FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

Bertrand Blier

SUE HARRIS

Bertrand Blier

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

DIANA HOLMES and ROBERT INGRAM *series editors*
DUDLEY ANDREW *series consultant*

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

Bertrand Blier

SUE HARRIS

MANCHESTER 1824
Manchester University Press

Published by Manchester University Press
Altrincham Street, Manchester M1 7JA, UK
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Pubhcation Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 0 7190 5297 1 paperback

First edition published 2001 by Manchester University Press

Contents

List of plates

Figures 1-3 are reproduced by permission of CAPAC (Compagnie artistique de productions et d'adaptations cinématiques). Figures 8 and 9 are reproduced by permission of Hachette Première. Figures 4-6,8 and 10 are reproduced courtesy of BFI Films: Stills, Posters and Designs. Every effort has been made to obtain permission to reproduce the figures illustrated in this book. If any proper acknowledgement has not been made, copyright-holders are invited to contact the publisher.

Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent on national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at A-level. The study of film as an art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about *auteurism*. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessarily coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the *auteur* perspective on film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain

volumes of the series, and, throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception which includes socio-economic and political determinants, the work of a large and highly skilled team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the informal and formal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES
ROBERTINGRAM

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere thanks to the many friends, colleagues and family members who have offered encouragement, support and practical help during the writing of this book. I acknowledge, in particular, a huge debt of gratitude to Jill Forbes, Siân Reynolds, Keith Reader and Elizabeth Ezra, whose erudition and enthusiasm for my work have been utterly invaluable. Pauline Fower, Louise Stirton, Kathy Magarrell, Louise Douglas and Audrey Farley have all offered support well beyond the call of duty, as have the friends in Amiens and Paris who have provided accommodation and a warm welcome during my various research trips to France. I have greatly appreciated the suggestions and advice offered by Diana Holmes and Robert Ingram, who have been patient and supportive editors. I extend my thanks also to Radio France Culture, for providing me with a recording of the broadcast 'Le bon plaisir de Bertrand Blier', and to the staff of Stirling University Library, the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal and the Bibliothèque du Film in Paris. And, like all who teach film studies, I am indebted to my students who have shared their reactions to Blier's films with me, with good humour and insight.

My final thanks are reserved for my husband Neil Harris, who has lived with Bertrand Blier and his films as long as I have, and who has been a constant source of practical and emotional support. In recognition of this, it is to him and our son Euan that I dedicate this book, with love and thanks.

Introduction

The director Bertrand Blier has, over a thirty-year period, come to be acknowledged as one of the most enduring and challenging talents of French post-new wave cinema. In that time, he has enjoyed a fruitful, if volatile, relationship with both critics and the viewing public, being variously feted and derided, applauded and jeered for his provocative approach to modern film-making. His commercial success, although inconsistent, has been impressive and he has been at many points in his career the object of significant peer recognition: an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film *(Préparez vos mouchoirs)* and a clutch of *Césars* attest to this. In addition to directing fourteen films of his own, he has ventured at various points in his career into the writing of screenplays, novels and, most recently, a play, showing himself to be an ambitious, creative and highly successful artist in a range of media. His influence on a younger generation of film-makers in the French industry has been equally remarkable: Patrice Leconte, Michel Blanc and Josiane Balasko are only the most prominent of those whose thematic and stylistic priorities reflect and emulate Blier's own.

It is, as we shall see, the very unconventionality of this work that has had such an appeal to emerging film-makers and actors. But this unconventionality has also proved confusing for many viewers: critics have, since the earliest films, documented the extent to which Blier's work has left cinema-goers amused, perplexed and offended, not always in equal measure. Some have taken the view,

for example, that his exuberant portrayal of sexual activity is suggestive of an ultra-libertarian sensibility, but many have read the more anarchistic elements of his work as profoundly reactionary. Some consider the man to be a playful puppet-master inverting the conventions and genres of gender representation, but for others he has been deemed a dangerous subversive who would do well to keep his macho fantasies under wraps. Viewers and critics have long failed to reach consensus on whether we should laugh or be horrified at the dysfunctional characters and societies set out before us, about whether we can interpret his films as comic explorations of the grotesque, or as misanthropic attacks on the frailties of human nature.

Ultimately, there is some validity in categorising Blier as one of the most difficult, irritating and incomprehensible of contemporary French film-makers, one whose work is to be approached with caution, and is to be analysed in terms of the exception, rather than the rule of mainstream French cinema. And yet the notoriety that has grown up around him and his corpus of fourteen films has in many ways served only to obscure our vision of what is clearly an intelligent and reflective *auteur,* working within the traditions of intellectual and theoretical engagement common to the wider French cinema industry. Whether one 'likes' his work or not, Blier is undisputably an important and influential presence in modern French film-making, and for those who would understand the nature and function of popular French culture, it has now become impossible to ignore his work. He may well be a maverick figure, but his abiding presence and obvious creativity inevitably speak for themselves, and point to the director as a figure worthy of the same critical attention as canonical luminaries such as Truffaut, Renoir, Chabrol and the other directors on which this series seeks to focus.

The intention of this book is therefore simple: in attempting to address some of the questions put above, I hope to be able to start formulating some answers to the puzzle that is Bertrand Blier's work. The aim is not to make the case for Blier as a misunderstood exponent of mainstream cinema and insist that that is where he really belongs, but rather to identify strategies for finding one's way

through a body of work which has disconcerted spectators, critics and academics alike, and to identify some reference points which the curious spectator can use as a map to navigate through Blier's preferred themes and stylistic techniques. By reappraising some of the received wisdom about the director's work, and identifying a counter-cultural context in which his work might profitably be read, it should be possible to evaluate Blier's contribution to modern French film-making more fully than has hitherto been the case. The analysis in this book therefore goes directly to the heart of the perceived difficulty with Blier's work, confronting questions about corporeality in the *mise-en-scène,* scatological content in dialogue and aggressivity in the portrayal of social interaction, in an attempt to locate Blier's work in culturally marginalised traditions which have their own aesthetic and historical value.

The discussion will reveal that the key tropes around which Blier's work is structured point to an engagement with a tradition of popular discourse, here translated into both content and form, which finds an echo in the wider cultural apparatus of the post-1968 period, and which is all the more significant for its location in mainstream visual culture. The concept of artistic subversion is absolutely central to understanding Blier's work: subversion in the popular tradition is about more than simply offending notions of good taste and behaviour, but is instead about an active engagement with patterns of disruption and parody, a valorising of the profane over the purely antagonistic. Popular culture has been greatly served by the analysis of traditional forms offered by Mikhail Bakhtin in his seminal work *Rabelais and his World,* which allowed for a re-evaluation of an enigmatic body of work, by a writer of whom Bakhtin says on his opening page '[O]f all great writers of world literature, [he] is the least popular, the least understood and appreciated. And yet, of all the great creators of European literature Rabelais occupies one of the first places' (Bakhtin 1984:1).

Sixteenth-century literature may seem an unusual place to start an analysis of the work of a contemporary French film director, but the parallels that we can detect between the aesthetic choices and

resulting discourses of the two artists are helpful when seeking to categorise the content and structure of their work. As Sue Vice points out: 'Bahktin reveals that Rabelais has been misunderstood, his grotesque images misread as simple political allegories or as obscenity and "cynicism"; replacing him in the tradition of popular humour gives a quite different dimension to his aesthetic' (Vice 1997: 191). And so it is with Bertrand Blier. When one attempts to move beyond the 'meaning' of Blier's work, and assessments of him as a 'failed realist' or amoral *agent provocateur,* and looks instead at the formal construction of his work -its rhetorical structure, complex verbal layering, ritualistic composition – then a clear cultural context in which Blier's work 'makes sense' quickly emerges. Bakhtin's concept of carnival is a useful place to start in as much as it invites a reading of Blier's humour as festive and ludic rather than wilfully aggressive, his characters as stock types rather than hideous incarnations of urban menace, his language as a celebration of linguistic diversity rather than a bald expression of offensive vulgarity.

The concept of *la fête* (the festive) which Bakhtin elaborated has a wider significance in Blier's work than the purely formal. Bakhtin's work, first published in 1970, was only one of a number of important texts which developed an understanding of cultural debate and production in post-1968 France in terms of the traditional carnival's associations with concepts of festivity, revolution, liberation of energies and subversion of discourses of authority.[1] As Brian Rigby has made clear, *la fête* has become a talismanic word in French cultural discourse, gaining in currency in the postwar period, and especially since 1968, and it has now become relatively commonplace to refer to the events of 1968 – an acknowledged moment of social and cultural transition in which privilege, social rank and prohibition were systematically questioned -using the rhetorical framework of carnivalesque or festive analysis (Rigby 1991). Contemporary ethnographers and cultural commentators also began to analyse cultural practices and events in

1 The 1970s saw the publication of two important historical texts on this subject, the first by Mona Ozouf, *La Fête révolutionnaire* (1976), and the second *Le Carnaval de Romans* (1979) by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie.

relation to *culture ordinaire* (everyday culture), and the revolutionary potential of *the fête* was reformulated by writers such as Henri Lefèbvre, who identified the possibility for cultural revolution as lying within marginalised groups in society such as the young, ethnic minorities and women.

The performance arts also experienced a renewed interest in the dramatic forms of popular spectacle; indeed, the tone, content and type of performance of Total Theatre, *création collective* (experimental collective theatre such as that performed by the *Théatre du soleil)* and *café-théâtre* expressed the festivity and aesthetic subversion of an art-form emerging directly from, and addressing *le peuple* (the people). The Situationists equally elaborated an ideology of *détournement* (a strategy of appropriation of bourgeois concepts of representation with the aim of subverting them) which gave momentum to the cultural mood of the times. In cinema, Jacques Doillon's *L'An 01* (1972) is representative of a new style of film which, as Jill Forbes has pointed out, shows 'youthful exuberance, transgression and anarchy ... It consists of a series of sketches or situations designed to illustrate, praise or promote the transgression of bureaucratic rules and the liberation from all forms of oppression' (Forbes 1992: 201-2). Even journalism was not exempt from this particular cultural trend, as a ludic, and at times exceedingly juvenile, commentary found expression in the new subversive magazine culture represented by *Hara-Kiri, Charlie Hebdo, Pilote* and the enormous popularity of the *bande dessinée* (cartoon strip). This generalised new interest in modes of expression deriving directly from popular festive forms, drew with great frequency on the central motif of the carnival, which came increasingly to be reflected, in cinema as elsewhere in popular culture, in the adoption of anarchic narrative structures, an iconography of youth, and in an explicit discourse of challenge to social, political and artistic hierarchies. The apparatus of Bakh-tinian discourse analysis, understood in terms of an association with generalised cultural trends in modern French society, is thus a key tool in working towards a considered understanding of the aesthetic, humour and cultural contexts of Bertrand Blier's films.

References

Bakhtin, Mikhail (1984), *Rabelais and his World* (trans. Hélène Iswolsky), Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
Forbes, Jill (1992), *The Cinema in France: After the New Wave*, London, Macmillan.
Ozouf, Mona (1976), *La Fête révolutionnaire*, Paris, Gallimard.
Lefèbvre, Henri (1968), *La Vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne*, Paris, Gallimard.
Le Roy Ladurie, Emmanuel (1979), *Le Carnaval de Romans*, Paris, Gallimard.
Rigby, Brian (1991), *Popular Culture in Modern France: a Study of Cultural Discourse*, London and New York, Routledge.
Vice, Sue (1997), *Introducing Bakhtin*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

1

‘L’impossible Monsieur B. B…’[1]

Bertrand Blier was born in Paris on 14 March 1939. As was still relatively conventional in the French film-making tradition, his career began in 1957 as an *assistant stagiaire* (trainee assistant). Promoted by Serge Vallin, a friend of his actor father Bernard Blier (a well-known and well-loved character actor with a long and distinguished career in France) and assistant to leading directors such as Renoir, Becker and Duvivier, Blier’s first involvement in film-making was as an assistant on the John Berry film *OK Mambo* (1959). In 1958 and 1959, Blier worked with the same status on films directed by Christian-Jaque *(Babette s’en va-t-en guerre,* 1959), Delannoy *(Maigret et Vaffaire Saint-Fiacre,* 1959) and La Patellière *(Rue despraines,* 1959), before graduating in 1960 to the status of second assistant with the director Georges Lautner. With Lautner, Blier worked for over two years (1960–61) on four moderately successful films *(Arrêtez les tambours,* 1960; *Le Monocle noir,* 1961; *Le Septième juré,* 1961; *En plein cirage,* 1961) all very much in the Veine parodique’ (‘parodie style’, (Jeancolas 1979: 149)) that has come to characterise his own work.

The story so far does not disguise the fact that Blier’s initial career benefited from some considerable advantages and privileges.[2]

1 ‘The impossible Mr B. B …’ (Riou 1993: 58).

2 Blier is described by Jeancolas (1979:137) as a ‘dauphin de divers pouvoirs’ (‘the heir apparent of various powers’), as opposed to someone who came into the industry via a more conventional route. The convention, broken by the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics and directors, was to serve a virtual apprenticeship at the level of assistant for a long number of years.