

Susan Hayward, Phil Powrie: The Films of Luc Besson: Master of the Spectacle

Manchester: Manchester University Press 2006, 197 S., ISBN 978-0-7190-7028-0, £ 45.-

I have the feeling that if Luc Besson had been born in America, he would be praised for exhibiting a European sensibility in his 'serious' films, lifting them above his 'journeyman' or 'hack' work in his popcorn movies such as *Le Cinquième élément* (1997). However, since he is a Frenchman, making action movies or movies with simplistic linear plots clearly proves he has been contaminated by American commercial cinema and is therefore not worthy of comment unless it is negative. Besson straddles that divide between high and low art, confounding critics doubly as he himself seems unconcerned about this (artificial?) division. This status of being 'neither fish nor fowl' might explain the lack of analyses of his work so far.

The Films of Luc Besson: Master of the Spectacle attempts to fill this gap. The book arose from a panel at the Popular European Cinema conference entitled 'The Spectacular' held at the University of Warwick in 2000, where the editors of this book, Susan Hayward and Phil Powrie, plus Stella Bruzzi, each gave a paper on the films of Besson. Hayward and Powrie subsequently commissioned papers from a wide range of international scholars to continue the work done by Hayward in her 1998 book on Besson (French Film Directors series, Manchester University Press).

This latest book of essays starts with a key text on the *cinéma du look* with particular reference to Besson, Carax and Beineix by Raphael Bassan translated into English for the first time. Then comes ten chapters on various aspects of Besson as a film-maker, such as his use of space to define character or the epic nature of much of his work. The book concludes with a previously unpublished interview with Besson by Gérard Dastugue given on the release of *Jeanne d'Arc* (1999).

The result is typical of this kind of project. It took time for all the essays to be written, edited, collated and published. In most of the chapters *Jeanne d'Arc* is the most current film directed by Luc Besson himself to be mentioned by the contributors. The exception is the chapter on Besson as producer which gives an historical overview of his career as director producer which is more or less up-to-date at the time of publishing in 2006.

The various chapters are of varying degrees of interest. The two chapters on the musical narration of his films and Besson's long term collaboration with composer Eric Serra are interesting from two different points of view. First, they describe one of the significant artistic partnerships between composer and director. Their collaborative artistic achievements are on par with, and as recognisable as, Sergio Leone/Ennio Morricone or Steven Spielberg John Williams. Secondly, music is rarely written about in an academic mode in film essays. One has to learn about the language of music to really appreciate Mark Brownrigg's essay and thankfully he provides a glossary to help guide the reader through his text. It's challenging but it engages with an aspect of filmmaking which has been neglected. Likewise Phil Powrie's essay on the clothes worn by Besson's protagonists deals with an area which has only been relatively recently focused on. However, Powrie's essay "Léon and the Cloacal Labyrinth" where he states "Léon works through a complex structure of abjection, establishing a cloacal labyrinth, where men's business and mess come together climactically in rectal homoerotics, 'shattering' and 'splattering' masculine identity" (p.157) could be considered as simply shit.

So, all in all a mixed bag of essays, which often analyse aspects of Besson's films in such detail that familiarity with his work is essential to extract the maximum benefit from this book.

Drew Bassett (Köln)