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In Search of Frenchness Lost?

French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference

Edited by Phil Powrie

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In the opening essay in this volume, 'Heritage, History and 'New Realism': French Cinema in the 1990s', Phil Powrie argues that certain trends can be discerned within French film production in the 1990s, trends which can be attributed to the GATT negotiations, the return of the auteur, and a new political consciousness in young film makers. This is an assertion he makes in spite of his simultaneous claim, after Susan Hayward,

always useful in defining the panorama of French film production at any given time' (1). Although approaching the question in a number of different ways, many of the contributions to this volume appear to attempt to do precisely this, to attempt to show the ways in which the films dealt with are inherently French.

The first section of the book, entitled 'History, Heritage, and Pastiche', deals mainly with period films that revisit French history: *_Germinal_* (Berri 1993), *_Indochine_* (Wargnier, 1992), *_Les Roseaux sauvages_* (Techine, 1994), *_Un Heros tres discret_* (Audiard, 1996), *_Ridicule_* (Leconte, 1996) and *_Les Visiteurs_* (Poire, 1993). In each case, the authors of these essays are at pains to point out why it is that these films found an audience in France in the 1990s, and in many of these contributions some convincing answers to this question are proposed. Russell Cousins, for instance, charts the commercial context in which *_Germinal_* was made, and argues that the film itself is symbolic of French cultural protectionism. Brigitte Rollet reads *_Indochine_* as being indicative of postcolonial attitudes in France, whilst Kathryn Lauten sees in *_Un Heros tres discret_* a significant revisit of Occupation times which, spectre-like, still linger in the minds of the nation. Mireille Rosello, for her part, finds in *_Ridicule_* not so much a concern to faithfully transmit precise historical fact and detail but, rather, an addressing of contemporary anxieties in a heritage setting. A very similar phenomenon is observed by Martine Danan in her analysis of a film which, at first, may appear to the viewer as the very antithesis of *_Ridicule_*, namely *_Les Visiteurs_*. In this section can also be found Paul Sutton's essay, 'Remaking the Remake: *_Irma Vep_* (Assayas, 1996)', which reads this film as a self-conscious commentary on the remake itself, which requires the collusion of the spectator for the remake to be successful, and Keith Reader's 'Right-Wing Anarchism and *_Le Bonheur est dans le pre_* (Chatiliez, 1995), which places this film in the long-standing French political tradition to which its title alludes.

The second section of the book, 'Inscribing Differences', concentrates on films which give voice to minoritarian voices or concerns: *_Les Nuits fauves_* (Collard, 1992), *_Gazon maudit_* (Balasko, 1995), *_J'ai pas sommeil_* (Denis, 1993), *_Romauld et Juliette_* (Serreau, 1987), *_Metisse_* and *_La Haine_* (Kassovitz, 1993 and 1995) and, more generally, the notion of *cinema de banlieue* -- which is to say films shot in housing projects at the periphery of major French towns, and which give voice to the sentiments created by the socio-economic conditions of these suburbs. For Carrie Tarr *_Les Nuits fauves_* is a film which repositions male sexuality in France during the AIDS-era, whilst Brigitte Rollet reads *_Gazon maudit_* as an example of humour being used by women as a transgressive force, a move that Rollet traces back in French cultural history to the 1860s with the nineteenth-century cabaret artist Theresa. Cynthia Marker, for

her part, carries out a complex analysis of *_J'ai pas sommeil_* which finds the thematic quest for in-between culturally negotiated spaces echoed in the very stylistic elements of the film, whereas Dina Sherzer finds the attempt to portray a similar kind of space through the portrayal of interracial relationships in *_Romauld et Juliette_* and *_Metisse_* somewhat flawed since, ultimately, the slave-owner dichotomy is retained. The two essays dealing with **cinema de banlieue**, although dealing with roughly the same films, approach this corpus in very different ways. Myrto Konstantarakos comments on the use of the **banlieue** as a peripheral space apart from the centre, drawing conclusions as to the political ramifications of this, conclusions which distinguish these films from the American 'hood' movies to which the **cinema de banlieue** is so often compared and sometimes references -- never more so that in Kassovitz's *_La Haine_*. Carrie Tarr, meanwhile, in her second essay in the volume, notes how white-authored **cinema de banlieue** focuses on the anger, alienation, and violence of the **banlieue**, whilst films by Maghrebi directors are more concerned with avoiding potential conflict, instead exploring individual crises of identity and integration from within their very traditional culture.

One more essay figures in this second section, Russell King's 'Zapping without Mercy: *_Merci la vie_* (Blier, 1991), an extremely insightful analysis that reads Blier's use of colour in this film as a punctuating device that points to a multiplicity of narratives which follow a 'zapping' logic common in the youth of today, who take incomplete snatches of information and conflate them into muddled historical and other narratives. To my mind, this essay would fit much better in the book's final section, 'Defining the 'National'' (although, admittedly, not under that section title), in which are examined *_Les Amants du Pont-Neuf_* (Carax, 1991), *_Chacun cherche son chat_* (Klapisch, 1996), *_Mon Pere ce heros_* (Lauzier, 1991) -- contrasted against its American remake, Kieslowski's *_Trois couleurs: Bleu_* (1993), *_Blanc_* (1993), and *_Rouge_* (1994), and Besson's *_Le Cinquieme element_* (1997). Whilst these essays are found in a section called 'Defining the 'National'' the authors here, like King, seem less intent on doing this than those in the first two sections, preferring instead to carry out in-depth and complex analyses of these films that, far more often than in the previous two sections, address the stylistic specificities of cinema rather than treating film as just another text to be dealt with thematically. Doing so, these essays stand apart in this collection, delivering what, for me, good film writing should, namely insights into the films that

change one's perception of them. Unlike reading, an activity which obeys the timetable of the reader who can pick up a book when s/he wishes and review passages at will, cinema (and I refer to cinema when seen on the big screen, obviously, even if most viewers watching a video will do so in one uninterrupted sitting also) enforces its own temporality upon the spectator, who is not free to stop the projection and rewind the reel in order to look more closely at a specific detail. The interest in film analysis often lies, then, in its ability to pick out elements -- very often stylistic elements -- which, although vital to a full comprehension of the work, may escape the casual viewer.

Most remarkable in this respect are King's essay already mentioned, Graeme Hayes's 'Representation, Masculinity, Nation: The Crises of *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*', Julia Dobson's 'Nationality, Authenticity, Reflexivity: Kieslowski's *Trois couleurs: Bleu, Blanc and Rouge*', and Susan Hayward's 'Besson's *Mission Elastoplast*: *Le Cinquieme element*'.

Hayes, in his essay, highlights the importance of the recurrent themes of water and fire in *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* -- each of which are coded to the two main protagonists, the symbolic importance of the bridge under renovation, and, through a Lacanian psychoanalytic reading, discovers a contrast between 'the representation of national identity through France's re-enactment of the myth of the foundation (the Bicentennial), and its representation through cinematic production' (208) that comes of the film's intertextuality. For Hayes, it is the State that replaces the father-figure of Hans in Alex's process of oedipalisation/socialisation, but a State which is dysfunctional. Alex is, then, never fully oedipalised, never able fully to enter into the Symbolic, an assertion that allows Hayes's to read the ending of this film in such a way that it is saved from the worst excesses of potential sentimentality and simplicity that disappointed so many.

Julia Dobson again stresses aspects of the notion of 'Nation' in her analysis of Kieslowski's trilogy, but the great merit of her essay lies in its analysis of Kieslowski's carefully crafted cinematography which opens up many further dimensions to a reading of his films. Susan Hayward, meanwhile, chooses to

examine the role of the cyborg in the _Le Cinquieme element_, as well as the film's transgressive male bodies. These questions ultimately, however, are subsumed in the final paragraph to comments about how such a film could not be made in Hollywood because of its transgendered, queer, and archetypically French elements. This paragraph weakens the essay somewhat, but is perhaps due to the author's desire to make her contribution conform more faithfully to the theme of the collection, as though, we might say, she had applied the elastoplast of her title to her own essay.

Ultimately this is indicative of the collection as a whole, which seems to insist too heavily on finding what is specifically 'French' about these films and why they appeal to French audiences. This emphasis on situating the films studied in a French context to show why they were made at this point in French history leads, at times, to somewhat pedestrian analyses that state the obvious, and to the repetition of some basic data across contributions. It does not need to be said repeatedly, for instance, that commercial considerations are of the utmost importance in the genesis of any film; this is axiomatic of the film industry, and even those films made on what are termed shoe-string budgets still require considerable amounts of money. It is, then, not necessary to argue that filmmakers attempt to find latent themes that resonate with audiences regardless of the explicit content, for any filmmaker knows s/he is finished without a box office return of some kind, even in a country whose government is as generous towards the seventh art as the French government.

The other aspect of this book that it is slightly hard to figure out is precisely who its target audience is. Whilst many of the essays point out the importance of the potential audience in the making of a film, as we have just stated, it is nigh impossible to gauge who this collection, as a whole, is aimed at. So keen is the collection to stress the Frenchness of the films studied, one would imagine that it is intended for Francophiles, which makes the choice to quote from the dialogues of these films almost exclusively in English somewhat surprising. Having ascertained that the book is aimed at Francophiles passionate about cinema, the question then arises as to what kind of Francophile is being addressed. The very complex analyses of some of the essays (particularly the later ones) would seem to be directed towards a

scholarly audience, but, at the same time, many of the general pronouncements made on the politics, demographics, and history of France would, no doubt, be entirely superfluous and a bit of a bore for a scholarly Francophile -- and, of course, vice versa.

In spite of this inconsistency, however, it should not be forgotten that this collection does contain some gems of interpretation and, for the casual Francophile, much interesting data that helps explain the particularities of the French cinema industry. Every reader will, then, find something to please him/her in this volume, but not, perhaps, throughout.

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