

ESSAYS ON

# LUC BESSON

MASTER OF SPECTACLE

SUSAN HAYWARD AND PHIL POWRIE



# **The films of Luc Besson**



Manchester University Press



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Master of spectacle

edited by Susan Hayward and Phil Powrie

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## Preface

This volume arose from a panel at the Popular European Cinema conference entitled 'The Spectacular', held in the University of Warwick in March 2000, where Stella Bruzzi, Susan Hayward, and Phil Powrie each gave a paper on the films of Luc Besson. We are very grateful to Ginette Vincendeau and Richard Dyer for allowing us to do this. Susan Hayward and Phil Powrie subsequently commissioned papers from a wide range of international scholars to continue the work done by Susan Hayward in her 1998 book on Besson. The editors are grateful to the contributors to this volume for their commitment to popular French cinema.

Note that when Besson's films are mentioned in this volume, only the original French title is given, on the assumption that readers will be familiar with those films. We give the translated titles here for the films made by Besson as a director, and which are considered in detail in this volume; all other details for the films are given in the filmography at the end of the volume. English titles for all other non-English films are given in the text.

1983	<i>Le Dernier combat</i>	( <i>The Last Battle</i> )
1985	<i>Subway</i>	
1988	<i>Le Grand bleu</i>	( <i>The Big Blue</i> )
1990	<i>Nikita</i>	( <i>La Femme Nikita</i> [USA])
1994	<i>Léon</i>	( <i>Leon</i> [GB]; <i>The Professional</i> [USA])
1997	<i>Le Cinquième élément</i>	( <i>The Fifth Element</i> )
1999	<i>Jeanne d'Arc</i>	( <i>The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc</i> )

The reader will also find a select bibliography at the end of the volume.

## Introduction

Susan Hayward and Phil Powrie

Excess and stylisation are the two major hallmarks of Besson's films. We are most vividly aware of this in characterisation, décor and genre. The characters are larger than life, often powerful physically, whether male or female, at the same time as they seem to lack psychological or historical depth, much like the comic-strip characters to whom they owe a great deal, and with whom critics are often, rather sniffily, prone to compare them. Much as the characters seem to be spectacular images cut loose from any clear historical context – spectacle for spectacle's sake – so too the décor in Besson's films is in excess of the referent, to the point of overriding the narrative. The Paris Métro in *Subway*, or space-age New York in *Le Cinquième élément* become more significant than the original to which they refer; they also become excessive in relation to the décor to which they often obliquely refer: Trauner's Paris in his 1930s films with Marcel Carné for *Subway*; or *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) for *Le Cinquième élément*. Excessive in relation to the real as well as imagined cities, Besson's décor is, in a way, too dense, spectacularly real, indeed postmodernly hyperreal.

Excess is one of violence and points to a lack, to an emptiness of meaning. Thus, as we have said, the characters – though larger than life – are in fact empty and ahistorical; similarly, the décors reduce the topography to which they refer to the supremely ugly or the dizzyingly grandiose. The *outer* abundance of the subject points to the lack *within*: characters and décor mirror each other in their excess and their violence until, finally, characters literally become the embodiment of violence, monstrous (in the old sense of freakish) and dazzling cataclysms. We are warned, in Besson's films time and again, of the effects of technology and the drive to control death through making life (bringing Nikita and Leeloo back to life, for example).

Besson's use of excess and stylisation is not just a metaphor for violence and death. It is also extremely playful. He mixes violence with humour (and did so long before Tarantino). He blends the intertexts of early cinema with the comic strip for the best of entertainment effects. The slapstick and gags of early cinema sit well with the bare narrative offered by the comic strip, something that brings Besson closer to Jean-Luc Godard in terms of practice, even though the comparison is not one readily admitted by critics. The combination works to propel the spectator helter-skelter from one violently spectacular event to another – the cinema of attractions at its best.<sup>1</sup>

Despite Besson's stature as a popular filmmaker during the late 1980s and 1990s, there was during this period little major academic work on his films. The single exception was Susan Hayward's monograph which opened MUP's French Directors series in 1998. Since that volume appeared, Besson's work has been explored by academics in more detail, as our bibliography shows. The purpose of this volume is to supplement that pioneering work by covering a broad range of issues in Besson's films, which have not yet been substantially covered by academic analysis; and, moreover, wherever possible, to use analytical tools developed in Film Studies during the same period as Besson's work.

We begin with a key article on the *cinéma du look* for the *Revue du cinéma* in 1989 by experimental filmmaker and film critic Raphaël Bassan, translated here for the first time. During the 1980s, the *cinéma du look* was roundly despised by establishment critics connected with the major film journal in France, the *Cahiers du cinéma*, who considered his films (and those of fellow *cinéma du look* director Beineix) to be simplistic exercises in style, bereft of any substantial 'message' (see Powrie 2001: 10–21 for an exploration of this issue). Ginette Vincendeau's description of this style of filmmaking reflects to some extent this view: 'Youth-oriented films with high production values . . . The "look" of the *cinéma du look* refers to the films' high investment in non-naturalistic, self-conscious aesthetics, notably intense colours and lighting effects. Their spectacular (studio-based) and technically brilliant *mise-en-scène* is usually put to the service of romantic plots' (Vincendeau 1996: 50). Bassan's reassessment was little short of revolutionary in its impact. Here was an experimental filmmaker, a director concerned with film as formal experimentation, claiming that Besson, Beineix and Carax exemplified new and vital concerns in both film form and in the way their films intersected with social concerns. Bassan argues in his article that the *cinéma du look* can be theorised as 'neo-baroque' in its emphasis on *mise-en-scène*; this is now the orthodox view of Besson in many recent film histories. As Bassan himself points out in his article, many European

thinkers had turned to the baroque sensibility with its emphasis on monstrous form and lighting effects during the 1980s (see Buci-Glucksmann, 1984 and 1986; Calabrese, 1992; Deleuze, 1988; Scarpetta, 1988), so that Besson's films were part of a larger cultural and intellectual development. Although Bassan's piece covers all three of the look directors (so Jean-Jacques Beineix and Leos Carax as well), it is an important article which signalled a change in perception of this type of filmmaking. However, it places Besson within a specific 1980s context, which many of the subsequent chapters will question.

The new way of filming exemplified by Besson is paralleled by a new way of producing and financing films, an area of Film Studies which is not generally explored in much detail, but which is vital for an understanding of how Besson has transformed French filmmaking. Rosanna Maule focuses on Besson's second production and distribution company alongside Leeloo (which he retains for his own films), Europa, intended to fulfill the European dream of creating an alternative to Hollywood. Besson, like French cinema more generally, has always had a love-hate relationship with Hollywood, from the distribution litigation with Fox for *Le Grand bleu* to the unsatisfactory or unproductive relations with Warner, Sony and Fox. With Europa, Besson expanded his distribution branch, created the sophisticated post-production studio Digital Factory, and began producing a more diverse set of films. Some of his production efforts are geared to the international mainstream circuit, as is the case for *Baiser du dragon* (*Kiss of the Dragon*, Chris Nahon, 2001) and *Wasabi* (Gérard Krawczyk, 2001). In France, Europa produces more culturally oriented films, directed by arthouse directors (such as the Italian Mimmo Calopresti). Maule's chapter shows how Besson uses strategies of production development and marketing promotion that have for many years been recommended by economic experts as the best way of overcoming the crisis of European cinema. Seen by most film critics as the most Americanised filmmaker of his generation, Besson learned the rules of the contemporary film market with his own films, and applies them to the promotion of projects aimed at the international market. The production and distribution strategies of Besson's companies reflect the coherence of a director who has always struggled to maintain his autonomy from the American as well as the French studios and corporations. Maule shows how the post-Hollywood Besson has overcome the inextricable set of conflicting interests that link European cinema, especially the French cinema, to Hollywood. His production and distribution initiatives view new forms of partnership in the international arena and in France as the only effective counterweights to the North American monopoly.

Our next two chapters consider another area of Film Studies which tends to be addressed less frequently than the visual – music, which has assumed increasing importance since the late 1980s. Long the poor relation in Film Studies, because of the primacy of the visual for theorists of spectatorship, music emerged as a concern from the work devoted to the soundtrack. The 1980 *Yale French Studies* special issue on sound edited by Rick Altman was a key early work (about half of it dedicated to music), as was the work of the French theorist Michel Chion (whose foundational 1980s work has been translated by Claudia Gorbman; see Chion, 1994 and 1999). Scholarship in this area has expanded rapidly as specialists in musicology and Film Studies have explored it, and the vitality of the area is exemplified by the publication of recent anthologies (Donnelly, 2001; Dickinson, 2003), as it is by volumes which attempt to give overviews of complex arguments (for example, Davison, 2004; Duncan, 2003). Although the key work has tended to be on pre-existing classical music and on music composed specifically for the screen (for example, Gorbman 1987; Flinn 1992; Kalinak 1992; and Brown 1994), there has also been a move to explore popular music and film (Kassabian 2000; Wojcik and Knight 2001; Inglis 2003; Powrie and Stilwell 2005).

Besson's films are good examples of the way in which music is a key component of the film. His films, often considered as flashy videoclips, have musical scores which guide audience reception: actions on screen are paralleled by a musical response on the soundtrack. Even though reviews underline Eric Serra's wall-to-wall music in Besson's films, they avoid analysing it, when it seems obvious that it cannot be considered as a mere aesthetic accompaniment. As in melodrama, it establishes a new depth of focus as well as an emphasis on the characters' inner feelings. Gérard Dastugue shows how the music's syntagmatic line unfolds in parallel with the narration, from *Le Dernier combat* through to *Jeanne d'Arc*, but with a particular emphasis on *Léon*, which, as is the case with all of Besson's later films, has music for approximately 90 per cent of the screentime. Mark Brownrigg adopts a more directly musicological analysis, examining the development of Eric Serra's compositional style throughout his association with Besson. He traces a clear progression from the early pop scores, which rely heavily on repeating riffs and set-piece song sequences, to the later full-blown orchestral work on *Le Cinquième élément* and *Jeanne d'Arc*. Brownrigg shows how Serra becomes more ambitious, replacing his Euro-rock riff style with an increasing grasp of orchestral/quasi-orchestral writing. Notwithstanding this development process, Serra has also retained links to his pop roots, most notably through the incorporation of pop songs either as numbers

in their own right in the films, or playing over the closing credit crawl, and can still be heard to use the riff-style backing, only using more grandiose riff constructions (as for example in *Le Cinquième élément*).

During the 1990s, work developed on costume in films. There was an influential collection on costume and the female body (Gaines and Herzog 1990), and later in the decade, Pam Cook explored British Gainsborough films, where she showed how a flamboyant 'Europeanness' betokened a scandalous urge to search for hybrid identities (Cook, 1996). Stella Bruzzi's landmark work considered broader issues of gender and costume, and opened up discussion on masculine costume (Bruzzi, 1997). In that volume, Bruzzi wrote some perceptive pages on gangster costume in *Léon*. Phil Powrie expands this work on masculine costume by focusing on what could be called Besson's 'sartorial system' of masculine costume, in this case suits of various kinds (including the frequently occurring 'diving suit'), and shows how the stability normally associated with the suit is destabilised in Besson's films. His chapter suggests that Ruby Rhod in *Le Cinquième élément* is a key figure in this sartorial system.

The following chapters move away from the broader overview of Besson's output to a closer focus on individual films. These are dealt with in broadly chronological order, although some films are dealt with in the same chapter. This is the case, for example, with Susan Hayward's chapter on *Le Dernier combat* and *Le Cinquième élément*, which she considers from the generic perspective of the science-fiction film, showing how there are considerable similarities between them, in that they both suggest an ambivalent relationship to technology. However, *Le Dernier combat* is, she shows, fundamentally dystopian in its ecological critique of various forms of consumption, whereas *Le Cinquième élément* is more utopian, but also less critical in its play with technology, whether at the level of production (the use of digital images), or at the level of representation (the fascinating issue of Leeloo's 'techno-body').

Laurent Jullier returns to the issue raised by Bassan, that of the new type of anomic 'sad young man', with particular reference to *Le Grand bleu*. Unlike Bassan, however, he shows how there is some continuity between the protagonists of the New Wave and Besson's films. Jullier focuses on the sea as metaphor, and uses classical psychoanalytic models and evolutionary psychology tools (those of denial and self-deception in particular) to show how Jacques denies reality in his attraction to the sea, which functions as a metaphor for extinction. His form of denial, Jullier suggests, is a combination of projection – where the subject denies aspects of the self which are unacceptable, and projects them onto others – and magical thinking, whereby Jacques considers that he is no longer human, and can live deep under the sea.



As is the case with music and costume in Film Studies, space is also a recent focus, relying principally on the work of André Gardies (Gardies, 1993). Mark Orme analyses *Subway* and *Nikita* from this perspective, showing how the interaction of space and identity is fundamental to the psychological intensity of both films. He shows how Besson exploits the films' settings to reveal the (emotional) state of characters, and how space is used as a vehicle for communicating a sense of 'imprisoned freedom' on which each film pivots. Focusing on the relationship between physical environment and personal psychology, his chapter demonstrates how claustrophobia in *Subway*'s subterranean setting is hijacked and rerouted as an alternative space. It may be an enclosed space, but it assumes for Fred and his fellow eccentrics the magical qualities of a haven liberated from the constraints of convention. In *Nikita*, by contrast, the film's enclosed spaces mirror Nikita's own psychological enslavement.

Several chapters in this volume explore the relationship between the 'French' Besson and the 'American' Besson. Hilary Ann Radner looks in detail at *Nikita* to show how the film creates paradoxes and tensions. It exemplifies an emerging feminine culture that is global in its scope, grounded in consumer competence and the cult of violence. To that extent it undermines its role as an auteur film that exports 'Frenchness'; moreover, despite the fact that Besson's obsession with the disintegrating family may be one of the marks of his auteur vision, in this film, the solitary individual that this vision produces – a single girl without national or familial ties – paradoxically supports the structures that may appear to 'cause' this same disintegration. The key tension of the film, however, is that it tries both to suggest new feminine ideals of autonomy based in consumer culture, while at the same time trying to contain that autonomy. Additionally, like Jullier, Radner suggests that there may be far more links between the New Wave and Besson than the *Cahiers* critics allowed for, in that the consumer-culture femininity that the film exemplifies so well has its roots in the films of the New Wave.

Like some of the areas previously mentioned – music, costume, space – the representation of masculinity in films is another area which came to the fore in Film Studies from the mid-1980s onwards, and is thus, like the other areas mentioned, broadly contemporary with Besson's work. Phil Powrie has already written on masculinity in *Subway* (Powrie, 1997); here, he turns to *Léon*, partly to offset the debates on the troubling heterosexual relationship between Léon and Mathilda at the time of the film's release. Returning to an issue adumbrated in studies of the baroque, mentioned above in relation to Bassan's work, and related to Orme's discussion of spatial configurations in Besson's films, Powrie

focuses on the traditionally feminine metaphor of the labyrinth to show how they are as intestinal as they are uterine in Besson's films. He links the labyrinth to Calvin Thomas's work on 'scatontological anxiety' (Thomas, 1996), and through a close analysis of the scene of Léon's death, he shows how the film can be read quite differently, as a rectal and homoerotic fantasy, where the salient relationship is as much that between Stansfield and Léon, as between Léon and Mathilda.

In this volume on Besson, Susan Hayward deals with *Jeanne d'Arc*, a film she was unable to treat in her 1998 monograph. Joan of Arc is one of France's great myths, and has generated a considerable number of film adaptations, with no less than eight in the silent period as well as the better-known sound films.<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly perhaps, Besson's version was mostly well received in the critical press in France, signalling to some extent the acquisition of critical respectability. Hayward provocatively, given this context, explores the spectacular, performance and excess in the film, and their relationship to camp. Camp is historically associated with display by French courtiers. Like Nikita before her, Jeanne is a transgressive female. However, she cross-dresses much more than Nikita, and because she also gives orders and wins battles, unlike the courtiers of the period who used camp as part of their abdication of any political responsibility, her performance of androgyny politicises camp. Hayward's argument helps us to see how Besson's film is more radical than its critical acceptance might have led us to believe, and suggests another reason why Jeanne was burnt as a witch.

We complete the volume with an unpublished interview with Besson, undertaken by Dastugue, that dates from late 1999 when *Jeanne d'Arc* was released. In that interview, when asked to explain his statement that he would only make ten films as a director, Besson recalls that there are Ten Commandments, and muses: 'I've always wondered why "Thou shalt not kill" is in sixth position rather than first. Rather than saying "You must believe in me",<sup>3</sup> we should have started with that'. His throw-away line is characteristically revealing, with its simultaneous foregrounding and backgrounding of violence in a framework – the Ten Commandments – which could not be more spectacular. Besson as a campy Moses with his ten tablets of stone; the image is as spectacular and knowingly self-deprecating as the films themselves.

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## Notes

- 1 The term is Tom Gunning's; see Gunning 1990: 58.
- 2 In chronological order, and excluding several TV films, these are directed by Alfred Clark (USA, 1895), Georges Hatot (France, 1898), Georges Méliès (France, 1900), Albert Capellani (France, 1908), Mario Caserini (Italy, 1909), Nino Oxilia (Italy, 1913), George Willoughby (Australia, 1916), Cecil B. DeMille (USA, 1917), Carl Dreyer (France, 1928), Marc de Gastyne (France, 1928), Gustav Ucicky (Germany, 1935), Victor Fleming (USA, 1948), Roberto Rossellini (Italy/France, 1954), Jean Delannoy (France, 1954), Otto Preminger (USA, 1957), Robert Bresson (France, 1962), Gleb Panfilov (USSR, 1970), Ulrike Ottinger (Germany, 1989), Jacques Rivette (France, 1994).
- 3 The First Commandment is in reality 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me'.

