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IRMA VEP

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A **DACIA FILMS** PRODUCTION  
OF A FILM BY **OLIVIER ASSAYAS**

# IRMA VEP

**MAGGIE CHEUNG** MAGGIE  
**JEAN-PIERRE LEAUD** RENE VIDAL  
**NATHALIE RICHARD** ZOE

**BULLE OGIER** MIREILLE  
**LOU CASTEL** JOSE MURANO  
**ARSINEE KHANJIAN** AMERICAN WOMAN

**ANTOINE BASLER** JOURNALIST  
**NATHALIE BOUTEFU** LAURE  
**ALEX DESCAS** DESORMEAUX  
**DOMINIQUE FAYSSE** MAITE  
**BERNARD NISSILE** MARKUS  
**OLIVIER TORRES** FERDINAND/MORENO

**CINEMATOGRAPHY** ERIC GAUTIER  
**SOUND** PHILIPPE RICHARD  
**EDITOR** LUC BARNIER  
**PRODUCTION DESIGNER** FRANCOISE-RENAUD LABARTHE  
**COSTUMES** FRANCOISE CLAVEL and JESSICA DOYLE  
**EXECUTIVE PRODUCER** FRANCOISE GUGLIELMI  
**PRODUCER** GEORGES BENAYOUN  
**WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY** OLIVIER ASSAYAS

A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

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# IRMA VEP

What price Hong Kong action diva Maggie Cheung as a latex-suited reincarnation of Irma Vep, the super-criminaline of Feuillade's silent serial *Les Vampires*? That is just one of the questions posed in this delirious, erotic and very funny satire on contemporary French cinema from young auteur Olivier Assayas. Jean-Pierre Léaud (as hunched and haunted as ever) plays a director in decline who is inspired to cast Cheung after seeing her in *The Heroic Trio*. As might be expected in this gallic counterpart to *Living in Oblivion*, the crew bicker, the director despairs of realizing his vision, and the endearingly English-bred Cheung is left adrift with only the friendship of a persecuted lesbian wardrobe mistress to lean on. Assayas employs his trademark style of superbly fluid camerawork, choice rock cuts and spontaneous performances to create a film of many levels. The dramatic centerpiece is Cheung's private exploration of her character on a furtive jewel raid in her hotel, a dazzling exercise in suspense and sexual frisson that is truly worthy of the presiding spirit of Feuillade.

—David Thompson, London Film Festival



# OLIVIER ASSAYAS ON THE MAKING OF IRMA VEP

In many ways *Irma Vep* is an improvised film. I'd met Maggie Cheung at a film festival, which was enough to make me want to construct a film for and around her. But I had no idea which film.

An opportunity arose when Claire Denis invited me to take part in a three-part film, to be produced by IMA Films, with different sections to be directed by different directors. Soon, Atom Egoyan joined us as the third.

We made some progress in developing a core idea: a hotel, inhabited by three foreign women visitors to Paris. I had no trouble devising a simple framework to fit this. One of the women would be an actress from Hong-Kong, over here on a shoot. The director would be played by Jean-Pierre Leaud.

But what would her part be? Immediately, I thought of *Irma Vep*. A few years ago, I was asked to work on a series of classic remakes for television. I hadn't known where to start until I remembered Feuillade's *Vampires*. I spent a few weeks considering the possibility, then I decided that, attractive as it was, I couldn't take it any further. Somehow, my heart wasn't in it. The only real point of interest was in reviving *Irma Vep* as a character but I felt there wasn't enough in that. So I let the matter drop.

But this episode gave me the germ of an idea for the story which, originally, was only supposed to form one third of a film: almost a short, in fact. As things turned out, Claire, Atom and I each went off in different directions, delaying our collaboration (not for long, I hope) in favour of individual projects.

Although I had only taken a few notes on a few scraps of paper, the story stuck in my mind. Then, one day towards the end of last summer, finding myself alone in Paris, I decided to write it up as a screenplay - almost just for the fun of it. I completed the script within ten days (not the kind of thing one usually advertises). I found myself writing quickly, evenly and with pleasure. All kinds of different ideas and concerns which had been milling around my head for quite some time, now seemed to come together and find expression spontaneously.

But none of this would have meant much, nothing would have come of it, unless I had been lucky enough to meet Maggie Cheung again. We were introduced by Christopher Doyle, an old friend who is Wong Kar-Wai, Chen Kaige and many other people's cameraman.



As I have said, Maggie and I originally met at a film festival, which is to say we might as well not have met. When I went to Hong-Kong last autumn, my intention was to meet a range of actresses and choose whichever happened to fit the part best. In any case, I had been told that Maggie was difficult to meet, that she was turning everything down and so on.

The minute we met for the second time, I realized that I'd written the part for her and no other actress. I knew that if she turned it down, I would probably never make the film. Often, when starting out on a film project, intuition is ignored. It seems to get in the way. It seems over-obvious, over-categorical, and incoherent. And then there are always timing problems and problems with third-parties, and things end up not getting made. But in this case, we seemed to have a powerful, shared conviction and a sense that this project was an opportunity not to be missed. I imagine all this must have seemed as evident to Maggie as it did to me.

But nothing was going to be easy. We had seen each other in early October. We were both busy. Shooting would have to start in January at the latest, or the film would never happen. That it did is entirely due to Georges Benayoun. It was he who made *Irma Vep* a reality, even though funding an unusual project like this, and particularly one spoken in English, is no easy task.

*Irma Vep* was never a sensible idea. The project was not devised in terms of production logic. Working conditions were tough, facilities minimal. The budget—with hindsight—seems laughable. We shot on Super-16, in four weeks. The cast and crew were largely paid on profit-share deals. All this meant finding ways of working fast, very fast, knowing there was no safety-net. No going over schedule. No re-shoots. No contingency whatsoever.

We started shooting on January 15th. By February 12th, the film was in the can.

To save money, the rushes weren't printed. We edited on AVID. It was on AVID that, on 2nd March, the producers, Georges Benayoun and Françoise Guglielmi, saw a first cut, excluding the final sequence. They green-lighted a film-transfer. By mid-March we were able to see that cut in a viewing theatre. That was the first time I saw images of *Irma Vep* projected on to a screen.

I would love to know how despite all these constraints, the chaos and the very considerable pressure, shooting *Irma Vep* turned out to be such an intense, serene experience. I believe that Maggie's kindness and her receptiveness had a lot to do with it. But I am singling her out for praise, when I should be praising the whole cast, which came together quite naturally. This is a playful film. I wanted to find characters with a shared affinity, friends in fact. And I think we developed an understanding, a pleasure in the work, which is reflected in *Irma Vep*.



# *Louis Feuillade's* **LES VAMPIRES** *and the original* **IRMA VEP**

Of the 700 or so films made by Louis Feuillade (1873-1925) during his eighteen-year career, none caught the public imagination quite like **Les Vampires** (1915-16). A ten-part, nine-hour silent serial following the exploits of a gang of Parisian jewel thieves known as "Les Vampires" and led by the indomitable *Irma Vep* (her name an anagram of "vampire"), the serial was an enormous success and caused a scandal when one of the episodes was temporarily banned by the chief of police for its glamorization of the criminal world.

Feuillade, a former cavalryman, journalist and publisher, was hired as a scriptwriter by Gaumont Studios in 1905. He made his first film in 1906 and the following year, after the departure of Alice Guy, he was appointed artistic director in charge of production at the studio. As a director he worked in various popular genres and also directed over a hundred vehicles for the vaudevillian child stars Bébé and Bout-de-Zan.

His greatest success, however, came with his crime serials **Fantomas** (1913-14), **Les Vampires** (1915-16) and **Judex** (1916). For **Les Vampires**, Feuillade cast the great French stage and music hall star Musidora (née Jeanne Roques—1889-1957) as the seductive, raven-haired, black-garbed arch-villainess Irma Vep—a direct contrast to the innocent blonde heroines of the rival American serials **The Perils of Pauline** and **The Exploits of Elaine**.

The films were shot cheaply and swiftly in the Gaumont studios and on the surrounding Parisian streets. The combination of lyrical, Lumiere-like naturalism and the bizarre melodrama of crime-fiction—the film is full of disappearances and disguises, sudden deaths and uncanny resurrections, hidden trapdoors and secret tunnels, car chases and rooftop escapes—gave the films their power, their sense of dread (perfectly matching the public's mood at the time of World War One). And it was that, coupled with their almost anarchistic view of society (the Vampires steal only from the rich), and their often surreal disregard of logic—the result of tight shooting schedules—which led to their being treasured by surrealists like Andre Breton and Louis Aragon.

After the scandal of **Les Vampires**, Feuillade appeased the authorities with the more moralistic **Judex**, but the exploits of the Vampires continued two years later in the serial **Tih Minh** (1918) with the gang, now based in Nice, bent on world domination and on revenge for the death of Irma Vep.

Despite their contemporary popularity and their obvious influence on European directors like Fritz Lang and Alfred Hitchcock, the films were forgotten in the sound era and were believed lost for decades, until they were rediscovered—without intertitles, thus adding to their surreal quality—in the late '50s by Henri Langlois. Feuillade's work found passionate new admirers in the '60s in directors like Alain Resnais and Jacques Rivette and in 1965 **Les Vampires** was shown for the very first time in America at the 3rd New York Film Festival.

More recently the missing intertitles have been rediscovered and the film restored to its full length by the Cinematheque Francaise. It remains one of France's great classic films.



# MAGGIE CHEUNG

One of the major stars of Hong Kong cinema in the '80s and '90s, Maggie Cheung has made some seventy films in the past 12 years. An action star, a serious dramatic actress, and a skilled comedienne, Cheung is probably best known to international audiences for her roles in Jackie Chan's **Police Story** (1985) and **Super Cop** (1992, released in the U.S. in 1996), Ann Hui's **Song of the Exile** (1990), Johnny To's martial arts fantasy **The Heroic Trio** (1993), Wong Kar-Wai's **Days of Being Wild** (1990) and **Ashes of Time** (1995), and Stanley Kwan's **Actress** (1992) for which she won the Best Actress award at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Born in Hong Kong in 1964 (her Chinese name is Cheung Man Yuk), Cheung moved to England with her parents at the age of eight and grew up in Kent. After a year working in a London book shop she returned to Hong Kong for a visit at the age of seventeen and while there she made a commercial which led to freelance modeling and eventually the Miss Hong Kong Beauty Pageant (she was the first runner-up). After a short but fruitful acting career on TV she turned to feature filmmaking in 1984, making her debut in Wong Jing's **Prince Charming** (1984).

Much lauded throughout her career, Cheung won the Hong Kong Academy's Best Actress award for **A Fishy Story** (1989) and Taiwan's Golden Horse Best Actress award for Stanley Kwan's **Full Moon in New York** (1990). Her role as tragic silent era starlet Ruan Ling Yu in **Actress** (1992) made her a quadruple award winner, sweeping the Best Actress category in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Chicago, and making her the first Asian performer to win the prestigious Silver Bear Award in Berlin.

**Irma Vep** (1996) marks not only her return to filmmaking after a two year sabbatical, but also her first international film. Since **Irma Vep** she has completed Peter Chan's Hong Kong-New York romance **Comrades, Almost a Love Story**, and the historical saga **The Soong Sisters**. She is currently filming **Chinese Box** for Wayne Wang, in which she will co-star with Jeremy Irons and Gong Li. Her next project will be a new film for Wong Kar-Wai which begins shooting this Spring.



# MAGGIE CHEUNG FILMOGRAPHY

1984	PRINCE CHARMING	Wong Jing
	BEHIND THE YELLOW LINE	Wong Tai-Loy
1985	GIRL WITH THE DIAMOND SLIPPER	Wong Jing
	POLICE STORY	Jackie Chan
	IT'S A DRINK, IT'S A BOMB	Chung Chi-Man
1986	ROSE	Yeung Fan
	HAPPY GHOST 3	Johnny To
	THE SEVEN CURSE	Lam Lai Choi
1987	SISTER CUPID	Lai Ying-Chao
	HEARTBEAT 100	Cheung Chak-Tse
	THE ROMANCING STAR	Wong Jing
	PROJECT A PART II	Jackie Chan
1988	GIRLS WITHOUT TOMORROW	Lam Tak-Luk
	LOVE SOLDIER FORTUNE	Fung Shui-Fan
	PAPER MARRIAGE	Cheung-Kin Tin
	DOUBLE FATTINESE	Keung Tai-Wai
	AS TEARS GO BY	Wong Kar-Wai
	MOTHER VS MOTHER	Leung Ka-Shu
	MOON, STAR, SUN	Mak Don-Kit
	HOW TO PICK	Wong Jing
	POLICE STORY PART II	Jackie Chan
	THE GAME THEY CALLED SEX	Sylvia Cheung
	THE NOWHERE MAN	Cheung Chuk-Tse
	LAST ROMANCE	Yeung Fan
1989	THE BACHELOR'S SWAN SONG	Yi Tung Sing
	DOUBLE CAUSES TROUBLES	Wong Jing
	MY DEAR SON	Keung Tai-Wai
	ICEMAN-COMETH	Fok Yiu-Leung
	A FISHY STORY	Friend Chan
	HEARTS NO FLOWERS	Cheung Wing-Hung
	IN BETWEEN LOVERS	Fung Yi Ching
1990	HEARTS IN HEARTS	Hin Gei Yin
	FULL MOON IN NEW YORK	Stanley Kwan
	SONG OF EXILE	Ann Hui
	THE DRAGON FROM RUSSIA	Fok Yiu-Leung
	RED DUST	Yim Ho
	FAREWELL, CHINA	Clara Law
	DAYS OF BEING WILD	Wong Kar-Wai
1991	THE PERFECT MATCH	Shin Gei-Yin
	ALAN & ERIC	Peter Chan
	WILL OF IRON	Johnny Keung
	TODAY'S HERO	Yip Shing-Hong
1992	FINAL JUSTICE	Ko Chi-Sam
	TWIN DRAGON	Tsui Hark
	ACTRESS	Stanley Kwan
	WHAT A HERO	Chan Muk-Shing
	SUPER COP III	Stanley Tong
	DRAGON INN	Li Wai-Man
	ROSE	Samson Chiu
	TRUE LOVE	Tam Long-Cheong
	MOON WARRIOR	Samo Hung
1993	MILLIONAIRE COP	Cheung Kin-Man
	THE HEROIC TRIO	Johnny To
	DONG CHENG XI JIU	Jeff Lau
	THE FIRST SHOT	Lam Tak-Luk
	TOO HAPPY FOR WORDS	Stanley Kwan
	FLYING DRAGGER	Chu Yin Ping
	HOLY WEAPON	Wong Jing
	THE ENIGMA OF LOVE	Wong Jin Wah
	THE MAD MONK	Johnny To
	BOYS ARE EASY	Wong Jing
	GREEN SNAKE	Tsui Hark
1994	THE NEW AGE OF LIVING TOGETHER	Sylvia Cheung
	EXECUTIONERS	Ching Siu Tung
	THE BARE FOOTED KID	Johnny To
	ASHES OF TIME	Wong Kar-Wai
1996	IRMA VEP	Olivier Assayas
	COMRADES: ALMOST A LOVE STORY	Peter Chan
	THE SOONG SISTERS	Alex Law/Mabel Cheung
1997	CHINESE BOX (in production)	Wayne Wang
	UNTITLED PROJECT (in pre-production)	Wong Kar-Wai



# OLIVIER ASSAYAS

One of the most exciting new directors to have made his mark in the '90s, Olivier Assayas is at the forefront of a French film scene revitalized by the films of young directors like Leos Carax (**The Lovers of the Pont Neuf**), Arnaud Desplechin (**My Sex Life...or How I Got Into an Argument**) and Claire Denis (**I Can't Sleep**), as well as the continually invigorating work of elder statesmen like Andre Techiné, Jacques Rivette, Philippe Garrel and Maurice Pialat.

Born in Paris in 1955, the son of a respected screenwriter who made his name in the pre-*Nouvelle Vague* era, Assayas grew up around film studios and always wanted to be a filmmaker, but he opted to study literature and painting instead of film. He made his first short film in 1979, but from 1980-1985 became an editor and prominent contributor to *Cahiers du Cinema* for whom he produced two seminal issues: "Made in USA" (1982) and "Made in Hong Kong" (1984). He began screenwriting in 1985 and collaborated with André Téchiné on the scripts for Téchiné's **Rendezvous** (1985) and **Scene of the Crime** (1986). And in 1986 he directed his first feature, **Desordre**, which won the Critics Prize at the Venice Film Festival.

Assayas came to the attention of American filmgoers when his third film **Paris S'Eveille** (1991) was screened at the Film Society of Lincoln Center in New York in their ground-breaking 1992 touring series of new French cinema. His next film **Une Nouvelle Vie** (1993) was featured in that series in 1994 and later that year **L'Eau Froide** (1994), a semi-autobiographical film made for the celebrated "All the Boys and Girls in Their Time" series, was selected for the New York Film Festival. In 1996 Assayas was honored with a retrospective of his films at Lincoln Center and at the Vienna Film Festival. **Irma Vep** debuted at the 1996 Cannes Film Festival and has since screened at festivals in Toronto, London, Vienna, Rotterdam and many other cities. It also became his second feature to be selected for the New York Film Festival.

In January of this year Assayas shot a documentary on the great Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-Hsien for France's ARTE channel, and he is presently working on an adaptation of Jacques Chardonne's novel *Les Destinées Sentimentales*, which will be a rare foray into period film making for this vigorously contemporary director.

Olivier Assayas is also the co-author, with Stig Bjorkman, of the book *Conversations with Ingmar Bergman* (1990).

[For more information on Olivier Assayas read the article by Kent Jones in this press kit.]

## OLIVIER ASSAYAS FILMOGRAPHY

1986	DESORDRE (DISORDER)
1989	L'ENFANT DE L'HIVER (WINTER'S CHILD)
1991	PARIS S'ÉVEILLE (PARIS AT DAWN)
1993	UNE NOUVELLE VIE (A NEW LIFE)
1994	L'EAU FROIDE (COLD WATER)
1996	IRMA VEP
1997	HOU HSIAO-HSIEN (documentary)



# JEAN-PIERRE LEAUD

Born in Paris in 1944, Jean-Pierre Léaud created a sensation around the world at the age of fifteen with his startling performance as Antoine Doinel in Francois Truffaut's **The Four Hundred Blows** (1959). He went on to make another six films for Truffaut, playing the director's alter-ego in the four Doinel sequels (1962-1979), and also co-starring in the hugely popular **Two English Girls** (1972) and **Day for Night** (1973). Though most closely associated with Truffaut, Léaud made as many films for Truffaut's *Nouvelle Vague* compadre Jean-Luc Godard, acted as Godard's assistant director on **Une Femme Mariée** (1964), and continued working with him through the 1980s. An actor for nearly four decades, Léaud has made more than sixty films with such illustrious international auteurs as Jean Cocteau, Pier-Paolo Pasolini, Jerzy Skolimowski, Bernardo Bertolucci, Jacques Rivette, Philippe Garrel, Glauber Rocha, Raoul Ruiz, Aki Kaurismaki and Jean Eustache, for whom he gave a tour-de-force performance in the legendary **The Mother and the Whore** (1973). Most recently he starred in the succesful French romantic comedy **Pour Rire** (1996). **Irma Vep** marks his second collaboration with Olivier Assayas.

## JEAN-PIERRE LEAUD SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

1959	THE FOUR HUNDRED BLOWS	Francois Truffaut
1959	THE TESTAMENT OF ORPHEUS	Jean Cocteau
1962	LOVE AT TWENTY	Jean-Luc Godard
1966	MASCULINE-FEMININE	Jean-Luc Godard
1967	LA CHINOISE	Jean-Luc Godard
1967	LE DEPART	Jerzy Skolimowski
1967	WEEKEND	Jean-Luc Godard
1968	LA CONCENTRATION	Philippe Garrel
1968	LE GAI SAVOIR	Jean-Luc Godard
1968	STOLEN KISSES	Francois Truffaut
1969	PIGSTY	Pier Paolo Pasolini
1970	BED AND BOARD	Francois Truffaut
1970	UNE AVENTURE DE BILLY LE KID	Luc Moullet
1971	OUT 1: NOLI ME TANGERE	Jacques Rivette
1972	TWO ENGLISH GIRLS	Francois Truffaut
1973	DAY FOR NIGHT	Francois Truffaut
1973	LAST TANGO IN PARIS	Bernardo Bertolucci
1973	THE MOTHER AND THE WHORE	Jean Eustache
1979	LOVE ON THE RUN	Francois Truffaut
1985	DETECTIVE	Jean-Luc Godard
1985	TREASURE ISLAND	Raoul Ruiz
1988	36 FILLETTE	Catherine Breillat
1988	LES MINISTRES DE L'ART	Philippe Garrel
1990	I HIRED A CONTRACT KILLER	Aki Kaurismaki
1991	PARIS S'EVEILLE	Olivier Assayas
1992	LA VIE DE BOHEME	Aki Kaurismaki
1993	THE BIRTH OF LOVE	Philippe Garrel
1996	IRMA VEP	Olivier Assayas
1996	POUR RIRE	Lucas Belvaux



# KENT JONES *on* OLIVIER ASSAYAS

Vertiginous speed is a fact of modern existence, and in the films of Olivier Assayas speed is palpable: Assayas may be the only filmmaker who gives us the poetics of the digital age in all its mean perfection. This former *Cahiers du Cinéma* critic must have the most rapturously mobile eye in modern movies: he makes an event out of every shape and spatial configuration that crosses his camera's field of vision. In terms of high canonical definitions of good cinema, his camera is often "unmotivated." It prowls around and bears down on the characters, at times nearly lacerating them, an outside force with a mysterious logic of its own. But each move, each color, each visual rush is firmly connected to those characters in particular and quotidian existence in general. His very moral conviction that people and how existence imprints itself on them is the only subject worth exploring gives his tightly circumscribed, super-tangible world an earned poignance.

If Assayas has a signature scene, it's two people in an antagonistic dance, both with something to hide, both perfectly centered in a medium shot and constantly on the move. They don't hate each other but they don't have enough mental time to sort out the knot of emotions in their heads. Scenes always start in media res, and there's never any build-up or background detail to take you outside the immediacy of the emotional material onscreen. Assayas never, ever gives us anything but the most concrete actions, and this also informs his vision of the world. For him, to be transcendental or nihilistic would seem evasive: the most honest thing to do is to clearly render the cruelly relentless forward movement of existence. And yet the films have a fairy-tale fluidity and shapeliness. "Reality is always magic," Renoir once said, and Assayas embodies that dictum more fully than any other modern director.

Assayas knew that he wanted to make movies early in life. His father was a screenwriter who worked with many of the hardened pros whose reputations the critic Truffaut tried to demolish during the '50s. No starry-eyed buffery here - regular sport around the dinner table was making fun of serious-minded critics in the magazine he would later write for. Not only did he never visit the Cinémathèque Française as a young man, but the first time he had to go there he couldn't find it. He studied literature and then painting at the Beaux Arts with the idea that anything would be better preparation for making films than going to film school, and he still thinks he did the right thing. Here is an artist who works and thinks empirically, carves out his own unique path with tools of his own making, who knows that the best way to indict what is so wrong in the world is not to attack it but to give it room to breathe and allow it to resonate on the faces of his characters.



He wrote for *Cahiers* throughout the early '80s, where he was an excellent, unsung critic. If he has a mentor in the film business it's André Téchiné, who hired Assayas for his first big screenwriting gig (he and his brother had written scenarios for the 'Maigret' television series when he was younger, as replacements for his ailing father; Assayas also co-wrote the scripts for Liria Begeja's **Avril Brise** and his friend Laurent Perrin's **Passage Secret**). He collaborated with Téchiné on the script for his fierce 1985 film **Rendezvous**, and on the subsequent **Scene of the Crime** with Téchiné and Pascal Bonitzer.

"The whole point is that the world is constantly changing," he once wrote to me when I was preparing a piece on his work, "and that as an artist one must always invent new devices, new tools, to describe new feelings, new situations." And he added: "If we don't invent our own values, our own syntax, we will fail at describing our own world." This aspiration, which depends on both a belief in art and in reality, is in short supply these days and when it appears it is seldom recognized or rewarded.

The remarkable thing about Assayas' work is the way in which it weds a very modern sensibility with an eye and ear for nuance and detail so rich and full as to be miraculous. The way people confront each other in his films, the way they sit in chairs or eat in restaurants, almost always strike me as deadly accurate in their imagination of tension and wariness. There's an immediacy to his films which, contrary to his detractors, are not intellectual constructs: the Kubrick/Renoir synthesis, let's call it, is not a self-conscious construction but rather an organic and impassioned response to modern life.

In this sense he is part of a new international canon that would also include Atom Egoyan, Wong Kar-wai, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang and Abel Ferrara. They share a completely unsentimental vision of the world that rejects post-modern alibis but recognizes post-modernism as a key component of modern life, and they never resort to fantasies, dreams, or the sort of "sympathetic expressionism" that has turned most of American cinema to pulp. And of all of them Assayas is the one who surprises me the most. **Irma Vep** is an unassuming, perhaps unconscious time capsule of this very moment, a virtual catalogue of modern fears, compulsions and styles of behavior. It is a humorous film, something new for Assayas, but the laughs often catch in your throat. Every character is in a state of flux and seems to be motivated by an unspoken fear of falling still and silent—they all have doubts about working on a proposed silent remake of Feuillade's **Les Vampires** (!), most of all the director (Jean-Pierre Léaud), who "finds a caring for the picture," as Scorsese would say, by structuring it around his desire for Maggie Cheung as his Irma.

The project is an impossibility, of course, but the sort of impossibility that is all too frequent these days. While everyone else charges from place to place in an orgy of



singlemindedness and stonewalling, Maggie is there to work, to ride the crest of whatever wave crashes. She is the only one who is wise enough to know that desire is enough (which she tells Léaud during a very poignant encounter) which enables her to float with gossamer lightness through this strange speedy world in which people are forever leaving her behind. Irma Vep may well be "the **Day for Night** of the '90s," as The New York Times' Janet Maslin has said, but it's more frightening than Truffaut's film ever thought of being. Written, shot and edited in record time, the film builds organically from its own breathless conception: it has a unique form of address that Jonathan Rosenbaum has correctly likened to automatic writing. The speed is also reflected/manifested in the bold intuitions and quick smudges of the acting and writing; in the action, which moves from one scene to the next with a breathlessness that is sometimes magical, sometimes disturbing, often both at once; in the bracing connections between people during that most chaotic and makeshift of enterprises, a film shoot; and in its dizzying array of focal points: a lengthy clip from **The Heroic Trio**, scenes from Feuillade's **Les Vampires** interspersed with rushes from the remake in progress and the final mind-blowing "edited" sequence, an extract from a post-'68 Actualité Revolutionnaire, a delicately unfolding relationship between Maggie and the costume designer magnificently played by Nathalie Richard, a delirious and stylized sequence dead center of the film where Maggie gets into her black latex costume and steals junk jewelry from the room of a naked woman played by Arsinée Khanjian, a jaw-dropping sequence in which a bullying young reporter played by Assayas regular Antoine Basler aggressively tries to impose his received ideas about a "choreographed" action cinema killing off an "outmoded" art cinema on Maggie, and a scene outside of a rave on the outskirts of Paris where the film slides into pure strobing abstraction. While it's impossible not to feel Olivier's roiling anger with the opinions expressed by Basler's character ("We need good, strong directors - like Schwarzenegger, Van Damme..."), the lunkheaded idiocy of his position is less important than the fact that he is yet another in an endless procession of phantoms racing across the surface of this phantasmagorical film, walking through each other as they hang on to their assorted opinions, tasks or trajectories for dear life.

—Kent Jones, 1997

Kent Jones is a freelance critic based in New York whose work has appeared in Film Comment, The Village Voice, Time Out New York and Harpers Bazaar. The article on Olivier Assayas is excerpted from articles which appeared previously in Film Comment and the catalogue for the 1996 Vienna Film Festival.