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Vanessa R. Schwartz, *It's So French! Hollywood, Paris, and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture*. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press. 2007. 272 pp. Color plates, halftones. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780226742427.

Reviewed by Siân Reynolds, Stirling University.

'How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm, now that they've seen Paree?' Vanessa Schwartz's book on Frenchness in postwar film culture has an immediate feel-good appeal. Beautifully illustrated with high-quality film stills and publicity photos, almost one hundred of them, in colour and black-and-white, it resurrects a world the author describes as "remote from our own experience" (p. 2) --though this reviewer must confess to having seen many of the featured films first time round, as a teenager in the 1950s and 60s. Skirts twirl, sports-cars dash (and smash), starlets (now there's a period word) pose on the Cannes seafront, Brigitte Bardot jives on the cover. As the author jokes, she is tackling some previously rather neglected subjects (what she calls the pioneering field of 'Gigi Studies').

As often in cultural analysis, Schwartz's book operates largely through linked case studies. Here there are four, each thoroughly explored via an impressive exploration of archives and press records in France and the United States, with the aim of reassessing the cinematic relationship between those two countries and locating it within what eventually became globalization. The first chapter discusses the wave of 1950s Hollywood 'Frenchness films': in particular *An American in Paris* (1951) and *Gigi* (1958), but by way of *Moulin Rouge* (1952), *French Can-Can* (1954) and *Funny Face* (1957) among others. Many of these English-language films, often made in authentic Paris locations, depict the *belle époque*: the age when cinema began in France, but also when wealthy American collectors began their massive buying of recent French paintings. Toulouse-Lautrec in particular inspired set design. From such spectacular movies, images of 'Paree' became familiar outside France. The location filming combined with advanced visual technology to create a version of 'Frenchness', clichéd though it might be, which dazzled and impressed the French themselves. Such productions, Schwartz maintains, go beyond surface nostalgia to define a transatlantic cinema and, to some extent, heal the breach so often referred to in cinema history between an 'invasive' Hollywood and a 'protectionist' France. Her starting-point (indeed it underlies the whole thesis of the book) is the famous Blum-Byrnes agreement of 1946, which limited the percentage of foreign films, mainly American, to be shown in French cinemas. Against the grain, she argues that there was more cooperation going on at many levels, including production, than you would think given the number of accounts which overly emphasise this as a nexus of Franco-American competition and conflict.

The second chapter effectively develops the theme with a solidly documented and original account of the Cannes Film Festival, using the festival's archives at BIFI in Paris. This charts in some detail, though not in strictly chronological order, the evolution of Cannes into a visual feast, as famous for its paparazzi (*La Dolce Vita* won the Palme d'Or in 1960) as for its stars. Gene Kelly was inclined to shun the 'shutterbugs' if he didn't have a hat or hairpiece handy; Jean Cocteau, in a reference both to the red carpet and to second thoughts, memorably called it a *festival d'escalier*. What interests Schwartz most, however, is the cooperation which Cannes initiated between the French organizers and the wider US film industry. She does not conceal some spats and awkwardness in this relationship, but concludes that

overall it prepared the way for a more international cinema, rather than a Europe/American split. No doubt the shrewd decision of the festival authorities to allow their selected films to bypass the quotas helped, though she also suggests a potential contradiction in that while Cannes claimed to exhibit films in proportion to production levels (p. 96), American producers still “never believed they had enough films exhibited at Cannes” for their size (p. 94).

The title of Schwartz’s third chapter, “And France Created Bardot,” indicates that the huge US box-office success of *Et Dieu créa la Femme* (1957) will be the main focus, but it starts with an thoroughly documented twenty-odd pages on efforts—from both sides of the Atlantic—to gain foreign, and specifically French, films more distribution in American movie theatres. Her argument convincingly suggests that Bardot’s fame initially surfed on a modest wave favouring the export of French commercial films in the latter half of the 1950s. *Et Dieu Créa la Femme* was, as she says “a fairly ordinary slick middlebrow product,” but it appealed to its US audiences for a variety of reasons, not least its visual style. It was made in widescreen and colour, which Roger Vadim, its director and Bardot’s then husband, explicitly described as American-influenced. More famously of course, it traded on Bardot’s photogenic “sex-kitten” image, made possible by French freedom from US production regulations. Her youth and casual manner—illustrated in the book by a striking unstaged shot of her alongside the Comédie Française’s Edwige Feuillère at a café in Cannes (Fig. 2.13)—offered an exportable image of *modern* French youth. This was no costume drama, although it was, of course, exactly contemporary with the *belle époque* movies.

The paradox is, as Schwartz points out, that the film was retrospectively incorporated into the New Wave canon. The New Wave directors themselves, just then emerging into the light, had made plain their own passion for Hollywood (albeit a very special, auteur-type Hollywood) but Vadim was very far from being Godard. While the short-lived Bardot phase appeared to usher in possibilities for the French home grown industry’s commercial success, it was not followed through for a combination of reasons, including perhaps government cultural policy under Malraux in the early 1960s. Middle America didn’t take to the New Wave, which ended up as cinema for intellectuals. “What [it] could not manage was big box office”, Schwartz concludes (p. 143). She sees Bardot’s screen death in Godard’s *Le Mépris* (1963) as a metaphor for the Nouvelle Vague’s “perhaps even accidental murder” of France’s export of commercial movies (p. 153). Still, she argues that rather than analyse Bardolatry as an episode in the success or failure of French national film, one should see it as a further loosening of frontiers between France and America, paving the way for the “cosmopolitan film,” the subject of Chapter 4.

The previous three chapters had been linked by a number of threads. Frenchness, largely centred incidentally on photogenic women, is absolutely central to their thesis. The French connection is radically stretched and perhaps weakened by making the focus of the final chapter Mike Todd’s blockbuster *Around the World in 80 Days* (1956). One can see how tempting it will have been to home in on a film “almost entirely omitted from the history of film” and now lost from screens, despite its ‘best picture’ Oscar. Admittedly, it *is* based on Jules Verne’s novel, “a French story about a shrinking globe,” and as Schwartz rightly emphasises, Todd did play three minutes of Georges Méliès’s version of Verne’s *Voyage dans la Lune* in the prologue. The story of Todd and his venture in glorious Todd-AO, as narrated here, is remarkable in itself.[1] And Schwartz is surely right in her portrayal of the transnational, or cosmopolitan, but essentially Occidental film-making of the late 1950s, and into the 1960s and 1970s, as a significant and linked development. The Bond films are perhaps the most iconic example of this. ‘Frenchness’ was no doubt a presence here, among others.

I’m less convinced of the case for tying too exclusive a connection between Todd’s movie and the French-US links previously unearthed. Any Frenchness still remaining in *Around the World* was pretty residual. As Schwartz concedes, casting Mexican star Cantinflas as the valet Passepartout, stripped out the French point of view that would otherwise have acted as counterpoint to David Niven’s imperturbable Englishman. The overall impression of the film (which I saw in Todd-AO) was arguably

a lot more Anglo-American, notably in its huge cast-list, than French. Schwartz rescues this by saying that the fact “that the story was French in origin but played otherwise suggests the porous way in which French culture could be easily assimilated into a generalised ‘Western’ culture” (p.175). Nothing to quarrel with there, but that is because the reasoning has at this point become rather bland. As the author rightly says, new technology and easier jet travel, not to mention Hollywood blacklisting, all played a role in the move towards more global film-making. *80 Days* was perhaps singled out as the cosmopolitan film with the best claim to a French connection, albeit a somewhat diluted one. But one effect of the narrowing of the focus, essential, no doubt to the book’s thesis, is to screen out virtually all other components of European-transatlantic contacts: Italy and Germany get only thirteen and eight index references respectively; Britain is almost completely marginalised, with a mere half a dozen mentions. Yet surely plenty was going on that wasn’t French).

Vanessa Schwartz’s book is refreshing and stimulating. She takes an unexpected angle on a much-condescended-to period and set of films, and her case studies are all intrinsically full of interest. She has uncovered a wealth of persuasive evidence of contacts between the French and American film industry, especially on the production side, and provides a formidable set of quotations from private correspondence and official minutes alike. It is a great asset too, to find such well-selected illustrations to back up the points. The downside of the case-study approach is a slight temptation to over-state the argument. The broader European cinema context, as suggested above, gets fairly short shrift. So too does the French political context of these years as reflected in the international media: viz. the Fourth Republic’s catastrophically unstable image in so many cinema newsreels of the time. That regime may have laid the foundation of France’s post-war recovery, but English-speaking cinema-goers were regularly fed a diet of disparaging shots of departing politicians, interspersed with Parisian fashion parades, to suggest that Frenchness was an uneasy combination of glamour and incompetence. The only ‘NATO’ in the index is the ‘National Association of Theater Owners’, rather than the better-known one welcomed to set up its headquarters in Paris between 1949 and 1966. There are one or two points of detail about which one could quibble.[2] And the book is rather short on statistics: it isn’t clear, for instance, whether even at the peak of Brigitte Bardot’s fame, any French-made films apart from *Et Dieu Créa la Femme* had anything like ‘mass’ distribution in the United States, i.e. outside New York and Los Angeles. [3]

But these are minor criticisms of a well-researched and original study. The strengths of the book seem to me to lie in its welcome comparative approach, its range of fascinating detail, and its challenge to received wisdom. Schwartz has made an excellent case for film historians to rethink the period, to boldly go beyond their more usual national approach, and to pay more attention to the origins of cosmopolitan/Western filmmaking, even if, in the terms posed here, her claims for the overwhelming importance of the French-US connection aren’t necessarily easy either to prove or disprove.

NOTES:

[1] Todd-AO is an improved variant, developed by Todd with Brian O’Brien, of the widescreen process Cinerama.

[2] Georges Bidault was not president, but *président du conseil*, i.e. prime minister. Saying that “Henri Langlois and his partisans used the broad events of Paris in May 1968 to shut down the [Cannes] Festival” (p. 72) doesn’t quite do justice either to the Cinémathèque scandal or to the reasons behind the protests.

[3] My 1993 edition of Katz agrees that with this film, “BB single-handedly brought French films out of the small art-houses and into the major movie theaters,” but that still looks more like a unique event accompanied by a lot of press attention, than a wave of all-conquering commercial French cinema. Schwartz doesn’t give figures for distribution of BB’s other films in the U.S.

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