Total cinema: Chronique d’un été and the end of Bazinian film theory

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In retrospect, Jean Rouch’s and Edgar Morin’s 1961 film Chronique d’un été/Chronicle of a Summer can be read as the snapshot of a moment in which cultural, theoretical and technological discourses are caught in the process of crystallization. Chronique’s historical importance to French cinema is incontestable: it is the first French feature to debate the Algerian war openly; it is one of the only ones at this time to include actual footage of factory workers on the shopfloor; it poses prescient questions about decolonization, and it contains an early instance of Holocaust testimony. The film raises these issues as part of a larger attempt to craft a ‘true’ representation of everyday life in Paris. Of all its innovations, it is this desire to realize what its directors called a new ‘cinema verite’ which has had the farthest-reaching consequences for film production and film theory.

Like the other terms they used to describe the project – cinéma direct, cinéma de fraternité, cinéma de sincérité – cinema verite hints at the open, straightforward connection Rouch and Morin tried to establish with their protagonists and their audience. Their efforts at direct communication had a dual impact. On the one hand, Chronique had a practical effect: by shooting their film with cameras and microphones that had never before been used in France, its directors helped to inaugurate a documentary aesthetic built around improvisation, handheld equipment and synchronized sound. On the other hand, the film also shaped the critical discourse of its time: its attempts at transparency set off virulent debates about the relationship between cinema, reality and truth.
This essay maintains that there is a strong connection between the technological changes *Chronique* introduces at the beginning of the 1960s and the theoretical shift in French film criticism which takes place over the course of the decade. This period sees a move away from the Bazin-inspired aesthetics of phenomenological realism promoted in journals such as *Cahiers du cinéma* during the 1950s. By 1969, the same journals had largely abandoned their phenomenological convictions in favour of materialist approaches to film that focused not on the ‘innate’ meaning of sound and image (film as experience) but on the production and arrangement of filmic elements (film as language). The central issue in this debate was mimesis: if the earlier position argued that the cinema could show the world, the later one harboured a profound suspicion of the medium’s capacity for representation.

Rouch’s and Morin’s film embodies aspects of each of these positions. While it manifests a humanist faith in film’s capacity for direct communication, it also challenges the credibility of its own message on structural and thematic levels. The following pages explore the implications of this fundamental incoherence. The first half of this essay places the film in its historical context: rather than connect it with the French documentary tradition, I argue that it is more closely related to the move towards the contemporary world made by the critics-turned-filmmakers of the New Wave. If *Chronique* prolongs the thirst for realism in early New Wave features, however, it also points to the limitations of their aesthetic. In doing so, it offers no better solution: in fact, by attempting to draw even closer to the world, it eventually undermines its claim to truth. The second half of the essay draws on a close reading of editing patterns and a discussion of texts by Morin and Rouch to examine how the film’s illusion of authenticity gradually collapses. By essentially documenting a phenomenological failure, *Chronique* anticipates the radical anti-illusionism of post-1968 film theory. This essay is a first attempt at analyzing its place within the slow transition from one conception of cinema to the other.

While the opening credits explicitly situate the film in 1960s Paris, *Chronique d’un été*’s images of the city are barely recognizable. With few exceptions, Rouch and Morin avoid the iconographic shots of monuments and tourist attractions that were mainstays of Paris documentaries of this period. This absence is indicative of their approach: rather than dwell on familiar symbols, their work focuses first on individuals. The film is organized around a group of protagonists largely composed of the filmmakers’ friends and acquaintances. This mostly young, generally leftist, group consisted of French and African students such as Jean-Pierre Sergent, Modeste Landry and Régis Debray, sociological consultants such as Marceline Loridan, office staff such as *Cahiers du cinéma* secretary Marilù Parolini and factory workers such as Renault employees Angelo Borgien and Jacques Gautrat. It also included the directors themselves: Rouch was an anthropologist who had...

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1 The city’s monuments feature prominently in numerous 1960s documentaries about Paris. See, for example, François Reichenbach’s *Visage de Paris* (1956).

2 Although it is not apparent in the film, many of these individuals were politically active. Gautrat, for example, was affiliated with the radical leftist group Socialisme ou Barbarie, and had attracted attention for *Journal d’un ouvrier*, the book he published with Les Éditions de Minuit under the name Daniel Mothé.
been making prizewinning ethnographic films in West Africa since the mid 1940s. Morin, a sociologist, was perhaps best known as the director of the review Arguments, and as the author of several important books: two of these (Le cinéma ou l’homme imaginaire and Les stars) dealt with film, and a third (Autocritique) was a memoir of his engagement with, and exclusion from, the French Communist Party.

Rouch and Morin filmed their subjects for more than six months, accumulating over twenty-four hours of raw material which was edited into a ninety-minute feature. The working title for the project was Comment vis-tu? [How do you live?]. As this title suggests, the directors envisioned their film as an intimate dialogue between equals. Accordingly, much of it is composed of lengthy conversations in which the protagonists admit satisfaction or, more frequently, confess profound discontent, with the past, present and future. These sequences are organized around closeups: faces fill the screen, blown up excessively large so that even the smallest tics and most subtle movements are made visible. By using form to confirm an intimate focus, the film doubly guarantees privileged access to private lives.

Although Chronique emphasizes bodies and faces, its individuals are never completely individualized. Rather than tell all, Rouch and Morin populate the film with semi-anonymous subjects in the hope of going beyond particularized truths and suggesting the reality of Paris as a whole. This tendency to move from concrete situations to broader abstractions hints at the film’s debt to phenomenology, the philosophical movement at the heart of postwar French intellectual life. In particular, the relationship between cinema and the real world here evokes positions associated with critic André Bazin. Bazin’s writing elaborates an articulate and powerful defence of cinematic realism that is nourished by a commitment to this philosophical approach.

This connection is worth analyzing in more detail. Phenomenology starts from the conviction that the essential truths governing existence can only be grasped through the direct experience of things themselves. In that it understands the world through the impressions of the individual, it is grounded in a Cartesian notion of subjectivity. At the same time, however, the ideal phenomenological subject is an ‘empty’ one devoid of specific psychological traits. In the 1940s and 1950s, French phenomenology generally ignored the influence of factors such as age, class, gender and cultural background. Its problematic aim was to arrive at universal knowledge, to discover the patterns of consciousness common to all human beings. The issue at the heart of this approach, then, was the relationship between self and world; that is, between subjective impressions and collective experience. For philosophers like Edmund Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty the frontier between these spheres is extremely fluid: it is through the particular that one arrives at an understanding of fundamental categories of being. Relying equally on emotional intuition and analytical insight,
phenomenology deciphers the world not by thinking about it but by encountering it.³

Bazin’s criticism consistently frames cinema as a phenomenological tool. In well-known essays such as ‘The evolution of the language of cinema’, he praises films that allow spectators to experience events in the same way as they would in life. Underpinning his argument is the belief that, when faced with a ‘random’ series of onscreen events, the viewer’s consciousness would gradually come to understanding. While never forgetting that cinema was a construct, this essay maintains that the greatest films were able to maintain an illusion of non-intervention and that, at its best, the cinematic image could act as a window onto a coherent and convincingly real world.

Bazin was neither the first nor the only critic during this period to make such claims. His writing fits into what Dudley Andrew has recognized as a strong phenomenological current in postwar French film criticism, one that includes intellectuals such as Amédée Ayfre, Gilbert Cohen-Séat and Morin himself.⁴ While it would be wrong to call any of these figures ‘Bazianian’ theorists, it is also true that the phenomenological dimension of their work relies on notions of realism and spectatorship that found their widest audience through Bazin. Given the extent of his influence, it is Bazin, more than any other writer, who provided the template for phenomenological film criticism in France. Addressing the move away from this approach, then, means coming to terms with the way he was understood in the 1960s.

The decade following Bazin’s death saw the almost hagiographic praise surrounding his work give way to a series of pointed critiques. Despite this shift in reception, the understanding of his writing does not change: what is at stake is not the meaning of his ideas but their value. Pro-Bazianian texts such as Eric Rohmer’s ‘The “sum” of André Bazin’ are fundamentally similar to negative assessments such as Pascal Bonitzer’s ‘The screen of fantasy’ since, for each writer, the essence of Bazinan cinema lies in its capacity to spark what Bonitzer calls ‘the epiphany of the tangible real’.⁵ By insisting on film’s inherent connection to an objective world, this reading of Bazin flattens the complexity of a body of work that, as Philip Rosen has suggested, is equally anchored in notions of ellipsis and subjectivity.⁶ Nevertheless, it constitutes the essential reference in a period in which, as Louis Skorecki indicates, the central concern for budding critics was the possibility of cinematic transparency.⁷ A key text in this regard, and the one most important in the present context, is ‘The myth of total cinema’.

In this well-known essay, Bazin envisions film as an outgrowth of a deep biological need for mimesis. The medium becomes the latest in a series of successive approximations of desire, of an innate craving for what he calls Total Cinema, that is, ‘a total and complete representation of reality ... a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief’.⁸ He argues that this passion for mimesis is responsible for the creation of the movie camera and subsequent technical advancements.
such as sound, colour and CinemaScope. More importantly, it also forms the point of origin for the ontological link that Bazin’s work forcefully establishes between cinema and the real. In moving film nearer to the world, each technological development better satisfied what he saw as an instinctive (and fundamentally insatiable) thirst for representation.

*Chronique d’un été*’s quest for a ‘true’ representation of Paris responds directly to Bazin’s unrealizable dream of Total Cinema. By trying to draw technically and metaphysically closer to the city, it is in step with a much broader current in French film at this time. Although Rouch and Morin situate their work within a tradition of non-fiction filmmaking that starts with Robert J. Flaherty’s *Man of the North* (1922) and Dziga Vertov’s *Man With A Movie Camera* (1929), its closest domestic counterparts were early features by the first-time directors of the New Wave. Since the project had no contemporary documentary equivalent in France, *Chronique d’un été* should also be read in terms of the realist aesthetic popularized by Bazin and disseminated in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma* by young critics who would later form the core of this movement.9

Rouch and Morin propose a singular approach to what by 1960 had already become a key component of New Wave discourse. In a recent article, Michael Rothberg persuasively demonstrates the connections between their method and opposition to the Algerian War during the late 1950s and early 1960s. While Rothberg is certainly correct to argue that ‘a discourse of “truth” was circulating in proximity to anti-colonial struggles at the moment when Rouch and Morin were creating the new cinema-vérité’, the notion of truth also held a definite aesthetic value during the same period.10 More specifically, vérité was a cardinal virtue for certain writers at *Cahiers*.

When critics like Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and Jacques Rivette declared French film formally and thematically bankrupt in the mid 1950s, they called for ‘true’ images of modern France which would contest the false ones disseminated in mainstream productions. The formula was simple: if Truffaut argued that ‘French cinema is being crushed to death by false legends’ and Godard denounced ‘la technique fausse’ of directors like Yves Allégret and Claude Autant-Lara, the New Wave was resolutely positioned as ‘the true face of French cinema’.11 Accordingly, the films these critics went on to make were laden with a burden of authenticity: Claude Chabrol, the first of the *Cahiers* critics to direct a feature, emphasized that ‘[in cinema] there are no major or minor subjects ... there is only truth’.12

This ambiguous notion of truth was anchored in a particular conception of realism. Of all the New Wave filmmakers, the *Cahiers* group was the one most strongly indebted to Bazin’s realist mythology. As critics, the directors they admired were those who, in their opinion, simply showed the world. In his article ‘Genius of Howard Hawks’, for example, Rivette concluded that the superiority of Hawks’s films lay in their materiality: ‘he proves movement by walking, existence by

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9 Rouch’s and Morin’s insistence on direct sound and mobile cameras brings the film closer to experimental documentary efforts such as *La vie commence demain* (Nicole Vedrès, 1949), *Lourdes et ses miracles* (Georges Rouquier, 1950) or *Le Monde du silence* (Jacques Couteau and Louis Malle, 1956). While similar in spirit to *Chronique d’un été*, however, the subjects of these films are far from the Parisian everyday.


breathing. What is, is.\textsuperscript{13} Truffaut’s review of \textit{Et Dieu créa la femme}/\textit{And God Created Woman} (1956) commends Roger Vadim’s direction of his star (and then-wife) Brigitte Bardot in similar terms: ‘I thank Vadim for directing his young wife by having her reenact everyday gestures before the camera. . . . Rather than imitate other films, Vadim wanted to forget cinema to “copy life”.’\textsuperscript{14}

This phrase – forget cinema to ‘copy life’ – could also describe Rouch’s and Morin’s original goal. On one level they wanted \textit{Chronique d’un été} to allow unprecedented access to real-world events as they took place. Above all, their cinema verite was anchored in a Bazinean dream of transparency in which the process of cinema is forgotten in favour of the real. Although this term was chosen to pay tribute to Vertov’s notion of \textit{Kino-Pravda}, Vertov’s name did not immediately possess the formalist connotations it carries now, since his writings and most of his films were widely unavailable in France until the mid 1960s.\textsuperscript{15} Initial assessments of his work by Soviet cinema expert Georges Sadoul and Rouch himself stress its innovative content: what distinguished the director from peers such as Kuleshov or Eisenstein was not his use of montage, but his strong attraction to contemporary life. Writing in 1949, Sadoul positioned \textit{Kino-Pravda} as an outgrowth of France’s realist tradition: ‘Vertov took these words, which mean \textit{Cinema Vérité}, as a slogan: like Lumière, he intended to banish from cinema all which was not “taken from life”[\textit{pris sur le vif}].’\textsuperscript{16} Rouch frames him in a similar manner: he claims that, by bringing the camera into the street, Vertov heightened the cinema’s capacity to show ‘[his] camera was an eye, a new eye open on the world, which allowed anything to be seen’.\textsuperscript{17}

If cinema verite paid tribute to the Soviet director’s interest in documenting reality, it was never imagined solely in these terms. In \textit{Les Stars}, written several years before the collaboration with Rouch, Morin defines it as a genre of independent film which includes neorealist fictions such as Luchino Visconti’s \textit{La Terra Trema} (1948) and Jean Renoir’s \textit{Toni} (1934) as well as documentaries like Flaherty’s \textit{Nanook}. These examples hint at the tension the label contains: while it promises a closer connection to an unspecified, pluralized notion of truth, Morin also suggests that cinema verite remains connected to the aesthetic experience that film affords. This contradictory agenda reappears in discussions of \textit{Chronique}. At times, Morin claimed that the film should ‘eliminate fiction and bring us closer to life’.\textsuperscript{18} If he stated that ‘this is not a fictional film’, however, he also added ‘this is not a documentary’.\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, many of \textit{Chronique}’s events are actively provoked rather than passively documented. Rouch in particular worked to surprise or disorient the film’s participants during shooting. While committed to the authenticity of the encounters before the camera, he also rooted the film in the desire to fabricate which lies at the heart of fiction. One of the best-known examples of this approach occurs during a discussion of racism and antisemitism on the restaurant terrace of the Musée de l’Homme, when he deliberately creates uncomfortable tension by questioning an

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\textsuperscript{14} François Truffaut, ‘Les critiques de cinéma sont misogynes: B.B. est victime d’une cabale’, Arts: Spectacles, no. 587 (11–18 December 1956), p. 3.
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\textsuperscript{18} Edgar Morin, ‘Chronique d’un film’, in Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, \textit{Chronique d’un été} (Paris: InterSpectacles, 1962), p. 41. A slightly abridged version of this book was included in \textit{Ciné-Ethnography}. While I generally follow its fine translation of Morin’s essay and the film transcript, at times I substitute my own, as is the case here.
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\textsuperscript{19} Morin, ‘Chronique d’un film’, p. 8.
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oblivious Modeste Landry about the camp number tattooed on Marceline Loridan’s arm.\textsuperscript{20}

The verite project is based on this conflict between spontaneity and mise-en-scene: its central issue is neither truth nor falsehood, it is the permeable border between art and life. In this sense, \textit{Chronique’s} search for a genuine depiction of French society and French youth parallels similar quests in the first features by ex-Cahiers critics like Chabrol and Truffaut. By popularizing the term cinema verite, Rouch and Morin gave focus and direction to the ill-defined New Wave rhetoric about truth. At the same time, their image of France surpasses those of its predecessors in two ways. \textit{Chronique} makes it clear that, despite Godard’s call for a cinema which could show ‘things as they are’, the early New Wave films were structured by a double gap.\textsuperscript{21}

The first gap in early New Wave realism has to do with the separation of appearances from the ideological complexity of physical reality. Although they explicitly proposed to deal with contemporary issues, films like \textit{Les quatre cents coups}/\textit{The 400 Blows} (Francois Truffaut, 1959) or \textit{A bout de souffle}/\textit{Breathless} (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960) tended to envision the real world in terms of surfaces. Roland Barthes makes this point in his review of Claude Chabrol’s \textit{Le beau Serge} (1958). While he praises the director’s accurate rendering of contemporary rural life, he condemns his inability to see appearances in context with larger forces: ‘[Chabrol is] always interested by the intermittence of human misfortunes, and never by how they connect’.\textsuperscript{22} What is deliberately bracketed in early work by Chabrol, Truffaut and Godard is not simply politics, but a clear notion of the social dimensions of representation.

This gap between surface and core is accompanied by a second separation: in the late 1950s, French cinema also testifies to a technologically determined split between film and world. Since cameras were too heavy and microphones too delicate, filmmakers did not have the equipment they needed to show ‘things as they are’. Although they proposed to lead the cinema into the streets of Paris, the Cahiers directors were still working according to classical notions of film production. They understood filmmaking in terms of the reconstruction of a preexisting scenario rather than as a spontaneous response to developing events in the real world. This traditional approach demanded a great deal of foresight: films had to be planned out shot by shot, each sequence needed to be properly lit, sets needed to be prepared and locations scouted, movements blocked and interactions rehearsed. By the time shooting began, everyone on the set was supposed to know what was going to happen in front of the camera.

\textit{Chronique’s} challenge to this paradigm becomes apparent when we compare it with an example made in the previous year. Although \textit{Breathless} championed an improvised aesthetic, its appearance of effortlessness was actually the product of a great deal of work. The camera used on the project, a 35mm Cameflex, was smaller than other models but still noisy, relatively heavy and easily visible: in order to
shoot Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg on the Champs Élysées, for example, Godard was obliged to hide his cinematographer Raoul Coutard inside a mail-delivery pushcart and physically drag him up and down the street.

*Chronique d’un été* marks the moment when this kind of baroque solution starts to become a thing of the past in France. This change is due to the equipment Rouch had developed especially for the project. Halway through shooting he started using a prototype of the portable 16mm sync-sound camera that would become an industry standard, the KMT Coutant-Mathot Éclair. This new prototype was smaller, lighter, and more inconspicuous than Coutard’s Caméflex. Its reduced size and weight allowed its operator to follow random movement with near-total freedom. Rouch enthusiastically framed the camera’s development as a turning point in cinema history: ‘We could film in the middle of the street, and no one knew we were shooting except the technicians and the actors. . . . We have at our disposal a fantastic tool in perpetual progress.’

This camera was not always present during the making of the film. Once Anatole Dauman agreed to fund *Chronique*, the project began as a standard production with Albert Viguier, a distinguished technician who had worked on *Le jour se lève* (Marcel Carné, 1939), as director of photography. Almost immediately after joining the crew, Viguier not only quit the film but asked Dauman to remove his name from it in order to preserve his reputation. In his opinion, Rouch’s improvised approach made it impossible to ensure the most important element of his role as cinematographer: the quality of the image.

Viguier’s opposition underscores the fact that what Rouch was asking for went against conventional filmmaking practice. *Chronique’s* aesthetic developed outside of French cinema: Rouch was strongly influenced by short features produced by Canada’s Office National du Film/National Film Board, in which experiments with non-sync 16mm cameras had been underway since the mid 1950s. He had seen early ONF/NFB efforts at the Flaherty Seminar at UCLA in 1958 and was particularly struck by *Les Raquetteurs* (1958), a documentary about competitive snowshoeing by Michel Brault and Gilles Groulx. What fascinated Rouch about this short was that the cameraman, Brault, filmed certain sequences while walking. Instead of placing the camera on wheels and filming at a distance as Raoul Coutard did, he was able to hold the image steady on his own while remaining close to his subjects.

For Rouch, this unusually fluid camerawork constituted the technical advance that would push cinema towards the world. Brault was the only person Rouch and his colleagues knew who was able to film this way, and they were so impressed by his work that they flew him to Paris from Canada to finish the film. His introduction to the crew corresponds with the adoption of the new camera. In the wake of his arrival, *Chronique* can be divided into two general categories of scenes: the initial fixed-camera sequences Roger Morillère and Viguier shot with a tripod-mounted...
While a number of other cameramen (including Raoul Coutard) made minor contributions to the project, the majority of the film’s footage was shot by Brau, Montlêtre or Viguier.


Jean-Luc Godard, ‘Entretien’ [1962], in Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard vol. 1, p. 215.


Arriflex camera, and the later mobile ones filmed by Brau with either the Coutant-Éclair or a silent hand-held Arriflex.

Rouch’s and Morin’s film also incorporates significant advances in sound technology. Up until 1960, it was difficult to capture live sound and image simultaneously outside controlled studio environments. Since exterior filming in synchronized sound was costly and required unwieldy equipment, it was easier to have the cast come back after shooting had finished and overdub an audio track during postproduction. *Chronique* marks the moment when this process starts to become unnecessary. In addition to his walking camera method, Brau also brought Electro-Voice lavaliere microphones with him from Canada. While the interior scenes were recorded with a boom mike, these new models could be concealed under clothing and connected to a portable Nagra tape recorder for outside shooting. Once the scene was finished, it was fairly easy to match the Nagra reels with the images, and in this way it was possible to create an early version of sync sound.

These different types of sound equipment allow *Chronique* to make a radical gesture towards what Morin called ‘an authentic talking cinema’. The film introduced the complexities of spontaneous speech generated by regular people in ordinary environments to a commercial cinema that had been dominated by trained actors delivering mannered, literary dialogue in studios. It provided a crucial platform for the voices of workers, students, housewives and immigrants. Godard, for example, would later claim with categorical aplomb that ‘the first time I heard a worker speak in a movie was in *Chronique d’un été*.

By including footage shot before and after the arrival of the new microphones, camera and cameraman, Rouch’s and Morin’s film constitutes a precious document of French cinema in a state of change. Through its various innovations, it was able to span the *Cahiers* directors’ double gap. In the first place, it implicitly responds to Barthes’s ideological criticism of Chabrol by using its sharpened image of the world to create space for marginalized voices and incite dialogue about political issues. Secondly, Rouch’s pioneering use of technology enabled French film to take one step closer to a Total Cinema which could integrally copy events in the real world as they happened. Since the new equipment radically opened film to improvisation, the recreation essential to both mainstream and New Wave features was no longer the only option.

*Chronique*’s impression of reality surpassed that of the New Wave, but it is important to emphasize that all of these filmmakers were working within the same paradigm. Like the *Cahiers* directors, Rouch and Morin shared a Bazinian faith in the cinema’s power to uncover fundamental truths: in showing appearances (things as they seem) they hoped to reveal essences (things as they are). They also shared Bazin’s admiration for films that ‘give back to the cinema a sense of the ambiguity of reality’. In *Chronique*’s final scene, Morin frames the film in precisely these terms: ‘This film, as opposed to ordinary cinema, reintroduces us to life.
People approach the film as they do in everyday life, that is, they aren’t guided, because we have not guided the spectator.

Although he positions *Chronique* as an ‘unguided’ film, the meaning of this word is not entirely clear. On the level of content, it is true that the work neither judges its protagonists nor promotes an obvious message about everyday life. On a formal level, however, I would argue that Rouch and Morin relentlessly guide their spectators. What Rouch’s technological push towards Total Cinema masks is another kind of reconstruction, one which took place when he and Morin assembled the material they had collected. In this respect, the work’s image of reality is just as constructed as that of any other film.

*Chronique* is a heavily edited feature which tries to mask directorial intervention. Rather than insist on the cuts from shot to shot, Rouch and Morin place editing in the service of phenomenological transparency. Their goals for the project become clearer when we examine a specific example. One of the key scenes in the film is a discussion between Morin, Jean-Pierre Sergent and Marceline Loridan in which the latter two express bitter disappointment with their lives. Although this conversation seems coherent, it is actually the product of calculated manipulation. What appears to be a single-take sequence is composed of two different scenes filmed months apart. The editing reverses chronology, putting the later of the two first.

The initial footage, in which we see Sergent working alone in an apartment, was filmed after Brault had joined the production. Almost immediately, his mobile-camera shot gives way to the actual discussion, a static, tripod-mounted Arriflex sequence that was among the earliest filmed for *Chronique*. If in many ways the atmosphere of authenticity in the film is founded on the synchronicity of sound and vision, the appearance of reality is achieved here by splitting the image and audio tracks. Morin’s introductory question, ‘Jean-Pierre, you are a student, you are twenty years old, and I wonder how you get by in life’, was a part of the second sequence, but Rouch and Morin lay it over images from the first, using a sound bridge across the two shots to mask the cut.

In the process of editing, however, something is lost: Morin’s detailed production diary, which he later published as ‘Chronicle of a film’, states that the images of Sergent at his desk originally had a completely different meaning. This footage was shot in order to document ‘Jean-Pierre preparing for his philosophy exams, which he failed in June. An important theme: if Jean-Pierre fails them again in October, he will lose his deferment and be called up for military service, that is to say, Algeria.’

The political subtext is absent not only here but in the discussion itself. In fact, the discussion suppresses an even more volatile connection to the Algerian War. In a 1991 interview, Sergent explained the context for his onscreen depression: before *Chronique* he had been a *porteur de valises* within the *réseau Jeanson*, the clandestine network of French operatives who were committed to aiding the FLN in its struggle for Algerian
On 24 February 1960, just a few months before his conversation with Morin, the French police broke up this network and revealed its existence to the general public. Sergent was not among those arrested and, for obvious reasons, the film contains no mention of his connection to this group. At the same time, the feelings of anxiety and depression he expresses in this scene clearly testify to the aftereffects of this political commitment.

What is interesting, then, is that the Algerian War structures both parts of this sequence while remaining completely invisible. Although the film represses overt political commentary, it does not completely remove the political: the term exists here as a function of philosophical commitments rather than particular issues. In this sense, the Jean-Pierre segment is one of Chronique’s most intensely political scenes, since it directly raises the question of individual engagement. Sergent begins by explaining how the previous generation’s intellectual collapse has deterred him from future commitment. Loridan concurs: while she avoids the specifics of her situation, the camera reveals that the past has affected her even more seriously when it pans down to show the concentration camp number on her arm for the first time. By showing its participants struggling in the wake of major historical events like the Occupation, the Holocaust, and the postwar failures of the French Left, the film communicates a shared feeling of despair and simply asks how to continue.

This question is raised again in the following scene, a roundtable discussion of the Algerian War. Chronique might have been the first French film to discuss this topic openly, but its treatment of the war is relatively superficial: it takes no overt position and the possibility of Algerian independence is never mentioned. The debate over the war resembles Morin’s conversation with Sergent and Loridan: both episodes manage to silence political issues while raising political questions. In each case, this contradictory engagement is a result of the editing.

While the roundtable discussion of the war is one of the film’s most relentlessly edited sequences, this only becomes clear when it is compared with transcripts of the rushes. These transcripts reveal the scene’s anodyne nature to be completely artificial: the final product, in fact, is a Frankenstein-like recombination of stray images and random sentences cobbled together into an uneven whole. Some of the cuts were made to focus a discussion that rambled on for over an hour. Others, however, were made to unfocus it: as in the previous scene, Rouch and Morin removed references to specific issues. The exchange between Sergent and Viguier, who at this point was still the project’s director of photography, provides a good example. In the film, Viguier attacks the younger generation:

There is an Algerian problem, and there is a student problem . . . the two problems have become mixed up, and that’s huge because it is a problem that touches you, particularly you young people, and what I reproach you young people for in this problem is for not playing your
part . . . me, in my opinion you aren’t playing it, you aren’t playing it in full.  

The rushes indicate that this statement was a fragment of a much longer monologue. As the following passage shows, the lines spoken in the film (italicized below) only give part of the picture:

AV: I remember people in the Resistance . . . who were getting their heads kicked in, who were getting sent to Auschwitz I mean, there are problems, there were people who came forward with exceptional courage, but you, you . . . tell me something, right now you’re in the process of working out a problem, you’re arguing it in the most highly philosophical way possible but damn it, that’s not what I’m asking you to do, there is an Algerian problem, and there is a student problem . . . the two problems have become mixed up, and that’s huge because it is a problem that touches you, particularly you young people, and what I reproach you young people for in this problem is for not playing your part . . . me, in my opinion you aren’t playing it, you aren’t playing it in full. Because unfortunately, the young person’s past requires contempt for death. . . . Well! You’re not there yet . . .

X: What do you mean by playing your part in full?

AV: Following one’s convictions to the bitter end.  

What Viguier was really doing before the cameras, then, was pushing the assembled group to action. If Sergent attacked the political failures of Morin’s generation in the previous scene, Viguier’s comments reverse the dynamic and put the blame on youth. They also point to the dense web of issues underpinning debate about the war during this period. As Michael Rothberg has argued, *Chronique* was produced within ‘a discursive context in which the association of torture, truth, testimony and resistance underwrote a link between the Algerian war and Nazi atrocities’.  

This example demonstrates how the tightly knit relationship between colonialism and occupation was systematically unravelled in the final cut. Political content was reduced to a spectral presence: it became the ghost which haunted this film and its protagonists.

Initially, this reluctance to engage with political issues seems easy to explain: the most obvious reason for removing references to the Algerian War is fear of reprisal, be it censorship of the film or, in Sergent’s case, arrest and interrogation. Rouch and Morin made their feature at a time when the French government was actively keeping all criticism of the Algerian war out of the movies. Rather than risk prohibition of the film’s release, they voluntarily cut material they knew would cause them problems with censors. Consequently, as Ivone Margulies has argued, the film’s politically engaged individuals are veiled in political anonymity.  

And yet these cuts should not solely be attributed to a fear of censorship. The film’s treatment of politics must also be seen as symptomatic of a work that is maddeningly riddled with gaps. The transcripts of the rushes confirm that the directors had filmed
conversations that situated their protagonists more clearly. They not only declined to include this material, they also avoided structuring mechanisms like intertitles or captions which would have clarified who was speaking, and when and where the conversations were taking place. As a result, the film swings erratically between anonymity and intimacy. We get hints of personality just as we get hints of politics, but we never fully understand who the people onscreen are and how they relate to one other. By presenting moments of intense personal confession lived in front of the camera by total strangers, the film suggests an embarrassing conflation of private and public.

Morin’s critical work helps to explain this confusion. While Rouch’s Les maîtres fous (1955) and Moi, un noir (1958) raise some of the same issues as Chronique, Morin’s writing offers a much more explicit account of both his vision of cinema and his philosophical approach. Margulies has provided a strong reading of the film’s connection to Morin’s Autocritique and his political positions during the 1950s and 1960s, but his work from this period on films, mass communication and everyday life also offers vital clues as to what was at stake in his collaboration with Rouch. When taken together, this work suggests that Chronique’s vacillation between private and public can be at least partially understood as its directors’ deliberate choice. Morin, in fact, had defined the everyday as vacillation a full two years before he started working on the film. In a lengthy review of Henri Lefebvre’s Critique de la vie quotidienne, he argued that ‘everyday life is indeed at the intersection of microsociology and macrosociology. It is subject to the great determinations, the great taboos, the great myths of macrosociological life, but it is lived on the level of individuals and individual relationships.’

In making Chronique, Morin positioned it as a total portrait which tried to account for these various levels of being: ‘The fundamental question that we wanted to pose was about the human condition in a given social setting and at a given moment in history’. Accordingly, when assembling the film from the rushes, he fought to create ‘[a] collective halo around the characters’. This emphasis on ‘humanity’ recalls the title of the book Morin published with Les Editions de Minuit in 1956, Le cinéma ou l’homme imaginaire. In this idealistic text he endowed cinema with the power to touch mankind itself, claiming that it possessed a ‘universal language’ which could move all viewers in fundamentally similar ways.

Both this book and its followup, Les stars, centre on the bond between spectator and film. These studies define viewing as a double act of projection onto and identification with the onscreen world. The terms ‘projection’ and ‘identification’, which Morin calls ‘fundamental psychic processes’, are linked through a circular relationship.

Everyone in life, either spontaneously or through the suggestion of cues or signs, transfers onto others feelings and ideas which he naively
attributes to them. These processes of projection are closely associated with processes which identify ourselves more or less strongly, more or less spontaneously, with others. These phenomena of projection and identification are encouraged by artistic spectacles. . . . We experience spectacles in a quasi-mystic way by mentally integrating ourselves into the characters and the action (projection) and by mentally integrating characters and action into ourselves (identification).

In essence, Morin argued that film and viewer shape each other in predictable ways. *Chronique* offered him a chance to apply these theoretical beliefs to practical situations. He intended it as an effort at communication, an exchange not only between the people on screen, but between the film and its audience. While focusing on the singular, the project was ultimately intended as a starting point for phenomenological communion in which spectators are led to a universal truth about contemporary life.

Morin’s notion of film as phenomenological tool sheds light on the inconsistencies of the film’s editing: its tendency to remove some, but not all, references to personal or political specifics suggests a desire to stage subjectivity as an open category which could embrace and transcend individual existence. This is why, to take just one example, its protagonists have first, but not last, names: the particular is partially included to avoid reducing the film’s participants to caricatures of social types, but an excess of personal detail is left out to keep them from being too singular.

If the film’s presentation of its protagonists was tailored to encourage audience identification, the same could be said of its structure as a whole. Visual anthropologist Barry Dornfeld emphasizes that *Chronique* was shaped to fit cinematic norms: ‘[i]t did not intend to call attention to the form (on the level of shot-to-shot construction) of this new cinema-vérité. . . . The film was intended to be agreeable to an audience, to avoid radical departure from the conventions of documentary film form in the structuring of images that were radically recorded.’ Establishing a conventional structure draws attention away from the form of the scenes and towards their content. By encouraging viewers to focus on the words and feelings of the protagonists, Rouch and Morin facilitate the transmission of the film’s emotional message.

In this respect, what *Chronique* seeks is neither fact nor fiction, but presence. Even the majority of its self-reflexive gestures – the directors discussing their work before the camera, for example – should not be read as distancing mechanisms. Instead, the film exhibits an anti-Brechian self-reflexivity: by acknowledging the artificial context for onscreen interactions, the filmmakers attempt to reinforce the honesty of their efforts and the sincerity of what was being filmed. As Morin stated: ‘I thought that we would start from a basis of truth and that an even greater truth would develop’. By displaying sincerity, the directors hoped to create an immanent onscreen world which would be recognizable to viewers.

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44 Morin’s ideas about film are in dialogue with the broadly framed US investigations into mass communication and mass culture which were developing at around the same time. He made these connections explicit in the first book he published after *Chronique’s* release, *L’esprit du temps: L’Événement* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1962), which draws on the work of sociologists like Paul Lazarsfeld and David Riesman.


46 *Chronique’s* absorptive self-reflexivity should be compared with the distancing self-reflexive techniques (the use of coloured filters, the disjunctions between sound and image, the foregrounding of formal techniques) employed by Godard in films like *Le mépris/Contempt* (1963).

Rouch, in fact, had been moving towards immanence since he began making films: ‘my goal’, he told Les lettres françaises in 1957, ‘[is] not to reconstitute life, but to show it’.\(^4\) In an early article on ethnographic film, he praises works in which ‘the screen stops being a screen which separates people from one another’ and ‘a mysterious contact is established . . . as if there were no more cameras, no more recording devices . . . none of that mass of accessories and technicians which make up the great ritual of classical cinema’.\(^4\) The same idea appears in Morin’s work: the latter begins a short piece on mass communication, for example, by declaring that ‘in a good piece of information, the medium is erased . . . in order to show the event and let it speak.’\(^5\) These quotations suggest that moments of real contact transcend the circumstances of their creation. At these times language, filmic or otherwise, gives way to feeling.

Morin’s ‘Chronicle of a film’ reveals a strong faith in this principle. His belief in universals seems to have led him to assume that the feelings the film transmitted were unmistakable, that its audience would all understand them in the same way: his own. He and Rouch intended to end the film with decisive proof of cinema’s capacity for direct communication. The final scene was supposed to record the protagonists’ reactions to a screening of unedited rushes at the Studio Publicis. Morin envisioned a Rousseau-esque happy ending:

I had dreamed of a sort of confrontation in a room after projecting the film, with multiple cameras and multiple microphones recording not only the reactions to the film, but also the conversations that would start up spontaneously and according to affinities between the different characters; a big final scene where the scales would fall from our eyes and conscience would be awakened, where we would take a new Tennis Court Oath [un nouveau Serment du Jeu de Paume] in order to build a new life.\(^5\)

The proposal he sketches out here is for a utopian panopticon that would not only capture a total image of ‘true’ communication but inspire the creation of a new social contract. The political implications of his language should not be lost. The Serment du Jeu de Paume, a turning point in the French Revolution, united the Third Estate and set it against the monarchy. This oath constitutes a moment in which marginalized groups pledged to change the political process that had excluded them. In alluding to it, Morin underscores the extent to which he imagined Chronique as a revolutionary enterprise.

Revolution, in fact, is the key component of the film’s phenomenological approach. As we have seen, Morin understood the act of viewing film as a process of recognition. Since his conception of spectatorship is linked with collective belonging, this recognition is implicitly social, and thus carries a definite political weight. It is no surprise, then, to find that his 1959 memoir Autocritique frames an early trip to the movies as a decisive moment in his leftist trajectory: ‘what I
felt, perhaps for the first time, was the possibility, the idea, the hope of
salvation through collective redemption, collective salvation, the
liberating horizon of so many expectations and anxieties’. The same
desire for shared catharsis haunts his descriptions of Chronique, which
he intended as ‘a montage of images in which the question “How do you
live?” is transformed into a “How can one live?” and a “What can one
do?” [Que faire?], which has repercussions on the spectator’. This
statement tells us much about the place of political action within
the film. The phenomenological truth to which it hoped to lead its
viewers was not a practical one. While the directors coded their work
with political sentiment, they did not make a militant film which pushed
spectators to a predetermined course of action. This lack of explicit
direction is also evident in Morin’s writing. The last question he asks in
the passage above – ‘Que faire?’ – is also the title of an article about
political engagement which he published in Arguments just a few months
before starting the film. In this wilfully indecisive text, Morin
emphasizes: ‘I believe in the great systems, in the great theoretical
and practical construction which encompasses the problems of nature and
man’ and asserts that ‘we must contribute towards the elaboration of a
new system’. However, he also concludes that ‘our role, today, is to
announce that there is no Good News’. Since he knows of nothing that
could supplant the French Communist Party’s discredited Marxism, he
has no idea what the new system he calls for should look like.

The same deep-seated uncertainty is clearly at work in his film.
Margulies reads this reluctance to provide answers as broadly
symptomatic of ‘a problematic moment in the [French] Left’s intellectual
engagement’. The late 1950s, she argues, was a period in which
intellectuals such as Morin were searching for an independent theoretical
platform outside the aegis of the Communist Party. In this sense,
Chronique’s indecision mirrors that of its times. Instead of leading its
viewers to answers, it attempts to level the hierarchical differences
between filmmakers, protagonists and audience so that all could search
together. In simply presenting evidence about the Algerian War, the
situation of the working class and the increasingly structured nature of
everyday life, Rouch and Morin gambled that individuals would feel
their way to a cathartic awareness of unity and the possibility for change.

Unfortunately, this hope was profoundly misplaced. In fact, Morin’s
dreams of catharsis were invalidated even before Chronique’s production
had wrapped. This brings us back to the Studio Publicis and the film’s
screening scene. Rather than provide a triumphant conclusion, the
discussion which followed the projection of the rushes quickly
degenerated into a series of arguments: Angelo Borgien’s ‘natural’
conversation with Modeste Landry, for example, was alternately read as
a moment of ‘human contact’ or as ‘excessively fake’, and many
participants strongly criticized the film as both false and ‘immensely
tiresome’.

52 Morin, Autocritique, pp. 20–21.
54 Edgar Morin, ‘Que faire?’,
Arguments, no. 16 (1958), pp. 1, 2.
55 Margulies, ‘Chronicle of a Summer
(1960) as Autocritique (1958)’,
p. 174.
56 Rouch and Morin, Chronique d’un
été, p. 126.
Morin’s diary informs us that this scene was absent from the initial print of the film; it was added only once he and Rouch decided that the original ending (their more timid evaluation of the project made weeks before the Publicis discussion) was not strong enough. When they decided to include it, they also shot a new ‘final’ scene, a postscript in which they struggled to come to grips with their participants’ unexpected reactions. Morin concludes the film by expressing his disappointment at the general lack of comprehension: ‘I thought that everyone would be moved by this film, and to see now that people that I like very much ... are criticized, well, that upsets me, that bothers me. I believed the viewer would like the characters that I liked.’

This comment points to the central conflict in Chronique d’un été. Ultimately, the film’s tremendous phenomenological push towards universally recognizable knowledge is openly invalidated by its conclusion. By moving one step closer to a Bazinian Total Cinema, the film managed to cast suspicion on the phenomenological process, on cinema’s potential accurately to reflect the world and ‘naturally’ communicate the larger truth it contains. As a result, what come to the fore are the problems inherent in the notion of collective consciousness.

The Publicis scene is perhaps the most dangerous moment in the film, since it calls everything that has gone before it into question. If Chronique’s earlier self-reflexive moments were placed in the service of sincerity, the discussion of the film by its participants embodies a more problematic self-reflexivity. In criticizing their onscreen behaviour, the protagonists establish distance within a work founded on proximity. When they label their intimate revelations exhibitionist, the shadow of a doubt is cast on the nature of the events depicted: how is it possible to know if those on screen are lying or telling the truth? And which truth are they telling? What was intended as a direct presentation of lives, feelings and political sentiment in fact provokes the suspicion that everything has been staged for the spectator’s benefit. Given the uncomfortable awareness of theatricality produced by this scene, the final discussion between Rouch and Morin must be read as an effort at salvaging a commonly held truth. In acknowledging differences in interpretation, they also make a last-ditch attempt at an authoritative reading of their subjects’ behaviour.

The negative reactions of Chronique’s participants were particularly damaging for Morin since they challenged the principles of projection and identification at the heart of his theoretical work. The texts he published in the 1960s do not abandon these concepts, but they do go further in acknowledging the possibility of individual interpretations. As his ideas changed, his assessment of the film became more critical. In 1963, he clearly confessed his disappointment with the experience: ‘Comment vis-tu, misnamed Chronique d’un été, was, under the name ciné-vérité, an unsuccessful draft of a cine-dialogue, of a cine-communication, that revealed the difficulties and the facilities, the traps and the diversions, of such an undertaking to me.’

See, for example, the discussion of cultural consumption on pp. 59–62 of L’esprit du temps.

Morin, Le voif du sujet, p. 279.
Chronique Rouch made a series of mid-length features (La Punition [1962], Rose et Landry [1963], Gare du Nord [1965]) using its equipment and some of its cast and crew, Morin gradually distanced himself from filmmaking. Interestingly, however, he was involved with at least one more film during the 1960s. The question of truth, and the lesson he learned from his collaboration with Rouch, were decisive influences on this second project, a 1964 Franco-Israeli coproduction tellingly entitled L’heure de la vérité.

Set on the eve of the Eichmann trials, this little-seen film, which never had commercial release in France, was scripted by Morin and directed by Henri Calef. It deals with an American sociologist’s unmasking of a Nazi war criminal, the supervisor of a Sonderkommando unit, who in the last days of the war masquerades as one of his victims, takes refuge in Israel, marries and starts a family there under the dead man’s name. The film opens with a shot that directly recalls Rouch’s and Morin’s feature. In order for the Nazi officer Hans Wernert to change his identity, he must have a camp tattoo. The credits unfurl against a closeup of the newly inscribed number, which immediately evokes the one from Birkenau on Marceline Loridan’s arm. L’heure de la vérité returns to one of Chronique’s most powerful, self-evident truths and recasts it not only as a lie, but as a screen which covers up past atrocities. Rather than attempt to speak the truth, Morin’s cautious script approaches the issue as an imbricated series of problems: the film ends on a deeply ambiguous note in which the fate of the now-captured officer is left completely open to question.

L’heure de la vérité’s very existence hints at the subterranean reach of Rouch’s and Morin’s film over the course of the 1960s. Chronique d’un été’s sharpened reproduction of contemporary Paris proved to be both a window and a brick wall. On the one hand, it inaugurated a current of documentary-style European filmmaking, directly influencing works such as Chris Marker’s and Pierre Lhomme’s Le joli mai (1963), Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Comizi d’amore/Love Meetings (1964), and Godard’s Masculin-Féminin (1966). These films attempted to extend Chronique’s investigation into the everyday lives of so-called ordinary people; they all work from a shared Bazinian faith in cinema’s power to show the real.

Although Chronique harks back to Bazin, however, its inability to confirm a consensual real underscores the necessary artificiality of filmic realism and contradicts what Eric Rohmer described as the main tenet behind all of Bazin’s criticism: his belief in the cinema’s inherent objectivity, in its innate capacity to represent the world as it exists. In this sense, Rouch’s and Morin’s feature indirectly announces the turn away from the ideal of cinema as transparency which takes place in French film and French film criticism over the course of the 1960s. By 1968, the enthusiasm for representational illusion had given way to the awareness of the cinematic image as a construct that can support, mirror or resist dominant ideologies. In the wake of the May riots, many critics...
and filmmakers wholeheartedly accepted the position that cinema’s role was no longer to reflect reality but to intervene in it. As the key theoretical questions shifted terrain from aesthetics to ethics (and, on another level, from phenomenology to structuralism), the revolution Morin hoped for was embraced, but on different terms. French cinema’s move towards political action largely occurred at the expense of conventional representation.

By casting a shadow on realism and raising questions about the forces that shape everyday life, ‘Chronique d’un été’ set off a slow-burning reconsideration of cinema’s relationship to the world. If the emergence of the New Wave was intimately connected with Bazin and auteur theory, major changes in the theory and practice of French cinema in the 1960s – the move away from phenomenology, the dissemination of new cameras and microphones, the expansion of militant filmmaking collectives, the reawakened interest in theories of montage, the rediscovery of the Soviet avant gardes of the 1920s – can all be traced to the early debates about cinema verité. Rouch’s and Morin’s film stands as a crucial document of a moment in which, to use Michael Fried’s terms, the Bazinian era of absorption starts to give way to a new emphasis on a theatricality of process: in its wake, the truth of the real was no longer a simple matter of sound and vision.

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