RÉMI FOURNIER LANZONI

2ND EDITION

FRENCH CINEMA

FROM ITS BEGINNINGS TO THE PRESENT

BLOOMSBURY

French Cinema

Jean Gabin (Jean) and Michelle Morgan (Nelly) in Marcel Carné's *Port of Shadows* (*Le quai des brumes,* 1938)

French Cinema

Second Edition

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Rémi Fournier Lanzoni

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Introduction

The present edition on the history of French cinema resulted from an increasing need for an English-language book on this history, an extensive overview of more than one hundred years of filmmaking. This volume considers motion pictures and cinematographic trends chronologically from 1895 to 2015, decade by decade, and investigates films and filmmaking within historical contexts through a diversity of disciplines such as social and political sciences. During the past few years the discipline of film studies has been the subject of growing interest among universities, especially in the humanities, traditionally involving, in its broadest terms, the study of film analysis, film history, and film theory. Unfortunately, among the general public as well as university departments of film studies, French cinema has often been restricted to the work of a few "masters," critics, and theorists. It represents, however, much more than internationally known film icons. The present book assimilates these traditional canons with often-overlooked contributions made by no less significant figures within the film industry.

Since the early days of motion pictures, when the Lumière brothers challenged the world in 1895 with the invention of the Cinématographe, France has frequently been at the cutting edge of film production. The visionary talent of Georges Méliès, who assembled the first elaborate background sets and special effects, inspired legions of filmmakers around the world. The film industry significantly benefited from the film archives movement, which originated in 1936 in Paris with the establishment of the Cinémathèque française. Later, the French New Wave granted filmmakers the exclusive authority, that of the auteur, in all areas of film production (mise-en-scène, photography, origin of the script, thematic and artistic choices). This trend, once labeled *politique des auteurs,* marked a prolific period for film production worldwide, setting a landmark in the history of filmmaking. Finally, at the turn of the twenty-first century, France emerged as the preeminent producer of European cinema and has proved its solid business and artistic infrastructure, despite the high volume of American films in the European market. In its contemporary context, the French film industry stands as the champion of European cinematic creativity, demonstrated in movies like Pitof's *Vidocq* (2001), the first all-digital feature film.

This book treats French film primarily as a unique and powerful art with its own traditions, history, conventions, and techniques, dispelling common misconceptions—frequently found in the literature on film history—by addressing less accessible issues and concepts. It analyzes aspects of film form, narrative, and genre and explores major interpretive approaches to the medium. The eight chapters in this volume combine cultural, historical, formal, and theoretical analyses of French films from a range of French and world cinematic sources. Each chapter provides both an overview of French film historiography and an introduction to specific examples and methods of historically oriented film research. One of the central goals is to introduce readers to basic issues of the history and aesthetic appreciation of motion pictures through the conventional aspects of cinematography, including camera movement, montage, cinematographic expression, framing, shooting angle and point of view, color (or black and white), sound, music, the script, lighting, settings, costume, and makeup. Another aim is to reintroduce film buffs to the movies they have most admired and loved.

The first chapter, entitled "The Invention of Motion Pictures and the Silent Era of Film," investigates the development of the Cinématographe as well as the contribution of major filmmakers of the time such as Georges Méliès, Louis Feuillade, Louis Delluc, Abel Gance, Marcel L'Herbier, and René Clair. The chapter also highlights the emergence of a national cinema (under the auspices of Charles Pathé, Léon Gaumont, and others), which by the first decade of the century had become one of the most significant phenomena, assimilating and embodying many artistic currents, such as Avant-garde, Impressionism, and Surrealism. The second chapter, "The Golden Age of French Cinema," centers on the numerous adjustments the French film industry had to face while incorporating in its structure the technical innovation of sound. It also describes Marcel Pagnol's successful adaptations of regional, popular literature to the big screen, confirming its prestige among general audiences at the time. In addition, the chapter organizes a select discussion of the principal artists and masters of the poetic realism era, Jean Gabin, Arletty, Marcel Carné, Jean Renoir, and Jean Vigo. Chapter 3, "French Cinema of the Occupation," narrates the exodus of many French film celebrities at the beginning of World War II, and the new situation imposed by German and Vichy censorship, which included a ban in 1940 of all Anglo-American productions and an extensive number of French films. Through the works of Henri-Georges Clouzot, and Marcel Carné, the chapter explores the complex working conditions for most

film actors and directors under the Occupation, which, although constraining, often instigated amazing ingenuity on and off the set. Chapter 4, "The Postwar Era," begins with the reorganization of the French film industry during the Liberation era as well as the Fourth Republic, with an emphasis on the difficult economic challenges of the period (e.g., the Blum-Byrnes Agreements). It presents the so-called *tradition de qualité,* represented by an old school of filmmakers, including Claude Autant-Lara, Carné, Christian-Jaque, and Sacha Guitry, as well as screenwriters Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost, and attempts to give the reasons for its success during the early postwar era. A large part of the chapter focuses on the innovative method of filmmaking by auteurs such as Robert Bresson, Jacques Tati, and René Clément. Chapter 5, "The Years of the French New Wave," examines the situation of France during and after the explosive political events of 1958, as well as the birth of the seminal review *Les cahiers du cinéma.* The auteur theory, which asserted that the film director was the principal authority in all areas of film production, involved many young directors, such as Claude Chabrol, François Truffaut, Alain Resnais, Jean-Luc Godard, and Agnès Varda, and led directly to the explosion of the New Wave. The New Wave, which began in the mid-1950s as a reaction to a stagnating establishment, and was granted general recognition in the years 1958–59, remains to this day considered a historical landmark. Chapter 6, "French Cinema of the 1970s," offers a synopsis on the new cultural era following the May 1968 upheavals throughout France and the so-called liberalization era and cultural change. The chapter centers on the three major movements of the decade: the coming of an innovative and successful genre, the "political thriller," which gradually began to replace conventional *polars* (whodunits led by directors Louis Malle and Costa-Gavras); the arrival of talented new storytellers (Bertrand Tavernier and Bertrand Blier); and finally, a trend of humanist film directors (Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, and Claude Sautet), whose works incorporate powerful reflections on the medium itself. Chapter 7, "The Cinema of the 1980s," begins with the economic restructuring of the French film industry and its new rapport with its principal partner: television companies. These changes resulted in major transformations in the entertainment business and spectatorship behavior in general. The 1980s also witnessed the development of so-called super productions, inclined toward more profitable commercial films, as well as the out-of-control rise of production costs. In addition, the chapter examines the successful continuation of already-established filmmakers, including Truffaut, Tavernier, Blier, and Maurice Pialat, as well as

myriad new rising talents, especially filmmakers such as Jean-Jacques Beineix, Luc Besson, and Leos Carax. Chapter 8, "French Cinema in the Fin de Siècle," points out the evermore central position of the French film industry, which has established itself as the largest and most successful in Europe. A unique financial-aid system, combined with the financial commitment of dynamic French television companies (led in major part by Canal+), underscores the success of a strategy initiated a decade before. These exceptional circumstances generated the realization of many new filmmakers such as Jean-Pierre Jeunet, Mathieu Kassovitz, and Eric Zonca.

Finally, Chapter 9, "The New Millennium," presents the French film industry in the digital era and introduces a detailed analysis of the political situation during the year 2000, the period of the long-awaited confirmation following the "rebirth" of the French cinema industry a decade before. One of the best visible causes as well as effects of this societal mutation can be best described with the Internet transformation, which affected all strata of society. This chapter also seizes the opportunity to emphasize the growing importance of the new generation of women filmmakers with artists such as Virginie Despentes, Catherine Breillat and Noémie Lvovsky to name a few. In parallel, a special focus highlights the national recognition for the so-called *Beur* Cinema, born in the eighties and finally established two decades later under the lead of Rachid Bouchareb and Abdellatif Kechiche. The most substantial part of the chapter is an in-depth examination of several French productions, which have resulted in an international success of French cinema. The road of success became noticeable when the French film industry was able to win several key awards, especially in the United States. Following in the footsteps of Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (*Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*) in 2001, Olivier Dahan's *La Vie en Rose* (*La môme*) won the Oscar for Best Actress for Marion Cotillard's performance in 2007; and Yves Darondeau and Luc Jacquet's documentary film *March of the Penguins* (*La marche de l'empereur*) won the Oscar for Best Documentary in 2006. At the 2012 Academy Awards, Michel Hazanavicius' *The Artist* received ten nominations, winning five awards. This represented by far the clearest evidence, whether emblematic or symptomatic, of the good health of French film abroad and, in particular, among English-speaking spectatorships.

I confess to the difficult task of dealing with an overwhelmingly large amount of material within a relatively confined space. It is important to bear in mind that the films I discuss represent only a fraction of the entire spectrum

of French films (over 10,000 produced since 1895) and the present history is evidently and necessarily incomplete. I have tried to offer an explicit and honest investigation of the main masterpieces, directors, and actors and actresses of French cinema, combined with observations of less acknowledged but equally noteworthy works, and hope that the present volume will contribute to the understanding of French films, on their own and within the family of other national cinemas.

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1

The Invention of Motion Pictures and the Silent Era of Film

- France at the turn of the twentieth century
- The invention of the Cinématographe
- Georges Méliès and the adventure of the film studio
- Growth of a national cinema: Charles Pathé and Léon Gaumont
- The invention of genres: Louis Feuillade and Max Linder
- Avant-garde cinema, French impressionism, and Surrealism: Louis Delluc, Abel Gance, Marcel L'Herbier, Luis Buñuel, and René Clair

More than a century ago, the invention and early development of motion pictures heralded the beginnings of an innovation that was about to transfigure humankind's view of the world and of itself. Movies would come to generate other new and unprecedented elements of artistic creation as well. Cinematography rapidly became perhaps the most significant technical and artistic phenomenon of the twentieth century, assimilating and embodying many other art forms, yet never really imitating any of them. Specifically, it was cinematography's special rapport with theater in particular, but also painting, literature, and many other performing/lyrical arts, that made it the "seventh art" of the new century. In the 1900s, however, the new medium, soon to become a major form of entertainment, would evolve closely within contemporary artistic currents and with respect to the preoccupations of popular audiences. This in turn would guarantee its commercial viability and, consequently, its destiny. Whether labeled "motion pictures" or "cinematography," not unlike any of the other lyrical or performing arts no matter what discipline, genre, or current, audiences assimilating the films of the silent era were, as always, affected by contemporary culture and fashion, sharing many passions and events of the turn of the century.

France at the turn of the twentieth century

The introduction of motion pictures in France occurred during a new prolific cultural era that promoted many important artistic currents in such fields as architecture, interior design, furniture, sculpture, and fashion. The new modern style of film backgrounds, directly influenced by the Art Nouveau movement (1890s–1910s), and later the Art Déco vogue (1900s–20s), which was consecrated at the 1925 Paris Exposition des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes, became one of the major visual trademarks of Impressionist artists. At the beginning of the century, Paris was the Avant-garde capital of the world in art, music, and literature. It was the residence of Pablo Picasso, Salvatore Dali, Igor Stravinsky, and Jean Cocteau, among many others. The yearning to explore the fields of music, painting, and poetry had now caught up with the seventh art under a quest for forms and visual images rather than meaning. In the field of poetry, the beginning of the century was characterized by a certain permanence, with the preceding current of poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud, who deeply influenced newer poets such as Paul Valéry, Paul Claudel, and Saint-John Perse (pseudonym of Alexis Léger). As for the Surrealists, André Breton, Louis Aragon, and Paul Eluard, whose inspiration came in part from Guillaume Apollinaire's *The Poems of Alcools* (*Alcools,* 1913), Cubist art, and the emerging Dadaist movement, their works created a serious gap with the rest of French cultural life, isolating themselves into an artistic domain by emphasizing the subconscious aspect of the imagination against all social structures and traditional forms of expression. In the field of the novel, two of the most spectacular popular successes were Alain-Fournier's *Le grand Meaulnes* (*The Wanderer,* 1913) and Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past,* 1913–27). Literary reviews (*La Nouvelle Revue Française,* created by André Gide in 1908) and publishing houses (Gallimard) emerged to promote and disseminate these novelists and others of the pre–World War I era.

Following the Lumière brothers' first screening at the Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris in December 1895, French cinema, at first a novelty, quickly progressed from popular entertainment to an art form, and eventually to a form of literature itself, as silent films reached greater complexity and length in the early 1900s and 1910s. The exceptionally profitable financial revenues that the silent movies generated permitted the French film industry to establish a sound network of distribution that gradually challenged other forms of public

entertainment. At first, French cinema dominated world markets with significant inventors (Louis and Auguste Lumière), inspired artists (Georges Méliès, Max Linder, Abel Gance, and René Clair), technicians (Ferdinand Zecca), and pragmatic entrepreneurs (Charles Pathé and Léon Gaumont). However, with both the coming of World War I (1914–18) and the demands placed on all industries for the war effort, plus the rise of Hollywood's immense influence, the French film industry slowly began to recede. The war rapidly changed the direction of the burgeoning film industry, ending the period of silent pictures with a double crisis: economic, with the financial panic of 1929; and technical/aesthetic, with the development of talking pictures, which forever redefined the original concept of motion pictures.

The invention of the Cinématographe

The last fifteen years of the nineteenth century were characterized by extraordinarily intense activity around the worldwide development of "animated photography" and mechanized entertainment. With an assortment of scientists, artists, technicians, and other innovators separately assembling their inventions at the same time in history, thus creating an unprecedented accumulation of contributions, the difficult task of attributing the exact paternity of motion pictures (for Americans) or cinema (for Europeans) remains somewhat arguable in its objectivity. In 1889, British scientist William Greene (1855–1921) invented a "chronophotographic camera" that combined animated pictures. One year later, in 1890, Herman Casler presented the Mutoscope. In France, Georges Demenÿ (1850–1917), who worked alongside Etienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904), invented the Photophone for photographing animated images in cinematographic form in 1893. That same year, Eadweard James Muybridge (1830–1904) invented the Zoopraxiscope, and in 1894, Birt Acres (1854–1918) and Robert William Paul (1869–1943) invented the Kineopticon. The same year in Germany, Maximillian Skladanowsky (1863–1939) built the Bioskop (Bioscope) and presented his achievement in Berlin in November 1895. In 1896, C. Francis Jenkins, then Thomas Armat (1866–1948), invented the Vitascope (originally named Phantoscope before being sold to Thomas Alva Edison (1847–1931).

Therefore, in light of this overwhelmingly abundant series of technical inventions, attributing the invention of motion pictures to one or two individuals, whether Edison alone or the Lumière brothers, would be rather questionable in

view of the fact that cinema, by its very essence, constituted, and still does today, a multifaceted event and medium. Such an assertion would simply require overlooking the technological and scientific endeavors achieved all over the Western world (mainly the United States, France, Belgium, Germany, and Italy, however) throughout the last two decades of the nineteenth century. For all these inventors, the ultimate goal was the same: the public projection of animated pictures. The question regarding the projection of animated photographs was a difficult one to solve, causing it to become the center of research and experimentations. Establishing the perfect projection device became the next challenge, as it appeared evident after numerous defective attempts (blurriness and ripped film-strip) that the projection of the image onto the screen was actually the mandatory toll for success.

The definitive beginnings of cinema, therefore, remain highly arguable; if anything, the genesis and early evolution of cinema underscore the seemingly universal origins of the invention, which was to give the visual element a major boom during the following century.[1]

The Kinetoscope, 1893–95

In 1889, in West Orange, New Jersey, Thomas Edison and British engineer and collaborator William Kennedy Laurie Dickson (1860–1935) developed the Kinetograph, a new system that utilized rolls of coated celluloid film to visualize animated images. The Kinetograph camera, weighing approximately 500 pounds, was built inside the Black Maria Studio, a tar paper–sealed structure with a large skylight that was adjacent to Edison's laboratory. To control light, the studio was painted in black, and the camera, mounted on a trolley, was built so that it could turn to follow the movement of the sun, allowing the right amount of luminosity for each desired subject (although never changing position during shootings). In May 1889, Edison purchased a Kodak camera from the Eastman Company that required a 2⅜-inch film stock, modified its size to 1⅜ inches (34.8 mm), and made double perforations on each side. Edison utilized the Eastman nitrate-base celluloid film stock for his commercial productions. More than a century later, the celluloid film support (35 mm) is still the standard in use, a rare example of nonobsolescence. When compared to video formats, for instance, or even international sound recording standards, Edison's film (forty-six frames per second) never experienced a continuing change of systems, and thus avoided delays in its international development.[2] Dickson, who had assembled the new

camera, filmed his first motion picture of associate assistant Fred Ott, calling it "Fred Ott's Sneeze" (the film lasted several seconds). The sequence was displayed to Edison, who decided to commercialize the idea. Edison's kinetoscopic record of a sneeze, January 7, 1894, starring Fred Ott as the sneezer and photographed by Dickson, became the first copyrighted film in history. Other sequences, characterized by unedited scenery and posed actions followed, such as "Fun in a Chinese Laundry," "The Gaiety Girls Dancing," "Trained Bear," "Dentist Scene," and "Bucking Broncos." Paradoxical as it may seem, Edison was more captivated by the possible application of soundtrack to the image[3] than image development itself. Dickson tried to persuade Edison to develop a projection device, but much to his dismay, the latter had a different agenda; Edison did not deem it necessary to multiply the number of spectators within the same projection. Therefore, all experiments were temporarily canceled.

In 1893, the patent was ready (but never entirely completed for the British market), and that same year the demo was finalized. Edison's first showing of the Kinetoscope viewer, as a continuous-film motion picture projector, occurred only on May 9, 1893, at the Brooklyn Institute. Rather than projecting films for large audiences, the individual viewer would put his or her eyes to the hole of a mechanism and enjoy a single strip film inside. Commercialized a couple of years before the Cinématographe, the inventor rapidly presented his "peep-show Kinetoscopes" in the United States, England, and France. Edison's invention corresponded to a peep-show motion picture that could be visualized by only one viewer at a time. In 1893, the Kinetoscope gained popularity in New York City, and in April 1894, Andrew Holland, on behalf of the Raff & Gammon Company, opened the first peep-show parlor on Broadway. For 25 cents, New Yorkers were able to share the cinematographic dream by individually viewing a series of sixteen-second films. Because Edison had underestimated the potential of motion pictures as a future industry, he failed to patent his Kinetoscope completely. Consequently, in England alone (this despite holding over 1,200 patents), Robert William Paul,[4] a British manufacturer of photographic equipment, rapidly replicated Edison's Kinetoscope in October 1894. In addition, he added the projector component that was crucially missing to the kinetograph.[5] As noted, the new apparatus was named Kineopticon. The demonstration by the Lumière brothers at the Keith's Music Hall in Union Square, New York, on June 18, 1896, as well as the emergence of the Pantopticon and the Vitascope, overshadowed the Kinetoscope whose cumbersome set could not project for public shows or entertain large audiences. Dickson created

the American Mutoscope & Biograph Company, which later encouraged the directing careers of D. W. Griffith (1875–1948) and Mary Pickford (1893–1979). Along with Dickson, Edwin S. Porter (1869–1941), a cinematographer and future filmmaker, was one of the first artist/technicians to initiate the practice of close-ups and dissolves (fade in/out). Edison's film company survived the competition and produced films such as *Vanity Fair* (1915), *The Cossack Whip* (1916), and *Chris and His Wonderful Lamp* (1917). At the beginning of the next decade, however, the company shut down.[6]

The Lumière's Cinématographe, 1895

Louis (1864–1948) and Auguste (1862–1954) Lumière, sons of Antoine Lumière, owner of a modern-style photography factory (200 workers), specialized in manufacturing a product set up in 1881 called *plaque étiquette bleue* (photographic plates for instantaneous shots). Having assembled the different elements for printing, shooting, and projecting nineteen to twenty-four frames per second, they decided to film their very first *vue* (view) entitled *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (*La sortie des usines Lumière à Lyon*) on March 19, 1895, as the well-dressed workers of the film factory came out onto the street (at the time Chemin Saint Victor, today renamed Rue du premier film).[7] Conceived and assembled by Jules Carpentier of the Lumière factory, the Cinématographe possessed a clawlike device that supplied the necessary alternating passage of the 35 mm perforated-celluloid film. The Lumières' band of film, fabricated by the Lumière factory, contained two punctures per frame (sixteen frames per second; the standard speed until the invention of sound), whereas Edison's used four rectangular perforations on each side of each frame. The composition and function of this lightweight 16-pound hand-cranked camera performed a threefold task: filming, printing, and projecting motion pictures. In addition to its phenomenally small size, permitting filming to take place anywhere, the new portable suitcase-sized camera was unique for its rapid installation and viewing, which consequently triggered a new style of filmmaking: the documentary. Thus, the operator could shoot footage in the morning, process the film print in the afternoon, and then project it to an audience that same evening.

On February 13, 1895, the Lumière brothers patented their invention, and on March 22, just a couple of days following their very first view, they organized a private projection at the Société d'encouragement à l'industrie nationale in Paris, featuring *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory,* followed by a discussion led by

Louis Lumière. Back in Lyon, on June 12, another projection of eight views for the Congrès des sociétés françaises de photographie was held, which immediately gave national fame to the invention as the members of the association saw themselves for the first time "photographed in motion." However, when compared chronologically, the 1895 Cinématographe invention already had

Figure 1 The Lumière brothers, Louis (1864–1948) and Auguste (1862–1954).

several forerunners in Etienne-Jules Marey, whose Chronophotographe did not contain the perforated film; Emile Reynaud (1844–1918),[8] whose Praxinoscope did not include photography, and Thomas Edison, whose invention did not incorporate public projection. In other words, the Cinématographe, which was instrumental in shaping the conventions of photographic synthesis of the movement to reproduce the reality of life, was the synthesis of three preceding discoveries. But generally speaking, December 28, 1895, corresponds to the actual birth date of cinema. It was that evening that the Lumière brothers presented their Cinématographe to a crowd of curious photographers and inventors in the Salon Indien, located in the basement of the Grand Café, 14, boulevard des Capucines, in Paris, thus achieving the first public and paying projection in history (ten views of about fifty seconds each for thirty-three spectators in an informally assembled viewing room). Although not completely documented a century later, the program most certainly included such views as *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (*L'arrivée du train en gare de La Ciotat*), *A Sprinkler Sprinkled* (*L'arroseur arrosé*)[9] probably the first fiction film known, *Baby's Meal* (*Le repas de bébé*), and *Card Game* (*Partie d'écarté*).

For the Lumière family, who never anticipated the new invention's potentiality—having little faith in the future unfolding of a revolutionary medium—the technical progress of the Cinématographe was merely a popular entertainment destined to supply traveling fair promoters. The Lumières' prediction, "Cinema is an art without a future," became famous and by overlooking the potential of the new invention, they realized too late the consequences that their new invention would have on an entire century (as opposed to the invention of color photography, which remained their major contribution). While temporarily retooling their factory for the production and sale of film equipment, the Lumière brothers were still clever enough to instruct a group of operators on the use of the Cinématographe and sent them to capture images of the world (the locations were Venice, London, Dublin, Berlin, New York, Chicago, Mexico City, Moscow, Jerusalem, Egypt, Constantinople, Sydney, Indochina, Japan, and Africa).

After the enormous success of the first projection, the Lumières sold 200 cameras in just a few days and maintained an almost absolute monopoly on the sale of film cameras for the next two years. Although the first views displayed an obvious sign of amateurism, subsequent films included impressionistic elements, which were deeply appreciated by the contemporary public (in particular, the subtle movement of the leaves in *Baby's Meal*). The first views were shot mainly to

chronicle contemporary moments or events and ran no longer than fifty seconds. During that very first year, the subject matter of each view gradually evolved from simple actions to quotidian scenes to comic films, in which a practical joke was staged as a single picture. One of the most famous films was undoubtedly *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat,* in which a locomotive was featured entering the station. The spectators, unaware of the cinematographic process, could not differentiate reality from this new "impression" of reality. Consequently, many of the panic-stricken audience members jumped out of their seats.

Although Louis Lumière is often referenced as the main protagonist in the invention proceedings, Auguste acted as his technical adviser. The new operators were instructed by Louis how to film, print, and project their films. In addition, they were taught how to regulate slow or accelerated motions with their hand-cranked cameras. From now on, the new cameramen—around fifty operators, including Félix Mesguich, Eugène Promio, Charles Moisson, Francis Doublier, Gabriel Veyre, and Maurice Sestier—would command all technical processes, since many effects required actors to perform against a background of previously prepared film. They ventured outside to capture the real world and brought back 1,500 films, discovering new technical skills, such as the first

Figure 2 The *Cinématographe.*

Figure 3 The first film *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (*La sortie des usines Lumière à Lyon*) filmed on March 19, 1895.

traveling shots (called panoramic views at the time) from a train platform or Venetian gondola.[10] The high quality of these views and the technical expertise are astounding. Despite the phenomenal success of the Cinématographe, however, the Lumières ended all productions in 1905, returning to their main activity, photography, especially color photography[11] (1904) and the introduction in France of the *autocrome* process (1907). In conclusion, despite the ongoing dispute of film historians regarding the paternity of motion pictures, chronology attributes December 28, 1895, as the starting point of the Cinématographe's commercialization as a projection device. By 1900, at the Exposition universelle de Paris, other manufacturers, who had already joined the competition, such as the Pathé brothers (Charles and Emile), Léon Gaumont, and Raoul Grimoin-Sanson, directly laid the groundwork for the future film industry.

Georges Méliès and the adventure of the film studio

At the antithesis of the Lumière cinema, which mainly focused on the documentary and the reproduction of reality, stood Georges Méliès (1861–1938),

whose films explored new frontiers within fantasy fiction, trick film, and elaborate mise-en-scène. Despite the international fame of the Lumière Cinématographe, film historians traditionally consider Georges Méliès the first genuine artist of motion pictures. Unlike the Lumière brothers, Méliès did not have a technical background, but rather a persuasive artistic inclination toward theater, visual illusion, prestidigitation, and magic. In 1888, Méliès bought the Robert Houdin Theatre, which specialized in magic shows and performed numerous popular attractions on stage. It is evident that this theatrical background coupled with a high dose of magical tricks laid the groundwork for his future cinematic feats of skill. Although one of the thirty-three spectators on the night of December 28, 1895, Georges Méliès's request to purchase the revolutionary camera/projector was denied by the inventors themselves. Far from being discouraged, in 1896 Méliès turned to Englishman R. W. Paul—the Lumière brothers' main competitor in Europe—who by then retailed his own version of Edison's Kinetoscope, called the Theatrograph. Eventually Méliès rebuilt and ameliorated the camera himself before venturing into cinematography.

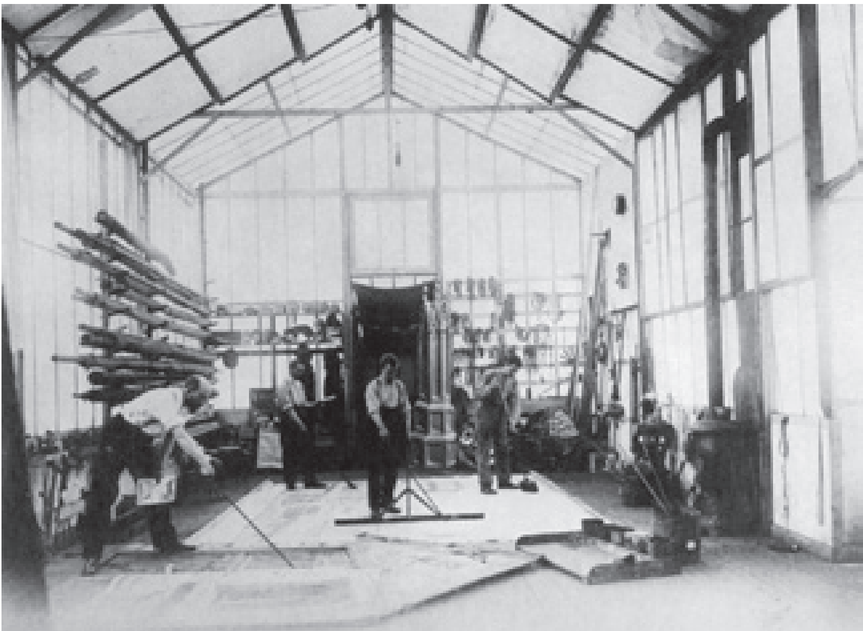

Figure 4 Georges Méliès's studio in Montreuil (1861–1938): the pioneer of special effects and film as an entertainment form (Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive).

Figure 5 Georges Méliès's *Trip to the Moon* (*Le voyage dans la lune*, 1902).

During the last years of the nineteenth century, cinematographic creativity, already debilitated by a generalized artistic plagiarism, was at its lowest level, and the newly born cultural medium struggled to renew its limited genres. French film, however, led by Georges Méliès's audacious vision, breathed fresh life into the new medium and became a popular form of entertainment in Europe. Méliès rapidly revealed the scope of his talent and imagination by adding special effects onto the film stock, as he developed a series of jointly artistic and technical views in his own style. Although his very first films were merely remakes of short Lumière-style views (never more than 60 feet), the newcomer to filmmaking achieved his first editing special effect, in October 1896, in a film entitled "The Conjuring of a Woman at the House of Robert Houdin" (*L' escamotage d'une dame chez Robert Houdin*). During the shooting, he interrupted the sequence for a few seconds while filming the actress, then resumed without her for the second take. This resulted in her sudden "vanishing" and inspired Méliès for more trick films to come, for example, "The One-Man Band" (*L'homme orchestre,* 1900) and "The Man with the Rubber Head" (*L'homme à la tête en caoutchouc,* 1901). Therefore, by using the narrative device of the Robert Houdin Theatre on the

screen, Georges Méliès may be considered the first storyteller in film history. In 1897, he built his own studio—the first film studio ever made—inside his house in Montreuil-sous-Bois, as well as his own film production company named Star-Film, whose slogan was revealing of his artistic vision: *Le monde à portée de la main* (The world is within reach). There, between five hundred and six hundred films were produced during the next fifteen years (seventy-eight films in the first year alone), films that helped shape the artistic and technical canons of cinematography.

With a myriad of special effects, superimpositions, double or more exposure, fade in, fade out, and painted-scenery backgrounds, Méliès generated a brand-new style. Méliès's major contribution was the organization of his fictional compositions around modern concepts of filmmaking, such as scenario, costumes, makeup, background set, editing cuts, and, of course, actors. Since his camera was always used in a fixed position and almost never pivoted, secured on its tripod, or moved toward or away from its subject, its cumbersome and stationary setup certainly could not enable viewers to enjoy different views compared with theater spectators. Well aware of his element, Méliès compensated on the visual effect of technical editing, recalling his memorable accidental anecdote of 1898, when his film stock became stuck inside the camera, thereby creating a sophisticated visual effect later called "stop motion." While filming a carriage in the Place de la Bastille, the projection showed the carriage suddenly becoming a hearse. Needless to say, this involuntary editing trick inspired countless imitators. Méliès created trick photography with the simple treatment of the camera; he carried out delightful alterations by stopping it and changing the scene, and achieved the impression of backward movement by rotating the camera upside down and inverting the film. The first infatuation of the public, evermore enthusiastic for the revolutionary entertainment, rapidly evolved into an increasing demand for new visual forms (longer views, more narrative with a real story line, and increased sophistication). In 1903, the average length of film was six minutes (over 300 feet). By 1910, each film lasted an average of approximately fifteen minutes (900 feet).

However, Méliès did not take his fervent inspiration from everyday life, as the Lumière documentaries did (although he shot *The Dreyfus Affair/L'affaire Dreyfus* in 1899), but rather from a fantastic world of fairy tales and magic. *Trip to the Moon* (*Le voyage dans la lune,* 1902) constituted thirty chapters and required three months of shooting, a high production cost for a total length of eleven minutes. Méliès's film, which premiered in Paris, was the first important

production in French film history. The story narrates the vicissitudes of the scientist Barbenfouillis (played by Georges Méliès himself), president of the Astronaut Club, who, accompanied by six scholars, begins his journey into space. A giant cannon projects the group in a shuttle toward the moon. Once on the moon, they are caught by a snowstorm and seek refuge within a cave. Inside, the inhabitants of the planet, the Sélénites, capture them and take them prisoner to the court of the king. Able to escape, the astronauts flee and regain their space shuttle. The shuttle falls vertically through space into the ocean and is brought safely back to port, where the heroes are celebrated. Inspired by Jules Verne's fantastic literature, the film's mise-en-scène no longer represented cinema as a show, but rather an experimental format of filmed narrative (usually utilizing a series of tableaux).[12] Faithful to its initial aesthetic, Méliès's camera, fixed in the rear of the studio, was predestined to present mainly long shots and as a result conveyed a claustrophobic sensation.

Despite an obvious but vain effort to copyright his productions, Méliès was never entirely able to control the distribution of his films in competition with larger film companies, and to his detriment, many counterfeit versions emerged all around Europe and the United States. To protect the copyrights of his films distributed in the United States, Méliès's own brother, Gaston, went to America in 1902 in an effort to represent Méliès's interests, but to no avail. His final film, "Conquest of the Pole" (*A la conquête du pôle,* 1912), clearly heralded the reason for Méliès's decline and commercial failure. The public grew bored with the repetitive aspect of narration and the immobility of the camera. Overwhelmed by the illegal copies distributed abroad, in particular in the United States, Méliès went bankrupt in just a few years. He was forced to sell the Théâtre Houdin, his own studio in Montreuil, and eventually to withdraw entirely from production in 1912. Méliès did not teach anyone. Although endowed with visionary talent, he never adjusted to the rapidly evolving film industry. His cinematographic career finished, he had to resort to selling manufactured toys in a concession stand at the Montpartnasse train station in Paris. Nicknamed the "magician of Montreuil," or the *homme-orchestre* (one-man band) of French cinema, Méliès opened the door to modern cinema. His humor, juvenile passion for fictional tales, elaborate background sets, and special effects inspired many American filmmakers, from D. W. Griffith to Steven Spielberg, making Méliès the forefather of modern cinematic science fiction.

Growth of a national cinema: Charles Pathé and Léon Gaumont

French cinema was the first to organize its own film industry and with this strength to assert itself as an authentic art form. Following the invention of the Cinématographe, many state fairs, variety shows, vaudeville houses, rented theaters, music halls, café-concerts, and even fairground tents adopted the new medium to attract popular audiences. Mainly suburban, French film viewers originated at the very beginning from working-class origins. A decade later, French cinema slowly turned its back on fair attractions and embraced theatrical traditions, aspiring to reach larger audiences mainly by targeting a middle-class audience.[13]

In 1896, Charles Pathé (1863–1957) and his three brothers, Emile, Théophile, and Jacques, all businessmen who specialized in the commerce of phonographs, created the Société Pathé Frères Company in response to their vision of cinema as a possible future industry. After acquiring George Eastman's European patent right, for film-stock production, film sales soared, and the rapid expansion of the firm made Pathé the largest film production company in the world. During the very first years (until 1906), the principal goal was the mass production of films, averaging six a week, mainly targeted to fairground managers and popular audiences. While commercializing both projectors and films, the rising company successfully persuaded most of its clients to enter the profession of exhibition, consequently creating an increasing demand for the Pathé product. With the collaboration of engineer Henri Joly, the company, first located in Vincennes, then in Joinville-le-Pont, began to construct film projectors (Eknétographe).

After 1906, Pathé production was in full swing, with an average of ten films a week. With the rapid increase of public demand, many new film companies entered the motion picture business. In addition to the two giant film companies, Pathé and Gaumont (see below), several others contributed to the growth of French cinema: Eclipse, Lux, and Eclair studios (the latter stopping its production in 1919). Société Pathé Frères specialized in fast productions, then reinvested the profits in the company's agenda for the enhancement of the technical quality of the company's films. Each company strove to secure economic success through original technical innovations to develop productions. One of the major steps was to finance swiftly the establishment of film studios with the organization of professional technical crews. After 1902, Pathé developed a branch network

in Europe (Milan, London, and Berlin) and the United States (New York) with its most active partner, Pathé Exchange, thus creating a formidable system for mass-producing motion pictures. Increasingly dependent on the supply of blank film stock released principally by American companies, Pathé manufactured its first French film stock in 1909. Motivated by competition abroad, Pathé soon became an important outlet for nickelodeon equipment in the United States as it made many types of phonographs and movie projector equipment.

By 1905, Pathé employed several production teams of directors, chief operators, screenwriters, set designers, and actors to make short films in an assembly line process. In August 1907, Charles Pathé decided to halt sales in favor of implementing a system of rentals through an efficient distribution network, the main concept of which is still in practice. Prior to this, films were simply considered a fair attraction, ambulatory entertainment all over France, whose exhibition concept was based on the sale of films (the price was determined by a film's length in meters). Film prints were used until they wore out. Once out of service, the film stocks were sent to the Pathé company in Joinville-le-Pont, where they were melted and recast into new film stock. From the summer of 1907 on, Pathé films screened in theaters were rented to theater management through an influential newcomer: the distribution company. Pathé also began to purchase movie theaters. This "triple organization" of the film industry also triggered the implementation of a new vertical integration of the cinema industry: production, distribution, and exhibition. The other significant contribution of the Pathé Company to French cinema was the introduction of the newsreel to theaters. A pioneer in the birth of newsreel footage, which in turn became the forerunner of commercialized current-events footage, Pathé began to screen, in 1908, the first cinematographic newsreels, through the creation of a new project labeled *Pathé-Journal.* Subsequently, Pathé's major rival, Gaumont, also implemented similar footage with *Gaumont-Actualités.*

During the years just preceding World War I, the presence of French cinema in the world market of films was enormous. According to film historian Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, the Pathé studios alone sold twice as many films to the United States as all American studios combined.[14] In addition, by 1910, two-thirds of the world film production was by French companies. The collapse of Europe, ensnared in the international conflict, as well as the rise of new West Coast investors, initiated America's slow but solid domination in film, which continues to this day. During the last years before the war, Pathé had begun to shift its commercial ambition toward distribution and exhibition, gradually reducing

its overall production. The American presence in European markets became an ever-increasing reality, since most film manufacturers and crews were requisitioned for the war effort. As a result, the American branch of Pathé, Pathé Exchange, ensured the survival of the entire international corporation. After 1918, however, it began to disassemble its own multinational conglomerate by selling, one by one, its branches in Italy and the United States. It was renamed Pathé-Consortium, until it was sold to Bernard Natan, becoming Pathé-Natan. In 1930, Charles Pathé retired from the group. With the increasingly dominating presence of American films in the world market, Pathé, like Gaumont (see below), progressively limited its activity to distribution (it resumed its production after World War II). Among the most important names who worked for Pathé were Ferdinand Zecca, Albert Capellani,[15] and Max Linder.

Despite Pathé's commercial supremacy in the French cinema world, no attempt was ever made to secure a monopoly, as smaller companies such as Gaumont[16] and Eclair confidently competed. As a major rival of Pathé, although smaller in size and ambition, the Gaumont Company, founded in 1895, initially specialized in the sale of photographic cameras and projectors (Chronophotographe: a camera-projection device engineered by Georges Demenÿ) and in 1902, in a sound system called Chronophone, which was the equivalent of a record player synchronized to the action on screen. Under Léon Gaumont (1864–1946), the company immediately entered the film industry with the prospect of diversification of production (especially projection devices). From 1897 to 1907, Gaumont delegated the responsibility of film production to his own secretary, Alice Guy (1873–1968), who became the first female filmmaker (*La fée aux choux,* 1896), completing over two hundred films through 1920.[17] The company soon expanded to laboratories and movie theaters throughout France, and in the early 1900s, new movie houses began to replace popular boulevard theaters. Later, in 1906, it took the name SEG (Société des Etablissements Gaumont). In 1911, Gaumont, an industrious pacesetter in the development of motion picture equipment,[18] inaugurated what was at the time the largest movie theater in the world, the Gaumont Palace (3,000 seats). It included an orchestra pit and was equipped with two projectors, allowing a seamless transition between reels. In Paris and other large cities, the most sophisticated theaters usually included an orchestra (from a piano to a small ensemble), and, on rare occasions, some attempts were made to synchronize the dialogue with a live performance from actors or singers hidden behind the screen.[19] However, the most common practice was known as the *synchronisation vivante* or *effet de réel,* which consisted

of reading intertitles to the public. The amplification of the soundtrack began in 1908 with Gaumont's Chronomégaphone, which often presented defective sound by capturing intrinsic noise that caused some disturbance during projections. Many renowned filmmakers worked under Gaumont's patronage, such as Léonce Perret (*Child of Paris/L'enfant de Paris,* 1913), Louis Feuillade, Victorin Jasset, Emile Cohl,[20] Etienne Arnaud, Romeo Bossetti, Marcel L'Herbier, and the Belgian, Jacques Feyder. Léon Gaumont finally retired in 1929, and the firm merged with two other film companies to become the GFFA (Gaumont-Franco-Film-Aubert) in 1930.

The invention of genres: Louis Feuillade and Max Linder

As the majority of early film artists failed to expand the scope of their production or to renew the paradigm of scenarios, the taste of popular audiences began to evolve toward more sophisticated plots and genres. Therefore, the demand for a wider variety of genres became more and more apparent among moviegoers. The pioneers of the silent era, quickly aware of the unconditional change, began to work in all different genres: documentary (Louis and Auguste Lumière), comedy (Max Linder), melodrama (Ferdinand Zecca), crime series (Louis Feuillade), historical reconstruction, and science fiction (as discussed, Georges Méliès).

The comedy genre, steadily the most popular, gave French cinema its first national and international stars, like Max Linder (1883–1925). Born Gabriel-Maximilien Leuvielle, Linder entered the acting profession through the Conservatoire de Bordeaux, under the pseudonym of Lacerda. In 1905, he moved to Paris to play his first supporting role in a full-length film with Pathé: *La première sortie d'un collégien.* After discovering that his real specialty was comedy (*Je voudrais un enfant,* 1909; *Un mariage à l'italienne, Les débuts d'un yachtman, La malle au mariage,* 1912; and others), he created the character of Max, a young and elegant dandy from the upper class, a womanizer on occasion, who relentlessly found himself in trouble by indulging in burlesque chases typically leading to a comical denouement. Like his successors Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd, Linder was small in stature, and his tiny features enabled him to stand in marked contrast to his movie adversaries. Max Linder wrote and directed most of his films from 1910 until his induction in World War I (*Max, Professeur de Tango,* 1912). Following a gas

attack while on the front, he contracted a severe pneumonia, and never fully recovered. Linder's increasing fame in France and Europe nevertheless led to a Hollywood contract with Essanay Studios. His image corresponded with a situational and elaborated slapstick comedy type, which mainly coincided with a parody of romantic melodramas and classical tragedies. Endowed with a wild imagination and an inexhaustible source of gags, Linder may accurately be labeled the first international movie star from 1905 to 1924. In 1921, he returned to Hollywood to set up his own production company. His fragile health compelled him to spend long sessions in a sanatorium, however, and after a last film, *Le roi du cirque* (1924), following a crisis of neurasthenia, he committed suicide in Paris.

What may best be remembered about Max Linder's contribution to the comedy genre was, above all, a new dimension for comic plot. More elaborated and less vulgar, his new take on vaudeville influenced many imitators worldwide. In addition, the chase genre, which characteristically represented a character frantically running after another, was by far the most praised of all forms of film comedy, since it somehow compensated for the lack of camera motions and the almost total absence of sequence editing (at the time, one shot often corresponded to one scene, and the finished product featured a series of scenes, not shots). Linder's legacy to world cinematography was temporarily neglected by film historians, until a rediscovery in the 1960s placed the French actor alongside Chaplin.

The second most popular genre was represented by the so-called historical reconstructions or period dramas. At the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, an extraordinary array of important feature films were targeted toward serious artistic filmmaking, gathering the most important artists of the time (screenwriters, playwrights, actors, and composers). Because the French public displayed an obvious taste for reconstituted current affairs, certain filmmakers did not hesitate to adopt the new genre, for example, Méliès's 1899 re-creation of the *affaire Dreyfus* (Dreyfus scandal) in eleven episodes.[21]

In 1907, a film company labeled Film d'Art aimed to produce one of the most ambitious historical films ever made. Because of the high expectations of audiences, many film companies did not hesitate to take a risk on their financial investments, for instance, the 1908 production by two distinguished members of the Comédie Française, André Calmettes and Charles Le Bargy's *The Assassination of the Duc de Guise* (*L'assassinat du duc de Guise,* 1908). This flamboyant production, the accompanying score of which was written

by Camille Saint-Saëns, experienced national acclaim and remained a cultural landmark in French film history for many years. It ultimately failed, however, to take the necessary critical distance from the origin of its inspiration, namely, the stage (many film historians even considered it the forerunner of the future "canned theater").[22] The national success of *The Assassination of the Duc de Guise* encouraged many imitators such as Pathé's Série d'art, Gaumont's Film esthétique, and Eclair's Association cinématographique des auteurs dramatiques. However, in the 1920s, the historical genre quickly lost ground at the French box office and ended its productions with the advent of sound.

Among the successful genres of the first decade of French cinema, *drames sentimentaux,* or melodramas, were regularly praised by the public. One of its most famous directors was the Corsican-born Ferdinand Zecca (1863–1946), who entered the film industry in 1899 under Charles Pathé in the production of phonographic cylinders. Zecca is one of the most significant cinema pioneers, challenging Méliès's historic position. In 1900, when Charles Pathé moved away from his brothers and created a new studio in Vincennes, he brought in Zecca to give the young company a new stamina and flair in film design.

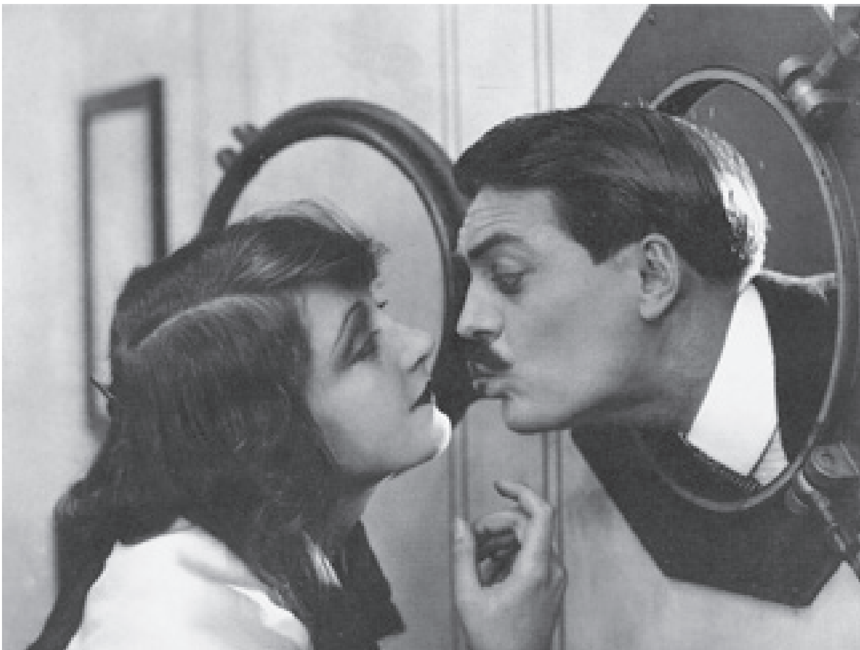

Figure 6 Max Linder and Alta Allen in *Seven Years Bad Luck* (1921).

Figure 7 Charlie Chaplin and Max Linder (*Le Cinéma de Max Linder*, 2012).

Zecca eventually persuaded Pathé to widen the scope of the studios' film catalog (mainly documentaries) and to embrace fiction projects. Later, Zecca was designated to represent the Pathé Company at the 1900 Exposition Universelle. Like Méliès, Zecca carried his initial inspiration into the popular-theater scene, directing the crime melodrama *Histoire d'un crime* (1902), as well as the realist and moralist *Les victimes de l'aloolisme* (1902). *Histoire d'un crime* is the story of a murderer (Jean Liezer), who, after killing a bank employee, is arrested in a nearby café. While in prison, he relives his past through a series of dreams until the day of his execution. The realist element, omnipresent throughout the story line, was directly inspired by French popular theater of the turn of the century. Police authorities, however, imposed their censorship on the film, compelling Zecca to remove certain shots, in particular the final execution scene. The major innovation of the film relied on its thematic approach to the melodramatic narratives and its biting social commentary. The juxtaposition of past and present within the same scene was an important technical and stylistic innovation for the early silent film era. Following consecutive productions of a biblical narrative, *La passion de notre Seigneur* (1902), and a reenactment of true events *The Flying Machine (La conquête de l'air,* 1902), Zecca was promoted

to general manager of the Charles Pathé film company in 1910. He moved to New Jersey a couple of years later to manage the American branch of Pathé Exchange, returning to France in 1920 to lead the Pathé-Baby Company, producers of cameras.

One of the most characteristic features of French cinema in the early 1900s was the interest in the so-called *ciné-romans,* also described as serials. Mostly crime serials, they were usually action-oriented narrations evolving around one type of subject matter or even a single main character. With this genre, one can easily recognize the special relationship between popular literature and the seventh art, which was one of the most significant characteristics of the early silent films in France.[23] Set designer and filmmaker Victorin Jasset (1862–1913) is the inventor or forefather of the cinematographic thriller, having taken his inspiration from the American-newspaper comic strip. He directed *Aventures de Nick Carter* (1906–11), the origin of the serial. This genre was popularized through the talents of Louis Feuillade (1873–1925), who used famous Parisian locations and evoked a new atmosphere of suburbia. Due to the ruthless (but mostly civil) competition between the major film companies during the mid-1910s, Pathé's American associate Pathé Exchange launched the American actress Pearl White with a series of films dedicated to the *Mystères de New York* and the *Exploits d'Elaine* (eighty episodes by 1915). In the meantime, American filmmaker Raoul Walsh developed the genre in America with *The Gangster and the Girl* (1914) and *Regeneration* (1915). Interestingly enough, the predominant themes of early French thrillers revolved around the representation of redemption as the criminal character begins to regret his crimes.

Eager to respond to Pathé's commercial operation, Gaumont launched its own crime-thriller series with the contributions of Louis Feuillade and his popular characters, such as the detective Jean Dervieux, played by René Navarre (*Le proscrit, L'oubliette, La course aux millions,* 1912). Journalist for the right-wing royalist press, Feuillade began writing scenarios for Gaumont around 1905 and became a director after 1906. In 1907, he was chosen as new head of production in charge of supervising all Gaumont productions. Although his career included more than six hundred films and more than one hundred scenarios, Feuillade is remembered for the Fantômas series: *Fantômas* (1913), *Juve contre Fantômas* (*Juve against Fantômas,* 1913), *Le mort qui tue* (*The Dead Man Who Killed,* 1913), *Le faux magistrat* (1914), and *Fantômas contre Fantômas* (*Fantômas against Fantômas,* 1914). In 1913, Feuillade adapted the famous serial *Fantômas,* written by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain, which by then had already become a

popular classic. Fantômas, genius of evil and "Emperor of Crime," was a negative hero who challenged the police authority, led by the incorruptible police Inspector Juve, and Jerôme Fandor, a reporter for the newspaper *La Capitale.* Through concealed identities and various astute stratagems, the protagonist robs, tortures, and kills countless victims all over Paris, and naturally escapes in daring rescues. Later, Feuillade continued with the new series *Les Vampires,* followed by another one called *Judex.* The prestige Feuillade exerted on the early thriller was predominant until the mid-1920s. Gaumont's *Les Vampires* responded in a way to Pathé's earlier serial, *Les mystères de New York,* produced by the American division of Pathé and released from November 1915 to June 1916. *Les Vampires* was a ten-episode serial, which namely reiterated the fantastic elements present in the Fantômas films. At the same time, it surpassed them in depth by adding a new dimension of corrosive wit, nightmarish events, filmic pragmatism, fictional horror, and sardonic humor. *Les Vampires* was a sort of criminal fresco under the form of popular *ciné-roman* and featured the exploits of bloodthirsty thieves led by the unconquerable and mysterious Irma Vep (anagram for vampire), whose erotically charged female body would mesmerize audiences. Practicing mass or serial murders, kidnapping, poison gas, and sexual domination to gain physical and psychological power over Parisian bourgeoisie, the vampires exerted, on and off screen, an unprecedented shocking fascination among the French. For instance, the corresponding role of inspector Juve (from the Fantômas series), the hero played by journalist Philippe Guérande (Edouard Maté), became even more passionate and excessive in his unpromising task eventually to capture the gang of vampires. On a purely aesthetic level, the representation of the villain itself in black tights and aggressive makeup rendered the concept of crime films even more disturbing for audiences of the 1910s. Upon the release of its very first episodes, the French Ministry of the Interior temporarily forbade a couple of sequences since the film represented the deference of organized crime. In the history of crime serial film, *Les Vampires* often triggered greater popular and critical attention when compared to the Fantômas series because of its modern mythology, which entered directly into the mass culture of the early decades of the twentieth century.

The existence of the popular series was short-lived, however, as a result of the worsening conditions of the war, as well as the need to shoot many sequences outdoors due to a serious lack of material, indirectly generating some incoherence within the story line. However, the myth of Fantômas and the vampires was seminal in the development of suspense films and thrillers

throughout Europe during the 1920s. It also inspired Surrealist artists—most likely for its outward sign for provocation and disorder—and directly influenced the German Expressionist artists of the decade. Championed by the Parisian Surrealist artists for its latent anarchist look and the modernity of its plots, the Fantômas series even had its own fan club. Guillaume Apollinaire, together with Max Jacob, founded the *Société des Amis de Fantômas* in 1913. In addition to the direct aftermath of its popularity, Feuillade's adaptation commanded considerable attention during the 1920s, as writers, such as Blaise Cendrars, Jean Cocteau, and Robert Desnos, and artists, such as Juan Gris, Yves Tanguy, and René Magritte, assimilated the Fantômas motif into their work, and in particular authors with their automatic writing. This trend was all the more paradoxical, since the authors of the Fantômas series, as well as Feuillade himself, stood light-years away from the political and aesthetic belief of the Surrealists themselves. In reality, the intensely "fantastic poetics" of Fantômas surpassed the intended initial ideological limitations of its production. One of the reasons for the apparent lack of logical scenario development in the series that attracted the Surrealists was the absence of actors because of the war. Actors were mostly working during their free time before returning to the front, which resulted in a discontinued quality to films. Falling into oblivion with the coming of sound, and despite the Surrealists' endeavors to perpetuate his legacy by professing the sharpest admiration for him, Feuillade was only rehabilitated subsequent to World War II (1939–45) thanks to a group of assiduous *cinéphiles*. One of them was Henri Langlois, who rescued many of his films after 1936 with the creation of the French *ciné-club* (film club) with filmmakers such as Georges Franju (cofounder of the Cinémathèque française), Alain Resnais, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Luis Buñuel.

Avant-garde cinema, French impressionism, and Surrealism: Louis Delluc, Abel Gance, Marcel L'Herbier, Luis Buñuel, and René Clair

With the emergence of abstract art, Dada, and Surrealism—the movement founded by André Breton—in the arts and literature, the seventh art was soon incorporated as a new, experimental, yet prolific medium. One of the most significant reasons for the growing presence of French Impressionism, along with commercially oriented productions, can be explained by the difficult

economic times, which penalized the French film industry. Consequently, many film producers, who had already lost their financial edge on international markets, were open to the experimentation of an alternative type of cinema. Because many French film companies were small businesses, mostly specializing in the distribution and exhibition of Hollywood product, they tended to avoid investing in problematic national productions, which, aside from facing high taxes, never guaranteed profit.[24]

Avant-garde filmmakers' main goal was to explore cinema as an art. With a new personal vision of the artist, the Avant-garde transposed through cinema the processes of deconstruction involved in literature and found its landmark with artist-authors such as Colette, Jean Cocteau, Blaise Cendrars, Guillaume Apollinaire, André Breton, Pierre MacOrlan, Cubist painter Fernand Léger, and photographer Man Ray. Although Avant-garde film theorists claimed that the new style was a synthesis of the other arts, all unanimously rejected the inspirational potential of stage drama; their focus remained graphic and not narrative. Considered a cinema of "intellectuals for intellectuals," French Avant-garde films—whether Impressionistic or Surrealist—represented a collective initiative from many different artists (mostly novelists) and were led by one film theoretician, Louis Delluc (1890–1924). Formerly a journalist and literary critic at *Le journal du Ciné-Club* then *Cinéa,* Delluc began to write screenplays for directors such as Germaine Dulac (1882–1942) for her *La fête espagnole* (*Spanish Fiesta,* 1919), as well as her best film, *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (*La souriante Madame Beudet,* 1923) and *The Little Kid* (*Gossette,* 1923), or for Jean Epstein (1897–1953) with *The Red Inn* (*L'auberge rouge,* 1923). Although a fervent admirer of Hollywood cinema, which at the time represented a majority of all screenings in France, Delluc's stance and crusade, much like the *Cahiers du cinéma*'s three decades later, pleaded the cause of film criticism and film education as well as a new cinema liberated from the dictatorship of drama scenarios and literary adaptations. Along with many other film critics, Delluc, who had turned director during the war years, entertained the hope that cinema could constitute a liberated form of popular culture mainly through symbolic expression and psychological explorations. Using original scenarios, Delluc underscored the crucial importance of a photogenic aesthetic as filmic language; his films *Fever* (*Fièvre,* 1921), a melodramatic story ambianced in the seaport atmosphere of Marseille, and *The Woman from Nowhere* (*La femme de nulle part,* 1922) attested to this aesthetic. In March 1924, Delluc died suddenly, leaving behind a small but essential legacy for future film studies. Louis Delluc

and Ricciotto Canudo were credited with forming the first significant *ciné-club* in France, whose members were prestigious celebrities of the film industry: Jean Epstein, Abel Gance, Marcel L'Herbier, Germaine Dulac, Colette, and André Gide. In 1937, his name was chosen for the prize awarded each year to the best French film (Prix Louis Delluc).

Never able to reach general audiences because of its omnipresent elements of dark humor, the Surrealist cinema was often scorned in its early decades by mainstream art and literary critics. Considered a useless demystification and an impertinent experiment meant to merely defy aesthetic and social taboos, Surrealist and Avant-gardist cinema was known to be an art screened for the satisfaction of intellectuals and therefore consisted of low-budget films evolving at the periphery of the industry. French Avant-garde cinema of the 1920s usually involved a legal and cultural outcome, as filmmakers stood at the forefront of the creative process, overtaking the credit of producers themselves. Directors, such as Cocteau, René Clair, Marcel L'Herbier, Luis Buñuel, and Jean Renoir, were considered the authors of the films and could claim intellectual entitlement on the movie once released, just like any artist, painter, or musician. For this particular reason, Surrealist cinema developed a persistent nonliterary approach, which displayed an overstated tendency for psychoanalysis rather than narrative, and in some cases it overthrew the already established aesthetic. Whether the authors personalized the screenplay or not, they remained closely connected to the process of production, since they were the ones on the set who were able to scrutinize characters' performance through the camera lens. This *cinéma d'auteurs* (authors cinema), initiated in France prior to the *nouvelle vague* rhetoricians, was the symbolic icon of all great directors, from Abel Gance to Renoir. The Surrealists' enthusiasm for the so-called primitive epoch of silent films resulted in a profusion of new filmmakers, which anticipated the groundbreaking movement of the 1960s French New Wave (mainly poets and authors turned directors).

Far from secluding themselves in a cultural ghetto, the new film-makers acknowledged the influence of other preceding or contemporary film artists, such as Feuillade's crime serials, the comedies of Charlie Chaplin and Mack Sennett, horror films such as Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) or Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), and many more. With them, a new cinematic language surfaced—visual associations, sudden slow motion, overimpression, nonlinear narrative discourse, a lack of narrative sequencing, and no analytical editing—which was mainly characterized by an absence of

Figure 8 The new style of the Art Déco. Jaque Catelain in Marcel L'Herbier's *Le vertige* (1926).

logical causality in filmic narration and whose main distinctive feature was to separate and reassemble captured images on an imaginary level. Antonin Artaud, Blaise Cendrars, and Robert Desnos, who wrote many Surrealist film scenarios, reevaluated the conventional narrative structure and content of the interior psychological realm of the dream, and eventually offered a new king of filmmaking through their visual insolence and provocation. One of the initiators of Surrealist filmmaking in France, Luis Buñuel (1900–83), was an active figure of both silent and sound Surrealist cinema. Characteristic of his work was the rendition of atmospheres designed to upset the so-called bourgeois cinematographic ethics (such as featuring a close-up of an eye being slit by a razor blade) as well as to mock other Avant-garde artists. With the collaboration of Salvador Dali (who conceived the background set and the experience-dreams), Buñuel adapted to the screen his own poem, entitled "Un perro andaluz," drawn from an earlier book of poems. The short film became known as *An Andalusian Dog* (*Un chien andalou,* 1929). In his elaborated images and aesthetism, Buñuel challenged Avant-garde's emphasis on form and camera "tricks" over subject matter. The contemporary spectator was led through many detours and convoluted psychological associations in the course of this unusual cinematic odyssey, into what could be the exclusive function of a motion picture: the sanitization of reality into a few intervals of passionate desire, antagonism, and ecstasy. The critical success of *The Golden Age* (*L'age d'or,* 1930) secured

Figure 9 Wera Engels (Edith) in Marcel L'Herbier's *Scent of the Woman in Black* (*Le parfum de la dame en noir*, 1931).

Buñuel a contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, which he turned down after a visit to Hollywood in 1930. In 1946, Buñuel moved to Mexico, where many of Spain's intellectuals and artists had emigrated after the Spanish Civil War. He returned to Europe only in the 1960s (see chapter 5).

Authors such as René Clair and Marcel L'Herbier advocated for diversity in technical innovation and offered extraordinary Art Déco set productions (for example, designs by Robert Mallet-Stevens for *Money/L'argent,* 1928). This new modern look of background set, directly influenced by the Art Déco style recently launched at the 1925 Paris Exposition des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes, became one of the major visual trademarks of Impressionist films such as L'Herbier's *The Late Mathias Pascal* (*Feu Mathias Pascal,* 1925), and *The Inhuman One* (*L'inhumaine,* 1924). Background sets were designed by artists Fernand Léger and Robert Mallet-Stevens. Born Marcel L'hebarium, Marcel L'Herbier (1888–1979), a playwright, poet, and essayist, was assigned to the cinematographic unit in the French army during World War I. As an influential figure in the development of the French Avant-garde, L'Herbier's films regularly integrated works of notorious artists from other fields, including painter Fernand

Léger and architect Mallet-Stevens. L'Herbier's experimental silent films and theoretical writing exerted a strong influence on cineasts, such as Alberto Cavalcanti and Claude Autant-Lara. However, with the coming of the sound era, L'Herbier's passage to the new medium proved difficult, as his apparent, solid innovative vision shifted to produce mainstream films of average quality. One of L'Herbier's most significant contributions to film history was his responsibility for the establishment of the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC) in 1943. There, many future celebrated filmmakers began their apprenticeships: Alain Resnais, Louis Malle, Costa-Gavras, Claude Sautet, and Patrice Leconte, to name a few.

Along with the Surrealist movement, which could never reconcile popular and intellectual audiences, many filmmakers of the 1920s followed the lead of Impressionist artists as they successfully blurred the frontier between accessible entertainment and art. Perhaps the most famous name among all French filmmakers of the silent era is Abel Gance (1889–1981). Gance began his career as a dramatic stage actor and screenwriter. After appearing in his first film, *Molière,* in 1909, and writing a few scenarios for Gaumont, Gance was drawn toward a more unconventional production type. His films were characterized by epic subject matter and historical figures. Following his first national success, *The Wheel* (*La roue,* 1923), a new style surfaced among French filmmakers, a new Romanesque eloquency through motion pictures. Adapted from Pierre Hamp's novel *La roue,* this lengthy melodrama narrated the sentimental but tempestuous relationship between two characters, Norma (Ivy Close) and Sisif (Séverin Mars), a railroad machinist who after adopting Norma as an orphan later develops a passion for her as an adult. With more than a year of shooting, an endless montage sequence (a meticulous editing procedure that trimmed the film's duration from thrity-two to twelve reels), reduced from eight hours to four hours of projection, and three years in production, *La roue* heralded Gance's future Impressionist initiatives, which shaped the last years of French silent cinema. Gance's style already had taken shape as he successfully demonstrated proficiency in new filmic techniques, introducing the panoramic screen, sound perspective, and the superimposition of shots. In addition, the characters' mental states were faithfully rendered through a series of fast-cut editing, generating an idiosyncratic visual rhythm. But for many film historians, the turning point of Abel Gance's career occurred with his masterpiece, *Napoléon* (1927), or *Napoléon vu par Abel Gance,* starring the mesmerizing Albert Dieudonné. First conceived for a triple screen, Gance envisioned, then orchestrated, an

innovative version of wide-screen vision, which employed three synchronized cameras to be projected on three separate frames (triptych screen). Gance's cinematographers (among whom was the young Henri Alekan) achieved a new fluidity in their camera work that resulted in high realism and a fast editing style (for example, cameras flying through the air on wires, falling off cliffs, or strapped to a runaway horse's back during battle scenes). Gance's original story line, which was implicitly inspired by the format of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation,* corresponded to a length of between six and eight hours and was organized around eight chapters: Bonaparte's youth, the French Revolution, Campaign in Italy, Austerlitz, Waterloo, Saint Helena, and so on. The film was all the more revolutionary because of its scope and length. Unfortunately, only the first three chapters were terminated.

With over one thousand extras and a total cost of 20 million French francs, the film severely hampered the stamina of Gance's future film career. Producers became reluctant to endorse his high-budget projects. As a result, Gance never regained any sort of creative control in future assignments. *Napoléon* premiered in Polyvision with a full orchestra on April 27, 1927, at the Opera in Paris.

Figure 10 Abel Gance's grandiloquent masterpiece, *Napoléon* (1927) or Napoléon vu par Abel Gance, starring the mesmerizing Albert Dieudonné.

Figure 11 Vladimir Roudenko as a young Bonaparte in Abel Gance's *Napoléon (1927).*

Interestingly enough, several versions of Abel Gance's *Napoléon* were reedited and eventually sonorized in 1935, 1942, 1955, and 1971 (at the initiative of film director Claude Lelouch, *Bonaparte and the Revolution/Bonaparte et la Révolution*). Finally, a reconstructed version of the five hours was released by film

historian Kevin Brownlow at the 1979 Telluride Film Festival. Two years later, Francis Ford Coppola also screened a longer version at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. Other significant works of Abel Gance include *I Accuse: That They May Live* (*J'accuse!,* 1937), *Blind Venus* (*La Vénus aveugle,* 1941), *Captain Fracasse* (*Le Capitaine Fracasse,* 1942), and *The Tower of Nesle* (*La Tour de Nesle,* 1954). With Abel Gance, the influence of theater obviously remained part of his inherent artistic background with sound individualistic actors' performances, but it was more the concept of mise-en-scène, which was effectively perfected, that appeared as pioneering to many.

The maturity and momentum of French Avant-garde cinema, in particular impressionistic, in the 1920s were partially the result of the growth of the French film spirit in its first and second decade of existence. The final ten years of the silent era laid the groundwork for the prolific new directing talents of the sound structures yet to come (including René Clair, Jean Renoir, Marcel Carné, and Jean Vigo). Born René Chomette, René Clair (1898–1981) began his career as an actor playing in Louis Feuillade's 1921 series *L'orpheline* and *Parisette.* Later, parallel to a writing career (as novelist and essayist), he served as assistant to filmmaker Jacques de Baroncelli. His first silent film, *The Crazy Ray* (*Paris qui dort*), was completed in 1923, but the real turning point for Clair occurred with a short film entitled *Entr'acte* (1924), featuring many celebrities of the decade (painters, writers, musicians, and journalists). The film, which initially was destined to serve as a visual intermission before features, was later screened at the famous Studio des Ursulines in Paris. Clair's *Entr'acte* was also reminiscent of the aforementioned automatic writing (*écriture automatique*) so dear to the Surrealist movement, and its techniques of intense emotional manipulation of audiences' unconscious desires. Clair's most significant silent films include *The Imaginary Voyage* (*Le voyage imaginaire,* 1925), *Prey of the Wind* (*La proie du vent,* 1926), and *An Italian Straw Hat* (*Un chapeau de paille d'Italie,* 1927), starring Albert Préjean, Olga Tchekowa, and Marise Maïa. Adapted from the famous Eugène Labiche's vaudeville, *An Italian Straw Hat* was a combination of American-style chase movies and trademark French Impressionism. The critical success of the film gave René Clair the confidence and momentum to renew an almost similar experience a few years later. At the beginning of the talking-pictures era, he directed *The Million* (*Le million,* 1931), which remains one of the very few French musical comedies. Throughout the last years of the silent era, Clair directed some of the most original and admired works of early French cinema, including another landmark musical, *Under the Roofs of Paris* (*Sous les*

toits de Paris, 1930), and the great classic social satire *Freedom for Us* (*A nous la liberté,* 1931).

The silent film era would come to an end with two major events, both of which were marked by innovations or events from across the Atlantic Ocean: the invention of the first "talking pictures" in the United States after 1927 and the economic turmoil following the Wall Street crash of October 1929. This new turning point of talking pictures clearly gave the French film industry a new vitality within its creative and organizational structure and heralded the coming of the golden age of French cinema.

2

The Golden Age of French Cinema

- The style of the 1930s
- The "Talkies"
- French cinema and economic recession
- Verbal cinema or filmed language? Marcel Pagnol
- Beyond filmed theater: Toward poetic realism
- Artists and masters of poetic realism: Jean Gabin, Arletty, Marcel Carné, Jean Renoir, and Jean Vigo
- Cinematography and the poetics of images

With the birth of sound in 1927, French cinema of the 1930s was able to reflect all aspects of French society through a major artistic current: poetic realism, a filmmaking era that began with the aftermath of the 1929 stock-market crash through the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. Shaped by seismic social and political events, French filmmakers of the 1930s created masterpieces that some seventy years later stand as landmarks of cinema. With the support of small-scale production companies whose insignificant capital base often could not contract personnel, directors nonetheless produced these great films. Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion* (*La grande illusion,* 1937), Marcel Carné's *Daybreak* (*Le jour se lève,* 1939), and Jean Vigo's *The Atalante* (*L'Atalante,* 1934) are just a few of the great achievements of the golden age of French cinema. All were strongly influenced by the unrivaled prestige of "populist literature" (*littérature populiste*), a literary movement that included authors such as Pierre MacOrlan and Francis Carco.

The style of the 1930s

The origins of this passionate artistic period go back even before the crash of 1929. For a long time, these difficult years were considered ill-fated since already

the cultural and creative movements linked to the 1920s' utopia had vanished with the disastrous aftereffects of World War I. The wreckage of the Great War actually served future conflicts (Hitler seized power in 1933, Franco became the Nationalist leader in Spain in 1936, Austria was invaded by Nazi Germany in 1938). These wounds were forever inscribed within each European nation, and even the most radical Avant-garde streams (Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism), could not compete with the hastened pace of the 1930s. The hope in progress, the joining of humanism to science within the project of an enlightened new society, where artistic creation would occupy a predominant role, was no longer perceived as historically logical. Taking the long historical view, the decade of the 1930s is today often recognized as a return to order.

Despite the world crisis and the endless debate "extreme right-extreme left," France was successfully able to command international attention by dint of its many artists, scholars, and intellectuals. Above all, it was the 1937 World's Fair in Paris that epitomized the French genius. The great decade also marked the founding of the *aéropostale* (air postal service) and a generation of reckless airplane pilots. Pilot Jean Mermoz multiplied his exploits, creating a link between France and Africa, then later the Andes and the rest of South America. On the seas, the French presented the great ocean liner *Normandie* to the world in 1935. This prodigious ship, a "moving museum" of decorative arts of the time, provided a luxurious escape from the morose atmosphere of the prewar era for its fortunate clientele. French music was also omnipresent in the Western world, with singers like Maurice Chevalier and the composer Maurice Ravel. On the theatrical and literary scene, Sacha Guitry, Jean Cocteau, and Jean Giraudoux remained in the spotlight.

At the turn of the new decade, with the beginning of tragic events such as the political and financial scandal known as the Stavisky affair in 1933, which cast a cloud of corruption on the political system, the rise of fascism in Germany that same year, and the eventual eruption of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, many French Surrealist artists adopted communism or even anarchy as their political inspiration (i.e., Louis Aragon's role in the French Communist Party). In literature, the Surrealists' involvement was led by Andre Breton's *Nadja* (*Nadja,* 1928) and Louis Aragon's *Le paysan de Paris* (*The Night-Walker,* 1926). In poetry, Paul Valéry, Paul Claudel, François Mauriac, Saint-John Perse (pseudonym of Alexis Léger), and Paul Eluard dominated. In the field of fiction, the literary scene saw the emergence of some of France's most popular writers, such as realist novelist Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Vol de nuit* (*Night Flight,* 1931), who

presented a new look from the traditional diary novel form, Marcel Aymé's *La Jument verte* (*The Green Mare,* 1933), and Jean Giono's *Regain* (*Harvest,* 1930), or spiritual authors such as François Mauriac's *Noeud de vipères* (*Vipers' Tangle,* 1932) and Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (*Journey to the End of the Night,* 1932). On the stage, the popular successes of Marcel Pagnol's *Marius* (*Marius,* 1929), a colorful comedy of Provence folklore, although ignored by the critics, triggered an immense triumph, resulting in the adaptation of his comedy to the big screen. Jean Cocteau and Jean Giraudoux's *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* (*Tiger at the Gates,* 1935) also took their work of tragedy to motion pictures. Jean-Paul Sartre's *La nausée* (*Nausea,* 1938) made him one of the leaders of the philosophy of Existentialism, which dominated the postwar era. (Sartre was later awarded a Nobel Prize in literature in 1964, which he refused.) The novels of André Malraux, *La condition humaine* (*Man's Fate,* 1933) and *L'espoir* (*Man's Hope,* 1937), combined lyricism with history, giving a dramatic picture of the Spanish Civil War.

The "Talkies"

The 1930s began with the sudden disappearance of silent film productions (first in the United States and rapidly all over Europe a couple of years later). With this technical and aesthetic revolution came the economic crisis of 1929 followed by the Great Depression, debilitating the American continent and resulting in a dramatic relegation of economic activities in Europe, as well as the emergence of several ominous dictatorships. As a result, in terms of the film industry, the 1930s can best be described as an era of reorganization. The industry was drawn closer each year to a government-regulated system (similar to those of Italy and Germany), and was eventually assimilated by the COIC (Comité de l'organisation de l'industrie cinématographique), during the first months of World War II. The COIC was later renamed CNC (Centre national de la cinématographie) in 1946. Within this period came the "talkies." The innovation of sound in motion pictures actually goes all the way back to the invention of the Cinematographe in 1895. The first experimentation with the synchronous dialogue system occurred when Louis Lumière filmed a conversation between Mr. Janssen and Mr. Lagrange, and later that day projected this particular shot during the Congress of the French Photographic Societies (Congrès des sociétés française de photographie) in Lyon on June 12, 1895. Using a primitive form of