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Charles Drazin, *French Cinema*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2011. xv + 448 pp. Notes and index. \$22 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-571-21173-9.

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Film histories are necessarily complex objects, film or, rather, cinema, being a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Industrial structures and practices, technologies and their applications, state policies and institutional and regulatory frameworks, professionals and their trajectories, forms, styles and representations, stars and genres, reception, exhibition and audience: all these things demand to be included in some way in an account of a national cinema history and analysed not simply independently but in their complex and over-determined interactions. If this were not hard enough, cinema is not a self-enclosed object. It is clearly inflected by what happens in the world around it as it interacts with other cultural forms and responds to social, political and ideological contexts and evolutions.

Finally, and this is something that increasingly attracts scholars' attention, the national is in many ways an inadequate framework within which to think cinema. Styles and genres do not respect national boundaries. Co-productions are made. Stars, directors, films (and their finances) travel while audiences may consume foreign cinemas as well as and often more than their own national productions. Put simply, national film cultures do not line up neatly with national cinema industries. More traditional film histories tended to deny this complexity, dealing with a national canon of great directors and important movements. More recent histories have had to deal with it while still seeking to maintain a clear narrative. This is clearly not an easy task: challenging the narrowly canonical; engaging with the popular; mapping cinema and the institutions and practices associated with it and not simply studying films as texts.

Charles Drazin's *French Cinema* finds its own, not entirely unproblematic, way to deal with this complexity and to maintain narrative clarity. The core of the story that the book tells throughout its approximately four hundred pages is above all about French cinema's relation with the English-speaking world, its reception in the UK and the USA and its interaction with British cinema and especially Hollywood. This approach is interesting and generates real insights. It is also well-informed and draws productively on primary sources such as press reviews and exhibitors' manuals, the guides that distributors sent to cinemas telling them the best way to present a given film to the public. We read, for example, of the differential promotion of Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963) in France and in the United States. In the former country, the film was promoted using the director's name. In the latter, it was tellingly promoted as a Brigitte Bardot film with exhibitors being advised that they might use a model in a towel to sell the film or seek the collaboration of local car-rental agencies, given the prominence of a red sports car in the work itself (pp. 324–325).

If the thrust of the contrast is relatively predictable, the details bring it vividly to life. Earlier, we read of how Abel Gance's famous pacifist film *J'accuse* (1919) was cut by its American distributors, United Artists, so its original anti-war message lost its universal thrust, becoming much more a tale of German villainy, a different film in effect, in a way that usefully reminds us that films are not necessarily single, stable texts (p. 39). A similar attention to detail helps explain why Anatole Litvak's little-remembered

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*Mayerling* (France, 1936) was able to outperform Jacques Feyder's classic *La Kermesse héroïque* (France, 1935) in the USA. While the latter could only prosper in the fledgling American art-house circuit, the former could be pushed at a larger public because one of its stars, Charles Boyer, was already a big Hollywood name, while the other, Danielle Darrieux, was working on her first Hollywood film (pp. 128-133). Interesting in their own right, these telling stories of the impact in the USA (or Britain) of individual films and, indeed, of directors combine to generate a sense both of the difference between different national film cultures and of the difficulty French film faced when it sought international, and particularly American markets.

On the downside, the risk of such a contrastive approach is that, drawn to differences, it may ultimately flatten internal diversity and produce national stereotypes. Drazin is aware of this danger and partly avoids it. Intellectually challenging or art-house figures like Godard or Varda are balanced by discussion of popular or populist directors like Berri or Deray. Canonical figures like Renoir, Duvivier and Vigo are balanced by other names (Decoin, Delannoy, Autant Lara) from French cinema's golden age. Although the obvious cliché of a dull, intellectual or narrowly art-house French cinema may thus be avoided, the deeper problem is that, used almost as ideal types, individual cases tend to be used to support what seems a pre-determined sense of what French cinema is or should be. Thus, for example, Gance's *J'accuse* (1919) is used to show how it came to be seen that cinema could be a vehicle for thought. Sacha Guitry's films, notably *Le Roman d'un tricheur*, underscore not only how words and images can be effective partners but also how cinema can be as productive a vehicle for the exchange of ideas as can literature (p. 98). Vigo becomes the archetype for committed cinema and an embodiment of the romantic ideal of the artist struggling against the industry (pp. 80-87). The French reception of Cecil B. de Mille's *The Cheat* (USA, 1916) reveals the cultural awareness and sophistication of the French audience (pp. 31-32). Any history has to find a path between the specificity of individual cases and the search for more general lessons. Drazin's book leans too far towards the latter. Taken together, his individual examples are used to produce a convincing enough, but somewhat familiar sense of a French cinema riven by tensions (between art and industry, individual and collective, elitist and popular) whose value, outside France, lies in its difference and its capacity to lead the way (p. 341).

While Drazin's book is good at finding the telling example or the significant detail, it is less effective at producing a densely textured sense of a whole or, indeed, of French cinema's relation to a broader national context. Popular directors are discussed, as noted, but popular genres are substantially ignored. Thus, while Jean-Pierre Melville is accorded due importance for his creative interaction with American models and his role as *auteurist* precursor to the New Wave, his place within the French *policier* is neglected. The use of Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* (1937) is not dissimilar. It is primarily used to underscore contrasts and interactions with English-speaking film: its debt to the American gangster film; its servile American remake; its subsequent influence on Graham Greene and Carol Reed; its capacity for the kind of nuanced exploration of a flawed character that the more morally strait-jacketed Hollywood studio films could not reproduce. All this is important and well-observed, but what is surprisingly lacking is any examination of the film as a key example of French colonial cinema, something which a book with a more developed attention to either film genre or to politico-historical context would surely have developed. This neglect of genre and the broader context is mirrored in a lack of attention to stars: Jean Gabin is discussed in relation to the dark Poetic Realism of the 1930s and Bardot is used to show how French film could fill a gap in US markets before Hollywood broke out of the moral ties of the Hays code, but there is no comparison of them to other stars and no sustained discussion of the French star system or of stars' social or ideological significance despite important developments in the study of this area.[1]

The relative lack of attention to context is only partially corrected when Drazin discusses the cinema of the Occupation, the Popular Front and 1968, periods when the broader history of events most obviously

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interacted with the narrower history of cinema. True to the author's consistent concerns, the Occupation is framed above all as a time when, freed from Hollywood's competition, French cinema paradoxically became more Hollywood-like due to the constitution of an integrated cinema circuit (using confiscated Jewish-owned cinemas), the establishment of a German-controlled major studio (Continental), the flight from the contemporary and towards genre and escapism, and the imposition of tight moral control. This is a stimulating and broadly convincing argument. Less convincing is the engagement with the other two periods. Discussion of the Popular Front limits itself to canonical films (the Renoir-supervised *La Vie est à nous* (France, 1936), other films by the same director such as *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1935), and Duvivier's *La belle équipe* (1936)). None of the films are gone into in any great depth. Clear ideological contrasts between *La Vie est à nous*'s Communist Party propaganda and *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*'s more non-conformist, *auto-gestionnaire* leftism are not engaged. Less well-known Popular Front films are not considered at all.[2]

A similar pattern holds for 1968 which is discussed in terms of familiar moments (the mobilisation against the government's dismissal of Henri Langlois as head of the Cinémathèque française, the disruption of Cannes) and the best known films (like Godard's *Tout va bien* (1972) or Costa-Gavras's *Z* (1969)). Discussion of the latter's initial American impact and subsequent influence on a small, but celebrated wave of Hollywood conspiracy thrillers like *The Parallax View* (1974) deepens the book's exploration of Franco-American cinematic interactions in productive ways but also underscores some of its limitations. *Z* is celebrated for its capacity to "offer a different way of seeing," this being "the traditional role that the French cinema had to play in its relationship with Hollywood" (p. 352). Somehow, the specific determinations and complex impacts of 1968 are shrunk back into the already familiar. Tellingly, there is no attempt to engage with the many, lesser known post-1968 films, many of which are once again becoming available. Nor is there any discussion of the ambitious attempts to break with mainstream production, distribution and exhibition and the search for new modes of collective authorship and new ways to theorize film.[3]

Pulling things together, the book's final chapter suggests a French cinema that has learned to live with itself and with Hollywood. "The undeclared war between France's commercial film industry and the *cinéma d'auteur* is over," Drazin declares (p. 385). Jacques Audiard's recent film, *Un Prophète* (2009), is brought in as evidence for this. Possessing visceral rather than intellectual appeal, and thus speaking to a non-elite audience, the film is nonetheless able to address issues around prison overcrowding and France's difficulty assimilating minorities. Speaking thus to French realities, it differs from more escapist Hollywood fare yet owes a clear debt to representations of prisons in US films and television shows. At the same time, as a popular *auteur* film, and like other recent French releases, the film finds a ready niche on the strong American indie film circuit that has grown up since the 1990s. This is a nice line of argument and brings the book to a neat close, underscoring its strengths and its weaknesses. It shows again how productive it can be to view the evolution of French film in an international, rather than in a narrowly national frame. Yet, the book's narrative closure is too neat. French cinema is hardly reconciled either with itself or with Hollywood. Multiplexes have reversed the long-term historical decline in audiences, but with big budget films, especially Hollywood ones, deploying enormous promotional budgets and occupying vast numbers of screens (especially in the multiplexes themselves), smaller films by less known *auteurs* struggle for screen space, press attention and public visibility.[4] The view from across the Atlantic or the Channel may indeed open up profitable new angles of vision. It may also take us too far away to see enough of what is going on.

## NOTES

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[1] Two important studies on French stardom are Ginette Vincendeau, *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* (London, New York: Continuum, 2000) and Guy Austin, *Stars in Modern French Film* (London, New York: Arnold, 2003). There is also substantial discussion of stars in Colin Crisp, *Genre, Myth and Convention in The French Cinema, 1929-1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

[2] On the range of cinema related to the Popular Front, see Jonathan Buchsbaum, *Cinéma Engagé: Film in the Popular Front* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

[3] There have been a wonderful series of DVD editions of post-1968 films brought out by the Association Périphérie (<http://www.peripherie.asso.fr/patrimoine.asp>) working with Editions Scope. There has been another produced by Editions Montparnasse. Taken together, these two collections give a real sense of the richness of post-1968 film.

[4] For a vivid sense of some of the tensions that still bedevil French cinema and of the struggle faced by small- and medium-budget films in competition with big releases, see Le Club des 13, *Le Milieu n'est plus un pont mais une faille* (Paris: Editions Stock, 2008).

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