



NEW RELEASES

Paris, 13th District

Jacques Audiard is often thought of as making very male films; he's also widely considered a quintessentially French director (which is sometimes more or less equivalent to saying: a white one). But his career shows a more nuanced picture. His first features *See How They Fall* (1993) and *A Self-Made Hero* (1995) featured male protagonists in darkly revisionist reimaginings of classic French cinema formats, the underworld crime drama and the Occupation-era historical picture. His later *The Beat That My Heart Skipped* (2005) was a remake of *Fingers* (1977) – a James Toback movie, which is about as male-angsty as cinema gets.

But since 2001's *Read My Lips*, Audiard has also made female-centred dramas. That film was a thriller about a deaf woman exploring a world of male criminality, while 2012's *Rust and Bone* largely focused on the experience of a young woman whose independence and sexual autonomy endure despite a catastrophic accident at the water park where she works.

As for race, Audiard has long kicked against the dominant whiteness of French cinema, albeit inevitably at the risk of controversy. *A Prophet* (2009), which made an overnight star of Tahar Rahim, was imagined as a modern *Scarface* from a Maghrebian angle, showing the rise of a young North African inmate through a prison's gang world; 2015's Palme d'Or winner *Dheepan* examined a Sri Lankan immigrant family facing down crime on an outer-Paris housing estate.

Now, following his US-set English-language western *The Sisters Brothers* (2018), Audiard has returned to Paris for a film that is not only multi-ethnic but significantly female in focus, and co-written with two eminent women collaborators, both also directors – the much-esteemed Céline Sciamma (*Petite maman*, 2021; *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, 2019) and Léa Mysius, known for her coming-of-age film *Ava* (2017) and her script collaborations with Arnaud Desplechin, André Téchiné and Claire Denis (on her upcoming *The Stars at Noon*).

Based, somewhat tangentially, on three stories by US graphic novelist Adrian Tomine, *Paris, 13th District* (in French, *Les Olympiades*) is a criss-crossing ensemble narrative about a quartet of youngish characters from different backgrounds, three of them women. The setting is contemporary Paris, specifically the 13th arrondissement – the southern district which is the location of the shopping and residential complex centred around the skyscrapers known as the Olympiades. Émilie, played by ferociously charismatic newcomer Lucie Zhang, is in her twenties, the daughter of a Taiwanese immigrant family; the 13th is known for its diverse Asian population and its Quartier Asiatique (Asian Quarter).

A university graduate at a loose end, Émilie lives in the high-rise flat belonging to her grandmother, and at the start of the action, is holding down a joyless job in telesales. Émilie is looking for a paying tenant: enter Camille (Makita Samba), a young Black schoolteacher researching his PhD in French literature. No sooner has he walked in than he has become both Émilie's

colloc' (flatmate) and her partner in carefree sex – although the relationship isn't as tension-free or no-strings as either would like to believe.

In a separate strand, Nora (Noémie Merlant, from Sciamma's *Portrait...*) is in her thirties, up from Bordeaux to belatedly start a law course at the Sorbonne. Serious-minded, introverted, isolated, Nora attends a student club night and dresses for the occasion in a blonde wig – but gets mistaken for a porn star and camgirl, Amber Sweet (played silkily larger than life by singer/actor Jehnny Beth, solo star and frontwoman of the band Savages). The ensuing mockery and ostracism cause Nora to have a full-on crisis – not unrelated to an unhappy pre-Paris backstory – and send her life on to a different track, bringing her into contact with Camille...

All of this takes place in a very 21st-century Paris. The film is shot in stark, crisp, high-contrast black and white by Paul Guilhaume (with a brief, dramatic burst of colour when Amber enters the picture). It opens with an aerial take of the Olympiades at night, moving from the Chinese-style roofs of the Pagodes shopping centre at ground level, up to the apartments at night, TV screens glowing through their windows, many floors up. This is a familiar, arguably clichéd image of boxed-in urban alienation, but it immediately sets a borderline-futuristic tone that establishes the film as being a world away from the enclosed, often cushioned environments of so many inner-Paris dramas.

I asked Jacques Audiard what he meant when he said, in the film's press notes, that he and Guilhaume had filmed Paris 'like an Asian metropolis'. 'Asian or American... Basically, [the idea was] to film Paris as if it were somewhere else. At the start, with the city in black and white – with all the windows, then the sound of Lucie singing – what I perhaps had in mind was a Wong Kar Wai film.' The idea was to get away from a heritage image: 'When you shoot in Paris, the city is there in front of you – imposing, but almost overwhelming. The museum city, the Romantic city, the historical imprint is so strong – I'm talking about the centre, of course.' By contrast, 'you could see the 13th as a vision of a metropolis that could be anywhere.' Which French films does Audiard see as offering authentic examples of an 'alternative' Paris? 'I didn't really have any examples – perhaps that's just what I was missing.' Then, surprisingly, he names a film by a director often associated with the high tradition of the Parisian relationship drama: Éric Rohmer, whose *Full Moon in Paris* (1984) is actually set partly in the suburbs.

Built in the late 60s and early 70s, the 12 towers of the Olympiades have been little filmed, although as Mysiuis and Audiard point out, the area has featured in the novels of sometime resident Michel Houellebecq. Audiard himself lived in the 13th for some ten years: 'I love the area.'

Despite its undertow of bleakness and its overall seriousness as a study of millennial mores, Audiard emphasises that his film is very much conceived as a comedy: 'It's about three characters who are wrong about themselves, who aren't what they think they are. Émilie sees herself as a kind of *punk d'amour*, free of all restraints; Camille thinks he's a Don Juan, no one's going to tie him down; Nora can't find her place in the world. And the world teaches each of them something, like in Rohmer's films: they each find their place at the end. Indirectly, it all happens through another character, Amber, who doesn't have any problems, who knows exactly what she is.'

One thing that brings the film's ironic schemas to life is the terrific acting all around, notably from the more or less unknown Zhang and Samba (she has appeared in a couple of shorts; he has had a number of TV and film roles,

including Philippe Garrel's 2016 *Lover for a Day*). They make their characters vivid, fun to be around if sometimes intensely annoying: Émilie in her dizzy moments of drugs/dance/sex euphoria, and her wonderful bursts of clockwatcher piss-taking; Camille in his languid, quizzical affability and sometimes downright pomposity. These actors' work includes some very natural sex scenes, which emerged from extensive work with choreographer Stéphanie Chêne, who helped the characters' personalities and their body language. Audiard says, 'It wasn't just for the sex scenes, it was for everything: how does Lucie walk, how does Makita move? It was to get them playing completely from within. When it came to the shoot, all I had to do was film what they offered me. In the sex scenes, they really directed themselves – I wasn't sitting on the end of the bed.'

As for his co-writers – Sciamma worked on the script early on, Mysiak took over later – Audiard isn't forthcoming with an opinion on whether they brought the film a specifically female perspective. Rather he says, it was something else: 'They're excellent screenwriters, but they're also directors – it's the first time that I've worked with writer-directors, and it's different. Perhaps they bring a certain pragmatism to it, rather than literary poetry – it was a very good experience.'

Different viewers will make up their own mind on whether the film is convincing as a picture of a young multiracial Parisian generation and its world, or as a picture about that world as lived by women. And fans of Sciamma might not just detect her auteur touch, but even read the story of Nora and Amber as essentially a Sciamma short interpolated into an Audiard feature. As for the question of whether a writer-director in his late 60s can pull off a convincing story told largely from a young female perspective... well, Rohmer did that superbly in film after film, even if recently sceptics have been more questioning of his sexual politics than in the past.

As for Audiard, he's heading off next into entirely new territory, and is planning a musical to be set in Mexico City, with a Mexican cast. Whatever it is, it's very unlikely to be – as fans and detractors alike might put it – 'quintessentially' French.

Jonathan Romney, *Sight and Sound*, April 2022

PARIS, 13TH DISTRICT (LES OLYMPIADES)

Directed by: Jacques Audiard

Production Company: Page 114

In association with: France 2 Cinéma, Canal+, Ciné+, France Télévisions

Producers: Jacques Audiard, Valérie Schermann

Written by: Céline Sciamma, Léa Mysius, Jacques Audiard

Based on the stories 'Amber Sweet', 'Killing and Dying',

'Hawaiian Getaway' by: Adrian Tomine

Cinematography: Paul Guilhaume

Editor: Juliette Welfling

Art Director: Mila Preli

Costume Design: Virginie Montel

Music: Rone

Cast

Lucie Zhang (*Émilie Wong*)

Makita Samba (*Camille Germain*)

Noémie Merlant (*Nora Ligier*)

Jehnnny Beth (*Amber Sweet*)

Camille Léon-Fucien (*Eponine*)

Oceane Cairaty (*Stéphanie*)

France 2021

105 mins

A Curzon release

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS**Preview: Inu-oh**

Wed 30 Mar 18:15

Liv Ullmann in Conversation

Fri 8 Apr 18:10

TV Preview: Gerry Anderson: A Life Uncharted + Q&A with producer-director Benjamin Field and producer Jamie Anderson

Sat 9 Apr 15:00

Worzel Gummidge Restoration Screening + discussion

Sun 10 Apr 12:00

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 11 Apr 18:30

Preview: Benedetta

Wed 13 Apr 20:30

Preview: Bubble (Baburu)

Wed 20 Apr 20:30

NEW & RE-RELEASES**The Worst Person in the World (Verdens verste menneske)**

From Mon 28 Mar

Paris, 13th District (Les Olympiades)

From Mon 28 Mar

Hive

From Tue 29 Mar

Cries and Whispers (Viskningar och rop)

From Fri 1 Apr

A Night of Knowing Nothing +

From Fri 1 Apr (+ Q&A with director Payal Kapadia on Sun 3 Apr 17:50)

Playground

From Fri 15 Apr (+ Q&A with director Laura Wandel on Thu 21 Apr 18:10)

REGULAR PROGRAMME**Relaxed Screening: Oska Bright Lights + intro and discussion**

Tue 29 Mar 18:20

Member Picks: Marnie

Thu 31 Mar 18:10

Sonic Cinema: Shogun Assassin with DJ Cheeba Live Score + intro by Juice Aleem, festival director of AfroFlux

Fri 1 Apr 18:30

Silent Cinema: Kinoteka Film Festival Closing Night Gala:**Forbidden Paradise with live score by Marcin Pukaluk + intro**

Sun 3 Apr 15:00

Member Salon: Cries and Whispers

Mon 4 Apr 20:15

Projecting the Archive: Little Friend + intro by Rosie Taylor,**BFI National Archive**

Tue 5 Apr 18:30

Woman with a Movie Camera Preview:**Small Body (Piccolo corpo) + Q&A with director Laura Samani**

Wed 6 Apr 18:15

African Odysseys: Cold Case Hammarskjöld + discussion

Sat 9 Apr 14:00

Art in the Making: The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright + intro by**Adrian Steel, Director of Collections and Programmes at RIBA**

Tue 12 Apr 18:15

Experimenta: Illuminating the Wilderness + discussion with artists**and makers from Project Art Works**

Tue 26 Apr 18:15

Terror Vision: The Funhouse

Thu 28 Apr 21:00

BUG 62

Fri 29 Apr 20:45; Thu 5 May 20:45; Fri 6 May 20:45

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