Heritage, History and ‘New Realism’: French Cinema in the 1990s

Philip Powrie

Continuity and difference, the subtitle of this volume, are terms used by Susan Hayward in her introduction to French National Cinema. As Hayward points out, however, the issue of a national cinema is a complex one, and not always useful in defining the panorama of French film production at any given time. At best one might be able to distinguish a mainstream cinema, or cinema of the ‘centre’, as Hayward calls it, following Gauthier, and a vaguely oppositional cinema of the ‘periphery’ (Hayward 1993: 13). And yet the terms continuity and difference can be profitably used, less in relation to defining any national specificity than in isolating certain key moves in the complex network formed by French film production in the 1990s, which is the focus of this volume. In what follows, I shall outline these key moves, linking them to social and political factors, before returning to the issue of ‘national’ cinema.

The first of these key moves is the conjuncture of the GATT negotiations (culminating in 1993) and the ascendancy of heritage cinema to mainstream dominance in French production at the expense of popular genres such as comedy and the polar.

The second is the attempted return of the auteur through the influential 1994 television series Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge (All the boys and girls of their age). In terms of the simplistic binarism centre/periphery, auteur cinema is complex, since arguably, for historical reasons, it is central to French film production and its sense of cultural worth (a marketing issue), while also being peripheral, since much auteur work defines itself in opposition to mainstream cinema (more of a stylistic or narrative-specific issue).

Finally, overlapping to some extent with the return of the auteur is the arrival of a new generation of film-makers whose political
impact in the call for civil disobedience of February 1997 has undoubtedly affected the way in which the French view the films of this younger generation of directors. Positif (unlike Cahiers du cinéma) ran a number of strongly committed pieces on the issue (see Jeancolas 1997; Garbaz 1997).

GATT 1993 and heritage

Two types (rather than genres) of cinema became dominant (both in terms of audience figures and in terms of media coverage) during the 1980s in French cinema—the cinéma du look and heritage cinema—increasingly disestablishing what might until then have been seen as the most sensible way of articulating French film production, namely a generic distinction between comedy and polar as the most popular genres, and auteur or art-house cinema. The cinéma du look became a spent force by the early 1990s. In a sense, it was less a set of films or directors (Beineix, Besson, Carax) than a critical debate, since the three directors in question had always pursued different agendas. Heritage cinema, on the other hand, retained its quantitative (if not qualitative) hold into the 1990s, arguably becoming the hegemonic French cinema of the 1990s. However, it shifted its focus significantly, becoming considerably less idyllic, and more problematically nostalgic, at the same time as it was exhausting itself into stereotype, to the extent that, at the time of writing (Christmas 1998), heritage cinema appears less hegemonic than it did in the earlier part of the decade.

Heritage cinema was hegemonic despite the immense popularity of some films in the comic genre, such as Les Visiteurs (Poiré, 1993), the second best-selling film in the history of French cinema. The success of Les Visiteurs is unusual, even if it is paralleled by a similar success in the mid-1980s for Trois hommes et un couffin (Serreau, 1985). These two films are isolated, however; French comic films have in general diminished in number and in popularity. In 1994, to take a single year, Frodon notes that a larger number than usual of comedies which would have been expected to be popular either because of their director (Leconte’s Tango, 1993; Blier’s Un, deux, trois soleil, 1993; Oury’s La Soif de l’or, 1993) or their star (Adjani in Esposito’s Toxic Affair, 1993) were not very successful at the box office (Frodon 1994: 22). And to

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take a longer timespan, in the period 1984–93, only 20 out of 47 French films with more than 2 million spectators were comedies. Frodon notes that of the 47 films, some 17 are specifically ‘historic’ in the sense that they reconstitute the past, and that many of them are based on recognizably classic literary texts (Frodon 1995a: 678), both characteristics of the heritage or nostalgia film (see Powrie 1997). Audience figures for French films rose sharply in 1990, the year of the heritage film, with Yves Robert’s Pagnol diptych La Gloire de mon père (6.2 million) and Le Château de ma mère (4.2 million), and also Cyrano de Bergerac (Rappeneau; 4.5 million). There was then a sharp decline in 1991, where what might be seen as a Cyrano sequel, Tous les matins du monde (Corneau), again starring Depardieu and Brochet, was the only French film in the first twelve box-office successes. Audience figures for French films have been rising since then from some 35 million to almost 50 million. No doubt Les Visiteurs, with its 14 million spectators, was partly responsible for this rise, but 1993 was also the year of Germinal (Berri; 6.2 million), another heritage film. The extent to which heritage cinema has become dominant can be adduced by two further factors.

The first is connected to the age of spectators in France. A 1997 survey covering films with over 500,000 spectators in the period 1994–7 showed that the average age of spectators had risen to 31.1 (Médiamétrie 1997). The nostrum that the majority of spectators are in the 15–24 age bracket, which served as a partial explanation for the success of the cinéma du look during the 1980s, seems to be no longer as true as it was. It is arguable that the rise in the average age is due in large part to the increasing popularity of the heritage film, with its evident appeal for older spectators, as well as, quite possibly, for a youth audience.

The second factor which might indicate the ascendancy of heritage cinema is that the comic film not infrequently seems dependent on it, in so far as it might be read as a pastiche of heritage, whether it be the costume comedy of Ridicule (Leconte, 1996), or the postmodern and Almodóvarian televisual comedy of Le Bonheur est dans le pré (Chatiliez, 1995) or even, arguably, Les Visiteurs itself, with its play on notions of medieval heritage. It is for this reason that this volume contains studies on the three films just mentioned, but does not have a section on that other popular genre, the polar, or police thriller. Frodon points out that this genre
too is on the wane, with only five films in the top forty-seven with over 500,000 spectators (Frodon 1995a: 678).

My suggestion that these three comedies might be seen as heritage pastiche is contentious. It clearly gives short shrift to popular comedies such as Poiré’s Depardieu/Clavier vehicle Les Anges gardiens (1995; 5.5 million spectators), or Blier’s controversial black comedy Merci la vie (1991; 1 million spectators, marking, as Frodon points out, a steep decline in the popularity of Blier’s films (Frodon 1995a: 700) and suggesting that Blier was an auteur whose time was the late 1970s through to the late 1980s). It takes no account of the extremely successful Gazon maudit (Balasko, 1995), which ran for forty-six weeks (thirty-four more than Les Anges gardiens) with almost 4 million spectators. Less contentious is the cartography of heritage that I would like to outline now, around three broad categories: ‘official’ heritage, ‘postcolonial’ heritage, and ‘Vichy’ heritage.

The archetypal ‘official’ heritage film is undoubtedly Germinal, which, as Russell Cousins points out in his essay in this volume, assumed iconic significance at the height of the very difficult GATT negotiations, where the French were arguing for what became known as a ‘cultural exception’ to the free market in the cinema. Worried by US hegemony in the audiovisual industries, the French argued that these ‘industries did not belong in the GATT agreement at all, because, as culturally-driven businesses crucial to the national identity, they were not comparable to other export/import industries’ (Finney 1996: 6). Germinal represented the uniquely French Other to the Same of Hollywood, and was very visibly supported by the Minister of Culture, Jack Lang: the première of the film was government-sponsored, and Lang had videocassette copies sent to schools free as a form of ‘national education’ (Austin 1996: 167). As Vincendeau points out, such films’ high budgets and production values, prestige producers, directors, ‘literary sources and stars all form part of a strategy to fight an industrial battle (against Hollywood) and an aesthetic one (against television)’ (Vincendeau 1995: 32). Although a high-budget spectacular, like Spielberg’s Jurassic Park (1993) with which it was compared at the time, Germinal was triply defined as indigenously French: by virtue of the status of the original novel by Zola in the French literary canon; by virtue of its major star, Depardieu; and by virtue of its director, Claude Berri, who had arguably launched the heritage
cinema boom in the mid-1980s with his Pagnol adaptations Jean de Florette and Manon des Sources (1986).

This type of heritage is 'official' because it is normally a combination of a high-profile actor and a cultural icon. The icon can be a novel from the literary canon (Le Colonel Chabert, Angelo, 1994; Le Hussard sur le toit, Rappeneau, 1995; La Reine Margot, Chéreau, 1994), but need not necessarily be. It can also be a play, as in Cyrano de Bergerac, or a literary figure (Beaumarchais, l’insolent, Molinaro, 1996, a much underrated film with an extraordinary performance by Fabrice Luchini in the title role; he had been a revelation in Le Colonel Chabert); or music (Tous les matins du monde, with its emphasis on the French baroque musical tradition of Lully and Rameau); or, even, a location, or collocation, such as Provence and Pagnol in the two Yves Robert films of 1990, or Giono and Provence in Le Hussard sur le toit.

A feature of many of the 1990s films mentioned is their darkness, ‘doubt and suspicion’ as Vincendeau says of Le Colonel Chabert (Vincendeau 1995: 32), which suggests a difference within the continuity of heritage cinema: class-based dispossession (Le Colonel Chabert, Germinal), or the turbulence caused by internecine strife and disease in Le Hussard sur le toit and La Reine Margot. In the case of the latter, the film is a conscious metaphor, according to its star, Adjani, and its director, Chéreau, for the Bosnian war (Austin 1996: 168), although given its ostensible subject, it could be read just as easily as a commentary on Mitterrand’s last years and the troubled atmosphere in his ‘court’. Austin makes a similar comment on films dealing with French history in the Mitterrand years: ‘Over the decade the focus switched from revolution (Austin is here referring to Danton (Wajda, 1982) and La Nuit de Varennes (Scola, 1982) ) to imperialism (Fort Saganne, Corneau, 1984) and ultimately—with Socialist power declining and Mitterrand’s presidency clearly doomed—to decolonization and the end of Empire’ (Austin 1996: 145). Fundamentally, though, these official heritage films based firmly in French history are struggling to negotiate a new French identity in troubled times:

The contemporary recourse to Balzac’s and Dumas’s mediations of the past must also be seen in the light of struggles over French national identity, which a conflation of factors are destabilizing: the passing of the last great populist leader (de Gaulle), the end of the trente gloires years of
economic boom, the demise of the colonial empire and the rise of multiculturalism. (Vincendeau 1995: 30)

It is to the demise of the colonial empire that I shall now turn. As Brigitte Rollet points out in this volume, 1992 was remarkable for producing no less than three films focusing on Indo-China: L’Amant (Annaud), Indochine (Wargnier), Diên Biên Phu (Schoendoerffer), and it is to these three that Austin is referring in the above quotation when he mentions ‘decolonization and the end of Empire’. Less speculative than the end-of-reign argument is the fact that these films occur, along with ‘post-war’ films, at a time when the issue of colonialism had become of major interest to historians and anthropologists (Sherzer 1996: 8). These films, in a process typical of the heritage film, ‘memorialize’ the colonial past, to use Norindr’s term (Norindr 1996: 138), in a veritable work of mourning. What is being mourned is not just the war dead in a film like Diên Biên Phu, officially sanctioned by the French government by virtue of Schoendoerffer’s presence at Mitterrand’s side on the state visit to Vietnam in 1993, but also ‘the loss of an era, of a colonial empire, of a utopian world; the loss of France’s influence and prestige’ (Norindr 1996: 140).

The third and final type of heritage film I would like to isolate is the ‘Vichy heritage’ film. This, like the postcolonial film, is anchored in a move by historians to review the past which came to haunt the French with highly public trials of Vichy officials in the 1990s and which has been called the Vichy syndrome (Rousso 1991). René Bousquet, for example, was indicted for crimes against humanity in 1991 and assassinated two years later; Maurice Papon’s trial saw interventions by academics on the use of history during 1997, amongst them Henri Rousso. The postcolonial heritage films on Indo-China are relatively simplistic nostalgia, even if Diên Biên Phu’s theatrical framing to some extent questions colonialist norms (see Austin 1996: 41). Norindr is unconvinced that this minimalistic lip-service to self-consciousness diminishes the film’s failure, located in its ‘inability to question its structuring vision, its will to contain the heterogeneous and bind the subject’ (Norindr 1996: 131). However, some of the Vichy films of the 1990s have tended to be more critical in their approach.

This is not the case, however, with M arbœuf’s wooden biopic of Pétain (1992). More interesting is Berri’s Uranus (1990), which

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does to Marcel Aymé's text what Jean de Florette did to Pagnol: grand, melodramatic heritage, with broad historic sweeps and key heritage actors (Depardieu, Jean-Pierre Marielle, also to appear, like Depardieu, in Tous les matins du monde two years later). Berri returned to the period in 1997 with Lucie Aubrac, the story of a Resistance fighter separated from his wife, which included scenes with the 'butcher of Lyons', Klaus Barbie. As Darke points out, the film is predictably revisionist, and 'sacrifices much-needed suspense in order to generate the oceanic feeling of the French as one big anti-Nazi family' (Darke 1998: 47). Docteur Petiot (1990) is in fact so calqued on the horror genre (see Austin 1996: 34–6) that it is not a heritage film in the sense in which I have been using the word, its Caligari-inspired opening sequence suggesting a meditation on Franco-German cinematographic relations.

On the other hand, Miller's L'Accompagnatrice (1992), although a disappointingly banal film (see Frodon 1994: 706) in terms of its sentimental and indirect critique of Vichy collaboration, is interesting because the events are viewed through the eyes of the adolescent musician, the accompanist of the title, who merely observes what goes on around her from her privileged position as a musical servant, deresponsibilized, a mere accompanist to the music of history. More interesting still is Audiard's Un héros très discret (1996), where, as Kathryn Lauten argues in her essay in this volume, there is a direct link between the narrative and the archival tendencies of current French historiography. The film also forces the 'hero' to confront moral quandaries when his chosen career of modest functionary becomes by force of circumstance inflated beyond his capacities. The film thus forces the spectator into a more critical view of collaboration by its structure, which dwells on the fabrication of identity, and by its narrative, which focuses on individual responsibility. Given the sensitivity of collaboration as an issue in France, it is hardly surprising that the Vichy heritage film should be considerably more interested in the individual and his or her construction in history, and considerably less in any 'memorialization' of this period which many French would prefer to forget.

It is precisely because the Vichy film is more critical that it shades off from heritage stricto sensu into areas which are of interest to the two other key moves in the 1990s: autobiography and biography on the one hand, and on the other an irreverent view of...
the past more in tune with the younger directors (indeed, both Miller, the director of L’Accompagnatrice, and Audiard, the director of Un héros très discret, were co-signatories of the February 1997 call for civil disobedience). Un héros très discret interrogates historical reconstruction in a way which the three postcolonial films cannot, and in so doing shows us how heritage is a postmodern spectacle which uses history to show the impossibility of using history to relocate the individual subject. The latter is either a stereotype caught in ‘illustration’ as Frodon calls it with regard to L’Amant and Indochine, or ‘memorialization’ as Norindr calls it with regard to Diên Biên Phu, or, at best in L’Accompagnatrice and Un héros très discret, an eye disembodied from the flux of events, positioned in ironic contemplation. The autobiographical films which I shall now briefly discuss are in this respect an attempt to ‘incorporate’ that disembodied eye.

The auteur and autobiography

One of the most successful of French cinema's marketing strategies has been the notion of the auteur, and it remains for many the principal player against the dominance of what Frodon calls the ‘Programme’ (Frodon 1995a: 692–4), a loose amalgam of Hollywood dominance in the cinema, combined with television, the fetishism of the advertising image, and digital technology. Whilst admitting that cinema's disappearance into this popularizing amalgam with its emphasis on the exotic and the sensational in a sense returns cinema to its popular roots, Frodon is keen to retain the auteur as a guarantee of quality and/or of national integrity against the ‘audiovisual continuum’ (Frodon 1995a: 692) initiated by the ‘Visual’ of the 1980s, by which he means the cinéma du look of Beineix and, in particular, Besson. Already in the 1980s French cinema had attempted to reinvigorate the notion of the auteur by an emphasis on ‘art cinema’ in a very literal sense: films which dwelt on painting (e.g. Godard’s Passion, 1982; Cavalier’s Thérèse, 1986), coupled with a sustained attempt by the Cahiers du cinéma to valorize auteurism through the academic link between cinema and painting (see Darke 1993). A new attempt was made in the early 1990s by the newly established Franco-German television channel Arte, catching the mood of much academic interest in
autobiography in the late 1980s, and an increasing interest in biography, interfacing with issues of memory, oral testimony, and archives, as mentioned above in relation to Un héros très discret.

As Wendy Everett explains in her chapter for this book, the channel commissioned a series of nine films, Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge. These were to be autobiographical in nature, focusing on the director's adolescence. The films were broadcast over a period of nine weeks in the autumn of 1994, following a historically chronological order: Le Chêne et le roseau, André Téchiné (early 1960s); US go home, Claire Denis (mid-1960s); Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60, Chantal Akerman (late 1960s); La Page blanche, Olivier Assayas (early 1970s); Paix et amour, Laurence Ferreira-Barbosa (mid-1970s); Travolta et moi, Patricia Mazuy (late 1970s); L'Incruste, Émilie Deleuze (early 1980s); Bonheur, Cédric Kahn (mid-1980s); Frères, Olivier Dahan (late 1980s). The directors concerned covered the well established (Akerman, Téchiné), as well as directors who had made their name in the late 1980s (Denis, Mazuy), and up-and-coming new directors of the 1990s generation (Assayas, Ferreira-Barbosa, Kahn; these three were co-signatories of the 1997 call for civil disobedience). Three of the films (those by Assayas, Kahn, and Téchiné) were also made as feature films, recalling a similar procedure by Kieslowski who turned two of the films of his Dekalog Krótki film a milosci (1988) and Krótki film o zabijaniu (1988), into feature-length theatrical releases. A number of films by younger filmmakers subsequent to this series were in this vein, for example, Cédric Klapisch's Le Péril jeune (1994).

Quite apart from the fertile if ironic collaboration between television and cinema which Everett mentions, the point to retain from this exercise is its strongly auteurist slant. The films' rationale is as a personal statement located in personal history; the history of the nation is refracted through these distorting lens in a kind of nostalgic memorialization of epoch. A more sophisticated memorializing can be found in Assayas's Irma Vep (1996) with its very self-conscious references: Truffaut's La Nuit américaine (1973), since the director of the film within the film is Jean-Pierre Léaud; the films of Musidora from the silent period, since the film within the film is a remake of one of these films; and, finally, because the actress who plays Musidora in the film within the film is Maggie Cheung, Hong Kong action films, which, along with other films
from the Pacific ring, have became the latest interest for art-house audiences (after the closer-to-home exoticism of New German Cinema in the 1970s). Similar reverential and intertextualizing moves can be found in a film such as Le Confessional (Lepage, 1995; strictly speaking Canadian), with its references to Hitchcock’s I Confess (1953), or L’Appartement (Mimouni, 1996), a narratively tortuous thriller with all-too-obvious references to a variety of Hitchcock thrillers, Vertigo (1958) being the most evident. Such intertextuality could be seen as an auteurist art-house’s response to the more ironic pastiche of postmodern ‘Visual’ films such as Besson’s Le Cinquième élément (1997).

There is little to distinguish between some of the auteurs mentioned in this section and many of the newer generation of young film-makers who were associated with the February 1997 call for civil disobedience.

New generations: the return of the ‘political’ and the return of ‘realism’

On 11 February 1997 sixty-six film directors held a press conference protesting against the regressive Debré immigration law which was being debated in the National Assembly, and against one clause of it in particular, requiring individuals to declare sans-papiers at their local town hall. The following day a petition (an ‘appel’, a term I shall use from now on) drawn up by Pascale Ferran and Arnaud Desplechin and signed by fifty-nine of them appeared in Le Monde and in Libération. The signatories were mostly from a younger generation of directors, such as Assayas, Audiard, Denis, Kassovitz, Klapisch, but also included older directors such as Breillat, Chéreau, Miller, and Tavernier. The ‘appel’ read as follows:

We, the undersigned French film directors, declare that each of us is guilty of having recently sheltered sans-papiers. We did not denounce our foreign friends. And we will continue to shelter, not to denounce, to sympathize with, and to work with our friends and colleagues without checking that their papers are in order.

Following the verdict pronounced on 4 February 1997 against Mme Jacqueline Deltombe, ‘guilty’ of having sheltered a Zairian friend whose papers were not in order, and following the principle that the law is the
same for everyone, we ask that we be investigated and judged as well. Finally, we appeal to our fellow citizens to disobey and not to submit to inhumane laws.

We refuse to see our freedom thus constrained (Manifesto 1997).

A second ‘appel’ in the run-up to the French elections was published on 14 May with sixty-eight signatories. Together with thirty-five of the original signatories, there were thirty-three new ones, which this time included many more of an older generation of directors (Chabrol, Corneau, Godard, Lanzmann), as well as those who had come to prominence in the 1980s (Charef, Chatiliez, Chibane). The first text was subsequently adopted by many in the arts and liberal professions, with tens of thousands of signatures.

The context for this declaration is the struggle by the sans-papiers themselves to move the state. On 18 March 1996, 300 Africans occupied a church in Paris, demanding to be given authorization to stay in France. Ejected by riot police four days later, they occupied a series of buildings, ending up in the Église Saint-Bernard. Ten of them went on hunger strike on 3 July 1996, and they were again evacuated by riot police on 23 August 1996, amongst protestations by a number of personalities. These included the actress Emmanuelle Béart, whose contract with Dior was as a result subsequently not renewed. This was not said Dior, because, they disagreed with her support for humanitarian causes, but because the star ‘no longer corresponded to the chic image of the brand’ (Kiosque en vue 1997: 31). The sans-papiers’ tenacity and their innovative use of the media, of which the picture taken of Béart in tears holding a young African child was but one example, seems to have brought about a repoliticization of a generation of intellectuals and artists, spearheaded by the film-makers’ ‘appel’ on 12 February 1997.

The two leading signatories, Pascale Ferran and Arnaud Desplechin, published an open letter to the French députés a week later, saying that ‘immigrants were being used as scapegoats for a French society in crisis’ (Ferran and Desplechin 1997: 13) and pointing to the paradox that the French were being asked to ‘renounce their freedom’ so as to ‘de-integrate’ immigrants. Béart, the film-makers, the sans-papiers, and the trade unions joined forces for a large demonstration on 22 February. As usual in these circumstances, numbers were disputed, but the demonstrators claimed some 150,000 people participated.
The film-makers, anxious to avoid ossification, not only ensured that public statements were made by as many of their number as possible, effectively ‘refusing the label of leader which the media wanted to pin on us’ (Klapisch 1997: 25), but also dissolved their group immediately after this demonstration.

Twelve of the signatories published short reflections on what had happened in Le Monde on 19 March. The common thread running between these brief pieces is that nearly all claim to have no party-political experience, and speak of the collapse of traditional left-wing party politics. This is coupled with a renewed sense of ‘something having to be done’, and that film-makers are as well qualified as anybody else to do this. What this meant in practice was an awareness of non-party-political action, ‘the invention, or re-invention of a political practice’, according to one (Goupil 1997: 25), community politics (militantisme de proximité), according to the ex-communist Guédiguian (Guédiguian 1997: 25), whose film Marius et Jeannette is a utopian Pagnol-esque exercise in working-class community, with touches of Brechtian didacticism (see Guédiguian 1998: 60; the film became one of the more popular in 1998, with over 500,000 spectators in the Paris area by April 1998). In terms of social rather than cinematic practice, this meant supporting individuals, according to Desplechin (Desplechin 1997: 24) and Cahen, as well as carrying on making films, because, in Cahen’s words, ‘the cinema is made for representing social relationships’, and films therefore ‘work on the imaginary of social relationships within which can be found the fantasies concerning immigrants’ (Cahen 1997: 25).

The dissolution of the group of younger-generation directors did not prevent further action, however. Many pursued the issues in different ways. Jeanne Labrune, for example, organized a meeting between sans-papiers and intellectuals at the Le Trianon cinema in Paris on 24 March; and a three-minute film, Nous, sans-papiers de France, was shown before feature films in selected film theatres during April both in Paris and in the provinces. This film was made by some fifteen film-makers co-ordinated by Nicolas Philibert, including, amongst others, Lucas Belvaux, the co-director of the Belgian film C’est arrivé près de chez vous (1992), and Claire Devers, whose uncompromising study of sadomasochism Noir et blanc (1986; see Powrie 1997: 184–6 and Austin 1996: 92–4) deals with ethnic issues. In addition, some 175 film-makers and others
involved in the industry added their names to the film, which is a close-up of one of the sans-papiers, Madjiguène Cissé, speaking the following text:

We, the sans-papiers of France, decided to come out into the open by signing this appeal. From now on, in spite of the risks we run, it is not just our faces which will be known, but our names too. We proclaim the following:

Like all of the sans-papiers, we are just like anybody else. We live amongst you; in most cases, we have done so for years. We came to France because we wanted to work and because we had been told that it was the ‘fatherland of the rights of man’: we could not endure the suffering and oppression in our own countries, we did not want our children to go hungry, and we dreamed of freedom. In general, we came into France legally. We were arbitrarily thrown into illegality by the hardening of successive laws which meant that town halls were able not to renew our residence permits and by the restrictions imposed on the right to asylum, which was only accorded sparingly. We pay our taxes, our rents, our bills, and our social security contributions when we are allowed to work regularly! When we are not unemployed and living hand to mouth, we work hard in clothing, leather, building, catering, cleaning. We put up with conditions of work which are imposed on us and which you can refuse more easily than we can, because being without papers we are without rights. We know that this is in a lot of people’s interests. We produce wealth and we enrich France by our diversity. We are sometimes single which often allows our families to subsist back home; but we also frequently live with our partners and our children born in France or who came to France when they were very young. We have given French Christian names to many of these children; we send them to state schools. We have opened the way for them to obtain French nationality, which many French, sometimes the proudest, themselves hold from parents or grandparents born abroad. We have our families in France, and friends too. We are asking for papers so as to be no longer the victims of the arbitrariness of administrations, of employers, and of landlords. We are asking for papers so as to be no longer the prey of informers and blackmailers. We are asking for papers so as to suffer no longer the humiliation of police checks based on what you look like, detention, being escorted to the border, the break-up of our families, living in perpetual fear. The French Prime Minister had promised that families would not be separated: we demand that this promise be kept at last and that the government’s frequent statements concerning humanitarian principles be put into practice. We demand that the European and international conventions to which the French Republic subscribes be respected. We are counting on the support of a large number of French people, whose freedoms could well be under threat if our rights carry on being ignored. As the examples of Italy,
Spain, Portugal, and on several occasions France herself, show that a global regularization is possible, we demand that our papers be regularized. We are not clandestine. We appear here in the full light of day.

There were other ways in which film-makers pursued their initial aims. Several of the signatories participated in a conference on 30 April whose aim was to find ways of bridging the gap between the workerist Left concerned with issues of employment and working conditions, and the ‘moral’ liberal humanist Left concerned with immigration issues. And a number of documentaries on the sans-papiers were announced at the Cannes Film Festival in May, for example La Ballade des sans-papiers (Abdallah and Ventura, 1997), Carnet d’expulsions de Saint-Bernard à Bamako & Kayes (Girardot and Baque, 1997). Nils and Bertrand Tavernier made a two-part documentary on life in the banlieues, De l’autre côté du périph’, screened on France 2 on 7 and 14 December 1997.

Film directors were not the only section of society to be protesting against the proposed law. Thirteen immigrants were on hunger strike in Lille at this time, and a variety of civil rights pressure groups, as well as several town mayors, were in noisy public opposition to the proposed law. Nevertheless, the fact that the directors, following Emmanuelle Béart’s very public stand, had made a call to civil disobedience was significant. This was because it was the first time that such an ‘appel’ had originated and been signed only by film directors, who in the past, more typically, joined larger groups incorporating writers and intellectuals. As Frodon, Le Monde’s cinema correspondent, points out on the same page as the ‘appel’, the ‘Manifesto of the 159’ against the Algerian war had been signed by five film directors, Resnais, Sautet, and Truffaut amongst them (Frodon 1997a: 9). Similarly, many actresses had signed the 1971 ‘Manifesto of the 343’ supporting abortion, but nothing of this kind had occurred since the heavily politicized years following the events of May 1968. Clearly, the protest was more symbolic than real, all the more so because the films of the better-known directors were not ‘political’ in the way in which films were political in the 1970s, and Frodon, as a historian of the cinema, is at pains to make the link between the political action and the films they had produced: ‘[They] show a very real relation with the world in which they live, and an attitude to that world. A relation which, although it may not be like the good
old days of films with a “message”, is also very much in their films’ (Frodon 1997a: 9).

Frodon seems to be suggesting that the films of these younger directors are somehow more engaged in a contemporary ‘reality’, a sentiment echoed by one of the twelve directors who had written a short reflection in Le Monde in March, Bertrand Tavernier, who said that ‘contrary to what has been said, the majority of [the directors signing the ‘appel’] make films which are in step with social reality’ (Tavernier 1997: 24). It is worth pausing to reflect on the nature of this ‘new realism’. Jeancolas, picking up on Guédiguian’s ‘militantisme de proximité’ (which I have rendered as ‘community politics’), calls this new realism ‘un réel de proximité’ (Jeancolas 1997: 57), the ‘proximity’ being double; it is both the documentary style of the observation, and the objects of the film-maker’s observation, ‘people of their own age, and who are probably much like them. Intellectuals and the unemployed . . . students, actors and worried-looking bums (des glandeurs inquiets) in the metro’ (Jeancolas 1997: 58). This leads, Jeancolas suggests, to a third element of ‘proximity’, a closeness to the sense of social change in a fragmented society.

Naturally, there are differences within the new generation of film-makers. Garbarz, pointing out that the new generation has moved away from the metropolo-centric, suggests three types of realism. The first is the ‘films du constat’, films which say things as they are (a ‘constat’ being both the acknowledgement of a state of affairs and a quasi-official report on those affairs); such films bring an austere, often ethnographic gaze to bear on their subjects. The second is the ‘films signaux d’alarme’, films which sound the alarm, and which are more politically engaged; and, finally, the ‘films de la solidarité’ (films of solidarity), best exemplified by those of Guédiguian (Garbaz 1997: 74-5). Not all film-makers in this generation show evidence of the ‘réel de proximité’, even if they may display the same signs of social disarray in their films. Herpe, reviewing the only book to have been written on this generation at the time of writing, points out, somewhat disapprovingly, how the films of Desplechin and Ferran fetishize form by their postmodern attachment to intertextuality, to Truffaut in Desplechin’s case, and to Demy and Resnais in Ferran’s case, both signatories to the ‘appel’ (Herpe 1998: 53-4; the book is Trémois 1997, which is more a descriptive compendium than an analytical
history). Nevertheless, the defining characteristic of the new realism, which Herpe likens to British film-makers (presumably Loach and Leigh, both Cannes winners in the 1990s), is an evident engagement with social realities, inhabiting an uneasy middle ground between the ethnographically dispassionate and the dramatically compassionate. A thoughtful piece by another signatory of the ‘appel’, Tonie Marshall, points out that the political cinema of the 1970s was part of a specific political context, and that because cinema has now spread more widely socially and geographically, the nature of the political engagement was different: ‘Those who are making films at the moment come from everywhere, which was not the case necessarily ten, twenty or thirty years ago. But that brings society into the cinema and it is no longer cinema which goes in search of society’ (Marshall 1997: 47). The Cahiers du cinéma, who supported the call to civil disobedience somewhat lamely, merely reproducing the original call in their March 1997 issue with a statement of support, made much the same point, coining the phrase ‘retour du politique’ in the title of Toubiana’s survey of the young cinema. For him, this new cinema showed a ‘preoccupation with social and political affairs’, and was characterized by ‘the banlieu [the term is difficult to translate, as Myrto Konstantarakos points out in her chapter on La Haine, 1995, in this volume], the crisis in urban lifestyles, the cultural and musical mix (métissage), the taking account of an elsewhere (la prise en compte de l’ailleurs), a real feel for otherness, the refusal of consensual morality’ (Toubiana 1997: 28).

This might be thought to be best exemplified by Kassovitz’s La Haine, a film of which Kassovitz notoriously said that it was ‘against the police’, playing to the disaffected youth audience which ten years earlier flocked to see a considerably less politicized, but equally anomically oriented 37°, 2 le matin (Beineix, 1986). La Haine is undoubtedly one of the major films of the 1990s by its focus on contemporary issues of youth alienation, and accordingly much attention was lavished on it, extending to government ministers watching it so as to understand what might be ailing the disaffected youth of the banlieues. To put this attention in the perspective of other successful 1995 films, however, La Haine garnered merely 2 million spectators to the 5.5 million of Les Anges gardiens, or the 4 million of another comedy, Gazon maudit, or even the 2.5 million of Le Hussard sur le toit. It also has to be
said that La Haine is not particularly representative of the ‘return to the real’ (Frodon 1995b: 32) in the vein of early films by Maurice Pialat, which many of the younger generation’s films exhibit, such as Karim Dridi’s Bye Bye (1995), or Richet’s État des lieux (1995), which quotes Marx and the situationists, making it a return to May 1968 as well. As Dridi points out in a striking metaphor, ‘our political, social and humanist thinking must be seen in our films. That is the struggle which I have chosen, without necessarily being militant, making films with a message. I try to make films like antibodies, to fight against the virus’ (Dridi 1997: 24).

Sandrine Veysset’s Y aura-t-il de la neige à Noël? (1996) is reasonably typical of this ‘return to the real’ reminiscent of Pialat’s early work, and is used by Garbarz as an example of his category of ‘films du constat’: a mother of seven struggles to survive as a tenant on the farm belonging to the father of her children (there are echoes of the Taviani brothers’ Padre padrone, 1977, here). The whole family almost literally slaves on the farm, with few moments of relief. The title refers to the snow the children long for at Christmas. On Christmas Eve the mother puts the children to bed in one room with her and switches on the gas, but is awoken by the snow as it falls; this small act of Nature is enough to make her, at least for the moment, forget her attempted suicide. Coming in the final sequence of the film, this attempted suicide, by its sudden drama, resembles Akerman’s Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975), collocating and repositioning 1970s realism and 1970s feminism. It might seem like an unpromisingly stark subject, but, surprisingly perhaps for an independent film unsupported by funds from TV channels, it was relatively successful with some 600,000 spectators in the three months after its release on 25 December 1996 (see Balsan 1997: 4–5).

The attention lavished on La Haine with its focus on youth difference was very much to the detriment of at least two other major issues which surfaced in the 1990s. Kassovitz’s first film, Métisse (1993), focused less on youth alienation than on another aspect of difference, that of ethnicity. Ethnicity in the form of beur films is clearly a defining feature of 1990s cinema, just as it had been in the 1980s. The difference between the 1980s and 1990s as far as beur cinema is concerned is that the appellation itself causes problems (Rosello 1996b). For obvious reasons of ghettoization
amongst others, Bosséno has called beur cinema transitional (Bosséno 1992), which should not lead us to underestimate its importance in a France wracked by ethnic tension. La Haine is again a key film in this respect, because its preoccupations might well seem only incidentally linked to problems of ethnicity, as Konstantarakos points out in her chapter in this volume, and much more an example of social tensions. And yet, the chapter by Carrie Tarr which follows it attempts to show how problematic La Haine, amongst other ‘return-to-the-real’ films, is in relation to problems of ethnicity, suggesting that the attention given to it has obscured the issue of ethnicity.

The second issue, no less pressing in some respects than the marginalization of ethnic minorities, is AIDS. Unlike the USA, however, where AIDS films increased in number during the 1990s, and became a feature of the mainstream cinema, AIDS films in France are few and far between. This is all the more surprising in the light of the scandal of the contaminated blood supplies of 1995 which at one point threatened to seep up to ministerial level (see Riedmatten 1996 and Sanitas 1995). There are only a handful of films which deal with AIDS, of which the most obvious to date are Blier’s allusive Merci la vie, a less allusive but poor film starring Nathalie Baye, Mensonge (Margolin, 1992), whose main protagonist is bisexual, just as is the main protagonist of Les Nuits fauves (Collard, 1992), a film whose neo-romantic self-indulgence was for a brief period obscured by its flamboyant style.

Although in this Introduction I have tried to articulate French cinema in the 1990s around three major focuses, the sections of the volume cannot be neatly mapped onto them. The first section, ‘History, Heritage, and Pastiche’, shows varieties of heritage (official, postcolonial, and Vichy), which demonstrate continuity in the form and purpose of the heritage film by an older generation of directors (Berri and Wargnier), while also demonstrating different approaches by other directors, whether Wendy Everett’s combination of the personal and the historical in Les Roseaux sauvages, or the questioning of historical discourses by Kathryn Lauten in Audiard’s Un héros très discret, or what I have claimed is heritage pastiche in a number of comedies: Ridicule, which, Mireille Rosello suggests, redefines the heritage genre by using ‘a historical setting to ask very specific questions about our contemporary ways of
relating to history, to words, to images and, in the end, to the film itself; *Les Visiteurs*, examined as a discourse on the ‘national’ by Martine Danan; and *Le Bonheur est dans le pré*, which Keith Reader associates with right-wing anarchism.

The second section, ‘Inscribing Differences’, explores a variety of films from the perspective of difference. Carrie Tarr takes a critical look at the iconic AIDS film *Les Nuits fauves*, while Brigitte Rollet examines the position of Josiane Balasko with particular reference to the ‘first lesbian comedy’ *Gazon maudit*. Issues of ethnicity are broached in a number of chapters focusing on gender relations. Cynthia Marker examines Denis’s very noir *J’ai pas sommeil*, and Dina Sherzer looks at the imbrication between gender, ethnicity, and comedy in two comedies, one by Coline Serreau, *Romuald et Juliette*, an updated Romeo and Juliet which followed the more popular *Trois hommes et un couffin*, and Kassovitz’s *Métisse*. The two following chapters by Myrto Konstantarakos and Carrie Tarr set up a debate on the extent to which ethnicity should be seen as central in the newly emerging cinéma de banlieue. Finally, a chapter by Russell King explores Blier’s *Merci la vie* from the perspective not of AIDS or history, as has often been the case for this film, but as an example of a new viewing practice more attuned to youth culture and zapping.

The final section, ‘Defining the “national”’, is an attempt to bring together studies on several films. By their collocation these films, although they are very different from each other, throw light on the difficulty of defining a ‘national’ cinema in a televsional global market. Graeme Hayes’s chapter on *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* (Carax, 1991) shows how the film is the site of multiple crises in masculinity, representation, and national identity. The film, I would contend, is not only an elegy for the 1980s and for Mitterrandism, but also for the possibility of a national cinema based on consensus. The collapse of that consensus is here figured by a number of events or items within the film, which are undermined. First there is the historical anchor of the bicentennial, ironically seen from a distance, and serving as a backdrop to a very personal love affair. Second, the geographical anchor of the bridge, eventually reconstructed in Montpellier, and illustrating, by the return to the studio, the impossibility of the ‘real’ at the beginning of the 1990s. Third, there is the typically Caraxian nostalgic return to pre-1940 cinema with the reference to Vigo’s *L’Atalante* (1934).
Chacun cherche son chat (1996), by one of the younger generation of film-makers, Cédric Klapisch, is also located in Paris, and also gestures to the films of the past, but is a more successful articulation of contemporary anxieties about fragmentation. Elizabeth Ezra examines the film as a meditation on what it means to be part of a community, and the film is affecting as an echo of the social-observation films of the 1930s, similar in many respects to Salvadori’s Les Apprentis (1995) in its whimsy, and its oddball characters, as Darke points out (Darke 1996: 62), but with a more careful address to problems of gender and ethnicity. The internationalization of the French cinema is made clear in a variety of ways by the other four films. Lucy Mazdon’s chapter on Mon Père ce héros shows how the phenomenon of the remake recycles cultural attitudes (and icons like Depardieu), whereas Besson’s Le Cinquième élément can be seen as the most startling combination of French postmodern style and Hollywood action movie. Its camp Gaultier costumes and references to other French films, combined with the trappings and the stars of the Hollywood action movie in a kind of hyper-postmodern transnational commodity fetish, require a different analytical approach, as Susan Hayward shows in the final chapter of this volume. It is curiously paralleled by Alien Resurrection (1998), directed by Jeunet, the co-director of Delicatessen (1990) and Cité des enfants perdus (1995), and starring, amongst others, one of the main actors in those two films, Dominique Pinon, suggesting that transatlantic crossover is a developing mode of film-making. Ranged against such films, there is auteur cinema, although here too, Ang Lee’s The Ice Storm (1998), as well as the work of some independent US film-makers such as Hal Hartley, suggests that auteurist art-house cinema is no longer confined to Europe. It is paradoxical that the director whom many might consider to be the quintessential French/European auteur, Kieslowski, was a Pole working in French, over whom opinions, as Julia Dobson’s chapter points out, are considerably divided, and divide over issues of the ‘national’.

I began this Introduction by alluding to the problem of the ‘national’ in French national cinema, and suggesting that heritage cinema is the hegemonic cinema in France today, precisely because its anchoring in French history makes it the most easily identifiable ‘national’ cinema. Arguably, the new realism of some of the
younger generation of directors could also suggest a claim to a national authenticity, perhaps less problematic than the melodramatic heritage film which is too much in thrall to its Hollywood cousins. But it is as well to remember that French cinema in the 1990s is more variable than the categories I have been arguing for. Quite apart from the internationalism and transnationalism of several of the films studied in the final section of this volume, quite apart too from the increasing interest in francophone cinema, whether Belgian (see Reader 1999), French-Canadian (see Donahoe 1991; Pallister 1995), or African (see Diawara 1992; Nwachukwu 1994; Downing 1996; Brahimi 1997), it is worth mentioning two less well-known films, both released in the UK: Total Eclipse (1995), a turgid biopic of the relationship between two eminently French poètes maudits, Verlaine and Rimbaud, starring the British David Thewlis, the lead in Mike Leigh’s Naked, and Romane Bohringer as Mr and Mrs Verlaine, directed by Agnieszka Holland, a French/UK/Belgian co-production. Details of the second film demonstrate even better the difficulty of defining national production. It is Décroche les étoiles (1996), directed by John Cassavetes’s son Nick, starring his mother Gena Rowlands, set entirely in the USA, but a French production starring and produced by that icon of French heritage, Depardieu. These two films, it could be argued, are examples of exceptions which prove more general rules, just as it is arguable that Besson’s Cinquième élément is also an unusual exception, which merely compounds most other directors’ (and critics’) difficulties in defining French cinema and/or ‘fighting against’ Hollywood (as Finney points out, this is a misguided approach; Finney 1996: 8). However, most of the films studied in the final section of this volume, and indeed some of those in the preceding sections, such as Irma Vep, prove only that in the (post?)postmodern world of super-productions and co-productions, France’s new young directors will find it hard to maintain the new realism anchored in the diffuse, marginalized ‘national’ of French national cinema.