

Netflix's *Lupin*: Cultural Heritage and Internationalisation in the Age of Global SVoD Platforms¹

David Pettersen

Netflix's series *Lupin* (2021–) about a gentleman thief has become a global success, reportedly generating over 70 million viewers worldwide in the 28 days that followed its initial release. Based on a series of turn-of-the-twentieth century popular novels well known to French audiences, the series features Omar Sy, France's best-known and most bankable star. The series's success has extended to several markets, with Sy reporting in an interview that he received fan messages from as far away as Brazil and Columbia (Roxborough 2021). The series also did well in French-speaking African countries. Journalist Geneviève Sagno writing for BBC Afrique calls attention to individual tweets by Senegalese politician Macky Sall and Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour that celebrate *Lupin*, Sy and his career following the series's drop (Sagno 2021). Replies to official English-language tweets about *Lupin* on Sy's public Twitter account are in a mix of languages, including English, French and Spanish, and it is clear from reading through the tweets that most (though not all) users responded positively to the series and to Sy's performance (Omar Sy [@OmarSy] 2021). While Sy was somewhat familiar to international audiences following the surprise success of Olivier Nakache and Eric Tolédano's film *Intouchables/Untouchable* in 2011, *Lupin* represents his breakout international hit, especially after relocating to Los Angeles in the early 2010s. There, he made several English-language films over the past decade, such as *Jurassic World* (Colin Trevorrow, 2015) and *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Bryan Singer, 2014), that failed to catapult him into starring roles in international mainstream cinema.

It is somewhat surprising that, despite Sy's efforts to learn and work in English, a French-language series would garner him so much visibility. Of course, international viewers could choose to watch the series dubbed into local languages, but beyond the question of language, *Lupin* is an important media object through which to understand the commissioning and media localisation practices of streaming video-on-demand (SVoD) platforms in the early 2020s. The series manages to be locally specific to France while also remaining postnational in its accessibility to different audiences around the world. Unlike the cultural mishmash of Europudding films from the early 2000s like *L'Auberge espagnole/The Spanish Apartment* (Cédric Klapisch, 2002), or the cultural genericness of entertainment films destined for international markets, such as EuropaCorp's *Transporter* films from the 2000s, cultural embeddedness in *Lupin* is not an obstacle to the international circulation of long-form serial television. Rather, cultural references anchored in the category of the nation help localise the series for different international audiences, though not always in the same ways.

Internationalisation practices

In the age of simultaneous worldwide release of films and series on SVoD platforms, questions of media localisation take on increased urgency. The first issue that scholars most often examine when considering localisation is the translation of language and cultural references through subtitling, dubbing and remixing. These are certainly important aspects of how media is localised for different markets, though it is hardly the only one. Media scholars Andrea Esser, Ian Robert Smith and Miguel Bernal-Merino describe how localisation studies has long been a fragmented field across different disciplines. Media translation studies approached localisation through questions of language subtitling and dubbing, video-game studies focused on issues of language

and interface design, and film and television studies examined practices of remakes and adaptations (Esser, Smith and Bernal-Merino 2016, 6–8). All these issues are relevant to Netflix's *Lupin*, and the series invites an adaptation studies approach not just because it is an adaptation of a series of novels but also because these novels have been adapted to the screen many times over the course of the twentieth century.

While I will discuss some issues of adaptation in this chapter, I want to expand the purview of localisation beyond a narrow focus on translation or adaptation to include other aspects of the distribution, exhibition and reception processes, including promotional campaigns, newspaper reviews and, at even the smallest level of scale, individual acts of interpretation. In the age of global media circulation through SVoD platforms that seek to reach multiple audiences simultaneously, I contend that we need a different term to think about the production processes at play, because increasingly, localisation is not something that happens after the production of media content is completed. Rather, it involves a series of decisions and practices that occur throughout the production process. Consequently, I have found the related term internationalisation helpful, especially as it has been used in the software design industry.

To appreciate why this term might be useful, we first need to distinguish between two broad categories of media that SVoD platforms offer to their subscriber base: content produced in local contexts that SVoD platforms *acquire* for distribution, and content that SVoD platforms *commission* for production in local contexts and then distribute internationally. The distinction between the two is not absolute, but it points to the level of creative influence or control the SVoD platform has upstream in the pre-production process. The distinction is difficult to draw because streaming companies often obscure a series's country of origin, branding everything as a Netflix, Amazon or Hulu 'original'. *Acquired* content aligns with the more familiar sense of localisation

as consisting of the translation of language (subtitles and dubbing) after a film or series is complete. SVoD platforms like Netflix that acquire and then localise international series have enabled a kind of golden age of global viewership for international films and series, especially as the pandemic halted media production and subscribers were hungry for new content. In the case of Netflix, *Dix pour cent/Call My Agent!* (France Télévisions/Netflix, 2015–2020) or *Engrenages/Spiral* (Canal+, 2005–2020) are examples of acquired series (though the latter is no longer available on Netflix in the USA). *Dix pour cent* is branded within the Netflix app as a Netflix Original series, highlighting the challenges of unpacking the production history of a series solely based on the metadata within a streaming app.

By contrast, when a SVoD platform like Netflix *commissions* a film or series, the content may be produced in a specific geographic and cultural context, but it is also created to circulate in many different markets. *Commissioned* content thus typically involves a series of decisions throughout the pre-production, production and post-production processes that facilitate localisation. In the realm of software design, developers prefer the term *internationalisation* to *localisation* to describe this approach, and the term can, in my view, help us better understand the multiple audiences sought by commissioned series. For example, the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the organisation that sets the standards for the World Wide Web, explains in one of its policy documents that when embarking on a process of internationalisation, ‘you design or develop your content, application, specification, and so on, in a way that ensures it will work well for, or can be easily adapted for, users from any culture, region, or language’.² In their view, ‘internationalization [...] *enables* easy localization for target audiences’ (my emphasis).³ As I adapt this term to think about the media production process, I would add that internationalisation also requires a consideration of interface: both how media objects reach audiences (theatrical

release, television release, SVoD platforms, disc); how the formal and stylistic choices of a media object play in different markets (questions of adaptation, remakes, genre, casting and stardom); and finally how media objects interact with local, regional and global capital flows (funding, subventions, profits and reinvestment of profits).

Lupin, released six years after Netflix's 2014 launch in the French market, exemplifies the kinds of postnational series that have emerged from production practices of internationalisation. Netflix was the first among US-based streaming platforms, which also include Amazon, Hulu and Apple, to move into localised media production outside the USA as a way of expanding its subscriber base globally (Scarlata, Lobato and Cunningham 2021, 138–139). While one might reasonably anticipate culturally generic films and series as the natural outcome of a strategy of simultaneous global release, content commissioners do not see a disconnect between the embeddedness of media in a local culture and the global circulation of media. While not every local in-reference makes it into the final cut of a series or film, Kelly Luegenbiehl, Netflix's Vice President of International Originals, has said that 'the more local that we are and the more specific we are, the more universal we actually are' (in Scarlata, Lobato and Cunningham 2021, 140). Local embeddedness that later supports global circulation can take many forms, including famous directors, recognisable actors or stars, adaptations or remakes of well-known local series or novels, iconic locations, use of genre codes and inclusive casting practices.

Conversations about internationalisation begin at the earliest stages of production and continue throughout the process. In the case of *Lupin*, George Kay, the series's creator and showrunner, originally hails from the UK, and in an interview with *Le Monde*, he highlighted the importance of collaboration in making the series appeal to different audiences outside France. However, French audiences were not neglected. Kay points to the importance of the writing team,

including French screenwriters like François Uzan, who collectively ensured that the France in the series would be recognisable for those living in and beyond the Hexagon (Sotinel 2021). The first three episodes were directed by Louis Leterrier, who has experience in France directing movies for EuropaCorp (*The Transporter*, 2002, and *Transporter 2*, 2005) and has made films in Hollywood (*The Incredible Hulk*, 2008).

In addition to carefully managing the production process, Netflix's interest in internationalisation extends to the localisation of production itself, hiring local talent and opening production offices throughout the world. In the case of France, Netflix opened an office in Paris in January 2020 after several years of tense relations with the French media industry and its protectionist policies. The relationship between Netflix and the French industry had a rocky start in 2017 when the Cannes Film Festival refused to screen Netflix-produced films in competition because they had never been released in theatres (Cousin 2018, 1–5). Netflix chose not to release those films in French theatres because that would have locked them into France's strict media chronology, which regulates the timeframe when a film can be commercialised in secondary media markets such as disc rentals, private pay-channel broadcast, public television broadcast and of course VoD release. These debates are still ongoing and a full engagement with them would take this chapter too far afield. What is important for the purposes at hand is that Netflix's opening of a French office represents an instance of localisation in the sense of entering and working within a local media industry, including the regulatory structures that govern it. In the case of *Lupin*, Netflix hired Gaumont Television to produce the series, working with rather than against local media companies.⁴

Gaumont had long been interested in a new adaptation of the *Lupin* novels, and Sy had expressed interest in the role shortly after the success of *Intouchables* that the French studio also

produced. Work had begun before Netflix came on board, but when Netflix arrived, they were not happy with the direction of the series's screenplays, and they invited Kay to take over. In coming to the series, Kay talks about being utterly seduced by Sy's charisma, suggesting that his stardom was central to how Kay and his team adapted the novels (Sotinel 2021). Casting France's best-known Black star in the role of Lupin has important consequences for how the series was produced and later circulated. By transforming the character into the twenty-first-century son of a Senegalese immigrant, it participates in the postnational trends discussed by Mary Harrod's and Christopher Meir's chapter in this volume of making diasporic actors more visible in mainstream French media. Furthermore, it frames the series as a tale of social integration, a key element of Sy's star persona. Finally, it aligns with the way Netflix uses inclusive casting as a central element of its internationalisation strategy.

Netflix is widely known for its desire to curate a racially, culturally and linguistically diverse catalogue. In a 2016 event in Seoul, Ted Sarandos, the co-CEO and Chief Content Officer of Netflix, explained the reason for this commitment by noting that half of Netflix's subscriber base is outside the USA and that international subscribers are essential for the company's growth. In his view, being a global SVoD service requires a different approach to casting, one that favours inclusivity and diversity. Sarandos suggested that while traditional Hollywood studios have experienced ongoing difficulties moving towards more inclusive representation in front of and behind the cameras, Netflix has an edge in this regard, and the company will only seek to become more diverse and inclusive in the casting of its series and films (in Hyo-won 2016). While Netflix's casting practices support the fight against systemic racism in the USA, they also make economic sense for a streaming company that releases content simultaneously in many markets around the world, not all of them countries in which White communities are the dominant social group. This

has led many of Netflix's original series to the practice of what the media scholars Alexa Scarlata, Ramon Lobato and Stuart Cunningham call 'circulation-based casting', that is, the use of a diverse and international cast of actors who are well known in different local markets and who often speak in accented English or another language (Scarlata, Lobato and Cunningham 2021, 145).

Despite *Lupin*'s postnational production process, the series is remarkable for just how French it is. The Netflix series was made in French rather than in English, and the casting choices reflect a diverse blend of French acting talent. The actors in this series include three familiar French actresses, Clotilde Hesme, Nicole Garcia and Ludivine Sagnier, known for their roles in several mainstream and auteurist films, as well as the male performers Vincent Londez, who is best known for his television work in French and Belgian crime series; Fargass Assandé, an Ivorian actor and director known for his theatrical work; and of course Sy. These casting choices represent an attempt to appeal to different types of domestic and international viewers that watch the kinds of media the actors are known for. The series itself also mixes many different genres from one episode to the next, moving freely among family melodrama, romantic comedy, action, comedy, thriller and police procedural.

Lupin has Sy's character, Assane Diop, adopt disguises drawn from different social classes. In the first episode, Sy's character poses as a caretaker who works at the Louvre. Later in the same episode, the character re-disguises himself as a tech millionaire, closer to the high society gentleman thief of Maurice Leblanc's original novels. For Assane Diop, social class and cultural distinctions seem to pose no barriers; his talent for theft has given him access to wealth, and his education makes it possible for him to imitate members of the upper class. Yet the character never forgets his roots as the son of a Senegalese immigrant, and his main desire is to get justice (or perhaps revenge) for his father, who was wronged by his upper-class employers. The use of Sy as

an everyman who can pass as belonging to any social class not only tracks with Netflix's commitment to inclusive casting that I discussed earlier, but also it aligns the series with Sy's international star persona, whose fame largely rests on *Intouchables*, also viewable on Netflix. In that film, he played a Senegalese immigrant character who successfully learns the social codes of the Parisian upper classes while remaining rooted in his class and culture of origin. Similarly, while Assane in *Lupin* takes on a variety of disguises from different social classes, his quest to clear his father's name testifies to a desire to maintain his rootedness in his own family's history.

In addition to language, casting and source material, the series also enables localisation in different markets through its narrative choices and its many references to art, music and sites of cultural heritage and tourism in Paris. These references serve to locate domestic and international viewers within an imagined national space and its cultural hierarchies. It would be easy to discuss the series's appeal to international audiences through a consideration of setting or genre. The series uses the viewing pleasures of genres that cross borders, from the action film and the crime genre to the romantic comedy and family melodrama. These two – setting and genre – often go together, evoking what film scholars Melis Behlil, Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado and Jaap Verheul in the context of a study of James Bond films call a 'postcard aesthetics' that reduces international locations to 'exotic non-places' (Behlil, Sánchez Prado and Verheul 2020, 96–97). The Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay are not quite exotic non-places, but they are postcards of overdetermined sites of tourism for international audiences.

***Lupin* with and against heritage cinema**

The ways in which familiar sites of tourism localise *Lupin* for international audiences do not detract from localisation for French audiences. *Lupin*'s domestic localisation depends on how the

series engages with the Maurice Leblanc novels, one of France's most beloved popular series of books and the source material for many previous film and television adaptations. Netflix's series shifts the relative positions of cultural taste and hierarchy by inducting a popular novelist, Leblanc, into the canon of French literature and, more importantly, but transforming Arsène Lupin into a second-generation Black French citizen. The showrunners position *Lupin* with and against the heritage film genre to highlight the ways in which the series is a fable of social integration very much in line with Sy's domestic star persona. *Lupin*'s engagement with the heritage genre also activated heritage spectatorship practices, such as travel to sites of cultural importance and reading the source novels, for domestic and even international audiences. The cultural politics of the series's use of the source novels might not be apparent to international viewers who lack specific local knowledge, but this does not necessarily impede the viewing pleasures offered by the series.

Any work of art, film or media situates its position in cultural hierarchies of value through intertextual references to other works. However, a film or series that explores questions of social integration, references to culture – high and low, legitimate and popular – positions itself with respect to the cultural values of dominant society. To put it differently, arguments in favour of inclusivity for minority communities cannot be separated from the ways in which these communities are aligned with different kinds of culture. This has been an important dimension of Sy's stardom from his breakthrough film *Intouchables*. That film's narrative depended on an opposition between legitimate and popular culture, and the Driss character's integration into French society required him to master the codes of legitimate culture and demonstrate proper use of popular and legitimate cultural references. This a crucial part of how many in France understand integration in a universalist country – learning the French language and legitimate culture, such as literature, as a (if not the) key vector of social integration. There are many diasporic and

postcolonial writers who focus on scenes at school and apprenticeship in language and literature, from Azouz Begag to Fatou Diome, through an initiatory figure, such as a teacher or other mentor.

Lupin also highlights the importance of cultural mastery for social integration, but its narrative arc scrambles the traditional parameters of legitimate and popular culture. One of the series's central subplots concerns the link between the democratisation of legitimate culture and the integration of diverse citizens into the nation. The climax of the series's first two parts revolves around a fundraising event that corrupt bigwig Pellegrini's daughter, Juliette, who runs the family foundation, organises to raise money to support equal access to legitimate culture regardless of one's social origins. A speech Juliette gives before a benefit auction in Episode 7 (P02/E02) makes explicit these stakes of the foundation's work.⁵ Juliette begins by acknowledging her own privilege. She explains that due to growing up in the Pellegrini family, she could visit the best museums and attend the most superb operas as a child, but she admits that not everyone could: 'there were no limits, as you might expect with my father'.⁶ The final sentence in Juliette's speech sounds like that of a mid-twentieth-century, Malraux-era deputy cultural minister arguing for the democratisation of legitimate culture at the opening of a *Maison de la culture* somewhere in the provinces: 'Culture must be accessible to all, without distinction. This is the foundation's very mission and the reason we call upon you today.' Juliette's use of the word *distinction* is likely an ironic wink at Bourdieu's famous 1979 study of cultural value (Bourdieu 1984).

Despite these noble intentions, the Pellegrini family reeks of backwards-looking forms of elite social distinction. Pellegrini's office is visually represented as a museum-like space, with its rich leather interior, its wood panelling and its bookshelf of leather-bound volumes. The Pellegrini apartment scenes were shot at the Musée Nissim de Camondo, a decorative arts museum in Paris, built in 1911 but designed to look like a late eighteenth-century space. Beyond the statues and

furniture, the production design also includes prominent medieval tapestries. This choice of location marks Pellegrini as a member of wealthy elite circles but also connects him to historical memories of the aristocratic or colonial elites. However, Pellegrini's mastery of legitimate culture is ultimately empty of authentic investment. It is a hollow marker of class privilege that masks his unbridled individualism. Juliette's phrase about life with her father having no limits comes across to viewers as ironic because it characterises how Pellegrini conducts business, doing whatever he wants for his own financial gain and only respecting the law when it is expedient or in his own self-interest to do so. Unbeknown to Juliette, the funds raised during the benefit concert will not facilitate access to culture for the poor but only add to his own personal coffers.

Whereas the series represents Pellegrini's relationship to legitimate culture as vacuous, it constructs Assane Diop's relationship to it as authentic and genuine. Unlike Sy's character in *Intouchables*, who was initiated into legitimate culture through Philippe, Assane Diop is a socially mobile autodidact who is already able to interact in whatever situation he finds himself, be it with the communities of the *banlieues* or the wealthy circles attending the auction of the necklace in Chapter 1 (P01/E01). Assane is also able to charm individuals connected through postcolonial histories, be they the woman from 'his village' who works at the prison or the wealthy woman who made her fortune in the Belgian Congo from whom he steals (P01/E05). The production design of his Parisian apartment is just as rich, opulent and spacious as Pellegrini's, though hipper and more modern. Always assuming he has the right to be wherever chooses has long been a part of Sy's star persona, but it takes on a new dimension in *Lupin*. If Assane's initiation into French culture could be attributed to Pellegrini, it is purely by accident and primarily through an experience of reading Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin novels. Thus, during a flashback in Chapter 1 (P01/E01) when Pellegrini becomes especially irritated by his flailing business deals,

he catches his driver, Assane's father, Babakar, taking a break from cleaning to see what the bookshelves in Pellegrini's office hold. Pellegrini yells at Babakar that he is not being paid to read. Pellegrini's wife comes to apologise for her husband's behaviour, and she invites Babakar to choose one of the books from the bookshelves as a gift for his son. Babakar selects the first volume of *Arsène Lupin* in a rich, leather-bound edition. Babakar is ultimately unable to give the book to Assane before he is falsely arrested for stealing the necklace from Pellegrini's office and killed in prison. After young Assane learns the news, he goes through his father's possessions, and he finds a wrapped birthday present: the first *Arsène Lupin* novel.



Figure 12.1: *Lupin*'s Assane (Omar Sy) gifts his copy of *Arsène Lupin* to his son, Raoul (P01/E01).

The series spends a significant amount of screen time demonstrating just how carefully Assane reads the Leblanc books. We see this especially in his efforts to pass on the gift of reading to his son, Raoul. Part 1's first episode ends with a scene in which Assane regifts the same book his father gave him to his son. The two stand on the Pont des Arts, the bridge best known to tourists

for the many combination locks that lovers used to place there (see Figure 12.1). In the background is the prestigious Institut de France building with its gilded dome, visually placing the Leblanc novels on a par with the hallowed knowledge dispensed inside. Assane gently chides his son for all the time he spends on his phone, remarking how much he enjoyed reading at Raoul's age. Raoul cheekily fires back that it was normal to read back then because smartphones did not exist. Assane calls Raoul's comment dreadful and wonders aloud if his son merits the gift he is about to make. As Assane pulls the book from his jacket, viewers can see sticky notes on certain pages, indicating how many times Assane has reread the book over the years. Later episodes feature close-ups in which viewers see the marginal notes Assane has made in the books, suggesting that he read the book with the close analysis techniques more properly reserved for literature. Even more than literature, however, the novels functioned as a kind of textbook for him. A flashback in Part 1's third episode features Assane reading while a young Claire sits next to him on a bed in the school dormitory. Claire asks Assane how he doesn't get bored always rereading the same book. Assane replies that he learns new things each time. Assane lacks a father, a teacher or another mentor figure, but the Leblanc novels play this role for him in a traditional literary apprenticeship, yet one that is based on the pleasure of reading. During the first episode's scene of Assane and Raoul on the bridge, Assane tells his son that he will 'enjoy' the book – 'ça va te plaire, ça' – suggesting that reading can be as pleasurable as other forms of popular culture. In an internal monologue heard as voiceover, Assane intones, '*Arsène Lupin* is more than a book. It's my heritage, my method, my voice. I am Lupin.' From the very first episode, the series positions the Leblanc novels as a form of cultural heritage and an instruction manual for social integration.

As the series continues, it models the initiation into cultural heritage through Assane's relationship to other characters, especially his son. The focus on reading reveals the series to be a

série patrimoniale but not in the typical ways scholars have defined heritage cinema. Dayna Oscherwitz defines the heritage picture genre in cinema as focusing on ‘heritage properties’ (Oscherwitz 2010, 3), what Pierre Nora has called in a different context ‘lieux de mémoire’ or sites or realms of memory (Nora 1996, 1–3). Heritage properties could involve adaptations of ‘culturally prestigious’ or well-known literary texts, or the use of ‘significant’ or ‘culturally resonant’ buildings, landscapes and interior spaces (Oscherwitz 2010, 3). While Maurice Leblanc’s popular *Arsène Lupin* novels, first published in 1905, are well known, not all viewers in France would necessarily agree that they are equivalent to prestigious novels by the likes of such literary greats as Balzac or Proust. Yet, through a self-conscious representation of characters reading the *Lupin* novels, the series seeks to shift perceptions of the cultural value afforded them. To put it another way, the series takes it for granted that Leblanc represents an instance of a popular site of memory, in Nora’s sense, yet it nevertheless seeks to convince viewers of this fact over the course of the series through viewer surrogates like Raoul. For Oscherwitz, while heritage films build on the genre of historical films of which they are a part, they are distinctive in that they respond to a ‘perceived loss of culture by encoding national identity as a product of memory’ (Oscherwitz 2010, 3–4). In a related vein, Hilary Radner, building on the work of Raphaëlle Moine and Ginette Vincendeau on the heritage genre, suggests that French heritage films are ‘preoccupied with a “meticulous” reconstruction in terms of costume and décor, as part of an aesthetic that might be appropriately described as curatorial or museological, exhibiting strong mannerist tendencies’ (Radner 2015, 293). Netflix’s *Lupin* is notable for the ways it refuses to do the work of cultural heritage as mannerism, museumification or memory. Instead, it opts for a hyper-contemporary, cosmopolitan and entertainment-oriented adaptation that fuses past and present. Yet, I would argue that it still creates the reverential relationship to the source novels that is characteristic of heritage

filmmaking through narrative *mise-en-abyme*.

As we have seen, Sy's *Lupin* is depicted as a devoted reader of the original novels, something that he passes on to his own son. Raoul does begin reading the *Lupin* novels and takes pleasure in them. Moreover, the series represents him as choosing to read the novels over other kinds of media, bringing reading to life as a heritage practice. In Part 1's second episode, Raoul reads the first *Lupin* novel at the dinner table. His mother, Claire, is surprised by this new behaviour, and she asks him if he now prefers reading to playing video games. Raoul does not answer her, clearly absorbed in the book. Later, in Chapter 9 (P02/E04), Raoul sits in his room reading the second *Lupin* novel, *Arsène Lupin versus Herlock Sholmes*. Claire's new boyfriend, Marc, enters Raoul's room and asks him what he is reading. Raoul replies that it is a *Lupin* novel his father gave him. Marc then asks if he is not too old to be reading such a novel, suggesting that popular novels are something for children and not young adults. When Raoul does not even reply, Marc asks what the story is about, and Raoul explains that the first part of the second novel revolves around a complicated escape. This scene is intercut with Assane and Benjamin's flight from the police in a chase sequence that ranges from Assane's apartment to a storage container to the Parisian catacombs. This kind of self-conscious intertextuality marks adaptation as a process of transcoding, in Linda Hutcheon's sense (Hutcheon 2013, 16–17), but it also connects the series engagement with popular media genres – from comedy and romance to the thriller and action-adventure – to the pleasure of reading popular novels.

Cultural heritage and modelling fandom

The series's staging of the *Lupin* novels as a site of memory worthy of heritage practices continues with the pilgrimage that *Lupin* organises with his son and his son's mother to Étretat to honour

Maurice Leblanc's birthday. Raoul dons a black cape in honour of Lupin, as do many other visitors to the beaches that appear in this episode (P01/E05). In addition to the Leblanc novels as a popular site of memory, the series transforms Leblanc himself and his home town into such a site through the trip to city and beaches of Étretat. By showing pilgrims dressed as Lupin on the beaches, the series normalises heritage practices such as visiting sites of memory. The series mixes this kind of cultural reverence with the narrative pleasures of the action film and thriller. One of Pellegrini's enforcers, Léonard, tries to abduct Raoul on the train to Étretat and then succeeds in kidnapping him at the beach. The series then moves into an extended car chase sequence and showdown in a deserted mansion. In this way, the series demonstrates that the reverential relationship to sites of memory is in no way antithetical to the pleasures of commercial entertainment.

Yet the series goes one step further than merely legitimating reading popular genres for pleasure: it inducts them into the canon of French literature. During Chapter 10 (P02/E05), the series flashes back to an earlier moment in the contemporary narrative to clarify the identity of one of the key characters. Assane and Benjamin seek to recruit a double agent to infiltrate Pellegrini's organisation. Their method, however improbably, is to look for people who go to the library to read *Lupin* novels. This scene is shot at the French National Library (BNF) Richelieu's main reading room, which is not as familiar a site to international tourists as the Louvre or the Musée d'Orsay, but its ornate architecture would nevertheless mark it as a place that focuses on the preservation of cultural heritage (see Figure 12.2). The setting is nevertheless absurd for two reasons. First, readers could not access the Leblanc novels at the BNF Richelieu because their collection focuses on rare books and manuscripts. Second, the *Arsène Lupin* novels are so widely available that it would suffice to visit any municipal library to read them rather than go through the researcher accreditation process at France's national library. As Assane and Benjamin walk

past the reading tables back to the stacks where the Arsène Lupin novels are kept, viewers notice a sign, probably added by the production designer, that reads ‘Maurice Leblanc – Littérature française’. The juxtaposition of Leblanc’s name and French literature subtly assimilates the *Lupin* novels into the rarefied category of legitimate French literature and demonstrates the series’s investment in a transvaluation of cultural values.



Figure 12.2: The French National Library Richelieu’s ornate reading room (P02/E05).

For their final gambit to expose Pellegrini, Assane and Benjamin await a passionate fan of Arsène Lupin who takes the novels as seriously as they do. However, they have to wait a surprisingly long time to find one. After several other patrons have come and gone, a young man arrives, removes the library call number tag from one of the *Arsène Lupin* volumes and slips it into his coat before asking Assane and Benjamin what they are doing. The young man is heavily tattooed, wears black make-up and has several piercings. During a makeover sequence, Benjamin and Assane turn him into a strait-laced business type, and viewers suddenly realise that he is Pellegrini’s investment consultant whom they met several episodes prior. In the same way that

Lupin's many disguises lead viewers to question the fixity of social roles, the series also invites viewers to question cultural hierarchies of the literary canon, if not the importance of reading itself.

The ways in which the series cues a heritage relationship to *Lupin* novels and to Leblanc himself as author have had effects in the real world. When both parts of *Lupin*'s first season appeared on Netflix at the height of the pandemic, French tourists flooded Étretat and the museum located in Maurice Leblanc's former house despite COVID-19 restrictions. Locals have taken to calling these visitors 'Netflix tourists', and the numbers were much higher than after the 2004 cinematic adaptation starring Romain Duris or the 1970s television adaptation with Georges Descrières (Pineau 2021). The numbers were so high that locals called for greater regulation and quotas. The series has also increased book sales, including among young readers – though not to nearly as many as the series's 70 million viewers (Baud 2021). While many forms of commercial cinema and television hope to create transmedia tie-ins, ancillary revenue streams and potential tourism business, *Lupin*'s success came as something of a surprise.

The anecdote about tourism to Étretat demonstrates that *Lupin* managed to create the spectatorial relationship of a heritage film for domestic audiences even as it departs from many of the genre's characteristics in cinema. Cultural heritage is not opposed to internationalisation in the age of SVoD; it is now a part of it. Viewers see the internationalisation of cultural heritage most strongly in the choice to cast Sy as Lupin. In her analysis of the different ways that minority actors are cast in contemporary theatre, Angela Pao enumerates the four types of casting practices used by the Non-Traditional Casting Project in the 1980s: 'color-blind casting', in which 'the best actor for

the role is cast'; 'societal casting', in which minorities play 'the roles they perform in society as a whole'; 'conceptual casting', in which a minority actor is cast 'to give the play greater resonance'; and 'cross-cultural casting', in which the play's narrative world 'is translated to a different cultural setting' (Pao 2010, 4). *Lupin*'s producers could have opted for a purely conceptual casting practice in selecting a Black actor to play Arsène Lupin in a period piece. Instead, they opted for a combination of conceptual and cross-cultural casting by transforming the *Lupin* novels into a contemporary tale about the son of a Senegalese immigrant in France.

The series thus diversifies the face of French cultural heritage, very much in keeping with Netflix's commitment to inclusive casting, while expanding the kinds of pleasures viewers can expect from a heritage film or series. This is not new per se, as there are many examples of combining the codes of French heritage cinema with various genres, from comedy in *Les Visiteurs/The Visitors* (Jean-Marie Poiré, 1993) to horror in *Le Pacte des loups/Brotherhood of the Wolf* (Christophe Gans, 2001) or action in *The Emperor of Paris* (Jean-François Richet, 2018). What is distinctive, I think, is Sy's cross-over appeal to many different domestic *and* international audiences and the notable success the series had on Netflix's streaming platform worldwide as opposed to distribution in film theatres or linear television. Given that *Lupin* was led by a British showrunner, featured a multinational writing team and was made by a French studio for an American SVoD platform, the series is a particularly revelatory example of the design processes of internationalisation and the global popularity that are possible for postnational French-language series in the current age of SVoD platforms.

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¹ This chapter grew out of the conclusion to my book *French B-Movies: Universalism, Suburban Spaces, and the Challenge of Hollywood* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2023). I am grateful to the press for permission to reuse a few paragraphs here in slightly modified form.

² ‘Internationalization’ (n.d.). World Wide Web Consortium. <https://www.w3.org/standards/webdesign/i18n>.

³ ‘Localization vs. Internationalization’ (n.d.). World Wide Web Consortium. <https://www.w3.org/International/questions/qa-i18n.en>.

⁴ See Christopher Meir’s contribution to this volume for a detailed appraisal of Gaumont’s role in producing the French postnational ‘popular’.

⁵ Because of the COVID-19 lockdown, Netflix divided what was supposed to be the first 10-episode season into two ‘parts’ – Part 1, Episodes 1–5 and Part 2, Episodes 1–5.

⁶ Translations are the author’s own.