French
Cinema

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

French Cinema

FROM ITS BEGINNINGS TO THE PRESENT

Rémi Fournier Lanzoni

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À ma Kristin . . . .

Contents

ILLUSTRATIONS 11
INTRODUCTION 17

CHAPTER 1: THE INVENTION OF MOTION PICTURES AND THE SILENT ERA OF FILM 23

France at the Turn of the Twentieth Century 23
The Invention of the Cinématographe 25
Georges Méliès and the Adventure of the Film Studio 32
Growth of a National Cinema: Charles Pathé and Léon Gaumont 36
The Invention of Genres: Louis Feuillade and Max Linder 39
Avant-garde Cinema, French Impressionism, and Surrealism: Louis Delluc, Abel Gance, Marcel L'Herbier, Luis Buñuel, and René Clair 45

CHAPTER 2: THE GOLDEN AGE OF FRENCH CINEMA 53

The Style of the 1930s 53
The "Talkies" 55
French Cinema and Economic Recession 62
Verbal Cinema or Filmed Language? Marcel Pagnol 67
Beyond Filmed Theater: Toward Poetic Realism 73
Artists and Masters of Poetic Realism: Jean Gabin, Arletty, Marcel Carné, Jean Renoir, and Jean Vigo 75
Cinematography and the Poetics of Images 100

CHAPTER 3: FRENCH CINEMA OF THE OCCUPATION 103
France in 1940 104
The Exodus of French Cinema Celebrities 106
French Cinema and Vichy 111
Propaganda and Censorship: The Case of Henri-Georges Clouzot 115
Working Conditions under the Occupation: Marcel Carné 124
Resistance and Liberation 136

CHAPTER 4: THE POSTWAR ERA 143
The Fourth Republic and Postwar France 144
The Blum-Byrnes Agreements 148
The Prestige of French Cinema or Cinema of Prestige? Jean Cocteau 150
A Certain *Tradition de Qualité* 157
Comedy *à la française*: Claude Autant-Lara 167
Film Noir or *film d'ambiance*: Henri-Georges Clouzot, Jacques Becker, and René Clément 170
Toward a New Cinema: Robert Bresson, Jacques Becker, and René Clément 183

CHAPTER 5: THE YEARS OF THE FRENCH NEW WAVE 195
France during and after the Events of 1958 196
The Signs of Change: Louis Malle 201
Les cahiers du cinéma and the Auteur Theory 206
The Emergence of the New Wave: Claude Chabrol, François Truffaut, Alain Resnais, Jean-Luc Godard, and Agnès Varda 210
The Return of Commercial Movie Successes 239

CHAPTER 6: FRENCH CINEMA OF THE 1970s 245
May '68: A New Cultural Era 246
Economic Assessment of French Cinema 249
The "Scandal" of the Cinémathèque Française 252
Political Cinema as a New Genre: Louis Malle, Joseph Losey, and Costa-Gavras 253

The Last Days of the French *Polar*: Jean-Pierre Melville and Henri Verneuil 262
The Humanists' School: Claude Sautet, François Truffaut, and Eric Rohmer 270
The Storytellers: Bertrand Blier and Bertrand Tavernier 286

CHAPTER 7: THE CINEMA OF THE 1980s 298
France in the 1980s 299
French Cinema of the 1980s: Over One Thousand Films Produced 304
Transformations in the French Film Industry 306
A New Partner: Television 310
The Old School of Filmmakers: François Truffaut, Bertrand Tavernier, Bertrand Blier, and Maurice Pialat 313
The Super Productions: Claude Berri and Jean-Jacques Annaud 326
New Directors for a New Generation: Jean-Jacques Beineix and Luc Besson 338
The Rebirth of Popular Comedies: Coline Serreau and Claude Zidi 346

CHAPTER 8: THE LAST DECADE AND BEYOND 349
French Society in the 1990s 350
The Improving Health of French Cinema 351
A Unique Financial-Aid System 354
French Television 358
French Cinema Abroad 361
New Artists, New Creators: Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro 365
The Epics: Régis Wargnier and Claude Berri 376
Period Dramas: Patrice Chéreau, Alain Corneau, Jean-Paul Rappeneau, and Patrice Leconte 382
The Return of Comedies at the Box Office: Jean-Marie Poiré and Francis Veber 400
The New French Cinema—*Le Jeune Cinéma*: Mathieu Kassovitz and Eric Zonca 405
The Digital Revolution and the High-Definition System: Pitof 414

ABBREVIATIONS 419

APPENDIX 421

NOTES 434

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY 468

INDEX 475

Illustrations

Frontispiece: Jean Gabin (Jean) and Michelle Morgan (Nelly) in Marcel Carné's *Port of Shadows* (*Le quai des brumes,* 1938) 2

1 The Lumière brothers, Louis (1864–1948) and Auguste (1862–1954) 29

2 The Cinématographe 31

3 The first film, *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (*La sortie des usines Lumière à Lyon*), filmed on March 19, 1895 31

4 The Montreuil studio of Georges Méliès (1861–1938): the pioneer of special effects and film as an entertainment form 33

5 Georges Méliès's *Trip to the Moon* (*Le voyage dans la lune,* 1902) 33

6 Max Linder (1883–1925) 41

7 The new style of the Art Déco background set, in Marcel L'Herbier's *The Inhuman One* (*L'inhumaine,* 1924) 47

8 Abel Gance's grandiloquent masterpiece, *Napoléon* (1927), or *Napoléon vu par Abel Gance,* starring the mesmerizing Albert Dieudonné 51

9 Annabella (Anna) and Georges Rigaud (Jean) in René Clair's *Bastille Day* (*Quatorze juillet,* 1932) 59

10 Marcel Pagnol's *Marius* (*Marius,* 1931), directed by Alexander Korda and starring Pierre Fresnay (Marius) and Orane Demazis (Fanny) 69

11 Marcel Pagnol's *Marius* (poster by Albert Dubout) 71

12 The legendary *partie de cartes* in Marcel Pagnol's *Marius* 71

13 Raimu (Aimable) and other supporting actors in Marcel Pagnol's *The Baker's Wife* (*La femme du boulanger,* 1938) 73

14 Jean Gabin (Pépé) in Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* (*Pépé le Moko,* 1936) 79

15 Jean Gabin (Lucien) and Mireille Balin (Madeleine) in Jean Grémillon's *Lover-Boy* (*Gueule d'amour,* 1937) 79

16 Two French actresses go to Hollywood: Simone Simon and Annabella 81

17 Viviane Romance (Gina) and Jean Gabin (Jeannot) in Julien Duvivier's *They Were Five* (*La belle équipe,* 1935) 83

18 Jean Gabin (François) and Arletty (Clara) in Marcel Carné's *Daybreak* (*Le jour se lève,* 1939) 85

19 Louis Jouvet (Monsieur Edmond) and Annabella (Renée) in Marcel Carné's *Hôtel du Nord* (Hôtel du Nord, 1938) 85

20 Jean Gabin's script in *Daybreak* (*Le jour se lève,* 1939) 87

21 Jean Gabin (1904–1976) 89

22 Jean Gabin, Marcel Carné, Jacques Prévert, and Alexandre Trauner 91

23 Alexandre Trauner's background set and Jean Gabin in Marcel Carné's *Daybreak* (*Le jour se lève,* 1939) 93

24 Jean Renoir among the actors of *Grand Illusion* (*La grande illusion,* 1937) 95

25 Pierre Fresnay (Captain de Boeldieu) and Jean Gabin (Lieutenant Maréchal) in *Grand Illusion* (*La grande illusion,* 1937) 95

26 Jean Renoir (Octave), Nora Gregor (Christine de La Chesnaye), and Roland Toutain (André Jurieu) in Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (*La règle du jeu,* 1939) 97

27 Pierre Fresnay (Dr. Germain) and Micheline Francey (Laura) in Henri-Georges Clouzot's *The Raven* (*Le corbeau,* 1942) 119

28 The Victorines Studios in Nice and the gigantic set designed by Georges Wakhevitch and Alexandre Trauner for Marcel Carné's *The Devil's Envoys* (*Les visiteurs du soir,* 1942) 119

29 Jules Berry (the Devil) in Marcel Carné's *The Devil's Envoys* (*Les visiteurs du soir,* 1942) 129

29A Alain Cuny (Gilles) and Arletty (Dominique) in Marcel Carné's *The Devil's Envoys* (*Les visiteurs du soir,* 1942) 129

30 The *boulevard du Crime* in Marcel Carné's *Children of Paradise* (*Les enfants du Paradis,* 1945) 131

31 Jean-Louis Barrault (Baptiste) and Maria Casarès

(Nathalie) in Marcel Carné's *Children of Paradise* (*Les enfants du Paradis,* 1945) 133

32 Jean-Louis Barrault (Baptiste) in Marcel Carné's *Children of Paradise* (*Les enfants du Paradis,* 1945) 135

33 Arletty (Garance) and Pierre Brasseur (Frédérick) in Marcel Carné's *Children of Paradise* (*Les enfants du Paradis,* 1945) 137

34 Jean Marais (Patrice) and Madeleine Sologne (Nathalie) in Jean Delannoy's *The Eternal Return* (*L'éternel retour,* 1943) 141

35 Jean Marais (the Beast) and Josette Day (Beauty) in Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* (*La belle et la bête,* 1946) 153

36 René Clément's *Battle of the Rails* (*La bataille du rail,* 1945) 154

37 Jean Marais (Orphée) in Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* (*Orphée,* 1949) 156

38 Martine Carol (1920–1967) 163

39 Jean-Louis Trintignant (Michel) and Brigitte Bardot (Juliette) in Roger Vadim's . . . *And God Created Woman* (*Et Dieu créa la femme,* 1956) 165

40 Jean Gabin (Grandgil) and Bourvil (Martin) in Claude Autant-Lara's *Four Full Bags* (*La traversée de Paris,* 1956) 169

41 Yves Montand (Mario) and Charles Vanel (Jo) in Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Wages of Fear* (*Le salaire de la peur,* 1953) 173

42 Véra Clouzot (Christina), Simone Signoret (Nicole), and Charles Vanel (Inspector Fichet) in Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Diabolique* (*Les diaboliques,* 1954) 173

43 Simone Signoret (Marie) in Jacques Becker's *Golden Marie* (*Casque d'or,* 1952) 177

44 Jean Gabin (Max) and Lino Ventura (Angelo) in Jacques Becker's *Grisbi* (*Touchez pas au grisbi,* 1953) 179

45 Brigitte Fossey (Paulette) in René Clément's *Forbidden Games* (*Jeux interdits,* 1952) 181

46 Claude Laydu (Priest of Ambricourt) in Robert Bresson's *The Diary of a Country Priest* (*Le journal d'un curé de campagne,* 1951) 187

47 François Leterrier (Lieutenant Fontaine) in Robert Bresson's *A Man Escaped* (*Un condamné à mort s'est échappé,* 1956) 187

48 Philippe Leroy (Manu Borelli) and Jean Keraudy (Roland Darbanin) in Jacques Becker's *The Night Watch* (*Le trou*, 1959) 191

49 Alain Delon (Tom Ripley) in René Clément's *Purple Noon* (*Plein soleil*, 1959) 193

50 Stéphane Audran (Frédérique) and Jacqueline Sassard (Why) in Claude Chabrol's *The Does* (*Les biches*, 1967) 219

51 Albert Rémy (Mr. Doinel), Claire Maurier (Mrs. Doinel), and Jean-Pierre Léaud (Antoine), in François Truffaut's *The Four Hundred Blows* (*Les quatre cent coups*, 1959) 219

52 Eiji Okada (Lui) and Emmanuelle Riva (Elle) in Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (*Hiroshima, mon amour*, 1959) 227

53 Jean-Paul Belmondo (Michel) and Jean Seberg (Patricia) in Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (*A bout de souffle*, 1959) 233

54 Corinne Marchand (Cléo) and Antoine Bourseiller (Antoine) in Agnès Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7* (*Cléo de 5 à 7*, 1962) 237

55 Jean Gabin (Charles) in Henri Verneuil's *Any Number Can Win* (*Mélodie en sous-sol*, 1963) 241

56 Louis de Funès (Saroyan) and Bourvil (Maréchal) in Gérard Oury's *The Sucker!* (*Le corniaud*, 1965) 243

57 Louis de Funès (Stanislas) and Bourvil (Augustin) in Gérard Oury's *Don't Look Now We're Being Shot At* (*La grande vadrouille*, 1966) 243

58 Yves Montand (the deputy) in Costa-Gavras's *Z* (1969) 255

59 Alain Delon (Jeff Costello) in Jean-Pierre Melville's *The Samurai* (*Le samouraï*, 1967) 263

60 Jean Gabin (Vittorio Malanese), Alain Delon (Roger), and Lino Ventura (Le Goff) in Henri Verneuil's *The Sicilian Clan* (*Le clan des siciliens*, 1969) 268

61 Michel Piccoli (Pierre) in Claude Sautet's *The Things of Life* (*Les choses de la vie*, 1969) 272

62 Charles Denner (Bertrand) and Brigitte Fossey (Geneviève) in François Truffaut's *The Man Who Loved Women* (*L'homme qui aimait les femmes*, 1977) 279

63 François Truffaut and Jean-Pierre Léaud 283

64 Patrick Dewaere (Stéphane) and Gérard Depardieu (Raoul) in Bertrand Blier's *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs* (*Préparez vos mouchoirs*, 1978) 289

65 Gérard Depardieu (Alphonse Tram) and Geneviève Page (the widow) in Bertrand Blier's *Cold Cuts* (*Buffet froid,* 1979) 291

66 Catherine Deneuve (Marion) and Gérard Depardieu (Bernard) in François Truffaut's *The Last Metro* (*Le dernier métro,* 1980) 317

67 Coluche (Lambert) and Richard Anconina (Bensoussan) in Claude Berri's *Tchao Pantin!* (1983) 329

68 Gérard Depardieu (Jean de Florette) in Claude Berri's *Jean de Florette* (1986) 329

69 Emmanuelle Béart (Manon) in Claude Berri's *Manon of the Spring* (*Manon des sources,* 1986) 333

70 Daniel Auteuil (Ugolin) in Claude Berri's *Manon of the Spring* (*Manon des sources,* 1986) 335

71 Jean-Jacques Annaud and Sean Connery during the shooting of *The Name of the Rose* (*Le nom de la rose,* 1986) 339

72 Isabelle Adjani (Helena) in Luc Besson's *Subway* (*Subway,* 1984) 343

73 Jean-Marc Barr (Jacques) in Luc Besson's *The Big Blue* (*Le grand bleu,* 1988) 345

74 Roland Giraud (Pierre), Michel Boujenah (Michel), and André Dussollier (Jacques) in Coline Serreau's *Three Men and a Cradle* (*Trois hommes et un couffin,* 1985) 345

75 Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro's *City of Lost Children* (*La cité des enfants perdus,* 1994) 367

76 Ron Perlman (One) and Judith Vittet (Miette) in Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro's *City of Lost Children* (*La cité des enfants perdus,* 1994) 367

77 Audrey Tautou (Amélie) in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (*Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain,* 2001) 373

78 Mathieu Kassovitz (Nino) and Audrey Tautou (Amélie) in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (*Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain,* 2001) 373

79 Catherine Deneuve (Eliane) and Vincent Pérez (Jean-Baptiste) in Régis Wargnier's *Indochine* (*Indochine,* 1992) 379

80 Gérard Depardieu (Cyrano) in Jean-Paul Rappeneau's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (*Cyrano de Bergerac,* 1990) 393

81 Anne Brochet (Roxane), Vincent Pérez (Christian), and Gérard Depardieu (Cyrano) in Jean-Paul Rappeneau's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (*Cyrano de Bergerac,* 1990) 395

82 Judith Godrèche (Mathilde de Bellegarde) and Charles Berling (Ponceludon de Malavoy) in Patrice Leconte's *Ridicule* (*Ridicule*, 1996) 397

83 Jean Réno (Godefroy de Montmirail) in Jean-Marie Poiré's *The Visitors* (*Les visiteurs*, 1993) 401

84 Hubert Koundé (Hubert), Saïd Taghmaoui (Saïd), and Vincent Cassel (Vinz) in Mathieu Kassovitz's *Hate* (*La haine*, 1995) 407

85 Elodie Bouchez (Isabelle) and Natacha Régnier (Marie) in Eric Zonca's *The Dreamlife of Angels* (*La vie rêvée des anges*, 1998) 411

86 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 416

87 Gérard Depardieu (Vidocq) and Ines Sastre (Preah) in *Vidocq* 417

Introduction

The present edition on the history of French cinema resulted from an increasing need for an English-language book on this history, an extensive overview of more than one hundred years of filmmaking. This volume considers motion pictures and cinematographic trends chronologically from 1895 to 2002, decade by decade, and investigates films and filmmaking within historical contexts through a diversity of disciplines such as social and political sciences. During the past few years the discipline of film studies has been the subject of growing interest among universities, especially in the humanities, traditionally involving, in its broadest terms, the study of film analysis, film history, and film theory. Unfortunately, among the general public as well as university departments of film studies, French cinema has often been restricted to the work of a few "masters," critics, and theorists. It represents, however, much more than internationally known film icons. The present book assimilates these traditional canons with often-overlooked contributions made by no less significant figures within the film industry.

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

artistic infrastructure, despite the high volume of American films in the European market. In its contemporary context, the French film industry stands as the champion of European cinematic creativity, demonstrated in movies like Pitof's *Vidocq* (2001), the first all-digital feature film.

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

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

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

Besson, and Leos Carax. The final chapter, "The Last Decade and Beyond," points out the evermore central position of the French film industry, which has established itself as the largest and most successful in Europe. A unique financial-aid system, combined with the financial commitment of dynamic French television companies (led in major part by Canal+), underscores the success of a strategy initiated a decade before. These exceptional circumstances generated the realization of many new filmmakers such as Jean-Pierre Jeunet, Mathieu Kassovitz, and Eric Zonca.

I confess to the difficult task of dealing with an overwhelmingly large amount of material within a relatively confined space. It is important to bear in mind that the films I discuss represent only a fraction of the entire spectrum of French films (over 10,000 produced since 1895) and the present history is evidently and necessarily incomplete. I have tried to offer an explicit and honest investigation of the main masterpieces, directors, and actors and actresses of French cinema, combined with observations of less acknowledged but equally noteworthy works, and hope that the present volume will contribute to the understanding of French films, on their own and within the family of other national cinemas.

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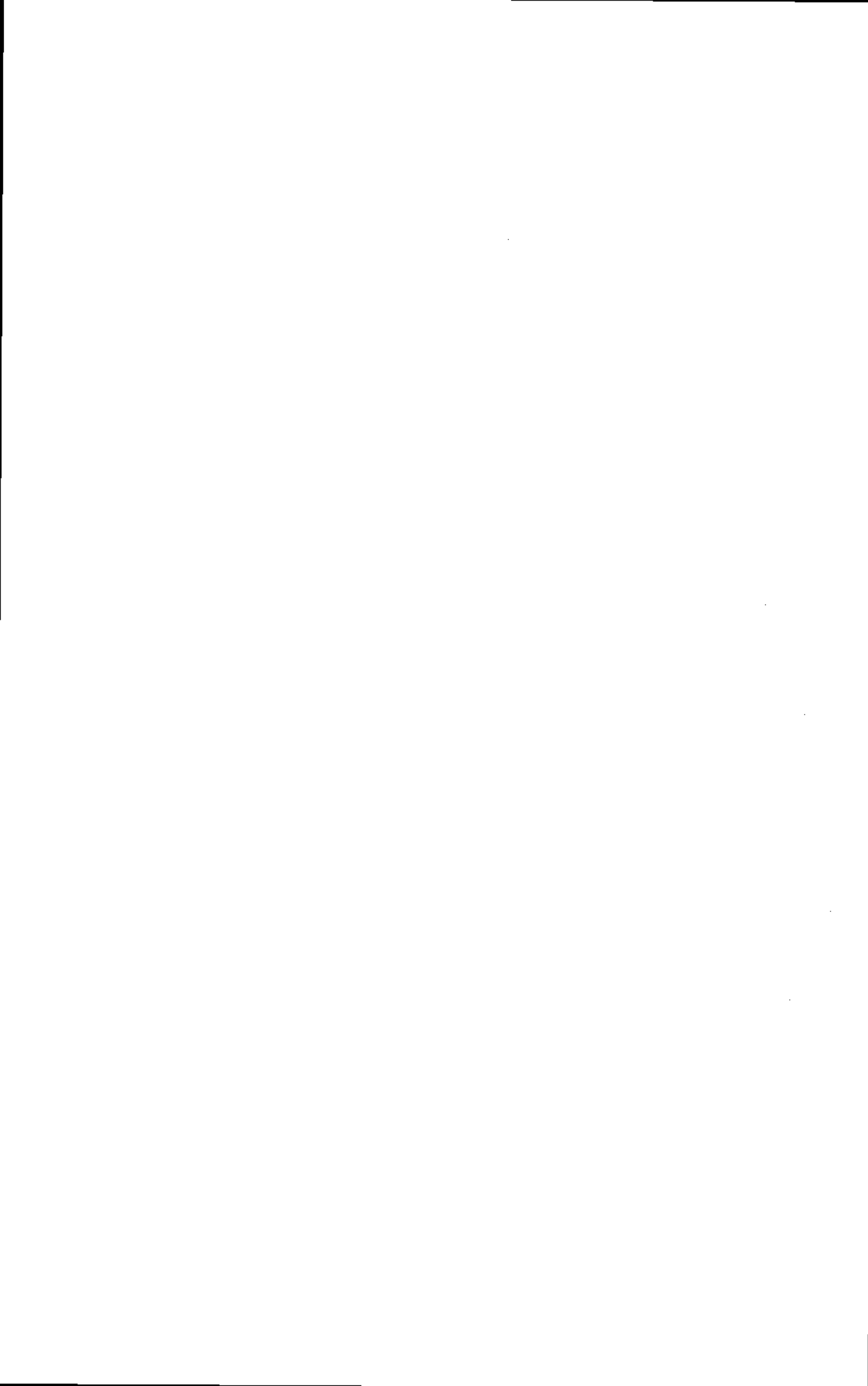

Chapter 1 The Invention of Motion Pictures and the Silent Era of Film

- *France at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*
- *The Invention of the Cinématographe*
- *Georges Méliès and the Adventure of the Film Studio*
- *Growth of a National Cinema: Charles Pathé and Léon Gaumont*
- *The Invention of Genres: Louis Feuillade and Max Linder*
- *Avant-garde Cinema, French Impressionism, and Surrealism: Louis Delluc, Abel Gance, Marcel L'Herbier, Luis Buñuel, and René Clair*

FRANCE AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

More than a century ago, the invention and early development of motion pictures heralded the beginnings of an innovation that was about to transfigure humankind's view of the world and of itself. Movies would come to generate other new and unprecedented elements of artistic creation as well. Cinematography rapidly became perhaps the most significant technical and artistic phenomenon of the twentieth century, assimilating and embodying many other art forms, yet never really imitating any of them. Specifically, it was cinematography's special rapport with theater in particular, but also painting, literature, and many other performing/lyrical arts, that made it the "seventh art" of the new century. In the 1900s, however, the new medium, soon to become a major form of entertainment, would evolve closely within contemporary artistic currents and with respect to the preoccupations of popular audiences. This in turn would guarantee its commercial viability and, consequently, its destiny. Whether labeled

"motion pictures" or "cinematography," not unlike any of the other lyrical or performing arts no matter what discipline, genre, or current, audiences assimilating the films of the silent era were, as always, affected by contemporary culture and fashion, sharing many passions and events of the turn of the century.

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

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

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

THE INVENTION OF THE CINÉMATOGRAPHE

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

Therefore, in light of this overwhelmingly abundant series of technical inventions, attributing the invention of motion pictures to one or two individuals, whether Edison alone or the Lumière brothers, would be rather questionable in view of the fact that cinema, by its very essence, constituted, and still does today, a multifaceted event and medium. Such an assertion would simply require overlooking the technological and scientific endeavors achieved all over the Western

world (mainly the United States, France, Belgium, Germany, and Italy, however) throughout the last two decades of the nineteenth century. For all these inventors, the ultimate goal was the same: the public projection of animated pictures. The question regarding the projection of *animated photographs* was a difficult one to solve, causing it to become the center of research and experimentations. Establishing the perfect projection device became the next challenge, as it appeared evident after numerous defective attempts (blurriness and ripped filmstrip) that the projection of the image onto the screen was actually the *mandatory toll for success*.

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

The Kinetoscope, 1893–95

In 1889, in West Orange, New Jersey, Thomas Edison and British engineer and collaborator William Kennedy Laurie Dickson (1860–1935) developed the Kinetograph, a new system that utilized rolls of coated celluloid film to visualize animated images. The Kinetograph camera, weighing approximately 500 pounds, was built inside the Black Maria Studio, a tar paper–sealed structure with a large skylight that was adjacent to Edison's laboratory. To control light, the studio was painted in black, and the camera, mounted on a trolley, was built so that it could turn to follow the movement of the sun, allowing the right amount of luminosity for each desired subject (although never changing position during shootings). In May 1889, Edison purchased a Kodak camera from the Eastman Company that required a 2⅜-inch film stock, modified its size to 1⅜ inches (34.8 mm), and made double perforations on each side. Edison utilized the Eastman nitrate-base celluloid film stock for his commercial productions. More than a century later, the celluloid film support (35 mm) is still the standard in use, a rare example of nonobsolescence. When compared to video formats, for instance, or even international sound recording standards, Edison's film (forty-six frames per second) never experienced a continuing change of systems, and thus avoided delays in its international development.[2] Dickson, who had assembled the new camera, filmed his first motion picture of associate assistant Fred Ott, calling it "Fred Ott's Sneeze" (the film lasted several seconds). The sequence was displayed to Edison, who decided to commercialize the idea. Edison's kinetoscopic record of a sneeze, January 7, 1894, starring Fred Ott as the sneezer and photographed by Dickson, became the first copy-

righted film in history. Other sequences, characterized by unedited scenery and posed actions followed, such as "Fun in a Chinese Laundry," "The Gaiety Girls Dancing," "Trained Bear," "Dentist Scene," and "Bucking Broncos." Paradoxical as it may seem, Edison was more captivated by the possible application of soundtrack to the image[3] than image development itself. Dickson tried to persuade Edison to develop a projection device, but much to his dismay, the latter had a different agenda; Edison did not deem it necessary to multiply the number of spectators within the same projection. Therefore, all experiments were temporarily canceled.

In 1893, the patent was ready (but never entirely completed for the British market), and that same year the demo was finalized. Edison's first showing of the Kinetoscope viewer, as a continuous-film motion picture projector, occurred only on May 9, 1893, at the Brooklyn Institute. Rather than projecting films for large audiences, the individual viewer would put his or her eyes to the hole of a mechanism and enjoy a single strip film inside. Commercialized a couple of years before the Cinématographe, the inventor rapidly presented his "peep-show Kinetoscopes" in the United States, England, and France. Edison's invention corresponded to a peep-show motion picture that could be visualized by only one viewer at a time. In 1893, the Kinetoscope gained popularity in New York City, and in April 1894, Andrew Holland, on behalf of the Raff & Gammon Company, opened the first peep-show parlor on Broadway. For 25 cents, New Yorkers were able to share the cinematographic dream by individually viewing a series of sixteen-second films. Because Edison had underestimated the potential of motion pictures as a future industry, he failed to patent his Kinetoscope completely. Consequently, in England alone (this despite holding over 1,200 patents), Robert William Paul,[4] a British manufacturer of photographic equipment, rapidly replicated Edison's Kinetoscope in October 1894. In addition, he added the projector component that was crucially missing to the kinetograph.[5] As noted, the new apparatus was named Kineopticon. The demonstration by the Lumière brothers at the Keith's Music Hall in Union Square, New York, on June 18, 1896, as well as the emergence of the Pantopticon and the Vitascope, overshadowed the Kinetoscope whose cumbersome set could not project for public shows or entertain large audiences. Dickson created the American Mutoscope & Biograph Company, which later encouraged the directing careers of D. W. Griffith (1875–1948) and Mary Pickford (1893–1979). Along with Dickson, Edwin S. Porter (1869–1941), a cinematographer and future filmmaker, was one of the first artist/technicians to initiate the practice of close-ups and dissolves (fade in/out). Edison's film company survived the competition and produced

films such as *Vanity Fair* (1915), *The Cossack Whip* (1916), and *Chris and His Wonderful Lamp* (1917). At the beginning of the next decade, however, the company shut down.[6]

The Lumière's Cinématographe, 1895

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

On February 13, 1895, the Lumière brothers patented their invention, and on March 22, just a couple of days following their very first view, they organized a private projection at the Société d'encouragement à l'industrie nationale in Paris, featuring *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, followed by a discussion led by Louis Lumière. Back in Lyon, on June 12, another projection of eight views for the Congrès des sociétés françaises de photographie was held, which immediately gave national fame to the invention as the members of the association saw themselves for the first time "photographed in motion." However, when compared chronologically, the 1895 Cinématographe invention already had several forerunners in Etienne-Jules Marey, whose Chronophotographe did not contain the perforated film; Emile Reynaud (1844–1918),[8] whose Praxinoscope did not in-

The Lumière brothers, Louis (1864–1948) and Auguste (1862–1954), (Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive).

clude photography, and Thomas Edison, whose invention did not incorporate public projection. In other words, the Cinématographe, which was instrumental in shaping the conventions of photographic synthesis of the movement to reproduce the reality of life, was the synthesis of three preceding discoveries. But generally speaking, December 28, 1895, corresponds to the actual birth date of cinema. It was that evening that the Lumière brothers presented their Cinématographe to a crowd of curious photographers and inventors in the Salon