

Introduction: we need to talk about Julien

When the French cinema dies, it might do worse than find his [Duvivier's] name written across its retina.

(Alistair Cooke 1971: 125)

No one speaks of Julien Duvivier without apologising.

(Dudley Andrew 1997: 283)

Once upon a time, Julien Duvivier (1896–1967) was considered one of the world's great film directors. He was beloved by Orson Welles, Rouben Mamoulian, Frank Capra, and John Ford, while Ingmar Bergman once admitted that, of all the careers that he would have liked to have had, it would be Duvivier's. The English novelist Graham Greene, in a much-quoted article from 1938, rated Duvivier and Fritz Lang as 'the two greatest fiction directors still at work' (1972: 195). Jean Renoir's 1967 obituary tribute, 'Duvivier, ce professionnel', focused on Duvivier's love of 'l'ouvrage bien fait' ('work well done') as his signature legacy. His frequent scriptwriter Maurice Bessy said he had the best career of any French director, primarily because he never stopped working (1977: 49).

Indeed, over the course of a five-decade career, Duvivier zigzagged between multiple genres. He turned his hand to, among others, literary adaptations (*Poil de carotte* [1932], *Pot-Bouille* [1957]), biblical epic (*Golgotha* [1935]), the 'sketch' film (*Un Carnet de bal* [1937], *Tales of Manhattan* [1942]), comedy (the Don Camillo series [1952, 1953]), the 'Hollywood' film (*The Great Waltz* [1938]), *film noir* (*Voici le temps des assassins* [1956]), poetic realism (*Pépé le Moko* [1937]), and the propaganda film (*Untel père et fils* [1945]). Such fluidity and range make

the case for Duvivier as a director of exemplary adaptability and proficiency. Like his Hollywood contemporaries Raoul Walsh, Michael Curtiz, and William Wyler, Duvivier could seemingly turn his hand to anything, imbuing each of his assignments with startling visuals or deft narrative turns while all the while serving the film's source material as efficiently as possible. Duvivier never left anything to chance – lighting, editing, framing, and camera movement were all impeccably planned. From the silent period right through to the late 1960s, Duvivier often joined forces with the same group of actors and technicians, returning to them over a series of consecutive projects. He worked with some of French cinema's most acclaimed screenwriters, including Henri Jeanson, Charles Spaak, and René Barjavel, and collaborated with some of French cinema's abiding stars, such as Harry Baur, Fernandel, and Jean Gabin. For a period in the 1930s, he was French cinema's most respected and exportable director, and prizes quickly followed. *La Fin du jour* (1939), for instance, won Best Foreign Film at the National Board of Review Awards, came second in the New York Film Critics Circle Awards, and won the Best Screenplay Award at the Venice Biennale.

Nowadays, Duvivier's stylistic qualities are discussed in terms of their intricacy, eclecticism, and modernity. Eight of his films were shown in newly restored versions at the Festival Lumière in Lyon in October 2015. As I write this, Criterion Collection (2015) is preparing a November 2015 release of a four-disc DVD box set of his 1930s films; its website notes Duvivier's 'formidable innate understanding of the cinematic medium'. And yet this was not always the case. For a director synonymous with the technical beauty, narrative fluidity, and poise of French 'classical' cinema exemplified by *La Fin du jour*, a strange phenomenon occurred from about 1947 to the late 1990s: slowly, but very surely, Julien Duvivier and most of his films were all but erased from film history. This, I think, was due to a number of reasons, some trivial, some important: Duvivier's spiky personality, the perceived uneven quality of his canon, his penchant for literary adaptations, his unwillingness to 'explain' his craft, the difficulty in tracking down his films (some are lost forever, and many others have never been released on VHS or DVD), the overemphasis on *La Belle équipe* (1936) and *Pépé le Moko*, and his critical marginalisation at the hands of *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Positif*. Even today, when we think of the key directors of the French pre-war era, Duvivier

is often the one omitted from a list usually headed by Jean Renoir, René Clair, Jacques Feyder, and Marcel Carné. The language used to describe Duvivier was, and often remains, shrill and highly patronising. Jacques Rivette once wrote that Jean Gabin could be considered ‘comme un metteur en scène presque davantage que Duvivier’ (‘almost more of a director than Duvivier’) (1957: 26). Jean-Luc Godard included Duvivier in a long list of directors he accused of desecrating French cinema with their ‘fausse technique’ (‘false technique’): ‘vos mouvements d’appareil sont laids parce que votre sujet est mauvais, vos acteurs jouent mal parce que vos dialogues sont nuls, en un mot, vous ne savez pas faire de cinéma parce que vous ne savez plus ce que c’est’ (1998: 194).¹ Internet sites and film festival retrospectives still now use words such as ‘plodder’, ‘journeyman’, ‘Jack of all trades’, ‘workaholic’, and ‘hack’ to describe him. For Dudley Andrew, ‘so many of his fifty-odd films are embarrassing to watch’ (1997: 283); David Thomson describes Duvivier’s style as ‘spruce but seldom original or interesting’ (1975: 156).² Slowly, but very surely, an enduring discourse took root. It is high time to rehabilitate Duvivier.

So, the purpose of this book, the first ever full-length English-language study of Duvivier, is to argue that Duvivier not only was a consummate technician and an assiduous craftsman but also created a scrupulous moral universe. Duvivier’s world is frequently cruel and pessimistic, harrowing and misanthropic. He reflected in 1946, while filming *Panique* (1946), perhaps his darkest film, that he was perpetually drawn to the murkier side of human nature: ‘Je sais bien qu’il est plus aisé de réaliser des films poétiques, doux, charmants avec de belle photographie, mais ma nature me pousse vers des thèmes âpres, noirs, amers’ (Duvivier 1946: 10).³ Again and again, he returned to the same core themes: pessimism, misanthropy, the

1 ‘Your camera movements are ugly because your subjects are bad, your casts act badly because your dialogue is worthless; in a word, you don’t know how to create cinema because you no longer even know what it is.’

2 In a rare attempt to balance the argument, Michael Atkinson calls Duvivier a ‘demi-auteur’; one of the many ‘overlooked and under-remembered artistes who helped build cinema history and often did so with hypnotic brio, and yet remain unpantheonised’ (2009).

3 ‘I know it is much easier to make films that are poetic, sweet, charming, and beautifully photographed, but my nature pushes me towards harsh, dark and bitter material.’

cruelty of the crowd, fatalism, defective memory, masquerading, exile, and the (im)possibility of escape.

Another objective is to fit Duvivier's work within broader political and social conditions. Duvivier always considered his most obviously 'political' work to be anything but. In 1957, he told Charles Ford and René Jeanne (1957) that '*La Belle Equipe* n'avait pourtant aucun caractère politique. Ou bien, alors, tous les films qui mettraient en scène des ouvriers seraient des œuvres de gauche.'⁴ Duvivier's cinema, unlike Jean Renoir's or André Cayatte's, rarely grappled with politics or wider debates about history and nation. Yet, occasionally, his films offered up contested ideological readings. While Duvivier was politically agnostic through a very conflictual period of French history, I will show how his films engaged with significant historical developments, such as pre-war anti-Semitism, class and race in America, the climate of reprisal in post-Occupation France, and the emergence of 1950s youth culture. Given that Duvivier has often been accused of misogyny, I shall also look at his take on gender politics and demonstrate the problematic status of women in his work, either as a pre-war threat to homosocial bonds or a post-war symbol of social disunity. The twin endings of *La Belle équipe* epitomise such tensions: one features a 'happy' ending, in which order is restored, the *femme fatale* banished, and male camaraderie and collective endeavour championed; the bleaker ending sees one man murder another while the divisive woman looks on. The fact that Duvivier pushed for the darker finale, against the wishes of worried producers who preferred the restorative, trouble-free conclusion, is a useful yardstick for us to measure Duvivier's ethical stance.

How these themes were then presented on a stylistic level is another component of the book. Duvivier's visual style can sometimes seem invisible: this is a filmmaker who tended to reject the ostentatious and the obvious. Yet Duvivier's 'touch' is often highly noticeable, most conspicuously in the use of expressive close-ups and double exposures, highly fluid camera movements, strong central performances by established stars and new actors, and the nuanced incorporation of music, costume, and production design. Duvivier rarely left anything to chance – lighting, editing, framing, and camera movement

4 '*La Belle équipe* has no political character whatsoever; unless every film that treats the working class must be considered leftist.'

all cohere to 'become' the meaning of his films. He favoured characters on the periphery of society, often trapped in down-at-heel settings, at the mercy of a *femme fatale* who threatened to tear asunder the male group. These narrative patterns were then coded in the *mise en scène*; Duvivier's theatre of cruelty often took place in the city, in dark, claustrophobic spaces, with walls and roofs pressing in on characters and diagonal shafts of light casting ominous shadows. As Sam Rohdie (2015) notes, '[t]he design of scenes is like the narratives, which are enclosures from which there is no way out, no relief, liberation, no alternatives – only limits, like the burdens and memories of the past from which his characters seek a respite in vain'.

My final aim is to reveal how Duvivier is all about opposites: misanthropic versus good-hearted, cruel versus sentimental, auteur versus *metteur en scène*, commerce versus art, French versus 'international', Hollywood versus artisanal, 'maniaque de la précision' versus 'rêveur'. Like his two conflicting writers in *La Fête à Henriette* (1952), Duvivier was a jumble of contradictions; it is this productive conflict that forms the warp and weft of his remarkable career.

Although I am sensitive to the risks of carving up Duvivier's work into neat periods, the book will follow a chronological format that uses key moments of technological, historical, and cultural change as staging posts in Duvivier's career. Chapter 1 will look in more detail at the Duvivier 'touch', his formal and thematic preoccupations, and will give an overview of the way his reputation has shifted over time and of his early life. Chapter 2 will focus on the twenty films he made during the silent period. Chapter 3 is set in the 1930s and will show how Duvivier transitioned into the era of the talkies, helped to establish the properties of the 'classic French cinema', and began injecting bleaker, more muted tones into his work. Chapter 4 takes us to America, where Duvivier worked from 1940 to 1945, and tells of Duvivier's interfacing with Hollywood and the various artistic and professional compromises he was obliged to make. Duvivier returned to post-Occupation France in 1945, and Chapter 5 recounts the difficulties he faced on his return. It will examine in close detail a set of films that oscillated in tone from breezy comedy to *noir*-drenched paranoia, and make the case for a director of dynamic variability. Chapter 6 charts the final years of Duvivier's career, arguing that he developed a compelling 'late style' that implanted his later work with a startling modernity.

A final brief word about the book's approach. Duvivier made sixty-eight films, which means that an in-depth discussion of all of them will be impossible, given the limitations of the book series to which I am contributing. There have already been many discussions of Duvivier's work, his technique, and his importance as a figure in French cinema in book chapters, journal articles, and online essays, but they have tended to focus, broadly speaking, on films he made with Jean Gabin, such as *La Belle équipe* and *Pépé le Moko*. In this book, some films will be analysed in detail based on their historical importance or aesthetic significance within Duvivier's career. More familiar works, such as the two aforementioned, plus the likes of *La Bandera* (1935), *Un Carnet de bal*, the Don Camillo series, and *Pot-Bouille*, will also be discussed, but we also need to look closely at the less well-known Duvivier films to see how they are equally representative of his artistic prowess and how they showcase his exemplary technical and narrative control. I have watched fifty-seven of his sixty-eight films (i.e. 84 percent) during the course of writing this book. Those films that I have not seen, but refer to in passing, are marked with an asterisk (*). Information about these asterisked films has been gleaned from print and online plot summaries and *dossiers de presse*.

References to Duvivier's films throughout the book are as complete as possible. Many reviews, particularly of his early films and those from his time in America, were consulted at the extensive electronic database at the Bibliothèque du Film at the Cinémathèque Française in Paris. The scanning of these reviews has often resulted in the omission and deletion of page numbers and dates of publication.

All translations from French to English are my own unless stated otherwise.

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