

## Chapter 7

# The Cinema of the 1980s

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The film industry of the 1980s reacted to a major technological advancement in the entertainment business that originated outside of cinema itself. Video technology and cable distribution progressively altered overall film consumption, supplying new markets and targeting at that time a limited but well-secured audience.<sup>4</sup> The 1980s were characterized by the shift from eclectic independent films to more profitable commercial films, the beginning of the frenetic rise in production costs (dividing big productions with remaining national productions), and the increasingly more powerful position of French television over cinematographic production. From now on, the French film industry had to consider television ratings, accentuated by the introduction of TV commercials during the screening of films. More than ever, the obligation for sound financial profit became the major criterion in decision making. Consequently, the constant *rapport de force* between the big and small screen reined in filmmakers' initiative and shaped an aesthetic model with a common mold.

It is a daunting task to attempt an overall description of French cinema of the 1980s. Traditional film categories, usually recognized

by general audiences, began to dissolve by the early part of the decade, rapidly substituted by a cinema of new young directors. For present purposes, the decade has been divided into three categories: experienced directors (Maurice Pialat, Bertrand Tavernier, Eric Rohmer, François Truffaut, Agnès Varda, Bertrand Blier), new directors (Jean-Jacques Beineix, Luc Besson, Leos Carax), and big-production directors (Claude Berri, Jean-Jacques Annaud). The 1980s was also a determining decade for feminist cinema. More women directors were represented at film festivals, and more women filmmakers graduated from French film schools. This particular trend accelerated in the 1990s.

Despite the move toward more commercial productions, film festivals around the world, like Cannes, strove to preserve the artistic ideals of filmmaking. Considered the most important film showcase in the world, Cannes had long been promoting European coproductions, Asian films (formerly little known in the West), and French New Wave. Moreover, it presented to the world a different image from the traditional Oscar iconography. At the end of the 1970s, the mission of Cannes seemingly moved toward the promotion of "courageous productions," rewarding films such as the Taviani brothers' *Padre Padrone* (1977), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Iron* (1981), Yilmaz Güney's *Yol* (1982), and even Wim Wenders's *Paris, Texas* (1984).

## FRANCE IN THE 1980s

Following a twenty-three-year conservative regime, the 1980s began with one of the most extensive political changes in contemporary French history: the election of socialist François Mitterrand to the presidency on May 10, 1981. It brought the first Left-coalition government in some forty-five years, following Léon Blum's ephemeral Popular Front alliance. Despite the significant liberalization of French society, which occurred during the Giscard years, from 1974 to 1981 (the voting age was lowered to eighteen, the enrollment of female students at the university level increased, the decisive Simone Veil Act legalizing abortion and divorce by common consent passed in 1975), the female and youth vote favored the candidate of the Left. The apparent stability of the French presidential regime clearly indicated that the Fifth Republic's constitutional issues played an essential role in the political agenda since it was created in 1958. Taking advantage of an unprecedented movement of national enthusiasm, Mitterrand promptly dissolved the *Assemblée nationale*, and the consequent legislative elections that took place in June confirmed the inclination for political change, giving a wide majority to the Socialist Party alone

(269 of the total 491 seats). Mitterrand's "sovereignty," corroborated by his successful campaign slogan *La force tranquille*, began with a rush of socialist fervor all over France. Because of the Communist Party's endorsement before the second round of the election, four members of that political party were appointed to the cabinet of Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy (the first time since the Liberation's coalition government).

With a political victory, which evidently appeared to be the voters' mandate, Mitterrand gained the confidence to rapidly carry out major economic and social reforms. (Radical change, however, did not occur in 1981, any more than it did in 1968, as the foundations of French institutions remained unchanged.) Some of the very first decisions, for which the new government was widely praised among the working-class population, were the significant raise in the minimum wage (the minimum wage, called SMIC, was raised 10 percent in June 1981), increased social security benefits, increased welfare compensations, a fifth week of paid vacation, the working week shortened to thirty-nine hours, and the subjecting of layoffs to state control. On the judiciary side, a historical reorganization took place under the close scrutiny of the new administration, and in September 1981, Justice Secretary Joseph Badinter, following a speech of great magnitude before the French Parliament, led the vote for the abolition of the death penalty. (France was actually the last country in the EEC to ban capital punishment officially.)

In addition to the political transformations, economic measures defined the future direction of the new government's agenda: a dozen major industries, national banks, and insurance companies were nationalized within a couple of years; a ban on nuclear testing was imposed; several projects for the construction of nuclear power plants were deferred; and taxes on the highest social brackets were implemented. In addition, the government decentralized, giving more power to the regions. In an effort to create a new dynamic for smaller companies, a substantial degree of economic delegation shifted part of the state's authority to regional and local councils. The new organization of state cultural interventions played a major role in the daily lives of the French people. In September 1981, the first TGV (high-speed train) connection between Paris and Lyon was inaugurated. Two hours was now all the time needed to reach the capital from its second largest metropolis. Consequently, this new technical advance directly created an intense competition with French airline companies.

But while the socialist administration was focusing on some gigantic socioeconomic tasks, the majority of European nations had already begun the program to counter the European Economic Community's<sup>2</sup> most urgent problem at the time, inflation. In France, inflation rose to

14 percent and unemployment to almost 10 percent. By 1982, the economy had deteriorated in most European countries (an average 12 percent inflation rate), and most governments imposed a controlled growth of wage caps and unpopular price freezes among small businesses despite tax concessions to business. Finance Minister Jacques Delors indicated that the present economic and social projects were ultimately undermining the national economy. The so-called period of economic austerity began with the devaluation of the French franc. Austerity measures were adopted in June 1982 and March 1983, including major cuts in public expenses.

The first socialist administration came to an end with the legislative elections in 1986 and the victory of the right coalition, which regained a slim majority in the parliament. This episode was the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic that the majority in the assembly did not endorse the president's party. The new government, formed mainly by center-right democrats (RPR, Rassemblement Pour la République, and UDF, Union pour la Démocratie Française), was led by newly appointed Prime Minister Jacques Chirac, who began a policy of privatizing state-owned companies, decreasing income tax rates at the upper levels, and removing the wealth tax. Allowing the prime minister to conduct domestic matters, Mitterrand focused on international relations.

Meanwhile, within the turmoil of the so-called cohabitation, a new political figure emerged on the French political scene. This was Jean-Marie Le Pen, who headed the National Front Party (Front National), which scored successes with its xenophobic-themed crusade to expel illegal or unemployed immigrant workers. The party's platform also strongly opposed the residency and electoral rights granted to certain categories of immigrants.

If it was true that social tensions in most large suburban areas rapidly caused a redefinition of the political debate around the mid-1980s, it was also apparent that despite the escalation of those conflicts, new associations, such as S.O.S. Racisme, were proving the solidarity and cohesion of French people. Stand-up comedian and film actor Coluche, followed by a myriad of French artists and celebrities, created an unprecedented association—Les Restos du Coeur—which to date symbolizes the awareness triggered by the spreading of a new kind of poverty in major French urban areas: *les nouveaux pauvres*.

The period of "cohabitation" between Chirac and Socialist president Mitterrand lasted only a couple of years, until Mitterrand's reelection on May 8, 1988. Despite the fact that a significant segment of the French population that was profoundly disillusioned with the social changes and economic reforms (they were often labeled *les déçus du socialisme*/the disillusioned ones), against all odds Mitterrand was able

to regain the confidence of the majority. What he had actually put in place, years before announcing his candidacy for a second mandate, can best be described as an understated reverence of the persona, an authentic "cultification" of the (or his own) presidency. Mitterrand's political career, indeed, extended over half a century, and his fourteen years as president of the French Republic made him France's longest reigning politician since Napoléon III.<sup>3</sup> However, despite the social reforms and historical decisions, the socialist administration's experience never quite succeeded in transforming French society's fundamental nucleus, capitalistic structure, or social profile.<sup>4</sup>

In France, the 1980s began with an assertive new cultural trend clearly defined as "cultural pluralism." One of the best examples of the new consensus occurred on March 6, 1980, as writer Marguerite Yourcenar became the first woman to enter the highly select society of the Académie française. In the field of popular music, the 1980s was marked by the rediscovery of cosmopolitan artists, particularly African artists (e.g., Touré Kounda, Manu di Bango, and Mori Kante), this time not exclusively by connoisseurs, but by large and diverse popular audiences. In the field of radio entertainment, and before the advent of video, there were new horizons for radio broadcast with the legalization of private and local stations in 1982. A multitude of new radio stations surfaced, along with traditional public radio stations on FM. Music stations, such as the newly created NRJ, Fun Radio, and Skyrock, were immediately popular among young audiences. The novelty led to the long-awaited reorganization of the radio networks. Unfortunately, the hope of seeing small radio stations finally emerge following decades of negation and sequestrations was squashed as the largest private radio companies (e.g., NRJ) promoted themselves as the new and exclusive leaders for young audiences. Created in 1981 by Jean-Paul Baudecroux, NRJ reached an audience between fifteen and thirty years of age. With its strong public relations strategy and organization of concerts in France, the company rapidly created a large network of provincial radio stations throughout the country.<sup>5</sup>

Outside the traditional fields of entertainment (music and cinema), France of the 1980s represented a new era for individual well-being. As the American trend for jogging invaded Europe and France, the French gradually developed a new awareness of physical fitness. In sports, France, one of the few western nations hitherto never to win any international title in team sports, came away with its first in June 1984: a victory in the European soccer championship. On water, Gérard d'Aboville was the first man to row across the Atlantic Ocean, and in space, astronaut Jean-Loup Chrétien was the first Frenchman to participate in an international space exploration project, spending seven days in the company of Soviet cosmonauts on *Soyuz T6* in 1982.

This success was echoed by another technological sensation. First launched in September 1982, Ariane began a long string of successful commercial contracts in the satellite market. In the field of architecture and national construction, the 1980s proved an exceptionally prolific period under the tutelage of President Mitterrand, whose decisions for the most part triggered fierce opposition from political adversaries and urban representatives, and as the years went by ultimately brought about a national reconciliation. Since Baron Georges Haussmann's architectural enterprises a century before, Paris had never undergone such extensive construction and architectural development. The following achievements asserted French cultural leadership by adorning Paris with a glittering collection of cultural monuments that included the Opéra Bastille (1989), I. M. Pei's pyramid of the Louvre (inaugurated in 1988), the Grand Louvre (1989), the new National Library (1995), a science and technology complex at La Villette (1985), and the gigantic Arche de la Défense (1989), making a spectacular visual and linear alignment with the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs-Élysées, the Tuileries, and the Louvre.

For cinema, as well as the arts in general, the nomination of Jack Lang as the new minister of culture within the socialist government would be of considerable importance for the rest of the century. With his nomination, the status of the *Ministre de la Culture*, traditionally secondary, even unknown at times, suddenly became the cultural window of a new nation in a new decade, and Lang served as the spokesman for the new political disposition. During the two socialist mandates, Lang was the only member of the government to be twice appointed to his position (1981–86 and 1988–93). Spectacular cultural manifestations, combined with a great communicative *savoir faire*, best define Lang's gift for popular appearances. Lang's agenda began immediately with a *coup de théâtre*, which occurred via his declarations toward Deauville's American Film Festival. Lang, who refused to attend the event, made several remarks emphasizing the desire for economic independence of French cinema from what was again perceived as American-cultural hegemony, which, according to observers at the time, was interpreted as outspoken anti-Americanism.

Despite some difficult episodes like the 1981 closing of the legendary Victorine Studios in Nice, French cinema was in part assisted by several encouraging initiatives, such as the foundation of the Lumière Institute in Lyon (1982), the inauguration of the flamboyant Palais des Festivals in Cannes (1983) to replace the old movie theater by then too small for the annual event, and the inauguration of the first annual French Film Festival in Sarasota, Florida (1989). And while Lang's popularity never wavered, particularly after organizing the first annual *Fête de la musique* in 1982, as well as the *Fête du cinéma*,

the beginning of the 1980s was synonymous with growing economic difficulties and with the dramatic and sudden increase in production costs in French cinema. As a result, Lang decided to create eight regional cinema centers (Grenoble, Nantes, Quimper, Le Havre, Bobigny, Vitrolles, Villemur-sur-Tarn, and Nanterre), known as *maisons de la culture*, all financed by the state. Despite the strong commitment of the government, however, regional cinema never took off commercially, and Paris continued to be, and still remains, the only generator of full-length features and new filmmakers.

### FRENCH CINEMA OF THE 1980s: OVER ONE THOUSAND FILMS PRODUCED

Compared to the preceding decade, which valued a certain type of militant cinema representative of the spirit of the time, French cinema of the 1980s could in retrospect be described as the era of the “*neopolar*.” Although still inspired by the New Wave, French directors instigated an eloquent return to more traditional storytelling reminiscent of the postwar era. If a dependable and critical debate on the war in Algeria was absent during the early 1960s (as well as the militant spirit of the post-’68 era), this new decade suggested a wide variety of different aesthetic styles and theories just as if each director claimed his or her own school or *politique*. Inventive fictions juxtaposed with aesthetic chronicles and spirituality took over (e.g., Alain Cavalier’s *Thérèse*, 1986, earned six César awards). One of the many reasons why political and militant cinema productions began to slow down at the end of the 1970s, and clearly during the first couple of years of the 1980s, was the shift of power to the new socialist administration. Many filmmakers, adherent to socialist political ideas, most likely did not feel a need to pursue a more politically engaged cinema while no longer in a position of opposition. Except in rare cases, most political films did not represent contemporary French society. Film historian Susan Hayward explains the reason for the trend:

The primary reason for this evaporation of authenticity in cinema was tied in with the overall meaning of disaffection with ideology. When the Left came to power in 1981, they did so on a platform of social reforms. The Left’s discourse was embedded with the rhetoric of social justice and as such was far removed from the politics of liberalism that had so valued capitalism, free-marketing ideology, and implicitly, the individual. In simple terms the socialist platform amounted to a credo in society. But by 1982–83—and to the electorate’s mind at least—this credo, because of the effects of recession, had all but evaporated, and to all appearances the Left was instituting policies that did little to distinguish it from the Right. It is in the centering of these discourses

that one can perceive the evaporation of authentic cinema. As with the political arena, the 1980s witnessed a centering of cinema's ideological discourses from the "left-Marxist-inflected" and "anti-American hegemonic praxis" films of the 1960s and 1970s, from a political cinema that was politically made to an apolitical cinema that was designer and consumer led. With rare exceptions, the cinema of the 1980s and early 1990s has been one that says "since there is nothing here (no ideology, etc.), let's imitate."<sup>6</sup>

With the decline of political films in the 1980s, contemporary social observation was less likely to be found in the subject matter of new filmmakers. On an economic level, the financial aid committees clearly would not approve of a militant cinema. Therefore, it is true that soon after the beginning of the Mitterrand years, political cinema, as well as the subject of politics in films, rapidly disappeared, with rare exceptions.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the artistic trend of the preceding decade, French cinema of the 1980s never quite seemed to reflect the spirit of its time. The reason for this was most likely a combination of the growing economic and humanitarian crises and difficulties, the catastrophe of Chernobyl, the outbreak of AIDS, the eruption of a new type of urban poverty, and the never-ending growth of unemployment. If the decade began with the people's visible aspiration to social change, the 1980s certainly ended with a sky full of clouds over French society in general. "In the 1980s," observes Hayward, "the authentic cinema evaporated in the face of pastiche,"<sup>8</sup> and it was no surprise to perceive the decline of original auteur cinema. Although in financially dire straits, French *cinéma d'auteurs* nevertheless was still present in the 1980s, but in a large part in productions that never reached an audience and remained without distribution. The celebrated *cinéphiles'* cinema was going through a difficult period. One of the most dramatic aftermaths of the ruthless competition between television and the seventh art was, paradoxically, the declining importance of the *qualité* cinema. Television productions, although lacking technical mastery and credibility, step by step gained popularity among general audiences and eventually secured access to a much wider spectatorship. For the French television industry, mass viewership was the number one pre-occupation, whereas for the French film industry, the notion of the art of film continued to supersede the importance of financial viability and audience fulfillment.

For the audiences of the 1980s, mainly by then television spectators, the star system began to change. Actors were no longer "movie stars" as in the past. With all the festivals, press conferences, promotional tours, TV talk shows, and magazines, French actors such as Gérard Depardieu, Catherine Deneuve, Nathalie Baye, Richard Berry, and Isabelle Adjani no longer embodied the hero or cult figure of their

predecessors. Consequently, the devaluation of their *médiatique* images became unavoidable.<sup>9</sup>

## TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE FRENCH FILM INDUSTRY

The debate over Hollywood hegemony versus French cinema corresponds to a general debate in France and throughout Europe regarding the growing supremacy of American culture. The main point of contention is the American system of mass production, as defined by most major US studios. Taking into consideration the higher cost effectiveness of the typical American production, the central point of the debate is whether to accept the system or to seek salutary alternatives. Although the issues around this old economic predicament were mostly a French concern in the first half of the century, it progressively became a European matter during the postwar era. Already suggested on many occasions by government officials as early as 1945 (Blum-Byrnes Agreements), the actual initiative to build up a European substitute for the Hollywood production system only began to take shape under the patronage of Jack Lang. In the end, the 1980s represented the realization of a distinct European production system.

Lang's endeavors were oriented toward preserving the identity of French cinema (and indirectly the European film industry in general) and making it prosper financially, despite the overpowering volume of American films and the menace of GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) on the international film industry.<sup>10</sup> To protect the French film industry from foreign competition, the government reasserted the doctrine of protectionism for national productions, via a complex set of quotas and state subventions. Logically, the best and most efficient way to accomplish preset goals, and to protect European cinema, was to encourage better and more productions. By persuading other European governments that quality cinematographic productions could also help reassert European economic and cultural authority, Lang indirectly implemented a rebirth in most European nations' efforts to subsidize their national film productions. Meanwhile, endowed with essentially worldwide comprehensible narratives and characters, American films quickly progressed within the European market, reaching fifty-six percent of the films shown in French movie theaters and over seventy percent in European movie theaters by 1990. Although incessantly providing leading new talent (film directors, actors, and technicians) with cutting-edge artistic scope, the French-film industry, in comparison to Hollywood's, was never able to sustain the necessary financial commitment and backing. As long as leading French filmmakers and critics firmly believed in cinema as an art form

rather than popular entertainment, the gap between the US and French film industries widened each year. From the first generations of the postwar era until the 1980s, ending with the GATT in 1993, Hollywood expanded the "commercibility" of films. In contrast, the French system maintained the sacrosanct idea of *cinéma d'auteurs* and the highly protected artistic prerogative of its filmmakers.

In 1978, production costs began to increase dramatically (by seven-tenths percent in just one year) and rose by 35 percent in 1988.<sup>11</sup> This increase represented an attempt to keep up with the overwhelming pace of Hollywood. As a result, many successful actors (e.g., Alain Delon, Gérard Depardieu, and Jean-Paul Belmondo) became producers and were eventually able to survive the tide.

Long before production costs increased, however, several French filmmakers and producers understood that in order to keep up with American turnout, French cinema had to join forces with other national cinemas. For many, due to new technologies (e.g., satellites and cable access), which internationalized by force the *paysage audio-visuel*, the key was no longer to protect national borders but rather to think in terms of a real and efficient European policy (if not global economy). As a result, 1989 became the first year in which the majority of feature films were actually coproductions. The project was all the more difficult for Jack Lang to submit, since most European countries, in similar fashion to the United States, did not have an authentic representative for "cultural affairs" in their government. The sudden escalation in production costs directly penalized the *cinéma d'auteurs* (more than doubling during the decade).

Every stage of production was now to be taken into account: from the cost of materials (camera, lighting equipment, editing, and studio time) to the stipends of technical crews who, less often employed, required higher compensations every year. Because of these financial difficulties, small-budget productions slowly began to disappear from the film market. Inspired by the Hollywood model, French producers began to organize their film commercialization no longer around the film itself but rather through a series of marketing products and media appearances by actors and directors. Visibility in post-production was by then more than just a commercial necessity. It was a solid guarantee for a producers' next project. Many French producers, like Claude Berri, reflecting on the reason for the commercial success of American films in France, came to the conclusion that the key component of profitable movies was the size of their budget. By the very nature of their financing, Hollywood super productions were in a position to conquer new European markets. Some French producers, less fearful of financial risk, took up the challenge, giving birth to multinational giant productions (interestingly enough, gratis mainly American fi-

nancing). Eventually, some French filmmakers, in order to secure necessary funding, chose English and English-speaking actors. This was mainly because most investors, especially distributors, were American, and their decisions were based on American versions of films. This gave an edge to those productions whose language was already English, such as Jean-Jacques Annaud's *The Name of the Rose* (*Le nom de la rose*, 1987) and Luc Besson's *The Professional* (*Léon*, 1994).

Meanwhile, the progression of American cinema seemingly continued to conquer the French market. In 1983, French films still constituted fifty percent of the market, as opposed to thirty-six percent for American films; three years later, in 1986, French spectatorship began for the first time to shift its preferences in majority for American films (over French films). The propensity worsened during the next couple of years, and in 1989 French films represented less than forty percent of the market, in comparison to fifty-eight percent for American films. This shift, however, was among regular film viewers and not among the occasional viewers whose attendance remained relatively stable. But despite the visible decline of its film industry (with an average of 180 million tickets sold annually in the 1970s, going down to 123 million by 1994), French cinema, compared to other European national cinemas, was still one of the best represented in its national market, with 34 percent in 1993.

A new phenomenon began to surface with the concentration of commercial successes in the French film market. In the 1970s, the most important commercial successes generally represented twenty percent of the market. But with the influence of Hollywood, French film viewing began to diversify, and big commercial productions grew to fifty percent of the markets. Especially among young audiences, American motion pictures became more and more popular, often perceived as more entertaining and more accessible when compared to the average French productions. In 1982, French cinema recorded more than 200 million spectators; attendance decreased by almost half the number at the end of the decade. Despite this crisis, because of its innovation and pragmatic energy, the French film industry somehow managed to limit its losses, especially when compared to countries like Italy, where the decrease in viewership reached 70 percent.

Momentarily leaving aside comparative assessments of US productions, the French film industry remains, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the most dynamic in Europe, with the largest distribution network of more than 4,000 theaters. According to the CNC, the attendance (in millions) at French theaters in the 1980s was 179 (1980), 189 (1981), 202 (1982), 199 (1983), 191 (1984), 175 (1985), 168 (1986), 137 (1987), 125 (1988), 121 (1989), and 122 (1990).

Finally, despite the growing presence of American films, the French film industry saw some profitable results, with productions such as

Claude Pinoteau's *The Party* (*La boum*; more than four million tickets sold in 1980), Georges Lautner's *The Professional* (*Le professionnel*; four million in 1981), Gérard Oury's *L'as des as* (almost 5.5 million in 1982, with 2.45 million during the first screening week), Jean Becker's *One Deadly Summer* (*L'été meurtrier*, five million in 1983),<sup>12</sup> Claude Berri's *Tchao Pantin!* (three million in 1983), Michel Blanc's *Marche à l'ombre* (5 million in 1984), Claude Zidi's *My New Partner* (*Les ripoux*, 5.8 million in 1984), Patrice Leconte's *Les spécialistes* (five million in 1984), Coline Serreau's *Three Men and a Cradle* (*Trois hommes et un couffin*, ten million in 1985), Claude Berri's *Jean de Florette* and *Manon of the Spring* (seven million and six million, respectively, in 1986), and Luc Besson's *The Big Blue* (*Le grand bleu*, nine million in 1988).

In light of growing US competition, French cinema relied heavily on the government's leadership and modernism in terms of coordinating a new system of financing national productions. For Jack Lang, the prevailing perspective of vertical integration (i.e., all phases of cinematographic production, from shooting, to marketing strategies, to distribution, to television rights), traditionally owned or controlled by a single investor or group of producers, had to be reorganized in order to liberate the market from the asphyxiating commercial conditions being created, which sooner or later would compel the French film industry to orient the very identity of its productions toward the Hollywood model. To supplement the *avances sur recettes* system, Jack Lang created the SOFICA (Sociétés de financement des industries cinématographiques et audiovisuelles) program in 1985. These investment companies were mostly created to acquire capital from private individuals or companies in exchange for fiscal advantages. As a result, more than fifty films were completed by the early 1990s. Contrary to common belief, the *avances sur recettes* system was not implemented solely to encourage new talent, but to provide sufficient financial help for already accomplished and even notorious filmmakers. Despite its numerous imperfections, the system was able, since its creation in the early 1960s, to set in motion some of the most important projects of the decade. Set against royalties from French box office revenues, the system directly benefited many other filmmakers and came to the assistance of some of France's most prestigious artists, such as Claude Lanzmann (*Shoah/Shoah*, 1984), Agnès Varda (*Vagabond/Sans toit ni loi*, 1985), Robert Bresson (*Money/L'argent*, 1983), and Alain Resnais (*L'amour à mort*, 1984).

In addition to its patron-of-the-arts image, one of the other objectives of the *avances sur recettes* institution was eventually to reinvigorate the film industry. As such, the regulation stipulated that movie companies benefiting from these incentives (mainly film producers) engage in all aspects of film activity, including post-production, distribution,

and establishing studios and cinema houses. On the one hand, French producers generally argued that companies established under this regulation were more inclined to conduct distribution activities at the expense of production and the establishment, and running of studios. On the other hand, French industry representatives accused these film companies of swamping the local market with American movies. Although the government doubled the budget of the *avances sur recettes* system in 1982, and consequently facilitated the first feature films of many young film directors, a number of them were precluded from pursuing a successful movie career for several reasons. These reasons included the evolution of the market with the rapid escalation of production costs, the disaffection of a public, more and more oriented toward the American-star system, and the lack of support of French television companies which were not always open to endorsing "unknown" films, much less coproducing them. When they would consent to participate in a production, television companies committed to only a certain percentage of the project, which often turned out to be a relatively negligible amount. Compared to their seniors, the main difficulty young filmmakers had to negotiate was that for the first time television represented a major obstacle to the beginning of a film career. Many young and talented directors were able to achieve only one film before disappearing from the movie business.

Unlike the early 1960s, when the general public went to movie theaters to see Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* or Claude Chabrol's *Bitter Reunion*, the same general public twenty years later could choose to wait several months and view new directors' films at home on the small screen. One of the major problems for the French film industry in its effort to ensure a new generation of filmmakers was the producers' trust in the old-school directors, such as Maurice Pialat, Bertrand Tavernier, and François Truffaut. Investments were difficult during the economic crunch of the early 1980s, and investors would usually bet on sure values rather than venture to endorse unknown projects. As a result, young directors were more or less in the same situation their seniors faced thirty years before them: only a providential professional connection could launch their professional careers. Despite the innumerable obstacles, however, a respectable number of new French directors were able to achieve a first full-length feature film each year (between fifteen and twenty annually).

## A NEW PARTNER: TELEVISION

In France, the 1980s represented a unique socio-economic phase, essentially dominated by the drastic acceleration in the consumption of cultural goods. Since its first broadcasts in the early 1950s, French

television had never undergone a major organizational transformation. The single state-owned channel, ORTF (Office radio-télévision française), slowly evolved into several channels without ever changing its purpose or mission. As the number of TV channels expanded from three to six, then later seven, television became the dominant medium in the world of images. The year 1984 saw a revolution in French television with the birth of Canal+, whose mission was to broadcast recently released films. Soon imitated by the creation of two other private television companies two years later (La 5 and M6), the government allowed another major breakthrough with the privatization of the oldest state-owned channel, TF1. With a total of six channels by 1985 (four of which were private companies), French viewers for the first time enjoyed a relatively broad choice in television entertainment. The first and direct victim of this expansion was, logically, cinema production, since both the television and film industries were by now, for better or worse, closely interconnected. Cinema was no longer the only "image" distributor around.

The aesthetic requirements and economic realities of French television deeply influenced the production of French films during the 1980s. More inclined toward general public and family entertainment, TV producers gradually moved their expectations toward a more refined aesthetic, emphasizing clear-cut commercial products, closer to the one of the *qualité* era rather than the post-'68 era (deeply embedded in a political and militant behaviorism no longer in demand among general audiences). From now on, a substantial part of French cinematographic production was conceived for TV. This not only affected the choice of subject matter, but also seriously limited the creativity of filmmakers. Many film historians, like Jacques Siclier, argue that the sudden shift toward more televised filmmaking explains the emergence, or reemergence, of more visually inclined directors, who, for the most part, came from the world of advertising (e.g., Jean-Jacques Annaud and Luc Besson).

Despite a solid financial situation and increasing profits,<sup>13</sup> due mainly to healthy advertisement contracts, French television companies continued to increase their participation in cinema productions and films rights. The turning point of the evolution of film consumption occurred in 1985, when for the first time a larger number of movies were screened on national television than in theaters (consequently, American films became predominant when compared to French films). Paradoxical as it may seem, television cinema—films whose rights were bought by television companies—was by far the cheapest and most popular source of programming, since the production costs for a TV film were usually higher when compared to the purchase of the film's rights. In addition, American television series, which since the

late 1970s had continued to overwhelm the European market with low prices (since already amortized in the US), indirectly slowed down the production of French TV films as well as French TV series. Because of this, national and European quotas were rapidly established. In 1985, the revenue of a film screened in theaters represented twenty-five percent of the total revenue; in 1990, less than twenty percent, with forty percent from television rights, eight percent from videos and fifteen percent from international sales.

In parallel with television, one of the largest society phenomena, which characterized so well the evolution of the 1980s, was a sudden and revolutionary shift in viewing format, which shaped the economic prediction of the cinematographic industry forever: television and VCRs, both accessible at home, became the new decisive adjuncts.<sup>14</sup> Born in the 1960s, the first tentative VCR models from the Sony Corporation initiated the market with the first affordable VCR in 1969, followed a few years later by the expansion of two viewing devices: the Betamax format by Sony and the VHS format by the Matsushita Corporation. Videocassette recorders gradually became less exclusive and consequently entered the homes of millions of families. In 1976, the VHS system was commercialized worldwide but its progression was somewhat relatively discreet in France. A rather small number of people at the time, mainly professional, clearly realized that this new format was about to revolutionize the concept of cinéphilie forever—the VCR would bring to the homes of millions a medium that had almost exclusively been presented in commercial houses since the invention of motion pictures. From the late 1970s on, the importance of video in the entertainment industry, as well as in art and education, grew. The accessibility to films on videocassette further affected attendance at the numerous *ciné-clubs* in France by offering the public its own selection of films. Although feared by film producers and distributors for its potential threat to exhibition profits (the sales of films on videocassette had increased steadily since the coming of VCRs, with a jump of 75 percent in 1993), the video market actually had the opposite effect: not only did it not dramatically affect attendance at theaters, but it also significantly prolonged the commercial time span of most French productions.

The 1980s were unquestionably the beginning of an important new viewing era, with more and more French households owning VCRs: over 200,000 VCRs in 1980; one million in 1982; three million in 1983; five million in 1988; and more than ten million in 1990. This trend parallels the growth in the number of televised films (over 800 feature films in 1986 and close to 1,300 films screened on French television by the end of the decade). With an increasing number of feature films screened on the six French channels (913 films in 1988,

for example), the number of VCRs continued to grow, allowing viewers to record movies at no cost and watch them at their leisure.

The creation of the first private TV channel, Canal+, brought a small revolution in the history of French-television viewing and symbolized the beginning of the end for the state monopoly over the marketing of images. As early as the first season, the new subscription channel, accessible only with a decoder system, immediately offered nonconforming competitive programs with one feature film per day (usually screened one calendar year after the release in theaters). This was a considerable advantage since the other national channels had a three-year interval period, unless they coproduced the film (which meant a one-year delay). Quickly, Canal+ improved its programming and began to screen films six times in a two-week period. Because of the creation of free private television channels (La Cinq and TV6), the development of Canal+ slowed briefly before taking off again in the late 1980s and early 1990s. With such incentives as a record screening of 320 films per year, the number of subscribers began to increase dramatically, from 230,000 in 1987 to 3 million in 1990. Another advantage, which indirectly contributed to the success of Canal+, was the gradual implementation, on other channels, of regular interruptions in films for commercial spots. This phenomenon, absent at Canal+, not only outraged filmmakers but also attracted new viewers to the uninterrupted viewing mode offered by the new company.

The 1980s also brought an important change in the French film industry regarding financing. In the early 1980s, French television coproduced just over twenty percent of French films and ended the decade coproducing more than fifty percent. In November 1987, Canal+ signed an agreement with major producing companies, which indirectly affected the production and distribution network all over France. Canal+ became by far the most active participant, and is still the major partner for the financing of French feature films (e.g., eighty percent of French productions benefited from Canal+ financial aid in 1993). Later on, Canal+ pledged to use one-fifth of its commercial and subscription revenue to finance full-length feature films, 50 percent of which were to be French productions. This was a daunting task indeed, since more than a quarter of the company's budget was allocated to screening copyrights.

### **THE OLD SCHOOL OF FILMMAKERS: FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT, BERTRAND TAVERNIER, BERTRAND BLIER, AND MAURICE PIALAT**

Although experienced directors such as Maurice Pialat, Bertrand Tavernier, Bertrand Blier, Eric Rohmer, and François Truffaut were still

active in the early 1980s, they represented their own cinematographic style. Despite their unshakable popularity among general audiences, they no longer epitomized the "young generation" of filmmakers. The case of François Truffaut is all the more interesting in that his career, although often celebrated for its phenomenal beginnings, finished with one of the greatest critical successes in French cinema history: *The Last Metro* (1980). The inspiration for the film came to Truffaut via Jean Marais's memoir on the splendor and pains of the Parisian stage during World War II. With a script written with Suzanne Schiffman, Truffaut again appealed to audiences with his multiple layers. He combined a delicate blend of artistic ambitions, popular storytelling, and excellence in the cinematographic tradition. *The Last Metro* was a realistic contemplation on the artistic mood during the Nazi Occupation. The film investigates the dynamics in the relationships between the actors of a theater company in a climate of antagonism and terror. Truffaut employed only recognizable significances from the plot's main implication. As the story unfolds, the emotional element progressively comes to imply another issue—the power of the artist even when confined to silence and isolation.

The double plot narrates the story of the struggles of the theater during the Occupation and Bernard Granger's fight for the French Resistance. In 1942 Lucas Steiner (Heinz Bennent), a stage director in the Montmartre district of Paris, takes refuge in the basement of his own theater to escape the Gestapo. Before his departure, he has left all the stage directions as well as the manuscript of his latest play to Jean-Loup Cottin (Jean Poiret), a fellow director. His wife, Marion (Catherine Deneuve), must persuade the French authorities not to close the theater. Meanwhile, the company hires a new actor, Bernard Granger (Gérard Depardieu). A parallel story evokes the double game played by Marion and Bernard, who hide their love affair as best they can, as well as the double game they play on the French censor. Although the gloomy environment of the theater echoes with the disorder of the Occupation and the tracking of the Jews, it also functions as a surreptitious device for solidarity among the stage actors. Through the theater's ventilation ducts, Lucas is able to continue to direct his play from a distance. When the police finally come to investigate the building, Bernard, who has learned that Marion's husband is living in the basement, decides to help the struggling couple.

With a large box-office profit of 3.3 million tickets sold and a record ten Césars (Best Film, Best Director, Best Scenario, Best Actor/Gérard Depardieu, Best Actress/Catherine Deneuve, Best Photography, Best Montage, Best Set, Best Music, and Best Sound), *The Last Metro* proved a triumph for its director. Truffaut overcame a difficult challenge, namely, to associate the work of two artistically diverse actors,

the most popular female actress from the 1960s with the biggest male actor from the 1970s. The shooting began January 28, 1980, and the film opened in Paris on September 17, 1980. *The Last Metro*, like most of Truffaut's films, was a subtle picture in the way its intrigue explored the characters, dexterously revealing individual layers of their psyche. The director's devotion to film, combined with his personal interest in male-female relationships, is omnipresent in the many elements of the plot. The film was a significant illustration of Truffaut's *modus operandi*: communication depends principally on sight and scent in order for the cinematography to create a faultless environment. This faultless *mise-en-scène* was actually re-created by stage decorator Jean-Pierre Kohut-Svelko and chief lighting operator Nestor Almendros through an unusual series of almost monochromatic colors, eventually rendering the mood of the Occupation more realistic for the everyday reality of artists during this time and tediously artificial to accompany the theatrical representation.

Truffaut's next film, *The Woman Next Door* (*La femme d'à côté*, 1981),<sup>15</sup> was a "frightening" love story where passion surpassed common neurosis. On a cinematographic level, the narrative of fatal attraction could be viewed as a psychoanalysis of contrasting implications behind the form of long takes, numerous cross-cutting, and fluid-camera movements. From start to finish, the intrigue reveals the phys-



Gérard Depardieu (Bernard) and Catherine Deneuve (Marion) in François Truffaut's *The Last Metro* (*Le dernier métro*, 1980), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Jean-Pierre Fizet).

ical hindrances between the couple. A sense of isolation and abandon grows stronger until the final explosion of energy recaptures what had been lost. Bernard (G rard Depardieu) and Arlette Coudray (Mich le Baumgartner), a young couple, live a peaceful life outside Grenoble with their young son. One day, a new couple, Philippe (Henri Garcin) and Mathilde Bauchard (Fanny Ardant), move in next door. After a seven-year separation, destiny brings Bernard and Mathilde back together. At first reluctant even to behave like friends, the couple inevitably has an affair. Bernard and Mathilde begin their secret rendezvous in town as their passion grows mercilessly. One day, Bernard cannot control himself any longer. Life must go on as each couple pretends to live with the indiscretion and forgive the past. Meanwhile, however, Mathilde is hospitalized suffering from depression. Philippe and Mathilde move out of town, but one night Mathilde returns to visit their deserted house. Bernard overhears the noise and reencounters her one last time. As passion again becomes all-consuming, Mathilde shoots Bernard before killing herself.

With *The Woman Next Door*, as he did with *The Man Who Loved Women* and *The Story of Adele H.*, Truffaut acquainted his public with another saga of passionate love, this time with the looming sensation evolving in an apparently convivial-bourgeois environment, chronicled by the peaceful village outside the innumerable disturbances of city life. Interestingly, many of Truffaut's films used a narrative frame under a voice-over, like the puzzling prologue of *Madame Jouve*, (V ronique Silver) during the opening shot, who instructs the spectator that the featured story not only is authentic but also a reminder that everybody's life is at some point unstable. Once more with Truffaut, who was still dealing with the emotional aftermath of *The Green Room*, the idea of death was equally present as the symbol of love in the final adage of the narrative: reminiscing temptation can eventually lead human beings to a fatal finale.

On August 1, 1984, Fran ois Truffaut had a cerebral stroke from a brain tumor and died a month later at the age of fifty-two at the American Hospital in Neuilly. Exactly thirty years earlier, Truffaut had entered the arena as a turbulent critic for *Les cahiers du cin ma* and as a fierce opponent of the *tradition de qualit *.<sup>16</sup> He ruthlessly fought cinematographic academicism and its overpowering literary adaptations, as well as its anti-intellectual character. For Truffaut and the young critics-turned-directors of the *nouvelle vague*, the aspiration to film corresponded to a poeticized but still realistic representation of contemporary France, and was a cinematographic revolution in all its artistic and production aspects. According to film critic David Walsh, Truffaut's cinema with its "self-consciously Bressonian austerity, still retains its essential eloquence."<sup>17</sup> Heir to the humanistic cinematic

tradition of Jean Renoir, Truffaut is remembered by both popular audiences and film historians as a unique filmmaker known for his contagious, exuberant celebration of filmmaking. Always involved with the production of his films as well as the well-being of his profession, Truffaut was also active as a film critic and commentator until the very end.<sup>18</sup> Two of his most noteworthy manuscripts include a long interview with Alfred Hitchcock<sup>19</sup> and a collection of critical essays, *Les films de ma vie (The Films in My Life, 1975)*. Physically hampered during the last months of his life, Truffaut had already planned numerous projects, including an adaptation of Paul Léautaud's *Petit ami* and *Le Comte de Monte Cristo* for American television. In addition, he had completed the screenplay for *La petite voleuse*, which Claude Miller directed in 1988.

Following in Truffaut's footsteps, director Bertrand Tavernier, although active in filmmaking since the early 1970s, quickly appeared as an experienced filmmaker in the following decade. The success of *Clean Slate (Coup de torchon, 1981)*, followed by his immaculate impressionistic composition *A Sunday in the Country (Un dimanche à la campagne, 1984)*, confirmed Tavernier's position as an artist of considerable influence. Adapted from a short novel by Pierre Bost, entitled *Monsieur L'admiral va bientôt mourir*, *A Sunday in the Country* narrates a bittersweet portrait of a man's life as he relives personal triumphs, family comedies and tragedies, the volatile politics of a war-torn world, and, most importantly, the people and passions that changed his life.

During the last peaceful years before World War I, Monsieur L'admiral (Louis Ducreux), a retired painter, lives at his country home with the memory of his late spouse. On a beautiful Sunday, he receives a visit from his son, Gonzague (Michel Aumont), with his wife and three children, Emile, Lucien, and Mireille. Realizing that his son has slipped into a conformist bourgeois existence despite himself, Monsieur L'admiral is disappointed with Gonzague's lack of ambition and adventure. But the peaceful family also receives a surprise visit that day from Monsieur L'admiral's daughter Irène (Sabine Azéma), a thoroughly modern and independent young Parisian woman. Irène's contagious stamina and energy begin to spread to the whole family. Unfortunately, she must rush back to Paris after a phone call from her lover, who waits for her. Following his children's visit, Monsieur L'admiral then returns to his studio to examine a painting that he has been working on for years, and reminisces on the passions and risks of life never taken.

Continuing the theme of *A Week's Vacation (Une semaine de vacances, 1980)*, Tavernier concentrated his interest on the rapport among the three generations within a family, much like Ettore Scola had done in *The Family (La famiglia, 1987)*. In addition to the poetic evocation of

paternal love, *A Sunday in the Country* is an insightful analysis of a family's interior dynamics and a moving account of an aging artist's consciousness that his "masterpiece" may not survive the passage of time. Here Tavernier's visual narrative centers on the presentation of individuals' basic situations (which belong to daily life). It presents individual human beings' intuition of their daily situations as they experience them. Tavernier's protagonists are isolated, static, and motionless, and thus express themselves especially from the inside; they are recognized through a picture of the world that the filmmaker designed for the spectator. The whole peaceful *champêtre*, or pseudo-pastoral universe, is a symbol of the mental world of the characters who are organic parts of it. The reality of the situations in which the characters appear is a psychological reality expressed in images that are the outward projection of Monsieur Ladmiral's state of mind. Often described as a filmmaker of the past, traditionally extolling cinematographic academicism in all its forms, Tavernier provided a rare impressionistic taste for atmosphere in this transgenerational portrait of a common family. He displayed an obvious mastery of stage direction. With numerous shots focused on one figure before slowly tracking to another angle, the cinematography was able to reveal in each take a different aspect that placed a new spin on the set and directly enhanced a mood of hidden undercurrents. At the 1984 Cannes Film Festival, *A Sunday in the Country* won Best Director (Prix de la mise en scène). It also won Césars in 1985 for Best Actress (Sabine Azéma), Best Adapted Screenplay (Bertrand Tavernier), and Best Photography (Bruno de Keyser).

After the success of *A Sunday in the Country*, Tavernier developed a parallel interest in jazz. Following contacts with American filmmakers Martin Scorsese and Irwin Winkler, the idea of a feature film narrating the tribulations of American jazzmen in France came to light. *'Round Midnight* (*Autour de minuit*, 1986) and its international success demonstrated that a well-organized cinematography (assisted by Alexandre Trauner for the set) coordinated with a judicious pace and a strong musical score (Herbie Hancock earned an Oscar for Best Score)<sup>20</sup> could do well at the box office, in particular among general audiences not necessarily keen on or even knowledgeable about jazz. The film is a virtual homage to the jazz world: the music and the musicians who lived and played in France. Dexter Gordon (who was nominated for an Oscar) plays a disheartened tenor saxophone player living in self-exile in 1959 Paris. A young amateur, Francis Paudras (François Cluzet), who first surreptitiously listens to the musician in the rain (since he cannot afford to pay admission to the Blue Note Club), is disappointed at the way this jazz great is treated and decides to help his idol. The story is a compelling reflection on the phenomenon of appreciation

toward artists and their subsequent interaction with fans. The title, taken from a Thelonious Monk piece, conveys the genuine atmosphere more than a literal narrative scheme.

Author of numerous articles, Tavernier also wrote, with Jean-Pierre Coursodon, a historical overview of American cinema from the post-war era, entitled *50 ans de cinéma américain* in 1995.<sup>21</sup> Today, Tavernier remains one of the most important and popular French filmmakers. His other significant contributions are *Deathwatch* (*La mort en direct*, 1980) and *Life and Nothing But* (*La vie et rien d'autre*, 1989), a pacifist film starring Philippe Noiret as a World War I major obsessed with making amends for the wartime carnage in which he took part. It is a persuasive investigation of the absurdity of war. Tavernier's career awards include the Prix Louis Delluc in 1974 for *L'horloger de Saint-Paul* and two Césars for Best Director in 1976 for *Let Joy Reign Supreme* (*Que la fête commence*) and in 1997 for *Captain Conan* and Best Original Screenplay for *The Judge and the Assassin* (*Le juge et l'assassin*) in 1977.

Compared to filmmakers such as Tavernier, François Truffaut, or even Jean-Luc Godard, Bertrand Blier can be considered, in his own style, a very conscientious observer of psychological conflicts. Like the others, Blier concentrated his work on a great deal of stage direction rather than subjective expression. In comparison to the film directors of the early 1960s, who found inspiration and artistic encouragement mostly within their inner selves or favorite literature, Blier goes as far as to capture inspiration from around him (e.g., *Going Places* and *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*). With *Beau-père* (*Beau-Père*, 1981), selected for the 1981 Cannes Film Festival, the continuity in his endeavor to direct confrontational films is still noticeable. Often viewed as a nonconformist, whose vulgarity and provocation go beyond understanding, Blier is either rejected by the French public and critics or adored. Blier's infuriating scripts were obviously written to astound spectators as early as the first scene, when unexpected situations diffused a recurrent-corrosive humor. Built on paradoxical situations, the plots were then pushed to the limits of cinematographic frenzy, according to a logic of absurdity that could be best described as a blend of Surrealist fantasy and Existentialist uneasiness. Blier's characters usually evolve in dramatic situations, sometimes in despair and sometimes in absolute derision. In *Beau-père*, love and sex, breaking the bourgeois rules by their unbalanced and extreme nature, begin to take the form of a comedy of despair. For film historian René Prédal, Blier's concept in filmmaking, and storytelling in particular, is the antithesis of artistic malleability since "Blier's cinema is incongruous as it tracks down emotions with a bulldozer and incise pain with a needle."<sup>22</sup> Despite

the depth of the implied sexuality, *Beau-père* mixes a significant dimension of humor with a tragic story.

The plot centers on Rémi (Patrick Dewaere), an almost-thirty-year-old composer and a philosophically disposed nightclub pianist who yearns to embrace a successful life before his next birthday. Discouraged by the melancholy of his professional career, Rémi limits himself to playing at night in fancy restaurants in order to survive financially. His longtime companion, Martine (Nicole Garcia), dies in a car accident, leaving her fourteen-year-old daughter, Marion (Ariel Besse), without a parent. Charly (Maurice Ronet), the child's biological father, wants to take her back home. Although extremely attached to her, Rémi takes Marion back to her father. After several weeks away, Marion, who has missed her "stepdad," suddenly stops by Rémi's apartment with her belongings. A romance begins to blossom immediately in the young teenager's imagination, but Rémi refuses to cede to temptation. He soon realizes that she in fact offers him emotional support. Meanwhile, Marion, desperate by his denial, loses her appetite for life and begins a slow slide into depression. She kisses Rémi one day, however, as he is taking her on the train for a ski trip. The romance takes a new turn, as both protagonists cannot live without each other, until Rémi meets Charlotte, a single woman his age. Marion finally understands that her future will be separate from Rémi's and reluctantly goes back to her father.

Often banal and even somewhat mediocre in nature, Blier's characters are meticulous studies in psychology, much as François Truffaut or Bertrand Tavernier do with their own protagonists: they all possess and communicate the flavor and pathos of life. Despite his congenial front, his humanist heart illustrated in its broad vision and bold courage, Rémi is actually a disturbed man. His fascination with Marion increasingly betrays his fragile self. Tender and violent, Blier goes beyond the tolerable limit on every occasion, and his visual insolence places his protagonist in impossible situations. For many French critics, Blier has always been an astonishing and influential director due in part to his representation of situations inspired by the theater of the absurd and outrageous dialogues rich in new colloquial expressions. The film does not lack the scope of many of his previous films, and the dose of hypnotism may be even more persuasive than *Get out Your Handkerchiefs*.

Five years later, Blier achieved a determinant picture with his very controversial *Ménage* (*Tenue de soirée*, 1986), for which he wrote the script and assigned the music score to trendy musician and songwriter Serge Gainsbourg. Overpowering in its unlimited audacity, *Ménage* is the most drastic and unprecedented depiction of the love triangle in motion-picture history. This time, it is the man who is conquered

when a stranger comes to insert himself in the privacy of a couple. Antoine (Michel Blanc) and Monique (Miou-Miou), a young, struggling couple, often argue about their poverty. Between fights and tenderness, they exist without any direction. One night, however, their lives change drastically when they meet Bob (Gérard Depardieu) in an outdoor bar. What Monique strives for is simply a life of leisure and luxury. Bob impresses Monique and persuades Antoine to befriend him. After initiating the young couple to his lifestyle (of professional burglary), Bob, who first gave the impression that he was attracted to Monique, slowly makes his move on Antoine, who ultimately will become no less than his sexual-domestic slave. Bob is not so much concerned with sexuality as he is in manipulating the pair, in order to have them go along with his disturbing plans. Far from being jealous, Monique is complacent as long as her new glamorous lifestyle continues. As the ménage à trois progresses, Monique's plight becomes more and more difficult as she becomes unwanted by the two men. She eventually leaves for another man. Within a matter of days, Monique and Antoine have been removed from their dull middle-class universe and parachuted into a gloomy sexual and criminal predicament. Now liberated from the feminine presence, the male couple spend their days in a Paris suburban home until one night, when Bob meets a younger man in a disco. The end of the film enters the domain of frenzy as Monique, who by then, having gotten rid of her man (who was no more than a pimp), meets up with Bob and Antoine again. By now, Antoine's submission to Bob's desire is so strong that he freely dresses in drag. Thirteen years after the controversy of *Going Places*, Blier's *Ménage* triggered considerable controversy once again. The manner in which Antoine and Bob appear in their startling final exposure makes the characters of *La cage aux folles* look like neophytes. The role of Antoine, no longer possible for Patrick Dewaere, who died in 1982, was offered to Bernard Giraudeau, who declined due to the sardonic tone of the film, and finally went to Michel Blanc, who not only accepted the role but also earned the award for Best Actor (along with Bob Hoskins for Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa*) at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival.

The key to understanding Blier's films is to be found in his treatment of the absurd. In what circumstances, then, does absurdity appear in Blier's scenarios? If spectators accept the possibility of common sense, and convenient logic may be absent, the dialogues consequently become entirely irrational and even absurd. The conflict between the world and human beings, who begin to be disillusioned with it, arises here. Can a simple fictional story, Blier suggests, be written about a topic that defies ridicule and the absurd? What Blier tried to capture in *Ménage*, however, was the feeling of absurdity inherent in the human condition as such, independent of personal motives. Blier's sense of the

absurd emerges from daily life as an anecdote that relates to Everyman's seemingly, banal existence.

Despite an element of the uncanny that is always part of the intrigue, we never leave the domain of realism. Often labeled a misogynist artist, especially by American film critics, Blier, whose protagonists often display unconventional attitudes toward women, does not promote an uninhibited worldview of erotic chauvinism or anarchy. The principal idea is to be found in social experimentation, as fiction usually allows viewers to do so. Strong with solid elements of social insurrection and provocation, Blier's visual paradigm centers on the love triangle to understand its sexual options, from heterosexuality to homosexuality. For Blier, comic roles, expressed on the screen, are the result of these options and discrepancies. Rather small and balding, with a discontented gaze, Antoine is the less plausible lover, just as the crude and conceited Bob is the less plausible of kindhearted lovers. Therefore, life is not absurd in itself, it only appears so. The nature of this discrepancy has to be carefully understood as Antoine progressively uncovers the "feminine condition." On the threshold of Blier's universe lies the promise of grasping a knowledge far beyond the regions of frustrated feelings; this new awareness neither contradicts nor offsets the absurd but balances it, following the author's intuition.

What can be seen as Blier's greatest quality as a storyteller is his relentless ability to put his own beliefs at risk. This active humility disarms his detractors and their label of "macho" or misogynist cinema. Visually speaking, the trademark of Blier's style is best described as a cinema of constant provocative close-ups blended with unbelievable pieces of reality and prosaic truths. Blier's next film, *Too Beautiful for You* (*Trop belle pour toi*, 1989), conquered the forty-second Cannes Film Festival in 1990 with the Special Jury Prize (shared with Giuseppe Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso*). In France, *Too Beautiful for You* received a series of awards, including Césars for Best Film, Best Director, Best Actress (Carole Bouquet), Best Scenario (Bertrand Blier), and Best Editing (Claudine Merlin).

The story narrates the extraordinary relationship that has suddenly been brought to passion between ordinary-looking interim secretary Colette Chevassu (Josiane Balasko) and automobile dealership manager Bernard Barthélémy (Gérard Depardieu). After fourteen years of marriage, Bernard seems to have it all: a beautiful wife, Florence (Carole Bouquet), two lovely children, and a very prosperous livelihood. However, he is immediately caught up in an intense love-at-first-sight situation. Through the glass walls of his office, Bernard's eyes meet Colette's, and the passionate couple begin to meet secretly in motel

rooms. All of his friends are astonished, since Bernard's wife, Florence, is beautiful. She is not disposed to let go of Bernard and battles back with a vehement arrogance. Although challenged in person by Bernard's wife, Colette, still "quivering" with bliss, manages to ask the unthinkable in an atypical wife-mistress altercation: "Vous pouvez pas me le prêter encore un tout petit peu? Il est bien avec moi, il est calme, il se repose. Quand je vais vous le rendre, il sera tout neuf; vous repartirez comme au premier jour." (Can you lend him to me a bit longer? He likes it with me; he's calm, he rests. I'll return him to you like new. You can start all over again.)

Introducing a hyper reality composed of phantasmagoric images and photographed with great passion by Philippe Rousselot (Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Diva*, Stephen Frears's *Dangerous Liaisons*), the narrative flash-backs and flash-forwards take the viewer from Bernard's wedding to Florence after he begins the relationship with his new mistress. Blier has converged many of his film subjects representing male sexuality—sometimes to the detriment of women, as most American critics like to remind—but this time he shows signs of moving more toward a compassionate and balanced psychoanalysis. The film is a disquieting tale, unsettling for the conservative minded, mixing burlesque comedy with drama, phantasms with the absurd. Once more, as in *Ménage*, the element of absurdity does not reflect on yesterday or tomorrow. Bernard is also a typically absurd hero, personifying the real quality of an absurd life. He is absurd through his passion for Colette, his suffering through his eternal fate, and his timeless quest for an idyllic love that can never be grasped. Although he is offered furtive moments with Colette, as an absurd character, Bernard misses any hopes, plans, and troubles about his future: so argues Bertrand Blier. One can see the great effort in him, recurring as he tries to move the expectation and push it up to the very last day. The film is laced with liberal amounts of offbeat humor and follows an unusual reverse order of melodramatic intrigue, since it begins within the domain of comedy, only to end as a more serious representation of the human condition. The two thematic threads are interwoven with great artistic gusto, and are finally emotionally fused in a climactic sequence that links the comedy to the drama. Gérard Depardieu, who plays the character of an ordinary man in a midlife crisis, communicates credibility in one of the most difficult roles in cinema. Depardieu makes his love obsession convincing because he never overacts it, and because the movie communicates it generally through the point of view of the actresses, Bouquet and Balasko. Blier's *Too Beautiful for You* was the third time Gérard Depardieu and Carole Bouquet performed together after *Cold Cuts* and Philippe Labro's *Rive droite, rive gauche* (1984).

A fourth director of the post-'68 era who was still a force in the 1980s is Maurice Pialat. Pialat unpredictably spun his contemporary films in a style borrowed from classic films and cinéma vérité. He deconstructed, systemized, and reinvented processes by breaking the rules of aesthetics with minimum lighting and austere realism. The spectator had the impression that the director invited audiences to share his fascination with melodrama but at the same time provided him with the necessary conditions to remain in full control. Often considered a chronicler more than a creator, Pialat's strength resided in the sincerity of the script as he alternated extremely diverse sequential shots: strong moments captured with a mobile hand camera—to best grapple with the behavior and the language of the characters—interspersed with rather banal excerpts of everyday life. Pialat was also known for his demanding treatment of actors and his memorable bursts of wrath, which explains why, in the director's universe, the individual always lived within close ties with society.

One of the most socially and politically charged of all French productions of the early part of the decade was undeniably Pialat's *Loulou* (*Loulou*, 1980). This film was all the more paradoxical for a filmmaker who always refused the title of political cineast. Although a love story in theory, Pialat's *Loulou* took advantage of each scene to remind viewers of the prominence of class awareness in modern French society. Nelly (Isabelle Huppert) is a middle-class woman married to a well-off publicist named André (Guy Marchand). Together, they live in a comfortable and spacious Parisian apartment. One night at a ball, Nelly meets Loulou (Gérard Depardieu), a tough *loubard* (thug), and immediately falls in love with him. Because Loulou seems so far away from reality, she is irresistibly attracted to this hoodlum and eventually leaves André for Loulou, sacrificing her current lifestyle to pursue her inner desire. While Loulou lives off Nelly's money in exchange for sexual and emotional fulfillment, she becomes pregnant. Nelly's brother attempts to assist the young couple by suggesting employment possibilities for Loulou, but much to his dismay, the future father is in no hurry to begin a full-time job. Often described as an "erotic revolution" in the American press, Pialat's love story is far from representing a radical change from 1970s sexuality. Trapped between two decades, the film actually serves a rather smooth transition between the sexual freedom of the post-'68 era and the return to storytelling of the 1980s.

However, the true innovation of Pialat at the dawn of the 1980s was the value he gave to the still often-underestimated importance of sex in social interactions and human patterns. Interestingly enough, *Loulou* addresses the notion of social abuse and the ambiguous affinity of a couple whose bond corresponds to the dialectical behavior of

reciprocal exploitation. The thin line that separates the exploiter and the exploited reminds the spectator that social barriers, although temporarily put aside, may ultimately haunt any couple in the end. Far from a purely political or socially rhetorical approach, the plot indulges in a witness of two individuals in love and their downfall in a hostile world, eventually leading to violence, boredom, deception, alcoholism, and, finally, love. Arlette Langmann's scenario, offering the two different languages, gave a vital force to the film. Pialat's work may be considered a slice of life, without a real beginning or a real ending; but it certainly is a compelling testimony of the "conflictual" predicament of class struggle in the 1980s. Included in the French Official selection at Cannes in 1980, the film gained international fame, although it was excluded from the final award list (with a similar fate at the César Awards ceremony, as a result of the phenomenal success of Truffaut's *The Last Metro*).

After the success of Pialat's next film, *A nos amours* (1983), French critics were eager to see if Pialat could continue and confirm his earlier successful accomplishments. *Under the Sun of Satan* (*Sous le soleil de Satan*, 1987) divided critics while reassuring fans with the triumph of the precious Palme d'or at the fortieth Cannes Film Festival in 1987. Endowed with a self-consciously Bressonian austerity, Pialat's cinematography retained its essential eloquence, despite an excessive exposition—the evident vicissitudes of the dispirited priest who fails to save souls, including his own. For the first time in nine films, Pialat confronted a literary adaptation, with Georges Bernanos's first novel. To this date, no French film had received the prestigious Palme d'or since Claude Lelouch's *A Man and a Woman* (*Un homme et une femme*, 1966). With a continuous use of narrative ellipses, Pialat's script examines the fall of a young country priest in the north of France who falls prey to doubts of his own spiritual vocation.

In a small Artois village, Germaine Malorthy, an adolescent also called Mouchette (Sandrine Bonnaire), is the mistress of the marquis de Cadignan. One night, she reveals her pregnancy to her lover, and following his indifferent reaction, she kills him with his hunting gun. The police conclude it is an act of suicide. Meanwhile, Donissan (Gérard Depardieu), an unpretentious and frail priest, is struggling with his ecclesiastical assignment. In many instances, he confesses to his father superior, the abbot Menou-Segrais (Maurice Pialat), a request to abandon his faith and his methodical recourse to self-flagellation. One night, as he walks along a country road, he is confronted by Satan, who appears in front of him as a peasant. Once freed from his psychological onslaughts, Donissan continues his journey to the village. There he meets Mouchette, who confesses to him her abortion. Donissan, touched by the depth of the tragedy that unfolds before him, tries to

help her, but to no avail. One day later, she is found dead, her throat slit. Back at home, Donissan is sent to a new parish in Lumbres, where he suddenly dies inside a confessional booth, on his way to sanctity.

The film generated a great deal of controversy, and at the 1987 Cannes Film Festival, Pialat received the Palme d'or under the insults and contemptuous growls of the crowd at the awards ceremony. He responded immediately by raising his fist in the air and saying: "*Si vous ne m'aimez pas, je peux vous dire que je ne vous aime pas non plus!*" under the compassionate, yet discomfited, smile of Yves Montand, president of the jury. For many of his opponents, Pialat's cinema proved to be too academic as he all too willingly injected his own interpretation of the novel, resulting in a movie far removed from filmed prose. What all Robert Bresson admirers expected to see (like Pialat, Bresson adapted a novel from Bernanos in the 1950s; see chapter 4) was perhaps a coherent narrative plot, which through its complexity and depth would have exposed a certain visual eloquence with sincere subjectivity. For many critics, Pialat's stoic portrait is an emblem of Bernanos's spiritual investigation, the exhausting obstacles a born outsider encounters in communicating his faith to and for others. For them, it is simply a betrayal of Bernanos's legacy or a pale imitation of Bresson's cinema.

Uncompromisingly rigorous and harsh, Pialat's high-powered adaptation of Bernanos's novel is undoubtedly a dark film, both literally and figuratively. It follows the chilling but compassionate atmosphere and the fight of mystical anguish against evil forces—much like Robert Bresson's 1951 *Diary of a Country Priest*, *Mouchette* (*Mouchette*, 1967) or even Philippe Agostini and Raymond-Léopold Bruckberger's *Le dialogue des carmélites* (1960)—mixed with the omnipresence of the French countryside, under ominous gray skies that serve to accentuate the twin sentiments of isolation and a hostile environment.

## THE SUPER PRODUCTIONS: CLAUDE BERRI AND JEAN-JACQUES ANNAUD

Although often commonly regarded from an American point of view as great contributions to cinematography, French critics usually like to remind moviegoers that big-budget productions mostly concentrate on less serious narratives, complex stage productions, and highly structured camera movements to the exclusion of heavy content. Although sporadic when compared to American cinema, French big-budget films did well at the box office during the 1980s. One of the major figures of the moment was producer-director Claude Berri. Born in Paris in 1934, Berri entered the industry in small parts such as Chabrol's *The*

*Girls* (*Les bonnes femmes*, 1960) and Clouzot's *The Truth* (*La vérité*, 1960). By 1967, he had significantly advanced his career as he directed *The Two of Us* (*Le vieil homme et l'enfant*), his first feature. Producing the majority of his films, Claude Berri also began to coproduce other directors' films, such as Jacques Rivette's *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (*Céline et Julie vont en bateau*, 1974) and Claude Zidi's *Inspector La Bavure* (*L'inspecteur la bavure*, 1980). His most significant productions as a filmmaker were *Le maître d'école* (1981), *Tchao Pantin!* (1983), *Jean de Florette* (1986), *Manon of the Spring* (*Manon des sources*, 1986), *Uranus* (1990), *Germinal* (1993), and *Lucie Aubrac* (1997).

The case of *Tchao Pantin!* demonstrates that any cinematic enterprise implies aesthetic choices. Berri, like many other artists of his time, imposed an authentically personal universe and a private vision of French society in a close observation of human tragedy. Adapted from a novel by Alain Page (his first literary adaptation in ten films, since Berri usually brought his own script to the screen), the movie won five Césars in 1984: Best Actor (Coluche), Best Supporting Actor and Best Newcomer (Richard Anconina), Best Photography (Bruno Nuytten), and Best Sound (Jean Labussière and Gérard Lamps).<sup>23</sup>

Lambert (Coluche) works the night shift at a suburban gas station. He tries to forget the dullness of his existence by drinking. Resigned to an existence of alcohol and *attentisme*, he does not expect much from life until he meets Bensoussan (Richard Anconina), a young man who one night stops to refill his moped. The friendship develops as both men realize that their solitude in life is not unique. Half Jewish and half Arab, Bensoussan lives off drug dealing. Although disappointed in Bensoussan (his own son died of a drug overdose), Lambert still maintains an unyielding friendship. One night, the young man is killed by rival drug dealers in front of Lambert, who swears to avenge his friend. With Bensoussan's death, the dreadful past suddenly re-emerges in Lambert's mind. Emotionally destroyed, Lambert, also a former cop, conducts his own investigation. He meets Lola (Agnès Soral), an acquaintance of Bensoussan, who will eventually lead him to Rachid (Mahmoud Zemmouri), a bar owner also heavily implicated in Parisian drug-traffic circles. Finally, Lambert kills Rachid to avenge his young friend and indirectly the memory of his son.

Chief operator (photography) Bruno Nuytten gave the movie a dreamlike quality, a kind of dark sensuality that permeated every frame. There was depth in the images as well as a kind of mystical sense that made the suburban Parisian underworld and the individuals who lived within it as important to the story as the actors. The urban stylization and blue back lighting combined to retain a uniquely Parisian feel. With sets by Alexandre Trauner,<sup>24</sup> representing the fa-

miliar mood of Belleville, the film was able to re-create, on its own terms and atmosphere, a piece of the 1930s poetic realism associated with the dramatic tension of film noir.

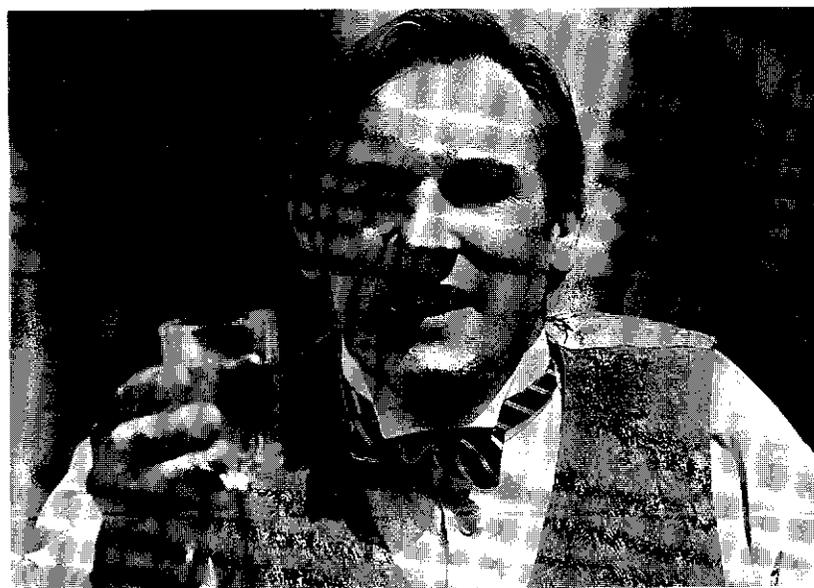
Although Berri had no guarantee for the success of the film, he heavily emphasized the importance and visibility of the central player, Coluche. Known as the most popular stand-up comedian in France, Coluche had never had the opportunity to fully reveal his acting talent in the field of pure drama. Berri's fascination with actors and real acting allowed Coluche, who was struggling with drugs in real life, to endow the entire film with a special resonance. In a style reminiscent of Jean Gabin in the prewar era (e.g., *Daybreak*, *Port of Shadows*, *Lover Boy*, *They Were Five*), the character of Lambert bewilders and at the same time seduces viewers with his immobile gaze while indirectly exuding from within an aptitude for his character's communicability. Humanitarian craftsmanship, visual perspicacity, and refined sentiment are the hallmarks of Claude Berri's visual cinema. Even perfect acting, Berri acknowledged, can be covered with the smallest movements:

I wanted Coluche's face to radiate with more and more light and be more and more handsome. I asked Bruno Nuytten, my cameraman, to light him and choose angles to favor this metamorphosis. For Coluche, the relief in having almost finished the film and knowing he was at the end of his work combined with the relief of Lambert who finishes with revenge, in the depths of which the hope of love is reborn. What I'm talking about is not directing an actor but a more intimate relationship between an actor and a director.<sup>25</sup>

The end result of the film corresponds to an epic variation on Berri's continual evocation that love can be indispensable, desirable, punishing, and destructive all at the same time. *Tchao Pantin!* was a deceptively composed film with an inherent connotation of modern-times poetic realism that eventually materialized through its visual surface, erupting in the emotional violence of thwarted and misdirected love. The César for Best Actor awarded to lead actor Coluche was the crowning touch for the comedian. Born Michel Colucci in Paris, Coluche (1948–86)—thanks to the support of actor Romain Bouteille—participated in the famous *Café de la Gare* (a renowned cabaret for stand-up comedians) with future celebrities such as Miou-Miou and Patrick Dewaere. Coluche began as a seasoned nightclub performer, and used the one-hour format to reveal more of himself as he often addressed the problems that the show endured in his audacious monologues (audacious for some, outrageous for others). In 1974, his solo career took off. Coluche often took questions from the audience, which frequently led to some uproarious exchanges and gave him a chance to exhibit his sharp wit. The sketches were better than the usual-variety



Coluche (Lambert) and Richard Anconina (Bensoussan) in Claude Berri's *Tchao Pantin!* (1983), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Renn Productions).



Gérard Depardieu (Jean de Florette) in Claude Berri's *Jean de Florette* (*Jean de Florette*, 1986), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Renn Productions).

fare, with Coluche walking off the set in the middle of routines over differences with the producers, and generally acting the petulant, spoiled superstar role. His tell-it-like-it-is humor influenced French comics of his own generation, as well as those who came later (Les Inconnus, Muriel Robin, Smaïn, etc.). Anticipating the liberalization of the 1980s, Coluche believed humor was to some extent the key to curing the prejudices of society. Coluche immediately captured the hearts of television viewers in the most adventurous radio and TV shows of the 1970s and early 1980s. It was his starring performance in one of the great music halls that made Coluche a household name in French cinema. In 1980, Coluche truly made national headlines. After announcing his candidacy for the presidential elections, he was credited with between 10 and 16 percent of the votes in the polls.

Meanwhile, despite putting on hold his comedic vocation, Coluche forged a successful acting career with commercial films such as Claude Zidi's *The Wing or the Thigh* (*L'aile où la cuisse*, 1976), *Inspector La Bavure*, *Le maître d'école* (1981), and *Banzai* (1983); Jean Yanne's *Quarter to Two before Jesus Christ* (*Deux heures moins le quart avant Jésus-Christ*, 1982); Bertrand Blier's *My Best Friend's Girl* (*La femme de mon pote*, 1983); and especially *Tchao Pantin!*

Taking everyone by surprise in the mid-1980s, the actor created an unprecedented charitable initiative, which to this day remains one of France's foremost humanitarian enterprises: the Restos du Coeur.<sup>26</sup> In addition to his efforts to create a new fiscal law that would ease taxes on companies in exchange for donations to his association, Coluche secretly offered 1.5 million francs to l'Abbé Pierre, one of France's greatest advocates for the homeless.<sup>27</sup> But Coluche's career tragically came to an end one afternoon in June 1986. In a motorbike accident, he hit a truck on a road in southern France. At his funeral on June 24, 1986, at the famous Père Lachaise cemetery, a myriad of film actors and directors (Yves Montand,<sup>28</sup> Roman Polanski, Miou-Miou, Michel Leeb, Richard Berry, Josiane Balasko, Richard Anconina, Thierry Le Luron, l'Abbé Pierre, Michel Blanc, Gérard Jugnot, Dominique Lavanant, Michel Boujenah, among others), as well as celebrities from all political and artistic backgrounds, gathered to salute one of France's most popular artistic figures. In the true tradition of the court jester, Coluche defied religious and political institutions, racism, and political correctness in all their forms and opened the gates for an entire generation of new comedians. With the psychology of a clown, he had the ability to invert the rapport of confrontation, of derision, and of ridicule. Coluche was the hero of a whole generation, not only the post-68's but also the entire youth of the 1980s.

Three years after the success of *Tchao Pantin!*, Claude Berri embarked on another challenge: Marcel Pagnol's *L'eau des collines*. Based

on a folk tale of his native Provence, Pagnol's novel directly inspired Berri to remake what only Pagnol seemed to have been able to direct flawlessly: *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des sources*. Thirty-five years earlier, Pagnol had himself attempted to make a feature film out of *Manon des sources* (1952), which included only the second part of the novel, and whose main protagonist was his spouse, Jacqueline Pagnol. It was with her consent—mostly due to the anticipated presence of actor Yves Montand—that Berri obtained permission to readapt the novel to the screen. In the same way Pagnol did with his Provençal characters three decades earlier, Claude Berri's efforts deliberately focused particular attention on his personages' disposition and language, partly with the assistance of the actors' southern accents.

The first "act," *Jean de Florette*, is set between the two world wars in a small village in Provence called Les Bastides, where César Soubeyran (Yves Montand) is the last guardian of his family's heritage. Under pressure to carry on the lineage through his simpleminded nephew, Ugolin (Daniel Auteuil), he covets his neighbor's land for its natural-flowing spring. The land belongs to Jean de Florette (Gérard Depardieu), a hunchback tax collector and newcomer from the city, who settles in the country with his wife, Aimée (Elisabeth Depardieu), and daughter, Manon (Ernestine Mazurowna), to begin life afresh. He decides to raise vegetables and rabbits on the property, which, according to the map, contains the aforementioned freshwater source. The Soubeyrans must acquire the land at all costs and thus develop a Machiavellian stratagem. Manipulated by his scheming uncle, Ugolin secretly blocks the spring with concrete, covering its site and hoping to ruin the value of the property, since the summer will bring little rain. Meanwhile, they both pretend to support Jean's efforts. By forcing him to get his water miles away, they hope to discourage him from staying in this hostile nature and consequently resell his property. At the beginning, the frequent rains favor the growth of the vegetables, and the rabbits multiply. Then comes the drought, and Jean is compelled to carry water from a neighboring well, using his own strength, and consequently literally transforming himself into a beast of burden. César sends Ugolin to befriend the optimistic Jean. Facing the adversity of an extended drought, Jean is desperate to borrow a mule to help haul water from a nearby spring, but his efforts are to no avail. All day long, the man transports water under the burning sun of Provence. But Jean is much more tenacious than both expected, as he decides to intensify his work until the day when, exhausted by the inhumane amount of work, Jean is killed by a charge of dynamite. His death means victory for Ugolin and his uncle and the realization of their carnation-growing project. As the widow and daughter are about to leave the house, Manon comes upon the two men singing in victory

while unclogging the spring. Her whole life unfolds before her as she instantly understands the devilish plot to which she and her family have been victim.

The second "act," *Manon of the Spring*, unfolds the suspense with the calculated pace of a Greek tragedy toward the inexorable resolution of justice. The account takes place a decade later when Manon (Emmanuelle Béart), by now a beautiful young woman who lusts for revenge, has returned to the hills of Provence to shepherd goats on the mountainside while living in poverty, rather than staying with her mother in Marseille. After the aging César and Ugolin become owners of the land, she reveals the long-silenced crime to the villagers. Ugolin, who has noticed the beautiful shepherdess on the hills, falls hopelessly in love with her. On the brink of despair, he publicly declares his love for her on the square of the village, but she directs hers to the local schoolteacher, Bernard (Hippolyte Girardot). One day, the entire village wakes up without water. No one knows that Manon has clogged the spring in order to avenge her father's death. During a gathering in the village shortly after, Manon accuses César and Ugolin of her father's death and reveals their stratagem. César denies the accusation, but Ugolin, first driven by ambition, then torn apart with remorse and love, publicly accepts the guilt and associates it with his love for her. Destroyed by her refusal and his guilt, Ugolin commits suicide the next day, hanging himself on a tree. As for César, he too no longer wishes to live, but before he passes away, one of the village patriarchs recounts the story of Florette, the young girl he was in love with in his youth. César then understands that the child she gave birth to, while he was in Africa, was the hunchback boy. Manon and Bernard, now her husband, unblock the spring. Prosperity comes anew.

Berri's main ambition was not to narrate a sequence of melodramatic episodes. Since most of the motives were disclosed early on, the outcome of Jean de Florette's fateful destiny appears quite predictable. Berri also did not intend to create a suspenseful plot devoid of any real psychological element, but rather to incorporate the ruthlessness of human voracity: the land and water are commodities worth dying for. The calculated pace of the multilayered and pervasive murder story emphasizes the abomination of the characters' wrongdoing. These two epic thrillers, shot but three months apart and totaling nine months of shooting, not only met with considerable success in the United States but also confirmed Claude Berri as one of the most talented producer-filmmakers in France.

For actor Daniel Auteuil (b. 1950), the collaboration with Claude Berri represented a decisive turning point in the actor's career, one of the premier examples of a sudden career takeoff in French cinema history. In 1975, Gérard Pirès assigned him a supporting role to



Emmanuelle Béart (Manon) in Claude Berri's *Manon of the Spring* (*Manon des sources*, 1986), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Renn Productions).

Claude Brasseur, Catherine Deneuve, and Jean-Louis Trintignant in *Act of Agression* (*L'Agression*). Before *Jean de Florette*, Auteuil was considered the archetypal B-picture actor, working in Claude Zidi's *Bêtes mais disciplinés* in 1979, and later *Les sous-doués* in 1980 and Charles Nemes's *Les héros n'ont pas froid aux oreilles* in 1978. Virtually no film critic could ever have imagined that the rest of his film career, following the success of *Jean de Florette*, would include illustrious awards such as the Césars for Best Actor in *Manon of the Spring* in 1987, and Patrice Leconte's *The Girl on the Bridge* (*La fille sur le pont* in 1999). Interestingly, Auteuil gave up a part in Coline Serreau's *Three Men and a Cradle* to play the role of the unattractive Ugolin, which secured him the César. From then on, Auteuil's roles have been a long series of successful choices, including work in Michel Deville's *Le paltoquet* (1986), and Claude Sautet's *Quelques jours avec moi* (1988) and *A Heart in Winter* (*Un coeur en hiver*, 1992). His participation on the stage was also crowned by success with Molière's *Les fourberies de Scapin* at the Festival d'Avignon and at the Théâtre Mogador during the 1990–91 season. As the years went by, Auteuil endorsed even more serious roles in André Téchiné's *My Favorite Season* (*Ma saison préférée*, 1993), *Thieves* (*Les voleurs*, 1995), Coline Serreau's *Romuald and Juliette* (1989), a convincing Henri IV in Patrice Chéreau's *Queen Margot* (*La reine Margot*, 1993), Berri's *Lucie Aubrac*, and Jaco Van Dormael's *The Eighth Day* (*Le huitième jour*, 1996)—for which he received the Prix d'interprétation at the Cannes Film Festival, shared with Pascal Duquenne, his young Down syndrome costar. Despite a rather "delayed" career revelation that did not occur until his mid-thirties, the magnitude of Auteuil's accomplishments promoted him as one of the most artistic and multitalented actors of his generation. The key to Daniel Auteuil's triumphs may actually be his uncommon maturity, which allowed him to endorse challenging performances with rare sensitivity and eloquence.

The series *Jean de Florette* and *Manon of the Spring* was also the springboard for Emmanuelle Béart (b. 1963). Daughter of the famous songwriter and singer Guy Béart, the actress mostly appeared in minor roles, primarily on TV, until being cast as a call girl in Edouard Molinaro's *Date with an Angel* (*L'amour en douce*, 1985). Although only present in the sequel *Manon of the Spring*, the intensity of her performance impressed the French cinema academy to such a degree that she received two awards, Best Supporting Role and Best New Talent, for her work in the film. Like Daniel Auteuil, whom she married shortly thereafter, Emmanuelle Béart expanded her career on screen as well as on the theatrical stage (Marivaux's *La double inconstance* in 1988 and Molière's *Le misanthrope* with actor Jacques Weber in 1989). Her most recent pictures are Claude Sautet's *Nelly and Mr. Arnaud* (*Nelly et*



Daniel Auteuil (Ugolin) in Claude Berri's *Manon of the Spring* (*Manon des sources*, 1986), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Renn Productions).

*Monsieur Arnaud*, 1995), Brian De Palma's *Mission: Impossible* (1996), Danièle Thompson's *La Bûche* (*La bûche*, 1999), Olivier Assayas's *Les destinées* (*Les destinées sentimentales*, 2000), and François Ozon's *Huit femmes* (2002).

Along with Claude Berri, director Jean-Jacques Annaud must be regarded as a filmmaker dedicated to an international market, as he has often described himself as a "French man" who makes movies and not a "French filmmaker." Born in 1943, Annaud came to film via a strong advertising background from the 1970s. A graduate of the national film school, the Ecole de Vaugirard, he achieved his first short feature at age nineteen with *Les sept péchés capitaux du cinéaste*. He later obtained a licence de lettres, which allowed him to enter the prestigious IDHEC. Annaud practiced his artistic talents in *Paris-Match* and TV commercials (more than 400 spots). After his first full-length feature film in 1976, *Black and White in Color* (*La victoire en chantant*), a satire of the colonial period that did not do well at the box office (despite its Oscar for Best Foreign Film/Ivory Coast), his name began to be associated with the promising expectations of new French directors. Although rather mediocre, *Coup de tête* (1979), his second film, was another step toward "cinematographic consecration." But it was only with *Quest for Fire* (*La guerre du feu*, 1981), an enormous commercial success, that Annaud met with international fame. The Anglo-

Canadian production, whose total cost reached \$12 million, gathered international actors such as Everett McGill, Ron Perlman, Namir El Kadi Gaw, Rae Dawn Chong, and Gary Schwartz, and won Césars for Best Film and Best Director in 1982.

*Quest for Fire* was the real breakthrough for Annaud; the film has defined his style ever since. Adapted from Joseph-Henri Rosny's 1911 novel,<sup>29</sup> the film is an allegorical tale narrating a tribal struggle for survival after its only source of fire has died. The tribe members know how to preserve it and spread it but not how to re-create it. Some of the tribe are sent on an expedition to discover the secret of fire. The story begins with the vicissitudes of three Homo sapiens in search of fire, which ultimately gives power to their tribe. Fire is not only a fearful weapon but a symbol of evolutionary superiority. Despite the unusual deploy of technical means for a French director, Annaud took the crew on a "similar" expedition around the globe as they began shooting in Kenya in 1980, Scotland, and ultimately in Canada in 1981.<sup>30</sup>

Five years later, Annaud successfully adapted the difficult novel *The Name of the Rose* (*Le nom de la rose*, 1986), written by the Italian novelist and semiologist Umberto Eco. With a budget of \$17 million, a Franco-Italian-German coproduction team, and three years of planning, the film also took four screenwriters attempting to master Eco's novel.<sup>31</sup> These medieval chronicles, beautifully photographed by cinematographer Tonino delli Colli, fully came to life, eventually winning the César for Best Foreign Film in 1987. This psychological thriller retraces the memoir of Adso of Melk (Christian Slater) and his visit in 1327 with his master, the Franciscan monk William of Baskerville (Sean Connery), to a Benedictine abbey in northern Italy. Outside its walls, starving peasants battle for leftovers thrown down from the monks' kitchens. William is sent to investigate the mysterious death of one of the monks. Despite the silence and oddity of many of them, he makes measured but effective progress. However, while the investigation continues, a second murder occurs. William is convinced that the key to the mystery, which will lead to the true murderer, resides inside the scriptorium of the main library, at the pinnacle of which stands a great tower arranged as a labyrinth. Brother Berenger (Michael Habeck), now the third assassinated monk, is found drowned in a wine barrel with once more a recurrent particularity: a black spot on one of his forefingers as well as on his tongue. The progress of the investigation is hampered by the arrival of Bernardo Gui (Murray Abraham), an officer of the Holy Inquisition, who immediately condemns several suspicious monks to be put on trial. Meanwhile, William discovers the source of all the deaths—a translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, a forbidden manuscript in medieval times, which defines the importance of human

laughter. An old monk, Jorge de Burgos (Feodor Chaliapin), placed poison in the corner of each page, thereby indirectly killing anyone who dared to read the blasphemous book. Once trapped, the old monk sets the tower on fire and dies in the flames. William has just enough time to exit alive. Meanwhile, the peasants gathered around the gallows start an upheaval, which ends in the death of the inquisitor.

Despite his international fame and contribution to world cinema, many French film critics tend to systematically categorize Annaud's movies exclusively as part of the French-film legacy. To this, Annaud usually answers by asserting his international endorsement, whether financially or artistically, by the very makeup of his cast of actors and technical crews. Annaud wrote the scenario of most of his films with the collaboration of Gérard Brach<sup>32</sup> (b. 1927), and the scores were by various French artists. In an interview with cultural attaché Laurent Daniélou, Annaud spoke of his philosophy regarding national cinema:

I think that one should not identify the nationality of a film with its language, as if it were literature. The art of film corresponds to the art of the image, and language is a secondary issue. When a French novel becomes an international success, it is because it conveys the thoughts of the French author and not his language. For films, it is the same.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Annaud explained his decision to work in the United States. With the regulations imposed on French directors working in France, Annaud preferred to keep his artistic freedom even if this meant working abroad. Annaud is fond of mentioning to the international press that all of his films have been financed in different countries (e.g., *The Name of the Rose* was financed by American, German, Italian, and French backers).

This is a good occasion to change mentalities and to explain to the French that Americans are not trying to kill French cinema. They are just businessmen whose goal is to make good movies. . . . We, professionals, think that with the American community, French people get the wrong idea about what is going on in Los Angeles. It is a much friendlier world and open to foreign influences than one thinks. We are here to help our French colleagues to understand the evolution of Hollywood cinema and to allow Americans to get acquainted with French technicians. The goal is to help contacts and eventually to create a friendly climate between the two communities.<sup>34</sup>

In 1991, Claude Berri offered Annaud the complex adaptation of Marguerite Duras's best-seller *The Lover* (*L'amant*), which proved to be a box office and critical success. Also successful at the box office was *Seven Years in Tibet* (*Sept ans au Tibet*, 1997), which took its inspiration from the autobiographical story of Heinrich Harrer, a war prisoner



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

held by the British in India during World War II, who escaped through the Himalayas and settled in Tibet, eventually becoming the preceptor of the Dalai Lama. Annaud's most-recent film, *Enemy at the Gates* (*Stalingrad*), depicting the Eastern front in epic scope through the character of the Russian sniper Vassili Zaitsev (interpreted by the rising British movie star Jude Law), was released in the United States in March 2001.

#### NEW DIRECTORS FOR A NEW GENERATION: JEAN-JACQUES BEINEIX AND LUC BESSON

As film historian René Prédal once observed, "After the cinema on weddings (the 1950s), the erotic cinema (1960s), cinema on sex (1970s), the cinema of the 1980s speaks about love as Beineix, Besson and Carax emphasize the comeback of the couple, following the *libertinage* of the New Wave and the sexual freedom of the following generation."<sup>35</sup> The new generation of young filmmakers was early

characterized by the innovative style of Jean-Jacques Beineix. Beineix began his career as first assistant to filmmakers Claude Zidi and Claude Berri. His first feature-length film, *Diva* (*Diva*, 1981), can be considered both an auteur film and a commercial thriller. After a catastrophic debut in March 1981, due to slow attendance and some bad press by unenthusiastic critics, the film took off slowly. The success of *Diva* in the US allowed a commercial second chance in France, as it took four Césars the next year (Best First Feature, Best Music Score, Best Photography, Best Sound), consequently becoming an exceptionally fashionable movie.

Adapted from Delacorta's novel, *Diva* narrates the tranquil existence of young moped postman Jules (Frédéric Andrei), who, passionate for opera, declares an infinite admiration for his idol, the American opera star Cynthia Hawkins (Wilhelmenia Wiggins Fernandez). During one of her rare recitals in Paris, he records her live performance with a tape recorder surreptitiously placed on his lap. To make matters worse, he steals one of her dresses while waiting for an autograph backstage. Although universally celebrated, Cynthia Hawkins has refused to become a recording artist. Therefore, any pirated recording becomes priceless on the black market. A second story, so far unrelated to the previous one, concerns the murder of a prostitute by two hit men, who before dying leaves in Jules's motorcycle bag a compromising tape-recorded confession that will help indict a drug ringleader and head of the prostitution network, who also happens to be one of the chief officers in the police force, Saporta (Jacques Fabbri). Later, Jules meets Alba (Thuy An Luu), a young Asian girl, who, also interested in opera, asks to listen to his secret recording. Overcome by guilt, Jules decides to take the dress back to Cynthia. A friendship begins, as well as a platonic-love relationship. The tape Jules possesses of the diva's finest performance falls into the mob's hands, and soon they threaten to release major bootleg copies of it unless Cynthia signs exclusively with them. Meanwhile, Saporta and his hit men are after Jules to find the cassette left by the prostitute. On the brink of being killed, Jules is saved by Gorodish (Richard Bohringer), who takes him away to Normandy. In a suspenseful finale, Gorodish invites both parties (the Asian gangsters and Saporta) to recoup their long-awaited prize.

The action scenes, including a remarkable chase through the Paris Metro, are powerfully contrasted with the languorous setting of Gardish's immense apartment as well as Jules and Cynthia's romantic walk through the park. This new type of visual contrast, so characteristic of the late 1980s, with its strong visual aesthetics, colors, and conflicting tones, contributed to *Diva's* reputation as a breakthrough film. Philippe Rousselot's cinematography<sup>36</sup> accounts for the numerous

visual effects, in particular the film's stylized noirlike sense, an amalgamation of a significant emotional background with idiosyncratic personages like Jules. Constantly finding himself navigating worlds whose borders appear prohibitive and mysterious to him, Jules is relentlessly chased by the police, the mob, record companies, and ultimately his own conscience. The result is an effective enterprise of assimilation of the Romanesque element with the visual. With some innovative cinematography and direction, and the action becoming increasingly frenetic but at the same time always under control, Beineix was able to challenge the conventional rhythms of the thriller. A model of pacing for some, while too slow for others, the film, with its complicated plot, survives without falling prey to the usual damagingly excessive levels of exposition. Vladimir Cosma's score and, of course, Wilhelmenia Wiggins Fernandez's voice anchored the film, giving it an extrasensory element that separates *Diva* from the run-of-the-mill light thriller or melodrama.

Spurred to renew his successful, and by then widely praised creativity, Beineix's next attempt was a clear commercial failure. Disapproved by the critics and ignored by disenchanted audiences, *The Moon in the Gutter* (*La lune dans le caniveau*, 1983) surprised viewers with its tone and format. With some of the biggest names in European cinema (Nastassja Kinski, Gérard Depardieu, and Victoria Abril, among others), the film does not really succeed in capturing the mood of the times despite the impressive sets of Hilton McConnico (winner of the 1984 César for Best Set). However, it was *Betty Blue* (37,2° *le matin*, 1986) that confirmed the expectations of this promising filmmaker. Beineix decided to produce this film himself on a more modest budget. Adapted from Philippe Djian's novel, the story takes place in the south of France and centers on the relationship between Zorg (Jean-Hugues Anglade),<sup>37</sup> a young handyman who lives in a beach house, and his girlfriend, Betty (Béatrice Dalle). Painting houses by day and making love by night, the couple seem to live a fulfilled and hedonistic existence. One day, Betty clashes with Zorg's boss, violently insulting him before burning down several of his beach cottages. Zorg then loses his job. They now both work at Eddy's (Gérard Darmon) pizzeria. One day, Betty discovers a manuscript written by Zorg. She comes to believe that he is a great writer and spends hours typing the manuscript, then mailing it to several publishers. Following a string of rejections, Betty loses her confidence. Later, the couple move into an old house in a small village, where Zorg finds a job as a piano salesman. The story turns tragic when Betty lapses into schizophrenia. While hoping to become pregnant, she becomes depressed and ultimately goes mad. Following a suicide attempt, she is sent to an asylum while in a coma. Compassionate and desperate himself, Zorg decides to soothe her

pain by choking her to death. The outcome of free-spiritedness is not uplifting success but madness, self-destruction, and ultimately death.

Beineix's primary goal for the film was to show the extraordinary relationship of this struggling couple from a compassionate perspective. Without being overbearing, the film succeeds in portraying the simple motivations of young people amid the obstacles of a complicated world. The director's visual talents (colorful style, spectacular crane shots, sliding camera movements) are combined with the fantastic photography and the tragic story line: "I had known Betty for a week. The forecast was for storms," reminds viewers of the implicit narrator in an early scene. Much like *Diva*, the film captured the mood and the sequential tensions as well as underscored the plot's inherent sexuality and absolute visual effervescence. Beineix's characters are creatures of pure will, given to ostentatious romantic obsessions. (Betty wanders without focus for her deep emotional energy.) Though the story was not atypical, it was already the expression of a new cinematographic trend. In its extraordinary narrative element, *Betty Blue* can come across as being both analytical and "swept away" in equal measure, and here the desolate poetry of Beineix's *mise-en-scène* is both unique and fully realized.

The other great revelation of the 1980s was director Luc Besson who experienced his first commercial success in 1984, with *Subway*. Born in Paris in 1959, Luc Besson grew up by the ocean, where his parents were diving instructors for the famous Club Méditerranée. After a brief stay in Hollywood, he returned to France, where he began to produce shorts. His first experiences were as an assistant in Lewis Gilbert's *Moonraker* (1979) and in Maurice Pialat's *Loulou* (1980). Winner of the Avoriaz International Film Festival, *Le dernier combat* (made in 1983, with a budget of 17 million francs) gave Besson the financial security he crucially needed to convince future producers. This success allowed him to win prestigious assignments, such as Isabelle Adjani's video "Pull marine" (music by Serge Gainsbourg) and some ad spots for the Dim brand. First perceived as neo-New Wave, Besson's so-called young cinema typically represents a heavily graphic world dehumanized by money and power, where the flight of human imagination and realism meet in a choked-up, overpoweringly oppressive environment. With the collaboration of Pierre Jolivet, Besson wrote the script for *Subway*, a film that was knocked by film critics for its lack of "real" characters. The public, on the other hand, not only ensured the success of the film but was also indirectly responsible for the César Awards in 1986 for Best Actor (Christophe Lambert), Best Set (Alexandre Trauner), and Best Sound (Harald Maury, Luc Périni, and Gérard Lamps).

Largely confined to the Paris Metro, the story narrates the vicissi-

tudes of Fred (Christophe Lambert), an eccentric young man, who meets Helena (Isabelle Adjani) in the strange world of the Parisian subway. Besson explores the compositional alternatives for his wild, bright-yellow spiky punk haircut personage who, after stealing some compromising documents from Helena's husband in his residence, takes refuge from his pursuers, her husband's thugs, in the Paris underground. Bored by her life of wealth, Helena agrees to meet him. Fred demands a ransom in exchange for the documents, but what he secretly desires is to see Helena again. Fred does not give her the documents immediately. Helena, with the assistance of a police inspector, and her husband's private militia all chase him. Nevertheless, as the manhunt intensifies, Helena experiences a change of heart. The combination of visual "punk," intensely drawn actors from the mean streets, and the mesmerizing beauty of Isabelle Adjani epitomize a sort of postmodern fusion of frames of reference that ultimately gives the film a Surreal, cinematic dimension. For the general movie public this specialized segment is enchanting, as the film possesses a factual plot and an execution that is so neo-romantic as to approach visual opulence.

After the suffocating universe of the Parisian subway, Besson moved on to his next project, this time embracing the world he knew best, that of the ocean. *The Big Blue* (*Le grand bleu*, 1988) is considered one of the most significant cult movies of the 1980s, a true manifesto of youth. Besson presented a compelling meditation on the fascinating spell that the great oceans cast on humans (Besson himself once aspired to be a marine biologist).

The story begins with the childhood of two friends, Jacques Mayol (Jean-Marc Barr) and boisterous and cocky Enzo Molinari (Jean Réno), who share a passion for snorkeling. The friends spend wonderful moments during makeshift-diving competitions as they challenge each other to see who can stay underwater the longest, braving danger and possibly death. Obsessed with the idea of outdoing each other, the boys spur each other on to more daring feats of physical skill. But one day tragedy strikes as Jacques's father, an experienced diver, dies at sea. As an adult, Jacques still keeps in mind this tragic accident. Johanna (Rosanna Arquette), an American insurance claims adjuster, sees Jacques diving in a frozen Peruvian lake and immediately falls in love with him. She then follows him from New York to Europe to pursue a difficult romance (Besson ultimately sets up the real competition: Johanna versus the dolphins). What the young woman does not anticipate is the hypnotic enchantment the ocean has on Jacques and the way it incessantly appears to pull him deeper and deeper. Enzo, who has not seen Jacques for twenty years, is by now a world-class diver but is still haunted by knowing there is indeed someone out there



Isabelle Adjani (Helena) in Luc Besson's *Subway* (*Subway*, 1984), (Courtesy of BIFI/© Gaumont).

better than he. During the world free-diving competition in Taormina, Sicily, both companions set world records that no competing divers can break. For his part, Jacques desires to put behind him the memory of his father's loss and earn Enzo's respect at a sport they have been playing for years. The contest between Jacques and Enzo keeps intensifying, with the two driving the other farther down to the depths of the sea. Although changed with time, their friendship remains strong until one day Enzo, surpassing his own limit in a dive, dies in the arms of Jacques when he returns to the surface. Distressed by Enzo's last request to leave his body at the bottom of the ocean, Jacques becomes depressed until the day he decides to dive for eternity. Once at the bottom of the sea, surrounded by the blueness, he slowly and silently lets go. With his cinematic storytelling style, Besson pondered the cosmos through his free-diving<sup>38</sup> hero Jacques Mayol,<sup>39</sup> a world-record holder, who stood at the center of the project. The role of Jacques was actually first offered to Christopher Lambert, Mickey Rourke, and Mel Gibson, before going to Jean-Marc Barr.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the apparent simplicity of the screenplay and the sagacity of the dialogue (the lack of complexity in the characters was unexpected), Besson, who is not considered a master storyteller, succeeded by virtue of his highly stylized use of imagery and his underwater scenes (*The Big Blue* oozed with a sensuous beauty unlike any other film at the time). *The Big Blue* was nonetheless intriguing, with the originality of its photography (by Carlo Varini) of Mediterranean waters. Eric Serra's score (*Golden Eye*, *The Fifth Element*) captured the director's ambitions with its pre-New Age music. In the American format, containing a drastically revised "happy" ending, a separate music score replaced the original sound track (by composer Bill Conti). The images and the music brilliantly intermingled as the eye of the camera plunged into the deep, generating a visual blend that could not be separated: vibrant hues and sound seem to glow off the screen.

Although French film directors and critics often address the hot-button issue of the "malevolent" Hollywood influence on their nation's cinematographic ethos, Luc Besson can be most accurately described as one of the few French filmmakers who has set out to compete head to head with heavyweights such as George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. But Besson's style also corresponds to a visual challenge that ultimately reevaluates the criteria of appreciation and visual coherence. In fact, Besson's main cinematographic force is his ability to capture the moment in vibrant images, to create a beautiful tapestry of emotions and sights. Distinctly un-European, Besson's productions are generally directed to the broad American public, yet they have still mostly pro-



Jean-Marc Barr (Jacques) in Luc Besson's *The Big Blue* (*Le grand bleu*, 1988),  
(Courtesy of BIFI/© Gaumont).



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 (Courtesy  
of BIFI/© Flachfilms).

voked a lack of sympathy on the part of American critics and much apathy from other overseas moviegoers.

The shooting of *The Big Blue* took more than nine months, in Italy, Greece, the Virgin Islands, the United States, and Peru. One of the major problems in post-production was cutting the 200-minute film to 132 minutes. (A 168-minute director's cut was released in the US market twelve years later.) First screened at the 1988 Cannes Film Festival, the film went on to garner seven nominations for Césars, winning the award for Best Music Score (Eric Serra). Despite a certain disappointment when compared to Jean-Jacques Annaud's *The Bear* and Bruno Nuytten's *Camille Claudel*,<sup>41</sup> the film's popular success in France and distribution in the United States remained a rare example of a *phénomène de société*. Luc Besson's career continued to flourish with *La Femme Nikita* (*Nikita*, 1990), *The Professional* (*Léon*, 1994), *The Fifth Element* (*Le cinquième élément*, 1997), and *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (*Jeanne d'Arc*, 1999).

### THE REBIRTH OF POPULAR COMEDIES: COLINE SERREAU AND CLAUDE ZIDI

The *café-théâtre* phenomenon, born outside the world of stand-up comedy at the end of the 1960s, evolved into a new type of *comédies de boulevard*, or popular comedy, a decade later. The 1980s thrived on its legacy and promoted the performance of its actors—aside from the predominant humor instigated by Coluche with such films as Michel Blanc's *Marche à l'ombre* (1984) and Gérard Jugnot's *Pinot simple flic* (1984).

Against all expectations, the greatest comedy success of the 1980s, as well as the fifth biggest commercial hit ever, came from an almost-unknown female director, Coline Serreau (b. 1947), with *Three Men and a Cradle* (*Trois hommes et un couffin*, 1985). The film, a persuasive testimony to the change in mentality which occurred in the 1980s, was produced during a sociological evolution toward a more liberal and progressive society. Three single men, Pierre (Roland Giraud), egomaniacal Jacques (André Dussollier), and Michel (Michel Boujenah), live a life of leisure in their luxurious apartment. One rule prevails: women are strictly forbidden. Jacques, an Air France flight attendant, accepts an unknown package the day he must leave for Asia. One Sunday, Pierre and Michel find a cradle in front of their door, a basket with an infant girl Marie, and a letter from the baby's mother, Sylvia (Philippine Leroy Beaulieu), Jacques's ex-girlfriend. The note says she must go to the United States and wants Jacques to take care of the infant for "just" six months. Life for the bachelors is immedi-

ately and drastically changed. In a series of comic scenes, they learn about baby formulas and diapers. After three weeks, Jacques finally comes home, and the three men become Marie's three dads. When Sylvia returns to take Marie away, the men feel an immense relief that is soon followed by an inexplicable void in their lives. The finale is quite unexpected, as Sylvia, a professional model, asks her companions to help rear the child, since her professional career cannot allow her the time. The script, which tracks the men's relationship with the baby, explores the hidden desire for fatherhood from men who typically avoid making commitments. This American-style comedy although generated on a small budget won an impressive series of awards: Césars for Best Film, Best Scenario, and Best Supporting Role (Michel Boujenah). The American remake, Leonard Nimoy's *Three Men and a Baby*, shot in 1987 (with Tom Selleck, Ted Danson, and Steve Guttenberg), was also successful at the American box office.

Also widely acclaimed as one of the best comedies of all time was *My New Partner* (*Les ripoux*, 1985) by Claude Zidi (b. 1934). Never before had a mainstream comedy been rewarded so handsomely at the French Academy Awards as this one was in 1985. With Césars for Best Film, Best Director, and Best Montage (Nicole Saunier), *My New Partner* confirmed the rehabilitation of comedy among general audiences as well as film critics. Zidi's idea came from a meeting with a young police officer during the 1982 Cannes Film Festival. From a series of authentic anecdotes, Zidi developed the plot into a full-length feature film (the title, *Les ripoux*, is French slang for "crooked cops"). The story is a confrontation between two schools in the Parisian police force. Corruption in *My New Partner* seems to be the natural state of law enforcement.

René (Philippe Noiret), a police inspector who thrives on fraudulent kickbacks and racketeering, is joined by a young newcomer, François (Thierry Lhermitte), who arrives straight from the police academy. The movie is primarily about the process of the conscientious, law-abiding officer and his "reeducation" under René. René has a hard time associating with his new partner since François disapproves of all his corrupt methods. Hoping to win François's loyalty, René's companion (Régine) finds a friend, Natacha (Grace De Capitani), an attractive call girl, who succeeds at least in changing his look. Both police officers enter a world of corruption as they get involved in drug trafficking. Ultimately François pulls it off, but not René.

Zidi is known for mainstream burlesque comedies and standard-bearers of Sunday cinema (purely commercial French cinema that normally never crosses the Atlantic). *My New Partner* was his first national commercial success. Except for *Three Men and a Cradle*, rarely has a

comedy managed to win the best film award at the Césars. The success of *My New Partner* triggered a no less successful sequel in 1990, *Ripoux contre Ripoux*. Other films from Claude Zidi include *The Wing or the Thigh*, *Inspector La Bavure*, *The Jackpot! (La Totale!, 1991)*, which inspired James Cameron's *True Lies* (1994), and *Asterix and Obelix vs. Caesar (Astérix et Obélix contre César, 1999)*.