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Thibaut Schilt, *François Ozon*. Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 198 pp. Filmography, bibliography and index. \$65.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN-13: 978-0-252-03600 (hb).

Review by Ginette Vincendeau, King's College London.

Since the 'shock' impact of his first feature *Sitcom* in 1998 and the international art house triumph of *Sous le sable* in 2000, François Ozon undoubtedly has become one of the star directors of contemporary French cinema. While the critical and popular reception of his films has been uneven and often sharply divided, the prolific Ozon (born 1967) has already directed a dozen features in about as many years, in addition to more than twenty short films and he has been handsomely rewarded with prizes. His films range from violent dramas such as *Les Amants criminels* (1999) to thoughtful art films with explicit homosexual themes (*Le Temps qui reste*, 2005) and popular, star-studded theatrical adaptations (*8 femmes*, 2002, *Potiche*, 2010). The diversity and hybridity of his work however have not deterred critics from seeking auteurist consistency in his output. Despite the relative brevity of his career, Ozon has elicited a large amount of writing, with many reviews, interviews and features and recently books with significant discussions of his work, by Lucille Cairns, Alain Brassart, Kate Ince, as well as a volume entirely devoted to him by Andrew Asibong—and now a book by Thibaut Schilt. [1]

The originality, brilliance and exportability of Ozon's films clearly account for this critical excitement. But when so many equally interesting figures from the classical and contemporary periods of French cinema, such as Julien Duvivier, Jacqueline Audry and Agnès Jaoui to name just three, go unsung, other parameters come into play to explain Ozon's popularity especially within academia. Top of the list is Ozon's openly gay identity and gay thematics, which have earned him the accolade as France's "first mainstream queer filmmaker" and made his work readable through identity and queer studies, especially in the English-speaking world. Indeed it is noticeable that writing on Ozon is much less abundant in France, where as yet there is no study dedicated to him. Second is the popularity, at least in academia, of the so-called "French extremist cinema," within which some of Ozon's films fit.

Schilt clearly states the filiation of "theories of gender and sexuality" (p. ix) as underlining his interest in cinema studies in general and Ozon's films in particular and, although this does not appear on the cover, he sub-titles his book "The Fabric of Desire." The idea originates in the double-meaning of the word "fabric" in a particularly fine analysis of the short film *Une robe d'été* (1996), where Schilt claims that "(t)he concept of fluidity, of which the dynamic movement of clothing in general and the airy summer dress in particular are powerful representations, is at the core of Ozon's cinema, from his early career as a short film director some twenty years ago to the present." (p. 2). Fluidity in the sexual sense is duly traced throughout the book as a key theme of Ozon's work, but the emphasis on clothing is distinctly less well-developed. For instance, the paramount importance of costume in films like *8 femmes* goes unexplored.

Writers on Ozon have all noted the several strands in his work but found different ways of conceptualising them. Schilt offers interestingly novel groupings (which, for instance, diverge from Asibong's). The decision to read *Sitcom*, *Les Amants criminels* and *8 femmes* under the banner of "Paternal Monsters" is rewarding, as is the emphasis on "Mourning Sickness" in the second chapter, which

examines *Sous le sable*, *Swimming Pool* (2003) and *Le Temps qui reste* (2005). I was less convinced with the grouping of *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* (2000), *5 x 2* (2004) and *Ricky* (2009) under the heading of "Foreign Affairs" and personally find that *8 femmes*, *Swimming Pool* and *Sous le sable* gain from being examined together on account of their portraits of mature femininity. Of course Schilt wrote his book before *Potiche*, which in turn makes a meaningful pair with *8 femmes* as flamboyant and "queering" theatrical adaptations centred on women. Nevertheless, this only goes to show how the richness and indeed fluidity of Ozon's work mean that it can be interpreted in so many different ways, making the two books (Schilt's and Asibong's), and other works on Ozon complementary rather than repetitious. On the other hand, I found Schilt's lack of attention to *Angel* (2007) on the grounds that it had not been distributed in North America slightly baffling and a shame, this being Ozon's major incursion into English-language filmmaking—as well as another complex study of a central female character.

Schilt's *François Ozon* is a consistently clear and well-written book that combines serious research and pedagogic concern with an evident enthusiasm for the work of the director. The author is careful to place the filmmaker's work within different contexts, both of contemporary French cinema (and its relationship with the New Wave) and of more international circles of films (queer cinema, "extremist" cinema, "cinema of the body"). Throughout, the themes of queer sexuality and the fascination with "the other" and difference are explored as authorial threads in a number of detailed analyses of the films. To these themes, Schilt appropriately adds Ozon's cinephilia. This is traced back to Ozon's childhood and education. Growing up in a Parisian middle-class milieu in the 1970s, Ozon was blessed with parents who, while they were teachers, were themselves cinephiles. His mother read film journals, his father made super-8 films, and Ozon convinced them and his siblings to figure in a number of his early short films, including one (*Photo de famille*, 1988) that humorously stages their death in a series of murders. He then went on to study for a postgraduate degree in film studies before entering the FEMIS film school, thus unusually combining theoretical and practical film education, the legacy of which can be seen in the high awareness of film history in his work. Schilt meticulously picks out filmic references—for instance a large section of the analysis of *8 femmes* (see pp. 70-73) is devoted to this; this is useful to the reader, even though at times it borders on cataloguing. As Schilt admits, "most commentators spend a large part of their reviews listing those inspirations, sometimes to the detriment of other elements..., and I realise that the present discussion may be guilty of the same crime" (p. 73).

While I would not go as far as calling it a "crime," I would point out that the excessive detailing of influences and references is part of a wider issue that is a reluctance to adopt a critical stance vis-à-vis the material. This takes two forms. One is over-reliance on the director's own words, Ozon's pronouncements never being really challenged or put in a critical perspective—illustrated by the interview with the director at the end of the book which is inserted without comment, and, as it were, given the last word; this is particularly noticeable as the book before the interview comes to an abrupt end, without any actual conclusion. The other point derives from the theoretical grid of queer studies and gender studies—in this book, as in many others of its kind, it has to be said, there is a lot of discussion of sexuality but not much of sexual politics. In this respect it would have been interesting for Schilt to engage with work that does offer a critical perspective on Ozon's ambiguous sexual politics, in particular Alain Brassart's discussion of Ozon within what he terms "gay misogyny"[2] (in *L'Homosexualité dans le cinéma français* which does figure in Schilt's bibliography) and of Lucille Cairns' critical view of the "lesbian" theme in *8 femmes* in *Sapphism on Screen* (which does not). The analysis of *Sous le sable* is typical in this respect.

The author provides a thorough discussion of the theme of mourning in the film (the central topic), seeing the heroine's trajectory of the film as one of "emancipation" (p. 91). This is true in the sense that Marie (Charlotte Rampling) goes from denial to acceptance of her husband's disappearance and thus likely death, but the reader unfamiliar with the film would not know that, throughout, Marie has no independent identity—neither personal (she is consumed by loss and denial, and is revealed to have

ignored basic facts about her husband, such as his depression) nor professional: she is an academic without any intellectual project (or, apparently, work), whose “lecturing” consists of reading extracts from Virginia Woolf to her class. In this respect, it would have been fascinating to challenge some of Ozon’s contradictory statements about the relationship between film, spectatorship and gender that appear in the final interview in relation to this film (among others), for example his assertion that he needed a “female point of view” (p. 161) and thus asked for female collaborators’ help. In turn, of course, this would require a wider examination of sexual politics in France today, beyond references to theoreticians such as Hélène Cixous (p. 90).

In a more minor key, there are a few quibbles, besides the lack of conclusion already mentioned. The illustrations are on the dark side, though this is clearly not down to the author. The writing is clear and the bibliography extensive, but a rather erratic referencing system is used—sometimes with the name of the author, sometimes the title of the piece, sometimes with the date, sometimes not, sometimes with page numbers and sometimes not (this may seem like academic hair-splitting, but given that this is an academic book targeting students who forever have to be taught to be consistent, I believe it has to be remarked upon). Although this is down to the author, perhaps more stringent copy-editing might have helped. With these reservations, Thibaut Schilt’s *François Ozon* is a solid and engaging addition to the literature on a director who has become central to studies of contemporary French cinema. As Ozon shows no sign of slowing down (he has already made three feature films—*Le Refuge* (2009), *Potiche* and *Dans la maison* (2012)—since this book was published), we can look forward to the continuation of a rich and expanding field of Ozon studies, in which this book has a natural place.

NOTES

[1] Lucille Cairns, *Sapphism on Screen: Lesbian Desire in French and Francophone Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006); Alain Brassart, *L’Homosexualité dans le cinéma français* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Editions, 2007); Kate Ince, *Five Directors: Auteurism from Assayas to Ozon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008); Andrew Asibong, *François Ozon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

[2] Alain Brassart, “Une misogynie gay: Ozon, Chéreau et quelques autres,” in *L’Homosexualité dans le cinéma français* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Editions, 2007), pp. 195-212.

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