See Alain Belbo, “Problèmes d’une stratégie de l’animation,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 245-246 (April-May-June 1973), pp. 15-18. He did not resume writing for the journal until 1976, from that point on under his real name.


\(^{69}\) Bonitzer now maintains that “Simply put, I didn’t believe in it. I didn’t believe that Cahiers could have any kind of political action or influence. I think I wanted to believe, like many others at the time, but deep down I absolutely didn’t believe in it.” Interview with Pascal Bonitzer, April 30, 2014.
secondary role in its implementation and were not at ease in the world of political activism. Baudry and Comolli were more alienated from Cahiers during the “Front culturel” period and were politically closer to the earlier perspective of reforming the PCF from within. Baudry formally resigned in February 1973, arguing for a critique of “the revisionism of the Party” rather than “the revisionist Party” and concerned at the journal’s apparent abandonment of theoretical work. Comolli’s position was more ambiguous: consumed with preparatory work on his film La Cecilia from 1971 onwards, he had become a somewhat aloof figure in the journal by this time. While today Comolli assumes unmitigated responsibility for Cahiers’ Maoist period, he never attacked “revisionism” with the vigor that his fellow editors did, and his colleagues are today convinced that he remained attached to the earlier political line of reforming the PCF.

Preceded by nine months of frenetic cultural animation by the Cahiers editors, the five-day stage at the 1973 Avignon festival was intended to inaugurate the Front culturel révolutionnaire as an ongoing organizational body coalescing the totality of Marxist-Leninist aligned cultural militants in France. Despite drawing 150 attendees (a creditable number), the Avignon conference was nonetheless perceived as a failure by the majority of the Cahiers team. Even the official, necessarily upbeat report on the event admitted that its meetings were “too frequent, too long and poorly prepared” and gave rise to “authoritarian and bureaucratic tendencies.” Indeed, apart from productive discussions on the culture of national minorities and immigrant workers, the conference descended into internecine sectarian disputes between the different Maoist tendencies represented, and even the Cahiers editors found themselves subject to barbed insults. In hindsight, Narboni, who still argues that the concept of a cultural front was an “idea that was not absurd per se,” admits that its realization was “beyond our means” and that its failure was primarily determined by the fact that “it took place at a moment that was the end of gauchisme.” Indeed, by 1973, the Maoist movement, and the far left more generally, had reached a point

71 Aumont, Pierre and Bonitzer all insist that Comolli was never involved in the journal’s Maoist turn and remained broadly aligned with the PCF. While he remained officially on the editorial board, his participation in meetings became more sporadic in 1972 and 1973, and outside of the “Technique et idéologie” series, he rarely wrote for the journal during this period.
72 “Pour un front culturel révolutionnaire (Avignon 73),” Cahiers du cinéma no. 248 (c. late 1973), pp. 5-12, here p. 10.
73 Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.
of decline. Five years of feverish activity after May '68 had taken a steep personal toll on the movement’s activists, one that was exacerbated by the harsh repression of militants by the Gaullist state. The promulgation of the “anti-casseurs law” in April 1970 led to the imprisonment of more than 1000 left-wing activists for “crimes” such as selling newspapers or attending demonstrations.\textsuperscript{74} In the early 1970s, the political impetus in France reverted to the conservative right, while the reality of the Chinese cultural revolution became more and more apparent. When the Maoist activist Pierre Overney was killed in March 1972, the resulting obsequies brought 200,000 people onto the streets in one of the period’s largest assemblies of the French far left, but the funereal atmosphere of the march was palpable, and Althusser would later claim that it was \textit{gauchisme} itself that was being buried that day.\textsuperscript{75} If this symbolic end point of the wave of left-wing militancy could be momentarily disregarded by the \textit{Cahiers} editors, the concrete experience of Avignon directly confronted them with the exhaustion of the far left and the breakdown of their own project. Comolli relates the aftermath of Avignon in the following terms: “We emerged from the failure of the Revolutionary Cultural Front bruised and bloodied. Afterwards, we met in a bar one evening, we looked at each other, and without needing to say much at all, we all profoundly understood that our will to continue this project had been broken.”\textsuperscript{76} Feeling “morally and politically responsible for the situation,” Comolli and Narboni resigned from the journal, which after Avignon was on the verge of collapse.

\section*{Film Criticism During the Front Culturel}

The period of the Front culturel is often presented as one in which reflection on the cinema was almost entirely abandoned in favor of political agitation within an amorphously defined cultural sphere. Certainly, the task of film criticism during this time was explicitly subordinated to political exigencies, and the issues of \textit{Cahiers} published in late 1972-1973 reveal a journal that appeared to be barely concerned with the cinema. The “Journal de la rédaction” had, as early as February 1971, noted “We don't go to the cinema anymore, which is radically true,”\textsuperscript{77} and Reynaud declares with

\textsuperscript{74} See Reynaud, “Introduction,” p. 6.
\textsuperscript{76} Comolli, “Yes, we were utopians (Part 1).”
\textsuperscript{77} Quoted in De Baecque, \textit{Histoire d’une revue vol II}, p. 228.
some justification that the activity of Cahiers, at this point, “can be read as two parallel lines: what it did, and what it missed. And the part of the ‘reality’ it missed was enormous. It stopped paying attention to the films released in the cinemas.”78 But the wholesale nature of this renunciation of film criticism can be exaggerated; in fact, even if they formed a small part of the journal’s activity, critical texts continued to be written and published throughout this time. In some key ways, however, the critical method adopted in the three issues in which the Front culturel policy prevailed (nos. 244-247) departed markedly from the approach that was dominant both before and after this period. If one of my chief hypotheses is the existence of a Cahiers “line” that runs from the journal’s origins under Bazin, right through its Marxist period and up to the departure of Daney in 1981, then the critical texts of its dogmatic Maoist moment fundamentally represent an aberration in the history of the journal. Most palpably, films were now to be judged along strictly instrumentalist political lines—that is, their ability to mobilize the proletariat in its revolutionary struggle against the twin enemies of bourgeois reaction and PCF revisionism. Furthermore, in a volte-face from the journal’s prior practice of emphasizing a film’s form (its écriture) when evaluating it, cinematic works were now to be assessed primarily on the basis of their content. Concomitantly, the journal’s legendary illegibility was subject to an autocritique: “Quelles sont nos tâches sur le front culturel?” explicitly decried a “fatalistic’ conception of the journal’s relationship with its addressees,” asking “What is the benefit, for example, of a correct critique of a television program, if 99.99% of workers who see it are not reached by this critique?”79 A later article would similarly rail against the adoption of “an ornate style which, under the pretext of signifying drift or the care for ‘writing,’ generally only served to blur the comprehension of texts.”80 Cahiers hence endeavored to write in a more straightforward, accessible fashion—although these efforts were hampered by the Maoist langue de bois which now dominated the journal and which was just as alienating for outsiders as its earlier “theoreticist” style had been. Hand in hand with this stance was the abandonment of the theoretical influences that had impregnated Cahiers since the late 1960s. A balance sheet from a working group set up on this question determined

79 “Quelles sont nos tâches sur le front culturel?,” p. 10. The text in question was evidently the Groupe Lou Sin’s analysis of À armes égales, which is further discussed in Chapter 26.
that its earlier interest in the contemporary theory of Lacan, Althusser and Barthes reflected a “complaisant, egocentric attitude” of “cultivating theory for the sake of theory.” Apart from a politically narrow utilization of Althusser’s notion of the Ideological State Apparatus, these thinkers were essentially abandoned as reference points during this period. The film criticism written under the Front culturel policy was thus, on several levels, atypical of the Cahiers writers, and few of the resulting reviews have stood the test of time.

Discussions of the Front culturel have generally avoided addressing the reviews written by Cahiers during this period, but they nonetheless warrant analysis—even if only as testimonies to the political pressures the journal had subjected itself to and the surprising critical evaluations that resulted. The first two reviews under the new perspective were also notable for deriving from discussions with radical students from the cinema department at the Université de Paris-III (where several Cahiers editors lectured), thus attesting to a politicized, collectivist approach to film criticism as well as an intersection between the worlds of cinephilia and academia that would only grow more preponderant in the years to come.

Aumont censured Bernard Paul’s depiction of trade union struggle in Beau Masque for conveying the revisionist line of the PCF in the lead-up to the March 1973 legislative elections (where the union de la gauche, an alliance with the Parti socialiste, had a genuine prospect of attaining a parliamentary majority) and saw the film as an “antidote” for communist militants to the recent gauchiste films on the same topic (Coup pour coup and Tout va bien). Daney and Oudart, meanwhile, penned a review of Loach’s Family Life, which viewed the film from an Althusserian standpoint as the articulation of two ISAs (the family and the psychiatric institution) that was nonetheless bereft of any understanding of their “global function” and treating them from the “petty-bourgeois” viewpoint of the struggle between the individual and society rather than the struggle between classes.

The concept of the ISA was also the theoretical framework for Daney’s review in issue no. 245-246 of Nel nome del padre and Sbatti il mostro in prima pagina (both by Marco Bellochio), which were judged to support the

81 Ibid.
82 Kané even admits that he essentially “parroted” the “stereotyped phraseology” of Marxist-Leninist discourse in his writings during this time. Interview with Pascal Kané, March 12, 2014.
PCI thesis that “the gauchistes are the objective harbingers of fascism.”

For Daney, the “radicality of Bellochio’s ‘despair’” is further denoted by the absence of a “positive hero” in the film: this concept, drawn directly from Mao’s theories on art, had already been developed in an article written by Daney in the previous issue, based on one of the “working groups” that Cahiers had set up. Rejecting Cahiers’ earlier advocacy of critically deconstructing “the very idea of representation,” Daney argued that the presence of a “positive hero” condensing the contradiction between the avant-garde and the masses represented the “line of demarcation between the bourgeois cinema and the revolutionary cinema.” Despite the quasi-Zhdanovian socialist-realism of its line of argumentation, the notion of a “positive hero” would persist in Daney’s criticism well beyond the demise of the journal’s Maoist orientation, and it would notably function as a conceptual counterpoint to the cynicism of the “retro mode” in mid-1970s French cinema. Still more surprising was the guardedly positive reception given by Bonitzer and Toubiana to Costa-Gavras’ État de siège, which repudiated the “unilateral” critique of Z made by Cahiers in 1969 for ignoring the “positive fact that constituted the diffusion among the working-class and popular masses of a film whose content […] had the merit of being anti-fascist and anti-militarist.” The goal of État de siège—to make a film denouncing American imperialism—was thus given Cahiers’ approval, although demurral was registered to the film’s “sentimental moralism” and its pacifist opposition to the Tupamaros’ policy of revolutionary violence. In any case, the political value of État de siège was evaluated purely in terms of the film’s content—its form was now a non-issue for Cahiers.

Issue no. 247 saw a subtle departure from this critical line, even though the journal was still under the sway of the Front culturel project. Bonitzer’s triple review of Ultimo tango a Parigi, La Grande Bouffe and La Maman et la putain was dubious about the hedonistic egoism of all three films, seeing them as “crepuscular reflections of the bourgeois conception of the world.” Although he conceded that Eustache’s film was more avant-gardist and “infinitely more talented” than the other two works, it was considered to be “more or less enclosed in the scandal” that they had provoked. Assimilating

the three works in this manner was later hotly contested by Eustache, himself a former Cahiers critic, who found Bonitzer’s review to be “in bad faith” and contended that he “did not feel at all in solidarity” with Ferreri and Bertolucci’s films.”89 The lukewarm attitude to Eustache did not last long: Bonitzer himself would heap praise on Une sale histoire in 1978,90 and by the end of the decade, Cahiers considered La Maman et la Putain to be one of the totemic films of the 1970s.91 Furthermore, it is worth noting that the article in question represented a chink of openness from within the political dogmatism enveloping Cahiers, as references to Bonitzer’s long-standing theoretical figures de proue (Lacan, Barthes and Bataille) saw the return of their names to the pages of Cahiers after a significant period of purgatory and presaged the rejection of a hardcore Maoist line that would come after the failure of the Avignon conference.

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