Many moons ago, as a neophyte tutor in film studies at Harvard, I found myself preparing a course on Renoir. I remember repairing to the stacks in Widener Library to read what the critics in *Cahiers du cinéma* had said about Renoir. The critics in question were a generation quite unprecedented in the history of cinema—Godard, Truffaut, Rohmer, Chabrol, Rivette, referred to by both Emilie Bickerton in *A Short History of "Cahiers du cinéma"* and Richard Brody in *Everything is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard* as “the Hitchcocko-Hawksians”—Young Turks who all envisaged themselves as future directors as well as cinéastes. While these may have been biding their time as critics at *Cahiers*, I can personally attest that they were not wasting it. (Godard wrote about film for ten years before being able to make *Breathless.*)

What the Hitchcocko-Hawksian generation had to say about Renoir fairly leapt off the page. These are people who knew their Renoir inside out and backwards. (Truffaut boasted of having seen *Rules of the Game* twenty times.) To this day I fail to understand why many of these incandescent writings still remain uncollected and untranslated.

What Bickerton and Brody emphasize and bring to the fore is that, on the one hand, when the first generation of *Cahiers* critics moved into filmmaking, “the New Wave they created ensured the magazine’s place in history” (Bickerton, 29), and that, on the other hand, *Cahiers* never really recovered from their departure. While it did not lack for gifted editors and writers, these did not succeed in halting a long-term decline. The paradoxes here run deep, and Bickerton’s book—a threnody—makes pressing reading.

It is for example nothing short of shocking that “*Cahiers* had nothing to say about cinema in 1973 . . . In Germany, Fassbinder—a devotee of *Cahiers’* canon who dedicated his first film to Chabrol, Rohmer and Straub—had already made ten extraordinary films that drew a portrait of contemporary German society using a mixture of Brecht, Sirk, and the New Wave; in India Satyajit Ray had long since completed his Apu trilogy; a strong body of work was emanating from the Senegalese Ousmane Sembène; Tarkovsky’s work was in full genesis; Bergman was entering his late phase, while from the saturated and beautiful *Oedipus Rex* and sober atheism of *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pasolini’s work (and shorty afterwards, his life) would come to an abrupt and shocking end with *Salò*. There was little trace of [any of] this in *Cahiers*” (83), even though a few years earlier it would commonly have been regarded as a paramount film journal. What had gone wrong? Could it not still be rectified, put to rights?

Bickerton indicates that what “*Cahiers* faced in the 1980s was the unprecedented dilemma of having to deal with a film culture and criticism that had fully internalized the *Cahiers* ideas and arguments.” *Cahiers* had in a sense become the victim of its own success. “The canonization of early Hollywood, the new wave of film-making, the theorization of film criticism and ideological readings: all have had direct impact on the subsequent generations of directors, often highly knowledgeable about movie history and self-conscious successors of the old masters. *Cahiers* [by the 1980s, and even earlier] needed to deal with a domain that had become, thanks partly to its teachings, fully self-aware. It ducked the challenge, preferring to treat film as a product that could sell magazines” (133). By 2001, there was a “vast coverage of *Apocalypse Now Redux* and *Pearl Harbour* in the same issue, one that could only find a few short lines about Rivette’s *Va savoir*” (110). Things had come to a pretty pass. This is a *trahison des clercs* if ever there was one. More fundamentally, *Cahiers* in its heyday—the yellow years, as Bickerton calls them (her book, nicely, sports a cover of the original *Cahiers* yellow) “invented, and compellingly deployed—before embodying and reinventing it in the New Wave—one notion that remains integral to any critical engagement with cinema: the *auteur*. Today, the scattergun use of this term might at first appear to confirm the magazine’s long-lasting influence, yet it reveals a bitter victory. The concept itself has been voided of meaning.” Indeed, she goes on, in France a director “must claim this title even before making a film so as to be eligible for funding” (143–44).

But even prior to this cheapening, the concern became that “*Cahiers* would become a mere organ of the New Wave” (36) and that this derogation would undermine its authority. In this way a hands-off attitude to the New Wave directors grew up within *Cahiers*. (Rivette, who took over its editorship when Bazin died, was particularly reticent, even though the New Wave directors—as Rivette surely must have known—needed all the help they could get.) The distancing was, admittedly, not uniform. Godard fared better, and Truffaut much worse, than the others. Jean-Louis Comolli, who replaced Rivette as...
editor, wrote perceptively about Godard; and in general, “seeking a reconciliation with Godard” was, according to Brody, the “key to explaining Cahiers’ red turn” (79). Yet the New Wave directors at large “had tended to accept a compromise: to make films on their own terms meant making cinema for a minority public. It was a major shift from their early ambition [as critics] to suppress the opposition between art films for the few and popular movies for the masses” (Bickerton, 58).

Richard Brody is no less sensitive than Bickerton to the paradoxes involved here. The Young Turks between the yellow covers, having used Cahiers “as a base from which to launch their assault on the citadel of the French cinema” (23)—and having in the process “changed the way that the French, and indeed the world, thought about movies”—had no way of knowing that “the rise of the New Wave” would coincide “with the demise of the studio system” (171), which meant the end of the American cinema as “an aesthetic well-spring” (179). As Godard himself once put it, “At the moment that we can do cinema, we can no longer do the kind of cinema that gave us the desire to do it” (123). Cahiers thus became “a point of departure, a lost paradise” (123). Even so, Godard “up to his exhibition at the Pompidou in 1973,” to quote Bickerton again, “mourned the death of cinema whilst simultaneously breathing new life into it with every project” (137), a judgment with which Brody would surely concur. But both writers are uncomfortably aware of the price that had to be paid. By the time Godard discovered video, teamed up with Anne-Marie Miéville, and moved to Grenoble then to Rolle, in Switzerland (where he still lives), he was also “heading in the direction of high art at a moment when even serious viewers were, more than ever, in thrall to the popular” (Brody, 431). Godard’s undoubted prestige was “out of step with the mood in France” (454). Nor do the poignancies, the ambiguities of his position end here. Godard “had a fierce desire for intellectual discussion” (583), Brody points out. “He was the model of the intellectual filmmaker in the eyes of moviegoers and critics, but for professional intellectuals he remained an aesthete.” Indeed, the “process that the Cahiers writers had helped to crystallize—the celebration of the director’s personality through the recognition of its distinctive imprint on his films—was turned around by Godard. With other filmmakers, the film came first, followed by the recognition of the auteur’s personality; with Godard, the person came first” (65), and this can become tiresome.

Brody’s lengthy survey of Godard’s extended career is more carefully written than Bickerton’s much shorter history of Cahiers, but it is not free from digressions, tangents, and longueurs. But then again it is a secret known only to the entire world that Godard’s films (or some of them, at least) have longueurs of their own. Brody’s book makes up for this by bristling with barbed insights about individual films that do much to explain why Godard and Cahiers could never quite let go of each other, even if Godard for his part kept his distance until 1979, when (as Bickerton relates) he and Miéville accepted an invitation to edit the 300th issue of Cahiers.

A few examples of Brody’s well-judged insights must suffice here. “In appearing amateurish [Breathless] calls attention to then codes of professionalism, and in the end highlights the fact that they are merely conventions: it denaturalizes them” (69); “Godard wanted [A Woman is a Woman] to be not realistic but real. He was not interested in constructing a set that resembled an apartment; rather, he wanted to film in a place that was an apartment (or a replica of one)” (111). The film “is constructed as a collage of its footage,” Brody goes on, featuring “images that are not so much disconnected as simply unconnected, as well as breaks and jumps in sound that are as essential as those of the image” (114). Note if you will the complex aesthetic here: “while for Bazin reality was the touchstone of the cinema, for Godard the cinema was the touchstone of reality” (90). In Alphaville, “Godard used the movie camera as a scientific instrument, attempting to put his faith not in the way things appeared but in what filming them might reveal” (230). Hence the shooting at night, and the futuristic inflection on everyday objects, objects which thus become talismanic. La Chinoise expresses Godard’s “despair that the radical politics of the time had surpassed the radicalism of his cinema” (309). More fundamentally, Godard had long seen “the cinema that ‘speculates in advance’ on the spectator, even in the name of Hitchcock, is necessarily reactionary; that art made in a spirit of aesthetic freedom and progress was inherently inclined to the left; that the right was necessarily hostile to such art; and that a new, post-Communist left would necessarily be favorably disposed to it” (125). It may be that by the time Cahiers decided to turn Maoist, Maoism was a waning force in France (timing is everything). But the point remains that Brody’s notion of the New Left of the 1960s as an offshoot or outgrowth of the cinematic New Wave is mind-boggling, and, remains, I submit, a thought to conjure with, much as Godard himself conjured with it in 1967.

PAUL THOMAS teaches politics at the University of California, Berkeley.
