

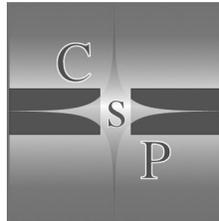
# France at the Flicks



France at the Flicks  
Trends in Contemporary French Popular Cinema

Edited by

Darren Waldron and Isabelle Vanderschelden



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Isabelle Vanderschelden

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## PREFACE

This book has been conceived for students and researchers of contemporary French popular cinema. It focuses on recent trends in “mainstream” film in France and thereby makes a very useful contribution to the field. It is also intended as a pedagogical support for tutors and lecturers of French and Film Studies alike. The volume’s strength lies in the diversity of its subjects and methodologies and, most importantly, in that it combines case studies not only of films which were distributed outside of France, but also productions which enjoyed major success with domestic French audiences. For convenience, film titles are provided in French in each article; their English translations can be found in the filmography at the end of the book. All quotations from the French have been translated by the authors unless otherwise indicated.

# INTRODUCTION

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In the last twenty years, academic studies of French cinema have gradually departed from largely auteurist and aesthetic approaches, with an increasing number of scholars turning their attention towards popular aspects of film in France. Such a shift reflects the prominence of Cultural Studies, a burgeoning field in Anglophone academic institutions which has also started to make inroads in Film Studies in France, as the work of several French scholars within this volume illustrates (see Moine, Molia and Nacache). Concerns about the question of legitimacy—whether mainstream cinema is a valid subject for scholarly investigation—which discouraged researchers from approaching this as an area in its own right have dissipated, paving the way for many of us who are interested both in what attracts large audiences in France and, more generally, in the evolution of the “popular”.

This new interest in popular European cinema was driven forward by Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau’s edited volume *Popular European Cinema*, published in 1991. Here, the authors brought together different perspectives on mainstream film in Europe and provided an important consideration of how to define the popular within a non-Hollywood context. Dyer and Vincendeau distinguish between two ways of appreciating what the popular signifies: “[t]he popular can refer to things that are commercially successful and/or to things that are produced by, or express the thoughts, values and feelings of ‘the people’” (1991, 2). The latter—what the authors term “anthropological concerns”—are very much influenced by folklore and local forms of cultural expression which have spanned the centuries. The former—what Dyer and Vincendeau term as “market concerns”—relate to reception and economics. It is this category which is of significance for the study of mainstream cinemas since, as Dyer and Vincendeau affirm, “there can be no understanding of popular

film without reference to the market, because popular cinema has only existed in a market economy” (1991, 4).

Within the area of French Film Studies, Phil Powrie’s *French Cinema in the 1980s: Nostalgia and the Crisis of Masculinity* (1997) explores three of the most mainstream genres of the 1980s—comedy, the *polar* and heritage film—and provides a landmark study of popular cinema in France. The heritage film can be identified as mainstream principally through its success with audiences. By contrast, the comic film and the *polar* bridge the “anthropological” and “commercial” because they remain the genres which attract the greatest numbers of spectators and utilise informal, everyday language and stereotypes. Powrie examines these genres through the prism of nostalgia and the crisis of masculinity, two themes with which, in his view, mainstream French film of the 1980s was preoccupied. His later edited volume which explores trends in French cinema in the 1990s, *French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference*, though not explicitly concentrating on the popular, includes a number of crucial case studies of mainstream films, including *Gazon maudit* and *Nikita*.

More recently, Lucy Mazdon’s edited volume, *France on Film: Reflections on Contemporary French Popular Cinema*, published in 2001, is the first book to make mainstream French cinema its principal area of interest, as its title explicitly states. Mazdon’s introduction considers how the popular can be defined within a contemporary French cinema context, thereby providing a key text within the field. Mazdon problematises the distinction between art and mainstream cinema (2001, 5) and argues that the films discussed within the volume question the received view among international audiences that French cinema is synonymous with notions of quality and art-house productions (2001, 1). Mazdon is also one of the first scholars in the field to identify the paradox within contemporary French cinema whereby individual films revive mainstream conventions traditionally associated with the Hollywood of the past—she cites *Taxi* (Gérard Pirès, 1997) as an example (2001, 5). This characteristic constitutes a recurrent feature of more recent French popular successes, such as *Les Rivières pourpres* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 2000) and *Le Pacte des loups* (Christophe Gans, 2001), and illustrates the increasingly transnational feel of contemporary French mainstream film (see Hayes and O’Shaughnessy 2005a; Tarr 2007). Many of the contributors to this volume develop this point, as will be seen.

Yet Mazdon’s volume, while important, is not without its limitations, as Martin O’Shaughnessy reveals in his review of the book (2002), and these are common to works which map out new perspectives within established fields. One of O’Shaughnessy’s comments concerns the fact that there is

no overarching definition of the popular to which all contributors to the book subscribe (2002). Another limitation, according to O'Shaughnessy, is that its dual focus on the popular and on national identity cannot easily be reconciled (2002). Finally, Mazdon's volume includes films which, in many circles, may not be considered popular—Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999) could be cited as an example.

Elsewhere in the study of European cinemas, mainstream film has attracted critical attention among scholars. This is particularly the case in work on contemporary Spanish cinema. Antonio Lázaro-Reboll and Andrew Willis provide a fruitful discussion of the popular which can be applied to some extent to the French context. Their categories are informed by the work of Raymond Williams, for whom a first dimension of the popular is something that is “organically produced from within social groups or communities, whereby the popular is something of the people” (Williams (1976, 198-9) as summarised in Lázaro-Reboll and Willis (2004, 4-5)). Similarities with Dyer and Vincendeau's “anthropological” concerns are therefore evident. Williams' second aspect of the popular, as summarised by Lázaro-Reboll and Willis, is something that is “enjoyed or consumed by large numbers of people, but not produced by them” (2004, 5). Lázaro-Reboll and Willis, then, echo Dyer and Vincendeau's postulation that the “commercial” is a fundamentally defining characteristic of the popular.

The interpretation of the term “popular” in the present book adopts these dimensions of the people and the market. However, it should be said that we are not interested in long deliberations of what the popular may signify, partly because its fluidity as a term resists clear and exact definition. Rather, it is our intention to focus on trends in the popular and how these reveal fundamental changes in recent French cinema, which is precisely what the contributions here reflect. Below, we outline what we think these developments are in their most general sense, and we use the films mentioned by our contributors, as well as other important mainstream releases, to guide us. Unlike Mazdon, the issue of national identity is not a central concern, although this does arise in some of the chapters. Our approach recognises the transnational and global influences on recent shifts in contemporary French popular cinema; indeed, the influences of Hollywood and other media have been instrumental in the commercial success of many of the films released in recent years in France and which are discussed in this volume. Additionally, while it may be said that some articles here mention productions which can be located at the periphery of the popular, the majority of these case studies concern movies which are resolutely mainstream, either in terms of their narrative, casting

of actors, themes and mode of address or in that they were enjoyed by a wide public.

An original aspect of this volume is that many of the articles examine films which were successful domestically, but which did not achieve an international distribution; examples include Joseph McGonagle's study of *La Vérité si je mens 1* and *2* (Thomas Gilou, 1997 and 2001, 4.8 and 7.7 million spectators respectively), Carrie Tarr's discussion of *L'Esquive* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2004) and Jacqueline Nacache's examination of the critical reception of *Boudou* (Gérard Jugnot, 2005). Existing work in the field—including, but not restricted to Mazdon's volume—tends to perceive the popular through the prism of films which have achieved some success, critical or other, outside of France. The inclusion of productions which resonated with a domestic as opposed to an international audience, therefore, gives an insight into the types of films successful with a French movie-going public, and enriches our knowledge of the characteristics and pleasures which appear to have a broad appeal in France. The book also includes studies of French releases which have reached an international audience and which have been widely incorporated onto film syllabuses outside of France. Thus, the collection of articles sheds light not only on how the popular is defined among and by French audiences, but also on the characteristics of French cinema which chime with spectators abroad.

If popular cinema can be mainly understood in its relation to the market, as Dyer and Vincendeau have argued, then the recent phenomenal box office success of a series of French films must be our first area of interest. Included in this category are, for instance, *Les Rivières pourpres* (3.2 million spectators), *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2004; 4.38 million spectators), *Le Pacte des loups* (5.6 million spectators) and *Les Bronzés 3* (Patrice Leconte, 2006; 10.22 million spectators).<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, contemporary French cinema also counts among its biggest audience successes films which articulate a localised, people's culture, and thus represent the second main dimension of the popular. Many of these target a teenage audience, such as *Astérix et Obélix: mission Cléopâtre* (Alain Chabat, 2002) and *Brice de Nice* (James Huth, 2005; 4.4 million spectators). Astérix, clearly, is the quintessential *gaulois* hero, but he is also France's most famous comic strip figure; yet, *Astérix et Obélix: mission Cléopâtre*, which is a sequel to *Astérix et Obélix contre César* (Claude Zidi, 1999) sidelines the central protagonist, placing peripheral characters in the main roles, the most important being Numérobis/Edifis played by Jamel Debbouze. Debbouze is widely regarded as the favourite film star of young French audiences.<sup>2</sup> His

presence in the cast brings with it references to the humour he developed in a series of comic programmes on Canal+ in the 1990s, as well as nods to youth culture and the language of the *banlieue* which, in recent times, has captured the imagination of young people more broadly.

French popular cinema also counts among its recent releases films which were designed for large audiences, but which ultimately did not succeed in reaching them, a category that Lázaro-Reboll and Willis also identify in relation to the Spanish context. *Blueberry: L'expérience secrète* (Jan Kounen, 2004; 800,000 spectators) and *Vidocq* (Pitof, 2001; 1.89 million spectators) were expected to succeed at the box office, but failed to match expectations. In addition, ticket sales for *Boudu*, while exceeding the key audience threshold of one million tickets—1.3 million people saw the film in cinemas—were relatively disappointing in comparison to forecasts which anticipated higher receipts.

Surprise successes—films which surpassed the expected audience figures of their makers—also feature in contemporary cinema in France. Productions encompassed by this category include *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001), *Chouchou* (Merzak Allouache, 2003), *La Vérité si je mens 1 and 2*, *Brice de Nice*, *L'Auberge espagnole* (Cédric Klapisch, 2002) and *Les Choristes* (Christophe Barratier, 2004). These films clearly resonated with audiences who actively sought to see them, rather than being motivated by expensive promotional campaigns or reviews. *Les Choristes*, for example, attracted an audience of around 700,000 spectators every week during its first five weeks at the cinema and achieved a figure of just under nine million after thirty-five weeks of general release. A number of recent successes owe their popularity to the timeliness of their release, thus allowing them to capture the *air du temps*. *Brice de Nice* inspired young audiences with its in-jokes and slapstick humour. *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, the object of an intensive promotional campaign, also fits into this sub-category, albeit in a different way in that it reassured French audiences keen to escape into its fantasy world from an atmosphere of pessimism at the beginning of the presidential campaign for the 2002 elections. The film remained in the French top ten for 22 weeks and sold 8.85 million tickets. Moreover, *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain's* significant success with international audiences can be partly attributed to the trauma which followed the events of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001—its distribution and exhibition in the United States coming just after the attacks on the Twin Towers.

Of significant importance in relation to the French context, and an area which is central to this volume, are films which have clear mainstream credentials, but which also assert their legitimacy as part of a

French quality cinema. Given the prominence of the *exception culturelle* in film discourses and constructions of French cinema, such ambiguity may seem rather unsurprising. Many recent French successes sit on the cusp between a cinema of popular appeal and one that conveys both a style associated with its director and which often addresses serious social issues. Films such as *Le Goût des autres* (Agnès Jaoui, 2000), *Chaos* (Coline Serreau, 2001) *Ma femme est une actrice* (Yvan Attal, 2001) and *Il est plus facile pour un chameau...* (Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi, 2003) can be described as *comédies de mœurs*, an established sub-genre that tackles questions of class, gender and sexuality through the medium of light entertainment, but which also bears the personal, authorial signature of the director. Particularly pertinent in this respect is *Le Goût des autres* which, as Sarah Leahy reveals, examines the theme of class as expressed through cultural taste and distinction. Interestingly, as Leahy argues, this film probes the very judgements that are at the heart of comparisons of so-called legitimate and popular culture. Consequently, the questions it articulates are of significant importance to constructions of a popular cinema and its relations to other areas of French film.

If *Le Goût des autres* probes the boundary between popular and legitimate culture from within its diegesis, *Boudu* challenges this from an extra-diegetic perspective. On the one hand, this film is a remake of a classic from French cinematic history—*Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932)—which was directed by the widely-acclaimed “godfather” of French cinema, Jean Renoir. On the other hand, it was marketed to attract large audiences, particularly through its casting of Gérard Depardieu as the central protagonist, and also as it was directed by Gérard Jugnot who started out as a comedian in the irreverent, but mainstream *café-théâtres*. Yet, the career of this remake testifies to the fact that a film’s economic achievements cannot only be measured by its box office takings; *Boudu* managed to attain a television audience figure of 7.5 million when it was broadcast on TF1 in the prime-time Sunday evening slot on 13 May 2007. Television plays a crucial role in the financing and exhibition of French films and we will return to this subject later.

Another category of popular films requires identification: those which, in many respects, may not initially seem likely to attract large audiences. Such films are distinguished from the earlier group of surprise successes in that they portray themes and social issues which are generally not deemed mainstream. One such film is *L’Esquive*, which explores the topical issue of youths growing up in the *banlieue*. Directed by a relatively unknown director, with a small budget, *L’Esquive* casts unknown actors and its dialogue makes use of street slang, all characteristics which are not

easily reconcilable with the popular. Like *Le Goût des autres*, its narrative examines the relationship between a classic cultural text—here a Marivaux play—and the working classes, who in this case live on a council estate on the outskirts of Paris. However, the film did achieve relatively high box office takings, as Carrie Tarr notes in her chapter: 80,000 people went to see it in the space of two weeks in 2005 and 188,000 tickets were sold before the 2005 Césars where it won four awards including best film, director and most promising actress. Such a figure may seem modest, but *L'Esquive*'s performance is remarkable given that little, if anything, in the way of a promotional campaign preceded its release; it owes its success, then, to the benefits of a strong reception among those who went to see the film when it was first released and who then recommended it to other people they knew—"word of mouth". *L'Esquive*'s audience rose to 283,000 after its re-release which followed the Césars. Clearly, fewer than 300,000 spectators do not make this film popular in the same way as, for example, *Les Choristes*, which, incidentally, did not receive any major awards, but it reveals that small budget films can achieve success and popularity and that this may not be immediate, but gradual and accumulative.

It is also perhaps worth mentioning *Indigènes* (Rachid Bouchareb, 2006) in this context; clearly, this film counts among its cast Djamel Debbouze as well as a number of other rising French stars. Yet it focuses on the plight of Maghrebi soldiers whose contribution to the liberation of France has been relatively unacknowledged by the French government, a subject, then, which many audiences may find controversial and rather serious. *Indigènes*, like *L'Esquive*, gains its popularity from the positive "word-of-mouth" campaign which preceded its awards at both the Césars and the Cannes film festival in 2006, eventually allowing it to reach an audience of three million (Loustalot 2006, 7).

Two further films—*Balzac et la petite tailleuse chinoise* (Dai Sijie, 2002) and *Depuis qu'Otar est parti* (Julie Bertuccelli, 2003)—destabilise the notions of both popular cinema and of French film, since not only were they not hits with the general French public, but they are also set outside France and include strong references to classic French literature and culture, again viewed from abroad. Yet, as Deirdre Russell and Binita Mehta argue respectively, these films construct a view of France and its culture that is shared by ordinary people, thereby examining the ways in which France penetrates the everyday lives of individuals in other countries.

## Increasing audiences, deepening crisis

Many of the box office figures for the above-mentioned films demonstrate that audience demand for domestic productions has risen fairly sharply in recent years. 2001 was a key turning point, with a steep increase in the number of films produced in comparison with previous years, greater audience takings and therefore a larger share of the market for French films. In 2006, the market share represented by French productions exceeded that of American films for the first time since 1984.<sup>3</sup> This comes after decades of Hollywood dominance at the French box office. For some, this, and the fact that the number of tickets sold is rising every year (see Hayes in this volume), may be a sign that French cinema is no longer experiencing a “crisis”. Yet, a form of crisis still exists, even if this has been displaced.<sup>4</sup> The new, larger audiences for French films tend to be attracted to a limited range of movies; as Michel Ciment argues, 90% of the tickets sold in 2006 were for only 10% of the total output, despite the significant rise in the number of productions—240 in 2005 (Ciment 2006, 78). As Hayes points out in this volume, funding for projects in France has grown significantly, with a third of finances being invested in films with budgets of over 15 million euros. Hayes attributes this to television channels which are keen to invest in films which will, eventually, secure large television audiences.

The rise in budgets of 240% between 1996 and 2006, and the concentration of finances on a limited number of productions, has created an atmosphere of concern, as illustrated by Jean-Michel Frodon’s regular articles in *Cahiers du cinéma* (2006, 11-15 and 2007, 37).<sup>5</sup> For Frodon and other critics of recent French films, the term “popular” is associated with a multifaceted crisis, evident not only in these exaggerated production costs, but also in that films enjoy far shorter runs at cinemas than in the past. Some see this as the result of recent developments in the consumption of cultural products, particularly in that cinemas have become merely one location of reception among many (we will return to this point later). Pascal Mérigeau, an established film critic writing for the French press, deplores the fact that French cinema has, like so many others, become a commercial enterprise. Mérigeau argues that films tend to be “products shown on cinema screens but destined for television”,<sup>6</sup> with a few exceptions such as Jacques Audiard and Kechiche:

When audiences make films like *Amélie Poulain*, *Les Choristes*, *Fauteuils d’orchestre* or *La Doublure* triumph at the box office, they are universally casting a vote for pre-television cinema. And these films conform to the image the spectators have of what cinema is. (2006, 65)<sup>7</sup>

In a noted speech made at the Césars in March 2007, Pascale Ferran—who, incidentally, received five awards for her film *Lady Chatterley*—outlined the negative effects of this commercialisation of cinema.<sup>8</sup> For Ferran, there is room in the French film industry for popular, big-budget films and for very small-scale “auteur” films which inhabit the margins of the cinephile market, but what Ferran refers to as films from the “middle ground” find themselves being squeezed out and denied the possibility of gradually gaining the favour of spectator groups. An example of such a film could be *Indigènes* which, while eventually reaching a budget of €14 million, took three years to secure its funding (Loustalot 2006, 7). Critics agree with Ferran, and speak of a polarisation of the French film industry between the blockbuster and the *film d’auteur*.<sup>9</sup> It should also be noted, however, that not all small auteur films receive the necessary funding for the project to come to fruition; first-time directors are privileged, but struggle to secure monies for their second and subsequent films.

Beyond the question of budgets, critics have been reticent about the success of blockbusters in France. Some have decried what they see as excessive repetition of the same commercial and production strategies. This includes devoting an increasingly large proportion of a film’s finances to publicity. According to the Centre National de la Cinématographie, advertising budgets doubled between 2000 and 2005.<sup>10</sup> Marketing for Jeunet’s *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* accounted for 3.5 million euros out of a total budget of 45 million (Priot 2005, 104). Increasingly, producers use business plans and approach large conglomerates to sponsor their projects, which, in return, are able to use the films as ways of advertising their own products. An example of this is *Arthur et les minimoyes* (Luc Besson, 2006) for which Besson and his production company EuropaCorp negotiated promotional contracts with major business partners.<sup>11</sup> *Arthur* was released in France in December 2006 with a record budget for a French film of 65 million euros after nearly a year of commercial preparation using a variety of supports, including partnerships with a bank (BNP Paribas) and a mobile telecommunications company (Orange). Customers and spectators alike could watch clips from the film on the Orange website and BNP Paribas bought the rights to use the face of Arthur in their own promotional material in order to rejuvenate their image, with every branch featuring posters of the charismatic central character. *Arthur* was an instant box office hit in France with 1.5 million viewers in its first week of release at 956 cinemas, culminating in a total audience figure of 6.3 million. Other common and recurring strategies include the use of familiar stars and recognisable genre conventions. As a consequence, originality and the

creative impulse have been said to suffer, there being little space for individual artistic expression within such restrictive financial, production and promotional practices (Frodon 2007, 38). Frodon observes what he terms an “anti-auteur ideology” among certain powerful production teams and television channels. This has contributed to the “bipolarisation” (Frodon 2007, 38; see also Vulser 2007) of the film market already mentioned in reference to Ferran’s speech cited above.

Critics keen to laud and retain the specificity of French cinema are also concerned about the cultural hybridity of some of these large blockbusters. Films such as *Les Rivières pourpres* and *Taxi 3*, both produced by Besson, are said to be the products of a globalised culture, not only in terms of financing, but also in terms of the representations within the diegesis, referencing Hollywood perhaps more than French culture. Besson is the most common victim of this disdain for the transnational shift in film funding and production, particularly with regard to his use of financial formatting of the type mentioned above in relation to *Arthur et les minimoyes*.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the most notorious example of a film which was perceived as challenging assumptions about a national cinema is *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*. An adaptation of a French novel, the film recounts an important period of French history and is shot in French with French actors, but its funding came indirectly from the USA and it benefited from a marketing strategy worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster, raising a polemic in critical debates as to how “French” Jeunet’s movie actually was. Although its release marked an important moment in contemporary French cinema history, it failed to match the long-term box office success of *Le Fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain*; its audience figure of 4.35 million was achieved after approximately six weeks of general release (Priot 2005).

A further criticism which results from the recent emphasis on big blockbuster movies is the perceived limitation in the types of scripts that are being made into films, thus recalling the polemical debates of the 1950s, in particular Truffaut’s lampooning of the *tradition de qualité* in his infamous article of 1954. Such a paucity of plots and themes has, in some ways, led to a return to genre films, many of which are the object of mixed success; again, *Boudu* and *Les Rivières pourpres* may be cited as examples.

Often, an audience’s perception of genre films differs from that of the critical establishment. For Nacache, the attitudes of film journalists can be narrow-minded, their language denigrating popular cinema, not only as being of little valid interest, but also as potentially damaging French cinema’s international image. Frequently, terms such as “ringard” (behind

the times, cheesy), “vulgaire” (common), and “franchouillard” (salt-of-the-earth-French) pepper the reviews of mainstream productions. This last word carries more negative connotations than its English-language translation suggests. When critics use this term, they convey their stereotypical perception of the French popular character or attitude and therefore articulate a highly judgemental view of certain sectors of the French population. It seems that these reviewers are reluctant to recognise the key changes which have occurred in French cinema in recent years. These include the transformation of production practices—particularly the use of digital special effects—which have adopted new strategies to counteract the dominance of Hollywood in the 1980s and 1990s (Austin 2004). Other media have played an increasingly powerful role in this shift, which we will now outline briefly.

### **The role of other media and developments in film exhibition and reception**

The relationship between French cinema and its small-screen counterpart has always been complex. In recent years, it can be said that French cinema has become increasingly dependent on television for its funding, as already mentioned. In fact, it is estimated that French television channels now account for 90% of film financing. Not surprisingly, then, television companies exercise great power over the choice of projects which get approval. For instance, films with tried and tested formulas—such as comedies—are privileged over more personal projects (Frodon 2007, 37). Productions which do not risk alienating audiences with subject matter than could offend, or forms which could surprise, spectators are prioritised—the aim being to enable these films to be screened during the prime-time periods of television consumption and to maximise their audiences.

In addition, as alluded to above, another trend which affects cinema consumption, in France as well as elsewhere, is the proliferation of “new” media through which audiences can watch films. The 1980s saw the introduction of video and witnessed a reduction in the size of audiences as a consequence, as spectators were presented with the option of renting and watching films in the comfort of their own home. During the 1990s, a shift from video to DVD was evident and soon individuals were presented with the possibility of purchasing films for almost the same price as a cinema ticket, but in a form which has a far better quality of image than video, contains much more information than is possible to access either through video or at the cinema and which is durable and flexible—it can be viewed

on a number of different devices from DVD players to computers. From the late 1990s, new developments in technology have allowed individuals to install cinema-like entertainment systems in their own homes, thus providing some of the pleasures afforded by a film auditorium—surround sound, large screens, widescreen, digitalised images which enhance picture clarity and so on. In addition, the Internet has increased access to film, allowing individuals not only to watch films, but also to purchase them through downloads (or other, less legal means). More recently, innovations in mobile telephone technology have paved the way for films to be viewed on a micro-screen and at times when they would not normally have been watched. Such changes alter not only the contexts of film reception, but also its modes; individuals can start watching a film, but pause it until later, thus forcing a break in the moment of reception. Film appears to have become more commercial, as Mérigeau asserts; it is also a commodity which can be accessed almost anywhere, in a range of different contexts and which can be picked up and dropped at will. As a result, ticket sales at the cinema account for an ever-decreasing percentage of the total recovery costs for a film project.

These new sources of exhibition and reception can now be said to threaten the traditional picture house, thereby presenting cinema managers with the dilemma of finding ways to continue to attract audiences. Movie buffs tend to remain faithful to the practice of watching films in cinemas, but these often erudite spectators are as much attracted to art-house productions as they are to mainstream blockbusters. As a result, producers and cinema managers alike have had to emphasise the specificity of the experience of watching films on the big screen and bring home the many pleasures it offers which cannot be replicated on DVD, through home cinema devices, the Internet or mobile phones. The spectacular, through the use of special effects, appears to be perceived as the area where cinemas can enhance the viewing experience. This has led to the proliferation of multiplexes, as discussed in Hayes' chapter. Multiplexes, due to their size, are often situated on the periphery of French cities and they provide audiences with an unprecedented choice of films which are screened with the latest technologies in image and sound. Consequently, the spectacle has been redefined since the arrival of the multiplex, with audiences now anticipating an experience that will wow and overwhelm them. The imperative need to impress the audience has led genres with their roots in more modest and intimate media forms to invest in the high-tech. Hence, the comic film has shifted from its theatrical aesthetics to the use of special effects in order to bring in large audiences and, in particular,

young spectators. As has been mentioned, *Astérix* and other adaptations of the comic strip or *bande dessinée* provide good examples of this.

This desire for innovation beyond the traditional blockbuster has become a contemporary characteristic which resolutely moves French cinema forward, a point which both Moine and Molia develop in their chapters. Yet contemporary French popular film is also characterised by an attraction for the codes and conventions of the past, a classic cinema of the pre-New Wave period. Vincendeau and Russell examine this in their chapters. Such a nostalgic return to a distant time is articulated through a revisiting of genres, a continuing perception of period dramas as quintessentially espousing a French world view and the release of remakes of past classics (see Nacache). Established themes and stylistic devices are revived without necessarily being modernised and a nostalgic atmosphere and aesthetic is often created. As the contributors argue, this particular trend appears to reveal a France which lacks the confidence to look to the future and to assume its place in a globalised, transnational world; a France which is withdrawing into itself.

If one of the strengths of this volume is the fact that it provides an up-to-date examination of trends in contemporary popular cinema within France itself, another is the varied methods deployed by the different authors in their engagement with many of the films mentioned. Some adopt a mainly textual analysis approach; Tarr, Mehta and McGonagle all provide studies of the representations of ethnicity in contemporary popular cinema in *L'Esquive*, *La Vérité si je mens 1* and *2*, *Chaos* and *Depuis qu'Otar est parti* respectively. Similarly, Leahy examines the theme of class and cultural distinction in *Le Goût des autres*, Vincendeau explores the relationship between *La Cage aux Rossignols* and *Les Choristes* and Michelle Scatton-Tessier probes the place of advertising techniques in *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* and *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*. Russell analyses the personal filmmaking practices evident in *Les Choristes*, *Ma femme est une actrice* and *Balzac et la petite tailleuse chinoise*, therefore combining an approach which is part-based in auteur discourses with film analysis and a study of critical reception.

Industrial concerns and contexts are the focus of the chapters by Hayes and Higbee: Hayes examines the emergence of a new exhibition market in France over the last ten years and its consequences, while Higbee considers the ways in which the influences on Mathieu Kassovitz's work reflect shifts in understandings of popular French cinema. Some of these influences clearly emanate from the United States, and the often choppy relationship between Hollywood and French cinema forms the focus of the articles of Moine and Molia; Moine investigates the grafting of foreign

generic conventions onto recognisably French material in *Taxi* (Gérard Pirès, 1998), *Le Pacte des Loups* and *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, while Molia discusses specifically the emergence and development of the French “superproduction” genre and what this owes to Hollywood. In his chapter, Tim Palmer analyses the relationship between art-house film and popular cinema in France through the case study of *Il est plus facile pour un chameau...*; for Palmer, Bruni-Tedeschi’s film sits at the frontier of both art-house and popular cinema—it is, as Palmer suggests, a “pop-art” product. Finally, although reception is a concern for many of the articles here, it provides the central focus of the chapters by Nacache and Ingrid Stigsdotter. Nacache explores the paradoxical and, at times, destructive preconceptions of French film critics through her case study of the reviews of *Boudu*. Stigsdotter also engages with critical reception, this time the reviews of *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* in the British press. Stigsdotter’s article makes an important addition to the methodological diversity of this volume in that it also provides a study of audience responses to the film among a group of British spectators. While a fairly established approach to the study of reception exists in work on British and American media products, little detailed and focused research has been carried out on the actual reactions among spectators to French films (Waldron 2004, 121). The range of case study material, the inclusion of factual data and the different methodologies employed clearly combine to provide what we believe is an original overview of the state of popular cinema in France today and how it is viewed, both in France and abroad.

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<sup>1</sup> The statistics provided are from the CNC unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Debbouze was voted most popular actor by 6-14 year-olds in 2003 and 2004. See Vanderschelden (2005) for a more detailed account of his career. See also Martin (1998) and Herzberg and Johannès (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Source CNC *Bilan 2006*, May 2007.

<sup>4</sup> For a provocative report on the theme of crisis affecting contemporary French cinema, see Cluzel (2003).

<sup>5</sup> For full budget information on key recent films see Priot (2005).

<sup>6</sup> “[D]es produits télé diffusés sur grand écran mais destinés au petit.” (Mérigeau 2006, 64). See also Mérigeau’s overtly polemical pamphlet, *Cinéma: autopsie d'un meurtre* (2007).

<sup>7</sup> “Quand le public fait un triomphe à “Amélie Poulain”, aux “Choristes”, à “Fauteuils d’orchestre” et à “La Doublure”, c’est le cinéma d’avant la télé qu’il plébiscite. Et ces films-là correspondent à l’idée que les spectateurs se font d’un film de cinéma.”

<sup>8</sup> The transcript of the speech was reproduced in *Le Monde*, 26 February 2007 (Ferran 2007). See also Péron (2007). Ciment talks of a “cinéma intermédiaire” (2006, 80); Ferran about a “cinéma du milieu” (2007).

<sup>9</sup> See Ciment (2006, 79-80); Frodon (2006); Vulser (2007).

<sup>10</sup> *La Promotion des Films*, CNC March 2006.

<sup>11</sup> See telling review titles such as: Bonnard and Lepage (2006) “*Minimoys, maxifric*”; Bouzet (2006) “*Minimoys, maximarché*”; and Lorrain (2006) “*Minimoys et maxi-business*”.

<sup>12</sup> For more information on transnational and postnational cinema, see Ezra (2004), Danan (2000, 2006) and Tarr (2007).

## CHAPTER ONE

# SCREEN GRAB: POPULAR CINEMA AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF FILM EXHIBITION IN FRANCE

GRAEME HAYES

In the mid-1990s, it was common for film professionals and politicians of the left and right alike to refer to multiplexes as “les porte-avions du cinéma américain”, invading “aircraft-carriers” ready to unleash Hollywood fodder on a subdued public. The consistently strong performance of French cinema at the domestic box office over the last ten years, supported by a wide range of state regulatory measures, has since calmed most of these initial fears. Indeed, according to official figures from the Observatoire de la diffusion et de l’exploitation cinématographiques, a monitoring body set up in 1995 by then culture minister Philippe Douste-Blazy in response to the unease about the development of multiplexes, the national market share of French films has increased as multiplexes have spread: whereas over the five years 1996-2000 French films attracted 32% of total admissions, in the five years 2001-05 this figure rose to an average of 37.3% (Observatoire 2006, 8), and in 2006 reached 45%, only 0.8% lower than the market share claimed by American films (CNC 2007). Moreover, France produced over 220 films in each of the three years 2003-2005 (compared to 160 in 1996), and has produced over 200 films every year bar one since 1999 (Observatoire 2006, 3). Meanwhile, as of the end of 2005, there were 140 multiplexes across France, including at least one in every conurbation of 100,000 inhabitants; only seven of these multiplexes are not owned by French concerns, and only one of these—AMC’s complex in Dunkirk—is American-owned.<sup>1</sup> An authorisation procedure introduced in 1996 has enabled the central state to intervene in cinema-building applications and protect multiplexes from potentially harmful competition by guaranteeing them local geographical monopolies, in turn enabling the constitution of

“national champions” –essentially EuroPalaces (a fusion of Pathé and Gaumont, with the former holding two-thirds and the latter one-third of shares) and UGC—with the capital to invest in exhibition markets elsewhere in Europe, particularly Italy and Spain (see Hayes and O’Shaughnessy 2005 for further discussion).

In France, French “popular” cinema has flourished in the multiplex era, particularly if we define popular as commercially successful. Indeed, high levels of investment in the modernisation of theatres have unquestionably attracted mass audiences back to the cinema. From the 124 million registered in 1994 (the year after the first multiplex was opened in France), admissions rose to 195 million in 2004 and, despite the disappointing results for 2005 of 174 million, recovered to 188 million in 2006. Most spectacularly, the unheralded *Les Choristes* (Christophe Barratier, 2004) attracted 8.6 million spectators in 2004, and further sold over one million soundtrack CDs and over two million DVDs, generating a total return of over 100 million euros for a production budget of only 5.3 million euros. More widely, 88 French films attracted more than a million paying spectators over the 2001-05 period, compared to 47 in the five years from 1996-2000 (Observatoire 2006, 10), while there are an increasing number of medium-large budget films being produced in France. Given also the increasing centrality in production decisions of television channels seeking mass-market films which will attract subsequent audience share, the signs are that there is a developing trend towards the concentration of total production investment in films with higher than average budgets (Bray and Catalayud 2005, 201-4, Bénabent 2006, 52-4). Thus, though 60% of French films had budgets of 5 million euros or less in 2005, 61.1% of investment was devoted to films with budgets of 7 million euros or greater (compared to 50.5% in 2002), and nearly a third of investment went to the dozen films with budgets of 15 million euros or more (CNC 2006a, 8-9).<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, there remain key concerns over the effect of multiplexes. They have provided the conditions for a sustained resurgence in French popular cinema, not simply in the quantitative terms of commercial success, but also by extending access to film socially and geographically; but they have also reinforced the dominant position of national programming circuits, especially UGC and EuroPalaces. Since 2000, this position has been further reinforced—especially in the key Paris market—by the introduction of loyalty cards (UGC’s *Carte Illimitée* and Gaumont/MK2’s *Le Pass*). While these developments have delivered high, stable audience levels, providing the commercial returns necessary for the production of a French popular cinema capable of competing with

Hollywood, at least at the domestic box office, they have also brought one key aspect of what we might term Americanisation: the development of saturation, or platform, release strategies. The last ten years or so have been remarkable for the inflation seen in the number of prints on which films are released, and the concomitant shortening of time that films have to find an audience. As I will argue, by entrenching the dominant position of national programming circuits, multiplexes have therefore afforded audiences outside central Paris rapid access to new mass-market releases, screened in modernised, state of the art theatres. But they have also brought into sharp focus questions over who defines what popular cinema might be. Given the widespread success of French films at the domestic box office, this question is not posed in terms of a Franco-American opposition, but rather in terms of access to and the prospects of independent cinema.

### **How multiplexes have transformed the geography of mass-market film**

Multiplexes brought the financial investment and technological modernisation underpinning the startling renaissance in cinema-going in France over the last decade; they have also brought first-run mass popular cinema to audiences outside the major urban centres. The spread of multiplexes has followed deliberately urban and peri-urban logics, with a number of predominantly rural *départements* (from the Vosges to the Creuse and the Gers) still awaiting their first multiplex; yet 68 of France's 95 *départements* now have at least one multiplex (compared to 47 in 2000), and only one of metropolitan France's 22 administrative regions (Corsica) is now unequipped (CNC 2006b, 24-8). This model of spatial development has had key consequences for the pattern of audience figures. Indeed, figures from the Observatoire (2005, 9-11) show that the increase in cinema admissions over the 1996-2004 period has been disproportionately low in Paris:

	1996		2004		change 2004/1996	
	Admissions millions	% of total admissions	Admissions millions	% of total admissions	millions	%
<b>France</b>	<b>136.7</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>194.8</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>+58.1</b>	<b>+42.5%</b>
<b>Paris</b>	<b>26.3</b>	<b>19.2%</b>	<b>30.3</b>	<b>15.6%</b>	<b>+4.0</b>	<b>+15.3%</b>
<b>Ile de France (not incl. Paris)</b>	<b>16.9</b>	<b>12.3%</b>	<b>27.9</b>	<b>14.3%</b>	<b>+11.0</b>	<b>+65.0%</b>
Petite couronne (inner suburbs)	7.8	5.7%	14.3	7.3%	+6.5	+82.0%
Grande couronne (outer suburbs)	9.1	6.6%	13.6	7.0%	+4.5	+50.4%
<b>Outside Paris and its region</b>	<b>93.6</b>	<b>68.5%</b>	<b>136.6</b>	<b>70.1%</b>	<b>+43.0</b>	<b>+46.0%</b>
Conurbations of >100,000	57.0	41.7%	83.3	42.7%	+26.3	+46.1%
Conurbations of <100,000	36.6	26.8%	53.3	27.4%	+16.3	+45.8%

**Table 1: Evolution of cinema admissions 1996-2004**

As the table shows, the increase in cinema admissions has overwhelmingly been a product of absolute increases in provincial cinema audiences, while audiences in the capital's suburbs—particularly in the “petite couronne” adjacent to the périphérique motorway ring—have produced the highest relative increase in admissions. These figures are consonant with the pattern of development of multiplexes. Though central Paris boasts UGC's Les Halles and Bercy complexes, which together accounted for more than 6 million admissions in 2004, it has only six multiplexes in total, accounting for 36% of the capital's total admissions in 2004. By contrast, the modernisation of France's cinema exhibition has been concentrated in the Parisian suburbs, where there are now sixteen multiplexes, and in the provinces. Multiplexes now account for one out of every two tickets sold in France, but three out of four in conurbations of between 100,000 and 200,000 people, while over a quarter of France's multiplexes are sited in agglomerations of fewer than 100,000 inhabitants.

The supporters of multiplexes frame this as the balanced development of social access to culture. Given the centrality of cinema to projections of national identity in France, it is important to underline that by extending access to commercial cinema into the suburbs, multiplexes can be seen as playing a valuable role in the construction of cultural cohesion, social integration, and democratic legitimacy. For Dominique Lefebvre, former chief adviser to Jack Lang at the ministry of culture in 1992-93, this is a process of cultural democratisation. As socialist mayor of Cergy in the northern Paris suburbs (since 1995), Lefebvre has actively supported the construction and subsequent extension of a UGC Ciné-Cité multiplex in the new town of Cergy-le-Haut (also within his constituency); this decision has locked him into an often bitter local dispute with the ASCUt, a thousand-strong spectators' association formed in 2002 to defend the neighbouring Utopia cinemas in Pontoise and St Ouen l'Aumône (see Hayes 2005). For the ASCUt, the new multiplex threatened cultural diversity by programming some of the more accessible art-house and subtitled films that the independent Utopia cinemas would normally screen. According to the spectators' association, though this programming policy might seem superficially progressive, it was simply economic bullying: UGC was really intent on reducing local competition by depriving Utopia of the receipts on which its financial security depends, and which also enable it to screen less immediately commercially viable films. For Lefebvre, in contrast, the two cinemas were not only compatible but provided a vital component in spectator choice, access to culture, and balanced infrastructural development; rather than a threat, the type of “quality” programming offered by UGC constitutes a key element of

municipal urban, cultural and education policies. Not only would the new multiplex play a vital role for the local community (“un rôle important de proximité”) and for the “quartiers très populaires” in particular—such as the 25,000 inhabitants of the nearby Saint-Christophe/Axe Majeur high-density housing estate—but it would also act as an anchor development helping to attract other cultural and leisure facilities to the under-resourced suburbs.<sup>3</sup> For Lefebvre, the three weeks of rioting which hit France’s suburbs in autumn 2005 serve to confirm this view, increasing the strategic importance of municipal cultural policy for social integration.<sup>4</sup>

First-run popular cinema now has a base in the Parisian *banlieue* as well as in small to medium-sized provincial towns (particularly through the CGR circuit). Not only have multiplexes brought mainstream cinema to mass audiences, then, but they have also by the same process transformed the geography of film distribution in France. In this sense, multiplexes can be seen as central to the construction of a popular cinema, where popular is identified in terms of social access to culture. Further, this is not only the case for the socially, culturally and economically disadvantaged suburbs, but for the construction of France’s cinema audiences as “un peuple”, a single entity with equal access to film, irrespective of internal geographical differentiation. Contrasting the current situation with that prevailing thirty years ago is instructive. In 1976, the review *Cinéma* devoted its August-September double issue to a highly critical analysis of the state of French cinema, focusing in particular on the treatment of cinema audiences outside the Paris region. In its study of five provincial towns of varying size—Dieppe, Montpellier, Saintes, Strasbourg and Toulon—the review noted that there were only two real similarities between the Parisian and provincial cinema-going experience: the price of admission and the opportunity to see successful commercial films. In contrast, though films attracting 100,000 or more spectators in their initial Paris run were released nationwide relatively quickly (and major productions were often released simultaneously throughout France), provincial audiences were obliged to wait several months to see less commercially successful films. Films attracting fewer than 50,000 spectators on their Paris run were often not released at all outside the capital, except in *ciné-clubs*. Moreover, when films did reach the provinces, the environment in which they were presented was all too often sub-standard: outdated theatres, poor-quality prints, artificially-inserted cuts to create an interval for selling ice-creams, dubbing rather than subtitles. According to the review, film exhibition outside Paris was—with only a few exceptions—in the hands of “shopkeepers who know nothing about cinema and take spectators for retards”, a situation which

highlighted “a fundamental absence of cultural policy and the incoherence of a commercial policy which cares little for the product sold” (Gévaudan 1976, 61).

Today, the dominance of national multi-screen cinema circuits enables films to open on screens throughout France at the same time, with little distinction made between Paris, provincial towns and cities, or their outlying suburban areas. One indication of this increasing non-metropolitan exposure is that mass-market films have consistently higher audience penetration in the provinces than they do in Paris. Of course, absolute audience figures are expected to be higher in successful films outside Paris, in line with the overall proportion of French audiences tabulated above; on average, films attracting over one million spectators at the domestic box office did 84% of their business in the provinces in 2004. But there is also evidence that very successful mass-audience films are proportionally more successful outside Paris and its region; in 2004, all four films which attracted over five million spectators (*Les Choristes*, *Shrek 2* (Andrew Adamson *et al.*, 2004), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2004), *Spider-Man 2* (Sam Raimi, 2004)), and ten of the top twenty films, found at least 90% of their audiences outside the Ile de France.

### **Saturation release strategies and the squeezing of screen space**

In other words, therefore, the spread of multiplexes across French provincial towns and cities has enabled the construction of a simultaneous, collective, *national* audience for cinema, while at the same time increasing the potential market penetration of French (as well as foreign) film. Yet—as apparently attractive as this *nouvelle donne* might sound—it is also highly problematic. One of the reasons why commercial films may do better in the provinces than in Paris is that there is also less available film choice outside Paris. American films, for example, receive proportionally more screenings outside Paris than they do in the capital, a trend which is especially pronounced in the Paris suburbs (CNC 2006b, 36). To put it another way: what makes a film popular may have less to do with the textual properties of an individual film than with the prevailing conditions of marketing, distribution and exhibition. In particular, simultaneous-release circuit programming privileges both the screening of relatively few films and a high weekly film turnover.

A key consequence of the multiplexing of French cinemas—as was the case with America’s malls in the 1970s—is that it has provided France’s