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France on Film: Reflections on Popular French Cinema, Lucy Mazdon (editor), (London: Wallflower, 2001) ISBN 1 903364-08-6 pbk, 180pp.

This book's dual thrust is indicated by its title. France on film suggests an interrogation of national identities and their filmic representation. Through consideration of history and heritage, gender and ethnicity, place and community, the book broadly delivers what the reader had been led to expect on this score, with its almost exclusively 1990s focus giving a decidedly contemporary relevance to the whole. The second half of the title suggests sustained reflection on the popular. The book partially delivers on this count. While some of the pieces do engage perceptively with the popular (without necessarily having a shared understanding of how it might be defined), others touch on it more tangentially, while yet others ignore it completely. This is a shame. A sustained analysis of what the popular might mean now would have been most timely.

The book's dual identity is confirmed in Mazdon's introduction. It begins with an interesting and nuanced consideration of how French cinema's identity and the popular or art cinema appeal of individual films may shift as they traverse national frontiers and move between viewing contexts. This discussion, which uses Kassovitz's La Haine as its primary illustration, also suggests how popular films must be multiply coded to assemble diverse audiences. Discussion of multiple coding, surely a core issue for an analysis of the popular in its national and transnational dimensions, is picked up in only a few of the book's chapters and only given an international dimension in Mazdon's own piece on Chacun cherche son chat and in Maria Esposito's piece on Jean de Florette. Mazdon moves on from discussion of the shifting popular to suggest that the book explores both French identities and the diversity of French cinema. She makes rather brief comments on identity. She suggests that the films considered show that current French cinematic production, when not tempted by the safety of heritage, engages in a constant renegotiation of identities. This claim is backed up by ensuing chapters, but more could perhaps have been done to draw out connections and to develop a systematic discussion of what shifting identities might mean for the popular. Mazdon raises a third issue when she suggests that the films considered show the diversity of French cinema. This evocation of diversity would seem in part an admission of the book's own internal diversity, its focus on two themes, identity and the popular, that never fully come together. As a result of this internal diversity, I shall continue this review by first dealing with the cluster of chapters which address the popular as a central concern, before turning my attention to those which don't.

Esposito's opening piece on the shifting pleasures of Jean de Florette is a good starting point for a consideration of the complexities of the popular. Her account of the film suggests that its main appeal to a French audience is its ability to offer a firm point of cultural, historical and national reference during a decade (the 1980s) marked by flux, instability and conflict. But she also suggests that the film is able to engage with present concerns through its exploration of the destructiveness associated with materialism. This blend of reassurance and contemporary relevance might seem to closely parallel accounts of British heritage cinema. Yet Esposito suggests the specificity of the French heritage genre by showing how the film's characters

(predominantly peasants), its locations (the family house, the bar, the village) and its setting (the wild Provençal landscape) differ from a more upper class and pastoral English variant, opening up more 'democratic' access to the past. Thus, while French heritage has the same middle-brow appeal as its English variant, one that, as Esposito notes, is culturally validated by literary, musical and painterly references and feeds off the experiences of mass tourism, it would also seem to be able to tap into more broadly shared 'folk' memories of mass postwar migration and collective internal exile. The reviewer is not entirely convinced by this line of argument. Internal migration and the destructive clash of tradition and modernity were indeed vital issues when Pagnol wrote the text (*L'Eau des collines*) upon which Berri's film adaptations are based. It is doubtful that they still were in the highly urbanised 1980s. The pleasures of *Jean de Florette* are surely more vicarious than vital, more consumerist than nostalgic and more to do with (internal and international) tourism than exile. Nevertheless, Esposito goes a long way towards explaining the film's diverse appeals to French and foreign audiences.

Mazdon's analysis of Klapitsch's *Chacun cherche son chat* provides another thorough exploration of how a film can appeal to diverse internal and international audiences by offering multiple and shifting pleasures. Mazdon shows how the film constructs a generalised Frenchness and mobilizes traditional expectations of French light romantic comedy in order to reach an international audience. She also shows how the film provides a detailed exploration of spatial and social concerns that has a much more specific appeal to a French audience. Her analysis is further developed by detailed delineation of a soundtrack that blends the traditional, national popular with more contemporary French and international musical forms so that the film explores cultural collisions while reaching out for different audiences. Mazdon is very aware of its apparent nostalgia for classic French cinema but could have taken her analysis further to explore how this extraordinarily intelligent but apparently slight film is in fact a meditation on the cinematic popular and its conditions of possibility. A mythologised people's Paris and the pleasures and sociabilities of seemingly rooted communities lay at the heart of the French popular. Klapitsch's film shows that with the capitalist redevelopment and gentrification of the capital and with the increased internationalisation of image circulation, the sociological and cultural bases of a certain popular are also vanishing. The film's attention to presidential elections that fail to concern the characters and to the inevitable exclusions of community building suggest that it is also very conscious of the popular's hidden violences and its habitual marginalisation of the political.

Powrie's chapter on Guédiguian's *Marius et Jeanette* considers the representation of working class Marseilles, another key site for popular Frenchness, while again engaging with the relationship between the political and the popular. Powrie's convincing central thrust is that Guédiguian's film hovers between nostalgia (both for a lost political commitment and for the classic French popular cinema of the 1930s) and utopia and thus avoids serious engagement with politics and class conflict in the present. He feels that the film is saved from simplistic sentimentalism by its recourse to some techniques of Brechtian distancing, but would overall seem to suggest that it fails to develop a convincing politicisation of the popular. While broadly agreeing with this account, I would suggest that the film is perhaps more politically effective than initially appears. Its evocations of past struggles, present wreckage (as figured by the abandoned cement works that plays a central role in the film) and potential

utopian community converge to refuse the apparent permanence of neo-liberal triumph. Failing to represent struggle in the present, it struggles against the present.

Powrie makes connections between Guédiguian and Pagnol and Renoir and their very different mobilisations of the popular. Outside of Paris, Pagnol's Provence and particularly Marseilles were key sites of screen Frenchness. Powrie shows how, even as Guédiguian connects with Pagnol, he reinscribes the ethnic diversity that was always part of the city but which earlier populisms stigmatised or erased in their search for cosy community. It would have been interesting here if Powrie had developed this line of analysis to show how a political cinema can mine populist tradition for audience appeal and for utopian possibility but must at the same time rework it to purge it of regressive baggage. This is surely what Renoir's earlier engagement with populism had already taught us. It is interesting to note, incidentally, that mass political mobilisation in the mid-1930s, as in the mid-1990s, created an opening for a politicised popular cinema that both fed off and worked against the more prevalent depoliticised variant.

Powrie's chapter is very usefully complemented by Darren Higbee's consideration of Dridi's *\_Bye-Bye\_*. Higbee's account shows how the film bridges and blends two versions of the port city, evoking both its strong working class heritage and its now very visible ethnic diversity, a characteristic again reinforced by a decidedly eclectic soundtrack. With a utopian dimension tied to the integrative capacity of shared neighbourhoods and labour, the film also engages head on with racism as it explores the central characters attempt to negotiate a fluid identity between the dual fixities of tradition and negative stereotyping. Higson shows how this aspect of the film addresses ethnic minorities in particular while seeking to educate the broader population. He also indicates how the story's general appeal is reinforced through its universalising central dynamic of guilt and responsibility and through its participation in the broad return of the social that was such a key feature of post-1995 French cinema. Updating our image of one of the loci classici of French populist cinema, Dridi's film shows how popular cinema can be a vehicle for making minority experiences speak to a majority. This point takes us back to the key issue of the politics of how popular cinema assembles its audience, whether it seeks general appeal by erasing diversity or whether it does so by making diversity speak to the general.

Another chapter that interestingly explores movement out from the specific is Lyn Thomas's reading of Veysset's acclaimed first film *\_Y aura-t-il de la neige à Noël\_*. Thomas's assured account shows how a combination of realism and the folk tale allows the film to ground itself in the experience of the director while speaking to shared experiences of childhood. This dual thrust allows it to plot its own highly distinctive way between expectations that high-cultural cinema bear the author's mark and the popular's push to a more general, impersonal address.

Two other chapters develop the intertextual appeal of the popular, its ability to feed off and rework inherited popular forms from within and beyond the cinema. Darren Waldon provides a thoughtful and persuasive account of Balasko's *\_Gazon Maudit\_* while Anne Jäckel examines the multiple appeals of the smash hit of the decade, *\_Les Visiteurs\_*. The two pieces show how the films draw on familiar comic traditions. Centred on a comic duo richly rooted in international and gallic comedy (e.g. Laurel

and Hardy but also Bourvil and De Funès), *Les Visiteurs* plays to an essentially national audience by rooting itself in French history and language. Based on a reworked eternal triangle, *Gazon Maudit* plays on familiar stereotypes of the fiery Spanish woman, the lesbian dyke and the southern macho. The cast and creative drive of both films spring from the café-théâtre movement of the 1970s. Despite these convergences, as the analyses show, the films take the popular in decidedly different directions. *Les Visiteurs* uses what is essentially a family romance to explore and contain historical discontinuity and thus, it is argued, reassure the French faced with contemporary uncertainties. Balasko's film uses a very different family romance to destabilise gender identities and filmic relations of agency and objectification and thus participates in the more general questioning of sexualities and identities that has been a strong characteristic of French cinema in the 1990s. What is interesting – and what the multi-author, discrete chapter format does not leave room to explore – is how the two films illustrate how the popular can be a vehicle for taking both the conservative and the radical to a broad audience.

On broadly the same territory as *Gazon Maudit*, *Ma Vie en rose* likewise uses the traditional heterosexual family of domestic comedy as a starting point for a radical destabilisation of gender expectations. Lucille Cairns's cogent and informed analysis of the film is more interested in its sexual politics than its popular appeal, but she does linger a little on the latter, evoking the film's combination of fantasy and kitsch to suggest how it may appeal to both consumers of romance and knowing postmodern intellectuals, but leaving as an unresolved paradox the question of how a film centred on transsexuality could garner a mainstream audience. This capacity can perhaps be explained. Firstly, as Cairns notes, the central character is a decidedly cute child and thus his decidedly minority orientation is mediated to a broad public by the universalising imperative to protect the young. Secondly, he is located within a sympathetic family whose own troubles dealing with his identity offer ways into the film for heterosexual adults. Like *Gazon Maudit*, then, the film's use of the family is complex, using in to cushion the impact of the radically challenging while at the same time reworking it from within.

Summarising the argument thus far, we can see how the book opens up space for a rich and multi-faceted exploration of the contemporary French cinematic popular whilst often leaving the vital work of synthesis to the readers themselves in a way that is perhaps typical of multi-author collections. What seems at this stage to emerge are a series of key questions about the popular. The first question might be about who is represented, and how a popular community in which the audience can recognise itself is assembled and demonstrated on screen. If French cinema traditionally figured popular community by centring a homogenised version of the common people and celebrating a supposedly shared national popular culture, it would seem that this move has now become problematic due to social and cultural shifts, the refusal of minorities to remain invisible and, not least, the destruction of communities in key locales (Paris, Marseilles) where the popular took on flesh. A second, related question is one of address and of how the popular assembles an audience by encoding different readings and mobilising varied pleasures. This question assumes new dimensions at a time when the previously marginalised are becoming routinely visible. Films centred on sexual or ethnic minorities have to rework popular traditions from within while finding ways to make their concerns speak to a broader audience. Some of the chapters show different strategies by which this is achieved. A third question, again

not unrelated, is about the problematic encounter between the popular and the political, an encounter that, as Powrie and Higbee's chapters show, again requires a reworking of inherited popular forms and traditions.

None of the three chapters yet to be discussed engage seriously with the popular although they could potentially be linked to those already considered by issues of identity and sexuality, history and heritage. Howard Seal writes about Audiard's *Un Héros très discret* and how it uses a destabilising blend of fiction and document to problematise representation of the wartime period. He concludes that the film ultimately fails on two counts. Firstly, by allowing audience mastery and stable identification for too much of the time, it insufficiently explores film's own role in constructing the past. Secondly, it fails to look sufficiently at what Vichy represented and what collaboration signified. Both points are convincingly argued, but perhaps somewhat unfair in that the film is surely primarily about the connivance between individual and collective drives to mythologise the past.

Emma Wilson writes interestingly about one of the most controversial French films of recent years, Breillat's *Romance*. She locates the film firmly in an art cinema tradition, noting its engagement with erotic literature, its authorial expressivity and its modernist interplay of word and image. She uses this last feature to show how the film is both highly cerebral and frankly corporeal and thus engages with sex as both mental construct and physical act. Commenting on the undecideable status of the film's action, its suspension between fantasy and the real, she notes how it demonstrates the dependence of desire on fantasy. She notes too, and in a way that chimes broadly with other chapters' exploration of the destabilisation of gender roles, how it undermines the classic distinction between activity and passivity by showing a character who actively chooses passivity. She shows convincingly how the film takes its lead character through various stereotypical roles before leading her to some form of autonomy, thus building into itself a reflexive historicisation of women's representation. She explores finally how it gives a voice to women's violation and pleasure thus overturning a long-standing silencing. A substantial case is thus assembled to push us to see *Romance* as a ground-breaking and progressive text. This reader is now reasonably convinced of the former quality, but deeply sceptical of the latter, on the simple grounds that a film that seems incapable of seeing relations between men and women in anything other than sado-masochist terms seems tied by the regressive forms it apparently struggles against.

Alison Smith's exploration of *Nikita* converges to a degree with Wilson's piece by focusing on issues of fantasy and domination. Arguing that a fantasy must have an author, she locates a decentred authorship in the authoritarian control centre within which Nikita is reclaimed by the State. This decentred fantasy allows the viewer to resist identification and thus both to escape the totalitarian reach of a narrative where every action is always watched and to avoid siding with the barbarian psychopaths of the start or the homicidal authoritarian apparatus of the main body of the film. Smith reads the end of the film optimistically, suggesting that Nikita's disappearance signifies her evasion of surveillance and thus escape from the repressive consciousness of the centre. Like the repressed unconscious, Nikita will still be there but beyond control. Although this reading is innovative and challenging, it does not attempt to account for the popular appeal of the film. Might one take the notion of decentred fantasy in a different direction and suggest, echoing the earlier argument,

that popular cinema must offer multi-centred fantasies to assemble a fractured audience? Such a reading might consider how *Nikita* (the film but also the character), offers to be all things to all people, combining the pleasures of sadistic control, spectacular violence, ludic role play and tender romance, detaching them from fixed identities to facilitate a postmodern consumerist pick-and-mix of spectatorial pleasures.

It is, in conclusion, undoubtedly difficult to give structure and coherence to collective works, especially when each chapter focuses on a different film rather than a shared theme. But the relative fluidity of such volumes allows one to read them with more freedom than single author works, to carve one's own preferred structure out of relatively malleable raw material. *France on Film* is no exception to this rule. Providing a series of loosely joined but intelligent and well-written analyses of recent French film, it allows one to focus, as one prefers, on representations of identity or on the multi-faceted popular and to assemble a rich and shifting array of connections and convergences. It will undoubtedly find a diverse audience and offer it a range of pleasures.

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