

There will probably never be another major film actor like Michel Simon (1895–1975), for whom the term “monstre sacré” or the Hugolian pairing of “sublime et grotesque” seems to have been invented. “Acteur atypique, car l’un des plus laids de sa génération,” as Gwénaëlle Le Gras bluntly describes him, Simon was generally cast as a repulsive or pathetic character: “Il interprète essentiellement des ratés, des cocus, des clochards, des criminels, des fous, souvent mal aimés, raillés, seuls ou grotesques” (12). And yet, his filmography includes some of the best films of the classical period of French cinema: *La Chienne* (Jean Renoir, 1931), *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (Jean Renoir, 1932), *L’Atalante* (Jean Vigo, 1934), *Drôle de drame* (Marcel Carné, 1937), *Le Quai des brumes* (Marcel Carné, 1938), *Panique* (Julien Duvivier, 1947), as well as his unforgettable last great role in Claude Berri’s *Le Vieil Homme et l’enfant* (1967).

Instead of a biography, Le Gras has produced categorized lists of the actor’s techniques and attributes, with the categories derived from the notion of *disgrâce*, a term that carries social as well as esthetic or moral connotations: “Dans tous ses films, Simon apparaît quasiment toujours suspect et marginalisé. Il cristallise l’idée d’un refus de l’Autre inassimilable” (30). The author convincingly argues that it is his uncanny ability to portray the Other with the appropriate mixture of empathy and distance that makes Simon not just “l’un des plus modernes des acteurs de la période classique” (115), but also an actor whose roles reveal much about cultural issues that were not directly addressed in the French cinema of his time. The three principal sections of her book display the ways in which Simon, an incredibly expressive *comédien* who could twist his face and his body to achieve emotional effects that were alternately subtle and blatant, managed to transcend the level of typecasting that confronted him throughout his career. In the process, he became “l’un des rares acteurs d’avant-guerre à s’attirer l’estime de la Nouvelle Vague et à garder intact une force subversive” (116).

The final section of Le Gras’s book provides case studies of five of Simon’s best film roles. The one surprising title is *La Poison*, a dark mixture of self-justification, social satire, and misogyny that was directed in 1951 by Sacha Guitry. The author points out that Guitry, a successful playwright and film director who had been jailed as a collaborator after the Liberation, used Simon as his onscreen *alter ego* in some of his postwar films, a process Le Gras refers to as “la sublimation de deux disgrâces” (59–63). The focalization of this study on the notion of *disgrâce* (a word used in the titles of most of the sections) is at once its strength and its weakness. Le Gras provides a detailed portrait of a remarkably talented actor that includes nuanced descriptions of his technical capacity and of his inner

conflicts. However, the constant depiction of Simon as “un marginal” or a social outcast fails to fully account for a film and theatrical career that was both exceptionally long and, by any measure, quite successful. That said, this short book, the result of thorough research, is well written, abundantly illustrated, and a pleasure to read. It also made this reviewer want to watch more of Simon’s films.

Western Washington University

Edward Ousselin