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The Elusive Pleasures of French TV Series

By ALESSANDRA STANLEY

It may be a small world, but it's remarkable how many barriers remain to easy viewing.

There is exotic and beguiling television all across the world, far away by plane but near enough by satellite, cable or Web to be tantalizingly just out of reach.

Television reveals the limits of globalization. In the era of Mumbai call centers, online offshore banking, Skype chats, drone attacks, satellite phones and avian flu pandemics, national borders seem almost quaint. Yet foreign shows that should be as easily found in Minnesota as Monte Carlo are not readily available.

Instead, Americans rely on trickle-down distribution. Audiences in the United States have been sampling the best of British television — and “Benny Hill” — since “[The Forsyte Saga](#)” reached PBS in 1969. They more recently discovered Nordic Noir police thrillers and other Scandinavian cult favorites, including the Danish series “The Crime” and “Borgen.”

It's not just Denmark. There are really well made programs in every corner of the world, and Internet streaming has opened the door a crack. Whether it's because of technological differences or copyright issues, American audiences today are a little like Italians in the era of Marco Polo: They have a few exotic spices and a faint sense that there may be a lot more somewhere out there.

“Spiral,” a French crime series originally called “Engrenages,” is a huge hit in France, as well as on BBC Four [in Britain](#), and it has found a devout American following on Netflix, which offers the first three seasons. But beyond “Spiral,” there are excellent French series that are almost inaccessible to American viewers, and for no good reason.

“Un Village Français” is a period drama about a village under Nazi occupation. “[Maison Close](#)” is a drama set in a 19th-century Parisian bordello — Baudelaire meets the Playboy Channel. “Les Revenants” is a matter-of-fact ghost story about a handful of people who return from the dead and try to resume normal life in a small French town.

Those four series represent different genres and have nothing in common, really, except the shared context of history and a stylishly unhurried pace that is a legacy of French cinema in its heyday. Most important, they serve up the most common themes — crime, war, sex and the occult — in fresh and unexpected ways. All but “Un Village” are under consideration for adaptations in

English.

“Spiral,” which just finished a fourth season, was the first to find an outside audience, probably because it belongs to the most familiar and exportable format, the police drama. But it’s a particularly rich and complicated version, weaving detectives hunting down drug traffickers and terrorists into a contemporary Parisian backdrop of political arrivistes, corrupt judges and criminals with friends in high places, including predators in the mold of Dominique Strauss-Kahn.

“[Un Village Français](#),” which began in 2009, was also a sensation, possibly because it was the first major French television series seriously to address collaboration during the Nazi occupation in [World War II](#). Vichy is not a taboo subject by any means. There have been scores of history books, novels, movies, documentaries and even [graphic novels](#) about the occupation. (Though it is a measure of how quickly postwar amnesia and myth making took hold that in the 1970s, one of the first scholars to point out that the Pétain regime willingly went along with Hitler was [an American historian](#), Robert O. Paxton.)

But France is not as much of a television culture as are Britain and other European countries. The French film industry, internationally respected and state subsidized, has thrived better than most, and, accordingly, producers and stars tended to favor movies over television. Films, commercial and art house, were a better reflection of the national mood and cultural mainstream; most of the top-rated series on French television are made in the United States.

“Un Village Français,” which is about to start its fifth season, is evidence that the tide has shifted. The drama begins in June 1940 in Villeneuve, a fictional village in the Jura Mountains, when the Germans are at the door, and the illusion of invulnerability is crumbling. The byword of the series is “To live is to choose,” and in each episode, and each season, the war intensifies, options narrow and collaboration thickens.

This series was not a shock or an awakening for French viewers in the way that the 1978 NBC mini-series “Holocaust” was to many Germans — half the country watched that drama about the plight of German Jews. “Un Village” goes over very familiar territory, only it is neither an indictment nor an exoneration. It’s a subtle, historically accurate but not unsympathetic look at ordinary people suddenly tested by war, defeat and enemy invasion.

Some of the most well-meaning people collaborate — *faute de mieux* — and some of the bravest resisters are downright unpleasant.

Many citizens of Villeneuve have personal reasons for working with the Germans or against them. Raymond Schwartz (Thierry Godard) is a local businessman whose sympathies lie with the Resistance, but he agrees to turn his sawmill over to the Germans, so he can freely cross

checkpoints to visit his mistress. The mayor's brother, Marcel (Fabrizio Rongione), is a Communist. He gets in trouble with the Germans but also with the local party bosses. The party chides Marcel after he risks his life clandestinely to distribute leaflets attacking Hitler because they didn't also denounce Churchill.

“Maison Close,” which opens in Paris in 1871, right after the suppression of la Commune, a workers' revolutionary movement that briefly took power in an uprising that year, lies somewhere between a historical drama and erotica. The drearier bits are about sex, not politics. One of the heroines is Rose (Jemima West), a country ingénue who goes into a bordello looking for her mother, and is quickly tricked and blackmailed into becoming a prostitute. The perils of Rose are almost comical — she keeps finding herself at police headquarters in corsets and petticoats.

The story gets more interesting when it gets down to business: politics and power, particularly the complicated cat-and-mouse relationship between the madam and her best employee and sometime lover.

Prostitution then was legal, but strictly controlled by the police.

“No woman leaves this profession,” the police commissioner warns Rose after issuing her a prostitute's identity card. “But it's a real profession, and there's a way to do it well, with self-respect.”

“Les Revenants,” which was shown [in Britain](#) with subtitles,” is strange, and strangely suspenseful. In a small town in the French mountains, a small number of people — a boy killed during a robbery, a teenager in a bus wreck, a bridegroom who committed suicide, a serial killer buried alive by his brother — return from the dead and quietly try to restart their lives. It was based on a movie by the same title, but the series focuses on the widening ripples of consequence as survivors slowly move from shock to acceptance and then, as weird things start to happen, suspicion.

All of these shows echo the most basic elements of American television — with a twist.

“Spiral” is “Law & Order” as seen by Stendhal. “Un Village Francais” is a “Band of Brothers” or “Foyle's War” for a nation that wasn't saved by its greatest generation and didn't have its finest hour. “Les Revenants” is “The Walking Dead,” only the zombies are sentient, and hungry for cassoulet, not human flesh. Unlike the Showtime series “Secret Diary of a Call Girl,” the French equivalent, “Maison Close,” traffics in prostitution without indulging the common male delusion that women become prostitutes because they enjoy the sex.

Nobody can complain anymore that there's nothing good on television. There could be more.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction: