Traditions in World Cinema
General Editors: Linda Badley and R. Barton Palmer
Founding Editor: Steven Jay Schneider

This series introduces diverse and fascinating movements in world cinema. Each volume concentrates on a set of films from a different national, regional or, in some cases, cross-cultural cinema which constitute a particular tradition.

The digitised spectacles conjured by a word like ‘blockbuster’ may create a certain cognitive dissonance with received ideas about French cinema – long celebrated as a model for philosophical, economic and aesthetic resistance to globalised popular culture. While the Gallic ‘cultural exception’ remains a forceful current to this day, this book shows how the onslaught of Hollywood mega-franchises and new media platforms since the 1980s has also provoked an overtly commercialised response from French producers eager to redefine the stakes and scope of their own traditions.

Cutting across a swath of recent French-produced cinema, French Blockbusters offers the first book-length consideration of the theoretical implications, historical impact and cultural consequences of a recent grouping of popular films that are rapidly changing what it means to make – or to see – a ‘French’ film today. From English-language action vehicles like Valérian and the City of a Thousand Planets (Besson, 2017) to revisionist historical films like Of Gods and Men (Beauvois, 2011) and crowd-pleasing comedies like Intouchables (T olédano & Nakache, 2011), the variously filiated ‘local blockbusters’ from contemporary France brim with the seeds of cultural contradiction, but also with the energy of a counter-history.

Charlie Michael earned his PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and currently teaches film and media studies in the Atlanta area. He co-edited the Directory of World Cinema: France (2013) and his work has also appeared in SubStance, The Velvet Light Trap, Quebec Studies, French Politics, Culture & Society, and A Companion to Contemporary French Cinema.
FRENCH BLOCKBUSTERS
Traditions in World Cinema

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FRENCH BLOCKBUSTERS
Cultural Politics of a Transnational Cinema

Charlie Michael
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditions in World Cinema</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreword by Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: French Blockbusters?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The Lang Plan and its Aftermath</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Popular French Cinema and ‘Cultural Diversity’</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Debatable Destiny of <em>Amélie Poulain</em></td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Valerian</em> and the Planet of a Thousand Critics</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Countercurrents in French Action Cinema</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Serial (Bad?) French Comedies</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: A Disputed Heritage</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURES

3.1 From Amélie / Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain 97
3.2 Cover of Cahiers du cinéma, January 2002 108
4.1 Cartoon published in Le Film Français 117
4.2 Cover of Valérian et Laureline, Tome 2: L’Empire des mille planètes 117
4.3 Cartoon originally published in Pilote 113 128
4.4 From Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets 133
5.1 From Taken 152
5.2 From Taken 153
5.3 From Lucy 156
5.4 Cover of Starfix 2 161
5.5 From Largo Winch: The Heir Apparent 165
5.6 From Largo Winch: The Heir Apparent 166
5.7 From Mea Culpa 168
5.8 From Une affaire d’état 169
5.9 From Une affaire d’état 169
5.10 From Une affaire d’état 170
5.11 From A bout portant 171
5.12 From A bout portant 171
5.13 From A bout portant 172
6.1 From Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis / Welcome to the Sticks 181
| FIGURES |
|---------------------------------|-------|
| 6.2 Chart published in Quentin Deleau, *Quels sont les genres du cinéma français qui s'exportent le mieux?* | 183   |
| 6.3 From *Intouchables* | 193   |
| 6.4 From *Intouchables* | 193   |
| 6.5 Poster for *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au bon dieu?* | 195   |
| 6.6 From *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au bon dieu?* | 199   |
| 6.7 From *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au bon dieu?* | 202   |
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TRADITIONS IN WORLD CINEMA

General editors: Linda Badley and R. Barton Palmer
Founding editor: Steven Jay Schneider

Traditions in World Cinema is a series of textbooks and monographs devoted to the analysis of currently popular and previously underexamined or undervalued film movements from around the globe. Also intended for general interest readers, the textbooks in this series offer undergraduate- and graduate-level film students accessible and comprehensive introductions to diverse traditions in world cinema. The monographs open up for advanced academic study more specialised groups of films, including those that require theoretically oriented approaches. Both textbooks and monographs provide thorough examinations of the industrial, cultural and socio-historical conditions of production and reception.

The flagship textbook for the series includes chapters by noted scholars on traditions of acknowledged importance (the French New Wave, German Expressionism), recent and emergent traditions (New Iranian, post-Cinema Novo), and those whose rightful claim to recognition has yet to be established (the Israeli persecution film, global found footage cinema). Other volumes concentrate on individual national, regional or global cinema traditions. As the introductory chapter to each volume makes clear, the films under discussion form a coherent group on the basis of substantive and relatively transparent, if not always obvious, commonalities. These commonalities may be formal, sty-
listic or thematic, and the groupings may, although they need not, be popularly identified as genres, cycles or movements (Japanese horror, Chinese martial arts cinema, Italian neorealism). Indeed, in cases in which a group of films is not already commonly identified as a tradition, one purpose of the volume is to establish its claim to importance and make it visible (East Central European Magical Realist cinema, Palestinian cinema).

Textbooks and monographs include:

1. An introduction that clarifies the rationale for the grouping of films under examination
2. A concise history of the regional, national or transnational cinema in question
3. A summary of previous published work on the tradition
4. Contextual analysis of industrial, cultural and socio-historical conditions of production and reception
5. Textual analysis of specific and notable films, with clear and judicious application of relevant film theoretical approaches
6. Bibliograph(ies)/filmograph(ies)

Monographs may additionally include:

7. Discussion of the dynamics of cross-cultural exchange in light of current research and thinking about cultural imperialism and globalisation, as well as issues of regional/national cinema or political/aesthetic movements (such as New Waves, postmodernism or identity politics)
8. Interview(s) with key filmmakers working within the tradition.
The year 1985. It is the mid-80s and US audiences flock to cinemas to see the latest blockbusters by Spielberg or Lucas – films by now so emblematic of the decade. Geopolitical ironies abound in these years, caught between the post-traumatic stress of Vietnam’s aftermath and the unexpectedly abrupt end of the Cold War. For a moment, President Reagan’s ‘Star Wars’ defence agenda even blurs the line between Hollywood effects and a ‘real’ spectacle about to take place at Cape Canaveral. Meanwhile, in France, the years of President Mitterrand and his proactive Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, are upon us. Together they launch an ambitious Gallic response to increasing transatlantic calls for ‘free trade’ – a controversial movement they call le Tout Culturel. Since David L. Looseley published his synthesis of Langian cultural policy in The Politics of Fun (1995), few works have studied the reform’s longer-term consequences. Fewer still have considered whether they could have engendered productive new forms of French cinema. Instead, scholars most often defer to a more cynical view, as if France’s waning cinematic influence must be inevitable, allied somehow with the death of so many other ‘master narratives’ decried by French philosophers of the late twentieth century.

There have been exceptions to this story, of course. In 1997, for instance, Laurent Jullier of the University of Lorraine brought the work of Christian Metz and Serge Daney to bear on theories of digital art in order to highlight what he called a ‘postmodern cinema.’ Outlining a contemporary style that revels in new forms of abstraction and ‘visual fireworks,’ Jullier pointed to...
the features of American blockbusters like *Star Wars* or *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but also to the so-called *cinéma du look* from France. Already noted by critic Raphaël Bassan in 1989, this relatively short cycle of films by three young directors – Luc Besson (*Subway, Le Grand Bleu*), Jean-Jacques Beineix (*Diva, Betty Blue*) and Leos Carax (*Mauvais Sang*) – signalled a ‘neo-baroque’ aesthetic that combined a commercialised, MTV-inspired style with erudite cinematic influences (Truffaut, Godard, Renoir) to create a fantastic form of visual poetry.3 While the *look* films remain a reference point for academics and critics alike, they often only get cited as an influence on later directors (Jean-Pierre Jeunet) or as a sort of cautionary parable about the dubious consequences of aestheticisation. Moreover, undue focus on the *look* may also prove to be a case of hiding a forest with a few trees.

This exciting new book by Charlie Michael proposes a counter-narrative to those who continue to reproduce what he calls ‘*a priori* assumptions about what the [French] industry’s role on the international scene *should* be’ as ‘an artisanal, aesthetic alternative to Hollywood hegemony.’ By focusing on just one ideological framing of these matters, Michael argues, we occlude the more complicated story of what the Gallic production sphere actually looks like today. Drawing on a broad range of research materials – from attendance data to archival documents and from film reception to interviews with industry professionals – Michael builds his hypothesis in several stages. His first move involves folding recent popular comedies (*Bienvenue Chez Les Ch’tis, Intouchables*) into an expanded generic definition of what he calls the ‘local blockbuster.’ But the most interesting part of the case study he performs here has to do with the tensions that his provocative concept (‘French blockbusters’) continues to generate, as each new success (or ambitious failure) spurs symptomatic quarrels of legitimacy between those who endorse the commercial prospects of ‘big’ French cinema and those who dismiss it with equal fervor. Indeed, these observations echo in numerous other artistic disputes of the 2000s, which lately seem to crop up almost every time a French director seeks to produce a popular genre film.4

By grouping numerous different studios (StudioCanal, EuropaCorp, Studio Orange, Gaumont) as contributors to one period of sweeping strategic change, Michael’s account brings together – without *a priori* judgments about quality – an entire genealogy of French ‘event films’ of the past thirty years: *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Rappeneau 1989), *Germinal* (Berri 1993), *Les Visiteurs* (Poiré 1993), *La Reine Margot* (Chereau 1994), *The Fifth Element* (Besson 1998), *Amélie* (Jeunet, 2001), *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au bon dieu?* (De Chauveron 2014), *La Famille Bélier* (Lartigau 2014), the *Astérix* films. All of these, in their own way, serve as different iterations of the phenomenon he calls the ‘French blockbuster.’ Obviously, if we reduce the blockbuster to a question of profit margins, then membership in such a group would be rather easy to
define. However, this book cannot be summarised as a simple rehabilitation of commercial films wrongly disparaged by French criticism.

Instead, Michael sketches the genealogy of the French blockbuster as a nascent cultural form. He notes that the year 2004 might constitute the swell of a movement that has only grown louder with each passing year, cresting perhaps in 2014, and featuring an entire decade of high-grossing films with international distribution. The titles are too numerous to list here: *Les Choristes* (Barratier 2004), *Un Long Dimanche de Fiançailles* (Jeunet 2004), *L’Enquête Corse* (Berberian 2004), *Les Bronzés 3* (Leconte 2006), *Arthur et les Minimoys* (Besson 2006), *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* (Boon 2008), *OSS 117* (Hazanavicius 2011), *Intouchables* (Tolédano and Nakache 2011). In 2007, director Pascale Ferran sounded the alarm bell for the French industry during the live broadcast of the Césars award ceremony, pleading for public support for a more robust ‘middlebrow’ cinema (*les films du milieu*) to mediate the ground between this new class of big budget films and ultra-subsidised small-scale projects.

It would seem, in fact, that the mainstream, ‘globalised’ French cinema of years past, which used to feature films by directors like Bernardo Bertolucci, now resorts most often to comedy. Another rewarding aspect of this book is that it allows us to re-assess the roles of Besson and Jeunet thirty years after their start in the 1980s. The former has become the most visible mogul in what Michael calls a new ‘oligopoly’ of French production as the head of his independent company EuropaCorp, while the latter ranks as a star of what we might call a new sort of ‘mainstream quality’ global cinema. Two directors that used to be models for an alternative sort of independent French art cinema in the 1980s are thus now prototypical business entrepreneurs. In two full chapters devoted to the debates that emerged during the releases of *Amélie* (Jeunet 2001) and *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (Besson 2017), Michael offers context for the ideological cleavages that these films exacerbated among French and American intellectuals as part of the rhetorical place that two directors now occupy in the landscape of transnational French film production. The final two chapters then evoke two other symptomatic tendencies of contemporary popular French cinema writ large: action and spectacle (Chapter 5) and comedy (Chapter 6). In each case, Michael notes how the stylistic features of recent French genre films reflect and refract the rapidly changing cultural politics of the period.

For sure, Michael’s work is not for readers who cling to the clichéd myth of a French cinema where small, independent (and technically imperfect) art films battle against the Hollywood goliath. Nor is it for those who refuse to view each new student at La Fémis as anything but an inheritor of the French New Wave. Instead, this is a book that confronts economic reality with clear eyes, showing how an industry has succeeded in adapting, albeit with great difficulty,
to a model for generating its own form of blockbuster cinema. Balancing an array of historical influences, Michael gives us a new language for navigating the internal conflicts that have marked a period of dynamic change, and when the intermittent success stories of ‘big’ films became fodder for debate about what forms of recognition (both economic and symbolic) are most appropriate for a national industry with transnational ambitions. Written briskly like a behind-the-scenes saga, this original book will challenge the preconceptions of anyone who thinks that notions of ‘French cinema’ and ‘blockbusters’ should remain diametrically opposed.

Avignon, April 2019

Text translated from French by Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb and Subha Xavier

NOTES


INTRODUCTION: FRENCH BLOCKBUSTERS?

The first two words in the title of this book may seem an unlikely pairing. Granted, the French film industry does not actually produce blockbusters very often – at least not in the inflated budgetary sense most associated with global Hollywood. In 2015, the average Anglo-American film budget was $60 million, while the average budget for a French production barely crossed the $5 million mark (World Film Market Trends). The gap between these two figures is also likely understated, as it excludes promotion and marketing costs, which recent estimates put at an additional $35 million for an average major North American release; summer tent-poles like superhero franchises are usually far more than that. Due in no small measure to the reach of these enormous franchises, Hollywood currently hovers around 65% of Europe’s annual market share while relegating all EU films combined to just 30% of their home turf and a miniscule 2% of the North American market (World Film Market Trends). Inextricable from major distribution companies and omnipresent on other media platforms, blockbusters are by now a mundane reality of North America’s screen presence as it plays out in France and Europe more generally. Given these brutal inequities, the field of film studies often regards blockbusters as something like a conceptual equivalent for the booming soundtracks that so often accompany them – disrupting other cinemas with the constant drone of cultural disequilibrium.

However, if we can bracket the routine caveats about economic scale and cultural hegemony for just a moment, there is also substantial evidence to
suggest that other film industries have recently been rather ambitious in seeking ways to flip the script. Scholarly attention in this regard tends to gravitate more frequently to the robust popular traditions currently flourishing across the Global South – from India, Korea or Brazil, for instance – while overlooking the corresponding shifts that have taken place in venerable cinemas from the ‘old’ continent. Moreover, among those, France has consistently been a leader among its comparable regional neighbours, annually producing the most films of any European cinema, showing those films on the largest number of screens, and drawing the largest number of people to see them (World Film Market Trends). In the process, a startling plurality of creative tendencies from France has begun to coalesce, attaining intermittent international visibility. From prestigious award winners like The Artist (Hazanavicius 2011) or La môme / La vie en rose (Dahan 2008) to English-language genre films like Lucy (Besson 2014) or Taken (Morel 2008) and to intermittent ‘breakout’ comedies like Bienvenue Chez les Ch’tis / Welcome to the Sticks (Boon 2008) and Intouchables (Toledano and Nakache 2011), something of a ‘new’ tradition of popular French cinema seems now to be appearing, seducing audiences on a surprising variety of commercial registers even while it provokes predictable cries of cultural ‘homogenisation’ from critics.

Proposing such intuitively different films as parts of an evolving tradition of popular filmmaking presents certain conceptual obstacles. Most obviously, that is because they tend to be indexed by media and scholarship as isolated or idiosyncratic endeavours – more the result of a bombastic mogul (Luc Besson) or an unpredictable flight of audience fancy (Les Ch’tis) than any concerted change in industrial strategy. Yet there are also ample reasons to consider these various titles – and the mutual distinctions among them – as the collective aesthetic outcome of a vigorous and ongoing campaign to foster a more competitive, commercialised Gallic production sphere. By amplifying this slant on recent industrial history, we give voice to the strategic concerns of an entire generation – executives, policymakers, producers, lobbyists, critics and creative personnel – who have worked diligently to find ways to counter Hollywood blockbuster franchises which, until the arrival of Netflix and other streaming platforms, ranked as the most significant structural challenge to their industry in recent memory. Since the mid-1980s in particular, French producers have responded not just by doubling down on the modestly priced art-house films that their national traditions remain best known for elsewhere, but also by paving the way for a fresh, vigorous and variously ‘home-made’ brand of crowd-pleasing entertainments. In its current form, this impulse dates to the reforms that occurred on the watch of François Mitterrand’s high-profile Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, who oversaw a period in the 1980s and early 1990s when the Gallic media industries began to reformulate their strategic ambitions in response to a newly aggressive and globalised Hollywood. Its
primary offspring today are French-made films with a glossy finish, focused on franchising and special effects, conceived by talent frequently culled from television and advertising. As a group, these are films that in some ways tend to evade easy classification, as they derive from a loose and still evolving group of three overlapping production tendencies: English-language, Hollywood-style genre films (usually from one of two studios, EuropaCorp and StudioCanal); pan-European co-productions (particularly big endeavours like the Astérix franchise, but also smaller ones); and a re-packaged French-language mainstream cinema that trades in a variety of different ways on what Raphaëlle Moine has called a ‘neo-globalist’ film aesthetics (Moine 2007: 39).

The ‘cultural politics’ most associated with this diverse set of titles derives from the historically specific and often paradoxical blend of forces lying behind a collective French impulse to ‘take back’ screens. Although they bubble with the enthusiasm of a revived popular tradition, these are also creative products conceived with an endemic awareness of how their approach to the cinema complicates the longer-standing convictions of a domestic film industry better known for other kinds of filmmaking. With a mind to capture the fraught dynamics that often greet such efforts, this book adopts a self-consciously multi-perspectival approach. In doing so, it parts company with numerous other strands of contemporary criticism and scholarship on French cinema, which tend to either reproduce or take for granted a set of a priori assumptions about what this particular national industry’s role on the global scene should be: a bastion of artisanal, aesthetic alternatives to North American hegemony. While a certain narrative of social and political-economic resistance to globalisation continues to play an undeniable role in the recent trajectory of French filmmaking (and arguably film history as a whole), we find that it also actively coexists, frequently conflicts and intermittently co-conspires with other attitudes about transnationalism that are every bit as ‘French’ in origin, yet receive far less coverage in the critical literature on France’s filmmaking traditions.

In other words, these pages document the disruptions brought about by a recent swath of popular films that are changing what it means to make (or see) a ‘French’ film today. Evolving with the caprice of market demand, responding to the pull of new media platforms, and signalling the influence of changing cultural tastes, the diversely affiliated ‘French blockbusters’ featured in these pages brim with cultural contradictions, but also with authentic convictions about how a revamped approach to mainstream filmmaking might change the face of one of Europe’s most vaunted culture industries. Theorising and historicising the emergence of this revitalised tendency – and its discontents – is the subject of this book.
French cinema’s push for new strains of commercial success has intensified in the current millennium. Although numerous 1990s titles presaged recent tendencies, from the comedy *Les Visiteurs* (Poiré 1993), to the heritage epic *La Reine Margot* (Chereau 1994) and the science fiction thriller *The Fifth Element* (Besson 1998), reports about a rejuvenated popular French film tradition crested in 2001, when French productions surged to near 40% of their domestic market share for the first time in fifteen years. The success of that year was not limited to the most visible film – Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain / Amélie* (8 million tickets sold) – but also to a striking variety of other titles, including a brazenly fantastic period-horror-martial arts hybrid, *Le Pacte des Loups / Brotherhood of the Wolf*; bawdily honest comedies (*La Verité si je mens 2 / The Truth if I’m Lying 2, Le Placard / The Closet*), a technically groundbreaking bird documentary (*Le Peuple Migrateur / Winged Migration*), and an action film for kids (*Yamakasi*). David Kessler, then president of the Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC), was ebullient about these new developments: ‘This is a revelation: it demonstrates the popular potential of our national cinema, contrary to this fatalist discourse that we’ve been hearing for so long: ‘French cinema no longer attracts the public, it is too egocentric, etc.’ (De Baecque and Bouzet 2001). In line with this enthusiasm, mainstream French media coverage tends to dote on commercially successful French-made films of any sort, suggesting that box office numbers portend a valuable role for mass-audience filmmaking, wherein savvy investment becomes a rampart of the renewed French charge against North American imperialism.

This narrative seems to be at least partially true. The sheer mix of titles that grace the top of the domestic French box office in recent years suggests the fruit of a collective push to find crowd-pleasing forms of cinema. In 2014, for instance, French productions commanded nearly half of their domestic market (44.4%) on the shoulders of four films at the top of the rankings, with nine in the top twenty (see Table I.1). They included the boldly irreverent breakout comedy *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au Bon Dieu? / Serial (Bad) Weddings* (over 12 million tickets sold) but also two rather different English-language films (EuropaCorp’s *Lucy* and StudioCanal’s *Paddington*) and a number of other titles that aim for success via various generic formulae: two domestic comedies (*La Famille Bélier and Babysitting*); an adaptation of a classic children’s book (*Le petit Nicolas*); an updated animated makeover for Europe’s most famous gaul (*Astérix*); and new starring turns for established box office draws Dany Boon (*Supercondriaque*) and Omar Sy (*Samba*). Though they disagree on the ultimate ramifications of the films, almost all recent analysts agree that these results evidence a domestic industry newly capable of attracting audiences and consolidating a strong commercial base.
These returns also seem to reinforce the French industry’s rarity among comparable neighbouring economies (see Table I.2). Since 2000, France has averaged just shy of 36% of its own market share, significantly outpacing Spain (15.7%), Germany (20.1%), Italy (26.1%) and even the UK (24%), which enjoys a conspicuous advantage due to a majority Anglophone audience and the collaboration on prominent Anglo-American franchises like *James Bond*, *Harry Potter* and *Kingsmen*.

A look to other recent yearly returns also makes the 2014 pattern look less like an anomaly. 2004, for instance, witnessed the cultural phenomenon of *Les Choristes* (8.5 million viewers) along with *Un Long Dimanche de Fiançailles*.
Jeunet's Amélie follow-up again starring Audrey Tatou) and a gaggle of other titles – Jean-Jacques Annaud's tiger adventure film for kids, Deux Frères; comedian Michael Youn's Biblical send-up Les Onze Commandements; and L'Enquête Corse, a buddy film reuniting Les Visiteurs stars Jean Reno and Christian Clavier. In 2006, it was Les Bronzés 3 that generated 10.2 million viewers, joined by an animated film (Arthur et les Minimoys), a fish-out-of-water farce (Camping), a romantic comedy (Prête-moi ta main), a surveillance thriller (Ne le dis à personne), a revisionist war film (Indigènes), and a spoof remake of a classic television show (OSS 117: Le Caire, nid d'espions). Similar depth and variety reinforced the record-breaking runs by Bienvenue ches les Ch'tis in 2008 (20 million tickets sold) and Intouchables in 2011 (19.4 million sold) as well as other years in the past decade and a half. And while not all years feature a breakout winner, almost every one places a handful of titles in the top 20 for national box office tickets sold. This happened again in 2017, led by the combined domestic returns of Besson's sci-fi epic Valerian (a disappointing but still consequential 4 million tickets sold), Boon's spoof action heist film Raid Dingue/R.A.I.D Special Unit (4 million tickets sold), and notable performances by three other comedies: the most recent offering from Intouchables co-directors Nakache and Toledano – Le sens de la fête/C'est la vie at 3.5 million tickets sold, and two entries from a dynamic group of young comedic performers informally called 'La Bande de Fifi' – Philippe Lacheaux's Alibi.com (3.5 million tickets sold) and Tarek Boudali's Epouse-moi mon pôte/Marry Me, Dude (2.5 million tickets sold). Notwithstanding the expected cycle of unpredictability and seasonal variation, we are seeing what certainly looks to be an emerging tradition of competitively commercialised French filmmaking with verifiably national – and intermittently international – success to its credit.

Not everyone reads these trends with optimism. A strong set of counter-arguments has also emerged since the elation around 2001, offering broad skepticism about what the success of recent popular French films means for the creative capacities and cultural relevance of the French film industry. In the aftermath of the success of 2001, Cahiers du cinéma devoted an entire special report to the advent of new popular genres, warning about their imminent artistic consequences and the lurking threat of stylistic 'uniformity' ('Cinéma Français: la face cachée de l'embellie' 2002). Over the past decade and a half, a legion of specialised reports from the CNC and the Ministry of Culture, along with frequent scathing articles, reviews and op-eds in numerous major periodicals pose a set of larger questions about the wisdom of trying to generate a cinema that can in any way compete 'head-to-head' with Hollywood. A troubling side effect of the push for bigger films in France has been budget inflation. As Laurent Creton suggests in a similar recent analysis, the average and the median French film budgets during the same period traced above tends to reinforce the impression that the push for competition with

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(Jeunet’s *Amélie* follow-up again starring Audrey Tatou) and a gaggle of other titles – Jean-Jacques Annau’s tiger adventure film for kids, *Deux Frères*; comedian Michael Youn’s Biblical send-up *Les Onze Commandements*; and *L’Enquête Corse*, a buddy film reuniting *Les Visiteurs* stars Jean Reno and Christian Clavier. In 2006, it was *Les Bronzés 3* that generated 10.2 million viewers, joined by an animated film (*Arthur et les Minimoys*), a fish-out-of-water farce (*Camping*), a romantic comedy (*Prête-moi ta main*), a surveillance thriller (*Ne le dis à personne*), a revisionist war film (*Indigènes*), and a spoof remake of a classic television show (*OSS 117: Le Caire, nid d’espions*). Similar depth and variety reinforced the record-breaking runs by *Bienvenue ches les Ch’tis* in 2008 (20 million tickets sold) and *Intouchables* in 2011 (19.4 million sold) as well as other years in the past decade and a half. And while not all years feature a breakout winner, almost every one places a handful of titles in the top 20 for national box office tickets sold. This happened again in 2017, led by the combined domestic returns of Besson’s sci-fi epic *Valerian* (a disappointing but still consequential 4 million tickets sold), Boon’s spoof action heist film *Raid Dingue / R.A.I.D Special Unit* (4 million tickets sold), and notable performances by three other comedies: the most recent offering from *Intouchables* co-directors Nakache and Toledano – *Le sens de la fête / C’est la vie* – at 3.5 million tickets sold, and two entries from a dynamic group of young comedic performers informally called ‘La Bande de Fifi’ – Philippe Lacheaux’s *Alibi.com* (3.5 million tickets sold) and Tarek Boudali’s *Eponge-moi mon pote / Marry Me, Dude* (2.5 million tickets sold). Notwithstanding the expected cycle of unpredictability and seasonal variation, we are seeing what certainly looks to be an emerging tradition of competitively commercialised French filmmaking with verifiably national – and intermittently international – success to its credit.

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Hollywood is costing the industry elsewhere. The average (*moyen*) French film budget (*devis*) produced over the last thirty years has nearly tripled in cost – from €2 million in the mid-1980s to between €4 million and €5 million in the 1990s, and to above €5 million in the 2000s with a peak of €6.4 million in 2008. Meanwhile, the median figures during that same period stay relatively constant – starting around €2.5 million in the mid-1980s but then levelling out, rarely passing the threshold of €4 million over the next three decades (Creton 2012; Creton 2014). What this means is that the films at the top of the scale now receive an increasingly disproportionate amount of resources – a hallmark of an industry increasingly driven by the strategic push for commercial practices, perhaps not in a positive sense. For when it invests in larger films, the French industry must deal with the endemic unpredictability of the ‘boom or bust’ model, but without the generous financial cushion the major Hollywood studios enjoy as a result of their distribution advantages and marketability in Europe and elsewhere.

Debates about how to interpret these trends have animated French film culture of late – in the process rehashing philosophical rifts that date, in many ways, to earlier decades. Budget inflation and fluctuating production levels are, by themselves, nothing new to the industry. As Susan Hayward points out in the concise ‘Eco-History’ that leads off her seminal book *French National Cinema*, a longer view of French film economics shows a tendency to move in budget cycles, alternating between growth in budget size and growth in the overall number of films (Hayward 2005: 17–76). Some might further argue that the current situation has its roots much earlier. During the *nouvelle vague* of the 1960s, for instance, it was not low-budget art house films that propelled the French industry, but rather mainstream genres (comedies, *polars*, literary adaptations) that provided the stable base. Moreover, as Ginette Vincendeau frequently reminds us, French cinema has always also been a popular film tradition worth reckoning with on its own terms (Vincendeau 2000a: 56). However, most contemporary economic accounts also agree that there is a reason to set aside the recent trends in French commercial cinema as a new and rather uncharacteristic phenomenon.

France’s ‘mixed economy’ approach to cinema has long been a model for other industries across Europe and the world. Since 1946, Gallic film policy has been orchestrated by the CNC, an independently run, government-affiliated body that oversees the *compte du soutien* (cinema support fund) which in its first incarnation derived from a tax on cinema admissions that were then rerouted to support indigenous cinematic production in a fragile post-war French exhibition market. Finding a fruitful balance between two basic funding principles has been the CNC’s remit for the past half century. The *soutien automatique* (automatic support fund), first instituted in 1948, rewards commercially successful French films by allocating ‘advance on
takings’ loans (*avances sur recettes*) to French producers for their subsequent projects. In 1959, the CNC was moved from its home in the Ministry of Communication to the Ministry of Culture under André Malraux – venerable author and filmmaker. That year, the *soutien sélectif* (selective support fund) was added as a way to complement automatic subsidies by supporting films with ‘artistic or cultural merit’. Together, these two programmes gave material reality to Malraux’s often cited call for a balance between ‘art’ and ‘industry’. As the media landscape for French cinema changed over the years, the CNC’s automatic support mandate rapidly expanded beyond film production – first to film exhibition (also 1959), then to distribution (1977), and later to export (updated in 2017).

Intensified global competition and new media platforms provoked sweeping reforms in the 1980s. French filmmaking of the 1960s and 1970s had reached a sort of plateau stage, consistently drawing more than half of its domestic audience during a period when there were only three French television stations (TF1, Antenne 2, FR3), all state-owned and regulated. That status quo changed abruptly in the 1980s, when the Hollywood majors found a lasting antidote to their own attendance ills by concentrating their investments on a handful of larger-than-life ‘event’ films. Building on the successful runs by *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975) and *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977), the strategy behind these ‘blockbusters’ amplified previous successes – combining foreign distribution deals, huge production budgets, and saturation marketing campaigns to generate maximal box office returns in a short time span. This aggressive new aesthetic and economic maximalism had a huge impact on the French market, flooding it with advertising, coercing cinemas to show its films on multiple screens at once, and appealing to the programming needs of the nascent television industry, which had just been privatised in 1982, and would soon be in need of prime time audience draws.

In response to the ensuing crisis, Jack Lang and other like-minded reformers at the Ministry of Culture introduced an aggressive new agenda as part of what David Looseley terms the ‘politics of fun’ (1995), pairing the commercial needs of television with the new deficits in film financing by prompting an industry-wide move towards televisual sources of revenue that could combine with existing state subsidy programmes. These new incentives included a system of tax shelters (SOFICAs), a government-backed risk-sharing agency (IFCIC), and – most notably – a pay-tv cable station, Canal+, that would be positioned at the centre of a new status quo. In exchange for having sole priority on film releases to television, Canal agreed to invest 20% of its profits back into French and European film production. As these initial plans became law, the crisis only escalated. France had managed to fend off the damage a few years longer than its European neighbours, but by 1986 French films dipped below 50% of their domestic share for the first time since Malraux’s system was put in place.
By 1989, France’s market share had slumped below 30%, primarily as a result of a slew of Hollywood franchises, led by *Batman, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and *Lethal Weapon 2*. The next year, Lang added another major reform, announcing the creation of a government-run ‘Investors Club’ capable of encouraging independent French producers to make their own ‘blockbusters’ to win back audiences in cinemas and on television. The Club itself was formally discontinued only two years later, but its philosophical strategy for supporting a crop of big budget films largely remains in place today, as do the bulk of the other programmes intended to support them.

Lang’s reforms continue to anchor the commercial ambitions of an audio-visual industry now concentrated around a few large firms, and dedicated to collectively producing a class of ambitious genre films. In recent years, a landslide of reports, articles and research initiatives have linked the former minister’s legacy to the current political-economic climate and the changed production culture of French cinema. In 2006, audiovisual economist René Bonnell (himself a crucial figure to whom we will return in Chapter 1) sounded the alarm anew, observing that the period between 1975 and 2000 could also be viewed as a singular moment of drastic expansion, when ‘the cost of French films literally multiplied by twelve’ (Bonnell 2006: 59). Bonnell suggests that the situation since the mid-1990s deserves special attention, as film budgets increased by 50% in the space of one decade alone. Not only that, but the skyrocketing numbers – unlike intermittent production bubbles of years past – were not driven primarily by European co-production agreements, but by projects financed and masterminded by a small number of concentrated, French production studios. By 2000, Bonnell writes, the numbers had actually stabilised into something like a new normal, wherein ‘10 to 15% of the films are made for two to three times the average cost while about a third are made for less than a quarter of the average’ (Bonnell 2006: 59).

This shift in emphasis can be seen in the extensive yearly documentation of production trends by the CNC. Table I.3 demonstrates the evolving tendencies of budgetary categories since 2000. First, French producers today are making more films overall – with a rather steep incline that starts at a low of 148 in 2000, rising to a peak of 234 in 2015 and settling in at just above 200 for the past five years. Second, French resources are responsible for making more big films these days – the category above €10 million doubles in the first decade of the 2000s, reaching a high point of 33 in 2012 before a slight recent regression. Finally, the industry has apparently begun to allocate its remaining resources more to the extreme bottom of the chart than to the middle echelons, with films below €1 million almost tripling between 2000 and 2016 while the middle budgets stagnate. Film critics, scholars and industry insiders regularly cite these three dynamics as evidence for the growing ‘bipolarisation’ of the contemporary French film industry. Skeptics of the new dynamic describe a
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new status quo that stretches resources in an unhealthy manner leaving out the ‘mid-range’ films that used to be the system’s strength, and a haven for its most prestigious auteurs. While the gap between large and small has become a common condition across modes of cultural production these days, including Hollywood, the French film industry remains remarkable for the sheer amount of documentation and discussion it has recently generated on this topic – and for its constant search for ways to remedy the situation through the legislative powers of the nation-state.

A growing source of optimism for some and of fatalism for others, homemade blockbusters from France sit at the heart of one of the more disputed narratives in contemporary French film culture. Anti-commercialist views reached an apex during the César awards ceremony in 2007, when director Pascale Ferran voiced displeasure during her acceptance speech for her film Lady Chatterley, decrying the ‘vanishing middle’ of French film production, and warning about dire consequences for the industry. Over the following year, she and twelve concerned colleagues from across the industry met for several months during off hours at the CNC. Together they coordinated and co-authored the ‘Club of Thirteen’ report, a widely-circulated two hundred-page document – part polemic, part prognostic – citing budget polarisation as its primary concern. Behind its coyly poetic title – Le milieu n’est plus un pont mais une faille – lies an impressive ‘transversal study’ (étude transversale) of an industry it claims sits on the verge of a painful schism between (increasingly) big-budget entertainment and (increasingly) low-budget art house films (Ferran 2008). Yet as Jonathan Buchsbaum documents extensively, the Ferran report was just the most visible intervention in a French debate that has actually been raging on similar terms over thirty years now (Buchsbaum 2016).

A Question of Hegemony

Perhaps no single phenomenon better encapsulates the uneven cultural dynamics of globalisation than Hollywood blockbusters. Along with Coca-Cola and McDonald’s, the biggest of Anglo-American film franchises are often characterised as a sort of universalised, mono-cultural takeover – ‘a kind of cultural smoke rising from a US-led struggle to convert the world to capitalism’ (Miller, Goval, McMurry, Maxwell and Wang 2005: 51). A common intellectual approach to these films in France – as well as to a lot of American commercial culture in general – has been to view them as mercilessly ‘top-down’ phenomena, steamrolling indigenous creative practices by buying up distribution outlets and duping European audiences with the allure of mindless, capitalist consumption. Yet even if we grant the necessary credence to a caricature like this one, it stands to reason that not all localities could possibly have the same relationship to the presence of blockbusters, wherever they are produced.
There is then another perspective worth considering – namely that the story of the localised responses to Hollywood’s recent ‘bigness’ is often quite a bit more complicated than we first think.

We can begin by observing that the word ‘blockbuster’ itself cannot be ruled synonymous with America or even with Hollywood. It is rather a concept de-linked from nationality or place-ness, designating a type of filmmaking that arose over the past four decades to exceed national specificities by design, often doing so through ties to corporate business culture, formulaic and ‘universal-ist’ themes and digitised special effects. At the same time, the mobility of this form that French critics often call le cinéma-monde also engages by definition with other cultural formations, often in quite indeterminate and contingent ways. Such matters circulate on the often paradoxical path of defining what Julian Stringer calls ‘local blockbusters’ (Stringer 2003: 9), a form of expression and a source of conflict that animates the current dynamics of global media capitalism, making the very generic status – and the ‘bigness’ – of certain films ‘something to be fought over’ (Stringer 2003:8). These investigations only begin with surface observations about economic inequity. We need an account that extends beyond one-dimensional claims about dominance or aesthetic homo-geneity, and instead searches for an understanding of how global media forms circulate and inhabit the many, varied auspices of the ‘national’– and vice versa.

These theoretical exchanges in film and media studies are subtended by larger recent debates across the humanities and social sciences. In the 1990s, sociological and anthropological studies of global cultural formations pushed back against the largely political-economic angle taken by the first wave of work on globalisation. Not coincidentally, the new conceptual terrain of ‘cultural globalisation’ coincided with a series of high-profile returns to the concept of the nation itself, as well as with widespread reconsideration of the historical and philosophical conditions that gave rise to national ‘containers’ in the first place (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990). Eventually, a body of literature emerged to complement the top-down slant of ‘world-systems’ (Wallerstein 1983) and ‘cultural imperialist’ models (Schiller 1976) of years previous, as theorists of global culture interrogated the play of difference that could animate various localised contingencies of the ‘global’ – figuring the cultural forms that dealt with new dimensions of ‘time-space compression’ (Harvey 1990), the imaginative ‘disjunctions’ of ‘ethnoscapes’ (Appadurai 1996), the resonance of the ‘glocal’ (Robertson 1995), the subversiveness of ‘hybridity’ (Pieterse 2004), the networking of ‘complex connectivity’ (Tomlinson 1999), and the ‘expedience’ of culture as a unique form of capital (Yudice 2004) among many others.

Academic studies of national cinema during the 1990s generally followed these trends. Moving away from the largely unexamined geographical and essentialist definitions of the past, these accounts held, as Andrew Higson
puts it, that any film should be studied as a product that can ‘pull together many diverse and contradictory discourses’ (Higson 1989: 44). Tom O’Regan’s *Australian National Cinema* usefully expands and defines this palette, proposing a ‘pluralist’ view that conceives of national cinema as an ‘assemblage’ of discourses – ‘the accumulation of its various (stylistic, critical, political) tendencies, the elaboration of its incommensurate (aesthetic, political, intellectual) values, its competing (filmic and social) identities and the contradictions, disjunctions and complementarities of these’ (O’Regan 1996: 40). A number of later theorists espouse similar methodologies, proposing various habile metaphors for what O’Regan calls the dynamics of ‘cultural exchange’ (O’Regan 2007). Other theorists of these matters caution, however, that any form of methodological pluralism must be grounded in the material realities of unequal exchange. John Hill’s often cited response to Higson reformulates an argument similar to many ‘cultural imperialist’ critics before him – that Hollywood’s overwrought influence requires a form of national filmmaking that ‘recognizes that its economic ambitions will have to be more modest’ and that its cultural components should be ‘correspondingly more ambitious’ (Hill 1992: 21). In a later account with similar leanings, Michael Wayne largely concurs, citing the savage inequalities between North American and European distribution networks as a limiting horizon for any discussion about the cultural heterogeneity that filmmakers might otherwise seek to stage in response to Hollywood blockbusters (Wayne 2002). A similar spirit of nationalist resistance serves as the organising principle of *Exception Taken*, where Buchsbaum cites Hill’s essay as a sort of call-to-arms at the end of his introduction. Revelatory in its fine-grained focus on policy and politics, the book is rather adamant in its focus on how ‘[France] financed and promoted a “certain idea of cinema” that made it the art form of the twentieth century’ (Buchsbaum xxvi). Building on Buchsbaum’s account in certain ways, this book highlights a set of ambitious films that nevertheless complicate the most familiar accounts of how the French film industry has sought to ‘defy’ Hollywood hegemony over the past three decades.

In response to these very concerns, film theory has tried on a series of compelling modifiers in recent years, from ‘global’ to ‘world’, and from ‘post-national’ to the prevailing current choice, ‘transnational’ cinema. In the process, the field has arrived again at a sort of fraught taxonomic stage, in part launched by Higson’s reflection on the limits of his own much-cited essay (Higson 2000). Obliged to take stock of multiple cinematic formations but vexed by how to ground them amidst the ethical considerations of unequal cultural exchange, film theorists frequently find themselves challenged by the methodological responsibility of what Randall Halle calls ‘comparing like with like’ (Halle 2008: 29). In the inaugural edition of the journal *Transnational Cinemas*, Will Higbee and Song-Hwee Lim map the genesis of this conversation, closing their essay with the suggestion that the most responsible methodologies – what they
call ‘critical’ transnationalism – should be able to both account for different modes of filmmaking and make careful evaluative judgements about a film’s political-economic possibilities (Higbee and Lim 2010: 17). Not coincidentally, this second component is where pushback against the study of blockbusters most frequently resides – at the intersection of materialism and ethics. For instance, while outlining eight intriguing transnational forms of cinema, Mette Hjort echoes Hill in her claim that the most ‘valuable’ approaches among them are those that feature ‘a resistance to globalization as homogenization’ and ‘a commitment to assuring that certain economic realities [. . .] do not eclipse the pursuit of aesthetic, artistic, social and political values’ (Hjort 2010: 15). Though her flexible categories do not preclude the possibility of worthwhile commercialised pursuits, Hjort expresses reservations for what she calls the ‘globalizing transnationalism’ of films like the Chinese blockbuster Hero (Zhang 2002). In a pair of schematic responses to Hjort’s value judgment about commercialised cinema, Deborah Shaw holds that ‘questions of artistic integrity are more complex than they first appear’ (Shaw 2013: 62) and that the scholarly privileging of ‘marginal productions as properly transnational’ has the paradoxical effect of ‘marginalising mainstream works from the discussion’ (Shaw 2017: 294). This argument is perhaps not surprising given Shaw’s intellectual investment in recent Hollywood films by the extravagantly successful ‘Three Amigos’ (Cuaron, Del Toro, Inarritu). Moreover, as her book-length study of that enterprising Mexican trio demonstrates, current debates about how recent practices of commercial filmmaking influence the ‘artistic integrity’ and ‘quality’ of national forms can have an ambivalent – and fascinating – historical dimension worth exploring on their own (Shaw 2015).

In an influential summation of how these and related issues circulate in the European cultural context, Thomas Elsaesser suggests that film culture of the ‘new’ old continent demands a more polyvalent approach:

the old Hollywood hegemony argument (whether justified on economic or stylistic grounds) and the ‘postmodern’ or ‘pragmatic’ paradigm (‘it is what audiences make of films that decides their identity and value’) tend to hide a perhaps more interesting relationship, namely that of national cinemas and Hollywood not only as communicating vessels, but (to change the metaphor) existing in a space set up like a hall of mirrors, in which recognition, imaginary identity and mis-cognition enjoy equal status, creating value out of pure difference. (Elsaesser 2005: 47)

Along these lines, transnational research on contemporary media industries can also move to allow theorists and historians space to probe how mutually implicated senses of the ‘transnational’ come to cohabit and imbricate the historical account itself.
This need for conceptual malleability also derives from the Hollywood strategy itself. As Stringer puts it, ‘some movies are born blockbusters; some achieve blockbuster status; some have blockbuster status thrust upon them’ (Stringer 2003: 10). In an early synoptic look at the period of global Hollywood, Thomas Schatz cites 1990 as an important turning point in this realisation by the industry itself, when three lower-budget hits (*Home Alone*, *Ghost* and *Pretty Woman*) reminded studio executives that other types of films could become hits. For every massively calculated *Titanic* (Cameron 1997), there is a lower-budget project that attains similar returns for just a fraction of the overall cost – a *My Big, Fat Greek Wedding* (Zwick 2002) or a *Paranormal Activity* (Peli 2007) – so planning a number of ‘calculated blockbusters’ (pre-planned tent-pole event films) has to be supplemented by a slate of possible ‘sleeper hits’ (carefully chosen films that could eventually attain ‘blockbuster’ results) (Schatz 2003: 33). As Schatz suggests, these films can eventually prove fit to be called ‘blockbusters’ – especially if they surpass the hallowed (yet arbitrary) benchmark of $50 million in profits (for his part, Arthur De Vany suggests that $100 million is now a more appropriate figure) (De Vany 2004: 243). Weekend release patterns by the majors now allow not only for a concentration around so-called ‘tent-pole’ pictures, but also for the alternative success stories of smaller films distributed alongside the larger franchises. This diversity of practices helps the majors infiltrate other markets at multiple levels, cross selling between platforms and exerting financial influence over other markets. In this context, then, even the smallest American film might become a ‘blockbuster’ – comparatively speaking – on a smaller domestic market. This space for a more flexible, mobile and ‘bottom up’ view of Hollywood’s cinematic ‘bigness’ has more recently been confirmed by Justin Wyatt in his influential theorisation of what he calls ‘high concept’ marketing and aesthetics (Wyatt 1994), by Geoff King in a pair of authoritative works on contemporary Hollywood (King 2000, 2002) and by Steve Neale and Sheldon Hall, whose co-authored book traces the contingent yet consistent role of ‘big’ productions from Hollywood’s first commitment to feature-length cinema in the teens all the way to its present global dimensions (Neale and Hall 2010).

As a result of these potential complications, Stringer suggests, it is useful to consider the word ‘blockbuster’ in a similar light to how Rick Altman proposes his influential methodology for approaching film genre (Stringer 2003: 2). Altman suggests that there are three basic dimensions for studying the meaning generated by generic forms. The first two derive from his earlier work on *The American Film Musical* (1987), which makes an analogy to Saussurian linguistics to highlight the slippery duality of generic signification, turning on both a ‘semantics’ (the stylistic and/or thematic ‘building blocks’ of form) and ‘syntax’ (the way that those components are strung together in terms of plot or thematic signification). With his third ‘pragmatic’ dimension of genre, added
in his more lengthy exposition in *Film/Genre* (Altman 1999), Altman openly responds to the influence of the field’s concurrent move towards cultural studies, making space in his terminology for different types of audience uptake and the relativity of cultural contexts. Genres thus become discursive ‘sites of constant struggle’, acquiring meaning only at the intersection of combative rhetorical claims, overlapping interest groups, and historical change writ large or small. In the end, for Altman (and Stringer) the friction between different appropriations of generic formulae ultimately warrants more targeted inquiries into the dynamics of classification itself as a problem of history and culture. Along these lines, the strategic distinctions that initially separate ‘calculated blockbusters’ and ‘sleeper hits’ can also be complicated via the consideration of other national – or nationalist – frames of reference, which themselves harbour the possibility for differences of opinion about incipient global forms. As Chris Berry puts it in his compelling case study of Asian blockbuster variants, ‘the blockbuster is made sense of and practiced according to local cultural and filmmaking contexts’ (Berry 2003: 218). And in many cases, as the collective authors of *Global Hollywood 2* put it, we find these are ‘cases of strategic making-do, not of being overwhelmed’ (Miller, Goval, McMurray, Maxwell and Wang 2005: 79).

In order to make sense of one way the French film industry has tried to ‘make do’ in the era of the Hollywood blockbuster, the current account brings together political-economics, film criticism and aesthetics in ways that few works in the current body of scholarly literature attempt. Despite the increase in interest in commercial and popular French cinema over the past thirty years or so, scholars still generally avoid drawing connections between the industrial factors that drive new commercial trends and the narrative and aesthetic features of the films themselves. Hayward’s *French National Cinema* broke new ground in this direction, bringing together a critical perspective on economics and aesthetics to formulate the ‘national’ as a bundle of discourses that arise from diverse sources. Since then, the academic literature tends to filter the stylistic features of popular French cinema through other critical frameworks – stars, genres, auteurs – that engage problems of cultural politics, but do so through the legitimation of individual agency or stylistic particularity rather than acknowledgment of the systemic socio-cultural conditions that inform all of the above. Meanwhile, a burgeoning body of work on Franco-European media industries and political economy sheds welcome light on recent political-economic trends, yet most often refrains from making meaningful commentary on the films themselves.

In the interest of breadth, the few scholarly approaches that do attempt to combine a political-economic account with aesthetic analyses in their work on popular French cinema tend to avoid speculating at much length about how the films resound in terms of cultural politics (Austin 2009; Lanzoni 2015).
Among the notable exceptions to this is a series of articles by Martine Danan, which proposes a fissure between two distinct modes of contemporary French filmmaking: the ‘national’ and the ‘post-national’ (Danan 1996; Danan 2000; Danan 2006). In the second and more recent of her two modes, Danan argues, we see a cinema that ‘erases most of the distinctive elements which have traditionally helped to define the (maybe) imaginary coherence of a national cinema against other cinematographic traditions or against Hollywood at a given point in time’ (Danan 2002: 238). While her astute combination of aesthetics and cultural politics remains a crucial move for the field, Danan’s model also falls somewhat short of acknowledging the variegated and often quite idiosyncratic cultural resonances of commercial French filmmaking since then – especially in the present era.

Across the various topics explored in this book, an over-arching suggestion will be that ambitious commercialised French films of today share a particular history that conditions their rhetorical place in contemporary Franco-European film culture. Bringing a number of contextual factors into play, I argue that the enduring significance of recent ‘local blockbusters’ from France lies not so much in any fixed reading of their origins or unrecognised innovation of their stylistic features, but in how their various attributes both derive from and spur conflicts between the palpably different worldviews and interpretive sensibilities that come into what Tim Palmer calls the creative ‘eco-system’ of contemporary French cinema (Palmer 2011). In this respect, the book performs an in-depth study of the factors behind what Isabelle Vanderschelden describes as the ‘combination of national, international and post-national elements’ that characterises recent popular French filmmaking (Vanderschelden 2007: 37). It also aligns with other revisionist trends in the study of French cinema: Ginette Vincendeau’s foundational research on popular traditions in French cinema – from her conceptual work in the 1990s (Vincendeau and Dyer 1992; Vincendeau 2000a) to her many other recent trajectories on stardom, authorship and the industry (Vincendeau 1996; Vincendeau 2000a; Vincendeau 2000b; Vincendeau 2003; Vincendeau 2014); Phil Powrie’s exploration of the aesthetic and socio-cultural resonances of French film texts and contexts (Powrie 1997) and his auteur study of Jean-Jacques Beineix (Powrie 2001); Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb’s interventions in favour of the overlooked legacy of the French fantasy film (cinéma du fantastique) (Gimello-Mesplomb 2012a; Gimello-Mesplomb 2012b); Laurent Jullier’s inquiries into the various taste economies and aesthetic histories of contemporary French cinema (Jullier 1997; Jullier 2012; Jullier 2014); and Moine’s ongoing research agenda, which probes the interface between French cinema and genre history by expanding Altman’s model and clarifying its consequences for the sorts of frameworks that have to this point dominated Gallic film studies (2005, 2007, 2015).

Moine’s work deserves particular recognition here, because her approach
has cleared the way for the gradual cleansing of conceptual terms that still elicit frequent grumbling about American imperialism. Her work calls for broader discussions of popular forms of filmmaking in the French academy, as well as provides a valuable interface for the research methodologies that now flow more frequently between France, the US and the UK. As she puts it in the introduction to the second edition of Les genres du cinéma:

The act of categorising and recognising genres – and of denying them sometimes – by different agents in the world of cinema (producers, directors, critics, ordinary spectators ...) is just as important in the study of genericity [généricité] as the comparison of filmic texts. Film genre is not just a question of identifying the genres of individual films, but a question of production and interpretation. From this perspective, a study of cinematographic genres must approach the subject from both a textual and contextual angle. The strong distinction between these two types of analysis in the French context generally explains the resistance to re-examining the concept of genre in a way that recognises its role as a creator of value in a complex set of interactions between films and their production and reception contexts. (Moine 2015: 4–5)

This intervention for the field of French film studies fits in quite well with a larger recent view propounded by economists, historians, sociologists and cultural theorists who research changing cultural countenance of post-war France (Schwartz 2007; Kuisel 2011; Martel 2006, 2010). Indeed, several recent anthologies share this book’s fascination with countering a French academic heritage that has often balked at research terms that might threaten its cherished traditions with new modes of popular culture (Vanderschelden and Waldron 2007; Looseley and Holmes 2013). Collectively, such claims amount to a view of the Hexagon as a nation-state embroiled in a prolonged transitional period, caught between the state-centric models that made way for its post-war return to prominence (les trentes glorieuses) and the urgent need to adapt to more recent economic trends. For co-authors Phillip Gordon and Sophie Meunier, this dynamic amounts to ‘the apparent paradox’ of France’s position in an increasingly globalised economy – as it is ‘resisting globalization (sometimes loudly) and adapting to it (far more than people realize) at the same time’ (Meunier and Gordon 2004). In Gordon and Meunier’s sense, adaptation means having to accept the shifting rules of the market economy, to change practices to better conform to them and, ideally, to maximise profit from those changes.

The recent French struggle with global identity thus becomes a complicated one, as the country tries to forge a place in a new international order while also salvaging its long-term role as a dignified model of national cultural production. In light of this backdrop, it is understandable how ‘blockbusters’
-- whether they fit more snugly into a ‘calculated’ or the ‘sleeper hit’ category-- might become a lightning rod for controversy about what role a rejuvenated French commercial cinema can (or should) play in the process. So while some onlookers view successful French films as healthy symptoms of an industry pursuing a combination of survival strategies, others see them as harbingers of destruction, wherein an infatuation with corporate success could eventually destroy the distinctive qualities of a culture and its cinema from the inside. It is a debate that has wracked French film culture in recent years, mobilising widespread fears of cultural homogenisation while pitting interpretive communities against one another. In the process, a rather diffuse diplomatic term has emerged to form a sort of uneasy truce among them: ‘cultural diversity’.

A Question of Framing

If this book embraces the paradoxical possibilities of its title, that is not only to theorise a nascent genre, but also to capture the fraught dynamics of an emergent site of struggle and cultural exchange. In so doing, it offers its own rendition of the sort of mobile, discursive practice of criticism favoured by scholars of cinematic transnationalism, who urge us to explore cultural formations in terms of the different thought trajectories generated by contemporary filmmaking practices. Recent inroads in the broader sociological literature analyse how the linguistic variations within interpretive communities generate different frames for how to interpret the localised contingencies of globalization (Fiss and Hirsch 2005). In his book Language and Globalization, for instance, Norman Fairclough calls attention to the ‘distinctive vocabularies’ that circulate around keywords like ‘free trade’ or ‘terrorism’ – ‘differ[ing] in grammatical features’ and ‘forms of narrative, forms of argumentation and so forth’ depending on context (Fairclough 2005: 4). Rooting out this sort of evidence lays bare the play of disjunctions that are created by global pressures as they appear within various contingencies of the ‘local’, the ‘regional’ and the ‘national’– to invoke Arjun Appadurai’s still prescient term (Appadurai 1990: 295).

To Fairclough’s point, a particular challenge for theorising and historicising the transnational activities of French cinema remains the vehement incongruence of different opinions expressed in the industry, both about political-economic strategy and about the films themselves. In their exhaustive survey The French Challenge: Adapting to Globalization, Meunier and Gordon single out the French film industry – among all the cultural areas they cover – as home to some of the greatest debates about globalisation and French cultural identity (Meunier and Gordon 2004: 48). One of the most memorable moments in this regard occurred at the 1993 Uruguay round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) negotiations, which saw a unified European contingent resist North American free trade proposals by arguing for an audiovisual
‘cultural exception’ to the liberal exchange of goods and services. Back in Paris, thousands of demonstrators, including hundreds of film industry professionals, hit the streets to show solidarity. Though this type of collective action does remain a significant animus for French cultural policy, historians like Meunier and Gordon are quick to point out that the Hexagon is also brimming these days with a renewed push for cultural and economic power. We are remiss to highlight French resistances to globalisation, they argue, without also showing how the country is actively adapting to and, in many cases, finding creative ways to profit from the new trajectories of global media capital. Moreover, if the past thirty years of French film history has witnessed the emergence of a new (or at least massively recalibrated) type of mainstream filmmaking, it is a development that can only be fully grasped as a product of extraordinary dissent, where heady days of commercial success invariably mix with widespread anxiety about an uncertain future. This account seeks to give those mixed emotions full voice – and indeed to make them a structuring principle of how its ideas are organised. The contention in doing so is methodological. For only by embracing the multiplicity of critical vantage points that currently animate the French film landscape can we begin to appreciate how recent trends in popular filmmaking are read and, in many cases, even make themselves readable in terms of the larger ‘conversation’ that is occurring across different levels of both the media industry and film culture at large.

In summary, this outlook offers a way to read the heightened commercialist tendencies of contemporary, mainstream French filmmaking as a product of antagonisms in a local community that entertains very different, ongoing viewpoints about what a ‘globalised’ national cinema means and what it should look like. For some, the very prospect of a new cinéma de genre – and its attendant push for ‘big’ films – is symptomatic of a regrettable double failure that results in films neither economically capable of competing with Hollywood, nor culturally significant enough to offer lasting value. Taken to the extreme, this view might see any placement of the word ‘blockbuster’ next to the word ‘French’ as an inevitable (yet quite depressing) endgame with rules rigged in favour of more powerful players. We need not deny this vantage point, however, to embrace a more multi-dimensional one as proposed by film scholars like Stringer, Altman and Moine, or put in practice by sociologist Olivier Alexandre in his recent landmark study (Alexandre 2015). This alternative research programme could ask, for instance, from what historical circumstances this new type of French productions initially sprang in the 1980s and 1990s. It could also suspend value judgments long enough to root out the varying, contingent senses of identity that have been attached to the recent and variously ‘big’ forms of commercial cinema in France.

To approach film history in this way is to re-immerses oneself in the bundle of theoretical insights initiated by theorists like Higson, O’Regan and Hayward as
well as to draw anew on the sociological caveats that drive recent cultural theories of globalisation. Along these lines, any informed sense of ‘national’ culture must be an incipient, moving target, composed of the competing discourses and rhetorical positions that cluster around all sorts of cultural production – even the overtly commercial ones. What we find when we do so is an entire set of generative mechanisms, often underplayed in accounts of the past thirty years of French cinema. And along with them comes a history of rampant internal disagreements, especially post-Lang, about how to preserve the hallowed Malrauvian balance between ‘art’ and ‘industry’ while coping with the intensified pressure generated by Hollywood blockbusters and their attendant strategies.

It turns out that the flirtation with making a more competitive popular cinema has been a persistent subplot of the French media industry’s more general conversation about how to establish a viable ‘cultural exception’ to Hollywood. Moreover, the continual, collective effort to do just that makes the history of France’s diverse and intermittent ‘local blockbusters’ a yarn filled with frequent strife and periodic consensus – one well worth spinning on its own merits. The six main chapters of this book sketch the contours of what that story might look like. The first two provide historical and theoretical backdrops for the material to follow. Drawing on research at the CNC, the Bibliothèque du Film (BiFi), the French Ministry of Culture, trade press publications like Le Film Français and Ecran Total, and interviews with film professionals from various levels of the industry, Chapter 1 relates a condensed history of the industry’s gradual investment in a yearly crop of big-budget films over the past thirty years. A look at the variety of reforms instituted by Lang between 1981 and 1993 shows how Socialist policies often entailed compromise between competing viewpoints, ending in a commitment to pursuing ambitious budgets while promoting an increased ‘audacity’ in commercial cinema that could complement art house fare both financially and culturally. The second half of the Chapter then surveys the many ‘unintended consequences’ (effets pervers) of Lang’s plan since then, including the industry’s concentration around a small number of big production companies and its ongoing attempts to adapt – this time to the new digital technologies and revenue streams that arrived when streaming services like Netflix became powerful new players in content creation in the past several years. Following this historical account, Chapter 2 proposes a method for charting how successful French films – in their various generic affiliations and stylistic guises – have become the fodder for an ongoing debate about the artistic legitimacy of globalised popular culture.

A dominant tendency in film criticism today remains a view of French cinema as the self-proclaimed European leader of a global auteur movement against Hollywood dominance. Broad mistrust of popular genre cinema frequently serves as a corollary to what I call the exceptionalist framing of the EU’s mandate for pursuing ‘cultural diversity’, which retains both the word choice and the
ideological bent of Lang’s original usage. Aligning with an attitude similar to those of the GATT demonstrations, this perspective of the industry and its proponents tend to draw taste-based lines between film ‘art’ and ‘commerce’, connecting them to the project of a united European front for supporting an independent, artisanal cinema focused on the creativity and authenticity of local forms of expression. Such views also tend to regret the current consequences of Lang’s reforms, which they now see contributing to heightened commercialist practices, to the detriment of auteur filmmaking. On this view, the malleability of the most recent international rhetoric used by the CNC and other outward-looking institutions in France also becomes a tactical error – the ‘acceptance of a logic that is clearly a neoliberal one’ (Poirrier 2006: 16).

Whereas many prevailing conceptions of Franco-European cinema focus on preserving its cause as a viable alternative to global media forms in France and elsewhere, they are often counteracted by what we term here a professionalist view of the same set of factual information. This second perspective suggests that state support mechanisms can only accomplish so much amidst the current accelerating financial and technological conditions of the world economy. No less committed to the survival of the industry in a certain sense, this viewpoint insists that any path to a sustainable ‘cultural diversity’ must remain grounded in the realities of a competitive, changing industry. Less obviously militant (though no less political) in its stance, it takes its name from the places it appears most often – statements by industry professionals who speak across global frameworks, referring both to French and to Hollywood filmmakers on a craft-based level, and embracing the work of ‘making films’ without necessary reference to the systemic inequalities of the global industry. On an executive level, this rhetoric often accompanies investment in corporate forms of creative practice, primed to compete within the logic of global flows and to respond quickly to the advent of new media platforms. On a critical one, it dovetails with the views of many critics and filmmakers who grew up in the 1980s, watching as Hollywood blockbusters dominated the market, and wishing that their own national cinema could muster a more direct response along similar lines. Denizens of this view tend to characterise themselves as ‘realists’ about what the industry faces. Not surprisingly, they also read Lang’s mixed-economy legacy rather differently to their exceptionalist peers, emphasising the wisdom of his choice to wed French film culture with incipient forms of media entrepreneurship (initially cable television) and to accept the Hollywood challenge as a mandate for catering to popular taste in more effective ways.

Finally, between these two tendencies lies a mediating move – perhaps the most common, frequently the most vexed. In its pragmatist support for commercialist and auteur cinema alike, this third tendency falls back on a gradual renewal of existing public-private policies, making concessions to both ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ forms of filmmaking. Embracing the complex socio-politics of French
film policy as it works to adapt progressively to the numerous challenges of the
digital era, this third framing also frequently proffers a relativist aesthetic sensi-
bility, highlighting the value of all types of films and visual media to the publicity
of a national media industry fighting for visibility in a global capitalist economy.

An approach like this one is by no means exhaustive. It does, however, offer
a useful heuristic for reading how various entities – films, filmmakers and state
institutions, as well as critics and scholars – can be drawn into larger political-
economic debates about how to articulate the wellbeing of contemporary French
cinema. As we shall see later in case studies of individual films and film genres,
these three extant framings of the same material, while separable in theory,
are not always so in practice. Yet it is in the places that they overlap or run up
against one another – the strategic rhetoric of individuals, the ambivalent aes-
thetics of films, or the unfolding practices of institutions – that we find our most
fruitful junctures for extended analysis. For although the language that circulates
in and around recent French films are always case-specific to some degree, they
also display the friction between several positions that have by now become
quite familiar, each encrusted in its own way with the hopes and frustrations of
a three-decade entanglement with the challenge of global Hollywood.

To further elucidate how these terms play out in debates about the many and
various ‘globalised’ qualities of contemporary French filmmaking, the follow-
ing four chapters demonstrate how and where these long-standing ideological
divisions – already a factor in Lang’s negotiations with trade unions and
industry professionals two decades prior – ripple to the surface of discussions
about the diverse filmmaking practices of contemporary France. First, we con-
sider two films that serve as bookends of sorts for the primary period of most
interest here. Chapter 3 returns to the often cited debate about the aesthetics
of Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s Amélie (2001), a benchmark case study for outlining
how three broad rhetorical frames traverse the trade press coverage, policy
reports and critical polemics that initially surrounded the film, as well as how
similar disagreements continue to make it a vital node for discussions about
the ‘globalised’ aspirations of French cinema. Chapter 4 performs a similar
analysis on Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets (Luc Besson 2017),
which nearly two decades later became the most expensive French-made film
in history. Here a look at the production and reception of one ambitious film
also allows us to reflect back on the career arc of its director, Besson, who
has been the most consistent – and controversial – contributor to the Gallic
attempts to ‘beat Hollywood at its own game’ since Lang.

The last two full chapters then look at how several different characteristics
of popular filmmaking have come to straddle the transnational dimensions of
the industry in provocative ways. Chapter 4 enlists the cause of action cinema,
perhaps the most visibly ‘globalised’ aesthetic ingredient of contemporary
Franco-European cinema. Initially left to Hollywood in the era of the tent-pole
blockbuster, action scenes have enjoyed a recent renaissance in French studios. Using recent industrial history and the formal analysis of individual films combined with their reception, the chapter shows how contemporary French-made action films traverse the ideological gaps between different approaches to one of the most visible components of ‘globalised’ cinema. In Chapter 6, we then consider the concurrent proliferation of ‘localised’ French comedies, which in an industrial sense often seek more limited regional audiences, yet also play formally with the broad cultural attitudes about transnationalism sketched earlier in the book. An analysis of three titles – *Intouchables* (Toledano and Nakache 2011), *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au bon dieu?/ Serial (Bad) Weddings* (de Chauveron 2014) and the three-deep franchise *Les Tuche* (Baroux 2011, 2015, 2017) – suggests that recent comedies, noted frequently for their ‘politically incorrect’ depictions of race and class, also work to caricature the discrepancies between the different faces of ‘local’ French identity that confront one another in an age of encroaching cultural globalisation and blockbuster cinema.

Finally, the conclusion offers a brief reflection on perhaps the most unlikely blockbuster of the bunch. *Of Gods and Men / Des hommes et des dieux* (Beauvois 2010) is a sedate, nuanced, quasi-documentary re-creation of the events leading to the tragic deaths of a group of French Trappist monks during sectarian conflicts in Algeria in 1996. A decorated auteur entry from the Cannes festival the previous May, the film sold a surprising three million tickets in France, setting records for a Cannes release and holding its own amidst the annual fall parade of North American Oscar contenders. Celebrated by critics as a slow-paced rejoinder to digitally enhanced Hollywood fare, the film also suggested a radical revamping of the Langian genre that started it all some thirty years prior: the heritage film. In so doing, *Of Gods and Men* also renewed once more an ongoing debate about the unfolding fate of a country’s cinematic heritage, stylistically countering the crop of differently affiliated genre films that continues to redefine the stakes of cultural legitimacy in a national film industry engulfed in an energetic, unruly period of transition.

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