Chapter 2
The Golden Age of French Cinema

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

THE STYLE OF THE 1930s

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

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

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

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

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

THE "TALKIES"

The 1930s began with the sudden disappearance of silent film productions (first in the United States and rapidly all over Europe a couple of years later). With this technical and aesthetic revolution came the economic crisis of 1929 followed by the Great Depression, debilitating the American continent and resulting in a dramatic relegation of economic activities in Europe, as well as the emergence of several ominous dictatorships. As a result, in terms of the film industry, the 1930s can best be described as an era of reorganization. The industry was drawn closer each year to a government-regulated system (similar to those of Italy and Germany), and was eventually assimilated by the COIC (Comité de l'organisation de l'industrie cinématographique), during the first months of World War II. The COIC was later renamed CNC (Centre national de la cinématographie) in 1946. Within this period came the "talkies." The innovation of sound in motion pictures actually goes all the way back to the invention of the Cinématographe in 1895. The first experimentation with the synchronous dialogue system occurred when Louis Lumière filmed a conversation between Mr. Janssen and Mr. Lagrange, and later that day projected this particular shot during the Congress of the French Photographic Societies (Congrès des sociétés française de photographie) in Lyon on June 12, 1895. Using a primitive form of synchronized dialogue, the two protagonists stood behind the screen during the projection and repeated word for word their initial conversation. During the entire decade of the 1930s, French cinema did not evolve much technologically despite the dramatic historical events that served as a backdrop, but the coming of sound eventually triggered immeasurable effects. The con-

tribution of sound required the standardization of film projection speed (twenty-four images per second), which improved the quality of projection. Film subjects evolved since dialogues allowed the spectator to penetrate the characters' psychology; as a result, the performance of the actors also had to adjust. Actors became living heroes who were known and seen in a different way by the public and served as a sort of landmark to national memory. Silent movies did not allow this "proximity": often superficial, they limited the public's credibility while the spoken word only increased it. Thirty-five years after the invention of motion pictures, actors and actresses could be heard interacting with one another on the screen. The silent era had been superseded forever.

On October 6, 1927, in a New York theater, Warner Brothers' Studios—a failing film company at the time—projected Alan Crossland's *The Jazz Singer,* starring Al Jolson, a giant step for cinematographic history with its memorable "Wait a minute! Wait a minute! You ain't heard nothin' yet!" Although including just a couple of "talking" scenes (a few synchronized dialogues and a song), the film was officially the first talking movie released to the public. In France, Gaumont Studios (with the collaborative efforts of two Danish engineers, Axel Petersen and Arnold Poulsen) had already developed sonorization, but the international marketing for this new cinematographic advancement came too late. One year later, in 1928, three giants from the electrical industry started a "war of licenses" that was resolved with an international compromise. Two American companies, RCA and Western Electric, and one German, Tobis-Klangfilm, delineated the technical standards of the new medium and became responsible for equipping thousands of theaters around the world with costly and complex equipment. In addition, all the silent film studios had to be completely reorganized and refurnished, and ultimately sound booths were now installed to shelter a newcomer: the sound operator. It was only in the fall of 1929, two years after the Americans had accomplished it, that the first studios were entirely equipped in France (studios of Epinay, with a German method, and Billancourt, with the American).

L'Argent, officially remembered as the final film of the silent era, was shown in mid-January 1929 on French boulevards and was followed at Aubert-Palace two weeks later on January 30 by *The Jazz Singer,* which was seen by half a million people during the period of its initial screening. Later that year, on October 22, the first French talking motion picture, *The Queen's Necklace (Le collier de la reine),* played. Although the designation of "first French talking film" has somehow remained a toss-up between André Hugon's *The Three Masks (Les trois masques,* 1929, produced in Twickenham for Pathé-Cinéma

Studios) and Gaston Ravel and Tony Lekain's *Le collier de la reine* (1929, for Gaumont Studios), most film historians believe that the Gaumont Studios' production was released a day earlier. Nevertheless, neither film incorporated more than segments of dialogue and songs to accompany the omnipresent musical arrangements. Those productions were in reality silent movies, to which a musical accompaniment and a few hasty dialogue scenes were added. The shots were long with a primitive set, and the camera remained fixed, just as in the time of Méliès. Technical imperatives took over the mise-en-scène, and actors now dealt with a cumbersome microphone usually hidden behind a seat or in a plant. Because dubbing techniques did not benefit from any significant technological development during the first part of the 1930s, many French as well as other European motion pictures were filmed and produced in multiple-language versions, either filming on the very same set with sequencing casts of different nationalities or even, intermittently, with a single set of actors mouthing words in a different language while the actual foreign-language speakers were hiding on the set, out of camera range.[1] For authors and playwrights, however, this terrible regression actually represented a period of assured prosperity since their plays were quickly adapted to screenplay and then to the screen. In a similar fashion, songwriters and music hall singers took advantage of this blooming revolution (it truly was not before 1930 that French films of authentic importance started to be produced).[2] However, a great deal of anxiety grew among actors of the silent era, since they now had to pass the test of sound. Photogenic presence, until the advent of sound films the only priority, suddenly became of somewhat secondary importance to the requirement of diction. Some careers were brought to a screeching halt, such as those of Abel Gance and Marcel L'Herbier.[3]

In the end, it was the sound operator who became the master of the game. His judgment on the recording quality and the vocal performance of the players ultimately determined the success of the movie. The cinematographic voice had to be harmonious, and this was what benefited theater actors. Although it may seem almost absurd today, one of the reasons why many critics and professionals of the cinematographic industry at the time did not welcome the new technological change was a legitimate apprehension that sound pictures would be artistically confined to the flawless elocution required by dramatic art. Around 1930, immediately after the revolution of sound (depicted by René Clair, for instance, as a "redoubtable monster"), the polemic about its necessity and dangers was for many directors perplexing and quite contradictory. Jean Renoir, an early supporter of the sound system and aware of the new artistic potential it could create, was not contracted to direct feature films between 1928 and 1931, while René

Clair, who resented it, was one of the first filmmakers to use sound resourcefully (*Under the Roofs of Paris,* 1930). Surpassing his initial struggles, Renoir, along with Julien Duvivier, became predominant directors of French cinematic masterpieces of the 1930s, while directors Gance and L'Herbier as noted earlier, among others, struggled with the new requirements imposed by the sound revolution and remained forever trapped in an outdated past. Even Gance, who envisioned *End of the World* (*La fin du monde,* 1930) as a silent movie and later incorporated technical modernization by offering an original sound angle, was unable to circumvent the evermore complicated economics leading at times to commercial fiascos. Film artists and movie critics constantly had to catch up with sound engineers and businessmen of the movie industry who controlled the technical innovations and inventions linked to sound.

Because of the sudden explosion of this new cultural environment, film historians commonly assign a premature disappearance of Avant-garde cinematography around 1930, while in reality several brilliant movies of this type were shot and produced during these very early years, including two feature films subsidized by the Vicomte de Noailles,[4] an affluent and passionate benefactor. Luis Buñuel's *The Golden Age* (*L'âge d'or,* 1930) was achieved with an unaffected independence and impudence. Acclaimed by Surrealist followers, much like his earlier work of 1929, *An Andalusian Dog (Un chien andalou), The Golden Age* unexpectedly motivated extremists to destroy the opening-night theater and caused the prefect of police to prohibit all further projections of the film.[5]

From 1929 on, French cinema required new stars. In the gigantic Paramount Studios equipped in Joinville-le-Pont, as well as in Berlin for the German film industry, teams shot up to six versions of the same movie to be spoken in different languages. It has been said that France's start was quite slow with the talkies, but no later than 1930, Avant-garde filmmaker René Clair finished *Under the Roofs of Paris* in Epinay, and in the following two years he completed *The Million, Freedom for Us,* and *Bastille Day* (*Quatorze juillet,* 1932). With the success of *Under the Roofs of Paris,* Clair became a director with an international reputation, above all in Berlin, where his artistic creations—admired for its dreamlike atmospheres and its technique—had an inspiring effect on a few young directors, most notably Marcel Carné.[6] René Clair's main objective with his first talking movie was to animate, through the support of music and song, the life of the *petit peuple* (middle-class Parisians), which ironically was of course anything but realistic. Scrupulously depicted in a studio by Russian set designer Lazare Meerson, photographer Georges Périnal, and composers Raoul Moretti and René Nazelles, *Under the Roofs of Paris* represented the

Annabella (Anna) and Georges Rigaud (Jean) in René Clair's *Bastille Day* (*Quatorze juillet*, 1932), (Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive).

lives of several protagonists verging on street crime and personal antagonism. Nevertheless, it must be noted that although dealing with a narrative of deep social realism, the director's interest never edged on graphically repulsive and ordinary voyeurism, but rather focused on the mode in which the camaraderie of two partners (Albert Préjean and Gaston Modot) prevailed by solving their contention over a charming but flirtatious young woman (Pola Illery). The film was first presented at the Moulin Rouge in May 1930 as an authentic talkie but did not receive any of its anticipated adulation or even popularity. As paradoxical as it may appear, the international success of *Under the Roofs of Paris* flourished (August 1930 in Berlin, and later that same year in December in New York City) because of its representation of the people of Paris, which precisely corresponded to the clichéd images of Parisian street singers, café ambience, and the popular character of French songs that eventually transformed the film into an emblematic French musical comedy.

René Clair was one of the most eminent French directors during the years of conversion from silent films to sound pictures and is still

considered one of the most significant auteurs of the twentieth century. Beginning as an assistant to filmmaker Jacques de Baroncelli, Clair developed a visual inquisitiveness for the Surrealist experience while maintaining an unadulterated awareness for the more popular musical-comedy genre, as well as a real panache for social satire. Just a few years after his first sound accomplishments, characterized by an aesthetic of simplicity and classical clarity, Clair's directing career took him to England, where he completed *The Ghost Goes West* (1935), and later *Break the News* (1938), starring Maurice Chevalier and Jack Buchanan. During World War II, Clair traveled to Hollywood, where he directed *The Flame of New Orleans* (1941), *I Married a Witch* (1942), *It Happened Tomorrow* (1944), and *And Then There Were None* (1945). He finally returned to France during the 1950s and successfully resumed his directing career, as he became one of the most prominent advocates of popular entertainment (while still maintaining his auteur icon), with big-budget musical productions starring the most popular names of the times: *Beauties of the Night* (*Belles de nuit,* 1952) with Martine Carol and Gérard Philipe, and *The Grand Maneuvers* (*Les grandes manoeuvres,* 1955), with Gérard Philipe and Michèle Morgan. Clair's masterpiece of the early talkie period is *The Million,* starring René Lefèvre and Annabella,[7] a musical comedy about two penniless artists persecuted by hardhearted creditors who one day win the lottery and suddenly become millionaires. Unfortunately, the lottery ticket is in a coat that had been sold to a pawnshop dealer and which is found after countless tribulations at the opera house in an unusually happy conclusion. The story, adapted from a vaudeville sketch written twenty years earlier by Georges Berr and Marcel Guillemaud, immediately seduced René Clair with its attractive combination of traditional burlesque and Avant-garde character. During the shooting, however, the director's preference went to the musical adaptation rather than the theatrical representation. The musical element, expressed by animated popular songs, corresponded to "operetta," and thus *The Million* became a permanent reference for French musical comedies at the beginning of the sound era.

With its inventive social caricature, *Freedom for Us* may have served as the inspiration for Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936).[8] Following his escape from jail, Louis (Raymond Cordy) develops a phonograph production technique, a highly mechanized assembly line where workers are reduced to mere robots that is just as tyrannical as the prison he just fled. Eventually blackmailed with his past, he joins up with Emile, his old cellmate, to seek new adventures on the road. Thanks to its futuristic sets, *Freedom for Us* conveys an earnest message: the challenging and ultimate negation of the concept of modern work. Clair's new vision, remote and at the same time incredibly close in its poetic

sensuality, seduced the world. Other directors, including several foreigners Alexander Korda, Erich von Stroheim, and Billy Wilder, demonstrated a similar technique and talent during the 1930s. In particular, the Russian director Anatole Litvak contributed to future poetic realism in *Lilac* (*Coeur de Lilas,* 1931). This picture introduced two fledgling actors, Fernandel and Jean Gabin, who would reign over French cinema for more than forty years.

Meanwhile, French directors had to recruit new faces along with new voices, and theater logically supplied this need with new talents and, of course, new subjects. It was the age of the so-called *théâtre filmé* ("filmed" or "canned" theater), highly criticized by intellectuals for its entertainment value, yet successful among audiences. Motion pictures no longer monopolized the images; the charm of the script was uncovered, and the public now related to famous quotes in order to remember their favorite films. Among the lucky actors were Michel Simon, Harry Baur, Raimu, Gaby Morlay, Jules Berry, and Arletty.

During this shift from silent movies to talkies, an exceptional phase of concentrated technological advancement abroad, French filmmaking significantly expanded, increasing from fifty-two to ninety-four features. From 1931 onward it sustained a similar growth, producing more than one hundred motion pictures annually until the end of the decade. As a result of the sound revolution, replacement and operating expenses multiplied threefold; because of these new financial demands, most filmmakers could no longer fund and manage their own projects. The filmmaking industry had been converted to a new and powerfully lucrative investment system set in motion by a multitude of small, inexperienced businesses.[9] The struggle for cinematographic preeminence between Hollywood and the European film industry implicated all production activities. As a result of this international tension, exceptional motion pictures were shaped and achieved by small producers, who frequently had to fight their way through the byzantine world of financial backing with often derisory financial assistance. What is most significant are the different strategies adopted by the two giant systems, German and United States studios. The American market produced an overwhelmingly large number of motion pictures for instantaneous local screenings, while the German, and to a lesser extent the European market, intended to fashion a "prestigious product" to be promoted internationally. The foundation of these colossal European productions (twenty-four films a year with Paramount) consisted of simple adaptations of existing narratives or plays, and gradually imposed the authority of the multifaceted and stylistically complex art of talking movies. The invention of sound immediately impacted French cinema, now at the mercy of German or American patent holders and cinematographic equipment manufacturers. From

the turbulent promotion of the Joinville studios, where film manufacturing was terminated in 1933, in favor of the postsynchronized dubbing system, practically no film legacy was ever maintained subsequent to Marcel Pagnol's first film, *Marius* (*Marius,* 1931). As paradoxical as it may seem, directors such as Jean Grémillon (also known for his antifascist positions), René Clair, and Julien Duvivier directed in German studios (between 1930 and 1932, whether in Berlin or in Epinay, at the Tobis Studios in Epinay on the outskirts of Paris) to make some of their quintessentially Parisian films. After establishing connections in France with modern sound systems, Tobis-Klangfilm Studios supplied other studios, such as the French competitors Pathé and Eclair. Despite the fact that several movies characterized a genuine French milieu, the French production sponsorship came from other European countries as well as the United States.

FRENCH CINEMA AND ECONOMIC RECESSION

By 1932, the rippling effects of the Great Depression impacted France's cinema industry just as much as any other part of the national economy. Investments diminished dramatically, and countless actors and technicians joined the millions of unemployed. Due to the frequency of demonstrations from both political borders, 1934 marked one of the most volatile years of a volatile decade. The outstanding quality and authenticity of French national cinema at that time was due to the pressure and weight of that troubled period. The economic and political upheavals in this second half of the decade unquestionably contributed to the approach taken by numerous filmmakers to indulge in adventurous productions, which brought into high relief a rare poetic, philosophical, psychological, and intellectual substance. Brilliant screenplays coupled with outstanding theatrical presentations resulted in what is acknowledged as the golden age of French feature films.[10] Though heavily influenced by both a painter's tradition (treatment of colors) and the Surrealistic overtone of the Avant-garde heritage, French productions quickly embraced literary and theatrical projects by authors such as Stendhal, Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, Emile Zola, and Guy de Maupassant. Elaborate scripts of writers such as Jacques Prévert, Charles Spaak, and Henri Jeanson, all of them coming from literary backgrounds, defined an era. Although the first effects of the depression reached France only after 1932, the cinematographic industry was far from being safe since it often depended on a multinational agreement to finance future projects. The American competition was revivified with a technique called *dubbing*. This new technological innovation was first considered doomed because of the language barrier it would have to face, but it brought forth the

unthinkable—American actors spoke in different languages on screen. Indeed, in 1932, James Cagney, Greta Garbo, and eventually all of Hollywood spoke French in movie theaters worldwide.

The gargantuan transformation of movie theaters and film studios as well as the construction of new and luxurious cinemas (such as the famous Rex in Paris) created huge debt in the movie industry. In 1933, bankruptcies erupted and unfortunately continued to prevail during the remainder of the decade. During the summer of 1929, Gaumont joined a holding company, GFFA (Gaumont-Franco-Film-Aubert). Two years later, the major financial investor for GFFA, Banque National du Crédit, was in difficulty and needed financial endorsement from the government. As a result, the French government indirectly became a major partner of GFFA. Despite financial assistance, GFFA went out of business in the difficult climate of scandals and corruption in July 1934. Gaumont followed GFFA in 1938 and was immediately bought by a financial group, the Havas agency, which prior to the war created a new company called SNEG (Société nouvelle des Etablissements Gaumont), which is still active today. These examples illustrate the fragility of the French film industry of the 1930s, constituted by small companies, often in fiscal trouble and always at the mercy of financial disaster, which frequently resulted in the production of one unique film. The precarious economic situation was addressed by the French parliament in March 1939 to regulate and reorganize the industry, but it was too late to restructure the financial framework of French cinema.

Despite its weak and disorganized financial system, between 1934 and 1940 France saw a handful of productions that elevated the image of its cinema to worldwide recognition. Not only the importance and the prestige were immense, but this period, more than sixty years later, remains a high point. One of the many explanations for this overwhelming avalanche of talent is to be found in the passage (sometimes extremely brief) of some foreign contributions to artistic and technical work. The first wave of foreign technicians who arrived in France took place in the early 1920s immediately following World War I, at the very time when Paris was considered the world capital for artists of all sorts. Among those foreign technicians, many Russians came to France fleeing the Soviet regime, and contributed mightily to the prestige and fame of the Montreuil studios. The tradition began in the 1920s, when Russian immigrants (Ladislav Starevitch, Victor Tourjanski) became well known among French popular audiences before the advent of the sound. Jacob Protozanoff's *L'Angoissante aventure* (1920), starring Ivan Mosjoukine and his wife, Nathalie Lissenko, was one of the most important productions of the 1920s. Besides the Russians, Danish filmmaker Carl Dreyer (1889–1968), who had al-

ready worked in several different European countries before coming to France, directed one of the most celebrated French silent films, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (*La passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, 1928). Following a long career around the world, and more precisely in Mexico, Spanish director Luis Buñuel would return to France three decades later with *The Diary of a Chambermaid* (*Le journal d'une femme de chambre*, 1963), starring Jeanne Moreau, and *Belle de Jour* (*Belle de jour*, 1969) with Catherine Deneuve. From Carl Dreyer to Luis Buñuel, Billy Wilder and Fritz Lang (who fled the Nazi regime in Germany), among others, all of them expressed a preference for the French creative and production system. But with the increasingly rising threat of Nazi Germany, many filmmakers stayed in France just in time to make a single motion picture before embarking to Hollywood. Others, like Max Ophuls, remained in France until the debacle of May 1940 just preceding the German Occupation. Some productions already had a sizable European market, such as *Carnival in Flanders* (*La kermesse héroïque*, 1935),[11] which was shot in two unconnected-language versions, both under the direction of the same filmmaker, Jacques Feyder (1885–1948), even before their distribution. This professional collaboration explains why after the rise of the fascist regime many professionals of the German cinema industry fled into exile, choosing Paris and its studios to continue their careers before reaching Hollywood. Not all of them were directors. One could also find technicians, background designers, and light operators, such as Curt Courant (1899–1968) and Eugène Shufftan (1893–1977), who offered their knowledge of "dark" lighting directly imported from the set of Babelsberg; they contributed to the immortal and gloomy atmosphere of Marcel Carné's *Port of Shadows* (*Quai des brumes*, 1938) and *Daybreak* (*Le jour se lève*, 1939).

Unlike its American and German counterparts, the French film industry of the postwar era did not thrive. In the United States, the studios were organized according to a "vertical monopoly,"[12] which ensured effective distribution, compensated for high production costs, and permitted export at a reduced rate to Europe. The pace of the patent competition between the United States and Germany left France behind. Paramount, in the meantime, supplied enormous funds for their studios in Joinville, which revealed the extent of their objective to make over a hundred motion pictures annually. As a result, many French filmmakers were compelled to move to England and Germany to rent foreign studios that were equipped to produce feature sound films (in 1929, only five fully synchronized films were completed). However, by 1932, the production, which by now was taking place in France, reached 150 films per year. Because of the ever-increasing cost of sound equipment, many Avant-garde and experimental filmmakers (mostly the Surrealists of the 1920s), who usually

operated on a minuscule budget, were, for the most part, not able to have their new projects subsidized.

Beyond financial difficulties lurked another major obstacle to film production, censorship. The decree that established censorship goes back to July 25, 1919; it stipulated that "no cinematographic film, with the exception of newsreels,[13] could be shown in public if the film and its title had not obtained the visa of the Ministry of Public Instruction and the Beaux Arts."[14] Needless to say, sound on the screen reactivated the relevance of censorship by the French government's Censorship Commission, and a more sophisticated control was adequately organized. Luis Buñuel's *The Golden Age,* initially approved by the commission, triggered protest among the right-wing political movement and was ultimately banned from screening. Jean Vigo's *Zero of Conduct* (*Zéro de conduite,* 1933) was also not granted a visa due to its numerous satirical allusions to the French educational institution.

The isolation of artistic French filmmakers from more-commercial productions was an active factor in the creation of an important new organization, Ciné-Liberté, the main objective of which was to preserve the independent nature of cinematographic creations as well as bring together independent film directors. Up to the rise of the Popular Front in the mid-1930s, political cinema feebly conveyed dogmatic propaganda (in comparison to literature and theater) and was often neglected by political parties as an alternative support for their campaigns. The PCF (French Communist Party) was therefore the first party to solicit intellectuals and artist-filmmakers for the reputation of their political actions. In November 1935, Louis Aragon, who had been elected as the new secretary-general of the AEAR (Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires), was present for the inauguration of the ACI (Alliance du cinéma indépendant), an organization whose main goal was to defend and promulgate artistic culture in France (music, theater, plastic arts, architecture, and, of course, cinema). Along with him, an impressive group of well-known intellectuals, such as novelists André Gide, André Malraux (who had recently won the 1933 Prix Goncourt for *The Human Condition*), Jean-Richard Bloch, and Jean Cassou, supported the event. ACI's first project was the production of *People of France (La vie est à nous)* in February 1936. Though never affiliated with the PCF, Jean Renoir was chosen to direct the innovative feature film *People of France,* an hour-long documentary made with the PCF's financial support. An enlightening endeavor but almost unknown, it united a well-edited newsreel subject (principally social current affairs), discourses from party leaders, and publicized cinematographic views in which several renowned actors of the decade appeared in small roles (including Marcel Duhamel, Gaston Modot, Jean Dasté, and Madeleine Sologne).

The PCF delegated to the ACI the responsibility of creating *People of France* for the forthcoming elections, and while producing the film, the young organization members realized the true sense of their mission and the immense potential of their action, which contrasted with traditional commercial cinema. The ACI, cinematographic division of the AEAR, had no administrative and financial link with the PCF, and became Ciné-Liberté[15] shortly before the making of *People of France* and continued to produce several movies until early 1938. *La Marseillaise,* which received the help of the CGT (Confédération général du travail, the largest trade union in France), was estimated to be "the" film of the Popular Front and symbolized leftist filmmaking and the mobilization of its people. The film indirectly memorialized the role of the people during the French Revolution and consequently their essential responsibility in maintaining democratic values in a society constantly harassed by extreme right-wing engagements: Prussians standing as a direct reference to Hitler's Germany, and French nobility as French Fascist factions. *La Marseillaise,* a classic homage to the grandeur of the French Revolution, represented Renoir's commitment to the ideas and ideals of the Left and his support of the newly elected Popular Front. Fundamentally optimistic by nature, Renoir often asserted his disagreement with the pessimistic message of Carné and Prévert's *Daybreak* and *Port of Shadows.*

The political scene of the 1930s is principally remembered for the triumph of the Popular Front in 1936 and its cultural policy (social and economic reforms voted by the parliament, such as the forty-hour work week and the first paid vacations), early filmmaking projects, as well as leftist radio organization. By 1934, the unstable conservative government was deeply affected by the Stavisky scandal (a financial affair that tainted the credibility of important leading radicals). Consequently, antiparliamentary factions of the Right took advantage of the incident to protest against the government. On February 6, a large gathering near the Parliament building ended in a tragic clash with police forces, during which a dozen protesters were killed and over a thousand injured. Soon after, France's conservative campaign was overpowered by unity of action on the Left that resulted in the creation of the Popular Front in 1935. In the spring of 1936, the first socialist government in French history came to power. The Socialist Party became France's leading political force for the first time, although the biggest political growth was in the Communist Party, the representation of which in the Parliament soared from ten to seventy seats. During the two previous years, the successful political movement had slowly gathered national interest, sparked by the tragic riots of 1934, which had startled the various leftist factions against a possible fascist menace. Just a few months after French Premier Léon Blum completed

his new government, the Spanish Civil War erupted in July 1936, leading to the question of intervention for countries such as France and England and posing a serious problem of conscience for Blum's government toward the Spanish Republic, the only other Popular Front regime in Europe. But after much indecision, the French government, fearing a possible civil war at home, reluctantly called off the military aid project and allowed private initiatives to take over (the radical members tenaciously opposed any kind of military involvement and threatened to bring down the coalition).

At the same moment, French cinema of the 1930s looked for a mode of diversion without social implications, and filmmakers who sought to give active support to the Popular Front received little encouragement from politicians. From June 1938 until January 1939, André Malraux (1901–76), novelist, historian, and outsider to the French film industry, shot *L'espoir* (*Man's Hope*, 1945), rare footage of the Spanish Civil War in Barcelona with the International Brigades, which despite precarious conditions managed to capture on film reportage that helped the Republican cause. It is important to observe that despite the tragic subject matter of this enterprise, the film set itself apart from the defeatist French mainstream features of the period.

VERBAL CINEMA OR FILMED LANGUAGE? MARCEL PAGNOL

Many of the filmmakers with a theatrical background who surfaced in the early 1930s were highly criticized for "misusing" the cinematographic medium in order to serve a certain ideal of the so-called filmed theater. One of them, Marcel Pagnol (1895–1974), began his involvement with the film industry in 1930. A former schoolmaster, he became a nationally famous playwright in the late 1920s and was contacted by Robert Kane, an American executive for Paramount Studios in France, who wished to give his studios a Parisian accent and intellectual flavor. Pagnol, dramaturge above all in his hometown of Marseille, considered the cinematic medium a great tool with which to promote his theatrical oeuvre. With the introduction of sound feature films and the prolific transformation of plays to the big screen, Pagnol's stage productions were logically sought out by film producers, and in three years all three of his big stage triumphs had been filmed: *Marius* by Alexander Korda for Paramount in 1931, *Fanny* by Marc Allégret in 1932, and *Topaze* by Louis Gasnier in 1933 (starring Louis Jouvet, with screen adaptation by Léopold Marchand). Needless to say, it was his extraordinary regional success that permitted him to enter directly into the movie industry. Instead of enjoying the mundane Parisian life, Pagnol spent most of his time on the sets and in work-

shops in Joinville in order to study this new medium. There he met Alexander Korda (1893–1956), an exiled Hungarian, who later became one of the most prominent directors of British films. In 1931, Pagnol took *Marius* to the screen with the same actors who performed in Marseille. Marius (Pierre Fresnay), a young bartender in Marseille, is torn by a harsh dilemma: he must choose between a tranquil life ashore with his fiancée, Fanny (Orane Demazis), and running off to sea on a ship to explore the world. Desperately in love with the young man since her early childhood, Fanny pretends to accept the favors of the old widower Panisse, a rich sailmaker (Fernand Charpin), in order to prompt Marius's jealousy. Pushed by despair one night, Fanny comes to the bar after hours to declare her love for Marius and her false desire to marry old Panisse. In response, Marius reveals to her the true nature of his thorny alternative, especially since a ship is leaving port that evening. The plans for embarkment are thwarted at the last minute, and the enamored couple spend their first night together. As the months pass, Fanny prepares for the wedding, but the call of the sea comes back to haunt Marius's fragile mind. Meanwhile, Fanny's mother, Honorine (Alida Rouffe), visits César, Marius's father (Raimu), to discuss their children's awkward state of affairs, and they finally agree on a dowry. But one night before the wedding, Piquoiseau (Alexandre Mihalesco), a local sailor, informs Marius that a ship, the *Malaisie,* is heading off the next morning and that he could join the crew. Fanny overhears their conversation and realizes that as long as Marius stays ashore, he will never be happy. As the departure of the ship approaches, Fanny uses subterfuge to persuade Marius to leave for his dreams. Because Marius refuses to leave her alone, she announces to him that she will eventually marry old Panisse for financial reasons. The infuriated Marius believes her account and immediately walks out to the ship. The sequel of the movie and second chapter of the trilogy, *Fanny* (*Fanny,* 1932), narrates the return of Marius after Fanny has married Panisse and reared Marius's child, Césariot. Many years later, Césariot reunites his parents after the death of Panisse in *César (César,* 1936), the second sequel. Seven decades after the making of the first part of the Marseille trilogy, *Marius,* it still seems remarkable that one of the most provincial works in French cinema, full of the flavor of the Midi of France (in which actors and actresses converse in picturesque dialect), should be an international accomplishment. The trilogy *Marius–Fanny–César,* combining comedy, melodrama, romance, and all the energy and flavor of Marseille, generated worldwide and long-lasting reception.

The predominance of narrative and theatrical values characterized the cinema of Marcel Pagnol, who at an early stage of his cinemato-

Marcel Pagnol's *Marius (Marius,* 1931) directed by Alexander Korda starring Pierre Fresnay (Marius) and Orane Demazis (Fanny), (Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive).

graphic career openly declared his attachment to the text, a key element to "filmic dramaturgy." Pagnol's straightforward chronicles of Provençal people progressed effortlessly between sagacious comedy and frivolous melodrama, delighting in vividness of language but always attentive to the variances between words and actions. The many verbal disputes between Marius and his father, César, which used an uninhibited exercise of language, accurately portrayed Pagnol's affection for the Provençal lifestyle, its values of family, honor, happiness, and idleness. Distancing himself from the synthetic environment of the Billancourt and Joinville studios, Pagnol returned to his native Marseille, acquired a soundtrack from Philips, and put together his own three-stage film studios outside the city. Many brilliant stars immediately followed him: Raimu, Fernandel, and Pierre Fresnay, to name a few. Pagnol, however, maintaining a critical distance, realized that the only way he would be able to control his work on screen was to select future actors, hire a crew, and direct the shooting—all himself. The young director disregarded all the conventions of studio sound still prominent in Paris and permitted his camera to tag along with the actors and to shoot on location. Pagnol chose his own property as the shooting location for many of his films; the influence and magnificence of the surrounding Provençal landscape served as background and functioned as his own outdoor laboratory. Between the delicate fragrance of the hills of Provence and the entertaining lifestyle of the fishermen at the Canebière in Marseille, the three films had a common effect, a French-style "meridional" commedia dell'arte that instantly charmed audiences. Although Pagnol's early career as a director of plays had a classical edge (similar to the style of Emile Augier and Courteline), he soon understood that the best source of inspiration was literally in his own backyard. He collaborated with the novelist Jean Giono, also from Provence, to produce *Harvest* (*Regain,* 1937) and *The Baker's Wife* (*La femme du boulanger,* 1938).

Best known for his distinctively Provençal quality, Raimu was unquestionably one of the best comic actors of the decade. Although quite different from Chaplin in physical appearance and style, Raimu could embody comic and tragic characters in the same sequence. *The Baker's Wife,* a narrative borrowed from an episode in Jean le Bleu's novel, featured Raimu as the village baker, deceived by an adulterous wife who runs off with a shepherd. Since he no longer wants to make the bread, the people of the village gather to persuade the "unruly" wife to come back and to ascertain a tolerable arrangement. Ginette Leclerc interpreted the idyllic, sultry spouse, and Raimu, assisted by Pagnol's dialogue, made one of his most outstanding performances, though his refusal to play dialogue scenes in the open air resulted in an odd and rather inadequate mixture of location and studio work for

Marcel Pagnol's *Marius* (poster by Albert Dubout, © Jean Dubout).

The legendary "partie de cartes" in Marcel Pagnol's *Marius,* (Courtesy of BIFI).

the film. After *The Baker's Wife,* Pagnol's movies resulted in successful careers for actors Fernandel (*Le Schpountz/Heartbeat,* 1938, *La fille du puisatier/The well-digger's daughter,* 1940) and Raimu (*Marius, Fanny* and *César*), among others.

Pagnol was nevertheless severely criticized for the Marseille trilogy. The devotees of "pure" motion pictures reproached him as merely a "lost" playwright whose personality and talent were incapable of adapting to the laws of the screen. According to contemporary critics, he conveyed a "false" cinematographic language, much too close to theatrical eloquence, and most works conveyed an apparent contradictory form, combining a traditional-conservative moral tone with an innovative structure. Still, Pagnol's contribution to motion pictures was to assert the preeminence of narrative values and his attachment to the text as well as the spoken word. His invaluable efforts resulted in the international dissemination of the folklore of Provence. The public, unlike most film critics, manifested a warm enthusiasm for this "sunny" work. Pagnol's films promoted the eloquence and generosity of the heart, the inspiration of the word, and the necessity for a peaceful life balanced by the natural rhythms of existence far away from the disquieting influence of the city.

Though of short duration, Pagnol's contribution to French cinema (1931–52), along with Jean Renoir and Marcel Carné's participations in the 1930s, remains significant. He served as an inspiration for many future young directors and authors (Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, and the Italian director Roberto Rossellini). Marcel Pagnol's movies were condensed samples of effervescent humanity; his characters were authentic archetypes, and his art remains alive due to his sincere contemplation of reality. In the early 1930s, Pagnol vigorously promoted the leadership of sound in cinema and advocated the idea of film as "canned theater," declaring that "silent film was merely the art of printing and distributing pantomime, the sound film was the art of printing and distributing theater."[16] Envisioning sound feature films as an actor's means of expression (for supporters of talkies, sound was far more significant than any series of visual metaphors), Pagnol considered his technical crew and actors part of one big enterprise involved in a joint venture.

During the years that the sound system rapidly expanded, Sacha Guitry (1885–1957) and Marcel Pagnol, among other playwrights, dynamically contributed to the coalition of cinema and theater, eventually using motion pictures as a successful extension of theater. Guitry, an indefatigable and self-centered playwright who remained indifferent to artistic techniques, assembled in film a series of his reworked theatrical productions and imaginative plays written for the screen, resulting in a blend of sophistication and humor, beautiful

Raimu (Aimable) and other supporting actors in Marcel Pagnol's *The Baker's Wife* (*La femme du boulanger*, 1938), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Roger Corbeau).

actresses, and an overall salient discourse. Strangely enough, Guitry's most remarkable and identifiable realization on film, *Story of a Cheat* (*Le roman d'un tricheur,* 1936), represents a performance without a specific channel of communication. In this film, he prefigured Alain Resnais's innovation of interchange, connecting text and image, a sharp communicative strategy for a storyteller's interpretation. Although reprimanded for his alleged allegiances and conduct during the later Nazi Occupation, Guitry reemerged after World War II and completed many noteworthy commercial productions of popular romanticized historical subjects, such as *Royal Affairs in Versailles* (*Si Versailles m'était conté,* 1953) and *Napoléon* (*Napoléon,* 1954).

BEYOND FILMED THEATER: TOWARD POETIC REALISM

Although poetic realism dominated French cinema of the 1930s, only a minority of the entire production of French films from that era could be considered part of the "realist" current. In fact, the 1930s

were a complex period that included comedies, "filmed theater," literary adaptations, and exotic and colonial adventures. Many financially insufficient film budgets generated mediocre scenarios, and the mise-en-scène often resulted in a poor display of actors. Poetic realism, by contrast, was a creative effort to reconstruct commonly accepted representations of life through the perspective of an artistic medium. The director's purpose was to convey his own, honest, and objective outlook on life. "Literary realism," initiated as a European literary movement in the eighteenth century, occurred as an insurrection against the classical standards of art, which held that human existence was more predictable and structured than it actually appeared. Furthermore, it was an insurgence against romantic conventions, in which life appeared more enjoyable than it was in reality. Cinematographic realism universally expanded together with the progress of modern science in its detailed social observation, precise footage, and new perspectives on human experiences. In addition to the image of life, authors as well as screenwriters began to develop a social conscience, representing the evils of society and insinuating radical transformations. Poetic realism, also labeled *social fantastique* (or *cinéma du désenchantement*), brought a new aesthetic to films. The aim was to show real life and represent a reality detached from the mundane trepidations and clichés of bourgeois drama. With its heavy atmosphere of *banlieue* (suburban) landscape, new film subjects of everyday popular culture were revealed and defined: naturalistic reflections on wet cobblestones, suburban commuter trains in the early morning, factories' smoke mixing with fog, small cafés in popular districts—in short, realism.[17]

Poetic realism can also be described as "cinematographic expressionism" refined in textured facades, gradation of grays, and a graceful equilibrium between naturalism and stylization. Poetic realism came directly from realism followed by the literary movements of naturalism, represented by the social novels of Honoré de Balzac (*Le père Goriot*), Victor Hugo (*Les misérables*), Eugène Sue (*Les mystères de Paris*), and Emile Zola (*Germinal* and *La bête humaine*). The essence of the plot focused on the working-class individual whose existence corresponded to a series of lost illusions, love deceptions, and existential disenchantment. The bourgeois psychology of the silent era was finally cast aside as the new kind of realism became part of the populist, artistic expression. Although literary critics invented the formula of poetic realism during the 1930s to distinguish so-called works from populist literature, it only became linguistically prominent after the war in an attempt to identify French films of the 1930s. The implicit contradiction of the terms *realism* and *poetic* explains the fate of the phrase, since it represents both the dramatic and urban concept of the plot as well

as a dreamy and lyrical dimension of quotidian life. However, the image of tragic destiny that came out of the new poetic realism was far from entirely negative and pessimistic, since beyond their profound distress, characters displayed new strength, which eventually led them to the quest for happiness and ideal love. A succinct summary of major themes in poetic realism could be presented as follows: the representation of the popular hero, the pessimistic atmosphere, the (doomed) quest for happiness, and finally the tragic destiny. The chiaroscuro lighting, background artifices, evocative visual imagery, and wittiness of dialogue resulted in a distinctive lyrical style. This cinematographic stream was characterized by its unity, its codes, and its very artifices. Only the actors, however, often prisoners of an image required by the public, were the main center of interest. In 1934 and 1935, several movies welcomed the dominating ideology: a slight dose of anti-Semitism or Parliamentarism, and occasionally, a reminder that the only solution for order was a strong political power. With the Popular Front's victory in 1936, these threats were set aside, but only for a while.

ARTISTS AND MASTERS OF POETIC REALISM: JEAN GABIN, ARLETTY, MARCEL CARNÉ, JEAN RENOIR, AND JEAN VIGO

The same realism, labeled as poetic, became even more pessimistic by 1939 with the failure of the Popular Front and the impending threat of war. Jean Gabin, (1904–76), the popular hero par excellence, dies at the end of most of his films: *Escape from Yesterday, Pépé le Moko, Port of Shadows, Daybreak,* and *The Human Beast.*[18] The stereotype of the characters played by Gabin during the 1930s often corresponded to the archetypical proletarian, the working-class protagonist who met his tragic destiny and ultimately became a victim, a representative of the syndrome of failure: failure to love, failure to dream, and failure to succeed. It was because he was able to reconcile contradictory elements (ordinary and extraordinary, poor and rich, proletarian and individualist bourgeois) that Gabin became a true movie star and was able to continue his career until his death in 1976. The "Frenchness" of Jean Gabin, besides his visual intensity, comes from the fact that he was the principal actor during the decade of realism, which perhaps more than any other cinematographic period, concentrated on the detailed representation of real and contemporary characters. This is also the reason why French cinema of the 1930s is often spoken of as the *cinéma d'acteurs* (actors' cinema). The sociopolitical climate of the Popular Front and the atmosphere of impending War forced the end of poetic realism. Its influences, however, remained predominant for the rest of

the century and confirmed the identification of the 1930s as the golden age of French cinema.

At the beginning of poetic realism, the social milieu was a fundamental criterion for determining the sequence of events, as seen in *Under the Roofs of Paris, The Crime of Monsieur Lange (Le crime de Monsieur Lange,* 1935), and *Freedom for Us*, but toward the end of the 1930s, and especially after the fall of the Popular Front, protagonists became more self-governing characters, unconstrained by social environment (as seen in *Daybreak* and *Port of Shadows*). Because of the minor importance of the star system in prewar France, "commercial" norms were less perceptible and less important than they were for Hollywood cinema. Cinematic representation evolved from a tradition of character types and set design that foreshadowed the influence of society and environment toward psychological and more idiosyncratic films, which favored individualized characters and unambiguous subjects. As noted, French cinema of the early 1930s relied a great deal on actors and actresses who were competent in a variety of theatrical backgrounds (operetta, cabaret, and boulevard),[19] and this movement built up their presence in terms of fixed-character roles.

Jean Gabin, something of a mythical actor and perhaps the only "star" in French cinema, received his first major acting role in 1930 for *Chacun sa chance,* but was only truly discovered in 1934, when he was introduced to filmmaker and producer Julien Duvivier (1896–1967). Although his national fame came after several years, Gabin's career proved to be rapidly prolific. Between 1930 and 1935, he acted in twenty films. He consequently appeared in a great deal of mythical and tragic movies in which he played a tough, introverted character haunted by a tragic fate: *Escape from Yesterday* (*La Bandera,* 1935), *Pépé le Moko* (*Pépé le Moko,* 1936), *Lover-Boy* (*Gueule d'amour,* 1937), *Port of Shadows, The Human Beast* (*La bête humaine,* 1938), and *Daybreak.* His character often evolved in a hostile urban underworld usually ruled by mobsters. As a main protagonist, typically an outsider, the personage temporarily relied on a line of work to unravel his own obstacles and confronted the criminals in a breathless finale, which ultimately resulted in the reestablishment of a moral order. After a series of successful films, Gabin and actress Viviane Romance were the most popular actors in France during the second part of the decade. Gabin's doomed characters included young lovers, bad boys, manual workers, soldiers, and gangsters. Thanks to his famous role as a pacifist deserter in *Port of Shadows,* he quickly became connected to the symbol of the Popular Front. Gabin stands as a monument of French cinema and his impact on the French collective imagination is enormous.

Jean Gabin's cinematographic icon displayed a permanence that is difficult to define, an alliance to a particular aesthetic style consistent

enough for the public to recognize him but offering enough diversity to avoid loss of interest. The numerous roles of gangsters and murderers contributed to build his great success and eventually his myth. According to Ginette Vincendeau,[20] the movie star was defined through a triangular rapport among actor, man, and character, which evolved altogether from movie to movie. *Escape from Yesterday,* far from being one of Gabin's best pictures, gathered all the ingredients of the myth, representing the protagonist through a variety of social, political, and cultural discourses. Gabin's performances were characterized by straightforwardness and bluntness, carefully crafted to convey an impression of "nonacting."[21] Although this trend changed dramatically after his return from Hollywood, when he interpreted characters with social status (rich gangsters, poised bourgeois, a president), Gabin is best remembered for his roles as a proletarian with a tragic destiny.

Gabin projected a sense of belonging to a unique symbolic community. (In the movies, Gabin wore the famous *casquette,* symbol of the French working class.) *Port of Shadows* provided Gabin the famous line *T'as d'beaux yeux, tu sais* (You have pretty eyes, you know) and another in *Daybreak:* "Listen . . . you're a charming girl, but when you've finished doing your washing, let me know."[22] The performances of Jean Gabin related to a masculine stereotype: motionless and silent, he represented the man who mastered his every gesture and emotion. Gabin's characters manifest virility and masculinity as well as emotional turmoil. It is because he was able to incarnate both features simultaneously that the myth came to life. The essence of Gabin was the inherent compromise between two different compulsions: the honest man and the brave proletarian. What most characterized Gabin's cinematographic performance as an actor was the absence of "behavioral motion"[23] (with the exception of his ritual burst of wrath on the balcony facing the crowd in *Daybreak*). However, the national fame, which quickly made Gabin a national icon, created an ambiguous rapport with the social structures. Not only his status as a movie star and an "extraordinary" actor, but also the original disposition of the populist ideal conveyed the image of the ordinary working man. This emerged from the trend in French cinema during the 1930s, which represented the individual within the community; in direct contrast, Hollywood privileged the individual, regardless of the social community. When in a group, Gabin was intuitively placed at the center; he had more close-ups than any other actor of the 1930s, at a time when most close shots were made at half the distance of today's (unlike Hollywood film, with its fervent use of close-ups during that decade). This innovation, identified as a modern photographic tool for the first time, allowed access to the characters' internal individuality.

When World War II broke out, Gabin left France for Hollywood, shot a couple of movies, and returned to Paris. Compared to the American star system, which financially compensated actors, European stars did not have access to similar means (Gabin was in fact under contract with the French studio Pathé-Natan). In France, the first few years following the war were problematic, and it was a good decade later that Gabin regained his star status, incarnating new characters—older, more experienced, and authoritarian—such as those in Marcel Carné's *La Marie du Port* (1950), Jacques Becker's *Grisbi* (*Touchez pas au grisbi,* 1954), Jean Renoir's *Only the French Can* (*French Cancan,* 1955), Claude Autant-Lara's *Four Bags Full* (*La traversée de Paris,* 1956), and *Love Is My Profession* (*En cas de malheur,* 1958).

Often associated with Jean Gabin as one of the *montres sacrés* (true stars) of French cinema is Parisian actress Arletty (1898–1992). Profoundly Parisian middle-class and street savvy, Arletty had one of the strongest personalities in French films of her era. Her first performance, as a parachutist in Jacques Feyder's *Pension Mimosa* (1934), led to some success, but it was her entertaining performance in Marcel Carné's *Hôtel du Nord* (*Hôtel du Nord,* 1938) whose famous line *Atmosphère . . . atmosphère . . . est-ce que j'ai une gueule d'atmosphère?* and her glowing charisma in *Daybreak* that brought her to the attention of the French public and made her legendary. Still loyal to Marcel Carné, her performances in both *The Devil's Envoys* (*Les visiteurs du soir,* 1942) and *Children of Paradise* (*Les enfants du Paradis,* 1945) have remained among the greatest in French cinema and unquestionably triggered her international stardom.

Sharing a great deal of success with Arletty was actress Simone Simon (born in Marseille in 1911), who first worked as a fashion designer and a model before becoming a film actress. She began in Marc Allégret's *Ladies' Lake* (*Lac aux dames*, 1934), which brought her to the attention of the French public. In 1936, Simon went to the United States when American producer Darryl Zanuck hired her for Twentieth Century-Fox. Two years later, she returned to France to star in Jean Renoir's masterpiece, *The Human Beast,* and also featured in other European cinemas, including two movies by Max Ophuls in the 1950s. As an actress, Simon benefited from her unique quality, a blend of innocence and sex appeal that often featured her characters as young, elegant, and erotic seductresses. Simone retired from movies in the 1950s, having accomplished such films as *The Human Beast,* Maurice Tourneur's *Cat People* (1942), *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944), and also Max Ophuls's *Roundabout* (*La ronde,* 1950) and *Pleasure* (*Le plaisir,* 1951). She lives in France to this day.

The distinction of French actors and actresses of the 1930s that characterized French cinema was not only the result of brilliant per-

Jean Gabin (Pépé) in Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* (*Pépé le Moko*, 1936), (Courtesy of BIFI).

Jean Gabin (Lucien) and Mireille Balin (Madeleine) in Jean Grémillon's *Lover-Boy* (*Gueule d'amour*, 1937), (Courtesy of BIFI).

formances but also the fruitful collaborative efforts of film directors with outstanding artistic and technical crews. Marcel Carné (1909–96), one of the preeminent directors of poetic realism, established himself during the 1930s by completing a short film, *Nogent—Eldorado du Dimanche* (1929), which so overwhelmed René Clair that he appointed Carné his assistant in *Under the Roofs of Paris*. Carné then collaborated as assistant to Feyder on *Pension Mimosas* and *Carnival in Flanders*. From 1930 to 1935, while working as an assistant to Clair and Feyder, Carné rapidly acquired his own cinematographic technique, learning from both veteran directors the notion of a motion picture as a pattern to be tailored within the film studio. During this time he also made publicity shorts and wrote film criticism, occasionally under the pseudonym Albert Cranche. Shortly after his involvement with Jacques Feyder, Carné supervised his first motion picture, a classic melodrama entitled *Jenny* (*Jenny*, 1936), which was written for the screen by Jacques Prévert. Prévert, a poet whose considerable magnetism originated from an exceptional arrangement of wit, sentimentality, and social parody, was often affiliated with the Surrealists as well as the politically active Popular Front. Carné's astute direction and Jacques Prévert's rigorous and poetic texts destined both men to have highly successful careers. Prévert and Carné met during the *Front populaire*, and in view of their very different personalities, no one could have ever predicted their long and fruitful collaboration. Carné's compassion went toward the marginalized groups, like homosexuals, and his style borrowed the technical approach used in German Expressionism and American thrillers. His domain of predilection was undoubtedly *atmosphère*. Prévert's background in Surrealist poetry and the Groupe Octobre (a communist-oriented theatrical group) contributed to his refinement of poetic realism's tragic pessimism and sociopolitical satire. The viewpoint that considers the success of Carné's work solely through his alliance with Prévert, however, is erroneous and unfair. The achievements of both writer and director (when operating on their own after they had split up) proved to be harmonious in the fundamental domains of the protagonist's social function, the emphasis given to human obsession, and the outcome of destiny in everyday life. The only true discrepancy in their work was their method of production and certainly not their philosophies and artistic schemes.

The road of poetic realism widened as the general public in France reconsidered their reaction to the Popular Front, moving from cheerful optimism to the anguish of the latent occupation. Characteristically, the collaborative work of Carné and Prévert showed signs of apprehension that vacillated between pragmatism and the metaphysical. Spectators perceived the apprehension through the combination of prominent lyrical speech, a pessimistic backdrop, and an exhaustive

Two French actresses go to Hollywood: Simone Simon and Annabella (Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive).

representation of tangible social situations. Their style, framed by populist poetry, singularized itself with emphasis on the actors' roles, their witty dialogues, and a chiaroscuro lighting that nuanced the characters. Carné realized his own personal style in the 1938 film *Port of Shadows,* which was quickly followed by *Hôtel du Nord,* inspired from a novel by the populist writer Eugène Dabit, as well as *Daybreak.* In *Port of Shadows,* the collaboration between Carné and Prévert reached its peak and gave birth to one of the most admired films of French

cinema. A similar situation occurred in *Hôtel du Nord,* which benefited from Henri Jeanson's dialogues, an avalanche of witty cinematographic citations. Prévert and Carné reunited for *Daybreak.* This picture, released June 7, 1939, remains one of the most celebrated examples of film noir.[24] André Bazin considered *Daybreak* and *Port of Shadows* two of the most successful dramas of the decade, possessing "the ideal qualities of a cinematic paradise lost."[25]

The pairing of Jean Gabin and Michèle Morgan in *Port of Shadows* powerfully represented the feeling of a heavy and impending doom. Adapted to the big screen by Jacques Prévert from Pierre MacOrlan's novel, the script possessed a subtle duality, coupling romantic myth and eternity much like that of Tristan and Iseult. The attention to visual and intellectual parallels gives Carné and Prévert's work the richness and complexity of the original novel. *Port of Shadows* is one of the best examples of poetic realism, featuring the archetypal Jean Gabin persona as it constructs a character of experience who appears skeptical and suspicious of everyone, but proves to be inspired by a highly developed moral code when the moment occurs. In these productions, it seems as though central characters are resolute to tempt their already doomed fate at any cost. Significantly, all of Carné's leading actors (in particular, Jean Gabin's roles) were alienated individuals, abandoned in a merciless cosmos and alienated from any social or intellectual order, and whose redemptory way out was to come through self-dependence. *Port of Shadows* narrates a love story between the sensual Nelly (Michèle Morgan) and Jean (Jean Gabin), a deserter from the French Foreign Legion in search of a secure haven. They encounter one another in the foggy port of Le Havre at a dockside back street, late at night in a brooding atmosphere, and immediately both destinies become tragically linked. Their brief moments of hope and happiness are interrupted by the presence of the villainous characters Zabel (Michel Simon), Nelly's criminal guardian, and Lucien (Pierre Brasseur), a local mobster. Jean engages in violent altercations with both of them, which highlights Gabin's legendary charismatic, masculine, stoic persona, and he is unpredictably murdered at the end of the movie. Jacques Prévert's inspirational dialogue and Alexandre Trauner's (1906–93) set design greatly enriched Carné's authentic filmic discourse, through the characteristic blend of words and images, which has come to be its trademark. *Port of Shadows,* like *Hôtel du Nord* and *Daybreak,* fits into the category of the archetypal French melodrama of thwarted passions and entangled providences. Because of its predisposed melodramatic surroundings, the stylistic approach of the film mirrors French emotional responses to the political, social, and cultural events of the 1930s. Carné's films typically feature people who are suffering from an existential angst: despondency, isolation, dishon-

Jean Gabin (Jeannot) and Viviane Romance (Gina) in Julien Duvivier's *They Were Five* (*La belle équipe*, 1935), (Courtesy René Chateau).

esty, disillusionment, pessimism, and psychoses. Carné's poetic realism portrays a humanity where people were not fundamentally good, but rather devious and manipulative. With subtle insight, the film perfectly expresses the leading actors' emotions and depicts the tender feelings of a pair of young lovers lost in an evil and pessimistic world. Today, *Port of Shadows* is widely recognized by film historians as the seminal example of French poetic realism.

As revelation or confirmation, actors' stares became legendary, and their love stories conveyed an impression of mystery thanks to Carné's talent. A year later, his perseverance and belief in cinema as a medium to communicate basic truths of human condition allowed his films to

overturn censorship and to bring *Daybreak* to the forefront of pre–film noir. UFA (Universum Film Allgemeine) decided not to pursue the production of the film based on the subdued and overly pessimist nature of the script. In reality, Carné's notorious "artistic melancholy" was not any more pessimistic than that of Julien Duvivier or even Jean Renoir. For both filmmakers, the inspiration of unattainable love and the desire for a blissful getaway were consistently exemplified in their script, in order to generate unadulterated feelings. *Daybreak* is a psychological as well as social drama, the major quality of which resides within its characters. François (Jean Gabin) kills a man named Valentin (Jules Berry). He shoots him in his hotel room, and the body rolls down the stairs just before the police arrive. Barricaded in his room, François, chain smoking because he is out of matches, contemplates one by one all the events that led to the tragedy. The story line is structured according to a series of emotional flashbacks that reconstruct the itinerary of the murder and the solitary days preceding it. Interspersed with each flashback, the narrative returns to the barricaded room where François, the alleged murderer, reflects on his past while a crowd gathers on the street outside begging him to surrender peacefully. The first flashback reveals how François meets a young-and-mild florist, Françoise (Jacqueline Laurent), at the factory and how they both realize that not only do they have the same name, but also that they are both from the same orphanage. As François gets to know Françoise, he discovers, m[illegible]h to his dismay, her odd fascination for Valentin, a manipulative dog trainer who exerts an outrageous influence on her as well as his assistant, Clara (Arletty). Clara eventually leaves Valentin for François, who offers her protection without romance. As the four destinies become emotionally intertwined, Valentin attempts to corrupt François, who ultimately kills the immoral perpetrator. Facing the inevitable, François commits suicide.

The emblematic *Daybreak* was produced entirely in the studios. Scenes of suburban architecture were cleverly re-created by the decorator Alexandre Tauner and magnified by artificial light. Carné's polished mise-en-scène, which benefited from chief operators Eugène Schufftan and Curt Courant, and composers Maurice Jaubert and Joseph Kosma, displays the most lifelike and meticulously detailed representation of reality, and paradoxically elicits the poetic course of action. It was, as André Bazin said, "written in verse or at least in prose which is invisibly poetic."[26] In addition to this scenario, the legendary screenwriter Jacques Prévert (1900–1977), formed a monologue of poetic words for the protagonists, resulting in a literary language tailor-made for Gabin, Arletty, Jules Berry, and Jacqueline Laurent. The representation of François, sitting alone in his room while outside an apprehensive crowd eagerly awaits the outcome of this

Jean Gabin (François) and Arletty (Clara) in Marcel Carné's *Daybreak* (*Le jour se lève*, 1939), (Courtesy of the Archives Marcel Carné).

Annabella (Renée) and Louis Jouvet (Monsieur Edmond) in Marcel Carné's *Hôtel du Nord* (*Hôtel du Nord*, 1938), (Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive).

hopeless impasse, provides an introspective metaphor for the entire nation's desperation on the eve of the war.[27] Through a deep awareness of the meanings produced through fashioning the individual images (with light and, for the most part, darkness), Carné shaped a highly subjective cinematographic style in which these elements were combined to reflect the mental state of his main tragic hero.[28] His cinematographic viewpoint managed to assemble the artificial and constrained studio style with his own experience of realism to eventually shape a unique visual quality. The consistent use of the deep focus, wide-angle lenses, night-for-night photography, and low-key lighting characterize a unique film noir quality.

Carné's style, described by others as the essence of the genre, could be defined as a combination of faultless atmospheric studio realism with compactness of action and a strong use of half-light. His finest movies were always a result of a rigorous partnership, which assembled a talented and experienced technical team. By the end of the 1930s, Marcel Carné's control of technical modus operandi had resulted in the making of films whose cold formal magnificence, logical dimension, and meticulous narrative rhetoric firmly stood at the vanguard of a future "tradition of quality" in filmmaking. *Daybreak* already prefigured the future characteristic features of film noir in the next decade through the physical and moral traits of Jean Gabin versus his characters: a doomed protagonist, with a strong personality and a generous heart, surrounded by an unsympathetic and hostile universe, usually a suburban area or possibly industrial port, and who is generally involved in ill-fated plots such as organized crime or corruption schemes, out of which comes a final attempt to secure social justice revealing through the device of social realism the depth of the hero's human nature.

Jean Renoir (1894–1979), consistently regarded as the greatest and most "authentically French" of all filmmakers, had a reputation that coincided with Marcel Carné's. While Carné mastered filmmaking in the studio, Renoir developed artistic aspects of cinematography on location. Son of the Impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Jean Renoir worked within all cinematographic genres: acerbic comedy, *The Bitch* (*La chienne,* 1931); literary adaptations, *Madame Bovary* (1933), *A Day in the Country* (*Une partie de campagne,* 1936; released in 1946) and *The Human Beast;* entertaining improvisation, *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (*Boudu sauvé des eaux,* 1932); social chronicals, *Toni* (*Toni,* 1934); solemn meditation on war, *Grand Illusion* (*La grande illusion,* 1937); political manifestations, *La Marseillaise* (1937) and *The Crime of Monsieur Lange;* and social satire, *The Rules of the Game* (*La règle du jeu,* 1939). Renoir's active artistic involvement in his film productions

Elle se tourne vers François et l'interpelle directement.

... Vous avouerez qu'il faut avoir de l'eau dans le gaz et des papillons dans le compteur (elle se tapote la tête) ...pour être restée trois ans avec un type pareil !

I55- PLAN RAPPROCHE

François, de face. Clara, en amorce, de profil.

FRANCOIS, très calme :

- Ecoutez... vous êtes bien gentille, mais quand vous aurez fini de faire le ménage, vous me le direz ?

CLARA :

- ... le ménage ?

FRANCOIS :

- Parfaitement !... Vous arrivez là ... vous videz vos tiroirs... vous battez vos tapis ...Je ne vous ai rien demandé, moi ! Pourquoi que vous me racontez votre vie ?...

I56- PLAN RAPPROCHE

Clara, de face. François, en amorce, de profil.

CLARA :

- Oh !... Faut pas m'en vouloir ... Si je vous parlais, c'est histoire de ne pas causer toute seule... Ce soir, je suis tellement heureuse... vous pouvez pas savoir... la liberté, ... c'est pas rien!

François, tout en écoutant Clara, continue à surveiller Françoise ... Clara le regarde et sourit.

CLARA :

- Tout de même, vous n'êtes pas très aimable... Vous feriez mieux de m'offrir quelque chose...

Elle se retourne face au bar.

Jean Gabin's script in *Daybreak* (*Le jour se lève*, 1939), (Courtesy of the Archives Marcel Carné).

following 1931 increased his esteem among French film critics (as opposed to the general public), who early on identified him as an essential and perceptive filmmaker. Renoir's sound films immediately demonstrated an obvious openness to the new standards of talking pictures; *Toni* and *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* exemplify the eclectic nature of Renoir's films, underlining that his artistic concerns prevailed over the actual subject matter; *Toni* demonstrates Renoir's early artistic vision. Set in the south of France, the film chronicles an Italian immigrant (Charles Blavette) in love with a Spanish girl (Célia Montalvan) who, failing to prove his innocence in a murder case, is killed for a crime that his young lover committed. Considered one of the early prototypes of neorealism in its social observation and pessimistic outlook, *Toni* departs from this genre in its lack of both authenticity and proper social perspective.[29] A film like *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* provides a link between an anarchist period of Renoir's early years and a militant interlude that brought Renoir closer to the PCF (French Communist Party). The movie, shot during the incipient months of the Popular Front, epitomized with joviality the confounded but truthful social point of view of the Left in 1936. Built around Jacques Prévert's scenario, the story shows how a common man in a collective society can conquer despotism. The employees of a small printing press collaborate to collect money and take over as publishers of the popular novelettes, *Arizona Jim,* after the owner, Batala (Jules Berry, the most insufferable "bad guy" of the 1930s), has fled to avoid facing his creditors. Unfortunately, the former proprietor revisits the business to maintain control of the now-flourishing publishing company. To defend his collectivity's autonomy, Lange, one of the publishing company's employees, guns down the old manager and becomes a fugitive from justice. In this film, the plot is almost secondary to the sense of atmosphere just prior to the establishment of the Popular Front.

Between 1936 and 1939, Renoir directed his best movies. *A Day in the Country,* a narrative by Guy de Maupassant that tells a touching, sensual, and emotional love story, ushered in a new epoch of filmmaking for Renoir. Using a technique comparable to Impressionist painters, Renoir focused on motifs to recapture original impressions. A year later came *Grand Illusion,* a film in which Renoir's militant spirit came to light. Having experienced World War I as an airplane pilot, he was part of the veteran group for whom war was never to happen again. It was a pacifistic movie with a certain dose of nostalgia and mystery. Although the audiences preferred Marcel Carné's films for their refined style and completed narrative structure, Renoir's *Grand Illusion* drew universal enthusiasm for its remarkable set of actors (Pierre Fresnay, Erich von Stroheim, Marcel Dalio,[30] and Jean Gabin), as well as its

Jean Gabin (1904–76), (Courtesy of the Archives Marcel Carné).

technical team. The story takes place during World War I, when the Germans capture two French Air Force officers from very different backgrounds. Captain de Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay), an aristocrat, and Lieutenant Maréchal (Jean Gabin), a mechanic before the war, join other prisoners and comrades-in-arms such as Rosenthal (Marcel Dalio), a well-off Jewish banker, in the prisoners' camp. Several months later, after a first and unsuccessful attempt at evasion, they are sent to the remote fortress of Wintersborn, which is ruled by the upper-class German camp commander Von Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim). Because of the deference given to his aristocratic lineage,

Captain de Boeldieu is given courteous hospitality; as a result, he initiates an amicable rapport with the German officer to aid Maréchal and Rosenthal's preparations for escape. To conceal their departure, de Boeldieu volunteers to serve as a decoy and distracts the guards by playing a tune on a flute while running on top of the fortress walls. He eventually gets killed by Von Rauffenstein, who, beseeching him to surrender, is forced to obey the military code and orders the guards to fire. Maréchal and Rosenthal, who twisted his ankle in the fall, manage to escape from the fortress, but they must reach Switzerland before the troops catch them in the exposing snowbound landscape. However, both their tempers rise when Rosenthal can no longer walk. Maréchal explodes: "Yes, a parcel, a ball and chain tied to my leg. I never could stand Jews for a start, get it?"[31] They finally seek refuge at a German farm, where a young widow, Elsa (Dita Parlo), with whom Maréchal falls in love, shelters them before they cross the border. Along with this final optimistic reflection on Franco-German relations, the story concludes with a message of anticipated hope, heralding the decline of the old aristocracy and the coming of a modern era, symbolized by the two prisoners' escape.

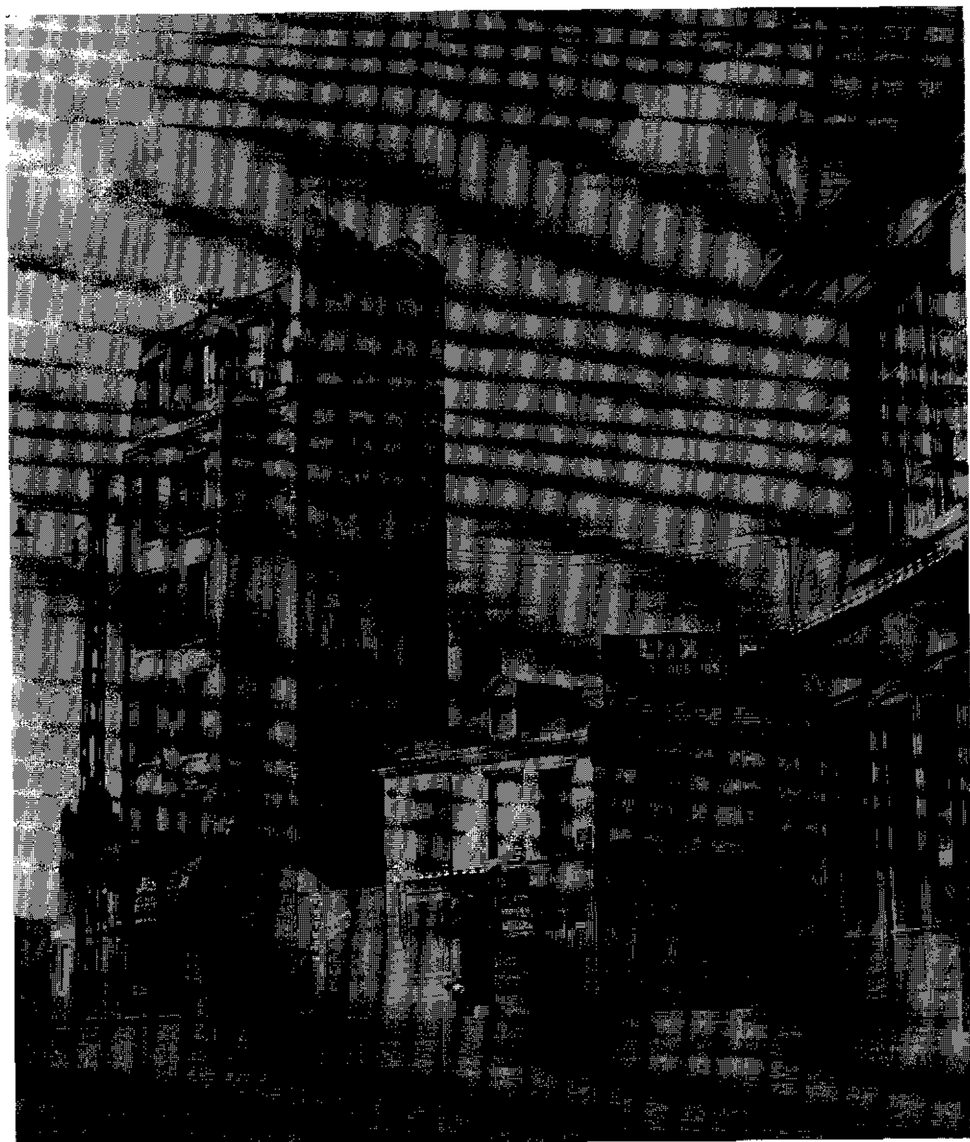
There is no doubt that this film, loosely based on Renoir's experiences in World War I,[32] provided an exceptional unity of purpose and drama. The message is clear: the rhetoric of war is deceptive, and patriotism is an illusion. The camera work in the film is expert, causing the viewer to move constantly along with the image (though not a single war combat is shown; most of what happens takes place offscreen). In addition to the cinematography, Charles Spaak (1903–75) contributed an extraordinary screenplay. Considered one of the leading scriptwriters at the time, Spaak had already collaborated with Renoir on *The Lower Depths* (*Les bas-fonds,* 1936). The true energy of *Grand Illusion,* however, was in its intimate relationships. In an understated denunciation of war, Renoir not only emphasizes the disintegration of a social idyll but also the primacy of the individual being above anything that is artificially created: the restrictions and conflicts between nations were shaped by outside influences and therefore were not significant, even in a world at war. This film, unlike *The Rules of the Game,* made just two years later, proved the best international accomplishment of Jean Renoir's career.[33] During the 1958 Exposition internationale de Bruxelles, the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique conducted a survey among the most prominent film historians around the world to designate the list of the twelve all-time greatest motion pictures. The result of the referendum, although remotely objective in its proceedings, included Renoir's *Grand Illusion.* Shortly after *Grand Illusion,* Renoir also directed *The Human Beast*[34] in 1938 in a twentieth-

Jean Gabin, Marcel Carné, Jacques Prévert, and Alexandre Trauner (Courtesy of BIFI).

century adaptation of Emile Zola's novel. In *The Human Beast,* Renoir, who by then was in the vanguard of militant filmmaking, began to move toward Carné's well-known pessimism, and the film was indubitably part of the poetic realism experience.

Although highly criticized before World War II for his indecisive and contradictory positions, Renoir is considered one of the greatest directors of French cinema. André Bazin viewed Renoir as the most accomplished filmmaker of the 1930s and considered him a generator of influence for directors of the next twenty years. His artistic concepts were exemplary, and his mise-en-scène triggered constant technological inventions. Although often believing in a method of improvisation to direct actors best, Renoir's influence was corroborated by a significant and lifelong love for the dramatic stage. During the 1930s, his attachment to acting was obvious. Because of their unprompted performances, Renoir's actors skillfully exceeded a sense of improvisation to communicate a dimension of stark reality and tangible authenticity. On frequent occasions, Renoir performed as an actor in his own films, with his most noteworthy theatrical role as Octave, the unsuccessful conductor in *The Rules of the Game*. Because the human condition as a theme was constantly reflected in all the elements of poetic realism, Renoir's films sought to be as authentic as possible, circumventing the practice of using studio set backgrounds to ultimately enhance the naturalness of actors' performances and credibility.[35]

A synthesis of all Renoir's previous works, *The Rules of the Game* had a complex structure and an elusive message that the public and critics of the time never fully understood. This fantasy is a mundane massacre, and a sharp vision of prewar social degeneration, with a hint of several theatrical traditions (Beaumarchais, Musset, Marivaux). The complex mise-en-scène setting, though somewhat experimental, was far ahead of its time, influencing a number of later directors, François Truffaut in particular. Although now considered by many his masterpiece, *The Rules of the Game,* released on July 7, 1939, was commercially unviable despite its influential emotional charge and the genuineness of its outlook. After the public attempted to set a theater on fire, the film was screened for only three weeks. This comedy, which veered inescapably into a dramatic finale, illustrated a series of ruptures in the social order. For example, the scene showing the senseless carnage of rabbits in the forest became an omen for the disproportionate combats that occurred a few weeks later all over Europe, and it exemplified society's plunge into pointless violence. Although malicious and totally useless, the hunt that is depicted has its conventionalized forms and procedures. Serving as accomplices, the servants beat the trees, driving the rabbits out of their retreat and into the open, where they are slaughtered. Rarely surpassing an ambiance of compelling pessimism, *The*



Alexandre Trauner's background set and Jean Gabin in Marcel Carné's *Daybreak* (*Le jour se lève*, 1939), (Courtesy of the Archives Marcel Carné).

Rules of the Game is less a formulaic kind of plot than it is a testimony to the perennial nature of human vulnerability, insatiability, and cruelty. The story begins with André Jurieux's (Roland Toutain) triumphant arrival in Paris following his transatlantic flight and his expectation of seeing Christine de la Chesnaye (Nora Grégor), the woman for whom he achieved this heroic act, among the huge, enthusiastic crowd. Immediately interviewed by a journalist, André makes his secret disappointment public on the radio. The next day, Octave (Jean Renoir), a friend in common, invites André to a party at Robert and Christine de la Chesnaye's at La Colinière. As the other distinguished guests arrive at the chateau, André Jurieux cannot identify with this entourage of conspiracy and deception. The following day on a hunt, Christine discovers, through her binoculars, the secret relationship between her husband, Robert, and Geneviève (Mila Parely), his longtime mistress. At the same moment, Schumacher (Gaston Modot), the janitor, finds his wife (Paulette Dubost) in the arms of the house servant, Marceau (Julien Carette),[36] and threatens to kill him. André sees his chances with Christine vanish when Christine elicits a new romance with another guest, Saint Aubin. Later that evening, she changes her mind and declares her love to André, and runs off with him. But Robert apprehends both and starts a fight with André. As the evening party comes to an end, Robert makes peace with André and agrees to let his wife leave with the famous aviator. Christine and Octave peacefully walk in the park reminiscing on their mutual childhood until they arrive at the greenhouse. Octave leaves to get his coat from the chateau, but decides to tell André the truth and persuades him to run to Christine. But when André is close to reaching her, Schumacher, the janitor, angered by his wife's deception, who in the darkness recognizes André as Marceau, mortally shoots the pilot. The story ends abruptly with the mourning of the intrepid hero.

The Rules of the Game clearly illustrated the social and moral decadence of French upper-class society before World War II. By radically turning his back on his former "humanist" films, Renoir engaged in a forthright satire of French society, which, a few weeks before the outbreak of the war, exemplified, through a notoriously intricate plot, its citizens as socially egotistical and mentally convoluted, desperately trying to escape a doomed reality. Throughout the film, viewers can feel that the rise of the impending threat of a possible world conflict, coupled with a deep apprehension of hostile foreign neighbors, had generated a defeatist mind-set about the prospects for the future of France. Indeed, the typical hero in Renoir's point of view unquestionably did not long for the future and only attempted to endure the present moment. His atypical use of the camera—overly long shots and extreme wide-angle compositions in unusual depth—is an indirect

Jean Renoir among the actors of *Grand Illusion* (*La grande illusion*, 1937), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Sam Lévin).

Pierre Fresnay (Captain de Boeldieu) and Jean Gabin (Lieutenant Maréchal) in *Grand Illusion* (*La grande illusion*, 1937), (Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive).

allusion to the commedia dell'arte, and consequently designed to capture what happens to all the guests of La Colinière without interrupting their frantic performance. With a pervading atmosphere of paranoia, suspicion, and intrigue, the main characters of *The Rules of the Game* seem equally perplexed about the plot as the audiences were on a first viewing. In 1939, aesthetic references to classic Hollywood movies were solidly established in Europe and usually stipulated the need for a strong story line, several main protagonists with an easily comprehensible outlook, and respect for the genre and other cinematographic codes. Commenting on what appeared to be a disappointing film, André Bazin observed the following: "But this was certainly not the principal cause for the commercial failure of the film. As a conventional love story, the film could have been a success if the scenario had respected the rules of the movie game. But Renoir wanted to make his own style of *drame gai,* and the mixture of genres proved disconcerting to the public."[37] Nevertheless, Renoir's picture stood as the antithesis of American definitions and broke the "rules" and principles of narrative continuity to express a more compelling assessment of French society gone astray on the eve of world conflict.[38] More than sixty years later, the film is still considered one of the most charismatic directing experiences of the prewar. It has been rediscovered by *cinéphiles* around the world and revalued for the eminence and the many strengths that make it one of the great movies of the thirties. Unfortunately, the film was rapidly withdrawn from distribution during the summer of 1939, and consequently was altered and then reedited for its too "depressing" content. It was not until 1965 that the original version was even found. Renoir went on to serve in the film unit of the French army in the first weeks of the war, but was lucky enough to reach Portugal and then the United States after the debacle of May 1940.

Unlike Renoir and Carné, whose prominence benefited from extended and prosperous careers, Jean Vigo (1905–34) directed only four movies, dying at the age of twenty-nine from septicemia. He inaugurated his cinematographic career as an "adolescent performer," in other words with an almost juvenile amusement in the potential of trickery (reminiscent of Georges Méliès), not with a typical and predicable filmmaker's aesthetic. He overlooked the traditional pattern of mainstream cinema and instead assembled his movies according to his perception of the misunderstood poet. He also had a compulsive fascination with the role of the artist and his sources of inspiration. Vigo replaced temporality and the conservative codes of objective realism with personal references to his own life and sentiments. Following his direction of several short documentaries, such as *A propos de Nice* (1930), contrasting the life of the grand hotels and the city's casino with the adjacent urban poverty, and *Taris, roi de l'eau* (1931), Vigo

Jean Renoir (Octave), Roland Toutain (André Jurieu), and Nora Gregor (Christine de La Chesnaye) in Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (*La règle du jeu*, 1939), (Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive).

rapidly began to shape an unparalleled cinematographic style that would establish his "outsider" status. *Zero of Conduct* (*Zéro de conduite*, 1933),[39] independently produced at the GFFA studios, subversively portrayed the authoritarian boarding school institution to which Vigo had been subjected during his disturbed and painful childhood. The central theme of the film is obvious: the suffocated childhood oppressed by a contrived adult world. Though deprived of visual brilliance and often difficult to follow, the technical value of both picture and dialogue in this study of a disjointed, claustrophobic, and fantastic boarding school remains a youthful innovation of uninhibited excitement. Vigo's cinema can be defined as the meeting point between social cinema and the poetic Avant-garde experience. It had many followers, among them, again François Truffaut.[40]

A year later, Vigo would direct *The Atalante*, filmed mostly on location in France but occasionally on studio interiors, intending to recreate identical conditions found on location. Jean (Jean Dasté), captain of a barge on the Seine River, marries a country girl, Juliette (Dita Parlo), in a small Normandy village, and together they start a new life on the water. Reluctantly, she accepts the monotonous life on board a

ship and immediately resents the close cohabitation with Jules (Michel Simon), an old eccentric. Following a fight with her husband, she decides to head to Paris, only to experience a much more difficult lifestyle than she had ever imagined. Resigned to her own fate, she relinquishes her desire for freedom and returns to her husband and an unvarying existence. In the movie, when the character of Juliette is alone in the city, the viewers are shown an exceptionally rare image of France during the post–Great Depression era that included prostitution, the lines of downhearted and unemployed, and a famished, hopeless robber beaten by an elegant, well-fed bourgeois. Vigo approximated his vital characters with the same judgment for realistic analysis, filming the discomforts of thwarted dreams and the ineffective relationship of two simple characters from completely different worlds.

Despite the restrictions imposed and the editing it received from French censorship, *The Atalante* was a film of exceptional authority. Jean Vigo presented a persuasive picture of the adult world in its deep responsiveness and recognition of sensual love. The film can be regarded as an Expressionist archetype, where action was interpreted as if emerging from inside a besieged individual's mind. By illustrating the individual's struggle with sensual love and nature, Vigo suggested an unusual complicity between the sailors of the barge, as the story imparted several fantastic episodes pictured during the scene under water. Far from functioning like most realist directors, Vigo's Surrealist rendition of a dream world was never remote from his story lines. He exemplified both the ecstasy of life and his own inner emotional impetus, and he transmitted images with an infinite assortment of contrasting styles, affectionate but acerbic, in order to invite the audience to reach his foremost objective, the poetry of the "unreal." In addition to being one of the precursors of the *ciné-club*[41] movement in France, Vigo was an authentic and sincere director who set the tone for poetry and realism of the 1930s. It is important to note that both commercial failure and the death of the author-director resulted in the cancellation of the film's forthcoming screenings. French censorship banned Vigo's movies until 1945, and it was only in 1990 that a thorough restoration of *The Atalante* made the film available in its intended version.

Finally, in addition to filmmakers such as Clair, Renoir, Carné, Vigo, and Feyder, it is impossible to omit the role of director Julien Duvivier. Although Duvivier's cinematographic career lasted several decades, he nevertheless remains associated with a particular style and time period. The positive reception of his movies was in large part contingent on the inspired coherence of his screenplays, whether created by himself or by an expert scenarist. Duvivier's pictures from 1934 to 1937, along with acting performances by Jean Gabin and

screenplays by Charles Spaak, greatly appealed to French audiences. These films include *Escape from Yesterday* (*La Bandéra,* 1935), a romanticized adventure movie with a Foreign Legion presence in North Africa. Adapted from Pierre MacOrlan's novel, *They Were Five* (*La belle équipe,* 1935) is a film about a group of five unemployed men (Gabin, Charles Vanel, Aimos, Robert Lynen, and Raymond Cordy), living in a rundown hotel, who after winning 100,000 francs in the lottery try to manage an open-air café-restaurant on the banks of the Marne River, only to split their friendly group. Finally, there is the well-liked *Pépé le Moko,* adapted by Henri Jeanson from Roger d'Ashelbé's novel, which offers interesting imagery of exotic lands that identify the depth of France's self-image as a colonial power. Gabin plays an expatriate Parisian mobster gone underground in the Algerian Casbah who slowly loses his willpower when challenged by the graceful Gaby (Mireille Balin), a Parisian seductress. An ominous ambiance full of darkness beautifully coincides with the figure of Pépé, the outsider who, after a romantic interlude with Gaby, attempts to flee with her, only to see her run away. His plans are further thwarted by police officer Slimane (Lucas Gridoux) in a typical spine-chilling ending—encircled by the police forces on the wharf, Gabin stabs himself. The unruly Algerian collective order, with its multiracial faces, serves as a fine parallel to the presence of the stylish but equally uncontrollable Gaby. Inspired by Howard Hawks's *Scarface* (1932), the film succeeded in France and resulted in the 1938 American remake *Algiers,* directed by John Cromwell.

All three of these productions by Duvivier had noticeably benefited from the Jean Gabin myth: the hopeless hero obligated to a life of crime who is, ultimately, callously eradicated. One of Duvivier's rare artistic limitations was the inaccessibility to the intensity and profundity of his characters' emotions. Thanks to Charles Spaak, Duvivier's movies presented custom-made parts not only for Jean Gabin, but also for actors and actresses such as Françoise Rosay, Viviane Romance, Charles Vanel, Harry Baur, Raimu, and Pierre Blanchar. It was *Escape from Yesterday* that truly established Gabin's national standing. He plays Pierre Gilieth, a man running away from a murder accusation in Paris. As he reaches his destination in Barcelona with no money, he desperately struggles to forget his past by enrolling in the Spanish Foreign Legion. His days become complicated as new friendships with fellow countrymen, Mulot (Raymond Aimos) and Lucas (Robert Le Vigan), and a love affair with Aischa (Annabella) make him want to fight against the violence of war.

In his films, Duvivier visualized leading roles as irreversibly spellbound by their existence and their social environment with little faith in collective accomplishment. In addition, the predominance of indi-

vidual vulnerability and suspicion is perceptible even in films whose conclusion offers a rare uplifting ending. More than a half century later, Duvivier could be considered a predictive reporter rather than a "committed celebrant" who involuntarily represented the (projected) downfall of the Popular Front.[42]

CINEMATOGRAPHY AND THE POETICS OF IMAGES

In the early 1930s several important cinematographers, such as Curt Courant and Eugène Schufftan, came to France and rapidly contributed to the growth of French cinema, thanks to their inspiring knowledge of the manipulation of light and framing. In addition to the expressive purpose of their assignment, one of their most important contributions was recognition by directors of the cinematographer's decisive responsibility in the creative process. The dilemma between actors and set was an eternal source of tension among technical crew, cinematographers, and directors. Often based on the hierarchy and the order of appearance in the pictures, the set designers argued the fundamental importance of an appropriate atmosphere for the actors. In other words, as Colin Crisp explains, the actors' photographic glamour and photogenic style could never be privileged at the expense of the set: "The unjustified use of close-ups, rare angles, and camera movements has a great disadvantage: it destroys the illusion of participating in the narrative; instead of believing in the film, the spectator focuses on the way it's put together."[43] So-called European lighting style, in contrast with Hollywood, did not emphasize the physical features of the actors in their most complimentary light. Throughout the 1930s, the preeminence of the artistic background over the light of the actors confirmed the minor attention given to movie stars in general and the greater importance given to the portrayal of French society over the actors' beauty or virility. The lighting setups, chiaroscuro, and knowledge of different hues of gray were crucial artistic mechanisms for the illusion of depth and relief, and were the most important aspects of the European scene.

Before the coming of sound, the debates between on-location shooting and studio reenactment had always been a dilemma with which directors and producers had to deal. According to André Bazin, the two types of French filmmakers of the prewar decade can best be described as follows: Jean Vigo, Jean Renoir, Jean Grémillon, Marcel Pagnol, as filmmakers utilizing real decor, and Marcel Carné, René Clair, Jacques Feyder, and Julien Duvivier as filmmakers more inclined toward synthetic decor. The role of the set had primary importance since it could either establish the artistic style of the film or incorporate the backdrop in the action. Some of the major problems encoun-

tered by technical crews with on-location shooting was dealing with the public on the set, clearing traffic, handling unwanted noise, which deeply affected the quality of direct recording, maneuvering cameras for preferred angles, and obtaining ideal lighting. Some directors, less interested in visual and artistic meticulousness, shot exclusively on location since it provided a higher degree of authenticity. The majority of early set designers' artistic backgrounds came principally from their experience in the theater, with its strong emphasis on colorful, spectacular, extravagant, and luxurious settings. Designers were suddenly compelled to modify their expertise to fit the designs characterized by the restricted symbolism of poetic realism. The primary importance of the background, originating from the theatrical tradition, came into the consciousness of directors in the early 1930s and served a double purpose in creating a film: contributing to the fashioning of a unique atmosphere and facilitating the "sympathy," and plausibility, of the characters. One of the drawbacks that emerged with motion pictures and that was irrelevant in theater backdrops was the function of close-ups, which divulged any scenographer's imperfections. Consequently, set designers had to focus to an even greater degree on their precision and realism.

> Set designers were faced therefore with a set of tensions, of contradictions. Trained as artists, and seeing themselves as engaged in an artistic undertaking, they were constrained to suppress any inclination to realize their artistic aspirations in the ways their fellow artists in other media realized them. Conditioned to an ideology of individual self-expression, they had to recognize the supremacy of a teamwork and collaboration in which, if there was a directive personality, it was not theirs. Given the supreme creative task of designing and building a world, they found themselves restricted to building one that would be a credible replica of the real world. The décor must pass unnoticed, yet determine the mood and atmosphere of the film. A décor which obtruded to the point of being symbolic would mean fewer spectators, financial crisis for the producer, and no more work for the set designer.[44]

The key decorators of the decade include Lazare Meerson (1900–1938) and his protégé, Alexandre Trauner. Meerson built the set representing the futuristic factory with *Freedom for Us* in the Epernay studios, as well as the extraordinary set representing the Renaissance city of Boom in *Carnival of Flanders* (1935). Trauner[45] was also well known for his reconstruction of Canal St. Martin in *Hôtel du Nord,* and the suburban working-class edifice decor built in false perspective to intensify the impression of solitude in *Daybreak*. Born in Hungary, Trauner arrived in France in 1929 and began his film career as assistant to Lazare Meerson. Then, in 1932, he met poet and screenwriter Jacques Prévert. Later, he went to Hollywood, working in turn with

Howard Hawks, Gene Kelly, Anatole Litvak, David Lean, Orson Welles, and finally Billy Wilder, with whom he won an Oscar for *The Apartment* in 1960. After his return to Europe in 1974, Trauner worked with directors such as Joseph Losey in *Monsieur Klein* (1976) and *Don Giovanni* (1979); Bertrand Tavernier, in *Round Midnight* (1986), Claude Berri in *Tchao Pantin!* (1983), and Luc Besson in *Subway* (1985).

The goal of set designers of the classic period was to guide the audience to an analytical reading of the picture without transcending into a symbolic or conceptual process of abstraction, which in the postwar era would set the tone for aesthetic convention (as the antithesis of originality and art in general). This explains why after the war, numerous decorators suddenly decided to abandon studio shooting for preexisting location shooting, such as Italian neorealist films *Open City* (*Roma, città aperta,* 1945) and *The Bicycle Thief* (*Ladri di biciclette,* 1948).