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## Channelling Globalism: Canal + as Transnational French Genre Film Producer

### Abstract

This article examines Canal +’s contribution to the recent or contemporary consolidation of three genres traditionally excluded from the French filmmaking landscape: romantic comedies, horror films and teen movies. The many films from these emergent French genres funded and in many cases also more indirectly supported by Canal+ speak to the organisation’s status as a transnational, transmedia production entity. Moreover, analysing the new French genre trends in whose burgeoning the company has been instrumental suggests the difficulties of unpicking geo-cultural allegiances and influences in an ever more multidirectional, multiplatform, cross-hybridizing mediasphere. This article considers the case study films *Alibi.com* (2017) and *Grave* (2016) to illustrate the fact that, like the European audiovisual mainstream as a whole, French genre films are bound up in an increasingly transnational and complex intertextual web – a state of affairs promoted by multinational conglomerates such as Canal +. It nonetheless suggests that such French iterations of US genres appropriate and transform rather than merely citing, echoing or emulating existing models. What is more, drawing on theorizations of aesthetics and affect suggests that these processes can foster new identities.

### French Abstract

#### Un canal du mondialisme : Canal + en tant que producteur de films de genre transnationaux

Cet article examine la contribution apportée par Canal + à la consolidation contemporaine ou récente de trois genres traditionnellement absents dans le paysage de la production cinématographique français : les comédies romantiques, les films d’horreur et les *teen movies*. Les maints films relevant de ces genres naissants qui ont bénéficiés du financement de Canal + – et souvent d’autres soutiens moins directs – évoquent le status transnational and transmédiatique de l’organisation en tant que fabrique de production. Par ailleurs, l’analyse des nouvelles tendances de genre dont le succès se doit considérablement à Canal +, indique la difficulté de dénouer les allégeances et les influences géo-culturelles dans une médiasphère qui ne cesse de multiplier les voies de distribution, les directions des échanges et communications et la promiscuité des références. L’article focalise les cas d’étude *Alibi.com* (2017) et *Grave* (2016) pour illustrer que les films de genre français, tout comme la culture audiovisuelle grand public européenne en général, font partie d’une toile intertextuelle chaque fois plus transnationale et complexe – situation encouragée par des organisations multinationales telles que Canal +. Il soutient néanmoins que de tels exemples français de genres “américains” s’emparent des modèles existants pour les transformer, et non pour les citer, les copier ou en faire l’écho. Qui plus est, en s’appuyant sur la théorie esthétique et affective, l’on suggère que ces processus ont la capacité de nourrir de nouvelles identités.

The relationship between cinema and television in France has traditionally been fraught. Cinephilic critics have at times neglected to hide their disdain for the small screen, when viewing it from the lofty pedestal to which the Seventh Art has been elevated by national culture. Yet, for Guillaume Soulez the two spheres have been seeking increased alliance and collaboration over the past two decades or so, in a situation where both have faced unprecedented challenges, broadly linked to the technological revolution, as well as to specific televisual developments. The latter include the advent since the 1980s of private networks – indeed, increased collaboration between cinema and television can certainly be traced back this far, including as promoted by Canal + after its inception in 1984; however, since the 1990s the emergence of national digital television channels, alongside the growth in popularity of new US-style series formats – an important component of the new “quality” or even “cinematic” television – has strengthened ties. While Soulez focuses in part on the case study of the importance of the Franco-German channel Arte in supporting French auteur cinema since the 1990s, this article will attempt to gauge the influential part played by the overall more mainstream Canal + network in newer trends in Gallic filmmaking. Such an analysis is overdue in view of the fact that Canal + had by the turn of the millennium become French cinema’s largest financier, outstripping even the substantial state subsidies provided by the Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée (CNC) (Soulez 265-8).

The well-documented boom in the French film industry since the late 2000s has been accompanied by an increase in the importance of genre cinema to the sector. This phenomenon can be observed in the fact that, while comedy has always been the mainstay of the national cinema, domestically produced French comedies released since 2008 make up an extraordinary three of the 20 all-time top grossing films at the domestic box-office, while contemporaneous French crime thrillers and heritage films also feature in the top 50 (Harrod and Powrie 1). Alongside such metrics stands the emergence or consolidation of several film genres over the past two decades, both more home-grown (for instance the *banlieue* film) but also, especially, examples that have historically been viewed as exogenous. The latter include the romantic comedy (see Harrod 2015), the horror movie and most recently the teenpic. In this article I will attempt to chart the broad incorporation of these genres within French filmmaking practice under the reign of Canal +, before homing in on examples from each in whose genesis (and of course distribution) the network has played a substantial role. The aim of this analysis will be twofold. Firstly, it will simply illustrate the growing diversification of output by the sector over which the film financiers at Canal+ have presided, alongside a number of different ways in which the organization can exert influence. Secondly, I will aim to unpack some of the transnational geo-cultural elements structuring case study films *Alibi.com* (Philippe Lacheau, France 2017) and *Grave* (Julie Ducornau, France/Belgium/Italy, 2016) as genre artefacts. Such an analysis is set against the backdrop of Canal+’s original remit to promote French and secondarily European film culture and status. In short, I seek to determine the extent to which the appropriation of “foreign” genres compromises such an aim or, conversely, bolsters national and/or European interests, not only at the level of economics but in terms of films’ contribution to local and transnational culture.

Whether analysing trends or individual films, it is worth noting that conclusions are impossible to tie to Canal+ too directly or exclusively, given that the collaborative nature of cinematic financing in general and at Canal+ in particular is a precept of the enquiry. Rather, notwithstanding some aspects that are unique to the company, on which I shall touch, it is apt to think of Canal+'s structure and influence as the French industry's salient example of a larger tendency towards multiplatform and multinational corporate backing for cinema that can be resumed under the rubric of *the Canal+ era*, denoting the post-1990s period in which such arrangements have proliferated (and other examples of which, such as the more recently prominent Netflix, are occasionally referenced).

Indeed, in teasing out films' cultural identities, this article recognizes that the diversification of French film culture in favour of more globally popular forms is in fact largely inevitable in the context of production and structures in the Canal+ era. Bearing this in mind, the present analysis probes ways in which the change might represent an enrichment of Frenchness as expressed through cinema, and not necessarily – as some still fear – a betrayal and abandonment of this identity. To test this claim, I argue, quantitative analysis of tropes recurring in genre films financed by Canal +, while also significant for apprehending generic patterns, cannot substitute for close analysis of textual elements, including formal ones linked to (transnational) genre, when this is understood as a key vector for films' tonal address as defined by Sianne Ngai in terms of the 'global or organizing affect' determining a cultural artefact's 'general disposition or orientation towards its audience and the world' (28). I thus here interrogate genre as among other things a series of affects in turn orienting the viewer in the manner described by Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant, whose work underscores the way in which such structures of address construct and foster group identities. While in Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, these notably include national ones, here I focus on the *transnational* as apostrophized by genre films. Consequently, after recapping Canal +'s role in film financing, the article first looks briefly at the corporation's association with the enhanced generication of French cinema, with a focus on new, self-evidently Hollywood-indebted genres, from a broadly quantitative perspective, attempting to make some general statements about generic specificity and evolution. It then deploys Rick Altman's (89-90) notions of genre syntax and semantics to unpick in greater detail the way in which differently geo-culturally-inflected aspects of two representative films speak to transnational Frenchness, not least as a blueprint for further research in transnational film studies. Consideration of cinephilic and critical discourse drawn on around Canal+'s genre film financing in general and *Grave* in particular, and notably intersecting with perceived auteur versus popular cinematic divisions, further testifies to the (sometimes fraught) issues of geo-cultural belonging in which French genre cinema is bound up and which it continues to reshape anew in the Canal+ era. In general, the methodology adopted is one equal to the task of apprehending transnational Frenchness as in part what Raymond Williams has described as an aesthetic 'structure of feeling' (see Simpson), in whose construction Canal + has been and continues to be highly influential.

## Canal + as (Genre) Film Financier

A brief recapitulation of Canal +'s place in French audiovisual industries, and how this may have developed since the network's inception in the 1980s, will clarify some of the foregoing statements and serve as a prelude to further claims about the organization's entanglement with trends in genre filmmaking. Firstly, it is perhaps useful to reiterate the distinction between Canal + and StudioCanal. While the latter subsidiary firm is a film production company with international distribution arms, Canal + is a television network with a brief to invest substantial percentages of its turnover in domestic film production, in exchange for the rights to show films on its subscription channel, where they can be broadcast much sooner after their theatrical release than on other channels. According to Soulez, "European works must represent at least 65% of these sums, French works 45%" , while in 2010 the company's then Head of Film Manuel Alduy claimed: "We pre-buy very few European films that are not French-initiative and they are mostly films by major auteurs [...] Our mission is to support pre-financing of French productions (French-language or otherwise)." (qtd. in Lemercier) Financing just over half of the 200 or so films produced annually in the 2010s is typical, even if exact numbers depend on turnover (as well as the particular array of projects and budget levels involved each year): while the channel was launched as a digital satellite in 1996 and at its peak moment of success in 1999 had a total subscription base in excess of 13 million<sup>1</sup>, French pay TV subscriptions declined by 22.3% between 2013 and 2019, ending 2018 with 4.7 million; the Canal + group's revenues over the past three years, while solid, have fluctuated slightly (Hamza and Gaber) (and are likely to have risen with 2020's lockdowns). – an effect doubtlessly catalysed by the rise of Netflix and other global on-demand platforms..

Also significant is Canal +'s acquisition by French water and utility company Vivendi in 2000 and in particular – for an analysis concerned with global audiovisual genres – its imbrication with Universal Studios between 2000 and 2004 through the parent company, over which period the now decidedly multinational conglomerate was named the Vivendi Universal group. During this collaboration between the two companies the US studio purchased several StudioCanal films, including the blockbuster international fantasy-horror-heritage film success *Le Pacte des loups* (2001), while Universal Pictures and StudioCanal also co-produced several films including the global mega-hit romcom *Love, Actually* (2003). It is difficult to quantify the effect such close ties with a Hollywood film studio may have had on Canal + executives charged with the decision of which home-grown projects to back; yet it seems no coincidence that these years and those directly after coincide with the distinct turn towards genre hosted by the national cinema in this millennium. 2004 marks an uptick in romantic comedy production, paving the way for the genre's wide recognition in the national press from the mid-2000s and its explosion towards the end of the decade, intensifying to date. As for horror, the case of *Le Pacte des loups* – whose generic innovation in the French context was remarked on (Oscherwitz 44) – seems likely to have catalysed the more modest but nonetheless steady emergence of the French variant, with films such as *Haute tension* (2003) and *St. Ange* (2004) following on its heels and being succeeded more recently by titles including *A l'intérieur* (2007), *Martyrs* (2008), *Livide* (2011), *Aux yeux des vivants*, *Alleluia*, *Goal of the Dead* (2014), *Évolution* (2015), *Grave* (2016) and *Revenge* (2017).<sup>2</sup> This is not an exhaustive list but it does take in some of the most visible French horror titles

presenting themselves through internet searches and consulting reviews and other paratextual materials. Of these twelve films, Canal + has credits on ten (excluding *Haute tension* – produced by the independently powerful EuropaCorp – and *St. Ange*). Although domestic box office has not tended to be as high for French horror films as for romcoms such as *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001), *L'Arnacœur* (2010) or family variant *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* (2014), this index may be misleading due to the tendency to consume this above all genres outside the cinema – perhaps especially in a country such as France with an older audience, given widespread assumptions that the prime audience for such films is young people.<sup>3</sup> French horror films have moreover not only tended to perform well abroad but, as we shall see, to enjoy substantial critical visibility and therefore potential cinephilic and cultural influence at home.

The teen movie is the most recent genre whose contours are becoming discernible in French filmmaking. There has historically been no European high school movie genre (Davenas 8) and the US version is of course the most globally recognisable variant (Driscoll 3). In France, teen narratives have tended to be aired on television, with TF1's *Hélène et les garçons* (1992-1994), already a spin-off of the earlier *Premiers baisers* (TF1 1991-1995) and followed up by three sequel series, providing a salient example. As with the traditional absence of horror films, this cinematic scarcity is perhaps unsurprising in view of France's overall older cinema-going public. Since the mid-2000s, a steadily more significant trickle of films broadly identifiable with the teenpic has begun to appear in France, including (again, not exhaustively) *Tel père, telle fille, Et toi, t'es sur qui?* (2007), *15 ans et demi*, *Lol (Laughing Out Loud)* (2008), *Une semaine sur deux (et la moitié des vacances scolaires)*, *Les beaux gosses, Neuilly sa mère!* (2009), *Camille redouble* (2012), *Lou!*, *La Famille Bélier* (2014), *Les Grands esprits, Divines* (2016), *La Colle* and *Sales gosses* (both 2017) and, arguably, *Neuilly sa mère, sa mère!* and *Première année* (both dealing with college students, 2018). Of these fifteen films, only *La Colle* and the (relatively more auteur-identified) *banlieue* film hybrid *Divines* received no funding from Canal +. The most successful of them at the box office have been *Lol* (with around 3.5m tickets sold) and especially *La Famille Bélier* (with around 7.5 million), both blending the teenpic with romantic comedy and in the second case the (high school) musical.<sup>4</sup> Such hits have no doubt in turn fed into production trends.

Meanwhile, in a 2015 interview with *Screen Daily* journalist Mélanie Goodfellow, the newly appointed CEO of Canal + Maxime Saada put out a call for increased French genre film production, especially targeting an older audience, “to fill the gap left by the US Studios’ focus on superheroes and teenage audiences”, since “[teenagers a]re not the ones paying the subscription fees”.<sup>5</sup> Despite his singling out of demand for action and adventure films and crime thrillers (genres with some French heritage that are also quite common today) – and the apparent discordance between the mature audience courted by the channel and the advent of teen and horror movies – I contend that the new proliferation of previously rare genres including these ones in France should be seen in the context of the overall “increased focus on the mainstream” (Goodfellow) identifiable with Canal +, especially into this millennium and increasingly of late.<sup>6</sup> This change was indeed already being bemoaned at a round table of film personnel the night before the 2014 Cannes Film Festival, prompting executive Franck Weber to riposte that Canal + “est la dernière chaîne à suivre une ligne éditoriale aussi vaste, du vrai premier film d’auteur jusqu’à *Supercondriaque*. On respecte les uns et les autres” (qtd. in Icher and Gester). Indeed, diversity is central to the economic

model of Canal + which is alone among comparable channels in relying on a subscription service such that “c’est l’attractivité globale du portefeuille qui compte. Donc il faut des films de toutes sortes [...] la palette des investissements et beaucoup plus large [que celle des autres]” (Pudlowski). Head of Film Nathalie Coste-Cerdan further adds to Weber’s statements that any fears about the channel’s disengagement from auteur cinema “correspond aussi à une évolution du public de la salle qui a beaucoup vieilli, alors que le nôtre n’a pas tellement changé” (qtd. in Icher and Gester) – just as Saada in fact corrects himself to note that in fact some of his viewers *are* teenagers. Repeated emphases here on range acknowledge rather than disavowing Canal +’s ample focus on genre films (including the [romantic] comedy *Supercondriaque*).

Scrutinizing the specifics of “imported” French genres bolsters the argument that Canal + is heavily implicated in their appropriation. For instance, the key difference between US teenpics and French ones is the distribution of narrative focus between young people and their families. As Gemma Edney (24) also notes in an analysis of the new French phenomenon, teen narratives in France are considerably more likely than US ones to divide their focus between the young and old and draw parallels between the two. This can make it difficult to directly remake or export these films to the USA, as evidenced by largely unsuccessful attempts to try these respective strategies for both *Lol* and *La Famille Bélier*. In other words, these are films with a multi-generational address – which also makes them perfectly suited to home viewing. In the same way, not only can horror movies’ over-identification with the young be immediately problematized on the grounds of ignoring genres’ inherent tendency to cross-fertilize (Altman), but as we shall see this applies particularly obviously to the many French horror films that contain strong elements of the intellectualized auteurist *cinéma du corps* (see West).

My interest in the remainder of this article will be to probe more substantively some of the geo-cultural allegiances of films from the genres in question – including, where apt, as these allegiances intersect with auteur-popular divides – through two closer analyses. Given the enormous choice of possible films, I attempt both to give prominence to films that can be seen as significant in various ways but also, in a necessarily modest fashion, to evoke the diversity central to the Canal + project and era by looking at two very different films. Firstly, the romcom *Alibi.com*, with around 3.6 million admissions, was the third-highest grossing French film at the domestic box office in 2017 and hence offers itself up as a potentially highly culturally influential text.<sup>7</sup> My second example, the 2016 film *Grave*, provides a useful case as it blends the recently consolidated trends of teen and horror production – a detail that attests to each genre’s increased recognizability within French filmmaking – and so responds to lines of enquiry about both. With a budget of 3.5m Euros, *Grave* – though a genre piece – is at the opposite end of the mainstream-auteurist spectrum of Canal +’s investment and would have come under its diversity clause, which obliges the company to spend 17% of its funds on films costing less than 4m Euros.<sup>8</sup> *Grave* took a respectable \$1m in France (and over \$2m elsewhere).<sup>9</sup> It has also been widely critically discussed and festival-circulated and has had a considerable intra-industrial influence. A further reason for choosing both these films concerns their directors’ history with Canal +. *Alibi.com* director Lacheau is one of the many comic performers with a history of appearing on the television channel to have graduated to film acting and, in this case, directing (see Isabelle Vanderschelden’s article in this issue).<sup>10</sup> The gestation of *Grave* began when director Julie Ducornau was shooting a similarly themed short

film, *Mange*, for the channel (see Blondeau). Thus Canal + has had a very substantial hand on both these career trajectories and therefore specific film projects in ways that include but also surpass the immediately visible element of production (financing) credits, giving a sense of the myriad ways in which the status of the network as the “poumon du cinéma français” (Pudlowski), and perhaps especially genre cinema, is undeniable.

### **Integrating Romantic Comedy**

At a syntactic level concerned largely with story structure, *Alibi.com* appears on the face of it an example of US models of high-concept comedy production imported wholesale to France. It focuses on an eponymous business dedicated to providing alibis for various clients engaged in activities they would rather keep secret, principally extra-marital affairs, with comedy ensuing when protagonist Greg (Lacheau) is hired by his girlfriend Florence’s father Gérard (Didier Bourdon) for just this purpose. The concept is revealed from the opening sequence, where, in line with Hollywood’s favoured extremely transparent approach to storytelling, we witness one such philanderer avail himself of the service, after a comic mishap involving him waking up to an irate message from his girlfriend only to discover he is in bed with an older female woman. The sequence is remarkably densely informative, including elements of redundancy typical of Hollywood and that might even be called “on the nose”. Notably, the ringtone of the male character’s phone, on which we open, repeats with maddening speed and frequency the high-pitched, synthetically voiced phrase, “Mon amour t’es où?”, directly aurally echoing the image of a phone showing a young woman’s face and the caller name as “monamour”. That even the words here are compressed beyond the strictures of traditional orthography figures spatially the narrative approach adopted: squeezing as much information as possible into a short time. Thus, within seconds from the credits, these details begin to establish the generic space of the film as a comic one concerned with male-female relationships (that is, the space of romantic comedy), with these being characterized by suspicion, possessiveness and – very soon, as we hear the girlfriend’s fury at reaching an answerphone service “*encore*” – disharmony. After the unnamed Lothario calls Alibi.com, this opening is followed up by a scene at company headquarters where Greg is shown hiring a new employee, Mehdi (Tarek Boudali), to the undisguised jealousy of his existing co-worker Augustin (Julien Arruti), further establishing the homosocial parameters of much of the film. These are indeed made so explicit also by semantic details of *mise-en-scène* and dialogue as to verge on self-parody, with Augustin sporting a shirt that reads “Geek” against an image of The Hulk and the duo referring to themselves as superheroes – referentiality that suggests the generic familiarity of buddy dynamics so prevalent in recent US romcoms, and of the masculine and US-inflected cults often associated with these (*The Forty Year Old Version*, whose protagonist collects action figures, springs to mind). This patina of adherence to Hollywood models is important when we consider the “surface nature of belonging” (Probyn).<sup>11</sup> US-identified generic referentiality and its attendant tonality in French cinema can thus promote a degree of identification with US culture – at least to the extent of confirming viewers’ competence to “read” the film. At the same time, just as the layering of information at the start of *Alibi.com* is so dense as to potentially call attention to itself as a strategy, it is tempting to hazard, further, that Mehdi’s response to a question about his



peripatetic career trajectory to date, that he gets bored easily, acknowledges winkingly the Hollywood-style fast pacing (including rapid editing) of this film's approach to comic narration. These details hail a cinephilic viewer able both to access US-inflected cultural competency-cum-belonging and to situate themselves at one (knowing) remove from the latter. In this way, they "soften" but by the same token facilitate the experience of cultural miscegenation, for reasons that dovetail with cognitive film scholar Torben Gordan's account of how a high level of metafictional artifice cues viewers to orient themselves positively to the audiovisual text (1999: 213). This is important because self-reflexivity is a recurrent feature of the new raft of French appropriations of US genre models – albeit not necessarily more common here than in US genre and itself (or, no doubt, its many global offshoots), as explored more fully in relation to *Grave*.<sup>12</sup>

When a montage of the company's services completes the prologue, however, this opening's debt to the hit French romcom predecessor *L'Arnacœur*, focused on a gigolo-for-hire service opening with a semantically identical sequence (involving an example job, an introduction to the team then a montage of humorous examples of their work), becomes hard to ignore. I have argued elsewhere (Harrod 201-7) that – high concept and cinematographic style notwithstanding – there is in fact a peculiarly Gallic character to *L'Arnacœur*'s plot dynamics and characterization, supported by casting, and in fact, contrary to my suggestions so far, the same could easily be argued for *Alibi.com*. The misogyny and lack of political correctness underpinning Lacheau's film are of particular note in this regard. The film's main plot ensures that much of the action hinges on a group of men conspiring to hide Gérard's adultery from Florence (Élodie Fontan) and her mother (played by romcom regular Nathalie Baye), extending the portrayal of women as nagging hysterics set up from the very start. The presence of Fontan is also significant in making the link to the equally ideologically troubling *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?*, in which she stars, and which is one of several recent French comedies that celebrate (in this case, trans-racial) male bonding as necessitating implicit allegiance against women. The slender but toned blonde actress is objectified by making her entrance in tight-fitting jogging clothes, attracting Greg's gaze to her character's departing behind. Straining credibility, when Greg saves her dog after a car collision, she offers him, "Un resto, de l'argent, une pipe?", before blaming her indiscretion on stress when his reaction is amazement – but hardly displeasure. This presentation, along with legal notary Florence's subsequently revealed love of action films and own penchant for moderate and playfully sexualized "rough-housing" with Greg, is consonant with descriptions of female "raunch culture", seen by Ariel Levy as inimical to feminist progress.<sup>13</sup> It resonates, too (along with her later donning of a French maid's outfit [Figure 1]) with the increasingly current figure of the Cool Girl imagined by Gillian Flynn in the much-discussed 2012 domestic noir novel and 2014 film adaptation *Gone Girl* and described by Agnieszka Piotrowska as "game for anything". The scholar goes on, "She is good looking, charming, thin, well educated, has a good job, gives blowjobs. She is an impossible patriarchal fantasy pretending to be a post-feminist success." (59) This appears ironic in view of the fact that the Cool Girl, as a fantasy version of herself [cf. Figure 2], is ultimately repudiated by the main character of *Gone Girl*, just as narratives about women who rebel against male fantasies are proliferating in the anglosphere (ibid.). In other words, the enhanced thematic and aesthetic construction of women as prospective sexual objects – reminding us of the always ideological implications of film form (here, especially *mise-en-scène*) per se – is still somewhat less problematically permissible for a broad public in France in (pre-#MeToo) 2017 than around

the same time in the USA. This is one example of the way that – in line with theorizations of the transnational as transcending but also including the national (Ezra and Rowden 4) – in transnationally informed genre filmmaking specific local features interbreed with external models rather than being eclipsed. While at the level of gender politics this is unpalatable in the present case, in terms of geo-cultural identity such cross-hatching is a fundamental aspect of the new identities facilitated by multinational media-industrial production and from this perspective it is undeniably invigorating and generative.<sup>14</sup>

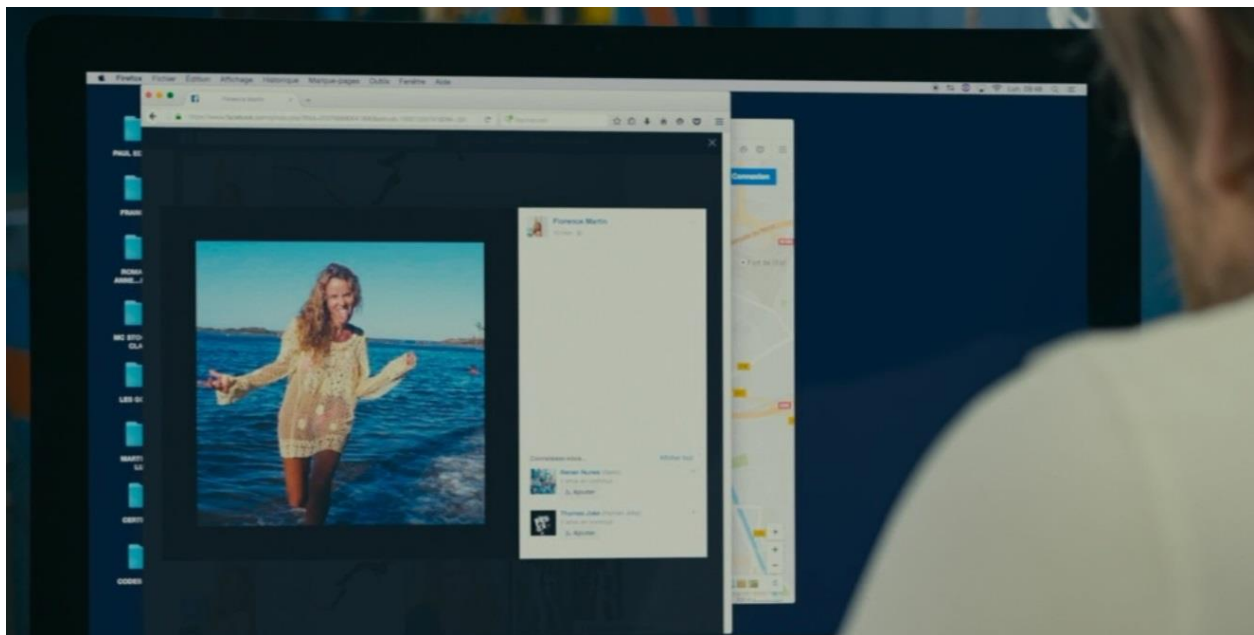


Figure 1 and 2: Adding a Gallic slant to global models, Florence as raunchy Cool Girl constructs herself as a fantasy for the male gaze.

As for not just French but more broadly European elements in *Alibi.com*, a storyline referencing the contemporary European trauma of the migrant crisis stands out. This subplot sees Mehdi lost at sea following some farcical manoeuvres to distract Florence's mother from her father's indiscretions and accidentally picked up by a group of illegal migrants attempting to land in the South of France. Comedy turns on the fact that Mehdi immediately hands the migrants over to the police to save his own skin, while assumptions by the police about North African-originated Mehdi's illegal status treat institutionalized racism with as much levity as the refugee crisis, in a further Gallic eschewal of political correctness that also demonstrates different parameters for what is simply familiar enough to become the subject of (black) humour in particular geographical contexts. A joke made by Augustin following Mehdi's hiring when he calls the team now Batman, Superman and 'Musulman' registers suggestively some of the geo-political specificities of the European and especially French landscape that cannot in any case merely assimilate US storytelling.

In fact, continuing the implied comparison between intratextual ethnic and metatextual geo-cultural identity politics, the notion of integration appears more fitting for the US romcom's status in French culture than does a paradigm of assimilation of either culture by the other. It is perhaps useful as a point of departure to conceptualize external genres' syntactic structures as having been populated with Gallic semantic elements. First and foremost among these are of course the stars themselves, among whom not only Lacheau but also his childhood friends Boudali and Arruti (who also co-wrote the screenplay with Lacheau and Pierre Dudan), as well as Fontan, all cut their teeth on Canal+'s talk-show *Le Grand journal* between 2005 and 2007 as part of the troupe *La Bande à Fifi* (Fifi being Lacheau's alias), before trying their hand at cinema. These almost exclusively domestically recognizable figures, then, provide the film's key selling point. On the other hand, just as post-Chomskyan linguistic models have questioned the separation of syntax and semantics, integration implies that new elements in turn feed back into and alter the super-structures – in this case film cultures – in which they are embedded (and indeed we have already noted an instance of “American semantics” here in Augustin's Hulk T-shirt). Notably, *La Bande à Fifi*'s artisanal professional history distances this film's production model from the factory-like Hollywood paradigm. Equally revealing is a remark made by *Alibi.com*'s reviewer in *France Soir*, who points out, “De nombreuses références à la pop-culture française sont faites,” before going on to cite as examples *Assassin's Creed*, *Taxi*, *Fast and Furious*, and a few “wacky” (*loufoque*) cameos by the likes of French actress Chantal Ladesou, French rapper JoeyStarr and French YouTuber Norman Thavaud. This list underscores the inextricability of national and transnational affiliations in many cultural allusions, such that *Assassin's Creed* and *Fast and Furious* are given merely as prime examples of *French* popular culture. As for Joeystarr and Norman Thavaud, these figures represent, *a contrario*, markedly transnationally positioned Gallic stars, through the transnational roots and character of hip-hop music and the transnational status of the internet, respectively. These are useful examples for foregrounding, in turn, the longer but also the more recently accelerated history of the globalization of culture, notably through the kind of multiplatforming of which it is both symptom and cause.

## The Horror of (Incorporating) Otherness

Like romantic comedy, both teen films and horror films are often held up as particularly extreme examples of genre films' tendency towards formalism – a fact not indissociable from their historical absence in France, as well as facilitating analysis of their emergence. It stands to reason, then, that teen horror is if anything even more typically conventionalized than its parent genres, making the recent, largely positive critical hype around *Grave*, a French film planted squarely within this hybrid (sub)genre, a point of intrigue. Premiering at Cannes, where it sensationally prompted several walk-outs, and nominated for several César Awards including Best Director, *Grave* is a story of adolescent cannibalism. It focuses on Justine's (Garance Marillier) arrival at veterinary school, following in her parents' and older sister's footsteps. Raised a vegetarian, the bookish and sexually inexperienced protagonist is forced to eat meat as part of an initiation rite, only to discover she craves human flesh, and finds this impulse particularly difficult to resist during sexual encounters.

While the complexities of defining any genre are well-known, *Grave*'s subject matter immediately identifies it with horror, broadly conceived. As for the teenpic, Driscoll's is one of the most comprehensive attempts. She thus cites as typical

narrative conventions that help define teen film: the youthfulness of central characters; content usually centred on young heterosexuality, frequently with a romance plot; intense age-based peer relationships and conflict either within those relationships or with an older generation; the institutional management of adolescence by families, schools, and other institutions; and coming-of-age plots focused on motifs like virginity, graduation, and the makeover. (Driscoll 2)

Every one of these elements is in place in *Grave*, with an off-key romantic relationship introduced through Justine's crush on – and loss of virginity to – her apparently gay Muslim roommate Adrien (Rabah Nait Oufella), and generational conflict featuring through her relationship with her older sister Alex (Ella Rumpf) and ultimately between the daughters and their parents. This is because, following a disastrous makeover in which Justine ends up eating Alex's finger, the latter reveals that she too is an active cannibal – a fate which Justine repudiates by attempting to resist human flesh. At the end of the film, with Alex jailed for eating Adrien, we learn that the girls' mother is a reformed cannibal, too, with the desire passing down the female line.

Teen horror specifically is also an extremely well-established US genre going back at least as far as the 1950s B-movie heyday, when it was the most frequently produced and enduring of such film genres. As Driscoll acknowledged in 2011, “despite changes to the film industry these series are ongoing” (84). While, as she notes, some critics suggested a waning of the genre in the late 1980s, this claim appears hard to sustain today in the wake of the *Twilight* franchise, not to mention recent prequels and remakes of 1970s classics including *Carrie* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. This genre's key features have arguably been most heavily “theorized” by cycles of

postmodern, self-aware films themselves, emblemized by the *Scream* franchise; however, Carol J. Clover's work on teen slasher films with bookish "final girl" survivor characters who share affinities with the monstrous antagonist (48-52) chimes strongly with *Grave*. Furthermore, within the teen horror category, the monstrous girl narrative concerned with abjectifying female sexual awakening is arguably a largely transhistorical North American subgenre of its own, spanning films including *Cat People* (1942); *Carrie* (1976); the Canadian film *Ginger Snaps* (2000, a sisters narrative with particularly strong similarities to *Grave*); *Teeth* (2007); and *Jennifer's Body* (2009), among others.

*Grave*'s resolutely generic identity is of interest from both contextual and intra- (as well as inter-) textual perspectives. In the first place, critical discourse about the film's generic status or otherwise attests strongly to the ongoing discomfort with this kind of filmmaking in higher-end critical circles. For instance, Benoît Franquebalme, writing in the magazine *Marianne*, reinvents language to insist that this film belongs to the genre of the "frantastique" (French fantastic) that goes back to Méliès by way of Jean Cocteau, Georges Franju, Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, as well as Roman Polanski (presumably an honorary Frenchman thanks to his art credentials). Perhaps most importantly, Ducornau herself has rejected the label horror movie for the film, although she accepts it is a "coming-of-age" (the phrase is untranslated in her French statements).<sup>15</sup> Evidently at pains to preserve her own high cultural capital, Ducornau states more specifically that *Grave* is both an auteur film and a genre film and the two need not be opposed. Yet her statements are peppered with an anti-Hollywood rhetoric inseparable from her embrace of auteurism, as she responds to a question about a possible future career in Hollywood: "Mon prochain film est français. Je l'écris seule. Voilà ce que je répons aux américains." (qtd. in Belpêche). This statement pairs Frenchness with notions of individual creative genius of the kind celebrated by the *politique des auteurs* that largely launched auteurism in film theory and criticism, here opposed to a collaborative approach seen as synonymous with contemporary Hollywood models. It is apposite that a critic writing in the generally pro-Hollywood cinephilic magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* suggests Justine's torment may represent among other things an allegory for Ducornau's own experience of needing to incorporate foreign (film) structures in order to mature artistically (Barnett). In any case, her statements wholly disavow the transatlantic character of the industrial context in which her film was produced (not to mention its formal accreditation as a co-production between several European territories) and which, as we have seen, the notionally French Canal+ nonetheless embodies.

As regards textual geo-cultural generic affiliations, *Grave*'s more "local" semantics in this case include somewhat pared down and drab aesthetics in shooting the locales of the vet school (Figure 3) – far removed from "the brightly coloured, exaggerated teen lives that end happily ever after of [...] Hollywood teen movies" (Edney 27) (although the latter format is parodied by a scene in which Justine is paired up with a male student for sex with the two of them covered in bright blue and yellow paint, respectively [Figure 4]). The example is useful for demonstrating the enfolding of geo-cultural allegiances into aesthetics, and vice versa – as mediated, in turn, by industrial structures. While Kath Dooley (56) has linked "cold corporate or sterile environments, such as office spaces, laboratories and hospitals", specifically to the *cinéma du corps*, Ros Galt (241) has noted that "colorless" beauty stands for modern European civilization in much cultural discourse.

Colourlessness here is of course also meant figuratively, as a metaphor for notions of purity and authenticity that go back to Plato's elevation of form. The literalization of colourlessness' figurative associations in *Grave* is highly revealing when we consider that Galt opposes such prized notions of formal sparsity to "pretty" aesthetics, which for her represent the problematic nature of visual spectacle per se in European thought historically: a key element in densely iconographically referential genre film. That is, *Grave*'s visual similarities to socio-realist cinema also tend to play down its popular form in a fashion consonant with high cultural phobia of genres as "busy" films rich in allusivity, including through the way they look. Further, Galt's work on anti-visuality in film theory identifies this leaning with a (longer) tradition peopled predominantly by French thinkers including Jean-Luc Godard and, following Martin Jay, Jean-Louis Comolli and Marcel Duchamp (189-90). Ducornau's remarks about her filmmaking suggest a parallel veneration of forms of supposedly noble beauty "free from foreign admixture" (Winckelmann qtd. in Galt 241), mismatched with the realities of *Grave*'s productively transnational texture, which is inseparable from its genesis and positioning significantly under the aegis of Canal+. Further French-identifiable features integrated into the overall Hollywood-indebted mould of *Grave* include the medical nature of the institutional setting, which, as well as bearing a debt to the professions of Ducornau's parents as a gynaecologist and a dermatologist, plays to France's identification with Cartesian rationalism and tight social control, especially for young people; the general absence of pop music in favour of a moody score; and the privileging of body horror specifically. The latter two details both link up with internationally visible yet highly French-identified auteur traditions of Extreme cinema, and particularly female-authored variants such as several films by Claire Denis, which are known for their bespoke scores, and Marina De Van's corporeally intimate *Dans ma peau* (2002).<sup>16</sup> So too does the casting of Laurent Lucas, who has featured in *Dans ma peau* and in several French supernatural or horror films, in the role of Justine's father. Given the status of recognizable stars as a typical feature of genres, the last example speaks particularly clearly to the recognizability of French horror across auteur and mainstream divides (Lucas has straddled the two) – and therefore the increasing obsolescence of fears based on this cinematic binary, as much as on the French versus foreign polarity it today so often tracks.







Figures 3 and 4: *Grave*'s colour palette in oppositional dialogue with that of US teenpics.

Thanks especially to his role in the (internationally successful) auteur film *Harry, un ami qui vous veut du bien* (Dominik Moll, 2000), a black comedy about a man tempted to murder his family to further his own creative and career success, Lucas' presence also informs the narrative's own thematics of convention versus freedom. Moreover, as we saw with *Alibi.com*, such overdetermination tends to foreground generic conventionality in an arch fashion. This humorous tone is likewise encapsulated in the film's ironically understated title – in a perfect demonstration of the aesthetically pleasing tonal complexity afforded by genre mixing, at one point the doe-eyed, petite and childlike Justine confesses in relation to her problem, with the kind of seriousness adolescents typically reserve for overblown romantic troubles rather than genuinely dreadful murderous impulses, “C'est grave”. As Timothy Shary has argued, fantasy (including horror) may blend particularly often with the teenpic precisely because of adolescents' penchant for the melodramatic (218).

For her part, Driscoll suggests that teen horror exemplifies well “the importance of teen film's systematic use of repetition and stereotype, including the way it twists repetition to new ends”. She links this to Freud's definition of the uncanny as dependent on repetition, alongside threat, or difference and unfamiliarity – ineed often literally shaped as familial dramas within teen horror movies (Driscoll 83; 87), as in *Grave*. This description provides a useful model for the workings of much overdetermined teen horror, which wrings discomfiting affects precisely from hackneyed and implausible formulae, through repetition with variation. A French teen horror film works in the same way but with variation implicit already in elements such as language, setting and stars. Its address is (thus) broadened to a wider and more varied audience, albeit ideally one with a certain level of cinephilic competency.

Importantly, for *Grave*, this cinephilia takes in “intelligent” auteur cultures more deliberately than is the case with many US examples of the genre, without in any way excluding the mainstream, in such a way as to potentially broaden target age range. It is finally pertinent to note in this regard the industrial legacy of *Grave*. This film so impressed the President of the CNC Frédérique Bredin that she has set up an annual fund of 1.5m Euros devoted to new *frantastique* films, with Ducornau

sitting on its jury. Such a development highlights a further instance of mainstream generic “Hollywood” influence bleeding into more director-led “French” practice and ultimately the legacy of Canal + as a backer of Ducornau.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

Adopting a perspectives on genre cinema as engendering feelings and so potentially either shoring up or reworking identities, as this article has done, makes a link to classic conceptualizations of both national and transnational identity. Thus, while in 1983 Benedict Anderson famously described national identity as a mental construct interpellated by culture, more recently pertinent notions of cosmopolitan and transnational identity evoke attitudes such as respect for diversity (Appiah), “trans-local understandings” (Vertovec and Cohen xvii) or “felt internationalism” (Acland 239). Similarly, this article has examined the way in which contemporary French film genres can play a role in felt transnationalism through their particular combinations of values and sensibilities that are both locally resonant and globally-nuanced (in the sense that US culture is a major global culture circulated primordially through international cinema, and now audiovisual culture more generally). This is not a new phenomenon; however, multinational corporate collaborations of the kind typified by Canal +’s business model are a major factor in the post-1990s accelerated globalization of culture.<sup>18</sup> Today, territorial categories such as *French* or *European* and *American* are irrevocably intermixed in cinema and adjacent media. This is demonstrated by many commentators’ striking identification on aspects of the seemingly highly Americanized *Alibi.com* and *Grave* as in many ways, in fact, curiously French: an evaluation my own readings endorse. This makes sense when we consider that films financed by Canal + target a primarily televisual and therefore theoretically domestic audience. However, even the identification of television audiences with national parameters is becoming an outdated model when we consider that in 2018 Canal + reported a major in international subscriptions growth (78 percent in five years and 12.7 percent in 2017-18) offsetting domestic decline (Hamza and Gaber).. This development complements the transnational production circumstances for such films with a markedly international exhibition orbit. Likewise, this analysis has sought to relativize the terms of comparisons that are frequently made about (trans)national identity in French cinema, turning xenophobic statements on their heads by showing that Gallic culture is itself a form of global culture more than ever before in the current era of multinational media conglomerates, in which context Canal + is the French audiovisual industry’s central figure.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/canal-plus-history/>

<sup>2</sup> The broadcasting since 2019 of the Netflix Original French television series *Marianne* suggests a further consolidation of the audiovisual trend, as well as providing a different example of the way in which multiplatform cross-fertilization facilitated by individual industry players in the global mediasphere goes hand in hand with inter-cultural dialogue.

<sup>3</sup> While far from unchallenged, Clover's 1992 discussion of slasher films' young male spectatorship is paradigmatic.

<sup>4</sup> Films by auteur director Céline Sciamma *Naissance des pieuvres* (2007) and *Bande de filles* (2014) have not been included in this list of popular genre films, despite drawing to an extent on teen film aesthetics.

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Christopher Meir for this and several other sources on which I have drawn in this article.

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<sup>6</sup> Action and adventure films' contemporary frequency is strongly linked to the emergence of production studio EuropaCorp; for a fuller discussion see Michael 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Figures sourced from CNC France.

<sup>8</sup> Figures sourced from imdb.com.

<sup>9</sup> Figures sourced from boxofficemojo.com.

<sup>10</sup> *Alibi.com* was also a StudioCanal production.

<sup>11</sup> In suggesting that overall story and some other elements give a “surface” impression, I depart here from the linguistic school of thought that identified syntax with “deep” structures and only semantics therefore with surface, a Chomskyan division in any case later challenged both within that discipline and by this article.

<sup>12</sup> On romcom reflexivity, see also Harrod 76.

<sup>13</sup> See also McRobbie on the “phallic girl”.

<sup>14</sup> Nor in fact should buddy films – with their typically attendant misogynistic dynamics – be over-identified with Hollywood, given the long history of male buddy duos in French comedy (cf. Moine 65-7).

<sup>15</sup> Although Alexandra Heller-Nicholas does cite her on one occasion accepting the label “body horror”, in Dooley 60.

<sup>16</sup> De Van's 2013 *Dark Touch* is closer to a horror movie. Both films received financing from Canal +.

<sup>17</sup> *Grave* received further funding from Arte, the CNC and Belgian television, among other sources.

<sup>18</sup> On this acceleration, see Acland; Ezra and Rowden.