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Lucy Mazdon and Catherine Wheatley, eds, *Je t'aime...moi non plus: Franco-British Cinematic Relations*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010. 300 pp. Images, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-84545-749-5.

Review by Timothy Scheie, Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester.

From the earliest years of cinema, national borders have proven porous to film products, technologies, influence, profits, and personnel. Already in 1913, when cinema pioneer Georges Méliès issued a bristling defense of the “Frenchness” of westerns made by his American subsidiary—“je tiens absolument à rendre à la France ce qui est à la France”/“I insist on rendering unto France what belongs to France” (p. 42)—the chauvinistic stridency of his remarks bespoke the erosion of the received assumption that insular national cultures claimed, contained, and exhaustively explained the production of a given corpus of films. An individual nation might house, subsidize, promote and police its own film industry, but the very necessity of such measures, in Méliès’ time or a hundred years later, evinces the urgency of a “transnational” perspective on film production. [1]

In *Je t'aime, moi non plus: Franco-British Cinematic Relations*, editors Lucy Mazdon and Catherine Wheatley have collected seventeen essays that explore the unbalanced dynamic between a British cinema culture suffused with French films and influences, and a general French indifference toward, if not outright dismissal of, production across the channel. On one side of this cinematic border, we find British fascination with French artistry and intellectualism, part of a more general francophilia that extends as much to cinema as to *haute cuisine*, houses in the Dordogne, and fashion; on the other lies an apparently widespread subscription to François Truffaut’s suggestion of the “incompatibility between the terms ‘cinema’ and ‘Britain’” (p. 211). An expressed purpose of the volume is to nuance how such prevailing attitudes shape and, in turn, are shaped by the cinema industries of the two countries.

The first of the collection’s three parts, “Industry and Institutions,” arguably best illuminates the interrelation of French and British film industries. Charles O’Brien’s contribution on Hitchcock’s *Waltzes from Vienna*, for example, compares the British original to the shorter French version, explaining how the newly deployed practice of dubbing not only influenced how Hitchcock constructed his shots at Gaumont’s British studio (obscuring the actors’ lips, having actors speak off-frame or with their backs to the audience, et cetera), but also spawned a robust new post-production industry on the French side of the channel that employed thousands of technicians and actors. The dubbed version resulted in cuts and re-arranged sequences so significant that a very different film emerged in France, amplifying in the process what O’Brien reads as a distinctly French predilection for strong father figures somewhat attenuated in the English-language original. This essay illuminates the cross-channel pressures—technological, esthetic, cultural, and financial—that bore on the versions of *Waltzes from Vienna* released in each country, hence the importance of situating such a film (or rather films, for the integrity of a single “text” is challenged) in its migration between the two film industries and languages. Other chapters on co-production agreements and the Dinard festival of British film further explore exchange and negotiation between the two national film cultures.

The greater part of the anthology, however, amply disabuses the reader of the notion that anything approaching symbiosis, or even dialogue, characterizes the relationship between the French and British film industries. The remainder of the first part and, with few exceptions, the contributions gathered in the other two (“Reception and Perceptions” and “Personnel and Performance”) chart the powerful and most often unreciprocated force French cinema has exercised on British reception and production. Geoffrey Newell-Smith and Sarah Street offer accounts of the reception of *la nouvelle vague* in Britain. Street’s analysis of Simone Signoret’s role in the British *Room at the Top* (1959) brings into sharp contrast the two film industries at this time. Signoret’s association with earlier French “quality” cinema made her less appealing to New Wave directors, who favored undiscovered and youthful actresses. In England, however, she became not only an emblem of Gallic sensuality that exposes English hypocrisy in matters of sexual mores, but more broadly of British ambivalence towards participating in a common European identity. Other contributors explore the influence of French “extreme” films (*Baise-moi*), of French realism (*La vie rêvée des anges*), of French actors (Annabella), of French directors (Truffaut), and French historical topics (the Resistance as portrayed in *Charlotte Gray*) in British film production.

Ian Christie’s account of the critical reception of British films in France stands out as a welcome reverse shot when it documents a French point of view grounded in French sources. He finds ample contempt among French critics and filmmakers for British cinema over the years, but also signals the French recognition of Joseph Losey, Stanley Kubrick, Michael Powell, Ken Loach, Mike Leigh and other directors who have lived and worked in Britain, some of whom are arguably more venerated in France. This perspective, however, is generally left unexamined throughout the collection. Catherine Wheatley’s own contribution on the British reception of French versions of *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* might serve as the emblem of the frequent exclusion of the French side of the equation from this collection’s purview. The article offers a penetrating glimpse of British censorship and of how the film’s “Frenchness” plays into shifting tolerance levels for sexual content. However, the focus lies squarely on British reception of French filmed versions of the novel, and although there are passing mentions of the films’ critical reception in France, no French reviews are cited or listed, nor is there any real examination of the French fascination with this British novel and its author that spawned the successive versions in the first place. Such an investigation would have balanced Ginette Vincendeau’s contribution on the British use of occupied France as source material in *Charlotte Gray*.

Vincendeau, in turn, participates in further delimiting the Britanno-centric perspective of the collection by neglecting to explore French responses to *Charlotte Gray* or any reciprocal French representations of Britain, wartime or otherwise, devoting instead several pages to the television series *‘Allo, ‘Allo* (a curious anomaly in this collection on film). Jim Morrissey’s reading of the tension between French universalist attitudes and Anglo-American multiculturalism into the “ghetto” films *La Haine* (1995) and *Bullet Boy* (2004) treads around a similar blind field, relying nearly exclusively on British and English-language sources without surveying how these cinematic representations were received, characterized, and debated by French critics and spectators.

Under the terms of the exchange portrayed in *Je t’aime moi non plus*, the scales are tipped. Where the British hungrily import stars, directors, and subject matter, the French make a handful of David Niven films. Britain embraces French innovation, technique, theory, sex, and an “art” cinema that profoundly shapes and transforms its own national cinema culture; France gets Jane Birkin. On one hand, the French incursions into British film production, exhibition, and reception discussed in these essays appear so deep that they effectively become a constitutive force sculpting our idea of “British film,” a term that thereafter comes under pressure: in short,

to understand British film we must grasp its measure of Frenchness. On the other hand, the dialogue promised on the book jacket is more of a soliloquy. Readers may wonder if these essays ultimately do more to confirm than to revise the received ideas about the two national film cultures targeted in the introduction. Others may ask if the French perspective on Franco-British cinematic relations is less indifferent than overlooked. All the while, moreover, Hollywood remains the elephant in the room, sometimes acknowledged but more often silently casting its enormous shadow over both film industries as the player who holds the trump cards in the game of transnational cinematic relations.

NOTE

[1] Méliès, Georges, "Letter," *Le Courrier cinématographique* 3/2(10 January, 1913): 42.

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