

FILM-PHILOSOPHY

The Auteur as Imposter

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Our conceptions of European Cinema are generally in a state of critical flux at the moment. Traditionally read as a “high art”, it was identified in the late 1970s and early 1980s as an institutional and aesthetic phenomenon by Steve Neale (1981) and David Bordwell (1979) respectively, an approach that has been substantially critiqued recently, notably by Ginette Vincendeau (1998). Broadly speaking, the critique of Neale and Bordwell runs thus. European Cinema was read as an alternative to mainstream Hollywood practice, and while Neale located the “different” financial underpinnings of its form, Bordwell succinctly and convincingly characterised its narrative form as dominated by a heightened sense of realism, “stylistic signatures in the narration” (59), i.e. overt directorial presence, loosening of cause and effect relations in the narrative structure, and ambiguity. Directors become known for their thematic motifs, their stylistic flourishes, and the world-view that these work to express. In other words, while Hollywood cinema was often read as a product of industrial and commercial pressures, with its stars and genres functioning as important marketing tools and expression of its commodified nature, European cinema was seen as largely delivered from market forces thanks to government subsidy, and as showcasing directors and their artistic genius.

Ginette Vincendeau argues that such an attention to the role of the director in European Cinema creates a canon which exalts the few at the price of ignoring the many:

those who work in popular genres such as comedy; those who are distanced from the nation through their language or racial background; or those who are less appealing to the (largely Anglophone) academic audience. She argues that authorship should be seen not [just] as “an expression of genius” but understood within its “industrial, social and cultural context” (1998) (445). It is in itself rather simplifying the situation to claim that neither Bordwell nor Neale addressed these issues. Careful reading of their work reveals otherwise. Neale’s account, for example, claimed the director in European art cinema not as a genius but “as a ‘brand name’, a means of labelling and selling a film” (38) and Bordwell’s stylistic signatures were always addressed to “a competent viewer” (59), an acknowledgment, if only tacit, that European cinema addresses itself to a certain kind of audience. There is a danger in Vincendeau’s approach that we end up throwing out the critical baby with the bath-water, ignoring the way in which previous generations of critics have indeed alluded to contexts in their work and criticising an auteurist approach without availing ourselves of the important critical insights sustained inquiry into a particular individual’s body of work may offer.

This is not to offer an apology for auteurist excesses, which wilfully ignore the important constraints placed upon a director, ranging from such issues as the gender of the individual concerned to funding arrangements and the difficulties involved in even getting a film into production, let alone exhibiting a finished product. Rather, it is to acknowledge that the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics were right when they asserted the primacy of the director as a controlling influence upon the finished text, even if we may question their romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration *and nothing else*. Thus, it is exciting and important that at such a critical juncture, Manchester University Press have produced a series of books on French Film Directors edited by Diana Holmes and Robert Ingrams. At first glance, this would seem to be just the kind of regressive move deplored by Vincendeau, clearly playing into the shibboleths of the director and the national. A brief glance at the titles published, however, gives an indication of how this series opens up the traditional category of auteur. Over the lifetime of the series, such canonical names as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut have been considered alongside early cinema makers, such as Georges Méliès; popular directors such as Luc Besson and Coline Serreau; and female directors get a pleasing level of visibility (Serreau, Kurys, Duras, Varda, and Denis all feature). The series’ editors foreword also responds to the accusation of auteurism that could be levelled at them when it claims that “the director will be treated

as one highly significant element in the complex process of film production and reception" rather than "a particular genius" (vii).

It is a label that Patrice Leconte, the subject of Lisa Downing's book in the series, might himself be happy with. In an interview with Downing, he reveals that he named his autobiography *Je suis un imposteur* because

the idea that I am an impostor does move around my head on a regular basis. What I mean by this is that when one says to a painter or a novelist, for instance, "Your painting is magnificent", or "Your book is magnificent", this comment refers to the artist's work only. A film maker by contrast, brings together the work of many different people, who are all talented. Alone, one means nothing (137).

Leconte would then seem an unprepossessing figure for a directorial study: a director himself who challenges the very notion of the director as the visionary of a film and who characterises himself as an impostor, someone who fools others through false appearances. However, in Downing's useful and provocative study, it is precisely this notion of the director as impostor which serves her as a model with which to analyse Leconte's famously eclectic body of work and indeed the European cinema model of the director more generally.

Rather than insisting along with Vincendeau that we must attend to the "contexts" as much as the "text" of the director, Downing's study suggests the ways in which the persona of the director may be a parade of differing personas and positions – a variety of masks, if you will. She underlines the heterogeneity of Leconte's work in subject matter, generic structure, and cultural and critical status, while convincingly arguing that it is this very difference which is essential to an understanding of Leconte's project, which works to question the established norms of relationships, whether those be between a man and a woman or a film and its director. Leconte is an imposter who is able to insinuate himself into different cinematic situations. The work of the film critic is not so much a revelation of the "true Leconte", but rather an account of how Leconte himself foregrounds the contingencies that shape and masquerades we perform in our daily lives. In this light, the notion that we can find a coherent united individual directorial subjectivity in a work becomes a fantastical myth. Downing alerts us to the ways in which the insights afforded by the work of Foucault and Butler, not normally used in this way in cinema studies, should reinvigorate our conception of authorship as a variety of poses and positions assumed by an individual self-consciously performing that role.

Downing's work reconceptualises the director not as a static being who operates within a certain cultural, national and economic context: rather, she characterises the director as someone who can transcend their context and be read using a universal ethical model and *yet at the same time* must negotiate with the reality of the human condition. What I mean by this is that it is reductive to think of directors as "French", "male", "female", "middle-class", "working-class", and so on, ad nauseum, a potential danger of the "contexts" approach. Directors contain multitudes. Neither, however, can we ignore the reality of the socio-political environment in which we all live, and directors, like anyone else, must make their accounts with the ideologies within which they work.

Leconte's work itself plays within and reflects upon these paradoxes, in the way it is interpreted by Downing. Downing's conclusion suggests the way in which in this fashion Leconte's work is profoundly self-reflexive and thus pushes us towards an important re-reading of this critically neglected director. Leconte's work, in its reflection upon discourses of power, insecure masculinity, modes of performance, chance and contingency, and, most importantly for Downing's reading, inter-personal encounters, whether those of a group of friends, two male buddies, or a "heterosexual" couple, reflects upon his own position as a director. Leconte's filmic universe is not a hermetically sealed locus in which there is no room for doubt and in which individual subjectivity is unproblematic. As Downing points out, for all that Antoine Doinel is an unhappy and troubled child, there is an unproblematic one for one relationship mapped out between him and his directorial alter-ego, François Truffaut. In contrast, the actor Jean Rochefort, Leconte's *acteur fétiche*, who has starred in four of his films and played roles in two others, plays a variety of roles, fragmenting the authorial persona. Furthermore, these roles are marked by abjection, loss, grief, melancholy and fragility: an authorial alter-ego "which dissipates rather than shores up authorial narcissism" (68). Leconte's cinema, in Downing's reading, works to question rather than confirm the power of the image in cinematic theory. Rather than suturing the viewer into a relationship of utter identification with his male protagonist, Leconte places the image into question by fracturing our easy identification with it into several component pieces. His use of genre is similarly parodic and playful. Leconte thus undermines the total identification between (male) director, film, camera and (presumed male) audience that animates traditional auteurism in a range of works that showcase what Downing dubs "the masculine masquerade"; the idea that masculinity, as with femininity, can be hysterical performance designed to hide lack. As

Downing argues, those who claim masculinity cannot be the subject of a masquerade as men already occupy the symbolic order forget, that for Lacan at least, the phallus, rather than the penis, is a delusional fantasy of masculinity rather than an attribute of it.

Whereas the chapters that discuss Leconte's portrayals of men and women in some ways feed into debates that are played out elsewhere in film studies, particularly striking and original are Downing's opening and concluding chapters, which put aside the question of gender somewhat to concentrate on what would seem to be the most awkward aspects of Leconte's work for auteur analysis: his "popular", low-brow comedies in the first chapter, and his refusal to examine contemporary socio-political issues in the last. In the first chapter, Downing argues that the distinctions classically made by critics when discussing Leconte's work between his "early" popular comedies and his later "mature" works are inaccurate and misleading. She compares his early popular hit *Les Bronzés* (1978) with his most critically successful work, the historical drama *Ridicule* (1996). Their difference in "brow elevation" level is a deliberate strategic move which works to highlight the way in which what has traditionally been thought of as France's "popular" genre, comedy may indeed serve an auteurist agenda, and the way in which a critically acclaimed "heritage" piece may reference populist roots rather than being completely separate from them. In Downing's lucid and convincing account, both films work to highlight performance anxiety and the social pressure to perfect oneself (either one's body or one's intellect), from which Leconte's generous and humane cinema ultimately seems to recoil.

This brings us neatly to Downing's most theoretically complex chapter, in which she discusses the ethical implications of Leconte's cinema. Drawing on recent developments in Continental theory, notably the work of Emmanuel Levinas, which argue that the interpersonal encounter is the key ethical problematic of (post) modernity, Downing argues that Leconte's emphasis on the personal and the private can be seen not as a retreat from the world, but rather as a profound engagement with this ethical model. Leconte's protagonists work towards acceptance of each other's flaws and a respect of their difference from each other. Rather than marriage and children, Adèle and Gabor in *La fille sur le pont* (1999) opt for adventure, travel, and an interconnection that only the two of them can understand, that cannot be interpreted by social convention. For Downing, this connection lies at the heart of Lecontian cinema: "not so much a call to arms against society, as a knowing ethical response to the fragmentation of discourses of meaning" (124).

This phrase sums up the way in which Downing's analysis of Leconte's work might usefully be brought into dialogue with auteurist critiques such as those of Vincendeau. Leconte's film-making acknowledges that there is not one unified space from which anyone can speak: that the director is inherently a kind of "impostor", someone who speaks through different voices and wears different masks from film to film, challenging the monolithic auteurist model. At the same time, it rejects the idea that context is all – that by paying attention to the financial, industrial and cultural context of a film we gain access to its meaning. Obviously, these paths of inquiry are useful. But each of these contexts is in itself fragmented and mobile. Ultimately, we are left with our personal encounter with the director through his or her film work. A director who interrogates the interpersonal relation on the screen interrogates our relationship to the cinema itself, a space that (still) belongs to the realm of fantasies and dreams as much as money and ideology.

Bibliography

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