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## **Audiard A-Z**

Julia Dobson

**A is for Anti-hero.** Audiard's films demonstrate a sustained lack of interest in the moral or sentimental appeal of their central characters, but rather strive to ensure that we engage with and admire the work involved in the process of their self-transformation, their capacity for resistance and their commitment to survival against the odds.

**B is for Bach.** Bach's 'Tocatta in E minor' sustains a stubborn, stuttering presence throughout *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* (2005) as Tom (Romain Duris) struggles to master the piece in time for his improbable, punitive audition. Audiard retained the specific audition piece from the cult film *Fingers* (Toback, 1978) on which *De battre...* is loosely based. The impact of the piece in the film contains central functions of soundtrack as its fragmented, repeated extracts create a mood of heightened tension and discord rather than any emotional swell. The piece's difficult, improvisatory structure is compounded in the audition when Mr. Fox (Sandy (Alexander) Whitelaw), Tom's late mother's agent and impresario, asks him to start not at the beginning of the piece as he has prepared it, but with the fugue, thus causing and perhaps anticipating Tom's humiliating flight from the audition. Romain Duris learnt the piece for the film, yet it is his sister, concert pianist Caroline Duris, who plays it on the soundtrack.

**C is for Cahiers.** A central feature of Audiard's screenwriting and directing practice is the creation of two script documents for each film: cahier A and cahier B. Cahier A is the main script, which Audiard describes as necessary for the narrative and which includes all scenes which are expected to be in the finished film. Cahier B contains scenes whose primary function is to add depth to characterization and which are used for rehearsal with the main cast, undertaken whenever the main filming schedule permits (Ollivier 2011). A different cahier – *Cahiers du cinéma* – has, as noted in the Editorial of this volume, often been the site of a negative critical response to Audiard and his work.

**D is for *Dheepan*.** Audiard's most recent film at the time of writing, *Dheepan*, was the winner of the Palme d'or at Cannes in 2015. Whilst Audiard had arguably been a Palme winner-in-waiting for several years, *Dheepan* was not perhaps the most obvious choice amongst his works. An 'accented' film with much of the dialogue in Tamil language, central roles are played by little-known and non-professional actors and the narrative addresses a rarely covered context, that of the Sri-Lankan civil war. The film charts the personal and social challenges faced by a Sri Lankan 'family' (one constructed for easier navigation of asylum laws) as they cope with both the legacy of their traumatic experiences of civil war and the complex dynamics of integration into French society, here represented by the microcosm of a *banlieue* terrorized by drugs gangs and barely sublimated violence. The film is at its best in the constructed intimacy of a series of domestic spaces as it presents tentative engagements with the parallel unknowns and complex dynamics of both an alien society and a new family. The film's ending presents a problematic combination of an exploration of serial displacements, in which the *banlieue* features at once as innovative decor for a displaced generic specificity (the traumatized veteran narrative) and, within a more realist frame, as rejected socio-cultural site of integration (in stark contrast to the almost dreamlike English suburb of the film's coda).

**E is for Elephant.** The elephant that forms a fleeting but striking presence in *Dheepan*, first via the beautiful abstract patterns of extreme close-ups of its skin, and later by a more identifiable eye and inscrutable gaze. This vision of the elephant has been read as a problematically exoticized construction of *Dheepan*'s dreamworld (Romney 2016).

**F is for Father Figures.** A series of sinister, self-interested paternal figures throw a shadow over many of the films' central protagonists and serve as threatening counterpoints against which the latter attempt to assert new identities. These rarely include biological fathers (Tom's father in *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* is an exception) but rather irregular or corrupted authority figures including Marx and Hirsch in *Regarde les hommes tomber*, Paul's murderous parole officer in *Sur mes lèvres*, Tom's father and the suggested substitute father, Mr Fox, in *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* and swaggering Corsican mafia boss (Niels Arestrup) in *Un prophète*. In the more recent *De rouille et d'os* and *Dheepan* it is rather the central

protagonists' relation to the projected functions of fatherhood that are at stake as Ali's neglectful behaviour towards his son Sam and the explicitly fraudulent paternal status of Dheepan raise the question of the function of the filial bond within the family unit.

**G is for Genre Hybridity.** Audiard's mixing of genres is widely recognized as one of the central recurrent features of his films and his auteur profile. This mixing provides not only a refreshing reframing of familiar generic modes and codes, but also narrative suspense in relation to which mode will prevail and dictate the film's ending.

**H is for Hands.** Hands are a recurring focus in Audiard's work as they replace conventional, primary attention on the facial close-up and serve as wordless bearers of intimacy (*Sur mes lèvres*), narrative suspense (*De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté*) and communication (*De rouille et d'os*, *Dheepan*). At key points in all his narratives, close-ups of dirty, damaged or bloodied hands are emblematic not only of suffering and the hard work of asserting subjectivity in the face of prevailing contexts, but also its constructive communication.

**I is for Influences.** In interviews, Audiard repeatedly namechecks John Huston as his favourite filmmaker, praising his freedom from genre restraints and the power of his *mise en scène* (Solomons 2009). Huston's professional profile as garlanded director and screenwriter (including classic examples of film noir) and personal profile as flamboyant eccentric are also clearly in play here. In response to the frequently proposed descriptions of himself as the French Scorsese, Audiard asserts his admiration of the latter as 'a student of world cinema' (Solomons 2009). Audiard also cites two Davids as key influences on his work: David Mamet and David Lynch (Vachaud 1994, 38). Whilst the influence of the first is evident in the tightly wrought scenarios and narrative tension of Audiard's narratives, the second may be more unexpected. Yet the Lynchian intent of creating signals and glimpses of other worlds just beyond the surface of the tangible real are echoed in Audiard's insistence on the power of the imagination to intrude upon both the real and the realist. A clear example of this can be found in the unmotivated use of the red drapes that form an unlikely background to Carla's self-directed performance of desire in *Sur mes lèvres*.

**J is for Juliette Welfling.** Welfling has edited most of Audiard's films, and he acknowledges the central importance of her contribution to decisions on the narrative and on the structure of the films. This collaborative practice reached what Audiard describes as the 'ideal situation' on *Un prophète* where, as the filming took place almost in a studio situation in one location, Welfling was able to undertake some editing on site and thus feed her ideas back into the emerging film (Anon 2011).

**K is for Kassovitz.** Mathieu Kassovitz's compelling performances as isolated and vulnerable central characters -- as Freddy/Johnny in *Regarde les hommes tomber* and as Albert Dehousse in *Un héros très discret* -- remain underrated. In the first film his performance as naïve outsider Freddy/Johnny, in thrall to Jean-Louis Trintignant's sinister conman, Marx, conveys a potent mix of almost comic naivety, pathological neediness and reckless violence.

**L is for Love.** Although Audiard has eschewed substantial engagement with Romance as 'lead' genre in his films, elements of the romance discourse remain present as minor modes in several of his genre mixes. Their narrative function revolves around the question of whether love, or often rather the status of being loved, can 'save' a (male) character, with the responses remaining ambiguous and double-edged. In *Sur mes lèvres* questions of trust, power and communication fuel the tension that brings together the generic modes of heist and romance. Whilst the final shot foregrounds tentative physical contact between Paul (Vincent Cassel) and Carla (Emmanuelle Devos), the question of the continuing conditions for shared access to the money stolen in the heist remains at play. Audiard filmed further scenes for *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* in which central character, Tom (Romain Duris) pursues his lover (and friend's wife) Aline (Aure Atika) to New York in an attempt to develop their sensual encounters, but dropped this from the final version, which ends rather with the more ambiguous pairing of Tom and Miao Lin (Linh Dan Pham). The brief shot that apparently establishes their relationship, his hand massaging the back of her neck to calm pre-concert nerves, can equally be read as the proprietorial gesture of a manager towards his commodified, fragile talent. The presence of love is less ambivalent in *De rouille et d'os*; indeed, in press interviews Audiard stated that the physical courage of the central characters should be seen in a relativized context as "the most heroic thing you can do is tell someone that you love them" (Audiard

quoted in Collin 2012). This love is not, however, governed by the codes of Romance but extends itself rather to the assertion of family relationships, particularly the tentative rehabilitation of Ali's role as father to Sam.

**M is for Michel Audiard.** For some French film fans the name Audiard will evoke not the director under discussion in this issue, but rather 'Audiard père', his father, Michel Audiard. Although he was also active in directing and acting, Michel Audiard's legacy is most keenly felt in his status as one of France's most successful and well-loved script and dialogue writers of countless genre classics of comedy and crime thrillers over almost forty years (1949–1985), and his knack for combining slang and caustic humour created a popular repository of memorable one-liners. Jacques Audiard collaborated with his father in the early 1980s (see Vanderschelden in this volume) and shared script-writing credits with him on *Randonnée mortelle/Deadly circuit* (1983). In interview, Audiard rebuffs any suggestions of working under the rivalrous shadow of his father, asserting rather that his father wrote films to earn a living and that this context provided him with a valuable demythologization of the film industry (Kaganski 2009).

**N is for Niels Arestrup.** Over his extensive career to date Niels Arestrup has won critical acclaim for his work in film and theatre. Yet his profile was raised by his award-winning performances (two Césars for best supporting actor) in *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* and *Un prophète*. In terms of international casting he has since secured roles in *War Horse* (Spielberg, 2011) and *By the Sea* (Jolie, 2015). In *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* his portrayal of Tom's sleazy, demanding father, Robert Seyr, reeks of self-interest and knowing manipulation, but also of repressed grief (underlined by his claustrophobic apartment) and a physical vulnerability that undercuts his verbal threats. Arestrup's performance as Corsican godfather, César Luciani, in *Un prophète*, communicates a terrifyingly unpredictable violence and brutal self-interest.

**O is for Odd Couples.** Audiard's films are populated by odd couples, employed not as the classical staple of situation comedy or rom-com tension but as mutually dependent outsiders whose respective self-reinventions are built on often anomalous and initially hostile connections.

**P is for Prison.** Audiard's prison thriller *Un prophète* (2009) remains his most critically successful film to date. The gripping portrayal of Malik (Tahar Rahim) as another 'self-made hero', who transforms himself in prison from vulnerable and illiterate petty criminal to head of a major criminal network, foregrounds his autodidactic mastery of a series of discourses including empowerment through literacy, linguistic access to conversations of the Corsican mafia gang and exercises in the rules of entrepreneurial negotiation. The film's suggestive projection of the prison as microcosmic mapping of national and social discourses of integration and the complex dynamics between power, knowledge and different modes of capital have attracted the most divergent scholarly response to Audiard's work thus far (see for example Macdonald 2013 and Oscherwitz 2015).

**Q is for Quadrennial.** Audiard came relatively late to film directing and is not noted for prolific production. His films have often appeared on a quadrennial basis with four years between *Sur mes lèvres* (2001), *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* (2005) and *Un prophète* (2009). The rate of production is currently increasing with 3 year gaps between *Un prophète* (2009), *De rouille et d'os* (2012) and *Dheepan* (2015), and his next film *The Sister Brothers* is announced for a 2017 release.

**R is for Reinvention.** The central characters in Audiard's films embark upon an explicitly performative process of reinvention, including an explicit learning process (Johnny in *Regarde les hommes tomber*, Malik in *Un prophète*) and lengthy rehearsals (Dehousse in *Un héros très discret*, Tom in *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté*). Thus the underdogs, outsiders and misfits that populate Audiard's films address their marginalization not by fighting the system in which they are caught, but by resituating themselves in relation to it. Audiard's construction of the hero is thus related to invention and resistance rather than moral or pathos as he states: 'The hero in my film is there to illustrate the capacity for resistance of the individual and his ability to make himself his own rules, his own life. I like to ask the question: have I just got one life to live or is there another way? And what is the price to pay for that other way, for inventing myself another way...?' (Audiard quoted in Solomons, 2009).

**S is for Star-Maker.** Audiard's films have provided star-making opportunities for central male leads Romain Duris, Tahar Rahim and Matthias Schoenaerts. The casting of Marion Cotillard in *De rouille et d'os* (2012), along with her role as embattled worker, Sandra, in the Dardennes' *Deux jours, une nuit/Two days, one night* (2014), has enabled her to extend her profile significantly to embrace contemporary realism.

**T is for To Be Continued.** Audiard's next project at the time of writing is an adaptation of the Booker prize-nominated novel *The Sisters Brothers* (DeWitt, 2011). DeWitt's darkly comic, deadpan novel is set in the 1850s West Coast gold rush and follows two brothers in their journey to carry out a commissioned assassination. The narrative's focus on family dynamics, the mutability of identity. Its playful manipulation of the conventions of the Western seem to provide a close fit with Audiard's central thematic concerns. This is projected as his English-language debut and will star John C. Reilly (also a co-producer), with Joaquin Phoenix in talks for the role of one of the brothers (imdb.com).

**U is for Unidentified Luminous Objects.** The presence of unexplained lights recurs in Audiard's films. There is the flickering presence in the hospital room of *Regarde les hommes tomber*, the floating, blurred patterns that dominate the opening sequence of *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* (re-integrated into the realist framework as car headlights), and the apparently festive red and blue lights in *Dheepan* that are revealed as glowing Disney ears, the humiliating wares that Dheepan and other refugees are trying to sell on the streets of Paris. The mysterious lights signal an otherworldly presence, an assertively poetic intrusion into realist settings, but also draw our focus beyond the immediate narrative context of the image.

**V is for Violence.** Violence lies at the heart of Audiard's cinema, yet it is not largely an explicitly choreographed affair, but rather a visceral, amateur, messy brutality. From the bloody suicide attempt in *Regarde les hommes tomber* to the almost unwatchable sequence in which Malik (Tahar Rahim) makes multiple attempts to conceal a razorblade inside his mouth, to Ali's (Matthias Schoenaerts) chaotic street fighting, violence in Audiard's oeuvre does not provide transcendence or escape, but reminds us of the characters' embodied experience and struggle. The exception to this norm is the large-scale violence of the final *banlieue* sequences of *Dheepan* (2015),

rendered spectacular through the use of an exhilaratingly mobile camera, rapid cuts and explosions. The disproportionate scale of the violence creates the awkward appendage of a war or vigilante film ending to a largely realist film and is rendered retrospectively **even** more excessive by the contrast with the film's coda, which is set in a leafy English suburb complete with a black cab and blossom-filled garden.

**W is for Women.** Supported by the generic modes that it privileges (crime thriller, heist, prison film and the forthcoming western), Audiard's cinema often presents homo-social environments in which women feature as secondary characters, often defined primarily in relation to the characteristics that they reveal in the central male characters (passion, vulnerability...). Such limited representation of women would fail the basic premises of the Bechdel test – i.e. that there should be at least two female characters and that they should be represented in discussion of something other than men. The female lovers, wives and mothers of *Regarde les hommes tomber*, *Un héros très discret* *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* and *Un prophète* are fleeting, sensual presences that support the characterization of their male counterparts. But beyond the suggestion of sanctuary in a nebulous affective space beyond that of the main narrative, they rarely fulfill any independent role in triggering narrative development. Even as Carla (Emmanuelle Devos) in *Sur mes lèvres* asserts her authority over Paul (Vincent Cassel) she remains in thrall to his masculinity. Strong female characters do, however, emerge in his later films. Stéphanie in *De rouille et d'os* has a narrative function far beyond 'feminine' foil to Ali's initial hypermasculinity or that of damaged damsel to be rescued. The ending does not offer escape via the Romance script, but rather an inclusion of Stéphanie as equal partner in an emerging social unit. *Dheepan* is more interesting in this context than either its choice of male character's name as title or its violent denouement would suggest. For the first two thirds of the film it is arguably the character of Yalini (a striking performance by Kalieaswari Srinivasan) who experiences the most nuanced negotiations of cultural displacement through her encounters with unfamiliar situations of freedom and restraint. These are articulated in a way that reveals and critiques the gendered discourses around sexuality, domestic and the maternal across public and private realms to which she is subject. Her role is reduced however by the ending and coda of the film in which she features respectively as the object of rescue

by Dheepan and the bearer of his child, in a final, rather over-determined, transformation of the constructed family into a biologically legitimized unit.

**X is for Xerox.** One of the key scenes in *Sur mes lèvres* for the narrative threads that bring together put-upon, administrator Carla (Emmanuelle Devos) and her improbable administrative assistant, the gloriously louche ex-con Paul (Vincent Cassel), involves the Xerox machine in the cramped back-office. The scene asserts three main elements; first, their mutual dependence as Paul's administrative inadequacies and Carla's ulterior motives in hiring him are demonstrated as he confuses a copier and a fax machine. Second, it is the arena for the shifting parameters of work and skills : Paul's 'training' involves Carla forcing him to enact revenge on her misogynist colleagues, and he convinces her to transfer her lip-reading skills to a criminal context in the planning of a heist. Third, the cramped back office serves as a key site for the emerging sexual tension between the pair.

**Y is for Yield.** The commercial return on Audiard's films is a central to his international status and auteur profile, enabling both freedom in project choice and access to star casting when required. Three of his films broke through the important threshold of a million box office entries in France – *De rouille et d'os* (1.93 million), *Un prophète* (1.3 million) and *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* (1.23 million) (JP's Box Office 2016). In terms of the profitability in worldwide box office returns it is *De rouille et d'os* which remains the most successful with 179% return on its 15.5 million euro budget, followed by *Un prophète* with a 141% return on its budget of 12.48 million euros (JP's box office). Unsurprisingly perhaps for a film (albeit a Palme d'or winner) with no stars and dominated by Tamil language, *Dheepan* did not sustain Audiard's box office profile; it had only 500,000 entries in France and did not register a commercial profit against its budget of 7.9 million euros.

**Z is for Zone.** This zone is the no-fire zone that Dheepan draws out between his block of flats and that occupied by the drugs gang. This physical demarcation of territory demonstrates his resourcefulness (he builds a machine to mark out the line) and is seen as a provocation by the gang who hurl insults at him followed by concrete blocks from their rooftop lookouts. Dheepan's announcement in English of the status of this line is almost comical in its absurdity as the gangs recognize no authority or

territory but their own, and builds the apparent narrative comparison between the violent hostility of this *banlieue* environment and the civil war that Dheepan has fled. This connection is more fruitful, as is the violent denouement of the film, if read as a subjective perception, i.e. through Dheepan's evident post-traumatic stress, but it remains open to reductive parallels of zones of violence and exclusion.

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