



FRENCH CULTURE COURSE

French Film & Television

10 Chapters

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Generated with Claude

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French Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Why French Film & Television? Scope & Sources

There is a famous story that when the first audiences in Paris saw a film of a train pulling into a station, they screamed and ran from the room. It is one of the best-known stories in film history, and most historians think it has been greatly exaggerated. That makes it a good place to begin a course on French film and television: a country that claims, with some justice, to have invented cinema, treats it as an art, funds it through the state, and argues about it constantly. This opening chapter explains why the subject deserves a course, sets out what the course covers, and shows how to read the sources. A great deal of film history is half legend, so the chapter marks what is firm and what is not.

Why French Film & Television?

France matters to cinema for several reasons. It was one of the places where the film projector was invented and where films were first shown to a paying public. It built some of the first large film companies. It produced a series of influential movements, from the 1930s "poetic realism" to the New Wave of the late 1950s, and it developed a tradition of writing about film that shaped how the rest of the world thinks about directors. It also gave cinema a place in public policy, with a state body that supports film and a long argument about protecting French culture from foreign competition. Television, which is covered alongside film as in the other courses of this series, followed a similar path: a state-run monopoly, then a gradual opening to private channels and, lately, to streaming services.

The question for the whole course

Is French cinema a national art, a national industry or a national argument? The honest answer is that it is all three, and the chapters follow how they were mixed: the inventors and showmen, the artists and critics, the popular comedies and thrillers, and the state that stands behind them. The capstone in Chapter 10 returns to this question.

A One-Paragraph Version

The Lumière brothers gave what is usually described as the first public paid film screening in Paris at the end of 1895 (check the claim, since others made similar claims at about the same time). French companies dominated the early international film business, and the country produced a distinctive series of schools of film-making. During the German Occupation the industry continued under restrictions, and after the war a state body was created to support it and the Cannes festival was founded. The New Wave of the late 1950s changed film-making around the world. Television was a state monopoly until the 1970s and 1980s. Today, France makes more films than most countries, and the state still supports them. These are the basic facts, and each is developed in later chapters.

What the Course Covers

Chapters	Theme
2–3	The birth of cinema; silent experiment and poetic realism
4–5	Occupation, liberation and Cannes; the New Wave
6–7	Comedy and popular cinema; the crime film and the cinéma du look
8–9	Television from ORTF to Canal+; contemporary cinema and the streaming era
10	Cinema as a national argument

What the course leaves out

This is a cultural history, not a catalogue of every film. It does not rank directors, list award winners or require you to have seen the films. Plots are explained only as far as the history needs. The sibling courses, Japanese Film & Television 1 and German Film & Television 1, take the same approach to other countries.

Scope: France at the Centre

The course is built around France. French-language film is bigger than France: Belgium, Switzerland, Quebec and many African countries have film traditions of their own, and many film-makers worked across borders. Where a figure or film is inseparable from the French story,

the course names it and says where it comes from, and it does not give those cinemas a strand of their own. The game show *Jeux sans frontières* is a television programme that belongs partly to French television history, and it is covered in its own course, *Jeux Sans Frontières* (It's a Knockout): Europe's Game Show 1, and mentioned here only in the television chapter.

Record, Legend and Memory

The train story shows why this distinction matters. Three kinds of claim need different handling.

Record

Dates of screenings, laws, studio foundations and ratings that appear in archives and reliable reference works.

Legend

Stories that have been repeated so often that they feel like facts: the panicking audience, the "first" of everything, the single genius who invented a technique. They often contain some truth, but the usual version is tidier than what happened.

Memory

What viewers recall about a film or a series they saw years ago. Good for atmosphere, unreliable for the year, the cast or the country that made it.

A note on accuracy

Dates, titles and names in this course are given from general knowledge and checked as each chapter is written. Where a point is uncertain the text says so. Before quoting a date or an award elsewhere, check it against a film archive or a reliable reference work. The same habit runs through the sibling courses.

Where to Watch and Read

- **The Cinémathèque française.** Founded in the 1930s (check the year), it holds one of the largest film archives in the world and shows films and exhibitions in Paris.
- **The national audiovisual archive.** The Institut national de l'audiovisuel, set up in the 1970s (check), keeps French radio and television, and much of it is accessible online.
- **Festivals.** The Cannes festival and others publish programmes and histories of their own.
- **Restored classics.** Many French films have been restored and released with English subtitles, often with commentary.
- **Books and documentaries.** Look for histories of French cinema and of French broadcasting, and for the critical writing that is part of the story (Chapter 5).
- **Subtitles.** Almost everything discussed is available with English subtitles. A French film is usually better watched in the original language.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

In three sentences, explain why French film and television can count as a window on French culture. Use at least two points from this chapter.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Sort these into record, legend or memory: (a) the Lumière brothers gave a paid public screening in Paris in 1895; (b) the first audiences ran from the room in terror at the film of the train; (c) your recollection of a French film seen long ago on television.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Choose a French film or series you believe you know. Write down the year, the director and one thing you remember, then check each against a reliable source and note any corrections.

Quick Reference

- **Early cinema:** the Lumière screening in Paris, 1895 (the "first" claim is contested)
- **Why it matters:** invention, early studios, influential movements, film criticism, state support
- **Television:** a state monopoly, then private channels, then streaming
- **Scope:** France-centred; other French-language cinemas only where inseparable
- **The train legend:** widely repeated, probably exaggerated
- **Handling sources:** separate record, legend and memory
- **Best first checks:** the Cinémathèque, the audiovisual archive and the festivals

Next chapter: The Birth of Cinema: Lumière, Méliès & Pathé, which looks at how French film began.

French Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · The Birth of Cinema: Lumière, Méliès, Pathé & Alice Guy

In the years before the First World War, France led the world in film. The Lumière brothers gave one of the first public screenings, Georges Méliès turned the camera into a magician's tool, the companies Pathé and Gaumont became the largest film businesses on earth, and a young woman called Alice Guy directed some of the earliest story films and later ran a studio in New Jersey. This chapter tells that story and, true to the course, separates the record from the legends that have grown round it. Dates and details are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

The Lumière Brothers

Auguste and Louis Lumière ran a successful photographic-plate business in Lyon. In 1895 they patented the *Cinématographe*, a compact device that worked as a camera, a developer and a projector in one, and which was light enough to be taken anywhere. They first showed films to invited audiences in the spring of 1895 (check), and on 28 December 1895 they gave a public screening to a paying audience in the basement of the Grand Café in Paris. It is the date most often given as the birth of commercial cinema.

- **What was shown.** A programme of short films, each lasting less than a minute: workers leaving the Lumière factory, a baby being fed, and a comic scene in which a boy plays a trick on a gardener with a hose (*L'Arroseur arrosé*, "the sprinkler sprinkled").
- **The style.** A fixed camera, one scene, no editing. These are real life and staged gags filmed in a single take.
- **The spread.** The company trained operators and sent them around the world to film and show the *Cinématographe*, which helped to spread the new medium quickly.

The "first" claim

Others have claims to earlier or similar public shows in 1895, including inventors in Germany and the United States, and the Lumière screening was one of several. It is safest to say that the Lumière screening was among the first public paid film shows and the one that did most to start an industry. See also German Film & Television 1 for the Berlin claim.

The Train Legend

The film *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* ("Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station") shows a train arriving at a platform at an angle. The popular story is that the first audiences were terrified and fled, convinced that the train would run them down. Film historians generally treat this as a legend, or at least a heavy exaggeration: the evidence for such panic is weak, and the audience knew they were watching a projected image (check). The story is retold because it expresses something true, the shock of a new medium, even if the details are probably not.

Méliès and the Trick Film

Georges Méliès was a Parisian stage magician who owned a theatre. After seeing the Lumière show he bought a camera and began making films in a different spirit, as magic. He built a glass-walled studio near Paris, designed painted sets and costumes, and used a series of tricks that he is credited with developing: stopping the camera and changing the scene so that a person seems to vanish, dissolves, double exposures and hand-coloured prints.

- **The Moon film.** His best-known film, *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), shows astronomers travelling in a shell fired from a cannon, and its image of the rocket in the Moon's eye is one of the most recognisable pictures in film history.
- **Piracy.** The film was widely copied abroad, particularly in the United States, and Méliès received little from its success.
- **Decline and rediscovery.** He fell out of fashion, went bankrupt before the First World War, and later ran a toy and sweet stall at a Paris railway station. He was rediscovered in the 1920s and honoured with a state award (check). The 2011 film *Hugo* retells part of his story.

Another legend

A well-known story says that Méliès discovered his stop-the-camera trick by accident, when his camera jammed while filming a street and the scene changed when it started again. It is a good story and may be partly true, but he told several versions himself, and it should be treated as a tale, not a fact.

Pathé and Gaumont

Business followed invention. Two French companies grew into global firms.

Company	Founder	Why it mattered
Pathé Frères	Charles Pathé and his brothers	Before 1914 it was the largest film company in the world; made and sold films and equipment, ran newsreels and had branches abroad; symbol: a rooster
Gaumont	Léon Gaumont	Founded in the 1890s; made films and equipment; often described as the oldest film company still in operation (check)

By the early 1900s French firms supplied a large share of the films shown around the world, including in the United States. This early lead was lost during the First World War, when production was disrupted and American companies took over the international market, a change that explains much of what follows in the course, including French worries about American competition (Chapter 10).

Alice Guy

One of the most interesting figures of the period is **Alice Guy**, later known as Alice Guy-Blaché. She began as a secretary to Léon Gaumont in the 1890s and became one of the first directors at his company, making short films in the late 1890s and after. She is often credited with directing one of the earliest story films, *La Fée aux choux* ("The Cabbage Fairy"), from around 1896, though the date and whether it was the very first are disputed (check). She went on to direct and supervise a large number of short films, and was involved in early experiments with synchronised sound.

- **Move to America.** After marrying Herbert Blaché, a colleague from Gaumont, she moved to the United States around 1907 (check).
- **Solax.** In 1910 she founded her own company, Solax, and later built a large studio in Fort Lee, New Jersey, at a time when that town, and not Hollywood, was a centre of American film-making. The studio is often described as one of the largest and best equipped of its day (check the wording).
- **Return and neglect.** Her company did not last, she left film-making in the early 1920s and went back to France. For decades her work was forgotten or credited to others, and she

has been rediscovered, including in a documentary about her life in 2018 (check).

Legend, record and who gets the credit

Alice Guy's story is a lesson in how film history is written. Early films were often unsigned, records were lost, and the later credit tended to go to men. Historians have therefore had to work to restore her name, and some of her claims are still argued over. This is the same tension between record and legend that the course returns to.

The Bridge to the Next Chapter

Another Gaumont director of the period, Louis Feuillade, made long serial crime films in the 1910s that were very popular. They lead naturally into the next chapter, in which French cinema, having lost its commercial lead, found a new role as an art.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the Lumière screening of December 1895 and the Cinématographe, and say why it is safest to call it "among the first" public paid shows.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Compare the Lumière approach to film with that of Méliès, naming one film by each, and explain why the train and the jammed camera are both better treated as legends.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Summarise the career of Alice Guy in four sentences, naming Gaumont, Solax and Fort Lee, and say why her story is a lesson about who gets the credit in film history.

Quick Reference

- **Lumière:** Cinématographe patented 1895; public paid screening in Paris on 28 December 1895
- **Style:** fixed camera, single scene, under a minute
- **Train legend:** probably exaggerated
- **Méliès:** stage magician; trick films; *A Trip to the Moon* (1902)
- **Pathé:** the largest film company in the world before 1914; rooster symbol
- **Gaumont:** founded in the 1890s; possibly the oldest film company still running
- **Alice Guy:** Gaumont director; Solax, Fort Lee, New Jersey; returned to France in the early 1920s
- **Check:** the "first" claims, the Solax studio's size, and the dates

Next chapter: Silent Experiment & Poetic Realism, which follows French film as an art through the 1920s and 1930s.

French Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · Silent Experiment & Poetic Realism

Having lost its commercial lead during the First World War (Chapter 2), French cinema found a different role in the 1920s and 1930s: it became an art. Writers, painters and young directors treated film as a serious form, tried out ideas in silent films that surprised audiences, and then, with the arrival of sound, produced a series of humane and gloomy dramas now regarded as classics. This chapter follows that development, from the serials of Louis Feuillade to Abel Gance's giant epic, the avant-garde, the first sound comedies, and the poetic realism of the late 1930s, which includes Jean Renoir's two most famous films. Dates and titles are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Feuillade and the Serials

Before the war, and during it, Louis Feuillade made long serial films for Gaumont, released in episodes. *Fantômas* (1913–14), about a master criminal, and *Les Vampires* (1915–16), about a gang of criminals (not supernatural vampires despite the title), were enormously popular, and later admired by artists for their strange, dreamlike atmosphere, with masked figures moving across ordinary Paris streets (check the dates). They show a cinema that was popular and that was already finding odd poetry in the everyday.

Abel Gance and Napoléon

Abel Gance made ambitious films that pushed the technique of silent cinema. His war film *J'accuse* (1919) was a powerful anti-war statement. His biggest project was *Napoléon* (1927), a very long epic using a hand-held camera, rapid editing and, in its final sequence, three screens side by side, in a process sometimes called Polyvision (check). The film was shown in shortened versions for decades, and later restoration work, led by the British historian Kevin Brownlow, brought back a much longer version that has been shown with live orchestras (check the details). It is a landmark of the silent period and an example of how film history depends on restoration.

Impressionism and the Avant-Garde

In the 1920s a group of film-makers and critics, including Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein and Germaine Dulac, argued that film should be an art in its own right and not a copy of the theatre. The style they developed is usually called French Impressionism, with close-ups, soft focus and rapid or slow motion used to show feelings and states of mind. Dulac, one of the few women directors of the period besides Alice Guy (Chapter 2), made *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1923), often described as an early feminist film (check).

The avant-garde went further, often working with painters and poets.

Film	Who	Why remembered
<i>Entr'acte</i> (1924)	René Clair, with music by Erik Satie	A playful short film made as an interval between the two acts of a stage show; Dada in spirit
<i>Ballet mécanique</i> (1924)	Fernand Léger	Machines and everyday objects in rhythmic motion, without a story
<i>Un chien andalou</i> (1929)	Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí	A short Surrealist film made in France by two Spanish artists, famous for a shocking image of an eye

Compare with Germany

The French avant-garde and the German Expressionists (German Film & Television 2) were looking at the same question: what can film do that no other art can? Germany answered with elaborate sets and shadows, France with rhythm, montage and dream logic.

Sound and Early Talkies

Sound arrived in France at the end of the 1920s, as in Germany (see German Film & Television 3). French directors proved quick to find a style for it.

- **René Clair.** His light musical comedies, *Under the Roofs of Paris* (1930) and *À nous la liberté* (1931), were international hits and made use of sound with wit and restraint.
- **Marcel Pagnol.** A playwright who moved into film and made warm, funny and sad films set in Marseille and Provence, including a trilogy starting with *Marius* (1931), which became part of French popular culture (check).

- **Jean Vigo.** A young director who made only a handful of films before he died in 1934 at the age of 29. *Zéro de conduite* (1933), a rebellious film about a boarding school, was banned for years, and *L'Atalante* (1934), about a young couple on a river barge, is now regarded as a masterpiece (check).

Poetic Realism

The late 1930s are the high point of the period. The term *poetic realism* is applied to a group of films, often scripted by the poet Jacques Prévert and directed by Marcel Carné, in which working-class settings, shadowy streets and doomed romances gave ordinary life a melancholy beauty. Jean Gabin was the central star, playing deserters, workers and criminals who cannot escape their fate.

- **Marcel Carné.** *Quai des brumes* (1938) and *Le Jour se lève* (1939) are the best-known examples.
- **Julien Duvivier.** *Pépé le Moko* (1937), about a criminal hiding in the Algiers casbah, was a major success.
- **The mood.** The films are pessimistic, and are often linked to the anxieties of the years before the Second World War, though the link is an interpretation and not proof.

Jean Renoir

Jean Renoir, a son of the painter Auguste Renoir, is regarded as one of the greatest directors in the history of film. His 1930s films cover a wide range.

- ***La Grande Illusion* (1937).** A film about French prisoners of war in the First World War, with Jean Gabin and Erich von Stroheim, which treats officers of both sides as members of a class that is passing. It was a major international success and is reported to have been the first foreign-language film nominated for the top American film award (check).
- ***La Règle du jeu* (1939).** A comedy of manners at a country house party, in which the upper classes and their servants both behave badly. It was a commercial failure on release, was cut and banned, and was later reconstructed and acclaimed. It now regularly appears near the top of lists of the greatest films (check).

A film that failed, then was a classic

La Règle du jeu is a good example of how reputation changes: rejected by its first audience, then rescued by critics and restorers. It is a reminder that "the greatest film ever" lists are judgements made later, by a particular group of people, and not a verdict delivered when the film came out.

What Happened Next

The mood of this cinema darkened with the political crisis in Europe. In 1939 France went to war, and in 1940 it was defeated and occupied. Chapter 4 follows what became of the film industry and its artists.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe two of the silent-era figures from the chapter (Feuillade, Gance, Dulac, Clair, Buñuel and Dalí, Léger) and say what each tried to do with film.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain what poetic realism is, naming a director, a scriptwriter, a star and one film, and say why linking it to prewar anxiety is an interpretation.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Compare La Grande Illusion and La Règle du jeu, and explain what the history of the second film shows about film reputations.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Feuillade:** serials *Fantômas* and *Les Vampires*
- **Gance:** *J'accuse* (1919), *Napoléon* (1927); three-screen finale
- **1920s:** Impressionism (Delluc, Epstein, Dulac); avant-garde (Clair, Léger, Buñuel and Dalí)
- **Sound:** Clair's musicals, Pagnol's Marseille films, Vigo's short career
- **Poetic realism:** Carné, Prévert, Gabin; late 1930s; doomed romance
- **Renoir:** *La Grande Illusion* (1937), *La Règle du jeu* (1939)
- **Check:** dates, restoration details and the claims about awards and rankings

Next chapter: Occupation, Liberation & the Cinema of Quality, which follows French film through the war and its aftermath.

French Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Occupation, Liberation & the Cinema of Quality

From 1940 to 1944 France was defeated and occupied, and its cinema carried on under German and Vichy control, producing, strangely, some of the most admired films in its history. After the Liberation the industry was reorganised, the state took on a new role in film, the Cannes festival began, and a polished, literary style of film-making dominated the 1950s until a group of young critics attacked it. This chapter follows that story. It deals with a painful period, so it sticks to what is widely documented and says where the details should be checked.

Film Under the Occupation

After the defeat of 1940 the country was divided between a German-occupied zone and a zone run from Vichy by a collaborating French government, and the Germans took over the whole country in 1942 (check). Film was controlled in several ways.

- **State control.** The Vichy government created a body to organise the film industry and license its workers (check the name and date). Its work later passed to a postwar body, the CNC (see below).
- **Exclusion.** Jewish film professionals were banned from working, and some had to leave the country or go into hiding. Others were persecuted.
- **German involvement.** A German-owned company in Paris, Continental Films, produced a number of French films, and German officials oversaw the industry (check).
- **Censorship.** Scripts and films were checked, and British and American films were banned.

A Busy Cinema

Cinemas did well in these years: attendance rose, partly because American films were gone and partly because cinemas were among the few warm places to go (check the claim). French studios made a large number of films. Many were light entertainment, some were costume dramas that allowed directors to avoid contemporary subjects, and a few have been read since as hidden comments on the times. *Les Visiteurs du soir* (1942), a medieval fantasy by Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert, is the best-known case. Whether audiences understood it as a message at the time is a matter of debate.

Great films in bad years

The most admired French film of the period, *Les Enfants du paradis* (Children of Paradise), was shot in the later years of the war and released in 1945. It is set in the Paris theatre world of the 1820s and 1840s and made Arletty and Jean-Louis Barrault famous. It is generally seen as a great film made under difficult conditions, and it is a reminder that artists worked within the system. Arletty was punished after the war for a relationship with a German officer (check), which shows how complicated judgements about the period became.

Liberation and the Purge

After the Liberation in 1944 there was a purge of people accused of collaboration, including some in the film world. Some were banned from working for a period. The case of Henri-Georges Clouzot is often cited: his thriller *Le Corbeau* (1943), a story of poison-pen letters in a small town, was made by the German-owned company and was criticised after the war as an attack on French society; he was banned from working for some time and returned to directing (check the details). The case shows how hard it was to separate art, circumstance and politics.

The Blum-Byrnes Agreement and the CNC

Two decisions in 1946 shaped the industry for decades.

- **The Blum-Byrnes agreement.** A financial agreement between France and the United States, under which the United States cancelled part of France's war debt and gave new loans, and French cinemas agreed to show more American films. It provoked protests from French film workers, who feared that the industry would be swamped (check the terms).
- **The CNC.** A state body for cinema, the *Centre national de la cinématographie*, was set up in 1946 (check), taking over from the wartime organisation. It grew into the main channel for state support of film, a subject taken up again in Chapter 10.

Together these decisions began a long argument that runs through the whole course: how to keep a national cinema alive beside the American one.

The Cannes Festival

The Cannes film festival was planned for 1939, as an alternative to a festival in Italy that was thought to be too influenced by fascist politics, and was cancelled when war broke out. It was held for the first time in 1946 (check). The festival's top prize is now the Palme d'Or, introduced in the 1950s (check). Cannes helped to give French cinema a showcase and to make France the centre of an international film culture.

Auteurs of the 1940s and 1950s

Director	Well-known films	Notes
Robert Bresson	<i>Diary of a Country Priest</i> (1951)	Austere, spiritual films, with non-professional actors
Jean Cocteau	<i>La Belle et la Bête</i> (1946), <i>Orphée</i> (1950)	A poet who made films of fantasy and myth
Henri-Georges Clouzot	<i>The Wages of Fear</i> (1953), <i>Les Diaboliques</i> (1955)	Suspense films; the first won the top prize at Cannes (check)
Max Ophüls	<i>La Ronde</i> (1950)	A German-born director known for flowing camera movement
Jean-Pierre Melville	<i>Le Silence de la mer</i> (1949)	Made independently on a tiny budget; looks forward to the New Wave

The Cinema of Quality

The dominant style of the 1940s and 1950s was later given a label by its critics: the *cinéma de qualité* ("cinema of quality") or the "tradition of quality". It meant polished studio films, often literary adaptations, with well-constructed scripts, fine sets and established stars. Directors such as Claude Autant-Lara, Jean Delannoy and René Clément are usually associated with it, as are the screenwriters Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost (check). Some of these films were distinguished, and the label is not simply an insult. It does show the thing that the next generation rebelled against.

The Critics Strike

In 1954 a young critic called François Truffaut published an article in the magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*, usually known by the title "A certain tendency of French cinema" (check). In it he attacked the cinema of quality as literary, stuffy and controlled by scriptwriters, and called for directors to be the real authors of their films. The article is one of the most famous in film criticism. It is the starting point for the New Wave and for the idea of the *auteur*, both discussed in Chapter 5.

A fair view of "quality"

Truffaut's attack was a young critic's polemic, written to make a point, and it overlooked a lot. Many of the films he disliked are still admired. The attack is best read as a statement of what the next generation wanted, not as a fair verdict on the older one.

Remembering the War Years

The war years were a source of argument long after. The early postwar films stressed resistance, for example *La Bataille du rail* (1946), a drama about railway workers, in a spirit that suited a nation wanting to remember itself as heroic. A much later documentary, *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969), by Marcel Ophüls, questioned the picture, and it was kept off French television for years, until the early 1980s (check). The gap between the two shows how the memory of the Occupation changed, a subject to which Chapter 10 returns.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe three ways film was controlled during the Occupation, and explain why *Les Enfants du paradis* and *Le Corbeau* both show how hard it is to judge the period.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain the Blum-Byrnes agreement and the CNC, and say why together they began a long argument about French cinema.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain what the "cinema of quality" was and what Truffaut's 1954 article said, and give one reason to be careful about taking his view as a fair verdict.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Occupation:** state control, exclusion of Jewish professionals, a German-owned production company, censorship
- **Films:** *Les Visiteurs du soir* (1942), *Le Corbeau* (1943), *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945)
- **1946:** the Blum-Byrnes agreement; the CNC; the first Cannes festival
- **Auteurs:** Bresson, Cocteau, Clouzot, Ophüls, Melville
- **Cinéma de qualité:** polished, literary studio cinema
- **1954:** Truffaut's attack in *Cahiers du cinéma*
- **Memory:** *La Bataille du rail* against *The Sorrow and the Pity*
- **Check:** dates, bodies' names, the Blum-Byrnes terms and the festival history

Next chapter: The Nouvelle Vague, which follows the critics who turned film-makers.

French Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · The Nouvelle Vague

In 1959 and 1960 a group of young French film-makers, many of them former film critics, made films that looked and sounded unlike anything before: shot in the streets, with lightweight cameras, with jump cuts, improvised lines and young stars who talked like real people. The Nouvelle Vague, the New Wave, changed what film-makers all over the world thought was possible, and it is the best-known chapter in French film history. It is also a chapter wrapped in legend. This chapter tells the story and, as in the rest of the course, marks what is record, what is legend and what is reputation. Dates and titles are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

The Critics Who Became Directors

The magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*, founded in 1951 by a group including the critic André Bazin (check), was the training ground. Its young writers, among them François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Éric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol and Jacques Rivette, spent their evenings at the Cinémathèque française (Chapter 1) watching films from all countries and eras. They admired American directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks and argued that a great director stamps a personal vision on a film, in what became known as the *politique des auteurs*, "auteur theory" in English. They attacked the cinema of quality (Chapter 4), and then, one by one, made their own films.

The name

The phrase "nouvelle vague" came from a magazine survey of young French people in the late 1950s and was then applied to the new film-makers (check). It was a journalists' label. The directors differed greatly, and some disliked being grouped together.

The Main Names and Films

Director	Well-known films	Why remembered
Claude Chabrol	<i>Le Beau Serge</i> (1958)	Often named as the first New Wave feature, set in a village, made with an inheritance
François Truffaut	<i>The 400 Blows</i> (1959)	A semi-autobiographical film about a troubled boy, Antoine Doinel, played by Jean-Pierre L��aud; won the best director prize at Cannes (check)
Jean-Luc Godard	<i>Breathless</i> (1960)	A petty criminal and an American girl in Paris; jump cuts, location shooting and a freewheeling style; stars Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg
Alain Resnais	<i>Hiroshima mon amour</i> (1959)	A film about memory and the atomic bomb, with a script by the novelist Marguerite Duras
Agn��s Varda	<i>Cl��o from 5 to 7</i> (1962)	A singer waits for medical results while walking through Paris; Varda's earlier <i>La Pointe Courte</i> (1955) is often called a forerunner
��ric Rohmer	<i>My Night at Maud's</i> (1969)	Talkative films about love and moral choices, in series called "tales"

Check the details

The table is a selection and not a ranking. Dates, prizes and the "first" claims are from general knowledge and should be confirmed in a film reference.

How They Worked

- **Location shooting.** Streets, caf  s and flats were used instead of studio sets, which made the films look fresh and cost less.
- **Light equipment.** Smaller cameras and portable sound recorders made it possible to film quickly with a small crew. Godard's *Breathless* is famous for its hand-held shots.
- **Jump cuts and freedom.** The editing broke the usual rules about smooth continuity, and scenes were sometimes improvised.
- **Young actors.** New faces such as Jean-Pierre L  aud, Belmondo, Anna Karina and Jeanne Moreau became stars.

- **Self-reference.** The films quote other films and acknowledge that they are films.

The Left Bank

A second group, sometimes called the Left Bank group after the area of Paris, overlapped with the Cahiers critics but came to film from literature and documentary. Resnais, Varda and Chris Marker are the best-known names. Their work was more literary and more concerned with memory, politics and time. *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) by Resnais is famous for being enigmatic (check).

Money and Support

The New Wave could not have happened without cheap equipment and changes in the funding system. A system of advances against future box-office takings, introduced at the end of the 1950s, helped to finance low-budget first films (check), and producers realised that young directors working cheaply could make profits. Success at Cannes in 1959, when Truffaut's first feature won a major prize, publicised the new group around the world. In this way the movement is another example of the French state's part in film, to be taken up in Chapter 10.

Legend and Record

The legend

A group of young rebels overthrew the old cinema overnight and started a revolution in 1959.

The record

The movement grew out of years of criticism and short films; earlier directors such as Varda, Melville and Bresson were already working in similar ways; and many different directors, over a hundred in a couple of years by some counts (check), made first features. Not all were of the same style or quality.

The reputation

The New Wave is regularly named as the most influential movement in postwar cinema. That is a judgement. It is widely held, and it is also partly a story told by the critics who took part.

Influence and Afterlife

The New Wave influenced directors around the world, and helped to inspire a new wave of American film-makers in the late 1960s and 1970s (check). Its habit of quoting other films and of treating the director as an author has become standard. In France, by the mid-1960s the movement had broken up: some directors became commercially successful, some went on making personal films, and Godard moved toward political film-making. The new freedoms were absorbed into the mainstream.

May 1968

The political events of 1968 reached the film world. In February the government dismissed the head of the Cinémathèque, Henri Langlois, which caused protests among film-makers (check). In May, in the middle of nationwide strikes and demonstrations, film-makers including Truffaut and Godard led a protest that halted the Cannes festival (check). The episode is often treated as the end of the New Wave as a unified spirit, and as a sign that French film and politics were closely tied.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain how the Cahiers du cinéma critics became directors, naming four of them, and say what the auteur idea meant.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Describe four ways the New Wave films were made differently, and name two films with their directors.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Separate the legend, the record and the reputation of the New Wave, and explain why "a revolution overnight" is too simple.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Cahiers du cinéma:** founded 1951; Bazin; critics Truffaut, Godard, Rohmer, Chabrol, Rivette
- **Auteur idea:** the director is the author of a film
- **Key films:** *The 400 Blows* (1959), *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), *Breathless* (1960)
- **Methods:** location shooting, light equipment, jump cuts, young stars
- **Left Bank:** Resnais, Varda, Marker; more literary
- **Support:** advances against box-office takings; success at Cannes in 1959
- **May 1968:** the Cinémathèque row and the closing of Cannes
- **Check:** dates, the origin of the name and the number of first features

Next chapter: Comedy & Popular Cinema, which turns to the films that most French people actually went to see.

French Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Comedy & Popular Cinema

The history of French film told by critics concentrates on poetic realism, the New Wave and festival prize-winners. The history told by the box office is different. For most of the postwar period, what the French public actually went to see was comedy: broad farces, gentle satires and star vehicles that rarely win prizes abroad. This chapter follows that tradition, from the great comic actors of the 1950s and 1960s to the record-breaking hits of recent decades, and asks why the gap between critics and audiences is so wide. Titles, dates and attendance figures are given from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Two Histories

French cinema has long had two tracks. One is the art-house tradition of Chapters 3 to 5, admired abroad and written about by critics. The other is the popular tradition, which fills cinemas at home and often travels badly. The two sometimes meet, but the audience for a Cannes prize-winner and the audience for the year's biggest comedy are often quite different.

Why the box office matters to the story

A film industry supported by the state (Chapter 4, Chapter 10) depends on films that earn money. The popular comedies pay the bills, and in some cases the levy on tickets that supports the CNC pays for the art films. The two tracks are less separate than they appear.

Comic Stars of the Postwar Years

Performer	Known for
Fernandel	A comic star since the 1930s with an expressive face, who starred in the <i>Don Camillo</i> films, a series about a village priest and a communist mayor, made with Italian partners (check)
Bourvil	A gentle, rustic comic actor who was also a capable dramatic actor; the genial half of several famous pairings

Performer	Known for
Louis de Funès	A manic, bad-tempered comic star who became the biggest box-office name of the 1960s and early 1970s
Jacques Tati	A director and performer who made a handful of visual comedies with very little dialogue

Jacques Tati

Tati stands slightly apart from the rest. He made only a few feature films, each carefully constructed, in which the comedy comes from the way people and machines move in a space, not from jokes. His character, Monsieur Hulot, a tall figure with a pipe, hat and raincoat, wanders through modern life without understanding it.

- ***Les Vacances de M. Hulot (1953)***. A seaside holiday. It made Tati and Hulot famous.
- ***Mon oncle (1958)***. A satire on modern houses and gadgets; it won an Oscar for foreign-language film (check).
- ***Playtime (1967)***. An enormous production built around a vast set, nicknamed Tativille, which cost so much that it ruined him financially (check). It was a failure on release and is now widely admired.

Tati also left an unproduced script about an old stage magician in a world that no longer wants him. It was made into an animated film, *The Illusionist* (2010), by Sylvain Chomet, and is set partly in Edinburgh (check), a rare case of a French film tradition travelling to the city of this course's author.

Bourvil, de Funès and the 1960s

The comedies of the 1960s were crowd-pleasers, and they defined popular French cinema for a generation.

- ***Le Gendarme de Saint-Tropez (1964)***. The first of a series of films, directed by Jean Girault, in which de Funès played a fussy police officer in a seaside resort (check the number of films).
- **Fantômas parodies**. A trilogy in the 1960s that took the old Feuillade serial (Chapter 3) and turned it into comedy.

- ***La Grande Vadrouille* (1966)**. A comedy about the Second World War in which Bourvil and de Funès help British airmen escape from occupied Paris. It was an enormous success and was for more than forty years the most-seen French film in France (check the figures).

It is notable that a comedy about the Occupation became the most popular film in the country, at a time when the serious memory of the war was still difficult (compare the Chapter 4 discussion of how the Occupation was remembered). Laughter allowed the French to talk about it.

The cinema and the national story

Comedies in every country tell a story about how the nation sees itself. In France the 1960s comedies are full of petty officials, small-town rivalries and bad-tempered bourgeois, and the war comedy invites the audience to see ordinary people as cleverer than the occupiers. It is a comfortable story, and, as with the resistance films, a later generation questioned it.

Records of the 1990s to the 2010s

The tradition continued, and a handful of films set new attendance records.

- ***Les Visiteurs* (1993)**. A medieval knight and his servant are thrown into the modern day; a very big hit in France (check the figures).
- ***Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (2008)**. A comedy about a postal worker transferred to the north of France, played for laughs over regional stereotypes and accents. It was the most-attended French film in France, passing *La Grande Vadrouille* (check).
- ***Intouchables* (2011)**. A comedy-drama about a wealthy man with a disability and his carer. One of the biggest worldwide successes in French film, and also criticised for how it handled class and race (check).

Other popular titles include the *Astérix* adaptations, the ensemble comedies of the group called Le Splendid, and the sharp farces of Francis Veber (check).

Why the Gap?

- **Language and reference.** Comedy depends on accents, wordplay and local habits that do not translate well.
- **Critical snobbery.** Critics have often looked down on popular comedy, and audiences have ignored the critics.
- **Different purposes.** One tradition wants to explore the medium and the other to entertain.
- **Both are French.** A complete history needs both, which is why the course gives popular cinema a chapter of its own.

The same gap exists elsewhere. Compare the German pattern in German Film & Television 9, where a parody of westerns drew more cinema-goers than most prize-winners.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the two tracks of French cinema and explain why they are less separate than they look.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain what makes Tati's comedy different from de Funès's, naming one film by each, and say what *The Illusionist* has to do with Tati.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain why it is interesting that a comedy about the Occupation, *La Grande Vadrouille*, became the most-seen French film for decades, and name the film that later passed it.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Two tracks:** art-house and popular; the box office pays for both
- **Stars:** Fernandel, Bourvil, Louis de Funès
- **Tati:** M. Hulot; *Les Vacances de M. Hulot* (1953), *Mon oncle* (1958), *Playtime* (1967)
- **The Illusionist (2010):** an animated film from a Tati script, partly set in Edinburgh
- **1960s:** the *Gendarme* films; *La Grande Vadrouille* (1966)
- **Later records:** *Les Visiteurs* (1993), *Les Ch'tis* (2008), *Intouchables* (2011)
- **Check:** attendance figures, dates and series counts

Next chapter: Le Polar & the Cinéma du Look, which follows the French crime film and the stylish directors of the 1980s.

French Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Le Polar & the Cinéma du Look

The French have a word of their own for the crime film: le polar, short for roman policier (police novel). It is a genre French directors loved and reshaped, borrowing from American film noir and handing the result back to Hollywood. This chapter follows the polar from the gangster films of the 1950s, through Melville's cool, ritualised thrillers, to the glossy, image-driven cinéma du look of the 1980s. As elsewhere in the course, dates and titles are from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Where the Polar Came From

Two sources fed it. One was the American crime film and the hard-boiled novel, which French readers and critics adored (the Série noire paperback imprint, started after the war, made American crime fiction popular in France; check). The other was the French poetic realism of Chapter 3, with its doomed men and shadowy streets, in which Jean Gabin had already played the criminal who cannot escape his fate. The polar put the two together.

Noir is a French word

The term "film noir" was coined by French critics in the 1940s to describe the dark American crime films that reached France after the war (check). The label came back across the Atlantic: an American genre named by the French, which French directors then imitated and Hollywood imitated in turn.

The 1950s: Gangsters and Heists

- ***Touchez pas au grisbi (1954)***. Jacques Becker's film about an ageing gangster, with Jean Gabin in a comeback role. It is the model for the weary, honour-bound French criminal (check).
- ***Du rififi chez les hommes (1955)***. Directed by Jules Dassin, an American exiled from Hollywood in the blacklist era (check), it contains a half-hour burglary scene played almost without dialogue or music. It was hugely influential on later heist films.

- **Clouzot.** *The Wages of Fear* (1953) and *Les Diaboliques* (1955), mentioned in Chapter 4, belong to the suspense side of the same appetite.

Jean-Pierre Melville

Melville, who took his name from the American novelist Herman Melville (check), is the central figure. He made small, tightly controlled thrillers in which men in trench coats and hats follow private codes of honour, with little dialogue and an almost ceremonial air. He had already appeared in Chapter 4 as the independent maker of *Le Silence de la mer*.

Film	Star	Notes
<i>Bob le flambeur</i> (1956)	Roger Duchesne	An ageing gambler plans a casino robbery; often counted among the films that anticipated the New Wave (check)
<i>Le Doulos</i> (1962)	Jean-Paul Belmondo	Double-crosses and informers
<i>Le Samouraï</i> (1967)	Alain Delon	A silent professional killer in a Paris flat; the most imitated of his films
<i>Le Cercle rouge</i> (1970)	Delon, Bourvil, Yves Montand	A heist film, with Bourvil in a rare serious role (see Chapter 6)

Melville's influence is wide. Later directors in Hong Kong, Japan and the United States have cited *Le Samouraï* (check), and Japanese crime films appear in Japanese Film & Television 1.

The 1970s: Cops, Politics and Stars

In the 1970s the polar moved onto the street and into politics. Stars such as Alain Delon and Jean-Paul Belmondo made a stream of commercial thrillers, and directors used the form to attack corruption.

- **Henri Verneuil and Costa-Gavras.** Verneuil made big-star crime films; Costa-Gavras, a Greek-born director in France, made political thrillers such as *Z* (1969) about the killing of a politician in a military-ruled country (check).

- **Claude Chabrol.** The New Wave director of Chapter 5 turned to cool, ironic crime stories about the provincial middle class, which he went on making for decades.
- **Bertrand Tavernier.** His police films mixed the genre with social observation (check).

Why the genre lasts

The polar is cheap to make, easy to sell abroad and flexible. It can carry a study of honour, a political argument or a star vehicle. The same reasons explain why crime series are so central to French television, taken up in Chapter 8.

The Cinéma du Look

In the 1980s a group of young directors made films that were fast, stylish and visually bold, with neon colours, pop music, advertising techniques and very little interest in realism. The label *cinéma du look* was applied by critics, some of them hostile (check). It names a loose tendency, not a formal movement, and its directors did not always accept it.

Director	Films	Notes
Jean-Jacques Beineix	<i>Diva</i> (1981), <i>Betty Blue</i> (1986)	A thriller about an opera recording and a young postal courier; a hit abroad as well as in France (check)
Luc Besson	<i>Subway</i> (1985), <i>The Big Blue</i> (1988), <i>Nikita</i> (1990)	Went on to <i>Léon</i> (1994) and a long international career as director and producer (check)
Leos Carax	<i>Boy Meets Girl</i> (1984), <i>Mauvais sang</i> (1986), <i>Les Amants du Pont-Neuf</i> (1991)	More poetic and romantic than the others; the Pont-Neuf film became notorious for its cost and delays (check)

Contested label

Critics who disliked these films called them style over substance, empty advertising aesthetics. Supporters argued that the look was the content: a generation raised on television, music video and advertising was finding its own visual language. Both views are judgements, and the label hides large differences between Beineix, Besson and Carax.

Besson and the Export Model

Besson matters beyond the label. He built a production company and studio complex outside Paris (check) and made English-language action films with French money, a model of a French industry competing with Hollywood on its own ground. Whether that is a triumph of French cinema or an escape from it is an old argument that returns in Chapters 9 and 10.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the two sources of the French polar, and say why "film noir" is described as a genre that crossed the Atlantic twice.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Describe Melville's style and name two of his films with their stars. Why is *Le Cercle rouge* notable for Bourvil?

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Define the *cinéma du look*, name three directors with one film each, and give the critics' view and the supporters' view of it.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Polar:** French crime film, fed by American noir and poetic realism
- **1950s:** *Touchez pas au grisbi* (1954), *Du rififi chez les hommes* (1955)

- **Melville:** *Bob le flambeur*, *Le Samouraï* (1967), *Le Cercle rouge* (1970)
- **1970s:** star thrillers, political crime (Costa-Gavras), Chabrol, Tavernier
- **Cinéma du look:** Beineix, Besson, Carax; neon, pop music, advertising style
- **Besson:** the export model, English-language action
- **Check:** dates, the origin of labels and influence claims

Next chapter: Television: From ORTF to Canal+, which moves to the small screen.

French Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · Television: From ORTF to Canal+

For its first decades French television was a state institution, run by the government and watched by almost everyone on a handful of channels. It was then broken up, partly privatised and overtaken by cable, satellite and finally streaming. This chapter follows that change, and the programmes that went with it: the news, the dramas, the variety shows and the long-running series. Television tells a different story from cinema, because it was closer to the state and closer to everyday life. Dates, names and channel histories are from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

The State Monopoly

Regular French broadcasting began in the 1930s and grew after the war. Radio and television were put under a public monopoly, and in 1964 the state broadcaster was reorganised as the **ORTF**, the *Office de radiodiffusion-télévision française* (check the dates). Government influence on news was a constant complaint: the minister responsible could be said to have a hand in what the evening bulletin contained. Viewers had one channel, then two, then three by the mid-1970s (check). A shared national audience watched the same programmes at the same time.

The strike of 1968

Television staff joined the strikes of May 1968 (see Chapter 5), and journalists were punished afterwards (check). The episode fed a long argument about whether a state broadcaster could ever report freely.

1974: The Break-Up

In 1974 the ORTF was broken up into separate state companies, including **TF1**, **Antenne 2** and **FR3**, with others for production and transmission (check). The aim was to introduce competition between the channels while keeping them in public hands. The three channels competed for audiences but were still publicly owned.

Private Television Arrives

- **Canal+ (1984).** A subscription channel, famous for its scrambled signal, films and sport. Subscribers rented decoders. It became a major funder of French cinema, which ties television directly to the film industry (check).
- **La Cinq and M6 (1986).** New private commercial channels. La Cinq failed and closed in the early 1990s, and M6 survived and grew (check).
- **TF1 privatised (1987).** The largest public channel was sold to a private group, and quickly became the country's most-watched channel, a position it has held for much of the time since (check).

Why television pays for film

French broadcasters are required to put money into French and European films and to show a quota of them. Canal+ pioneered the link, and the obligation is now general (check). It is a central element of the "cultural exception" discussed in Chapter 10.

Programmes That Defined the Medium

Programme	Kind	Notes
<i>Les Cinq Dernières Minutes</i>	Detective drama	A long-running police series that began in the 1950s, with Inspector Bourrel (check)
<i>Maigret</i>	Detective drama	Adaptations of Georges Simenon's stories about a Paris police commissaire, made several times, notably with Jean Richard in a long series from 1967 (check)
<i>Apostrophes</i>	Books talk show	Bernard Pivot's weekly literary programme, famous for making and breaking authors (check)
<i>Les Guignols de l'info</i>	Satire	A puppet parody of the news on Canal+ (check)
<i>Plus belle la vie</i>	Soap opera	Set in a fictional Marseille neighbourhood, running from 2004 on France 3 for many years (check)

French television has also been a leading home of the *feuilleton*, the serialised drama, and of the made-for-TV film, often adapting literary classics. The police drama is the strongest tradition and is the television cousin of the polar in Chapter 7.

Game Shows Without Frontiers

One French television format travelled across Europe: *Jeux sans frontières*, in which teams from different countries competed in absurd physical games, with live linked broadcasts. It is covered in its own course, *Jeux Sans Frontières (It's a Knockout): Europe's Game Show 1*, so it only gets a mention here as an example of television as a shared European experience.

Cable, Satellite and the End of the Shared Screen

From the 1990s cable and satellite packages multiplied the number of channels, and digital terrestrial television in the 2000s multiplied them again (check). The old single national audience fragmented. Public television survived as France Télévisions, the group formed from the former state channels (check), and the public arts channel Arte, a joint French-German project, appeared in 1992 (check). It links to the Franco-German cultural story in German Film & Television 8.

Check the details

Channel names, launch years and ownership changed many times. The overall shape (state monopoly, break-up, private channels, fragmentation) is firm. The specifics need checking in a reliable broadcasting history.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the ORTF and what happened to it in 1974, and say why the independence of television news was a constant argument.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Give three developments in French private television in the 1980s, and explain why Canal+ matters to the film industry.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Choose two programmes from the chapter, say what kind each is, and explain how the fragmentation of channels changed the shared national audience.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **ORTF:** state broadcasting monopoly (reorganised 1964)
- **1974:** break-up into TF1, Antenne 2, FR3 and others
- **1980s:** Canal+ (1984), La Cinq and M6 (1986), TF1 privatised (1987)
- **Link to film:** broadcasters fund and screen French films
- **Programmes:** *Maigret*, *Apostrophes*, *Les Guignols*, *Plus belle la vie*
- **Later:** cable, satellite, digital, Arte (1992), France Télévisions
- **Check:** all dates, names and ownership

Next chapter: Contemporary Cinema & the Streaming Era, which brings the story up to date.

French Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Contemporary Cinema & the Streaming Era

The last thirty years brought two changes at once. French cinema grew more varied, with new voices from the suburbs, from women directors and from the regions, and the way people watch changed completely, as streaming platforms arrived. French television, long thought of as parochial, produced series that sold abroad. This chapter surveys the period and then looks at the argument that streaming reopened: who pays for national film and television when the viewer is on a global service. Because it covers recent years, many details here are the most likely to need checking, and are marked accordingly.

Cinema Since the 1990s

Film	Director	Why it matters
<i>La Haine</i> (1995)	Mathieu Kassovitz	A black-and-white film about three young men in a Paris suburb after a night of riots; a landmark for films about the <i>banlieue</i> (check)
<i>Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain</i> (2001)	Jean-Pierre Jeunet	A whimsical Montmartre romance that was a huge hit at home and abroad; also criticised for an idealised picture of Paris (check)
<i>Entre les murs</i> (<i>The Class</i> , 2008)	Laurent Cantet	A school drama that won the Palme d'Or at Cannes (check)
<i>The Artist</i> (2011)	Michel Hazanavicius	A silent film about the arrival of sound, which won the best picture Oscar (check)
<i>Anatomie d'une chute</i> (<i>Anatomy of a Fall</i> , 2023)	Justine Triet	A courtroom drama that won the Palme d'Or, making Triet one of very few women to win it (check)

Check the awards

Palme d'Or and Oscar results are given from general knowledge. Confirm each against a festival or academy list, and check recent winners especially.

The Banlieue and Other New Voices

For much of the period, the suburbs of French cities, the *banlieues*, became a subject in their own right, after *La Haine*. Directors with roots in these areas, among them Ladj Ly with *Les Misérables* (2019), made films from the inside (check). Women directors, including Claire Denis, Agnès Varda in her later career (Chapter 5), Céline Sciamma and Julia Ducournau, also came to the front (check). Ducournau's *Titane* won the Palme d'Or in 2021 (check). The range runs from social realism to horror.

Two Kinds of Success

- **Crowd-pleasers.** The comedies of Chapter 6 still dominate the home box office, with *Intouchables* (2011) as the model.
- **Festival and critical films.** A steady flow of auteur films keeps France at the centre of the festival circuit.

The two tracks introduced in Chapter 6 are still there, and the state helps both (Chapter 10).

Television Goes Global

French drama was long seen as hard to sell abroad. Since the 2000s some series travelled well, helped by pay channels, premium budgets and streaming.

- **Engrenages (Spiral, from 2005).** A gritty Paris police and legal drama on Canal+ that built a following abroad and ran for many seasons (check).
- **Dix pour cent (Call My Agent!, from 2015).** A comedy-drama about a Paris talent agency, with real film stars playing versions of themselves. It was an international hit and sparked remakes in other countries (check).
- **Lupin (2021).** A Netflix series with Omar Sy as a modern gentleman thief inspired by Maurice Leblanc's character. It drew a very large international audience (check).

Lupin is a useful example because it is French in setting, language and source, yet it was financed and distributed by an American company. Whether it counts as French television is a live question.

Streaming and the Quota Debate

When global platforms such as Netflix and Amazon arrived in France in the 2010s, they fell outside the old system, in which broadcasters had to invest in French films and show quotas of them (Chapter 8). The question was whether foreign streamers should be forced to join in.

The French position

Anyone who earns money from French viewers should help to fund French and European work, and offer a share of it in their catalogues. A European Union rule on audiovisual services allowed national obligations of this kind (check).

The platform position

Platforms argued for flexibility, noting that they also pay for local productions and reach a worldwide audience. In practice France negotiated rules requiring investment, and agreements were reached with platforms (check the details).

The old cinema trade

Cinema owners and producers also fought over the delay, the "window", between a film's cinema release and its appearance on streaming, since French rules traditionally set a long wait (check).

Where the argument comes from

This is not a new quarrel. It is the Blum-Byrnes dispute of Chapter 4 in a new form: how a country keeps its own screen culture when a larger, richer industry offers its product at home. Chapter 10 traces the thread.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Name three films from the chapter with their directors, and say what each shows about French cinema since the 1990s.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe the three series in the chapter and explain why *Lupin* raises the question of what counts as French television.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain the quota debate over streaming in terms of the French position and the platform position, and say how it repeats the Blum-Byrnes argument.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Films:** *La Haine* (1995), *Amélie* (2001), *The Class* (2008), *The Artist* (2011), *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023)
- **New voices:** the banlieue, women directors
- **Series:** *Engrenages*, *Dix pour cent*, *Lupin*
- **Streaming:** platforms outside the old quota system; investment rules negotiated
- **The thread:** Blum-Byrnes (1946) to streaming quotas
- **Check:** all awards, dates and recent rules

Next chapter: Capstone: Cinema as a National Argument, which pulls the whole course together.

French Film & Television

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · Capstone: Cinema as a National Argument

The first nine chapters told a story of films, directors and programmes. This last chapter follows a single thread through all of them: the argument over whether a country should protect its own screen culture, and how. France answered yes earlier and more firmly than most countries, and the answer shaped what its cinema and television look like. This chapter collects the main pieces of the system, shows how they fit together, and ends with the questions the system still faces. As throughout the course, details of laws and figures are from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

The Thread, Chapter by Chapter

Chapter	What happened	The argument underneath
2	Pathé and Gaumont dominate the world market, then lose it in the First World War	Industrial strength can be lost; an American lead followed
3	Cinema becomes an art in the 1920s and 1930s	Film as culture, not only business
4	Blum-Byrnes and the CNC (1946)	How to keep a national cinema beside the American one
5	The New Wave is helped by state advances	Public money can pay for artistic risk
6	Popular comedy pays the bills	The box office funds the whole system
7	Besson exports a French style	Compete on Hollywood's ground, or stay national?
8	Canal+ and broadcasters fund films	Television as a source of film money
9	Streaming and the quota debate	Blum-Byrnes again, in a new form

The Machinery

The system that came out of this thread has several parts, which work together.

- **The CNC.** The national cinema body set up in 1946 (Chapter 4) collects a levy on cinema tickets and on television, and returns the money to the industry as support for production, distribution and cinemas (check the details of the levy).
- **Selective and automatic aid.** Some money is awarded by committee to specific projects, such as first films. Some is automatic, earned by a producer's earlier successes and reinvested in new films (check).
- **Broadcaster obligations.** Television channels must invest a share of their income in French and European films and show a minimum of them (Chapter 8).
- **Quotas.** A minimum proportion of French and European works on air and, more recently, in streaming catalogues (Chapter 9).
- **Protection of the cinema release.** Rules on the delay between a cinema release and television or streaming (Chapter 9).
- **Support for cinemas.** Funds for independent and small-town cinemas and for the art-house network.

A tax on success that pays for risk

The key idea is that the money comes largely from the audience itself, mostly through the ticket and television levies, and much of it is spent on the next generation of films. An American blockbuster that fills French cinemas therefore helps to pay for a French first film. Supporters call this a fair way to share a market. Critics see it as a subsidy that protects film-makers from their audience.

The Exception Culturelle

The principle behind the machinery has a name: the *exception culturelle*, "the cultural exception". It holds that films, books and music are not goods like any other, and that trade rules should allow states to support and protect them. The idea was prominent in the international trade negotiations of the early 1990s, when France led the argument that audiovisual works should be treated differently from other goods (check). It has since been broadened into a wider idea of "cultural diversity" (check). It is a political position, defended by supporters on cultural grounds and attacked by critics as protectionism.

The case for

Without support a small national cinema would disappear under a larger one, as many have. France has kept a large, varied industry and a high number of films a year, and its cinemas show many national and foreign films (check the comparison).

The case against

Protection can shield mediocre work, create a cosy industry that makes films for committees and festivals, and cost viewers choice. Some of the most successful French work, from Besson to *Lupin*, has come from outside the system's centre.

A fair summary

Both can be partly true. The system has kept French film alive and varied, and it has costs. The honest question is how well it works, and not whether it exists.

The Other Thread: Memory

A second theme ran alongside the first. France's screen culture has also been a place where the country argues about itself: the Occupation (Chapter 4), colonial history, the suburbs (Chapter 9) and what counts as French. The comfortable stories of one generation, such as the resistance films and the war comedy of Chapter 6, were questioned by the next. State support has helped both kinds of film to exist.

Compare with Germany and Japan

Germany built its modern film support on a different history, with regional funds and the memory of the Nazi era (German Film & Television 10), and Japan's system was shaped by studios rather than the state (Japanese Film & Television 1). French centralised, levy-based support is one answer among several.

Open Questions

- **Can the model survive global platforms?** The streaming rules of Chapter 9 are still being worked out.

- **Who counts as French?** When a French story is made with foreign money, or a foreign story with French money, which gets the aid?
- **Does protection help or hold back?** Defenders and critics both point to evidence, and the answer may differ for different kinds of film.
- **What about audiences?** Cinema admissions have fallen in many countries, and the habit of going out is changing (check the current figures).

What This Course Left Out

The course concentrated on France. It did not follow Belgian, Swiss, Quebec or African francophone cinema as strands of their own, nor the many fine films and series that fall outside the chapters. Treat it as a map of the main roads, not a complete atlas.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe four parts of the French support system and explain how the ticket levy turns an American blockbuster into funding for a French first film.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain the exception culturelle, and give one argument for it and one against.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Trace the protection thread through three earlier chapters of your choice, from the 1946 decisions to the streaming debate, and say what question remains open.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **The thread:** how to keep a national screen culture beside a larger one
- **The machinery:** CNC levy and aid, broadcaster obligations, quotas, release windows, cinema support
- **Exception culturelle:** culture is not a good like any other
- **For and against:** keeps an industry alive against protectionism and cosiness
- **Second thread:** memory, the nation arguing with itself on screen
- **Open:** platforms, who counts as French, audiences
- **Check:** levy details, the trade history and current figures

End of course. For comparison, see German Film & Television and Japanese Film & Television, and for a French television format that crossed Europe, Jeux Sans Frontières (It's a Knockout): Europe's Game Show.