

## Directors of the Year

## Jacques Audiard by Nina Caplan



Here is a question that the CV of Jacques Audiard begs – one he may spend his entire career trying to answer: if you are the child of privilege, the son of a successful screenwriter who grew up outside Paris with le tout French film industry wandering through your lovely home, why do you end up obsessed with gangsters?

There is a threefold issue of inheritance here: personal, political and cinematic. Audiard's father, Michel, made his name writing screenplays with names like *Cop or Hood* and *Crooks In Clover*; he was particularly valued for the snap of his slang, a skill his son has inherited, although one that subtitles muffle. In politics, Audiard has made clear that he finds French attitudes despicable: *A Self-Made Hero* (*Un héros très discret*) deals with the pervasive fiction that France in the Second World War was a country full of Resistance heroes (as Mathieu Kassovitz, who plays the self-fictionalising hero of the title, has pointed out, if everyone in France had been a Resistance fighter, there would never have been a war). Audiard's most recent film, the superb prison drama *A Prophet* (*Un prophète*), looks at the injustices (including

racial divisions so draconian they don't require bars) within the prison system. The director is not a propagandist; these are the subjects that interest him, and he invariably uses them to service a shapely and romantic story. But it is less surprising, when you consider his problems with the French rule of law, that his characters should try to work around or outside it.

Cinematically, of course, France has as robust a lineage of gangster movies as America. Here again, subtitles let the Anglophone audience down: when Vincent Cassel's hood in *Read My Lips* (*Sur mes lèvres*) talks about 'les biftons' (the dosh), he is showing himself a good cinematic son of Jean Gabin and his 'grisbi' (dough) – just as his creator is demonstrating his own linguistic lineage (Gabin, the quintessential French gangster, was one of the friends of his father's wandering through that childhood home, and Audiard père wrote dialogue for him).

Jacques Audiard was born in 1952 in Paris, into a family of artists (his uncle and brother both also work in the film industry, and the sculptor Michel Audiard is another relative). He tried to turn his back on the family tradition,



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claiming he would only go into film ‘when I fail at everything else’ and studying literature and philosophy with a possible view to becoming a teacher. However, things didn’t turn out that way and he slipped into editing, then writing and eventually directing. ‘As a writer you lack liberty,’ he has said, ‘so it is natural to try to gain more autonomy. I did it in three bounds by becoming a producer and then a director.’ His wife, Marion Vernoux, is also a writer-director; the two collaborated on the script of *Venus Beauty Institute* but other than that appear to have stayed out of each other’s professional lives. Audiard has, however, created a cinematic family for himself, perhaps in part homage to *la famille Audiard*, or maybe just because he tends to deal with anxiety-provoking topics; either way, his composer, Alexandre Desplat, and editor, Juliette Welfling, have worked on all five of the films he has directed. Other crew, and several actors, also pop up more than once in what is still, after all, a sparse oeuvre: Audiard was 42 when he directed his first film, *See How They Fall* (*Regarde les hommes tomber*), about a naïve young man (Mathieu Kassovitz) who becomes an assassin out of hero-worship for a played-out old gambler (Jean-Louis Trintignant). Fifteen years on (and despite having named John Huston as his favourite director, partly on the grounds that Huston slipped so easily between genres), Audiard is still making gangster films.

Or is he? A gangster belongs to a gang; Audiard’s characters are invariably isolated – in fact it is their wish to join in, to belong, that leads them into criminal behaviour in the first place. Once there, these stymied individuals at last find an outlet for their hitherto untapped potential: in *A Self-Made Hero*, Albert (Mathieu Kassovitz), having failed to write a novel, gets to rewrite his own life; deaf, underrated Carla (Emmanuelle Devos) in *Read My Lips* can at last put her impressive talent for negotiation as well as her lipreading skills to good use – and win a man’s appreciation for both; Malik (Tahar Rahim) in *A Prophet* discovers his formidable business abilities in the course of his struggle to survive the prison system. Even Tom

(Romaine Duris), the thwarted pianist in *The Beat That My Heart Skipped* (*De battre mon coeur s’est arrêté*), is very good at being a thug – at least until his love of classical music reasserts itself and his struggle for survival takes on a different emphasis.

Certainly, though, Audiard’s characters tend to work outside the law. This seems less a tip of the trilby to daddy (fathers tend to get short shrift in the films themselves: either they’re inadequate or they’re invisible) than a wish to zoom in on the transactions that make up a life – gangsters, after all, play openly with power. They know that self-reinvention is expensive, in every sense, and they chalk the cost up more clearly than the rest of us.

They also use their brains fully, if unconventionally. The Audiard character is a chancer, a bright guy (or, in the case of Devos’s Carla in *Read My Lips*, girl) afire with warped promise and incendiary disappointment. He is a romantic bright enough to know the dangers of that trait (rose-coloured spectacles obscure the view, and he needs clear sight in order to know when to duck). Only Kassovitz’s character in *See How They Fall* lacks this intelligence (he has learning difficulties). But Kassovitz’s Lieutenant-Colonel in *A Self-Made Hero*, dreaming himself up a past as a Resistance hero; Vincent Cassel’s ex-con hoodlum and Emmanuelle Devos’s deaf secretary in *Read My Lips* – an unlikely but enchanting couple of opportunists if ever there was one – and Romaine Duris’s thuggish,



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stymied piano player in *The Beat That My Heart Skipped* all pounce on opportunities and wrestle them into submission. Malik, the prophet of Audiard's most recent film (if *A Prophet* can be said to have an actual prophet), is no deviation. An unmoored youth who has wound up in prison for some unspecified crime, he grabs every chance offered to improve his lot and, despite being an Arab, winds up an integral part of the Corsican-run internal machinery of the prison. He may or may not be a prophet, but Malik is certainly a profiteer.



**Read My Lips**

So Audiard, in both the personal and the historical sense, has inherited his preoccupation with gangsters, and he is busily making the most of it. He is not a realist in the larger sense (his characters always get a happy ending, of sorts, which, given their multifarious disadvantages and misdemeanours, is about as fantastical as it gets), but on a more intimate level, he is. As a writer and director, he seems to be fuelled by an awareness of his own luck – a sense of ‘there but for the grace of God go I’ that’s as potent as Benzedrine, and his characters are almost all graceless versions of their creator. They have powerful minds but have been taught only to use their fists (his films all bring up the biggest opposition in so-called civilisation, the one framed so beautifully in John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: the gun versus the law); they long to communicate but have no idea how. So Kassovitz’s self-made hero writes himself – his invented persona is essentially a love



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letter to the world, which makes it doubly bitter when he falls in love and realises that proper communication is impossible without truth. Audiard, the arch communicator, writes the rage of frustrated interaction really well: he knows that every love story is about the attempt, in a sense, to read someone else’s lips.

It is this rage – born from the fear of remaining unheard, and therefore unloved – that causes Audiard’s characters to lash out. Some of them use guns, some their hands; it’s an opposition rendered clear in the case of Tom, in *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*, because his hands are used both as weapons and as instruments. Violence, after all, is a form of communication too – one that can be as powerful as speech. Or screenwriting.

Just as a punch is a way of telling somebody something, all art is an attempt to make contact, and *The Beat That My Heart Skipped* may be Audiard’s saddest film because, while Duris escapes the seedy world of underhand property dealing, he becomes not a pianist but an amanuensis. Someone has heard him – Miao Lin (Linh Dam Pham), who was his piano teacher. But the world never will. The world doesn’t quite hear Audiard as they might, either, because most of his dialogue is not listened to but read, on the screen, in translation. The title of the Duris film is a perfect example of this: in French, it is both poetic (*De battre mon cœur s’est arrêté*) and practical: *arrêter*, to stop, is the verb used when Duris’s Tom talks of having quit

piano playing. The whole film is about what has stopped that shouldn't have – his piano playing, his relationship with his father, his mother's life and therefore her playing – and what needs to begin. The awkward English title keeps the lovely dual meaning of *battre* – Tom beats time and beats people up – but it loses a great deal, not least the fluidity of the French. In the end, whatever your personal facility or the budget allocated to your self-expression, communication is never as easy as it sounds.

The darkness at the heart of all Audiard's films may spring partly from the knowledge of this dour truth. Tom will never be a pianist; Malik has become a link in a chain of violence that may one day end when another young upstart supercedes him as he has done with the Corsican capo, César (Niels Arestrup). In *Read My Lips*, Devos and Cassel may walk off into the sunset, hand in hand with a garbage bag of ill-gotten cash slung over each shoulder, but will he manage to stay straight? Is he really a candidate for the calm coupledness she seems to crave? Won't these two strong personalities end up clashing – always assuming that some greedy associate of the thugs they've ripped off doesn't come looking for payback and snuff those personalities out? As for Albert Dehousse, the self-made hero, he pays his debt to society but Audiard, in his most self-conscious film to date, throws up more questions about his character's future than he answers. Various talking heads disagree on what happened to Dehousse after prison; Jean-Louis Trintignant, supposedly the old Dehousse,



**Read My Lips**

stares at the camera and asks us if he looks natural (has he made all of this up, too? Well, in a sense, yes). And most unsettling of all, the two lovely women Albert has romanced, lied to and abandoned forgive him and each other so enthusiastically that the whole scene becomes a joke. Sandrine Kiberlain and Anouk Grinberg gaze adoringly through the bars at their Albert (who has been put away, in the end, not for large-scale fraud but for bigamy), before slinking off together – to have dinner? To have sex? Either seems possible.

With another director, this could be written off as irritating male fantasy (in France especially, it seems, the myth of the unknowable but sexually available woman is still going strong). But Audiard is good at women. Devos's character in *Read My Lips* is superbly drawn (and deservedly won her a clutch of awards), but as importantly, she is the equal of the men he writes: Audiard's mistrust of hypocrisy (the anti-Semites who then claimed to have been Resistance fighters, the anti-Arab sentiment that spills over into the prison system) extends to sexism as well. It may be his finely tuned contempt for two-facedness that makes him such a sensitive portrayer of people caught between two worlds. Carla is a woman in an office full of men, a singleton, possibly even a virgin, in an atmosphere where even her boorish coworkers are married and cheating on their wives; and a deaf person surrounded by those who can hear, but who don't listen. These are powerful disadvantages... or are they simply powerful? After all, they barely see her, while she even sees what they say. And as anyone who has ever seen a gangster film knows, knowledge is power – especially knowledge that others don't realise you have. Her uncomfortable position between worlds – the perch of the eternal outsider – is the most useful asset she has.

All Audiard's people are like this: bold yet vulnerable, cunning yet needy, on the outside staring hungrily in like a succession of little match girls. The actors he chooses both portray and reflect this: he has said that he



**A Self-Made Hero**

likes to cast virile men who nonetheless have something feminine about them, and Devos is a woman with a streak of masculinity about her. These people may move between worlds – negotiating public and private spaces, trying to adapt themselves but also manipulate others in their ceaseless quest for a better, more whole, more satisfying life – but they have also internalised that duality. They are masculine and feminine, open and closed, taken for granted yet never really accepted, lawbreakers who despise the criminal game and most of the other players (they are liars, but never hypocrites). Albert in *A Self-Made Hero* is a coward and a fantasist; he's almost pathologically detached, which enables him to play on everyone else's weaknesses, yet he concentrates all his abilities on the project to belong. Paul and Carla in *Read My Lips* are quintessential outsiders, at war with both the office – bourgeois respectability, if with a little baksheesh here and there – and the nightclub, where money comes in black plastic and the wrong move will get you not fired but killed. In *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*, Tom's division is clearest of all: he wants to express himself in music, to live for art, and to jettison the hardscrabble world of petty crime that is his father's legacy (his blowsy dad is almost a caricature of human failure – chain smoking, uncommunicative, a terrible businessman and forever getting his son further mixed up in the kind of persuasion that leaves scars). And Malik, who comes from nowhere, is the distilled essence of not-belonging: the Corsicans call him Arab, the Arabs deride him for working for the Corsicans and nobody else

cares if he lives, dies – or rots in jail, which is somewhere between the two. Is it their dual nationality, so to speak, that makes these people so preoccupied with communicating – learning languages (Malik) or dialects (Albert) or codes (Carla) or scores (Tom)? Their creator grew up in a dual world – a bourgeois home made comfortable by gangster slang – and his anxieties about communicating are as fascinating as they are profound: they impel him to remind us, incessantly, that he is trying to communicate – and that what he wants to say and what we choose to hear may not be the same. It's a common anxiety, of course, but rarely so elegantly played out: as director, Audiard will obscure part of the frame, or have a character speak directly to the audience, or fiddle with the sound as Devos does with her hearing aid. His soundtracks soothe us with strings even as he messes with our minds: in *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*, the jerky electro Romaine Duris listens to, brow furrowed as if having to concentrate on liking it, speaks eloquently of the kind of thug Tom isn't; the musicians we see onscreen in *A Self-Made Hero* remind us that Albert isn't the only person making up stories – or that, as Jean-Luc Godard put it, 'the only reality in a film is the reality of its own making'. Audiard's films are exceptionally stylish but the style often feels as if it's there to make that core anxiety palatable, like an insecure man who dresses beautifully – or a hoodlum whose mouthiness and swagger send signals about his toughness, his impregnability. Inside, of course, he's as soft and scared as the rest of



**The Beat That My Heart Skipped**

us. It is Audiard's great achievement to offer us both at once: gangster cool and the hot flush of self-doubt. This is what great cinema can do that people, even great people, can't: express itself fully and show only its best side, at the same time. This is what art has that violence doesn't – the capacity to eat cake and have it, or to fire guns yet kill no one.

If you're an artist, your elaborate lies may win you not a jail term but a clutch of Césars, international renown and the honour of having your fifth film represent your country in the 2010 Academy Award nominations. As Albert

Dehousse puts it, 'la plus belle vie est celle qu'on invente', and Audiard – pen in hand, camera to eye and gun at his back, invents lives of peerless beauty. 'When death comes,' he has the old Dehousse say, 'we'll lie to it.' Death keeps coming. Audiard, we hope, has many more lies up his sleeve.

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## Jacques Audiard filmography

[feature film directing credits only]

1994

### REGARDE LES HOMMES

#### TOMBER (See How They Fall)

Script: Jacques Audiard, Alain Le Henry. Photography: Gérard Sterin.

Production Design: Jacques Rouxel.

Editing: Juliette Welfling. Music:

Alexandre Desplat. Players: Jean-Louis Trintignant (Marx), Jean Yanne (Simon), Mathieu Kassovitz (Johnny), Bulle Ogier (Louise), Christine Pascal (Sandrine), Yvon Back (Mickey), Yves Verhoeven (Homosexual), Marc Citti (Informant), Roger Mollien (Marlon), Pierre Guillemin (Mr. Vernoux), Philippe du Janerand (Merlin), Rywka Wajsbrot (Mme Rajenski), Blats (Donata). Produced by Didier Haudepin. 90 mins

1996

### UN HÉROS TRÈS DISCRET (A Self-Made Hero)

Script: Jacques Audiard, Alain Le Henry. Photography: Jean-Marc Fabre. Production Design: Michel Vandestien. Editing: Juliette

Welfling. Music: Alexandre Desplat.

Players: Mathieu Kassovitz (Albert Dehousse), Anouk Grinberg (Servane), Sandrine Kiberlain

(Yvette), Jean-Louis Trintignant (Albert Dehousse), Albert Dupontel (Dionnet), Nadia Barentin (The General's Wife), Bernard Bloch (Ernst), François Chattot (Louvier), Philippe Duclos (Caron), Danièle Lebrun (Madame Dehousse), Armand de Baudry d'Asson (Englishman). Produced by Patrick Godeau. 107 mins

2001

### SUR MES LÈVRES (Read My Lips)

Script: Jacques Audiard, Tonino Benacquista. Photography: Mathieu Vadepied. Production Design:

Michel Barthélémy. Editing:

Juliette Welfling. Music: Alexandre Desplat. Players: Vincent Cassel (Paul), Emmanuelle Devos (Carla), Olivier Perrier (Masson), Olivier Bonamy (Annie), Bernard Alane (Morel), Céline Samie (Josie), Pierre Diot (Keller), François Loriquet (Jean-François), Serge Boutleroff (Mammouth), David Saracino (Richard Carambo), Christophe Vandavelde (Louis Carambo). Produced by Philippe Carcassonne, Jean-Louis Livi. 118 mins

2005

### DE BATTRE MON COEUR S'EST ARRÊTÉ

(The Beat That My Heart Skipped)

Script: Jacques Audiard, Tonino Benacquista. Photography: Stéphane Fontaine. Production Design: François Emmanuelli. Editing: Juliette Welfling. Music: Alexandre Desplat. Players: Romain Duris (Thomas Seyr), Niels Arestrup (Robert Seyr), Jonathan Zaccà (Fabrice), Gilles Cohen (Sami), Linh Dan Pham (Miao Lin), Aure Atika (Aline), Emmanuelle Devos (Chris), Anton Yakovlev (Minskov), Mélanie Laurent (Minskov's Girlfriend). Produced by Pascal Caucheteux. 108 mins

2009

### UN PROPHÈTE (A Prophet)

Script: Jacques Audiard, Thomas Bidegain. Photography: Stéphane Fontaine. Production Design: Michel Barthélémy. Editing: Juliette Welfling. Music: Alexandre Desplat. Players: Tahar Rahim (Malik El Djebena), Niels Arestrup (César Luciani), Adel Bencherif (Ryad), Hichem Yacoubi (Reyeb), Reda Kateb (Jordi), Jean-Philippe Ricci (Vettori), Gilles Cohen (Prof), Antoine Basler (Pilicci), Leïla Bekhti (Djamila), Pierre Leccia (Sampiero), Foued Nassah (Antaro), Jean-Emmanuel Pagni (Santi), Frédéric Graziani (Chef de détention), Slimane Dazi (Lattrache). Produced by Lauranne Bourrachot, Martine Cassinelli. 155 mins