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Irma Vep

**Dir. Olivier Assayas. 1996. 96mins.
In French, with subtitles. Maggie
Cheung, Jean-Pierre Léaud,
Nathalie Richard.**

Before seeing *Irma Vep*, you can take most of your preconceptions about French cinema and throw them out the window. Assayas's film is a rush, a mad romp through cinema's past and present; it's funny, it's kinetic, and it's got Maggie Cheung. This may be the first French film of its generation to be embraced the way the old folks embraced Godard.

The setup is borrowed from *Day for Night*. Cheung plays herself, the Hong Kong star who arrives in Paris to film a remake of the Feuillade silent crime serial *Les Vampires*. She is to play Irma Vep, the leader of a female crime ring who dresses in a black latex cat-suit and becomes the secret erotic hero of Paris. But the production is in chaos.

The director (the sometimes unintelligible Léaud, child star of *The 400 Blows*) is on a downward trend: He fights with his wife, suffers a breakdown and gets fired. A costumer, Zoe (Richard), falls for Maggie, but the enigmatically simple star keeps a smiling distance. Meanwhile, Zoe is being persecuted by a classic film-set bitch. Rumors and plots swirl as quickly as Assayas's ebullient handheld camera.

The film is no *Breathless*, not even close. The dialogue is often too easy; the nonromance of Zoe and Maggie doesn't quite work; and Assayas substitutes charm for perception far too often.

But it's a pleasure to watch Assayas luxuriating in the life of the movies, even while he slices up the face of



Year of the cat: Maggie Cheung stars in *Vep*.

French intellectual cinema and, at the same time, takes some wicked swipes at American blockbusters.

The film's ravishing centerpiece finds Cheung falling in love with her own character and being inspired to become a cat burglar for a night. Assayas shamelessly pours on the cinematic drama: the glimmering cat-suit, Cheung stalking the hallways of a mysterious hotel, a naked woman on the phone, the theft of a gorgeous necklace, thunder and rain and blazing light. It's a summation, a brilliant cascade of movie power. And *Vep* is a young beauty, not to be missed. (Now playing; Film Forum)—*Stephan Talty*