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Foreword: French Blockbusters. Cultural Politics of a Transnational Cinema

Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb

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FRENCH BLOCKBUSTERS

Cultural Politics of a Transnational Cinema

CHARLIE MICHAEL

Foreword by Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb



FRENCH BLOCKBUSTERS

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French Blockbusters

Charlie Michael

FRENCH BLOCKBUSTERS

Cultural Politics of a Transnational Cinema

Charlie Michael

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FOREWORD

Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb

The year 1985. It is the mid-80s and US audiences flock to cinemas to see the latest blockbusters by Spielberg or Lucas – films by now so emblematic of the decade. Geopolitical ironies abound in these years, caught between the post-traumatic stress of Vietnam's aftermath and the unexpectedly abrupt end of the Cold War. For a moment, President Reagan's 'Star Wars' defence agenda even blurs the line between Hollywood effects and a 'real' spectacle about to take place at Cape Canaveral. Meanwhile, in France, the years of President Mitterrand and his proactive Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, are upon us. Together they launch an ambitious Gallic response to increasing transatlantic calls for 'free trade' – a controversial movement they call *le Tout Culturel*. Since David L. Loseley published his synthesis of Langian cultural policy in *The Politics of Fun* (1995), few works have studied the reform's longer-term consequences.¹ Fewer still have considered whether they could have engendered productive new forms of French cinema. Instead, scholars most often defer to a more cynical view, as if France's waning cinematic influence must be inevitable, allied somehow with the death of so many other 'master narratives' decried by French philosophers of the late twentieth century.

There have been exceptions to this story, of course. In 1997, for instance, Laurent Jullier of the University of Lorraine brought the work of Christian Metz and Serge Daney to bear on theories of digital art in order to highlight what he called a 'postmodern cinema.'² Outlining a contemporary style that revels in new forms of abstraction and 'visual fireworks,' Jullier pointed to

the features of American blockbusters like *Star Wars* or *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but also to the so-called *cinéma du look* from France. Already noted by critic Raphaël Bassan in 1989, this relatively short cycle of films by three young directors – Luc Besson (*Subway*, *Le Grand Bleu*), Jean-Jacques Beineix (*Diva*, *Betty Blue*) and Leos Carax (*Mauvais Sang*) – signalled a ‘neo-baroque’ aesthetic that combined a commercialised, MTV-inspired style with erudite cinematic influences (Truffaut, Godard, Renoir) to create a fantastic form of visual poetry.³ While the *look* films remain a reference point for academics and critics alike, they often only get cited as an influence on later directors (Jean-Pierre Jeunet) or as a sort of cautionary parable about the dubious consequences of aestheticisation. Moreover, undue focus on the *look* may also prove to be a case of hiding a forest with a few trees.

This exciting new book by Charlie Michael proposes a counter-narrative to those who continue to reproduce what he calls ‘*a priori* assumptions about what the [French] industry’s role on the international scene *should* be’ as ‘an artisanal, aesthetic alternative to Hollywood hegemony.’ By focusing on just one ideological framing of these matters, Michael argues, we occlude the more complicated story of what the Gallic production sphere actually looks like today. Drawing on a broad range of research materials – from attendance data to archival documents and from film reception to interviews with industry professionals – Michael builds his hypothesis in several stages. His first move involves folding recent popular comedies (*Bienvenue Chez Les Ch’tis*, *Intouchables*) into an expanded generic definition of what he calls the ‘local blockbuster.’ But the most interesting part of the case study he performs here has to do with the tensions that his provocative concept (‘French blockbusters’) continues to generate, as each new success (or ambitious failure) spurs symptomatic quarrels of legitimacy between those who endorse the commercial prospects of ‘big’ French cinema and those who dismiss it with equal fervor. Indeed, these observations echo in numerous other artistic disputes of the 2000s, which lately seem to crop up almost every time a French director seeks to produce a popular genre film.⁴

By grouping numerous different studios (StudioCanal, EuropaCorp, Studio Orange, Gaumont) as contributors to one period of sweeping strategic change, Michael’s account brings together – without *a priori* judgments about quality – an entire genealogy of French ‘event films’ of the past thirty years: *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Rappeneau 1989), *Germinal* (Berri 1993), *Les Visiteurs* (Poiré 1993), *La Reine Margot* (Chereau 1994), *The Fifth Element* (Besson 1998), *Amélie* (Jeunet, 2001), *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au bon dieu?* (De Chauveron 2014), *La Famille Bélier* (Lartigau 2014), the *Astérix* films. All of these, in their own way, serve as different iterations of the phenomenon he calls the ‘French blockbuster.’ Obviously, if we reduce the blockbuster to a question of profit margins, then membership in such a group would be rather easy to

define. However, this book cannot be summarised as a simple rehabilitation of commercial films wrongly disparaged by French criticism.

Instead, Michael sketches the genealogy of the French blockbuster as a nascent cultural form. He notes that the year 2004 might constitute the swell of a movement that has only grown louder with each passing year, cresting perhaps in 2014, and featuring an entire decade of high-grossing films with international distribution. The titles are too numerous to list here: *Les Choristes* (Barratier 2004), *Un Long Dimanche de Fiançailles* (Jeunet 2004), *L'Enquête Corse* (Berberian 2004), *Les Bronzés 3* (Leconte 2006), *Arthur et les Minimoys* (Besson 2006), *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (Boon 2008), *OSS 117* (Hazanavicius 2011), *Intouchables* (Tolédano and Nakache 2011). In 2007, director Pascale Ferran sounded the alarm bell for the French industry during the live broadcast of the *Césars* award ceremony, pleading for public support for a more robust 'middlebrow' cinema (*les films du milieu*) to mediate the ground between this new class of big budget films and ultra-subsidised small-scale projects.

It would seem, in fact, that the mainstream, 'globalised' French cinema of years past, which used to feature films by directors like Bernardo Bertolucci, now resorts most often to comedy. Another rewarding aspect of this book is that it allows us to re-assess the roles of Besson and Jeunet thirty years after their start in the 1980s. The former has become the most visible mogul in what Michael calls a new 'oligopoly' of French production as the head of his independent company EuropaCorp, while the latter ranks as a star of what we might call a new sort of 'mainstream quality' global cinema. Two directors that used to be models for an alternative sort of independent French art cinema in the 1980s are thus now prototypical business entrepreneurs. In two full chapters devoted to the debates that emerged during the releases of *Amélie* (Jeunet 2001) and *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (Besson 2017), Michael offers context for the ideological cleavages that these films exacerbated among French and American intellectuals as part of the rhetorical place that two directors now occupy in the landscape of transnational French film production. The final two chapters then evoke two other symptomatic tendencies of contemporary popular French cinema writ large: action and spectacle (Chapter 5) and comedy (Chapter 6). In each case, Michael notes how the stylistic features of recent French genre films reflect and refract the rapidly changing cultural politics of the period.

For sure, Michael's work is not for readers who cling to the clichéd myth of a French cinema where small, independent (and technically imperfect) art films battle against the Hollywood goliath. Nor is it for those who refuse to view each new student at *La Fémis* as anything but an inheritor of the French New Wave. Instead, this is a book that confronts economic reality with clear eyes, showing how an industry has succeeded in adapting, albeit with great difficulty,

to a model for generating its own form of blockbuster cinema. Balancing an array of historical influences, Michael gives us a new language for navigating the internal conflicts that have marked a period of dynamic change, and when the intermittent success stories of ‘big’ films became fodder for debate about what forms of recognition (both economic and symbolic) are most appropriate for a national industry with transnational ambitions. Written briskly like a behind-the-scenes saga, this original book will challenge the preconceptions of anyone who thinks that notions of ‘French cinema’ and ‘blockbusters’ should remain diametrically opposed.

Avignon, April 2019

Text translated from French by Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb and Subha Xavier

NOTES

- 1 David L. Looseley (1995). *The Politics of Fun: Cultural Policy and Debate in Contemporary France*. Oxford and Washington, DC: Berg.
- 2 Laurent Jullier (1997). *L'écran post-moderne: un cinéma de l'allusion et du feu d'artifice*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- 3 Raphaël Bassan (1989). 'Le cinéma du look'. *La Revue du Cinéma* 448: May 1989. Translation in English 'Three French neo-baroque directors: Beineix, Besson, Carax from *Diva* to *Le Grand Bleu*.' *The Films of Luc Besson: Master of Spectacle* (2007). Susan Hayward and Phil Powrie, eds. Manchester: Manchester University Press: pp. 11–23.
- 4 Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb (2012). 'Produire un film de genre fantastique en France, entre hétérotopie artistique et quête de légitimité. Analyse d'une tension identitaire dans le champ de la création' in Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb, ed. *Les cinéastes français à l'épreuve du genre fantastique. Socioanalyse d'une production artistique* 1 (1), Paris: L'Harmattan: pp. 9–72.