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Is it French? Popular Postnational Screen Fiction from France

Edited by Mary Harrod · Raphaëlle Moine

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Introduction: The Expanding Imagination of Mainstream French Films and Television Series

Mary Harrod and Raphaëlle Moine

As we write this introduction in December 2022, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup in Qatar is the subject of fierce disapproval, and victim of some boycotts, due to the nation's poor human rights record and anti-LGBTQ+ laws. Televised international sport shares with screen fiction a privileged status as a forum for articulating transnational culture (Giulianotti and Robertson 2009; Hedling 2015). While the persistence of national categories in such competitions is nothing less than their *sine qua non*, the current controversy

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serves to highlight the significant economic and political stakes engaged when transnational identities are instantiated even within the seemingly anodyne sphere of entertainment: the central pillar of what this book dubs postnational popular culture.

The initial idea for a research project exploring this category in French film and television series was fleshed out in 2018 through a series of meetings between its editors. At that time, we observed that in the previous decade, data from the French Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC) and the European Audiovisual Observatory had recorded exceptionally high cinema attendance in France, the second-largest industry in the Western world, alongside strong figures for Europe as a whole. Local produce is a significant element of this picture—especially in France, where the national comedies that always hold the status of the most popular domestic genre (here as elsewhere) have since 2008 comprised three of the top 20 films *ever* at the domestic box office, while home-grown post-millennial crime and heritage films are also represented in the nation's overall top 50 (Harrod and Powrie 2018). More strikingly, given the usual conceptualisation of ex-Hollywood genre films as destined for home markets, several of these—for instance, comedies *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain/Amélie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001), *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis/Welcome to the Land of Shtis* (Dany Boon, 2008) or *Intouchables/Untouchable* (Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, 2011); the heritage musical *Les Choristes/The Chorus* (Christophe Barratier, 2004); the heritage biopic *La Môme/La Vie en rose* (Olivier Dahan, 2007) or the neo-noir thriller *Ne le dis à personne/Tell No One* (Guillaume Canet, 2006)—had also performed markedly well outside France.¹ Meanwhile, 'quality' French television series such as police procedural *Engrenages/Spiral* (Canal+, 2005–2020), sold to the highly internationally oriented BBC in a landmark development; supernatural drama *Les Revenants/The Returned* (Canal+, 2012–2015), part funded by the EU's MEDIA programme (Fig. 1); workplace comedy *Dix pour cent/Call My Agent!* (France 2/Netflix, 2015–2020); and heritage drama *Versailles* (Canal+, 2015–2018) (Fig. 2) had, along with Scandinavian crime dramas, started to become international household names to an unprecedented degree for European television.

This raised the question of how 'the Frenchness of French cinema' (Vincendeau 2011) and its typically even more domestically oriented cousin television, both produced within a system historically characterised by cultural exceptionalism, might need to be rethought through reference to translocal signifiers. If, as it is generally claimed, nations comprise



Fig. 1 The newly outward-looking face of postnational Frenchness in *Les Revenants*



Fig. 2 The newly outward-looking face of postnational Frenchness in *Versailles*

‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1991 [1983]), mass cultural discourses including popular film and television are key signifiers for not only national but also—increasingly of late—transnational identity (cf. Appadurai 1996, 35), as a category that transcends the national *while taking this in and even shoring it up* (Ezra and Rowden 2006a, 4). In other words, new narratives of Frenchness demand scholarly scrutiny in order to apprehend shifts in how France represents and thereby constructs itself during a period of neo-liberal globalisation—with attendant anxieties about nationhood.

The project’s broad primary objective has from the outset been to designate an intensification of truly mass-popular audiovisual products’ uncoupling from national spheres of circulation if not production. Charlie Michael’s chapter in this volume dates a move to embrace genre filmmaking in France back to Minister of Culture Jack Lang’s structural reforms in the sector during the 1990s, which made cable television a key source of film finance. More recently, as producer of *Les Revenants*, *Engrenages* and *Versailles*, the subscription channel Canal+ was instrumental in early changes in France (see also Kitsopanidou and Thévenin forthcoming; Harrod 2021, 304). However, since the mid-2010s, a shift has occurred that renders the need for such new terminology all the more urgent: the increasing reach and visibility of global digital subscription video-on-demand ((S)VoD) streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu or a growing list of competitor services.² It is striking to consider that these were but one element of the changes becoming apparent even as recently as 2018. Market-leading Netflix expanded very significantly in 2011–2012 and developed a French division in 2014, while Amazon Studios was founded in 2013. However, the obligation from early 2020 onwards for swathes of the world’s population to spend most if not all of their time at home for weeks or months on end gave such services an enormous boost. Thus, data suggests that after a broadly steady rise in the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, by 2021 around 19 million French households subscribed to at least one (S)VoD service (Netflix represented 8.4 million subscriptions, with Prime Video and Disney+ the next most popular) (Goodall forthcoming).³ Meanwhile, the French streaming service Molotov had become available in half a dozen Francophone African countries (only more recently ceding dominance to Netflix), and an international surge in series production was already underway. While evidence of a waning in the fortunes of Netflix specifically has generated headlines since 2022, this is hardly surprising after such spectacular success and at a moment when world populations are not only out of lockdown but face heightened financial pressures; it does

not detract from the massive reorientation of viewing models that has been prompted by the ability to stream films and television programmes from all over the world with ever-increasing ease and flexibility, across multiple devices, either in the original language with or without subtitles or else dubbed, in almost any situation. It is commonly asserted by post-modern geographers that digital technology has led to space–time compression (Mihelj 2011, 144). For audiovisual products, there is no doubt that recent changes have made the consumption of narratives produced abroad easier than ever before.⁴ Today, for the millions of subscribers to (S)VoD platforms, televisual immersion in a wide variety of ‘foreign’ cultural narratives can be achieved effortlessly from the comfort of one’s own home. Moreover, thanks to the now standard provision of multilingual dubbing, it can also be enjoyed in their own language by the vast majority of audiences who prefer to avoid subtitles (Mazdon 2015, 208–209; see also Betz 2009, 45–92) (even if social media platforms amply evidence the use of such products by a significant proportion of viewers to enhance language learning). Given the commonly held view that ‘no other media institution was more central to the modernist intent of engineering a national identity [than was television]’ (Chalaby 2005, 1; cf. Elsaesser 2005, 54), such a change highlights a demand for investigation into the role of fictions consumed on small as well as (more traditionally transnational) large screens in forging postnational identities, and the specificities of their contours.

The shapes traced by such new configurations of a particular postnational identity are the subject of this volume. One challenge has clearly been to grapple with focalising a period of transition (post-2000) from older to newer models for the production and distribution of Frenchness in popular audiovisual fiction. Contributions to it bridge this divide, while seeking ultimately to understand how the latest emergent tendencies may develop in the future and with what significance for postnational identity-formation. First of all, however, we sketch out a more detailed survey of both the historical background to and recent landscape of postnational Frenchness as articulated in mainstream film and television. This involves a dialogue that aims to build on and update existing scholarship on trans/postnational media industries, as a foundation for deciding which perspectives are most fitting when turning subsequently to significant trends in texts themselves. Here, an overview of the rationale for the book’s chapter selection, accompanied and followed by summaries and extrapolations of the foci and implications of each, reflects the twin objectives of capturing a representative variety of empirical developments in media production

and testing apt paradigms for their analysis. In so doing, it points to initial conclusions about key emergent features of on-screen postnational Frenchness, as well as other comparable identities, as constructed and circulated through fictions produced for mass-popular consumption.

FROM A TRANSNATIONAL TO A POSTNATIONAL MODEL

It is well known that in the pre-sound era France, widely perceived to have invented cinema, rivalled the USA for world dominance of screen markets. The nation's toppling from grace occasioned much Gallic cultural agitation, including concern about threats to national identity, in the second half of the twentieth century. It was without doubt a factor in France's adoption of protectionist policies preventing Hollywood produce from saturating domestic circuits, the subject of fraught GATT negotiations in 1993 in particular (Mazdon 2000, 6–8). This account hints at why France recommends itself as a case study for an enquiry into postnational identity. The national cinema's status as emblematic of European exceptionalism dates back until at least the art cinema movements of the 1960s, when for *Sight and Sound* editor Penelope Houston 'if Hollywood's directors look longingly towards the greater freedoms of Europe, it is to France that they look first' (1963, 81). This long-standing, elevated status, linked to subsidies and grassroots activities along with generalised and persistent forms of national cultural protectionism (Lobato 2019, 144–151; Buchsbaum 2017), has enabled French audiovisual fiction to retain a particularly strong identity, both in itself and as a privileged articulator of Europeanness more generally—in particular from Anglo-American perspectives.⁵ At the same time, France has continued to nurture major ambitions as an exporter of audiovisual fare: for decades it has been the most numerically dominant non-Anglophone nation in Europe when it comes to exporting film and now—following a concerted industrial effort to adapt to the greater international opportunities offered by VoD models announced at the Unifrance Rendez-Vous in 2017 (Hopewell 2017)—the nation also occupies that status in world television markets.⁶

Emphasising the importance of (S)VoD does not of course suggest televised fictions of the previous decades, whether serial or feature-length, were necessarily all more domestically circumscribed than theatrical films. For one thing, a proliferation of overlaps between the categories dates back at least to the 1980s, and the strengthening of financing arrangements between television channels and film production companies (cf.

Elsaesser 2005, 54–56) has generally continued to date, including to an exceptionally high degree in France (Delaporte 2015, 75–77). This is above all a result of television channels financing film production in exchange for exclusive or priority screening rights after any theatrical release—quite some time after in France, due to the strict local ‘media chronology’ also outlined by Christopher Meir’s chapter in this volume.⁷ Rather, the difference is both the scale and the multidirectional diversity of flows that make up the traffic system. Thus, in the 1970s, European nations and especially the USA dominated export markets for not only cinema but also television (Lobato 2019, 140–141). Subsequently, this picture has diversified to a degree. In cinema, notably, several East Asian nations and India now feature in the top ten exporters of cinema. Television’s transnational ambitions first expanded significantly in the 1980s with the advent of satellite distribution (Chalaby 2009, 7–53; 2023, 37–55). Jean K. Chalaby’s 2005 discussion of transnational television’s contribution ‘towards a new media order’ seeks to move away from unidirectional accounts of the relationship between ‘the West and the rest’ through reference to channels such as the Qatari Al Jazeera, catering to the Arab world; looking more directly to both televised *fiction* and the Global South, Latin American telenovelas, after growing in export importance in the 1980s, were the largest global television export form in 2008 (see Bielby and Harrington 2008, 75, 69). However, the USA actually increased its dominance over European nations in global television production during the 1980s (for reasons largely contingent on developments in the latter territories rather than any taking place in the US industry [Bielby and Harrington, 17]). Subsequently—and as Chalaby’s own work on MTV (2009, 29–30) symptomatises—television produced in the USA has remained dominant (Buonanno 2008, 92–94).⁸ In the last ten years (especially the last five), much more content produced in a far wider variety of countries has become available to mainstream audiences in any countries penetrated by (S)VoD: the reach of Netflix and its successors is global, totally excluding only nations such as China that exert rigid state control over media—even if the cost of subscriptions does limit the audiences along class lines that also track the wealth of nations themselves to a degree, simultaneously creating new cross-national categories of exclusion.

If we recall that (prior to Benedict Anderson’s work) Ernest Gellner’s (1983, 127) classic theorisation of national identity posited that it was not so much the content of media as the sheer existence of its shared channels that created a sense of belonging, the scale of the potential change effected

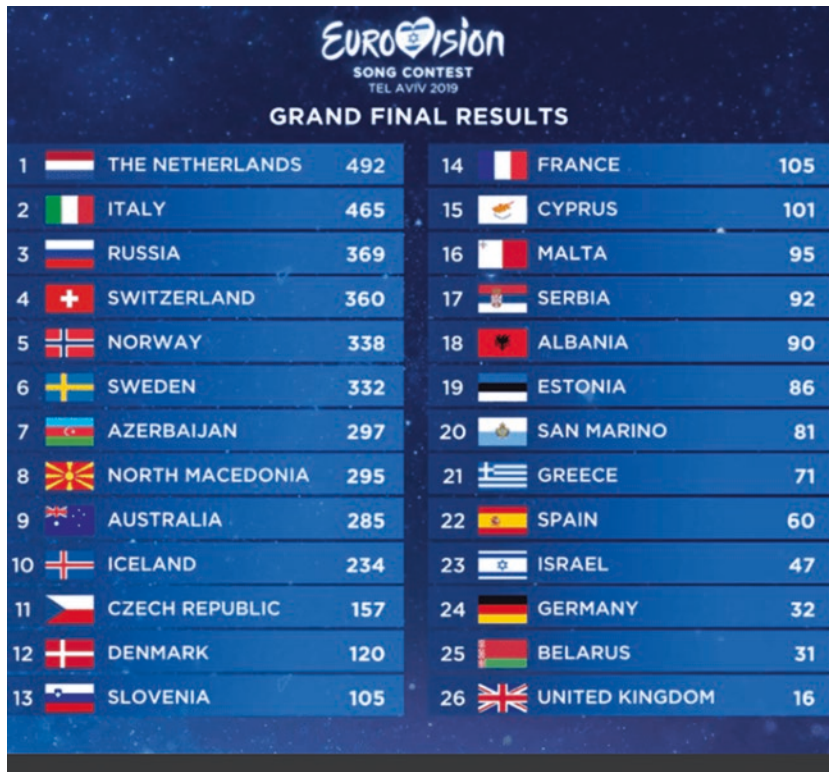
by recent developments comes into relief. More specifically, Gellner's observation suggests that the transmission of film and television digitally across borders via a shared transnational space has very great potential to rewrite the coordinates of human identification and community. Sabina Mihelj is right to point out that Gellner and Anderson were theorising nation at a time when the vogue for discourse analysis tended to lead to idealised conceptions of cultural production. As she puts it, nations may comprise imagined communities but these are not imagined in circumstances of individuals' own choosing (Mihelj 2011, 16). Indeed, it is in recognition of media products' thorough and formative embedding in economic structures that this collection takes in industrial perspectives from macro (in Meir's and Michael's analyses) to micro (in Reece Goodall's and the book's 'co-authored' closing chapters) levels, and everything in between.⁹ Nonetheless, applying Gellner's contention to (S)VoD consumption, it is clear that the experience of viewing fictions from multiple world cultures results at the very least in diffuse feelings of communion thanks to transcultural familiarity, prior to the analysis of cultural and ideological specificities in which many of the essays in the collection engage.

Our allusion to a sense of belonging takes up the call for transnational television studies to consider in more depth the place of emotion in the translocal viewing experience and attendant contributions to constructions of identity (Harrington and Bielby 2005). We return to affective questions in closing this introduction. However, acknowledging their absence from much relevant scholarship here serves to underline the fact that, although we have noted that very recent changes to industrial structures are a major driver of the need for new frameworks for conceptualising on-screen transnational identities, the historical perspective points to a pre-existing need, from various perspectives. Not that transnational French identities have been neglected by film scholarship. Rather, research on cinematic constructions of French (and typically other European) identities has been heavily skewed in favour of 'art' over popular cultural artefacts and trends, both at home and internationally, and in reference to both domestically popular and (perhaps especially) internationally circulated fare. In cinema in particular, European identity has been equated with high art at least since the 1960s New Wave, when France's internationally visible and influential auteurist filmmaking and criticism helped legitimise and shape Film Studies. Although there have been attempts to redress this balance over the last 30 years through analyses informed by Cultural Studies, with Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau's collection

Popular European Cinema (1992) representing a significant milestone, none of them take in the unapologetically mainstream contemporary production sector with which the present study concerns itself. While their work was pioneering outside France especially, Dyer and Vincendeau centralised truly popular genre films of earlier periods rather than contemporary ones, reproducing a trend whereby these cinemas are reclaimed from a historical perspective in a fashion that, if not enabled by nostalgia, is at least animated by the benefits of hindsight. Further, our own understanding of *popular* refers to films and series addressing a significantly broad public *at their inception*, through choices made around genre and industrial positioning—and not including arthouse products that may have broken through at the international box office; it is thus synonymous with the more culturally denigrated moniker *mainstream* that we have chosen, for the sake of clarity, to centralise in the title of this introduction. With these criteria in mind, examining in detail scholarly analyses centred on ‘popular’ French audiovisual narratives from an external (broadly transnational) perspective reveals that, even recognising that the popular vs. auteur opposition is ever-less meaningful (cf. Moine 2005), the bias towards art cinema is plainly still endemic many years after the popular cinema was notionally embraced by academic enquiry. To take one representative example on French cinema, Lucy Mazdon’s (2001) edited collection *France on Film: Reflections on Popular French Cinema* includes (out of a total of 11 chapters) three essays on films by Karim Dridi, Alain Berliner (his transgender story *Ma vie en rose*) and Jacques Audiard that are more immediately aligned with minoritarian filmmaking (Dridi and Berliner) or auteurist positioning (Audiard) than with the mainstream, as well as three analyses of others by Sandrine Veysset, Robert Guédiguian and even Catherine Breillat (her challenging *Romance*) that are resolutely auteurist, arthouse-oriented pieces from whichever perspective one cares to examine them.¹⁰ The more recent co-edited *The Europeanness of European Cinema* (Harrod et al. 2015) attempts to begin to move past these biases by specifically emphasising popular cinema but contains only one chapter (by Neil Archer) dedicated to French cinema with major export success and nothing on television. In short, there is still very limited work on mainstream contemporary French audiovisual narratives, still less in English, and no book-length analyses at all dedicated to how such forms intersect with the (recently accelerated) trans/postnationalisation of media—let alone in the (S)VoD era.

This situation is also partly down to the reproduction of such biases in transnational film scholarship, where they sometimes overlap with but also exceed the championing of European art cinema. Such scholarship has proliferated in this millennium, neatly signposted by the publication in 2000 of the essay to which this introduction owes its subtitle, Andrew Higson's 'The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema'. Here, Higson challenged a previously dominant model of scholarship that accorded great weight to the intersections between cinema and national identity, in view of the fact that national identities are not fixed, impregnable and unadulterated, but rather 'borders are always leaky and there is a considerable degree of movement across them (even in the most authoritarian states). It is in this migration, this border crossing, that the transnational emerges' (2000, 67–68). Following the post-1990s acceleration in the globalisation of culture, a string of works certainly took up the baton laid down by Higson (see, e.g., Ezra and Rowden 2006b; Higbee and Lim 2010; Durovičová and Newman 2010; Marshall 2012; Lim 2019), while 2010 saw the launch of the journal *Transnational Cinemas*. However, not only do the definitions of the transnational and/or transnationalism emerging from these studies often diverge somewhat—when the term is explained at all rather than appearing as a 'largely self-evident qualifier requiring only minimal conceptual clarification' (Hjort 2010, 12–13; see also Higbee and Lim 2010, 10)—but they all base their explorations on corpuses dominated very significantly by arthouse and/or independent films.¹¹

There has been a logical turn in very recent years towards considering the transnational aspects and implications of streaming platforms, notably by Mareike Jenner (2018, 185–240) and Ramon Lobato (2019, especially 67–71). Noting that the transnational phenomenon as understood via Netflix is linked to convergence culture, in the sense that it relies on audiences who do not discriminate content according to its source, Jenner actively embraces this terminology in the streaming platform context. Specifically, building on Mihelj's (2011, 70–94) account of the ongoing importance of 'grammars of nationhood' in a global world, she thus coins the phrase 'grammars of transnationalism' to describe key structuring principles of Netflix's international operations (Jenner 2018, 224–226). Mihelj argues convincingly that national markers are the building blocks of transnational spaces, symbols, dialogue and events—the world clock, say, or we might add the multi-flag display on the voting board of the



The image shows the voting board for the Eurovision Song Contest 2019 Grand Final. The board is set against a dark blue background with a starry pattern. At the top, the Eurovision logo is displayed in white, with 'SONG CONTEST' and 'TEL AVIV 2019' underneath. Below the logo, the text 'GRAND FINAL RESULTS' is written in white. The results are presented in two columns of blue boxes, each containing a rank, a national flag, the country name, and the total score.

Rank	Country	Score	Rank	Country	Score
1	THE NETHERLANDS	492	14	FRANCE	105
2	ITALY	465	15	CYPRUS	101
3	RUSSIA	369	16	MALTA	95
4	SWITZERLAND	360	17	SERBIA	92
5	NORWAY	338	18	ALBANIA	90
6	SWEDEN	332	19	ESTONIA	86
7	AZERBAIJAN	297	20	SAN MARINO	81
8	NORTH MACEDONIA	295	21	GREECE	71
9	AUSTRALIA	285	22	SPAIN	60
10	ICELAND	234	23	ISRAEL	47
11	CZECH REPUBLIC	157	24	GERMANY	32
12	DENMARK	120	25	BELARUS	31
13	SLOVENIA	105	26	UNITED KINGDOM	16

Fig. 3 The 2019 Eurovision Song Contest’s voting board illustrates transnational spaces’ typical reliance on declaratively national components

Eurovision Song Contest (Fig. 3)—and thus cannot be dismissed as major determinants of cultural identity (not to mention economic trends).

Jenner combines this framework with a citation from Steven Vertovec:

Transnationalism describes a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common—however virtual—arena of activity. (in Jenner 2018, 191)

Such relationships become, we can infer, the bedrock of the streaming platform's approach to transnational models of commerce and cultural representation. In fact, Jenner here asserts that the case of Netflix takes the paradigm one step further, making the transnational audience primary ('[it] precedes any notions of a national market [or the concept of cultural export]') in determining production patterns. However, such claims refer to commercial considerations and as such, taken alone, they reveal little about how the processes underpinning the production of fictions instantiate cultural identities. Moreover, even as a description limited to industrial-economic arrangements, they are potentially misrepresentative of the situation as it has evolved since Netflix's international collaborations have multiplied into the later 2010s. As David Pettersen's chapter in this volume explains, Netflix led the way among US-based streaming platforms (including also Amazon, Hulu and Apple) and has been by far the most active agent in not merely acquiring but commissioning content in other territories, starting (with a Brazilian collaboration) in 2014 and moving into French collaborations from 2016.¹² If this distinction is rendered hazy by the overuse of the label 'original', as Meir's chapter reminds us, the discussion with the producers of *Dix pour cent* included in this volume illustrates how the US company can concretely influence content even when it merely acquires locally produced series mid-run. Writing four years after Jenner, Christel Taillibert and Bruno Cailler (2022) describe Netflix more specifically as adopting what they call a 'localized' model of 'local production as the foundation of global consumerism', in a fashion emblematic of other (S)VoD services' models. They thus detail a business approach wherein a property is planned locally but simultaneously analysed by a team of Netflix experts who assess its likely local and global audience potentialities as a basis for recommending a production budget. This paradigm situates any text's immediate context as primordial in the development of its identity; yet the local production team are incentivised to target a putative global audience as well (cf. Goodall and Harrod [forthcoming](#)). Analysing *Lupin*, Pettersen helpfully draws on terminology from software design to describe this move in terms of *internationalisation*, as a process which leads to texts whose postnational status is—somewhat counterintuitively—a function of the very ease with which they can be attributed locally, to their recognisably signalled and notionally familiar nations or regions of origin, by (varied) target audiences. *Postnational* here refers, then, to audiovisual fictions designed from the development stage with eyes trained on the export market as—though not necessarily

primary—much more than the afterthought it has historically tended to represent for non-Anglophone fare, without this delocalising them. Of course, any shift is a question of degree not category. In European television, the logics of purposeful transnationalism underpinned production to a degree at least as far back as the 1970s, when France rivalled the UK (now dominant in Europe) as a key exporter of worldwide television (Nordenstreng and Varis 1974, 30).¹³ According to Chalaby (2023, 1), indeed, ‘Broadcasting was a national industry that progressively internationalised[, while streaming is essentially a global industry that is progressively localising]’. Purposeful transnationalism was certainly already also an influential factor shaping blockbuster movies, most obviously US-produced ones (see Miller et al. 2005) but also, increasingly in this millennium, French films such as *Intouchables* (see Pettersen 2016).¹⁴ However, since the mid-2010s such practices have become more widespread across a much wider range of mainstream texts than was previously the case, ushering in what we might dub a truly postnational era in the circulation of audiovisual fictions.

Many of Jenner’s observations are nonetheless incisive. In fact, her discussion of national versus transnational dynamics even in relation to earlier (i.e. principally locally distributed rather than commissioned) Netflix products does accord significant space to accounts that warn against ‘underestim[ing] the salience of the nation-state in the process of globalization’ (Iwabuchi in Jenner 2018, 191). This tendency to foreground the persistence of nationally accented values and symbols within expressions of transnational identity resonates strongly with the locally (co-)produced corpus examined by this volume, which takes the view that accelerated globalisation is always accompanied by heightened attention to the national. This is most obvious in the form of backlash—as evidenced of late in the political sphere by the rise of populist national parties across the Western world. But the opportunities for nation-building offered by postnational media (for instance, promotion of local brands like the French cars highlighted by Michael’s analysis of Netflix’s *Balle perdue/Lost Bullet* [Guillaume Pierret, 2022], of aspects of French culture such as the stand-up comedy scene scrutinised by Mary Harrod’s discussion of *Drôle/Standing Up* [Netflix, 2022] or of newly ‘globalised’ gender identities examined in chapters by Le Gras, Ginette Vincendeau and Anne Kaftal on female stars and characters) are not simply reducible to reactionary politics. The observation that international audiences have *more* primacy than ever before when it comes to determining details of the

production and circulation of fictions on streaming platforms informs our enquiry, as one which shares with much transnational film scholarship an interest in the dialogical interfacing of national and other elements to produce specific new textual articulations (cf. Higbee and Lim 2010, 10). Where we concur with Lobato rather than Jenner is in the conviction that ‘we lack an adequate vocabulary to describe the geographical configurations characteristic of internet-distributed television. We may need to go beyond terms like global, national, and transnational; however, as yet there is no consensus regarding viable alternatives’ (Lobato 2019, 67). Although Lobato suggests that rendering the complexity of digital flows’ global-national implications and allegiances may prove impossible, we offer *postnational* as a partial solution to the issue when it comes to audiovisual media—even if we do not limit its relevance to internet-distributed products, which in any case lacks coherence as a category, in view of licencing deals that mean many texts are available in multiple viewing spaces.

The concept of the postnational offered her shares with other ‘posts’ (postmodernism, postfeminism, to name only two salient examples) a conviction that *post* denotes a structuring genetic debt to the (national) forebear and not a severance of ties. It is worth stressing at this point another way in which national identity, rather than enduring as a residual aspect of such developments, determines both ends of the production–circulation process. Thus, not only is nation still the primary production context for film and television (international co-production practices and mechanisms notwithstanding), but it is also their dominant destination, since the domestic market is still by far the biggest market for most cultural fictions, especially non-Anglophone ones. This model foregrounds the thorough interweaving of national and postnational identity-construction. Acknowledging it reflects the fact that this collection is not merely concerned with how France represents itself abroad but also how postnationally inflected fictions reinvent French identity within France—even if the European Audiovisual Observatory insists that in 2020 ‘global streaming services’ were still only responsible for 10 per cent of European television series produced (Fontaine 2022). There is a certain parallel here with a scholarly drive spearheaded by David Morley to move away from emphasising mobility when discussing media’s role in geo-cultural identity-construction, privileging instead the way in which such media may allow for a strengthening of notions of ‘home’ (2001, 426–427).¹⁵ In the present case, rather paradoxically, the contention is that precisely because the influence of the geographical nation-state cedes ground at one middle

stage of the production process to a privileging of notions of what might sell elsewhere, Frenchness *tout court* is here renegotiated in a bilateral relation with external cultures: national identity on screen is reconstructed with significant reference to values drawn from global film and television culture, even when playing to local audiences. Thus, the interview that closes this collection notes that the purchase by Netflix of France 2's *Dix pour cent*—which, as an acquisition, would be excluded from European Audiovisual Observatory calculations about ‘global streaming’ produce—led (as noted) to it evolving in terms of focus and also to increased viewer numbers for the show when it was broadcast on the domestic channel. The interview also reminds us of the fact that such fictions also exert second-order creative influence (such as through personnel) in ways impossible to measure in the broader domestic mediasphere. The enhanced reach and impact of global media on French screens to which such examples attest is all the more remarkable in a national context defined by historically heavy state control of television for a democratic nation (this monopoly ended with the Broadcasting Bill in 1982) and an ongoing high level of regulation. Nonetheless, it will be clear by now that the short answer to the question posed in this book's title, *Is it French?*, is yes, on the proviso of recognising national identities are permanently under negotiation.

SCREENING POSTNATIONAL FRENCHNESS

One of the textual results of the industrial paradigm centralised by Jenner's work on Netflix is a proliferation of narratives that abstract from history, yet do so by way of specific referentiality to spheres of representation that resonate ‘glocally’. Jenner cites as a paradigmatic example the US series *Stranger Things*'s (Netflix, 2016–2024) heavy appeal to an imaginary of 1980s–1990s Spielberg-influenced screen Americana (2018, 227). While not every transnationally exported fiction plays up rather than playing down specificity, especially when a particular exporting nation's own international profile may be less clearly defined, we do see a similar phenomenon in several of the French films and series examined in these pages. Notably, spaces that are declaratively national to the point of metonymy such as the French Riviera—in Thomas Pillard's chapter—and especially Paris and its suburbs—in the contributions by Harrod, Michael, Vincendeau, Kaftal and Pettersen—recur as key signifiers of Frenchness.¹⁶ That such spaces are not only discursively (re-)constructed but complexly

intercultural is brought to the fore by Harrod's analysis of both space and language in writer Fanny Herrero's major international hit series *Dix pour cent* and her follow-up *Drôle*, with which the book's Part I, 'New Figures, New Voices', opens. Harrod builds on Thomas Elsaesser's concept of ImpersoNation to suggest that such narratives offer an ImPosture of Frenchness for international consumption, yet one that may nonetheless have performative benefits, notably for race relations as constructed by the emphatically 'multicultural' later series. Questions of diversity, including linguistic ones typically ignored by audiovisual analysis, are then developed in Gemma King's chapter examining the increasing presence of LSF (*Langue des Signes Française* or French Sign Language) as a form of communication, complicating long-standing ties between national identity and language in recent narratives. Her most visible example concerns the film *La Famille Bélier*/*The Bélier Family* (Eric Lartigau, 2014) (Fig. 4)—although this visibility comes partly courtesy of the film's Oscar-winning US (Apple 'Original' but French co-financed) remake *CODA* (Siân Heder,



Fig. 4 The French poster for *La Famille Bélier*, promising feel-good comedy



Fig. 5 Marketing for *CODA*, like its title, subtly amps up the emphasis on social issue realism

2021) (Fig. 5), in a classic example of a long-standing remake strategy involving the suppression of a text's local origins.

By reminding us that Americanised produce still captures the most massive markets—certainly if we exclude the special case of the rapidly growing Chinese industry, which is linked primarily to the size of the Chinese viewership itself—even by comparison with a successfully exported European film, King's analysis provides among other things a usefully comparative angle on certain ongoing economic limitations (as well as affordances) to postnational screen culture. Together, the two opening chapters establish various textual clichés of Frenchness that recur in post-national narratives: namely, modern urban milieus characterised by an admixture of glamour and realism connected to what Vincendeau's chapter calls 'the extremes of the French social spectrum', alongside nostalgic narratives more obviously aligned with the 'transnational middlebrow' (see Galt and Schoonover 2016), whether these literally return us to the French past or, in the case of *La Famille Bélier*, do so more performatively. Goodall then turns to genres with a shorter history in French audiovisual production that now appear to be gaining some traction, more obviously calqued from the outset at least partially on external models: horror and sci-fi. Expanding the opening section's exploration of new perspectives to

take in the space behind the camera, his chapter suggests that the director, producer and all-round industry player Alexandre Aja, who has been behind a recent wave of successful films in these categories, may offer the perfect example of a postnational genre auteur. Here, genre acts as a higher-order category for positioning Aja's films than questions of nation, without the latter being totally elided. As this phenomenon has to date not been typical outside films made in English (cf. Mazel 2023), Goodall's chapter offers something of a counter-perspective to any suggestion inferable from King's piece that all French genre pieces might need an English-language remake to truly maximise their potential circulation.¹⁷ For Aja's films, the process is if anything reversed, as his name has become synonymous with 'French horror' especially as an internationally saleable discursive property.

If discussion of the partial unmooring of postnational narratives from geographical coordinates nonetheless appears to suggest the waning of certain concrete histories, the book's Part II, 'Embodying the Postnational', complicates this assumption by centralising individual industry actors and voices in postnational production and fan culture, alongside the endurance of bodies and material culture more generally, in on-screen articulations of postnational identity. As regards corporeality, an obsession with the body is a stereotype of French cinema as viewed from beyond the Hexagon. This is perhaps most obvious in the wide export of arthouse body horror and/or sexually explicit films under the rubric of New French Extremity since the 1990s (Quandt 2004; see also Palmer 2011). Within more mainstream fare, we have already observed that action has been a key export genre and it comes under critical scrutiny in Part II. Notably, Luc Besson's production company EuropaCorp, specialising in such films, has been responsible for no fewer than four of the top five French films exported in the 2010s (Unifrance 2020, 20), before collapsing in 2019.¹⁸ As such, its success then fall from grace represent highly influential developments deserving of sustained scrutiny, accorded to it in the two chapters that open this section. Firstly, Pillard's analysis of international reactions to Besson's recent films on the online platform IMDb (Internet Movie Database) points towards the paradigm shifts described by this introduction as screen industries are increasingly postnationalised, and Besson's status as a victim of this change: a 'has-been' who knew success with a 1980s and 1990s generation of viewers but who, in trying to adapt to post-millennial trends he does not fully grasp, fails to seduce either audience. As well as explicating certain industrial factors in the demise of his

blockbuster studio, Vanderschelden's following chapter identifies in Besson's filmmaking an attempt to be 'postnational' that broadly accords with the derogatory definition of the concept offered by Martine Danan. This represents one of the few pre-existing attempts to pin down the term, certainly within French film studies, and from which this collection distances itself.¹⁹ Danan thus describes the 'erasure of distinctive elements which have traditionally helped to define the imaginaries and traditions of national cinemas against Hollywood' (2006, 177; see also Danan 1996) in high-budget international films of the late twentieth century. Vanderschelden's analysis of the infamous mega-budget flop *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (Besson, 2017) argues persuasively that in fact the total dilution of Frenchness, and even cinematic medium-specificity, through incorporating delocalised sci-fi elements unfaithful to the French source text and starring celebrities instead of actors, is central to the failure of EuropaCorp and therefore the whole project of the truly global French blockbuster, at least in the delocalised terms envisaged by that studio.²⁰ The contrast with the case of *Aja* in Part I is striking here. Indeed, both Pillard's and Vanderschelden's contributions also sketch out the way in which the failure of recent major EuropaCorp productions equates to the diminished currency of writer–producer–director Besson's brand. This comprises an industrial complex that functions much like a more traditional popular auteur 'label' as a mark of what to expect for Besson's fanbase—not least since, for Vanderschelden, (gendered) aspects of Besson's genre filmmaking have been co-constellated with culturally decried episodes in his personal life.

Closing the section with the first contribution to focus on Netflix as such, Michael maps out points of contact between this company's intervention into cultural politics through action cinema in particular and the negotiation of local versus global production sites within an emblematic French film, *Balle perdue*. His chapter suggestively captures the wider phenomenon of global culture's tendency to endorse consumerist ideologies and practices as a substitute for varied forms of local affiliation (including those lying, by contrast, outside top-down circuits of power) and 'the emerging parameters of a marketplace where national identity increasingly mingles with other sliding forms of referentiality on demand'. At the same time, just as Goodall acknowledges the Frenchness of 'body horror', Michael's chapter identifies a kind of intensified corporeality in French action cinema, obviously linked to a paucity of special effects but also to 'athletic performers'. Although Michael is referring here principally to the



Fig. 6 Jean Dujardin in *The Artist* strikes a carefully controlled pose

performance of action stunts, other forms of virtuoso control of the body distinguish more than one standout star career in French fictions that have travelled, from Jean Dujardin's turn in the Oscar-winning *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011) (Fig. 6) to the work of Omar Sy indirectly examined in these pages by Pettersen (Fig. 7). The fact that both these personae are infused with significant overtones of knowing self-deprecation further tallies with Michael's conclusions: that Frenchness can trade in an aesthetic of unremarkability and self-effacement that is nonetheless positioned by the same token as a 'plucky'—and, we would add, altogether cool—player in the global marketplace.²¹

Part III examines intersections between French postnational and different iterations of feminine and/or feminist values on screen, including orienting the discussion of embodied identities to include female stars. This section's emphasis implicitly acknowledges women's privileged status as symbols of the national 'body politic' (cf. Yuval-Davis 1996), emblems that may or may not resolve tensions around 'progress' versus tradition that

Fig. 7 A French poster for Netflix's *Lupin* foregrounds Omar Sy's imposing physicality



frequently map onto those of globalisation versus localism (cf. Ozia 2006, 21–44). Le Gras's opening contribution considers the stardom of veteran actress Charlotte Rampling. While English-born Rampling's work across British, French and other cinemas underlines the historical status of transnational identity-formation, Le Gras identifies complex postnational inflections in the actor's recent film work (a move from local embedding to a status connoting generic otherness—perhaps even posthuman identity—that is, we note, broadly paralleled by at least one other major European star: Javier Bardem). Both Vincendeau's and Kaftal's following contributions explore in detail a collision already symptomatised by the problem of outmoded gender representations in Luc Besson's films: a clash between

conventional French attitudes to female and feminine identities, which are in many ways quite conservative, and the injunctions of contemporary global (post)feminism. Vincendeau's piece pinpoints the precipitate obsolescence of the female characters—and construction of racial identities—in a forerunner to the contemporary moment of widely postnational television, *Engrenages*. Her detailed analysis of the series's two much-mediatised, counterpointed female leads probes beneath the veneer of feminist assertiveness to root the characters in much older and more reactionary representational lineages. These observations speak clearly to the way in which shifts in production circumstances equate to shifts in aesthetics and therefore culture. Kaftal's essay then carefully unpicks the fine line negotiated by more recently conceived French narratives featuring the 'modern' French postnational star Camille Cottin, who is positioned to appeal simultaneously to both value systems. Postfeminist culture's ability to 'regulate its own tensions' through irony is central to this process, chiming with the cool masculinities outlined in Part II—although through a notably more middle-class and racially Whiter lens. Seeking a potentially dual address for more local and more international audiences, moreover, is quite typical of postnational screen fictions; yet it represents a very particular twist on Amanda Lotz's (2018) observation that increasingly finely calibrated modes of distinction become more important in the era of 'taste cultures based on race and class that supersede national borders and align with changing contemporary TV technologies and production models that emphasize quality television programming and transnational distribution' (Nygaard and Lagerwey 2021, 40).²² Such findings support Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerwey's claims in the same passage that in such a context the imagined community of transnational viewers targeted by fictions that circulate internationally is conceived fundamentally as a 'coalition audience'—in other words, with different on-screen (and paratextual) elements appealing to different segments.

Part IV, 'Industry Players: From Product to Brand', opens with an examination of the good fortunes of the major French film studio Gaumont in the streaming era. In an analysis focused almost exclusively on industrial change, Meir demonstrates the benefits of the company's flexible adaptation to the new models of audiovisual circulation, notably developing series to complement their traditional cinematic output but also engaging in other partnerships with newly emergent key players, such as licensing its back catalogue to Netflix for both local and international screening. Meir also highlights the particular importance of Netflix's female CEO, Sidonie

Dumas, in weathering the storm. Like Vanderschelden's chapter especially, such an emphasis contributes to correcting the paucity of 'middle-level' analysis of specific industry organisations and actors in media studies (Bielby and Harrington 2008, 10–21). Pettersen's chapter, in contrast, homes in on a particular actor in the traditional sense of the word, but one whose influence rivals that of major producers: Omar Sy. Combining industrial and textual analysis, Pettersen shows how Sy's career, and specifically his role in the most streamed—and altogether extremely popular (see Alessandrini 2021)—French series *Lupin* (Netflix, 2021–), has rewritten the script of not merely legibility but desirability for Frenchness at several levels.

Sy's success is notably indicative of one important finding emerging from the corpus of postnational fictions under examination. While French cinema remains overwhelmingly (around 80 per cent) White, and the numbers perceived as non-White in French television as a whole dropped from 17 per cent in 2018 to 15 per cent in 2019, fictions whose genesis and/or circulation is markedly postnational appear to be leading the way in slowly diversifying French casts.²³ Further notable examples include the very popular comedian and film actor Kad Merad, who in 2022 starred in Disney+ French historical drama miniseries *Oussekine* (2022), and Tahar Rahim, whose success in the awards-decorated and widely exported popular auteur film *Un prophète/A Prophet* (Jacques Audiard, 2009) led to roles in *Samba* (2014), the film with which Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano followed up *Intouchables* and in which he played opposite Sy; multi-lingual crime series *The Last Panthers* (BSkyB, Canal+, 2015–2016), distributed in the UK, France and Germany; the US counter-terrorism procedural drama series *The Looming Tower* (Hulu, 2018); and the forthcoming UK-US feature biopic *Napoleon* (Ridley Scott, 2023), alongside French international auteur circuit regular Ludivine Sagnier. While we have noted that women of colour still lag behind, especially in the A-list category, Leïla Bekhti (who also played the most substantial if still undeveloped female lead role in *Un prophète*, among other successes in cinema) features in key roles in postnational series *Midnight Sun* (Sveriges Television/StudioCanal, 2016), a Franco-Swedish crime drama; the Paris-set multinational co-production drama *The Eddy* (Netflix, 2020); and the comedy spoof *The Flamme* (Canal+, 2020), a remake of a US series (as well as the non-fictional Amazon Original *LOL, qui rit, sort!* ['LOL, Whoever Laughs is Out', Amazon Prime, 2021–]), while Harrod's and Michael's chapters also highlight in passing the careers of Stéfi Celma, and

the former that of *Drôle*'s Mariama Gueye as well.²⁴ Some of these roles are clearly inherently ethnically marked (while Meir's chapter lists various postnational French actions films and series where reactionary racial stereotypes endure); however, this is not true across the board, including *a priori* for the behemoth *Lupin*, and as Pettersen notes, motivations behind increased racial variety on screen may also be economic, a product of 'circulation-based casting' informed by the perception that ethnic diversity plays well in many parts of the world—and his engagement with international social media responses to *Lupin*, while unsystematic, suggests the approach's efficacy for that show. Given that second-generation West African immigrant Sy reportedly came up with the idea behind the series, and its evident tailoring to his performed persona such that this becomes a creative motor in *Lupin*'s narrative design, the example approximates fulfilling the potential of diasporic cinema for 'occupying or influencing the mainstream in national and transnational cinematic spaces' in the manner of a director such as Rachid Bouchareb, who has worked in Hollywood after several significant popular successes in French cinema—while stopping short of 'exploring the transnational connections or intercultural exchange between France and [its former colonies]' (Higbee and Lim 2010, 10–12) in as much depth as such a predecessor.²⁵ The example might appear something of a pyrrhic victory in continuing to exclude creative personnel of diasporic heritage from officially occupying key creative roles *behind the camera*. This circumscription limits such figures' ability to shape narratives, not to mention their celebrity capital more generally, in a long-standing socio-industrial tendency to obfuscate the achievements of socially disempowered subjects: to cite another pertinent instance, the first screenplay draft for the recurrently mentioned *Un prophète* was originally written not by auteur director Audiard but the lesser-known Abdel Raouf Dafri, yet the former is widely credited with being its 'genius' creator. Nevertheless, many creative practitioners (notably comedians) attain fame as performers first and moreover, as Harrod argues, even the optics of diversity on screen can be performative in a media age in which we are constantly reminded that appearances ultimately generate realities. While it is beyond the scope of the operations examined in this book to radically renegotiate relations between France and its former colonial subjects, or their descendants, they do contribute to making perceived norms of Frenchness itself much more inclusive. Furthermore, while Régis Dubois (2016, 33) has suggested that entertainment and sports industries have had degrading connotations in France as one of the few arenas in which Black

people might succeed, it is unclear that this is true to the same extent in the USA, where Black citizens have attained success in a wider range of professions, or by extension in global cultures, also as these are influenced by a US-led love of mass-popular entertainment. Here, postnational screen fictions are no doubt part of a wider array of factors likely to be gradually contributing to an elevation in the status of French showbusiness figures in general and multi-ethnic ones in particular.

The book's final chapter, comprising the text of an interview with Harold Valentin and Christian Baute, producers of *Dix pour cent* and its British remake, respectively, offers among other things a first-hand account of being confronted with the withholding by Netflix of the kind of data that makes assertions like some of those made above speculative. Bringing the book's focus full circle by returning to the pioneering series on whose textual substance its first case study chapter concentrated, the last chapter provides detailed insight into the production process behind the representations engendered, as well as the steps involved in the series being remade by a different nation. This remake contrasts in its approach with that of *La Famille Bélier* examined by King, playing up rather than denying the more culturally prestigious source text (also true of the *Fleabag* [BBC Three/Prime Video, 2016–2019] remake *Mouche* ['Fly', Canal+, 2019] examined by Kaftal). The chapter also emphasises the influence of not merely economic but more broadly institutional and cultural contexts in shaping a nation's output, as interviewee Valentin points to French specificities in the approach to training screenwriters for televisual writing—practices in whose updating he has personally played a role. Finally, the interview is of note for engaging with the issue of transnational queer culture as framing elements of *Dix pour cent*: a perspective curiously absent from many analyses in a fashion that suggests French postnational products' relatively tenacious focus on heterosexuality even in the (S)VoD era. This is notably in contrast to, for example, Hispanic fare, where important transnationally popular series such as the Mexican *Cuna de lobos* ('Cradle of Wolves', Televisa, 2019) and *Control Z* (Netflix, 2020–2022) or the Spanish *Veneno* ('Poison' Atresplayer/HBO, 2020) (the latter two both featuring trans characters) and especially *Elite* (Netflix, 2018–) place queer identities and culture front and centre. The two Hispanic Netflix series' related focus on adolescents also illuminates the general absence of teen-focused narratives in major French series, evoking the (for now) ongoing influence of the national cinema, with its audiences and narratives known to skew older

than average, on this aspect of audiovisual fictions, even when they are circulated on notoriously youth-oriented streaming platforms.²⁶

INDUSTRY, IDENTITY, IDEOLOGY

The above statement throws into relief the fact that neo-global (often broadly US-consolidated) approaches to storytelling are not simply absorbed by postnational fictions from other countries. This is true even in the realm of genre: we have noted that ‘noir’ narratives like *Engrenages* have a French history, and indeed US–European exchange is now truisitic of scholarship on the historical genre, for instance. Likewise, even claims by Jenner (2018, 194) that narratives produced by a US company, Netflix, result in a ‘nationally bound’ version of racial diversity prove untenable. Before Omar Sy became a Netflix star, Vincendeau (2014, 559–560) had demonstrated the inextricability of his globally successful persona from French-oriented earlier work (*pace* Pettersen 2016). In the same way, the racially mixed cast of *Drôle* (or indeed the roughly contemporaneous Netflix film *Tout simplement noir/Simply Black* [John Wax and Jean-Pascal Zadi, 2020] and series *En place/Represent* [2023–, also created by and starring the Black performer Zadi]) play with stereotypes drawn from the French stand-up tradition.²⁷ Thus, even French audiovisual fictions that seek postnational positioning are almost as far from being post-racial as they are from being post-gender. We can conclude, then, that—the distinctive case of certain remakes aside—not only do postnational narratives self-evidently refuse categorisation as products of American cultural imperialism (as some earlier televisual ‘flows’ were accused of engendering [see White 2003]), but nor do they exist in some non-specific global space of the kind put forward, for instance, in comparative literary studies that argue world literature ceases to be national literature in the case of today’s ‘new globally directed works all too *easy* to understand’, and seen by some to contribute to the ‘McDonaldization of the globe’ (see Damrosch 2003, 18, 25).²⁸

Comparing contemporary global (S)VoD services with the dominant US-originated global brand McDonald’s may be partially defensible in the economic sector alone. The US identity of the major existing streaming platforms means that profits from their local investment do not end up significantly lining the coffers of production companies in the country in question, instead being majority-channelled into the US-based parent corporation (Meir 2021, 23)—certainly in the case of commissioned fare.

Although Meir's European Commission report calls for European companies to develop their own streaming platforms to combat the potentially expanded media market dominance by the USA that the emergence of such enterprises currently implies (2021, 17–19), his analysis of the fortunes of Gaumont contained in these pages nonetheless demonstrates significant benefits of globalisation for local actors. Moreover, when it comes to constructing cultural and not merely economic identities, in line with work on Australian television by Alexa Scarlata, Ramon Lobato and Stuart Cunningham cited by Pettersen, it seems from the case study of French postnational film and television series that global markets seek difference rather than the cookie-cutter sameness of fast food—but difference within recognisable parameters. As in these writers' analysis of exaggerated regional accents, the question of language is revealing here. Although dubbing possibilities online mean that language is essentially a secondary issue in the streaming sector (while a show such as subscription channel Canal+'s *Versailles* instead widens its audience base by filming in English), the analyses of communication and dialogue in postnational French film and media by Harrod, King, Le Gras and Kaftal suggest that recognisability is potentially likely to be more desirable than extreme complexity when looking beyond national borders: French language is certainly an additional draw for some viewers but it tends to be standardised and/or 'folklorised', which is also the tendency when representing (already somewhat universalised) 'French' sign language.²⁹ This trend is not exclusive to contemporary production: *inter alia*, there are suggestive comparisons to be made with Le Gras's analysis of Rampling's earlier oeuvre in which she occasionally accentuated 'foreignness' for a particular role through inauthentic means, by intensifying her accent in speaking French (an approach more extensively and caricaturally associated with Jane Birkin even earlier). Put simply, relying on recognisable oppositions (here, Gallic vs. Anglo-Saxon) as a strategy for self-definition, akin to those identifiable with earlier European cinema most famously through Elsaesser's positioning of the latter 'face to face with Hollywood' (2005), has far from disappeared in the postnational era. Yet discursive self-definition always takes place in relation to something else and the process in no way detracts from Frenchness being asserted as a 'site of [transnational] resistance' to cultural homogenisation (Wayne 2002, 2).

A further conclusion to be drawn from the recurrent importance accorded to genre in these essays concerns the way in which the move to VoD not only complicates but also strengthens the relationship between

cinema and television, broadly defined. While Meir makes this point specifically in relation to industrial mechanisms for collaboration, more generally it can be seen in the ongoing influence of US genres on production; yet this influence also dates back to the earliest cinema and is a cliché of transhistorical scholarship on such questions. While in this volume the chapters by Pillard, Vanderschelden and Michael centralise spectacular action, and Goodall's the newly Gallicised horror movie format, other notable extensions of a move to embrace 'US' genres in evidence elsewhere in the new mediascape include traces of sci-fi, also touched on by Goodall and Vanderschelden as well as Le Gras, and—more prominently—romantic comedy, partly scrutinised by Harrod.³⁰ It is important to recognise that discussing films and television series together in this collection not only reflects digital (S)VoD services' blurring of boundaries between these categories (even relative to the earlier 1980s turn to television funding of cinema described earlier) through algorithms and interfaces that deprioritise feature-length versus serial status as a criterion for promoting products to users, as Michael in particular adumbrates in this volume. It also reflects the more generalised phenomenon of convergence culture, as famously analysed by Henry Jenkins, through intermedial exchange and influence: the popularity of science fiction on Netflix in France can lead to more sci-fi being produced for 'traditional' theatrical release (including through the trajectories of specific industry actors moving between domains), for example. Conversely, more traditionally Franco-European-accented genres are also populous on postnational television. Salient here are the cases of both crime dramas, often with *banlieue* film elements, explored in most detail by Vincendeau with reference to the prominent example of *Engrenages*, but also in a less realist mode by Pettersen's consideration of *Lupin*. His analysis simultaneously demonstrates that this wildly popular series also engages primordially (albeit subversively) with tropes of another important local (i.e. originally 'European') genre: heritage drama, which is equally to the fore in Gemma King's examination of the (modestly exported) film *Marie Heurtin* (Jean-Pierre Améris, 2014) and the Netflix series *La Révolution* (The Revolution) (2020).

The role played by heritage and history even in a contemporary series such as *Lupin* raises two suggestive points. Firstly, we have already underlined the importance of Sy's body to his performance style, which ranges from dancing in *Intouchables* to performatively conquering space in *Lupin*. These representations tend either to play on (in the first case) or overturn (in the second) racialised stereotypes.³¹ In other words, their meaning

depends intimately on France's particular history of imperial colonisation, and the migratory flows and enduring power imbalances consequent upon it, signalled by Sy's physical appearance. Such an observation foregrounds the paradoxical nature of bodies—human and by extension territorial—and the material histories played out upon them as postnational signifiers. That is, we have seen that bodies are potent loci of international stardom, since they are in one sense universal (we all have one); yet in a contradiction that runs to the heart of the postnational, their concrete characteristics retain idiosyncrasy and cannot be disembedded from their specific past experiences and associations. Secondly, like Harrod's chapter, Pettersen's analysis of *Lupin* recalls Tim Bergfelder's (2015) identification of a tendency for European popular cinema of the 2000s to make widely recognisable European histories the material for contemporary comedy. Such a comparison reminds us of the hybridity of genres and (therefore) ultimately the geo-cultural associations they often imply, in a relation that transcends the technological and industrial shifts of the postnational era. Both points simultaneously bring us back to questions of European identity that enquiries into Frenchness always also represent: one future research direction among various nationally and postnationally accented ones for which this study is intended in part as a blueprint and stimulus.³²

This introduction has engaged very considerably with the concept of the postnational. We will close it by returning to that other too often taken-for-granted notion underpinning the research it describes: the popular. What makes the fictions analysed in these pages especially interesting to scholars of cultural history is the fact that the world-building in which they engage is calibrated to give pleasure and very often succeeds in doing so. As fan studies have shown, their ability to incite emotions means such texts are predisposed to become bound up in consumers' social identities in ways that exceed the viewing experience—in other words, to promote forms of identification. Certain aspects of the new postnational media regime particularly encourage the development of such feelings. Notably, on-demand streaming platforms' imperviousness to local broadcast scheduling, alongside their 'original' products' immunity to media chronology legislation, allows the simultaneous release of new material across territories. C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby (2005, 847) suggest that in the case of serial television, an asynchronous release interrupts viewers' sense of participation in storytelling: a key defining features of the form, regularly highlighted by critics across the board from the early days of television studies onward. Today, instead, international commentators can

debate the merits of new productions in social media spaces as soon as they are released. However, mainstream audiovisual fictions' ability to prompt active engagement at the same time precedes and exceeds streaming platform fare. Pierre Bourdieu has famously described 'the complex social process in which individual and collective ever-structuring dispositions develop in practice to justify individuals' perspectives, values, actions and social positions' as a 'habitus' (Costa and Murphy 2015, 4). Recent engagements with this psychosocial concept—that is, one concerned with 'the mutual constitution of the individual and the social relations within which they are enmeshed'—have sought to highlight its significant basis in 'passions and drives' experienced affectively in the body (Reay 2015, 10–12). The multiple online posts about Luc Besson's cinema examined by Pillard are just as revelatory about passionate attachments—or the painful processes of mis- and dis-identification that ensue when changes to fan objects are experienced as an assault on the fan themselves—as the pilgrimages to the Normandy locations of *Lupin* that are detailed by Pettersen's chapter. All these examples show that popular audiovisual texts, and their very particular textures, have the potential to create feelings of affiliation, perhaps now more than ever before. Therefore, even while fully recognising that the scope of their representational work may be ideologically compromised by economic and other prejudicial factors, their iterations of national and other identities less 'authentic' than ever by virtue of being determined in part from the outside and access to them limited by social inequalities (all charges to be levelled against almost any cultural text), it is clear that mainstream postnational fictions create new communicative lines across borders, with the potential for new lines of communion linked to the cross-cultural sharing of norms and values as well. In an era characterised by the polarisation of cultures, misunderstanding and retrenchment, such channels gain in significance. This book takes seriously their existence, and the fictions engendering and engendered by them, as major determinants of newly postnationalised identities, in France and beyond.

NOTES

1. According to the website boxofficemojo.com, the international box-office takings for these films to the nearest million dollars were as follows: *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* \$141m, *Bienvenue chez les Ch'rtis* \$51m, *Intouchables* \$416m, *Les Choristes* \$85m, *La Môme* \$77m and *Ne le dis à*

personne \$27m. The international success of many French animated films of recent decades should also be acknowledged, even if their frequent status as English-language co-productions maintaining minimal local markers means they are not obvious sites for interrogating perceived Frenchness as such.

2. While data for film production and consumption during the same period has been skewed by the closure of theatres during the pandemic, by 2021 the French cinema industry seemed to be making steps towards recovery, with a 43.5 per cent rise in the number of French-approved films to 340 (Vulser 2022).
3. For reasons unconnected to COVID-19 but reflecting already growing influence and ambition, Netflix opened offices in Paris in January 2020, following the establishment of a European hub in Madrid the previous year.
4. (S)VoD subscriptions are notably cheaper than earlier pay-television services. For a full account of their market growth, and its linkage to a proliferation in the number of series produced (albeit with a focus on English-language fare), see Chalaby (2023, 57, 38).
5. Lobato details battles between European, especially French, bodies and Netflix over regulation. A recent article in *Le Monde* suggests that Netflix's investment in remastering national film represents an attempt to ingratiate itself locally in the face of such clashes (Cauhapé and Ridet 2021).
6. For cinema exports, see <https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/production-countries/#tab=territory>. On television, see <https://www.cnc.fr/documents/71205/151678/French+TV+Export+in+2020.pdf/d2d0bc12-def0-fe20-f69e-ef4cd13762bd?t=1631031387576> (p. 24).
7. Meir highlights the long gap demanded by French law between theatrical and televisual release for films, upon which French law insists, as posing a problem for Netflix; we might further speculate that it incentivises the company to produce their own content (which is then subject only to their country's laws) rather than licensing it.
8. Although Chalaby (2023, 38–39) does pick out other important exporters of television drama prior to the influence of streaming platforms, including in addition to Latin America, Egypt and Japan, in the last 30 years; the UK, over the last 20; and more recently Turkey and Korea.
9. Laurent Creton (2016, 11) has been prominent in defending such structural perspectives within French audiovisual industry studies.
10. In European cinema studies, Wendy Everett's (2005) [1996] collection on *European Identity in Cinema* betrays similar, emblematic biases (one chapter on a truly mainstream—but poorly exported—French film, *The Visitors* [Jean-Marie Poiré, 1993], notwithstanding).
11. The fact that sometimes this tendency coincides with a focus on 'minority' (including migrant and diasporic) cinemas provides an apt moment to reit-

- erate that the present collection is concerned with metropolitan Frenchness (albeit in world circulation and including migrant and diasporic identities) rather than other forms of transnational Francophone identity.
12. Amazon is attempting to follow suit, with major French investment announced in 2022 and Prime Video France's country manager Brigitte Ricou-Bellan stating, 'We have a double approach, to be very anchored locally and also bring French culture abroad'; French feature *Overdose* (Olivier Marchal, 2022) was the most-viewed non-English-language Amazon Original content worldwide last year (Lefler 2022).
 13. The BBC is Europe's most recurrent partner in co-productions, as well as its largest purchaser of fiction (Kitsopanidou and Thévenin [forthcoming](#)).
 14. Miller et al. situate the international market as coming a close second to the domestic one in importance when it comes to the planning of Hollywood blockbusters.
 15. Although much critical work relevant to this intervention has tended to stress the role played by screen media in reshaping the attitudes of diasporic citizens towards their nation of origin (see Harrington and Bielby 2005, 834–843), or, for a recent example, Dalila Missero's project currently being carried out at Oxford Brookes University, UK 'Investigating Cinema Memories and Transnational Practices: A Qualitative Study with Female Latin-American Audiences in Barcelona and Milan'.
 16. Vincendeau's chapter and the transcribed interview that closes the book both describe major series selling a 'non-touristic Paris'—that is of course then absorbed into the expanding array of recognisably saleable views of the city.
 17. Quentin Mazel's empirical study based significantly on interviews with personnel making French genre films since 2000 has found the use of English to be on the rise, across the board in blockbusters and in mid-budget and lower-budget productions. Horror and fantasy are particularly prominent in the latter category (films featuring British expat Catriona MacColl are exemplary), where there is a sense that movies should be made in English to attract financing even in cases where the international market itself is a very secondary concern for the creative producers. For a pan-European perspective on such questions, see Kulyk (2015).
 18. These were, in descending order of tickets sold, *Lucy* (Besson, 2014), *Taken 2* (Olivier Megaton, 2012), *Taken 3* (Megaton, 2014) and (the unwisely budgeted, hence its 'flop' status) *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (Besson, 2017). The fifth—and only Francophone—film was *Intouchables*. As Michael's chapter notes, StudioCanal was the other major contributor to the transnationalisation of the (mainstream) French film production sector in the 2000s. For a full account of this company's

- ongoing important status—including comparisons with competitors Wild Bunch and Pathé—see Meir (2019).
19. Harrod's chapter outlines the present study's closer kinship with Thomas Elsaesser's forward-looking uses of the term.
 20. Comparable examples cited by Danan such as *I492: Conquest of Paradise* (Ridley Scott, 1992) were also unsuccessful.
 21. As well as evidently connoting poses designed to stage confidence, ethnographic research locates male coolness in a frequent ability to 'make faces' for comical effect (Danesi 1994, 72).
 22. This comment appears in a discussion of broadly 'postfeminist' US television shows with undercurrents of racist animus, underlining the hand Western feminist movements have had in maintaining White women's disproportionate visibility over their non-White counterparts, including in France. The writers' emblematic example here is *Fleabag* (BBC/Amazon Prime, 2016–2019), whose French remake is one of the series examined by Kaftal.
 23. For data on raced representation in cinema, see <https://collectif5050.com/cinegalites/> and in television Baromètre de la diversité de la société française—vague 2019.pdf.
 24. Black French female actors face particularly pronounced marginalisation. For a first-hand account of these struggles, see *Noire n'est pas mon métier* (Collectif 2018). It is unsurprising, then, that there is no female equivalent to Omar Sy.
 25. On Bouchareb, see Gott and Kealhofer Kemp (2020).
 26. Elsewhere, Harrod (2021) has noted the consolidation of French teen films under the influence of the US teenpic in products on the highly globally imbricated subscription channel Canal+. This can arguably be connected to auteurist interest in youth narratives on a channel that was more originally 'quality'-aligned from the start than Netflix, despite the latter's subsequent move in this direction (see Jenner 2018, 24).
 27. The lead actors of the popular three-season *Plan cœur/The Hookup Plan* (Netflix, 2018–2022), meanwhile, feminise the 'black-blanc-beur' trio popularised by the exceptionally successfully exported French *banlieue* film *La Haine* (Hate) (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995), even if the series's narrative is decidedly post-racial (see Harrod 2023).
 28. These are no doubt simplistic views even in the case of the media they describe (as White's article demonstrated for earlier television, just as some of Damrosch's recent statements have distanced him from this view of world literature).
 29. A comparison can be drawn with the circulation of international literature through translation, where 'born translated' (Walkowitz 2015) novels written in multiple dialects are infrequently translated into further interna-

tional languages for export. Kira Kitsopanidou and Olivier Thévenin's (forthcoming) analysis of the Franco-Belgian-Israeli television series *No Man's Land* (Arte/Hulu, 2020) and other Arte productions suggests a contrasting drive to expand a (still niche) international space for products emphasising more complex forms of linguistic diversity as part of their appeal.

30. On sci-fi, see also Scott (2022) and Goodall and Harrod (forthcoming). On romcom, see also Harrod (2023), where she traces the particular legacy of 'postfeminist television' on the postnational French screen.
31. On Sy's dancing in *Intouchables*, see Pettersen (2016, 68–50).
32. See for example Goodall and Harrod (forthcoming).

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PART I

New Figures, New Voices



From ImpersoNation to ImPosture: (Sub)urban Fantasy in Fanny Herrero's *Dix pour cent* and *Drôle*

Mary Harrod

Michel Chion has argued that French cinematic dialogue is polarised between a refined, highfalutin version of standard French and a folkloric working-class slang. While he attributes this partly to the non-neutrality of the French language as such, he also speculates that the idiom's already restricted, 'unmarked' middle ground may be suffering further erosion under the influence of screen cultures. More particularly, he singles out as a key culprit for this phenomenon the rise of television formats such as the literary chat show adopting a pretence of agreeably down-to-earth candour: thus he laments the use of the increasingly ubiquitous colloquial and familiar term *bouquin* in lieu of the traditionally unmarked moniker *livre* by personal acquaintances to describe his book publications, with the

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consequence that *livre* is pushed into the realms of formality (Chion 2008, 7, 12).

The majority of the films examined by Chion have enjoyed distinguished international careers. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the compatibility of his observations about their linguistic tendencies with Thomas Elsaesser's theorisation of cinematic ImpersoNation (2005, 46–67, 2013). Sometimes also dubbed 'self-othering', ImpersoNation refers to the inclusion of 'self-conscious, ironic or self-mocking display[s] of clichés and prejudices' in the cinematic construction of national imaginaries designed to play to 'the look of the other' (2005, 49). Like the types of language and in particular the associated upper- and lower-class social identities identified by Chion in French cinema, clichés are sedimented when mere everyday occurrences or figures become extreme in their frequency or scale—self-conscious clichés even more so. Elsaesser situates a turn to ImpersoNation in European cinema within the expansion of postnational filmmaking during the 1990s, linked to newly border-crossing production arrangements. However, Elsaesser's definition of postnational as 'reintroduc[ing] the national for external use' (2005, 57) takes in new representational developments, too:

The films have developed formulas that can accommodate various and even contradictory signifiers of nationhood, of regional history or local neighborhood street-credibility, in order to re-launch a region or national stereotype, or to reflect the image that (one assumes) the other has of oneself. [...] [T]he films openly display this knowledge of second order reference. (Elsaesser 2005, 58)

The novelty of the phenomenon's 'second-order' self-consciousness is well illustrated directly following this passage via a contrast between an earnest claim by a character in Wim Wenders's *Kings of the Road* (1976) that 'the Yanks have colonized our subconscious' and *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) protagonist Mark Renton's statement that '[s]ome people hate the English but I don't. They're just wankers. We, on the other hand, are colonized by wankers.' If the second utterance is much more distanced from any essentialist inhabitation of Scottishness by othering itself, it nevertheless also draws a link with earlier depictions of national identity—as Elsaesser acknowledges. It is likewise apparent that the 29 transhistorical films examined by Chion spanning from the early sound era (from *Sous les toits de Paris/Under the Roofs of Paris* [René Clair, 1930])

to postclassical popular comedy (*Le Père Noël est une ordure/Santa Claus is a Stinker* [Jean-Marie Poiré, 1982], among others) but also taking in (post-)New Wave auteur fare from directors such as Jean-Luc Godard or Bruno Dumont, though they anticipate the contemporary intensely post-national moment, include representations of Frenchness that address international audiences. The difference in recent decades is more likely to reside in the degree of intention behind this aspect of their identity-construction. Put simply, many earlier films resonated with international audiences, while many recent ones are constructed with this market more directly in mind—even if extremely rarely at the expense of domestic viewers.¹ My present concern, however, is not with cinema at all but with the recent explosion in widely internationally circulated French (and by extension other nationally originated) television, which is by nature postnational because it ‘[re]introduces the national for external use’, in the first place simply by making audiovisual fictions produced within national contexts much more widely available elsewhere. It is noteworthy, then, that Elsaesser’s contextualisation of ImpersoNation engages with Benedict Anderson’s (1991 [1983]) theorisation of nation in terms of a community imagined through media, only to stake out the distance between this conceptualisation of (colonial and postcolonial) nation-building through top-down discourses circulated by print media and the altogether more difficult to pin down work of cinema produced by commercial actors in conjunction with creative personnel. Instead, argues Elsaesser, ‘Anderson’s scheme would be more likely to apply to television than to the cinema’ (2005, 53–54). Yet the television described here preceded the advent of so-called not-television, as Charlotte Brunsdon (2018, 21) pithily dubs it to suggest the cinematic parentage of quality, long-form series (her early example is *The Wire* [HBO, 2002–2008]), and which are now increasingly consumed on-demand and postnationally. This raises questions about the role of on-screen mechanisms for ‘reintroduc[ing] the national’ in television now available on streaming platforms. More specifically, does postnational television exploit the same strategies of ImpersoNation Elsaesser finds in the cinema from which it at least partially descends, and from which it is in fact increasingly inseparable?²

This chapter will take as a test case for this line of enquiry two recent French series by one highly regarded screenwriter shown on Netflix, *Dix pour cent/Call My Agent!* (France Télévisions/Netflix, 2015–2020) and *Drôle/Standing Up* (Netflix, 2022), both scripted by Fanny Herrero. I suggest that we do see schizophrenic cultural ImpersoNation, involving

contrasting caricatures of Frenchness akin to those pinpointed by Chion, in French television distributed by international streaming platforms, and even across the œuvre of one influential creative practitioner alone. To this end, the analysis that follows is attentive to notions of televisual enworlding, which I argue is achieved to a limited extent through language (as a form of audience design [Bell 1984]) but even more so spatialised on-screen milieu construction, comprising a critical vector for the construction of social identities, where details such as ethnicity, class, age, gender and so on intersect with geographical affiliations. Not only that, but it will ultimately be argued that at times the type of ImpersoNation in evidence in these audiovisual fictions can be productively dubbed ImPosture, since it does not merely offer elements connoting nation but articulates a fictionalised version of Frenchness for external consumption that fairly directly contravenes observable realities. This in turn raises ideological questions about whether such a commercially embedded gesture should be interpreted merely in terms of cynical self-promotion or whether, instead, the potential to generate new psycho-social possibilities by widening legitimised representations of French identities emerges from reading for Frenchness as ImPosture.

STREAMING FRENCHNESS: NEW SPACES, NEW SPEECH?

The choice of fictions whose analysis forms the basis of this chapter is informed partly by their visibility but more particularly by the typicality of *Dix pour cent* and *Drôle* within the trends in representing Frenchness proposed in this chapter. To illustrate the first point, a snapshot of those fictions regularly cited in online lists of '[best] French-language series available on streaming platforms' at the time of writing in 2022 is likely to include shows such as (in addition to those under discussion) the Netflix-distributed *Lupin* (2021–), *Plan cœur/The Hookup Plan* (2018–2022), *Au service de la France/A Very Secret Service* (Arte/Netflix, 2015–2018) and *La Révolution* (2020), as well as elsewhere *Le Bureau des légendes/The Bureau* (Canal+, 2015–), *Engrenages/Spiral* (Canal+/BBC, 2005–2020) and *Maison close* ('Brothel') (Canal+, 2010–2013). Meanwhile, *Versailles* (Canal+/Netflix, 2015–2018) and *Emily in Paris* (Netflix, 2020–) stand out among popular and so culturally impactful non-French-produced series set in the Hexagon (more specifically, in and around Paris). These broadly conform to the extremes of refinement versus vulgarity that screen representations of France have a history of promulgating, with the first

tendency dominating.³ Thus, the ‘Anglo-Saxon’—and English-language—perspective on France offered by *Emily in Paris* and (almost parodically) *Versailles* most obviously constructs elegant visions of French architectural and sartorial splendour in the upper echelons of society of different periods (the world of international prestige brand marketing and the French court, respectively). *Plan cœur* and *Au service de la France*, while not set in milieux that are opulent to the extent of Versailles or the world of luxury commerce, present well-heeled, upper-middle-class characters associated in the first place with twenty-first-century hedonistic cultures and in the second with 1960s chic. A romcom about 20- and 30-something Parisians, *Plan cœur* ostentatiously makes the most of the tourist cityscape in terms of location shooting, even if its modernity renders its dialogue a little less *soutenu* [formal] than in *Au service de la France*, approximating Chion’s ‘familiar’ category rather than his fully working-class [*populaire*] one (Chion 2008, 9), including many common abbreviations and other idioms, in particular Anglicisms—as you might expect from a series produced by Netflix and focused on ‘global’ metropolitan elites. Spy comedy *Au service de la France*, for its part, joins contemporary-focused spy drama *Le Bureau des légendes* in a rather specific fetishisation of office spaces: unlike with the classic spy films epitomised by the global James Bond franchise and sent up in France by the twenty-first-century *OSS117* series, exotic locations are quite sparse compared to grey interior spaces delineated and divided along the hard lines that dictate human instrumentalisation but also have geo-cultural resonance for their connotation of Franco-European bureaucracy. Language in each case is generally formal, even if the space retains elements characterised both by visible wealth and power and by shabbiness, especially in *Au service de la France* as part of its satire on the failing French secret service. This is also true, but differently, of *Lupin*, *Maison close* and *La Révolution*. The first, a vehicle for the performer Omar Sy to incarnate a modern avatar of the eponymous literary detective of the French popular children’s canon, extensively exploits high-end tourist locations but also intermittent tastes of the ‘underworld’. This duality is narratively justified by the protagonist’s background as a second-generation Senegalese immigrant who grew up in the grand household where his father worked as a domestic servant but can now fit in anywhere; in Episode 1 alone, he frequents the Louvre as both moneyed auction guest and cleaner who enters by the back door. Dramas *Maison close* and *La Révolution* are both heritage productions set at the end of the eighteenth century. Having in common with *Lupin* a thematic

interest in classed performance, the first probes beneath the spectacle of glamorous allure adopted by female sex workers in a Parisian brothel to reveal the tawdry realities of their existence. *La Révolution*, as you would expect from its subject matter, plays centrally with similar class oppositions, opening as it means to continue with the visit of a countess to the squalid cells of a prison. Dialogue in all these, meanwhile, remains on the whole *soutenu*, even if some colloquialisms appear here and there in *Lupin*, as befits the series's slickly contemporary setting but also crime scenarios, which see villains and (often indistinguishable) policemen deploy words long infused with a 'street' aura, such as *pognon* for money. Indeed, in this list, only the full *polar* or police procedural drama *Engrenages* is more fully rooted in the seedy world of criminals and Parisian law enforcement, including many *banlieue* settings and accordingly extensively slangy dialogue (alongside professional language, including legal jargon). On the other hand, a striking number of films on streaming services also fall into the *banlieue* genre (Grodner 2020; Pettersen 2023) that showcases 'ugly [...] run-down [and] desolate' spaces (Vincendeau 2005, 23) and is animated by its 'own language, [the French reverse-slang] *verlan*', with a 'declamatory, raucous musical quality to the intonation of young *banlieue* inhabitants' (2005, 26) originally seen and heard in global critical and commercial hit *La Haine/Hate* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995), and so reflecting an illustrious history on the silver (rather than small) screen. These include *Divines* (Houda Benyamina, 2016), *Banlieusards/Street Flow* (Kery James and Leïla Sy, 2019) and *La Vie scolaire/School Life* (Mehdi Idid and Grand Corps Malade, 2019) on Netflix alone. Such an observation highlights the fact that the phenomena examined in these pages have extended from cinema into television, broadly defined, rather than series generally supplanting the work of films.⁴

This is an apt point at which to highlight the recurrence of the French capital in all these representations, as in *Dix pour cent* and *Drôle*. As Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau remind us, being the 'official' birthplace of cinema and one of the most frequently filmed and iconic cities, as well as the site that inspired the notion of *flânerie* that became so central to modernist understanding of both city planning and cinema as part and parcel of this, 'Paris is the cinematic city par excellence' (2018, 1). Brunsdon (2018, 24–64), among others, extends this work by according cultural significance to Paris on the small screen even before the era of convergence culture's 'not-television' television phenomenon. The important point is that Paris is a much-represented city and as such the

on-screen metropolis comprises a heavily fantasised space, able to signify through multifarious connotations recognisable almost all over the world. *Banlieue* narratives are but one development within this history—the paradoxical way in which this apparently architecturally mundane or else Brutalist landscape has been aestheticised speaks to the long tradition of capacious and varied romantic-poetic visions of man-made urbanity within which Paris holds pride of place. In this sense, the contrasting Parisian settings of *Dix pour cent*—taking place principally in the first *arrondissement*—and *Drôle*—whose central locus is the north-eastern *arrondissements* (including the one-time suburb of Ménilmontant) but which also takes frequent sorties to the southern suburb of Morsang-sur-Orge, as well as some upscale, more central Parisian locations—are inherently critically significant within this historiography of representation.

In addition, there is no doubt that *Dix pour cent* is one of the most talked about French television series of recent years, perhaps second only to *Lupin*. Its international success is reflected by various remakes, including so far versions in India and Turkey (with rumours of another forthcoming in South Korea), as well as a recent BBC-distributed iteration whose failure to find an audience only suggests the virtuosity, not to mention important French-specificity, of the original. *Dix pour cent* also stakes a claim to being one of the first cases of a French audiovisual property for which a kind of auteur has become synonymous with the global branding figure of the showrunner in scriptwriter Herrero, widely touted as the main creative inspiration behind this series about the show business world in which she herself worked for many years. That Herrero also scripted *Drôle* meant it was much anticipated, certainly at home but also to some extent internationally—even if largely circumstantial reasons (connected to Netflix's profits dipping since the pandemic and amid international economic downturns) have led to its foreshortening after one nonetheless critically lauded season. Together these series represent, then, important narratives of postnational French televisual identity, while we shall see that the contrasting social worlds they construct recommend them as focal points for examining the way in which strategies of ImpersoNation, to the fore in *Dix pour cent*, can tip over into ImPosture, notably in *Drôle*.

COMMODIFYING GLAMOUR IN *DIX POUR CENT*

The original idea for *Dix pour cent*, which is set in and around a talent agency for star film actors and personnel in the rue Saint-Honoré and features real stars and actors playing themselves, came from producer Dominique Besnehard, himself formerly an agent. It was first considered by the increasingly internationally oriented Canal+ a few years before being produced by Mother Production for France 2, then recommissioned by Netflix as an ‘original’ production after the success of its first season; the streaming platform now distributes the entire series, comprising four seasons of six 48–67-minute episodes. As the last chapter in this volume records, Harold Valentin, joining the production team after Besnehard and with an Anglo background on his mother’s side, was also an important figure in the series’s journey from concept to realisation, not least in bringing the influence of the show *Extras* (BBC/HBO, 2005–2007) to bear on its design. Further, Valentin notes that the office comedy format was a universal one, as was the topic of stardom. In sum, despite originally being shown on a domestic channel, *Dix pour cent*’s production context was always transnational and a postnational audience can never have been far from the minds of creators.⁵

This impetus extends to ImpersoNating Frenchness in a number of ways, among which the most obvious concerns its creation of a glamorous Parisian world. Embedded stage and screen performances recur in French cinema, with explicit examples abounding from the work of Jean Renoir and Jacques Prévert to the *Nouvelle Vague* or offerings from more recent auteurs, such as Agnès Varda’s documentaries about filmmaking or Abdellatif Kechiche’s theatrical cinema. Moreover, as Stephen Gundle shows in his elucidation of ‘the enduring glamour of the Parisienne’, Paris’s legend depicts the city as ‘imbued with a special vocation for female performance’ (2018, 167). While *Dix pour cent* features stars of both gender, 14 of the 25 who lend their name to an episode title are female (five out of seven in S01, when production decisions were more firmly in French hands before the Netflix acquisition/recommission) and the star cast also leans towards the feminine. At first, aspiring agent Camille (Fanny Sidney) and later her boss Andréa (Camille Cottin) are arguably narratively situated as the primary identification figures. Further important roles in the action are played by agent Arlette (Liliane Rovère), as well as support staff Noémie (Laure Calamy), Sofia (Stéfi Celma) and the highly feminised gay character Hervé (Nicolas Maury)—alongside the

heterosexual males: self-effacing Gabriel (Grégory Montel), struggling on the whole successfully to be a new man, the less reconstructed senior agent Mathias (Thibault de Montalembert) and, from midway through Season 2, London-based international multimillionaire businessman CEO Hicham (Assaad Bouab). The agents are hardly less performers than the film stars, adopting a gallery of expedient professional demeanours with aplomb, while both Sofia and Hervé later become actors themselves. The character of Camille is also embedded particularly firmly in this seam of French representational history, when we consider that Gundle highlights *French Cancan* (Jean Renoir, 1955), and its tale of an ordinary young woman, Nini, who comes to Paris to become a theatrical star, as typical of narratives that erect Paris as a site of enormous possibility. This is almost the exact trajectory followed by Camille as Dick Whittington-esque ingénue, the everyman figure who launches the first episode by coming to Paris in search of her fortune—‘to try my luck’, as she puts it in the fairy-tale vernacular—via her previously somewhat long-lost father, Mathias (who was and still is married to someone other than Camille’s mother and so has kept her existence a secret).⁶ Camille’s arc throughout the series in achieving her dream of becoming an agent herself echoes Nini’s, underscoring the mythic allure of *Dix pour cent*’s Paris as a hub of fortune in the performing arts.

Similarly, a glamorous look characterises not only the series’s on-set sequences but also its ‘everyday’ set-ups, as extravagant and sumptuous decors and costumes feature alongside the more pared-down and modern but nonetheless quite imposing professional spaces and the carefully put together outfits of Andréa, Mathias and, increasingly, Noémie in particular. Indeed, its credit sequence foregrounds the continuities between these spheres of luxury sartorial consumer culture. Here, graphic matches juxtapose close-ups showing Versailles-era silken buckle-shoes, a powder-blue gown in taffeta, chiffon and lace and an elaborate wig and baroque jewellery being removed with, firstly, a shot of the same actress, now in jeans and Converse trainers, exiting the shoot, then another woman’s pair of legs in a flattering dark, knee-length A-line skirt and black patent high heels. These pick up the stride—or rather, an elegant catwalk-style gait—from the previous shot, now on a dark carpet that is revealed by subsequent overhead shots to be located in the offices of the talent agency ASK, around which the action revolves. No hint here, then, of the drab or even low-budget aesthetic of the offices of *Le Bureau des légendes*, with its flimsy partitions (at least until S04 when ASK’s near ruin is figured spatially by



Fig. 1 Gritty elements do little to obscure the essentially glamorous backdrop of *Dix pour cent* (S01/E03)

the legal team having to move to the same floor as the agents); the production team may attest to having wanted to offer a different view of the French capital from the extreme caricature of *Emily in Paris* (see the discussion in the last chapter of this volume), and there are certainly a few slightly ‘grittier’ elements here, yet close attention suggests similarities are as plentiful as differences (see Fig. 1).

Notably, outside the office, characters frequent extremely upscale restaurants and cafés, including a local one bedecked with dark red velvet upholstery and other finery (in E01, a wide-eyed Camille reacts to the venue, where she meets Mathias, by commenting that ‘It’s chic here’ and mistaking the coffee sugar for a lollipop). Meanwhile, industry events, and especially the Cannes Film Festival—where Juliette Binoche is memorably styled in an impractical skin-tight white feather dress—remind viewers of the close interpenetration of the fashion and entertainment industries. The fact that Binoche trips over in her dress and describes it as resembling a dead swan is nonetheless typical of *ImpersoNation* that redeploys, while explicitly citing, questioning or in this case openly mocking, clichés of national identity (chic Frenchness and the Parisienne in particular as an effortlessly ‘elegant high fashion woman’ [Rearick in Gundle 2018, 169]). In this example, as during the credits, *Dix pour cent* purports to get behind the smoke and mirrors; yet the ‘unadorned’ scene beneath—a good-looking actress in skinny jeans; glamorous, high-end places of work;

Juliette Binoche on a bad hair day—still appears pretty fabulous. Thus, ImpersoNation pokes fun at clichés while not abjuring them.

Anne Kaftal's chapter in this volume also discusses the figure of the Parisienne in *Dix pour cent*, teasing out how Cottin's star persona shapes and is shaped by her role as Andréa in ways that address domestic and international audiences differently but in both cases with reference to the stereotype. In fact, her analysis points to an updating of the figure through initially more locally recognisable *franchouillardise* or the inclusion in comedy of 'typically French and folksy' elements generally used to 'gently mock' the mores of French people. ImpersoNation, then, has a special place in French comic tradition, and what is more Kaftal links it to the informal language that (she notes) Chion has already identified with French comedy throughout film history. Andréa's modern Parisienne reflects the cliché that French women—and Parisians in general—can be irritable: hence her tendency to swear when faced with even small inconveniences. Revealingly, the initially meek and well-spoken Camille too adopts this habit as she increasingly integrates into the series's world and walks in Andréa's shoes, a detail to which the show draws distancing attention when another character, new recruit Elise Formain (Anne Marivin), suggests the junior agent put her energies into being persuasive with talent rather than swearing over obstacles. While elegant refinement and bawdy verbal diarrhoea might appear rather antithetical, in fact I suggest the Parisienne type can comfortably accommodate both when we consider Gundle's estimation that glamour always blends 'class and [also] sleaze' (Gundle 2008, 15), or the kind of behaviour that guardians of moral authority have seen 'improper' language to symptomatise. The dyad of class and sleaze also sums up both Andréa's sexualised incarnation of lesbian chic (her high libido, pick-up artist techniques and callous partner-shuffling are repeatedly stressed) and indeed the series's world as a whole. In linguistic terms, exaggerated foul-mouthing off (to coin a phrase) sits cheek by jowl with the elegant lexicon employed by most actors on set and many even off it. This clash is underlined when Julie Gayet, playing an aristocratic woman in a heritage production, accuses Joey Starr, in the role of her servant lover, of lacking 'delicacy, elegance and finesse' [*un peu de pudeur, d'élégance et d'esprit*] and when he suggests she goes back to society dinners, she tells him to articulate more clearly, before they both insult each other with the vulgar slurs *connasse* and *connard* ['bitch' and 'ass-hole'] (S01/E05)! Likewise, the glittering show business world that ASK inhabits is characterised by shady dealings, ruthlessly self-serving

backstabbing and Machiavellian conspiracies among agents, which undergird most of the plot contortions. The class–sleaze dialectic maps onto the paradoxical space of performance *and* authenticity the show as a whole inhabits so effectively, with a number of further attendant oppositions feeding into this pseudo-binaristic mode of self-articulation. For instance, echoing comments by Valentin recorded in this book’s final chapter that set Andréa in opposition to traditionally more intellectual French protagonists because she embodies a more frank iteration of the identity, Season 1, Episode 2 pits *Nouvelle Vague* veteran actor Françoise Fabian against popular musical star and AIDS activist Line Renaud as putative rivals over a role, having Renaud grudgingly call Fabian ‘smart’ and (therefore) ‘the Frenchwoman par excellence’, while Fabian describes Renaud with the more backhanded compliment, ‘she’s in every French heart’. It is noteworthy that in the end, both women are cast in the film in question. Of course, the lofty intellectual versus well-liked and down-to-earth binary equally plays into a dialogue between high (especially auteurist and cinephilic) and more mainstream cultures that we have already seen informs *Dix pour cent*’s positioning, particularly through Herrero as auteur-showrunner, and that equally recurs in its storyline, sometimes overlapping with generational clashes. Thus senior screen actor François Berléand is nonplussed to be cast in a play by a trendy new interactive ‘experiential’ theatre director (S01/E06); Andréa misses a trick in devalorising highly popular television star Mimie Mathy, only to lose her to rival company StarMédia (S04/E01); and at the Season 3 finale’s office party an old-timer cannot believe Andréa has never heard of classical film stars Martine Carol and Bella Darvi (S03/E06). Meanwhile the *mise-en-scène* often winks to classic cinephile viewers, for example by featuring the poster for *Le Diable au corps/Devil in the Flesh* (Claude Autant-Lara, 1947), about overwhelming physical passion, during a scene in which Gabriel and Sofia’s attraction for one another becomes irresistible (S02/E05). At the same time, this love intrigue equally works as a standalone node of light entertainment for another group of (presumably mainly younger) viewers.

This example speaks to the status of *Dix pour cent* as, among other things, a story of workplace romance. While quite routine in a US context where work encroaches into all walks of the middle-class life typically focalised by on-screen romance, this development retains novelty within the archetype of French/Parisian romance (itself another national cliché), even as it feeds into the trend that has seen French fictionalised narratives of work in general proliferating in recent years (Lane 2020, 2–3). The

latter phenomenon is certainly attributable to the erosion by global neo-liberal capitalism of spaces outside economies of labour and exchange even in relatively left-leaning France. Making work take over characters' lives—also repeatedly acknowledged by dialogue in *Dix pour cent*—has the advantage of creating a complex tissue of plot threads linked to multiple characters while limiting a great deal of shooting to studio sets. Thus, in between intermittent exterior shots of the office and its rue de Rivoli surroundings under whose famous arches the show's four main agents are filmed stalking in slow motion at the close of the credits sequence, and although it is filmed in the single-camera style associated with contemporary quality television, much of the series's action is redolent of a traditional US sitcom.

Yet by the very same token, *Dix pour cent* simultaneously evokes the style of theatre popular in eighteenth-century France and built upon characters' entrances onto and exits from the stage, stoking dramatic ironies, masquerades, cases of mistaken identity and other sources of conflict. Associated especially with Pierre de Marivaux, this style of *mise-en-scène* boasts a legacy in French cinema from Eric Rohmer to many contemporary romcoms or the work of the aforementioned Kechiche. Such a comparison foregrounds the extent to which—like many televisual dramas and many studio-filmed Hollywood comedies—*Dix pour cent* creates its own professionalised world as something of a *huis clos*, replete with glass panes as well as windows through which comings and goings 'outside' in off-screen space are frequently reported by onlooking characters and sometimes act as plot motors. This insularity certainly applies at the level of nation, since despite frequent (mostly negative) evocations of Los Angeles, New York and London, the show never strays beyond the Hexagon or often outside Paris, certainly when it comes to location shooting—Cannes is constructed almost exclusively through interior or geographically non-specific outdoor shots. But ASK and the world of its clients and business partners or rivals centred around the office set are also presented as, in the words of Mathias, 'all of Paris' (S01/E01, when he claims he has introduced Camille to this notional group): it is a synecdoche of a synecdoche, ASK standing in for the capital that stands in for the nation-state. This is most self-consciously achieved in Season 1, Episode 4 when Arlette likens the threat of takeover by a German company to the 1940 invasion of France. From this angle, part of the textual work achieved by *Dix pour cent* is to take the model of 'family' as a unit of national reproduction and reframe it—and so Frenchness itself—as an organisation openly dedicated

to capitalist labour: ASK is repeatedly referred to in familial terms (though ironically so when Mathias invokes these following the birth of Andréa's baby on the office reception floor in order to try to dissuade colleagues from pursuing a clandestine plan to start their own agency), with its clients infantilised, while Andréa's partner Colette accuses the agent of substituting '*la grande famille du cinéma*' ['the great family of cinema'], a common phrase, for their own family unit during a row. At the end of the series, tellingly, the key narrative thread dealing with Camille's integration as a Parisienne is resolved not through Mathias recognising her as his child, as they have discussed, but by the pair's decision to start an agency together instead. On the other hand, the series's ending does not completely follow through on promoting the ideological move to enshrine work as the meaning of identity, national and beyond, in that in a contrastingly re-traditionalising gesture, in the wake of ASK's insolvency, the once ruthless businesswoman Andréa appears set to become a stay-at-home mother.

The 'ordinariness' of the lives of young to middle-aged professionals depicted in *Dix pour cent* invites comparison with Henri Lefebvre's discussions of space in his *Critique of Everyday Life*. Everyday life occurs at 'the intersection of the sector man controls and the sector he does not control' (1991 [1947], 21), where biological rhythms collide with social ones in spaces that after the mid-twentieth century had become entirely colonised by capitalism. Even within the comedy format of *Dix pour cent*, there are hints at the violent demands exerted by the neoliberal workplace on its foot soldiers, such as in a sequence in which workers consume coffee to excess, set to a Wild West musical motif that casts the battleground of the capitalist war machine as North American while also celebrating neoliberal resilience (S01/E03). The space of the wider consumer-commercial city is also intimately bound up with flows of power (i.e. capital) in Season 3, Episode 4 when prolific actor Huppert is double-booked and whisked by an ASK-employed car from one shoot to the other, exerting mastery over the urban traffic network as a means to control the currency of the star body. Yet the show is intermittently aware of those excluded from these economies. It is marked by (tokenistic) 'woke' politics (see Gray 2019) in including a gay and a Black character in its cast, Hervé and Sofia apparently both proving notable hits with audiences (see the final chapter in this volume). As mentioned, these two have the possibility of acting careers before them at the end of the series, in something of a utopian resolution. However, most characters are White and middle class, not to mention

unusually (though not totally implausibly) attractive, and all are able-bodied. More strikingly in the French context, the only key *beur* actor is Bouab in the role of Hicham Janowski; yet it is arguable that his specific ethnic difference is tempered—and rendered more familiar to US viewers—by being cast as implicitly Jewish, as Janowski is a Polish Jewish name. In another meta-significatory gesture, the exclusion of *beur* identities on screen is condemned by Camille: when her client Sami (Soufiane Gerrab) is fired because, in the words of Mathias, ‘he doesn’t know how things are done’ (in his quasi-Bourdieuian phrase, ‘*il a pas les codes*’), she berates her father for racism and promises Sami that the road ahead is ‘big and [it’s] wide open’. Her vow’s veracity is in fact affirmed by the comic finale that sees Sami probably rehired when senior actor Gérard Lanvin takes him back under his wing (just as Gerrab has come to international visibility through a major role in *Lupin*). However, audiences would have to wait for Herrero’s follow-up series to see both a leading role tailored to a latter-generation North African Frenchman and capitalism more explicitly questioned, although not totally repudiated, as a social goal.

STANDING UP FOR MULTICULTURAL FRANCE

An overarching argument Chion (2008) puts forward in his study of French film dialogue is that the nation’s cinema is unusually fond of the-matising linguistic proficiency as a form of social currency, as in the case of the *Cyrano de Bergerac* story to which his book’s title alludes. While the protagonists of *Dix pour cent* certainly manipulate words, usually as a vehicle for rhetoric if not deceit to achieve their professional and personal goals, in *Drôle* verbal mastery takes centre stage, initially as a vector for worldly success but increasingly as the series progresses simply as a communicative end in itself. The theatrical metaphor is apposite for the subject matter of its six (40–49-minute) episodes: the lives of a group of aspiring stand-up comics. However, *Drôle* does not fit easily into the mould of language polarised along class lines we find more traditionally on French-language screens. Although its principal male lead, Nezir (Younes Boucif), fits the *banlieue* protagonist stereotype in being the cash-strapped son of an Algerian immigrant who lives in cramped housing in the urban periphery surrounded by drug dealers and listens to rap music, unlike in *banlieue* narratives from *La Haine* to *Engrenages* or, to cite a more recent example, *A l’abordage/All Hands on Deck* (Guillaume Brac, 2020, featuring teenage boys from La Courneuve on holiday in the south of France), his

otherness in relation to ‘Franco-French’ metropolitan and sometimes bourgeois identities is not linguistically marked. Rather, Nezir’s speech is elegant, off stage and especially on it, where for instance he muses: ‘*Moi, quand j’invite une fille au restaurant et qu’elle refuse ... bénéf! [...] Moi, si vous voulez, très clairement, mes moyens avec les filles c’est ma tchatche, mon humour, ma répartie. Quand la peur m’enlève ces moyens, que me reste-t-il?*’ [‘When I invite a girl to a restaurant and she says no ... bonus! [...] You see, my best features when it comes to girls are my chat, my humour, my repartee. When fear robs me of those, what do I have left?’] (E03 ‘Black Goes with Everything’). Nezir’s French is perfectly correct, with the inversion of the verb and noun in the interrogative *que me reste-t-il?* even conveying marked formality (while *bénéf*, abbreviating a French variant on ‘benefit’, and the Anglicism *tchatche* are more colloquial but very common); the actor’s strikingly clearly articulated, slow diction and careful pronunciation are also amplified by his character’s on-stage microphone.

What are we to make of this? Explanations might well include Herrero’s (and potentially Boucif’s) own lack of ease in ‘banlieue-speak’, and a desire not to travesty it, perhaps intersecting with valid questions over the extent to which this really exists at all. Certainly, it has been exaggerated in cinema; residents of *banlieues* took umbrage specifically at what they perceived as the inauthentic language they heard in *La Haine*, and which Vincendeau has pointed out overuses certain slang words likely to be easily recognisable to broad publics (2005, 84, 26)—principally in France but, we can assume, to a lesser extent outsiders who might have some linguistic knowledge. With postnationalism in mind, it seems even cannier for producers to simply stick to standard French, even better an intermittently *soigné* version, yet one enlivened by idioms contributing to an impression of vaguely hip but wholly mainstream ‘youth speak’.⁷

I would nevertheless like to advance a further explanation for the change in language design in evidence in this (partial) *banlieue* story, or at least an analysis of its effects, linked to the manipulation of real pro-filmic spaces into a fantasy on-screen world in *Drôle*. A defining trait of *banlieue* films is their tendency to stage trips to Paris *intra muros* to underline oppositions between the two spaces and the failure of *banlieue* youths to fit in within the metropolis (Konstantarakos 1999, 162). *Drôle* opens by showing two ‘immigrant’ characters’ incursion into the urban centre. The first is the almost comically diminutive and bespectacled but heavily moustachioed child-man Nezir, riding a delivery company’s bicycle down Haussmannian boulevards rehearsing his sketch to himself. The second is

Aïssatou (Mariama Gueye), a statuesque Black woman, who asks if she can put up posters for her act in various increasingly downmarket shops and business premises, sometimes with her young daughter under her arm, not always successfully. It is evident that these are characters on the lower rungs of capitalist society and their status as temporary occupants of (if not intruders into) the spaces they frequent is signalled: Nezir is there by virtue of belonging to the service economy, Aïssatou through chutzpah that is at times rewarded with an invitation to leave the way she came in. However, there is no sense of hostility or hopelessness; although Nezir references his poor living conditions and impecuniousness, he is smiling as he deftly navigates a Paris of modern-looking, colourful urban spaces in the sunshine, reclaiming the time demanded by the labour market to simultaneously work on his own craft, while the last shot of indefatigable Aïssatou's odyssey shows how, through sheer force of charm, she persuades an initially reluctant retailer to accept her poster. Thus, both characters evidence class mobility in their ability to dominate the modern metropolis, and notably by using language—the benefits of a Republican education—to recreate their worlds.

The opening sequence is more generally typical of *Drôle's* attitude to ImpersoNating Frenchness via the clichéd history of representing (sub) urban working-class characters in postclassical realist drama: it flirts with stereotypes while 'updating' these by suppressing class difference—including through the original US associations of stand-up comedy itself (down to the French term being the identical Anglicism, *le stand-up*). Remaining with the central-periphery dynamics, we do see Nezir asleep on his grey-toned RER commuter train home and later in the film the convention is acknowledged in one of his sketches about a budding romance with bourgeois Apolline (Elsa Guedj), who lives in the sixth *arrondissement*: 'I was Cinderella. I needed to get my train home before midnight or I'd turn into a homeless person.' However, unlike in more classic ImpersoNation (for instance, Scotland as a deprived land of uneducated ne'er-do-wells in *Trainspotting*), the ironic distance from stereotypes of marginal working-class youth implied by this phrase is in the case of *Drôle* overwhelmingly maintained by the *mise-en-scène*. Nezir's home, Morsang-sur-Orge, while not without vestiges of the now hackneyed scenes first mass-exported on screen by *La Haine* via the drug-dealing youths, is depicted as down-at-heel but pleasantly rural, drawing on 'quiet *banlieue*' representations that are beginning to multiply and combat the pre-existing caricature (Vincendeau 2018, 93–95). Even the drug dealers have their civic use, as



Fig. 2 *Drôle*'s suburban scenes eschew the bleak iconography and affects associated with most prominent post-1980s representations of the *banlieue* as such (E01)

Nezir purchases cannabis from them to medicate his father's chronic spinal pain following a life of manual labour (Fig. 2).

Equally, while the series focalises a multi-ethnic group of friends and professional associates, including as well as Nezir and Aïssatou the second-generation Vietnamese Etienne, known as Bling, and Nezir's White love interest Apolline, only Nezir actually lives in the *banlieue* (the already quite successful Bling's apartment, while shot to obscure specific localising markers, can be discerned through close scrutiny to sit halfway down the rue St Maur in the eleventh *arrondissement*; Aïssatou's is more difficult to place as it is shot from the inside). As suggested earlier, most of the action unfolds in north-eastern Paris, in and around Belleville, where Bling's comedy club *Drôle* is also located on the rue de Mont-Louis, and neighbouring Ménilmontant: an intermediary between the grand architecture of the central quarters and the emptier spaces of the *banlieues*, in the process of being gentrified as bohemian (see Clerical 2013) but typified by the influence of multiple cultures in Paris *intra muros*, such as the many 'ethnic' restaurants seen in night-time jaunts by the main characters. If *Dix pour cent* purported to popularise a fresh view of Paris postnationally, *Drôle* is surely better designed to achieve this goal, updating historical folkloric portrayals of working-class Paris seen abundantly in 1930s Poetic Realist cinema through a celebratory multicultural lens.

The exception concerns Apolline's domain, which unapologetically ImpersoNates French high culture. Her parents live (at first with her) in a grand wood-panelled, high-ceilinged apartment bedecked with finery and where classical music constantly plays. That they have forced Apolline into studying History of Art and set her up with an apprenticeship at fine art and antiques dealer Christie's in London, despite her damp enthusiasm for the topic, suggests the series's negative view of this social stratum: hence, Apolline's mother, while elegantly dressed, turns out to be oppressively mentally unstable and her father frequently absent on business. Still, self-consciousness about the caricatured nature of the depiction also tempers any value judgements to a degree; thus, when Apolline reveals her old-fashioned and undeniably upper-class name on introducing herself during a stand-up routine, the audience takes it as the first joke!⁸ Moreover, the key function of Apolline's distinction from other characters concerns *Drôle*'s status as an inter-class, inter-ethnic dyadic romantic comedy, where difference works to allow reconciliation. Romcoms often feature elements of comedian comedy, perhaps especially in France, where it is an exceptionally significant cultural channel, among other things for minority ethnic performers to attain A-list stardom. Vincendeau (2015, building on observations by Nelly Quemener) and Jonathan Ervine (2019, 96–128) have shown the importance of theatrical and televised stand-up, especially Canal+'s *Jamel Comedy Club* (2006–), in establishing multi-ethnic comic stars in France.⁹ Several performers in this tradition have gone on to enjoy extremely successful film careers, including in addition to Debbouze, Gad Elmaleh, Dany Boon and most recently Sy. However, the title of the Netflix Elmaleh vehicle *Huge in France* (2019) underlines the fact that, while Netflix is beginning to try to exploit French stand-up (the UK offering includes a series dedicated to the performer Fary, who also plays a lead role in the platform's *Tout simplement noir/Simply Black* [John Wax and Jean-Paul Zadi, 2020]), and a 53-minute routine by Fadily Camara), it is only recently that any such performers have become at all widely recognisable beyond the Hexagon, thanks still fairly exclusively to Sy's trajectory. And Sy's truly worldwide fame has in fact been cemented not by only his international hit film *Intouchables/Untouchable* (Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, 2011) but—as both the Introduction and David Pettersen's contribution to this collection detail—by his role in *Lupin*.¹⁰ *Drôle* is arguably to be credited for attempting to extend this phenomenon (even if the ultimate ideal would be a level of diversity and visibility of roles for such performers that we are still far from attaining)—or rather, reorient it

slightly differently, in that the performers in *Drôle* are actors *playing* stand-up comics. Further, just as Sy's protagonist 'Lupin' is able to use amassed cultural capital including performative virtuosity to penetrate the corrupt and decadent upper echelons of society, so too it is Nezir's talent as a comic that cements Apolline's desire for him, beginning when he teaches her how to structure jokes. This [leads Apolline] to credit him with enabling her moderate revolt against her parents, by occupying her own attic room in the apartment building (though this is owned, it is implied, by her family), refusing to go to London and insisting on pursuing stand-up. Since language does not provide a key to characters' class backgrounds in *Drôle*, the many sequences the series dedicates to filming stand-up routines reduce characters if not quite to a wholly disempowered Agambenian bare life then at least to just another name on the billing offering themselves up vulnerably to the mercy of a demanding public, with their isolation against dark, largely monochrome backgrounds evoking a zero degree of identity-construction. Going further, in a frank reversal of a stereotype so widespread it is a source of conflict in recent French fictions as varied *Il a déjà tes yeux/He Even Has Your Eyes* (Lucien Jean-Baptiste, 2016, distributed by Netflix and giving rise to an eponymous spin-off television series available in Belgium and France) and Leïla Simani's 2016 Goncourt Prize-winning novel *Chanson douce/Lullaby*, White Apolline also works as Black Aïssatou's nanny—but only briefly and informally. Likewise, while she does visit Nezir's home turf once, declaring in a comic routine performed there, 'I've always dreamed of being in the *banlieue*', it is in her space that their relationship as lovers actually plays out, suggesting Nezir's successful attainment of metropolitan upper-middle-class status (even if hiccoughs caused by Apolline's mother's ill health challenge their utopia temporarily, before the series's final image of her, when she turns up after his show, suggests its restitution may be on the cards). In other words, just as language displays few if any markers of class in *Drôle*, the otherness of working-class 'colour' is in the end altogether reassuringly contained by the narrative.

Drôle is self-aware about the naivety of such a representation. On one occasion, Apolline's mother mistakes Nezir for an Uber driver, and he goes along with it to avoid social awkwardness; on another, confronted with the horrific story of his younger brother's death by falling from a tower block roof, Apolline blithely asks why they didn't simply move house to escape the scene of the tragedy; and he repeatedly blanches at her obliviousness about the cost of everything, including another room she

rents on inherited dime. Nonetheless, the approach it adopts presents certain drawbacks for any drive to level up representational economies. I have already hinted at the commercial underpinnings of the series's desire to present a different view of Paris, arguably marketing a modern-day version of the 'postcolonial exotic' (Huggan 2001), while Netflix's 'inclusive' casting policy is also clearly a strategy to optimise their products' resonance with different ethnic communities.¹¹ If in *Dix pour cent* discourses of collective enterprise and family are hijacked by neoliberal logics, then in *Drôle* this extends to social justice imperatives (i.e. diversity initiatives) themselves. Kristen J. Warner (2017) has also famously critiqued the politics of 'woke' identifiable with many mainstream representations for their superficiality in ways that chime with Netflix's insistence on diversity box-ticking: she takes to task the way in which '[s]wapping in and out racial groups with little adjustment to the parts themselves retains the original work as the primary driver and as a result marks the changes as superficial'. *Drôle* doesn't quite do this but nor does it follow through on its premises when it comes to marking social differences, ultimately collapsing these in favour of elevating the fairy-tale integration plot to the status of key narrative motor. And in attributing a certain superficiality to the series's diversity of characterisation, it becomes pertinent to note Jodi Melamed's (2006) persuasive account of how 'neoliberal multiculturalism' can be integrated into national identities themselves in the era of advanced capitalism.

Jacqueline Ballantine (2021, 153–155) has meanwhile identified nostalgia as limiting the power of mixed-race romcoms to change perceptions—here, to normalise French mixed-race, cross-class couples for a domestic and international audience—because they set their central couples outside history.¹² Such an affective mode is clearly courted by this series's tale of charismatic ordinary people at times displaying overtly anti-capitalist attitudes. Nezir's cheerful simpleton father stands out here: unable to use a mobile phone, he spends his time happily watching cooking programmes, engages in slapstick physical comedy and tells his son that '[m]oney's not the most important thing in life'—a lesson Nezir takes to heart when he implausibly foregoes the opportunity to earn €400 per minute writing content for his TV presenter boss and takes a stand against the latter's unethical behaviour by feeding him plagiarised lines to embarrass him on air (referencing similar incidents involving well-known French comedians, notably Gad Elmaleh). Leading to the protagonist's summary dismissal and industry blacklisting, this plotline conforms to

transculturally recognisable narrative archetypes valorising humble self-sacrifice for moral good with a long history in Judeo-Christian thought and beyond.

In contrast, the symbolically named Bling represents the corrupting force of advanced capitalism, becoming complacent, hedonistic and bigoted (even if he too is ultimately fleshed out, while choosing a French name for his real first name, Etienne, speaks of a desire for realism about the complexity of immigrant identities, rather than xenophobic clichés). Yet we have already seen that the counterposed ‘feminist anti-aspirationalism’ (Hagelin and Silverman 2018) embodied by Apolline—who wants to stay in Paris and ‘ride a bike’ after being banned from taking her driving exams due to a suspension from university for cheating—does not hold up.¹³ The series is clearer-sighted about this when it comes to Aïssatou’s arc. Her comic routine is by far the most socially engaged and so politically controversial, as she discusses her experience of harassment by racist police following an innocent shopping trip (subverting the trope of criminal *banlieue* youth perpetuated by the Black girls who do shoplift in the mass-exported film *Bande de filles/Girlhood* [Céline Sciamma, 2014]). However, her White manager warns her stridently against this course of action and sure enough, noting some hesitation in reactions to it among her growing and increasingly lucrative fanbase, she returns to the less overtly political terrain of body comedy, more often associated with women performers and indeed closely resembling the sketches of *Jamel Comedy Club* graduate Blanche Gardin. Such a development tacitly acknowledges the utopianism of Nezir’s and Apolline’s storylines—in other words, the fact that depicting France as a post-racial society in which people from all backgrounds speak elegant French and princesses marry paupers falsifies realities along Republican universalist lines to the point of constructing an ImPosture of national identity.¹⁴

* * *

How are we to interpret the move in Herrero’s work from the innovative yet firmly historically rooted self-caricature of *Dix pour cent* to the more distinctly novel and even utopian but still self-aware posture of Frenchness adopted by *Drôle*? There has been some debate over the ideological value of irony in representation. Many theorists attribute to the mode political force as a means of trying to engage with the world, in a situation where all politics could be seen as ironic ‘because it requires an acceptance of the

pretense, the possible fiction, that living together matters in the face of death' (Seery 1990, 10). However, when it comes to racialised comedy that at once recognises clichés and yet partially reproduces them in French stand-up, sociologist Quemener takes the view that the social engagement of such discourse is 'often dispersed in favour of easy laughs' (2012, 124). Sometimes the routines engaged in by performers in *Drôle* fall into precisely the sort of ethnic self-othering Quemener is referring to. Thus, while shy 'Arab' Nezir—like Aïssatou's Black partner Vlad—is reassuringly feminised, he nevertheless recounts his father's inability to do domestic work; or, more extremely, East Asian Bling describes and graphically mimes a pornographic scene in which a submissive woman eats rice (S01/E01).¹⁵ Such negative images of immigrants are surely grist to the mill for the view that 'brands should be held to account for attempting to market themselves as being concerned with issues of inequality and social injustice ("woke-washing"), including in ways that involve stereotypical representations' (Sobande 2020, 2740). Likewise, when it comes to the central issue in *Drôle* of the difficulties for marginalised subjects of negotiating their place in a contemporary French nation still beset by social prejudice, we have seen that the series's narrative tends not even to hold these up in inverted commas so much as try to wish them away, in a fashion that sceptics of 'woke' have also begun to criticise (see John McWhorter in Doubek et al. 2021). On the other hand, Francesca Sobande's strongest critique is reserved for organisations that make no contribution to addressing inequality, whereas the casting of ethnic minority actors and less often other personnel has concrete economic benefits. Moreover, on the question of fictionalised identities, rather than offering easy laughs, narrative irony pertains to and mitigates even both the sometimes (excessively negative) stereotyped individual identities and the sometimes (excessively positive) clichéd individual story arcs represented nonetheless. This is because other aspects of *Drôle*'s plot, characterisation and iconography more implicitly recognise that structural inequities endure. It is worth pointing out that the overall intentions of the series's creators here are elusive and perhaps immaterial (in both senses of the word), harking back to the way in which many thinkers in the domains of both genre and especially ironic address have understood meaning-making as a dynamic rooted in often unconscious cultural structures and beliefs circulating between creators and audiences.

I suggest that in inevitably calling attention to its status as a fairy-tale, *Drôle* invites us to understand the riches-to-rags ideology it intermittently

promotes *as* a kind of performative gesture. If *posture* describes a stance adopted in physical space, (Im)Posture here describes leaning (or perhaps ‘standing up’) into an idealised vision of what France *might* look like. Opened up by irony, this space transcends the structural constrictions of everyday life, having more in common with the radically inclusive notion of ‘thirdspace’ developed by Lefebvre’s successor Edward Soja: a conception informed by an acknowledgement that the built environment (‘first-space’)—for instance, the French capital’s layout, including its peripheral *banlieue*—can produce new material realities, such as the kind of cross-cultural interpersonal dynamic that exists between Apolline and Nezir (Soja 1996). For Soja this occurs through the intervention of ‘second-space’, described as the realm in which firstspace is conceptualised, and it is tempting to attribute this status to on-screen fictional worlds, and in this instance that of *Drôle* specifically. In any case, the narrative’s slippages, aporias and contradictions mean that *Drôle* offers more than a naive celebration of national assimilationist policies, even if the points of contact with these may resonate with domestic audiences. In a situation where the imagination remains one of the only spheres potentially outside the circuits of self-reproducing edifices of neoliberal power that shore up economic disparities and attendant social divides, performativity seems overall as positive a response as may be possible to the injunction to offer a ‘legitimate’ view of contemporary Frenchness beyond fetishised views of limited strata. It is worth citing here the positive influence of the Netflix acquisition of *Dix pour cent* on domestic network France Télévisions’s viewing figures, as acknowledged in this collection’s final chapter, to remind us of the bilateral nature of any negotiation of identities in postnational audiovisual production. The important implication of this observation is that imagining Frenchness in ways that play well internationally ultimately shifts norms of national identity from the motherboard, so that for all their capitalist underpinnings, postnational platforms may offer spaces for challenging entrenched fear of difference in France.

NOTES

1. A rare example of a postnational French film primordially targeting international audiences might be a horror movie such as *Haute tension/Switchblade Romance* (Alexandre Aja, 2003) or others directed by Aja, whose unusual case is examined by Reece Goodall’s chapter in this volume.

2. Elsaesser also notes the overlaps between television and cinema through production funding arrangements (2005, 54–56), a situation intensified by the rise of streaming platforms that produce both and a related trend for releasing some properties (almost) simultaneously in both spaces.
3. This list is not exhaustive, with some other examples such as *Mythomaniac/Mytho* (Arte/Netflix, 2019–2021) set in more ordinary locations.
4. Indeed, Chion (2008, 138) singles out the *banlieue* film as having enriched French cinematic dialogue.
5. While the Introduction to this volume surveys definitions of the *transnational*—and their vagaries—in more detail, here I simply use it to reflect the fact that this French series also includes international influences and resulting elements.
6. All translations are the author’s own unless otherwise indicated.
7. Twitter posts suggest many foreign-language series are used as supports for language learning.
8. See <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/garance-apolline-diane-ces-prenoms-qui-trustent-les-mentions-tres-bien-3247407> on the highly classed nature of the name Apolline. My thanks to Ewelina Pepiak for this reference and other stimulating dialogue on *Drôle*.
9. With thanks to Ginette Vincendeau for reading and crucially nuancing my thoughts on certain details of the present chapter.
10. *Intouchables* performed notably less well in the UK. https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt1675434/?ref=bo_se_r_1.
11. Cf. David Pettersen’s chapter in this volume.
12. In fact, France’s interracial marriage rate is unusually high and rising, suggesting that French mixed-race couples are relatively unremarkable at home; however, this fact appears partly explicable through the sheer numbers of immigrants in the population (Bancaud 2017), placing some limits on the conclusions to be drawn.
13. Sarah Hagelin and Gillian Silverman use this phrase to describe how ‘In a period marked by heightened expectations for women, [female characters’] indifference to the achievement mandate [...] constitutes an important mode of feminist resistance’. Apolline does not emulate the laziness identified in female-centric mass-exported US television and her trajectory also mimics real Parisian ‘bobo’ (bourgeois-bohemian) trends, yet her ‘professional defeats [...] non-normative body’ and rejection of conventionally sanctioned, capitalist routes to ‘success’ are likely to resonate more widely thanks to this global televisual trend (Hagelin and Silverman 2018, 117).
14. The summary cancelling of the series despite positive reviews at a moment when Netflix’s shrinking business may be tightening belts is another ironic reminder of inexorable economic realities.

15. Jonathan Ervine (2022) interprets the stand-up routines of Frédéric Chau in similar terms but suggests younger East Asian comedians take a more politicised approach to ridiculing and confronting stereotypes, in a change which can be linked to the ethnic group's improved social status. My thanks to him for sharing an advanced copy of this article with me.

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Sign Language, Multilingualism and the Postnational Popular Screen: From *La Famille Bélier* and *Marie Heurtin* to *La Révolution*

Gemma King

Despite the historic and popular linking of French national cinema with the French national language, multilingualism has been part of French film dialogue since at least the 1930s. Whether in domestic French languages (French Sign Language [LSF], Basque, Breton), European national languages (English, Italian, Spanish, German), migrant languages (Vietnamese, Arabic, Wolof, Turkish) or others, films that include multilingual dialogue have long been connected with traditions of French and transnational filmmaking. The majority of multilingual films are made as co-productions, which have been popular in France since the interwar period and have grown from early twentieth-century partnerships with

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European neighbours to contemporary agreements with countries as varied as Burkina Faso, Chile and Georgia. Yet since the mid-2000s, the representation of multiple languages on French screens has grown dramatically in breadth and depth. With their multilingual dialogue, multicultural casts, co-production funding, significant successes at global film festivals, popularity on streaming platforms and frequent selection for remakes, multilingual films are some of the most diverse, border-crossing screen texts being produced in France and the contemporary world. Their simultaneous connection to and questioning of national cinemas, languages and identities render them some of the most fruitful objects of study for understanding the postnational popular.

This chapter explores a range of twenty-first-century French multilingual audiovisual texts which situate language in a postnational framework. It begins by laying out the general characteristics of contemporary French multilingual cinema, before focusing in on a specific language case: a growing group of films that are bilingual in spoken French and the national French Sign Language of the Deaf, or *Langue des signes française* (LSF).¹ Examining the rise of sign language cinemas within the context of contemporary multilingual screen cultures indicates the place language occupies in an increasingly postnational screen production space. The chapter analyses several LSF films and series of the past decade, concentrating on the 2014 feature films *La Famille Bélier/The Bélier Family* (Eric Lartigau) and *Marie Heurtin* (Jean-Pierre Améris) before examining the 2020 Netflix series *La Révolution/The Revolution* (François Lardenois and Aurélien Molas). The notion of the postnational popular offers us the tools to understand the relationship between the mythic ‘national’ space and the various subnational and supranational filmmaking spheres with which it is interlaced. Ultimately, the chapter argues that sign language cinemas illuminate the fundamental multilingualism of contemporary screen cultures and undermine the notion of the monolingual nation from within.

CONTEMPORARY FRENCH MULTILINGUAL CINEMA

Multilingualism in French film takes diverse forms and spans genres, movements, budgets and production contexts. In a chapter for the volume *Transnational French Studies* (King 2023), I lay out three categories of films which characterise the majority of contemporary French multilingual cinema. The first explores multilingualism across neighbouring European

languages, namely English, German, Italian and Spanish. Examples are Christian Carion's *Joyeux Noël/Merry Christmas* (2005), Cédric Klapisch's *L'Auberge espagnole/The Spanish Apartment* (2002) and Volker Schlöndorff's *Diplomatie/Diplomacy* (2014). These films, which Mariana Liz has described as 'Europuddings' (2015, 73), often represent relationships and connections that are forged through war, tourism, romance, work or study abroad. In the case of films such as *Joyeux Noël* and *Diplomatie*, they draw together characters of different linguistic backgrounds through histories of inter-European conflict, diplomacy and alliance. In Dany Boon's *Rien à déclarer/Nothing to Declare* (2010), Europeans of different nationalities meet at geographical border crossings, in this case France and Belgium (although in that film both groups are Francophone). In *L'Auberge espagnole*, Europeans of various nationalities are brought together seemingly at random by the Erasmus university exchange programme, which sees French, German, Belgian, Italian, Danish, Spanish and (pre-Brexit) British students renting a shared apartment together in Barcelona. Though tensions can run high in these films, the scenarios in which characters meet are quite logically dictated by geography, history or bureaucracy, and characters are frequently middle class, European and White.

The second category that is prominent in contemporary French multilingual film focuses on the polyglossia of (post)colonial relations, in which characters and languages are drawn together due to lingering colonial or postcolonial connections, ranging from decolonisation and immigration to exile and return. Important examples of this trend include Rachid Bouchareb's war films *Indigènes/Days of Glory* (2006) and *Hors la loi/Outside the Law* (2010) and post-*beur* immigration tales such as Ismaël Ferroukhi's *Le Grand voyage/The Great Journey* (2004) and *Les Hommes libres/Free Men* (2011), Tony Gatlif's *Exils/Exiles* (2004), Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano's *Samba* (2014) and Houda Benyamina's *Divines* (2016). Arabic is the obvious language for this category, but also spoken are Bambara, Malinka, Romany, Vietnamese, Wolof and many others. Though speakers of these languages were sometimes present on French screens in the twentieth century, their depiction usually reinforced assimilationist ideas of foreign language use as disenfranchising and upheld fluency in French as the only relevant linguistic goal or asset. This was achieved either through isolating characters who speak foreign languages (as with Arabic in Mehdi Charef's 1986 *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède/Tea in the Harem*) or by forbidding their characters from speaking their native

language when in France (such as Wolof in Ousmane Sembene's key decolonial text, *La Noire de.../Black Girl* of 1966 [see Sinon 2020; Dovey 2009]).² Though French remains a common requirement for belonging in French society, as is still depicted on screen, contemporary films in this category recast historically marginalised languages as an opportunity for potential self-determination and empowerment.

The third category of contemporary French multilingual cinema is the most nebulous and the least clearly dictated by French colonial history or European geography. Best described through reference to global networks or relationalities, this category depicts films which embrace more distant or unexpected connections between languages and groups. Examples include Philippe Lioret's *Welcome* (2009), in English, French and Kurdish; Jacques Audiard's *Dheepan* (2015), in English, French and Tamil; and Claire Denis's *L'Intrus/The Intruder* (2004), in English, French, Polynesian French, Korean and Russian. These films are not without hierarchy or historical precedent; they often tell stories of European colonisation in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, or chart migrations from the Global South to Western Europe. But these are usually not migrants originating from Francophone territories, and these migrants often are not aiming to settle in France. Such films' narrative stakes extend far beyond the traditional horizons of the French nation or any limiting notion of the Hexagon.

However, there also exists a fourth category that is perhaps more post-national and subversive than any other. This is a domestic, 'Gallie' category which depicts multilingualism originating from inside the Hexagon. I call this 'the multilingualism within'. The multilingualism within describes a corpus of films in which characters speak not only French but other French languages, that is languages also originating, like verbal French, from metropolitan France. These include regional languages such as Breton, Occitan and Basque, but most often French Sign Language (see Appendix for full list).

THE RISE OF SIGN LANGUAGE CINEMAS

La Famille Bélier, *Marie Heurtin* and the 2020 French Netflix Original series *La Révolution* are LSF original texts that construct a world of linguistic plurality located entirely within the contours of the French nation, in White, rural contexts which would not traditionally be associated with linguistic diversity. In so doing, they radically interrogate the power

dynamics of internal multilingualism and ask what ‘national language’ means for a nation that was always already multilingual.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, France became the first country in the Western world to found schools for deaf children, in which sign language use (i.e. manualist instruction) was encouraged. Both *Marie Heurтин* and *La Révolution* depict how during this period, schools for the Deaf represented a new option for deaf children, who previously risked being sent to an asylum, their deafness presumed an intellectual and mental defect that would prevent them from participating in society. These first schools were a significant moment of progress for Deaf culture and education. Yet in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France, sign became increasingly vilified as a divisive challenge to republican universalism. Following the Milan Convention of 1880 (Avon 2006, 192), an education conference which codified oralist pedagogies promoting speech and banning sign in many contexts across the Western world, sign language oppression became the dominant model of Deaf education, socialisation and healthcare—and ultimately cultural representation. The first three-quarters of the twentieth century saw the height of the oralist movement. Oralist education was famously portrayed in Randa Haines’s 1986 film *Children of a Lesser God*, in which a hearing teacher triumphantly teaches his deaf students to sing, and for which Marlee Matlin received the Academy Award for Best Actress, the first acting Oscar won by a Deaf person in history. (In 2022, Troy Kotsur would win the second, Best Supporting Actor, for *CODA* [Siân Heder, 2021], the transnational USA/Canada/France remake of *La Famille Bélier*, also starring Matlin. *CODA* was also the first sign language film to win the Best Film Academy Award, renewing international interest in—and, as we shall see, critique of—*La Famille Bélier*.)

The rise of oralist politics across the Western world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with the invention of cinema itself, and the norms of Deaf representation on screen up until the late twentieth century reflected this shared history. The vast majority of screen material about deafness in the twentieth century perpetuated oralist modes of representation, in which deafness is portrayed as socially isolating, frustrating and disenfranchising in all areas of a Deaf person’s life. As Martin Norden writes, ‘most movies have tended to isolate disabled characters from their able-bodied peers as well as from each other’ (1994, 1). Deaf characters in these films were often played by hearing actors, who had little understanding of the complexity of authentic sign language

communication or Deaf experience, a trope that was perpetuated in *La Famille Bélier*. Narratives often focused on redemption and civilisation through the process of oralising, or learning to speak, frequently taught by hearing saviour characters, as in *Children of a Lesser God*. Deaf characters were often represented as tragedies and/or burdens, who must strive to ‘overcome’ their disability in order to integrate socially and succeed, as in the three Hollywood *Miracle Worker* films and series episodes (Arthur Penn, 1962; Paul Aaron, 1979; and Nadia Tass, Disney Channel, 2000), about the valiant triumphs of Helen Keller’s hearing and seeing teacher of tactile sign language, Anne Sullivan. Deaf characters were also often portrayed as passive and vulnerable targets for violence, as in the two *Johnny Belinda* films (Jean Negulesco, 1948; Paul Bogart and Gary Nelson, 1967) and *Hear No Evil* (Robert Greenwald, 1993). Others were depicted as sources of crude and dehumanising humour, as in *See No Evil, Hear No Evil* (Arthur Hiller, 1989) and *Murder by Death* (Robert Moore, 1976).

In a 2017 interview with *Le Monde* entitled ‘Deafness is Still Considered an Illness to be Cured’, prominent LSF activist and French Deaf actor Emmanuelle Laborit explained that during much of her lifetime, in France:

Sign language was forbidden, since specialists condemned it at the Milan Convention in 1880! It was shameful, undervalued, considered a sub-language. The medical system felt it would make us sick, ghettoise us. Deaf people had to assimilate, hear ‘the voice of God’ and ‘oralise’. (Laborit in Merchin 2017)³

Laborit’s comments are not unique, but they are rendered all the more resonant by the twenty-first-century rise in French Sign Language screen cultures.

FRENCH SIGN LANGUAGE ON SCREEN

One of the only French films to include LSF dialogue before the decline of oralism in the late twentieth century was François Truffaut’s *L’Enfant sauvage/The Wild Child* (1970), which conformed to these oralist stereotypes. Indeed, the only well-known Deaf person active in French cinema before the contemporary era was the above-mentioned Emmanuelle Laborit herself. Laborit was born profoundly deaf in 1971 and has communicated mostly in LSF since learning the language at age 7. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, she had several starring roles in LSF cinema,

including in Pascal Baeumler's 1999 *Retour à la vie/Return to Life*, Christoph Schaub's 2001 *Stille Liebe/Secret Love* and Claude Lelouch's short in the portmanteau film *11'09"01/September 11* (2002). In fact, Patrice Leconte's 1996 heritage film *Ridicule* is one of the few films from this period that includes LSF dialogue, but not Laborit. Though Laborit was the only prominent Deaf actor active in France at the turn of the twenty-first century, the period also saw a number of other films which included excerpts of LSF, though usually interpreted by hearing actors (as in Jacques Audiard's *Sur mes lèvres/Read My Lips*, 2001) or unnamed side characters (as in Michael Haneke's *Code inconnu/Code Unknown*, of the previous year). In both Laborit's roles and these more peripheral representations, though the films show a general compassion for Deaf experience and acknowledgement of LSF as a language in itself, narratives generally conform to the aforementioned tropes of what Martin Norden (1994) calls a 'cinema of isolation', whereby deafness engenders disconnection and exclusion from broader society, one which can only be overcome by learning to assimilate linguistically through lip-reading and speech.

However, since the 2010s Deaf roles have become increasingly frequent and authentic. Recent years have seen multiple releases in which French Sign Language is a vector of cultural belonging and civic participation. These are often fleeting scenes within a broader French-speaking narrative, such as the Deaf character Bachir in Robin Campillo's *120 battements par minute/BPM/Beats Per Minute* (2017), whose use of an LSF interpreter allows him to participate in public debate about AIDS activism in France. Though it was a small role for Deaf actor Bachir Saïfi, *BPM*'s Bachir is an important intersectional character: queer, *beur*, Deaf and HIV-positive. Of particular importance to the French Deaf community in the 2010s was the documentary *Avec nos yeux* ('With Our Eyes', 2013), directed by Marion Aldighieri and featuring a range of prominent LSF users, including Laborit. Using a combination of subtitled LSF interviews and French voiceover, *Avec nos yeux* is one of the most significant films to explore translingual Deaf experience in France, from a Deaf perspective. Several other LSF documentaries were also released in this period, including *Témoins sourds, témoins silencieux* ('Deaf Witnesses, Silent Witnesses', Brigitte Lemaire, 2008), *J'avancerai vers toi avec les yeux d'un sourd* ('I Will Approach You with Deaf Eyes', Laetitia Caron, 2015), the documentary short *La Vérité* ('The Truth', Julien Bourges, 2015) and *Signer/Signing* (Nurith Aviv, 2018), a French-Israeli co-production in French, French Sign Language and Hebrew.

However, the most widely circulated feature films in French Sign Language were both released in 2014: Jean-Pierre Améris's *Marie Heurtin* and Eric Lartigau's *La Famille Bélier*. *Marie Heurtin* is set in the 1880s in rural Vienne near Poitiers. Based on a true story, it tells the tale of a deaf-blind girl, Marie Heurtin (Ariana Rivoire, a sighted Deaf actor), who is adopted by the sighted and hearing main character, Sister Marguerite (popular actress Isabelle Carré). *La Famille Bélier* is set in the contemporary era and tells the story of the teenage Paula (Louane Emera), who is torn between her duties on her parents' dairy farm in Normandy and her dream of pursuing a singing career in Paris. The two films differ in genre and time period but are alike in their setting: a closed, rural, White community in picturesque north-west France, far from any cities or hubs of multiculturalism, in what Mary Harrod and Phil Powrie have described as discrete and conservative French communities (2018, 6). These are far from Mary Louise Pratt's typical 'language contact zones' (1991), far from borders or *banlieues* in which multilingualism is to be expected. And yet these are fundamentally bilingual spaces. For both *Marie Heurtin*'s Marguerite and *La Famille Bélier*'s Paula are Codas (Children of Deaf Adults): hearing children born to deaf parents. Paula is the only hearing person in a family with a deaf mother, father and brother, and Sister Marguerite, whose late mother was deaf, is one of the few hearing nuns in a boarding school for deaf children. Both films include roughly as much French Sign Language as French dialogue, and their hearing protagonists are a minority in their mostly Deaf environments. In *Marie Heurtin* in particular, LSF is not a peripheral or maligned code but an inclusive and indispensable lingua franca (as shown in Fig. 1). Spoken French is only used between the few hearing staff residents of the school, where LSF is accessible to all. The film thus shows us an example of discrete, functional, translingual d/Deaf/hearing communities and advances an inclusive model for Deaf belonging, a model which would later be championed in *CODA*, as well.

While 2014 was a particularly active year for sign language cinemas (in addition to *Marie Heurtin* and *La Famille Bélier*, Myroslav Slaboshpytskyi's acclaimed, unsubtitled Ukrainian Sign Language film *Plemya/The Tribe* was also released that year), French Sign Language screen texts have continued to appear in large numbers in cinemas and on streaming platforms. Most notably, in 2020 Netflix France released a single season of the revisionist historical drama *La Révolution*. This original series revolves around a young deaf girl from an aristocratic French family, Madeleine de



Fig. 1 *Marie Heurtin's* Sister Marguerite (Isabelle Carré) introduces the deaf-blind Marie to her deaf classmates in LSF

Montargis (Amélia Lacquemant), before and during the outbreak of revolution in the late 1780s. Plagued from within their rural chateau and neighbouring village by a mysterious virus that is turning the landed gentry into ravenous zombies, Madeleine and her loved ones witness the villagers turn on their oppressors (led by a tall, blonde warrior woman named Marianne) in an attempt to contain the outbreak. The series not only revises the history of the events that finally triggered the Revolution but also the origins of the notorious execution device, the guillotine. As the only way to defeat the monsters is through decapitation, Joseph Guillotin (Amir El Kacem, based on the real-life physician Joseph-Ignace Guillotin) invents the guillotine for the purpose of dispatching the zombies.

Though Madeleine's sister Elise (Marilou Aussilloux) is the protagonist of *La Révolution*, Madeleine is at the centre of its narrative, as she possesses supernatural powers and experiences visions which are posited as the key to understanding the virus, though the abrupt cancellation of the series during the pandemic left these loose ends untied. (This is a trope of both Deaf and Indigenous children on screen, who are often portrayed as spiritually and supersensorially connected to nature and truth, accessing transcendental knowledge through visions.) The series uses the hearing characters' attitude towards French Sign Language as a means of signposting 'enlightened' characters who sympathise with the democratic cause

and differentiating them from ‘unenlightened’ ones who scorn sign as much as they do the working-class ‘rebels’. This is brought to the fore in two contrasting sequences in episodes (entitled Chapters 4 and 6). In Chapter 4, Guillotin visits Madeleine and her friend Ophélie (Coline Beal), having heard that her visions might be linked with the virus, and reveals a rudimentary understanding of sign. At first, Madeleine fears that Joseph’s rare competency in sign is evidence that he works at an asylum and has come to take her away (Fig. 2). However, he quickly reveals he knows some LSF because he considers it a real language, useful in his career as a physician and for communication with people.

Guillotin (French Sign Language, also speaking French): Hello, Madeleine.

Madeleine (to Ophélie, French Sign Language): Who is this?

G: I’m a doctor.

M: You know sign language?

G: I only know some of the basics.

M (to O): You’re a liar! ... You and Elise promised no one would take me to the madhouse!

G: No. I’m not taking you anywhere.

M: You’re not the asylum doctor?

G: No.

M: Then why are you here?



Fig. 2 Amélia Lacquemant as Madeleine signs with Joseph in *La Révolution* (Chapter 4)

Conversely, in Chapter 6 Madeleine is accosted by her recently infected cousin, Donatien (Julien Frison), who had always been cruel to the villagers before his zombie infection and has graduated to murdering and consuming them since his metamorphosis. When Madeleine signs that Donatien is scaring her horse, he waves his hands in mockery and says, ‘I don’t understand a word you’re trying to tell me, cousin’, before continuing only to speak. *La Révolution* is sensitive in its portrayal of Deaf experience in eighteenth-century France and declines reductive norms that would represent Madeleine as passive or disempowered by her deafness. However, Lacquemant is a hearing actor and in the series’s magical realist voiceover segments, Madeleine speaks with a hearing accent. Though it is possible that Madeleine is intended to be a non-verbal hearing character, she is coded as deaf and associated with tropes of mystical disability and the ‘supercrip’ (Clare 1999). These problematic elements notwithstanding, *La Révolution* is noteworthy—though simplistic—for its association of sign language use with inclusion, humanism and democratic values, by contrast with the oppressive, monolingual zombie aristocrats who refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy or value of sign.

Despite their fundamental linguistic diversity, *La Famille Bélier*, *Marie Heurtin* and *La Révolution* are all defined by their regional settings. Though both *La Famille Bélier*’s Paula and *Marie Heurtin*’s Marguerite are Codas living in predominantly Deaf environments, neither character experiences their bilingualism in the context of cities. This distinguishes the multilingualism of the White rural heartland (in which migrant and Indigenous languages are notably absent) from the ethnically and nationally diverse categories of multilingual film discussed earlier in this chapter. In reality, of course, multiple languages are present in many rural communities, including in metropolitan France, and people of colour are important members of Deaf communities. Yet despite the narrow view of Deaf culture that *La Famille Bélier*, *Marie Heurtin* and *La Révolution*’s mostly White lens provides (though *La Révolution* does cast several French-speaking people of colour), each text shows us how linguistic diversity, and transcultural dynamics, can exist *within* racially homogeneous communities. In these multilingual worlds, sign languages are not only family languages but languages of civic belonging, education, business and even political organisation. This backdrop, which Mary Harrod calls ‘the historical heartland of the right’ (2020, 101), is especially important when it comes to Paula’s father in *La Famille Bélier*, who runs for village mayor on a protectionist platform focused on supporting farming

families, spurred rather than deterred by his deafness. In an unsubtle joke, Rodolphe runs under the slogan ‘I hear you!’ (‘Je vous entends!’), Fig. 3).

Despite the cultural impact and relative commercial success of LSF films in the 1990s and 2000s, texts such as *La Révolution*, *La Famille Bélier* and its eventual transnational remake *CODA* signalled an important shift in the cinematic spaces and scales sign languages occupy. Much of Emmanuelle Laborit’s filmography, for example, would be described as small-budget *cinéma d’art et d’essai* [arthouse cinema] or heritage film in the *cinéma du milieu* [middle-budget cinema] tradition. Though sign language cinema began to grow notably in the early 2010s, in France and beyond it was mostly an arthouse tradition, enjoying critical attention and respectable, but not enormous, commercial success. By contrast with these important but less widely distributed films, *La Famille Bélier* represented a decisive step into the popular for sign language cinema, not only in its slapstick family dramedy genre but in the scale of its reception. The film was an immense commercial success, earning US\$56 million at the French box office and US\$73 million worldwide.⁴ It was the second-highest earning domestic film of 2014 in France after the smash hit *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au bon Dieu?/Serial (Bad) Weddings* (Philippe de Chauveron) and remains the 32nd highest-grossing French film of all time at the home box office.⁵ It received six César nominations: Best Film, Best Actor, Best



Fig. 3 Rodolphe (François Damiens) of *La Famille Bélier* argues his deafness will not affect his ability to serve as mayor of his village

Actress, Best Supporting Actor, Best Original Screenplay and Best New Actress, with the latter being awarded to Louane Emera or simply Louane, recently discovered star of the French reality series *The Voice: la plus belle voix/The Voice* (TF1, 2012–, S02 2013). Many reviews of *La Famille Bélier* couched the film's popularity in its balance between a fresh topic and formulaic 'feel-good' genre; 'not subtle—but moving and pleasurable' (Vincendeau 2015, 81). Netflix's original series *La Révolution* and Apple TV+'s acquisition *CODA* also reveal the importance of streaming to the rise of sign language screen cultures (many more original LSF texts are streaming on Netflix and other platforms), whose quasi-borderless distribution methods and embedded subtitling feature in multiple languages enhance the accessibility and postnationalism of these texts.

Despite its success, it is important to note that *La Famille Bélier* also drew controversy for the casting of hearing stars Karin Viard and François Damiens in the roles of Paula's deaf parents. Paula's brother Quentin (Luca Gelberg) is the only character played by a deaf actor. The strongest criticisms originated from members of the Deaf community, many of whom criticised the film for perpetuating a long history of hearing actors misrepresenting deaf characters in ways that have been likened to pantomime and even blackface (Atkinson 2014). French Deaf reviewer Viguen Shirvanian described French Deaf viewers' inability to understand Karin Viard in particular, 'whose excessively fast and jerky signs are quite incomprehensible to Deaf signers, who even had to read the subtitles' (in Narbonne 2017). However, Shirvanian also emphasised the cultural importance of centring Deaf characters (if not actors) 'in the context of a popular comedy aimed at a mainstream audience'. *CODA* avoided these representation issues, casting Deaf actors in all its Deaf roles, though it is important to note that the project did not take the opportunity to hire a Deaf director or co-director. This increased authenticity also allowed a more multilayered humour that appeals to both hearing and Deaf audiences, through the actors' ability to sign comprehensibly and make jokes that operate translingually (e.g. the siblings' creative sign insults for one another ['twat waffle', 'shit face', etc.] and Kotsur's melding of sign and mime to describe the need to wear a condom as 'putting a helmet on that soldier'). However, it is key to note the limits to Deaf accessibility in both films' narratives. For *La Famille Bélier* and *CODA* retain a core focus on music: before *La Famille Bélier*'s release Louane was best known for her role on *The Voice*, and both films' plots build up to the daughters' auditions for music schools, with significant screen time dedicated to

practising and performing the songs of Michel Sardou in *La Famille Bélier*, and Motown and Joni Mitchell music in *CODA*.

A CODA ON *CODA* AND BEYOND

It is difficult to analyse *La Famille Bélier* in the 2020s without taking into account its highly successful Anglophone adaptation. The ‘remade’ film was shot in Massachusetts, but co-produced in Quebec and co-financed by French production companies Pathé and Vendôme, in their first joint venture to tap into Anglophone markets with French narratives. The hearing US director, Siân Heder, joined the project after this Francophone co-production had begun, and the purchase of the film by US distributor Apple TV+ occurred after its completion, following its premiere at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival. Yet *CODA* and *La Famille Bélier* do not just share a transnational connection through the border-crossing conditions of the remake’s production, heightened by *CODA*’s streaming acquisition. Nor does their transmutation from one cultural context to another simply add a ‘Gallic humour’ to an American product (Hans 2021). Rather, I identify *La Famille Bélier* not only as the source text of the best-known and most critically acclaimed sign language film thus far but as the first example in a contemporary wave of popular sign language films and series.

In fact, *La Famille Bélier* was the first, and *CODA* the largest, in a series of increasingly popular, mainstream sign language screen texts. These are dominated by US films and series available on international streaming platforms. Series include the Marvel’s *Hawkeye* (Disney Plus, 2021–, including crucial Deaf Indigenous representation), Star Wars’s *The Mandalorian* (Disney Plus, 2019–) and *The Book of Boba Fett* (Disney Plus, 2021–), for which *CODA*’s Troy Kotsur created and performed the Tusken Raider sign language, as well as the Netflix Original reality miniseries *Deaf U* (2020, set in the world’s only Deaf university, Gallaudet University in Washington DC). Blockbuster features with global distribution include John Krasinski’s horror franchise *A Quiet Place* (2018) and *A Quiet Place: Part II* (2020), Adam Wingard’s *Godzilla vs. Kong* (2021, an Australia/Canada/India/US co-production) and Chloe Zhao’s superhero epic *Eternals* (2021, with dialogue in Ancient Greek, American Sign Language [ASL], English, Latin, Marathi, Spanish and Sumerian). These mainstream texts are increasingly dominant in transnational screen culture spaces in which the postnational popular is heightened, from the box

office to the awards ceremony and especially the streaming platform. As explored elsewhere in this volume, the latter is increasingly relevant to the ways many postnational screen texts circulate in the 2020s, as shown by *CODA* (Apple TV+) and *La Révolution* (Netflix) here.

CONCLUSION: THE POSTNATIONAL WITHIN AND BEYOND FRENCH BORDERS

Sign language films are part of an ever-expanding number of contemporary French films which explore the complexity and value of multilingualism. Contemporary French films increasingly represent ‘foreign’ languages as diverse as Arabic, English, Korean, German, Hebrew, Kurdish, Romany, Vietnamese and Wolof. These stories show us how even the most peripheral languages can occupy a legitimate place and offer potential cultural capital, in the cultural landscape of the contemporary Hexagon. Yet French Sign Language films also expose the multilingualism within and therefore the myth of a monolingual pre-globalisation France.

Though the French screen industry has always been invested in the perception of a national cinema connected with a national language, it has also always been connected in myriad ways with the postnational. These include widespread co-productions, funding schemes to support translingual and transnational collaboration, and increasing freedom in awards schemes for films made in languages other than French (as shown by Kristen Stewart’s Best Supporting Actress César for her English-speaking role in 2014’s *Sils Maria/The Clouds of Sils Maria* [Olivier Assayas], the same year as *La Famille Bélier*). Within this postnational context, sign language screen texts such as *La Famille Bélier*, *Marie Heurtin* and *La Révolution* are both national and postnational. In these translingual stories, which treat sign languages as the native, domestic languages that they are, language barriers (for monolingual characters) and cultural contact (for multilingual ones) not only occurs across national borders but inside them.

APPENDIX: LIST OF LSF FILMS AND TELEVISION SERIES

11'09"01/September 11 (Claude Lelouch, 2002). Languages: French, French Sign Language.

- 120 battements par minute/BPM/Beats Per Minute* (Robin Campillo, 2017). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
- Avec nos yeux* ('With Our Eyes') (Marion Aldighieri, 2013). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
- Code inconnu/Code Unknown* (Michael Haneke, 2001). Languages: English, French, French Sign Language, Romanian, Malinka.
- L'Enfant sauvage/The Wild Child* (François Truffaut, 1970). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
- La Famille Béliet/The Béliet Family* (Eric Lartigau, 2014). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
- J'avancerai vers toi avec les yeux d'un sourd* ('I Will Approach You with Deaf Eyes') (Laetitia Caron, 2015). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
- Marie Heurтин* (Jean-Pierre Améris, 2014). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
- Retour à la vie* ('Return to Life') (Pascal Baeumler, 1999). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
- La Révolution/The Revolution* (created by François Lardenois and Aurélien Molas, Netflix, 2020 [one season]). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
- Chapter 4, 'The Executioners' (directed by Jérémie Rozan).
- Chapter 6, 'The Alliance' (directed by Edouard Salier).
- Ridicule* (Patrice Leconte, 1996). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
- Signer/Signing* (Nurith Aviv, 2018). Languages: French, French Sign Language, Hebrew.
- Stille Liebe/Secret Love* (Christoph Schaub, 2001). Languages: English, German, German Sign
- Sur mes lèvres/Read My Lips* (Jacques Audiard, 2001). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
- Témoins sourds, témoins silencieux* ('Deaf Witnesses, Silent Witnesses') (Brigitte Lemaire, 2008). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
- La Vérité* ('The Truth') (Julien Bourges, 2015). Language: French Sign Language.

NOTES

1. This chapter will alternate between the spellings *deaf* and *Deaf* as the two words have separate meanings: lower-case ‘deaf’ refers to the physiological condition of deafness, whereas upper-case ‘Deaf’ is a cultural identity, referring to a person’s belonging to a Deaf culture, of which use of a sign language is always the primary identifier.
2. Sembene originally wanted to include significant Wolof in his script but was dissuaded by producers to appeal to a French audience.
3. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
4. Box office data obtained from IMDbPro. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/releasegroup/gr3033813509/>.
5. The live list of the highest-grossing films of all time in France (including a column for domestic-produced films only) is held on Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_films_in_France.

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Alexandre Aja: A Postnational Genre Auteur?

Reece Goodall

In 2006, the French director Alexandre Aja was identified by Alan Jones of the magazine *Total Film* as part of a group he called the ‘Splat Pack’. This comprised independent directors making horror films with extreme violence and low budgets, all of whom would come to share a similar status as contemporary drivers of the shape of twenty-first-century horror cinema. The members of the group encompassed diverse global origins—as well as Aja, the Splat Pack also includes directors from the UK (Neil Marshall), Australia (James Wan and Leigh Whannell) and the USA (Eli Roth and Rob Zombie)—but all the associated filmmakers were united by generic and stylistic commonalities. Where national identity was evoked in discussions of the ‘pack’, it was largely in the critical analyses of their films, rather than in their directorial personas; the group was one in which the unifying identity of genre seemed to overshadow the relevancy of national origins. Yet, even within this group, Aja remains singular: for one thing, he is the only Splat Pack director to produce a non-Anglophone film, a detail that is particularly striking given France’s historical distaste for national

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iterations of horror.¹ Indeed, 2003's *Haute tension/High Tension*, despite its use of the French language and Francophone actors, was essentially dismissed by French critics at the time of its release for being American, but it was a smash hit abroad among global audiences with a taste for its brutal representations of violence, kickstarting a wave of foreign interest in French horror as a result.² Thanks to the ensuing critical acclaim, Aja moved to the USA and began directing genre works in Hollywood. He took up the mantle of horror auteur and produced a slew of successful remakes and adaptations of horror-adjacent source texts, before directing a number of original films. However, now that Aja has become a renowned name in global genre cinema, his country of origin and the critical establishment that initially rejected his generic work seem to want to reclaim him as a significant French personality in contemporary filmmaking. Despite a clear uneasiness with reconciling an auteur status with the 'low' genre of horror and the fact that most of his films are of US origin, critics such as Vincent Gautier (2019) and Philippe Guedj (2019) have recently made the case for Aja as a French success story, both in relation to a specifically national cinema and against the backdrop of a global cinema economy.³ And yet, despite this sense of an ideological battle situating Aja between France and the wider world, it is striking how little national identity actually features in discussions of the director's work and his auteurial persona; indeed, I argue that Aja has both been established and established himself as a genre figure first and foremost, with this aspect almost eclipsing questions of his nationality within the critical discourse and his work's positioning for audiences. Paradoxically, Aja is known as both a French and a US filmmaker without fully being defined as either.

Consequently, despite (as I will show) clearly producing films featuring nationally resonant iconography and themes, and despite benefitting from the transnationalism inherent in a global film economy, it is my contention that Aja has essentially become a postnational figure in the world of filmmaking because of his wholehearted embrace of genre. The importance of the national markers in Aja's texts, which he seems to both embrace and undermine in equal measure, has been almost entirely superseded in interpretations of his work by a focus on the conventions of the internationally popular genre of the horror movie that serves as the anchor to his global image. I suggest that certain genres are so globally prevalent, and their iconographical elements so widely understood by audiences all over the world, that the concept of genre identity can and does carry the necessary force to surpass national identity as a key locus of the film's meaning, and

Aja is a prime example of how that can be achieved. It is consequently more fruitful to think of Aja as a genre director than in terms of his national origin or in relation to the national contexts in which he works; thus, it is clear that the efforts to reclaim Aja as simply ‘French’, as it were, are missing the complexities of how nation is articulated and interrogated in his filmography. Aja is a highly relevant figure in terms of postnational filmmaking because he embraces the semantic and syntactic elements of genre to such an extent that any easy sense of national positioning in relation to either his work or his auteur status is drowned out. That is, he is a director whose auteurial stardom is based around genre; by the same token, he is not principally classifiable as a French filmmaker in any traditional sense.

This chapter will demonstrate how Aja’s stardom has been established through his genre filmmaker status, rather than primarily within the realms of either the national or the transnational, through an examination of the generic textuality of his films and external factors that have shaped his persona. I then discuss the extent to which Aja’s work nevertheless engages with the national, interrogating the cultural ideas and iconography that work to construct ideas of the nation in his remakes and adaptations, before poking at the limits of nation by analysing a fascination with borders that infuses his two most recent and original films, *Crawl* (2019) and *Oxygène/Oxygen* (2021). Through recourse to both theorising Aja’s borders and the overwhelming status of the globalising genre elements in his films, I demonstrate that the lens of the postnational is the most appropriate one for interrogating Aja’s mainstream success.

POSTNATIONAL GENRE (AND) STARDOM

Exploring Aja’s films first requires a discussion of the idea of genre stardom. The concept is not a new one: it is possible to cite a considerable number of actors (Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, Robert Englund and Adam Sandler) and directors (John Ford, Wes Craven, Eli Roth and Michael Bay) whose careers and star identities are largely connected to and, in some cases, defined by their involvement with a particular genre, and whose presence may function as a form of generic shorthand for the informed viewer. In a Francophone context, a pertinent example is the actor Jean Dujardin, linked to popular comedy through both the *Brice de Nice* (2005, 2016) and *OSS 117* (2006, 2009, 2021) franchises. However, in each of these cases, it is a generic stardom that is also strongly linked to national cinema; Bay’s action films or the comedies that provide vehicles

for Dujardin's talents are clearly rooted in their respective national film cultures, a national grounding that is both evoked and reinforced by relevant films and their reception by local audiences.⁴ What I suggest differentiates Aja's genre stardom is that he is central to discussions of both contemporary US and French horror without being fully aligned with either national discourse. It is striking here that French critics read *Haute tension* as trying too hard to be American, with one discussion of his career framing him as 'Aja the American' (Laquittant 2016), while his success in the USA saw Aja positioned as 'a Parisian in Hollywood' (Perrello 2010, 15) and so implicitly outside the Hollywood stable. To compensate for this unusually marked lack of local grounding, as we shall see, the horror genre acts as a superstructural category of/for interpretability, transcending national frameworks when it comes to situating Aja's auteurial persona.

Although different nations have their own particular forms and specificities when it comes to any individual genre, I contend that the semantic properties of popular genres such as horror are so internationally recognisable in a global media economy that they can effectively be liberated from the implicit confines of national genre and instead be framed in terms of the postnational.⁵ This sense of globally familiar genres has been examined in scholarship before as a consequence of transnational cinematic exchange, and it is certainly true that transnational media exchange has been responsible for the flow of generic paradigms around the world in the past hundred years. However, I suggest that a postnational framework is better suited to the evolving shape of the media ecosystem and the increased fluidity and lapsing of national identities today. Through the rise of streaming services (which can mitigate linguistic and national barriers), the internet and other forms of new media and visual communication (e.g. phenomena such as meme culture), the semantic properties of a genre can proliferate adjacent to (or even separately from) their source texts in other media forms. Defining a text as belonging, say, to the horror genre carries with it enough pre-existing meaning in its own right to obviate the need for national qualification; consequently, drawing on markers of a specific national culture serves as an extra descriptor that works to delineate the syntactic elements of the texts, those that imbue the semantic grammar with more explicit cultural and collective meanings, thus grounding the overarching postnational frame of the genre in specific narrative or formal properties linked to a particular nation's interpretation of said genre.

It is important to underline the fact that such a reading does not suggest that Aja completely ignores the national in his work nor that adopting

a postnational analytical lens implies minimising the impact of nationally inflected imagery; indeed, my construction of postnational genre leaves significant room for articulating the national on the dual levels of a text's formal qualities and its audience engagement. On this point, I agree with Tey Marianna Nunn's contention that 'postnational, as a theoretical construct, does not mean that nationalism has ended. On the contrary, postnational coexists with the national. They are inseparable' (2011). These national signifiers may be more general (the use of the French language and Gallic stars in *Haute tension* or *Oxygène*) or they could draw on specific markers associated with the relevant national context: it would be impossible to watch a film like Aja's *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006) without feeling a tangible sense of Americanness, evoked by details from disputes between a Republican father and his Democrat son-in-law to the inclusion of shots of the desert landscape customary of the US Western genre, complete with swelling musical cues and low camera angles to accentuate the heroism of the character who emerges as the central focus. *The Hills Have Eyes*, then, is clearly intended to be understood as a US horror film, wherein the formal characteristics of the text work together with the common cultural knowledge of genre provided by audiences that this is what a horror film should look like: knowledge that represents a constitutive part of the multidimensional construction of genre (see Tudor 1974; Ryall 1975/1976). Acknowledging the national resonances of the text does not preclude the use of the postnational as another scholarly framework for illuminating the film's textual construction and address. My conception of postnational genre invites drawing on the national even at the syntactic level as a means of further discussing a text: it frames the label *horror*, for example, as one master identity that transcends the national and then the specific national label of 'French horror' or 'US horror' as a more distinctive identity explicitly contextualising the genre product on a local level (through details such as language, geography, references to cultural and historical events, etc., which lend specific resonance to the semantic elements of the film).

Similarly, discussing Aja in terms of both national and the postnational context does not imply ignoring the inherently transnational nature of the director's work. Despite my argument that scrutinising postnational positionality and signification offers the most useful way to interrogate Aja's filmmaking practice, his movement between nations and the ways that his work clearly engages with other cinema cultures invites reference to Mette Hjort's (2010) characterisation of various forms of transnational identity.

Hjort describes transnationalism as a scalar concept that allows for manifestations of the identity linked to both texts and their production contexts, and which may be strong and/or weak in its different forms. Aja's work and his directorial persona certainly correspond (if uneasily) to a number of Hjort's classifications of transnationalism, from the more formally driven epiphanic transnationalism (the cinematic articulation of elements of national belonging that overlap with other national identities [2010, 16]) to the contrasting and financially driven opportunistic transnationalism (which is fuelled by economic factors and opportunities arising in relation to funding partners [2010, 19]).⁶ It is also tempting to cite Aja as an example of auteurist transnationalism, as he is certainly a figure who 'decides to embrace a particular kind of collaboration beyond national borders' (2010, 23), although Hjort's description connects this to auteurs who are both established and iconic in relation to their own national cinema; this complicates the classification, as Aja's auteur status has followed a different trajectory, suggesting the need for alternative terminology. Indeed, the paradoxical ease and unease of defining Aja in relation to these categories is illustrative of the potentially limiting aspects of transnationalism in itself as a descriptive framework. Thus, I turn to notions of genre and the postnational to analyse his filmography, with the caveat that these keep open dialogue with questions of both nation and auteurism.

FROM NATION TO GENRE IN AJA'S OEUVRE AND BRAND

Beginning with the endurance of the national in connection with Aja's films and persona, his first feature to receive mainstream attention was *Haute tension*, a slasher film with an infamous twist ending in which the Final Girl and central character turns out also to be the killer. It draws on numerous US horror conventions and references many US horror texts, including Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and William Lustig's *Maniac* (1980), Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) and Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). These references are highly allusive, placing the film in conversation with other canonical texts to help define its place within the genre (Fig. 1). It is important to note that, at this point in time, horror was not considered a French genre at all, apart from a few key examples (most famously, *Les Yeux sans visage/Eyes Without a Face* [Georges Franju, 1960]), and the film is actually credited with initiating a turn in horror production that would continue to a limited degree in the 20 years that followed.⁷ This

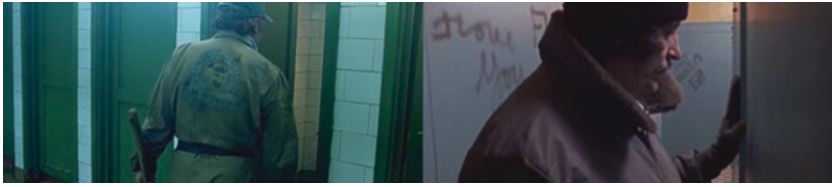


Fig. 1 Bathroom chase sequences in *Haute tension* and *Maniac*

detail helps explain the negative critical reaction to the film in France, and it places Aja in an unusual position in relation to his national cinema—by embracing this particular genre, a genre that was widely believed to be predominantly American, he was effectively working against what was understood to be popular in French filmmaking at the time, thus situating himself at one remove from his national film culture and reinforcing the generic identity of the director almost in opposition to the interests of his national cinema.

Due to the international success of *Haute tension*, Aja moved to the USA, where he was recruited by horror auteur Wes Craven to direct a remake of *The Hills Have Eyes*—a move that can clearly be read in terms of one genre auteur effectively giving his blessing to the next generation. Aja then remade or was involved with the remakes of a number of other US and Asian horror texts, such as *Mirrors* (2008), *Piranha 3D* (2010) and *Maniac* (Franck Khalifoun, 2012), before adapting two books in 2013 and 2016, respectively, *Horns*, a gothic romance by Stephen King's son Joe Hill, and *The 9th Life of Louis Drax*, a supernatural narrative adapted by Aja with distinctly Hitchcockian inflections. Another level of engagement with the genre emerges in Aja's casting choices, bringing in stars who have featured in significant canonical texts: Ted Levine was cast as the patriarch Big Bob in *The Hills Have Eyes*, his casting and the alliterative name evoking his role as Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), while Kiefer Sutherland assumed the lead role in *Mirrors*, returning to the genre after appearances in *The Lost Boys* (Joel Schumacher, 1987) and *Flatliners* (Schumacher, 1990). In press tours, Aja actually expressed his intention to bring Sutherland back to the genre, positioning himself carefully as a kind of gatekeeper of horror and implicitly further cementing his generic ties in the process.⁸

These remakes and adaptations all play with their source material, and it has long been suggested that the very nature of remakes and adaptations

speaks to a sense of the fluidity of identity and meaning in themselves. I contend that Aja's work revises these texts in such a way that each film can be read as undercutting and undermining some of the values and institutions that make up US national identity, thus drawing attention to the fallacy of fixed national markers in an increasingly globalised world. Aja's version of *The Hills Have Eyes* makes the mutant enemies the consequence of the US atomic age, and one of the final confrontations sees a hero character battle a mutant in a house whose set is modelled to look like a typical 1950s home. The villains are, then, a monstrous nuclear family, a direct counterpoint to the dysfunctional Carter family of *The Hills Have Eyes*. In the ultimate subversive statement, the head of the mutant family is killed with a model of the US flag. Released two years later, *Mirrors* is set within an abandoned department store, pointedly called the Mayflower in a reference to America's founding; the building is hidden away by scaffolding, suggesting a country literally striving to cover up the less than appealing parts of its history. Both this setting and the premise of the film—a demon that lives in reflections—invite us to read it as a metaphorical exploration of a consumerist society excessively concerned with appearance. For Alexandra West, using national imagery in this way evokes 'an Americana spirit that has fallen into disrepair' (2016, 167), with the narrative refusal to condemn the building implying the possibility of its resurgence. However, Aja's pessimistic conclusion, in which the building is blown up and the main character is forever trapped in the mirror world himself, seems to strip away this option. Indeed, it draws links between consumerism and US history, and frames them as an almost fatalistic combination. By cuing this reading, the film shares certain commonalities with *Piranha 3D*, in which the threat comes from the titular literal monstrous consumers, their targets in this case young, attractive US teenagers who would otherwise embody free-spiritedness in a beach movie. The most threatening consumer is, however, a monstrous porn producer who, like the piranhas, targets the bodies of the main characters (although his motivation is making a film). The promotional posters for this movie were largely based around the bikini-clad body of a spring breaker and the possibility of seeing it in 3D, so this criticism of unbridled consumerism actually functions on both a textual and an extratextual level; the film's narrative renders monstrous the consumption of young, attractive bodies, yet its promotion works to implicate the viewer in this practice. In *Piranha 3D*, Aja sells a flagrantly consumerist film (a summer blockbuster featuring a nubile

young cast) in a manner deliberately concerned with criticising such ‘American’ practices.

This nationally inflected critique even extends to Aja’s non-horror texts, with *Horns* and *Louis Drax* presenting a less than flattering image of the small American town and of the dynamics that govern family life, respectively. For my purposes, it should be noted that while these latter two films depart from horror scripts, horror was nonetheless the lens through which the critical establishment understood them, accentuating the fact that genre is central to Aja’s directorial persona.⁹ Indeed, as Guedj (2019) writes, a return to the horror genre was necessary ‘to reinforce Alexandre Aja’s reputation as a reliable craftsman in Hollywood, where he was beginning to attract disapproval after the poor results of his two previous films’, further cementing the relationship between Aja and the genre that made his name.

My discussion of the important role played by Aja’s name in the promotion of these films bears comparison with Timothy Corrigan’s (1990) work on the commerce of auteurism: the idea that, rather than some unseen hand that exists behind or implicitly within the text, the role of the auteur is one of ‘commercial performance’, granting them and their name an economic and cultural value that is of use for marketing and promotional purposes. Thus, the auteur can be considered another one of the film’s stars, and their presence preconditions how a film is perceived prior to its reading. If a film is linked to a certain auteur, Corrigan suggests that there is a certain pleasure ‘in being able to know already, not read, the meaning of the film in a totalizing image that precedes the movie in the public images of its creator’ (50). Aja has frequently been discussed as a figure who approaches the film industry in terms of both its cultural and economic capital—as Guedj [2019] asserts, ‘Aja accepts the business part of “show-business”’—making the economic auteur label pertinent to his persona, and it is clear that this tag is in the director’s case intrinsically linked with his genre identity. In recent years, Aja’s films have been associated with and at the forefront of dominant trends in popular horror genre filmmaking, from gritty remakes of 1970s/1980s horror classics (*The Hills Have Eyes*) to J-horror remakes (*Mirrors*) to horror summer blockbusters (*Crawl*). In each case, the connection of Aja’s work to a moment in the industrial cycle suggests that he is in tune with the economic forces that underpin the genre as well as its semantic/syntactic elements, implicitly underlining his simultaneous position as a custodian and driver of the genre. Aja has discussed the fact that his initial success with *The Hills Have*

Eyes led to him receiving offers to direct big-budget Marvel blockbusters and films that were not connected to the horror genre, and that all these offers were turned down in order to both work within horror and alternatively put forward distinct film projects and screenplays shaped by the director's interests and instincts (Laquittant 2016). This interview and the work ethic to which it attests speak to Aja's auteur qualities and his own apparent awareness of his primordial association with the horror genre.

It is important to stress that as Aja's status has grown due to the continued success of his horror films, so too has his name as a marker of generic pedigree. The Gallic director has been discussed in terms of contemporary and economic auteurism—the sense, to quote Tyson Wils (2013), that auteurism now 'exists as doxa, as a type of knowledge that is shared by the community at large, which accept it as a normal way of speaking about and representing film and other cultural texts'.¹⁰ This connects back to the concept of economic auteurism as articulated by Corrigan and leads to a virtuous circularity within Aja's career; each subsequent horror text reinforces his status within the genre, but at the same time, Aja's status within the genre serves as a marker of horror when promoting these films to audiences. To speak of an Alexandre Aja film indicates to the informed audience that the result will be a genre product. Not only that but the way that marketing often puts Aja's name in conversation with key figures in genre history (Craven for *The Hills Have Eyes*, Sam Raimi for *Crawl*) further reinforces both the generic pedigree of his films and the strength of the Aja brand. That brand has proven significant for Gallic filmmakers linked to Aja, and the director has used his commercial success to facilitate the production of further horror films in the USA; thus, just as the connections to existing genre figures have worked to cement his name in the horror genre in trailers and promotional material, Aja too engages in a process of generic patronage for his collaborators Franck Khalifoun (*P2* [2007]; *Maniac*) and Grégory Levasseur (*The Pyramid* [2014]). Each time Aja's name is referenced by horror publicity, it both evokes and further strengthens the generic connotations of his auteurial identity.

CRAWL AND OXYGÈNE AS POSTNATIONAL GENRE TEXTS

Although it is clear that national and transnational dialogues are at play throughout Aja's work, it is useful here to demonstrate how his films both showcase overriding generic identities and engage with nation (and its

limits). I therefore turn to Aja's two most recent films, *Crawl* and *Oxygène*, which perfectly encapsulate his subsumption into the realm of postnational genre. They are interesting and relevant case studies because they mark the director's first foray into original stories since *Haute tension*; thus, the films do not rely on prior knowledge on the part of the audience to the same extent as Aja's remakes or adaptations, meaning his directorial persona is likely to be more influential in conveying their properties to potential viewers. The two films are set predominantly in confined locations—a house crawl space and a medical unit, respectively—and their narratives are concerned with escape. In *Crawl*, young swimmer Haley (Kaya Scodelario) attempts to save her father from the basement of his house as a hurricane moves in. Soon, they both find themselves trapped in the basement as the flood waters rise and several alligators start to hunt them. Meanwhile, *Oxygène* sees a woman named Liz (Mélanie Laurent) wake up in a cryogenic chamber with no memory of how she got there. Soon learning that the pod is running out of air, she attempts to reconstitute her identity, and either restore the airflow or escape the pod before she suffocates. She discovers that she is a clone, and part of a project by the original version of herself to rebuild humanity on a far-off world after Earth has been struck by a deadly virus.

The ultimate driver of the two narratives is the desperate need to break free from these claustrophobic cramped spaces, confined areas that will soon become uninhabitable due to external forces, by shattering fixed borders. The idea that horror and other genre texts explore different types of border as a figure for those of the nation-state has been seen as a major impetus of French horror cinema. More specifically, this national genre has been read—as Marc Olivier (2007) notes in a review of Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury's *A l'intérieur/Inside* (2007)—in terms of the threat emerging from the vulnerability of borders to fracture, be they the borders of the body, the home, the nation or some other kind.¹¹ It is certainly the case that evocations of borders hang over *Crawl* and *Oxygène*, both because the threats emerge from the dangerous piercing of an external border and also, more curiously, as we shall see, because the ultimate resolution stems from a positively framed internal border fracture (or at least the promise of such) effected by the main character. We thus encounter a number of borders in the films. *Crawl* largely takes place in the house, with the first half occurring in a crawl space where borders are both a threat (the main characters are trapped as flood water rises) and guarantors of safety (the alligators are unable to pass by the pipes and brickwork that



Fig. 2 Borders that threaten and protect in *Crawl*

constitute these borders) (Fig. 2). Meanwhile, in *Oxygène* Aja's tendency to isolate the confined structure of the pod in the frame, surrounded by black in order to underline Liz's lack of knowledge of the space outside, invites the viewer to share the character's disorientating confinement. Both the pod (as the result of a collision with a meteor) and Liz's body are also punctured or threatened with puncture throughout the film: in Liz's case, by the machinery designed to sustain her bodily functions during the journey (a fracture constructed as a positive development by the narrative), and then as the pod attempts to euthanise her after determining she has no ability to survive with the oxygen leaking (a combination of two negatively charged fractures, in narrative terms).

The concern with border play in both *Crawl* and *Oxygène* extends to their own positioning in both national and transnational spheres of reference. Both films are distinctly national products in a number of ways. *Crawl* is a typical US horror blockbuster and the dual threat of the hurricane and the alligators heavily connote Florida, where the film is set. Aja also invites reference to a historic US tradition of creature features through the man-vs.-animal narrative (most famously dating back to the canonical *King Kong* [Merian C. Cooper/Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933]). *Oxygène* most immediately references France through language markers and in the form of two big-name French actors: Laurent and Mathieu Amalric as the voice of the pod, both multiple César winners and recognisable figures in contemporary French cinema.

In this way, Aja's undermining of borders subtly invites the viewer to consider the limits of nation even as he evokes it. Indeed, in the case

Oxygène, the presence of two French stars known for their transnational work outside France and the film's release on Netflix, a platform that enables viewers to employ subtitles and/or change the language via dubbing, complicate the process of reading the film in relation to a specific national context. As a result of Aja's involvement with the streaming service and his choice of globally recognisable stars, *Oxygène* is a film that exists in a liminal state, both markedly national and consciously transnational at the same time, and these are some of the factors that recommend postnational paradigms for interrogating it. Similarly, the fact that the film takes place entirely in space and is concerned with a journey to a new world, both settings clearly liberated from the shackles of national grounding, subtly evokes the spectre of the postnational.¹²

Crawl does not obviously exist in such an extreme state of in-betweenness when it comes to geo-cultural affiliations, instead clearly belonging to the Hollywood blockbuster mould. Indeed, with *Crawl* marking Aja's first US foray into a totally original horror film benefitting from a wide cinematic release, liberated from the potentially limiting relationship necessitated by the remake, and *Oxygène* clearly a French sci-fi product on a streaming service, their status as high-concept popular genre texts appears to be one of the only immediate similarities between the two works.¹³ Yet although the two films are superficially aligned with different genres, it is clear that *Oxygène* occupies a similar space to Aja's other horror-adjacent works. Many of the formal and narrative properties that work to qualify *Crawl* as a horror text are also present in *Oxygène*: the films both prominently display a strong female character who is the victim of corporeal distress throughout the narrative; and these female characters are positioned as effective reflections of the villain (Haley is a swimmer who has been trained by her father to think like an 'apex predator' in the water; the original Elizabeth is the pioneer of the clone programme and thus the initially unseen reason the clone Liz is in the pod), echoing the intrinsic self-other binary that has often characterised readings of horror texts. That Aja employs the female body as a marker of his unifying generic identity is particularly interesting given that gendered corporeality has also historically been positioned as constitutive of the nation and national(ist) values/ideals (see Yuval-Davis 1997). The corporeal focus on these two female characters could seem at first blush to invite national readings, but I suggest Aja deliberately complicates this on the level of casting (Scodelario is an English actress playing an American woman) and narrative (Liz's identity must be rebuilt through the film, so despite the obvious Frenchness

of Laurent, the character's status as a clone means she is effectively nationless). By clearly invoking the associations of the female body with nation only to destabilise them, Aja invites the informed viewer to instead consider the films predominantly through other conceptual frameworks, notably those of genre and auteurism. The seeming nationlessness of Liz and the outer-space setting of *Oxygène*, both filtered through the lens of French identity, invite comparison to Aja himself and his own ambiguous relationship with conceptions of nation and its geo-cultural specifiers.

It is striking that Aja's recent return to France and the world of French filmmaking with *Oxygène* serves as the perfect example of the delocalising and postnationalising effect of genre on his directorial practices, in that it is turning back to national semantics that renders the postnational syntax of his films so difficult to ignore. Along with his Splat Pack contemporaries, he is emblematic of a genre-focused auteurism that, if not entirely novel, has certainly been raised to a new level by an increasingly transnational film industry, new modes of production and distribution, and a streaming era that has facilitated the spread and acceptance of 'lowbrow' genre products among global mainstream audiences. If the figure of the author is, as Rosanna Maule argues, 'mainly the expression of nationally over-determined film practices and discourses' (2008, 273), then the postnational genre stardom exemplified by Aja appears to indicate a potential new phase in the understanding and articulation of contemporary European auteurism, one that addresses the global development of media through the use of genre to mitigate and, crucially, in so doing facilitate the endurance of the national trappings of a text. Although Aja's success is singular in the particular field of French horror filmmaking, his case study serves as an invitation to interrogate the career trajectories of other directors, both French (such as Michel Hazanavicius) and more widely European, and examine the ways that their films are both specifically local yet, thanks to drawing on popular postnational genre modes such as comedy and horror, remain accessible and familiar to an international audience.

NOTES

1. Maxime Bey-Rozet discusses the genre's 'modest footprint' in his work on contemporary iterations of horror in France (2021, 191–192).
2. In French reviews of the film compiled on Allociné, *Le Figaroscope's* Brigitte Baudin dismissed the film as 'a poorly-done *Texas Chain Saw*

- Massacre*, while *Télérama*'s Frédéric Strauss linked it to 'the outdated gore films of the 1970s' (all translations mine unless otherwise stated).
3. Often, problematically, this concept of global cinematic success is implicitly coded as 'US', although this paradigm has shifted in recent years.
 4. Tim Palmer has described Dujardin's comic stardom as a tool through which Frenchness and popular cinema can be exported (2011, 106–114).
 5. The basis for this analysis owes much to Rick Altman's (1984) conception of the semantic/syntactic approach to genre.
 6. Hjort cites as an example of epiphanic transnationalism *Pelle the Conqueror/Pelle Erobreren* (Bille August, 1987), as the film references and makes natural the connection of Swedish and Danish identities.
 7. National horror occupies an interesting place in the French cinema ecosystem, achieving far more critical and commercial success abroad, thus complicating the picture of a home-grown popular genre.
 8. Aja described a similar motivation behind his casting of Richard Dreyfuss for a cameo appearance in *Piranha 3D*, with his character's name, outfit and humming of the familiar tune 'Show Me the Way to Go Home' all intended to evoke his earlier role in the canonical horror film *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) (in Radish 2010).
 9. Elements such as the inclusion of monstrous figures and the camerawork align the films with horror cinema. On *Horns*, Peter Bradshaw (2014) criticised the recourse to horror, writing that 'somewhere inside this lumberingly long fantasy-horror is a smart little black comedy', while Peter Travers (2014) argued that Aja 'lets his preference for cheap horror tricks overcome a blazing visual style'. A similar critical consensus shaped the response to *The 9th Life of Louis Drax*, with Liz Beardsworth (2016) suggesting that including fantasy and horror elements in a thriller film is 'jarring and makes for an odd, oppressive feel'. Bradshaw (2016), meanwhile, described the generic mix as 'tonally odd'.
 10. Wils is speaking specifically about the promotional impact of the James Wan name, but many of his observations about the construction of contemporary auteurs are just as pertinent to an analysis of Alexandre Aja.
 11. Xavier Gens's *Frontière(s)/Frontiers* (2007) is perhaps the most obvious example of how these ideas can intersect, with both a title and narrative concerned with borders.
 12. For a fuller discussion of *Oxygène*'s postnationalism, see Goodall and Harrod (forthcoming).
 13. Constantine Verevis (2022 [2005]) discusses the differing expectations of fidelity to an original text faced by remakes in his work on the concept of remaking film.

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PART II

Embodying the Postnational: Fans,
Filmmakers, Action Spectaculars



An Alternative to Hollywood? EuropaCorp's 'Blockbusters' and the Global Audience

Thomas Pillard

Translated by Daniel Morgan

Films produced by EuropaCorp, especially those conceived and written by Luc Besson, have achieved remarkable success outside of France, appealing to a global audience. Encouraged by the international success of *Lucy* (Besson, 2014), however, the company ran into increasing difficulty meeting its business targets in the following years, which saw a series of strategic errors and flops at the box office (Meir 2020). This chapter will examine the identities, strengths and weaknesses of these peculiar 'blockbusters', which have unusually large budgets for French cinema, even though they are produced at 'half the price of Hollywood' (Le Guilcher 2016, 178), according to opinions published by English-speaking users on the internet platform IMDb. How are these films, stigmatised for their supposed similarity to Hollywood by critics in France, perceived by the

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members of this online community, which is mainly made up of users from English-speaking countries but includes viewers from across the world? Is the popularity of these films attributed to their origin in France and/or Europe, or, on the contrary, to their use of a neo-Hollywood style intended to encourage their export? What criticisms are aimed at these culturally hybrid films by audiences whose members are themselves culturally diverse?

My goal is to address these questions, building on a previous study that examined EuropaCorp's branding and production strategies by looking at their reception on IMDb (Pillard 2020). This analysis complements that study by considering the possibility, sometimes put forward by internet users and—more cautiously—by researchers, that the films written by Besson offer an 'alternative' to Hollywood cinema. This chapter will question this notion and its implications by conducting a 'concrete observation of cultural exchanges that use and take place on the internet' (Leveratto 2019, 43–44). The hypothesis is particularly ripe for examination since the earliest academic research focusing on the studio, published when it was on the upswing in the second half of the 2000s, had already begun to question the credibility of the company's 'quest to offer a viable popular alternative to Hollywood' (Vanderschelden 2007, 47). I thus aim to gauge whether and to what extent this aspiration has actually been achieved by looking at the abundant sources available in the 'user reviews' section of the IMDb website, where each feature film can generate hundreds of evaluations and comments. Drawing on a qualitative examination of about 1000 reviews published between 1998 and 2022, referring to a corpus of 20 films written and sometimes directed by Besson, I will divide the discussion into three parts. After demonstrating how these films are more often seen as European than associated with any form of American culture, I will assess the extent to which their reception on IMDb throughout the period correlates—or otherwise—with the 'allure of otherness' (Sexton 2017) that they appear to offer. Finally, I will analyse the increasingly negative character of the films' reception in recent years (2017–2022).¹

AMERICAN-STYLE BLOCKBUSTERS?

Representing the most overtly commercial part of EuropaCorp's output, the films over which Besson exerts a large amount of creative control have a consistent, homogeneous, industrially produced appearance, earning him a reputation in France as 'the champion of an American-style

commercial cinema' (Delon and Vinuela 2020, 7). This nevertheless takes in a range of productions as varied as those in the studio's entire catalogue, which includes films in English as well as explicitly French ones, with a gamut of budgets and different international ambitions (Vanderschelden 2008, 92–93). Charlie Michael (2020, 221) has recently analysed these editorial strategies by showing how the studio, far from adopting a uniform mode of production, has relied on a range of stylistic practices: he distinguishes between 'major' and 'minor' investment in the characteristics associated with Hollywood blockbusters, as well as between contrasting stances favouring global or local distribution. As Fanny Beuré (2020, 84–85) has observed, EuropaCorp's production methods changed between 2000 and 2010, 'with an increasingly large proportion of high-budget films'. This trend 'is both the cause and the consequence of EuropaCorp's international ambitions: while the studio produces high-budget films in order to target foreign markets, these films' revenues in France alone will not be enough to make them profitable' (85–86).

The films written and in some cases directed by Besson are hardly ever seen as 'American' on IMDb. Only a tiny minority of users, notably with regard to the franchise *Taken*, believe that they are commenting on Hollywood films, such as one person writing about the first episode: 'When will Hollywood studios actually comprehend the concept of "subtle"? Yet again here is a most stupid film [...]' (*Taken*, michaelmouse1, 22 November 2015). Aside from these exceptions, the national origin of each production is clearly identified by the platform's users, who indeed are often experts: '*Kiss of the Dragon* is a hyperactive martial arts movie with a heavy European feel' (*Kiss of the Dragon*, Shawn Watson, 27 June 2004); 'This movie is FUNNY, at times a little cheesy (which we can also call FRENCH)' (*Wasabi*, Quicksand, 23 October 2004). The films' identity seems all the more obvious given that they bear the marks of a certain internationalisation: *Taxi* is thus viewed as 'the french [*sic*] version of US blockbuster car movies' (*Taxi*, Grumpy Pheasant, 3 January 2011), while *District 13* is described as 'a frantic rehash of "Escape from NY", rightly realized in French style' (ma-cortes, 2 June 2013) following 'the recent *Ong Bak* trend of action movies [...], albeit in this case with a French flavor' (*District 13*, CelluloidRehab, 13 October 2005). National association can also become a benchmark for positioning these films with respect to global film production, as can be seen in two comments about productions with considerably different budgets and aspirations: 'While this movie is not a major Hollywood production, the director did a

tremendous job' ('*Michel Vaillant*', marsbetr, 21 October 2012); 'For an international French movie, "Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets" is a very ambitious project' ('*Valerian*', aquascape, 28 March 2018). The company is credited with making a true effort to compete with Hollywood, especially when it comes to its established expertise in action films: "Anna" is another bug [*sic*] budget movie (for European standards) and looks and feels that way, with gorgeous scenery and photography throughout' ('*Anna*', paul-allaer, 29 June 2019). Starting in the mid-2000s, numerous users agreed that 'Luc Besson is one of Europe's biggest action producers' ('*The Transporter*', dee.reid, 31 August 2005), a judgement that was confirmed in the following years: the success of the *Taken* saga (2008–2015) seemingly proved that 'Europe is suddenly a rising force in the action/thriller genre' ('*Taken 2*', diac228, 1 February 2010), and in 2016 Besson was deemed 'responsible for just about every decent French action flick in the last decade' ('*Taken*', Leofwine_draca, 5 November 2016).

This ambition can backfire on Besson, however. On the one hand, EuropaCorp productions sometimes disappoint viewers who see them as hewing too closely to models from the English-speaking world, thus failing to provide the image expected of French cinema (though these opinions are in the minority on IMDb): 'This film, although French, feels too Americanized, if it isn't gun toting guys holding their guns at acute angles, its [*sic*] the overhyped car chases' (modius, 15 September 2000); 'Its drawback may be just that: it being French, I expected more: subtlety, intelligent humour, sociological points, dark, seedy characters. Instead, we get a good American commercial movie' (R. Ignacio Litardo, 27 May 2010). On the other hand, the studio's aspirations to compete with American cinema on its home turf can also prompt ironic opinions: in the same way that *Taxi* is only 'an ersatz of the American equivalent', which is 'an already mediocre product' (Grumpy Pheasant, 3 January 2011), *The Transporter* 'was watchable don't get me wrong, but as Hollywood trashy fun, minus the word fun mostly and it's just Hollywood trash' (blacklist-1, 7 August 2010). The most vociferous users critique Besson as harshly as the French press: 'I am very pleased to know that's at last the final chapter of this juicy, fancy crap trilogy. Product one more time of Europacorp [*sic*] crap factory. Luc Besson's crap factory' ('*Taken 3*', searchanddestroy-1, 21 January 2015).

Still, positive reviews are more common, which demonstrates that audience approval of the films written by Besson is not due to their conformity with Hollywood standards but to their differences and the distance they

maintain. Attracted by an atypical creative approach that they regard as more innovative and entertaining than the one seen in American blockbusters, fans highlight the craft of these films that are mainly shot in Europe, an aspect that is reflected in their modest budgets (with the exception of *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* [henceforth *Valerian*], which we will come back to) as well as in their artistic approach. 'Freed' from Hollywood's restrictions, these films have greater leeway to experiment with modes of narration that emphasise spectacular action that is less justified by the plot and less standardised in its execution, as one comment published at the time of *Taxi*'s release illustrates: 'Give this to some blockbuster US outfit and they'll create some half-assed dross that feels like walking through bubblegum' (RICH!, 3 December 1999).

This kind of assessment is particularly common in reaction to Besson's French-language action comedies, praised for their efficiency and simplicity: 'Also the car chases are mostly pretty simple and not full of the excesses of Hollywood movies where everything MUST crash and everything MUST blow up in big style' (bob the moo, 26 July 2001); 'Sure it may not have the high budget thrills that Hollywood seem to think are necessary in such films but for breathtaking action and some hilarious comedy moments *Taxi* is amazing' (cooper-dale, 3 May 2006). The recurring use of the adjective 'refreshing' indicates a great deal of appreciation for the only attempt to offer something different from the constantly repeated formulas and opulent aesthetics of Hollywood: '*Taxi* was a refreshing change from the usual onslaught of Hollywood's big budget action thrillers and the deluded notion that "bigger and more extravagant is better"' (Silver_Lynx, 28 November 2008). It is all the more remarkable that these comments can also be found about a film like *Valerian*, which, despite its greater adherence to the economic model of global blockbusters, is still different in the opinion of many users, in terms of its entertainment value and the financial risk taken to produce it: 'For a change we aren't looking at a pre-meditated, box-office driven, risk-free effort to make a lot of money. We are looking at an alternative effort to make a box-office hit, with a more personal vision, also more individualistic, maybe more European?' (joao_filipe_rodrigues, 9 August 2017).

Comments like these suggest that EuropaCorp is capable of appropriating the idiom of Hollywood cinema in order to promote its own brand, telling stories that are similar in structure but often different in their narrative choices, responding to viewers in the USA and elsewhere who are 'seeking out alternatives to American cinema because it has become so

formulaic and awful' ('*District 13*', Matt, 14 June 2005). The reception of these 'popcorn' films by an audience of cosmopolitan film buffs, mostly male users between the ages of 30 and 40,² also reveals the significance of a second dichotomy, pitting the preference for genre films made with a European touch against the taste for critically acclaimed, award-winning international art cinema. Countless fans, often responding to negative comments, express their delight that Besson aspires neither to offer social commentary with his films nor to match the great works of classic cinema:

People people people [...] anyone expecting *Citizen Kane* out of this movie needs to have their head examined. BUT [...] if you were looking for a thrilling, fast paced roller-coaster, that's what you will find. ('*District 13*', Matt, 14 June 2005)

Hamlet it ain't but of its—very limited kind—better than many. So there you have it: *Transporter* is not *The Merchant Of Venice*, *On Golden Pond*, *ET*, *Schindler's List*, *The Godfather* or any of the other films which get consistently good ratings. It is just another macho piece of b*****s. The important difference is that, of its kind, it is rather more impressive [...] Hence my high rating. ('*The Transporter*', patrick powell, 19 November 2011)

Aficionados attribute these productions' 'strangely dumb likability' ('*The Transporter*', Mr-Fusion, 26 November 2015) to the fact that they have no pretensions to the 'pseudo-intellectualism' that wins Oscars:

Forget about Oscars, plot points, or coherence. [...] Do you want to see him find his daughter and take down the scum who took her? Of course you do. ('*Taken*', happendingrocks, 24 June 2009)

Pretension and all the pseudo intellectual pretense we leave to the Oscar voters, film fan's [*sic*] often just want a empty shallow piece of entertainment and escapism that delivers the good's [*sic*]. ('*Taken 3*', georgewilliamnoble, 22 October 2018)

The references mentioned here are particularly revealing of an audience that sees itself as embodying a form of alternative cinephilia, 'affirming a heterodox aesthetic position' close to that of a 'reparation cinephilia' that Laurent Jullier and Jean-Marc Leveratto (2010, 187) describe as the promotion of a viewpoint with 'a taste distinct from the norms of commercial cinema quality'. Although the authors state that this preference 'is mainly

associated with young viewers', the remarks published on IMDb in this case reveal an older, mostly male audience declaring their taste for films that are 'mindless' and 'entertaining for us explosion loving fanboys with the minds of 10 year olds' ('*The Transporter*', Superunknovn, 1 January 2006).

A EUROPEANNESS AS SEDUCTIVE AS IT IS STRANGE

These unconventional works thus offer their fans an ideal way to discover French and European cinema: they are 'a great introduction of it to someone who may have been avoiding it because of the wrong idea that all European cinema is dull and pretentious drama' ('*Wasabi*', Wizard-8, 1 March 2003). The frequency of this kind of opinion shows that many of the characteristics perceived as 'American' by the French press can appeal to audiences around the world, who see a kind of French or European touch in these same qualities. This demonstrates the fluid identity of these films and their ability to elicit different notions of quality depending on the context of their reception. Many commenters emphasise that 'it's good to see some really good European films for a change' ('*Taxi 2*', Lord Onim, 7 March 2003), while at the same time expressing their surprise that these films bear little resemblance to what they expected from European cinema. This is particularly visible in two reviews, concerning *Taxi* and *District 13 Ultimatum*:

I bought this film by accident, not realising it was French, and when I did I just stuck it in a cupboard and thought I'd pass it off onto someone else. Some months later I actually open it up and stick it in, thinking I'd may as well see what I'd bought. I am VERY glad I did, this film is excellent, and put me onto the path of discovering foreign cinema by starting at the best. (cooper-dale, 3 May 2006)

I saw *District B13* randomly in the movies when it first came out with my friend with no pretense only knowing it was an European action flick. I was impressed with it. It was the first time I had seen [parkour] and it was just electrifying especially mixed with intense martial arts. (rivertam26, 3 January 2013)

In order to understand the value of the often unrecognised French/European origin of these productions (Archer 2015, 187), it is useful to

consider the reception of the othering mechanisms they set up, which researchers analysing EuropaCorp have thus far either glossed over or assigned a limited role. Isabelle Vanderschelden (2007, 47), for example, states that the international action films written by Besson, which take place ‘in cosmopolitan or spectacular French locations serving as attractive backdrops for the benefit of foreign audiences’, are nevertheless characterised by a form of ‘deterritorialisation’ because they ‘blend together different nationalities and genre conventions to the extent that national characteristics become virtually imperceptible’. Fanny Beuré (2020, 93–94) contrasts ‘English-language films with international stars’ that, ‘to varying extents, manage to compete and earn profits on the international market’ with ‘French films that use their “French exoticism” as the driving force behind their efforts to exist outside of France’.

Nuancing such claims or filling them out in more depth is a precarious task, thanks at once to the perpetual risk involved in extrapolating generalisations from specific examples—whether these are drawn from films or from critiques—and to the difficulties posed by using a term as contested as *exoticism* to explain transnational reception processes. Associated with travel, in recent years this notion has become a key concept in studies of ‘world cinema’ to designate both sources of spectacle based on the encounter with the unfamiliar that global cinema allows a transnational public to domesticate, and a ‘mode of aesthetic perception (...) which effectively manufactures otherness’ (Huggan 2001 in Berghahn 2021, 224). The widespread existence of the term, and of what Jamie Sexton calls ‘the *exoticist assumption*’, poses, however, different problems: underlining the fact that researchers who engage in this type of interpretation ‘rarely provide[s] any evidence from actual reception processes’, Sexton emphasises that ‘the appeal of difference does not necessarily coincide with exoticism’ and that we should ‘beware of assuming that such modes of exotic consumption are the only ways in which transnational cult films are perceived’ (Sexton 2017, 5–19). Without ignoring these conceptual difficulties, which point to the need to justify terms’ usage through reference to the discursive extracts analysed or the sometimes significant differences between the various types of productions that bring diversity (including cultural diversity) to the company’s catalogue, the observations cited above concerning EuropaCorp productions can be re-examined in light of related comments published by ordinary viewers on IMDb. In particular, three recurring motifs are often discussed and appreciated for their otherness—sometimes linked to the perception of an ‘exotic’

quality—even though they also sometimes elicit negative comments, thus revealing potential strategic weaknesses as well as concrete risks the films are exposed to because of their global audience: their use of language, their roots in Europe and their hybrid style.

First of all, for the films shot in French, language appears to be a potential source of enjoyment for viewers. At the same time, it can also be unstable, awkward or even a source of unexpected outcomes when the films are distributed in the international market. IMDb users who enjoyed the first two *Taxi* films explain:

It is still very 'French' and is an easy way into 'foreign' cinema for those of us who speak no other language than English. ('*Taxi*', Matthew Monk, 23 August 2000)

At first I expected this film to be boring, because they speak French, which I don't understand. But too [*sic*] my big surprise I loved it, because French sounds so funny when spoken in comedic situations. The Frenchmen are so hilarious [...] ('*Taxi 2*', martymaster, 27 July 2001)

It is interesting to note that what these viewers see as the light, humorous quality of the French language, certainly accentuated by the clichéd aspect of the dialogue, makes this cinema accessible to an international audience even though its comedy and quintessentially French character might suggest that it is unexportable. At a time when streaming platforms were not as widespread as they are today, it also introduced viewers to the practice of watching the French-language version with subtitles: 'Okay so if you want a non-art-house introduction to foreign cinema to get used to reading subtitles then check this movie out' ('*District 13 Ultimatum*', WakenPayne, 27 April 2014). Evaluations of the subtitles are mostly positive, confirming the expertise of the viewers who used them. Language still represents a major challenge, however, as one British user points out in his comments on *District 13*: 'The whole movie is spoken in French with English subtitles which means it is not exactly audience friendly! Also, it means you have to concentrate on the subtitles as well as the picture which means it is likely you will miss some of the action!' (Chris Sparks, 18 July 2006).

IMDb users tend to react positively to subtitles, while fearing that they might drive away part of the audience; however, they roundly condemn the poor quality of the dubbing, which they feel is the result of cost

cutting. ‘Unfortunately, I did see the dubbed version rather than subtitled, and I’m sure that took away quite a bit of the quality’ (*Taxi*, chicagopoetry, 8 November 2011); ‘The blu-ray seems to default to the English dubbed version. Big mistake. Watch this in the original French with subtitles. The performances are much better’ (*District 13*, runamokprods, 17 November 2011). Viewers especially notice the inconsistencies produced by dubbing in films with highly diverse, cosmopolitan casts:

The dubbing is what finally kills the movie. There may be a French and an international version, but the latter is a complete mess-up. French actors speaking English (with a French accent); other French actors’ voices are dubbed into British English or American English [...] How could this mess come about? Simple, they wanted to sell the film to an international (read English-speaking) audience. Shame on you, Luc Besson, for getting involved in this disastrous film project!’ (*Michel Vaillant*², bandofoutsiders, 31 March 2004)

It is understandable, then, that the company has repositioned itself, favouring English-language films geared at the international market, while at the same time focusing on the visual attractiveness of its films.

A second type of otherness, which comments sometimes link to exoticism in the sense of ‘a particular mode of aesthetic perception that is simultaneously anchored in the filmic text and elicited in the spectator in the process of transnational reception’ (Berghahn 2021, 222), arises from the use of urban spaces that are different from those that frequently appear in American films: ‘Gorgeous scenery in the French Riviera, beautiful exotic women taking revenge on their pimp, and a Luc Besson story combine with an extended Audi product placement to make an entertaining action movie’ (*The Transporter Refueled*, phd_travel, 27 February 2016). IMDb reviewers’ valorisation of scenes shot on location in iconic French settings, as well as in other countries considered attractive or picturesque by English-speaking Western audiences, reveals just how much positive reviews are associated with the promise and the pleasure of viewing these spaces: an Australian user, for instance, explains that he ‘[likes] how and where this movie was presented. The director shows off Paris in many ways, such as landmarks like the Eiffel Tower, which is cleverly incorporated through a fighting sequence’ (*Kiss of the Dragon*, Old Joe, 20 November 2002); a Taiwanese viewer explains that ‘here in Taiwan it [*Taxi 2*] was a hit. It’s fresh and clean, and shows some nice French

locations' (axraupp, 3 April 2002); another user, likely American, notes that *The Transporter* is 'easy to watch' and 'engaging' precisely because 'it's set in the beautiful French riviera where we are once again reunited with Jason Statham in another action/crime packed movie' (happytoms, 5 November 2019). When films fail to live up to this promise, viewers lament their blandness, as was the case with *Taken 3* (set in Los Angeles, whereas its two predecessors were set in Paris and Istanbul, respectively):

Wish *Taken 3* had used the European or east European countries to shoot the film, at least the topology of the terrains, the cityscapes, the landscapes, their highways, subways and autobahns systems, the streets and the lanes would be different and not so boring like l.a.; what we have seen million times already. (LogicIsEverything, 13 January 2015)

Even though 'no exotic location is half the fun gone' ('*Taken 3*', phd_travel, 9 January 2015), as one user puts it, images of new, different locations are not always greeted positively. The location shots of the French Riviera in *The Transporter Refueled* (Camille Delamarre, 2015), highlighted in the film's promotional materials (Fig. 1), are designed to produce a form of visual pleasure but were still criticised for their lack of originality. What was new in the early 2000s seems clichéd and tacky 15 years later, both for audiences unfamiliar with the earlier saga (in the first quotation below) as well as for fans:

A movie like this might have worked for audiences during the early 90's [*sic*]. But it's past 2010 and it's just really generic and kind of outdated. (KineticSeoul, 23 December 2015)

I couldn't get rid of the feeling that I was watching a faint imitation of the original. There was really nothing we haven't seen before. A clichéd film that looks like an extended commercial about Audi. This is what i call product placement. (peterp-450-298716, 1 March 2016)

A third source of cultural difference is the films' startling, hybrid aesthetic. Offering 'something Americans aren't used to seeing, but well worth a look' ('*Wasabi*', Quicksand, 23 October 2004), 'something with a little more style' ('*Taxi*', Leofwine_draca, 9 November 2016), the films are characterised by an 'in-your-face' visual intensity that draws attention to their unexpected mixing of cultures, linked to their cosmopolitan casts and incorporation of aspects of kung fu cinema. While 'Besson creates an



Fig. 1 The poster for *The Transporter Refueled* gives prominence to the film's setting on the French Riviera

evocative world of Euro-Asian textures and action beats', this 'charged, exciting and gratifying' show (*Lucy*, aminifatimaaa, 4 March 2019) seems to appeal particularly to a male audience by featuring 'action dolls' with statuesque physiques and sexy outfits, whose performances emphasise a glamorous form of femininity. An example of this is the following comment on a scene from *Taxi 2* featuring Petra (Fig. 2), a German policewoman played by the Swedish actress and model Emma Sjöberg: 'Again from under the writing/producing banner of Luc Besson, it's little wonder that this is hardly high art. But then, only a French import would



Fig. 2 The showcasing of different ‘action dolls’ in *Taxi 2* is one aspect of such films’ hybrid aesthetics

feature a knickerless female police officer performing endless high kicks. And vive la France for that’ (margulanabutrlov, 23 March 2019). This kind of perspective can also be found more recently in the reception of *Anna*, with users stating that ‘something about strong ass-kicking women makes a movie more entertaining’ (bostonct, 22 June 2019).

While the hybrid form crafted by Besson, which is aimed particularly at male viewers, has the advantage of broadening EuropaCorp’s international audience, it can also be seen as unfocused, sloppy or even bizarre, even in cases where a film is appreciated for other reasons: ‘The cast are pretty good even if the international mix of actors all in Paris is a bit strange’ (*Kiss of the Dragon*, bob the moo, from the UK, 26 November 2004). This problem becomes more conspicuous when the ‘graft’ fails to take, as was the case with *Les Rivières pourpres 2*, which left many users perplexed: ‘The result looks like a strange pot with differently colored and flavored potions that do not really mix or combine well together’ (dromasca, 21 February 2006). These problems illustrate the difficulty of the task EuropaCorp has set for itself, summed up in the following terms in 2007 by co-founder Pierre-Ange Le Pogam: ‘The universal film that sells worldwide yet also has a strong identity? Our lives are spent searching for it!’ (Le Pogam 2007, 37). The studio’s success at reaching this ambition has been limited, as illustrated by the failure of *Valerian*. Ironically, the film is praised on IMDb for its visual inventiveness while also criticised for the lack of conformity of its script and cast to the norms of a worldwide blockbuster. One French viewer, who grew up with the comic book and

was reminded of moments from his childhood, explains that he ‘can understand the weirdness of this world for an American viewer’ (ericrochard, 23 July 2017). This view is confirmed by numerous other comments: ‘I wanted to like this movie. I did. It’s a weird combination of sci fi and epic high fantasy, but ... just ... Ehhh’ (invaderxan, 24 February 2018). The broad rejection of *Valerian* on IMDb, admittedly a special case, shows that the French/European touch and the personal mark of Luc Besson, two features that characterise EuropaCorp, are difficult to reconcile with their aspiration to universal appeal. It is as if Besson had somehow overstepped the bounds of his status as a producer of cheap, European action films by claiming to put on a show of the same calibre as those only Hollywood is capable of financing and producing. The comments of users who happily got their money’s worth from *The Transporter* or *Taken* are answered by those for whom *Valerian* fails to meet the standard one would expect from its budget: ‘Despite having a large budget this movie failed to provide a decent plotline’ (farhadalif, 24 November 2019); ‘It’s a cheap high school production of *Avatar*’ (refbumrulz, 19 February 2020).

CONCLUSION: A TENUOUS AMBITION, A DOWNWARD SLOPE

In light of the foregoing analysis, a definitive answer to my question remains elusive. As we have seen, taken individually, EuropaCorp productions can be viewed as an ‘alternative’ to Hollywood on IMDb. This is little more than a possible outcome, however, that applies only in certain cases. It is difficult to apply this label to the entirety of the company’s output, which is better described as encompassing a broad range of projects with uncertain outcomes rather than a single coherent alternative to American cinema. Moreover, the cultural instability of the studio’s films would appear to undermine their prospects of international success, as the company is in some ways forced to continue experimenting with new and unexpected stylistic combinations in order to create buzz and attract a variety of foreign audiences. The risk of this strategy, however, is to make ‘a movie that targets everyone and satisfies no one’ (*‘Valerian’, the_wolf_imdb*, 19 March 2018). This possibility of success is even more tenuous given the competition from Hollywood, which remains fabulously successful at assimilating foreign innovations, as many commentators have observed about the spread of models created by *Nikita* (Luc Besson, 1990) and *Taken* throughout the contemporary media landscape. That

same Hollywood competition remains the standard by which Besson's films are inevitably measured, apparently with a lesser degree of tolerance as the years go by: 'Between *Lucy* and this film, Luc Besson has lost his touch and his golden days of *Nikita*, *The Fifth Sense* [*sic*] [1997] and *Leon* [1994] are far away ...' ('*Valerian*', gfranceschini, 22 October 2018). The company's most recent films (*Valerian*, *Anna* and *The Transporter Refueled*) have generally received more negative reviews, including from Besson's fans. Fans accuse these films of lacking in originality and innovation, points that were once seen as the studio's strengths and of taking a direction that goes against the studio's original values in order to attract teenage viewers.

Anna is an example of the first of these two factors, although the film also generated positive comments hailing the director's comeback. Most comments, however, compare it unfavourably to numerous other films featuring a 'badass' heroine, criticising the director for the obsolescence of his signature style and his inability to reinvent himself: '[it] is a clear-cut combination of a few different movies [...] Perhaps because it wears its influences on its sleeve, it just comes across as a pale imitation of them' (Pjtaylor-96-138044, 6 July 2019); 'Even if you are a fan of Besson, skip this mess' (random-70778, 8 October 2019); 'This is [Besson's] worst disappointment' (random-70778, 10 December 2019).

Valerian illustrates the second case, despite some favourable reviews expressing surprise at other IMDb users' harsh critiques. The film, which Besson's fans on IMDb generally disliked, was seen as lacking the intensity and stature that major male stars brought to *Le Cinquième élément/The Fifth Element* (Besson, 1997): 'Without the magic of Bruce Willis, Gary Oldman and co, you can't make a movie that is all colours and CGI effects without any other substance' (skintone-38600, 30 December 2017). Users criticised the film's casting choices, especially the male lead, seen as insufficiently virile and muscular: 'Role of Valerian definitely needed to be given to someone else, maybe someone a little older and manly looking' (candicelee82, 19 December 2018). This hints at the strength of the gender and generational norms affecting the reception of this production, described contemptuously by one user as a 'film for affectatious millennials who have no real experiences to draw from', which 'mimics it's [*sic*] core hipster audience in that it lacks the depth or development of character' (rcgiroday, 21 July 2017).

The Transporter Refueled (Camille Delamarre, 2015) drew a combination of both critiques, resulting in an extremely negative reception.

Declaring that ‘Luc Besson’s writing of thrillers and action flicks used to be interesting enough to watch. No longer so’ (moofee, 29 January 2016), fans complain of a glaring lack of imagination and feeling, concluding that ‘its box office failure is well deserved’ (FlashCallahan, 12 September 2015). The main critiques focus on the replacement of Jason Statham by the English actor Ed Skrein, famous for his role in the series *Game of Thrones*, deemed unconvincing as an action hero because of his youth and his slender figure, and too ‘sophisticated’ because of his accent: ‘You don’t send a boy to do a man’s job’ (Wizard-8, 20 December 2015); ‘Ed Skrein only amounts to carbon copy lookalike with accent’ (quincytheodore, 3 September 2015). Separating this reboot from the rest of the franchise—‘No Statham, no Transporter’ (MoonwalkerKari, 25 July 2021)—fans agree that ‘the worst offender is the awful script, bordering on cheap fantasy or softcore porn’, since the plot centres on a plan hatched by a group of prostitutes to eliminate their pimp, while the hero is ‘caught up in the struggle and forced to help them’ (quincytheodore, 3 September 2015). Although the eroticism of the female characters has always been an important factor in viewers’ enjoyment of Besson’s alluring spectacle, users object to the way in which this aspect of the show, considered here as a ‘juvenile guilty pleasure’ (quincytheodore, 3 September 2015), takes on greater importance and interferes with the plot: ‘It’s a women’s revenge movie, definitely not a “Transporter”’ (Reno-Rangan, 4 February 2016).

Taken together, in fact, the various comments on these EuropaCorp films tend towards oxymoron: fans are at once disillusioned by too much reliance on past formulae yet nostalgic for narratives of gender differentiation, and epic masculinity in particular, associated with an earlier phase in the studio’s output. Thus, more androgynous male heroes are critiqued as embodying both more of the same (‘a carbon copy’) and a difference too far (‘you don’t send a boy to do a man’s job’). One might speculate that such contradictions arise from the fact that for an important segment of its key fanbase, EuropaCorp has come to stand as a reminder of the very obsolescence of certain representations, whose loss is a source of regret and bitterness. In any case, the studio seems to have lost the approval of many viewers who once supported its ambitions to offer international audiences something different from the apparent standardisation of Hollywood cinema.

NOTES

1. This figure corresponds to approximately 50 comments for each film in the corpus. This necessarily includes the franchises spearheaded by Besson, which occupy a critical position in EuropaCorp's business model. These are, in chronological order, from the first series produced: *Taxi*: five films in 1998, 2000, 2003, 2007 and 2018 (the first four directed by Gérard Krawczyk, the fifth by Franck Gastambide); *The Transporter*: four films in 2002 (Louis Leterrier), 2005 (*idem*), 2008 (Olivier Megaton) and 2015 (Camille Delamarre); *Banlieue 13/ District 13*: two films in 2004 (Pierre Morel) and 2009 (Patrick Alessandrin); *Taken*: three films in 2008 (Pierre Morel), 2012 (Olivier Megaton) and 2014 (*idem*). In addition to comments on these films, I have examined those related to some of the studio's most emblematic productions, the ones most closely associated with Besson in reviews on IMDb from 1998 to 2022. In chronological order: *Yamakasi: les samourais des temps modernes/Yamakasi* (Ariel Zeitoun, 2001), *Wasabi* (Gérard Krawczyk, 2001), *Le Baiser mortel du dragon/Kiss of the Dragon* (Chris Nahon, 2001), *Michel Vaillant* (Louis-Pascal Couvelaire, 2003), *Les Rivières pourpres 2: les anges de l'apocalypse/Crimson Rivers 2: Angels of the Apocalypse* (Olivier Dahan, 2004), *Danny the Dog/Unleashed* (Louis Leterrier, 2005), *Lucy* (Besson, 2014), *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (Besson, 2017) and *Anna* (Besson, 2019). I have included the first *Taxi* film even though it was made in 1998, shortly before the founding of EuropaCorp (1999), both because its production broadly anticipated the marketing and development strategies that the studio would implement in the 2000s (Pillard 2020, 193) and because 'the success of the *Taxi* series was a turning-point in [Besson's] career as producer, and the signal for EuropaCorp's rapid expansion as a European alternative to Hollywood' (Vanderschelden 2007, 43).
2. When I began working on this material in 2017, statistics covering the generational, geographical ('inside the USA' or 'outside the USA') and gender breakdown of reviews published on IMDb for any given film were available, and information about the age and nationality of reviewers frequently appeared next to their user names. This information unfortunately became unavailable after 2019, probably because of the site's implementation of the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), making it more difficult to gauge the reception of films according to these criteria. Various elements in published comments or in the biographies that users add to their profiles do indicate, however, that this section of the site is accessed primarily by male users between the ages of 30 and 40; these elements sometimes also reveal users' gender and nationality.

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The Limits of Luc Besson’s ‘Made-in-France’ Blockbusters: From the Transnational to the Postnational in *Valerian* and *Anna*

Isabelle Vanderschelden

With their European film major EuropaCorp, Luc Besson and Pierre-Ange Le Pogam constructed, between 2000 and 2010, an innovative model and viable alternative to the Hollywood studios.¹ They built their trademark around big-budget films—in the European context—designed for the increasingly globalised markets and cultures of the twenty-first century, while EuropaCorp also backed and distributed smaller films aimed at more modest French audiences. After 2011, the corporation’s strategic priorities changed dramatically, its growth exposing the potential and limits of its internationalisation strategies. The group increasingly focused on blockbusters in English with international casts and, despite commercial successes, repeatedly showed signs of financial difficulties.² Negative results between 2015 and 2019 led to the sale of subsidiaries and scaling

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down of assets from 2016. After aborted negotiations with Netflix and Pathé in 2019, the US-fund Vine Alternative Investments took control of EuropaCorp in February 2020, with Luc Besson just retaining an honorary administrative role and some shares in the company.³

This chapter examines how Besson's ambitions, especially with his own filmmaking ventures, were instrumental in the difficulties encountered by EuropaCorp after 2012. It briefly retraces significant challenges, before focusing on the last two films Besson released after the global success of *Lucy* (Besson, 2014): *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (Besson, 2017), a space-opera with a record budget for European cinema and global blockbuster aspirations; and *Anna* (Besson, 2019), a mid-budget action movie featuring a young Russian female hitwoman recalling *Nikita* (Besson, 1990). *Valerian* and *Anna* are French majority productions, partly financed by pre-sales to minimise financial risk, shot in English with international casts and Besson's arsenal of experienced French technical personnel. Both films exemplify the popular strand of French cinema targeting wide global audiences. Yet their production and exhibition strategic plans seem to disregard important signals sent by the film industry after 2015. Though both sought in different ways to balance corporate commercial concerns and their own modes of differentiation, they confirmed the volatility of the film markets and highlighted flaws in the group's business strategies.

The chapter draws on recent cultural studies definitions of 'transnational' and 'postnational' cinema to assess how the two films negotiate Besson's tested production models and the mutations in the consumption of global blockbusters after 2015. Recent studies (Le Guilcher 2016; Michael 2019; Delon and Vinuela 2020) have explored the evolution of the vertical integration model of EuropaCorp and the development of its international model of production and distribution under Besson's leadership. Building on Fanny Beuré's research on the group's evolution after 2011 (Beuré 2020) and Christopher Meir's analysis of questionable expansion decisions made in that period (Meir 2020), the chapter highlights the limits of hybrid formatting and corporate image differentiation in the pre-pandemic globalised film industry. It also evaluates the impact of new platforms on cinematic spectacle and the consequences of inflated promotional budgets. Finally, regarding Besson's demise after 2019, it considers the fragility of personal success and professional reputation in the age of global culture and news circulation.

CRITICAL CONTEXTS AND CULTURAL SETTINGS

Before focusing on how Besson's recent films illustrate transnational popular trends, it is useful to briefly revisit the theoretical groundings of 'cinematic transnationalism' and 'cosmopolitan cinema', linking them to the globalised filmmaking patterns governing the group's production model and, specifically, Besson's filmmaking. For years, he was the driving force behind the group's international strategic development with a direct impact on French film exports (Beuré 2020, 90–94). The income generated for the national film industry has often been underestimated by Besson's critics, who despised EuropaCorp's popular success. In this context, the notion of 'high concept' helps to define expensive projects produced by EuropaCorp with the global market in mind. 'High concept' film has been theorised in the context of Hollywood (Wyatt 1994; Isaacs 2011). It is less used in the context of French film production, where it refers to a strong but simple main premise, the identification of an effective pitch, fast-paced, spectacular action and/or special effects (Pillard 2020, 189).

When it comes to the circulation of cultural products, using 'international' or 'global' to describe a film, a director or a production process is problematic in the current context of globalisation. For example, in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, 'international' when applied to film tends to indicate 'a parity relation between nations' (Durovičová and Newman 2010, ii), while 'global', as used by Beuré (2020, 89) to describe blockbusters, implies a totalising logic of film culture. However, the term 'transnational', when applied to cinema, suggests 'uneven exchanges' between cultures and nations (Durovičová and Newman 2010, ix–xi). *Valerian*, with its €197 million budget, its assumed universal generic typology and its global marketing campaign, deploys many of the components and ambitions attached to superproductions aspiring to global blockbuster status. Discussing twentieth-century cinema, Vanessa Schwartz (2007, 6) associates global culture with 'an idiom through which an additional identity is formed, one whose every definition is based on the knowledge that it is simultaneously consumed around the world'. The conditions for this 'additional identity' were met for *Lucy*, but for reasons addressed below, *Valerian* possibly was too heterogeneous for worldwide consumption (especially in the USA).

Internationalisation processes raise other terminological issues. In French, 'international' is preferred (see Delon and Vinuela 2020; Beuré

2020). ‘Postnational’ seems to be used less frequently than ‘transnational’ in Anglo-American film studies and research since 2000.⁴ In addition, neither term seems to appear as prominently in Francophone film academic writing, and when employed, they tend to be used rather indiscriminately. Therefore, precise definitions are needed to address the cultural differentiation found in Besson/EuropaCorp’s productions, especially after 2011, in changing contexts of film circulation and consumption. Ezra and Rowden (2006, 1) have defined as transnational the ‘global forces that link people or institutions across nations’. More recently, Mette Hjort (2010, 15) has grounded her typology of ‘cinematic transnationalism’ on ‘resistance to globalization as cultural homogenization and a commitment to ensuring that certain economic realities associated with filmmaking do not eclipse the pursuit of aesthetic, artistic, social, and political values’. She addresses several transnational modes directly relevant to the two films discussed in this chapter that can be summarised as follows: ‘milieu-building transnationalism’ is based on collaboration as resistance to purely economic constraints; ‘opportunistic transnationalism’ envisages financial imperatives as the priority dictating partners or responding to opportunities arising; ‘globalising transnationalism’ is a response to inadequacy of national sources of finance, including the premise of high cost to attract wide audience and recuperation through broad audience appeal; ‘auteurist transnationalism’ connects the director’s identity and collaborations beyond national borders; ‘modernising transnationalism’ links cultures across nations engaging with the modernisation of society by forging connections; and ‘experimental transnationalism’ resorts to unconventional practices to increase transnational appeal (Hjort 2010, 16–28). These ‘transnational modes’ can, with varying degrees, be related to EuropaCorp’s production practices. Besson’s filmmaking exemplifies Hjort’s modes of transnationalism through the adoption of a range of global visual style codes and techniques. As a producer, too, his constant renegotiation of business strategies to maximise global positioning in a fast-changing film industry is a form of ‘globalising transnationalism’. Additionally, by actively exploiting the French cultural exception to his advantage, including subsidies and tax-shelter mechanisms, he practises an ‘opportunistic transnationalism’ that has direct repercussions for the French film industry in terms of exports, development of local infrastructures and work opportunities.

For Hjort (2010, 20), ‘cosmopolitan transnationalism’ highlights multiple belonging and trajectories of migration, thus responding to an ideal

of film capable of strengthening social imaginaries. This finds echoes in the work of Dimitris Eleftheriotis (2016, 203), for whom cosmopolitan cinema involves multi-ethnic groups of creative personnel and the utilisation of transnational channels of marketing, distribution and exhibition in its articulation of difference. All three features can be attached to *Valerian* and *Anna*, which are discussed in more detail below. For Felicia Chan (2017, 2), cosmopolitan heroes bring 'mobility and adaptability to new cultures', a feature that also fits Besson's high-concept protagonists, who travel a great deal and are multilingual. *Valerian* and Laureline, the two protagonists, are extreme, intergalactic fantasies of cosmopolitan heroes, as are the exotic communities they visit. *Anna*, too, unlike the French protagonist of *Nikita* for example, is represented as a cosmopolitan figure, always on the move to complete her missions.

The transnational features found in EuropaCorp's productions help to inform the nature of French popular cinema, as explored in this volume. They include familiar genre conventions and a superficial take on world politics and globalisation. The protagonists are mobile and mainly speak in English, displaying surface cosmopolitan rather than truly intercultural or transnational spirit. However, some of Besson's own films retain some differentiation and Frenchness for different reasons that cannot be detailed here. It is significant that EuropaCorp's technical crews are made up of a core of French regular associates and that Besson has worked since the 1990s with the same core teams of technical crew for stunts, special effects and so on. Thierry Arbogast, for example, has been his director of cinematography from *Nikita* to *Anna*. Hugues Tissandier has been production designer for Besson and EuropaCorp since *Joan of Arc* (Besson, 1999) and Olivier Bériot costume designer since *Arthur et les Minimoys/Arthur and the Invisibles* in 2006. Eric Serra has composed most of Besson's soundtracks except *Valerian*. All these French contributors are part and parcel of the artistic signature of his films.

THE EVOLUTION OF LUC BESSON'S INTERNATIONAL PRODUCTIONS

Besson's box-office successes predating EuropaCorp, *Nikita* in 1990, *Leon* in 1994 and especially *The Fifth Element* in 1997 attracted international mainstream audiences and were sometimes retrospectively identified as postnational (Hayward and Powrie 2006; Vanderschelden 2008).

While EuropaCorp took on board the French cultural exception mechanisms (subsidies, specialist film and television financing funds and tax shelters), it was created as a European alternative to Hollywood majors designed to conquer global markets—with emphasis on the USA and Asia. The productions therefore reworked universal thematic or genre motifs, developing popular franchises like *Taken* and *Transporter*—a total of eight films between 2002 and 2018—that Besson wrote, produced and oversaw but did not direct. These helped to finance the global projects entirely created and directed by Besson, like the fantasy animation trilogy *Arthur and the Invisibles* (Besson, 2006, 2009, 2010) in the 2000s and *Valerian* in the 2010s.

As the leading main stockholder of EuropaCorp, Besson fulfilled his ambition of becoming a tycoon-like producer of global blockbusters. If the action films and international franchises had a mixed, often derogatory, critical reception in France, EuropaCorp was gradually recognised as a major player in the French film industry, increasing the visibility of new French action movie directors like Pierre Morel, Louis Leterrier or Franck Gastambide and experienced technicians, whose international careers thrived. Box-office results fluctuated, but the films regularly topped the French exports, establishing the company's overt 'conquering' strategy of making popular films 'with a blurred national anchoring' (Delon and Vinuela 2020, 7). World audiences did not always realise that the *Taken* franchise, *Lucy* or the biopic of the Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Lady* (Besson, 2011) were all 'registered' as majority French productions from an industry perspective. In effect, *Les Aventures extraordinaires d'Adèle Blanc-Sec/The Extraordinary Adventures of Adèle Blanc-Sec* (Besson, 2010) was the last culture-specific film that Besson made in French. Adapted from Jacques Tardi's *bande dessinée* (BD), filmed in French with a French cast, *Adèle* combined lavish production values and an overt cultural differentiation strategy, which impacted the marketing of the film as an international superproduction. For a substantial budget of €25 million *Adèle* was an honourable national success with 1.6 million admissions in France and \$34 million returns worldwide, including the Chinese market. When acquiring the rights, Besson had envisaged a trilogy that never materialised (Lambie 2017).⁵ *Arthur* and *Adèle* sent warning signals that he chose to ignore about the limits of lavish adaptations of French popular culture in a globalised market context. Although *Valerian's* adaptation was designed as a global blockbuster with inventive visual

effects and an international cast, to be filmed in English, this was not enough to make cultural differentiation a recipe for a global blockbuster.

In 2010, the *Revue des médias* (Ragot 2010) had analysed EuropaCorp's evolution and financial results, emphasising the high-tech values underlying its successful industrialisation. The eviction in 2011 of partner and producer Le Pogam, who had played an important and strategic editorial role at EuropaCorp, sent another strong signal. The arrival, in 2012, of a new business partner coming from advertising, Christophe Lambert, marked another turning point. His nomination as CEO coincided with the inauguration of the Paris studios at Cité du Cinéma, designed to expand production opportunities and the group's autonomy with subsidiaries like Digital Factory for special effects and l'École de la Cité for training screenwriters, directors and technical crew in-house (Vanderschelden 2020). After 2011, however, EuropaCorp relied increasingly on its successful franchises, especially *Transporter* and *Taken*, deploying global distribution and exhibition strategies.⁶ As Meir (2020, 123) has argued convincingly, RED, the Relativity subsidiary created in 2014 to distribute the films in the USA, contributed to EuropaCorp's increasing debt at least as much as *Valerian's* mixed box-office results.

Throughout his career, in an obsession to compete with Hollywood, Besson has moved the goalposts from national cinemas to test out global filmmaking opportunities in a fast-changing industry. Yet his growing reputation as an international producer and director was double-edged. If his name was associated with flair and a vision, his taste for excess also caused financial difficulties. Making alliances with local partners to access the US and Chinese distribution markets from a European base is another example of misunderstanding the markets. It follows the setbacks of the *Arthur* trilogy's dwindling success and *The Lady's* flop (only earning \$7.6 million worldwide despite a €21 million budget).⁷ In both cases, the US market let him down, prefiguring the resistance that a project like *Valerian* could face. Even the global success of *Lucy* can be viewed retrospectively as leading to a false sense of security.

With *Lucy*, Besson combined an effective high-concept and universal generic sci-fi conventions (including numerous cinematic references that world audiences would recognise) with his own personal style and technical expertise (Vanderschelden 2020, 163–164). A EuropaCorp, TFI and Canal+ co-production costing €49 million, it was filmed in the Cité du Cinéma studios in English. Distributed on a global level as a blockbuster and benefitting from the international stardom of Scarlett Johansson and

Morgan Freeman, it attracted 5 million spectators in France and the world receipts exceeded \$463 million, which translated into 1000 per cent profitability ratio and 50 per cent of the takings garnered by French films abroad in 2015. Without resolving EuropaCorp's financial exposure after 2011, this staggering return was interpreted as a sign of vitality. Besson underestimated the changes in the film industry when launching *Valerian's* production after 10 years of gestation, describing his project as nothing less than the first episode of a 'French *Star Wars* franchise' (Dumazet 2017).⁸

VALERIAN: TOO FRENCH FOR A GLOBAL BLOCKBUSTER

In the context of EuropaCorp's recurrent financial difficulties after 2012, *Valerian's* record budget of €197 million, oversized by European standards, always represented a great financial risk despite substantial international pre-sales.⁹ The transnational cast included Dane DeHaan and Cara Delevingne, with Clive Owen, Ethan Hawke, Herbie Hancock, Alain Chabat and the singer Rihanna in supporting roles, as part of a careful strategy to attract young international audiences, but appears not to have been iconic enough to bring the charismatic figures to life—*Valerian's* corny humour and Laureline's feminist modernity of the punchy dialogue imagined by Pierre Christin for the BD *Bande dessinée* (BD) often fell flat in the film. The international technical crew included most of Besson's familiar French core team. The Oscar-winning Alexandre Desplat replaced the usual partner Serra—which surprised many but produced a soundtrack adopting the codes of the Hollywood sci-fi genre. The shooting took place in the seven studios of the Cité du Cinéma over a hundred days and required 65 sets; 2206 people were involved on set, including 115 actors and 552 extras (Allociné 2017). Besson, once again, fully embraced the latest digital age technology, multiplying inventive digital effects never seen before in a European film. Peter Jackson's New Zealand company WETA was responsible for 600 shots, including the motion captures of 200 different types of aliens and intergalactic creatures—particularly the humanoids of planet Müll (Fig. 1). Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) created around 1000 effects for settings such as the grand 'big market' scene (Fig. 2), while Canadian company Rodeo focused on spatial vehicles and fight scenes (Besson in Lambie 2017). Up to 80 cameras were used for motion capture and 1371 people worked on the post-production of the 2734 shots requiring visual effects.¹⁰ In his efforts to update his take on global blockbusters, Besson straddled (local) differentiation and (global)



Fig. 1 Spectacular digital effects in *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets*: planet Müil and its princess



Fig. 2 Recreating the big market for the screen

blockbuster values. On the one hand, he needed to attract the *Valérien et Laureline* BD fans by retaining the spirit of a dated, culturally specific iconic French BD. On the other hand, he sought, perhaps naively, to create a global blockbusting event, as Spielberg had done with his lavish computer-animated adventure film adaptation of Hergé's *Adventures of Tintin* (2011).¹¹ Obsessed with competing with the likes of the *Star Wars* franchise and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), Besson prioritised the technical production values and global marketing arsenal over a solid transnational screenplay. *Valerian's* shallow characters and dialogue were

often harshly criticised in reviews, and many viewers, especially outside France, found the narrative arcs difficult to follow.¹²

Released in 81 countries from July 2017, *Valerian* garnered \$225 million in ticket sales, which was not enough to cover the global marketing and distribution costs. Though it attracted a respectable 4 million spectators in France, it was possibly disadvantaged by a global summer release calqued on the Hollywood model, but ill-suited to European summer cinemagoing habits. However, low US takings—only \$40 million receipts for 3500 screens—represented the main commercial setback. The Chinese release by Fundamental Films, EuropaCorp’s Chinese financial partner, in August on 9000 screens broke the earnings record for a French film. In Asia, it represented 75 per cent of entries for 2017 (Sallé 2018), but this did not compensate for the poor results in the USA.

On a purely cultural level, adapting a French BD from the 1970s in 2017, albeit the one that had inspired George Lucas for *Star Wars* and Besson for *The Fifth Element*, was risky. *Valerian*’s intergalactic world is cosmopolitan and transnational in spirit, but it lacks some of the ‘totalising’ elements required of blockbusters, namely universal genre and narrative features facilitating global circulation (Michael 2020, 207). Besson is perceived more as ‘impressive in his ability to express idiosyncratic tendencies through the lens of a big-budgeted spectacle; this is tentpole auteurism’ (Perez 2017). *Valerian* thus stands at the intersection between an individual artist’s film and a product.¹³ Its technical execution matches Hollywood standards, but its heterogeneity, a trademark of Besson’s style, limits its ability to develop a high concept. The proliferation of inventive visual ideas and intertextual citations from classic films that made *Lucy* a global hit (Vanderschelden 2020, 162–164) become flaws for *Valerian*. For example, the film resists becoming homogenised as generic Hollywood sci-fi, and its duo of emerging stars fails to win over audiences all over the world across generations. Its quirky characters and multilingual dialogue requiring subtitles—especially the disconcerting silly jokes of the script (which did not feature in the original cartoons)—are difficult to reconcile with the constraints of fast-paced innovative spectacle demanded by global blockbuster events targeting wide young audiences. More generally, the cultural references to a vintage sci-fi world—often faithfully imported from Jean-Claude Mézières’ visual imaginary world—engender ‘discrepancies’ (Cousin 2017) and expose the dangers of differentiation (Dumazet 2017). Even before addressing any marketing and distribution

considerations, Besson's juggling between loyalty to his source and blockbuster conventions represents an unattainable ideal.

Valerian's marketing campaign started well before 2017 with teasers published on social media and information on the shooting released strategically in the French press (Picard 2016). It raised expectations from Besson's regular audiences worldwide, as well as Francophone BD fans, while the intensive use of social media targeted younger audiences (Chenel 2017). The global marketing campaign, estimated between \$60 and \$100 million, and not part of the official budget, worsened EuropaCorp's debt.¹⁴ It also highlighted the pitfalls awaiting French films aspiring to the status of global blockbusters. Besson devoted large amounts of energy and money to accessing new technologies and social media, but his notorious culture of secrecy and reluctance to do press previews may have been counterproductive. For example, Charlie Michael's reception overview (2020, 127–129) shows that international/US-based critics were disconcerted by the film's heterogeneous balancing act, while Thomas Pillard's assessment of the film's reception on IMDb (2020, 194–198) confirms the volatility of global success. As mentioned earlier, *Valerian* was not the first of Besson's differentiated transnational superproductions to fail to attract the US audiences. If the damage caused by the *Arthur* venture was probably understated in business reports (Le Guilcher 2016, 198–201), the scope of *Valerian's* financial gamble was such that it could not be erased by another film or new strategic plan. When EuropaCorp scaled down to three to five mid-budget films in English per year and *Anna* was rushed into production in October 2017, it felt like the last chance to recentre business and ease a mounting debt crisis.¹⁵

ANNA: A PAST-FACING POSTNATIONAL PRODUCT

Anna was shot using Besson's regular teams in France, Bulgaria and Russia for a €30 million budget mainly sourced from international pre-sales. Its international release, initially planned for 2018, was postponed by the independent distributor Lionsgate Films (Summit Entertainment) following Besson's lawsuit for allegations of sexual misconduct and concurrent rumours of EuropaCorp's imminent sale (see Murray 2019). By April 2019, only an international trailer had circulated. *Anna* was eventually released in the USA on 21 June and by Pathé in France on 30 June with limited promotional campaigns. The film's reception and its global takings of \$31 million were considered disastrous—though hardly surprising

given the conditions of release. In France, *Anna* only attracted 430,000 spectators in two weeks amid relative media indifference, ending its career at 736,000. However, despite a record-low \$7 million in takings from 2114 screens in the USA, it still topped the French film exports for 2019 (Unifrance 2019).

Reminding us of Besson's past successes and recycling familiar genre conventions, *Anna* takes a back-to-basics approach in a delusional attempt to reboot the made-in-France action film. Set in the late 1980s to early 1990s, the plot revolves around a young Russian woman (Sasha Luss) recruited as a hitwoman by a KGB agent and trained by a handler (Olga, played by Helen Mirren) before being co-opted by CIA agents to retrieve information and kill the KGB boss. Returning to the safety of (now vintage-looking) postmodern neo-noir thriller, *Anna* deploys pastiches of formulaic action scenes from *Nikita* and *Lucy*. For example, the screenplay recycles a phoney (training test) mission in a restaurant with escape routes blocked and acrobatic escape scenes down chutes. It even reprises many of their specific stylish and spectacular aesthetic details: girl with gun (see Figs. 3 and 4), graphic violence with forks as fetishised weapons, choreographed single-handed fight scenes, car chases and physical transformations (glamorous outfits and wigs). Though *Anna* often feels like a straight remake of *Nikita*, it is easy to see why Besson chose to revisit the iconic 1990s high concept and the figure of action movie heroine. But rather than engaging with generic and thematic rebooting for the twenty-first century, he played the card of nostalgia, hoping to entice new audiences as

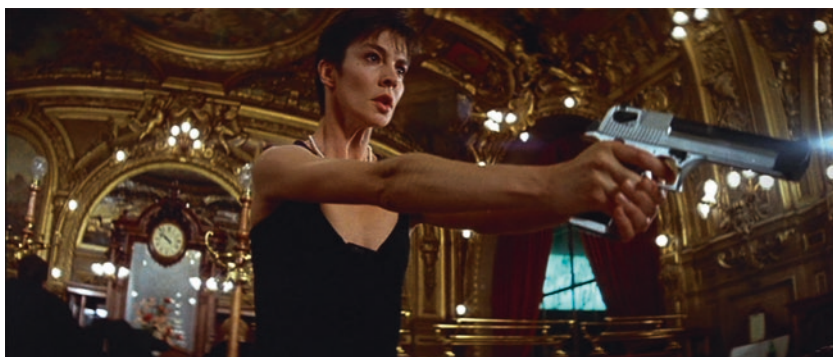


Fig. 3 Nikita fulfilling her contract in the Blue Train restaurant in *Nikita*



Fig. 4 Anna fulfilling her contract in the hotel room in *Anna*

well as his core fanbase still ‘drawn to his distinctive approach to action and fantasy films, which combine the aloof cool of fashion photography with comic book exaggeration’ (Murray 2019). By trying too hard to reach wide audiences, Besson seems to have relied on postnational features that are in contradiction with the period in which he set the film. This generates anachronisms in the narrative, such as the use of cellular phones, computers and the internet by characters living before 1990. Despite Mirren’s performance, the character of Olga is stereotyped and lacks credibility. More importantly, the lack of a coherent script affects *Anna*’s universal appeal and postnational agenda.

‘Postnational’, as used in Martine Danan’s discussions of French cinema from the late 1990s (Danan 1996), qualifies a process of ‘erasure of distinctive elements which have traditionally helped to define the imaginaries and traditions of national cinemas against Hollywood’ (Danan 2006, 177).¹⁶ As this volume shows, other definitions of postnational have since become broader to embrace the variety of ways in which films may address a mainstream popular international audience from the outset, carefully calibrating rather than simply eclipsing markers of nation or region. After Besson failed to impose *Valerian* as a transnational global blockbuster, for *Anna* he tried to adopt more exaggeratedly postnational production strategies. His script reduced Frenchness to a minimum and national identities to coarse stereotypes or glossy postcards (as the *Taken* and *Transporter* franchises had done before). The Anglophone cast distinguished *Anna* from *Nikita*—a film shot mainly in Paris with a French-speaking cast. While in *Valerian*, the casting, genre conventions, language

and spaces were counterbalanced by the cultural capital that the French BD adaptation entailed, most traces of French cultural or cinematic traditions were deliberately erased in *Anna*, leaving only a superficial, cosmopolitan postnational setting. If Besson updates the technical execution of his action cinema via some incursions into video-game aesthetics (photography, use of zoom and close-ups), the plot fragmentation hardly reboots the female action or spy movie genres to reinvent postnational narrative forms. An array of flashbacks, flashforwards and cosmopolitan urbanscapes knits together the action scenes imbricated in a ‘Russian doll cubism rewriting of [Besson’s] fantasy female protagonist’ (Mandelbaum 2019). Nothing in the screenplay suggests any interest in, or commentary on, political, gender and cultural changes in the world since the 1980s. By casting Luss, a top model of the 2010s with high visibility on social media, however, he strives to attract younger global audiences, updating his marketing strategy to new modes of celebrity resting on looks and fast-paced action entertainment. As a result, *Anna* offers little differentiation from Hollywood action movies, while sending mixed messages to world audiences.¹⁷ By aiming to be more postnational than *Valerian*, the film eschews a distinctive generational target and loses its identity, being neither a French action movie nor a global entertainment commodity, its budget preventing comparison with lavish Hollywood blockbusters. The cosmopolitan Parisian and Russian settings remain purely decorative spaces in which the protagonist operates. In particular, the lack of stars immediately identifiable worldwide—a flaw already found in *Valerian*—constitutes a further obstacle for marketing a global cultural event.

As an action heroine, Anna reproduces some familiar traits identified in Besson’s previous female characters (social isolation, looks and physical energy). However, she does not reach the universality of postnational action heroines (Lara Croft). Unlike Nikita or Lucy, Anna remains a glossy character—she is even filmed modelling as part of her undercover missions. Though her behaviour is more sexually explicit than Nikita’s, her affair with Maude (Lera Abova) seems a half-hearted nod towards gender fluidity. Her relationships and the sex scenes with her male co-leads (played by Luke Evans and Cillian Murphy), in which she is seen in a range of sexy outfits, primarily suggest fetishised objectification. This nullifies Anna’s empowerment as a female who, after being manipulated by men, becomes manipulator to regain her freedom. As noted in the *LA Times* review, it is ‘hard to watch *Anna* without thinking about Besson’s off-screen issues, given that it’s about a woman who stands up for herself after a lifetime of

being abused and manipulated by men' (Murray 2019). *Variety* also notes that the photographers, as portrayed in the film, could easily be seen as caricatures of tyrannical film directors (Debruge 2019). The narrative could also be read as a post-#MeToo token admission by Besson of his own exploitative use of actresses in his films. More crucially, the reception of *Anna* demonstrates how the action heroines that Besson imagined for several decades may no longer be attuned to the current global cultural climate. Anna is a one-dimensional, calculating protagonist, devoid of Lucy's offbeat personality or Nikita's mixture of wildness and moving vulnerability. Luss's performance style is mainly kinetic, displaying video-game stylisation, but lacking the sensuality of Johansson or the mysterious 'French' charm of androgynous Parillaud. Trapped in a twentieth-century narrative mode smacking of retro nostalgia, Besson seems to be 'running after a train that he cannot catch' (Goldberg 2019).

* * *

Besson, through EuropaCorp, continued after 2015 to employ transnational strategies and imagine popular films designed for the global market by deploying high concepts, universal cultural markers, English as the main language, cosmopolitan protagonists and transnational stars. With *Valerian*, he sought to produce an ambitious global blockbuster, hoping that he could renegotiate differentiation and audience expectations in an increasingly globalised digital cinema market, but failed. Hastily recycling universal generic action movie codes that were part of his trademark, he tried to bounce back with a more postnational film, *Anna*, that became his worst commercial flop.

If throughout his career Besson has adopted controversial methods attracting harsh criticism, he also undeniably imagined alternatives to Hollywood cinema that for over 30 years brought his vision of popular cinema to a national film industry challenged by the digital revolution and launched new generations of French film professionals. Some of EuropaCorp's action movies competed with Hollywood, offering alternative global popular entertainment at lower cost. But Besson's defiant obsession to conquer the globalised market as a form of cultural resistance led to risky expansion moves and alliances that he could not always control. Not only did he impose controversial changes that weakened the group, but he also misjudged Hollywood, whose tested method for countering competition since the 1920s has consisted of forging alliances with

challengers only to absorb them. By overlooking basic commercial rules and cultural codes to impose *Valerian* as a global blockbuster on the US and Chinese markets, he accelerated the group's demise. The attempt at bouncing back with *Anna* proved that launching a film to a world audience requires a clear business plan and a solid marketing campaign.

Finally, Besson underestimated the importance of celebrity and reputation in a networked, globalised cultural environment still dominated by Hollywood. In France, he had absorbed relentless attacks because his vision of cinema clashed with the national critical canons; his role in the local film industry and his impact on French exports were noted, but rarely acknowledged to mitigate his reputation.¹⁸ However, recurrent allegations and court cases in France since 2000 (linked to plagiarism as well as political collusion and financial malpractice) never prevented him from financing his films. In Hollywood, Besson had developed a solid trademark and business reputation (Le Guilcher 2016, 289). Yet, the minute his name was associated with sexual misconduct, in the post-Weinstein and #MeToo era, he lost the support of his US partners, whereas his previous judicial problems had not affected his international career.

In 2022, the once familiar EuropaCorp logos have disappeared from cinemas, while the re-formed group's communication and social media visibility are sparse. Following the global pandemic's impact on the film industry, the studios in Paris were sold to Tunisian entrepreneur Tarak Ben Ammar in February 2022. After a three-year blackout, June 2022 saw the release in France of *Arthur, malédiction/Arthur Curse* (Barthélemy Grossman, 2022), a €2.24 million French horror film and spin-off of the trilogy produced by Besson's new company LBP (Henni 2022). The shooting at his Normandy property of a self-authored screenplay points towards a low-key return to recycling and auto-citation. Meanwhile, another film starring Caleb Landry Jones, *DogMan*, produced by LBP and EuropaCorp USA and written and directed by Besson has been produced with only a handful of his former French collaborators. Virginie Besson Silla, appointed CEO of EuropaCorp USA for films and TV programmes in November 2020, is the co-producer. *Dogman* was released in September 2023; however, the gap left by EuropaCorp in the French film industry has cast serious doubts on the future of global blockbusters made in France.

NOTES

1. EuropaCorp's vertical development into an independent European major between 2000 and 2011 is discussed in Maule (2006), Vanderschelden (2008), Ragot (2010) and Le Guilcher (2016).
2. See Joyard (2012), Benabent (2014), Paquette (2017) and Richaud (2017) for detailed information.
3. Losses of €109.9 million for 2018–2019 and €82 million 2017–2018 led to staffing reductions and the sale of assets, including Digital Factory to Chinese group Southbay in 2019 (Keslasy 2017; Debouté 2018). The 2017 strategic plan envisaging three to five productions annually for five years was abandoned following Vine's takeover in 2020.
4. See, for example, Ezra and Rowden (2006); Vanderschelden (2007); Durovičová and Newman (2010); Shaw (2017); Michael (2019); de la Garza, Shaw and Doughty (2020). It is also significant that a scholarly journal published by Taylor and Francis has been devoted to transnational cinemas since 2010 (*Transnational Cinemas*, renamed *Transnational Screens* in 2019). Yu (2012) and Yu (2015) also make useful distinctions between international and transnational stardom for Chinese cinema.
5. He was also trying to produce an *Adèle* spin-off TV series before EuropaCorp's collapse.
6. See Archer (2015) for a discussion of *Taken* and Michael (2019, 2020) for the impact of franchises in the development of EuropaCorp's empire.
7. *Arthur and the Invisibles* (Besson, 2006) cost €60 million and grossed \$108 million worldwide. With 6.3 million spectators in France, it outperformed *Valerian* (4 million) or *Lucy* (5.2 million). However, *Arthur 3: The War of the Two Worlds* (Besson, 2010) only returned \$30 million worldwide for a €65 million budget.
8. All translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated.
9. See Besson in Lambie (2017) and Michael (2019, 124) for information on the financial package. However, Meir (2020, 126–127) showed how *Valerian* broke the 20 per cent maximum budget exposure rule, in the sense that pre-sales and official budget did not include the huge marketing campaign, estimated according to sources to be between €60 and €100 million (see Crété 2021).
10. See Valadé (2017) and Hamus-Vallée (2020, 238–240) for SFX discussion and Lambie (2017) for Besson's account.
11. A \$35 million Paramount/Columbia co-production with over 3,000 special effects by WETA and a global box office of \$374 million.
12. Besson admitted that *Avatar* (\$2.8 billion income) forced him to reconsider his initial project (Jagernauth 2017). *Valerian's* production values

- were greatly influenced by the innovations of WETA (Besson in Hamus-Vallée 2020, 239). See also Perez (2017).
13. This assertion is also made by Isaacs (2011) about Cameron's take on Hollywood's idea of high concept.
 14. See Le Guilcher (2016, 292–294) and Meir (2020, 118–119) for detailed accounts of flawed EuropaCorp distribution alliances with local partners to access the US and Chinese distribution markets.
 15. In 2016, *Taxi 5* (Franck Gastambide, 2018) had set the trend with a €20 million budget entirely from pre-sales.
 16. See Vanderschelden (2007, 2008), Pettersen (2014) and Michael (2019) for postnational critical readings of French cinema and Besson.
 17. *Red Sparrow* (Francis Lawrence, 2018) is a comparable Cold War movie produced by 20th Century Fox, filmed in Eastern Europe and starring Jennifer Lawrence as a Russian spy. Released in 2018 with a budget of \$70 million and returns of \$151 million, the film was described by as a rehash of other similar films on female empowerment, but smarter and more sophisticated than *Anna* (Debruge 2019).
 18. However, Crété (2022) shows that overall Besson's reviews in the French press over the years were not as negative as often suggested.

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Whose *Lost Bullet*? Netflix, Cultural Politics and the Branding of French Action Cinema

Charlie Michael

As Netflix exerts new dominance in the wake of the pandemic, its iconic ‘stack’ menus continue to make media consumption into a game of sliding referentiality. Armed with the appeals of gunplay, car chases and hand-to-hand combat, action genres seem tailor-made for this environment, beckoning us with sensorial cacophony as our cursors hover over perpetually loading teaser trailers. Recent experience suggests that this cascade of algorithmic browsing culture might also offer unexpected opportunities for more diverse cultural uptake. The international success of recent non-Anglophone series—Korea’s *Squid Game* (Siren Pictures/Netflix, 2021–), Spain’s *La casa de papel/Money Heist* (Atresmedia/Netflix, 2017–2021) and France’s *Lupin* (Gaumont Television/Netflix, 2021–), to name a few—suggests that foreign languages and subtitles are no longer the impediment they once were, perhaps because audiences have become

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accustomed to navigating captions on so many other forms of online content.

Somewhere at the intersection of these variables, we encounter the focus of this chapter: a handful of French-made, action-based genre films and series that have gained increasing visibility on Netflix streaming queues. While still modest in terms of the total number of products available, Gallic action is an emergent category on Netflix that seems to be growing. Recent French-produced titles on offer from the platform include rather different modalities—from the expressively subjective motorcycle chases in *Burn Out* (Yann Gozlan, 2017) to the claustrophobic submarine interiors in *Le Chant du loup/The Wolf's Call* (Antonin Baudry, 2019). Some titles serve as vehicles for stars of the present—*Lupin's* Omar Sy in *Loin du périph/The Takedown* (Louis Leterrier, 2022) or Franck Gastambide in *Sans répit/Restless* (Régis Blondeau, 2022). Others serve as callbacks to stars of the past, as with Jean-Claude Van Damme in *Le Dernier mercenaire/The Last Mercenary* (David Charhon, 2021). Still others rip their dramatic backdrops from actual French headlines, like the true-crime police scandal story depicted in *BAC Nord/The Stronghold* (Cédric Jimenez, 2020), or invest in the ever-fertile imagination of the *banlieue* genre, such as *Banlieusards/Street Flow* (Kery James and Leïla Sy, 2019). The nascent space for French action genres on Netflix has also begun to spur repeat collaborations, as it did between director Julien Leclercq and star Sami Bouajila, whose pre-Netflix success on *Braqueurs/The Crew* (2015) begat the similar tonalities of two recent entries—a feature called *La Terre et le sang/Earth and Blood* (Julien Leclercq, 2020) and, more recently, the series *Braqueurs/Gangland* (Hamid Hlioua and Julien Leclercq, 2022), an expanded streaming version of their first film. Likely the most prolific creator of French action via Netflix, Leclercq has also begun to build a modest online following among action aficionados, who recognise his spartan style even in more marginal outings such as *Sentinelle* ('The Sentinelle', 2021) from which Bouajila is absent (see Appendix).

Though the financial clout of this recent list of titles is difficult to gauge, such audiovisual narratives present questions about how Franco-European sensibilities might fit into a new cultural calculus dominated by streaming subscriptions. Self-reporting from Netflix remains the primary source for quantitative figures, and that methodology has shifted within the last two years alone.¹ Yet while the fortunes of these titles remain somewhat mysterious, several of them have garnered headlines in the trade

press for their ‘surprising’ success on the platform, ranking in the top 20 for their category during the first several weeks of their release. Meanwhile, we should also mention that *Lupin*, the Netflix-produced adaptation of *Arsène Lupin* featuring *Intouchables/Untouchable* (Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, 2011) star Omar Sy, also includes a significant number of action-based scenes, though not in every episode—a fact that reminds us of action’s abiding malleability as a mode rather than a stable or codified genre of screen practice (Holmlund et al. 2023).

Collectively, the rise of French action genres on Netflix refreshes the cultural and theoretical stakes of ‘postnational’ media production. Like most popular media practices from France, their success stories remain somewhat at odds with the reputation of a national cinema still far more known abroad for arthouse and festival fare than genre-based productions. Do the aggregate features here—non-English dialogue, less familiar cast members, ‘European’ backdrops, fleeting cultural references—qualify these titles as legitimate cultural products from France? What type of methodology might we use to illuminate the significant and ongoing role of French-made action in a global landscape increasingly mediated by search terms rather than cultural specificity? Put more succinctly, what do we *do* with these French action films on Netflix?

This chapter outlines some relevant contexts for beginning to search for answers to these questions. It does so by evaluating some of the thematic and aesthetic parameters of *Balle perdue/Lost Bullet* (Guillaume Pierret, 2020), which seems to offer an early prototype for the sorts of stylistic and cultural interventions that French-language filmmakers can make in the Netflix era. As of October 2021, *Balle perdue* was the ninth most-watched non-English Netflix Original title, with 37 million views (Moore 2021), and its sequel quickly became the best Thursday international launch in the history of the platform when it was released in November 2022 (Durand 2022). Although at first glance it may read as a ‘Frenchified’ version of the *Fast and Furious* franchise, *Balle perdue*’s compact construction, unassuming generic bearing and sardonic flair for localised detail typify the attitude we see in a growing recent line of action vehicles issuing from the contemporary French media ecosystem. As we will see, textual analysis can also reveal how recent films and filmmakers have come to internalise the risks and rewards of these new cultural logics, turning the potential loss of cultural specificity into a wellspring for creative expression.

NETFLIX AND THE FRENCH ACTION COMPLEX

Netflix presents a precarious cultural opportunity cost to French creative personnel. As several other contributions to this collection document more extensively, the recent chance to lock horns with a new, unpredictable form of North American hegemony involves a rather delicate balancing of priorities. On the one hand, the global distribution provided by Netflix (and potentially by its (S)VoD competition) offers enhanced visibility to non-English creative talent rarely seen in decades prior, when international distribution was more a question of territorial bottlenecks and the de facto state control exerted by transnational US corporations. On the other hand, as Christopher Meir warns, the sorts of contracts currently doled out for most European producers working with North American (S)VoD platforms belie a familiar, age-old dynamic, since the former has ‘no additional revenues that can be extracted from this popularity’ (Meir 2021, 23). As in the past, the establishment of a continental-based entity—in this case a European (S)VoD giant—may be the best long-term strategy to combat inequity. Unfortunately, European companies seem reluctant and/or unable to abandon their previous funding model, based in the far less agile realm of linear pay-television funding and its more predictable funding ‘windows’ (Meir 2021, 19).

It is here that we encounter our primary exemplar for the present study: *Balle perdue*, a commissioned, feature-length action film that in many ways internalises this cultural inflection point via its clever play with generic conventions and an awareness of its own cultural branding dynamics. Since there are numerous properties featuring the characteristic red ‘N’ logo on the upper left corner of their menu cards, that affixed letter does little to identify their production status or national affiliations, which become visible only after an initial viewing of the credentials hyperlinked to the menu. This blurring of categories is integral to how Netflix treats the ‘postnationality’ of its products. On the surface, of course, their presentation is rather unvexed on the menu stacks themselves, presenting all ‘Netflix Originals’ as similar artefacts to the eyes of the consumer. As Meir’s chapter in this volume and a more extensive study by Amanda D. Lotz (2022) both point out, the proprietary branding of international products by Netflix blurs distinctions on several grounds. First, the labelling does not clarify the programme’s production status itself—lumping international acquisitions into one category despite the important distinctions between *licensed* content (that which graced national screens in years

prior to its stacking on the menu) and *commissioned* content (where Netflix participates with local production companies to create new material) (Lotz 2022, 19–21). Here action genres serve as an instructive example, as they are placed on stack menus alongside other products in a manner that does not necessarily discriminate between the categories we might be accustomed to browsing. Films and series are called up to the screen, side by side, as are products from vastly different national ‘containers’ or made by different directors or companies. All these search terms are possible—but not required—unless so instructed by the desires of a given subscriber.

Consider, for instance, the results of a query from typing the word ‘action’ on the menu search bar (see Fig. 1, taken from my personal Netflix account).

We can observe here the cohabitation of rather different films. Hollywood is well represented, of course, with blockbuster franchises like *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) or *Skyfall* (Sam Mendes, 2012), prestige ‘social problem’ thrillers like *Blood Diamond* (Edward Zwick, 2006) or *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), and vaguely xenophobic titles like *Beirut* (Brad Anderson, 2018) or *Siberia* (Matthew Ross, 2018). Mixed into the menu of apparent possibility, we also find a handful of more conspicuously ‘othered’ cultural entries—*Wira* (Adrian Teh, 2019) from Malaysia, *Yaksha: Ruthless Operations* (Nyeon Ha, 2022) from South Korea, *Rurouni Kenshin* (Kyeshi Otomo, 2021) from Japan or *RRR*

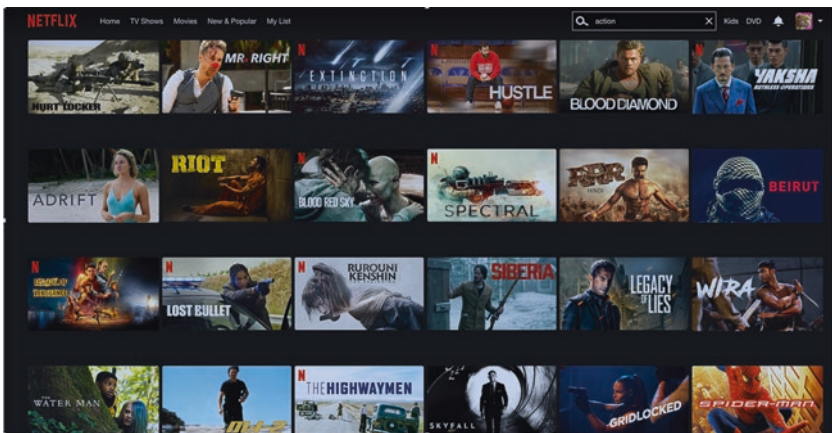


Fig. 1 Netflix search results for ‘action’, circa August 2022

(S. S. Rajamouli, 2022) from India. Note that all of these options retain, even on the surface, a modicum of distinction from the universalised branding of North American franchises or series: culturally specific dress, titles that bespeak non-Western origins, strategically placed ‘diverse’ cast members and most often some combination of these elements. However, nestled somewhere in the middle of the page, inconspicuous at first glance, sits *Balle perdue*. The film appears strangely inscrutable, at least on an initial glance. There are scant indications of its national origins unless Stéfi Celma is familiar—here wearing cornrows, brandishing a firearm and almost unrecognisable from her breakout role as Sofia in *Dix pour cent/Call My Agent!* (France Télévisions/Netflix, 2015–2020). Hovering over the image, perhaps, one might recognise the French surnames of its cast and crew, but it is only by pausing on the teaser—and thereby hearing the French-language voiceover—that any demonstrably ‘foreign’ element emerges. Moreover, the French title for the film (in this case a quite literal translation of its English title) does not appear in the teaser trailer and is nowhere to be found on the title card. Whatever their industrial logic, products like this also present questions for cultural critics. How do we begin to consider the ambivalent address of *Balle perdue*, beyond its cohabitation of a menu with so many different products? Several factors for how to first address the apparent ‘postnationality’ of the film leap immediately to mind—at least in a historically informed approach to the cultural place of the action genre as it currently germinates and circulates inside (and outside) France.

First, it is crucial to relate the appearance of Netflix action films made in France to a slightly longer recent history. Given their modest number, it would be reasonable to wonder whether French action on Netflix has enough precedent to even be worthy of study. However, the features are strikingly similar to what we can safely call a contemporary tradition of French-made action films that are a more or less direct result of 1990s reforms to the French audiovisual sector, when Minister of Culture Jack Lang responded to increased Hollywood competition by making cable television into the new backbone of film finance (Buchsbaum 2017; Michael 2019). One of the long-term outcomes of this strategy was to revivify popular filmmaking, meaning that genres historically neglected in France could find new footing. And for action genres, this took place primarily at StudioCanal and EuropaCorp, two studios often credited with an upswell in French genre filmmaking over the past two decades more generally.

Second, as I have argued at more length elsewhere (Michael 2019, 142–178; Michael 2020, 2023), we should acknowledge that such ‘globally’ influenced films from France are usually not the homogenised products that critics allege. This is particularly true of action cinema, which has rarely if ever been ‘national’ in a codified way like the ‘heritage films’ (*films de patrimoine*) that dominated many previous discussions of how European film industries marked and marketed continental culture for international audiences. A cursory glance at the landscape often leads critics to dismiss French-made action as pale Hollywood imitation. In a welcome exception to this rule, action scholar Lisa Purse argues for a critical process that should be less a matter of finding a new label than of conducting fine-grained research into how an ‘internationalising formula’ emerged out of the competing cultural and political-economic interests of French stakeholders during a period of transition in the 1990s and 2000s (Purse 2011, 175). The role of film historians (as opposed to critics) should be to specify how individual films engage with the plural modes of an action tradition that itself had already been internationalised prior to any French intervention. For instance, when we are considering films that take part in a tradition that as a rule already depicts ‘place-ness’ without concern for cultural specificity, theorising a ‘postnational’ mode has less explanatory power. These films vary greatly according to the production contexts and aesthetic goals of their creators.

Balle perdue, it would seem, offers a few possible answers to the question of what sorts of stories and kinds of styles these forms might take when they reside on Netflix. As a creative collaboration between first-time director Guillaume Pierret and stuntman-turned-star Alban Lenoir, *Balle perdue* offers a low-budget rejoinder to the CGI action films that surround it on streaming queues. Instead, the film is built around a string of effects-free set pieces while also deploying a cunning sense of self-deprecating humour about its own enterprise. In so doing, the film trades on its own unassuming position amid big-budget superhero films and more distinctively ‘cultural’ Asian action genres. Offering what first looks to be a stripped-down, French-language variant on the *Fast and Furious* franchise (Universal Pictures, 2001–2023), *Balle perdue* features an ambivalent mix of North American genre conventions and Franco-European cultural inputs.

In some ways, the production history of the film illuminates the details of the landscape described by Meir in his analysis of how (S)VoD platforms have recently inflected a European corporate landscape still acclimating to

the strategic creative realities of the ‘platform era’ (Meir 2021, 5). Concisely filmed in 38 days, the film is the feature-length debut of Pierret, a self-proclaimed ‘total autodidact’ (Anon 2022) who, along with co-producer, writing partner and long-time pal Rémi Leautier, spent the 2000s learning to film with a Mini-DV video camera, editing his footage with laptop software, avoiding storyboards and sharing his work on a burgeoning cluster of French online forums for aspiring videographers. Most notable among these, for Pierret at least, was the website *Repaire* ([Repaire.net](#)), where he could share his work and receive feedback from other amateur video-makers. In conjunction with fan forums like *Filmsdeculte* ([Filmsdeculte.com](#)), such resources offered a generation of millennial artists a chance to workshop and discuss their favourite mainstream genre fetishes and offbeat curiosities, circulating their work outside the more established and ‘legitimate’ enclaves of print publications and their affiliated websites.

Pierret’s experience also illustrates the reality of a French production ecosystem in the 2000s that was effectively becoming transnational primarily via the efforts of two studios: EuropaCorp and StudioCanal. Like many of their counterparts, Pierret and Leautier had only modest success in an industry dominated by the ambitions of a select few. In interviews, Pierret describes a landscape of 2000s French production that was largely bereft of opportunity for those aspiring to make action films—or really genre films of any type. No surprise that when the duo did eventually succeed in mounting a modestly distributed short action film—*Matriarche* (2012)—their main thought initially was that they ‘should mail it to Besson’ (Engle 2020).² His mention of Besson, of course, is not an accident, as the erstwhile director of 1980s classics like *Subway* (1985), *Le Grand bleu/The Big Blue* (1988) and *Nikita* (1990) whose notoriety and influence helped create a ‘go-it-alone’ production company, EuropaCorp, which, following the European success of *Taxi* (Gérard Pirès, 1998), became a major outlet for genre filmmaking in France, boldly co-producing a string of unapologetic, international-facing action films in English throughout the following two decades. The financial success of EuropaCorp films like *Kiss of the Dragon* (Chris Nahon, 2001), *The Transporter* (Louis Leterrier, 2002), *Danny the Dog/Unleashed* (Louis Leterrier, 2005), *Taken* (Pierre Morel, 2008) and *Lucy* (Luc Besson, 2014) helped establish Besson as a visible mogul of popular genre cinema in France, a status he used to curry favour with the film establishment during the 2010s in support of constructing the Cité du Cinéma—a state-of-the-art studio

outside Paris—intended to house ambitious blockbuster-level films. Besson’s approach did offer an apprentice-style system, giving numerous young directors like Pierre Morel, Louis Leterrier and Olivier Megaton a springboard for successful careers in France and Hollywood. Clearly, though, EuropaCorp’s success soon also made its walls seem insurmountable to directors like Pierret, who expresses his bitterness about his creative prospects in the Hexagon.

By the 2010s, Pierret claims, the conventional wisdom in France was that there were three primary obstacles for aspiring action directors: ‘action is expensive, it doesn’t make money, and EuropaCorp has a monopoly over the genre’ (cinedirectors.net). Having marketed their concept to French producers since 2015, frequently only to have the funding collapse at the last minute, Leautier and Pierret were on the verge of giving up when they succeeded in securing a meeting with Sara May, Director of Acquisitions and Co-productions for Netflix in France, in 2018. It is not surprising that Pierret speaks glowingly of that experience, claiming that he was given near complete creative control and that all of his conversations with May revolved around the technical logistics of mounting an action spectacular (Engle 2020). Granted these comments to the press should be taken with a grain of salt given that the success of the film meant that Pierret was likely already in negotiations to direct its sequel (*Balle perdue 2/Lost Bullet 2: Back for More* premiered in November 2022). And yet, the narrative spun by Pierret also tracks with a much longer history of French talent working with US production companies, as he mobilises what I have called a discourse of professionalism that effaces overt concerns with national particularity for the sake of ‘just making a film’ (see Michael 2019, 70–79). In the case of the action genre, contemporary French fans and directors often bristle at questions of cultural legitimacy, instead evincing a cosmopolitan sensibility by proclaiming their relative lack of concern about anything other than action itself—what Pierret calls a ‘guilt-free’ action cinema (*cinéma d’action décomplexée*). The implication here is to embrace what Pierret elsewhere calls his like-minded producers’ ‘radical’ push to make genre films with less regard for cultural value—in this case, the action scenes of spectacular, technical accomplishment rarely seen (or attempted) in French production prior to Besson. For sociologist Sylvie Octobre, a similar discourse can be discerned in interviews with younger consumers in France, who evince a similarly ‘omnivorous’ sensibility of what they call ‘aesthetico-cosmopolitanism’, wherein a sense of ‘good taste’ derives from an embrace of North American culture that

rejects previous hierarchies of legitimacy brought to cinematic expression (Octobre 2020). Of course, this sensibility parallels the rebellious stance of the New Wave generation of the 1960s in some ways, but Octobre is careful to delineate how the present moment is distinct from days past, when foreign cultural forms rarely circulated so easily beyond Cinéclubs and the Cinémathèque française.

As we also know, directors and their films can sometimes tell very different stories about the weft of their subject matter. To wit, I would argue that the film itself also participates rather cleverly in a form of running meta-commentary about what it means to produce a Frenchified version of US genre tropes and adopt the commercialised production methods associated with these. Renault, after all, participated in the funding of the film—a factor in its product placement that Pierret, despite his zest for de-hierarchising elite French cultural practices, remains tight-lipped about in interviews, but which became quite clear on Twitter feeds around the time of the film’s UK release. Crass commercialism notwithstanding, the film does make the Renault part and parcel of its stylistic approach and narrative drive, as the car encapsulates both the hero’s journey and, I would argue, a larger thematic statement about the postnational.

ACTION CINEMA AND CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Numerous media scholars have written lately about the effect of Netflix and other streaming platforms on the phenomenon of branding as a cultural process of negotiation. Timothy Havens (2018), for one, argues that what separates the streaming giant from its competition is its ability to capitalise on what he calls *translational* branding. In many cases, this involves the use of paratexts that explain or bring out different elements of a product to help it speak to audiences in other parts of the world. Havens uses the example of marketing the Netflix Original series *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–2018) in India via a separate series of advertisements in which two well-known Indian actors play a father–son duo. The son explains the Netflix series to his father, who fantasises about using the diabolical methods of Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) in his own workplace (Havens 2018, 328–329). Havens explains that what makes this type of branding new is that it works both to indigenise the individual show (*House of Cards*) for Indian audiences and to promote the parent brand (Netflix) more generally.

Questions remain about how this process of translation might work between two media ecosystems conventionally considered to be closer culturally than India and the UK. As it turns out, here, too, the ‘guilt-free’ features of *Balle perdue* become a way to help the film straddle multiple cultural contexts. It is clear that certain paratexts for the film function in the case of *Balle perdue* to market it as a Franco-European take on American genre tropes. Although he was uninvolved in the production of the trailer for the film that Netflix made for international audiences, Pierret acknowledges that it fosters a clear connection with *The Fast and the Furious* precisely in its emphasis on the more extreme moments of action absurdity in the film (Engle 2020). However, what is perhaps most interesting in this case is how a certain awareness of action film branding becomes central to the humour of the film and its narrative intrigue.

From the first instant, *Balle perdue* overtly equates the car and its mechanical attributes with its thematic sensibility as a French-made action film. In the initial shot during the credit sequence, the viewfinder tracks from right to left, scanning a sparsely lit garage housing what appear to be assorted car frames and parts, then comes initially to rest on Lino (Alban Lenoir), bent over and soldering new parts onto the engine of one of the scrap vehicles. With his work centred in the frame, we also note the author’s name at the bottom right of the shot, here giving Pierret a writing credit (Fig. 2).

As the opening sequence of the film continues, it plunges us into a highly improbable (and logistically impractical) burglary scene. Lino and



Fig. 2 *Balle perdue*'s Lino (Alban Lenoir) at work on Pierret's action vehicle

his apparent sidekick, Quentin (Rod Paradot), nervously prepare the souped-up vehicle for a robbery attempt where it will be used as a battering ram to break into a jewellery store. Lino revs the vehicle, rejecting pleas for sanity from Quentin—‘Your car won’t hold!’ He then sends the car barrelling down the sort of narrow, typically European urban alleyway it looks designed for navigating, bursting through a shop window, then losing control and ploughing through several interior walls before landing—in a cascade of glass and cement—on an adjoining block. As sirens approach, our impetuous driver-hero is then trapped by possibly the worst-timed seatbelt malfunction ever. Quentin retreats on foot and Lino resigns himself to certain capture.

The self-effacing humour of this scene offers a first entry point for reading this film in a postnational light. The unexpected scale of Lino’s engineering success (blowing through multiple walls) leads to unpredictable failure on an exasperatingly small scale (a malfunctioning seatbelt). Lino is thus hamstrung not by his lack of ambition but by the utterly conventional (and frustratingly automatic) limitation imposed by prior conceptions of vehicle safety, which here seem absurd in the context of what has just transpired. Notably, even the title of the film contains a double meaning lost in its English translation. Whereas the title *Lost Bullet* suggests primarily a detective hermeneutic—something lost must now be found—the French version *Balle perdue* contains at least one other strong connotation, akin to what Anglophones would instead term a *stray* bullet. In this sense, then, the suggestion might be the threat of unintended consequences. As Lino navigates the opening sequence in his ridiculously under-equipped European hatchback, it is easy to imagine Pierret—like callow sidekick Quentin—having doubts about the viability of his little action vehicle, perhaps destined for algorithmic anonymity despite an ambitious design.

Moreover, Lino’s choice of transportation might also be seen as an ironic reference to an entire history of transatlantic, auto-vehicular differentiation. Narratively, it has a role in the intrigue; our hero is a savant mechanic known for maximising this type of vehicle against all odds by retrofitting it with used parts. Minutes of screen time after his imprisonment, Lino is sprung by the leader of a ‘Go Fast’ crew headed by detective Charas, played by the Franco-Algerian actor Ramzy Bedia, primarily known for his buffoonish comedy partnership with Eric Judor on M6 (*Les Mots d’Eric et Ramzy*, 1997), but also for their remarkably uninhibited action film spoof, *La Tour Montparnasse infernale/Don’t Die Too Hard!*

(Charles Nemes, 2001), and a cameo role in *Dix pour cent*. Charas, we quickly learn, leads a crew of undercover narcotics agents trying to stake out illegal drug trade across the border. The drugs, it seems, are transported rather quickly through the French provinces by, well, cars that *go fast*, and he can use a mechanic-savant like Lino to help him catch the criminals by retrofitting a fleet of Renault hatchbacks for the cause. It is during his recruitment pitch that Charas also shows Lino his ruby red Renault 21: the vehicle that will come to figure most prominently in the intrigue to come.

Pierret and Lenoir are on familiar ground here, of course, as there has been something of a recent mini-cycle of ‘Go Fast’ films borne on the cultural imaginary around the drug-running trade. These include at least two EuropaCorp productions, *Le Convoi/Fast Convoy* (Frédéric Schoendoerffer, 2016) and *Go Fast* (Olivier Van Hoofstadt, 2008). None of the generic turns in *Balle perdue* are particularly surprising on these terms. Unbeknown to Charas, some of his own agents cannot resist the lure of double dealing, led by Areski (Nicolas Duvauchelle) and Marco (Sébastien Lalanne). When their boss discovers their corruption, Areski shoots him in cold blood in the front seat of that same red Renault, and after removing his body, they torch the car and stow it in an out-of-the-way vacant lot—overlooking, of course, the bullet from Areski’s gun that still lies embedded inside. Given his recent prison sentence, Lino then becomes their perfect candidate to frame for the crime. Some thirty minutes into the film’s runtime, we are set up for his epic action comeback.

We might be tempted to write off Pierret’s choice of the Renault if it were dropped in later scenes. To the contrary, the film develops the role of cars throughout, bringing the metaphorical association between cinematic and action vehicles full circle. As Areski and Marco attempt to turn the authorities against Lino, he realises the importance of finding the lost/stray bullet, breaking out of prison and frantically searching for the 21, enlisting the intermittent help of others he manages to convince of the truth: his partner Quentin and his ex-girlfriend Julia, the lone member of the ‘Go Fast’ team who suspects the truth about Charas’s death. Given this thoroughgoing use of car branding throughout the film, it cannot be a mistake that the climactic scene, a standoff between Lino’s revamped red Renault (equipped with a *Mad Max: Fury Road*-esque bulldozer contraption on its hood), takes on the corrupt establishment, with the image track careful to display a competing brand logo on its bumper: Ford.

Pierret has been candid in interviews about his choice of the Renault 21, a vehicle iconic for its ordinariness, one that he deemed at once ‘typically French’ and redolent of a certain ‘military history’ somehow appropriate for his film and unexpectedly popular with the car aficionados he encountered online (Engle 2020). And yet from this simple reference point we might derive any number of a veritable network of possible connections—local, global or otherwise. It is certainly unlikely that international audiences register the details of the venerable French car manufacturer, or know of its iconic rebranding of the 21 as the Clio. It is perhaps even more doubtful that, despite the admirable efforts of cultural historian Kristin Ross in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (1996), audiences know how essential American cars have been to French cinema’s much longer conception of modern cool—think *Lola* (Jacques Demy, 1961) or *Un homme et une femme/A Man and a Woman* (Claude Lelouch, 1966). At the very least, however, any Netflix viewer grasps that Lino’s ride is strikingly quotidian and unremarkable compared to those of any *James Bond* or even the vehicles in other contemporary French action films. Franco-European audiences might note, by way of further comparison, Lino’s plausible connection to EuropaCorp’s *Taxi* franchise, which established the firm’s domestic success on the appeal of a taxi driver retrofitting his vehicle into an overperforming sports car. Clearly, in *Balle perdue*, vehicular craftsmanship and cinematic creation are co-associated in a far more systematic and self-conscious way than is typical, gesturing to the structuring risks—and unpredictable rewards—of Lino’s predicament and, of course, of making action cinema in the ‘platform era’ of contemporary French media.

TOWARDS A POSTNATIONAL TYPOLOGY

Entertaining and fast-paced, Pierret’s film presents us with an example of how a future Franco-European cinema might look when forms of culturally diverse cultural uptake are taken for granted as an *a priori* part of how streaming culture circulates. And yet, one of the more salient and endearing features of recent French action films is also that they are rarely able to dispense with the observable vestiges of their specific cultural identity. Given the multiple potential features that can ensue from this combination, it might be useful to plot the approach of a film like *Balle perdue* on a broad, genre-specific typology for how to think about the ‘Frenchness’

of contemporary action genres in the context of increased global circulation.

In a prescient 2004 analysis of globalised Hong Kong action cinema that anticipates features discussed here, Meaghan Morris draws on Deleuze and Guattari to specify how contemporary action filmmaking so often exists on a continuum between ‘major’ and ‘minor’ forms of circulation. For Morris, the major form is typically driven by global stars, big budgets and special effects, keyed towards mainstream audiences and multiplatform distribution, while the minor one draws on lesser-known athlete-performers, a cost-cutting aesthetic, niche audiences and localised circulation (Morris 2004, 190). Key among the aesthetic distinctions she draws are the city spaces of action scenes, which in both cases serve as functional backdrops, but can be distinguished in terms of class context and the mobility of the characters. Here Morris evokes terms proposed by spatial theorist Marc Augé, claiming that the major tradition gravitates towards globalised ‘non-places’ of the privileged modern city (hotels, resorts, airports, commercial centres), while its minor counterpart relegates its staged fights to more working-class ‘any-place-whatevers’ (buses, trains, factories, wharfs). These designations are not mutually exclusive, but rather evocative of a multifaceted generic tradition that moves freely between forms. Whence the explanation for the emergence of performers like Jean-Claude Van Damme, among so many others, whose rapid ascent from ‘minor’ to ‘major’ star tracks with the pre-internet circulation of films like *Bloodsport* (Newt Arnold, 1988) on DVD and VHS. While Morris could not quite have foreseen how the minor form would circulate in an era of YouTube and viral content creation, her framework helps to describe how transnational action directors can knowingly borrow from different traditions within the genre, priming their products for different types of uptake on multiple platforms. Moreover, the model can also be extended and expanded to describe the parameters of a localised creative palette. This is particularly true in a codified cultural sphere like the French media industries, where talents like Pierret and Lenoir use their knowledge of the genre’s mixed global and national address to position themselves within it in clever ways.

In this context, *Balle perdue* becomes a fascinating found object, figuring somewhere on the continuum of global action’s perpetual potential for identifiable cultural reference points in a generic context usually unconcerned with elevating them. While they are without ready access to the digitally enhanced, star-driven, ensemble casts of the *James Bond* or *Mission:*

Impossible franchises, French-based directors can still benefit from a generation of athletic performers based in France, riding in the wake of Besson's EuropaCorp efforts—Lenoir got a first career break as a stuntman in *Taken*. The film combines the genre's tried-and-true formulae of constructive editing with the technical resources of the Cité du Cinéma and an expanding group of independently run post-production outfits based in Paris (for instance, Le Labo and StudioB). Moreover, its accumulation of ambivalently 'local' features—the actors' spoken language; their plucky Renault hatchback; its subsequent breakneck journey down identifiably Gallic (or at least European) city blocks; its temporary disappearance into a countryside dotted with nondescript rural warehouses—form a fungible 'place-ness' more typical of action screens generally. Here the film embraces elements of the minor mode, eschewing by economic necessity the CGI world-building exercises of an unapologetically major entrant like *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (Besson, 2017), embracing instead the pulpy intrigue more redolent of 'minor' tendency entries like *Taken*, albeit in French and on the more budget-conscious end of the spectrum than Liam Neeson's career-altering cameo with Besson. Moreover, while variations on the 'major/minor' axis have been most visible in English-language productions from EuropaCorp over the past two decades, the French action complex has also experimented, albeit more rarely, with another stylistic option: the 'alt-global' tendency, which attempts to mount French-language versions of the 'major' mode, but in a culturally distinct lexicon. Among intermittent attempts in this vein through the years, the best remembered exemplar remains StudioCanal's now cult-classic horror-heritage-martial arts blockbuster *Le Pacte des loups/Brotherhood of the Wolf* (Christophe Gans, 2001), which mounted a genuine effort to establish a visibly Franco-European cultural spin on the 'major' mode.

Meanwhile, it would also be a mistake to throw *Balle perdue* into the same category with more ardently localised fare that has also appeared lately. Another recent Netflix title, *BAC Nord*, proves a case in point. That film, trading on the local news story of a highly publicised police corruption case, stars Gilles Lellouche, François Civil and other recognisable faces (at least to French audiences), staging its action against a backdrop of 'non-places' that are (at least theoretically) actual geographical locations in the northern suburbs of Marseille. It is also worth noting that *BAC Nord* also took a different route to Netflix, first gaining funding and distribution access *within* its home country, then playing at European festivals and on French screens for a full run before being acquired (as

opposed to commissioned) by Netflix for its ‘Original’ label. Culled from a more culturally reputable pole of filmmaking in the Hexagon, it also gathered legitimacy in other ways for the film establishment, garnering multiple César nominations for its gritty depiction of street violence (despite a concurrent controversy about its apparent endorsement of police brutality). At the time of writing, other recent French-language releases like *Athena* (Romain Gavras, 2022) have just begun to populate Netflix offerings, embracing a similarly chaotic *banlieue* imaginary and presenting a rather dystopian vision of urban, Franco-European life that both deals in fictitious hyperbole and seems to aspire towards a more authentic form of cultural commentary suggesting a place for them on the ‘minor’ axis of the generic spectrum. While there is not sufficient space to pursue all the cultural and political ramifications of these types of ‘neo-local’ depictions here, it seems clear that their variations on *banlieue* action can and should be schematically separated from Pierret’s emerging franchise, which may deal in similar landscapes and action choreography set pieces, yet does not seek (nor achieve) such cultural cachet, investing in a more unpretentious rendition of the minor action modality.³

Distinguishing titles like these might, then, suggest that another dimension be added to the major/minor dyad provided by Morris (2004) to explicate the varying ways in which cultural specificities do (and do not) intercede in conventions. Indeed, the sheer diversity of possible approaches helps to concretise an emerging schema for contemporary French action directors conceptualising their films according to cultural logics that play rather differently than any drop-down thumbnail sketch can render visible (Fig. 3).

In this vein, it might also be appropriate to plot other examples of action genre production on this chart. The first episode of *Lupin*, for instance, could figure somewhere on the ‘alt-global’ and ‘neo-local’ axes, drawing as it does on perhaps the most bankable global French star (Omar Sy’s journey from *Intouchables* to Marvel is well known) as well as a backdrop of overtly globalised tourist landmarks (a heist at the Louvre and its pyramid), and a centuries-old, more locally resonant cultural reference point (*Arsène Lupin*), as if to offer an ardently French version of ‘quality’ products offered by US streaming platforms (cf. Pettersen’s chapter in this collection). As with any semiotic approach, the placement of any chosen title here is less crucial than the conceptual exercise of querying the apparent options, weighing how various features resonate in a shifting cultural landscape redolent with multiple perspectives.

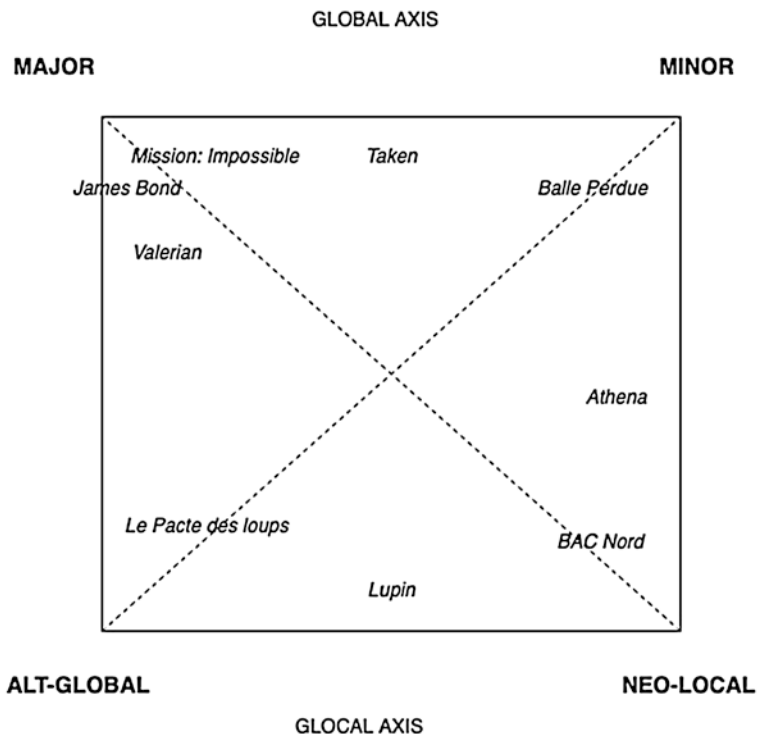


Fig. 3 Postnational action cinema—a semiotic typology

The bundle of issues covered in this chapter may well raise more questions than it answers. As Netflix commissions more action films like *Balle perdue* rather than simply acquiring them from French distributors, it seems likely that others will pursue a similarly hierarchy-free form of cultural address to the one sought by Pierret in his debut feature. Rather than a morass of differently pitched US ‘clones’, what appears instead here is an emerging menu of possible options, one that interfaces in interesting ways with the increasing intervention of Netflix and other streaming platforms in transnational genre production. The table in Fig. 3 might also offer some conceptual clarity on how film practitioners work within the emerging parameters of a marketplace where national identity increasingly mingles with numerous other sliding forms of referentiality on demand.

The anecdote about the Netflix menu from earlier in this account offers some important reminders about legibility in different contexts. It remains an important question whether or not key geo-cultural distinctions ever even emerge for many international viewers watching monolingual products amid the cascade of other streaming content. As we have seen, however, Pierret and his *Balle perdue* crew also seem aware of their film's socio-cultural status in the current state of play in the streaming industry, suggesting a not-so-subtle link between their French underdog hero, his deft mechanical labour and a larger meta-textual quest to render both of these things visible amid the shifting games of citational plurality that characterise global popular media at large. For some, working in an omnivorous manner between traditions becomes a way to market authorial credibility to the press. Pierret, for his part, frequently cites titles like *The Shield* (Fox Television Studios, 2002–2008) and *Jack Reacher* (Christopher McQuarrie, 2012) as influences for his films (Engle 2020). And yet his reverence for prior North American franchises also marks an attitude as characteristically French as it is 'global'—carrying with it a long legacy of cinophilia for Anglophone products, but also a certain militancy against the cultural and economic inertia of a smaller, risk-averse national industry. In this light, the broad thematic resonance of *Balle perdue*'s climactic confrontation—between Lino's back-from-the-dead Renault 21 and a highway blockade of corrupt French cops brandishing US-made police cruisers—should not be lost on audiences from any shore where 'beating Hollywood at its own game' remains a persistent temptation. With a third instalment in the series reportedly on tap for 2024, it's hard not to root for Lino's scrappy vehicle to continue holding its own—boldly advancing French stakes into an internationalised genre without undue fear, as it were, of what might be lost.

APPENDIX: ACTION-ORIENTED FRENCH-LANGUAGE NETFLIX ORIGINALS (MARCH 2023)

Films

Athena (Romain Gavras, 2022)

BAC Nord/The Stronghold (Cédric Jimenez, 2020)

Balle perdue/Lost Bullet (Guillaume Pierret, 2020)
Balle perdue 2/Lost Bullet 2 (Guillaume Pierret, 2022)
Banlieusards/Street Flow (Kery James and Leïla Sy, 2019)
Braqueurs/The Crew (Julien Leclercq, 2015)
Bronx/Rogue City (Olivier Marchal, 2020)
Burn Out (Yann Gozlan, 2017)
Le Chant du loup/The Wolf's Call (Antonin Baudry, 2019)
Le Dernier mercenaire/The Last Mercenary (David Charhon, 2021)
Frères ennemis/Close Enemies (David Oelhoffen, 2018)
Loin du périph/The Takedown (Louis Leterrier, 2022)
Le Monde est à toi/The World is Yours (Romain Gavras, 2018)
Paradise Beach (Xavier Durringer, 2019)
Sans répit/Restless (Régis Blondeau, 2022)
Sentinelle ('The Sentinel') (Julien Leclercq 2021)
La Terre et le sang/Earth and Blood (Julien Leclercq, 2020)

Series

Braqueurs/Ganglands (Hamid Hlioua and Julien Leclercq, 2021)
Lupin (George Kay, 2021)

NOTES

1. In January 2020, the streaming service announced that it would change its definition of 'watched' from '70% of a single episode or series' to 'chose to watch and did watch for at least 2 minutes'. See Gartenberg (2020).
2. All translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated.
3. For an authoritative analysis of the roots and ramifications of this type of film, see David Pettersen's excellent *French B Movies: Suburban Spaces, Universalism, and the Challenge of Hollywood* (2023).

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PART III

French Femininity and (Post)
Feminism



Charlotte Rampling *Made in France*: From a National to a Postnational Identity

Gwénaëlle Le Gras
Translated by Daniel Morgan

Born in Sturmer in 1946 to a British Army colonel and a painter, Charlotte Rampling began her career as an actress in London of the Swinging Sixties. She moved to Italy in 1966 after her sister committed suicide, an event that deeply affected her family history. She became a household name with her appearances in Italian cinema, including in *La caduta degli dei/The Damned* (Luchino Visconti, 1969) and *Il portiere di notte/The Night Porter* (Liliana Cavani, 1974). Her first French period lasted from 1975 to 1986 (and could be extended to 1996 if four television films are counted), with forays into Hollywood (*Farewell, My Lovely* [Dick Richards, 1975]; *Stardust Memories* [Woody Allen, 1980]; *The Verdict* [Sidney Lumet, 1982]; as well as *Angel Heart* [Alan Parker, 1987]), before a period of decline in the 1990s due to depression. She proclaimed her European identity from a very young age: ‘I didn’t want to stay English, because I

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am very English. If I just stayed English, in England doing English things, there were a lot of barriers, since you are on an island. I wanted to travel,' she stated (Gesbert 2020). She added that after the death of her sister, her self-exile in Italy and then in France was beneficial, changing her public image to that of a European. She remained attached to this idea of an identity that was fragmented and somewhat marginal, choosing to live outside her country of origin and professing not to feel truly at home anywhere. She needed to turn towards more sombre roles to, as she put it, 'work on the dark matter of life' (Angelier and Rouyer 2019). This accounts for her predilection for art cinema and the arts in general. Today, she paints, in a very dark style; works on photography in front of and behind the camera; sings; and in 2015 published a striking first book, an impressionistic autobiography entitled *Who I Am/ Qui je suis*.

Ironically, she seems to have experienced a revival in her international career following a comeback in France with *Sous le sable/ Under the Sand* (François Ozon, 2000), at a time when she had reached a pivotal age for an actress and had somewhat drifted into obscurity. She won the 'Grownups Award' for Best Actress—a prize for films made by and aimed at people over 50—for this film in the first year of the awards' existence. That same year, Patrice Chéreau presented her with an honorary César, describing the film as a triumphant return for the actress. She would go on to receive nominations and awards for acting at the Césars and the European Film Awards, shining again in the international spotlight (see Table 1), even after the controversy that struck when she was nominated for an Oscar in 2016 for *45 Years* (Andrew Haigh, 2015). That year's awards were condemned and boycotted for the lack of any nominations for Black artists. Rampling, in a live radio interview, accused critics of 'anti-white racism', adding, 'Maybe no Black actor or actress deserved to make it to the final selection' (Roux 2016).

A British citizen who lives in France, where she spent part of her childhood and has frequently worked, Rampling is sometimes referred to as a French actress by foreigners, from the *Hollywood Reporter* (Kit 2019) announcing the cast of the remake of *Dune* (Denis Villeneuve, 2021) to Mick LaSalle (2012, 96) including her in his book on French actresses. In France, she is regularly presented as the 'most French of the British (along with Jane Birkin)' (Mérigeau 2002).¹ Such pronouncements act as a reminder of the way in which the cultural capital of identities varies for different audiences. Hence, playing up clichés of national identity (without meta-textual self-aware gesturing of the kind examined by Anne

Table 1 Charlotte Rampling's nominations and awards for major European and US prizes^a

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
César	X	X		X	X	X														
European Film Award	X		X	X	X															
Berlin																				X
Venice																		X		
Emmy													X							
Award/Golden Globes/Oscar																X	X	X		

^aSourced from https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001648/awards/?ref_=nm_awd

Kaftal's chapter in this volume) tends to target exogenous audiences (Elsaesser 2013): Birkin's more extreme caricature of upper-class Englishness, notably through her accent, is if anything a source of humour in British popular culture. However, in the case of Rampling, even for the British she has maintained a somewhat 'exotic' aura, and the actress likes to define herself this way (Elmhirst 2014). Thus in an article in *The Guardian* promoting the series *Broadchurch* (Chris Chibnall, 2015, Season 2), she is described as a 'great brooding figure from the continent' (Elmhirst 2014), highlighting her status as something of an outsider in the British Isles: she has lived in Paris longer than she ever lived in London, and was married to an Englishman (the actor Bryan Southcombe) before two marriages with Frenchmen (Jean-Michel Jarre, then Jean-Noël Tassez).

One could speculate that this continental Englishwoman's comeback in French cinema has coincided with the acceleration of the floating conception of national cinema that has been outlined by Thomas Elsaesser: 'neither essentialist nor constructivist, but more like something that hovers uncertainly over a film's "identity"' (Elsaesser 2013, §19). Rampling embodies an increasingly fluid transnational identity that is becoming ever more postnational. While the actress still speaks with an English accent, three factors make her identity less clear-cut: its greater geo-cultural fluidity when her voice is dubbed, her powerful use of silence as a universal language and changes over time in the roles she has played in French films (roles characterised by a vaguely English identity, co-productions in which she takes the role of a non-English European character and sci-fi films where she plays an otherworldly figure). The remainder of this chapter examines these three aspects of Rampling's evolving star persona.

'AUTO-REVERSE' DUBBING

Since 1977, one year after meeting Jean-Michel Jarre and two years after appearing in her first French film, *La Chair de l'orchidée/The Flesh of the Orchid* (Patrice Chéreau, 1975), Rampling has nearly always done her own dubbing. Even though she has spoken French since she was a child, her command of the language was slightly rusty in her first appearance on French television, in a 1974 promotion for *Zardoz* (John Boorman, 1974), but she spoke fluently when she promoted Chéreau's film barely one year later. Dubbing herself, both in English and in French, has been vitally important to her. The language, accent, texture and timbre of her voice go

hand in hand with her image and are essential in order to fully grasp this. In an interview about the Franco-Danish series *Kidnapping* (Arte/TV2 Danmark, 2019), she explains, ‘I’ve always wanted to dub myself because I speak French, I live in France and a large part of what I do is my voice. So I would prefer, if possible, not to have someone else “take” my French voice [or my English voice]’ (Nurbel 2020). Previously, in the first part of her career, the actress’s artistic identity was incomplete, since an element of her Europeanness was still missing. Her first French film was therefore an important milestone. Her secondary role in the blockbuster production *Assassin’s Creed* (Justin Kurzel, 2016) has been the only exception to the rule since 1977. This habit of ‘auto-reverse’ dubbing has given her a certain cross-cultural fluidity as well as facilitating a diffuse but continuous form of self-alteration that has become more pronounced since she began participating in large-scale, high-budget films (*Spy Game* [Tony Scott, 2001]; *Basic Instinct 2* [Michael Caton-Jones, 2006]; *Dune*) and series (*Dexter*, Season 8 [Showtime, 2013]; *Broadchurch*) in the 2000s. The effect of rearticulating the self comes through just as much in these productions as it does in interviews given by the actress.

Swimming Pool (François Ozon, 2003), a French film with an English title that casts Rampling as a sour, cynical British crime writer, was shot mostly in English, with the passages in French subtitled for export. Rampling overplays her character’s English accent by failing to pronounce her ‘r’s when speaking French. The actress explains:

In my view, *Swimming Pool* is a film that is entirely in English. The French I use isn’t the language I speak in real life. It’s the language of an Englishwoman who only speaks some French and speaks it poorly. It was an odd experience, by the way. People are different, depending on whether they are speaking one language or another. Their voice, their intonations: everything changes! When I speak English, I find myself more down to earth, less romantic. [...] English is a blunt, straightforward language, definitely not a language of seduction. [...] Do you have the feeling that this changes your performance? Of course. And that’s a good thing: it’s another card in the deck. (In Lepage and Rouchy, 2022)

Heavily influenced by Hitchcock, while at the same time filled with references to European and especially French films (*La Piscine* [Jacques Deray, 1969]; *Tristana* [Luis Buñuel, 1970]; *Les Diaboliques* [Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1955]; Ozon’s earlier films and the works of Claude Chabrol,

Table 2 Box-office results and profitability of François Ozon's films from 2001 to 2003^a

	<i>Budget</i>	<i>Tickets sold</i> <i>(France)</i>	<i>Profit</i> <i>margin</i> <i>(France)</i>	<i>Box office</i> <i>(USA)</i>	<i>Box office (rest</i> <i>of the world)</i>	<i>Profit</i> <i>margin</i> <i>(world)</i>
<i>Sous le sable</i> (2001)	1.72M €	682,777	216%	\$1,452,698	\$5,078,989	380%
<i>8 femmes</i> (2002)	8.46M €	3,711,394	245%	\$3,081,191	\$39,321,823	501%
<i>Swimming</i> <i>Pool</i> (2003)	6.1M €	711,723	67%	\$10,105,505	\$12,311,215	367%

^aFigures taken from the site <http://www.jpbox-office.com/>

among others), it was quite profitable, like *Sous le sable*, although it had a higher budget and was aimed at a larger audience (see Table 2).

While *Sous le sable* enjoyed success at festivals, bringing visibility and international recognition to its director and making *8 femmes/8 Women* (François Ozon, 2002) financially possible, *Swimming Pool* confirmed that success with good commercial results in the USA—still the best today for any of Ozon's films, since *8 femmes* comes in a distant second with a little over \$3 million in revenue despite a worldwide rate of return of over 500 per cent. It was Charlotte Rampling's third most successful film in the USA, but the only one in which she took the leading role and easily the most profitable, after *Babylon A.D.* (Matthieu Kassovitz, 2008), which brought in \$22.5 million, and the co-production *Assassin's Creed*, which made \$54.6 million in North American revenue. *Swimming Pool's* plot is based on her encounter with the figure of a young, exuberant Frenchwoman (Ludivine Sagnier). The product of cross-fertilisation between reality and imagination, between the realist and theatrical veins of Ozon's cinema, this meeting revives the culinary, creative and sexual appetites of the introverted, sour writer as she develops her new novel in a farmhouse in the Luberon, close to the Marquis de Sade's estate, as one line mentions. The relationship between the two characters is also one of mutual give and take between two clichés of English and French female identities—an Agatha Christie-style 'crime queen' and a crass, provocative young woman from the south of France. The former gradually takes on the latter's epicurean qualities (see Fig. 1): Rampling gives up her low-fat cottage cheese and Diet Coke and steals her housemate's charcuterie, foie gras and wine.



Fig. 1 Charlotte Rampling's upright and cerebral English woman is seduced by the French sensuality embodied by Ludivine Sagnier in *Swimming Pool*

Rampling's venture into French cinema and into the French language thus engendered a hybrid identity compared to the one she had established in the first part of her career; this new identity was carried primarily by her voice. From this point on, she became a British actress who was particularly French, avoiding the dulling effect of dubbing in European films that, as Mark Betz has shown, leads to a loss of meaning and cultural identity for many actors and actresses (Betz 2009, 1–43). She thus reconnected with the tradition of polyglot European performers from the era of multiple versions in the 1930s, allowing her to make connections between England and France as well as between Europe and the USA while still maintaining her authenticity. When she finally tried her hand at theatre after many years acting only on the screen, her first role was in a Marivaux play, *La Fausse suivante*, at the National Theatre in London in 2004, underlining the hybridity that had become a key component of her media DNA.

SILENT STRENGTH AS A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

The string of French films that revitalised Rampling's career in the early 2000s reportedly relied on the power of her silence, a universal language that transcends national identity, in order to convey the inner life of her

characters (Le Gras 2021, 253–255). Her comeback, beginning with *Sous le sable*, was marked by leading roles associated with inwardness and intimacy (*Embrassez qui vous voudrez/Summer Things* [Michel Blanc, 2002]; *Swimming Pool*; *Lemming* [Dominik Moll, 2005]; *Vers le sud/Heading South* [Laurent Cantet, 2005]; *Désaccord parfait/ Twice Upon a Time* [Antoine de Caunes, 2006]). In a 1983 interview, she mentioned that she preferred cinema to theatre for the intimacy that comes with appearing in front of the camera (Defaye 1983). Her acting often goes beyond words: she expresses herself through minute facial vibrations and unspoken feelings emanating from her that she tensely holds back, making her a favourite subject of great photographers. Without ever becoming overbearing, the actress has managed to make her silence and mysteriousness stand out even more in the years since *Sous le sable*, which relied extensively on these elements. Ozon himself stated that ‘simply filming her in close-up told a story on its own. It was already fiction, because there are wrinkles, expressions, a sadness, a melancholy, something that catches the light and the camera’ (Ozon 2018). The actress has always preferred to choose roles that were in sync with her life, often involving a certain masochism, feeding off the drama she has lived through, not in the manner of the Actors Studio, but instinctively. As she explained to Bernard Rapp (2001), acting ends up being a form of therapy, and *Sous le sable* brought her closure, exorcising the denial of her sister’s death by allowing her to act out a similar situation:

I couldn’t have played the character of Marie without the power of experience. These are emotions that you can’t reproduce if you haven’t experienced them yourself. So I didn’t hesitate to expose myself, in every sense. (Baudin 2001)

Without giving in to the masochistic, belittling cultural representation of ageing as a decline, which has long been associated with maturing actresses, *Sous le sable* is also the rebirth of a woman’s independent personality at a turning point in her life, brought on by age and by her husband’s mysterious disappearance. According to Rampling, Ozon ‘didn’t want it to be overly emotional. Every time I went a little too far, I felt that he didn’t like it. He didn’t want neurotic reactions’ (Tesson 2001, 57). *Sous le sable* is an ambitious film that reveals Marie’s inner character by creating a blur between reality, dreaming and psychological vulnerability. It shows a process of mourning that is never carried out, an absence that gradually

restructures the life of a woman who learns to live alone. Marie asserts her own subjectivity by rejecting the demands of her social circle: her friends encouraging her to rebuild her life; her mother-in-law's cruel words, blaming her for the loss of her son; advice from doctors not to see the body; etc. Marie is seen as troubling because she chooses to escape from a highly codified social structure in order to invent a new identity for herself, responding only to her own desires, even when they are only dreams. Although she is destabilised by the loss of her husband, a fixture in her life, the film shows her grappling with both her grief and her full independence, specifically by refusing to become involved in a new relationship despite her friends and family insisting. The disturbing richness of the heroine's intimate life, as her suffering brings her to the brink, is largely expressed by Rampling turning her melancholy gaze inward, acting with typically English restraint while maintaining a strong physical presence; she plays a more ordinary, everyday character than in her previous roles as *femmes fatales*.² We follow her point of view without fully grasping her thoughts. The intensity of her silence and her lost gaze in scenes where she is alone are embodied in everyday activities, when she takes off her make-up in front of the mirror, for example, revealing her inner life while keeping us at a distance (see Fig. 2). This register and the ability to display such a complex inner character on screen while keeping her speech to a minimum revived her international career, as evidenced by her appearances in the noted documentary *The Look* (Angelina Maccarone, 2011) shown at Cannes; *45 Years*, which earned her an Oscar nomination at the age of 70



Fig. 2 Rampling's faraway gaze indicates her character's active inner life in *Sous le sable*

and the Silver Bear for Best Actress at the Berlin Film Festival; and *Hannah* (Andrea Pallaoro, 2017), for which she won the Volpi Cup at the Venice Film Festival. Time has worked in her favour, deepening the intensity of a steely gaze now framed by sagging eyelids and thus renewing her greatest asset, ‘The Look’. Expressing the weariness of life experience as age has brought an organic, epidermal, sometimes mineral dimension to her silence, Rampling’s mute stare is all the more powerful because few stars choose to age naturally, as she has.

FROM A SPECIFIC TO A GENERIC FORM OF OTHERNESS

In Rampling’s French films, from *Sous le sable* to *Benedetta* (Paul Verhoeven, 2021), four patterns can be identified that ultimately track a move in her characterisation as geo-culturally ‘other’ from not only specificity to generality but by the same token, I argue, from transnational to more postnational iterations of her persona.

The first involves films mostly made in the 2000s that clearly define Rampling’s character as English (*Swimming Pool*; *Vers le sud*; *Désaccord parfait*; *Quelque chose à te dire/Blame It on Mum* [Cécile Telerman, 2009]; *Rio Sex Comedy* [Jonathan Nossiter, 2010]), as well as comprising most of her previous French films (*La Chair de l’orchidée*; *Un taxi mauve/The Purple Taxi* [Yves Boisset, 1977]; *On ne meurt que deux fois/He Died with His Eyes Open* [Jacques Deray, 1985]; and *Max mon amour* [Nagisa Oshima, 1986]).³ The actress serves in these roles as an explicitly exotic element, creating oppositions or attractions based on identity: colonised/colonisers; France/England; old Europe/developing countries. Speaking English (as in *Vers le sud* and *Rio Sex Comedy*, which bring together characters of different nationalities) works as a marker associating characters with the upper class, as it does in *La Grande illusion* (Jean Renoir, 1937). Specifically, Thérèse de Raedt observes that in *Vers le sud*, the three North American heroines

generally speak English with each other when they are alone but speak French in the presence of Haitians [...] The use of languages points out social, political and economic status: English indicates neo-colonial exploitation; French, vestiges of the past and a certain social status; Creole is the language of the people, who are trying to survive as best they can. (De Raedt 2008, 124)

As in the short story by Dany Laferrière, which the film adapts by setting the action under the dictatorship of François Duvalier, these women deliver monologues about their experiences in Port-au-Prince, which for them is a sort of no man's land where Western social norms no longer apply and they have fulfilled themselves sexually in ways that their age and social status make impossible in their own countries. Charlotte Rampling plays Ellen, an Englishwoman in her fifties who teaches French at Wellesley College in Boston and comes back every year to the same beach that exists outside of time and away from civilisation, yet is also situated within a country enduring intense violence and poverty. She cynically gives money to a young lover, Legba, in order to feel desirable, aware that everything in Haiti is only an illusion. Cantet's film deals with one of Western societies' blind spots: the sexual and emotional hardships endured by ageing women. Without condoning the form of neocolonial sex tourism engaged in by the protagonists, the film allows the subjectivity of ageing women to emerge and be expressed on screen. Still, every character is assigned a binary identity as old or young, White or Black and dominant or dominated, boiling intimacy down to a sordid socio-economic power relationship. Ellen is portrayed as a foreigner on holiday in Haiti. William Brown (2012, 58–59) shows that Rampling's image as a star has always relied on her representation of a feminine otherness by way of her national origin and her transnational success, and this representation has only become more pronounced with age. Rampling has often personified deviant desires, and for Brown, this series of French films develops this idea by having her represent a threatening form of otherness.

The second pattern situates Rampling's character within a group of French people while assigning her an unclear identity, which a suggestive line of dialogue associates with an English background (*Sous le sable*, where she is a professor of English literature; *Embrassez qui vous voudrez*, where her identity is suggested by her first name, Elizabeth, and her remark about Le Touquet being infested with Britons; *Lemming*; *Le Bal des actrices/All About Actresses* [Maïwenn, 2009]; *L'Homme aux cercles bleus* [Josée Dayan, 2009], a made-for-television film shown on France 2 where, as in the source novel by well-known French crime writer Fred Vargas, her name is Mathilde and another character makes a comment about Queen Matilda of Scotland).⁴ These characters have an exotic side to them, but one that vaguely suggests mystery or even danger, particularly in *Lemming*, through the expression of desires that are seen as inappropriate for the character's age.

French productions and especially co-productions have also produced a third trend, consisting of two overlapping subcategories that have taken the latter part of Rampling's career in a postnational direction. First of all, there are films and series where she plays a character who is French or comes from a European country other than the UK (French in *Crime contre l'humanité/The Statement* [Norman Jewison, 2003]; *Le Dos rouge/Portrait of the Artist* [Antoine Barraud, 2014], where she only provides an off-screen voiceover; and the series *Kidnapping*, Nordic in *Melancholia* [Lars von Trier, 2011]; Belgian in *Hannah*; and Italian in *Benedetta*). These fictions further develop a characteristic already present in her previous French period, where she had played characters identified as French, in Claude Lelouch's pseudo-fantasy *Viva la vie* (1984) and more distinctly as figures of French cultural tradition in two television films and a costume drama miniseries: *La Femme abandonnée* (Edouard Molinaro, 1992) for France 3, where she plays Madame de Beauséant, the figure of Parisian high society from Honoré de Balzac's *Père Goriot*, shown here in her period of decline; in the Franco-German miniseries *La Marche de Radetzky* ('Radetzky March') (Gernot Roll and Axel Corti, 1994) for ORF and France 2, where she is the lieutenant's mistress; and *La Dernière fête* ('The Last Party') (Pierre Granier-Deferre, 1996) for France 3, another fiction depicting the era of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an adaptation of Stefan Zweig's short story *Story of a Downfall*, where she portrays the Marquise de Prie as she loses power. The second subcategory consists of sci-fi films, which have become an increasingly large part of her filmography, transforming her accent and the mute force of her gaze into a generic, dystopian otherness that extends a facet of Rampling's image that began with the post-apocalyptic *Zardoz*, where she portrays a sort of ultra-conservative guardian of the law who ends up as a sexually liberated 'new Eve'. She is a doctor and one of the rare humans in *Immortel, ad vitam/Immortal* (Enki Bilal, 2004), a high priestess in *Babylon A.D.* (Fig. 3), a leader of the Templar Elders in *Assassin's Creed* and, in *Last Words* (Jonathan Nossiter, 2020), one of the last human women alive, who dies giving birth to a still-born child. Her role as a high priestess in the remake of *Dune* follows this same trend. Rampling almost played the role of Jessica in Alejandro Jodorowsky's planned Franco-Chilean adaptation of *Dune* in the 1970s.⁵ In 1989, Enki Bilal also asked her to play the futuristic female lead in his first film, *Bunker Palace Hôtel*, set in a cold, decaying universe, but she refused because she was suffering from a bout of depression. This is

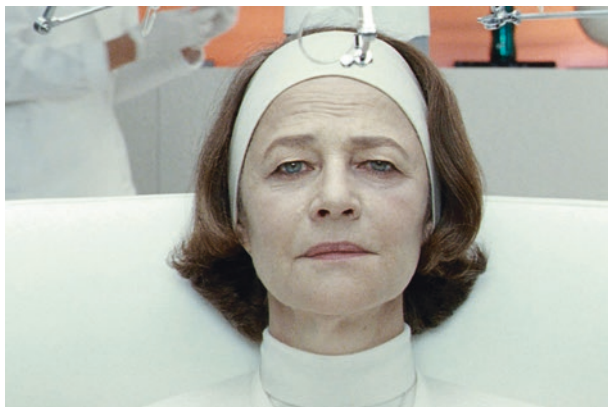


Fig. 3 *Babylon A.D.* channels Rampling's dystopian otherness

therefore a long-standing aspect of the actress's image, but it has become more defined as she has aged.

Through the different stages of her French career, we can observe an evolution in the fluidity of Rampling's identity, both real and imagined, from a period when she was explicitly or implicitly attached to roles as Englishwomen, mainly in auteur films that reached a relatively broad audience, to a period now dominated by non-English European identities, mainly in European co-productions aimed at popular audiences. Ultimately, her British identity is not central to her image, since this becomes an aspect of her class identity in auteur cinema, and is processed into a generic otherness by sci-fi films that nonetheless retain its basic essence. This essence is clearly revealed by the actress's ageing, in French cinema as well as in other European films that build on the trend established in France. The common denominator lies in the fantasy of otherness, which is superimposed on her European identity. The exoticism of this identity is a function of Bourdieusian distinction, and thus of recognition (by art cinema, which tacitly endorses it) and exclusion (by mainstream audiences, for whom she embodies threatening antagonists, mainly in works of science fiction). Namely, Rampling's identity is associated with the dominant classes of old Europe and their attributes of conceit—audible in her accent—decadence, neurosis and even degeneracy (which is already present in her first major roles). Put simply, it is expressed by melancholy, which can sometimes lead to renewal (*Sous le sable*), sometimes to demise

(suicide in *Lemming*), the end of the world in *Melancholia* and a joyous apocalypse in *Last Words*, a *Metropolis*-like dictatorship in *Immortel*, inquisition in *Assassin's Creed* and *Benedetta*. As Agnès Peck has aptly observed, 'Charlotte Rampling excels in this ability to have her own singularity fade into a stream of memory, to merge into the universal' (Peck 2003, 9).

* * *

In interviews, Rampling has frequently mentioned that she is the daughter of an army colonel, Godfrey Rampling, a strict, imposing father who won a gold medal in track at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. She points out that she learned French from nuns in a private Catholic school in Fontainebleau while her father was working for NATO. Rampling, who often appears patrician, has almost exclusively played powerful women (surgeon, police captain, author, artist, university professor, Mother Superior), or roles marked by class distinction, such as the bourgeois woman who impresses Karin Viard in *Embrassez qui vous voudrez* and its sequel. The controversy that likely cost her an Oscar in 2016 may not be unrelated to her embodiment of this type of European identity that she embodies. Ultimately, the expansion of her career, her comeback and transnational success all began with the contemporary regeneration and re-signification of her image in French cinema, particularly in films that were popular and/or received significant media attention, where she is at her most *unheimlich*, in the ambiguous, double meaning of the term: both unsettlingly odd and strangely familiar.

While other foreign actresses have found a home in French cinema, they have followed different models for doing so. One British example that comes to mind is Kristin Scott-Thomas. The daughter of a Royal Navy pilot, Scott-Thomas studied acting in France, where she had most of her first major roles before moving centripetally towards an international career via two British films, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994) and the British/American co-production *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996). Even though her image has been tinged by a certain strangeness in her French films, this aspect has only come up occasionally and later in her career, as she has grown older, in films like *Il y a longtemps que je t'aime/I've Loved You So Long* (Philippe Claudelle, 2009), *Partir/Leaving* (Catherine Corsini, 2009), *Contre toi/In Your Hands* (Lola Doillon, 2010) and *Crime d'amour/Love Crime* (Alain Corneau,

2010). Rampling, on the other hand, has embodied a threatening or at least mysterious European form of seduction ever since her first roles.

A more interesting comparison can be drawn with another trans-European actress, Romy Schneider. Like Rampling, Schneider got her start in her native country's own cinema. While Schneider was marked by the bittersweet image of Sissi, the Austrian Empress she famously played, Rampling had more of a sunny, pop image, in the context of Swinging London comedies (*The Knack ... and How to Get It* [Richard Lester, 1965]; *Georgy Girl* [Silvio Narizzano, 1966]). Schneider made her way across Europe in a centrifugal movement shaped by her work with Luchino Visconti, appearances in auteur cinema and a more serious aspect to her persona, similar to Rampling's. She did not make her debut in French cinema with the same image, however. Instead, Schneider embodied the idea of European reconciliation in the couple she formed with Alain Delon, a fact that highlights the other important aspect of her image: she was never defined by her off-screen individuality, and her characters almost always met with failure in their quest for emancipation, thus making her an illusory figure of modernity. She was moulded first by her mother, Magda Schneider, herself an actress, who brought her daughter up to become a child star, then by Alain Delon, her engagement to whom allowed her to escape from the grip of her mother and stepfather. He acted as a Pygmalion figure, determining the course of her career at several junctures and giving her the opportunity to meet Visconti; Claude Sautet would become the Pygmalion of the final part of her career. Rampling, however, would assert herself through her own agency: she was only a muse to her husband, the musician Jean-Michel Jarre, which boosted her reputation, and her only continuing collaboration was in late middle age with Ozon, giving her an alter ego in *Swimming Pool*. From a young age, she established a reputation as a free agent, embodying a repressed European identity, her dark side, in two roles as Holocaust victims (*The Damned* and *The Night Porter*) that would go on to haunt her image for the rest of her career and amplify her multiple forms of otherness: she has always turned towards films that allow her a more or less direct form of introspection about her own personal traumas.

'She has a sense of ghost,' David Cronenberg has said, even though he has never directed her. 'That is a beautiful compliment,' [she replied]. 'It means that I inhabit a haunted universe. I've always had that within me. What can

be seen as coldness or distance is just a way of looking at things differently. I'm in another space ...' (Baurez 2016)

Ultimately, if Rampling's '[an]other space' has in today's post-Brexit era become a European no man's land, it is because she has always worked as a cultural gleaner, an eternal exile who has cultivated her own difference from national norms by taking up a European identity and using it as a productive, hybrid cultural space. She has negotiated her way through dialectical shifts both geographical and cultural, between an intimate art cinema and films intended for a broader audience. Each of these films has added to the otherness, built up via multiple moves from country to country, that defines her persona.

NOTES

1. A number of articles from French newspapers cited in this essay were consulted at the Bibliothèque du film in Paris, where the online archiving of materials removes original page numbers.
2. The part and the style of acting also highlight Rampling's ability to free herself from playing a passive object of desire. Although this role defined her career as a young actress, since passing the age of 50 she has been able to become a full, active subject.
3. She is Irish in *On ne meurt que deux fois* and *Un taxi mauve*, where the action takes place in Ireland, and English in *La Chair de Porchidée* (adapted from a novel by James Hadley Chase) and *Max mon amour*, where the action takes place in France.
4. *Embrassez qui vous voudrez* is also an adaptation of an English novel. *Mathilde* of *L'Homme aux cercles bleus* may also recall Queen Matilda of Flanders, who was French and became Queen of England by marriage.
5. She ended up refusing the role because of a scene she believed was unnecessarily crude.

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National and Postnational Femininity in *Engrenages*: The Limits of Empowerment

Ginette Vincendeau

The police series *Engrenages/Spiral* was the first internationally successful French television crime series. The eight seasons, from 2005 to 2020, were exported to a multitude of countries and drew critical acclaim and awards, notably the Globes de Cristal in France and an International Emmy in 2015, while internet users' comments on IMDb and Allocine.fr attest to its popular appeal.¹ Initially produced by Son et Lumière and backed by Canal+, *Engrenages* soon gained international exposure. The BBC distributed the series from 2006 onwards (BBC4 co-produced Seasons 4 and 5), and it was acquired by the Netflix catalogue in 2012—*Le Monde* saluting the latter accolade as 'Finally, the "French touch" is bankable!' ('F.B.' 2012).² Throughout the 86 episodes, we follow the '2e DPJ', a unit in the Parisian *Police Judiciaire* (the equivalent of the UK's CID) led by Laure Berthaud (Caroline Proust), with two principal male assistants, Gilles Escoffier, aka Gilou (Thierry Godard) and Luc Fromentin, aka Tintin (Fred Bianconi), and a few other regulars, including JP

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(Jean-Pierre Colombi), Tom (Lionel Erdogan) and Nico (Kija King). Reflecting the institutional closeness between the police and the judiciary in France, another set of central characters is drawn from the legal professions, principally barrister Joséphine Karlsson (Audrey Fleurot), examining magistrate François Roban (Philippe Duclos) and prosecutor—barrister from Season 3—Pierre Clément (Grégory Fitoussi). Each season has an overarching theme (such as drugs, serial killers or terrorism) linked to groups of characters who subsequently vanish; each episode typically includes two or three subplots in which the recurrent central characters are also involved.

Engrenages presents itself and is widely appreciated as a ‘realistic’ police series in which crime solving is used to expose social and institutional dysfunction. At the same time, a major focus is on the close ties between the characters, primarily Laure and her team, their family and amorous entanglements, as well as their complicated relationships with the legal staff and rival police departments. In the process, *Engrenages* showcases the idiosyncrasies of the national criminal justice system. Indeed, scholars have been drawn to the specificity of the series in this respect (Wallace 2014; Villez 2016), while this pedagogic value has been noted by internet users. Of particular interest to this chapter, though, is the fact that the head of the police unit, Laure, and the main barrister, Joséphine, are women, the series thereby raising questions about the representation of female professionals in crime series and the contours of exportable French femininity. Of the two, Laure is undeniably the lead character in screen time, underlined by the musical score, a point to some extent obscured *a posteriori* by the fact that Audrey Fleurot has pursued a more visible international screen career.³ Nevertheless, both women *as a pair* play a major structural role in *Engrenages*: under the dense grid of characters and events typical of ‘complex television’ (Mittell 2015) and the often self-contradictory individual trajectories, a long arch of moral polarity between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ emerges, channelled through their parallel and yet contrasting trajectories. This crime series thus includes a strong melodramatic streak, not an unusual combination as Linda Williams has shown in her book on *The Wire* (2014), one of the inspirations for *Engrenages*.

After a brief examination of the series’s major representational trope, its much-vaunted ‘realism’, this chapter explores how gender, filtered through the moral polarities inherited from melodrama and the intersection of work and sexuality, contributes to the generic identity of *Engrenages* as well as its French specificity within the national-international-postnational spectrum.

GRIT AND GLAMOUR: A 'REALIST' SERIES?

Stylistically, *Engrenages* is rooted in realist (melo)drama. In the 2012 'Engrenages/Spiral Dossier', which covers the first four seasons, Janet McCabe sees the series as an heir to naturalist literature, in particular 'the novels of Émile Zola [which] explored the bleak harshness of life, such as poverty, violence, prejudice, corruption and prostitution, with a pervasive pessimism' (102). The original title *Engrenages*, which refers to the notion of being caught in an inescapable set of events or vicious circles, indeed evokes Zola's fatalistic chronicle of French societal woes, updated to early twenty-first-century Paris and its *banlieues* (suburbs). As in *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008) or the Danish series *Forbrydelsen/The Killing* (DR1, 2007–2012), 'At the end, the crime is solved [...] But the moral and social problems that produced the crime are still with us' (Pinedo 2021, 43).

Concurrently, the close relationship between the makers of the series and the institutions it portrays is frequently invoked as a badge of authenticity. The show was conceived by Alexandra Clert, a trained criminal lawyer, co-written by a policeman under a pseudonym and supervised by lawyers and a former investigating judge. Actors were made to observe real policemen, judges and lawyers to copy their gestures and professional slang; plotlines are frequently drawn from real-life cases (Séry 2010; *Engrenages* podcast 2019).⁴ The fact that most of the actors came from the theatre and were initially unknown to the audience has also been cited as enhancing their plausibility (Cauhapé and Séry 2009; Séry 2010). Another dimension of the series's perceived realism refers to its graphic violence. Here, *Engrenages* conforms to global trends as it routinely incorporates violent beatings, autopsies and mutilated corpses (insistently in Season 1, more discreetly later, allegedly as a response to negative comments), a feature seen to raise it above the national: 'Like Anglo-Saxon TV shows [...] this new French fiction establishes a tone, a narration and a script that are strikingly more radical than their [French] rivals,' singling out *The Wire* as a model (Fraissard 2005). The disparaged French counter-models are the gentler, and very popular, indigenous crime series such as *PJ* (France 2, 1997–2009), *Navarro* (TF1, 1989–2006) and *Julie Lescaut* (TF1, 1992–2014). Compared to these sedate series where crime tends to be solved through 'reasoning and human relations' rather than violent action, aiming to bring female spectators to the crime genre (Beylot and Sellier 2004, loc. 2478), *Engrenages*, broadcast on the pay-channel Canal+, clearly aimed at a younger, more male-oriented, cosmopolitan,

audience—as confirmed by internet commentators. On Allocine.fr, the main French film news and reviews platform, the ‘noir’ or ‘sordid’ [*glauque*] topics and *mise-en-scène* are celebrated. On the US-based, more international IMDb, terms such as ‘gripping’, ‘gritty’ and ‘grim’ are bandied about approvingly. Additionally, for international IMDb commentators, the gritty world of *Engrenages* leads to a different perception of French identity, the ‘general scruffiness’ seen as countering ‘our stereotype of the French as always chic and elegant’.⁵

Echoing declarations by the writing and filming team, the representation of Paris and its *banlieues* is also singled out by internet commentators as central to the realism of the series: *Engrenages* ‘avoids romantic Paris’ and shows ‘the harsh reality of Paris’, its ‘underside’ (*Engrenages* podcast 2019, ep. 3). A majority of scenes take place in the north-eastern, less affluent, though gentrifying, *arrondissements* of Paris, the tenth, eleventh, twelfth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth, corresponding to the remit of the 2e DPJ in real life. We repeatedly roam the populous, narrow streets of busy working-class areas, small flats and dingy hotels, the emblematic aerial Métro thundering above, the desolate banks of the Canal de l’Ourcq at La Villette and the underpasses of the boulevards des Maréchaux. The inner Paris locations extend to the north-eastern suburbs of the Seine-Saint-Denis *département* (referred to by its postcode 93, or 9-3), home to a large immigrant population and pockets of the worst poverty in the country. While this geo-social anchorage runs through the entire series, Season 6 turns it into its ostensible subject with an inquiry into the gruesome death of a young police officer who worked in the fictional town of Cléry-sous-bois. This moniker is a transparent pseudonym for the real Clichy-sous-bois, the notorious *banlieue* where the death of two young men fleeing the police, Bouna Traore and Zyed Benna, led to three weeks of violent riots in the suburbs of Paris and major French cities in October–November 2005. The investigation covers a range of criminal characters and activities as well as municipal and police corruption that are presented as inherent to such ‘difficult’ *banlieues*. Although Laure’s office in that season and her mobile phone screen saver sport a poster of glamorous Alain Delon in the classic Jean-Pierre Melville film *Un flic/A Cop* (1972), the depicted milieu is legible to contemporary audiences through the internationally distributed *film de banlieue* and especially Mathieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine* (1995) and its avatars, which popularised a narrow, yet influential, visual and oral grammar of run-down blocks of flats and recurrent conflicts between multiracial male youth and the police (Higbee

2013; Tarr 2005; Vincendeau 2005, 2018). The ordinary, ‘quiet *banlieue*’ of modest individual houses (*pavillons*) is occasionally glimpsed, but it remains marginal to the violent action scenes, which are mostly located in high-rise estates—locations typically associated with drug dealers.

The dominant, working-class/dysfunctional, habitat of *Engrenages* is however contrasted, throughout the series, with its spatial and sociological opposite through views of iconic ‘high-end’ Paris. Rooftop vistas of the capital punctuated by landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower, the Sacré-Coeur and the Opéra Garnier recur as transitions, sporadically but sufficiently to orientate the viewer. The Palais de Justice (Law Courts) on the Ile de la Cité provides a narratively justified glamorous counter-location, with outside, historic buildings and the banks of the Seine and, inside, grand rooms with lofty ceilings, marble floors and wood-panelled tribunals.⁶ Glamour and opulence are thus seen as intrinsic to the judiciary. Joséphine works on avenue de l’Opéra in S01 and later, when Pierre balks at the rental price for their new office, she tells him that an address near the Champs-Élysées is *sine qua non* (S03/E04). Similarly, when crimes do not take place among the poor or the underworld, they are mostly located among the upper classes: powerful businessmen and politicians (S01), an upper-class adolescent dealing drugs at his posh *lycée* (S02), a grand-bourgeois gay escort in the Marais (S06), a high-flying Libyan businessman (S05), luxury hotels (S07) and so on. Such developments provide pretexts for the display of magnificent apartments, expensive furniture and designer clothes. Judge Roban finds proof of a *banlieue* mayor’s corruption by literally stripping his wife of her Chanel suit and Prada shoes (S03/E07). Thus the series inhabits the extremes of the French social spectrum rather than the statistically larger centre, and the representation of the city echoes this divide spatially. Despite aiming to promote a ‘non-touristic Paris’ and offer innovative images of poor areas, Alexandra Clert acknowledged that, as *Miami Vice* did for Miami, the aim was ‘to sell Paris’ (*Engrenages* podcast 2019, ep. 3). As a result, images fall back on the familiar visual grammar of French cinema exported to international audiences, at both the luxury and underworld ends.

The ‘realism’ of *Engrenages* exhibits an equally awkward tension when it comes to racial stereotyping despite frequent invocations of deriving cases from real life and praise for the series’s depiction of socially relevant issues such as drugs (S02), undocumented migrants (S04) and delinquent Moroccan adolescents in the eighteenth *arrondissement* (S08). Be that as it may, under *Engrenages*’s multitude of plots, subplots and characters lie

stark racial stereotypes: White cops fight racialised criminals. There are a few non-White members of the police team but they are either recurrent but marginal (Nico) or important but short-lived, such as Sami (Samir Boitard) in Seasons 2 and 4 and Ali (Tewfik Jallab) in Seasons 7 and 8. And one or two isolated scenes denounce racism: when Sami joins the team (S02/E04), he is treated like a criminal before they realise he is a new colleague. Similarly, Ali sardonically points out that he is asked to infiltrate a *banlieue* drug network because his Maghrebi origins make him 'plausible' (S07/E03). But these are fleeting moments. On the judiciary side, Judge Carole Mendy (Fatou N'Diaye), a Black woman, appears in brief subplots in Seasons 4 and 5 and then vanishes, leaving the legal profession almost entirely White. *Engrenages* includes plenty of White offenders and yet, with one exception (the political terrorists of Season 4), the major narrative arcs feature ethnically marked criminals: Romanian (S01), Maghrebi (S02), Mexican (S03), Kurdish (S04), Black women (S05) and men (S06), Chinese (S07), Moroccan (S08).⁷ Moreover, such criminals are frequently presented in gangs or families: the most prominent Kurdish, Maghrebi and Black criminals appear as sets of brothers with extended families, reinforcing the impression of a dangerous racialised mass preying on the French White population.

As a result of the series's narrative and stylistic choices outlined above, gender in *Engrenages* emerges as particularly complex and contradictory. The two lead roles being women undoubtedly generates interest and spectatorial appeal. Yet gender inversion in (traditionally male-oriented) crime series is no guarantee of progressiveness and, as Deborah Jermyn puts it, it no longer constitutes 'novelty in itself' (2017, 260). The fact that victims are mostly female and criminals mostly male echoes social reality, yet also draws on patriarchal stereotypes of vulnerable femininity and the gruesome spectacle of their bodies: Seasons 1, 3 and 5 start with mutilated female corpses and there are multiple images of and references to women being abused, beaten and raped.⁸ The series more generally includes myriad oppressed women, such as drug 'mules', trafficked women, go-go dancers and abused spouses—illustrating Barbara Klinger's observation that 'these stories' strong female protagonists are frequently defined in relation to archaic specters of femininity' (Klinger 2018, 531). Moreover, the exceptionality of Laure and Joséphine within their respective male-dominated milieus both precludes female solidarity and sets the scene for their central narrative function as arch enemies, structuring the whole series in this respect around another set of familiar sexist stereotypes.

WOMEN AT WORK IN *ENGRENAGES*: FEMINIST INTERVENTION OR FEMINISED UTOPIA?

The centrality of Laure and Joséphine to *Engrenages* is often ascribed to the strong female presence in the series's production team: the main show-runner is Alexandra Clert working with several women, including Anne Landois, who stated that 'what interested [her] especially in *Engrenages* was the position of women within an ultra-violent world' (Nurbel 2017). Yet we should be wary of 'a feminist approach that attributes the production of female agency mainly to direct female creative control' (Pinedo 2021, 53). Equally influential are global trends in the feminisation of crime genres (Beylot and Sellier 2004; Brey 2016; Laugier 2019; Toulza 2022) and earlier French popular crime and legal series centred on women, including, in addition to *Julie Lescaut*, *Une femme d'honneur* ('A Woman of Honour', TF1, 1996–2008) and *Avocats et associés* ('Lawyers and Partners', France 2, 1998–2010), all of which amply demonstrated the appeal of female leads in this erstwhile male-oriented genre and profession.⁹ However, as Geneviève Sellier points out, these French series were notable for offering 'an acceptable and reassuring version of gender relations which did not challenge patriarchal domination' (in Beylot and Sellier 2004, loc. 2419). The question thus arises as to whether *Engrenages* updates the earlier series beyond increased violence and international exposure, whether it significantly empowers its heroines. Promotional discourse regularly describes Laure and Joséphine as 'powerful', 'furiously intelligent' women who 'contradict, in each episode, the archaic illusion of a "man's world"' (*Engrenages* podcast 2019, ep. 4), and Laure has been saluted in *The Guardian* as a 'feminist anti-hero' (Chrisafis 2011). I will first look at the two women's physical styling and professional activities throughout the series, before moving on to the interaction of their sexuality with work, with the aim of assessing their degree of agency and empowerment beyond promotional discourse.

Laure ostensibly looks 'ordinary', which for an actress in screen fiction means little visible make-up, casual clothes and dishevelled hair. She routinely wears jeans, T-shirts and jackets in dark, muddy colours. She never carries a handbag, replacing this feminine accessory with the ultimate phallic symbol, the gun. From the beginning, reinforcing the gender inversion, her behaviour is tougher than that of her male colleagues: on several occasions they are physically sick at a particularly horrible crime scene, while she is not. In Season 4, Episode 5 she faces hostile hoods on

her own as her male colleagues look on, hidden in a car, while in Season 3, Episode 12 she alone faces a vicious serial killer. Her unisex garb, fit for action, is designed to make her blend in with her male team (see Fig. 1).¹⁰ Recurring shots emphasise Laure's unfashionably flared trousers, as she stomps around in heavy boots. The attire, gestures and behaviour spell professionalism and practicality, while playing down her sex appeal. Nevertheless, her T-shirts are clinging, open at the neck, sometimes low-cut and sometimes with thin shoulder straps, revealing her shapely torso. Hers is thus not a de-sexualised image but one in which sex appeal is half-hidden (literally under her jacket) and adapted to her job. Relevant too is her light-brown hair: cut short, gamine-style in Season 2, it is otherwise shoulder-length, held in a variety of untidy ponytails or plaits, denoting someone who has no time to waste on such trivial matters. In its 'girliness', Laure's hairstyle also signifies youthful energy, while Proust's soft facial features, short retroussé nose and large, round brown eyes exude a sense of openness and empathy, contributing to her character's integrity and sincerity.

In stark contrast (see Fig. 2), Joséphine Karlsson, when not in barrister's robes, wears body-hugging, expensive-looking dresses or skirts and tight sweaters that accentuate her hourglass figure. Her clothes' deep,



Fig. 1 Laure (Caroline Proust) blending in, and surrounded by her male team (*Engrenages* S06)



Fig. 2 The glamorous, eroticised Joséphine (Audrey Fleurot) is frequently isolated in the frame (S06)

saturated colours match or offset her vivid blue eyes, bright lipstick and long, elaborately coiffed red hair. Stiletto heels, click-clacking on the marble floors of the Palais de Justice, and glamorous dresses, make-up and jewels in nightclub scenes complete the femme fatale look. Everything about Joséphine is bold, sharply defined and blatantly sexy. In Season 2, Episode 4, after earning a lot of (ill-gotten) cash, she goes on a shopping spree, comes home and preens in front of the mirror, in a moment of narcissistic pleasure that nevertheless seems destined for the male gaze. Her sex appeal defines her to the point of being narrativised, repeatedly commented/acted upon by colleagues and clients alike. The actress Audrey Fleurot argues that Joséphine's ultra-feminine garb is a 'shield', a 'masquerade' (*Engrenages* podcast 2019, ep. 4). One might agree with her insofar as her outfits are excessive, almost caricatural, singling her out from the rest of the cast, but also because the thought evokes Joan Riviere's theorisation of femininity as masquerade. In this foundational text for feminist theory written in 1929, Riviere argues that 'womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it' (1986 [1929], 38). This reading, however, is contradicted by the fact that Joséphine's ultra-feminine surface is revealed on many occasions to hide feminine vulnerability rather than masculine power. In their colourful artificiality, Joséphine's looks also suggest the character's dishonesty. Her

time in prison up to her ‘down and out’ state when she comes out (S06/E12 to S07/E05) is marked by her dreary clothes and the absence of make-up. But as soon as she is better, that is back on aggressive professional form (S07/E07), colourful make-up and sexy garb reappear; from that point on she occasionally wears trousers, but they are very tight and paired with stiletto heels.

The contrast in looks and grooming between Laure and Joséphine is reproduced in their attitude to work. Laure, who holds the middle rank of *Capitaine* and, from Season 6, *Commandant*, is a highly efficient, respected and trusted policewoman, who elicits a huge amount of admiration and sympathy, frequently reiterated by colleagues as well as Roban, himself presented as the most honourable Investigating Judge [*Juge d’instruction*]. The two reiterate their mutual sympathy and admiration at various points in the series, sharing its virtuous moral pole (see Fig. 3). Laure’s position within the hierarchy means that she is both head of a team¹¹ and subject to the authority of the *Commissaire* above her and with whom, typically within the genre, conflicts arise. However, such clashes are never about her capabilities, but about defying orders. Laure’s pugnacious attitude puts her in the category of the empathetic, ‘troubled female detective’ (McHugh 2018, 536) and ‘difficult woman’ (Pinedo 2021) of



Fig. 3 Laure and Roban (Philippe Duclos) share the virtuous moral pole of *Engrenages* (S03)

contemporary series: her rule-breaking derives from empathy or legitimate motives and is vindicated by results. In Season 2, for example, her spur-of-the-moment use of a truncheon to arrest a violent hoodlum leads to her being investigated by internal affairs and eventually suspended, yet her action, while technically illegal, is shown as legitimate self-defence against a vicious thug. Conversely, in one of many points of contrast between the two women, Joséphine's manipulative defence of the same thug, while exploiting the letter of the law, is motivated by greed and the desire to harm Laure and the police in general. At the end of the season (S02/E08), when Laure retaliates to clear her name, her law-breaking method (threatening Joséphine with a recording of one of her illegal deeds) is justified as both righting an obvious wrong and exposing the lawyer's duplicity. Many other examples could be cited of Laure's upheld legitimacy even as she breaks rules, from her regularly covering Gilou's misdemeanours to her shooting of serial killer Ronaldo Fuentes (Misha Arias De La Cantolla) in self-defence in Season 3, Episode 12. Her superiors, especially Herville (Nicolas Briançon, S04/S06) and Beckriche (Valentin Merlet, S06/S08), display initial hostility towards her independence and methods and both temporarily remove her from leading her team—yet they systematically end up recognising both their error and her competency. Laure's consistently recognised abilities despite her 'difficult woman' status clearly updates the pre-2005 French series analysed by Sellier, where rightful transgression of the law as a mark of independence was a prerogative of male cops (in Beylot and Sellier 2004, loc. 2397). Laure's consistent professional success, recognition and well-liked status in the eyes of her peers and superiors, while a source of spectatorial pleasure, nevertheless raise two types of issues for a feminist reading.

The first is that, unlike, say, the female protagonist of canonical British police drama *Prime Suspect* (Granada, 1991–2006), the function of Laure as a character does not appear to be that of challenging 'the entrenched sexism of the police' (Brunsdon 2013, 376). Laure being the only woman of her rank is plausible, as women with the title of *Capitaine* or *Commandant* constitute less than a quarter of the workforce.¹² On the other hand, sexism within the French police in *Engrenages* appears miraculously absent, figuring only in tiny details: Laure has to chide Gilou and Tintin for giggling during the reconstruction of a rape with a female mannequin (S01/E07); knowing she is pregnant, Herville mocks her for being 'hormonal' (S05/E08).¹³ Significantly, virtually all examples of sexism and misogyny are located *outside* the police: criminals routinely direct sexist

abuse at Laure (and Joséphine); in S01-E04, Tintin asks a criminal to show respect to Laure, adding ‘she’s my boss’, to which the hoodlum replies, ‘I would hate that’; a grossly sexist pathologist describes her as a ‘loose woman’ (S01/E06). Unsurprisingly, the absence of institutional sexism in the police in *Engrenages* contradicts its rampant presence in the real force, increasingly in evidence over the last 20 years or so. Journalistic reports of social media networks channelling racist, sexist and homophobic messages and condoning rape culture have appeared, while women have testified from the inside to widespread discrimination in the police and the army (Souid 2012; Miñano and Pascual 2014). I would suggest three reasons for this startling discrepancy in a series vaunted for its realism. First, one may surmise a bias in favour of the police linked to the presence of former members of the institution in the writing team, one reason also perhaps for the reported popularity of the series among policemen. Second, the wish not to alienate the largely young, male demographics of Canal+ viewers (McCabe 2012, 106) is likely. And third, we may note a wider indifference to gender issues among French audiences, suggested by commentaries on Allocine.fr, where the vanishingly low number of remarks about women concern Joséphine, either to praise Fleurot’s sex appeal or condemn Joséphine’s malevolent character. Commentaries on IMDb by contrast show greater awareness of gender issues, though none remark on the absence of sexism in the police. Laure’s deeply satisfying professional status as a valued and recognised policewoman among an all-male team thus in many ways belongs to a utopian vision of the French police.

The second issue concerning Laure’s and Joséphine’s professional practice is the degree to which their parallel narrative arcs are placed within a *moral* framework. As we saw, while Laure may be a ‘difficult woman’ and regularly breaks the rules, her integrity is never compromised. In a reverse mirror image, Joséphine is repeatedly portrayed as unprincipled, disloyal and greedy. While Laure is surrounded by flawed, yet ‘salt-of-the-earth’ male colleagues, Joséphine is drawn to sleazy male lawyers: Vincent Leroy (Vincent Winterhalter) in Season 1 and Szabo (Daniel Duval) in Seasons 2 and 3; she moreover regularly agrees to, or volunteers to perform, illegal acts for crooked clients such as Aziz (Reda Kateb) in Season 2 and Solignac (Philippe Jeusette) in Season 7, in order to earn large sums, frequently materialised as wads of notes in envelopes. Joséphine’s love of money functions as a leitmotiv: Szabo tells her, ‘to work with me you have to love money, and only money’ (S02/E04). A leading criminal she defends says,

'You love money, don't you,' to which she replies, 'Yes, so what!' (S02/E07). Her professional and later personal relationship with the honourable Pierre Clément at first looks like heralding a change; yet she falls back on dishonest practice more than once, prompting him to tell her accusingly, 'you love money' (S03/E09). Pierre is killed in Season 5, before she can demonstrate a significant moral change. Indeed, later, her sleazy behaviour continues; she also attempts to murder a colleague and ends up in prison. Contrasting with the widespread respect for Laure, Joséphine is called 'ruthless', a 'whore', 'a pitbull' and 'a carnivore'. In Season 7, Episode 12 Roban declares: 'Your cynicism is boundless!' While Laure fights to eradicate crime, Joséphine defends a gallery of disreputable or horrendous characters, not simply because it is her job but because it gives her pleasure: at the prospect of defending a serial killer, she exclaims, 'A monster, exciting!' (S03/E08). Even when money is not involved, bad behaviour is never far from the surface: at the end of Season 1, when Vincent Leroy is cleared of rape by his female accuser who is dying of cancer, Joséphine deliberately fails to tell him and she destroys the evidence (S01/E08). Not above obtaining forged documents (S03/E7), she discloses the names and photos of Laure and her team to her terrorist client, knowingly putting their lives in peril (S04/E05). After Joséphine comes out of prison homeless in Season 7, Laure gives her shelter in her flat; she repays her by leaking information glimpsed on Laure's tablet and devises a Machiavellian scheme to trap Roban, almost bringing his and Laure's careers to an end. And so on, until almost the end of the series. Laure's unassuming decency and professional ethics are thus constantly contrasted with Joséphine's flamboyant, ruthless drive to get results at all costs.

At first sight, the Laure–Joséphine moral polarity matches Charlotte Brunson's distinction between second-wave ('fuddy-duddy') feminism and postfeminism: although Laure is not exactly one of these women who have 'sacrificed their femininity and their niceness in their journey to the top' (Brunson 2013, 385), she embodies a type of 'no-nonsense' feminism that aims at equality and camaraderie. By contrast, Joséphine fits within a 'girly' postfeminism marked by privilege, consumption and a form of 'raunch culture' (378). In this light, it is tempting to see her relentlessly bad behaviour as a form of 'punk feminism', a rebellion against patriarchal models of submissive femininity. In practice, however, although her ruthlessness earns her occasional victories in court, it ultimately brings her insults, failure and punishment rather than power and success. She is repeatedly humiliated by the crooks she defends, including being

physically attacked by some. While Laure's ethos is underpinned by professionalism and team loyalty, Joséphine's is defined by corruption and individualism, a point visually underlined by the framing of the two women across the series: Laure is frequently seen in spaces surrounded by her team, Joséphine repeatedly isolated (see Fig. 2). Similarly, sexuality and motherhood, to which I now turn, interact with work in sharply contrasting parallel trajectories for the two women.

FEMALE SEXUALITY IN *ENGRENAGES*: BODY MATTERS

As a series about women invested in traditionally male jobs (police and the law), *Engrenages* inevitably narrativises the conflict between their professional and their personal life. In this respect too, Laure and Joséphine follow divergent parallel paths that both crystallise around traumatic bodily experiences. As Iris Brey points out, it is Laure's body that 'brings her back to the fact that she is a woman, that she is different from her colleagues' (*Engrenages* podcast 2019, ep. 4) and the same is true of Joséphine. While both women are portrayed as sexually active (within an almost entirely heterosexual framework), Laure's narrative takes her through motherhood, while Joséphine experiences rape.¹⁴

Season 1 introduces us to Laure as the 'sexually free' woman vaunted by Angélique Chrisafis (2011). In the opening scene of the first episode, she calls Pierre 'hot' and makes clear that she is attracted to him. They kiss and sleep together from Episode 3, although she claims it is 'no big deal' (S01/E04), and when their brief liaison is over, they remain good friends. Meanwhile, she sleeps with an interpreter (S01/E02) and flirts with a colleague (S01/E05), though later, when he harasses her, she threatens him with her gun and he is never seen again. Other brief sexual encounters are alluded to. And yet, except for a couple of misogynist remarks by unsympathetic, marginal characters (such as one of the pathologists), Laure is not denigrated as a promiscuous woman, confirming Proust's view of her modernity in this respect: 'She's not a slut, she's just a woman who obeys her desires in a very simple way' (in Chrisafis 2011). The succession of guilt-free, one-night stands gives way, from Season 2 onwards, to more substantial liaisons with colleagues. First there is Sami, a relationship interrupted by the dramatic conclusion to that season: he almost dies and is posted elsewhere. Season 3 charts Laure's liaison with Commissaire Brémont, a sexual attraction to which is added an ulterior motive (retrieving a compromising piece of evidence to protect Gilou [S03/E06]). In

Season 4, Episode 4 she moves in with him. When Sami returns halfway through that season, she hesitates between the two men but Sami dies in a terrorist attack (S04/E12) and she is single throughout Season 5. Season 6 witnesses the sexual consummation of her close friendship with Gilou, her most significant male colleague, interrupted in Season 7 while he is in prison and reprised 'for good' at the end of Season 8, the conclusion to the entire series. Thus Laure's sexual journey takes her from brief sexual encounters to monogamous coupledness, via short-lived affairs. Overlapping this conventional sexual/romantic journey is her trajectory towards motherhood.

From the start, Laure is ambivalent about children. Threatened with being barred from the police because of an internal affairs inquiry, she cries: 'Christ, Gilou, I'm 34, no man, no kids, what do I do?' (SE2/E03). For the internal affairs psychologist, she invents a desire for children, guessing this will make her look more 'normal', but later breaks down in tears, telling her, 'I want impossible things' (S02/E05). Yet, once she becomes pregnant (from her affair with Brémont), she immediately considers abortion. Told she cannot have one in France because she left it too late, she books a train to Amsterdam but renounces the trip at the last minute, ostensibly to pursue an inquiry (SE5/E04). Choice eludes her again when a violent knife attack induces the birth of her very premature baby girl, Romy, at the end of Season 5 (E12). Across Season 6, her visits to Romy in intensive care primarily show her alienation from the infant. Although she appears, gradually, to come to terms with motherhood, at the end of the season she runs away instead of taking her home, despite Gilou having offered to help bring up the child. At the beginning of Season 7, she is off work for severe depression but abbreviates her sick leave to get back to work. She eventually, slowly, bonds with the baby throughout Season 7, and at the end of Season 8 (and of the whole series) gives up police work in order to look after Romy, with Gilou as stepfather. This long-drawn-out subplot, interwoven with countless police enquiries, is of course typical of long-form television, working to create a series of cliffhangers. But Laure's struggles with motherhood are also a way for *Engrenages* to scrutinise not only the work/motherhood interface but the mother herself, echoing Philippa Gates's insight that 'While a mystery surrounding a crime motivates the involvement of the female detective in these films, ultimately the mystery to solve is that of the detective's place—both socially and professionally' (2011, 257).

While Laure's struggles to combine work with motherhood echo many women's experience, *Engrenages* engages with them in essentialist rather than socially grounded terms. The discovery of Laure's pregnancy at the beginning of Season 5 is graphically anchored in female bodily functions and, throughout that season, uncomfortably linked to violence against women. We see Laure in a bar picking up a man and taking him to her car for sex. As she undoes her trousers, she discovers a lot of blood and brutally sends the man away. A doctor tells her she is pregnant despite the blood.¹⁵ In the very next scene, a woman and her young daughter, from a bridge over the canal, spot the corpses of a mother and young daughter tied together, towed by a barge in the water (S05/E02). As if anticipating that she is pregnant with a girl, throughout that season Laure is shown to be particularly affected by the dead mother and daughter—echoing Kathleen McHugh's observation about 'the problematic conflation of the female detective with the usually female (or feminized) victim, what Lindsay Steenberg astutely terms *forensic femininity*' (2018, 537; emphasis in original). In yet another echo of the mother–daughter dyad, the season's finale involves the kidnapping of a little girl, along with the young woman looking after her. Unusually (in the series and statistically), the perpetrators of the kidnapping, and of the initial murder of the woman and her daughter, turn out to be a gang of adolescent girls. To nail the point further home, we learn that the leader of the group, Oz (Shirley Souagnon), was abandoned by her mother at a young age and it is the mother who helps the police track Oz down.¹⁶ Throughout Season 5, the overdetermined repetition of mother–daughter pairs from a variety of backgrounds and ethnic groups therefore stresses biological links over social circumstances. When Laure visits her premature daughter, her diffidence is contrasted with the 'correct' maternal behaviour displayed by nurses as well as by Brémont and his wife. On more than one occasion, Laure's prioritising of work over visiting the baby is frowned upon; a nurse tells her, 'a baby is more important than work' (S06/E02). Later, using a familiar motif from the Hollywood maternal melodrama, in which a mother is made to feel guilty for her child's illness or death in her absence, Laure arrives late when the baby, now staying with the father, has been rushed back into hospital (S07/E03).¹⁷ Everything ends well for the baby, but the disapproval of Laure's behaviour is tangible. In the next episode, a female judge removes her custodial rights to her child.

Once Laure comes to terms with motherhood, *Engrenages* gives remarkably little consideration to the practicalities of looking after a baby

while working as a policewoman. Throughout Season 8, she takes turns with Brémont to look after Romy, a process that appears entirely effortless, a matter of decanting the child amicably from one car to another and then cooing blissfully with her at home. The difficulties of reconciling work with motherhood that she foresaw ('I want impossible things') have miraculously vanished. Ultimately, Laure is united with Romy and Gilou, though the latter is not the father, while Brémont, Romy's biological father, has another child with another woman, in addition to two adolescent daughters from an earlier relationship, the group forming a typical twenty-first-century *famille recomposée*. But under the veneer of modern family mores lurks a conservative vision of femininity. Already in Season 3, Episode 4, Gilou told Laure she needed 'a man', not just sex, just as Brémont wanted 'more than sex' from her (S03/E11), insisting she move in with him and his two daughters (S04/E04). An essentialist view of parenting confirmed by the series proving these suitors right is further reinforced by the contrasting trajectory of Tintin, who eventually loses his wife and children as he repeatedly fails to prioritise them over work. Laure's move from sexual freedom and intense investment in work to romance and family life at the price of giving up work, thus follows a highly traditional gendered scenario.

Against Laure's positive normative resolution, Joséphine's trajectory continues to function as a reverse mirror image, marked by trauma, violence and loss, also anchored in the female body. In Season 4, we learn of her unhappy childhood: her mother was regularly beaten by her father and committed suicide after Joséphine told the police; ever since she has viscerally hated him. In a troubling move, a confrontation with her father at her sister's wedding leads her to initiate rough sex with Pierre (S04/E04). Later in the same season, after Pierre, shocked by her unethical work practices, tells her their relationship is over, she slashes her wrists in the bath (S04/E09; she is saved in time by a neighbour). These associations between Joséphine, sex and violence culminate in her rape. The third episode of Season 6 opens with her collapsed on the banks of the Seine, groggy with her hair and clothes in disarray. She realises she has been raped after her drink was spiked at a party the night before, so does not know who the perpetrator is. She comes to Laure for comfort and advice, one of several brief and implausible rapprochements between the two women. This is followed by Joséphine changing her mind, twice—a behaviour consistent with her incoherent persona, marked by a series of U-turns (a point picked upon negatively by a few IMDb commentators: one

queries why a ‘strong female lead has to be emotionally unbalanced’, while another ‘would rate the show higher if it wasn’t for Josephine’).¹⁸ At first she suspects her former colleague, barrister Eric Edelman (Louis-Do de Lencquesaing). When she finds out the rapist is another colleague, Jean-Etienne Vern (Sylvain Dieuaide), she rejects legal redress offered by Laure and decides instead to kill him.

The insertion of rape in the series is congruent with French social reality where, according to a 2018 report, 12 per cent of women surveyed said they had been raped (Morin 2018). It also aligns *Engrenages* with global screen trends, in which rape has become a recurrent motif in the construction of female characters, with a focus on the victim rather than the rapist. As Iris Brey puts it, ‘Above all the rapists are no longer depicted solely as monsters who loom in alleyways at night: they are boyfriends and husbands, work colleagues, step-fathers, the close entourage of the victim’ (2016, 148). However, the way *Engrenages* treats the aftermath of Joséphine’s rape through the trope of the rape-revenge movie locates the cause of her erratic and self-destructive behaviour not in the rape itself, nor in her traumatic childhood, but in what showrunner Anne Landois sees as her ‘pride’, designed to hide her fragility. Landois argues, ‘to expose this fragility means losing part of the whole image Joséphine built for herself and we thought it was inevitable that she would decide to avenge herself’ (Nurbel 2017). Landois’s narrative choices, however, not only reinforce Joséphine’s incoherent persona with her frequent changes of mind, they also make her the aggressor. Having found out that Vern is the rapist, first she perversely defends *him* in court when he is accused, all too plausibly, of sexual harassment by another female colleague, and in the process she publicly humiliates the woman (S06/E06). She then runs Vern over with his own car, but is denied the triumph of the avenger as he survives to denounce her. While he is in intensive care, she slips into his room and viciously squeezes his genitals as he lies helpless, covered in tubes (since the rape is left off screen, she is the one who visually attacks him). Meanwhile, a different plotline sees her relentlessly pursue Judge Roban in court, for a case about which, in a familiar motif, she is legally right but ethically wrong: she unnecessarily harasses a sympathetic character who is also a sick old man. The overall effect is that, while Joséphine is a true victim of male violence, she appears as the predator, thereby justifying her arrest and imprisonment for most of Season 7.

Joséphine to some extent succeeds in reconstructing her life after prison. She decides to specialise in rape cases, though this is limited to one

case, in which she defends Lola (Isabel Aimé González-Sola), a beautiful young inmate she befriended in prison (S07/S08). Lola was raped by her stepfather but, in a clear echo of Joséphine's attitude, refuses to appear as a victim, thereby endangering her own case. Joséphine has fallen in love with Lola, but the young woman rejects her both professionally (she demands another lawyer) and personally (she leaves her). This pattern of loss continues in Season 8, when she becomes attached to a delinquent Moroccan youth, Souleymane (Ayoub Barboucha), who is eventually killed—partly as a result of her own relentless fight against the police—and then to his young brother Youssef (Ahmed Azaoui), who is returned to his parents. Although in the last image of her in the series, she and Edelman are seen kissing, suggesting the formation of a couple, the loss of the two boys completes Joséphine's repeated punishments—the father's abuse of the mother and the latter's suicide, Pierre's death, her own suicide attempt, the rape, Lola's departure. The series in this way confirms her powerlessness, epitomised by her cry to Edelman, 'Why do we always want what we can't have?' (S08/E07).

Laure's consistently upright behaviour has thus been rewarded with loyalty and love (to protect her, Gilou magnanimously goes to prison alone in Season 7 for a misconduct in which they are both implicated), as well as motherhood, while Joséphine's innumerable misdemeanours meet retribution. Under the complex network of subplots of the long-form series, the simplicity of the polarised ethical codes that are attached to Laure and Joséphine creates the series's melodramatic 'moral legibility' (Williams 2014, loc. 659; 1294). Although its appeal is deeply connected to the two female leads, *Engrenages* squarely adheres to the trend in which series that are distinguished by the prominent, autonomous roles they offer women protagonists seem to do it, as in the case of the US series *Homeland*, 'at the price of a re-inscription in "classic" if not archaic concepts of femininity' (Courcoux 2015, 95).

NATIONAL, INTERNATIONAL, POSTNATIONAL

If *Engrenages* was an extremely popular national series and for a while equally successful internationally, it appears that the gender formation discussed in this chapter has led to its failure to reach postnational status. Three years after the conclusion of the series, its absence from Netflix is noticeable. Some clues as to this situation can be found in viewers' comments. An IMDb post entitled 'Terrible representation through a 2021

lens' suggests that the viewers' gaze has changed, in tune with the massive cultural transformation that has taken place globally in terms of gender in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement in 2017.¹⁹ Some viewers give relatively low ratings to the series because of the frequent 'violence against women' and their repeated 'objectification'. Another, 'Lucyvanbaars' (30 March 2022), says of the first season, 'Maybe in 2005 when it came out it was more acceptable to continually objectify sexual violence against women.' Returning to Sellier's critique of the female detective in earlier French crime series as providing a 'reassuring' vision of femininity, it is noteworthy that while *Engrenages* updates *Julie Lescaut* and *Une femme d'honneur* in terms of Laure's sexual activity and fearless involvement in tough physical action, it reproduces the earlier series' apparent freedom from institutional sexism. Moreover, while Lescaut and the protagonist of *Une femme d'honneur* remain working mothers, Laure's final retreat from work into motherhood is hardly innovative. *Engrenages*'s deployment of a baby as a happy resolution for a woman is found in other Gallic genres, such as romantic comedy (Harrod 2015) and the series *Dix pour cent/Call My Agent!* (2015–2020), in which the lesbian Andréa (Camille Cottin) leaves work to care for her baby, thus pointing to the French specificity of the formula. Similarly, the hyper-sexualisation and malevolence of Joséphine, combined with her trajectory marked by punishment and powerlessness, signals a classic demonisation of the sexually active, apparently strong, woman on screen. Figured as a *garce* [bitch] rather than the more powerful femme fatale, Joséphine pursues a long national tradition, going back to the French film noir of the 1930s to the 1950s (Vincendeau 2007; Burch and Sellier 2014) and which endures, as in Paul Verhoeven's 2016 film *Elle*.

Beyond gender, another change in the viewers' gaze is clearly at work, concerning race and intersectionality. It is noticeable that many recent French Netflix programmes, including *Plan cœur/The Hookup Plan* (2018–2022), *Lupin* (2021–), *Drôle/Standing Up* (2022) and *En place/Represent* (2023–), as well as the film *Tout simplement noir/Simply Black* (John Wax and Jean-Paul Zadi, 2020), all work towards racial and multicultural inclusivity. The 'Terrible representation through a 2021 lens' post also points out that in the first two seasons, 'I think I've seen just three black actors so far', and goes on to criticise their stereotypical roles. Another adds that in *Engrenages*, 'Paris is full of criminals, mostly immigrants', a perception which, as we have seen, is correct throughout the series. Since 2020 and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter

movement, there appears to be a growing desire among younger audiences for greater gender and sexual, but especially racial, diversity, which is met by the likes of *Lupin*, *Drôle* or *Plan cœur*. *Engrenages* remains a brilliant national and international crime series, but in the postnational era it seems already to belong to another age.

NOTES

1. Information on the number of countries to which *Engrenages* was exported varies according to sources, from 70 to 85. On both platforms, more than two-thirds of internet users gave the series top ratings. There is a consensus that Season 1 is weaker and that *Engrenages* improves as it goes along, although the last one, Season 8, was judged disappointing by some.
2. At the time of writing (late 2022), *Engrenages* is no longer viewable on the platform from the UK. All translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated.
3. I am grateful to Phil Powrie for sharing his statistical work on the musical themes in *Engrenages*, which shows that Laure totals 428 'musical interventions', against 176 for Joséphine.
4. A *Le Monde* article on money laundering in the Chinese community in Aubervilliers points out that *Engrenages*, which features the issue in Season 7, was ahead of the judicial system in this respect (Piel and Saintourens 2023).
5. 'Cntwr', IMDb user reviews, 11 May 2011.
6. In Seasons 7 and 8, the Palais de Justice is located in its equally lofty but modernist new premises in the seventeenth *arrondissement* (north-west) of Paris.
7. For further discussions of this issue, see Clasby (2015); Vatsal (2019).
8. See McHugh (2018) for a discussion of the mutilated female body in Season 1.
9. In the UK, famous female-led crime series include *Prime Suspect* (1991–2006), *Vera* (2011–), *Broadchurch* (2013–2017), *Marcella* (2016–2021) and *Happy Valley* (2014–2023); in the USA, *Cagney and Lacey* (1981–1988) and the spy series *Homeland* (2011–2020); in New Zealand, *Top of the Lake* (2013–2017); and some of the most successful 'Scandi noir' series are led by women, including *Forbrydelsen/The Killing* (2007–2012), *Bron/The Bridge* (2011–2018) and *Trom* (2022–).
10. Young women on two occasions join the team but their presence is fleeting and they remain marginal.
11. With a few exceptions, as in Seasons 7 and 8, where she temporarily loses her position.

12. https://www.enp.eu/wp-content/uploads/women_in_police_services_eu_2012.pdf.
13. In Season 5, Episode 1 she pins a poster for a hotline for victims of sexual violence on her office wall. However, the shot of Laure pinning the poster for the '39-19' line is very fleeting (would be missed by most viewers), and its contents are never discussed.
14. In Season 7, Episode 8, Joséphine bonds with a female client named Lola and later defends her. Lola at one point lives in her flat. Although attraction is suggested, no actual sex scene is depicted and when Joséphine kisses Lola (S08/E04), Lola pushes her away and soon leaves her.
15. Oddly, there is no discussion of how she became pregnant, even though one has to assume she was using contraception given her active sexual life.
16. As mentioned earlier, the young women are Black; while this is an important dimension, here I concentrate on the gender aspect.
17. See, for instance, *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945).
18. 'surfisfun', 21 January 2022; 'resukcs', 18 October 2020. IMDb user reviews. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0477507/reviews?ref_=tt_ql_sm.
19. 'Jdadverb', 6 February 2021.

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Camille Cottin: A Comic Reappropriation of French Femininity in a Globalised, Postfeminist Culture

Anne Kaftal

Translated by Daniel Morgan

Since her revelation in the miniseries *Connasse* ('The Parisian Bitch', Canal+, 2013–2015), Camille Cottin has become one of the emblematic figures of the new wave of comic actresses to have emerged in France since the early 2000s. This is a remarkable phenomenon for two reasons: first, because these new actresses have seized the limelight in a French comic cinema that has historically pushed women into the shadows (Vincendeau 2014, 16), but also because they have built their comic personas in ways that are in line with traditional norms of femininity, unlike their predecessors (Jacqueline Maillan, Josiane Balasko, etc.). Camille Cottin's career has made this development visible: her roles have highlighted both her glamour and her comic potential, using this association as the very basis of

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her image as a modern woman and allowing her to become the first comic actress to be featured as the public face of Chanel in 2018.

This type of reconfiguration of female comedy can only be fully understood as a symptom of postfeminism, which emerged in the USA in the 1990s. This ambivalent cultural sensitivity, which draws on the achievements of second-wave feminism but breaks with the continuity of the movement in the contemporary context, appears in the media through paradoxical gender representations that consolidate the traditional norms favoured by the 1980s anti-feminist backlash (Faludi 1991) while at the same time acknowledging the new status of women at the end of the twentieth century (McRobbie 2009, 11–15). Specifically, in order to attract the attention of female viewers, who have never before had as much economic and social influence, postfeminist culture offers them new female protagonists they can identify with, endowed with a degree of subjectivity that has rarely been possible for female characters to attain in popular culture so far, and which conflicts with traditional gender representations.

The cultural contradictions of postfeminism began to emerge in France a decade later, through comedy, largely by way of the Canal+ group. Inspired by the success of female comics in US postfeminist culture, the network updated its programming by developing its own female comedy formats in the early 2000s: ‘American-style’ romantic comedies such as *Décalage horaire/ Jet-lag* (Danièle Thompson, 2002), for example, but also TV shows featuring new female comedians such as *Connasse*, which launched Cottin’s career.

Cottin thus embodies the importing of a US cultural phenomenon. However, as the press have frequently pointed out, she also strikingly reflects the way English-language media have presented the figure of the Parisian woman or Parisienne since the beginning of the 2000s (D’Orgeval 2020): frequently cast as chic, assertive women, the actress seems to have adopted, as part of her persona, a form of Frenchness that has been tailored to the North American imagination.¹ The goal of this essay is to examine Cottin’s career as an actress who has crystallised the movement of the figure of the Parisienne between US and French postfeminist cultures, in order to identify certain effects of this movement on representations of femininity in France. While the actress has clearly drawn inspiration from this Americanised figure, she has transferred the Parisienne to the specific cultural context of French comedy, which is heavily determined by its own national features and is therefore capable of modifying the meaning of the archetype. How has the figure of the Parisienne been reconfigured by this contact with the French comic landscape?

AN IRONIC INCARNATION OF AMERICANISED FRENCHNESS

To understand the importance of the Parisienne to Cottin's persona, we should first look back at the enthusiasm this figure has inspired within postfeminist US culture, which can be explained by its ability to adapt to postfeminism's inherent contradictions. The Parisienne is a feminine ideal that is perfectly compatible with the new social status of women at the turn of the twenty-first century, as it is associated with a set of qualities that can be seen as markers of female emancipation: the Parisienne is defined by her passionate personality, her free sexuality and her ability to disarm men in order to get what she wants. At the same time, these qualities reveal the figure's profound ambivalence: despite her apparent modernity, the Parisienne is intrinsically determined by male desire, and the signs of female power that she displays are only celebrated inasmuch as they can help her seduce men. They thus draw on and reinforce the provocative, erotic connotations that define historical representations of the Parisienne (Rétaillaud-Bajac 2013), which make French women's assertiveness an instrument for arousing male desire.

This ambivalent representation has appeared in fashion magazines associated with US postfeminist culture, which have frequently featured the seductive figure of the 'French girl' since the early 2000s. Although she has mainly performed in French cinema and television, Cottin has not been immune to the effects of these US cultural representations, which have influenced her career and even transformed her into a local ambassador of 'Frenchness': in *Dix pour cent/Call My Agent!* (France Télévisions/Netflix, 2015–2020), *Larguées/Dumped* (Eloïse Lang, 2018) or even in *Connasse*, the actress plays glamorous, dominant women, noted for their provocative mode of seduction and closely aligned with heterosexual desire—even if that means being drawn back into this economy through 'lesbian chic' imagery. In *Dix pour cent* for instance, the lesbian woman she plays finally agrees to have sex with a man she had previously resisted, thus revealing, in line with representations in mainstream pornography, a form of 'authentic heterosexual instinct' that can be aroused by deserving men (McKenna 2002, 288).

It would be wrong, however, to consider Cottin as a simple transposition of an Americanised figure to the French context, since she significantly modifies the Parisienne type by moving it into comic territory. Since the early 2000s, French comedy has been reshaped by the introduction of female subjects on screen, who have gained importance on the cultural

scene under the influence of US postfeminism: by appropriating a comic subjectivity historically denied them in French media culture, contemporary comic actresses have managed to subvert the limited roles they have been assigned by patriarchal society. Louise Bourgoïn and Frédérique Bel are emblematic figures of this wave of female comedy initiated by Canal+, as they were able to reorient their traditional roles as ‘window dressing’ on the set of the channel’s *Grand Journal* (‘The Major News Show’, Canal+, 2004–2017) news programme—Bourgoïn as a weather reporter chosen for her pretty appearance and Bel as a ‘dumb blonde’ on *La Minute blonde* (‘Blonde Moment’, Canal+, 2004–2006)—by adopting an exaggeratedly innocent delivery style while telling bawdy jokes, thus exploiting a semblance of naivety to underline the comedy’s self-conscious status. As a direct heir to these actresses (having herself been revealed on Canal+ several years later), Cottin does something similar by appropriating the eroticised figure of the Parisienne *ironically*, in order to distinguish herself from it: her performances show that she is perfectly aware of the archetypal figure she is associated with, and deliberately play with the stereotypes it conveys—especially the myth of Parisian women’s slenderness, fuelled by US fashion magazines (Schneider 2016) and infamously by the bestseller *French Women Don’t Get Fat* (Guiliano 2006), a food guide that perfectly illustrates the normative dimension of the phenomenon. In *Connasse*, the series that launched her career, Cottin uses this stereotype to irritate her chosen targets, for instance by complaining—with a certain insensitivity—that she cannot gain weight and is doomed to remain slim. This witticism is also present in the series *Dix pour cent*, in which her character effortlessly substitutes her lunch with a Diet Coke; revealingly, an almost identical scene occurs in the US series *Emily in Paris* (Netflix, 2020)—with a cigarette instead of the Diet Coke—which was roundly decried by French critics for its caricatured portrayal of Parisians. This is no coincidence: Cottin’s comedy relies on the ironic reappropriation of US representations of Frenchness and its clichés, like the ‘accidentally’ slimming diet of Parisian women—the US origins of the Diet Coke indicating, in this case, the actress’s obvious ironic distance from the stereotype in question.

An important clarification must be made here: Cottin’s ironic portrayal of Parisian women is not unique to her comedy, nor to French comedy. In fact, it is already present in US representations of Frenchness—including in *Emily in Paris*. Although the series was attacked by French critics for its numerous stereotypes, its purposefully exaggerated depiction of French

culture actually reveals a form of ironic distance and a certain self-consciousness about the artificiality of its own representations. As Angela McRobbie demonstrates, this specific type of irony allows postfeminist culture to regulate its own tensions, by adapting norms of femininity to twenty-first-century women's new gender consciousness, which tends to make those norms obsolete. In order for women to manage this growing contradiction within their identity, postfeminist culture utilises traditional markers of femininity in an *ironic* mode—that of the 'postfeminist masquerade'—allowing women to have it both ways: by adding a comic tone to traditional codes of femininity, they can conform to social conventions and avoid being marginalised while at the same time showing that they are aware of the conservative dimension of the gender roles they are performing (McRobbie 2009, 64–65). US postfeminist culture has made ample use of this masquerade in order to reiterate the normative representation of the Parisienne: fashion magazines have systematically presented Parisian women within a retro universe that is out of step with current society (often drawing on 1960s imagery linked to New Wave cinema), thus revealing their awareness of the outdated aspect of this representation (see Fig. 1). Cottin employs irony in a similar way: through her roles, she



Fig. 1 The retro Parisienne played by Camille Rowe in 'How to Speak French with Camille Rowe' (Available on *i-D* magazine's YouTube channel)

mocks the myth of Parisian women's 'accidental' thinness but, in doing so, also deflects the fact that she perfectly corresponds to this ideal. The actress's satiric tone helps her to balance these contradictions within her own image, but also to adapt to the expectations of English-speaking audiences by seamlessly conforming to the ironic representations common in international postfeminist culture. Her modelling work for Chanel, for instance, consists in an advertisement that explicitly plays with the stereotype of the headstrong Parisienne and, unsurprisingly, places her within a retro Parisian decor, filmed in black and white (see Fig. 2).

At the same time, Cottin's humour differs from that of US postfeminist culture on one crucial point: the actress's presence as a fully fleshed out central character is rooted in an 'authentically French' identity, which adds a further layer of irony to her performances. Cottin's national identity certainly helps explain the difference between the reception of *Emily in Paris*—which, despite its irony, incited the wrath of French journalists for its stereotypical portrayal of Parisian women—and the roles played by Cottin—which have received steady praise. Although the actress makes ironic use of the stereotype, she does not simply mock the Parisienne as a potentially retrograde figure: she also pokes fun at it as an *Anglophone* image, out of step with the true identity of French women. By playing this



Fig. 2 Camille Cottin crossing Paris in black and white in the 'Suis-moi/Follow Me' advertising campaign for Chanel's J-12 watch

Americanised figure ironically, Cottin is thus able to cultivate an exportable media image and simultaneously distance herself from it through a subtle nod to her French audience, establishing a peculiar form of complicity lacking in *Emily in Paris*—whose artificial representations necessarily alienate French viewers. The dual audience targeted by Cottin is also visible in the ad for Chanel, which presents English-speaking viewers with a chic, sassy Parisienne, in line with their expectations, while building complicity with the French audience through precise references—for example, when she says that the boat that she boards after diving spectacularly into the Seine is double parked [*garé en double file*], an expression generally used for cars that nods to Paris’s infamously chaotic traffic, and whose comic connotation is absent in the English subtitles (‘Hurry! He won’t hang around’). The title sequence of the film *Connasse, princesse des cœurs* (‘The Parisian Bitch, Princess of Hearts’, Noémie Saglio and Eloïse Lang, 2015), a feature film inspired by the Canal+ series, is another example of this process: presenting the female protagonist driving through the streets of Paris behind the wheel of a Citroën 2CV, wearing a beret and a striped Breton top while smoking a cigarette, the film creates a self-conscious image typical of postfeminism, playing with an internationally recognisable stereotype. However, this image also contains a second level of irony addressed to French viewers, who would understand that Cottin is mocking the inauthentic fantasy of Paris played out by foreign tourists (‘hicks’ in Cottin’s own words) who wear these clothes even though they bear no relation to the reality of French fashion (see Fig. 3).

This second level of irony thus depends on a particular complicity with French audiences, made possible by Cottin’s ‘authentic’ French identity, a position from which she can ridicule ersatz representations of Frenchness: in the title sequence of *Connasse, princesse des cœurs*, the artificiality of her costume only takes on this peculiar ironic tone because of its juxtaposition with the character’s coarse personality and her rudeness behind the wheel, interpreted by French viewers as legitimate signs of her national identity, which humorously confront US fantasies built around the figure of the Parisienne.



Fig. 3 Camille Cottin wears a standardised Parisian uniform in *Connasse, princesse des cœurs*

CAMILLE COTTIN'S *FRANCHOULLARDISE*: BETWEEN COMIC UNRULINESS AND MISOGYNISTIC COMEDY

As the example of *Connasse, princesse des cœurs* reveals, the personality traits employed by Cottin to underline her French identity are *flaws*: while they may initially seem to point to a form of anti-patriotic self-criticism, these flaws in fact allow the actress to announce her *franchouillard* roots, which serve as a basis for her ironic Frenchness. Derived from the word *français* along with the pejorative suffix *-ard*, the adjective *franchouillard* (as well as its noun form *franchouillardise*) refers to anything that is 'typically French and folksy' and is generally used to 'gently mock' the mores of French people.² This makes *franchouillardise* especially compatible with comedy and allows it to serve as the basis for the *franchouillard* comedy omnipresent in the history of French comic cinema, which caricatures the quirks and flaws of the French people with a certain tenderness. Cottin's taking up of *franchouillard* comedy is hardly a coincidence: it has played a decisive role in French cinema during periods of national identity crisis, encouraging a sense of belonging among viewers by making them laugh at 'flaws associated with the average French person' (Duval 2007, 134). Roland Duval cites the example of the post-war comedy *La Traversée de*

Paris/The Crossing of Paris (Claude Autant-Lara, 1956): mocking the pettiness and selfishness of the character Jambier, the film allowed the French to reclaim their national identity through laughter, an identity that had recently been tarnished by collaborators and black market profiteers during the Second World War (Duval 2007, 135). Although Cottin uses *franchouillardise* in an entirely different cultural context, it seems that she does so according to a similar logic of national identity, to deflect the threat posed by the Americanisation of French culture—a development of which her own career is a symptom. *Franchouillardise* thereby allows her to reaffirm her true national identity and to destabilise from within the Anglophone representations of Frenchness that have shaped her image.

Franchouillard comedy has traditionally been the domain of *male* stars in French cinema, and thus bears on the gendered aspect of Cottin's performance: by adopting this style of comedy to revisit the figure of the Parisienne, the actress transgresses the traditional norms that define this figure and the actress transforms it into an image of female unruliness. The qualities associated with the Parisienne thus become pretexts for Cottin's deployment of *franchouillard* comedy: she transforms the prickly character associated with French women into typically French irritability, which appears on screen as a tendency towards anger and bad faith—exemplified by the agent for stars she plays in *Dix pour cent*, who lashes out at her assistant when reminded of meetings she would rather forget, and emblematically by her *Connasse* character, who complains (in English) that 'the cars are not going the right way' when arriving in London.

There is also a significant physical aspect to these characters' bad temper. Cottin has in fact made angry outbursts one of the hallmarks of her acting: when her characters are frustrated, her slender body is suddenly transformed by sharp, nervous gestures, the reddening of her skin and screams that amplify and carry her voice. In addition to its physical dimension, Cottin's comic potential also relies on a specific use of language that has always been a crucial part of the *franchouillard* cinematic tradition: from Michel Audiard's dialogue to the verbal duels in the film *Brice de Nice* (James Huth, 2005), French comic cinema frequently portrays its characters' ill-tempered nature through quarrelling and witty repartee (Chion 2008, 92). Cottin's characters excel at this: her cutting rejoinders are largely responsible for earning her the insulting moniker of *Connasse* in the eponymous series, and the agent Andréa Martel's caustic comments cause her assistant to quit her job in the very first episode of *Dix pour cent*.

This verbal comedy is also closely associated with a style of informal language that is a key aspect of the *franchouillard* tradition, but which is also, more generally, a historical feature of French comic cinema. According to Michel Chion, this pervasiveness of informal language is explained by the lack of a neutral tone in spoken French, which is perceived as formal whenever speech is grammatically correct (Chion 2008, 8): the question ‘comment allez-vous?’ [‘how are you?’], for instance, is usually replaced in conversation by colloquial expressions (‘comment ça va?’). In order to establish a connection with the audience, French comic cinema thus favours everyday language, relying heavily on informal and slang terms—even if that means falling into the linguistic vulgarity typical of the ‘Gallic spirit’, a bawdy, rebellious attitude traditionally attributed to the French. Cottin’s irreverent language includes numerous references to sex and to excretion, which when used by a woman convey boldness and insubordination: while Andréa in *Dix pour cent* perplexes her colleagues by suggesting that they fill their competitors’ offices ‘de merde’ [‘with shit’], even the usually well-mannered young woman she plays in *Telle mère, telle fille/Baby Bump* (Noémie Saglio, 2017) rebels against her mother-in-law by shouting profanities (‘Bite! Couille! Sodomie!’ [‘Dick! Balls! Buggeration!’]). This use of language allows the actress to reinforce the sexually transgressive quality of most of her characters: whether involving unrestrained sexuality (*Dix pour cent*, *Larguées*) or even a tendency towards exhibitionism (*Connasse*), Cottin subverts the erotic potential traditionally associated with Parisian women, turning this quality into a tool for social destabilisation. The linguistic aspect of this reappropriation is particularly effective, since Cottin interferes with the very language of Frenchness as it is portrayed in the English-speaking world, where spoken French is often presented as a key element in the perceived sensuality of Parisian women. Language is, for instance, particularly eroticised in the video ‘How to Speak French with Camille Rowe’ posted on *i-D* magazine’s YouTube channel, where the model’s lips appear in close-up while she speaks in French (‘La langue française est sensuelle’ [‘The French language is sensual’]).³ Cottin’s bold use of language turns this dynamic on its head, creating a comic contrast between her delicate, feminine appearance—compatible with the Americanised conception of Frenchness—and her deep voice and *franchouillard* vocabulary—which undermine it.

The language associated with *franchouillard* culture is thus a key component of Cottin’s comedy, allowing her to subvert the Americanised figure of the Parisienne attached to her and to strengthen her bond with her

French audience. This language has determined most of her roles, but is particularly visible in *Connasse, princesse des cœurs* because of its distinctive use of spoken French. This feature film, composed entirely of hidden camera shots, extends Cottin's playing field to the UK, where she is forced to interact with English-speaking characters, swapping her native language for an apparently improvised Franglais. Despite using this hybrid language, her roots in *franchouillard* verbal humour continue to provide the main drive behind the comedy. First of all, the actress infuses her Franglais with jokes that are unintelligible to English-speaking viewers, since they involve wordplay based on typically vulgar, *franchouillard* expressions: for example, she transforms the expletive 'bordel de merde' ['fucking shit'] into 'bordel de shit', and awkwardly translates the expression 'avoir un balai dans le cul' (literally, 'to have a broom up the arse') with the phrase 'you take your balai off your cul'. The humour of these lines of dialogue thus depends on the French audience's familiarity with *franchouillard* language, which remains at the heart of Cottin's comedy even when she is using it in a somewhat different form.

However, the *Connasse* character's *franchouillard* language is actually mixed with English in *Connasse, princesse des cœurs*; and far from being anecdotal, this blending of languages reveals the instability of the character's cultural identity, defined by what are presented as native French characteristics yet inspired by the female comic figures who have emerged from US postfeminist culture, therefore echoing a North American phenomenon. This cultural influence even becomes an issue within the story of the film: although the protagonist is an incorrigible Parisian, she moves to London, shows that she can speak English (with skill when she applies herself) and makes numerous references to the Anglophone postfeminist culture she is so familiar with at various points throughout the film (quoting the film *Dirty Dancing* [Emile Ardolino, 1987], striking a 'Titanic pose' [James Cameron, 1997] on board the ferry bringing her across the English Channel, etc.). The *Connasse* character's Franglais reflects the tension in her national identity in a way comparable to that observed by Michel Chion in the film *Brice de Nice*, also famous for its use of Franglais: both deeply influenced by and out of step with the English-speaking world, the hero's Franglais expresses 'the internal turmoil of the self-conscious Frenchman' faced with the Americanisation of his national culture (Chion 2008, 223). A similar internal struggle seems to underlie the *Connasse* character's Franglais, though in this case it has a firmer patriotic dimension: it reveals the weight of English-language cultural influences on

the character, but also her willingness to resist the erosion of her French identity.

Franchouillardise again plays a decisive role in this assertion of national pride, since beyond the internal identity struggle it reveals, the *Connasse* character's Franglais can also be interpreted as reflecting a form of everyday French chauvinism. In a video interview for French online magazine *Madmoizelle*, Cottin explains that her character's strong French accent and rough English (transforming the phrase 'don't bother me' into 'you don't come pour me déranger', for example) are used in the film to show that she makes no effort to make herself understood, thus revealing a typically French reluctance to speak foreign languages and reinforcing her national identity.⁴ The *Connasse* character also relies on the bellicose language of *franchouillardise* to assert her superiority as a French woman, peppering her Franglais with scathing insults aimed at the English-speaking characters. These characters are thereby unknowingly dragged into verbal duels typical of French comedy films, which give Cottin an unfair advantage as she uses terms they do not understand and cannot respond to: they can only remain silent as she provocatively calls them 'coincés du cul' ['anally retentive'] or 'celluliteux' ['lardasses']. The insults she directs at male characters also have strong homophobic and misogynistic connotations ('coquettes' ['teases'], 'pédés' ['poofs']) that aim to belittle them by feminising them: while these insults are paradoxically delivered by a woman, they can only be seen as descending from the *franchouillard* comedy appropriated by Cottin, a masculine comic tradition relying on a patriarchal use of language. It is important to note that language has traditionally been the most important site of power relations between characters in French cinema: unlike in Hollywood cinema, for example, which uses the gaze as a vehicle for domination (Mulvey 1999 [1975]), French cinema relies on the linguistic arsenal of male characters, who use language to confront one another and above all to dominate female characters, reducing them to silence (Moine 2006, 77–80). Misogynistic insults are therefore a common trait of French comedies and, by extension, of the *franchouillard* tradition adopted by Cottin without any reconsideration: she employs these sexist insults in the majority of her roles, and in a particularly emblematic way in the film *Toute première fois/I Kissed a Girl* (Noémie Saglio and Maxime Govare, 2015), where her character calls her rivals 'pute' ['slag'], 'blondasse' ['bottle-blonde'] and 'catin' ['whore'].

The patriarchal legacy of *franchouillardise* means that the relationship between the performers and the audience is more than one of simple

complicity between compatriots: it is also a relationship of male complicity, which tinges Cottin's performances with a form of misogyny descended from this comic tradition. Faced with the influence of US postfeminism, the *franchouillard* tradition at the heart of the actress's comedy thus raises two intersecting issues: national resistance and gender resistance. *Franchouillardise* allows Cottin to undermine the foreign cultural representations that have influenced her career, asserting her French identity as a means of resisting the threat of Americanisation; simultaneously, however, this aspect of her comedy interferes with the new feminine perspective brought about by imported postfeminism, blunting its subversive quality. Re-evaluating Cottin's ironic Frenchness in light of this observation, it becomes clear that she not only caricatures the Parisienne as an Americanised ideal, but also as a female figure, whose femininity is presented as an object of ridicule in line with the traditions of *franchouillard* comedy. The *Connasse* character is a striking illustration of this dimension of Cottin's comedy: as her insulting name clearly reveals, she is above all a misogynistic caricature, exaggerating the flaws (vanity, selfishness, venality) associated with femininity by patriarchal culture.

CAMILLE COTTIN ABROAD: THE DISINTEGRATION OF HER COMIC PERSONA

Although Cottin subverts the Americanised stereotype of the Parisienne with her *franchouillardise*, her performances convey an inherent misogynistic bias for this very reason. Nonetheless, this *franchouillard* tradition has become an integral element of her comedy, as proven by the fact that her comic persona systematically vanishes when she appears in foreign productions, where *franchouillardise* is impossible to express. Her comic power is evacuated from the purely dramatic roles she has recently been offered in Hollywood (*Stillwater* [Tom McCarthy, 2021], *House of Gucci* [Ridley Scott, 2021])—despite the fact that her international career was launched by the success of her role in *Dix pour cent*, whose comic aspect is obvious. The transformation of Cottin's image outside the realm of French comedy reveals more than just traditional Hollywood typecasting: a similar phenomenon seems to have shaped her role in *Mouche* ('Fly', Canal+, 2019), the adaptation of the British TV series *Fleabag* (BBC Three/Prime Video, 2016–2019). Even though *Mouche* is a comedy series produced in France, it has not been a resounding success: critics have

pointed out that Cottin struggles to achieve the same comic potency as her English-language counterpart, Phoebe Waller-Bridge (for example, Bordages 2019). Yet the French adaptation follows the original script closely, relying on the same distinctive device: at various points throughout each episode, the protagonist expresses herself by addressing the audience directly, breaking the fourth wall to share mischievous, sarcastic comments about the action. The comedy of the original series relies heavily on this process: it allows the female protagonist to take control of the plot and guide its interpretation—thus asserting a form of comic insubordination with respect to the rules of the diegesis—but also, and above all, it serves to build a strong rapport between the audience and the eponymous heroine, which is at the heart of the series’s comic contract. The complicit position viewers are placed in encourages them to identify and laugh along with Fleabag, taking pleasure in her unruly nature. This complicity is reinforced by the status of the actress Phoebe Waller-Bridge: while she was little known at the time of *Fleabag*’s release, promotional interviews for the first season focused mainly on her role as the series’s creator and scriptwriter, as well as on the semi-autobiographical aspect of the main character—‘Fleabag’ was the actress’s childhood nickname (Jung 2016). The blurring of the boundaries between actress and character shapes the show’s humour: it transforms the protagonist’s witticisms into authorial trademarks, and at the same time deepens viewers’ feeling of familiarity by giving the character a stamp of authenticity. This invites them to believe that they are hearing Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s own confessions and strengthens their embrace of her comedy. This feeling of complicity and familiarity is missing in *Mouche*, however: the French adaptation lacks the autobiographical mythology surrounding the original, but as Mimi Kelly and Victoria Souliman point out, the failure of the series is also due to the fact that the audience already know Cottin and perceive her performance as inauthentic, as it does not align with the persona she has developed through her roles in French cinema and television (Kelly and Souliman 2022, 14).

Critics generally agree, however, that Cottin is the ideal actress to take on Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s role, especially because of her characters’ snappy wordplay and sexual independence, which echo the main character’s traits:

Who in France, then, had enough presence to take on the role of the endearing loser, capable of shooting glances directly at the camera and delivering

cynical monologues, all the while getting laid by male partners throughout each episode? Canal+ and Jeanne Herry had the same thought as you and me: it could only be Camille Cottin. (Olité 2019)

But although Cottin is apparently perfectly suited to the role, Kelly and Souliman (2022, 10) argue that the grotesque, even despicable nature of the *Fleabag* character conflicts with Cottin's image as the ideal Parisienne. In the majority of her roles, this figure serves as the basis for the actress's unruly quality, but also for the heterosexual ideal she represents, making her incompatible with *Fleabag*'s 'repulsive' femininity (Kelly and Souliman 2022, 15). In addition, this 'repulsive' femininity derives its comic value from being juxtaposed with Phoebe Waller-Bridge's typically British restraint and awkwardness; but this tension vanishes in Cottin's performance, since her persona is already defined by a form of vulgarity rooted in *franchouillard* culture, which, as we have seen, extends the sexual aspect of her image as a Parisian without producing this kind of antagonistic effect. At the same time, Cottin's failure in *Mouche* is also ascribable to translation issues: director Jeanne Herry chose to remain faithful to the original script and to translate *Fleabag*'s screenplay rigorously, often to the word, without adjusting it to the distinct linguistic qualities of French comedy—preventing Cottin from using the slang and colloquial language her *franchouillard* comedy relies on. Whereas Waller-Bridge addresses viewers with the neutral pronoun 'you', Cottin uses the formal French 'vous', creating distance between her character and the audience. Another difference in register occurs when Cottin's *Mouche* uses the vocabulary of sexuality: the word 'penis' used by Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* to describe the bodies of her lovers has a similarly neutral connotation in English, but a much more formal one when used by *Mouche*—as this kind of vocabulary is usually replaced by slang in spoken French (Chion 2008, 188–189). Revealingly, the only occurrence of vulgar language in the series is in one of the rare added lines: feeling bored while at work in a tea room, *Mouche* tries to amuse her friend and co-worker by offering a customer 'un petit jus de bite' ['a small dick juice']. While this crude language is perfectly consistent with the verbal comedy that typically defines Cottin's performances, it clashes with her overall performance in *Mouche*. This line thus reveals the discrepancy between *Mouche*'s language and Cottin's, whose characteristics are undermined by a translation of the screenplay that is too literal and does not allow for the change in register needed to deploy her *franchouillard* comedy. The translation restricts the actress's persona,

interfering with her ability to inhabit the role: by neglecting the critical work of *franchouillardise* in Cottin's image, *Mouche* ends up creating a conflict between the protagonist and the actress's persona, hindering any sense of comic collusion spectators might feel with her.

By preventing Cottin from expressing the *franchouillard* language that forms the basis of her comic identity, *Mouche* deprives her of the tool she used previously to subvert the figure of the Parisienne and, consequently, brings out the idealised Frenchness that also forms part of her persona—but without any of its usual irony. Instead of her characteristic nervousness, the actress thus delivers a distant, sensual performance, acting out a more fantastical version of the *Fleabag* character, compatible with the eroticised figure of the Parisienne. The story itself is altered in order to make her character more compatible with male desire: several scenes of heterosexual seduction were added to the French version, which highlight the protagonist's link to the ideal of the Parisienne through the attention she receives from men ('T'as du chien, ma colombe!' ['You're full of charm, young maid!']). The shift to a more normative femininity in the French version is also visible in the reception of each series and the terms used to describe the two main actresses: whereas Phoebe Waller-Bridge is presented as 'hilarious' (Gélot 2020), journalists have described Cottin with adjectives such as 'impertinent' (Olivier 2019) and 'biting' (Martin 2019), compatible with a sexualised image of femininity.

Mouche thus reveals the way Cottin's image is reconfigured around an Americanised ideal of Frenchness when deprived of her usual *franchouillard* comedy. This phenomenon goes far beyond the case of *Mouche*, affecting the entirety of her international career, where the distinctive French characteristics of her comedy are inaccessible to viewers. The characters she plays in *Killing Eve* (2018–2022) or *House of Gucci*, for example, are variations on the figure of the Parisienne: although they are not explicitly connected to the city of Paris (or even to France, in the case of *House of Gucci*), they are invariably chic, sexual, assertive women. The only thing left of Cottin's comic persona in these roles is a touch of post-feminist irony, which exists independently from the actress's national identity and is exemplified by the ostensibly standardised entrance of her character Héléne in the series *Killing Eve*, wearing red high-heeled shoes and large dark glasses (see Fig. 4). Cottin's *franchouillard* comedy and her implied rebelliousness, however, are conspicuously absent from these performances.



Fig. 4 Camille Cottin's flashy 'Parisian' chic in *Killing Eve* (S03/E04)

This brief survey of Cottin's international appearances reveals the full extent to which she transforms the figure of the Parisienne in her roles in French cinema and television, taking it into comic territory and, above all, endowing it with a *franchouillard* identity that is an integral part of her comic presence. The actress's roots in *franchouillard* culture allow her to assert her true national identity and to subvert the Anglophone figure of the Parisienne by performing it with visible irony, mocking its intrinsic artificiality with the complicity of French spectators. However, since it is grounded in the physical and linguistic traditions of *franchouillard* comedy, Cottin's 'authentically French' image has ambivalent consequences in terms of gender representations. As a male comic tradition, *franchouillard* comedy allows Cottin to transgress the norms that determine the fantasy of the Parisienne and to transform her character into a subversive figure, but only by means of inherently misogynist comic devices built up by the long line of *franchouillard* actors in whose footsteps she follows. Although ideologically charged, this national tradition serves as the foundation of Cottin's comedy, which collapses when she ventures outside French cinema and its distinct comic heritage: in foreign films and series, the actress's image is reconfigured to conform to the Americanised image of the Parisienne, as the *franchouillard* comedy that has allowed her to undermine this figure is non-viable in an international context.

Cottin's international career thus reveals the fundamental limits of her comic rebelliousness: used to resist the normative influence of postfeminist representations from the English-speaking world, this unruliness allows Cottin to set herself apart from the idealised figure of the Parisienne on the sole condition that she conform to the misogynistic elements of the *franchouillard* tradition in her French roles, thus weakening the subversive potential of female comedy. Although Cottin is unable to completely transform these traditional representations, the tensions surrounding her comic persona are nonetheless revealing. Caught between a fetishised image of Frenchness and a *franchouillard* comic tradition that violently mocks it, she exposes the impossible choice women are forced to make in contemporary patriarchal societies: either submitting to alienating norms of femininity or adopting the oppressive norms of masculinity. By appropriating a comic culture from which women were long excluded, the post-feminist scene to which Cottin belongs thus brings to the forefront a disturbing reflection of the female subjective experience, 'which manages to make one smile at an impossible situation [...], while reminding one that there is no way out' (Melchior-Bonnet 2021, 224).

NOTES

1. Articles consulted in digital versions on the *Factiva* and *Europresse* platforms do not include page references.
2. This definition is taken from the online dictionary *La Langue française*. <https://www.lalanguefrancaise.com/dictionnaire/definition/franchouillard>.
3. Video published on the *i-D* magazine YouTube channel on 24 July 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8CNpNUKoQA>.
4. Video published on the *Madmoizelle* Youtube channel on 28 April 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Iug2zWSQGg>.

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PART IV

Industry Players: From Product to Brand



Depuis que le Streaming Existe? : Gaumont and French Cinema in the Streaming Era

Christopher Meir

To say that the Gaumont Film Company is a fixture in the French cinema landscape would be something of an understatement. The studio has in fact been a constant since the very beginning of the French film industry, and indeed world film history as we know it. As is referenced in its corporate motto—‘depuis que le cinéma existe’ or ‘born with cinema’ in its English-language branding—Gaumont is the world’s longest-running film company, predating Pathé Frères, France’s first corporate superpower in the global film industry, as a registered corporate entity. Since 1895, Gaumont has, with some brief interruptions and occasional changes in corporate strategy, consistently been in the business of making and distributing French films. For significant portions of that time the company also ran cinemas, expanded internationally and produced content for television broadcasters. The dawn of the streaming era—a period in film history that has seen global video-on-demand platforms come to dominate film

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production and consumption—however, finds Gaumont now at the forefront of global audiovisual production. For the first time in its celebrated history, the company's reputation is not based on its work in French cinema, but instead its best-known works internationally and arguably in France as well are its series, particularly those made with the subscription video-on-demand (henceforth (S)VoD) service Netflix. Gaumont's production of the Omar Sy-starring *Lupin* (Netflix, 2021–) has in some ways become the studio's (and the star's) signature work, and as such it joins other internationally famous Gaumont-produced Netflix series such as *Barbaren/Barbarians* (Netflix, 2020–) and the *Narcos* franchise (Netflix, 2015–).

While these series are among the most widely watched series on the global service, Gaumont has also remained an important constituent of French cinema, with its films continuing to post significant admissions figures and win César awards.¹ In 2021, for example, as *Lupin* achieved global notoriety on a scale that few French series (if any) have achieved, Gaumont also released the local box-office hits *Adieu les cons/Goodbye Morons* (Albert Dupontel, 2020) and *OSS 117: alerte rouge en Afrique noire/OSS 117: From Africa with Love* (Nicolas Bedos, 2021), as well as *Illusions perdues/Lost Illusions* (Xavier Giannoli, 2021), which swept the 2022 César awards. The company has thus become one of the world's leading producers of television series while remaining a potent force in French cinema. Crucially, the company has been able to achieve all this in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis that has adversely affected film and television production around the globe and that dealt a severe blow to the cinema exhibition sector of the industry in particular.

This chapter will seek to explore just how, within approximately a single decade, Gaumont has so profoundly reinvented itself while not missing a beat in its core business of producing and releasing French films. To do so, it will first provide a chronicle of this fateful decade, beginning with the unprecedented success of *Intouchables/Untouchable* (Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, 2011) and the decision in 2012 to launch a new television division, and concluding in the present day as the company finds itself a major player simultaneously in global television and French cinema. With this chronology established, and working from a theorisation of the role of producers such as Gaumont as 'intermediaries' of various kinds, the chapter will then turn to highlighting the key creative and corporate relationships that the company has formed during this period, particularly with creative partners such as stars and directors on one hand and buyers/

financiers, particularly (S)VoD platforms such as Netflix, but also later with Amazon and other important global platforms such as Disney+ and Paramount+, on the other. Along the way, this exploration will also allow us to appreciate how Gaumont's collaborations have affected its film output and how the company established a model that its peers in the French industry have tried to follow.

DUMAS TAKES THE HELM: GAUMONT SINCE *INTOUCHABLES*

With its fabled position as the oldest film company in the world, Gaumont has a long history that goes far beyond what can be covered in this chapter. For accounts in English of its role in shaping the earliest days of the global film industry, readers can consult the many fine studies of the period and the role of French studios therein that are found in the field of historiographies of early cinema (see, for instance, Abel 1994; Thompson 1984, and others). Suffice it to say that Gaumont has produced a significant proportion of France's film patrimony—including a library of some 1000 feature films, among other holdings—and was for a long time an important exhibitor, with many cinema halls in France to this day bearing its name, even if, as we will see, the company no longer owns them. Instead, the period that this chapter is concerned with begins with the appointment of Sidonie Dumas as CEO in 2010. Up until this point, Dumas had worked in a number of managerial roles, including as chairperson of the board of directors under her father Nicolas Seydoux, who had been the majority shareholder in the studio since the mid-1970s. One of the first major projects released by Gaumont with Dumas as CEO would be *Intouchables*, which would ultimately gross over \$450 million at the international box office and would spawn a number of remakes, including the US film *The Upside* (Neil Burger, 2017). The broader importance of *Intouchables* to French cinema hardly needs reiterating here, but it should be noted that among its many legacies, this film would help to reshape Gaumont in numerous ways.

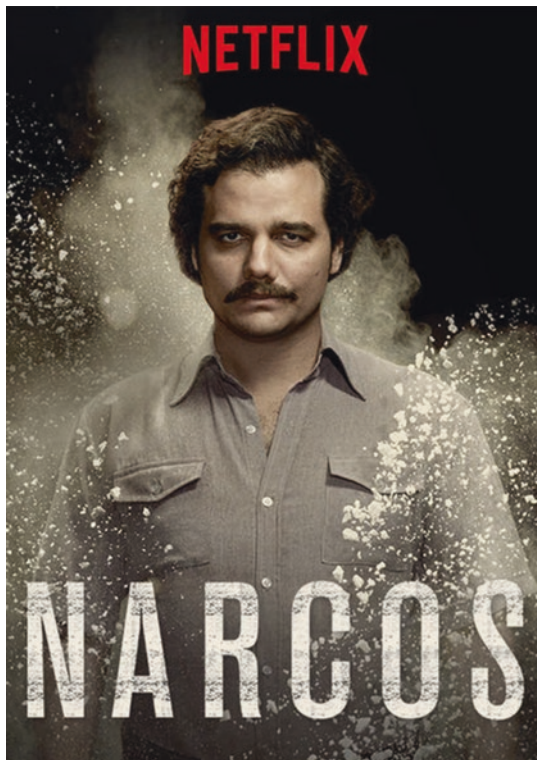
One of these impacts came in the form of the immediate financial windfall that Gaumont reaped from the film's unprecedented box-office success. Gaumont would go on to report record profits for the 2011 fiscal year, with net income doubling from 2010 to €26 million, with the initial success of *Intouchables* in French theatres being cited as the primary driver in this growth (Gaumont 2012, 10). These profits would then be utilised by the company to grow its television production business, which at the

time was only producing cartoon series and made-for-television movies and documentaries for French broadcasters. At the same time that Gaumont was announcing its 2011 profits, Seydoux revealed that the company would be investing in US television production, calling it a lower-risk and generally more stable business than film production and distribution (in Gaumont 2012, 4). Dumas provided more details about the first major international project it had in development: the American horror series *Hemlock Groves* (in Gaumont 2012, 6). This series would later be retitled *Hemlock Grove* and sold to a US (S)VoD company that was taking its first steps as a commissioner of original series, thus becoming one of the first fully-financed original series commissioned by Netflix, alongside famous titles such as *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–2018) and *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–2019).

Hemlock Grove (Netflix, 2013–2015) would run for three seasons on Netflix and was one of three very significant US series produced in the early 2010s by Gaumont. The second of these was the critically acclaimed series *Hannibal* (NBC/AXN, 2013–2015), which attracted a passionate fanbase and became a cult hit of sorts, despite the low ratings that led to its cancellation by NBC after three seasons. The more significant series for our present purposes, however, would be *Narcos* (Netflix, 2015–2017), which would become one of Netflix's most popular original shows at the time of its initial release and would later spawn a sequel series in the form of *Narcos: Mexico* (Netflix, 2018–2021), which was also produced by Gaumont (Fig. 1). For Gaumont, *Narcos* helped to consolidate and deepen its relationship with Netflix while also significantly enhancing its visibility and reputation as a producer of international series. Around this time, Gaumont Animation also began producing *F is for Family* (Netflix, 2015–2021), a series that would ultimately run for five seasons.

Buoyed by the success of Gaumont's experiments in international television production, Dumas announced in 2017 that the company would undertake an important transformation by selling off its interest in the Les Cinémas Gaumont Pathé cinema exhibition business. In announcing the deal—which saw Gaumont sell its stake in the company to fellow shareholder Pathé for a reported \$400 million—the company said it intended to use the proceeds to invest further in film and television production (Hopewell 2017). Gaumont would then embark on an aggressive expansion of its television operations, growing its animation and French television production subsidiaries and forming partnerships and subsidiaries in Latin America, the UK, Italy and Germany (Gaumont 2022, 11). Crucial

Fig. 1 Gaumont produces one of Netflix's first major global hits, and one of its longest-running franchises, with *Narcos*



to the commercial fortunes of these partnerships and subsidiaries was Gaumont's relationship with Netflix specifically and the growing content needs of the global (S)VoD platforms generally. Netflix commissions to arise from these increased development activities so far include French series such as the aforementioned *Lupin*, which became a blockbuster success for the (S)VoD service, as well as docuseries such as *Move* (Netflix, 2020–), the British series *Damage* (Netflix, 2022), the German series *Barbarians* and animated series such as *Samurai Rabbit* (Netflix, 2022–), among others. These partnerships have also produced series with Amazon (e.g. the Chilean series *El presidente/The President* [Amazon Prime Video, 2020–], the animated series *Do Re & Mi* [Amazon Prime Video, 2021–] and the French drama series *Totems* [Amazon Prime Video, 2021–]), Disney+ (a forthcoming scripted series about Karl Lagerfeld) and at least

four series to come for Paramount+ (Vivarelli 2022). The company has also produced the animated series *Stillwater* (2020–2023) for Apple TV+ and a range of series and made-for-television movies for pay-television and broadcast television channels in France, Germany and the UK.

Gaumont's television operations have thus turned the company from a film studio producing almost exclusively in France to a multinational producer with operations in seven countries.² To take just one data point that demonstrates this 'postnational' position on Gaumont's part, the company generated about €16 million in revenue outside France in 2011, about 13 per cent of its overall total for that year (Gaumont 2012, 11), whereas in 2021, the company reported that 79 per cent of its revenues came from outside France (Gaumont 2022, 51). Crucially, the latter figure includes television series production, which now makes up the majority of the company's revenues. To dramatise just how much this part of the company's business has grown, a comparison with 2011 is once again instructive. In that year, Gaumont reported about €6 million in revenue from the production of television series of various kinds, all of which were made for French television networks (Gaumont 2012, 11), a figure that constituted less than five per cent of its overall revenue. By way of comparison, in 2021 the company generated about €195 million from television production and distribution, approximately 73 per cent of its overall total turnover (Gaumont 2022, 20). While it could be said that 2021 was an anomalous year for the balance of film and television income—French cinemas were closed for about 21 weeks due to the COVID-19 crisis—this reliance on television production was part of a decade-long trend at Gaumont.

GAUMONT AND FRENCH CINEMA IN THE STREAMING ERA

By 2021 Gaumont was thus more of a television producer than a film producer and distributor; it was also more of an international corporation than a French one. What has this meant for its French cinema business? As was shown at the outset of the chapter, Gaumont's presence in French cinema has not declined during this period, and indeed the company has consistently released about 10–12 French films annually throughout this period, and among these films there are to be found many critical and commercial successes. How do we reconcile these two seemingly paradoxical facts? Firstly, we should begin by discarding the notion that success in either television or film necessarily precludes success in the other

medium/industry. Instead of looking for evidence of a zero-sum game between film and television at Gaumont, we should instead reframe the question so that it is more concerned with understanding the relationship between the company's activities in the two media. Similarly, against the widespread perception in popular cultural discourses surrounding Netflix and (S)VoD generally that sees the company and streaming generally as threats to the industrial ecosystem of cinema, we should take a more open-minded approach to asking how the growing power of global (S)VoD services has affected Gaumont's film output.

The remainder of the chapter will seek to take both of these approaches and in the process of doing so, it will focus on two kinds of relationships that Gaumont has formed in this period, one creative and one commercial, that have shaped both its film and television output in the streaming era. This examination of the work of a producer through the lens of relationships grows out of a theoretical understanding of the labour of the producer as fundamentally that of an 'intermediary' who mediates between the various agents who create and consume films and series (Spicer et al. 2014). Instead of positing the producer as an authorial figure, this theorisation holds that producers form relationships with partners such as stars, directors and writers as well as other creative agents, while also developing and maintaining relationships with financiers, distributors and other industrial agents. Producer labour is thus concerned with connecting all of these otherwise disparate segments of the film industry and film culture.

To return to Gaumont and its two key relationships, we can begin with the creative relationships that have underpinned the company's overall output in both media during this period. While Gaumont has developed numerous relationships with directors, producers, writers and other personnel that have been significant in their contemporary work in French cinema, perhaps none has been more visible and important in recent years than the company's association with star Omar Sy. Sy was of course the breakthrough star of *Intouchables* and the relationship he then formed with Gaumont marks yet another important legacy of the film, as shortly after it became such a massive hit, Gaumont and Sy began looking for projects on which they could collaborate in the future. One of those was Sy's idea of rebooting the Arsène Lupin stories in some form or another (Leonard 2021). Developing this idea would take a number of years to accomplish, but in the meantime, Sy would go on to make four more films with Gaumont: starring in *Samba* (Olivier Nakache and Eric Toldano, 2014)—which reunited Sy with the writer-directors of

Intouchables—Chocolat/Monsieur Chocolat (Roschdy Zem, 2016), as well as making a guest appearance as himself in *Tout simplement noir/Simply Black* (Jean-Pascal Zadi and John Wax, 2020). Later, following closely on the heels of *Lupin*'s global success, Sy would star in the Gaumont production *Tirailleurs/Father and Soldier* (Mathieu Vadepied, 2022). While these were all commercially viable propositions due to Sy's appearance in the films, the projects were very political works that reflected critically on race in contemporary France and French history, with Sy often speaking in interviews promoting the films about the personal dimension these issues and the narratives on the whole had for him as the child of Senegalese immigrants (see, for instance, Keslassy 2021).

We can thus see this partnership as a symbiotic one that helped Gaumont to make numerous critically and commercially successful films, while also producing one of the most important French series of this period. From Sy's point of view, he was able to leverage this studio relationship in ways that helped to enhance his already considerable international profile while also getting films that were of personal import made. Helping the star in this way also helps Gaumont to keep Sy working on *Lupin*, which is currently slated for a second season on Netflix, while Gaumont is also developing possible spin-offs for future series (Wiseman 2022). While few of the creative relationships Gaumont possesses in contemporary French cinema are as visible as the one with Sy, many other creative personnel have worked across the company's production for cinema and television, such as writer/director Fred Cavayé, who directed a number of genre films for the studio, including *A bout portant/Point Blank* (2010), as well as creating the series *Nox* (Canal+, 2018) for the company. As the last decade has been generally one of industrial and artistic convergence between television and film in Europe and around the world, it is perhaps not surprising to find that so many are working in both media, but producers like Gaumont play a vital role as intermediaries in facilitating the casting and staffing of the works in both media and therefore in driving that convergence.

Gaumont was able to connect Sy with Netflix in part because the company had already established a commercial partnership with the service with its aforementioned early collaborations on Netflix Original series. Beyond helping to maintain its creative relationship with stars like Sy, this relationship has also had a multifaceted impact on Gaumont's French film output during this period. This is most clearly evident in the Netflix 'Original' films that Gaumont has produced. As has been noted by

numerous scholars, Netflix uses the branding of films and series as ‘original’ works in ways that are loose and often misleading (Petruska and Woods 2019). A film that has been labelled as a Netflix Original can be a work that was fully financed by the platform, one for which the company has purchased all distribution rights while not actually participating in the production, or a work that is only distributed by Netflix in some parts of the world, with other permutations of financing and distribution possible. Gaumont has made numerous Netflix Original films using a number of different financial and contractual relationships.

The company has to date made three films with Netflix that were fully financed and distributed exclusively by the latter company. These include the French-set documentary feature *Les Rois de l’arnaque/Lords of Scam* (Guillaume Nicloux, 2021); *Point Blank* (Joe Lynch, 2019), an English-language remake of the aforementioned 2010 film *A bout portant*; and a Spanish-language remake of *Burn Out* (Yann Gozlan, 2017) entitled *Centauro/Centaur* (Daniel Calparsoro, 2022), which Gaumont co-produced with Spanish partners Borsalino Productions. The company also has an animated feature—*High in the Clouds* (Timothy Reckart)—currently in production with Netflix that will be produced in this way. Gaumont has also sold all global rights (i.e. including France) for one of its features to Netflix, namely *Bronx/Rogue City* (Olivier Marchal, 2020). The majority of the company’s film work with Netflix, however, have been films for which Gaumont handled French distribution (where the film was released in theatres and followed the French media chronology [*chronologie des médias*], the traditional release pattern that sees films made available across a series of retail ‘windows’ in a certain order and after prescribed windows of time) and then sold some or all of the international distribution rights to Netflix. Films distributed in this way include *Burn Out*, *La Vie scolaire/School Life* (Mehdi Idir and the Grand Corps Malade, 2019), *Mystère/Vicky and Her Mystery* (Denis Imbert, 2021) and the aforementioned *Tout simplement noir*.

These deals represent just a few of the dozens that Netflix has made to grow its French ‘original’ content, a growing branch of its overall library, and, as will be discussed later in the chapter, Gaumont is not alone among the major French studios in supplying original films to Netflix. But what do these deals mean for Gaumont itself? Before answering that question, some explanation of the various kinds of deals and their respective advantages and drawbacks is in order. Put crudely, films fully financed by Netflix represent the least risky arrangement for Gaumont because Netflix absorbs

all the costs and takes all the distribution risk, but these deals also offer no opportunity for major commercial success as Netflix does not at present release films in theatres or sell them individually to users. This type of production is thus typically low-risk and brings only a mediocre reward as Netflix is known to pay above the cost of production in order to ensure the producers profit from the project, but there are no further revenues that can be obtained from the films.³ Global acquisitions function in a similar way, in the sense that the producers give up the potential to generate profits from selling the films in question to different outlets; the risk is somewhat higher for the producer as they have to get the film made without having guaranteed sales for it—though in the long run, the ownership of the film often returns to the producers. Finally, the model of retaining some distribution rights and selling others offers the producer the opportunity to profit from the film’s theatrical release in some territories (typically those in which the film was produced), while not facing the risk of the film failing to sell well in others. In the ideal scenario for the producer, the film does well in the home territories, leading to profits for the producer on top of what they received from Netflix for the international rights. For this reason, producers in Europe report that this is the most desirable model for making original films for streaming services (Meir 2023).

With this understanding of producer business models in mind, we can observe that Gaumont seems to have been very shrewd in its dealings with Netflix when it comes to original films. Firstly, leaving aside for now the two remakes, Gaumont has done relatively little film work that has been fully financed by Netflix and which were not remakes, with only a low-budget documentary film (the feature *Les Rois de l’arnaque*) and what is reported to be an ‘ambitious’ and therefore likely expensive computer-animated feature (*High in the Clouds*) having been made with Netflix money. The majority of its deals have been made in the mixed distribution model. Among these films are *La Vie scolaire* and *Tout simplement noir*, each of which did well at the French box office (1.8 million and 760,000 admissions, respectively) but which also faced numerous challenges when it came to international distribution. These challenges included their themes of race, class and French immigration, but also the complex and uncertain path that faced films that were released internationally during the COVID-19 crisis, which shuttered theatres around the world and left audiences wary about returning to the cinema in those countries that reopened their doors during 2020. The industrial fallout from COVID

was also a major factor in Gaumont's decision to sell all world rights to *Bronx* to Netflix. With theatres closed and a growing backlog of films waiting for theatrical releases in France, all films were risky investments in 2020, but few more so than *Bronx*, which had a reported budget of \$13 million (Kesslassy 2019), a high number by French standards. While the financial details of the film's sale to Netflix have yet to be disclosed publicly, the simple fact that Gaumont was able to recoup anything from the film represented a positive outcome given the state of the exhibition industry at the time.

Getting *Bronx* distributed during the chaotic year of 2020 is just one example of how working with streaming platforms has helped Gaumont to address a long-standing problem for the company: the inability to consistently export its films to markets beyond France. The anomalous success of *Intouchables* notwithstanding, few Gaumont films in recent years have had a great deal of international success, with proceeds from international sales of its French movies consistently making up a small portion of its revenues. By selling such works to Netflix, Gaumont has been able to monetise its works without the risks that come with traditional film distribution. Another long-standing problem that Gaumont has been able to address with help from Netflix has been with the monetisation of its back catalogue of French films. Netflix has directly licensed some of these for use on its French service, while also licensing titles in other markets as well. Moreover, the remakes Gaumont has produced with Netflix can also be seen in this context, as the company was able to generate ancillary revenues from two library titles. In this way, Gaumont has participated in a larger trend in the European and US film industries that has seen those studios which possess large back catalogues of films attempt to use remakes in particular as a strategy to extract more value from those holdings (see Meir 2021).

Between these film-based collaborations and the numerous series that Gaumont has produced for Netflix, the relationship between the two companies has thus been a fruitful one. In fact, Gaumont has in the past reported Netflix to be (by some distance) its biggest individual buyer, far exceeding other companies in France or elsewhere, as was seen in 2019 when sales to Netflix made up some 46 per cent of the company's revenue with no other company being responsible for more than 10 per cent of Gaumont's revenues (Gaumont 2020, 49). Dumas's intention to grow this relationship way back in 2012 has thus paid off in spades, resulting in a prolific partnership and one that has helped Gaumont to address some

of its long-standing distribution problems, while also helping the French studio to mitigate some of the economic damage caused by COVID.

GAUMONT'S PLATFORM ORIGINAL FILMS AND CONTEMPORARY FRENCH CINEMA

Whatever impact these film deals have had on Gaumont's business, the question still remains as to what artistic and cultural impacts these films have had on French cinema more broadly, particularly as seen outside France, where Gaumont itself has managed the distribution of the majority of films. In attempting to answer this question, this section of the chapter will address not only the Netflix Original films that Gaumont has produced, but also *Overdose* (Olivier Marchal, 2022), a film that the company produced for Amazon Prime Video (Fig. 2). Surveying this corpus, there are two tendencies that can be discerned, tendencies that are broadly in line with other French original films commissioned and acquired by Netflix. In this way and in keeping with one of its core overall premises, this part of the chapter will also demonstrate that the tendencies found in Gaumont's original film production are emblematic of the broader impact that streaming services are having on French cinema as we know it.

The first of these tendencies is one that has thrust race and ethnicity to the forefront of the representations found in French films. Observers of Netflix's commissioning strategies will perhaps not be surprised by this finding as the company's work has long been shaped by a pronounced interest in multiracial casting and other forms of diversity in terms of on-screen and off-screen representation (Jenner 2018, 171–176). Indeed, these efforts have become very important to Netflix's self-promotional efforts, with the company going as far as commissioning studies of its (US) films and series in order to highlight its achievements in inclusion and the ways in which it could improve on this front (Smith et al. 2021). *Tout simplement noir* is perhaps the most obvious example of this larger tendency to be found among Gaumont's Netflix films, but it is also a core theme in *La Vie scolaire*, which deals with the parallel lives of the working-class, multiracial and largely first- and second-generation immigrant student body at a secondary school in the *banlieue* of Saint Denis and their middle-class but also multiracial teachers, who are also often the children of immigrants to France. Race and immigration are of course also prominent themes in *Lupin*, as they are in a large number of Netflix Original

Fig. 2 Gaumont reunited much of the creative team behind *Bronx* for *Overdose*, which it produced for Amazon Prime Video



films from France. Such can be seen in *Divines* (Houda Benyamina, 2016), the first film Netflix acquired as an original film from the country, along with numerous other examples, including *Banlieusards/Street Flow* (Kery James and Leïla Sy, 2019), one of the first French films that Netflix fully financed. A short list of other significant examples would include the controversial film *Mignonnes/Cuties* (Maïmouna Doucouré, 2020), other auteur works such as *Une fille facile/An Easy Girl* (Rebecca Zlotowski, 2019) and *Shéhérazade* (Jean-Bernard Marlin, 2018), as well as numerous others.⁴

Race and racial conflict also play a part in the second tendency found in Gaumont's original films for streaming platforms, but the ideological treatment of these themes is decidedly more ambiguous than their seemingly 'progressive' representations seen in the first tendency. Here I am

referring to the action films that Gaumont has produced for and/or sold to Netflix and Amazon. Gaumont has sold two such films in their original form to Netflix: *Burn Out* and *Bronx*; it has also remade two of its French library titles for Netflix (the previously discussed *Point Blank* and *Centauro*) and has agreed to produce another film in this genre for Amazon: *Overdose*, which will be directed by *Bronx*'s director Olivier Marchal. Finally, with its depiction of organised criminals who move from wire fraud to murder, *Les Rois de l'arnaque* could be described as sharing many elements in common with the action films, even if it is a documentary. These films are part of a larger corpus of French action cinema that has been sought after by Netflix, with the company counting numerous examples of the genre by French filmmakers among its catalogue of original films. These include a number of films directed by Julien Leclercq (*Braqueurs/The Crew* [2015], *La Terre et le sang/Earth and Blood* [2020] and *Sentinelle* [2021]), who has proven himself something of a favourite of the company, leading to a relationship that involved Leclercq writing and producing *Braqueurs/Gangland* (Netflix, 2021–), a series remake of his film *The Crew*. Other prominent examples include *Balle perdue/Lost Bullet* (Guillaume Pierret, 2020, examined by Charlie Michael's chapter in this volume), which is being turned into a trilogy by Netflix after the success of the first film on the service; the French box-office hit *Bac Nord/The Stronghold* (Cédric Jimenez, 2020); and *Loin du périph/The Take Down* (Louis Leterrier, 2022), a star vehicle for Omar Sy, and the first film made as part of a multi-picture deal the star made with Netflix following the success of *Lupin*.

Among this group are to be found films that contrast very sharply with Netflix's self-promotion as a home to progressive representations of race. While there are some exceptions, the majority of them feature representational politics that are much more problematic than those seen in films like *Tout simplement noir* or *La Vie scolaire*. They often feature Black and darker-complexioned inner-city men as murderous villains, whereas protagonists are cast as White or light-complexioned men of North African descent. Such a schema can be seen in Leclercq's films *Les Braqueurs* and *La Terre et le sang*, where characters played by Sami Bouajila face off against Black street gang members. It is also notable that *Bac Nord*, a film that received highly dubious praise from Marine Le Pen on its release in France, features prominently within this corpus. Within this context, Gaumont's contributions are less problematic than others, in the sense of having multiple sympathetic Black characters, but still nonetheless feature

White protagonists and both Romany (*Burn Out*) and Black (*Bronx*) antagonists.

While reliable viewing figures are notoriously hard to come by for streaming services generally and Netflix in particular, French action films do seem to be very popular on the service, at least relative to other films that were not made in English. In 2020, for example, Netflix released a list of its most popular non-English-language films in the USA, three of which were French action films: *Balle perdue*, *Les Braquers* and *Bronx* (Grater 2020). Gaumont's *Burn Out* was also one of the first examples of the genre to arrive on Netflix, preceded only by Leclercq's *Les Braquers*, thus helping to solidify the national genre's place on the world's biggest (S) VoD service. With that place now seemingly well established, Amazon is following Netflix's lead in producing *Overdose* with Gaumont, a film that, besides sharing a director with *Bronx*, also features a plot involving smugglers racing against the police to deliver drugs from Spain to France, thus closely resembling those of *Burn Out* and *Balle perdue*.

* * *

It should be abundantly clear by now that Gaumont played a central part in many trends that have characterised the streaming era in the global audiovisual industry generally—those being the convergence between the film and television industries and the reliance on streaming services to export new films and to monetise older films—and in French cinema specifically, namely tendencies contributing towards diverse representations of multiracial France and the growing popularity of the action genre. Gaumont's trailblazing role can be seen in the many ways the company's corporate rivals in France have imitated its strategic moves during this period. StudioCanal, for example, forcefully moved into series production shortly after Gaumont made its move (Meir 2019, 106–111) and has also sold numerous films made in both English and French to Netflix and Amazon for international distribution, works that include the aforementioned *The Stronghold*, *Le Monde est toi/The World is Yours* (Romain Gavras, 2018) and others.⁵ Pathé has likewise used Netflix's financial and distribution muscle to co-produce the forthcoming reboot of the *Astérix and Obélix* franchise, entitled *Astérix & Obélix: l'Empire du Milieu/Asterix and Obelix: The Middle Kingdom* (Guillaume Canet, 2023), while the company has also made the Dany Boon star vehicle *8 Rue de l'Humanité/Stuck Together* (Boon, 2021) for Netflix directly, as well as

producing a series about the Notre-Dame cathedral fire for the platform. All the French studios have also followed Gaumont's lead in finding ways to remake films that often end up on streaming services in one form or another, typified by Pathé's *CODA* (Sian Heder, 2021), a remake of *La Famille Bélier/The Bélier Family* (Eric Lartigau, 2014), which of course won an Oscar for Apple TV+ and Pathé (see Gemma King's chapter in this collection), or the forthcoming remake of *Les Invisibles/The Invisibles* (Louis-Julien Petit, 2018), a film sold to Netflix by Wild Bunch.

By acting as a pioneer in this new era, and shifting so quickly and decisively to the business models and creative strategies that would allow the company not only to weather the challenges presented by streaming but also to mitigate the dangers of the COVID-19 crisis, Gaumont has distinguished itself as one of the most important companies of the period. It is difficult to speculate about hypotheticals, but it is very probable that Gaumont would not have formed the relationship it did with Netflix if the company hadn't committed to series production in the early 2010s, and likewise, the company was surely spared the worst of the COVID impacts by no longer owning theatres and also having the contacts needed to shift its riskiest film project at the time to streaming. While Gaumont is made up of thousands of employees whose labour drives the organisation and oversees its creative output, CEO Sidonie Dumas also deserves a great deal of credit for her strategic vision that led to the company's current successes. Other chapters in this collection have highlighted important women in French cinema, but as a closing point it is worth noting that very little is said in either French cinema scholarship or journalism about the lack of women in the boardrooms of the national industry. Working in a male-dominated industry (particularly at the management level) and as the heiress to an already well-established family business, Dumas could easily have been complacent and continued following her family's lead. Instead, she took bold risks that have paid off handsomely, transforming the world's oldest film company into one of the leading European studios at the dawn of the streaming era. When the historiographies of the period are written, they must therefore include Dumas as one of its most important figures.

NOTES

1. In a letter to shareholders to recap the company's performance in the fourth quarter of 2020, Netflix highlighted both *Barbarians* and *Lupin* as very popular non-English-language original series (Netflix 2021, 3).
2. It should be mentioned that Gaumont has participated in the production of a number of English-language features over the last ten years, including *The Death of Stalin* (Armando Iannucci, 2017), among others. Such films, however, make up only a small part of the studio's output, which is still overwhelmingly made in French.
3. It should be noted that most of the series commissioned by global (S)VoD platforms, including those made with Amazon and Netflix, are funded with this financing model and that Gaumont has likely given up the ability to reap long-term profits from those series.
4. For an overview of a number of French Netflix films that embody this trend, see Meir (2022).
5. While the company's name often appears in print as 'StudioCanal', following the wishes of the company itself, expressed through its Communications team while I was working on previous publications about the company, I refer to it as Studiocanal.

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Netflix's *Lupin*: Cultural Heritage and Internationalisation in the Age of Global (S)VoD Platforms

David Pettersen

Netflix's series *Lupin* (2021–) about a gentleman thief has become a global success, reportedly generating over 70 million viewers worldwide in the 28 days that followed its initial release. Based on a series of turn-of-the-twentieth-century popular novels well known to French audiences, the series features Omar Sy, France's best-known and most bankable star.

This chapter grew out of the conclusion to my book *French B-Movies: Universalism, Suburban Spaces, and the Challenge of Hollywood* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2023). I am grateful to the press for permission to reuse a few paragraphs here in slightly modified form.

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The series's success has extended to several markets, with Sy reporting in an interview that he received fan messages from as far away as Brazil and Columbia (Roxborough 2021). The series also did well in French-speaking African countries. Journalist Geneviève Sagnò writing for BBC Afrique calls attention to individual tweets by Senegalese politician Macky Sall and Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour that celebrate *Lupin*, Sy and his career following the series's drop (Sagnò 2021). Replies to official English-language tweets about *Lupin* on Sy's public Twitter account are in a mix of languages, including English, French and Spanish, and it is clear from reading through the tweets that most (though not all) users responded positively to the series and to Sy's performance (Sy [@OmarSy] 2021). While Sy was somewhat familiar to international audiences following the surprise success of Olivier Nakache and Eric Tolédano's film *Intouchables/Untouchable* in 2011, *Lupin* represents his breakout international hit, especially after relocating to Los Angeles in the early 2010s. There, he made several English-language films over the past decade, such as *Jurassic World* (Colin Trevorrow, 2015) and *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Bryan Singer, 2014), that failed to catapult him into starring roles in international mainstream cinema.

It is somewhat surprising that, despite Sy's efforts to learn and work in English, a French-language series would garner him so much visibility. Of course, international viewers could choose to watch the series dubbed into local languages, but beyond the question of language, *Lupin* is an important media object through which to understand the commissioning and media localisation practices of subscription video-on-demand ((S)VoD) platforms in the early 2020s. The series manages to be locally specific to France while also remaining postnational in its accessibility to different audiences around the world. Unlike the cultural mishmash of Europudding films from the early 2000s like *L'Auberge espagnole/The Spanish Apartment* (Cédric Klapisch, 2002), or the cultural genericness of entertainment films destined for international markets, such as EuropaCorp's *Transporter* films from the 2000s, cultural embeddedness in *Lupin* is not an obstacle to the international circulation of long-form serial television. Rather, cultural references anchored in the category of the nation help localise the series for different international audiences, though not always in the same ways.

INTERNATIONALISATION PRACTICES

In the age of simultaneous worldwide release of films and series on (S)VoD platforms, questions of media localisation take on increased urgency. The first issue that scholars most often examine when considering localisation is the translation of language and cultural references through subtitling, dubbing and remixing. These are certainly important aspects of how media is localised for different markets, though they are hardly the only ones. Media scholars Andrea Esser, Ian Robert Smith and Miguel Bernal-Merino describe how localisation studies has long been a fragmented field across different disciplines. Media translation studies approached localisation through questions of language subtitling and dubbing, video-game studies focused on issues of language and interface design, and film and television studies examined practices of remakes and adaptations (Esser et al. 2016, 6–8). All these issues are relevant to Netflix's *Lupin*, and the series invites an adaptation studies approach not just because it is an adaptation of a series of novels but also because these novels have been adapted to the screen many times over the course of the twentieth century.

While I will discuss some issues of adaptation in this chapter, I want to expand the purview of localisation beyond a narrow focus on translation or adaptation to include other aspects of the distribution, exhibition and reception processes, including promotional campaigns, newspaper reviews and, at even the smallest level of scale, individual acts of interpretation. In the age of global media circulation through (S)VoD platforms that seek to reach multiple audiences simultaneously, I contend that we need a different term to think about the production processes at play, because increasingly, localisation is not something that happens after the production of media content is completed. Rather, it involves a series of decisions and practices that occur throughout the production process. Consequently, I have found the related term internationalisation helpful, especially as it has been used in the software design industry.

To appreciate why this term might be useful, we first need to distinguish between two broad categories of media that (S)VoD platforms offer to their subscriber base: content produced in local contexts that (S)VoD platforms *acquire* for distribution, and content that (S)VoD platforms *commission* for production in local contexts and then distribute internationally. The distinction between the two is not absolute, but it points to the level of creative influence or control the (S)VoD platform has upstream in the pre-production process. The distinction is difficult to draw because

streaming companies often obscure a series's country of origin, branding everything as a Netflix, Amazon or Hulu 'original'. *Acquired* content aligns with the more familiar sense of localisation as consisting of the translation of language (subtitles and dubbing) after a film or series is complete. (S)VoD platforms like Netflix that acquire and then localise international series have enabled a kind of golden age of global viewership for international films and series, especially as the pandemic halted media production and subscribers were hungry for new content. In the case of Netflix, *Dix pour cent/Call My Agent!* (France Télévisions/Netflix, 2015–2020) or *Engrenages/Spiral* (Canal+, 2005–2020) are examples of acquired series (though the latter is no longer available on Netflix in the USA). *Dix pour cent* is branded within the Netflix app as a Netflix Original series, highlighting the challenges of unpacking the production history of a series solely based on the metadata within a streaming app.

By contrast, when a (S)VoD platform like Netflix *commissions* a film or series, the content may be produced in a specific geographic and cultural context, but it is also created to circulate in many different markets. *Commissioned* content thus typically involves a series of decisions throughout the pre-production, production and post-production processes that facilitate localisation. In the realm of software design, developers prefer the term *internationalisation* to *localisation* to describe this approach, and the term can, in my view, help us better understand the multiple audiences sought by commissioned series. For example, the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the organisation that sets the standards for the World Wide Web, explains in one of its policy documents that when embarking on a process of internationalisation, 'you design or develop your content, application, specification, and so on, in a way that ensures it will work well for, or can be easily adapted for, users from any culture, region, or language'.¹ In their view, 'internationalization [...] enables easy localization for target audiences' (my emphasis).² As I adapt this term to think about the media production process, I would add that internationalisation also requires a consideration of interface: both how media objects reach audiences (theatrical release, television release, (S)VoD platforms, disc); how the formal and stylistic choices of a media object play in different markets (questions of adaptation, remakes, genre, casting and stardom); and finally how media objects interact with local, regional and global capital flows (funding, subventions, profits and reinvestment of profits).

Lupin, released six years after Netflix's 2014 launch in the French market, exemplifies the kinds of postnational series that have emerged from

production practices of internationalisation. Netflix was the first among US-based streaming platforms, which also include Amazon, Hulu and Apple, to move into localised media production outside the USA as a way of expanding its subscriber base globally (Scarлата et al. 2021, 138–139). While one might reasonably anticipate culturally generic films and series as the natural outcome of a strategy of simultaneous global release, content commissioners do not see a disconnect between the embeddedness of media in a local culture and the global circulation of media. While not every local in-reference makes it into the final cut of a series or film, Kelly Luegenbiehl, Netflix's Vice President of International Originals, has said that 'the more local that we are and the more specific we are, the more universal we actually are' (in Scarлата et al. 2021, 140). Local embeddedness that later supports global circulation can take many forms, including famous directors, recognisable actors or stars, adaptations or remakes of well-known local series or novels, iconic locations, use of genre codes and inclusive casting practices.

Conversations about internationalisation begin at the earliest stages of production and continue throughout the process. In the case of *Lupin*, George Kay, the series's creator and showrunner, originally hails from the UK, and in an interview with *Le Monde*, he highlighted the importance of collaboration in making the series appeal to different audiences outside France. However, French audiences were not neglected. Kay points to the importance of the writing team, including French screenwriters like François Uzan, who collectively ensured that the France in the series would be recognisable for those living in and beyond the Hexagon (Sotinel 2021). The first three episodes were directed by Louis Leterrier, who has experience in France directing movies for EuropaCorp (*The Transporter*, 2002, and *Transporter 2*, 2005) and has made films in Hollywood (*The Incredible Hulk*, 2008).

In addition to carefully managing the production process, Netflix's interest in internationalisation extends to the localisation of production itself, hiring local talent and opening production offices throughout the world. In the case of France, Netflix opened an office in Paris in January 2020 after several years of tense relations with the French media industry and its protectionist policies. The relationship between Netflix and the French industry had a rocky start in 2017 when the Cannes Film Festival refused to screen Netflix-produced films in competition because they had never been released in theatres (Cousin 2018, 1–5). Netflix chose not to release those films in French theatres because that would have locked them

into France's strict media chronology, which regulates the timeframe when a film can be commercialised in secondary media markets such as disc rentals, private pay-channel broadcast, public television broadcast and of course VoD release. These debates are still ongoing and a full engagement with them would take this chapter too far afield. What is important for the purposes at hand is that Netflix's opening of a French office represents an instance of localisation in the sense of entering and working within a local media industry, including the regulatory structures that govern it. In the case of *Lupin*, Netflix hired Gaumont Television to produce the series, working with rather than against local media companies.³

Gaumont had long been interested in a new adaptation of the *Lupin* novels, and Sy had expressed interest in the role shortly after the success of *Intouchables* that the French studio also produced. Work had begun before Netflix came on board, but when Netflix arrived, they were not happy with the direction of the series's screenplays, and they invited Kay to take over. In coming to the series, Kay talks about being utterly seduced by Sy's charisma, suggesting that his stardom was central to how Kay and his team adapted the novels (Sotinel 2021). Casting France's best-known Black star in the role of Lupin has important consequences for how the series was produced and later circulated. By transforming the character into the twenty-first-century son of a Senegalese immigrant, it participates in the postnational trends discussed by Mary Harrod's and Christopher Meir's chapters in this volume of making diasporic actors more visible in mainstream French media. Furthermore, it frames the series as a tale of social integration, a key element of Sy's star persona. Finally, it aligns with the way Netflix uses inclusive casting as a central element of its internationalisation strategy.

Netflix is widely known for its desire to curate a racially, culturally and linguistically diverse catalogue. In a 2016 event in Seoul, Ted Sarandos, the co-CEO and Chief Content Officer of Netflix, explained the reason for this commitment by noting that half of Netflix's subscriber base is outside the USA and that international subscribers are essential for the company's growth. In his view, being a global (S)VoD service requires a different approach to casting, one that favours inclusivity and diversity. Sarandos suggested that while traditional Hollywood studios have experienced ongoing difficulties moving towards more inclusive representation in front of and behind the cameras, Netflix has an edge in this regard, and the company will only seek to become more diverse and inclusive in the casting of its series and films (in Hyo-won 2016). While Netflix's casting

practices support the fight against systemic racism in the USA, they also make economic sense for a streaming company that releases content simultaneously in many markets around the world, not all of them countries in which White communities are the dominant social group. This has led many of Netflix's Original series to the practice of what the media scholars Alexa Scarlata, Ramon Lobato and Stuart Cunningham call 'circulation-based casting', that is, the use of a diverse and international cast of actors who are well known in different local markets and who often speak in accented English or another language (Scarlata et al. 2021, 145).

Despite *Lupin*'s postnational production process, the series is remarkable for just how French it is. The Netflix series was made in French rather than in English, and the casting choices reflect a diverse blend of French acting talent. The actors in this series include three familiar French actresses, Clotilde Hesme, Nicole Garcia and Ludivine Sagnier, known for their roles in several mainstream and auteurist films, as well as the male performers Vincent Londez, who is best known for his television work in French and Belgian crime series; Fargass Assandé, an Ivorian actor and director known for his theatrical work; and of course Sy. These casting choices represent an attempt to appeal to different types of domestic and international viewers that watch the kinds of media the actors are known for. The series itself also mixes many different genres from one episode to the next, moving freely among family melodrama, romantic comedy, action, comedy, thriller and police procedural.

Lupin has Sy's character, Assane Diop, adopt disguises drawn from different social classes. In the first episode, Sy's character poses as a caretaker who works at the Louvre. Later in the same episode, the character re-disguises himself as a tech millionaire, closer to the high society gentleman thief of Maurice Leblanc's original novels. For Assane Diop, social class and cultural distinctions seem to pose no barriers; his talent for theft has given him access to wealth, and his education makes it possible for him to imitate members of the upper class. Yet the character never forgets his roots as the son of a Senegalese immigrant, and his main desire is to get justice (or perhaps revenge) for his father, who was wronged by his upper-class employers. The use of Sy as an everyman who can pass as belonging to any social class not only tracks with Netflix's commitment to inclusive casting that I discussed earlier, but also it aligns the series with Sy's international star persona, whose fame largely rests on *Intouchables*, also viewable on Netflix. In that film, he played a Senegalese immigrant character

who successfully learns the social codes of the Parisian upper classes while remaining rooted in his class and culture of origin. Similarly, while Assane in *Lupin* takes on a variety of disguises from different social classes, his quest to clear his father's name testifies to a desire to maintain his rootedness in his own family's history.

In addition to language, casting and source material, the series also enables localisation in different markets through its narrative choices and its many references to art, music and sites of cultural heritage and tourism in Paris. These references serve to locate domestic and international viewers within an imagined national space and its cultural hierarchies. It would be easy to discuss the series's appeal to international audiences through a consideration of setting or genre. The series uses the viewing pleasures of genres that cross borders, from the action film and the crime genre to the romantic comedy and family melodrama. These two—setting and genre—often go together, evoking what film scholars Melis Behlil, Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado and Jaap Verheul in the context of a study of James Bond films call a 'postcard aesthetics' that reduces international locations to 'exotic non-places' (Behlil et al. 2020, 96–97). The Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay are not quite exotic non-places, but they are postcards of overdetermined sites of tourism for international audiences.

LUPIN WITH AND AGAINST HERITAGE CINEMA

The ways in which familiar sites of tourism localise *Lupin* for international audiences do not detract from localisation for French audiences. *Lupin*'s domestic localisation depends on how the series engages with the Maurice Leblanc novels, one of France's most beloved popular series of books and the source material for many previous film and television adaptations. Netflix's series shifts the relative positions of cultural taste and hierarchy by inducting a popular novelist, Leblanc, into the canon of French literature and, more importantly, by transforming Arsène Lupin into a second-generation Black French citizen. The showrunners position *Lupin* with and against the heritage film genre to highlight the ways in which the series is a fable of social integration very much in line with Sy's domestic star persona. *Lupin*'s engagement with the heritage genre also activated heritage spectatorship practices, such as travel to sites of cultural importance and reading the source novels, for domestic and even international audiences. The cultural politics of the series's use of the source novels

might not be apparent to international viewers who lack specific local knowledge, but this does not necessarily impede the viewing pleasures offered by the series.

Any work of art, film or media situates its position in cultural hierarchies of value through intertextual references to other works. However, a film or series that explores questions of social integration, references to culture—high and low, legitimate and popular—positions itself with respect to the cultural values of dominant society. To put it differently, arguments in favour of inclusivity for minority communities cannot be separated from the ways in which these communities are aligned with different kinds of culture. This has been an important dimension of Sy's stardom from his breakthrough film *Intouchables*. That film's narrative depended on an opposition between legitimate and popular culture, and the Driss character's integration into French society required him to master the codes of legitimate culture and demonstrate proper use of popular and legitimate cultural references. This a crucial part of how many in France understand integration in a universalist country—learning the French language and legitimate culture, such as literature, as a (if not the) key vector of social integration. There are many diasporic and postcolonial writers who focus on scenes at school and apprenticeship in language and literature, from Azouz Begag to Fatou Diome, through an initiatory figure, such as a teacher or other mentor.

Lupin also highlights the importance of cultural mastery for social integration, but its narrative arc scrambles the traditional parameters of legitimate and popular culture. One of the series's central subplots concerns the link between the democratisation of legitimate culture and the integration of diverse citizens into the nation. The climax of the series's first two parts revolves around a fundraising event that corrupt bigwig Pellegrini's daughter, Juliette, who runs the family foundation, organises to raise money to support equal access to legitimate culture regardless of one's social origins. A speech Juliette gives before a benefit auction in Episode 7 (P02/E02) makes explicit these stakes of the foundation's work.⁴ Juliette begins by acknowledging her own privilege. She explains that due to growing up in the Pellegrini family, she could visit the best museums and attend the most superb operas as a child, but she admits that not everyone could: 'there were no limits, as you might expect with my father'.⁵ The final sentence in Juliette's speech sounds like that of a mid-twentieth-century, Malraux-era deputy cultural minister arguing for the

democratisation of legitimate culture at the opening of a *Maison de la culture* somewhere in the provinces: ‘Culture must be accessible to all, without distinction. This is the foundation’s very mission and the reason we call upon you today.’ Juliette’s use of the word *distinction* is likely an ironic wink at Bourdieu’s famous 1979 study of cultural value (Bourdieu 1984).

Despite these noble intentions, the Pellegrini family reeks of backwards-looking forms of elite social distinction. Pellegrini’s office is visually represented as a museum-like space, with its rich leather interior, its wood panelling and its bookshelf of leather-bound volumes. The Pellegrini apartment scenes were shot at the Musée Nissim de Camondo, a decorative arts museum in Paris, built in 1911 but designed to look like a late eighteenth-century space. Beyond the statues and furniture, the production design also includes prominent medieval tapestries. This choice of location marks Pellegrini as a member of wealthy elite circles but also connects him to historical memories of the aristocratic or colonial elites. However, Pellegrini’s mastery of legitimate culture is ultimately empty of authentic investment. It is a hollow marker of class privilege that masks his unbridled individualism. Juliette’s phrase about life with her father having no limits comes across to viewers as ironic because it characterises how Pellegrini conducts business, doing whatever he wants for his own financial gain and only respecting the law when it is expedient or in his own self-interest to do so. Unbeknown to Juliette, the funds raised during the benefit concert will not facilitate access to culture for the poor but only add to his own personal coffers.

Whereas the series represents Pellegrini’s relationship to legitimate culture as vacuous, it constructs Assane Diop’s relationship to it as authentic and genuine. Unlike Sy’s character in *Intouchables*, who was initiated into legitimate culture through Philippe, Assane Diop is a socially mobile autodidact who is already able to interact in whatever situation he finds himself, be it with the communities of the *banlieues* or the wealthy circles attending the auction of the necklace in Chap. 1 (P01/E01). Assane is also able to charm individuals connected through postcolonial histories, be they the woman from ‘his village’ who works at the prison or the wealthy woman who made her fortune in the Belgian Congo from whom he steals (P01/E05). The production design of his Parisian apartment is just as rich, opulent and spacious as Pellegrini’s, though hipper and more modern. Always assuming he has the right to be wherever he chooses has long been a part of Sy’s star persona, but it takes on a new dimension in

Lupin. If Assane's initiation into French culture could be attributed to Pellegrini, it is purely by accident and primarily through an experience of reading Maurice Leblanc's *Arsène Lupin* novels. Thus, during a flashback in Chap. 1 (P01/E01) when Pellegrini becomes especially irritated by his flailing business deals, he catches his driver, Assane's father, Babakar, taking a break from cleaning to see what the bookshelves in Pellegrini's office hold. Pellegrini yells at Babakar that he is not being paid to read. Pellegrini's wife comes to apologise for her husband's behaviour, and she invites Babakar to choose one of the books from the bookshelves as a gift for his son. Babakar selects the first volume of *Arsène Lupin* in a rich, leather-bound edition. Babakar is ultimately unable to give the book to Assane before he is falsely arrested for stealing the necklace from Pellegrini's office and killed in prison. After young Assane learns the news, he goes through his father's possessions, and he finds a wrapped birthday present: the first *Arsène Lupin* novel.

The series spends a significant amount of screen time demonstrating just how carefully Assane reads the Leblanc books. We see this especially in his efforts to pass on the gift of reading to his son, Raoul. Part 1's first episode ends with a scene in which Assane regifts the same book his father gave him to his son. The two stand on the Pont des Arts, the bridge best known to tourists for the many combination locks that lovers used to place there (see Fig. 1). In the background is the prestigious Institut de France



Fig. 1 *Lupin*'s Assane (Omar Sy) gifts his copy of *Arsène Lupin* to his son, Raoul (P01/E01)

building with its gilded dome, visually placing the Leblanc novels on a par with the hallowed knowledge dispensed inside. Assane gently chides his son for all the time he spends on his phone, remarking how much he enjoyed reading at Raoul's age. Raoul cheekily fires back that it was normal to read back then because smartphones did not exist. Assane calls Raoul's comment dreadful and wonders aloud if his son merits the gift he is about to make. As Assane pulls the book from his jacket, viewers can see sticky notes on certain pages, indicating how many times Assane has reread the book over the years. Later episodes feature close-ups in which viewers see the marginal notes Assane has made in the books, suggesting that he read the book with the close analysis techniques more properly reserved for literature. Even more than literature, however, the novels functioned as a kind of textbook for him. A flashback in Part 1's third episode features Assane reading while a young Claire sits next to him on a bed in the school dormitory. Claire asks Assane how he doesn't get bored always rereading the same book. Assane replies that he learns new things each time. Assane lacks a father, a teacher or another mentor figure, but the Leblanc novels play this role for him in a traditional literary apprenticeship, yet one that is based on the pleasure of reading. During the first episode's scene of Assane and Raoul on the bridge, Assane tells his son that he will 'enjoy' the book—'ça va te plaire, ça'—suggesting that reading can be as pleasurable as other forms of popular culture. In an internal monologue heard as voiceover, Assane intones, '*Arsène Lupin* is more than a book. It's my heritage, my method, my voice. I am Lupin.' From the very first episode, the series positions the Leblanc novels as a form of cultural heritage and an instruction manual for social integration.

As the series continues, it models the initiation into cultural heritage through Assane's relationship to other characters, especially his son. The focus on reading reveals the series to be a *série patrimoniale* but not in the typical ways scholars have defined heritage cinema. Dayna Oscherwitz defines the heritage picture genre in cinema as focusing on 'heritage properties' (Oscherwitz 2010, 3), what Pierre Nora has called in a different context 'lieux de mémoire' or sites or realms of memory (Nora 1996, 1–3). Heritage properties could involve adaptations of 'culturally prestigious' or well-known literary texts, or the use of 'significant' or 'culturally resonant' buildings, landscapes and interior spaces (Oscherwitz 2010, 3). While Maurice Leblanc's popular *Arsène Lupin* novels, first published in 1905, are well known, not all viewers in France would necessarily agree that they are equivalent to prestigious novels by the likes of such literary

greats as Balzac or Proust. Yet, through a self-conscious representation of characters reading the *Lupin* novels, the series seeks to shift perceptions of the cultural value afforded them. To put it another way, the series takes it for granted that Leblanc represents an instance of a popular site of memory, in Nora's sense, yet it nevertheless seeks to convince viewers of this fact over the course of the series through viewer surrogates like Raoul. For Oscherwitz, while heritage films build on the genre of historical films of which they are a part, they are distinctive in that they respond to a 'perceived loss of culture by encoding national identity as a product of memory' (Oscherwitz 2010, 3–4). In a related vein, Hilary Radner, building on the work of Raphaëlle Moine and Ginette Vincendeau on the heritage genre, suggests that French heritage films are 'preoccupied with a "meticulous" reconstruction in terms of costume and décor, as part of an aesthetic that might be appropriately described as curatorial or museological, exhibiting strong mannerist tendencies' (Radner 2015, 293). Netflix's *Lupin* is notable for the ways it refuses to do the work of cultural heritage as mannerism, museumification or memory. Instead, it opts for a hyper-contemporary, cosmopolitan and entertainment-oriented adaptation that fuses past and present. Yet, I would argue that it still creates the reverential relationship to the source novels that is characteristic of heritage filmmaking through narrative *mise-en-abyme*.

As we have seen, Sy's *Lupin* is depicted as a devoted reader of the original novels, something that he passes on to his own son. Raoul does begin reading the *Lupin* novels and takes pleasure in them. Moreover, the series represents him as choosing to read the novels over other kinds of media, bringing reading to life as a heritage practice. In Part 1's second episode, Raoul reads the first *Lupin* novel at the dinner table. His mother, Claire, is surprised by this new behaviour, and she asks him if he now prefers reading to playing video games. Raoul does not answer her, clearly absorbed in the book. Later, in Chap. 9 (P02/E04), Raoul sits in his room reading the second *Lupin* novel, *Arsène Lupin versus Herlock Sholmes*. Claire's new boyfriend, Marc, enters Raoul's room and asks him what he is reading. Raoul replies that it is a *Lupin* novel his father gave him. Marc then asks if he is not too old to be reading such a novel, suggesting that popular novels are something for children and not young adults. When Raoul does not even reply, Marc asks what the story is about, and Raoul explains that the first part of the second novel revolves around a complicated escape. This scene is intercut with Assane and Benjamin's flight from the police in a chase sequence that ranges from Assane's apartment to a storage container

to the Parisian catacombs. This kind of self-conscious intertextuality marks adaptation as a process of transcoding, in Linda Hutcheon's sense (Hutcheon 2013, 16–17), but it also connects the series's engagement with popular media genres—from comedy and romance to the thriller and action-adventure—to the pleasure of reading popular novels.

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND MODELLING FANDOM

The series's staging of the *Lupin* novels as a site of memory worthy of heritage practices continues with the pilgrimage that Lupin organises with his son and his son's mother to Etretat to honour Maurice Leblanc's birthday. Raoul dons a black cape in honour of Lupin, as do many other visitors to the beaches that appear in this episode (P01/E05). In addition to the Leblanc novels as a popular site of memory, the series transforms Leblanc himself and his home town into such a site through the trip to city and beaches of Etretat. By showing pilgrims dressed as Lupin on the beaches, the series normalises heritage practices such as visiting sites of memory. The series mixes this kind of cultural reverence with the narrative pleasures of the action film and thriller. One of Pellegrini's enforcers, Léonard, tries to abduct Raoul on the train to Etretat and then succeeds in kidnapping him at the beach. The series then moves into an extended car chase sequence and showdown in a deserted mansion. In this way, the series demonstrates that the reverential relationship to sites of memory is in no way antithetical to the pleasures of commercial entertainment.

Yet the series goes one step further than merely legitimating reading popular genres for pleasure: it inducts them into the canon of French literature. During Chap. 10 (P02/E05), the series flashes back to an earlier moment in the contemporary narrative to clarify the identity of one of the key characters. Assane and Benjamin seek to recruit a double agent to infiltrate Pellegrini's organisation. Their method, however improbably, is to look for people who go to the library to read *Lupin* novels. This scene is shot at the French National Library (BNF) Richelieu's main reading room, which is not as familiar a site to international tourists as the Louvre or the Musée d'Orsay, but its ornate architecture would nevertheless mark it as a place that focuses on the preservation of cultural heritage (see Fig. 2). The setting is nevertheless absurd for two reasons. First, readers could not access the Leblanc novels at the BNF Richelieu because their collection focuses on rare books and manuscripts. Second, the *Arsène Lupin* novels are so widely available that it would suffice to visit any



Fig. 2 The French National Library Richelieu's ornate reading room (P02/E05)

municipal library to read them rather than go through the researcher accreditation process at France's national library. As Assane and Benjamin walk past the reading tables back to the stacks where the *Arsène Lupin* novels are kept, viewers notice a sign, probably added by the production designer, that reads 'Maurice Leblanc—Littérature française'. The juxtaposition of Leblanc's name and French literature subtly assimilates the *Lupin* novels into the rarefied category of legitimate French literature and demonstrates the series's investment in a transvaluation of cultural values.

For their final gambit to expose Pellegrini, Assane and Benjamin await a passionate fan of *Arsène Lupin* who takes the novels as seriously as they do. However, they have to wait a surprisingly long time to find one. After several other patrons have come and gone, a young man arrives, removes the library call number tag from one of the *Arsène Lupin* volumes and slips it into his coat before asking Assane and Benjamin what they are doing. The young man is heavily tattooed, wears black make-up and has several piercings. During a makeover sequence, Benjamin and Assane turn him into a strait-laced business type, and viewers suddenly realise that he is Pellegrini's investment consultant whom they met several episodes prior. In the same way that *Lupin*'s many disguises lead viewers to question the fixity of social roles, the series also invites viewers to question cultural hierarchies of the literary canon, if not the importance of reading itself.

The ways in which the series cues a heritage relationship to *Lupin* novels and to Leblanc himself as author have had effects in the real world.

When both parts of *Lupin*'s first season appeared on Netflix at the height of the pandemic, French tourists flooded Etretat and the museum located in Maurice Leblanc's former house despite COVID-19 restrictions. Locals have taken to calling these visitors 'Netflix tourists', and the numbers were much higher than after the 2004 cinematic adaptation starring Romain Duris or the 1970s television adaptation with Georges Descrières (Pineau 2021). The numbers were so high that locals called for greater regulation and quotas. The series has also increased book sales, including among young readers—though not to nearly as many as the series's 70 million viewers (Baud 2021). While many forms of commercial cinema and television hope to create transmedia tie-ins, ancillary revenue streams and potential tourism business, *Lupin*'s success came as something of a surprise.

* * *

The anecdote about tourism to Etretat demonstrates that *Lupin* managed to create the spectatorial relationship of a heritage film for domestic audiences even as it departs from many of the genre's characteristics in cinema. Cultural heritage is not opposed to internationalisation in the age of (S) VoD; it is now a part of it. Viewers see the internationalisation of cultural heritage most strongly in the choice to cast Sy as Lupin. In her analysis of the different ways that minority actors are cast in contemporary theatre, Angela Pao enumerates the four types of casting practices used by the Non-Traditional Casting Project in the 1980s: 'color-blind casting', in which 'the best actor for the role is cast'; 'societal casting', in which minorities play 'the roles they perform in society as a whole'; 'conceptual casting', in which a minority actor is cast 'to give the play greater resonance'; and 'cross-cultural casting', in which the play's narrative world 'is translated to a different cultural setting' (Pao 2010, 4). *Lupin*'s producers could have opted for a purely conceptual casting practice in selecting a Black actor to play Arsène Lupin in a period piece. Instead, they opted for a combination of conceptual and cross-cultural casting by transforming the *Lupin* novels into a contemporary tale about the son of a Senegalese immigrant in France.

The series thus diversifies the face of French cultural heritage, very much in keeping with Netflix's commitment to inclusive casting, while expanding the kinds of pleasures viewers can expect from a heritage film or series. This is not new per se, as there are many examples of combining the

codes of French heritage cinema with various genres, from comedy in *Les Visiteurs/The Visitors* (Jean-Marie Poiré, 1993) to horror in *Le Pacte des loups/Brotherhood of the Wolf* (Christophe Gans, 2001) or action in *The Emperor of Paris* (Jean-François Richet, 2018). What is distinctive, I think, is Sy's cross-over appeal to many different domestic *and* international audiences and the notable success the series had on Netflix's streaming platform worldwide as opposed to distribution in film theatres or linear television. Given that *Lupin* was led by a British showrunner, featured a multinational writing team and was made by a French studio for an American (S)VoD platform, the series is a particularly revelatory example of the design processes of internationalisation and the global popularity that are possible for postnational French-language series in the current age of (S)VoD platforms.

NOTES

1. 'Internationalization' (n.d.). World Wide Web Consortium. <https://www.w3.org/standards/webdesign/i18n>.
2. 'Localization vs. Internationalization' (n.d.). World Wide Web Consortium. <https://www.w3.org/International/questions/qa-i18n.en>.
3. See Christopher Meir's contribution to this volume for a detailed appraisal of Gaumont's role in producing the French postnational 'popular'.
4. Because of the COVID-19 lockdown, Netflix divided what was supposed to be the first 10-episode season into two 'parts'—Part 1, Episodes 1–5 and Part 2, Episodes 1–5.
5. Translations are the author's own.

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An Industry Perspective on *Dix pour cent* and *Ten Percent*

*Harold Valentin, Christian Baute, Kira Kitsopanidou,
Olivier Thévenin, Mary Harrod, Raphaëlle Moine,
Geneviève Sellier, and Anne Kaftal*

The transcript of an interview followed by group discussion with Harold Valentin, producer of *Dix pour cent* (Mother Production), and Christian Baute, producer of its British remake, *Ten Percent* (Headline Pictures), that took place on Saturday 11 September 2021 as part of the bilingual online workshop ‘Global Gallicisms II: Circulating Frenchness Through Mainstream Film and Television’ (10–11 September 2021). The event was

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organised and chaired by Kira Kitsopanidou with Olivier Thévenin (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle).

Transcribed and translated by Mary Harrod.

Kira Kitsopanidou—I'm delighted to be chairing this round table offering more industrial perspectives on *Dix pour cent*: a series that was national, then international, then again national, as Christian put it to me in an earlier exchange about its many lives. I'm delighted to welcome, with our warm thanks, Harold Valentin, who was Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1997 and 2002, before taking charge of fiction for France 2, where he was responsible for such successful series as *Fais pas ci, fais pas ça*, and who then went on to found a production company with Aurélien Larger, Mother Production, who are behind several series to have had great audience impact—notably *Dix pour cent* but also *La Garçonne* and feature films such as *Lou!* and *Garçon chiffon*. He's also a founding member of the 50/50 Collective supporting equality and diversity in cinema and audiovisual production. Christian Baute, the 'man behind' the British adaptation, is originally German, has worked in cinema and audiovisual production and distribution for 20 years, in international sales, and before joining the firm Headline in 2010 he was Senior Vice President of Distribution and Acquisitions at Celluloid Dreams, which some of you will be familiar with as an international company. He produced the US remake of Haneke's *Funny Games* and also *The Mourning Forest* by Naomi Kawase, which received the Grand Prix du Jury at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007. At Headline Pictures, he has produced *The Man in the High Castle*, *Quartet*, *The Invisible Woman* and *Peter and Wendy*, which was a

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winner at the Emmy Awards. He's also worked at the Canadian National Film Board and other organisations too numerous to list but notably he has held the role of Vice President of Independent Producers in France. Thank you both. My first questions will be for Harold. Who had the idea for the project or how did it come about? I'm interested in particular in the encounter between two rather different companies, *Mon Voisin* on one side, a firm wholly associated with cinema, and *Mother Production*, which has a more diverse background but is more associated with the wider audiovisual context. Thinking about collaboration in artistic terms, we also see on the one hand the televisual sector, with Fanny Herrero, a screenwriter and director of prestigious series, especially on Netflix at the moment, and on the other, a highly 'cinematic' director, Cédric Klapisch, who took part in the shoot with his own team. So how did the series get made in such circumstances?

Harold Valentin—Thanks and hello to everyone. So, on the project's origins, it was Dominique Besnehard, who was an agent for 20 years to stars like Sophie Marceau, Béatrice Dalle and many others, then left the agency Art Media in 2005, who had the idea. He tried to develop it with Canal+ but in the 2000s in France there were still very few modern series and people with cinema backgrounds had a development model that was very ill-suited to serial production. Namely, Canal+ received a screenplay every six to eight months and they asked the producers to be present almost every day during the project's development so the author could preserve their voice by interfacing with the buyer or buyers, in order to retain the series's integrity. Canal+ had ended the series and I'd spent five years at France 2, had started my production company and knew the writer behind *Dix pour cent* well, so I told Dominique I thought French audiences were broadly ready for more sophisticated series than before—in 2000 channels were still promoting identificatory heroes in whom audiences could recognise themselves and I was really convinced from my experience with Anglo-Saxon, Israeli and Scandinavian projects that what was important was just having interesting examples of humanity on screen, and that that's what's engaging. At that time there was just one writer, Nicolas Mercier, so we quickly went to France 2. They hesitated for a long time because it was more of a cable TV series that we wanted to offer to the major French public broadcast channel, where you need between 4 and 6 million viewers. I was convinced people can get excited about a Cornish fishing village if the writing's good and there's real humanity there.

We developed the series for three years. It was complicated, in the first place because the original writer left—I think he wanted to make his feature film—and I’d put together a team of writers, including Fanny Herrero, who was quite excited about it, but we took a good 18 months to find the series’s essence. France 2 was at once behind the series and quite hesitant. We had a great Programmes Adviser, Fanny Rondeau, who really believed in it, but above, the people on the board of France 2 all said: ‘10 per cent is the audience share you’ll get!’ You need 20 per cent on France 2. We put together a team around Fanny made up of 80 per cent women and that tells you something about the narration of the series and how the characters are constructed. We spent 18 months finding the essence, because what was missing was a dynamic linking ‘upstairs and downstairs’. It was the versatile device of Mathias’s secret daughter Camille that allowed us to create this link, and so to create intimacy in this professional world, because we realised while developing the series that whenever we had purely professional scenes it was boring. You always needed personal issues to upset the agents’ work situations—and Fanny and I are fascinated by neuroses and getting really into the characters. We also had a psychoanalyst who’d worked on cinema look at the scripts to give the characters real psychological depth—for example, the rather sado-masochistic couple formed by Mathias and Noémie. In addition, I have quite a strong English cultural background as my mother was raised in England, and during the Canal+ period there was a crime thriller thread in the series. Meanwhile, Andréa hadn’t come out as a lesbian and Sofia’s problem was being Black. But pretty quickly I pointed out that we were in the 1990s and there were plenty of coming-out stories, plus in the world we were depicting characters’ gayness isn’t a story in itself, so Andréa’s story had to be one of love. As for Sofia, her issue should be insecurity. So we completely changed the series’s essence. We got rid of the crime plot, an investigation into Samuel’s death, which was totally uninteresting and didn’t fit with the series (at the time—and still sometimes, though less often—channels demanded crime or thriller subplots to add tension because they were afraid of bland storytelling). And so Fanny Herrero, who’d written the best of the three episodes so far, took the lead again, implementing everything I’ve just said. Fanny and I saw each other every couple of days, she practically lived by my desk. We must have done 15 or 20 versions of every script for the first season—not least because then Cédric Klapisch arrived with his former assistants Lola Doillon and Antoine Garceau, with whom he wanted to co-direct, and when we started getting the guest actors—which mainly fell

to Dominique Besnehard and Cédric Klapisch—we noticed that there was a bit less openness to self-mockery with French stars than in Britain (just look at *Extras*, which goes quite far with its guests, whereas we had trouble convincing ours). There was even an actress whom we invited to do Episode 4, someone quite well known, who called Cédric Klapisch and said that not only would she not do it but he shouldn't either! So it was a slightly precarious moment: France 2 said to us either we should stop or we could avoid using actors' real names, but this was too far away from our vision.

The stalemate finally ended thanks to Cécile de France. The first episode is about an actress getting older and we were really struggling to find the guest star, then Cécile—who's Belgian, so perhaps less worried on that front, or in any case found it funny and trusted Cédric—came on board. After that it really was a marriage, as you were saying, between cinema and series cultures. Cédric had never really shared power on his films and at that time in France, once series went into production, the writers were sidelined. I didn't want to do that, so Fanny came to all the meetings (casting, sets and so on) and we often had to do rewrites for the guest stars because they would change their minds, maybe saying no to one episode then yes to a different one; and the thing about the series is that the best episodes are those that play with professional and personal life but also public and private images, when the guests stars would agree to get a bit more involved in the plot, as with Monica Bellucci or Isabelle Huppert. These episodes have more flavour because of course it's all made up but they play with aspects of the guest stars' real personalities. And in fact having such trouble with the guest performers meant Cédric also got involved in rewriting episodes, especially the first and third ones, and Fanny, who was beginning to be more widely recognised as the series's true creator, found this difficult. I was rather stuck in the middle, negotiating between their different rewrites and with France 2, who, for instance, said after the first few days of shooting, 'Harold, it's not as funny as on the page.' I said, 'Yes, but it's more real.' It was really important to Cédric that it should stay real and plausible in terms of what characters were going through—prioritising authenticity over contrived humour was really a joint decision he and I took. I'd done *Fais pas ci, fais pas ça* before and people said during the first season of that series they were worried when it wasn't funny that they weren't fully engaged with the characters' emotions, so we were convinced you really needed this engagement and only then you could laugh at the comic aspects.

To complete this process, when it came to the moment of casting the show, things went really positively because we had Cédric Klapisch, and because at that time French film actors weren't keen to work on series, especially for France 2 (as opposed to Canal+), but Klapisch's name attracted them—that and the writing quality, of course—and we were lucky that because we had very well-known stars on board we were free and indeed we needed to choose lesser known actors for the regular cast. Apart from Camille Cottin, none of them were known. Casting took a long time, we did a lot of callbacks to find the 'family'. We found Laure Calamy for Noémie via Dominique Besnehard through her cinema background—we wanted someone a bit more down-to-earth in this rather arty milieu. With Nicolas Maury, Cédric Klapisch and Fanny Herrero wanted a very straight gay guy but I said to them, 'Look, we aren't coming up with anyone, and we've had very masculine gay characters for 15 years. I love *Ugly Betty*, we could have some fun with a feminine character with a certain literary quality to him like Nicolas Maury—also because of *follophobie*, which is the tendency for camp gay men to be scorned nowadays, which I thought would be interesting to explore. It was similar for Sofia's character: at first the hairdresser wanted to straighten her hair and we said no, we want an Angela Davis—in other words, to go for an idea of self-affirmation that was already becoming fashionable rather than to use the characters to suggest gay people are just like straight people (or else have issues with coming out); we wanted to get beyond those narratives and instead promote each character's individuality.

Kira Kitsopanidou—You've slightly anticipated my next question about the guest stars. So this play on public and private image via self-mockery is right at the heart of the show, but did Netflix, when it bought the series as one of its 'original' creations, as the phrase now goes, have a view on the choice of stars? Specifically, were you forced to internationalise their profiles and did the profile as such become more important than just the idea of self-mockery?

Harold Valentin—Yes and no. Yes in the sense that—well, first of all Netflix got interested in the project very early; they'd already expressed an interest when it was in development at France 2. We stayed with France 2. From Season 2 on—well, the first season wasn't a huge success on Netflix, but little by little it caught on and what they told us was that the audience doubled each season, and then for the fourth season I think it multiplied exponentially. So there's something that still wasn't in place for the second season. But its success (including lots of prizes) lay in a modernity that

hadn't been seen before in contemporary French comedy series for a long time [...] and so the guest stars had begun to get it and many more were willing to work with us by the second season. Furthermore, there's no doubt that for someone like Isabelle Huppert, who travels a lot and spends time in New York, the fact that her American and British friends were speaking to her about the show influenced her decision to take part. Sigourney Weaver agreed in the space of a day thanks to the Netflix success. What's more striking is that I think there was also a certain complementarity, or feedback loop, where people who don't watch much France 2 but do watch Netflix would watch *Dix pour cent* on France 2 when the new season came out; so Netflix's role as secondary distributor had a really positive effect.

Kira Kitsopanidou—So the series has been very successful internationally and this international success catalysed the participation of certain French guest stars known abroad. We've mentioned Netflix but there's also the sale of the format adaptation rights to the UK—and in a moment we'll ask Christian how that came about—but the show's also been adapted in Italy, Spain and also Turkey. Meanwhile, Camille Cottin is becoming an international star in her own right, working in Britain and Hollywood. What do you think is behind *Dix pour cent*'s international success and has this ultimately changed international audiences' ideas about French television fiction?

Harold Valentin—On the question of the series's success, it's hard to say because when we first showed Season 1 in London, people said the stars were unknown. They understood what kind of stars they were, and Audrey Fleurot was a bit familiar from *Engrenages*, but Nathalie Baye and Cécile de France were completely unknown, so that wasn't the hook. It was an office comedy, which is pretty universal. And it plays with something that exists in every country, that is, people who seem to have more than other people but who actually have lives much like everyone else's, except that if they cheat on their boyfriend, it's in all the papers, or if their daughter's ill, the same thing happens. The price of celebrity and the stars' enduring humanity is recognisable everywhere—every nation has its demi-gods and newspapers that mock celebrities to show that for all they seem to have it all, they have the same problems as everyone else: they put on weight, people cheat on them and so on. That was very contemporary. Lastly, the *New Yorker* said that *Dix pour cent* had no cynicism to it, and I think that earlier series about the showbiz world such as *Entourage* or *Extras* were either cynical or else leant towards absurdity, whereas we had

a certain human truth that resonated with people. I think the writers managed to infuse something quite contemporary and modern by showing the conflict and link between ambition, or commerce, and art. The series affirms the importance of such links and of art in general—of there being more to life than just material success, that other things also count. Then of course Paris has a very strong image, and from the outset, knowing Cédric Klapisch has a lot of experience shooting Paris, we wanted to give a view of the city that's less often seen: one that's not *Emily in Paris*, despite preserving some glamour. Different sorts of ingredients like these drew audiences—plus I think the quality of the writing and the filming. We used directors from cinema throughout—this was important for the French guest stars. Everything's changing completely now on that front, but ten years ago that was still true overall. That's what I think makes the show travel.

Kira Kitsopanidou—I think Olivier has a question here.

Olivier Thévenin—Yes, I have a sociological question about measuring the series's success. You've talked about the audience for France Télévisions, for which figures are readily available, but how do you conceive the indicative context for measuring the series's influence using data that's in a sense hybrid, and especially how do you compare this with figures from non-French contexts about its influence elsewhere? With apologies for a rather technical question!

Harold Valentin—Not at all: you're quite right to ask it because Netflix has rights for a limited period, then they keep renewing them so they avoid giving us viewing figures, something I'd never experienced. It will also change as institutions develop tools for measuring the amount of time people spend watching particular programmes rather than simply focusing on the 2-minute and 75-minute viewing marks, as Netflix does. I'm very good friends with Rebecca Zlotowski, who made the film *Une fille facile* with Zahia [Dehar] that was in the top 10 internationally for a month, but she told me Netflix put an image on their menu of Zahia half-naked with the title *An Easy Girl* so people clicked on it but then saw it was a French film and doubtless stopped watching after 2 minutes! So there's an asymmetry in the data that has to change and sooner or later will do. With us, they just said the audience was doubling each season and this was further confirmed by our personal networks: we had Grégory Montel filming in the Czech Republic telling us that there were huge crowds of people outside his hotel, and Camille Cottin that every time she went out in London she was being stopped by people, so we could see the

series's impact but only via these weak indicators. In sum, we had extraordinarily little information.

Kira Kitsopanidou—Aude Albano [Head of Series at Pathé] was telling us just now that the series *Versailles* has really changed other nations' ideas about French audiovisual fiction. Do you think *Dix pour cent* has also, though in a very different way, changed international audiences' view of French fiction of this sort, and does the series's international success tell us something about French fiction's ability to internationalise itself?

Harold Valentin—I'd say *Dix pour cent* is a lot more French than *Versailles*, which was written by British people and often featured British actors as well, making it to my mind more of a hybrid product. People told us that they felt *Dix pour cent's* worldview was very French, and it's true, for example, that the couple dynamics in France and the USA are different; the issue of being faithful to your partner's not the same. I had a [US] colleague say to me that the idea of having sex at work seemed completely impossible to them, whereas we chose to do a love scene at work because we needed to shoot as much of the series as possible at the office for economic reasons and it's less forbidden in France; but in any case, there's something that seems to them very French and at the same time modern. Because previously there had been a stiffness to French fiction, while here the writers really worked to show characters' inner lives, the workings of their unconscious, their self-destructive side and also the strong ties binding them together. The team worked to produce writing good enough to compete with those British, US and Scandinavian series we all love, and that was quite new. It came from the fact that the screenwriters who worked on *Dix pour cent* are screenwriters who retrained themselves in writing drama by watching UK and US series and dissecting them, as there were no or very few serial screenwriting courses in France. I did a job for the La Fémis film school in 2011 to help them initiate a section dedicated to televisual series production and I was amazed to discover that at that time—it's changed a bit since—over a four-year course they had only six weeks' training in writing drama. The *Nouveau Roman* and the *Nouvelle Vague* ruptured the intergenerational transmission of France's storytelling tradition, which was very strong in the 1960s and 1970s and earlier, and this generation has rediscovered that thread, learning on the fly together. Since then, we've started having the elements needed to make good series descended from literary antecedents.

Kira Kitsopanidou—We've spoken a lot about the original series so now I'd like to invite Christian to join the discussion and tell us about the

genesis of the British adaptation, as the filming will be finished in just a few weeks, so we're looking forward to seeing the results. And then we'll talk about what's endured, in other words the place of the French *Dix pour cent* in the adaptation.

Christian Baute—The project came into existence one day after I'd been cooking at home in London and watching [*Dix pour cent*] [...] a distributor at TF1 had sent me a link so I watched it and was captivated.

Harold Valentin—We had various remake propositions on the table at the time but Christian's proposal was the strongest in creative terms, with real thought put into which writers should be involved. Some Americans had come with proposals but they were very vague about how to take ownership of their version, whereas Christian had already thought about this. We found that much more exciting.

Christian Baute [in English at the chair's encouragement]—I watched it while it was being broadcast in France and I was amazed by it. I wasn't sure if I was amazed because I knew these stories—as Harold mentioned, the series is inspired by authentic stories and people who exist, like us, some of whom I knew because I'd worked in France before. So I was asking friends who have no clue about this business—what we call 'inside baseball'—whether they liked it too. They were as surprised as I was and so I thought, there's something about it, and I think what Harold was saying is absolutely true: the key thing is that it's about people like us who have neuroses and so on, who try to do something together, and more or less they achieve something together. They can't do it alone but when they work together they get it done. That's something really different to other shows 'inside baseball' that we might quote in this case—*Entourage* is very cynical, it's all about back-stabbing. Of course there's a lot of back-stabbing in the French series and there will be in the English series too. But the awareness that that doesn't work is always what makes this the greater moment—recognising the greater good. And so then we negotiated the rights, which took some time, obviously. We also knew that there were some competitors so we quickly proposed to involve Harold and Dominique and the two French companies in the remake, and the first intuition that I had for writing and showrunning it was a man called John Morton, who was then writing the second season of a show called *WIA*. *WIA* is the postcode of the BBC, Old Broadcasting House, next to Oxford Circus, and he was doing a mockumentary based in the BBC headquarters. He took a character that he created in 2012, played by Hugh Bonneville; in 2012 that character was preparing the Olympic

Games in London and because he was successful he got a mission on *WIA* to reform the BBC, which is of course an impossible endeavour. That show went on for four seasons I think, so John wasn't available. TV is a long-haul business: first we hired another writer, who unfortunately failed at writing it properly, making it a comedy and not a drama any more. Then John finally became available and we made the show with him.

Kira Kitsopanidou—So the series has been in development for two or three years and will be broadcast in a few months, I guess?

Christian Baute [returning to French from now on]—I think it'll be in February or March.

Kira Kitsopanidou—Well, there's a lot of expectation and I'm obviously not going to ask you to reveal what's in the adaptation, but with your overall vision of the series, do you think some of *Dix pour cent*'s French essence has endured or is it an adaptation for the British context that adds to or rearranges the original ingredients?

Christian Baute—Both. It's a hybrid in more than one sense. Firstly, because we're very worried about being compared to the original. We want to do something different as we often ask ourselves: why remake it? And I think at least we can say Britain doesn't really have a remake tradition, unlike the USA. For a long time there's been resistance to doing remakes because it's a bit like the French with champagne or wine, there's an attitude that says just as we're not going to tell the French how to make wine, we're not going to tell the British how to do series—it's a long tradition there, as Harold was saying, going back as far as the 1970s with Granada TV, or maybe even earlier. And the Commissioning Editor in Britain doesn't acquire formats. So within one channel's different silos you have Acquisitions, who might buy formats but that's usually focused on non-scripted [material] and shows like *Britain's Got Talent*, and in Programming they're all typically Oxbridge-educated and focused on scripts. So the first problem I had was to get the programmers to look at anything because they're so focused on the screenplay that they're not open to watching a finished product. We had put the links on Vimeo [website], where you can see if people have watched something. They hadn't, because they wanted to see a screenplay. I thought it would be easy to remake this series but it wasn't at all—in fact it was longer than three years, we started working on the project in 2016, which dates it a bit. So there was this problem and then the issue of comparison, of how to distinguish ourselves. Of course, we wanted to take the good parts of *Dix pour cent*, of which there are many, but also to improve on it. The bar's very

high! We adapted. The basic ingredients were the family of agents but we've made the cast bigger, which isn't easy, inventing a different situation that explains the challenge facing the audience, that is, the disappearance of the founder. I think this is more central in our series; even if he disappears after the first hour, his shadow's present for a lot longer. We also created two or three more characters who are very important. We were really exercised about how to find someone with a presence comparable to Camille Cottin's, and we knew that the writing needed to prevent people from making this comparison, as no actress is going to want to be compared to her, so it's true that that character is written differently—with the same ingredients (she's bi etc.) but she's a lot franker and less cerebral, I'd say, and so we also had to adapt the contents for the British context as one that's much in demand in the USA. The idea of 'two countries divided by the same language' is very important in the adaptation as there are obviously lots of Americans in London. Filming it right now, we've found out there are 25 other series shooting at the same time and most of them are American. The development was in fact also done in conjunction with a new US studio, which contributes to the adaptation's hybridity; we had to finance this and it's expensive—Headline is a little independent organisation. No English channel wanted to step up as a partner, I think because of this cultural resistance to making remakes—I think there have only been a handful of British ones done in the past decade. At the same time, I think that will change in Britain, if we're lucky enough for our series to be successful.

Harold Valentin—Something else I've discovered about Britain, after being raised on British films that mix comedy and drama, is that in contrast British TV channels' commissioners did either drama or comedy. The notion of 'dramedy' that was very British to me had stopped being British!

Christian Baute—Another obstacle that in my view is bigger in Britain than elsewhere is captured by this expression 'inside baseball', even if it's American. In other words, there's some unwritten rule that Commissioning Editors never show 'our world', whereas if you look at the most successful HBO series, they do just that. Yet the British press thrives on celebrity gossip! So I don't really know why it is, but I suspect it's something to do with class—some idea of closing ranks and not allowing people to see inside. I was just saying that Commissioning Editors are mostly Oxbridge: it's almost scandalous! There's a rather snobbish idea of never exhibiting this milieu. Also, when it comes to the actors and second-degree humour,

I'm not sure I agree with Harold as I found it very difficult to get British actors to laugh at themselves at all!

Kira Kitsopaniidou—As the discussion's covered a lot of ground, I propose to open the floor to questions from the audience.

Mary Harrod—I was interested by Harold's statements about cultural translation in the Anglophone context—for instance, sex in the office being an alien idea to Americans—and Christian's comment about Cottin's character becoming more forthright in the adaptation, and whether this was merely a coincidence. My key question along these lines for Christian is, were there other aspects of *Dix pour cent* you thought wouldn't work at all in a British version?

Christian Baute—Not exactly, but I recall that with our first writer we did ask the question of whether it was possible for Mathias to exist in Britain, with an illegitimate daughter about whose existence he hasn't told his wife, and we said that of course it's possible and that's what we ended up doing. Then I think the debate about diversity and what we used to call BAME is more advanced in the UK thanks to the US influence, so we thought a lot about that during development, how to advance this idea. This was also because we had a US partner who was even further on in this debate because it is in his milieu, and also because the diverse talent pool's bigger in the USA (leaving aside certain blind spots like the way that Asian never counts as 'diverse' there).

Harold Valentin—I'd also say that the way French people speak to each other is more straightforward, including more aggression and confrontation.

Christian Baute—Yes! The 'stiff upper lip' British thing really comes into the adaptation. In fact it's one of our key motors and John Morton has a very particular skill here, which is one of the reasons we chose him: his comedy often comes from conversations at crossed purposes, if you've ever seen *WIA*—they don't listen to each other, finish their sentences or even sometimes words. He's really observed that closely, a bit like the novel *The Employees*, where you wonder how on earth people get anything done when they communicate so badly. Many of these situations of misunderstanding come from this idea of 'you know what I mean' you find in the world of structured communication, when in fact nobody understands anything.

Raphaëlle Moine—My question is also for Christian. I wanted to ask about a detail of the market targeted by the remake. Are you mainly

targeting British audiences or are you after more international ones, via a British flavour (albeit based on a French source text)?

Christian Baute—We're targeting a British and US public because Amazon and AMC are our partners. AMC came in at the start of shooting, so we didn't know at the writing stage. Still, of course we knew there's a big market for British series in the USA and we conceived a whole story strand about Americans turning up and being viewed with suspicion by the Brits. At the same time, there's a certain duplicity because the British industry needs the US money. I've forgotten the exact amount announced by the Culture Secretary the other day, but film and TV in the UK is a multibillion-dollar business and if I said just now there are 25 series shooting at the same time in London, that tells you how important this business is to the British economy. There's another double-edged sword here: we've really created an inflated production bubble in the UK where very, very young people straight out of screenwriting school can become story producers for Netflix and so on and be paid incredible sums. Overall, that's good for the industry now but I'm not sure it will work long term, as it's unsustainable—plus there aren't enough people for that. It's partly the Brexit effect but we had trouble finding technicians [...] that's another story, though. But the two markets we had in mind were Great Britain and North America. Australia comes along with the UK as they almost always watch the same stuff. We would like the adaptation to travel and maybe even come back to France, but who knows.

Harold Valentin—I think there are enough differences for people to want to see it because *Dix pour cent* is also a series about a culture common to all countries. What Christian said about the links between the US industry and the UK in terms of the culture around modes of production is also really interesting as it's something we don't have in the same way in France because language is a barrier.

Kira Kitsopani—We could cite the example of *En thérapie* and *In Therapy*, which is a bit different, but it shows that people can consume both [original and remake].

Geneviève Sellier—My question is for Harold. I was struck by what you said about screenwriters. You pointed out that self-training happened within a team dominated by women; I speculate that women are generally more open to throwing themselves into work like this. But do you think that *Dix pour cent's* success could influence the economic and cultural status of screenwriters in France? This is a structural problem, as they're

very badly paid. It's really striking that it's one of the first series where you really feel that the screenwriters are taking the characters seriously.

Harold Valentin—This change is in motion. French screenwriters aren't so badly paid as all that, since there's the screenwriting fee but also exploitation rights, which is about 40 per cent of what the producers pay with the big channels. For a long time the issue's been the [lack of] training. When you talk about showrunning in the US model, you're talking about people who know how to write and be on a set, talk to actors, talk to directors, be in the editing suite [...] At the moment our screenwriters have no experience of sets, and secondly they have this American dream but sometimes little awareness of the way in which a series is really the product of multiple creative influences. Of course there are geniuses like Eric Rochant or Jacques Audiard who could make series, as they're both brilliant writers and brilliant directors, and Fanny Herrero grew up here and now she's showrunning for Netflix, which is great, but the tension between Cédric Klapisch and Fanny Herrero came from the fact that although she's an actress so she had experience of performing, sometimes writers are so attached to their scripts that when actors make these their own along the same lines but with slight differences, they only see what's missing and not what's there. Totally mastering your subject's impossible anyway, you have to feel the truth of what's going on and that happens with training and experience. So on all our shows the writers are allowed to be on set. They don't talk to the actors but they can talk to the director as much as they like, as they need to learn and to have the chance to move towards becoming showrunners once they're able—if they want, that is, as some aren't interested (I recall [producer] Richard Brown on *True Detective* telling me about the conflict between [series creator Nic] Pizzolatto and other creative personnel and how he was stuck in the middle, like me between Fanny and Cédric, and that in the end HBO gave Pizzolatto full control over the second season, and as a result it was less good). So as a producer I'd love to find screenwriters with enough experience to have all the skills in place for showrunning. This comes gradually with experience. There's been very little training. La Fémis did a little bit because they have the means to expose screenwriters to direction and shooting, as well as editing, which is absolutely essential, although screenwriters are generally good editors as they feel the thing; it's on the shoot that there can be problems. So that movement's in motion and it's just as well.

Anne Kaftal—I have a question for Harold and one for Christian. For Harold, yesterday we were talking about the way in which Camille Cottin is anchored in a typically French context, thanks especially to her use of language and way of expressing herself. I wondered, therefore, whether you have any sense of what allowed the series to work as a comedy outside the Francophone world? Which brings me to my second question for Christian. I wanted to know how this issue of adapting humour was handled in the remake process. Did you aim for British humour or instead to create some sort of hybrid comedy including French elements?

Christian Baute—I really think that the series we've made is a bit less funny. There are moments [in the original]—to cite an obvious example, the scenes with Cécile de France on the horse are very funny, almost in the style of Buster Keaton, and they make me laugh a lot. But I think the humour in our version comes much more from [...] well, there's one episode where we have two agents chasing a client whom they're told they have to 'poach', and they take this literally and become poachers, so that's in the same vein—but otherwise I'd say the humour's more Lubitsch, in other words we the audience know what's going on behind the closed door but a character doesn't, which is the definition of 'the Lubitsch touch' in a way. From time to time you laugh out loud, but in general the plot's dramatic.

Harold Valentin—With a great deal of imagination. But even for us with *Dix pour cent*, there are some episodes that are much more dramatic and others that are more comical, and the further we got through the seasons, the more we had a sense of what a particular actor was capable of. Though farce isn't generally done on TV, we could then really push some scenes—Andréa giving birth at work, for example—because we knew our actors could handle it without becoming fake. But I'm not sure we would have dared to do that scene in the first season, as it could have seemed ridiculous. As for how audiences saw it, it's hard to say; I only know that all our actors are consummate professionals who totally inhabited their roles. We've stopped at Season 4—apart from a special—and now they're all in demand everywhere, which is great. But I don't really know why it travelled, except what I said at the start. Regarding Camille Cottin's role, we had a sense she could become a cult figure during the writing process, but we did a lot of castings and she got the part immediately. As far as France goes, I think there was a gap in 30-something actresses: we only had very pretty girls, with no flaws. And Camille with her nose, her look,

her own beauty, that also sent the message that women shouldn't worry about having something a bit different from other people, as they look at her and she's seductive (also an ideal for French women). At the time in series, and French series specifically, there were no actresses like that. There were more in Britain, actually—there was less attachment to a very classical beauty there at the time. But that's changing in France now, too.

Kira Kitsopanidou—As we've gone over our allotted time, we need to draw this fascinating event to a close, with many thanks again to Harold and Christian for many new perspectives on this trailblazing postnational show.

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