
H-France Review Vol. 20 (September 2020), No. 159

Gemma King, *Decentring France: Multilingualism and Power in Contemporary French Cinema*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017. x + 213pp. Appendices, filmography, references, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-5261-1357-7; \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-5261-1358-0.

Review by Alison J. Murray Levine, University of Virginia.

Gemma King's 2017 monograph, *Decentring France: Multilingualism and Power in Contemporary French Cinema*, makes a focused intervention in the cultural history of French cinema that has broader implications for the role cinema plays in commenting on social issues and in projecting an image of French culture internationally. To frame the discussion, King begins by engaging the question that has been debated for several decades in film studies, of whether it makes sense at all to write about national cinemas, or if all cinema should be studied using transnational paradigms.[1] King makes a convincing institutional and cultural argument about the particularity of the French case, in which the idea of national cinema has continued importance even as the practice and economics of production become ever more multi- and transnational. King provides detailed and clear explanations on the ways in which specific films are or are not labeled as French depending on the context of financing, festival acceptance, and so on. Her examples include, among others, a fascinating discussion of why *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*, a film whose iconic "Frenchness" was so well known internationally, was not, in fact, a French film (pp. 10-12). This is because French film production is intertwined with state cultural policy and institutional definitions of what is French about French cinema in the first place, an observation that arguably raises the stakes of what French cinema says about France.

It is therefore noteworthy that since about 2005, French cinema has become more intentionally multilingual than it was in the past, and that some multilingual films have become commercially successful and reached wide audiences. While these generalizations might seem anecdotal, King lays out a convincing argument for considering the year 2005 as a turning point. Based on an extensive filmography, she contends that prior to this date, French cinema was dominated by the French language, with other languages used primarily for "decoration," or as a marker of foreignness, or for humorous effect. Often, dialogue in other languages appeared not for its "semantic meaning" but to signal a kind of "symbolic threat of otherness" (pp. 25-26). The shift King wants to articulate is an increase in films that "draw explicit attention to their multilingualism" and often "refer to the importance of linguistic understanding and the value of speaking multiple languages" (pp. 25-26). She supports her case for this shift with evidence of a sharp increase in the number of multilingual French films after 2005; the increased commercial success of multilingual films after 2005; and new scholarship that highlighted France as a leader

in the production of multilingual cinema. Without drawing a direct parallel, she also points out the sociocultural importance of the 2005 riots and extended state of emergency that racked France that same year.

King's work joins that of other scholars attempting to move beyond binary paradigms for film analysis that draw on postcolonial theory, in favor of multidirectional, multilateral models.^[2] She attempts to dismantle an understanding of postcolonial cinema as structured according to a center vs. periphery model, in which the representation of France, the French language, or French urban centers are hegemonic reservoirs of cultural power to be reckoned with, or aspired to, by individuals on the periphery. Her overarching claim, which also gives rise to her title *Decentering France*, is that the new form of multilingual film she has identified succeeds in unmooring the French language from a certain idea of French culture, the French nation, or the French urban center as a destination, or ideal to be attained. In the most basic terms, they do so by foregrounding other languages alongside French in situations where language proficiency affords characters social power and agency.

To develop this argument, King advances a corpus of eight films for in-depth analysis. The number may seem slight; however, the case studies are framed by a very helpful chapter on the cultural and institutional history of multilingualism in French cinema, as well as several useful appendices. These include an extensive filmography of multilingual films and the languages they include, and a detailed timeline of policy changes affecting the development of international co-productions and multilingual films from 1946 to 2012. The eight films that receive detailed treatment were selected based on reception rather than the simple fact of their multilingualism. All eight films, as King demonstrates, had high box office numbers and significant critical success, and they were selected for various awards and festivals. They are worth our attention because, taken as a group, they make a significant intervention in contemporary debates about multiculturalism, multilingualism, and power among French-speaking audiences.

The case studies that make up the center of the book are organized spatially into four "contact zones" (p. 3) in which King explores a pair of films: capital centers (*Polisse* and *Entre les murs*), urban margins (*Un prophète* and *Dheepan*), coastal borders (*Welcome* and *La graine et le mulet*), and international spaces (*London River* and *Des hommes et des dieux*). In each pair of case studies, she investigates the power dynamics underpinning the use of language in the relevant contact zones, in order to demonstrate "the decentering trajectory of language, space and power at the heart of these films" and to expose the "rhizomatic nature of language relations in multilingual film" conceived more broadly (p. 55). In the chapter on migration and coastal borders, for example, she explains that in most French films on immigration, France "is oriented as centre, reinforced in the mapping of Paris in relation to its outer suburbs, and the ontological centre of the civilized world" (p. 144). The new multilingual cinema, on the other hand, is different, decentering this ontology and de-emphasizing the cultural importance of France.

Some readers may find the contrast too stark, the exceptions too readily available (*L'esquive* for example, appears to highlight and foreground the cultural importance of France and the French language). And yet, one of the strengths of the book is that each generalization is nuanced and grounded in close analysis of language use in specific scenes. For example, King demonstrates the way in which the use of language evolved from *La Haine* (in which slang use disconnects the marginalized characters from mainstream society) through *L'esquive* (in which power lies not only in the ability to master Marivaux but also, crucially, "in the ability to manoeuvre between

the film's numerous cultural environments and their respective languages") and, finally, to what she argues is the "decentred" presentation of multilingualism in *La graine et le mulet* (in which "French among other languages is useful in some situations and irrelevant in others" (pp. 150-153)).

King's close analysis will, for many readers familiar with the films, lead them to view the films differently because of the attention to language and multilingualism in various forms, which no other study to this point has addressed in such detail, at least for French cinema. The focus on language brings detail and precision to the discussion. One more example makes the point: King refers to a contention by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam that "language *is* culture, and those who 'inhabit' different languages might be said to inhabit different worlds."^[3] While this contention might seem obvious, King brings it vividly to life in her analysis of a scene in which language use becomes a strategic matter. The scene is from the film *Polisse*: when a suspect switches from French to Arabic in an attempt to intimidate the female officer interrogating him, she also switches to Arabic, undaunted, in a move to assert power and shame him into silence (p. 66).

Beyond the immediate frame of this project, which draws extensively on the ideas of rhizomatic connection and contact zones to articulate the notion of decentering filmic representations of France, King's work also suggests many productive affinities with another decentering project in French and Francophone film studies, that of *cinéma-monde*. Primarily focused on "French cinema," King's work intersects with the project of *cinéma-monde*, suggested by Bill Marshall as a way to rethink the broader category of Francophone cinema through a decentering paradigm.^[4] Three of these points of intersection are: an attention to transnational, often multilingual cinema in which France, the French language, and French culture are not central; an interest in dismantling postcolonial paradigms; and a methodological approach that joins esthetic analysis and film theory with attention to institutional history and the contexts of film production and reception. King does engage with the idea of *cinéma-monde*; however, she perhaps underplays the extent to which her work on multilingual cinema is likely to remain an important intervention in the debates about decentering French film studies from within and beyond the Hexagon.^[5] King has written a highly readable, richly detailed, and well-argued book from which scholars and students interested in what contemporary French film has to say about contemporary France, and why it matters, have much to gain.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Will Higbee and Sarah Leahy, eds., *Studies in French Cinema: UK Perspectives, 1985-2010* (Chicago: Intellect, 2011).

[2] See, for example, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, eds., *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

[3] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "The cinema after Babel: language, difference, power," in Ella Shohat ed., *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 106-138 (107), cited by King on p. 66.

[4] Bill Marshall, "Cinéma-monde? Towards a concept of francophone cinema," *Francospheres* 1:1 (2012):35-51. See King for further reflection on the term "French cinema" within a broader discussion of film and nationality (pp. 9-15).

[5] See, for example, Michael Gott and Thibault Schilt, eds., *Cinéma-monde: Decentred Perspectives on Global Filmmaking in French* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

Alison Levine
University of Virginia
alevine@virginia.edu

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172