



MAGGIE CHEUNG: FILMS OF ROMANCE, MELANCHOLY AND MAGIC

Irma Vep

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Director: Olivier Assayas
Production Company: Dacia Films
Executive Producer: Françoise Guglielmi
Producer: Georges Benayoun
Production Associate: Catherine Hannoun
Production Manager: Sylvie Barthez
Unit Managers: Sylvain Blaché, Philippe Guinot, Jérôme Tardieu, Frédéric Carré
1st Assistant Directors:
François-Renaud Labarthe, Alice de Andrade
2nd Assistant Director: Dina Arbib
Script Supervisor: Edmée Doroszlaï
Casting: Pierre Amzallag
Screenplay: Olivier Assayas
Director of Photography: Éric Gautier
Assistant Photographers: Stéphane Fontaine, Sophie Lemaire
Stills Photography: Isabelle Weingarten
Special Effects: Olivier Zenenski, Grégoire Delage
Editors: Luc Barnier, Tina Baz, Marie Lecoeur
Art Director: François-Renaud Labarthe
Costumes: Françoise Clavel
Costumes (For Irma Vep): Jessica Doyle
Make-up: Nancy Tong, Isabelle Nyssen
Title Calligraphy: OA
Opticals: Trois Lumières, Arane
Final Sequence Filmstock Scratching: Claude Duty
Piano for Les Vampires: Philippe Richard
Music Co-ordinator: Eric Michon
Sound: Philippe Richard, Amaury de Nexon
Mixer: William Flageollet
Sound Editors: Marie-Christine Ratel, Marie-Christine Ruh
Sound Effects: Laurent Lévy, Olivier Marlangeon
Stunt Consultant: Michel Julienne
Cast:
Maggie Cheung (*Maggie*)
Jean-Pierre Léaud (*René Vidal*)
Nathalie Richard (*Zoé*)
Antoine Basler (*the journalist who loves John Woo*)
Nathalie Boutefeu (*Laure*)
Alex Descas (*Desormeaux*)
Dominique Faysse (*Maité*)
Arsinée Khanjian (*American*)
Bernard Nissille (*Markus*)
Olivier Torrès (*Ferdinand Moreno*)
Bulle Ogier (*Mireille*)
Lou Castel (*José Murano*)
Jacques Fieschi (*Roland*)
Estelle Larrivaz (*switchboard operator*)
Balthazar Clémenti (*Robert, assistant*)
Lara Cowez (*script supervisor*)
Dominique Cuny (*grip*)
Jessica Doyle (*Jessica, Roland's friend*)
Sandra Faure (*sex shop salesperson*)
Catherine Ferny (*policewoman*)
Maryel Ferraud (*make-up woman*)
Filip Forgeau (*camera operator*)
Nicolas Giraudin (*unit manager*)
Valérie Guy (*Valérie, in Mireille's apartment*)
Laurent Jacquet (*electrician*)
Philippe Landoulsi (*inspector*)
Smail Mekki (*Kermor, unit manager*)
Maurice Najman (*Maurice, Roland's friend*)
Leslie Rain (*stuntperson*)
Yann Richard (*Kevin*)
Jérôme Simonin (*property man*)
Alexandra Yonnet (*Lili, Markus's friend*)
Pierre Amzallag (*emergency doctor*)
Françoise Clavel (*René's wife*)
Françoise Guglielmi (*producer*)
Odile Horion (*Zoé's assistant*)

Shot in four weeks on a minuscule budget and written by director Olivier Assayas for the Hong Kong action star Maggie Cheung, *Irma Vep* explodes like a firework over its thematic terrain: a mourning for cinema's 'innocent' past.

In a film about the making of a television film, Cheung plays herself. She is cast by a burnt-out, middle-aged French *auteur* René Vidal (Jean-Pierre Léaud) to play Irma Vep, the famous black-clad Parisian criminal, in a remake of the 1915 French silent serial *Les Vampires* (directed by Louis Feuillade). Vidal's *idée fixe* is of Musidora, the original Irma Vep, as an icon of cinema grace and of Feuillade as cinema's brilliant primitive. But he knows that his attempt to revive their purity is little more than a futile séance. Assayas seems to share Vidal's obsessions, yet he seeds this film with telling glimpses of images that suggest that such 'innocence' is still possible. A video screening of the 1968 militant film *Classe de lutte* stands for political purity and Vidal's own terminal film-poem is its poetic equivalent.

Although petty rivalries and myopic arrogance characterise the depictions of film people here, Cheung herself is grace incarnate, deliberately demystifying her star persona. When Vidal describes her, in her Hong Kong action persona, as being 'like an acrobat,' she tells him, 'It's all done by stunt men.' Yet she displays a touching faith in Vidal, whose intuition about her (which is also Assayas') proves correct: in her black latex catsuit, she does make an iconic and slinky Irma. Assayas succeeds where the fictional Vidal fails because he can use Vidal as a surrogate conscience to shoulder the weight of film history for him. Where Vidal is creatively exhausted by his fidelity to the past, Assayas can be an urgent force. *Irma Vep* doesn't work out its mourning for cinema with the romantic nostalgia of Godard's *Le Mépris* or *Passion*, it's more like the Mexican Day of the Dead: remembrance as an act of celebration.

The theme of cinema history as a dead weight on modern directors is crystallised by the film's ending, when the replacement director, José Murano, watches Vidal's edited footage: a viciously experimental squall of film. Shots of Maggie-as-Irma are bleached-out, out-of-focus, scratched and defaced; the obsessive attention paid to every frame reflects Vidal's state of mind. He's like a child who colours in every letter of a favourite book before trashing it. He can't possess Maggie – Irma is inviolably distant anyway – so he vengefully imposes himself like a spurned lover on his flimsy celluloid material.

Assayas isn't just using the stylistic tropes of experimental cinema for expressionistic atmosphere here. Compared to the similarly distressed opening credits of *Sé7en*, there's a greater coherence to René's black and white film-poem. A torrent of scratches pours from Maggie's eyes. Her gaze becomes a visual fusillade echoing down from Feuillade's day. On the one hand, the sequence expresses the impossibility of rejuvenating silent cinema's 'innocence' – a theme alluded to when Vidal damns the idea of the television remake of *Les Vampires* as 'blasphemy'. On the other hand it's about the mystery of cinema's attraction (the television film is entitled *Les yeux qui fascinent*). Cheung says: 'Desire. It's what we make films with.' But it's also what makes us watch films. This circuit of desire unites those who cast lifelike shadows on a wall with an audience that re-animates them in their heads.

Another circuit of desire is played out and projected on and off the film set. Zoé (Nathalie Richard), the bisexual costumier, develops a crush on Maggie; Maité,

François-Renaud Labarthe (TV cameraman)
Alain Martin (boy at 'Café des Oiseaux')
Guy Patrick Sainderichin (TV dignitary)
Willy Martin (bellboy)
Michel Brousseau (taxi driver) *
France 1996©
99 mins
Digital

* Uncredited

2K digital restoration was undertaken from the 16mm and 35mm original camera negatives at Eclair in Vanves, France, with the support of the CNC and approved by Olivier Assayas

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(Dominique Faysse) the production assistant, attempts to poison Maggie's attitude to Zoé; Mireille vicariously exploits Zoé's attraction to Maggie and Vidal himself harbours barely suppressed desires for his lead. When Maggie prowls the hotel corridors in her Irma Vep outfit and steals jewellery from a room, she's not only losing herself in a character she'll never perform, she's also enacting the play of desire that the film so effortlessly works through.

Formerly a critic on *Cahiers du cinéma*, Assayas has made five films before *Irma Vep*. His last, *L'Eau froide* (1994) was a particularly impressive example of intimate portraiture. But *Irma Vep* is an experiment that has paid real dividends. Assayas must now be seen as one of the most exciting European filmmakers currently at work.

Chris Darke, *Sight and Sound*, March 1997

In Venice, Maggie Cheung briefly met French director Olivier Assayas: 'It was a vision,' recalls the latter. 'I didn't think contemporary cinema could still produce an actress with such an aura. I felt like a little kid looking at the great stars of the past.' A year later, Assayas was working on a screenplay about a filmmaker asked to remake Feuillade's *Les Vampires*, and Cheung's persona inspired him to flesh out the character of the actress in the 'Irma Vep' role (a jewel thief originally played by the French star Musidora). Thinking she would not accept a part in a low-budget French movie, he went through frustrating casting sessions in Hong Kong, until he was again introduced to Cheung. 'It was her,' recounts Assayas. 'She was exactly right for the role, and I thought, if she doesn't do it, there's no reason for me to make the film.' Cheung was as seduced at the prospect of working with Assayas: 'I really appreciate Olivier, because he doesn't want me to pretend I am more Chinese than I really am. I am quite westernised, since I have lived in England. I wondered if he had a more "typical Chinese girl" in mind. And he told me, "Don't ever do that. Just be you."'

Assayas describes the shooting of *Irma Vep* as 'an idyllic experience, because of Maggie's luminous, almost magical performance. She has an incredible intuition, she knows how to insert herself in a situation, she listens. You tell her one word, one idea, and she immediately assimilates it, makes it more alive, and gives it back to you with an incredible lightness and grace. It may be a cliché, but you have the feeling of playing on a Stradivarius. I was constantly amazed by her pure intelligence, her sweetness and receptiveness. She combined the best of both worlds: the total freedom of independent cinema, and the sovereign poise of a great star.'

In *Irma Vep*, Cheung indeed plays herself, a popular Hong Kong actress landing with flair and elegance amidst a French film crew who don't really know what to make of her. Director Jean-Pierre Léaud sees her as an exotic version of Musidora, costumier Nathalie Richard falls in love with her, hangers-out admire her beauty, others think she simply doesn't fit. At the end, she is asked to leave the production. Yet breathtaking images keep haunting those who have surrounded her, until they view the black-and-white footage of the film-within-the-film: as a sensuous and mysterious Irma Vep, Cheung joins the legendary pantheon of the silent era – Louise Brooks, Lillian Gish, Marlene Dietrich – her face and body transcended into light and beauty, pure cinematic signifiers.

Bérénice Reynaud, *Sight and Sound*, March 1997