



An Alternative to Hollywood? EuropaCorp's 'Blockbusters' and the Global Audience

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Translated by Daniel Morgan

Films produced by EuropaCorp, especially those conceived and written by Luc Besson, have achieved remarkable success outside of France, appealing to a global audience. Encouraged by the international success of *Lucy* (Besson, 2014), however, the company ran into increasing difficulty meeting its business targets in the following years, which saw a series of strategic errors and flops at the box office (Meir 2020). This chapter will examine the identities, strengths and weaknesses of these peculiar 'blockbusters', which have unusually large budgets for French cinema, even though they are produced at 'half the price of Hollywood' (Le Guilcher 2016, 178), according to opinions published by English-speaking users on the internet platform IMDb. How are these films, stigmatised for their supposed similarity to Hollywood by critics in France, perceived by the

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members of this online community, which is mainly made up of users from English-speaking countries but includes viewers from across the world? Is the popularity of these films attributed to their origin in France and/or Europe, or, on the contrary, to their use of a neo-Hollywood style intended to encourage their export? What criticisms are aimed at these culturally hybrid films by audiences whose members are themselves culturally diverse?

My goal is to address these questions, building on a previous study that examined EuropaCorp's branding and production strategies by looking at their reception on IMDb (Pillard 2020). This analysis complements that study by considering the possibility, sometimes put forward by internet users and—more cautiously—by researchers, that the films written by Besson offer an 'alternative' to Hollywood cinema. This chapter will question this notion and its implications by conducting a 'concrete observation of cultural exchanges that use and take place on the internet' (Leveratto 2019, 43–44). The hypothesis is particularly ripe for examination since the earliest academic research focusing on the studio, published when it was on the upswing in the second half of the 2000s, had already begun to question the credibility of the company's 'quest to offer a viable popular alternative to Hollywood' (Vanderschelden 2007, 47). I thus aim to gauge whether and to what extent this aspiration has actually been achieved by looking at the abundant sources available in the 'user reviews' section of the IMDb website, where each feature film can generate hundreds of evaluations and comments. Drawing on a qualitative examination of about 1000 reviews published between 1998 and 2022, referring to a corpus of 20 films written and sometimes directed by Besson, I will divide the discussion into three parts. After demonstrating how these films are more often seen as European than associated with any form of American culture, I will assess the extent to which their reception on IMDb throughout the period correlates—or otherwise—with the 'allure of otherness' (Sexton 2017) that they appear to offer. Finally, I will analyse the increasingly negative character of the films' reception in recent years (2017–2022).¹

AMERICAN-STYLE BLOCKBUSTERS?

Representing the most overtly commercial part of EuropaCorp's output, the films over which Besson exerts a large amount of creative control have a consistent, homogeneous, industrially produced appearance, earning him a reputation in France as 'the champion of an American-style

commercial cinema' (Delon and Vinuela 2020, 7). This nevertheless takes in a range of productions as varied as those in the studio's entire catalogue, which includes films in English as well as explicitly French ones, with a gamut of budgets and different international ambitions (Vanderschelden 2008, 92–93). Charlie Michael (2020, 221) has recently analysed these editorial strategies by showing how the studio, far from adopting a uniform mode of production, has relied on a range of stylistic practices: he distinguishes between 'major' and 'minor' investment in the characteristics associated with Hollywood blockbusters, as well as between contrasting stances favouring global or local distribution. As Fanny Beuré (2020, 84–85) has observed, EuropaCorp's production methods changed between 2000 and 2010, 'with an increasingly large proportion of high-budget films'. This trend 'is both the cause and the consequence of EuropaCorp's international ambitions: while the studio produces high-budget films in order to target foreign markets, these films' revenues in France alone will not be enough to make them profitable' (85–86).

The films written and in some cases directed by Besson are hardly ever seen as 'American' on IMDb. Only a tiny minority of users, notably with regard to the franchise *Taken*, believe that they are commenting on Hollywood films, such as one person writing about the first episode: 'When will Hollywood studios actually comprehend the concept of "subtle"? Yet again here is a most stupid film [...]' ('*Taken*', michaelmouse1, 22 November 2015). Aside from these exceptions, the national origin of each production is clearly identified by the platform's users, who indeed are often experts: '*Kiss of the Dragon* is a hyperactive martial arts movie with a heavy European feel' ('*Kiss of the Dragon*', Shawn Watson, 27 June 2004); 'This movie is FUNNY, at times a little cheesy (which we can also call FRENCH)' ('*Wasabi*', Quicksand, 23 October 2004). The films' identity seems all the more obvious given that they bear the marks of a certain internationalisation: *Taxi* is thus viewed as 'the french [*sic*] version of US blockbuster car movies' ('*Taxi*', Grumpy Pheasant, 3 January 2011), while *District 13* is described as 'a frantic rehash of "Escape from NY", rightly realized in French style' (ma-cortes, 2 June 2013) following 'the recent *Ong Bak* trend of action movies [...], albeit in this case with a French flavor' ('*District 13*', CelluloidRehab, 13 October 2005). National association can also become a benchmark for positioning these films with respect to global film production, as can be seen in two comments about productions with considerably different budgets and aspirations: 'While this movie is not a major Hollywood production, the director did a

tremendous job' ('*Michel Vaillant*', marsbetr, 21 October 2012); 'For an international French movie, "Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets" is a very ambitious project' ('*Valerian*', aquascape, 28 March 2018). The company is credited with making a true effort to compete with Hollywood, especially when it comes to its established expertise in action films: "Anna" is another bug [*sic*] budget movie (for European standards) and looks and feels that way, with gorgeous scenery and photography throughout' ('*Anna*', paul-allaer, 29 June 2019). Starting in the mid-2000s, numerous users agreed that 'Luc Besson is one of Europe's biggest action producers' ('*The Transporter*', dee.reid, 31 August 2005), a judgement that was confirmed in the following years: the success of the *Taken* saga (2008–2015) seemingly proved that 'Europe is suddenly a rising force in the action/thriller genre' ('*Taken 2*', diac228, 1 February 2010), and in 2016 Besson was deemed 'responsible for just about every decent French action flick in the last decade' ('*Taken*', Leofwine_draca, 5 November 2016).

This ambition can backfire on Besson, however. On the one hand, EuropaCorp productions sometimes disappoint viewers who see them as hewing too closely to models from the English-speaking world, thus failing to provide the image expected of French cinema (though these opinions are in the minority on IMDb): 'This film, although French, feels too Americanized, if it isn't gun toting guys holding their guns at acute angles, its [*sic*] the overhyped car chases' (modius, 15 September 2000); 'Its drawback may be just that: it being French, I expected more: subtlety, intelligent humour, sociological points, dark, seedy characters. Instead, we get a good American commercial movie' (R. Ignacio Litardo, 27 May 2010). On the other hand, the studio's aspirations to compete with American cinema on its home turf can also prompt ironic opinions: in the same way that *Taxi* is only 'an ersatz of the American equivalent', which is 'an already mediocre product' (Grumpy Pheasant, 3 January 2011), *The Transporter* 'was watchable don't get me wrong, but as Hollywood trashy fun, minus the word fun mostly and it's just Hollywood trash' (blacklist-1, 7 August 2010). The most vociferous users critique Besson as harshly as the French press: 'I am very pleased to know that's at last the final chapter of this juicy, fancy crap trilogy. Product one more time of Europacorp [*sic*] crap factory. Luc Besson's crap factory' ('*Taken 3*', searchanddestroy-1, 21 January 2015).

Still, positive reviews are more common, which demonstrates that audience approval of the films written by Besson is not due to their conformity with Hollywood standards but to their differences and the distance they

maintain. Attracted by an atypical creative approach that they regard as more innovative and entertaining than the one seen in American blockbusters, fans highlight the craft of these films that are mainly shot in Europe, an aspect that is reflected in their modest budgets (with the exception of *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* [henceforth *Valerian*], which we will come back to) as well as in their artistic approach. 'Freed' from Hollywood's restrictions, these films have greater leeway to experiment with modes of narration that emphasise spectacular action that is less justified by the plot and less standardised in its execution, as one comment published at the time of *Taxi*'s release illustrates: 'Give this to some blockbuster US outfit and they'll create some half-assed dross that feels like walking through bubblegum' (RICH!, 3 December 1999).

This kind of assessment is particularly common in reaction to Besson's French-language action comedies, praised for their efficiency and simplicity: 'Also the car chases are mostly pretty simple and not full of the excesses of Hollywood movies where everything MUST crash and everything MUST blow up in big style' (bob the moo, 26 July 2001); 'Sure it may not have the high budget thrills that Hollywood seem to think are necessary in such films but for breathtaking action and some hilarious comedy moments *Taxi* is amazing' (cooper-dale, 3 May 2006). The recurring use of the adjective 'refreshing' indicates a great deal of appreciation for the only attempt to offer something different from the constantly repeated formulas and opulent aesthetics of Hollywood: '*Taxi* was a refreshing change from the usual onslaught of Hollywood's big budget action thrillers and the deluded notion that "bigger and more extravagant is better"' (Silver_Lynx, 28 November 2008). It is all the more remarkable that these comments can also be found about a film like *Valerian*, which, despite its greater adherence to the economic model of global blockbusters, is still different in the opinion of many users, in terms of its entertainment value and the financial risk taken to produce it: 'For a change we aren't looking at a pre-meditated, box-office driven, risk-free effort to make a lot of money. We are looking at an alternative effort to make a box-office hit, with a more personal vision, also more individualistic, maybe more European?' (joao_filipe_rodrigues, 9 August 2017).

Comments like these suggest that EuropaCorp is capable of appropriating the idiom of Hollywood cinema in order to promote its own brand, telling stories that are similar in structure but often different in their narrative choices, responding to viewers in the USA and elsewhere who are 'seeking out alternatives to American cinema because it has become so

formulaic and awful' ('*District 13*', Matt, 14 June 2005). The reception of these 'popcorn' films by an audience of cosmopolitan film buffs, mostly male users between the ages of 30 and 40,² also reveals the significance of a second dichotomy, pitting the preference for genre films made with a European touch against the taste for critically acclaimed, award-winning international art cinema. Countless fans, often responding to negative comments, express their delight that Besson aspires neither to offer social commentary with his films nor to match the great works of classic cinema:

People people people [...] anyone expecting *Citizen Kane* out of this movie needs to have their head examined. BUT [...] if you were looking for a thrilling, fast paced roller-coaster, that's what you will find. ('*District 13*', Matt, 14 June 2005)

Hamlet it ain't but of its—very limited kind—better than many. So there you have it: *Transporter* is not *The Merchant Of Venice*, *On Golden Pond*, *ET*, *Schindler's List*, *The Godfather* or any of the other films which get consistently good ratings. It is just another macho piece of b*****s. The important difference is that, of its kind, it is rather more impressive [...] Hence my high rating. ('*The Transporter*', patrick powell, 19 November 2011)

Aficionados attribute these productions' 'strangely dumb likability' ('*The Transporter*', Mr-Fusion, 26 November 2015) to the fact that they have no pretensions to the 'pseudo-intellectualism' that wins Oscars:

Forget about Oscars, plot points, or coherence. [...] Do you want to see him find his daughter and take down the scum who took her? Of course you do. ('*Taken*', happyendingrocks, 24 June 2009)

Pretension and all the pseudo intellectual pretense we leave to the Oscar voters, film fan's [*sic*] often just want a empty shallow piece of entertainment and escapism that delivers the good's [*sic*]. ('*Taken 3*', georgewilliamnoble, 22 October 2018)

The references mentioned here are particularly revealing of an audience that sees itself as embodying a form of alternative cinephilia, 'affirming a heterodox aesthetic position' close to that of a 'reparation cinephilia' that Laurent Jullier and Jean-Marc Leveratto (2010, 187) describe as the promotion of a viewpoint with 'a taste distinct from the norms of commercial cinema quality'. Although the authors state that this preference 'is mainly

associated with young viewers', the remarks published on IMDb in this case reveal an older, mostly male audience declaring their taste for films that are 'mindless' and 'entertaining for us explosion loving fanboys with the minds of 10 year olds' (*The Transporter*, Superunknovn, 1 January 2006).

A EUROPEANNESS AS SEDUCTIVE AS IT IS STRANGE

These unconventional works thus offer their fans an ideal way to discover French and European cinema: they are 'a great introduction of it to someone who may have been avoiding it because of the wrong idea that all European cinema is dull and pretentious drama' (*'Wasabi'*, Wizard-8, 1 March 2003). The frequency of this kind of opinion shows that many of the characteristics perceived as 'American' by the French press can appeal to audiences around the world, who see a kind of French or European touch in these same qualities. This demonstrates the fluid identity of these films and their ability to elicit different notions of quality depending on the context of their reception. Many commenters emphasise that 'it's good to see some really good European films for a change' (*'Taxi 2'*, Lord Onim, 7 March 2003), while at the same time expressing their surprise that these films bear little resemblance to what they expected from European cinema. This is particularly visible in two reviews, concerning *Taxi* and *District 13 Ultimatum*:

I bought this film by accident, not realising it was French, and when I did I just stuck it in a cupboard and thought I'd pass it off onto someone else. Some months later I actually open it up and stick it in, thinking I'd may as well see what I'd bought. I am VERY glad I did, this film is excellent, and put me onto the path of discovering foreign cinema by starting at the best. (cooper-dale, 3 May 2006)

I saw *District B13* randomly in the movies when it first came out with my friend with no pretense only knowing it was an European action flick. I was impressed with it. It was the first time I had seen [parkour] and it was just electrifying especially mixed with intense martial arts. (rivertam26, 3 January 2013)

In order to understand the value of the often unrecognised French/European origin of these productions (Archer 2015, 187), it is useful to

consider the reception of the othering mechanisms they set up, which researchers analysing EuropaCorp have thus far either glossed over or assigned a limited role. Isabelle Vanderschelden (2007, 47), for example, states that the international action films written by Besson, which take place ‘in cosmopolitan or spectacular French locations serving as attractive backdrops for the benefit of foreign audiences’, are nevertheless characterised by a form of ‘deterritorialisation’ because they ‘blend together different nationalities and genre conventions to the extent that national characteristics become virtually imperceptible’. Fanny Beuré (2020, 93–94) contrasts ‘English-language films with international stars’ that, ‘to varying extents, manage to compete and earn profits on the international market’ with ‘French films that use their “French exoticism” as the driving force behind their efforts to exist outside of France’.

Nuancing such claims or filling them out in more depth is a precarious task, thanks at once to the perpetual risk involved in extrapolating generalisations from specific examples—whether these are drawn from films or from critiques—and to the difficulties posed by using a term as contested as *exoticism* to explain transnational reception processes. Associated with travel, in recent years this notion has become a key concept in studies of ‘world cinema’ to designate both sources of spectacle based on the encounter with the unfamiliar that global cinema allows a transnational public to domesticate, and a ‘mode of aesthetic perception (...) which effectively manufactures otherness’ (Huggan 2001 in Berghahn 2021, 224). The widespread existence of the term, and of what Jamie Sexton calls ‘the *exoticist assumption*’, poses, however, different problems: underlining the fact that researchers who engage in this type of interpretation ‘rarely provide[s] any evidence from actual reception processes’, Sexton emphasises that ‘the appeal of difference does not necessarily coincide with exoticism’ and that we should ‘beware of assuming that such modes of exotic consumption are the only ways in which transnational cult films are perceived’ (Sexton 2017, 5–19). Without ignoring these conceptual difficulties, which point to the need to justify terms’ usage through reference to the discursive extracts analysed or the sometimes significant differences between the various types of productions that bring diversity (including cultural diversity) to the company’s catalogue, the observations cited above concerning EuropaCorp productions can be re-examined in light of related comments published by ordinary viewers on IMDb. In particular, three recurring motifs are often discussed and appreciated for their otherness—sometimes linked to the perception of an ‘exotic’

quality—even though they also sometimes elicit negative comments, thus revealing potential strategic weaknesses as well as concrete risks the films are exposed to because of their global audience: their use of language, their roots in Europe and their hybrid style.

First of all, for the films shot in French, language appears to be a potential source of enjoyment for viewers. At the same time, it can also be unstable, awkward or even a source of unexpected outcomes when the films are distributed in the international market. IMDb users who enjoyed the first two *Taxi* films explain:

It is still very 'French' and is an easy way into 'foreign' cinema for those of us who speak no other language than English. ('*Taxi*', Matthew Monk, 23 August 2000)

At first I expected this film to be boring, because they speak French, which I don't understand. But too [*sic*] my big surprise I loved it, because French sounds so funny when spoken in comedic situations. The Frenchmen are so hilarious [...] ('*Taxi 2*', martymaster, 27 July 2001)

It is interesting to note that what these viewers see as the light, humorous quality of the French language, certainly accentuated by the clichéd aspect of the dialogue, makes this cinema accessible to an international audience even though its comedy and quintessentially French character might suggest that it is unexportable. At a time when streaming platforms were not as widespread as they are today, it also introduced viewers to the practice of watching the French-language version with subtitles: 'Okay so if you want a non-art-house introduction to foreign cinema to get used to reading subtitles then check this movie out' ('*District 13 Ultimatum*', WakenPayne, 27 April 2014). Evaluations of the subtitles are mostly positive, confirming the expertise of the viewers who used them. Language still represents a major challenge, however, as one British user points out in his comments on *District 13*: 'The whole movie is spoken in French with English subtitles which means it is not exactly audience friendly! Also, it means you have to concentrate on the subtitles as well as the picture which means it is likely you will miss some of the action!' (Chris Sparks, 18 July 2006).

IMDb users tend to react positively to subtitles, while fearing that they might drive away part of the audience; however, they roundly condemn the poor quality of the dubbing, which they feel is the result of cost

cutting. ‘Unfortunately, I did see the dubbed version rather than subtitled, and I’m sure that took away quite a bit of the quality’ (*Taxi*, chicagopoetry, 8 November 2011); ‘The blu-ray seems to default to the English dubbed version. Big mistake. Watch this in the original French with subtitles. The performances are much better’ (*District 13*, runamokprods, 17 November 2011). Viewers especially notice the inconsistencies produced by dubbing in films with highly diverse, cosmopolitan casts:

The dubbing is what finally kills the movie. There may be a French and an international version, but the latter is a complete mess-up. French actors speaking English (with a French accent); other French actors’ voices are dubbed into British English or American English [...] How could this mess come about? Simple, they wanted to sell the film to an international (read English-speaking) audience. Shame on you, Luc Besson, for getting involved in this disastrous film project!’ (*Michel Vaillant*², bandofoutsiders, 31 March 2004)

It is understandable, then, that the company has repositioned itself, favouring English-language films geared at the international market, while at the same time focusing on the visual attractiveness of its films.

A second type of otherness, which comments sometimes link to exotism in the sense of ‘a particular mode of aesthetic perception that is simultaneously anchored in the filmic text and elicited in the spectator in the process of transnational reception’ (Berghahn 2021, 222), arises from the use of urban spaces that are different from those that frequently appear in American films: ‘Gorgeous scenery in the French Riviera, beautiful exotic women taking revenge on their pimp, and a Luc Besson story combine with an extended Audi product placement to make an entertaining action movie’ (*The Transporter Refueled*, phd_travel, 27 February 2016). IMDb reviewers’ valorisation of scenes shot on location in iconic French settings, as well as in other countries considered attractive or picturesque by English-speaking Western audiences, reveals just how much positive reviews are associated with the promise and the pleasure of viewing these spaces: an Australian user, for instance, explains that he ‘[likes] how and where this movie was presented. The director shows off Paris in many ways, such as landmarks like the Eiffel Tower, which is cleverly incorporated through a fighting sequence’ (*Kiss of the Dragon*, Old Joe, 20 November 2002); a Taiwanese viewer explains that ‘here in Taiwan it [*Taxi 2*] was a hit. It’s fresh and clean, and shows some nice French

locations' (axraupp, 3 April 2002); another user, likely American, notes that *The Transporter* is 'easy to watch' and 'engaging' precisely because 'it's set in the beautiful French riviera where we are once again reunited with Jason Statham in another action/crime packed movie' (happytoms, 5 November 2019). When films fail to live up to this promise, viewers lament their blandness, as was the case with *Taken 3* (set in Los Angeles, whereas its two predecessors were set in Paris and Istanbul, respectively):

Wish *Taken 3* had used the European or east European countries to shoot the film, at least the topology of the terrains, the cityscapes, the landscapes, their highways, subways and autobahns systems, the streets and the lanes would be different and not so boring like l.a.; what we have seen million times already. (LogicIsEverything, 13 January 2015)

Even though 'no exotic location is half the fun gone' ('*Taken 3*', phd_travel, 9 January 2015), as one user puts it, images of new, different locations are not always greeted positively. The location shots of the French Riviera in *The Transporter Refueled* (Camille Delamarre, 2015), highlighted in the film's promotional materials (Fig. 1), are designed to produce a form of visual pleasure but were still criticised for their lack of originality. What was new in the early 2000s seems clichéd and tacky 15 years later, both for audiences unfamiliar with the earlier saga (in the first quotation below) as well as for fans:

A movie like this might have worked for audiences during the early 90's [*sic*]. But it's past 2010 and it's just really generic and kind of outdated. (KineticSeoul, 23 December 2015)

I couldn't get rid of the feeling that I was watching a faint imitation of the original. There was really nothing we haven't seen before. A clichéd film that looks like an extended commercial about Audi. This is what i call product placement. (peterp-450-298716, 1 March 2016)

A third source of cultural difference is the films' startling, hybrid aesthetic. Offering 'something Americans aren't used to seeing, but well worth a look' ('*Wasabi*', Quicksand, 23 October 2004), 'something with a little more style' ('*Taxi*', Leofwine_draca, 9 November 2016), the films are characterised by an 'in-your-face' visual intensity that draws attention to their unexpected mixing of cultures, linked to their cosmopolitan casts and incorporation of aspects of kung fu cinema. While 'Besson creates an



Fig. 1 The poster for *The Transporter Refueled* gives prominence to the film's setting on the French Riviera

evocative world of Euro-Asian textures and action beats', this 'charged, exciting and gratifying' show ('*Lucy*', aminifatimaaa, 4 March 2019) seems to appeal particularly to a male audience by featuring 'action dolls' with statuesque physiques and sexy outfits, whose performances emphasise a glamorous form of femininity. An example of this is the following comment on a scene from *Taxi 2* featuring Petra (Fig. 2), a German police-woman played by the Swedish actress and model Emma Sjöberg: 'Again from under the writing/producing banner of Luc Besson, it's little wonder that this is hardly high art. But then, only a French import would



Fig. 2 The showcasing of different ‘action dolls’ in *Taxi 2* is one aspect of such films’ hybrid aesthetics

feature a knickerless female police officer performing endless high kicks. And vive la France for that’ (margulanabutrlov, 23 March 2019). This kind of perspective can also be found more recently in the reception of *Anna*, with users stating that ‘something about strong ass-kicking women makes a movie more entertaining’ (bostonct, 22 June 2019).

While the hybrid form crafted by Besson, which is aimed particularly at male viewers, has the advantage of broadening EuropaCorp’s international audience, it can also be seen as unfocused, sloppy or even bizarre, even in cases where a film is appreciated for other reasons: ‘The cast are pretty good even if the international mix of actors all in Paris is a bit strange’ (*Kiss of the Dragon*, bob the moo, from the UK, 26 November 2004). This problem becomes more conspicuous when the ‘graft’ fails to take, as was the case with *Les Rivières pourpres 2*, which left many users perplexed: ‘The result looks like a strange pot with differently colored and flavored potions that do not really mix or combine well together’ (dromasca, 21 February 2006). These problems illustrate the difficulty of the task EuropaCorp has set for itself, summed up in the following terms in 2007 by co-founder Pierre-Ange Le Pogam: ‘The universal film that sells worldwide yet also has a strong identity? Our lives are spent searching for it!’ (Le Pogam 2007, 37). The studio’s success at reaching this ambition has been limited, as illustrated by the failure of *Valerian*. Ironically, the film is praised on IMDb for its visual inventiveness while also criticised for the lack of conformity of its script and cast to the norms of a worldwide blockbuster. One French viewer, who grew up with the comic book and

was reminded of moments from his childhood, explains that he ‘can understand the weirdness of this world for an American viewer’ (ericrochard, 23 July 2017). This view is confirmed by numerous other comments: ‘I wanted to like this movie. I did. It’s a weird combination of sci fi and epic high fantasy, but ... just ... Ehhh’ (invaderxan, 24 February 2018). The broad rejection of *Valerian* on IMDb, admittedly a special case, shows that the French/European touch and the personal mark of Luc Besson, two features that characterise EuropaCorp, are difficult to reconcile with their aspiration to universal appeal. It is as if Besson had somehow overstepped the bounds of his status as a producer of cheap, European action films by claiming to put on a show of the same calibre as those only Hollywood is capable of financing and producing. The comments of users who happily got their money’s worth from *The Transporter* or *Taken* are answered by those for whom *Valerian* fails to meet the standard one would expect from its budget: ‘Despite having a large budget this movie failed to provide a decent plotline’ (farhadalif, 24 November 2019); ‘It’s a cheap high school production of *Avatar*’ (refbumrulz, 19 February 2020).

CONCLUSION: A TENUOUS AMBITION, A DOWNWARD SLOPE

In light of the foregoing analysis, a definitive answer to my question remains elusive. As we have seen, taken individually, EuropaCorp productions can be viewed as an ‘alternative’ to Hollywood on IMDb. This is little more than a possible outcome, however, that applies only in certain cases. It is difficult to apply this label to the entirety of the company’s output, which is better described as encompassing a broad range of projects with uncertain outcomes rather than a single coherent alternative to American cinema. Moreover, the cultural instability of the studio’s films would appear to undermine their prospects of international success, as the company is in some ways forced to continue experimenting with new and unexpected stylistic combinations in order to create buzz and attract a variety of foreign audiences. The risk of this strategy, however, is to make ‘a movie that targets everyone and satisfies no one’ (*‘Valerian’, the_wolf_imdb*, 19 March 2018). This possibility of success is even more tenuous given the competition from Hollywood, which remains fabulously successful at assimilating foreign innovations, as many commentators have observed about the spread of models created by *Nikita* (Luc Besson, 1990) and *Taken* throughout the contemporary media landscape. That

same Hollywood competition remains the standard by which Besson's films are inevitably measured, apparently with a lesser degree of tolerance as the years go by: 'Between *Lucy* and this film, Luc Besson has lost his touch and his golden days of *Nikita*, *The Fifth Sense* [*sic*] [1997] and *Leon* [1994] are far away ...' ('*Valerian*', gfranceschini, 22 October 2018). The company's most recent films (*Valerian*, *Anna* and *The Transporter Refueled*) have generally received more negative reviews, including from Besson's fans. Fans accuse these films of lacking in originality and innovation, points that were once seen as the studio's strengths and of taking a direction that goes against the studio's original values in order to attract teenage viewers.

Anna is an example of the first of these two factors, although the film also generated positive comments hailing the director's comeback. Most comments, however, compare it unfavourably to numerous other films featuring a 'badass' heroine, criticising the director for the obsolescence of his signature style and his inability to reinvent himself: '[it] is a clear-cut combination of a few different movies [...] Perhaps because it wears its influences on its sleeve, it just comes across as a pale imitation of them' (Pjtaylor-96-138044, 6 July 2019); 'Even if you are a fan of Besson, skip this mess' (random-70778, 8 October 2019); 'This is [Besson's] worst disappointment' (random-70778, 10 December 2019).

Valerian illustrates the second case, despite some favourable reviews expressing surprise at other IMDb users' harsh critiques. The film, which Besson's fans on IMDb generally disliked, was seen as lacking the intensity and stature that major male stars brought to *Le Cinquième élément/The Fifth Element* (Besson, 1997): 'Without the magic of Bruce Willis, Gary Oldman and co, you can't make a movie that is all colours and CGI effects without any other substance' (skintone-38600, 30 December 2017). Users criticised the film's casting choices, especially the male lead, seen as insufficiently virile and muscular: 'Role of Valerian definitely needed to be given to someone else, maybe someone a little older and manly looking' (candicelee82, 19 December 2018). This hints at the strength of the gender and generational norms affecting the reception of this production, described contemptuously by one user as a 'film for affectatious millennials who have no real experiences to draw from', which 'mimics it's [*sic*] core hipster audience in that it lacks the depth or development of character' (rcgiroday, 21 July 2017).

The Transporter Refueled (Camille Delamarre, 2015) drew a combination of both critiques, resulting in an extremely negative reception.

Declaring that ‘Luc Besson’s writing of thrillers and action flicks used to be interesting enough to watch. No longer so’ (moofee, 29 January 2016), fans complain of a glaring lack of imagination and feeling, concluding that ‘its box office failure is well deserved’ (FlashCallahan, 12 September 2015). The main critiques focus on the replacement of Jason Statham by the English actor Ed Skrein, famous for his role in the series *Game of Thrones*, deemed unconvincing as an action hero because of his youth and his slender figure, and too ‘sophisticated’ because of his accent: ‘You don’t send a boy to do a man’s job’ (Wizard-8, 20 December 2015); ‘Ed Skrein only amounts to carbon copy lookalike with accent’ (quincytheodore, 3 September 2015). Separating this reboot from the rest of the franchise—‘No Statham, no Transporter’ (MoonwalkerKari, 25 July 2021)—fans agree that ‘the worst offender is the awful script, bordering on cheap fantasy or softcore porn’, since the plot centres on a plan hatched by a group of prostitutes to eliminate their pimp, while the hero is ‘caught up in the struggle and forced to help them’ (quincytheodore, 3 September 2015). Although the eroticism of the female characters has always been an important factor in viewers’ enjoyment of Besson’s alluring spectacle, users object to the way in which this aspect of the show, considered here as a ‘juvenile guilty pleasure’ (quincytheodore, 3 September 2015), takes on greater importance and interferes with the plot: ‘It’s a women’s revenge movie, definitely not a “Transporter”’ (Reno-Rangan, 4 February 2016).

Taken together, in fact, the various comments on these EuropaCorp films tend towards oxymoron: fans are at once disillusioned by too much reliance on past formulae yet nostalgic for narratives of gender differentiation, and epic masculinity in particular, associated with an earlier phase in the studio’s output. Thus, more androgynous male heroes are critiqued as embodying both more of the same (‘a carbon copy’) and a difference too far (‘you don’t send a boy to do a man’s job’). One might speculate that such contradictions arise from the fact that for an important segment of its key fanbase, EuropaCorp has come to stand as a reminder of the very obsolescence of certain representations, whose loss is a source of regret and bitterness. In any case, the studio seems to have lost the approval of many viewers who once supported its ambitions to offer international audiences something different from the apparent standardisation of Hollywood cinema.

NOTES

1. This figure corresponds to approximately 50 comments for each film in the corpus. This necessarily includes the franchises spearheaded by Besson, which occupy a critical position in EuropaCorp’s business model. These are, in chronological order, from the first series produced: *Taxi*: five films in 1998,

2000, 2003, 2007 and 2018 (the first four directed by Gérard Krawczyk, the fifth by Franck Gastambide); *The Transporter*: four films in 2002 (Louis Leterrier), 2005 (*idem*), 2008 (Olivier Megaton) and 2015 (Camille Delamarre); *Banlieue 13/ District 13*: two films in 2004 (Pierre Morel) and 2009 (Patrick Alessandrin); *Taken*: three films in 2008 (Pierre Morel), 2012 (Olivier Megaton) and 2014 (*idem*). In addition to comments on these films, I have examined those related to some of the studio's most emblematic productions, the ones most closely associated with Besson in reviews on IMDb from 1998 to 2022. In chronological order: *Yamakasi: les samourais des temps modernes/Yamakasi* (Ariel Zeitoun, 2001), *Wasabi* (Gérard Krawczyk, 2001), *Le Baiser mortel du dragon/Kiss of the Dragon* (Chris Nahon, 2001), *Michel Vaillant* (Louis-Pascal Couvelaire, 2003), *Les Rivières pourpres 2: les anges de l'apocalypse/Crimson Rivers 2: Angels of the Apocalypse* (Olivier Dahan, 2004), *Danny the Dog/Unleashed* (Louis Leterrier, 2005), *Lucy* (Besson, 2014), *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (Besson, 2017) and *Anna* (Besson, 2019). I have included the first *Taxi* film even though it was made in 1998, shortly before the founding of EuropaCorp (1999), both because its production broadly anticipated the marketing and development strategies that the studio would implement in the 2000s (Pillard 2020, 193) and because 'the success of the *Taxi* series was a turning-point in [Besson's] career as producer, and the signal for EuropaCorp's rapid expansion as a European alternative to Hollywood' (Vanderschelden 2007, 43).

2. When I began working on this material in 2017, statistics covering the generational, geographical ('inside the USA' or 'outside the USA') and gender breakdown of reviews published on IMDb for any given film were available, and information about the age and nationality of reviewers frequently appeared next to their user names. This information unfortunately became unavailable after 2019, probably because of the site's implementation of the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), making it more difficult to gauge the reception of films according to these criteria. Various elements in published comments or in the biographies that users add to their profiles do indicate, however, that this section of the site is accessed primarily by male users between the ages of 30 and 40; these elements sometimes also reveal users' gender and nationality.

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