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# The Spectator's Position as a Thinking Space for the Contemporary Essay Film: *Face aux fantômes* (2009) and *Jaurès* (2012)

This article aims to carry out an analysis of the spectatorial position as a thinking space for the contemporary essay film based on the comparative study of two Francophone films: *Face aux fantômes* (Jean-Louis Comolli and Sylvie Lindeperg, 2009) and *Jaurès* (Vincent Dieutre, 2012). The dialogism of the essay film, the interpellation to the spectator to produce self-reflection on their position and critical thinking about the images shown, is then generated from the premise of identification. The analysis shows how *Face aux fantômes* offers an audiovisual thinking process on the mobilization of the gaze of the *emancipated spectator* theorized by Jacques Rancière, while *Jaurès* provokes the same reflection from the opposite approach: the fixation of the gaze and the representation of spectatorial passivity. In this way, both films reveal the possibilities of the spectator's position as an epistemological space for the contemporary essay film.

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## Keywords

CONTEMPORARY ESSAY FILM

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## Introduction

The essay film presents as one of its defining characteristics its dialogical nature between author and spectator and, consequently, the role of the latter in the construction of the film. Its evolution consolidates the dialogism between the enunciating subjectivity/ies and an equally individualized spectator. Following the reflections of Laura Rascaroli and David Montero, it establishes an I-you relationship that allows a dialogue with a real spectator to address and interpellate: “The essayist [...] allows the answers to emerge somewhere else, precisely in the position occupied by the embodied spectator [...] The two subject positions, the ‘I’ and the ‘you,’ determine and shape one another” (Rascaroli 2009, 36). Thus, an “active spectatorship” emerges, allowing the development of critical thinking: “interpellation in essayistic films is a liberating force since it encourages the viewer to develop a critical position” (Montero 2012, 121); and the self-reflection about our own position as spectators: “the audience is invited actively to reconsider their role and what is expected of them in order to reflect upon their own status as spectators” (2012, 118–19). The essay film explores and delves into the possibilities of this dialogical nature, producing different dynamics and displacements between both positions: “An important element when considering viewer positioning in essayistic filmmaking is the discursive displacement of the author towards the interpretative field of the viewer [...] The same process can be observed from the other side, allowing the reader to actually re-experience the original process of reflection” (2012, 124). In general, we can say that the essayist’s position has moved from being the author of the images, behind the camera—*Lettre de Sibérie* (1958)—to being the editor of both their own images and those of others,

in the editing room—*Scénario du film Passion* (1982)—until a progressive dematerialization of this position associated with digital technology in contemporary essay films. It also implies a progressive approach of the filmmaker to the spectator’s position. This article aims to carry out a comparative study of two contemporary Francophone essay films that are generated precisely from the identification between filmmaker and spectator, since the former decides to place themselves in the position of the latter. It is a practice that we rarely find in the European Francophone essay film before, and which would be confirmed as an epistemological space for the contemporary essay film.

*Face aux fantômes* (Jean-Louis Comolli and Sylvie Lindeperg, 2009) and *Jaurès* (Vincent Dieutre, 2012) are generated from the premise of placing the authors in the physical position of the spectator, of bringing the approach-distance dynamics of that I-you relationship to identification, from where to generate an audiovisual thinking process. In addition, and in a very significant way, in both cases this condition of spectator is shared by two individuals, enabling intersubjectivity between the two, a second level of dialogism between the internal spectators of the film. This premise generates different levels of thinking: the one that occurs on the first spectatorial level—the projected audiovisual pieces—; between the projection and the spectators-filmmakers; between both internal spectators; and finally, between those internal spectators and the spectator of the essay film. In this way, parataxic (Català 2014) and interstitial (Rascaroli 2017) thinking, and the sentence-image (Rancière 2003) as a defining element of the audiovisual thinking process (Monterrubio Ibáñez 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022), will be generated at three different levels. The essay film then produces a reflection about the

mobilization of the spectator's gaze inherent to both self-reflection and the production of critical thinking. My analysis aims to carry out a comparative study of both works that allows us to determine the elements, strategies and results of converting the spectator's position into the epistemological space for the essay film, of bringing the filmmaker-spectator dialogism to identification.

### ***Face aux fantômes: From the mobilization of the gaze***

Comolli and Lindeperg's film emerges as an audiovisual reflection on the latter's literary essay, *Nuit et brouillard: un film dans l'histoire* (2007). Thus, the reflection on the memory-history-art axis from the film by Alain Resnais (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1956) and its author become protagonists of an essay film that places the historian as a spectator, accompanied by the filmmaker. Reflection aims to expand its territory to convert the literary spectator-historian into a filmic one, through a thinking process that the filmmaker transforms into an audiovisual process. To do this, both interlocutors are located in a kind of laboratory-projection room that will allow multiple reflections on the position of the spectator as an epistemological space: "Together, the filmmaker and the historian put themselves in front of the ghosts to consider the status of these images of the experienced bodies," "each film situates the spectator differently and singularly in front of the ghosts"<sup>1</sup> (Blümlinger 2014, 81, 82).

The first image of the film exposes the synthesis of its purpose. In a fixed shot of the rails upon which the camera will soon move in an interior space yet to be discovered, we hear Comolli's voice indicating the start of the shot. The camera then begins to move along the track. Finally, the shot ends with a superimposition of a close-up of the filmmaker's hands leafing

through his co-director's book (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> In this way, a sentence-image is generated, a synthesis of the thinking process that begins. First, a crucial shot and camera movement from Resnais' film is revisited—the shot of the abandoned railroad tracks in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp (Fig. 2) and the tracking shot he used to shoot the film's color images—and they are moved to an interior space that we will discover is that of the spectator. Thus, not only is the reflection on Resnais' film evident, but also the self-reflection on the spectator's position. Secondly, the superimposition of the hands leafing through the book exposes how both reflections are going to bring together two perspectives from which intersubjectivity will emerge: that of the historian and literary essayist, and that of the filmmaker and cinematic essayist.

Starting from this sentence-image synthesis, the film builds a historical reflection on Resnais' film through the materialization and mobilization of the spectator's position, where we find both subjectivities conversing in the same frame. We see Lindeperg speaking and Comolli listening, surrounded by the different devices that will provide the spectatorial experience: television monitors, projection screens, slide projectors, and audio players, among others. The first archival image shown in the film, the one of the return of French deportees in 1945 that Lindeperg is explaining, is shown reproduced on a monitor, including the device and its sound (Fig. 3). Therefore, an essential question of the film is established, offering the documentary images through a kind of second spectatorial level, both visual and sonorous. In this way, the film accumulates material elements of the spectator's position, characterizing a space that evidences the mediation of the device as the spectator's first element of self-reflection. Lindeperg's explanations continue in an individual

medium shot that moves to show Comolli listening. Thus, the essay film establishes an itinerary of the spectators' gaze, showing Lindeperg as a spectator of *Nuit et brouillard* and Comolli as a spectator of Lindeperg. Next, the camera follows her through a tracking shot, while she approaches the projector with which she will show archival documents (Fig. 4). This second tracking shot is already configured as a key element of the film. The tracking shot that revealed the actuality of the concentration camps in *Nuit et brouillard* is used here to reflect on the position of the spectator—in this case a historian—as a materialization of the mobilization of her gaze. Next, the documents shown again include the materiality and sonority of their reproduction device, confirming that second level that causes self-reflection (Fig. 5). There is then a second tracking shot of Lindeperg, which now surrounds her as she speaks (Fig. 6). The camera movement evidences the spectatorial subjectivity of the historian. Her testimony is hence emphasized not as an irrefutable truth, but as an individual reflection to which different perspectives can be applied.

A new rhetorical element emerges when referring to the key of Resnais' film: the relationship between the concentration camp system and the extermination of Jews and Roma. This abyss materializes by means of a zoom-in on a photographic image. Therefore, the analytical search of the spectator, the scrutiny of the image as an epistemological search, is encrypted in this element. Then the first sound recording appears to reveal the conception of the film that would finally become *Nuit et brouillard*. Henri Michel's and Olga Wormser's statements about the historical value of films culminate in the former's proposal to make a film about the concentration camp system. Once again, we listen to the archival source while looking at its device first

(Fig. 7), to include its listener later. We still stay in that second self-reflective level of the spectatorial experience. After hearing about the origin of *Nuit et brouillard*, the film takes up the tracking shot, through a series of three shots:

- the tracking shot on its own tracks in the first shot of the film (Fig. 8);
- a tracking shot through the filming elements of the space, which again finds its correspondence in the interior tracking shots through the barracks of the camps in Resnais' film (Figs. 9 and 10);
- the end of a tracking shot on Lindeperg (Fig. 11).

Thus, a second sentence-image synthesis of the essay film is produced. The mobilization of the gaze in the historical space that Resnais executed in *Nuit et brouillard* is taken up by Comolli in the spectatorial space to show Lindeperg's mobilized gaze. It is then that the historian states the key element of her reflection. Anatole Dauman accepted the commission for a film about the concentration camp system on the condition that it was "equally defined by a high artistic ambition." In Lindeperg's words: "It is truly the moment of the transition to art." By introducing this *passage à l'art* into the reflection, the tracking shot around Lindeperg undergoes a key change: it now moves behind Comolli, including him in the image (Fig. 12). This produces a new materialization of a symbolic sentence-image. The *passage à l'art* of Resnais' film besides historical facts moves to the transition to the essayistic reflection: from Lindeperg's literary work to the audiovisual work filmed by Comolli, which implies the inclusion of the filmmaker's subjectivity and authorship. In this way, the intersubjective construction between the spectator-historian and the filmmaker who films her is exposed, embodying her thinking process in an audiovisual way, which we also observe as spectators.



By introducing the documentary material from *Les camps de la mort* (*Les actualités françaises*, 1945), we see Lindeperg, for the first time, in the spectator's position, included in the image (Fig. 13). Her body partially covers the screen, hiding the harshest image fragments. Therefore, the essay film produces a new symbolic sentence-image, in this case about the spectator's need for a critical gaze, who can "develop a critical position not only in relation to authorial discourse, but also to the screened images and other discourses which compose the essay" (Montero 2012, 121). In other words, Comolli creates a symbolic sentence-image that embodies Lindeperg's critical gaze. It then crystallizes the complete cartography of the spectator's position as epistemological space, showing its three levels: Lindeperg's position as spectator, Comolli's position as Lindeperg's filmmaker-spectator, and our position as spectators of the essay film. The configuration of this cartography enables both critical thinking about the images shown and self-reflection about the spectator's own position. Thus, the reflection developed by the essay film can address the film in question, *Nuit et brouillard*, from both perspectives: "Alain Resnais is not part of a narrative of proof by image [...] to build the right distance with them [the images] to both report on the event but build his film around a will of critical distancing of these images." Lindeperg then raises the nuclear question of the spectator's position: "What is the relationship between seeing, believing and knowing" and expresses Resnais and Jean Cayrol's starting point: not to use the question of the proof image, but to consider that, on the contrary, "they are not able to allow us to apprehend the event."

In this way, the first third of *Face aux fantômes* constructs the cartography of the spectator's position, of the different spectators and their possibilities, to

give them the tools of reflection with which to contemplate *Nuit et brouillard*. Its images are shown to us for the first time from a first spectatorial level 25 minutes into the film, without the device mediation, in order to now be able to apply critical distance and self-awareness in its viewing. The spectators of the essay film face the images on the first level after having reflected on our position as such. Therefore, this first level is reserved for *Nuit et brouillard*. The first fragment corresponds with the color tracking shots filmed at Auschwitz-Birkenau; the second with archival images in black-and-white; and the third with a combination of both. It is then that Lindeperg's words, addressing again the idea of the film's *passage à l'art*, are shown to us with a second tracking shot behind Comolli, in the opposite direction to the previous one (Fig. 14). While Resnais made this transition through the filming of color images through tracking shots, Comolli transfers this element to embody the mobilization of the spectator's gaze, identified with Lindeperg, to ask them if "art itself has the potency of truth."

The second sound document, the words of Resnais himself, takes up the representation of the first, Lindeperg listening to it, to then create a second superimposition that now also includes sound. Resnais' words evoke some images found in Amsterdam, of German officers on the platform of a deportation convoy, shown to us superimposed on the sound reel from which the audio comes (Fig. 15). Thus, Resnais is also characterized as a spectator of the documentary images on which he worked. While previously we saw Lindeperg as a spectator of the images from *Les camps de la mort* on a monitor that she partially hid, now we observe her contemplating the only moving images that show a deportation convoy, in Westerbork (Fig. 16). This confirms the critical position of the spectators besides the images. While

before she hindered the viewing of “the intolerable image” that “prevented any critical distance” (Rancière 2009, 89), tracing “a straight line from the unbearable spectacle” (2009, 103), now she gives way to silent images without manipulation (we observe the time code on them).

Next, the *passage à l'art* of these images materializes audiovisually. Resnais decided to show them in his film together in a single block and in the absence of Jean Cayrol's commentary; only accompanied by Hanns Eisler's music. However, he included three shots of an old man with two children that belong to material found in Warsaw. This double viewing hence exemplifies the *passage à l'art* on which they reflect, and the spectator is interpellated to reflect on too. The tracking shot on Lindeperg when recounting the relevance of the only shot of a person looking at the camera evidences once again the mobilization of the spectator's gaze, of the critical thinking that must question that *passage à l'art*. The image, which shows a young girl—Anna Maria (Settela) Steinbach, who was discovered in 1997 to be Roma—will become an icon of the Shoah, and the essay film freezes it as such. Addressing hitherto unknown photographic images of Himmler's visit to Monowitz, to the IG Farben factory, in 1942, which prove how concentration camp prisoners became the workforce of the Third Reich, Lindeperg exposes how these allowed “adjustment of the viewing to the knowledge” while a new tracking shot associates this capacity with the critical position of the spectator. A second visit to Birkenau to attend the gassing of Dutch Jews links the concentration system with the extermination of the Jewish and Roma population. The emergence of the *final solution* in the film script, and its suppression in its definitive commentary, is then represented with a second zoom-in on an image and the subsequent tracking

shot on Lindeperg. Thus, the filmmaker spectator of the archival images identifies with the spectator of the created film. It is in this moment that the film shows again, in the first level, the conclusion of *Nuit et brouillard*, ending the second part of *Face aux fantômes*.

The third and last part focuses on Lindeperg's subjectivity as a spectator-historian of the film, based on her study of Olga Wormser's work. The camera now covers the distance between the screen and its spectator, the space that embodies the mobilization of the spectator's gaze in front of the work. Therefore, it is Wormser's encounter with the film that allows Lindeperg to understand the necessity of reversing the perspective: *Nuit et brouillard* creates a “circle of knowledge” between history and art in the process of its construction. Only twenty years later, Wormser will conclude her investigation of the “history in the making.” Lindeperg also decided to abandon the historian's distance and enter Olga's atelier.

The third sound document of the film, again Resnais' statements, in this case about the writing of Cayrol's commentary and Marker's participation in it, is shown again with Lindeperg's figure listening to it, in front of the device. A tracking shot on the physical space of the essay film, in the opposite direction to the previous one, now generates the third superimposition, with the image of Annette Wieviorka's book: *Déportation et génocide : entre la mémoire et l'oubli* (2003) (Fig. 17). Next comes the conversation between Lindeperg and Wieviorka, the latter becoming a third spectator, also a historian. Once again, the tracking shot generates intersubjectivity, the exchange between both spectatorial gazes, whose nature is emphasized by placing them, again, in the spectator's space, with the screen behind them on which projected images appear at times. Their conversation about how Resnais' film became the definitive film on

genocide, at the same time that it began to be criticized for the perception of the Shoah it conveys, finds its reflection in the paradox that implies that historians, until the 1980s, worked on it without being its spectators, reducing their study to Cayrol's commentary, ignoring its images. Wieviorka addresses the evocative power of Birkenau's color images even though they do not show the evoked object.

The conversation between both historians gives way to the fourth sound document, again from Resnais, explaining the decision, and the experience, of shooting in color and with tracking shots. A new sentence-image synthesis of the film and of the reflection it has developed is then produced. On the sound image of Resnais, we see, in the first level, a black-and-white photograph of the shooting, assembling the rails for the tracking shot. Next, the images from the beginning of the film, with that unique vertical tracking shot with which we are situated in the present of the film, are silent, accompanied by the sound of the audio reel. Resnais' words reemerge when the film appears projected on the screen Lindeperg observes: first the documentary photography of the shooting; then the images of the film; and finally a new photographic image of the shooting. Now it is not the camera that moves on Lindeperg but the historian who moves from one side of the screen to the other as it shows the color tracking shot from *Nuit et brouillard* (Figs. 18 and 19). Thus, the *passage à l'art* materializes through the convergence of the four spaces:

- that of Resnais as a creator through the convergence of his sound testimony, the black-and-white archival photographs of the shoot and the color images of the film;
- that of Lindeperg as a spectator in front of these images, displacing her position as a spectator at the same time as Resnais' tracking shot moves;

- that of Comolli as the essayist who creates this convergence;
- the spectator who must generate their own reflection of what is perceived.

Resnais' fifth sound document, again with Lindeperg listening, offers us the filmmaker's determination: "I don't want to make a monument to the dead." Doing so would mean not articulating critical thinking. Resnais explains the filmmaker's need for it, with whom the spectator can identify at this moment of the reflection. The censorship of one's own work is analysed with the question of the *corps indésirable of the gendarme*, as a testimony of the collaboration of the French state in the arrests of the Jewish population. The external censorship, of the projection in Cannes, with the sixth sound document, in this case by Dauman, evidences the present value of the film in relation to the Algerian War. To conclude, Lindeperg addresses the issue of the translation of the film commentary, as a new stage where critical thinking can materialize, and therefore exercise it in its viewing. The translation of Cayrol's text into German was carried out by Paul Celan, who knew how to *transfer* the work to the critical needs of the German people, displacing some of its meanings. "I am not responsible" becomes "I am not guilty;" "the old concentrationary monster" turns into "racial madness." In this way, Celan also contributes his critical thinking, confirming that it can be applied from any position.

The film's reflection is coming to an end. The two previous zooms in on archival images are now completed with two other zooms on Resnais' film: a zoom-out on the image of the film that evoked the first image of the essay film—the color image of Birkenau rails— and a zoom-in on the black-and-white image of the yard at the entrance to Auschwitz. Once again, the mobilization of the gaze finds a final materialization as the search for the critical distance



through the movements of distance and approach. In her final digression, Lindeperg takes up the figure of Olga Wormser to conclude the work with its core, confirming “a sort of duplication with the figure of the historian Olga Wormser on whose steps she continues to advance in her quest for truth” (Véray 2011, 187). By taking up Daniel Arasse’s reflection (2006), the historian delves into the dialectics of emotion-knowledge regarding the work of art: “There are two forms of emotion in front of the work of art [...] there is the one that springs from the visual shock of the first viewing, and then there is something else that can put the work of time, the learning of the gaze.” Lindeperg recognizes how Wormser made this journey: mobilizing her gaze, changing her point of view, transforming emotion into reflection. A final tracking shot from the projection screen to the figure of Lindeperg synthesizes the itinerary from the work of art to the spectator’s position from which the essay film has been made, hence showing the distance to be covered, the need for the displacement of the gaze: “Displace our gaze on this film *Nuit et brouillard* that we thought we knew, that we thought we had seen, but at the same time that we had lost sight [...] that we re-learn to see it differently.” Lindeperg exposes her final conclusion as spectator of the film, as an example of any spectator, which generates the self-reflection of her experience as such:

By positioning my gaze following Olga Wormser’s gaze, by placing my steps in her footsteps, it is also a reflection that I wanted to pursue regarding my own relationship to this film *Nuit et brouillard*, on which I had started to work in ‘87. And, as Olga, it had finally taken me twenty years to achieve it [...] I had the impression that I had not been able to see it.

### ***Jaurès*: From the immobilization of the gaze**

*Jaurès* is also generated from the position of the spectator, who on this occasion does not face the images of history but those of contemporary reality. In this case, the filmmaker, Vincent Dieutre, is in the editing and recording room to show a film to his friend Eva Truffaut; images about which they talk while contemplating them. The initial shots of the editing table, the projected images and the characters who observe them present this new space of enunciation from the spectator’s position. The projected film, made by Dieutre, consists of the images captured from the apartment window of his lover, Simon, in the Parisian neighborhood of Jaurès, over several months, from the winter to the summer of 2010. From that window we see the metro station of the same name and the Saint-Martin canal where an Afghan refugee settlement has been established, which will be the theme of the images shown. Dieutre and Truffaut, Vincent and Eva—we will call them that in their capacity as characters—contemplate the images, unknown to the latter, with headphones and in front of microphones that record their words to be included in the film. In this way, Eva identifies with the spectator who sees the work for the first time. Based on the questions that the images raise for Eva, Vincent will narrate two parallel existences: that of the refugees outside, captured in the visual image; that of the couple’s relationship inside, which remains offscreen and materializes only through the sound image. And finally, a third space, that of the experience of both as spectators of the images.

While *Face aux fantômes* focused on the space of that second spectator level that led reflection through its mobilization, *Jaurès* focuses on the first level accompanied by the sound image of its spectator’s comments. Therefore, Dieutre creates two simultaneous

off-screen images: that of Vincent and Simon in the projected images; and that of Eva and Vincent as their spectators. The spectator's gaze is fixed to a position, to the images taken from a window. The frame changes between shots, but the camera always remains fixed. There is no movement in the frame either. The spectator's self-reflection and critical thinking are generated through this immobilization, through the cohabitation and dialectics between the inside and outside of the images shown, and between the spectatorial experiences of the internal characters, with which to confront the spectator's own experience. The interpellation is hence doubled, facing the images and facing the different spectatorial experience of Eva and Vincent: she viewing the images for the first time; he explaining them in response to her questions. The parallel between the visual image of the outside of the refugees' reality and the sound image of the inside of the couple's reality is established through a sort of clandestine love. Simon did not want to make their relationship public, and Vincent never had access to his lover's apartment in his absence. Thus, the refugees from the canal and Dieutre share the same temporality. If the former take refuge in the canal at night and pick up the camp in the morning to return to it at the end of the day, Dieutre only shares with his lover the nights after work and the mornings before starting the day. This generates the structure of the projected film: alternating mornings and nights in which actions and characters will be repeated. Outside the daily life of refugees; inside that of the lovers.

The images follow each other while Eva asks about the beginning of the relationship. At the same time a piano melody emerges from the sound image; it is Simon, practicing "À Chloris" (1913),<sup>3</sup> a piece by Reynaldo Hahn with which the film begins. It will become

the leitmotif of the film and a symbolic sentence-image of the *passage à l'art* of contemporary reality through a kind of progressive recreation: Simon's clumsy rehearsals on the piano; the real melody; the fragmented recitation of part of its lyrics by Eva and Vincent—changing the name of Chloris for that of Simon—; until they finally sing the piece together. Eva's first questions deal with the biography of Simon, an activist and social worker in different parts of the world who, back in Paris, has retired and now collaborates as a legal adviser in an association that helps refugees with their asylum applications. Thus, Simon in his working life is a direct witness to the reality faced by the refugees who appear in the image, and to the dialectic-cohabitation offered by the film: "He would let go of all the pain, while down there in front of his eyes were these refugees. They were very young and might need his help the next day, or the day after."<sup>4</sup> The first transition between both spectatorial levels then takes place, from the first to the second, through the connection of the projected images (Figs. 20 and 21), always from Vincent's position, also emphasizing his status as their author. In this way, a first strategy is produced that aims to strengthen the idea of simultaneity while cancelling the distance between both levels. The second procedure consists of showing the faces of the spectators (Figs. 22 and 23), accompanied or not by a shot of the editing room and its editor (Fig. 24). Both strategies reinforce parataxis and annul the gap as a space for mobilizing the gaze.

The images show the parallel routines of the inside and the outside. In the case of the refugees: the morning ablutions, the settlement gathering, the police controls, the visits of the NGOs, offering breakfast or providing hygiene material, the reestablishment of the camp at night, the prayers. In Vincent's case: breakfasts, dinners, minimal

fragments of dialogue and the sound of everyday actions. It is this fixation of the spectator's position and the separation between the inside and the outside that becomes an interpellation of the spectator to generate self-reflection and critical thinking about the immobility the work imposes to them. However, this separation is destroyed in three moments, all of them crucial for reflection. In the first, the contact is only evoked, when Eva asks Vincent if there had been any interaction:

That winter they camped under the bridge, the canal froze over. We brought them blankets. We called out from the bridge and dropped them down. I knew that Simon was spending his days trying to help them to obtain a secure status, and it reassured me. I felt a connection with them. I really admired Simon [...] To him, each of them had a story that had to be told.

For Vincent, the inevitable link between the refugee situation and his relationship with his partner, his point of view, is one of the elements that interpellate the spectator. Does the experience of love anesthetize the social conscience? Is there a romanticization of social conflict and commitment? In the second moment of contact (at minute 35), Dieutre goes down to the street during the demonstrations in support of the refugees, and for the only time we are shown the images of that contact, as we will analyze below. In the third (at minute 49), the filmmaker recounts how the situation of immigrants leads some of them to prostitution. Thus, the activist who helps them is interpellated to objectify them: "these kids were reduced to that."

The sound image later offers us Simon's voice giving his opinion on the situation: "My work is so depressing. It gets worse every day. The State Council's rulings are hard to accept. The court contradicts itself, there is no

consistent policy. It's highly political and badly run." The image of an artist in the opposite building, working with some neon lights, gives rise to the narration of Simon's position about the social value of art, now through Vincent: "Only useful things matter to him. Worthwhile things, like his activism. I struggled to explain to him that to me, art served a purpose. That art also affected the world" (Fig. 25). We already find a similar discussion about the value of the work of art exposed in *Face aux fantômes*. While Lindeperg reflected on it in relation to history—the transformation of aesthetic emotion into knowledge—Dieutre focuses on the present: does the artistic work that we witness as spectators transform the social reality that it shows us? The conflict between emotion and knowledge is generated in this case through the dialectics between Vincent's love feelings and the social reality he observes. The spectator is interpellated to generate self-reflection: Is social reflection possible and/or effective through the experience of love? The spectators' self-reflection about identifying or not with both characters is constant: in relation to Vincent for his emotional point of view; in relation to Eva for the elements that interest her and about which she asks. What questions would we spectators ask if we were in her position? The sound image then offers us a radio fragment that outlines the social reality of the refugee situation: "Hundreds protested yesterday in Paris against 'disposable immigration' [...] including the Greens, the Communist Party, the RESF and the League of Human Rights. Socialist M.P.s joined the march but were not organizers."

The film places the spectator in front of a mirror in relation to the dialectics between the private and the social. The immobility of the gaze imposed on us by the images becomes once again a symbolic image of social passivity besides the immigration issue. Those

dialectics are reinforced by Vincent's words, about this point of view from the window (Fig. 26): "Simon called the view his 'little theatre.' Because you see the metro up high, people and cars below, and further down, the hidden world of the Afghans. A world in cross-section with its various strata." A fictionalization of the outside is already suggested, which will next materialize in the progressive appearance of animation elements in the image. In the first place, two policemen's jackets and the figure of a refugee wrapped in a blanket that has been shown to us previously (Figs. 27 and 28). It is therefore configured as a new strategy of the *passage à l'art* already in process through Hahn's song, generating a reflection on the transition from the documentary image to fiction.

Later, the sound image offers us a joint reflection by the couple on the reality they inhabit, as they contemplate the passers-by: "This is national identity... that deconstructs and reconstructs itself each morning... That's what revolution is!" The spectator is doomed to self-reflection and critical thinking caused by this immobility: In what direction would we like to mobilize our gaze? Approaching the exterior space of the refugees? Turning the camera towards the interior space of the lovers? In this way, the different, separate realities on which the essay film reflects are configured. Vincent explains in the image: "Jaurès was, to me, the threshold, the place where our two worlds met;" Simon's world of social activism, Vincent's art world, mediated by the reality of refugees.

As mentioned earlier, Dieutre shows the protests at night in support of the refugees, first from the position of spectator, second level (Fig. 29), then, through the continuity to the first level (Fig. 30) and finally from the canal, passing through it in images for the first and only time (Fig. 31). We could say that it is the only moment of mobilization of the filmmaker's gaze.

Therefore, it is the social mobilization that causes the mobilization of his gaze, exposing the reverse path, where social action generates the artistic gesture. This mobilization allows us to hear the sound image of the outside also for the first and only time: "In response to this scandal, we are taking matters in hand. Yesterday we offered shelter to 150 homeless Afghans [...] We will now end this first protest rally. Unfortunately, it will not be our last." At that moment, the editing table, once again, not only reminds us of the position of Eva and Vincent as spectators and commentators in the film, but also of the previous montage made with the images. Vincent's reflection evidences the consequences of this mobilization of the gaze as a recognition of the outside shown, as a vindication of its status as reality: "They were part of the neighborhood [...] We know their country is at war since our soldiers are there. But they must constantly prove their suffering [...] They were living on borrowed time, borrowed time." It is this explicit acknowledgment of the other that allows the comparison of both clandestine activities, the social and political outside, the romantic one, "clandestine lover," inside.

In this second part, and from the mobilization of the gaze in the night demonstration, both Eva and Vincent delve into the reality of the refugees. Regarding some images of police control, Dieutre states: "There were never any clashes or arrests. Just constant harassment. A combination of assistance and control. It was always ambiguous. [...] They didn't speak French and were extremely vulnerable." The same thing happens in Eva's reflection, which now introduces the gender issue: "What strikes me is that it's a world without women. Both in your apartment and down at the canal with the refugees [...] It shocks me that women are like ghosts." Eva offers us the first emotion in front of the work



of art, the visual shock that Lindeperg speaks of. Spectatorial passivity is hence linked to that first moment of the aesthetic emotion. Vincent recognizes the reality of the absence of women, but immediately returns to the theme of homosexuality to highlight that third moment of contact already alluded to around prostitution. Women, therefore, stand almost exclusively as spectators of the film. And the external spectator must then question themselves about their identification with Eva. In her capacity as spectator-character, the filmmaker's friend does not question or problematize Vincent's story, but rather limits herself to serve as a catalyst for it. In the same way that Dieutre fixes the spectator's gaze on the window, he offers us a passive spectatorial presence, once again provoking self-reflection and critical thinking through its absence in the performance.

Accompanying the images that show the arrival of the spring, Vincent concludes the lyrics of the song. Owing to the shift in the season, the refugees now sleep in the open air. While Vincent continues the story of his romantic relationship, the images show the presence of the police assistance unit, BAPSA (Brigade d'assistance aux personnes sans abri). First, we hear Simon as an inside spectator of the images: "That's outrageous. Are policemen allowed to smoke?" Vincent then summarizes for Eva the nature of those visits: "They came to check on their health and dental problems. It was also a way to keep an eye on the camp." After reciting the first part of the poem together again, the intimate account of Vincent's emotion—"He was sleeping like a child. It made me cry"—accompanies the image of a young refugee dancing by the canal (Fig. 32). The *passage à l'art* is then produced by connecting the emotions of the inhabitants of both realities. The appearance of a dove in the image

sparks the same poetic revelation that reality offers and also marks the *passage à l'art*: "It just appeared one morning from nowhere. It was like a vision." This revelation evokes the issue of the narrative becoming fiction, now included in the same shot, as before with the rain and a car, an animated dove (Figs. 33 and 34). The animation is then continued on a mattress carried by the refugees, after which the real dove appears again. This creates a new reflection that challenges the spectator. Dieutre reflects on the *passage à l'art* of the cohabitation of the intimate story and the social reality and also on its fictionalization.

Again, in the early hours of the day, two women help the refugees (Fig. 35). This second appearance of the feminine gender leads, once again, to homosexual identity: "Simon said they went there to pick up the young guys, but he was being cynical. Like Simon, they gave these people their time." It is necessary to point out that this trait of cynicism in Simon's character emerges exclusively at this moment, in relation to the only appearance of women in the images. The film would then offer the opportunity for Eva to exercise a critical position in this regard. The spectatorial passivity of the character is confirmed, who asks but does not question, completing the scheme of immobility designed by Dieutre, and thus urgently interpellating the spectator. Next, Vincent makes the only direct reference to the political reality to which the images belong, by naming the Minister of Home Affairs, Brice Hortefeux. And in this present context, he evokes the failure of both practices; activism and artistic creation: "To him [Simon], cinema and art had no purpose. But now his activism was also useless."

The parallel between the presences of Vincent and the refugees in *Jaurès* continues in the film's denouement. The latter were expelled from the canal

in the summer of 2010, as reported by the institutional statement that Dieutre includes before the credits. The former became also permanently absent from Jaurès that summer: "There were no more refugee camps. But I never saw him again." These two sentences, on the image of two refugees in the settlement, complete the parallel itinerary of both realities, intimate and social. The following images are progressively overtaken by animated elements (a buoy in the river, the tops of the trees, a car in the canal), now linking the *passage à l'art* with the transformation of reality into memory. Already in the denouement, Dieutre exposes his reflection on the connection between both realities:

Nowadays, it seems that notions of attachment and love are very difficult to define. Just as we have trouble defining our relationship with politics, or even with the idea of justice. However, it turned out, I have no regrets at all about those years at Jaurès.

In this way, he relates both spaces through the absence of commitment both in the romantic sphere and in the political and social domain. For the first and only time, it is Vincent who asks Eva, and again it is necessary to point out that the question refers exclusively to the sphere of love: "How about you? How do you know if you love someone or if you will love them?" The spectatorial passivity in which Dieutre places Eva is confirmed again. All this intensifies the interpellation of the spectator, of their critical thinking and self-reflection. Next, the images of the editing table and those of both spectators' positions evidence the essayistic nature of the piece, on which Dieutre concludes his reflection:

I'm not going to compare my situation to theirs. [...] I was up in the apartment; they were down below. They taught me that you can start from zero, the energy of existence

will triumph. To me, that was very important to give life some depth, for it to be worthwhile [...] I know that moment in time existed, and that in some small way, the world was transformed. Not a great deal, but everything changed slightly.

Thus, Dieutre claims the capacity for transformation of the intimate-social dialectics, and of its *passage à l'art*, bringing together the two elements that have spawned it throughout the work on the image of the prayer of refugees: the small animations that appropriate the image and the song that Eva and Vincent finally sing, after having recited it several times (Fig. 36). On this final image, and by way of credits, the institutional statement that reported the eviction of the refugees from the Saint-Martin canal in July 2010, by order of the immigration minister Éric Besson, is presented. Dieutre hence confirms the relevance of the social reality on which he has built his story; he proves the need for the spectator's reflection on the work that concludes.

The theoretical analysis of the film proves the potency of the interpellation it generates; its capacity to produce diverse reflections. While Tom Cuthbertson (2017) focuses on the intimate story of the film in order to reflect on the fictionalization of the autobiography, without problematizing its device, the texts by James S. Williams (2020) and Comolli (2012) embody the dialectics that the film provides. Williams criticizes the chosen spectatorial position regarding the refugees and the cohabitation of both realities, since it "objectifies the migrant figure" (2020, 172). Comolli defends the point of view of the film, analyzing the difference between the spectator and the voyeur, reflecting on the spectatorial limits and the "*passage à l'acte*," which he has previously theorized (2009).

### The emancipated spectator of the contemporary essay film

The decision of the filmmakers of both *Face aux fantômes* and *Jaurès* to place themselves in the spectator's position, in very different ways, opposed in various senses, makes that their comparative study raises very relevant questions about the nature, capacities and possibilities of the emancipated spectator defined by Jacques Rancière, when applied to the contemporary essay film:

Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting [...] The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages in other kind of place. She composes her own poem with the element of the poem before her [...] They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them. (Rancière 2009, 13)

Thus, the emancipated spectator questions both the equivalences between "gaze and passivity, exteriority

and separation, mediation and simulacrum" and the oppositions "between the collective and the individual, the image and living reality, activity and passivity, self-ownership and alienation" (2009, 7). The emancipated spectator mobilizes their gaze and carries out the operations of association and dissociation: "It is in this power of associating and dissociating that the emancipation of the spectator consists—that is to say, the emancipation of each of us as spectator" (2009, 17). Therefore, the emancipated spectator, who performs self-reflection on the distance that separates them from the work and its variation to generate critical thinking that will establish both consensus and dissent regarding what is shown, finds in the analysed films two proposals that interpellate them from almost opposed premises, which makes it possible to reflect on the aforementioned equivalences and oppositions. The foregoing analyses offer us the following synthesis, as a very relevant materialization about the tensions exposed by Rancière:

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#### ***Face aux fantômes***

Mobilization of the gaze  
 Interstitial thinking  
 The itinerary of the distances:  
 Tracking shot  
 Embodiment of the active spectator  
 Aesthetic reflection  
 Gaze on history  
 Gaze on the other  
*Passage à l'art* of history  
 Transition from emotion to knowledge  
 Intersubjectivity as materialization of the audiovisual thinking process

#### ***Jaurès***

Fixation of the gaze  
 Parataxic thinking  
 Cancellation of the distances:  
 Simultaneity and continuity  
 Representation of the passive spectator  
 Aesthetic emotion  
 Gaze on the present  
 Gaze on the self  
*Passage à l'art* of intimate-social dialectics  
 Transition from experience to memory and fictionalization  
 Intersubjectivity as catalyst of the narrative

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Both films are hence situated in the spectatorial position to provide two experiences that allow mapping and reflecting on the possibilities of the emancipated spectator. *Face aux fantômes* offers us the embodiment of an emancipated spectator to show us the possibilities of self-reflection and critical thinking from the viewing of *Nuit et brouillard*. Comolli transforms this discourse into an audiovisual thinking process using tracking shots as a materialization of the mobilization of the spectator's gaze. In this way, the film offers a "pedagogical model" (Rancière 2008, 59) where the emancipated spectator would identify with Lindeperg in her viewing and research on Resnais' film, and with Comolli regarding the audiovisual materialization of the thinking process of protagonist. Self-reflection and critical thinking then arise from a mobilization of the gaze that aims to cover the different distances, the interstitial spaces at distinct levels: between the diverse materials of *Nuit et brouillard*, between the film and Lindeperg, between Lindeperg and Comolli, between the two filmmakers and the spectator of the essay film. The identification of the pedagogical model means that this last distance is practically abolished. Therefore, the spectator *shares* the self-reflection and critical thinking around the *passage à l'art* of the historical material, about how the transition from emotion to knowledge is inserted in the believe-know-see axis.

Considering the interstitial thinking the previous film develops, Dieutre generates parataxic thinking consisting of fixing the gaze, imposing cohabitation and preventing its mobilization, hence annulling the interstices and the variation of distance. The only point of view facing the exterior space of the refugees and the interior space of the lovers, and their simultaneity, annuls the mobilization of the gazes in the filmed images. The simultaneity

and continuity between these images and the spectator space of Vincent and Eva also annuls their interstice. Finally, the represented spectator, Eva's character, does not materialize into an active spectator who questions the images, but in a spectatorial passivity that serves as a catalyst for Vincent's story. However, she offers us a relevant experience of the first viewing by showing us the first aesthetic emotion, especially regarding the absence of women. The visual shock of the internal spectator also provokes the reflection of the external spectator of the film. In this way, the emancipated spectator of the essay film would not experience the identification that occurred in *Face aux fantômes*; instead, from the denial of identification, the spectator is asked to reflect on the position in which they are placed, without the possibility of mobilization within the film. This spectator's self-reflection is also linked to critical thinking about the *passage à l'art*; on this occasion about the cohabitation and dialectics between intimate emotion and social knowledge of the present reality, and finally, about the fictionalization of this experience and its transformation into memory.

*Face aux fantômes* interpellates the emancipated spectator by offering them the audiovisual materialization of their self-reflection and critical thinking, thus instrumentalizing identification. *Jaurès* interpellates the emancipated spectator by the denial of the previous possibilities, seeing them doomed to reflect on the mobilization of a fixed gaze, on the possibilities of an active spectator facing a representation of their passivity. As Rancière indicates: "Pensiveness thus refers to a condition that is indeterminately between the active and the passive [...] It is to speak of a zone of indeterminacy between thought and non-thought, activity and passivity, but also between art and non-art" (2009, 107). The comparative study of both works reveals the fertile



extension of this zone of indeterminacy in the essay film, still to be explored, where it is possible to reflect on the tensions between the active and the passive, thought and non-thought, emotion and reflection. This would remain therefore one of the challenges

of the contemporary essay film: to consider the spectatorial position as an epistemological space, as a space for its audiovisual thinking process.

See original text at the end of this journal.

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- 1/ English translations of original references in French and Spanish are from the author.
- 2/ Figures are included at the end of the article
- 3/ Translation: "If it be true, Chloris, that you love me, / And I'm told you love me dearly, / I do not believe that even kings / Can match the happiness I know / Even death would be powerless / To alter my fortune / With the promise of heavenly bliss! / All that they say of ambrosia / Does not stir my imagination / Like the favor of your eyes!"
- 4/ English translations of the film dialogues are taken from the DVD subtitles.

*Face aux fantômes*

Superimpositions

Fig. 1

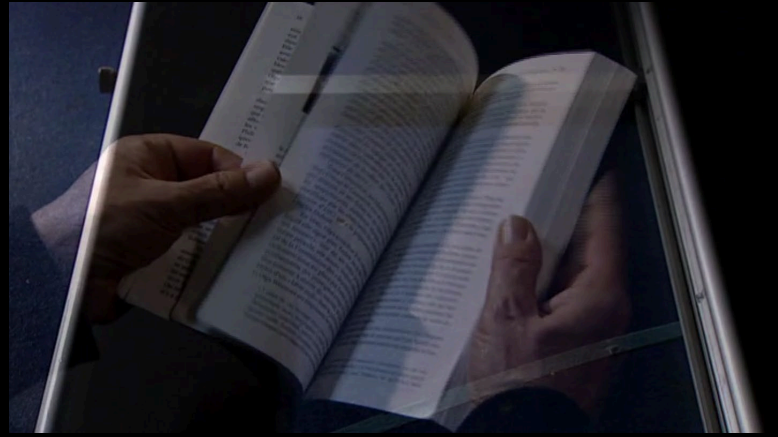


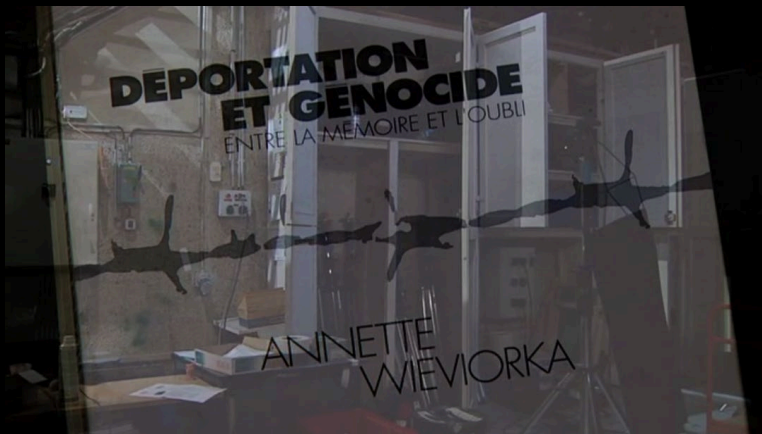
Fig. 2



Fig. 15



Fig. 17



Tracking shots

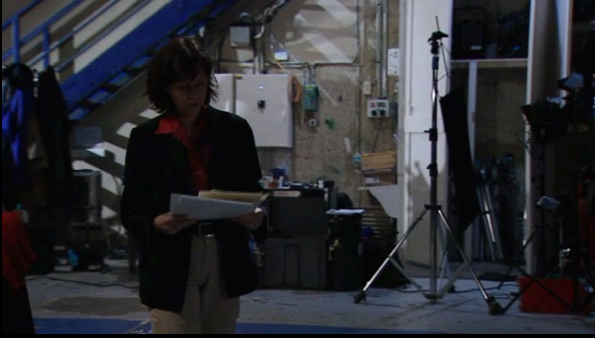


Fig. 4



Fig. 6



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 14



Devices



Fig. 3

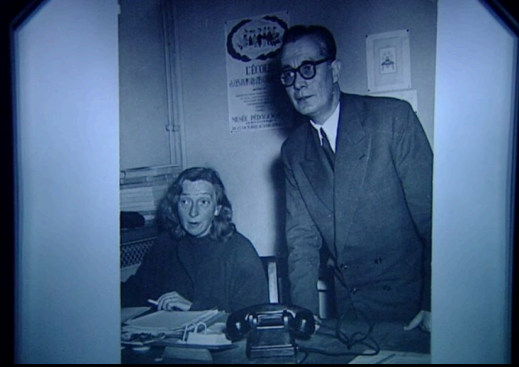


Fig. 5

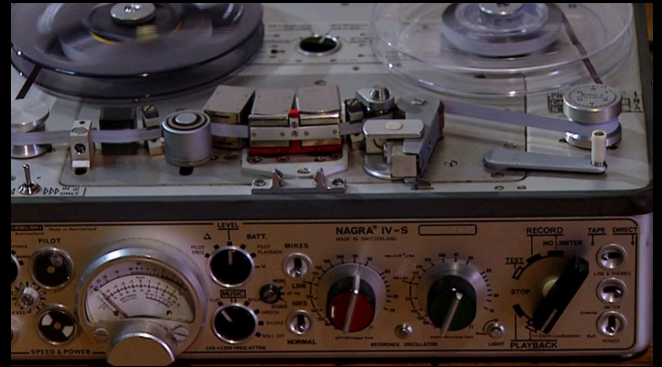


Fig. 7

Second spectatorial level



Fig. 13

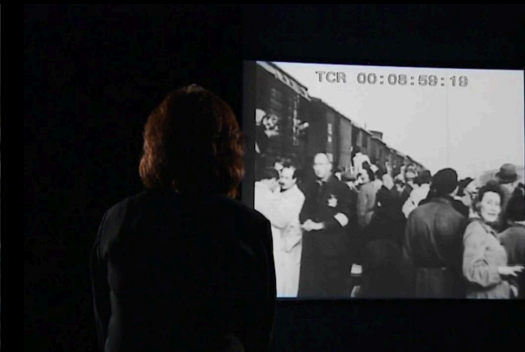


Fig. 16



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Jaurès

Second spectatorial level



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24

Continuity between both levels



Fig. 20



Fig. 21



Fig. 29



Fig. 30



Fig. 31

First spectatorial level



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27



Fig. 28



Fig. 33

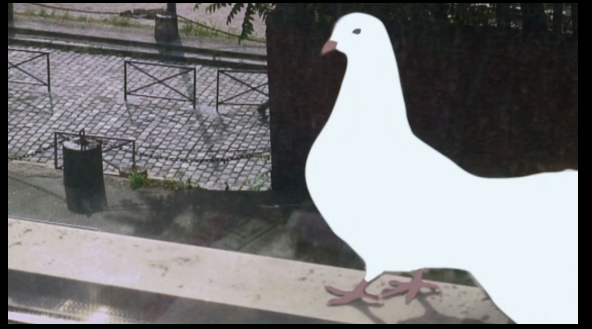


Fig. 34



Fig. 32



Fig. 35



Fig. 36



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