CONTEMPORARY FRENCH CINEMA

AN INTRODUCTION

Second edition

Guy Austin

Contemporary French cinema

Manchester University Press

For Joanne, Joseph and Patrick

Contemporary French cinema

An introduction

Second edition

GUY AUSTIN

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Preface

This book is written for students and fans of modern French cinema, and is intended to provide an introduction to French film studies. I have concentrated mainly, though not exclusively, on films which have had either a theatrical or video release in Britain, or which are available on video or DVD from France. It seems important to me that the films analysed here be fairly readily available to the readers of this book, and there are other books which bring the attention of an Anglophone audience to more obscure or neglected French films.

For ease of understanding I have provided my own translations of the French comments cited in the text, although all film titles remain in the original.

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French cinema from 1895 to 1968, a brief survey

1

The birth of cinema

The year 1995 saw France celebrating the centenary of cinema as a national achievement, a celebration enhanced by the recent victory over the United States regarding the exemption of films from the GATT free-trade agreement. Numerous film exhibitions and retrospectives were organised, including a showing of the entire catalogue of 1,400 short films made by the pioneering Lumière brothers. A hundred years after the Lumières' break-through in 1895, the film industry remained the barometer by which the French measured the cultural state of their nation.

The pioneers of moving pictures

The development of moving pictures was a piece-meal process, dependent on experimentation and advancement in the recording, reproduction and projection of photographic images. The first steps in this process were the invention of the magic lantern in the seventeenth century, and of photography and various moving-image toys – such as Jacob Plateau's *phénakistiscope* – in the 1830s. By 1895, developments were coming to a head on both sides of the Atlantic. In the States, Eadweard Muybridge had made his photographic studies of people and animals in motion, and Thomas Edison had patented and exported his kinetoscope, whereby a single spectator could watch a tiny image on film. The first kinetoscope parlour in France opened in late 1893, and Parisians could also watch the animated cartoons of Émile Reynaud's *Théâtre optique.* But the first truly collective film show, and hence the birth of cinema, took place on 28 December 1895, when the Lumière brothers' *cinématographe* was watched by an audience paying one franc each at the Grand Café, boulevard des Capucines in Paris. The *cinématographe*, a combined motion-picture camera, projector and printer, had first been patented by the photographers and inventors Auguste and Louis Lumière in February 1895.

Whereas Edison's early films had to be shot in the studio, the *cinématographe* was light enough to be used for filming in the street, and the Lumières captured such unstaged events as a baby playing or workers leaving a factory. Their famous short film of 1895, *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, 'is said to have made the unprepared audiences scatter in alarm as the locomotive seemed to approach them' (Robinson 1994: 9), while *L'Arroseur arrosé* of the same year, the world's first (albeit brief) fiction film, established the visual gag as the basis for film comedy. Besides initiating what later became the documentary and comedy genres, the Lumières also developed film techniques which were to prove fundamental to the grammar of cinema. Their series *Les Pompiers de Lyon* (1895) linked together various shots taken from different angles in a pioneering example of editing; a year later one of their agents developed the tracking shot while shooting from a gondola in Venice (Sadoul 1962: 7).

If the Lumières pioneered the recording of action on film, and the techniques of open-air filming and montage (editing), their contemporary Georges Méliès used *mise en scène* (staging) to create artful and fantastical tableaux. The two strands of cinema that they inaugurated can be traced throughout film history, the Lumières influencing documentary, neo-realist and *nouvelle vague* film, Méliès the fantasy film, literary adaptation, historical reconstruction and *la tradition de qualité* (see below). A professional magician, Méliès built the precursor of the film studio in 1897, a glasshouse with a central stage, which was filmed from a point of view identical to that of the spectator watching a play. This concern with filmed theatre even led Méliès to move the titles of his films up the screen in imitation of the curtain going up on a stage play. Spurning camera movement for static tableaux and close-ups for a wide composition showing all the stage, Méliès had to exaggerate the size of important objects, hence the enormous key in *Barbe-Bleue* (1901). As already noted, the genres established by Méliès were numerous, but he was most famous for his fantasy films, either fairy-tales and legends like *Cendrillon* (1899) or science-fiction films adapted from the novels of Jules Vernes, like *20 000 lieues sous les mers* (1907). He prefigured the heritage film's obsession with authenticity (see chapter 7) in his careful researching of recent events for films like *L'Affaire Dreyfus* (1899). His tight control over all aspects of staging and filming – including the introduction of innovative effects like the double exposure and the dissolve – and his idiosyncratic style also make Méliès the first *auteur* in French cinema (see below). He seems to have recognised this himself when declaring that the success of film as a medium was due not to its inventors the Lumières, but to those who used it to record their own personal productions (Sadoul 1962: 8).

Early French cinema as a global force

Following Méliès' lead, the cinema entrepreneurs Charles Pathé and Léon Gaumont built studios in Paris in the early years of the twen-

tieth century. Both men also headed powerful French companies, Pathé Frères originally specialising in the phonograph, L. Gaumont et Compagnie in photography. Between them, they established the French film industry as a commercial force of such global influence that in the years 1908 to 1910 the majority of films distributed in the world were French (Billard 1994: 56). Commercialising the new medium far more rapidly than their American counterparts, Pathé and Gaumont were responsible not only for developing technical hardware, but also for producing and distributing films, and for setting up chains of cinemas in France and in England.

While Méliès, having failed to adapt his rigid film style, ceased independent production in 1909, the directors employed by Pathé and Gaumont ensured that innovation continued, particularly by launching new and extremely popular genres. At Pathé, for example, Ferdinand Zecca introduced the crime film and the use of seedy, realistic settings with *L'Histoire d'un crime* (1901) and *Les Victimes de l'alcoolisme* (1902). In the ensuing years, the melodramas, crime stories and comedies of Zecca and his colleagues at Pathé were distributed with great success through a series of agencies in Europe, Japan and America, and in 1908 Pathé sold twice as many films to the United States as all the American production companies combined (Sadoul 1962: 12). Meanwhile Léon Gaumont, who had given up directing in 1900, turned to his secretary Alice Guy, who thus became the first woman film-maker. Guy directed numerous films before setting up a branch of Gaumont in New York in 1907. After Guy's departure, her co-director on *La Vie du Christ* (1906), Victorien Jasset, launched the detective film with the *Nick Carter* series, filmed between 1908 and 1910 for the third major production company, Éclair. The immediate popularity of the genre led Louis Feuillade, Guy's replacement at Gaumont, to emulate and indeed surpass Jasset's success, by filming the *Fantômas* novels written by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Alain. If Nick Carter was the world's first film detective, Feuillade's Fantômas, star of a cycle of adventures shot in 1913 and 1914, was its first arch-villain, known as 'the emperor of crime'. Set in realistic urban surroundings, and combining a documentary attention to the streets of pre-war Paris with an evocation of mystery and lyricism, the *Fantômas* series was to prove a major influence on surrealism (see below). It also ensured, along with Jasset's *Nick Carter* films, French dominance in popular cinema before World War One. The formula employed by Jasset and Feuillade was imitated across the world, by the *Homunculus* series in Germany, *Ultus* in Britain, *Tigris* in Italy and *The Perils of Pauline* (filmed for Pathé by a French director) in the United States.

France was pre-eminent in the field of the art film. Founded in 1908 and reliant first on Pathé and later on Éclair for production and distribution, the *Film d'Art* company brought the 'high' culture of the theatre into the realm of cinema. Using stage actors from the Comédie Française and prestigious writers from the Académie, the company

achieved its greatest success with Charles Le Bargy's film *L'Assassinat du duc de Guise* (1908), followed by literary adaptations from Victor Hugo, Eugène Sue, and others. Like the work of Méliès, the *film d'art* is a major precursor of *la tradition de qualité* and the heritage film. But in pre-war cinema, it was overshadowed by popular genres, notably the crime story and also the Pathé comedies starring the first international film star, Max Linder.

French dominance of world cinema was curtailed by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The Russian and eastern European markets were lost immediately, while the threat to Paris from the German army halted film production for a year, and subsequent French production included nationalistic propaganda films which were far less successful than the pre-war offerings. Moreover, as was to happen in 1940, a number of French technicians and directors left the country to work elsewhere. Coincidentally, American cinema was beginning to compete successfully both in the United States and in Europe. In return for exporting French productions, Pathé, Éclair and Gaumont imported American films into France, notably the popular comedies of Mack Sennett and Charlie Chaplin. Aware that France was on the point of losing its Anglophone markets in Britain and the United States, Charles Pathé decided in 1918 to pull out of film financing and production, and to concentrate on distribution. Emerging from the war victorious but damaged, France found that in terms of cinema, the United States was now the dominant force. By 1919, only 10 per cent of films on French screens were home-produced, and an unprecedented 50 per cent were American (Billard 1994: 57).

The first and second avant-gardes

In the aftermath of World War One, not only was French cinema commercially in decline, it was also aesthetically stagnant. While Germany, the United States, Britain and Sweden all boasted emergent national film movements of considerable artistic importance – the most influential being German expressionism – French productions were still in the pre-war vein. Yet within ten years, France had provided cinema with its first avant-garde movement – impressionism – and with surrealist film, known as 'the second avant-garde'.

Impressionism

The prime mover behind impressionism was Louis Delluc, a journalist and director who is often credited with inventing film criticism. Having established the first *ciné-club* in 1920 to promote alternative films, the following year Delluc launched the review *Cinéa*, in which he declared: 'Que le Cinéma français soit du cinéma, que le Cinéma français soit français' [Let French Cinema be true cinema, let French Cinema be truly French] (Sadoul 1962: 24). Reacting against the literary adaptations of the *film d'art* – although far from commending the popular genres of comedy and crime story – Delluc asserted that cinema was

an artistic medium in its own right, distinct from theatre or literature. Influenced by D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919), Delluc sought in his own films to convey, through editing, the motions of human psychology, and to this end developed the flashback technique in *La Femme de nulle part* (1922). Similar aims were held by the film-makers associated with Delluc and forming the impressionist avant-garde. Germaine Dulac, who had directed *La Fête espagnole* from Delluc's scenario in 1919, summarised impressionist practice in assessing her film *La Mort du soleil* (1920): 'I used, in addition to facial expressions, [...] objects, lights and shadows, and I gave these elements a visual value equivalent in intensity and cadence to the physical and mental condition of the character' (Williams 1993: 101). The innovations in film technique which resulted from the impressionists' desire to evoke human subjectivity included close-ups, camera movements, rapid editing, flashbacks and subjective point-of-view shots. Marcel L'Herbier's *El Dorado* (1921) featured 'semi-subjective' sequences to express a character's psychological state: 'The most famous of these is set in a cabaret where a dancer [...] distractedly sits with other women, thinking about her sick young son. She is out of focus, the other characters perfectly in focus' (Williams 1993: 105). Rhythmic cutting to express a drunken or unstable state of mind, first evident in Abel Gance's *La Roue* (1922) and subsequently in Jean Epstein's *Cœur fidèle* (1923), was perhaps the technique most closely linked with the movement. In *Napoléon vu par Abel Gance* (1927), the most famous and idiosyncratic member of the group combined a commercial, conventional subject – the historical epic – with radical new forms. His use of three screens for the projection of the film predated Hollywood's Cinerama by over twenty years, while the subjective camera was employed in a number of startling new ways, all facilitated by the portable movie cameras available in France at the time. For chase scenes, Gance attached a camera to a horse; when Napoléon dived into the sea, a camera was thrown off a cliff to record his point of view; at the staging of the siege of Toulon, a tiny camera in a football evoked the experience of a soldier blown into the air.

With the exception of Gance's *Napoléon* and L'Herbier's *L'Argent* (1928) – neither of which was purely impressionist – no major productions came out of the movement after 1923. Out of favour with the large production companies and the public, impressionism had nevertheless established film in France as a complex artistic medium supported by a critical discourse and an alternative screening and debating network, the *ciné-clubs*. It was this network, and in particular the avant-garde Parisian cinemas, Studio des Ursulines and Studio 28, which provided the second avant-garde – surrealism – with an audience.

Surrealism

Born out of the pacifist and absurdist Dada group, surrealism developed as a major artistic movement in Paris during the 1920s, under the authoritarian leadership of André Breton. The year 1924

saw the publication of Breton's first surrealist manifesto, and the group proceeded to demand a revolution in the arts and indeed in lifestyle, subverting received norms of expression in many fields including literature, painting, photography and cinema, and aiming to liberate the unconscious from codes of civilised behaviour. The first surrealist film was the ironically titled *Le Retour à la raison* (1923), a short collection of animated photos by the American photographer Man Ray. The film's première, a Dadaist evening, in fact degenerated into a riot. The riot produced a schism out of which the surrealist group was formed. The following year René Clair, a young film-maker not directly associated with either group, was asked by the Dadaist painter Francis Picabia to direct his short scenario. The result, *Entr'acte* (1924), was an absurdist 'rewriting of a pre-war chase movie' (Williams 1993: 144), in which a coffin chased by mourners zoomed about the streets of Paris. Clair's subsequent success as a director of comedies such as *Un chapeau de paille d'Italie* (1927) was however dependent on the very narrative structures subverted in *Entr'acte.* In a 1924 review of Jean Epstein's *Cœur fidèle*, Clair compared impressionism's gratuitous optical effects unfavourably with 'American film technique, which is completely at the service of the progression of the story' (Williams 1993: 134), and in the 1940s he was to work in Hollywood as part of that classical narrative tradition.

Another director from outside the group who nonetheless created a seminal surrealist work was the former impressionist Germaine Dulac. Her adaptation of a scenario by Antonin Artaud, *La Coquille et le clergyman* (1928), used optical effects and clever editing to convey the repression of unconscious desires. Premièred at the Studio des Ursulines, the film was not well received by the generally misogynistic surrealists who accused Dulac of 'feminising' Artaud's scenario (Williams 1993: 148). In contrast, Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* of the same year was immediately hailed by Breton as a surrealist masterpiece. Although only twenty minutes long, the film managed to disrupt the codes of cinematic representation (time, space, character definition, narrative structure – even silent titles are all subverted), and to create disturbing dream-like episodes dynamised by violent desires. The infamous opening scene, showing a woman's eyeball sliced in half with a razor, was both a deliberate shock tactic and a warning that, in the words of the surrealist-inspired young director, Jean Vigo, 'dans ce film, il s'agira de voir d'un autre œil que de coutume' [in this film, one will have to see things with a different eye than usual] (Prédal 1972: 194). Contrary to Dali and Buñuel's intentions, *Un chien andalou* was a success with middle-class audiences, running for nine months at the Studio des Ursulines. Two years later, Buñuel's feature-length sound film *L'Age d'or* (1930) attempted to put this right by launching a violent attack on the bourgeoisie, parodying the Church, the police, and all manner of Establishment conventions, presented as so many obstacles to the consummation of a couple's sexual desire. Again, the Dali-inspired images were startling – a cow

in a luxury bedroom, a burning giraffe being thrown out of a window – but were also more determinedly sacrilegious, as in the concluding sequence which portrayed Christ as a libertine from the Marquis de Sade's *Cent vingt journées de Sodome.* Unsurprisingly, the right wing took offence, and the film was prohibited by the *préfet de police* after a fascist mob destroyed the Studio 28 cinema during a screening in December 1930. Buñuel went on to have a long and brilliant career, making numerous films in France, Spain and Mexico, and carrying his own brand of surrealism into the 1970s (see chapter 3). But most avant-garde film-makers, including Germaine Dulac, were unable to continue in the 1930s, faced with the technical demands and high production costs of the sound film.

Sound cinema and poetic realism

The late 1920s and early 1930s saw French cinema in crisis. Production became increasingly dependent on foreign input, either in the form of technology or finance, usually of American origin. In 1924 Gaumont in France merged with MGM, and in 1927 Pathé joined George Eastman's production company to form Kodak-Pathé. In terms of overall production, 1929 marked a nadir, with only fifty-two feature-length films made in France, as compared with hundreds annually before World War One (Prédal 1972: 114). The crisis was compounded in 1927 when *The Jazz Singer*, made in Hollywood for Warner, inaugurated the era of the 'talkie'.

The coming of sound and the crisis of the early 1930s

The Jazz Singer was premièred in France in February 1929. By that time, French film studios and cinemas alike had begun to re-equip for the new medium of sound cinema, an expensive process requiring American technology. For the studios in particular, the coming of sound was ill timed. Dating mostly from the early 1920s or the pre-war period, French film studios had only just finished modification to accommodate electricity. The first French sound studio at Épinay was ready in February 1929, but the earliest French 'talkies' were actually shot in Britain or Germany, while other films, like L'Herbier's *L' Argent* (1929), were partly sonorised half way through production (Crisp 1993: 104). Many French cinemas, meanwhile, were not equipped to screen sound films until 1934, and when they did so, relied on the American Vitaphone system rather than Gaumont's own underdeveloped Cinéphone (Crisp 1993: 100).

The technical problems associated with the advent of sound were compounded by the purist attitude of many leading French film-makers – including Abel Gance and initially René Clair – who deemed it fit only for musicals and vaudeville. To turn 'silent' films into 'talkies' would be to 'produce talking films that were restricted to a specific-language community' and to lose the 'universality' of the original medium (Crisp 1993: 97). Such a stance only weakened

French cinema further in the face of Anglophone dominance. Ironically, it was René Clair, one of the vociferous opponents of sound, who directed the first great French sound film, *Sous les toits de Paris*, at the Épinay studio in 1930. Although the film did manifest an adventurous use of sound – privileging songs while reducing dialogue to a minimum, and including some counterpoint experiments, in which sound and image were not synchronised – it was most notable for Lazare Meerson's set design, which evoked a realistic yet lyrical picture of working-class Paris. At first ignored by the French public, *Sous les toits de Paris* became an enormous world-wide success, fêted in Berlin, London, New York and Tokyo (Sadoul 1962: 317). By late 1934, however, Clair had left France for England and subsequently Hollywood, after the commercial failure of *Le Dernier Milliardaire* (1934). The same year saw the death of Jean Vigo, whose *Zéro de conduite* (1933) and *L'Atalante* (1934) had suggested a fruitful integration of surrealist imagery into realistic narrative cinema. French film production also entered a crisis in 1934 to rival that of 1929. Exacerbated by the Depression, which struck France later than it did Britain or the United States, and above all by the financial collapse of both Gaumont and Pathé, film production fell from 158 features the previous year to only 126 in 1934, and 115 in 1935 (Prédal 1972: 114). But although production remained at this level for the rest of the decade, the industry was to be revitalised in aesthetic terms by poetic realism, the key genre of classic French cinema.

Poetic realism

In general terms, the evolution of sound cinema shifted film-making from location shooting to studio production and from modernism to realism (Crisp 1993: 104). The coming of sound was a particular catalyst in the development of poetic realism: for technical and economic reasons, sound film was best shot in the studio, hence the increased importance of set design. Poetic realism, a naturalistic but lyrical genre shot almost exclusively on carefully designed studio sets, was given its characteristic atmosphere by art directors like Lazare Meerson and Alexandre Trauner. As Colin Crisp has noted, 'The set decorators' contribution to this style was crucial, and [...] helps to clarify a "movement" which is notoriously difficult to define' (Crisp 1993: 367). Like poetic realism as a genre, the set design which served it was a stylisation of reality, in which the guiding principle was realism, simplified, exaggerated and rendered symbolic. Whether in historical farce (Meerson's reconstruction of seventeenth-century Flanders for Jacques Feyder's *La Kermesse héroique* (1935)) or contemporary tragedy (Trauner's urban sets for Marcel Carné's *Quai des brumes* (1938) and *Le Jour se lève* (1939)) set design established the tone of the film. As Trauner said, it was essential to isolate and emphasise the principal details of the setting (Crisp 1993: 372). In a similar way, characterisation was based in reality but was also larger than life, with certain types representative of social class or position, the

most prevalent and famous example of which is Jean Gabin's iconic status as the working-class hero. Gabin's roles in particular tended to be tragic heroes trapped by fate. Fatalism – which was also found in the slightly later American genre of the *film noir* (see chapter 5) – was manifest, indeed often personified, in a number of films written by Jacques Prévert and directed by Marcel Carné. Their first great film of the period, *Quai des brumes*, featured Gabin in a fog-bound Le Havre as a deserter driven by love to murder, while in *Le Jour se lève*, a year later, Gabin was again the doomed working-class hero, this time trapped in a house by the police and recalling his past love and his motives for murder. With Gabin's tragic hero, Trauner's realistic yet symbolic sets, and the theme of fate – here personified by a blind man – *Le Jour se lève* epitomises the poetic realism of the 1930s. But the reception of Carné and Prévert's *Les Portes de la nuit* (1946) proved that the genre was out of place after the harsh realities of World War Two and the German occupation of France.

While poetic realism was at its height, Jean Renoir – the most important film-maker of the era, a talismanic figure in post-war film and arguably the greatest ever French director – was faced with a generally lukewarm reception from critics and audiences. Renoir had met popular success with his version of Emile Zola's *Nana* in 1926, but in the ensuing decade his work was not well received despite encompassing a variety of genres from the comedy of *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932) to the political propaganda of *La Vie est à nous* (1936). In 1937 the pacifist *La Grande Illusion* was a success, but the cool reception of *La Règle du jeu* two years later, combined with the outbreak of war, led Renoir to leave France for Hollywood. It was only in the 1950s, thanks largely to *la politique des auteurs* (see below), that his importance was recognised. Often cited as an exemplary director of actors, Renoir also displayed a technical mastery of the medium. Throughout the diversity of setting and tone, his films are characterised by fluid camera movements (particularly tracking shots), by deep focus photography, and by a careful *mise en scène* which contrasts foreground and background. These techniques allowed him to develop a humanist concern for the place of the individual in society, filmed with a realism far less stylised than that of his contemporaries. He has proved a major influence not only on the *nouvelle vague* cinema of the 1950s and 1960s (see below), but also on the heritage genre of the 1980s (see chapter 7).

Wartime cinema and *la tradition de qualité*

In 1940, France suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the German army. The resultant period of occupation – in which the country was initially divided into a northern zone administered by the invaders and a 'free' southern zone governed by Marshal Petain's neo-fascist Vichy regime – was to prove one of the most traumatic eras of French history. While responses varied from active collaboration with

the Germans to flight or underground resistance, most of the population struggled to continue living as before. Cinema-going increased, and, ironically, the German occupation actually saw a flowering of classical French cinema.

Film during the Occupation

Naturally enough, 1940 saw French film production reduced to an unprecedented low of thirty-nine films (Prédal 1972: 115). Many film personnel were lost to the industry. A few (such as composer Maurice Jaubert) were killed in action, but most simply fled the country. Directors Jean Renoir, René Clair and Max Ophüls began new careers in Hollywood, while Alexandre Trauner and a number of other Jewish technicians sought the temporary safety of the south (the 'free' zone was later invaded by Germany). Although many personnel resettled in Nice or Marseilles, production facilities and capital remained in Paris. As a result, 'Almost the only producer in a position to work on a film was Marcel Pagnol, who had his studio, actors, technicians, and bank accounts all in the Marseilles region' (Williams 1993: 248). Pagnol was thus able to follow his popular comedies and melodramas of the thirties with *La Fille du puisatier* in 1940.

Thanks largely to German finance and also to an influx of filmmakers replacing those who had departed, after 1940 French film production began to increase, more than doubling in quantity by 1943 (Prédal 1972: 115). During the 1930s the German companies Tobis and U.F.A. had produced many French films, and they were now joined by Continental. With imports from America and Britain banned, the French film industry, censored and to some extent controlled by the Germans, could monopolise its captive audience. Many German and some Italian films were also screened, but French-produced cinema claimed 85 per cent of box-office receipts during the Occupation (Sadoul 1962: 89). Moreover, despite the desire of Joseph Goebbels, the German Propaganda Minister, that the French public should be fed a diet of empty and stupid films (Prédal 1972: 91), a vibrant French film industry was a useful tool to placate the population and thus to deter resistance. The result was indeed a highly successful era for French cinema, albeit one characterised by escapism and fantasy, and shot almost entirely in a closed studio environment (Crisp 1993: 375). Constrained by censorship but also reflecting a national desire for an escape from the present, Occupation cinema has been characterised as a cinema of isolation and immobility, dominated by historical subjects, lyrical fantasies and remote settings (Williams 1993). Thus Christian-Jacques' *L'Assassinat du Père Noël* (1941) took place in a snowed-in mountain village and Jacques Becker's *Goupi Mains-Rouges* (1943) in a remote inn, while the major successes at Parisian cinemas – Marcel L'Herbier's *La Nuit fantastique* (1941), Marcel Carné's *Les Visiteurs du soir* (1942) and *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945), and Jean Delannoy's *L'Éternel Retour* (1943) – were either fantastical or historical subjects or both at once. Even Henri-Georges Clouzot's

controversial thriller *Le Corbeau* (1943) was set in a small provincial town isolated from the outside world. None the less, the contemporary setting and bleak plot of *Le Corbeau* – in which poison-pen letters ultimately provoke murder – did spark a critical debate about the film's relation to the realities of the Occupation. Although the film could be interpreted as a comment on the neuroses and betrayals of life in occupied France, as resistance intensified and the Occupation was lifted, Clouzot was subjected to attacks from the Comité de Libération du Cinéma, which contrasted the defeatist pessimism of *Le Corbeau* with the spirited optimism of Jean Gremillon's aviation story *Le Ciel est à vous* (1944). With the Liberation of Paris in 1944, Clouzot was driven out of the film industry. But after three years he returned, just as the themes and styles of Occupation cinema were to return in the immediate post-war period.

Post-war 'quality' production

In the decade following the Liberation, the French film industry exploited to commercial success the trends established by the cinema of the Occupation. Literary screenplays, historical or nationalistic subjects, and an increasing attention to production values were predominant in the post-war era, resulting in what came to be known as *la tradition de qualité.* This was a period of consolidation and of competition with the Hollywood films which, banned under the Occupation, flooded post-war France. The Blum-Byrnes agreement of 1946 had reduced the industry's protectionism against American imports and this decision, combined with the appeal of high-quality Hollywood studio productions fronted by famous stars, appeared to jeopardise the commercial viability of French cinema. But the domestic industry was aided in its efforts by two institutions originally set up by the Vichy regime during the war. The Comité d'Organisation de l'Industrie or COIC, established in 1940 to revitalise French production and distribution, was continued in a modified form as the Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC) after 1946. In addition, the national film school IDHEC (Institut des hautes études cinématographiques), which dated from 1943, was given government support (as was the pre-war film archive, the Cinémathèque française). In a policy which was to be echoed by government aid for the prestigious heritage genre in the 1980s (see chapter 7), from 1949 a CNC committee 'began to select projects deemed worthy of *primes de la qualité* or "bonuses for quality"', including literary adaptations of classics by Zola, Stendhal and Maupassant (Williams 1993: 278). European co-productions, especially with Italy, were also encouraged, and the average film budget rose from 50 million old francs in 1950 to 100 million five years later (Sadoul 1962: 103). Such tactics proved invaluable in the competition with Hollywood: whereas in 1948 American films accounted for 51 per cent of French box-office receipts and home product only 32 per cent, by 1957 the situation had been reversed (Sadoul 1962: 145).

Among the literary adaptations central to the success of the *tradition de qualité* were Christian-Jacques' *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1948) and Claude Autant-Lara's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1954), both taken from nineteenth-century novels by Stendhal. Both films also featured the actor Gérard Philipe who, along with Martine Carol, played in numerous films of the period and epitomised the new French star system. The acting style of the 1930s, in which characters embodied a given social class and gave an 'extrovert expressiveness' to poetic realist film, was now superseded by the 'anguished interiority' of literary adaptations in which the psychology of the individual characters was paramount (Crisp 1993: 365). The decline of poetic realism was most clearly marked in the hostile reception of Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert's *Les Portes de la nuit* (1946). Although the film was set in post-war Paris, the fantastical plot and Alexandre Trauner's stylised sets 'already seemed dated, belonging to a past era' (Crisp 1993: 375). After the commercial and critical failure of *Les Portes de la nuit*, Carné's fantasy film *Juliette ou la clé des songes* (1951) met a similar fate, as did Jean Cocteau's cryptic fantasy *Orphée* (1950). If the historical drama flourished in the 1950s, the fantasy genre entered an almost terminal decline, not arrested until the coming of the *cinéma du look* in the 1980s (see chapter 6).

For all the popularity of the costume drama – and in particular of films set at the turn of the century, such as Jacques Becker's *Casque d'or* (1952) or Jean Renoir's *French Cancan* (1954) – French post-war cinema included a number of more contemporary dramas. As under the Occupation, the thriller genre allowed a cynical and pessimistic portrayal of society, witness Yves Allegret's *Une Si Jolie Petite Plage* (1948) and Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* (1954). A more documentary-style realism was provided by René Clément's depiction of the war, *La Bataille du rail* (1945). Although Clément went on to film typical 'quality' projects, such as the Zola adaptation *Gervaise* (1955), *La Bataille du rail* belonged to the realist style of post-war European cinema, as did Robert Bresson's *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1950), *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1956) and *Pickpocket* (1959). Bresson's films, although stylised to an extent, used real locations and amateur actors, as did the most important realist movement of the period, Italian neo-realism. And although such examples were relatively rare in French cinema during the 1940s and 1950s, they prefigured the emergence of *la nouvelle vague*, a style of film-making which sought to destroy the high production values and orthodox format of *la tradition de qualité.*

Cahiers du cinéma and *la nouvelle vague*

In the decade after the Liberation, a fresh conception of cinema evolved in parallel with the development of *la tradition de qualité*, but in strident opposition to the values embodied by 'quality' productions. First formulated by young critics in the magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*,

the new film theories were put into practice in the late 1950s and early 1960s by many of those same critics who, as directors, became known as *la nouvelle vague.*

La politique des auteurs

Cahiers du cinéma was launched in April 1951 by Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Lo Duca and André Bazin. As editor, Bazin became the mentor to the young critics who contributed to the magazine, including François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol and Eric Rohmer. These critics tended to praise the work of idiosyncratic French directors such as the comic actor and director Jacques Tati, along with many Hollywood productions, especially the film noir and the B-movie thriller (see chapter 5), but they reserved contempt for the French offerings of *la tradition de qualité.* This position was most strongly stated in François Truffaut's polemical article 'Une certaine tendance du cinéma français', published in *Cahiers* on New Year's Day, 1954. Targeting the scriptwriters Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost, who had worked on numerous 'quality' films for various directors since the war, Truffaut contrasted the 'abject characters' they created with the more personalised creations of Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau and Jacques Tati, all of them '*authors* ["*des auteurs*"] who often write their own dialogue and in some cases themselves invent their own stories, which they then go on to direct' (Crisp 1993: 234). Truffaut went on to write: 'I cannot see any possibility of peaceful coexistence between the *Quality Tradition* and an *auteur cinema*' (Crisp 1993: 234–5).

La politique des auteurs, or in other words, the conception of 'an *auteur cinema*' in which the film-maker, like an author or an artist, uses the medium (including not just the direction but the screenplay and even the production) to express a personal view of the world, was not invented by Truffaut in 1954. The idea of cinema as art had been first propounded in 1908 by the *film d'art* group (see above). More recently, an article by Alexandre Astruc for *L'Écran français* in 1948, had suggested the concept of 'la caméra-stylo' – the movie-camera used like a pen – by declaring: 'After having been successively a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to boulevard theatre, or a means of preserving the images of an era, [cinema] is gradually becoming a language [...] by which an artist can express his thoughts' (Williams 1993: 306). Nevertheless, it was the *Cahiers* group who popularised the concept during the 1950s. Most significantly, they applied the term to almost all of their favourite film-makers, irrespective of nationality or cultural status. Among French directors, Jean Renoir was considered the classic *auteur*, writing, directing and even starring in his own films. The first special issue of *Cahiers* was devoted to him in January 1952. The reappraisal of Renoir was facilitated by the re-release of *La Grande Illusion* (1937) in 1946, and the first showing of the unfinished *Une partie de campagne* (1936) the same year. These films, along with post-war Hollywood productions, were

watched by the *Cahiers* critics at the Cinémathèque française. But the subsequent veneration of popular Hollywood directors like Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks and Sam Fuller proved controversial: 'Part of the scandal created by the *politique* was caused by its application to popular American cinema, generally thought of as mass entertainment reproducing·dominant ideology and incompatible with the interests of art' (Cook 1985: 126). Ironically, whereas in the 1950s *la politique des auteurs* attacked *la tradition de qualité* while granting Hollywood directors like Hitchcock serious critical attention for the first time (see chapter 5), since the 1970s auteurist criticism in France has been used to defend 'quality' French art cinema against the very notion of anonymous Hollywood product which the *politique* originally challenged.

La nouvelle vague

In 1957 François Truffaut acted on his auteurist convictions and founded his own production company, Les Films du Carrosse, which was to produce nearly all his work from his second short, *Les Mistons* (1957) to his final feature *Vivement dimanche!* (1983). One year later, in June 1958, a new wave of French cinema – *la nouvelle vague* – was launched, with the preview at the Cinémathèque française of Claude Chabrol's first feature, *Le Beau Serge.* Set in a small rural community and shot with a rigorous realist style in bleak locations, the film was not a popular success. But it was followed in 1959 by three films which gave *la nouvelle vague* a commercial as well as an aesthetic impact: Chabrol's *Les Cousins*, Truffaut's *Les 400 coups* and Godard's *A bout de souffle.* While the latter was a fine example of collaboration within *la nouvelle vague* – conceived by Truffaut, it was scripted and directed by Godard, with Chabrol as artistic supervisor – *Les 400 Coups* was a personal triumph for its director. Banned from the 1958 Cannes film festival for his outspoken views as a critic, Truffaut won the best director award at Cannes a year later for *Les 400 Coups*, his first feature film. This 'instant critical and commercial success not only afforded Truffaut considerable artistic independence [...], but also made it much easier for other *Cahiers* critics turned film-makers to finance their own projects' (Monaco 1976: 13). While *Les Cousins* and *A bout de souffle* owed a particular debt to the Hollywood thriller, *la nouvelle vague* as a whole brought a fresh sensibility and a radical style of filming to French cinema, indeed arguably to world cinema. Godard's *A bout de souffle* startled audiences with the systematic use of jump-cuts, and Truffaut's *Les 400 Coups* ended in stunning fashion with a freeze-frame. In contrast with *la tradition de qualité*, 'the aesthetic of New Wave cinema was improvisational (unscripted), and its photography and editing· were far less mannered than its predecessors' (Cook 1985: 40). Working with low budgets, using the new cheaper and lighter equipment, able to film in real locations and at night if required, influenced by television practices like hand-held shooting and the interview straight to camera, the *nouvelle vague* film-

makers paradoxically achieved a vibrant and graphic realism while at the same time experimenting self-consciously with the medium of film.

La nouvelle vague is usually taken to encompass five principal directors: François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette, all of whom wrote for *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s (Monaco 1976). However, this canonical list, and indeed the dating of the movement as beginning in 1958/9, should be qualified. Agnès Varda, a major omission from some accounts of the movement, predated Chabrol, Truffaut and Godard by shooting her first feature, *La Pointe courte*, in 1954. Shot independently on a very small budget, the film alternated between realism and symbolism, as does much of Varda's subsequent work (see chapter 4). Everyday life in a fishing village provided a graphic background to a young couple's rather literary discussions about their struggling relationship. *La Pointe courte* was given a limited release in 1956, the year which saw another important precursor of *la nouvelle vague*, Roger Vadim's *Et Dieu créa la femme*, prove a great commercial success. Despite its low budget, Vadim's film benefited from the presence of Brigitte Bardot in her first screen role, and its performance at the box office encouraged production companies to finance projects by unknown directors, a policy which was instrumental in the evolution of *la nouvelle vague.* Contrary to the rhetoric of cinematic revolution which surrounds *la nouvelle vague*, the emergence of the movement was thus prepared not only by technical factors, allowing more flexible filming techniques, but also by the commercial significance of *Et Dieu créa la femme*, and even by the post-war system of state subsidy, which saw Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* gain a *prime de la qualité* alongside the 'quality' productions more readily associated with this prestige bonus (see above). One might conclude that, for all its stylistic innovations, 'the New Wave does not represent a sharp break with past practices, but the culmination of a development which had been apparent [...] ever since the war' (Crisp 1993: 376).

Among the forms explored by *la nouvelle vague* and related film-makers were fantasy genres hitherto neglected in France: science fiction in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1963), Godard's *Alphaville* (1964) and Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966); the musical in Godard's *Une femme est une femme* (1961) and Jacques Demy's *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964) and *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1966). The New Wave also tended to mix previously distinct genres, thus making use of generic structures while submitting them to a personal, auteurist vision. Truffaut's *Tirez sur le pianiste* (1960), for example, although an adaptation of an American crime novel by David Goodis, added comic and fairy-tale elements to the basic thriller narrative. By the middle of the decade, however, Truffaut had become much more conservative in terms of both narrative structure and genre, a development which resulted in his becoming the most commercially successful film-maker to come out of *la nouvelle vague.* Meanwhile, Chabrol had started to

work consistently within the thriller genre (see chapter 5), but both Eric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette did not break through commercially until the late 1960s and early 1970s (see chapter 3). If the mid-sixties marked the dissipation of the movement, it did not see any diminution in the formal innovations carried out by the most radical of the group, Jean-Luc Godard. While Truffaut and Chabrol had become *auteurs* in a fairly conventional mould, Godard remained at the cutting edge of both cinema and politics. Experimenting with colour in *Le Mépris* (1963) and *Pierrot le fou* (1965), he also challenged the traditional identification between audience and characters through his use of interview techniques in *Masculin-Féminin* (1966) and *Week-End* (1967). The latter, with its violent attack on the bourgeoisie and depiction of counter-culture terrorists, has been interpreted in retrospect as heralding the social unrest which shook France in May 1968 (see chapter 2). Godard's political activism was also evident in his collaboration with a group of film-makers including Agnès Varda, Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, on the protest film *Loin du Vietnam* (1967).

For all its artistic influence – manifest not just in Europe but in the work of American directors such as Arthur Penn and Martin Scorsese – *la nouvelle vague* was not a major commercial form. The French box office of the 1960s was dominated by the popular genres of the thriller and the comedy. Although cinema-going in France declined over the decade, from 355 million spectators in 1958 to 185 million in 1970 (Prédal 1991: 212), there were notable hits, including Yves Robert's childhood comedy *La Guerre des boutons* (1962) with 9.6 million spectators, and Gerard Oury's Resistance comedy *La Grande Vadrouille* (1966) with over 17 million (Prédal 1991: 404). The late 1960s also saw increasing numbers of pornographic films being made in France, a trend which was to culminate in the mid-seventies with the temporary acceptance of pornography into mainstream French cinema (see chapter 3).

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