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Sarah Leahy, *Casque d'or*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007. xii + 116 pp. Filmographies, Bibliography, Index. \$20.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-252-07472-1.

Review by Alan Williams, Rutgers University.

Beginning roughly in the early 1990s, (relatively) hard times came to scholarly book publishers. Costs soared and sales were flat. Film books suffered more than most: they are, after all, generally expensive, and their sales are no longer what they once were.[1] One result of this cost- and market-driven pressure has been the profusion of shorter, often monograph-length books devoted to manageable topics such as genres, technical questions, directors, or individual films. Great Britain and France have had little books like these for a long time, but now we see more and more of them from American publishers. Sarah Leahy's monograph (or is it? it's hard to come up with a label for such formula-driven works) on Jacques Becker's 1952 film *Casque d'or* is one of a collection devoted to "some of the most significant [French] titles, from the silent era to the early 21st century." The books are published in the U.K. by I. B. Tavis as the "Ciné-files Guides to French Films," and in the U.S. by the University of Illinois Press. This makes the series an international coproduction worthy of the time of Becker's film (the so-called "Tradition of Quality" in French cinema). However, as in the 1950s film co-productions, there is a dominant partner, and the heavy lifting appears to be done in the U.K., where Ginette Vincendeau edits the series.

Judging from the first entries, Vincendeau will give a large place to her peers and colleagues in Britain (though she has, for example, chosen the American scholar Judith Mayne to do a volume on *Le Corbeau*). To note this is not to make a nationalistic lament: Vincendeau would be hard pressed to find as many appropriate and knowledgeable academic authors in other English-speaking countries.[2] In the United States, for example, most French departments do not have even a single scholar whose primary speciality is film — probably because of the lingering notion that these are mainly programs in *literature* — and many cinema studies programs do not have a specialist with adequate language skills. In the U.K., on the other hand, film studies generally find a home in programs more oriented to "language and culture." There has evolved, in fact, a fairly coherent scholarly movement, often dubbed "French Cultural Studies," with worthy scholars scattered almost everywhere in the U.K., particularly in regional universities.[3]

This is the context of Sarah Leahy's study of *Casque d'or*. It is a very good, well-crafted example of this sort of work, and can be recommended without hesitation to anyone interested in the film. Whether it is to be recommended to readers interested in postwar French cinema in general, however, is a more complicated question. The answer is probably yes — but mainly because there's no satisfactory general work on the period. (Leahy, with her detailed knowledge, and her clear prose style, should definitely consider writing one.) Most of the time, works such as

this one suffer from the limitations of their series formats and subjects, and from the reality of contemporary academic careers. (To put it bluntly, it would not be cost-effective, for any scholar — particularly a younger one — to put in more than a year or eighteen months on such a project.) And not all films necessarily benefit from the sort of sustained attention that this series will bring to them. *Casque d'or*, in particular, seems at first glance a good example of a rather particular sort of film, the *cinéphile* favorite (the British series' bad pun on "ciné-files" would reinforce this suspicion). This normally means a film that was not terribly popular with mass audiences, often spectacularly unpopular, but appreciated nonetheless by the cognoscenti. Whether this sort of work merits a place of pride in academic film history is not immediately evident; it will, however, sell enough copies — to *cinéphiles* — at least to break even.

Fortunately, there is more to be said about *Casque d'or* than that it was appreciated by the young Turks at *Cahiers du Cinéma* and elsewhere during the 1950s and by other enlightened souls today. The first good news about the book is that it, unlike some of its peers, does have some useful primary-source research to back it up. (Many "film guides" are based almost entirely on secondary sources, and their merits reside, mainly, at the level of critical insight — in the inevitable "reading" of the film which will form one long chapter — and in their intellectual synthesis or *bricolage*.) Leahy has made ample use of the production notes and clipping files now held at the Bibliothèque du Film (BiFi) in Paris. The second piece of good news is that she seems to admire the film, and thus has made more of the book than might be expected in other domains as well. *Casque d'or* is divided into three roughly equal parts: (1) Production contexts, (2) The Film: narrative, style and ideology and (3) Reception at home and abroad. I presume that this division is dictated by the series, but it produces a curious effect: parts one and three are dense and (to my taste, anyway) useful, while part two occasionally seems a bit padded.

The first section, on the film's production, will be the most useful for many readers. And in it, several arguments can be glimpsed in favor of a serious study of the film. *Casque d'or* (and Becker's work in general) was "on the cusp" between industry standard practices and the alternative practices of more eccentric directors such as Tati, Bresson, or Cocteau. Those who did not like the commercial mainstream of the "Tradition of Quality" often complained about its great distance from social or historical reality. Becker chose to make a film about real people, about whom books had been written and whose names still meant something in popular memory. Leahy does an excellent job summarizing the relations between the finished film and the historical "originals." The impression that emerges is that Becker was neither the typical industry hack, nor a daring rebel, but the ways in which he made his story relatively conventional (only relatively!) are highly enlightening.

Part Two, "The Film," is a curious mixture of reading and analysis with some material that might more logically have gone into the first part, particularly comments about stars and genre. (If these are not part of "production context," I don't know what is.) But while Leahy has the good fortune to be writing this sort of book about a film that she genuinely admires, that does not mean that she can necessarily find more things to say about the film than have others such as Georges Sadoul, André Bazin, and (more recently) Dudley Andrew.[4] The section on the film itself begins with a musical metaphor which doesn't seem to me to be worth very much, quickly restated in (to me) much more interesting terms with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope." This would be worth more extensive development in cinema studies, but not necessarily with reference to this particular film, and I think Leahy

gets about as much out of it as she can. And then it's on to brief overviews of problems of narrative structure, "authenticity" (a problematic concept deriving mainly from André Bazin's work), genre, stardom, and — as a fairly convincing, if not earth-shattering conclusion — feminist perspectives.[5] For me, the best work in this section is the consideration of Becker's (and Marguerite Houille/Renoir's) editing, though its relation to the rest of the chapter is relatively loose. (Few directors, after all — one thinks of Eisenstein, or early Welles — have an editing style that is absolutely necessary to their conception of cinema; Becker, arguably, is not one of them. One could, however, take his highly edited style as emblematic of his relation to the so-called "Tradition of Quality," which generally emphasized *mise-en-scène* over editing: Becker may be seen as manifesting the era's typical fetishization of technique using very different means. Or it would be interesting to compare *Casque d'or* with the postwar films of Jean Renoir whose French *CanCan* (1955) is also tightly, precisely, and relatively edited, somewhat in the manner of Becker's film.) This is a topic that doesn't often get sustained attention in a book like this, and it's welcome indeed. It is some of the sharpest work in this very sharp study.

Does *Casque d'or* really merit such extensive consideration, purely as a film? I am afraid I am not as much an admirer of the work as Leahy is (I much prefer Becker's contemporary comedies and dramas), and no doubt this colors my evaluation of her second section. For me, it is a work that is much more interesting in terms of how people reacted to it, and I would have liked a much more extensive section on the film's reception. (Perhaps Leahy would as well, who can tell, but she's stuck with the series format....) For if there is an argument to be made for the film's inclusion in a monograph series like this one, it is not in terms of popularity (it was neither particularly popular, nor unpopular), nor typicality (it is, in fact a fairly untypical film, a point to which Leahy does justice, but not so untypical as to be scandalous or ground-breaking), nor is it widely considered a masterpiece--except by certain *cinéphiles*. But in Leahy's third section I think we can discern the outlines of a rationale for the film's importance. It arguably served as a kind of generational--and *not* ideological--litmus test for members of the French film community during the 1950s.[6] Or so it seems from Leahy's coverage, which here (the only point in the book, for me) seems too condensed and a bit unbalanced. The most obvious problem with her study is that it supposedly covers "Reception At Home and Abroad," but "abroad" is limited to Britain (to England, really) — not by any means the most important market for French films. But Leahy cites twenty reviews from the U.K., as opposed to only *eight* from France! And none come from the U.S.A., a much bigger market. And — though I admit this would be difficult, probably too difficult to merit the effort for a small publication like this — nothing from Latin America (where Simone Signoret was particularly popular). To summarize her perspective crudely, Leahy seems to think that the film got a much better and more nuanced reception in the British press than in the French, but that is about as far as she goes with reception "abroad."

Leahy presumably doesn't agree with me about the crucial importance of the film's reception in any argument for its historical importance; otherwise she would have gone beyond the BiFi clipping file in her search for reviews. The lack of any mention of *Le Figaro's* response to the film, or of the weekly supplement *Le Figaro Littéraire* is striking. Presumably she rules them out because of the publication's longstanding feud with the couple Yves Montand-Simone Signoret (and Signoret was the economic backbone of the film's marketing). Still, it would have been useful to know how this played out, if it did, because *Le Figaro* was an opinionated center-right publication that almost always wore its politics on its sleeve, even in its arts coverage. And the

lack of a differentiated *political* response to the film, at least in Leahy's summary, is quite striking. For Becker was in many ways a political filmmaker, not necessarily in the content of his films, but in his associations and his history. He was the filmmaker many leftists counted on to continue the spirit of Jean Renoir's 1930s films when Renoir himself conspicuously refused to do so.

And yet, the admirers of *Casque d'or* seem at least as often on the political Right as on the Left, if we believe Leahy's summary. Unfortunately, she doesn't consistently identify magazines and newspapers by their politics. In particular, she avoids the vexing issue of classifying *Cahiers du Cinéma* in sociopolitical terms. Yet this shouldn't be too difficult: although the magazine welcomed many young critics with little in common except for a disdain for postwar consensus politics — and in particular it showed a fondness for outspoken Right-wing anarchists--its political heart was Center-Right-Catholic. To admit this, however, is to point to the contradiction at the heart of much contemporary English-language work on French cinema: its vocabulary and many important critical concepts (such as "authenticity") come from André Bazin, a Center-Right thinker, and then are used in the service of a kind of modern, Center-Left intellectual populism. Sometimes the cracks show. Sometimes, however, the contradictions produce interesting and fruitful results, as I think they do here. (But note Leahy's striking ambivalence about the concept of "authenticity," sometimes put in single quotation marks, sometimes not, depending on whether she is using it seriously or citing it critically). Sarah Leahy's monograph is not a perfect book, but it is an awfully good one. Where it is (from my perspective) wrong, it makes cogent arguments with which one may disagree, and from which disagreement one can learn a great deal. Within the confines of a rather limiting series format, she has done a wonderful piece of work.

NOTES

[1] One symptom of this state of affairs on the American scene was seen when a leading university press with (up to that point) an admirable film line radically changed its policy: henceforth, management decreed, no film book would be more than roughly two hundred pages long. Caught in the policy shift was a book I had evaluated, and raved about: Richard Abel's *The Ciné Goes to Town*, which the press's extremely able film editor managed to place with another publisher. She then left her job, presumably in protest, and took her considerable talents elsewhere.

[2] Still, it will be a shame if series editor Vincendeau does not include *many* voices from the serious scholars of French cinema scattered through the anglophone world--some in the U.S. but even more in Canada and Australia (where, it seems, French film scholars don't have to be in language and literature departments). In doing so she might ameliorate what I suspect might just be a strain of academic provincialism in the otherwise very sound and ambitious British works. (See later comments about the book's limited notion of "reception abroad.")

[3] For excellent overviews, see Jill Forbes and Michael Kelly, eds. *French Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) and William Kidd and Siân Reynolds, *Contemporary French Cultural Studies* (London: Arnold, 2000).

[4] Dudley Andrew's study, in particular, provides an extensive and compelling, if eclectic reading of the film. See "*Casque d'or, casquettes, a case of ageing wine: Jacques Becker's Casque d'or,*" in Susan Hayward & Ginette Vincendeau (ed.) *French Film: Texts and Contexts*, 2nd ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 112-41.

[5] Bazin didn't always use the word *authenticité*; he also had other phrases such as "*impression de vérité*," to designate something closely related to physical, social, or historical reality. See, for example, the comments on non-actors in "Le Réalisme Cinématographique et L'Ecole Italienne de la Libération," in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* vol. IV (Paris: Le Cerf 1962), pp. 18-19.

[6] On both the Right and the Left, older critics (André Bazin, Georges Sadoul) disliked the film and younger ones (François Truffaut, Roger Boussinot) liked it. This symmetry is obscured by the fact that Truffaut didn't get to review the film, but he was nonetheless instrumental in convincing Bazin to give the film a second, more favorable look. Films that split critics by generations were not all that rare in the period. Another, ages-reversed example was René Clair's *Les Grandes Manoeuvres*, liked by older critics and disliked by younger ones. *Cahiers du Cinéma* went so far as to publish two conflicting reactions to the film, as *Les Lettres Françaises* had done for *Casque d'or*.

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