
Abstract
In this chapter, Jean-Louis Comolli’s shift from editor of Cahiers du cinéma to director of fiction and, predominantly, documentary films is followed. After early forays in filmmaking in the late 1960s, his first significant project was La Cecilia in 1976, a fictionalized account of an anarchist commune in Brazil. But the bulk of his cinematic output since the 1980s has been in documentary cinema, the highlight of which has been the multi-part series focusing on electoral politics in the southern French city of Marseilles from the 1980s to the present day, dubbed Marseille contre Marseille. As well as practicing documentary filmmaking, Comolli has also continued to develop his theoretical views on the cinema, resulting in a combination of film theory and practice that has few equivalents in the contemporary era.

Keywords: Jean-Louis Comolli, La Cecilia, anarchism, documentary cinema, political filmmaking, elections in Marseilles

From Film Criticism to Filmmaking: La Cecilia

Alongside Eisenschitz’s work as a film-historian, Comolli’s experience as a filmmaker and theorist of film practice from the 1960s to the present day is the other key site of political engagement exercised by the Cahiers writers. Indeed, in 2006 Comolli would boldly state, “I believe I practice an engaged cinema.” In doing so, he has amassed a corpus of more than forty works of fiction and, more preponderantly, documentary, made for both cinema and television. Released in 1976, La Cecilia was his first post-Cahiers work, and many of the political and technical problematics
that will course throughout Comolli’s later œuvre are already introduced in this film. Comolli often depicts his decision to tackle the historical experience of the Cecilia colony—a colony conceived and piloted by the prominent Italian anarchist Giovanni Rossi—as a direct result of the foundering of the Cahiers project, but the film’s genesis dates to well before this moment: an initial screenplay for La Cecilia was completed in collaboration with Eduardo de Gregorio in late 1971. Moreover, although he now considers La Cecilia to be his “first real film,” Comolli actually already had a degree of experience in filmmaking, taking on directorial duties for television programs on Pierre Perrault and Miklós Jancsó, the documentary Les Deux Marseillaises on the June 1968 French legislative elections (co-directed with André S. Labarthe) and two unreleased short fiction films. Nonetheless, La Cecilia was to be Comolli’s first fiction feature and represented—in both aesthetic and logistical terms—a breakthrough for the budding filmmaker.

One of a large number of socialist communes founded in the Americas by European émigrés in the nineteenth century, La Cecilia was initiated by Rossi and ten other settlers in Brazil in April 1890 and lasted four years, growing to a population of 150 before its collapse and the colonists’ return to Italy. Trained in agricultural science, Rossi considered the commune to have been a successful preliminary “experiment.” Despite the material hardship involved in building a sustainable social unit from scratch, La Cecilia’s inhabitants “led an existence that overflowed with vitality, that trembled with excitement.” And yet the initial version of Comolli’s project was guided by a critique of, in his words: “what we called at the time (1971), in a rather condescending fashion, [...] the ‘anarchizing tendencies of the

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2 An early, undated version of Comolli/de Gregorio’s script, noticeably different to the completed film, is presently available for consultation in the Cinémathèque française archives in Paris under the reference code SCEN492-B145.


4 Of these works, Comolli now only mentions Les Deux Marseillaises in his filmography. The two television programs, part of Labarthe’s “Cinéastes de notre temps” series, can be viewed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. The two short films, Un coup pour rien and Comme je te veux (both 1970), which were made under amateur conditions and never released commercially, are not presently available for viewing. A screenplay for the former film, however, is housed in the archives of the Cinémathèque française (reference code BERAUDz-Bj) and reveals a Gidean narrative concerning two would-be left-wing terrorists who plan to assassinate a provincial industrialist.

intellectual petty-bourgeoisie.” As Comolli’s project progressed, however, its critical target changed in nature: henceforth, the film would interrogate the broader question of the revolutionary intellectual’s role in the class struggle. Or as the critic-turned-filmmaker put it: “The negative character changed: it is no longer Rossi the anarchist (and through him the negative nature of anarchism), but Rossi the theorist, the master of the experiment who arranges matters so as not to be at risk. It is not only politics [...] that Rossi represses, but also the discourse and the body of the other, the desire of the other, about which he wants to know nothing.”

It is possible that Comolli had always been attracted to this material due to its resonance with his own experience in the theoretical and political cauldron that was the Cahiers team in the late 1960s and early 1970s—cut off, to a large degree, from broader political struggles and obsessively focused on internal disputes and the clarification of its “line.” But once he had detached himself from the journal, La Cecilia much more tangibly acquired the status of an allegory for the critic’s period at Cahiers. Looking at the work retrospectively, Comolli acknowledges that “in truth, the subject, or the theme, of the film was concealed, since it was really a film which spoke about what had happened in the Cahiers group in the months beforehand,” and it is evident that the figure of Giovanni Rossi can function as a cipher for Comolli and Narboni’s position within Cahiers, having voluntarily dissolved their privileged status as editors-in-chief into a broader collective grouping at the time of the journal’s radicalization. Indeed, the question of leadership within far-left movements is of fundamental importance in the film: as instigator of the commune and its theoretical driving force, Giovanni Rossi cannot help but play a role as leader, but he remains a character who refuses this function through an “admirable excess of historical awareness.” At crucial junctures, however, La Cecilia is found to be in need of leadership, and it is here that Rossi will abrogate his responsibilities to the group he had established, preferring to play the role of external observer in a manner befitting his scientific background.

More broadly, the dynamic of the film is generated by the intersection between external historical forces and contradictions internal to the

7 Ibid.
8 The quotes in this paragraph are from Jean-Louis Comolli, interviewed by Daniel Fairfax, “Yes, we were utopians; in a way, I still am…: An Interview with Jean-Louis Comolli (part 2),” Senses of Cinema 64 (September 2012), sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/yes-we-were-utopians-in-a-way-i-still-am-interview-with-jean-louis-comolli-part-2/ (accessed January 1, 2021).
commune. In *La Cecilia*, history functions not as an “absolute outside, a master-reference” but as a “causal outside, an outside within the inside, which acts on it, determines it and transforms it in the very process of being repressed by it.” Thus, the film is punctuated by incursions of outside history into the enclosed world of the Cecilia commune, frequently depicted through the use of framing and scenographic composition. For example, when Rossi and a fellow communard, Rocco, venture to a general store to buy supplies, they are met with hostility and aloofness from the storeowner and local customers, who see Italian migrants as an unwelcome threat to their standard of living. This economic contradiction is depicted in the spatial construction of the scene. As a caption in *Cahiers* notes: “The two universes are hermetically sealed from one another, there is no communication apart from the exchange or purchase of domestic products; hence, there are no common visual codes. Nobody is worthy of a look, nobody is seen by anybody else.”

Similarly, when the group pays a collective visit to the governor’s house to discuss the revocation of their title deed to La Cecilia, the contrast between the communards and the functionary they address is multiply connoted: their working-class dress and impassioned diction contrast with the stiff formality of the bureaucrat who receives them, while their ebullient gestures and movements perpetually spill out over the boundaries of a scenic space that can barely contain them. It is at this point, however, that the internal contradictions within the group burst out into the open. While Rossi is on a lecture tour of Italy, a mass meeting is called to discuss the situation facing the commune. A sharp division arises between those who insist that a vote be taken on sending the group’s proletarian members to a government road-building unit in order to pay off La Cecilia’s debt to the new republic, and those—led by Luigi, the embodiment of an unwavering, purist attachment to the ideals of libertarian anarchism—who see this as the onset of an insidious form of “parliamentarism.” No political common ground exists between the two groups; they are shown facing off against each other from either side of a visual chasm.

The most overt use of screen space to depict the pressures to which the group is subject, however, comes at the end of *La Cecilia*. In high spirits, the group stages a reading of *Dantons Tod* by Georg Büchner. Significantly, Luigi

10 The caption appears in *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 264, p. 47.
11 There is some irony to the use of the play in *La Cecilia: Dantons Tod* is far from being an unambiguous celebration of the revolutionary zeal of the Jacobin wing of the revolutionary movement, which is the spirit in which the Cecilia group performs the text.
plays the character of Robespierre, while Rossi has no role *per se*, instead whispering lines from the text for all the characters—a function that is symbolic of his relationship to the commune. The intellectual Lorenzini, meanwhile, is given the role of a *sans-culotte*, who declaims, at one point, the revolutionary catch-cry “in the name of the law, there is no law.” The others applaud the uncompromising sentiment of the phrase, but Rossi stops and looks off-screen. A slow lateral pan reveals—by means of an “irruption of the *hors-champ*” an officer from the republican army standing in the doorway. He informs the inhabitants of La Cecilia that they have been conscripted to quash a nearby rebellion and will be escorted to military headquarters in one hour’s time. The group is crestfallen, their dream of an anarchist utopia has been snuffed out by the repressive state apparatus, but it is Luigi—not, pointedly, Rossi—who has the last word: “Italy? Why not? Brazil? Why not? Anywhere is fine... But not here. Not like this. Our place is no longer here. There are other things to do.”

That *La Cecilia* should end with a theatrical scene was a deliberate move by Comolli and formally rhymes with the film’s opening moments in which Rossi meets Dom Pedro during a performance of *Nabucco* in Milan. The film is thus bookended by allusions to the theater, which, Comolli claims, should be viewed as the “toppling over of fiction, as the superposition, dislocation [*décalage*] or unhinging of two representations (the filmic scene and the theatrical scene), one on top of the other, one against the other.” A similar bifurcation of the scene is produced within the shot itself through the use of depth of field. The deep-focus lenses used by Comolli on the film yielded images whose multiple layers possessed equal visual clarity. Building on the theoretical discussion already adumbrated in “Technique et idéologie” in 1971, Comolli rejects the Bazinian notion that this technique reinforces the “realism” of the cinematic image. Instead, it “theatricalizes the shot,” thereby denouncing the cinematic image as an artificial construction, most notably through the production of a “lateral-vertical *decentering* of the ‘subjects.’” More than a mere “montage within the shot,” such an image offers a “re-inscription of theatrical space and duration, [...]” where the performance [*jeu*] of the actors involves an interplay with the other actors and the elements of the decor, and where the bodies are always captured

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12 Comolli notes that this sentence possesses an “extraordinary violence” and that the chosen conclusion to the film gestured towards “turning the end of the Colonia Cecilia into a larger version of all stories of failed utopias.” Comolli, “How to Film History.”
13 The quote comes from another caption in *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 264, this one on p. 49.
within a given space and time."15 Certainly, La Cecilia is replete with striking depth of field compositions, and these are frequently combined with roaming, Jancsóesque long-takes, including one majestic shot early in the film that lasts nearly seven minutes. Formal inventiveness is also evident on the level of sound, where frequent bursts of anarchist song contrapuntally punctuate the film’s diegesis, as well as in La Cecilia’s lacunary, decentered narrative structure.16 Whether these innovations represented a significant challenge to the formal conventions of mainstream filmmaking—as had been advocated by Comolli during his time at Cahiers—was nonetheless a disputed question in the reception of the film. Writing for rival film journal Image et son, André Cornand states that “To say that La Cecilia breaks with the habitual working methods, just as it shatters the narrative, to say that it departs from the habitual codes of cinematic representation, amounts to either being ignorant of the cinema or to displaying a certain contempt for everything that has been made in the last few years.”17 From an English perspective, Alison Smith tentatively agrees with this claim, writing that Comolli’s chosen aesthetic strategy is “rather a disappointment, or at least a strange compromise, and unadventurous in comparison with the ideals […] Comolli praised in his theoretical work.”18 Of further concern for Smith—and in this she echoed earlier reservations aired during an interview with Comolli by the magazine Ciné-Tracts after a poorly received screening of his film during a conference in Milwaukee—is the representation of women in La Cecilia. For most of the film, the only female inhabitant of the colony is Olimpia, who is presented in an idealized, Milletian manner as a paragon of swarthy beauty. She forms the object of desire for a number of the colonists, including Rossi himself, who embarks on an “experiment in free love” with her that consumes much of the latter half of La Cecilia.19 In contrast to Rossi’s

16 Comolli felt that the film’s music was “the other side of speech, the other sound of the voice, the other voice that is superposed on top of the voice making a speech [discours], the other discourse running underneath that of the logos, of ideology, anticipating it or prolonging it.” Comolli, La Cecilia, p. 104.
17 Cornand even avers that Rossi’s failure is an unintended metaphor for Comolli’s own “failed” passage from film theory to direction. See André Cornand, “La Cecilia,” Revue du cinéma/Image et son, no. 304 (March 1976), pp. 73-76, here p. 76.
19 The fictional Olimpia is an amalgam of two figures from Rossi’s account of the Cecilia commune: an unnamed individual who was the only female member of the initial settlement,
abstract intellectualism, Olimpia embodies an intuitive instinct for the core principles of anarchism, and the portrayal of her character was viewed by many of those in the Milwaukee audience as sexist and outdated. Comolli, however, contested the notion that his film was sexist, claiming that the audience in question exhibited “a profound lack of understanding of how the image functions” by reading the character on a purely psychological level rather than as a “logical sign.”

The reception the film garnered on the pages of Cahiers itself was decidedly more enigmatic. While space was given to Comolli to elucidate the principles behind La Cecilia, the film also inspired three reviews—by Toubiana, Daney and Kané—which all seem to be written in a private code: overtly speaking about the film at the same time as covertly discussing their earlier experiences with Comolli at the journal. Toubiana, for instance, writes about the “trauma” provoked by the group’s “encounter with the real,” while Daney begins his review with the statement: “There is a phrase that one never hears in La Cecilia. ‘I told you so! I said that things would end badly, that it couldn’t succeed.’” Kané, meanwhile, stresses the importance of play (le jeu) in Comolli’s film. When looking back at La Cecilia, this is also the aspect that the director himself emphasizes: although he used professional actors, the nature of the shoot led to a jubilant spirit of freedom and improvisation reigning on the set, such that, in Comolli’s view, “the little troupe of actors and technicians unwittingly became a homologue to the pioneers of this anarchist commune.” In the process, Comolli’s own position as director was transformed. He came to see all the participants as equal collaborators on the project, a transformation that was partly an unforeseen consequence of his own inexperience on set: “I was the young rookie […] in a film where I did not comprehend what was going on, with actors who I could not understand (in reality, they directed me, rather than vice versa).”

and a later arrival called Elèda with whom Rossi undertook his “experiment.” The presence of a single woman in the film has clear parallels with the situation at Cahiers, where Sylvie Pierre found herself in an otherwise entirely male group.

25 Comolli, “Yes, we were utopians (Part 2).”
Fiction and Non-Fiction: From *L’Ombre rouge* to *Tous pour un!*

*La Cecilia* was a moderate critical and commercial success, but Comolli’s entry into the world of auteur filmmaking would be far from straightforward. His next project, based on an ambitious script (which would have yielded a 265-minute film), focused on the Paris commune, but although shooting was announced for late 1978, the film was never realized. In spite of the commitment of an impressive list of actors (Gérard Depardieu, Claudia Cardinale, Brigitte Fossey and Andréa Ferréol), backing from the *avance sur récettes* funding system and an Italian co-producer, Comolli was unable, “through a lack of force in the conception and the initiative of the production, to go beyond these initial steps.” When this project fell through, his energies were turned to another undertaking, *L’Ombre rouge*, a story of political espionage set during the Spanish Civil War, with two Marseilles-based weapons traffickers for the USSR, Anton and Leo, as the protagonists.

As with *La Cecilia* and *La Commune* then, *L’Ombre rouge* was a historical film—a cinematic genre Comolli had written about in guest articles for *Cahiers* in the late 1970s. In “Un corps en trop,” for instance, he had specifically treated the problem of actors playing historical characters in period fictions: turning to Renoir’s *La Marseillaise*, he remarks on the existence of a “bodily rivalry” between Pierre Renoir playing Louis XVI and the real-life monarch, which Jean Renoir solves by representing the difficulty of performing the role within the very performance of his brother. The affinities between Comolli’s three projects go deeper than this, however: all three focused on the complications of commitment, with its concomitant defeats and compromises, interrogating what it means to live with a political ideal—which, for Daney, is “Comolli’s eternal question.” Furthermore, as Comolli outlines, all three relate “the same type of story: the difficult, dialectical relations between subjects and the group to which they belong.” As with *La Cecilia*, the conclusion of *L’Ombre rouge* is a pessimistic one. Despite his dedication to the Comintern, Anton faces being recalled to Moscow, where he will inevitably face a show trial, and instead commits suicide. Leo, in

26 According to a notice in the March 20, 1978 edition of *Le Figaro*, which gave the film’s working title as *La Commune*.
30 Comolli, ”Entretien avec Jean-Louis Comolli,” p. 23.
despair and fleeing his Soviet pursuers, utters what Daney called a “famous line of dialogue” lamenting the futility of his revolutionary activities: “A whole life for nothing!” It was on this apparent fatalism that reviewers of the film were most divided: writing for Révolution, PCF critic Émile Breton denounced the film as a “spit in the face” to the communist movement and upbraided his colleagues for their more laudatory response to the film.

The conventional, even glossy style of L’Ombre rouge also raised eyebrows in certain quarters. Comolli himself noted his attraction to “a certain image of classical cinema” and felt there were similarities between L’Ombre rouge and the serial films of Feuillade. He even came out in favor of “transparent” filmmaking, claiming, “I am still a partisan of a certain transparency, which means that the active part of writing must not be detected immediately, but act on a pre-conscious level.”

Michel Mardore compared its style with that of the anti-communist comic Tintin au pays des Soviets—a trait bolstered by the fact that a graphic novel adaptation of the film drawn in Hergé’s ligne claire style by Ted Benoit was published in tandem with the film’s release. Similarly, Daney, although broadly supportive of the endeavour, nonetheless expressed reservations about its “retro glazing effects.”

In spite of the thematic similarity with La Cecilia, the production of L’Ombre rouge was of a very different nature to that of the earlier film: with a budget of 6 million francs, a script co-written with historian Gérard Guicheteau, and the involvement of star actors (Claude Brasseur, Jacques Dutronc and Nathalie Baye), Comolli’s second feature-length fiction much more closely conformed to the norms of French commercial cinema. For the director, however, this episode in his filmmaking career was a mixed one: while he found working within an industrial structure of filmmaking to have a “pedagogical, didactic” value, the more rigidly organized nature of the shoot was “not a joyful experience” and did not sit easily with Comolli’s preference for improvisation and spontaneity. His following film, Balles perdues (a comedy thriller from 1983) returned to this looser filmmaking spirit, but its box-office failure seemed to block the way for Comolli to make any further progress in fiction filmmaking. The only fictional works since completed by Comolli are Le Bal d’Irène, a

1986 television film, and *Pétition*, an adaptation of the Václav Havel play made the same year. From this point on, his energies would be focused on documentary filmmaking, for the most part conceived for television broadcast. Two projects made in the years 1987-1988 were decisive in Comolli’s transition to the documentary mode and brought an end to the “blurred zone” that the period 1982-1987 represented in Comolli’s own eyes. Both were made for public television, and in the period since the 1980s this would be the filmmaker’s preferred distribution platform. As Comolli explains, his decision to work in television rather than cinema was a consciously political choice to “maintain the principle of a political and artistic public sphere.” Not only was he able “to show on the small screen (as much as possible) formal systems which diverge from the dominant ones” but, through the sheer mass of television spectators (many times more than even a successful art-house release could achieve), his work could also “reach viewers who have not already been strictly classified within the cultural segments of the markets.” Although Comolli continues to see television as a “majoritarian ideological apparatus, a system of control of behavior and thought, a shop-window for commodified society,” he insists that it is possible to “fight against the adversary within the boundaries of its own activity.” In the case of Comolli’s electoral films, their television broadcast was of particular importance: it enabled these works to be present in the very space where, to a large degree, election campaigns in the contemporary era are played out and provided the possibility for “a different political experience from that of the ‘spectacle’ to which television tries to habituate us.”

*Tabarka 42-87* (1987) was of obvious personal relevance for Comolli: the film charts the return to the Tunisian town of Tabarka of the settler-communities who had lived there until the end of the colonial era. Despite mainly being of Spanish and Italian origin, these residents were classified as French by the colonial authorities, and they mostly left for Europe in the wake of Tunisian independence. Upon visiting Tabarka in 1987, they are warmly welcomed by the local inhabitants, eager to reunite with former neighbors and friends, and the two communities enjoy a feast together in commemoration of the bombing of the area by the German *Luftwaffe* in 1942. A low-key work, the film nonetheless conveys a humanist perspective in

35 Comolli, *Voir et pouvoir*, p. 27.
36 Comolli, *Cinéma contre spectacle*, pp. 78-79 [p. 105].
37 Comolli, *Voir et pouvoir*, p. 663.
38 Ibid., p. 593.
its depiction of solidarity across racial and religious divisions and presents an optimistic political vision of the potential for the scars of colonialism to be healed through tolerance and hospitality. It was the production of Tabarka 42-87 that led to Comolli’s discovery of “the great emotion involved in filming my contemporaries in a documentary—that is, in their fiction and not just in my fiction,”39 and it was the first film in which he developed a filmmaking dispositif that has governed his documentary work since then. This approach consists essentially of three “rules of the game,” which have the goal of “trying to receive the aleatory soul of polymorphous events”: firstly, to “organize as little as possible, and in moments of grace to not organize at all,” secondly, “to efface (or blur) the boundary between life and the scene” and, finally, “to reduce the distance between the camera and the people it films.”40

First established for Tabarka 42-87, these principles were also followed during the filming of Tous pour un! (1988), which focused on the two rounds of the 1988 French presidential election, and which is the main pivoting point of Comolli’s work as a filmmaker. With its focus on grassroots activity during an election campaign, Tous pour un! returned to the subject matter of Les deux Marseillaises, which had treated the legislative elections in the same north-western district of the Parisian banlieue (Asnières) twenty years earlier. The 1968 election saw the right convincingly retain power on the national stage in a wave of conservative reaction to the events of May.41 On the local level, Gaullist candidate Albin Chalandon (a minister under de Gaulle) saw off both the PCF and the socialists, who had nominated actor Roger Hanin as a candidate. In the 1980s, it was President François Mitterand whose power was confirmed at the ballot box, shattering the hopes of the right that rival candidate Jacques Chirac would be able to topple him. As with the earlier film, Comolli retains a degree of even-handedness in his treatment of the different political parties, and his interviews with militants also dismantle the tribalist myth of parliamentary politics, as many confess to backgrounds in rival groupings. The main shock, however, of the 1988 election—both to the French political system and the cross-party ecumenism Comolli had cultivated—was the rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front national (FN). Absent in the previous presidential election, the far-right candidate

39 Ibid., p. 27.
40 Ibid., pp. 33-34.
41 The election was called for during a radio broadcast by de Gaulle, in which he refused to resign the presidency and called for the defense of parliament democracy against “totalitarian” forces. This address can be heard on the soundtrack in the opening sequence of Les deux Marseillaises.
won nearly 15% of the vote in the first round, effectively scuppering Chirac’s chances of unifying the right to defeat Mitterand. The spectacular entry of a xenophobic extremist fringe into French politics represented a profound metamorphosis of the electoral landscape, whose effects are still being felt today. With his adamant opposition to the far right, it also tested Comolli’s approach to documenting the political process, a challenge that centered around the question of whether FN members should be filmed in the same manner as their counterparts from other political parties. This dilemma would preoccupy the filmmaker for much of the following decade.

**Marseille contre Marseille (I): Filming the Political**

More particularly, this ethical problem would haunt Comolli’s most significant work on electoral politics, the ten-part series retrospectively titled *Marseille contre Marseille* extending from the late 1980s to the present: eight “episodes” were filmed in quick succession in the period 1989-2001, while two “epilogues” dating from 2008 and 2014 have subsequently been completed. In total, the released films come to approximately 13½ hours of running time. The succession of glimpses into political life in Marseilles combines to produce a grand fresco of the city during a period of significant social transition in France. Initially conceived for television broadcast, the episodes of *Marseille contre Marseille* have more recently been projected in cinémathèques, cultural centers and museums across France.42 While Comolli admits to affinities between his series and other documentaries on electoral campaigns (such as *Primary* by D.A. Pennebaker and 50.81% by Raymond Depardon), the vast temporal scope of the series sets it apart from these works and brings it closer to the ethnographic studies of Rouch. Comolli, indeed, has been explicit that “Our approach is closer to anthropology than it is to journalism.”43 While the city itself and its political machinery

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42 At the same time, the possibility of broadcasting the episodes on television has significantly dwindled: whereas *Marseille de père en fils* was shown on both France 3 and Arte, *Rêves de France à Marseille* could not find a television partner and instead was released in theaters in 2003. The two epilogues, meanwhile, were produced for a much smaller budget by the INA (Institut national de l’audiovisuel) and are primarily available for viewing on its website.

are explored at length in the series, individual participants in Marseilles politics have also become recurring characters, aging, growing in stature, or disappearing in disgrace or ignominy, while new figures enter the stage. Some even make improbable comebacks. In the first installment of the series, for instance, conservative politician Jean-Claude Gaudin resigns himself to the fact that he will not become the mayor of Marseille. Six years later he was elected to the post, which he held until 2020.

Comolli’s turn to documentary filmmaking in the late 1980s was also accompanied by a return to film theory after a hiatus of more than a decade in which he wrote very little on the cinema. Since this time, he has amassed a theoretical output totalling nearly 2000 pages, a wide selection of which is contained in the two critical anthologies *Voir et pouvoir* and *Corps et cadre*. While Comolli’s broader theoretical outlook on the position of cinema in the contemporary era will be discussed more deeply in the epilogue, much of this material directly addresses his own documentary filmmaking, and this theoretical reflection immeasurably enriches the value of the films he has made in this period. Comolli, therefore, merits a status as one of the great theorist-practitioners of the cinema in the lineage of Eisenstein, Epstein, Pasolini and Godard, and the proceeding analysis of the *Marseille contre Marseille* series will seek to intertwine his filmmaking with his film theory as two complementary, dialectically interacting aspects of an integral cinematic praxis.

The genesis of the *Marseille contre Marseille* series owed much to circumstance. Comolli had biographical ties to the city (the port of entry for many of those migrating from Algeria to France), and shooting *L’Ombre rouge* in Marseilles renewed his affection for it. His original project in the late 1980s, however, was a documentary on the diverse religious communities of Marseilles, a city whose status as a migrant hub has turned it into a melting pot of different denominations. It was in the middle of filming this project that the Marseilles political scene exploded: Gaston Defferre, the politically impregnable socialist mayor of the city who had been in office since 1953, was challenged for control of the party apparatus by younger rival Michel Pezet. The latter won in a bruising political battle, and on the night of Pezet’s designation as secretary-general of the regional branch of the Parti socialiste (PS) in May 1986, Defferre died of a brain hemorrhage after falling in his home. The spectacular death of Defferre, around whose individual figure so much power in the city had been accumulated, was a traumatic moment for political life in Marseilles, and in the absence of an anointed dauphin a fratricidal war of succession between Defferre loyalists and Pezet’s supporters broke out, with Pezet accused by Defferre’s widow,
the writer Edmonde Charles-Roux, of having contributed to the mayor’s death. Comolli was inexorably drawn to this topic, and he sees it as “one of the strengths of documentary filmmaking” that he was quickly able to “change course and begin a new film.”

He saw the internal battle within the PS as a “tragic combat, which, with its intrigues, conspiracies and family feuds, was practically Shakespearian,” and the mythological nature of the dispute forms a key part of the tapestry woven into the two-part overture to the series completed in 1989, Marseille de père en fils, whose three hours of screen time were drawn from 100 hours of raw footage edited over the course of seven months.

In charting the internal battle between Pezet and the pro-Defferre forces, led by Robert Vigouroux, who would eventually prevail and be elected mayor of Marseille, Comolli gained a premonitory glimpse into a process of political degeneration wherein, by 1999, he could attest that “the PS in Marseilles ha[s] almost entirely self-destructed (if not as a ‘system,’ then at least as a political force and direction) and only recompos[ed] itself from within as a simulacrum.”

This process presaged the decomposition of the PS on a national level: the Marseille battle preceded the split in the party that took place at its 1990 congress in Rennes, as the Mitterand administration was riven by corruption scandals and personal rivalries. Weakened in strongholds such as Marseille, the party would go on to a disastrous result in the legislative elections of 1993. It won only 53 seats out of 577 (down from 260), and soon after the election result, outgoing prime minister Pierre Bérégovoy committed suicide. Moreover, local-level politics in Marseilles echoed the political shockwave represented by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, an event whose global repercussions would have a notable effect on both the left and the right in France. By the time of Marseille en mars, filmed in 1993, the dramatic changes in the world political order had been consciously registered by all sides of politics. While it was predictable that the collapse of communism and the erection of a global neoliberal hegemony would lead to a crisis of identity for the left, Comolli also reveals anxiety among the traditional forces of the right. Jean-François Mattei, a candidate for the center-right Union pour la démocratie française, admits that in the “brutal confrontation” between

44 Comolli, “Yes, we were utopians (Part 2).”


collectivism and capitalism in the twentieth century, neither side proved satisfactory: while the Soviet Union “was incapable of constructing a society fit for humans,” free-market capitalism in the US has led to 37 million Americans living in poverty. In a downcast mood, the politician concludes that “without political references or values, we are doomed.” His despair is accentuated by Comolli’s montage: immediately before the interview with Mattei, a local voter being handed a leaflet by an environmentalist candidate can be heard exclaiming, “Le Pen’s the only one who’s making things happen.”

In order for the series to adequately take stock of politics in the southern city, however, an extra element was felt to be necessary for the project. As Comolli explains:

I immediately realized that, in order to make this new film on the political battle being waged in Marseilles, I needed the support of someone who was intimately familiar with the city’s politics. I had read Michel Samson’s articles in Libération, and I found him a very interesting journalist, so I went to Paris and asked to meet him. When we met, I knew I would work with him right away. I said that I was interested in working with a journalist, because he has the requisite knowledge and contacts, an entire network that I don’t have access to, but only on the condition that he truly become a character in the film, because I had no desire to simply have an expert lurking in the shadows. 47

Samson has centrally participated in all the Marseilles films and is credited as co-author of the Marseille contre Marseille series. His on-screen presence as an investigator into the back corridors of political power, probing and pursuing his interlocutors with mild-mannered persistence, instills the series with an unmistakably cinematic quality, giving it resonances above all with the detective genre. Samson’s drives through the city recall Lemmy Caution in Alphaville (a film that was already cited in Les deux Marseillaises), while Patrick Leboutte has compared him to Peter Falk in the Colombo TV series. 48 Comolli, meanwhile, stresses the importance of Samson’s physical body to the aesthetic needs of his approach to documentary: “I explained to him that I needed his body to be filmed. The body of the journalist had to become the body of a character, it had to be exposed, and its fragility, its

47 Comolli, “Yes, we were utopians (Part 2).”
weakness had to be shown.” Comolli has theorized the human body in the cinema as a repository of “filmed speech” (la parole filmée), arguing that since *Chronique d’un été* (the first documentary to use synch sound on location), the documentary has been able to “push the inscription of the body to its furthest extent. Further, even, than the theater.” For Comolli, *Marseille contre Marseille* has highlighted “the subtle, ill-defined link between erotics and politics,” and the goal of his series is to “film bodies, to film political men and women in Marseilles as bodies, speaking, mobile bodies, in space and time, playing between light and shadow, off-screen and on-screen, in short, cinematic bodies.” Noting that Samson is often filmed partially blocking the spectator’s view of his interlocutors, Comolli argues that his body “re-frames the frame somewhat, inscribes itself in the frame as a screen or a mask [cache]: a surface on which words and looks rebound.”

The question of on-screen corporeal presence in the Marseilles films is closely linked to Comolli’s use of duration, which is present in the series in two major ways. Firstly, the aesthetic technique adopted for the series relies heavily on lengthy, uninterrupted takes focusing on the “speaking bodies” of local political figures. Secondly, the extension of the series over the course, now, of a quarter of a century introduces an additional element of duration to the project, one linked to the Braudelian notion of the longue durée, registering subtler, long-term processes at work beyond the more immediately recognizable electoral peripeteia that monopolize media coverage of the political scene. As Comolli has recognized, the fact that the series preserves moments of political life that would otherwise be washed away by cultural amnesia has significantly altered the interaction between the filmmakers and their interviewees: the politicians shown in *Marseille contre Marseille* now know “that we are constructing an archive of the future, and that part of their public action will pass to posterity in this filmed form. They tell themselves that here, perhaps, there is a date with something like history.” As *Marseille contre Marseille* stretched first into the 1990s and then into the 2000s, these two modes in which time and cinema intersect have come to the forefront of the project.

49 Comolli, “Yes, we were utopians (Part 2.).”
Marseille contre Marseille (II): Filming the Enemy

A predilection for the long-take aesthetic has been a perennial feature of Comolli’s filmmaking since La Cecilia and has come to feature heavily in the Marseilles films. Comolli has expressly drawn on the theory of Bazin to link this procedure to an understanding of the cinema’s ability to produce a “true inscription”—understood here as the “specificity of the cinema to bring together, in the same space-time (the scene) one or more bodies (actors or not) and a mechanical dispositif, camera, sound, lights, technicians.” For Comolli, however, the “ontological realism” of the cinema lies “less on the side of the photograph as imprint of the visible world, and more on the side of time, of a common time, of an elapsing of time common to the action and its recording, of a synchronism.”

Experimenting with this form of duration in the Marseille contre Marseille series, meanwhile, intensifies the political nature of the long-take technique and derives not only from the material used in the final edit of the film but also in the nature of the filming process. Filming an interview with a politician that endures for up to two hours creates a markedly different dynamic between the individual and their on-screen image than that which currently prevails in media coverage of election campaigns. Instead of reducing discourse to a brief, stage-managed soundbite, it allows for freedom and improvisation and fosters a certain loss of control. Comolli notes the importance of allowing tiredness to settle in—on the part of Samson, his interviewees and the filmmakers—and argues that this process opens up “a certain charging of time: suddenly, speech is no longer organized in the same way. When you speak for a duration of two hours, for example, even if we only use two minutes of it in the film, these two minutes taken from two hours will be different from two minutes taken from twenty minutes, or two minutes taken from two minutes. The form of speech changes.”

Retaining these conversations in uninterrupted long takes has become a formal hallmark of the series. Indeed, the fact that the editing rhythm of the films departs so markedly from the frenetic pace of most televsional image production is a large part of its subversive effect and brings it closer to the work of contemporary “slow cinema” filmmakers, whose work has been defended by Comolli in his recent writings on cinema. A notable early

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55 Comolli, “Yes, we were utopians (Part 2).”
instance of this procedure was visible in Marseille de père en fils: a five-minute take shows Samson walking along the La Joliette wharf in the Marseille docklands with Defferre supporter Charles-Émile Loo (nicknamed Milou) as he delivers a “Jesuitical monologue on the art and the manner of killing the father without doing anyone harm.” Editor Anne Baudry had difficulties with cutting the sequence and so eventually took the radical option of retaining it in its entirety. For Comolli, it is only by showing the scene in continuity that he can adequately represent the progressive divergence between the bodies of Samson and Milou—reflecting the sense of unease that Samson feels towards the rhetorical dissemblances of the PS apparatchik. This “co-presence of elements,” then, serves principally to highlight a political divide: “it is no longer possible to see Milou without seeing the gap opened up by the growing absence of Samson, who is absent by the very fact of his presence. Like the scene, the gaze of the spectator is split into two.”

This aesthetic approach became more politically trenchant in later episodes of Marseille contre Marseille, which, throughout the 1990s, were dominated by the entry onto the political stage of two larger-than-life, populist figures. On the left, flamboyant businessman Bernard Tapie—owner of the Olympique de Marseille football club and briefly a minister under Mitterand—sought control over the city’s politics, pursuing a glitzy, personality-based campaign that local poet and independent candidate Christian Poitevin lambasted as the “Americanization” of French politics. Tapie’s star shone brightly but briefly: by the late 1990s he was mired in debt and corruption scandals and banned from seeking public office. Of more enduring influence was the Front national’s strategic offensive to “take” the Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur region, which involved campaigns by Jean-Marie Le Pen and Bruno Mégret. Growing support for the FN amongst the non-immigrant working class in Marseilles was bolstered by its dominance in surrounding rural areas. In filming the 1992 regional elections for La campagne de provence, Comolli’s focus rested on the relationship between the FN’s growing political support and the victories it made on the semiotic level. The language it used, speaking of an “invasion” of France by immigrants and of threats to the country’s “identity,” had seeped into the political mainstream, even when the FN was unable to win electoral power. Indeed, this “ideological victory” was consciously understood by

57 Gerstenkorn/Goutte, Cinéma en campagne, p. 61.
58 Althabe/Comolli, Regards sur la ville, p. 48.
Mégrét—unwittingly espousing a Gramscian strategy—as preparing the ground for the “political victory” to come.59

Filming the Front national re-framed the question of Comolli’s own political engagement. He and Samson could remain detached observers to the infighting within the PS. They were also able to retain a “republican” respect for figures of the center-right such as Gaudin, who “even if we do not share his political ideas, moves us in his contradictions.” When it came to the Le Penists, by contrast, Comolli was moved to affirm that “our position is that of the engaged, and thus actively anti-fascist filmmaker. I fight the Front National, including when I film them.”60 How exactly to do this in the most effective manner possible was a constant concern and has given rise to several articles by Comolli on the question of “filming the enemy.” FN militants had already been recorded on camera for Tous pour un! and Marseille de père en fils. Despite witnessing some revelatory moments (activists singing racist songs, for instance), Comolli discarded the footage as too distant from the central projects of these films. These experiences were nonetheless seen as a valuable first stage in encountering the FN, one which entailed “filming in order to know them better, but not yet filming in order to combat them better.”61

As Le Pen rose in political prominence, this question was again posed, but the two films that focus most on the FN in the 1990s—La Campagne de Provence from 1992 and La Question des alliances five years later—offer different strategies for filming one’s political adversary. As Comolli explains:

For La Campagne de Provence, which shows how the themes of the Front national became the themes of the campaign, we chose to film all individuals and parties in the same manner, in a sort of equilibrated distance, so as to avoid any privileged relationship. The same distance for everybody, no private interviews, but rather, always in public circumstances. La Question des alliances led us to change our dispositif. The Front national had become a major political force, distance could not work a second time, and we decided to carry out very long, very precise, very well-prepared interviews on the strategies that the parties—above all those on the right—had towards the FN.62

59 Mégrét himself left the FN in 1999 and ran for president in 2002 as a candidate for the Mouvement national républicain.
60 Comolli, “La chronique Marseillaise,” p. 5.
In both examples, duration once again comes to the fore. For Comolli, Le Pen’s political success is at least partly derived from “the manner in which politics is dealt with on television.” Le Pen is “a champion of the soundbite, he is a champion of the slogan,” and the FN has contributed towards shifting politics to a level of discourse that resembles advertising or PR. Hence, the long takes of the film not only combat the forms of contemporary media coverage, they also have a deeply political purpose, allowing Front national figures like Le Pen and Mégret to effectively reveal their own mendacity: “By filming Bruno Mégret for an hour or more, his cunning and ambitiousness appear. His strategy becomes visible on a psychological level.” As such, Comolli became critical of his earlier attempts, in *La campagne de Provence*, to accentuate the “monstrousness” of the FN’s ideological discourse by mannerist filmic touches—distorted frames, green-tinged lighting, an ironically discordant jazz score by Louis Sclavis—describing it as a “rather desperate effort” to “push the spectator towards a logical sentiment of horror and revolt when faced with the ordinary monstrosities of the FN.” Later films in the series treating the FN—*Marseille en mars* and *La question des alliances*—are thus filmed in a soberer, less politically slanted manner, but this “defeat of propaganda” is now understood as a more effective means of waging political struggle. The FN is henceforth filmed in such a way as to “give body and presence to the enemy, so that it appears in its strength, such as it is today on the political scene—a threat to be taken seriously. Here, horror is not a caricature. It lies within logical thinking, reasoning, calculation, negotiation.”

Two moments in the series stand out for their incisive illustration of the underlying political dynamic of the FN, and, tellingly, neither required the kind of mannerist embellishments of which Comolli was self-critical. Instead, they resembled Brecht’s notion of the *Gestus*—a technique that seeks to capture the reality of broader social relations through performance and staging—but for the fact that, here, they are achieved by the alteatory means of the documentary rather than the calculated techniques of the theater. Three decades earlier, Comolli had already detected such an effect when writing on *La Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder* in “Le détour par le direct.” Here, the capture by a documentary film crew of the “absolutely raw event” of a female worker resisting entreaties to return to her job after

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63 Comolli, “Yes, we were utopians (Part 2).”
64 Comolli, “La chronique Marseillaise.”
65 Comolli, “Comment filmer l’ennemi?,” p. 396.
66 Ibid., p. 400.
the end of a strike is seen as a “crystallization and symbolization of the entire situation of worker-boss-union relations in the months of May and June.” Each character, “as if by miracle,” in Comolli’s account of the scene:

plays the role that is their own, says the words that are the key phrases of this strike, to such a degree that an irresistible impression of unease is installed. It could not be clearer that nothing has been “tampered” with; and yet everything is so exemplary, “truer than the truth,” that we can only make reference to the most Brechtian of scenarios, the document seemingly produced by the most masterful of fictions.67

Towards the end of Marseille en mars, we see Le Pen walking through a street market in the small Mediterranean town of Gardannes. Encircled by a throng of admirers and reporters, he seems in high spirits as he makes his way through the market. An inaudible off-screen heckle draws an ironic remark from the self-assured FN leader, but at this moment a staffer innocuously brushes his body in an attempt to protect the politician from the surrounding crush of humanity. Le Pen seizes up, his face wrenched in momentary horror, and, with unexpected violence, unleashes a volley of abuse at the culprit: “Don't touch me like that, damn it! I told you not to touch me! I don't like it when you touch me like that.” Although Le Pen immediately recomposes himself, acting as if nothing has happened, it is in this punctual moment—captured, “as if by miracle,” on camera—that the entire façade of the FN’s drive towards political legitimacy falls away, and the fear and psychosis that subtends its anti-immigrant politics is revealed. For Comolli, the moment is a “return of the real.” “Filmed, this phobic gesture and speech suddenly open onto another scene that lurks behind the smiles and bonhomie. Something of the relationship between the political idea and the political body is inscribed here, a relationship that only the cinema can aver and unfold. As soon as it is incarnated and represented, power becomes its own caricature. There is no need to force the point, it is forced all by itself.”68

A second, related moment of punctual Gestus appears in the series, but this one has remained undiscussed by Comolli. In La question des alliances, Comolli includes, for the first time in the series, an interview with a grassroots FN member. Uniquely, it is Comolli himself, rather than

67 Comolli, “Le détour par le direct (1),” p. 49. This article is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2.
Samson, who interviews the activist. Although he remains off-screen throughout, this is the only time in the entire series in which Comolli himself interacts with an on-screen “character.” Marie-Odile Rayé, however, is anything but the stereotypical image of the FN supporter as oafish bullyboy. Middle-class, well-dressed and soft-spoken, she comes across as reasonable and articulate, even as she fulminates against a political order that has finally managed to erect a cordon sanitaire against her party, stating ominously: “They insult us, but we will win alone, without the media. We have time.” If any moment in the series presages Marine Le Pen’s more recent project to “de-demonize” the FN (now re-named the Rassemblement national) in order for it to achieve a viable electoral majority, it is this. But the framing of this sequence, held in a steady, immobile shot for several minutes of uninterrupted screen time, further accentuates the internal contradictions of the FN’s drive towards respectability, away from the provocations of Le Pen père. To Marie-Odile’s left, a laser-printed poster tacked to the wall urges party members to “respect the person who is speaking by not interrupting. In politics, we must know how to listen.” Not only is this an unexpected attitude to find in a far-right campaign office, it is also, ironically, an apt description of Comolli’s own filmmaking method in the Marseilles series. Behind Marie-Odile, however, plunged in shadow and half-obscured by a door frame, there is another poster whose slogan precisely spells out the racism that, irrespective of attempts at “de-demonization,” remains at the core of the FN’s political project: “Immigrants enter, jobs leave: protect our borders!” This composition was chanced upon by Comolli, and he may not even have been aware of it while filming, but the prolonged, static nature of the shot emphasizes its status as a Brechtian Gestus, elucidating, through the juxtaposition of scenic elements, the ideological contradictions seething within the filmmaker’s declared enemy.

_Marseille contre Marseille_ (III): Filming the city

As _Marseille contre Marseille_ continued into the 2000s, the series shifted its gaze away from the FN, which despite gaining greater national prominence during this period (especially when Le Pen reached the second round of the 2002 presidential election) had been effectively shut out of political power on the south coast. The later episodes of the series—_Nos deux Marseillaises_ and _Rêves de France à Marseille_ in 2001, and the two epilogues _Les clés de Marseille_ (2008) and _Marseille entre deux tours_ (2016)—moved the focus
towards a less spectacular but more sociologically fundamental transition in the political culture of Marseilles: the emergence of second-generation Maghrebi migrants as political actors, notably in the PS. France has been especially slow in integrating its migrant communities into the country’s political system, but it would be natural that Marseille would spearhead this process. The city’s long tradition of welcoming migrants and refugees from diverse backgrounds, and the earlier efforts made by Italian, Armenian and Jewish communities to wield political influence, placed it in a unique situation within the French political context. As the later installments in Marseille contre Marseille show, however, this process was far from a smooth one.

These installments also delineate the evolution that has taken place in the political culture of Marseilles since the start of the series, one that reflects, albeit with delays and décalages, the demographic changes experienced by the city. In 1989, politics in Marseilles was still exclusively the domain of white French men, a monopoly that was at odds with the cultural diversity of the city’s population. Comolli devotes a significant proportion of Marseille de père en fils to migrant communities from the Arab world and sub-Saharan Africa, including a touching sequence where Zohra Maaskri, an Algerian migrant whose son was shot dead by the Marseilles police, ascends the stairway of the Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde cathedral. But at this stage they were still unrepresented within the prevailing municipal power structures. Since they were effectively cut off from the political scene, the presence of these communities in the 1989 films functions in a contrapuntal fashion—they are the outside of the world of electoral politics, representing a different scene to that of the elections shown. The new films, by contrast, are governed by the inverse hypothesis: here, Comolli wagers, “the two scenes would tend to overlap.”

Nos deux Marseillaises is structured around two parallel biographical paths: Samia Ghali and Nadia Brya are both young Islamic women descended from north African migrants, and both are attempting to establish themselves as elected officials on PS tickets. But it is here that their narratives diverge: Ghali, the politically savvier of the two, opts to take a safe spot on the party’s slate for the municipal elections, while Brya is handed a far more challenging position: winning a departmental district that has long been a bastion of the communists. With Ghali’s victory assured, the film concentrates on Brya’s efforts to mobilize her community in support of her bid to defeat the PCF, but she falls agonizingly short of doing so. In this

69 Comolli, Voir et pouvoir, p. 566.
“modern fable at the foot of the vast estates of the northern districts,”70 Brya was the sacrificial victim, and she failed to establish herself in Marseilles politics. Ghali, meanwhile, has become a significant figure in the city’s political scene, and her fierce battle with Patrick Mennucci (who has recurrently featured in Marseille contre Marseille since 1989) to be the PS’s candidate for mayor in the 2014 municipal elections formed the backdrop for the series’ latest installment.

In addition to depicting the demographic evolution of Marseilles and the effects this has had on its electoral machinery, the series is also a portrait of Marseilles tout court, and Comolli has stressed this aspect of the films in a number of texts. From the very first episode, the political dialogues were regularly interspersed with languid panoramic shots of the city. Taking in its dramatic shoreline, picturesque harbour, the housing estates of the north and the hills beyond its perimeter, the camera frequently lingers on residents, pedestrians, shoppers or café dwellers. Comolli’s initial supposition was that the program of “filming the city” provided by the very title of the first installment (Marseille de père en fils) was impossible: “This city, I tell myself, is invisible to me, I can not see anything of it, it is not promised to me, it only reaches me in one or another of its fragments, which, I hope, will be able to stand in for the whole.”71 But with the progressive accretion of these fragments, over the course, now, of 25 years of filming, a portrait of the city has taken shape, one that constitutes “a corpus of bodies and a network of signs,” or, alternatively, “an inexhaustible reserve of fictions. A story-city. A labyrinth where the dice of encounters, good or bad, is cast.”72

Deploying the ideas of the historian Fernand Braudel, Sylvie Lindeperg has given a perceptive account of the multiple temporalities, stratified but intersecting with each other, that are at work in Marseille contre Marseille: beyond the “evental history” of short-term historical incidents (electoral defeats and victories, the rise and fall of individual politicians), there is an “intermediate time” that stretches across decades and takes in economic cycles, demographic changes and more fundamental political shifts, such as the decomposition of traditional political structures from the 1980s to the present day. Additionally, however, Braudel’s longue durée, a temporality inscribed by the history of “geographical and material structures,” is also

71 Althabe/Comolli, Regards sur la ville, p. 27
present in the series, which takes the shape of the hills that squeeze Marseilles onto the coastline; the mistral winds whose brute force PS functionary Philippe Sanmarco, in Marseille de père en fils, insists has filtered into the local political climate; the sea that has linked the city, historically, culturally and even temperamentally with its fellow Mediterranean metropolises. For Comolli himself, Marseilles is above all a “city of the impossibility of forgetting,” an urban palimpsest where 2600 years of continuous human settlement finds itself cohabiting with the present. It is “history made into a city,” and, in particular, a site where France’s colonial past is made manifest: both a launchpad for wars of conquest and a refuge for those fleeing the disastrous legacy of European imperialism. Paradoxically, however, the history of war, oppression and genocide that has left indelible traces on Marseilles also provides the condition for the city to be “one of the possible figures of utopia,” and it is a continued belief in utopia, even after the great political defeats of the late twentieth century, that is at the core of Comolli’s political outlook.

Two decades into Gaudin’s mayoralty, which came to rival Defererre’s in its longevity, the once proudly proletarian city has been significantly reshaped in the neoliberal image of his political ideals. Investment in the city center has boomed and was further catalyzed by Marseilles’ status as the European capital of culture in 2013. New museums and modern tramways have opened, while the Massalia festival created by Gaudin appropriates the city’s ethnic diversity for marketing and tourism purposes. But its migrant areas remain mired in structural poverty, and Ghali laments, in Les clés de Marseille, that “two Marseilles” have arisen from the city’s widening economic polarization, a statement verified by her and Samson’s visit to a refugee campsite on the margins of the city, whose residents, bereft of electricity and running water, are aptly described by the politician as living in “fourth world” conditions. Filmed in 2014, Marseille entre deux tours focuses only intermittently on Ghali’s joust with Mennucci, the ostensible pretext of the film: an opening scene showing a campaign rally attended almost entirely by journalists suggests that electoral politics has become an empty charade played out almost entirely for the purposes of media spectacle. Instead, the film’s main focus lies on the hors-champ of the electoral campaign, and most of its screen time is absorbed by discussions with historians of the city, poets, playwrights and ecologists, who are variously engaged in forging counter-narratives of Marseilles that diverge from those provided by broadcast media and the

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press. Julie de Muer, a young activist and “urban narrator” who founded the “Hôtel du Nord” co-operative, is the last of these figures and perhaps the one whose utopianism is most in tune with Comolli’s own sentiments: from a rocky hilltop overlooking the city, she dreamily muses about the Celtic villages that ringed the original Roman settlement and praises Marseilles for the spirit of inexhaustible curiosity it instills in its residents.

Comolli’s documentary work of the 1990s to 2010s has extended far beyond the Marseilles series. Jeux de rôles à Carpentras (1998) and Le Monde dans l’arène (2008) looked at the intersections between politics and the media, and both films also featured Michel Samson as their “guide.” Rêve d’un jour (1995) and Jours de grève à Paris Nord (2003) centered on the 1995 general strikes, which revived trade union militancy in France and briefly summoned the specter of May ’68. Outside of France, Comolli has looked at the trial of former Maoist activist Adriano Sofri in Italy (L’Affaire Sofri, 2001), the biography of 1930s Catalan anarchist Buenaventura Durruti (Buenaventura Durruti, anarchiste, 1999) and New Caledonia’s independence movement, the last violent struggle against French colonialism (Belep danse autour de la terre, 1990 and Les Esprits de Koniambo (en terre kanak), 2004). Beyond the realm of politics, his documentaries have also looked at the mundanity of white-collar office work in the public sector (La Vraie Vie (dans les bureaux), 1993) as well as the artistic work involved in the fields of architecture (Naissance d’un hôpital, 1991), music (Le Concerto de Mozart, 1996) and poetry (Le peintre, le poète et l’historien, 2005). Homages to filmmakers have included those to Youssef Chahine (Chahine & Co, 1993), Alain Resnais (Face aux fantômes, 2009), Roberto Rossellini (La Dernière Utopie (la télévision selon Rossellini), 2006) and Federico Fellini (À Fellini d’un spectateur amoureux, 2013). And in 2011, together with Narboni, Comolli interrogated his own past at Cahiers in À voir absolument (si possible). But the ten films that comprise the Marseille contre Marseille series will inevitably be regarded as his true magnum opus. Comolli’s exploration of a city and its politics for nearly three decades is a unique endeavor in the history of film, and it is one that is further enriched by its multiple intersections with the filmmaker’s copious theoretical reflections on the cinema in general and politically engaged documentary filmmaking in particular.

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