

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

# Marcel Pagnol



BRETT BOWLES

**Marcel Pagnol**



Manchester University Press

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

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BRETT BOWLES

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## Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent upon national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at A-level. The study of film as art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about auteurism. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessarily coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the auteur perspective on film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain volumes of the series, and, throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception which includes socio-economic and political determinants, the work of a large

## **viii** SERIES EDITORS' FOREWORD

and highly skilled team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already well known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the formal and informal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES

ROBERT INGRAM

## Acknowledgements

Like most academic monographs, this book had a long gestation period and was completed with support from many people and institutions. In 1996 a residential fellowship at the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, combined with a dissertation stipend from Pennsylvania State University, allowed me to take the essential first steps of conducting archival research in Paris and Marseilles, as well as seeing first-hand the fabled Vieux Port, the villages of La Treille, Le Castellet, and the rugged terrain in the surrounding countryside where Pagnol shot many of his films.

For his infectious enthusiasm and services as a tour guide, I owe a particular debt to the late Georges Berni, who for thirty years promoted Le Petit Monde de Marcel Pagnol exhibit in Aubagne. In Marseilles, I would especially like to thank the Archives Départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône in Marseilles and Aix-en-Provence for allowing me to consult rare copies of the journal *Fortunio* and documents related to Pagnol's copyright dispute with Jean Giono; the Bibliothèque de Marseilles à Vocation Régionale – L'Alcazar for sharing the fascinating unpublished correspondence between Pagnol and Jean Ballard. The Cinémathèque de Toulouse generously provided access to its 168-minute print of *César* – the only complete, original copy of the film known to exist – while the Archives Françaises du Film in Bois d'Arcy allowed me to screen an equally rare nitrate copy of *Direct au cœur*, Roger Lion's 1932 adaptation of an early play by Pagnol and Paul Nivoix.

Like many researchers of French nineteenth- and twentieth-century performing arts, I owe a great intellectual debt to Auguste Rondel (1858–1934) and his voluminous inventory of press clippings now housed in the Arts du Spectacle wing of the Bibliothèque Nationale. As one of Pagnol's earliest contacts in the theatre world of Marseilles, it seems fitting that Rondel provided me, though unknowingly and well in advance, much of the raw material needed to understand Pagnol's evolution as a playwright

## X ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

and his transition to filmmaking. Similar assistance was provided in Beverly Hills by the Special Collections department of the Margaret Herrick Library and the New York State Archives in Albany, both of which house extensive American censorship files on Pagnol's films. Above all, I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Compagnie Méditerranéenne de Films in Boulogne-Billancourt, its former director Marianne Pagnol-Larroux, and her successor Nicolas Pagnol. Their generosity in granting me access to the company's voluminous press books, photo collections, and copy machine – despite my often critical take on their uncle/grandfather's work – enriched the project enormously. I will always have a fond memory of sipping Dom Perignon with Jacqueline Pagnol in her home on a chilly 11 November while discussing her late husband's career and her own starring roles in *Naïs*, *La Belle Meunière*, and *Manon des sources*.

As the book slowly evolved into its present form, funding and leave time were provided by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Iowa State University, as well as its Center for Excellence in the Arts and Humanities. Intellectually and morally, many colleagues in the profession have inspired and supported me: Dudley Andrew, Richard Abel, David Culbert, Chris Faulkner, Lynn Higgins, Keith Reader, Steve Ungar, and Alan Williams, to name only a few. Alongside Matthew Frost and the rest of the production team at Manchester University Press, series editors Diana Holmes and Robert Ingram have my sincere gratitude for their feedback during the writing process and their patient belief that I could transform what was initially a narrowly focused socio-political reading of Pagnol's rural films into a more comprehensive work of cinema studies. I can only hope that the final product justifies the long wait.

## Introduction: Pagnol as auteur

On 28 February 1995 an estimated 50,000 visitors descended on the town of Aubagne, located 15 kilometres east of Marseilles, to celebrate the centenary of Marcel Pagnol's birth. By midday traffic had blocked virtually all access roads and transformed several kilometres of the nearby national highway into a parking lot as motorists abandoned their vehicles on the shoulder and walked to town. Once there they discovered Aubagne as it had appeared a hundred years earlier through an old-fashioned Provençal fair complete with a farmer's market, demonstrations of traditional professions, acrobats, children's games, and a livestock display. After visiting 'Le Petit Monde de Marcel Pagnol', an expansive display of painted clay figurines depicting memorable scenes from his work, many fans left with their own handmade *santons* personifying their favourite Pagnol characters, including the filmmaker himself. Thousands of tourists also spilled over into the surrounding countryside to visit Pagnol's tomb in the nearby village of La Treille and other sites featured in his films and novels. The celebration confirmed Pagnol's status as a French cultural icon twenty-one years after his death and inaugurated a year-long series of events commemorating his life, including a travelling exhibition with stops in Paris, Marseilles, Lyon, and Monte Carlo as well as retrospective screenings of his films at the Modern Museum of Art in New York and the National Gallery in Washington, DC.

For Pagnol, cinema was the middle stage of an extraordinarily long and diverse career that began in boulevard theatre and ended in novels and memoirs. He excelled in all four genres, making him one of twentieth-century France's most popular and versatile dramatic

authors. In addition to earning him international fame, fortune, and the distinction of being the first filmmaker admitted to the French Academy, Pagnol's work also generated substantial controversy. In 1930 at the height of his success as a playwright, Pagnol publicly 'converted' from stage to screen, claiming that the invention of talking motion pictures rendered both live theatre and silent film obsolete. He provocatively defined cinema as the visual embodiment of speech, casting the image and cinematic technique as supplements to the spoken word.

The outrage sparked by that position, which struck theatre professionals as a treasonous act of commercial opportunism and cinephiles as a wilful degradation of the so-called 'seventh art', followed Pagnol throughout his career. Though critics often denigrated his work as 'canned theatre', its popular appeal was immediate and durable. Pagnol's trilogy of films set in Marseilles – *Marius* (1931), *Fanny* (1932), and *César* (1936), the first two co-directed adaptations of his hit plays by the same name – scored unprecedented ticket sales and have remained among the best-loved classics of French cinema.

Pagnol's precocious commercial success afforded him a unique measure of financial and creative independence in an industry struggling to compete with Hollywood imports because of underfunding and organisational disarray. From the founding of his own production company in 1932 until his retirement from filmmaking in 1954, Pagnol served as his own writer, producer, director, and distributor, even building his own studio complex and acquiring two small cinemas in Marseilles. Surrounded by a loyal troupe of technicians, employees, and actors, he created an entirely self-sufficient, vertically integrated system for making and marketing films. In 1930s France, it was the only viable alternative to Paris and a model of efficiency that generated profit margins rivalling and often exceeding those of larger competitors based in the capital.

Convinced that only the public had the right to judge his work and vindicated by its consistent box-office performance, Pagnol gleefully antagonised critics in a variety of ways: by sometimes holding unannounced sneak previews of his films for the general public rather than private pre-release screenings for journalists; by drowning out negative reviews in a blitz of hyperbolic newspaper and magazine advertisements; finally, by attacking his detractors directly. In late 1933 Pagnol founded *Les Cahiers du film*, a short-lived publicity

vehicle presented as a 'revue de doctrine cinématographique' (a journal of cinematic doctrine) whose purpose was to reaffirm his view of cinema as 'l'art d'imprimer, de fixer et de diffuser le théâtre' (the art of printing, definitively capturing, and disseminating theatre) (Pagnol 1933: 8) and to underscore commercial success of that formula. He went a step further in his 1949 essay *Critique des critiques* by characterising critics as envious, hypocritical assassins of true talent: 'des gens incapables d'agir ou de créer qui se donnent pour tâche, le plus sérieusement du monde, de juger les actions et les œuvres des autres' (persons incapable of doing or creating who in all seriousness assign themselves the task of judging others' actions and works) (Pagnol 1995: I, 1015). According to Pagnol, the arbitrary critical sabotage once endured by great authors such as Molière, Racine, and Stendhal was fortunately no longer possible thanks to the advent of modern marketing techniques that allowed direct communication between creative writers and their public. He concluded approvingly that 'c'est surtout dans le domaine du cinéma que l'autorité de la critique moderne pourrait être mesurée par un chiffre voisin de zéro' (with regard to cinema in particular, the authority of modern critics measures close to zero) (Pagnol 1995: I, 1033). This triumphant embrace of art-as-mass-commodity was of course anathema to most critics and many artists, only intensifying their disdain.

One of the first commentators to attempt a balanced reassessment of Pagnol was *Cahiers du cinéma* founder André Bazin, who in his 1959 classic *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* devoted a chapter to the filmmaker as part of an extended reflection on the links between theatre and cinema. Bazin broke new ground by rejecting the longstanding tendency to dismiss Pagnol's work as the cinematic recycling of theatrical convention and by recognising the value of subordinating image to speech – especially the richly inflected, performative variety of French spoken in Marseilles – as the basis of social and psychological realism.

L'accent ne constitue pas, chez Pagnol, un accessoire pittoresque, une note de couleur locale; il est consubstantiel au texte, et par-là, aux personnages. L'accent est la matière même de leur langage, leur réalisme ... Si Pagnol n'est pas le plus grand auteur de films parlants, il en est en tout cas quelque chose comme son génie. Le seul peut-être qui ait osé depuis 1930 une démesure verbale comparable à celle [la démesure visuelle] de Griffith ou de Stroheim au temps de l'image muette. Le seul auteur qui puisse lui être comparé aujourd'hui est

Chaplin et pour une raison précise: parce qu'il est aussi avec Pagnol le seul auteur-producteur libre.<sup>1</sup> (Bazin 1958–62: II, 121, 124)

Despite his admiration for Pagnol's creative independence and unrivalled talent as a screenwriter, Bazin deplored the end result of those qualities: a frequently self-indulgent style of filmmaking marked by slow pacing, static framing, extraordinarily long takes, overabundant dialogue, and uneven editing; in short, a blithe indifference to cinema's potential as a visual medium. He concluded in characteristically passionate terms by reaffirming his predecessors' negativity.

Les centaines de millions que Pagnol a gagnés dans le cinéma, il ose les consacrer pour son plaisir à des monstres cinématographiques que la production organisée et rationnelle ne saurait même concevoir ... Tout l'art de Chaplin est tendu vers sa propre critique et laisse un sentiment de la nécessité, de l'économie, et de la rigueur. Tout, au contraire, dans Pagnol contribue à un incroyable gâchis. Une plus grande absence de sens critique est difficilement concevable et relève d'une véritable pathologie de la création artistique.<sup>2</sup> (Bazin 1958–62: II, 124)

Justified in part by comparing Pagnol's work to that of accomplished peer directors from the 1930s such as Jean Vigo, Marcel Carné, and Jean Renoir, Bazin's scathing judgement was also influenced by the undeniably weak films Pagnol made late in his career, most notably *La Belle Meunière* (1948), a musical that recounted a fictional adventure of Franz Schubert's using experimental Rouxcolor technology and popular crooner Tino Rossi as the celebrated composer; and *Les Lettres de mon moulin* (1954), an incongruously burlesque rendering

- 1 Accent is for Pagnol not a quaint accessory, a note of local colour; it is substantial with the text and thus with the characters. Accent is the very substance of their language, their realism ... If Pagnol is not the greatest author of talking films, he is in any event something like their genius. He is perhaps the only one who since 1930 has dared a verbal excess comparable to the visual excess of D.W. Griffith or Erich von Stroheim during cinema's silent era. The only author to whom he can be compared today is Charlie Chaplin, and for one specific reason: because alongside Pagnol he is the only independent writer-producer-director.
- 2 For his own pleasure, Pagnol dares invest the hundreds of millions he has earned from cinema in making cinematic monstrosities inconceivable to organised, rational production ... Chaplin's entire art points to self-critique and creates a sense of necessity, economy, and rigour. On the contrary, everything in Pagnol's work contributes to an unbelievable mess. A more complete absence of critical judgement is hard to imagine and stems from a veritable pathology of artistic creation.

of three short stories by Alphonse Daudet. In addition, the three screen adaptations of *Topaze* (1932, 1936, 1951) – the first directed by Louis Gasnier for Paramount, the last two by Pagnol himself – never successfully captured the incisive social and moral critique or lived up to his original 1928 play.

Yet these shortcomings should not prevent acknowledging the maverick playwright-turned-director as a quintessential auteur whose work bears a unique personal stamp and constitutes one of the most intriguing and ambitious contributions to the development of French cinema. From his debut as a solo director in 1933, Pagnol's signature style depended not only on emphasising speech over visual technique, but on his embrace of realism through location shooting in the hills and villages of Provence, the use of actors with authentic local accents and often limited formal training, and the synchronous, on-site recording of sound. Deployed in a series of rural films adapted from short stories and novels by Jean Giono – starting with the improvised short feature *Jofroi* (1933) through to the big-budget hits *Angèle* (1934), *Regain* (1937), *La Femme du boulanger* (1938) – this realist mode of production always incorporated theatrically inspired scenes shot in studio. So did Pagnol's original screenplays, including *Merlusse* (1935), *Cigalon* (1935), *César*, and *La Fille du puisatier* (1940). His two best post-war films, *Nais* (1945) and *Manon des sources* (1952) were photographed almost entirely on location and confirmed his seminal influence on Italian neo-realism (Leprohon 1976: 399–400). In France proponents of the new wave also identified strongly with Pagnol's independence as a producer-writer-director and collaborative, improvisational shooting practices, prompting admiring retrospectives in *Cahiers du cinéma* and *L'Avant-scène cinéma* (Guégan 1965; Labarthe 1965; Delahaye 1969; Gauteur 1970; Leprohon 1976).

In virtually every Pagnol film the combination of theatrical artifice and documentary realism is accompanied by another formal paradox – a constant oscillation between comedy and drama, genres he viewed as complementary rather than antagonistic. Echoing philosopher Henri Bergson's *Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique* (1900) and his own view of performative speech as the essence of cinema, Pagnol conceived laughter according to its social and psychological functions, defining it in his 1947 essay *Notes sur le rire* as 'un chant de triomphe; l'expression d'une supériorité momentanée et brusquement découverte du rieur sur le moqué' (a song of triumph; the expression of a

sudden, momentary sense of superiority experienced by the laugher over the person being mocked) (Pagnol 1995: I, 980).

Like Bergson, Pagnol emphasised laughter's essential role in regulating society by identifying values, practices, and institutions in need of reform, but he added a new dimension to the theory by positing comedy as indispensable to creating the deep pathos necessary for effective drama. For Pagnol, true compassion and recognition of the ontological equality of all humans across artificially constructed social and cultural boundaries could emerge only following the sudden dissipation of laughter and the momentary feeling of superiority that sparked it. As he put it: 'Avoir pitié, c'est se sentir égal à une autre créature humaine qui souffre, et dont nous redoutons le sort pour nous-mêmes ... Egoïste par ses causes, elle est belle et noble dans ses conséquences. Elle est, comme le rire, le propre de l'homme, et le rire s'arrête où la pitié commence' (Pagnol 1995: I, 1006–7).<sup>3</sup>

By juxtaposing humankind's inherently selfish, competitive nature with its potential for compassion and solidarity, Pagnol draws on the humanistic tradition of Rabelais, Molière, and Chaplin, all of whom he cites as sources of inspiration. His belief in the social role of the artist as a comfort against injustice is expressed most directly in the following monologue from *Le Schpountz* (1938), which simultaneously satirised the disarray of the French cinema industry and refuted highbrow critics' scorn for popular comedy as a superficial, frivolous genre.

Quand on fait rire sur la scène ou sur l'écran, on ne s'abaisse pas, bien au contraire ... Celui qui fait oublier un instant les petites misères – la fatigue, l'inquiétude, et la mort – celui qui fait rire des êtres qui ont tant de raisons de pleurer, celui-là leur donne la force de vivre, et on l'aime comme un bienfaiteur ... Le mérite est encore plus grand puisqu'il sacrifie son orgueil pour alléger notre misère. On devrait dire saint Molière; on pourrait dire saint Charlot ... Ne dites pas de mal du rire. Le rire, c'est une chose humaine, une vertu qui n'appartient qu'aux hommes et que Dieu, peut-être, leur a donnée pour les consoler d'être intelligents.<sup>4</sup> (Pagnol 1995: II, 727–8)

3 Feeling compassion means feeling equal to another human being who is suffering and whose fate we fear will befall us ... Selfish in its causes, compassion is lovely and noble in its consequences. Like laughter, it is uniquely human, and laughter stops where compassion begins.

4 When one makes others laugh on stage or on screen, one does not lower oneself, quite the contrary ... He who makes it possible to momentarily forget

If this passage offers further evidence of Pagnol's penchant for self-indulgence, it also suggests the extraordinarily rich social and cultural content of his films, which hinge on the reconciliation of tensions associated with France's difficult transition to modernity in the context of the Great Depression: the persistence of regional identity among increasingly strong national cohesion; the erasure of rural culture by urbanisation; generational conflict between parents who stress familial duty and children who seek self-fulfilment and independence; changes in traditional gender roles, particularly with regard to sexuality, and the consequences of that shift. In inter-war and immediate post-war years, these issues resonated strongly not only with French spectators, but with international audiences as well. Since then Pagnol's films have remained among the most marketable French exports to the rest of Europe, the Americas, and beyond thanks to his unique talent for crafting stories that are culturally specific yet remain broadly relatable to spectators worldwide.

In its attempt to balance the particular and the universal, as well as comedy and drama, Pagnol's representation of French society always risks caricature and cultural stereotyping. Even at the peak of his success in the 1930s, popular film magazines sometimes poked fun at his formulaic recycling of character types and themes, especially in the *Mareilles Trilogy* (see [Figure 1](#)). That same attitude resonates in the equivocal opening lines of Bazin's essay: 'Avec La Fontaine, Cocteau, et Jean-Paul Sartre, Pagnol complète l'Académie Française idéale de l'Américain moyen. Or, sa popularité internationale, Pagnol la doit d'abord paradoxalement au régionalisme de son œuvre' (Bazin 1958–62: II, 119).<sup>5</sup>

In France the unusual legacy of critical scorn and popular success attached to Pagnol's films has generated a voluminous yet largely superficial and repetitive corpus of publications aimed at the general

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miserias such as fatigue, worry, and death – he who makes laugh those who have so many reasons to cry, he gives them the strength to live, and he is loved like a benefactor ... His worth is even greater since he sacrifices his pride to lighten our misery. We should say Saint Molière; we could say Saint Chaplin ... Don't speak ill of laughter. Laughter is a human thing, a virtue that belongs only to human beings and that God perhaps gave them to console them for being intelligent.

5 Alongside *La Fontaine*, *Cocteau* and *Jean-Paul Sartre*, Pagnol rounds out the average American's ideal French Academy. Yet, paradoxically, Pagnol owes his international popularity primarily to the regionalism of his work.

public: anecdotal memoirs by those who knew the man in some capacity (Audouard 1973; Castans 1975, 1978; Calmels 1978; Galabru 1999; Hernou 2005); novelistic biographies embellishing fact with imagined dialogue and other unverifiable inventions (Berni 1980, 1981; Castans 1987; Jelot-Blanc 1998; Ferrari and Pagnol 2000; Jelot-Blanc 2010); annotated collections of iconography (Bens 1994; Castans 1982, 1993); even illustrated guidebooks to the outdoor shooting locations of his films (Dariès 1995; More 1996; Dehayes and Pagnol 2002). This hagiographic tone persists even in the best French scholarship: Jean-Baptiste Luppi's meticulous account of Pagnol's life and early work until 1931 (Luppi 1995) and Claude Beylie's *Marcel Pagnol, ou le cinéma en liberté*, the first serious scholarly overview of his career as a filmmaker. First published in 1974 following Pagnol's death and revised twice since (1986 and 1995), it offers perceptive insights into recurring themes and a comprehensive filmography, but often sacrifices critical analysis to admiring description. As for English-language scholarship on Pagnol, it has been comparatively limited in scope and volume, ranging from useful though uneven overviews (Caldicott 1977; Michalczyk 1980) to insightful articles and book chapters focused primarily on the Marseilles trilogy (Vincendeau 1990, 2009; Andrew 1995; Heath 2004).

Taking up the challenge issued by Bazin fifty years ago, this book offers the first comprehensive, scrupulously documented, and unapologetically critical reading of Pagnol's cinema. Its aim is to highlight his singular contribution to classic French film as an auteur and businessman while at the same time evaluating the larger cultural and aesthetic stakes of his movies. Doing so means reconsidering Pagnol in several ways: first, by offering a reading of style and technique that links his theories on film, theatre, and the primacy of dialogue over image with French economic and social anxieties triggered by the arrival of talking cinema and the Great Depression; second, by framing his rural films as an alternative form of poetic realism that draws on a history of representations encompassing French painting, literature, and silent cinema; third, by mapping his complex personal and professional relations with influential contemporaries such as André Antoine, Jean Renoir, and René Clair; finally, by highlighting Pagnol's status in the 1930s as a successful industrialist and folk hero who combined quintessentially French artisanal production values with an innovative, highly efficient system of

marketing and distribution modelled after Hollywood. Rather than adopting a strictly chronological approach, the book's five chapters are structured thematically, beginning with an overview that traces the emergence of Pagnol's signature style in theatre and ending with an epilogue that surveys the afterlife of his work in France since the mid-1970s.

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## The emergence of a dramatic author

Marcel Pagnol began his life in Aubagne, a small town in south-east France near Marseilles, on 28 February 1895, the same year that the Lumière brothers perfected the cinematograph and held the first public screenings in Paris. Although admiring commentators have often cited that chronological coincidence as a sign that Pagnol's fate was somehow cosmically intertwined with cinema, nothing in his family background or early years suggests any such predisposition. His ancestors were middling peasants and artisans anchored firmly in the region, since the mid-sixteenth century on his father's side and the early nineteenth on his mother's. The first of four children born to Joseph Pagnol, a public schoolteacher dedicated to promoting the secular values of the Republic, and to his wife Augustine, a seamstress and devout Catholic who had her son secretly baptised, Marcel enjoyed a happy and uneventful childhood. The Pagnols moved several times to facilitate Joseph's rise through the ranks, but in mid-1900 settled permanently in Marseilles just off La Canebière, approximately two kilometres north of the Vieux Port. Beginning in 1904 the family divided its time between the city and a rented summer house in the tranquil Marcellin valley between Marseilles and Aubagne. Later recounted with lyrical nostalgia in his novelistic memoir *Souvenirs d'enfance* (1957–59), the young Marcel's vacations in the countryside instilled in him a strong sense of regional identity and underscored the contrast between rural and urban culture, thereby providing the central themes for his future screenplays. Equally important, his exploration of the area also served as an unconscious, preliminary scouting of the outdoor locations where he would shoot many of his films.

To the consternation of his father, Pagnol was an underachiever as a student, described by his instructors as ‘intelligent mais léger’ (‘intelligent but frivolous’) and ‘peu travailleur’ (‘not very hardworking’) (Luppi 1995: 90). His class rank in science and maths remained consistently mediocre throughout middle and high school, but he gradually began to excel at languages after being forced to repeat a grade in 1907. His mother’s untimely death in 1910 from pneumonia and father’s remarriage two years later to a much younger woman appears not to have affected Pagnol adversely, for he won composition awards in Latin, English, and German on the way to receiving his baccalaureate in 1913. After graduation Marcel dutifully fulfilled his family’s expectations by training to become a teacher like his father, paternal aunts, and uncle. Yet he dreamed of surpassing the banality of civil service through creative writing. During his final years at *lycée* he began publishing bucolic poems in a local literary magazine called *Massilia*, drawing inspiration from Virgil, nineteenth-century Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral, and his own summer adventures alongside best friend David ‘Lili’ Magnan (Luppi 1995: 94–100).

These first publications ignited an entrepreneurial spirit and an irrepressible ambition to achieve fame and fortune that would subsequently define his career as both playwright and filmmaker. Leading a team of recruited classmates, Marcel founded two literary magazines. The first, titled *Le Bohème*, folded after only two issues for lack of funding; the second, *Fortunio*, fared somewhat better, but the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 interrupted its publication. Conscripted shortly thereafter, Pagnol served less than six months in all, receiving a medical discharge in May 1915 and escaping the murderous combat that killed 1.5 million Frenchmen, including his friend Lili and cousin André Pagnol.

In early 1916 he received a *licence ès lettres* degree from the University of Montpellier, married sweetheart Simonne Collin after a brief courtship, and embarked on a career teaching English that over the next three years took the couple from Pamiers to Aix-en-Provence and back to Marseilles (Luppi 1995: 139–52). The homecoming allowed him to revive *Fortunio* with the assistance of several former classmates. The magazine devoted roughly equal space to original literary works by local authors and criticism of books and plays, boasting a print run of about 800 by early 1921 (Luppi 1995: 163). More important, it provided Pagnol a forum for publishing sections of *Ulysse chez*

les *Phéaciens* and *Catulle* – plays that drew directly on classical Greco-Roman literature – as well as two coming-of-age novellas inspired by the author's first loves, *La petite fille aux yeux sombres* (later reworked and published under the title *Pirouettes*) and *Les mémoires de Jacques Panier* (later revised and republished as *Le mariage de Peluque*). Well written though rather formulaic in their melodrama, these early works exemplify the twin creative strategies that would subsequently define Pagnol's dramatic writing: embellishing pre-existing stories and character types from various narrative traditions with references to his own experiences and Provençal culture.

### Adapting to Paris

Significantly, there is no mention in Pagnol's voluminous autobiographical writings of his ever having any interest in or exposure to cinema prior to an unexpected transfer to Paris in mid-1922. Assigned to the Lycée Condorcet, one of France's most prestigious schools, Pagnol worked tirelessly to break into the literary world while continuing to teach full-time. His unpublished correspondence reveals a seething ambition to succeed by any possible means in the face of intense homesickness, recurring eye problems and migraines caused by overwork and poor diet, constant financial worries, and increasingly strained relations with Simonne. Sleeping little and writing up to ten hours a day, he was initially drawn to cinema not as a technology or a form of artistic expression, but as an expedient way to make money. In a characteristically vehement letter to *Fortunio* co-founder Jean Ballard from 27 November 1922, Pagnol argued that:

les grandes manifestations de la pensée aujourd'hui n'ont pas 36 formes. Il n'y a que trois qui peuvent nous intéresser, quatre au plus: l'édition, en premier lieu, puis le théâtre (les théâtres parisiens font 7.000.000 de recette par semaine, selon *Comœdia*) puis la musique, puis le cinéma. Le reste n'intéresse personne et seuls les spécialistes lisent les journaux spéciaux. Je vous propose donc d'agrandir encore la place accordée aux livres, au théâtre, et à la musique. Le cinéma, lui, doit nous rapporter beaucoup d'argent à bref délai.<sup>1</sup> (Archives de la

1 Today there are not 101 forms of great intellectual expression. There are only three that can interest us, four at the most: the printed word, first of all, then theatre (Parisian theatres take in 7 million francs weekly according to [the

Bibliothèque Municipale de Marseilles à Vocation Régionale, hereafter ABMVR)

He supported that position by demanding that the journal shift its focus from publishing original literary works to music, theatre, and film review columns: 'Celle du cinéma peut nous rapporter dix à douze mille francs par an. J'ai des propositions de la Paramount' (The cinema rubric can make us ten to twelve thousand francs a year. I have proposals from Paramount) (ABMVR, undated letter to Ballard, late 1922). These 'proposals' were likely not solicitations to purchase the rights to the mediocre plays and novels he was frenetically peddling, but offers to pay for favourable reviews of the company's new releases – a common practice at the time.

Pagnol appears not to have actually written any commissioned pieces for the American movie juggernaut or had much interest in cinema overall, for his regular review column in *Fortunio* focused almost exclusively on boulevard theatre (Pagnol 1922–24). The sole film critique he published was a scathing dismissal of Abel Gance's surrealist-influenced masterpiece *La Roue* that proclaimed the artistic inferiority of silent cinema to both theatre and the novel:

La parfaite platitude de la production actuelle n'a jamais fait aucun doute pour personne, sauf pour les 'créateurs' de films, qui sont les premiers – et les seuls – à se reconnaître beaucoup de mérite. Cependant, il est indiscutable que le Septième Art a des possibilités égales à celles du théâtre, s'il m'est permis de comparer les deux; et, depuis toujours les intellectuels du monde attendent avec inquiétude le *cinégraphiste* de génie qui réalisera la première œuvre digne de ce nom.<sup>2</sup> (Pagnol 1923: 56)

Recasting the nearly unanimous acclaim that had greeted Gance's film as 'de la publicité moderne qui nous gonfle en forme de phare

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daily arts paper] *Comœdia*), then music, then cinema. The rest doesn't interest anybody and only specialists read specialised journals. I am therefore proposing to further increase the space devoted to books, the theatre, and music. As for cinema, it can certainly pay off big for us in short order.

- 2 The utter flatness of today's productions has never been contested by anybody except for the 'creators' of films who are the first and only ones to acknowledge their worth. However, it is certain that the seventh art has a potential equal to that of theatre, if I may compare the two; and intellectuals worldwide are still anxiously awaiting the ingenious *cinégraphiste* who will produce the first work of art worthy of that name.

une très vulgaire vessie' (modern advertising that would have us see the most common candles as great beacons), Pagnol added:

Parmi les 'trouvailles' que célèbre la critique, il faut signaler l'amour du mécanicien pour sa locomotive: il l'a *baptisée*. Est-il besoin de rappeler ici qu'Emile Zola a écrit *La Bête humaine*? M. Gance, par sa réalisation assez froide de cette conception émouvante, nous a montré quel abîme le sépare de l'homme de génie. La moindre page du célèbre roman vaut les 11.000 mètres de la pellicule ... Il n'y a donc là qu'un film assez banal, relevé par deux ou trois tentatives qui ne sont point géniales, mais simplement ingénieuses. En fin de compte, *La Roue* est assez loin d'être un bon film selon la formule.<sup>3</sup> (Pagnol 1923: 57)

Published under the pseudonym 'J-H Roche' to conceal his identity, these remarks constituted the reactionary manifesto of an ambitious, bitter young author who at the time felt unjustly excluded from an entertainment industry defined by rigid aesthetic codes and self-serving institutional practices rather than talent, hard work, or quality. The contempt he would feel throughout his career for professional critics is expressed here publicly for the first time, targeting by name the renowned Emile Vuillermoz for having praised Gance as a 'un génie qui a donné une orientation nouvelle au cinéma et provoqué une révolution dans l'esthétique moderne' (a genius whose work pointed cinema in a new direction and revolutionised modern aesthetics) (Pagnol 1923: 56). As a further protest against what he perceived as the commercial corruption of art, Pagnol often divided his play reviews into two sections respectively titled 'Théâtre' and 'Commerce', with the latter receiving summary, usually dismissive treatment.

Yet privately Pagnol was already coming to accept the necessity of financing and publicising his own work in a highly competitive environment. In his single-handed attempt to launch *Fortunio* in Paris, Pagnol did everything from negotiating advertising fees, subscription rates, and the cost of paper and printing to delivering the final copies

3 Chief among the 'innovations' celebrated by critics is the love of the mechanic for his locomotive, which he *named*. Is it necessary to recall that Emile Zola wrote *The Human Beast*? In his rather cold rendering of this moving idea, Mr Gance showed us the chasm that separates him from a man of genius. The least significant page of the famous novel is worth 11,000 metres of the film ... This leaves us with a rather banal film distinguished by two or three attempts which are the work not of genius, but of ingenuity. In the end, *The Wheel* is far from being a good film, even by formulaic standards.

to vendors, at times even reselling review copies of books received by the journal in order to keep it afloat (ABMVR, letter to Ballard, 1 February 1923). His natural talent for marketing is confirmed by the journal's shift from monthly to bi-monthly format in January 1923, a new cohort of Parisian advertisers, and a growing subscription list of around 250 by late spring (ABMVR, letter to Ballard, 29 April 1923). Along the way Pagnol also cultivated contacts with a number of high-profile personalities (novelist Henri Béraud, actor Edouard de Max, actor-directors Firmin Gémier and Charles Dullin), literary publishing houses (Gallimard, Hachette, Grasset, Albin Michel), arts newspapers or journals (*La Nouvelle Revue Française*, *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, *Le Mercure de France*, *Comœdia*), and boulevard theatres (Arts, Nouveautés, Variétés, Madeleine) that he would later use to good advantage (ABMVR, letter to Ballard, 19 March 1923). The experience convinced the future studio head, as he put it a decade later in *Les Cahiers du film*, that 'le commerce est le fumier qui nourrit la fleur de n'importe quel art' (business is the manure that nourishes the flower of all art) (Pagnol 1933: 3).

In that spirit of commercialism, the aspiring playwright rejected classically inspired drama as unmarketable to popular audiences hooked on topical plays treating current events, instead refocusing his work around socio-political satire. In late 1922 he and Paul Nivoix, a fellow transplant from Marseilles, co-authored 'Boxe' ('Boxing'), a three-act satirical play based loosely on the controversial fixed championship bout that had taken place in September between Georges Carpentier and Louis 'Battling Siki' Fall (ABMVR, letter to Gaston Mouren, 15 November 1922). While unsuccessfully trying to sell the manuscript as both a film treatment and a stage production, Pagnol set to work with Nivoix on *Tonton, ou Joseph veut rester pur*, a racy vaudevillian farce about a woman who attempts desperately to get pregnant immediately after the death of her rich husband so that she may access the fortune denied her by a pre-nuptial agreement (ABMVR, letter to Mouren, 15 November 1922). Signed Nivoix and 'Castro', another of Pagnol's early literary pseudonyms, the play was rehearsed briefly in December 1922 at a small neighbourhood theatre in the Belleville district of Paris, but not publicly performed until August 1923 when it was picked up by the Théâtre des Variétés in Marseilles to fill a one-week slot at the end of the season.

Encouraged by that first small taste of success, Pagnol soon began

distancing himself from *Fortunio* in order to focus on his own projects and escape the hopeless feeling that he might never succeed as a solo author. ‘Celui qui n’a rien écrit à 30 ans est un raté, un vrai raté’, he confided to another friend in Marseilles. ‘A 35 ans, il est irrémédiablement perdu’ (He who hasn’t published anything by the age of 30 is a failure, a true failure. At 35, he is irrevocably lost) (ABMVR, letter to Mouren, 10 March 1923). Though he continued to contribute occasional copy through late 1924, Pagnol effectively turned over control of the journal to Ballard in August 1923, when it first appeared with the subtitle *Cahiers du sud*. Under Ballard’s leadership the journal returned to prioritising original prose and poetry over criticism and reviews, eventually adopting *Cahiers du sud* as its only appellation in January 1925 and enjoying a reputation for launching up-and-coming authors until it eventually ceased publication in 1966.

### Modern classicism

While extricating himself from *Fortunio* Pagnol was still searching for a style of his own between classicism and modernism. Having already rejected traditional verse dialogue as commercially unviable, he also disliked contemporary dramatists such as André Gide and Jean Cocteau, ‘des exemples à ne pas suivre qui défigurent prétentieusement la langue’ (examples not to follow who pretentiously disfigure language). Posing again as ‘J-H Roche’, Pagnol expressed particular contempt for Cocteau’s minimalist, avant-garde rendering of *Antigone*, which he claimed:

a dépouillé la pièce de Sophocle de son incomparable lyrisme verbal et de la sonorité des vers antiques au profit d’un invisible porte-voix qui remplit très exactement la fonction des sous-titres au cinéma. Cette *Antigone* est brève, resserrée, toute en action; la plastique et le geste y ont une grande importance; elle est accompagnée d’une musique de scène; ce sont là toutes les caractéristiques d’un film. Cette *Antigone* est un film parlé.<sup>4</sup> (Pagnol 1923a: 182)

- 4 stripped Sophocles’ play of its incomparable verbal lyricism and the ancient verses of their musicality in favour of an invisible narrator who serves exactly the same function as cinematic subtitles. This *Antigone* is truncated, tightly packed with action; plasticity and gesture are of primary importance; it is accompanied by stage music; these are all the characteristics of a film. This *Antigone* is a spoken film.