Chapter 4. Violence at the Cinema 1930–1944

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Paris in the Dark: Going to the Movies in the City of Light, 1930–1950.
For the Hollywood studios that had come to dominate global film distribution, Marlene Dietrich’s stardom, as well as Maurice Chevalier’s, eased the transition from silent film to sound. But, at least in Paris, that transition did not always go without incident. A case that demonstrates the point occurred on Sunday, December 8, 1929, during the early evening screening of *Fox Folies* at the newly reopened Moulin Rouge cinema in the eighteenth arrondissement, just below Montmartre. “Donnez-nous des films français! Parlez-nous en français!” “Give us French films! Speak to us in French!” That’s what the Parisian audience yelled during the movie, while some of the viewers tore the numbered, metallic plates off their seats and hurled them at the screen.

The city and its suburbs, it would seem, were not always safe places for cinéphiles or casual fans. As a result, going to the movies in Paris might not be so simple as dipping into a ciné-club to hear a discussion or debate, or choosing to see a new Dietrich film rather than one showing in reissue. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, one might at least occasionally pick out a film, settle into a seat, and find oneself suddenly a witness to, or participant in, a violence that we do not usually associate with spectatorship. Rather than violence onscreen, this brand was at the cinema itself. Politics typically seemed to motivate this violence, and these politics were almost always rightwing, sometimes carried out by the governing authority in and around Paris, sometimes by one of many fascist or fascist-leaning groups in France, and sometimes by a combination. At least one case, the 1930 *L’Age d’or* screening at the Studio 28 cinema, has entered the canon of important historical events of French cinema. The others have remained mostly invisible, and hint at the possibility of still more that can never be documented.
Studying the occasional violent responses to movies in and around Paris moves us away from more rapturous viewings, when fans gazed at Greta Garbo, or the routine neighborhood pleasures of a film like *Nu comme un ver* moving around to various, peripheral cinémas des quartiers. These extreme instances tell us something more broadly about the importance of cinema, and about the significance, in Paris at least, not just of films but of the places where they were shown, and the cinema's day-to-day interaction with events that often, at first glance, might seem to have nothing to do with the movies.

The earliest such instance that I have found, if we begin with the sound period, was precisely about the movies, however, and particularly about the transition to new technology. This was the evening of *Fox follies* at the Moulin Rouge, a space that had been one of Paris's leading music halls since 1889, except for a six-year period after it burned down in 1915 and then was rebuilt for a 1921 reopening. The Moulin Rouge had occupied the same address on the boulevard de Clichy during all of that time, and just about everybody who was anybody in French popular music had performed there: Mistinguett, Max Dearly, Maurice Chevalier, Jean Gabin, and many, many others. The Moulin Rouge closed once again in 1929, but not because of any natural disaster like a fire. Rather, this time, the most famous music hall in Paris was being transformed into a cinema, to become part of the Pathé chain of exhibition sites in the city.

This constituted a significant shift in the Parisian cultural landscape, and the press took notice. In November 1929, *La Rampe*, a weekly review of cultural events in Paris, let readers know that the Moulin Rouge would reopen for Christmas, completely transformed, with the latest American musical revue, *Fox follies*. Of course, other sound films from Hollywood had played in Paris and had not caused any trouble, so there was no reason to believe that *Fox follies* would be any different.

In its coverage, *Les Spectacles* gushed that the city was being given the gift of “a large and luxurious cinema,” and that the director of the Moulin Rouge had invited all of the best people in the city (“le tout-Paris”) to the grand opening. The weekly film journal *Cinéa* reported on the transformation of the Moulin Rouge and called it a “tour de force,” and gave special praise to the new “American-style” mezzanine. Not all progress, however, was necessarily for the better. *Cinéa* also acknowledged the “justified irritation” of those in Montmartre who lamented such a major change and mourned the passing of the music hall.

Opening night at the new cinema did not go well, and *Le Figaro* reported many of the details. The subtitles for *Fox follies* were “written in deplorable French.” As a result, the “audience quickly tired of following a story it did not...
understand.” They became unhappy, and the ensuing “ruckus” was such that the management called off the next show. The following day, Sunday, the same thing happened again, and that’s when the audience started shouting at the screen, with those protests, according to the newspaper, becoming “something of a leitmotif” for the entire screening.6

In the interest of fairness, the reporter for Le Figaro talked to the management at the cinema. They said that the film already had been a big success in Marseille and Nice, where it went off without a hitch (Fox folies, apparently, was one of those rare films that opened elsewhere in France before coming to Paris). Even if the public had been unaware of those earlier screenings, they certainly knew, through advertisements as well as the posters at the cinema, that the film was from Hollywood, and that, anyway, there just weren’t enough French sound films available to be shown (the first French film with recorded sound, Le Collier de la reine, had only opened two months before, in October 1929, and at the time of the incident at the Moulin Rouge only one other French sound film in addition to Le Collier was playing in Paris, Les Trois masques [1929]).7

This may have all seemed reasonable enough, but then the management fell back on a time-honored Parisian tradition; blame any problem on outside agitators. First, the management named a “cabal” to whom the current owners had refused to sell the Moulin Rouge, and who had paid off some members of the audience to cause trouble. Then they suggested that a few disaffected

![Figure 4.1 The Moulin Rouge cinema, around the time of the premiere of Fox folies.](image-url)
projectionists, who had quit just before the screening, may have been responsible for the unpleasantness. Finally, management claimed that the transformation of the Moulin Rouge into a cinema had infuriated the old music hall’s orchestra members who suddenly were out of jobs and may have come to Fox folies looking to blow off a little steam.³

In its report on the “noisy and violent incidents,” the Parisian fascist newspaper L’Action française, which always seemed ready to blame Jews or communists for any unrest in Paris, this time chose not to single out anyone from outside, or to place responsibility on outraged orchestra members. The newspaper devoted almost two full columns to the events at the Moulin Rouge, and gave the story a dramatic headline: “The Fall of Fox Follies” (“La chute des Folies-Fox”). The newspaper gave much more detail about the violence at the cinema than Le Figaro had, and it is here that we find the detail of spectators tearing the metal numbers from their seats and throwing them at the screen. The analysis in L’Action française, at least at the beginning, is surprisingly measured, and mostly placed the event within a nationwide context of a film industry unable to produce sound films as quickly and efficiently as the Americans. L’Action française claimed not to be surprised by any of this, and said that it had been warning readers for weeks that an influx of American films would cause problems. Making matters worse, a musical revue like Fox folies could only remind readers of what they had lost with the transformation of the Moulin Rouge, from music hall to cinema.⁹

After this, L’Action française reverted fully to form. The article complained not only of hearing only English rather than French, but to add visual insult to linguistic injury, Fox folies also showed “blacks and whites” (“noirs et blancs”) on screen together. This was, according to the newspaper, more than viewers could take.¹⁰

The press kept the story going for some time. Not quite a week later, La Renaissance, a very serious weekly journal of politics and culture, headlined its article about the Moulin Rouge events, with no small amount of irony, “À Propos of Progress in the Cinema.” La Renaissance explained that the audience was fully justified in its complaints, which also included shouts of “In French!” and “Shut up!” (“Ta gueule!”), and then, as viewers stormed out of the cinema and saw others standing in line for the next show, “Stay out!” (“N’entre pas!”).¹¹ As late as March 1930, the monthly—and very sober—French review Europe ran its own story, arguing that the sound film would undoubtedly evolve slowly, and that while Fox folies may have been enough to make Americans proud, it certainly wasn’t sufficient, technically or aesthetically, for French audiences.¹²
Fox folies left the Moulin Rouge after a week or two and seems never to have played at another Parisian cinema. If this was indeed the case, it would have been extraordinary for a major American film to have such a brief run and then disappear completely, even if there were still relatively few Parisian cinemas wired for sound at the time. This certainly would not have been the original plan for the film, so French cinemas at the time must have been able to break contracts with distributors for Hollywood films, or had agreements that allowed them to cancel showings at fairly short notice. If this is what happened, it marks a rare occurrence of the French film industry responding quickly and directly to the apparent demands of its audience, demands that were vocal and violent and difficult to miss. At least in the very earliest months of the transition to sound in France, some Parisians literally refused to remain quiet about the films they wanted to see and hear.

The case of Fox folies tells us a great deal about the tensions that might work their way through a movie screening in Paris. In this instance, an innocuous American film agitated viewers to violence because, perhaps, of unwanted changes to a neighborhood venue, or a sense of American cultural domination, or the musicians’ discontent over jobs lost as a result of the transformation of the Moulin Rouge, or outside agitators who were always looking to start trouble, or, if L’Action française is to be believed, because a movie implied that races might mingle. Different sources with different interests, from the Moulin Rouge management to journals across the ideological spectrum, were able to interpret the incident along varied but perhaps predictable lines. The incident itself, however, seems more or less benign, in terms of those that came after, and that directly involved the growing threat of fascism in France.

**Fascists at the Movies: Some Background**

The earliest and best-known instance establishes a pattern of behavior and introduces at least a partial cast of characters. Luis Buñuel’s L’Âge d'or premiered at the Studio 28 cinema in December 1930. Studio 28, on the rue Tholozé in the eighteenth arrondissement, had opened in 1928 as a site for avant-garde films, although it also showed commercial movies as well as those that might hover between those two categories. A single week of screenings just a few months after the L’Âge d’or affair, and just as Studio 28 was reopening after dealing with the damage caused by the violence there, condenses all of the space’s programming interests, and shows the fluidity in Parisian film culture at the time between the experimental and the conventional. During the week of March 6, 1931, Studio 28 showed a short film by the great Franco-Russian stop-motion animator Ladislas Starevitch, as well as a 1930 Czech film directed by Karl
Anton, *Tonischka* (*Tonka Sibenice*), a reissue of the 1929 German film *Terre sans femmes* (*Das Land ohne Frauen*), a short 1930 film codirected by René Magritte, *Fleurs meurtriers*, and also the 1928 ethnographic documentary about cannibals (later exposed as a hoax), *Chez les mangeurs d’hommes*.\(^\text{14}\) One of the feature-length films that week at Studio 28 almost certainly made no appeal to high art: the 1929 German version of the Sherlock Holmes novella, *Le Chien des Baskerville* (*Der Hund von Baskerville*). The other, however, was a film understood at the time to be both extraordinarily entertaining and a sign of the future of cinema, both popular and artistically important, René Clair’s first sound film, *Sous les toits de Paris*, which had opened in Paris the year before. Given this typically eclectic mix of films as well as the practice of showcasing the experimental and the nontraditional, it made perfect sense for Studio 28 to stage the premiere of *L’Âge d’or*, and with no reason for this to seem anything other than business as usual.

The fascist group Jeunesses patriotes thought otherwise. A few nights into the run of *L’Âge d’or*, angered by what they perceived to be the film’s anti-Catholicism and its decadent surrealist aesthetic, members of the group destroyed the screen while the film was playing, assaulted some members of the audience, and defaced artwork in the lobby of Studio 28. According to Georges Sadoul, the fascists shouted “Death to Jews” during their rampage. About a week later, and after a great deal of administrative hand-wringing, an alarmed Paris prefect of police, Jean Chiappe—who will return to this narrative of cinema violence—took it upon himself to shut the film down and ban further screenings.\(^\text{15}\) This has become a familiar story and one told fairly often, perhaps because of the canonical status of the film and also as a sign of what has been called “Vichy before Vichy,” the entrance of fascism into everyday life in France well before the war. But it also has served to obscure other acts of rightwing violence related to the cinema, and its dominance in the narrative of French film history has also worked to lessen our sense of the steady impact of fascism on Parisian popular culture during the years just prior to World War II.

From the occurrence at Studio 28 we can move to Paris after Vichy, to the first few weeks following the Liberation in 1944. Unlike the *L’Âge d’or* violence, we have only traces of an event involving the cinema, the first as a brief mention in the *Los Angeles Times*.\(^\text{16}\) American newspapers were not always the most fastidious sources for information about Parisian violence at the movies, making this trace even more obscure. While the Jeunesses patriotes tried to prevent screenings in 1930, in 1944, according to the *Times*, trouble began because too many people tried to see movies, with police having to calm down
“some 50,000 people milling” along the Champs-Élysées, trying to get into cinemas showing Liberation newsreels. “Many went home fearful of being crushed” by the crowd, the *Times* reported, and, apparently, these wild newsreel enthusiasts smashed store windows and fired guns in the air. All of this seems quite speculative. There was certainly a great deal of enthusiasm over newsreels about the Liberation, and I will write about that in a subsequent chapter. I have found just one Parisian report of this “combative joy,” to use the *Times*’s term, and this one makes it difficult to accept at face value the *Times*’s sense of frightening violence. The Resistance newspaper *Combat* described the “enthusiasm, punctuated by gunshots” over the long-awaited reopening of Parisian cinemas, closed since the Liberation. *Combat* made the whole thing sound mostly playful, as it described not only the gunfire, but also mock duels with umbrellas rather than swords. The newspaper also insisted that, really, the crowds were smaller than might have been expected, because the metros leading to the Champs-Élysées had closed early that day.\(^{17}\)

These events from 1930 and 1944, at the Studio 28 and along Paris’s most famous thoroughfare, bookend those that most interest me here. Examining them provides us with the pleasure of the strange and perhaps unexpected aspects of spectatorship, but also helps us understand some of the particulars of Parisian film culture at the time. They tell us something about the relationship between the Far Right and popular culture, which is more usually discussed in far broader terms—fascist aesthetics in national cinemas or in mass gatherings like the Nuremberg Rally, for example.\(^ {18}\) In the instances from Paris and the suburbs from the period, the connection is more local and immediate, planned but also spontaneous, and linked more to neighborhoods than to the nation. These incidents also describe a form of spectatorial activity all too absent from discussions of the cinema. We are presented, here, with an extraordinarily active and dangerous spectator, one who is politically motivated and also mobilized by the events onscreen to act out in the public space of the exhibition site.

When French film historiography about the period concerns itself with what might broadly be called political rather than aesthetic issues, however, the emphasis tends to stay on governmental and industrial efforts rather than the activities of individuals or small groups or the risks of certain instances of film exhibition. Two foundational and important histories, one in English and one in French, typify this approach. Colin Crisp’s *The Classic French Cinema, 1930–1960* remains fixed on import quotas imposed on foreign films, or the government’s intervention in the 1934 Gaumont debt crisis, or the industry’s development, a few years later, of the Fédération des chambres syndicales de
la cinématographie française, intended to deter the state from intervening in the affairs of cinema. Yann Darré maintains much the same emphasis in his *Histoire sociale du cinéma français*, at least in his discussion of the 1930s, as he moves from the Stavisky Affair to the Gaumont bankruptcy to the Herriot accords regarding imports as well as to other affairs of state and industry.

The French cinema of the period, especially in Paris, also took up a different kind of place altogether in the political landscape. The events depicted onscreen, and the space of the cinema itself, might motivate actions by citizens and citizens’ groups disconnected from government but hoping to achieve ideological goals. This version of politics and cinema had both macro- and microlevels, responding as they were to the various governing coalitions that rose and fell so quickly in France in the 1930s but also to specific neighborhoods, the activities of local political clubs, and even to modes of transit that facilitated movement through the city. For some, and especially on the right, going to the movies in Paris during the 1930s came to be understood as engaging in political activity. The common debate about fascist cinema has been whether a fascist nation necessarily produces fascist films. Fascism would not come to govern France, however, until the surrender to the Germans in 1940 and the subsequent Nazi Occupation of Paris and installation of the Vichy regime in the southern “Free Zone” of France. The events at cinemas in Paris and the suburbs in the 1930s, however, make us consider whether there are particularly fascist reception strategies at the movies, and fascist uses of cinema in general.

Part of the difficulty of assuming any such strategy overall is the problem of French fascism itself. During the 1930s, at least, there were any number of fascist groups, and although most of them emerged in response to the Franco-Prussian war and Paris Commune of 1870–71, or to the Dreyfus Affair at the end of the nineteenth century, or to the disaster of World War I at the beginning of the twentieth, they were marked as much by differences as similarities. There also have been longstanding debates as to whether or not we might even call these groups fascist with any assurance, and whether we might always consider them a reaction from the Far Right of the political spectrum rather than from the Left. At least since the 1990s and the meticulous work of Robert Soucy, among others, and at least in an American context, the argument has more or less been settled. These groups indeed were fascist, and manifested an extreme rightwing version of French antiparliamentarianism and anticapitalism.

That the argument has existed for so long amply shows the difficulty of establishing all the relevant connections between these groups. As well, some
of the most significant of these groups, like the influential and longstanding Action française, began at least somewhat respectably in the late nineteenth century, and only over time became more prone to violence and to paramilitary actions. Thus, the contentious development of so many right-wing groups throughout the first few decades of the century, not only the Action française, but also Jeunesses patriotes, the Ligue des patriotes, the Union Nationale, the Ligue de la patrie française, the Ligue antisémite française, and, among others, the Croix de feu. The latter group fully understood the importance of motion pictures, having established its own “Section ciné” for the production of propaganda films, and was one of the largest fascist organizations in France by the early 1930s and one of the most significantly involved in the events from 1931 and 1937 that I will discuss in detail.

These various groups did unite around a few core issues; their commitment to Catholicism and hypernationalism, a rejection of parliamentary forms of government, and also an embrace of antisemitism, antisocialism, and anti-Marxism, as well as their willingness to resort to violence. All of these groups, and particularly the Croix de feu, sought to celebrate the veteran of World War I and especially an idealized veteran of the Battle of Verdun, which in the years after the war took on such mythic power in French culture. Just as the end of the war helped establish the democratic reforms of the Third Republic, and in doing so developed the possibility of the Popular Front in the 1930s, so too did it provide an important foundational moment for the modern French Right and also for French fascists. While French fascist organizations might fight among themselves during the 1930s, they also made common cause with a range of right-wing groups, giving them at least a fair amount of political influence. But for many years historians deemphasized the significance of these groups in France, largely because republican democracy remained stable there, precisely the opposite of Italy or Germany. Due to the significant levels of fascist terrorism in those two countries in the interwar period, historians have also, until recently, tended not to acknowledge fully the important place of violence in the organizational and political strategies of the French Far Right of the 1930s. Urban political violence actually had a long and established history in Paris, from 1789 to the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 and on to the Commune of 1871. By the 1930s, the source of that violence had shifted fully from the political Left to the Right.

That violence, in and around Paris, frequently targeted sites of film exhibition as well as other cultural venues, and just a few weeks after the events surrounding L’Âge d’or at Studio 28, there was a weekend of escalating disruption and violence in Paris cinemas. The connection between those events, while
plausible, is also hard to pin down. At Studio 28 the actions seemed fully premeditated and associated with a significant faction of Parisian rightwing culture, the Jeunesses patriotes. Those later events appear perhaps more spontaneous, and more the work of individuals who may or may not have been members of fascist organizations. In each case, however, the images on screen became the immediate cause for action at the cinema.

They also took place in cinemas quite different from the independently owned Studio 28. The events a few weeks after the *L'Âge d'or* incident occurred at cinemas that were parts of the largest chains in Paris, the Pathé-Natan exhibition circuit and the one controlled by Gaumont-Franco-Film-Aubert. Gaumont and Pathé both had chronic money problems and would go bankrupt by the middle of the decade, but in early 1931 they were powerful, vertically integrated companies that produced films, distributed them around the world, and often showed them in cinemas that they owned. During the 1930s filmgoers in Paris, no matter where they lived, were almost of necessity habitués of cinemas in the Pathé and Gaumont chains.32

Even before these events at Pathé and Gaumont cinemas, and even before the *L'Âge d'or* violence, disturbances at exclusive cinemas were not unknown in Paris. There was, of course, the *Fox folies* incident at the Moulin Rouge. There also were others, where the evidence is spotty at best, for example a brief mention in early November 1930 in *Ciné-Comoedia*, a daily Parisian journal of cultural events, and a story seemingly deemed unworthy of note by every other journalistic source still available.33 “Violent Demonstrations at a Cinema on the Boulevards,” the headline claimed, with the location—on the boulevards—and the story about the effects of a film playing there, indicating that the unnamed cinema must have had some importance. The spectators, apparently unhappy with the film, became so agitated that the exhibitor called the police. As the result of a struggle either with another spectator or with the police, one of the viewers that night was wounded.

There were only two new films that week in Paris, *Toute sa vie* (1930) and *Nos maîtres les domestiques* (1930). The first was a Paramount film made in France and directed by Alberto Cavalcanti, playing at the Paramount cinema in the ninth arrondissement, while the second, produced by Jacques Haïk and made, in French, in Great Britain, also played in the ninth, at the Olympia. Neither seems compelling enough to generate such a heated response.34 There were, however, several reprises opening that week playing at prominent cinemas. Buster Keaton’s *L’Operateur* (*The Cameraman*; 1928), for example, played at the Raspail in the sixth and the Cambronne in the fifteenth. Most interesting, though, in relation to the events of just two months later, the
German director G. W. Pabst’s silent film, *Le Journal d’une fille perdue* (1929), showed in the fifth arrondissement at the Ursulines cinema, which as I mentioned earlier specialized in experimental films and challenging commercial movies. *Le Journal d’une fille perdue* had opened in Paris the previous April, but had played for only one month, so it is possible to guess that many Parisians had not yet seen the film when it returned in November. Pabst’s story of rape, illegitimacy, prostitution, and suicide indeed may have been just the thing to anger unsuspecting viewers.

**Violence and the Sites of Parisian Popular Culture**

A little more than two months later, on Saturday evening, January 17, 1931, spectators at the Mozart-Pathé in the sixteenth arrondissement whistled derisively when the image of Théodore Steeg appeared in a newsreel. Steeg had had a long career as a colonial official, and in December had been elected the head of a new (and, eventually, short-lived), leftwing French government, replacing that of the more moderate André Tardieu. The next day, during a matinee at the Gaumont-affiliated Aubert-Palace on the boulevard des Italiens in the ninth arrondissement, a group of young men tore up the movie screen, once again, it seems, when Steeg’s image appeared, probably in the same newsreel that had played at the Mozart.

In all likelihood the patrons of neither cinema expected anything unusual that weekend, but this would have been particularly true for audiences attending the Mozart. That cinema tended to play innocuous films that had already shown in Paris, and the sixteenth had always been one of the most comfortable and well-heeled arrondissements in the city. Just previously the Mozart had played a Thelma Todd comedy from 1928, *La Petite dame du vestiaire* (*Naughty Baby*), and a week later the audiences watching the Steeg newsreel really had come to see *Atlantis*, a French-language version of a British film based on the story of the Titanic that had opened elsewhere a few months earlier, as well as a 1927 Laurel and Hardy silent short about World War I, *Les Gaietés de l’infanterie* (*With Love and Hisses)*.

The angry young men at the Aubert the next day may have been more prepared for action than the viewers at the Mozart who hissed and whistled at Steeg. The Aubert audience had come to see a very different kind of film about the war from the Laurel and Hardy short. They were there for G. W. Pabst’s *Quatre de l’infanterie*. This bleak antiwar film about four doomed members of the German infantry was a very big deal when it opened in Paris, exclusively at the Aubert in December 1930, just as *L’Âge d’or* began its brief run at Studio 28. Critics claimed that it was a fitting and important companion film
to À l’Ouest rien de nouveau, which had premiered at about the same time at the state-of-the-art, newly opened Ermitage cinema in the eighth arrondissement on the Champs-Élysées.\textsuperscript{35}

That film, based on Erich Maria Remarque’s international antiwar best-seller, would play for months at the Ermitage, apparently in a silent version with music and sound effects. At the end of February, in an exhibition strategy typically reserved for only the most popular films, it moved to another exclusive engagement at the Impérial-Pathé on the boulevard des Italiens in the second arrondissement.\textsuperscript{36} Quatre de l’infanterie did not cause quite the same excitement, but it did play at the Aubert for about three months, replaced on February 27 by the costume melodrama Échec au roi (1931), starring Françoise Rosay as the Queen of France and codirected (along with Leon D’Usseau) by international playboy (and former husband of Gloria Swanson) Henri de la Falaise. Quatre de l’infanterie moved immediately to thirteen cinemas throughout Paris, not quite the same trajectory as À l’Ouest rien de nouveau but still a probable sign of the movie’s importance to film audiences in the city.\textsuperscript{37}

A film moving to so many cinemas in Paris would seem to indicate that many filmgoers had no difficulty waiting to see a movie until it came to their neighborhood. But the months-long exclusive run of Quatre de l’infanterie at the Aubert also shows us that Parisians were willing to leave those neighborhoods and pay at least a little more for a film that particularly interested them. We have very little evidence with which to judge these filmgoing habits. Long after the evening of the torn screen at the Aubert, in 1947, the Société nouvelle des établissements Gaumont—the organization that owned the chain of Gaumont cinemas in France and throughout Europe—began polling the customers at the company’s flagship cinema, the Gaumont-Palace in Paris’s eighteenth arrondissement. That poll found that around one-third of all viewers came from the eighteenth, and another quarter came from the suburbs, and mostly those that bordered the arrondissement.\textsuperscript{38} So more than half of this first-run cinema’s clientele came from within easy walking distance, or were a short ride away on the metro—the Paris subway. Most of the rest of the viewers, though, came from other parts of Paris, and we might then assume that the same would have been true for other cinémas d’exclusivité during other eras.

On the day of the torn screen in 1931, police arrested two young men, both from working-class districts at least partially removed from the Aubert: a sixteen-year-old who lived on the boulevard Barbés in the eighteenth arrondissement and a twenty-nine-year-old accountant from the rue Capri in the twelfth. If either of them had just wanted to go to the movies, they
would have had any number of choices within easy walking distance of their homes. In particular, the eighteenth arrondissement was full of cinemas, with seventeen showing programs that week. Nevertheless, transportation systems in Paris certainly brought neighborhoods closer and made it much easier to move across the city. The young man from the eighteenth would have had several metro choices on the street where he lived, the boulevard Barbés, all of them on the same line, and so he could have taken a long ride to the station at Réamur-Sébastopol, changed metros there, and taken a direct trip to the metro stop nearest the Aubert, the 4 Septembre station. Coming from the twelfth arrondissement on the eastern edge of the city would have taken the other man arrested that day just a little longer, but still probably only involved one change of metro trains, at the Bastille station. Thus the Paris subway—along with the elaborate bus system in the city—made it possible to go almost anywhere to see a movie, as well as for like-minded young people to meet and engage in a range of political activities.

A number of Parisian newspapers covered the events at the Mozart and Aubert cinemas that weekend, reporting on them together, with the newsreel images of Steeg serving as the link. Some reports refused to identify the men arrested for the crime at the Aubert, although at least one, in Le Petit Parisien, provided their names and addresses. But only one source seems to have situated the men ideologically. According to the Communist newspaper L’Humanité, both men were fascists, just like the toughs who wrecked Studio 28 when L’Âge d’or played there. L’Humanité called them “troublemakers” (troublions) and “thugs” (voyous), probably belonging to the fascist youth group Camelots du roi. L’Humanité continued that they had been egged on by the newspaper that sponsored the Camelots, L’Action française, which had a long history of disrupting plays and other public events that the editorial staff considered unpatriotic. Perhaps as further evidence of the political inclinations of the suspects, the eighteenth arrondissement, where the younger man lived, was one of those neighborhoods on the northeastern edge of the city that had become such significant areas of fascist sentiment and recruitment, in no small part as a reaction to all of the Eastern European Jews who had settled in these sections over the previous forty years. L’Humanité then lamented that the men arrested at the Aubert would certainly be released soon from police custody. The newspaper likened the event at the cinema to the destruction of Studio 28, which had led to the decision to suppress further screenings of L’Âge d’or. According to L’Humanité, the fascists just kept winning. Indeed, only five years later in February 1936, and making the Aubert eruption seem harmless by comparison, the Camelots du roi would drag newly elected
Socialist (and Jewish) Prime Minister Léon Blum from his car and beat him practically to death.45

The precise relationship between all of the incidents of December 1930 and January 1931 is difficult to determine. The same voyous at the Aubert may or may not have been at the Mozart the night before, and at Studio 28 a few weeks earlier. It also remains unclear whether any of them could have known which newsreel would be playing at the Mozart or the Aubert, because those short actualités tended not to turn up in the typical movie advertisements or listings. There is no question, though, that at least in the case of the violence at the Aubert, Quatre de l’infanterie alone was enough to attract a politically motivated crowd, from both the Right and the Left of Parisian politics.

In fact, in the weeks before the Aubert attack, in November and December 1930, the socialist Club du Faubourg held two apparently open conferences where the film would be featured. At the first, on November 8, speakers engaged in a “débat cinématographique” taking sides “for and against” the two antiwar films about to open in Paris, À l’Ouest rien de nouveau and Quatre de l’infanterie. The following month the club would be at it again, when a wide range of speakers from across the political spectrum, including leaders of women’s groups and members of the military, discussed the possibility of a war in Europe while also focusing on “the horrors of chemical warfare” and “women against war,” as well as the merits of the same two films. Both events received wide publicity, from periodicals like La Semaine à Paris, read, presumably, by everyone in Paris with an interest in the week’s cultural events, to those with more specific interests, for example the Socialist Party’s daily newspaper, Le Populaire.46

The Club du Faubourg met at 15 boulevard de Rochechouart in the eighteenth arrondissement, just a few blocks away from where the sixteen-year-old assailant at the Aubert lived, on the boulevard Barbès. It is easy to imagine that he might have been at one or both of the meetings, or certainly would have known about them, and would have had his interest piqued in a film so important to the Parisian Left. His presence at the club remains speculative, largely because after all of the initial excitement about the events of the weekend, both of the men arrested seem to disappear from the available public record, and so we can find out nothing about their activities before the screening. Perhaps L’Humanité was right, and they were quickly released and no charges were pressed. Certainly the rightwing Chiappe, the prefect of police who had banned L’Âge d’or the month before, would have sympathized with their politics if not with their actions. Or there may have been more compelling news
to report, as there was no shortage of sensational murders in the Parisian press from the period.

Just a few days after the events at the Mozart and the Aubert, on January 22, 1931, Steeg himself was out of office after only five weeks as head of the government. À l’Ouest rien de nouveau and Quatre de l’infanterie, of course, continued to play in Paris, apparently without incident. But the events of December 1930 and January 1931 at three different cinemas in the city remain as reminders of the long history that links violence, and especially rightwing violence, to Parisian sites of leisure and popular culture.

Rightwing organizations targeted sites other than cinemas, and viewed much in the landscape of popular culture as dangerous. In the weeks just after the events at the Mozart and the Aubert, a fascist group made a more organized effort to disrupt Parisian entertainment venues than the young men who tore the screen during the Steeg newsreel. In mid-February 1931, the Théâtre Nouvel-Ambigu began presentations of L’Affaire Dreyfus. This was an adaptation of a German play about the most charged political and cultural
event in France since the Franco-Prussian War, and one that, according to the press at the time, emphasized Dreyfus’s innocence. The Ambigu was a distinguished theatre in Paris, in operation on 2 boulevard Saint-Martin in the tenth arrondissement since 1828. By the 1930s it was part of a significant entertainment district, just down the street from the Folies-Dramatiques cinema, which typically showed films that had just left their first-run, exclusive locations. The Ambigu would become a cinema itself in 1938, and then just a few years later reestablish itself as a theatre.\footnote{47}

The Croix de feu caused trouble at most of the performances, and by early March, the group’s leader, the reliably anti-Dreyfusard François de La Rocque, had had enough. He wrote to Chiappe, the prefect of police, expressing concern that \textit{L’Affaire Dreyfus} opened up old wounds that had “placed Frenchman against Frenchman for thirty years.” La Rocque urged Chiappe to shut the play down, and seemed to threaten the possibility of more violent interventions if the group’s concerns were not addressed. Chiappe, with his own Far Right politics, needed little convincing, and he followed La Rocque’s instructions and closed the play. \textit{L’Affaire Dreyfus} was replaced at the Ambigu by \textit{L’Homme qui assassina}, based on a novel by Claude Farrère who, along with La Rocque, will return to this narrative of violence at the sites of popular culture.\footnote{48}

For good measure, that same week in March 1931, Chiappe also put a stop to an evening of classical music at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées because the conductor would be the Austrian Felix Weingartner, who during the Great War apparently had cast aspersions on the French. Here Chiappe acted not on the advice of a rightwing group but on the orders of the fascist champagne mogul Pierre Taittinger, and apparently backed by threats by the Camelots du roi and the Jeunesse patriotes.\footnote{49} I mention these noncinematic events to give a sense of the many ways that the Right in Paris attempted to achieve political ends through manipulations of popular culture, manipulations that might be violent or at least involve the possibility of violence. In the years after the events at the Mozart, the Aubert, and the Ambigu, fascist groups only intensified these efforts, resulting in 1937 in one of the most violent events in Paris just before the Nazi Occupation, and one that particularly involved the cinema.

Three years earlier, in February 1934, French fascists staged an uprising in Paris that has been studied extensively but still remains somewhat mysterious, at least to the extent that we understand its motivating causes. Over a few days early in the month, fascist groups, and most notably the Croix de feu, stormed the Ministry of the Interior, the Place de la Concorde, and the presidential residence, the Élysée Palace. They were, ultimately, forced to withdraw after
battling the Parisian police and French military authority. The uprising itself may have been a genuine attempt at a coup d’état by an emboldened coalition of rightwing groups. Or it may have begun as a protest over Chiappe having been fired as prefect of police, or possibly motivated simply because the many fascist groups in Paris joined forces so that none of them might be deemed weaker than any of the others. Whatever the reason, when the Popular Front coalition of Radicals, Socialists, and Communists took over the Chamber of Deputies in 1936 and Léon Blum became prime minister, and with the 1934 rebellion still a very fresh memory, the new government outlawed all of France’s Far Right groups.

The Battle of Clichy

With ground zero at the Place de la Concorde, those 1934 actions focused on the famous landmarks of Paris. But the violence of 1931 and 1937 dealt with the more modest and everyday aspects of Parisian architecture, the theatre and the cinema. After the Croix de feu had been outlawed, La Rocque legally reconstituted it as the Parti social français (PSF), and on March 16, 1937, around five hundred members met at the Olympia cinema in Clichy, a suburb just outside of Paris, for a screening of La Bataille. This was either the 1933 French film starring Charles Boyer or the 1934 British remake, which also starred the very popular French actor.

French fascists had mobilized at cinemas before. In May 1934, in the Parisian suburb of Drancy, the café manager at the Kursaal cinema had no interest in serving a group of fascists who obviously were looking to start a fight, and so he kicked them out. Sensing trouble, the Communist newspaper L’Humanité put the word out for leftists to converge on Drancy, and around twelve hundred answered the call. They sang “L’Internationale” as they moved through the suburb, and they shouted “Soviets everywhere!” as well as “Down with fascism!” and “Liberate Thaelmann!” (the imprisoned head of the German Communist Party who would be executed by the Nazis in 1944). They met with absolutely no resistance, as the fascists dispersed rather than challenge them. Just a few days after the demonstration in Drancy, members of the fascist organization Solidarité française met at a cinema in Moulins, a town about 180 miles south of Paris, and this time there was violence. Local workers stormed the cinema, and the police, who would also protect the fascists at Clichy in 1937, fought them off. A few policemen were injured, and a number of workers were arrested and interrogated. Still in May 1934, this time in the Parisian suburb of Cachan, fascists and the police combined once again, in what L’Humanité called an “état de siège,” a state of siege. The Solidarité
Figure 4.2  The Kursaal cinema, in the Parisian suburb of Drancy, as it looked around 1934, when fascists tried to commandeer the café there.
française joined forces with another Far Right group, Action française, and about four hundred fascists overall, protected by around eight hundred members of local law enforcement, held a meeting at the Cachan-Palace cinema. Communists protested outside the cinema, shouting, as they did in Drancy, “Down with fascism!” as well as “Unity through action!” The police stood for none of this. Instead, they sent police cars and motorcycles crisscrossing through Cachan without stopping, to prevent any large gathering anywhere near the cinema. A number of protesters were injured; others threw rocks at the police. Meanwhile, the fascists were able to hold their meeting.

In the leftist, working-class Parisian suburb of Saint-Denis, and around the same time as the events in Cachan, fascists gathered in the Kermesse cinema. L’Humanité called that a clear provocation, and asked that “communists, socialists, and those not aligned with any party protest as vigorously as possible.” Indeed they did, and they, too, used the spaces of popular culture as their headquarters. Rather than meeting in cinemas, they assembled in two of Saint-Denis’s theatres, the Municipal and the Hénaff, and then took to the streets in a show of force that the fascists could do nothing about, because in Saint-Denis they apparently did not have the support of local police. Then, in March 1935, the Redressement français (French Resurgence) scheduled a mass meeting at the Central cinema in Vitry, a southeastern suburb of Paris. Antifascists also gathered there to disrupt the meeting, but the police, in support of the Redressement, broke up the protesters and sent at least one of them to the hospital.

In none of these instances was there much interest in watching a movie. Instead, the cinema functioned as a convenient space for a large gathering. We can see, then, that at least during the 1930s, in and around Paris, the typical cinema could be understood as a multiple-use space, ideal for movies, of course, but also for other things. In fact, in the working-class twentieth arrondissement of Paris, there was a cinema designed in just this way, the Bellevilloise, which as I mentioned earlier showed movies and also served as a community cultural center. There were also larger institutions with cinemas attached. While fascists gathered in Drancy, for example, the Fascistes slovaques, a Czech expatriate group, met at the cinema connected to the Maison catholique in Argenteuil, a northern suburb of Paris, where they were shouted down by workers who had come to protest.

In 1937, at Clichy, the PSF seem to have bought out the cinema, and the audience included a number of women and children, as both the Croix de feu and the PSF had always emphasized family and family activities more than other similar groups and always welcomed women into their ranks. Like so
many gatherings of the Far Right in and around Paris during the 1930s, however, this event was not simply planned as a chance to meet and mingle with like-minded ideologues. Communists had gathered around the cinema as a protest, and early in the evening, perhaps even before the movie started, fighting began between the fascists and police on one side and the Communists on the other. At least five were killed and many more were injured.\textsuperscript{58}

It was no accident that La Rocque chose Clichy for his group’s movie night. Clichy had long been a \textit{banlieue rouge}, one of the “red suburbs” of Paris known for its Communist leadership.\textsuperscript{59} La Rocque almost certainly hoped to embarrass or intimidate Clichy’s radicals on their own turf, and so tensions were already very high by the night of the screening. Members of the Comité du Front Populaire de Clichy (Popular Front Committee of Clichy) had put up posters throughout the suburb, alerting residents that La Rocque, “Chèf des Fascistes,” and his followers would be coming to Clichy on March 16, with the committee calling for a counterdemonstration that very day.\textsuperscript{60}

Knowing the details of the movie that night, and, really, knowing much at all about the cinema in Clichy, is extremely difficult. The available materials tell us very little about the Parisian suburbs from the period, with newspapers and other sources giving us only occasional information. Nevertheless, there are some things we can piece together. The Olympia cinema was on the rue de l’Union in Clichy, just at the back of the town hall, situating it perfectly for a political gathering that tried to pass itself off as a benign evening’s entertainment. Clichy had a population of about fifty-five thousand in 1937, normally enough people to support three or four cinemas.\textsuperscript{61} It is possible that, because of Clichy’s proximity to Parisian cinemas in the neighboring seventeenth and eighteenth arrondissements, the Olympia was the only exhibition site in the suburb (even today, with about the same population, Clichy only has one cinema, the Rutebeuf).\textsuperscript{62}

The Olympia served not only as the gathering place for the PSF but as a significant architectural presence in the battle. Newspaper reports indicate that the Clichy police, siding with La Rocque, placed themselves in formation behind the town hall, effectively making it impossible for the Communist protesters to go anywhere, blocked on one side by the police and on the other by the cinema. The police attacked, and there was little the trapped Communists could do.\textsuperscript{63}

The movie that night, \textit{La Bataille}, had had a long history in the area. The more prominent, at least in Paris, British version had premiered in the city in January 1934 at the very fashionable Marignan cinema in the eighth arrondissement, and then in March moved to the Max Linder cinema in
the ninth for a further exclusive run. After that the film remained in fairly steady reissue, for instance at three important Parisian cinemas in July 1935 (the Majestic Brune, the Gambetta-Étoile, and the Mozart, the site of that evening of whistling at the newsreel), and at the glamorous Louxor in the tenth arrondissement later that same year, as well as at the Fério in the twelfth. Charles Boyer, the star of the film, had a large following in Paris, and even while the PSF was gathering in Clichy, the Marignan and Max Linder cinemas once again were preparing for the premiere, in just a few days, of his latest film, the 1936 David O. Selznick production *Le Jardin d’Allah* (*The Garden of Allah*), which also featured Marlene Dietrich.

For the fascists gathering in Clichy, however, Boyer was only one of the stars that night, making this the only instance I have found when the film itself, and not just the convenient space of the cinema, was particularly important, although it remains unclear whether a screening was part of the plan for the evening. *La Bataille* had been based on a novel by Claude Farrère, the same man who wrote the source material for *L’Homme qui assassina*, the play at the Théâtre Nouvel-Ambigu that replaced *L’Affaire Dreyfus* after the 1931 protest by the Croix de feu. In addition to being a well-known novelist, Farrère...
was also a fascist, a contributor to *Le Flambeau*, the newspaper of the Croix de feu, and someone who might give La Rocque’s groups an imprimatur of cultural respectability at a time when fascist organizations liked to boast of having at least some adherents who were more literary than paramilitary.  

*La Bataille* may not have had much of a political charge when it typically played in Paris or throughout France during the 1930s, but it certainly did that night in Clichy.

The violence in Clichy in March 1937 is well known to historians. The place of cinema in that violence tends to remain peripheral, if mentioned at all. This may in part be due to the difficulty of finding information about cultural events in the Paris suburbs at the time, or just to a general dismissal of the significance of popular culture to interwar French political movements. The events of 1929, at the premiere of *Fox follies*, show the possibility of aggrieved spectators resorting to protest and violence at the movies; and the uprisings in 1931 and 1937, and also the agitation around the screening of *L’Âge d’or* in 1930, make it clear that rightwing violence in and around Paris was often significantly connected to the cinema and other cultural venues. The incidents surrounding the Théâtre Nouvel-Ambigu and the Olympia cinema, no less than those in 1934 at the Place de la Concorde, demonstrate the dangers posed by the French Far Right and their understanding of the importance of a range of symbols of Parisian life, from the most elite to the fully mundane, and their willingness to stage violent disruptions there.

Just a few years later, during the Occupation, the cinema became an obvious space for Nazi surveillance of Parisians and for rounding up those thought to be threats to the Nazi authority. Although evidence of these activities is hard to come by, as they typically went unreported in the collaborationist press, there are traces here and there. On September 2, 1941, the *New York Times* reported on a series of antifascist demonstrations in and around Paris, including an instance in a Parisian suburb where “in a cinema at Melun spectators left the house when a Fascist newsreel appeared on the screen.” According to the *Times*, “gestapo . . . agents drove the public back into the hall,” with the German commandant of Melun, as a result, issuing a 9:00 p.m. curfew that went into effect the next day in this southeastern suburb of Paris.

The *Times* article raises more questions than it answers. Were the gestapo typically policing Parisian and suburban cinemas, or did they just happen to be near that cinema in Melun? Was there any risk of the crowd becoming violent, or were audiences simply refusing to watch the newsreel? How reliable was the *Times* article in the first place? Parisian newspapers provide no answers. The report in *Le Matin* said only that two Communists had been
arrested because they had been circulating subversive tracts, perhaps inside the cinema, while other available newspapers seemed to be uninterested in the event. Just a week later the Germans distributed an anti-Communist documentary, *La Face au bolchevisme*, to dozens of cinemas in Paris and the suburbs, including the Majestic cinema in Melun, and so, of course, we can imagine that the “Fascist newsreel” as well as other pro-Nazi films would be staples of the bills at cinemas during the period, even as the feature films might seem little changed from those before the war.

We have come full circle, then, from the newsreel that incited protest and violence in 1931 to a newsreel that caused a walkout in 1941. In that first instance, of course, the fascists or fascist sympathizers objected to what they saw, and in the second, it was the fascist authority demanding that audiences continue viewing the film that so upset them. This state-sponsored violence at the cinema certainly had its antecedents in the seemingly more spontaneous uprisings at the Mozart and Aubert cinemas, while also drawing from the events at Clichy, when La Rocque and the PSF understood the cinema itself as a space of containment and control. Most of the available evidence during the period, from Paris especially, tells us about the feature films playing at cinemas, the times they played, and the ways those films moved through the city. There is a different kind of evidence, however, often barely visible, that tells us about what took place at those cinemas, and that tells us, as well, of the occasional and very serious political dangers in the 1930s and 1940s of going to the movies in Paris.