

Research article

The pedagogical impact of the gestures of filmmaking

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Submission date: 1 February 2025; Acceptance date: 18 August 2025; Publication date: 18 December 2025

How to cite

Henzler, B. and Siety, E. (2025) 'The pedagogical impact of the gestures of filmmaking'. *Film Education Journal*, 8 (2), 101–113. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/FEJ.08.2.04>.

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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Open access

Film Education Journal is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

In this article, we consider the concept and methodology of the international film education project *Le cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse* (CCAJ) and how this is adapted in practice. We argue that this project is based on a phenomenological approach, in that it explores film aesthetic questions that have an existential dimension and make palpable the embodiment of perception and reflection. Hence, CCAJ proposes gestures of filmmaking that are not mere technical operations, but express an embodied relation to others and to the live-world. Our argument is threefold. After a theoretical introduction to the notion of the gesture, we discuss the subjects proposed in CCAJ in the last 30 years with regard to their existential dimension. We then have a closer look at the cycle 'Filming the Other – The Documentary Gesture' (2023–4): first, in delineating the phenomenological conception of the subject's central notion of alterity, and second in revisiting a series of interviews made with four tandems of teachers and filmmakers from Bulgaria, Paris and Portugal participating in the project. Based on these interviews we categorise different gestures of documentary filmmaking and discuss their specific pedagogical potential, especially in deploying a means for the pupils to engage with others. It is the process of filmmaking that triggers an interest and initiates a move towards others, they would not make otherwise.

Keywords *Le cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse*; CCAJ; film aesthetics; phenomenology; gesture; documentary; alterity; film practice; framing; film education

Introduction

In this article, we would like to consider the (exceptional, coherent and flexible) concept of the international film education project *Le cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse* (CCAJ) and how it has explored – since 1995 – the pedagogical potentials of film aesthetics.¹ The methodology of CCAJ combines the cultural, perceptual and creative aspects of cinema, especially active reception (the practice of film analysis and comparison of film fragments) and creative gestures (framing, sound recording, editing, photography, note-taking, etc.). As explained in the Editorial of this issue, each year a new film aesthetic subject is formulated through a set of ‘rules of the game’ for the practical exercises and a corpus of film extracts, the linking of which introduces a variety of filmic gestures. The participants – either adults or pupils – understand the subject less by adopting the abstract concept than by watching the film extracts and making the exercises. Therefore, the process of thinking and learning about or with film is incorporated into watching and making. The exercises proposed enable the pupils to approach the gestures of creation and spectatorship through the prism of an abstract question called upon to ‘take flesh’.

Bettina Henzler has shown in detail that this pedagogical approach, as delineated by one of its founders, Alain Bergala, in his seminal essay *The Cinema Hypothesis* (2016), relies, in part, on a phenomenological conception of cinema and education (Henzler, 2013, 2025a). Phenomenology considers the *embodied existence* of human beings as situated within and open to the world: thus thought, communication, emotion, sensation are based on perception, which means they are not mere subjective or cognitive processes, or even cultural constructions, but always anchored in a specific framed perspective and a bodily entanglement with the environment. As philosopher Merleau-Ponty stated, it is *specific* to the medium of film to make palpable this embodiment of existence; ‘the movies’, he wrote in his article on the parallels between existential philosophy and film, ‘are peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1949/1964, p. 58). In film theory this phenomenological conception of cinema has been explored in two directions: in considering *film watching as an experience*, that relies on our embodied perceptions of the world (e.g. Sobchack, 1992), and in reflecting on the *materiality of film*, for example the transformation of fragments of reality into a film world (e.g. Bazin, 1973; Kracauer, 1960). André Bazin’s notion of the real, which has already been named by others as the implicit aesthetic agenda of CCAJ (Chambers, 2020; Reid, 2019), links these two aspects. He analyses how films (especially those of Italian Neo-realism) – in working with real places and non-professional actors, preferring anti-dramatic plots and long takes, including chance and capturing the ‘irrepeatable’ moments – might recreate the ambiguity of the world, thus situating the spectators as if in the real world and conveying the impression of reality as embodied experience.

This phenomenological dimension of CCAJ’s film pedagogy might be exemplified in its focus on *filmic gestures*, as already evoked previously. Merleau-Ponty explained with regard to the activity of grasping (in its double sense) that a gesture is always a bodily relation to another, which grounds a possibly signifying process. *Meaning* is thus grasped and conveyed through the body; when raising one’s hand towards an object, the subject is at the same time active *and* passive, it touches and is being touched (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In considering films as a network of gestures instead of mere signs, formal constructions or representations, the focus is shifted on the process of (film) reception as being linked to the process of filmmaking: filmic gestures are thus an operation on the world (including its media) *and* an expression of the embodied relation to it. They are a form of relating to the materials and the concrete situation in the moment of filmmaking, transforming these into filmic takes (or sequences), that do not only bear the traces of profilmic materiality, but also of the gestures of filmmaking. What we call ‘filmic gesture’ thus does not refer solely to a technical operation, but also and above all to the corporeal and intellectual internalisation of its symbolic, expressive and relational implications. In this sense, learning such gestures involves becoming aware of these implications: experiencing them through experimenting.

For a student, this experience may take place on two levels: in the lived relationship (with other pupils, trainers or the filmed environment) and in the relationship with the work in the course of it being created.

This focus on filmic gestures in CCAJ is not only present in the 'rules of the game' that are conceived to understand an abstract question in the embodied process of filming and to initiate an awareness of perception and sensation. The categorisation of film extracts also functions not only as an intertextual analytical method of comparing motifs, figures and forms throughout film history, but as a phenomenology of filmic gestures for each and every one to nourish their own practices of viewing and making. Finally, the overall subjects proposed each year, more or less explicitly, always combine aesthetic questions with existential questions: the apparent formalistic devices initiating and reflecting on the embodied aspects of being.

We would like to show in the following that the specificity of the pedagogical concept of CCAJ lies in its phenomenological approach to cinema and, more specifically, in this systematic interrelation between filmic and existential questions. This will be done in three steps: first, we will revisit the 30 years of CCAJ to consider the named conception of the subjects as questions on cinema *and* on being; second, we will focus on one year's subject, 'About Documentary – Filming the Other', which we investigated in the context of the Erasmus project 'Exploring *cinéma cent ans de jeunesse*' in 2022–4 (see also the article by Boutin and Henzler in this issue). On the one hand, we will analyse the phenomenological dimension of this subject and the rules of the game preconceived by Nathalie Bourgeois and Alain Bergala. On the other hand, we will look at interviews we did with four tandems of participating filmmakers–teachers on how they adapted this approach to the specific context of their classes. Relying on these interviews we will discuss specific gestures of filmmaking as – at the same time – technical procedures and relational operations.

The philosophy of *Le cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse*

From its start in 1995, the subjects explored in CCAJ reveal two tendencies: either being formal parameters (such as take, offscreen sound, montage, light, colour, camera movements etc.), or existential/anthropological categories (such as 'alterity in cinema', 'filming gestures', 'real or filmique space', 'real or filmique time'). A list of the subjects explored since 2007 can be found online (<https://blogs.cinema-cent-ans-de-jeunesse.org/>). Elise Tamisier, who describes the historical development of the project in her doctoral thesis 'Devenir-personnages: Les enfants et ce qu'ils créent dans le dispositif "*Le cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse*"' ('Becoming Characters: Children and What They Create in the "*Le cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse*"' Programme'), argues that these subjects revolve around three core 'matrixes': first, the 'impurity' of cinema, in the Bazinian sense, being made of fragments of the real (things, bodies, places), second, the 'gesture' (of the actors) and, third, 'alterity' as filmic experience – most of them being investigated in a dialectics between the inscription of the real *and* the (narrative) construction of the image (Tamisier, 2022). These matrixes can obviously be related to the phenomenological conception of cinema as outlined previously.

In spite of this conceptual coherence, there might also be detected significant changes during the 30 years of CCAJ. The more technical parameters investigated in the first years are replaced by formal figurations covering different filmic gestures in which the interlacement of film aesthetics and existential questions becomes evident: 'Showing/Hiding' (2010–11), for example, is investigated as a play with the spectator (on the levels of framing, editing, sound, scenario). Or, 'The Distance' (2014–15) between actors as well as actors and camera is explored as an expression of emotional or social relations, of affect and meaning. Vice versa, subjects with an existential dimension come up more frequently, such as in 'The Climate' (2015–16), 'The Play' (2016–17), 'The Situation' (2018–19), 'The Sensation' (2019–20). Nevertheless, these are never tackled as mere subjects of filmic representation, but rather as film-specific means of expression, in their specific configurations of *mise en scène*, and as filmic explorations of embodied experiences (such as the atmospheres of weather events, the dizziness of playing, the sensation of places and objects). This tendency to explore existential questions in filmmaking goes hand in hand with a shift

towards subjects that deal with aspects of community, an underground current in 'The Play', 'Places and stories' and 'Mise en scène' (list of subjects in Tamisier, 2022, p. 331) that surfaces in 'Individual, Group, Community' (2024–5).

As Tamisier demonstrates in analysing the films and final presentations of three consecutive years of CCAJ (2015–18), these subjects are not just imposed by the intellectual tandem of Alain Bergala and Nathalie Bourgeois, but developed in response to the films made by the pupils and the discussions with the participating adults in the pedagogical meetings following the films' presentations at the end of the year. Thus, Tamisier noted the importance of places as 'refuge' from the social in films made on the subject of 'The Play', which led, in the following edition, to propose the subject of 'Places and Stories' (Tamisier, 2022). Or, as to the years we investigated, when realising that the subject 'Centered/Decentered' (2022–3) led to a series of films telling about the isolation of the individual, Bergala and Bourgeois decided to put 'Filming the Other' on the next year's agenda. This was done, as Bergala explained, to counter the tendency of withdrawal in the digital media society, of which the pupils' films seemed to tell.

If the subjects are thus chosen in dialogue with the films made by the pupils, we would also argue, that its pedagogical potential lies in the described interrelation of aesthetic and existential, social, ethical questions. Each subject gives a specific frame for the pupils to deal with the conflicts and themes important to them. More specifically, as to Tamisier, these offer the opportunity to negotiate in the process of filmmaking the relation to each other, as well as an ethics of shared values. We would like to exemplify this with the two recent subjects, 'Centred/Decentred' and 'Filming the Other – The Documentary Gesture' – that represent the two tendencies as described earlier.

'Centred/Decentred' – chosen for the cycle of 2022–3 – was representative of CCAJ in focusing, as the subjects before, primarily on fiction film. It can be equally understood as referring to forms of attention to the world (paying attention to the obvious or to the marginal), as a way of being in the world (in the centre/in periphery), and as a designation of concrete, material operations on image and sound. These operations were explored by the exercises, that dealt with the framing and composition of an image, with the shooting of a long take, and with the relation of sound and image.² Thus, the subject decentred the creative gesture from what usually monopolises the primary attention of pupils invited to make a film: the story to be told.

The documentary approach adopted in 2023–4 has given the *encounter with the other* a particular importance. The 'rules of the game' – which proposed filming someone working in a long take, filming an animal, filming a place, relating to someone unknown – were not mere technical instructions, but pointed to the complex relationship between the concreteness of cinematographic gestures and the ethical stakes of the relationship to the other.³ They defined a field of experimentation, underlying the difference between 'filming the other' and 'being in relationship' with him or her, also indicating that it is possible to dissociate *looking at* the other from *listening to* him or her, and asking what 'dialogue', 'questioning' and 'addressing' might mean.

If the pupils' films, in both years, explored a wide range of aesthetic strategies, themes and stories, in each year different core themes detached themselves. In 2022–3 many films seemed to be haunted by narrative structures that not only decentred the subject of film viewing, but also told stories about destabilised protagonists. They often focused on characters marginalised in the classroom or within society, and expressed the loss of control, an uncertainty about what is real and what is imagined, a questioning of gender and cultural origin, or an encounter with traumatising experiences such as suicide or death. It seemed as if the subject centred/decentred enabled the pupils to confront their uncertainties and fears – probably intensified by the experience of the Covid-19 years.

In 2023–4, the documentary approach to otherness led some groups, especially of younger children, to encounter elderly people, confronting their biography, their way of talking, their specific work or practical knowledge. Many of those films, moreover, show us something about the social problems of contemporary society such as homelessness, housing, gentrification and the loss of public space.

Although the conception of the subjects invites pupils to deal with these themes, the pedagogical reflections of the adults at the mid-term meetings and final encounters nevertheless showed that they were surprised by the themes and narratives chosen by the pupils, and by the dynamics of the filmmaking process. The films of the pupils, in these meetings, provided a basis for the discussion, not only of the challenges and potentials of the year's work, but as an expression of the young filmmakers on their conditions of being. Thus, in 2023 there was a general astonishment about the harshness and pessimist dimension of many films, and in 2024 the discussion evolved around the questions of whether and to what extent the young people were aware of the political impact of their films.

The pedagogical impact of the gestures of filmmaking

The fundamental principles of CCAJ, already mentioned, mean that filmmaking gestures – such as watching, taking distances, arranging bodies, framing locations, etc. – are at the same time relational gestures to others and to the world. In the following, we point out some of these gestures that became evident in the semi-structured interviews we made with the adults of four classes, teachers and professionals, participating in the 2023–4 cycle 'Filming the Other – The Documentary Gesture'. Before we go into detail, we would like to briefly consider the phenomenological dimension of the subject and the rules of the game, and how this was addressed in the films made by the pupils.

The notion of alterity

The subject combined two aspects from the first years of CCAJ, the documentary approach of the initial 'Lumière Tendency' (1995), and the subject of alterity (1996–7), as dealt with in fictional films before. Alterity is a central notion of Alain Bergala's pedagogical writings as well as a recurring motif in his writings on cinema. In *The Cinema Hypothesis* he claims two notions of alterity (see [Henzler, 2013](#)). On the one hand, in the tradition of aesthetic theories, he insists on the formative encounter with film as an art form that resists easy consumption and understanding. On the other hand, he deploys a film-specific notion of alterity that derives from the writings of film critic Serge Daney, who considers film as mediating the 'encounter with the unfamiliar – be it other people or perspectives, other life-worlds or cultures – and might sensitise for the otherness in/of the worlds filmed, that exceeds our understanding and resists the images made of it' ([Henzler, 2025a](#), p. 166).

In the introduction to the CCAJ subject 'About Documentary', Bergala linked Serge Daney's aesthetics of alterity to the phenomenological ethics of Emmanuel Lévinas. The latter claims the acceptance of a radical difference of the other human being, that cannot be overcome, as we are differently situated in the world ([Lévinas, 1991](#)). In this sense, alterity is neither a mere difference that might be transcended when getting to know the other, nor a (cultural) construction of otherness, but an *experience* that challenges our sense of being. Bergala aligns to this phenomenological notion of alterity in proposing in his notes on the subject to 'film the other as alterity, as a bloc that resists to me and that I do not pretend to bring back to myself and my limited experience of the world'.⁴

This film aesthetic conception of alterity is based on the previously named impurity of film, that may take into itself fragments of the real that resists the understanding and the control of the filmmakers (and the viewers). The rules of the game, therefore, propose different strategies to explore alterity, bringing into play embodied experiences (see link to rules provided in previous section). The first and the third exercise (Exercise 1.1 and 3), for example, invite to *take time and watch* when making a long shot of two minutes of someone working, or when coming back to the same place throughout a full year. In both cases the duration of the shot or of the filmmaking process allow the consideration of change, movement, the appearance of something unnoticed or unforeseen. Another rule of the game (Exercise 1.2) suggests a *sensitive approach*, when asking to film (in 1–5 takes) an animal 'by highlighting its difference, its uniqueness: its animal species' while paying 'attention to sound, details, sensations'.⁵

The second exercise invites the consideration of *how to place oneself* in face of the other, either filming them from the exterior, or in engaging them in the filmmaking process.

Characteristic for the phenomenological approach is also the typology of the 'word in documentary' established in the selection of film extracts, including 'word taken in a "dispositif" of mise en scène', 'dispositif engendered by the set', 'voice over of the commentary', 'to address someone'. The spoken word, here, is not in the first place considered as statement, information or interpretation, but as an intersubjective act of speaking that emerges from a concrete situation, a situation that is searched or established in the process of filmmaking.

If the subject, the rules of the game and the film extracts provide a 'philosophical' frame for the filmmaking processes, this is not necessarily accepted and 'applied' exactly as proposed by the different groups. Each year, the initial workshop, in which Alain Bergala introduces the subject in presenting the categories of filmic gestures, is also a space for engaged discussions (either in plenum or between groups) about how to understand the subject and how to make it comprehensible to the pupils, as well as on the practicality of the proposed 'rules'. In the case of the documentary subject, for example, some missed a more fundamental discussion of the ethics of documentary filming or did not adhere to the outlined conception of alterity. Especially the proposition of 'types of alterity' – such as animals, cultural difference, handicap and adolescence – was criticised, because it risks to construct a common 'we' that is rather a white 'normal' European adult, instead of addressing the experience of alterity of possibly each and every individual. Partners from non-European countries – such as Brazil – argued that for their children who belong to those groups historically and culturally stigmatised by othering, it might be more important to show a different image of themselves and their live-world.

During the year, in the workshops with the students, as well as in the discussions among the adults, the subject is continually negotiated and in the final presentations aspects might come up that were not conceived of at the beginning. In the case of the final presentations in Lisbon, June 2024, for example, several films dealt with old people as others and introduced the question of past time into the category of alterity, not conceived of by the steering team before. Also, as already mentioned, many groups filmed public places or institutions, as a heterogeneous space, structured by a diversity of social groups. When Bergala remarked in the final pedagogical meetings that these films deal with heterogeneity rather than with alterity, this was heavily disputed and contradicted by filmmakers who questioned the notion of alterity proposed by him. One source of this 'disaccord', was probably that the phenomenological notion of alterity is based on the subject's embodied 'positioning' in face of the other, while the challenge for the different workshops was rather to find a common point of view within a group. It might not be by chance that some of those films that achieved mediating the experience of alterity were made by individual students, such as the English *The Inside Track* (Abingdon School) or the German *Die Passerelle* (Katholische Schule Liebfrauen, Berlin). In spite of, or rather because of these engaged discussions and differences among the participants, the main goal, to make the pupils engage with others was achieved by most of the classes: Many of the pupils, in the discussions of their films, described their filmmaking as a process of encountering and also becoming familiar with someone else. Many of them developed an interest in others *while* filming, found their themes *while* editing. How this process is related to specific filmic gestures will be discussed in the following by revisiting the interviews we made with the adult tandems of teacher–filmmaker in four of the participating groups.

The partners chosen covered different countries and regions, a variety of institutional frames between voluntary and compulsory workshops, as well as different age groups: 11–12 years in Collège Jean Moulin, Perpignan (France), 12–13 years in ObU Neofit Rilski, Dermantsi (Bulgaria), 13–14 years in Collège Paul Klee, Thiais (France), and 17–21 years in Escola Secundária Marquês de Pombal, Lisbon (Portugal). The four workshops covered a wide range of diversity issues, with either socially disadvantaged pupils, first generation of immigrants or pupils with special educational needs. This allowed for an investigation of the adaptability of the CCAJ methodology to address different target groups. The interviews provided an insight into how the conceptual frame of CCAJ is applied in different contexts, how the adults adapt

it to the needs of their specific groups and how they reflect on their work. They revealed differences in the aesthetic and pedagogical choices of the adults: some insisting on the conscious search of a point of view, some paying attention to what might happen by chance, some reflecting on the way of asking questions and some sensing the atmosphere of a place. If these differences are due to the different persons and their respective approaches to cinema and pedagogy, they also tell us something about the flexibility of the project's methodology and its pedagogical potential.

Filmic gestures relating to others

Framing and duration: paying attention

Most of the teams interviewed insisted on the importance of the *careful framing and duration of the shots* which enables *focused attention*. The takes are, in this sense, themselves a form of paying attention (Henzler, 2025b). Children are encouraged to take much longer shots than they are accustomed to through their use of mobile phone applications, which means they need to take the time to look and, while observing the world, to allow things to happen that were not planned.

This might first concern the attention focused on a person: in Dermantsi, the filmmaker thus remarks with regard to the second exercise in which the pupils filmed a lady in a sewing room: 'I was not there [during the shooting], and when I watched the footage, I couldn't believe, when she's outside, how close they are, even from a distance, and wait, and wait, and wait for her to say something really special, and it happened' (Interview 2, Dermantsi, 3 April 2024). This exercise in patience and attention results in an almost magic moment in the film, when the woman during her break starts to speak about her hope that it might snow. These words open the film's frame to the natural environment, express intimate expectations on the changing of seasons, and create a metaphorical link to the whiteness dominating the working place. The filming process becomes a means to create attention to other people and their live-world. And at the same time the pupils develop a sensibility for what might happen without being planned.

Attention might also be focused on a place, as in Perpignan where the pupils were encouraged to detect the sensations and emotions they felt inside a museum of natural history. After the first visit, as part of Exercise 2, the children went back a second time in small groups. During the preparatory session, they were encouraged to identify the sensations and emotions they felt in the site, and then to seek how to convey them through their photographs. Finally, they chose the museum as the place for their film essay *Domi* (2024). The sensitive approach to a real place, here, allowed for freedom of *aesthetic invention and imagination* when the children chose to integrate animal sounds into the film, which seemed to fill the museum like ghosts (Interview 2, Perpignan, 15 May 2024; translated from French). The result is a mysterious, ghostly tone to the place being filmed. In this case, the pupils worked on how films combine the real and the imaginary, and developed a strategy to relate their own perceptions of the space to what their protagonists says about it. The attention to the environment can therefore lead to an aesthetic form that is not realistic, although it remains faithful to real-life experience.

Another aspect is named by the team in Lisbon, who insisted on the importance of careful framing as a means to *choose a point of view*. The artist describes the work of the pupils as a 'visual searching'. As for other teams, the work with the tripod, for him, is a specific device to encourage a careful framing and a conscious decision on the point of view: Setting up and moving the camera tripod requires more time and effort than manipulating a handheld camera, and therefore encourages careful decision-making. Another important aspect is the consideration of time. As the artist said: 'There are two things I do not give up: the time of the take – I have a lot of work with them to have them take their time. The other one is framing. When they make a frame that is not good, I interview them: what have you done?' (Interview 3, Lisbon, 18 July 2024). This learning process is also visible in the exercises and the film essay *Casas Fechadas (Closed House)* (2024) made by their pupils, characterised by a remarkable pictorial composition of the shots. As already elaborated, the filmic device of framing, here, functions as a pedagogical device, the necessity to take time for framing it carefully might initiate the interest in the other.

These different examples show that questions of framing and duration are linked to more fundamental attitudes towards the environment, including patience, attention, sensation and reflection – all of them participating in aesthetic sensibility. This aspect was also articulated by others, especially when considering the seminal exercise of filming Lumière minutes. Thus, Mark Reid names this gesture to ‘frame the world aesthetically’, and argues that film as an ‘artistic medium can reveal the “real in the everyday”, and it can “slow down perception” enabling children to see more, less or differently in a more focused way’ (Reid, 2019, p. 474). He shows how these perceptive processes induce cognitive processes of ‘making meaning’. Ralitsa Assenova considers the camera as means to exploring everyday reality and an instrument of ‘transposition of the ordinary in the extraordinary’; the camera, she notes, ‘contains the secret of the transition between two realities: the reality that surrounds us, and the one we produce on screen’ (Assenova, 2023, p. 134). To these considerations, we would like to add that in a phenomenological sense the gesture of framing also means to ‘situate’ oneself within and to the world, and thus to engage in and articulate the relation to others.

Approaching the other (with camera and microphone)

The subject of documentary required the pupils to get into contact with people they did not know before, a contact that was at the same time enabled *and* changed by technical devices such as a microphone and camera. It brought into play different forms of communication, of speaking, of addressing the other by word or gestures. The preparation and shooting of the films induced different types of contact: single or repeated, with and without sound recording, with and without camera, in groups of varying format, prepared collectively or improvised on the spur of the moment. It demanded them to experiment with different forms of approach, which for many pupils (as well as for the adults) meant diverse challenges: ethical, motivational, intentional.

The first problem some of the groups had to face was the willingness of the people to be filmed. In Dermantsi, the shooting of an exercise in a tattoo studio was impacted by one of the staff’s refusal to be filmed. The pupils were, thus, forced to make rather close shots and choose specific angles, instead of portraying the whole space as the exercise prescribed. In Thiais, the guard of the shopping arcade chosen as location refused to be filmed, even from a distance, and even from behind, so they used only his voice, as an *off commentary*. These limitations made the pupils understand the practical obstacles to documentary filming, which many pupils – in statements to the adults – considered much more difficult than they thought. The act of creation is not limited to the implementation of a carefully prepared project but requires the ability to adapt, negotiate and be inventive in the moment. Moreover, these limitations also allowed the groups to reflect on ethical questions: what does it mean to film people, to get their consent etc.

Another challenge for the adults was to overcome the pupils’ disinterest in others, to be motivated to engage with unknown people. This was especially the case for the oldest group in Lisbon, as the adults told us. In other cases with younger pupils, it was their shyness that prevented them from connecting to others. The Bulgarian teacher pointed out that the pupils of the 7th grade level were ashamed to reveal themselves in asking questions, which he interprets as a lack of maturity: ‘Their shyness doesn’t come from their being shy to talk to people. It comes from being shy, not to embarrass themselves, asking stupid questions’ (Interview 2, Dermantsi, 3 April 2024).

To avoid a refusal to be filmed, pupils might be tempted to film from a distance, without exposing the gaze of the other. This is a simple example, among others, of how a technical parameter, and a technical gesture, offers opportunity to highlight its phenomenological and philosophical aspects. In an individual exercise, as a teacher of Thiais recounts, a pupil filmed a worker from a distance, using the zoom. It was an attempt ‘that was very interesting, precisely because it was “unsuccessful”’: it made it possible to tackle the question of encountering the other, revealing the fact that ‘filming someone without asking them’ was not an encounter. In fact, most classes had to deal with thwarted encounters (Interview 2,

Thiais, 24 April 2024; translated from French). The exercises, therefore, do not only allow for practical implementation, but also for reflection afterwards. The pupils view and comment on their exercises. The film analysis work developed from excerpts by other directors is applied to their own work. This critical reflection can serve as a springboard for shooting other exercises and the end-of-year film.

Getting to know the other: questioning, listening, engaging oneself

Once they found people who agreed to be filmed, the pupils had to face the problem of how to talk to them, how to ask questions that might open them up to reveal something of their personality. A teacher of Thiais remembers preparing for an interview with a baker. The pupils suggested questions such as 'How long have you worked in the bakery?' or 'How many hours do you work?'. He adds:

We told them we'd have to try and go further. But it was abstract. Once the exchange had taken place, the man started talking about his father's bakery. The pupils realised that, in the end, this was the most interesting part. That time, we hadn't filmed. We came back with the camera, with the aim of getting him to tell us more about his relationship with his father. (Interview 2, Thiais, 24 April 2024; translated from French)

Similar situations were described by the Dermantsi team who also mentioned how the pupils in some cases overcame the problem. They found a common interest with a lady in a nail studio, which helped them to connect to her and 'open her', or to adapt to a situation by discarding the prepared questions and rather asking spontaneously. The Bulgarian artist also adds that the challenge is not only how to ask questions but also how to *really listen to the other*: 'And a second part of the shyness is when they have to learn to listen really deeply and to continue not with the next question, but to go deep into something that is really interesting to them. So they have to learn to listen and to watch the interviewees' (Interview 2, Dermantsi, 3 April 2024). These examples illustrate the learning process that may be triggered by CCAJ's framework, dynamically linking abstract reflections, concrete gestures and sensitive experiences that are repeated and reinvested. The experience, over the course of the year, might even be pedagogically productive, if the filmed encounter is not fully satisfying. Thus, the teacher of Thiais continues on the example of the baker:

I'd say they felt the difference between questions about 'doing' and questions about 'being', but they didn't necessarily manage to get out of the man what he could have really told us. We're more at the level of feeling than of something accomplished. Except that some of the pupils kept this experience in mind. (Interview 2, Thiais, 24 April 2024; translated from French)

The lack of deeper encounters prompted the Thiais team to make their film about a place and its social configurations, instead of a person. By observing the pupils when they first tried to talk to people in the small shopping centre, they realised that there was a power in the spontaneous encounters and thus encouraged the pupils to use the device of the *micro-trottoir*, a typical television reporting technique involving interviews with passers-by in the street. In retrospect, they concluded that this was the approach that best suited the place, in which it was not possible to connect to one person, as it is a place where people only pass. In the final film, the mode of interviewing is reflected explicitly, when in one take we see the whole crew: pupils asking questions and others holding the microphone above the heads from a distance. No matter what the finished film is like, a learning process has been completed. Indeed, the teacher reports: 'The urge to ask questions was there, but then, when you're 13–14 years old, sometimes you're going to stammer and then, by the end, they weren't stammering at all' (Interview 3, Thiais, 12 July 2024; translated from French).

If this question of encountering the other is at the centre of the documentary practice, the learning process may not be just about language, about *how to communicate with others*, but about human contact that is often lacking in contemporary forms of reportage and media communication: an emotional and reflexive *engagement of the self with others*.

Finding a story and creating a character: entering into relationship (at the editing table)

All teams insisted on the challenge that filming a documentary takes more time over a longer period and cannot be planned as when filming a fiction film – in particular, the teams with younger children, with less pedagogical resources or time per week, face logistic challenges. Unlike in fiction films, the stories cannot be written and shot in a couple of days, but they have to be found while filming. The structure of a film, the presentation of a character and the line of ‘narration’ is to be constructed at the editing table. Because of the lack of time, most often the professionals prepared propositions of editing and discussed them with the pupils to find the form that best suits pupils’ intentions. The filmmaking thus resembles a process of mutual exchange and resonance between the artist/adults and the pupils, the films being a product of cooperation. All the relational experiences made by the groups during shooting constitute both a creative *and* a pedagogical material to think the encounter with the other. In Perpignan and Lisbon, where the groups decided to focus their film on one character, the editing process, the question of how to combine the image and the voice of the person, also meant exploring their point of view on the other.

The Perpignan class made a portrait of a guide in a museum of natural history. The description of this process by the adults illustrates the complexity of the situation, as the pupils had to create intimacy and show empathy, but at the same time needed to maintain a distance, a sense of control. During filming and editing, the individual being filmed was both a person they were getting to know, and a ‘character’ they were constructing, which presupposed a lucid outside view. In the interview, the professional and one teacher of Perpignan underline the difficulty of their pupils in understanding and sympathising with the person: he seemed ‘strange’, ‘offbeat’, in his ‘world’, possibly ‘boastful’, trying to make the children laugh and sometimes succeeding, sometimes not. For some pupils it was easy to connect to him, others needed time for trial and error. The teacher remarks: ‘We had to film him with dignity, not by making fun of him’, and the professional adds:

We felt that this character was inhabited by generous things, that this place gave birth to an imagination in him, and that he wanted to share this imagination with them. But we had a hard time figuring out what devices to put in place so that the story could be told clearly in a ten-minute film, and what shooting conditions we needed to put in place to make it possible. So we tried out a number of things, and the film-essay is a product of all of them. (Interview 2, Perpignan, 15 May 2024; translated from French)

According to one of the teachers, a key moment was the interview conducted by a single pupil, accompanied by the artist, based on questions prepared by the whole class. This interview, inspired by the artist’s experience as a documentary filmmaker, created a real intimacy with the person. This also helped them create situations to portrait him, as she explains:

So this interview gave us a better idea of who he was. And we learned that he had played music a lot, that it was his second passion, literature and music, alongside the fact that he had been a teacher. As a result, we shot a sequence where he brought along a whole bunch of musical instruments more or less directly linked to the museum, i.e. made from animal bones. (Interview 2, Perpignan, 15 May 2024)

A second important decision was to split the voice from the body and to edit it with images of the museum, especially with stuffed animals filmed in a way that created an imaginary, even creepy atmosphere. As the artist reports: ‘When they saw that it worked together and that this voice could exist outside of him, it was also as if he became ... part of these ghosts in the place’ (Interview 2, Perpignan, 15 May 2024). Therefore the aesthetic choices of pupils at the same time gave resonance to the person, to his imagination of the place, and also helped to portray him in his otherness, not only adhering to his self-presentation. It also made them discover that documentary film does not only mean to represent, but to re-construct a vision of reality.

Encountering the other as transformative process

In Lisbon, the film also explored the relationship between a protagonist and a place. The pupil encountered an old lady who lives in a small street nearby the school, whom they discovered while looking for a topic for the exercises. The film also works with a partial split between the voice of the protagonist(s) and the images, but in this case, not the imaginary, but the *social and historical dimension* of this place, is revealed. Archival photography, the voice of the woman telling about the past, are contrasted with images that show houses that are closed down. The structure of the film, that first shows the small, colourful ground-level houses as a closed world, and in the end reveals in wide shots the surroundings with skyscrapers and modern buildings, underlines the concern expressed by the woman that the whole place is endangered. As the teacher told us, the film treats one of the most important social problems of Lisbon, the lack of housing due to over-tourism and gentrification, a topic that especially concerns the younger generations and made them connect to the concern of the old people.

Interestingly, in the first interviews, the teacher and the filmmaker named the lack of interest of the pupils to film the other. The teacher also stressed that they were not interested in political questions, rather concerned with social issues. This changed, as they told us, when they discovered the place no one knew before, and encountered, the same day, the old lady who easily faced the camera and talked to them. After this encounter, the pupils got involved and became enthusiastic about their project. In the end, a group of them even accompanied the woman – in their free time – to a demonstration on the occasion of the Portuguese ‘Carnation Revolution’, which is the anniversary of the revolution against the dictatorship of Estado Novo in Portugal, 25 April 1974. As the teacher mentions, this made ‘a huge impression on the students’, they filmed the demonstration with the handheld camera and the cameraman ‘was very proud of what he was doing’, accomplishing this difficult task (Interview 3, Portugal, 18 July 2024). It was their choice, during the editing process, to end the film with an almost two minutes shot showing the woman in the midst of the demonstration singing the song of the revolution. This decision was probably made because they were affected by the political consciousness of the old woman *and* as they felt the power of their own accomplishment in filming her. Later, one of the pupils even decided to make a documentary on the revolution for the final exam. Being a professional school with a technical, musical and artistic focus, the exams are practical works such as videos, musicals, web designs etc. This example seems to indicate how the process of filmmaking might develop an *inter-generational collective dynamic*, connecting those who are filmed and those filming.

The possibly *transformative dimension* of this filming experience is indicated in a written exercise in which the pupils reflected in retrospect on their learning experience:

Our project focused on telling the stories of elderly people who live in a small alley, practically hidden among the skyscrapers in the centre of Belém. It was a transformative experience, not only because of the technical challenge of learning to use cameras and microphones, but, above all, through human contact and the stories that emerged before the lens.

I learned that a documentary is a window into lives that often go unnoticed. It is a powerful tool that allows you to capture and share the essence of real stories, preserving memories and promoting empathy. By listening to and recording the stories of the elderly, I realised the importance of giving a voice to those who are rarely heard. Each interview, each moment captured, was a lesson in resilience, memory and identity.

I am grateful for this project. (Boy, 18 years old, written answer to ‘What did you learn?’, Lisbon, June 2024; translated from Portuguese)

This quotation points to *fundamental abilities for human contact as well as for learning*, and shows a *social and political awareness*, when it describes film as an instrument to give marginalised people a voice and

a memory. In contemporary society, where democracy is more and more endangered by intolerance and ignorance towards others, this potential of aesthetic film education seems to be of utmost importance.

Even if, of course, these examples do not say everything about the complex working process of the groups, they show the ability of the different teams to develop their own approach to the subject, that suits the needs of their class, their situation, and that is also formed by their personal point of view and experiences as pedagogues and filmmakers. This ability is also influenced by the long-term engagement in CCAJ, which not only provides for a familiarity with the approach, but also enables them to reinvest their experiences with earlier subjects (such as 'sensation', 'places and stories' etc.) into their approaches of 'new' subjects. Jamie Chambers criticised the invention of new subjects each year as impractical and impossible especially in economically fragilised project constellations (Chambers 2020, p. 156). On the contrary, all the adults we interviewed named this continuous challenge and learning process as a major reason for them to engage in the project – which in this sense might function as a film school for all, adults and pupils.

These examples indicate that the methodology of CCAJ is not a rigid 'curriculum' imposed on the participating workshops, but rather an open framework, which might be adapted to the most diverse situations and groups in age, social and cultural background, and which allows for rich exploration of the topics, the aesthetics of cinema and its pedagogical potentials. The devices of filmmaking and the gestures of *mise en scène* serve as a pedagogical frame, which not only allows the pupils to become familiar with the process of filmmaking, but enables more general forms of learning, in this case, especially, engaging with others.

The quality of this pedagogical work is also indicated in that the adults, too, seem influenced by the experience. The Lisbon team showed a great enthusiasm in discovering together with their pupils a place they did not know before. In Thiais, the filmmaker in watching the takes and interviews made by the pupils on the underground passage reconsidered the question of alterity in view of the gender and social background of those who rejected the place or adopted it as their own. In Dermantsi, finally, the filmmaker even said that working with children changed her own work as a filmmaker: 'So it's the children, they are giving you the way you have to improve your work. They are showing sometimes things that are interesting for them, but also a way to change your own work' (Interview 1, Dermantsi, 27 October 2023).

Notes

1. See the website of the project <https://www.cinemacentansdejeunesse.org/>.
2. The subject, the rules of the game and the exercises and film essays of the pupils are presented in the CCAJ Blog: <http://blogcinemacentansdejeunesse.org/centredecetre/rules-of-the-game/>.
3. See <http://blogcinemacentansdejeunesse.org/filmer-l-autre/rules-of-game/>.
4. Cited from the unpublished notes of Alain Bergala, transferred to the participants to invite propositions of film extracts.
5. Cited from the Rules of the Game, see <http://blogcinemacentansdejeunesse.org/filmer-l-autre/rules-of-game/>.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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