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The Red Years of Cahiers du Cinéma (1968–1973), by Daniel Fairfax. Amsterdam University Press, 2021, 816 pp.

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Right in the middle of *Irma Vep* (Olivier Assayas, 1996), a VCR excerpt from *Classe de lutte* (Medvedkin group, 1969) is shown during a dinner party. In the context of postmodernist Paris, those militant, raw, politically engaged images look like footage from another planet, a veritable foreign body. As recently as 2012, in *Something in the Air* (*Après mai*), the same director would zoom into the aftermath of 1968, thoroughly reconstructing the historical fabric of those years.

In a sense, this is equally true of *The Red Years of Cahiers du Cinéma (1968–1973)*, published in two volumes of roughly 400 pages each. Gone are the days in which radical modernism, including its late postwar varieties, were seen as a mere accident, a bump in the road, a forgettable detour in the march toward the definitive stability of the postmodern era. Whereas the most prominent historical overviews on *Cahiers du Cinéma*, such as those by Antoine de Baecque and Emilie Bickerton, gloss as hastily as they can and not without embarrassment over that time characterised by outspoken political engagement, Daniel Fairfax examines them closely to show that even the Maoist season (1972–73) is no foreign body, no alien object. No doubt, that couple of years in which *Cahiers* adopted an austere dogmatism unlike anything else in its long history is controversial, but it does come from somewhere, and leads somewhere else: it has specific historical causes, and it has reverberations that should be properly recognised. Rather than dismissing it as an intractable discontinuity as the by-now-outmoded postmodern strategy would have had it, *The Red Years of Cahiers du Cinéma* looks for the continuities binding that discontinuity to what comes before and after. To name but one among many possible examples: no images graced the Maoist pages; on the other hand, some twenty years later, no images graced those of *Trafic* either, the journal founded by key *Cahiers* writer Serge Daney under largely different premises in 1992. There's a legacy to be acknowledged there: an iconoclasm of a somewhat more specific kind than the one generically ascribed to twentieth-century French thought by Martin Jay.

In strictly historical terms, a wide range of sources are used, including several richly revealing interviews Fairfax conducted around 2014 with Jean Narboni, Pascal Bonitzer, Jean-Louis Comolli and the other protagonists of that phase. This way, he accurately retraces not only *Cahiers*' political positioning within the spectrum of the Left, but also the complex interactions with the contemporary publications they were in dialogue with, such as *Cinéthique*, *La Nouvelle Critique* and *Tel Quel*, the latter often acting as a theoretical polestar of sorts. Indeed, the many turnarounds of the journal (at least three different ideological stages are counted in as brief a span as five years) can only be understood in the light of its ever-changing placement within the cultural and political arenas of that time, both in fact highly

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interdependent. For instance, the rapprochement with the French Communist Party (PCF) happened mainly due to the influence of Louis Althusser and his idea that mainstream political parties had to be changed from within; this in turn prompted a differentiation on aesthetic grounds between PCF's *La Nouvelle Critique* and *Cahiers* as the latter, unlike the former, consistently gravitated towards *Tel Quel*'s avant-garde literary theory, spearheaded by contributors such as Julia Kristeva, Tzvetan Todorov, and Jean-Louis Schefer; when the conflict between this perspective and PCF/*La Nouvelle Critique*'s relative cultural traditionalism became untenable, Maoism was embraced—although, again, not really following any of the two main tendencies of French Maoisms (one being a sect of PCF, the other gathering a variety of spontaneist groups), but rather just in the wake of *Tel Quel*'s own pro-Chinese stand.

The *Tel Quel* allegiance goes a long way toward confirming that few eras in *Cahiers* history have been as theory-laden as the five years after 1968. Thus, in order to truly identify the continuities within the discontinuity marked by that period, it is necessary to leave behind the old history/theory divide, itself by now as outmoded as postmodern historiography itself, and integrate the historical account with an exploration of the dense theoretical stratifications informing that kind of film criticism. This is why this monograph has a hybrid, fourfold, intelligently flexible structure, not completely historical but also not as completely "thematic" as the author seems to suggest in his introduction either (27). Even in Part II, which comes closest to being a historical summary, sizeable chunks are dedicated to published analyses of exemplary films such as Jean Renoir's *Life is Ours* (*La vie est à nous*, 1936) or on the much-maligned ones by Costa-Gavras. Part I is "an introduction to the core theoretical ideas of the journal during its Marxist phase" (27); Part III addresses "questions of aesthetics" (29), and Part IV "the contentious topic of the cinema's relationship with the real" (30), extending to other visual media too.

Thus, one of the merits of *The Red Years of Cahiers du Cinéma* is the effective elucidation of an often-dense theoretical background, by way of brief references to a considerable number of texts but especially by scrutinising more closely a selected number of key articles. Most of them are commendably clarified, while a few others still remain a bit opaque (e.g., Pascal Kané's study on George Cukor's 1935 *Sylvia Scarlett*). The 1968–73 section in the second tome of De Baecque's *Histoire d'une revue* is a mandatory point of departure, but then gets massively expanded and inflated until the outcome rather recalls, at least partly and in spirit, the monumental *French Film Theory and Criticism, 1907-1939* by Richard Abel.

Among the key articles, Jean Narboni's "Vicarious Power" ("La vicariance du pouvoir") stands out as particularly well chosen. A seldom-quoted review of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Othon* (1970), it shows how the original piece by Corneille is deconstructed by the two filmmakers very much in the Derridean sense. More precisely, what is at stake is Jacques Derrida's logic of supplement, as Straub-Huillet add the materialist writing of their own découpage, use of locations, and articulations of vocal tones and rhythms to Corneille's theatrical writing—not so much in the way an adaptation would add itself to something pre-existing, but rather so as to *replace* and retro-determine the original by the same token, subverting its ideology in the process. The importance of "Vicarious Power," however, goes far beyond the celebrated duo's cinema, as it can be said to define the kind of formal operations that *Cahiers* was mostly interested in when looking at films more generally: what for years had been going by the name of *mise en scène* but now, after the 1968 earthquake, needed another formulation accounting for not only the aesthetic dimension, but also and

inseparably the political one. Across the two volumes, this new formulation in its various guises has been very frequently acknowledged as significantly close to Derrida's *écriture*.

Building on Narboni's analysis, Fairfax notices (133–36) that this logic of supplement is, in fact, strikingly close to what André Bazin had theorised on theatrical adaptations not more than twenty years before. Indeed, the name of the journal's co-founder and former editor-in-chief recurs with some frequency in *The Red Years of Cahiers du Cinéma*. That is because Fairfax asserts that whatever official line the magazine had between 1968 and 1973, it was never limited exclusively to the influence of the then-popular (post)structuralist waves. Rather than pursuing a recognisable, single direction, *Cahiers* has allowed even in those engaged and sometimes dogmatic years for a certain sprawl, for a relative plurality of directions and critical approaches all propelled by an unsolvable conceptual tension: that between Bazin's sophisticated realism and the (then-)new thinkers such as Althusser, Barthes, Lacan and the others. This was an unlikely but extremely fruitful marriage, generating a theory-informed cinematic taste that the Parisian journal will also profitably apply post-1973, after the political undertones faded away: a kind of criticism privileging cinemas remaining faithful to both visible reality and its invisible, fantasmatic underside. Psychoanalysis called the latter "the other scene" (*l'autre scène*); in 1970 Daney and Jean-Pierre Oudart, following Derrida, were even more explicit than their colleagues that that scene was not accessible without overcoming the "photology" inherent in Western metaphysics, "that obstinate will to confuse vision and cognition, making the latter the compensation of the former and the former the guarantee of the latter, seeing in directness of vision a model of cognition" (484–85).

This credo separated the magazine from other major scholars who had crossed paths with it such as Noel Burch and Raymond Bellour, both too painstakingly textual/analytical and not sensitive enough to the other scene. Even more so, distinctions gape between *Cahiers* and the *Screen* strand it has often been equated with, and Fairfax rightfully dedicates a few pages to clarify their mutual differences, for instance, a different attitude toward the Brechtian legacy—even when, around 1972, "distanciation took the place of deconstruction" at *Cahiers* (312). And if, on the one hand, *Screen* did much to spread the theoretical and critical exploits of its French counterpart in the English-speaking world, on the other hand it came at the cost of a certain simplification: even the path-breaking "Cinema and Suture" by Oudart got partly lost, as the implications of its twofold, open structure (requiring its two conflicting parts to be conceptually sutured themselves by the reader) were largely overlooked because of inadequate interpretations and translations.

More generally, one of the main goals of this work doubtlessly consists of making up for the all too partial anglophone reception of 1968–73 *Cahiers* by laying out in detail the content of several pieces that are not yet available in English translation, and occasionally also correcting the inaccuracies of existing translations—as in the case of many passages from "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" and "Technique and Ideology", perhaps the two most seminal texts of that period. The latter, in particular, had a key role in the formation of the New Film History movement, one of the most decisive turns in the evolution of Film Studies as a discipline.

A similar expansion of scope inevitably comes with some risks. Connecting 1968–73 to what the critics involved have done in the subsequent decades entails substantial digressions, flash forwards and a wealth of individual profiles; this may sometimes be in conflict not so much with the collective dimension so prominent in the editorial work of those years, but rather with the imperative of synthesis demanded by any historical endeavours, and may throw the

work structurally out of balance. *The Red Years of Cahiers du Cinéma*, however, ultimately eschews these risks, thanks to its historical rigour, and the aptness of its case studies: a relatively quick mention of the magazine's treatment of Marin Karmitz's 1972 *Blow for Blow* (*Coup pour coup*) can convey better than any long explanation that if a film has a political content but not a political form, then it is ultimately *not* political—one of the key *Cahiers*' assumptions at that time (314).

Under the microscope, surprises abound. A thread (a red one, of course) may start from Bazin and get to Bonitzer's 1991 authoritative monograph on Eric Rohmer through the same author's critiques of ideology in the early 1970s, as all of them would be linked by a similar centrality of fetishistic disavowal (the tenet of psychoanalytic film theory famously encapsulated by the slogan *je sais bien mais quand même*, [I know very well, but nonetheless]). A 1972 inquiry by pro-Chinese collective Lou Sin on a contemporary talk show sheds light on Serge Daney's TV criticism in the 1980s. Jacques Aumont's long, prolific academic career may be at times (as in *The Image*) still in dialogue with "Technique and Ideology" by Jean-Louis Comolli, whose films have occasionally indirectly reflected on his years at *Cahiers* (*La Cecilia*, 1975) or developed a documentary style remarkably in line with the political aesthetics devised in those red days (*Marseille contre Marseille*, 1989–2001).

Decidedly, the conceptual, theoretical, aesthetic and political richness of that period is far from having been exhausted yet. Genealogies still have to be traced, and they are likely to stretch to the present day, dominated by post-cinematic visuality in ways that even Daney couldn't have suspected. And while criticism toward what Comolli as well as Guy Debord named "spectacle" is by now everywhere in the mainstream, the *Cahiers* legacy can still provide us, as Fairfax suggests in his last chapter, with a critical posture that is unobvious, unreconciled, spot-on, and up to the specific challenges of today's media.

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