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RICHARD KUISEL

## The Fernandel Factor: The Rivalry between the French and American Cinema in the 1950s

The French and the Americans have competed for cinematographic leadership since the days of the nickelodeon. From a French perspective, however, the rivalry has been rather one-sided. Even before the Second World War, the Hollywood juggernaut began to shut Europeans out of the United States and to sweep global markets, and in the last twenty years the Americans have even dominated French movie screens. The year 1998 was the worst on record. Hollywood monopolized seventy percent of the French box-office.<sup>1</sup>

But the 1950s were different. In retrospect, this postwar decade seems to have been the Belle Époque of the national cinema. It represents the days when the big screen still belonged to native productions, not to American imports.

Immediately following the liberation of France, however, it seemed that Americans were everywhere, even in the movie houses. In the late 1940s, for a brief moment, Yankee imports crowded out indigenous films. At the time many blamed the accords negotiated between the two countries in 1946, the Blum-Byrnes agreement, for opening France to Hollywood. Most historians reject this view. They believe the tidal wave of imports arrived not as a consequence of Blum-Byrnes, but because the French industry was in a state of collapse at the war's end and because the war had created enormous demand for the huge backlog of American films.<sup>2</sup> Almost half the films projected in France during

1. *Le monde*, 30 December 1998. Whether or not 1998 was an aberration, because of the huge success of *Titanic*, remains to be seen. But for the first time since the war less than 25% of the French selected their own films. What, from a Gallic perspective, was especially ominous was that of the top 20 films only 3 were French—virtually all the rest came from Hollywood.

2. The literature on Blum-Byrnes is immense. The place to start is: Jean-Pierre Jean-

1947–49 were American, but the national cinema quickly recovered and regained its market. In the 1950s the French were able to maintain about half of their box office and to limit Hollywood's share to a third. For the entire decade Hollywood was kept at bay. What is even more striking is that the French were virtually unique in their ability to protect their movie screens from the Americans in the 1950s. Most other West Europeans, including the British, Belgians, Danes, Swedes, and Italians relinquished as much as half of their receipts to the Americans during these years.<sup>3</sup>

France's ability to withstand the American invasion raises important questions for a historian. What enabled the French in the 1950s to keep such a large share of their box office? How did they force a retreat on the Americans after the late 1940s? How does one account for this relatively good performance when compared both to recent years and to that of other European cinemas in the 1950s?

A closer look at data for the 1950s sketches the problem more precisely. In the early postwar years the American share of box office peaked in the late 1940s and then declined while the audience for French films grew. After 1947 American films lost 2 percent of the market (number of entries) each year falling steadily from a peak of 46 percent in 1948. Over the course of the decade the two cinema industries reversed positions so that by end of 1950s, of the total number of spectators, French films attracted about 50 percent while the viewers of Hollywood's products dropped to about 30 percent.<sup>4</sup> This 50:30 ratio of

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colas, "L'arrangement Blum-Byrnes à l'épreuve des faits," 1895: *Bulletin de l'Association française de recherche sur l'histoire du cinéma* 13 (December 1993), 3–49; and Irwin Wall, *The United States and the Making of Postwar France, 1945–1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 114–21. A place to avoid is Jill Forbes, "Winning Hearts and Minds: the American Cinema in France, 1945–49," *French Cultural Studies*, 8 (February 1997), 29–40. Forbes, in an article littered with factual errors, asserts that in the late 1940s the American cinema was popular because it "promoted uncertainty about the truth of the image . . . and because it presented the individual as, at best, an explorer on the road to knowledge" (38). This is an absurd explanation for the millions who bought tickets for American films.

3. With respect to gross box-office receipts France was unlike other West European countries. Although data here are thin, what exist show that American movies fared less well within the Hexagon than elsewhere. During the late 1950s in Italy, Hollywood's share of such receipts hovered around 60% and in the Netherlands and Denmark it was close to 50%, but in France it was only 37%. See Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 53–57.

4. The data from different sources vary slightly, but there is a consensus on the general trend. The source for the data on the 2% American loss after 1947 is Claude Forest, "L'évolution de l'exploitation en France dans les années cinquante," in Pierre-Jean Beng-

the late 1950s was far better for the French cinema than the situation had been during the 1930s when Hollywood captured roughly half the market annually. With respect to total receipts for French and American films, the 50:30 ratio held. By the mid-1950s, for example, French films earned 50 percent of total receipts with only 30 percent of the movies in circulation.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the majority of screens were showing foreign imports among which American films were the most numerous. But the locals fancied their own. The average audience per film strongly favored the French over the Hollywood product: in the late 1950s it was 2:1 (Chemla, 18). What is most striking about these data is the trend—French films improved their position vis-à-vis American imports during the 1950s. It seems the French increasingly preferred their own cinema at the expense of the Americans.

The story is much the same if one considers the nationality of the biggest hits of the time. (Ascertaining “the nationality” of a film can be a complex question, but this was less true in the 1950s than it is now.) In the year 1950, of the top dozen attractions (determined by the number of entries rather than receipts), five were American and five were French. Hollywood scored successes with spectaculars like *Gone With the Wind* and Disney's *Cinderella*.<sup>6</sup> But two years later, among the top dozen films, there were five produced by the French, among them *Un grand patron*, as well as three Franco-European coproductions, including *Le petit monde de Don Camillo* and *Fanfan la tulipe*. And by 1953, seven of the top twelve were coproductions, mostly

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hozi and Christian Delage, eds., *Une histoire économique du cinéma français, 1895–1995* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 188. Patricia Hubert-Lacombe (*Le cinéma français dans la guerre froide, 1946–1956* [Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996], 151–53) shows the peak for the Americans came in 1947–49 with 44% of spectators, followed by decline and then stability at about 35%. Meanwhile French films recovered after the late 1940s and held a steady 48% share. Data for the end of the decade can be found in Véronique Chemla, “Une image des États-Unis en France entre 1957 et 1960. La critique cinématographique française et le cinéma américain,” DEA mémoire, Institut d'Études politiques, Paris, 1983, 80–86. She shows the number of viewers for American films stabilized around 30/32% in the late 1950s, then fell to 28% in 1962, while French films hovered between 48% and 52%. Chemla's statistics for total receipts show American films earned 31/32% while the French share was 49/50%. With respect to films in circulation, Chemla notes that the American share diminished from 33% to 23% while the French share increased from 23% to 38%. She thus confirms the pattern of American decline and French increase.

5. Hollywood with 38% of films in distribution received only 34% of total income. Colin Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema, 1930–1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 82.

6. For data on top box-office films see Hubert-Lacombe, 156–58; Chemla, 20.

Franco-Italian, for example, *Le retour de Don Camillo*; two others, Jacques Tati's *Les vacances de Monsieur Hulot* and Marcel Pagnol's *Manon des sources* were French; and only three were American. In 1960 Hollywood managed only five of the top twenty-four money-winners. Of the 60 most successful films of the decade, only 19 were American while 31 were French or Franco-Italian coproductions (Crisp, 83). Even in the competition for "blockbusters," Hollywood finished second.

Public opinion polls confirm the French preference for their national cinema. When asked which nation's films they liked (hardly a question to elicit sympathy for the Americans), the French in 1954 said: 76 percent of their films were excellent or good and only a tiny fraction were mediocre or bad. Italian films received a respectable 57 percent favorable rating. But those polled gave American films terrible marks—only 21 percent thought they were excellent or good and 24 percent ranked them as mediocre or bad (Hubert-Lacombe, 171–72). Four years later, polls showed the same preferences (Chemla, 16–17). Now there is some contradiction here since the American share of box office was much better than these surveys would suggest. If only 1 in 5 Frenchmen said they liked American films, 1 in 3 actually saw them. At least such polls suggest the poor reputation for most American films of the 1950s. This disapproval was due, in part, to the kind of films we exported, many of which held little appeal for a Gallic audience.

The 1950s were a relatively prosperous decade for the national cinema of France. Total audience averaged about 390 million entries per year—far more than the 1930s or the decades that were to follow. The decade witnessed the record high for average attendance per capita (Crisp, 67). And half of those who went to the movies chose French films. This preference, along with a virtual monopoly of cheap entertainment and generous government subsidies, made production, distribution, and exhibition of films profitable—a rather unusual situation for an industry whose financial health had normally been precarious. It is audience preference that I want to examine here as a way of understanding Gallic success in reconquering the national market after the late 1940s.

What are the alternative explanations for audience choice? Of all the issues of cinema history this may be the most difficult to address given the diversity of spectators, the complexity of motives, and the paucity of sources. And in this instance the question is especially intriguing because many film critics, especially those who championed

the "New Wave" of the late 1950s and 1960s, attacked these films as the bad, old cinema.<sup>7</sup> Why would the public have made such movies their choice?

One possible answer is that quotas protected France from the Yankees. It is true that the Fourth Republic renegotiated the Blum-Byrnes agreement in 1948 in order to curb Hollywood imports. Two years later the French government unilaterally set annual quotas for dubbed American imports at 121. This new ceiling cut imports in half from what they had been in 1949. During the rest of the decade, Hollywood was limited to about 140 films per year. It might seem, then, that quotas offer a simple explanation for the phenomenon.

But the question cannot be settled so easily. Quotas do not account for the weak demand to see those American films that were imported. It seems that there was little French interest in more American films. There was no serious lobbying from French exhibitors—who, generally speaking, were the sector of the cinema industry most enamored of Hollywood—to raise the quota. In fact, during the 1950s, there were years when Hollywood did not even fill its quota because of sagging French interest, so that American negotiators did not press very hard to raise the quota.<sup>8</sup> The audience simply did not exist for more.

If the answer was not successful exclusion by means of import restriction, then perhaps it was because of another form of protection—the ample financial support furnished the cinema industry by the government. The Fourth Republic viewed subsidies as the best way to compensate for the market advantages enjoyed by Hollywood—aid to the cinema industry, according to government officials, was a defense against the Americans.<sup>9</sup>

There is no doubt that government subsidies (more precisely tax transfers) were financially significant. Experts calculate that about 21 percent of French production costs were covered by subsidies, for the most part advances paid to producers and exhibitors from a tax on ticket sales. It is likely that such aid helped equip the industry with the ca-

7. A major exception is the recent authoritative study by Colin Crisp, who finds much to praise in the cinema of the 1930–60 era. He finds the origins of the New Wave itself in the "classic cinema."

8. André Holleaux, "Le cinéma dans le monde," September 1965, unpublished report prepared by the Centre National de la Cinématographie for the Minister of Culture. This report is in the archives of the ministry: Ministère Malraux, cinéma, carton no. 2.

9. Jean Gründler, "Note relative au soutien financier dont bénéficie le cinéma français depuis 1948," 18 February 1959, Ministry of Culture, Ministère Malraux, cinéma, carton no. 4.

capacity to produce over 100 films per year.<sup>10</sup> Some argue, moreover, that government assistance provided the margin that made the industry profitable in the 1950s. Such aid distinguished the 1950s from the 1930s, which had seen the industry starved of capital. Moreover, after 1959 the production subsidy not only automatically rewarded producers on the basis of previous box-office receipts, but also selectively promoted "quality" films. Government aid also helped renovate and then expand the number of theaters so that the French had access to over 5,500 movie houses by the end of the decade.

But this interpretation is not very compelling. It is a supply side argument, when the answer should come from the demand side. If aid helps explain why the industry produced more films and companies enjoyed better financial security, it cannot demonstrate that subsidies improved the quality of what was produced. Above all, it does not directly answer why the public chose to see French, rather than American, films. There is still the question of why so many ticket-buyers selected the national product over the foreign import. Government assistance does not answer this.

A third possibility is that American films were victimized by the Communists and the left-wing intelligentsia in the 1950s. Perhaps strident anti-Americanism discredited Hollywood imports?

It is true that the Communists and their allies, such as those in the major trade union federation, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), attacked American films both as an unhappy consequence of Yankee imperialism and as propaganda for the American way.<sup>11</sup> Communist film critics sneered at Hollywood films for featuring gangsters and pinups and exposed them as sneaky attempts to sell American products and capitalism. To the Communists, the Blum-Byrnes agreement was a notorious example of Washington using its power to pry open the French market for exports. Hollywood films, the Marshall Plan, and NATO were allegedly all part of an organized American effort to force France into the camp of capitalist warmongers and prepare it for an economic takeover.

What gives this argument some weight is the fact that the French cinema industry, in the wake of the Liberation, contained a potent

10. Gründler, in his "Note relative au soutien financier," provided data on financial aid and concluded that it gave a powerful impetus to production.

11. The strongest case for this position is made by Hubert-Lacombe, 89-144, 177. For Communist views and lobbying also see Wall, 116-18; and Philippe Roger, *Rêves et cauchemars américains* (Lille: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 1996), 234-87.

number of Communist sympathizers. The CGT was powerful among certain cinema unions (like that of the cinema technicians), and there were prominent directors, film critics, actors, and actresses who were aligned with the Left and who supported the protectionist position championed by the Communists. The influential review *Écran français* was openly Communist and the Ciné-club movement, which represented tens of thousands of discriminating fans, expressed strong distaste for Hollywood films.<sup>12</sup> In 1947–48, energized by the Communists, the industry's leadership formed a *Comité de défense du cinéma français* that railed against the Blum-Byrnes agreement with slogans like "Assez des navets américains." And in 1948 the industry was able to mount street demonstrations and other forms of pressure that forced the government to renegotiate the agreement. The anti-American current even found its way, in the form of a disparaging image of Americans, into some early postwar films such as *L'impossible Monsieur Pipelet*, *L'air de Paris*, and *Les femmes sont folles*.

The Communists had allies outside the industry among the French intellectual community, which was in one of its more militant anti-American moods in the early 1950s. Not just Hollywood, but *Readers' Digest*, comics, and Coca-Cola were all derided by some of the left-wing intelligentsia as products of American junk culture that accompanied American political and economic domination. A combination of cultural snobbery toward mass culture, an aversion for capitalism, stereotypes of America and Americans, and anxiety about American hegemony and French decline, led many prominent intellectuals as well as influential newspapers and reviews to attack the American cultural menace—especially Hollywood.<sup>13</sup> St.-Germain-des-Prés, along with the Communists, staged a formidable attack on American popular culture.

But there are problems with looking to the left-wing intelligentsia and the Communists for the sagging performance of American movies. First, did the mass of moviegoers pay any attention to what was written or said in St.-Germain-des-Prés? Polls suggest that what film critics or the intelligentsia said had little impact on audience preference

12. Emmanuelle Loyer, "Hollywood au pays des Ciné-clubs," *Vingtième siècle* 33 (January–March 1992): 45–55.

13. Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 37–52. For a more literary-philosophical approach, see Jean-Phillipe Mathy, *Extrême Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 52–162.



in the 1950s.<sup>14</sup> And the cognoscenti in the Ciné-clubs had no influence over commercial cinema. Second, it is doubtful that the Communists' vehement cultural anti-Americanism affected the cinematic choice of even the twenty percent of the population that regularly voted for the party. Indeed, there is reason to believe that some of the party's supporters went their own way when it came to private matters including selecting movies. A local study of the city of Longwy, for example, demonstrates that workers who voted Communist preferred American movies.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, guidance from the Catholic Church contradicted the Communists. Catholic censors judged American films, on the whole, as more suitable for the faithful than French films (Wall, 120–21). At most the Communists played a marginal role in influencing spectator choice and did so only briefly. After the very early 1950s, Communist influence ebbed not only in national affairs, but within the cinema industry. This industry, which even in the late 1940s had never been uniformly pro-Communist, drifted away from bashing Hollywood. In 1950–52 Communist fellow travelers were purged from the Centre National de la Cinématographie, the official corporatist body that supervised the industry. And, symbolically, the *Écran français*, the Stalinist film review, ceased publication in 1953. Even the image of Americans in films improved in the mid-1950s (Hurt-Lacombe, 126–27).

Cold War anti-Americanism does not explain much about cinema choice. It may have made it difficult for Communist militants to buy tickets to American movies—and the anti-American barrage may have inspired wider disapproval of those ideological Cold War imports, like *The Red Danube*, that trumpeted anti-Communism. But surely this is not the answer for the mass of film goers who probably paid no attention to what either the Communists or the left-wing intelligentsia had to say about films. The answer to the question is not a political one.

If none of the above—quotas, subsidies, anti-Americanism—sug-

14. Polls of the late 1950s show the voice of critics via press and radio finished a poor fourth behind actors, subject, and personal advice as a guide to selecting films (Chemla, 16). Pierre Sorlin citing survey data also concludes the influence of critics was small. See Sorlin, "What Made a Popular Film in France in the 1950s," in Brian Rigby and Nicholas Hewitt, eds., *France and the Mass Media* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 70. Crisp (213–65) argues that film critics were only one discourse among many that formed the audience and that the Ciné-clubs had little influence over mass entertainment.

15. Fabrice Montebello, "Hollywood Films in a French Working Class Milieu, Longwy, 1945–60," in David W. Ellwood and Rob Kroes, eds., *Hollywood in Europe* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), 213–46.

gests an adequate explanation for French behavior, then what does? I think the answer can be found in the nature of movie-going and a certain cultural conservatism. Attending the movies during the 1950s, for most of the public, was a routine leisure activity that involved rather little choice. The audience watched what was offered. To the extent French moviegoers had a choice they preferred familiar "French" films—a cinema program reminiscent of the 1930s and 1940s, with conventional plots and settings, narrated in their language, that featured French stars. In a word, they wanted to see Fernandel.

In 1955 there were 3,500 films in circulation. But only 380 of these were new and they were exhibited at downtown theaters in large cities. The rest were two-to-five years old showing at neighborhood theaters mainly in smaller cities and the suburbs (Sorlin, 74–75). Spectators had little choice of what they saw because distributors selected what was presented and kept films in circulation for years. We know very little about distributors except that they liked French films for their staying power and American imports because they often filled their theaters. In the 1950s customers rather passively watched what was offered because attending the movies was a routine pastime. Cinema-going was a leisure habit, a relatively cheap form of family entertainment, enjoyed at the local theater on Saturday nights. And it was not very selective.

Within the limits set by distributors, ticket-buyers, of course, had likes and dislikes which in turn had some influence on what was exhibited. Above all, this audience wanted to be distracted. In a 1954 survey nine out of ten respondents chose "distraction" as their motive for attending movies, followed by "escape," "forgetfulness," and "fantasy."<sup>16</sup> There were also favorite genres. Although labeling films can be deceptive, some generalizations are possible. The French public favored adventures, romances, comedies, and detective films. The leading ticket-sellers were grand costume dramas. Although Hollywood excelled in making such movies, the French competed with productions like Sacha Guitry's record-setting *Si Versailles m'était conté*, René Clair's *Les grandes manoeuvres*, and Jean Renoir's *French Can Can*. Literary adaptations, from authors like Colette and de Maupassant, as well as stylized dramas and excursions into the world outside France also did well. Movies offered escape—escape into history, the exotic,

16. Catherine Gaston-Mathé, *La société française au miroir de son cinéma* (Paris: Arléa-Corlet, 1996), 81–82.

or the salon. This was a society seeking distraction from recent memories of national anguish and from a daily reality that was, for many, unexciting, and often harsh—these were not the palmy days of the 1960s or 1970s.

But distraction is hardly a novel motive for moviegoers, and, if it is to contribute to an explanation, the notion must be refined further. In this case a search for distraction, along with a habitual pattern of movie-going, and a yearning for the familiar all combined to form the basis of what I call the “Fernandel Factor.” If there were occasional visits to see an American spectacular like *Ben Hur*, most of the time French audiences wanted what they were used to. They liked their movies in French rather than dubbed or subtitled. Linguistic preference was strong for this generation. Above all, audiences wanted the old repertoire and their own actors. Some of the biggest hits of the entire decade were the Don Camillo series—featuring that comfortable, very French comic, Fernandel. At the end of its first run, *Le petit monde de Don Camillo* sold over a half-million tickets. And audiences wanted stories and roles repeated—thus the sequel(s) in the Don Camillo or the *Caroline chérie* series. The big stars of the decade were French, not American, actors and actresses like Michèle Morgan, Jean Gabin, Jean Marais, Gérard Philip, Danielle Darrieux, Edwige Feuillère, and Martine Carol. But the most popular of all was Fernandel. Many of these names had been stars before the war. When the fan magazine *Cinémonde* polled its readers about their favorite stars, there was a consistent list. Of the top twenty favorites in 1954, only two (Gary Cooper, Ingrid Bergman) were “American” (Hubert-Lacombe, 168). A certain cinematic conservatism motivated the French who continued to prefer what had always pleased them.

Indeed, the cinema of the 1950s was reminiscent of the films of the 1930s. In decor and themes, actors and directors, postwar films closely resembled prewar products. There were plenty of remakes of earlier successes and numerous films based on the literature everyone knew. And there was the heavy influence of the theater. Some film historians speak of the “classic French cinema,” which stretched from the beginning of talkies in the 1930s through the 1950s, as a unit: movies of this era displayed a certain continuity of content and style.

Among the hundreds or so films produced each year, the best, for example, Max Ophüls’s *Lola Montès* and Autant-Lara’s *Le rouge et le noir*, have earned the rubric *cinéma de qualité*. Along side (or beneath) the “quality” cinema with its high production values and theatrical

style, which the younger generation came to regard as stilted and artificial, was a mass of formulaic, commercial films that also functioned as entertainment for the Saturday Night Movie fans. As many as half of the films made in the 1950s were of this B or inferior quality. These films had modest budgets and even more modest esthetics. They closely resembled the *cinéma de qualité* in subject, style, and personnel—even some of the great directors like Max Ophüls or Jean Renoir contributed—and above all in function. They were entertainment. All these films, both the “quality” and their poor cousins, the formula films, emphasized diversion. There were adventures, romances, detective stories, and fantasies. There were exotic themes like foreign legionnaires and Arab beauties. Above all, there were comedies—all types of comedies from village farce to drawing-room satire. Of the 97 films produced in 1952, for example, 49 were comedies and 11 were adventures or detective movies (Gaston-Mathé, 96). A few titles convey the character of these formula films: *La danseuse de Marrakech*, *Mémoires de la vache Yolande*, *Papa, maman, ma femme, la bonne, et moi*, *Le charcutier de Machonville*, *Amour, toujours l’amour*, *Paris c’est l’amour*, and *Le gorille a mordu l’archevêque*.

These formula films were routine entertainment for routine cinema-goers. They addressed topics dear to *la France profonde* whose values were still anchored in the past (Gaston-Mathé, 81–97). Marriage, adultery, love triangles, and family legacies were favorite themes. Marriage was treated as a holy union, which made adultery a serious issue and *mésalliances*, that is, romances that tried to cross boundaries of age or social class lines, were dangerous. Daughters suffered under patriarchal control and those who strayed usually ended up marrying the man who had saved them. These Saturday Night Movies either avoided, or disguised, the recent past and contemporary issues. They did not evoke Vichy, or the red suburbs, or the flight from the farm, or life in the HLM, or the colonial conflicts. And if the Don Camillo series addressed a contemporary theme—a Catholic priest going head to head against a Communist mayor—it was displaced to Italy and treated as a farce.

The Saturday Night Movie played to a big audience in the 1950s. Television would change this. With the arrival of the little screen in the 1960s this audience would desert the local theater and return home for its entertainment.

How did American movies play to this audience? Generalizations are dangerous because audiences were local. They varied not only from inner city to suburb or small town, but within cities from neighborhood

to neighborhood. We know, for example, that in one city the American movies seen by leftist workers were different from those shown at the parish cinema. Whereas the workers viewed films like *The Big Sleep* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, the spectators at the cinema of Sainte-Anne watched *The Song of Bernadette* and *Heaven Can Wait* (Montebello, 172). Despite such audience diversity some general observations seem possible. If certain Hollywood imports—like historical spectacles, musicals, thrillers, and animated films—appealed to French tastes, many others displeased the Gallic palate. Westerns, dramas about the war (many of which were badly dated), spy stories, violent gangster movies, certain types of adventures like those featuring pirates, and zany comedies were shunned (Hubert-Lacombe, 159–65). If new Technicolor superproductions like *Quo Vadis* and *The Robe* attracted crowds, Abbot and Costello comedies, or a Western like *Rawhide Years*, or war movies like *Objective Burma* or *A Yank in Korea*, or an ideological tract like *I Married a Communist*, were flops. Hollywood had some big successes, but it also had far more duds than the French did.

Audience choice in this case seems to have expressed wider historical circumstances. The France of the 1950s, Fernandel's France, had not yet become the mobile, wealthy, optimistic, consumer society of the 1960s and 1970s. The economy was in the early stage of postwar renovation; it was heavily protected, inflation-prone, and only beginning to show its capacity for growth. The opening to European markets and the mass acquisition of consumer durables were still in the future. The national psyche, if one can speak of such an entity, was badly damaged and given to pessimism. The French had been embarrassed by their performance in the world war and afterwards had grudgingly accepted aid and protection from the United States. They were embroiled in bitter colonial wars and anxious that the Americans and Russians might fight yet another war in Europe. The governments of the Fourth Republic were usually weak centrist cabinets, undermined by a fractured polity and held hostage by *situations acquises*. Perhaps the most popular political figure of the early 1950s was that conservative bourgeois Antoine Pinay. This was the France that made the Poujadists, those strident defenders of small-town life and the enemies of modernity, a powerful political movement in the mid-1950s. This was also a society in which Catholicism still governed mores and one that was just beginning to see the massive move from farm to city. Social scientists labeled France of the 1950s a "stalemate society" seemingly entrenched against modernity. Its rigidities and conservatism were de-

picted in Laurence Wylie's celebrated study of a village in the Vaucluse.<sup>17</sup> Agnès Varda captured this world of struggle in her film *La Pointe-Courte* set in a poor fishing village. In many ways France of the mid-1950s was closer to France of the mid-1930s than it was to that of the 1960s. The films of Fernandel were appropriate for a society that hesitated on the brink of renovation. It would be another decade before the socioeconomic effects of a rising standard of living, of consumer society and European integration—including the popular ownership of automobiles and television—would change the audience for movies.

The sad story of the French film in America reinforces this account of Franco-American competition. The French cinema had virtually no success during the 1950s crossing the Atlantic. In any year, less than one percent of American audiences watched French films. If there were hits, many of these were risqué films like *And God Created Woman*—the naughty French would show what was off-limits for Hollywood. But the bulk of French productions held little interest. The *cinéma de qualité*, with its emphasis on French history and literature, and the formula films did not travel well.<sup>18</sup> Jean Gabin and Fernandel were known only to the small, elite audience that frequented what were then called "art theaters." In fact it seems French companies had little interest in designing films for foreign markets—they were still pursuing a traditional format for a conservative, national audience and made little effort to compete on Hollywood's turf.

French producers and distributors, nevertheless, were perplexed by American disinterest in their product. They sent delegations to the U.S. and worked with the embassy in Washington trying to analyze the problem. These experts complained that linguistically-challenged American distributors and puritanical censors kept their films off the market. They complained that the American public refused to see subtitled or dubbed films. And they blamed the French themselves for trying to export stagy, soporific films and for failing to publicize their offerings. What the American public wanted, according to the French ambassador, was "a mixture of humanity, humor, and artistry" and more "gaiety" and "simplicity."<sup>19</sup> French moviemakers must have

17. Laurence Wylie, *Village in the Vaucluse*, second ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964).

18. Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, "The Inexportable, the Case of French Cinema and Radio in the 1950s," in Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau, eds., *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992), 141-48.

19. H. Bonnet to R. Schumann, 4 May 1950, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, B

found the ambassador's recommendations of limited utility. In 1950 a correspondent for a French fan magazine offered more pointed advice to French producers on how to make films to please Americans. First, he advised, give them what Hollywood did not provide—real French movies, i.e., a French setting with sparkling dialog. Later, however, he reversed course and warned producers to tailor their product for the Americans. He recommended more action and less dialogue; more realistic scenery; fewer men in tuxedos and women in formals; and no "indecent" subjects (Hubert-Lacombe, 63–64). In short, the Saturday Night Movie that pleased the majority of the French seldom made it by American distributors who believed American audiences were not interested in films that appeared to be photographed versions of theater, or history, or literature, or the French upper class at play.

By the late 1950s some of the changes that were to transform the industry and its audience were already visible. The "classic French cinema" and the Saturday Night Movie had begun to recede and the New Wave was approaching. The allure of Martine Carol was fading and Brigitte Bardot was the new star. The "Belle époque" of the cinema, like all such golden memories, was something of an illusion or, at least concealed ominous trends. The 1960s were going to be different.

Perhaps the principal change occurred in the audience—it was becoming smaller and more selective. After 1957, cinema attendance began a long, sharp decline. Americans, and other West Europeans—the British, Italians, and Belgians—experienced this loss as much as a decade earlier. Total film audience in France reached its peak rather late, in 1958; then, within a decade, the total number of spectators fell by half. The new competitor was, of course, television, which came rather tardily to French homes. Moreover, as the French grew more prosperous they elected to diversify their discretionary spending, shifting it away from movies toward other leisure options such as recorded music, sports, camping, vacations, and the automobile. Spending on the movies, along with that for other spectacles like theater, diminished from the 1950s on (Crisp, 69, 73). The cinema was losing its monopoly over cheap family entertainment. Moreover, when routinized film attendance declined, audiences became more selective with fewer and fewer films attracting large numbers—and the few that did sold more tickets. Fans began seeking, for example, more spectaculars or

more films that people were talking about. Colin Crisp has argued that the cinema was evolving as a social institution, "away from a mass and routinized habit oriented around local cinema attendance, toward an elitist and criterion-based activity."<sup>20</sup> Most ominously, for the Saturday Night Movie, from 1959 on, the average size of audience for French films declined while that for American movies held steady.<sup>21</sup> Inevitably Saturday Night films began to suffer at the box office and producers shifted away from the formula movie.

A dwindling, more selective, audience still did not embrace American imports. During the 1960s and 1970s roughly half the market continued to be occupied by indigenous films—the familiar 50:30 ratio did not disappear until the early 1980s when the full-scale American conquest occurred.<sup>22</sup> But the reasons for successful French resistance after 1960 were different from those for the 1950s. The industry turned to *auteur* or New Wave films, which often borrowed American styles and addressed contemporary issues, to win the new audience. And it made romantic hits like *Un homme et une femme*, engaged heavily in successful coproductions especially with the Italians and the Americans, and turned to soft-core pornography. At the same time a sharp decline in Hollywood's output curbed the supply of American movies. Nevertheless, the national cinema was losing ground. The French had already abandoned several film genres including children's movies to the Americans, making it likely that when this generation matured, they would find viewing American films more normal than their parents once did. And in the 1970s, megahits like *Jaws* and *Star Wars* signaled the tidal wave from California that would soon engulf French screens.

In retrospect, the 1950s represent the waning of an old-fashioned kind of cinema audience and an old-fashioned world. When a closed society, for whom hardship and deprivation were still present or at best a recent memory, gave way to the more open, more prosperous consumerism of the 1960s and 1970s, audiences tastes would turn away

20. Crisp, 89. My account of changes that anticipated the 1960s and beyond depends heavily on Crisp, 69–73 and Forest, 190–92. Forest raises the question of rising prices after 1957 as a cause for smaller audiences, but dismisses this as more a psychological, than a financial, inhibition.

21. According to Chemla's data [84–86], the average audience per French film fell from 1.7 million spectators in 1955 to 1 million in 1961, while average for American films held steady at about 750,000.

22. For data on the 1960s and 1970s see Jeancolas, "From the Blum-Byrnes Agreement to the GATT Affair," in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Steven Ricci, eds., *Hollywood and Europe* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 53.



from Fernandel. The “quality cinema” and the formula movies would be less appealing to a France with more mobility, more individual choice, more discretionary income—and more television sets. The nostalgia of the 1950s cinema would subside before an interest in the contemporary. Brigitte Bardot symbolized the free, young woman who broke with convention and lived for pleasure. She represented the growing youth culture and the ethic of instant gratification of the coming affluence (Crisp, 366). The Saturday Night cinema fell victim to consumer society.