
Last Century

Francine Lévy

In those days, towards the end of the 20th century, École Louis Lumiere was not yet an Ecole Nationale Supérieure, but a Lycée Technique (Technical School) that offered training solely for the BTS Cinéma de France (Brevet de Technicien Supérieur or Higher National Diploma/HND). The postal address was on Rue Rollin near the pretty Place de la Contrescarpe on top of the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève in Paris. This undeniably prestigious location contained an 18th century building. Formerly a farm, it was appointed with a “farmyard” featuring two beautiful lime trees. The main building had several classrooms on the first floor and the “sound” studio on the ground floor. The cramped indoor areas led the school to acquire two prefabricated cubes, which were mounted in the middle of the courtyard.

Apart from this pleasant courtyard and somewhat dilapidated building, a former chapel located on Rue Lhomond was converted into a film set owing to its significant ceiling height, with the mezzanine used as an editing room. Getting from Rue Rollin to Rue Lhomond only took five minutes by slightly circumventing the Pantheon. My work area included the courtyard, upstairs at Rue Rollin, and the studio at Rue Lhomond, as well as the passageway between the two.

One day, by chance, I heard about the existence of a third space. The site was referred to a little dismissively, as if it were of no interest: “Chatillon” or Rue de Chatillon in the 14th arrondissement where video production was taught.

I don't want to revisit the “religious wars” that pitted video against film for two decades, but the fact is that in the 20th century, cinema was art and video wasn't taken seriously. Of course, between Rue Lhomond and Rue Rollin, this view served to limit the territory of the enemy presence. So much so that several months passed before I ventured discreetly towards Rue de Chatillon.

It was a fine day, one of those still mild autumn days when the light is particularly prized. Entering those premises for the first time, I immediately used the wrong door because of the absence of signage, instead opening the door to a hangar as vast, elongated and high as a cathedral nave, roofed with an industrial skylight in poor condition. Golden light poured in through the broken panes training strong beams on the dusty floor. Pigeons were flying about high up in the glass roof and a thick layer of bird excrement covered the stacks on the ground, which rose up in columns composed of round cans in all sizes. Occupying a considerable surface area and height, great quantities of them were strewn all over the place.

There were films cans, film fragments and offcuts... photograms that were perhaps only from École Louis Lumiere - formerly École de Vaugirard - with the school's archival footage stockpiling here for over half a century. Maybe there were only exercises or exam papers, but also surely some of the films we are still trying to trace. On shelves brushed with the autumnal sun and between fallen columns, I read a few labels printed with the names GTC or Éclair, displaying titles - but rarely a name – indicating the

contents of the sealed cans.

I grew somewhat dazed, unable to comprehend what to do before the enormity of the task that needed to be accomplished there. A few months later, the hangar was razed to the ground and everything was gone for good.

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