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FRANCE
French Revolutions at the Movies

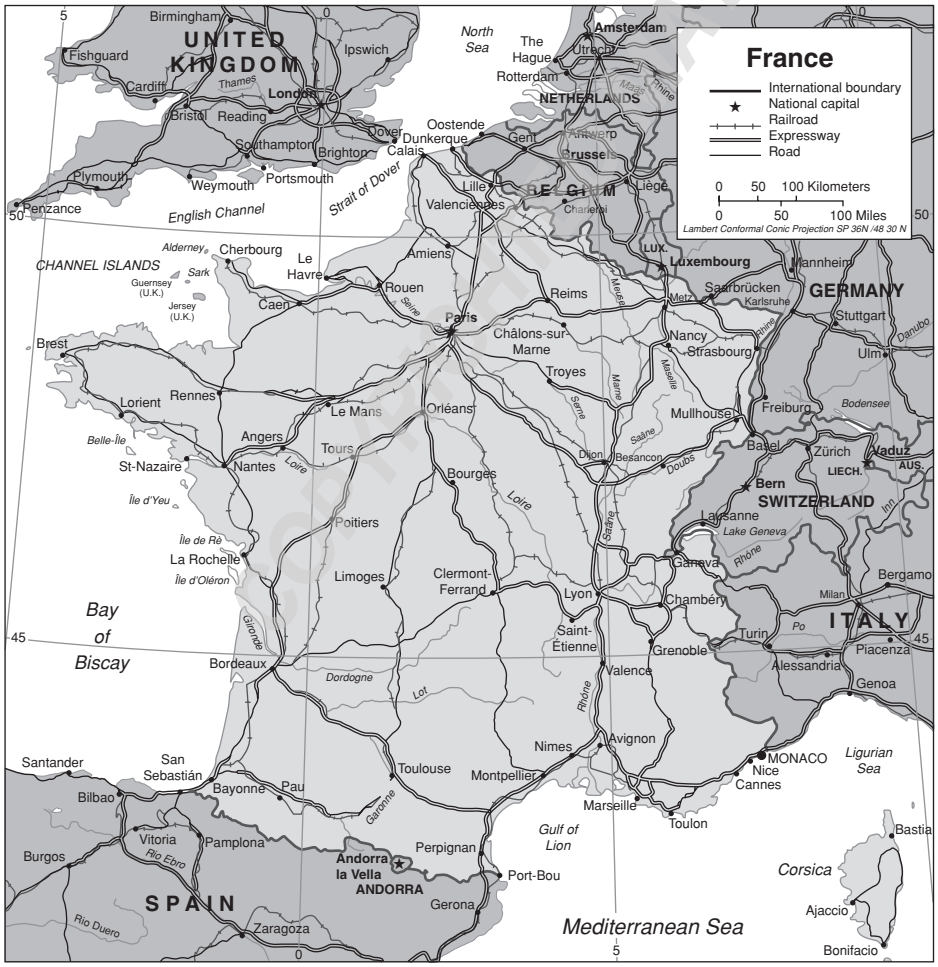

FIGURE 1.1 From *Rules of the Game* aka *La Règle du Jeu* (Dir. Jean Renoir, 1939). B&W. 110 mins. The upper center hall of the mansion of the Marquis Robert de la Chesnaye (Marcel Dalio) and his wife, Christine (Nora Grégor). In the front of the frame we see Octave (Jean Renoir), Christine's old friend, and Lisette (Paulette Dubost), Christine's maid. Approaching them with a tray is one of the La Chesnaye servants. The Marquis, seen only as a reflection in the mirror to their left, speaks with his butler.

What are you looking at?

Figure 1.1 is a frame from *Rules of the Game* (Dir. Jean Renoir, 1939). We begin with this film because it is one of the benchmarks of French cinema, and we begin with French cinema because it is the birthplace of the movies. We start with this frame because it is a representative example of the brilliant use of the film frame by one of France's most important filmmakers, Jean Renoir, who was as courageous as he was talented. *Rules of the Game*, a biting satire on the lives of the French aristocracy and upper middle class, caused near-riots when it was first shown, as Renoir, who fully understood French culture, knew it would. First, it enraged the more violent French bigots because Renoir had cast a Jewish actor (Marcel Dalio) as a French nobleman, the Marquis de la Chesnaye, the main character, which brought to the surface the undercurrent of anti-Semitism in the French public of Renoir's day. Second, as Renoir knew they would be, some audiences were outraged to see France's ruling class portrayed, without exception, as either profoundly immoral or ignorantly foolish. Renoir's cynical tale was even deemed unpatriotic

by some zealots. By now, you have seen many directors imitate Renoir's witty **comedy of manners**; satire of the upper classes is no longer considered interchangeable with treason. But the troubled reception of this film in 1939 tells you much about the time, and about Renoir's valor. This frame tells you about his timeless genius.

Look closely at Figure 1.1. Using **deep focus** – a technology that shows objects in the front, middle, and back of the frame with equal clarity – Renoir creates a feeling of immense depth on the flat surface of the movie screen. Each element of the image digs a pathway into a deeper and more fully dimensional depiction of the action. In this image we are in the home of the Marquis de la Chesnaye. His friend, Octave (Jean Renoir) and Lisette (Paulette Dubost), his wife Christine's maid, are having a conversation in the front of the frame. Instead of keeping the background simple or showing it as a vague blur to prevent any possible distractions for the audience from what they are saying, Renoir carves out a busy world around them that renders them small pieces of a large, interconnected whole. The approach of the servant on the left of Octave and Lisette creates a plane of action behind them. The furniture on the right of Octave and a nearby staircase create two more planes that are now still but could be filled. Directly over Octave's shoulder, a recess into the depths of a room that we see partially through an open door suggests that your eye could go back even further. And to the left of Octave and Lisette, directly behind the approaching servant, we can see reflected in the wall-sized mirror the image of the Marquis de la Chesnaye, who is tinkering with the wheels and springs of a mechanical bird as he talks to his butler. The mirror magically makes visible a plane of action that would otherwise be outside the frame.

The image is breathtakingly complex. In motion, the impact of Renoir's multileveled visual field is intensified. What Renoir achieves here is beautifully articulated by André Bazin, one of the greatest of French film critics:

> Technically this [Renoir's] conception of the screen assumes what I shall call lateral depth of field and the almost total disappearance of montage. Since what we are shown [in cinema] is only significant in terms of what is hidden from us . . . the *mise en scène* [frame composition] cannot limit itself to what is presented on the screen. The rest of the scene, while effectively hidden should not cease to exist. The action is not bounded by the screen, but merely passes through it. And a person who enters the camera's field of vision is coming from other areas of the action and not from some limbo, some imaginary "backstage."

The almost total disappearance of montage! Here, Bazin places himself and Renoir as two rebels against the domination of the cinema of the time by montage. This is to say, Renoir's contemporaries believed that the excitement of film was the result of the work of the editor, who created onscreen space by cleverly joining together little pieces of film in a **montage**: a series of images that shapes the audience's understanding of the **mise-en-scène**, or, the composition of the screen environment. In the early twentieth century, Sergei Eistenstein, the most famous of all Soviet directors, explored the possibilities of montage in both the films he made and the

film criticism he wrote. He and D. W. Griffith, an American pioneer of the movies, virtually created the shape of feature film through editing techniques (see Chapter 2). Bazin wrote this passage with the knowledge that Renoir's use of the film frame was revolutionizing the movies.

Bazin was not suggesting that filmmakers do away with editing, nor was this Renoir's goal. Rather, they both saw that other ways of visual storytelling should also be explored. Renoir investigated the creation of space in the frame through the use of deep focus and the fluid sweep of the camera over the planes in front of it in order to reflect the larger environment of the action instead of intensifying details within the scene, as was the genius of montage. In the scene in *Rules of the Game* in which Figure 1.1 appears, the pleasure of watching involves the freedom of the viewer's eye to roam through the deep space in frame compositions, and the freedom of the **panning** movements of the camera, that is the sweep of the camera across the scene. Consider how different this pleasure is from, for example, the excitement of the shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho (1960)*, which limits the movement of the eye and the camera to the tightly controlled rhythms created by the editor. A good way to begin understanding Renoir's innovations is to watch *The Rules of the Game* more than once: that way, you'll get the full effect of Renoir's groundbreaking creation of deep space and his use of the long take – that is, a take that lasts minutes rather than seconds to allow the camera maximum freedom.

In other ways, Renoir was a bit more typical of his period. When you watch *The Rules of the Game*, you will see that most of the scenes are shot on soundstages; after World War II, in the late 1940s and the 1950s, directors rejected studio sets and lighting. They insisted on real locations and **available light**, light that comes from natural or ordinary sources found in people's homes, like sun and moon light, lamps, and candles. But even in this respect Renoir was already changing the cinematic playing field. Renoir was a master at maneuvering within a studio set, and did most of his work in the studio. However, by the time he made *The Rules of the Game* he had already achieved some spectacular effects on location. For example, you might want to take a look at the opening montage of his film *La Bête Humaine* aka *The Human Beast* (1938), a visual tour de force shot on location from the point of view of a two men stoking the boiler on a fast-moving, coal-powered train. No dialogue is used, nor is it needed, so powerful is the excitement of Renoir's use of location shooting.

You might also want to reflect on Renoir's presentation of social order, which contrasts in some ways with today's freewheeling world. In Renoir's day, there were strict rules that "must be observed in society if one wishes to avoid being crushed," as he has said. In fact, the film's drama erupts because André Jurieu (Roland Toutain), a pilot who has broken the record of the American Charles Lindbergh for flying across the Atlantic Ocean, comes into conflict with this social rigidity. He insists on honestly declaring his love for the Christine, the wife of the Marquis de la Chesnaye (Nora Grégor), and he is destroyed. This may not sound much like a comedy to you, but if the story ends unhappily, along the way Renoir makes us laugh at the human faults and selfishness that have caused trouble from the beginning of time.

Hollywood has accustomed us to happy endings for people who dare to break the rules and express their true feelings. And you may say that we no longer have this problem. But, although society in the United States and in Europe is now much more open than it was in the 1930s, is it true that open and forthright people triumph in life as they do in Hollywood movies? Some are rewarded for honesty, but you know from evidence in the news media that most run into serious trouble. Hollywood loves rule breakers, and you probably do too–in the movies. But in life most of us don't want the problems that come along with reckless passion. Renoir's 1939 film may contain a truth that today's movies, overly optimistic about individual freedom, might take a lesson from.

Rules of the Game is very conscious of how social situations can spin out of control when people 'do what feels good,' even when the motives for unorthodox decisions are generous. In this film, no one pays enough attention to the rules of the social game. The Marquis de la Chesnaye ignores them when he invites national hero André Jurieu to a party at his country estate for a week of hunting and extravagant dining, even though Jurieu has impetuously declared his love for the Marquise. The invitation makes the Marquis a 'big man,' but his magnanimous gesture is the beginning of the end for Jurieu. Or maybe the blame lies with the la Chesnaye family friend, Octave, whom you saw in Figure 1.1. Out of friendship for Jurieu, he coaxes the Marquis into letting his rival into his home. Can it be that his own secret passion for la Chesnaye's wife has something to do with Octave's bad advice to the Marquis? Another social rule bites the dust when la Chesnaye foolishly also allows his own mistress, Geneviève (Mia Parely), to convince him that she be invited to the party too. La Chesnaye again adds fuel to the fire when he hires a game poacher named Marceau (Julien Carette) for a job in his mansion without considering that his game warden Schumacher (Gaston Modot) detests him. Instead of thinking about the bad chemistry he is creating, la Chesnaye acts impulsively. Making things worse, Lisette, Schumacher's wife and Christine's maid, flirts with Marceau, which drives Schumacher into a homicidal rage. Finally, poor Schumacher is also upset about Octave, who sometimes takes advantage of his social position to romance Lisette, because seducing a poor man's wife is considered a prerogative of the middle class. Too many people on the la Chesnaye estate are too close to the boiling point and because a foxhunt has been planned, there are too many guns within easy reach. The great Russian playwright Chekhov wrote that if there is a gun in the first act of a play, the audience will be angry if it isn't fired before the play ends. Renoir heeds this advice: one of the jealous, frustrated lovers commits murder. The film ends on the shadowy terrace of the la Chesnaye mansion as, to avoid a scandal, the Marquis covers up the killing, explaining that "there has been an accident."

If this sounds like a standard melodramatic situation, in some ways it is. But in melodrama wrongdoers are usually punished; here the crime is made to disappear. You will also see that *The Rules of the Game*, unlike most melodramas, doesn't draw its characters neatly in black and white. Each character is a mixture of the admirable and the contemptible. For example, what do you think of Robert, the Marquis de la Chesnaye? He is kind and gentle with his wife, Christine, but creates

the likelihood that he will embarrass her by inviting his mistress to their home. He is generous with his friends and even with Jurieu, but what do you think of the hunt that la Chesnaye organizes during the house party on his estate? There is no verbal commentary about the cruelty of hunting, but the images Renoir shows us emphasize the suffering of the rabbits and the pleasure that la Chesnaye and his friends take in killing. Finally, how do you judge la Chesnaye's cover-up of the murder? Isn't this, like the pointless slaughter of the innocent animals, a comment on la Chesnaye's refusal to think about the consequences of his actions because, as an aristocrat, he feels that he can do whatever he likes? America doesn't have an aristocracy, but Renoir is speaking to us too. Who are the people in the United States who cause all kinds of trouble because they feel entitled to act on their impulses instead of having respect for the laws and traditions of society?

The Rules of the Game is an excellent place for us to embark on our journey into French film culture because it sums up the strengths of a filmmaker who many believe changed the course of French and world film. It also lays the groundwork for your understanding of the developments in French cinema that later led to the **New Wave**, an international turning point in filmmaking, in the late 1940s and 1950s. Before we launch into the excitement of that revolutionary cinematic development, however, let us take a few steps back to France in 1895. Revolutionizing cinema was a tradition in France. In fact, the first changes France made in public entertainment were connected with the first public screening of a movie.

The Movies Are Born in France

The first public display of a "moving picture," as we think of it, took place on December 28, 1895 when a pair of French brothers, Auguste and Louis Lumière exhibited the first "movie" in Paris. The Lumières went on to aim their moving picture camera at everything around them that wasn't nailed down. The Lumière catalogue shows that by 1898 Auguste and Louis had made 1,424 very short films (each was only a few minutes long). All of the Lumière films were documentaries, short takes of family, street, or factory life. Being first, the Lumières, who owned the legal patents on their cameras and projectors, dominated the market briefly when the movies began, even though there were, at the time, two other possible designers and venders of motion picture technology: Thomas Alva Edison in the United States and Robert William (R. W.) Paul in England.

The movies were born into a period in France known as the Belle Époque ("Beautiful Era"), roughly 1870–1914, which France and Europe as a whole thought of as a time of peace and prosperity. However, you may wish to look beneath the surface of this cliché. The explosion of national hatreds and economic and political competition in World War I, which broke out in 1914, did not come out of nowhere: what was festering beneath the pretty surface of the Belle Époque that Europeans were not anxious to recognize? If you read further about World War I, you will find

that it was a very violent war that employed technologies so vicious that they have since been outlawed by international agreement; many soldiers who returned from the battlefields never recovered from the trauma of their wounds and experiences. Even the history of the origins of film within the free market, capitalist economies of the time in France, the United States, and Great Britain suggests turmoil. If you delve more deeply into the history of early cinema, you will find that Thomas Edison, R. W. Paul, and the Lumières were all trying to figure out how to control the profits that could be made from this new technology. The American, Edison, was particularly aggressive in attempting to control film production worldwide. But the movies had a life of their own, and it quickly became apparent that they were implacably international in character. When the Lumières tried to prevent competition from a fellow Frenchman George Méliès, who was as eager as they to work with film, by refusing to let him use their cameras, Méliès bought his equipment from the English firm run by R. W. Paul.

Méliès, a magician by profession, became the second great influence on French cinema. Like the Lumières, he began by filming street scenes, but by 1896 he had become curious about what it would be like to film his own stage illusions. This lead to his creation of hundreds of short film fantasies in which he told stories that involved magical appearances and disappearances, as well as imaginative action stories. His famous fourteen minute feature, *Voyage to the Moon* (1902) is considered the first science fiction film. Fortunately, this and many of his other films have been preserved. To prepare yourself for understanding fiction and special effects in the movies of all countries, you will want to see this brief film and a selection of Méliès's other works. You will be surprised by how early he was able to use the primitive technology available to him to create special effects that were not improved upon significantly until the digital revolution in film.

When the Lumières lost interest in creating a monopoly in French film production, two major French movie producers, Charles Pathé and Léon Gaumont stepped in and took charge, each creating his own studio. The films made by both Gaumont and Pathé were generally simple melodramas and comedies, but they had a distinctly French flavor that predicted the special character of film in France, and they could pay for themselves almost immediately. Given production costs at the time, Gaumont and Pathé broke even as soon as 15 copies of any film were sold, and most films sold worldwide in the amount of 350 prints to markets that could not yet produce their own movies. The money rolled in. At the Gaumont studios, women made an early entrance into the history of French film. Alice Guy Blaché, who began at the age of 24 as Léon Gaumont's secretary, went on to become the supervisor of all Gaumont productions. Guy Blaché also directed and wrote hundreds of short films for Gaumont, of which only a few have survived. Guy Blaché at Gaumont and Ferdinand Zecca, the supervisor of production at the rival Pathé studios, brought enormous success to both of these film companies through policies of keeping costs at a minimum and production at a maximum.

Then, World War I, 1914–18, derailed the French film industry; raw materials were no longer available for film stock and the upheaval of a wartime economy

sent production schedules into chaos. This gave the aggressive movie community in the United States an edge that it has kept ever since. After World War I, French directors, writers, and actors were forced to compete with the films exported to France by the United States. To make Gaumont studios competitive with American imports, its artistic director, a filmmaker named Louis Feuillade, pioneered movie **serials**. That is, Feuillade made a name for himself and profit for Gaumont by producing action stories in episodes, so that the public would have to return to the theater for as many as thirteen or fourteen weeks in a row to find out "what happened next." Among his most popular serials is *Les Vampires* (1915). The series is not about Dracula-style blood suckers, but rather about an organized Parisian crime syndicate that has taken that name for dramatic effect. The episodes, which tell the story of how Philippe Guérande (Édouard Mathé), a reporter, and his zany assistant Mazamette (Marcel Lévesque) track down and capture these gangsters, were freely improvised on the streets of early twentieth-century Paris. What's more, they are full of humor and suspense – and they provoke interesting gender issues. As you might expect, the official leaders of Les Vampires are men, but their driving force is a woman, Irma Vep, played by an actress named Musidora. In fact, if you scramble the letters of Irma Vep's name, you will see that they spell "vampire." Musidora made Vep so dynamic that the public loved to hate her; things get so quiet after she dies in the last episode that even heroes Guérande and Mazamette miss her. *Les Vampires* is available on DVD; you might have a lot of fun comparing it to the episodic drama and comedy on television today.

In the 1920s, the vitality of France's film community made Paris, the center of the French industry, a magnet for filmmakers from countries that offered far less freedom for cinematic experiments. Carl Dreyer, a Danish director, filmed his masterpiece, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, in Paris in 1928, starring a Corsican actress, known professionally only by the name Falconetti. Belgian-born director Jacques Feyder experimented with putting on screen melodramas and fantasies that used special effects and also location shooting that was daring for the time. An example of Feyder's combination of both effects and location shooting with conventional melodrama can be found in the color-washed frames and magnificent images of the desert he included in his film *Queen of Atlantis* (1920). One of the most important international developments in 1920's Paris was that it became a center for a revolutionary group of artists called **Surrealists**, a twentieth-century literary and artistic movement that represented the unconscious through fantastic paintings and **nonlinear** storytelling – that is to say, story structure built not on chronological organization of events, but on the kind of free association that goes on inside the imagination. Surrealists, like French-born Germaine Dulac, and Spanish artists Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali congregated in Paris to explore the cinematic possibilities of their dreamlike school of art.

The most famous surrealist film ever made, *Un Chien Andalou* aka *The Andalusian Dog* (1929) grew out of a collaboration between Buñuel and Dali. Like Méliès's *Voyage to the Moon*, seeing it is a necessity for any film student. Violence and 'shock cinema' have become commonplace today, but at the time Dali and

Buñuel's image of a razor blade slicing an eye open and their repeated use of images of ants crawling out of open wounds in human bodies were scandalous. Their wild images have influenced countless artists, and it will be interesting for you to see whether, despite the CGI images of body parts and exploding cities that you are used to, *The Andalusian Dog* still has the power to shock you.

However, in France, as in all industrialized countries, the next big leap in the commercial development of cinema was not surrealism, which has never appealed to a mass audience. Rather, it was the transition in the 1930s to **synchronized sound** film – that is, film in which the sound of speech and other effects was integrated with the images of characters in action – that forced the film cultures of the world to reinvent themselves. There had never been fully silent films; music and sometimes sound effects always accompanied the image. But in the 1930s, technological advances made it possible to synchronize lines spoken by the characters with their lip movements. Synchronized sound constituted another setback for French cinema because the United States was in the vanguard of that technology. However, once the sound era began, France entered into a period of cinematic creativity that still remains one of the wonders of the world on film.

CASE STUDY

Jean Renoir

Born: September 15, 1894, Paris, France
Died: February 12, 1979, Los Angeles, California

Select Filmography

Boudu Saved From Drowning aka *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932)
Madame Bovary (1934)
A Day in the Country aka *Partie de campagne* (1936)
The Crime of Monsieur Lange aka *Le crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936)
The Lower Depths aka *Les bas-fonds* (1936)
The Grand Illusion aka *La grande illusion* (1937)
The Human Beast aka *La bête humaine* (1938)
The Rules of the Game aka *La règle du jeu* (1939)
The Diary of a Chambermaid aka *Le journal d'une femme de chambre* (1946)
The River aka *Le fleuve* (1951)
The Little Theatre of Jean Renoir aka *Le petit théâtre de Jean Renoir*, made for television (1970)

From the 1930s until his death in 1979, Jean Renoir, the son of the influential Impressionist painter Auguste Renoir, exerted a similarly monumental influence on film. As we have already seen, Jean Renoir made his mark by pioneering a cinema in which there was less dependence on montage (editing) and more use of the camera as a surrogate for the deep focus and fluid movements of the human eye. The combination of his extremely liberal social attitudes and his new film aesthetic resulted in the prevalence in France, during the most creative part of his career, of a cinema inspired by his work, which has been labeled **poetic realism**. Poetic realism is generally defined as a kind of cinema that makes use of the artistic control that is possible in studio settings to produce a mise-en-scène that fuses historical accuracy with stylized aesthetics. However, the visual excitement of Renoir's films did not depend on unusual settings or fantastic and/or action filled stories. Rather, Renoir used film to show the fascinations of ordinary life.

Boudu Saved from Drowning aka *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932)

There's poetry as well as realism in bourgeois society?

The French gave us the word "bourgeois," and in their art did a great deal to clarify their concept of this socioeconomic class as both a stabilizing and stifling influence on culture. In *Boudu*, Jean Renoir tells a story of the bourgeoisie, the comfortable middle class, by examining the frustrations created by its strict set of normative rules and customs intended to preserve the sanctity of the family and to guarantee the safety of property and the efficient function of business. Sound familiar?

The bourgeois desire for a reasonable, safe society keeps the boat from rocking, but it also threatens to prohibit any new and necessary changes in culture. In many ways, this frame not only epitomizes Renoir's approach to poetic realism, but also his piercing understanding of the contradictions of bourgeois existence. In this frame, Renoir honors the beauty and peace of ordinary bourgeois life with this striking image that he constructs using the stability and proportion of a **frame-within-a-frame** composition. Figure 1.2 depicts Anne-Marie the servant of the proper, bourgeois Lestingois family, leaning through the window to do nothing more exciting than ask a neighbor for matches. Despite the fact that he is filming a simple act, Renoir takes an exuberant delight in positioning Anne-Marie dramatically within the borders of a triple frame. He places her at the center of the outline of the film frame itself; and the frame of the window nearest to the camera through which we see across an alley to the third frame, that of the kitchen window toward which Anne-Marie leans. Evoking a further depth, Renoir also permits us to see the frame of another window behind Anne-Marie.

When you see this film, you will discover that this frame occurs after a dazzling display of Renoir's **fluid**, smoothly moving camera. We discover Anne-Marie only after the camera has panned across a hallway by means of which we can see, from two perspectives, the Lestingois family at lunch in the deep space of the dining room at the end of the hallway. Here you can see Renoir's masterful use of studio sets to

FIGURE 1.2 From *Boudu Saved from Drowning* aka *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (Dir. Jean Renoir, 1932). B&W. 85 mins. Anne-Marie (Séverine Lerczinska), the maidservant of the bourgeois Lestingois family, is in their kitchen, seen through two layers of window frames. What is bourgeois?

create a realistic looking yet extraordinary effect. In the big budget spectacles and action films you are used to seeing today, this technique is often used, but the director pans across the action or sets it within a striking frame composition to inflate the importance of some unusual event, for example a car chase or a glittering social ritual. In this and many more fresh and vibrant framings of daily life in *Boudu*, Renoir indicates an immense pleasure in even the smallest, most seemingly unimportant gestures. Yet, given how securely Anne-Marie is bound within this triple frame, doesn't Figure 1.2 also suggest a sense of repression in the bourgeois order that might create a need to 'break out'?

Boudu tells a comic story about the way each member of the Lestingois family breaks out of the peaceful, but narrow pleasures of the bourgeois family nest once they are forced to confront Boudu, a poor, undisciplined man who has no use for bourgeois propriety. It all begins when Monsieur Lestingois (Charles Granval), a middle-aged bookseller, noticing a man jumping into the river from a bridge, leaps in to save him. When the stranger wakes up in the Lestingois apartment, Monsieur Lestingois finds that the would-be suicide is Boudu (Michel Simon), a filthy, somewhat deranged street person. However, despite everything, Lestingois decides to let

Boudu stay with his family, fearing that left to his own devices Boudu will jump again. As in *Rules of the Game*, here too Renoir shows that no act of kindness will go unpunished – if it breaks the social rules.

Michel Simon gives a bravura performance as the wild, uncivilized Boudu, who may well disgust you at first. Dirty, messy, and never appropriately grateful to Lestingois, Boudu is a train wreck in action. You are likely to empathize with Madame Lestingois (Marcelle Hainia) and Anne-Marie, who at first don't want him to stay in their orderly apartment. But, like them, you may also come to find Boudu's practicality and surprising lack of concern for propriety refreshing. As you will see when you screen the film, we actually meet Boudu before his suicide leap, and so we know that he will mean trouble for the compassionate Lestingois. At the beginning of the film, we see Boudu wandering in rags around a lovely Parisian park, muttering to his dog, who suddenly comes to a decision that he might do better than Boudu and leaves him. Not even a stray dog wants to be with Boudu. When a middle-class woman gives him five francs, so that he "can buy bread," and Boudu hears her say to her child that "one must always help the less fortunate," Boudu almost immediately gives the five francs to a very wealthy man in a snazzy car, who is flabbergasted when Boudu hands him the money, and says, "So you can buy bread."

This typical moment from *Boudu* makes it impossible to make easy judgments. Boudu is admirably independent, but at the same time it is hard not to think he's an idiot for giving up money he clearly needs. Similarly, the middle-class woman is generous, but she tactlessly also describes him in insulting terms as though he had no feelings or pride. With many **ambiguous** scenes like this – that is, scenes capable of multiple interpretations – Renoir prepares the audience for the unexpected closure of the story. After a while, Boudu's uninhibited ways become sexually attractive to both Madame Lestingois, whom he seduces, and Anne-Marie, whom he marries. Wild and wooly Boudu married? Not for long. Right after a delightful wedding ceremony, as the wedding party travels by rowboat in the ravishing beauty of the spring countryside, Boudu, in his usual reckless way, capsizes the boat. As the Lestingois family and Anne-Marie hysterically struggle to get ashore, Boudu peacefully floats away. They mourn, thinking he has drowned, but he is only floating with the current of the stream, happy to be on his way, in the open air, with the rural animals, trees, and grass around him.

In Renoir's character study of both the bourgeois Lestingois family and the unconventional Boudu, we ultimately see that each way of life has its own strange logic, beauty, and appropriateness. Renoir provokes you to see a welcome energy in Boudu's clownish, animal-like existence. Can you also see beauty in the kindness of the fat, balding Lestingois, who keeps a young mistress in the same house where his wife lives? This will certainly be a challenge for viewers used to Hollywood casting only of young, muscular men in romantic roles, and for feminists who may want to judge Lestingois harshly. Since in real life most mistresses are not treated with the warmth and concern with which he treats Anne-Marie, should we take Renoir to task for sentimentalizing Lestingois's belief in male entitlement? Or does poetic

realism suggest such a loving, complex view of gender considerations that, while not approving of Lestingois's behavior, it lets us see the battle between the sexes in terms of gray areas rather than in black-and-white polarities?

The Grand Illusion aka *La Grande Illusion* (1937)

What is the poetic realism of war?

You are looking at Jean Gabin, one of the great stars of French film in the 1930s and 1940s. At that time, France did not have a system that aggressively created and promoted stars with the vigor of the Hollywood film industry. However, what interest the French film industry currently has in stars was prefigured by Gabin, one of a relatively modest number of French actors who have been regarded at home and internationally as stars. Gabin made his reputation playing working class men in trouble. Generally, his characters are very realistically drawn in terms of the social pressures on working people, but the Gabin proletarian (lower class) hero generally transcends the restrictions of working class existence through his fierce life force. In many ways, Gabin, as a **heightened** (intense) but never glamorized representation of a working man, is a human embodiment of the essence of poetic realism.

FIGURE 1.3 An image from *The Grand Illusion* aka *La Grande Illusion* (Dir. Jean Renoir, 1937), B&W. 114 mins. showing Jean Gabin in the part of Lieutenant Maréchal.

Gabin, as you see in this frame, does not have the plastic perfection of actors molded by surgery or selected for chiseled and regular features in the United States, but he has immense charisma. Seeing him in action in *The Grand Illusion*, you will notice that his appeal lies in his expressiveness and originality. Although Gabin also worked with other directors, Renoir was in large part responsible for co-creating this **persona** with Gabin, giving him his chance to hone his talents in several important films aside from this one, including *The Lower Depths* aka *Les bas-fonds* (1936), and *La bête humaine*, mentioned above. Gabin went on to work with Marcel Carné, who directed him in two of his signature roles, Jean in Le *quai des brumes* aka *Port of Shadows* (1938), and François in *Le jour se lève* aka *Daybreak*, 1939. As he grew older, Gabin endowed older characters with his unusual charisma; for example in *Touchez pas au grisbi* aka *Hands off the Loot* (Dir. Jacques Becker, 1954), in which he played Max le Menteur (the liar), an aging gangster.

As Lt. Maréchal in *The Grand Illusion*, Gabin plays a former mechanic who has risen to the rank of officer during World War I, as a result of his talent and service. The film tells a story about how Maréchal is taken prisoner by the Germans and escapes from an 'escape- proof' prison with a fellow officer, Lt. Rosenthal (Marcel Dalio). Through Gabin's character, *The Grand Illusion* becomes the story of a social revolution taking place in Europe that is changing the relationships among ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes. As we watch, Maréchal, who initially has the usual anti-Semitic beliefs of the time, gets past them to become close friends with Rosenthal, a Jewish Frenchman. We also see the aristocratic officers in both the German and French armies facing the necessity to recognize and even support the rise to power of men who are not of the nobility.

As in *Boudu*, director Renoir reveals social situations in vivid detail, in this case ethnic and class tensions, but there are no villains but the war itself. This is particularly striking in a war movie, a **genre** (type of film) in which you would be hard pressed to find many other examples of sympathetic explorations of both sides of the combat. As in *Boudu*, Renoir uses deep focus in scenes primarily shot on carefully-constructed and lit sets.

The major narrative moments occur in a German prisoner of war camp for French, English, American, and Canadian soldiers, commanded by the highly aristocratic Captain von Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim); and in a small German farmhouse in which Maréchal and Rosenthal hide after they have escaped. In the prisoner of war camp, Renoir paints both prisoners and guards as ordinary men who want the same things and who even respect those feelings in each other, though the Germans hold the guns. Renoir details the respect felt by Rauffenstein for Captain de Boieldieu (Pierre Fresney), a member of the French nobility who is a prisoner along with Maréchal and Rosenthal. Rauffenstein is unfailingly and genuinely courteous to Boieldieu, and, out of respect for him, to Maréchal and Rosenthal. But Boieldieu understands, as Rauffenstein does not, that the times are changing, and regards Rosenthal and Maréchal as his equals because of their performance under fire, while Rauffenstein regards them as social inferiors.

Boieldieu reveals the depth of his understanding when he gives his life to permit Maréchal and Rosenthal to escape. In one of the most extraordinary sequences in the history of cinema, Boieldieu masterminds a plot that forces Rauffenstein's hand. Once you see *The Grand Illusion*, you will never forget this early version of the prisoner of war escape episode. You may want to compare it to other films of this type to discover how it has influenced later films about breaking out of captivity. Here, Rauffenstein, heartbroken by the necessity to shoot Boieldieu, but duty bound to do so, mourns him when he dies of his wounds in unforgettable scenes that you must see the film to appreciate. How many other war films show this kind of relationship between battlefield enemies?

What is the "grand illusion" referred to in the title? To answer that question with another question, let us ask what is revealed by the mutual admiration of Rauffenstein, a German, and Boieldieu, a Frenchman, during a war in which the French and the Germans are killing each other? The illusions that divide people from each other are referred to again and in a slightly different way when Maréchal and Rosenthal, after escaping, take shelter in the home of Elsa (Dita Parlo), a poor German farmwife; again the emphasis is on the essential unity of human beings being torn apart by the war. Although Elsa is a woman alone with a little daughter, and a German, she takes pity on Maréchal and Rosenthal. She feeds them and nurses them back to health. Rosenthal, a Jew, helps Elsa and her daughter and Maréchal to celebrate Christmas. Maréchal and Elsa have a brief love affair. But the mutual interests of these people cannot prevent the war from separating them again before the film ends.

Renoir's film protests not only war, but also the way class, religion, and nationality have estranged people from one another. Again, however, questions arise about the way Renoir's use of poetic realism sometimes softens the edges of social problems. Does Renoir's generous wish for a better reality lead him to downplay the actual, bitter ethnic and national tensions of World War I out of which World War II and the Holocaust later grew? Should we take Renoir to task for imagining the nobility of Boieldieu and Rauffenstein at a time in France and Germany during which the nobility rarely did anything for people in other classes? Should we resist his glowing portrait of potential harmony between one extremely loving and generous Jewish man, Rosenthal, and one immensely decent and tolerant French working man, Maréchal? Is the love affair between Else and Maréchal romanticized so that we forget too easily the exploitative elements that might go into such a wartime arrangement? Even the image of a neutral Switzerland will be troubling to some, as we now know that on too many occasions Switzerland took advantage of its neutrality and the war to enrich itself, both in World War I and in World War II, during which it exploited the helplessness of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Or should we praise Renoir's films for giving us role models for the best in human behavior? Is Renoir moving us beyond stereotypes in a liberating manner, or is he using positive stereotypes in a way that stops us from asking important questions about war?

Renoir's Peers and the Golden Age of French Cinema

In the 1930s, Jean Renoir and his peers worked within a climate of turmoil; Europe was moving ever closer to the second world war of the century. In France, the Third Republic, a parliamentary form of democracy, which had been formed in 1870, was experiencing many socio-economic strains. 1936 saw the rise of a socialist government in France under the leadership of Léon Blum, but it lasted only one year, and was followed by a backlash conservative government. During the 1930s, the French movie industry was also unstable. Its lack of preparation for the new revolution in sound technology had opened up an opportunity for experienced American studios to export their experts to France, at a huge profit for Hollywood. Paramount, a major Hollywood studio, sent Robert Kane, who understood neither the French language nor French culture, to Paris to supervise the conversion of the large Joinville studios to sound production. While great filmmakers like Jean Renoir, and his peers Jean Vigo, Marcel Carné (of whom more below) maintained the French national character of film entertainment that had begun with Gaumont and Pathé, the American studios dumped a flood of profitable but anonymous factory-made products on the French and international markets.

The films we are about to explore reflect the struggle of France to keep her own film industry alive. Paris saw some **avant-garde**, experimental, film production at this time. Luis Buñuel made *L'âge d'or* aka *The Golden Age* (1930) a surrealist film still considered shocking for its religious and political iconoclasm, as well as its sexual freedom. (For example, it included a representation of masturbation.) Jean Cocteau, a brilliant surrealist who was open about his alternative lifestyle as a gay man, and who worked in French cinema until his death in 1963, directed his first film, *Le sang d'un poète* aka *Blood of a Poet* in 1930. But for personal and political reasons, both Cocteau and Buñuel left Paris and directed few films until after World War II. The bulk of genuinely French films made under **atelier**, or workshop, conditions in the 1930s were directed by Renoir, Marcel Carné, René Clair, and Jean Vigo, mentioned above, along with Sacha Guitry, Marcel Pagnol, Jacques Feyder, and Julien Duvivier. (Note that by this time, women no longer held positions of creative importance in the French film industry.) As we are about to see, French atelier production involved a much smaller, more personal, and less formulaic kind of film production than the movies produced by the American film industry.

L'Atalante (1934)

What is the poetic realism of married life?

You are looking at an example of one of the very best of director Jean Vigo's frame compositions. Here, he uses a very high-angle perspective to visualize for us the crowded kitchen on the barge called *L'Atalante*. Wedged into a cramped space between

FIGURE 1.4 A frame from *L'Atalante* (Dir. Jean Vigo, 1934), B&W. 89 mins. showing the tiny galley of the barge L'Atalante. Juliette (Dita Parlo) and Jean (Jean Dasté) are seated on the right-hand side of the frame. In the lower left-hand corner, we see the back of the head of "the boy" (Louis Lefebvre) who does odd jobs on the barge.

the walls and the stove, Jean (Jean Dasté), the Captain of *L'Atalante*, and his wife, Juliette (Dita Parlo), eat dinner with the barge errand boy (Louis Lefebvre). Because the grouping is shot from the top down, Vigo avoids the oppressive weight of a ceiling bearing down on this overfull area. Instead, he creates a sense of depth that hollows out more room than actually exists. Moreover, he has lit the scene to bring out the beauty of human faces and bodies, as well as of the weathered stove and table and the cutlery, plates, and bottles that appear here with a charm they rarely possess when we sit down in real life to a simple meal. Using a studio set, Vigo has meticulously re-created the seedy atmosphere of barge life, but through his craft he has given it a poetry that speaks volumes of his love of human beings. Figure 1.4 is only one of numerous frames in this film in which Vigo achieves a thrilling combination of accurate representation of the life on the river in 1930's France and unexpected perspective and lighting. Later in the film, Vigo even experiments with underwater and aerial photography, and action taking place in night and fog. When you remember the limits of the cinematic technology of the time – there were no **dollys**, **handheld cameras**, or **digital editing** – these frames may seem to you nothing short of miraculous.

Vigo is equally daring and original in his depiction of sexual desire, which he portrays as natural, but which shattered movie conventions of the day and would no doubt still shock some people. *L'Atalante* comically explores the explosion of sexual passion in and outside of marriage through the story of Juliette, a girl from a provincial French town who marries Jean, a barge captain, who is a stranger to her friends and family. 'She always had to be different,' says one member of the wedding party, snidely, at the beginning of the film. And indeed Juliette is in for something new as she is bounced right from the wedding to a barge on which the laundry hasn't been done in months, and in which numerous cats nest anywhere there is available space. Juliette finds herself caught up in the rapture of physical desire for Jean, and in the tensions, caused by the close quarters, between Jean and his eccentric first mate, Père Jules (Michel Simon) and the young boy who works as his gopher. With Père Jules, we meet again with Michel Simon, who played Boudu. Simon is every bit as uninhibited here as he was in Renoir's film, but here his character does have a place in society, as a womanizing "fixit man" on the barge. Muttering almost incoherently much of the time, Père Jules seems to be out of control, indulging his desires without respect for propriety, but by the end of the film we see him as a figure of redemption. When the marriage of Juliette and Jean is about to break up because of various tensions caused by their poverty, it is Père Jules who saves the day.

The trouble begins for Jean and Juliette when he takes her for her first visit to Paris and she is swept off her feet by the luxuries displayed in the shop windows that they cannot afford and by the seductions of a fast-talking salesman (Gilles Margaritas). Jean's violent response to the threat he feels from the Parisian con man leads Juliette to defy her husband and sneak off the barge to see Paris by herself. When Jean discovers that Juliette is gone, his pride overcomes his common sense. He shoves off with his barge before Juliette returns, leaving her stranded in Paris and forced to survive by her wits. Jean, horrified by what he has done but too proud to return and apologize, becomes increasingly dysfunctional. While Juliette and Jean are separated, each of them suffers from longing for the other. Their frustrated desires are communicated to the spectator through a highly erotic juxtaposition of the two of them in their beds, separated by many miles, as they clearly experience urges that can only be gratified by the missing partner. At the point that Jean's breakdown prevents him from being an effective captain of *L'Atalante*, Père Jules goes looking for Juliette and returns her to Jean for a passionate reunion. If there is a kind of poetic realist symbolism here, we may say that the materialist world of Paris threatens the marriage, and the natural enjoyment of erotic impulses embodied in Père Jules restored it.

You are not likely to experience this as a message film, however. The symbolism of *L'Atalante* is muted by the visual poetry that radiates from Vigo's delight in the abundance of natural pleasures in the world, which outshine the extravagant items in the shop windows and the fast pace of Parisian life. Vigo really makes the audience feel that the organic world is more beautiful than things money can buy. What a difference from Hollywood's romantic comedies in which people tell us that a

good heart is more important than riches, but in which we are seduced into longing for material wealth by scenes that visually adore consumer extravagances. If goodness of heart is so important in *Pretty Woman* (Dir. Gary Marshall, 1990), why does that film make such a fuss about the expensive wardrobe Edward (Richard Gere) can buy Vivian (Julia Roberts)? At the same time, despite the astonishing beauty of the natural world that Vigo communicates, you may still wonder if *L'Atalante* achieves its rapturous, enchanting portrait of married bliss amid economic privations by closing its eyes to the power and allure of materialism.

Children of Paradise aka *Les enfants du paradis* (1945)

Poetic realism examines the tragedy of beauty in a violent world.

What is your first response to this familiar image of men fighting over a woman? Perhaps it is that Garance (Arletty), center frame, Baptiste (Jean-Louis Barrault),

FIGURE 1.5 From *Children of Paradise* aka *Les enfants du paradis* (Dir. Marcel Carné, 1945). B&W. 160 mins. In an underworld dance hall, the beautiful actress Garance (Arletty) tries to prevent a fight between one of the thuggish regular clients, to the left of the frame, and, to the right of the frame, Baptiste (Jean-Louis Barrault), a highly sensitive actor, who has wandered in by chance.

right frame, and the thug, left frame, who is giving them trouble in this lower-class dance hall are very crowded. Unlike the augmented space in Figure 1.4, in which Jean Vigo widens the small galley of the *L'Atalante*, this frame evokes the claustrophobic experience of being in a mob. Although *Children of Paradise* is punctuated by important moments when the lovers, Garance and Baptiste are isolated together in a space that opens up for them alone, this frame shows the typical visual texture of this film, which fills the frames with distressingly close mobs of people. Even the French name of the film evokes overcrowding: the French term *paradis* refers to the highest, least expensive area in the theater, called in English, "the gods." The children of paradise are, ironically, the poor, uneducated part of the audience who pack the seats furthest from the stage, filling the room with their guffaws and loud responses to the show. The fearful power of mobs is a recurrent theme in the films of Marcel Carné; in his witty farce *Drôle de drame* (1937) which you might want to screen as a contrast to the romantic intensity of *Children of Paradise*, you will see him use this threat in a comic way.

When you see the dance-hall sequence, you will also notice another characteristic trait of this film: its expansion of the definition of male heterosexuality. Baptiste, the only man that Garance – the woman with whom all men are in love – will ever desire, could not be more different from the male models you have been taught by the entertainment industry to respect, and (perhaps) to emulate. Baptiste is slender, soft hearted, and gentle; his features are irregular, his eyes small, and his nose extremely large. Instead of being the conventional aggressive action hero, Baptiste is a mime by profession – that is, an actor who never speaks, but instead uses the graceful, controlled movement of his body to create characters and situations. In Hollywood-influenced entertainment, Baptiste would be considered effeminate, the man whom the heroine could never take seriously as a sexual partner. Not so in this film or in other films in which Barrault starred; he played many romantic leading roles. In *Children of Paradise*, director Marcel Carné pointedly exhibits major reservations about conventional male ideals as he emphasizes the way Baptiste and Garance light up from within when they are with each other, while Garance's traditionally masculine lovers bore her with their sadistic styles of sexuality. Moreover, although Garance is protective of Baptiste in Figure 1.5, it becomes clear that Baptiste is more than able to take care of both of them. In a sequence that will strike a familiar chord in those who are acquainted with Kung Fu films, Baptiste humiliates a thug because he can concentrate his attack in a single elegant motion, rather than relying on the ineffective waste of energy through brute strength.

Actually *Children of Paradise* is two films, both made under almost impossible conditions during World War II, and shown only after the termination of the war. The first part is titled "The Boulevard of Crime," referring to the location of the theaters in which Baptiste and Garance work as performers. The second part is called "The Man in White," referring to the white, flowing costume Baptiste wears as a mime. In telling the story of the doomed love between Garance and Baptiste, *Children of Paradise* sums up the end of the era of poetic realism, with its beauty and its

contradictions, just as French cinema was about to take a turn toward The New Wave. Garance, a woman of the people, is idealized as beauty itself. She too expands gender definitions, as she is certainly not the "cute" young, blonde, surgically altered sex kitten that Hollywood today prefers, but rather the womanly, intelligent more realistic figure preferred by the French of that day. But, her enigmatic radiance is pure poetic realism that rises above historical probabilities.

Brought up in the slums by a single mother who took in washing to support her after the family was abandoned by her father, Garance was forced onto the streets as a prostitute at the age of 15 after her mother's death. How can such a life produce Garance, who remains unstained in spirit even if her body has been bought and sold? Her mysterious purity attracts many different kinds of men, including Lacenaire (Marcel Herrand), a cold, witty, hateful murderer, and Frédéric Lemaître (Pierre Brasseur), an egocentric actor who loves people, but primarily as his audience. Even aristocrats long to possess her: when Garance's position as a poor woman makes her vulnerable to unjust persecution by the law, she is protected by the fiercely proud and aloof Édouard, Count de Montray (Louis Salou). Garance cannot return the feelings of either Lacenaire, Lemaître, or the Count de Montray, because she will always love Baptiste, who like her is only at home in the world of the imagination, either onstage or in the private world they create together.

Yet the strength of their passion is no match for the crude, brutal world of the mob. Jealousy and murder part them forever, as you will see when you screen the film. Everything that comes between them is summed up in Carné's images of the thoughtless Paris street mob, as the last scene of the film takes on the shape of a nightmare in which the dreamer experiences powerlessness. In the final frame of *Children of Paradise*, Baptiste chases after Garance's carriage, as she drives away not knowing that her life has been changed for the worse by a murder of which she is not yet aware. But it is the time of Mardi Gras, and the streets are filled to overflowing with revelers. As Baptiste calls after Garance and tries to follow her, the crowds engulf both of them until he can no longer see her and we can see neither of them. All that is visible is the wild, excited mob.

If we think of the internal struggle in poetic realism between social problems and the ability of the human spirit to transcend them, we can read *Children of Paradise* as the last victory of the spirit over the problems of ordinary life. When Édouard, Count de Montray first meets Garance, he sums up this turn in poetic realism toward darkness. Garance rejects his wealth and power for love, and he replies, "You're far too beautiful for anyone really to love you! Beauty is an exception, an insult to the world . . . which is ugly. It's rare for a man to love beauty. They simply buy it so that they won't have to hear about it anymore." Historical events seem to bear out this analysis. *Children of Paradise* was made right after the end of World War II, during which the hatred, and fears felt by mobs of ordinary people turned them into Nazi thugs. France had to face the fact that the violence of the Holocaust was not overcome by the beauty or innocence of any of its victims. This brought about an upheaval in the French film industry, as well as in French society in general.

For Further Thought

1. Do you agree with the school of thought that believes that emphasizing depth of field and the motion of the camera creates a more realistic cinema than can be achieved by montage? What do you think of the critics who believe that creating the illusion of depth in visual art causes even more confusion between film and life? Does the illusion of layered space created by deep focus make it even easier than the space created by editing for audiences to think of the stories they see at the movies as real?
2. In their films, Jean Renoir, Marcel Carné, and Jean Vigo all bond their audiences with the unfortunate, the poor, the eccentric, and the marginalized among us. This is also true of other poetic realist directors of the time, like René Clair in his delightful and original musical social satire, *À nous la liberté*, and other filmmakers who were popular in their day but whose films are now hard to find, like Sacha Guitry and Jacques Feyder. Is stimulating empathy and concern for people who are different from us so important that it is worthwhile to downplay the more complicated aspects of social problems as they did? Or do such fantasies tend to cause a backlash when our illusions are shattered?
3. What are the main differences between being a star in French film and being a Hollywood star? Did anyone care about Jean Gabin's love affair with Marlene Dietrich until he made movies in Hollywood? Could Gabin, as a French movie actor, change the French idea of masculine identity the way Marlon Brando, as a Hollywood star could alter the American idea of what it means to be a man? How would you go about thinking about this question?

Projects

1. How is human sexuality defined in the films of the French poetic realists that you have seen? Choose a film of this period and write an essay in which you consider both what it means to be sexually attractive and the prevailing social attitudes toward sex.
2. What does the title of Jean Renoir's *The Grand Illusion* refer to? Write an essay in which you analyze the characters and actions in the film to discover what illusions Renoir dramatizes in his film.
3. In many ways, *Children of Paradise* is reflexive; that is, it is entertainment about people who entertain audiences. Write an essay in which you explore the film's reflexivity. Perhaps you might want to write about how, through its presentation of the problems of its characters as entertainers, *Children of Paradise* comments on its own social role as entertainment. *Or*, consider the relationship between the lives of the characters and the roles they play onstage and write about how *Children of Paradise* shows us how popular culture expresses feelings that cannot be communicated as well in any other way.

The Fourth and Fifth Republics and the Prologue to the New Wave

During World War II, 1938–45, when Adolf Hitler's Fascist government occupied France, some French actors and directors, including Jean Gabin and Jean Renoir, escaped to the United States. After the defeat of Hitler, as actors and directors returned, France went through two major successive political reorganizations and some changes in the film industry. In 1946, the Fourth Republic was proclaimed and lasted until 1958. The Fourth Republic was an attempt to restore the parliamentary government of the Third Republic that had collapsed with the German invasion of France. But in its twelve years of existence, the Fourth Republic remained unstable and gave way under the pressures of negotiating independence for Algeria, one of the French African colonies that had started a guerilla war for freedom against France. Conservative forces in France that did not want to grant Algeria independence threatened a military coup. Charles de Gaulle, a French World War II hero, kept France from becoming a military dictatorship by agreeing to become the first Prime Minister of the Fifth Republic, which was formed around a strengthened executive role to ensure social order. The postwar period was also a time of chaos for the French film industry, which seemed to have outgrown poetic realism, but lacked a clear, new direction.

In 1944, when the war in Europe ended, the new French government organized The Committee for the Liberation of French Cinema, which offered financial support to producers for refurbishing theaters and other improvements that would revitalize the French film industry. But there was no immediate resurgence of cinematic creativity. Directors of this period have been accused of making nostalgic films instead of giving France the new cinema it needed to examine the country's postwar realities. It would be best for you to look at the films of this period accused of nostalgia to determine for yourself their value, including those directed by veterans such as Claude Autant-Lara, Jean Delannoy, and René Clement. For contrast, you may want to search out films made in postwar France that did show some signs of vitality and innovation: the work of Jacques Becker, Robert Bresson, and Henri-Georges Clouzot. Their films about working class and marginalized people reflect in indirect ways the hardships of wartime France, presenting these lives with an artistry akin to that of the poetic realists, although in each case modified by a the knowledge of the brutality that had surfaced during the war.

For example, Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*, aka *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, 1951, in telling the story of a poor cleric, explored an austere monastic spiritualism, or rejection of the temptations of the material world to achieve purity of soul, that diverged sharply from the lush and lyrical humanism of Renoir and Vigo. Why, do you imagine, was Bresson's imagination captivated by renunciation of worldly pleasures at this point in history? In *The Wages of Fear* aka *Le salaire de la peur* (Dir. Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1953) reflects the instability of a war-torn country still in chaos through the lives of truck drivers transporting nitro-glycerin in trucks that are not fitted with the necessary brakes. At the same time, however,

the winds of change also brought with them some exuberant new cinematic experimentation. Jacques Tati, one of the most innovative directors ever to pick up a camera, filmed *Jour de Fête* (1949) and *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* aka *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (1953), the adventures of completely eccentric, but nevertheless ordinary, people (like postal workers) on vacation. In these lighthearted films, Tati pioneered funny and original uses of sound and visual images outside of the studio setting, on location. The sound of a screen door opening and closing became a major narrative event. But, perhaps, the most unique director of this period was Jean Cocteau, who after many years of experimenting with surrealism in theater, finally found his cinematic voice. In Cocteau's surrealist voyages into the unconscious in *Beauty and the Beast* aka *La Belle et la Bête* (1946); *Orpheus* aka *Orphée* (1950); and *The Testament of Orpheus* aka *Le testament d' Orphée* (1960), he spoke with personal intensity, from the deepest part of his being, about the life of an artist. But some critics believe he was also speaking in an indirect, dreamlike way of his experience of World War II. As you look at the films of Jean Cocteau, you may want to consider their social implications as well as their obvious psychological meaning.

Orpheus aka *Orphée* (1950)

How do you film the region of dreams?

You are looking at an image of a man, his rubber gloves, and his mirror. Separately, what could be more ordinary than these items? Yet put together in this manner, there is nothing ordinary about them or this strange image. It turns the spectator, you, into Orpheus (Jean Marais) because Cocteau has shot this scene from Orpheus's point of view. It is as though his reflection in the mirror were ours, and he is about to do something really unexpected with those gloves. Heurtebise (François Périer), the servant of Death (Maria Casares) is teaching Orpheus to use the rubber gloves to penetrate the mirror so that he can move through it into a fantastic realm known as the Underworld. This image, with its use of the mirror as a door into death, presents death to the audience as another level of reality. It is typical of *Orpheus*, and of the surreal work of Jean Cocteau in general, that time and space are altered, as in dreams, so that people and objects are transported from one place to another through magical means.

In *Orpheus*, Cocteau justifies his enchanted picture of the world by basing the film on the story of his favorite mythological figure, the musician Orpheus, whose wife, Eurydice, was taken from him by Death. The myth had great appeal for Cocteau, because it was about an artist, and Cocteau was very interested in ideas about the nature of art and the artist. In the ancient Greek myth, after Eurydice dies from a snakebite, Orpheus plays songs of such beauty and sorrow as a result that the gods of the underworld are filled with pity and allow him to take her back to the world of the living. The myth also describes how Orpheus is warned that if he looks back at Eurydice as they leave the underworld, he will lose her again, forever. But Orpheus does turn to look back and death reclaims his wife. What does this

FIGURE 1.6 From *Orpheus* aka *Orphée* (Dir. Jean Cocteau, 1950). B&W. 95 mins. You are looking at a striking mirror image of Orpheus (Jean Marais) photographed from his point of view. You see what he sees in front of him through his outstretched hands encased in shiny rubber gloves. To the left side of the frame, partially hidden by Orpheus's gloved hands, is Heurtebise (François Périer), one of the servants of Death (Maria Casares), whom you will meet in this film in the shape of a sophisticated woman.

tell you about the original myth's depiction of the relationship between art, life, and death? Cocteau takes a modern approach to this myth and the powers of the artist.

In Cocteau's *Orpheus*, Eurydice (Marie Dea) is endangered not by a snake, but by the obsession of her husband Orpheus, a twentieth-century poet, with technology. Cocteau's Orpheus is enthralled by messages broadcast over the radio of the car owned by a dark haired, very fashionable woman called The Princess, whom Orpheus learns is actually Death; the owner of the seductive technology that tears Orpheus from his wife. It might be interesting for you to ponder the way Cocteau has changed the myth. His story is still about art, life, and Death, but he pits a pregnant woman against a sophisticated, feminized technology. What is Cocteau saying about the twentieth century? Might the changes he made in the myth have something to do with the massive increase of technology of death that he saw during World War II? Another change is that while Cocteau's Orpheus is beautiful as he is in the Greek myth, he is also absurd, which was not true of the old Greek

story. Cocteau's Orpheus looks foolish when we find him keeping his ear to the radio in Death's car, and bizarre walking through mirrors using her special pair of rubber gloves. You also might find that Orpheus's use of rubber gloves to rescue his wife has something comic about it.

Because Cocteau was using film to retell the story of Orpheus, his description of death had to be more visual and more specific. But the oddities of Cocteau's picture of Hell go beyond the needs of a visual medium. The director tantalizes his audience with some very unusual suggestions about his Underworld. First, we find that the woman Orpheus believed to be Death is only one "shape" of death. We also discover that the part of the underworld Orpheus visits looks like the bombed-out streets of Europe after World War II, and that it is ruled by bureaucratic committees – men in suits – who punish the shapes of Death and their servants very harshly for disobeying the rules. It turns out that The Princess is going to be punished for taking Orpheus's wife, since she had official orders to take only Orpheus. As Orpheus and Eurydice escape to their home and prepare to live a normal married life, The Princess and her servant are escorted through the Underworld deeper into Hell, where some horrible tortures too terrible to speak of await them.

Watching a film like *Orpheus* is something like having a dream. If you enjoy dreams, you can enjoy *Orpheus* if you let it unfold for you, taking in its strangeness the way you accept the shifts in time and space in your dreams and the sudden appearance of **incongruous** objects and locations, that is things and places that are not where and what you expect them to be. But, you may be thinking, this isn't a dream; films are supposed to mean something. And you're right. But dreams mean something too. How do people go about discovering their meaning? Usually, we try to figure out the poetic associations of the images and words in our dreams. In *Orpheus*, you can start by puzzling out the associations between the Underworld and what lies under our rational minds, the subconscious. Why does Orpheus have to go into his subconscious to cure his ruined relationship to his wife? It is interesting that Orpheus, a poet, is seduced by technology away from the life-giving powers of his wife, who can create a baby inside herself. We don't usually think of poets that way. Even more interesting, why is a mirror Orpheus's door to the place where he will reunite with his wife? Mirrors are associated with narcissism. Why does Orpheus have to submerge himself in a narcissistic experience to overcome the division he has created between himself and his wife? You would expect that the solution to his problem would be separating himself from overly intense self-love in order to reach out to a more productive and open idea of love. There are many enigmas in Cocteau's films.

Thinking about what world is under your ordinary life might lead you to the subconscious, and this is an idea that works in understanding Cocteau's film. It is a modern idea that the ancient Greeks were not thinking of when they talked about Hades and the abduction of Eurydice. By turning the subconscious into a place, the Underworld, that Orpheus can magically visit, Cocteau finds a way to make an action plot about the process of looking inward into a disturbed person. Is Cocteau's surreal drama a way to bring health to our imaginative lives by showing us

Orpheus's illness? Or does Cocteau use film to draw us into the same kinds of delusions that Orpheus suffers? These are interesting questions because they go to the root of how art functions in society. Is it a healthy encounter with our hidden needs and wishes? Or pathological excess? By letting his own Underworld/imagination/subconscious run freely with dreamlike images, Cocteau gave French cinema a push in the direction of surrealism, and offered his audience the chance to ponder these questions. But although he remains one of the most important filmmakers of his period, he didn't determine the future of French film.

The New Wave

In the early 1950s, critics and filmmakers opened up a lively conversation about what was perceived – despite the interesting work of Cocteau, Becker, Bresson, and Clouzot – to be the generally stagnant state of French cinema. Paradoxically, the lack of vitality was blamed on the critical and commercial *success* of what has come to be known as "the tradition of quality," encouraged by postwar French government support for the arts. In 1953, the French legislature renewed the funding for the cinema it had begun right after the war. In order to receive a stipend, some filmmakers began to adapt for the screen classical literature and stage plays that came with guaranteed pedigrees of quality. These films were beautifully produced and extremely popular with French and even world audiences. What, then, was the problem? A group of young, idealistic, and angry critics and artists opposed this tradition of quality because they felt it meant looking backward instead of forward to original ideas relevant to modern life. These young men and women clustered around a journal started by André Bazin in 1951, called *Cahiers* [notebooks] *du Cinéma*; they went on the attack, both by criticizing the tradition of quality and by making their own films without government grants.

Dubbed the New Wave by critic Pierre Billard in an article in *Arts*, a popular journal of the time, this diverse group of filmmakers included Agnès Varda and her husband Jacques Demy, and Claude Chabrol, whose film *Le beau Serge* (1959), about blighted lives in a small French town, is generally considered to be the first full-length New Wave feature. Other filmmakers in this group included Jacques Rivette, whose masterpiece *Paris Belongs to Us* aka *Paris nous appartient* (1960) was a major influence on developments to come; and Eric Rohmer, even though he did not become an international name until 1969 with his film *My Night at Maud's* aka *Ma nuit chez Maude*. But the filmmakers of the New Wave who rocked French and international film were Alain Resnais, François Truffaut, and Jean-Luc Godard, whose film *Breathless* aka *À bout de souffle* (1960) was, if not the first important film of this period, the one with the greatest initial impact.

The New Wave war trumpet had already been sounded in 1948 in an article by a critic named Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: The Caméra-Stylo," published in *L'Écran français* [The French screen]. In this essay, Astruc

compared the camera to a pen (*stylo*), paving the way for a new relationship between director and film that would make film a highly personal statement. Directors who use the camera as a pen, a personal vehicle of expression, would come to be called **auteurs**, suggesting the use film as a form of primary creation. The auteur was contrasted by New Wave critics with the kind of a director who serves the vision of someone else, be it a producer or a long dead classical writer. This other kind of director was called a **metteur-en-scène**, a craftsman who merely sets the scene. In 1954, François Truffaut wrote an essay in *Cahiers du cinema*, "A Certain Tendency of French Cinema," that echoed Astruc's ideas, but in a more explosive, argumentative, or **polemical** vein. He called the directors of films of quality slaves to literature who were incapable of exploring the real possibilities of cinema. There was protracted open warfare in the press between these two groups of filmmakers. The New Wave won that battle.

While there are enormous differences among Truffaut, Godard, Renais, Varda, Demy, Rivette, Chabrol, and Rohmer, all identified as New Wave auteurs, they all share certain cinematic ideals, which have shaped the future of cinema around the world. They called attention to and named as the auteur, the director, who creates the story of the film and, ideally, does not adapt literary material, or even use a finished script, but rather improvises. Ideally, the auteur will not use sets, artificial lighting, the controlled production of sound in a studio, or dubbing, that is, dialogue later added to the film by the editor. Ideally, a New Wave auteur shoots on location using available lighting, and direct sound recording – an interesting set of principles. The auteur philosophy of the New Wave, however, would never have seen any practical implementation without the availability of the Arriflex camera, an important advance in moving picture technology for its purposes. The Arriflex was a light camera, weighing 12lb, that had been introduced for use in shooting 35mm films in 1937. By 1952, there were Arriflex cameras for shooting in 16mm. Arriflex cameras were portable and could be handheld because of their weight; they were much quieter than previous handheld cameras, which were hand-wound springwork contraptions that were as noisy as they were unwieldy, and thus caused trouble for the recording of dialogue. Arriflex cameras allowed the New Wave directors to move easily in location settings and to give their films a personal stamp by spontaneously capturing images that were much more difficult to catch with larger, heavier cameras. (Until the French caught up with technology that made possible on-site sound recording, however, the New Wave auteurs had to settle for dubbed sound.)

New Wave auteurs also preferred to work with nonprofessional actors, or those new to the profession. However, as directors continued to use certain actors, just as Gabin became a star of poetic realist films, stars of the New Wave emerged, including Brigitte Bardot, Anna Karina, Alain Delon, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Jean-Pierre Léaud, and perhaps the greatest and most internationally known movie icons of this group, Jeanne Moreau and Catherine Deneuve. Were women auteurs? Agnès Varda was a pioneer of the New Wave, but this period did not see a significant influx of women directors. Primarily, New Wave auteurs were men. In terms of longevity

and intensity, Jean-Luc Godard has emerged as the paradigm of the New Wave auteur, there at the beginning of this revolution in cinema and still shocking audiences with his innovative and personal films.

CASE STUDY

Jean-Luc Godard

Born: December 3, 1930, Paris, France

Select Filmography

Breathless aka *A bout de soufflé* (1960)
A Woman is a Woman aka *Une femme est une femme* (1961)
My Life to Live aka *Vivre sa vie: Film en douze tableaux* (1962)
The Little Soldier aka *Le petit soldat* (1963)
Contempt aka *Le mépris* (1963)
Band of Outsiders aka *Bande à part* (1964)
Alphaville aka *Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution* (1965)
Pierrot le fou (1965)
Weekend aka *Le week-end* (1967)
Tout va bien (1972)
Hail Mary aka "*Je vous salue, Marie*" (1985)
New Wave aka *Nouvelle vague* (1990)
Notre musique (2004)

Though born in Paris, Jean-Luc Godard, the son of an upper-middle-class Franco-Swiss family, was raised in Switzerland. He attended university at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he studied ethnology, but was distracted from his studies by a growing interest in film. At first, his family supported him, but by the time he was 21 years old they stopped giving him money. Refusing to be forced into a more "suitable" profession for a young bourgeois, Godard continued to follow his interest in cinema, though he sometimes had to steal food and money to survive. By 1952, Godard was writing criticism for *Cahiers du Cinéma*. After achieving several major successes with feature films in the early 1960s, especially *Breathless*, *My Life to Live*, *Alphaville*, *Contempt*, and *Weekend*, he became impatient with the indirectness of fictional films. For much of the 1970s, he belonged to a group of revolutionary filmmakers called the DzigaVertov Group, in honor of the great Soviet documentary filmmaker (see Chapter 2). These filmmakers abandoned the notion of the auteur, and instead made films in the style of the New Wave that they claimed represented the political will

of their action group. Although Godard has since returned to making fictional feature films as an auteur, he has increasingly blended documentary with fiction as a means of pushing storytelling toward the exposure of real life. For example, in *Notre musique* (2004), Godard juxtaposes news footage of various twentieth-century wars with footage from feature films about war and a story about a young Israeli journalist who is in despair over the incessant warfare in her country.

Then and now, Godard rarely begins a project with a script, often writing pages the day before filming is to take place, and simply improvising as he is about to shoot. Taking his camera and sound equipment into the street, he rarely uses sets or artificial lighting, and only in rare cases does he use stars, a prominent exception being *Contempt* (1967), in which he featured internationally known "sex kitten" Brigitte Bardot and American star Jack Palance, whose reputation as a perennial villain he used to advantage in the role of Jeremy Prokosh, a repulsive Hollywood producer. In the same film, legendary German director Fritz Lang played himself in the fictionalized situation of working for the awful Prokosh. The satire of Hollywood-influenced filmmaking in *Contempt* is a good example of how Godard's blend of fiction and reality conveys his truths about the politics of life and art. Godard's complicated relationship to Hollywood has been visible from his very first film, especially in his first great success, *Breathless*.

Breathless aka *À bout de souffle* (1960)

What is a New Wave crime thriller?

You are watching Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo), a thief, a liar, and a murderer – one of the New Wave's first major **antiheroes**, that is, a protagonist whose behavior goes against established norms. In fact, just before Michel pops into his friend's bedroom in this frame, he casually kills a motorcycle policeman. When Michel kills the policeman, he shows a strange, free-floating immorality. It's true that the policeman chases Michel because he is speeding, and he is driving a stolen car, but there doesn't really seem to be any motivation for Michel to take a man's life in this situation, and the only thing that makes the murder possible is pure chance: Michel finds a pistol in the glove compartment of the stolen car. Living in the moment is typical of Michel, who is frequently dramatized as a free-spirited, playful adventurer. But our first impression of Michel's go-with-the-flow life is how deadly it can be. The New Wave is very interested in the freedom possible in modern culture, just as Hollywood is. But unlike Hollywood, the auteurs of the New Wave do not allow us to be seduced by the wild lives of their characters, no matter how charming they are.

In Figure 1.7, you see Michel's spontaneity in its most attractive form. Here, on a whim, Michel plays with light, creating a surreal, dreamlike, image in which a two-sided, handheld mirror reflects a perfect circle of light over his image in the dressing-table mirror, as if his face were scooped out and projected onto the other side of the small mirror he holds. This effect is created without studio technology,

FIGURE 1.7 From *Breathless* aka *À bout de souffle* (Dir. Jean Luc Godard, 1960). B&W. 90 mins. Michel Poiccard (Jean Paul Belmondo) plays with two mirrors in the bedroom of a young woman from whom he has come to borrow money.

using the light available in this location, one of the many small, grungy apartments inhabited by young people in Paris. This shot might well have been suggested to Godard by accident, when actor Belmondo was playing around with the props while waiting to shoot the scene. Since throughout *Breathless* Godard plays with light and mirrors, there seems to be an identification between the film's criminal protagonist and the director. There is a kind of **reflexivity** here, that is, a way in which the story of the film is also in some ways a meditation on how the film was made. This gives us a clue to how Godard understood the innovation in filmmaking of which he was a part. His hero is an overaged adolescent in impossible conflict with society, yet he is also a sexy breath of fresh air, like Jean Renoir's Boudu, but much more dangerous.

Seconds after Michel puts down the small mirror, he looks into his reflection in the large mirror over the dressing table and makes a series of faces in imitation of the American movie star Humphrey Bogart. Here is another aspect of the New Wave; its surprising love for some aspects of Hollywood movies. You may well be wondering how a group of filmmakers dedicated to a break with the studio system can idolize American film, the epitome of factory filmmaking. However, the New Wave critics at *Cahiers du cinéma* identified several Hollywood directors whom they asserted

were actually auteurs, despite studio pressures to conform. This list included Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, John Ford, and Nicholas Ray. At the same time, some American stars, like Bogart, were also honored by New Wave directors for radiating a genuine humanity, like that of Jean Gabin, despite the usual artificiality of the Hollywood celebrity. Then why didn't Godard use Gabin in *Breathless*? One possible answer is that Gabin represented a traditional man of the working class while "Bogie" was the paradigm of the modern loner, which is what Michel Poiccard is. Gabin always suggested the bonds that tied him to his class, but class solidarity doesn't exist in *Breathless*. In fact, there isn't much ordinary friendship here either. Michel steals money from the girl he is visiting, as soon as he is sure she can't see him.

While *Breathless* honors great American movies and stars, there is also a strong negative aspect to things American as represented by Patricia Franchini (Jean Seberg), the American girl living in Paris with whom Michel is in love. At the end of the film, after all their romantic adventures, Patricia betrays Michel to the police on the spur of the moment, the way Michel killed the policeman. Michel has spent the movie trying to get some money that a friend owes him so that he can take Patricia to Italy. Patricia has seemed loyal, but suddenly she lets the police know where Michel is. When she confesses to Michel what she has done, she explains that she did it because she doesn't love him. If we are stunned by this bizarre way of dumping a boyfriend, what happens next is even more peculiar. Michel decides that he doesn't feel like running away just at that moment; he's tired. Then when the police arrive, a chance event dooms him. Without any warning, the man who owes Michel money brings it to him and insists Michel take a gun to defend himself from the police. Because Michel is holding a gun, even though he has no intention of firing, the police shoot and mortally wound him.

It is hard to keep from wondering what would have happened if Michel *had* felt like escaping on that day, or if his friend hadn't shown up or given him a gun, or if, to begin with, he hadn't felt like shooting the policeman who tried to give him a traffic ticket. In how many Hollywood crime films does the outcome hinge on whims like these? Michel dies in the middle of the street with Patricia looking on. If you are like most people, you will have difficulty figuring out what she feels as she gazes at him. She never says she is sorry, but when Michel is dead she stares directly into the camera and then violently turns the back of her head to it and us, an unusual action for a movie character; they face the camera to convey feelings and perhaps thoughts. What does Patricia want to conceal from the camera?

Just as improvisation and using a camera on the streets of Paris – where much less can be controlled than on a studio set – are central to the way New Wave films were made, so chance was often central to the events of the New Wave story. You may want to think about the role of chance in other New Wave films you see. Is part of the New Wave rebellion against the tradition of quality based on a sense that life is absurd, not rational or understandable? Patricia and Michel never know where they are going or why. However, if you examine the film for clues to help you understand the lives of Patricia and Michel, you may come up with many ideas of your own about them. Is there too much freedom in the modern world, epitomized

by the liberated American woman? Do Michel and Patricia lack the traditional limits that might have saved them? At the same time, even though this is a thriller, it grants the audience a lot of freedom in refusing to explain what most thrillers carefully explain. Do you feel that you have too much freedom as a spectator? Would you prefer Godard to tell you clearly why Patricia ends up betraying Michel?

Godard clearly has no interest in that kind of convention. Although it would have been very easy to tell the story of *Breathless* using a tightly structured Hollywood formula, Godard places both audience and characters in states of radical uncertainty. Even the camerawork imitates the casual glances of Michel and Patricia, the natural motion of the eyes that André Bazin believed made for the best cinema, not the careful Hollywood framing and editing of shots that focus on what is essential to the plot. If you find Godard annoying, you may also find that you respect his desire to distance himself from the way Hollywood audiences are trained to enter into the world of a thriller that is as different as possible from ordinary life. *Breathless* is a thriller that is as similar as possible to the unpredictable nature of reality. Is Godard showing a troubling resemblance between the ways that both the flow of life and crime upset cultural expectations of control and threaten the rules we set for ourselves?

FIGURE 1.8 From *My Life to Live* aka *Vivre sa vie* (Dir. Jean Luc Godard, 1960.) B&W. 85 mins. Nana (Anna Karina) looks right into the camera instead of at the old philosopher she is talking to in a Paris bistro.

My Life to Live aka *Vivre sa vie* (1960)

The New Wave does modern women.

Freedom, chance, women, and cinematic reflexivity are also central to *My Life to Live*, as you can see if you look carefully at this frame of Anna Karina, not only on the page, but in the film itself. Karina became one of the faces of the New Wave as Godard's favorite actress, for a while. Here, playing Nana, the protagonist of *My Life to Live*, she looks directly at the camera, disrupting her conversation with an older gentleman, a philosopher, whom she has met by chance in a Paris bistro. They are discussing, of all things, the difficulty of using language, quite an intellectual subject, considering that Nana is a pretty, uneducated prostitute. Playing against audience expectations, Godard shows her speaking of the ideas of philosophers from Plato to those of the seventeenth century, instead of trying to solicit the man as a client. And suddenly Nana turns deliberately to the camera. Her silent glance seems to contain some meaning, but what is it? Since Nana has told her new friend that she wishes she could live in silence, this can be read as a test of whether such a life is possible. The unidentified man thinks it is not. You may agree with him as you are trying to figure out what Nana's gaze in your direction means. But there is another issue here. In looking at you, Nana is breaking the illusion of the film. Except in some comedies and in experimental films, movie characters do not acknowledge the presence of the audience. To do so is to remove the viewer from the make-believe situation. Godard interferes with your engagement with the film to make you think. Is Nana acting out the failure of language and fiction to communicate? Does she need to break away from both of them to try to do better? When silence doesn't work and she slips back into the film, is this a statement of hopelessness?

Meaning is Nana's problem throughout the film, just as it is Godard's. Both Nana and Godard are involved in reflexivity, film talking about itself, that is, similar to what we saw in *Breathless*. But in this film the tension between fiction and documentary is much greater. Godard has even more trouble keeping Nana inside the film than he had with Patricia and Michel. Nana escapes from the film's fiction several times to stand outside the process of filmmaking by talking to the camera. Why does Godard want to create a film that isn't sure it wants to be fiction? Is this because Godard himself is impatient with the categories that people ordinarily use to order the world? In many ways, Nana's story is about the human dilemma of finding social organization unsatisfactory; and it reflects Godard's dissatisfaction with society.

In *Breathless*, Godard made a connection between himself and a criminal. Here he appears to identify with a woman who cannot define her identity or her role. When *My Life to Live* begins, Nana is breaking up with her husband, Paul (André S. Labarthe), with whom she is leaving their little son. Their conversation suggests that Nana is an early 1960s feminist. She wants to be free to pursue a career and feels that Paul doesn't respect her ambition. But as the film unfolds, we see that Nana's ambitions do not lead her toward situations that most feminists would seek.

Initially, she wants to act in films and can't get anywhere, so to support herself, she becomes a prostitute. Godard makes every effort to avoid the glamour that Hollywood often associates with prostitution, and suggests that in her struggle for independence Nana becomes increasingly exploited by men. When we see Nana being taught the rules of sex work by her pimp, Raoul (Saddy Rebot), nothing could be less sexy, except the scenes in which we see Nana with her clients. How would you describe Godard's colorless portrayal of a prostitute's work in these scenes? Perhaps Nana turns toward the kind of sophisticated ideas that she exchanges with the stranger in the bistro described above because she is so bored with mechanical sex. When she meets a young man she wants to try living with, the attraction is also a passion for art and ideas, not only sex. But just as Nana is about to tell Raoul that she wants to leave her job, he decides to sell her to another pimp. The transfer of Nana to her new owner turns violent and Nana is killed accidentally in the crossfire between the two gangsters. She has become nothing more than product on the market, and a disposable one at that. Nana's shocking, pointless sudden death may remind you of Michel's death in *Breathless*.

Some audiences become furious at Godard for doing everything he can in *My Life to Live* to avoid the things that usually provide pleasure in movies. The film is in black and white. Nana, though extremely beautiful and unpredictable, is hard to care about. She shows little concern for her son, lies and cheats, and never uses her freedom to accomplish anything significant. Moreover, Godard often makes us think about what he is doing with his camera instead of about her story. In the opening frame, he introduces us to Nana so that we can only see her **backlit** in such a way that her features are veiled by shadows. **Backlighting** means leaving the space in front of the actor and the space in which she is standing unlit and using lights only in back of the figure. This is usually used to create a romantic halo of light around the slightly darkened head. Here, backlighting makes Nana confusing, not romantic. Worse, when Nana dies at the end without the preparation or fanfare that usually accompanies the death of a film's main character, you may blame Godard for forcing you to make this trip with Nana, when it all comes to nothing.

But with this very thought, you place yourself in a position to appreciate what Godard is trying to do as an auteur. Instead of giving you either the upbeat or tragic ending you expect, he gives you a sudden death that shows Nana's individual life as disposable in a modern, materialistic society, pushing fiction as far toward documentary filmmaking as he can at the moment. (Anyone who has ever had a fight with an automated telephone system has known the feeling that individuals count for little, given the way things are organized today.) Is it really *her* life to live? Or does Godard show a world in which individuals are inevitably overwhelmed by larger impersonal forces? Might his abandonment of conventional story structure be considered a helpful recognition of our experience of modern meaninglessness that is ignored by traditional movies? Or does he fail his responsibilities as an artist to give a shape to human experiences of all kinds? Godard is more extreme than most New Wave filmmakers in pushing the envelope, but each one in his or her own way avoids making the movies into a comforting, effortless escapist fantasy.

Perhaps looking at other New Wave directors will help you gain perspective on what these filmmakers were trying to accomplish.

Hiroshima, Mon Amour (1959)

How does the New Wave go political?

In this frame you can see the last hours of an interracial romance between a French film actress, Elle, and a Japanese architect, Lui. Because these are not real names – in French, the words mean "she" and "he" – you may get the feeling that these abstractions are pointing the film toward an abstract message. This impression may be supported by the setting of the film is Hiroshima, where, in many ways, World War II ended. As you may know, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the two Japanese cities on which, in 1945, the American Air Force dropped the first atomic bombs, vaporizing everything at ground zero, and horribly killing and maiming civilians for miles around. The bombs accomplished the goals of the Americans; Japan surrendered to the Allied forces of the United States, Great Britain, Russia, and France shortly afterward. But because of the terrible price Japan paid, there has been a great deal

FIGURE 1.9 From *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (Dir. Alain Resnais, 1959). B&W. 90 mins. The heroine (Emanuelle Riva), known as Elle ("she" in French), sits on a bench with her lover (Eiji Okada,) known as Lui ("he" in French). They are about to part, probably forever, and between them sits an old woman, who wonders what is going on between them.

of discussion about whether it was ethical for the United States to inflict so much damage on civilians to win the war. Hiroshima has since been the center of peace protests and antiwar movements. The title *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* sums up the strangeness of the film, which is both about war atrocities and love, and tells the story of a brief love affair between a French actress who has come to Hiroshima to make an antiwar movie and a Japanese architect who lives in the city.

As you see in Figure 1.9, if the names are abstract, the setting is very real and simply photographed. There is even a comic element here in the innocent confusion of an old peasant woman stuck between the two highly sophisticated protagonists. The story of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is also simple. On the last day of shooting a film in Hiroshima, Elle sleeps with Lui, a Japanese architect whom she has met by chance. They are each happily married and ultimately they must part, probably never to see each other again. But they believe that they will never forget meeting each other. What has drawn them so strongly to each other after only a couple of nights together? The film never answers this question, but director Resnais strongly suggests that it is through this love affair, unimportant in the grand scheme of things, that they finally find a way to escape from the nightmare of their histories.

At the beginning of the movie, while they are entwined, naked, in each other's arms, Lui insists that Elle knows nothing about the catastrophic days after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Elle insists that she has seen everything there is to see about it in her four visits to the Hiroshima museum. It is an odd juxtaposition, sexual embrace and this kind of conversation, but it accurately predicts what the film is about: the relationship between the personal and the political. Lui lost his family when Hiroshima was bombed. In her little town in France, Nevers, Elle had a love affair with a German soldier who died in her arms from a sniper's bullet. Afterward, she was punished severely by the town for consorting with the enemy. The connection between Elle and Lui seems to be that the emotional pain of World War II is still alive for each of them.

Yet the film focuses on the sexual affair instead of arguing the pros and cons of dropping the bomb on Hiroshima, about which there is still great debate; or passing judgment on Elle's fraternization with the enemy. Director Resnais chooses this way of telling his story because he is not interested in abstract questions, but rather in the personal dilemmas of how it is possible to communicate the horror of such experiences to people who were not there, and to keep the memory alive so that people will not forget those experiences and perhaps can learn from them. He is also telling the story of how people go on living after deep suffering. Do you think that a museum, even one that contains film of the days following the bomb blast, can really make anyone understand what took place in the Hiroshima conflagration? Lui doesn't. And if Elle believes that she understands Hiroshima, she doesn't believe that Lui can understand what she suffered as a young girl in Nevers.

Elle is also filled with sorrow because she is losing the memory of her love affair with the young German soldier as time passes. Elle has struggled not to forget him, but she has, which is almost as gut-wrenching to her as the pain of her memories of being punished for loving him. At the end of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, when it

is almost time for her to go to the airport, Elle screams at Lui, in agony, "I'll forget you. I'm forgetting you already!" She abruptly calms down as they gaze into each other's eyes and she tells him, "Hiroshima, that's your name." He agrees and adds, "your name is Nevers. Nevers in France." This is a moment of satisfaction for them both. But what is it? Is it possible that somehow communication has taken place, that they each finally know what the other has been through, that each is now able to lay to rest the unthinkable suffering of the past?

If so, how? Resnais offers a very personal answer to this question. He believes that by breaking the rules of marital fidelity and having an affair, this man and this woman have found what they cannot find inside the limits of their happy, respectable lives. Are you convinced? Do you think that the healing each needed had to take place outside of their normal lives and across the boundaries of ethnic difference? What do you know of personal lives scarred by a cultural event? We can say that families who lose loved ones in a war, a terrorist attack, or a natural disaster have had that kind of experience. Similarly, anyone who has wrongfully been imprisoned and families who have lost loved ones who were wrongfully executed can say the same. What about people who, after years of service to a corporation, are cheated out of their pensions? What about people who have been infected with the AIDS virus because of tainted blood transfusions administered by a corrupt or incompetent health system? Have you ever wondered how anyone can deal with that kind of suffering? Do you think anyone can make peace with that kind of nightmare of history? These are certainly not questions that Hollywood wants to deal with, unless it tells a tale of violent revenge which suggests that somehow wrongs can be made right again by the use of force. This film never considers the solution of "killing the bad guys" that obsesses Hollywood-influenced stories about social catastrophes. Rather it suggests the solace of human understanding that is possible when we are free of normal limits. What kind of politics is this?

FIGURE 1.10 From *Jules and Jim* aka *Jules et Jim* (Dir. François Truffaut, 1962). B&W. 105 mins. Cathérine (Jeanne Moreau), in white silk pajamas, points a gun at her lover, Jim, who is not seen in this image.

Jules and Jim aka *Jules et Jim* (1962)

What are the erotics of the New Wave?

You are looking at Jeanne Moreau, the New Wave's most famous actress, not only in France, but throughout the world. It was *Jules and Jim*, directed by New Wave director François Truffaut, that introduced Moreau as a major star, with a New Wave difference. Look carefully: she belongs to none of the standard types of women expected onscreen at that time: the vamp, the wife, or the **ingénue**, or innocent young girl. Rather, in Truffaut's film, Moreau projects an image that blends sexuality, intelligence, independence, and unpredictability. Moreau, who is not beautiful in the usual sense, falls outside all of the established categories of cinematic womanhood. Anna Karina, who is typically beautiful, was used by Godard in *My Life to Live* to break out of the category of ingénue she could have easily played, but there is no category that could conceivably have contained Moreau, especially after *Jules and Jim*. The image above is a good example of her unique screen presence. Wearing the white silk pajamas of the ingénue, placed in a bedroom, the location of the sexually experienced woman, she unpredictably threatens her lover with a pistol. There is nothing of the feminine cliché of softness or modesty in her bearing as she takes aim, but this conflicts with the delicate, flowing fabric of her clothing.

Despite the attention of the title to the two central men in *Jules and Jim*, this film is about Cathérine, a woman who cannot be controlled and is not willing to control herself. Again, as in most New Wave films, *Jules and Jim* tells a story of people living on the edge, permitting themselves an unusual amount of freedom. Jules (Oscar Werner) is German and Jim (Henri Serre) is French; like Lui and Elle in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* they are citizens of countries that have a difficult history of conflict with each other. Yet, they are extremely close, perhaps closer than most ordinary male friendships. Some students believe that they are gay. You will need to judge for yourself whether they use their love for the same woman, Catherine, to indirectly consummate their desire for each other, or whether, as in the characterization of Baptiste in *Children of Paradise*, this is an example of the expansive definition of male heterosexuality in French cinema. Because Cathérine loves both of them, they become a ménage à trois, a sexually intimate relationship among three people rather than between two.

If Cathérine cannot be classified, the men can: Jules is the husband, while Jim is the free-living lover. At times, Cathérine wants the security of a husband's love, at others the excitement of an adventurous lover. Cathérine and Jules have a daughter, but this changes nothing for Cathérine. She even entertains other lovers on the side. When Jim no longer wants to play Cathérine's game, he tells her that he is going to marry a longtime girlfriend who is natural 'wife material.' At first Cathérine is merely teary-eyed, but suddenly her mood changes and she pulls a gun on him, as we see above. Jim escapes, but soon after, the three meet again in one of those New Wave accidents that you are now familiar with, and Cathérine invites Jim to drive

with her, telling Jules to "watch carefully." Smiling, Cathérine drives her car off the end of a broken jetty with Jim in the passenger seat. He makes no attempt to escape this time, and they both die. Cathérine's moods, which blow through her like hurricanes, suddenly propel her to death along with Jim.

Many decades have passed since director Truffaut created this unusual triangle. Do you find Cathérine and her domestic arrangements as unusual, shocking, and possibly enraging as they would have been in 1962? Or do you consider *Jules and Jim* just another feminist film? Now, try thinking in terms of your knowledge of the New Wave; is this a feminist film at all? It certainly shows us a woman who grants herself the kind of erotic freedom we usually associate with men, but do you think Truffaut has structured this film to encourage us to think of the plight of women in society? In many ways, Truffaut seems to use Cathérine to delve into the erotic problems that women cause men. Moreover, doesn't Cathérine's erotic spontaneity make her part of the brother and sisterhood of New Wave protagonists who suffer not from sexism but from the modern disappearance of traditional limits and guidelines, frequently bringing about death for themselves and others?

Beyond the New Wave

The New Wave is generally thought to have ended in 1968. Of the three following statements, which do you think sums up its legacy?

A. The New Wave changed French film forever.
B. The New Wave was followed by a backlash that returned to old movie practices.
C. Both of the above.

Choose C. The uncompromising politics of filmmakers like those in the Dziga Vertov Group, which you have already heard about in the Jean-Luc Godard case study, never became popular; hardcore films of this type remain a feature primarily of the 1970s. However, location shooting and interest in nonprofessional actors and available light became a permanent part of filmmaking in France, and around the world, as a result of the New Wave. So did treating previously taboo subjects, like unheroic aspects of French behavior during World War II and in French territories in Africa. You may wish to look into the history of these political issues to better understand the post-New Wave movies that discussed the pro-Fascist sympathies of many French people during World War II: *The Sorrow and the Pity* (Max Ophuls, 1971) and Claude Lanzmann's later *Shoah* (1985), both about the Holocaust. You may also want to look into the history of French imperialism in Africa to understand better Bertrand Tavernier's and Patrick Rotman's movie about the Algerian war, *La Guerre Sans Nom* (1992), which is critical of French colonial policies. But before long, French film returned to sentimental melodramas.

The 1980s saw a period of crisis for French cinema, which seemed to be losing the head of steam it had worked up during the New Wave. During this time, critics complained of a new upsurge of **nostalgia** films, that is, films that satisfy a popular longing for what seems to be a simpler, more understandable past. Called "heritage films," these productions seemed to bring back the legacy of the "films of quality" of the 1950s. Like films of quality, heritage films adapted old, reassuring stories taken from French literary classics and produced them as lush, color, star-filled spectacles that rivaled those of Hollywood. A defining film of this type is *Jean de Florette* (Dir. Claude Berri, 1986), a two-part, big-budget Technicolor adaptation of Marcel Pagnol's literary account of the life of a family in the Provence region of France. The first film, *Jean de Florette*, is about the destruction of Jean de Florette (Gerard Dépardieu) by his greedy neighbors, old César and his nephew Ugolin, played by the great French popular culture star Yves Montand, and Daniel Auteuil, who was a rising star. At the film's closure, only Jean's little daughter, Manon, knows the ugly truth about her father's death.

The second film, *Manon of the Springs* aka *Manon des sources* (1986), is about the revenge that the now grown-up and extremely beautiful Manon (Emanuelle Béart) exacts on the men who drove her father to his death. You may want to see this two-part film to discover for yourself what French critics mean by the term "nostalgia film." In the tradition of the New Wave, the two-part *Jean de Florette* certainly uses the natural terrain of Provence. You can almost smell the trees and feel the wind moving through them. What makes it backward looking, then? Some critics have written of its false hope of an ultimately just world. It turns out that Jean is actually the son that César didn't know he had. There is great pathos attached to César's discovery that he killed his own child and the heir he so desperately wanted. This kind of providential justice is a world away from the sense of modern meaninglessness in the films influenced by the New Wave. You might also want to look at *The Last Metro*, a film by François Truffaut, one of the star directors of the New Wave, who surprised everyone by making heritage films. *The Last Metro* is not based on literature, but some critics feel that it takes a sentimental look back at the resistance movement against the Nazis in Paris during World War II.

However, the 1980s also saw the development of **cinéma du look**, a "hip" movement in French film that features "cool," sometimes surreal, cinematography, a high-speed montage style, and visual effects influenced by the technical virtuosity of advertising. Cinéma du look often winked at the audience, proclaiming its "hipness" by making references to famous images or stars from well-known movies. Three of the directors most representative of cinéma du look are Jean-Jacques Beineix, Luc Besson, and Leos Carax. Cinéma du look was attacked fiercely by *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the film journal that had such a large part in creating the New Wave, for, as they believed, commercializing cinema by making it into nothing more than a shop window. Typical of this point of view is this comment by critic Marc Chevrie: "You don't look anymore, you simply recognize, as though you were leafing through a catalog." Is using the great Jeanne Moreau in a **cameo role**, a brief scene that capitalizes on her fame, as Luc Besson does in *La Femme Nikita* (1990), a way

of **commodifying** her, that is, turning her into a marketable object? Jean-Jacques Beineix responded to this kind of criticism by saying that he didn't care about the truth; his goal was to make cinema an art of seduction and magic. You can judge this controversy for yourself by screening Beineix's film *Diva* (1982), the first and still the most important film of cinéma du look.

Diva features a hip, interracial cast driving wildly around Paris on two different but overlapping quests. One group is trying to get hold of an illegally made tape of a famous soprano who does not permit recordings of her voice, worth a fortune to whoever can market it. The other group is trying to get its hands on a tape that would incriminate the corrupt police chief, who is actually a kingpin of the illegal drug trade. The stories cross often, causing car crashes and violence, getting in the way of a strange love story between Jules (Frédéric Andréi), a very young Frenchman, and Cynthia Hawkins (Wilhelmina Fernandez), the beautiful, older African-American soprano whose voice he secretly tapes. You may agree that *Diva*, despite its location shooting, turns Paris into a artificial object of beauty and intrigue, but does it contain an element of truth about modernity? Or is it too close to advertising slickness as *Cahiers* charged?

Another issue of post-New Wave film concerns the return of women to a vital place as French filmmakers in the 1980s and beyond. Agnès Varda, still a force in French cinema, was joined by numerous other French women in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, including Diane Kurys, Coline Serrau, Catherine Breillat, and Claire Denis. (Chantal Akerman, who is Belgian but Francophone, that is, French speaking, can be added to this list.) But there are questions about whether the films stake out territory for a school of feminist film. Diane Kurys's *Coup de Foudre* (1983) breaks ground as an examination of lesbian passion; however, Coline Serreau's *Three Men and a Cradle* aka *Trois hommes et un couffin* (1985) is a completely commercial comedy that was remade in Hollywood as *Three Men and a Baby* (1987). Agnès Varda, in films like *One Sings, The Other Doesn't* aka *L'une chante, l'autre pas* (1977) explicitly offers a feminine point of view, as do Breillat and Akerman in films like *36 Fillette* (1988) and *Jeanne Dielman: 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1985), respectively. However, in 1987, Akerman insisted that, at least in French culture, the idea of women's films is outdated: "There is no longer any ideological difference in France between cinema made by men and cinema made by women."

To test Akerman's assertion, let us look at *Beau travail* (1999), and ask whether the gender of its director, Claire Denis, is pertinent to our understanding of it. In fact, let us use Denis's *Beau travail* as a bellwether of the present state of French cinema. How does she treat the tensions that you now know have historically divided French filmmakers? As you think and comment about *Beau travail*, you can use the following checklist of oppositions to evaluate Denis as an inheritor of the rich history of French cinema:

1. Frame compositions and camera movement that imitate the human eye as opposed to montage.
2. Poetic realism as opposed to documentary; the tradition of quality; surrealism; the new wave; heritage films; and cinéma du look.

3. Stars as opposed to nonprofessional actors.
4. Well-crafted, studio-created effects as opposed to location shooting and spontaneity.
5. Adaptation of literary works as opposed to stories improvised for the screen.
6. Breaking taboos as opposed to recalling traditional values.
7. Documentary truth as opposed to technical virtuosity.
8. Competing with Hollywood on its own terms as opposed to subverting Hollywood practices.
9. Gendered perspective as opposed to gender-neutral film.

Beau travail aka *Good Job* (1999)

Where is French cinema now?

This image suggests the possibility of classifying *Beau Travail* as cinéma du look. It visualizes the central conflict of the film between Master Sergeant Galoup (Denis Lavant) and legionnaire Gilles Sentain (Colin Grégoire) through this "cool," stark, dreamlike image of contrasts between the sea and the land and this "hip" frame composition. These might almost be men on the moon. Also, like the films of cinéma du look, *Beau travail* makes sophisticated reference to other important films. For example, in this film about the rivalry between Galoup and Sentain, soldiers in a company of the French Foreign Legion stationed in Djibouti in East Africa, the Commandant is a man named Bruno Forestier, played by an actor named Michel

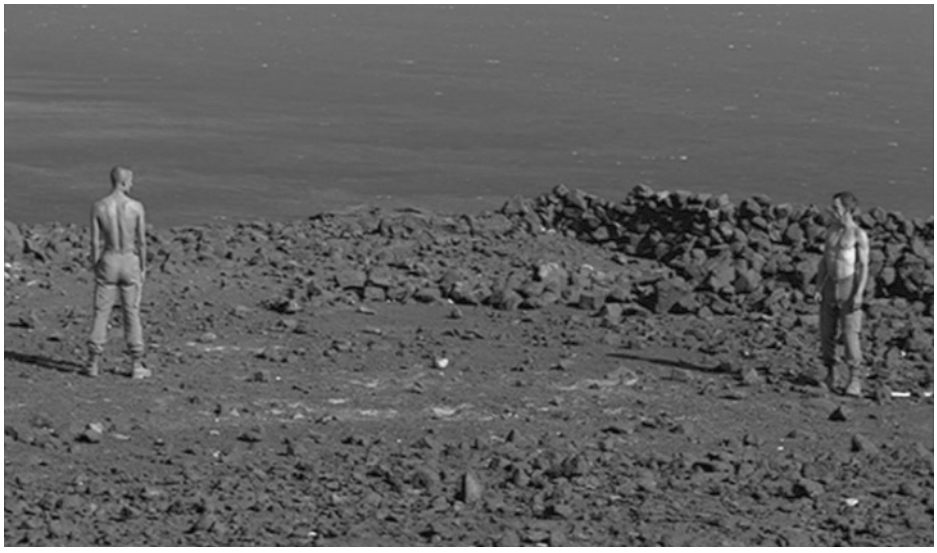

FIGURE 1.11 From *Beau travail* aka *Good Job* (Dir. Claire Denis, 1999). Color. 90 mins. In this frame, set on the coast of Djibouti in northeastern Africa, Gilles Sentain (Grégoire Colin), left frame, and Chief Master Sergeant Galoup (Denis Lavant), right frame, face off against each other in smoldering hostility. The extremely blue water makes a striking contrast to the almost colorless grey-brown, dry, arid land on which the men stand.

Subor. With this character, Denis quotes from *Le petit soldat* aka *The Little Soldier* (Jean Luc Godard, 1963), in which Subor also played a soldier of that name, who was stationed in Africa.

Moreover, as the sequence in which this frame occurs is played out, it takes on a surreal tone. (As you remember, cinéma du look often deals in surreal images.) You will find it impossible to know for sure whether the film is recording an external event or framing images of the internal conflict between the two men in this frame, Gilles Sentain, left frame and Galoup, right frame. Edited into a scene in which the entire company of legionnaires is eating lunch on the beach, this frame jumps out suddenly as Sentain and Galoup exchange hostile glances while they chew their food. A **jump cut**, a montage-edit lacking a logical transition between images, turns the unspoken anger between the two men into a physical confrontation. Suddenly Sentain and Galoup are visualized as the bookends of a landscape that pulsates with their fury at each other. Director Claire Denis creates a world of anger through the choreographed positions of their bodies placed as distantly from each other as the frame will allow. Is this a jump cut from one action to another? Or is it a fantasy of what the beach would look like if Sentain and Galoup played out their antagonism?

Yet, for all this, it would be a mistake to classify *Beau travail* as cinéma du look. Figure 1.11 is not a slick image of high-end automobiles and women wearing short plastic dresses, as we might find in Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Diva*, the definitive cinema du look film. This frame is not slick, but rather part of a striking, psychologically evocative sequence about men staking out territory in which the two move in an ever-narrowing circle toward each other. As the film cuts to closer and closer shots, we leave the long take and long shot of this frame, in which there is nothing but deep focus, for cuts of increasingly extreme close-ups of their furious faces. The sequence thus begins with a long take, of the kind that Jean Renoir liked to use, and then changes to a montage technique. Director Claire Denis uses a mixed language of film with a great concern for truths about societies of men without women, living a military life.

Beau travail could just as easily be labeled a heritage film because it is loosely based on *Billy Budd*, by Herman Melville, a great nineteenth-century story about the tensions that occur in all-male, or homosocial, subcultures. Like the heritage film, *Beau travail* is an adaptation of a literary classic, although Melville was American, and the French heritage film tended to be based on French literature. But Denis's film doesn't fit neatly into this category either. Rather than conveying the audience back to a more secure, idealized past, as heritage films do, *Beau Travail* exposes the viewer to the taboo subject of homoeroticism that is at the core of Melville's story. Melville's *Billy Budd* is about a beautiful young sailor who is persecuted for no clear reason by Claggert, a more experienced sailor with authority over the men. Melville makes it as clear as was possible in the nineteenth century that Claggert's animosity toward Budd is caused by his attempt to stifle a forbidden sexual attraction he feels toward him. In *Beau travail*, Galoup also falls into an inexplicable hatred for Gilles Sentain. Galoup himself is puzzled by his feeling that Sentain is a menace, even though he seems to be a brave, decent soldier. This growing anger, combined with the many images director Denis shows of perfect half-naked and sometimes fully naked

male bodies, create an erotic **subtext**, that is, an unspoken undercurrent, in this military, all-male situation, much as the words of *Billy Budd* create an erotic subtext.

Beau travail establishes as its focus the subtextual passions of a homosocial environment that, unchecked, can cause trouble. Galoup is ultimately responsible for Sentain's disappearance in the desert, and perhaps his death. As a result, Galoup is court-martialed for cruel and abusive behavior unbecoming a legionnaire, and discharged from the Legion. Told by Galoup as a memory, the story departs from the linear structure of the heritage film – and Melville's story – as Galoup shuttles back and forth not only between past and present, but also between his external reality and inner fantasies. This structure permits director Denis to contrast Galoup's life in the French city of Marseilles after he is discharged from the Legion with his life in the legion, both as a strict disciplinarian who wants desperately to have the good opinion of his Commandant, and as a man in relationship with a lovely North African girl. His lover involves him in the color and rhythm of African life that is the diametrical opposite of the almost colorless, harsh life of the Legion. Galoup's tender scenes with his girl complicate the subtext of homoeroticism, as do his scenes with Commandant Forestier; might his fraught relationship to Sentain have more to do with competition with him for Forestier's approval than with sexual desire? Does the fact that this film about male psychology in a homosocial environment, and the establishment of male identity, was directed by a woman who grew up in colonial Africa complicate the question still more? Is this a feminine understanding of men from a point of view that would not have been possible had a man directed it? Or, would you agree with Chantal Akerman that there would there be no ideological difference had *Beau travail* been conceived and directed by a man?

The final frames of the film are challenging. They look entirely real, but it is hard to believe that they are anything but an inner life given body by Galoup's fantasy, much like the visualized event in Figure 1.11. As the film is about to end, we see Sentain, barely conscious but alive, being cared for by a colorfully dressed, caring African woman. But the film gives us Galoup's point of view, and he doesn't know where Sentain is. Is this what he hopes happened to the rival toward whom he acted so cruelly? Then we see Galoup as a civilian carefully making a bed, across which he lies, placing his gun on his torso. A small muscle pulsates in Galoup's upper arm and the film cuts to Galoup, all by himself in the dance club he used to go to with his girl in Djibouti. Galoup imagines himself in the eerie emptiness of a club hundreds of miles away from his new home in Marseilles, experimenting with allowing his rigid military body to give itself over to a song called *The Rhythm of the Night*. As the film cuts to the final credits, we leave Galoup dancing, at least in his head. Why does Galoup see himself dancing alone in a club that, in real life, is always packed with people? Has Galoup learned a larger sense of manhood? Or is there a clear atmosphere of suicidal threat about the closure? Both?

Some critics believe that, aside from the great directors of the New Wave who are still involved in cinema – Godard, Varda, Chabrol, Rivette, Rohmer – Claire Denis is the best filmmaker working in France today. In any case, you can see that she blends into an exciting new vision of French experience many of the legacies of the great filmmakers who went before her with her fluent use of the vocabulary

of film: long take; montage; surrealism; realism; deep-focus frames; the spontaneity of location shooting; the craft of studio-lit sets; adaptation; improvisation. Denis adds to this a probing look at subjects that were once taboo in French cinema, involving gender, race, and politics.

For Further Thought: Dogme 95

In 1995, a group of Danish directors – including Thomas Vinterberg, Lars Von Trier, and Kristian Levring – calling themselves Dogme 95, wrote and signed a manifesto that set forth strict rules for filmmakers that they called a Vow of Chastity:

First Rule: Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).

Second Rule: The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice-versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot).

Third Rule: The camera must be handheld. Any movement of immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place.)

Fourth Rule: The film must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera.)

Fifth Rule: Optical work and filters are forbidden.

Sixth Rule: The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)

Seventh Rule: Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (This is to say the film takes place here and now.)

Eighth Rule: Genre movies are not acceptable.

Ninth Rule: The film format must be Academy 35mm. (This is film stock that records sound and so post-recording of dialogue and ambient noises is not necessary.)

Tenth Rule: The director must not be credited.

MINI RESEARCH MISSION
How many countries award prizes named in honor of Jean Vigo, the director of *L'Atalante*? Research both online and in print to find out. What would you expect the qualifications to be for an award given in Vigo's name? Are you surprised by what your research reveals?

The abiding influence of the New Wave can be seen in the manifesto of the Dogme 95, though they are more draconian, that is severe, than the original French New Wave directors. What limits did the Danish group place on filmmakers that the French group did not? What kinds of films would be impossible if directors really obeyed these rules? What would be the advantages of this Vow of Chastity? Curious about Dogme 95 cinema? Try the following films: *Celebration* (Dir. Thomas Vinterberg, 1998); *The King is Alive* (Dir. Kristen Levring, 2000); and *Dancer in the Dark* (Dir. Lars Von Trier, 2000). Do these Dogme filmmakers actually follow the rules of their manifesto?

Projects

1. Surrealist films explore the unconscious, which has traditionally been associated with women. Write an essay in which you discuss the role of women in the films of Jean Cocteau, the pioneering French surrealist. Are women more significant in his surrealist works than they usually are in cinema? In addition to *Orpheus*, you might also want to look at *Beauty and the Beast* (1946) and *The Eternal Return* (1943).
2. A modern belief in human life as a random collection of events over which human faith or reason exercise very little influence is strongly expressed in New Wave films. Write an essay in which you examine the role of chance in any New Wave film of your choice.
3. Contrast and compare the depiction of the French political influence in Africa in *Le Petit Soldat* (Dir. Jean Luc Godard, 1963) with the way it is shown in *Beau Travail* (Dir. Claire Denis, 1999). In your essay you may wish to consider the differences in the politics of Godard and Denis. Or you may wish to discuss the differences in the way the two directors dramatize the sexual and emotional aspects of military life. Can you see gender differences in the ways that Godard and Denis handle their subject?
4. *Cahiers du cinéma* has attacked cinéma du look, saying that it reduces cinema to the level of advertising by commodifying human beings, that is to say, depicting people as if they were things, just objects in the culture's collection of consumer goods. Write an essay discussing *Diva* (Dir. Jean-Jacques Beineix, 1982) in which you either support or argue against this position. Has Beineix made a movie that is "cool" because it attracts our attention to its characters the way advertising lures us to products? Or is Beineix taking a "hip" critical look at France's commodified consumer culture?
5. Sample some videos on YouTube. Discuss the influence on these young, independent filmmakers of the liberations encouraged by various movements in French film that distinguish themselves from Hollywood practices. Do young filmmakers actually have to have seen any of these daring and innovative films to be affected by them? Would seeing French film make them better at their craft?

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