

# GRENOBLE ECOLE DE MANAGEMENT

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##### **How bloated film stars ate French cinema**

By John Lichfield

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The silent movie *The Artist* swept the board at the Oscars last February, and *Les Intouchables* – a joyous, comic movie about physical disability – broke all French box-office records in 2011. French cinema ticket sales may have dropped 6 per cent last year from a 2011 peak, but they remained historically high. And above all, France is one of the few countries in the world which still boasts a broad, domestic movie industry making thrillers and comedies, epics and cartoons. And yet, even the most successful French films fail; all but one of the 10 highest-grossing French films lost money last year.

Top French actors – some scarcely known outside their own country – exploit the oddities of a state-protected and publicly subsidised movie industry to claim gargantuan, Hollywood-size fees (€2m or more). As a result, French movie stars have become rich but French movies are often poor.

These are not the sour observations of a Francophobic Hollywood film executive. They are the iconoclastic arguments of one of France's most successful film producers, Vincent Maraval of the Wild Bunch company.

Mr Maraval's comments in an article in *Le Monde* and an interview with GQ magazine have created an epic row in France this week. The French movie industry is one of the "untouchables" of French life: the crown jewel of French exceptionalism; a living proof that state interference and creativity can go hand in hand.

Mr Maraval's article was intended partly as a defence of Gérard Depardieu, who has been lambasted by the government for seeking tax exile in Belgium. "The real scandal is elsewhere," he wrote. "French actors are rich on public money and a system which is supposed to protect our cultural differences... How is it that a well-known French actor can earn up to €2m for a French movie but, if they act in an American film, they get €200,000?"

French TV companies, obsessed by competition from the internet, will now only sponsor films which feature the "bankable names" which supposedly ensure high audience figures.

As a result, French TV has created a kind of movie "star system" reminiscent of the worst excesses of Hollywood in the 1930s. There are about 30 "bankable" acting names in France. Many are scarcely known in the rest of the world (Thierry Lhermitte, anyone? Edouard Baer?) They have become an over-exposed repertory company appearing in mediocre films with predictable scripts and no foreign sales prospects. But they know they are "bankable names" and can demand huge fees. As a result, the cost of high-profile French movies has become so exorbitant that even those which achieve modest-to-high box-office figures cannot turn a profit.

Thus one of the best-paid movie actors in the world is now the moderately talented but internationally uncelebrated Dany Boon, a stand-up comedian who broke French box-office records with his movie *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* in 2008. Despite a series of mediocre films since then, he is earning €10m for a new comedy film, *L'Hypercondriaque*, which is in

production this year. In 2012, he branched out into romantic comedy. He was paid €3.5m to make *Le Plan Parfait*. According to Mr Maraval, the movie was such a flop that it did not earn enough money to pay Mr Boon's fee.

"[Maraval] has put his finger on a real problem," said one veteran French movie producer. "In the last 20 years, the 'above the line' cost of films in France [fees guaranteed to stars, producers and directors] has risen from 15-20 per cent to 35-40 per cent of the total cost of a movie."

The director Bertrand Bonello agrees. "Maraval is right to say French movies are too costly. How is it the Americans can make funny films for €2m, while ours cost €4m and you can't see on screen where the money has gone?"

France makes over 200 movies a year, compared to 600 in Hollywood and about 1,000 in India. Just over 100 films are made in Britain annually. The public subsidy to movie-making and distribution in France amounts to €700m, raised from an 11 per cent tax on movie tickets and taxes on DVDs.

In theory, this cash is supposed to fund adventurous, creative movies, which symbolise, and preserve, a separate French cultural identity. According to Mr Maraval, too much goes on would-be blockbusters which would be better if they were subjected to market discipline. This is not so. Most of the public subsidy goes to run-of-the mill movies which are neither especially adventurous nor especially commercial. Occasionally, the system throws up a gem. As for the rest, the French view seems to be: it may be rubbish but at least it's our own rubbish.