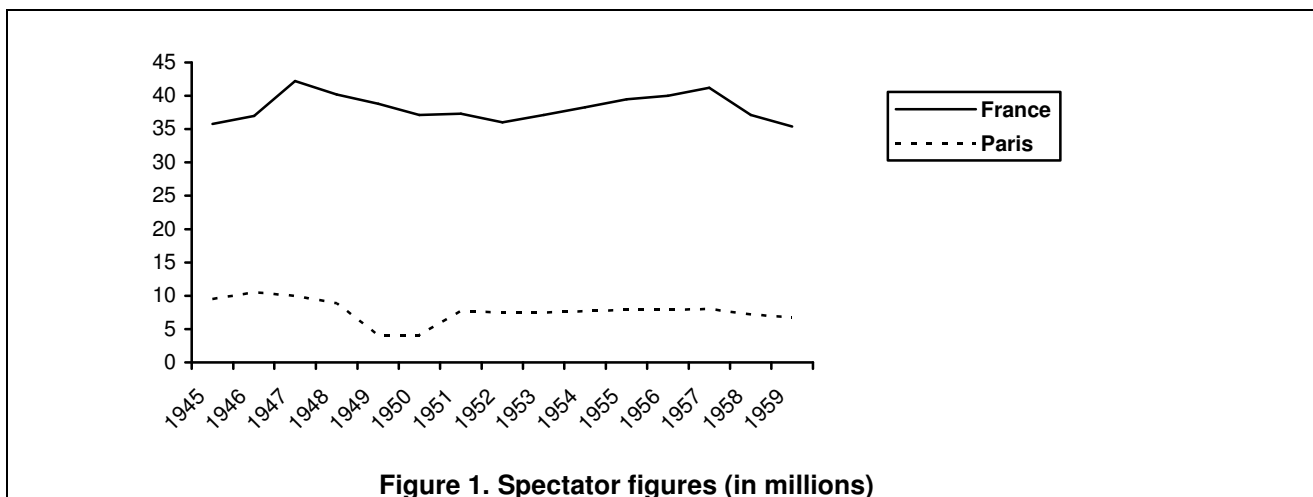


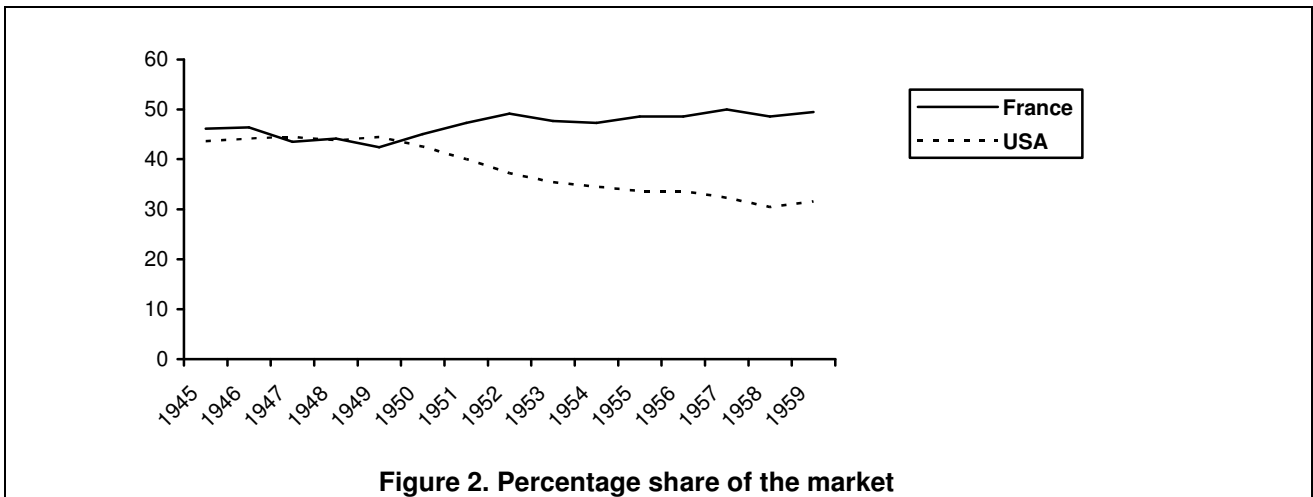
Fifteen years of fifties cinema ¹

Susan Hayward and Phil Powrie

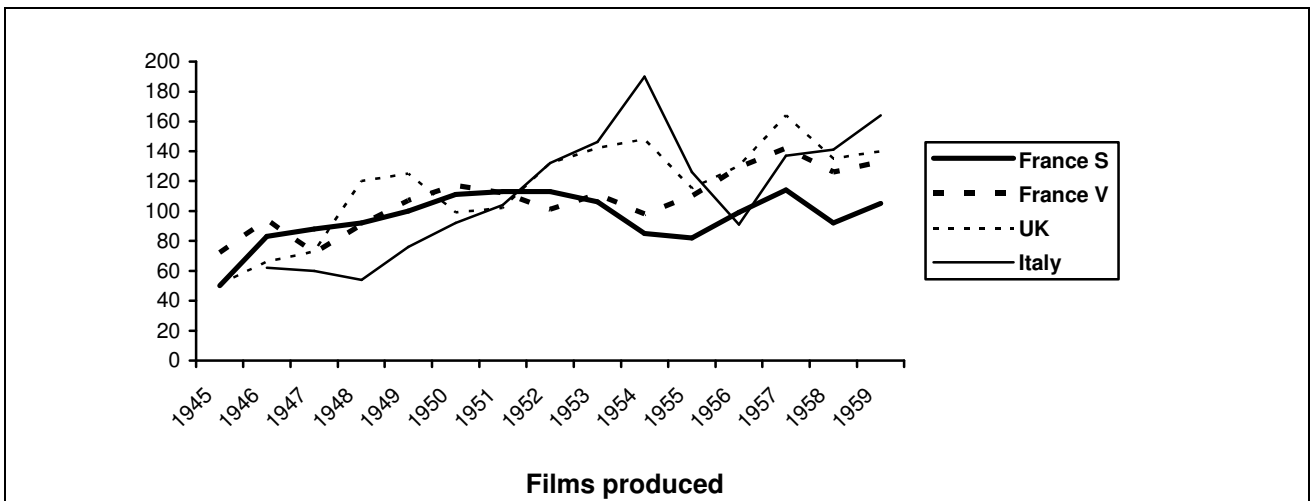
The 1950s are, like the 1970s, one of the ‘forgotten decades’ of academic work on French cinema, caught, for those who like the simplicity of ‘important movements’, between the ‘Golden Age’ of the 1930s and the New Wave of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The 1930s cinema is synonymous with the great directors of Poetic Realism (Carné, Renoir, Grémillon, Vigo), and the transition to sound at the technical level, and to the celebration of left-wing ideals. The New Wave, although less politically correct, is synonymous with a different transition, to the freedom of the light-weight camera at the technical level, and the advent of a modernised France requiring new characters, and new young players who rejected both the cinema of the 1950s and the politics forged in the fall-out of the Second World War. When you add to that Truffaut’s vitriolic and much-publicised rejection of Quality Tradition in his 1954 article (Truffaut 1976), it is clear that the 1950s never stood a chance. The advent of Cultural Studies and Star Studies in work on French cinema, and their emphasis on the popular, has led to a revival of interest in the much-despised 1950s. A number of studies have appeared in France since the mid-1980s (see Chirat & Presle 1985, Passek 1988, Hubert-Lacombe 1996, Gilles 2000, Chapuy 2001), to which we can add a special number of the journal produced by the Institut Européen de Cinéma et d’Audiovisuel at the University of Nancy, *Focales* no 2 (1993), and, finally, amongst the many more recent histories of the French cinema which will address the 1950s at least partly, Colin Crisp’s monumental study of the ‘classic French cinema’ (Crisp 1993).

The 1950s do not of course fit neatly into the decade where the cinema is concerned. It is much more useful to conceptualise the decade, as did Jean-Pierre Jeancolas for the 1930s (Jeancolas 1983), as a period of fifteen years going from the end of the Second World War, signalling a sea-change in production and distribution after the Nazi control of the industry, to the key year of 1959 which saw the arrival of the New Wave. In that period, the cinema did very well; indeed, it had never had bigger audiences (see Figure 1), who, attracted no doubt by the influx of American films in the immediate post-war period, remained faithful to the weekly trip to the cinema, and to the national product. As the 1950s wore on, the figures for a very successful film gradually rose, as can be seen from the Appendix, from six to nine million. Audiences gradually drifted away from American films (see Figure 2), only returning to them in the mid-1980s.





Production was also healthy (even if below Italian and British production), as can be seen from Figure 2, with approximately 100-120 films per year, as can be seen in Figure 3: ²



There is a tendency in many general histories of the French cinema to see the 1950s as a decade dominated by the *polar* or police thriller, and, thanks to Truffaut's 1954 article, the Quality Tradition of literary adaptations. A more nuanced approach would be to redefine the literary adaptation as part of a more wide-ranging popular interest in 'history', focusing not just on the rather narrow literary adaptation, but also on costume dramas and epics, as Raphaëlle Moine's article on Sacha Guitry, one of the most popular purveyors of this genre, suggests. And to this, we might wish to remember that the most popular genres, as can be seen from our Appendix, were comedies and musical films.

The comic film in this period was dominated by Fernandel and Jacques Tati. Tati's 1950s films were successful partly because they chronicled naïve amazement at post-war change: *Jour de fête* (1949, 6.7m, 1st), *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (1953, 5m, 4th), *Mon Oncle* (1958, 4.6m, 3rd); his later films, in 1967 and 1971, were less successful, partly because comic styles were changing. Similarly, Fernandel, who was already a star in the 1930s, was still going strong in the 1950s. Renowned for his toothy grin and thick Marseilles accent, he made anything from two to six films a year in the 1950s, most of them with 2-4 million spectators, and some with spectacular results, such as the Don Camillo series where he plays the priest at loggerheads with the Communist Mayor in an Italian village. The first in the series, *Le Petit monde de Don Camillo* (Duvivier, 12.8m) was released in 1951. It was the top-selling French film that year; remarkably, all of his remaining films in 1952 were in the top 20 with 3-4 million spectators each (in 5th, 6th and 12th

place). The following year, *Le Retour de Don Camillo* (Duvivier, 7.4m) was again the top French film.

Where musical films are concerned, the now forgotten operetta film was an important feature of the period. Tino Rossi, who had already been a pre-war star, regularly had films in the top ten French films with three to four million spectators through to the early 1950s (*Sérénade aux nuages*, 1945; *L'Île d'amour*, 1945; *Destins*, 1946; *Le Gardian*, 1946; *Le chanteur inconnu*, 1947; *Deux amours*, 1949; *Paris chante toujours*, 1952). He overshadowed Egyptian-born singer Georges Guétary, who, before going to Hollywood and starring alongside Gene Kelly in *An American in Paris*, had four major successes in France, all directed by Gilles Grangier, and all with two to four million spectators (*Le Cavalier noir*, 1945; *Trente et quarante*, 1945; *Jo la romance*, 1948; *Amour et compagnie*, 1949). Arguably more popular than both Rossi and Guétary was the Spanish tenor Luis Mariano, who specialized in the film adaptations of his popular stage operettas. He rose as Rossi waned, with a string of very successful films in the early 1950s. *Andalousie* was the best-selling French film of 1951; *Violettes impériales* the second best-selling film of 1952, with *Rendez-vous à Grenade* doing well in the same year. *La Belle de Cadix* was the fourth best-selling French film of 1953, as was *Le Chanteur de Mexico* in 1956. His following late 50s films, *A la Jamaïque* and *Sérénade au Têxas*, although less popular, remained in the first twenty French films of their year; Cécile Sorin's article in this issue is partly devoted to this latter film. Mariano appealed to the thirst for the exotic, as the titles of his films suggest, albeit tempered by familiar musical and melodramatic forms.

Operetta films, even in their American variant, had a European flavour, as they were often based on music by European composers, usually set in European locations, often with European directors, such as Lubitsch, and, finally, in the first series mentioned above, with the quintessentially (and stereotypically) French Maurice Chevalier. The other major musical form to come to prominence in the post-war period, jazz in its swing variant, was much more attuned to American music. The Ray Ventura Orchestra, for example, did well on screen because they echoed the US musicals of the 1930s, and were clearly an antidote to the tragic realism of the cinema of Carné, whose films, with embattled proletarian heroes, reflected perhaps too starkly the political realities of the time. In their first pre-war success, *Feux de joie*, a group of musicians decide to work together in a hotel on the Côte d'Azur; in *Tourbillon de Paris*, impoverished students play to make a living and end up turning professional. Ray Ventura's successes carried on after the war in a series of films with the director Jean Boyer, notably in *Mademoiselle s'amuse*, and *Nous irons à Paris*, the story of a pirate radio patronized by Ray Ventura amongst other musical stars of the time, and the best-selling French film of 1950.

The stars of the period, as can be seen from our Appendix, were changing. They were changing their personas with the changing times, as Nicholas Hewitt's article on Jean Gabin argues; see the year 1955 in the Appendix for an extraordinary showing by one of the great actors of the 1930s. But the panoply of stars was also being modified in these fifteen years. Although Fernandel was still a major star in this period, as we suggested above, the duo of Bourvil and Louis de Funès were in the ascendancy, de Funès representing, as Vincendeau has argued, the Ordinary Joe's resistance to modernization (Vincendeau 2000: ?????); and Eddie Constantine's comic polar was one of the more popular genres in the period (see Sorin's article for an account of its relationship to the American genre). There were new 'jeunes premiers', such as Jean Marais and more particularly Gérard Philipe. Amongst women stars, there was Martine Carol, Danielle Darrieux, and even more so Simone Signoret, with Brigitte Bardot arriving in the second half of the 1950s. We include two articles in this issue on Signoret, because she signals, as much as Bardot, a change of femininity in this period, but a resisting femininity, unlike Bardot's objectified gamine.

This issue of the journal does not cover all of the genres mentioned above, nor many of the major stars; there remains considerable work to be done on the period. We hope, however, that this issue will whet our readers' appetites for one of the forgotten decades of French cinema.

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Appendix

The five top-selling feature films each year followed by a selection of 'important' films, with directors, stars, and prizes won. Audience figures are from Simsi 2000. For the sake of space, we have not included the English titles.

1945				
<i>La Cage aux rossignols</i>	J Dréville	5 085 489	M Francey	
<i>Les Enfants du paradis</i>	M Carné	4 768 505	Arletty, J-L Barrault	
<i>Carmen</i>	Christian-Jaque	4 277 813	V Romance	
<i>Le Roi des resquilleurs</i>	J Devaivre	3 679 438	S Dehelly, J Batti	
<i>Le Cavalier noir</i>	G Grangier	3 672 572	M Parély, G Guétary	
<i>Boule de suif</i>	Christian-Jaque	3 000 550	M Presle	
<i>Falbalas</i>	J Becker	2 108 663	M Presle	
<i>L'Espoir</i>	A Malraux	292 233		Delluc
1946				
<i>Mission spéciale</i>	M De Canonge	6 781 120	J Holt, P Renoir	
<i>La Symphonie pastorale</i>	J Delannoy	6 372 837	M Morgan	Cannes Grand Prix, Best Actress
<i>Le Père tranquille</i>	R Clément	6 138 837	Noël-Noël	
<i>La Bataille du rail</i>	R Clément	5 727 203	J Clarioux	Cannes Special Jury & Best Director, Méliès
<i>Le Capitain</i>	R Vernay	5 098 185	P Renoir	
<i>La Belle et la Bête</i>	J Cocteau	3 779 692	J Marais	Delluc
<i>Les Portes de la nuit</i>	M Carné	2 559 337	P Brasseur	
<i>Une partie de campagne</i>	J Renoir	(not avail)	S Bataille	
1947				
<i>Le Bataillon du ciel</i>	A Esway	8 649 691	J Crispin	
<i>Monsieur Vincent</i>	M Cloche	7 055 290	P Fresnay	Cannes & Venice Best Actor, Lumière, Oscar Foreign
<i>Pas si bête</i>	A Berthomieu	6 165 419	Bourvil	
<i>Quai des orfèvres</i>	H-G Clouzot	5 526 341	B Blier	Cannes Best Director
<i>Le Diable au corps</i>	C Autant-Lara	4 762 930	G Philipe	
<i>Le Silence est d'or</i>	R Clair	4 179 396	M Chevalier	Méliès
<i>Panique</i>	J Duvivier	2 493 526	V Romance	
<i>Les Jeux sont faits</i>	J Delannoy	1 162 744	M Presle	
1948				
<i>La Chartreuse de Parme</i>	Christian-Jaque	6 150 551	G Philipe	
<i>La Bataille de l'eau lourde</i>	T Müller/J Dréville	5 373 377		
<i>Clochemerle</i>	P Chenal	5 027 714	Maximilienne	
<i>Aux yeux du souvenir</i>	J Delannoy	4 559 689	M Morgan	
<i>Les Casse-pieds</i>	J Dréville	4 328 290	M Deval	Lumière
<i>Gigi</i>	J Audry	3 202 482	D Delorme	
<i>Les Parents terribles</i>	J Cocteau	2 256 777	J Marais	
1949				
<i>Jour de fête</i>	J Tati	6 679 608	J Tati	
<i>Barry</i>	R Pottier	4 086 921	P Fresnay	
<i>L'Espagne sur la main</i>	A Berthomieu	3 657 951	Bourvil	
<i>Manon</i>	H-G Clouzot	3 412 167	C Aubry	Venice Golden Lion, Méliès
<i>L'Héroïque Monsieur Boniface</i>	M Labro	3 261 238	Fernandel	
<i>Au-delà des grilles</i>	R Clément	2 018 745	I Miranda	Cannes Best Director & Best Actress, Oscar Best Foreign
<i>Les Rendez-vous de juillet</i>	J Becker	1 888 964	D Gélin	Delluc
<i>Le Silence de la mer</i>	J-P Melville	1 371 687		
<i>Une si jolie petite plage</i>	Y Allégret	849 005	G Philipe	
1950				
<i>Nous irons à Paris</i>	J Boyer	6 658 693	R Ventura	
<i>Uniformes et grandes manœuvres</i>	R Le Hénaff	4 588 407	Fernandel	
<i>Justice est faite</i>	A Cayatte	4 319 752	V Tessier	Venice Golden Lion, Berlin Golden Bear
<i>Le Rosier de Madame Husson</i>	J Boyer	4 304 624	Bourvil	
<i>Meurtres</i>	R Pottier	4 013 769	Fernandel	
<i>Dieu a besoin des hommes</i>	J Delannoy	2 745 065	P Fresnay	Venice International

<i>La Beauté du diable</i>	R Clair	2 581 132	G Philipe	
<i>La Ronde</i>	M Ophuls	1 509 923	G Philipe, S Signoret	Venice Best Script
<i>Orphée</i>	J Cocteau	1 149 396	J Marais	
<i>Les Enfants terribles</i>	J-P Melville	719 844	N Stéphane	

1951				
<i>Andalousie</i>	R Vernay	5 734 973	L Mariano	
<i>Le Roi des camelots</i>	A Berthomieu	4 059 172	C Ripert	
<i>Chacun son tour</i>	A Berthomieu	3 810 569	R Lamoureux	
<i>Un grand patron</i>	Y Ciampi	3 737 966	P Fresnay	
<i>Caroline chérie</i>	R Pottier	3 602 845	M Carol	
<i>L'Auberge rouge</i>	C Autant-Lara	2 662 329	Fernandel, F Rosay	
<i>Journal d'un curé de campagne</i>	R Bresson	2 184 027	C Laydu	Delluc, Lumière, Méliès
<i>Juliette ou la clé des songes</i>	M Carné	513 063	G Philipe	

1952				
<i>Le Petit monde de Don Camillo</i>	J Duvivier	12 790 676	Fernandel	
<i>Violettes impériales</i>	R Pottier	8 125 766	L Mariano	
<i>Fanfan la tulipe</i>	Christian-Jaque	6 712 512	G Philipe	Cannes Best Director
<i>Jeux interdits</i>	R Clément	4 908 992	B Fossey	Venice Golden Lion
<i>Le Fruit défendu</i>	H Verneuil	4 002 100	Fernandel	
<i>Belles de nuit</i>	R Clair	3 499 199	G Philipe, M Carol	Cannes Special Jury, Méliès
<i>Nous sommes tous des assassins</i>	A Cayatte	3 062 569	Mouloudji	
<i>Casque d'or</i>	J Becker	1 917 248	S Signoret	

1953				
<i>Le Retour de Don Camillo</i>	J Duvivier	7 425 550	Fernandel	
<i>Le Salaire de la peur</i>	H-G Clouzot	6 943 447	Y Montand, C Vanel	Cannes Grand Prix
<i>Les Trois mousquetaires</i>	A Hunebelle	5 354 739	G Marchal	
<i>Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot</i>	J Tati	4 945 053	J Tati	Delluc
<i>La Belle de Cadix</i>	R Bernard	4 328 273	L Mariano	
<i>La Môme vert-de-gris</i>	B Borderie	3 846 158	E Constantine	
<i>Les Orgueilleux</i>	Y Allégret	2 805 061	G Philipe, M Morgan	Venice Bronze Lion
<i>Thérèse Raquin</i>	M Carné	2 364 260	S Signoret	Venice Silver Lion
<i>Madame de...</i>	M Ophuls	1 619 154	D Darrieux	

1954				
<i>Si Versailles m'était conté</i>	S Guitry	6 986 788	S Guitry	
<i>Papa, maman, la bonne et moi</i>	J-P Le Chanois	5 374 131	R Lamoureux	
<i>Touchez pas au grisbi</i>	J Becker	4 710 496	J Gabin	Venice Best Actor
<i>Le Rouge et le noir</i>	C Autant-Lara	4 343 365	G Philipe, D Darrieux	Méliès
<i>Les Femmes s'en balancent</i>	B Borderie	4 314 139	E Constantine	
<i>Le Blé en herbe</i>	C Autant-Lara	2 849 371	E Feuillère	Lumière
<i>Monsieur Ripois</i>	R Clément	2 005 349	G Philipe	Cannes Special Jury

1955				
<i>Le Comte de Monte Cristo</i>	R Vernay	7 780 642	P Richard-Willm	
<i>Napoléon</i>	S Guitry	5 405 252	S Guitry	
<i>Les Grandes manoeuvres</i>	R Clair	5 301 504	G Philipe, M Morgan	Delluc, Méliès
<i>French-Cancan</i>	J Renoir	3 963 928	J Gabin	
<i>Chiens perdus sans collier</i>	J Delannoy	3 905 504	J Gabin	
<i>Les Evadés</i>	J-P Le Chanois	3 830 332	F Périer	Lumière
<i>Les Diaboliques</i>	H-G Clouzot	3 674 380	S Signoret	Delluc
<i>Du rififi chez les hommes</i>	J Dassin	3 284 666	J Servais	Cannes Best Director
<i>Razzia sur la schnouf</i>	H Decoin	2 906 148	J Gabin	
<i>Lola Montès</i>	M Ophuls	1 323 062	M Carol	

1956				
<i>Michel Strogoff</i>	C Gallone	6 920 814	G Page	
<i>Notre-Dame de Paris</i>	J Delannoy	5 693 719	A Quinn	
<i>La Traversée de Paris</i>	C Autant-Lara	4 893 174	J Gabin, Bourvil, L de Funès	Venice Best Actor (Bourvil)
<i>Le Chanteur de Mexico</i>	R Pottier	4 779 435	L Mariano, Bourvil	
<i>Gervaise</i>	R Clément	4 108 173	M Schell	Venice Best Actress
<i>Et Dieu créa la femme</i>	R Vadim	3 915 059	B Bardot	
<i>Un condamné à mort s'est échappé</i>	R Bresson	2 747 434	F Leterrier	Cannes Best Director
<i>Bob le flambeur</i>	J-P Melville	716 920	R Duchesne	

1957				
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<i>Le Triporteur</i>	J Pinoteau	4 888 151	D Cowl	
<i>Le Chômeur de Clochemerle</i>	J Boyer	4 397 173	Fernandel	
<i>Porte des Lilas</i>	R Clair	3 946 553	P Brasseur, G Brassens	Lumière
<i>Honoré de Marseille</i>	M Regamey	3 755 963	Fernandel	
<i>Folies-Bergères</i>	H Decoin	3 513 397	E Constantine, Z Jeanmaire	
<i>Pot-Bouille</i>	J Duvivier	2 602 374	G Philipe	
<i>Ascenseur pour l'échafaud</i>	L Malle	1 902 036	J Moreau, M Ronet	Delluc

1958				
<i>Les Misérables</i>	J-P Le Chanois	9 966 274	J Gabin, B Blier, Bourvil	
<i>Les Tricheurs</i>	M Carné	4 953 600	P Petit	Lumière
<i>Mon oncle</i>	J Tati	4 576 928	J Tati	Cannes Special Jury, Méliès, Oscar Best Foreign
<i>L'Eau vive</i>	F Villiers	4 083 521	P Audret	
<i>Les Grandes familles</i>	D de la Patellière	4 042 041	J Gabin	
<i>En cas de malheur</i>	C Autant-Lara	3 152 082	J Gabin, B Bardot	
<i>Les Amants</i>	L Malle	2 594 452	J Moreau	Venice Silver Lion
<i>Montparnasse 19</i>	J Becker	1 297 340	G Philipe	
<i>Moi, un noir</i>	J Rouch	83 540	E Constantine	Delluc

1959				
<i>La Vache et le prisonnier</i>	Verneuil	8 849 752	Fernandel	
<i>La Jument verte</i>	C Autant-Lara	5 294 328	Bourvil	
<i>Babette s'en va en guerre</i>	Christian-Jaque	4 657 610	B Bardot	
<i>Les Liaisons dangereuses</i>	R Vadim	4 322 955	J Moreau, G Philipe	
<i>Archimède le clochard</i>	G Grangier	4 073 891	J Gabin, D Cowl	
<i>Orfeu negro</i>	M Camus	3 690 517	B Mello	Cannes Palme d'Or
<i>Les 400 coups</i>	F Truffaut	3 642 981	J-P Léaud	Cannes Best Director
<i>Les Cousins</i>	C Chabrol	1 816 407	G Blain, J-C Brialy	
<i>Le Beau Serge</i>	C Chabrol	1 112 986	G Blain, J-C Brialy	

¹ Some of the material in this article was previously published in Powrie 2003a and Powrie 2003b.

² The approximation depends on how one counts co-productions. In Figure 2, 'France S' represents the figures given in Simsi 2000, which implicitly include some (but not all) co-productions; 'France V' represents the figures given in Vincendeau 1995) which explicitly include co-productions.