
**Abstract**
After the collapse of the Front culturel révolutionnaire and the departure of Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni as editors in 1973, *Cahiers du cinéma* was on the verge of collapse. The journal was rescued by the efforts of Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana, who shifted it away from Maoism and towards a more open political orientation. For much of the 1970s, *Cahiers* remained firmly on the far left, but it oriented itself toward new political movements (Third World solidarity, feminism, anti-racism) and theoretical trends. Key interviews with Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Rancière, Marc Ferró and, most prominently, Michel Foucault were published, while the *Cahiers* critics attacked the “retro cinema” trend they saw emerging in this decade. By 1981, however, critical consensus within the journal had frayed again, and Serge Daney’s departure marked a conclusive return to the—political and cinematic—mainstream for *Cahiers*.

**Keywords:** *Cahiers du cinéma*, Serge Daney, anti-imperialist cinema, retro cinema, Michel Foucault

**After Avignon: Resuscitating *Cahiers* under Daney and Toubiana**

The debacle of the 1973 Avignon conference represented the opportunity for the editors discontented with the situation to overturn the “Pakradouni line.” Bonitzer, Toubiana, Kané, Daney and Oudart vacationed together at Avignon after the festival, where, at the initiative of Toubiana, conspiratorial discussions took place about the journal changing direction, which continued in his apartment upon their return to Paris.¹ On

1 See Toubiana, *Les Fantômes du souvenir*, p. 61; and De Baecque, *Histoire d’une revue vol. II*, p. 262. This account has been corroborated in interviews with Toubiana (April 29, 2014) and Bonitzer (April 30, 2014).


doi 10.5117/9789463728508_CH11
October 21, the editorial team met at the journal’s offices on the rue des Petits-Champs. Pakradouni remained optimistic about the prospects for the Front culturel and advocated the subordination of cultural work to political struggle—essentially, the voluntary abandonment of Cahiers as a film journal. But he was alone in this perspective. For Bonitzer, the time had come to “shake off the Maoist ideological game that had been the line at Cahiers for motivations that had absolutely nothing to do with the cinema. [...] Simply put, we needed to fire [Pakradouni].”2 Countering Pakradouni, he and Toubiana proposed that Cahiers return to its “specificity” as a film journal, but a clear decision on the matter was deferred. The second half of 1973 saw Cahiers in limbo: only a single, undated issue was published, and the disparate nature of its contents betrayed the absence of any clear line governing the journal’s work at this time: reports on Avignon which continued to speak in Maoist jargon were accompanied by texts that represented a less rigid approach to the cinema. The first of Daney’s “Fonction critique” series began a fresh interrogation of the contemporary role of film criticism,3 while Pascal Kané furnished a practical example of a film review freed from stifling dogmatism in his take on Billy Wilder’s comedy Avanti. Noting that the palpable “anti-Americanism” of Wilder’s film profits from remaining within the “limits fixed by the Hollywood system,” Kané returned to the Young Mr. Lincoln mode of addressing studio-produced cinema in arguing that “the critical stake of the film is [...] the elucidation, in a narrative system that is still very coherent, of a profound contradiction between the emergence of increasingly insistent and present ideological themes and the manner in which filmic discourse [...] appropriates them.”4

After months of tension, the dissension within Cahiers was settled at an editorial meeting on February 7, 1974, where Pakradouni was decisively sidelined. Toubiana, in particular, was merciless in his attack, with the “Journal de la rédaction” reporting him as saying “What right do you have to pass from one front to the other, from cinema to politics? [...] In the end, your problem, your pleasure, is political economy. So hasn’t it been a total mistake for you to join Cahiers?”5 Pakradouni left the journal shortly

---

2 Interview with Pascal Bonitzer, April 30, 2014.
5 Cited in de Baecque, Histoire d’une revue vol. II, pp. 262-263.
afterwards, “disappearing overnight” in Aumont’s words. 6 Months later, he sent a letter to Cahiers (in the name of himself and other ostensible “members of the ex-Animation Commission of Cahiers”), which accused the journal of succumbing to “petty-bourgeois liberalism” and advocated the “constitution of the authentic Communist Party and the elaboration of a communist program posing the question of proletarian revolution in France.” His former colleagues reacted with considerable bemusement to the missive.7

This change of course prompted the question of new leadership for Cahiers. Comolli and Narboni both felt they could no longer continue as editors, with Narboni speaking of the period as one of “almost depressive disenchantment,”8 and both soon turned to filmmaking projects. Aumont’s responsibility for the journal’s administrative tasks made him the presumed heir to Comolli/Narboni, but he too was increasingly involved in another sphere of film culture: teaching at the cinema studies department at Paris-III. The circumstances of his departure are nonetheless cloudy: Aumont relates that he was excluded in spring 1974 for “rightist tendencies” and that he was “ill-treated” by the other editors, but it seems strange that a purge would have taken place at this point in time, after Pakradouni’s departure. He admits “I don’t even remember anymore how it concretely happened” but insists that “the memory that I have is that it had become evident that I was going to leave. […] I no longer understood what was happening, to be frank. I couldn’t follow things anymore.”9

The three most experienced editors had, in quick succession, left the journal, and a power vacuum resulted. It was to be filled by a new editorial pairing: Daney and Toubiana. In Daney’s words, “I had to answer ‘present’ when, in late 1973, the journal was given away to whoever was willing to pick it up.”10 Toubiana recalls: “Nobody had asked Serge to play this part. […] He happened to be available. The only thing I could offer him was that I was there.”11 The two had a generally agreed upon division of labor:

6 Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 11, 2014.
8 Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.
9 Interview with Jacques Aumont, March 11, 2014. Elsewhere, he has commented, “As for me, I was booted out the door in 1974. I can’t remember anymore if it was because I was too left-wing or not left-wing enough.” Aumont, “Jacques Aumont, le cinéma né sous X.”
10 Daney, L’Exercice a été possible, monsieur, p. 302.
while Daney would provide the critical and theoretical guidance for the journal, drawing *Cahiers* out of the impasse into which its Maoist orientation had led it, Toubiana would play a more administrative role, gradually re-establishing *Cahiers* as a commercially viable entity after it had reached the verge of financial abyss, ensuring that issues would again be published on a monthly basis and reconnecting the journal with the readership it had lost.\(^{12}\) Charles Tesson, a later writer for *Cahiers*, has percipiently called the duo the “Moses and Aaron” of the post-*gauchiste* *Cahiers*, saying “Serge Daney was an absolute Moses of thought,” while Toubiana represented the “pragmatic reality” of the biblical Aaron.\(^{13}\)

The journal’s new orientation was already signaled by Daney in the first installment of “Fonction critique” in which he outlines two potential responses to the question “How to ‘intervene’ in films?” Firstly, a film’s aesthetic criteria could be equated with its political criteria, and secondly, politics could be put in the command post. The two positions, evidently, were those successively defended by *Cahiers* in 1969-1971 and 1972-1973 respectively. Both perspectives, according to Daney, were “tarnished with a certain dogmatism,” and his article sought to establish a new position for film criticism, one that would take account of the fact that the aesthetic criterion does not “flow automatically” from the political criterion. Merely stressing, for instance, that a film is a means for the bourgeoisie to impose its vision of the world is correct from a Marxist standpoint, but it is a knowledge that remains “dead, dogmatic, stereotyped and—as our experience shows—unworkable to the extent that one is incapable of grasping, for each film, how it imposes itself.” Similarly, relying on an analysis of the “base apparatus” merely conformed to “ultra-left mysticism” and prevented the journal from making concrete interventions on films. In other words, criticism must focus on “the relationship between two terms: the énoncé (what is said) and the enunciation (when it is said and by whom).”\(^{14}\) From this perspective, a triple critical function is discerned. With films where the énoncé predominates, those that superficially appear to have a neutral, objective, de-subjectified discourse (documentaries, television programs), *Cahiers* must stress that “there can be no énoncé without enunciation”—that

---

\(^{12}\) When interviewed, Toubiana placed particular emphasis on the importance of winning back readership during this period, pointing to high sales of issue no. 251-252 (which featured an interview with Michel Foucault) and the special issues edited by Jean-Luc Godard and Marguerite Duras. Interview with Serge Toubiana, April 29, 2014.


\(^{14}\) The quotes in this paragraph are from Daney, “Fonction critique,” p. 39 [pp. 56-57].
is, that a discourse must have a subject that speaks it and an “apparatus” in which it is spoken. For films where the enunciation predominates (auteurist cinema, for instance), the reverse operation is needed: behind the cumbersome subjectivity of the enunciator (the “auteur”) it is, in the end, a class with objective interests that speaks—and thus there can be no enunciation without an énoncé. Finally, Daney addresses the mass of films situated between these two poles, particularly those outwardly “progressive” works of “critical realism.” In this case, the “line of demarcation between a reactionary, progressive and revolutionary filmmaker” tends to be “mobile, uncertain, blurry.” Here, it is the position of the filmmaker with respect to the inevitable “double reading” of the film (that of its énoncés and that of its enunciation) that allows the critic to distinguish between reactionary, progressive and revolutionary works.15

Daney’s outlook is further developed in “Les Cahiers aujourd’hui,” a May 1974 editorial co-signed with Toubiana that, serving as a guide for the journal’s new political and critical perspectives, can be seen as something of a sequel to “Cinéma/idéologie/critique.”16 A detailed overview of the mistakes of the “Front culturel” period dominated this text. Here, Daney/Toubiana were openly critical of Cahiers’ combination of theoreticism (the project itself was presented in overly abstract terms) and empiricism (their practical interventions were piecemeal and lacked any connection with a global strategy). Resulting from the editorial team’s blend of “political virginity” and “unbridled politicism,” these shortcomings “nourished an entire system of contradictions” that “erupted” at the Avignon conference, the failure of which was exacerbated by the sectarian intransigence of the Marxist-Leninist groups participating in the project.17 Locating a “dogmatic current” within Cahiers (in clear reference to Pakradouni), the new editors emphasized the “question of the specificity of the journal” and rejected a vision of Cahiers as the “magazine of a party” (whether existent or in potentia). Instead, they conceived of it as “an apparatus in the service of the struggles of the revolutionary movement, particularly in the area of film.” But Cahiers would also be a “critical and theoretical journal,” one that would aim to “respond, with its own weapons, to the issues raised by the

---

15 Ibid., p. 40 [p. 57].
16 Toubiana recalls that his contribution to the text was minimal: “Serge [Daney] had written it in one burst, during the night, asking me the next day to read it and correct. Not a word needed changing.” Toubiana, Les Fantômes du souvenir, p. 66.
ideological conjuncture and the struggles flowing out of it.\textsuperscript{18} Rather than Mao, the main reference points in this project would be Brecht and Gramsci, as well as the Italian leftist dramatist Dario Fo, whose theater company’s recent tour of Paris greatly influenced Cahiers at this moment.\textsuperscript{19}

While critiquing “dogmatism,” Daney/Toubiana were not yet ready to totally abandon the Marxist-Leninist political standpoint that Cahiers had identified with for the last five years, and the journal remained positioned within the milieu of the French far left well into the late 1970s even while adopting a “post-gauchiste” perspective critical of the excesses of the period of heightened political activity in 1968-1972. This era was one of flux and transition for Cahiers, where dogmatic certainty was replaced by a disoriented groping for new directions. Reynaud describes it as a “fractured, turbulent, sometimes exhilarating, sometimes bitter, always engaging” phase in the journal’s history, which abounded in “ruptures, contradictory positions, fearless enthusiasms, suspicions, disgusts, stringent self-criticism or amused hindsight.”\textsuperscript{20} In this respect, Cahiers was once again in synchronicity with its time: the change in editorial line reflected a broader political cleavage point that took place in the mid-1970s. As Daney notes: “It is not difficult to date, between 1973 and 1975, the caesura of the decade: the oil crisis, the beginning of unemployment, the end of the ORTF, the return of consensus.”\textsuperscript{21} Domestically, the demise of left-wing militancy in France was accompanied by the advent of the union de la gauche (which campaigned for Mitterand as presidential candidate in 1974) and the rise to power of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, who, while still on the political right, represented a liberal turn away from the authoritarian tendencies of de Gaulle and his successor Georges Pompidou. Under Giscard, film censorship was formally abolished, the media liberalized, and police repression of the left was significantly relaxed, moves that facilitated the reconciliation of former leftists with the political status quo.

These tumultuous changes were reflected in Cahiers by a pronounced changeover of personnel. Bonitzer, Kané and Oudart remained on the editorial committee alongside Daney and Toubiana, while Narboni, having absented himself in 1973, rejoined the journal in 1976. Beyond this core group, however, the pages of Cahiers featured an expansive list of contributors: Alain Bergala, Serge Le Péron, Bernard Sichère and Jean-René Huleu were drawn from militant

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., pp. 8-9 [pp. 51, 53].
\item\textsuperscript{19} See “Dario Fo à Vincennes,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 250 (May 1974), pp. 16–25.
\item\textsuperscript{20} Reynaud, “Introduction,” pp. 1-2.
\item\textsuperscript{21} Daney, L’exercice a été profitable, Monsieur, p. 303.
\end{itemize}
circles; Thérèse Giraud, Dominique Villain, Danièle Dubroux and Nathalie Heinich brought feminist politics into Cahiers; and old friends of Daney such as Jean-Claude Biette and Louis Skorecki returned to writing for the journal. Jean-Paul Fargier made a Damascene conversion in 1976, departing from Cinéthique and joining Cahiers, to which he would contribute until the end of the decade. Even former Positif critic Louis Seguin submitted occasional articles. Comolli, Baudry and Pierre also published texts on isolated occasions, although none would formally rejoin the team. Later in the 1970s, a new generation of critics also entered the ranks: chiefly brought in by Toubiana, they included Charles Tesson, Olivier Assayas, Leos Carax, Yann Lardeau, Jean-Jacques Henry and Bernard Boland. Bereft of any participation in the stormy debates of the journal’s militant period, their critical perspective would be markedly different from that of their “elders,” and they proved to be far more receptive to Hollywood and other popular cinemas such as that of Hong Kong.

The turnover of personnel reflected a fluctuation in the “line” espoused by Cahiers as the 1970s progressed, shifting from “anti-dogmatic” Marxism to a gradual return to the mainstream of film criticism, an evolution that was reflected by changes in the journal’s format in 1976 and 1980, which gave it a glossier, more magazine-like appearance. Despite their personal closeness, this evolution betrayed a division between Daney and Toubiana. Whereas the former sought to anchor Cahiers in its political/theoretical heritage, even at the expense of remaining a marginal publication, the latter was eager for the journal to return to the center of film culture in France, a project that inevitably entailed a more commercially oriented, popular mindset. Simmering throughout the late 1970s, these contradictions eventually came to a head in 1981. Daney’s departure from Cahiers that year saw Toubiana’s perspective prevail and marked the effective end of Cahiers as a site for the production of film theory derived from the positions it held in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Anti-Imperialist Film Criticism: 1974-1975

In the initial years of Cahiers’ post-Avignon period, the evaporation of the Maoist movement in France led the journal to seek out avenues for politically
radical filmmaking in other terrain. In these years, Chile, Palestine and Algeria supplanted China as international sites of interest for revolutionary cinema. Closer to home, the experience of migrants and other minorities in France was given special attention for the first time. In addition to this “anti-imperialist” approach to the cinema, the mid-1970s saw the initial germination of feminist film criticism in France, reflecting the belated birth of a French women’s liberation movement, which sprang out of the nascent identity politics of the anarcho-Maoist group Vive la révolution! For the most part, however, this critical work was the preserve of female critics, particularly Thérèse Giraud and Danièle Dubroux. Reynaud even later regretted that “their witty, often acerbic, texts did not generate larger discussions on issues of feminism or sexual politics per se” and sat uneasily alongside the masculinity of the Cahiers brand of cinephilia. The chief exception to this state of affairs was Daney’s review of Histoires d’A, a film banned for its stance against France’s anti-abortion laws. The political context of the film had been discussed by Thérèse Giraud in an earlier issue, and the filmmakers Charles Belmont and Marielle Issartel were interviewed for Cahiers. Daney, for his part, insisted that the film’s claims about the safety of the Karman method were proven above all through its practical demonstration that the technique was filmable—by opening with a long, graphic sequence showing a young woman undergoing the procedure. While the critic noted that this represents a “new relationship” between the woman and her body, it is not feminist issues but questions of film that formed the center of his discussion. Histoires d’A breaks down the dichotomy—shared by both “metaphysical” film theory and “technicist discourse”—between mise en scène (fiction) and direct cinema (documentary). For Daney, the film calls for a “new position—spatial, moral and political—between the filmer and the filmed.” The filmed abortion sequence in Histoires d’A allows a glimpse of this new position, and the “collective of enunciation” it thereby creates poses a “question that is essential for thinking through the relations between the political front and the cultural front,” namely: “How to restitute to those who struggle—at the same time as the strategic meaning of their struggle—the ardor, inventiveness and pleasure that there is in struggling?”

A similar framework was used to discuss cinematic representations of the immigrant experience in France, which became distinctly more prevalent in the 1970s. Works such as *Bicot-nègres, vos voisins* by Med Hondo and *Nationalité: immigré* by Sidney Sokhona not only addressed the question of “guest-workers” in France but, of supreme importance for *Cahiers*, they sought to do so from the point of view of the African and Maghrebi migrants themselves. As Daney would later recognize, “the magic word in this short period is ‘point of view,’” a term that can be understood both in the militant political sense (the line of an organization on a given question) and more broadly as “the situation that a filmmaker, his team and his tools de facto occupied during a shoot, the contact he had with the ‘actors’ who he did not know, and even (above all) if they supported them and their just struggles.”27 In line with the perspective outlined by Daney, Kané’s discussion of Hondo’s work linked it to the question of cinematic enunciation—a question that had decidedly become central for *Cahiers* at this time. Rejecting attempts by militant cinema to “universalize its énoncés” and “detach them from the context in which they operate” (which would only lead to “dogmatic and terroristic propositions”), Kané is in the end ambivalent about the formally heterogeneous sequences that make up *Bicots-nègres, vos voisins*, concluding that “the film never creates its own proper context of struggle, which would justify it alongside the struggle of its brothers, in the courageous combat that it wishes to carry out.”28 His negative appraisal would be shared by Giraud, who even calls Hondo’s film “para-revisionist.”29 *Nationalité: immigré* was more warmly received by *Cahiers*: Daney found it, for instance, a refreshing alternative to the sterile dogmatism of much militant filmmaking, which had never been able to adequately synthesize “the (necessarily dogmatic) title cards and the (necessarily wretched) ‘lived experience’.”30 Sokhona’s use of title cards within the shot in the film’s opening scene, for instance, is comparable to Godard’s *Ici et ailleurs* in its ability to make information “the very matter of his images,” and the film’s formal maneuvers allowed Daney to perceive that “denotation is also a question of racism.”31

31 Ibid.
Considerations of international cinema during this period were largely dominated by political concerns, and thus the global flashpoints of the mid-1970s—specifically, China, Chile and Palestine—were given the greatest attention. This turn to Third World cinema can legitimately be criticized for the presence of a certain patronizing paternalism and an Orientalist fascination with non-European cultures: Reynaud notes that the interviews with filmmakers conducted under this rubric “were mostly focused on conditions of production, the filmmakers’ struggle with political and cultural powers, the political use of the film etc., and not on issues of *mise en scène*.“ And yet they played a valuable role in breaking the journal free of its previous hermetic isolation within the milieu of the French far left and led to a radical re-casting of many of the questions surrounding politics, ideology and cinema that had formed the center of *Cahiers*’ critical energies in the half-decade after 1968.

Two documentaries by Western filmmakers on China under Mao’s rule were the source of ongoing polemics in and around *Cahiers*: *Chung-kuo China* by Antonioni and *Comment Yukong déplaça les montagnes* by Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan. Antonioni’s film—which was loathed by the Chinese media but praised by the still-Maoist Philippe Sollers in *Libération*—initially received a cool reception by *Cahiers*, who had rarely warmed to the filmmaker’s work. Aumont dubbed *Chung-kuo China* “a series of ahistorical stereotypes (filmed with art, of course)” which completes “the collection of received ideas on China, its present and its eternity,” while Daney, writing for *Libération*, called it a “sumptuous potluck party” and criticized the film for not giving a voice to the Chinese people themselves. Ivens/Loridan’s *Yukong*, by contrast, was widely lauded upon its release in 1976, with an interview with the filmmakers and a review by Le Péron, even though *Cahiers* had long abandoned a strictly Maoist orientation by this time. Soon afterwards, however, Daney would, in his own words, “go to Canossa and end up avowing that he prefers *Chung-kuo China* by Antonioni over *Yukong* by Ivens and Loridan.” Both films, as Daney argued in his text “La re-mise en scène (Notes),” denoted the relationship between “here” (the West) and “elsewhere” (China under Maoist rule). But whereas Daney criticizes Ivens/Loridan for making “direct cinema on a coded reality” (which unwittingly

attests to a social “pre-mise en scène”), he came to respect Antonioni for the filmmaker's strategy of finding images that strike a balancing act between the requirements of the Chinese authorities and the ethnographic curiosity of Western audiences, a striking example of which is found in the anaesthetic-free Caesarian section performed on a Chinese woman that begins the film, since it demonstrates the prowess of the Chinese medical system as well as suggesting that “the relationship that the Chinese have with their bodies is, to say the least, very different from that which exists in a Judeo-Christian, capitalist society such as our own.”\textsuperscript{35} In pursuing this double operation, Antonioni is, in a metaphor that would be felt across much of Daney's later writings on cinema, akin to a smuggler of contraband: “He could write his position as: (here) (elsewhere). He is between parentheses, at once protected by them and floating between them, without any anchoring, exposed. Exposed to utopia, to the non-place.” It is this, then, that ties Antonioni's documentary on the PRC to the rest of his work, which is defined by Daney as “the cinema as non-place, as an affirmation of distance.”\textsuperscript{36}

Soon after this article was published, Mao's death in September 1976 led to the trial of the Gang of Four and the ascension to power of the “capitalist roader” Deng Xiaoping, and cinema relating to the Chinese cultural revolution would cease to be of interest to \textit{Cahiers}. By this time, the journal's interest in revolutionary film had shifted its focus to other countries. In 1973-1974, Chilean cinema became a significant focus of attention for \textit{Cahiers}, as the country's Popular Unity government under Salvador Allende radicalized its socialist program before being brutally crushed by Augusto Pinochet's CIA-backed coup on September 11, 1973. During this time, interviews were conducted with Chilean filmmakers-in-exile such as Helvio Soto and Miguel Littin, as well as the Bolivan Jorge Sanjines and the Latin American media theorist Armand Mattelart. For the \textit{Cahiers} critics, Chile represented a practical demonstration of Althusser's theories of the Ideological State Apparatus. Allende's election meant that the political apparatus was in the hands of a socialist party, but the capitalist class and many wings of the repressive state apparatus (the police, judiciary and, most importantly, the military) remained hostile to his rule. The media—the press, television, radio and the cinema—were thus, to use Althusser's formulation, a “stake in the ideological struggle” in Chile. As Daney/Toubiana recognized, however, the political situation there had induced \textit{Cahiers} to abandon a “conception

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
of ideology as the reverse side of Science” and instead led them to speak of ideologies, in the plural, which were in opposition to but also coexisted with each other. Aware of the potential for accusations of “exoticism” (which had already been leveled during the journal’s “sinophilic” period), Daney/Toubiana maintained that the development of communication apparatuses in the South American nation is not merely a question pertaining to foreign nations and argued that “up to a certain point, large swathes of the Chilean experience are transposable to France and Italy.” Against the dominant (“revisionist”) understanding of the failure of the Allende government, the editors outline a cluster of questions centering on issues of ideology, hegemony and knowledge, which were summed up by Rancière in the following terms: “To each circumstance of the class struggle corresponds a certain position of science, of the relationship between its object and those of perception and production, of the division that exists between the visible and the invisible, the phenomenon and the law, etc.” More broadly, in the journal’s wish to move beyond the schematic dialectics of Althusserian theory, the philosopher’s renegade pupil was an influential figure, and Rancière became one of Cahiers’ regular interlocutors through the 1970s.

With Fatah and other guerrilla organizations intensifying their resistance to Israeli occupation, even after the bloody setback of Black September, Palestine was the other international flashpoint that preoccupied Cahiers in this period. An interest in the Palestinian question was evidently stoked by Godard’s Ici et ailleurs (and its unfinished precursor, Jusqu’à la victoire) but was also pertinent to the journal due to its large number of Jewish contributors: Kané, Bonitzer, Narboni and Daney all had a Jewish family background, although none were openly religious at the time. Palestinian militants had also, of course, made global headlines by kidnapping Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic games in 1972, although the event was not discussed by Cahiers at the time. In 1974-1975, a series of texts focused

on the cinema of the Palestinian people: interviews were published with Lebanese filmmakers Heiny Srour and Borhan Alaouié (both of whom were involved with the movement against Israeli occupation), while the Moroccan critic Abdelwahad Meddeb, Serge Le Péron and Jean Narboni all devoted articles to Palestinian films. Narboni's response to Alaouié's depiction of the 1956 Kafr Kassem massacre was particularly stimulating, affirming that the film offers a corrective to the "false alternative" between the detached distanciation of the "simili-Brechtians" and the affective spectacle defended by the proponents of a "visceral" cinema. In this, he sees Eisenstein as Alaouié's most significant precursor (despite major differences in their respective approaches to filmmaking), since the Soviet director's films were similarly capable of "maintaining the internal tension between blood and sign, of producing a dynamism whereby each would be implied and negated by the other, of setting in motion both the emotional charge and the signifying mechanism." By far the most important contribution those associated with the journal would make on the issue of the Palestine conflict, however, was a project that preoccupied Narboni at the time he wrote on *Kafr Kassem: L'Olivier*, a documentary made in 1973-1975 by a collective based in the cinema studies department at Vincennes.

*L'Olivier: Filming the Palestinian Struggle*

Since 1970, Narboni had been teaching film regularly at Vincennes (Paris-VIII), succeeding Rivette in the post. The project of a film on the Palestine issue arose from contacts the Cahiers critic made with other faculty members and students on campus. Ali Akika, Guy Chapouillié, Danièle Dubroux, Serge Le Péron and Dominique Villain ended up joining Narboni to form the core team responsible for the making of *L'Olivier*. The origins of the project came from Akika, an Algerian militant who had traveled to Jordan in 1969 and taken photographic slides for use at activist meetings in France;

---


41 Ibid., p. 45 [p. 265-266].

42 Of the five, Le Péron and Dubroux would become regular writers for Cahiers in the 1970s, while Villain (Narboni's partner at the time), wrote and translated texts on an intermittent basis for the journal.
perceiving the limitations of this method, he met Le Péron at Vincennes to discuss the possibility of making a film on the subject. 43 Soon a group of six collaborators had coalesced at the Avignon conference in August 1973, which thus makes L’Olivier one of the positive legacies of an event that was otherwise a generally adverse experience for Cahiers. A trip to Lebanon was organized, where contacts were made with Palestinian filmmakers and fedayeen fighters. Two years would pass between this moment and the completion of L’Olivier, as the phases of the filmmaking process were coordinated with the academic calendar. The 1973-74 school year was dedicated to archival research and establishing contact with European anti-Zionist activists. July and August of 1974 were taken up by further trips to the Middle East, where the bulk of filming took place. Finally, the 1974-75 school year was used for gathering additional footage in Paris and transforming the eight hours of rushes into the final 85-minute edit, which was released in the Cinéma du Temple (now the Luminor Hôtel de Ville cinema) in the Marais district of Paris in March 1976.

In addition to the broader context of Middle Eastern politics in the 1970s, the cinematic context at the time L’Olivier was made was also of central importance to the filmmaking collective, as was made clear in the round table on the film published by Cahiers in February 1976. A negative model for their project was Claude Lanzmann’s Pourquoi Israël (1973), a work of political propaganda justifying the existence of the Zionist state. While censuring the film for “completely exclud[ing] the Palestinians,” the Vincennes filmmakers were careful to avoid conceiving of their film as a unilateral retort: “We had no wish to remake the Lanzmann in the opposite direction, that is to say, by excluding the Israelis.” 44 Instead, Lanzmann’s work was subject to a cinematic critique, as Narboni elucidates:

During the screening of Pourquoi Israël I was haunted the whole time by the insistence of a question absent from the film. [...] This question is quite simply: where am I? [...] What is this place from which I have obtained this frame, and at what price? What power pre-existing my own has permitted it? What new power-effects does the place that I occupy authorize, and on whom? This is a question which [...] in all good conscience, Lanzmann does not even glimpse.

The most striking example he gives of this problem in Lanzmann’s film is a long-shot of the Wailing Wall: “What technical tour de force made it possible? Lanzmann’s genius, the skill of his cameraman? No, or not only. Rather, that of the Israeli administration which, since 1967, had cleansed the surrounding Arab neighborhoods, and without which the filmmaker would never have been able to afford himself such a depth of field.”

A key aim in making L’Olivier was to provide an alternative to many of the received norms of militant cinema in the post-1968 period, which had long been critiqued by Cahiers but which were further subject to interrogation as the journal emerged from its own period of militancy. When pressed on the matter by Daney, Narboni admits that “a certain type of political cinema made since 1968 was no longer possible,” specifying that it was the “disdainful insouciance towards formal questions, considered as ‘bourgeois,’ […] the catechistic tone, the artificial optimism and the denunciative droning of the voiceovers” that rankled in these films. He notes in particular that a work such as Revolution Until Victory (1973) by the Newsreel collective, while being a “penetrating, admirably assembled” work, was nonetheless, “suffocating, so rapidly did the information, dates, citations pass by” and that it only led to “stunted, sterilized” discussions after the screenings. In contrast, L’Olivier is largely free of voice-over—which, when it does come, is succinct and softly spoken—and relies mostly on interviews with activists and Palestinians. Care was taken to ground these voices in the context of their day-to-day existence: we thus see lengthy sequences where entire families are interviewed together, and other passages show Palestinians returning to their bombed villages or reminiscing about the olive groves of their childhood.

A key influence on this revamped critique of militant cinema came from Godard’s Ici et ailleurs, which was seen by the L’Olivier collective before its theatrical release. The transformation of a propaganda film for Fatah into a critical interrogation of the techniques of militant cinema and an exploration of the very nature of the image/sound relationship in the cinema was mirrored by a similar—albeit less historically dramatic—shift in the conception of L’Olivier during the film’s production process. Le Péron notes that the schematic nature of their initial project, which inscribed the Palestinian struggle into a broader global movement against imperialism (equating the Middle East with events in Chile, Vietnam and

---

46 Ibid., p. 12.
other post-colonial countries), came to be rejected. Instead, the filmmakers adopted a framework that emphasized the “specific difficulty of the Palestinian problem” and focused as much on the daily life of Palestinian families as it did on more directly political matters. 48 Far from veering into a “suspect descriptivism, an ethnological approach,” Narboni viewed this method as the “struggle between a dynamic, ample conception of politics and a fossilized, bureaucratic point of view on the question.” 49

Notably, too, the filmmakers refused to reduce the issue to that of a racial conflict between Jews and Arabs. Much of the first half of the film comprises interviews with Jewish anti-Zionist activists in both Europe and Israel, ranging from young Maoist militants to elderly Jewish Auschwitz survivors. 50 In this sense, one of the totemic moments of L’Olivier shows two members of the far-left group Red Front—one Jewish, the other Arab—being led from a prison van into a courthouse by the Israeli police, their legs manacled together. Regardless of their nationality, this charged image suggests, the Zionist state is ruthless in its repression of those who resist it. Another more ambiguous expression of Arab-Jewish unity was addressed by Narboni: during the shoot, the group interviewed a young Algerian migrant in Gennevilliers who justifies his belief in the possibility of peaceful coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis by inaccurately claiming that Jews were originally descended from the Arab people. Narboni notes the potential “catastrophe” that arises when an interviewee “gets it wrong, utters false ideas with respect to the line taken by the mini-apparatus constituted by the filmmaking team.” He outlines the two prevailing approaches taken by filmmakers in this situation: either they can take a “sociological, objectivist or neutralist approach” and retain the entire sequence out of respect for the “complexity of the real,” or they can adopt a “militant, vigilant” stance that would “censure, redress and rectify” the passage in question, either by cutting it entirely or smothering it with the “correct” authority of a voice-over. Against both of these positions, Narboni advocates a strategy that would subtly highlight the “accent of truth” of such a moment by “inscribing this scene in the economy of the film in such a way that this accent is rendered.” 51

48 Ibid., p. 16.
49 Ibid., p. 32.
50 These figures include Auschwitz survivor and anti-Zionist campaigner René Raindorf; Piet Nak, a Dutch communist who led a strike of workers in the Netherlands against the deportation of Jews to the concentration camps when the country was under German occupation; and Israel Shahak, a Holocaust survivor and president of the Israeli League for Human and Civil Rights.
51 Ibid., p. 27.
Although the Vincennes group were wary of the premature triumphalism of much militant filmmaking, a cautious optimism is nonetheless discernible in the film, one that comes less from a resolute belief in the inevitability of a victorious revolution and more through a portrayal of the ways in which everyday life has already been transformed by the mass mobilization of the Palestinian people. In particular, the role played by Palestinian women within the resistance movement was a major concern for the filmmakers. One sequence in particular shows a group of Palestinian teenaged women from a Lebanese refugee camp sitting in a circle wearing battle fatigues and clutching Kalashnikov rifles. Here, again, the filmmakers of L’Olivier choose to highlight the “accent of truth” of this scene, which comes through in both what the young women say—they speak of their visions of a future, liberated Palestine in paradisiacal terms, despite having never set foot in their homeland—but also how they say it: their words are free of the deadening jargon of many militant groups, and, at first hesitant, they soon gain the confidence to give free reign to their reveries. It is almost as if the process of political awakening is taking place before the spectator’s eyes.52

Perhaps the most emblematic image of the film, however, is reserved for its conclusion. Here, a guerrilla fighter being treated after suffering injuries from an Israeli attack is lying on a hospital bed, his eyes covered in bandages, a bloodied cloth in his hand, and an intravenous drip attached to his forearm. Haltingly, but with perfect lucidity, he asserts: “We thank the progressive forces and peoples throughout the world for their precious support. Zionism disposes of powerful means of propaganda. We need this solidarity to defeat them, for our cause is just.” The contrast with the forced stridency of the perorations preponderant in militant cinema is stark: here we are presented with an image of a bloodied man speaking with immense physical difficulty but unbowed in his political determination. He represents, as Chapouillié notes, “the image of a Palestinian people that is wounded but fighting.”53

Reaction to L’Olivier upon its theatrical release was divided: after bomb threats were made to cinemas screening Ici et ailleurs, there were fears of similar attacks, especially given the fact that the film was being shown in a heavily Jewish neighborhood.54 These never eventuated, but the French

---

52 Their mode of speech is noticeably different to that of male teens (known as “lion cubs”) in a parallel scene: here one individual seems to speak for the entire group, and his summary history of the Palestinian revolution is recited in mechanical fashion, as if learnt by rote.
53 Chapouillié, in ibid., p. 35.
54 Interview with Jean Narboni, April 2, 2014.
left was far from unanimous in its appraisal of the film. While Hennebelle called it “one of the most successful feature-length films in contemporary French militant cinema,” others criticized L’Olivier for offering a “folkloric” and insufficiently political view of the Palestinian struggle. As could be expected, Cahiers devoted ample coverage to a work that was closely associated with the journal: a round table with the filmmaking team was followed by a review of the film by Comolli, who saw the gap between the Palestinian people and “Palestine as referent” as the film’s key stake, and argued that “the force of L’Olivier lies in not eluding the difficulty of a deceptive representation, of bringing deception to the heart of representation, of anchoring deception itself to the offensive force of representation, against satisfying, reassuring, mystifying representations.” The project was evidently close to Comolli’s heart: at the same time Narboni was engaged with L’Olivier, Comolli was working on his own project, La Cecilia. The two films were released nearly simultaneously and discussed in the same issues of Cahiers. In retrospect, they can be seen as close complements of each other. Made when both editors had left the journal, disheartened at the collapse of a project in which they had each invested a decade of their lives, La Cecilia and L’Olivier both deal with the contradiction between revolutionary utopias and the everyday reality of political struggle, and both relate to questions of collective intellectual labor. But whereas La Cecilia served as the springboard for Comolli’s long filmmaking career, L’Olivier remained an isolated experience for Narboni—until 2011 it was the only directorial credit to his name. Since the completion of L’Olivier, Narboni’s energies have remained focused on film criticism and teaching. On a political level, meanwhile, the strident anti-Zionism of L’Olivier is distinct from Narboni’s later perspectives: not only has he largely been averse to radical political movements in more recent decades, but his views on the Israel/Palestine question evince a greater degree of sympathy with the Israeli perspective. When asked about this matter, however, Narboni did not agree that his position had substantially changed since the 1970s. He continues to believe in a right of self-determination for Palestine—while lamenting

56 Narboni discusses these criticisms and ascribes them to the viewpoint of “some bewildered (French and Arab) dogmatists.” Narboni, in Ali Akika et al., “L’Olivier,” p. 32.
58 See Chapter 13 for more on La Cecilia.
the “tragic,” seemingly unresolvable nature of the conflict—and he still looks upon his experience making *L’Olivier* in a broadly favorable light.60

**Anti-Retro: *Cahiers*, Foucault and Allio**

*Cahiers* critics were involved in another film project during this period, with Pascal Bonitzer and Serge Toubiana’s participating in the preparatory work for René Allio’s 1976 adaption of *Moi, Pierre Rivière, ayant égorgé ma mère, ma sœur et mon frère...* Pierre Rivière’s memoir had been exhumed by a research group directed by Michel Foucault, whose own contact with *Cahiers* was established in a 1974 interview centering on the “retro” trend in mid-1970s European cinema. Exemplified above all by the films *Lacombe Lucien* by Louis Malle and *Portiere di notte* by Liliana Cavani, “retro” cinema was marked by a prevailing cynicism and a historical reconsideration of the resistance/collaboration binary during World War II. In France, the retro mode was seen as symptomatic of the rise to power of a “neo-bourgeoisie” (that of “multinational, technocratic big capital”) with the narrow victory of Giscard d’Estaing over the union de la gauche in the 1974 presidential election. The “post-gaullist” French state, *Cahiers* maintained, represented “a chance for the bourgeoisie to rid itself of a certain heroic, nationalistic, but also anti-Pétainist and antifascist image, which was still reflected if not by Pompidou, at least by de Gaulle and Gaullism.”61 Cinematically, the ground had been prepared for these films by the demolition of the Gaullist myth of the popular resistance to the German occupation in Marcel Ophuls’ 1970 documentary *Le Chagrin et la Pitié*, a film that was criticized at the time of its release by Pierre Baudry for eliding the discourse of the working class from its overview of the French resistance movement and for the “general blindness” produced by its “series of ambiguities, repressions and things left unsaid.”62

Baudry’s review of the Ophuls documentary set the template for *Cahiers’* later response to the “retro” films of Malle and Cavani. Daney used the concept of the “positive hero” developed during the journal’s Maoist period

---

60 Interview with Jean Narboni, April 2, 2014.
to attack the bourgeois cynicism of the retro mode, bristling against the “generally accepted idea” that “‘positivity’ (the positivity of a message or of a hero) is of interest only to the propagandists, the party men, the big sectarian and Zhdanovian dinosaurs.” In fact, he argues, positivity is not the exception but the rule; the point of distinction comes in the class interests represented by these films: each class “possesses its own style of ideological struggle, its own way of rendering its conception of the world, its own positive ideas,” and thus even messages of a negative or indeterminate character can be positive ideas “from the viewpoint of the bourgeoisie and its immediate interests.” Moreover, Daney makes the startling concession that, in 1974 in France and Italy, “the initiative belongs to right-wing filmmakers”; rather than repressing domains of human experience such as politics and sexuality (the source of much of Cahiers’ earlier criticism of mainstream cinema), the bourgeoisie in these countries is now confident enough to “hold a (bourgeois) discourse on what, only yesterday, it still wanted to hide. […] It can anchor its fictions in History if it has emptied the word of all content.”

In “Histoire de sparadrap,” Bonitzer continued Daney’s line of thinking by reading *Lacombe Lucien* through the semiotic distinction between denotation and connotation: Lucien’s behavior, for instance, may indeed denote fascism, but it “connotes something else entirely, and it is this ‘something else entirely,’ in principle indefinable (Lucien’s psyche), which, in the final instance, carries the meaning.” Bonitzer also attacks the equation made by Malle and Cavani between fascism and sexual perversion, which ends up naturalizing the political ideology of the Nazis, blurring the boundaries between victim and executioner, and masking the true governing structure of fascist ideology: racism. In a later text, Daney similarly focuses on the question of the “eroticization of power”—a question on which, he claims, “the tradition of Marxist economism […] has nothing to say”—and argues for the construction of a “left perspective” on this issue, drawn not from “some remote dogma, or even the endlessly repeated names of Brecht and Reich” but on the basis of “what, today, in the practice of those who meet these questions in their struggle, already contains this construction.”

64 Ibid., pp. 39-40 [pp. 59-60].
The interview with Foucault, appearing in Cahiers’ July-August 1974 issue, centered on the same concerns and represented the first time in the journal’s post-1968 period that Marxism itself, rather than just its dogmatic distortion, was subject to critique. Foucault here highlights the limitations of the orthodox Marxist definition of fascism and criticizes Marxist intellectuals for their lack of historical knowledge. Not only this, he also excoriates the French far left for lacking a genuine desire to defeat the right “due to a false definition of the masses, a false appreciation of what it means to want to win. To avoid the risk of having victory snatched away it prefers not to run the risk of winning. Defeat, at least, can’t be recuperated.”67 In terms of the cinema, Cahiers did not always see eye to eye with the philosopher, and in the interview itself Foucault expresses his approval of Le Chagrin et la pitié.68 But an opposition to the “retro mode” united the two. In opposition to the “false archeology” displayed by the retro films, Foucault posits the necessity of “popular memory,” a need that is particularly acute at a time when “a whole series of apparatuses has been established (‘popular literature,’ cheap books, but also what is taught in school) to block this development of popular memory.”69 He understands the obsessive revisiting of the combats of the 1940s in the retro films as a will to “codify” and “stifle” popular memory in order to impose “a grid for interpreting the present.”70 Foucault nonetheless distinguishes between the ways in which sexuality and power are entwined in Lacombe Lucien and Portiere di notte respectively: whereas Malle’s film is seen as a “fairly facile antithesis between power and love,” Cavani’s film, for the philosopher, more probingly explores the erotic charge produced by the exercise of power in fascist regimes.71

While finding fault with retro cinema, Foucault admits to the impossibility of making “a positive film about the struggles of the Resistance.”72 The interview itself, however, did give rise to a positive counter-model to the work of Malle and Cavani. Foucault’s interlocutors at Cahiers, Bonitzer and Toubiana, suggest in the interview that the dossier prepared by Foucault

---

67 Michel Foucault, “Anti-Retro,” p. 15 [p. 171].
68 Ici et ailleurs was also a point of division between the journal and the philosopher. In June 1981, Daney recalled that, “in 1975, Michel Foucault left a screening of Ici et ailleurs at the Quatorze-Juillet Bastille cinema, furious. The man who wrote Discipline and Punish did not want to be disciplined and punished by Jean-Luc Godard.” Serge Daney, “Michel Foucault,” in “Dictionnaire sans foi ni loi,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 325 (June 1981), p. 116.
69 Michel Foucault, “Anti-retro,” p. 7.
70 Ibid., p. 13.
71 Ibid., p. 10.
72 Ibid., p. 8.
and his colleagues on Pierre Rivière (published in 1973) could be fruitfully used to combat the “retro” cinema of Lacombe Lucien. Foucault, seeing the possibilities, turned to René Allio, whose Les Camisards the philosopher recognized as a “beautiful” and “historically impeccable” film. Drawing on his experience working with Brechtian theatrical troupes, Allio had made films that had been steadfastly defended by Cahiers, which warmly received Une vieille dame indigne and Les Camisards, and published an extensive interview with the filmmaker upon the release of Rude journée pour la reine in 1974. It was therefore a natural step for Bonitzer and Toubiana, with Foucault’s approbation, to approach Allio to adapt Rivière’s memoire for the screen. Although they are credited as screenwriters alongside Allio and Jean Jourdheuil, Bonitzer now clarifies that “in truth, Serge and I did not contribute much to the script. […] Even if we co-signed it, I can’t consider myself as one of the film’s screenwriters.” Their main role, therefore, was that of a passeur (in Daney’s sense of the word), transferring sensitive material from one hand to another.

Rivière’s memoire was discovered as part of preparatory work on Foucault’s major work on the history of judicial punishment, Surveiller et punir, published in 1975. A 20-year-old peasant from Normandy convicted of the murder of his mother and siblings in 1835, Rivière composed a 100-page treatise outlining his motivations for the crime (to free his father from a loveless marriage with a headstrong wife), despite the fact that he was widely considered to be a barely literate half-wit. Notwithstanding its departures from standard orthography, the text often exhibits a genuine literary flair (Foucault states that “its beauty alone would suffice to protect it today”) and the Raskolnikovian logic behind Rivière’s act confounded the jurists assigned to his case, who were unable to decide whether he was a deluded madman or a lucid criminal: in the end, the death sentence for parricide was commuted to life imprisonment, but Rivière committed suicide soon after his conviction. For Foucault, speaking in a second interview given to

---


74 Ibid., p. 15.

75 Interview with Pascal Bonitzer, April 30, 2014.

Cahiers, the case is “a phenomenon for which I can’t see any equivalents in the history of crime or of discourse: a crime accompanied by a discourse so powerful and so strange that the crime doesn’t in the end exist any more, can’t be pinned down, by the very fact of what is said about it by the criminal himself.” Allio’s film, meanwhile, gives the material a remarkably sober treatment: long recitations of the documents associated with the crime are accompanied by a painstaking recreation of early-nineteenth-century peasant life. Rural inhabitants of the Normandy area in which the events took place were enlisted to play the roles of the Rivière family and their neighbors, such that a confrontation is established between the vernacular diction and gestures of the region (both in the 1830s and in the present day) and bourgeois modes of speech (the technocratic discourse of the judicial apparatus), which were reproduced by professional actors. Although this procedure could potentially be tarred with the brush of naturalism, Cahiers preferred to see Allio’s film as a prise de parole by the peasantry and argued that “the acting of the peasants refers back to the active presence of the dispositif that surrounds them (the camera, the text, the choices made in the mise en scène): it permanently states that all this, everything we see and hear, is written.”

Cahiers’ interview with Foucault ushered in a period of new encounters between the journal and figures on the French intellectual left: between 1975 and 1981, Rancière, Deleuze, historian Marc Ferro and art theorists Jean Louis Schefer and Pierre Legendre were all interviewed by the journal, and they assisted in its shift away from a purely Marxist theoretical framework. At the same time, the Cahiers editors were engaged in grappling with political issues as they presented themselves in contemporary cinema, but they often did so in a groping, tentative manner, with different members of the editorial team reaching different conclusions. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the round tables the journal conducted in the latter half of the 1970s, which often saw Cahiers engaged in internal debates, albeit without the obdurate sectarianism of earlier in the decade. Three of these discussions—on contemporary “naturalist” cinema (held in 1975), Robert Kramer’s Milestones (1975) and Chris Marker’s Le fond de l’air est rouge

are of particular interest in charting the vicissitudes of the journal’s political evolution over the course of this erratic period in its history. But they also evince a certain “retro” nature to Cahiers’ own critical practice in the “post-gauchiste” era. All centered on the disenchanted aftermath of the post-1968 period of militancy, and they even, at times, exhibit a nostalgic yearning for a lost past. So much of the discourse produced in this period was written in a kind of preterite tense, referring back to the history of the journal and the radical milieux in which it was situated. Although the editors clearly strove for a new spirit of openness and tolerance, their discussions often seem to be exclusively addressed to fellow anciens combattants, as if only those who were also implicated in the political struggles of the post-1968 militancy could understand the discourse now being developed. The trauma of gauchiste politics continued to leave its marks on the journal well after the movement itself had waned.

The Return to the Mainstream: 1979-1981

Discord over specific films was nothing new to Cahiers, of course, but in the late 1970s a more fundamental cleavage took place within the journal. Daney and Toubiana had always been something of an odd couple at the head of the journal, but initially the duo’s division of labor—between theoretical guidance and administrative knowhow—had been complementary in nature. As the 1970s drew to a close, however, their respective visions for the journal became increasingly divergent, and not even the creation of a comité de direction in 1978 (incorporating Daney, Toubiana, Narboni and film technician Jean-Pierre Beauviala) was able to smooth

---


80 Beauviala was the Grenoble-based inventor of the Aäton camera and a collaborator with Godard. His involvement was intended to re-orient the journal towards questions of film and media technology, but this desire was only intermittently realized in subsequent issues of Cahiers.
over the tensions within *Cahiers*. Certainly, nobody at the journal could cavil at Toubiana’s tireless efforts to return the journal to financial stability. The crisis of the Maoist years—in terms of monetary deficits and declining sales—took several years to overcome, and the mid-1970s was punctuated by desperate appeals to the journal’s readership in a bid to increase subscription numbers. France’s heightened inflation levels and the difficulties for an independent publication to operate within the nation’s media monopoly only made matters worse. The July-August 1976 issue was frank about the state of crisis the journal was in: an appeal titled “*Cahiers* needs 50,000 francs” notified its readers that this sum was rapidly required “so that, once our administration is reorganized with a view to substantial savings, *Cahiers* can once again become a monthly.” The push met with success, and from September 1976, the journal achieved its aim of appearing regularly at the end of each month. February 1978 saw a change of format to a less austere, more magazine-like style and an augmentation in the number of pages from 68 to 76 per issue. The issue also contained an editorial co-signed by Toubiana and Daney, who acknowledged that “the last text engaging the general orientation of the work at *Cahiers*, its ‘line’ as we used to say back then, dates to issue no. 250 (May 1974).” The “almost four years” separating these two editorials was an eternity given the sweeping changes to the political and media landscapes in France in the intervening period, and the new text sought to grasp the contemporary context in which the journal operated, in an attempt “more to sketch out a framework than to erect a line.” Distancing themselves from the “indefatigable babble on the ‘crisis of cinema,’” the editors nonetheless acknowledge that the cinema has lost its “monopoly over the mass imaginary” to television and that the film spectator has given way to the “cultural consumer.” And yet, they reject the notion that *Cahiers* should “participate in a sort of united front for the defense of the cinema.” Instead, it should seek to “carve up [découper] the cinema differently,” a tactic that would consist of studying the cinema in its “impurity” (the allusion to Bazin is explicit) and “heterogeneity.”

What exactly this should consist of, however, remained vague, and the joint signature masked the different directions in which Daney and Toubiana were heading. Daney was backed by the “old guard” of the journal—Narboni, Bonitzer and Kané, with Bonitzer in particular registering his strident

---

81  *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 268-269 (July-August 1976), p. 3.
opposition to the prospective abandonment of film theory—and de Baecque notes that “violent quarrels frequently broke-out in the ‘back-office’” during this time.

Increasingly, Toubiana’s orientation of returning the journal to the center of mainstream film discourse in France gained the upper hand, a change that entailed the dissipation of any engagement with radical politics as well as the marginalization of theoretical discussions. This shift was a gradual one, occurring in fits and starts, and there is no clear date at which the nexus of politics and theory that had marked the Cahiers project for more than a decade came undone. And yet, between 1976 and 1981, the tendency is clear. The “Toubiana line” did, however, represent an opportunity to open the journal up to new developments in cinema that it had disregarded or disdained in earlier years. In particular, the work of the New Hollywood filmmakers was given sustained attention for the first time: Kané, who had always been more susceptible to the charms of contemporary Hollywood cinema, dedicated articles to Taxi Driver and Dog Day Afternoon in 1976 and Brian de Palma in 1977, while Daney followed with an appreciative response to Annie Hall later that year. By 1979, blockbusters such as Apocalypse Now and Alien were assuming an increasingly prominent place in the journal; while Daney’s and Bonitzer’s responses to these films still attested to a wry critical distance, the younger generation of critics brought on by Toubiana were far more adulatory in their attitudes toward Hollywood spectacle.

In addition to the return of Hollywood, the late 1970s also saw a reconciliation with Truffaut. The nouvelle vague luminary with whom, even in the 1970s, much of Cahiers’ broader fame was still associated, had been close to the journal in the years 1968-1970, despite the fact that he was far from sharing its Marxist outlook. After collaborating with Cahiers on the Henri Langlois campaign in early 1968, Truffaut had provided a sizable amount of capital for the journal’s buy-out of Fillipachi two years later. This support was reciprocated in the positive appraisals given to his films during this period—although the increasingly contorted attempts to shoehorn relatively conventional works such as Baisers volés, La Sirène du Mississippi
and L’Enfant sauvage into the radical film aesthetics vaunted by Cahiers perhaps indicates that certain opportunistic considerations played a role in these assessments. A freezing in relations came, however in 1971: after Truffaut’s withdrawal from the journal’s comité de rédaction in August 1970, Cahiers reprinted an interview he gave to La Vie lyonnaise justifying his departure in the following terms: “To be frank, Cahiers today has fallen into politics, they do a Marxist-Leninist analysis of films. Reading the journal is prohibited to anyone who has never gone to university. As for me, I have never read a line of Marx. But they are doing serious work.” Quoting these comments seemed innocuous, but they led to Truffaut sending a message to the Cahiers editors, stating, “At the start of the year you wrote to me to invite me to lunch. I answered: ‘Yes, with pleasure.’ Since then, I received no. 226-227 and read page 121, which made me lose my appetite. Don’t wait for me to start eating, I’m not hungry.” The rupture was total, and Cahiers’ silence on Truffaut’s work lasted until Bonitzer’s review of La Chambre verte in May 1978, which the critic anointed “the most beautiful, the most profound of François Truffaut’s films.” Earlier, in January 1976, Daney and Toubiana had paid a visit to the filmmaker in a bid both for financial support for Cahiers and, tacitly, to receive his approbation for their re-launch of the journal. As Toubiana recalls, Truffaut had harsh words for the journal’s Marxist-Leninist period, insisting that it had become so divorced from Bazin’s original project that the editors should have abandoned the name Cahiers du cinéma entirely and stated that his position with respect to Daney/Toubiana’s venture would be one of “benevolent neutrality.” From this point on, the editors assiduously wooed Truffaut: further positive notices greeted L’Amour en fuite in March 1979, Le Dernier Métro in October 1980

87 See Jean-Louis Comolli, “Rêves mouvants (Baisers volés), Cahiers du cinéma no. 205 (1968), p. 57; and Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Rêverie bouclée (La Sirène du Mississippi).” For the texts on L’Enfant sauvage, see Chapter 15.
89 Quoted in de Baecque Histoire d’une revue vol. II, p. 227.
and, in the last article Kané would write for Cahiers, La Femme d’à côté in November 1981.92 The filmmaker’s return to Cahiers was fully consecrated with a two-part interview published in September-October 1980, his first with the journal since 1967.93

Truffaut’s importance for Toubiana was undeniable, and in 1996, the critic collaborated with Antoine de Baecque on an authoritative biography of the director.94 Moreover, his return to grace in Cahiers was emblematic of its new orientation: just as Truffaut represented the “just middle” of the cinema—between mainstream commercialism and avant-garde radicalism—so too did Toubiana seek to re-position the journal in a critical center ground between the lofty rarefaction of film theory and the lower depths of consumer-oriented entertainment guides.95 Correspondingly, January 1980 saw the beginning of the “Journal des Cahiers du cinéma,” an insert within the magazine that focused on short, journalistic pieces—necessary, the editors stressed, as a response to the “acceleration of cultural consumption.”96 A year later, Cahiers’ format was again altered, now containing an additional eight pages and an emphasis on more photographs at the expense of text, with an advertisement for the change proclaiming that “Cahiers du cinéma must become more beautiful.”97 The changes were paying dividends: the print run for the monthly was now set at 20,000 copies, and a goal of 8000 subscribers was set for 1981—qualitatively higher than its entire readership was throughout most of the 1970s.

Despite this boom in sales, the tone in much of Daney’s writings during this period was downcast, and by mid-1981, he resolved to end his nearly two decades of involvement with Cahiers, having accepted a long-standing offer from Serge July to become the chief film critic for the left-wing daily Libération. Although an editorial trio involving Bonitzer, Le Péron and Toubiana was initially considered, Bonitzer declined the offer, and instead

92 See Pascal Kané, “Qui y a-t-il sous les jupes des femmes (La Femme d’à côté),” Cahiers du cinéma no. 329 (November 1981), pp. 51-52.
93 See François Truffaut, interviewed by Serge Daney, Jean Narboni and Serge Toubiana, “Entretien avec François Truffaut (1e partie),” Cahiers du cinéma no. 315 (September 1980), pp. 7-17, and “Entretien avec François Truffaut (2e partie),” Cahiers du cinéma no. 316 (October 1980), pp. 21-35.
95 The term “just middle” (le juste milieu) had already been used to describe Truffaut’s work in a 1967 mini-dossier on the filmmaker. See “Francois Truffaut ou le juste milieu,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 190 (May 1967), pp. 17-36.
97 Cahiers du cinéma no. 317 (November 1980), p. 3.
Toubiana become sole editor-in-chief, which essentially marked the end of the 1968 generation's involvement with Cahiers. Oudart had already ceased writing for the journal in 1980, and soon after Daney's departure, Narboni and Kané would follow suit. Bonitzer continued to contribute articles until the late 1980s, but his texts became more intermittent and more divorced from the central project of Cahiers, as his energies were more consumed with screenwriting during this decade. The caesura between the old Cahiers and the new was most clearly symbolized by the pair of issues dedicated to the “Situation of French Cinema” in May and June 1981. The first, overseen by Daney, focused on the journal's canonical nouvelle vague auteurs—Godard, Rivette, Rohmer, Pialat—while texts by Daney himself (“Le cru et le cuit”) and Bonitzer (“Juste une image”) sought to discern the continuities in the Cahiers line that ran from its founding under Bazin to the present day—continuities which, it was implied, had now reached their conclusion.98 The second, edited by Toubiana, was dedicated to economic questions affecting French cinema from the perspective of producers and audiences and was largely written by a newer generation of critics. From this point on, it was the latter perspective that would prevail in the journal.

Daney was sanguine about what this meant for Cahiers: Toubiana had “watered down the wine,” and the journal's current discourse, he noted in 1983, was “far behind the great theoretical and doctrinaire enthusiasm of yore”; but he accepted that “the times don't lend themselves to this. As far as thinking is concerned, this era is rather weak.”99 Indeed, that May 1981 should mark the end point of the political and theoretical project of Cahiers was appropriate: this month also saw the end of 23 years of right-wing rule in the Fifth Republic with the election of Mitterand as president of France. Having gained the support of many of those who, in the 1960s and 1970s, had been active in the far left, the Mitterand administration failed to fulfil the promise of the Parti socialiste's electoral program and lurched instead towards a centrist, consensus-based politics—although the boost to film funding under Minister of Culture Jack Lang was a rare bright spot. On a global level, meanwhile, the prospects for a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism had markedly receded. Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK ushered in a phase of economic neo-liberalism, while the brutal repression of the Solidarność movement in Poland marked the onset of the Soviet bloc's death spiral. China was now embarking on market reforms under Deng

---

Xiaoping, and the anti-imperialist movements in the Third World had lost their impetus. The 1980s, therefore, was a period of global reaction, to which Cahiers was not immune. At the same time, the deaths in the early years of this decade of Lacan, Barthes and Foucault, as well as the detention of Althusser for the murder of his wife, represented a symbolic termination to the wave of French critical theory that had guided the journal since the early 1960s. In a cinematic context, the final exhaustion of the modernist period (it too marked by the symbolic deaths of Eustache, Rocha, Truffaut, Fassbinder, Buñuel and Tarkovsky in quick succession in the early 1980s) was recognized by Bergala as early as 1983 and became a major topic for Daney’s writings in the 1980s.100 Within this context, little new reflection on the cinema of lasting value could be found on the pages of Cahiers, whether of a political or purely theoretical nature. It is symptomatic then, that de Baecque chooses to end his history of the journal in 1981, while the BFI series of Cahiers articles ends even earlier, at 1978. For a continuation beyond the early 1980s of the project established during Cahiers’ Marxist period, we have to turn to other areas and to other ways of thinking and practicing cinema carried out by those who were members of the team in the years 1968-1973.

Works Cited


100 See Alain Bergala, “Le vrai, le faux, le factice,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 351 (September 1983), pp. 5-9.


THE RED YEARS OF CAHIERS DU CINÉMA (1968-1973)


Jean-Paul Fargier, “Pour le dépérissement du cinéma militant,” Cinéma d'aujourd'hui no. 5-6 (1976), pp. 163-168.


Pascal Kané, “Qui y a-t-il sous les jupes des femmes (La Femme d'à côté),” Cahiers du cinéma no. 329 (November 1981), pp. 51-52.


—, “Parce que l’amitié!,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 458 (July-August 1992), pp. 6-8.


