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Charlie Michael, *French Blockbusters: Cultural Politics of a Transnational Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. xvii + 236 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$110.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781474424233; \$27.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781474484275; \$27.95 (epub). ISBN 9781474424257; \$110.00 U.S. (pdf). ISBN 9781474424240.

Review by Ben McCann, University of Adelaide.

When it comes to describing a certain type of film, the word “blockbuster” dates back around eighty years. It was first used in the 1940s in film trade magazines such as *Variety* and *Motion Picture Herald*. It was in the 1970s, with the release of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), that the concept of the blockbuster became commonplace. Ever since, the term has been used to describe a certain type of (usually) Hollywood film—full of CGI and special effects, with a fast-paced and action-packed narrative, full of memorable heroes, villains, and one-liners, and financially lucrative at the box office. Blockbusters are not just highly mediated, extraordinarily successful films on their own merits, but they also come to dominate the cultural landscape. So far, so Hollywood. But blockbusters *à la française*? That seems like an oxymoron too far.

Indeed, as Charlie Michael admits early on in his fascinating, well-timed, and provocatively titled new book—*French Blockbusters: Cultural Politics of a Transnational Cinema*--the first two words in the title “may seem an unlikely pairing” (p. 1). We quickly learn that in 2015, the cost of the average Anglo-American film was sixty million dollars compared to around five million dollars in France (Michael is very good at the “numbers game” throughout, and frequently uses statistics such as these to make important strategic points). Hollywood, it seems, has won—its hegemony is all-powerful.

And yet, since the 1980s, French producers have been eager to challenge the Hollywood blockbuster hegemony that had taken root in France’s domestic cinema ecosystem. A new breed of film—revisionist historical epic, high-concept action movie, four-quadrant comedy—has emerged over this period that has challenged the notions of “a French film” and revitalised the multiplex versus art-house debate that has been part of the critical discourse for decades. He defines the French blockbuster as “delinked from nationality and place-ness designating a type of filmmaking that arose...to exceed national specificities by design, often doing so through ties with corporate business culture, formulaic and “universalist themes and digitised special effects” (p. 13).

In chapter one (“The Lang Plan and its Aftermath”), Michael charts the political and economic conditions that paved the way for the present-day practices of film production culture in France.

We are reminded of the sweeping audio-visual reforms that took place in the early 1980s after Mitterrand won the presidency and the decisive impact of Jack Lang's cultural policies. As Mitterrand's Minister of Culture from 1981 to 1993, Lang played a key role in promoting French culture and defending the country's "cultural exception" in the face of globalisation. Michael does an excellent job in laying out Lang's cultural strategies—from the inauguration of Canal Plus to robust new funding opportunities—that were a direct attempt to beat Hollywood at its own game. These plans were deceptively simple: "to pursue a class of prestigious, culturally oriented blockbusters" and "to generate a more competitive...more 'democratic' French culture, capable of appealing to both mass audiences and to elites" (p. 36).

Chapter two ("Popular French Cinema and "Cultural Diversity") expands on this interrogation of Lang's cultural politics and shows how the French film industry initiated a "search for new forms of cultural relevance in a multi-media platform, multi-media era" (p. 59). In this theoretically rich and methodologically robust account, Michael explores the knotty concept of "cultural diversity" (a term frequently used to describe the commercial ambitions and practices of popular contemporary French cinema) through three interlinked lenses: exceptionalism, professionalism, and pragmatism. His arguments here will be familiar to scholars and connoisseurs of French cinema, and Michael does an excellent job of outlining each tendency and how its discourse has become progressively embedded in discussions about French cinema in politico-economic and aesthetic terms. Michael shows how Lang's early gains in promoting a vibrant audio-visual domestic policy as a counterbalance to Hollywood's hegemony were gradually eroded and compromised by the growing power of France's television stations (with their focus on primetime programming), the rise of multiplex culture, and reduced budgets for those filmmakers unwilling to compromise their artistic sensibilities. Michael recalls the arresting speech given by Pascale Ferran in 2007 after her film *Lady Chatterley* had triumphed at that year's César Awards. One particular sentence in that speech offered a stark reminder of the ongoing structural iniquities in French cinema: "Here, as elsewhere, the violent strength of the world economy has managed to dumb down our popular taste and then pit us against one another" (p. 62). As for the professionalism argument—well, French cinema could match Hollywood for global reach and commercial success if only it could adopt "a sleeker, more contemporary form of business practice that works to keep its audiences (both global and national) in mind" (p. 71). Making films that can appeal to as broad an audience base as possible was, to many executives and politicians, an obvious way to mount a resistance to Hollywood and boost domestic output. Michael's "third way" to negotiate these often-overlapping tendencies is the pragmatic approach, in which the French film industry needs to find a happy medium that incorporates both auteur-led cinema and popular genre cinema. It is a two-tier approach, it seems, that remains "the best possible solution to the problems of maintaining a culture industry in an era of global flows" (p. 81).

Chapter three is devoted, almost inevitably, to Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain/Amélie* (2001), its "blockbuster-ness" status in France, and its embodiment of "both the hopes and contradictions at the core of any commercial drive for a newly globalised cinema" (p. 93). Michael allows us to see the film with fresh eyes, reminding us of stylistic and aesthetic characteristics, its energetic reworking of classic French iconography, and, of course, the political backlash that surrounded *Amélie* in the weeks after its release. This is a familiar story to scholars of contemporary French cinema, but Michael reminds us nonetheless of the revealing rhetorical ambiguities and ideological fissures in French film culture that emerged in the summer of 2001 as the film gained its blockbuster status. By returning to the political debate that *Amélie* sparked

and detailing the discourse surrounding the film from all sides of the cultural spectrum, Michael prompts us to revisit not just the film, but also deliberations concerning French film exportability and the ongoing tension between the domestic and the transnational when it comes to France's film industry and its uniqueness.

Luc Besson's *Valérian et la cité des mille planètes/Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (2017) is the focal point of chapter four, as is Besson's EuropaCorp film company that he founded in 1992 and his preeminent role in the dissemination of a commercially inflected product within the domestic industry since the 1980s. We learn about the pre-production of *Valérian*, Besson's place in wider cultural politics in France post-*cinéma du look*, and the imposition of a particular business model in the French film sector that aggressively marketed its products, employing a range of non-Gallic stars, genres, and aesthetic sources to create a range of work (the *Taken* trilogy, the *Transporter* franchise, *Le Cinquième élément/The Fifth Element*, and so on) that sum up "the hopes and fears that lie at the heart of French cinema's current 'mixed-economy' blend of art and commerce" (p. 116).

Chapter five eruditely and convincingly charts the rise of spectacular action sequences, intensified continuity, and the cultural exchanges taking place in French action cinema alongside American and Asian traditions. Following on from the previous chapter's focus on Besson's authorial imprint and cultural value, Michael looks more closely at other Besson projects (*Taken* [dir. Pierre Morel, 2009], *Lucy* [dir. Besson, 2014], *Banlieue 13/District 13* [dir. Morel, 2004]) to demonstrate how his methods have sketched out a "'house style' predisposed towards certain exportable formulas" (p. 146). Moreover, argues Michael, Besson's eclectic approach and fondness for genres that embrace *parkour*, car chases, and fast-paced cutting has allowed the creation of a readable, globally recognisable French film landscape that is ready to provide alternative forms of thrilling spectacle alongside Hollywood's own contributions.

In chapter six, Michael pivots away from EuropaCorp franchises to focus on the prevalence of mainstream comedies like *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis/Welcome to the Sticks* (dir. Dany Boon, 2008), *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu/Serial (Bad) Weddings* (dir. Philippe de Chauveron, 2014), and *Intouchables/The Untouchables* (dir. Olivier Nakache and Éric Toledano, 2011) in French cinema, and how their plots and narrative contrivances are frequently concerned with "the various localised consequences of global capitalism in France or the French-speaking world" (p. 179). Such modern comedy blockbusters are rooted in a longstanding French film tradition that dates back to Max Linder and *La Grande Vadrouille/Don't Look Now... We're Being Shot At!* (dir. Gérard Oury, 1996), and Michael shows how these localised comedy products continue to outperform other genres at the domestic and international box office. Once again, we are taken back to the source films and they are reinterpreted for us in light of recent scholarship on, say, the racial and political discourses circulating around *Intouchables*, and argues that at a distance, these films are becoming "the subjects of larger, vexed, and ongoing games of transnational hermeneutics" (p. 207).

It seems almost counter-intuitive for Michael to conclude *French Blockbusters* at the Cannes Film Festival in 2010 and focus on the standing ovation that greeted the end of Xavier Beauvois's *Des hommes et des dieux/Of Gods and Men*, a dramatic retelling of the fate suffered by a group of French Trappist monks in an Algerian monastery during the civil war there in the 1990s. And yet that film's success, both critical and commercial, across France in the second half of 2010 exemplifies a different kind of blockbuster cinema that sits alongside the book's earlier case studies. With *Des*

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*hommes et des dieux*, the blockbuster overlapped with the heritage genre—already alluded to by Michael in his earlier discussion of heritage super-productions like *Germinal* (dir. Claude Berri, 1993)—and the subsequent forensic examining of the critical discourse around Beauvois’s film reveals just how much the success of the film was mobilised to serve as evidence for the coexistence of multiple types of French cinema: local, small and slow-paced; transnational, big, and kinetic.

This is an exciting, well-researched, and urgent retelling of the tropes and trajectories of contemporary French transnational, blockbuster cinema. Michael’s rich case studies, confident grasp of political and cultural theory, and engaging, fluid writing style make for a compelling account of France’s dalliance with big-budget cinema. His engagement with current sources and methodologies is excellent (each end-of-chapter bibliography is impressively extensive), while the use of box-office statistics, specific production histories, and the reception of the chosen films add much-needed contextual data. *French Blockbusters* is ultimately all about a series of tense, strategic compromises that the industry has made since the 1980s, and how the emergence of new types of genre films (comedies, action, martial arts, *parkour*) has encouraged it to “go global.” His concluding remark is particularly apposite—that the popular films explored here continue to animate the question of “what it still means to make (or see) a ‘French’ film today” (p. 224). The answer to this enquiry, in a post-Covid age of streaming and changed cinema-going habits, will continue to reverberate across France’s dense, fraught, and vibrant film sector.

Ben McCann  
University of Adelaide  
[benjamin.mccann@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:benjamin.mccann@adelaide.edu.au)

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