

Cinéma and the Vitality of Mid-century French Film Culture

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In March 1957, *Cinéma 57* implicitly posed a question that reveals much about late-1950s film culture in France: Can a serious journal engage with actor Jean Gabin's love life *and* an anticolonial essay film by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais?¹ Absolutely, it turns out. Invested in both the *populaire* and the "elite," the issue contains both an installment of Gabin's autobiography and an excerpt of the script for *Les Statues meurent aussi* (*Statues Also Die*, 1953). The previous issue contains an essay by Marcel L'Herbier, then president of the film school Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC), about the need to better educate film technicians, several articles about the work of Erich von Stroheim, an account of a workshop on Czech cinema, and a survey of thirty teenagers on their favorite films.² On the eve of the New Wave, the journal adroitly navigated fan culture, experimental documentary, trends in global cinema, the work of legendary auteurs, and film education, testifying with prescience to film's multiple cultural functions and pleasures. *Cinéma*, whose title shifted with each passing year (*Cinéma 56*, *Cinéma 57*, etc.), debuted in November 1954 and persisted until 1999. Launched ten months after the publication of François Truffaut's essay "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," the journal was less clubby and polemical than *Cahiers du cinéma* (1951–present), but shared many of its collaborators and goals.³ A glimpse at even a small slice of the monthly journal's life in the latter half of the 1950s reflects the multifaceted nature of French film culture and the highly networked structure of institutional cinephilia at a moment of transition in French cinema.

When we think of 1950s French film culture, we tend to contemplate the activities of influential figures such as Truffaut, who wrote film criticism for multiple publications before becoming a film director; André Bazin, the critic and theorist

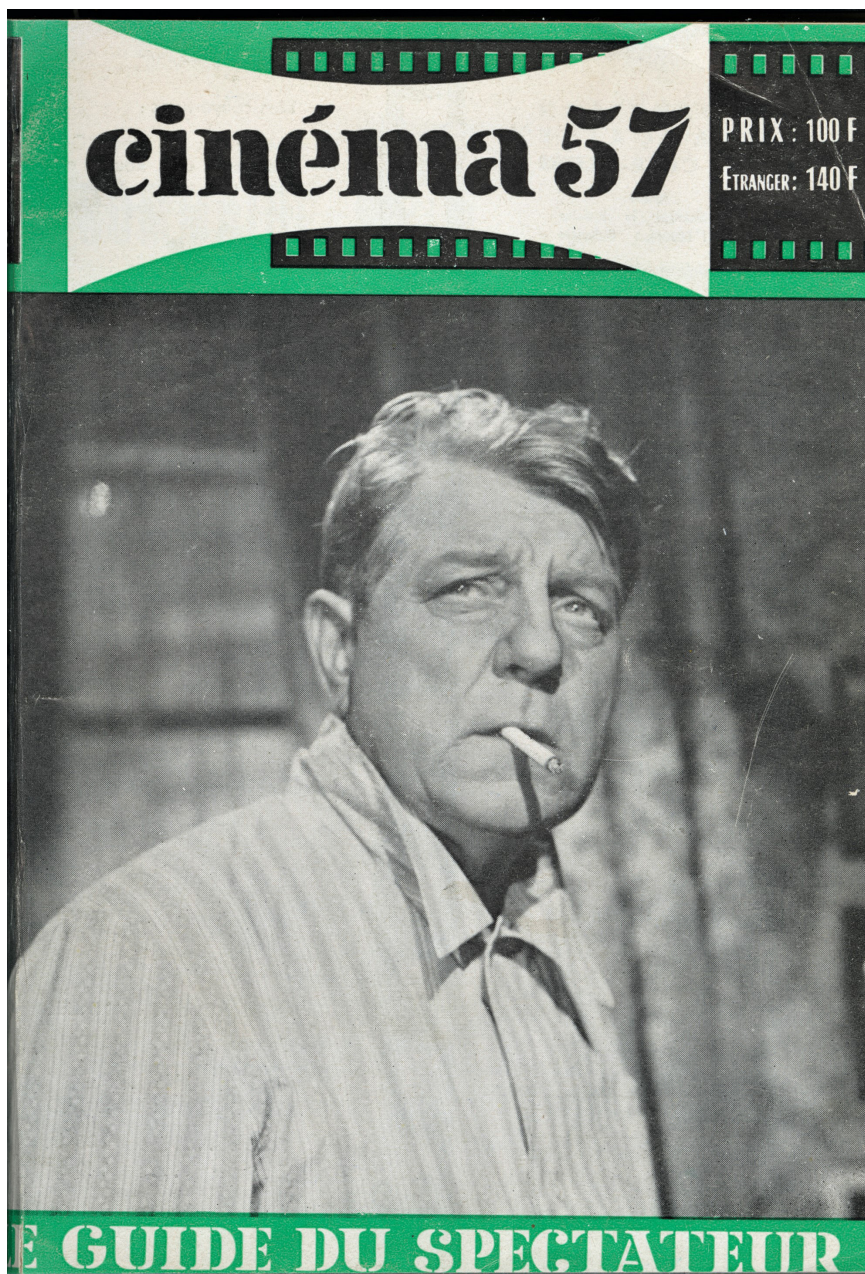


FIGURE 9.1. *Cinéma 57*, March 1957, front cover featuring Jean Gabin.

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TOUS DROITS DE REPRODUCTION INTERDITS POUR TOUS PAYS
SAUF ACCORD PREALABLE AVEC L'ADMINISTRATION DE "CINEMA 57"

FIGURE 9.2. *Cinéma 57*, March 1957, table of contents.

celebrated for his theories of film realism; and Henri Langlois, who created the Cinémathèque française.⁴ For the fullest understanding of this period, however, it pays to examine the cross-pollinated streams of the era's many vibrant publications and fora.⁵ *Cinéma* emerged during a period of extraordinary institutional energy around film culture, whose elements include film festivals, the Cinémathèque française, the *ciné-club* network, and film journals. In 1947, the Cannes Film Festival finally materialized after its aborted 1939 launch, while the Tours International Festival of Short Films (Journées internationales du film de court-métrage de Tours) was born in 1955 with a prestigious inaugural jury that included Bazin, Abel Gance, Roger Leenhardt, and Francis Poulenc.⁶ The now famous festival of animation, the Annecy International Animation Festival (Journées internationales du cinéma d'animation), officially launched in 1960 after several years in embryonic form. The Cinémathèque française, which had existed since 1936, became in the postwar period a "hive of cinema heritage . . . multiplying its programs, exhibitions, publications, courses, and lectures."⁷ Ciné-clubs experienced an extraordinary resurgence in the postwar period, and became a veritable movement, one that was very different from its 1920s predecessors.

Bolstered by the new, postwar civic initiatives devoted to cultural democratization and adult education—Travail et culture (Work and Culture) and Peuple et culture (People and Culture)—ciné-clubs quickly developed their own framework in the form of federations.⁸ By 1960, the federations oversaw approximately twelve thousand clubs throughout France. Figures familiar to us from their activity in other arenas of film culture—Langlois, Bazin, Truffaut, Jean Cocteau, and Jean Painlevé—were engaged in the formation of ciné-clubs in the immediate postwar period. At the end of the 1940s, for example, Cocteau and Bazin launched Objectif 49, the short-lived but influential club that called for a new avant-garde and cultivated a community of young cinephiles and critics.⁹ In the immediate aftermath of the war, ciné-clubs expanded dramatically from their prewar incarnations, attracting members of diverse ages and socioeconomic milieux throughout France and its colonies and exposing viewers to a wider range of films from around the world.

Film journals, too, exerted a huge impact on film culture. Between 1950 and 1965, an astonishing 188 periodicals devoted to film were published in France.¹⁰ The future New Wave directors at *Cahiers du cinéma* typically take center stage in any accounts of writing about film in the 1950s, but in fact a number of other notable journals were circulating in France.¹¹ *Cinéma* was launched by Pierre Billard (1922–2016), who served as editor-in-chief of the journal from 1954 to 1968. Billard is especially appreciated today for his wide-ranging history of French classical cinema.¹² When Billard launched *Cinéma*, he was already a respected and prolific film critic and, starting in 1952, a leader of one of the most important ciné-club federations, the French Ciné-Club Federation (Fédération française du ciné-club, or FFCC). In 1955, the FFCC had 205 clubs and 377,495 members.¹³ *Cinéma* was the official journal of the FFCC, which, along with several other ciné-club federations,

was a vital agent in film culture and, more broadly, the postwar proliferation of adult education opportunities in the arts.¹⁴

CINÉMA AND THE CINÉ-CLUB MOVEMENT

Cinéma's affiliation with the ciné-club movement was determinant. Indeed, the first three sentences in the journal's inaugural editorial state clearly the publication's expansive goals: "The renaissance and the continued expansion of the ciné-club movement constitute without doubt one of the significant events in French cinematic experience since the liberation. Until now, this movement lacked an organ that could further deepen and refresh its mission. This is the goal of CINÉMA 55."¹⁵ The journal further stated that it would rely on the FFCC network, be enriched by that organization's lengthy experience, and "extend to a wider audience the collective effort of reflection and criticism."¹⁶ The emphasis here is on the creation of collective knowledge and a broader view of what is worthy of attention. *Cinéma* "will be interested in all of the cultural aspects of the production and diffusion of film as well as the history and aesthetics of film."¹⁷ The journal was also, notably, invested in both exploring global cinema and supporting French cinema. It pledged to "report on worldwide film production" but would "follow closely the cinema of our country: artists and technicians will come into its columns to expose their reflections on their profession, their projects, and their problems. They will thus contribute to one of CINÉMA 55's tasks: the defense and illustration of French cinema."¹⁸ In its conclusion, the opening editorial imagines the journal not as a one-way channel of communication in which experts educate readers, but as a space for dialogue between ordinary viewers and specialists: "CINÉMA 55, finally, will constitute a forum in which spectators and specialists will nourish a fruitful dialogue which will help us to better define and appreciate the reasons, both emotional and intellectual, behind cinephiles' love of cinema."¹⁹ The goals of the journal were thus multiple: to draw on the knowledge and activities of France's vast ciné-club network, explore local and global cinema, provide a forum for technicians and artists working in the film industry, and launch discussions between specialists and nonspecialists on films, filmmakers, film history, aesthetics, and even the nature of cinephilia itself.

The first article published in *Cinéma 55*, by Jean Painlevé, was a fiery denunciation of mediocre documentary and a call for an expansion in ciné-club programming of one specific type of film: the industrial and scientific documentary. Celebrated for his documentaries about the natural world that are both serious scientific explorations and lyrical, inventive works, Painlevé had long been a defender of documentary's artistic, cultural, and educational value.²⁰ Through his membership in the Union mondiale du documentaire (World Documentary Union), created in 1947, and as a signatory of the 1953 manifesto of the Groupe des Trentes (Group of Thirty)—a collective formed to support short films—Painlevé

was connected to multiple communities in French film culture, including the surrealists; documentary filmmakers Joris Ivens, Henri Storck, Paul Rotha, John Grierson, and Jean Grémillon; and archivist-programmers Iris Barry at the Museum of Modern Art and Henri Langlois at the Cinémathèque française.²¹ In his article, Painlevé laments a degeneration in the quality of documentaries, a reduction in quality he believed had been sparked by television's mass production of documentaries and by those who simply wanted to take advantage of plentiful public subventions.²² He expresses particular disdain for a recent wave of "pretentious" films about painting made by those he claimed knew nothing about art: "To be honest, there is nothing cheaper, in terms of production means and mental effort, than to light a painting, do a slow tracking close-up of a detail and sprinkle in some blandly flowery commentary by a narrator who deep down couldn't care less."²³ He is careful to exclude from his criticism of this group of films the short documentaries about art and artists made by Alain Resnais, expressing disdain instead for Luciano Emmer and Enrico Gras, Italian filmmakers who landed on an inexpensive formula for art historical documentaries in the 1930s and '40s—"as pretentious as they are worthless."

In his article, Painlevé did more than complain about documentaries he disliked; he also had a cause to promote. He was president of the FFCC from 1946 to 1956, and from his perch at the helm of this ciné-club federation he launched a call, in the first issue of *Cinéma*, for an expansion in ciné-club programming—arguing that in addition to the more typical ciné-club screenings of the documentaries he admired by Robert Flaherty, Joris Ivens, and Jean Vigo, viewers should have the chance to view programs of industrial and scientific documentaries.²⁴ Such programs, he asserts, could be offered three or four times per year, should feature the work of *chercheurs cinéastes* (researcher-filmmakers), and should be presented by the filmmakers or local specialists. Painlevé recommends the screening of specific industrial films, including those about the French national rail company, SNCF; the national electricity company, EDF; and the car manufacturer Renault. He also calls for programming of medical films and those made by biologists, zoologists, and astronomers. He recommends the work of, among others, Jean Comandon (1877–1970), the microbiologist and filmmaker known for his development of micro-cinematography. The films' subjects should be varied—never focused on a single discipline—and, above all, be satisfying *as films*: "Il s'agit de *cinéma* d'abord" (It's about *cinema* first). Painlevé's overall point is that too many documentaries were being made by nonspecialists of both film and the subject matter at hand. However, his call to action is not, as one might expect, a proposed overhauling of the subsidy system or a new emphasis on documentary pedagogy at IDHEC. Instead, he looks for the solution to this problem in the realm of exhibition—specifically, that of the welcoming community of cinephiles found in the ciné-club. Painlevé's call for an expansion in ciné-club programming of high-quality industrial and science documentaries made by those who are specialists in the subject matter and capable of making compelling films—a small community of which he was a part—might lead

one to think that his essay smacked of self-promotion. As if anticipating such an objection, he asserts that his goals are to reveal the poetry in science, offer a breath of fresh air in programming, and provide a way to link film and culture.²⁵

The second article in *Cinéma*'s inaugural issue was authored by Lotte Eisner, who wrote from her experience at a different institution of French film culture: the Cinémathèque française. Today, Eisner is remembered as a legendary curator who was instrumental in the creation of the Cinémathèque's archive and museum.²⁶ She was also a rigorous historian of German cinema, having published *The Haunted Screen* in 1952.²⁷ She begins her *Cinéma* 55 article by reporting that the most frequented screenings at the Cinémathèque, other than those of Erich von Stroheim's films, were French avant-garde films and "German films known as 'Expressionist.'"²⁸ Regarding viewers' interest in German expressionism, she speculates that young people appreciate the films' "enigmatic" and "dreamlike" qualities, despite viewers' "tendency to be 'matter of fact' in the struggle of daily life."²⁹ Her main goal in the article, however, is to correct the misunderstanding that all German films of the classical period are works of expressionism.³⁰ Eisner notes that, ever since Siegfried Kracauer wrote of Max Reinhardt's 1917 theatrical production of Reinhard Sorge's *The Beggars* as "expressionist"—and due also, she concedes, to the subtitle of her own book (*Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*)—people have mistakenly categorized Reinhardt as an "expressionist" director. In fact, Eisner argues, Reinhardt also used impressionist techniques of lighting and, moreover, German cinema of the 1920s featured a mix of styles. *Cinéma* was thus from the beginning a space for nuanced arguments about film style and national cinema as well as a platform for one of the few women working in the realm of film criticism and history at this time.

Beyond such articles that supported programming initiatives or corrected the historical record on a given issue was the monthly "Guide du spectateur" (Spectator Guide), a recurring section of *Cinéma* featuring lengthy film reviews, overviews of national cinemas, and surveys of reviews from multiple publications. In that first issue, French, Soviet, and American films were reviewed, including Marcel Carné's *Lair de Paris* (The Air of Paris, 1954), Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Vasili's Return* (1953), Otto Preminger's *River of No Return* (1954), Luis Buñuel's *Robinson Crusoe* (1954), John Ford's *Mogambo* (1953), and two films by Robert Wise, *Executive Suite* (1954) and *Desert Rats* (1953). But most of the attention in the first "Guide du spectateur" was reserved for a re-release: Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), "the cinematic event of the month." There were extracts of reviews of *Modern Times* from other publications: a reprint of an article by Georges Sadoul from *Les Lettres françaises* along with admiring reviews from Claude Mauriac of *Le Figaro littéraire* and Jean de Baroncelli of *Le Monde*.

Beyond the "Guide du spectateur," the journal also published reports on films in progress. The first issue, for example, contained an article about the shooting of the first feature in the small port town of Sète, France, by then unknown director Agnès Varda. One Fernand Dufour of the Ciné-Club de Sète, who witnessed the

shooting of the film, reports: "The experience that the making of *La Pointe Courte* represents is endearing in more ways than one. It has all the charms of an avant-garde attempt. Faith inspired each of the members of the 'crew' engaged in this exciting adventure: to produce a film, and a film which brings a message that is at once aesthetic, social, and human. This kind of admirable madness which consisted in shooting a major film with very limited financial means was brought to fruition, patiently, with a wise determination in a cleverly organized way."³¹ Dufour notes the townspeople's engagement with the film's production and describes their enthusiastic participation in the scenes of jousting and dancing. He recognizes the director's and the crew's obvious and rare love of cinema "as a means of artistic expression" and expresses impatience to see the finished film.³² *Cinéma* was thus invested in a wide range of films, including beloved classics by celebrated auteurs, Hollywood genre films, new releases from multiple nations, and even films in progress.

Attesting once again to *Cinéma*'s connection to ciné-clubs, the magazine's first issue devoted considerable space to a film education event held in July 1954 and sponsored by the Centre national d'éducation populaire (National Center for Popular Education).³³ Held at the Chateau de Marly in Val-Flory, west of Paris, the weeklong seminar was attended by more than sixty people, including directors and members of ciné-clubs from Germany, England, Belgium, Colombia, Denmark, Holland, Italy, Switzerland, and the US. At the event, production designer Max Douy spoke about set design and color; Jean Mitry, film theorist and cofounder of the Cinémathèque française, spoke about narrative and style in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, 1942); and Lotte Eisner presented screenings of German expressionist films. The group also saw several Hollywood westerns, presented by a "specialist of the genre," Jean-Louis Rieupeyrou. The week's "grande révélation," however, was the session on Asian cinema presented by critic Georges Sadoul and Anne Philipe, writer, ethnographer, and wife of actor Gérard Philipe. Among the films screened were the Chinese *The White-Haired Girl* (Choui Khoua and Bin Wang, 1951), the Japanese *Okaasan/Mother* (Mikio Naruse, 1952), and the Indian *Do Bigha Zamin/Two Bighas of Land* (Bimal Roy, 1953). Finally, there were practical sessions designed to strengthen ciné-clubs, with discussions of how to program and introduce films and how to manage productive post-screening discussions.

The attention *Cinéma* devoted to the Marly event reflects an expansive vision of film culture, encompassing the education of viewers in workshops, the appreciation of cinema from around the world, the celebration of Hollywood genre films as well as the avant-garde, and the exposure of ciné-club members to legendary directors such as Jean Renoir, but also to craftsmen, theorists, archivists, and historians. The analysis, exploration, and celebration of film art should be cross-cultural, the article implies, and shared by professionals and nonprofessionals alike. Ciné-clubs, the pages of *Cinéma* reveal, were neither exclusive gatherings for insiders nor a forum for promoting a narrow range of films.

Subsequent issues featured an intriguing mix of material: in addition to reviews of films and accounts of ciné-club activities, there were excerpts of screenplays, interviews with directors, and calls to action on various issues concerning the French film industry. In the journal's second issue, for example, Marcel L'Herbier bemoans the decline of French film production and attendance and calls for stronger administrative coordination, a rethinking of France's export and import policies, better screenplays, and more resources devoted to developing the technical skills of directors.³⁴ Concluding on a nationalist and distinctly conservative note, L'Herbier advocates the creation of a "veritable national film production company . . . similar to that of the [prestigious state theater] Comédie-Française," which could compensate for the "denationalization caused by coproductions," "project to the world the true face of France," and "resuscitate the prestige of our cinematography."³⁵ Distinctly at odds with L'Herbier's call for a cinema of "prestige" is Renoir's astute prediction regarding low-budget films made by young people: "It is entirely possible that, in the future, great technical and industrial advances in cinema lead to the creation of an artisanal cinema, perhaps in the form of clubs, no doubt via 16mm, an artisanal cinema from which will emerge the most important works. There is every likelihood that the film that will amaze the people of the future will be a film made by young people, with no budget, working in 16mm."³⁶

Without explicitly saying so, the second issue of *Cinéma* reflects a cleavage in attitude between those on the side of the Tradition of Quality and those anticipating the New Wave.³⁷

CINÉMA 58 AND THE NOUVELLE VAGUE

In early 1958, *Cinéma* acknowledged the artistic and organizational crisis in the industry and celebrated new currents that might revitalize French cinema. The lead article by editor-in-chief Billard in the February issue of *Cinéma* 58, "40 Under 40," provides a snapshot of the rise of the New Wave (*La nouvelle vague*). Billard divides French filmmakers into two generations, those born before and after World War I.³⁸ The list of "old" directors contains many names still familiar to us today, including Marcel L'Herbier, Jean Renoir, Abel Gance, Raymond Bernard, Marcel Pagnol, Julien Duvivier, René Clair, Jacques Becker, Robert Bresson, Henri-Georges Clouzot, Jacques Tati, Marcel Carné, and Nicole Védres. But the list of "new" directors contains the names of many directors who did not go on to enjoy lengthy and illustrious careers, reflecting the uncertainty of a transitional moment. Of those on the list, only Alexandre Astruc, Pierre Kast, Roger Vadim, Agnès Varda, Marcel Camus, and Louis Malle remain reasonably well known today. Alain Resnais, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Éric Rohmer had not yet made their first features and thus do not appear on the list. That Billard's list of promising directors includes Agnès Varda might seem surprising, given that *La Pointe Courte* (1955)

received an extremely limited distribution, but the impact of ciné-club support and attention from the film press on a director's visibility was significant.³⁹

The ever-shifting shape of the canon is made clear here. Just as we might be surprised by the inclusion of some directors on the list, there are conspicuous absences as well: Jacqueline Audry (1908–77), a commercially successful director of the 1950s—and one of the few female directors active in the French film industry before Varda emerged—is missing from the “old” list, and Jean-Pierre Melville (1917–73), whose dramas and thrillers are indisputably part of today's canon, is not among the “new.” Billard concludes his overview by urging readers to keep their eyes on the films made by directors associated with *Cahiers du cinéma*: “a semi-aborted attempt by Rivette (*Le coup du berger*), a more successful one by Truffaut (*Les Mistons*), the next feature from Chabrol (*Le beau Serge*), all undertaken as independent productions . . . [and] liable to result in interesting discoveries.”⁴⁰

While Billard was in sync with many of his fellow critics in identifying the importance of a youthful rejuvenation of French film, he initially resisted describing the developments of this period as a “new wave.” Billard protested the phrase itself:

If a friend bores you with the “new wave,” whether he sings its glories or curses its failings, simply tell him: Hiroshima. Art does not advance in waves, winds, and tides, against all odds: this reductive stormy metaphor for journalists scraping for column inches and filmmakers craving attention would have you applaud the emperor's new clothes, miss the forest for the trees, and deprive yourself of the crucial works of our time. The event in French cinema in 1959 is not the “new wave” (we'll revisit the adherents and victories of this mission in the autumn). The event of 1959 in French cinema is HIROSHIMA, MON AMOUR.⁴¹

Avoiding both Truffaut's polemics and the sometimes obscure references and breathy self-promotion in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Cinéma* took its time in assessing the new currents of late-1950s cinema, offering in-depth reviews of individual films it deemed important and interviews of emerging directors, including Kast, Malle, Resnais, Truffaut, and Vadim.

By January 1960, however, Billard was willing to label the group of new films by young people a “new wave” and to defend it against its critics.⁴² “The new wave, praised to the heavens only yesterday, is now the target of also-rans of every color and stripe, who tremble at the connection between youth and talent. The dogs may bark, but the caravan keeps rolling along.”⁴³ He reports that 1960 will see even more new, young films than 1959 did. “As I write this, some fifteen-odd films have been completed, ready for release. Another twenty will be put into production during the next three months. The scale of the phenomenon, and the rapidity of its evolution, prompts us to postpone until next month the publication of our investigation of ‘the new wave.’”⁴⁴ For the moment, in the January 1960 issue, *Cinéma 60* delved instead into the contemporary slate of exciting films by looking

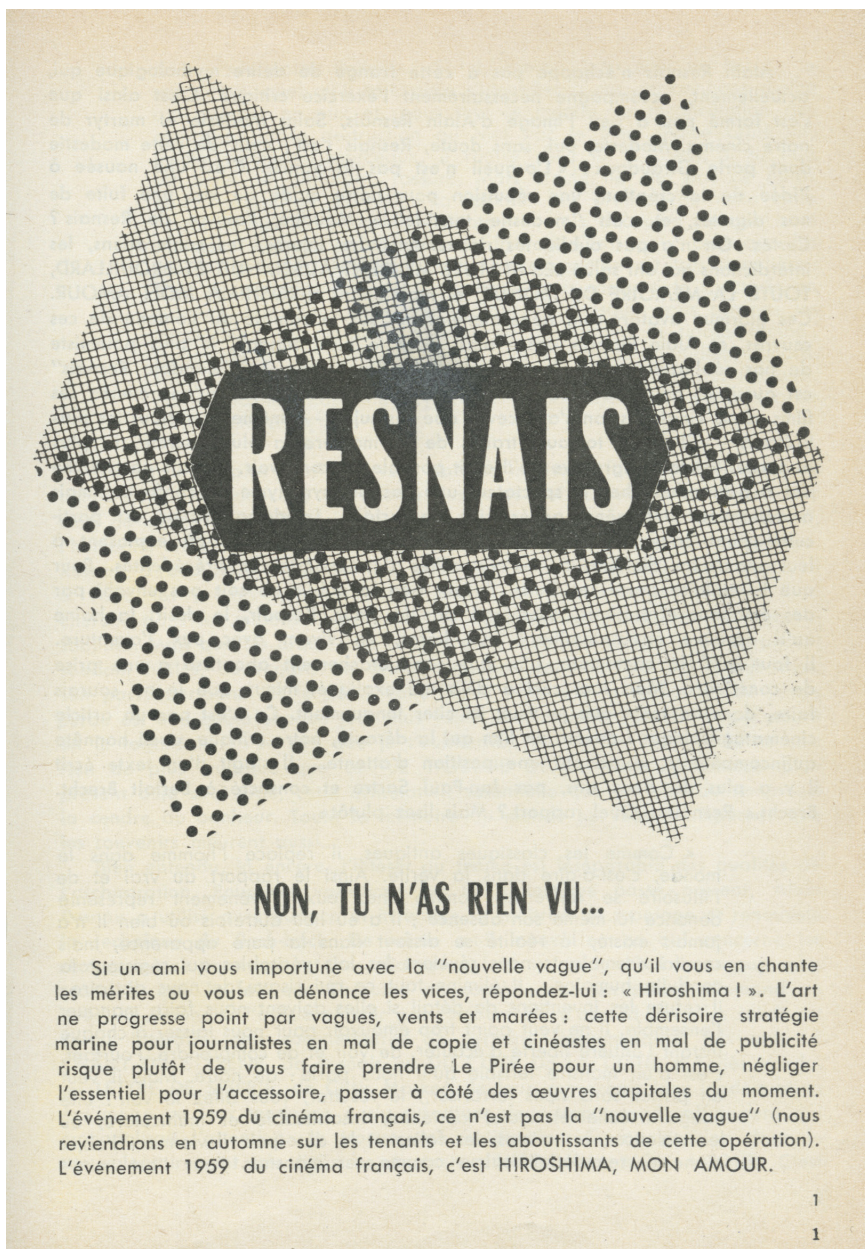


FIGURE 9.3. *Cinéma 59*, July 1959, statement expressing resistance to the phrase "New Wave" and admiration for the film *Hiroshima, mon amour*.



FIGURE 9.4. *Cinéma 59*, July 1959, Emmanuelle Béart in *Hiroshima, mon amour*.

closely at Resnais's *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959), Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups/The 400 Blows*, and Kast's *Le bel âge* (1960), works that combined a "maturity of thought," a "freedom of tone," and "formal invention." The journal would attempt to determine the New Wave's "real contributions on the aesthetic, technical, and financial levels" after a period of "oscillation between publicity campaign and a battle of generations."⁴⁵ Continuing its characteristic interest in screenplays, the magazine also featured in this issue excerpts of Marguerite Duras's screenplay for *Hiroshima, mon amour*, four character sketches written by Truffaut in preparation for making *The 400 Blows*, and dialogue from the scene in the latter between young Antoine Doinel and the psychologist. The issue also pays homage to Kast, a director who seemed central to the French New Wave in the late 1950s but who is less celebrated today. Commending *Le bel âge*, the magazine published excerpts from its screenplay, stills, and a filmography. The inclusion of such elements

foregrounds the magazine's mission as a ciné-club publication; ciné-club *animateurs* around the country needed such information for their introductions and post-screening discussions.

In addition to publishing articles about New Wave directors and films, *Cinéma* documented the movement's production conditions. However, the magazine resisted the romanticization of low-budget filmmaking. In the February 1960 issue, Jean Cotet, Claude Chabrol's production director for *Le beau Serge* (1958), challenges the notion that New Wave filmmakers invariably sought reduced crews and low budgets. Yes, Cotet notes, New Wave filmmakers often relied on unorthodox sources of financing, shot on location, and sometimes made their films before securing a distributor. However, he adds, this mode of production was not necessarily what young filmmakers wanted. Instead, directors sought to "say what they want to say [and] express themselves as freely as possible with a restricted budget."⁴⁶ Asserting that the early profitability of New Wave films might not be sustainable, Cotet calls for additional government subsidy.⁴⁷

In the following month, March 1960, *Cinéma* returned again to the subject of the New Wave. Marcel Martin, film critic and member of the magazine's editorial board, cautions against the "passion and mysticism" and "hasty generalizations" surrounding the New Wave. Moreover, Martin wants to avoid reducing the New Wave to individual directors because their ages, paths into the industry, narrative preoccupations, and styles were far too diverse.⁴⁸ Instead, and contrary to Cotet in the previous issue, he argues that the key characteristic of the New Wave is the shift in economic and material conditions under which films are being made. This shift in mode of production, he argues, is accompanied by a new tone: "modern, adult, lucid, disillusioned, pessimistic, willingly cynical and cruel, often amoral and libertine."⁴⁹ To his characterization of the New Wave, Martin adds cinephilia as a causal factor in the movement, noting that these filmmakers shared a passion for film history nourished by regular screenings at the Cinémathèque française.⁵⁰ For *Cinéma*, then, the New Wave was many things: first, a few films with a new tone and style; next, a new, low-budget mode of production; and, finally, a rise to prominence of a significantly large group of filmmakers making innovative films informed by a systematic exposure to global film history at the Cinémathèque française. Between 1958 and 1960, French film culture's understanding of the New Wave was in flux. Scrutiny of *Cinéma* reveals the month-by-month, on-the-ground development of perceptions about movements as they were emerging and shifting.

SADOUL AND THE WRITING OF FILM HISTORY

In addition to tracking the development of the New Wave as it emerged and documenting other trends in contemporary world cinema, *Cinéma* was invested in the writing of film history. Indeed, the magazine demonstrated a strong historiographic impulse as early as its second issue (December 1954), in which Georges Sadoul contemplates the task of writing film history in an article entitled

“Paradoxes and Truths on the History of Cinema.” Film scholars typically associate Sadoul only with his monumental, six-volume film history, *Histoire générale du cinéma* (1946–50), but he had multiple roles in French film culture in the post-war period. He served as secretary general of the FFCC, where he curated film programs that circulated through the federation’s clubs; organized pedagogical sessions for ciné-club directors; wrote film criticism for multiple publications; and taught film courses at the Institut de filmologie and IDHEC.⁵¹ Sadoul also served on the Commission de recherches historiques de la Cinémathèque française (Commission of Historical Research of the Cinémathèque Française) created by Henri Langlois in 1943 with the goal of “bringing together the pioneers and artisans of early cinema in order to collect their testimony and their memories.”⁵² In contemporary scholarship, Sadoul’s multiple roles in French film culture have been forgotten, and synoptic accounts of world cinema by the likes of Robert Grau, Terry Ramsaye, Bardèche and Brasillach, and Jean Mitry have gone out of fashion. But Sadoul’s 1954 essay in *Cinéma* provides fascinating clues to the nature of cinephilic anxiety at this moment in time.⁵³ How ironic that in 1954—the same year that his sixth volume of *Histoire générale du cinéma* was reprinted—Sadoul asserted that writing a history of film, or even a history of one director, was utterly impossible.

In “Paradoxes and Truths on the History of Cinema,” Sadoul illustrates the historiographic challenges of writing film history, by first emphasizing the problem of access. Someone writing on Stendahl, he notes, can simply go to a library or a bookstore, acquire the novels, read, reread, annotate, and cite the text without risk of error.⁵⁴ In contrast, Sadoul asks us to contemplate the following situation: “I am writing a study in October 1954 on Orson Welles. . . . If I want to complete my study within three months, where will I rewatch and consult *The Magnificent Ambersons*? Perhaps *Citizen Kane* or *Lady of Shanghai* are still in distribution. But can I be sure to see them before January 1955?” He continues, enumerating the difficulties that arise even when a historian is writing about films that are still in distribution, noting that one cannot rely on one’s memory of the films and certainly cannot ask the projectionist to pause during a screening so that one can take adequate notes. One might, he allows, rely on published screenplays for information. He reports, for example, that Jean George Auriol was able to publish in *La Revue du cinéma* a scene from the screenplay of *The Magnificent Ambersons* thanks to the support of RKO. But alas, he lamented, a screenplay is not the same as the finished film and cannot be relied upon to confirm details.

But even if one managed to locate a print of a film and create the viewing conditions that favor close analysis, there were other challenges. One could never be certain that the print on the Moviola had not been shortened, reordered, or altered in some way. Even if, by some miracle, one accessed a complete print whose elements conformed to the work’s condition upon initial release, the film historian’s work had scarcely begun. The writing of a complete film history, Sadoul asserted,

required consultation of the screenplay, stills, posters, marketing materials, reviews of the film published in all of the countries in which it was shown, interviews of the director and actors, and reading of the source material, if the film had been adapted from a novel or a play.⁵⁵ Finally, film history cannot be written without an understanding of cameras, film stock, chemistry, physics and optics, and technical innovations.

Sadoul also argued that one must understand film financing and distribution and the history of film studios more generally. A full history of Welles, Sadoul insisted, must include the fact that RKO “mutilated” *The Magnificent Ambersons* and caused the director’s unemployment for three or four years.⁵⁶ Even after conducting this research, the historian would still not be ready to write. Knowledge of film’s industrial and technological contexts was insufficient. It was “impossible to speak of this art without studying its relationships with other arts or means of expression (ballet, the novel, architecture, radio, the press, television).”⁵⁷ Furthermore, the historian of film must undertake to understand the historical context in which a film was made, including the general history of cultures and people, relationships and social conflicts within various countries, and relationships between nations.

Next, his tone increasingly playful and faux-desperate, Sadoul imagines how a film historian might write an account of the year 1955 in cinema. The “ideal researcher” would need to begin by seeing the fifteen hundred or two thousand great films (*grands films*) produced that year by the seventy or eighty producing countries, read the worldwide film criticism written about this corpus of films, acquire their screenplays, and conduct an analysis (*analyse filmique*) of them. This researcher would also need to page through and absorb the information contained in the directories and trade publications published around the world, precious publicity materials, and the two to three hundred novels and plays from which the films were adapted. To conduct all of this research, the researcher would need to know many languages, including English, Arabic, Japanese, Chinese, Tamil, Telegu, Malay, Hungarian, and Bantu. “It would also be useful for him to visit these countries, not only to see films there, but to note the influence of a nineteenth-century painter from Prague (unknown in France) on a Czech cinematographer, of Balinese art on a Filipino set designer, or the behavior of the last Aztecs on the performances of Pedro Amendariz.”⁵⁸

Sadoul then reaches a “desperate conclusion”: it is impossible to write not only a history of world cinema, but also the history of the films of a single nation, a single filmmaker, or even a single film. And yet, he concludes, we must try. Sadoul’s humorously expansive vision of film history starts with one case study—*The Magnificent Ambersons*—and moves outward to an industrial, technological, and cultural history of global cinema. For Sadoul, then, the enterprise of writing film history requires both close analysis of individual films and large-scale economic, aesthetic, and social contextualization. The project was national and global, impossible and yet essential.

In his insistence on the difficulty of providing an accurate and sufficiently expansive account of film history, it is possible that Sadoul was responding directly to Truffaut's critique of the latest volume of *Histoire générale du cinéma*.⁵⁹ Two months before Sadoul published his historiographical lament in *Cinéma*, Truffaut published a scathing article complaining of misremembered plot details and especially of the leftist Sadoul's ideological blind spots, notably his tendency to criticize Hollywood film.⁶⁰ Whether Sadoul was responding directly to Truffaut or not, his emphasis on completeness, his anxieties about gaps and missing sources, speak both to the ideological landscape of 1950s and to a vision of history that was already falling out of fashion. Indeed, in the years following Sadoul's fretting about film history's impossibility, the field of history moved away from what E. H. Carr in 1961 critiqued as the "ultimate view" of history—a belief that enough facts, words, and published pages could plausibly chronicle all of history's significant events.⁶¹ Instead, the leading approaches to historiography took the incompleteness of sources, the subjectivity of the historian, and the need for critical interpretation as their starting points.

Sadoul further ensured the impossibility of his theory of film history through conceiving of it as the enterprise of an individual researcher. One person doesn't need to know twenty different languages and the nuances of every culture. Twenty people can know forty languages. Forty people speaking the same languages can form a research community, investigating small to mid-scale histories, what David Bordwell has described as the "piecemeal" approach to film history.⁶² To his credit, Sadoul acknowledges the way that film history necessarily developed collaboratively over time, through mistakes along with discoveries. He notes that Lewis Jacobs made many erroneous assumptions in *The Rise of the American Film* (1939) about editing in a film he had not seen—Edwin S. Porter's *Life of an American Fireman* (1903)—which, in turn, were recirculated by Sadoul, much to Sadoul's chagrin.⁶³ But, Sadoul notes, if Lewis had not bothered to write about the film in 1939, it might have remained unknown by later historians.⁶⁴ Mistakes made by film historians can lead to fertile discussions and new discoveries. Sadoul recognized the longitudinal dimension of film history, but he struggled to envision it laterally: that a network of researchers (like the group of authors contributing to this book) could collectively produce histories spanning more nations, industries, languages, films, and animating questions than any individual working in isolation.

Although Sadoul wasn't thinking laterally, *Cinéma* certainly was. By the time the journal marked its first birthday in November 1955, it had become more self-conscious about its identity as a film journal. There were, as always, a startling array of topics covered, including the state of the contemporary French film industry; French film under the German occupation; ciné-club events; films from Mexico, the Netherlands, and Czechoslovakia; the works of Carl Theodor Dreyer and Vittorio De Sica; and *Boudou sauvé des eaux/Boudou Saved from Drowning* (Renoir, 1932) and *The Magnificent Ambersons*. The opening editorial announced

a few changes: it would be “more varied, more current, better documented, and easier to read than in the past.”⁶⁵ But the journal would continue to avoid publishing “pseudo-philosophical jargon that hides its lack of consistency under [the authors’] pretentious and bombastic style,” and “bitter polemics in which wit and demonstrations of self-satisfaction take the place of argument.”⁶⁶ The journal, they asserted, was not interested in the provocative formalism that existed in a certain sector of French film criticism, nor in discovering some misunderstood genius or the “metaphysical meaning of the work of the script-girl.” This may seem like a not-so-veiled dig at *Cahiers du cinéma*, but it’s worth recognizing how much cinematic material was being generated in postwar France, at every level of society—education, youth culture, popular press, lectures, discussions, radio broadcasts, production, adaptation, consumption, heritage, and legacy. It’s clear just from this sampling of the pages of *Cinéma* that its contributors and editors were not operating in the hush of a rarefied cathedral, but rather in the roar of the marketplace, amid throngs of competing voices, wares bought and sold, traded and bartered, accessed and accessible—much like the landscape of commercial, popular cinema at the time. If nothing else, *Cinéma* reflects that wealth of material, the vitality of film culture at the center of French popular and intellectual discourse, and the scale of the exchanges between filmmakers, philosophers, historians, critics, and audiences. Clearly, resources such as this journal must be digitized and preserved for our continued contextual enquiry, as Sadoul would term it, to understand better the many layers of our cinephilia.

NOTES

1. *Cinéma* 57, no. 16 (March 1957). This journal is not yet available in the Media History Digital Library, but one can access its covers and tables of contents, as well as those of many other francophone film journals, here: <https://calindex.eu/index.php>.

2. *Cinéma* 57, no. 15 (February 1957).

3. François Truffaut, “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français,” *Cahiers du cinéma* 31 (January 1954): 15–29.

4. Essential starting points for understanding 1950s French films, the film industry, and film culture include Richard Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, [2002] 2007); and Colin Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema, 1930–1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

5. For some useful steps in this direction, see Colin Burnett, *The Invention of Robert Bresson: The Auteur and His Market* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016); and Gwénaëlle Le Gras and Geneviève Sellier, eds., *Cinémas et cinéphiles populaires dans la France d’après guerre, 1945–1958* (Paris: Nouveau monde, 2015).

6. Henry Moret, “Petite histoire du festival de Tours,” *Image et son*, no. 150–51 (April–May 1962), 37–38.

7. Laurent Mannoni, *Histoire de la Cinémathèque française* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2006), 136.

8. Léo Souillès-Debats, *La Culture cinématographique du mouvement ciné-club* (Paris: AFRHC, 2017).

9. Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb, *Objectif 49: Cocteau et la Nouvelle Avant-Garde* (Paris: Séguier, 2014).

10. Erika Noemi Badani Martinez, "Les revues françaises de cinéma entre 1950 et 1965," Rapport de recherche Bibliographique, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Sciences de l'Information et des Bibliothèques, 2000, 17.

11. For an introduction to the major voices in French film criticism of the period, including Bazin, Georges Sadoul, François Truffaut, Roger Taillieur, and Bernard Dort, see Antoine de Baecque, *La cinéphilie: Invention d'un regard, histoire d'une culture, 1944–1968* (Paris: Fayard, 2003). For an in-depth study of one important journal, see Olivier Barrot, *L'écran français, 1943–1953: Histoire d'un journal et d'une époque* (Paris: Les Éditions Françaises Réunies, 1979).

12. *L'Âge classique du cinéma français: du cinéma parlant à la Nouvelle Vague* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995). Billard's son, Jean-Michel Frodon—also a well-known film critic and historian—authored the companion volume *L'Âge Moderne du cinéma français: de la nouvelle Vague à nos jours* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995).

13. Léo Souillès-Debats, *La Culture cinématographique du mouvement ciné-club* (Paris: Association française de recherche sur l'histoire du cinéma, 2017), 552–53.

14. Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb, Pascal Laborderie, and Léo Souillès-Debats, eds., *La Ligue de l'enseignement et le cinéma: une histoire de l'éducation à l'image (1945–1989)* (Paris: AFRHC, 2016). *Cinéma* was actually the FFCC's longer-lived, second journal. Its predecessor, *Ciné-Club* (1947–54), was a large-format monthly that published articles by some of the most influential figures in mid-century French film culture, including Jean George Auriol, André Bazin, Jean Mitry, Georges Sadoul, and Jean Painlevé.

15. *Cinéma* 55, no. 1 (November 1954), 1. "La renaissance et l'expansion continue du mouvement ciné-club constituent sans doute un des événements marquants de la vie cinématographique française depuis la libération. Il manquait jusqu'alors à ce mouvement, un organe qui puisse approfondir encore, et davantage actualiser son action. C'est le but que se propose CINEMA 55."

16. *Cinéma* 55, no. 1, 1. "... prolongera auprès d'un public plus large l'effort collectif de réflexion et de critique des ciné-clubs."

17. *Cinéma* 55, no. 1, 1. "Revue de culture cinématographique, CINEMA 55 s'intéressera à tous les aspects culturels de la production et de la diffusion des films ainsi qu'à l'histoire et l'esthétique du cinéma."

18. *Cinéma* 55, no. 1, 2. "... s'attachera particulièrement à suivre de près le cinéma de notre pays: artistes et techniciens viendront dans ses colonnes exposer leurs réflexions sur leur métier, leurs projets et leurs problèmes. Ils contribueront ainsi à l'une des tâches de CINEMA 55: la défense et l'illustration du cinéma français."

19. *Cinéma* 55, no. 1, 2. "CINEMA 55, enfin, constituera une tribune où spectateurs et specialists nourriront un fructueux dialogue qui aidera à mieux définir et à mieux faire apprécier les raisons de coeur et les raisons raisonnantes qu'ont les cinéphiles d'aimer le cinéma."

20. James Leo Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

21. Roxane Hamery, "Jean Painlevé et l'esprit documentaire," in *Le Court Métrage Français de 1945 à 1968, de l'âge d'or aux contrebandiers*, ed. Dominique Bluher and François Thomas, 85–91 (Rennes, France: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005).

22. Jean Painlevé, "Le bluff sur le toit," *Cinéma* 55 (November 1954), 6.

23. Painlevé, 5. "Il faut dire que c'est ce qu'il y a de moins cher matériellement et mentalement que d'éclairer une toile, faire un travellingue sur un détail et d'assaisonner d'un commentaire lyrico-fleur de peau dit par un spiqueueur qui au fond s'en fout."

24. Painlevé, 7.

25. Painlevé, 8. "... permettre de susciter du point de vue cinégraphique pur une insufflation de vie nouvelle, la poésie étant incluse dans la science. Ce sera une manière supplémentaire de lier le cinéma et la culture."

26. Laurent Mannoni, "La 'Eisnerin' et les écrans démoniaques," *Sociétés & Représentations*, no. 32 (2011), 241–51. <https://doi.org/10.3917/sr.032.0241>.

27. Lotte H. Eisner, *L'écran démonique: Influence de Max Reinhardt et de l'expressionnisme* (Paris: Bonne, 1952, 1965). For the most recent translation of Eisner's work into English, see Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

28. Lotte Eisner, "L'Ecole Expressioniste, Mise en garde et mise au point," *Cinéma* 55, no. 1 (November 1954), 14.

29. Eisner, "L'Ecole Expressioniste," 14.

30. Naomi DeCelles explores Eisner's criticism, historiography, and archival work in *Recollecting Lotte Eisner: Cinema, Exile, and the Archive* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022).

31. Fernand Dufour, "Agnès Varda tourne *La Pointe Courte*," *Cinéma* 55, no. 1 (November 1954),

80. "L'expérience que représente la réalisation de *La Pointe Courte* est attachante à plus d'un titre. Elle possède tous les charmes d'une tentative d'avant-garde. La foi a animé chacun des membres de 'l'équipe' engagée dans cette aventure excitante: produire un film, et un film qui apporte un message à la fois esthétique, social et humain. Cette espèce de folie admirable qui consistait à tourner un grand film avec des moyens financiers très réduits a été menée à bien, patiemment, avec une sage détermination d'une manière astucieusement organisée."

32. Dufour, "Agnès Varda tourne *La Pointe Courte*," 80.

33. René Gilson, "Marly: à l'école du spectateur," *Cinéma* 55, no. 1 (November 1954), 37.

34. Marcel L'Herbier, "Vers les Etats Généaux du Cinématographie," *Cinéma* 55, no. 2 (December 1954).

35. "...compense la dénationalisation qu'entraînent les coproductions, s'attacherait à produire les des films ambitieux, peu faits pour séduire le secteur privé, mais qui, projetant au monde le vrai visage de la France, ressusciteraient le prestige de notre cinématographie."

36. Jean Renoir, "A bâtons rompus," *Cinéma* 55, no. 2 (December 1954), 33. "Il est parfaitement possible que, demain, les très grands perfectionnements techniques et industriels du cinéma n'amènent la création d'un cinéma artisanal, peut-être sous forme de clubs, probablement par le 16mm, cinéma artisanal d'où sortiraient les œuvres les plus importantes. Il y a de grandes chances pour que le film qui bouleversera les gens de l'avenir sera un film fait par de jeunes gens, sans aucun moyen, et en 16mm."

37. For incisive analyses of the shifting notion of "quality" in 1950s French cinema, see Colin Burnett, "Cinema(s) of Quality," in *Dictionary of World Cinema: France*, ed. Tim Palmer and Charlie Michael, 140–48 (Chicago: Intellect Press, 2012); and Guillaume Vernet, "La 'qualité française' et la 'tradition de la qualité': arguments critiques d'une lutte politique," *1895 98* (2022): 16–49.

38. Pierre Billard, "40 moins de 40," *Cinéma* 58, no. 24 (February 1958), 5–42. Cited in Richard Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), xxii.

39. *La Pointe Courte* circulated in ciné-clubs and screened in January 1956 at the Paris art house Studio Parnasse. Kelley Conway, *Agnès Varda* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 25–26.

40. Billard, "40 moins de 40," *Cinéma* 58, no. 24 (February 1958), 34.

41. Pierre Billard, "Resnais: 'Non, tu n'as rien vu . . .'," *Cinéma* 59, no. 38 (July 1959), 1. "Si un ami vous importune avec la 'nouvelle vague,' qu'il vous en chante les mérites ou vous en dénonce les vices, répondez-lui: Hiroshima! L'art ne progresse point par vagues, vents et marées: cette dérisoire stratégie marine pour journalistes en mal de copie et cinéastes en mal de publicité risque plutôt de vous faire prendre Le Pirée pour un homme, négliger l'essentiel pour l'accessoire, passer à côté des œuvres capitales du moment. L'événement 1959 du cinéma français, ce n'est pas la 'nouvelle vague' (nous reviendrons en automne sur les tenants et les aboutissants de cette opération). L'Événement 1959 du cinéma français, c'est HIROSHIMA, MON AMOUR."

42. Pierre Billard, "Introduction à la Nouvelle Vague," *Cinéma* 60, no. 42 (January 1960).

43. Billard, "Introduction à la Nouvelle Vague," 6.

44. Billard, 6.

45. Billard, 6.

46. Jean Cotet, "La 'nouvelle vague' a-t-elle révolutionné les méthodes de production?," *Cinéma* 60, no. 43, 79.

47. Cotet, 80.
48. Marcel Martin, "Nouvelle Vague: Tentative de Bilan," *Cinéma 60*, no. 44 (March 1960), 5.
49. Martin, 11.
50. Martin, 11.
51. Valérie Vignaux, "Georges Sadoul et la Fédération française des ciné-clubs ou contribution à une histoire des usages non commerciaux du cinéma," *Cinémas 27*, no. 2-3 (2017): 179-94.
52. Commission de Recherche Historique and La Cinémathèque Française, *Fonds Commission de Recherche Historique* (Paris, 1896-1966), <http://www.cineressources.net/repertoires/archives/fonds.php?id=crh>.
53. Georges Sadoul, "Paradoxes et vérités sur l'histoire du cinéma," *Cinéma 55*, no. 2 (December 1954): 16-24.
54. Sadoul, "Paradoxes," 16.
55. Sadoul, 21.
56. Sadoul, 22.
57. Sadoul, 22.
58. Sadoul, 23. "Elles lui seront aussi utiles pour visiter ces pays, non seulement pour y voir les films, mais pour constater l'influence de tel peintre pragois du XIXe siècle (inconnue en France) sur tel opérateur tchèque, de l'art balinais sur un décorateur philippin ou du comportement des derniers Azthèques sur le jeu de Pedro Amendariz."
59. Georges Sadoul, *Le cinéma pendant la guerre (1939-1945)* (Paris: Denoël, 1954).
60. François Truffaut, "Georges Sadoul et la vérité historique," *La Parisienne*, no. 21 (October 1954), 1114-18. I am grateful to Bernard Bastide for drawing my attention to this source.
61. E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Penguin, 1961). I am grateful to Eric Hoyt for sharing his ideas with me on the larger context of film historiography at this moment in time.
62. David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 118.
63. Sadoul, "Paradoxes," 24.
64. Porter's editing would be scrutinized, of course, by many scholars who came after Jacobs and Sadoul. See André Gaudreault, "Detours in Film Narrative: The Development of Cross-Cutting," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, 133-44 (London: British Film Institute, 1990); Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 118-39.
65. Editorial, *Cinéma 56*, no. 7 (November 1955), 1.
66. Editorial, *Cinéma 56*, no. 7, 2.

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