



## La lettre du Collège de France

9 | 2015

Collège de France Newsletter n°9

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### The Collège de France: 1973, 1993, 2013

A retrospective outlook on Marcel Bluwal's documentaries

Antoine Compagnon and Céline Surprenant

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#### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/lettre-cdf/2180>

DOI: 10.4000/lettre-cdf.2180

ISSN: 2109-9219

#### This article is a translation of:

Le Collège de France : 1973, 1993, 2013 - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/lettre-cdf/1790> [fr]

#### Publisher

Collège de France

#### Printed version

Number of pages: 52-53

ISSN: 1628-2329

#### Electronic reference

Antoine Compagnon and Céline Surprenant, "The Collège de France: 1973, 1993, 2013", *La lettre du Collège de France* [Online], 9 | 2015, Online since 28 September 2015, connection on 17 August 2022.  
URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lettre-cdf/2180> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/lettre-cdf.2180>

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# The Collège de France: 1973, 1993, 2013

A retrospective outlook on Marcel Bluwal's documentaries

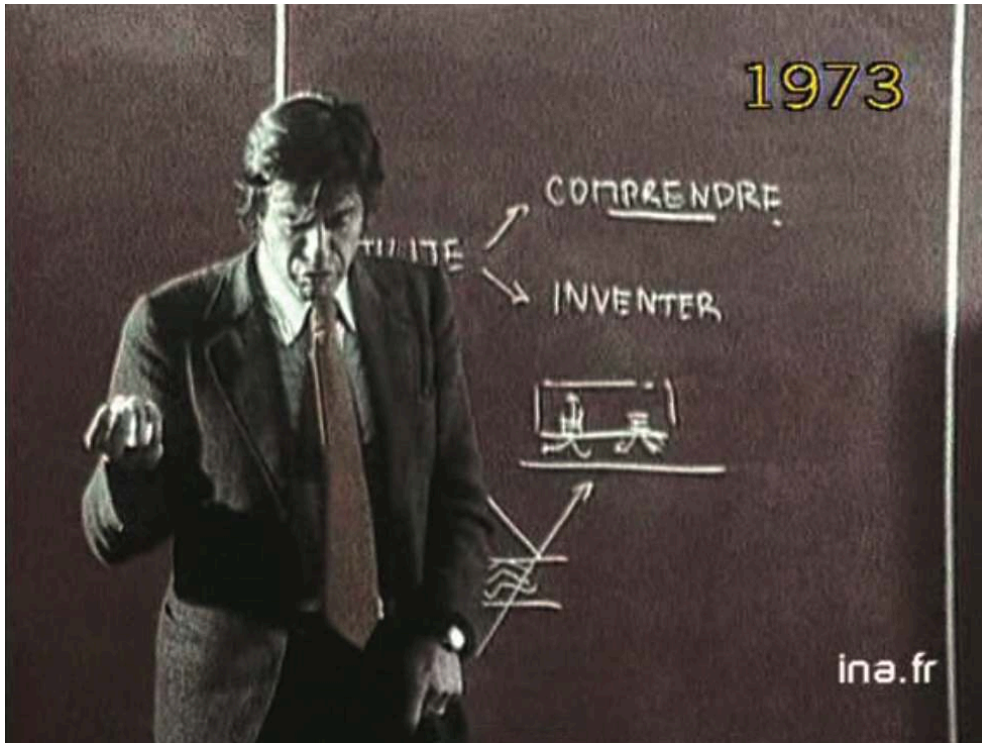
Antoine Compagnon and Céline Surprenant

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Source: La lettre, no. 38, June 2014

- 1 **Marcel Bluwal made two documentaries on the Collège de France: the first in 1973 for the ORTF (former French broadcasting corporation), as part of a series of programmes called “Signe des temps”, broadcasted between 1972 and 1974; and the second produced in 1993 for the INA (National Audio-Visual Institute). These films captured professors, the audience, the staff, buildings, and surrounding streets, offering a wealth of information on the major periods of the institution's history.**



Prof. Pierre-Gilles de Gennes in Marcel Bluwal's documentary in 1973



From left to right: Profs Antoine Compagnon, Marcel Bluwal, Jacques Glowinski, Pierre Corvol, John Scheid, Claudine Tiercelin and Alain Prochiantz

- 2 Eight new professors were appointed in 1973, including Jacqueline de Romilly (Greece and the Formation of Moral and Political Thought, 1973-1984), the first woman elected as a professor at the Collège de France. In 1993, a year that saw almost as many transformations as did 1973, renovations were begun on the Collège de France's Marcelin-Berthelot site. The last phase of this overhaul has now been completed, with

the inauguration of the Physics Institute and the Chemistry Institute, in the building designed by Guilbert Architects in the 1930s.

- 3 In 1973, the film director “stormed the Collège”, shooting in lecture theatres, laboratories, the Assembly hall, inner courtyards, and the Administrator’s office, occupied at the time by Étienne Wolff (followed by André Miquel in 1993), with whom he discussed the continuity of the Collège de France’s traditions. The influence of structuralism was a notable theme of the first programme, filmed shortly after the 1968 upheaval in the then “run-down” buildings of the Collège de France. Bluwal staged the opposition between “structure” and “history” through a discussion with mathematician André Lichnerowicz, historian Georges Duby and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose Laboratory of Social Anthropology was founded in 1960. This opposition – and the Marxist dialectics that underlies it – summed up the debate that was central to that era, on whether scholars and science were engaged “in the century” or not.
- 4 In 1993, the mathematician Alain Connes, who was also interviewed, suggested that the structure/history alternative, a subject of intense intellectual activity in the 1970s – and one that Bluwal had readily emphasized – was no longer so current. Connes jokingly criticized the use of mathematical models in the humanities, particularly by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. The focus, he said, had then shifted to “transdisciplinarity”, the organizing principle of the Collège de France long before it became fashionable when the documentary was made. The 1993 film furthermore involved personalities and distinct approaches to scientific work.
- 5 Physicists Claude Cohen-Tannoudji and Pierre-Gilles de Gennes respectively spoke about “pleasure” as the driver of research and the scholars’ public role after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Jean-Marie Lehn discussed how chemists “sculpt” matter, and historian Paul Veyne talked about the professors’ freedom to devote themselves fully to their work. This constituted a defence of fundamental research, which is still just as imperative today as it was in 1993. These two films also manifested a desire to understand what the Collège de France is, as the institution became an object of research in its own right in front of the director’s camera.
- 6 Twenty years after the last film, it seemed opportune to organize a new meeting between the Collège de France’s professors and Marcel Bluwal, to discuss still highly topical questions in the framework of the research project on the evolution of disciplines at the Collège de France (“Passage des disciplines”), directed by Antoine Compagnon in collaboration with Céline Surprenant. In 2013, instead of a television programme, a round table facilitated by Antoine Compagnon brought together Marcel Bluwal and Professors Claudine Tiercelin, Pierre Corvol, Jacques Glowinski, John Scheid and Alain Prochiantz. Series of excerpts were screened from the 1993 documentary, which itself included excerpts from the 1973 programme. This was the opportunity to pay tribute to Marcel Bluwal, an attentive observer of the Collège de France and a pioneer of French television who, in addition to the documentaries, filmed many anthological adaptations of novels and plays (see filmography in the box below).
- 7 Bluwal opened the debate by explaining his “position of distinguished amateur”, filmed from behind in the interviews with the professors. “I am in a sense a medium”, he said, to “show” that television is a mediate thing, and that “there is no direct contact through the image between a person and the public”. He established himself as a “spectator”, whilst orchestrating the opposition of divergent points of view such as

those of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and of the historian of literature Marc Fumaroli, for instance, or concerning the broadcasting of lectures or the broadening of their audience. Marcel Bluwal maintained this role during the round table, by asking professors about the secret of certain renowned Collège de France practices, such as Faculty Meetings in camera, where the selections of disciplines and the election of professors take place. Participants expressed their emotions aroused by old images of the Collège de France, recalled their early days in the institution, and talked about the “difficulty of being at the Collège de France”, as it is made of individualities and a sum of disciplines, which are not always harmonized. Their predecessors’ accounts led the professors to reflect on the “subject of science” and of language, which is present in all scientific discoveries but has tended to be minimized in favour of a mathematical model that long determined the image of science. They argued that scientists’ permeability to “what happens in the world, in society” was, and still is, at stake. The relevance of the opposition between humanities and hard sciences was discussed, with the participants maintaining that the films conveyed an image of these sciences that belonged to the past.

- 8 Finally, whether it recalled the recent history of the “Grand Travaux” [François Mitterand’s Grands Projets which allowed for large-scale building works to be undertaken at the Collège], or highlighted philosophical questions on the practice of science, the round table afforded a new encounter between a film director, who is a researcher through images, and scientists around an object, the Collège de France, whose history still largely remains to be written.

• For more information on these documentaries, see: [www.ina.fr](http://www.ina.fr) • A video of the round table will soon be available at [www.college-de-france.fr](http://www.college-de-france.fr)

Marcel Bluwal, born in Paris in 1925, is an author, director, and most importantly one of French television’s most prolific filmmakers. He has won renown in all genres, particularly through many adaptations of classical literary and dramatic works, including:

- *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1961)
- *Don Juan ou le Festin de Pierre* (1965)
- *Les jeux de l’amour et du hasard* (1967)
- *La Double inconstance* (1968)
- *Les Misérables* (1972)
- *Les Indes Noires* (1964)

He filmed the ORTF’s first series, including *L’Inspecteur Leclerc* (1962), *Vidocq* (1967) and *Les Nouvelles Aventures de Vidocq* (1971). More recently, in addition to literary work, he has made documentaries: *Les Ritals* (1991), *À droite toute* (2009).

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