Chapter One

A Journalistic Slogan and a New Generation

L'Express and their "New" Campaign

Surprisingly, the expression "Nouvelle Vague," which refers for everyone today to a moment in French film history and a particular collection of films, such as *The 400 Blows* and *Breathless*, was not specifically linked to cinema at the beginning. The label appeared in a sociological investigation of the phenomenon of the new postwar generation, and the inquiry was launched and popularized by a series of articles written by Françoise Giroud for the weekly magazine *L'Express* (which is the French equivalent of *Time* or *Newsweek*). This detail of origins is important. Its genesis signals the thematic role played by the new youthful generation, but also the role played during the 1950s by a new sort of publication, represented by *L'Express*, which first appeared in 1953. We see here the beginning of a general application of surveys and inquiries as well as a particular mode of sociological studies.

In August 1957, *L'Express*, modeling itself on the American weekly news magazines, launched a huge survey, in an obvious effort to reach and define its new readership. With the collaboration of the Institut français d'opinion publique (IFOP), they tried to question nearly eight million French people between the ages of 18 and 30, a segment of the population who, in ten years, "will have taken France in hand, their elders taking leave, the younger ones helping move them out."[1] The theme of "the succession of generations," crucial, as we will see, in regard to the cinema, was already

strongly present in the ideological landscape in the late 1950s. France would change its face, its government, and also its cinema. The survey's results appeared in *L'Express* between October 3 and December 12, 1957 with the slogan "The New Wave Arrives!" and an accompanying photograph of a smiling young woman. The tallies also reappeared in a volume published by Françoise Giroud under the title *La Nouvelle Vague: portraits de la jeunesse* (*The New Wave: Portraits of Youth*). Within these portraits, the researchers touched on all subjects: clothing habits, morals, values, lifestyles, and cultural behavior, amongst which the cinema was of secondary importance. When films are mentioned, they are titles said to parallel this "new generation's" values, and are summarized by the researchers as representing "new moral values, presented with refreshing, never before seen frankness."

It is not difficult to imagine how Roger Vadim's first feature, *Et Dieu créa la femme* (*And God Created Woman*), which premiered in Paris on November 28, 1956, became the exemplary, "call to arms" film for this mindset. His leading actress, Brigitte Bardot, who was just 22 years old, symbolized the young French woman who was finally "free and liberated." Vadim, who had been a young journalist for *Paris-Match* magazine, and assistant director and screenwriter for fairly traditional films, such as Marc Allégret's *Futures Vedettes* (*Future Stars*, 1955) and Michel Boisrond's *Cette Sacrée Gamine* (*That Naughty Girl*, 1955), knew what he was doing in selecting such a title. The press responded: "Vadim's cinema creates a new image of the young French woman," and that image was suddenly much more exportable than the established typical 1950s French woman as portrayed by Martine Carol, Michèle Morgan, or Françoise Arnoul. We will return later to the image offered by this new sort of French girl proposed by Vadim's film. But first it is important to underline the revealing role played by a social phenomenon: huge numbers of young French women identified with the character Juliette in *And God Created Woman*, and even more with the actress who incarnated her, Brigitte Bardot, as scholar Françoise Audé has explained in her 1981 book, *Ciné-modèles, cinéma d'elles*."[2]

In 1959, during the early furor over the New Wave, a journalist asked François Truffaut, "Does the label 'New Wave' correspond to reality?" Truffaut responded:

Bardot as Juliette, "the new French woman;" *And God Created Woman* (Vadim, 1956).
Produced by Raoul J. Levy

I think the New Wave had an anticipated reality. It was, after all, first an invention by journalists, which became a reality. In any case, even if no one had invented this journalistic slogan at the Cannes Film Festival, I think the label, or some other, would have been created by the force of events as people became aware of the number of "first films" coming out.

The "New Wave" originally designated a real, official survey carried out in France by some statistical research agency on French youth in general. The "New Wave" was about future doctors, future engineers, future lawyers. That

study was published in *L'Express*, which lent it broad public attention, and for a number of weeks *L'Express* appeared with the sub-title "*L'Express*, the magazine of the New Wave" on the front page.[3]

From the Perspective of Critical Cinema Journals

The journal *Cinéma*, published by the French Federation of *Ciné-clubs* and edited by Pierre Billard, first appeared in November 1954, at the very moment when nationalistic movements set in motion what would become the Algerian War. The first issue of *Cinéma 54* (the title changed with each new year) featured a cover photo of actor Gérard Philipe holding actress Danielle Darrieux in his arms, from a publicity still for *Le Rouge et le noir* (*The Red and the Black*, Claude Autant-Lara, 1954). Autant-Lara's film was very representative of the dominant aesthetic known as the "tradition of quality" at the heart of a certain tendency of French film production.

Four years later, in February 1958, Pierre Billard proposed an inquiry into the younger generation of French cinema. The specialized press thus followed the example set by the new weekly magazines. The report was entitled, "40 who are under 40: The young academy of French cinema." While the front cover of this small journal featured a standard publicity portrait of Ava Gardner in *The Sun Also Rises* (Henry King, 1957), the back cover was devoted to two very different photos: one was Brigitte Bardot (apparently naked, hiding behind two fans), the second was a popular, 30-year-old actor named Darry Cowl, and the caption read, "The two favorite muses of the young academy of French cinema."

Pierre Billard applied one strict biographical criterion, the date of a person's birth, in distinguishing between "*ancien*" (a word suggesting both older and ancient) directors born before 1914, and "new" directors born after 1918. This dividing line left Jean-Pierre Melville, born in 1917, to fall between the cracks, since he was older than the young generation, but also an important precursor of their movement, as he himself attested on numerous occasions. It was the notion, however, of a "young academy" or school

that recurred systematically during the article, while the term "New Wave" was used only once as a detour in a paragraph to designate clearly some unsettling, observed conformism: "The prudence with which this New Wave follows in the steps of their elders is disconcerting." Admittedly, when Billard wrote this in February 1958, Claude Chabrol had just finished *Le Beau Serge*, shot during December 1957 and January 1958. But *Le Beau Serge* would not be released for a full year, premiering on February 11, 1959 at the Studio Publicis in Paris, so Billard's notion of a young academy seems a bit premature to us now.

It was again *L'Express* that renewed the New Wave label by applying it to new films distributed early in 1959, and in particular to the youthful works presented at the Cannes Film Festival that spring. This time, the original generational and social senses of the term were swept away so that it could be employed more strictly in relation to the cinema, and this specialized focus was in part due to the extraordinary success of a publicity campaign orchestrated by Unifrance-film, the official agency of the Centre national de la cinématographie (CNC) charged with promoting French film abroad. Their activity intervened directly on the heels of the 1959 Cannes Film Festival, which had been organized for the first time under the tutelage of the new Minister of Culture, André Malraux, who was both a famous novelist and a filmmaker. The term "New Wave" was quickly relayed by the daily and weekly press and was unfurled from their columns during the entire film season between spring 1959 and spring 1960. Truffaut's interview confirms the importance of this festival:

> Because of this stroke of luck, which turned the Festival into a forum for films by young directors – not just for France, but also for foreign nations – the film reviewers and journalists made use of this expression to designate a certain group of young directors who did not necessarily come from among critics, since Alain Resnais and Marcel Camus were included. And that is how this slogan was forged. In my opinion, it never really corresponded to reality in the sense that, for example, outside of France, in particular, people seemed to believe there was an association of young French directors who got together regularly and had a plan, a common aesthetic, when in fact there was never anything like that and it was all a fiction, made up from those outside.[4]

The Colloquium at La Napoule

In tandem with the Cannes Festival, Unifrance-film took the initiative to assemble some young and even future directors at La Napoule, a few miles from the central Croisette of Cannes, for a colloquium sponsored by the Minister of Culture, with Georges Altman standing in for André Malraux. It very directly demonstrated to a number of foreign journalists already present at what was a very media-hyped Festival that a changing of the guard was at work within the French film industry.

A large number of critics, as well as the famous critic-directors from *Cahiers du Cinéma*, participated in debates organized by *Cahiers* editor Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and featuring Truffaut, Chabrol, and Jean-Luc Godard. Other directors present included Roger Vadim, Robert Hossein, who had directed *Les Salauds vont en enfer* (*Bastards Go to Hell*, 1955) and *Pardonnez nos offenses* (*Forgive Us Our Sins*, 1956), Edouard Molinaro, François Reichenbach, Edmond Séchan, Jean-Daniel Pollet, Marcel Camus, Jean Valère, and Louis Félix. The proceedings from this colloquium were immediately published by the weekly journal *Arts*, the regular home to Truffaut's critical articles, under the title, "For the First Time, at the La Napoule Colloquium, the New French Cinema Defines its Statement of Policies."[5]

Of course, any analysis of these presentations reveals that there was no set definition, but, rather, deeply divided opinions. With great enthusiasm and ingeniousness, Robert Hossein, followed by Edouard Molinaro and Marcel Camus, proposed organizing a "constituent assembly of young cinema," which anticipated by ten years the "States General" proposed for cinema during the strikes at Cannes in May and June 1968. Chabrol, Truffaut, and Doniol-Valcroze politely approved of the idea, but refused the concrete measures proposed by the rash idealism of Hossein. Louis Malle and Jean-Luc Godard put forth very polemical arguments, undercutting any unanimous front, with Godard serving as a killjoy for the assembly even though he had so far only shot several virtually unknown short films. Nonetheless, publication of these debates jump-started anew the media campaign surrounding all the new young filmmakers in France.

The serious daily newspaper *Le Monde*, which at the time was very circumspect with regard to these cinematic developments, published a series of interviews with directors of all ages in August 1959. They included patriarchs such as Jean Renoir and René Clair as well as newcomers Louis Malle and Alexandre Astruc, while Roger Vadim and Georges Franju represented the intermediate generation. *Le Monde* also asked Raoul Lévy, producer of *And God Created Woman*, "Does a New Wave really exist?" Lévy replied, "I think the New Wave is just a huge joke." Following *L'Express* and *Le Monde*'s lead, *France Observateur* had Pierre Billard organize two round tables. The first, late in 1959, included Truffaut, Doniol-Valcroze, Jacques Rivette, and Pierre Kast. The second, in October 1960, involved Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, Godard, and Marcel Moussy. This very selective list demonstrates that it was above all the critic-directors from *Cahiers du Cinéma* who occupied the microphones, much to the rancor of the older generation, from Claude Autant-Lara to René Clément, who were admittedly less garrulous, but also much less sought out by the media. Finally, it would be vain to try to search through the testimony from this era hoping to isolate a single coherent definition of the movement, especially in light of the debate published in 1960 that concluded by stating, "The New Wave is diversity itself."

This promotional process really found its most assured cultural consecration in the publication of books devoted to the movement, which were written and published with remarkable speed. The New Wave barely existed, it was elusive and undefinable, but it was already the object of historical exegesis. André-Sylvain Labarthe, collaborator at *Cahiers*, published his *Essai sur le jeune cinéma français* (*Essay on the Young French Cinema*) in Italian format by June 1960.[6] Jacques Siclier followed the rapid trend with a small book, prudently entitled *Nouvelle Vague?* Written between September 1959 and December 1960, Siclier's book first appeared in February 1961, in the celebrated "7th Art" series published by Cerf, which had also just published the four-volume, complete works of *Cahiers*' founder and master critic André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*

This consecration of the New Wave drew polemical attacks as well. Rebuttal began quickly once Raymond Borde, Freddy Buache, and Jean Curtelin united to publish an extraordinarily vicious pamphlet against the

movement. Their argument, partly published as articles in 1959 and 1960, was based on the critical positions of *Positif*, a rival French film journal, opposed to *Cahiers*, and its militant, ideological committment.[7] Their booklet tried to present itself as a sort of assessment of what they saw as the New Wave's deception, combined with its obituary:

> Certain beginners have thrown themselves into directing, much like young girls in the nineteenth century used to paint watercolors in order to occupy their gilded leisure time. These directors will disappear rather quickly. Others have a career in mind, and since teaching did not pay enough or management school was too difficult, they took the path that led to the studios, intending to remain there. Their little "message," as the undertakers of culture say, was delivered right away: it was generally an inane moral principle for adults, occasionally mixed with a libertine crisis of originality. Next they dropped anchor and here they are, I do believe, moored in the profession. This is the case with Claude Chabrol, François Truffaut, Edouard Molinaro, Robert Hossein, Louis Malle, and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze. We have not seen the last of their names on the credits, and, if they know how to swim, they have before them the same future as their elders: Christian-Jacque, Léo Joannon, and Jean Delannoy.[8]

Birthdate: February–March 1959

In an effort to mark the boundaries of the terrain with a bit of precision and avoid any uncontrollable expansion of this historical movement, which risks including precursors like *Le Silence de la mer* (*Silence of the Sea*, Jean-Pierre Melville, 1948) or post-New Wave films like *Weekend* (Godard, 1967), or even Godard's later film entitled *La Nouvelle Vague*, we have to impose a few limits. As I have explained, the expression "New Wave" appeared and then came into systematic use within the popular press in February and March of 1959. The term initially accompanied the commercial release of Claude Chabrol's two features, *Le Beau Serge* and *The Cousins*. The release of these two features followed one after the other because the former had remained in the can for nearly a year. But, just as Godard began to shoot *Le Mepris* (*Contempt*, 1964) before *Les Carabiniers* (*The Soldiers*, 1963) had been released, Chabrol shot his second feature *before* the release of his first,

thanks in part to the "Quality Aid" he received for the first (a point I will return to in the first section of chapter 3).

The New Wave's starting point (at least from the perspective of its arrival in the media): *Le Beau Serge*, filmed between December 1957 and January 1958; premiere, February 11, 1959; and *The Cousins*, filmed during July and August 1958; premiere, March 11, 1959.

This double release of Chabrol's films was followed two months later, in May 1959, by the very unexpected selection of François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* to represent France at the Cannes Film Festival, along with Marcel Camus' *Orphée noir* (*Black Orpheus*). Truffaut won the Best Director Award and Camus won the Palme d'Or for best film. The nomination of Truffaut's film came despite very strong opposition from within the established cinema crowd, especially since Truffaut had been banned from Cannes the previous year for his vicious article attacking the French film industry, "The French Cinema Is Crushed by False Legends," published in *Arts*. (We will return to the significance of this article in the next chapter.) In addition, Culture Minister André Malraux, who was prevented, for political more than aesthetic reasons, from getting his son-in-law Alain Resnais' first feature, *Hiroshima mon amour*, included in the Official Selections at Cannes, did manage to encourage its producer, Anatole Dauman to present it at Cannes outside competition. It created a sensation.

The 400 Blows and *Hiroshima mon amour* were distributed in June 1959, immediately after the Cannes Film Festival, in order to take full advantage of the journalistic and promotional bounce they had just received. Truffaut's movie opened on June 3 and Resnais' on the 10th. Their commercial success surpassed all expectations. Nevertheless, the high point for the exhibition of New Wave films arrived the next spring with the release of *Breathless* by Godard, which sold 259,000 tickets in its Paris first run, beginning in March 1960. In the meantime, Claude Chabrol's third feature, *À double tour* had been released on December 4, 1959, as well as Pierre Kast's *Le Bel Âge*, on February 10, 1960. But during 1960 there were already commercial and media reactions against the New Wave phenomenon: Chabrol's fourth feature, *Les Bonnes Femmes* (*The Good Girls*), released on

April 22, was a critical and financial failure. In addition, Jacques Rivette's first feature, *Paris nous appartient* (*Paris Belongs to Us*) as well as Eric Rohmer's *Le Signe du Leo* (*Sign of the Lion*) found no commercial distribution and would have to wait three years to be shown, and then only in limited releases. Even more serious was the total banning of Godard's second feature, *Le Petit Soldat*, in the spring of 1960. Because of its references to torture and the Algerian War, it could not be shown in France until 1963. Godard's third feature, *Une Femme est une femme* (*A Woman is a Woman*, 1961), was also a commercial failure, as was Truffaut's second, *Tirez sur le pianiste* (*Shoot the Piano Player*, 1960).

In short, especially from the media's official perspective, the New Wave really only marked two seasons of French cinema, from the beginning of 1959 to the end of 1960. From that point on the films received uneven receptions both from the public and the critics. As we will see in chapter 2, even directors who were themselves an integral part of the movement, such as François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, initially denounced what they saw as an erroneous label, lumping together such a wide range of films from young directors. They argued instead that each was distinct and not part of any group style. Later, however, as the New Wave aesthetic came under vicious attack from some critics as well as many older directors, and especially those from the so-called "Tradition of Quality" and mainstream popular cinema, these young individualist directors radically changed their strategies and affirmed their membership in the New Wave movement, while defending the originality of its collective aesthetic choices.

It is even more risky to try to propose a date to mark the end of the movement than it is to find its beginning. As mentioned, the end of 1960 did mark the point where negative criticism and financial failures increased. And, while 1957 marked the peak of movie attendance in France, with 411 million spectators, 1958 proved the beginning of the drop in attendance that would continue for a decade. There was a decline from 354 million tickets sold in 1959 to 328 million in 1961 and only 292 million in 1963. From 1957 to 1969 the crisis in attendance became dizzying, ending with 184 million tickets sold at the end of the decade. The French cinema had lost one half its audience in only 15 years.[9] This phenomenon was not limited to France, since the British and German industries were affected as

well during these years, but there were many critics in France who could not restrain themselves from laying blame for the decline on the appearance of so many films by young directors. The New Wave was painted as the villain.

While *The 400 Blows* and *Breathless* each attracted as many as 450,000 spectators by the end of their first showings throughout France, *Shoot the Piano Player* sold 70,000 tickets, *A Woman is a Woman* 65,000, Chabrol's *Les Godelureaux* (*Wise Guys*, 1960) 23,000, and Jacques Demy's first feature, the amazing *Lola* (1961), only 35,000 people. In response to these declines, Truffaut charged: "It is becoming clear that films by young directors, as soon as they distance themselves even slightly from the norms, immediately run up against a roadblock set up by the exhibitors and the press." He even pointed out a certain revenge by the "old wave," which was seeing many of their own films gaining great success at the box office. For instance, Jean Delannoy's *Le Baron de l'écluse* (*The Baron*, 1961), starring veteran actor Jean Gabin, sold 366,000 tickets, while Henri-Georges Clouzot's *La Vérité* (*The Truth*, 1960), featuring the young Brigitte Bardot alongside such old standbys as Charles Vanel and Paul Meurisse, was the top French film, with 527,000 sales. Another Gabin movie, written by old-guard scriptwriter Michel Audiard, *Rue des prairies* (*Rue de Paris*, 1960), was launched with one of the most explicit advertising slogans of the era: "Jean Gabin gets even with the New Wave."

However, the New Wave did not disappear so fast. The phenomenon of renewal via young directors continued until at least 160 new filmmakers had made their first features between January 1959 and the end of 1962. *Cahiers du Cinéma* published a dictionary in their December 1962 issue listing all the new directors. Claude Chabrol completed seven features in four years, but their box office returns dropped in a dramatic decline down to 84,000 tickets sold for *Les Bonnes Femmes* (*The Good Girls*, 1960), 8,000 for *L'Oeil du malin* (*The Third Lover*, 1962), and just 6,900 for *Ophélia* (1962). After the mediocre reception of *Shoot the Piano Player*, Truffaut had more luck with *Jules and Jim*, attracting 210,000 spectators. Godard too rebounded, with 148,000 tickets sold in France for *Vivre sa vie* (*My Life to Live*, 1962), before suffering another failure with *Les Carabiniers* (*The Soldiers*, 1963) which only ran for two weeks and sold 2,800 tickets. This was perhaps the worst

showing for any New Wave film. At the same time, Chabrol accepted an offer to shoot a commercial production, *Landru* (*Bluebeard*, 1962) in order to revive his career. This movie was based on the true story of a French serial murderer, from a script by popular novelist Françoise Sagan, and starring the established actress Michèle Morgan. Truffaut, meanwhile, struggled desperately to find funding for his next production, *Fahrenheit 451*, which he would only manage to shoot three years later. Thus, the beginning of 1963 marked a turning point: it was the beginning of the end of the New Wave era.

The New Wave had lasted only four or five years, which is by no means insignificant for a cinematic movement subject to the changing moods of the media and the inconsistent desires of the movie-going public. Despite its brief duration, however, the New Wave completely altered France's cinematic landscape, provoking a number of psychological "shocks" felt across the world, as national cinemas discovered these films and greeted them with a mixture of amazement and discomfort.

A Rather Morose "Young Academy"

At the start of 1958, Pierre Billard, editor of the journal *Cinéma 58*, published his annual appraisal of the French film industry, and his account was particularly gloomy. His summary follows the path set by *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which had registered its own disappointment with recent French cinema six months earlier in a special issue entitled "The Situation of French Cinema," (#71, May 1957), to which we will return in the next chapter. Billard's editorial pointed out that the undeniable economic prosperity of contemporary French cinema was accompanied by a deep artistic crisis: "It is hard to disagree that inspirations have run dry, subject-matters are sterile, and film aesthetics ever more static. With a few rare exceptions, the best films in recent years come from outdated conceptions of form and content."[10] Billard calls attention to "hopefuls who have already disappointed or are still to be proven," listing a number of directors to watch: Edouard Molinaro, "auteur of short films full of humor," who was just beginning to shoot his first feature, *Le Dos au mur* (*Back to the Wall*, 1958)

based on the novel by Frédéric Dard; Roger Pigaud, who had just filmed *Le Cerf-volant du bout du monde* (*The Kite That Flew to the End of the Earth*, 1957) in France and China; Robert Ménégoz, auteur of a short film getting a great deal of attention, *Vivent les dockers* (*Life of Dockers*, 1957), and had recently begun shooting *The Great Wall* in China, which was never completed. Finally, Billard cited "the talented Louis Malle," co-director along with Jacques Cousteau of *Le Monde du silence* (*The Silent World*, 1956), and more recently, winner of the Louis Delluc Award for his own first feature, *L'Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (*Elevator to the Gallows*, 1957).

Pierre Billard's second category, helping rank the forty most interesting directors under the age of 40, was entitled "False and Real Greats." This group includes Yves Ciampi, Henri Verneuil, Denys de la Patellière, Jack Pinoteau, Hervé Bromberger, Claude Boissol, Michel Boisrond, Charles Brabant, Norbert Carbonnaux, Robert Hossein, Marcel Camus, and Alex Jaffé. Billard also mentions Alexandre Astruc for his *Les Mauvaises Rencontres* (*Bad Encounters*, 1955), which he somewhat devalues, criticizing its excessive formalism. By contrast, he overvalues Roger Vadim's first feature, *And God Created Woman*. But, in praising it, Billard followed the reactions of most of his critic colleagues at the time, all of whom were captivated by Vadim's modernity:

> What style! Vadim has successfully managed to create personal and endearing films with Curt Jurgens, the Côte d'Azur, and Brigitte Bardot in *And God Created Woman*, and again in Venice even with an infantile story to adapt in *Sait-on jamais?* (*No Sun in Venice*, 1957). He likes jazz, money, pretty girls, and publicity . . . like you and I. He is thus very modern. [We must certainly ponder here Billard's definition of modernity.] He knows how to create probable story situations that overturn conventions, as well as retorts that set him apart from Henri Jeanson. His number one quality: classy nonchalance. His principal fault: being a dilettante. I would gladly put my money on his success at a 50:1 shot, if I were convinced he would not end up a producer, corporate head, professor at the University of Alabama, or Minister of the Navy.[11]

Next, Billard has no trouble contrasting the pallor of this new academy of French cinema with the revelations marking a renewal among international filmmakers during the mid-1950s: Robert Aldrich in the USA had just

made *Kiss Me Deadly* and *The Big Knife*, both released in 1955, the Soviet Union's Grigori Chukhrai directed *The Forty-First* (1956), Spain's Juan Antonio Bardem made *Death of a Cyclist* (1955) and *Main Street* (1956), while Poland's André Wajda caught attention with *A Girl Talked* (1955) and *Kanal* (1956), and Italy's Francesco Maselli directed *The Doll That Took the Town* (1956). Billard attributes the comparative weakness of France's overall cinematic sphere, which was "very unfavorable to the new generation's attempts to take flight," to the following problems:

- the absence of a strong sector for experimental film production;
- the absurdity and incoherence of the profession's organization, which creates multiple barriers and dividers between various specialties, and reinforces strict hierarchies among jobs;
- relative prosperity within the realm of short filmmaking, which retains some of the best talent;
- a tendency in French production to develop "big international films" co-produced with other countries, featuring foreign stars, in color, with high budgets, and which are thus offered to established directors who have already proven themselves, at least commercially, with similar projects;
- finally, a lack of any real spirit for experimentation or risky ventures on the part of producers who offer most of their work to a small number of directors "who are work horses but without talent."

During 12 years, from 1945 to 1957, *167 films*, or 20 percent of France's total production output, were shot by only *9 directors*, for an average of 18 movies each. It is worth listing all their names so as to perceive better the true nature of French cinema during the 1950s. These are the filmmakers who were supported by producers and to whose movies most of the cinema-going public flocked: André Berthomieu (30 films), Jean Stelli (22 films), Jean Boyer (21 films), Richard Pottier (18 films), Robert Vernay and Maurice Labro (17 films each), Henri Lepage, Maurice de Canonge, and Raoul André (14 films each). These directors were all professionals who shared a narrowly artisanal conception of their work. They directed their films so as to maximize their box office takings and thus increase the return

on production costs. A complete list of their films would be excessive here, but, needless to say, this state of affairs was not able to permit a renewal of creativity such as could be seen in the ongoing revival of 1950s French literature and theater.

Pierre Billard concluded his essay by warning that new talent was moving over into television or reinforcing the brilliant successes in the area of short film production. He wondered also about the semi-abandoned effort by Jacques Rivette, *Le Coup du berger* (*Fool's Mate*, 1956), and the semi-success of François Truffaut's *Les Mistons* (*The Mischief Makers*, 1957), while also calling attention to Claude Chabrol's upcoming feature, *Le Beau Serge* (1958), as well as a number of other short and feature-length projects in the works "from those at *Cahiers du Cinéma* now undertaking independent productions. Could these projects have a chance of success at creating interesting revelations?" His suggestion certainly proved insightful.

French Cinema in 1958: The State of Affairs

Aesthetic sclerosis and good economic health: this summary reflects French cinema just before the explosion that was to be the New Wave. The ten years separating 1947 and 1957 were bracketed by two years of record high box office attendance, with 423 million tickets sold in 1947, and 411 million in 1957. During this period, 1952 was the lowest, with 359 million movie-goers. The French went regularly to the cinema, especially for Saturday night shows. In that way, the 1950s proved to be a continuation of the high attendance numbers of the Occupation years of the early 1940s, making exhibitors quite prosperous. Hence the myth of a new "Golden Age of French Cinema" during the reign of Maréchal, with "gold" taking on a purely monetary sense here, at least for distributors and theater owners.

The number of films produced each year averaged between 120 and 140, with 129 in 1956, 142 in 1957, and 126 in 1958. That range corresponds fairly closely to the market capacity, and there was now none of the over-production that had been seen during some of the prewar years in France.

For instance, during 1933 there were 143 movies made plus 32 French versions of films made outside France. The only weak wing in the 1950s was the export market, where, other than in the French colonies and territories, French films were having a tough time competing with American movies. If Vadim's *And God Created Woman* became a mythical film so rapidly, it was in part due to its unexpected success abroad, especially on British, Brazilian, German, and North American screens, following a respectable but hardly record-breaking first run in France. This phenomenon of highly successful international distribution would recur with the first films of the New Wave, such as *The 400 Blows*, *Breathless*, and *Hiroshima mon amour*.

As for the popular audience in France, the films attended most during the second half of the 1950s were big budget American movies, including *War and Peace* (Vidor, 1956), *Around the World in 80 Days* (Anderson, 1957), followed by England's *Bridge on the River Kwai* (Lean, 1957), as well as huge spectacle blockbusters, whose prototype was Cecil B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments* (1956), which was seen by 526,000 people in its Parisian first run alone. But French comedies were also very popular, including Jack Pinoteau's *Le Triporteur* (*The Tricyclist*), starring Darry Cowl, which was the third-biggest money-maker of 1957, followed by Jean Dréville's *A pied, à cheval, et en spoutnik* (*A Dog, A Mouse, and Sputnik*, 1958). French detective films, or *policiers*, were also successful, especially the semi-parodic *Les Femmes s'en balancent* (*The Women Couldn't Care Less*, Borderie, 1954) and *Votre dévoué Blake* (*Your Man Blake*, Laviron, 1954), both of which helped launch Eddie Constantine as a star.

Another film, directed by a young auteur, became a huge success: Louis Malle's second feature, *Les Amants* (*The Lovers*, 1958). Its high returns were undoubtedly fueled by the bold presentation of the sexual relations between the central characters, played by Jeanne Moreau and Jean-Marc Bory. The staging of these scenes was quite daring for the era, and *The Lovers* transformed Moreau into an international star.[12]

Other French successes of the mid-1950s were achieved by veteran director Sacha Guitry, whose *Si Versailles m'était conté* (*Royal Affairs in Versailles*) was the top film of 1954, selling 685,000 tickets, and Henri-Georges Clouzot, whose *Les Diaboliques* followed Guitry to the top in 1955.

In addition, René Clair's *Les Grandes Manoeuvres* (*The Grand Maneuver*) came in fourth at the box office in 1955. During 1956, three French films came in behind Vidor's *War and Peace*: Jean Delannoy's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (*Hunchback of Notre Dame*), René Clément's *Gervaise*, and Claude Autant-Lara's *La Traversée de Paris* (*Four Bags Full / Pigs Over Paris*).

In 1958, Marcel Carné saw his first real triumph since 1945's *Les Enfants du Paradis* (*Children of Paradise*), with *Les Tricheurs* (*The Cheats*), while Jacques Tati was also very successful with *Mon Oncle* and Denys de La Patellière scored big with *Les Grandes Familles* (*The Possessors*). Finally, during 1959, the year of the New Wave, the box office champion was Roger Vadim's *Liaisons dangereuses, 1960* (*Dangerous Liaisons, 1960*), followed by Marcel Camus' *Black Orpheus* and Henri Verneuil's *La Vache et le Prisonnier* (*The Cow and I*), which began its amazing long-term success story, attracting 401,000 spectators in its first run, but eventually selling more than 8,800,000 tickets in revivals over the next several decades.

Not all these successful French films were mediocre, although Dréville's *A Dog, A Mouse, and Sputnik* hardly advanced the history of cinematic art. During this period there definitely was a correspondence between the tastes of the bulk of the audience and the "tradition of quality," despite François Truffaut's vehement attacks against the latter. The excellent financial returns for *Les Diaboliques*, *Gervaise*, *The Grand Maneuver*, *Les Portes des Lilas* (*Gates of Paris*, Clair, 1957), and *The Cheats* attest to their popular appeal. These purely commercial successes must be supplemented by the panorama of "prestige films," accorded value by institutional criteria; these were French films that earned recognition at international film festivals or that garnered domestic awards, such as the critics' Louis Delluc Award, or the profession's Grand Prix of French Cinema Awards.

If, during the years 1954 through 1958, the Cannes Film Festival granted only one Palme d'Or to a French Film, Louis Malle and Jacques Cousteau's *The Silent World* in 1956, the festival nonetheless awarded prizes for directing and acting to a number of French productions: *Monsieur Ripois* (René Clément) and *Avant le déluge* (*Before the Deluge*, André Cayatte) both in 1954, *Le Mystère Picasso* (*The Mystery of Picasso*, Henri-Georges Clouzot) in 1956, *Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé* (*A Man Escaped*, Robert Bresson)

in 1957, and *Mon Oncle* (Jacques Tati) in 1958. Then, in 1959, Marcel Camus and *Black Orpheus* were honored with the Palme d'Or, while François Truffaut earned the best directing award for *The 400 Blows*.

André Cayatte, Henri-Georges Clouzot, and René Clément, all of whom were considered "quality directors" by Truffaut, and the auteurs Robert Bresson and Jacques Tati, were all internationally recognized thanks to Cannes, which can act as a barometer of critical opinion. The French cinema's Grand Prix, following more traditional and corporate criteria, rewarded Autant-Lara's *Le Blé en herbe* (*The Game of Love*) in 1954, Jean-Paul Le Chanois' *Les Evadés* (*The Runaways*) in 1955, Clair's *Gates of Paris* in 1957, and Carné's *The Cheats* in 1958. However, in 1956 they were more daring, selecting Albert Lamorisse's *Le Ballon rouge* (*The Red Balloon*) and Alain Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*), which would also go on to win the Prix Jean Vigo that year.

The Louis Delluc Award shifted from purely traditional selections, such as *Les Diaboliques* in 1954 and *The Grand Maneuver* in 1955, to more innovative selections, with *The Red Balloon* in 1956 and *Elevator to the Gallows*, Louis Malle's first feature, in 1957. By 1958, the Louis Delluc Award reached the height of audacity, crowning what was by professional standards a very marginal production, Jean Rouch's *Moi un noir* (*Me, a Black Man*), as winner. We will later return to the importance of this Rouch film.

During this decade, Hollywood's Oscar for Best Foreign Film was several times given to French films. René Clément won twice, first with *Au-delà des grilles* (*Beyond the Gates*, 1948) in 1950, and again for *Jeux interdits* (*Forbidden Games*) in 1952. Later, Jacques Tati won for *Mon Oncle* in 1958 and Marcel Camus inevitably won with *Black Orpheus* in 1959. Between 1948 and 1958 the tastes of the American jury clearly became more refined, since they shifted from rewarding the mediocre *Monsieur Vincent* by Maurice Cloche, to honoring Tati's distinctive *Mon Oncle*.

All the recognized, big-name auteurs were thus from the generation that got their start in the days of the silent cinema, such as René Clair, or during the time of the Occupation, including Clouzot, Jacques Becker, and André Cayatte. It is nonetheless a mistake to argue, as some have, that the French cinema was an unassailable fortress. Every year new directors appeared on

the scene to shoot their first features: 8 new directors in 1946, 15 in 1947, and 21 in 1951. Only the years 1954 and 1955 were particularly weak, with 9 new directors each. Nevertheless, because of all the constraints enumerated above by Pierre Billard, most of these newcomers followed the recipes established by the commercial cinema for popular consumption. The French film industry remained rather impermeable to innovation throughout the 1950s. This stasis was denounced forcefully by the collection of critics gathered at *Cahiers du Cinéma* for their issue number 71, in May 1957, devoted to "The Situation in French Cinema," to which we will return in chapter 3.

A telling sample to represent the disappointing state of affairs can be found in the films directed in the single year of 1951. The following directors each shot a feature in 1951, 12 of which were distributed in 1952: Guy Lefranc's *Knock*, Jean Laviron's *Descendez, on vous demande* (*Come Down, Someone Wants You*), Henri Schneider's *La Grande Vie* (*The Big Life*), Henri Lavorel's *Le Voyage en Amérique* (*Voyage to America*), Claude Barma's *Le Dindon* (*The Turkey*), Jack Pinoteau's *Ils étaient cinq* (*They Were Five*), Henri Verneuil's *La Table aux crevés* (*Table for the Exhausted*), Bernard Borderie's *Les Loups chassent la nuit* (*Wolves Hunt at Night*), Daniel Gélin's *Les Dents longues* (*The Long Teeth*), André Michel's *Trois Femmes* (*Three Women*), Ralph Baum's *Nuits de Paris* (*Paris Nights*), and Georges Combret's *Musique en tête* (*Band Out Front*). The bulk of these titles never played outside France and have since been long forgotten. However, from this list, distinguished primarily for its continuation of old formulas, we might isolate *The Big Life*, Henri Schneider's only movie, which was a rather clumsy attempt at imitating neorealism, but which nonetheless earned the first-ever Jean Vigo Award. And, in addition, actor Daniel Gélin's *The Long Teeth*, which was the tale of an ambitious young journalist who leaves Lyons to come to Paris and win the job as editor-in-chief of *Paris-France*. The storyline is very similar to Alexandre Astruc's first feature, *Bad Encounters*, and *The Long Teeth* would prove to be Gélin's only feature film.

Following *The Turkey*, Claude Barma, who had participated in the filming of the Liberation of Paris in 1944, was so discouraged by the state of the film industry in the early 1950s that he switched over to the new

medium of television, where he joined Pierre Dumayet and Pierre Desgraupes on the TV series "In Your Soul and Conscience," and staged *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Cyrano de Bergerac* with actor Daniel Sorano. Barma was certainly not the only young director to follow this path. Most recent graduates of the national film school, IDHEC (Institut des hautes études cinématographiques), had trouble entering the film industry and opted instead for careers in television. Some even went on to help constitute the TV documentary school at the famous Paris Buttes-Chaumont Studio. French cinema and the national television network remained shut off from one another. Transferring back and forth from one medium to the other remained quite rare, in contrast to production practices during this same period in England and the United States, where some actors, writers, directors, and other crew members could move across media.

The directors from this decade that are retained by most film histories include Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Max Ophuls, Jacques Tati, Jacques Becker, Jean Cocteau, and Jean Grémillon. Of these, only Grémillon was omitted by François Truffaut in his famous article, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," where he listed the top auteurs, though he also included, partly as provocation, Abel Gance and his *Le Tour de Nesle* (*Tower of Nesle*, 1954), as well as Roger Leenhardt, who had shot only one movie, *Les Dernières Vacances* (*The Last Vacation*, 1947). We will return to Truffaut's controversial article in the next chapter.[13]

By 1958, the French cinema had clearly become increasingly industrial, even if film production remained, at least in strictly economic terms, somewhat artisanal. It churned out picture shows principally to entertain and turn a healthy profit. However, by the end of the decade French cinema would subtly change its social function, becoming more a means of artistic expression, in partial response to Alexandre Astruc's predictions (which I will expand upon in chapter 2). The tens of thousands of ciné-clubs that characterized French film culture in the 1950s helped contribute a great deal to this transformation. Significantly, in 1959, the cinema would leave the domain of the Ministry of Industry and Commerce for its new home within the newly formed Ministry of Culture.

The "New Wave" became one of the ways this brutal rupture of the cinema's social status was expressed. Adapting the structures for film pro-

duction to new functions would take all of four decades to accomplish. It is worth noting, however, that since 1908 this sort of radical adjustment of the norms of French cinema had been regularly occurring, always labeled a "cinema crisis."