Sign Language, Multilingualism and the Postnational Popular Screen: From *La Famille Bélier* and *Marie Heurtin* to *La Révolution*

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Despite the historic and popular linking of French national cinema with the French national language, multilingualism has been part of French film dialogue since at least the 1930s. Whether in domestic French languages (French Sign Language [LSF], Basque, Breton), European national languages (English, Italian, Spanish, German), migrant languages (Vietnamese, Arabic, Wolof, Turkish) or others, films that include multilingual dialogue have long been connected with traditions of French and transnational filmmaking. The majority of multilingual films are made as co-productions, which have been popular in France since the interwar period and have grown from early twentieth-century partnerships with

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European neighbours to contemporary agreements with countries as varied as Burkina Faso, Chile and Georgia. Yet since the mid-2000s, the representation of multiple languages on French screens has grown dramatically in breadth and depth. With their multilingual dialogue, multicultural casts, co-production funding, significant successes at global film festivals, popularity on streaming platforms and frequent selection for remakes, multilingual films are some of the most diverse, border-crossing screen texts being produced in France and the contemporary world. Their simultaneous connection to and questioning of national cinemas, languages and identities render them some of the most fruitful objects of study for understanding the postnational popular.

This chapter explores a range of twenty-first-century French multilingual audiovisual texts which situate language in a postnational framework. It begins by laying out the general characteristics of contemporary French multilingual cinema, before focusing in on a specific language case: a growing group of films that are bilingual in spoken French and the national French Sign Language of the Deaf, or *Langue des signes française* (LSF).[1] Examining the rise of sign language cinemas within the context of contemporary multilingual screen cultures indicates the place language occupies in an increasingly postnational screen production space. The chapter analyses several LSF films and series of the past decade, concentrating on the 2014 feature films *La Famille Bélier/The Bélier Family* (Eric Lartigau) and *Marie Heurtin* (Jean-Pierre Améris) before examining the 2020 Netflix series *La Révolution/The Revolution* (François Lardenois and Aurélien Molas). The notion of the postnational popular offers us the tools to understand the relationship between the mythic 'national' space and the various subnational and supranational filmmaking spheres with which it is interlaced. Ultimately, the chapter argues that sign language cinemas illuminate the fundamental multilingualism of contemporary screen cultures and undermine the notion of the monolingual nation from within.

Contemporary French Multilingual Cinema

Multilingualism in French film takes diverse forms and spans genres, movements, budgets and production contexts. In a chapter for the volume *Transnational French Studies* (King 2023), I lay out three categories of films which characterise the majority of contemporary French multilingual cinema. The first explores multilingualism across neighbouring European

languages, namely English, German, Italian and Spanish. Examples are Christian Carion's *Joyeux Noël/Merry Christmas* (2005), Cédric Klapisch's *L'Auberge espagnole/The Spanish Apartment* (2002) and Volker Schlöndorff's *Diplomatie/Diplomacy* (2014). These films, which Mariana Liz has described as 'Europuddings' (2015, 73), often represent relationships and connections that are forged through war, tourism, romance, work or study abroad. In the case of films such as *Joyeux Noël* and *Diplomatie*, they draw together characters of different linguistic backgrounds through histories of inter-European conflict, diplomacy and alliance. In Dany Boon's *Rien à declarer/Nothing to Declare* (2010), Europeans of different nationalities meet at geographical border crossings, in this case France and Belgium (although in that film both groups are Francophone). In *L'Auberge espagnole*, Europeans of various nationalities are brought together seemingly at random by the Erasmus university exchange programme, which sees French, German, Belgian, Italian, Danish, Spanish and (pre-Brexit) British students renting a shared apartment together in Barcelona. Though tensions can run high in these films, the scenarios in which characters meet are quite logically dictated by geography, history or bureaucracy, and characters are frequently middle class, European and White.

The second category that is prominent in contemporary French multilingual film focuses on the polyglossia of (post)colonial relations, in which characters and languages are drawn together due to lingering colonial or postcolonial connections, ranging from decolonisation and immigration to exile and return. Important examples of this trend include Rachid Bouchareb's war films *Indigènes/Days of Glory* (2006) and *Hors la loi/Outside the Law* (2010) and post-*beur* immigration tales such as Ismaël Ferroukhi's *Le Grand voyage/The Great Journey* (2004) and *Les Hommes libres/Free Men* (2011), Tony Gatlif's *Exils/Exiles* (2004), Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano's *Samba* (2014) and Houda Benyamina's *Divines* (2016). Arabic is the obvious language for this category, but also spoken are Bambara, Malinka, Romany, Vietnamese, Wolof and many others. Though speakers of these languages were sometimes present on French screens in the twentieth century, their depiction usually reinforced assimilationist ideas of foreign language use as disenfranchising and upheld fluency in French as the only relevant linguistic goal or asset. This was achieved either through isolating characters who speak foreign languages (as with Arabic in Mehdi Charef's 1986 *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède/Tea in the Harem*) or by forbidding their characters from speaking their native

language when in France (such as Wolof in Ousmane Sembene's key decolonial text, *La Noire de…/Black Girl* of 1966 [see Sinon 2020; Dovey 2009]).[2] Though French remains a common requirement for belonging in French society, as is still depicted on screen, contemporary films in this category recast historically marginalised languages as an opportunity for potential self-determination and empowerment.

The third category of contemporary French multilingual cinema is the most nebulous and the least clearly dictated by French colonial history or European geography. Best described through reference to global networks or relationalities, this category depicts films which embrace more distant or unexpected connections between languages and groups. Examples include Philippe Lioret's *Welcome* (2009), in English, French and Kurdish; Jacques Audiard's *Dheepan* (2015), in English, French and Tamil; and Claire Denis's *L'Intrus/The Intruder* (2004), in English, French, Polynesian French, Korean and Russian. These films are not without hierarchy or historical precedent; they often tell stories of European colonisation in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, or chart migrations from the Global South to Western Europe. But these are usually not migrants originating from Francophone territories, and these migrants often are not aiming to settle in France. Such films' narrative stakes extend far beyond the traditional horizons of the French nation or any limiting notion of the Hexagon.

However, there also exists a fourth category that is perhaps more postnational and subversive than any other. This is a domestic, 'Gallic' category which depicts multilingualism originating from inside the Hexagon. I call this 'the multilingualism within'. The multilingualism within describes a corpus of films in which characters speak not only French but other French languages, that is languages also originating, like verbal French, from metropolitan France. These include regional languages such as Breton, Occitan and Basque, but most often French Sign Language (see Appendix for full list).

The Rise of Sign Language Cinemas

La Famille Bélier, *Marie Heurtin* and the 2020 French Netflix Original series *La Révolution* are LSF original texts that construct a world of linguistic plurality located entirely within the contours of the French nation, in White, rural contexts which would not traditionally be associated with linguistic diversity. In so doing, they radically interrogate the power

dynamics of internal multilingualism and ask what 'national language' means for a nation that was always already multilingual.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, France became the first country in the Western world to found schools for deaf children, in which sign language use (i.e. manualist instruction) was encouraged. Both *Marie Heurtin* and *La Révolution* depict how during this period, schools for the Deaf represented a new option for deaf children, who previously risked being sent to an asylum, their deafness presumed an intellectual and mental defect that would prevent them from participating in society. These first schools were a significant moment of progress for Deaf culture and education. Yet in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France, sign became increasingly vilified as a divisive challenge to republican universalism. Following the Milan Convention of 1880 (Avon 2006, 192), an education conference which codified oralist pedagogies promoting speech and banning sign in many contexts across the Western world, sign language oppression became the dominant model of Deaf education, socialisation and healthcare—and ultimately cultural representation. The first three-quarters of the twentieth century saw the height of the oralist movement. Oralist education was famously portrayed in Randa Haines's 1986 film *Children of a Lesser God*, in which a hearing teacher triumphantly teaches his deaf students to sing, and for which Marlee Matlin received the Academy Award for Best Actress, the first acting Oscar won by a Deaf person in history. (In 2022, Troy Kotsur would win the second, Best Supporting Actor, for *CODA* [Siân Heder, 2021], the transnational USA/Canada/France remake of *La Famille Bélier*, also starring Matlin. *CODA* was also the first sign language film to win the Best Film Academy Award, renewing international interest in—and, as we shall see, critique of—*La Famille Bélier*.)

The rise of oralist politics across the Western world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with the invention of cinema itself, and the norms of Deaf representation on screen up until the late twentieth century reflected this shared history. The vast majority of screen material about deafness in the twentieth century perpetuated oralist modes of representation, in which deafness is portrayed as socially isolating, frustrating and disenfranchising in all areas of a Deaf person's life. As Martin Norden writes, 'most movies have tended to isolate disabled characters from their able-bodied peers as well as from each other' (1994, 1). Deaf characters in these films were often played by hearing actors, who had little understanding of the complexity of authentic sign language

communication or Deaf experience, a trope that was perpetuated in *La Famille Bélier*. Narratives often focused on redemption and civilisation through the process of oralising, or learning to speak, frequently taught by hearing saviour characters, as in *Children of a Lesser God*. Deaf characters were often represented as tragedies and/or burdens, who must strive to 'overcome' their disability in order to integrate socially and succeed, as in the three Hollywood *Miracle Worker* films and series episodes (Arthur Penn, 1962; Paul Aaron, 1979; and Nadia Tass, Disney Channel, 2000), about the valiant triumphs of Helen Keller's hearing and seeing teacher of tactile sign language, Anne Sullivan. Deaf characters were also often portrayed as passive and vulnerable targets for violence, as in the two *Johnny Belinda* films (Jean Negulesco, 1948; Paul Bogart and Gary Nelson, 1967) and *Hear No Evil* (Robert Greenwald, 1993). Others were depicted as sources of crude and dehumanising humour, as in *See No Evil, Hear No Evil* (Arthur Hiller, 1989) and *Murder by Death* (Robert Moore, 1976).

In a 2017 interview with *Le Monde* entitled 'Deafness is Still Considered an Illness to be Cured', prominent LSF activist and French Deaf actor Emmanuelle Laborit explained that during much of her lifetime, in France:

> Sign language was forbidden, since specialists condemned it at the Milan Convention in 1880! It was shameful, undervalued, considered a sub-language. The medical system felt it would make us sick, ghettoise us. Deaf people had to assimilate, hear 'the voice of God' and 'oralise'. (Laborit in Merchin 2017)[3]

Laborit's comments are not unique, but they are rendered all the more resonant by the twenty-first-century rise in French Sign Language screen cultures.

French Sign Language on Screen

One of the only French films to include LSF dialogue before the decline of oralism in the late twentieth century was François Truffaut's *L'Enfant sauvage/The Wild Child* (1970), which conformed to these oralist stereotypes. Indeed, the only well-known Deaf person active in French cinema before the contemporary era was the above-mentioned Emmanuelle Laborit herself. Laborit was born profoundly deaf in 1971 and has communicated mostly in LSF since learning the language at age 7. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, she had several starring roles in LSF cinema,

including in Pascal Baeumler's 1999 *Retour à la vie/Return to Life*, Christoph Schaub's 2001 *Stille Liebe/Secret Love* and Claude Lelouch's short in the portmanteau film *11′09″01/September 11* (2002). In fact, Patrice Leconte's 1996 heritage film *Ridicule* is one of the few films from this period that includes LSF dialogue, but not Laborit. Though Laborit was the only prominent Deaf actor active in France at the turn of the twenty-first century, the period also saw a number of other films which included excerpts of LSF, though usually interpreted by hearing actors (as in Jacques Audiard's *Sur mes lèvres/Read My Lips*, 2001) or unnamed side characters (as in Michael Haneke's *Code inconnu/Code Unknown*, of the previous year). In both Laborit's roles and these more peripheral representations, though the films show a general compassion for Deaf experience and acknowledgement of LSF as a language in itself, narratives generally conform to the aforementioned tropes of what Martin Norden (1994) calls a 'cinema of isolation', whereby deafness engenders disconnection and exclusion from broader society, one which can only be overcome by learning to assimilate linguistically through lip-reading and speech.

However, since the 2010s Deaf roles have become increasingly frequent and authentic. Recent years have seen multiple releases in which French Sign Language is a vector of cultural belonging and civic participation. These are often fleeting scenes within a broader French-speaking narrative, such as the Deaf character Bachir in Robin Campillo's *120 battements par minute/BPM/Beats Per Minute* (2017), whose use of an LSF interpreter allows him to participate in public debate about AIDS activism in France. Though it was a small role for Deaf actor Bachir Saïfi, *BPM*'s Bachir is an important intersectional character: queer, *beur*, Deaf and HIV-positive. Of particular importance to the French Deaf community in the 2010s was the documentary *Avec nos yeux* ('With Our Eyes', 2013), directed by Marion Aldighieri and featuring a range of prominent LSF users, including Laborit. Using a combination of subtitled LSF interviews and French voiceover, *Avec nos yeux* is one of the most significant films to explore translingual Deaf experience in France, from a Deaf perspective. Several other LSF documentaries were also released in this period, including *Témoins sourds, témoins silencieux* ('Deaf Witnesses, Silent Witnesses', Brigitte Lemaine, 2008), *J'avancerai vers toi avec les yeux d'un sourd* ('I Will Approach You with Deaf Eyes', Laetitia Caron, 2015), the documentary short *La Vérité* ('The Truth', Julien Bourges, 2015) and *Signer/Signing* (Nurith Aviv, 2018), a French–Israeli co-production in French, French Sign Language and Hebrew.

However, the most widely circulated feature films in French Sign Language were both released in 2014: Jean-Pierre Améris's *Marie Heurtin* and Eric Lartigau's *La Famille Bélier*. *Marie Heurtin* is set in the 1880s in rural Vienne near Poitiers. Based on a true story, it tells the tale of a deaf-blind girl, Marie Heurtin (Ariana Rivoire, a sighted Deaf actor), who is adopted by the sighted and hearing main character, Sister Marguerite (popular actress Isabelle Carré). *La Famille Bélier* is set in the contemporary era and tells the story of the teenage Paula (Louane Emera), who is torn between her duties on her parents' dairy farm in Normandy and her dream of pursuing a singing career in Paris. The two films differ in genre and time period but are alike in their setting: a closed, rural, White community in picturesque north-west France, far from any cities or hubs of multiculturalism, in what Mary Harrod and Phil Powrie have described as discrete and conservative French communities (2018, 6). These are far from Mary Louise Pratt's typical 'language contact zones' (1991), far from borders or *banlieues* in which multilingualism is to be expected. And yet these are fundamentally bilingual spaces. For both *Marie Heurtin*'s Marguerite and *La Famille Bélier*'s Paula are Codas (Children of Deaf Adults): hearing children born to deaf parents. Paula is the only hearing person in a family with a deaf mother, father and brother, and Sister Marguerite, whose late mother was deaf, is one of the few hearing nuns in a boarding school for deaf children. Both films include roughly as much French Sign Language as French dialogue, and their hearing protagonists are a minority in their mostly Deaf environments. In *Marie Heurtin* in particular, LSF is not a peripheral or maligned code but an inclusive and indispensable lingua franca (as shown in Fig. 1). Spoken French is only used between the few hearing staff residents of the school, where LSF is accessible to all. The film thus shows us an example of discrete, functional, translingual d/Deaf/hearing communities and advances an inclusive model for Deaf belonging, a model which would later be championed in *CODA*, as well.

While 2014 was a particularly active year for sign language cinemas (in addition to *Marie Heurtin* and *La Famille Bélier*, Myroslav Slaboshpytskyi's acclaimed, unsubtitled Ukrainian Sign Language film *Plemya/The Tribe* was also released that year), French Sign Language screen texts have continued to appear in large numbers in cinemas and on streaming platforms. Most notably, in 2020 Netflix France released a single season of the revisionist historical drama *La Révolution*. This original series revolves around a young deaf girl from an aristocratic French family, Madeleine de

Fig. 1 *Marie Heurtin*'s Sister Marguerite (Isabelle Carré) introduces the deaf-blind Marie to her deaf classmates in LSF

Montargis (Amélia Lacquemant), before and during the outbreak of revolution in the late 1780s. Plagued from within their rural chateau and neighbouring village by a mysterious virus that is turning the landed gentry into ravenous zombies, Madeleine and her loved ones witness the villagers turn on their oppressors (led by a tall, blonde warrior woman named Marianne) in an attempt to contain the outbreak. The series not only revises the history of the events that finally triggered the Revolution but also the origins of the notorious execution device, the guillotine. As the only way to defeat the monsters is through decapitation, Joseph Guillotin (Amir El Kacem, based on the real-life physician Joseph-Ignace Guillotin) invents the guillotine for the purpose of dispatching the zombies.

Though Madeleine's sister Elise (Marilou Aussilloux) is the protagonist of *La Révolution*, Madeleine is at the centre of its narrative, as she possesses supernatural powers and experiences visions which are posited as the key to understanding the virus, though the abrupt cancellation of the series during the pandemic left these loose ends untied. (This is a trope of both Deaf and Indigenous children on screen, who are often portrayed as spiritually and supersensorially connected to nature and truth, accessing transcendental knowledge through visions.) The series uses the hearing characters' attitude towards French Sign Language as a means of signposting 'enlightened' characters who sympathise with the democratic cause

and differentiating them from 'unenlightened' ones who scorn sign as much as they do the working-class 'rebels'. This is brought to the fore in two contrasting sequences in episodes (entitled Chapters 4 and 6). In Chapter 4, Guillotin visits Madeleine and her friend Ophélie (Coline Beal), having heard that her visions might be linked with the virus, and reveals a rudimentary understanding of sign. At first, Madeleine fears that Joseph's rare competency in sign is evidence that he works at an asylum and has come to take her away (Fig. 2). However, he quickly reveals he knows some LSF because he considers it a real language, useful in his career as a physician and for communication with people.

Guillotin (French Sign Language, also speaking French): Hello, Madeleine.
Madeleine (to Ophélia, French Sign Language): Who is this?
G: I'm a doctor.
M: You know sign language?
G: I only know some of the basics.
M (to O): You're a liar! … You and Elise promised no one would take me to the madhouse!
G: No. I'm not taking you anywhere.
M: You're not the asylum doctor?
G: No.
M: Then why are you here?

Fig. 2 Amélia Lacquemant as Madeleine signs with Joseph in *La Révolution* (Chapter 4)

Conversely, in Chapter 6 Madeleine is accosted by her recently infected cousin, Donatien (Julien Frison), who had always been cruel to the villagers before his zombie infection and has graduated to murdering and consuming them since his metamorphosis. When Madeleine signs that Donatien is scaring her horse, he waves his hands in mockery and says, 'I don't understand a word you're trying to tell me, cousin', before continuing only to speak. *La Révolution* is sensitive in its portrayal of Deaf experience in eighteenth-century France and declines reductive norms that would represent Madeleine as passive or disempowered by her deafness. However, Lacquemant is a hearing actor and in the series's magical realist voiceover segments, Madeleine speaks with a hearing accent. Though it is possible that Madeleine is intended to be a non-verbal hearing character, she is coded as deaf and associated with tropes of mystical disability and the 'supercrip' (Clare 1999). These problematic elements notwithstanding, *La Révolution* is noteworthy—though simplistic—for its association of sign language use with inclusion, humanism and democratic values, by contrast with the oppressive, monolingual zombie aristocrats who refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy or value of sign.

Despite their fundamental linguistic diversity, *La Famille Bélier*, *Marie Heurtin* and *La Révolution* are all defined by their regional settings. Though both *La Famille Bélier*'s Paula and *Marie Heurtin*'s Marguerite are Codas living in predominantly Deaf environments, neither character experiences their bilingualism in the context of cities. This distinguishes the multilingualism of the White rural heartland (in which migrant and Indigenous languages are notably absent) from the ethnically and nationally diverse categories of multilingual film discussed earlier in this chapter. In reality, of course, multiple languages are present in many rural communities, including in metropolitan France, and people of colour are important members of Deaf communities. Yet despite the narrow view of Deaf culture that *La Famille Bélier*, *Marie Heurtin* and *La Révolution*'s mostly White lens provides (though *La Révolution* does cast several French-speaking people of colour), each text shows us how linguistic diversity, and transcultural dynamics, can exist *within* racially homogeneous communities. In these multilingual worlds, sign languages are not only family languages but languages of civic belonging, education, business and even political organisation. This backdrop, which Mary Harrod calls 'the historical heartland of the right' (2020, 101), is especially important when it comes to Paula's father in *La Famille Bélier*, who runs for village mayor on a protectionist platform focused on supporting farming

families, spurred rather than deterred by his deafness. In an unsubtle joke, Rodolphe runs under the slogan 'I hear you!' ('Je vous entends!', Fig. 3).

Despite the cultural impact and relative commercial success of LSF films in the 1990s and 2000s, texts such as *La Révolution*, *La Famille Bélier* and its eventual transnational remake *CODA* signalled an important shift in the cinematic spaces and scales sign languages occupy. Much of Emmanuelle Laborit's filmography, for example, would be described as small-budget *cinéma d'art et d'essai* [arthouse cinema] or heritage film in the *cinéma du milieu* [middle-budget cinema] tradition. Though sign language cinema began to grow notably in the early 2010s, in France and beyond it was mostly an arthouse tradition, enjoying critical attention and respectable, but not enormous, commercial success. By contrast with these important but less widely distributed films, *La Famille Bélier* represented a decisive step into the popular for sign language cinema, not only in its slapstick family dramedy genre but in the scale of its reception. The film was an immense commercial success, earning US$56 million at the French box office and US$73 million worldwide.[4] It was the second-highest earning domestic film of 2014 in France after the smash hit *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au bon Dieu?/Serial (Bad) Weddings* (Philippe de Chauveron) and remains the 32nd highest-grossing French film of all time at the home box office.[5] It received six César nominations: Best Film, Best Actor, Best

Fig. 3 Rodolphe (François Damiens) of *La Famille Bélier* argues his deafness will not affect his ability to serve as mayor of his village

Actress, Best Supporting Actor, Best Original Screenplay and Best New Actress, with the latter being awarded to Louane Emera or simply Louane, recently discovered star of the French reality series *The Voice: la plus belle voix/The Voice* (TF1, 2012–, S02 2013). Many reviews of *La Famille Bélier* couched the film's popularity in its balance between a fresh topic and formulaic 'feel-good' genre; 'not subtle—but moving and pleasurable' (Vincendeau 2015, 81). Netflix's original series *La Révolution* and Apple TV+'s acquisition *CODA* also reveal the importance of streaming to the rise of sign language screen cultures (many more original LSF texts are streaming on Netflix and other platforms), whose quasi-borderless distribution methods and embedded subtitling feature in multiple languages enhance the accessibility and postnationalism of these texts.

Despite its success, it is important to note that *La Famille Bélier* also drew controversy for the casting of hearing stars Karin Viard and François Damiens in the roles of Paula's deaf parents. Paula's brother Quentin (Luca Gelberg) is the only character played by a deaf actor. The strongest criticisms originated from members of the Deaf community, many of whom criticised the film for perpetuating a long history of hearing actors misrepresenting deaf characters in ways that have been likened to pantomime and even blackface (Atkinson 2014). French Deaf reviewer Viguen Shirvanian described French Deaf viewers' inability to understand Karin Viard in particular, 'whose excessively fast and jerky signs are quite incomprehensible to Deaf signers, who even had to read the subtitles' (in Narbonne 2017). However, Shirvanian also emphasised the cultural importance of centring Deaf characters (if not actors) 'in the context of a popular comedy aimed at a mainstream audience'. *CODA* avoided these representation issues, casting Deaf actors in all its Deaf roles, though it is important to note that the project did not take the opportunity to hire a Deaf director or co-director. This increased authenticity also allowed a more multilayered humour that appeals to both hearing and Deaf audiences, through the actors' ability to sign comprehensibly and make jokes that operate translingually (e.g. the siblings' creative sign insults for one another ['twat waffle', 'shit face', etc.] and Kotsur's melding of sign and mime to describe the need to wear a condom as 'putting a helmet on that soldier'). However, it is key to note the limits to Deaf accessibility in both films' narratives. For *La Famille Bélier* and *CODA* retain a core focus on music: before *La Famille Bélier*'s release Louane was best known for her role on *The Voice*, and both films' plots build up to the daughters' auditions for music schools, with significant screen time dedicated to

practising and performing the songs of Michel Sardou in *La Famille Bélier*, and Motown and Joni Mitchell music in *CODA*.

A Coda on *CODA* and Beyond

It is difficult to analyse *La Famille Bélier* in the 2020s without taking into account its highly successful Anglophone adaptation. The 'remade' film was shot in Massachusetts, but co-produced in Quebec and co-financed by French production companies Pathé and Vendôme, in their first joint venture to tap into Anglophone markets with French narratives. The hearing US director, Siân Heder, joined the project after this Francophone co-production had begun, and the purchase of the film by US distributor Apple TV+ occurred after its completion, following its premiere at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival. Yet *CODA* and *La Famille Bélier* do not just share a transnational connection through the border-crossing conditions of the remake's production, heightened by *CODA*'s streaming acquisition. Nor does their transmutation from one cultural context to another simply add a 'Gallic humour' to an American product (Hans 2021). Rather, I identify *La Famille Bélier* not only as the source text of the best-known and most critically acclaimed sign language film thus far but as the first example in a contemporary wave of popular sign language films and series.

In fact, *La Famille Bélier* was the first, and *CODA* the largest, in a series of increasingly popular, mainstream sign language screen texts. These are dominated by US films and series available on international streaming platforms. Series include the Marvel's *Hawkeye* (Disney Plus, 2021–, including crucial Deaf Indigenous representation), Star Wars's *The Mandalorian* (Disney Plus, 2019–) and *The Book of Boba Fett* (Disney Plus, 2021–), for which *CODA*'s Troy Kotsur created and performed the Tusken Raider sign language, as well as the Netflix Original reality miniseries *Deaf U* (2020, set in the world's only Deaf university, Gallaudet University in Washington DC). Blockbuster features with global distribution include John Krasinski's horror franchise *A Quiet Place* (2018) and *A Quiet Place: Part II* (2020), Adam Wingard's *Godzilla vs. Kong* (2021, an Australia/Canada/India/US co-production) and Chloe Zhao's superhero epic *Eternals* (2021, with dialogue in Ancient Greek, American Sign Language [ASL], English, Latin, Marathi, Spanish and Sumerian). These mainstream texts are increasingly dominant in transnational screen culture spaces in which the postnational popular is heightened, from the box

office to the awards ceremony and especially the streaming platform. As explored elsewhere in this volume, the latter is increasingly relevant to the ways many postnational screen texts circulate in the 2020s, as shown by *CODA* (Apple TV+) and *La Révolution* (Netflix) here.

Conclusion: The Postnational Within and Beyond French Borders

Sign language films are part of an ever-expanding number of contemporary French films which explore the complexity and value of multilingualism. Contemporary French films increasingly represent 'foreign' languages as diverse as Arabic, English, Korean, German, Hebrew, Kurdish, Romany, Vietnamese and Wolof. These stories show us how even the most peripheral languages can occupy a legitimate place and offer potential cultural capital, in the cultural landscape of the contemporary Hexagon. Yet French Sign Language films also expose the multilingualism within and therefore the myth of a monolingual pre-globalisation France.

Though the French screen industry has always been invested in the perception of a national cinema connected with a national language, it has also always been connected in myriad ways with the postnational. These include widespread co-productions, funding schemes to support translingual and transnational collaboration, and increasing freedom in awards schemes for films made in languages other than French (as shown by Kristen Stewart's Best Supporting Actress César for her English-speaking role in 2014's *Sils Maria/The Clouds of Sils Maria* [Olivier Assayas], the same year as *La Famille Bélier*). Within this postnational context, sign language screen texts such as *La Famille Bélier*, *Marie Heurtin* and *La Révolution* are both national and postnational. In these translingual stories, which treat sign languages as the native, domestic languages that they are, language barriers (for monolingual characters) and cultural contact (for multilingual ones) not only occurs across national borders but inside them.

Appendix: List of LSF Films and Television Series

11′09″01/September 11 (Claude Lelouch, 2002). Languages: French, French Sign Language.

120 battements par minute/BPM/Beats Per Minute (Robin Campillo, 2017). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
Avec nos yeux ('With Our Eyes') (Marion Aldighieri, 2013). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
Code inconnu/Code Unknown (Michael Haneke, 2001). Languages: English, French, French Sign Language, Romanian, Malinka.
L'Enfant sauvage/The Wild Child (François Truffaut, 1970). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
La Famille Bélier/The Bélier Family (Eric Lartigau, 2014). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
J'avancerai vers toi avec les yeux d'un sourd ('I Will Approach You with Deaf Eyes') (Laetitia Caron, 2015). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
Marie Heurtin (Jean-Pierre Améris, 2014). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
Retour à la vie ('Return to Life') (Pascal Baeumler, 1999). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
La Révolution/The Revolution (created by François Lardenois and Aurélien Molas, Netflix, 2020 [one season]). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
Chapter 4, 'The Executioners' (directed by Jérémie Rozan).
Chapter 6, 'The Alliance' (directed by Edouard Salier).
Ridicule (Patrice Leconte, 1996). Languages: French, French Sign Language.
Signer/Signing (Nurith Aviv, 2018). Languages: French, French Sign Language, Hebrew.
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Notes

1. This chapter will alternate between the spellings *deaf* and *Deaf* as the two words have separate meanings: lower-case 'deaf' refers to the physiological condition of deafness, whereas upper-case 'Deaf' is a cultural identity, referring to a person's belonging to a Deaf culture, of which use of a sign language is always the primary identifier.
2. Sembene originally wanted to include significant Wolof in his script but was dissuaded by producers to appeal to a French audience.
3. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
4. Box office data obtained from IMDbPro. https://www.boxofficemojo.com/releasegroup/gr3033813509/.
5. The live list of the highest-grossing films of all time in France (including a column for domestic-produced films only) is held on Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_films_in_France.

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