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Isabelle Vanderschelden, *Studying French Cinema*. Leighton Buzzard UK: Auteur Press, 2013. 249 pp. Glossary, bibliography, filmography, and index. \$76.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-906733-16-2. \$27.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-906733-15-5.

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Isabelle Vanderschelden's *Studying French Cinema* is the newest in a group of works that attempt to synthesize the broad movement of modern French cinema. As the title suggests, and the organization and style of the book confirm, this is an introductory volume targeted for either the undergraduate classroom or the independent novice seeking a point of entry into French film history. Unlike many if not most books on the subject of French cinema (among them studies by Guy Austin [1], Susan Hayward [2] and Ginette Vincendeau [3], Rémy Lanzoni [4], Phil Powrie [5], and others) *Studying French Cinema* is organized neither by strictly chronological or historical timelines, nor by periodization (the study of a particular decade), nor the study of particular themes, genres, or styles of film; rather, it attempts to blend all of these in a hybrid historical, thematic, genre-based study. This is an ambitious task, particularly in an introductory volume, and the book succeeds in some regards, but falls short in others.

The book is divided into ten chapters and an introduction. The introduction is a semi-historical overview of the development of French cinema from the New Wave, but it also includes a discussion of the concept of auteurism, and overviews of various genres or styles, including the policier and the "intimist" film. The first six chapters of the book deal with films by New Wave directors or their contemporaries (the directors treated in these chapters are, in order, Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Varda, Malle, and Miller).

The first chapter treats François Truffaut and explores the landmark *Les 400 coups* (1959) and the later *L'Argent de poche* (1976), both of which, as the chapter asserts, are films exploring childhood. The chapter begins with an overview of Truffaut's place in cinema, including his role as film critic, and then offers a synopsis of each film, a discussion of production contexts, and an interpretation of the two films together through the thematic frame of childhood. This is followed by a discussion of cinematic elements, including the use of space, camerawork, narrative, and editing, each of which is approximately two paragraphs. The chapter concludes with an assessment of Truffaut's evolution as a filmmaker, as evidenced by the contrast between the two films, and a bibliography with suggestions for further reading.

The second chapter examines two films by Jean-Luc Godard, *A Bout de souffle* (1960) and *Pierrot le fou* (1965). Like chapter one, it begins with an overview of the significance of the director, which is followed by synopses, a discussion of production contexts, a discussion of the types of characters in Godard's films, an analysis of narrative structure, a section on Godard's editing, and a discussion of "other style issues," in which Vanderschelden asserts that "critics have underestimated the role played by the director of photography Raoul Coutard in the distinctive visual styles associated with the New Wave and Godard's early films" (p. 61). This is followed by a section on Godard and Language, in which the

author discusses Godard's influence on film grammar and his innovations in the use of dialogue. The chapter concludes with an exploration of audience response to Godard's work.

The third chapter, entitled "New Wave Legacy and the French Auteur," is an examination of the work of director Claude Chabrol through an analysis of the film *Le Boucher / The Butcher* (1969). It contains segments exploring Chabrol and genre, particularly the thriller, *mise-en-scène* and narrative, and motifs and associations, and concludes with a discussion of Chabrol as film auteur.

Chapter four of the volume is dedicated to Agnès Varda, but contains a discussion of only one of her films, *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), although there are mentions of other films. The chapter centers on the issue of "cinécriture" or filmic writing, an aspect of *auteur* theory, and so continues the idea of film authorship. This chapter is divided into an introduction to the director, a synopsis of the film, a discussion of the genesis of the film, an exploration of narrative structure, a discussion of the blending of narrative fiction and documentary in the film, an examination of the film's *mise-en-scène*, a short segment on feminist readings of the film, and a conclusion.

The fifth chapter of the book focuses on Louis Malle and specifically his Occupation films, *Lacombe Lucien* (1974) and *Au Revoir les enfants* (1987). This chapter contains discussions of Malle's place in French cinema, characterization and youth in the two films, the historical contexts of the films, approaching the films as personal narratives, and the reception of the films, as well as a very cursory section on *mise-en-scène*.

Chapter six is devoted to director Claude Miller and examines his work through the filter of "intimist" cinema, or a cinema that tends "to focus on introspective or psychological narratives" (p. 136). This chapter focuses on two films by Miller from the 1980s, *L'Effrontée* (1985) and *La Petite voleuse* (1988). The chapter contains sections on film in 1980s, production contexts, motifs and *mise-en-scène*.

Chapter seven deals exclusively with Nicholas Filbert's documentary film *Être et avoir* (2002). The chapter situates the film within the French documentary tradition and organizes the study of the film around issues of production contexts and genesis, the depiction of rural France, the film's depiction of the educational system, documentary strategies, and documentary aesthetics. The eighth chapter shifts from documentary to comedy and treats Francis Veber's *Dîner de cons* (1998) and *Le Placard* (2001). Apart from a discussion of Veber's evolution from playwright to filmmaker and synopses of the two films, the chapter discusses the evolution of comedy in France from the *café-concerts* to the cinema, the concept of the star, characterization, comedy as social text, and the use of comic devices.

Chapter nine focuses on Christophe Gans's elaborate postmodern costume drama *Le Pacte des loups* (2001). The chapter reads the film as historical drama and heritage film, and discusses production contexts, narrative contexts, postmodernism, genre, and the use of digital effects.

The tenth and final chapter is also a single film chapter and it deals with Ismaël Ferrouhki's *Le Grand voyage* (2004). The film is situated as an example of transnational, immigrant, and / or Beur filmmaking, and is discussed in terms of genre, multiculturalism, and religion.

The book has several issues and shortcomings, particularly in comparison to other available books on the same subject. First and foremost, nearly half of the book deals with New Wave filmmakers or their contemporaries (Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Varda, Malle) and while not all of the films treated are from the 1960s, it does skew the book quite heavily toward a handful of filmmakers closely associated with a particular decade. There is also a lack of symmetry among the chapters. Some chapters deal with two films by a single director from the same decade, some chapters deal with a single film by a single director, and some chapters deal with two films by two different directors. Typically in a book of this kind, a broad survey and parity across chapters is important to give readers a sense of the relationships among films and directors or across time. The net result is that it might be difficult to grasp (particularly for a novice reader) how key aspects of filmmaking such as editing and camerawork,

production contexts, *mise-en-scène*, or even the concept of the *auteur* have evolved over time or even how they compare filmmaker to filmmaker or film to film (for those directors and films treated in the book), because these things are not dealt with in a consistent way. Moreover, despite periodic historical contextualization of films, the book's structure impedes any clear sense of historical trajectory.

This puts the book at a disadvantage when compared to other introductory film books. Vanderschelden's book might have overcome this disadvantage by focusing on a greater number of recent films. However, the most recent film included in the volume is from 2004.

Another shortcoming of the book is some inconsistency in the underlying research, or at least in the citations and bibliographies included. In her introduction to the book, Vanderschelden states that in selecting films for the book "precedence was given to films for which no detailed critical studies had recently been published in English" (p. 19). This suggests that a rigorous search was conducted to verify the state of recent scholarship. However, in some cases, there have been recent, and sometimes quite important, studies of the films treated in this volume that are not cited or acknowledged, despite some overlap with the discussions in the book. Truffaut, Godard, Varda, and Malle are discussed in both Richard Neupert's *A History of French New Wave Cinema* (2007) [6], and in Geneviève Sellier's *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema* (2008) [7], but neither book is cited or listed.

Similar problems exist with the more recent films by recent directors. There have been two recently published studies on Christophe Gans's *Le Pacte des loups* (2001), one article that appeared in *Studies in French Cinema* in 2011 [8] and one book from the previous year [9]. Both of these discuss the film in more or less the same terms as Vanderschelden's chapter (postmodernism, super-production, digital effects, and the heritage film), but neither work is listed or cited. Similarly absent from this chapter are references to or citations from the extensive body that exists on French heritage films, despite the fact that this is a major focus of the chapter, and despite the fact that works dealing with the heritage film (by Phil Powrie [10] and Guy Austin [see note 1]) are alluded to very briefly, for reasons that are not entirely clear, in the chapter on Claude Miller. Also absent from the chapter on Claude Miller is any reference to Tim Palmer's *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (2011) [11], which explores films, including those of Miller, through a similar framework.

These criticisms notwithstanding, *Studying French Cinema* does make some important contributions. Claude Miller, who is the subject of chapter six of the book, has been understudied, particularly in the English language context, and the concept of "intimist" cinema has been only minimally explored in English-language scholarship. The book is also easily readable and accessible to students and non-academics, and does discuss some very important, canonical films, as well as some equally important, but lesser-known films, summarizing the broad critical consensus of the importance of both types. The book also includes some widely taught, but understudied (in English) films, including the Veber films. Therefore, while it would be difficult to imagine structuring an entire class using this book, it might work well as a supplemental reading, and certain chapters, particularly the chapter on Claude Miller, certainly fill a void in contemporary cinema studies.

NOTES

[1] Guy Austin, *Contemporary French Cinema: An Introduction. Second Edition*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

[2] Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema*. (Routledge: London and New York, 2005).

[3] Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau, *French Film: Texts and Contexts*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

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- [4] Rémi Fournier Lanzoni, *French Cinema: From Its Beginnings to the Present*. (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2004).
- [5] Phil Powrie, *The Cinema of France*. (London: Wallflower, 2006).
- [6] Richard Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2007).
- [7] Geneviève Sellier and Kristen Ross (trans.), *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*. (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).
- [8] Dayna Oscherwitz, "Shaking Up the Historical Film: Christophe Gans's *Le Pacte de loups* / *The Brotherhood of the Wolf* (2001)," *Studies in French Cinema* 43.1 (2011): 43-55.
- [9] Dayna Oscherwitz, *Past Forward: French Cinema and the Post-Colonial Heritage*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010).
- [10] Phil Powrie, *French Cinema in the 1980s: Nostalgia and the Crisis of Masculinity*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- [11] Tim Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

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