Chapter 8 The Last Decade and Beyond

- *French Society in the 1990s*
- *The Improving Health of French Cinema*
- *A Unique Financial-Aid System*
- *French Television*
- *French Cinema Abroad*
- *New Artists, New Creators: Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro*
- *The Epics: Régis Wargnier and Claude Berri*
- *Period Dramas: Patrice Chéreau, Alain Corneau, Jean-Paul Rappeneau, and Patrice Leconte*
- *The Return of Comedies at the Box Office: Jean-Marie Poiré and Francis Veber*
- *The New French Cinema*—Le Jeune Cinéma: *Mathieu Kassovitz and Eric Zonca*
- *The Digital Revolution and the High-Definition System: Pitof*

French cinema of the 1990s is characterized by three consecutive trends: the persistence of economic difficulties in the early part of the decade due to the declining attendance of general audiences; the assertion in 1993 of the "cultural exception" to promote cinematographic pluralism against the growing presence of American productions in Europe; and finally, in the mid-1990s the unprecedented financial revival of French cinema due to the significant investments of television companies in film production, which moves beyond the twentieth century into the present time.

Following the declining attendance of the mid-to-late-1980s, French popular audiences continued to decrease in size during the first part of the 1990s. But contrary to popular predictions, the French film industry, during the second part of the decade, experienced a sudden revitalization thanks to the increased investments of television companies. This not only reversed declining attendance but also ensured French

cinema's prosperity and independence. The return of comedies to the box office with films such as Jean-Marie Poiré's *The Visitors* (*Les visiteurs*, 1993) and Francis Veber's *The Dinner Game* (*Le dîner de cons*, 1998) confirmed the financial recovery for the entire industry. In addition, throughout the 1990s French cinema reestablished itself as an international critical success earning recognition with films such as Jean-Paul Rappeneau's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (*Cyrano de Bergerac*, 1990), which garnered a Best Actor at the Cannes Film Festival, Régis Wargnier's *Indochine* (*Indochine*, 1992), winner of the Oscar for Best Foreign Film, and more recently, Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (*Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, 2001).

French Cinema's strength today is in large part due to the active role of Canal+—a division of Vivendi Universal, the world's second-largest media company, present in 100 countries with over 300,000 employees—which in terms of growth and profit has become omnipresent and indispensable to French film production. By the end of the decade into the present, it has become clear that the French film industry is regarded as the leader of European productions in great part due to its recently remodeled infrastructure. At the turn of the new millennium, French cinema is represented by many original conceptions and imaginative creations like Pitof's *Vidocq* (2001). The industry as a whole is able to adapt to the rapid technological developments of modern filmmaking, along with the demands of popular audiences for more entertaining films, without losing its unique French spirit.

FRENCH SOCIETY IN THE 1990s

Elected for a second term (1988–95), François Mitterrand appointed Michel Rocard as the new head of government in May 1988. An accomplished financial consultant and a promoter of government by bilateral consent (left and center), Rocard contributed to the renovation of the social security system, helped organize the European Union at the beginning of the new decade, and ultimately qualified France for the European monetary union, which was achieved in 1999. On January 1, 2002, France and most European nations adopted the euro as their official currency.

Following the winds of change and hope, which mainly originated in Eastern Europe, the French government also reevaluated itself in May 1991. One of these changes was the replacement of Rocard with Edith Cresson, the first female prime minister. Despite the persistent high unemployment rate, drawn-out workers' strikes, and financial scandals that temporarily beleaguered the Socialist government, Mitterrand's vision to fortify the status of France in the European Union

was exemplified by his participation in drafting the Maastricht Treaty in 1991, with a pledge to endorse closer economic connections between France and its European partners. Despite antagonistic criticisms, Mitterrand, who counted on a popular referendum to increase the coalition, won it with only 51 percent of the votes. In March 1993, Mitterrand did not participate in the resulting political infighting of the legislative election, which gave conservative forces a clear majority in the Assemblée nationale. Although the triumphant conservatives called on Mitterrand to resign, the president refused to leave office and carried on his presidential term until the end. He died on January 8, 1996, at age seventy-nine, just six months after leaving political life. Edouard Balladur, a Gaullist whose political mentor had been Georges Pompidou, became premier in March 1993. Although his platform to reduce unemployment and clandestine immigration and his promise to end an epidemic of political corruption won applause, subsequent financial scandals left Balladur's government vulnerable as well.

Like Mitterrand, who ran for three presidential elections before finally winning, Jacques Chirac's third attempt was a victory as he defeated Socialist candidate Lionel Jospin in May 1995. He immediately appointed Alain Juppé prime minister. Chirac's political win brought an end to the fourteen-year-long Socialist presidency, but only temporarily, since in the summer of 1997, the elections for the National Assembly gave the Socialist coalition a clear majority. Much to the surprise of many, the conservative parties lost control of the House, and Socialist leader Lionel Jospin became prime minister in 1997, serving in Matignon until the spring of 2002. On May 5, 2002, Chirac was reelected president and appointed conservative Jean-Pierre Raffarin as the new prime minister.

THE IMPROVING HEALTH OF FRENCH CINEMA

The visual lyricism, which had best described French cinema from the 1930s through the French New Wave and even into the 1970s, appeared at the turn of the last decade to have lost its mythological presence in contemporary movies. While attempting to capture the new look of French contemporary society, with its changing racial makeup, economic hardships, and growing apathy among young people, French filmmakers of the 1990s such as Marc Caro, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, Luc Besson, Leos Carax, Eric Zonca, Mathieu Kassovitz, Cédric Klapish, Olivier Assayas, Jean Becker, Patrice Leconte, and Dominik Moll emerged as the artists best able to reunite these apparently conflicting trends. Despite the political and economic bleakness of the country, new realities emerged: filmmakers successfully conciliated the

technological evolutions in modern filmmaking with the increasingly challenging demands of popular audiences.

With a serious lack of original and innovative scripts, combined with a prevailing and almost stylish morose tone, much of French cinema of the early 1990s presented a new form of hyperrealism, a new trend for psychological realism as well as the romantic tale. But because of their high degree of pessimism, usually involving forlorn individuals evolving in an unsympathetic atmosphere, these films challenged the basic conventions of classic movies of the prewar poetic realism era. Even when killed at the end of macabre and doomed plots, Jean Gabin, unlike modern-day protagonists, usually appeared to secure a certain degree of deliverance in movies such as *Daybreak, Pépé le Moko,* and *The Human Beast*. This tendency among new and accomplished film directors and scriptwriters generated, as illustrated by Leos Carax's *Les amants du Pont-Neuf* (1991), starring Juliette Binoche,[1] an alarming fissure between French general audiences and regular *cinéphile* moviegoers.

Although healthier on paper when compared to other European film industries, the French film industry did not show any optimistic signs of renewal during the first half of the 1990s. The overall economic situation, with the power struggle involving global trade issues in the background, directly affected the morale of investors. As a result, more and more productions were directly achieved through government assistance and the cosponsorship of television companies.

From an average 180 million tickets for French films sold each year in the 1970s to a record 202 million in 1982 (half the 1960s' figures), attendance continued to decrease dramatically, reaching an all-time low of 116 million in 1992. But against all pessimistic prognostications, the French film industry was about to create the biggest revolution of the decade not only by reversing the decreasing-attendance trend but also by triggering one of the most vigorous and unprecedented waves of new productions. In order to appreciate the different rationales of the economic accomplishments of French cinema in the 1990s (both in domestic and foreign markets), it is helpful to understand the situation France and other countries faced in 1993 during the difficult GATT negotiations.

In the early 1950s, GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), was the only international pact on world-trade and advocated three main principles: nondiscrimination between lateral parties, economic consolidation, and, above all, trade negotiation. Since it was only an agreement in principle, GATT never imposed any specific regulations, but rather suggested guidelines for a liberal economy and a free market. In 1994, the newly created World Trade Organization (WTO) officially replaced GATT. The European protection quotas,

TABLE 1: TICKETS SOLD (IN MILLIONS) AND BOX OFFICE REVENUE (MILLION FRANCS)

YEAR	TICKETS SOLD (IN MILLIONS)	BOX OFFICE REVENUE (BILLION FRANCS)
1990	121.92	3,826.12
1991	117.50	3,881.22
1992	116.00	3,941.15
1993	132.72	4,519.02
1994	124.42	4,286.80
1995	130.24	4,526.93
1996	136.74	4,762.11
1997	149.02	5,175.03
1998	170.57	6,013.96
1999	153.53	5,476.13
2000	165.54	5,858.78
2001	184.42	N/A

(*Source:* CNC)

established to limit the import of American films (see chapter 7), broke new ground in benefiting the French film industry (but not for all European-national cinemas). In addition to the motion-picture market, the entire audiovisual industry was directly affected by new minimums in television programming for instance. French television companies had to include in their primetime programming a minimum of 60 percent European films and 40 percent French-language films. Anticipating the new contretemps, the American delegation argued (to no avail) that the politics of heavy government-funded subventions, state intervention, and protective quotas promoting the "cultural exception," as well as national productions, were against the spirit of GATT and the global market.

What has been commonly called the "cultural exception" against the American domination (*l'exception culturelle,* incongruously dubbed the "French exception" by its numerous detractors) corresponded to an oral agreement, suggested after innumerable heated discussions, by which governments were entitled to decide which categories of "goods" should remain outside the accord (for example, cinema and audiovisual productions in general which could be considered "cultural goods"). This suggestion, voiced by French representatives, became very popular among European governments. Five years later, in November 1999, at the WTO conference in Seattle, the central question of "cultural exception" was never addressed. Many French filmmakers, like Claude Berri, promoted the imperative responsibility of the French administration to defend cultural "pluralism" via the sponsorship of new legislation

and public funding to assist cinematographic production and international exports. For Berri, like many European filmmakers, movies were not to be considered common commercial merchandise, and political leaders were expected to become accountable for shielding and sustaining the efforts of the entire audiovisual sector (the European film market is the equivalent in size to that of the American). More than just a cultural venture, the world-film industry is also a political and economical asset. Beyond modestly promoting pluralistic-cultural supply, the French government must face the difficult challenge of successfully continuing its effort to co-finance local productions and stimulate quality as well as quantity, and more importantly to ensure the commercialization of these productions on foreign markets.

A UNIQUE FINANCIAL-AID SYSTEM

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the self-regulated financial assistance for filmmakers and producers initiated by the CNC in the early 1960s, and enhanced in the early 1980s, was in full swing in the early 1990s (Jack Lang doubled the allocation during his first term, in 1982). Each year over a hundred full-length feature films were produced in France, making it the leading film industry in Europe. Despite the successful *avances sur recettes,* the main mission of which was to set funds against royalties from box office revenues for quality, auteur, and experimental films, French cinema has always been in search of new subsidy opportunities. The financial aid system *aide sélective à la production* was money given directly to producers, once approved by the CNC, often as a long-term loan, since most of those films generally did not do well at the box office. In fact, only 10 percent of those films have been able to earn out and reimburse the initial credit. In the 1990s, state subsidies encouraged productions for international audiences as well as films by major foreign filmmakers, whose home countries did not create such favorable financial environments. In addition, several fiscal incentives, like the tax shelter named Sociétés de financement des industries cinématographiques et audiovisuelles (SOFICA), also created by Jack Lang in the 1980s, boosted investments in films and established a closer link between the movie industry and the world of finance.

Subtantial financial help also came from French-television companies, which slowly became the principal partners for coproductions. In 1993, their participation through public and private channels, (called *aide automatique,* or automatic financial aid) reached 35 percent of the overall volume of investments, or around $150 million. Joint productions included Claude Berri's *Germinal* (*Germinal,* 1993), Jean-Marie

TABLE 2: EVOLUTION OF FILM PRODUCTION IN THE 1990s

	REGISTERED FILMS	FRENCH INITIATIVE	COPRODUCTIONS MAJORITY FOREIGN	FOND ECO/SUD
1990	146	106	37	3
1991	156	108	36	12
1992	155	113	31	11
1993	152	101	36	15
1994	115	89	22	4
1995	141	97	32	12
1996	134	104	27	3
1997	163	125	33	5
1998	183	148	32	3
1999	181	150	31	/
2000	171	145	26	/

(Source: CNC)

Poiré's *The Visitors* (*Les visiteurs,* 1993), Francis Veber's *The Dinner Game* (*Le dîner de cons,* 1998), Gérard Pirès's *Taxi* (*Taxi,* 1998), Claude Zidi's *Asterix & Obelix vs. César,* and Luc Besson's *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (*Jeanne d'Arc,* 1999). In addition, the four major national television stations (TF1, France2, France3, and M6) had to comply with a financial obligation, called *soutient automatique,* which constrained them to advance a minimum of 3 percent of their annual operating turnover toward future film productions and to broadcast a minimum of sixty percent European films. As ironic as it may seem, although French television debilitated French cinema in the 1980s, a decade later it helped to resuscitate it. In 2002, it is clear that, economically, French television needs French films, and French films need the funds of French television. After years of struggle, the financial-aid system established in the early 1980s was finally taking off. Nineteen-ninety-five was the first successful year, which immediately triggered spectacular growth in French cinema.

In the mid-1990s, for the centennial of the seventh art (1995), many statistics and rankings were published on the health of the French film industry. The figures showed that the film industry in France had now established itself as the largest, most successful market in Europe, with France the leading film producer (e.g., 134 films produced in 1996, up from 124 in 1995). France also had the largest distribution network in Europe, with more than 4,000 movie theaters (4,297 screens registered by the CNC in 1992, 4,762 screens in 1998). But the assessment of movie theaters' economic activity cannot rely simply on unsystematic statistics. Therefore, to assess the theaters'

TABLE 3: MARKET SHARES OF BOX OFFICE REVENUE

YEARS	FRENCH	EUROPEAN	AMERICAN	OTHERS
1990	37.4	5.3	56.6	0.7
1991	30.1	9.9	58.7	1.3
1992	35.1	4.3	58.3	2.3
1993	34.8	4.1	57.6	3.4
1994	28.3	8.6	61.3	1.9
1995	35.2	8.4	54.0	2.4
1996	37.3	6.0	54.7	2.0
1997	34.2	10.0	52.2	3.5
1998	27.2	7.2	64.0	1.7
1999	32.0	11.2	54.1	2.8
2000	38.3	12.2	35.7	13.8

(*Source:* CNC)

numbers accurately, the CNC established an annual review of *salles actives* (active theaters) in 1992. Each movie theater participates, releasing its revenue reports for the assessment of automatic financial aid and for the production of an entire array of statistics on theater distribution. Theater owners provide weekly statistics, per screen, per film. This system indicates a new approach in distribution: film copies circulate more easily from one screen to another during the same week, especially in multiplexes, and movie programming adapts to the customs and immediate reactions of audiences.

French cinema is one of the fastest growing sectors of the national economy, and official projections for the year 2005 predict a doubling of employment in the film business compared to the 1990s. According to Daniel Toscan du Plantier, chairman of Unifrance, the French film industry "is not to be the second-cinema industry worldwide, trailing the first, but to be the leader of an alternative to the monopoly." The relentless endeavors, articulated by the Ministère de la Culture in the early 1980s and film industry professionals did indeed preserve the identity of French cinema (and ultimately European cinema). Despite the overwhelming volume of American films, the French film industry appears more than ever the champion of European filmic creativity.

Despite their popularity among French audiences, American movies do not, as they do for the rest of the European market, pose a critical commercial or financial threat to the French film industry (even though action and animated films from Hollywood remain the most popular genres among the French public). In 1999, American films were seen by more than 70 million spectators, representing a steady market share at 54.1 percent and 34 percent of all films distributed; whereas

TABLE 4: NATIONALITY OF FILMS DISTRIBUTED IN FRANCE IN 2000

	NUMBER OF FILMS	MARKET SHARE (%)
United States	194	35.7
100% France*	144	26.5
France majority**	33	6.1
Great Britain	37	6.8
France minority***	31	5.7
Japan	17	3.1
Italy	9	1.7
Spain	5	0.9
Germany	9	1.7
Canada	11	2.0
Other countries	48	8.7
TOTAL	544	100.0

(Source: CNC)
**Films entirely financed by French investors*
***Films coproduced, with a majority of French investment*
****Films coproduced, with a minority of French investment*

French films represented almost 39 percent of all films distributed, 32 percent of all revenues, which was up almost 5 percent from the previous year. These statistics, although showing France as a distant second to the United States in the world market, underscore the strength of the French film industry in Europe as well as its growing appeal worldwide.

Coproductions with French partners have been an effective way for Hollywood studios and production companies to increase their market share, but this method has proved problematic, especially when compared to the British or Italian film industry. For instance, Great Britain's national cinema is now one of the most vulnerable in western Europe.[2] In 1992, one of its least productive years for example, national productions in Great Britain totaled 17 full-length feature films, compared to 155 films in France that same year. (Subsequent to the dismantlement of the financial-aid system initiated at the end of the 1970s, investments in the British film industry decreased almost 50 percent over the course of the 1980s.)

At the turn of the new century, European film industries have experienced one of their most challenging periods ever. In fact, if European governments do not comply with what filmmakers and the major professional organizations petition for, an effective pan-European policy on film production, promotion, and distribution, the entire future of European cinema could be compromised or in serious jeopardy.

FRENCH TELEVISION

Since 1982, the Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel (CSA), an independent council known for its autonomous decision making, regulates private and public television and radio companies, and gives necessary authorization to broadcast and to edit programs, supervises the freedom of expression, and assigns airtime for political debates and campaigns (the regulation also applies to the time allowed for publicity and airtime for broadcasting). Although sound in its structure, the dilemma for the French film industry remains the discrepancy between the profits of television companies and the ethical principles of the CSA. The evolution of technology makes it difficult for both parties to conciliate economic choice to fairness, and consequently the profitable logic of the film and television markets usually stands in opposition to the ethic of the high authority's regulations.

As an active component of the Paysage Audiovisuel Français, French television in the early 1990s had become, over the course of three decades, as much a cultural barometer as cinema was throughout the century. As a popular cultural catalyst, television, because of its accessibility, could very well become *the* new medium for artistic discourse due to its accessibility, thus outpacing the esteemed and powerful cinematographic medium as sole or primary architect of visual aesthetics. So one question arises: Is today's French cinema on the verge of progressively becoming a *telefilmic* medium? The tradition of public service and the role of the state as principal partner in social and economic life remain a strong characteristic in Europe. Despite the explosion of private-television companies in the late 1980s and digital broadcasting in the 1990s, France is still in search of an equilibrium between the necessary freedom for the development of new markets and the support of regulations guaranteeing a certain pluralism. However, the alliance between film and television does facilitate the collaboration of the two industries. In France, private television companies thrive in an almost paradoxical situation. They offer programs as worthy as the ones screened on public television while profiting from advertising revenues derived from a large market. Today, the competition posed by the growing purchase of videos and now DVDs (which doubled from the 1980s to the 1990s), and especially the strong influence of American television, has threatened the quality of programming, its coherence, and the professionalism of both sectors. As a result, most French television companies have reshuffled their documentary, news, and entertainment programming, while reducing overall film productions.

In this era of growing communication, it appears more crucial than ever for a national medium like cinema to relate to the global-

communication network. As of 2002, the management of television programs and artistic images already signals a new cultural, political, and economic competition. To be part of the frontrunners in digital distribution, the successful companies will have to become part of the fastest-growing communications networks and technologies (Internet, music, film, sports, education). Such is the case with the television company Canal+. Its commitment to the French film industry reveals the success of a strategy initiated a decade before. *Diversification* had been the buzzword during the 1990s and resulted in a significant rise in viewership, with more than 14 million subscriptions currently in eleven countries throughout Europe, 7.3 million outside France. In addition, more and more customers are making the switch to digital, with the number of subscribers to digital services rising to 4.5 million (50 percent of all subscribers have now opted for digital service). Canal+ commits actively, in terms of growth and profit, to the television and movie division of Vivendi Universal, the world's second-largest media company, and remains Europe's leading multiservice pay-television operator. In addition, Canal+ has become omnipresent as well as indispensable for French film productions, as the following statistics in Table 5 (page 360) reveal.

In comparison, the rest of French television companies (France2, France3, TF1, M6, and Arte) financed a total of eighty-eight films in 1999, thus confirming the predominance of Canal+, in particular its production studio called Le Studio Canal, in terms of financial commitment within the French film industry. Each year, 50 percent of all French films are produced by Canal+. In addition, Canal+ has created a European film distribution network in partnership with the Pathé Film Company.

For the French film industry, the arrangement between Universal Pictures and Canal+ created the second-largest film library in the world—9,000 feature films in all—breaking new ground in distribution of the motion-picture business. Due to its recent European success, Le Studio Canal's next ambition is a greater involvement in the United States. Throughout the 1990s, Le Studio Canal's situation, as a growing foreign producer in the US, generated much interest among independent filmmakers (e.g., David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive,* 2001, and *The Straight Story,* 1999; Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai,* 1999; and Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides,* 2000). Since the mid-1990s, Le Studio Canal has played a dominant role in the production of European films. It has indirectly led to the domination of French film within the European market. Through inspired diversification strategies, Le Studio Canal entered into a joint venture in England with its longstanding associate Telema (Toc Films) to develop and produce English-language films, to coproduce Italian

TABLE 5: EVOLUTION OF THE INTERVENTIONS IN PRE-PRODUCTION BY CANAL+

YEAR	FRENCH FILMS	COPRODUCTIONS	TOTAL
1992	102	22	124
1993	80	16	96
1994	76	16	92
1995	79	22	101
1996	85	22	107
1997	108	26	134
1998	117	22	139
1999	121	19	140

(*Source:* CNC)

films (e.g., Ettore Scola's *The Dinner/La cena* in 1998, Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful/La vita è Bella* in 1998, Michael Radford's *Il postino* in 1994, and Nanni Moretti's *Dear Diary/Caro diaro* in 1994), and to produce or coproduce twenty to thirty French feature films each year, through its subsidiaries and in conjunction with a number of independent filmmakers and producers (producing films for commercial audiences as well as young auteur films).[3] One of the most reliable partners of the group is producer Alain Sarde, who has made many films, including Jacques Doillon's *Ponette* (*Ponette,* 1997), Jean-Pierre Salomé's *Restons groupés* (1998), Jean-Pierre Ameris's *Bad Company* (*Les mauvaises fréquentations*, 1999), Danièle Thompson's *La bûche* (1999), Pierre Jolivet's *Ma petite entreprise* (1999), and Bertrand Blier's *Les acteurs* (2000). Important also are three associate producers, Alain Rocca, Adeline Lecallier, and Christophe Rossignon, who constitute Lazennec Films.[4] In 1995, 9 percent of Canal+'s operating turnover had to be reinvested to support French cinema as well as foreign film coproductions, not including other large-scale productions sponsored by its subsidiary, Le Studio Canal. Canal+'s financial-backing structure was designed to sponsor many productions in the French film industry and to promote the completion of first-feature films as well as to assist big-budget productions of proven cultural value (80 percent of French films each year are presold to Canal+). The omnipresence of the television company is all the more valuable for French national cinema since most French productions today appear incapable of attaining any profitability without public subventions.

Led by Jean-Marie Messier (former chairman and CEO of Vivendi) and Pierre Lescure (former chairman and CEO of group Canal+), the Group Canal+/Vivendi[5] was able to achieve a uniquely powerful

growth.[6] With the support of Seagram and Canal+, Vivendi's position in global-communications is significant with, for instance, the aforementioned film library, the production studio, theme parks, and PC-based software game publishing through Vizzavi. As for distribution, Group Canal+/Vivendi provides Internet access through Vivendi/Vodafone Mobile to 60 million customers in Europe, and has become the principal partner of Internet consumers, business-to-business information, and other entertainment universes. Its Internet division, CanalNumedia, was created in January 2000. The new millennium opens important new markets for the Canal+ Group, and as the Internet allows extensive development of the recorded-music market (particularly among a growing young audience population using the MP3 format), by offering straightforward consumer experience, the Group Canal+/Vivendi has enormous potential, involving Europe's most influential wireless and wired trademark with the worldwide network.

FRENCH CINEMA ABROAD

In 1949, the CNC created the production company Unifrance to help in the commercialization and distribution of French movies in other countries. Since its creation, results have often exceeded expectations. For example, Jean-Paul Rappeneau's *Cyrano de Bergerac* made 50 million francs in the foreign market, twice its total production costs. Unifrance regularly indicates the fundamental magnitude of film exports as vital to the strength of the French-cinema industry since 85 percent of the total revenues of French films are generated abroad: Western Europe represents 40 percent of box-office revenues, while the United States alone accounts for 26 percent, followed by Germany and Japan with 16 percent, and Italy at 10 percent. Concurrently, the market share for French films abroad is regularly projected at around three to four percent, an apparently inconsequential stature which, nevertheless, still places France as the number-two film producer behind the United States. Foreign-language films inevitably face an additional challenge before distribution in the American market, namely, language subtitles. Because of the general reluctance among the average American audiences to view subtitled films over English movies, the perspective of commercial success in the US market is limited (in addition to the constraint of any commercial representation outside Europe).

Toward which future is French cinema moving? Unlike most French filmmakers, Jean-Jacques Annaud defends the future relationship between films and cultural identity:

TABLE 6: MAIN MARKETS FOR FRENCH FILMS (MILLION FRANCS)

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
United States	47	26	51	32	65	41	36	74	21	168
Japan	25	31	37	40	45	44	43	108	52	68
Germany	89	70	80	69	71	56	46	106	50	73
Italy	25	33	52	20	18	26	34	69	35	36
United Kingdom	18	11	9	9	14	9	5	53	10	23
Spain	17	17	34	15	18	14	25	42	30	51
Belgium	22	17	23	30	19	23	28	23	38	26
Australia	3	3	4	4	3	3	4	23	3	14
Argentina	2	1	5	7	2	1	2	25	4	14
Netherlands	3	2	5	3	4	4	3	3	5	17
Total (main markets)	251	211	300	229	259	221	226	626	248	490

(*Source:* CNC)

> Today's cinema is a global art form, it is impossible to make movies for a market the size of France, representing no more than four percent of the world's total. When Americans shoot movies, they aim at the entire planet. When the French make movies, they aim at Paris. I think that it is about time we stopped putting little flags on movies. When you create a movie, you create something in your image.[7]

This assertion, despite being in the minority among French filmmakers, confirms the international image that French cinema has embodied through its one hundred years. If it is true that many French directors and animators have gone abroad, especially to Hollywood (Jean-Jacques Annaud, Luc Besson, Claude Autant-Lara, Jean Renoir, Maurice Tourneur, and Julien Duvivier, among others), many foreign artists have been able to profitably utilize the competent, professional, and rather unique modus operandi in France. Traditionally, France has fostered many foreign filmmakers. Carl Dreyer, Luis Buñuel, Robert Altman, Marco Ferreri, Volker Schlöndorff, Ettore Scola, Nagisa Oshima, and Wim Wenders, among others, have expressed a preference for French modalities of production and the French creative system of subsidies and co-productions that have been perfected over the years. This tradition began in the silent era of the 1920s when Russian immigrants (Ladislav Starevitch, Victor Tourjanski, Ivan Mosjoukine, and Nathalie Lissenko) became famous among French audiences. Along with them, Carl Dreyer came from Denmark to shoot *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). In the late 1920s, Luis Buñuel directed such coproductions as *An Andalusian Dog* and *The Golden Age*. In the 1960s, and after a long absence abroad, Buñuel returned to France with *The Diary of a Chambermaid* (*Le journal d'une femme de chambre,* 1963), with Jeanne Moreau; and *Belle de jour*. Like many artists of his time,

Table 7: MAIN FOREIGN PARTNERS IN FRENCH COPRODUCTIONS (NUMBER OF FILMS)

	1997	1998	1999	2000
Spain	12	16	16	7
Belgium	10	18	10	10
Italy	13	12	8	11
Switzerland	11	10	7	6
Canada	8	5	7	8
Portugal	6	5	6	4
United Kingdom	7	4	6	6
Germany	7	5	4	8

(*Source:* CNC)

German-born Max Ophuls chose to live in France in the early 1930s and directed movies such as *La ronde* and *Lola Montès* (*Lola Montès,* 1955). Still attracting foreign artists and film professionals, French cinema of the 1970s welcomed new Polish directors such as Roman Polanski, Andrzej Zulawski, and Walerian Borowczyk, and more recently Krzysztof Kieslowski, with his famous trilogy *Trois couleurs: Bleu* (1993), *Blanc* (1994), and *Rouge* (1994).[8]

As the second-largest exporter of feature films after the United States, France, as noted, has become the preeminent producer of European cinema. Throughout the 1990s, French productions only initiated their commercial operation once set up on the distribution market abroad, where French films have regularly attracted a broader worldwide audience. This growth was facilitated by the creation in November 1989 of the Sarasota Film Festival, which besides screening, in competition, French movies to the American public, also gathers French film directors along with American distributors. Every year, several French films are able to cross the Atlantic and make profitable revenues at the box office: Rappeneau's *Cyrano de Bergerac* ($15 million), Annaud's *The Lover (L'amant,* 1992; $4.9 million), Régis Wargnier's *Indochine* (*Indochine,* 1992; $5.7 milion), and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (*Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain,* 2001).

Perhaps one of the most successful and regular representatives of French cinema abroad (although far from representing its "Frenchness") is Luc Besson (b. 1959). Along with Leos Carax and earlier Jean-Jacques Beineix, Besson is considered one of the key propagators for the emergence of the *cinéma du look* of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1990 *La Femme Nikita,* starring Anne Parillaud, presented new possibilities for French action movies, which were usually behind the fast pace of Hollywood productions. Warner Bros. bought the rights and assigned direction of the American remake to filmmaker John Badham as *Point*

of No Return (1993), which starred Bridget Fonda. In 1994, Besson directed *The Professional* (*Léon,* 1994) in New York, with the emerging star of French cinema of the 1990s, Jean Réno. This story of a hit man who befriends a little girl made $20 million in three weeks and altogether tallied more than $32 million at the American box office.

Acclaimed by international commentators and film historians, and screened at countless international film festivals throughout the second part of the 1990s, French films seem to have recaptured the powerful spirit of the times—somehow lost in the early 1980s—plus the favor of audiences and, more importantly from a financial point of view, the cutting edge on a faster-paced-motion-picture market. This thriving spirit and achievement, both in France and in the United States, can best be seen in the broad variety of genres offered to an evermore diverse and seemingly fragmented public, from comedies (*The Dinner Game*), to flamboyant dramas (*Cyrano de Bergerac,* Nicole Garcia's *Place Vendôme*), to film noir and action pictures (Besson's *The Messenger,* Annaud's *Enemy at the Gates*).

Despite the apparent omnipresent Americanization of the international-movie scene, French cinema clearly remains an industry for which the rules and regulations are radically different. Because of the customs and tastes of its audiences, French cinema is still considered a singular catalyst of cultural messages. For the French public, cinema, above all, is an art, and its most important mission, despite the pace of technology and other trends, is to remain creative and culturally relevant.

French cinema finished the first year of the new millennium—and the start of its third century—in a healthy position, encouraged by higher box-office revenues in the United States, as the following revenues (in million francs) illustrate: 50 (1995), 53 (1996), 184 (1997), 33 (1998), and 192 (1999). With such an international aura, it is no surprise to see many American producers and scriptwriters looking for new inspiration from already accomplished and guaranteed European successes. Considered more a commercial product, the "author" of which is the producer (certainly at the opposite end from the scriptwriter or even the director), American cinema finances each year, motivated by pure commercial logic, a certain number of remakes, and in particular French remakes such as *Dinner For Schmucks* (2002) after Francis Veber's *The Dinner Game* (*Le dîner de con,* 1997); Jean-Marie Poiré's *Just Visiting* (2001), after his own *The Visitors* (*Les visiteurs,* 1993); Ivan Reitman's *Father's Day* (1997), after Veber's *Les compères* (1983); John Pasquin's *Jungle 2 Jungle* (1997), after Hervé Palud's *Un Indien dans la ville* (1994); Donals Petri's *The Associate* (1996), after René Gainville's *L'associé* (1979); Jeremiah Chechik's *Diabolique* (1996), after Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les diaboliques* (1954); Mike

Nichols's *The Birdcage* (1996), after Edouard Molinaro's *La cage aux folles* (1978); Chris Colombus's *Nine Months* (1995), after Patrick Braoudé's *Neuf mois* (1994); James Cameron's *True Lies* (1994), after Zidi's *La totale* (1991); John Badham's *Point of No Return* (1993), after Besson's *Nikita* (1990); Jon Amiel's *Sommersby* (1993), after Daniel Vigne's *Le retour de Martin Guerre* (1982); Leonard Nimoy's *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), after Coline Serreau's *Trois hommes et un couffin* (1985); Blake Edwards's *The Man Who Loved Women* (1983), after Truffaut's *L'homme qui aimait les femmes* (1977); Jim McBride's *Breathless* (1983), after Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle* (1960); Bob Rafelson's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981) and Tay Garnett's *The Postman Always Ring Twice* (1946), after Pierre Chenal's *Le dernier tournant* (1939); Otto Preminger's *The Thirteenth Letter* (1951), after Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Le corbeau* (1942); and Anatole Litvak's *The Long Night* (1947), after Marcel Carné's *Le jour se lève* (1939).

NEW ARTISTS, NEW CREATORS: JEAN-PIERRE JEUNET AND MARC CARO

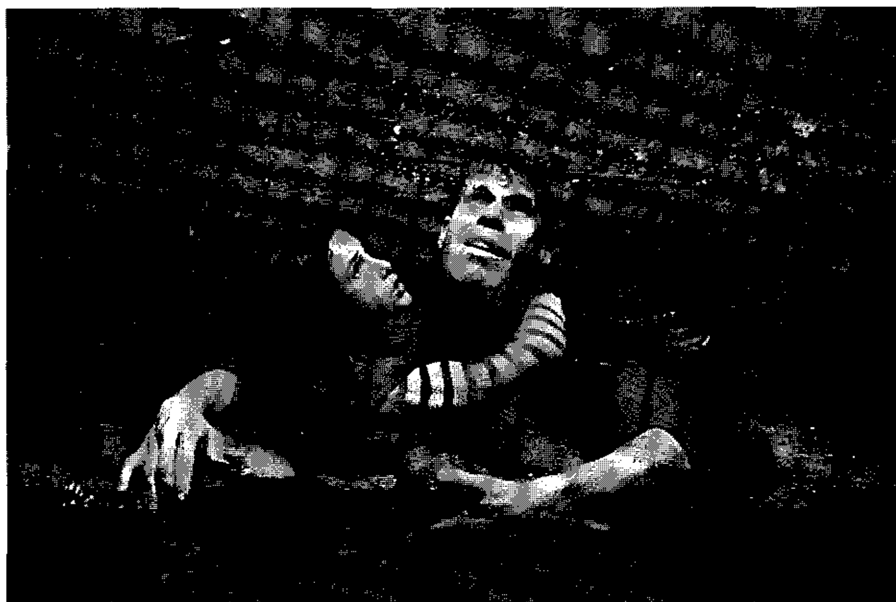
Two of the most stylish, outlandishly original French filmmakers of the decade, endowed with an entirely original inspiration, Jean-Pierre Jeunet (b. 1955) and Marc Caro (b. 1956), stand as seminal figures in French cinema history for the scope and artistic vision of their productions. During the 1980s, both artists began their careers in music videos and animated shorts like *Le Manège* (1980), only to rapidly make their mark on international filmmaking. By creating elaborate storyboards, including unique futuristic fantasies, and balancing simple and likable characters with ingenious special effects, the work of Jeunet and Caro resulted in a style that will not likely soon be surpassed or even well-imitated. Their films are an inspiring series of visual effects blended with Orwellian paranoia, then embedded within production designs seemingly pieced together from the shared dreams of Franz Kafka. Jeunet's *Things I Like, Things I Don't Like* (*Foutaises,* 1989) won the César for Best Short Film Fiction in 1990. *Delicatessen* (*Delicatessen,* 1991) was Jeunet and Caro's first full-length feature (Jeunet directed, while Caro controlled the visuals and the design production). The film earned numerous awards in 1991: Césars for Best Editing (Hervé Schneid), Best First Film (Marc Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet), Best Original Screenplay (Gilles Adrien, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, and Marc Caro), and Best Production Design (Jean-Philippe Carp and Kreka Kljakovic).

The story of *Delicatessen* comes straight out of a Gothic comic book and uses cartoon-style visual design. But with Caro and Jeunet, the story becomes eccentrically original. Gilles Adrien led the plot and the

characterization of the protagonists: an imaginary journey to the edge of sanity, questioning the nature of human identity. In a possibly alternate 1950s, postapocalyptic-imaginary time, the people of a small town have turned to cannibalism to survive. A malevolent butcher named Clapet (Jean-Claude Dreyfus) secretly kills unsuspecting tenants, and serves the meat to supplement the lentils that have taken over as hard currency in the famished town. The butcher's ritual is to hire a new maintenance worker, kill him, and sell the meat to the tenants of the decadent apartment building he owns. The sinister edifice is filled with the presence of eccentric characters, including Monsieur Potin, who lives in a cellar filled with water frogs and snails, and Madame Interligator, a woman who is constantly and unsuccessfully committing suicide. One day, the butcher-landlord hires Louison (Dominique Pinon), an unemployed clown grieving over the death of his monkey (a chimpanzee named Dr. Livingstone, who has recently been devoured by famished circus spectators), who will work as a repairman in exchange for room and board. But the butcher has grisly plans for him, and of course the real reason for his employment is to eliminate him. In the meantime, Louison befriends Julie (Marie-Laure Dougnac), the butcher's nearsighted daughter and the only character who remains untouched by the omnipresent carnivore frenzy. She falls in love with him and tries to save her new lover from his horrific fate. Their grotesque and unsophisticated romance offers an interval of rationality and optimism from the many dark themes of the film. Determined to fill his empty shelves with freshly butchered clown parts, the butcher plans to kill Louison the next night. To save him, Julie must seek the help of the Troglodytes, a rebellious group of vegetarians who live underground and circulate through the endless sewage network. At first, they are reluctant to help her, anticipating an ambush, but she persuades them by revealing the existence of an astronomic amount of lentils in her father's cellar. The Troglodytes plan their collective assault the same night that the butcher has decided to kill the unsuspecting Louison. Following a climactic rescue, the butcher is killed and a normal life begins anew.

The nightmarish atmosphere was well suited to the story, immersing the audience in the same sense of paranoia that recalls the visceral power of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985). Despite dealing with the unsettling subject of cannibalism, *Delicatessen* is poised between farce and horror. With an invading and almost ominous presence, borrowed from the poetic realism of the prewar era, the representation of a postapocalyptic nightmare was viewed as a surreal black comedy too dark for mainstream audiences in the United States. Caro and Jeunet fashioned an exceptionally detailed world, as the film seemed both high-tech and curiously quaint. The technique had the ability to turn

Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro's *City of Lost Children* (*La cité des enfants perdus*, 1994), (Courtesy BIFI).



Judith Vittet (Miette) and Ron Perlman (One) in Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro's *City of Lost Children* (*La cité des enfants perdus*, 1994), (Courtesy BIFI).

cinematographic preconceptions around: shocking and ominous visual predicaments are comical, and amusing witticisms become alarming. With subjective and imaginative viewpoints, *Delicatessen* appeared as if its narratives had concealed explanations, which, while they may be part of a futuristic universe, fit into the framework of conventional linear narrative. Scripted by noted comic book writer Gilles Adrien, the film was rife with comic devotion to a series of vignettes about minor characters. According to film historian Susan Hayward, Caro and Jeunet succeeded in the difficult task of bringing innovation to the comedy genre: "What is significant is that the renewal is being attempted in comedy, the most conservative of all genres."[9]

Thanks to Darius Khondji's impressive camera skills, the film was particularly noteworthy on a visual level, with many pictorial landscapes bursting with vibrant colors (e.g., series of gray hues among the claustrophobic urban sprawl). Not only does the apartment building feel oppressive to a Kafkaesque degree, but every indoor set created a claustrophobic sensation, enough to evoke the feeling of being trapped in a universe where death is literally the only escape. *Delicatessen* is a story of originality and creativity that effortlessly blends special effects. Many observers considered the innovation a type of cinematographic challenge that cleverly manipulated action and special effects instead of being controlled by them. Among the most memorable cinematic ventures of the 1990s, with its complex camera movements and shots, *Delicatessen* used a deliberate technique designed to unsettle the audience, making it difficult to believe what any protagonist said or thought. But what makes the film seminal is not only its look and artistic vision, but also its hypnotic, haunting, and dark photography, which constantly evokes new angles and strange developments. The film was framed in disquieting moments that seemed strangely contemporary, and simultaneously conveyed a futuristic science-fiction noir quality, which transported the viewer beyond conventional spheres of imagination.

The filmmakers' next assignment, *The City of Lost Children* (*La cité des enfants perdus,* 1994), was once again sheer imaginative creation, full of visual wonders, this time capturing the magic of Georges Méliès's *Trip to the Moon*: dark phantasmagoria combined with hallucinatory nightmares and striking imagery also reminiscent of Gustave Doré's illustrations. Their artistic inspiration—the advertising industry for Jeunet and comics for Caro—appeared to be firmly rooted in so-called underground comix, whose characters come to life by the unique use of wide angles, mobile frames, and fantastic visual effects with computer imagery. *The City of Lost Children* resourcefully assumes a life and a flow of its own. Screened as the Grand Opening Night picture at the

1995 Cannes Film Festival, *City of Lost Children* was nominated for several awards, including the Palme d'or.

With a screenplay by Gilles Adrien, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, and Guillaume Laurant, this futuristic tale transports the spectator to an unidentified seaport, a synthetic but stylized world devoid of adults where young orphans mysteriously disappear. When captured, the unfortunate children are sent to an abandoned offshore oil rig, erected on stilts in the middle of the sea and protected by countless submerged mines. The mastermind is a prematurely aging scientist, named Krank (Daniel Emilfork),[10] who, tormented by having lost the ability to dream, has invented a device to steal children's dreams through a thought-transfer apparatus. Krank, which means "ill" in German, directs the systematic kidnapping by contracting a crew of blind fanatics, known as the Cyclopes, in order to capture young children from the nearby harbor town. Once brought onto the sea platform, the scientist ties each child in sleeping sarcophagi, wires them to download their dreams, then invades these little internees' mind. Little does Krank know that altering children's dreams will not provide him with the answers for which he so desperately searches. The experiment continues to fail as the children's slumber is invaded by unpleasant nightmares. Convinced of the existence of a psychologically poised child who is not afraid of him, the mad scientist continues to exploit more and more children with the help of his brutish henchmen. One day, Denrée (Joseph Lucien), a three-year-old orphan adopted by a circus strongman named One (Ron Perlman),[11] is kidnapped by the Cyclopes, who organize the trade with Krank. Desperately searching for his adopted brother, One eventually discovers a sinister orphanage held by the tyrannical Siamese-twin sisters Zette and Line (Geneviève Brunet and Odile Mallet), a.k.a. *la Pieuvre* (the Octopus). In order to be sheltered, the children are taught the art of robbing and become pilfering street urchins. Precocious nine-year-old Miette (Judith Vittet), the oldest girl of the orphan gang, understands One's tragedy and decides to assist him in his doomed quest. One night, as they discover the location of the trade between the Cyclopes and Krank's accomplices, they attempt to intervene, but to no avail. Captured, they are immediately sent to death. Their hands and feet tied, they are pushed into the canal. As they both fall into the water, One is rescued by Marcello (Jean-Claude Dreyfus), a circus director who once owned the Siamese sisters as a popular attraction. Gutsy little Miette's destiny is also providential when a lonely deep-sea diver (Dominique Pinon) rescues her in the murky waters of the harbor. He was once a scientist himself working for Krank, but was chased off the platform. But the malevolent sisters are still after One and Miette. Using a sinister device, a flea

carrying poison that ultimately develops aggressivity within its victim, they achieve their goal by having One turn against Miette. Just as One is about to strangle her to death, a colliding boat comes into the port and pushes them into the water. Marcello, who had planned to eliminate the tyrannical sisters years ago, arrives in time to send another deadly flea, this time contaminating the sisters themselves and eventually forcing them to kill each other. After discovering the existence of the platform at sea, Miette and One embark on a barge to discover its location. Krank's lieutenants, six genetically engineered clones (all played by Dominique Pinon), quarrel among themselves about which among the group is the "original." Irvin (voiced by Jean-Louis Trintignant), Krank's philosophical brother, who subsists as a submersed disembodied brain in an aquarium with a lens for sight and a gramophone for hearing, is the only wise individual on the platform. As One and Miette arrive, they successfully outsmart the team of clones and find Denrée asleep and connected to the diabolical machine. For Miette, the real challenge begins. To save Denrée, she must penetrate Krank's dream, fight against his will, age prematurely (while sending him back to childhood), and bring Denrée back to reality. The nature of the nightmare is too strong for Krank, who dies of a heart attack. Thanks to the deep-sea diver—the authentic "original"—Krank's empire is destroyed and all the children are liberated.

In the *City of Lost Children,* the oneiric representation is deliberately related through the icons of childhood, bliss, and purity, which explains the reason why the evil scientist's elaborate scheme focuses on young, unspoiled children (e.g., the opening scene representing the "ominous" arrival of several Santa Clauses through the chimney bringing toys). As true visionaries, Jeunet and Caro, who conceived the film some fourteen years before, achieved one of the most audacious and original films of the decade. The eerie grandeur of this film, in addition to the countless dazzling special effects designed to overwhelm audiences, relied on the awareness of imagination and of the importance of protecting a child's faculty to dream. Mythic childhood innocence is also represented as the narrative's emotional focal point—the poignant sentimental rapport of One and Miette. Assisted by careful lighting and framing, Miette's ingénue personage displayed an almost adult performance with a touching cynical facade to conceal her solitude. Although elaborated with thoughtfulness and unadulterated feeling, the team of One and Miette share a minimal but clearly ephemeral erotic attraction. The character of Miette even sees in One and Denrée an opportunity for the traditional family she has never experienced, but throughout the narrative the ambiguities of this relationship never draw near the sordid or perverse.

The City of Lost Children is both intuitive and cerebral, and its lucid story line is backed by a series of stunning sets and special effects. The imaginative set construction of the Studios de France[12] (supervised by designer Jean Rabasse,[13] who won the César for Best Production Design in 1995) corresponded to a dark configuration that visually borrowed Jules Verne's turn-of-the-century illustrations. Caro's Surrealistic art direction and production designs can be experienced as excursions into a hypnotic world with illusory colors that are highly reminiscent of Verne's representations of fantastic underworlds as well as Marcel Carné's atmosphere in *Port of Shadows*. Jean-Marie Vivès's contributions for the *peintures numériques*/matte paintings (the first digital matte paintings in France) offered a seamless transition between matte painting and set, and a subtle combination of real characters, model, and matte painting. This expensive high-tech production (120 million francs and one gigantic set mainly made of styrofoam), using more special effects than any other films at that time, was a rarity and really a world of its own. Whereas the film manages to strike a perfect balance between dreamlike Surrealism and real-world reference points, the unconventional camera angles and wide-angle lenses in a sense call to mind a wide-eyed child's innocuous way of looking at life. Darius Khondji's cinematography and dark fantasy (*Seven, Evita, The Beach, Stealing Beauty*) created a gloomy world by assembling his most salient visuals on top of one another in shot-by-shot editing (Hervé Schneid), thereby magnifying the scope of the nightmarish view of this post-apocalyptic world.

With a big budget for a European film, the movie included an impressive series of "numeric" special effects[14] (40,000 digitalized images, 17 minutes of special effects, orchestrated in 144 sequences out of the 800 included in the final version of the film), as well as technical innovations like the first use of accelerated and slowed-down speed in the same take. The post-production technique known as "warping" made the opening and final dream sequences intriguingly Surreal compared to conventional representations. The dream sequences were artistically well inspired and developed gradually darker in tone as the plot progressed. The inventive editing changed speed during the same shot–motion control process; at the same time, the music and voices slowed independently from the images (e.g., in the final-dream sequence). Another feature of the film was the fine use of *images de synthèse* (digital-image system; e.g., the flea shot with a steady cam; the metamorphoses occurring between Miette and Krank in the dream sequence, forty-eight sequences representing ten months' work), under the supervision of Pierre Buffin and his unit known as Buf Compagnie. In addition, the digital special effects of Pitof *(Les visiteurs, Alien IV,*

The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc, Vidocq), who the previous year had done the special effects for Michel Blanc's comedy *Dead Tired* (*Grosse fatigue*), proved influential for the rest of the decade. The costumes by Jean-Paul Gaultier (Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element*) generated a real sense of childish/impertinence within this eccentric humanity. The richly atmospheric music of Angelo Badalamenti (*The Beach, The Straight Story, Twin Peaks*) triggered intense and utterly Surreal emotions. Far from being an experimental film (despite its radically different artistic approach relating dreams to creativity), *The City of Lost Children* followed a rather conventional narrative format. Although too pessimistic for the general public, and unfortunately often misconstrued as a picture for children due its fairy-tale quality, the final message of the film reminded audiences of the dreadful prospect of losing one's imagination, encouraging individuals to protect idealism and creativity. More of a fantasy than a macabre comedy, *City of Lost Children* did not hit big at the American box office as general audiences most likely aspired to see a little more "light at the end of the tunnel."

A couple of years later, following the completion of *Alien: Resurrection,* in 1997, Jeunet's career took a new turn with *Amélie,* an "authentic" fairy tale "made in Montmartre," which was released in France on April 25, 2001, and in the United States on November 4 of the same year. Its release appeared to be much more than just a commercial blockbuster but an authentic *phénomène de société.* The poetry and satire that had been missing from French film during the last part of the 1990s returned to the screen with this feel-good movie, much lighter and more engaging than *Delicatessen* or *The City of Lost Children*. Jeunet's decision to return to France after a relatively successful Hollywood experience can be compared to the so-called French cultural exception, as *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* is another compelling reminder of the comparative strength and vitality of contemporary French cinema.[15] *Amélie* echoed the trend in increased attendance figures for French productions, which at the time grew by 24 percent when compared with the previous year, and French films finally surpassed the 50 percent market share.[16] Despite its rather small budget (76 million francs, one-tenth that of *Alien IV),* the rights of *Amélie* were rapidly sold in forty countries.[17]

During an austere childhood, young Amélie witnesses many strange episodes that forever shape her personality. Both of her parents are averse to outward signs of emotion, and Amélie endures difficult hours. Her goldfish, unsuccessfully and repeatedly attempting suicide, is finally released in a municipal fountain. Amélie's neurotic mother, Amandine, who had educated her at home, is accidentally killed on the front steps of Notre Dame when Amélie is eight. Her nonchalant and unemotional father, Raphael (Rufus),[18] a family doctor, secludes

Audrey Tautou (Amélie) in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (*Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, 2001), (Courtesy of Victoires Productions/UGC).

Mathieu Kassovitz (Nino) and Audrey Tautou (Amélie) in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (*Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, 2001), (Courtesy of Victoires Productions/ UGC).

himself and devotes his affection to a garden gnome, repainting it endlessly. He rarely communicates with his daughter except via stethoscope while conducting medical check-ups. He eventually misdiagnoses her condition and believes that her heart beats faster in these unusual moments of physical contact. Unfortunately for Amélie (Flora Guiet), the only treatment her father can think of is to be confined at home, and the little girl grows up without playmates and in a world of her own colorful dreams. Once disallowed any emotional and physical contact with children her age, Amélie begins to compensate with her fertile imagination.

The film moves to an adult Amélie (Audrey Tautou),[19] who lives on her own in Paris and works as a waitress in a bar in the Montmartre district.[20] Shy by nature, and a troublesome ingenue, Amélie nurtures a unique penchant for the small pleasures of life. She loves to dig her hand deep into a bagful of beans, break the crust of crème brûlée with the back of a spoon, and compulsively collect stones to skim off the canal Saint-Martin. The young woman continues to develop an unconditional taste for imaginative romance. In conclusion, she lives her life within her daydreams while discovering the wonders of humanitarianism. Amélie, with her girl-next-door looks, is depicted as an extraordinary being with a mind of her own concealed in an imaginary universe.

As the story unfolds, the heroine becomes conscious that the shorter path to happiness entails taking her destiny into her own hands by reaching out to others. One of Amélie's greatest gifts is her ability to observe the people of Montmartre around her. She has not been corrupted by bliss, nor compromised by desire. One day, stunned by the news of Princess Diana's death, Amélie inadvertently drops a bottle and, stooping down, discovers a tin box of old toys behind the bathroom wall in her apartment. She makes up her mind and decides to return it to the now-grown owner, Dominique Bretodeau (Maurice Benichou), to whom it once belonged. After tracking him down, Amélie is able to offer him one of life's greatest sensations: an impromptu vision of one's childhood treasures.

Proud of her success, the new *marchande de bonheur*, decides to turn her kindness toward the people around her. She begins with the janitor of her building, Madeleine Wallace (Yolande Moreau), an inconsolable widow abandoned by her husband. Amélie is fond of Lucien (Jamel Debbouze), a young produce grocer at the fruit stand called Marché de la Butte, and the way he delicately hands the endives to customers: his own way of expressing his love for his job. Because he is relentlessly patronized by his tyrannical boss (Urbain Cancelier),[21] she decides to help him out. Amélie also looks after Raymond Dufayel (Serge Merlin),[22] an aging artist whose frail bones have compelled him to live in

an entirely padded apartment for the past twenty years. His only pastime is to paint a copy of Renoir's *Le déjeuner des cannotiers* every year. Despite his unfriendly appearance, he quickly becomes her mentor and guardian angel. At the Café-Tabac des Deux Moulins, Amélie succeeds in setting up two lonely people, Georgette (Isabelle Nanty),[23] an employee of the establishment and entertaining hypochondriac, and Joseph (Dominique Pinon),[24] a bitter customer in search of black humor. Amélie's endeavors are finally rewarded by a providential encounter in a subway station with Nino Quincampoix (Mathieu Kassovitz),[25] a secluded sex-shop salesperson and recreational spook-show ghost at the Foire du Trône who collects discarded photo-booth pictures all over Paris. Because she suddenly recognizes him as a kindred soul, she begins to search for him. Her timidity compels her to stay hidden, and only the firm admonition of Raymond will convince her to step forward.

Jeunet's plot and characterization of the protagonists are entirely original and inspired from the insight that inhabits his own fruitful mind. What is cutting edge in his filmmaking? How can one consider Jeunet's concept of mise en scène numérique groundbreaking? He fashions a detailed world, and the film seems both high-tech and curiously quaint. With its subjective and imaginative perspectives, *Amélie* looks as if its narratives have concealed explanations, which, while they may be a part of reality, do not quite fit within the framework of a conventional linear narrative. It effortlessly blends special effects and traditional cinematography. Far from being a purely experimental film (despite its radically different artistic approach relating dreams to creativity), the movie presents, in many ways through its nonlinear plot, a rather mesmerizing and eccentric worldview.[26] The central asset of this self-indulgent Montmartre fairy tale, light years away from the universe of their previous independent experiments, is that the scenario writers Guillaume Laurant and Jean-Pierre Jeunet were able to insert an idea behind each shot and sequence (e.g., the recurrence of inventories, Prévert style, and an extreme sense of detail for the sad and the absurd). More of a fantasy than a comedy, *Amélie* hit the French box office (more than eight million tickets sold) just at the moment French audiences were thirsting for, and finally ready to see, more uplifting pictures. The film garnered five Academy Award nominations, including Best Foreign Film.

Jeunet's first three feature films were shot exclusively in the studio, which allowed him to exert absolute artistic control over the direction as well as the special effects. With *Amélie,* however, he went outside the studio to shoot in an all-zinc and marble café of Montmartre, the Café des Deux Moulins, an authentic Parisian café, which is now an authentic landmark among filmgoers. The Café des Deux Moulins, one

of eighty Paris locations in the movie, reveals a new facet of Jeunet's aesthetic. In an interview with Jean-Marc Lalanne and Didier Péron,[27] Jeunet confesses his passion for the look of the 1940s: *Un micro-ondes aujourd'hui, c'est moins beau qu'une télé des années* 40! (A modern-day microwave oven is not as nice as a television set from the 1940s!) Passionate about the Paris of the 1940s and 1950s, Jean-Pierre Jeunet emphasized the scarce presence of automobiles in his outdoor shorts in the streets of Paris, without the so-called mobilier urbain and graphics of the 1990s. Jeunet's work is a blend of national nostalgia, of a postcard-Paris reminiscent of Robert Doisneau's work, combined with marvelous post-production special effects. These special effects are the work of Alain Carsoux and Thomas Duval of the Duboi Company, the team responsible for more than 150 digital special effects (also in Pitof's *Vidocq*). On the set, special effects were achieved by Yves Domenjoud of the Société des Versaillais.

Working independently of Marc Caro, Jeunet was able to exploit his sensitive and sentimental side, rather than being influenced by Caro's typically artistic gloom (claustrophobic apartment, rundown building, disquieting underground paths). *Amélie* is the first film to present a realistic universe—far from *Delicatessen, The City of Lost Children,* or even *Alien IV,* despite the numerous instances of intertext sequences with the first two films (the squeaking of the box springs; the teddy bear left outside the home).

THE EPICS: RÉGIS WARGNIER AND CLAUDE BERRI

According to the artistic ambience of each decade or era, certain genres or cinematographic themes suddenly disappear from the screen only to reemerge when there seems to be a new public appeal or when artistic circumstances permit or sponsor their resumption. This is very true of epic productions, which became popular again in the early 1990s, especially those that dealt with the suddenly fashionable topic of the old French-colonial empire. One such film, Régis Wargnier's *Indochine* (*Indochine,* 1992), was a $20 million epic, a huge budget for a non–Hollywood film. *Indochine* opened in France on April 15, 1992, and premièred in the United States on Christmas Day of the same year. For French cinema, 1992 saw a return to the colonial period in its themes as several major films took a retrospective look at the country's colonial legacy in Southeast Asia, the others being Jean-Jacques Annaud's *The Lover* (*L'amant*)[28] and Pierre Schoendoerffer's *Diên-Biên-Phu* (*Diên-Biên-Phu*). At the 1992 Academy Awards, *Indochine* came away with the Oscar for Best Foreign Film, as well as a nomination for Best Actress (Catherine Deneuve). It also won for Best Foreign Language Film at the 1993 British Academy Awards. At the 1992 Césars,

Indochine was the recipient of an avalanche of awards: Best Actress (Catherine Deneuve), Best Cinematography (François Catonné), Best Production Design (Jacques Bufnoir), Best Sound (Dominique Hennequin, Guillaume Sciama), and Best Supporting Actress (Dominique Blanc). Director Régis Wargnier, who began his career as second-unit director and assistant director for films such as Patrice Leconte's *Viens chez moi, j'habite chez une copine* (1981) and Alexandre Arcady's *Le grand pardon* (1981), had his first and greatest success with *Indochine*. He became a celebrated international filmmaker overnight. His credits also include *A French Woman* (*Une femme française*, 1995), again starring Catherine Deneuve, and *East-West* (*Est-ouest*, 1999), with Sandrine Bonnaire and Catherine Deneuve.

Set in 1930s French Indochina and picturing the last twenty years of French presence, *Indochine* opens as a recollection with a voice-over narration by Deneuve that tells the story of Eliane Devries (a tailor-made role for the actress), a single woman who manages a profitable rubber plantation. Camille (Linh Dan Phan), her adopted Vietnamese daughter, an Annam princess educated in French schools, is her only joy in life. While facing the rising tide of nationalistic sentiment, Eliane is able to survive thanks to the assistance of her longtime friend, Guy Asselin (Jean Yanne), the Saigon chief of police. Mother and daughter are inseparable until their semipeaceful existence is suddenly altered by the arrival of a dashing young naval officer, Jean-Baptiste Le Guen (Vincent Pérez). Eliane's conservative outside appearance confounds her own passion, which becomes evident when Jean-Baptiste enters her life for a brief romance. Eliane falls for him in spite of herself. Her daughter, Camille, later falls in love with him too. Believing that she is acting in her daughter's own good, Eliane manages through her connections to have Jean-Baptiste reprimanded for his behavior, at an upper-class gathering, by having him reassigned to a faraway outpost on the Island of the Dragon. But Eliane misjudges Camille's tenacity. Although betrothed since birth to her cousin Tanh (Eric Nguyen), the young woman is still in love with Jean-Baptiste and flees the comfort of her dwelling in search of the man she loves. During her perilous expedition, Camille, who undertakes a strenuous journey, learns immensely about Indochina and realizes the true depth of misery among her people. She eventually ends up in the camp where Jean-Baptiste was assigned.

The pace of the story suddenly picks up as the film shows how the French army organized the slave trade, separating families and keeping the population in fear. Outraged, Camille kills an officer in charge of the slave traffic. Jean-Baptiste immediately decides to desert the navy in order to protect her. For years both flee through the wilderness of Indochina, seeking refuge from the armed forces that still want to

entangle them. As they hide during the day with a traveling-theatrical group, Camille gives birth to their son, Etienne. Their run comes to an abrupt end when the army captures the baby and the father, sending Camille to prison. Eliane is able to get the child back and rears him after the sudden, mysterious death of Jean-Baptiste. In 1936, Camille is released from the penitentiary of Poulo-Condor, where she was imprisoned, but despite the comforting presence of her mother at the door, she decides to join the resistance against the French-colonial power. Eighteen years later, in Geneva, Eliane has just finished her story to Etienne. She reveals to him that among the Communist Vietnamese delegation is his mother, who came to sign the peace treaty with France.

Inspired by the established genre of colonial narratives, the film has been criticized for its "Eurocentric" point of view, contributing to a so-called cinematic neocolonialism.[29] Unlike the British, the French have generally been reluctant to look back critically at their past: the war in Algeria, the loss of Indochina (Vietnam), or even the collaboration during World War II. Director Régis Wargnier, however, did present French imperialism with a radically deadening spiritual isolation. Although accused of presenting a sanitized version of colonialism, the corrupt and cruel colonial establishment is clearly represented at every stage of the film. After nearly a century of French-colonial control, Vietnam, then known as Indochina, was tormented by decades of violence in pursuit of independence. The political turmoil in the dying days of the French colonial regime functions as a backdrop. Although the story steers away from political opinions, its measured pace evokes the poignant fading of the empire as well as the exploitation of the people of Indochina. Sympathies—obviously against French occupation—and political viewpoint remain somewhat understated, however, since, in many instances, "the colonized are never characterized in an individual manner."[30]

In its depiction of this episode in French colonialism, the film offered a vague chronology of events. Reminiscent of Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa, Indochine* was a well-photographed motion picture, the main quality of which was to capture striking images of a magnificent landscape with local colors. This lack of historical precision was overshadowed by the film's striking photography (François Catonné) and lush orchestration (Patrick Doyle). From the opening shot to the very last frame, audiences were presented with stunning images. The dramatic beauty of places like Saigon, along with the beauty of the tropical rain forest (all the scenes were shot on location in Vietnam), granted the film a matchless atmosphere and a unique postcard look.

Catherine Deneuve (Eliane) and Vincent Pérez (Jean-Baptiste) in Régis Wargnier's *Indochine* (*Indochine*, 1992), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Jean-Marie Leroy).

A year after the release of *Indochine,* another epic came to French theaters: Claude Berri's 1993 *Germinal* (*Germinal*).

Germinal was the fourth[31] adaptation of Emile Zola's 1885 novel. At the time it was the most expensive French production ever, with a budget of 172 million francs (around $20 million, a third of which served for the construction of the gigantic mine set). Since the novel is considered one of the greatest works of French literature, movie producers were far from being discouraged by the astronomical production cost (almost five months of shooting in the very same mining region near Valenciennes where the story took place one hundred years before), and an entire legion of extras were recruited (most of them unemployed miners). Berri's ambitious epic, produced with the support of government agencies as well as television companies (France2 and Canal+), premiered in Lille on September 1993 with national publicity in the presence of President François Mitterrand, Jack Lang, and Jacques Delors. Claude Berri's political involvement extended beyond national borders; his seminal role for the defense of European cinema during the 1993 GATT negotiations made him one of the spokespersons for the entire film industry. This super produc-

tion, French style, was awarded Césars for Best Cinematography (Yves Angelo) and Best Costume Design (Bernadette Villard, Caroline de Vivaise, Sylvie Gautrelet) at the 1993 French Academy Awards. This period drama set in the late nineteenth century and adapted by Arlette Langmann, was a naturalistic depiction of the lives of coal miners and their families in northern France as they attempt to organize themselves for the first time to overcome their ubiquitous poverty. This was far from a simple, sanitized version of history, but rather a critical and unswerving look at a dark time, as one critic observed: "The film's representation of the nation's immediate history to itself seeks an accommodation with past mistakes rather than confrontation."[32] For many film critics, the inner strength of Berri's period recreation relied on the consentual attempt to present a novelistic discourse rather than indulging viewers with a conflictual and ideological discourse.

Recently dismissed from the railroad company, central character Etienne Lantier (popular singer and working-class icon Renaud) comes to a mining community looking for work. Hired at the Voreux Coal Mine in Montsou, the out-of-work machinist must immediately face a new challenge as he descends into the pit to discover the harsh working and living conditions of the miners. He is assigned to the team of Toussaint Maheu (Gérard Depardieu), and the two rapidly become friends. Maheu takes Lantier into his digging crew to replace a deceased worker, and later at the end of the day invites him to stay at his home (barracks provided by the mining company). What Etienne sees around him during that first day is chaos: the workers, whose plight stands between servitude and starvation, strive to maintain even simple humanity in the face of their grim working and living conditions. Becoming more hazardous by the moment, the state of the mineshaft roof with sturdy wooden beams becomes the main concern of the workers. Engineers constantly reprimand miners for not fixing the timbering (since, in the case of fatal accidents, owners must pay benefits to families). Yet miners who spend time fixing the timbering are penalized for not bringing out enough coal. Workers scramble to load as much coal as possible, neglecting their own well-being while hoping to provide more bread on the table.

As the working conditions in the mine worsen, and pay is cut back, Etienne persuades Maheu to organize a strike. Etienne becomes a rebellious leader against his will, and as an outsider he is considered the perfect man to speak up in defense of the miners' rights. While the idea of a hypothetical trade union develops during the end of the nineteenth century, Etienne closely participates in the organization of a strike. He relentlessly emphasizes the outrageous interdependence between the starving miners and their well-fed overlords. When the

mining organization lowers the workers' wages, the miners finally decide to strike. At first nonviolent, the labor unrest rapidly becomes more intense, with predictable consequences. As the strike takes a new turn, miners at other sites decide to return to work. Immediately alerted, the miners at the Voreux mine sabotage the installations to prevent work from resuming. But the work stoppage is not resolved, and the situation turns sour. The mining company decides to hire Belgian miners as replacements and thus continue with production. The result is a chain reaction of tragic events. Maheu, who believes in the inherent goodness of man, cannot accept that French soldiers brought in to defend the mine would fire on their own countrymen. The angry crowd attempts to oppose their arrival but the armed forces shoot at them. Maheu dies under fire, and his wife, la Maheude (Miou-Miou), is determined to take up and continue the fight. Lacking unanimity and cohesiveness, the striking-miners' resentment turns to all-out insurrection as they begin tearing apart the mines. For one of them, Souvarine (Laurent Terzieff), a Russian anarchist, the only solution is to burn down all of the mines and factories created by humankind and from this, he believes, deliverance will come. One night, Souvarine descends into one of the mines by himself and undoes a water duct, hoping to flood the entire network of galleys. The chilling climax shows terror and desolation, as the mine floods and the workers are trapped inside. Etienne leaves the troubled mining community and a mourning town, convinced that the ideas he fomented will eventually germinate in the future.

Berri's reworking of Zola's classic novel was much more than a heritage film tailored as a big-production epic. Zola's denunciation of the miners' plight appeared simple and moving as the subtext in part 1 meticulously described the growing threat of the strike. An authentic and powerful look into the tumultuous, ill-fated existence of the nineteenth-century French coal mining community, *Germinal* is far from being a model epic tale. But it is impossible not to sense the realism that pervades the enormous project. Whereas Zola's fervent and uncompromising call for social reform lie at the heart of the novel, the relations between each individual protagonist symbolize the very essence of the film. The movie tackles every theme pertaining to a conventional drama (from love and death to labor relations and class warfare to destructive violence). Yves Angelo's cinematography, assisted by an impressive production design, put every theme and shot in sharp contrast, faithfully rendering the ultimate hopelessness of the human condition. Audiences were transfixed by the visual veracity, not only via the translucently illustrated protagonists who inhabit this universe, but also by the ability of the cameras to conjure up the labyrinth of the coal-mines with claustrophobic genuineness. Berri's

meticulously detailed account of inherent social inequalities and despondent living conditions remains ever faithful to the original naturalist description made one hundred years before.

Born Claude Langmann in 1934, Berri began his acting career with small roles in Claude Autant-Lara's *Good Lord without Confession* (*Le bon Dieu sans confession,* 1953) and *The Game of Love* (*Le blé en herbe,* 1954), Claude Chabrol's *The Girls* (*Les bonnes femmes,* 1960), and Henri-Georges Clouzot's *The Truth* (*La verité,* 1960). He later appeared in Patrice Chéreau's *The Wounded Man* (*L'homme blessé,* 1983), and more recently in Didier Bourdon and Bernard Campan's *The Three Brothers* (*Les trois frères,* 1995). However, Berri's principal career has been as producer and director. His first short, *The Chicken* (*Le poulet,* 1965), which won an Oscar for Best Live Action Short Film that same year, was followed by his first feature film, *The Two of Us* (*Le vieil homme et l'enfant,* 1967), starring veteran actor Michel Simon. In 1980, the most popular artistic celebrities of France, such as Catherine Deneuve, Gérard Depardieu, Jean-Louis Trintignant, Serge Gainsbourg, and Alain Souchon appeared in Berri's *I Love You All* (*Je vous aime*). Berri is also remembered as the first and only director who gave a dramatic role to France's most popular comedian, Coluche. Berri's movies include a long list of popular successes: *Tchao Pantin!* (1983), *Jean de Florette* (1986), *Manon of the Spring* (1986), *Uranus* (1990), *Germinal,* and *Lucie Aubrac* (1997). Producer of a variety of films from popular comedies to high-budget historical epics, Berri worked with such internationally known filmmakers as Roman Polanski, *Tess* (1979), Pierre Schoendoerffer, *Le Crabe-tambour,* (1977), Claude Sautet, *A Simple Story* (*Une histoire simple,* 1978) and *Garçon!* (1983), Claude Miller, *The Little Thief* (*La petite voleuse,* 1989), Jean-Jacques Annaud, *The Lover,* (1991), Patrice Chéreau, *Queen Margot* (*La reine Margot,* 1994), Christian Vincent, *The Separation* (*La séparation,* 1994), Josiane Balasko, *French Twist* (*Gazon maudit,* 1995), Claude Zidi, *Asterix and Obelix vs. Caesar* (1999) and *La boîte* (2001), and Alain Chabat, *Astérix and Obélix: Mission Cléopatre* (2002).

PERIOD DRAMAS: PATRICE CHÉREAU, ALAIN CORNEAU, JEAN-PAUL RAPPENEAU, AND PATRICE LECONTE

Patrice Chéreau's *Queen Margot* (*La reine Margot,* 1994), was a long anticipated, prestigious French production (with a huge budget totaling 120 million francs). Far from being a Shakespearean tragedy or a romanticized historical adaptation, the screenplay, written by Danièle Thompson and Patrice Chéreau, was an adaptation of Alexandre Du-

mas's grandiose historical novel of the same name. (Dumas of course also wrote *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers.*) Originally involved with theater and opera as, most notably, the Piccolo Teatro di Milano, Patrice Chéreau (b. 1944) began his career in film with the adaptation of Jacques Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (1978). As codirector, with Roger Planchon, of the Théâtre National Populaire de Lyon/Villeurbanne and director of the Théâtre des Amandiers in Nanterre, Chéreau discovered many unknown talents who ultimately dominated the 1990s, such as Vincent Pérez, Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi, Agnès Jaoui, and Isabelle Renauld. Chéreau's major productions are *The Wounded Man* (*L'homme blessé,* 1983), *Those Who Love Me Can Take the Train* (*Ceux qui m'aiment prendront le train,* 1998), *Intimacy* (*Intimité,* 2000), and *Betsy and the Emperor* (2002). The filmmaker has also performed in various films, such as the voice of Marcel Proust in Raoul Ruiz's *Time Regained* (*Le temps retrouvé,* 1999); Berri's *Lucie Aubrac*; Michael Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), as General Montcalm, and Andrzej Wajda's *Danton* (*Danton,* 1982) as Camille Desmoulins.

Sumptuously rich visuals and a story of doomed love characterize *Queen Margot.* Imprisoned between Eros and power, Margot's character is ambivalent regarding her union with the future Henri IV, since their marriage is simply for the purpose of ending religious hostilities. Viewers are introduced to the religious persecution that occurred in sixteenth-century France, a country rife with violence and dominated by the French exile of Catherine de Medici (Virna Lisi). Catholics and Protestants live under difficult circumstances as a result of the political machinations in the court of the ineffectual King Charles IX (Jean-Huges Anglade).[33] Influenced by the queen mother, Catherine de Medici, the king compels his own sister, Marguerite de Valois, known as Margot (Isabelle Adjani), to marry a Protestant prince, Henri de Navarre (Daniel Auteuil), leader of the Huguenots in an ostentatious wedding in order to secure a fragile reconciliation between the religious communities (and, it is hoped, to tease the Huguenot community away from the Spanish Crown). The film explores King Charles's limited and immoral efforts to end the divisive religious hatred of this time, and thereby overcome the many plots, both within his own court and overseas, to usurp him. Whereas this artificial concord is intended to guarantee peace between the rival religious factions, it is a marriage of convenience. Despising her new husband, Margot openly chooses a lover, the dashing Huguenot Boniface de la Môle (Vincent Pérez). Six days later, the "religious" marriage proves to be a political failure: the repression against the Protestants increases until the night of Saint-Barthélémy, with the gruesome slaughter of thousands of Protestants,

among them, the king's counselor, Coligny (Jean-Claude Brialy). Thousands of Protestants die, including most of the guests whom Henri de Navarre had brought to the wedding. Much of the story then revolves around the newlyweds being held captive in the Palais du Louvre as implicit prisoners.[33]

It is in this climate of bloody schemes and last-minute political alliances that Margot becomes acquainted with power. To save the life of many of his subjects, Henri is forced to convert to Catholicism. Margot decides to assist her husband (by now advisedly converted to Catholicism). La Môle's assignment, under the influence of Annibal de Coconas, is to gather an army of Protestants to fight the treacherous Papists. The events take a turn when Henri de Navarre strikes an alliance with Charles IX. Meanwhile, conspiracies against the king develop within his court and abroad. Although both men seem to trust each other, Catherine de Medici prepares a poison for her son-in-law, but it is the king who takes it and dies. As the Medici family crumbles, the revenging brothers accuse La Môle, and with one swing the new king will have gotten rid of two tormentors. Margot avoids death at the last minute, but La Môle is arrested and executed with his companion Coconas. The new king is crowned, and Margot departs from Paris, exiling herself to Navarre. Henri III, Margot's brother, ascends to the throne and consolidates his power, as his most immediate challenge now is to calm religious strife.

The title of the film can be misleading since *Queen Margot* is the complex story of many protagonists, not simply Margot. Although usually represented as fanatical and even nymphomaniacal, Margot despised the thought of being reliant on any man, and to a certain extent showed how she played her rivals off one another by entertaining many marriage offers without accepting any of them. (What must be taken into account is that Margot came from what may be the most dysfunctional family in French history!) The dramatic disposition of Margot is a compelling combination of strength and weakness. The character is admired for her freedom of thought and self-determination, yet seen as chained by her repressed emotion. All who have loved her unsuccessfully—including her own brothers who are believed by historians to have been involved to the point where incest is suspected—or whose love has been thwarted by cowardice, find in her their fateful toll. Eventually, the viewer is left to reach the conclusion that Margot, who did not become an adult with the healthiest deference for the institution of marriage, sees her union to Henri de Navarre as the main *raison d'être* to maintain her independence.

The ageless Isabelle Adjani took on the mythical role that was interpreted with an unarguable screen presence by the great Jeanne Moreau some forty years before (in Jean Dréville's *La reine Margot,*

1954). Adjani's sensual features truly embodied the sexually dynamic character of Margot. Known for portraying independent if not ill-fated historical figures (e.g., *The Story of Adèle H., Camille Claudel*), Adjani expressed with style, composure, and aptitude Margot's disposition as a scheming, influential, advanced thinker, who was far too conscious of her own extraordinary nature to bow to any man. Adjani's Margot is no exception. Also of note is the performance by Italian actress Virna Lisi, a worldwide sex symbol in the 1960s, who outstandingly concealed her striking features as the court matriarch Catherine de Medici, the very embodiment of wickedness and malevolence. Like most monarchs before them, the Valois's reign was constantly threatened mainly because they did not have absolute power. Still, Charles IX was faced with a rising sea of troubles, both internal (powerful religious and political enemies) and external (superior powers Spain and England were threatening invasion). It is how he confronted and conquered these threats that forms the compelling center of this film. During the reconstitution of the Saint-Barthélémy massacre, the violent, yet dazzling scenes of religious warfare were cleverly shot with visual aptitude. With historians differing about which faction started the massacre, the audience is left to decide on its own (around 3,000 were massacred that day in the capital and many more all across the kingdom). The important set production for this sixteenth-century period piece included several historic locations, such as the famous apartments of the Louvre, the Cathedral of Saint-Quentin (Margot's wedding), some streets in old Bordeaux, the forest of Rambouillet (for a memorable hunting scene), the Palace of Mafra in Portugal, and the Théâtre des amandiers de Nanterre, so dear to Patrice Chéreau.

Film critics argue that period movies inevitably reflect more on the times in which they are shot than on their subject, and *Queen Margot* is no exception. When classified with the big-screen productions of the decade, *Queen Margot,* which covered the years 1572–76, is remembered as a top-quality historical epic featuring immaculate costumes and a carefully re-created historical background. But the accuracy of the movie setting became immediately less preponderant as a cinematographic issue; the film generated its own historical context within a complex network of conspiracies and wide variety of personalities, sceneries, and action even though many historical events were altered, compressed, and juxtaposed for dramatic effect. (Understandably, it may be difficult for some historians to benefit from a fictional narrative set in such a decipherable historical context if it is weakened by what would appear to them as noticeable historical errors.)

On one level, *Queen Margot* was obviously a grand epic reminiscent of Jean-Paul Rappeneau's *Cyrano de Bergerac,* but the mise-en-scène clearly portrays a character-driven story line that indirectly elucidated

various events and vengeance acts from the very beginning of the film. One of the most staggering features of this multi-character historical film was that it opened on a bewildering assortment of individuals whose motives were to be guessed by the spectator. Indeed, many observers in America noted that a chart of the succession to the throne placed in the opening credit would have helped audiences, less familiar with French history, interpret the tortuous series of political arrangements, betrayals, coalitions, warring religious factions, secret plots, poisonings, purges, executions, and, of course, love-affairs. The plot possesses enough cinematic vigor, however, to progressively drive the sequencing of the different sword fights and battle scenes, and Chéreau, to the satisfaction of many, did not indulge in filming too many scenes with only the two main protagonists. As a renowned stage and opera director, Chéreau successfully got his players to act without any degree of bodily limitation. The film never appears wearisome despite its running length. More than thirty minutes were edited by Miramax from the 164 minutes of the 1994 Cannes Film Festival original cut. For a nonspecialist spectatorship, the editing of certain scenes found compensation in the long explanatory clarifications at the opening of the film. Some observers declared that the cuts did indeed trigger a certain element of clarity, while others considered the drastic editing a narrative oversimplification.[34]

Philippe Rousselot's camera movements were tight on the characters much of the time while capturing the dazzling visual-feast background to create an intense imagery. The dark interior of the Louvre settings generated a claustrophobic intensity that underscored the emergent sense of paranoia and the brothers' ominous maneuverings in a battle for the crown. This darkness also implied the inflexible social structure of the time, with its internal strife between the political and religious aristocracy who regarded the masses as pawns to be sacrificed for the greater good of the kingdom. Rousselot (*Diva, Dangerous Liaisons, A River Runs through It, The Tailor of Panama*), who painstakingly recreated the period, maximized the period costumes at his disposal and utilized the inspired device of candlelight, thereby overwhelming the senses with the inimitable royal apartments and floors of the Louvre. His photography was in constant motion and generated an ominous dynamic and depth, working in tandem with the somber colors and heavy-stone interiors of the set to create a dark, Gothic look that befit the lush dramatics of the piece. Like the momentum of the final plot, the beauty of Moidele Bickel's striking costumes blended and harmonized with the overpowering sound track (Goran Bregovic), thereby elevating the dramatic tension even further. With all of this, at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival *Queen Margot* took the Prix de la mise en scène (Jury Prize) and the Prix d'interprétation féminine (Best Actress

to Virna Lisi as Catherine de Médicis, despite the fact that Isabelle Adjani was widely expected to win a Best Actress Award for the film's main character). At the 1994 French Academy of Cinema Awards, the film received the Césars for Best Actress (Isabelle Adjani), Best Cinematography (Philippe Rousselot), Best Costume Design (Moidele Bickel), Best Supporting Actor (Jean-Hugues Anglade), and Best Supporting Actress (Virna Lisi), as well as a nomination for Best Foreign Language Film at the 1995 Golden Globe Awards and one for Best Costume Design at the 1994 Oscars.

Another highly anticipated project was *All the Mornings of the World* (*Tous les matins du monde,* 1991) by Alain Corneau (b. 1943). The film is a transparently nostalgic vision of what an accomplished filmmaker such as Corneau, had in mind for years. In addition to his musical background in jazz, Corneau is mainly known as one of the most successful advocates of the French-style thriller of the 1970s. After graduating from IDHEC, Corneau became an assistant director to Costa-Gavras on *The Confession* (*L'aveu,* 1970), and soon imposed himself as an assistant director working in particular with filmmakers Marcel Camus and José Giovanni. Corneau's first feature film, *French Anonymity Society* (*France société anonyme,* 1973), revealed his talent for police thrillers. This talent grew throughout the 1970s, with films such as *The Case against Ferro* (*Police Python 357,* 1976), a movie that marked his debut in big productions with actors such as Yves Montand, Simone Signoret, François Périer, and Italian actress Stefania Sandrelli; *Série noire,* an adaptation of Georges Perec's novel, eventually selected for French representation at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival with Patrick Dewaere; and finally, one of his largest critical and popular successes, *The Choice of Arms* (*Le choix des armes,* 1981), with Gérard Depardieu, Yves Montand, and Catherine Deneuve. In 1984, Corneau moved from the police thriller to the so-called heritage film as he directed the biggest stars of the decade: Depardieu, Deneuve, Sophie Marceau, and Philippe Noiret in *Fort Saganne,* an adaptation of Louis Gardel's novel. For the occasion of the centennial of the invention of motion pictures, Corneau and Jacques Perrin directed *The Children of Lumière* (*Les enfants de Lumière,* 1995), and recently *The Prince of the Pacific* (*Le Prince du Pacifique,* 2000).

One of his most significant contributions to the heritage genre, however, is undeniably *All the Mornings of the World* (*Tous les matins du monde,* 1991). After seventeen versions of the scenario, drafted by Alain Corneau and Pascal Quignard, who is also known as a scholar of baroque music, the film is the realization of a rather difficult task: namely, it makes the beauty of baroque music apparent to contemporary audiences. Although a film for a musically inclined spectatorship,

the success among popular audiences sparked a national revival of interest in French baroque music. Recipient of the prestigious Prix Louis Delluc, the film garnered eleven César award nominations, and won for Best Film, Best Director (Alain Corneau), Best Supporting Actress (Anne Brochet), Best Cinematography (Yves Angelo), Best Costume Design (Corinne Jorry), Best Music (Jordi Savall), and Best Sound (Pierre Verany, Anne LeCampion, Pierre Gamet, and Gérard Lamps).

The story begins with a voice-over narrative by the aging Marin Marais (Gérard Depardieu), a retired viol musician-courtier and virtuoso composer, reminiscing with his students on his first music teacher. His voice-over begins a series of flashbacks about his master the Jansenist[35] Monsieur de Sainte-Colombe[36] (Jean-Pierre Marielle), teacher of the viol, or viole de gambe. Following the death of his wife (Caroline Sihol) in the spring of 1660, Sainte-Colombe secludes himself into silence in an eremetic lifestyle with just one goal in mind: to attain musical perfection (which he will not share). Detached from the outside world and psychologically alienating himself, Sainte-Colombe rears two daughters by himself, Madeleine (Anne Brochet) and Toinette (Carole Richert), while teaching them the rudiments of music literacy and the techniques of the viol. As the years go by, Sainte-Colombe and his daughters give rare trio performances in his house for the privileged nobility. Unavoidably, their exquisite but infrequent performances become famous and attract the attention of the court. At Versailles, the cultural and artistic center of the Western world, King Louis XIV gets wind of Sainte-Colombe's reputation and sends an emissary, summoning him to play at the court. Without subtleties, the disconsolate musician turns down the request, offended by the thought of entertaining for prestige or money. This does not endear him to the court.

Sainte-Colombe spends hours each day in a recluse cabin, rehearsing his viol. One day, an adolescent, Marin Marais (Guillaume Depardieu), visits him and begs to be his student. After a long deliberation, Sainte-Colombe accepts, but the lessons turn out to be laborious. When, after a few rehearsals, Sainte-Colombe recognizes that his novice may eventually rise above his art, he simply declares that he has nothing more to teach. The music teacher becomes denigrating, as he tells Marais that his virtuosity, though brilliant, is limited and cannot compensate for a lack of spirit: "You make music, you are not a musician," says the unimpressed teacher. But Sainte-Colombe's daughters successfully intercede on behalf of the handsome young man until the day the relationship between the two men ends in a feud. The tempestuous and vile-tempered master does not see any talent in the young aspirant, and in a rage he breaks Marin's instrument. Meanwhile, Madeleine, a

talented violist herself, and already in love with Marais, allows him to spy on her father's secret rehearsals and teaches him everything she has learned. Marais cedes to the temptations of fame and fortune, and decides to go to Versailles to become court conductor, abandoning Madeline. Sainte-Colombe asks him to return, but to no avail. Filled with remorse, Marais eventually returns to Sainte-Colombe. Madeleine wishes to listen to a piece he has composed for her. But as Marais again departs, Madeleine is overcome with grief and hangs herself. Devastated by this second loss, Sainte-Colombe fantasizes that his deceased wife visits him as he witnesses a series of her apparitions. During his later years, Marais realizes that his emotional bond to his master was more powerful than he had ever thought. All that he has left are memories and thoughts of what might have been.

Musicologists know little about the life of Sainte-Colombe. Besides being known as Marin Marais's spiritual father, Sainte-Colombe was an ascetic, grieving, metaphysical personage, isolated from the outside world, who mainly rejected unheard musical lavishness. But in 1966, a manuscript containing sixty-seven pieces for the viol attributed to Sainte-Colombe was discovered among the belongings of French pianist and conductor Alfred Cortot. A tribute to an underrated artist, *All the Mornings of the World* was a challenge to investigate the artist's muse from a privileged angle. By portraying both talented musicians, demonstrating to each other their expertise of the viol, first through the canons of classicism (discipline, grace, respect for rules), and then through flamboyant talent, the film illustrates the symbolic conflict between art and commercial success. The serious, slow-paced, sadly beautiful music that pervades the film reveals the tragic and terrifying nature of the mourning artist's haunting memory of his wife. The two main characters stand in sharp contrast, and the film presents an interesting melodramatic fictionalization of the relationship between the two men. Sainte-Colombe, with his cold, dour appearance (usually wearing black clothing), despises the trappings of Versailles and epitomizes the antithesis of young Marais's hedonistic quest for recognition. Marin Marais, on the other hand, aspires to a position that will bring him prominence and wealth. For Sainte-Colombe, Marais's compositions are musical fragments, the very essence of which is to please others. Faith, without which no genuine art can be achieved, is at the center of Sainte-Colombe's philosophy. Unlike Marais, he plays because he is driven to do so. Every day, the divine melody generated from the heart of his instrument is destined for no receptive audience, nor is it to be rehearsed endlessly; it is instead a private and intimate communion with the self, unique and never quite to be repeated as the title of the film, an excerpt from a sentence in the novel suggests: *Tous les matins du monde sont sans retour* (All the mornings of the world are

without return). Assisted by inspired editing, the interplay between the haunting baroque music and the pastoral scenery brought the somber and underrated viol to the public's attention (compositions by Sainte-Colombe, Marais, Lully, and Couperin, in arrangements and performances by Spanish viol master Jordi Savall). In the absence of dialogue, a resonant and mesmerizing musical score took over in a steady flow of baroque requiems. Everything appeared to be nuanced musically or in visual hues. Corneau's narrative entirely disassembled the notions of time and space; the story was interrupted by flashbacks, which consequently gave no accurate suggestion of where the current action stood in relation to the chronology.

The frail lighting reproduced the period's visual atmosphere with great precision. Yves Angelo's photography—a series of long head shots, fixed camera angles, and detailed period accuracy (reminiscent of paintings by Georges de la Tour and others)—embraced a wealth of visually decorative details. Between the reclusive master, illustrated by austere and monotonous colors, and the flamboyant Marais, represented by an explosion of light as he leaves Sainte-Colombe for the glamour of the court, *All the Mornings of the World* is far from a simple parable. The film does not step out of the semantic frame it has chosen for itself (heritage film, that is), and it would be difficult for contemporary viewers to overlook the filmmakers' endeavors to present a specific vision of the seventeenth century.

Also set in the seventeenth century, Jean-Paul Rappeneau's *Cyrano de Bergerac (Cyrano de Bergerac,* 1990) was a greater success than Corneau's production as the film won the 1990 Oscar for Best Costume Design (Franca Squarciapino), with nominations for several other categories, such as Best Actor, Best Art Direction–Set Decoration, Best Makeup,[37] and Best Foreign Film. At the 1990 Cannes Film Festival, Gérard Depardieu won the prize for Best Actor. The production also earned the award for Best Foreign Film at the 1991 Golden Globes. In France, this costly epic ($17 million) received an impressive series of awards (ten in all, equaling the record held by François Truffaut's *The Last Metro*), such as the 1991 César for Best Film, Best Director (Jean-Paul Rappeneau), Best Actor (Gérard Depardieu), Best Supporting Actor (Jacques Weber), Best Cinematography (Pierre Lhomme), Best Costume Design (Franca Squarciapino), Best Editing (Noëlle Boisson), Best Music (Jean-Claude Petit), Best Production Design (Ezio Frigerio), and Best Sound (Pierre Gamet and Dominique Hennequin).

Jean-Paul Rappeneau (b. 1932) began as a screenwriter for Yves Robert's *Signé Arsène Lupin* (1959), Louis Malle's *Zazie dans le métro* (1960), and Philippe de Broca's *That Man from Rio* (*L'homme de Rio,* 1964, written with Alain Cavalier and Claude Sautet). His directing

debut was *A Matter of Resistance* (*La vie de château,* 1965). His second feature film, *The Swashbuckler* (*Les mariés de l'an II,* 1971), confirmed an inclination toward comedy as well as costume epic productions. With his most successful production, *Cyrano de Bergerac,* Rappeneau showed a talent for high-budget literary adaptations narrowly fluctuating between both cinematic substance and enunciation, preserving the essential theatricality of the play.

Rostand's flamboyant tale evokes the turbulent yet passionate life of poet-swordfighter Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac (1619–1655)[38] in seventeenth-century France, and presents the atypical love triangle between Cyrano, his companion of arms, Christian, and the woman they both love, Roxane. Endowed with a protuberant nose, Cyrano leads a life of poetry and battles. Since the only way Cyrano secures the admiration of women is through poetry and physical feats of skill, he is astonishingly brilliant as he battles one hundred men single-handedly. Cyrano seeks refuge in his persuasive eloquence, while concealing his repulsiveness behind his mental powers. The opening sequence in a theater acquaints the viewer with Cyrano's character in medias res, as he generates a famous fight, which eventually results in a duel with his rival, the Vicomte de Valvert (Philippe Volter). During the duel, Cyrano lively extemporizes alexandrines to ridicule the young nobleman until defeating him by the sword. He strikes his rivals with his sword, but it is his verses that touch the heart of others.

At the request of his cousin Roxane (Anne Brochet), Cyrano (Gérard Depardieu) takes Baron Christian de Neuvillette (Vincent Pérez) under his wing at the cadet regiment of Gascogne. Roxane is infatuated with the young cadet, whom she thinks is trying to reach her. Christian is in love with her too, but he blatantly lacks the words to convey his love. Roxane ignores the passion, which burns Cyrano secretly. He believes himself too repulsive to win the affection of women. But his eloquent poems prove successful, since Roxane immediately falls in love with Christian. One night, as Christian struggles with some verse to seduce Roxane, it is Cyrano who comes to the rescue of the intrepid lover and, hidden behind a tree, whispers the sweet poetry he has always wanted to declare. Christian climbs up to seek his reward, while Cyrano walks away in the rainy night, alone. That same night, a monk brings a letter from the Comte de Guiche (Jacques Weber), who has arranged a secret rendezvous with Roxane. To avoid the impending tragedy, Roxane decides to marry Christian immediately. When the Comte de Guiche arrives, it is too late. To avenge himself of this insult, the comte sends the regiment of cadets to the front against the Spanish troops who besiege the city of Arras. Hope suddenly resurfaces when Cyrano realizes he may have seduced Roxane, who has fallen in love with the soul behind the alexandrines. While in battle, Cyrano

writes to Roxane daily and signs, as usual, Christian's name. But one day Christian realizes that Cyrano has gone so far as to risk his own life to convey the letters across enemy lines, and understands that Cyrano really loves Roxane. Discouraged, Christian comprehends that Roxane loves only his physical features, not his soul. He loses hope and fights to the death.

Fourteen years go by, Roxane has retreated to a convent, while Cyrano has come to visit her every Saturday afternoon. Following a deadly ambush, Cyrano, now critically wounded, finds the strength to come to his weekly appointment. As he sits down, knowing that he is about to die, he requests one final favor from Roxane. He asks her to let him read the last letter "Christian" wrote to her. As he begins to read, Roxane is struck by the beauty of the voice, which comes through the verses. She turns and realizes that it is too dark for Cyrano to read but that his voice still goes on as if he had written the letter himself. She understands and declares her love to the dying Cyrano. The disconsolate poet reveals to Roxane the truth about his and Christian's deception, and of his lifelong love for her.

Adapted from Edmond Rostand's drama (written, when he was twenty nine), *Cyrano de Bergerac* has been the inspiration for several more-or-less successful versions (e.g., Michael Gordon's Oscar-winning version *Cyrano de Bergerac,* starring Jose Ferrer in 1950, and more recently, in 1987, the modernized popular retelling of the story by Steve Martin in Fred Schepisi's *Roxanne*). On stage, many productions attempted to re-create the genius of Rostand, in particular, the popular production by Robert Hossein, with lead actor Jean-Paul Belmondo at the famous Théâtre Marigny. The daunting task for Jean-Paul Rappeneau and Jean-Claude Carrière was to maintain control of the versification of the original play, which made difficult, even impossible, to keep the poetic nature of the drama within the cinematographic requirements of the screenplay, deconstructing and reconstructing each scene while leaving the play's sharp verses unbroken. Although reduced in length, the spirit and poetic dimension of each act survived and resulted in an unexpected emotion among popular audiences. Indeed, the public's endorsement of the story's enchanting romanticism showed a recognition of the audacity of the screen-writers in retaining the alexandrines from the original play. Film critics discovered a version of Cyrano matching up as intimately as possible to a truthful, uncontentious visualization of the celebrated play rather than the imaginative reshapings often found on stage. Rappeneau's mise-en-scène complies with Rostand's general narrative development, despite the few oversights of particular occurrences or secondary personages and the reworking of poetic verses. The screenplay conveys this roman-

Gérard Depardieu (Cyrano) in Jean-Paul Rappeneau's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (*Cyrano de Bergerac*, 1990), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Hachette-Première).

tic intrigue in a series of court adversities and outrages, with Cyrano always evolving as the main protagonist yet also a character of shadows.

Cyrano's famous self-descriptive verse, *j'ai été toujours l'ombre* (I have always been the shadow), laid the groundwork for the success of the film. Furthermore, the richly evocative verse translation by the English author Anthony Burgess is succinct yet filled with atypical literary audaciousness. It thereby contributed to the triumph of the film in America. Cinematographer Pierre Lhomme worked to keep the film from feeling like a filmed play. With his lively camera work, exuberant intelligence, and tragic poignancy, Rappeneau allowed the logical process of sequencing to flow without visually disengaging viewers. The rich costumes, sets, and lighting kept it from feeling heavy or fossilized. In a similar vein to how Cyrano dies at the end of the play, this film deserves to be remembered for its panache. *Cyrano de Bergerac* was ultimately a tragedy of grand scale, the final scene being reminiscent of French poet André Chénier's memorable verses *L'art ne fait que des vers, seul le coeur est poète.*

The *siècle des lumières* (the Enlightment era), especially the Revolution, has always been a favorite among French audiences. Therefore, it is no surprise to see Patrice Leconte's *Ridicule* (*Ridicule,* 1996) emerging as one of the true successes of the 1990s.

Born in 1947, Patrice Leconte began specializing in film studies in 1967 at IDHEC, where he met future cinematographer and director Bruno Nuytten. After graduation, he went into cartoon publications, thanks to designers Marcel Gotlib and especially René Goscinny, who hired him for the magazine *Pilote.* Several years later, Leconte made his first full-length feature film with Coluche, *Les vécés étaient fermés de l'intérieur* (1975). Still in the comedy genre, Leconte wrote the scenario for his next film with L'Équipe du Splendid, a group of comedians known in the *café-théâtre* circle, who looked to adapt their latest success to the big screen, *Amours, coquillages et crustacés,* a satirical parody of the Club Méditerranée resorts. This immediately became a double success with *French Fried Vacation* (*Les bronzés,* 1978), followed by *Les bronzés font du ski* (1979).

In 1984, Leconte changed direction along with an action movie with Gérard Lanvin and Bernard Giraudeau called *Les spécialistes.* One of the most interesting films of his career was a remake of Julien Duvivier's *Panique* (1946), an adaptation of a thriller from Georges Simenon's *Les fiançailles de M. Hire,* starring Michel Blanc and Sandrine Bonnaire. *Monsieur Hire* (*Monsieur Hire,* 1989) was an official selection at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival. Following growing popular success, Leconte took more initiative in the choice of screenplays as he successfully directed *The Hairdresser's Husband* (*Le mari de la coiffeuse,* 1990)

Anne Brochet (Roxane), Vincent Pérez (Christian) and Gérard Depardieu (Cyrano) in Jean-Paul Rappeneau's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (*Cyrano de Bergerac*, 1990), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Hachette-Première).

and *Tango* (*Tango*, 1993) both reminiscent of Bertrand Blier's absurdist comedies. Leconte has also directed *The Girl on the Bridge* (*La fille sur le pont*, 1999), *The Widow of Saint-Pierre* (*La veuve de Saint-Pierre*, 2000), and *Rue des plaisirs* (2001).

At the opening of the 1996 Cannes Film Festival, *Ridicule* met with terrific popular and critical success, winning a year later Césars for Best Art Direction (Ivan Maussion), Best Costume Design (Christian Gasc), Best Director (Patrice Leconte), and Best Film. It also was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the 1996 Academy Awards. The story narrates Grégoire Ponceludon de Malavoy's futile pursuit of royal favor against the decadent disciples of a mean-verbal sport, which ultimately symbolizes man's struggle against the forces that contain him. An overwhelmingly powerful film with many inspired moments, *Ridicule* shows viewers in Laclos's fashion how deception is something inflicted by one person on another, inevitably defying reason and logic.

Set at the Versailles court of Louis XVI in 1783, the film tells the story of Grégoire Ponceludon de Malavoy (Charles Berling),[39] a young, serious-minded aristocrat who makes a trip to the capital in order to petition and to persuade King Louis XVI (Urbain Cancelier) to drain the festering marshlands of his estate, which holds his people in a state

of poverty in the Dombes region where disease is killing the peasants. To see his plan succeed, he must be introduced to the life of the prerevolutionary court and master its protocols. With no access to the king's court, however, he is resigned to his fate and decides to return to his rural province. On leaving Paris, however, he is robbed and left semiconscious. The Marquis de Bellegarde (Jean Rochefort) rescues Grégoire and decides to help him by giving him access to the court and to a file he has kept of every witty remark he has ever heard at the court. The young baron is immediately attracted to Mathilde de Bellegarde (Judith Godrèche), the marquis's daughter, who is also a scientist experimenting with a rudimentary diving suit. Having inherited her father's yearning for scientific knowledge, she reveals her disgust toward life at the court, and her attraction to the spirit of the Lumières. Nevertheless, she is about to enter into a wedding of convenience with a rich nobleman, Monsieur Montalieri (Bernard Dheran), and will be able to use his wealth to support her experiments.

As the protégé of the Marquis de Bellegarde, Grégoire discovers the true nature of the court, for instance, the influential Madame de Blayac (Fanny Ardant) and the Abbot de Vilecourt (Bernard Giraudeau). Both are expert at plots, compromises, and other Machiavellian subtleties. Unfortunately, the characters talk about wit much more than they exhibit it. With the viciously competitive pressures of the court, the young baron surprisingly survives the verbal games in this fortified and sophisticated system of humiliations, a world constantly permeated by a Machiavelian atmosphere. Grégoire must be taught to play the delicate games of wit at a place where the aristocrats show an indifference to social concerns other than the ones that please their own vanity. The alternately calculating, seductive, and manipulative Madame de Blayac, a flirtatious woman of the world, thought to be the mistress of the king, favorably notices the unusual presence of Grégoire and becomes his mistress. She is a powerful ally, especially for this novice seeking to meet the insulated king. Although a man of compassion and reason, Grégoire is determined to beat the king and his court at their own game. In a parallel story, Mathilde is in dismay since she had renounced her marriage. As Grégoire finally wins a private audience with the king, he is forced into a duel that proves fatal for his adversary, an eminent officer who is close to the king. While his mischievous counterparts view Ponceludon with mocking disdain, Grégoire ultimately chooses Mathilde over Madame de Blayac, leaving behind the arena of power and a world of characters unaware of the apocalypse toward which they are heading.

Conceived from Rémi Waterhouse's screenplay,[40] this engaging costume drama featured spiritual dialogues and a beautifully designed *mise-en-scène*. Art director Ivan Maussion (*Monsieur Hire, La fille sur le*

Judith Godrèche (Mathilde de Bellegarde) and Charles Berling (Ponceludon de Malavoy) in Patrice Leconte's *Ridicule* (*Ridicule*, 1996), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Epithète Productions).

pont, La veuve de Saint-Pierre, Felix et Lola) oversaw the countless interiors, exteriors, costumes, and artifacts that contributed to the tone of the film. In addition, cinematographer Thierry Arbogast skillfully recreated the lavishness of 1783 Versailles through his impressive production designs, and a colorful setting for captivating period detail. But beyond the common portrayal of a corrupt court universe, with its visual splendor and pathos, the film emphasized a variety of literary elements. The power of words was passionately evoked with the arch dialogue, turning the whole experience into exhausting conversational games and matches of the soul. This unusually literate comedy-drama offered subtle ironies and acid-laced dialogue as if from the best theatrical plays. Again, the film was a visual feast and a semantic tour de force. With the linguistic exercise of style of eighteenth-century fashion, the camera frequently lingered on rituals of the courtesan's day (the powdering of Madame de Blayac, played with utter finesse by Fanny Ardant). One of the most compelling aspects of *Ridicule* was the representation of the two deceitful main characters and their ultimate humiliation. They arbitrarily thrived on control and manipula-

tion, and it is not until the climax that viewers are shown their frail and apprehensive side.

Of special note is the performance of Fanny Ardant as Madame de Blayac, a Parisian courtisane whose living is spent concocting sophisticated erotic intrigues. With her malevolent smile, she seems majestically corrupt, like an evil queen in a fairy story, and she openly recognizes that "her life is governed by intrigue and that her power is indistinguishable from her sexual attraction."[41] The Countess de Blayac's compulsive destructiveness makes her a character with true classical grandeur. With that opening glance, she draws viewers into her confidence, making them party to her contemptuous conspiracies. Along with unscrupulous and dark characters, such as the sly, suave, sexual predator Abbot de Vilecourt, she is a devious powermonger who, with a single impulse, can devastate the lives of anyone around her. Her boudoir expertise, which the film underlines in basic terms, is to exert her persuasive powers in the world (how she exerts herself seems almost beside the point). And she deliberately exploits her powers, whenever and however she desires, without contemplation for the consequent harm. But she lacks the devilish charm and seductiveness necessary to carry off all her conquests, much like Valmont, her corresponding character in Stephen Frears's *Dangerous Liaisons* (1989). Along with her comes the main protagonist of the film, Grégoire. Ignorant and ill equipped to face the social protocol of Parisian nobility, Grégoire must first learn the rules of the grotesque and hypocritical game and find his way through the courtesans to accomplish his goal. In order to advance, he needs more than simple logic and benevolent reason: he needs wit. But it must be a particular malicious kind of verbal amusement to leave one's victim in a state of ridicule and disgrace. The thriving continuance of his new lifestyle begins to supersede his reasons for coming to Versailles in the first place. Yet Grégoire and Mathilde, in their naively optimistic state of mind and youth, are threatened by imminent corruption: Grégoire by having to ward the countess's ruses in order to advance his plans; Mathilde by a union to an aged, wealthy suitor whom she sees as the only way to fund her study. Grégoire finds an eccentric despotism at court, dominated by wit and aristocratic genealogy. Whereas his mentor advises him not to laugh at his own jokes, to exclude all usage of puns and, whenever he laughs, not to do it with his mouth open, the young baron, deliberately oblivious to the rules, rises through the ranks and the machinations of the court. Taking a critical distance from the distribution of characters, only Mathilde, who personifies the scientific spirit of the Enlightenment, can be considered one of the rare characters not to indulge in this "dangerous liaisons" style Russian roulette and voyeuristic game. Interestingly, the behavior of most characters seems

completely logical in relation to their own motivations, as the game reduces them to a form of dishonor through verbal dueling.

Supremely caustic, like *Dangerous Liaisons*, *Ridicule* is an enlightening costume drama with much modern relevance that simultaneously functions as a period satire and a kind of contemporary metaphor. According to the logic of this decadent universe, if bright individuals are evil, then virtuous people must be dull and without character.[42] But what began as a luscious spiritual game deepened into a double-edged tragedy. From the salons to the boudoirs, humor is used as a disarming device or form of verbal fencing, as audiences are reminded with a quotation from the duke of Guines: "In this country, vices are without consequence, but ridicule can kill." Each successful riposte opens doors, an advantage that money and noble birth could not provide. Louis XVI himself sets the tone, encouraging or rejecting his spellbound cohorts according to his evaluation of their individual wit. What dominates at court is not the art of subtle diplomacy but rather an effective talent for repartee, the ability to make clever and humorous comments and ultimately cruel witticisms, especially ones that damage others' reputations. Although wittiness appears to be the most precious apparatus for aspiring courtesans, each individual's fate and character could be made or ruined in parlors, at card games, or even at dress balls over the influence of a single observation uttered in front of one's peers. Once ridiculed, the unfortunate victims' influence instantaneously declines among king and courtiers, courtesans and assorted other players. In *Ridicule*, "the body's skill and elegance are just as important as the mastery of language and the latter can actually damage the former."[43] As Mireille Rosello remarks, the film can be seen as "a convincing heritage film while commenting on cultural and political issues of immediate relevance to a contemporary French audience; that is, its ability to invent a particular past to construct a particular present."[44] With poignant veracity, *Ridicule* captures the ethos of an elite social group, a group for which manipulation and sexual power struggles turn into a game of chess. It is the France of Louis XVI, and French aristocrats are entertaining themselves at the edge of the abyss, ignoring all but themselves.

THE RETURN OF COMEDIES AT THE BOX OFFICE: JEAN-MARIE POIRÉ AND FRANCIS VEBER

In the 1990s, French comedy appeared best able to resist (at the box office) the assaults of Hollywood blockbusters. The uncontested money-making winner of the 1990s was Jean-Marie Poiré's *The Visitors* (*Les visiteurs,* 1993), the second-biggest film in French history, with

13.6 million tickets sold (second only to Gérard Oury's *Don't Look Now We're Being Shot At,* with 17.2 million). This commercial success was all the more remarkable since it belonged to the select list of five films to exceed the bar of ten million spectators: Julien Duvivier's *The Little World of Don Camillo* (*Le petit monde de Don Camillo*), with 12.7 million; Gérard Oury's 1965 *The Sucker!,* with 11.7 million; and Coline Serreau's *Three Men and a Cradle* in 1985, with 10.2 million.[45] Despite its enormous popularity, *The Visitors* was awarded only a single César (Best Supporting Actress, Valérie Lemercier).

The story begins in the Middle Ages during the reign of King Louis VI in 1122, as Count Godefroy de Montmirail (Jean Réno)[46] is about to marry Frénégonde de Pouille (Valérie Lemercier). On his way to the wedding ceremony, the count accidentally kills his future father-in-law while under a spell cast by a sorceress. Unable to marry his betrothed, he is devastated by the idea of not having any heirs. The magician Eusaebius conjures a potion to transport the count into the past and eventually give him the necessary time to change the course of history. Unfortunately, he forgets to include quail eggs inside the potion and the magician mistakenly sends the count and his squire, Jacquouille la Fripouille (Christian Clavier), into the future instead. Once in modern-day France, the two men meet upper-class Béatrice Goulard de Montmirail (also played by Valérie Lemercier), a descendant of Frénégonde, and slowly realize that they have jumped a thousand years into the future. Béatrice mistakes Godefroy for her long-lost cousin Hubert. Much to his dismay, she reveals to him that the chateau no longer belongs to their family. The new owner, Jacquart (also played by Christian Clavier), a descendant of Jacquouille, runs it as a luxury hotel. Appalled to see the feudal world upside down, Godefroy pledges to restore the family honor. As for Jacquouille, he adapts quickly to his new lifestyle and does not pay attention to his master's concerns. He even falls in love with "Dame" Ginette (Marie-Anne Chazel), a small-time artist, unemployed and homeless, who is convinced that he is an actor shooting a movie in medieval times. To return to the past, Godefroy must find an old parchment with the magician's secret potion. In the chateau, he discovers a secret path leading to the dungeon. There, he finds a message urging him to see Ferdinand Eusèbe, a descendant of Eusaebius. After countless tribulations, creating confusion in a contemporary small town and other misunderstandings, Godefroy forces his squire to return with him to the past. As they both land safe and sound back in the twelfth century, Jacquart (Jacquouille surreptitiously evades his master's orders and stays in the present by interchanging Jacquart at his place while asleep) wakes up among an angry crowd of starving peasants. As for Godefroy,

Jean Réno (Godefroy de Montmirail) in Jean-Marie Poiré's *The Visitors* (*Les visiteurs*, 1993), (Courtesy of BIFI/© J. Prébois).

he arrives just in time to change the target of his arbalest and save the life of his father-in-law.

Despite the long prologue, the weak composition of its structure, and its ad hoc style, which recalls, albeit less successfully, the delirious antics of Monty Python, *The Visitors* enjoyed great word-of-mouth approbation. The apparent popular consensus around the film came from the long-established comic device of the culture shock in moving ahead eight centuries, as well as the sheer new style of the film. Imaginative witticisms and more importantly, the enormous intertextual network of popular-culture references inform this unique and memorable scenario. With allusions to other comedies (e.g., *Le Père Noël est une ordure, French Fried Vacation*), television celebrities, and popular icons—ignorance of the two medieval protagonists indiscriminately triggered a similar derisive and comical reaction among audiences' collective imaginary, attesting to the utterly evident "Frenchness" of the film. In *The Visitors,* comedy is shifted from plot development to the individual comic reliance on greater physical and personality traits. For instance, the character Jacquouille embodies self-deprecating humor and also plays with language, learning contemporary slang. In addition to collective awareness, the most spectacular

multifaceted aspect of his personality was mirrored by the mutation of his language skills (another sign of social emancipation). Jacquouille's catchphrases have become especially popular among young audiences (e.g., *dingue* for "crazy" and the new intonation of "OK"). As one of the most eagerly anticipated releases, the sequel, entitled *The Corridors of Time: The Visitors II* (*Les visiteurs II,* 1998), had the biggest opening day in French-film history, breaking the record set by *Men in Black* and again generating an array of inventive sight gags. This in a country where few films ever received the "sequel treatment." At $23 million, the second film cost three times as much as *The Visitors,* and its success, although less impressive than the first, allowed Jean-Marie Poiré to pursue the American remake, *Just Visiting,* which was released in the United States in April 2001. The nature of this overwhelming success continues to amaze, and like all similar pop-culture phenomena, no one knows the true reasons for the craze. Like Luc Besson's *The Big Blue* and Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Betty Blue,* word of mouth resulted in enormous success.

Born in 1945, Jean-Marie Poiré, son of Alain Poiré, a successful film producer, began his career as first assistant to the operator of the Gaumont newsreels. Later, he worked for directors such as Claude Autant-Lara, Edouard Molinaro, and Gérard Oury. One of his most providential moves was to cast actress Josiane Balasko, who connected him with the increasingly popular café-théâtre actors L'Équipe du Splendid. In the early 1980s, he coauthored *Men Prefer Fat Girls* (*Les hommes préfèrent les grosses,* 1981) with Balasko. Similar to what Patrice Leconte did with *French Fried Vacation,* Poiré adapted the group's latest comedy, *Le Père Noël est une ordure,* inspiring the Hollywood remake directed by Nora Ephron, *Mixed Nuts,* in 1994. *Le Père Noël* immediately became a hit in 1982 and remains to this date one of the most celebrated comedies in France. Since then, Poiré has regularly cast Christian Clavier, Gérard Jugnot, Thierry Lhermitte, and Josiane Balasko in his films. But it was only in the 1990s that Poiré was able to make history at the French box office by successively achieving top box-grossing records: *Opération Corned-Beef* (1991), *The Visitors, The Guardian Angels* (*Les anges gardiens,* 1995), and *The Corridors of Time: The Visitors II.*

Although not quite the social phenomenon of Poiré's comedies, Francis Veber's *The Dinner Game* (*Le dîner de cons,* 1998) was no less a commercial success. Adapted from his own stage comedy, which was directed in 1993 by Pierre Mondy at the Théâtre des Variétés with actors Claude Brasseur and Jacques Villeret, *The Dinner Game* became a huge success at the box office and won Césars for Best Actor (Jacques Villeret),[47] Best Screenplay (Francis Veber), and Best Supporting Actor (Daniel Prévost). Not surpringly, the rights to *The Dinner Game* have

been sold to DreamWorks for the announced American version, entitled *Dinner for Schmucks* (2002) to star Kevin Kline and Steve Martin.

A master of French high-concept comedy, Francis Veber (b. 1937) has always displayed a talent for comic scenarios. He wrote some of the most memorable scripts for stand-up comedian Guy Bedos. Veber can be best characterized as the French filmmaker or artist who has been, like Robert Bresson—although working in a radically different genre—one of the most studied and imitated. Veber was one of the writers of *La cage aux folles* and cowrote the American remake, *The Birdcage.* Although Veber's productions have been consistently disregarded (in terms of critical consensus), Hollywood producers have repeatedly purchased or borrowed his ideas for American remakes. These include films such as *The Man with One Red Shoe* (1985), a remake of *The Tall Blond Man with One Black Shoe (Le grand blond avec une chaussure noire,* 1972); *My Father the Hero* (1994), a remake of *Mon père ce héros* (1988); *The Toy* (1982), a remake of *Le jouet* (1976); *Three Fugitives* (1989), a remake of *Les fugitifs* (1986); and *Father's Day* (1997), a remake of *Les compères* (1983). With eight films remade in Hollywood, Francis Veber has since declared residence in California, where he released his latest production, *The Closet (Le placard,* 2000).

An insightful journey into social-class differences, identity misunderstanding, and arrogance characterize Veber's work. Indeed, for twenty years Veber has relished in associating on screen unlikely and antagonistic main protagonists with divergent personalities—all for comedic purpose. *The Dinner Game* tells the story of Pierre Brochant (Thierry Lhermitte), a successful and arrogant publisher who organizes, with other well-off executive friends, a weekly practical-joke nicknamed *dîner de cons.* The rule is simple enough: the winner is the one who finds, invites, and sponsors the most stunning "idiot" for one evening. The uninformed guests are led to believe that it is their honor to share their hobbies and leisurely pursuits. Brochant makes the acquaintance of François Pignon (Jacques Villeret), a humble financial controller at the Department of Finance, who spends most of his time building models of towers and bridges out of matchsticks (his Eiffel Tower uses exactly 346,422 matches). Brochant believes he has found the perfect "idiot" for the next competition. Deluding Pignon with the idea of publishing a book on his matchstick masterpieces, Brochant manages to invite him to dinner. But shortly after, Brochant hurts his back while playing golf and must cancel the dinner party. Unfortunately, it is too late and the guest is at the door of his lavish Parisian apartment. Pignon, however, insists on staying in order to help Brochant, resulting in a sequence of catastrophic events that leaves Brochant's sheltered existence a wreck. Pignon desperately attempts to astound his new

friend, whereas Brochant, appears more and more malicious in his voracious need for amusement at the expense of Pignon. Brochant's wife, Christine (Alexandra Vandernoot), leaves in protest of the cruel sport, announcing her decision for an immediate separation. Devastated at the idea of having sent his wife into the arms of an ex-lover, Brochant is at a loss. To compound his predicament, Pignon offers his services and agrees to play the role of a Belgian film producer in order to find out whether or not Christine is with Brochant's old friend, Just Leblanc (Francis Huster). As the attempt fails miserably, they both find out that she may be with Pascal Meneaux, a notorious Parisian womanizer. Unexpectedly, Christine changes her mind and comes home, only to find Pignon, who sends her away, mistaking her for Marlène (Catherine Frot), Brochant's mistress. When Marlène enters the apartment soon after, Brochant realizes that Pignon has thrown out his own wife. Pignon's primary intuition was to lend a hand in every way he possibly could, but he is seemingly a magnet for every mix-up and injudicious decision. Convinced that his wife is now with the famous advertising tycoon Pascal Meneaux, Brochant is discouraged since he does not know Meneaux's address. With the help of Cheval (Daniel Prévost), Pignon's cynical colleague, who supervises Meneaux's tax audit, they obtain the address. The plot generates even more momentum toward its climax, when a visit to Brochant's by the tax auditor finds all of Brochant's undeclared artwork in a back room. Pignon then learns that Meneaux is not in the company of Christine but rather Cheval's wife. In conclusion, over the course of the night, Pignon essentially devastates Brochant's marriage, inadvertently invites Brochant's mistress over, and discloses his private and undeclared art collection to an overzealous tax inspector. The story, as expected, provides a moral ending, allowing Brochant to learn a lesson about using spitefulness as malicious entertainment.

Reminiscent of the popular comédie de Boulevard dear to Georges Feydeau, this fast-paced comedy of errors contains all the essential elements of the traditional farce: odd-couple relationships, mistaken identities, near collisions of people who should not meet, slapstick physical humor, situational absurdity, and shrewd wordplay. Assembled as a screwball comedy, *The Dinner Game* relies heavily on timing and a continuous intensification of comic momentum. For each problem there corresponds a solution, but Pignon and Brochant are clearly unable to remedy the situation as they create more chaos by the minute. The two protagonists thrive to surpass each other's limitations and eventually find common ground at the conclusion of the story (this may explain why characters like Pignon subconsciously remind viewers of Jerry Lewis, perhaps one of the most beloved American comics among the French). The humor is imaginative and unapologet-

ically idiosyncratic and can be viewed as an antidote to the Gallic predisposition to wry comedies, even with the presence of a nonsentimental ending. Modestly staged in high-sitcom style, this low-budget production reveals Veber's ability for effective stage direction as well as the artistry of the actors themselves. The presence of the one-room apartment setting, the use of the telephone as a comic device, and the dependence on rich and elaborate dialogue are all evident signs of the theatrical genesis of this film. (On stage Jacques Villeret played the comedy more than 900 nights.) In particular, Villeret gives the character of François Pignon a true presence, a bittersweet emotional life, and an understandable desire to be accepted by his new acquaintances rather than making him a two-dimensional object of pity or ridicule.

With the resounding successes of *The Dinner Game* and *The Visitors*, character comedies made a spectacular comeback. The trend continued with Hervé Palud's hit, *An Indian in the City (Un indien dans la ville,* 1994), scoring over eight million spectators and distributed through 43 countries since then. With 5.5 million tickets sold, Josiane Balasko's *French Twist (Gazon maudit,* 1995) was nominated for Best Foreign Film at the 1996 American Academy Awards, and Jean-Marie Poiré's *The Guardian Angels,* with the team of Depardieu and Clavier, remains one of France's most successful productions.

THE NEW FRENCH CINEMA—*LE JEUNE CINÉMA:* MATHIEU KASSOVITZ AND ERIC ZONCA

Mathieu Kassovitz (b. 1967), son of filmmaker Peter Kassovitz, began his movie career as an actor before stepping behind the camera. He can be seen in roles such as the ephemeral apparition in the initial scene of Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *The City of Lost Children,* as the lead in Jacques Audiard's *A Self-made Hero (Un héros très discret,* 1996), in international productions such as Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (*Le cinquième élément,* 1997), his father Peter Kassovitz's *Jakob the Liar* (*Jakob le menteur,* 1999), and most recently in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie.* But it is not so much his acting career as his contributions as a director that have helped to create the new French cinema: *le jeune cinéma.* Of special importance is his film *Hate (La haine,* 1995). His filmography also includes *Café au Lait (Métisse,* 1993), *Assassin(s)* (1997), and *The Crimson Rivers* (*Les rivières pourpres,* 2000).

Hate managed to carry off its premise and characters with amazing visuals and a self-conscience aesthetic, combining varied camera angles and black-and-white lighting. When *Hate* was first screened in French theaters in 1995, it caused mixed reactions among audiences as a result of its purposefully ambiguous exploration of escalating racial tensions. The story was seen by some as a truly eye-opening account of life in

troubled communities outside Paris, and simultaneously was criticized by others as a vicious commercial misuse of the same issue.

In a Parisian *banlieue* (suburb), racial tensions and urban violence explode in reaction to police brutality. Most young people of the surrounding low-income housing projects have sporadic altercations with the police. Unemployed, with no real tangible economic independence, they survive through a routine of petty crimes and drug dealing, and consequently serve time in prison. This becomes a badge of honor while handguns are deemed with the highest regard. As a result, riots and general chaos emerge to protest against the increasingly epidemic poverty. Abdel, a sixteen-year-old teenager, is near death in a hospital after being beaten during a police interrogation. His friends Hubert (Hubert Koundé), an aspiring boxer eager to escape the violence and the *banlieue* he lives in, Saïd (Saïd Taghmaoui), a small-time crook, and Vinz (Vincent Cassel), a rash character who alternates between turbulent temper and an emotionless state, learn that Abdel is in a coma and might not survive. The film is the journey of the three *banlieusards* in Paris during their twenty-four-hour stroll as they heighten hostilities among each other and seek their own justice. Vincent confesses that he has a handgun, a chrome-plated Smith and Wesson .44, that was lost by a police officer during the riot. Each of them feels the thrill of power. During their Parisian spree, they manage to sneak into an art gallery vernissage, from which they are later expelled, winding up in a confrontation with a gang of skinheads before stealing a car. While sitting in front of the Eiffel Tower, the most idealized monument in France, Hubert, more mature than his friends, relates an anecdote he once heard from an old rabbi, about a man who fell off a skyscraper: on the way down, he says to himself, "So far, so good." The line seems to fit the protagonists in the suburb: so far, so good. But how will they land?

Later, Saïd and Hubert are picked up by the police and tortured by an unscrupulous cop, who wants to teach the coercive technique of terrorization to his new partner. Ironically, while the banlieue is an austere battle zone of impending misfortune, a commercial street billboard illustrating Planet Earth says *Le monde est à nous* (The world is ours). During their aimless wandering through early morning Paris, the young men learn that their friend Abdel has died in the hospital. Hubert and Saïd worry that the news will enrage Vinz, although by now it occurs to them that Vinz does not want to kill anyone; he just does not know how to deal with his growing frustration. Returning to the *banlieue,* they are intercepted by a police patrol. During the check, an officer unintentionally kills Vinz. Hubert seizes Vinz's .44 and holds it against the officer. Suddenly, a gunshot is heard.

Hubert Koundé (Hubert), Saïd Taghmaoui (Saïd), and Vincent Cassel (Vinz) in Mathieu Kassovitz's *Hate* (*La haine*, 1995), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Productions Lazennec).

Constructed as a visual time bomb (the gunshot is the very last frame), *Hate* was one of the most eagerly anticipated screenplays at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival. Although focusing on the lives of three youngsters in a twenty-four-hour period, the ultimate implication of this film went beyond the conventional documentary. The rendering of today's generation of aggravated, disenchanted youths shows that violence in itself is a reaction to social powerlessness. Seemingly aimless, their solidarity lent the film both incongruity and poignancy. Presented by Jodie Foster and Egg Pictures Film Company, *Hate* drew an austere visual rendering of the grim reality of French *banlieues*. According to Phil Powrie, Kassovitz's production was "undoubtedly one of the major films of the 1990s by its focus on contemporary issues of youth alienation, and accordingly much attention was lavished on it, extending to government ministers watching it as to understand what might be ailing the disaffected youth of the *banlieues*."[48]

One of Kassovitz's strengths is keeping situations genuine and characters authentic. *Hate* neither glamorized nor trivialized its anxious antiheroes, and although some characters may have appeared more in

focus than others, no one is seen as a stereotype or as an uncompromising character, with the exception of the local-police officers. Through the device of intensive characterization, the film brought a sense of impulsive realism. Occasionally, this realism was used for comic relief, as when the three young men instigate a vigorous exchange, which quickly becomes a dispute, at the art gallery, and end up in the street. *Hate* also portrays the protagonists' intensity without dwelling on emotional values, and at the same time underscores their limitation without being condemnatory. This is what made the film thoroughly engaging and compelling. By sharing twenty-four hours in each character's life, and detailing each of their personalities and their relations with one another, the film helps viewers come to realize the process through which the unfortunate protagonists arrive at their final predicament and become caught up in the passion of the inferno that mercilessly surrounds them.

Hate belongs to the category of films in which script and direction are so on-target that it appears difficult to evaluate the real quality of the actors (although Vincent Cassel already had extensive acting and directing credits in France).[49] Besides the evident acting talent of most of its nonprofessional actors, the good reception of the movie essentially relied on its simplicity: *Hate* consists of a series of events, not quite a homogeneous plot. Kassovitz approached his canvas in an Expressionist manner, as the film includes many characters and several narratives told simultaneously. However, the major strength of the opening narration helps draw audiences quickly into the story. This alone revealed Kassovitz's creative abilities, since he did not concentrate so much on the narration and plot as he did on character development and atmosphere. The result is an insightful, thematic film, even if the themes are ostentatiously involved. The film benefits from a sound script and direction, which capture the look, feel, and gritty language of the *banlieue* with real compassion.

Hate is also an introverted inquiry of the different lines of social power. What appears fundamental is the awareness that the three youths, representative of most French suburban areas, emerge at times alienated from one another, not so much by ethnic background and religious identity but by a simpler separation of those who have power and those who do not. When Vinz gets hold of the gun, he too is convinced that he can shift the balance of power. Vincent Cassel captures the hostile feelings teens have for adults and society, their street smarts, and code of honor among friends. The account is a riveting and intense denunciation of urban predicaments and police brutality, seen through the perceptive sensibilities of youngsters who are inclined to violence. In this Parisian suburb, racial bigotry, although never openly realized on the screen, is omnipresent but subtly

so, and while the impression of racial anxiety and despondency pervades each and every shot of the Parisian journey, the representation of the heroes' spiritual psyche (hate, opportunism, and nonviolent conciliation), help the viewer to sympathize with the impending tragedy of the heroes.

By 1995, Kassovitz was already a director of promising talent. His expert camera work, character-driven story lines, and incisive dialogue in *Hate* and *Café au Lait* recalled the best films of Spike Lee and Quentin Tarantino. In addition to Scott Stevenson's editing (mostly jump cuts, "argumentative" intertitles to lead the audience, and prompt zooms), the omnipresent montage faithfully renders the boiling passion that grip Vinz, Hubert, and Saïd. Each frame is seemingly filled with implications of which the characters are not aware. The film constantly moves in the rhythm of real time. Cinematographer Pierre Aim's camera jumped and tracked down its leading characters, but never really called attention to its own technical feats of skill. The remarkable illusory-visual minimalism, a series of deceiving kinetic exploits, marked the emergence of Kassovitz's new style. He used a handheld camera and indulged in a certain—perhaps fashionable—stylistic looseness that corresponded to a tragic, deterministic narrative. The black-and-white cinematography of *Hate* suggests cinéma-vérité, and captures the raw energy of the streets by using real locations along with hyper realistic dialogue (the latest French urban slang). Interpreting the linguistically "insubordinate" dialogue was undoubtedly a rather difficult undertaking for English subtitles' authors Alexander Whitelaw and Stephen O'Shea. Their translation, however, successfully made the most of American rap lyrics in order to bring a certain level of comprehension to US audiences. Kassovitz made excellent use of music (Iam, FFF, McSolaar) to create tension and to echo the action. As a result, the art direction turned out to be a vivid, dynamic work that truly crossed the boundary between entertainment and art. This aspect of new French cinema clearly motivated the choice of the 1995 Cannes Film Festival Jury for Kassovitz's directing debut: the prize for Best Director at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival as well as the 1996 Césars for Best Film and Best Editing (Scott Stevenson).

For new and emerging French directors, such as Kassovitz, Eric Zonca, Cédric Klapish, Olivier Assayas, and Dominik Moll, a new type of film directing had to fashion heroes whose lives heavily relied on a mundane, almost monotonous type of happiness. One of the best examples of these successful filmmakers is Eric Zonca. Born in Orléans in 1956, Zonca came to Paris to study acting when he was only sixteen, and at the age of twenty he moved to New York City to pursue a new chapter in his apprenticeships in dance, theater, and documentary filmmaking. After working odd jobs on both sides of the

Atlantic for many years, he returned to France, and it was only at age thirty that Zonca entered the film industry where he secured an apprenticeship. He became an assistant, then a director of TV commercials and television documentaries, and later made three shorts (*Rives,* 1992; *Eternelles,* 1994; and *Seule,* 1997). For the producers as well as the film critics, the result was unambiguous. For each short, Zonca displayed maturity in his delicate and desperate studies of the human condition.

Zonca has clearly established himself as one of the most significant and farsighted new filmmakers in French cinema. In competition at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival, Zonca's first full-length feature, *The Dreamlife of Angels* (*La vie rêvée des anges,* 1998), earned the prize for Best Actress (Elodie Bouchez and Natacha Régnier). In 1999, it went on to win Césars for Best Film and Best Actress (Elodie Bouchez), as well as the César for Most Promising Young Actress (Natacha Régnier). Bouchez and Régnier repeated their Cannes success at the European Film Awards. In 1999, Zonca released a second feature, *The Little Thief* (*Le petit voleur*), which premiered at the 1999 Cannes Festival. His latest contribution was the script for Virginie Wagon's *The Secret* (*Le secret,* 2000).

In the opening scene of *The Dreamlife of Angels,* which recalls Agnès Varda's heroine Mona in *Vagabond* (*Sans toit ni loi,* 1985), twenty-year-old Isabelle Tostin (Elodie Bouchez)[50] arrives in Lille in the middle of winter with a backpack and bedroll, expecting to stay with a friend. But since her male friend has long moved on, in order to survive she must sell handmade cards on the street and in the bars of the city. The next day, she finds a job as a seamstress in a sweatshop. There she meets Marie Thomas (Natacha Régnier), a hard-edged woman constantly caught between a lack of affection and a fearsome revolt against life. Since Isabelle does not have a home, Marie temporarily invites her to share her apartment. (She actually stays in the apartment while the owner and her daughter, Sandrine, gravely injured in an auto accident, are in a coma at the hospital.) Isabelle moves in with her, and stays on even after she is fired for inefficiency and for her tempestuous free spirit. Shortly after, Marie quits. Due to their mutual solitude, their friendship takes on a new dimension, as both their lives are thrown together by difficult circumstances, and the two kindred spirits rapidly become inseparable. They wander at night, provoking random men in a mall as well as two leather-jacketed bouncers at a local nightclub, Fredo (Jo Prestia) and Charly (Patrick Mercado). Warm and good-natured beneath their brusque exteriors, the two men later become attracted to the girls. Generally at odds with those around her, Marie somehow becomes attached to them and begins dating physically

Elodie Bouchez (Isabelle) and Natacha Régnier (Marie) in Eric Zonca's *The Dreamlife of Angels* (*La vie rêvée des anges*, 1998), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Productions Bagheera).

unattractive but affectionate Charly. Marie is apprehended in a department store while attempting to steal a leather jacket, but Chriss (Grégoire Colin), the son of a wealthy nightclub owner, spontaneously rescues her from the police, volunteering to pay for the jacket. Instantly hostile to the untrustworthy individual, her emotional barriers fall. She pretends for a while not to attach any great significance to his generosity, but decides to see him again. Chriss takes her to the hotel owned by his father, and an intimate relation, although tempestuous at times, begins. Immediately in love with Chriss, although aware that he has other girlfriends as well, Marie loses touch with reality and deludes herself into believing that she and Chriss can make a life together. But the differences that make their friendship also threaten its fragile balance. In the meantime, the waitressing-job prospect that Marie and Isabelle both expected turns out to be only sandwich-board-jobs distributing flyers in the street on roller skates. Only Isabelle accepts the humiliation, while Marie grows bitter. One day, Chriss stops by the apartment to inform Isabelle that he no longer wishes to see Marie and asks her to transmit the news. Isabelle must now face a difficult challenge: letting her best friend know about the illusion of her relationship without hurting her feelings and jeopardizing their

friendship. Her rapport with Marie soon begins to unravel. Meanwhile, Marie enters a self-destructive phase; she no longer displays intervals of lucidity. She becomes increasingly withdrawn and emotionally secluded. She does not understand Isabelle's lifestyle, in particular, the hours she spends at the hospital keeping company with Sandrine while holding her hand to assist the young girl, who apparently has no other visitors. Isabelle, knowing how devastating the news will be, tells Marie of Chriss's decision. Marie, in despair, commits suicide. Back to her initial life of solitude, Isabelle goes to another factory to assemble electronic components.

With *The Dreamlife of Angels,* the "great plot versus great character" debate seems irrelevant. The characters are in service to style, and the result is a movie adhering to the classic rules of storytelling. Zonca's minimalist script direction never interferes with the performance of the actors, who work with a great deal of self-abandonment. The narrative develops around two young working/idle women of contrasting temperament: Isabelle, with her animated face that reveals her youthful optimism and survival instincts (even though all her possessions fit into a backpack) conveys a childlike sense of discovery, while the unenthusiastic and rebellious Marie, always reluctant to show affection, indirectly persuades the viewer that Isabelle would be enthralled with someone as introverted as she is outspoken. Although some argue that Zonca clearly displayed more interest in the character of Isabelle (due to more screen time), and consequently utilized Marie literally as a "supporting" function to prop up the film's dramatic dimension, the real quality of the movie must be found in its treatment of relationships (especially the ill-fated friendship between these two women). While shooting the film, Zonca neither moderated his approach nor mainstreamed his visually striking vision, as he explained the method (or more precisely, the absence of method) for his inspiration:

> It is from these two encounters, from these two feminine characters, that I built my story. It took me two years to write it and to develop it from the initial four-hour project to what the film actually is today. My approach to the text is mainly a visual one. The starting point of my scenarios is always my imagination. Any didactic approach does not suit me. I do not start from a theme or a theoretical point of view; rather, I let myself be guided by my only imaginative inspiration. The introduction of the significance and coherence is a device that occurs after a intuitive phase randomly initiated.[51]

This sincere assertion shows the director's inclination toward straightforward communication of motions and confirms that the final version of Zonca's scenario surfaced in post-production. The well-

defined main characters are shaped and highlighted by Zonca's lucid and economical screenplay. As for the dialogue (written by Zonca and Roger Bohbot), it is reminiscent of the outspokenness of Eric Rohmer's scripts. Although most of the characters' discourses take up little screen time, they are complex enough to maintain a true sense of realism. With its courageous plot, ultimately about the power of friendship and the disastrous consequences of unwanted solitude, the film tells a tragic tale with great attention and compassion. Seemingly photographed with minimal technique by accomplished veteran cinematographer Agnès Godard, the deceptively casual rhythms of the film—each scene reaching the perfect balance between a controlled and naturalistic outcome—won over the audiences at Cannes. Godard's unassuming camera work involved frequent close-ups, natural light set-ups, and the aforementioned cinema-verité techniques to impart a genuine organic feel to the film. Additionally, the cinematography, efficiently done with super-16 cameras, allowed for more visual agility in the pseudodocumentary format; the grainy film stock added convincing realism to the actors' performances. The photography accompanied the performances with austere, washed-out pastel hues, adding a dour atmosphere to the narrative but ultimately offering "cheerful" blues to counterbalance the bleak world of saturated whites. Although highly sophisticated characterization remained the strong element of the narrative, the atmosphere, authenticated by the score of Yann Thiersen, was equally eloquent in Zonca's cinematography.

One of the challenges for the new French cinema is to combine authentic ideas and feelings without failing to pursue ideas artistically to their end. *The Dreamlife of Angels* offers glimpses of a story that exists in the imagination as well as in daily life, and it is not necessarily dependent on the established realism it means to promote. Yet Zonca refuses to emotionalize his characters beyond what is necessary, taking the narrative to an unusual level of truthfulness and consequently realism. Whereas many detractors could indeed argue that the film is merely about the dreams and illusions of young working-class women and about their emotional struggle when a man comes between them, the intensity of the film's aestheticism proves just the opposite. In fact, the picaresque elements that displace the psychological interpretation of the characters give the story a highly realistic image and display a true ability (at least for a male) to enter the female psyche. Zonca presents a uniquely touching rapport that essentially modifies both women's awareness of existence, as Marie and Isabelle are both imagining a better life for themselves, making this psychological drama the kind of film that the French have always thrived in making. The utter sense of realism is often heartbreaking to witness as Marie, affected by her uncommunicative mind-set and unsentimental spirit,

quickly spirals into a violent emotional descent. Moreover, despite the same film critics' disapproval—in particular, that the character study takes a premature and unnecessarily melodramatic turn—the dynamic between the two central characters remains the key component of the film's success among French audiences. The movie is about the permanence and the disruption of a friendship. Zonca's zealous passion for the splendor of the quotidian is reminiscent of *The Four Hundred Blows* in the way that it represents two people spellbound by the burdens of reality as they live (though temporarily) amorally, stealing what and where they can as well as the prewar poetic-realism concept with its stream of the "Popular Front" picturing the tragic destiny of heroic loners.[52]

The title casts a reservation on the actual ending of the film (who is dreaming, and who are the angels?), and the viewer is left to wonder if the title of the film should be understood as "Life Dreamed by Angels." Indeed, the heroines' dreams never come into focus: there is no dream life, and there are no angels in the narrative. *The Dreamlife of Angels* leaves an aftertaste of irony since not only is the narrative about veracity and realism, but both girls appear to be unsophisticated. Irritated by the idea that Isabelle constantly fantasizes about a better life away from poverty, Marie says to her: "You're torturing yourself, and you dream a lot." However, the only moment that the characters' dreams come into view in a rather concrete manner is when Isabelle, in return, writes a farewell note to her friend: "I wish you the life you want, the one you're dreaming of, each day, each second." The note will never be read in time, and Marie's chaotic obsession is never fully explained. Viewers who address the issue of Isabelle's plight without having the opportunity to verify the filmmaker's intent will of course be quite limited in their appreciation.

With just three full-length feature films to his credit, Zonca appears to possess one of the most compelling visions of contemporary social discourse. His narrative about life is practically isolated in reflecting a sense of discomfort in today's society. Since his works display the outward signs of visual invention and an evident revelation of the inner investigation of the meaning of film language as sign, Eric Zonca will most likely be one of the historic icons of the present century, as his films will have an effect on other filmmakers, both mainstream and avant-garde.

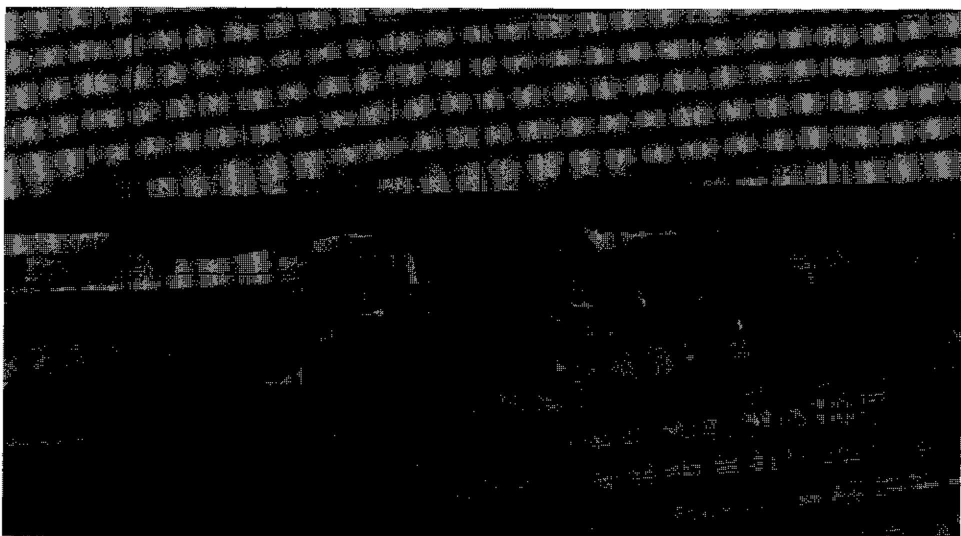
THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION AND THE HIGH-DEFINITION SYSTEM: PITOF

The high-definition digital system made its shooting debut in France in May 2000, with *Vidocq*, the first 100-percent digitalized film (before

George Lucas's second episode of *Star Wars*).[53] *Vidocq* was the first feature film of Jean-Christophe Comar, also known as Pitof (*City of Lost Children, Alien IV*). This thriller takes place in 1830 Paris and narrates the story of Vidocq (Gérard Depardieu), a legendary Parisian detective, who disappears while fighting against the Alchemist, a ruthless serial killer responsible for several crimes in the capital. On the brink of death, Vidocq asks the murderer one last favor, which is to reveal his identity by removing his mask. Following his death, a young journalist, Etienne Boisset (Guillaume Canet), who swears to avenge Vidocq, tries to solve the mystery surrounding his murder. The most insane rumors begin to spread all over Paris, asserting that the killer, a man without a face, could very well be the reflection of the soul of more than one hundred faces.

The digital camera used in the film is the Sony HDF-F900, which unequivocally is meant to replace the traditional 35mm cameras, although it is no longer incompatible with the older format. Before the advent of digital cinema, due to the overpowering heaviness of the 35mm camera, the complexity of operating it, and the necessary technical support, filmmakers had to overcome countless obstacles to realize their projects. Soon enough, digital cameras will be light enough to capture images from the comfort of the filmmaker's hand and at the complete disposal of the artist, in part due to the separation of the monitor and the lens, which allows greater manipulation and motion freedom. Fifty years after the invention of the concept of the *caméra stylo,* a second revolution in cinema has arrived (in other words, the reinvention of the "camera-pen"). Although problems with funding and distribution will still be part of the production process, it is clear that filmmakers will gain considerable initiative in their choices, control, and especially artistic vision, virtually as if they were to hold their own pen in the palm of their hand. In short, this means no more celluloid film stocks, but instead high-resolution video.

As a universal format (two million pixels), the new system is compatible with television and film, and stands as a major step forward for the international-film industry as well as for the world of science. Broadcast and television companies are collaborating on a time-saving, cost-efficient high-definition film process that offers filmmakers daily video viewing and optical transitions inserted for preview screenings in high definition. The history of the development of cinematographic techniques, as in television, is really viewed as a quest for greater realism. With the progress in image quality and sophistication of techniques, general audiences have become more aware and educated, and consequently more passionate and demanding in terms of visual and sound requirements (e.g., colorization of old black-and-white films, and the commercial success of the DVD system and home



Gérard Depardieu (Vidocq) and Ines Sastre (Preah) in Pitof's *Vidocq* (2001), (Courtesy of RF2K Productions).

theaters). The pace of high-definition technology is accelerating each year, and by 2005, it is expected that more than 10 percent of homes in France and 20 percent of all European homes will subscribe to digital services.

This high-definition system reduces costs, saves time, and provides a result that gives filmmakers an equivalent if not better rendering (mainly through superior preview screenings) than film; and in particular, it provides the ability to recognize defects and shooting predicaments immediately. One significant advantage of the new system is that the cinematographer and the director can view takes at the shooting location itself, and consequently avoid waiting for rushes (formerly, monitors could help the director in the framing of the takes, but could not reveal the quality of the photography). The new system allows technicians to remaster a film digitally, store it in a computer, then screen it via a digital projector. Virtual montage also allows editors to manipulate—through disc recording and computer memory—images, special effects, lighting, sound track, and sequencing at will. Consequently, the movie is scored via the desired sequencing of scene, which presents a major advantage: a reduction of time in the editing room and cost for post-production. In addition, several versions of a film can

Opposite: Pitof's *Vidocq* (*Vidocq*, 2001). Sequence 32 representing a view of nineteenth-century Paris with first a sketch from Jérôme Fournier (Matte painter) then its corresponding view in 3D and lastly the final version in digital video, (Courtesy of RF2K Productions).

be shaped without having to recut the entire film stock and remix the sound from the start. The fast-developing systems of production using digitally processed images have already significantly reduced post-production costs, and consequently are meant to allow "non-producing" markets to build self-sufficient production structures customized to their own cultural regulations.