

## **French cinema, 1931–1939**

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### **Q. How strong was the French film industry in the 1930s?**

A. The French film industry was weak and fragmented during the period concerned, in contrast to the Hollywood film industry. The American film industry was vertically integrated – that is, the same few big players dominated production, distribution and exhibition – allowing for both great economies of scale and tight control of the all-important US home market. Because the US market was so big, Hollywood films could recover most of their costs there and thus be exported relatively cheaply, making Hollywood a fierce competitor of other cinema industries in the world. The coming of sound at the end of the 1920s initially caught the French industry off guard: key patents were owned by German and US companies and had to be bought. In addition, sound pushed the costs of both production and exhibition up considerably, making it hard for smaller companies to survive and forcing the French industry towards a more concentrated structure with fewer but bigger players. But sound also helped the French industry to compete in its home market, even if export became more difficult. Only a few years into the decade, however, the two biggest French studios, Gaumont and Pathé, both got into major financial difficulties. The result of this was that the French industry remained fragmented and under-financed for the rest of the 1930s. Instead of being produced in an 'industrial' manner by big studios, French films would typically be made by small and often short-lived production companies. This may have been a blessing in disguise. Whereas the Hollywood studios held an iron grip on films that they produced, French films were made with considerably more freedom, with directors often able to put together teams of people with whom they found that they could work productively.

### **Q. What sort of films were made? Who were the key directors?**

A. To answer the first question, one should perhaps return to the impact of sound. Because its coming pushed costs up, French cinema had to give up some of the more experimental ventures that had marked the late 1920s, in order to produce films that would attract a broad public. It was thus a popular cinema in the sense of having to produce works with mass appeal. Moreover, sound meant a cinema where dialogue now needed to play a central role. As a consequence, French cinema turned massively to the theatre as source of ready-made scripts that had already been seen to work with the public. Filmed theatre – whatever its aesthetic limitations – was the staple fodder of the early years of the decade. Sound also meant that French cinema could draw heavily on popular song to enhance its appeal – songs routinely figure in a wide range of films, sometimes without very serious attempts being made to justify their presence in narrative terms. Because Paris was the centre of both the film industry and of the entertainment sector (theatre, music-hall, café-concert), cinema could easily draw on well-known performers and bring them to a wider national public. Yet, the relationship between cinema and other entertainment forms was not necessarily

equally beneficial to both. Cinema's competition with older entertainments inevitably caused them to decline.

As the 1930s wore on, the theatrical fare that had dominated film in the early part of the decade gave way to a degree to adaptations of novels and original scripts. This in turn allowed for a relative shift away from visually unadventurous dialogue-led works to visually more creative films. The most celebrated group of films of the latter half of the decade – usually called 'PoeticR' (Poetic Realist) works – were typically adaptations of novels. These generated their celebrated 'atmosphere' from a combination of seedy urban milieux (usually stage sets in reality) where their action was situated and from their sophisticated use of light and shadow as well as from the often grimly dark stories that they told. Poetic Realist films were far from forming the predominant output of the late 1930s, but given the grimly depressing socio-political context of the period, they are the ones that have retrospectively come to dominate public and critical memory by seeming to sum up the mood of the times.

A handful of directors seem retrospectively to have dominated the period. The most celebrated are Jean Renoir, Vigo, Carné and Duvivier, followed by Pagnol, Feyder and Grémillon. Widely seen as one of world cinema's greatest directors, Renoir towers above all the others. Vigo is a figure apart. Apart from some documentary work, he made only one short fiction film and one full-length feature, but such is the anarchic brilliance of the former and the lyrical beauty of the latter that his work is still rightly celebrated. Carné is the leading director of Poetic Realism, closely followed by Duvivier. With his own studios in the South of France, Pagnol made a series of highly successful films that did much to create still influential stereotypes of Marseilles and of Provence that served as rival versions of Frenchness, challenging the usual predominance of Paris in the imagination of the nation. However, concentration on these leading figures can create a profoundly distorted sense of the cinema of the period, distracting attention from the work of many less celebrated and generally less original directors as well as from those such as l'Herbier, Epstein or Poirier, who were highly respected figures of their time. Perhaps more importantly, an over-emphasis on directors can distract attention from the fact that the French cinema of the period was created by a coming together of directors, actors, script-writers, set designers, composers, cameramen and other technicians. Finally, one should remember the rich contribution to the French cinema of the period from the many foreign professionals who, for reasons often not of their own choosing, spent short or longer periods working in France. They helped create the look, the sound, the style and the mood of some of the most remarkable films of the time.

**Q. Is it possible to divide the films into different types?**

A. The normal way film critics and academics divide films into different types is to identify genres, such as the detective film or the western. It has been suggested that the French industry was too fragmented and the number of films it produced comparatively too small for it to have developed such strongly identifiable genres as the Hollywood cinema of the period did. There is certainly some truth in this. It is also true that the categories routinely applied to films were often deliberately broad (*drame*, *comédie* or *comédie dramatique*) and that generic imprecision might be a deliberate tactic to attract as many different people with different tastes as possible. It is nonetheless useful to talk of the genres of the period, not least in order to begin to identify patterns and contrasts between the hundreds of films produced. Popular genres were, for example, the boulevard comedy, a satire of middle-class manners, the

vaudeville, or knockabout comedy, and the *comédie troupière*, or barrack-room comedy, a specifically French genre. On the more sombre side, we might identify the *drame mondain*, or upper-class drama of manners, and the *drame populiste*, the latter clearly converging with what we have called the Poetic Realist film. Other characteristic 1930s' genres – again with clear overlap – were the exotic film and the colonial film. Detective and crime films – one of the continuing staples of French cinema – were also important in the 1930s. Army and war films were regular features too, some of the more notable ones promoting pacifism, others now forgotten supporting nationalist sentiment at a time of rising international tension.

**Q. How political were the films?**

A. The majority of films were very deliberately apolitical, which does not of course mean that they were free of their own values and prejudices. France was a country with sometimes vicious political divisions. A cinema that sought above all to attract different audience segments could not in general afford to divide its public along political lines. There were, however, notable films that took up more political positions, especially when public opinion allowed it. The emergence of the anti-fascist Popular Front, for example, made it possible for a leftist cinema to exist and find an audience. Although not the only director who supported the Front, Renoir is nevertheless the towering figure of this brand of film-making. His *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1935) is, for example, a very powerful piece of radical cinema, while his *La Marseillaise* (1937), a film celebrating the French Revolution, started out as a Popular Front flagship. Vigo's anarchist political leanings come through strongly in his famous short piece, *Zéro de conduite* (1933). Cinema overtly of the political right is decidedly thin on the ground. Léon Poirier's *L'Appel du silence* (1936), with its glorification of the army, the missionary work of the Catholic Church and French colonialism is one of the very few films that one could cite. Significantly, and like Renoir's *La Marseillaise*, it looked to public subscription for its funding, in a way that serves to underline how difficult it was to nurture a political cinema in the mainstream commercial industry. There were some prominent pacifist films in the period – notably Renoir's *La Grande illusion* (1937) and Raymond Bernard's *Les Croix de bois* (1931) – but pacifism, it should be noted, was a relatively consensual value in a country still traumatized by the slaughter of the First World War. As the Second World War drew nearer, patriotic films unsurprisingly become more numerous. Despite these different decidedly minority tendencies, one should stress the essentially consensual or escapist drive behind the majority of films.

**Q. How did French films represent class, race and gender?**

A. Class was a staple, but not, except in the rare political films, class struggle. A good number of films figured the wealthy classes, their lifestyle and their dramas, allowing cinema audiences to enjoy the display of high living and elegant costumes. But the dominant strand of the cinema of the period preferred to focus on the common people, usually portraying them in ambiguous terms as both sympathetic figures, with whom a popular audience could identify, and as picturesque or dangerous characters whom the middle and upper classes could enjoy watching, with a mixture of horror and excitement. Many films used the interplay of the classes as a source of dramatic or perhaps comic contrasts and tensions, often to the advantage of the common people, but without ever suggesting that the social order itself should be changed.

Race, alas, was a staple: foreign and exotic figures were routinely shady, disruptive or untrustworthy characters, often serving to establish a positive sense of Frenchness by contrast. Renoir's films are a notable (but not the only) exception to this, giving positive and sometimes prominent roles to a range of minorities from Italian immigrants (*Toni* (1934)), to Black or Jewish characters (*La Grande illusion* (1937), and *La Règle du jeu* (1939)).

On the issue of gender, the overall picture might also seem to be very dark. Negative feminine stereotypes such as *la garce* (the slut) and *la femme fatale* are usual presences in a cinema that is usually seen as deeply patriarchal, with younger woman often being tied into subordinate relationships with older men – some of the leading male actors of the period were relatively mature figures. Yet this picture should perhaps be nuanced. If films overwhelmingly seemed to sustain the gender status quo, it should be remembered that they also provided fantasies of female mobility, consumption and empowerment, even if, as was often the case, the women had been returned to their place by the end of the film.

**Q. Who were the most popular actors/actresses and why?**

A. The figure who retrospectively seems to dominate the period is Jean Gabin, an actor whose popularity would seem to spring from his ability to be simultaneously proletarian and reassuring, virile yet vulnerable, strong yet tender, and thus to appeal to both male and female, both upper- and lower-class audiences. Behind Gabin, the most remembered male stars are probably such great character actors as Raimu, Louis Jouvet or Jules Berry, not least because they starred in some of the legendary films of the period. For a similar reason, the most remembered women stars of the period are perhaps Michèle Morgan (Gabin's partner in several of his films) and the decidedly assertive Arletty. Yet even a brief trawl through the popular cinema press of the period shows that there were other highly popular figures, who, because they are less visible in the iconic films of the period, have tended to fade from memory. Pierre Richard-Willm, for example, with his matinee idol good looks and dashing on-screen character was a big star of the period, now almost forgotten. If we paid more attention to figures like him, we might be more aware of how a supposedly deeply patriarchal cinema nonetheless had to offer seductive visual pleasures to its vital female audience. French cinema also had a good range of leading ladies, many of whom have slipped at least some extent from memory. Thus, alongside Morgan and Arletty, we should place Annabella, a much bigger star for much of the 1930s, Viviane Romance, Mireille Balin, Danielle Darrieux and others. If Balin tended to play the *femme fatale* or *garce* on-screen, off-screen, in the cinema magazines, she was associated with consumption and modernity. If her screen roles might seem deeply conservative, her off-screen persona clearly has a more liberatory potential.

**Q. How popular was the cinema as a pastime?**

A. Cinema was the most popular entertainment form of its era and would continue to dominate until the rise of television, alternative leisure activities and suburban living in the 1960s. It was also a leisure form that, as we have noted, appealed to all social classes, broadly showing them the same films, although not necessarily at the same time nor in the same cinemas. Films would normally open in the more expensive picture palaces in the big urban centres and would only later find their way onto the less central and more humble screens. Despite its great popularity, however, French

cinema could not rival the audiences enjoyed by American, German or British cinemas – the main reason for this being that, until the middle of the twentieth century, about half of France’s population lived in small towns and the countryside. Cinema was an enormously popular but also a predominantly urban pursuit.

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