

Genre Claws Its Way Into France

As local films find success, shingles look to embrace edgy fare though financing lags

By Ben Croll



To say that Julia Ducournau's Palme d'Or win in July inspired waves of excitement across swaths of the French industry would be something of an understatement.

Indeed, to those working in genre, the fact that the "Titane" filmmaker became only the second woman director to claim one of the film world's most august accolades follows well behind an accomplishment that they would argue puts in

her even more rarified company: That she claimed such a feat from within an industry still hostile to genre itself.

"It's not our culture," says Grégoire Melin, producer and CEO of sales outfit Kinology. "Unlike American or Asian or English film cultures, ours is not versed in pure genre films. In France, there's still a built in resistance to these kinds of projects. Which is very strange!"

The former sales chief at Luc

Besson's EuropaCorp, Melin has toiled in the genre trenches for more than two decades, seeing homegrown talent including Alexandre Aja — whose 2003 horror smash "High Tension" Europa produced and sold — break into the mainstream and out of France.

"France was and remains allergic to the imaginary," Melin continues. "People are afraid to live their emotions. Auteur films have emotion, of course, but in a very

respectable way, whereas a more [outré expression] makes certain decision makers uncomfortable."

"There's real divide between the public — a certain public — and the ones that decide," he says. "The audience for such fare isn't smaller in France than in any other country. But in our top institutions, we're still too awed and deferential to a certain narrow vision of auteur cinema. There is a lack of people ready to speak and willing to listen."

↑ Julia Ducournau's "Titane" broke ground by winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes.

Recent circumstances, however, are changing that logic.

When “Titane” premieres in Toronto, it will bring its Palme d’Or and the institutional heft that carries to the festival’s Midnight Madness program, a first for any Cannes prizewinner. Also playing in Midnight Madness is Bertrand Mandico’s “After Blue (Dirty Paradise),” another French-language fantasy film that will arrive in Toronto following a launch out of a prestigious European festival, in this case Locarno.

Over the past five years or so, the growing presence of genre fare at the major the festivals, specifically within their flagship competitions, has had a marked effect, fueling international interest and keying the larger sales companies onto their potential.

And this international curiosity will be key to break the logjam that has, thus far, kept a lid on French genre’s potential.

“Genre films, which are often by definition more spectacular and more violent, suffer from structural disadvantages within the current financing system,” says Axel Scoffier, deputy managing director of UniFrance.

“Finding financing within the French system remains depen-

dent on distributors — for whom financing rating restricted genre films comes with a risk — and the broadcasters — who can’t exactly air certain genre films in prime-time. So there are fewer parties willing and able to finance such projects, and as a result, there are fewer films produced.

“It’s like the snake eating its tail,” he says. “The ones that do are made with lower budgets, which affects their production values. And then once a few of them don’t work, others take that as proof that the genre itself is at fault. If we had a more robust scale of production, we could prove a greater level of success.”

To up that scale of production, UniFrance is looking to take a

more active role from earlier on in development.

“Going forward, we’re working to help producers develop, finance and give visibility to their upcoming projects.

“That’s why we have to prime the pump, to offer filmmakers the time to write and develop with residences, to find the right financing — if not from the traditional actors then from public funds. We’re going to work with those producers, federating them and helping them with visibility, accompanying them to pitch sessions, or to specific markets all over the world.”

In concrete terms, that means expanding the promotional organization’s footprint, build-

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Bertrand Mandico’s “After Blue (Dirty Paradise)” unspools at Toronto.

ing stronger institutional ties with the parallel circuit of genre festivals like Sitges, Bifan in South Korea, and Montreal’s Fantasia, the latter of which have robust financing markets that have played a major role in fueling genre fare’s international rise in stature.

And as sales companies including Kinology, Wild Bunch, WTFilms and Charades build out more genre heavy slates, presenting them to international buyers without those broadcast impediments, streamers have stepped in at earlier stages of development, and are now beginning to finance productions that left traditional French broadcasters skittish.

In France, the industry continues to grow. Over the past two years a number of genre-focused production outfits have been created, including Wild West, a joint venture sales companies Wild Bunch and Capricci described as a “European Blumhouse,” as well as Sony Intl.’s Parasomnia Prods., a genre dedicated label launched in association with Moana Films, among several others.

There’s also the simple fact that as new generations of filmmakers and producers with a taste for genre take the stage, industry eyes will be closing watching “Titane” and its international rollout, hoping to use one filmmaker’s success story and throw open the door even wider.

“‘Titane’ can’t be the tree that hides the whole forest,” Melin says. “Neither ‘The Swarm’ [a horror thriller that was in 2020’s Critics’ Week lineup and sold to Netflix] nor ‘Titane’ will immediately shift an industry mentality until we can create a more diverse representative body.

“But I had tears in my eyes when, accepting the Palme d’Or, Julia said it was time to let in the monsters, because she had done exactly that. She managed to bring in auteur cinema through the doors of genre, or maybe the reverse. We need more like her, people who try. And hopefully that will inspire the next generation coming up over the next 10 years.”

