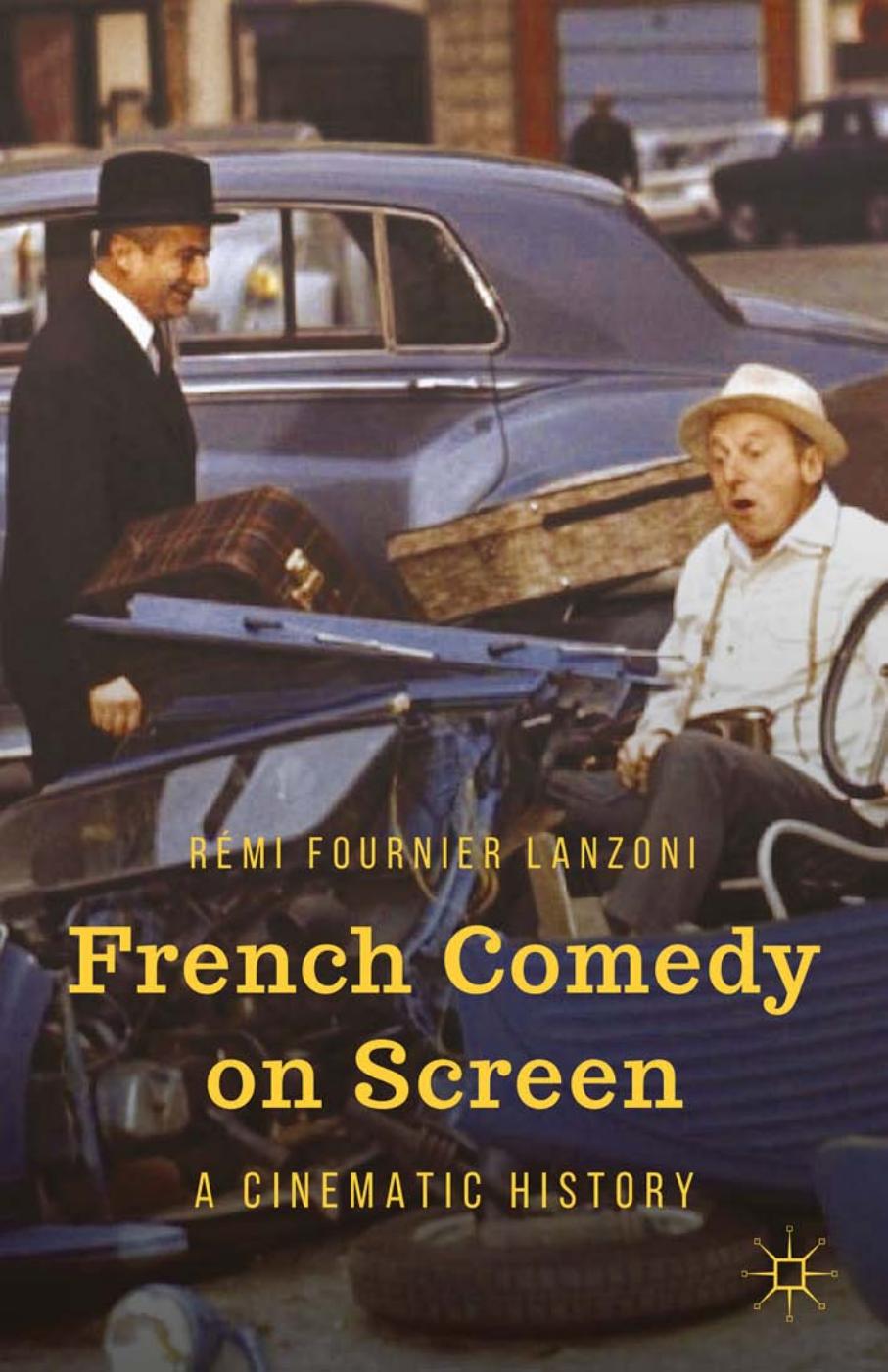

RÉMI FOURNIER LANZONI

French Comedy on Screen

A CINEMATIC HISTORY

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Rémi Fournier Lanzoni

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Introduction

Since comedy is often considered a universal and transnational genre on a cinematic level, many comic films belong to a specific cultural space influenced primarily by national traditions and shared cultural references. French comedies are no exception. Regardless of their artistic format, French comedies have always been difficult to classify. Often a combination of several genres, they can be described as a hybrid art form, incorporating daring, even delicate subjects, with exceptional actors delivering literary dialogues or, on the contrary, using popular slang known to millions of French spectators, with a *savoir faire* equal in quality to the best comedies made in Hollywood.

French comedy, though unconditionally "plebiscited" by popular audiences, has a long history of delicate rapport with film critics who have often reproached its lack of consistency and commitment in the promotion of the seventh art. Despite being the financial backbone of the entire French film industry, the genre has rarely won national recognition except for statistics at the box offices. The only exceptions to the rule occurred with Claude Zidi's *Les ripoux* (*My New Partner*, 1984) and Coline Serreau's *Trois hommes et un couffin* (*Three Men and a Cradle*, 1985), as both comedies won the César Award for Best Film. This phenomenon can indeed be considered a rarity in the history of French cinema as these are the only two instances where professionals from the French film industry granted national recognition to the comedy genre (Guillaume Gallienne's *Guillaume et les garcons à table!* [*Me, Myself and Mum*, 2013] also won the César Award for Best Film but can arguably be considered more of a romantic comedy as opposed to pure comedy).

This introduction serves as both a pre-examination of comedy and as a forum for questioning comical preconceptions in France. Going back in the history of cinema, one could argue that comedy was the second genre to see the light (no pun intended) from the Lumière brothers' *cinématographe* with *L'arroseur arrosé* (*The Sprinkler Sprinkled*, 1895), a farce featuring a boy playing a prank on a gardener, stepping momentarily on a hose to cut the

water flow; as the gardener inspects the nozzle, the boy takes his foot off the hose, causing the water to spray the gardener. These 50 seconds of slapstick comedy made history (the first genre, chronologically speaking, being obviously the documentary film *La sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon* (*Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* that was shot earlier the same year). Between 1896 and 1913, and following the national and international success of the *cinématographe*, many comic feature films were directed and shot by a newcomer in the film industry, Georges Méliès. Around 1910 the French burlesque school reached international fame with actors like Max Linder who embodied the character of a dandy aristocrat, disturbing the tranquility of Parisian salons, prone to catastrophe, often drunk but still preserving an inherent dignity. Dressed in his famous striped pants and top hat, Linder introduced a certain level of humanity in situational comedies. He was the world's first international star for motion pictures, whose venues in the major European capitals attracted huge crowds to see the movie star in person (Chaplin himself considered Linder as one of his masters). Along with Linder, actors such as André Deed (Boireau), Charles Prince Seigneur (Rigadin), Ernest Bourbon (Onésime), Lucien Bataille (Zigoto) dominated the comedy screens until 1914, in films produced by Pathé and Gaumont, but also by smaller studios like Eclipse, Eclair, and Lux. During those boom years (1906 to 1914), about 150 short comedies were produced by just the Pathé studios. André Deed, whose real name was André Chapuis, earned a reputation with Pathé by embodying the character Boireau in small films directed by Albert Capellani. All these comedians were adepts at stunts, chases, fights, pranks, absurd situations, vaudeville, and misunderstandings; everything, in fact, was discovered by these pioneers of a new art. Half of the French cinematic productions before World War I were classified as comedies. This period of euphoria was followed by a much less prolific one. During and after the war, French comedies began their decline due to three simultaneous obstacles: the hardship of war and its repercussions on the French film industry, the rise of Hollywood, and the lack of interest in up-and-coming filmmakers in France. Comedy, which did not adhere to the style of film auteurs such as Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, Abel Gance, or Marcel L'Herbier, saw its last hope in filmmakers like René Clair, who did not display a keen interest for the conventional slapstick comedy, but gave preference to the newly established school of the *absurde* with *Entr'acte* (1924) and the comedic pursuit pattern with *Un chapeau de paille d'Italie* (*An Italian Straw Hat*, 1927). A few years later, with the advent of sound and the development of the so-called talkies, silent comedies paid the price of a growing preference among popular audience for talkies; these films also had multiple effects on French society and its spectatorship. One of them was the return to vaudeville as a form of

entertainment, as the improvement of synchronization led to the sudden conquest of cinematic adaptations of the "boulevard" comedies. Michel Simon, Louis Jouvet, and especially Jules Auguste Muraire, better known as Raimu, performed on an emotional level, along with actors used to the popular comedic register like Saturnin Fabre, Julien Carette, Fernand Charpin, and Noël-Noël. The big names of the poetic realism movement appeared to remain disinclined to comedy, with rare exceptions like Marcel Carné and his *Drôle de drame* (*Bizarre, Bizarre*) and Marc Allégret's *Gribouille* (*Heart of Paris*), both in 1937. Writers, especially screenwriters, all of sudden became indispensable: Henri Jeanson, Jacques Prévert, and Marcel Pagnol among others.

The present study begins its survey with the talking pictures. Leaving aside almost three decades of silent comedies was a difficult but conscious decision as these reflect a different art form, which has already received substantial academic scholarship in both French and English. But the data and scholarly work on French comedies (non-silent, that is) is close to nonexistent, except for rare works dealing mainly with particular auteurs such as Jacques Tati or Sacha Guitry.

Chapter One, entitled "The Early Comedies of the Sound Era," narrates the development of French comedy during the prewar era and in particular the influence of regional literature, popular culture, and its subsequent effect on film spectators and comedy filmmakers. It includes the comedies of the 1930s and the influence of the *chansonniers* on musical comedies in France. Then it considers the celebrated comedy genres such as the military vaudeville (also known as *comique troupier*), verbal comedies promoting Parisian slang on national screens, and of course the contributions of Sacha Guitry as a major actor/director of the decade. One of the sections of the chapter provides the explanation of the fundamental differences between cinematic comedies and the so-called canned theater; this careful delineation is made through a study of the work of Marcel Pagnol and his famous mythology of the South. Chapter Two, "The Comedies of Postwar France," offers a panoramic view of the comedy genre in a country in search of new cinematic models with a detailed synopsis of the French film industry of the 1950s and 1960s. It examines the role of state censorship during these years of profuse cinematic productivity and innovation as well as investigates the reasons for the success of the commercial film. Social satires, as well as comedies dealing with recent World War II events, gangster parodies, and the presence of comic legend Fernandel are at the center of the chapter. Also included are the innovative skills of Jacques Tati and his unique burlesque humor. This period is often defined as the golden age of French comedies since three of France's most celebrated comic actors (Bourvil, de Funès, and Fernandel) flourished

during these two decades. Chapter Three, "Comedy in the Modern Era," evokes the first signs of economic crisis of the 1970s. The themes of comedies changed to introduce some of the effects of social alienation, capitalism and speculation, and the differences between provincialism and consumerism. Comedy served as a vehicle to address the unprecedented liberalist wave that brought in modernity. It also offered a humanist representation of the spirit of the times with the first race-based satires as well as the first comedies dealing with homosexuality (1970s) and gender roles (1980s). This chapter is organized around the most important filmmakers of the 1970s whose emblematic productions are often mistaken for dramas due to the high level of cynicism, unconventionality, and tragic endings (e.g., filmmakers like Bertrand Blier, one of the major protagonists of the new comedy style, due in large part to his vivid social satires and scathing portrait of an amoral society). Finally, Chapter Four, "French Comedy Today," introduces a detailed analysis of the political situation during the 1993 "rebirth" of the French cinema industry. After an in-depth examination of French productions which have resulted in the deregulation of media laws and the subsequent greater presence of television, the chapter focuses on current French comedies with a careful consideration on their inherent discourse of cynicism. It then studies the influence of stand-up comedy, television talk shows, the internet, and their respective influence on the so-called communitarian humor. It also explores the comedies as social phenomenon—for instance, Jean-Marie Poiré's *Les visiteurs* (*The Visitors*, 1993) or, more recently, Dany Boon's *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (*Welcome to the Sticks*, 2008) with 14 and 20 million spectators at the box office respectively—in an attempt to decode these films' success and their potential social impact as they circulate via mass audiences.

As in any human relationship projected on screen, film narratives are mostly subject to the complexity, the spontaneity, and the level of sophistication that the relation with the "other" requires. Comedies on screen define different realities, often multifaceted, and include various specific situations, all carrying different meanings. These comedies, from Christian Jaque's *François 1er* (*Francis the First*, 1937) to Michel Blanc's *Marche à l'ombre* (1984) or Franck Gastambide's *Les Kaïra* (2012), cover a variety of fields such as aesthetics, sociology, history, psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and philosophy. With so many criteria at their disposal, should comedic films still be considered as part of a cinematic genre or simply a mode to treat a story? While one may argue that in literature comedy may be less of a genre as opposed to a style, the present study, however, will attempt to justify the entire legitimacy of comedy as a full-fledged cinematic genre. Aristotle said in *Poetics* that comedy was the "imitation of a foolish action," thus arguing that

laughter was to mock and ridicule human weaknesses. Therefore, the ancestor of French comedy (before cinema existed), Molière himself, entertained his public with similar concepts of comedy: the tribulations of a snob (*Le bourgeois gentilhomme*), an avaricious bourgeois (*L'avare*), and a charlatan (*Tartuffe*), among others. The resulting action blended comedy and serious reflection, whether social or human, in ways similar to today's filmmakers who, centuries later, took on the same format as Jean Renoir's *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (*Boudu Saved from Drowning*, 1932), Raymond Bernard's *Tartarin de Tarascon* (1934), Sacha Guitry's *Le roman d'un tricheur* (*The Story of a Cheat*, 1936), Maurice Tourneur's *Volpone* (*Volpone*, 1941), Patrice Leconte's *Les bronzés* (*French Fried Vacation*, 1978), and more recently Francis Veber's *Le diner de cons* (*The Dinner Game*, 1998).

Comedy is by definition nonconformist, and therefore the most reformists of all genres (even if some counter-examples of its conservative usage can always be found). In his study on the connection between comedy and human imagination, scholar Russell B. Gill defined humor and comedy as "active, creative responses by the self to the disorder of its world,"[1] which confirms the inherent and natural vocation of the genre to constantly reinvent itself as an art form (on the contrary, a few film scholars mistakenly see it as a conservative genre[2]). For decades French comedy, especially through satire and parody, has openly displayed its desire to portray caricatures, social excesses, and social injustices with innovations, in order to push the limits of socially acceptable laughter further as, for instance, in the coproduction of *La grande bouffe* (1973) with Italian filmmaker Marco Ferreri. This is why in many comedies, such as Didier Bourdon and Bernard Campan's *Les rois mages* (2001), Dany Boon's *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, Jean-Marie Poiré's *Les visiteurs*, and Francis Veber's *Le diner de cons*, the comedic plot includes the presence of a "stranger" as seminal character: an intruder, ignorant of the rules, who will legitimately produce an effect of surprise and comedy. To treat sensitive subjects through laughter requires diverting the offensive nature of certain discourses which can prove an efficient way to dodge censorship or, as in recent years, to be politically correct. Generally speaking, French comedy has been an instrument of resistance and liberation when considering films like Sacha Guitry's *La poison* (1951), Bertrand Blier's *Tenue de soirée* (*Ménage*, 1986), or Josiane Balasko's *Gazon maudit* (*French Twist*, 1995). However, it should be noted that a rather formatted evolution of laughter has recently taken shape in France. For example, the concept of comedy is increasingly being appropriated by comedians on television shows. It now weighs on the form and content of laughter and unfortunately tends to pre-format a type of behavior, thus potentially leading comedy to fall into conformity if not predictability. Compared to stand-up comedy, French comic films have been less

the object for laughter than the suggestion of an original reflection. Over the years they have made popular audiences smile more than they have made them laugh.

The Theories of Comedy

Throughout the ages scholarship has attempted to answer the question: which humor is related to laughter? Though none of them pretends to be exclusive, scholars often have animated debates as to whether the two are mutually compatible or complement each other. Insights from philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and literature have been able to bring some answers, in particular for the field of film studies. While these present enunciations may appear as a potential oversimplification of the existing scholarship, they do not pretend to exclude other concepts. Despite important discourses on comedy by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Schopenhauer, Bergson, and Freud, who all have acknowledged the importance of the phenomenon of laughter and tried to understand its meaning and mechanisms, no unified theory of comedy seems to have emerged from their texts and no clear explanation of what comedy is and how it works seems to be enunciated to this day. Freud considered laughter partly originating from a source of anxiety, among other considerations, whereas Bergson saw it mostly as a defense mechanism to prevent feelings to guide the mind overwhelmingly. Others see laughter as a safety valve, a relief from the stress and torment of life or as the result of inappropriateness, but ultimately all agree on the exclusively human character of laughter as proper to man.

Based on ridicule, the superiority theory sees the object of laughter as inferior and consequently the cinematic experience immediately provides the public with an ephemeral, yet tangible, sense of superiority (also described by Thomas Hobbes[3] under the famous formula of "sudden glory"). Plato and Aristotle both agree that it is mostly aggressive feelings that can fuel comedy (wit, Aristotle said in the *Rhetoric*, is the equivalent of "educated insolence"[4]) and therefore the act of laughter is in essence a product of derision. In the *Poetics* Aristotle concurred with Plato's idea of the origins of amusement generated by comedy. Unlike tragedy, which often involved out-of-the-ordinary protagonists, comedy however included characters that could be easily seen as "inferior" to the spectators. In his 1899 essay entitled "*Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique*" (Laughter: An Essay on the Significance of Humor) Henri Bergson[5] established the bases of modern scholarship not only on comedy but more importantly on its mechanisms, and attempted to respond

to the questions of why and how humans laughed. For him no comedy outside of what is truly human was able to exist. In addition, laughter was to be defined as a group phenomenon, as well as to be shared with other humans. Comedy is therefore social. It is a mode of communication that allows self-assertiveness and promotes a function of sociability, reflects on the customs of society, and of specific community humor. Scholar Adrian Bardon stated that: "The ridiculous is the self-ignorance of others when they falsely believe that they possess wisdom."[6] Thus he asserts that while comic characters are generally comical in relation to their very own ignorance of ridicule, so are the potential spectators. To be thorough in this survey of concepts related to the different ideas of comedy, one may argue that the actual superiority theory contains flaws by excluding several types of laughter such as the innocent laughter produced by babies, or laughter triggered by the sudden effect of surprise.

The relief theory, another concept developed at a later stage, is basically about release of energy generated by repression. Sigmund Freud, forerunner of psychoanalysis, in his 1927 essay entitled "Humor" argued that laughter was the logical and natural consequence of the stress relief due to the difficulties of everyday life, including tensions, stress, frustrations, even anger of all sorts. When film spectators understand the absurdity of a gag, they also realize unnecessary tensions involved in the process, and release it through laughter. This moment of relief, though only providing temporary contentment, is still a reprieve. Just like the superiority theory, the relief theory is not exempt of criticism as it is proven that humans are able to laugh even when in total relaxation, therefore contradicting the notion of a tension-release experience. In addition, this release of supposedly excessive energy may not be applicable to comedy gags, which, by definition, occur quickly. While literature may provide the necessary time for tension build up, the cinematic experience does not always provide (nor desire to provide) these necessary conditions.

Finally, the incongruity theory is predominant among all theories of humor as it accounts for a large amount of comedic narratives, especially films, and involves elements of ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance, and inappropriateness. The incongruity theory is the leading approach and historical figures such as Kant and Kierkegaard have argued that comedy inherently possesses an incongruous relationship between human mind and mechanical behaviors (perception of the senses). In addition, the hypothesis expresses the idea that spectatorship understands the world of comedy either through abstract concepts or perception of the senses. In other words, it is the result of a permanent conflict between mind and sensitivity, between norm and abnormality.

The Registers of Film Comedy

Defining the different registers of comedies with words is a far from easy venture as often artistic subjectivity clashes with personal emotions and interpretations. In addition, the ephemeral and highly personal character of humor renders the essence of any humorous situation as rather intricate to define, and, when defined, loses a lot of its enchantment. If in the classical aesthetics of comedy unity of tone was the rule, it is actually quite rare in cinema. The mixture of registers can be used to create a balance of effects. With French comedies many nuances have their own importance. A comic film can mix several of these registers, for example, satire and drama, as, for instance, in Claude Autant-Lara's *La traversée de Paris* (*Four Bags Full*, 1956), or parody and verbal comedies with Georges Lautner's *Les tontons flingueurs* (*Monsieur Gangster*, 1963). In addition, I seize the opportunity to remind readers that the present volume strictly deals with pure comedy only. Therefore, films that do not fit into this category are not taken into consideration. For this precise reason the following genres are excluded: musical comedies (i.e., Jacques Demy's *Les parapluies de Cherbourg* [*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, 1964]), romantic comedies (i.e., Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* [*Amélie*]), melodrama (i.e., Olivier Nakache and Éric Toledano's *Intouchables* [*The Intouchable*, 2011]), action movies (i.e., Philippe de Broca's *L'homme de Rio* [*That Man from Rio*, 1964]), or films for a young audience, also called family movies (i.e., Laurent Tirard's *Astérix & Obélix: Au service de sa Majesté* [*Astérix and Obélix: God Save Britannia*, 2012]).

Character Comedies

Based on the exaggeration of human flaws, obsessions, and vices, these usually illustrate a single central character or group of characters. These timeless and universal comedies, by nature at the antithesis of comedies of manners, can also be associated with the famous screwball comedies made in Hollywood. They involve mistaken identities, double entendres, and cross-dressing characters, all of which contribute to misunderstandings. Marcel Pagnol's *Le schpountz* (*Heartbeat*, 1937), Guillaume Gallienne's *Guillaume et les garçons à table!*, Gérard Oury's *La grande vadrouille* (*Don't Look Now, We've Been Shot At*, 1966), and Edouard Molinaro's *La cage aux folles* (1978) are some examples among many others.

Verbal Comedies

The "comique de mots" is filled with puns, play on words, regional accents, repetitions of speech patterns, whether from a vulgar register or an

idiosyncratic pronunciation (surprisingly the French, unlike English speakers, do not have a term to designate this type of comedy). Pagnol's *Marius*, Claude Autant-Lara and Maurice Lehmann's *Fric-Frac* are examples of this linguistic dimension, along with the cinema of Sacha Guitry who remains one the most emblematic figures of French verbal comedies with *Le roman d'un tricheur* and *Ils étaient neuf célibataires* (*Nine Bachelors*, 1939).

Self-deprecating Humor

It has the ability to recognize its faults by laughing at its own self and making others laugh. It has a special status, which leads it to be part of a comedy as it is the part that amuses and facilitates relationships with others. Consequently this kind of comedy has a triple interest because of its existential attitude that involves having a sense of the ridicule, then being aware of its own eccentricity, and especially knowing how to laugh at itself. Films like Gérard Oury's *Les aventures de Rabbi Jacob* (*The Mad Adventures of Rabbi Jacob*, 1973), *Lévy et Goliath* (1987), Thomas Gilou's *La vérité si je mens!* (*Would I Lie to You?*, 1997) as well as Dany Boon's *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* all offered their new approach to comedy with a certain dose of self-deprecating derision.

Gesture Comedies/Slapstick/Burlesque

Based on exaggerated facial gestures, mimicry, pursuits, wrestling, and falls, the genre experienced its heyday with the vaudeville of the silent era. Later sound era films such as Maurice Tourneur's *Les gaietés de l'escadron* (1932), Jacques Tati's *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (*Mr. Hulot's Holiday*, 1954), Gérard Oury's *La grande vadrouille*, and Pierre Richard's *Le distrait* (1970) received regular success at the box office and promoted a label which can be described as essentially burlesque although film critic and historian André Bazin did not see much of "Frenchness" in the present genre:

> French burlesque, with the exception of Max Linder's last films in Hollywood, has hardly survived past 1914, as it was overwhelmed by the overwhelming and justified success of American comedy. Since the talkies, apart from Chaplin, Hollywood has remained the master of comic cinema.[7]

Comedies of the absurd

Based on the lack of logic in the plot as well as the narrative thread. For existentialist filmmakers absurd was a better descriptive term when compared to irony. Nonsensical situations are a strong component of this particular type of comedy. In many instances absurd comedies tend to indirectly approach

serious subjects such as social injustices, religious problems, morality, and so on. Surrealism and the absurd take shape from reality, but both obey different logics. On the one hand, the universe of surrealism is governed by the logic of dreams, the unconscious, while on the other hand the absurd is characterized by a simple noncompliance of logic in favor of comedy. In French cinema this is characterized by the work of filmmaker Bertrand Blier and some of his films like *Buffet Froid* (*Cold Cut*, 1978) or *Préparez vos mouchoirs* (*Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*, 1977).

Comedies of Manners

This kind of comedy usually mocks the habits of a particular aspect within society and targets the traditions of a social class or an époque, thus potentially resembling social satires. Originally a theatrical genre with varying degrees of depth, a comedy of manners denounces the failings of an era, of a group, of a class, or of institutions and takes inspiration in the social reality. Maurice Tourneur's *Volpone*, Josiane Balasko's *Gazon maudit*, Edouard Molinaro's *La cage aux folles*, and Jean Renoir's *Boudu sauvé des eaux* are some emblematic comic narratives portraying French people (and Italian in the case of *Volpone*) and their time.

Situational Comedies

Usually include mistaken identity, surprises, unexpected twists, coincidences, spectacular reversals, misunderstandings, *quid pro quos*, and treachery; they are also called comedies of errors. The plot brings together characters who should not have met in the first place, or involves characters in a particularly illogical or ludicrous situation as, for instance, in Coline Serreau's *Trois hommes et un couffin*, which depicts the panic of three men who, against their will, have to take care of a newborn baby for several months, or Henri Verneuil's *La vache et le prisonnier* (*The Cow and I*, 1959) that narrates the tribulation of a French prisoner of war escaping through the roads of Germany thanks to a cow, or Gérard Oury's *Le corniaud* (*The Sucker*, 1964), that features an honest man driving on the roads of Italy unaware that his car is filled with drugs, gold, and diamonds smuggled by gangsters, or finally Jean-Marie Poiré's *Les visiteurs* where famous medieval visitors mistakenly travel into the present time and wreak havoc in modern France.

Grotesque Comedies

These narratives like to display a taste of predilection for the bizarre and for distorted caricatures. When pushed to the extreme they can also be labeled as

dark humor with their very own vision of gloomy reality. Whether cruel or vicious, the term "joke" represents a legitimate expression of a tragically farcical mood, which, to many popular audiences, does not always fit the conventional landscape of comedy. "Despite our better inclinations," noted Maurice Charney in the introduction of his anthology of humor, "we laugh at sick jokes to relieve ourselves of burdensome inhibitions."[8] So, when dealing with grotesque comedies, the question of whether certain subjects should or should not be utilized for the sake of comedy becomes relevant. A genre particularly dear to Italian comedy filmmakers of the 1970s, this type of laughter, though appearing as a provocation, symbol of bad taste, or promoting an absence of morality, was actually endorsed by popular audiences and critically acclaimed internationally (i.e., Ettore Scola's *Brutti, Sporchi e cattivi* [*Ugly, Dirty and Bad* in 1976] or Marco Ferreri's *La grande bouffe*). Thus we may define dark humor as a boundless aspect of comedy which inherently questions any given area of humanity. Films like Sacha Guitry's *La poison*, Josiane Balasko's *Gazon maudit*, and Bertrand Blier's *Tenue de soirée* were all subversive in their own ways and all were able to transgress some of the contemporaneous taboos of their times.

Parodies

By nature ironic, they promote a different significance based on an original foundation, often a mocking imitation of a style, in order to make a satirical reproduction and create a comical effect. With some early attempts in the 1960s as in Georges Lautner's cult film *Les tontons flingueurs*, parodies have become a major source of comedy after the late 1980s with films like Didier Bourdon and Bernard Campan's *Les trois frères* (1995), and *Les rois mages*, or Franck Gastambide's *Les Kaïra*, Michel Hazanavicius's *OSS 117: Le Caire, nid d'espions* (*OSS 117: Cairo, Nest of Spies*, 2006), or *OSS 117: Rio ne répond plus* (*OSS 117: Lost in Rio*, 2008). Based on the reversal and exaggeration of features belonging to the original subject, parodies choose details to accentuate and reveal the unpleasant aspects of a person or a group.

Satires

Perhaps one of the most famous of all comedy sub-genres, satirical humor often resembles a criticism, mocking or ridiculing a failure or defect. To achieve its goal, satires use sarcasm, deformation, exaggeration, and even caricature. One may argue that satire is in some ways inherently tragic as its recounts a narrative through devices taken from drama such as behavioral pattern, social injustices, or uncontrolled passions. Satires are characterized as a cinematic genre that disparages a form of power, which carries vice,

falsehood, or injustice. A dangerous and formidable double-perspective weapon, satire can bruise or provoke contempt from the viewers and can also put its author in difficult situations like Sacha Guitry and his vitriolic comment on France's judicial system with *La poison*, Patrice Leconte's *Les bronzés* that commented on the vacation industry in Africa and was followed a year later by another satirical view of the ski vacation industry in *Les bronzés font du ski* (1979), and Jacques Tati's tender portrayal of the upcoming materialistic society with *Mon oncle* (*My Uncle*, 1958). Not all satires are created equal in their intensity, and technique can vary. The subtlest often use irony in order to convey their final message to the viewers, which states the opposite of what is meant to be understood. Often found in controversial comedies charged with political meaning, they are easily recognizable by the use of understatement as defined here by scholar Don Nilsen.

> Unlike humor (irony) serves to make people think more than to make them laugh; and unlike satire, it does not strive to change people's opinions or to move them to take action.[9]

Irony

Though not a comedic genre of its own, irony is a comedic tone used in many different types of narratives. On an etymological level, the concept of irony originated from ancient Greece with the terminology *eiron* which meant "disassembled speech" as in lack of correspondence between the original speech and its own subsequent meaning. As for the audience who are in a position of knowledge on certain key information—that remains unknown to the protagonist—the awareness will eventually trigger dissonant reaction and humor. It is about paradox: the incongruity between a character's perception and what the audience knows to be true and what a protagonist says and means, what viewers expect to happen, and what really takes place in the unfolding of a story. Capitalizing on a resemblance of concepts is the very heart of the dynamics of irony, thus providing multiple implications and a comic outcome. Confusion surfaces when the terms satire and irony are used together without distinction. Therefore, spectators may very well ask themselves if irony is legitimately inherent in satire? Satire has ultimately a didactic goal, but irony underlines the paradox of a situation without such a goal. Irony therefore plays on the momentary illusion of truth and incorporates a specific thought process that can only be voluntary, while laughter is spontaneous. With the rise of the politically correct in recent years, irony or sarcasm can be often misunderstood as a vehicle of arrogance and contempt instead of a simple rhetorical device.

Farce

In the history of cinema farce was the very first comedic genre to be screened to the great delight of popular audiences. Portraying the countless possible misunderstandings of everyday life, the successful genre gradually gained respectability and acceptance and evoked spontaneous laughter (more visceral than cerebral). It gave birth to the slapstick comedy and cinematic vaudeville and inspired the plays of Georges Feydeau (1862–1921) like *L'Hôtel du libre échange* (1894), *Occupe-toi d'Amélie* (1908), *On purge bébé* (1910), *La puce à l'oreille* (1907), or Eugène Labiche's *Un chapeau de paille d'Italie* (1851) as well as other bedroom farces and the *comédies de boulevard*. Scholar Norman Shapiro reminds us of its underlying link with an unexpected intellectual discourse.

> Farce, for all its unsophisticated humor—its breathless chases, its mistaken identities, its small causes snowballing into monstrous effects, its whacks and thwacks at the emotions, as well as its cudgeling of the physical body—does allow a measure of philosophical speculation. Hence its academic stature.[10]

Therefore, it is not a surprise to come across the large amount of scholarly essays on silent Hollywood films and in particular the comedies of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd. The common denominator among them was the guiltless dimension of their characters entrapped in a series of circumstances that were rarely of their own volition and whose countless tribulations, physical distortions, and brutal destinies stood at the forefront for their comic device: the domino effect of victimization. Despite all expectations after the advent of the talkies in 1927, the role of such gestures and actions in farcical comedies survived and adjusted to the new demands of the spectatorship (e.g., The Marx brothers, The Three Stooges, and, in France, actors like Jean Tissier, Noël Noël, and Georges Milton maintained a decent level of popularity).

In conclusion, history shows that French comedies have always been very popular with English-speaking audiences and the numerous Hollywood remakes of comedies from France is a good indicator of this sustained endorsement over decades of filmmaking. French cinema, too often restricted to the work of a few "masters" such as Truffaut or Renoir, sits uneasily between French literature and film studies, and it seems imperative to bridge this gap by turning some of the concerns and methods of current film studies toward comedy and popular culture. Therefore, as expected, for Anglo-Saxon spectatorship, the French comic mind, heir of a long tradition of theatrical vaudeville, takes its premises on a combination of ambiguity and contradictions.

Understanding French comedies in their cultural context and the aesthetics of French film (through issues of history and the aesthetic appreciation of comic film, and at the same time, to provide increased access to French humor, filtered through the work of individual artists), the present volume intends to investigate the different methods in which these comedies textually inscribe and exemplify a variety of cultural and historical landmarks. The diversity of disciplines—history, linguistics, social and political sciences—that forms the background of this analysis guarantees a variety of approaches. The volume's central discussion attempts to answer seminal questions to gain a more comprehensive vision of the comedy genre, such as the fascination and influence of comedies, grotesque parodies, irony, farce, and the profound disposition of French satires toward sociological interrogations.

CHAPTER 1

The Early Comedies of the Sound Era

If the 1920s heralded and developed many new artistic currents in France, the 1930s were not a revolutionary period per se on a cinematic level, but rather a decade of transition confirming the advent of sound and its impact on mass audiences in France. The sudden venue of the talkies with *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 and the first French talkie a couple of years later created a disruption and ultimately a revolution in the world of music and its relation to the seventh art. In France, more than a year later, Aubert Franco-Film Gaumont produced Tony Lekain and Gaston Ravel's *Le collier de la reine* (*The Queen's Neckless*, 1929). Intended to be a silent movie, it included a recorded music soundtrack and a dialogue scene, which was the first scene with dialogue in a French long feature film. A few days later André Hugon's *Les trois masques* (*The Three Masks*, 1929), produced by Pathé-Natan, was released and is to this date considered the first "talkie" in French film history (though shot near London due to the better equipment available at Elstree Studios). This newfound situation, emblematically represented by the end of an era giving birth to a new one, can be best epitomized by the popular song on Parisian nostalgia "Où est-il donc?" rendered by national icon Fréhel in Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* (1936). The song evoked a certain melancholy about the popular district of Montmartre, which was already undergoing an identity transformation, starting in the famous "années folles" (the Golden 1920s in English). The popular singer deplores the end of an era, not only weeping about her lost glory days, but also missing a mythical Paris, which seems to have vanished for good in this new decade just as the impending fate of silent cinema.

I. Forerunner Comedies in the 1930s: Chansonniers and Musical Comedies

While official historical accounts of French cinema rarely leave any space for comedies in their anthologies, or for their authors and directors, the inclusion of several actors promoted to the rank of national stars is a clear testimonial of

the importance of the genre. Without this generation of comic actors, much of an entire decade of filmmaking would have fallen into oblivion. Saturnin Fabre, Raymond Cordy, Jules Berry, Julien Carette, Pauline Carton, and Elvire Popesco, among others became movies stars thanks to comedy but more importantly they all came from a common artistic background—the music hall. In the initial years of the sound era, traditional comedies were not top-ranked by producers of the film industry, the reason being that attention was focused on the spoken word and the so-called films chantés like Tino Rossi's *Marinella* (1936), which became the title of a musical comedy directed by Pierre Caron. Theatrical repertoire being similar in essence, producers gave priority to theatrical adaptations rather than original comical scenarios, in particular to the vaudeville and military comedies. In order to satisfy the public's enormous appetite for musical comedies, the decade of the talkies began with the domination of the music hall, the café concert, and of course the predominance of the most powerful medium of the prewar era—the radio. In conjunction with the rise of popular songs was the appearance of the TSF (*transmission sans fil* or wireless transmission), which began in 1921, and resulted in the use of half a million radio sets by the end of the decade, one million by 1932, and eventually five million by 1935. Paris, for instance, hosted several radio stations such as le Poste Parisien, Radio 37, Radiola (later Radio Paris), Tour Eiffel, Paris PTT, and so on. . . . The domination of recorded music (*phonographe électrique*) or live broadcast, interrupted occasionally by a speaker or announcer, was the norm. Radio became not only the main source of information for the daily news, but also the source of entertainment with a predilection for popular hits. The *chansons populaires* became the essential element of popular mythology, landscape, and leisurely weekends as illustrated by Jean Gabin with the famous song "Quand on se promène au bord de l'eau" in Julien Duvivier's *La belle équipe* (*They Were Five*, 1936) for which the music was composed by Maurice Yvain.

With the support of radio broadcasts, which gave priority to popular music, a myriad of songs became national icons, such as Berthe Sylva's "Frou Frou" and Joséphine Baker's "J'ai deux amours" in 1930, Charles Trenet's "Prosper youpla Boum" in 1935 and "La Romance de Paris" in 1941, Marie Dubas's "Mon Légionnaire" in 1936, and Edith Piaf's "L'accordéonniste" in 1940. These so-called *chansonniers* from the café concert along with other stars of the music hall were all of a sudden propelled to the rank of movie stars. Capitalizing on their celebrity status, producers began to contract out acting roles to most of these already established singers. Consequently, many of them (also known as *chanteurs-interprètes*) with a national ambition had to make an immediate and delicate transition from singer to actor, such as Ray Ventura, Maurice Chevalier, Fréhel, Charles Trenet, Jean Gabin, Tino

Rossi, Albert Préjean, Georges Milton, Josephine Baker, and Mistinguett among others (Edith Piaf made a brief appearance in Jean de Limur's *La garçonne* (*The Tomboy*) in 1936). On the other hand, some already established actors had to learn how to sing in order to further their acting career, as in the case of Danielle Darrieux, Arletty, Annabelle, Jules Berry, Gaby Morlay, Paulette Dubost, Pierre Dux, Françoise Rosay, Michel Simon, Fernandel, and Charles Boyer.

According to film historian Pierre Billard, French cinema "revitalized the plebeian format of several entertainment shows such as the revue, operetta, vaudeville, melodrama, café concert, all of them reinforcing its vocation for popular art."[1] In theater comedy, singers who combined song and comedy on stage were legion. Bach (born Charles-Joseph Pasquier), who was a very fashionable star at the beginning of the talkies, managed to entertain French crowds with his famous jostling in Henry Wulschleger's *Gargousse* (1938). The other actor who rose to fame in the theater singing bawdy verses and silly songs was Dranem (born Armand Ménard), provoking laughter with a touch of madness. Thus, popular music finally penetrated the seventh art offering a new dimension to the talkies. Surprisingly it pervaded all stratas of French society, from popular working classes to intellectual and poetic artistic circles like the so-called *cinéma d'avant-garde*. Composers like Vincent Scotto, Armand Bernard, Raoul Moretti, Maurice Yvain, Jean Wiener, Joseph Kosma, Maurice Jaubert, Jacques Ibert, and Georges Auric included popular songs as part of their registry for the musical scores of long feature films and happily embarked on the musical comedy trend as many of them had received contracts to write numerous scores for the big screen. So it was in this context that a new type of artistic career was born—that of the studio musician—and film composers, to the dismay of former silent film orchestras, saw their future jeopardized. Once a song was written, recorded, and featured in movie productions, it quickly and almost systematically became a national success thanks to the predominance of radio broadcasts, local balls, and street singers such as those featured in René Clair's *Sous les toits de Paris* (*Under The Roofs of Paris*, 1930). The song "Y'a de la joie," written by a little known singer, Charles Trenet, in 1936, was first performed by Maurice Chevalier in his show "Paris en joie," at the Casino de Paris and became a hit. The song would also be featured in Julien Duvivier's *L'Homme du jour* (*The Man of the Hour*, 1937).

In this early period of the new decade and soon after the revolution of sound, the controversy about its value and potential negative consequences became a source of contention and confusion for many directors of the French film industry. Ironically, amidst this theoretical quarrel, Jean Renoir, an early enthusiast of the talkies who was aware of the new artistic promise this medium could generate, did not direct long feature films between 1929

and 1931, a time when talkies were breaking new grounds, while filmmaker Clair, who begrudged the talkies to the point of calling them a "*redoutable monstre*," was one of the first to use sound efficiently in his first talkie *Sous les toits de Paris* in 1930. With the rapid national success of this pseudo romantic musical comedy, Clair never looked back, despite his previous position against the predominance of sound in the seventh art. He directed *A nous la liberté* (*Freedom for Us*, 1931) and *Quatorze juillet* (*Bastille Day*, 1932) and went on to become one of the most eminent French directors during the years of conversion from silent films to sound pictures and is still considered one of the most significant *auteurs* of the twentieth century. Beginning as an assistant to filmmaker Jacques de Baroncelli, Clair developed a visual inquisitiveness for the surrealist experience while maintaining an unadulterated awareness for the more popular musical comedy genre, as well as a real panache for social satire. Clair's contribution to the comedy genre of the early talkie period was *Le million* (*The Million*, 1931), starring René Lefèvre and Annabella in a musical comedy about two unfortunate artists persecuted by an unsympathetic destiny who one day win a lottery and unexpectedly become millionaires. Alas, the lottery ticket is left in a coat that was taken to a local pawnshop and is found after much trouble at the opera house, winding up in an unusually happy conclusion. The story, adapted from a vaudeville sketch written 20 years earlier by Georges Berr and Marcel Guillemaud, triggered Clair's curiosity with its attractive combination of traditional burlesque and *avant-garde* character. During the shooting, however, the director's preference tilted toward the musical adaptation rather than the theatrical representation. The musical element, expressed by popular animated songs, corresponded to the "operetta," and thus *The Million* became a permanent reference for French musical comedies at the beginning of the sound era. The very same year Clair reiterated his popular success this time with an ingenious social satire, *A nous la liberté*, which reportedly may have served as the stimulation for Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). Following his escape from jail, Louis (played by Raymond Cordy) develops a phonograph production technique that uses a highly mechanized assembly line where workers are reduced to mere robots—an oppressive universe that is just as tyrannical as the prison he just fled. Eventually, caught up by his past, he decides to join his comrade Emile, an old cellmate, and both embark on a new journey on the roads of France. Thanks to its futuristic sets, *A nous la liberté* suggested a social significance charged with the notion of modernity and its possible consequence in the workplace. Clair's innovative foresight, at the same time remote and extraordinarily progressive in its poetic sensuality, seduced many contemporary artists.

Spectatorship and Genre: The Question of Filmed Theater

Is filmed theater possible? Can it truly be something other than a hybrid product, borrowing elements from film and theater, but never able to offer the viewer a real and authentic experience? These questions have indeed been at the center of many debates among historians of cinema, the majority of whom have argued in favor of the exclusive incompatibility of the media. The fact is that in the 1930s the large majority of theater spectators felt indirectly linked to the fate of the characters they observed on stage. In order to draw the same popular attention, cinema needed to better represent the process of identification. Does "filmed theater" take its source from the playwright, as opposed to a live stage performance? Or is the written play the common denominator between theater and cinema, leading each medium to interpret and present the written material to audiences by means of their own respective assets? The 1930s were the age of the so-called *théâtre filmé* ("filmed" or "canned" theater), which was highly criticized by intellectuals for its deliberate entertainment value, yet successful among popular audiences in France and abroad. Motion pictures no longer monopolized the image; the charm of the script was uncovered, and the public now related to famous quotes in order to remember their favorite films. Among the lucky actors were Michel Simon, Harry Baur, Raimu, Gaby Morlay, Jules Berry, and Arletty.

From the early days of cinematography, whether in the fictions of Méliès or the comedies of Max Linder, the question of adaptation was always in doubt and constantly debated among film critics and filmmakers, mostly in terms of literary honesty, intellectual ethics, and artistic aesthetics. The central question, as exposed by French film theorist André Bazin, was to explicitly articulate if cinema had to be at the service of theater or vice versa. For many film historians of the 1930s, cinema's logical function was to faithfully reproduce theater, or at the most to continue its artistic itinerary. For instance, the act of filming a *mise en scène*, to capture a comedy like Claude Autant-Lara and Maurice Lehmann's *Fric-Frac* (1939) via the impersonal nature of a cinematic lens, exceeded the limits of the original transposition from theater. In contrast, the collapse of time and space, scenic locations and sets, gave birth to an authentic filmic re-creation, and therefore a new momentum to stage comedy (e.g., *Boudu sauvé des eaux* [*Boudu Saved from Drowning*, 1932] adapted from René Fauchois's 1919 eponymous comedy in four acts). Comedy, vaudeville, *théâtre de boulevard*, farce, and even reproductions from the *commedia dell'arte* were all part of a flourishing popular cinema. Jean Renoir was well aware of this trend as he successfully utilized space and exterior, editing tricks, in *Boudu sauvé des eaux*, bringing authenticity, freshness, and madness to a work originally written by a playwright a decade earlier.

If the film serves today as a reference for the new comedy style of the 1930s, other authors of vaudeville made less dramatic adaptations that were still able to restore fame to comedies. Georges Feydeau dominated the production with *On purge bébé* (*Baby's Laxative*, 1931) directed by Jean Renoir; *L'Hôtel du libre échange* (1934) by Marc Allégret; *La dame de chez Maxim* by, repectively, Emile Chautard in 1912 then Alexandre Korda in 1932; and *Occupe-toi d'Amélie* (*Take Care of Amelie*) by Emile Chautard in 1912, Weisbach and Viel in 1932, and by Claude Autant-Lara in 1949. Another prolific author was Georges Courteline who inspired *Les gaîtés de l'escadron* (*The Cheerful Squadron*, 1932) by Maurice Tourneur with Raimu and Fernandel. Robert de Flers and Gaston Armand de Caillavet wrote *Miquette et sa mère* directed by Henri Pouctal in 1914, Henri Diamant-Berger in 1933, and Henri-Georges Clouzot in 1950; and *Le roi* (*The King*, 1936) directed by Pierre Colombier and Louis Verneuil. Marcel Achard's *Noix de coco* (*Cocoanut*, 1939) directed by Jean Boyer confirmed the popularity of this fashionable trend. Edouard Bourdet provided the screenplay and dialogues for the adaptation of his play *Le sexe faible* (1933) for Victor Boucher and Pierre Brasseur, directed by Robert Siodmak, and obtained triumph when Michel Simon and Arletty resumed the play on screen that they had created on stage a few years earlier in *Fric-Frac* directed by Maurice Lehmann. With the advent of the sound era, the tradition that came from classical tragedy surreptitiously slipped toward popular drama and comedy. The excessive feelings, expressions, and situations peaked at the turn of the century in the "heroic comedy-drama" or "tragic-comedy" such as Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (there were nearly ten versions among which was the international success of Jean-Paul Rappeneau in 1989) and in scandalous melodramas like *L'Enfant de l'amour* (*Illegitimate Child*) by Marcel L'Herbier in 1930 and Jean Stelli in 1944; and *La femme nue* and *Maman Colibri* by Julien Duvivier in 1929 and Jean Dréville in 1937. Other examples are Henri Bernstein's plays *Le Bonheur* (1934) directed by Marcel L'Herbier and *Mélo* (*The Dreamy Mouth*), which had four versions among which were Paul Czinner's in 1932 and 1937, and Alain Resnais's in 1986.

André Bazin was in favor of filmed theater: his text "Théâtre et cinéma" published in 1951 in the journal *Esprit* from *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* established his position unequivocally. Bazin's theory regarding adaptations of theatrical works onto the big screen argued that these experiences were far from perverting cinema; on the contrary, theater could only enrich the seventh art. For Bazin theater and cinema were not separated by an impossible aesthetic gap but rather raised two mental attitudes on which film directors were to keep a wide control. While theater's main preoccupation was to promote conceptualization, cinema was to promote identification. The actor's

presence on the screen was rendered by the artificial proximity made possible by the magnification of the camera. By magnifying traits, films actually soothed spectators' experience, whereas theater tended to challenge them. The frequent use of "middle shots" also provided means to better monitor dialogues. Characters on the screen were naturally objects of identification (while those on stage were rather objects of mental opposition). In Bazin's view, the actual presence of the actors on stage gave them an objective reality that was often reduced if not absent in films. Moviegoers generally tended to identify with the hero via a psychological process that resulted in "uniformization" of emotions. The phenomenon occurred because the actor–spectator relationship was different in cinema than it was in live theater. The interaction between spectator and actor in stage theater was an interaction of intellectual involvement, as the actor's presence within the context of the stage was experienced more objectively by the audience, whereas in the movie theater the spectator–actor relationship was one of emotional bonding and was more comparable to the melding of identities between reader and protagonist in a novel. The film spectator experienced the narrative differently, as he/she was encouraged for various reasons (the presentation of 'real' space in film, monumentality of screen size, etc.) to put aside intellectual barriers and experience the narrative by identifying with the actor-protagonist. On stage comic actors like Raimu and Michel Simon essentially provoked a psychological reaction in the spectator and set up a perspective of opposition to the actor, but the intellectual involvement necessary for a more satisfactory processing of the narrative element in both novel reading and theater viewing was still similar, as in both media, the spectator or reader was expected to get involved by means of activating imaginative faculties. Bazin's concept of "presence" underlined the difference in substance regarding the spectators' experience.

For Bazin, the problem of filmed theater was not simply in the delicate transposition of the actors and the text from theater into film, but also the reconversion of the stage space to promote the "theatricality" of the plot. Moreover, the additional problem for comedies was not so much to accurately translate a staged scene on the screen, but more importantly to preserve the effectiveness of the text. The film director's duty was to retain the comic energy in an environment, which reflected or at least gave enough resonance to the content so that it could still be perceived by film spectators. According to André Bazin's assumption, filmed theater was doomed when too many attempts were made to stay away from a photography of stage performances, especially when the camera tried to make the spectatorship forget the ramp and backstage. The more the filmmaker was hiding the theatricality of the plot, the more the film looked like "canned theater."

Emblematic Transfers from Stage to Screen

At the end of the 1920s, due to the different characteristics of the written and visual media, adapting literary works for the newly popular talkies posed many theoretical and technical difficulties. The most obvious evidence was the frequency of harsh criticism about failed adaptations. One of the basic problems of adaptation was the necessity to leave out parts of the literary material and, on the other hand, to fill the gaps that the author had left to the reader's imagination. Since mainstream comedies rarely exceeded the limit of one and-a-half hours, it became necessary to leave out scenes or whole subplots when the literary work was long. Very often comedy screenwriters left out secondary plots, since introducing too many characters in a film may have led to confusion in popular audiences. As opposed to literature where authors had the luxury of exposing their plot at great length, cinema compelled authors to leave out any element that did not have subsequent development (with rare exceptions like Sacha Guitry's long and ambiguous monologues serving as prologue, for example, in *Le roman d'un tricheur* [*The Story of a Cheat*, 1936]).

One of the complaints filmmakers expressed toward stage comedies like the ones of Feydeau was the static point of view of the theater spectator. Since the action usually took place in a very restricted area, important details, like the faces of the actors, were often an obstacle. The theater director had no means of focusing the audience's attention on a chosen element on stage (although to a certain degree this could be achieved with lighting effects). Movies, on the other hand, had the capacity to overcome these limitations and eliminate the emotional distance between performers and spectators. Thus, the film director was virtually compelled to move the camera and use different angles and distances; otherwise, the film would make a dull and artificial, "theatrical" impression: hence the need to concretize every detail of the setting on the screen (e.g., the abundance of details in the library and camera movement in Renoir's *Boudu sauvé des eaux*). The film medium required a fundamental transition from verbal to visual effects and a much greater economy of text. Thus, the script of the theatrical comedy often had to be reduced in length as well as in expressiveness. The result was a gap that had to be filled with visual means of expression; it was not at all sufficient to concretize the setting only. It was precisely here that many adaptations failed to convey the play's essence due to a blind fidelity to the dramatic text. The most notorious example is the film by Pierre Colombier, *Ignace* (1937), starring Fernandel. A good screenwriter should not hesitate to reduce a long monologue to one fierce look, or a dialogue to an emotional gesture, if the conveyed message remains unchanged. An example of this technique was

Raymond Bernard's *Tartarin de Tarascon* (1934). This was a powerful narration device via motion pictures that managed to replace the numerous original monologues interpreted by Raimu more than adequately. In other cases, it was often difficult to convey the thoughts or feelings of the characters without words, using only visual means of expression. But after all, this difficulty was a challenge for the ambitious screenwriter or director and therein lay the particular attraction of film adaptations.

Marcel Pagnol versus René Clair

The controversy of the so-called canned theater was an opportunity that provided authors from the film industry to gradually accept the text as a fundamental element of the seventh art. In 1934, Marcel Pagnol and René Clair debated in a constructive manner regarding the evolution of film and of Pagnol's aesthetic contribution to the beginnings of the sound era. To this end, Pagnol declared that "silent film was merely the art of printing and distributing pantomime, the sound film was the art of printing and distributing theater."[2] A specialist of visual aesthetics, Clair imposed himself from the beginning as a figure of the *avant-garde*. In 1928, the filmmaker found himself as destabilized as the film industry in the wake of the arrival of the talkies. While the French film industry had found great benefit in the purely visual dimension of silent film (also a means of distributing most productions internationally), Clair promoted the universal character of his visual poetry as purified language from any presence of literature. Clair repeatedly compared Pagnol to a "lost" playwright whose individuality was unable to take theater to the next level: the laws of the screen. Pagnol's main drawback was allegedly to convey a "false" cinematic language, much too close to the expression used on stage, which in the end was blending a traditional-conservative moral tone through a persuasive medium. In other words, his motion pictures describing the mythology of his native Provence were simply a profitable extension of theater. Pagnol, on the other hand, never attempted to claim, in all his undertakings, anything other than the status of a literary author. Subsequently, Pagnol defined his cinema from the theater angle; hence the accusations of "misusing" the cinematic medium in order to serve a certain ideal of the so-called filmed theater. That approach was justified insofar as he never questioned its essence, but only the advantages that this new medium could bring to his creations. Its publicly acknowledged literary experience came from his talent of playwrighting, which earned him immediate recognition in the world of theater, while he stood light-years away from Clair's concept of filmmaking. With Korda, Pagnol rapidly perceived the difference of speech he had foreseen: freed from stage constraints, it was no longer necessary to offset

the unity of time and place by descriptive words to explain the action. It was therefore replaced by dialogue embellished with stage directions. In this logic, Pagnol retained from theater the predominance of the text, of the plot, and of the characters. He also kept the best advocates of dialogue—the actors, his actors, and more generally his troop. But as far as editing the text was concerned, Pagnol was only inclined to do so if the scenarios came from his original works. Interestingly enough, Pagnol's films that attained national success were the ones that he had authored and also directed. For Pagnol, if this condition was not fulfilled, chances were that the author would succumb to filmed theater.

> It is indeed easier to adapt a novel than a play for a film. Making a film based on a novel is a creation; making a film based on a play is redoing something. A novel is not crystallized. I can write a scene to translate a page from a novel onto the screen. With a play, the scene is already made. As one can never fully shoot it entirely, one must adapt and lighten the text. I do not dare; I do not feel that I have the right to cut someone's lines. After filming plays, I am now tackling novels. There is an opportunity for creativity here; we can change domains: from the literary we move to the dramatic.[3]

The supremacy of the text and theatrical ethics accurately described by Pagnol himself were unequivocal as he openly declared his attachment to the narrative, a key element of his "filmic comedy." Although Pagnol's early vocation as a stage director had a classical perspective, he soon recognized that the most prolific source of inspiration was literally in his own backyard. By collaborating with the novelist Jean Giono, also from his native Provence, he produced *Regain* (*Harvest*, 1937) and *La femme du boulanger* (*The Baker's Wife*, 1938) among a long series of other films. Pagnol's candid chronicles of Provencal characters easily moved in the genre of witty comic vividness of language but were always attentive to the variances between words and actions. For Pagnol and most comedy filmmakers of the 1930s the question of filmed theater never interfered with their work; for them comedies based on theatrical adaptations were to interpret the written word of the play through the cinematic devices that were at their disposal and were not to become a parallel form of stage theater.

II. From Military Vaudeville to *Comique Troupier*

Since the first hours of the *cinématographe*, governments have always considered cinema as an art whose potential for communication was a significant weapon to transmit consequential ideas. In France, two logics dominated the

political scene: on the one hand, to recognize cinema as an integral part of freedom of expression, and, on the other hand, to view cinema as a medium of exception to be subjected to close surveillance. It was precisely this antagonism that presented a real dilemma for a democratic state: the recognition of basic human rights clashing with attitudes that were not yet mature to accept the consequences.

The first national censorship commission was established in 1916. It was controlled and organized in collaboration of the Ministry of Education and Fine Arts and the Interior. Film censorship in France was like a double-edged sword as state censorship (under the leadership of the "préfets," equivalent of state governors, who communicated their decision by "décrets") as well as municipal censorship was allowed to take action (political censorship usually emanating from the state and moral censorship from mayors, due to a prerogative based on an 1884 law regarding the maintenance of public order). These sporadic and individual initiatives were enforced by city mayors with an ironical concern of protecting the "souls" of their citizens, especially the most impressionable ones, against the potential "evils of corruption" that could be found within the cinema medium. Following World War I the political events led the French authorities to use cinema for political purposes on a larger scale. A clear concern surfaced for the respect of French institutions, especially the army. Consequently, under the leadership of various governments (Alexandre Millerand and Gaston Doumergue), cinematic censorship began to focus particularly on the newsreels of the postwar era. The newly created board for film control, independent from the authority of Georges Clemenceau's government, established by a decree on February 18, 1918, was composed of 16 representatives from the profession and 16 civil servants. It became all the more important to the film industry that its verdict was linked with the issue of visas. State censorship expressed concern about "protecting the interests of national security" and deleted everything that was likely to "impress in a deplorable manner the less enlightened part of the population, easy to be moved." Since no criteria were as yet established, the commission was guided by intuition rather than ethic codes and ultimately decided to grant (or not) the visa for exploitation.

The 1930s reflected the rise of antiparliamentarism and the threat of a new war. During the German Occupation, the occupants reserved the right to establish and control political censorship, while the Vichy government was charged with controlling moral censorship, assisted by local mayors and Catholic associations. In June 1940, the Propaganda Abteilung was introduced (whose cinematic branch was called Filmprüfstelle). Six months later in the free zone the *Comité d'organisation de l'industrie cinématographique*

(COIC) was created which included a Franco-German censorship commission. In 1941, in the German-occupied zone Ciné clubs and cinémathèques were closed and all amateur films prohibited along with the distribution of all French films prior to 1937. A year later, the ban extended to all American and British films.

Censorship and Military Vaudeville

In 1929, Jacques Feyder's *Nouveaux Messieurs* did not receive the operating visa following a request from a group of senators denouncing a potential "contempt of Parliament." Marcel Carné wrote about the *cinématographe*: "Il serait pourtant important de savoir, une fois pour toutes, si seul de tous les arts le cinéma doit être éternellement mis en tutelle. Nous revendiquons pour lui les mêmes droits que pour la littérature ou le théatre."[4] As a matter of fact, every *préfet* and mayor was able to intervene in any given city of France, just as producers, publishers, and operators were able to edit, add, and cut without the author's right of control. Marcel L'Herbier's *L'argent* (1928) was originally composed of 6000 meters, which was reduced to 3000 by the censorship's decision. The same was the case for Carl Dreyer's *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1928), where many scenes were removed by the request of an archdiocese. With the advent of the sound era, the commission was also particularly active: Jean Vigo's *Zéro de conduite* (*Zero for Conduct*, 1933) was forbidden because it was considered anti-French and because it showed the school institution in a negative light with its comical depiction of dormitory revolt and aspiration to freedom (it was able to secure its operating visa after the liberation in 1945). Luis Buñuel's *L'âge d'or* (1930) was prohibited by the *préfet*. But censorship also struck upstream with, for instance, George Gauthier's *Bagnes d'enfants* (1933). Jean Renoir's *La grande illusion* (1937) featured a famous conversation between de Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay) and Von Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim) about the end of the old regime,[5] which saw a total of 18 minutes cut from the original film after it was deemed too "*défaitiste*" (it was only in 1958 that it was fully restored). Marcel Carné's *Le jour se lève* (*Daybreak*, 1939) was prohibited following the declaration of war, for its "depressing and morbid" connotations. The film ran briefly in 1941, but was truncated because of the nude scene featuring Arletty before being banned again until the end of the war. *Le corbeau* (*The Raven*/*The Crow*, 1943) directed by Henri-George Clouzot considered anti-French following the liberation months (accused of having been used as an example in Germany, under the title "A French City"), resulted in the life suspension of the author by the Committee of Liberation French Cinema in the immediate postwar era (the ban was eventually lifted

in 1947 thanks to the intervention of cinematic personalities such as Pierre Bost, Jacques Becker, and Henri Jeanson).

After October 1937, all films were subjected to a newly established pre-censorship for potentially controversial scenes, a decision made possible because of the influence of theater historian Edmond Sée. War and espionage movies were particularly affected and could not show the horror of armed conflicts or belittle foreign national sentiments. Military vaudeville could no longer ridicule soldiers and the prestige of the army; films representing prostitutes, proxenetism, smugglers, and drug dealers, other *personae non grata*, as well as armed robbery and other crimes that may influence younger audiences could be denied a visa. The Occupation certainly continued to transform French cinema, which was already deeply affected by censorship, this time into a full-scale propaganda tool. With the onset of World War II in Europe, and more specifically the German Occupation, French cinema was no longer the only object of German censorship: it also became the focus of attention of the Vichy government in order to turn it into a convincing propaganda. Other films, such as Abel Gance's *J'accuse* (1919) and Renoir's *La grande illusion* were banned during the war period. In total 56 films suffered the same fate. In the spirit of "national recovery," censorship, encouraged by the influential *Centrale Catholique du Cinéma*, required to purify cinema of its *grossièretés*, its baseness, and depravity. Then in 1939 a *Code de la famille* was created, promoting a severe regulation concerning theater access for underage spectators. The COIC created by the Vichy regime in December 1940 accentuated the pressure on film artists and producers as control from the government increased. These different forms of censorship fed off each other while in the background sentiments of anti-Semitism, xenophobia, anti-Jewish, and anti-foreigner paranoia grew. Ironically some cases of censorship went beyond expectation and returned against original wishes. One such example is when Henri-Georges Clouzot adapted Georges Simenon's novel *Les inconnus dans la maison* (*Strangers in the House*, 1942) for Henri Decoin, who brought it to the screen, in which a retired lawyer resumes service after his daughter is found involved in a murder. The final argument of the attorney can be read as a requisitory against the passivity of the bourgeois class. At the release there was a call to ban the film, this time with the charge of being anti-semitic as one of the accused parties had a Jewish name, Ephraim Luska. Decoin was obligated to revise its scenario under penalty of censure, and renamed the unfortunate character Amédée.

Military censorship became economic censorship and served as propaganda by exerting control in all areas: personnel, production, distribution, and exploitation. The law of October 26, 1940, required any staff of the film industry to have an authorization issued by the minister in charge of

information on the advice of the committee of professional organizations established by the law of August 16, 1940. On October 3, 1940, another act established a status on Jews, prohibiting them from being elected to any office, forbidding them to engage in any activity that may have an impact on cultural life, and excluding them from civil government, military, and other responsibility for cultural affairs and media. The grip of the state over the mechanisms of production was now completely under the yoke of Goebbels with the company Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft. Anglo-Saxon films were banned, as well as French films prior to October 1, 1937. So did French cinema from 1940 to 1944 reflect the climate of denial and delusion in which the government intended to keep its citizens? Indeed, one may argue in this direction since the exile of famous movie stars did not go unnoticed, among who were Jean Gabin, Jean Renoir, Jean-Pierre Aumont, René Clair, Michele Morgan, Julien Duvivier, and Jacques Feyder.

Even before the Occupation, some films that had received their visa, such as Jean Renoir's *La règle du jeu* (*The Rule of the Game*, 1939), Raymond Bernard's *Les otages* (1939), and Abel Gance's remake of *J'accuse* and in particular war films like Léonide Moguy's *Le déserteur* (1939), Raymond Bernard's *Les croix de bois* (1932), and Jacques Baroncelli's *Cessez le feu* (1934), were still prohibited for distribution. With the Vichy regime more than 50 films were temporarily suspended for the same reasons. Other films qualified as being depressing and morbid had a similar fate. Therefore it came as no surprise when the genre of military vaudeville was added to the list. As for the export of films, censorship was obviously very active and sought to prevent any representation of France that could damage the image of the country and its traditions. There was a time when French filmmakers could not represent the army without prior authorization of the army itself. Military censorship was especially evident in a context of growing tension in the 1930s with the rise of fascism beginning in 1922 when Mussolini attained power, and then in 1933 with the arrival of Hitler. For various reasons, apart from the usual "licentious" or violent scenes, the most disputed passages were those accused of undermining the prestige of the army, institutions, and foreign powers that were "friends" of France. Sometimes they were even considered "pro-communist" as Sergueï Eisenstein's *Potemkine* (1926), which remained banned until 1953. Many complaints were filed, including from senior officers of the army, asking the commission to withold everything that could tend to ridicule this corporation. The different ministry involved (*Ministères de la Guerre, de l'Air et de la Marine*) provided each one with a representative. The Catholic censorship against comedies was active in the 1930s. In 1932, the *Union Française des Offices du Cinéma Educateur Laique* (UFOCEL) began a publication called "Ciné-Document" whose intention was to draft a critical guide

for spectators, thus anticipating possible exposure to "subversive" films. At the other end of the spectrum stood the *Comité Catholique du Cinéma* (CCC) with the publication of "Choisir" also founded in 1932. In 1934 the *Action Catholique* created the *Centrale Catholique du Cinéma et de la radio* (CCR). At the same time the challenge for laic militants was to assist popular audiences to understand cinematic genres but most importantly to be able to distinguish movie preferences on their own.

The Genre of an Epoque: The *Comique Troupier*

The *mise en scène* of military life in a less than glorious light deprived of any kind of noblesse or epic glory was a genre that traced back to the eighteenth century, and experienced a radical change after the 1880s. From novel to stage, then from stage to screen, many innovations occurred. Indeed, on the one hand, the literary heroes were no longer exclusively officers but for the large majority regular conscripts, suddenly transferred from the "civil" society to the military society; on the other hand, war—as a potential horizon—disappeared from these representations and favored the world of ordered barracks, making an autonomous paradigm, dispossessed of any purpose, if not its own operating system. The outside gaze was now focused on the military world as a remote entity, filled with irony and cynicism, and proceeded to highlight systematically the absurdities of life in the barracks. Despite their diversity of form and content, these novels and short novels (from the 1880s on), and later these films, made for the very large majority during the 1920s and 1930s, all contributed in some way to ridicule the manners of the barracks and the institution of military service (as opposed to the army as an institution). It was in this context that the Bergsonian theory developed around these years (1900) with its social ethic on the problem of comedy since imagination was the faculty that led to the conscience of the comic mind. As Bergson's theory made it clear, the comic theater came from a reflection of the human condition resulting from a stage projection of a contrast between individuals, between individuals and society, and also between individuals and institutions. Comedy was therefore a mirror that reflected the amplified deformation of a conformist society though inclined to describe and represent itself. It was then by laughing at itself that French society agreed to reevaluate one of its institutions (the army) through the unpredictable medium of stage comedy.

To criticize the military institution or even portray it as a comical or ridiculous object was a rather complicated enterprise as long as the memory of the traumatic defeat of the 1870 Franco-Prussian war remained alive. The profusion of military novels could be understood as the result of the

remoteness and the fading memory of the defeat and, more generally, the growing myth of revenge pervading new generations. As the tragic vision dissipated in the following years, the comic element and cynical criticism were able to rise again, driven by a new generation who was too young to remember the tragedy of 1870. Like all national defeats, the one of 1870 did not inspire French literature to commemoration, but the force of the impact could not remain without effect. The glory of colonial battle and military actions, which could restore the image of the French Army, was not itself without downfalls: the colonial hero himself did not escape skepticism. Until 1914, popular literature contributed to the rising anxiety of an abundant use of plots representing the fragility of soldiers. As for the 1870 defeat, it was far from being thematically ignored as many authors more or less consciously used it as a historical deference or even a pseudo-prediction. During times of peace, an army that did not fight indirectly felt unloved and accommodated itself in a state of isolation—the most widespread reaction in military experience. This explained in part the rise of sarcastic literature attacking the military's lack of common sense at the end of the 1880s. Literature was largely based on several direction types: those of the *comique troupier* by Charles Leroy with his colonel Ramollot, or by Georges Courteline with his captain Hurluret and adjutant Flick (comical denunciations of the reign of arbitrariness of officers), or by Oscar Méténier, or Alphonse Allais.[6] Speaking of Courteline, scholar Mariangela Mazzocchi Dolio noted: The space of the author's personal memory conjures up familiar images which bring to life the famous "slices of life" in front of the eyes of the spectators.[7]

The first works of Courteline (1858–1929) were interpreted by Bach, Gaston Ouvrard, and Polin, with the many versions of *Tire au flanc* (1928, 1933, 1949, 1961); these multiple references overshadowed the actual potential of the military vaudeville by impregnating in popular audiences the idea that the comic was the only mode of staging life in the barracks. Since its inception, the "military novel," as an early type of representation of military service, was built around a duality between comedy and tragedy. Similar to mockery, cynicism seemed to deny the seriousness of its purpose by attempting to decrease its level of seriousness and underlining the ridiculous aspect of the military chain of command by unveiling the discrepancy between intentions and result. Senselessness, cruelty, cowardice, and alcoholism of the officers, the arbitrariness of implementing orders, bullying, the quality of food and material condition in general, and the pointlessness of physical exercise were usually the main targets and subjects for comedy. However, it is important to note that in these texts, the comedic content was never alone or dominant as the notion of ridicule almost always came accompanied by an exacerbation of tragic facts. This corresponded to the demand of the author

to represent them with a respect for their human personality until they suddenly fall into the "inferno" of comedy. The comic effect, as Bergson once wrote in *Laughter*,[8] seemed even funnier when due to a natural cause. Courteline's characters were often compelled to be isolated or victims of their own lack of common sense. This is why the public of the 1930s, though laughing at their own faults, felt a certain fondness for them and easily indulged in pity. In his article historian Jean-philippe Lecomte commented on this delicate rapport:

> Thus, in military comedy, the criticism of the military establishment composed of the pejorative and ridiculous depiction of the officers (senile or blandly paternalistic officers, sadistic noncoms, nymphomaniac nurses, etc.) is always attenuated by the ultimate loyalty of young resourceful conscripts.[9]

The historicity of this cinematic staging invites modern spectatorship to consider them in the context of their conditions at the time of production. The sudden birth of the genre, its disappearance, and resurgence led audiences in fact to understand these satires not only in terms of their motivation, but also particularly within the historical context of a social and political background that went beyond the conventional comic device. The critique of the military world was closely related to the politico-military probably due to the growing feeling of an impending conflict in the years before World War I. The development of military vaudeville appeared as a direct consequence of the extension of the experience of military life and, therefore, "universalization" of military service (attempted in 1868 and introduced in 1872), as it led to the walls of the barracks youth from privileged classes who hitherto had almost always escaped it. A mandatory 3-year military service was voted for in 1889, which was then reduced to 2 years in 1905 and extended again to 3 years in 1913. Consequently the extinction of the military novel occurred during the years 1905–1910 and with the abrupt cessation of military vaudeville films in 1938 with the impending war looming once again even though this was following a decade of popular demand.

While most of the military vaudeville repertoire was written a few decades before the advent of the sound era, the cinematic genre experienced its peak during the late 1920s and 1930s. The genre's first author was Eloi Ouvrard (1855–1938), a music-hall performer, who wrote and performed several hundred songs during his career. Following his footsteps rose artists like Polin, Bach, Vilbert, and also Gaston Ouvrard, the son of the forerunner artist, who authored the famous song "Je n'suis pas bien portant." Later during the 1920s other artists like Fernandel, Maurice Chevalier, and Raimu were also able to begin their career as comic troopers. Considered the subgenre of

the vaudeville, the *comique troupier* was reintroduced at the end of the decade by Jean Renoir himself with his *Tire-au-flanc* (*The Sad Sack*) in 1928. In 1886, Georges Courteline wrote his very first novel called *Les gaîtés de l'escadron*, which was later adapted as a stage comedy. In 1932, Maurice Tourneur directed *Les gaîtés de l'escadron*, which is today considered the most representative film of the genre In plays written by Georges Courteline and Edouard Norès, the triumph of the actors was such that it tended to overshadow the literary character of its authors (the association of the three myths, Raimu, Fernandel, and Jean Gabin, was a directing *tour de force* from Tourneur).

The story of the movie *Le 51ème Chasseur* takes place at the end of the nineteenth century and recounts 2 days in the lives of professional soldiers and reservists. Though the original plot was reorganized into a series of comical scenes, the merit of the film was in presenting a continuous exposition to farcical moments. One of the most memorable episodes was the one featuring Fricot (Jean Gabin) and Laplotte (Donnio), two recalcitrants sentenced to internal punishment. Vanderague (Fernandel), who is constantly bullied, reacts to contradictory and nonsensical orders of his superiors with a repetitive "Y'a du bon!" With the arrival of Capitaine Hurluret (Raimu), a comical officer in charge of the barracks, the plot takes on new heights as his

Figure 1.1 Raimu in *Les gaîtés de l'escadron* (*The Cheerful Squadron*, 1932) by Maurice Tourneur

apparently authoritarian style does not seem to function and is in reality an excuse to avoid using force against his men, despite their constant desire to dodge the rules and regulations. Hurluret finds consolation in his daily *absinthe*, and tries to maintain a semblance of order so that his men avoid the vendetta of a frustrated adjutant. Therefore, the military farce, as in the original novel, turns into a satire of the French army. All of this pseudo orderly society crumbles with the impromptu arrival of the general for his yearly inspection. At the end of the day, accompanying the general to the train back to the capital, Hurluret proclaims his devotion to his men and the French army in a beautiful *tirade*.

> *Général*: Voyons, vous n'êtes pas sans savoir que ces gaillards-là ne vous craignent guère.
> *Capitaine*: Ah mais je m'en fais une gloire d'en être convaincu! [. . .] Je confesse bien volontiers mes tords mon général, mais je ne me soucie guère de n'occuper qu'une mince place dans le respect de mes camarades, si j'ai pu me faire un petit coin dans leur coeur et dans leur souvenir.[10]

The film's dialogues are rich in exclamations and slang, with an obvious emphasis on clarity, a tendency that used language as the catalyst and made Courteline's theater a terrain for eloquence and linguistic meticulousness, which was rather unusual for the genre. The meaning of the many *répliques*, especially the amazing relevance of words, made the theatrical works of Courteline masterpieces that are till today resistant to time. In one instance, a lieutenant desperately looking for a soldier in order to announce his punishment declares to bemused witnesses: "Il est possible qu'il y soit, mais comme il suffirait que j'y fusse moi pour qu'aussitôt il n'y fut plus lui, j'aime autant le croire que le voir!" The *théâtre de boulevard* was often considered a conformist genre for the nature of its content (reflection of bourgeois morality) as for its form (reproduction of obsolete formulas). Yet it would be wrong to reduce this genre to these conventional dimensions. Admittedly, the *vaudeville* authors of the time as well as filmmakers of the 1930s refused to enter into a strategy of opposition, especially on the political level. At the same time the comedies about mannerisms at the turn of the century, by their inherent use of social satire dealing with sensitive subjects in the prewar era, were in their own way provocative enterprises, particularly in terms of challenging bourgeois morality. Provincial and Parisian critics, though specialized in moralizing during the 1930s, had nothing against the military vaudeville itself: far from seeming always provocative, this genre was considered repetitive and barely innovative in its content. By following the usual vaudeville protocol, each character was sooner or later tempted to hide or "travestite"

behind doors to eventually end up in a disguised imbroglio. So why were contemporary critics lenient with this particular cinematic genre? The answer is to be found in the actual format of the films. If the comedies were well-structured and amoral excesses partly avoided, cinematic critiques were often favorable if not raving.

III. Sacha Guitry and the Auteur Theory

To give fair consideration to the importance of Sacha Guitry in French cinema, film historians and scholars need to explore his artistic background before dissecting his cinematic work. Well-known playwright, Sacha Guitry, like Marcel Pagnol, made a successful transition from theater to the new demands of the cinema industry. He was able to seduce the new public of cinema, while his comedies were constantly played in theaters in France. Then in 1935, a drastic change occurred as Guitry's enthusiasm for cinema began to grow exponentially. Between 1935 and 1939 he directed 12 films, of which 4 were released in 1936. He directed 31 films in 23 years, including 14 adaptations of his own plays. However, when any of his films were screened, critical reviews usually praised the direction of the actors and the delivery of the dialogues, thus confirming once again that Guitry's modus operandi was not conventional filmmaking but just a case of filmed theater. Even today, if there are numerous books on the playwright and his theater, only a handful of works speak about the filmmaker on an academic level. This little known side of Guitry's legacy is rather startling because directors such as Orson Welles, François Truffaut, and even Alain Resnais have always indicated the important role of Guitry as an inspiring filmmaker. They have commented on the author's unique style and his particular writing ability where innovation is the quintessential driving force. However, and as paradoxical as it may appear, Guitry in his early years did remain distant, even hostile, for a while to the motion picture industry, claiming that the cinematic experience was an appropriate form for documentary but not necessarily for fiction; he thus produced a series of filmed portraits entitled *Ceux de chez nous* (*Those Among Us*, 1914), which included a long list of famous artists and intellectuals of the time like Anatole France, Sarah Bernhardt, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Auguste Jean Renoir, Auguste Rodin, Edmond Rostand, and Camille Saint-Saëns among others.[11] For many years Guitry's work was unjustly considered "minor"; Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach, like most of the critics of their time, only spared *Le roman d'un tricheur* and, for special reasons, the old documentary *Ceux de chez nous*. However, few actors, writers, or directors have attracted so much discussion about themselves and their work. Guitry has been both praised and vilified, dragged through the

mud and considered a master of the seventh art. In the same manner that Pagnol faced ruthless detractors, Guitry has been long despised by the professionals of the French film industry. This reputation can be tracked in many conventional histories of French cinema written most of the time by "purist" film scholars and historians, who considered his work under the lens of a theater director or *boulevardier*. Indeed Guitry did not direct many films outside the comedy genre, with the exception of a few serious dramas like *Pasteur* (1935), *Donne-moi tes yeux* (*My Last Mistress*, 1943), *Le diable boiteux* (*The Lame Devil*, 1948), and *Le comédien* (*The Private Life of an Actor*, 1948). It took over 20 years for this opinion to start changing. In the meantime, Guitry had built a filmic style much more varied than it seemed, going beyond what is often called "filmed theater." Considered a suspicious case in the field of cinema by many fellow filmmakers due to his formal background of theater, Guitry's honor was eventually rescued by the New Wave filmmakers who saw in him an outstanding inventor and prolific narrator. Guitry's most successful experience with comedy was without doubt *Le roman d'un tricheur*.[12]

The film is an adaptation of Guitry's stage comedy written as a novel, *Mémoires d'un tricheur* (1935). Sitting on the terrace of a café, a former professional cheat (Sacha Guitry) writes his memoirs describing how his fate was sealed when, at the age of 12, he stole coins from the cash register of the family's grocery store in order to buy beads. For punishment he was sent to bed without dinner. Shortly afterward the 11 family members died by eating poisonous mushrooms. Placed with a distant family relative who aspired only to rob him of his inheritance, the orphan was forced to flee. Guitry's character made an instant ally of trickery, thus profiting from it the rest of his career. Alone in life and convinced of the futility of being honest, he thereafter had only one ambition of extolling the virtues of vice and ultimately became rich. Almost implicated in the assassination of Czar Nicholas II, seduced by a hotel thief (Rosine Deréan), and mesmerized by a lady gambler (Jacqueline Delubac), considering his miraculous survival a sign of destiny, he chose to achieve his goals by becoming a professional thief and con artist. Starting as a bellboy, he got promoted to doorman until he became an elevator operator and finally a groom in a luxury hotel of the French Riviera. Years later, following his military service and after the war, he became a card dealer and croupier at the casino in Monte Carlo. His taste for women and in particular Henriette, his attraction for wealth, and his ruthlessness made him a player and a happy cheater. But one night, he realized that he was about to abuse the man who saved him from death during the war. Remorseful and ashamed, he decided to resign to his own fate and to learn the game in an honest manner. Fortune smiled on him for a while, as he enjoyed the game but later on he

began to lose everything he had won by cheating. Now ruined, he completed his career in the police force, the only place where he felt safe from his personal weakness.

Morally subversive, *Le roman d'un tricheur* expresses a certain dose of dark humor rather ahead of its time. Looking back fondly on a life of crime, the protagonist finds himself in the underworld on many occasions, involved in theft and vice, and as the puppet of powerful and convincing women. As a witty picaresque narrative, the film has all the hallmarks of a classic tale of studious innocence corrupted by the dazzle of easy money, the fantasy life of Monte Carlo, its excess, and the thrill of the illicit. Inevitably, though, the high roller lifestyle which began with a long and lucrative career ended in a rough reality check. With *Le roman d'un tricheur* Guitry decided to speak with the camera to suit its own comedies to the big screen and consequently created original stories. From the beginning, he was opposed to the so-called canned theater that plagued innumerable French creations between the two wars, and imposed an economy of means that transformed his text. From then on, Guitry evolved from the stage to the screen and began to move from the adaptations of his own comedies to the production of original films. Surprisingly he broke certain conventions of cinema with his very own narrative technique, thus attracting a new audience. Film critic Desson Howe commented on Guitry's unconventional position on film standards arguing that "Guitry seemed to be doing more than celebrating his own creativity. He's also cheating time and convention, as if he wants these films to outlast other movements and genres, so that they're seen again and again. The ploy seems to have worked."[13] The most intriguing feature of *Le roman d'un tricheur* was the actual narrative structure as opposed to the content of its comedy. Framed as a flashback, the story comprised a series of independent episodes linked together in a chronological order. Instead of cutting dialogues from his stage comedy, Guitry had the idea of using text, written in the first person, as a commentary on the series of filmed images that would simply serve as a support for the narration. Created in an idiosyncratically aesthetic manner, the film promoted the art of ellipse conjugated with a cynical lens. One example of the filmmaker's innovation was the film's prologue where Guitry takes the spectator on a tour of his set and introduces most of his crew one by one (including supporting actors and staff members). A new type of comedic narration was born and, confident in the power of cinema, Guitry invented the "filmed novel."

> It was in 1936. Sacha, a little tired of filmed theater, conjectured that cinema was perhaps closer to the novel than to the play. In theater one plays a role; in film one has already played the role. So he designs a film, which will be filmed

> as a novel. The character that is on screen will not say: "I'm miserable today." He will look unhappy, and the voice of the narrator will say: "I was unhappy that day." The moment he makes that statement, Sacha Guitry has just invented "playback" even if he does not realize it. He has just invented the primacy of the soundtrack, as Orson Welles, trained in radio, did three years later with Citizen Kane. Now during filming, the preset soundtrack will guide the actors' movements, gestures, and facial expressions. The *mise en scène* is thus guided by a *mise en sons*.[14]

It was only after a long prologue that anything resembling a story started to take shape. Even then, Guitry lingered over the details of the protagonist's childhood, while the plot developed. Seeing it now, years after the French New Wave, contemporary spectatorship is more familiar with such methods, but in 1936 this style must have seemed very different indeed. In fact, Guitry's elliptical camera work and staccato editing were a strong influence on the New Wave, as was his playful sense of homage to other films. Therefore, almost 25 years before the New Wave, Guitry anticipated the "politique des auteurs," which would become in the 1950s the banner of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the New Wave. Though obvious for film scholars today, the concept of promoting the author to the role of the director as well far from made sense in the 1930s.

Contemporary critics of the prewar era commonly accused Guitry of filming theater rather than embracing the seventh art. These allegations were still arguable as a film such as *Le roman d'un tricheur* demonstrated fluency and inventiveness. In addition, the film drew inspiration from conventional film comedies as opposed to stage comedies (i.e., through striking gestures and facial expressions directly inspired from the silent era). Guitry went to great lengths to make a type of "cinema" by increasing special effects, light years away from the reality of theater, by extending space, diluting time, thus avoiding the principles of "filmed theater." Guitry instead created "filmed comedies" by promoting the spirit of the boulevard with some of his memorable quotes such as "Pour moi l'argent n'a de valeur que quand il sort de notre poche. Il n'en a pas quand il y rentre" (For me, money has value only when it comes out of our pocket. It does not have any when it gets in) and "Mais de même qu'on peut devenir un assassin sans avoir une âme de criminel, je pense qu'on peut avoir une âme d'assassin et ne pas commettre de crimes" (While one can become a murderer without a criminal soul, I think one can have a soul of an assassin and not commit crimes).[15] At one moment Guitry, as a full-fledged cinema actor/auteur, took the liberty of exhibiting his delightful impudence, daring to stare and wink at the camera on repeated occasions. Guitry knew that comedy was essentially a matter of rhythm, situational dynamic, and that dialogues, a question of timing. Pace was doubly

important, not only in Guitry's comical rhetoric, but also in the transition from his stage comedies to the screen.

The Voice-Over in Question

Le roman d'un tricheur was entirely built on voice-over narration: the main character currently writing his memoirs on the terrace of a café, starts the story in his own voice. This single discourse made Guitry the author-actor-narrator. The innovation was not so much in using a voice-over device as a narrative tool but more in adding a voice to shots partly inspired by silent movies. At first superfluous, the narrative voice-over gradually liberated itself from the visual influence: the voice-over narrated, commented, analyzed, but also tricked. Humor in this instance allowed redundancy to become an acceptable duplication, thus making filmmaker François Truffaut wonder as to who was to lead the narration, the voice or the image.

> If the great originality of *Le roman d'un tricheur* is to be the only fiction film in the history of cinema whose spoken content is 90 percent voice-over, its great merit is to have led the spectators to forget this aspect of the film so completely that, when interviewed at the exit of the theater, they believe they have seen a movie played and spoken directly.[16]

One aspect of the voice-over was that it corresponded to a device that allowed a scene to be narrated by an actor who was not to be seen on screen. In fact, all of the film was in voice-over, Guitry himself lending his voice to all the characters.[17] Only once did he interrupt his narrative for real dialogues during a comedy sketch with the eccentric Countess (Marguerite Moreno) on the terrace of the café. Guitry's visual effervescence matched by his clever editing and cinematography was to influence filmmakers like Orson Welles (in *Citizen Kane*) and François Truffaut (in *Jules et Jim*). With the advent of talkies, a new challenge arose for filmmakers, particularly in comedies. The combination of moving pictures, witty dialogues, and music was not always persuasive enough to carry elaborate puns or farce as the basis of a comic scene. This lack of efficiency was the reason for Guitry to employ voice-over narration, not as the traditional omniscient third person, but this time as a "confessional" first person. The addition of Guitry's voice gave the notion of a revelation delivered in full honesty and conveyed greater depth and meaning to the audience. Voice-over narration, propelled entirely by Guitry's talent for narration, made the film more realistic, even though the device distanced spectators from their immediate understanding of the story. However, confessional first-person narration was able to fill that gap and bring spectators into the world of the con artist.

Guitry was able to bridge Renoir's cynical humanism and the equally cynical existentialism of the New Wave: he offered a wry prescription for their disillusion. Even the ending of the story, which featured an ingenious and amusing twist in the plot that tied all the film's themes together in a single stroke, was depicted without dramatic emphasis, as a momentary irony. Although *Le roman d'un tricheur* told the story of a mature man reaching the end of his career, it remained a youthful experimental story, essentially a moral parabola, with a style still fresh and novel against the flow of years of literary adaptations.

Along with *Le roman d'un tricheur*, Guitry wrote many successful comedies. One of them, *Désiré*, remains till today a rather modern and pungent *vaudeville* piece. After being fired from his job, Désiré (Sacha Guitry), a professional maitre d'hotel, is offered a job in a new home. He is now at the service of Odette (Jacqueline Delubac), a former actress and the elegant mistress of Monsieur Montignac (Jacques Baumer), a prominent member of the government. Among the personnel is the chambermaid (Arletty) and the cook Adèle (Pauline Carton). As she checks his reference, Odette learns incidentally that he was recently fired from his last position at the service of a Russian princess, after he allegedly tried to seduce her. Though she now knows of his scandalous past as a ladies' man, Odette hires him. The following

Figure 1.2 Sacha Guitry in *Le roman d'un tricheur* (*The Story of a Cheat*, 1936) by Sacha Guitry

week while in Deauville, the two start dreaming about one another: Désiré begins to dream out loud, addressing Odette, his mistress, now as "maîtresse." She, in turn, utters Désiré's name in her sleep to the perplexed look on Montignac. To avoid the embarrassment of this unacceptable romantic love, Désiré decides to resign and leave. Similar traits as in *Le roman d'un tricheur* can be found in this social comedy prolific in witty verbal exchanges on gender roles.

> *Montignac*: D'ailleurs, les hommes qui s'imaginent que les femmes s'habillent pour eux sont des naïfs! Vous ne vous habillez pas pour les hommes . . . vous vous habillez contre les femmes!
> *Odette*: C'est un peu vrai. Mais tu peux ajouter que si c'est pour les femmes qu'on met de belles robes, c'est du moins pour vous qu'on les retire![18]

On the cinematic level, the beginning of *Désiré* was particularly original with several successive plans, where spectators could follow the living arrangements accentuating the parallelism of actions. Guitry often used the process of developing a feeling, a reaction to the comfort of a chic living room and the kitchen space. Comparisons also took place as a parallelism of words this time, contrasting the so-called *bienséance* and the argot in the kitchen space. However, the final scene reveals the use of the argot and vulgar language by the minister himself ("j'men fou"). Reminiscent of Renoir's *La règle du jeu* with its distinct members of the downstairs crew, Guitry excelled at portraying the complex relationships of deference versus arrogance and refined the entertainment by adding misunderstandings, quid pro quo, and exchange of identities. Because Guitry interpreted the main role, that of Désiré a servant, many critics were not convinced by the performance, particularly by his initial choice. The dichotomy of a great master of theater who usually embodied the characters of aristocrats and bourgeois versus the present role as a servant brought confusion and ambiguity. For critics this was Guitry's least convincing performance as he uttered slang such as "s'pas," "ben voyons," and "ch'pense bien" or brilliant quotes like "Qu'est-ce que ça peut fiche qu'il ait une jolie femme! Entre hommes, on ne se complimente que sur ses maîtresses" (Who the hell cares if he has a pretty wife! Among men, we only compliment each other on our mistresses).

IV. Period Comedies: When Humor Challenged History

The 1930s and 1940s were a prolific time for period movies. Many masterpieces emerged in that period with films as varied as Claude Autant-Lara and Maurice Lehmann's *L'affaire du courrier de Lyon* (1937), Anatole

Litvak's *Mayerling* (1936), and Marcel Carné's *Les visiteurs du soir* (*The Devil's Envoys*, 1942) and *Les enfants du Paradis* (*Children of Paradise*, 1945). But dramas and historical fresco were not the only genre to be solicited by filmmakers' ambitions to rewrite history as the popularity of French period comedies was also visible among popular audiences. Period comedies, like dramas, were legion in the 1930s and some productions already had a nonnegligible European market, such as *La kermesse heroique* (*Carnival in Flanders*, 1935), which was produced in two unconnected-language versions, both under the direction of the same filmmaker, Jacques Feyder (1885–1948), even before their distribution. In 1691, Spain invades and occupies Flanders, and the city of Boom is suddenly informed of the imminent arrival of Spaniard troops. While the men are about to leave the town, the women hastily unite to divert and charm the militia. With a script by Charles Spaak and splendid sets by Lazare Meerson (justly credited with achieving a minor miracle in paying tribute to northern European masters such as Pieter Bruegel, Franz Hals, and Vermeer), the film was not only a skillful comedy but also an unusual example of the work of Jacques Feyder.[19]

One advantage for producers and filmmakers was that most of these period comedies never attempted to faithfully depict a specific time period. Therefore the necessity to replicate specific costumes and set designs using new techniques and costly special effects was not a priority. Rather the scenario and dialogues remained the key components of success with popular audiences. These conditions created a favorable terrain for producers as the period comedies generally allowed audiences to suspend their disbelief of the time period that was depicted to them. Unlike historical reconstitutions or dramas whose attempts to realistically depict a historical event was never a guaranteed success, the period comedies had the luxury of utilizing the historical background as a backdrop to create new characters or plots that had no real historical basis. Another advantage of period comedies was their diminution in creating characters who did not have to necessarily fit into a time period. In Maurice Tourneur's *Volpone*, there was no need to accurately depict the time period in which Ben Jonson wrote, since the play did not refer to real historical characters. In some cases authors deliberately used anachronism for the sake of comedic dynamics (also possibly to circumvent the ignorance in national history of the majority of the popular audience). Films like *Francois 1er* intentionally used anachronistic elements in order to render the film more relevant to a modern audience, thus making the representation of the period less believable and at the same time more laughable.

Money, Greed, and Corruption as Comic Device

One of the finest film adaptations of a work of theater to have been produced by French cinema, Jacques Tourneur's *Volpone*, united two legends of French theater and cinema, Harry Baur and Louis Jouvet. Baur was dominating every scene he appeared in, and gave what can only be described as a superlative comic performance. Jouvet was no less impressive, playing the straight man to Baur's comic *Volpone* with the force and subtlety of a master of the dramatic art. Each character was defined by one dominant passion and a unique physical appearance: each one was a moral and physical caricature associated with animal-related names including one of the dominant traits of their character.[20] The masterpiece of filmed theatrical farce, Tourneur's *Volpone*, was based on the eponymous play *Volpone* by the Elizabethan playwright, Ben Jonson, which was later translated into French by Jules Romains in 1928. In 1937 Romains worked on the literary adaptation including Raimu where Marcel L'Hebier was the designated director, following a *commedia dell'arte* style. Due to financial difficulties the project was momentarily abandoned and again resumed in June 1938 under the hospices of filmmaker Jacques de Baroncelli.[21] The shooting lasted 2 weeks and was interrupted again.

Volpone (Harry Baur) is a Levantine trader established in sixteenth-century Venice who is experiencing financial bankruptcy because one of his vessels carrying precious stones is reported missing. Imprisoned for debt, he

Figure 1.3 Jean Témerson, Louis Jouvet, and Harry Baur in *Volpone* (1941) by Maurice Tourneur

meets Mosca (Louis Jouvet), who lifts his spirits. Released at the unexpected arrival of his boat, Volpone pays off Mosca's debts, takes him as his confidant and handyman, and to avenge himself from his former creditors who had sent him to jail, goes to great length with the complicity of Mosca into a macabre farce by pretending to die. He sends Mosca all around Venice to spread the word that he will bequeath his wealth to the Venetian who shall display the most sincere friendship. This enterprise has no other goal but to see to what extent greed will drive candidates to his inheritance as Mosca himself declares:

> L'odeur seule de l'argent suffit à saouler les hommes. Vous leur faites flairer les écus, rien que flairer, et ils arrivent à plat ventre, et ils tendent le cou, et la tête leur tourne. Les femmes rampent vers votre lit. Les marchands vous fournissent à crédit et les poètes vous encensent; c'est ça la magie de l'argent![22]

So the usurer Corbaccio (Charles Dullin) decides to disinherit his son in his favor, while Corvino (Fernand Ledoux), the most jealous husband in Venice, bring his faithful wife (Jacqueline Delubac) to Volpone's bedside. Her demure nature attracts the son of Corbaccio and the scandal would have been brilliant if Mosca had not turned the situation in his own favor. To escape what now seems to be an attempted rape trial, Volpone must leave Venice. Mosca, who is by now the sole heir, throws gold coins from the window to the crowd, much to Volpone's dismay.

The film's finale looks as though Romains and Zweig had cut and pasted it over Jonson's original ending: again, like in too many contemporary movies, the film's conclusion seems to be an arbitrary twist, a *deus ex machina*, rather than the end product with added value from the interactions of plot with character psychology. The main difference between Ben Jonson's 1606 play and Jules Romains and Stefan Zweig's 1928 adaptation was the ending: in Jonson's version, Volpone and Mosca, his right-hand man, are eventually brought to trial; it was deemed a "moral" conclusion.

Could audiences of the 1940s see the film as a *requisitoire* against unbridled capitalism, historically born in the merchant cities of Italy, like Venice? The film recounts less a story than making and remaking a demonstration of human greed: spectators know the outcome from the start and, though the stakes keep increasing, the repetitive exhibition of the characters' vices becomes the modus operandi of the comedy. This corresponds to the depiction of Volpone and how he sets the scenario for his own doom—his faked death becomes a real suicide. It does not strike like the unavoidable outcome of a sophisticated process carried out by a flawless scenario.

When taking into consideration the film's judiciary ramifications triggered at the end of the liberation, reflected in Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Le corbeau*,

one cannot help drawing a parallel with Tourneur's *Volpone*. Surprisingly enough the film was never labeled as a potential collaborationist work, mainly due to its French production company as opposed to *Le corbeau*'s German-controlled production by Continental Films. However, Tourneur's problems at the end of the war related, like Clouzot's, to his association with Continental Films, not to *Volpone*. The tragic destiny met by Harry Baur, who was imprisoned, tortured, and who may have died as a consequence of the torture meted out during the interrogation by the Gestapo, most likely explains the reasons for which the film was not involved in the polemic. The character of Volpone, originally a noble Venetian, was changed into a Jew during the period of the Occupation, giving another meaning to multiple charges of greed and wickedness, which were launched in the film. At the postproduction stage, however, the word "Jew" was replaced with "Levantine," which allowed reducing somewhat the anti-Semitism and thereby ensured the sustainability of the film.

In Guitry's *Le roman d'un tricheur* the author asserts as conclusion: "Etre riche, ce n'est pas avoir de l'argent: c'est en dépenser" (To be rich is not to have money, but to spend it). This premise seems to follow quite the opposite of Tourneur's *Volpone*, as the main character is obsessed to keep his wealth while his servant and accomplice Mosca throws it all from the balcony with his memorable ending quote: "Et que désormais personne ne me parle plus d'argent!" (From now on no one speak to me about money!) The altruistic desire has turned into a selfish introspection. Money is a master of illusion that gradually replaces reality. It does not allow access to the enjoyment of life, but become a pleasure in itself, which is sterile as well as harmful. For Volpone money has become the foundation of his personal universe because it is within the comedy the tyrannical and misleading master.

The words of the French novelist Bernanos, who wrote "Tous les péchés capitaux ensemble damnent moins d'hommes que l'avarice et l'ennui"[23] (All capital sins together damn fewer men than greed and boredom) could serve as a judicious commentary on the film's intention to moralize mainstream audience. Money with a human face: Tourneur has, however, expressed a trend to humanize money more than demonizing it. Undoubtedly the idea is that money is close to human nature, or rather that man is so close to money to the point of confusing it with his own conscience. But the film goes further and shows that the character of Volpone considers his money as a human being, as a full-fledged person, and even as a true friend. He wishes that people consider his gold with as much respect as he does, and this is why he invites his servant Mosca to greet his gold; thus making it an undeniable humanization of money. For Volpone, his gold is a noble entity, one that

gives life, even procreates, generating potentially more wealth to the point of enjoying it in a rather hedonistic manner. Baur embodies to perfection the role of a man of money lavishly endowed with overly mannered gestures. Volpone plays in excess in order to impress as he provides a huge table for guests and organizes a parade of servants with the most sophisticated dishes. This scene presents a hedonic concept of money, which does not exist in most films where money corresponds to the protagonist of choice.

Despite being a comedy, the film questions the ability of humans to pursue the possibility of self-destruction for the sake of money. As a film specialized in reversals of values, *Volpone* develops particularly all the compromises that man is willing to make for money. This comedy shows human tendencies and the degradation through greed that drives men to lies, denial, and hypocrisy, epitomized by Volpone. The lust of the legacy is built on the degradation of values of each character: one gives his wife, the other disinherits his own son, and the last one, a notary, corrupts even a judge. During the trial where he is accused of attempting rape on Corvino's wife, one learns that the notary, also on the lookout for the legacy of Volpone, corrupts the judge to avoid the gallows. The quest for the legacy even pushes a lawyer into corruption, going against all the principles of justice. The quest for money pushes the notary into fraud, the stingy one to extravagance, and the jealous one to cuckoldry—this is the basis of the comedy. Would money be decidedly stronger than anything? Would it be so precious to the point of shaking, even temporarily, the values that each one usually holds?

Volpone has so much pleasure possessing his gold that he is represented as living through it literally and as suggested by the lexical fields of the five senses. When Mosca declares "L'odeur seule de l'argent suffit à saouler les hommes. Vous leur faites flairer et ils arrivent à plat ventre (. . .) c'est ça la magie de l'argent!" (The smell of money alone is enough to get men drunk. Just give them a whiff, and they come groveling (. . .) that's the magic of money!) Unlike the well-known proverb "money has no flavor," money here has a smell so strong that it intoxicates men and draws them into its traps. But money also has a flavor as suggested by Volpone in this punch line: "La bave leur coule autour de la bouche. La danse se fait autour de mon or" (The drool flows out of their mouths. They dance around my gold). Money is also related to the desire for festivity. This festive image is enhanced by the association that is made with sound in the film. Money has a smell, a flavor, but also a particularly sound. Corvino, one of the three candidates who covet the inheritance of Volpone, offers 300 sequins to the dying Volpone. Mosca then makes a revealing comment about the protagonist: "Quand le vieux grigou entend sonner les sequins, on dirait qu'il soulève le couvercle de son cercueil"

(When the old miser hears the ringing of coins, you would think he was lifting the lid of his coffin). Money has the power to give back life to the dead (perhaps more appropriately to wake the dead) as if money were an elixir of life.

However, the comedy emphasizes and even exacerbates the numerous defects of man like greed. Initially, Volpone's intention is to play on the greed of the other characters, but they appear even greedier than the anti-hero, himself. Corbaccio, Corvino, and Voltore are desperate to inherit the legacy of the dying Volpone. The latter eventually gets caught in his own game and begins to "despise" his servant and adviser Mosca, and the spectators can see that Volpone is indeed ultimately stingier than the other three opponents. Mosca then turns the trap to his advantage. The last sentence is rather emblematic of the general emotion of the film and its outspoken weariness of greed as Mosca confesses at the very end of the story: "Et que désormais personne ne me parle plus d'argent!"

Money triggers paranoia in those who are the most interested in its power. There is a scene where Mosca touches and caresses his master's gold coins with his hands, while pondering as to what he would do if he were in his place.

> *Mosca*: Ah monsieur, votre or me fait de la peine parce qu'il est en prison dans vos coffres. Moi si je pouvais je lui donnerais des ailes.
> *Volpone*: Eh, quelle sottise! Lui donner la liberté quand j'ai eu tant de peine à le mettre en cage! Mais qu'en ferais-tu?
> *Mosca*: Moi? Une nuit d'amour, une noce puissante avec des copains, un voyage d'agrément en Turquie.[24]

The mere thought of money thus spent, in addition to seeing Mosca touching his gold, leads Volpone to panic as he snatches the coins from his hands and closes the chest abruptly. The moral of the discourse is that money is to be spent, and this is supported by Mosca, who assigns himself the role of the gambler. At one point, the pretendent argues on which order they will visit the dying Volpone. To remedy the dispute, Mosca offers to determine which of the two will be the first at the bedside of Volpone by tossing with a gold coin. Of course both refuse to provide the coin. As an ultimate subliminal message Tourneur attempts to show the spectators that one can become increasingly avaricious as one gets closer to a fortune.

With *Volpone*, the comic register functions in a large part due to the enormity of the topic, an exaggeration that prohibits the character from existing in real life. The excessive archetype, the concentration of defects, leads the protagonist to become a mere literary product. As film scholar James Welsh wrote: "Jonson's framework has been replaced by a framework founded in the

XXth century ideology, and as a result of this significant alteration, Volpone and Mosca become contrasting rather than compatible figures. In this fashion the film attempts to impose a realistic approach upon a play that deals with physical and moral monstrosity."[25] This bias is actually reassuring for the film spectators, who see in him a device that can moralize social relations, especially the conflict between the protagonists of different social classes.

Mosca summarizes the situation in a premonitory scenario: "This one sells his wife, the other will sell his son. They would sell God if he fell into their hands. Money, Money! Money everywhere! Money on every floor, all along the streets, throughout the city, throughout the world! All of them vile! I'll make them dance!"[26] According to Welsh, "Although the predatory characters of Jonson's original are generally preserved and recognizable, the relationship between Volpone and Mosca is seriously changed, and their dispositions at the end of the play, Jonson himself would probably not recognize."[27] Tourneur chose derision rather than a bitter comedy. If it is lit by the explosion of life in the characters, the play remains a cynical and ambiguous portrait like some of Molière's comedies, for example, *L'avare*, *Le misanthrope*, and *Georges Dandin*. Through the *commedia dell'arte*, Volpone comes indirectly from the comedy couple in ancient classical comedy where the old uses his power to prohibit the young from accessing fortune. Yet, if we consider Volpone as an older character, one can argue that his attitude is to eventually expunge the temptations of senility: the decline of vitality that secretly comes gnawing at dynamism and confidence, the fear of losing one's identity. Northrop Frye once wrote about the character of Volpone and his dramatic function within the comedy dynamics:

> Hence the moral quality of the society presented is not the point of the comic resolution. In Jonson's *Volpone* the final assertion of the moral norm takes the form of a social revenge on vulpine, and the play ends with a great bustle of sentences to penal scripture and the galleys.[28]

As previously mentioned the period comedies of the 1930s and 1940s were legion, and one of the most popular ones was unquestionably Christian-Jaque's *François Ier*. While the screenplay was far from being the best example of comedies, the film experienced an undeniably popular success throughout the country. From 1936 to 1938, Christian-Jaque and Fernandel worked on six comedies together, but *François 1er* remained the most celebrated due to the public's identification through the heroes' multifaceted language, leading to French spectators' emotional involvement, thus explaining how the reassuring image of France represented in the story could function effectively as a myth.

At the "Petit théâtre Cascaroni" Honorin (Fernandel) dreams to become an actor and is auditioning for the operette *La Belle Ferronnière* to play the role of the knight on stage. When the actor who is playing this role falls ill, Honorin has his chance to substitute, but struck by stage fright, he seeks advice from his friend Cagliostro (Alexandre Mihalesco), a magician who predicts the future. Distraught, he uses the offices of the hypnotist to familiarize himself with the role, and is sent by magic to the past at the court of François Ier (Aimé Simon-Girard), King of France. Little does he know that keeping with him his small Larousse dictionary will help him predict the future and impress all of the courtesans of the king. Indeed, the dictionary allows him to become the confidant of the king and appreciate the life of the sixteenth century by introducing leisurely pastime such as foxtrot, belote, and java to the Valois court. As all good things must come to an end, Honorin comes back to the present to find out, much to his dismay, that life at the time of the renaissance was much more enjoyable for him.

Christian-Jaque was able to successfully parody conventional period films with exquisite costume detail and sophisticated effects in a burlesque manner without indulging in historical issues. If the consensual success of *Francois Ier* is undeniable till date, even after eight decades, the mechanism by which this critical achievement occurred remains to be analyzed. The plot primarily revolves around Honorin's desire to pursue happiness back to the time of the renaissance, a lesson in happiness which may seem a rather simplistic sociological message today. However, in the 1930s, the film was able to trigger an emotional response from the public. This interest was achieved not only through language, but also through multiple signs and allusions evoking a shared national culture. The verbal comedy resulted from the odd juxtaposition of different speech patterns. For instance, Fernandel spoke French in 1520 Amboise, as he did in Paris in the twentieth century and addressed King Henry VIII (Alexandre Rignault) in a rather nonchalant manner. Since the renaissance protagonists are unaware of contemporary customs, languages, and also their own impending future, they are victims of their naivety and become the center of public ridicule.

Henry VIII: Vous venez avec moi à London et vous apprenez la danse à ma femme.
Honorin: Laquelle?
Henry VIII: Toutes!
Honorin: Non mais, laquelle de femme?
Henry VIII: Comment, laquelle de femme? The Queen! La Reine!
Honorin: The Queen? Non, vous me comprenez pas. Comment s'appelle-t-elle?

Henry VIII: Mais Catherine, voyons!
Honorin: Catherine? Mais laquelle? Il y en trois de Catherines; trois Catherine sur six femmes! Il y a Catherine d'Aragon, Catherine Parr, Catherine Howard. Vous comprenez, c'est pas à moi qu'il faut faire le petit cachottier. Non c'est inutile. Je la connais la vie privée d'Henri VIII. Pensez un peu, votre film, je l'ai vu au moins dix fois au cinéma![29]

In this particular scene, unlike the famous character of Jacquouille in the 1993 *Les visiteurs*, Fernandel's idiosyncratic language does not evolve throughout the film, despite his constant exposure to French renaissance; instead he persists in adapting to his archaic environment which would liberate himself from more trouble ahead (i.e., he is eventually questioned under torture as a potential heretic). Most of the protagonists, including Honorin and François 1er, are characters whose language reflects the complexity of disparate viewpoints and who are most likely to give rise to multiple identifications among the public. Though the storyline remains mediocre at best, a remarkable characteristic of Christian-Jaque was that his direction to his actors never indulged in exaggerated satire or grotesque behavior. What the contemporary critique may deplore, however, is that the satirical element was always kept within bounds and the protagonists' repartees were never out of place. The film's weakness is based on omnipresent common sense, good manners, sound morality, real wit, and true humor. While it cannot be denied that there is little action in his plays, there is a great deal of comedic conversation; Honorin makes vice appear in its most ridiculous aspect, in order to let his audience laugh and despise it; his aim is to correct the follies of the old age by exposing them to ridicule. Away from the domination of military vaudeville and theatrical adaptation, France had long been waiting for genuine comedy. However, several decades later the film still enjoys popular appreciation while critical comments continue to be harsh. Film historian Raymond Chirat once said about actor Fernandel that he indeed rescued many "navets" (flops) by his own acting and presence, thus making him one of the greatest benefactors of French cinematic history.

V. Regional Comedies: The Provence of Marcel Pagnol

Although poetic realism dominated French cinema in the 1930s, only a minority of the entire production of French films from that era could be considered part of the "realist" current. In fact, the 1930s were a complex period that included an overwhelming number of comedies, "filmed theater," literary adaptations, and exotic and colonial adventures. Many financially insufficient film budgets generated mediocre scenarios, and the *mise en scène*

often resulted in a poor display of actors. Poetic realism, by contrast, was a creative effort to reconstruct commonly accepted representations of life through the perspective of an artistic medium.

Since 1928, Marcel Pagnol (1895–1974) had been enjoying huge popularity in France and abroad. He began writing plays as a production team because directors and actors added their interpretations to the text. Then, when the talkies came into existence, Pagnol adapted his plays into films. His success among the public was so significant that he managed to build his own studio and a movie theater in Marseille. He was able to gain financial independence and created his own production company, its distribution agencies, sets, laboratories, and projection rooms. Consequently, he was able to shoot films at his own pace, regardless of external pressures.

Pagnol began his involvement with the film industry in 1930. A former schoolmaster, he became a playwright of national fame in the late 1920s and was contacted by Robert Kane, an American executive for Paramount Studios in France, who wished to give his studios a Parisian accent and intellectual flavor. However, Pagnol always had a volcanic relationship with film studios and quickly entered into conflict with Paramount producers over the conditions under which his play *Marius* was to be adapted to the big screen. Pagnol as a consequence decided to form his own production company in 1932, and acquired the art of filmmaking from skilled filmmakers, such as Alexander Korda (*Marius*) and Marc Allégret (*Fanny*). Dramaturge above all in his hometown of Marseille, Pagnol considered the cinematic medium as a great tool with which to promote his theatrical oeuvre. With the introduction of sound feature films and the prolific transformation of plays to the big screen, Pagnol's stage productions were logically sought after by film producers, and in 3 years all three of his big stage triumphs had been filmed. From 1938, he wrote, directed, produced, and distributed his films. Toward the end of his life, he turned to a more solitary activity—that of novel writing. His fictionalized autobiography became a bestseller. Needless to say, it was his extraordinary regional success that permitted him to enter directly into the movie industry with films like *Marius*, directed by Alexander Korda for Paramount in 1931, *Fanny* by Marc Allegret in 1932, and *Topaze* by Louis Gasnier in 1933 (starring Louis Jouvet, with screen adaptation by Leopold Marchand). Instead of enjoying the mundane Parisian life, Pagnol spent most of his time on the sets and in workshops in Joinville in order to study this new medium. There he met Alexander Korda (1893–1956), an exiled Hungarian, who later became one of the most prominent directors of British films. In 1931, Pagnol took *Marius* to the screen with the same actors who performed in Marseille. Marius (Pierre Fresnay), a young bartender in Marseille, is torn by a harsh dilemma: he must choose between a tranquil life ashore with his fiancée,

Fanny (Orane Demazis), and sailing off to sea on a ship to explore the world. Desperately in love with the young man since her early childhood, Fanny pretends to accept the favors of the old widower Panisse, a rich sail maker (Fernand Charpin), in order to provoke Marius's jealousy. Pushed to despair one night, Fanny comes to the bar to declare her love for Marius and her false desire to marry old Panisse. In response, Marius reveals to her the true nature of his thorny alternative, especially since a ship is leaving port that evening. The plans for embarkment are thwarted at the last minute, and the enamored couple spends their first night together. As the months pass, Fanny prepares for the wedding, but the call of the sea comes back to haunt Marius's fragile mind. Meanwhile, Fanny's mother, Honorine (Alida Rouffe), visits César, Marius's father (Raimu), to discuss their children's awkward state of affairs, as they finally agree on a dowry. But the night before the wedding, Piquoiseau (Alexandre Mihalesco), a local sailor, informs Marius that a ship, the *Malaisie*, is heading off the next morning and that he could join the crew. Fanny overhears their conversation and realizes that as long as Marius stays ashore, he will never be happy. As the time of departure of the ship approaches, Fanny uses subterfuge to persuade Marius to leave for his dreams. Because Marius refuses to leave her alone, she announces to him that she will eventually marry old Panisse for financial reasons. The infuriated Marius believes her account and immediately walks out to the ship. The sequel of the movie and the second chapter of the trilogy, *Fanny* (*Fanny*, 1932), narrates the return of Marius after Fanny has married Panisse and reared Marius's child, Cesariot. Many years later, Cesariot reunites his parents after the death of Panisse in *César* (*César*, 1936), the second sequel. Seven decades after the making of the first part of the Marseille trilogy, *Marius*, it still seems remarkable that one of the most provincial works in French cinema, full of the flavor of the Midi of France (in which actors and actresses converse in picturesque dialect), should be an international accomplishment. The trilogy *Marius–Fanny–César*, combining comedy, melodrama, romance, and all the energy and flavor of Marseille, generated worldwide and long-lasting reception.

Distancing himself from the synthetic environment of the Billancourt and Joinville studios, Pagnol returned to his native Marseille, acquired a soundtrack from Philips, and put together his own three-stage film studio outside the city. Many brilliant stars immediately followed him, such as Raimu,[30] Fernandel, and Pierre Fresnay to name a few. Pagnol, however, maintaining a critical distance, realized that the only way he would be able to control his work on screen was to select future actors, hire a crew, and direct the shooting all by himself. The young director disregarded all the conventions of studio sound still prominent in Paris and permitted his camera to tag along with the actors and to shoot on location. Pagnol chose his own

property as the shooting location for many of his films; the influence and magnificence of the surrounding Provençal landscape served as background and functioned as his own outdoor laboratory. Between the delicate fragrance of the hills of Provence and the entertaining lifestyle of the fishermen at the Canebière in Marseille, the three films had a common effect, a French-style "meridional" *commedia dell'arte* that instantly charmed audiences. Although Pagnol's early career as a director of plays had a classical edge (similar to the style of Emile Augier and Courteline), he soon understood that the best source of inspiration was literally in his own backyard. He collaborated with the novelist Jean Giono (1895–1970), also from Provence, to produce *Regain* (*Harvest*, 1937) and *La femme du boulanger* (*The Baker's Wife*, 1938). Best known for his distinctively Provençal quality, Raimu was unquestionably one of the best comic actors of the decade. Although quite different from Chaplin in physical appearance and style, Raimu could embody comic and tragic characters in the same sequence. *The Baker's Wife*, a narrative borrowed from an episode in Jean le Bleu's novel, featured Raimu as the village baker, deceived by an adulterous wife who runs off with a shepherd. Since he no longer wants to make the bread, the people of the village gather to persuade the "unruly" wife to come back and to ascertain a tolerable arrangement. Ginette Leclerc portrayed the idyllic, sultry spouse, and Raimu, assisted by Pagnol's dialogue,

Figure 1.4 Fernand Charpin and Fernandel in *Le schpountz* (*Heartbeat*, 1938) by Marcel Pagnol

gave one of his most outstanding performances, though his refusal to shoot dialogue scenes in open air resulted in an odd and rather inadequate mixture of location and studio work for the film.

Following the popular success of *Marius*, Pagnol's productions of *meridional* comedies gained momentum and it was during the shooting of *Angèle* in 1934 that the idea of a new story was born for what was going to be known as *Le schpountz*. Because of the double task, actors did not always know how to dress and occasionally mixed their lines. The working method of Pagnol, which was to make the films as a "family," eventually adapted well to this apparent chaos as the two films kept the same actors and technicians.[31] Every day, some inquisitive passersby from surrounding villages gathered to attend the outdoor shoots of the new film. Among them stood a young man in tattered clothes who came every day and commented endlessly and apologetically on his inappropriate clothes as if he were a full-fledged member of the casting crew. One of the chief operators by the name of Willy called him the "Schpountz."[32] He and his team took great pleasure in teasing him by evoking a possible career as an actor ("the next Charles Boyer") and one day went so far as to offer him a fake contract to sign. Pagnol took this anecdote as the starting point of the script and tailored it to the comic genius of Fernandel,[33] while offering him the opportunity to play on his sensible cord (a rather tragicomic role indeed when the character sees the illusions crumble tangled up in pathetic lies). This was therefore a rather reassuring role for Fernandel, who was able to use his proven expertise in comedy, while exploring the extent of his talent. The *Schpountz* was also an enticing device aimed at Fernandel since Pagnol wanted him for his film *Regain* shot concomitantly the same year.[34]

In the small village of Eoures in Provence, between Aubagne and Marseille, Irénée Fabre (Fernandel) works in the grocery store of his uncle Baptiste (Fernand Charpin). Brave and naive he despises groceries and dreams only of becoming a major movie star. A Parisian film crew is in town to conduct some shooting for a movie. Amused by the claims of the "schpountz" and his ego of Hollywood epic proportions, the director entertains his delusions by pretending to offer him, in mockery, a false contract following a staged screen test. The text is a line from the French Civil Code covering a wide range of emotions: "Tout condamné à mort aura la tête tranchée" (Those sentenced to death shall be beheaded). At the request of the film director, he must repeat the line over and over, sadly, desperately, lightly, romantically, hopefully, and so on. Oblivious to the warnings of his relatives, Irénée, with contract in hand, goes to Paris and presents himself at the studio, thus triggering general laughter. Irénée is subjected to a series of humiliations. He also disturbs the shooting of a film about Napoleon with 200 extras, provoking the fury of the

director. A little ashamed of their joke, the filmmakers find him a job as a prop, as a consolation. Little by little, he rises through the ranks with his "gift" for comedy. Moved by Irénée's speech, one of the filmmakers, Françoise (Orane Demazis) takes pity on him and both start a romantic relation. He marries her, gives good advice to the producer Meyerbaum (Léon Beliéres), and enjoys public triumph. He then decides to pay a visit to his hometown with his wife and brand new sports car.[35] Impressed by his success, his uncle Baptiste welcomes the return of the prodigal son.

An amusing, cunningly structured look at the perils of film production, *Le Schpountz* was an inside joke with a generosity of humor that made it accessible to anyone. Modest in scale and ambition, and sophisticated without being exclusionary, this story ostensibly examines the anxieties and mishaps that can befall the creators of low-budget pictures, but its observations could be applied to virtually any collaborative process where egos, wills, talents, libidos, and technology are bound to collide. *Le Schpountz* was Pagnol's fondest, most compassionate film and although it was packed with references to films and film people (*Occupe-toi d'Amélie*, *Tir au flanc*, among others), it did not particularly appear as a so-called inside movie (exploring how movies are made, how dreams are manufactured, how actors are directed, but its major concerns are people working at a profession they love, sometimes to the exclusion of everything else).

The Role of Dialogues: Form and Content

Pagnol did not want cinema to correspond to a medium based on images, but rather a medium that gave life to his dialogues and his plots, just as he had done earlier with theater. As a businessman, he always tried to keep the paternity to avoid "dénaturation." This perhaps was his weakness. In the early 1930s, Pagnol vigorously promoted the importance of sound in cinema and advocated the idea of film as "canned theater," declaring that "silent film was merely the art of printing and distributing pantomime, the sound film was the art of printing and distributing theater." Envisioning sound feature films as an actor's means of expression (for supporters of talkies, sound was far more significant than any series of visual metaphors), Pagnol considered his technical crew and actors to be part of one big enterprise involved in a joint venture.

Unlike the usual Pagnol film that evolved in the mythological Provence and its regional daily life, the story takes place in a multinational environment. The production is presented on a wall visibly cracked, which is marked "Studios de France." *Le Schpountz* can be seen as a means that Pagnol had at his immediate disposal to avenge himself on the film industry, in particular

those who rejected him when he wanted to convince theater artists to step into talkies. One of the famous quotes of the film features an actress in search of fame telling her producer out of despair "Who else must I sleep with to see my name on a poster?" "You could try the printer!" replies the producer. Many actors of theater and silent films did not view the sudden eruption of talkies favorably, especially from a man who belonged outside the film industry. The intricacies of the plot were of lesser consequence than the chemistry among the actors who were confronted for the first time with their own voices while technicians had to adopt equipment often manufactured in the United States. Pagnol himself, as an advocate of talkies and canned theater, was under attack from journalists, and theater critics considered him a sellout and therefore a traitor.

During the preceding decade of the 1920s Marcel Pagnol made significant contributions on many occasions to the French theater scene. Topaze was one of them. Later, Marius raised Pagnol to the level of a recognized playwright. In complete osmoses with his time, Pagnol was able to give a second life to stage theater of the 1930s inspired by different schools. Indeed, influenced by the school of realism, Pagnol was able to bring something more: a certain symbolism and poetry; far from wanting to reproduce a specific reality, he was the author of a universal oeuvre. While Pagnol was at the peak of his fame through his theater, he launched via the talkies a new way to express his "drama" in the early 1930s. Criticized by the theater world, which he had left, and little regarded by the film industry, which was still predominantly silent, Pagnol faced harsh criticism. However, the controversy did not prevent major studios like Paramount from believing in the commercial potential at a time when the only existing dialogues were the ones taken directly from filmed theater. Once again, it was a success, and French spectators filled theaters screening *Topaze*, *Marius*, or *Fanny*. This was not the real world that was projected on the screens, but only an aspect of the real world where everything made sense, and where dialogues were sometimes disconcerting moments of intensity and sometimes pieces of prolific comedy. Despite himself, Pagnol became the leader of a method of shooting comedy films, by designing a comic scenario at a time when creations were necessary for a new means of comical expression.

During the staged monologue of the Schpountz, "he who is sentenced to death, shall be beheaded," Pagnol clearly revealed his intentions to show through the powerful medium of comedy that the meaning of a text was not to be judged only by its content but also in great part by its delivery. Irenée begins to recite the words following different registers ranging from a series of emotions (laughter, fear, triumph, modesty, etc.). Pagnol emphasizes the actor's performance as a fundamental vector for his kind of cinema. To film

scholar Ginette Vincendeau, Pagnols's style of filmed theater did not reflect a lack of imagination "but in a cinematic reworking the legacy of *café-concert* and vaudeville to melt in a cinematic style."[36] This independence also allowed him to achieve a particularly impressive list of mythological productions without any real equivalent in French cinema. While poetic realism still remains today one of the trademarks of the prewar period, it is important to investigate the contribution of the other genres which in reality composed most of the decade's productions. Many of the filmmakers with a theatrical background who surfaced in the early 1930s were highly criticized for "misusing" the cinematic medium in order to serve a certain ideal of the so-called filmed theater.

The Essence of Comedy

Le Schpountz was also a reflection on the essence of comedy, a relevant question on the role of the clown in the seventh art and in French society. Pagnol sought what was the most tragic in the profession of an entertainer and above all what brought out greatness. Pagnol summarized what many people thought of the profession of an entertainer through the voice of Baptiste, who reminds his nephew of his ability to act: "Tu n'es pas bon à rien . . . tu es mauva is à tout! Je ne sais pas si tu me saisis, mais moi je me comprends" (You're not a "good for nothing" . . . you are bad at everything! I don't know if you get it, but I understand myself). At the end of the story the statement is even more eloquent. Convinced by his failure to integrate the world of cinema in Paris, Baptiste lays out his own projected conclusions to his nephew:

> Mon pauvre Irénée te voilà revenu. Tu étais parti la tête en l'air en poussant des cocoricos, tu nous reviens la tête basse et complètement escagassé par la dure leçon de la vie. Tu sais maintenant et d'une façon indiscutable, que tu n'es qu'un fada, un raté, un bon à rien, une loque, une épave . . . mais j'ai du tact; je ne veux pas te le faire savoir.[37]

The supremacy of the narration and theatrical principles best illustrated the cinema of Pagnol, who since the beginnings of his film career explicitly asserted his attachment to the text, a key element of "filmic dramaturgy." Pagnol's straightforward chronicles of the people of Provence progressed effortlessly between sagacious comedy and frivolous melodrama, delighting in vividness of language but always attentive to the variances between words and actions. The many verbal disputes between Irénée and his uncle, Baptiste, which used an uninhibited exercise of language, accurately portrayed Pagnol's affection for the Provençal lifestyle, its values of family, honor, happiness, and

idleness. Frequently in Pagnol's films, the narrative had the ability to "stand still" while loquacious characters engaged in prolonged, witty, argumentative exchanges about some topic of minor importance. Once again, Pagnol's strength was in being a visionary, especially in these early days of cinema where his "canned theater" was often disapproved. As a great lover of Provence, nature was a character in itself, which worked with the connivance of novelist Jean Giono. It was the French language that stood as the basis of Pagnol's world, yet today's spectators must not forget that not only are many Provençal expressions present in the script but they still create the most sensational moments of the films. Thus a constant reminder of this subculture though dominated by its Parisian counterpart stands in contrast and adds to the dramatic tension and irony of Pagnol's work. While characters tend to speak in Provençal when they say something rather emotional, French spectators realize that the language of true feelings stands in opposition to the one spoken by others. The author did not hesitate to get his message through the mouths of his characters. As Irenée expresses contempt for the comedy genre, Françoise replicates that in fact the comedy genre makes people who have reasons to cry, laugh and "gives them the strength to live and love as a benefactor (. . .) we should say Saint Molière, one could say Saint Charlot (Chaplin)."

Pagnol: Humanist or Naturalist?

The success of Pagnol's films often lay in his portrayal of rural peasants and the display of the surrounding countryside of Provence. Filming on location set the tone of French naturalism. Pagnol was nevertheless severely criticized for the Marseille trilogy. The devotees of "pure" motion pictures reproached him as merely a "lost" playwright whose personality and talent were incapable of adapting to the laws of the screen. According to contemporary critics, he conveyed a "false" cinematic language, much too close to theatrical eloquence, and that most of his works took on an apparently contradictory form, combining a traditional-conservative moral tone with an innovative structure. Still, Pagnol's contribution to motion pictures was to assert the preeminence of narrative values and his attachment to the text as well as to the spoken word. Behind the satire appears to be a humanistic portrayal as the producer of the film company confesses his feelings to the crew: "Et pourtant si une seule fois vous m'aviez mis dans le coup, si vous m'aviez invité à une blague, il m'aurait semblé que j'avais réussi à passer sous la ficelle qui attache le bouquet. Ah, ça jamais, c'est un Juif, et c'est le patron!"[38] Similar to the role of fables, Pagnol's films always included a didactic component, and although the author never engaged in politics, his vision of human

nature was not apolitical, as some critics have claimed. Rather, it was intended for all humanity, for the world community. Pagnol's cinema promoted the assimilation into society—as opposed to the promotion of "communitarianism" —and he did not like the exclusion of individuals as exemplified in *Le Schpountz*.

His invaluable efforts resulted in the international dissemination of the folklore of Provence. The public, unlike most film critics, manifested a warm enthusiasm for this "sunny" work. Pagnol's films promoted the eloquence and generosity of the heart, the inspiration of the word, and the necessity for a peaceful life balanced by the natural rhythms of existence far away from the disquieting influence of the city. Though of short duration, Pagnol's contribution to French cinema (1931–1952), along with Jean Renoir's and Marcel Carné's participation in the 1930s, remains significant. He served as an inspiration for many future young directors and authors (e.g., Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, and the Italian director Roberto Rossellini). Pagnol's movies were condensed samples of effervescent humanity, his characters were authentic archetypes, and his art remains alive due to his sincere contemplation of reality. This was the reality that he wanted to bring to the screen, less by ideology than by love for his beloved hills and his native Provence. While Marius and Fanny were largely shot in the studio since the scenes were mostly indoors, films like *Jofroi* exposed the peasant world and outdoor location were numerous. Years later Pagnol said that film historians considered *Jofroi* to be the first model of the future Italian neo-realist school.[39] Indeed, Italian neorealism was born in the mid-1940s. Italian filmmakers were constrained to film with little means, and then to prioritize the natural setting, which was the only available resource in addition to being economical. This new-found awareness of reality was not quite similar to the French realism supported by Pagnol a decade earlier, in large part due to the absence of a political message. In fact, it was the so-called poetic realism of his theater that he transcribed into images, and this was probably the element that appealed to the public at the time as well as the young, promising filmmakers. The iconic Italian neorealist filmmakers Vittorio de Sica (*Bicycle Thief*, 1948) recognized the influence Pagnol's films as one of his inspirations. According to Patrick Brion: "The neo-realist Italian school, it is Pagnol who made it in 1934 with *Angèle*."[40] Similarly, Roberto Rossellini, figurehead of the Italian movement, said in an interview: "I discovered the films of Marcel Pagnol in Italy before the war. [. . .] I was enamored by Pagnol. I think, though, he has influenced my choice came after."[41] Pagnol's work is unique for many reasons, one of which being that he is probably the only French filmmaker of his time who was part of a national culture while keeping a regionalist element that defined him universally.

VI. Verbal Comedy Meets Parisian Slang

In the 1920s many French filmmakers directed films whose subject had been given to them by producers. Most of the time producers commissioned the subject of the film according to the different demands from other producers. However, this trend began to change, especially with the advent of sound, and filmmakers like Jean Renoir, Julien Duvivier, and René Clair were among the first to actually break away from this trend and successfully impose their names alongside producers. Renoir adapted Feydeau's *On purge bébé*, with Michel Simon's[42] adaptation of *La chienne* (*The Bitch*) by Georges de La Fouchardière. Despite reservations from producers, Renoir was able to impose his choice of Michel Simon, for the tremendous potential he had—namely, the ambiguity of feelings collected in a single expression. A year later he reiterated his trust in his main actor, this time with the adaptation of René Fauchois's *Boudu sauvé des eaux*. From the comedy play, Renoir retained only the main narrative frame, added a prologue and an epilogue, and structured the film around cleverly intertwined semidramatic forms. The tragi-comic tone of Boudu came out as metaphysical irony though this was absent in the original play. After a difficult start, the film became increasingly popular, thus establishing the collaboration of Jean Renoir and Michel Simon. Through the characterization of its main protagonists, Renoir heralded a new kind of social vision, which sharpened with films like *La bête humaine* (1938) and *La règle du jeu*, as well as *films engagés* participating in the enthusiasm of the Popular Front such as *La vie est à nous* (*Life Belongs to Us*, 1939). Often labeled as naturalist cinema—in that it described less human nature as opposed to the interactions between them—it was a genre seen through the lens of simple humanity, characterized by poetic vision in the epilogue such as that of Clair's *A nous la liberté* (*Freedom to Us*, 1931). Renoir chose to portray Boudu as a hero, to the detriment of Lestingois, the main character of the play. Renoir rearranged the play and eventually its conventional space centered around Lestingois's library and refocused the storyline onto the character of Boudu, with a very personal ending. Renoir undertook another dimension quite remote from the original stage comedy which was based on a dramatic logic and a vision of a world directly borrowed from the rules of classical comedies. Renoir instead recreated a comedy whose dynamic and logic shared a naturalistic vision of the world. As an awkward and immature protagonist, Boudu unleashes his natural dimension, which clashes in the world of *petit-bourgeois* Lestingois.

Desperate after the loss of his dog and disgusted by Parisian society, Boudu (Michel Simon), a shaggy street bum, decides to drown himself in the Seine jumping from the Pont des Arts. Mr. Lestingois (Charles Granval), a bourgeois

Figure 1.5 Michel Simon in *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (*Boudu Saved from Drowning*, 1932) by Jean Renoir

bookseller who likes to observe crowds through his telescope, saves Boudu from drowning as the title implies. After dashing through the crowd and diving into the Seine, he must accept the hearty congratulations from his fellow Parisians for his heroic act. But little does he know the repercussions of his altruism as he brings the shabby and unkempt bearded bum to his shop determined to reform and "civilize" him. Boudu will soon shake Lestingois's theory to its very foundations. Once he's back to himself, Boudu settles for a time at Mr. Lestingois's, much to the dismay of his wife Emma (Marcelle Hainia) and the maid Anne-Marie (Séverine Lerczinska), who is also his mistress. Boudu soon proves to be a troublesome and unapologetic houseguest as he wreaks havoc wherever he goes. When he does not indulge in aimless lounging or engage in an impromptu headstand, he shovels sardines into his mouth with dirty fingers, spits into expensive first-edition novels (Balzac's *Physiology of Marriage*), wipes his shoes on satin bedspreads, repeatedly spills wine on the tablecloth, breaks dishes, and leaves the faucet turned on, inundating the kitchen. To make him a thriving socialite, Lestingois sends Boudu to a barber and buys him a new custom-fit suit. Once clean, Boudu returns the favor by shamelessly chasing both women around the house and conducting an affair with Lestingois's wife. Interestingly enough Mrs. Lestingois's initial disgust at his crude manners eventually yields to his endless reserve of animal lust. Boudu wins the national lottery and marries Anne-Marie, who seems delighted to end her own affair with Lestingois. During the boat ride

he manages to capsize the boat and sends the bride and the witnesses into the Marne river. Boudu takes advantage of the general panic, and lets himself go with the flow: he regains his freedom and decides to forego his new-found wealth for his previous carefree existence, leaving the rest of the company on their own. The young man swims away from his new fortune and middle-class life, by throwing it all away to once again become a loner tramp.

Produced by Michel Simon, who had already acted in the original comedy on stage at the Théatre des Mathurins, starting as early as 1925, *Boudu* was the fourth film directed by Renoir involving the actor. Renoir based his adaptation on the play's first couple of acts and built a new narrative inspired in particular by outdoor scenes. *Boudu* was a commercial failure that put an end to their many projects.[43] Nevertheless it remains one of the masterpieces of Renoir, where the character of the tramp, played by Michel Simon, takes on a mythological dimension. "I've never seen a tramp perfect like him!" exclaims Mr. Lestingois at the beginning of the film, when he observes Boudu through the telescope as a prototypical bourgeois gentleman. But in yet another twist, Boudu is revealed as anything but an opportunist vagabond. Three decades later in 1968, Renoir commented on this symbolic choice for the character of the tramp:

> I am not alone in suggesting this kind of solution. A large number of people today, or at least a large number of young people, are trying to reject the conventions of society and discover a way of life that is less comfortable but more free.[44]

Renoir's satire of the conventions of self-righteous bourgeoisie in 1932 was far ahead of its time, and has clearly not aged even to this day. *Boudu* deserves its reputation as a classic that was able to stand the test of time. The best proof is the two remakes of the film, one of which is an American film and the other French (American remake *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* in 1986 and *Boudu* in 2005). It is an atypical film, different from the contemporary productions of the early 1930s, when popular cinema primarily aimed at vaudeville. With this happy story of a free epicurean (Boudu) who causes disturbance to a couple of small self-satisfied bourgeois (Lestingois the book-seller and his wife), Renoir and Simon upset the cinema that is often cynical and conformist of their time. It is not surprising therefore that the film was a financial failure at the time (too innovative) and that it has not seen permanent success ever since. One can also appreciate the moderation of Renoir who refrains from caricaturing his characters. *Boudu*'s amoral libertarian fable was a work ahead of its time: an archetypal libertarian utopia and anti-bourgeois filmmaking emblematic of Renoir of the years of the sound era.

The comedy indirectly questioned the primacy of reason through an anarchical protagonist. Furthermore, the notion of reason must be assessed by experiencing knowledge of the facts as opposed to the knowledge of Lestingois and his preconceived ideas.

Lestingois: L'homme qui a craché dans la "Physiologie du marriage" d'Honoré de Balzac n'est plus rien pour moi.
Boudu: Ben, c'est qui cet homme là?
Lestingois: Et bien, va le demander à ma femme.[45]

The film can be best described not so much as a clash between order and anarchy but rather as the temptation of the first for the second. *Boudu* is often mistakenly considered today as an indictment against liberalism and its welfare system, suggesting that the poor (le "petit peuple" de Paris) need not be helped and that the solution will come from self-reliance as opposed to assistance—an irreverent celebration of the lightness of human spirit or a hymn to anarchism? Ironically, Boudu is first spared of a societal suicide and is eventually confronted by a second suicide embodied by marriage. His exit strategy is no less than to throw his company to the Seine.

In addition to its socially charged thematic, the film today represents a fine example of the early sound films and in particular the comedies that face the dilemma of literary adaptation and consequently reconcile to the delicate demands of reality and stage, from theater to cinema. The opening sequence of *Boudu* reveals the originality of the link between the narration and the reality present in the film. An adaptation of a stage comedy, the film is indeed characterized by its movement toward the real, as well as its strong attraction to the raw reality, urban and natural, but also social and political. The movement suggested by the montage of the first sequence clearly indicates a kind of transition from stage to reality. The film moves indeed from a film of many takes, theatrical and artificial, to a cinema that tends more toward the recording of reality, in its staging. Repeatedly, Renoir speaks about the inherent nature of his open ending. This characteristic, which was emblematic of the impressionist painters, transformed the film experience, not into a representation of a closed place, but into an open space, different for each spectator. As for the adaptation of *Boudu* Renoir adopted once more a painter's reflex: "After all, what interests us in an adaptation is not the possibility to recover the original work into the filmed work, but rather the reaction of the author of the film in front of the original work. (. . .) We do not admire a painting because of its fidelity to the model. What we expect from the model is to open the door to the artist's imagination." It is therefore with this notion of re-creation of the literary model that one can discover what constitutes the originality of Renoir.

The *mise en scène* is nearly improvisational in its tone and filled with spontaneity. The opening of *Boudu* is indeed based on the conventional representation of the mythology of comedy: Lestingois appears with the maid in the form of a nymph and a satyr between Pan and Bacchus. Renoir's starting point is theater, its conventions, and its artifices to go in search of the real, to track down its signs, to even sometimes scuttle the realistic illusion of cinema through the power of staging, either by using the soundtrack or the depth of field. Renoir's success is captured in his trademark deep, long takes. *Boudu* is less a film that records reality than a film that stages reality. Renoir captured the Paris of the prewar era in fine detail using deep focus and long shots on outdoor locations, which lent the film a unique documentary attribute.

Renoir makes a distinction in his film between the upper and lower classes of French society: the comedy combines some genuine comedic dynamic with a serious social message. Part of the difficulty for the filmmaker is to consider both sides of the case while never indicting any part of society. Interestingly enough Renoir aims at showing the social impasse that both classes find themselves in as Lestingois, though socially adept, declares: "Il ne faudrait jamais sauver les gens qui ne sont pas de la même classe sociale" (One should never save people who are not of the same social class), or when Anne Marie asks him why they have a piano if no one plays it, and Lestingois replies, "even so, we have a piano because we are respectable people." Social class is not the only landmark tackled in the film as gender roles also appear to be in question. Erudite women may not be as inclined as a favorable audience (as much as men are), probably due to the unlikely situation in which both the wife and the maid fall for the alleged charms of the scruffy, rude, and abusive Boudu. The film version stood very far from its original inspiration as Renoir diverted the moralizing element of the comedy into a rather satirical experience. Inside the fossilized universe of Lestingois, Boudu not only embodies the role of an intruder but more importantly a messenger from another world who indirectly and unconsciously reveals the impulses that agitate the so-called respectable society.

Argot, Javanais, and Parisian Slang

Another successful adaptation of the prolific boulevard comedy to the big screen was *Fric-Frac*. Adapted from a theatrical comedy written by Edouard Bourdet in 1936, the play was first performed at the théâtre de la Michodière by Victor Boucher, Arletty, and Michel Simon, and earned popular success. With Claude Autant-Lara as technical director and Maurice Lehmann as executive producer, the verbal comedy resulted from the odd juxtaposition of different speech patterns and in particular the linguistic abyss between two language registers. One reason *Fric-Frac* is part of the history of French

cinema is because of the special place it earned. For the author, at the beginning was the "word": by wanting to leave his theatrical imprint on cinema, his own personality originated hereafter, he built his work from the word, that is to say, omnipotence of the author over and around the voice (usually his own), bestowing on himself a status of authority. If this film is a masterpiece, it is because less than ten years after the advent of the talkies, it was an extraordinary experiment with the voice. It is in this movie that the popular culture of the Parisian voice *par excellence* is the most successful, perhaps because the film was an adaptation as opposed to a stage comedy.

The comedy is based on the intricate love story between Marcel (Fernandel), an overzealous assistant to a jeweler Mercandieu and his bossy daughter Renée (Hélène Robert) along with his coworker. However, one day, while attending a cycle race,[46] he meets the charming Loulou and her nonchalant friend Jo "les bras coupés" (Arletty and Michel Simon), both involved in the Parisian underworld activities. Renée dreams of marrying Marcel one day, but he is under the spell of Loulou. To make matters worse, Loulou is under the protection of gang boss Tintin who is currently serving a 6-month jail sentence. As both crooks realize that Marcel works in a jewelry atelier, they imagine doing a "fric-frac" taking advantage of Marcel's naivety. While

Figure 1.6 Arletty, Michel Simon, and Fernandel in *Fric-Frac* (1939) by Maurice Lehmann and Claude Autant-Lara

Marcel idealistically attempts to implement some ethics in their existence, the crooks manage to make him, unknowingly, a partner in crime in the burglary of his boss' jewels. When compared with other comedies that were produced in the 1930s, it is striking that the film is quite unique in its intense linguistic scenario. The background set, technique, and music score were reduced to the minimum, in order to accentuate the real focus of interest of the comedy: the colorful dialogues of the actors, especially the collision of the underworld and the hardworking law-abiding citizen, and slang versus standard French. What makes the film out of the ordinary is the clash of two antagonistic cultures: that of the Parisian underworld, the so-called *titis parisiens*, who live off thefts and use their secret language in public in order to protect their own, and the *petit bourgeois* world here represented by the bijoutier Mercandieu and his employee Marcel.

One of the substantial points in *Fric-Frac* was the immersion in the Parisian underworld and in particular its linguistic component thanks to the talent of Michel Duran and Fernand Trignol. The dialogue appeared simple but was, in fact, remarkably nuanced. By delicately preserving the language of the working class from the regional dialect to the inherent social codes and rituals embedded within it the adaptation created a richly textured portrait of a delightfully obscure world, a corner of France that the theater had previously ignored. The screenplay did not merely borrow the slang of the waterfront working class. Of course Michel Duran, like all great stylists, certainly savored the colorful, picturesque dialect, but took the language of Paris and shaped it in such a way that the screenplay developed its own comedic impact, often veering toward social satire. Slang of the prewar era corresponds today to a pseudo-ethnological documentary. Today's street slang as well as adopted word in standard French come from this period. The plausibility of the script by Michel Duran is open to question on several counts. While the intrigue of the film is rarely plausible, and so is the content of action, the real and only protagonist of the narrative, however, is the Parisian slang: argot and *javanais*. The distinction between what is said and how it is said appears to be particularly relevant to the substance of the pungent dialogues. It could be argued that an important element in the skill of adaptation to the screen lies in the ability of the screenwriter to detect the added clues to the identity of characters, which are encoded in the way they speak. Here Marcel, clearly disappointed to see Loulou accompanied by her partner in crime Jo, expresses his feeling in the most idiosyncratic manner light years away from Loulou's reality.

Marcel: J'eusse préféré que vous vinssiez seule.
Loulou: Quoi?
Marcel: J'aurais préféré que vous veniez seule.

Loulou: Là, j'ai pigé. Redites-le comme la première fois, pour voir: c'est marrant!
Marcel: J'eusse préféré que vous vinssiez seule.
Loulou: Ha ha . . . t'entends ça, Jo?
Marcel: Mais c'est français!
Loulou: À qui vous voulez faire avaler ça? Vous nous prenez pour des caves?

Interestingly enough, the use of argot constituted in these years a reaction against the standard modern French dialogues, which was predominantly spoken by the middle classes. The notion of Parisian argot and its variety in the way language was used suggested the existence of a standardized form of the language with which nonstandard forms could be compared and even confronted in the most spectacular manner (Marcel confesses he is from Provence as opposed to Loulou and Jo who are true Parisians). Although accent and pronunciation of Parisian slang formed important elements in the essence of the comic device they were particularly difficult to represent in the written form while variations in grammar and vocabulary are arguably conveyed by Édouard Bourdet for the adaptation of the play. French cinema entered a very fertile period in great part due to films whose scenario and dialogues were directly transferred from the Boulevard theater. This resulted in a sort of cinema where most of the intrigue was exaggerated and rarely plausible with elaborated speech opposed to street slang.

Like the use of regional dialects in Italian cinema, Parisian slang often referred to the nonstandard use of words in a cinematic language as it was associated with informal and colloquial spoken language. Many films of the decade—mainly due to the necessity of implementing strong dialogues with talkies—often originated in the subcultures of the capital, and were created at a time when people needed a private form of communication. Jo, for instance, is characterized by lexical innovation through the creation of new words throughout the film. Particular forms of slang, for example, the slang used by Loulou, were often used as a means of expressing identity between members of a group. Tempted by the linguistic game of learning and using new words, and thus a new language, Marcel gradually immerses himself in a world he does not belong to.

Marcel: J'ai du mal à comprendre ce qu'il dit. Il est Français?
Loulou: Pur sang de la Villette. Moi, je suis de Barbès.
Marcel: Alors tout ça c'est de l'argot.
Loulou: Vous avez mis le doigt dessus: l'oseille, c'est le fric. Se faire la paire, c'est se débiner. Casser les pieds, c'est emmouscailler. Bonnir un truc, c'est jacter.
Marcel: Jacter?

Loulou: Causer, quoi!
Marcel: Ah, c'est drôle. Vous me traduisez de l'argot que je ne comprends pas en argot que je comprends.

Initially, this exchange demonstrates how linguistic anachronism was a valid device for verbal humor. Comedy underlines the absence of a register of the French language, which could be labeled as neutral. Instead there is a predominance of either a popular register or a highly sophisticated and/or literary format in dialogues. For this, it is still necessary to explain what criteria were used to characterize verbal humor. According to Bergson, the deconstruction of slang has to go through "a distinction between the comic expressed and the comic created by language."[47] Indeed, sometimes words lend themselves laughter, whether in voluntary situations (puns) or involuntary (slip). In such cases, humor does originate from a particular situation, but actually from the words themselves. Any attempt to interchange slang words with standard French synonyms would lose the humor. *Fric-Frac* as the linguistic complexity of the spoken dialogue in this film encapsulates some of the difficulties involved in the translation of slang and dialect. The use of Parisian *argot* is integrally related to the social theme and characterization in the film and the different layers of connotation encoded in the use of verlan complicate the translation dilemma for a non-Parisian, let alone the French. Most dialogues between the Parisian underworld were also difficult for native speakers to understand and the use of impenetrable spoken language is also a means of communicating the distance between the main characters and mainstream society.

In this type of film where the use of nonstandard language is integrally related to both the characterization and the theme of the film, the use of slang and dialect includes certain connotations, which are not necessarily conveyed by the visual images on the screen. For instance, Arletty combines charm and "gouaille" and high verbal skills contrast with the ingenuity of Fernandel. As the intensity of the dialogues unfolds, actors express and maintain their identity through their use of language. It is therefore logical to suggest that characterization is one of the main functions of the dialogue in *Fric-Frac* and that a character's use of language or idiolect, which may include slang and/or dialect, can be of fundamental importance in helping to establish and assert the identity of a character as members of a particular socioeconomic group from a particular geographical region. The use of Parisian jargon also expresses a sense of solidarity in the face of unemployment and their alienation from the social establishment, whether pickpockets, gangsters, or prostitutes, always standing by their men. In this respect

Fric-Frac was not only a well-organized comedy of the last years of the prewar era, but also one of the very last testimonials of Parisian life, its popular mythology before the dark years of the Occupation with the argot spoken in the district of Montmartre and Belleville, its bars, restaurants, and a bicycle stroll in the bois de Boulogne, or the horse racing scenes shot at the Hippodrome de Longchamp.[48]

CHAPTER 2

The Comedies of Postwar France

Comedies, on a universal level, are often the end result of a series of visual gags, but not always necessarily. Comedies can also sometimes correspond to narratives that address real political and social issues. Laughter and cinema as a popular comic art can address national tragedies, reflecting social, economic, or political realities and directed by their strength of conviction, denounce the manipulation to an entire nation. These comedies, often misclassified by their occasional ambiguous appearance, can be best described as satirical comedies whose intent is to both exploit the comic vein and influence the evolution of mentalities with a social and political impact. Therefore satires and parodies can demonstrate a socioeconomic reality and ultimately contribute to the emancipation of consciences. The 1950s were the years when these social satires developed and some eventually became national phenomena. These films intended to create some degree of social impact, condemning individualism and plunging spectators into the heart of social and economic realities. While social satires were legion, other comedic genres still dominated the cinemtographic scene in France, a country now in search of new cinematic models. The postwar era, a period which started from the first hours of the *Libération* and ended with the events of May 1968, is often defined as the golden age of French comedies. The French film industry, which gradually regained a profuse cinematic productivity and innovation, saw the rise and stardom of many comedians, among whom three names flourished during these two decades: Fernandel, who had already secured national recognition before the war, Bourvil, and Louis de Funès. Finally this postwar era, as any artistic period in history, met several highs and lows such as, on the one hand, the delicate rapport between state censorship and films dealing with World War II and, on the other hand, the success of gangster parodies, as well as the innovative burlesque comedies of Jacques Tati both in France and abroad.

I. Social Satires in Postwar France

Social satires usually spring from basic human traits and can be viewed as one of the more demanding comedy genres, which, at best, can promote its share of meaningful reflection on the human condition. Social satires therefore correspond to one essential device that allows an individual, and in this respect a filmmaker, to observe and dissect social phenomena. Following World War II a large number of comedies began to focus on denouncing all that could directly or indirectly hinder freedom and undermine human dignity. Many historical contexts in the postwar era inspired several French filmmakers: the German Occupation, the collaboration it created, the *épuration* which took place immediately after the liberation, the so-called national reconciliation, the Indochina colonial war followed by the events in Algeria, and finally the advent of the Fifth Republic. One of them, *La traversée de Paris* (*Four Full Bags*, 1956) filmed by Claude Autant-Lara (starring Bourvil and Jean Gabin) narrated the woes that French civilians faced under the Occupation. This film was one of the first satirical comedies to provide a self-introspective review of the French facing their recent past, denouncing cowardice during the Occupation, and even pointing out the responsibility of the "poor" as they engaged with the mediocrities of the black market odyssey (e.g., Jean Gabin's notorious line: "salauds de pauvres!").

What is the point of social satire? Is censuring the ridiculous the ultimate purpose of social satire? Can comedy exist without satire? This does seem to be the case for many filmmakers of the postwar era. Sacha Guitry, with perhaps a more motivated agenda of his own, was one of the most prolific authors of that period to indulge in this pervasive subgenre of film comedies. With films like *La poison* (1951) and *La vie d'un honnête homme* (*The Virtuous Scoundrel*, 1953), Guitry not only explored some of the dark aspects of French society but was also able to reconnect with popular success in France. While Guitry had not forgotten his *déboires* with French judicial institutions, he made a point of using satire (as opposed to drama) to invite his fellow citizens to reflect on their inherent flaws. According to film scholar Harry Keyishian: "Whatever its tone or form, satire tries to invoke the authority of common sense, basing its criticism on universally valid standards of morality and behavior."[1] For Guitry, especially after the difficult years of the Occupation and liberation, wit and humor were more than ever mandatory ingredients in his theatrical plays and film comedies.

So is satire the most powerful of all comedy genres? Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, an essay on genres, views satire as a form of "militant irony with clear set of goals" when it comes to moral norms and it "assumes standards against which the grotesque and the absurd are measured."[2]

Because confusion may arise when the terms satire and irony are used together without a clear distinction, it is crucial to make a differentiation between satire and irony. While the former is more a subgenre of comedy, the latter is often perceived or used as an ingredient in comedies or drama. Irony is used as a paradox between outward appearance (and consequently its anticipated meaning) and reality. Guitry himself wrote: "L'ironie est un diapason, et ce diapason décèle ce qui sonne faux" (Irony is a diapason that detects what sounds off tune).[3] This discrepancy manifests itself in a variety of ways. An incongruity may arise between what a character says and what the actual meaning is, between what spectators expect will happen and what really occurs on the screen, or between what seems to be real and what really is real. It usually involves a discrepancy between a character's perception and what the reader or audience knows to be true. The film spectators are acquainted with a certain knowledge that the protagonist lacks, and it is precisely his/her insufficient awareness that motivates or explains the dissonant reaction. Etymologically speaking, the term irony originates from the ancient Greek *eiron*, giving the term *ironia* in Latin, meaning "to dissemble language" as in disparity between discourse and its own meaning such as present in many Aristophanes's tragedies.[4] For the purpose of comedy this meant the action of interrogating while pretending ignorance in order to mock a person or a situation by eventually asserting the contrary of what was intended originally, as stated by Guitry himself:

> In France we may not have a sense of humor, which is more Anglo-Saxon than Latin, but why could not we develop a sense of irony? [. . .] which, in my humble opinion, is lacking in French cinema.[5]

So on a cinematic level, is irony inherent of satire? While many comedy filmmakers refute the idea of including a minimum dose of moral message, most satirical comedies have ultimately a didactic goal in trying to offer spectators a better comprehension of an objectionable situation. On the other hand, irony has a tendency to underline the paradox of a particular comical situation without incorporating necessarily a didactic aim. Parody, then, is by nature ironic, since it presents a different significance based on an original foundation.

Censorship and Comedies

In the 1950s, due to the competition from US films, French studios had to gradually adapt to an ever-changing market. As paradoxical as it may appear, the end of World War II did not see the return to a more liberal policy in

artistic creation. During the immediate postwar years many filmmakers, accused of collaborating in, "demoralizing," or presenting France in a bad light, were blacklisted, although some ultimately received sanction. They were judged either by the courts of law or by the new *Centre National de la Cinématographie* (CNC) created on October 25, 1946, and subjected to temporary suspension. On October 17, 1944, filmmaker Henri-Georges Clouzot stood in front of the *Comité de Libération du Cinéma*, especially created to review officers of the film industry and their responsibilities during the years of the Occupation. In Clouzot's case the main charge was the political significance of his film *Le corbeau* (*The Raven*, 1943). On a much larger scale, one should argue that behind Clouzot and Chavance's hearings was a political agenda to sanction Alfred Greven's closest collaborators. On May 7, 1945, Clouzot was condemned to lifetime professional suspension. One year later, however, the sentence was reduced to two years even though *Le corbeau* was still considered an anti-French movie. The committee never expressed a clear verdict on the film, leaving the impression that the main accusations were leveled toward the director and his close working relationship with Greven.

Years later another obstacle awaited filmmakers—that of censorship's objective to maintain the recent effects of World War II at a distance from popular audiences. Alain Resnais's documentary *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1955) treated the difficult subject of the dehumanization of deportation and the horrors of concentration camps. The film was commissioned by the Institute of History of the Second World War to mark the tenth anniversary of the liberation of the camps. The French censorship commission intervened against the mass circulation of the documentary as it was still considered too "delicate," which in part showed the role of the French police as being potentially involved in the deportation of thousands. The film received the Prix Jean Vigo in 1956, but was precluded from participating in the Cannes Film Festival that year. To preserve the Franco-German friendship (1956 was the year the treaty of Rome was signed giving birth to the European Economic Community), and following the intervention of the German Embassy, *Nuit et brouillard* was removed from the official competition. The 1950s, in the context of the Cold War and of the fear of communism, facilitated the imposition of limitations of all sorts. Soviet films were subjected to police checks in *ciné clubs* and not allowed in the military theaters since they were judged "detrimental to the discipline and morale of the troops." With the constraints of the Cold War in the early 1950s came along those of the war in Algeria in the mid- and late 1950s. French cinema at the time could not express freely as filmmakers practiced self-censorship more recurrently in order to avoid postediting issues and potential problems for future funding. However, in the era of decolonization,

the so-called concept of war without a name remained a taboo subject for the French film industry. The arrival of de Gaulle to power in 1958 strengthened the enforcement of censorship, decrees, and laws defending "state security and morals." Censorship was very vigilant regarding movies involved with themes close to decolonization. What was undoubtedly one of the biggest issues of the time was Autant-Lara's *L'objecteur* (1958). The film was presented in 1961 at the Venice Film Festival under the title *Tu ne tueras point* (*Thou Shalt Not Kill*) and shortly after that, in 1962, it was eventually banned in France, Italy, and Germany (the final version was released in 1963 with no less than 13 sequences deleted). In the face of the escalating rate of censored films, as well as the events in Algeria, 121 artists and intellectuals signed a manifesto in 1960 justifying the refusal to take up arms against the Algerian people. The signatories were banned on the screens and prevented from presenting their films to commissions distributing financial aid. Censorship also affected other areas, far from political concerns. As French society evolved, it reflected a change, which also took place in the industry, this time with a significant novelty: the rise of filmmakers. Censorship affected violent films, politically charged comedies, but also erotic movies and those classified "X." This movement was due to the sexual emancipation of women and gender equality. Thus, in Roger Vadim's *Et Dieu créa la femme* (*And God Created Woman*, 1956) Brigitte Bardot appeared as one of the world's sex symbols. Nudity was then increasingly present in films, and no longer shocking popular audiences (1959 saw the implementation of the minimum age of 18 years to view restricted movies). A slow liberalization of cinema was taking shape thanks to the evolution of morals and concepts of censorship. In France, the liberalization of the film industry was tangible, especially after May 1968 and the flood of slogans such as "it is forbidden to forbid" became emblematic of an era."

So was comedy a genre spared by the scope of institutionalized censorship? While fewer comedies were sanctioned by the censure commission compared to dramas, some instances proved the difficulty of satires to fully function within the areas of republican institutions such as the army or law enforcement. As for comedies, one example which illustrated the censorship in action was Claude Autant-Lara's *L'auberge rouge* (*The Red Inn*, 1951) and its potentially *anticonformist* position, which displayed a scene in which Fernandel, in the role of a friar, denigrates the social status of police officers by stating "Qu'est-ce qu'un gendarme? . . . Rien . . . un grain de poussière" (What is a policeman? . . . Nothing . . . a grain of dust). This line was part of a rhetorical pattern as Fernandel, in the role of a monk, argues in favor of a young woman wanting to marry the son of a court judge as opposed to the one of a *gendarme*. The scene was cut after the censorship commission asked

to have it removed. The line was considered a derogatory comment where gendarmes were actually compared to "grains of dust," even though the story presented gendarmes from the 1830s. As a compromise the line resulted thus: "Qu'est-ce que c'est qu'un gendarme, dans l'immense gigantesque appareil de la société? Le gendarme, c'est fait pour arrêter les gens" (What is a police officer in the immensity of society? An officer's duty is to arrest people!)—a proposition formulated by the censorship commission and accepted by the producers. In addition to the official censorship commission from governmental agencies and the film industry, unofficial censorship was an extra obstacle for many filmmakers of the time, particularly in comedies. The *Centrale Catholique du Cinéma* classified the films as 4B, which corresponded to "à déconseiller," and of course such ratings, though unofficial, were still followed by millions of spectators, especially among the Catholic audiences and through its distribution in rural areas.

If it is true that in 1951 Sacha Guitry's *La poison* exposed a darker side of small-town chronicles in postwar France, balancing the optimism of Hollywood melodramas by focusing on squalid criminals and doomed atmospheres, the question of whether or not the film was fundamentally hostile toward the Fifth Republic institutions remains arguable. While French cinema strove to maintain a high public morale during the immediate postwar years, Guitry's films on the contrary tended to give spectators a peek into the alleys and backrooms of a world filled with corruption. Films like *La poison* undoubtedly made Guitry a leading authority of social satire in the postwar era. He said about the censorship of the Fifth Republic on *Le diable boiteux*:

> The censorship commission did not grant us the visa. Certain lines were underlined in blue pencil as likely to provoke manifestations! How could the Fourth Republic feel threatened by some lines that were originally Talleyrand's himself or the Emperor Napoleon, Louis XVIIIth or even the Duke of Orleans? [. . .] With the refusal of the censorship, I immediately wrote a play from the film and forgive me to speak about it, but "the manifestations" that occurred every night had no political sense and they went straight to my heart [. . .] The censorship visa was eventually granted—with no good grace, however.

If the 1930s were for Guitry years of critical acclaim, the 1940s, on the other hand, were a dark period made up of self-limitation and difficult choices. However, the postwar era turned out to be a synthesis of the two preceding decades and did not permit the artist to regain fully the extent of his legacy. Guitry always had conflicting relations with artistic critique. Having invented a style of his own, based on incisive and hard-hitting dialogues, Guitry often engaged in indirect retaliation throughout his work to mock the profession, which, according to him never seemed to understand his work. Regularly

accused of promoting the so-called filmed theater, Guitry, like Marcel Pagnol, had no choice but to impose his style, and build a world of his own. In addition, film critics disapproved of Guitry's choice to reveal artifacts in the filmmaking process (e.g., showing a camera). However, Guitry went a step further: as a filmmaker showing his style was a way to affix his signature and prevent anyone from copying it. Among the most virulent critiques, he was regularly accused of grandiosity and pretentiousness. When Guitry staged *Si Versailles m'était conté* (*Royal Affairs in Versailles*), a historical film showing Versailles from its beginnings to the present day, it was paralleled to a pseudo documentary on a visit to the Musée Grevin. Criticism attempted to demolish the film and forgot that Guitry was a director with all the responsibilities that entailed the job, but more importantly he was a screenwriter and actor. Few filmmakers of that time were able to assume all these charges. Orson Welles, who acted in *Si Versailles m'était conté* and *Napoléon*, regarded Guitry as his master as several similarities between the two artists were noticeable: both were men of the theater and radio, with the same sense of humor. Guitry was rehabilitated by the New Wave and by François Truffaut in particular, who saw in him a full-fledged author, like Charlie Chaplin, who was an inspirational model for the role of director–writer–actor.

Guitry's *La poison*, a sophisticated black comedy, shot in 1951, was reminiscent of a Hitchcockian perfect murder, with acerbic and vitriolic social commentary and partly Platoesque destruction of logic. But in hindsight, the film remains an unusually provocative satire whose subversive dimension gave a greater sense of Guitry's political breadth from his previous work: bitter cynicism conjugated with a propensity for subversion. In a small village called Rémonville, Paul Braconnier (Michel Simon), a provincial farmer, can no longer stand his wife Blandine (Germaine Reuver) despite a 30-year-old marriage. However, the situation is reciprocal as both of them are obsessed with the same idea: to find a way to kill each other without risk. Inspired by a radio broadcast, Braconnier disingenuously consults a famous Parisian defense attorney, fishing for tips on how best to get away with murder. Maître Aubanel (Jean Debucourt) specializes in the acquittal of murderers and has just succeeded in securing his one-hundredth acquittal. Once in his office, Braconnier purposely misleads the attorney by pretending that he just killed his wife. The lawyer, who loves to hear the gear of his own legal mind, inadvertently supplies his future client with plenty of pointers on leniency. While drafting a defense strategy, he then asks Paul a series of questions in order to eventually reconstruct the detailed circumstances of the tragedy. Without knowing it, the lawyer gives away all of the necessary information and instructions on how to commit the perfect murder. Now comforted by the knowledge of performing the perfect murder Braconnier feels comfortable to

murder his wife and hopefully avoid death penalty. Back home Braconnier puts into action his plan and during supper he stabs his wife, who dies on the spot. Now assisted by the best defense attorney of the country, Braconnier eventually secures an acquittal for his murder.

The immediate postwar years were painful for Sacha Guitry: accused of being a collaborationist, a charge which never materialized into trial, the artist spent 60 days in jail in late 1944 after being arrested without charge by a group of resistants. He was denounced in the press on unfounded rumors by writers such as Pierre Descaves and journalists from the Figaro, despite the fact that he had always opposed the idea that his plays be performed in Germany. When the judge could not gather any conclusive evidence, the charges were dropped due to a lack of proof. Battling for his rehabilitation, he obtained the dismissal in 1947; however, the event had a lasting impact on his popularity (he later said he would have preferred a trial). During three long years Guitry gathered evidence to clear his name and proved that he had only used his influence with the Germans of his acquaintance to save the lives of many Jews among whom were philosopher Henri Bergson and novelist Colette's Jewish husband. Seven years after this incident and what turned out to be a judiciary error, Guitry, who never forgave, decided to use his outwardly sparkling comedy in order to launch a scathing attack on both the legal system and the impressionable populace that believed whatever it was

Figure 2.1 Michel Simon in *La poison* (1951) by Sacha Guitry

told. While in Deauville, he received regular visits from his closest friends, particularly Raymond Hubert, a famous lawyer who celebrated yet another acquittal. In collaboration with writer Henri Jadoux, Guitry then developed the story of Paul Braconnier, a murderer who decided to put into place the conditions for his acquittal . . . even before he had committed the crime. In the opening generic "La poison," he reminds the audience that the decor of the cell was—created from his own memory—an inconspicuous way of preserving the bitterness and resentment that he retained after 60 days of incarceration.

As an amoral black comedy set in an undistinguished, impoverished French village, mocking the French legal system, conventional morality, and horrors of small-town life, Guitry seized the occasion to seek some kind of revenge on the legal system in France following his tribulations in 1944. The film indicted the hypocrisy of judges and the too many social conventions that ruled France at the time. Braconnier's newfound logic reached a point of no return that makes almost illegitimate the right to punish: "Vous essayez de faire de moi un assassin, mais ça ne prend pas. Car si je n'avais pas tué ma femme, c'est elle qui m'aurait supprimé, et me reprocher de l'avoir tuée c'est me reprocher de ne pas être mort."[6] Braconnier carries out his modus operandi: preach the false for the truth. Caustic and cynical, he denies charges by returning the accusations from the president of the court, arguing that if he had not killed his wife, he would not be there to face these accusations (as his wife put rat poison in his drink, which, fortunately for him, he did not drink). The film was also an unconventional play on morality. It made a distinction between an "assassin" (dangerous to society) and a mere "murderer" (driven to a desperate act and having no motive to ever kill again). When on trial, Braconnier gives a courtroom speech advocating his common-man philosophy denouncing a hypocritical judiciary system that sanctions without critical judgment and is based solely on factual evidence. The public did not find this twist funny like they did a decade earlier in the characterization of *Story of a Cheat*. It was made at a time when divorce was almost unthinkable among the poor, and the guillotine was standard punishment for murder. During the final murder trial, the Procureur de la République responding to the defense lawyer Aubanel declares visibly exasperated: "Justice is no theater!" Moments later Guitry proves him wrong with the triumphant return of Braconnier to Rémonville, the good prodigal son, incidentally a murderer. The irony that Guitry portrays by this simple image is absolutely derisive against the judicial system as Braconnnier must defend himself against allegations of jealousy and infidelity from his wife. He answers with shocking remarks (for the time) evoking the fundamental sexual differences between a man and a woman: "La question ne se pose jamais de savoir si une femme

peut ou ne peut pas; elle veut ou elle ne veut pas (ce qui est d'ailleurs secondaire). Tandis que l'homme lui, il faut qu'il puisse. … Il peut pas s'en tirer en fermant les yeux. Je sais pas si je me fais comprendre."[7] *La poison* was not only an anarchist pamphlet against human legal systems, in particular the integration of moral justice, it was also a rather biting satire on postwar France, and the small towns where everybody knew everybody. Guitry portrayed each and every one with odious cynicism: Braconnier, demonstrating that he has murdered his wife for a good cause; the lawyer, who welcomes his victories by releasing criminals; the villagers, who put business before human life and hail a murderer as a hero; a woman (Pauline Carton) reading the pharmacist's book to find other villagers' deseases; and a group of store owners asking the village priest to organize a staged miracle on a handicapped girl in order to attract business. Society to Guitry is a theater stage where each one becomes an actor, then eventually a spectator.

What makes *La poison* such an incisive comedy is the way it incites contradictory thoughts and feelings. While it is rather easy to like the character of Braconnier at the moment, it is considerably more difficult for postwar spectators to reconcile themselves with him in the epilogue. This feeling of internal conflict, the friction between like and self-doubt, ultimately poses the film's central question: What constitutes morally acceptable behavior in a world where injustice is universal? As for his main protagonist, Guitry still dwells on cynicism. Braconnier is a man with a mission who embodies all the character's incongruities effortlessly: his trim movements bear the weight of his ponderous gaze, he is diligently systematic in his criminal behavior, he dispatches a wised-up criminal lawyer with particular aplomb, and when he believes he is going to murder his spouse, he prepares the knife and saucer with culinary *nonchalance*. The point of Braconnier's conspicuously charming personality is not so much to make him appealing as it is to engage critically with that kind of appeal, to question the basis of an audience's attraction to a character and, even more importantly, to suggest the degree to which that audience will embrace immorality.

While it is true that Guitry has a track record of misogynist quotes, it is not against women but only against the character of the shrewish wife that the film is focusing attention on. Braconnier's wife is intentionally unattractive, ugly, dirty, and rude (according to her husband she drinks three liters of wine each day and washes her feet once a month). When asked to show moderation in her drinking she replies: "Je ne suis jamais assez saoûle pour oublier ta gueule!" (I am never drunk enough to forget your ugly face). Despite his misogynist stance, Guitry married five times, only to actresses. He was also known for his many affairs with artists, including the dancer of

the "Belle Epoque," Jane Avril, the actress Arletty, the singer Geori Boué, Simone Yvette Lebon, and so on. Guitry has often talked about his fondness for women, but in parallel gained a reputation as a misogynist as many of his humorous essays confirmed his particular inclination for women and his explicit infatuation for genre roles. Some of his famous quotes include reported dialogues such as: A woman says to Sacha Guitry: "Monsieur, if you were my husband, I'd pour poison into your drink!" Sacha Guitry answered: "Madame, if you were my wife, I would definitely drink it." Or "What makes women stay is the fear that men can console themselves immediately after their departure." Guitry also wrote humorous lines on marriage such as: "Marrying a woman twenty-five years younger includes two risks: either she may leave, or she may stay." Or "Marriage is like being served at the restaurant: one cannot help looking at the neighbor's plate." While others clearly went beyond the socially acceptable conventions: "It is a mistake to think women cannot keep a secret. They can, but it takes several of them." Or "A woman generally leaves a man for another man, whereas a man can very well leave a woman because of her." While it may be argued that Guitry's style was a language of excess, with a disproportionate taste for paradox, his knowledge of humanity displayed in his many comedies was, however, undisputable.

As always, many critics were not enthusiastic about Guitry's comedies. Criticisms mostly focused on his unusual generic credits, which showed Guitry often praising his actors.[8] Almost all movies made by Guitry opened in a similar way, with the "mastermind" making a double gesture in greeting his employees but also in the exhibition of the fundamental artificiality of cinema. In the opening of *La poison*, the praise for his lead actor Michel Simon remains memorable to this date: "Vous possédez cette vertu précieuse qui ne s'acquiert pas et qui n'est pas transmissible: le sens inné du théâtre, c'est à dire la faculté de faire partager aux autres des sentiments que vous n'éprouvez pas."[9] As Guitry himself reminds the audience, theatrical comedy was at the center of this art. Reality, its transformation, and its confrontation with staged theater, all lead to a key question: Was theater a place for reality and truth? Since theater could no longer keep its illusionist character, when competing with movies and the growing presence of television, which far exceed it with its own unparalleled resources, was it then to remain the exclusive domain for truthful narration and representation of reality? Tinged with realism, or macabre satire, Guitry found in *La poison* a brand new tone, constantly magnified by this incomparable spirit. Partly destabilized, the mainstream public of the 1950s judged the film with relative contempt at its release (on a critical level, André Bazin, for example, was obsessed with its "technical approximation"). It was not until years later that *La poison* began

to gradually gain its status as a classic. Despite the theatricality of its simple setup on a single set, Guitry's cinematic performance was a precise combination of décor, lighting, minimalist pantomime, camera placement, and music. The choice for casting Simon was not an obvious one. In recent years, the actor had not acted but in a few short films since Duvivier's *Panique* (*Panic*, 1946) and was undergoing some depression in his personal life. In early auditions, Guitry perceived the blatant lack of confidence in the comedian and asked what he could do to make him as comfortable as possible. Simon, in an interview with the Cahiers du cinéma, responds to Guitry's offer:

> I always have a difficult time in movie studios because I do not fully trust the operators. They often have contempt for artists, whether lead actors or extras. For them, the artist is part of the background. It is a very expensive tool that can be moved at will, and whose role does not really matter. I am unable to express a feeling twice in a row, because the second time I act and it becomes a lie and this situation is a nightmare for me. That is why I would like to request that all takes be shot only once, and never shot again.

Guitry then warned his team that only a single take was to be shot for each scene. The filming therefore took only 11 days. The scenes were carefully rehearsed and shot using three cameras simultaneously, giving *La poison* a distinctive freshness and spontaneity. Guitry was interested in television, which being at its very debut, innovated new shooting methods, very much in tune with his *désinvolte* style. During some scenes including long dialogues, he used a set of two different cameras, each filming one actor, and let the acting go on nonstop. It was precisely this écriture directe that was going to attract the future protagonists of the New Wave in favor of the *politique des auteurs* (in 2001 Jean Becker directed the film's remake, *Un crime au paradis*, with Jacques Villeret and Josiane Balasko).

II. Comedies and World War II

As paradoxical as it may appear, a few film historians have studied the particular interest comedy films developed toward the subject of World War II, examining in particular how humor and war participated in the reflection of French society, eventually developing along with other comedic media into a mirror of French society following the war itself. While comic films on war generally reflected patriotic fervor, they sometimes advanced a specific cause that was not always easy to express in light of the difficult years during the Occupation. As comedies evolved along with French society, many served as a form of protest against French military policy in times of

war and peace. Through the study of the so-called war comedies, one can explore the ways in which specific cultural and historical contexts (World War II in particular) shaped the manner in which postwar comedies were created, watched, and responded to. It is also important to examine how comedies can travel outside of their intended context in different ways. Context can shape the creation and consumption of popular comedies, making them transcend their role as a social comment and, depending on the commercial success, can eventually become a form of transformative social or political practice. As paradoxical as it may appear comedies on war can become a device to get better acquainted with a country at war and its people. While these comedies may not necessarily function as historical and ethnographic documents, they are in a way less constrained by demands of realism and accuracy, and therefore constitute a more nuanced source of knowledge than the more conventional materials that shape the common understanding of war.

French comedies reminded the postwar audience that man was not only a victim of war but also a potential vector of violence through the political and military influence. In addition they reminded them that humor and war often showed that the actual dimension of World War II superseded the tragic killings involved and broadened the discourse to the human experience and beyond. Bringing different social classes together, as well as several nations, through laughter was in itself a novelty. Some theories of humor linked the propensity of humans to laugh as a direct consequence of a perceived aggression; therefore, humor often served to "reduce tension" and functioned as a substitute to violence or sorrow. Following World War II a growing interest in humor and laughter in scholarly literature took shape, with significant contributions in the fields of psychology, medicine, linguistics, philosophy, and literary criticism. The emerging interest in humor can be interpreted as a sign of appreciation of the important role that this phenomenon played in human life, in particular in comedies and for the purpose of comedies on war. Through comedies, humor in postwar France did not deny the importance of violence and death during World War II; instead, using hyperbolic statements on the extraordinary amount of violence, they allowed audiences to gain a privileged insight into some of its functions. French people of the postwar era remembered World War II for the carnage it caused, the people it liberated, and the new nation it allowed to rebuild. Consequently rarely did they remember it for the comedy it may have inspired. However, a decade later they were invited to revisit their brutal war with audacious and honest comedies like *La traversée de Paris* (1956) or *La vache et le prisonnier* (*The Cow and I*, 1959).

The Ocupation's Quotidian Through Autant-Lara's Comic Lens

Emphasizing humor during wartime as a means to connect to a common experience of war was a way to desensitize audiences with the hardship and atrocities committed in France. The critical distance these comedies offered allowed spectators to resvisit war in a different light: less stress and more room for an objective reflection. The mere fact that comedy can occur in times of despair, as well as after the disaster itself, suggests that humor can be a strong potential human experience. To modern-day audiences, evoking a World War II through humor may be less sensitive, but to an audience which experienced the tragedy in question, the impressive honesty emanating from the comedies led them to directly address the suffering rather than hide behind some official versions of their recent history. While humor could not stop the massacre and the death toll, it could help French people to talk about these events less than a decade later. Laughter presented a mirror to French society that reflected an image very different from the one promoted by those in positions of power in the immediate postwar era. The humor in a film like *La traversée de Paris* (1956) constituted a strong allegory for envisioning the balance of power and dynamics of social relationships within French society. Here the gap between official statements and declarations and the reality of war was clearly "desanitazed." But as this new style of humor experienced popular success, emanating from the need to revisit this tragic period from both sides (good and bad), most comedy writers increased the audacity of their comedy. Those who kept pushing the limits in comedic devices argued that bold, comedic truth-telling was exactly what France needed at the time, in particular those stories that provided a device of self-introspection for French society. Were these films funny to all spectators? Probably not, as the factors that contributed depended on a large variety of individual differences. Depending, for example, on the individual's experience during the Occupation, their age, gender, race, and education, a postwar spectator could find a scene funny that no other spectator would perceive in a similar way.

So did the narratives of comedies contribute to the development of the images of armed conflicts that dominated the postwar cultural and sociopolitical debates in France? The connection between comedy and war may appear unlikely, as the modern spectator is used to regarding World War II as one of the lowest points in twentieth-century history. The dominance of death and suffering in other films, especially popular drama and action, was the main reason why the occurrences of humor in the context of World War II seemed incongruous at the time. But the questions filmmakers were able to raise were rather significant: Was there a place for humor with the topic of World War II? And if there was such an attribute, should there be any

boundaries to it? Was it permissible to laugh while so much death and destruction occurred? While these questions were not contested among popular audiences, film critics expressed different views, some of them arguing that these comedies could not provide lucid and insightful commentary on the legacy of war. However, there seemed to be a consensual agreement on the fact that the comedies of the 1950s were able to capture the tumultuous climate of profound social and political change: the changing role of the working class and the creation of a new social order in a free market economy.

Anxious to consolidate de Gaulle's and France's image internationally, French society led by its politicians and its government tried in general to turn the page of the dark hours of the collaboration period, focusing mainly on its resistance movement in London and the liberation of Paris. Many were those who firmly believed that Vichy was not France, but a parenthesis to be forgotten in order to regain a national consensus. René Clément's *La bataille du rail* (*The Battle of the Rails*, 1945), showing trains sabotaged by resistance fighters, or *Le père tranquille* (*Mr. Orchid*, 1946), where every single protagonist belongs to the French resistance, confirmed this national trend. Therefore one may argue that in the postwar history of French filmmaking, the four years of Nazi occupation was never a prolific subject indeed. Despite several attempts to approach this delicate theme such as Raymond Bernard's *Un ami viendra ce soir* (*A Friend Will Come Tonight*, 1946), Alexander Esway's *Le bataillon du ciel* (*They Are Not Angels*, 1947), and Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le silence de la mer* (1949), few were long feature films that mainly dealt with the less glorious aspect of French resistance. The myth that came along with the liberation of France indirectly revived by the possible return of General de Gaulle in the late 1950s—the country's recovered honor, mainly evoking the memory of the resistance throughout its period of occupation. However, *La traversée de Paris* was none of that. This scathing anecdote (an adaptation from a novel by Marcel Aymé[10]) was characteristic of its director Claude Autant-Lara, both in its acerbic disposition and passion for storytelling.[11] The film treated in harsh, often Manichean fashion the people of France caught in a world they never made, struggling in it as best they could at a time when France was under the yoke of the Nazis. In addition the film disclosed a too-often concealed side of the Occupation (an era that mostly extolled the value of an undivided resistance).

During the Nazi occupation of Paris, Marcel Martin (Bourvil), a timorous cab driver must give up his job due to gas shortage to enter a black market delivery business. He regularly goes to the basement of a butcher, Jambier (Louis de Funès), a wartime profiteer who cashes in on the misery of others, and plays the accordion while the butcher kills animals. When his partner is arrested, he must recruit another man, Grandgil (Gabin), who soon will

Figure 2.2 Jean Gabin and Bourvil in *La traversée de Paris* (*Four Full Bags*, 1956) by Claude Autant-Lara

prove resourceful but highly unpredictable. The two unlikely companions must smuggle four suitcases filled with contraband pork across Nazi-occupied Paris. But when Grandgil meets Jambier, he attempts to pressure him for more money by screaming his name aloud, an act that threatens to wake up the entire neighborhood. Jambier quickly agrees to double his fee, and both men go on their way. In their furtive journey they dodge police patrols, nighttime curfew, hungry stray dogs, and even air raids. While Martin tries to make it through their dangerous errand, the cynical Grandgil accidentally creates unexpected obstacles. During the journey, he lashes out at black marketeers and attacks a petit bourgeois bar owner, who is about to turn them over to the police. He even knocks down a policeman in the neighborhood where Martin lives. When fleeing a German patrol, they end up taking refuge in Grandgil's apartment. Martin is stunned to discover that his new partner is a renowned painter. They finally arrive at the delivery address but find the door closed. Grandgil then makes such a loud racket that a German patrol intervenes and takes them to their headquarters. In the Kommandantur, a German officer recognizes the painter Grandgil. He is about to release them when the news of the murder of a German colonel comes around. The German officer saves in extremis Grandgil while Martin is sent to Germany. Years later after the war, one finds Grandgil striding along a station platform while Martin, now a porter still lugging suitcases, trails behind until suddenly

Grandgil recognizes him: "Alors Martin, toujours les valises?" "Oui celles des autres" (Still with suitcases? Yes … other people's suitcases).

Unlike many French comedies that were often targets of film critics for carrying little social issues, emotional depth, and artistic elements, *La traversée de Paris* did quite the opposite. Barely ten years after the war was over, Autant-Lara turned this cynical war/noir film into a substantial success, both critically and popularly.[12] Nonconformist in a decade dominated by conventional bourgeoisie, the author portrayed France in its darkest aspect: here there were no resistant fighters, no heroes with great cause. The film was the discovery of an oft-concealed history (collaboration, black market, war profiteers) and a virulent criticism even of the victims of this time (informers, police state of Vichy, discrimination against Jews). While the heroes of the French resistance are in some ways noticeable by their nonexistence in the film, the German occupants are portrayed in a rather neutral light, for instance, the German soldier who gives a tip to a homeless musician playing the Marseillaise in the Parisian subway. They are depicted as harsh as any oppressor would be in wartime, but interestingly enough they are also depicted as capable of being in conflict regarding certain duties, as one officer (who happened to be a connoisseur of Grandgil's art) decides to rescue him. The film ran countercurrent to postwar patriotic and bourgeois conventions, and can be viewed as a subliminal indictment of the suspicion, with all its excesses, engendered by the Occupation. In his description of the society of the time one discovers that resistant fighters were unfortunately not the most numerous and the modest citizens were not always the bravest. In fact, this comedy was a caustic and scathing satire using as an example a population held at gunpoint by the German occupiers and proving to be, out of selfishness or cowardice, as dangerous as the enemy when misery and fear were at stake. Undoubtedly an "initiatic" journey, the story quickly became a picaresque adventure. Grandgil, whose artistic creation is temporarily suspended due to the war, entertains himself by provocation. This long night walk through the neighborhoods of Paris allows him to expose to Martin, in a concrete manner, the limitations of the human mind. The scene where Grandgil gets loose in the company of Martin and temporarily frees the latter from his own prejudices is a compelling example of what verbal and physical abuse can lead to. Martin is jostled by the outrageous extravagance of Grandgil. He gets caught up in the game of power instigated by the disillusioned painter who likes to destabilize his counterparts, whom he considers weak, via his scathing remarks. Gabin addresses the bar owners, a Victor Hugo Ténardier-like couple, who not only exploit Jews illegally, but also act as police informers, betraying anyone who comes in their way: "Cinquante ans chacun, cent ans pour le lot, cent ans de connerie! Mais qu'est-ce que

vous êtes venus foutre sur terre, nom de Dieu? Vous n'avez pas honte d'exister?"[13] This dark period is portrayed with meaningful expressionist touches. The criticism of its humanity is harsh but not completely devoid of humanism, for instance, the momentous exchange between both protagonists as Martin wonders why Grandgil should get involved in the black market:

> *Marcel*: Ben pourquoi t'as fait ça, quoi?
> *Grandgil*: Ah, pourquoi? Pour voir jusqu'où on peut aller en temps d'occupation. T'as vu comme on peut aller loin? T'as vu ce qu'on peut se permettre avec ces foireux-là? Aussi bien avec les riches comme Jambier qui se déculottent pour qu'on les dénonce pas qu'avec les pauvres—qui se déculottent eux aussi—alors eux on se demande bien pourquoi. C'est probablement que c'est la mode en ce moment de se déculotter.
> *Marcel*: Et toi, toi non, jamais?
> *Grandgil*: Non, pas encore.[14]

The dialogues were written by Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost, who underwent, like millions of fellow nationals, the horrors of the Occupation, the compromise for survival, and the lack of freedom of speech. They were indeed spectators of grandiose, yet sometimes loose, behavior in people's quest for survival. For ten years they pondered over all these elements and eventually restored this acidic and subversive pamphlet to a country which was trying to sanitize its recent history and to some extent trying to forget. Marcel Aymé (1902–1967) was a rather prolific playwright and novelist. With 17 novels, dozens of short stories, and a dozen plays, he became a true "parigot" as he often staged the Parisian popular classes. He provided a "social study" with a precise vocabulary for every human kind. His language was also one of the richest in contemporary literature, combining Parisian slang, corporate jargon, and regional dialect. Often attacked by critics, including for his most innocuous texts as *Les contes du chat perché*, his success mainly came from the public. In theater, his plea against the death penalty, *La tête des autres* (*Other People's Heads*, 1952), provoked strong reactions, but also enthusiasm as his comedy *Clérambard* (1950). He translated popular texts of American writers like Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and Tennessee Williams's *The Night of the Iguana*. But in cultivating his politically incorrect status as a writer, he stayed away from intellectual circles, which first classified him as a leftist writer, then a conservative, and ultimately a right-wing anarchist. Aymé's anarchism was first and foremost a strong sense of individualism; his misanthropy was human and away from political ideologies. It manifested defiance against groups more than a political creed. *Le vin de Paris* was a collection of short stories, published in 1947, which included eight stories

that shared a common theme in that they all took place in Paris during the German Occupation. The topics were related to the concerns of the time: the shortages, human cowardice, and the consequences of collaboration to name a few. As for Autant-Lara, he began his cinematic career in the film industry as a set designer with Marcel L'Herbier, and then went on to Hollywood (1930–1932) to complete French versions of minor films (including one with Buster Keaton). His career was considered one of the forces of French cinema of the postwar era, before the young critics of the future New Wave began to question the roles and legacy of the traditional "cinéma de qualité." Autant-Lara in homage to the 1930s German expressionism made a conscious choice to eliminate color (originally budgeted) and opted to shoot in black-and-white,[15]portraying the nighttime street sequences convincingly, realized by set designer Max Douy[16] in the famous Joinville film studios. They consequently created a real sense of imminent danger as the protagonists made their way across the sleepy capital, now resembling a vast urban desert filled with ambush.

The choice of the lead actors was a crucial moment for the production; they saw big and decided to enlist two heavyweights of French cinema for the two main roles.[17] Jean Gabin came as an evidence for Marcel Aymé, as the actor was in his comeback period (the preceding decade of the 1940s had indeed not been as intensive for the actor). The choice of Bourvil for the role of Martin was the subject of controversy raised by Marcel Aymé, who expressed a preference for an alternative.[18] Autant-Lara, who held on to his choice had to reduce his budget by more than 50% (thus cancelling the color option) to obtain total freedom for the casting. Aymé subsequently recognized his error about Bourvil and declared in a personal letter to Autant-Lara (November 8, 1956): "This is really the first time something good and high quality is done from my work. And in this particular case, it was not easy." The film, however, differed from the original work since Grandgil was actually killed by Martin, who embodied the honor of the proletariat against the cynicism of an idle bourgeoisie. However, all other episodes of the story did bear the mark of Aymé, his wry humor, his pessimism, and his cruel misanthropy. The supporting role was assigned to Louis de Funès,[19] an actor who was booming and soon to become the leading French comedian of the 1960s and 1970s.

The other main issue of course was the role of Gabin, the logical voice of the authors (and first of all Aymé) and the social point of view the film sought to convey. The choice of Gabin was unanticipated because of the popular image of the actor, usually embodying a proletarian hero or gangster boss (e.g., Jacques Becker's *Grisbi*), now acting as a bourgeois artist. The commitment of Gabin in this very risky adventure did not correspond to the needs

of "ordinary" black marketeers. The character of Grandgil decides to get involved just "for the fun" of it to see what it is like behind the scenes: the cruel gaze of the artist, spotless and blameless of cowardice, repugnant to his fellowmen. In fact this road movie on foot, despite the beautiful images of Paris at night, was primarily a story of initiation, a test of critical insight. Between the painter, spared from the horrors of the war, and the unemployed taxi driver, forced to practice in the black market, the shock is radical. The disillusioned artist, as a privileged middle-class man who views the Occupation as a minor convenience, does not hesitate to proclaim his misanthropy and hatred for mediocrity.

Unlike many films depicting World War II, the comedy dynamic is limited in its characters and is really about the individual, two of them in this case, and their capacity to carry on and even, at times, bumble into heroism. Above all, it is a comic but loving view of the bravery and cowardice of the common man. The story, mordantly satirical, takes normal people and puts them in a situation that is abnormal; the comedic device in *La traversée de Paris* derives from the fact that the characters do not know how to handle the situation. Both, despite their opposing social positions, eventually socialize through different tribulations. This journey through the streets of Paris, especially in its conclusion, places Grandgil in a more responsible role where he has to display wisdom to save the life of his comrade. Film critic François Truffaut who endorsed the film, despite his opposition to the so-called cinéma de qualité, warned viewers: "Don't laugh too loudly when you see *La traversée de Paris*, first of all so your neighbors can hear the dialogue—but even more because Martin and Grandgil could be you and me."[20] In conclusion, the film was a complex and detailed antiwar film. Although it showed very little violence on screen, there were many occasions to conjure up consequences of the conflict. The limits of political and social tolerance were tested, and the film did not shy away from confronting these prejudices of its own heroes—their humanity over anyone's individuality.

Situational Comedies: Henri Verneuil's War Tales

A few years after *La traversée de Paris*, another comedy, Henri Verneuil's *La vache et le prisonnier*, successfully approached the subject of war, this time concentrating on prisoners of war (POWs) as opposed to the years of Occupation. Verneuil cast a very wide net and drew out the most nuanced dimensions of story and character, providing scene after scene with profound and serious themes: the realities and implications of war, nationalism, and the relationship between soldiers and with their captors. Rather than being a handicap when it came to conveying the depth of a subject as serious as

World War II, Verneuil's sensibility and ultimately optimistic approach took over the film's tone. The emphasis was surely on human-sized concerns, starting long before the spectators were introduced to the POWs' reality. The daily routines of life in the different German prison camps and the way it brought a disparate group of men together dominated the narrative's central theme. Today film historians tend to remember Henri Verneuil for his talent as a storyteller, and it seems a fair assessment when considering his cinematography in French cinematic history. Born Achod Malakian in 1920 in Turkey from Armenian origins, Verneuil came to France in 1924 and grew up in Marseille. Following the Liberation, he developed an interest in cinema. With the assistance of comedian Fernandel, he began directing short films in the late 1940s, and a few years later, he made several of the most popular feature films of France such as *Le mouton à cinq pattes* (*The Sheep Has Five Legs*, 1954), also with Fernandel. A big admirer of American gangster films, he managed to create the distinct French variation of the genre in the gangster noirs like *Un singe en hiver* (*A Monkey in Winter*, 1962), *Mélodie en sous-sol* (*Any Number Can Win*, 1963), *Le clan des Siciliens* (*The Sicilian Clan*, 1969), and *I… comme Icare* (*I… as Icarus*, 1979).

This comedy, one of his very best, was released in the beginning of the New Wave, and of course the critics were hard on this story which was much deeper than it seemed at first. In artistic terms Verneuil was not a subtle filmmaker; he did not get carried away with questions of aesthetics, and remained at the end of the 1950s one of the last representatives of "French quality" so vehemently criticized by Truffaut in 1954 and ever later. Nevertheless, the film was a success at the box office that year.[21] The story is rather simple and linear. In 1943 Germany, Charles Bailly (Fernandel), a French POW, is assigned to work in the fields on a farm. After two years of captivity, he decides to escape in broad daylight, dressed in his POW uniform with the letters KG on his back (Kriegsgefangener = prisoner of war), holding a cow on a leash in one hand and a bucket of milk on the other. The idea is far from extravagant that no one may notice him as he slowly moves from one farm to another until he reaches France. Marguerite, the cow, provides him not only his passport to freedom but also the milk to sustain him on his arduous journey. The escape starts on the wrong foot after a neighbor spots him 20 miles away from the farm and offers to drive him back home. Out of courtesy, and to avoid suspicion, Charles has no other choice but to accept his offer. Back at his starting point Charles must escape a second time. Now he is on his way for good, and everything seems to work out well until he eventually gets caught for a few hours by a team of French prisoners working in a sawmill. He is able to escape at the last minute just in time before the prisoners are sent back to their barracks on a military truck. He later meets Russian

prisoners who agree to give him a civilian suit but on the condition they can have Marguerite for their meal. Charles moves on with his cow until one day, surrounded by German soldiers, he must hide under a bush in the rain while they set up their camp. At night while they are asleep, he decides to sneak into their truck carrying supplies of food. He crawls in after putting his life in danger and when he returns to his hiding place, what he thought were victuals are only drugs and equipment care. The next day, crossing the Danube River with a heavy cow on a bridge built by a German company does not pose a scarcity of problems. He is then arrested by two SS officers who fortunately turn out to be French escapees just like him. As the border approaches, Charles, with a heavy heart, must separate from Marguerite. Finally in France, he reaches the train station of Lunéville hiding under a train, but there two French policemen notice him and ask him for his documents. Charles decides to flee and unfortunately jumps into the wrong train that actually takes him back to Germany!

La vache et le prisonnier is a bittersweet comedy. Humor is omnipresent despite the discretion with which it is used. And this is where the strength of the film lies in keeping the comic scenario credible while disguising the seriousness of the situation. Despite a difficult subject that dealt with death threats from Nazi soldiers—far from a comical topic—French popular audiences were made to laugh without a sense of guilt. The scenario (and dialogues written by Henri Jeanson) was a typical road movie, and took momentum each time a character, during his quest, met a secondary character

Figure 2.3 Fernandel in *La vache et le prisonnier* (*The Cow and I*, 1959) by Henri Verneuil

who was bigger than life. While sawing tree trunks with a group of French POWs Charles is instructed how to work by his fellowmen: the lesser effort he puts in, the better. To this he replies mentioning the difference in work ethic between Germans and French: "Mais pour qui ils nous prennent ses gens là? C'est tout de même pas eux qui vont nous apprendre à rien foutre" (But who do they think they are? They are not going to teach us how to procrastinate). The film illustrated a rather unexpected odyssey for both man and animal. The contrast was stunning between this dimension of brotherhood between man and animals and the background of the film, World War II, where men behaved with hatred and violence toward other men. One of the key comedic sequences is the crossing of the military bridge. Marguerite wedges through the makeshift bridge while a German infantry column seeks to go through the same narrow path. Given the inability of the cow to turn around, the commander of the unit must get his men into a single column; Fernandel proudly parades with his cow on a leash, as though he were reviewing the column marching to German martial music. War is turned into derision as the unanticipated presence of a cow creates a mix of tense and tender moments. Laughter becomes bittersweet as the couple's separation takes place toward the end of the story. With the approach of the French border, Charles releases Marguerite. The separation is all the more poignant because he promises her that he will never eat veal again. The cow here is a complex symbol, one that too often could be reduced to the status of "image d'Epinal" symbolizing a France pressed to turn a dark page of its history. Yet the comedy displays through the cow a rather disturbing visual pattern. A mother figure and national symbol, the cow is also a trivial animal, imposing its heavy presence on the melancholy of the antihero fleeing the German eagle. In this odd dynamic, Verneuil was able to draw from the material of a sad film abundant humanity made up of fear and abandonment, where the cheerful face of Fernandel acted as a merry *façade* when compared to the actual horrors of war.

La vache et le prisonnier offered a nuanced vision of wartime, but was this film implicitly part of French heritage? It is true that while the story was not filled with suspense or a wild originality, it could be seen with relevance, as it was a true story, where the improbability was anything but implausible, and it also happened to be the recent history of France? This kind of comedy could not have been made either earlier, when the wounds were still too raw, or later, at a time when the horrors of the holocaust had gradually filled the cinematic landscape, eventually relegating to the background the other aspects of war. Coincidentally, 1959 was also the time when twin partnerships between French and German cities were legion, when millions of French students were learning German in schools as their first foreign

language, and when Western Germany was able to renew itself with prosperity. In 1959, two statesmen, Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer, were governing France and Germany in an atmosphere of cordiality and respect, and much of the French public who had lived the reality of war, 15 or 20 years earlier, was not to easily accept an overly sanitized version of history: the shame from the ignorance of what had happened was also the shame of having done nothing. It was far from *Army of Shadows*, which was another reality for a few lucid heroes who saw the true face of horror. The desire for the reconciliation of exhausted populations was obvious. In the history of nations, the duty of memory is often, if not always, more important than the obligation to forget, which for some politicians is the only way that society will not be fueled just by resentment.

With decades now passed since the film was first released, it is also easy to forget how strong its humanist message seemed at the time. A simple, although powerful World War II escape story was here transformed into a treatise on human behavior during the time of fanaticism of the Nazi era. The presence of war and impending violence was the most prominent, indelible reiteration of the theme permeating the film, from its beginning right up to its final frame: the disruption and damage caused by war to what Verneuil clearly sees as the real, nonviolent, and nonnationalistic dimension of human life. Verneuil directed a gentle, almost surreal comedy (in its depiction of behavior that seems so alien), which nevertheless made significant observations on the futility of war. The merest suggestion of the barriers which separate the free people from the prisoners was enough to illuminate how fragile the delineation between friend and foe was. The film was filled with superb visual strategies that harmonized, enriched, and enhanced its every dramatic episode. Verneuil did not just tell a story that took his protagonist to freedom as its only principle; he enacted those principles through the use of his medium, in the way in which he brought his protagonist and his circumstances to life with an elegant simplicity that, while never ostentatious, was very emotional for the viewers of the late 1950s, making fresh imprints no matter how familiar the French public had become with the horrors of war.

Once again, in a similar fashion as Autant-Lara's *La traversée de Paris*, the rules of engagement were different than in usual World War II dramas, as gentlemanly conduct was displayed at the heart of imprisonment. Although prisoners were taken, they were treated humanely and even invited to exchanges with their captors. Here, the idea of one man's humanity toward another man was more important than the political machinations of war. The war Verneuil showed his contemporary was not always threatening and potentially deadly, but it earned its credibility through the filmmaker's honest acknowledgments of life's bitter truths and complexities. This is, for example, the case when two

French prisoners on the run dressed as Nazi officers are arrested by the Germans under the helpless eyes of Fernandel. No mention of the probable impending death was mentioned in the following sequence, but spectators were left to their own logical contemplation of the harsh realities of war.

Verneuil's camerawork was rather elaborate, with many scenes carefully framed so that the camera went across them like a roving eye, making fresh discoveries as it traveled. While this may look slightly melodramatic by today's standards, at the time his style was breaking new ground and would go on to be emulated by many, in particular in the soon-to-become road movie genre. The vibrancy and vividness with which the film painted a picture of human relationships was noteworthy. The dialogues, highly color, especially coming out of Fernandel's mouth in a southern style, never got in the way of the film's emotional depth as demonstrated in this exchange between Fernandel and a fellow French prisoner:

French POW: Saint Léonard, ayez pitié de lui.
Charles: Saint Léonard? Qui c'est celui-là?
French POW: Tu ne sais pas que Saint Léonard c'est le patron des prisonniers?
Charles: S'il y avait un patron des prisonniers, il n'y aurait pas de prisonniers.[22]

Verneuil's sense of objectivity behind the camera breathes through every scene of the film, and the director's moral convictions about war's tragedy and futility emerge powerfully, without any moralizing, through nothing but his steadfast insistence on always prioritizing the human over history. Unlike many escape movies, such as Jean Renoir's *La grande illusion* (1997) or Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption* (1995), where protagonists on the road to freedom who have survived hostile territory finally reach an oasis of civilian life, *La vache* on the other hand showed quite the opposite. The final scene shows Charles returning to France and eventually realizing, much to his dismay, that home has become a hostile territory. The conclusion of the film can be viewed as ironic since far from being anti-German, the film was actually antiwar before all. It included a humanist cry for the cancelation of boundaries (political and social) and a warning that everything man-made is ultimately an illusion, be it a prison camp, the border between countries, or even the idea that war can settle anything.

War Comedy Makes History at the Box Office

Ten years after *La traversée de Paris*, another comedy on World War II made history in French cinema. Gérard Oury's *La grande vadrouille*[23] was not only a war comedy but also a commentary on a nation during the time of enemy

occupation. The narrative, though closer to an action film than a social satire, told popular audiences how class divisions can somehow run deeper even than those between nations, or how damaging and disruptive warlike dispute over boundaries and governmental power can be for an entire nation. The filmmaker presented a film that indulged the public of the 1960s. With all the narrative elegance and sheer cinematic exuberance he demonstrated his attachment to his fellow Frenchmen, whatever their flaws, weaknesses, or mistakes during the war. Oury kept all the action interpersonal in one way or another, so it was always about human relationships, needs, and values, even when it came to the film's momentously significant depiction of war (leaving war's brutalities off-screen). The subtle but cumulatively overwhelming force arising from *La grande vadrouille*'s deep compassion and magnificent cinematic prowess made the comedy in this film actually credible.

In 1942, during the German occupation of France, a British bomber returning from a raid gets lost following a navigation error due to a damaged map. The captain of the crew, Sir Reginald Brook (aka Big Moustache/Terry Thomas), asks for their location but the answer of Calais is proven wrong when the clouds part and the Eiffel Tower appears below. Shot down, the three aviators abandon the plane and jump with their parachutes, landing in different locations of the capital. The first one, Brook, lands in the Vincennes zoo; the second, Cunhingam, on the workshop of a painter, Augustin Bouvet (Bourvil);[24] and the last, MacIntosh, on the rooftop of the Opera Garnier and hides in the lodge of the conductor, Stanislas Lefort (Louis de Funès).[25] The rallying point of the three airmen is the grand mosque, and more specifically the Turkish baths. Augustin and Stanislas reluctantly agreed to meet there on their behalf to help the British soldiers reconnect. Once reunited the British aviators express their intentions: to reach the free zone in Southern France and then rejoin England. Compromised by the presence of the soldiers, Augustin and Stanislas are also forced to flee Paris and accompany the three Englishmen to Meursault, Burgundy. What follows is a treacherous journey through occupied France, a journey in which solidarity and courage of these unlikely heroes will be severely tested. Chased by the Germans, and especially a tyrannical Major Achbach, the fugitives experience many ups and downs during their trip to freedom.

Though *La grande vadrouille* will never belong to the category of antiwar films, the story was an interesting look at a dying social order, a dissection of the intractability of class differences. At the beginning, both main protagonists do not know each other and are opposites of each other: one is peaceful, the other angry; one is generous, the other selfish; one is a manual worker, the other an artist. Augustin is aware of the differences between them and the values associated with them: when Stanislas considers it normal that the best

bike goes to him but cannot say why, he thinks this is normal. Augustin does not endorse this statement of course, but his remark indicates that this view is widely represented in society: the manual worker being considered below intellectual professions on a social level places Stanislas in a position of superiority throughout the story. The comic actors' differing styles not only complement each other, they also express a social commentary upon class divisions in French society: the wealthy take advantage of the poor, who eventually will resign to their own fate. This comedic dynamic reoccurs throughout the film as Stanislas steals Augustin's shoes and later his bicycle before forcing him to carry him on his back over a mountain. This social inequality is, however, offset by another type of inequality, this time to Augustin's advantage: he is not only more resourceful than his companion, he even has better luck. When the four fugitives steal clothes to hide, Stanislas gets clothes and shoes unsuitable for walking. The balance of forces between the two companions is therefore determined by the double inequality, which finally makes them equal. Here Stanislas uses his position to remediate his temporary bad luck, this time by coercion:

> *Augustin*: Evidemment, c'est pas des chaussures pour la marche que vous avez là.
> *Stanislas*: Puisque vous me le proposez si gentiment, j'accepte!
> *Augustin*: Quoi? Que vous me prêtiez vos souliers. Vous chaussez du combien?
> *Stanislas*: Du comme vous (Ils échangent leurs chaussures). Ah, là, ça va mieux![26]

The film was far from representing accurately the realities of the Occupation. Indeed, the storyline downplays the reality of the Occupation: in no instance, the situation at the front is raised and no violence occurs throughout the film (except the trivial injury of English pilots). The Germans seem courteous and their reputation of being potential torturers is only vaguely mentioned in the story through Major Achbach. Aside from quotidian constraints such as the identity checks, curfews, and food rationing, the film does not evoke the raids and atrocities committed against local populations and even less the existence of death camps. In the wake of France's capitulation to the Germans and the collaboration period, which developed during the Occupation, a new image of the resistance needed to be established—an image of France to inspire popular audiences. Therefore the creation of an omnipresent image of French active participation in the resistance feats was the solution. This myth not only emphasized the importance of the French who did resist the German occupation, it also downplayed the extent of the collaboration and the presence of the Vichy regime. By representing most, if not all, French people as resistant fighters, and how some heroically succeeded in challenging the

Figure 2.4 Bourvil and Louis de Funès in *La grande vadrouille* (*Don't Look Now! We're Being Shot At,* 1966) by Gérard Oury

powerful German army, the comedy plot provided a good conscience to French popular audiences and indirectly allowed them to accept this humiliating conflict which divided an entire nation geographically and morally.

With a strong comic structure under control, the film's narrative was able to function and take advantage of some of the most trusted devices comedies traditionally relied on: stereotypes. Like many comedies, *La grande vadrouille* offered a series of clichés of the Germans, the English, but also the French. The Germans, as in most World War II films, were designated as the villains of the narrative, and were the object of the most ferocious caricatures. However, the film dodged any notion of cruelty to portray strong characters. Epitomized in the character of Major Achbach, the Germans were mostly vociferous and authoritarian. They seemed intrinsically guided by a discipline which provoked comedic behavioral reflexes (e.g., the compulsive "Heil Hitler!"). In addition French comedies of the time portrayed German soldiers as being far from efficient and incapable of personal initiative and easily deceived by appearances. As for the English, they are with the Americans oftentimes consecrated as the heroes of World War II, and this image has been for decades an archetype of the resistance cinematic fiction. Far from being passive, they seem clearly superior to the German soldiers, to the point of being able to take control of their own survival while never losing their composure and humor (English humor that is). Finally the French stereotype centers on the notorious difficulty to speak in a foreign language, inherent bad faith, and the Latin behavioral tendency to raise the tone of voice when problems occur. While the film was viewed as a comedy, it is important—decades later—to consider its scope not limited to comedy only, but as a comic epic,

mixing all genres from several movies into one. The film had the characteristic of mixing elements from various film genres and harmonizing them with skill: action movie, comedy, as well as road movie. In many ways, the film borrowed a variety of comic mechanisms. The genius was characterized by the presence of a clown, Stanislas, and the almost juvenile behavior of Augustin. It fed on chance encounters and ongoing misunderstandings that multiplied exchanges between the heroes and the Germans. What specified the comic acting of de Funès was the predominance of facial expressions, exclamations, exaggerations, and grand gestures accompanying speech (what French commonly refer to as "grand Guignol" style). The other winning combination was the ingredient of ambiguities and situational misunderstandings like the encounter in the Turkish baths when the two main protagonists, who do not know each other, have to connect via an English tune they discretely sing. The cartoon characters and dramatization reinforced the theatrical and comical impression. Burlesque in many ways (throwing pumpkins from a truck on German soldiers chasing them on a motocycle), it seemed more often the result of chance such as the moment where de Funès lands on Bourvil's shoulders. This ephemeral highlight of the film was not originally planned in the script and was a pure product of improvisation from both actors (originally de Funès was to climb the wall and then land on Bourvil falling to the ground). The result was so stunning that the image was used for the movie poster, and is now considered one of the greatest scenes from French comedy.

After almost five decades following the national release of the film, it is important to notice the ever-strong popularity of the *inoxydable* movie (as the French public likes to call it: stainless through time). The other significant success of the film can be measured in terms of television career. The first TV screening took place in 1976 and ever since then at least once a year. In 1988 the comedy film was watched by 46.7% of TV viewers, and in December 2009—a traditional period for family broadcasting—more than 9 million people watched it on channel TF1, making it the most popular film broadcast on TV for the year, as reported by the magazine *Telerama*.[27]Released in 1966, the film sold 17 million tickets as a record at the box office. It lost its rank only to James Cameron's *Titanic* in 1997 and then again to Dany Boon's *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* in 2008.[28]

III. Gangster Comedies as Popular Cinema

Crime cinema has always interested French comedy directors. All of them have been influenced by detective novels making a perfect harmony between cinema and crime literature. Through the past century, influences were

reciprocal and each medium benefitted from lucky finds, generating thousands of films of the genre. In the 1910s several French newspapers gave birth to serial films which found their master at Gaumont Studios in the person of Louis Feuillade with the series of *Fantômas*. Pathé, the other major competitor, produced *Rocambole* and *Les Mystères de New York*. This competition continued until the end of World War I and evolved toward a more sophisticated police genre as the years went by. What is interesting to note is that crime films took their sources not only from cinema and the press but from other artistic media as well. The low-key-lighting schemes commonly linked with the classic mode were executed in the tradition of chiaroscuro techniques using high contrasts of light developed by German Expressionism of the 1920s closely related to the developments in theater and photography. The opportunities offered by the Hollywood film industry and, later, the threat of growing Nazi power led to the emigration of many important film artists working in Germany who had been directly involved in the expressionist movement. Directors such as Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, and Michael Curtiz brought dramatic lighting techniques and a psychologically expressive approach mise-en-scène to Hollywood. Lang's *M* in 1931 was among the first major crime films of the sound era to join a *noirish* visual style with a noir-type plot. Popular movies in the genre such as *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932) demonstrated that there was an audience for crime dramas even with morally reprehensible protagonists. According to film historian Raymond Chirat the interest for crime film in France also boomed during the prewar years and the advent of the talkies:

> Movies took advantage of the public's fascination for the police scene, flirting with courthouses. The increasing vogue of Simenon's novels, advertized with ominous photographic covers, was relayed by film adaptations. The form often displayed the rain, the wet heat of the breweries, and the crowd of Montparnasse with a clear attraction for the romanticism of the underworld.[29]

As early as in 1932 Jean Renoir made *The Night at the Crossroad*, a Georges Simenon adaptation, memorable for its fog and rain-drenched nocturnal imagery. Jean Gabin was the perfect embodiment of the romantic fatalistic hero that dominated the French films of the period. In Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* (1937), Gabin played a tough gang leader in the Algerian casbah who became vulnerable through his love for a beautiful French tourist. Though it was primarily a gangster film, it had a lot in common with the films of "poetic realism" that the actor made with director Marcel Carné shortly before the outbreak of World War II. The inevitable, symbolic defeat which Gabin's character embodied in *Le jour se lève* (*Daybreak*, 1939) matched the mood of the time.

The films of "poetic realism" displayed a strong sense of composition and lighting, visual motives of night in the city, deep shadows and patterned lighting on faces, as well as squalid locations such as bars and clubs. Carné's *Le jour se lève* featured many of the genre's hallmarks: a cynical private eye as the protagonist (Gabin), a femme fatale (Arletty), multiple flashbacks with voice-over narration which was a novelty, dramatic chiaroscuro photography, and a fatalistic mood. But at the same time in 1939, Pierre Chenal made *Le dernier tournant*, adapted from James M. Cain's noir novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* several years before Hollywood produced its own version. So France's postwar interest in film noir was rediscovering its own cultural tradition that had been interrupted by World War II. Many film critics have long proclaimed that France's tradition of film noir and crime cinema was linked to American B-pictures. But the French had a noir tradition long before they had a word for it. After the war, French filmmakers took a good look at the American films of the 1940s, which they had not been allowed to see and recognized the link to the genre developed during the 1930s.

French crime novels gained considerable importance with the publications of Georges Simenon, who was the first to focus on suspense, the ambiance, as well as offering a psychological description of protagonists, going against the trend of American crime fiction. The triple dynamics was love/money/chance: love, with the cliché of a devouring passion, often triggered by the presence of a femme fatale; money, as the main vehicle for lust and power; and chance, often bringing together protagonists to the wrong place at the wrong moment. Later on, the American noir novel not only gave more visibility to crime fiction but, more importantly, it energized its content by shifting the focus on human nature. Unlike the novels of Agatha Christie, the noir literature was now able to bring the plot on the street level to confront it with real life, with the social, economic, and cultural context of the moment. This anchoring in reality pushed the police enigma on the back burner and focused instead on what was essential: man and the human adventure. It also exposed the most secret aspects of and most complicated human behavior with at times a devastating pessimism. While Raymond Chandler centered most of his novels and stories on the character of the private eye, Cain featured less heroic protagonists and focused more on psychological exposition than on crime solving; Cain's approach quickly became identified as the "noir fiction." Thematically, *films noirs* were exceptional for the relative frequency with which they centered on women of questionable virtue—a focus that had become rare in Hollywood films after the mid-1930s and the end of the pre-Code era. The reference movie in this vein was Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944); setting the mold was Barbara Stanwyck's femme fatale in a film which brought a new dimension of eroticism and baroque visual style.

French Film Noir Parody

In 1934, Maurice Tourneur, who had worked in the United States, directed *Justin de Marseille*, a film that compared favorably with many American films of the genre, and was one of the first to show the underworld *milieu*, which became the cliché of the polar in the 1950s. The film heralded the parodic series which was going to take place in the 1950s and 1960s with Georges Lautner's *Les tontons flingueurs* (*Monsieur Gangster*, 1963). But it was not until the adaptation of the first true French thrillers, mixing the *milieu*, humor, and slang, that the French film noir took shape. These novels were Albert Simonin's *Touchez pas au grisbi* and *Grisbi or not grisbi*, and Auguste Le Breton's *Du rififi chez les hommes*, *Le clan des Siciliens*, and *Razzia sur la schnouff*. Their corresponding adaptations for the big screen were Jacques Becker's *Touchez pas au grisbi* (1954) and Jules Dassin's *Du riffifi chez les hommes* (1955). Finally the 1960s moved farther from the genre, accentuating the already often parodic humor prompted by Simonin or Lebreton. It was precisely its refusal to glorify the underworld and its seedy gangsters that seduced filmmakers like Georges Lautner and Michel Audiard. Simonin adapted this comedy from his book *Grisby or Not Grisby*, with dialogues written by Audiard. Both Simonin and Audiard later worked on director Lautner's *Les Barbouzes* (*The Great Spy Chase*, 1964), featuring Francis Blanche, Lino Ventura, and

Figure 2.5 Lino Ventura, Bernard Blier, and Francis Blanche in *Les tontons flingueurs* (*Monsieur Gangster*, 1963) by Georges Lautner

Bernard Blier.[30] However the success of *Les tontons flingueurs* in 1963 was such a popular phenomenon that it is to this date considered a cult film.

Ex-gangster Fernand Naudin (Lino Ventura), now a manager of a tractor company in Montauban, receives a telegram from a childhood friend, Louis (aka the Mexican, played by Jacques Dumesnil), from Paris who has just spent the last 15 years in exile in Central America. His ordinary life is disrupted since he accepts his former colleague and friend's last will. At the point of death, Louis asks Fernand to watch over his daughter, Patricia (Sabine Sinjen), and to take over his business with all the necessary discretion toward his daughter. Fernand cannot refuse and becomes "Uncle Fernand." While taking his new role to heart, by monitoring Patricia's homework, and her relationships, the man is honest and eager to assume to perfection the mission that was entrusted to him. Soon the new situation escalates into a series of problems. The daughter, who only thinks about having fun in lavish home parties, has never been kept in the same school for more than six months; she is more than he can handle, and to make matters worse some of his new associates think of killing him. Fernand eventually loses his temper after he escapes several onslaughts from the rival mobsters and retaliates randomly against who he thinks are his new foes: the Volfoni criminal family (Bernard Blier and Jean Lefebvre). He eventually finds peace after marrying Patricia and Antoine.

In the 1960s, while the New Wave certainly made its contribution to the crime genre, one of the most dedicated artists of the period was director Henri Verneuil, who perfected the crime film and stylized it until it looked as dark as possible. In the film as well as in the novel, which the story was drawn from, the characters constantly spoke in slang, the only vernacular form of expression of most protagonists of French film noir. However, the dialogues were never inappropriate. One of the most famous scenes was set in a kitchen where the gangsters try without success to avoid making a nonsensical conversation while drinking counterfeit liquor:

> *Raoul Volfoni:* Faut reconnaître, c'est du brutal!
> *Paul Volfoni*: Vous avez raison c'est du curieux!
> *Fernand*: J'ai connu une Polonaise qu'en prenait au petit déjeuner . . . faut quand même admettre, c'est plutôt une boisson d'homme!

As a screenwriter, Audiard did not care much for this scene and proposed to delete it but Lautner kept it in the final run as he saw it as a tribute to the film noir *Key Largo*, when the protagonists were reminiscing half drunk over the good old days of the prohibition era. Besides the verve of Audiard's lines, one comical device of the film was in the register of language, a specific jargon

used by gangsters, to hide the truth from Patricia and her fiancé Antoine. To combine on the big screen a comedy based on slang with the atmosphere of a thriller, which was that of Simonin's novel, was a rather delicate task. Therefore, to make *Grisbi or not Grisbi* a convincing comedy, great liberties had to be taken from the original work (including by Simonin himself who was part of the adaptation team). While the main plot was maintained (the succession warfare, the fight against Volfoni), new characters had to be added like the lawyer Folace and the young Patricia and her fiancé Antoine. In the same vein, the confrontation between Fernand Naudin and Volfoni was rather bloody in Simonin's novel, but treated in comic terms in the film. Nevertheless, the spirit of the writing style, that is to say, a book written entirely in slang, was ultimately recognizable in the dialogues concocted by Audiard. Among other adaptations of Simonin's works, Gilles Grangier's *Le cave se rebiffe* (*The Counterfeiters of Paris*, 1961) was performed in the same spirit as *Les tontons flingueurs*.

Audiard was one of French cinema's very best screenwriters. Influenced by his literary background (Proust and Céline) as well as others famous writers (Jeanson and Prévert), his dialogues were one of the best examples of French slang in the 1960s. Audiard's career began in 1949, when André Hunebelle commissioned him for the scenario of a thriller, *Mission à Tangier* (*Mission to Tangier*), soon followed by two more films, three detective novels, and the first successful adaptation of novels to cinema (*Le passe-muraille* [*The Man Who Walked through Walls*] and *Les Trois Mousquetaires* [*The Three Musketeers*]). In 1955, he met Jean Gabin who proposed to him the scenario for *Gas-oil* and a collaboration of seven years began (*Mélodie en sous-sol*, *Archimède le clochard* [*The Magnificent Tramp*], *Les vieux de la vieille*, [*The Old Guard*], *Le Baron de l'écluse*, [*The Baron of the Locks*], *Un singe en hiver*, and *Le cave se rebiffe* among others). Now a popular writer, Audiard became the favorite of young filmmakers of the New Wave for whom he symbolized the "cinéma de papa." In 1978, he published a partly autobiographical novel *Night, Day and Every Other Night*. He finally obtained the recognition of his peers by winning the César for best screenplay in 1982 for Claude Miller's *Garde à vue* (*The Grilling*, 1981).

Les tontons flingueurs was about the small world of mobsters, represented by a group of mid-life men, the bourgeois of the time. In some ways Lautner was indirectly telling audiences that these men belonged to the past and that they were about to be confronted with the growing spirit of May 1968. Their past was made up of several events of the Fourth republic, that is, World War II (Fernand, former Resistant, agrees to work in harmony with Theo, a German former Nazi). This past was also the time of colonial wars, mentioned with nostalgia by Volfoni and Fernand himself, where the power of money was the

only rule, and which was also euphemistically called "grisbi." This was a world which the French youth of May 1968 wanted to eradicate along with social injustice, politico-industrial scandals, and the supremacy of white collars. The end of the film could be seen as a cynical and pessimistic view of the future of France. Fernand, despite his business of gambling, brothels, and illegal distillery, makes an alliance with the Vice-President of the International Monetary Fund, who also happens to be the father of Antoine (Patricia's fiancé). Perhaps the world of finance is after all similar to the one of the underworld, Lautner seemed to say. Were the early 1960s a time when filmmakers were able to freely criticize French society and its establishment without the fear of censorship? While many filmmakers dealt with some artistic restriction, the choice of laughter and derision, targeting social criticism, was apparently a safer solution with parodies.

The film was a success in theaters, without being a popular triumph since it attracted 3.3 million when released in 1963. Lautner was, however, severely criticized by film commentators who at the time were for the most part surfing in the New Wave spot, in particular by film critic Henry Chapier. Indeed, at the time the press saw a parody that was too grotesque for their taste, and entertaining at best. The reputation of the film has only grown over the years, and many of its lines have entered the collective memory such as Lino Ventura's "Les cons, ça ose tout. C'est même à ça qu'on les reconnaît." Since its release, the film has been broadcast 17 times on television and has sold 250,000 copies in its DVD release in 2002, making it a cult film par excellence. Fifty years later the film is still going strong. Two days after Lautner passed away on November 22, 2013, *Les tontons flingueurs* was screened on national television as a tribute to the filmmaker and scored an impressive 6.7 million viewers (25% of the public viewers).

Following the national success of *Les tontons flingueurs*, Oury teamed Bourvil and de Funès in what was going to be a major commercial and comedy success of the decade, *Le corniaud* (*The Sucker*, 1964). Antoine Maréchal (Bourvil) is on his way to Italy for a long-awaited summer vacation but during the first minutes of the trip, and while still in Paris, his modest Citroen 2CV gets crushed by a heavy Rolls Royce of an obnoxious businessman, Saroyan (de Funès). This scene showing the 2CV getting split vertically with Bourvil walking on the wreck still holding the steering wheel has become an iconic comedic moment in French film history. Nevertheless, Maréchal is offered as compensation a one-way plane ticket from Paris to Naples after agreeing to drive back Saroyan's convertible car to Bordeaux for his return. In reality, Saroyan is also working with mobsters, whose business is to smuggle drugs and diamonds into France hidden inside his luxury Cadillac (gold inside the bumpers, cocaine inside the fenders, and a gigantic diamond at the

centerpiece of the steering wheel). Saroyan himself, who does not trust anyone, follows the automobile at a distance with his accomplices, while Maréchal, too distracted enjoying Italy for the first time as well as flirting with young female hitchhikers, does not notice the comical gangster chase raging behind him. After countless incidents, Maréchal arrives in Bordeaux with the Cadillac, outsmarting the gangsters who had underestimated his knowledge of the so-called *milieu*. One of the spectacular scenes is illustrated by Bourvil suddenly speaking with the appropriate gangster slang (and accompanied by accordion music to create the "popular" atmosphere):

> Ecrase! T'as voulu me foutre dans le bain mais je sais nager. Alors tu veux me flinguer, moi? […] Me fais pas marrer, j'ai les lèvres gercées […] Vise un peu. Ça sonne creux […] Pousse ta viande, veux-tu. Regarde un peu la batterie, tu peux visiter: y'a pas de balle. Et le pare-choc, c'est pas de l'or. C'est de la bonne ferraille. […] Pauvre cave. T'as pas encore compris que cette bagnole-là c'est du bidon?[31]

The outrageously humorous element provides an extravagant misconception of characterization and while the spectators remain focused on the absurdity of the parody, the scene's message points out some arguments that are casually brought into light, and before they know it, the hidden facet of Bourvil is seamlessly integrated into the discussion. The quality of the dialogues using slang and regional accents, the liveliness of the scenario, the rate of recurrence of the gags, and the hilarious confrontations between the honest Maréchal and the astute manipulator Saroyan made this one of the most popular parodies with French audiences. In the elaboration of the tale of how Bourvil and de Funès became friends, Oury's film is an early example of a genre of French cinema which gathered momentum throughout the twentieth century: the comic double act. These patterns were formed by de Funès and Bourvil in Oury's *La grande vadrouille* (*Don't Look Now, We're Being Shot At*, 1966), De Funès and Yves Montand in *La folie des grandeurs* (*Delusions of Grandeur*, 1971), Gérard Depardieu and Pierre Richard in Francis Veber's *La chèvre* (*The Goat*, 1981), *Les Compères* (*The ComDads*, 1983), and *Les fugitifs* (*The Fugitives*, 1986), or Thierry Lhermitte and Jacques Villeret in *Le dîner de cons* (*The Dinner Game*, 1997) among others.

IV. From Regional to National Stardom: The Case of Fernandel

Movie star from the 1930s until the early 1970s, Fernandel (1903–1971), along with a small handful of comedians (e.g., Jean Gabin), consistently remained at the top of the charts, tirelessly entertaining several generations of

French audiences. Born Fernand Joseph Desiré Contandin in Marseille, he was, along with Raimu and Sacha Guitry, one of the most popular comic actors of French cinema of the prewar era. Fernandel was a comedian who first gained popularity in French vaudeville, operettas, and music hall revues. From the *comique troupier* to *provençal* folklore, his physique, graciously described as having "horselike features," made him famous. In 1928 Fernandel began to sing the first parts of the Odeon cinema programs in Marseille, which was part of the Paramount network; he moved to Paris and performed at the Bobino Theater. Given the success of this performance, he signed a contract the day after for a 19-week deal to animate the intermissions at the Pathé cinemas in Paris. This is how Henri Varna, director of the Casino de Paris and the Mogador Theater, discovered him and committed him for the Mayol Cabaret, a nude show. Film director Marc Allégret who attended the show one evening remained struck by Fernandel's physical aspect and personality and decided to offer him the role of a groom in Marc Allegret's *Le blanc et le noir* (*Black and White*) with Sacha Guitry, the author of the play, and Raimu the main actor. The year 1930 marked the beginning of Fernandel's film career. The following year Jean Renoir offered him a bigger role alongside Michel Simon in *On purge bébé* (*Baby's Laxative*), adapted from the play by Georges Feydeau. Marcel Pagnol contacted him in 1933 for the character of Saturnin in *Angèle* (*Angele*, 1934). After the huge success of his first dramatic role, Fernandel acted in three other films directed by Pagnol: *Harvest* (*Regain*, 1937), written by novelist Jean Giono, *Le Schpountz* (1937) and *La fille du puisatier* (*The Well-Digger's Daughter*, 1940) with Raimu, and *Nais* (1945), whose screenplay and dialogues were written by Pagnol, after Émile Zola's novel.

After Carlo Rim's *L'armoire volante* (*The Cupboard Was Bare*, 1948) and his comeback on the theater stage, Fernandel finally got to work in Sacha Guitry's *Tu m'as sauvé la vie* (1950) for which he received excellent reviews. He then acted in *Adhemar* (1951) and a series of national successes began. Fernandel was the lead actor in Pagnol's *Topaze* and Claude Autant-Lara's *L'auberge rouge* (*The Red Inn*, 1951) before the *Don Camillo* series initiated by Julien Duvivier. With an original scenario from Jean Aurenche and inspired from a true story which took place in the Ardèche region in 1830, *L'auberge rouge* depicts a group of travelers who must spend the night in a secluded mountain inn after their stagecoach breaks down amid a snowstorm. The innkeepers, Pierre (Carette) and Marie Martin (Françoise Rosay), welcome them. Soon after that a cheerful monk (Fernandel) on his way to a monastery arrives to spend the night there as well. Before dinner the owner's wife feels the need to confess her sins and in the secret of confession, avows the truth: for years, her husband and she drugged their clients and murdered

them in cold blood in order to steal their belongings before burying their bodies in the inn's backyard. First, the monk, appalled, tries to escape by saving his own life but to no avail as all the doors have been locked before he could regain consciousness and attempt to hint to the travelers the impending tragedy without betraying the secret of the confession. The story becomes even more *rocambolesque* as the monk tries to save the lives of the other hosts. Ultimately the gendarmes find the body of a recent victim inside a snowman in the garden and arrest the murderous couple.

Director Autant-Lara was accused of anticlericalism with the treatment of the Catholic institution and its depiction at a time when the question of the church's presence and its role in society was a heated discussion. After being questioned under the Vichy regime which subsidized Catholic schools, the 1946 Constitution reaffirmed the secular nature of the state as the legislative body continued the secularization of society, including education and family policy. The character of the monk was indeed ambiguous in its comedic function as the role of Fernandel overpowered the actual ecclesiastical character, overshadowing it unlike Carette who created comical lines just by the sinister aspect of his eloquence (Parisian "gouaille"). His comedic performance was all the more impressive as the nature of his character (callous and cynical murderer) had nothing humorous in theory. The critiques underlying the films hostility to religion may have noticed, and rightly so, a satirical comment at the very end of the story. While the depiction of the priest throughout the plot may be qualified as anticlerical, the end of the film, especially its very last take, may be construed as antireligious, even as denying the existence of God. However, the victorious and now rescued travelers ride away as the monk wishes them a safe journey under the benediction of the eternal. However, all his prayers prove to be in vain as God does not manifest clemency following the deadly accident when the stagecoach falls into the ravine as it goes over the bridge, accompanied by singer Yves Montant's "Que cette sanglante affaire vous serve de leçon, la vertu vous sera chère, Dieu pour vous sera bon." This spectacular ending gave the farce all its signification and here a double function: first, to create laughter through coarse and spectacular situations, and second, to narrate certain truths under a comedic tone, which otherwise would be unbearable.

The film's humor partly confused viewers and critics as it carried several comedic genres in the same film. For example, there was farce in such lines as the mechanical "ora pro nobis," satire against Catholic institutions (marriage and confession), and dark humor with the discovery of the dead body inside the snowman. *L'auberge rouge* was literally trashed by film critics except for Georges Sadoul (*Les lettres françaises*). In his article in "L'écran Français,"[32] Autant-lara explained the choice of the comedic genre to treat the story and

emphasized his desire to use the farce as the modus operandi, in particular a "tragic farce" in this case using both genres simultaneously. Ironically the scene of the confession is by far the most comic scene and coincidentally the most gruesome (a confession of one hundred murders). Satire of the institution: under intimidation the monk at the end of the confession absolves the woman of a hundred murders. The scene evokes such emotions mainly due to the omniscient position of the viewers who find it delectable to see the monk learning about the murders step by step, yet being unable to react since he is bound by the secret of the confessional institution. During the shooting of the film Fernandel realized that the narration had more anticlerical aspects than he had envisaged, and consequently felt they violated his personal convictions. The rest of the production was not facilitated by the vision Fernandel had of the film since, at this time, the actor was already famous and used to be the exclusive focus for comedies in which he participated. Finally, Fernandel pledged not to participate in a film casting him as an ecclesiastic. This was wishful thinking since after embodying the character of a monk the actor reenacted an ecclesiastical role, this time as an impetuous priest in the *Don Camillo* series of motion pictures for which he was perhaps best-loved for his portrayal of the irascible Italian village priest at war with the town's communist mayor. Drawn from the work of Giovannino Guareschi in which the priest and the communist mayor of a small Italian village are engaged in a power struggle, the films gave the actor a dimension of immortality (in France as well as in Italy). The series included six films: *The Little World of Don Camillo* (1951) and *The Return of Don Camillo* (1953) by Julien Duvivier, then, with other directors, *Great Brawl of Don Camillo* (1955), *Don Camillo Monseigneur* (1961), *Don Camillo in Russia* (1965), and finally *Don Camillo and the Protesters*, which began in 1970 but could not be completed because of the actor's declining health the following year.

In 1946, in a small Italian village in the Po Valley called Bassa, municipal elections have just ended with the victory of the Communists, led by Peppone. The impetuous Roman Catholic priest Don Camillo, spiritual leader of the town's Christian community, and notorious opponent, can hardly control his anger but finds solace and advice in his daily conversations with Jesus, when standing alone by the altar. Upon his appointment as mayor of the village, Peppone promises to build a *Maison du Peuple*, a highly cultural and recreational center accessible to all. Don Camillo, who is convinced that such a project is unaffordable, demands to know how Peppone can achieve his promise. At the end, despite their many disagreements, the two "enemies" combine their efforts as torrential rains suddenly flood the village and the evacuation creates the opportunity for Communists and Christians to join forces in the face of adversity.

Beyond its many comedic situations, the film offered valuable evidence of the actual tensions during the Cold War. The first was the social warfare with a rural bourgeoisie (the doctor, the landowners) on the one hand and the plebe with its workers and peasants on the other. To finance the construction of the new project Peppone simply uses money confiscated from the fascists during World War II; Don Camillo of course takes pleasure in conveniently blackmailing him since he knows the truth. The other center of interest for the comedic dynamics was the political warfare. On the side of Don Camillo, residents rallied to the Christian democracy, whereas on Peppone's side, supporters were mostly members of the Communist Party (PC). In real life the situation was indeed similar. After the war, Italians were strongly affected by the failure of their ruling classes to mobilize the reconstruction of their country. The Italian Communist Party, well established in the cities of Central and Northern Italy, enjoyed a privileged relationship with the USSR. The myth of Stalin (whose resemblance with Peppone is obvious and rather comical for that matter) was present in the consciousness of the workers as well as among the viewers of the time. The third aspect of the comedic dynamics was perhaps the most well known as it was responsible for the most memorable humorous quotes of the film: religion. The figure of Jesus on the large crucifix speaking throughout the film to Don Camillo expressing the many discrepancies between him and the priest created a rather unique comedic effect at the time. Christ expressed much more compassion for the people's struggle, as he eventually must reprimand the priest for his impetuosity. Constantly at odds with Jesus, this exchange best describes the level of antagonism Don Camillo must deal with:

Jésus: Tes mains sont faites pour bénir, non pour frapper.
Don Camillo: Les mains sont faites pour bénir . . . mais les pieds?[33]

In France, the Catholic press reacted moderately to the scenes of violence frequently caused by Don Camillo himself, but in Italy the subject was more sensitive. The dialogues were intentionally ambiguous as they represented Christ and the ecclesiastical hierarchy as potentially more lenient than Don Camillo, thus creating an ambivalence, which accentuated the comedic aspect of Don Camillo's plight. Having heard that the priest got involved in several fights, including an organized boxing match, and throwing a table to the crowd, the bishop cannot help saying to Don Camillo: "Un homme de Dieu doit prêcher l'amour et la douceur, et non pas faire le lutteur de foire en lançant des tables à la tête de son prochain!" (A man of God must preach love and harmony, and not be a fairground wrestler throwing tables at his fellowmen!) The film series painted a human picture of a community that, despite

excessive speeches, antagonisms, and threats, eventually goes beyond the level of primary reaction (boxing match or the soccer game where the local honor is at risk). On many occasions, the icon of the village seems to be an ideal place for a community and clearly stands as opposed to the city, which is a source of disorder. Interestingly enough Peppone and Don Camillo were two versions of the same man as their many similarities created a common denominator: a glorious past in the antifascist resistance, a shared aversion for social inequality, and a sense of honor and concern for the common good. In summary Peppone appears as a secular version of Don Camillo. Guareschi created many short stories and after his initial success came up with the idea of a single compilation of the 347 stories of this "small world" representation of what rural Italy was like after World War II. These Don Camillo short stories were published in the weekly magazine *Candido*, founded by Guareschi along with Giovanni Mosca. Julien Duvivier, as an experienced filmmaker, who had already authored *La bandera* (*Escape from Yesterday*, 1935), *La belle équipe* (*They Were Five*, 1936), and *Pépé le Moko* (1937), intentionally added a southern accent to most actors (especially the Italian actors who needed to be dubbed in French). Thus, for French audiences, the film could have very well taken place in Provence due to all of its characters' southern accents reminiscing films that were already part of the collective imagination: *Marius*, *Fanny*, and *Le Schpountz* among others (see chapter 1). Fortunately enough this choice of the producers proved successful as the depiction of a rural society was credible on both sides of the Alps.

Fernandel's acting career continued to be a popular success throughout the 1950s and 1960s with its ups and downs, from one of the worst comedies in French film history like Jacques Becker's *Ali Baba et les 40 voleurs* (*Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, 1954), which was all the more surprising as Becker was a renowned filmmaker who had just finished masterpieces such as *Casque d'Or* and *Grisbi*, to an important collaboration with Henri Verneuil (eight movies in total) such as *The Cow and I* in 1959. In 1963 Fernandel along with Jean Gabin founded a production company called Gafer (Ga-bin and Fer-nandel) and produced Gilles Grangier's *L'age ingrat* (*That Tender Age*, 1964), with both actors in the lead roles accompanied by his son Frank Fernandel and Marie Dubois. Fernandel starred in over 150 films and his popularity lasted over four eventful decades. He also appeared in Italian and American films and in 1956 starred in a Hollywood motion picture, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, as David Niven's coachman. His popular performance in that film led to him starring with Bob Hope and Anita Ekberg in the 1958 comedy, *Paris Holiday*. Fernandel performed one of his best roles with Bourvil, the other grand comic actor, in Grangier's *La cuisine au beurre* (*My Wife's Husband*, 1963). From the music hall to French comedies,

Fernandel was for decades one of the biggest stars of the French cinema box office as he attracted more than 300 million viewers in theaters over the course of four decades: in 1952 with Julien Duvivier's *The Little World of Don Camillo* (12,790,000 admissions), in 1953 with Julien Duvivier's *The Return of Don Camillo* (7,420,000 admissions), in 1959 with Henri Verneuil's *The Cow and the Prisoner* (8,840,000 admissions), and in 1963 with Gilles Grangier's *La cuisine au beurre* (6.39 million admissions).

V. Jacques Tati and Burlesque Humor

With Jean Renoir and Francois Truffaut, Jacques Tati is perhaps one of the very few French filmmakers best known outside France. So what do the French think of Tati and more importantly why is Tati not any more celebrated in his own country as he is, for instance, in the United States? Born Jacques Tatischeff in 1907, Tati's career began with mime shows and music hall performances. Then he started acting in short films like Jack Forrester's *Oscar, champion de tennis* (1932), Charles Barrois's *On demande une brute* (1934), and René Clément's *Soigne ton gauche* (1936). Early in his acting career Tati was inspired by the burlesque legacy left by Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and Laurel and Hardy and continued with the Marx Brothers

Figure 2.6 Jacques Tati in *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (*Mr. Hulot's Holiday*, 1953) by Jacques Tati

(the term *burlesque* has also evolved through the years and now can also refer to variety shows and cabaret entertainment). He then traded places and went behind the camera to make a short film *L'école des facteurs* (1947), which then launched his first long feature film *Jour de fête* (1949).

Tati was often catalogued as a conservative, so under the pretext of this rejection of progress that continued in the following films, it was a warm and benevolent gaze of others that questioned the obligation to move. *Jour de fête* (1949)[34] was Tati's first work and despite its popular success to this day, it is one that has the most aged. The film showed Ste Sévère, a rural village in France after World War II, under a joyful lens demonstrating an optimistic view contrasting it with some of its contemporary films in the immediate postwar years. The film was above all a remarkable document on a missing France and this was the first building block, both nostalgic and revolutionary, that would be part of Tati's filmography. The narration was a comedy, heavily based on burlesque, a modus operandi very important in the work of Tati. The character of the postman who was among the five professional actors only represented a link between the farmers and what symbolized evolution and progress through the institution of postal service.

Shot in 1947, completed in 1948, but released in France in 1949 due to the reluctance of French distributors, the film received the Best Screenplay Award at the Venice Film Festival in 1949 and the Grand Prize of the French cinema in 1950. Though primarily a burlesque comedy it included a sociological content and serves today as a testimony of the daily life of the 1940s in a small French town. Tati is François, the postman of this sleepy French village. Among the attractions at the carnival is a mobile cinema, which screens the postman, and discovers a documentary film depicting the United States postal service and praising in particular the efficient delivery system. Impressed by what he sees François takes up the call and decides to embark on a tour in American style on his beloved bicycle "Rapidité! Rapidité!" The principle of the different gags is built on imagination and its "reconstruction" by the viewer who is often held at a distance (a total absence of zooms and close-ups was Tati's trademark). Tati does not want to impose a guide on his own gaze but rather plays on the viewers' participation, compelling them to adapt their vision to the meaning, sometimes by passing through the eyes of others to understand (e.g., the scene of the crossing where François looks around for his bike and cannot find it but the spectators, however, as accomplices of the gag, know where it is). Tati expects an attentive audience who can observe and be solicited for subliminal meanings at any time. Protesting against the passivity of the individual, Tati also denies it to the viewers themselves with his own style and film grammar. The use of long shots often juggles several movements in the same space and it is for the viewer to

reconstruct a certain logic. This device is supported by the importance of "off screen" (both visual and audio) as explained by Tati himself in an interview with André Bazin:

> Now, in the past, only the spectators used to watch what was happening on the screen; the actors who surrounded the comic never realized, or showed they realized, that they were in the middle of a gag. But I always do the contrary: the actors are on the same level as the viewers and realize at the same time that some gentleman has, say, forgotten to close the door. In Laurel-and-Hardy movies, you could see people tossing custard pies, pots, and pans, yet the others on screen looked as though they were going about their business without noticing in the least that some fellow was walking around with a pot on his head.[35]

The film was shot simultaneously with two cameras, one in black and white and the other with an experimental color system, which failed for technical reasons. This production had to wait almost 50 years before it was screened the way Tati had designed it. Four years later, Tati created the character of Mr. Hulot, who never left his persona, as an *alter ego*. Tati's second and much awaited long feature film was released entitled *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (*Mr. Hulot's Holiday*, 1953). The story written by Tati, with the collaboration of Henri Marquet, takes place at a Brittany beach resort during summer when Mr. Hulot arrives in his small backfiring car, causing one catastrophe after another, and disrupting the tranquility of the clients. Through various anecdotes, the film presents a gallery of vacationers such as children playing around the hotel, the businessman stuck to the phone, the intellectual, the English lady knitting, and the pretty blonde accompanied by her aunt (at a time when vacation at the beach was just becoming a popular destination). As he opens the door of the beach hotel, it causes an air draft in the room which disrupts the calm and order. His movements cause many disasters, but Mr. Hulot does not seem to realize it. If he happens to be aware of one, such as when he leaves footprints on the hardwood floor, he does not admit it and rather tries to hide and runs away like a child caught red-handed. Hulot is a gallant man, however, polite and discreet, yet will never be integrated into the group of vacationers who oppose him in a world set with rituals, to which Monsieur Hulot cannot adapt. He is an atypical character, *décalé*, who unwittingly brings a breath of poetic comedy to the world that surrounds him. Through all these small, yet significant observations of everyday life, Tati reminds audiences that tenderness lies in the details. Among all the vacationers, Hulot seems to be the only one who truly enjoys the summer holiday. He is the most vivid and obviously the most endearing character in the film. *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot* was released in 1953, and received several awards including the Prix Louis-Delluc as well as the Prix de la critique

internationale, at the Cannes Festival that year. It remains one of the most popular French films of this period.

By now it was clear that Tati's winning trademark was to present through comedy the actual tension between Mr. Hulot's old-world sensibilities and the new era of mechanization and consumerism. In his difficult odyssey through the tribulations of modernity, the character of Hulot, Tati's alter ego, served as a meaningful modus operandi to reflect on the nature of humanity in relation to the consumerism in France. *Mon Oncle* (*My Uncle*, 1958), Tati's third opus, did not present Hulot in his customary role, as many producers and spectators expected, but as a new character still very much in tune with Mr. Hulot's behavioral patterns. Yet, *Mon oncle* was clearly a "picture with a message," built as it were from a series of loosely connected sequences that revolve around pressing social and economic issues. It was the first film in which Tati openly depicted the 1950s, and pushed political boundaries with many of the film's gags. The Arpels, a wealthy family of industrialists who manufacture plastic pipes, live in an ultramodern villa, with all the latest appliances inside and outside the house. Gérard, their nine-year-old son, loves his uncle, who sometimes makes a visit to his sister, and who seems to be the only one to know how to share his games. But according to Mr. Arpel, the uncle does not make a good example for his son and he seeks to move him away from Gérard. So he finds him a job in the factory where Hulot, unable to follow orders, creates chaos around him. To make matters worse, Ms. Arpel has the idea of marrying her brother to a nearby snobbish neighbor: this is again a failure. The Arpels do not give up and ask Hulot to conduct some commercial representations abroad. At the airport, where Mr. Arpel and Gérard come to say goodbye to Hulot, they discover that friendship can actually unite father and son. Released in 1958, *Mon oncle* was Tati's first film in color, which received significant distinctions in France and abroad, including the Oscar for Best Foreign Film.

The trilogy—Les *vacances de Monsieur Hulot*, *Mon oncle*, and *Play Time*—can be considered an opus of a visionary and hypersensitive filmmaker. *Mon oncle* is perhaps the most satirical comedy of Tati's entire legacy, as it satirizes the dehumanizing effect of industry and the rise of big business. Challenging the *metro–boulot–dodo* dogma, as well as the incursion of the world of machines into the old, gentler human world, the film suggests another option: according to Tati's logic, society has its counterpart with the triumph of nondialogue or semi-silent comedy over traditional verbal comedies. Here almost no *auteur* dialogues prevailed, no memorable close-ups, no suggestive frames, but instead an infinite series of medium or long shots where innumerable things occur as in real life. The character of Hulot seems to suffer from coming off the back of Tati's former films, and also for his tendency to

keep away any possible undeveloped romantic narrative, feeling more like a tonic to the dark, socially aware humor than a social satire in its own right. However, the narrative contains some of the most iconic movie moments and is a virtuoso display of Tati's comic timing, imagination, and social conscience.

Yet for all its comedy, *Mon oncle* was a film born of serious concerns. Tati, like many artists of his time, had a horror of automation, which he saw as symptomatic of a trend in modern life to turn people into machines, with mechanical lives and thoughts. The sweetness of life's images in *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot* was gradually getting lost, and *Mon oncle* was Tati's comic response. But the most important reason for the film's ongoing relevance was its contemporary themes and forward-looking perspective. The famous symbolic opening shot, with opening credits displaying footage of construction workers building brand new high rises, lost nothing of its impact. Indeed, contemporary viewers can easily make the connection between Tati's image and the world of enclosures and passageways so familiar to corporate America's cubicle dwellers—and to fans of Chaplin's *Modern Times* or *City Lights*. Critics and historians have long argued about the precise meaning of the film's message. The ideas in the narrative emerged from Tati's observations of the effects of the worldwide depression during the 1930s, and it was understandably received as a film with a specific social/political agenda, something that Tati had never done outright. The opening title suggests as much, with its references to "industry," "humanity," and "happiness," the three pillars of capitalism that were indeed lacking during the 1950s, and Tati visually confirmed the film's social bent with an opening shot that dissolves from similar-looking workers bustling out of a subway station to a herd of sheep. Yet, Tati was reluctant to label the film a "social satire" or anything that came close to it.

The comedy begins in a futuristic factory where workers are essentially enslaved to the nonstop movement of an assembly line followed immediately with a depiction of traditional city life that is colorful and human (farmers' market, outdoor café). The film's most famous segment occurs with Hulot getting drawn into the massive cogs of the machinery and eventually losing his mind from the repetitiveness of his work. Like most of Tati's previous features, the comedy modus operandi was given a sidekick of sorts: in this case, in an attempt to make plastic pipe, Hulot falls asleep on his monotonous job and consequently involuntarily creates a malfunction in the assembly line, eventually manufacturing sausages instead of regular plastic pipes. Natural sweetness and innocence underscores the film's poignant portrayal of fundamental human desire for personal freedom and interpersonal connection. There are human voices throughout the film, but aside from the scene

in which minimal exchanges are perceived, all the voices are heard through some kind of mediating technology. Like in *Jour de fête* and *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot*, Tati used a synchronized soundtrack for the film's carefully composed and arranged music while also employing strategic sound effects for comedic purposes, which range from the mechanical noises in the factory to the automated noise of modern home appliances. *Mon oncle* was one of Tati's masterpieces, a film of timeless human comedy and social observation that was both firmly rooted in its time and place, yet destined to be universal in its humor and emotional impact.

Revisiting France's Hasted Modernization: Satire or Parody?

Tati raised criticism, which caused him on the one hand to be a reactionary and on the other not to obey the classical conventions of burlesque. In the middle of the so-called *Les trente glorieuses* (the "Thirty Glorious Years"), which saw the economic reconstruction, full employment, and growth of industrial production, Tati criticized the consumer society that was booming (literally) and destroying the old way of life. But it was not modernism that the filmmaker was condemning, but rather the hasty use man was putting it to: the disappearance of any real human relationship, including from within the family. The reactions were obviously caused by the socioeconomic context. Tati was not the first to bash the potential of modernism. Chaplin's *Modern Times* and René Clair's *A nous la liberté* were his predecessors. But what Clair and Chaplin questioned was the working conditions, the exploitation of man by man which was made obvious with mechanization, automation, and assembly line production. It was also, and especially, the anonymity of the worker, the trivialization of the individual. As for Tati, he was attacking privacy, the improved individual comfort, and all these wonderful electronic machines to free women as so well advertised by manufacturers. What he targeted was in fact a more subtle economic exploitation which eventually was destroying human relationships and family values.

On a comedic level, Tati represented the revival of French burlesque in these years of postwar era. Burlesque comedy was originally a theatrical genre based on the sequence of visual gags. In 1910 it became a popular genre with stars like Max Linder, Harold Lloyd, and Buster Keaton. Interestingly enough the French themselves can claim to be the first to have created the genre with the Lumière brothers' short *L'arroseur arrosé* (*The Sprinkler Sprinkled*) as a burlesque film. Indeed silent film lent itself conveniently to this comedy genre as a clear emphasis was placed upon its visual content. Burlesque was then characterized by highly visual effects where close-ups and middle-range shots were assembled back to back causing laughter. Tati was not a big fan of

nonrealistic gags. One of them was during the initial scene of *Jour de fête* where after entering a café with his bicycle the postman can be seen on the second floor without having had sufficient time to get there (via a jump cut in postproduction). Tati did not make full use of these unrealistic gags since to him they somehow were infringed in a certain cinematic convention, preferring instead the most likely comic effects (verosimile). In the same film, semi-realistic gags were legion. Tati's bicycle can be found continuing its way to the end where eventually it will stop on its own while he runs desperately after it. In *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot*, however, the car (newly upgraded vehicle) accelerates on a slope without the two passengers realizing that there is no driver. Here following a more realistic convention the car does not follow the curve and exits the road to enter a private property. In *Jour de fête*, Tati hardly used this type of comic unrealistic process and all of its gags fit a realistic notion, that is to say, those which do not transgress the realistic representation of life, even if, of course, bending it at times to create a comical effect (the postman temporarily leading a cycling race).

Tati proposed a form of comedy that required constant vigilance of the viewers. *Hulot* was perhaps the most original of his films as it included an interactive comedy format. The gags, often awkward, were primarily due to chance, and lay in the eye of the viewers who were able to capture the mishaps: everything was a matter of attention from the viewers who had to be on the prowl for details. For the spectators laughter was found mainly from observations, as many gags appeared at the most unexpected places and times in shots that were often prolific in detail. His comedy was primarily visual (*gestuelle*), inheriting the tradition of pantomime. However, Hulot did not want to appear as a comic character, whose funtion was to trigger laughter among the tourists. On the other hand, his appearance was extravagant, as it seems disproportionately large and dressed in shorts. But it was his approach that made it original. Always on the verge of falling, his body, such as Chaplin's, defies the laws of gravity; it may wobble but never falls. He seems to hesitate, then falls on his feet, and this perpetual existential hesitation gives great freedom of action. He also choreographed a game of tennis by inventing an effective way to win over his opponent. A witness exclaims: "But this is not tennis!" Indeed, Hulot does not follow the canonical rules of tennis, but the advice of the old lady who sold him the racket. Unfortunately, following his rules isolates him from the others. Hulot is excluded from society and, worse, the possibility of finding love. Hulot is shifted into this world where conventions and rules often operate so antagonistically. The character of Mr. Hulot with its slim silhouette and pipe was one which Tati himself compared to Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton: the inadequacy of the character played by Tati to the society in which he lives. This inadequacy was less a desire to

distinguish himself than the desire to bring the viewer to reflect on all aspects of daily life. In the sterile world of *Mon oncle* where nothing is left to chance and humans have no place to breathe, Hulot is the incident intrusion which brings life, essential gaffe, unnecessary essentials, and also poetry. Rather than backward, Tati parodied contemporary society as a sociologist. However, Tati waived the privilege of professional comedians or expert mime to highlight the importance of supporting roles or secondary characters. Without hierarchy or prejudice, Tati's films permitted all characters that appeared on the screen the right to be funny. As paradoxical as it may appear, Tati's self-centered persona can also be viewed as an altruistic character who promoted the importance of the participation of extras in a comedy.

For instance, Madame Arpel's character corresponds literally to one of a slave of her own house. The couple's life is set as clockwork, which consists of the whereabouts of Mrs. Arpel so that she can bring the necessary accessories to her husband, indeed suggested by a cuckoo clock (while he is standing at the door ready to go to work, she brings him one by one his coffee, his cigarette box, his lighter, his hat and gloves, and finally his briefcase). Everything is in its place and Mrs. Arpel is there to watch. The living room is clean and is anything but a place of living: meals are served on the porch and the couple move outside including when watching television. "Comme vous le voyez, tout communique!" (Everything communicates!) says Mrs. Arpel. The metaphor of the pipe is to be understood as "empty." Mrs. Arpel repeats that slogan but it is clear that nobody knows really how to communicate. The loss of social ties and social relations, mined by the lust of materialism, propriety, and hierarchy prevents the father to do so as he does know how to communicate with his son. This is ironic indeed since noise of the household appliance prevents the couple from hearing and conversing with one another.

Tati's evolution as a film director is remarkable. While in *Jour de fête*, the postman François remains the main attraction of the narrative, *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot* just a few years later no longer placed the main character at the epicenter of the narrative but made him act more as a catalyst. Finally in *Mon oncle* the main character has evolved to higher grounds as he is a prime witness in his anonymous search for human relationship. Objects can also be considered real characters and part of Tati's urban mythology. They belong just as living creatures to the universe depicted. They can be simultaneously provocative weapons and the accomplices of Tati's blunders: they are the devices that often trigger the dynamic of comedy (a rather rare pattern that merits attention). Objects can do tricks, turn archetype to modern-day functionality, which eventually turns progress into derision. Objects serve as a middleground opposing two worlds: the simple world of Tati and the other one, a rather complicated world where Tati's heroes struggle to survive

without much success. The fish water jet does not function for the pleasure of the Arpel family, but rather to impress the visitors. It is not turned on for Hulot's visits, since as a close relative he already sees beyond the Arpel's appearances and it is turned off immediately after the visitors vacate the premises. Another full-fledged character of the film, the villa Arpel, with all its gadgets that are as futile as they are sophisticated, is not only a great source of gags but also the result of a careful observation, though certainly through a skeptical lens, of the architecture of the 1950s. On the opposite side of town (and society) the old apartment block of the popular periphery of the capital vibrates friendliness between neighbors who, unlike the Arpel family, are able to meet daily in the endless staircases. The location indeed compels each one of them to run into the other. Every day Hulot must go up and down, and pass by the neighbor's balcony where she dries his laundry, and goes around her apartment before accessing his front door.

Tati's treatment of sound was unique in several ways. First, the use of voices was close to what it was supposed to be in normal perception, that is to say, surrounded and imperfect. The comic acting, whether by François the postman or Monsieur Hulot, was almost silent in words but overly talkative through gestures. Dialogues were also treated in a very original manner: there was a difficulty in capturing them, short sentences were used typical of locals, jargon was used by fairground staff, and there was the chopped articulation of François himself. Equally important were the scenes where the dialogue was replaced by sounds or gestures through soundtrack. Sound was omnipresent in Tati's universe: the bicycle bell, the cries of animals (chickens, roosters, dogs, cows, etc.). In *Mon oncle*, needless to understand what the boss shouted over the intercom, he just shouted since he was a boss. All these noises helped shape the social imagery of the time. Produced entirely by post-synchronization, the soundtrack managed to execute the precision of each element, to give the impression of magma in which the characters struggled. François Truffaut once wrote about Tati's ambiance and qualified it as a "delusional, nightmarish and suffocating universe, which paralyzes laughter more than it generates it."[36] While indeed the treatment of sound can be perceived as overly excessive at times, it is a fair assumption to indicate that Tati is also very much of an innovator with regard to sampling sound and music, especially during the montage. In *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot* one of the principle effects is the alternating opposition between the ocean waves and the music with a gradual entry of instruments, as though establishing a mutual respect between the instruments and the sea (Tati was very selective about sound as he reportedly recorded different sounds of waves every day). The music score composed by Alain Romans "What time is it in Paris" became a haunting refrain in the film, which is purposely repeated incessantly just

like the flow of the waves. Sound in Tati's films far from functions as a background mechanism; it rather identifies for the attentive spectators fracture lines between Tati's humanity and its environment. This principle of opposition includes, for instance, Hulot's car backfiring among the vacationers' silent cars.

Like Charlie Chaplin, Tati preferred the visual and corporal expression than words themselves. Thus, he did not manipulate sound to create statements but to narrate through a new idiosyncratic sound. In fact one can go as far as to say that Tati, as a filmmaker, "observed" sound. One of his greatest innovations was to actually disrupt the raison d'être of talkies (already established two decades prior to his first film) in favor of the invention of another language. Tati modulated the sound, tampering with it, and finally invented his own sound universe. Sometimes sound was similar to a noise, a crash, or almost an inaudible mumble. The sound editing of Tati's films also had a quite paramount musical function and he often took advantage of it to give a new energy and rhythm as illustrated by the "choreographed" tennis match in *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot*. The uniqueness of Tati was, beyond the quantitative modesty of his filmography in the feature films he made between 1947 and 1973, the special status he gave his character/alter ego, Monsieur Hulot. This desire to keep the comic character in the background as opposed to the center stage remained his great invention as Hulot, a lightweight character in essence, clearly set the tone, and watched others and the world through his comical lens. The distinctiveness of Tati finally lies in the extreme consistency of a unitary and isolated work. All of his films renewed the same aesthetic project: in a world saturated with people and signs, the search for characters who give a comic sense as well as a humanist dimension.

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CHAPTER 3

Comedy in the Modern Era

The years following the May 1968 events were an auspicious time for comic movies in France. Most comedies of the 1960s rarely chronicled the *faits de société* (real-life chronicles); nor did they make faithful representations of everyday life. Once the wake of the 1968 era dissipated among general audiences, French comedy of the 1970s appeared as a much more transparent medium since its thematic content translated not only the state of mind of an eventful era but also, uniquely, the physical and emotional background of contemporary society. With an active production and distribution, the main themes of the time were novelties (1974 was the last year for cinematic censorship): racism (Gérard Oury's *Les aventures de Rabbi Jacob* [*The Mad Adventures of Rabbi Jacob*], 1973), female emancipation/gender roles (Coline Serreau's *Trois hommes et un couffin* [*Three Men and a Cradle*], 1985), marital life (Yves Robert's *Nous irons tous au paradis* and *Pardon Mon Affaire*, 1977), power (Francis Veber's *Le jouet* [*The Toy*], 1976), unemployment (Michel Blanc's *Marche à l'ombre*, 1984), homosexuality (Édouard Molinaro's *La cage aux folles*, 1978), police corruption (Claude Zidi's *Les Ripoux* [*My Best Partner*], 1984), and military service (Claude Zidi's *Les bidasses en folie* [*The Five Crazy Boys*], 1971). French comedies addressed the desire to "deconstruct" the daily realities of the French people and were characterized by an unprecedented liberalist wave bringing modernity, relevance, and truth in their representation of the spirit of the times.

I. The Spirit of the Times: The 1970s and 1980s

Immediately post the 1968 era, directors of comedies, often authors of their own work, wanted to change the established order, if not society per se, in a certain manner to represent contemporary Frenchness through their films. If comedy was still one of the favorite film genres among popular audiences,

it was not because of the volume of its production (a few dozen films per year over the 270 produced annually) but owing to its originality (no longer obeying the criteria for the so-called *cinéma du dimanche*). Despite the huge transformations generated more than ten years earlier by the directors of the New Wave, French comedy, which stood far away from the concerns of auteur cinema, did not alter its cinematic standards or the modes of visual consumption. Later in the 1980s many comedies were characterized by the shift from eclectic independent films to more profitable commercial films, announcing the beginning of the frenetic rise in production costs (dividing big productions with the remaining national productions), and the increasingly powerful position of French television over cinematic productions. Despite financial pressure, comedies in the 1980s were big on commercial success. In 1985 Coline Serreau's *Trois hommes et un couffin* was the largest success of the year, as well as the two decades combined, with over 10 million tickets sold.

After de Gaulle's death in 1970, his successor Georges Pompidou replaced the former president and continued his policies, despite the oil crisis of 1973 that was sparked by the Arab–Israeli conflict as well as an unprecedented economic setback. Then the unexpected death of Pompidou in 1974 corresponded to the end of a period commonly called the *Trente glorieuses* (the "Thriving Thirty"). The following decade began with one of the most substantial political changes in contemporary French history: the election of socialist François Mitterrand to the presidency in 1981. In the early 1970s, French comedy aspired to increasingly become a reflection of reality and society. A few years earlier, French cinema had gained total artistic freedom thanks to the legacy of the New Wave and its close link to and support of the events of May 1968. However, popular audiences started shunning art houses, which were not entertaining enough and too politicized in their eyes. In some ways the image of popular cinema and comedy in particular was no longer compatible with the visually overpowering nostalgia for the New Wave, present in other genres. Popular audiences began to shift and displayed a tendency to stay at home to consume a growing entertainment device: the television. The small screen indeed found its place among French households: in 1970, household equipment rate with the television reached 80% (whereas it was only 25% in 1960). A decade later, a substantial part of French cinematic production was conceived for the television. This was also the beginning of coproductions, which reached their peak in 1988, with 53% of French films being coproduced with television. This new deal not only affected the choice of subject matter, but also seriously limited the creativity of comedies as the television began to associate with film projects, thus ensuring their exclusive distribution. With the television, the development of video games, music videos, TV commercials, and special effects in the 1980s took

over audiovisual space, which led the public to seek a more visual cinema, fully committed to the growing "pop culture." Video technology and cable distribution progressively altered overall film consumption, supplying new markets and targeting at that time a limited but well-secured audience.[1] Consequently the first and direct victim of this expansion was, logically, cinema production, since both the television and film industries were by now, for better or worse, closely interconnected.

At the same time the 1970s and 1980s saw production costs increasing dramatically. This increase represented an attempt to keep up with the overwhelming pace of Hollywood's commercial policies. Hollywood was able to fill the cinematic landscape with images of sci-fi, fantasy movies, and big-budget adventure films like *Star Wars* (1977) and *Indiana Jones* (1981), which easily conquered the French box office along with their respective sequels. The screen blockbusters reigned, and restored the Hollywood domination on the film industry they had once enjoyed during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. At the end of the 1980s, the market share of American films in France well exceeded domestic productions. The reason for this crisis was primarily economic: French filmmakers had much fewer financial resources than their American counterparts. The average budget of a French film was approximately ten times lower than that of a trans-Atlantic film. Faced with this economic challenge, the government decided to intervene and generously subsidized a system in decline. The *avances sur recettes* (financial advances program) granted loans to film producers based on screenplays. This financial aid was usually earmarked for newcomers to the film industry, who without this particular type of loan did not have the funds to complete their first assignments. One of the changes in French cinema in the new decade was the emergence of different types of financial sources. No longer waiting for financial assistance from large film companies, many young directors financed feature films with the assistance of corporations, such as smaller film production companies, and eventually French television itself. Under the patronage of the French government and its emblematic Minister of Culture and Communication (1981–1986 and 1988–1992), Jack Lang, endeavors were oriented toward preserving the identity of French cinema (and indirectly the European film industry in general) and making it prosper financially, despite the overpowering volume of American films and the menace of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) on the international film industry.[2] As for the consequences on the French film industry, theaters began to slowly empty on a national scale and to meet the demands of the ever-changing international market, French comedy, although the main source of income, had to settle to a more popular format (Francis Veber's *La chèvre* [*The Goat*], 1980 and *Les compères*, 1983, with an action genre element

added to the comedy). This situation changed in the early 1990s and saw an actual rebirth of French cinema with the concept of "*exception culturelle*" and an innovative financial strategy making the French film industry one of the most vibrant cinemas of Europe.

In 1982, French cinema recorded more than 200 million spectators; attendance decreased by almost half at the end of the decade. According to the Centre National du Cinéma (CNC), the attendance (in millions) at French theaters in the 1980s recorded the following numbers: 179 (1980), 189 (1981), 202 (1982), 199 (1983), 191 (1984), 175 (1985), 168 (1986), 137 (1987), 125 (1988), and 121 (1989). With an average of 180 million tickets sold annually in the 1980s, going down to 123 million by 1994, French cinema, compared to other European national cinemas, was still one of the best represented in its national market, with 34% in 1993. Comedies like *Trois hommes et un couffin* and *Les aventures de Rabbi Jacob* played a major role in reinforcing the presence of national productions. In 1983, French films amounted to half of the national market, as opposed to a third for American films; three years later, in 1986, French audiences began for the first time to shift their preference to American films (over French films). The trend worsened during the next couple of years, and in 1989 French films represented less than 40% of the market, in comparison to 58% for American films. This tendency actually gave an edge to those productions whose language was already English, such as Jean-Jacques Annaud's *The Name of the Rose* (*Le nom de la rose*, 1987) and Luc Besson's *The Professional* (*Léon*, 1994).

As mentioned earlier the new comedy style of the 1970s wanted to be at a critical distance from conventional comedies and observe life events in their daily routine. In the midst of the new economic crisis, French spectators sought a source of entertainment in the film industry; this was the consequence of an ill-fated reaction toward a society in decline, the main escape to which was the creation of an artificial desire to comment on their daily reality and predicaments. Therefore comedy played an important role and so did comedians of the time. Pierre Richard was of great value to comedies as he represented a sure economic bet for producers (Francis Veber's *La chèvre* in 1980 with 7 million spectators reunited with Gérard Depardieu in a trilogy *Les compères* and *Les fugitifs* [*Fugitives*]). The star system came back and viewers never tired of seeing Louis de Funès on the small or big screen (especially following the loss of the other two giants of comedy, Bourvil in 1970 and Fernandel six months later in 1971). Ten years later, a crisis took place between the public and comedy. The reason for this crisis was in part related to the content of the films: French cinema was no longer able to seduce audiences. It suffered from an image of a cinema often perceived as too intellectual and not always entertaining. The contrast with American films was

obvious. For the past two decades, French comedy directors (almost all with a background as film authors) had imposed their choices and they were now paying the price. The public got tired. Dynamism was nevertheless stronger in comedies as a group of young actors from the *café-théâtre*, the troupe *Le splendid*, were already at their peak with *Le père Noël est une ordure*, a satire on society and the Christmas holidays. Thus appeared a new form of humor based on a more cynical analysis of society and its various social strata. The concept was successfully reused in Etienne Chatiliez's *La vie est un long fleuve tranquille* (*Life is a Long Quiet River*) in 1988.

In the post 1968 era, comedy became a militant and demanding genre of cinema. Many filmmakers, politically engaged, wanted to use comedy for purposes other than entertainment. The generation of the 1970s felt that it was a duty to inform the audience and make them think. They wanted to use the camera as a witness of society and denounce its shortcomings: Coline Serreau's *Trois hommes et un couffin* and the new gender role, Gérard Oury's *Rabbi Jacob* and the conflict between Jews and Arabs, and Bertrand Blier's *Tenue de soirée* (*Ménage*) regarding homosexuality. In addition, comedies were also written by people of theatrical background, which often resulted in a highly technical expertise in writing, such as Jean Poiret and Francis Veber with *La cage aux folles*, making their persuasive rendition of the problems of the time effective. With the decline of political films in the 1980s, contemporary social observation was less likely to be found in the new comedies. Unlike the artistic trend of the preceding decade, French cinema of the 1980s never quite seemed to reflect the spirit of its time. The reason for this was a combination of the growing economic and humanitarian crises and difficulties, the outbreak of AIDS, the eruption of a new type of urban poverty, and in part the never-ending increase of unemployment.

In France, the 1970s began with an assertive trend to promote women in French society and in particular provide an easier access to many professions and by the 1980s a new cultural trend was clearly defined as cultural pluralism.[3] One of the best examples of the new consensus occurred in 1980, as writer Marguerite Yourcenar became the first woman to enter the highly select society of the *Académie Française*. So this historical period was indeed a prolific time for women, particularly in the film industry. Women could now advance in a profession that had been heavily influenced and controlled by men. More women directors were represented at film festivals, and more women filmmakers graduated from French film schools, which indirectly was a determining trait for feminist cinema like Coline Serreau (for the 1970s Chantal Akerman, Nina Companeez, Nelly Kaplan, Liliane de Kermadec, Jeanne Moreau, Ariane Mnouchkine, Anne-Marie Miéville, and Anna Karanina; and for the 1980s Claire Denis, Patricia Mazuy, Danièle Dubroux,

Josiane Balasko, Claire Devers, Juliet Berto, Catherine Breillat, and Suzanne Schiffman). Moreover, the liberalization of customs in the 1970s affected the film industry as some of the last taboos were lifted. A film like Bertrand Blier's *Les valseuses* (*Going Places*, 1974), a rather symptomatic film of the 1970s, which revealed Gérard Depardieu overturning all social conventions through unprecedented sex scenes on screen. French spectators were also witnessing the emergence of a new genre with erotic movies, best known from Just Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* in 1973 or *Histoire d'O* (*The Story of O*) in 1975, a series of soft-core erotic movies starring Sylvia Kristel and Corinne Cléry, respectively. The new genre promoted love scenes with a raw visual aspect. It was no longer just naked bodies, hot kisses, or sexual allusions, but more explicit scenes where the sexual act was partly shown. This was also the time for avant-garde *provocateurs* who experienced a mix with this new genre and the auteur cinema (Nagisa Oshima's *In The Realm of the Senses* in 1976, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò or the 120 days of Sodom* in 1975). The female body was revealed in its entirety at the same time that miniskirts were left behind, while topless scenes became almost commonplace. This movement began in May 1968 and accelerated in the 1970s. Male–female relationships were openly discussed on the radio without the usual limitations of political correctness. With the steep increase in divorce rates and the rise of cohabitations between young couples, the old *bourgeois* and patriarchal order was partly challenged, especially following the hippie movement appearing on the West Coast of the United States in the late 1960s, and quickly spreading throughout Europe. Slogans such as "Make Love not War" and "Peace and Love" were displayed on the walls of universities all around the world. Not only were libertarian communities experiencing sexual promiscuity and free love, but in the mid-1970s, sexual liberalization became commonplace thanks to the formation of a militant claim and underground democratization. This was the end of the so-called puritanism as sexual practices became freer and more diverse, on and off screen. The model of the virgin at marriage, with a single life partner, quickly disappeared during this decade and soon female sexuality—as a theme—flourished in many films, particularly in comedies such as Patrick Schulmann's *Et la tendresse? bordel!* (1979). The work of sexual liberation began in the 1960s and found its completion in the 1970s through this "liberalization of pornography." From the point of view of moral and sexual standards, the 1980s were marked by two trends: on the one hand, a more permissive consumption of images and, on the other, a criminalization of certain practices (rape, incest, pedophilia, and sexual harassment). The permissiveness grew in the 1980s, as the former protesters of May 1968 had become parents by the turn of the new decade and, as expected, gave their children more freedom with regard to sexuality. Similarly, in comedy

(as well as in film in general, in television, and in advertising) sex scenes became commonplace, and permissiveness and tolerance toward homosexuality became widespread.

The majority of the great comedy directors of the preceding decade such as Gérard Oury were still present but adapted to the new decade using new comedians. Success allowed them to discover new faces such as Pierre Richard, Gérard Depardieu, Coluche, Jean Yanne, the actors of Le splendid, Daniel Auteuil, Jacques Villeret, and Aldo Maccione. With their first film alone, the authors covered a large part of the spectrum of comedy, be it social, generational, tinged with tragedy, or pure comedy. Many comedies produced in the 1970s included veteran comedian Louis de Funès with *Le gendarme de Saint-Tropez* (*The Troops of St. Tropez*), *La folie des grandeurs* (*Delusions of Grandeur*), *and Les aventures de Rabbi Jacob*, Pierre Richard (*Le grand blond avec une chaussure noire*, *Le distrait, Le jouet*), and the team of *Le Splendid* in the late 1970s with their three popular hits: *Les bronzés* (*French Fried Vacation*), *Les bronzés font du ski*, and *Le père Noël est une ordure*.[4]

II. The Early Development of Race-Based Satires

Film scholars have paid little attention to the development of comedy in the post 1968 era as a medium to address racial discourse in contemporary French society. Satirical comedies, however, displayed an atypical ability to foster newfound reflection on the taboo of subjects such as religion and race. French mainstream audiences had a chance to reshape their very own perceptions and prejudices in a society that was on its way to major social changes with a strong aspiration from the government to make it a color-blind society. Yet what is of interest in this section on race-based humor is the increasingly unique and understudied role that comedy played in France, when explicit racist language was far from restricted in public. The crucial role that race played in the 1970s was that it was a rather complex and new argument that very few filmmakers ventured to deal with. For them the main challenge was to promote race-based humor as a rhetorical form in order to successfully deride racism.

It may be argued that such a perspective was a preview of what was to become a reality in the postracial France of the 1980s. So indeed, comedies like Gérard Oury's *Les aventures de Rabbi Jacob* (1973) were a bit ahead of their time. Nevertheless, satirical movies began to be granted a *carte blanche* by the film industry, which allowed them to approach social taboos while being protected from potential backlash. But what allowed satires to bypass the formalities of political correctness of the time? During the 1970s and until the early 1980s, French popular audiences had always incorporated

denial in their behavior using a combination of stereotypical imagery and detachment, which allowed them to engage in overt racial commentary while denying racism or racist intent (e.g., the national success of stand-up comedian Pierre Péchin with his infamous sketch of "La cigalle et la fourmi," a revisited version of a Fable de la Fontaine narrated with a pronounced Maghrebin accent, was symptomatic of the era). The strategies that stand-up comedians or film comedies used in the 1970s suggested another possible answer to the question of how racism was communicated in France, which indirectly disavowed the racist discourse. There were numerous instances of comic situations whereby spectators were surprised by the absurd, unexpected predicaments the characters found themselves in, and laughed because they were able to feel the sense of detachment. Since in everyday France racism was expressed in public and overtly so, its offensiveness was deflected in the media as a safety net (i.e, strategies that make the performers seem nonracist, even as they uttered racist jokes). The role of upcoming comedies was to denounce these archaic practices and therefore outsmart the established policy. This time the original idea that Gérard Oury had was to use a racist character as the main protagonist in order to communicate a nonracist message. In other words, mixing humor with bigotry was to release tension and eventually reduce racial prejudice.

The Algerian postwar period, which also corresponded to a phase of an important immigration from North Africa, was marked in France by an ethnic and racial humor of accommodation—a period that lasted until the early 1980s (corresponding with the rise of the first antiracist association like *Touche pas à mon pote* in 1984). Therefore it took many years for the concept of comedy to evolve and it was only after that period that ethnic and racial minorities, Beurs and blacks in particular, openly engaged in antiracist comedies (or reverse discourse) as a form of resistance to this cultural and social oppression. So performing racial stereotypes on the screen, at the time of *Rabbi Jacob*, required a successful execution typically reflecting the position of average protagonists. In the 1970s only French comedians were performing racist comedies (Pierre Péchin using the Arabs to imitate their accent via a parody device and Michel Leeb, a few years later, using the Africans). A decade later race talk changed dramatically. In the 1980s performing racial stereotypes in public in a growing color-blind society became possible for new Beur comedians like Smain, but also more intricate for the French themselves. The strong rise and success of racial humor (as opposed to racist humor) in the now color-blind era (e.g., Jamel Comedy Club) suggests that a drastic change took place from prior decades where constraints limited French authors from engaging in racial humor freely in public. Indeed if racist discourse was still publically tolerated or conveniently ignored in the

1970s, it bestowed prolific subjects for potential comedies. Then the 1980s provided a reverse situation: the subject of racism was no longer ignored and its content no longer became tolerated; thus more constraints were put on comedies to tackle this increasingly delicate topic. Claude Zidi's *Banzai*, a film produced in 1983, was one of the first comedies to ridicule racism as had rarely been the case during the 1970s. In the concorde flight that takes Coluche to New York City for the first time, a French businessman (Jean-Marie Proslier) confesses his vision of the big city life in America with its endemic criminality and insecurity: "Pour moi New york, c'est un grand noir avec un grand couteau qui vous court après: c'est tout" (New York City for me is a big black man with a large knife chasing you down: that's all).

Today, despite the huge success of the new generations of French comedians specialized in race-based humor, it would be a mistake to limit "communitarian humor" to its defensive aspect: as a tool in the fight against injustice, as a distraction from the hardship of immigration, as escapism against racism—in short, to make it the voice of the unheard. Communitarian humor represents much more as it also means to be a liberating testimony of optimism. With the 1980s, social tensions in many large French cities caused a redefinition of the political strategy on immigration and integration, which involved newly created associations, such as *S.O.S. Racisme*, and revealed a newfound solidarity and cohesion of the French people. Stand-up comedian and film actor Coluche, followed by a myriad of French artists and celebrities, created an unprecedented association, *Les Restos du Coeur*, which to date symbolizes the awareness triggered by the spreading of a new kind of poverty in major French urban areas known as *nouveaux pauvres*.

The Mad Adventures of Race in French Comedy

In 1973 Gérard Oury tackled this sensitive issue through a comedy called *Les aventures de Rabbi Jacob* starring Louis de Funès, whose goal was to achieve the near-impossible task of being politically incorrect without being offensive to the Jewish, Arab, and French communities. The film totaled 7.3 million admissions and received a nomination for the Golden Globe in 1973. After 30 years in America the revered Rabbi Jacob (Marcel Dalio[5]) and his secretary Rabbi Samuel are flying to Paris to visit their relatives, the Schmoll family. At the same time in France, Victor Pivert (Louis de Funès), a rich and narrow-minded businessman, is preparing to marry his daughter Antoinette (Miou-Miou) to the son of an army general. But one Friday night, on his way back home, his car ends up in a lake by accident. As night falls, his driver Salomon (Henri Guybet) can no longer help him as it is the beginning of the Shabbat.[6] Pivert fires him immediately and begins walking alone on a deserted Normandy

road to seek help until he finds an isolated factory. There unexpectedly he interrupts what appears to be an execution scene between armed men of an Arab country and a kidnapped political dissident, Mohammed Larbi Slimane (Claude Giraud). Pivert involuntarily helps Slimane to flee, leaving two thugs dead. Since Slimane's plans are to return to his country to lead the revolution, both men go to Orly Airport chased by a number of people: Arab terrorists who want to kill Slimane, Germaine (Suzy Delair), Pivert's wife who thinks her husband is with another woman, and police inspector Andréani (Claude Piéplu), convinced that Pivert is a dangerous killer. At the same time the real Rabbi Jacob and Rabbi Samuel land from New York. While in the restroom, Pivert and Slimane steal the clothes of the two rabbis, to escape their pursuers. As they successfully escape the terrorists and the police, they are recognized and welcomed by the Schmoll family in the lobby of the airport. As the real Rabbi Jacob arrives for his meeting no one is waiting for him and to make matters worse he is mistaken for Pivert by the French police, and then by Colonel Farès, the Arab terrorist, and his gang of killers (who pull his long beard twice to unmask him, but to no avail). In spite of themselves, they are driven for a Bar-Mitzvah to rue des Rosiers in Paris. Pivert, now officially Rabbi Jacob, is greeted by the crowd but comes face to face with his ex-chauffeur Salomon, the only one who has recognized him through the disguise. With the promise of better working conditions, he helps Pivert and Slimane to keep their secret identity and even to read a sermon in Hebrew. The grand finale is a series of happy endings with Slimane about to become the new president of his country due to a revolution, Antoinette falling in love with Slimane, and Pivert learning to be tolerant toward other religions and cultures. Salomon and Slimane make peace with their respective Arab and Jewish colleagues, and the Schmolls finally find the real Rabbi Jacob.

While the storyline leaves no doubt about the sincerity of the film to address the issue of religious and racial tolerance between communities, it was however not the way in which the film's message was received by the various Jewish and Arab communities, which saw a misrepresentation of their respective cultures. Therefore race satire, as a new conceptualization of humor, had the ability to engage in political incorrectness and this privilege was crucial to broaden cultural discussions surrounding race, which was timidly taking place in the 1970s. *Rabbi Jacob* displayed many stereotypes. However, these stereotypes, whether negative or positive, were powerful visual tools to consciously address issues of race. The implication that the French were laughing at stereotypes, which were a must in any comedy on race, indicated that it was an appropriate racial discourse at the time (whether stereotypical or subversive). *Rabbi Jacob*, in this respect, exploited stereotypes so forcefully that they ultimately became funny rather than malicious.

The following exchange is a direct comment on what average French people may have thought of Arabs as de Funès speaks his mind (while he replies to the chief of police):

> *Inspector*: Mais dites-moi monsieur Pivert ces moricauds vous les avez vus?
> *Pivert*: Mais je pense bien et surtout un gros, huileux, frisoté, avec des petits yeux, tout petits yeux cruels avec des lunettes noires. Une vraie tête d'assassin! Vous comprenez, qu'ils règlent leurs comptes entre eux, très bien, moins y'en aura . . . mais pas chez nous, monsieur le commissaire![7]

This scene prompted insightful viewers to reflect not only upon their own prejudices toward Jews and Arabs, but also upon how the average French tended to tolerate prejudices which triggered a fertile ground for racial intolerance. These considerations were noteworthy, as for the vast majority of critics and popular audiences, *Rabbi Jacob* effectively accomplished the aim to unmask the absurd. While the viewer concentrated on the absurdity of racism and its violent rendition, the film's main message was casually brought into focus, and consequently the question of racism as a taboo was effortlessly integrated into the discussion. Unlike Italian comedies, which were heavily scrutinized by the censorship commission due to their high level of social commentary, French comedies were usually left unfiltered as their political implication rarely provided a source of concern for the government. Therefore this relative freedom gave filmmakers like Oury the option to say exactly what they felt and as a result their product was almost unfiltered. This unadulterated honesty allowed popular audiences to examine their own prejudices and biases. Once the taboo of racism was removed from the screen, all of the race stereotypes, fears, hypocrisies, and absurdities were simultaneously rendered accessible for scrutiny. And yes, satirical comedies about race reflected an image of the French people, their culture, ideas, perceptions, and prejudices, but it did so in a refracted fashion. Satire thus provided an opportunity for French audiences to see themselves with greater objectivity and transparency such as the scene when de Funès displays his utter ignorance of the Jewish faith and community and reveals his own fictional world as being inhabited exclusively by white French Catholics:

> *Pivert*: Raciste? Moi, raciste Salomon? Raciste? Enfin, Dieu merci, Antoinette épouse un Français bien blanc. [. . .] Il est riche comme moi, et catholique comme tout le monde!
> *Salomon*: Pas comme tout le monde, Monsieur, parce que moi par exemple, je suis juif.
> *Pivert*: Vous êtes juif? Comment, Salomon, vous êtes juif? . . . Salomon est juif!
> *Salomon*: Et mon oncle Jacob qui arrive de New York, il est rabbin.

Pivert: Mais il est pas juif?
Salomon: Ben si.
Pivert: Mais pas toute votre famille?
Salomon: Si!
Pivert: Écoutez, ça fait rien . . . je vous garde quand même.[8]

Thanks to the double asset of satires at the time (the protective "shield" conjugated with French taste for its acerbic tone) comedies like *Rabbi Jacob* were the most candid mode of a commentary on race publicly available and indirectly provided a device to measure the level of racism within French society. The success of the film at the time as well as its longevity can be attributed to its nonambiguous denial of racism but also by displaying French characters engaging in self-deprecation as de Funès did repeatedly throughout the film. However, *Rabbi Jacob* did not solicit praises alone as it faced many criticisms, one of them being a concern for the film's potential to exacerbate bigotry further. Though comedies are by definition entertainment before anything and though Gérard Oury included racial statements to be entertaining and acceptable, many of them were regarded as objectionable and offensive. In other words, the film detractors declared that *Rabbi Jacob* provided the possibility to French audiences to actually identify with those being parodied and as a result find their dormant racist sentiments aroused through humor. For instance, de Funès's comment as he sees a wedded white man and black woman entering a luxurious car was one such controversial statement: "Ils ont des voitures maintenant. Ils ont des Rolls blanches, les Noirs" (They have cars now. Black people have white Rolls Royce). This punch line was an example of the different forms of racist humor rhetorically acting upon the ambivalences and was accused in particular readings of potentially reinforcing racism. To them this reversed humor, which was a humor originally intended to be antiracist, may very well unwittingly strengthen racism. Another criticism was regarding the exaggerated tone of the satire: this mode of satire tended to exaggerate stereotypes to the point of caricature. The result was a sort of hypermagnification of the specific traits Oury intended to ridicule, critique, or comment upon. In the case of *Rabbi Jacob* the many exaggerated caricatures of Arabs as violent terrorists ultimately resulted in propagating the already established ignorance of French people toward Arabs, as well as offending the North African immigrants living in France. Here again de Funès describes the Arab terrorist Farès to the chief of police (while he actually speaks to him unknowingly):

Pivert: Vous allez pouvoir coffrer toute la smala! Leur chef s'appelle Farès! Je vous donne son signalement: gros, huileux avec des yeux plissés cruels qui passent à travers de ses lunettes noires.
Farès: Une vraie tête d'assassin![9]

Interestingly enough the actual stereotype was perhaps the only one in the film based upon historical facts as opposed to popular fictional culture. Indeed the kidnapping of Slimane in a Parisian café was inspired by the actual kidnapping of Mehdi Ben Barka in the Brasserie Lipp in 1965 (a Moroccan politician who opposed King Hassan II). One of the protagonists of the case was called Benslimane and in the film one member of Colonel Farès's gang makes a rather explicit reference to the Ben Barka case by saying: "Mon Colonel, on ne peut pas l'enlever comme ça en plein Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Ça a déjà été fait." (Colonel, we cannot kidnap him like that in Saint-Germain-des-Prés. It has already been done.) Should there be overriding moral considerations in favor of joking about the idiosyncrasies of an ethnic group before a film industry is entitled to morally do so? While its implementation is arguable, the 1973 sociopolitical situation clearly did not favor the reception of the film, making it a pioneer at the time. On October 6, 1973, two weeks before the release of the film, the Yom Kippur war between Israel and the neighboring Arab states began.[10] While the timing of the distribution in French theaters could not have been more disastrous, the comedy, against all odds, was a national success, as most of the film's gags were perceived as essentially harmless. The racial issues did not appear as problematic as anticipated by the producers and screen writers (Danièle Thompson and Josy Eisenberg, a Rabbi himself). Under the deceptively casual direction of Gerard Oury, bigotry was thoroughly ridiculed with very controlled and slapstick humor (when the two fake rabbi, with no knowledge of Jewish customs and protocol, bluff their way through their predicament while being chased). *Rabbi Jacob*, despite its national success, remains a rare experiment in the history of French comedy. In the decade that followed, few were the filmmakers who attempted to use a similar route for their own comedies. If race-based humor was used, it was only for the purpose of offering exotic supporting roles, but never as the main argument of the film, with the exception of comedies produced much later like Paul Boujenah's *Yiddish Connection* (1986), Gérard Oury's *Lévy et Goliath* (*Levy and Goliath*, 1987), and Alexandre Arcady's *Mariage mixte* (2004).

African Immigration in French Comedy

In the mid 1990s, a new filmmaker, Thomas Gilou took up the challenge for his very first long feature film called *Black mic mac* (1986) and offered unpretentiously to take an endearing photograph showing the reality of the immigrant community in Paris. While avoiding most easy clichés (excepted unsavory stereotypes such as Africans' belief in black magic and keeping live chickens in their houses) the film represented the tribulations of African

immigrants in Paris and the trouble they faced adjusting to a new life away from home. The fundamentals of the comedy were to be based upon the immigrants' skills and knowledge to survive as an overlooked community striving to find their place in France. In this film, Gilou moved beyond the simple physical comedy of *Rabbi Jacob* into a statement about the hypocrisy of immigration in France. But the main highlight of the film was its sociological treatise via the mode of comedy. The subject of illegal immigration (not present in *Rabbi Jacob*), calling for gravity and seriousness, inaugurated a new trend in French comedy. A generous comedy about the African community in Paris, the film subtly criticized xenophobic prejudice and did not hesitate to denounce in the strongest terms the difficult living conditions of immigrants. The look was neither pessimistic, nor compassionate, nor militant, but rather full of good humor, smiles, and without malice. Gilou displayed great merit of showing, briefly but clearly, the singularities of the juxtaposition of the two worlds, the two cultures: the joyous African nonchalance meeting the French administrative rigor.

Michel Le Gorgues (Jacques Villeret), an overzealous official from the disease prevention center in Paris, works on closing an unhealthy building where many African immigrants live. Dozens of them are about to be expelled and as they gather to find a solution they decide to contract a marabou from Africa to influence the decision of the official and ultimately to cast a spell on him, thus preventing the completion of the work order and avoiding the demolition of their building. On the plane to Paris, Lemmy, a young African on his way to visit relatives in Paris (Isaach de Bankolé), meets the marabou and finds out the amount of money the old man is getting paid for his services. He then drops sleeping pills in his drink, steals his clothes, and lands in Paris dressed as a marabou. In Paris the usurper is welcomed as a hero by the anxious immigrants who see in him their unique chance to preserve their home. Unfortunately for him, he finds out from a real marabou that to perform the spell, he must collect pieces of hair and a piece of cloth from the inspector's clothes. Lemmy asks his cousin Anisette (Félicité Wouassi) to befriend the inspector, which she successfully does. While the story takes the protagonists through countless tribulations, the real marabou who discovers France for the first time is lost in the Parisian subway eventually finding his way out after several days of wandering and reconnects with the community.

As the title suggests, *Black mic mac* was rife with emblematic references about the African diaspora. With France's economic development between the 1960s and 1980s, the image of migrant populations had increasingly become intertwined as mass-mediated. Far from being simply isolated affairs, the representation of immigrants had become a reality as stories and images

of African immigrants were fully synchronized with media culture in this film. Due to the complex nature of race-based humor, the relation between humor and race has proven delicate in film history. For instance, the depiction of African immigrants as underprivileged and unsophisticated, yet sympathetic and kindhearted characters confirmed the controversial aesthetic of the stereotypical. The eternal problem that race-based comedies faced was to raise criticism from the provocative and touchy nature of the rhetoric of prejudice which tended to entrench opposing views and offend those who might not understand the use of satire as a tool, eventually leading to misconceptions about Africans in France. However, *Black mic mac* offered a combination of different types of humor. First, a picturesque humor, a subtler wit, less offensive in comedic devices like puns, such as the instant reaction when three Africans come to take a picture of the inspector in his office at the marabou's request. Villeret is photographed and blinded by the flash and remarks: "J'ai vu trois noirs entrer, et maintenant, je ne vois plus que du blanc!" (I saw three blacks entering and now I only see white!). On the other hand, a more culturally based humor may be more difficult to apprehend such as Villeret's reaction when investigating the kitchen of an African restaurant and discovering a dead monkey inside the refrigerator:

Michel: Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça?
Aïda: C'est le singe de ma cuisinière, mais moi je mange pas ça.
Michel: Vous avez ses certificats vétérinaires pour l'importation?
Aïda: Quoi?
Michel: Oui . . . le singe, il a ses papiers?[11]

Here an underlying element of realism makes the immigrant's experience more than just absurd. Gilou takes control of this dominant imagery of the host society by stereotyping the typical migrant in order to expose social prejudices that are prevalent in the assimilationist period (France in the 1980s) while, at the same time, eliciting viewers' empathy with characters in typical grotesque humor.

With *Black mic mac* the comedy genre proved a good way to address the issues of immigration and integration. The story spoke freely of precarious living conditions, unhealthy homes, difficulties for illegal immigrants, the use of ancestral traditions against administrative pressure, and police brutalities during evictions (anticipating the upcoming cohabitation between President Mitterrand and Premier Chirac, and future radical actions taken by Interior Minister Charles Pasqua who made French headlines by expelling 101 Malians on charter flights back to Bamako on October 18, 1986). Interestingly enough back in the mid-1980s, forced evictions of illegal immigrants were

acceptable comedy subjects, while nowadays on the contrary it provides inspiration for more politically engaged films (e.g., Philippe Lioret's *Welcome* [2009] or Costa-Gavras's *Eden à l'ouest* [*Eden Is West*] the same year). Popular by principle, unifying by definition, and optimistic by nature, comedy is able to treat immigration, which is supposedly divisive as a theme, while de-dramatizing its drawbacks and eventually offering a solution via redemptory laughter. However, one may argue that the danger to forcefully wanting to "resolve" race issues on screen also includes the risk to "dissolve" in the politically correct consensus. This distinction allowed Gilou to consciously underline the contradictions of this generation of immigrants. The character of Lemmy is Gilou's visual expression of the undesirable African migrant stereotype, but he is also by extension an image of the migrant from the South, in a general sense, and his plight in an assimilationist society that rejects those elements it deems different. Thus, Lemmy in this regard is not a typical African migrant but a stereotype of the African as perceived in the wider community, condensing the prejudices of both the French society and the African community where a north–south bias exists about fair skin versus dark skin. For instance the discourse of racism and color prejudice inside the African community is relevant. The scene that best illustrates this dichotomy is the one that features two African women arguing about skin color at a hair salon:

> *Amina*: Tu vas quand même pas te mettre à te blanchir la peau toi aussi? Si il y a des cocottes complexées qui veulent avoir la couleur peau de bananes, c'est leur affaire. Mais nous dans notre famille on reste couleur locale.
> *African woman*: Si il y en a qui veulent rester des macaques. Un singe qui peut pas atteindre un fruit dit qu'il est amer.[12]

Even if the register used was that of the burlesque, the film knew how to hit its target as there were moments when key narrative points were obscure, and when characters behaved in a way that was not anticipated. Clearly *Black mic mac* put its own truth above the fear of possibly offending viewers of any racial background. And in this case the anecdotal scenes representing racism among different African communities (here illustrated through skin color) was all the more relevant that the issue was rarely addressed publicly through French media at the time. The voluntary ambiguity of this type of racial humor was no longer received in the same way a comedy like *Rabbi Jacob* was in 1973. With the growing presence and pressure of the political correctness in 1980s France, the distinction between racist and antiracist humor was sometimes delicate and eventually difficult to define. By drawing its comical stereotypes from race, *Black mic mac* interiorized an ethnic minority, and more importantly by not labeling the humor racist as opposed to racial, it

indirectly promoted a form of ideological denial. On the cinematic level, the image of Africans was charged with a critical power, that of migration policies that surrounded their presence in France and affected their lives. In France, through the voice of immigrants, viewers could finally see the difficulties of dual culture, and the forced adaptation to the majority culture that Africans had to deal with. Paris, a city which by the mid-1980s had chosen a policy of multiculturalism (like several other Western capitals) also showed signs of temptation toward the "communitarian refraction." While many of the comedies should have echoed the decline of the public racial discourse, race-based comedies persisted in representing the illusory challenges of a postracial or color-blind France.[13] Perhaps this was an indication that France, though a multicultural society and heir of an extensive colonial past, was still not ready for color blindness in its own backyard.

The development of cinema and the phenomenon of immigration in France after the 1960s were profoundly interrelated: their threads covered every aspect from social and economic history to racial politics and film aesthetics. *Black mic mac* drew on narratives of displacement, which evoked the problematic transcultural experiences of African immigrants in France and thereby commented on the larger narrative of the preglobalization era. But Gilou's filmic language not only depicted the stereotyping of African migrants but also French prevalent stereotypes, in order to further expose the irreconcilable divisions in a society, which made the conscious choice to promote conditions conducive to the integration of immigrant cultures. In the 1980s African protagonists could no longer remain peripheral to France's film narratives as they had made themselves visible in the new social landscapes of urban areas. But their presence within the film industry was still very confidential in order to reach visibility with high-profile actors as main protagonists. Whether it was about cinema made by conventional "French" directors or by "beurs" directors, the scenarios experienced a difficult time to explicitly render the relationship with the countries of origin as well as the reality of immigrants in France. Yet it was during this decade that comedies began developing strategies to document and reflect on these shared stories between the two continents. In French movies featuring immigrants, mainstream audiences could only see the fleeting image of rejected individuals, subject to harsh realities between the workplace and places of residence, and often prisoners of stereotypical behavior. The icon of the Maghrebi or blacks was almost always associated with gangsters or pimps in most films produced in the early 1980s such as Bob Swaim's *La balance* (1982), Claude Berri's *Tchao Pantin* (*So long, Stooge*, 1983), Claude Zidi's *Les ripoux* (*My Best Partner*, 1984), and Maurice Pialat's *Police* (1985). As the suburbs became the place of

expression for urban delinquency with the first so-called rodéos in the Minguettes district in Vénissieux near Lyon in 1981, the French film industry echoed this new phenomenon on their screen. However, no comedy had attempted a long feature film portraying immigrants as the main protagonists until Gilou's film came on the national screen.

Black mic mac was not concerned with plot exclusively, as it also concentrated on giving viewers a feel of the society inhabited by authentic characters. In the mid-1980s modern France was still a study of contrasts, between Africans and French, between upper and lower classes, between native French with African origins and African immigrants as well as the various immigrant groups, some of which, such as Lemmy's cousins who owned a restaurant, had just started to prosper. This film was also innovative as it gave black actors the opportunity to play real black characters and not stereotyped ethnic caricatures usually utilized for supporting roles (e.g., Benny Luke as Jacob "the maid" in *La cage aux folles* in 1978 or Abbes Zahmani as the épicier in *La vie est un long fleuve tranquille* [*Life Is a Long Quiet River*] in 1988). The purpose of ethnic comedy was to reassert the inherent human aspect of French society and its intimate relationship with the world, in particular Africa. A variety of different African accents from Mali, Cameroon, and Congo were purposely used as a guaranty of authenticity as well as a reminder to the French audiences of the multicultural nature of sub-Saharan immigration. Overall, African migrants to France inflected French cinemas' ideological, aesthetic, and social context, by patterning films' subject matter, genres, representational routines, styles, and stars' identity—both on and off screen. The authors of the film seem to say that once in Paris it is the art of getting by that takes over, even if the pockets are empty; Africans still wear fashionable jackets and ties thanks to their *sapeurs* and get ready to "*ambiancer*" to an excellent musical score gathering authentic musicians from Senegal, Mali, and Congo (Youssou N'Dour, Papa Wemba, Tabu Ley, Salif Keita). In the field of popular music, the 1980s was marked by the rediscovery of cosmopolitan artists, particularly African artists (e.g., Toure Kounda, Manu di Bango, and Mori Kante), this time not exclusively by connoisseurs, but by large and diverse popular audiences. Probably for these reasons the film won a solid box office success in 1986 and helped Isaach de Bankolé win the César Award for Best Male Newcomer in 1987. The film's parting quote indicated the happy ending so typical of French comedies and confirmed its inclication for a liberating cinema from an oppressive environment: "Maintenant tu fais partie de la famille en tant qu'ami de la meilleure copine de ma cousine, ce qui fait que tu es mon cousin, enfin c'est l'Afrique tout ca, non?" (Now that you're part of the family as my cousin's best friend's friend, which makes you, my cousin. . . . So welcome to Africa, right?)

III. Comedies on Nonconformity and Homosexuality

It is commonplace to assert that cinema is a mirror of society, but historians often neglect the fact that certain films can also contribute to the construction of an identity and gender relations due to their influential legacy through the years. So was this the case with *La cage aux folles*? While an affirmative answer is always arguable, the film certainly worked as a process of subliminal influence that forged unconscious collective perceptions, especially regarding concepts like homosexuality (both the image that heterosexuals have toward homosexuals and among gays themselves). Why does *La cage aux folles* make such a different comedy when compared to the rest of the comic films of that era? Does the theme of a gay lifestyle dramatically change the keys of the comedy genre? Does homosexuality as a cinematic theme disrupt intergender relations by adding to the biological division its own kind of sexual preference? Almost nonexistent or morally censored for decades, homosexuality as a cinematic theme started developing in the film industry during the early 1970s (long after the Hays codes were replaced in 1961). In the wake of the sexual revolution, the changes in women's rights, and the aftermaths of the Stonewall riots in 1969, the social network looked indeed more favorable with these changes brought forth in society. Consequently it was only at that time that Hollywood slowly began to show heterosexuals what to think of homosexuality and to suggest to the gay community what to think of themselves and how to perceive their own sexuality on screen, including the need for recognition and belonging. Before the 1970s gay filmmaking was largely confined to the avant-garde (e.g., Andy Warhol and Kenneth Anger) and while the screen slowly changed, mainstream viewers remained still largely conservative until the advent of *La cage aux folles* in 1978. This was the case in France as well, as progressive views on alternative lifestyle were still going through an uphill battle in the 1970s. The best illustration of this symptomatic trend was the symbolic decision taken by the French Assemblée Nationale in August 1982, which voted in favor of the decriminalization of homosexuality following a proposal from the Minister of Justice, Robert Badinter. With the repeal of Article 332-1 of the Criminal Code, homosexuality was no longer a crime (although the law had not been applied for decades).

Longtime lovers and partners, Renato (Ugo Tognazzi)[14] and Albin (Michel Serrault),[15] manage a trendy drag club in Saint-Tropez called *La cage aux folles*, whose main star is Zaza Napoli, that is to say, Albin. Renato has a son, Laurent, who one day comes home to make an announcement about his impending wedding with Andrea, the daughter of an ultraconservative congressman, Charrier (Michel Galabru), vice president of a political party called "L'union pour l'ordre moral." Andrea, who knows the truth, presents

Figure 3.1 Michel Serrault and Ugo Tognazzi in *La cage aux folles* (1978) by Edouard Molinaro

Laurent's dad as a cultural attaché and the mother as a housewife. Now in order to ease the first meeting with the future in-laws, Laurent begs his father to make an effort and present himself as a traditional straight man, as well as changing all of the house decoration (ostentatiously gay decorum). Renato accepts but knows the difficulty in convincing Albin to hide his sexual identity or even to stay away for a few days, and fears that he will take it the wrong way. Both men have trouble at first accepting the notion that their treasured son is going to get married. They have even more trouble accepting the notion that the intended bride is the daughter of a crusading conservative activist. Renato goes to great lengths by paying a visit to his former wife Simone, a sophisticated woman with little maternal instincts, to ask her to attend the dinner (but to no avail). At the same time Charrier is coincidentally in a precarious position after a sex scandal involving the president of his own party. Therefore a wedding will help regain his image of integrity and family values, as a large church wedding in the headlines will be just the ticket to save his reputation. After trying to keep Albin away without hurting his feelings, conflict breaks out between the couple. Renato is torn between the desire to help his son and his feeling for Albin, who now feels rejected. The latter eventually accepts to stay out during the dinner for that evening. A few days later the Charrier family, who believes Laurent's parents are a traditional

family, travel to Saint-Tropez to meet them. As disaster looms Renato and Laurent must act quickly. The latter is able to convince his father to send off Albin. When Andrea's family arrives, everything—in theory—is supposed to have been arranged to demostrate dignity. Suddenly, without warning, Albin shows up dressed as a woman to play the role of the mother. To Renato's stupefaction the situation becomes even more complicated when Simone, who unexpectedly pretends to be Renato's wife for the evening, shows up as well. Mr. and Mrs. Charrier, obviously puzzled, demand an explanation as to who the real mother is. Outside the building, eager journalists in search of a sensational scoop, discover the truth as to who the hosts really are by bribing the chauffeur. Desperate and now panic-stricken, Charrier begs Albin to find a decent solution to avoid the pack of journalists poised to ruin him, and besieges the club seeking to frame him red-handed among drag queens. The congressman will find his salvation in an exit strategy, escaping as a transvestite!

Despite the success of the play, which was initially created by actor-playwright Jean Poiret, *La cage aux folles* ran for almost 1,800 performances, from 1973 to 1978, at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal in Paris. Since no French producers agreed to adapt it as a film, Molinaro took his chance in transferring the play from stage to screen with the assistance of Francis Veber, an experienced comedy screenwriter (soon to go behind the camera as a comedy director).[16] The film, a Franco-Italian production, was a commercial success in France and Italy and two sequels were shot: *La cage aux folles II* in 1980 (directed by Molinaro as well) and *La cage aux folles III* in 1985 (directed by Georges Lautner). As film critic David Ehrenstein once wrote: "*La cage aux folles* had struck oil no one knew was there."[17] After all who would have expected a gay comedy to attract a mainstream crowd in the 1970s? Consequently United Artists sought to score big with the profitable film, despite its unusual plot, as an American remake of the film was released in 1996 as Mike Nichols's *The Birdcage*, starring Robin Williams, Nathan Lane, and Gene Hackman with the action taking place in Florida's South Beach. The commercial success in the United States was far from ephemeral as it remained the most watched foreign language film in the United States from 1980 to 1998 and remained the biggest French box office success in the United States until Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amelie* in 2002 (with over five million admissions in France and over eight million in the United States). A performance rare enough to be noticed for a foreign movie, *La cage aux folles* was nominated at the 1980 Academy Awards for Best Screenplay, Best Costume Design, Best Director, and won the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Film of the same year.

Apart from comedy the film's main contribution was its promotion of new approaches on how to perceive homosexuality and its representation within a given social group. The presence of homosexuality is rarely represented in French films, and can be found only sporadically, for instance, in Marcel Carné's *Hotel du Nord* (1938), in which François Périer played the small role of Adrien, one of the residents who leaves no doubt about his sexual attractions. Carné also called upon the talents of Jean Parédès in *L'Air de Paris* (*Air of Paris*, 1954). In recent years the presence of supporting roles implying homosexuality can be found in Jean Delannoy's *Les amitiés particulières* (*This Special Friendship*, 1964), Marcel Carné's *Les jeunes loups* (*Young Wolves*, 1968), and Serge Gainsbourg's *Je t'aime moi non plus* (*I Love You, I Don't*, 1976). If gay characters where extremely rare in French cinema, it was even more difficult to find any in the realm of comedy. While for years gay characters, confined to supporting roles, had been depicted as foolish through parodies (e.g., the character of Occhiofino in Dino Risi's *Il sorpasso* [*The Easy Life*, 1962]), *La cage aux folles* offered just the opposite. This time spectators did not laugh at the gay protagonists or at Albin's temperamental outbursts and his narcissistic hypochondria, but instead they were given the opportunity to laugh with him. This primary difference clearly marked a turning point in the history of comedy and defined the representation of the gay character in mainstream cinema with a boundary beyond which any pejorative stereotypes from the past were now noticeable as argued by film critic David Ehrenstein:

> What's particularly powerful about these scenes as played by Serrault is the way they emphasize the personal dignity of a character we've up to now thought of solely as someone to laugh at. Albin may seem silly, but he is also human, and his inability to "rise to the occasion" and appear as a conventional male wounds him deeply.[18]

Unlike the character played by Serrault, many films of the decade did not avoid the trap of asexual caricatures picturing an "eternal femininity" which contributed to foster greater intolerance toward homosexuals via clownish and/or foolish appearance. The negative criticism toward the film at its release should be considered, today, with a critical distance, as many critiques in the 1970s may still have been influenced far beyond the external attributes of homosexuality to the core of homophobia itself. Because it can be described as a fear of man within man, that is to say, fear of otherness that is inside (i.e., hidden femininity), many criticisms could have been motivated from this aspect rather than from an artistic standpoint.

With a certain pretence of sophistication, reinforcing the most popular conventions and stereotypes, comedy was not considered a novelty by many

of its detractors. *La cage* was even classified as a traditional comedy, heavily dependent on dialogue to keep the momentum going from scene to scene. Surprisingly the film and the play were both criticized by gay associations, who essentially saw the staging of two caricature figures and effeminate homosexuals rather than the elaboration of multifaceted performances. However, while the caricature aspect was never fully demonstrated, other criticisms on the contrary emphasized Renato and Albin's image as a stable couple, in love, and who raised a son previously rejected by his biological mother, which rendered a rather positive image (Laurent was in some ways the offspring of an illicit heterosexual transgression by Renato). Though *La cage aux folles* fits the criteria for a comedy of errors, the character of Albin never indulges in a gay parody. A temperamental drag queen he may be, but he is also deeply in love with Renato, and cares for his adopted son more than the mother ever did.

For its detractors the adaptation lost the unique vaudeville arrangement from the early theater play, thus giving homosexuality a political function marked by a position of claim. However, the concept of homosexuality in the film cannot be summed up only through its disapproval or defense. The turning point was the access it gave to the general public to reflect on the subject thanks to its global success, the reactions it triggered, and the social impact it generated. At a time when gay marriage and gay parenting are still debated in today's society, the artists' expression on the subject remains significant for at least one reason: the artist who makes a film on homosexuality will most likely offer an objective viewpoint since by definition a film is a collective production which belongs to a group as opposed to an individual and therefore a subjective thought. In this regard, the 1978 French comedy of errors has the unique advantage of appealing to gays and straights alike. While it is true that most of the characters appear stereotyped in the story, the familiar plotting, however, reveals that the gay duo could have easily been heterosexual or an odd couple. The film's main asset was to combine an innovative polemical issue and a classic interfamilial culture-clash story reaching out to audiences not otherwise interested in the personal quotidian life of drag queens.

If indeed the vaudeville dimension was removed from the actual play, the importance of the comical dinner was kept (the plot's climactic revelation), for it was the principal comedy device of the film. Renato and Albin must disguise themselves as the most straight-laced couple possible in order to fool the conservative family, and therein lies the bulk of the comedy of errors with an impossible mission. Both men, a middle-aged gay couple, live in Saint-Tropez, the most famous beach resort on the French Riviera. They have been together for 20 years bickering and fighting while carrying on as couples do: Albin the more feminine, flamboyant, and temperamental of the two,

continually jealous and subject to sudden and uncontrollable screeches. How will they possibly conceal such a heavy past for even one evening? And this is where the comedy contains several classic sequences. The most memorable was illustrated in the scene where Renato tries to teach Albin to be more masculine to impress the future family and how to act "macho," an attribute that apparently consists of knowing how to butter toasts with manly firmness, and on how to walk like a man:

> *Renato*: Essaie de marcher comme John Wayne.
> *Albin*: Le cow-boy?
> *Renato*: Oui, John Wayne. Tu descends de cheval, tu t'avances vers le saloon. Envoie valser la porte et crac! Tu peux essayer?
> *Albin*: Que je fasse John Wayne?
> *Renato*: C'est ça. [Albin tente une démarche approximative] Ça, c'est John Wayne jeune fille.[19]

Watching Albin pretend to be a man, who has been pretending to be a woman most of his life, now trying to walk like John Wayne, provokes so many levels of laughter simultaneously that the viewers' response is as much amazement as amusement. This scene is doubly memorable if one recognizes Tognazzi as one of Italy's leading tough and cynical male actors who has acted in comedies very well known to the French public (e.g., Marco Ferreri's *La grande bouffe* [1973] and Mario Monicelli's *Amici miei* [1975]). Tognazzi finds himself alternately amused and exasperated by his partner's frequent tantrums and eventually asks Albin to vacate the premises for the evening to allow him to convey an impression of "propriety and rectitude." With the impending visit, which throws the household into panic, Renato makes plans to camouflage their home and keep Albin under wraps. But as it goes with farces, the plan starts to unravel almost as quickly as it gets made. Albin who hopes to pretend to pass as an uncle puts all the skill he can muster into wearing a conservative suit and sitting in a chair like an everyday *bourgeois*, but to no avail. The film's comedic mechanism relies on the following vicious circle: the more the gay couple tries to pretend they are something they are not, the more obviously their real identity is revealed. Their ostentatious gay attitude keeps bursting out, whether it is Renato's casual remark about coffee or the uproarious episode in which Albin gets a hopeless lesson in how to walk, talk, and spread jelly on toast like a real man. But thanks to the guidance of director Molinaro, neither character is made to seem ridiculous or the butt of any jokes, despite Albin's penchant for wildly effeminate clothing. As Albin (or Zaza when in drag), Serrault is the more effeminate of the pair, a bit of the stereotype of the emotional drag queen, while Tognazzi plays the far more

virile Renato, who has to keep everything under control as they try to trick the future in-laws into thinking that Laurent comes from a traditional background. So, yes, the film plays on stereotypes to entertain, but at the same time it challenges those who usually take stereotypes too seriously. The pivotal character of Albin changes through the narration to eventually become "humanized" to such a level that his mere presence drains the drama of any tension unlike in the 1996 remake, *The Birdcage*.

> The true object of the satire and caricature in the *Cage aux folles* is the woman: Albin is used as a vector of misogyny, being presented as a stereotype of the married woman who creates scenes to her husband; the caricature of the homosexual is then eliminated. In the *Birdcage*, on the contrary, it is the homosexual who is discredited as a clownnesque figure.[20]

To save grace, the girl has told her parents that Laurent's father is a cultural attaché. On his side to avoid the full extent of the sex scandal, Charrier figures their daughter's marriage to a diplomat will salvage some of their reputation. This dilemma inspires the film's comical scene where the flamboyant apartment ends up austerely redecorated in oversized crucifixes and antiques. Renato, who clearly sacrificed himself speaks directly to the enormous crucifix with this memorable quote: "L'antiquaire qui t'a prêté est un voleur. Mais si tout va bien, je suis disposé à t'acheter." (The antiquarian who lent you is a thief. But if all goes well, I am willing to buy you.) The cluttered apartment represents the height of extravagant bad taste, so Laurent finds it necessary to purge it of all homoerotic bric-a-brac and bring in new props to redecorate his home to make it look "straight" before guests arrive. This means removing all of their nude male statues, phallic knickknacks, rampant soft lighting, flamboyant wardrobes, and dressing their butler in traditional uniform. Jacob, the "maid" whose usual attire around the house is a thong and a skimpy chambermaid's uniform, is forced to wear a tuxedo and shoes, but he has not worn any in such a long while that he does not know how to walk in them. His demeanor is also equaled by his sense of repartee as, for instance, his answer to Renato's offensive remark:

> *Renato*: Ton café est franchement dégueulasse. Vous les français, vous faites vraiment un café de merde.
> *Jacob*: On m'a déjà traité de nègre, on m'a déjà traité de tante, mais jamais de français.[21]

The long awaited climactic dinner confrontation between the parents displays the culture clash from which the comedy stems, as Albin attempts to play it

straight and try to hide their obviously gay surroundings from the conservative family. It begins with Charrier, who as a merciless bigot, misogynist, and power-obsessed politician, unexpectedly pays attention to the plates' decoration and the erotically patterned dinnerware: the dialogue is the culmination of some inspired comedy.

Charrier: Elles sont curieuses, ces assiettes. Ce sont des jeunes gens qui jouent ensemble, non?
Albin: Vous savez, il y a tellement d'assiettes dans cette maison, que je ne peux pas vous dire ce qu'il y a dedans.
Charrier: Ce sont des Grecs, j'ai l'impression que ce sont des Grecs.
Albin: Oh! En effet, des Grecs. Des Grecs dans mes assiettes! Ça, c'est bizarre alors, hein? Vous avez raison, ce sont des Grecs.
Charrier: C'est effrayant, moi je ne vois plus rien sans lunettes. Attendez, ce sont des garçons?
Albin: Des garçons? Vous avez des garcons? Y'a sûrement des filles aussi. Vous n'avez pas des filles? Vous voyez, là, vous avez une fille, là. Ça, c'est une fille, non?
Charrier: Y'a longtemps que vous n'en avez pas vue, c'est pas possible! Non, ce sont des garcons; c'est pas difficile ils sont tout nus.[22]

What made the film much more than a conventional screwball comedy was the sense of emotion instilled in Albin, who despite the heavy gay stereotype, was able to convey on an emotional level the message of acceptance and family through nonconformism. The character of Albin, besides his good disposition, is expected to change internally to bring a solution to chaos and ultimately make others happy. Later, Albin wears a conservative suit and tries to look at ease and appears like a man at war with himself, pressured to pretend to be something he is not, at the cost of his own happiness. According to Molinaro's memories on the set, Serrault experienced some difficulty in playing "a real homosexual" whereas playing a screaming transvestite performing numbers onstage did not challenge him. But by asking him for greater reality and depth, they realized, to their surprise, that he was not comfortable with it. As one would expect, society can only suppress natural instincts so long before it comes back with force, and the dinner scene offers the big payoff of the entire comedy.

Though several decades later its message still contains a progressive implication, can *La cage aux folles* ultimately be considered a work of comedy classicism? Crafted with precision and efficiently paced, the irreverent topicality of the comedy was one of its most refreshing components. So, classical in its structure though it may be, the social impact was still a novelty. Without challenging viewers' notions of how gay men behave, the film presented

characters showing a loving family headed by longtime same-sex partners who are embraced by their local community. So, what makes *La cage* more subversive than it might initially appear? With an acerbic screenplay, the film was an invigorating range of comedic devices, and provided countless inside gags, clever one-liners, physical humor, and flamboyantly burlesque without feeling trapped into being a politically charged feature film. On the contrary, the film was designed to indirectly show viewers that there was not much difference between conservatives and liberals as was any more between straight and gay people. By contextualizing the story within the history of the representation of gay characters in society, *La cage aux folles* was able to display moral issues without pretention or hypocritical ponderousness. Although the gay lifestyles on display may appear old-fashioned some 30 years later, the characters' underlying fierce pride, along with the play's resilient defense of an alternative family structure, still wins over modern spectatorship.

Provocation, Cynicism, and Unlimited Audacity: The Comedy According to Bertrand Blier

Despite the national and planetary success of *La cage aux folles*, few filmmakers took on the initiative to pursue similar comedies. A decade later, however, one filmmaker known for his controversial topics rose to the challenge. Often classified as a nonconformist filmmaker whose comedies have pushed the limits of cinematic frenzy beyond provocation, Bertrand Blier is either rejected or revered as a distinctive free spirit by the French public and critics. Overpowering in its unlimited audacity, his comedy *Tenue de soirée* (*Ménage*, 1986) was the most innovative and unprecedented depiction of homosexuality at the time—all genres considered. While it is true that the *cinéaste* had oriented many of his film subjects representing male sexuality sometimes to the detriment of women, with *Préparez vos mouchoirs* (*Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*), which won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1979, and carried on his idiosyncratically humorous style with *Les valseuses* (1974);[23] this time, however, signs of compassionate and balanced psychoanalysis were visible. Almost exclusively masculine, even misogynistic, his comedies were criticized for making an unfavorable contribution toward the female figure during the 1970s. In his 1986 *Tenue de soirée*, however, women were no longer exacerbated and castrating feminists. Blier started this new trend with *Tenue de soirée* and continued it with *Trop belle pour toi* (*Too Beautiful For You*, 1989), a film that narrowly lost the Cannes Palme d'Or in 1989, which went to *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*.[24] Between abstract and uninhibited painting of French society of the 1980s, vacillating between bitter comedy and social drama, Blier unraveled the toughest nods of a society blinded by illusions.

Lucid, acid, cynical, and humorous, films by Bertrand Blier have been invaluable and surprisingly lasted through the years. What can be seen as Blier's greatest quality as a comedy author is his persistent desire to put his own beliefs at risk. For film scholar René Prédal, Blier's theory of comedy is the antithesis of artistic flexibility since "Blier's cinema is incongruous as it tracks down emotions with a bulldozer and incises pain with a needle."[25] Blier can be best described as a careful observer of psychological conflicts via a blend of surrealist fantasy and existentialist uneasiness. Often accused of promoting unbridled misogyny as a filmmaker, especially by American film critics, Blier's characters often display alternative behavior toward women, but with *Tenue de soirée* he did not endorse his emblematic point of view of erotic chauvinism but rather expressed an uninhibited critique of erotic anarchy.

Antoine (Michel Blanc) and Monique (Miou-Miou) are a couple gone adrift despite Antoine's love for Monique. One night at a ball, Monique violently scolds Antoine reproaching him about their dire situation as they are now reduced to live in a dilapidated trailer. A stranger named Bob (Gérard Depardieu) is present at the scene and unexpectedly defends Antoine, eventually slapping Monique: "My one rule is: A man's gotta be respected." With a strong charisma, the poetic ex-con proceeds to seduce first the wife and then the husband before training them to burglarize Parisian mansions. Within a matter of days, they have been removed from their dull lower-class universe and parachuted into a gloomy, sexual, and criminal predicament. As the trio operates, Bob gradually seems interested in Antoine as it emerges that he has more than friendship in mind. Monique blossoms amidst luxury whereas Antoine becomes increasingly concerned. While Monique is happy to see her standard of living rise due to the presence of Bob, she even encourages Antoine to accept the sexual favors Bob is asking of him. As the *ménage à trois* progresses, Monique's plight becomes difficult as she slowly becomes a housewife and ultimately, unwanted by the two men, she decides to leave the *ménage*. While the couple spends their days in a Paris suburban home, Antoine also becomes Bob's sexual-domestic slave and eventually accepts to wear transvestite clothes until Monique, who by then, having gotten rid of her protector, meets up with them again.

Blier once again investigated male insecurity and men's relations with other men while acknowledging a real subject: homosexuality. But the film was far more than a simple comedy on homosexuality as it deliberately offered an ambitious and shocking fiction. *Tenue de soirée* described the slow dehumanization of human relationships, often reduced to their most elementary state: sex. A few years before *Too Beautiful for You*, Blier inextricably bonded reality and fantasy, the primitiveness of sexual identity with its intellectual thinking, a sort of social experimentation, as fiction usually allows viewers to

do. Strong with solid elements of social insurrection and provocation, Blier's visual paradigm centered on a triangle of lovers sampling their sexual options, from hetero to homosexual, from bisexual to transgender sexuality and even beyond. A complex film indeed, part crime comedy, part transvestite, it featured a homophobe becoming a fully dressed transvestite prostitute at the end of the story. This bond between the three protagonists as they undergo bastardizations of basic romantic situations resulted in ultimate transvestism and prostitution, as if their sexuality sent the plot to an *oneiric* level. With its prose poetry, Blier took the viewers to the heart of the relationship, tore it apart, made it complex, and twisted it in all directions, pointing out its less tolerated fragments in French society. Questions run through Antoine's head, a deeply sensitive character, lost in an absence of tenderness. At first, Bob's sexual advances and deviations frighten him and seem to increasingly trouble him, while still having feelings for his wife. But finally Antoine forgets his principles: he gives free rein to his desires and falls into Bob's arms:

> *Antoine*: Tu vas m'aimer toi au moins?
> *Bob*: Bien sûr que je vais t'aimer, je vais faire de toi une reine![26]

This scene is not to be taken only as a joke, but as a cry of despair. Spectators are really within an archetype of the domestic scene. Later Bob coaxes Antoine into becoming a full-fledged drag queen and surprisingly this new awareness neither contradicts nor offsets the absurdity of the comedy but rather balances it. Blier neglected social realism to explore the burlesque to create one of the biggest scandals of the 1980s, mixing homosexuality and prostitution, all without detour. Unlike *La cage aux folles*, the three main protagonists may have been archetypal or iconic, but never caricatured or stereotyped. This time comedy no longer confined homosexuality in a ghetto with its inherent mythology but allowed viewers to laugh as they would laugh at adultery, without making it a world apart. It is a love story like many others, however, with the condition to accept and follow its developments without imposing a logical reasoning about the reactions of these hypersensitive criminals.

Though a comedy, the film is still a cynical tale, unsettling for the conservative-minded, mixing burlesque comedy with drama, sexual fantasies with the absurd. Blier's abrasive imagination heavily utilized in *Les valseuses* and *Préparez vos mouchoirs* has never considered charming his audiences as much of a priority. Indeed, Blier who rarely shies away from controversy has repeated in interviews his disappointment when his films fail to provoke indignation. Visually speaking, the trademark of Blier's style is best described as a cinema of constant provocative close-ups blended with unbelievable pieces of reality and prosaic truths. In other words, the darker the story is, the

funnier the comedy. In *Ménage* Blier did not limit himself to a mere provocation. Beyond delirium, folly, and repartee, not to mention outrage, the *cinéaste* also offered a chilling representation of modern love. The format having little importance, it can be found between a man and a woman or between two men or two women. Blier shifts from seeing sex as a manifestation of love to portraying it as an article of trade, something to be bought, sold, or stolen. As the movie darkens, it grows more obvious. In only a few days, Antoine and Monique have abandoned forever their world of lower-class predictability and enter a gray area of sexual and criminal experimentation. The further viewers advance in the narration, the more it becomes abstract (Blier has often expressed his inspiration as coming from fellow directors like Godard and Buñuel). As the dynamic among the three continues to shift and evolve, one can see gender roles and notions of sexual orientation move into unexpected arrangements, psychological stalking, and manipulations of all sorts, ranging from blackmail to emotional bullying. Blier is probably the filmmaker who best understood the complexity of gender relations of men/women as well as the intricacies of the rapport of dominated–dominant as Bob's misanthropic quote reminds viewers: "My one rule is: A man's gotta be respected."

As a writer and director Blier has always had a freedom of tone that is quite unique and which contrasts with the formatting of most of his contemporaries or predecessors in French comedies (with the exception perhaps of Jacques Tati and Guitry). For example, his scripts were often written to overwhelm viewers as early as in the opening scene, where a paradoxical situation provides corrosive humor and sets the tone. Like all of Blier's films, *Ménage* begins with a pragmatic setup and then moves steadily toward the absurd. Another example is the almost imperceptible jump cuts Blier executes to manage his narration with a technique heavily dependent on ellipses, so that viewers can see a succession of scenes to relaunch the comic sequencing. By the end of the story, Antoine is so under Bob's influence that he willingly dresses in drag; he has allowed a stranger to walk into his life and wilfully rearrange it. Out of context, this story may resemble a plain comedy of customs but the strength of *Ménage* was its potential acting. Associating a tall thug like Depardieu, feeling romantic feelings for a weakling like Michel Blanc, was risky. Depardieu was even more impressive because of his added aggressive bisexuality. As for Michel Blanc, he was the revelation of the film. Usually confined to the popular comedies in the role of a looser, here he is a homophobic man who falls for a thug who manipulates his relation and ends up dressing up to please him. Rather small and balding, with a disgruntled look, the character of Antoine is far from embodying the archetypical lover. The comic nature of this discrepancy is the key to understanding Antoine's

journey during which he progressively uncovers his "feminine condition." In this movie Michel Blanc allowed himself to be directed as few comedy actors would have dared to be seen, and the chances he took for this role make other comedies on homosexuality rather timorous attempts. Michel Blanc earned the award for Best Actor (along with Bob Hoskins for Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa*) at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival.[27] A few months later Blanc was also nominated for the 1987 César Awards for Best Actor, and the movie for Best Film (Miou-Miou was nominated for Best Actress, Blier himself for Best Director, Best Scenario, Serge Gainsbourg for Best Music, Claudine Merlin for Best Editing, and Dominique Hennequin, Bernard Bats for Best Sound).

The solution to appreciating Blier's comedies can be found in his utilization of the absurd in his scenarios. Can a simple fictional love story between two men, Blier suggests, be written about a topic that defies ridicule and the absurd? When French audiences think of Blier's comedies, they often think of his idiosyncratic representation of women, but also his transcendent dialogues in an absurd universe and sometimes Kafkaesque (like *Cold Cuts*). Wicked, vulgar, consisting of aphorisms that have become cult lines, his dialogues hit their target because they carry with them an apparent simplicity which oscillates between realism and dreamlike. What Blier tried to capture in *Ménage* was the feeling of absurdity inherent in the human condition, independent of personal motives, emerging from daily life as an anecdote that relates to everyman's seemingly banal existence. One of Blier's objectives was to make a peremptory link between a comedic scene and a scene taken from quotidian life. He provided a constant spectacular dilemma, often depicting the French individual caught between adhesion and repulsion, assonances and dissonances. Following Blier's trademark, the film ultimately seems to hinge on those throwaway lines. One of the favorite sexually explicit dialogues can be illustrated with Bob's comparison between houses and women for a professional burglar: "Une maison dans la nuit, c'est comme une femme au lit, ça secoue, ça gémit. Et quand ça gémit, moi je m'introduis" (At night a house is like a woman in bed, it shakes and moans. And when it moans, I introduce myself). As paradoxical as they appear, the raw and unequivocal dialogues often saved the film in a series of scabrous situations when sometimes difficult to identify and participate in the comedy momentum. These crude dialogues included a unique blend of realistic surrealism where characters seem to be veering off their own characters, or talking as if they were actually outside the plot and commenting on it. Working out the permutations among the three actors with a schematic rigor, Blier never created an overdose of lyrical blend and consequently the audience is never really given the chance to empathize with any of the protagonists. Comedy *auteurs*

like Betrand Blier brought a revealing "sense of measure" in the direction of their actors by dosing out the element of comedy with a spur to reflection without imposing a pattern toward a judgment of morality of any sort.

IV. Gender Roles and Comedies of Manners

When considering female filmmakers such as Agnès Varda, Coline Serreau, Nelly Kaplan, and Diane Kury among others, a question comes to mind: What have they contributed to an already ultramasculinized French cinema? Often the answer that comes to mind is alternatives to the dominant representation of gender and gender roles on the screen, and, for the most part, a voice to different female characters. However, Coline Serreau's point of view on cinema and its relation to feminism is not unambiguous. When the French journal *Le Film Français* dedicated a special on the "cinéma des femmes," in 1977 the filmmaker declared: "I am not a woman who does films, I am someone who does films." This assertion was all the more relevant as it was made in the 1970s, a decade that saw the rise of the first female authors and directors on a national level. During the prolific time for militant and politically engaged cinema, the statistics were rather eloquent: the number of new filmmakers between 1969 and 1980 was five times higher than in the postwar era. Moreoever, the number of women in the Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques (IDHEC) created after World War II—since then replaced by the École Nationale Supérieure des Métiers de l'Image et du Son (FEMIS)—accounted for only 4% of all candidates in 1974.[28] At the

Figure 3.2 André Dussollier, Michel Boujenah, and Roland Giraud in *Trois hommes et un couffin* (*Three Men and a Cradle*, 1985) by Coline Serreau

beginning of the Mitterrand years, women directors were still growing in number and were no longer regarded with the same inquisitiveness as in the previous decade.

Coline Serreau's *Trois hommes et un couffin* (1985) focused on French attitudes toward gender roles and how they may be changing as reflected in humor. The story was a sentimental vaudeville in all aspects, which illustrated the proximity of comedy to the concerns of shifting gender roles in French society. Organized with a rapid pace, the film gathered the ingredients of a great comic success: humorous situations alternately provoking sympathy and moments of gravity. Serreau inverted the archetype of the traditional couple by a spectacular redistribution of the roles and as film critic Emmanuel Schwartzenberg wrote in *Le Figaro* at the time of the film's release: "It is the first time in the history of cinema that a baby really plays a role, and the leading role."[29] This American-style comedy, although generated on a small budget, won an impressive series of awards: in addition to being nominated for the American Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film, it won the César Awards for Best Film, Best Scenario, and Best Supporting Role (Michel Boujenah). The American remake, Leonard Nimoy's *Three Men and a Baby*, shot in 1987 (with Tom Selleck, Ted Danson, and Steve Guttenberg), though not critically acclaimed, was also successful at the American box office and was followed by a sequel, Emile Ardolino's *Three Men and a Little Lady* (1990).

In *Trois hommes et un couffin* three confirmed bachelors, Jacques (André Dussollier), Michel (Michel Boujenah), and Pierre (Roland Giraud), live together in a luxurious Parisian residence in the Marais district. One evening at a party held in the apartment, one of Jacques's coworkers asks him to receive a package for him. Having barely had the time to inform his friends, the following day Jacques flies to Asia for a week. The package turns out to be a small baby girl left on the doorstep with a note saying her name is Marie: the daughter of Jacques's ex girl-friend Sylvia asks him to take care of the baby for six months. Both men react with the expected panic followed by their disastrous first attempts to take care of the baby until the return of Jacques the following week. They spend countless hours at the local pharmacy trying to figure out which kind of diapers and baby formula to buy. Their high-flying life of womanizing, drinking, and partying all of a sudden comes to a halt as they spend nights wide awake to tend to Jacques's hitherto unknown infant. To make matters worse, two individuals come to claim the package, which the trio has been unwittingly harboring. Relieved, they give them the cradle, but realize that the package that the men were waiting for is another one. After discovering that the package contains drugs, they quickly understand the misunderstanding and recover, in extremis, the little baby girl. However, they are now under the constant surveillance of the police

drug squad and dealers who want to recover their goods. After Jacques returns the three men begin to organize their lives with the baby. As they grow attached to her, they become accustomed to having a baby around the apartment after discovering that their old ways no longer seem appealing. Months later Sylvia comes back and recovers her daughter. The three bachelors are happy to resume their normal lives again but they soon miss Marie. Much to their surprise the doorbell rings again as the mother seeks help once again from the three dads.

Three Men and a Cradle was innovated in terms of a comedy of manners. With its inverted situations, this film addressed a nascent topic 20 years ago: the breakdown of the family and unconventional upbringing of a child. The subject was treated well in tune with the times, surfing on the fashion of new social practices: the changes in the roles of man and woman in marriage, the relationship with a child, and equality toward domestic tasks. Inscribed in the growing sociological trend of the 1980s that saw not only divorce as a growing phenomenon but also men starting to claim their right to paternity, the film did not seek any political claim and avoided the trap of appearing demonstrative. By illustrating that some models of French society had become antiquated in terms of family dynamics, it did not impose a didactic conclusion, as most satires would have done, which in itself was rather new at that time. Serreau's modus operandi was visible: showing the flaws without censuring the existing norms of traditional family, while confirming the legitimacy of the traditional family values and its representation as being included in the average French family. The real message of the film was the positioning of its characters within modern society. Though far from unconventional, the protagonists legitimate their way of life by displaying their visible happiness, and their well-being and lifestyle that are eventually jeopardized by the established norm. The rigid image of traditional family ends up being the reason of its own obsolescence. Coline Serreau successfully confronted traditional stereotypes about gender roles and class by placing an unconventional family (as well as nonexistent) as the main platform of the plot.

The 1980s can therefore be seen as a defining moment in Serreau's cinematic career, as many film critics hailed her as a promising comedy author and director. Although labeled a feminist director by film scholars, Serreau was reluctant to be classified into a stereotype. Far from such conventions, Serreau simply aspired to show that the family discourse could be examined differently. This was a key feature of her work since her cinematic endeavors offered alternatives to the dominant models of family and couple. By trying to eradicate inherited roles on screen, *Trois hommes et un couffin* answered the concerns shared by many feminist views regarding the family and gender roles. But Serreau's discourse was not to put the macho protagonists up

against the wall. Conducted with a wry humor, this apparently pseudo-feminist comedy gently pinned the macho world and its patriarchal structure, as well as the already accepted forms of social categorization. Examples of humor in the 1980s that targeted a primarily female audience (as well as male), which also exacerbated the gender gap through the objectification of gender roles, were not common. These shifts were trending toward an eventual cultural change that resulted in a narrowed gender gap and eventually terminated the traditional machismo ideal as politically correct. Serreau's choice for comedy of customs, offered, without any malice, a laugh at men fixated on female conquests. But she also knew how to break this selfish varnish to discover the dormant paternal love ready to awaken (desires of fathers toward their baby and nostalgia for their childhood were the center of the comedy dynamics). By sowing misunderstandings inside a story staged like a Hollywood comedy, the scenario gradually moved deeper on the instinct of paternity, and turned the tables around. Decades later, *Trois hommes et un couffin* has kept all its impertinence because of the universality of the topic: the cowardice of men when they must meet their responsibilities. But unlike certain feminist authors, Serreau displayed some affection for her characters, and did not hesitate to give them a second chance. At the beginning of the narration the scenario portrays three men symbolically free of any women in their lives (one-night stands being the absolute maximum). All of a sudden they are willing to go beyond their self-declared misogyny to approach their newfound masculinity living in a utopian community where the daily agenda is dictated by the baby's needs. To respond to this situation, Jacques decides to hire a professional nurse, much to Pierre's dismay. In this iconoclastic situation, the new nurse (Dominique Lavanant) is received with spite in her new job by Pierre, who uses an aggressive male-dominating discourse to deter her from living in the apartment while nursing the baby. She replies to his attacks with unexpected wit:

> *Nurse*: J'attends que vous me montriez ma chambre.
> *Pierre*: Mais je sais pas où Jacques va vous fourrez. Ça c'est son problème. Peut-être dans sa chambre. Mais je vous préviens: on est trois à vivre dans cet appartement et on est tous de sacrés baiseurs!
> *Nurse*: Mais Monsieur, chacun vit sa vie. J'espère bien que vous n'avez pas fait vos voeux de chasteté; à votre age ça serait une pitié. Moi, je m'occupe des enfants, un point c'est tout. Et pour ce qui est de la baise, j'ai ce qu'il faut chez moi, merci beaucoup.[30]

Women's voices in French humor, as well as the shifting positions on masculinity, have without a doubt changed since the mid-1980s. However, at the time the rise of women's independence and emergence into a style of

comedy that mostly promoted male-centered issues was something of a novelty and more importantly somewhat of a commercial risk among popular audiences. It appeared from the reception of the film and its critical success at the César Awards that men's perception of manliness and machismo was rapidly shifting. In other words, the endearing plot could have given some desire of paternity to the most misanthropic spectators. The evolution of all macho characters was also spectacular. From self-centered egotistical bachelors, they all became loving and altruistic pseudo-fathers. Michel and Pierre unknowingly describe Jacques's lifestyle (and their own) in their conversation about how to reach Sylvia, the mother of the baby:

> *Michel*: Pourquoi veux-tu que j'aie son téléphone? J'ai jamais entendu parler de cette nana, moi.
> *Pierre*: Mais t'as pas son téléphone? Son adresse? C'est pas une fille que tu connais?
> *Michel*: Mais absolument pas, je vais te dire: si je devais connaitre le téléphone et l'adresse de toutes les petites amies de Jacques, je serais secrétaire à plein temps, moi![31]

Later in the narration, the same character in question, Jacques, visibly inspired by his own picaresque itinerary, changes his views on gender roles by asserting: "Moi si j'étais Dieu, si je pouvais refaire le monde, je fabriquerais Adam à partir d'une côte d'Eve" (If I were God, and I could redo the world, I would make Adam from Eve's rib). If the manner in which French people spoke with one another were a reflection of culture, then shifts in speech patterns would indicate that cultural changes were also taking place. The cultural changes were facilitated by new legislations, which gradually took into account the possible commitment of the father toward the child. A new type of fatherhood slowly emerged, where the father's role was increasingly more defined not only as an essential financial provider, but also as a caring and emotional daily support (without having to lose his own sense of authority). Far from the conventional organization of society relying on a social, sexual, and economic hierarchy and imposing prohibitions through political correctness, all three protagonists of the film, once self-absorbed bachelors, can no longer follow the patriarchal codes and eventually begin to ignore taboos as they evolve toward new gender roles.

V. The Newcomers of French Comedy: Le Splendide

The Parisian comedy scene has been for years represented by the *café-théâtre*, an emblematic place born in the wake of May 1968 and soon to become a genre of its own, mainly characterized by its close rapport between actors and

the public and for the large part dominated by its format for improvisation and spontaneous humor. In the 1970s the *café-théâtre* was instrumental in the momentum French comedy gained on stage and also on the big screen. Created by Bernard Da Costa, it first appeared in the late 1960s under the name "Le Royal." As its name suggests, the *café-théâtre* was a local venue with a small framework that obliged comedians to adapt their comedy format. The singularity of the *café-théâtre* was to provide a place of artistic freedom where stand-up comedians were able to express themselves without taboo, and develop a close intimacy with the audience using gags mainly based on the reality of quotidian life. Over the years many *café-théâtres* established themselves in Paris, totaling 20 locations by the end of the 1970s. The genre's success can be attributed to the dire need for renewal in comedy theater of the 1960s. In the early 1970s new actors like Coluche, Miou-Miou, Romain Bouteille, and Patrick Dewaere emerged on the comic scene giving birth to one of its most famous theaters (from a former factory in the Marais district), which later became the notorious Café de la Gare, soon to be followed by Le Splendid in 1970, Le Vrai Chic Parisien established in 1971, Les Blancs Manteaux opened in 1972, and Point-Point opened in 1975. The *café-théâtre* has seen its ranks of actors and comedians today such as Josiane Balasko, Gérard Depardieu, Jacques Higelin, Elisabeth Huppert, and Sylvie Joly. Some years later, in 1975, a new team of comedians—Martin Lamotte, Gérard Lanvin, and Thierry Lhermitte—emerged at the theater called La Veuve Pichard.

The years following May 1968 can be best described as a decade characterized by all-out creativity. Pierre Richard's *Le distrait* (1970), Claude Zidi's *Les Bidasses en folie* (1971) starring Les Charlots, Yves Robert's *Le grand blond avec une chaussure noire* (*The Tall Blond Man with One Black Shoe*, 1972), and Jean Yanne's *Tout le monde il est beau, tout le monde il est gentil* (1972) were all successful comedies but also belonged to a film industry facing growing competition from television, thus relying more than ever on comedy. As a reflection of the sociopolitical context of an ambiguous time, both permissive and severely restricted by authorities, French comedy of the 1970s wanted to be critical and subversive. Consumerism, politics, sex, and religion (in short, all major national taboos) started to be parodied on a regular basis. In 1976, veteran comedian Louis de Funès in Claude Zidi's *L'aile ou la cuisse* (*The Wing or Thigh?*), gave the leading role to a young actor who was triumphant on stage as a stand-up *café-théâtre* comedian: the star of the new comedy style was now Coluche for the next ten years to come (until his premature death in 1986). The same year, the Parisian *café-théâtre* called Le Splendid was finalizing its new show. The troupe included four friends who met in high school in Neuilly-sur-Seine: Christian Clavier, Michel Blanc, Gérard

Jugnot, and Thierry Lhermitte. They were later joined by Josiane Balasko, Marie-Anne Chazel, Bruno Moynot, and Claire Magnin. They only implemented their roles in the form of comedy that they saw. Collective writing was the rule: everyone worked both their own dialogues and those of the other characters. Unlike the Café de la Gare (Romain Bouteille, Coluche, Patrick Dewaere, and Miou-Miou), which was born after May 1968 and was openly leftist, Le Splendid was hardly politicized and its humor was not subversive. But it was effective enough to attract the attention of producer Yves Rousset-Rouard (*Emmanuelle*, 1974) who chose the young filmmaker, Patrice Leconte. Author of comics, the filmmaker had only one feature film to his credit (*Les vécés étaient fermés de l'intérieur*, 1976) with Coluche, which proved to be a national flop. So with virtually unknown actors, nonchalant camera scenario, and inexperienced artistic direction, how can one explain the success of his next film *Les bronzés* in 1978?

Heir of the old variety show (and not to be confused with cabaret, one-man-show, or the *Théâtre d'improvisation*) the *café-théâtre* was designed to entertain popular audiences, hence the short length of the skits. Because of the unpredictable nature of the comic challenge, the genre was never considered an authentic protagonist of the comedy scene, though it was the springboard of many comic artists before entering the world of cinema. The *café-théâtre* prepared actors for the camera, as it forced them to carry their voice, which implied a certain way of acting. This was one of the reasons why comedy directors, since the explosion of *café-théâtres*, came there in search of some young talents rather than going to the Conservatoire or Cours Simon. But the closeness to the public, plebiscited by *Les bronzés*, was due to the spontaneity of acting in their original theater play called *Amours, Coquillages et Crustacés.*

How could this cinematic adaptation of a *café-théâtre* comedy, which was slammed by critics, played by all unknown actors, and directed by an inexperienced filmmaker, become a cult film? *Les bronzés* satirized the business of tourism in exotic destinations and in particular the lucrative industry of large beach resorts such as Club Med. Coincidentally Le Splendid attended Club Med several times and its observation was first hand. At the time they were part of the guests' forums and had to perform shows in exchange of a week's holiday, hence their familiarity with the world of Club Med. In a beach resort in the Ivory Coast, the village of Assinie welcomes its new vacationer for the week while the ubiquitous friendly staff have one objective: to encourage meetings. Bernard (Gérard Jugnot) comes with his wife Nathalie (Josiane Balasko). Jean-Claude Dusse (Michel Blanc), a clumsy bachelor, comes more for socializing than to rest. Jérôme (Christian Clavier) is a pedantic doctor who believes he is indispensable to the society while never losing a minute to

Figure 3.3 Michel Blanc in *Les bronzés* (*French Fried Vacations*, 1978) by Patrice Leconte

flirt. Gigi (Marie-Anne Chazel) is a young urban woman who seeks a little naive love and, while believing in one-night stands, she also believes in the existence of Prince Charming. Christiane (Dominique Lavanant) is a beautician from the *province*, and would like to possibly meet a significant other. They are all welcomed by Popeye (Thierry Lhermitte), one of the hotel staff, who is best known as an inveterate womanizer. With the caricature of average French vacationers, Patrice Leconte offered a scathing satire with real sets, real situations, and real people so that mainstream audiences were able to project or recognize themselves. The success at the box office was probably due to its mirror effect, and this was perhaps what some from the press disliked. If the film offered no utopia their creators at least provide on their characters a keen and lucid gaze. More than mere caricature, they have a sense of sketch.

At the origin of the success were the word and the writing stage. Collective writing revealed itself as the modus operandi of the company, and exploded in their third feature film, adapted from another of their rooms: *Le Père Noël est une ordure* (1982). The writing sessions took place, in turn, at each other's homes. Much more caustic than *Les bronzés*, this extravagant fable confronts, on Christmas Eve, two volunteers of the conformist SOS Détresse-Amitié. This vein of comedy evoked some of the Italian comedy in Ettore Scola's *Affreux, sales et* méchants (*Ugly, Dirty and Bad*, 1976). The text, more than ever, was essential while characters, though comical, never attempted to become spiritual. With comedy filmmaker Jean-Marie Poiré, they did *Papy fait de la résistance* (*Gramps Is in the Resistance*, 1983, 4.1 million admissions)

written by Clavier and Lamotte, then they continued their solo careers, often shared between acting and producing. All of them took along some of their common culture, this "spirit of Le Splendid" found in Michel Blanc's *Marche à l'ombre* (1984), Gérard Jugnot's *Une époque formidable* (1991), Hervé Palud's *Un Indien dans la ville* (*Little Indian, Big City*, 1994) produced by Thierry Lhermitte, and Josiane Balasko's *Gazon maudit* (*French Twist*, 1995). The legacy of Le Splendid can be best described as having permanently established in just five years the new faces of French comedy in cinema, including emerging female personalities such as Josiane Balasko, Anémone, or Dominique Lavanant. In the field of popular culture where inventors of a new "school" commonly feed from all those preceding it, establishing new artistic filiations is a perilous exercise. Le Splendid borrowed the "esprit décapant," grinding but not really bad, and the sociological portrayal caricaturing French characters with diametrically opposite social backgrounds.

Could the tourism industry and in particular Club Med have asked for better publicity? The Club was intended to bring people not knowing each other to a remote vacation and share onsite activities. Based on this observation, Le Splendid decided to deliver its vision of this unexpected melting pot. The starting point was simple: to create multiple reflections of the French microcosm of the time. From regular employees to doctors, the vacationers find themselves far from their social environment to live only in the context of the holiday. But the original idea especially allowed to articulate, to magnify the line of caricature and inject the worst traits, and to fully exploit the *filon*. It was in any case an unflattering portrait of the average French, as France discovered in 1978 with this social satire. One observation came to mind: no one can escape the scrutiny of the authors since the satire concerned everyone. Let us start with Popeye, the handsome gym instructor, a macho character incapable of diplomacy who collapses as soon as his wife cheats on him. Bernard and Nathalie, a couple in distress, apparently free to seek adventure as part of the provocation (their relationship eventually finds their balance in the sequel *Les bronzés font du ski*), who behave like the *nouveaux riches*, spending their money in filth and vulgarity and a questionable taste for art. *Phénomènes de société*, or cult films, both films of Patrice Leconte were emblematic identities of French comedies of the 1970s that took full advantage of the fertile period of liberalization of customs, and still hold up their reputation despite the test of time due to their strong bond with reality. Both comedies were able to describe with acuity the world of mass vacationing, experienced by millions of French people each year, in which viewers recognized themselves not in its "beaufitude" concept, but in the identification of common situations.

Whether under the sun of the Côte d'Ivoire or in the bitter cold of the French Alps, Patrice Leconte's sequel *Les bronzés font du ski* (1979) remained

faithful to this *franchouillard* humor that exuded from the group. In the ski resort of Val d'Isère where Jérôme, Gigi, and Popeye now work during the winter season, the vicissitudes and setbacks accumulate for the group. Nathalie and Bernard, reconciled and quite *nouveaux riches*, own a time-share. Jean-Claude, always looking for a soul mate, tries desperately to attempt new female conquests. Christine, the beautician, appears with her latest conquest. Popeye spends his time getting humiliated by his wife and her new lover, the owner himself. Gigi takes care of a local crêperie while her husband Jérôme heals wounds and bumps in his medical practice. Jean-Claude plans an idyllic ski lesson with a beautiful ski instructor (by studying all instructors' pictures), but instead inherits a senior instructor with an unfriendly military style, whose favorite pedagogical phrase repeatedly emphasizes "le planter de baton" (sticking the poles in the snow). The days and nights are filled with mundane activities, unusual encounters, stories of failed love, hope, and despair, but all these mishaps are not able to change the friendship. The characterization of the protagonists, interestingly enough, did not promote new aspects, but had a comic structure which was clever but within normative bounds. The exception is the character of Popeye, who is now much less self-confident than before since he is regularly humiliated by his wife who cheats on him with his cousin. From scene to scene, the activities of the group are depicted as little more than a series of sight gags and zany antics, of amusing pratfalls and one-liners delivered with poise; it is not surprising that such clowning, as eminently performed, seemed so compelling. For instance, Jean-Claude, who is obsessed with female conquests, gives his personal advice to Bernard:

> Ecoute Bernard, je crois que toi et moi on a un peu le même problème; c'est-à-dire qu'on peut pas vraiment tout miser sur notre physique . . . surtout toi. Alors si je peux me permettre de te donner un conseil: oublie que t'as aucune chance, vas-y fonce, on sait jamais, sur un malentendu, ça peut marcher.[32]

Despite the anticipated content of the conversation, the humor functions. Though the spectators are acutely aware throughout the scenario (as well as the first film) that Jean-Claude is simply playing the part of a cartoonish libertine, his on-screen desperate tactics are always a foreplay before fading into humiliation. The film plays on the observation of people in an unusual environment for whom cult scenes are only previous adventures in the sun. The viewer feels that this troupe of "Le Splendid" was a fan of improvisation for complicity and cohesion existing between the various actors having as much fun as the audience. The ensemble acting is credible, suggesting a wealth of depth to each character without overwhelming them with detail. During an

outing for off-track skiing, the group gets lost before being rescued by mountain farmers who offer them a rustic dinner, at the end of which comes an infamous liquor served in honor of their departure:

Jérôme: Ca déboucherait un chiotte, ça!
Le paysan: C'est pas une boisson pour mauviette!
Popeye: Qu'est ce que c'est que cette merde?
Le paysan: C'est de la liqueur d'échalote! Mais, c'est relevé au jus d'ail, parce que l'échalote toute seule, ça serait trop fade.

The hard liquor called "la foune," a rustic shallot liquor mixed with garlic juice in which is soaked the remains of a toad, is a parody of the famous scene of *Les tontons flingueur*. Here the promiscuity of mountain refugees turns out to provide the best comedic momentum of the scenario. The comedy of the sequel was based on coherence as this time all of the gags were linked very consistently. Through the rigor of an outstanding interpretation, any situation that may have seemed trivial takes an irresistible magnitude at the level of derision and comedy. In addition, the story's structure, though deprived of a solid main plot, was built on a series of attractive events though this time less composed of a series of sketches pasted one after the other with no real consistency. As the players were better characterized and as the action was more focused on them, the protagonists of *Les bronzés* never looked inserted somewhat artificially into the story.

Leconte used the camera humanistically with a sheer, engaging, and entertaining panorama of humanity and feeling. He manages to encompass it with a spontaneous and affecting comedy style, never schematic or cerebral. In 1982, Le Splendid, however, gave up the project of a third part to concentrate on the film adaptation of *Le Père Noël est une ordure*. The *Bronzés* series became a cult comedy in France, as it sold 2.2 million tickets during its initial theatrical release. To bring the young generation into cinema, it had to renew the genre and against all odds Le Splendid met again in 2006 with Patrice Leconte to shoot *Les Bronzés 3: Amis pour la vie* (*Friends Forever*, 2006). The film recorded 10.3 million entries, a substantial performance when compared with the first two releases but the audience often confessed their (more or less expected) disappointment.

VI. When Comedy Challenges French Institutions

The police institution, as one of the most customary reference in vaudeville and popular culture, has often played a crucial role in comedy. One of the most purely entertaining comedies of its era, Claude Zidi's *Les ripoux* (*My*

Best Partner, 1984), featured a good mix of action and comedy, producing a maximum amount of laughter and thrill in equal measure. This comedy focuses on a streetwise police inspector, René (Philippe Noiret), who leads a quiet life for the last 20 years in the 18th arrondissement of Paris, between his girl friend Simone, a former prostitute, and his work. He essentially collects bribes from minor criminals, kickbacks of all kinds, and minor racketeering from local businesses, which allows him to pursue his passion for horse racing. The routine of the cop is going to be upset by the arrival of police inspector François Lesbuche (Thierry Lhermitte), who is extremely scrupulous when it comes to following procedural guidelines and certainly naïve. The rookie is being trained by the wily veteran narcotics detective who explains that one must have a little dirt on to survive in undercover work. As the first day passes, viewers find out more and more about just how much dirt René is wallowing in and it becomes tougher to figure out what is a lie and what is the truth. He sets out to corrupt his young partner and, after a difficult start, he eventually succeeds. First ambitious, young, provincial, fresh from the police academy, full of and brimming with high moral principles, François gradually accommodates to the new style, becoming corrupt like his senior colleague and eventually surpassing him.

The strength of the film lay in its good-natured humor, which allowed it to win popular French audiences on a large-scale, but on the other hand it was critically acclaimed as a rare accomplishment for a comedy. Director Claude Zidi, as an eclectic filmmaker who was known for touching many topics in varied tones, was the main reason behind the success of the film (César Award for Best Film and César Award for Best Director for Claude Zidi in 1985). Already a veteran of comedies, Zidi observed that all the films featuring protagonists who bent the rules and who at times were forced to break them were actually depicting public servants as derelict in their duties, such as the one Noiret portrayed. However, the sequel, *Ripoux contre Ripoux* (*My New Partner II*, 1990), predictably did not regain the verve of the first comedy. Another sequel was later made, *Ripoux 3* (2003), also less successful as by that time the buddy cop's dynamics had become too commonplace to strike again. Zidi's contribution to French comedy is as impressive as Gérard Oury's or Francis Veber's as he was able to screen famous comedians such as the group of Les charlots in *Les bidasses en folie* (1971), followed by *Le grand bazar* (*The Big Store*, 1973), Pierre Richard in *La moutarde me monte au nez* (*Lucky Pierre*, 1974), Coluche and Louis de Funès in *L'aile ou la cuisse* (1976), *Inspecteur la Bavure* (*Inspector Blunder*, 1980), *Banzaï* (1983), *La totale!* (1991), and *Astérix et Obélix contre César* (*Asterix and Obelix vs. Caesar*, 1999). Claude Zidi has been one of the standard-bearers of the so-called

Figure 3.4 Philippe Noiret and Thierry Lhermitte in *Les ripoux* (*My New Partner*, 1984) by Claude Zidi

cinéma du samedi soir (mainstream commercial French cinema that normally never gets distributed outside France).

Films on police corruption have granted the public an intimate look into a very low-visibility and mystifying phenomenon, shaping the way French people think about the police institution and the potentially deviant behavior it carries. The original French title *Les ripoux* can be translated as "rotten cops." The term is from the verlan lexicon, a type of urban street slang where syllables, or letters, of words are pronounced backwards ("ripoux" is an inversion of "pourris," which means rotten). René continues to challenge the newcomer, showing him the real underbelly of Parisian streets as he takes him through places where no junior detective has gone before. René establishes his authority right from the start when he asks François to observe him. From here, René maintains the upper hand with François and forces him to do assignments that he knows are wrong. François's ethical principles contrast in attitude with those of René, who feels that any attempt to do justice is justice, even if it corresponds to the law of the street. To say that René's police procedures are unorthodox would be an understatement. René is a streetwise, tough cop who uses fists and intimidation before he uses his badge. Then the picture dwells on dueling ambitions: François striving for permanent assignment to undercover work and René constantly conning his rookie partner.

Following a failed attempt to rob a pimp off his money, both cops are about to be apprehended by the police:

> *René*: Ça serait trop con de tomber tous les deux, alors qu'il y en a un qui pourrait s'en sortir.
> *Pierrot*: Hein?
> *René*: Laisse-moi t'arrêter.
> *Pierrot*: Ben pourquoi moi?
> *René*: Parce que c'est moi qui ai eu l'idée.[33]

For many spectators of popular cinema, it is through films that certain ideas about crime and criminality may be transmitted. Consequently the difference between entertainment and reality is not always clear, making it all the more important for viewers to recognize the intersection of criminal justice and popular culture. The film was not a series of generic gunfire and chase sequences. It asked the compelling question of whether it is possible to effectively fight crime without descending to the level of the criminal. In addition it asked the following questions: Can an idealist like François be a warrior and protector? On the lower depths of the street level, what is the difference between good and evil? While these questions added relevance to the comedic discourse, the plot, rarely gave an easy answer. There is a deluge of comedic scenes played out like a carefully designed morality tale in which the upright hero must be dragged through the most ghastly conditions, be exposed to the most venal influences, and fight powerful temptations to boot, all while the audience is being entertained.

Thanks to a riveting and intense plot, *Les ripoux* displayed just enough action to satiate viewers from popular audiences who usually enjoy the action drama genre (rarely tired of the long litany of actions films in the growing presence of large multiplexes throughout France). Although the film was less strictly an action film than a comedy, it did not lose its crucial and central comedic dynamics by allowing René a series of nonstop gags. In view of his broader role, his brashness was as well suited to detective work as to sweet-talking his way out of trouble most of the time. As paradoxical as it may appear, Noiret came closer than ever to being able to carry the comedy single-handedly, despite the presence of an excellent supporting cast directly imported from the comedy genre (Lhermitte was a full-fledged comic actor with roles in films such as Patrice Leconte's *Les bronzés*, Bertrand Blier's *La Femme de mon pote*, Jean-Marie Poiré's *Le père Noël est une ordure* and *Papy fait de la résistance*, and Jean-Loup Hubert's *La smala*). René makes François an idealized young man who toughens up first for the wrong, then the right,

reasons as he realizes he must trust his own instinct and principles. François bursts out: "Je viens peut être de province mais faut pas me prendre pour plus con que je suis, hein?" (I may come from a provincial town, but don't take me for dumber than I am). François is arguing against René's methods while providing the viewers' politically correct point of view. The casting kept the tempo loose in front of the camera, and the chemistry felt between the actors definitely showed on screen. Nominated for the César Award for Best Actor, Noiret confirmed to be comedy's newfound revelation, bringing a convincing improvisational style, a blend of street-smart, core intelligence, and good physical presence that made for a comic hero worth watching and listening to every word he uttered. Noiret proved here that he was as fine an actor whether playing compromised evil or noble, roles he usually took on (*Il postino* [*The Postman*] or *Cinema Paradiso*). He initially seduces the audience soothingly smoothing over his radical actions with his recurrent rhetoric. As they drive around the popular district of Paris on François' first day on the job, many locals wave at René and he answers, to François's bewilderment, with his signature line: "Ben, ça fait 20 ans que je suis là. Je les ai tous arrêtés au moins une fois. Ça crée des liens." (It's been 20 years since I was here. I have arrested all of them at least once. It creates bonding). The 18th arrondissement is known for its multiethnic background with the presence of Africans and North Africans, in particular in the Goutte d'Or district, famous for its marché Barbès. The only moment of noncomedy for Noiret is balanced with the presence of Simone, who offers her advice on how to handle René's new recruit. As an ex-prostitute she claims to know men even better than doctors: "Écoute, moi les bonshommes, je les connais mieux que les psychiatres, parce que moi, je m'allongeais sur le divan avec eux." (I know men better than psychiatrists do, because I would lie down on the couch with them). The plot is also incidental to Noiret's verbal humor and a few physical gags. The story involves something about the aforementioned bonds and smuggling. Noiret makes himself a target in order to get the goods in the operation. Thematically, as expected, the film deals mainly with the father–son dynamic, something that has obviously been covered countless times in other comedies like Pagnol's *Marius* or Zidi's *L'aile ou la cuisse*. However, the cop context does give it a fresh twist, and allows for some amusing situations, for example, regarding the scene when François proudly brings to the police station his very first pickpocket. The thief had just stolen a purse from an old lady and was caught by Thierry seconds later. He presents him to René who is about to type the police report:

René: Alors, vous l'avez trouvé où, ce sac?
François: Dans le panier d'une bonne femme!

René: Non, écoute, tais-toi, je t'en prie, laisse répondre Monsieur. Ce sac, vous l'avez trouvé dans la rue?
Pickpocket: Euh . . . Oui?
René: Voilà. Vous l'avez ramassé?
Pickpocket: . . . Oui?
René: Et à ce moment-là, vous avez aperçu Monsieur, et vous lui avez demandé où se trouvait le commissariat de police le plus proche.
Pickpocket: Oui?
René: Oui! Coup de bol extraordinaire, vous tombez sur un flic sympathique qui prend la peine de vous accompagner jusqu'ici.
Pickpocket: Oui.
René: Voilà! Eh ben bravo! Parce que c'est triste à dire, mais y a très peu de gens qui ramènent les objets trouvés maintenant. Alors, si dans un an et un jour, ce sac n'a pas été réclamé, il est à vous. Alors vous signez là, s'il vous plaît.
Pickpocket: Et je peux partir?
René: Mais bien évidemment![34]

René is the central character around which gravitates all of the comedy dynamics. Although for much of the storyline viewers are unsure as to where the tumultuous policeman is heading, it remains mesmerizing just to follow his lead. René rants, howls, fights, and always lectures at the conclusion of each situation, whipping back and forth between being jovial and fearsome. He is unpredictable and entertaining—two of the best elements a comedy character can be. With *Les ripoux* the French comic buddy cop film was born (however, very few imitations followed to this very day except for comedies like Alain Berbérian's *L'enquête corse* [*The Corsican File*] or Gérard Jugnot's *Pinot simple flic*). Despite the novelty of Noiret's middle-age lust and Lhermitte's mature adolescence, the coincidences that have to pay off start coming into view. Unfortunately the film's climax is slightly anticipated by a string of coincidences and implausibilities that start to give the proceedings a contrived feel, and the gritty realism so carefully constructed over the course of the first part seems lost. The plot also suffered from a few *clichés* of the action thriller genre: an unlikely agreement between the two protagonists to rob the drug dealers, an ending that almost lost itself in fistfights, guns, and car chases. But, like great comedies should, it left popular audiences with unfinished views and material for debate and prospect for a possible sequel.

Despite its structural flaws, *Les ripoux*'s relevance cannot be disputed as innumerable high-profile scandals involving police officers at all ranks have again placed the law enforcement institution, and police corruption in particular, under the public spotlight ever since. In an imperfect world, police corruption may very well be considered a simple subdivision of fallible humanity and that the tyrant one knows may be at times preferable to the

tyrant one does not. *Les ripoux* leaves one of its characters on a precipitous, ambiguous ledge (Noiret) and another unambiguously transformed (Lhermitte). One may never know if comedy has offered an inspiring role in tackling police corruption and in putting into place strategies to detect, investigate, and eliminate corruption within its ranks; the boundary between "corrupt" and "noncorrupt" activities appears difficult to define, primarily because it is an ethical problem. While police corruption cannot simply be explained as the product of a few "bad apples," some areas of law enforcement are more prone to corruption than others, and René's tribulations are the best examples. If it is true that from the spectators' perspective, Zidi's comedy may not offer any easy answers, its delicate questions remain open for the viewers to decide, but the performances of both actors, along with a consistent script, real urban setting, and fine direction make *Les ripoux* one of the best comedies in French cinema.

VII. Pierre Richard and the Renewal of Burlesque Comedy

Since its beginnings French cinema has counted many comic actors among its ranks. If the names of Louis de Funès, Bourvil, and Fernandel come to mind immediately, critics and film historians often compare Pierre Richard and Jacques Tati before anyone else to actors like Charles Chaplin, who also created the image of the archetypical unlucky and misunderstood character. Such a comparison, which is probably the greatest honor for every comic actor, is all the more significant knowing that Pierre Richard became a comedian by default as he was told that he was not good enough for tragedies (as one may argue that sensitivity was not one of his traits). Since Pierre Richard had always loved burlesque movies, he started his career in Yves Robert's *Alexandre le bienheureux* (*Very Happy Alexander*, 1968) playing a small role. But he felt closer to Americans like the Marx Brothers, Buster Keaton, Jerry Lewis, and Danny Kaye as French Pierre Etaix. He came to burlesque by performing in many Parisian cabarets, in particular in a duo with Victor Lanoux (*Cousin, cousine* [1975], *Un éléphant* ça trompe énormément [1976], and *Nous irons tous au paradis* [1977]), which led Yves Robert to immediately identify his comedy potential. With a strong idiosyncratic comedy style, Pierre Richard was the most recognized comedic figures of the 1970s. With the sudden death of two giants of comedy, namely, Bourvil in 1970 and Fernandel in 1971, Pierre Richard was granted a new space to manage in French comedy, which partly explained his national success in Yves Robert's *Le grand blond avec une chaussure noire* (1972), Claude Zidi's *La moutarde me monte au nez* (1974), Francis Veber's *Le jouet* (*The Toy*, 1976), and his own *Je suis timide mais je me soigne* (*I'm Shy, But I'll Heal*, 1978). The pseudo

revolutionary aspect of his character which was his trademark during the 1970s gradually disappeared to give way to a more conformist character in the following decade, due to his association with Gérard Depardieu in Francis Veber's trilogy *La chèvre* (*The Goat*, 1981), *Les compères* (1983), and *Les fugitifs* (*Fugitives*, 1986), as well as Yves Robert's *Le jumeau* (*The Twin*, 1984). Pierre Richard often played roles of burlesque characters and dreamers, blundering and bouncy, but often charming, such as François Pignon and François Perrin in the films of Francis Veber. This was one of the first successful screenplays by Francis Veber, who went on to write the screenplay for *La cage aux folles* and many other successful comedies. Richard's humor can be best described as a comedy of character conjugated in the first person, handling slapstick and wit with equal aplomb, and whose fertile imagination triggers disaster after disaster. The common denominator of all his films is the absence of unawareness that surrounds the protagonist as he evolves around the countless disasters that he causes, thus adding to his comic appeal given that according to Bergson: "A comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself."[35] Just like Tati's *Mon oncle* a decade earlier, Pierre Richard's first film as a director and actor *Le distrait* (1970) was an entertaining critique of some of the advertising methods used at the time. Inextricably associated with the ubiquitous stylized silhouette of his main character, the actor's traits were to some extent symptomatic of the growing alienation and increasing lack of intimacy among French people, as rural exodus resulted in the growing role of anonymous city suburbs taking on new sociological forms. *Le distrait* brought a new dimension of the comedy landscape in France offering different forms of well-orchestrated gags with a pace leaving no respite to the viewer. The film combined elements of a slapstick and romantic comedy, but more importantly included a visually effervescent dimension. However, the dialogues were also convincing: the puns and absurd replies developed a very particular style that was tender, but never wicked humor. One recalls the influence of the great masters of silent film, Chaplin and Keaton. This popular film became Richard's signature role, and he often used the character's name in subsequent comedies always giving the appearance to renew the popular burlesque tradition in France contrasting with the comic *cinéma de papa*.

The plot follows the tribulations of Pierre Malaquet (Pierre Richard),[36] an eccentric and absent-minded young man, hired by a large advertising agency Jérico for the sole reason that his mother, Glycia (Maria Pacome), is the mistress of Alexandre Guiton (Bernard Blier), the actual company CEO. Gifted with a vivid imagination, sometimes of bad taste, Pierre is unable to adapt to the real world, so he opts for his own fantasy world. He is convinced that shocking ads filled with dark humor are the most powerful and he likes to include themes of death and violence in some of them. While shooting a

commercial ad for a new toothpaste, he asks a young woman to pretend to faint in the street; bystanders start arguing about how to help her and some rush by her side. As a handsome young man gives her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, she comes to her senses right away and recites the ad slogan out loud. But this scene degenerates into a street fight, causes the intervention of the police, and to make matters worse it becomes a media scandal. Enraged TV viewers gather around the agency's building to express protest. Guiton understands that it may ruin the agency's reputation and finally decides to send Malaquet away to one of his agencies in the United States. On board the plane, right before takeoff, Pierre goes searching for restrooms and somehow gets out of the plane, which takes off without him.

Though poeticizing the human environment, Pierre Richard's *Le distrait* was a reflection on the industrial society of the post 1968 era, especially on the difficulty of living in modern spaces. Pierre Richard's work was replete with images of the modern France (post 1968) that seemed prevalent in the modern technological life of the early 1970s. The film's comic assault was directed against the reduction of spatial and cultural experience to a global world of technology and consumerism. Not so much interested in depicting the alienation of people, Pierre Richard was able to transform the difficulty of living into something comedic. The character of Perrin, like Chaplin in *Modern Times*, lives in a reality controlled by rules that he does not understand and therefore lives like a child who simply and without being aware breaks them. The result is a comic one, even if the topic of the film is not always intensively comedic. The protagonists in the film, which is set in a modern Parisian advertizing agency with its glass staircases and shinny chromed elevators, grow almost indistinguishable from one another, lost in the world they manipulate. In some respect, the character of Malaquet is the consummate outsider looking in. While he is not totally inept at modern life, his character has nevertheless a poetic look at the details that inform such a world. But François Perrin is also an antidote to the overly aggressive and cynical view that takes technical or material progress for granted. Perrin's confusion works well as a vehicle for modern technology and gadgetry. He is shy and unassuming, and always out of place. This is what the viewer gathers by seeing him going about disoriented and interacting with people and things. However, Malaquet himself shows no antipathy toward technology. He is simply amused by it all.

Throughout his filmography, most characters played by Pierre Richard have been used as referents to suggest the confusion of modernity. But another recurring theme in Pierre Richard's work is that of confusion. He pokes fun at what appears to be a humanity lost in its own glowing material progress. Yet the film does not offer an ideological format in which to reject

technology or science. Instead, he cites examples of how human beings have become, whether consciously or not, dependent on consumerism. Part of this confusion—not alienation, as some more politically minded critics would argue—comes about due to the dynamic and vibrant nature of the modern world. And thus spectators see Malaquet as possessing the most characteristic quality of modern man: adaptability. It highlights the protagonist's inability to fit in or comply with professional expectations. Despite his efforts, he fails to conform to the situation, which in this instance is the smoothly regulated running of the agency, again recalling the impact of capitalism in France. After the national and commercial success of *Le distrait*, his following film—as both filmmaker and actor—was *Les malheurs d'Alfred* (*The Troubles of Alfred*, 1972), which almost did as well as the first one (with 1.3 millions admissions) just before he became the emblematic François Perrin in Yves Robert's *Le grand blond avec une chaussure noire* (1972), which more than doubled the commercial success (3.4 million tickets). Emblematic of French burlesque cinema of the 1970s, the film promoted a comedic story of a normal man trapped into a world of espionage and intrigue, not only with comic instincts but quite unexpectedly a slight political edge. The film is filled with misunderstandings and unexpected situations in which Pierre Richard's characterization fuels the manic energy that powers screwball comedy. The head of the French secret services, Louis Toulouse (Jean Rochefort), is compromised by his deputy Milan (Bernard Blier) in a case of double agent. This conspiracy led by Milan aims to discredit Toulouse in order to take his place. But Toulouse, having discovered the plans of Milan and to prevent rivals from closing in, sets up a trap. For this, he decides to use a stranger, anyone in the crowd chosen at random among travelers arriving at the Orly airport, and identifies him to his rival as a master spy who must be followed at all costs. This unknown is chosen by random because he wears a black shoe on a foot and a brown on another—François Perrin (Pierre Richard), a clumsy and unsuspecting violinist. Milan immediately falls into the trap and deploys a team of spies to follow Perrin and begin a series of attempts to find out what Perrin knows. But his normal, even sometimes bizarre, behavior further destabilizes Milan. While Milan thinks he is privy to top-secret information, he attracts him to the bed of his female agent, the beautiful, sculptured, femme fatale Christine (Mireille Darc), to get pillow talk. Instead, convinced of his innocence, she falls in love with him. The film ends as it began, at Orly airport where both fly off to Brazil.

At first, film spectators see a quirky character that is witness to a multitude of simultaneously occurring phenomena. But as the film progresses spectators begin to see that Perrin is at the center of these commotions, perhaps not necessarily physically, but through his ability to draw the viewers' attention to

them. In a startling scene, Christine greets Perrin at her door in a demure high-necked black-velvet dress (from high fashion designer Guy Laroche's creation), then turns around and suddenly reveals that the dress is backless, displaying an ostentatious buttock cleavage. One may argue that Pierre Richard, as a comedy author and actor, may very well resemble Tati in one particular aspect: both filmmakers depict the world-as-spectacle. Pierre Richard equally displays a poetic respect for the chaotic contingencies of human reality. Both, who favor directing and acting in their respective projects, visibly express their need to promote human existence as if always in motion, as if moving through a labyrinthine maze with its ritualistic and timeless choreography. Roger Greenspun from the *New York Times* wrote in 1973 about the comedy style of the film and characterized it as "an obsession with repetition, with a mechanical continuation of gesture, seems to characterize French movie comedy from the greatest down to the very worst."[37] Motion is therefore the modus operandi of Pierre Richard's comedy. Motion is like a meticulous, macrocosmic tribute to Buster Keaton where, viewed from a distance, all actors seem to know where they are going: every comic character is in constant motion, people entering or leaving buildings, doors opening and closing, and so on. His films can be simply described as a poetic depiction of dynamic processes with an implicit sense of timing "au millimètre." However, in most of Pierre Richard's films the intrigue's plot too often offers the mechanics of comedy without the final effect in its expected form.

The innate sense of the comic Yves Robert, whatever the intention, gesture, or mime, is associated with an unbridled imagination, where irony, malice, humor, taste, and sense of hoax rhythm are balanced with tenderness and emotion. Believing that it is all a game, the character of Perrin unknowingly turns every threat and dramatic situation to a joke, a move that creates the impetus for nearly all the humor in Yves Robert's script. With a series of gags like this, one might reasonably assume that the director's latest endeavor was a parody of a spy film; however, it was more a satire than a spoof on the spy genre with its inherent mistaken-identity thrillers. Unlike many spoof comedies, the scenario offered a smart script that understood just how to play up all the tricks and contrivances of the secret agent genre to their best comic effect. While it is virtually not viable for the premise of a scenario based in a mistaken identity to sustain the length of an entire feature film, the film was able to do just the opposite by employing enough variations that, until the very end, remained surprisingly lively. Of course, it could be argued that certain situations in the film were so outrageous that it was as much an experimental scenario as a mistaken-identity parody, such as the scene where Perrin's zipper gets stuck in Christine's hair (a repeat of a successful gag used in *Le distrait*, two years earlier).

All the way back to World War II, French cinema has a strong record of producing comedies with style and edge. The reason why they are less well-known than French dramas is simply because international film awards tend to look down upon comedies and, as a result, few art house cinemas abroad will take a financial risk to distribute a French comedy. Instead, French comic films have been successfully remade for several consecutive decades. *Le grand blond avec une chaussure noire* (1972) and its sequel *Le retour du grand blond avec une chaussure noire* (*The Return of the Tall Blond Man With One Black Shoe*, 1974) ultimately inspired an American remake with Stan Dragoti's *The Man With One Red Shoe* (1985) starring Tom Hanks. Though well orchestrated, Pierre Richard's films kept settling for academic demonstrations of comic ideas and devices and if his films never failed at the box office, paradoxically they also rarely attempted any stimulating or even hazardous comedic originality.

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CHAPTER 4

French Comedy Today

Entering its last period, French comedy, as a cinematic genre, proves again that it can maintain a high level of originality in its productions with a firm belief in the idiosyncratic nature of its scenarios. Following the 1993 rebirth of the French cinema industry, the deregulation of media laws, and the subsequent greater presence of television, a growing symptomatic discourse of cynicism pervaded the comedy genre. The influence of stand-up comedy, television talk shows, the Internet, and their respective influence on the so-called communitarian humor brought about more changes than in the last several decades altogether. Today the new French cinematic humor is able to synthesize years of comedic experience into an innovative momentum, which combined with its social impact as it circulates via mass audiences, triggers an immediate response leaving no one indifferent among mainstream spectators. From now on, French comic actors will invest in a new mission, one to forge an unambiguous individuality based essentially on a new approach to modern France and the art of deciphering the new sociocultural precepts of a multiethnic society. Spectators are able to relate to and capture various stylized signs through individual or collective existence. Humor, therefore, is prompted by the spectators' own recognition in the comedians' roles. To paraphrase an expression by film critic Serge Toubiana, French comedies try to "fossilize the quotidian experience into the stereotypical."

I. Communitarian Humor: Ethnic Diversity and Cinematic Space

When considering ethnic humor as one of the main novelties in the French comedy landscape today, the need for its representation in anthologies and critical humor studies is apparent. Its lack of consideration may be in part due to the reluctance from film historians to examine race relations as a long-established phenomenon in France. In a similar way, many filmmakers seemed hesitant, until the 1990s, to take on the explosive subject of France's

colonial past, partly due to a governmental practice to enforce censorship and consequently temper the ambition of potential distributors and producers. Writing a comprehensive chronological survey of the development of the so-called *cinéma beur* is obviously beyond the scope of this book, but at the same time, this section will consider its development in relation to the popular success of ethnic comedy in France in recent years. Ethnic comedy must also be reflected in terms of its rapport with conventional comedy. After the two preceding decades, dominated by Louis de Funès (1960s and 1970s) and Coluche (late 1970s until the mid 1980s, until his sudden accidental death in 1986), the following period saw the decline of traditional comic stars in the late 1980s, bringing French comedy face to face with an unprecedented void. Detractors of ethnic humor often argue that its promotion in cinema and television serves to keep the minorities in place and thus to perpetuate, with varying degrees of subtlety and different forms of latent oppression. So this final chapter will attempt to answer the following questions: In what ways do French comedies problematize the representation of minorities and the *banlieue*? Do they adhere to standardized models or stereotypes established by earlier films in the 1970s and 1980s, or do they launch into new modes of portraiture? How do issues of French national identity intersect with the representation of *beur* identity?

The question of minority has been the subject of numerous discussions since the 1980s, a decade that witnessed the emergence of social unrest associated with chaotic confrontations between groups of ethnic youths and law enforcement officials in France. Following that decade, working-class *banlieue* and peripheral urban spaces have been more present in the studies of contemporary French culture, in particular film studies. In those early days *banlieue* comedy did not officially exist and the only type of representation was an incipient filmic type called *cinéma beur*, thus taking the role that was equally concerned with viewing social exclusions than fighting them. Used extensively in the media in the 1980s and 1990s to refer to the children of North African immigrants born and socialized in France, the phrase "beur" first coined in the late 1970s became part of the mainstream lexicon in the 1980s. While *beur* actors have often been cast with roles of marginalized victims, excluded youth, and/or delinquents in the years before 2000, the new trend of the *cinéma de banlieue* seems today to emphasize the dilemma of choosing between the right to integration and the right to ethnic diversity.

The main purpose for *cinéma beur*, most of which originated from the *banlieue* genre itself, was not to entertain, but rather to denounce social injustice and inequality and eventually focalize on the signs of the time. Historically, the revelation of a *cinéma beur* was marked in France in 1984 by the release

of Abdelkrim Bahloul's *Le thé à la menthe* (*Mint Tea*), Serge Le Péron's *Laisse béton* (1984), followed by Mehdi Charef's *Le thé au harem d'Archimède* (*Tea in the Harem*, 1985), and Rachid Bouchareb's *Bâton rouge* (1985). Later films like Jean-Claude Brisseau's *De bruit et de fureur* (1988) or Malik Chibane's *Hexagone* (1994) also continued the legacy of *cinéma beur*. These films often featured young protagonists of second-generation North Africans and were directed by filmmakers, many of whom were of Algerian descent, but living and working in France. For them making films, through compelling storytelling, was a way to participate in the collective memory of an entire generation of immigrants as motion pictures were a visible family album of the minority's social memory. At the time, French film critics hailed the films for their groundbreaking aspect arguing about their innovative representations of North African immigration: one symbolized by the verticality of the suburbs (from the backdrop of high-rise buildings also known as the infamous habitation à loyer modéré [HLM]) with an emphasis on popular working classes, and the other symbolized by the cultural/religious image.

Unlike other countries, French policies for integration have been promoting for years the concept that ethnic minorities had to assimilate the dominant Gallic culture as opposed to a multicultural society accepting minority cultures. A controversy over the Islamic hijab, known as the *affaire du Tchador*, took place in 1989, when three female students were suspended for refusing to remove their scarves in class. The different opinions emanating from high French legal authorities of the *Conseil d'État* and several French governmental officials of the time (deciding whether or not the scarf was a sign of religious expression and whether it was compatible with the principle of *laïcité*) fueled even more heated discussions and attracted media attention on a national level. The issue of ethnic relations once again dominated French society with the outbreak of a controversy, which was, for the first time, setting new perspectives in immigration. The opponents of the scarves underlined the integrationist notion according to which immigrants living in France were to accept secularism within the public sphere and the institutions of the republic. This debate persisted throughout the 1990s, and found a new media exposure in 2004 with the vote of the new law called "*loi sur le voile*" (in public schools) and recently the new law against the *burqa* (in public places),[1] thus drawing considerable attention from scholars, politicians, associations, and religious groups. Surprisingly, while the polemic was raging in mass media, comedy filmmakers and even stand-up comedians unexpectedly refrained from covering this controversial subject.

The notion of multiculturalism on screen first appeared in popular culture as a double-edged sword as it offered to some a possible benefit for a nation increasingly scoring under the demographic rate, but it was also perceived by

others as a potential menace to national identity. While these disputes took place in political and academic contexts (and have continued and grown exponentially ever since), they are also present in the field of popular culture today, as represented in ethnic comedies. The French government implemented different ways of steering clear from potential conflicts. One of these issues dealt with how filmmaking had been comprehended as a possibility for the ethnic minorities to make their cause observable. On the cinematic level, the young *cinéma beur* of the 1980s tended to focus primarily on a rapport with reality more than presenting a new type of filmic language or image. This cinematic trend rejected violence and its sensational representation in favor of intimacy, including the crisis of identity and human relationships, and also preferred inspiration from simple chronicles to sophisticated narrative constructions. A human condition seized on the spur of the moment, whose authenticity gave the story a true poetic force. A decade later comedies on immigration and minorities such as Merzak Allouache's *Salut cousin*! (1996) starring Gad Elmaleh were still on the side of reality rather than of the scenario: no slow motion, no special effects, no flashbacks, no overlays, and no postproduction editing tricks. After the year 2000 the trend seems to be inverted with comedies giving a large priority to their scenario, providing more visibility among mass audiences with a true capacity for entertainment, and demonstrating an ability to circulate where other genres failed to reach.

Cinéma de Banlieue

What is the origin of ethnic comedy? Though designating a precise origin in time and space seems a rather difficult task due to France's colonial past, the 1960s, which saw the decolonization period take shape along with the large wave of immigration, were the time when new kinds of racist caricatures flourished. As France was confronted by a large number of immigrants who struggled with the notion of assimilation, some French nationals aimed their jokes at North African newcomers and their lifestyle as one method of promoting cultural conformity. After the 1970s, a rather quiet transitional period, the 1980s witnessed the outburst of urban unrest opposing ethnic youths of *banlieue* and the police. The political climate of the society at the time was all the more tense so that a huge gap was growing between the social presence of immigrants and their own representation on screen or in the media. As a direct consequence of frustration in an economic recession, which weighed most heavily on the ethnic communities, the climate of extreme tension required repeated governmental interventions. The riots of 1981 (the Minguettes district of Vénissieux near Lyon) gave inspiration to the *marche des beurs* in 1983 when young people from the second generation

walked from Marseilles to Paris as a symbol of their goal for full-fledged inclusion in the French society. As this violence sporadically continued throughout the decade, the different governments under the two consecutive Mitterrand mandates considered ways to capitalize on the potentially dangerous situation and to eventually avoid the direct confrontation. One of these strategies, more or less successful, involved filmmaking and was viewed as a viable solution for the ethnic minorities to make themselves heard (initiated by the Minister of Culture Jack Lang). The idea was rather simple and straightforward: to utilize the medium of filmmaking in order to reach out to ethnic minorities and eventually provide greater acknowledgment by society. This was the end result of a long process of identification in the world of entertainment media as well as of a policy of "inclusion of diversity" promoted by the Conseil National de l'Audiovisuel (the National Advisory Board for Broadcasting). On the opposite end of the spectrum, French minority cinema was able to offer a critical viewpoint on the French institution underlining how cinema participated in, and added to, the current debates on cultural and social differences, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

At the end of the 1980s, and during the early 1990s, French cinema saw a new wave of film productions targeting multiethnic youth from the immigration community living in so-called sensitive zones, that is, areas surrounding large cities. Mathieu Kassovitz's *La haine* (*Hate*, 1995), released at the Cannes Film Festival, was emblematic of an entire generation and went beyond the frustration of social misrepresentation among *beurs*, which still more than a decade after the first violent outbursts remains unchanged: the high level of unemployment combined with the lack of opportunities and a feeling of stagnation reinforced the growth of delinquency and other illegal ways of earning quick money. The year 1995 marked the official birth of *cinéma de banlieue* as a cinematic category. Kassovitz's *La haine* created a new reflection on the existence of a specific ensemble in the French film industry as well as its appropriate label and designation. If the expression "*banlieue* film" (suburban cinema) remains more a characteristic inspired by the *Cahiers du cinéma*, the expression continued to be used in various periodicals during the remainder of the 1990s. According to mainstream audiences and film critics, most of these films maintained a rather pessimistic image of a world crippled by violence and crime, whether they portrayed preteen robbers or unemployed offenders. However, it was the release and critical success of *La haine* which contributed in establishing the semantic field which was desperately needed for this film genre, in large part due to its aesthetic and narrative innovations when compared to previous films representing French suburbs (developing symptomatic and phenomenological elements within its narratives). Following the lead of *La haine* several productions contributed to the new

genre with, for instance, Karim Dridi's *Bye-bye* (1995), Ahmed Bouchaala's *Krim* (1995), Jean-François Richet's *État des lieux* (*Inner City*, 1995), Thomas Gilou's *Raï* (1995), Malik Chibane's *Douce France* (1995), Paul Vecchiali's *Zone franche* (1996), Jean-François Richet's *Ma 6-T va crack-er* (1997), Jacques Doillon's *Petits frères* (*Little Brothers*, 1999), Djamel Ouahab's *Cour interdite* (1999), Kamel Saleh and Akhenaton's *Comme un aimant* (2000), Serge Meynard's *Voyous voyelles* (2000), Rabah Ameur-Zaïmèche's *Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?* (2002), Abdellatif Kechiche's *L'esquive* (*Game of Love and Chance*, 2003), Malik Chibane's *Voisin voisines* (2005), Audrey Estrougo's *Regarde-moi* (2007), Norah Hamdi's *Des Poupées et des anges* (*Dolls and Angels*, 2008), and François Dupeyron's *Aide-toi, le ciel t'aidera* (*With a Little Help from Myself*, 2008). Facing the danger of "imprisonment" in the eyes of mainstream audiences as the "other," ethnic comedy came out as the real novelty of the decade within the *cinéma beur* in a desperate quest to develop new strategies. While in the 1980s antiracism claimed "the right to difference" on a national level in order to resist the growing universality of the dominant culture, the 1990s saw "the right to indifference" claiming the choice to be the considered normal in a society theoretically based on plurality. *La haine* insisted on the strategic and political necessity of refusing the imperative to choose, for example, to be either *beur* or French. Its narratives capitalized on the fundamental contradiction of the rapport, which connected the immigrant from a formerly colonized place to an assimilationist culture.

In this social climate, ethnic comedies rapidly gave an impression of diversity and characterized French comedy under the label of ethnic minorities such as "beurs" and "blacks," which have made a noteworthy emergence in mainstream entertainment such as talk shows and television serials. From the early days of television shows like *Théâtre de Bouvard* (1981–1986) featuring some 30 comedians (with only one *beur*, Smain) and *La classe* (1986–1994), and later on Canal+ in the 1990s, minority protagonists were virtually nonexistent in the French cinematic landscape and when attempting to include themselves, took on a very minor role such as the Arab characters of the grocer in Etienne Chatiliez's *La vie est un long fleuve tranquille* (*Life Is a Long Quiet River*, 1988). Later on, taboo topics such as social and ethnic discriminations, racism, and nonhegemonic identities were directly promoted by a new type of stand-up comedy and no longer approached with the usual political correctness (stereotyped roles reserved for social positions or immigrants such as manual workers, housekeepers, nannys, prostitutes, maids, bouncers, musicians, dancers, etc.). It was no longer the *café-théâtre* tradition which gave momentum to social stamina and filled conversations and debates. Situational comedies and parodies gave room to authentic storytelling created by ethnic minorities, which, marginalized at first, eventually, in the 2000s,

offered a new type of subjectivity in comedy away from the usual hegemonic figure in French mainstream comedies. Racial and ethnic stereotypes were impersonated through shifting dialect moving alternatively from French to Arabic. In addition self-directed stereotypes were used to critique racism in France, and also ironically privileged the social vicissitudes of French *beurs* at the immigrant's expense. This process of disidentification with the newer immigrant promoted a distinction with the *beur* generation. Thomas Gilou's *Raï* (1995), Jean-François Richet's *Ma 6-T va crack-er* (1996), Jacques Doillon's *Petits frères* (1999), Djamel Bensalah's *Le Ciel, les oiseaux et . . . ta mère!* (*Boys on the Beach*, 1999) were among these. In all of these comedies the theme of suburban youth living with a profound identity crisis through the linguistic divide was a particularly sensitive issue. The notion of integration was first conceived as the result of an ethnic blend erasing the culture of origin, as well as cultural specificities. Consequently many filmmakers had to face the difficult task of avoiding ambiguous caricatures—ones of hyperbolic desire turned into an unconscious stereotyping and stigmatization.

Stand-Up Comedy

Along with the development of ethnic comedy in the 1990s, ethnic stand-up comedy slowly developed in parallel to reach full national viewership by the year 2000. The development of stand-up comedy in France (commonly referred to in French as "le stand-up") was fulfilling a double task: creating new spaces that were able to touch on the delicate issues of racial discrimination and extracting the comedy scene from the conventional context of French humor. Recent statistics have shown that ethnic humorists have benefited from viewing channels on television talk shows in the 1990s and even more after 2000, leading to the conclusion that national exposure through popular media served a double purpose: dealing with racial discriminations and suburban identity, as well as offering a platform for subcultural identities and racial issues. Most of the sketches of the 1990s established a sense of straightforwardness or legitimacy that took their most accomplished form 20 years after the advent of stand-up initiated by Coluche in the 1970s (in skits like "Le CRS arabe" in 1974). While Coluche paved the way for many stand-up comedians to address issues of racism and immigration in an indirect discourse, some counterexamples using direct speech instead created an unambiguous discourse, which was symptomatic of the state of racism in France during the 1970s. With comedians like Pierre Péchin ("La cigalle et la fourmi," 1975) and Michel Leeb ("L'africain," 1980), who perpetuated racial stereotypes, French comedy had to clearly take a new approach to denounce racism. Later comedians originating from the immigration surfaced with

comedian Smaïn in the 1980s, paving the road to deal unequivocally with ethnic, religious, and gender identities. Smaïn's idiosyncrasy was seen through the embodiment of hegemonic characters, often from French immigration. His many acts of ethnic self-impersonations emphasized the preconceived notion attached to the subject of ethnicity. His memorable skit "Un beur président" in 1986 represented an Arab newly elected as "Président de la République" and featured his opening speech with all of the expected stereotypes (Maghrebi accent, mercantile attitude, mixing the *tu* and *vous* forms, etc.), thus redefining for a moment a hegemonic vision of the French versus the Arabs transformed in self-derision. This ethnic comedy quickly favored stand-up comedians (a direct influence from America such as Russell Simmons's Def Comedy Jam in the 1990s) but also caricaturists and TV commentators of the newly created talk shows. Comedians such as Jamel Debbouze, Gad Elmaleh, Élie Semoun, and even Dieudonné were central figures of this new phenomenon, which promoted new ethnical identities performing across a variety of cultural and political contexts.

The creation of the Jamel Comedy Club (JCC) was the most emblematic movement. Created in 2006 the JCC offered an innovative comedy format, standing between a stage for TV *café-théâtre*, a talk show, and a variety program—a blend of several genres—and continued the cultural phenomenon with the promotion of countless comedians such as Amelle Chahbi, Claudia Tagbo, Thomas N'Gijol, Fabrice Éboué, Blanche Gardin, Le Comte de Bouderbala, D'Jal, Tony Saint Laurent, and Malik Bentalha. With a clearly recognized influence from Def Jam, JCC stands outside the French tradition of *café-théâtre*, which, for three decades, had been associated predominantly with white males of all ages. On the contrary the JCC is built with a reference to a youth urban culture, which emphasizes on the visual, with a direct influence on the pop culture present in the media and television. While the *café-théâtre* gave access to a wider range of comedians from a sociological point of view, it rarely put comedians from the immigration community into the spotlight. In return the JCC phenomenon used the so-called categorization of humor to give a springboard to an entire generation of unheard voices, which opened a space outside the hegemonic framework of French humor. Jamel's image as the product of a star system was concomitantly identifiable around a *beur* personality as well as an urban youth culture exemplified with the *banlieue*, a cultural heritage he utilized more than other *beur* artists of his generation. Jamel Debbouze was first an odd figure as a candidate for national success not only because of his marked ethnicity but also, to make matters worse, a disadvantaged physical presence (due to the loss of his right arm in a car accident in 1989).

While their respective one-man shows cover many different themes and social issues, the performance of race is often made explicit in their stand-up and remains unequivocally the main center of interest. Among them a new trademark appears as the common denominator: the rhetorical spirit of race-based comedy is such that racist viewpoints are endorsed under the momentum of the gag, such as Coluche's own personal position three decades earlier with his infamous "Le racisme, c'est comme les noirs, ça devrait pas exister" (Racism, like black people, should not exist). At the time this new type of assertion was difficult to fathom as it belonged to an array of racial caricatures and double-voiced discourses. However, today the ethnic stand-up comedy can afford contemptuous, even outrageous, social critiques and racial slurs that are normally proscribed in other film genres, making humor an important but often understated site of antiracist pedagogy. This self-diagnosis sarcastically gives them a successful exit strategy and a conclusion of the notion of inassimilable community members. The biggest asset of this new type of humor is the deconstruction of identity through the burgeoning of personal anecdotes that accelerates the individualization process of comedies and characterizes *beur* comedy (e.g., Frank Gastambide's 2012 *Les Kaïra*). Like Coluche, who was able to impose himself in the early 1980s as the spokesperson representing the discontent of various social groups, such as immigrants, homosexuals, and workers, hence transcending class identifications, the new comedy's modus operandi relies on a "consciousness" demonstrated by the outrageous discourse of its main protagonists and on the confrontation of a concentrated vertical power.

As an emblematic character, coming from the suburban areas often associated with social imaginations of unemployment, crime, and immigration, the JCC introduced storytelling by using the personal "I" and playing with stereotypes. With the shift of Parisian *café-théâtres* toward television sets, especially with Canal+ talk shows like "Le grand journal," JCC opened the way to first-person narrations like American stand-up. In this context, identity issues constitute the central part of the JCC comedy, which draws considerably on personal experience. Semi-autobiographic narratives, one of the most important contributions of JCC comedy, beyond their inherent quality for comedy, object and even confront the hegemony of dominant culture in French comedy, in a similar way that directors like Medhi Charef, Malik Chibane, or Karim Dridi had done in their own films (pioneers of *cinéma beur* in the 1980s). In addition, ambivalence is part of the paradox of race-based humor as it aims (in theory) at subverting a discourse of xenophobia despite its form and content, which seem to replicate it. Film critics commonly consider this type of comedy as explicitly looking at racism, violence, and crime in a new way, as an elaboration of complex and layered identities,

that is to say as the most pressing social issues of contemporary France. This new kind of humor created narrative shifts and verbal exchanges without precedent.

Ethnic Comedy

In today's France, one of the most visible types of humor in modern media is the so-called *humour communautaire* (or ethnic humor). It cumulates different levels of identifications and possible discriminations (on the basis of race, religion, and regional origin) and draws inspiration from the conflict triggered by the social and economic exclusion of young people from working-class backgrounds and urban suburbs, as well as the general feeling of frustration due to social conflicts like the absence of the right to vote for immigrants, the feeling of helplessness in the face of the aggressive capitalism, globalization, and alienation, and the tensions of north versus south with all of the generated antagonisms. With comedians from different ethnic groups (African, Beur, Jewish, and Asian mainly) and recently including women, the so-called ethnic comedy is composed of a multicultural collectivity in which ethnicity and race identify themselves as the common denominator of belonging and exclusion, followed by secondary subdivisions such as gender, religion, and sexuality.

The first generations of ethnic humor in the 1990s created a feeling of uneasiness as the subject represented an area of society that was not politically represented. Mini television programs like "Le cinéma de Jamel," live interventions on the set of Nulle Part Ailleurs, as well as the duo Omar and Fred, between 1996 and 1998, were also echoed in *café-théâtres* performances by Smaïn or Dieudonné, the first to resume the discourse on racism left by Coluche. Dieudonné, in his duo with Elie Semoun, reinvented the stereotype of the racist protagonist through anti-semitic and racist characters leaving some intriguing ambiguity on the mechanism of exclusion. One notorious example, now a classic of pop culture humor, occurred on March 29, 1999, when Jamel, a guest of the news hour with television anchor Rachid Arhab (the first news anchor of North African origin in France), ironized on the anchor's last name and imitated the journalist looking straight into the camera: "Bonjour, vous êtes bien sur le journal télévisé de France 2. C'est Rachid Arhab . . . y'a un problème?" (Hello, this is live from the news hour on France 2. I am Rachid Arhab . . . is there a problem?). As a mediator between two cultures, the comedian, in just a few seconds, was able in part to demystify the discourse of exclusion conveyed in the media for years. Today many politicians and associations disavow the classification of ethnic comedy and its conceptualization of humor and believe that social organizations based on

specific ethnic groups may result in a social fragmentation and possibly in a dangerous polarization of French society. To them the most detrimental dimension of ethnic humor is its inherent ability not to require its comedy source to have any connection to a specific ethnic identity: the comedian imagines that social marginalization alone, especially in light of its awareness and sensitivity, justifies a claim to a marginalized or oppressed status. Interestingly enough these comedians, when asked to define communitarian humor, tend to refute a labeling of their work that limits its potential universalism. Instead they are more interested to point out the innumerable instances of contradictions, as Nelly Quemener wrote:

> Contradictions trigger laughter around the "unexpected" and decompartmentalize stereotyping mechanisms. While playing with these contradictions inherently hybrid, comedians outline the discourses that have "subjected" their lives and point out the arbitrariness and artificiality of the categories they are assigned to. By triggering laughter, they transform the avowal, the contradiction, the stigmatizing element in way of existence and power.[2]

Though far from being exempt of criticism, ethnic humor proves to have a preponderant ability to address the real issue in regard to immigration and racism, as film critic Olivier Barlet noted: "French cinema simply reflects a permanent misunderstanding in our relationship with immigrants: a desire of both assimilation and *distanciation*."[3] Despite being of mixed race and taking a position that had the potential for victimization through discrimination and stereotyping, communitarian humor such as Dieudonné's promoted—on a second-degree level—a violent hatred toward specific communities, pictured as an invading population, and resorted to various stereotypical processes (eventually crossing the ethically acceptable boundaries as revisionism). Of course, the comic device relies on the theatricality of the comedian's discourse on racism and sexism and the demonstration of their respective arbitrariness. Despite its recent rise in popular culture, ethnic humor actually comes from an old tradition already visible in European stage comedy, for instance, the *commedia dell'arte* and the different accents present in Italy (Venice, Naples, etc.)[4] as well as the derisive humor on idiomatic expressions, intonations, pronunciation, and dialectal lexicon. Today twenty-first-century Paris, the capital of France, is in its own way a multiethnic transnational urban space comparable to medieval Italy. However, reducing communitarian humor to a homogenous paradigm, essentially expressing the divisions between foreign communities in France, is ignoring the different trends within this type of comedy. As Olivier Mongin noted, a large part of ethnic comedy is not directly based upon exclusion and alienation but rather on the

construction of an identity using ethnic discourses as metonyms of larger political struggles:

> This identity comedy draws its energy from a reality it contributes to transform. On the contrary, a strictly ethnic-based comedy limits itself to target the other, to set boundaries in order to distance itself from it.[5]

The so-called *comique identitaire* can be best described as a multiethnic comedy of integration, essentially allowing favorable perspectives for the future, featuring characters usually described in terms of both fictive and actual nature existing in parodies as well as in real life, and reminding viewers of the archetype of the social issue with a certain depth behind the protagonist. Coluche's famous skit title "L'histoire d'un mec" remains highly emblematic of the emancipation of the individual spokesperson of an entire community. This trend aiming to fight social and racial discrimination illustrated society's evils such as crime, unemployment, and the emergence of a street culture associated with the development of new sociolinguistically significant features. Today the JCC comedy serves to recontextualize the idea of language, culture, identity, and representation by emphasizing the structures of inequality and the systems of power that underscore lived experiences (mainly in *banlieue* vs French society).

Self-Deprecating Jewish Humor

Ethnic humor can also be self-deprecating. The view that Jewish humor is often self-deprecating and promotes self-derogatory jokes is widely recognized, as Jews, like the members of most other minorities, frequently tell jokes about their own group. Though many Jewish jokes present the narrative voice of comedy as neither hostile to their own people nor inclined to support the stereotypes, Jewish jokes play widely on stereotypes without fully endorsing them. One of the fascinating aspects of French comedy is its unique privileged rapport with the film industry as many production funds, despite the constant financial risk, regularly work with filmmakers in order to reflect France's largest minority groups—Arab, Black, and Jewish in particular. Directed by Thomas Gilou *La vérité si je mens* (*Would I Lie to You?*, 1997) was one of the most spectacular examples of the decade (the triple series earned respectively 4.9 million, 7.8 million, and 4.6 million entries). Characterized by a hypervisibility of ethnic satire and caricature in broadcasted media, *La vérité* series rehabilitated a traditional conception of comedy with a strong scenario and straightforwardness in the Jewish stereotypes it tried to sustain. Despite its delicate subject, presenting audiences with the

highly contentious issues of religion and race, the film was a success, as it cleverly utilized comedy as an arena for promoting the contradictions between and within racial/ethnic groups as well as the importance of narratives in the articulation of collective identities. In a multicultural France (or Paris to be more precise), ethnic communities are often attributed with political values and defenders of a so-called heterogeneous nation, which in many ways proves to be inaccurate and at times the opposite. Often celebrated (or criticized) as a city of pluralism and diversity within the nation-state, Paris is often the place that mixes fiction and reality and builds coherent, ethnically caricatured characters through multicultural representations. For this comedy to take place among the Jewish community, screenwriters Michel Munz and Gérard Bitton understood the value of this privileged location as the ideal place for a new urban mythology of diversity.

Eddie Vuibert (Richard Anconina) is unemployed and desperately walks the streets of the Sentier district in Paris with the hope of finding work. However, when a fight with a street crook leads Victor Belkassem (Richard Bohringer), a local wholesale fabric shop owner, to mistakenly believe him to be a fellow Jew, Eddie finds a whole world of opportunity opening up for him. Indeed his new mentor decides to hire him as a warehouseman. Eddie shows a knack for business in the garment field and rapidly rises through the ranks in the Jewish community and is promoted as sales manager. Keeping a low profile about his origins, Eddie pretends to be a nonreligious Ashkenazi in order to close in on Sandra (his boss' daughter played by Amira Casar), who is involved with the unscrupulous Maurice (Anthony Delon). During

Figure 4.1 José Garcia, Vincent Elbaz, Bruno Solo, Gilbert Melki, and Richard Anconina in *La vérité si je mens III* (*Would I Lie to You III*, 2012) by Thomas Gilou

the preparation of his upcoming wedding, Eddie must navigate the dangerous waters of learning new customs and unfamiliar behavior of Sephardic Jews until he eventually unmasks himself involuntarily in a comic fashion. He then unleashes a scandal and earns the wrath of Sandra. After having earned the friendship of a couple of young Sentier hustlers, Dov (Vincent Elbaz) and Yvan (Bruno Solo), he turns himself into an entrepreneur and sets up his own shop with them, which is not to the liking of Benzakhem. In the sequel, *La vérité si je mens 2*, Dov (this time played by a different actor, Gad Elmaleh), Patrick (Gilbert Melki), and Serge (José Garcia, a powerhouse comic actor) see their business struggling due to the competition of Internet start-ups. Out of desperation and with a business spiraling toward bankruptcy, Eddie has no other choice but to turn to the devious multinational EuroDiscount, a giant chain of departmental stores whose director is known to drive exceedingly hard bargains using less then ethical means. After their initial meeting, Vierhouten (Daniel Prevost), a cunning manager, maliciously turns down the manufactured merchandise, an unfair tactic that puts Eddie out of business, and to make matters worse he eventually plagiarizes their logo and distributes the concept across Europe. Reduced to sell on a market stall, Eddie vows revenge until the day he comes up with a potential coup against Vierhouten. After creating a fake textile company in Tunisia (an abandoned factory repainted for the occasion), Dov and Patrick invite Vierhouten to seal what appears to be the bargain of the century: 400,000 tailored garments at a low cost. Once the merchandise arrives at EuroDiscount, Vierhouten is present with his team to open the precious delivery. The surprise is devastating when they realize the scam: all of the items have been calculated in millimeters instead of centimeters (as stipulated on the contract), resulting in a huge number of useless miniature garments. The third and final sequel of the opus once again features a struggling Eddie facing off against economic tribulations and trying to survive among the growing presence of Chinese import/export companies installed in Aubervilliers, outside Paris. Like many Jewish textile businesses, Eddie had left the Parisian Sentier district for the up-and-coming Aubervilliers, a more prosperous suburb, where, however, competition is fierce with the Chinese wholesalers. Compromised in a case of counterfeit watches made in China, Eddie must explain to French customs officials the presence of an entire merchandise within his company (the merchandise was planted by a competitor). With the threat of seeing his company shut down, they have no choice but to head to China in order to cut a deal that may keep them afloat. In the meantime Eddie turns to Simon, an unscrupulous competitor who offers to "save" his company by buying it at an insignificant price. But discovering that it was this very competitor who had planted the illegal merchandise, Eddie seeks an audacious vengeance. He asks

Serge to convince Simon to finance a deal (of 800,000 pairs) of a revolutionary pair of sports shoes called "Whitcomb Judson" to be made in China. Once convinced, Serge and Simon go to China to sign the contract. Once the delivery takes place in Marseille, Simon is stunned on opening the thousands of boxes, only to find that all the shoes are left-footed. Devastated by the useless merchandise, Simon, who has lost a fortune in this deal, leaves Serge on the spot. But the scam is not over as the second part of the shipment (all of the right-footed shoes) arrives a few days later in Le Havre. To gain possession of this unwanted merchandise, Eddie makes a significant payment in Euros and gets ready to reassemble the pairs together.

Beyond the intriguing comedy and sophisticated scenario the trilogy provided compelling evidence on how French Jewish characters can be represented in mainstream French comedies. The series of *La vérité si je mens* provided a tangible and successful humor of trades using ethnic stereotypes. Capitalizing on the French Sephardic communitarism, Gilou continued his enterprise as a cinematic ethnographer of France's minorities. After *Black mic mac*, a comedy on the survival strategies of Paris's African immigrants (see Chapter 3), and *Raï*, a tale of French-Arab toughs unwisely released in the shadow of Mathieu Kassovitz's *La haine*, *La vérité si je mens* explored the multiplicity of Jewish identity and the extent to which the community can be defined not exclusively by ethnic "belonging" so much as cultural tolerance and monolingualism. The intersectional dimension of identity and citizenship led to a de-politicization of the dilemma thanks to the comic discourse. Christie Davies wrote: "Jokes are thermometers that help us to understand social reality; they are not thermostats controlling that reality."[6] Interestingly enough the film's comedic dynamics also provided a compelling commentary on discrimination, exclusion, and intolerance within the Jewish community. Several outrageous commentaries as a way of revealing the absurdity and irony of xenophobia practiced by older Jewish generations appeared in the scenes, in particular the issue of mixed marriage (with a non-Jew). The character of Patrick, madly in love with his new girlfriend and who happens to be a "goy" (non-Jew), asks Eddie for advice on either getting married to her now and proceeding to a conversion to Judaism afterward or simply waiting for her to be converted first and then getting married. To this, Eddie simply replies with a smile charged with meaning: "Je ne sais pas. Si tu l'aimes tel qu'elle est, pourquoi tu veux la changer?" (I don't know. If you love her as she is, why do you want to change her?). Other comments on the traditional value of Judaism provided a compelling reflection of ancestry and patriarchal as well as matriarchal Judaism. Eddie, who is invited for his very first Sabbath, has to answer many questions about his Judaism since he appears to ignore its most simple rules. Knowing that he can be exposed at anytime, he recycles

information that he has heard in the Sentier on Jews, eventually changing their names to appear more "French":

> *Sister*: Vuibert . . . C'est juif?
> *Eddie*: Vuibert c'est Weber [. . .] c'est comme Bensaid, c'est Ashkenaze.
> *Sister*: Vuibert c'est juif alors?
> *Mother*: Bien-sur que c'est juif, si il dit juif.
> *Sister*: Son père peut ne pas être juif. C'est des choses qui arrivent malheureusement. . . . Il est juif votre père?[7]

Eddie appears as the best vector of French homogenous views, as his discourse is neutralized both by his non-Jewishness and by his outsider position in the Sentier district. The laic-minded character of Eddie begins to reconsider his religious and ethnic allegiance and this reversion to his origins soon strains his relationship with Sandra almost to breaking point. The protagonist is subjected to a double challenge: he is himself the "other," as the only non-Jew in the story, and he represents the side of the "ignorant." Such performances focus on Eddie's provoking act and recreate a consensus in the condemnation through laughs of both his involuntary racist statements and his ignorance. The outcome of this consensus is a transfer of responsibility for discrimination and stereotyping from the collectivity of viewers to the representatives of the minority group. Eventually, the mainstreaming of comic denunciation of stereotypes and hyperbolic "racialization" leaves unresolved the hegemonic dimension of Judaism in France:

> *Eddie*: Est-ce qu'il y a des pathos dans le Sentier?
> *Dov*: Non . . . tu rigoles? Ils tiendraient pas deux mois les pauvres. Mais je connais un Arménien, remarque. Mais bon, tout le monde le prend pour un juif. Bien oui, c'est pas marqué sur son front qu'il est goy.[8]

While the story raised critical questions of race, origins, and religious practices, it also demystified the preconceived notion that community identity and physical appearance are codetermined. However, the small universe of the French Jewish culture, in particular the one evolving around the fabric and fashion industry of the Sentier, is purposely revealed from a privileged angle: from the point of view of an outsider who is desperately trying to make his way in this "foreign" world. Gilou's sure hand at directing large and exuberant crowds, already evident in *Rai*, attracted even more attention given the profound echo the first film has found among younger French viewers. Film scholars Sophie Grassin and Robert Sender commented on the image of the flamboyant Sephardic Jews in the sequel who despite their best efforts still

struggle to stay afloat in a world of devious multinational corporations. For them the sequel brought about a change in the notion of foreigner of the community: "Si dans *La vérité si je mens*! le rôle de l'étranger revenait à Eddie, cette fois, c'est la grande distribution qui tient cet emploi." (If Eddie had regained the role of the outsider, this time it would be the retail store industry that would hold it.)[9] Indeed as Eddie climbs the ladder of ambition, he takes advantage of opportunities that are presented to him. But at the moment he feels he has undergone a total osmosis with the community, though his identity is threatened from the outside, hence questioning the incommensurability between Jewish ethnicity and "Frenchness."

Critics have argued that the film's humor has remained uniformly chauvinistic in the three sequels. If an omnipresent aspect of the comedy is indeed the male-bonding element and the countless tribulations of the macho pranksters whether competing for female conquests or new business ventures, the story, however, underlines the constructions of gendered identities, concentrating on verbal exchanges around relationships between Jewish protagonists. Although the friendship between the men is the axis around which the storyline develops, the character of Serge is remembered as the comical wildcard, true emblematic flamboyant, emotive Sephardic Jew. Often compared to male-bonding comedy such as Yves Robert's *Un élephant ça trompe énormément* (*Pardon Mon Affaire*, 1976) and *Nous irons tous au paradis* (*Pardon Mon Affaire, Too*, 1977) the film put into the spotlight males and machos with a famous "Champion du monde" rally slogan.

The versatility of characters builds a satisfying context for the central story and characters, and the portrayal of their lifestyle is part of the comedic dynamics: for instance, Patrick lives in a luxurious mansion while his cousin, the "lovable loser" Serge, is a motorcycle delivery employee who still lives with his elderly parents, thus engaging in constant family fights. One of the most successful comic devices was the use of different languages in this ethnic comedy, which throughout the scenes underlined intergenerational conflicts and diverse notions of integration; it clearly exposed the gap between the generation of those born in North Africa (*juifs rapatriés*) and those born in France. As younger generations carve out new identities and languages for themselves, often in opposition to that of their parents, the story shows the important role of the family within the cultural framework of the community. Consequently the countless verbal exchanges through the prism of ethnicity, and specifically the conflictual verbal encounters, are illustrated, in particular, in the scene where Serge speaks to his mother on the phone unknowingly. The spectacular demonstration of socioethnic contrasts is reflected in the condensation of argotisms (and often vulgarisms) and by the presence of less frequent vernacularizations in favor of borrowing immigrant

terms like goy (non-Jew), pathos (Catholic), haich, meskine (unfortunate), kiffer (to like), makach or walou (nothing), h'mar (idiot from the Arabic word meaning donkey), and so on. There is an attempt to come to terms with the following question: Does the use of the spoken word in an ethnic comedy merely reaffirm the identity of separate communities, or does it rather function as a site for construction and reconstruction? The three films actually provide a version of their own as it clearly appears to popular audiences (confirmed by three consecutive popular endorsements) that transforming preexisting stereotypes and enhancing them through the manipulation of the master's language does both at the same time. The numerous and ongoing debates regarding the nature of French republicanism emphasize that some of the most effective recent attempts to promote a legacy of critical thinking about comedy/France in its connections to Jewish identity and national identity have been the center of attention for film critics who have provided many interpretations.

The Ultimate Ethnic Comedy: Les Kaïra

Similar in its format to *La vérité*, as a self-deprecating satire focusing on an ethnic group, Franck Gastambide's *Les Kaïra* (2012) was able to capitalize on a commercial success as well as focus its conceptualization on the struggles of *beur* youth to understand their social expectations. Unlike *La haine*, which portrayed urban youth in terms of fantasies involving guns, violence, and excessive action, *Les kaïras* just took the opposite route thrusting its protagonists into exaggerated idle situations. These characters can be perceived as actual tools for textual analysis exposing the mechanisms by which protagonists and narratives are presented to pop culture viewers through the comedy genre. In *Les kaïras* the rise of *beur* protagonists as comic characters is somehow deceitful because under the pretext of offering a more human and sensitive alternative to the traditional macho male, they may be perceived as acting as a Trojan horse for rampant misogyny, racism, infantilism, and reinforcement of male authority. The story takes viewers inside the universe of three friends: Mousten (Franck Gastambide), Abdelkrim (Medi Sadoun), and Momo (Jib Pocthier). They are three childhood friends who have always lived in the Parisian suburb of Melun. With their baseball hats, Americanized sneakers, and fake Lacoste sweatshirts, all three have the same problem: desperately single, they spend their days watching their own existence drain their lives, without motivation or ambition. All three dream of music, girls, and money until they find an advertisement in a magazine that offers casting to become actors of pornographic films. They think they have found their holy grail that will bring them success in life.

The format of the film came from the author–actor–director Franck Gastambide, a resident of Melun himself, who became popular with his series *Kaïra Shopping*, broadcast on Canal+ in 2008. Originally designed for the web, then promoted on Canal+, the *Kaïra Shopping* series, of which this film is an adaptation, organized in vignettes of two minutes parody snapshots of teleshopping broadcasts on TV (this time selling unusual items such as stolen wolves, stolen cars, fake police cards, witnesses for false testimony). Many commentators argued that the switch from TV to film format was a delicate move, as precedents have often faced losses in the comedy transfer. Another criticism of the film was its frenzied smoothing, perceived as an eagerness to erase all traces of subversion of a scenario that asked for just the opposite. However for all comedy filmmakers (the first long feature film for Gastambide) the risk with a film adaptation of a short program was to fall into the fairly predictable trap of sketches without much consistency. Nevertheless, the film provided a rather consistent level of comedy, a human condition seized on the spur of the moment, and whose authenticity gave the entire story a true prosaic force. While it seems very difficult to identify a common denominator for the majority of these filmmakers who have learned the basics of comedy on TV sets, it is, however, possible to identify a space within which the present *banlieue* comedy is located: intimacy, human relationships in small well-defined groups, and crisis of identity. It is a cinema of the allusive, the suggested *non-dit* (unsaid).

Directly inspired by commercial concepts, the comedy does not propose a specific sociological approach, but offers, however, a documented point of view to be shared. Objectifying life in the *banlieue* and discussing exit strategies

Figure 4.2 Franck Gastambide, Jib Pocthier, and Medi Sadoun in *Les Kaïra* (2012) by Franck Gastambide

outside its alienating boundaries are key bonding rituals in which the characters intend to engage. The narrative comprises vignettes, some of which include scenes of intense profanity (and at times unparalleled vulgarity). To a lesser degree, it contemplates life in the *banlieue*, with the trio refusing to acknowledge that they must resign to their own fate. For certain critics who saw more potential in this film, especially on the level of social commentary, it was striking how each scene, as soon as it addressed a sensitive topic (ethnic profiling, discrimination at night club entrances, repressed homosexuality, machismo big brothers, sexual misery, etc.), was abruptly stopped in its tracks in order to favor the plot and its logical progression, thus potentially influencing the viewers' acceptance of troubling social norms as an irreversible aspect of social life.

So is *Les kaïra* filled with gentle stereotypes, or does it highlight specific relevant features of a cultural trend? The suburb, emblematic neighborhood par excellence, is populated with these stereotypes, but these stereotypes can be seen through a different prism, like the angle of television shows, in which a menacing look can affect the viewer's response. To return to the two sides of the same stereotype, one can take the example of the ultra *clichéd* North African offender: whether amusing (in stand-up comedy) or threatening (on TV local news), the dual position is identical on a social level and the stereotype remains the same as the conveyed image, often uniformed, remains one of an idle and delinquent youth. In this particular instance, the present cliché of the neighborhood thug can be best exemplified by the character of Warner, converted for the occasion as a local rap artist (played by Ramzy) selling his music on the market and violently forcing passersby to buy his self-produced CDs: "Là, je te mets la chanson sur la prison, parce que je vais aller en prison un jour Inch'Allah!"[10] Thus the stereotype becomes caricature, which does not necessarily mean adherence to caricature itself, but it allows the greatest number of popular spectators to see the same narrative with a very different reading.

Does *Les kaïra* present a relevant and innovative image of the *beur*? Today, strong signs still persist, allowing the perception of a continuity of visual consciousness in the representation of Arab characters in French cinema. Film scholar Julien Gaertner wrote:

> What do we learn from French cinema in our relationship with the cinematic image of the Arab? First of all, that beyond sensitive developments, a large opinion remains, which regularly endorses the archetype built around the Saracen. Cinema transcribes the images that it draws from society and it re-injects them back.[11]

However, developments in traditional imagery, sometimes loaded with the weight of a turbulent history between the West and the Muslim world, face the difficult challenge of moving away from the orientalist speech (still unconsciously present) and a tenacious colonial imagery. With a humor based on denigration, or that vilifies people on the basis of social or ethnic identity, one can also analyze reactions to the film as an example of how humor can perpetuate social inequality with stereotyped roles reserved for social positions or immigrants as imagined in *Les kaïra*: salespersons, bouncers, musicians, dancers, and so on. The film used many common themes and a similar aesthetic approach to other comedies, but in particular it underlined the proximity of the ethnic minorities, whatever their origins. Through the story, it appears that both the political sphere and the filmmakers decided to de-dramatize the question of immigration through comedy. It therefore illustrated the policy of integration advocated by antiracism associations, where the specificities of ethnic culture were played down and the usual representation of negative youth avoided, projecting their anger toward people outside the *cité* of Meulun.

Urban culture is another stereotype, which indicates that the culture of neighborhoods has now become seminal in pop culture in terms of influence on the film industry, but also on television and advertisements. At one point in the narrative urban culture takes on a comical twist as the trio comes to Paris for a private "libertin" party in one of the chic districts of the capital. As they enter the old and luxurious building, their comment leaves no ambiguity of their cultural urban landmarks:

> *Abdelkrim*: Il est chelou cet immeuble. Y'a même pas de paraboles aux fenêtres. Ils ont pas la télé ici ou quoi?
> *Mousten*: Non, mais ça c'est parce que c'est un immeuble genre ancienne époque, genre Louis XVI et tout ça.[12]

The *banlieue* comedy also featured its protagonists as connoisseurs of visual media, such as films and comic books, and the emphasis upon visual consumption extended eventually to the unavoidable tendencies toward voyeurism with a keen interest in pornographic culture. While a great deal of *banlieue* comedy narratives conventionally involve protagonists shamelessly spying upon women, the conclusion of the story promoted the idea that if urban youths can imagine a desire, the potential for vivid imagination enables them to feel justified in committing acts of voyeurism as substitutes for real relationships. While relationships in *banlieue* comedies are almost always centered upon narratives of male bonding, a concomitant suggestion regarding homophobic repudiation of homoeroticism between closely bonded male

friends is made visible in the narrative from a privileged angle. At a rap concert, Abdelkrim is about to fulfill his dream of singing live. As he is about to get on stage, he decides to make a last-minute confession to his long-time friend Mousten. With an unambiguous allusion to homosexuality, he evokes in a confused elocution, his youth and early sign of his "difference":

> *Abdelkrim*: J'suis pas comme toi, j'suis different en vérité. J'suis né comme ça, j'y peux rien. J'ai découvert ça y'a longtemps. J'ai déjà perdu un pote à cause de ça; tu captes ça?
> *Mounsten*: Tu me fais flipper, je comprends pas.
> *Abdelkrim*: Quand t'es un rebeu dans un quartier, c'est pas possible à assumer ça, ok? Le regard des gens, de la famille, c'est chaud. Quand on matait les clips de rap ensemble, avec toutes les meufs, ben moi . . . je pensais pas aux mêmes choses que vous, mon frère.[13]

The comic relief intervenes seconds later as Abdelkrim begins his performance, which against all odds, is not a rap song but an R&B song, hence triggering the wrath of the entire public. The scenario cleverly juxtaposes homosexuality and music as a means to underscore the delicate situation of sexual orientation in the *banlieue* still today. The comedy successfully serves as a vector, involving two different views cutting across each other: one turned toward the concept of "otherness" in terms of sexuality in Muslim culture while the other remains immersed in a tradition that represents Arabs on the margins of society. During these episodes the narration insinuates a notion that is not expected in a conventional *banlieue* film: the pursuit of their own virility as Momo, Abdelkrim, and Mousten struggle in a world they have only dreamed of through the Internet. Through their limited lens, they strive to see themselves, in turn, featured as hip hop singers or eventually porn actors. The reality check is potentially so violent that they prefer to stay in their leguminous state rather than to confront their destiny. Many *banlieue* films' theoretical position rests, somewhat problematically, on the assertion that the image of the *beurs* is necessarily documented by their personal experiences of displacement. Comedy, instead, takes the concept from a different angle with a clear desire for appeasement and insertion. Film critic Olivier Barlet asserted that "French cinema simply reflects a permanent misunderstanding in our relationship with immigrants: a desire of both assimilation and distanciation."[14] Cynicism is also subtly evoked, with strong ties to stereotypical depictions of gangster culture. The three protagonists give a vision of the *banlieusards* which is somewhat facetious but also, in counterpoint, sad and hopeless. By making his protagonists credible caricatures of the world of the *cité* (the thug, the wannabe rap singer, etc.) Gastambide manages to insert

inside everyday situations a real comic power without a judgment of moral or value. His vision on the quotidian, not necessarily favoring the trio and their existentialist void, interestingly shifts toward Abdelkrim's sister Khadija (played by Alice Balaïdi), the only one who seems to want to get out of the present condition and who talks eloquently standing in sharp contrast to her brother's passive lifestyle.

Indeed one of the strong selling points of the comedy was its verbal performance, similar to *La haine* almost two decades earlier. As expected the countless argotic expressions and *verlan* lexicons were utilized throughout the film as a symbol of cultural membership and ethnic origin. The word "kaïra" is the *verlan* for "*racaille*" (the equivalent to riff raff), a French word which made the headlines in 2005 when Nicolas Sarkozy, the then interior minister, used the word on national television while visiting the city of Argenteuil following riots: "Vous en avez assez de cette bande de racailles?" (Aren't you tired of these hoodlums?) As paradoxical as it may appear *verlan* slang is often denigrated as a superficial jargon, without much culturally charged consistency, but in recent years this new language register has been gradually considered and eventually assimilated as a relevant signifier for cultural innovation in French popular culture. The omnipresence of *verlan* in talk shows and mainstream media is a true *phénomène de société* no longer an emblematic linguistic vehicle of suburban France. To assert their adherence to the emblems of urban culture in France, the protagonists use the in-vogue vernacular of the Parisian street slang as in the opening scene of the film: when they both challenge each other on their hypothetical female conquests:

> *Mousten*: Dis-moi juste le nom d'une meuf qui te kiffe pour savoir, puisque toutes les meufs te kiffent.
> *Abdelkrim*: Ta mère! Ta mère elle me kiffe!
> *Mousten*: Ferme ta gueule avec ma mère, sur le Coran!
> *Abdelkrim*: Ferme ta gueule avec le Coran, sur la tête de ma mère![15]

Conscious of the legacy of parody on younger generations *Les Kaïra* multiplied eccentric references, idioms, and slang phrases emblematic of antihero films of suburbs. A reference/tribute to Mathieu Kassovitz (whose name is inscribed on a bus shelter) is also a tribute to the filmmaker who led Franck Gastambide to think of the present project as a long feature film. For 15 years, French directors who tackled suburb themes have all suffered a comparison with *La haine*, and could not escape the confrontation. *Les Kaïra*, however, did not dodge this challenge, but rather anticipated the tension. The scene played by Vincent Cassel in *La haine*, threateningly speaking to himself in front of a mirror (in tribute to Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*), is

reproduced identically with a comical outcome as Abdelkrim is interrupted by his sister who needs to use the bathroom. With films like *La haine* and *Ma 6-T va crack-er*, the suburb had already inspired great dramas but never to the extent of a comedy of reference. In addition, one may recall that Kassovitz's success had interested all types of audiences, thus proving that *banlieue* cinema can be popular and have a successful mainstream audience. So why is the image of the suburbs treated so differently on the screen and in real life? Youth and *verlan* speakers, just like any other social group with a homogeneous practice, cannot accept the demand to bury their own identities by trying to speak like someone else. In the case of *verlan*, traditionally limited to the language of the *banlieue*, it is important to bear in mind that the simultaneous presence of different communities, all of which use different types of linguistic registers, results in a wide diversity of speech patterns. Like many earlier filmmakers, Gastambide's camera used cinematic representation to underscore the failures of an established sociopolitical system going through perpetual reforms, and the need for rethinking the notions of French identity. Despite the profound nature of entertainment, the comedy offered a serious look at the voice of *banlieue* characters, usually silenced as minority subjects, from French mainstream society.

II. From Stand-Up to Big Screen Comedy: *Les Inconnus'* Social Satire

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, TV series' such as "Les nuls" (an equivalent of "Saturday Night Live" with a more cynical tone) and "La télé des Inconnus" (entitled The Unknowns) were providing inspiration to an entire generation of stand-up comedians in French comedy. While "Les Nuls," a product of Canal+, relied more on an absurd style, "Les Inconnus," on the other hand, explored the universe of parody, deconstructing French society in every detail and its fossilized social archetypes with a humor that would be easily labeled today as politically incorrect. Skits like "Les chasseurs," a cruel satire on the world of hunters in France under the format of journalist investigation was a prime example of the cultural gap of traditional France confronted with the pace of modern society. The popularity of "Les Inconnus" culminated with the release of their first film *Les trois frères* (*The Three Brothers*, 1995), a mature comedy about three men in a crisis-stricken France, appealing to all strata of French society in search of broad social satire.

Three half-brothers separated since childhood are reunited at their mother's death. Didier (Didier Bourdon) is a part-time womanizer working as a security guard in a departmental store (watching women undress through a video camera placed above a fitting room), and living with a traditionalist

Catholic family; because he has no other option, he endures both their racist assertions at the dinner table and the growing pressure to marry their prude and unattractive daughter. Bernard (Bernard Campan) sells detergent as a salesman in local markets. Finally Pascal (Pascal Légitimus), the least struggling of the three, is a self-made yuppie bachelor working for a marketing agency (where every employee wears a ponytail after the boss' own style) and the only one renting his own apartment with a misunderstood modern sculpture that everyone takes for a coat rack. After being told of their inheritance they all meet for the first time at the attorney's office. Each of them begins spending his share of the money (one buys a 1957 Chrysler, the second roundtrip airplane tickets to Brazil for two, and the third makes his newfound fortune public at work saying that it is a result of his savviness of investing in stocks). A few days later they find out that they will not receive the will's money due to an expired deadline. Unfortunately the meeting takes place a day too late as the will stipulates that after this deadline all of the money will be bestowed to the state of Texas for the creation of an orphanage. Didier also discovers that he has a young son he never knew about. Now on the run they must take the child along with them due to the debts they cannot pay. To make matters worse all three brothers are now jobless, and wanted by the law. To elude their followers, they must improvise a journey across France, between stealing cars, leaving restaurants without paying bills, and wreaking havoc on the roads. Though the narrative could be best described as an unorthodox picaresque comedy, *Les trois frères* was reminiscent of the emblematic tone of the group while on stage in stand-up comedy performance through a highly recognizable succession of gags.

The solid script, the trademark of the group in stand-up comedies of the 1990s, ensured the film's popular success (it was the highest-grossing French film of the year totalling 6.8 million entries at the box office). In 1996 the film won the *César de la meilleure première oeuvre* (Award for Best First Work). The legacy of "Les Inconnus" is more than just brilliant comedy performed on stage or in front of the camera, but also an authentic cultural phenomenon as countless of their famous and witty *répliques* became part of French pop culture instantaneously, making the trio one of the most quotable sources of French comedy. Created in 1984 the group originally included five members (Didier Bourdon, Bernard Campan, Pascal Légitimus, Seymour Brussel, and Smaïn) and was known as "Les Cinq." In 1990 the group aired their satirical show on national television under the name "La télé des Inconnus." The comedy show was very successful among young audiences, who elevated them to stardom throughout France. Not only did "La Télé des Inconnus" secure two *Septs d'Or* (the equivalent of French Television Awards), they also won the Molière for Best Comedy Show on stage (the equivalent of the César

Award for Theater) and a video clip from the show, "Auteuil, Neuilly, Passy," won two Victoires de la Musique. As representative of a new generation of popular comedians imported from the worlds of television and comic theater, taking over French cinema screens and the "presse people," the group became the main comedic reference among younger generations.

The group's treatment of language is clearly one of the most idiosyncratic comic assets. During the scene when the attorney must explain to the three brothers that the heritage is no longer theirs, the language used as the comedic device echoes one of the group's most famous sketches about professional jargon ("Les languages hermétiques"/hermetical languages), illustrating that each profession is potentially able to abuse consumers with their very own jargon in order to avoid confrontation (e.g., a banker, an architect, a car mechanic, a Portuguese janitor, even the local priest using a confusing Latin vernacular!). In this precise moment of the narrative the comedy reaches its peak as the three men's minds are still on the money and their evolution from incredulity to total fury is unstoppable. The attorney, whose responsibility was to arrange this meeting before the will's deadline, is embarrassed and tries to bring the bad news to the three brothers without triggering a riot. For this he switches from standard French to legal jargon (heavily incorporating Latin formulae) every time the going gets tough.

Attorney: Aujourd'hui il se trouve que l'usufruit de votre quote part entière à diviser . . .
Didier: Excusez-moi mais je comprends l'histoire du jus de fruits . . .

One of the advantages of the parodic humor proprosed by "Les Inconnus" was its engagement in a merriment of political incorrectness with shameless inhibition. Their perspicacious ingenuity in their talent to crystallize and update the collective representations of France in all socioeconomic, racial, and gendered ethnoregional categories was drawing from an inexhaustible reservoir of stereotypes and caricatures. A witty punch line of the film was immediately redeemed by a memorable pun used in the hotel scene. The three penniless brothers must share the same bed of a cheap motel for the night. In this rundown building any whisper is immediately heard by clients of other rooms due to the thinness of the walls. To while away time the trio eventually engages in different types of conversations, one of them being their female ideal:

Pascal: Voilà . . . la femme idéale, c'est ça: les jambes de Cindy Crawford, les hanches de Kim Bassinger, les seins de Demi Moore, les lèvres de Michel Pfeiffer, les yeux de Sharon Stone.

Client: Et le poing de Schwarzenegger dans la gueule, tu l'veux aussi? (voice coming from another client who is trying to sleep)[16]

If the legacy of the group were to be summarized into one single aspect of comedy, their idiosyncratic trademark would be an outstanding ability to generate catchphrases that the general public, in particular younger generations of popular audiences, use in everyday life. The famous "Bonjour . . . tu . . . vas . . . bien?" epitomized the bourgeois and hypocritical greeting, followed with the song's catchphrase "Auteuil, Neuilly, Passy, tel est notre ghetto!" On the other hand, they produced a famous video clip on the *banlieue* to create a counter effect whose famous chorus "Et les keufs, et les meufs dans le RER, la banlieue c'est pas rose, la banlieue c'est morose" depicted the lack of originality of French rappers, as heavily influenced by American counterparts. The police, as an old fashion institution, and its tendency to operate with racial prejudice was ridiculed in the skit where the climactic moment is the comment of an officer on immigration in France: "La migration c'est les oiseaux qui volent; l'émmigration c'est les arabes qui volent!" The experience of race-related issues among popular audiences is in a large part cultural and linguistic. The room for an embedded visual content in racism issues stands far behind. Ironically, the world of French popular spectators, the comedians' main public, was depicted through a rather conservative touch and portrayed as racist, archaic, and mostly male chauvinistic with a clear emphasis on a locally centered mentality.

What remains striking and powerful in the scenes written by "Les Inconnus" was that popular audiences finally felt that everyone was potentially the laughing stock of everyone through, ultimately, a unifying laugher against society's woes, whether targeting regional accents (news anchor from Corsica, Marseille, Savoie, or Alsace), socioeconomic groups, or ethnic communities (the Creole sisters working in hospitals). Identification by others in turn usually stimulates self-identification and may condition new forms of social organization. Changes in French society today evolve a lot more through comedy, which may relegate other genres like dramas or documentaries to the background. Comedies with satirical undertones like "Les Inconnus" thus adapt better to social changes. The diversity of their background is not just used in the setup but establishes their personalities with a real depth. The center of interest was to depict the average characters expressing an average conception of society, a credit to the realism of the screenplay, especially when dealing with a comic commentary on the xenophobic, authoritarian tendencies of modern France. In the film, the character of Didier must undergo the xenophobic discourse of the future father-in-law without being able to express a dissenting view:

Charles-Henri: C'est bien la preuve que la France ferait mieux de s'occuper de ses propres misères, au lieu d'aller jouer les bons samaritains, à l'étranger . . .

Geneviève: C'est sûr qu'au lieu d'envoyer du monde sur la lune.
Charles-Henri: Ah mais c'est pas la question Geneviève ! Seulement en France aujourd'hui tout va à l'eau, on favorise les bons-à-rien, les parasites. Et ça rapporte à qui tout ça? Je vous le demande. Aux métèques, aux bicots, aux rastaquouères, j'ai pas raison?[17]

The Three Brothers also offered its share of physical comedy on a cinematic level, as some of the slapstick gags incorporated readily recognizable images from silent film comedy, such as Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid*. In "Les Inconnus" the revisionary approach to physical comedy revealed its own unique aesthetics as well as the cinematic slapstick's unnoticed potential to contribute to the comic discourse. The scene where a *huissier* comes into their apartment to sequester their belongings degenerates as the brothers begin to hustle him. The dispute continues and after pushing him around the apartment they eventually push him by accident into a bathtub creating a peak of hilarity. As the *huissier* grabs a plugged hair dryer he is electrocuted on the spot. This type of "body humor" should not solely be seen in terms of Rabelaisian celebration but also as a sardonic interpretation of the isolation of the modern individual against the tyranical presence of bureaucratic institutions. Critics praised the uninhibited laughter as well as the relative solidity of the story,

Figure 4.3 Pascal Legitimus, Didier Bourdon, and Bernard Campan in *Les rois mages* (*The Three Kings*, 2001) by Didier Bourdon and Bernard Campan

probably satisfied that the film avoided the trap of falling into an abundance of grimaces or anticipated physical jokes that have served for decades as the convention in French comedy. Drawing on contrasts between such films and "high-concept" comedies in the Hollywood mold, *Les trois frères* was able to implement its own elements.

The second opus of "Les Inconnus" dealing with film comedy was *Les rois mages* (*The Three Kings*, 2001). The film was for the large part, more than an escapist fantasy, a biting satire based on the impressions of three visitors attracted by Parisian life, pointing out the absurdities of contemporary society. Similar to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* where two Persian visitors travel to Paris, this comedy can be interpreted as a satirical analysis organized around the implication of modern society and its individualist component. The quest is, however, very much conscious of the contemporary issues of modern times, from economic crisis to the daily struggle of French society; even when not specifically referenced, they clearly underlined the form of rapid, yet powerful, evocations such as poverty, drugs, and crime. Regarding the sociological approach as the basis of the film's humor would be restrictive, but centering the observation on the role of the alienation of the individual as a social practice leads to deciphering some of the key elements of the narrative. Of course, the gaze of the "outside observers" can be confined to the narrow circle of subjectivity, and justifies the sometimes unexpected visions of a homogeneous society. However, the ironic ambition that is present in the film tends to harden the portrayal of the Parisian world depicted here as impatient, intolerant, and even violent.

Balthazar, Melchior, and Gaspard (Didier Bourdon as Balthazar, Bernard Campan as Melchior, and Pascal Legitimus as Gaspard) are traveling to Galilee to find Jesus. But upon arrival in Bethlehem, an unfortunate spacio-temporal miracle takes place and the three wise men are projected into the future to the year 2000 and at different places on the planet. The pursuit of their mission ultimately leads them to Paris where they must quickly adapt and interact with the wonders of the twenty-first-century modern society. In the plane that takes him to the capital city, Balthazar meets Macha (Virginie de Clausade), the daughter of a famous television news anchor. Melchior, who is also in Paris, befriends Jo, a drug dealer. After many tribulations in the Parisian subway they all manage to meet at Macha's apartment. She invites them to stay at her place and after realizing the incoherence of their speech, especially after they insist that she is their guide who will lead them to the messiah, she decides to find them a psychoanalyst. As they wander the streets of the capital, their identity raises growing suspicion, in particular by a media mogul who recognizing their supernatural powers tries to use them for commercial purposes. Though they become instant TV pop idols, they are soon

disillusioned and decide to resume their original quest. The three wise men flee a TV show and during their escape in the subway they find an abandoned newborn infant. Thinking that it is their messiah, they offer their gifts and entrust the baby to Jo and Macha. The mission is over, and they can now disappear and return home.

Through their ability to organize a brilliant script composed of many puns and quid pro quo, "Les Inconnus" were able to create and conduct a satirical critique of French society. The distance between ancient Middle Eastern men and French popular audiences was enriched with the description of common practices in oriental terms. Turning a penetratingly questioning gaze on French customs, the wise men found ideal ground for comedy. The idea of representing an outsider's look is a theatrical one: Paris is the stage on which the ancient Orient is supposed to be confined temporarily. On this stage appear many ordinary situations and protagonists whose role is to represent the larger society (France and/or the Western modern world) from which they emanate. In the depths of this Oriental lens stands a prodigious cultural repertoire whose individual items evoke a world of fabulously rich concepts unknown to the visitors. One of them, a comedic one, is their instant infatuation for French television as they fall under the spell of an American soap opera called *Amour, gloire et beauté* (the actual American soap opera series *The Bold and the Beautiful* very popular in France in the 1990s). Their addiction to the soap opera, after viewing a single episode, led them to heated discussions in the street of Paris as to which character is in love with whom. Earlier, they must also learn how to order at a local McDonald's as they struggle to understand the phrase "sur place ou à emporter?" (eat here or take away?), hence creating confusion in the restaurant.

As usual "Les Inconnus" use satire as their modus operandi to form a critique of French social and political life. The film places the example of the ancient Orient at the service of an ongoing discourse on the nature and extent of modern institutions and lifestyle. The characters playing the role of outsiders explicitly question the rationality of religious, state, military, and cultural practices and by their query uncover much of the absurdity, irrationality, or frivolity of Parisian materialism. Their innocent and unforgiving gaze becomes the mirror through which Paris, France, and ultimately today's Western culture might see itself. The best example is a reflection on the concept of hospitality in Western tradition as both Balthazar and Gaspard request free hospitality at the Ritz hotel for their first night in the capital. At the check-in desk, the hotel manager welcomes the new clients by asking for a credit card. The center of interest of the comic dynamic is the obvious play on words that capitalizes on a similitude of pronunciation between the terms "map" and "credit card," which are both the same word in French (*carte*)

whose significance, yet irrelevance, provides a double implication, as well as a comic effect. To the manager's request the wise men simply reply: "Nous voyageons sans carte. Le destin est notre guide" (We travel without map. Destiny is our guide). The puzzled manager then asks for another means of payment with a colloquial term for cash: "Et vous avez du liquide?" Again the next pun creates another double implication with yet another comic effect as "liquide" means both cash and drinking substance: "Hélas nos outres sont vides et nous avons grand soif" (Alas, our bottles are empty and we are very thirsty). As paradoxical as it may seem, the advantage of the scene is its own self-limitation to avoid the mistake, common in comedy films, of overemphasizing the didactic element of the joke. Regarding this Gerald Mast argues that "the most effective film comedies, as well as the most thought-provoking ones are mimetic rather than didactic, descriptive rather than prescriptive."[18] Not only a descriptive satire, *Les rois mages* is also a situational comedy where the view of the "other" is an essential concept in an intercultural approach (modern-day France seen through the enchanted exoticism of the ancient Middle East). Criteria such as space, taste, the marvelous, and verisimilitude are examined in order to analyze the images transmitted by the perceived society (France) and by the perceiving one (ancient Middle East) and to evaluate the film's ability for social irony. The best example of this irony is exemplified when Melchior, who has befriended Jo, a young drug addict, is asked as a favor to meet several drug dealers inside the Gare Saint Lazare to deliver a small package and receive cash in exchange. As he concludes the deal, Melchior is asked to convey a message to Jo which sounds like a clear warning for the twentieth century: "If there is a problem tell him I will know where to find him." Unaware of the meaning of this implied death threat, Melchior, retains only the positive first-degree language and ironically comments on this exchange saying to Gaspard: "J'ai le sentiment que la nature humaine s'est bonifiée avec le temps!" (I have the feeling that human nature has improved with time). Gaspard, perhaps wiser than Melchior, retorts: "Oh . . . le léopard change-t-il ses taches?" (Does the leopard change his spots?) Despite the presence of crime, hypocrisy, individualism, and excessive materialism, leading to a universal skepticism and the failure of tolerance, the story first seems to want viewers to doubt the human capacity to overcome selfishness or cultural determinism, but eventually provides reasons for hope. To the evils that accumulate, *Les rois mages* offers some remedies: trust in mankind and strength of utopia emerge as a source of progress.

The situational comedy also functions with a technique generated by the alternating viewpoints. The view of the wise men, mostly enthusiastic and optimistic, combined with their austere gravity, alternates with Macha's pessimistic and disenchanted view on life. Their judgment rarely coincides with

that of the French. And where they see dishonesty, Macha sees a natural expression of daily life. For instance, while Macha believes she first met Balthazar on the plane by chance, the latter firmly retorts—with brutal honesty—saying quite the opposite, asserting his profound dislike for irrational powers and demonstrating that "chance" does not exist (quoting from memory an ancient Greek philosopher Alcmaeon of Croton). Still with alternating viewpoints the comedy is fed with countless quotes such as Balthazar's reply after Macha expresses her desire not to pursue a conversation on her private life: "Le silence est le plus beau bijou d'une femme; il est vrai qu'elle le porte rarement!" (Silence is the most beautiful jewelry of a woman; it is true she rarely wears it). Sometimes the comedy effect comes from alternating viewpoints within the wise men themselves. With an unconditional trust in the superior power "L'eternel nous guide!" or "Son pouvoir est sans rival!" the wise men slowly move toward pragmatism. Often skeptical, and prey to the doubt of their own values, they are in search of a universal code, and the human ideal they incarnate gradually adapts to reason as they understand modern society. Enlightened and tolerant, they are as enthusiastic about Western values, especially about scientific progress, as they are critical against it. In terms of morality, they combine the advocacy of frugality and that of luxury. Such contradictions can be explained if spectators see the desire to make their behavior even more ambiguous like in the film *Les visiteurs* (*The Visitors*) made a few years prior to this which adopted the same narrative frame (visitors from the past). To the alternating viewpoints, one can add the clever use of alternating speech of the wise men. The script also tries to vary the register of expressions used by the wise men. An irresistible comic effect is generated from the alternating switch from a colorful, eloquent, oriental style to sharp urban slang of twentieth-century speech such as this unorthodox phrase in self-defense: "Dans ma jeunesse, j'ai émasculé un scarabée à trente pas . . . veux-tu risquer ta descendance?" to the adoption of "Je kiffe à donf" (I love it) or "les thunes" (money).

One main reason of disapproval some film critics pointed out was that the ambition to act out a pseudo political manifesto eventually ended up impeding its comedy dynamics and consequently burdening its effectiveness. Others argue that on the contrary the choice of "Les Inconnus" for a pragmatic yet powerful social satire allowed the comedy not to dwell on the social commentary but instead to remain within the boundaries of comedy. This choice can be best described in the words of film historian Jean Emelina:

> Despite temptations towards the absolute, comedy intuitively perceives its own limits. It can feel, under penalty of failure, according to the formula, "until which limit not to trespass." It knows that its power is both irresistible and

> ephemeral, and that one cannot win against universal gravitation and that the feared and reassuring gravity remains the law.[19]

These so-called boundaries, though fueling many debates among scholars in Humor Studies, ultimately allow the humorous tribulations of *Les rois mages* to represent French society through the eye of picaresque characters (they seem to be made only for the consumer society, and they find their identity only in the mirror effect provided by their conversations). Though *Les rois mages* did not receive stellar critical acclaims, it somehow managed to accomplish the difficult task of drawing popular crowds to theaters with a story potentially reminiscent of the phenomenal success of *Les visiteurs* (scoring a respectable total of 2.3 million entries in 2002).

III. Screening New Sexual Encounters: *Gazon Maudit*

In the mid 1990s Josiane Balasko's *Gazon maudit* (*French Twist*, 1995) was an innovative comedy for many reasons. First of all, it was an ambitious project conjuring up the difficult subject of female homosexuality, rarely discussed before as a central subject in films for the general public. *Gazon maudit* was written and directed by Josiane Balasko, whose most familiar works originated from her early career with the *café-théâtre* (a genre targeting for years the bourgeois lifestyle and its sociocultural mythology). To English-speaking audiences Balasko's work is most likely unknown as it offers an itinerary of an actress with a strong inclination for comedy roles that she has played in *Les bronzés* (*French Fried Vacation*, 1978), *Le maître d'école* (1981), Jean-Marie Poiré's *Les hommes préfèrent les grosses* (*Men Prefer Fat Girls*, 1981), *Papy fait de la résistance* (*Gramps Is in the Resistance*, 1983), and as an ordinary-looking secretary in Bertrand Blier's *Trop belle pour toi* (*Too Beautiful For You*, 1989), featuring Gérard Depardieu and Carole Bouquet. The film won the César Award for Best Writing in 1996 as well as a Golden Globe Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film the same year.

The emergence of a visible development in modern French mainstream comedies emphasized, explicitly or implicitly, issues related to gender construction and gender identity. Since comedy films such as *La cage aux folles I, II, III* had already been efficacious political tools due to their ability to focus audiences' attention on particular descriptions of individuals, *Gazon Maudit*, more than a decade later, was able to bring to the spotlight the relevance of academic analysis for the current debate over political correctness and homosexuality in film and popular media. By deconstructing stereotypes on female homosexuality (heavily subscribing to the stereotypical description of lesbian

Figure 4.4 Josiane Balasko, Victoria Abril, and Alain Chabat in *Gazon maudit* (*French Twist*, 1995) by Josiane Balasko

butch), the film took chances and a real enjoyment at twisting conventions, which made it solidly entertaining. As far as the political correctness debate is concerned, what seemed to be the major center of interest was the aptitude for the film to both inspire and emphasize sexual stereotypes in France. The reason why the 1990s were a crucial time which needed the implementation of humor ethics within French cinema was quite relevant to the present debate, given the propensity for certain forms of humor (e.g., stand-up comedy and television talk shows) to transform the ways in which popular audiences think about individuals and the relations between them.

In the small town of Cavaillon in southern France, Laurent (Alain Chabat) and Loli (Victoria Abril) appear to be a happy couple living a bourgeois existence with their two young children. Despite being chronically unfaithful with a string of mistresses in town, Laurent loves his wife. But one day Marijo (Josiane Balasko), a short-haired, cigar-smoking, gruff-looking lesbian wearing pants who works as a plumber, involuntarily steps into their lives after her minivan breaks down outside their home. She requests assistance and meets Loli, who looks demure and seductive to her. A mutual attraction begins. The following night Marijo invites the couple to the restaurant to thank them for their help. Laurent suddenly realizes the women's mutual attraction when, picking up his pack of cigarettes from under the table, he sees Marijo caressing Loli's leg. Shocked and repulsed, he decides to cut short the dinner and

confronts Marijo. That night Laurent refuses Loli in the marital bed; she ends up seeking comfort from Marijo. The next day, Laurent tries to reconcile with Loli but she does not forgive his reaction and discovers that she is attracted to Marijo. During a bike ride with his friend Antoine (Ticky Holgado) Laurent tells him the cause of his sorrow, and tries to drown his grief in alcohol. Antoine wanting to fix things goes to talk to Loli, and in good faith begs her to reconcile with her husband claiming that Laurent has decided to turn a new leaf. Unfortunately he accidentally reveals his friend's numerous infidelities and past affairs with other women, which stuns Loli and enrages her. Loli asks Marijo to settle in their house, thus becoming a permanent guest, much to Laurent's perplexity. As expected, cohabitation proves difficult between the two suitors. The atmosphere is electric despite the fact that Laurent and Marijo have one thing in common: their desire for Loli. When Laurent promises to change his ways, they come to an agreement to splitting the time every week (Loli will spend three days with Laurent and three days with Marijo and get Sundays off!). One day Marijo makes a deal with Laurent: she will leave their lives at once if he agrees to make her pregnant. Following this secret arrangement Laurent and Loli once again regain the peace they had lost until Loli hears that Marijo is several months pregnant somewhere in Paris. Loli finds her working as a DJ in a lesbian dance club. Loli and Laurent take her back to their home, where she has her baby. The *ménage à trois* gets a new start, this time with two mothers happily caring for their respective children. Despite the conventional conclusion of the story, which is a happy ending, a latent ambiguity arises: Laurent's potential hidden homosexuality.

The film must be seen as a comedy of manners: a modern spin on the *ménage à trois* with a familiar emphasis on sexual appetites and domestic abuse, balancing between overt comedy and light drama (until it turns into a farce using a humor bordering on screwball mode). Perhaps the most intriguing departure from the norm was the use of *ménage à trois* as the main subject. Ultimately, it proves a convincing choice, both from a comedic and an aesthetic standpoint. Despite the film's clear social agenda, taking any part of *Gazon Maudit* on a first-degree level of humor may lead to some misconception and eventually a mistake. Though Balasko played a stereotypical lesbian caricature, she still made plausible a situation that initially seemed contrived, engaging in comedy that mixed its laughs with unforced social commentary. However, her pseudo-transgender character as an entertaining, colorful, and "carnivalized" lesbian lover erased objectivity and, probably, the possibility of identification by the majority of French popular audiences. The result was the kind of door-slamming bedroom farce, reminiscent of a conventional vaudeville but without masks. The scenes cowritten by Telsche Boorman,

Patrick Aubrée, and Balasko offered more than a few double entendres or a satirical punch at the traditional male/female double standard and homophobia. The substantial dialogues also provided many derogatory comments on lesbian lifestyle as both Antoine and Laurent used stereotypical approaches to lesbianism oddly enough with their own "tolerant" view of lesbians: "Remarque deux femmes ensemble, je suis pas contre . . . si il y a une petite place pour moi!"[20] or commenting on the lack of femininity of many lesbian women: "Une fois, je suis allé dans une boite de gouines . . . eh bien, je me sentais légèrement éfféminé sur les bords!"[21] The film purposely reinstalled a sexualizing male gaze on relational and social issues, to ridicule it all the more along with any conventional conceptions of female sexuality. At the same time critics argued that the film's narration and graphic cinematography was able to position mainstream viewers in a rather different and yet privileged position, feeding much of its own unrevealed curiosity toward female eroticism—this time through the voyeur gaze of a woman (just the same way Loli benefited from Marijo's devoted love and arousing sexual attention). Balasko developed a unique psychological form of sexual humor that was dependent on the comic disjunction between mental fantasy and physical reality (e.g., the husband literally reduced to negotiate for equal conjugal rights). The comedy dynamics were able to shape the plot as an erotic vaudeville, as the instantaneous passion between Loli and Marijo become steamier and funnier scene after scene (Loli's naive dignity combined with Marijo's overassertive self-confidence). As the plot thickens further, it eventually ends up twisting its doomed protagonists and audience ever tighter into a sticky web of eros, power, and suspicion. Laurent confesses the many precautions his double-life entails: "Je passe ma vie à faire gaffe. On m'appelle jamais à la maison et les endroits où je vais, elle les connait pas. J'suis pas un salaud. Je veux pas la rendre malheureuse." (I spend my life being careful. No one calls me home and she doesn't know where I go. I'm not a jerk, I don't want to hurt her.) Laurent, on the other hand, is convinced that his wife is not the type to engage in private indiscretion as he claims that she would never have an affair. Ironically it is during the same evening that Loli loses her inhibitions upset about the attention her husband no longer provides. To make matters worse her loss of reference points combined with the egotistical attitude of her husband (who pretends to have a business dinner) eventually accelerates her desire to explore new routes for herself and consequently molding the fetishist gaze of her suitor. Interestingly enough, the character of Laurent, an outspoken homophobe with an inherent chauvinist hypocrisy, receives a double blow to his ego when Loli decides to take on a female lover.

Many changes occurred in the 1990s regarding the cinematic representation of homosexuality in mainstream French commercial films, a trend which accelerated during the second half of the decade as a reaction to and inspiration from a rapidly evolving social and political backdrop. The *Pacte civil de solidarité* (PACS) was voted and introduced in France in November 1999 and a new legislation enabled adult couples, same sex or not, to obtain an officially recognized contract which granted rights and responsibilities with the option of going through a formal ceremony in city halls identical to that of civil marriages. While the new legislation gave equal rights for housing, health insurance, and inheritance it, however, did not give same-sex couples the right to adopt or to obtain artificial insemination. A decade later in 2012, gay parenting and the right for adoption came to the forefront of national debate with the new family law voted in 2013, also known as the Taubira Law which made same-sex marriage legal for the first time. But even before the recent legal changes, the growing presence of film protagonists without traditional heterosexual boundaries exerted a double effect: it not only promoted the focus and visibility of their image in mainstream media but also fueled a wave of homophobia in the French political debate. Films like Gabriel Aghion's *Pédale douce* (1996), André Téchiné's *Alice et Martin* (*Alice and Martin*, 1998), Alain Berliner's *Ma vie en rose* (1996), Jean-Jacques Zilberman's *L'homme est une femme comme les autres* (*Man Is a Woman*, 1998), Stéphane Giusti's *Pourquoi pas moi!* (*Why Not Me?*, 1999), Marcel Bluwal's *Le plus beau pays du monde* (*The Happiest Place on Earth*, 1998), Francis Veber's *Le placard* (*The Closet*, 2000), and Valérie Lemercier's *Le derrière* (1999) prompted the expansion of mainstream audiences as opposed to aiming at more restricted community-based audiences. In addition, the introduction of the annual Gay Pride parade provoked great media buzz (TV company Canal+ broadcasting a special "Gay Night" program to support Gay Pride). While these comedies of the 1990s successfully introduced a new idea, that of a construction of gender and sexuality in a mainstream context, examples of more direct references to specific elements of a broader gay rights debate can be found in other filmic genres such as drama (Cyril Collard's *Les Nuits Fauves* [*Savage Nights*, 1992]). The contribution of gay cinema was on the one hand to retain the stereotypical characteristics indispensable for mainstream box office success, and on the other hand to succeed in bringing to a mixed audience a consideration of topics of gay interest which would otherwise remain confined to more confidential audiences.

Gazon maudit offers a depiction of a traditional family, respectful of a patriarchal model but challenged by a sudden and unexpected alternative

femininity, one which comes into conflict not only with the wife but with the husband as well. Each in their own way feels despair from the situation but trapped in their unusual *ménage à trois*. Loli remains the emblematic figure of the beloved wife and mother, and the rivalry between Marijo and Laurent emphasizes the alignment of the two characters on the male stereotypes, despite the final twist. Film scholar Darren Waldron describes the new point of view from a cinematic angle:

> Loli's apparent disavowal of the patriarcally defined role of the blushing bride provides a visual manifestation of the consequences of this tension; her gaze engages directly with the viewer, her hands placed on her hips reinforcing the strong defiance she symbolizes.[22]

Balasko uses a great deal of what can be best described as absurd and grotesque body imagery in order to exemplify the three protagonists' moral dilemmas. The comic treatment of the dichotomy between mind and body ties the story to a tradition of humor in which both extremes end up obligated to coexist. Through the stereotyping of femininity and the valorization of virility dominating the comedy screens for decades, French comedy, thanks to *Gazon maudit*, began for the first time to show signs of a possibly different vision, away from the binary disposition of sexual ethics. This new androgynous vision of a redefinition of modern sexual politics found its best expression concomitantly in both the explicit rejection of feminist struggle for equality and the male chauvinist humor, and therefore offered a view of another angle: that of the ambivalent identity of female homosexuality versus conventional gendered identities found in contemporary French society. One of the key arguments was brought up by film scholar Brigitte Rollet who asserted that the film's center of interest was ultimately to be found in the conflictual juxtaposition of female sexuality and the notion of maternity:

> Motherhood remains the safest "way" to grant lesbians a "femininity" supposedly absent in them but mostly to present them primarily as mothers, which reduces the transgressive dimension of their sexual practices, and lifestyle, sexually independent from men.[23]

This dilemma illustrates the complex circumstances these stereotypes have brought to the attention of popular audiences. Ripe with all the elements necessary for a convincing comedy, Balasko's *Gazon maudit* won more than the circumstances allowed and made successfully accessible to the still recalcitrant audience of the mid-1990s a new type of comedy attracting attention to the complexity of its theoretical engagement with sexuality and laughter.

IV. Comedy as a Social Phenomenon

While many English-speaking viewers, ardent Francophiles among arthouse devotees, may be under the impression that all films emerging from France can be a bit elitist, and artistically eclectic. Jean-Marie Poiré's *Les visiteurs* (1993) was able to alter that impression forever. This travel-through-time adventurous comedy was a social phenomenon as well as a box office record, even outgrossing Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* in the year it was released. With a total of 220 copies distributed nationally and 45 in Paris only, the film distribution efforts were still 10 times less than productions such as Claude Berri's *Germinal* that same year. Yet, once distributed all over France, the film did not follow the normal trend, which traditionally observes a decrease in the attendance after the third week. Instead the word of mouth functioned and the success of the film kept expanding nationally, eventually becoming the second-most-successful French film (14 million tickets sold) of the postwar era after Gérard Oury's *La grande vadrouille*. Many articles of the French national press at the time such as *VSD* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* published articles of several pages, mostly dealing with its national triumph and much less about the actual comedy. It was quickly considered a symptomatic phenomenon of a particular mindset of French society. In front of the magnitude of the popular success, film journalists sought to exonerate popular audiences caught by a hysterical wind and instead dwell on the history in the making rather than tackle its content, the exquisite details of the period, and countless sophisticated effects.

In the year 1122, the King of France Louis VI le gros is ambushed by English troops but in extremis rescued by the Comte Godefroy (Jean Reno) also known as Amaury de Malfète, comte de Montmirail d'Apremont, and

Figure 4.5 Jean Reno and Christian Clavier in *Les visiteurs* (*The Visitors*, 1993) by Jean-Marie Poiré

Papincourt. For saving his life, he gives him in marriage to Frénégonde (Valérie Lemercier), the daughter of one of his dukes. Godefroy travels across France to meet his future bride. On his way, he runs into a black mass and takes a witch prisoner. Unbeknownst to him, however, the witch uses her magic to avenge herself and this results in Godefroy killing Frénégonde's father. In the midst of a spell-induced hallucination, the duke of Apulia appears as a menacing bear and Godefroy kills him with his crossbow. The duke now dead, Frénégonde enters a convent, unwilling to marry the man who killed her father, thus preventing his marriage and ruining his hopes of offspring. Desperate, Godefroy asks the sorcerer Eusebius to bring the duke back to life. The sorcerer reminds him that he cannot undo his deed and that only God can, but that instead he can send him back in time just before the accident and prevent it from occurring again. This way he will be able to deflect the shot of his crossbow and spare the life of Frénégonde's father. The potion and a Latin formula will supposedly send him and his squire, Jacquouille la fripouille (the scoundrel also known in the English subtitles as Jacquasse played by Christian Clavier), to a few moments before the fatal incident. Unfortunately Eusebius errs in his formula and gets the ingredients wrong: the knight and his faithful squire are catapulted into the future by nearly 1000 years, to the year 1992. Both meet Béatrice Goulard de Montmirail (also Valérie Lemercier), the descendant of Godefroy, who is a mother of a bourgeois family married to a reputed dentist. They also meet Jacques-Henri Jacquard (again Christian Clavier), a *nouveau riche* commoner, who is no other than Jacquouille's very own descendant and the new proprietor of the castle Montmirail. Godefroy now only has one goal: going back in time to marry his betrothed. For this he must find the ancient spellbook still hidden in the castle dungeon. But the task ends up being difficult because Beatrice takes him for her late cousin Hubert, a rally driver who has disappeared for several years, whom she believed dead. However, he will eventually find the descendant of Eusebius mage who gives him the potion to get to the right moment in time. But Jacquouille, who has in the meantime met Ginette, an eccentric homeless girl, whom he plans to marry, no longer wants to go back to the Middle Ages and with a last-minute switch, Jacquard is transported to the Middle Ages, leaving Jacquouille happily stranded in the present.

Looking back some 20 years later, the film, for many, is a cult film across national social divisions. So a question has intrigued many film historians of the time and to this date, to which no clear answer seems to emerge from the discussions: Did the success of the film come from the need of French popular audiences to escape during the recession of the time? Many incongruous conclusions have been drawn to explain the mysterious success of the film, most of which lack substance and evidence; some historians state that the

film was able to "reinforce a consensus around French national identity."[24] This theory pretended that by making all French audiences laugh off all their own domestic fears, the comedy was able to reinforce the sense of belonging to the same national community, to an indissoluble fraternity that is the basis of nationalism. If the film may indeed offer a remotely coherent subtext on the concept of nation building, the vast majority of popular audiences in France certainly did not find these subliminal concepts in this slapstick comedy. The burlesque side of these gags, mainly based on the loss of human dignity, was an inherently universal device and therefore easily appealed to popular audiences. So the notion of French national identity seems light years away to what appeared to be at the core of the comedy's success. Thus, the film can well be considered an innocent representation of history and certainly not a witness of the time. The myth of metamorphosis, symbolized and illustrated by the capacity to travel through time, was the real center of the story. The acronymic designation of this type of comedy was called "Bon Ton, Bon Marché" and suggested a possible sequel due to the momentum it inspired in producers. Like all sequels, the pressure was immense due to the financial expectation. After the enormous domestic success of *Les Visiteurs*, the producers wanted to bring in an even faster pace. *Les Visiteurs 2: les couloirs du temps* (1998) once again featured the noble time-traveling knight and his scruffy squire. Following a five-year hiatus, the new script was revived by solid direction and acting, but it seemed to contain only a thin plot connected by a beginning and a predictable end. Among missing development and an avalanche of new gags many of them were written in an unpredictable manner.

One of the central elements of the comedic dynamics was the discourse of modernity based on a time binary opposition: past versus present. Most of the film's humor was grounded in the visitors running up against modernity while speaking their dialect of Old French to survive. The screenplay employed some historical accuracy to exemplify through humor the bewilderment and cultural shock of the two protagonists as well as their efforts to adapt themselves to modern life. While Godefroy and Jacquouille handle modern times as best they can, they spend much of their time wreaking havoc in the conveniences of contemporary life. They carve up a car with their swords, try to rescue artists trapped inside a television set (a boys' band singing), devour steaks with their bare hands, struggle with indoor plumbing, eat sandwiches with the plastic wrap, attempt to roast a lamb leg on an umbrella, pull electric lamps out from their wall sockets, and so on. The endless use of anachronism was a source of subversive pleasure, because it multiplied the destructive gags on bourgeois property. Poiré's satire of medievalism implicated modern-day France as well as the mythical past of a nation born at the time of feudalism.

Where it romanticized the past by undermining the feudalism and its codes with burlesque disorder, the satirical dynamic of modern France in the eyes of the medieval characters appeared more intricate. In a nutshell the grubby medieval characters enter the present day and leave the modern world frightened and bewildered by them. Through parodying chivalric and medieval epic tales, the movie examined how the protagonists dealt with the modified world, of 1000 years later, where time has not only been affected by technology, but it has seemingly changed morals and values as well.

Poiré's discourse on heritage cinema and his choice of representational strategies of chivalric romances can be viewed as much as being commemorative as it can be considered a satire. Will McMorran argued that the film was also part of the group of films whose aim was to represent the Middle Ages on the screen often labelled as "heritage cinema" in the early 1990s in France, with a clear inclination to display a sanitized rendering of the past:

> Nevertheless, if a specific cinematic target is implied in the burlesque anti-medievalism of *Les visiteurs*, then it is arguably the kind of picture-postcard depiction of the Middle Ages found in its immediate contemporary. *Les visiteurs* is no exception.[25]

Indeed the comedy did not specifically target medievalism and all of its inherent mythology, but extended its discourse to French history, in particular the legacy of the French Revolution. Beatrice gives a crash course on French history revealing that at a certain time, people rebelled to have a republic in which every man would be considered equal before the law. With the *Larousse Encyclopedia*, Godefroy finds out that he is not the hero of the family, who is much talked about in history books, but Gonzague de Montmirail, who after having endorsed the ideas of the French Revolution, denounced the privileges and supported the distribution of land to the peasants. Beyond the discourse of modernity, the second element of the comedy was its commentary on social classes.[26] Man is able to adapt to his surroundings despite the difficult adaptation process to modernity, illustrated here by Jacquouille's many splurges in consumerism and his endless desire for modern commodities like sports cars, tooth paste, and light switches. Godefroy finds a modern France in which there is little left for his descendant to inherit from. The count's descendant is now a "bourgeois" and the squire's descendant is the owner of the castle and its lands. This creates several caste problems between the characters and the scenario successfully exploits its dichotomy on the contemporary cultural context. According to Mcmorran: "While the world around him conspires to subvert chivalric values and expectations, only Godefroy emerges with anything approaching dignity, his chivalric

credentials uncompromised."[27] The insufferable Jacquard, who runs the now posh Montmirail estate, is the central character. As a bourgeois parvenu, nouveau riche, remotely effeminate, obnoxious, tyrannical with his colleagues, misogynistic, Jacquard clearly stands opposite his ancestor Jacquouille who can be best described as shifty and quick-witted (Clavier, however, deploys outstanding energy for both characters). Beyond the comic discourse, an indirect commentary seems to surface with the destiny and tribulations of Jacquard when confronted with upper classes and his obsession with social status. Jacquouille's prissy descendant clearly embodies the character of the parvenu, also called nouveau riche whose legitimacy is doomed to be viewed under sarcastic scrutiny and is the springboard of most of the jokes. What is at stake in the narrative is for Jacquard to change social class but there is no mention of changing the classes themselves. After the discovery of the change of his family name (from Jacquouille to Jacquard) as well as his modest origins and his resemblance with Jacquouille, a series of difficulties seems to follow him mercilessly (Jacquard's new flamboyant SUV is eventually destroyed by lightening). Is this the punishment for the social class usurper, may wonder Jean-Jacques Delfour as he wrote: "The enemy is not the bourgeois who is praised as a member of a social class, but the bourgeois as a person, whose place people dream to take."[28] Jacquard in his own right displays a strong sense of scorn toward the bourgeois clientele he entertains as well as the common people he once belonged to.

So what about the image of the nobility? Compounded by a noble ancestral France, which have founded the roots of today's France, the myth of nobility is openly challenged and revisited in the comedy. Unable to adapt to present-day France, Godefroy's image of noble knight with his code of honor and chivalric conventions belongs to the past, unlike the authority of Beatrice who knows how to get respected by her social origin though still very much playing her role as ordinary housewife and mother caught between raising her children and household chores. But Beatrice treats her guests with a unique sense of tolerance reflecting the best in both the aristocratic and egalitarian traditions, which is not the case with her ancestor (e.g., the scene at the dinner table where Godefroy throws Jacquouille scraps of food like a dog while debating why feudal aristocracy is a good thing). While Godefroy's medieval mind is well explored, Jacquouille's past is on the other hand presented in a rather trivial manner despite his gradual interest in some ideas of French republicanism. However, one of the best and humorous depictions of medieval life is surprisingly delivered when Jacquouille talks about his parents: "Ma mère avait pour nom Gwendoline, elle est morte dévorée par les loups, parce que notre père qu'était parti pour boire à la taverne de Duchenot a crevé gelé dans l'étang à cause de son pied-bot!" (My mother's name was Gwendoline,

she died devoured by wolves, because our father who had gone drinking at the Tavern died frozen in the pond because of his clubfoot!) As paradoxical as it appears, it is the "crass" peasant whose vistas are opened up by a trip into the future. Not having the innate graciousness of his master, who naturally seems to maintain a certain level of decorum in all circumstances, Jacquouille elicits the worst disasters, breaking dishes, screaming on the phone and producing strange animal noises, or spitting on his plate at dinner time. His intolerance of the social climb (i.e., his rejection of a commoner owning a castle) quickly tones down to opening up to social justice. Much is made of the stark contrast between a France centuries after the revolution and the one the time travelers are used to, chiefly the fact that Jacquouille realizes that he does not need to be under the yoke of oppression any further. With the phone that he has just learned to use, Jacquouille announces to Godefroy that he is no longer willing to go back in time with him. Interestingly enough he declares his own emancipation through the register of language as he is abandoning his customary "Messire" to what has now become "mon Godefroy." Therefore Jacquouille has quickly learned to verbally defend his rights in order to find a respectable place in modern society, and eventually to choose his destiny by freeing himself from the tutelage of his master.

Largely slapstick, mixed with mistaken identities and misunderstandings, the film bounces off all of these devices with considerable comic energy and a great deal of inspired madness. Unintentionally destructive, the medieval protagonists break all modern codes of good manners: flooding the house, ripping out electrical candelabras, smothering a hotel room with soot from the chimney's secret passageway, burning cars or destroying them. However, the slapstick devices used in the film should not be confused with traditional physical comedies, but rather considered in terms of burlesque realism, featuring outrageous encounters with such modern accoutrements as cars, telephones, toilets, and so on. It is true that the film was striking for its grotesque emphasis on the body following the pure tradition of French medieval fabliaux and Bakhtin's notion of "carnivalesque body comedy" (the carnivalesque portrayal of nobility behaving like peasants; Frenegonde's father burps loudly at the dinner table despite her protests). The "esprit gaulois" combined with an unconventional male duo (inspired by the old tradition of Laurel and Hardy, Jean Poiret and Michel Serrault, Depardieu and Pierre Richard to name a few) was the modus operandi. But considering the comedy of *Les visiteurs* exclusively under the lens of slapstick would be somewhat reductive as many of the gags came directly from the situations themselves. The result all but defines the term situational comedy, a form that attempts to generate laughter by placing the characters in an unfamiliar and often

embarrassing predicament. The situational comedy scenes of Godefroy and Jacquouille trashing Beatrice's home are reminiscent of the anarchic humor of Jean Renoir's classic *Boudu, sauvé des eaux* (*Boudu, Saved from Drowning*, 1932). Turned into a pseudo romantic hero, Reno is a contemporary response to the medieval epic literature hero treated in large part through the burlesque lens. Thinking it is a cart from a Sarasin enemy, while in reality it is a French postal service vehicle, Godefroy draws his sword and hacks the "metal chariot" to rubble; "Ah! Messire! Un Sarrasin, Messire, un Sarrasin dans une chariotte du diable. C'est tout ferré, y a point de boeuf pour tirer!" (Sire, a Sarracen, Sire, a Sarracen in a devil's cart. It is all made of iron with no ox to pull!) This is the very first human contact both men have in the modern world and as emblematic as it may seem it is a Guadeloupian postman but for them a Sarrasin will do for people of any kind of skin color.

Usually comedies and medieval background take on a rather predictable role for scatological tendencies. Both the main protagonists play the "fish out of water" aspect of this script. Godefroy and Jacquouille attempt to discern how the various conveniences of a modern bathroom function. One of the jokes, an especially overused and familiar one, which includes a toilet is engaging because when the medieval men come into contact with a toilet bowl, what else would they think of doing with it other than using it as a sink to wash their faces. In addition much of the humor centers around the filthiness of the Middle Ages—people bathing only once a month, their rotting teeth, and bad hygiene, as the squire beseeches his master not to force him to bathe: "Ah non messire, j'ai pris un bain y a deux mois dans la rivière!" (No sire, I took a bath two months ago in the river!) This gives strong hints about their body odor, and that they take baths while fully clothed, after pouring thousands of francs' worth of expensive Chanel perfume into the water.

While many film scholars assert that comedy is the most conservative of all genres, as it inherently relies on familiarity, they fail to take into account the possible innovation of humor on the technical level. Anne Jäckel wrote: "Deeply rooted in national mythology and cultural traditions (language and humor), comedy is the genre most prone to stereotypes, and *Les visiteurs* is no exception."[29] While this assertion is indeed verified on the level of the script and its comical function on a narrative level, the director's choices in terms of editing and cinematography are far from conventional. Poiré's[30] fondness for wide-angle lenses, frenetic cutting, sharp focus whenever a character exits one dimension for another, and nicely dosed score all contribute to the triumphant nonsense (using highly innovative techniques such as morphing, digital grading, and matte painting). The many hideous faces shot in close-ups, which remind one of Jerome Bosch's portrayal of medieval terror, were accomplished

thanks to a unique frantic pacing combined with an occasional wide-angle shot distorting facial expressions. With more than 2000 shots in the film (average being 500–700 frames per film), Poiré's fast pace editing created a good response from the viewer to the fast humor mode (already successful in his *L'opération corned beef* directed in 1991). Commenting on his own editing style, Poiré once said about the rapport between comedy and filming pace:

> I tend to think that a film that has more frames is more exciting than others. First because at each frame, the brain works. It is a rhythm that sticks to our time, to zapping [surfing channels].[31]

Indeed the film's humor is partly due to the clever use of a calculated filmic language in order to accentuate the comical behavior from the medieval men coping with constant culture shock. While the best part of the linguistic puns may have vanished in the translation of the subtitles, the usage of a semifictional old French versus the modern-day French slang was at the basis of the film's humor along with visual gags. Indeed this mixture of Latin and Old French was the highlight of the strangeness of the medieval characters' speech, and a few words sounding archaic but understandable, the ancestor nevertheless spoke the same language as their descendants and as modern-day spectators.

Fascinated by his new surroundings, Jacquouille enjoys every new sound as he tries to mimic what he hears, with the understanding that language in some way is a sure road for integration. Amused by the strange-sounding words like *dingue* (crazy) and *c'est okay*, he enjoys repeating them with his very own exaggerated accent. This is how "*diiingue*" became a symbol of the influence of this cult film on French pop culture. Another example is the tactful interaction of Béatrice who makes a conscious choice not to call Jacquouille by his real name and switches to "Monsieur Ouille" in order to keep her dignity. The character of Béatrice uses an upper-class accent, occasionally adding trendy English words as well as adverbs like "hyper" to her speech. In her case it is more of an intonation than an accent, which composes the bourgeois caricature. In parallel Jacquard, on the other hand, uses a forced bourgeois accent with very idiosyncratic phrases like the one which entered popular culture "Mais qu'est-ce que c'est que ce binz?" (What is this mess?) Some medieval comic lines fully integrated the comic registry of the script like a medieval flavored song recalling the cruelty of the times: "Et on lui pèlera le jonc comme au bailli du limousin, qu'on a pendu un beau matin, qu'on a pendu . . . avec ses tripes!" (We shall skin him as we did for the bailiff of Limousin, who was hung one morning . . . hung with his guts!) Verbal and

physical violence were indeed equally at the core of the comedy dynamics. Other puns were based on the evolution of similar words through time periods. One of them is a dialogue between Jacquouille and Ginette, which at one time becomes spectacularly anachronistic:

> *Jacquouille*: Merci la gueuse, tu es un laideron, mais tu es bien bonne!
> *Ginette*: T'as pas vu ton pif! Quand tu te mouches, t'as pas l'impression de serrer la main à un pote?[32]

The rejuvenated old French is rife with examples of the script's humor which allowed audiences to capture the intended significance of the archaic tongue. By showing the fundamental differences of languages, and thus cultural perspectives, the comedic verbal exchanges ultimately spoke less of time difference than assimilation, and so contributed to notions of both nationhood and common humanity.

Poiré directed the gags with an assured hand, and the comedic script was able to move along at an efficient pace, with some tight editing to keep the comedy effective. The pounding soundtrack at the end of the story gave the entire comedy a kinetic feel, and the judiciously used split screen work helped generate a suitably old school atmosphere, which fit well with the comic subject matter. Not only was the comedy full of suspense and exciting throughout, but Poiré gradually built up the action, letting things fly with a few bursts early on, mainly in the form of chase scenes, before packing in a rush of comic gags during the last act. This gave the comedy exactly the kind of thrilling conclusion it deserved, giving a steady hand to a logical sequel a few years later.

The Triumphant Return of Regional Comedies

A decade later, following the second opus of *Les Visiteurs*, another film made history at the box office: Dany Boon's *Bienvenue chez les ch'tis* (*Welcome to the Sticks*, 2008). That year the film became an instant hit on a national level and produced a phenomenon known as "chtimania" while few were the critics at the time who could have guessed that this gentle comedy would break nearly every box office record in France with pandemic magnitude. *Bienvenue chez les ch'tis* debuted as the top film at 793 sites and a couple of years later of active *bouche à oreille* it had been seen by more than 20 million people, thereby breaking the longstanding record held by Gérard Oury's *La grande vadrouille* (17 million admissions in 1966). With a budget of just 16 million dollars—a small budget in comparison to the *Astérix aux jeux olympiques* produced the

Figure 4.6 Anne Marivin, Guy Lecluyse, Dany Boon, Zoé Félix, Kad Merad, and Philippe Duquesne in *Bienvenue chez les ch'tis* (*Welcome to the Sticks*, 2008) by Dany Boon

same year with a 100 million euro budget—the film grossed the equivalent of 190 million US dollars. During the first two months of screening half of the population of the department Nord-Pas de Calais had seen the film as well as more than one-third of the French general population.

Yet the film already suggests Boon's possible dissatisfaction with the traditional idea of comedy as he did not cast comic stars. When asked about the writing of the screenplay and the possible difficulties of inserting a comedic device into it, Boon answered that it was indeed a rather difficult challenge as his past stage experience of the stand-up comedy had allowed him to transmit comedy through self-derision. For years he was able to promote sketches on characters that were highly exaggerated caricatures and thanks to the conventional rules of the use of archetypal and stock features, stand-up routines, and an exhilarating sense of freedom, the derision toward the Nord was successful. However, once on the screen, the task was a lot more delicate since credibility was at stake. Beyond the north versus south rapport, a duality familiar to many countries around the globe, the film was able to play on particularities of regionalism, which is at the basis of the concept of a nation in France. Like many conventional comedies the heroes of the film were the so-called petite gens such as in *Amélie* (a waitress), or François Pignon (an IRS

inspector) in *Le diner de cons*, or Bourvil in *Le corniaud* (symbolically illustrated by his 2CV which is smashed by Louis de Funès's Rolls Royce). There is an insatiable and inexhaustible source of comedy. With the success of the film, Boon directed another ambitious film a couple of years later with twice the budget entitled *Rien à declarer* (*Nothing to declare*, 2010). Once again he used the strategy of displaying inverted stereotypes. The same year *Bienvenue chez les ch'tis* also gave birth to an Italian remake directed by Luca Miniero (featuring a cameo appearance of Dany Boon himself) and offered an inverted geography as *Benvenuti al Sud* (2010) which opposed a Milanese post office director sanctioned and sent to the region of Naples for two years.

Years before the national success of Dany Boon's *Bienvenue chez les ch'tis*, the derisive jokes on France's northern regions and the heterogeneity of its linguistic situation have been legion. Examining and challenging stereotypic representations of northern France, Coluche, the nation's most famous and iconic stand-up comedian of all time, once said in his satirical view of the rainy north:

> On a beaucoup exagéré avec la Normandie. Moi j'y suis allé trois fois cet été, il a pas neigé une seule fois. Et puis le climat est très sain pour celui qui supporte les bottes en caoutchouc.[33]

From Normandy to Picardie, Dany Boon's films produced a similar concept. The films' prologue and epilogue are usually quite emblematic of the duality of a nation caught between cultural, geographical, and linguistic differences. In this last decade French cinema has shifted the concept of the national comedy with a focus on regional specificities, raising questions of national identity, regional conflicts, and stereotyping dialects. This trend in comedies was last seen four decades ago, in particular in the 1960s, as many comedies had attempted, some of them with great success, to represent the dichotomy of a nation offering antagonistic characters from the south and the north. Two of the most memorable films were shot by filmmaker Gilles Grangier, a veteran of comedy with *La cuisine au beurre* (*My Wife's Husband*, 1963) featuring Fernandel as the Provencal and Bourvil as the Norman, and *L'âge ingrat* (*That Tender Age*, 1964) with Fernandel once again in the role of the Provencal and Jean Gabin as the man from Normandy.

The discussion emanating from the representation of regionalism through comedy is connected to a concept of identity and region, and to the possible question of the transgression of linguistic and cultural boundaries. Regional differences, whether in film, literature, or folklore, seemed more than ever a theme in vogue in this new millennium. However, in a period when European integration is omnipresent, a question appears relevant: Is there still room for

narratives, albeit comedies, to promote an inclination toward traditions and regional dialects? While it is perceptible that the effect of growing globalization in France concomitantly triggers an inbuilt desire toward universalism, a similar desire for regionalism and investigating one's past and origins, language and identity, also takes precedence. In 2008, *Bienvenue chez les ch'tis* responded to this yearning and the debate it suggested on the countless peculiarities of regional differences solicited a renewed curiosity for the northern region. As a caricature of regional differences, the film offered key concepts of national versus transnational cinemas. With a transcultural dialogue the story of Philippe (the southerner from Provence) and Antoine (the ch'ti from Nord-Pas de Calais) somehow resonated in foreign countries like Italy due to a common denominator and similar problems of regional stereotyping. Regional barriers appeared as important to solve as transcultural issues, as these had been the main focus for years and thus it helped to focus on the importance of barrier crossing domestically.

Philippe Abrams (Kad Merad) is the director of a post office in a picturesque small town Salon-de-Provence in southern France. He is married to Julie (Zoé Felix), whose depressive nature makes his life impossible. Philippe cheats his way into a transfer to obtain a highly coveted post in the glamorous Côte d'Azur. Hoping to gain an edge on his competition, Philippe pretends to be wheelchair-bound during his interview, but forgets and stands up to shake hands with the inspector at the end. The ruse now discovered, his punishment is either to lose his job or to accept to be transferred north, to Bergues, a reputedly inhospitable small town in the Nord-Pas de Calais region between Belgium and the English Channel. For Abrams, a southerner full of preconceived ideas, the north is a grim place to live in, with deindustrialized flatlands perceived as the "Siberia of France," a cold region inhabited by uncivilized people who speak an incomprehensible language, "cheutimi." Armed with arctic clothing and a furry hat, Philippe hits the road to embark on his miserable journey leaving his wife and son behind and, as expected, arrives in pouring rain. To his surprise, he discovers a charming place, a friendly staff, welcoming people, and makes a friend—Antoine, the postman and the carillon ringer of the town belfry who lives with his overbearing mother. When Philippe returns to Salon for his first weekend off, Julie refuses to believe that he is happy in the north. She even thinks that he is lying to spare her. To satisfy and simplify his life, Philippe makes her believe that, indeed, he lives in hell in Bergues. He feels compelled to maintain an unhappy façade in front of his friends and family back home, with horror stories on his weekend visits. Therefore, his life slips into a comfortable lie: befriending many locals (by delivering their mail, and accepting the recipient's invitation for a drink), eating smelly Maroilles cheese, Fricadelles, a local ritual of

dipping stinking cheese on toast into coffee, going to a Lens football game and experiencing for the first time the "chars à voile" on seashores, and so on. All goes well, until Julie decides to join Philippe in Bergues to help him through what she believes to be a test. As his tales are about to come back to haunt him, Philippe is forced to confess to Antoine and his team how he has been describing them to his wife—as barbarians. He begs them to behave accordingly to cover his lies hoping to scare Julie to depart as soon as possible. Grudgingly Philippe's employees lend themselves to a masquerade as Julie arrives. Dressed as backwoodsmen and women, they welcome her in an indecipherable patois and let her stay in the old mining place of Bergues, pretending that the disused coalmines and rusting factories are the main town. The "backward country folk" try to live up to their reputation as drunken yokels to put her off. She discovers the trickery and finds out her husband's real Bergues home, and consequently decides to move north to be with him. Three years later, Philippe receives his transfer. Accepting it, he and his family move south. Just as he is about to say goodbye, he is moved to tears, proving Antoine's theory on the ch'tis proverb: "Dans le Nord, on braie deux fois: quand on y arrive et quand on en repart." (A visitor cries twice in the north: once upon arrival and once at departure.)

Perhaps the most debated question among the different theories of humor was whether the fundamental nature of the gags was subversive or conservative. The film presented a reversed typical situation where people in the south look depressed and unhappy while the northerners are full of life (ironically ch'ti mothers can also become abusive and possessive just like archetypical Mediterranean mothers!). Most of the characters from the north appear in a relatively favorable light, despite their respective flaws (lack of cultural knowledge, alcoholism, etc.). On the other hand, and except for the character of Philippe who evolves throughout the story from initial dejection to poised emancipation, most of the southerners are depicted as stressed, depressed, and ignorant. However, viewing the film as a potentially therapeutic attempt on a wounded region, and consequently as a regional comedy, is not enough to explain the success of the film on a national scale. Strangely enough many commentaries focused on the regional ingredients of the film but very few dwelt on the "*lutte des classes*" elements. If Boon's comedy cannot be labeled as an anti-Sarkozy or anti "bling-bling" statement, the presence of a dose of class antagonism is to be noticed. While not using a visible Marxist rhetoric on the class warfare, Boon featured the two main protagonists, whose differences are not only geographic but cultural, as one belongs to the provincial *petite bourgeoisie* and the other to the popular class. In his analysis of the film's social commentary, Régis Dubois noted that the film "allowed them, by proxy, to take their own back from the elite."[34] Indeed the film was far more

than a victory of people from the north over France but needed to be considered also as the rehabilitation of popular culture over the Parisian, bourgeois, centralized culture. So can one claim that the film's political message is a direct statement that Paris no longer rules France? Although the film promoted the absence of xenophobia (far from rejecting Abrams, the ch'tis accept him while maintaining their love for their own regional culture and lifestyle), a few weeks later an infamous episode took place when ultra soccer fans of Paris Saint-Germain deployed banners during a game against the northern club of Lens in March 2008 saying "Pédophiles, chômeurs, consanguins: Bienvenue chez les ch'tis" (pedophile, unemployed, inbreds: welcome to the land of ch'tis). It made national headlines and was immediately followed by disciplinary action. Criticized for its nostalgic dimension and for indirectly concentrating on an imaginary past and utopian stereotypic French values, the film appeared indeed a bit disconnected from social realities (in some ways not an oddity for a comedy). For decades the northern region, Nord-Pas de Calais, had been stereotyped as a forsaken place of disused coal mines and rusting factories, where the residents prone to alcoholism and poor manners and speech, unemployed or suicidal, kept warm by beating each other up. (Coincidentally a wave of suicides on a national scale at France Telecom began at the same time as the film's release in 2008.) For the millions of Picards who lived in northern France, it was likely that they gathered a greater contextual understanding about what the film was parodying through thundering clichés and the epiphany of a southerner who had to survive in an unknown region only to be won over by its kind generosity.

Therefore the dilemma for popular audiences was the following: for some the film succeeded in turning around the French cinematic cliché that comedies take place in the south, usually on a beach, and the north is reserved for depressing social realism, like Emile Zola captured their bleak existence in his nineteenth-century mining novel, *Germinal* (a narrative of Etienne Lantier, the stranger who comes to town indeed exploits these archetypes for the construction of identity). However, many critics underlined the fact that despite Boon's best effort to show that the ch'tis were people like many others, the comedy unfortunately only accentuated the already existing differences. As mentioned earlier the French have a rather negative vision of the region, be it poverty, despair, unemployment, or mines. So in some ways Boon's film ventured into an unfavorable territory, touching upon national stereotypes and other preconceived ideas from popular culture. The storyline was based around the observation that life in the south of France was mostly sunshine and happiness, while the north of France was a cold and miserable place to be. Hence the desire to make a very human comedy, the main character of which is a nonnative of the north who is bound to discover the ch'ti culture,

its environment, its humanity, its sense of hospitality, and its generosity. Consequently the film earned its rewards and popular success throughout the country, due to its universal scenario and not at the expense of its ch'ti-speaking characters. Many viewers indeed perceived the film less as a denigration of northern provincialism than it was a philanthropic gesture to the region from one of its native sons. Dany Boon actually had the idea of the film even before his first long feature, *La maison du Bonheur* in 2006. He wanted to see if he could make a film with a topic very close to his childhood, his region, and his people.

The protagonists presented a humorous outlook because they both avoided the conventional inherent spirituality of their characters. These on the contrary were concealed inside a hermetic language leaving no room for improvisation, and the content and form of their discourse, as paradoxical as it may sound, already existed in daily life, and their unsophisticated usage made it amusing. The scenario was punctuated with corrosive references to social depression and geographic hardship such as the following exchange:

Jean: T'es muté dans le nord.
Philippe: Le nord? Non . . . A Lyon?
Jean: Ah non, pas à Lyon, dans le nord, nord!
Philippe: Ah non, pas à Paris, me dis pas qu'ils m'envoient à Paris!
Jean: Pas à Paris . . . Plus au nord.
Philippe: En Belgique?
Jean: Ben non . . . Avant la Belgique, y'a . . . Le Nord Pas-de-Calais! Voilà, t'es muté à côté de Lille.
Philippe: L'île? L'île de quoi?
Jean: Non, pas sur une île! Lille! La ville de Lille!
Philippe: La ville de Lille? Mais c'est horrible!

The effort for verbal characterization was promoted to the maximum. Why were so many of the comic lines of this film remembered? Because these lines came from what the French call a "comique de langage" with witty dialogues, as opposed to films like Veber's which favor the structure of the plot, thus neutralizing the potentiality of the play on words (comique de langage vs comique de situation et de personnages). In some ways, the success of *banlieue* films and ethnic micro-milieux was a new momentum to present French dialogues in the light of a new day. Were both Philippe's "southernness" and Antoine's "northernness" evoked by the language of the film just as metaphors would serve the commodities of a comedy? While simplified versions of the midi accent or Parisian slang have contributed for decades to the national cinema's general drive toward geographical abstraction, the so-called ethnic micro-milieux has successfully reinvigorated the French dialogue

tradition. Most of the comic dynamics comes from Philippe's unawareness of the ch'timi dialect, thus producing comical misunderstandings (where in linguistic terms, a confusion of signifiers leads to a transgression of human behavior). An obvious hint is about urban populations traditionally not understanding the rural populations on a cultural level and hence judging their slower ways and their slower speech as evidence of slower minds and less culturally developed personalities. In some ways the film aggravated the confusion around the true linguistic identity of the region Nord-Pas de Calais. Like the Marseillais, illustrated in Pagnol's comedies, the people of the north have finally an authentic accent of their own on the screen. The "a" vowels are replaced by the "o" like for the word Coca Cola becoming "Coco Colo." However, beyond the memorable comic lines, the comedy bet on a double effect that inherently resulted in conflicting views: first, by basing the strategy of the comedy on a Picard dialect (or accent), thereby attracting all the attention and expectation for laughter, and second, as an expected consequence, promoting an erroneous image of the Picard through an oversimplification of the dialect and a reductive characterization for the purpose of comedy (small lexicon and absence of grammar).

The main focus of the comedy was the countless dialectical oddities most of which were produced by Antoine. At his arrival Philippe believes that Antoine has a fractured jaw, when in reality it is just his accent. The linguistic element of the film is particularly important. The ch'ti of the title refers both to the natives of Bergues and their distinctive patois, and numerous words find their meaning completely warped. The two key features of the Picard patois are the "s" sounds becoming "ch," and personal pronouns such as "toi" and "moi" becoming "ti" and "mi." On asking why Philippe's apartment contains no furniture, Philippe is perplexed to hear Antoine reply that the previous inspector took the furniture for "les chiens" ("the dogs"), until he realizes that "les chiens" is simply ch'ti for "les siens" ("his own furniture").[35] Along with cowriters Alexandre Charlot and Franck Magnier, Boon's humor was very much reminiscent of Raymond Devos's style, a stand-up comedian who was celebrated for his tongue-twisting puns and double entendres and whom Boon refers to as his "artistic father." With Philippe and Antoine both positioned as the linguistic producers, the film's verbal comedy was from this point on able to attain a greater degree of subtlety and sophistication.[36] In conclusion, the lesson of such a national and unprecedented success was the novelty of comedy. The linguistic and cultural subtext of the film helped bring about a new outlook among audiences who for the most part were unpredictably swept away by the new energy of this comedy. Using the classic stratagem of vaudeville combined with acerbic dialogues, Dany Boon was able to redirect the plot toward a parade of frenetic and ingenious situations.

APPENDIX

Box Office in France (in Million Entrances)

Tickets Sold	French Title	English Title	Director	Year
20.48	*Bienvenue chez les ch'tis*	*Welcome to the Sticks*	Dany Boon	2008
19.44	*Intouchables*	*The Intouchables*	Toledano/Nakache	2011
17.27	*La grande vadrouille*	*Don't Look Now We're Being Shot At*	Gérard Oury	1966
14.55	*Astérix et Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre*	*Asterix and Obelix: Mission Cleopatra*	Alain Chabat	2002
13.78	*Les visiteurs*	*The Visitors*	Jean-Marie Poiré	1993
12.79	*Le petit monde de Don Camillo*	*The Little World of Don Camillo*	Julien Duvivier	1952
11.73	*Le corniaud*	*The Sucker*	Gérard Oury	1965
10.35	*Les Bronzés 3: Amis pour la vie*	*Friends Forever*	Patrice Leconte	2006
10.25	*Trois hommes et un couffin*	*Three Men and a Cradle*	Coline Serreau	1985
10.24	*Taxi 2*	*Taxi 2*	Gerard Krawczyk	2000
9.94	*Les misérables*	*Les misérables*	Jean-Paul Le Chanois	1958
9.88	*La guerre des boutons*	*The War of the Buttons*	Yves Robert	1962
9.22	*Le diner de cons*	*The Dinner Game*	Francis Veber	1998
9.19	*Le grand bleu*	*The Big Blue*	Luc Besson	1988
9.14	*L'ours*	*The Bear*	Jean-Jacques Annaud	1988
9.09	*Asterix et Obelix contre* César	*Asterix and Obelix vs. Caesar*	Claude Zidi	1999
8.89	*Emmanuelle*	*Emmanuelle*	Just Jaeckin	1974

(Continued)

8.84	*La vache et le prisonnier*	*The Cow and I*	Henri Verneuil	1959
8.65	*Le bataillon du ciel*	*Sky Battalion*	Alexander Esway	1947
8.63	*Les Choristes*	*The Chorus*	Christophe Barratier	2004
8.17	*Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*	*Amélie*	Jean-Pierre Jeunet	2001
8.15	*Rien à déclarer*	*Nothing to Declare*	Dany Boon	2011
8.03	*Les visiteurs 2*	*The Visitors 2*	Jean-Marie Poiré	1998
7.88	*Un indien dans la ville*	*An Indian in the City*	Hervé Palud	1994
7.87	*La vérité si je mens 2*	*Would I Lie to You?*	Thomas Gilou	2001
7.81	*Le gendarme de Saint-Tropez*	*The Gendarme of St. Tropez*	Jean Girault	1964
7.78	*Le comte de Monte-Cristo*	*The Count of Monte Cristo*	Robert Vernay	1955
7.70	*Le cinquième élément*	*The Fifth Element*	Luc Besson	1997
7.46	*Les bidasses en folie*	*The Five Crazy Boys*	Claude Zidi	1971
7.43	*Le retour de Don Camillo*	*The Return of Don Camillo*	Julien Duvivier	1953
7.30	*Les aventures de Rabbi Jacob*	*The Mad Adventures of Rabbi Jacob*	Gérard Oury	1973
7.22	*Jean de Florette*	*Jean de Florette*	Claude Berri	1986
7.08	*La chèvre*	*The Goat*	Francis Veber	1981
7.06	*Monsieur Vincent*	*Monsieur Vincent*	Maurice Cloche	1947
6.99	*Les grandes vacances*	*The Big Vacation*	Jean Girault	1967
6.99	*Si Versailles m'était conté*	*Royal Affairs in Versailles*	Sacha Guitry	1954
6.94	*Le salaire de la peur*	*Wages of Fear*	Henri-Georges Clouzot	1953
6.81	*Astérix aux Jeux olympiques*	*Asterix at the Olympic Games*	Langmann/ Forestier	2008

Notes

Introduction

1. Russell B. Gill, "Why Comedy Laughs: The Shape of Laughter and Comedy," *Literary Imagination* (2006) 8 (2): 233–250, p. 250.
2. See Susan Hayward's claim "What is significant is that the renewal is being attempted in comedy, the most conservative of all genres," in *French National Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge), p. 254.
3. "The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (*Human Nature*, ch. 8), p 65.
4. Aristotle, *Rhetorics.* W. D. Ross ed. (New York: Cosimo, 2010). (book 2, chapter 12), p. 85.
5. Member of the Académie Française and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927.
6. Adrian Bardon, "The Philosophy of Humor," in ed. Maurice Charney, *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2005), p. 463.
7. Bazin André, *Monsieur Hulot et le temps. Qu'est-ce que le cinéma* (Paris, Cerf: 1994), p. 41. "Le burlesque français, si' l'on excepte les derniers films de Max Linder réalisés à Hollywood, n'a pratiquement pas dépassé les années 1914, submergé ensuite par le succès écrasant et justifié du comique américain. Depuis le parlant, en dehors même de Chaplin, Hollywood est demeuré le maître du cinéma comique."
8. Maurice Charney, *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, Volume I (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005), p. 5.
9. Don Nilsen, *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, Volume II (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005), p. 408.
10. Norman Shapiro, *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, Volume I (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005), p. 305.

I The Early Comedies of the Sound Era

1. Translated by the author from the French: "Contaminé et revitalizé par les spectacles plébéiens par excellence que sont la revue, l'opérette, le vaudeville, le mélodrame, le caf'conc', renforce sa vocation populaire." Pierre Billard, *L'âge classique du cinéma français*, 1995, p. 157.
2. Armes, Roy. *French Cinema*. 1985. p. 72.
3. Interview of Roger Régent, Candide, September 27, 1934: "Il est en effet plus aisé de tourner un roman qu'une pièce . . . Réaliser un film d'après un roman, c'est faire une création; réaliser un film d'après une pièce, c'est refaire. Un roman n'est pas cristallisé. Je peux écrire une scène pour traduire à l'écran une page de roman. S'il s'agit d'une pièce, la scène est déjà faite. Comme on ne peut jamais la tourner intégralement, il faut adapter, alléger le texte: je n'ose pas, je ne me reconnais pas un droit de couper les répliques de quelqu'un. Après avoir filmé des pièces, je m'attaque maintenant aux romans. Il y a là matière à création; on change de plan: du littéraire, on passe au dramatique."
4. Carné, Marcel. "Censures" Cinémagazine numéro 38. September 20, 1929.
5. This is an interesting characteristic of the aristocrat de Boeldieu who knows the English language as an impromptu code to converse with German aristocratic officer von Rauffenstein and eventually "forgets" that he knows English when he has to assist his companions and allies. An ambiguity quite revealing just 3 years before the Occupation.
6. The adventures of Colonel Ramollot or private Chapuzot were rather contemporary of the suffering, while other humiliations and harassment experienced by the heroes of H. Fèvre or G. Darien depicted the military world as a world of corruption.
7. Mazzocchi Doglio, Mariangela. "L'espace de la mémoire personnelle de l'auteur renvoie des images connues qui donnent vie, devant les yeux des spectateurs, aux fameuses tranches de vie." p. 188.
8. Bergson, Henri. "Here again is exemplified the law according to which the more natural the explanation of the cause, the more comic is the effect." *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, p. 25.
9. Jean-Philippe Lecomte. "Ainsi, dans la comédie—bidassière—[. . .], la charge contre l'institution militaire que pouvait constituer la peinture péjorative et ridicule des cadres militaires (officier senile ou benoîtement paternaliste, sous-officier sadique, infirmière nymphomane, etc.) est toujours désamorcée par le loyalisme en dernière instance de jeunes appelés débrouillards." "Contestation par la dérision du service militaire et de la vie de caserne depuis 1885." p. 69.
10. General: "Come now, you are surely aware that these chaps are not afraid of you." Captain: "Oh, but I'm proud to be convinced of it! [. . .] I am glad to acknowledge my faults, sir, but I could care less about garnering a little respect from my brothers in arms if I've managed to gain a small corner in their hearts and in their memory."
11. The silent version of 1915 was intended to be projected with a casual talk by the author. In 1939, Guitry made a sound version, with commentary, in which he

added his father, Lucien Guitry, plans, which were not included in the 1915 version. The final version revised in 1952 is 44 minutes long.

12. *The Story of a Cheat* premiered on September 19, 1936, at the cinéma Marignan in Paris.
13. Howe, Desson. "Story of a Cheat and Pearls of the Crown" Washington Post. October 7, 1994.
14. Truffaut, François. "C'était en 1936. Sacha, un peu las des pièces filmées, se fit la réflexion que le cinéma était peut-être plus près du roman que de la pièce: 'au théâtre on joue, au cinéma on a joué.' Il conçoit donc un film qui aura la forme d'un roman filmé: Le personnage qui sera sur l'écran ne dira pas: "Je suis malheureux aujourd'hui." Il aura l'air malheureux, et la voix de celui qui raconte dira: "J'étais malheureux ce jour-là." Au moment où il fait cette déclaration, Sacha Guitry vient d'inventer le play-back même s'il ne s'en rend pas compte. Il vient d'inventer la primauté de la bande sonore, comme Orson Welles, formé par la radio, le fera trois ans plus tard avec Citizen Kane. La bande sonore pré-établie servira de guide aux mouvements, aux gestes et aux mimiques des acteurs pendant le tournage. La mise en scène est alors guidée par une mise en sons." In *Sacha Guitry. Le cinéma et moi*. 1977, p. 16.
15. Guitry, Sacha. *Mémoires d'un tricheur*, p. 29.
16. Truffaut, François. "Si la grande originalité du Roman d'un tricheur est d'être l'unique film de fiction de l'histoire du cinéma qui soit commenté en voix off à 90%, son immense mérite est d'avoir fait oublier cette particularité au point que des spectateurs interrogés à la sortie de la salle croiront avoir vu un film joué et parlé directement." In *Sacha Guitry: le cinéma et moi*. 1977, p. 17.
17. When Guitry's voice was not performing it was Adolphe Borchard's score which accompanied the action.
18. Montignac: "Moreover, men who believe that women dress for them are naive. . . . You do not dress for men . . . you dress against other women!" Odette: "That is somewhat true. But you can add that if it is for women that we put on beautiful dresses, it is nonetheless for you that we take them off!"
19. In 1936, it won the New York Film Critics' Award for Best Foreign Film.
20. Volpone means fox in Italian, the servant Mosca means the fly, the usurer Corbaccio means "ugly crow," the trader Corvino means "small crow," and finally the notary/attorney Voltore means "vulture".
21. Jacques de Baroncelli began filming in June 1938 and had to stop it for financial reasons. It was taken over with the same actors by Maurice Tourneur in March 1940. Some scenes filmed in 1938 were kept in the final montage. *Volpone* was released on May 10, 1941, during that most peculiar of times: the Nazi occupation of France or, more accurately then, Northern France.
22. Mosca: "The smell of money is enough to make men drunk. You give them a whiff of the coins, just a whiff, and they come groveling, and they bare their neck, and it goes completely to their head. Women will crawl to your bed. Merchants will give you credit, and poets will sing your praise; that's the magic of money!"
23. "Dédicace à une jeune fille." Rio, October 21, 1940.

24. Mosca: "Sir, your gold makes me sad because it is in prison in your chests. If I could I would give it wings." Volpone: "Nonsense! Set it free when I had so much trouble getting it into a cage? But what would you do with it?" Mosca: "Me? A night of love, a powerful party with friends, a leisure trip to Turkey."
25. Welsh, James. "Shades of Ben Jonson and Stefan Zweig: Volpone on Film," p. 46.
26. "Celui là vend sa femme, l'autre vendra son fils. Qui vendrait Dieu s'il leur tombait dans les pattes. L'argent, l'argent! L'argent partout! L'argent à tous les étages, tout le long des rues, par toute la ville, par tout le monde! Tous ignobles! Je vais les faire danser!"
27. Welsh, James. "Shades of Ben Jonson and Stefan Zweig: Volpone on Film," p. 43.
28. Frye, Northrop. *Writings on Shakespeare and the Renaissance*, p. 6.
29. Henry VIII: "You come with me to London and teach dance to my wife." Honorin: "Which one?" Henry VIII: "All of them!" Honorin: "No, but which wife?" Henry VIII: "What do you mean . . . which wife? The Queen!" Honorin: "The Queen? No, you did not understand me. What is her name?" Henry VIII: "But Catherine of course!" Honorin: "Catherine? But which one? There are three Catherines for six women! There is Catherine of Aragon, Catherine Parr, Catherine Howard. You know . . . don't play secrets with me. No, it's useless. I know the private life of Henry VIIIth. Your movie, I saw it at least ten times at the theater!"
30. Born in Toulon, Muraire Jules Auguste (1883–1946) began as a young actor in military vaudeville under the pseudonym Rallum, then Raimu. Singer Maurice Chevalier and composer Vincent Scotto noticed him and encouraged him to move to Paris. There he met music hall director Felix Mayol, also from Toulon like him, who eventually casted him in his Parisian theater, then later in La Cigale, the Folies Bergères, and the Casino de Paris. Sacha Guitry offered him his first role on stage with *Faisons un* rêve (*I Have a Dream*, 1915) at the Théâtre des Bouffes Parisiens. Raimu made his first film appearance in Roger Lion's *L'Enlèvement de Vénus* (1916). But it was the advent of the talkies that triggered his fame with popular audiences thanks to his vibrant voice combined with a strong southern accent. In 1929, Raimu performed in Marcel Pagnol's *Marius* on the Parisian stage, then in 1931, in Alexander Korda's screen adaptation, a prelude to Marcel Pagnol's Marseilles trilogy. The following year, he resumed his role as César in *Fanny* directed by Marc Allégret. In 1938, Marcel Pagnol gave him the greatest role of his career with *The Baker's Wife*, which became a classic of French cinema. During the Occupation, at the height of his career, he joined the Comédie Française and performed two comedies of Molière: *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* and *Le malade imaginaire*. Scenes and dialogues, emblematic of Marseilles culture remained very famous, including the famous "Tu me fends le coeur!" (You break my heart!).
31. The film was shot between March and September 1937 in Marseille and was released on April 15, 1938, in Paris.
32. William Faktorovitch, Pagnol's cinematographer of Russian origin, was at the origin of the nickname, a word taken from his native tongue. About the origin of

the word "Schpountz," see Marcel Pagnol in the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, December 1965. See also Georges Berni's *Merveilleux Pagnol*, p. 122.

33. Fernandel (1903–1971), born Fernand Joseph Desiré Contandin in Marseille, was along with Raimu, one of the most popular comic actors of French cinema. Fernandel was a comedy star who first gained popularity in French vaudeville, operettas, and music hall revues. From the *comique troupier* (military vaudeville) to Provençal folklore, his physique, graciously described by film scholar Ginette Vincendeau as "horselike features, especially his huge teeth, and a strong southern accent," made him famous. In 1930, he appeared in his first motion picture and for more than 40 years he would be France's top comedic actor. He was perhaps best loved for his portrayal of the irascible Italian village priest at war with the town's communist mayor in the Don Camillo series of motion pictures. He starred in over 150 films, including Claude Autant-Lara's *The Red Inn* (1951), Julien Duvivier's *The Little World of Don Camillo* (1951), and Marcel Pagnol's *Harvest* (1937), and his popularity lasted over four eventful decades. He also appeared in Italian and American films. His first Hollywood motion picture was in 1956 in *Around the World in Eighty Days* in which he played David Niven's coachman. His popular performance in that film led to starring with Bob Hope and Anita Ekberg in the 1958 comedy, *Paris Holiday*. Fernandel performed one of his best roles with Bourvil, the other grand comic actor, in Gilles Grangier's *My Wife's Husband* (*La cuisine au beurre*, 1963).
34. A playwright, screenwriter, producer, and director, Pagnol had a juggler's gift for filmmaking. *Le Schpountz* was shot simultaneously with another Pagnol picture: *Regain* (*Harvest*, 1938), which also stars Fernandel and Demazis. According to one source, Pagnol was writing (and rewriting) *Le Schpountz* as they filmed, which occasionally called for reshoots. In one case, an actor who appeared in one portion of the film (Pierre Brasseur) was not available for the retakes, so his role is truncated in the finished film.
35. At the end of the story, Fernandel appears driving a spectacular coupé-cabriolet "Eclipse" 601 Peugeot, which was a gigantic publicity for the car brand at the time.
36. Vincendeau, Ginette. "Les acteurs méridionaux dans le cinéma français des années 1930," in *L'acteur de cinéma: approches plurielles*. Eds. Vincent Amiel, Jacqueline Nacache, Geneviève Sellier and Christian Viviani. (2007) p. 228.
37. Baptiste: "My poor Irénée, you're back. You left crowing, your head high, now you return humiliated and completely crushed by the harsh lessons of life. Now you know, and indisputably, that you are nothing but a crackpot, a failure, a bum, a wreck . . . but I'm tactful; I don't want to let you know."
38. Along with the presence of Jewish connotations such as Meyerboom, the film also uses French names such as Irenée, Casimir, and Baptiste. The character is played by Leon Meyerboom Bails, an actor who specialized in Jewish roles (although he himself was not Jewish). Meyerboom, as a character, engages in dubious financial practices, the same as those stigmatized by the French press and several official investigations, as responsible for the instability of the French cinema of the 1930s.

39. Pagnol, Marcel. *Jofroi*, 1995, p. 108.
40. Brion, Patrick, "L'inventeur du néo-réalisme." 1975, p. 14.
41. Interview with Roberto Rossellini. "Le masque et la plume." January 18, 1976, www.ina.fr/archivespourtous/index.php?vue=notice&id_notice=I00015101.
42. *Tire au flanc* (1929) was the first opportunity for collaboration with Michel Simon.
43. The film was shot in the summer of 1932 with all interiors at the Éclair studios in Epinay, and most exteriors in Chennevières, on the banks of the Seine. The film was premiered on November 11, 1932, at the Colisée in Paris.
44. Renoir, Jean. Interview with Rui Nogueira and François Truffaut in 1968. *Jean Renoir: Interviews*. 2005. p. 170.
45. Lestingois: "The man who spits in Balzac's *Physiology of Marriage* is now less than nothing to me." Boudu: "So, who is that man?" Lestingois: "Well, go ask my wife."
46. The cycle race scenes at the very beginning of the film were shot in Montrouge, Hauts-de-Seine.
47. Bergson, Henri. *Laughter*, p. 103.
48. While it may have never transpired through the screen, Michel Simon and Fernandel did not get along on the set of *Fric-frac*. The two actors were in fact in a volatile competition, and Michel Simon regularly engaged in improvisation, which did not help to lower the preexisting tension. Reportedly, Arletty had to intervene on repeated occasions to attempt to reconcile and resolve conflicts. After this experience, the two actors never worked together again.

2 The Comedies of Postwar France

1. Keyishian, Harry. "Satire." *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, p. 528.
2. Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 208.
3. Guitry, Sacha. *Le cinéma et moi*, p. 77.
4. Although as a character Eiron was weaker than his opponent Alazon, he nevertheless defeated him by misrepresenting himself in some way through ironic witticisms. Eiron often acted obtuse and imprudent in order to fool the credulous characters.
5. Guitry, Sacha. *Le cinéma et moi*, p. 76.
6. Braconnier: "You try to make me out to be a murderer, but you can't. Because if I hadn't killed my wife, it is she who would have killed me, and to reproach me for killing her is to reproach me for not being dead."
7. Braconnier: "The question is never whether a woman can or cannot. She either wants to or does not want to (which, in any case, is secondary). Whereas the man, he must be able to. . . . He cannot get away with just closing his eyes. I don't know if I'm making myself clear."
8. Guitry addresses the duet Jean Debucourt and Jacques Varennes, saying: "Vous jouez si bien la comédie, Jacques Varennes, qu'on croirait que vous êtes à la Comédie Française; et vous la jouez si bien, Debucourt, qu'on croirait que vous n'y êtes pas!" (You play comedy so well, Jacques Varennes, one would believe that

you are at the Comédie Française Society; and you Debucourt, you play it so well, one would think that you are not!)

9. Sacha Guitry, addressing lead actor Michel Simon during the opening credits of the film, says: "You have this precious virtue which cannot be acquired and which is not transferable: the innate sense of theater, that is, the ability to share with others the feelings that you do not experience."
10. Marcel Aymé, *La traversée de Paris*, a short novel published in 1947 in the collection *Le Vin de Paris*.
11. In a letter dated 5/12/1956 the production company (Franco Film SA) suggested to change the original title into two possible options: "Drôles de copains" or "Copains d'une nuit." The reasons mentioned that the original title was, according to the Film Company, "anti-commercial and anti-public." Dossier de presse, Institut Lumière.
12. Against tenacious rumors the film met popular success with 4.8 million entries, scoring the fourth place at the box office in 1956. It also won several important prizes such as the Coupe Volpi for Best actor with Bourvil (Gabin had received the same international recognition 2 years earlier for Jacques Becker's *Grisbi*), Prix du Meilleur Film by the Syndicat Français de la Critique du Cinéma in 1956, and Prix Méliès in 1957. Nomination for the Golden Lion at the Mostra di Venezia in 1956 and a nomination for Jean Gabin at the BAFTA in 1957 for Best Foreign Actor.
13. Grandgil: "Fifty years each, a hundred years for the lot, one hundred years of stupidity! But what the hell are you doing on earth goddamit? Aren't you ashamed to exist?"
14. Marcel: "Why did you do that?" Grandgil: "Why? To see how far one can go when your country is occupied. Did you see how far we can go? Did you see what we can do to get away with those yellowbellies? With the rich like Jambier who kiss butt to avoid been denounced, as well as with the poor who kiss butt as well—although with them, you wonder why. It's probably just the fashion these days to kiss butt." Marcel: "And you, of course, never?" Grandgil: "No, not yet."
15. The film was colorized in 1994 by the American Film Technologies (AFT) company with the agreement of Claude Autant-Lara.
16. Max Douy also worked on Claude Autant-Lara's *Le diable au corps* (*Devil in the Flesh*, 1947) and Robert Bresson's *Les dames du bois de Boulogne* (*The Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne*, 1945).
17. Originally actors Yves Montand and Jean Richard were the designated lead actors for the initial project.
18. In a letter to Claude Autant-Lara, Marcel Aymé reminded him of Bourvil's "poor performance" in *Le passe muraille* (letter March 8, 1956).
19. Before this small but unforgettable part in the role of Jambier, a black market butcher, comedian Louis de Funès had already appeared in over 90 films, invariably in minor supporting roles. During the few minutes he appeared on screen, in the two memorable cellar scenes, de Funès stole the show playing the victim to Gabin's merciless teasing: "Monsieur Jambier, 45 rue Poliveau . . .!" A few years

later, de Funès became the biggest star in French cinema, particularly with his subsequent appearances with Bourvil in *Le Corniaud* (1964) and in *La grande vadrouille* (1966), two of the most successful comedies in the 1960s.

20. François Truffaut, *The Films in My Life*, p. 172.
21. The film was the largest box office success of the year 1959 with 8.8 million tickets sold.
22. POW: "Saint Leonard, have mercy on him." Charles: "St. Leonard? Who's that?" POW: "You don't know St. Leonard is the patron saint of prisoners?" Charles: "If there was a patron saint of prisoners . . . there would be no prisoner!"
23. Director and screenwriter Gérard Oury previously made films that were predominantly dark, like the polar genre famous in the 1950s such as *La main chaude* (1959), *La menace* (1960), and *Le crime ne paie pas* (1961). Actor Louis de Funès persuaded him of his talents as a comedy writer and indeed Oury quickly encountered much success not only as a screenwriter but eventually as a filmmaker. His creations include *Le corniaud* (*The Sucker*, 1964), *La folie des grandeurs* (*Delusions of Grandeur*, 1971), and *Les aventures de Rabbi Jacob* (*The Mad Adventures of Rabbi Jacob*, 1973). Master in the comic genre, Oury did not hesitate to tackle controversial topics such as those of racism and intolerance, for example, in *Le Schpountz* (1999).
24. Born André Raimbourg in Normandy (in the small village of Bourville which inspired his pseudonym as an actor), Bourvil is nowadays best known for his films, but he began his artistic career as a singer. In the immediate postwar years he became an apprentice baker and plumber to make a living in Paris. He slowly resumed his career as a singer in preludes for shows in Pigalle. In May 1946 Bourvil signed his first record with Pathé, which included a parody of realistic songs he has sung in his first film, Jean Dréville's *La ferme du pendu* (*Hanged Man's Farm*, 1945). His acting career follows the lead and he gets comic roles in which he excels: Jean Boyer's *Le trou normand* (*Crazy for Love*, 1952), Marc Allégret's *Un drole de dimanche* (*Sunday Encounter*, 1958), Gilles Grangier's *La cuisine au beurre* (*My Wife's Husband*, 1963) with Fernandel, and *Le corniaud* (*The Sucker*, 1964).
25. Born in 1914 and of Spanish origin, Louis de Funès began his acting career after World War II as a modest pianist and entertainer in Pigalle. With his brief passage at the famous Cours Simon (Parisian acting school) he made the acquaintance of actor Daniel Gelin, who secured him his first role in *La tentation de Barbizon* (*The Temptation of Barbizon*, 1945). His major breakthrough came in 1956 from his role as the cynical butcher in the film by Autant-Lara, *La traversée de Paris*. This was his first opportunity to perform in the company of Bourvil. Gérard Oury reunited Bourvil and de Funès in 1964 in *Le corniaud*. De Funès was also known for his role of gendarme in Jean Girault's six films (*Le gendarme de Saint-Tropez*, *Le gendarme à New York*, etc . . .) until 1982.
26. Augustin: "Of course, those are not walking shoes you're wearing there." Stanislas: "Since you're offering so kindly . . . I accept!" Augustin: "What? That you lend me your shoes? What size are you?" Stanislas: "The same as you! (They exchange shoes). Ah . . . that's much better now."

27. *Télérama*, 20 January 2010.
28. The film was also distributed internationally and in Germany, where it was the first comedy on World War II presented on the big screen in 1967. The film won the best Foreign Film Award at the Taormina Film Festival in 1967, and the Golden Plate at the Donatello Awards in 1967.
29. Note from a series of interviews conducted by the author with film historian Raymond Chirat in Lyon (July and August 2012 as well as July-December 2013).
30. Actor Paul Meurisse (*Les diaboliques*, *Le deuxième souffle*), the archetypical gangster figure in postwar "polar" cinema, who originally declined the main role for health reasons, appeared for a few seconds in the final scene. Indeed, Lino Ventura hesitated to play this role because of the comical dimension of the character; he was convinced that he would not be credible in this new kind of composition.
31. No translation is being proposed by the author due to the complexity of the use of slang and puns.
32. L'écran Français, October 31, 1951.
33. Jesus: "Your hands are made to bless, not to hit." Don Camillo: "Hands are made to bless. But what about feet?"
34. Two years before *Jour de fête*, Tati had already made an award-winning short film entitled *L'école des facteurs*, which foreshadowed the character of François. Resistant to enticing proposals from producers who wanted a sequel to the popular adventures of the postman, Tati, who was a true independent filmmaker, decided to continue his personal itinerary in exploring new directions in comedy in *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (*Mr. Hulot's Holiday*) with a new character who was closer to the realities of the time. *Jour de fête*, the most purely burlesque of the all the works of Tati, also remains the most popular to this date among French audiences.
35. André Bazin's interview (in French) was published in "Les cahiers du cinéma" 83 (May 1958), pp. 2–20, then translated in English in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*. 19:4, pp. 285–298.
36. Truffaut, François. "Il crée un univers délirant, cauchemardesque et concentrationnaire, qui paralyse le rire plus facilement qu'il ne l'engendre." Arts (05/14/1958).

3 Comedy in the Modern Era

1. The advent of the VCR and the private TV channel Canal + encouraged French popular audiences to stay home. Facing a potential loss, the Ministry of Culture created "The Film Festival" in 1985. This celebration of cinema, unique in the world at the time, allowed viewers to watch several movies at the theater at very low prices for three days.
2. To supplement the *avances sur recettes* system (advance on earning subsidy), Jack Lang created the *Sociétés de financement des industries cinématographiques et audiovisuelles* (SOFICA) program in 1985. These investment companies were mostly created to acquire capital from private individuals or companies in exchange for

fiscal advantages. The subsidies were paid to film producers against box office receipts in France, and restricted to French-speaking films.

3. The 1970s also witnessed the first *Mouvement de libération des femmes* (MLF) demonstrations, equivalent to the American National Organization for Women.
4. In the 1980s some team members eventually went solo, for example Thierry Lhermitte starred with Philippe Noiret in Claude Zidi's *Les ripoux*, Michel Blanc in Bertrand Blier's *Tenue de soirée*, and Gérard Jugnot in his own *Pinot simple flic*.
5. Marcel Dalio (born Israel Moshe Blauschild) plays the role of Rabbi Jacob. He began his acting career in Parisian cabarets and music halls in the 1920s, very much in vogue at the time. His expressive features became famous after he played in major films like Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* (1936), and Jean Renoir's *La grande illusion* (*Grand Illusion*, 1937) and *La règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939). When Germany invaded France, the Nazi administration used pictures of Dalio to produce a series of posters designating him as the archetypal Jew. Dalio who had fled to Mexico, then to Canada, was invited to Hollywood to play the role of Emile in Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942) starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman which established his American reputation. His Hollywood career includes roles in Howard Hawks's *To Have and Have Not* (1944) before returning to France after the Liberation. He also continued his acting career with Henry King's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1952) and Howard Hawks's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953).
6. The film is supposed to take place from Friday evening to Saturday afternoon. This is indeed inconsistent, as an Orthodox rabbi would most likely not travel on Friday night during Shabbat.
7. Farès: "But tell me, Mr. Pivert these Arabs, did you see them?" Pivert: "Yes of course and especially one, a big one with oily curly hair with small eyes, tiny cruel eyes with dark glasses. A real murderer's face! You know, as long as they settle their differences with each other . . . fine (the less they are . . .), but not here in France, Inspector!"
8. Pivert: "Racist? Me racist Solomon? At least, thank God, Antoinette is marrying a French . . . white! [. . .] He is rich like me, and Catholic like everyone!" Solomon: "Not like everybody, sir, because I, for example, am Jewish." Pivert: "You're Jewish? Solomon . . . Jewish? Solomon is Jewish!" Solomon: "And my uncle Jacob, who arrives from New York, he is a rabbi." Pivert: "But he's not Jewish?" Solomon: "Of course he is." Pivert: "But not your entire family?" Solomon: "Yes they are." Pivert: "Look, it's nothing . . . I keep you anyway."
9. Pivert: "You are about to bust the whole gang! Their leader is called Farès! Here's his description: fat, oily with cruel pleated eyes that pass through his dark sunglasses." Farès: "A real murderer's face!"
10. The day of the film's release on October 18, 1973, Danielle Cravenne, wife of producer Georges Cravenne, diverts flight Air France Paris–Nice. Psychologically fragile, she threatens to destroy the Boeing 727 and kill some of the 112 passengers if the film is not banned from theaters. She considered the film as intolerable in light of the international situation and anti-Palestinian. During an exchange of

gunfire with the French police, Danielle Cravenne was hit in the head and chest and died in the ambulance while being transported to the hospital.

11. Michel: "What's that?" Aida: "It's the monkey of the cook, but I do not eat that." Michel: "You have veterinary certificates for the import?" Aida: "What?" Michel: "Yes . . . the monkey, has his documents?"
12. Amina: "You're not gonna whiten your skin too? If there are complexed girls who want banana skin color, that's their business. But we, in our family, we stay local color." African woman: "If there are those who want to stay macaques. A monkey who cannot reach a fruit says it is bitter."
13. Critics of color blindness argue that it operates under the assumption that France of the 1980s was living in a "postrace" world, where race no longer mattered, when in fact it was still a prevalent issue in French society.
14. Pierre Mondy, who was the French voice of Ugo Tognazzi in the film, was also the first director of the homonymous play in 1974.
15. Michel Serrault won the César Award for Best Actor in 1979 (the first before two more in 1982 and 1996).
16. As an Italian coproduction, the film consequently employed many Italian actors instead of the French distribution (Ugo Tognazzi in place of Jean Poiret).
17. David Ehrenstein. Essay on *La cage aux folles*. *Criterion*, September 2013. Ehrenstein has been writing about films and gay politics since 1965, for a wide variety of publications. His books include *The Scorsese Picture: The Art and Life of Martin Scorsese*, *Open Secret: Gay Hollywood 1928–2000*, and *Masters of Cinema: Roman Polanski*.
18. David Ehrenstein. Essay on *La cage aux folles*. *Criterion*, September 2013.
19. Renato: "Try to walk like John Wayne." Albin: "The cowboy?" Renato: "Yes, John Wayne. You get off your horse, you walk toward the saloon. Slam the door and bang! You can try?" Albin: "To do John Wayne?" Renato: "That's right. [Albin walks timidly] That's John Wayne as a girl."
20. Bienzobas, Pamela, and Diane Langlumé. "La question de l'homosexualité dans *La cage aux folles* (1978) et son remake *The Birdcage* (1996)." *Inverses*, 2006, p. 142.
21. Renato: "Your coffee is frankly disgusting. You French really make shitty coffee." Jacob: "I have been called a Negro, a faggot . . . but I have never been called French."
22. Charrier: "These are odd plates. These are young people playing, right?" Albin: "You know, there are so many dishes in this house, I can't tell you what's in it." Charrier: "They're Greeks. I think they are Greeks." Albin: "Oh! In fact, Greeks. Greeks in my plates! That's weird. You are right, they are Greeks." Charrier: "This is scary, I can't see anything without glasses. Wait . . . are they boys?" Albin: "Boys? You have boys? There are probably girls too. You don't have girls? You see, here you have a girl there. That's a girl, right?" Charrier: "It's been a while you haven't seen any! No, they are boys; it is not difficult, they are naked."
23. With a lucid look at French society of the early 1970s, as well as a mordant irony and innate sense of powerful dialogue, *Going Places* was a powerful narrative

against the *cinéma de papa* as the Nouvelle Vague was two decades earlier. The trio of actors (Gérard Depardieu, Miou-Miou, and Patrick Dewaere) were suddenly propelled as icons, representing the gap between youth and the post 1968 government of the time.

24. The jury subsequently explained that they were asked to watch both films again before making a decision.
25. René Prédal, p. 158.
26. Anthony: "You're going to love me at least?" Bob: "Of course I will love you. I'll make you a queen!"
27. Bertrand Blier originally planned to have Patrick Dewaere (*Going Places* and *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*) taking on the role of Antoine. With the sudden death of the actor, the role went to Blanc and the new tandem Depardieu/Blanc allowed the director to explore some other aspects of male relationships.
28. Burch, Noël, and Geneviève Sellier, *La drôle de guerre des sexes du cinéma français*, Paris, Nathan, 1996.
29. Schwartzenberg, Emmanuel. "A quoi tient le succès de *Trois hommes et un couffin*?" *Le Figaro*, Décembre 8, 1985.
30. Nurse: "I expect you to show me my room." Pierre: "But I don't know where Jacques will put you. That's his problem . . . maybe in his room. But I'm warning you: we are the three of us to live in this apartment and we are all pretty darned hooked on sex!" Nurse: "But sir, everyone lives his life. I hope you have not made your vows of chastity; at your age it would be a pity. As for me, I take care of children, and that's what I need. And as for sex, I have all what it takes at home, thank you very much."
31. Michel: "Why would I have her phone number? I never heard of that chick." Pierre: "But you don't have her phone? Her address? It's not a girl you know?" Michel: "Absolutely not, let me tell you: if I had to know the address and phone of all Jacques's girlfriends, I would be a full-time secretary!"
32. Jean Claude: "Listen Bernard, I think you and I have the same problem; that is to say, we can't rely only on our good looks . . . especially you. So if I may give you some advice: forget that you've got no chance; go for it, you never know, on a misunderstanding, it might work."
33. René: "It would be stupid to both get caught, whereas one could get away." Pierrot: "What?" René: "Let me arrest you." Pierrot: "Why me?" René: "Because I had the idea."
34. René: "Where did you find this bag?" François: "In the basket of a woman!" René: "Please! Be quiet and let Monsieur answer. This bag, you found it in the street?" Pickpocket: "Uhm . . . yes?" René: "You picked it up?" Pickpocket: " . . . yes?" René: "You saw this gentleman and asked where the closest police station was." Pickpocket: "Yes?" René: "What a luck! You found a cop willing to walk you over here." Pickpocket: "Yes." René: "Congratulations! It is actually sad to say, but few people would bring back lost objects. So if in one year this bag is still unclaimed, it is yours. Sign here." Pickpocket: "I can go?" René: "Of course!"
35. Bergson, Henri. *Laughter*, p. 16.

36. The prototype of the character is Ménalque from Jean de La Bruyère's *Les Caractères*.
37. Greenspun, Roger. August 31, 1973, *New York Times*.

4 French Comedy Today

1. The law was voted in October 2010.
2. Quemener, Nelly. "Les contradictions déclenchent le rire autour des inattendues et décloisonnent les mécanismes de stéréotypisation [. . .] En jouant de ces contradictions porteuses d'hybridité, les humoristes énoncent les discours qui les ont subjectivés et désignent l'arbitraire et l'artificialité des catégories auxquels ils sont assignés. Par le déclenchement des rires, ils transforment l'aveu, la contradiction, l'élément stigmatisant en modalité d'existence et du pouvoir." "Mère black, père noir, je suis métisse!" *Conflits, résistances, visibilités des humoristes non-blancs sur la scène télévisuelle en France*. p. 19.
3. Barlet, Olivier. "Africultures: Filmmakers inhabited by Africa." *H & M*, p. 76.
4. Mongin, Olivier. *De quoi rions-nous ? La société et ses comiques*. p. 29.
5. Mongin, Olivier. "Ce comique identitaire puise son énergie dans une réalité qu'il contribue à transformer. Alors qu'un comique strictement ethnique se contente de viser l'autre, de marquer des frontières pour s'en distancier." *De quoi rions-nous? La société et ses comiques*. p. 32.
6. Davies, C. "Exploring the thesis of the self-deprecating Jewish sense of humor." *Humor*, p. 203.
7. Sister: "Vuibert . . . is it Jewish?" Eddie: "Vuibert it is Weber [. . .] like Bensaid, it is Ashkenaze." Sister: "Vuibert, it's Jewish then?" Mother: "Of course it is Jewish, if he says it is Jewish." Sister: "His father can very well be a non-Jew. Those things happen unfortunately . . . is your father Jewish?"
8. Eddie: "Are there non-Jews in the Sentier?" Dov: "No, are you kidding? They wouldn't last two months. But I know an Armenian though, but everybody thinks he is Jewish. Of course it's not written on his forehead that he is not a Jew!"
9. Grassin, Sophie. *Comédies françaises*, p. 131.
10. Warner: "I am playing for you the song about prison, because one day I will go to prison, Inch'Allah."
11. Gaertner, Julien. "Aspects and representations of Arab character in French cinema," *Confluences Méditerranée*, p. 189.
12. Abdelkrim: "This building is weird. No satellite dish on the windows. Don't they have TV here?" Mousten: "No, because here, it is a building 'old style', like Louis XVI or something."
13. Abdelkrim: "I ain't like you, I am different, you know. I was born like that, nothing I can do about it. I found out a long time ago. I already lost a friend about that. You get it?" Mousten: "You're scaring me. I don't get it." Abdelkrim: "As an Arab in the hood, you can't just . . . come out, ok? People who look at you, your family, it's complicated. When we used to watch rap videos together, with all the chicks . . . well I . . . wasn't thinking about the same things as you guys."

14. Barlet, Olivier. "Africultures: Filmmakers inhabited by Africa." *H & M*, p. 76.
15. Mousten: "Just give me the name of a girl who digs you since they all dig you." Abdelkrim: "Your mama! Your mama digs me!" Mousten: "You shut up with my mom, on the Koran!" Abdelkrim: "You shut up with the Koran, on my mother's head!"
16. Pascal: "My ideal woman is Cindy Crawford's legs, Kim Bassinger's hips, Demi Moore's breasts, Michelle Pfeiffer's lips, Sharon Stone's eyes." Client: "How about Schwarzenegger's fist in your face?"
17. Charles-Henri: "This is proof that France would do better off taking care of its own misery, instead of playing good Samaritans abroad." Geneviève: "Of course, instead of sending people on the moon." Charles-Henri: "But it's not the question! Today in France everything is falling apart; we assist all the good-for-nothings, the parasites. [. . .] And who is taking advantage of it? I'm asking you . . . the macaques, the Arabs, the immigrants; ain't I right?
18. Mast, Gerald. *The Comic Mind*. p. 23.
19. Emelina, Jean. "Mais, malgré certaines tentations d'absolu, le comique, intuitivement perçoit ses limites. Il sent, sous peine de faillité, selon la formule, "jusqu'où ne pas aller trop loin." Il sait que sa puissance est à la fois irresistible et éphémère, qu'on ne gagne pas contre la gravitation universelle et que la pesanteur, redoutée et rassurante, reste la loi." *Le comique: éssai d'interprétation générale*, p. 171.
20. Antoine: "Two women together, I am not opposed . . . as long as I can get a shot"
21. Antoine: "One time I went to a dyke club . . . and I felt slightly effeminate."
22. Waldron, D. "Fluidity of Gender and Sexuality in Gazon Maudit," *France on Film*, p. 70.
23. Rollet, Brigitte. "La maternité reste le 'moyen' le plus sûr de conférer aux lesbiennes une féminité que l'on suppose donc absente chez elles mais surtout de les présenter avant tout comme des mères, ce qui atténue la dimension transgressive de leurs pratiques sexuelles et leur mode de vie sexuellement indépendantes des hommes." "Comment peut-on être lesbienne? Hétéronorme et hétérosexisme des fictions télévisées françaises." p. 3.
24. Vanderschelden, Isabelle, "Les visiteurs." *The Cinema of France*, ed. Powrie Phil, p. 222.
25. Mcmorran, Will. *Les visiteurs and the Quixotic Text*, p. 165.
26. Almost all characters of the narrative seem to belong at the extreme ends of the social spectrum (from homeless to wealthy bourgeoisie) with the banker eventually humiliated with a bowl of soup landing on his head or Jacquard grossly wallowing in the mud.
27. Mcmorran, Will. p. 167.
28. Delfour, J-J (1995), "L'ennemi, c'est non pas le bourgeois dont en tant que classe sociale il est fait l'apologie, mais la personne du bourgeois dont on rêve de prendre la place." "Les visiteurs: mythologie et haine de classe," *La voix du regard*, p. 154.
29. Jäckel, Anne. "*Les visiteurs*: a feelgood movie for uncertain times" *France on Film*, ed. Mazdon, p. 41.

30. Director Jean-Marie Poiré appeared in a cameo scene at the end of the film as a villager asking Jacquard, who has just landed in the Middle Ages, to give up his jewelry: "Donne tes bijoux, le drôle!"
31. Klifa, Thierry. "J'ai tendance à penser qu'un film qui a plus de plans est plus palpitant qu'un autre. D'abord parce qu'à chaque plan, le cerveau retravaille; c'est un rythme qui colle à notre époque, au zapping." Interview with Jean-Marie Poiré "Les clés du rire," p. 53.
32. Jacquouille: "Thank you woman, you're ugly, but you're nice" Ginette: "Wait . . . have you seen your nose? When you blow it, doesn't it feel like shaking hands with a friend?"
33. Coluche. "Le syndicat" (1979) "People have greatly exaggerated with Normandy. I went there three times this summer, and it did not snow once. And the climate is very healthy for those who can stand rubber boots."
34. Dubois, Régis. "leur permet, par procuration, de prendre leur revanche sur les elites." "Bienvenue chez les prolos: le cinéma populaire français et la lutte des classes." p. 127.
35. The nickname "ch'ti" emerged during World War I when soldiers from the region were teased by comrades about their pronunciation of "ch'est ti, ch'est mi" instead of "c'est toi, c'est moi" (it's you, it's me).
36. In parallel to the regionalism of the film, it is worth noting the personal origins of the two main actors in North Africa: Kad Merad was born in Algeria, while Boon is the son of a ch'ti mother and a Kabyle father.

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