

H-France Review Vol. 8 (November 2008), No. 160

Elizabeth Ezra, *Jean-Pierre Jeunet*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008. xii + 162 pp. Thirty illustrations, filmography, bibliography, and index. ISBN 13978-0-252-03318-6 (cl), \$60.00; 13978-0-252-07522-3 (pb), \$19.95.

Review by Phil Powrie, University of Sheffield.

This is the sixteenth volume in Illinois's Contemporary Film Directors series, edited by James Naremore, and the third of these to be devoted to a French director.[1] It is appropriate that Jeunet should figure amongst the first French directors in the series, given his popularity in the USA, and the transnational flavour of at least two of his five feature films to date, *Alien Resurrection* (1997) and *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (2004).

Jeunet's work resembles the films of the *cinéma du look*, whose directors are Luc Besson, Jean-Jacques Beineix, and Leos Carax. Like their films, Jeunet's have highly polished images; they demonstrate a clear affection for French cinema of the 1930s; their imagery is "baroque," richly convoluted and fantastical; and they too have simplistic but quirky characters, exemplified by Jeunet's *acteur-fétiche*, Dominique Pinon, who first came to prominence as a thug in Beineix's *Diva* (1981), and who has appeared in all of Jeunet's feature films.[2] Unlike the *cinéma du look*, however, scholars have paid considerable attention to Jeunet's work over the years.[3] Even so, Elizabeth Ezra's volume is the first to cover all of his work to date. She discusses the five short films Jeunet made during the late 1970s and 1980s, four of them with Marc Caro, before devoting extended sections to each of the five feature films, the first two also made with Caro as co-director: *Delicatessen* (1991), *La Cité des enfants perdus* (1995), *Alien Resurrection* (1997), *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001), and *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (2004).

Before doing so, she gives a broad overview of Jeunet's cinema, entitled "prosthetic visions." This is a reference to the influential work of Alison Landsberg, whose concept of "prosthetic memory" refers to the way in which individuals, thanks to technology, experience events through which they have not lived themselves.[4] While within Jeunet's films a good example of this would be the references to Diana, Princess of Wales's death in *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, it serves as a useful description of Jeunet's films themselves, with their constant fantasized allusions to past traumatic events. An example of this would be *Delicatessen's* post-apocalyptic and cannibalistic society, which functions as an allegory for the historical trauma of the Second World War, complete with its Resistance fighters in the form of the faintly ridiculous Troglodistes who live underground. As Ezra's volume brings out, Jeunet's fiction films are more frequently than not about history, or rather our relationship to historical events, and our attempts to process them, forget them, or retrieve them. Ezra usefully assembles a number of key themes related to this issue and to each other, thus linking films that on the surface appear disparate.

This gives a very coherent picture of Jeunet as an *auteur* who is as a director with a consistent set of major preoccupations.

She shows, for example, how the loss of the past leads to specific aesthetic and narrative choices in Jeunet's films, particularly the way he draws connections between apparently unconnected events. This procedure works to neutralize the absurdity of contingency, reinstating a sense of necessity. This is

often combined with extensive catalogues of objects, events and people in what Ezra aptly terms a “collage aesthetic.” Jeunet’s films are like machines, which endlessly produce parts as if they might somehow magically combine to form an absent whole. We can postulate that the whole being gestured at is the urgency of a lost or abandoned history, not least because Jeunet’s films display a veritable obsession with the inevitability but unlocatability of origin. It is no surprise, then, that several of Jeunet’s preoccupations relate to the loss of the past and the loss of origin. His films are full of orphans, lost children, abandoned lovers; and two films that otherwise might seem related only by their fantastical elements, *Delicatessen* and *Alien Resurrection*, both obsessively explore cloning as a frantic response to the loss of origin. In that sense the multiple versions of Sigourney Weaver and the aliens in the latter film, which drew much criticism for its departure from aspects of the horror element in previous *Alien* films, go much deeper into what we might consider to be a greater horror. This is not the abjection of maternal slime, bad enough though that may be, but the inevitability of dispersal: dispersal of the present in the past, the past in the present, and the impossibility, as Deleuze puts it, of ever being present. (As he argues, the present is always past as soon as you articulate it, just as it is always already future.) No surprise either, then, that mutilation is a frequent motif in Jeunet’s films, often connected with a retreat from the horror of the present: who can forget the bizarre moment in *Le Fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain* when the Glass Man watches the one-legged Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates tap dancing? Or the clone-like soldiers in *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* who, one after the other, shoot themselves in the hand, so as to be sent home as “mutilés?”

As Ezra also points out, Jeunet’s films, although they may obsess gloomily about the past and the impossibility of the present, are also playful. Their playfulness is relatively alien to much French cinema, despite its roots in the work of George Méliès, Surrealism and the influential genre of the *bande dessinée*. It is perhaps precisely because of Jeunet’s eclectic mix of aesthetics, with one eye firmly fixed on the past, that critics have so frequently and so unfairly dismissed his work. Ezra’s book rightly re-establishes Jeunet as a major filmmaker. It is also full of brilliant moments, such as the meditation on the word *fil*, or thread (p. 113), which shows how the idea is used as an allegory of communication in both the technological and the social sense, as well as signalling communication with the past, despite memory’s faults and failures.

The volume concludes with an interview given by Jeunet to French television in 2005. Among the many interesting comments he makes, perhaps the most fascinating is his enthusiasm for the films of David Lynch. This retrospectively throws a very different light on some of the more fantastical aspects of Jeunet’s films. It is tempting to see his cinema as a French version of Lynchian “wierdness,” replete with surrealist-inspired objects and costumes, intricately woven narratives, and what the Surrealists would have called black humour, the humour of defiance in the face of the attrition of time and history.

NOTES

[1] The others to have appeared are Judith Mayne, *Claire Denis* (2005), and Nora Alter, *Chris Marker* (2006).

[2] See the influential article by experimental film-maker Raphaël Bassan, “Trois néobaroques français,” *Revue du cinéma*, 449 (1989): 44–50. This is translated in Susan Hayward and Phil Powrie, *The Films of Luc Besson: Master of Spectacle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006). For an extended discussion of the baroque in the films of the *cinéma du look*, see Phil Powrie, *Jean-Jacques Beineix* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

[3] Their work has only elicited a few major volumes, all published by Manchester University Press; apart from the two mentioned in note [2], see also: see Susan Hayward, *Luc Besson* (1998); Fergus Daly and Garin Dowd, *Leos Carax* (2003). It is worth listing work on Jeunet (here in chronological order), as

Ezra's volume only has a general bibliography which does not contain many of the following:

Stephen C. Infantino, "Delicatessen: Slices of Postmodern Life," *Arachne: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the Humanities* 4:1 (1997): 91-100.

Graeme Hayes, "Replaying History as Farce: Postmodernism and the Construction of Vichy in *Delicatessen*," *Modern and Contemporary France* 7:2 (1999): 197-208.

Sean Cubitt, "Delicatessen: Eco-Apocalypse in the New French Science Fiction Cinema," in Ziauddin Sardar and Sean Cubitt eds, *Aliens R Us: The Other in Science Fiction Cinema* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 18-33.

Isabelle Daunais, "Le Grand Jeu," *Inconvénient: Revue Littéraire d'Essai et de Création* 8 (2002): 67-74.

Elizabeth Ezra, "Resurrecting the Alien Director: Jean-Pierre Jeunet in Hollywood," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 1:1 (2002): 54-60.

Samuel A. Kimball, "Conceptions and Contraceptions of the Future: *Terminator 2*, *The Matrix*, and *Alien Resurrection*," *Camera Obscura* 17:2 (2002): 69-107.

Mireille Rosello, "Auto-portraits glanés et plaisirs partagés: *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* et *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*," *Esprit créateur* 42:2 (2002): 3-16.

Joan Caroline Picart, "Ripley as Interstitial Character: White Woman as Monster and Hero in *Alien Resurrection*," *p.o.v.: A Danish Journal of Film Studies* 16 (2003): 26-41.

Jackie Stacey, "She is Not Herself: The Deviant Relations of *Alien Resurrection*," *Screen* 44:3 (2003): 251-76.

Dudley Andrew, "*Amélie* or *Le Fabuleux Destin du Cinéma Français*," *Film Quarterly* 57:3 (2004): 34-46.

Elizabeth Ezra, "The Death of an Icon: *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*," *French Cultural Studies* 15:3 (2004): 301-10.

Michelle Scatton-Tessier, "*Le Petisme*: Flirting with the Sordid in *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*," *Studies in French Cinema* 4:3 (2004): 197-207.

Jen Webb and Tony Schirato, "Disenchantment and *The City of Lost Children*," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue Canadienne d'Etudes Cinématographiques* 13:1 (2004): 55-68.

Patricia Melzer, "Technoscience's Stepdaughter: The Feminist Cyborg in *Alien Resurrection*," in Patricia Melzer, *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 108-48.

Rick Moore, "Ambivalence to Technology in Jeunet's *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 26:1 (2006): 9-19.

Phil Powrie, "The Fabulous Destiny of the Accordion in French Cinema," in Phil Powrie and Robynn Stilwell eds, *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music in Film* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 137-51.

Carolyn Durham, "Finding France on Film," *French Cultural Studies* 19:2 (2008): 173-97.

Anna Gural-Migdal, "Paris comme parc d'attractions à la Disney dans *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*," *AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* 108 (2007): 131-48.

Isabelle Vanderschelden, *Amélie: Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (London /New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

Stephen Mulhall, "The Monster's Mother: Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Alien Resurrection*," in Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 119-36.

[4] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

Phil Powrie
University of Sheffield
P.P.Powrie@sheffield.ac.uk

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172