



états généraux du film documentaire
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Etats Généraux du Film Documentaire : “The mutations of cinema”

Thursday 20 August 2015, by [Benoît Labourdette](#)

Anthropologies of cinematographic devices, by Jean-Louis Comolli, Benoît Labourdette and Vincent Sorrel.

The [Etats Généraux du Film Documentaire](#) offer as part of their 27th one-day seminar, 20 August 2015: [“The mutations of cinema”](#).

Introductory text

The mutations of cinema

The hypothesis, expressed by André Bazin and developed by Serge Daney, notably, is that any technical gesture is a choice of meaning and affects the way seeing and hearing function. With the transition to digital, forms and techniques have become more interdependent than ever. The book *Cinéma, mode d'emploi* (Jean-Louis Comolli, Vincent Sorrel, Verdier Editions, 2015) examines in dictionary form all the fields of technique and theory: the machines, procedures and practices of filmmakers change, but also the forms and impacts of films. In this workshop, we will approach two key moments which marked accelerations of a general movement tending towards ever greater mobility, lightness, instantaneity: direct cinema and the transition to digital, which it is high time we analysed.

In the sixties, amateur equipment and light 16mm cameras made it possible for cinema to record synch sound with the image outside the studios, filming daily life in a new closeness to people. Ordinary men and women filmed with their particular speech and idioms, in the acoustics and settings of their daily life entered the hitherto closed circle of cinema. In the streets, cinema tied stronger bonds with the world, which it was no longer satisfied to recount but also fashioned. The title of Pierre Perrault's film *Pour la suite du monde 2* announced it: filming included a share of promise.

With video, cinema became simpler and the direct style the norm. Then digital technology

accelerated the movement toward ever-greater immediateness, fluidity, mastery – and paradoxically, given the power making it possible to modify the image at every one of the pixels composing it, filmmaking is still dominated by the vain idea of naturalism. Yet, behind appearances, the nature of the image is no longer the same and the link connecting cinema to reality has changed. Digital technology no longer needs the represented object to make a representation of it. The tiniest particle of the image can be programmed to make a new idealised, rationalised and game-like world.

Then, miniaturised cameras have exacerbated yet again the tendency to film anywhere, at any time. From the moment the tool is potentially in the hands of everybody, the position of the cineaste as the one who films is put into question. Cameras, becoming more autonomous, omniscient, airborne, virtual... are multiplying in number. The broadcast of images is immediate, which profoundly changes their social function. What was experimental has become accessible. It has become ever more crucial for the filmmaker to affirm a singularity while digital technology produces the identical, at a time when the tools are designed for everybody, images have become more volatile, their production generalised, their distribution immediate.

The machines of perception change, and thus ways of looking change, but the question of oneself and the other remains at the heart of all anthropology. Humanity cannot be deprived of a way of seeing. A tool, an instrument, an apparatus, a prosthesis, a fetish, we for our part are more interested in the conditions in which the camera can become an in-itself, an alter. Why make images if no one sees them? Nothing is an image if it is not viewed by a spectator. The very function of cinema is put into question at the same time as digital cinema opens up to another space (just as cinema did when it first appeared). To make cinema, freezing time and a way of looking seems even more essential in the face of the flow of images. What is resisting? Materials, lengths, time, bodies, the theatre... An idea of cinema. We think it essential to act as if something like the Real were still resisting us.

Generally, film histories simplify the question by saying that technical evolution precedes changes in form. Looking at the history of the Éclair 16 camera which marked direct cinema with automatic while shooting synchronous sound, we will see how trial and error experiments, approaches, attempts by filmmakers preceded changes in technology. On one hand, “the amateurs” appeared on screen; on the other, filmmakers became interested in less perfect cameras which gave them greater freedom because their use was less calculated. To illustrate these gaps between cinematic desires and the techniques that allow their fulfilment, we will use passages from historic as well as contemporary films. Today, other devices allow the recording of images and filmmakers are making use of them. Emil Weiss has sent us excerpts from a work in progress, *Auschwitz, le complexe*, shot from a drone. We will study how this choice is coherent with the continuity of his work. We will also discover rushes made by Marie Moreau who uses the cell phone as both camera and screen. The device passes through the hands of the characters and of the filmmaker just as the question of filmer and spectator circulates within the film. Writing, shooting, production, distribution: everything can be rethought.

Jean-Louis Comolli, Benoît Labourdette, Vincent Sorrel.