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## EDITORIAL

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### **Introduction: Jacques Audiard – 21st Century Auteur**

Jacques Audiard is one of the best-known, French filmmakers working today, his presence well-established in film festival headlines, the mainstream film press and critics' choice (including an appearance at number 85 with *A prophet* (2009) in the recent BBC critics' poll of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's 100 greatest films (BBC 2016)).<sup>1</sup> His national status as son of the seminal scriptwriter Michel Audiard, has long been replaced by his own international profile as director, yet scholarly engagement with his hugely confident and engaging oeuvre continues to lag behind his international commercial profile. The aims of this special issue are therefore twofold – to render existing engagement with his work more visible and to bring together a set of diverse critical approaches in the hope of triggering further exploration of these films.

Audiard's credentials as exemplary 21<sup>st</sup> century auteur are seemingly uncontested. *Ciné-fils* of France's treasured screenwriter, Michel Audiard and *cinéphile* who name-checks emphatically international influences, his films exhibit signature elements of mise en scene and recurring thematic obsessions, turn relatively unknown actors into bankable stars (Duris, Rahim, Schoenaerts) and win an impressive array of international awards. The latter run to 54 wins and 56 nominations (source IMDB.com) including the Grand Jury prize at Cannes and wins in almost all major categories at the Césars for *Un prophète / A Prophet* in 2009. Although *De Rouille et d'os / Rust and Bone* was, surprisingly, overlooked in the Grand Jury selection at Cannes 2012, he went on to win the Palme d'or in 2015 with *Dheepan*. Further evidence of his broad cultural capital can be found in the recent inclusion of *De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté / The beat my heart skipped* (2005) on the French baccalaureat syllabus and the confirmation in interviews (and accompanying photoshoots) of his cultural branding (in reception at least) as dandy, hat-wearing, combination of

contemporary European sensibility and classic American auteur – the ‘French Scorsese’ indeed (Aftab 2010).

The reasons for the mismatch between commercial and media profile and academic attention are undoubtedly multiple – yet one of the primary contexts may be his lack of fit with perceived tendencies and models of contemporary French film-making. He does not fit easily into new canons or broader tendencies (such as ‘extreme cinema’, politically-engaged realism or indeed popular cinema) and is not the identifiable product of a high-profile film school. Crucially, his age excluded him from being labeled as a member of the generation of filmmakers, ‘le jeune cinéma’, delineated in critical work of the 1990s - 2000s (see Hardwick 2008) that was important to the construction of models of French auteur film in that period (see Dobson 2012).

The contribution to auteur status of Audiard’s extensive (contributed to the writing of 20 films between 1974 and 1994) and continuing status as screenwriter is foregrounded in Isabelle Vanderschelden’s critical examination of Audiard’s status as screenwriter. Foregrounding this critically neglected function, she reveals Audiard’s development of a writing practice that extends across the filming and editing stages of his filmmaking process. The distinctive, collaborative nature evidenced here serves, perhaps paradoxically, as a further element of his signature style as auteur.

A further characteristic of Audiard’s oeuvre – and one which may not fit the profile of the auteur - is the complex refashioning of existing texts including novels. Whilst he rejects the term ‘remake’ he often chooses to work with, on and through the skeleton of an existing narrative premise - *Regarde les hommes tomber* is based on Teri White’s novel *Triangle/ Un trio sans espoir*, *De rouille et d’os* draws elements from two short stories by Canadian author, Craig Davidson and Audiard’s ongoing project at the time of writing has been revealed as an English language adaptation of Patrick Dewitt’s bestselling novel *The Sisters Brothers*. This interest in reshaping existing premises is explored in Douglas Morrey’s detailed comparative analysis of *De battre mon coeur s’est arrêté* and its loose source text *Fingers* (Toback 1978). Morrey traces the shifts in narrative focus and film language that, he argues, lead to a ‘smoothing out’ of elements of the earlier film.

The insistence in his films of the importance of genre hybridity to structure, characterization and narrative has perhaps been seen, for some French critics at least, to undermine his status as auteur. Yet, as Dobson argues in her discussion of the central repurposing of the melodramatic mode in *De rouille et d'os*, the projected binary opposition between auteur and genre-led production has been largely eroded to foreground the knowing and often playful use of genre as mode in contemporary film. Audiard indeed describes his engagement with genre as a device, which enables him to project his marginalized characters and their struggles for agency and reconstructed identity onto universal narratives and immersive experiences:

‘For me, genre cinema is about representation on a noble, large, wide scale – it’s not about making socioeconomic films, or documentaries, or imparting information. It’s about creating a big, heroic image, in CinemaScope and full colour.’ (Audiard quoted in Romney 2015)

The generic frames that Audiard privileges (thriller, heist, rites of passage film) are often those that foreground homo-social hierarchies of masculine filiation. Geneviève Sellier’s close critique of the representation of gender in *De battre mon coeur s’est arrêté*, reveals a gender politics which is in tension with apparent general discourses of inclusion and empowerment through agency and reinvention. In a further opening of Audiard’s work to the politics of representation, Ruth Kitchen discusses *De rouille et d’os* in the context of the representation of physical disability and embodied experience.

Audiard’s receipt of the Palme d’or for *Dheepan* in 2015 has further increased his international profile and it is to be seen whether this success and the further extension to his oeuvre will provoke a greater number of critical and scholarly responses. His singular profile is represented in the responses to this most recent film. A negative framing of Audiard’s work is not sited in one journal alone, more recent critical reception of his films in *Cahiers du cinéma* invites comment. In addition to predominantly indifferent reviews, Audiard features in *Cahiers*’ editorial text as an example of broadly-painted undesirable traits of contemporary French cinema. An editorial from 2015 attacks French cinema’s perceived abandonment of political

engagement in favour of what it describes as a self-defeating and non-threatening 'social cinema'. Audiard serves as prime target in this piece:

'French cinema [...] shuts itself away in a world of images cut off from the real. At its worst this political vacuum barely conceals a cynical affirmation, a more or less brazen move to the right – from Audiard's war fantasies to flashy dramas...' (Delorme 2015a).<sup>2</sup>

The 'war fantasy' referred to here is Audiard's Palme d'or-winning *Dheepan*, with the Cannes victory itself also later undermined as a reward for vulgar strategy - 'a calculated mixture of naturalism and bad guy cinema'<sup>3</sup> (Delorme 2015b). The film is flawed - its generic mix (finishing a complex narrative of exclusion and cultural negotiation with a vigilante film ending) is atypically clumsy for Audiard and its final sequences remain dominated by the legacy of his desire to make a remake of *Straw dogs* (Peckinpah 1971) and a rushed edit in order to finish the film in time for Cannes – yet *Cahiers'* response seems disproportionate.

Audiard's non-specific response to such charges has featured a repeated insistence upon the pragmatic nature of his narrative and filmic strategies. Firstly, to focus on representing a diversity of characters unusual in mainstream French cinema: 'In most French films, I see people like me. And I'm not that interested in people like me' (Romney 2015) and secondly, to render marginalized characters and narratives accessible and culturally visible: 'The political act here wasn't liberal sentiment [...] it was shooting in Tamil and making this character a hero' (ibid).

Audiard's constructed profile as auteur may be seen to echo the situation of his central characters; plausible and engaging anti-heroes who undertake often explicitly strategic self-reinvention through the dazzlingly inventive play of existing codes and discourses to create ambiguous and enigmatic hybrid identities. Audiard's current production, his first English language film based loosely on Patrick Dewitt's novel *The Sisters Brothers*, provides further evidence of a director now able to attract major international funding and stars to projects that communicate an exuberant narrative pleasure and virtuosity of mise en scene.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Julia Dobson is Reader in contemporary French Film and Performance at the University of Sheffield, UK. She has published widely on French cinema including work on Audiard, Kieslowski, first person documentary and her 2012 book *Negotiating the Auteur* with Manchester University Press. She is currently writing a book on Performing Objects and starting a project on adolescence in post-1990 French film.

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<sup>1</sup> There are nine French films in the list including two entries for Haneke with *Amour* (2012) at number 42 and *Caché* (2005) at number 23.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Au pire le vide politique cache mal une affirmation cynique, une droitisation plus ou moins décomplexée – des fantasmes guerriers d’Audiard aux comédies clinquantes...’

<sup>3</sup> ‘son mélange calculé de naturalisme et de cinéma de salauds’