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Jonathan Ervine, *Cinema and the Republic: Filming on the Margins in Contemporary France*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013. x + 196 pp. Notes, filmography, bibliography, and index. \$135.00 U.S (cl). ISBN 978-0-7083-2596-4.

Review by Greg Hainge, University of Queensland.

The approach taken by Jonathan Ervine's *Cinema and the French Republic: Filming on the Margins in Contemporary France* might, at first glance, seem somewhat paradoxical since, in spite of the very precise title given to his book, the range of films that he sets out to examine in itself provides proof that, in relation to cinematic production at least, there is no such thing as a single culture in France today that could be said to be "*une et indivisible*." This, of course, is precisely the point, for it is Ervine's intention to examine the ways in which marginalised sectors of French society have been represented in different forms of cinematic production. To do this, however, is a huge undertaking and so the work, sensibly, places a number of constraints upon itself. Firstly, the corpus to be examined starts in 1995 and extends to the present day. Secondly, the films examined concentrate on four separate issues or themes involving certain marginal groups in France today: the status of *sans-papiers* in France; attempts to defend foreign nationals subjected to the *double peine* law; relations between young people and the police in France's *banlieues*; and, finally, representations of communal activities and daily life in France's *banlieues*.

These four categories narrow the field somewhat, yet still present a potentially vast corpus and so another selection criterion is enacted, namely the requirement that the films under consideration explicitly focus on power relations, and in particular instances where there is presented an imbalance of power between various groups. No other parameters are set on the corpus under consideration meaning that Ervine deliberately sets out to compare and contrast the presentation of these four overarching themes in both documentary and fiction film texts situated at any point on the spectrum from small independent films to (relatively) mainstream films. To understand the scope of the project that emerges from this methodology, it is undoubtedly instructive to list the films that are treated to individual examination in the four primary chapters dealing with these respective themes. They are:

1. *Sans papiers*

Samir Abdallah and Rafaele Ventura's *La Ballade des sans-papiers* (1997)
Carole Sionnet's *Parmi Nous: sans-papiers, sans visages et sans paroles* (2004)
Alain Gomis's *L'Afrique* (2001)
Michael Haneke's *Code Inconnu* (2002)

2. *Double peine*

Bertrand Tavernier's *Histoires de vies brisées* (2001)
Jean-Pierre Thorn's *On n'est pas des marques de vélo* (2003)
Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche's *Wesh Wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?* (2002)
Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche's *Bled Number One* (2006)

3. Young people and the police.

Matthieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995)

Jean-François Richet's *Ma 6-T va crack-er* (1997)
Éric Pittard's *Le Bruit, l'odeur et quelques étoiles* (2004)
Philippe Triboit's *L'Embrassement* (2007)
Christophe-Emmanuel Del Debbio's *Banlieues: sous le feu des médias* (2006)

4. Non-stereotypical representations of the *banlieue*.

Bertrand Tavernier's *De l'autre côté du périph'*
Christophe Nick's *Les Mauvais garçons* (2005)
Hughes Demeude's *93: L'Effervescence* (2008)
Abdellatif Kechiche's *L'Esquive* (2003).

As well as dealing with this number of films, the range of films and issues examined means that the author needs to tackle a formidable number of cinematic theoretical issues that have to do not only with the complexities of dealing with documentary and fictional film forms as somehow equivalent to each other, the different industrial conditions under which various films in his corpus come into being and taxonomic considerations such as the category of Third cinema. The author also must address the wide range of political questions and contexts that his study brings into the fray. Ervine faces all of these head on, giving in his early chapters very competent summaries of a number of different theories, including postcolonial theory, the operations of stereotypes and stigmatisation, and entering into discussions of concepts such as republicanism and multiculturalism, transnationalism and globalisation. Given the amount of material covered here, Ervine does a wonderful job of synthesis and provides an incredibly useful overview of the issues at stake for the study to come. Unsurprisingly, given the amount of ground covered, the reader familiar with the basic tenets of these issues and theories will not find anything particularly new or challenging in these early chapters, but this, of course, matters little in the final analysis, since these chapters serve only to set the scene for the main game, which is to say the investigation of the book's main themes as exemplified in the films listed above.

Each of these main chapters begins once again with a very good overview of the context, history and political significance of the specific thematic grouping under consideration. Thus we get, for instance, an excellent potted history of the *sans-papiers* movement and a synthesis of some of the primary theoretical texts that have analysed the specific affordances and ramifications of this movement as a counter-hegemonic event. Following this overview, each chapter goes on to examine its own set of filmic texts as listed above, each one taken in turn.

As competent and useful as the overview sections of the book are, I was nonetheless hoping that the level of theoretical complexity and original thought would increase dramatically once I arrived at the core of the book, namely the analyses of the individual filmic texts examined. This was not to be, however, for the analyses of the individual filmic texts again follow an intensely programmatic model, providing a brief plot summary before articulating the film's content to the theoretical positions summarised in the introductory sections in a somewhat cursory manner and ultimately failing to provide any true analysis. In its place, these films are simply taken to be exemplars of the theoretical positions outlined, with no real consideration given to how the specific affordances of the cinematic text may go some way towards either problematizing or building on those theoretical positions. Thus, again and again we get sentences such as: "This demonstrates the pertinence of Rosello's comments" (p. 44); "[this] demonstrates the validity of Rosello's argument" (p. 48); "This is precisely the sort of foreigner that Rosello argues that French immigration legislation..." (p. 74); or "This...provides further evidence of how the film's engagement with such notions is symptomatic of a problematic approach identified by Rosello that was mentioned at the start of this chapter" (p. 108). What is more, as should be more than clear from these few examples, the range of theoretical texts used to back up the arguments made in relation to the filmic texts is far more limited than in the early chapters in which there is engagement with a wide range of materials.

This is not to suggest by any means that there is something wrong with using the work of a scholar as rich and thoughtful as Rosello in a number of contexts, but it is to suggest that it is highly problematic to see such a wide range of films as simply exemplifying, again and again, something that has already been said in an entirely different form and genre. What is more, the insistent repetition of ideas from a small selection of secondary texts used to back up arguments made across all of the different thematic groupings in the book, as well as an almost obsessive use of terms such as “hegemonic” and “counter-hegemonic,” lead to a somewhat predictable outcome in every chapter and fairly quickly, then, to a realisation that we will never progress beyond the very competent, but ultimately cursory approach adopted at the start.

Lest this seem overly negative, let me state for the record that I really like many things about this book. To begin with, it assembles an amazing array of documentation and facts in a very economic and regimented manner. In addition, I was delighted to be provided with such capable overviews of such complex events that encompass so many different questions and to be introduced to some films that I did not know anything about previously. What is more, in spite of my frustration at the perhaps overly programmatic nature of the methodology followed, I have to admit that Ervine’s book is impeccably structured, a near-perfect model in many respects of how to write a thesis. Herein though lies the problem: this is not a thesis, it is a book, and for this reason I really wanted it to do more, I wanted it to follow some of the lines of investigation that it either promised and did not deliver or else those that it prompted in my head due to the interesting juxtapositions of diverse materials and approaches adopted.

To give an example of what I am talking about, allow me briefly to share with you one of the fascinating possibilities that one such juxtaposition provoked in me when reading this book. At one point, fairly early on, having pointed out that this will be a book that examines filmmakers’ attempts to represent subaltern positions, we suddenly pass to a consideration of the industrial conditions in which all of these films are made, namely an industry dominated by large global players who control the vast majority of screens in France. This led me to think about the political efficacy of the cinema or potential lack thereof in the absence of alternative models of distribution. It then led me to wonder whether in fact, somewhat counterintuitively and certainly *contra* the theoretical background of Spivak’s theories as expounded here, it might be the case that the most politically efficacious form of cinema is in fact mainstream hegemonic cinema that is somehow able to slip in some counterhegemonic element and to represent, no matter how problematically in many cases, those people from underrepresented and marginal groups who would not normally be visible to vast sections of French society. And this in turn led me to question my own position on Rosello’s theories on the stereotype that plays such an important role here.

Reflections such as this are, of course, much more open-ended and speculative than those allowed by the strict methodology that Ervine adopts, but they are, I believe, questions that a book such as this needs to face head on. As is pointed out, the post-1995 films examined herein have all been made in a context where a certain form of republicanism and the rise of the Front National have meant that the need for other kinds of representations of marginal groups has only become more urgent and pressing with every passing day. I write this review, indeed, in the wake of massive gains for the Front National in municipal elections. This book contains the tools that would be required for an in-depth analysis of the deep complexities involved in crafting texts with political intent in a highly controlled industrial environment and in understanding the ways in which those texts are received by the general public or, indeed, specific communities. As it stands, however, they are tools that remain in isolation, that are never deployed together in order to produce a more complex result.

Paradoxically once again, therefore, if I started off by suggesting that the variety of films, genres, approaches and themes tackled by Ervine seemed somewhat anti-Republican, presenting instead a far more democratic and inclusive model suited to the book’s focus on marginal cultures, what we are left with by the end is strangely Republican. Indeed, ultimately this is a book in which every chapter is equal, in which the individual parts brought together into one space are made to conform to a uniform

model imposed in the interests of the sovereign individuality and equality of all but which, in the same move, erases the difference between them and thus the far more interesting, surprising and politically progressive effects that can be produced out of differential relations.

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