12. Bernard Eisenschitz: Cinema, Communism and History

Abstract
This chapter focuses on Bernard Eisenschitz’s activities as a film critic and historian after he was expelled from Cahiers du cinéma in 1972. A member of the Parti communiste français throughout the 1970s, he initially wrote for the party’s cultural journal La Nouvelle Critique as well as communist publications such as Révolution and L’Humanité, and he exposed the readership of these organs to a wide array of films influenced by Cahiers’ own cinematic canon. Later, his lifelong passion for film history manifested itself in a prolific series of books, written with a meticulous care for detail, which included historical surveys of German and Soviet cinema and studies of the filmmakers Nicholas Ray, Fritz Lang and Chris Marker.

Keywords: Bernard Eisenschitz, La Nouvelle Critique, Parti communiste français, film history, Soviet cinema

Eisenschitz and the French Communist Party

After his 1972 exclusion from Cahiers, Bernard Eisenschitz was active throughout the 1970s as a film critic, programmer and, increasingly, historian, pursuing this work within cultural organizations linked to the PCF. His activity during this period can be seen as a sort of alternative trajectory to that of Cahiers: one in which the strategy of aligning with the Communist Party, with its hundreds of thousands of members and sympathizers, was continued and deepened rather than being abandoned for the tumultuous path of Maoism and its post-gauchiste aftermath. Having joined the PCF in 1970, Eisenschitz remained a member until the late 1970s and wrote for PCF-aligned organs (La Nouvelle Critique, Révolution and L’Humanité) until the mid-1980s. Even up to the present day, however, his work on the cinema has been impregnated by this political orientation, which comes through

doi 10.5117/9789463728508_CH12
above all in the type of cinema with which Eisenschitz has steadfastly engaged: the filmmaking of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, dissident directors within the Hollywood studio system, and German filmmakers who grappled with that country’s politically convulsive history. In general, the filmmakers he has focused on have been those who consciously worked within national film production systems—albeit often as subversive or rebellious elements—in order to further their political and aesthetic goals rather than auteurs whose work is divorced from a broader social or film-industrial context.

Three terms, then, govern Eisenschitz’s work from his time at Cahiers up to the present day: cinema, communism and history. These terms were already linked in his early biography. The first screening the young cinephile attended at the cinémathèque was Fritz Lang’s Eine Frau im Mond, a viewing inspired by the successful launch of the Sputnik satellite by the Soviet Union. After initially coming to political consciousness as a teen by the Algerian war and the Gaullist coup of 1958, Eisenschitz’s interest in politics was soon subsumed by his obsessive cinephilia, until a later moment of radicalization began in 1967. \(^1\) From this point, his political evolution was linked with that of Cahiers: its initial rejection of the Communist Party during the 1968 protests, followed by the rapprochement with the PCF’s cultural milieux beginning in late 1969. Eisenschitz has claimed that his position within the journal was “that of a historian, not that of an ideologue,” \(^2\) but he would distinguish himself by being the only member of the post-1968 Cahiers team to take the step of joining the party, doing so in 1970. He was also the only Cahiers writer to travel to the USSR, attending the Moscow film festival in 1969 and visiting the Soviet film archives in preparation for the “Russie années vingt” special issue. The visit did not instill Eisenschitz with any illusions about the reality of day-to-day life in the Soviet Union, \(^3\) but it did arouse his interest in Soviet cinema, which thenceforth assumed a central position in Eisenschitz’s research, and in addition to his archival work he met contemporary filmmakers such as Otar Iosselliani, Andrei Tarkovsky and Andrei Konchalovsky.

After joining the PCF, Eisenschitz soon found employment, alongside Cahiers alumnus Jean-André Fieschi, in Unicité (the party’s audiovisual department), a position he held for the duration of his membership in the

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1 Interview with Bernard Eisenschitz, April 1, 2014.
3 “We never thought it was a dream, but we saw that it was even less than that,” as he would put it. Interview with Bernard Eisenschitz, April 1, 2014.
party. Fieschi and Eisenschitz, who also collaborated in the film review section of *La Nouvelle Critique*, maintained a strict division of labor within Unicité. Fieschi oversaw communist-aligned film production, while Eisenschitz concerned himself with distribution. Initially this consisted of disseminating 16mm prints of PCF-produced militant films to regional areas for screenings at party meetings. Soon, however, Eisenschitz took the initiative of organizing the theatrical distribution of films from the Eastern bloc. In 1973, for instance, he was involved in the release of East German documentaries by Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann on the Pinochet coup in Chile as well as the less overtly political Georgian film *Pirosmani* by Georgi Chengelaia, a biography of the eponymous Caucasian painter. The most ambitious event that Eisenschitz was involved in during this time, however, was a week-long program of films from the USSR at the Avignon festival in July 1975. *La Nouvelle Critique* had long been involved with Avignon and even offered a program of films and discussions on the topic “Situation and Perspectives of French Cinema” at the 1973 festival, simultaneous with the foundering of *Cahiers*’ project of launching the Front culturel révolutionnaire.4 Two years later, the focus on Soviet cinema involved a program of 25 films, accompanied by question-and-answer sessions with directors from the Soviet Union, including a panorama of contemporary films from the Soviet republics. Eisenschitz defended this focus in his summary of the program for *La Nouvelle Critique*: lamenting that the paucity of Soviet films distributed in France led to an “almost total unawareness of the situation of Soviet cinema,” he stressed the diversity of filmmaking cultures that had evolved in the different republics of the USSR, such that he found it more appropriate to speak of “Soviet cinemas” in the plural, with the output of the Ukrainian, Georgian, Uzbek and other non-Russian studios developing independently of Moscow-based production.5

Eisenschitz would continue curatorial work such as this long after he severed ties with the PCF, and he has frequently been involved in retrospective programs at the Cinémathèque française as well as festivals such as Bologna and Locarno. When he was still involved with the party, his cultural activity had a dual purpose. Firstly, he participated in the PCF’s project of creating a broad-based ideological alternative to Gaullist (and later post-Gaullist) rule in France as it strove to gain a majority of the


country's support for its union de la gauche program. Secondly, within the communist movement itself, Eisenschitz sought to participate, however modestly, in the transformation of the party towards a more open, pluralist political organization, specifically by deepening its membership's exposure to a diverse range of cinematic practices and by fostering the appropriate discursive framework in which this work could be appreciated, thereby creating a counterpole to the Stalinist, Zhdanovite heritage that still weighed heavily on the party apparatus. His practice therefore mirrored Althusser's political strategy of reforming the party from within, but such parallels are largely coincidental. Eisenschitz professes that he understood little of the polemics among the party's intellectuals upon the publication of Althusser's article on the “Ideological State Apparatuses.”

Film Criticism within the PCF: La Nouvelle Critique, L'Humanité, Révolution

The most important element in this dual counter-hegemonic aspect to Eisenschitz' activity was undoubtedly his film criticism in the 1970s and early 1980s. Beginning with La Nouvelle Critique, this work continued with more sporadic contributions on the cinema to the party's daily newspaper L'Humanité and its weekly cultural magazine Révolution, which was founded in 1979 as a replacement for both La Nouvelle Critique and La France nouvelle. Eisenschitz began writing for the bi-monthly journal in 1970. Initially, this was supplementary to his contributions to Cahiers, thereby continuing the critical polygamy he had practiced in the 1960s. Indeed, in the years 1970-1971, the critic functioned as something of an emissary of Cahiers' critical tastes to the readership of La Nouvelle Critique, which was far larger than that of the film journal. His first article, from November 1970, is indicative of this. Mirroring the discussion of Kramer's Ice in Cahiers and presenting an alternative view to that of other communist critics (including Fieschi), Eisenschitz argued against seeing the film as “an apology for gauchisme,” and in the guise of a brief critical notice he presented a synoptic example of the mode of critical analysis practiced by his Cahiers colleagues: only a “totally mechanistic reading” would confuse the ideological content enunciated in

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6 “I did not understand why Althusser wrote an article called ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ for La Pensée, and everyone in the Communist Party was furious. I remember that Jean-André Fieschi was furious about this article. I asked him to explain it to me, but he never did.” Interview with Bernard Eisenschitz, April 1, 2014.
the film with the viewpoint of its filmmaker. Rather, a political reading of any film “must be situated on the level of its application [mise en œuvre].” In the case of Ice, Kramer’s film attests to a “decentering of the fiction and its writing,” precisely because “formal transposition [mise en forme] can not be defined as the simple transparency or faithful recording of the utterings of the characters,” and it is this decentering that allows Kramer to operate “a constant dialectic between gauchiste ideology and futuristic fantasy.”

The next month, however, the kind of nuanced reading given to Ice was not proffered to Camarades, a film with its own stridently gauchiste, anti-PC rhetoric. Here, following Bonitzer’s skewering of Karmitz’s film for Cahiers, Eisenschitz pillories Camarades as a “workerist, sub-Lelouchian banalization” that is founded on the insoluble contradiction of “making a film transmitting a sectarian [groupusculaire] ideology and addressing it to the widest possible masses.”

In contrast with the great works of cinema focused on the coming to awareness of a subject (Kuhle Wampe, La vie est à nous), Camarades is, for Eisenschitz, a mediocre film filled with “revolutionist logorrhea.”

Reviews of historical films given theatrical re-releases formed a focus of Eisenschitz’s critical pieces during this time, and his response to the politics of such works no doubt surprised some of his readers. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation, for instance, was reviewed in 1971, and although Eisenschitz admits to its racist ideology, he does not dismiss the film for this reason. Introducing the non-specialist readership to Eisenstein’s seminal text “Griffith, Dickens and the Film Today,” he proceeds to note a key lacuna in the Soviet filmmaker’s analysis of the interpenetration of form and ideology in Griffith’s work: “What Eisenstein omits is the ideological importance of the imbrication of the sexual theme of white virginity with the political ‘message.’ Griffith’s eroticism (which is itself dated and localized), founded on terror, is more central to his ouevre than his social descriptions, and ends up determining them or simply replacing them in his later works.”

Another American filmmaker widely viewed as a political reactionary, Samuel Fuller, received nuanced consideration via a review of his 1948 film Park Row. Its “erroneous vision” of newspaper journalism as an artisanal trade serves as an allegory for Fuller’s own status as an independent filmmaker battling against the Hollywood monopoly. “The

8 Bernhard Eisenschitz, “Camarades (Marin Karmitz),” La Nouvelle Critique no. 39 (December 1970), p. 73.
mode of production of *Park Row*—near total independence and poverty (and concomitant commercial failure)—is exactly that of the hero's newspaper, which bears the same name as Fuller's production company.”¹⁰ By contrast, Kozintsev/Trauberg's *New Babylon* is given a lukewarm response, despite the fact that it was politically far closer to the PCF than the work of Griffith or Fuller. In tandem with the sympathetic but firm critique formulated by *Cahiers*, Eisenschitz sees the film as a “dated vision” of the Paris Commune, remote from the class analysis carried out by Marx, despite the avowed debt the directors had to *The Civil War in France*. But it also represents “the apogee and conclusion” of a current of enthusiasm that took hold of the Soviet cinema in the late 1920s, and in Eisenschitz's view it is this, rather than any political acuity it may have possessed, that makes the film worthy of interest.¹¹ Elsewhere, Eisenschitz's views differed from those of his *Cahiers* colleagues: the journal, for instance, was scathing towards *Il conformista*, with Oudart calling it a “simulation of political discourse” attesting to the confusion of its director.¹² Writing for *La Nouvelle Critique*, Eisenschitz is more measured in his appraisal of the film. Rejecting the equation between auteur cinema and “poor cinema,” he highlights the potential for formal work that a larger budget enabled. For Eisenschitz, Bertolucci's analysis of fascism—a political system that was itself, Brecht notes, “the greatest of formalisms”—results in “an extremely complex, considered play of forms, seeking to exhaust its own possibilities to the point of parody.”¹³

Following Eisenschitz’s exclusion from *Cahiers*, his contributions to *La Nouvelle Critique* were no longer dispatches presenting the perspective of another organ and came to more closely conform to the PCF journal's cultural interests. For the most part, however, he would refrain from retaliatory attacks on *Cahiers*, which when they did come tended to be the work of other *Nouvelle Critique* writers. Émile Breton, for example, ridiculed the praise heaped on *The Red Detachment of Women* by *Tel Quel* (and by implication *Cahiers*, which also lauded the film) and penned a rebuttal to the film journal's March-April 1972 issue, censuring its editors for a dogmatic understanding of Althusser and

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taking issue with the “fundamental formalism of their research.”14 Eisenschitz was more circumspect, unwilling to play the role of political commissar. It is only in a brief review of Dominique Noguez’s 1973 anthology Cinéma: théories, lectures that he makes his views about the contemporary state of film theory known: for Eisenschitz, Noguez’s volume reflects “a disarray, a refusal to make a theoretical decision, a fear of leaving nothing out, which we should not impute to an individual, but to a rather generalized confusion in the teaching of cinema at the university.”15 For the most part, however, Eisenschitz’s focus in La Nouvelle Critique remains on films: a program of Vietnamese propaganda shorts, appreciated for the fact that “the formal interest of the films is directly linked to their content, their style commanded by their political project”; Emile de Antonio’s Nixon compilation Millhouse: A White Comedy, compared to Brecht’s Arturo Ui for its comedic vulgarity; and Edouard Bobrowski’s cinéma-direct documentary on the use of “political marketing” during a 1973 municipal election campaign in Arras, Aux urnes citoyens, seen as “testifying massively to the favor of the union de la gauche,” despite the filmmaker’s own skepticism towards the electoral project.16

None of these articles would have ruffled feathers within the party, but when Eisenschitz, along with de Gregorio, Breton and Michel Marie, dedicated a multi-authored analysis to Godard-Gorin’s explicitly anti-PCF film Tout va bien, discontent was raised among those who were more unequivocally hostile to the film—although Eisenschitz is categorical that while “they were unhappy with what we said in the text, nobody said that it was scandalous for La Nouvelle Critique to publish it.”17 For the four Nouvelle Critique critics, Tout va bien was “an important film because it marks a stage in the theoretical reflection of Jean-Luc Godard” and even attests to a “rupture with a triumphalist-gauchiste cinema functioning on outdated guidelines.”18 All four critics, in their separate interventions, sought to reject the anti-communist énoncés of Tout va bien at the same time as understanding the ways in which the film’s formal work often undermined

17 Interview with Bernard Eisenschitz, April 7, 2014.
18 See Bernard Eisenschitz, “Tout va bien: un film ‘plein de talent,’” La Nouvelle Critique no. 56 (September 1972), pp. 64-70. The quote is from an introductory note by Michel Marie on p. 64.
its overt content. Eisenschitz, reprising the argument developed two years earlier with respect to *Ice*, was lucid about the need “to not confuse the film with its explicit discourse, to not reduce it to the ideology that it ‘contains.’ To judge it thus would amount to seeing works as the immediate reflection of the real, to seek in them a spontaneism of signification that we are better off leaving to bourgeois criticism.” While emphasizing the film’s comic aspect, Eisenschitz nonetheless sees *Tout va bien* as a “regression in relation to the films of the Groupe Dziga Vertov,” with Godard/Gorin making a calculated concession to the political and economic censorship governing French cinema in 1972. It is, however, precisely the film’s “disintegration-deconstruction” of its status as a spectacle that differentiates it from the comparable undertaking of *Coup pour coup*, which was more roundly denounced by the *Nouvelle Critique* writers. While the PCF-aligned journal and *Cahiers* openly reviled each other at this stage, it is interesting that they both reached similar conclusions about both Karmitz’s and Godard-Gorin’s films. The cinephilic heritage of Eisenschitz and his schooling in the *Cahiers* critical tradition doubtless had much to do with this uncanny critical accord.

From 1974 on, Eisenschitz wrote more rarely for *La Nouvelle Critique*, despite remaining on the editorial board; his last article for the journal was published in 1976, and the end of his political activity dates from soon afterwards. From that year until the end of the 1970s, however, he became an occasional correspondent for *L’Humanité*, beginning his association with the newspaper with a short piece on *La vie est à nous* in January 1976, which was screening as part of the festivities for the PCF’s national congress. A couple of dozen articles would follow over the next four years, alerting readers to the screening of films (at festivals or on television) such as *Pastorale* by Iosselliani and *Moses und Aron* by Straub/Huillet, as well as, less obviously for a communist audience, the work of Howard Hawks, Vincente Minnelli or the Marx Brothers. Although writing for *L’Humanité* allowed Eisenschitz to reach a much vaster readership than either *Cahiers* or *La Nouvelle Critique*, his articles were generally limited to short, informational notices, and he was unable to leave his stamp on journalistic film criticism in the same way that Daney would for *Libération* in the following decade.

19 Ibid., p. 68.
20 Eisenschitz describes his leaving the PCF as a “distancing” rather than a “rupture,” and, making metaphorical use of film vocabulary, as “more a fade-out than a straight cut.” Interview with Bernard Eisenschitz, April 7, 2014.
When the weekly magazine *Révolution* was set up in the 1980s, Eisenschitz willingly migrated to the new platform. Contributing fifteen pieces in the years 1980-1985, he benefited from the more expansive format to write in-depth articles, with texts of a historical angle taking on a greater importance over contemporary film criticism. Obituaries were delivered for recently deceased directors such as Louis Daquin and Abel Gance, while retrospectives gave Eisenschitz the opportunity to discuss the work of King Vidor, Boris Barnet and, thanks to a vast program organized by Marco Müller in Turin in 1982, Chinese cinema from the 1930s to the 1960s. A screening of a reconstituted version of *Intolerance* at Cannes allowed Eisenschitz to make a case for understanding the film from a Marxist perspective, observing that the analysis of the “oppression-strike-repression mechanism” in the modern episode of the film is “more concrete and more precise” than that of Eisenstein’s *Strike*.

Book reviews appeared on David Goodis, Howard Hawks and the Lux studio in Italy, while Eisenschitz’s response to Victor Navasky’s *Naming Names* provoked a surprising assessment of the Hollywood blacklist: far from using the McCarthyite witch hunt to politically attack the studio system as a “welcome image of the horrors of capitalist democracy” (as may have been expected in a communist magazine), he criticizes the tendency to equate it with the far more serious repression of filmmakers in Nazi Germany and even declares that there is “a relationship between the will of the [US] Communist Party to superintend artistic creation and that of the studios to prescribe the aesthetics of their products” (described by Max Ophuls as “capitalist realism”). After the end of his collaboration with *Révolution*, however, Eisenschitz would largely stop writing for critical outlets—a handful of recent pieces in *Le Monde diplomatique* being the chief exception—and instead he has focused more squarely on the historical work upon which his contemporary reputation largely rests.

**Bernard Eisenschitz: Film Historian**

Eisenschitz tends to describe himself in biographical profiles as a “translator and film historian.” In terms of professional status, translation is indeed his primary activity: he has worked on film subtitling since the 1960s and

translated a large number of articles and books on the cinema. Doubtless his multilingual family background has enabled him to feel at home in the translation of films and texts from English, German, Italian and Spanish into French, and he has even been one of the few figures directly involved with film subtitles to give serious theoretical attention to the practice. When interviewed, Eisenschitz has argued that “the idea of translation has a lot to do with writing” and that film translation “is a way of understanding the manner in which a film is made more than the manner in which the dialogue is made; it allows one to understand the respiration of a film, its editing, speech rhythms, the nature of speech.” In 2013, he even dedicated the text “Sous-titrage mon beau souci” to the intricacies of subtitling, which included a prolonged discussion of the different English renderings of the poetic voice-over to *Nuit et brouillard*, before concluding with a Marxist analysis of the state of subtitling in the digital era: far from improving the quality of subtitling work, technological advances have only served to imperil the survival of translators by putting downwards pressure on their wages. But Eisenschitz warns against Ludditism. “It is not,” he contends, “the instrument that threatens to destroy this activity, but the social conditions in which it is exercised.” He even holds out hope for a socially transformative use of the technology: “This technical mutation may, however (and this is already the case, sometimes), help to invent new creative relations between the translators of films and their authors.”

It is Eisenschitz’s work as a film historian, however, that is both his true passion and the activity for which he is best known. In his self-effacing words, “I am above all a film historian. It is my primary activity, but it is often the last in terms of time and means.” Being a historian of the cinema has entailed, for Eisenschitz, a diverse range of practices, including historiography, archival work, curatorial programming, public lectures, restoration and even, at various times, making films. The rigorous nature of this work is all the more impressive given that Eisenschitz received no formal education as a historian and, having abandoned a bachelor’s degree in German studies, has never taught at a university or held an academic post. Instead, his “training” as a historian of the cinema came primarily from the hothouse of 1960s Parisian cinephilia— with its obsessive practices of

27 Eisenschitz, “Paroles intemporelles.”
notetaking and list-making—and, more specifically, his interactions with seminal figures of film historiography such as Georges Sadoul and Henri Langlois.

Eisenschitz briefly met Sadoul shortly before the latter’s death in 1967, but his contact with the Marxist historian’s widow Ruta in Moscow in 1969 led him to oversee the posthumous publications of Sadoul’s pharaonic *Histoire générale du cinéma*, left as a series of scattered manuscripts at the time of his death. Six volumes were published under the tutelage of Henri Langlois between 1972 and 1975, charting the development of the cinema from its “pre-history” to the 1920s.²⁸ Although Eisenschitz’s presence in this project is discreet, the work he carried out to bring the manuscripts to a publishable state was considerable, and his prolonged exposure to Sadoul’s historiographical method doubtless had a major influence on his later work, as evinced by the Sadoul text that Eisenschitz arranged to be published in *La Nouvelle Critique*, “Matériaux, méthodes et problèmes de l’histoire du cinéma.”²⁹ Nonetheless, Eisenschitz now feels that he “did not have the intellectual means” to carry out the requisite work on these volumes and is now “ashamed” of the compromises that were made to bring them into being. At issue was whether Sadoul’s text should be respected even when it was flagrantly erroneous: although today the interest of Sadoul’s historiography may lie more in the subjective nature of the text (film history *as seen by Sadoul*) than its objective accuracy, at the time the perceived need for an encyclopedic history of the cinema rendered the situation more ambiguous, and Eisenschitz was commanded by Langlois to make tacit corrections to the text, an imperative that led to a falling out between the two.³⁰

If Eisenschitz’s contact with Sadoul came through textual materials, with Langlois it came from the films screened at the Cinemathèque française throughout the latter’s tenure at the institution. As with virtually the entire generation of Paris-based cinephiles who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, Eisenschitz’s knowledge of film history came principally from Langlois’ programming. While Eisenschitz avows his inestimable debt to the man Cocteau nicknamed the “dragon of the cinémathèque,” he has also expressed frustration at Langlois’ tempestuous personality, the polar opposite to his own methodical disposition: while the cinémathèque

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³⁰ Interview with Bernard Eisenschitz, April 7, 2014.
collection was vastly superior to those of its peer institutions, it was also marked by lacunae stemming from personal feuds instigated by Langlois. Moreover, his refusal to arrange private screenings for researchers such as Eisenschitz meant that the young scholar often had to travel to Brussels to view films, where Jacques Ledoux of the Cinémathèque royale de Belgique was far more obliging. Despite the temperamental differences with Langlois, Eisenschitz was centrally involved in the Cinémathèque’s 2014 homage to its founder, Dominique Païni’s exhibition “Le Musée imaginaire d’Henri Langlois,” which was accompanied by the publication of an anthology of Langlois’ writings (Écrits de cinéma) edited by Eisenschitz and Bernard Benoliel. In their preface to the anthology, the editors stress the “liberty of tone” and “fidelity to his tastes” that characterize Langlois’ writings.31 For Eisenschitz, indeed, the founder of the cinémathèque can most fruitfully be considered as “a historian-essayist” who combined seemingly incompatible qualities: he “refuse[d] to abdicate his subjectivity, and at the same time he refuse[d] to reject anything at all in his role as a programmer.”32

Eisenschitz’s major historical writings will be discussed in the sections below, but these should also be placed within the context of a five-decade-long multifaceted historiographic practice, incorporating activities that are often considered to be peripheral to film history but that are in fact integral to his work. A long-term collaborator with the Cinémathèque française, Eisenschitz has overseen restorations such as that of L’Atalante—conceived as a corrective to a previous effort judged to be “excessive, over-restored”33—and has been involved in a large number of retrospective programs, including career overviews of Frank Tashlin at the Locarno film festival (1994), Fritz Lang at the Valencia filmoteca (1995), Chris Marker at Pesaro (1996), Eisenstein at the Cinémathèque française (1998), and the history of censored Soviet cinema, again for Locarno (2000). He has also turned to filmmaking to pursue historiographic ends: this activity can be traced back to his participation in educational television, yielding the discussion of Une partie de campagne by his Cahiers colleagues and another program on Ivan the Terrible. The fictional short film Printemps 58 (centering on reactions to the May 13 coup that brought de Gaulle to power) followed in 1974.

33 Eisenschitz, “Paroles intemporelles.”
but more recently Eisenschitz has returned to making pedagogical films, directing short works on *L'Atalante* (2001), *Monsieur Verdoux* (2002) and *Die Nibelungen* (2007) and the more ambitious compilation film on Soviet silent cinema *Un si joli mot: le montage* (2003). A unique collaboration with Godard, meanwhile, took place for the book version of the latter’s magnum opus *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. Eisenschitz had made a brief appearance as an actor in Godard’s 1992 film *Les enfants jouent à la Russie*, and the filmmaker tasked him with tracking the source material for the hundreds of films cited in the 4½-hour video-essay.34 Despite following his œuvre assiduously, Eisenschitz had previously written little on Godard since his *Tout va bien* piece, but this silence was broken with an article on Godard’s 2006 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, in which he counter-intuitively criticizes the need “to understand everything, to have everything explained, to seek to underline the links. Why interpret? ‘What is shown can not be said.’” Instead, Eisenschitz urges the visitor to delight in the unexpected: “that sudden revelations and encounters can happen, this is what an exhibition can do (hanging [accrochage] my fine care). Whereas the film imposes its discourse, the gallery-stroller imposes their own rhythm, their tastes and distastes. JLG knows this and does it with us.”35

This article appeared in *Cinéma*, the second of two film journals with which Eisenschitz was involved as an editor in the 1990s to 2000s. Having been on the editorial board of *Cinémathèque* under Dominique Païni’s direction, Eisenchitz left in 1999 as part of a mass exodus when Jean-Charles Tacchella, who had become head of the Cinémathèque française, wanted an organ that focused more purely on historical research. *Cinéma* was founded in 2001 as a means of continuing the work of *Cinémathèque*: the previous editorial committee consisting of Eisenschitz, Païni, Aumont, Benoliel, Michèle Lagny and Jean-François Rauger was reconstituted and joined by experimental filmmaker Érik Bullot, and the team now came under the direction of Eisenschitz. Symbolically, *Cinéma* began with issue no. 02, to signal continuity with the eighteen issues of the journal *Cinémathèque*, which collectively represented issue no. 1 of the new journal. Eisenschitz described the new journal’s goal in a way that also describes much of his own practice in film culture: as being to “connect two approaches, which, separately, are well represented in film studies: the subjective approach drawn from the French critical tradition and the academic approach drawn from the

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study of the cinema by university researchers, especially historians.”

Work by French writers including Narboni, Émile Breton and Jacques Rancière was accompanied by that of scholars from abroad such as Tag Gallagher, Adriano Aprà, Peter von Bagh and Janet Bergstrom. The presiding tastes of the journal, however, were impregnated by Eisenschitz’s own outlook, and the quality of the writing published attests to his exigencies as an editor. Of most interest, each issue of the journal included a DVD featuring previously inaccessible films (by Mizoguchi, Stroheim, Straub/Huillet and others), a pioneering strategy that was considered an integral part of the journal’s editorial work. In 2007, however, publisher Léo Scheer withdrew his support for the project, and Cinéma ceased publication after issue no. 14. While regretting the collapse of the ambitious project, Eisenschitz is also self-critical with respect to his role as an editor: “It was a journal that was dominated by my cinephilic taste, which possibly stifled things that did not interest me: theory, experimental cinema, etc. Maybe I did not reach out enough for them to have the place they deserved. I strove to go in my own direction, a cinephilic and historical direction.”

Two National Cinemas: Germany and the USSR

In the blend of history and cinephilia that constitutes the core of Eisenschitz’s work as a film historian, two national cinemas and three auteurs stand out: firstly, the cinemas of Germany and the USSR, and secondly, the work of Nicholas Ray, Fritz Lang and Chris Marker—all highly politicized filmmakers who, in different ways, rebelled against and subverted the institutional structures in which they worked. Perhaps more than any other national cinema, the respective histories of German and Soviet film production have been marked by the tumultuous historical vicissitudes that striated the two states over the course of the twentieth century. Both countries were marked by revolutions (successful and abortive), the rise of totalitarian regimes, Cold War paranoia, and periods of thaw and relative openness. But both nations also saw the rise of successive generations of filmmakers who aspired to make great cinema even under the most adverse

37 Interview with Bernard Eisenschitz, April 7, 2014. In the same interview, Eisenschitz revealed that a fifteenth issue of Cinéma had been prepared for publication but never saw the light of day.
conditions. Indeed, it is this often tragic tension between the will to artistic creation and larger historical forces that has fueled Eisenschitz’s interest in the cinematic output of Germany and the Soviet Union. In both cases, moreover, he nuances the idea of a single “national” cinema: his emphasis on the various national cinemas produced by the fifteen Soviet republics in the 1975 program of the films of the USSR was already an indication of this perspective, which has continued throughout his work on the cinema of the world’s first socialist state. Germany, too, is marked by a multiplicity of cinemas, this time more diachronic in nature and determined by the country’s political transformations: from the Wilhelmine Empire to the Weimar republic, the Nazi regime, and the period of post-war division followed by reunification in 1989.

The notion that German film is marked above all by plurality is the guiding thread of Eisenschitz’s 1998 overview of the nation’s cinema. *Le cinéma allemand* is avowedly a history written from the standpoint of “someone who discovered the great pre-1933 German cinema at the Cinémathèque française of the rue d’Ulm and Chaillot, then thanks to the archives at Brussels, the GDR and West Berlin.” Published as part of François Vanoye’s “Cinéma 128” collection, the enforced concision of a text dealing with such a vast topic resulted in a pithy style, with bracing passages such as this description of the end of the silent period in German cinema: “The haunted screen [écran démoniaque] is no longer on the agenda. In 1929-1930, Arnold Schönberg composes his *Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene*, whose three parts bear the sub-headings, ‘Threatening danger, fear, catastrophe.’ The real cinema ceased to say anything about these emotions.”

Beyond the idea of a multiplicity of cinemas that bear the appellation “German”—a category that includes, for Eisenschitz, films made by Germans in exile as well as those made by non-Germans working inside the country (Griffith, Dreyer, Rossellini, Straub, Kramer)—the guiding hypothesis of the study is that “the history of German cinema is joined with that of the century. The cinema became Germany’s history, it had a stake in it and shaped it, it was an opinion on it and a vision of it. Its ruptures are more visible there than they are elsewhere.” Moreover, the historian abides by the dictum that “Every film, every œuvre, says more than and something

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40 Ibid., p. 5.
other than what was in the conscious intentions of its author. Eisenschitz barely tempers his enthusiasm for German cinema’s halcyon periods, those moments when “the cinema comes to be the best expression of the state of the nation and its imaginary.” Of perhaps greater interest, however, are the passages on production during Nazi rule and the even more obscure work of East German filmmakers. Eisenschitz categorically affirms that 1933 represents the point at which “one of the greatest cinemas of the world ceases to exist, and the industry of images becomes an instrument for the ‘aestheticization of politics’ that Nazism represents.” But he also recognizes that Goebbels was “one of the first practitioners of mass communication” and that the propagandistic methods promoted by the minister of culture were often explicitly modeled on Soviet practices. While from the standpoint of film art, the films made in the period 1933-1945 are judged to be “of zero interest,” Eisenschitz nonetheless trenchantly probes the work of Sirk, Riefenstahl, Harlan and others during this era. His book also rescues GDR cinema from the scholarly purgatory in which it had been mired, one where “forty years of films [had become] forgotten, never discussed, even in the German language, almost invisible and inaccessible.” Eisenschitz’s access to East German film archives placed him in an optimal position to overturn this critical neglect. In the historian’s view, “if the GDR was a ‘satellite’ of the USSR, it was also something else: a country and a culture where intellectuals and artists who participated in the struggle against Hitler recognized themselves.” He does not shrink, however, from charting the passage towards political repression and audience indifference leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall, against which forces the likes of Konrad Wolf, Heiner Carow and Jürgen Böttcher intrepidly battled. Eisenschitz is palpably terser when it comes to the reunified nation’s cinema of the 1990s, but it is perhaps symptomatic of his intuitive sense for the aesthetic and historical forces animating the German cinema that he closes the book by discussing Kurz und schmerzlos, the debut of the then little-known Turkish-German filmmaker Fatih Akin, whose depiction of the “violent history of friendship between a Greek, a Turk and a Serb” takes place in “a Hamburg from which Germans have almost completely disappeared.”

41 Ibid., p. 24.
42 Ibid., p. 15.
43 Ibid., p. 5.
44 Ibid., p. 58.
46 Ibid., p. 90.
47 Ibid., p. 123.
If Eisenschitz’s interest in German cinema dates to his time as an assiduous patron of Langlois’ cinémathèque programs, his fascination for its Soviet counterpart is just as long-lasting. The “Russie années vingt” special issue of Cahiers was not only organized by Eisenschitz but also contains some of the most important articles he wrote for the journal. Three texts published as part of the special issue place Soviet montage cinema within the broader context of the Russian cultural and artistic avant-gardes of the 1920s. In “Maïakovski, Vertov,” Eisenschitz traces the situation of mutual influence prevailing between the filmmaker and the poet: both tend to be linked with the constructivist movement, but the Cahiers writer rejects the idea of a “falsely obvious connection of linear filiation” between them, in favor of a relationship marked by numerous “detours and ramifications.”

“Le Proletkult, Eisenstein” carries out a similar operation for the role played by the director of Battleship Potemkin within the artistic institution led by Anatoli Lunacharsky, whose “ultra-left” promulgation of “proletarian culture” faced the hostility of Lenin and Trotsky.

Finally, Eisenschitz’s “Note sur Meyerhold et le cinéma” charts the theater director’s numerous ties with filmmaking: although the two films he directed are no longer extant, there remain a large number of texts by Meyerhold on the cinema, ranging from unrealized scripts to critical notices, and his influence on his students—including Yutkevich, Ekk and Eisenstein—remains the one area in which “we can successfully seek a definition of Meyerhold’s relationship with the cinema.”

In the case of Eisenstein, the nexus was a particularly close one, and Eisenschitz quotes Soviet film historian Leonid Kozlov’s hypothesis that the style of Ivan the Terrible—and even the character of Ivan—referred to Meyerhold, who had been something of a substitute father-figure for the filmmaker.

Eisenschitz’s more recent writings on Soviet cinema tend to shift the focus away from the titans of the 1920s to figures whose critical stock has been more mitigated. The work of Boris Barnet formed one center of Eisenschitz’s later research. A planned monograph on the director was never realized, but for an early issue of Trafic Eisenschitz did publish a diary of his time in Moscow spent researching Barnet’s œuvre. His September 1992 visit represented the first time he set foot in the former Soviet Union after its

dissolution and coincided with a retrospective on Barnet organized by Naum Kleiman, another kindred spirit in the film history milieu. Eisenschitz’s travel notes alternate between accounts of his exposure to previously unseen Barnet films and his experiences of a newly post-communist Russia, whose residents struggle to survive against the forces of hyperinflation and gangster capitalism. The latter is observed with bemused detachment and even moments of humor, such as when his visit to the Eisenstein house, kept intact by Kleiman, is described as a “return to the USSR.” Eisenschitz, meanwhile, does not overly romanticize Barnet’s œuvre: his viewing of the high-Stalinist work *A Night in September* (1939) is described as a “harsh blow, even if I always knew that it was an act of survival, no more nor less.” But *Bountiful Summer* (1950), equally a work of “socialist-realist” propaganda, is lauded for showing a “harmony between the characters and nature that can otherwise only be seen, occasionally, in the work of Griffith and Henry King,” and Eisenschitz concludes that “Barnet did not put forth the idea that communism has realized a harmony with nature, he incarnated it.” For this reason, the historian assents to the sentiment articulated by Rivette—in a 1953 review of *Bountiful Summer*, his first article for *Cahiers*—that “if we except Eisenstein, Boris Barnet must be considered the best Soviet filmmaker.”

The work on Barnet served as a prelude to Eisenschitz’s major achievement in resuscitating lesser-known specimens of Soviet cinema: the ambitious retrospective *Lignes d’ombre: une autre histoire du cinéma soviétique* (1926-1968) for the Locarno film festival in 2000, which was accompanied by a book of the same title. Highlighting the output of censored Soviet filmmakers between the years 1926 (the year *Battleship Potemkin* was released) and 1968 (the invasion of Czechoslovakia), the book brings together historical documents, portraits of the filmmakers affected, an interview with Kleiman and an introductory text by Eisenschitz himself. Soviet censorship was particularly perverse: unlike its Nazi counterpart, which did not even countenance the realization of films that did not unambiguously conform to its ideological diktats, the Soviet studio system not only produced films that later met the ire of the censor, it often poured significant state funds into these projects. As Eisenschitz, notes, a particularity of Soviet cinema was

52 Ibid., pp. 129-130. For the Rivette quote, see Jacques Rivette, “Un nouveau visage de la pudeur (Un été généreux),” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 20 (February 1953), pp. 49-50.
that “the function of the producer [did] not exist. [...] The director is master of his film: it is possible to harrass him, humilitate him [...] but not to take his work from him.”54 Banned films were, for the most part, not destroyed, simply “shelved” for a later date, meaning that the body of work available for screening in the post-Soviet era was considerably rich. The gambit of the retrospective was to present a potential alternative vision of Soviet cinema to that of the accepted canon, and part of its mission was to “relativize the identification, which used to appear obligatory, between political art and the avant-gardes.”55 All Soviet films were profoundly marked by politics. The resource-intensive nature of film production meant that the kind of schizophrenia that pervaded other artistic practices—Shostakovich, for instance, alternating between pompous official music and personal, avant-garde compositions—existed, in the cinema, within the films themselves: “[Filmmakers] worked for the most part with a high idea of themselves and the enterprise in which the country was engaged in, and the little game of ‘critical or uncritical?’ can only be resolved by answering: [...] both at the same time.”56

Three Rebels: Nicholas Ray, Fritz Lang, Chris Marker

Alongside his output on national cinemas, Eisenschitz has also dedicated significant historical research to his elected “rebel” filmmakers, an effort that has resulted in a trio of landmark studies: Roman américain: les vies de Nicholas Ray (1990), Fritz Lang au travail (2011) and Chris Marker (1996). The first of these texts, and the closest one to a standard biography, was the culmination of a project that dated back to 1979, when Eisenschitz participated in the production of Lightning over Water, co-directed by Ray and Wim Wenders shortly before the former’s death. A collaborator on this film, Terry Fox, compared Ray to Captain Ahab for having “rebelled against all restrictions and [having] lived in an absolute manner, according to the code he had formulated,” and Ray’s widow relayed to Eisenschitz that, on his hospital bed, the director quoted at length from Moby Dick.57 It was upon

55 Ibid., p. 12.
56 Ibid., p. 15.
hearing about this recitation that Eisenschitz struck upon the idea of writing a biography on the filmmaker. His research for the project coincided with the moment when the Hollywood studios began depositing their archives to American universities, which allowed Eisenschitz to establish the production history of Ray’s films with unprecedented precision. This archival work was buttressed with oral testimony from Ray’s collaborators. “Lived cinema,” for Eisenschitz, “is something that must complement archived cinema.”

The resulting book is a pioneering study, elevating the genre of the Hollywood biography to the status of scholarly research. After charting Ray’s Wisconsin childhood, Eisenschitz follows his career from his agit-prop theater days in the 1930s through his time working within the Hollywood studio system and up to his experimental work in upstate New York in the 1970s. Of these three periods in the filmmaker’s career, the first is the most eye-opening aspect of Eisenschitz’s study. Together with Elia Kazan, Ray participated in political theater troupes such as the Theater of Action and the Federal Theater Project (the latter subsidized by the New Deal-era Works Progress Administration), which sought to agitate for political change and bring culture to the working masses. Ray never joined the Communist Party and subsequently did not feel the full brunt of the Hollywood witch hunt, but his theater activities brought him into close contact with communist militants. Cahiers du cinéma, of course, had always idolized Ray: a young Godard even famously claimed that “if the cinema ceased to exist, only Nicholas Ray gives the impression of being able to reinvent it.” It is in Eisenschitz’s biography, however, that the full extent of Ray’s subversion of the Hollywood studio system is revealed and that his status as a lifelong rebel is highlighted. As Eisenschitz recalls, “he dreamt of another cinema that could concentrate everything in an image and could say everything via the image.” The historian draws satisfaction from Rivette’s observation that “what was interesting about the book is that they couldn’t have imagined that Ray was a crazy visionary like Abel Gance.”

If anything, Eisenschitz’s work on Lang, which reached its culmination with Fritz Lang au travail in 2011, had a longer gestation than the Ray biography. He reports having carried out archival work on Lang as early as 1970, interviewing surviving collaborators for Sadoul’s Histoire générale,

58 Interview with Bernard Eisenschitz, April 7, 2014.
59 Jean-Luc Godard, “Rien que le cinéma (L’Ardente gitane),” Cahiers du cinéma no. 68 (February 1957), pp. 42-44, here p. 42. Translated as “Hot Blood,” in idem., Godard on Godard, trans and ed. Tom Milne, pp. 43-45, here p. 43.
and he has recalled that Lang’s opposition to fascism made him a hero for Eisenschitz’s family of exiles from Austria and Germany. Studying Lang had a twin advantage to the comparable work on Ray. Firstly, thanks to Lang’s friendship with Eisner, the director had donated his meticulously compiled personal archives to the Cinémathèque française, giving Eisenschitz ready access to the material. Secondly, his status as a major filmmaker was widely recognized as early as the 1920s, resulting in a much greater amount of pre-existing historical work. The first fruit of Eisenschitz’s research work was a 1992 monograph on one of Lang’s most politically engaged films, the 1941 work of anti-Nazi propaganda Man Hunt. Here, a 70-page discussion of the film is accompanied by a portfolio of film stills and preparatory sketches drawn from the Cinémathèque’s Fritz Lang archive. Eisenschitz judges that, out of all Lang’s films, Man Hunt is “one of those that most clearly affirms the total imbrication between ‘documentary’ and fantasy.” The film also exemplifies a trait that the historian sees as a general feature of Lang’s work: it allows us to see “the extent to which there is not a Fritz Lang ‘method,’ on the one hand, and his films on the other hand, with his themes, obsessions and styles, but to what degree the movement that goes from what he likes to call the ‘idea’ to the screen is indissolubly linked to his method.”

This notion will also be the guiding principle of Eisenschitz’s major work on Lang, Fritz Lang au travail, which combines a biographical overview of the filmmaker’s life with detailed documentation on the preparation of his films. For a filmmaker who had built up a substantial mythology around himself—but who, in depositing his personal archives, provided the tools for this mythology to be dismantled—the project also entailed carefully separating fact from fiction while avoiding the temptation to salacious revelation that marked earlier efforts such as Patrick McGilligan’s biography of Lang. As with Ray, Lang’s work is dominated by his intractable fidelity to his own artistic vision; for Eisenschitz, his steadfast position is that of “the rejection of compromise and the path of least resistance” and “the struggle against producers, not because they represent money, but because they are more easily satisfied than him.” In this sense, the book is propelled by Lang’s own awakening political consciousness: from the unengaged dandy

63 Ibid., p. 39.
of the 1910s and early 1920s, who was frustrated at the outbreak of revolution during the shoot of his first film, we see a filmmaker progressively pushed into political action through his disgust at fascism. Although Eisenschitz tempers Lang’s own claims that Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse was specifically conceived as a riposte to Hitler, he charts the remarkable twin chronologies of the film’s completion and the rise to power of the Nazis. Shooting finished on the film in mid-January 1933, and by the end of the month Hitler had become Reichskanzler. On February 27, the Reichstag fire gave the pretext for the suppression of constitutional rights, and the March 5 elections gave a sweeping majority to the NSDAP, while communist and social-democratic deputies were forced into exile. On March 20, Mabuse was ready for projection, and the next day its premiere was announced for March 24. On March 23, its run was canceled; the same day, the Reichstag voted in the Ermächtigungsgesetz, giving dictatorial powers to Hitler. On March 28, Goebbels addressed members of the film industry, including Lang, at the Hotel Kaiserhof; the following day, he personally viewed Mabuse. It was banned on March 30. As Eisenschitz summarizes, “Between the conception and the completion of the Testament, the state had passed without resistance into the hands of a gang of criminals, but it is only after the fact that we can put it like that.”

Paradoxically, it is during his exile in Hollywood that Lang’s filmmaking is the most politicized: Man Hunt, Hangmen Also Die! and Ministry of Fear were works specifically conceived to bolster anti-fascist sentiment; at the same time, however, his portraits of the liberal-democratic American society in which he had found refuge, including Fury, You Only Live Once, The Woman in the Window and Beyond a Reasonable Doubt, offered a dark, pessimistic vision of the country. Eisenschitz’s focus on the production history of these films—featuring Lang’s famously stormy relationship with the studio bosses—attests to the filmmaker’s “obsessive relationship with this supplementary, mechanical eye that is the cinema.” But Fritz Lang au travail is also a story of redemption, one in which Cahiers plays a central role. By the 1960s, Lang was an exile from the cinema, unable to find backers for his films, and, as Eisenschitz notes, he was generally considered a “great creator from the silent period, whose ‘American’ period marked his decline.” But the dogged defense of his work by Langlois and the Cahiers critics of the 1950s and 1960s, leading to his appearance in Godard’s Le Mépris, initiated his consecration in France and, subsequently, the rest of the world.

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66 Ibid., p. 97.
67 Ibid., p. 6.
68 Ibid., p. 258.
Chris Marker, Eisenschitz’s third rebel, never worked in the commercial film industry. And yet his long relationship with the PCF and the communist movement on a global level represents a similar institutional dynamic to the relationship Ray and Lang had with the studios, one that involved both working with power when appropriate and establishing a firm autonomy from it when necessary. Eisenschitz recalls meeting the filmmaker at the Leipzig documentary film festival in 1971, where Marker received a prize for his essay on Aleksandr Medvedkin Le Train en marche, and a close collaboration developed between the two in the mid-1980s, when Eisenschitz worked on the subtitles for Marker’s television series L’Héritage de la chouette. Given the proliferation of scholarship on Marker today, it is perhaps astonishing that the Italian anthology Eisenschitz assembled to accompany a retrospective on Marker’s work in Pesaro in 1996 is the first book dedicated to the filmmaker. Eisenschitz has compared it to his earlier publication on Bogart: a “compilation book” gathering a wealth of documents on the subject, in this case articles by Edgardo Cozarinsky, Jean-Louis Leutrat, Louis Seguin and Jean-André Fieschi, the “script” for Sans Soleil and the 1993 epilogue to Le Fond de l’air est rouge, and an annotated filmography collating extracts from a vast number of critical responses to Marker’s films. Eisenschitz’s own contribution is relatively short but no less decisive. Here the historian opposes Marker to Godard, in spite of their obvious affinities. Unlike his comrade-in-arms, Marker “has always been happy to tell stories, and has never abdicated this right, one that is difficult to exercise.” Moreover, Marker’s films would not have come into existence if, for each one, “the only possible technical—and thus narrative—solution to tell the story had not been found.”69 In defending Marker’s work, Eisenschitz was, of course, in conflict with the Cahiers “line” on the filmmaker: far from sidestepping this fact, he confronts it head-on, acknowledging Delahaye’s denunciation of Le Joli Mai and noting the continuities between that text and the later critiques of Le Fond de l’air est rouge. In this polemic, Eisenschitz sees “the incompatibility between two lefts, the left which issued from the resistance and the anti-colonial struggles, and the left which appeared with the 1960s divorce within the communist movement”—but he insists that the value of Marker’s work is in its recognition that these two lefts were nonetheless united “like the scorpion and the frog in Mr. Arkadin.”70

70 Ibid., p. 50.
For Eisenschitz, in spite of the absence of Marker’s face and voice from the films he realized, they are “the most autobiographical films in existence.” Whereas Rouch needed to use his own voice in order to circulate “his unsettling objects” and Godard ended up “launching his body into his films in order to close them off to the outside world,” in Marker’s case “the absence of C.M. evidently only serves to underline his presence—the commentary does not say ‘I,’ but the style does.”71 As a summation of Eisenschitz’s own work as a historian and scholar, these lines could hardly be improved upon. All his texts are written in a self-effacing style, where an objective, neutral tone prevails and where the emphasis is placed on historical fact over individual critical opinion. And yet there is a strong personal side to his major books on the cinema, which Eisenschitz himself has stressed: his decision to dedicate studies on these cinematic rebels represents “profoundly subjective choices, which I try to justify, perhaps, by the great objectivity of the tone, because I prepare argumentations that are as irreproachable as they can be, but my sentiment is that these books are very much linked to my own subjectivity.”72

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