

Screenwriting the Euro-noir thriller: the subtext of Jacques Audiard's artistic signature

It took a long time for me to accept that I might become a director, just as it took time for me to start writing screenplays. Nearly ten years each time. It probably has something to do with my family background. Maybe it also has something to do with the fact that I am slow. In any case, I was definitely not precocious. (Audiard in Rigoulet 2010b)

Jacques Audiard (born 1952) is the eldest son of legendary screenwriter and dialogue writer Michel Audiard (1923-1985). When asked, in interviews, about his father's legacy to French cinema, Jacques Audiard becomes rather subdued and recalls formative anecdotes from his childhood, and the times when, as a teenager, he helped his father writing scripts, for what he calls 'summer jobs'. Before becoming a screenwriter, and then the director of his own screenplays, Jacques Audiard appeared as co-writer of Michel Audiard's last scripts, even if reviewers did not always notice this at the time.¹

With seven feature films co-written and directed over a period of more than 20 years, Jacques Audiard is recognised internationally for his European noir thrillers with a distinctive signature. Jonathan Romney claims that 'when it comes to hard-bitten crime cinema, [he] has few equals in Europe (Romney 2009). He is also associated with a certain form of stylistic 'audacity' (Bouquet 1994: 65). Labelled in France as a director who 'symbolises French-style classicism' (Murat 2012), his use of literary adaptations to reinvent genre cinema - noir thrillers or melodramas, and his status as both screenwriter and *metteur en scène* are central to the critical discourse around his films. He has received many awards, including several Césars for Best Screenplay or adaptation.² In 2009, *Un prophète/A Prophet* was awarded the *mise-en-scène* prize at the Cannes Festival, at which, in 2015, he also received the *Palme d'or* for *Dheepan*. The cinema of Jacques Audiard has attracted a range of critical and academic responses (fewer in France than in the English-speaking world), highlighting the impact made by his reworking of established genres through their familiar conventions (Dobson 2007, 181; Lauten 1999, 66). Scholars and critics have commented on his distinctive

¹ See for example the long interview with Audiard published in *Télérama* (Rigoulet 2010a and 2010b). It seems however, that Jacques only really collaborated with his father on *Mortelle Randonnée* (see Libiot 2009a).

² César for Best Screenplay for *Un héros très discret* (1996), *Sur mes lèvres* (2001) and *Un prophète* (2009). César for Best Adaptation for *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* (2006) and *De rouille et d'os* (2013).

use of *mise en scène*, and his relationship with American cinema (Dobson 2007) or its representation of France (Lauten 1999; Macdonald 2013).

This article approaches Jacques Audiard's cinema from a different, rarely addressed perspective, namely his working method as a screenwriter, and the ways in which the development process of his screenplays informs his filmmaking. The object of inquiry is the situation, far from unique in France, of the screenwriter who, having turned to directing, continues to write screenplays and works on repeated occasions with one, or several, co-writers. As part of a broader reflection on the status of French screenwriters after the New Wave, it seeks to map out the contribution made by Audiard and his collaborators to film authorship, with a view to identifying certain screenwriting strategies that underpin the renewal of the European neo-noir thriller in France from the 1990s onwards. Beyond establishing his own brand of filmmaking, Audiard has developed a working method in which the so-called writing stage seems to extend far beyond preproduction, to influence the shooting and finally to shape the editing process as completed in postproduction. From his first film *Regarde les hommes tomber/ See How they Fall* (1994) to *Dheepan* (2015), Audiard has tackled very different stories. A recurring term used to describe his craft is that of 'virtuoso' (e.g. Sotinel 2009; Coutaut 2012) and we will try to elicit the nature of this 'virtuosity' more specifically in the screenplays of *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté/ the Beat My Heart Skipped* (2005), *Un prophète* (2009), and *De rouille et d'os/ Rust and Bone* (2012), all of which result from a collaborative writing process.

The collaborative nature of screenwriting has received little academic attention in the context of French cinema as the early stages of production tend to be at least partly eclipsed by the study of *mise en scène* and directorial style. The writing credits often remain unspecified, with elusive reference to tasks undertaken, and the scripts can undergo a large number of successive drafts. Moreover, the screenplay, in its form as written text, is by nature transient, and generally disappears once the film is completed, and, if a screenplay does reappear after the film's release, the published text is normally based on a transcript from the finished product. For these reasons, an analysis of Jacques Audiard's cinema from the perspective of the screenwriting process may help to bring new light on some understated motifs of his fictional world.

In terms of methodology, it would have been valuable to gain access to successive versions of the screenplays and other documents used during the filming, such as successive drafts or annotated scripts. Unfortunately, these working documents are not readily available

in any archive consulted – in fact, very few traces of written work in progress are accessible. We have not been able to trace any annotated scripts or production correspondence for our corpus in the archive funds deposited in the library of the French Cinémathèque in Paris (BIFI) except for *Un héros très discret/A Self-Made Hero* (1996). No screenplay has been published in *Avant-scène cinéma* or by other specialised French script outlets. The only document we found is a script in English made available on a website for *Rust and Bone*.³

Consequently, our investigation rests upon comments made by the different contributors to the writing process, such as production notes, interviews, recorded masterclasses with Audiard and his co-authors, as well as commentaries and materials made available as supplementary features on the DVD releases.⁴ These resources provide primary information towards an understanding of the writing process and discussion of the film narrative features (including plot, genre conventions and character construction) as well as an evaluation of the dialogue where relevant. As we will see below, this form of control over the uses made of the screenplay is hardly surprising in a French context, especially in view of Audiard's auteur status and his explicit views on the use of screenplays in filmmaking, as discussed in his masterclasses and interviews. These views will be developed below and will form an important part of our discussion. Films reviews will also be used to illustrate the critical reception of Audiard's cinema, and more specifically, to report on comments made on the narrative, characterisation and the formal properties of the films. They will illustrate, albeit concisely, the terminology used for the construction of Audiard's identity as a filmmaker.

After completing literary studies and having envisaged a career in teaching, Jacques Audiard trained as a film editor in the late 1970s, working with established filmmakers such as Costa Gavras, Roman Polanski and Patrice Chéreau. He helped his father informally on a few scripts in the late 1970s, for which he was mostly uncredited. For example he contributed to the adaptation and was credited as co-editor on *Bon baisers... à lundi/Kisses till Monday* (Michel Audiard, 1974). For *Le Professionnel* (Georges Lautner, 1981), adapted from Patrick Alexander's novel, *La Mort d'une bête à la peau fragile*, his name appears as co-writer and adapter alongside his father's (but is absent from the film's reviews). *Mortelle randonnée/Deadly Circuit* (Claude Miller, 1983), an adaptation of Marc Behm's novel,

³ Available on Sony's website http://www.sonyclassics.com/awards-information/rustandbone_screenplay.pdf, consulted 12 December 2015.

⁴ All translations from French sources are mine unless otherwise specified.

remains his major collaboration with his father. It is difficult to avoid mentioning this filiation in an article on Jacques Audiard as screenwriter, and many reviews of his early films refer to his father's legacy (e.g Riou 2005). However, Audiard himself is more laconic, arguing that he was always more attracted to literature than screenwriting in this period of his life (see Libiot 2009a and Rigoulet 2010a).

Audiard contributed to the writing of 23 films between 1974 and 1994 (source IMDb and BIFI). In the 1980s, he gained some valuable experience in collaborating on the adaptation of novels into genre films, notably commercial hits like the above-mentioned *Le Professionnel*. Other, perhaps more surprising, collaborations include comedy screenplays, such as *Réveillon chez Bob* (Denys Granier-Deferre, 1984) and *Sac de nœuds/All Mixed-up* (Josiane Balasko 1985), co-written with Balasko who was in charge of the dialogue, and *Vénus beauté (Institut)*... (Tonie Marshall 1998) on which he worked with Marshall and Marion Vernoux.

Audiard speaks in harsh terms about his writing experience early in his career, and claims to have become 'worn out by screenwriting' ('usé par le scénario') to the extent that he could no longer 'project himself into it' (in Mandelbaum 2009). He also refers to a 'form of loneliness and melancholy that he needed to evacuate' (in Rigoulet 2010b), which was alleviated by his embrace of film directing:

I realised that the system did not suit me and that I would only be able to exist through the desires of a filmmaker, and that a producer would continue the story without me. It made me feel somewhat despondent. (Audiard in Rigoulet 2010b)

Audiard thus had little other option but to direct films himself, even if he sees chance as an important factor in his directing debut with *Regarde les hommes tomber* (1993), adapted from Teri White's *Triangle/Un trio sans espoir* and co-written with Alain le Henry (see Libiot 2001b).

The screenwriting experience, gained by helping other directors, allowed Audiard to establish professional contacts and paved the way for the establishment of collaborative writing on his own films. His name was associated in the 1990s with a 'nouvelle qualité Française' (Chauvin 1994) and with *Regarde les hommes tomber*, he demonstrated his potential for rewriting the plots and characters of the noir thriller, his move into directing reinforcing the close association of the writing process with *mise en scène* and film language. He took a clear stand on the role of screenplays in 1994 when his first film was screened at

Cannes, stating that: ‘The best screenplay is that which is forgotten to give way to strong images and emotions’ (in Raoux 1994).

The reviews of his early films as director tend to remark upon the formative nature of screenwriting and editing and his filiation. It is significant that these should also include remarks on the ‘closed’ nature of the screenplays. For example, Pascal Mérigeau, commenting on the sophisticated parallel plots of *Regarde les hommes tomber*, highlighted how this type of sleek writing process could ‘lock the screenplay’ (Mérigeau 1994) which ‘did not fully fulfil its promise’ (Bouquet 1994, 65; Raoux 1994). This was echoed by other reviews reporting that beneath its ‘modernised packaging’, Audiard had made a ‘predictable film’ recalling the *tradition de qualité* (Trémois 1994).⁵ This seemed to overlook the departure of the film’s complex narrative from the classic temporal structure of the book and its use of ellipsis, noted in another review (Tranchant 1994). Audiard’s screenwriting method was clearly attracting less commentary than his *mise en scène*.

Since 1994, Audiard’s artistic signature has been defined primarily by his directing technique and his strategies of *mise en scène* as well as his talent for creating a distinctive style (see for example Solomons 2009). We have found few French scholarly studies of Audiard’s cinema so far, although the Cannes exposure afforded *Dheepan* is likely to change this soon. The critical discourse, mostly found in detailed reviews for the cinema press, scrutinises his style in relation to his status as an *auteur-director* (or not). The genesis and screenwriting process receive brief mentions rather than detailed analyses, except in a few interviews conducted with Audiard, for example in *Positif* where the subject is broached, usually by the filmmaker himself (Herpe 1996; Vassé 2005; Baumann and Rouyer 2009; Rouyer and Tobin 2012). Anglo-American academic articles do not pay much attention to Audiard’s screenplays as such either. They do, however, engage in more in-depth narrative analysis, in addition to discussion of themes and style, referring more specifically to the plots’ complexity and the effective character construction of unusual heroes (see Kaganski 2012). The scripts of the early films have sometimes been criticised for their underdeveloped secondary characters, but Audiard has also attracted attention for creating complex, elusive protagonists. For example, the narrative of *Un prophète* is qualified as ‘labyrinthine, sometimes perplexing’ (Romney 2009).

⁵ In 1997, Trémois kept Audiard out of his list of ‘*enfants de la liberté*’ which reviewed the new directors of the 1990s and referred to him instead as one of the ‘*jeunes déjà vieux*’ (young auteurs who are old already) (Trémois 1997, 242-5). See Dobson (2007, 182-3) for an example of detailed narrative analysis of the film.

In typical French auteurist tradition, Audiard takes an active part in the development of his film ideas from the initial stages (sometimes referred to as a pitch). He appears in the writing credits of all his films to date for adaptation, story development and/or dialogue. He works slowly on his screenplays, often leaving gaps of several years between two films and, as the writing process itself can span over several years, admits that he tends to start each film as a response to the previous one (Rigoulet 2010b). The development of an idea tends to be a long and sometimes convoluted process, involving the collective input of a team: 'I have never worked alone. There's a big difference. That's why I make movies – it's a group process. To make movies is to start out as an individual project and then collect ideas along the way' (in Alberico 2010; see also Libiot 2001b).

Audiard's 'filmmaking factory' (Frois 2001), as he likes to refer to it, requires time and reflection to develop an idea into a script, find a production package before the collective project becomes a film by Jacques Audiard.⁶ It is also significant that he should choose to adapt pre-existing texts for his own films - with the exception of *Sur mes lèvres/Read my lips* (2001), his only original screenplay, a tightly narrated complex plot, co-written with the experienced novelist and screenwriter Tonino Benacquista (see Libiot 2001a). *Un héros très discret* was adapted from a novel written by Jean-François Deniau (1989), whereas *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* is a loose remake of *Fingers* (James Toback, 1978).⁷ As for *De rouille et d'os*, it started as a blended adaptation of themes from two short stories by Canadian Craig Davidson (Davidson 2005), from which a tightly written screenplay was produced, leaving little space for improvisation. For his most recent film *Dheepan*, Audiard opted, on the contrary, for a loosely written script to leave more leeway to the actors during filming:

I would say the script was under-written, while I would normally tend to try and frame everything as soon as possible. I tend to over-write and then tidy up. This script had to develop from inside. I hesitated and then I thought it was this time or never, the evolution of the relationship between Dheepan and his partner mostly took shape in the shooting [...]. But I did not make this a method and I can't say how I'll proceed for my next film. (Audiard in Alion 2015)

This illustrates the perfectionist take on filmmaking adopted by some screenwriters who consider filmmaking as a craft. This mode of inspiration raises the issue of intertextual referencing in the context of screenwriting. Recently, Audiard has claimed that he lacks creative imagination, and that it would take him too long to develop a rounded story and

⁶ He even created a production company in 1990 (Bloody Mary) with Didier Haudepin and Alain Le Henry, his first screenwriting collaborator on his early films.

⁷ See comprehensive analysis of screenwriting style and appropriation of genre conventions in Anger, 2006, 5-7.

fully-formed characters. Therefore, he prefers to appropriate an idea and adapt it to fulfil his desire for cinema. In this, he follows his father's example.

The critic Frédéric Strauss summarises the craft of Audiard's filmmaking as based on characterisation and unusual narratives: a 'filmmaker with character, but also a chameleon, he knows like no one else how to follow in the footsteps of his characters [...]. He tells us a weird, atypical story which gradually takes up more space and ends up being simply touching.' (Strauss 2015) Characterisation has therefore always been at the centre of his screenwriting process, as revealed through the iconic characters in *De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté*:

[...] I hope my characters are cool, in the sense of iconic. That's my job, at its very essence. For me, that's what cinema is all about – it produces monumental figures, icons, male or female, people who are emblematic of their time, who are in their time and who define their time. Used properly, cinema is the coolest thing in the world. (Audiard in Solomons 2005)

The reviews of *Un prophète* also place characterisation at the centre of the film's evaluation: they comment on the representation of masculinity, the fascination with power struggles, and they highlight formal qualities that are not necessarily expected in French cinema. For example, Eric Libiot talks of 'an aesthetic world upon which his mythological narrative rests [...] escaping moral judgement' (Libiot 2009b). However, Audiard's screenplays tend to combine motifs of violence and masculinity that are familiar within American genre cinema, but that are not necessarily as credible in a French context. In Audiard's plots, these genre influences are blended with more realist representations of the world, including identity issues, power relations and coming-of-age/life-experience processes. Thus American film genre codes are challenged and appropriated, as this other British review highlights:

A French prison movie is oddity enough, but Audiard's treatment of the genre is outstanding, blending American-style toughness with a European sense of documentary-like realism and a host of stylistic flourishes, including sudden bursts of rap music, freeze frames, magical hallucinations, jolts of violence and gripping set-pieces. (Solomons 2009)

Genre appropriation is part and parcel of Audiard's creative process and of the development of his screenplays. His films start from an idea, translated into easily identified genre conventions for characters, narrative pace and plot. His objective is then to question these and 'work within the interstices' to boost his creative process (Audiard in Mandelbaum 2009;

Fontana 2005). For example, *Sur mes lèvres* rests upon the unlikely encounter between Paul (Vincent Cassel) and Carla (Emmanuelle Devos): established genre conventions, social drama and film noir, are challenged by the change in social milieu which leads to a hybrid form, oscillating between unconventional romance and heist. Similarly, *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* combines romance and artistic aspirations with social violence and underground criminal activity. This blending of American genre cinema and European realism is a recurring concern in comments made about Audiard's films. Discussing *Un prophète*, Romney notes that the film is 'both hard edged, painstaking detailed social realism and compelling genre entertainment' (Romney 2009). Audiard himself admits that he sought 'effects of realism' in *De rouille et d'os*:

I wanted effects of realism, a film that not is too scripted, raw, where the scenes cannot be anticipated, and where nothing was taken for granted. These people are in precarious situations, anything can happen to them. (in Lorrain 2012)

However, this hybrid screenwriting method can be disconcerting, especially for French critics and audiences used to clear distinctions between genre films and social realism, a perception questioned by some critics:

Why is it that what appears natural in American cinema [...] and in real life can be suspect in the context of French cinema, not worthy of being filmed, explored and reworked? As a timeless French genre film, with multiple layers of meaning, *Un prophète* is punchy cinema, it makes a loud noise and it resounds for long time'. (Kaganski 2009)

Audiard's cinema is clearly influenced by American genres, but this aspect of his cinema extends beyond the scope of this study. What is worth noting, however, is that his chosen writing collaborators also share this attraction for Hollywood cinema genres and for narratives that foreground violent masculinity. This is why the collaborative writing practice that he has developed, and that constitutes one of his trademarks, deserves closer attention.

Collaborative screenwriting practice

Audiard's idea of cinema (and screenwriting) rests on the premise of a collective process: '[O]ne [the screenwriter] is no longer the only holder of an idea. Other people make it progress' (in Rigoulet 2010a). Since moving into film direction, he has only envisaged screenwriting and filmmaking as teamwork – with Tonino Benacquista, Thomas Bidegain, and recently with Noé Debré. Bidegain, his closer partner, started as the commentator of the

rushes for *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* (Rigoulet 2009) and became a key-collaborator in the writing of all the subsequent films. In numerous interviews, he stresses the collaborative nature of his work with Audiard and their complementarity (see Labbas 2012; Guichard 2012; Blumenfeld 2012a).

Interviews with Audiard provide valuable insight into an artisanal script development process, and show to what extent his screenwriting practice is affected by a number of external factors: his collaborators, his actors, his own cinephilia and literary background, and his projections as *metteur en scène* and editor (with visual representations and questions about cinema). In the brainstorming stage, he talks extensively with his collaborators to plan his films (see Anger 2006, 5) and this has become even more evident since he started working with Bidegain. They start from a formal framework, for example generic conventions, to avoid the pitfall of anecdotal stories (in Rouyer and Tobin 2012, 9). If we take the example of *Un prophète*, the well-documented genesis of the long development provides a chronology of the writing process (Ceaux and Pelletier 2009; Tessé 2009, 19-21). The producer Marco Cherqui presented the project to Audiard and asked him to read an original screenplay by Abdel Raouf Dafri, a long script featuring a psychopath who comes out of prison.⁸ The successive screenplay drafts went through numerous stages and hands, over a period of three years. Audiard with Bidegain and Nicolas Peuffailit (and even Cherqui it seems) took over the development, adapting and appropriating the initial idea. They changed the narrative focus, moving away from the pure violence and brutality of Dafri's text which was largely inspired by Scorsese's *Scarface*, and introduced a young beur gangster character, Malik (Tahar Rahim), with no family, a sort of opposite of *Scarface*. The objective was to create a character who goes through a learning process and becomes a hero (Audiard in Libiot 2009a). This produces 'a new type of hero, with no demonstration of strength, no testosterone, a character who adapts and learns all the time: *intelligence of life in movement*' (Audiard in Rigoulet 2009).⁹ This notion of life in movement can also be applied more broadly to Audiard's aesthetic quest as a screenwriter and filmmaker. If he makes films to 'provide an answer to a formal question', then the answer is only accessible once the film is finished.

⁸ Screenwriter of the two *Mesrine* films (Richet 2008); see Ceaux and Pelletier 2009 for a full profile of Dafri. See Alberico 2010 for Audiard's detailed explanation on the character creation process: 'in the writing process, we had ideas on how to write Malik. We always thought Malik interested us when he was learning, so it was important for him to be learning all the time ... and he was eager to learn. The second rule we had when writing Malik's character was that when you see him do something, that's when you see him learn.'

⁹ Many reviews analyse the character of Malik in detail and his unusual construction as hero (see Masson 2009, 14-6; Kaganski 2009).

Dafri's initial draft did not use the prison as main location setting, and the protagonist was released from prison thirty minutes into the film. Bidegain suggested increasing the number of scenes set inside the prison and let Malik come out only for a few days' leave. This provided the film with a new structure and significantly changed the narrative perspective and the dispositif of the screenplay (Baumann and Rouyer 2009, 17). Some late changes, often motivated by adjustments needed in terms of tenor, took place during filming and at the editing stage (2009, 19). The register of the dialogue appeared excessively coded in Dafri's version (featuring underground and banlieue slang), so as to make it more accessible to a wide audience. Bidegain suggested rewriting some of the lines in order to enhance emotion (in Labbas 2012) and altering certain scenes deemed too explicative, as confirmed in the DVD commentary. It is only on set that certain decisions to cut unnatural cues or redundant scenes became obvious. The genesis of *Un prophète* therefore confirms that the writing process continues during the shooting and, as Bidegain watches the rushes for Audiard and reports back on inconsistencies, the final writing stage takes place during editing with the help of a different type of collaborator, the editor, joining the team.

Juliette Welfing has edited all of Audiard's films since 2004 (see Anger 2006: 13). Discussing the editing of *De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté*, she finalises a number of features of the film's structure already identified, namely the complexity of the narrative and the focus on Tom's point of view. These were decided in postproduction and thus some scenes, which had been shot with other characters, were left out as they did not then fit with the rest (Anger 2006, 7). The fact that there are few scenes, some interchangeable, is also of interest in understanding the character's trajectory through psychological continuity. Her perspective thus confirms editing strategies and technique as part and parcel of the writing process.

The input of actors into the collaborative writing process should not be underestimated either, even though this is by no means a new phenomenon. Indeed, Jean Gabin worked closely on the dialogue with Michel Audiard in the 1950s. Jacques Audiard normally starts writing before thinking of actors for the role, but once the casting is complete, they really can transform the screenplay. For example, in the case of *Un prophète*, it was a daring challenge to choose the then inexperienced actor, Tahar Rahim, to play the central character, Malik, on whose performance the whole film rests. It was perhaps an even bolder gamble to cast Niels Arestrup, a Parisian actor born in Denmark as César, the Corsican godfather. The pair inspired important changes in the draft screenplay that confirm the unstable status of the written text/screenplay:

If I had not listened to the indications given by the actors, I would have made a completely different film, and missed the emergence of a romantic dimension, it helped me to adopt a more flexible approach to screenwriting and not lock any of the elements. (Audiard in Rigoulet 2010b)

Audiard allows flexibility within the screenplay in other ways. For example, he does not always share the full script with his actors prior to shooting in order to trigger spontaneous reactions on set. Therefore, the development of the screenplay is not merely an initial stage of Audiard's film production strategy, it is in fact at the centre of his aesthetic project and filmmaking as a whole. As he explains in a 2012 interview:

I really believe the form of the film must be in the scenario; cinema is not just added value to the scripting. I believe in it as a totality. There was a specific problem with this film (*De rouille et d'os*), which we saw often during the writing: the clash between realism and stylisation. You had constantly to be looking for an equilibrium. If it's too realistic, it's boring. If it's too stylised, you don't believe it. (in Pulver 2012)

This mixture of realism and stylisation is at the core of Audiard's writing process. It represents and clarifies the essence of his authorial signature, his creative working method for the 'fabrication' of fiction.

Constructing Fictional narratives : 'une fabrique du faux pour un fabricant de film'¹⁰

The features of the screenplays written by Audiard et al offer valuable pointers to defining and understanding his fictional world as a filmmaker. Having already looked at his appropriation of genre conventions and characterisation, let us now turn more specifically to the ways in which he approaches narrative construction. Audiard's plots are described as 'elaborate and cunning' (Bordwell 2010 on *Sur mes lèvres*), complex and 'sophisticated' (Blumenfeld 2012). When he manipulates literature by adapting existing stories, genre conventions by subverting them, and the function of screenplays by breaking them up during filming, Audiard's overt motivation is to create cinema in the 'interstices' of the written text and the narrative (Tirard and Baurez 2006, 101).

Audiard tends to structure his plots around a protagonist who goes through a learning process (in Libiot 2009a; in Rouyer and Tobin 2012, 9). As early as 2001, with the unlikely pairing of Carla and Paul in *Sur mes lèvres*, he associated character evolution with the notion

¹⁰ See a number of reviews and interviews using these expressions around the notions of fake and fabrication including Libiot 2001b and Frois 2001.

of an abrupt turning point ('un basculement', in Rouyer 2001: 27). In *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté*, the opportunity to play the piano triggered the change in Tom's attitude (Romain Duris) and in *Un prophète*, the inversion of the power relation between Malik and César provides the narrative turning point and the unexpected and complex trajectory which disconcerts the audience (see Pezzela and Rossi 2011, 163-4). In the context of character stereotypes in narratives of recent French films, the Arab/ beur protagonist rarely comes out a winner. In *De rouille et d'os*, the learning process is plot-driven initially, involving personal adaptation and the bringing together of the two central protagonists. The character of Ali went through a number of personality changes in the successive versions of the script, before Audiard was satisfied that he had developed the offbeat character that he wanted. The outline, prior to the casting of Belgian actor Mathias Schoenaerts for the role, was that of a colder and tougher character type. These examples reveal recurring patterns of narrative construction associated with screenwriting strategies serving the mise en scène of 'fabricated' images.

Several analyses published in English have highlighted the construction of fictional narrative in Audiard's early films.¹¹ In French reviews and interviews, the notion of the fake ('le faux') appeared as early as 1996 in relation to *Un héros très discret*. The screenplay proposed multiple narrative strategies to stage this 'faking' through mise en scène (Herpe 1996), such as the device which consists of including present day talking-head style narration by Marx (Jean-Louis Trintignant). The construction of 'fake characters' in *Sur mes lèvres* consisted of creating (with the help of the actors) a misleading discrepancy on screen between their appearance and their actual substance and thereby surprising the spectator (in Frois 2001). In *De rouille et d'os*, Audiard and Bidegain envisaged for a time that Ali's five year old son, Sam, could be the potential narrator, before alternating between the narrative perspectives of Ali and Stéphanie (Marion Cotillard). Bidegain also encouraged Audiard to integrate a romantic dimension into the narrative (Blumenfeld 2012b). In *De battre mon cœur s'est arrêté*, however, the camerawork creates a single viewpoint, that of Tom (Romain Duris) the protagonist.

Despite his personal background, Audiard does not place his screenplay text at the same level as 'cinematic form' (see Libiot 2012). The cinematic language used by the filmmaker and his crew during the shooting is not necessarily part of the script, which maps the organisation of scenes and providing plot and dialogue information. The cinematic form includes the recreation of artificial sets, the subversion of familiar generic codes, and the

¹¹ For examples, see Dobson's analysis (2008) of *Regarde les hommes tomber* and Lauten's discussion (1999) of *Un héros très discret*.

manipulation of camera angles. The process of the ‘fabrique du faux’ (creating what is fake through film) results from concerted strategies implemented to create effects with some attention to social resonance and precise thematic priorities. For example, when developing the script of *Un prophète*, his objective was to explore and revisit a familiar genre, the prison drama, using new ‘faces’ (Audiard in Baumann and Rouyer 2009, 17).

Audiard’s screenplays combine genre cinema, action and French-style naturalism and defy classification. In 2012, following international critical and public successes that established his aesthetic signature, the critic Pierre Murat still introduced *De rouille et d’os*, as the ‘symbol of French-style film classicism’ (Murat 2012). However, each new screenplay provides the director-artist with ‘a base from which he then moves away to create air pockets’ (in Rigoulet 2010b). By using the term ‘air pocket’, he figuratively suggests a space of freedom in which he can move away from the text, or the flexibility that the script retains to allow for some changes of direction during the filming itself. Audiard is known to use two different versions of the script while shooting, the ‘Cahier A’, namely the traditional screenplay given to the actors, and the ‘Cahier B’, a document only used by himself and the technical crew, that includes complementary notes on extra scenes or potential changes of direction in the actual narrative. In *De battre mon cœur s’est arrêté*, he relativised the authority of the screenplay on set:

During rehearsals, I ask the actors to use a text that contains narrative elements, but also proposes different situations, so that they can retain a certain freshness of approach and so that the script is not overused. A screenplay text is poor, it mainly provides situations, it is not a Shakespeare play! It must not be overexploited, otherwise what is there left to find when we shoot? On the set, I use two different scripts in fact, and in my B script, I have kept bits of scenes developed on the margins of the main narrative that can offer potential for straying away and take the actors in a direction that we had not anticipated. (Audiard in Rigoulet 2010b)

The reluctance to finalise the script before shooting is part and parcel of Audiard’s writing strategy, and suggests a conscious move to prevent ‘locking’ his narratives. For *Un prophète*, the ‘Cahier B’ contained many alternative scenes, but few were actually used, partly because the script was more tightly constructed and did not allow much flexibility (Baumann and Rouyer 2009, 19). For *De battre mon cœur s’est arrêté*, Audiard ‘created a tight screenplay, only to question it, wear it out, before eventually breaking it up during the shooting’ (in Gianorio 2005). He used it as a tool to trigger the creative process and the emergence of film language. This illuminates how personal and inquisitive Audiard’s creative approach is and

contradicts the perceptions of classicism raised above. If he gives the written text considerable attention during the development of a project, it is as a transitory object. It is also significant that the screenplay should not necessarily be limited to one authoritative version, reaffirming the French tradition of control by the auteur-director.

Audiard's working method recalls the distinction made by the screenwriter and director Olivier Assayas between two different types of screenplays and screenwriting approaches: open screenplays ('scénario ouvert') 'which answer the needs of a filmmaker', as opposed to closed or completed screenplays ('scénario achevés/finis') 'that invade all the space and close it' as their 'tight strings surround the storyline like a parcel and everything is driven by drama' (Assayas 1985, 7). Audiard combines these two strategies: out of his precise, extremely worked, initial text regarded as 'closed', there emerges the potential of openings during the shooting, when decisions of mise en scène and other considerations can change the final version, and so can change the text as it becomes the film. His practice underlines the distinction between writing a film and filming from a screenplay. This distinction is at the core of the perception of screenwriting and the place of screenwriters in French cinema today. In Audiard's 'fabrique du film', the writing continues during the shooting of the film, and even sometimes as part of the editing process.

At this stage, it is worth reminding ourselves that Audiard trained first as a film editor, namely a technician who supports the work of a director for the final rewriting of the film. When he started editing in the 1970s, he resorted to traditional cut and paste techniques, which must have comforted him in his belief that this was the time when subjective, authorial choices were reaffirmed. As digital editing developed in postproduction, software acted as an even more flexible tool through a range of processes including sharpening, cutting, reordering and enhancing the filmed matter. It is therefore hardly surprising that Audiard should use his co-writers (especially Bidegain) as editing assistants and his bespoke editor as an implicit extra co-author in this process.

The meta-language used to describe the production process in Audiard's films is in itself revealing. It often suggests a power struggle (between written text and director's mental images) and the notion of the written screenplay as an obstacle which resists the filming stage, and therefore requires 'taming' and this is when the director takes over as, above all, a metteur en scene. As a director, Audiard seeks to 'move beyond the script, it's too rigid; the words and sentences follow each other relentlessly, so I want to break them up' (in Herpe 1996, 177). In 2001, talking about *Sur mes lèvres*, he playfully admitted to 'bashing the script' once on set ('foutre une trempe au scénario' in Libiot 2001b) in order to 'find an

image and its expression in film language’, in other words, to find a point of view. He certainly found both.

French directors, whether they are identified as auteurs or not, normally control the production of their films and have control of the final cut. Audiard’s case study shows how this limits the autonomy of screenplays as texts. Even when director and screenwriter work separately or alongside one another, the final authorship rests with the director (see Bidegain in Labbas 2012). As he develops the screenplay, Audiard tries to ‘think intuitively of the images to come and to imagine the place of the film in the cinema landscape’ (in Rigoulet 2010b). As the references to critical reviews of his films have confirmed clearly throughout this essay, his cinema is associated with creating powerful images and with a distinctive use of film language after a long and painful process of screenwriting.

Conclusions

In 1994, Jacques Audiard considered that the betrayal of the screenplay was proportional to the talent of the director-metteur en scene (in Grassin 1994). In 1996, he could not wait to ‘betray the script’ because it left him ‘no space for freedom’ (in Grassin 1996). In 2001, he felt he needed to ‘bash’ the script to obtain the film he wanted and, in 2005, created a tight screenplay only to ‘break it up’ on set. In 2009, filming the ‘interstices’ of the screenplay was his goal and by 2012, nothing should be ‘taken for granted’ (in Lorrain 2012). For *Dheepan*, the film had to ‘develop from the inside’ (in Alion 2015). Audiard’s positioning of his practice in terms of the relation between the screenplay and the film has evolved with each film. Clearly, transforming a screenplay into a film comes at a cost. He surrounds himself with collaborators who are in position to question the screenwriting and to probe the creative process. In fact, the more time passes, the more he is prepared to leave the writing to others in order to concentrate on the transformation of screenplay into film. Yet, his multi-faceted experience as screenwriter, adapter and editor allows him to retain a clear overview, while maintaining his distance from the script.

The evolution of Audiard from *Regarde les hommes tomber* to *Dheepan* as a master of Euro-noir cinema, combining genre reinvention and art-house qualities, can be attributed as much to the work invested on the screenplays as to his vision as a director. His direct involvement in the screenwriting process and his association with expert collaborators are important factors in the international success of his films. In addition, the constant reworking of his thematic motifs, their integration into offbeat narratives and plots and the careful

choice of actors who can convey his unusual characters also enrich his artistic signature. A detailed analysis of his working method reinforces the conviction that screenplay development is a crucial creative basis for filmmaking and that it consists of different ‘writing’ stages, not all in words, through the constant probing of cinematic language during shooting, and editing techniques in postproduction. Audiard has integrated this broad vision of screenwriting and put it into practice as he developed his film career slowly around these three forms of ‘writing’. He has thus reinvented neo-noir narratives and atmospheres with an increased control on his screenwriting technique every time. An analysis of his films from the perspective of the writing process, in this broad sense of the term, provides new insights into his euro-noir style and into the films’ formal properties. It helps to reconcile the paradoxes of his complex identity (‘son univers’), somewhere between genre and art house, classicism and personal style, but never quite where the audience expect him.

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