
H-France Review Vol. 14 (February 2014), No. 25

Lucy Mazdon and Catherine Wheatley, *French Film in Britain: Sex, Art and Cinephilia*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013. viii + 238 pp. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-85745-350-1.

Review by Codruța Morari, Wellesley College.

In their collaborative endeavor, Lucy Mazdon and Catherine Wheatley delve into archives of film magazines in order to settle two general truths regarding the distribution, circulation and reception of French cinema in Britain. First, the French films distributed in Great Britain displayed by and large a rare artistic ambition. Second, the discourses they generated mostly emphasized sexuality and eroticism, either in a clichéd way, or offered an intentionally new artistic vision about both sensuality and cinematic representation. That French cinema is about sex, argue the two scholars, is “of course a light-hearted, fictional definition of French film, [but] it does provide a very accurate summary of dominant perceptions of the Gallic cinematic product in Britain, perceptions established in the early decades of the twentieth century and still prevalent today” (p. 1). In spite of its wide perception as an immoral body of narrative and visual representations of sex, the only national cinema able to compete with Hollywood was defended by critics who promoted it heavily. If French cinema is seen as an “acquired taste,” it is because it displays a vivid concern with its art status, which has animated cinephilic movements since the early years of film industry.

The book follows chronologically the development of film industry in France and Britain respectively. Six major periods are identified, starting with the advent of sound and its dramatic consequences in a market that already struggled to rescue cinema from the fairground and legitimate it as an artistic practice. It follows the war and its aftermath, with the differently shaped audiences, constituted mainly of women and elderly people in need of distraction. The book then moves on to the 1950s when both France and Britain strived to make cinema an appealing form of entertainment. “Saucy and Naughty and Witty and Chic: Can French Films Fill the Gap?” is the main question of the third chapter and the answer it provides is negative, especially because of legal regulations and censorship practices installed in Britain in the 1950s. Insisting on the sensational and tempestuous changes brought by the French New Wave, Mazdon and Wheatley take issue with the late arrival of these movies on the British shores. They argue that the reception of the New Wave in Britain indeed confirms a longstanding attitude of reluctance and distrust regarding French cinema, a British resistance to less straightforward narratives and visual forms of representation. Before exploring the changes brought by the advent of videos and DVDs in a last section of this collection, the two scholars tentatively map what they vaguely call in chapter five’s title, “the changing perceptions of French cinema,” that is the lack of a constant and vivid presence in Britain, undoubtedly related to the failure of Art Houses.

Every chapter is supplemented by a selective filmography that lists the films in discussion, and short bibliographies that comprise lists of general treatises in film history. Although carefully documented, the book never engages with the larger context of film history and, except for one or two tentative comparisons with the situation in Germany, it paces quietly a very limited territory. As such, it serves as an introductory study to a large and exciting topic, rather than a more thorough scholarly endeavor.

The book clearly states its purpose to minutely chart the limited, but clearly defined territory of British distribution of French films, and promises in its title an engagement with wider issues of film theory, like art and cinephilia. Although the reader's awareness of the effectiveness of such concepts as "art" and "cinephilia" in the academic discourse goes hand in hand with a relatively extensive knowledge of the debates surrounding them, it is not sure that it will fuel reflection among those unfamiliar with it.

In the linear and chronological story of French cinema in Britain, with its lists of films and names gathered around historical events, the points of contention are mainly supported by ample and at times engaging quotes from newspapers, film journals and magazines, as well as tabloids. These points of contention are of course, the resistance of British popular audiences to artsy and sexy French cinema, especially sound cinema, and the consequences of this attitude for the distributors. In the end, the book reads as a heterogeneous collection of data and anecdotes, standardized by the univocal opinion of its authors that the issues of sex and art are engrained in the British perception of this foreign cinema. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

Mazdon and Wheatley's study sets out to cover a century of cinematic exchanges, some successful, some aborted, between two national systems. Indeed, with the passing exception of an introductory note that promises to mobilize this historical material in an adventitious inquiry into questions of national identity, the book proceeds from the assumption that the two constituted systems regulating the presence of French film over the Channel are the British and the Gallic. Not only does this conceptual format affect the progress of what appears as an archival work, it cannot but lead to the conclusion that "as we move forward into the twenty-first century, the future of French cinema in Britain is far from certain" (p. 219). Although this uncertainty could open new and productive ways to tell such a compelling story as the one of the French cinema in Britain, the authors approach it with a concerned eye. And their concerns are surely justified if they wonder what "French cinema" is as a national cinema, and what constitutes "British perception" in an age of post-globalization. By the end of the book, the reader gets the sense of a both homogenous and hegemonic notion of "Frenchness" and "Britishness."

This book's existence seems above all to derive from funding opportunities offered by British agencies and to be fueled by a higher education system's instrumental rationality that judges scholarly activity in terms of the number of pages published. The hope is that the two scholars will reprise this stimulating topic in a project that will engage with more analytical and conceptual discourses about film, Frenchness and their perception across the Channel.

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