



## 'Most people think Benny Hill is the epitome of British TV'



Art historian Sandrine Voillet, who spent time working for the BBC, describes some of the cultural differences she has noticed between France and the UK

Illustration: Nathalie Lemaire

**Y**ou don't look French enough,' I was told by BBC producers during the casting for the 'Paris' TV series. Straight away I was taken to a clothes shop and dressed in ... a trench coat. I guess that's what they felt French people should look like on British television, but personally I had the feeling of being dressed like Inspector Clouseau. I thought my strong accent would be enough to prove my Gallic credentials but apparently not. Fair enough, I thought, as most French people think of Benny Hill and 'Mr Bean' as the epitome of British TV...

In any case, hoping to influence the British perception of France towards more than simply a collection of clichés, I had proudly enrolled to work for the British Broadcasting Corporation. After a few months preparation work, researching and refining the scripts, we began shooting.

A BBC crew in action was a formidable sight to behold, 12-hour working days with hardly a break for three consecutive weeks that everyone seemed to think was normal. Nobody ever complained. Of course, invoking the hallowed name 'BBC' to French authorities was like saying 'Open Sesame!'; it opened doors everywhere. Unfortunately even this renowned institution is now experiencing budget cuts, such as on period drama productions.

But then, the situation in France is no better. Can we compare the BBC to France Télévisions, the state owned group which runs five channels, France 2, 3, 4, 5, Ô? The recent reform of state TV funding plans to stop advertising between programmes. Knowing that France is one of the countries with the fewest adverts on TV, some wonder how its TV channels will cope with the loss of funds.

Cinema and TV are two very different worlds, for many reasons the former has always looked down on the latter. While French cinema is widely appreciated abroad, French television is less so. The opposite is the case with Britain, where its television output is better known than its cinema.

While working in London for Artificial Eye, an independent film distribution company, I noticed other differences, too. Overall, there are fewer moviegoers in Britain, and art house films and venues are also rarer. The cinema screens are dominated by major distribution companies pumping blockbuster and it's quite hard for an independent film to get released. For example, it

takes a really brave venue to screen a European movie in the UK when Spider-Man comes out. Not so in France. It has the highest number of cinema visits a year in Europe (around 177 millions in 2007) and films produced (185 in 2008 including co-productions).

Although local productions such as *Mr Bean's Holiday* enjoyed success in the UK and across Europe, some UK films are better known abroad than at home. For example everybody in France knows who Ken Loach is and in 2006 his film *The Wind that shakes the Barley* received the highest award at the Cannes Film Festival, the Palme d'Or. But back home it was largely ignored.

I guess the main difference is philosophical. In Britain people talk about the 'film industry', but here it is known as 'The 7th Art'. Cinema is taken very seriously in France, like all culture. The French government created a system to subsidise scriptwriting and filmmaking - the CNC (Centre National de La Cinématographie). In 2007 its budget was €548 million.

A good example of this difference can be seen in the status of production and other staff. For instance, French technicians and actors are employees (salariés) and not freelancers, as is often the case in Britain. Due to the frequent alternation of periods of employment with periods of unemployment a special status to support actors and technicians was created in France called 'intermittents du spectacle'. They are entitled to benefits for longer periods than people in other trades as work opportunities in the arts are few and far between, and people frequently alternate between busy and quiet periods.

In Britain, by contrast, freelancers are sometimes asked to sign what is called a 'buy-out'. This Faustian contract entitles the production company to make people work extra hours (read: very long hours) for the same money as a normal eight-hour shift. They are also asked to double or triple their job title: producer/runner/tea maker...

Would both countries benefit from more mutual influence? In terms of arts or cultural programmes, I believe that co-production is the future. Such co-operation would provide the perfect environment for learning from each other's different practices and points of view. If we start eroding stereotypes, the quality of programmes can only increase. Think about it, how many people do you know in France who wear trench coats?

Sandrine Voillet is an art historian who presented the BBC TV series 'Paris' on the history of the French city. Her website: [www.sandrinesparis.com](http://www.sandrinesparis.com)

## TOWN & Country

While both our writers chose to live in France one opted for the glamour of Paris, the other for a quiet life in the country. Each month they write about their very different lifestyles



**Town:** Kimberley Poty

'It was when they started chanting 'Leggo My Boobies! Leggo My Boobies!' that I thought I should say something'

**M**y two children have started at a new school this year which meant travelling by metro. The first day was filled with a sense of adventure, the children excited by the crowds and the street performers. As we arrived on the train platform my eight-year-old son suddenly stopped and stood gaping while my daughter, aged four, started giggling. On a billboard before them a priming blonde model lay sprawled on her back, completely naked and stretched to red, her glowing legs stretched out flat up in the air, and a blonde woman checked flat against her chest. Ah, yes, those by the Galeries Lafayette annual lingerie sale. In all my American portmanteau glory, I pretended that I had no idea what the children were looking at and ignored their question altogether. 'Why is she skinny? Do you think she's a normal? Is she going to make her baby increase some more?' It was when they started chanting 'Leggo My Boobies! Leggo My Boobies!' that I thought I should say something. 'I see she's chilly, huh? Those silly men who made that ad think that a gross body with no clothes on will make everyone want to buy a sweater. That's crazy, isn't it? I'd rather buy my sweater from a nice family in Basel than wouldn't you?' With a very unconvincing 'yes' from my son, I ushered the two into the train. Settling into our seats I heard a familiar incantation. 'Hot-and-mess-dresses-et-mes-sœurs

*Et ça se voit de vous-à-elle-est-elle...* It was a small Russian girl with a plump baby on her hip. She told us about her sick mother and her brothers and sisters and how they were destined to spend another night on the streets. As the girl and her baby made their way down the car for collections, the other passengers turned themselves round to look at the woman at the bottom of my carriage but the sound of my children's words breaking distracted me. The girl slumped down at our seats and there in one swift moment I saw the children's destination. It wasn't long before I was handing over my change. After she moved on, the children couldn't stop with their questions. 'Where were their parents? Was that her brother? Why didn't you give her some paper money?' All I could muster up was that I hadn't had time to go to the ATM. I grabbed a Carambar into each of their mouths and prayed that the rest of the ride would pass without incident. Getting off the train at our stop we began playing a matching game of 'I Spy'. 'I Spy With My Little Eye... A red scarf!... A girl eating an ice cream!... A little dog in a basket!... A man in a short dress wearing lipstick! What?'

Kimberley's wedding planning agency can be found at [www.parisianparty.com](http://www.parisianparty.com)



**Country:** Frances Penwill-Cook

'As we heaved logs from under a tarp in the freezing cold and lashing rain, we swore we would never spend another winter this way...'

**O**n first winter in the French countryside we spent huddled against arctic temperatures in a spacious rented farmhouse that was wonderfully cool in hot summer months, but a challenge to warm up in winter. For five months we felt as though we were living in swelter - we heated only the lounge to minimise costs and even kept soup warm on the fire so we could avoid the sub-zero kitchen. Something of a shock after push-button central heating in London!

Last year the first winter in our little stone house was warmer, but as the cold weather seemed to go on and on our budget didn't stretch to quite enough wood to see us through the winter. This meant a return to arctic conditions for the last two months. But even when we had wood things were pretty miserable, as the chopped wood we had delivered was too long to fit in our fire. As Ross and I heaved logs from under a tarp in the freezing cold and lashing rain, before manually sawing each piece to size, we swore we would never spend another winter this way. As you can imagine, this never-ending chore did little to contribute to the festive spirit!

So, earlier this year we invested in a chainsaw. I was excited when it arrived, but I did find the free gift of a machete quite a surprise. I remember a time when free gifts were tiny perfume samples or cosmetic bags containing a

miniature lip gloss and mascara... How life has changed!

I also never thought I would get so excited about a supply of wood. Not long ago our French neighbour (the one who calls me 'Frances' and to whom I have grown very attached) told us she and her husband were downsizing and moving to a nearby town. All years of country living they have an awful lot of stuff and as we've just started out they have generously donated all sorts of useful items: an air terraille, piperno, tortis, grillage, topin, bidons, fantaisie - to name a few - all of which have been very gratefully received. First Noël has definitely come early this year! The best prize of all, though, is their wood. 'Pour faire mon voisinage sera sweeping her arms around while pointing at the mass of chopped wood that we can have.

That said, she doesn't think we'll need it all and says that this coming winter won't be as cold as last year. How does she know? The element September, she explained, means a less severe winter. I hope she's right. But if we have to fuel a fire and I say, well, I can now 'bring it on!' with newly-found bravado. And that's not something I thought would happen quite so soon!

Frances's editorialing agency can be found at [www.zoonpublishing.co.uk](http://www.zoonpublishing.co.uk)