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Preface

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A network of new conceptions, arguments and debates about cinema produced in the 1970s made these years one of the key periods in the history of film theory. With the contemporaneous "take-off" of university film studies in the English-speaking world, these ideas assumed foundational status during a period of expansive professionalization and academic institutionalization. As contested as some became, certain ideas and concepts from 1970s film theory have had staying power. However, many of the most important formulations of 1970s film theory claimed motivation in the politically radical impulses and ideas of the period, which also permeated some of the most important filmmaking of the time.

By the mid-1960s, there were already important claims for a distinctive break with earlier, "classical" film theory. Then, in 1968, a number of political tensions and conflicts erupted in spectacular political disruptions and oppositional public events all over the globe. For a few years after 1968, yearnings for political transformation often intersected with desires for the radical transformation of intellectual sectors, desires which one finds in certain of the initiating texts of 1970s film theory. Among all of these events, May 1968 in France was the time and place where film culture was most famously – and perhaps even mythically – associated with politicized practices and understandings of cinema.

Jean-Louis Comolli was one of the central figures in French film culture at that moment. Very much an *homme du cinéma,* he is a filmmaker as well as critic and theorist. As critic and theorist he has always committed himself to engaging with the very textures of films while simultaneously conceptualizing the broader aesthetic vocations and social possibilities and roles of cinema. In the early 1960s, Comolli had emerged as a writer, and then chief editor, for that most influential of Parisian film journals, *Cahiers du cinéma*.

His articles from the late 1960s and early 1970s are not his only important theoretical and critical work, but they may be counted among the foundational texts of 1970s film theory. In this volume, Daniel Fairfax provides corrected, theoretically and historically informed translations of certain of Comolli's most widely discussed writings dating from the immediate post-1968 years of *Cahiers*. These include two polemical editorials written in 1969 and co-authored with Comolli's fellow *Cahiers* editor Jean Narboni, along with Comolli's most far-reaching, extensive, and consequential work for the history of film theory, "Technique and Ideology," which was written and

published serially in 1971-1972 in several issues of *Cahiers*. Fairfax additionally provides a translation of "Cinema against Spectacle," a recent major essay in which Comolli reconsiders the position of cinema some 40 years later, when filmmaking finds itself part of a transformed 21st-century media universe.

Fairfax's extensive introduction gives us a detailed account of the debates and critiques generated by "Technique and Ideology" and the *Cahiers* editorials. In the English-speaking world, the impact of "Technique and Ideology" was all the more remarkable because of the cumbersome, inconvenient way it was distributed. Though rapidly translated into English, it was at first available only in typescript form for discussion and study groups in London. Some contemporaneous British translations of other French film-theoretical polemics were quickly published in the journal *Screen*, the most central English-language journal for 1970s film theory, and they soon became standard texts in Anglophone debates. But strangely, none of the "Technique and Ideology" translation was published in *Screen* or other British venues. Instead, the British translation took on something of an itinerant status. I myself first encountered the text as a xerox of the British typescript as it circulated among certain graduate programs in what was then the small world of US academic film studies in the early 1970s. Eventually, most installments of "Technique and Ideology" as rendered in these British translations were published, but piecemeal and in a variety of venues. Until now the text as a whole has never received an integral English-language publication. Along with Comolli's own retrospective and prospective reconsiderations, Fairfax's new translation and his historical contextualization of "Technique and Ideology" can stimulate a nuanced and contemporary re-evaluation of Comolli's interventions, and of 1970s film theory more broadly.

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Seen in retrospect, the programmatic *Cahiers* editorials Comolli wrote with Narboni schematically declare what became two of the privileged and defining themes of this 1970s theory. One was a new kind of emphasis on the realist claims of cinema, which entailed interrogating any cinematic "impression of reality" by placing it under political and ideological critique. The second theme was a new kind of approach to spectatorship, which at this point focused on conceptualizing spectatorial recognition, misrecognition and self-recognition, all understood as interconnected with ideology. As the arguments and debates quickly developed, many emphasized claims about contradictory processes underlying structures and experiences of subjectivity, invoking notions of the imaginary in a technical, psychoanalytic sense.

1970s film theory was often more diverse than its opponents allowed, partly because it was formed in a developing network of debates and projects among several writers, and partly because it was often associated with positional journals. One way we might conceive a preliminary mapping of such film-theoretical discussions and debates could be to treat the two themes outlined above as conceptual markers of its general terrain. One finds differing and overlapping accounts of each of these two

markers in the major texts of 1970s film theory. These show that the post-1968 critique of realist ontologies and epistemologies in film theory was not grounded in run-of-the-mill social constructionism or representational conventionalism. Rather, it entailed an intricate and radical critical explication of the nature, capacities, and limitations of filmic representation and operations.

On the heels of 1968, Marxism was central to establishing this film-theoretical terrain in France. This was evident in *Cahiers du cinéma* and its key leftist sparring partner, *Cinéthique*. Claims for radical new conceptions of cinema required radical theoretical grounds consonant with the political inspirations and urgencies of the moment. In the Parisian context, this most often led to the theories being developed by Louis Althusser at the same time. This is not the place to rehearse Althusser's conceptions, except to note that they entailed a revision of Marxist notions of historical determination by and within the "complex whole" of a contradictory social formation; that they opened the way for new emphases on the importance and "relative autonomy" of ideological practices within Marxist theory; and that Althusser himself was linking ideology and subject-positioning. Appeals to Althusser as a central reference for film theory overlapped with other major developments in the French theoretical landscape. Thus, by 1968, a self-conscious post-structuralism was being formulated. Comolli himself has recourse to the early work of Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva. Meanwhile, those interested in spectatorship were turning to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, which would very soon become central to many wings of 1970s film theory.

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Within this heated French discursive arena, there was a certain distinctive thrust in Comolli's contributions. Take the critique of the cinematic impression of reality, which was being defined as a pivotal operation of dominant ideological practices. Comolli consistently refused to treat it as a unitary, monolithic end product, instead seeing it as a complex, ongoing production or process. For Comolli, the cinematic impression of reality never entails a simple submission of the spectator to an illusion, but an *activation* of the spectator. In his view, the cinematic impression of reality is always inadequate to the task of transmitting reality in any absolute sense. This is why the impression of reality can only be completed by spectatorial investment, which means spectatorship is an *activity*. Here is one passage from "Technique and Ideology," where he makes this crucial point in the context of a discussion of silent film:

> It is at the price of a series of blind spots (of disavowals) that the silent image could be accepted as the objective reflection and duplication of "life itself": the denial of color, stereoscopy and sound. Founded on these absences (just as, incidentally, all forms of representation are founded on an absence governing them, on a fault-line lying at the basis of every simulacrum – the spectator, in any case,

> very well knows about the artifice, but prefers to believe in it all the same), filmic representation could only be produced, as I have already noted, by working to attenuate their effects, and even masking their real existence. Otherwise, it would have been refused, as being too visibly factitious: it was absolutely necessary for it to facilitate the disavowal of those veritable sensorial castrations which established its specificity, and for it not to stymie this process by re-marking them. *Compromises* were needed in order for the cinema to function as an ideological apparatus, in order for it to act as a lure.[1]

The reference is to Octave Mannoni's comments on Freud's account of fetishism, where fetishism is described as a disavowal.[2] Mannoni's much-noted formula for this disavowal is "I know very well, but all the same..." In Comolli, it summarizes the structure of belief engendered by any signification claiming secure referentiality. In cinema, according to Comolli, "realism is only produced [...] as a denial of filmic reality."[3]

It is worth considering some of the implications of the metaphor of the lure. First, a lure is designed to attract an action from its target; that is, if the target takes the lure, this means it must *do* something in order to take the bait. So the metaphor encompasses the idea of an activation of the spectator. But second, there is always the possibility that the target of the lure might recognize it as an artifice, as mere bait for something else. A fetishistic structure has potential knowledge value – "I *know* very well, but all the same." The possibility of gaining such understanding of the nature of the lure entails the possibility of counteractivity. The lure might be refused, or even destroyed. Or there might be a kind of play with the lure, whereby structures of belief and artifice can be investigated. To put it more generally, this metaphor of the lure designates the cinematic impression of reality as a complex, contradictory process, a kind of balancing act that admits the possibility of comprehending its nature.

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Within this complexity, Comolli finds the potential to counter cinema's ideological mechanisms. Such an impulse can be found throughout his writings, even in the socially and politically evaluative schematism of "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism (1)" – a text that could too quickly be read as affirming straightforward textual determinism, and therefore a duped or "passive" spectator. The editorial polemically announces that one must begin from the premise that cinema is an ideological practice based on the impression of reality. It even goes so far as to assert that cameras and film

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1. Cf. infra, p. 230.
2. Cf. Octave Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène* (Paris: Seuil, 1969).
3. Cf. infra, p. 186.

stocks seem to be made with the goal of presenting a reproduction of reality, such that cinema is a privileged instrument for the naturalization of "bourgeois ideology." Therefore, it proposes, militant film theory must always ask whether films (and probably theories) "are content to be traversed by ideology such as it is, as its site of passage, its transparent mediation, its chosen language, or whether, on the other hand, they attempt to turn it back on itself, to reflect on it, to intervene *into* it, to render it visible and in doing so render its mechanisms visible."[4] At first this seems to be a clear and absolute binary criterion: all sociopolitical evaluations of films are to be based on an opposition between transparency (the impression of reality) and self-reflexive exposure of the inadequacies of the impression of reality. Yet, Narboni and Comolli go on to generate a much-discussed textual typology of films, which is composed of *seven* categories of ideological complicity and/or interventions. We might note the logical strangeness here: a binary opposition generates an odd number of oppositions. This is the consequence of recognizing the importance of mixed cases and contradictions, an arena that would be central to Comolli's subsequent theoretical contributions.

Polemical and unfinished as it was, "Technique and Ideology" can be read as working out the terms and consequences of this complexity in the context of the early, foundational debates establishing 1970s film theory. Fairfax and Comolli himself have much to say about it. Here, I will just make notations on three of its major moves.

First, "Technique and Ideology" begins with Comolli's intervention in foundational debates about the ideological status of cinematic technology, including several formulations that helped establish what is now sometimes called apparatus theory. Mostly written in the years immediately following 1968, many texts of apparatus theory were written with greater or lesser awareness of the distinction attempted by Althusser between science and ideology, and they often focused on the camera and perspectival optics. In his comments on Jean-Patrick Lebel, Marcelin Pleynet and Jean-Louis Baudry (among others), Comolli once again complicates what appears as a binary opposition. As Fairfax points out, Comolli reaffirms the idea that cinema has an ideological vocation, with the crucial proviso that it is more than just this vocation.

One of Comolli's critiques of other participants in the debate is that they make the camera stand in for all cinematic technology. Whether this critique is justified or not, it leads to the more general principle: cinematic technology must be seen as a multiplicity, an assemblage. This is a pluralization of "the" apparatus. It is a way of developing the idea that the impression of reality is a dominant social vocation of cinema, while opening up the possibility – the inevitability – of frictions, contradictions, and changes within that vocation. That is, it leads not only the ideological analysis of cinema as apparatus to history, but also film theory itself to history. It is also related

4. Cf. infra, p. 252.

to a larger theoretical principle: the concepts or identities of objects or processes under discussion must be conceived as a structured multiplicity that shifts over time.

Second, this leads Comolli to conceive of a materialist historicity. Here yet another binary opposition must be surpassed: the hoary but widespread division between theory and history. In "Technique and Ideology" film theory becomes radically historicized, because the components of cinema that this text privileges – cinema technology, depth of field, the impression of reality itself – are historically shifting assemblages rather than immutable identities or unities. Film technology must be conceptualized as a multiplicity whose contents and forms may shift over time depending on the interrelation of economics and ideology. On the other side of the ledger, film history requires self-conscious, reflexively considered concepts and conceptualizations – that is, theory.

Another way of putting it is that film theory must understand cinema in its historical actuality; however, that actuality is not available to any simple, positive empirical investigation. It can only be thought through the construction of a problematic – a structure of concepts and questions – suitable to it. This was one of the noted assertions of Althusser, and it informs the quest for a materialist approach to history in "Technique and Ideology." One can find the effects of this principle at several levels in Comolli's text. For instance, it is manifest in his critique of simply accepting the statements of historical agents such as studio technicians at face value rather than reading them symptomatically. Another example is Comolli's attack on standard practices of writing film history by finding "first times" and producing linear accounts stemming from such alleged origins. His theoretical sources no doubt attuned him to problems in the widespread rhetoric and tropes of "firsts" in film history and theory. After all, Althusser had defined history as a process without origin or end, and in "Technique and Ideology" this dovetails with the contemporaneous post-structuralist critiques of origins, especially in Kristeva. A related example is Comolli's embrace of a notion of differential historical temporalities, which is aligned to his understanding of the multiplicity of assemblages constituting cinema technologies and techniques. These and other of his initiatives for a materialist historiography generated significant discussion in an emergent academic film studies in the 1970s, for which methodological self-consciousness and theoretical innovation were important.

Third, "Technique and Ideology" seeks to subject concepts in film theory to a materialist historicization of film technique and stylistics. The particulars of Comolli's intervention in film theory are structured by another French debate. Once again Comolli seems to define a binary opposition between two of the most ambitious and synthetic of French film theorists, in order to complicate and surpass it: André Bazin, the "idealist" theorist of realism, *versus* Jean Mitry, who presents himself as a more empirical, perceptually constructivist theorist. Aware of Althusser's critique of empiricism in philosophy, Comolli is in many ways more critical of Mitry than Bazin. He argues that Mitry takes technologies and their discourses at face value and too often dismisses the impression of reality as a mistaken question. For Comolli, Bazin

has the virtue of foregrounding and interrogating the problem of realism, which is central to the ideological operations of the cinema, even if Bazin's account must be transformed from the perspective of a Marxist theory of ideology. Depth of field is Comolli's privileged example of a stylistic device, precisely because Bazin privileged it as a realist strategy.

According to Comolli, the basic flaw Bazin and Mitry share is their assumption that a concept such as "depth of field" designates a stable identity. Comolli argues that depth of field, whether considered as technological product or as signification, has appeared intermittently and with different import and purposes at different points in film history. It is to be understood as the product and component of historically shifting assemblages of technical practices and stylistic configurations. But not just that. These historically shifting technical and cinematic configurations are themselves components of broader signifying, technological, and social conjunctures.

This brings us back to multiplicities. Comolli wishes to show that "realism" as ideological ambition must be understood as existing in different combinations of elements at different historical moments. On the technological level, these certainly include imaging and photographic techniques, but even these camera manipulations may be composed by varying combinations of focus, lighting, tonality, and so forth. In addition, "realism" includes work that is detached from the camera and the instant of filming, such as changeable practices of color grading and other post-production operations, and, after 1926, sound recording and mixing. At yet another level, the history of film styles and techniques signifying realism and reality in films does not belong just to cinema, even considered only as a technology. Thus, in the final installment, Comolli argues that at any given social and historical conjuncture, techniques and codifications signifying the realism of cinema develop historically in relation to the current state of techniques and codifications in other media technologies and forms. For example, theorists note that depth of field seems to have been less important in the early sound period. Comolli will refuse Mitry's explanations through technological changes (in this case film stock and lighting equipment), but tie it to a more profound, wide-ranging codic shift involving the possibility of guaranteeing cinema's reality-status by the voice as the expression of the human subject.

Thus, in "Technique and Ideology" Comolli sees such formal, stylistic, and codic options in filmmaking as interventions that may sustain, rebalance and/or contest the impression of reality. That is, they are engaged on the field of the lure.

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Opponents of 1970s film theory often treated it as a monolithic discourse. By the 1980s, some of those affiliated with such different perspectives as the cultural studies movement and cognitivist film theory argued that 1970s film theory *tout court* constructed the spectator as "passive." In fact, such critical accounts rarely if ever thought through the complexities and difficulties of the active-passive distinction, whose genealogy includes theological accounts of the soul and free will. For Comolli,

spectatorship and operations of cinema's ideological vocation are contradictory and complex, and his work could suggest another binary opposition must be surpassed, namely active *versus* passive.

From my own perspective, a weakness of some 1970s film theory lies elsewhere but, again, cannot be monolithically applied to the whole period. Some important and productive strands of 1970s theory in practice did not follow Comolli's refusal of the theory-history divide by intertwining theoretical argument with historical analysis. Perhaps the institutionalization of film studies in the university contributed to this. The breakthrough theoretical innovations of the 1970s also helped justify the distinctiveness of film studies, and the academy likes specialization. Conversely, academic film historians have since gone on to reconstruct the history of film with remarkable results, and continue to do so. But this sometimes occurred in a way that bracketed, or even posed itself against, film theory. Interestingly, the onset and diffusion of electronic and digital technologies into film history has stimulated new forms of overcoming the theory-history opposition, something that Comolli already announced as a necessity.

This brings us to the present. From the early 1970s, Comolli argued for the multiplicity and instability of the objects of film history grasped as theoretical concepts, and the non-identical character of theoretical concepts because they must respond to historical complexities and changes. This was connected to his insistence on the potential productivity of the lure (an idea which also was not always sustained in sectors of 1970s theory). These are principles that are sustained in "Cinema against Spectacle," even as the new work proposes that there have been some fundamental changes in the status of cinema as he had approached it after 1968.

Comolli understands films as now existing within a vast multimedia spectacle immersed in a universalizing commodification. He certainly remains admirably committed to critique and to a politics of the cinematic. But his account of the contemporary situation seems to deemphasize the Althusserian Marxism and Kristevan poststructuralism of 1968, while it incorporates other formulations in order to conceptualize and respond to this new media context, with references to figures such as Foucault, Deleuze ("societies of control"), Baudrillard, Rancière, and more. It also appears that the contemporary situation requires of critical thought that it conceive of cinema in somewhat different terms. All of these changes can be exemplified by the appearance of two theoretical concepts that were excluded from "Technique and Ideology."

First, there is alienation, a concept that has no presence of any consequence in "Technique and Ideology." It is true that at points Comolli himself now reads the critique of alienation back into his post-1968 writings, but in fact the term does not appear there. Indeed, there it would have been a theoretically problematic concept. The critique of alienation was foundational in the humanist Marxist tradition that Althusser attacked in the name of a theoretically non-humanist Marxism. But now, the need to develop critiques of universal commodification in the present-day global

multimedia spectacle seems to have led Comolli to resuscitate the term. It is striking that not even all of the newer theorists cited in "Cinema against Spectacle" would necessarily embrace this concept, so Comolli's turn to it is an important decision on his part, responding to his perception of the new media context.

The second concept absent from Comolli's previous writings that informs "Cinema against Spectacle" is the concept of the spectacle, as derived from Guy Debord's situationist polemic, *Society of the Spectacle*. The term spectacle does not appear in its Debordian sense in "Technique and Ideology," even though Debord was certainly among the prominent references in the cultural politics of 1968. But again, Debord's definitions of capitalism as universal spectacle were grounded in a critique of universal commodification that appealed to the concept of alienation. Perhaps this is why Debord's concept of the spectacle was nowhere to be found in the Althusser-oriented "Technique and Ideology." In fact, this same absence of Debord was true of 1970s film theory generally.

If Comolli's sense of the contemporary media universe now leads him toward a Debordian notion of the spectacle, he nevertheless criticizes and diverges from Debord on the basis of one of his own central principles: the potential productivity of the impression of reality as lure. This idea does not lose any pertinence but, if anything, gains in critical importance. According to Comolli, Debord does not allow for the multiplicity and frictions that have always been central to cinema, its spectatorship, and its history. We can see their importance in "Cinema against Spectacle" by mentioning just one of its characterizations of the contemporary media spectacle, namely fragmentation. Fragmentation and synthesis constitute the cinema as a machine that produces illusions of movement and continuity, and they are basic to such fundamental filmic operations as editing and framing. How, then, should the cinematic fragmentation-synthesis interplay be deployed within the spectacle? For, according to Comolli, the spectacle works through intensive and constant fragmentation, an impossibly rapid, perpetual blizzard of commodified particles of the world. One of the formal problems for the politics of the cinematic thus becomes addressing the universalizing normalization of fragmentation. This problem leads Comolli to discussions of such fundamental filmmaking elements as framing and camera setups, and what he sees as the changed status of montage. Montage, he argues, could be positively critical and even utopian in earlier leftist filmmaking, but now it may too easily and unproblematically merge into the forms of contemporary spectacle. Thus, the problem for a political, critical cinema is no longer engaging and countering the artifices of the illusion of reality, but countering fragmentation. This changes and revivifies the realist function of cinema, whether fiction or documentary. Comolli here invokes contemporary filmmakers whose films use strategies that slow down and critique the fragmentation on which the spectacle is built, for example, through an emphasis on the engagement of the film with the human body, with a temporality, or with a location.

This is not to revert to a realist aesthetic, or a Bazinian account of the cinema, even if some comparisons are possible. It remains a matter of the impression of reality as lure, but that lure is now a field of critical potentiality. For Comolli, the political task of cinema has always been to work with the lure, against the lure, by staying open to its potential productivity. This is a principle he has consistently maintained, and it might serve as a starting point for rereading 1970s film theory and asking whether it has unexpected kinds of use value in the present. For it is a basis for the challenge Comolli puts forward about the place of cinema in the contemporary multimedia universe. To pose cinema against spectacle is to say that one must exploit regimes of belief and knowledge activated in cinema, in the contradictory processes and play between them.

This can be understood as a paradox, a subtlety, or a dialectic. In a certain sense, this *homme du cinéma* is now arguing that the productivity of the type of lure specific to cinema could be even more important in the contemporary world than after 1968, but now because of the newly positive, critical role it may allow cinema to play in the spectacle. Cinema is one of the components of the spectacle, but there remains the lesson of "Technique and Ideology": it is simultaneously a complex, historically shifting assemblage that we encounter and deploy as an apparatus. Comolli suggests that the multiplicity that constitutes cinema has once again resulted in an unexpected historical and critical turn, giving it new kinds of value in the sociopolitical present.