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Black magic

**Chuck Stephens on
the avant-garde eye lube of
Olivier Assayas's bewitching *Irma Vep***

Re: Vamp

Irma Vep maps the head-on collision of French art film and Hong Kong—action pow!

By Chuck Stephens

WHERE DO movie stars come from?
Where do they go at night?
What does it mean to be an icon?
An object of desire?
What does it mean to be, say,
Maggie Cheung?

I mean, besides being Hong Kong's reigning screen siren: a 32-year-old, Shanghai-born, English-educated fashion model turned movie star, the featured player in over 70 films during a career that has seen her evolve from weeping, nearly wordless reaction-shot roles as Jackie Chan's molested girlfriend to become the radiant muse for H.K.'s maverick art-smudge giant Wong Kar-wai and the only three-time winner of the Hong Kong Film Awards for Best Actress. The movie-creature Maggie Cheung certainly embodies all that, but what else? That's exactly what Cheung was asking herself when she ended a two-year hiatus from filmmaking in Hong Kong to star in the most radiant French film in ages to win over the art houses of America: Olivier Assayas's rock-soaked re-vamp of silent film mysteries and avant-garde eye lube, the dazzling *Irma Vep*.

But what does she "mean," this Maggie Cheung?

Wait a minute. First of all, what does it mean, this Irma Vep?

Well, that part is simple, sort of: Irma Vep is a character played by a music hall chanteuse named Musidora in Louis Feuillade's 1915 silent film serial *Les vampires* (which is not, by the way, about neck-nibblers). Feuillade's caper flick—cum-meditation on "modern" female sexuality is about a band of jewel thieves for whom Irma Vep—a rival thief whose name is an anagram of *vampire*—becomes a kind of all-purpose fantasy: supercrook and sensuous Madonna, a full-thighed, pinup vision of mysterious power and social transgression in a skintight black body stocking. Eventually, Irma Vep came to haunt the imagination of an entire generation. The surrealist Louis Aragon saw her as "a magnificent beast of the shadows," the sexual fantasy that drifted like smoke

from the lips of dying Frenchmen in the trenches of World War I. Both pussy and panther, she's also—if you ask writer-director Assayas—the precursor of every femme fatale the screen has ever known: "Irma Vep is the Catwoman, the cat burglar of *To Catch a Thief*; she is the invisible, dark poetry of cinema itself."

Which us back the "meaning" of Maggie.

In *Irma Vep*—Assayas's own stab into that poetic darkness—being Maggie Cheung means playing "Maggie Cheung," a Hong Kong movie star who has come to Paris to star in a remake of *Les vampires*. The film-within-the-film is to be directed by one René Vidal, a wilted auteur who's played by a puffy, gravel-tongued Jean-Pierre Léaud, as far from his days as the French nouvelle vague's all-purpose boy-man as a blimp is from a blintz. Nearly washed-up and closing in on

deranged, Vidal is filmmaker whose "intellectual" movies have contributed to the aggrieved "*nombriliste*" state of French cinema. Having seen Maggie—or should that be "Maggie"?—in a Hong Kong action flick called *The Heroic Trio*, a film in which the real Maggie Cheung plays a kind of funky catgirl on an outsize chopper, Vidal decides he has found his modern-day Musidora. "You are like a dancer, an acrobat, floating through the air," Vidal tells her, convinced that only she can embody a reinvention of French cinema's ultimate bad girl.

"Yeah, but really those were all just stunts," Maggie warns him, uncertain just what she's gotten herself into. After all, Maggie speaks no French, most of the crew speaks only distorted English, and the film within the film is fast coming apart at the seams. By the end of the first day's shoot, Vidal is having a nervous breakdown, the costume girl (played by the astonishing Nathalie Richard) has developed a mad crush on Maggie, and the line between film and "reality" has become as fragile as cigarette ash.

In the middle of this maelstrom stands Maggie Cheung—the real Maggie Cheung, ravishing, baffled, a vision of svelte perfection in black rubber suit—for whom Assayas wrote the part. (As if anyone else could have played it.)

But why? Who is this beacon of pallid, milk-white light from within? Eyes like liquid eight balls; skin like an alabaster casket pillow; lips as swollen as a shotgun wound—who is this accumulation of fetish features, cockney-accented Canto-pulp celebrity, and puff-pieced-to-distraction exotica from the East? Behind the brittle mask of the superstar lies what?

Maggie Cheung lights another American Spirit, throws her Lycra-taut legs over the arm of an easy chair, and breaks into bright, cautiously confessional laughter—the kind of laughter you might expect if you'd asked a woman on a bus if



Rubbermaid: Canto-pulp star Maggie Cheung stars in Olivier Assayas's rock-soaked re-vamp of silent-film mysteries.

she was wearing underpants and, startled but intrigued, she went with the moment and admitted that, well, in fact ...

"It's hard for me to speak about myself," admits Cheung — veteran of a-million-and-one interviews with everyone from scandal-parched Hong Kong gossip weavers to French academic feminists — her smile fading into something like trepidation. "Because I really don't know what people want to know about me, because, really, I don't know why people want to talk to me in the first place. I mean, I know we're here to promote a film, etc., but really, I'd like to know more about you. Can we talk about you? Because when you do a whole day of interviews, every sentence of mine starts with 'I' — I think, I am, I should, I will, I, I, I... I mean, what about me is worth an interview?"

Well?

"I really don't know," Cheung says, sobering. Her jet-black, shocked-raccoon hair soaks up the light that leaks in through the Hotel Rex's windows; a child's playful shrieks bleed up from the alley below. "If a journalist has specific questions

about the film, OK, I can do that. But what's so special about my life? I don't know. I do exactly the same sorts of boring things everybody does when they're not working."

In the two years before she made *Irma Vep*, Cheung made a habit of not working; it was the first time since she was 18 that she hadn't been juggling three or four film projects a year. "I was turning 30, and I realized I needed to find out what my life, and my career, really needed to be about. I spent a lot of time just hanging out, playing tennis, and catching up on all the movies I'd never gotten around to seeing — I'd always been too busy making them."

And winning awards for them as well. Not just Hong Kong awards, either; in 1993 she became the first Chinese actress to win an acting award at the Berlin Film Festival, for her starring turn in Stanley Kwan's *Ruan Ling-yu* (more widely known as *Actress*, and available on video in a pitifully truncated version as *Centre Stage*), a chillingly reflexive biopic about the Chinese silent screen's equivalent of Greta Garbo. Lithe, bottomlessly expressive, and im-

mensely popular, Ruan became a cause célèbre in the Shanghai film industry, and her compelling presence generated so much media attention that, once her private life became the object of malicious conjecture, she committed suicide at the age of 25. Kwan's film — a fabulous meld of period recreations, interpolated footage from Ruan's films, and modern day interviews with survivors from the period — makes no secret of the potential parallels between Cheung and Ruan.

The key word there is "potential." Cheung, who was 25 when she made *Actress*, is far too centered an actor — and far too centered an individual — to allow herself to become a victim of the press the way Ruan did. And at the moment she's having far too much fun turning her gaze back on Hong Kong's shark-tank style of tabloid sensationalism: a recent issue of the glossy H.K. culture rag *Amoeba* featured Cheung on the cover, wearing a devious grin and snapping her own pocket-size camera back at the magazine's photographer.

"Hong Kong just never seems to be able to break out of the system of

superficial shit that the press there is based on," Cheung explains. "It's like a disease, the press in Hong Kong. They never want to talk to you about your work. Just give them a list of the skin-care products you use and they'll be happy to print it. That's what they think their readers want. And that's just a nice example; it can get much more violent than that." She trails off, taking another puff. "All that kind of attention has done for me is to put me off from wanting to be a star. I don't want to be a star, I want to be an actress. I hate that word: *star*."

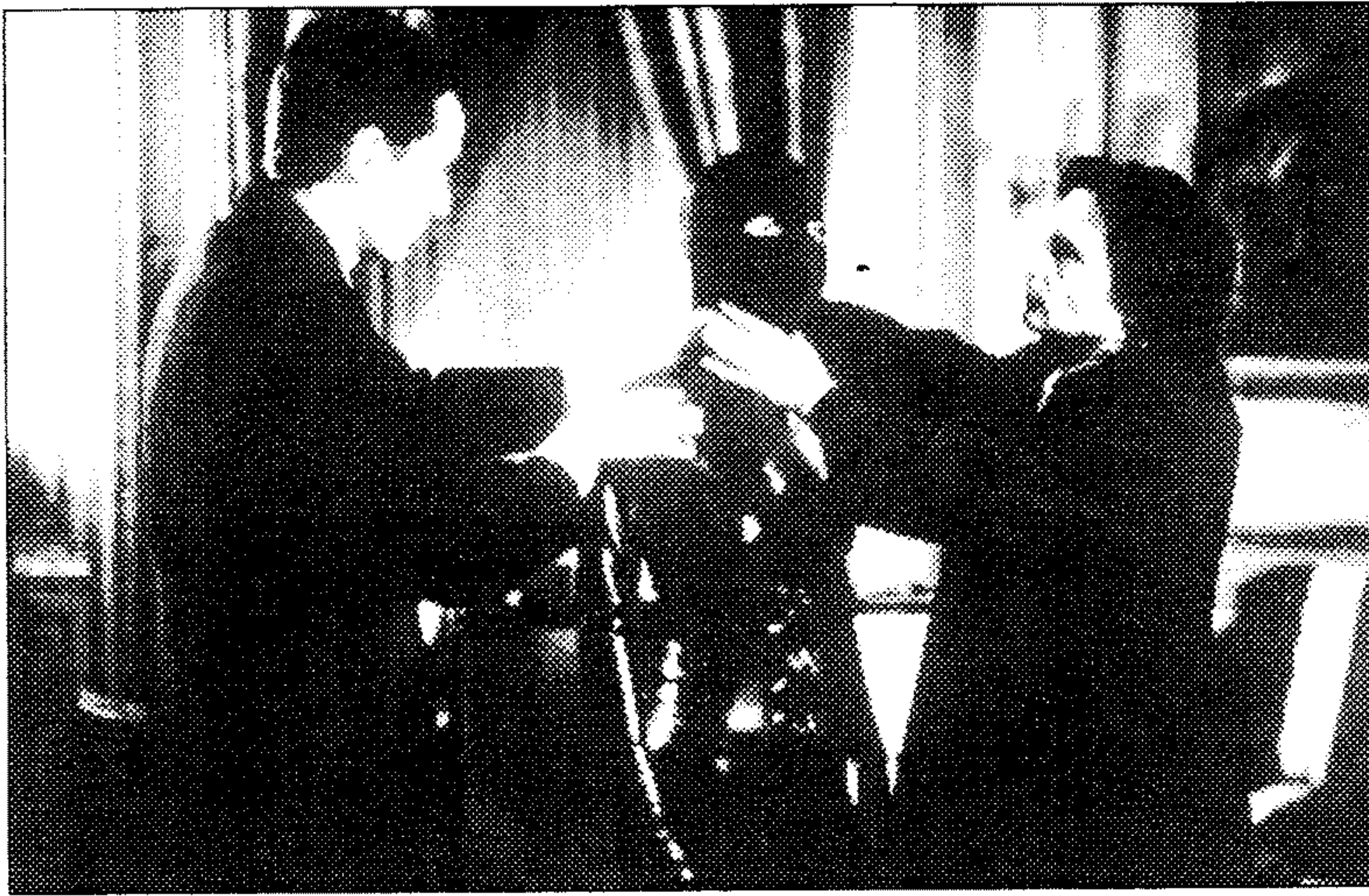
Nevertheless, star power certainly had something to do initially with Assayas's interest in Cheung, and lies at the base of *Irma Vep* — or should we say, at one of its bases. More than any other film in recent memory, *Irma Vep* is open to being read on a wide variety of levels. Is it a scabrous satire on the current, calamitous state of the French film industry, which is torn between reinventing a national cinematic identity and churning out prestige pabulum to daub some putative international middlebrow? Or is it an extended in-joke,

à la Fassbinder's *Beware of a Holy Whore*, on Assayas's much-dismissed-at-home brand of both deeply sensuous and deeply intellectual filmmaking, complete with an appearance by Lou Castel, who plays the role of a fusty director in *Irma Vep* just as he did in Fassbinder's *Whore*? Is *Irma Vep* a meditation on the West's recent and frequently lopsided encounter with Hong Kong filmmaking — embodied by the French journalist in the film who attempts to convince Maggie's character that the world needs more "strong directors like Schwarzenegger and Van Damme" — or is it a kind of black magic, a ritual conducted by Assayas to draw the real Cheung into his orbit? (If so, it seems to have worked; they've been a real-life couple for more than a year now.)

It's all of that and more. For one thing more, it's the most downright delightful film of the year, flush with constantly roving camerawork, altogether frenetic performances, and the best soundtrack in recent memory: Sonic Youth's "Tunic (Song for Karen)" colliding with Luna's lilt-glittered, doubly cross-cultural cover of Serge Gainsbourg's "Bonnie and Clyde" while Cheung skitters across moonlit rooftops, tosses diamonds into the rain, and drifts in and out of every other character's dreams — and maybe a few of her own. "This was the first film in which I didn't really think about what I was going to do in advance," Cheung admits. "It was a bit like self-hypnosis, actually, even though it was completely scripted. In a sense, my work in this film may be the furthest extension of things I learned working with Wong Kar-wai." (Cheung starred in Wong's *As Tears Go By* and *Days of Being Wild* and had a featured cameo as the romantic fulcrum of *Ashes of Time*.) "He was really my professor. He taught me a lot about acting as thinking, rather than as a way of reacting to things; he showed me how to work from within."

That sort of inner gear-grinding pays off in *Irma Vep*: the way surprise and disorientation and unexpected enthusiasm spill out through Cheung's eyes is a marvel to behold. The scene during which "Maggie" realizes that the costume designer has a crush on her is so authentic that audiences from Rotterdam to Hong Kong have invariably wanted to know how such palpable frisson could possibly have been scripted. It was, and Cheung simply rose — from within — to the occasion. And with moments like those in her filmography, she'll shake that dreaded "star"

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Not Maggie: Olivier Torres and Jean-Pierre Léaud, left and right, adjust the "bonnet" on Maggie's double, played by Natalie Boutefeu.

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thing yet. She's already turning down every action-girl script that Hollywood sends her way. "I couldn't live with the idea of being a 'James Bond girl' or something like that," she says, stubbing out her smoke and getting ready to do the "I, I, I" thing for whichever journalist is killing time down the hall. "I mean, I love flying around the movie set on wires, but I'm lousy at faking martial arts. Besides, I just don't want to have to carry off that sort of cliché." (Next up for Cheung: Wayne Wang's *A Chinese Box*, with Jeremy Irons and Gong Li.)

But aside from finding ways to work from within, Cheung still finds herself being worked on from without, and there is a very real sense in which *Irma Vep* is about various people finding ways to act on their fantasies and desires about this exoticized actress from China, no matter what the "real" Maggie might "mean." Perhaps the most striking of all the film's episodes is its final one, in which images of Maggie's rubber-clad Irma Vep have been doctored with scratches on the actual film strip, transforming her into some sort of electron-shooting extra-terrestrial. Lurching out of narrative moviemaking and into a kind of pure cinema, this final sequence reiterates on a purely formal level all the ways in which the film-within-a-film's filmmakers have been toying with—and purposefully misunderstanding or re-orienting—Maggie's image all along.

To his credit, it's a topic that Assayas—tall, reedy, pushing-40-but-looking-14, and possessed of a laugh that might belong to a freaked-out parrot—is eager to address, though, given his emotional proximity to the subject, the conversation drifts further and further from the "meaning" of Maggie and into realms most filmmakers don't have the vocabulary, let alone the stomach, to explore. "At the heart of any creation is something very weird, something that's based in fantasy and desire. That's where you start from, but where do you go from there? Usually you end up hiding or suppressing that desire along the way. But this film deals, in many ways, with how you can translate sexual desire, in as direct a manner as possible, into cinema. The filmmaker within the film makes it very clear that he wants to remake the

Feuillade film because there is something in it that sexually means something to him. And that something is Irma Vep, but it's also Maggie Cheung."

Still virtually unknown in this country—though his fantastic portrait of '70s French youth culture, *Cold Water*, recently shared space with Kwan's *Actress* on a *Film Comment* poll of the most important films of the '90s that have yet to find a U.S. distributor—Assayas got his start as a screenwriter (for André Téchiné) and a critic for *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Ask him for his favorite films and you'd better be up on the darker corners of experimental film history if you plan on recognizing the answers: Kenneth Anger's *Invocation of My Demon Brother* and Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* are the easy ones. But how about Isidore Isou's 1951 *Venom and Eternity*? A prime exemplar of the lettrist movement and precursor of Debord's situationist filmmaking, Isou's film, Assayas says, "is the most underrated French film of the last 50 years. In terms of inventing a much freer, more spontaneous, more literary type of filmmaking, Isou did it like 10 years before the nouvelle vague."

But while Assayas's digressions sometimes drift into murkier realms than most folks are accustomed to, he's always willing to temper them with intimations of good old-fashioned human nature. "I think I've tried to deal with the evil part of relationships in all my films. And of course the creative process is where evil is always the most present. Because, especially in the process of making films, you can get away with things that you couldn't get away with in real life. You can do some very strange things and create some really weird relationships. Actors always want to make it seem like what they do is just like a regular job. It's not a regular job," he exclaims, breaking into that weird laughter that starts to sound more and more like the devil's nose-fire.

"I think this is why I have this obsession with Kenneth Anger, because he confronts that aspect of filmmaking," Assayas continues. "He uses real life characters [such as Manson family button-man Bobby Beausoleil] to embody abstract forces or abstract powers or whatever. He helps them to express whatever character or person

or god they have within themselves. Good or evil, it doesn't really matter, because it's about revealing whatever is inside man. It's about revealing the things that society doesn't want to confront. Anger touches the raw nerve of that. He confronts the idea that cinema deals with black magic. For my films, I wouldn't use the words 'black magic,' but I would try to come up with something that means more or less the same thing."

"Something like erotic alchemy?" I suggest, trying to steer the conversation back in the Cheung direction, to little avail.

"Possibly a little bit beyond that," Assayas answers, "especially in the ways that actors are allowed to express parts of themselves—and parts of everyone—in movies that society would not ordinarily accept. I mean, just watch the American movies now, they're so much about the desire for war, for death, for destruction. There's not one single big Hollywood movie today that's not about destroying a city and being in ruins. But that's not fear, it's desire. It's what people want!"

Assayas's eyes are bright and excited now, and it's clear that—discursively at least—Maggie has left the building. "They want war, they want weapons, because that's what's in man. But society wants you to pretend that man, in the core of him, is just good or whatever. What's at the core of humanity is not good at all! It's scary and brutal and dangerous—but that's humanity's creative part, its most interesting part. The nicer parts are not that exciting. In fact, they're really very boring," Assayas snorts and snorts.

"But you know, Maggie is waiting for me downstairs and we have to go to lunch. But let me tell you this," he says, smiling, and suddenly it seems as if the room has cooled down by several degrees. "I've just seen the most atrocious, horrible film: this *Chasing Amy*. It was impossible! The so-called American indies, they're far more superficial than anything Hollywood creates. *Independence Day* is about real human desire! I'd rather see *Volcano* over and over again than to re-watch even a part of *Chasing Amy*!"

And then Mr. Assayas—clutching a couple of CDs (Atari Teenage Riot and some vintage Johnny Paycheck) from his morning's shopping—heads off to meet Ms. Cheung. Slowly I remember how we got to where we just left off: *Irma Vep*, a sweet, sensuous film about filmmakers and their desires, and stars and their "meanings." In the back of my mind, Johnny Paycheck is singing something about the lights going on at night and lighting up the playground of sin. Then Luna's lilting rendition of "Bonnie and Clyde" segues in, and I picture Maggie and Olivier heading off down the street. *Irma Vep* seems darker now than I'd thought it before, but Assayas seems brighter than ever. As bright as a burning movie frame, or the flash of Maggie Cheung's camera in some gossip-monger's eye, and as red and raw as a glowing nugget of brimstone, deep in some fathomless cave. ■

'Irma Vep' plays Fri/8–Thurs/14 at the Castro Theatre, 429 Castro, S.F., and opens at other Bay Area theaters Fri/15.