

## **Gemma King, *Jacques Audiard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021)**

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As the director of nine feature films, author of at least two dozen screenplays, and the recipient of a Grand Prix and Palme d'Or at Cannes, multiple Césars, and a myriad of international awards, Jacques Audiard merits a book. Surprisingly, Gemma King's is the first, in English or in French. Although her focus is on the features, from *See How They Fall/Regarde les hommes tomber* (1994) through *The Sisters Brothers/Les frères Sisters* (2018), King is concerned with Audiard's body of work as a whole, which she illuminates by suggesting how some of his longer films resonate with his work on shorts, music videos, streaming series, and screenplays.

The book carefully parses recurring themes and sensory details that distinguish Audiard's films: his fascination with isolated people, abused or abandoned sons, and tortured masculinity; his reformulation of French and American genre conventions; and his dramatic uses of light, framing, ambient sound, and music to capture characters' subjectivity. More globally, King argues, each of these qualities is mobilized in service to the director's enduring concern with the transgression of boundaries social, cultural, and national. Through chapters that move steadily from micro to macro—from "body" to "society" to "globe"—King explains how Audiard's films depict boundaries and celebrate transgressions that enable his marginalized protagonists to find power, pleasure, and safety.

The grouping of films in King's first chapter, on the body, feels somewhat forced in its linking of the toughly masculine *The Beat That My Heart Skipped/De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté* (2005) with Audiard's only two films, at that point, to have put women at their center: *Read My Lips/Sur mes lèvres* (2001) and *Rust and Bone/De rouille et d'os* (2012). *Paris, 13th District/Les Olympiades* (2021) is Audiard's third to feature female protagonists, but it was released after this book had gone to press. King justifies the association by explaining how her chosen three films focus on non-verbal sensory experience as means of communication that relieve their heroes' psychic isolation, and she makes a plausible case for that reading. What I found more innovative was her discussion of the similarities between *Read My Lips* and *Rust and Bone*, movies about women with physical disabilities that neither victimize nor "cure." Reading both movies against the literature on "extreme cinema" and alongside Rosemary Garland Thomson's work on disability, King argues that Audiard's protagonists find

“emotional fulfilment, sexual actualisation and self-determination” not despite their disabilities but through confrontation of them (64). In so doing, King not only calls attention to two of Audiard’s less commonly discussed works but significantly enhances the reach of French film studies by integrating it with a very dynamic American literature on disability.

King’s chapter on “society” positions early films *See How They Fall* and *A Self-Made Hero/Un héros très discret* (1996) alongside Audiard’s international blockbuster, *A Prophet/Un prophète* (2009), to focus on the director’s critique of social marginalization and his exploration of mobilities achieved by mastering violence, languages, and cultural codes. “Globe” concludes the book by positioning *Dheepan* (2015) and *The Sisters Brothers* as equally concerned with “profound questions about nation, culture, and identity that have defined Audiard’s cinema since the earliest stages of his career” (122). This last point is, indeed, one of the book’s central themes, which King firmly grounds throughout. *A Self-Made Hero*, she has already noted, uses protagonist Albert Dehousse’s reinvention of himself as a Résistant to reflect on how myth-making about the past shapes national identity, and she rightly insists that all of Audiard’s films since *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*—with its Russian gangsters, immigrant squatters, and Vietnamese pianist—have depicted an increasingly multilingual and transcultural France. Moreover, King adds, transnationalism is not just a plot device or recurring theme in Audiard’s work. His very processes of filmmaking have long crossed national borders for funding, cast and crew, locales, and generic conventions.

King’s account of the transnational in Audiard’s films is the dimension of this book most likely to interest readers of *Film Journal*, above all because she so often returns to the director’s engagement with North American culture. Three of Audiard’s films are based on stories by Canadian or American writers, and *The Beat That My Heart Skipped* is a remake of American director James Toback’s critically unloved *Fingers* (1978). King describes *Dheepan*, idiosyncratically but persuasively, as a mash-up of Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters/Lettres persanes* (1721) with Sam Peckinpah’s violent, controversial *Straw Dogs* (1971) (53). Most importantly, she returns repeatedly to Audiard’s appropriation of “genres typically associated with popular culture and the American B movie”—noir, Westerns, melodramas, and prison films—to argue that one of the director’s most distinctive achievements is his capacity to “elevate” such “low-brow” forms “to the level of cinéma d’art et d’essai” (80). That bricolage qualifies Audiard as the auteur King defines at the outset: one who brings a “coherent creative vision” (14) to the films he directs, even when collaborating with others, and who successfully refashions existing representations.

If King excels at explaining the internal distinctiveness of Audiard’s body of work, she is perhaps less successful at making explicit what sets him apart from other French directors, above all in his relationship to American culture. Asking whether his “penchant for subverting low-brow genres typically associated with Hollywood is simply an authorial marker of Audiard’s, or a characteristically French tendency in the tradition of the Nouvelle Vague,” King concludes somewhat vaguely that this is “up for debate” (143). Some of the formal comparisons leave us equally uncertain. Admittedly, she argues that *See How They Fall* differs from French polars of the 1950s and 60s in having neither a discerning detective nor a glamorous femme fatale. And yet, if we position that film within the post-’68 generation to which it belongs, it is like many a modern polar (at least one of which Audiard himself scripted) in refusing the triumph of traditional notions of law and order.

And yet, well before reaching these somewhat equivocal conclusions, King has already explained what sets Audiard apart from predecessors and peers. Above all, she makes amply clear, Audiard stands out for using generic conventions to explore social marginalization. Unlike many a New Wave director, who appropriated American genres for aesthetic reasons, or New Wave heirs, who adopted American

forms for commercial advantage, Audiard uses genre to explore “the various ways in which the socially oppressed can experience twenty-first century French society as rigid and hostile” (74) and to consider how such figures overcome their exclusion. Accordingly, King explains how *A Prophet* fuses the French banlieue film with the American prison genre to explore racism, xenophobia, and socioeconomic disability. *Dheepan*, she continues, returns to the banlieue film, albeit in a distressingly reductive way, and marries it with American gangster tropes to depict immigrants’ experience and challenge the myth of a homogeneous France cordoned off from the rest of the world.

But perhaps nowhere is Audiard’s appropriation of American genre conventions more singular or more evocative than in his relationship to the western. For although *The Sisters Brothers* is explicitly his first “true” western—set in America at the time of the Gold Rush and cast exclusively with Anglophone actors—all of Audiard’s films are “westerns,” King quotes Jean-Dominique Nuttens as saying, insofar as they depict “characters at the margins, [who] fail... to find peace—and love—until they’ve purged the violence they carry within them” (151). I would go still further than Nuttens by highlighting the gendered nature of those “characters.” For even Audiard films that focus on women are concerned with how those characters’ male partners purge the violence that poisons them, in order to find a new way forward. Audiard is distinctive among French directors for not simply appropriating American genre conventions but for turning those conventions potently back on themselves to cast a critical eye on the violence and supposed masculine self-reliance that these genres celebrate and are meant to sustain.

These last thoughts are less a criticism of King than intimation that there is still more to be said. Hers is a thoughtful, generous, revealing book which, it is to be hoped, will not be the last word on Audiard but, instead, a widening of the conversation about his beautiful, provocative films.