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David A. Gerstner and Julien Nahmias, *Christophe Honoré: A Critical Introduction*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015. 272 pp. Illustrations, 118 black and white photographs. \$ 34.99 U.S. ISBN 9780814338636

Review by Florian Grandena, University of Ottawa.

Often labelled as “a provocative auteur” (p. 3), novelist/playwright turned filmmaker Christophe Honoré has, over the last 15 years or so, produced a consistent and challenging body of cinematic work. His first film effort, the 2002 haunting and most definitely underrated *17 fois Cécile Cassart*, was a sombre heart-felt drama on loss and mourning, which focused on the eponymous protagonist’s rejection of motherhood and her slow self-reconstruction outside the so-called traditional family. However, Honoré is not famous for this particular film; rather, and somewhat unsurprisingly, it is his “urban” feature films that have attracted the attention of domestic and international critics, as well as French audiences. His “Paris trilogy” (*Dans Paris*, 2006; *Les Chansons d’amour*, 2007; and *La Belle personne*, 2008) is indeed made up of three important auteur films—important in both Honoré’s distinctive career and more generally in early twenty-first century French cinema—and thus deserve all the attention that David A. Gerstner and Julien Nahmias give them in their excellent book.

Rich and complex in their own ways, *Dans Paris*, *Les Chansons d’amour* and *La Belle personne* are productions that subtly hint at the director’s own experience of loss and mourning while making multiple references to the history of art and film (mainly the French New Wave and Jacques Demy). These are films that both hint at the French New Wave and “interject New Wave aesthetics into contemporary issues that touch on national identity, particularly in relationship to desire, queer sexuality, pleasure, urban friendships, family relations, death, and not insignificantly AIDS” (p. 1). The book is divided in four parts: first, a thorough introduction laying out the theoretical foundation of the analysis and skilfully embarking on a more than welcome intersectional definition of the queer film auteur, as well as three chapters chronologically dedicated to each film of the trilogy.

The introduction is divided in eleven subsections, which pay attention to, for example, Honoré’s identity as a queer auteur, his relation to previous queer French filmmakers (Demy, of course, but also André Téchiné, François Truffaut and Jacques Nolot), various film versions of the queer family and the symbolic and literal place occupied by beds in Honoré’s cinema. One of the greatest contributions of the introduction is its willingness to both problematize and enrich the notion of the auteur by giving it an intersectional sheen: in the context of this book, the auteur is understood in terms of sexuality and sexual orientations, two distinctive personal features allowing a gifted and ambitious film director such as Honoré to construct a cinematic queer world of his very own.

Part one is dedicated to *Dans Paris*, a film about loss and memory, heartache and depression as well as fraternal support. Here, the authors underline the ways that the film “explores the tension between urban and rural in terms of the affective response to desire, loss, and family” (p. 59). This chapter is divided in several subsections and discusses the filmmaker’s recurrent interests in the male body, but

also the film's focus on strong smells. One of the strengths of the book is that discussion does not solely focus on narrative and themes, an approach that is all too commonly found in film analysis: indeed, in the subsection entitled "Prayer" (p. 69-75), the authors make interesting connections between the graphic composition of some of *Dans Paris'* shots and French 19th-century classic paintings. Similarly, the observation on the New Wave-inspired opening credits allows the authors to underline the richness of Honoré's intertextuality: in cinematic terms, such an intertextuality is embodied by Chiara Mastroianni (the daughter of two major European film stars) Louis Garrel (Honoré's male muse and the son of filmmaker Philippe Garrel, grandson of actor Maurice Garrel, and godson of New Wave star and icon Jean-Pierre Léaud) and Marie-France Pisier, also discovered during the New Wave. Here, we are told, the recurrent theme of prayer "functions in parallel with three particularly French phenomena: culture and religion, art and aesthetics, film history and homage" (p. 71).

Part two is dedicated to the Demy-inflected "film with song" (as Honoré himself puts it) *Chansons d'amour*, one of Honoré's most successfully commercial and artistically accomplished endeavours. Not unlike *Dans Paris*, "the themes of family, love, and loss" (p. 85) are here very much present. Inspired by the passing of two of Honoré's close friends, Aude Monnin and Jean-Claude Guiguet (a French filmmaker who died of AIDS in 2005 and to whom *Chansons* is dedicated), this is a cathartic film dealing with the process of mourning. *Chansons* is all "about love, loss, and family relations" (p. 86). The authors argue that Honoré's cinema is partly about AIDS: "his films need to be viewed in the larger context of a queer auteur whose work in relation to 'the political' stretches broadly and across wide swathes of media production" (p. 88). It is an affectionate tribute to Jacques Demy, but a distant one and one that is different from the films of Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau. Unlike these two filmmakers, known for their willingness to tackle AIDS issues as well as varied experiences of gay life both in and out of Paris, Honoré does not want to make a musical with a clearly identifiable message. Nor does he aim to ape Demy and copy his style "in terms of either aesthetic form or uninteresting 'harmonious sexuality'" (p. 89). This is somewhat an unjust claim when one objectively examines the diversity of themes and genres in Ducastel and Martineau's production: it does not do justice to either the filmmakers in question or to the chapter's main point (since one specific cinematic approach to political matters should not necessarily invalidate another). More convincing, however, is the argument regarding the challenge to communities, including the national one: "Honoré's queerly erotic renegotiation of the family, his amalgamation of American-British-French-sounding pop music... and his marginalized characters (Bretons, gays, prostitutes) trouble the idea of a national sensibility or community as such" (p. 91). Less nostalgic than queer, the use of songs in *Chansons* is reminiscent of Alain Resnais's in *On connaît la chanson*: "Honoré's invites the history of French song into his cinema as a critical tool that draws spectators into querying their everyday relationship to national culture" (p. 92). The songs composed by long-time collaborator Alex Beaupain are echoes of past sounds, not copies of those, they are "queer infiltrations on sentiment (national, emotional, and otherwise)" (p. 92) characterised by "intimate detachment" (p. 92). However, Gerstner and Nahmais underline that nostalgia does not quite have a place in the works of Honoré as the filmmaker does not yearn for a long lost community / culture / country: rather, while still acknowledging the past through subtle tribute to Demy and other French filmmakers, Honoré is eager to discover and explore new types of relationships and communities in a global context: "Les chansons delivers on and rearranges the invariable clichés to which global community culture leads, by identifying queer French bodies and erotically entangling them within pop culture packaging. Song in film is the hinge on which the hetero-national package is queered" (p. 93). The rest of the chapter focuses on Honoré's cinematic Paris (namely the 10th and 11th arrondissement), the erotic relationships within those (including the ménage à trois between the three characters, interpreted by Honoré's cherished acting and extended family, Louis Garrel, Ludivine Sagnier and Romain Duris) and different architectural symbols of transition (bridges, passageways). Part two concludes with observations on one of Honoré's most original tropes: the bed.

The last part of the book focuses on *La Belle personne*, a contemporary cinematic re-take on Madame de La Fayette's classic novel *La Princesse de Clèves*. Here, the emphasis is on the unspoken: "Where words fail, Honoré's youths communicate through media technology, international languages, and--most

importantly—the look” (p. 127). This is in contrast to the other two films which, respectively, focus on Paris and on French cinema (p. 128)). Sound has a central place in this particular film too as it does some of the talking, so to speak (a quintessential example of cinematic monstration according to the authors). It interacts and responds to images (and vice versa) and, as the two authors argue, *La Belle personne* relies on “the specificity of sound and the primacy of image while ensuring that when they commingle, they announce themselves distinctively yet merge as a creative whole” (p. 130). This is certainly not a scene-by-scene screen adaptation of the novel; the film condenses a long and intricate story into a simpler, linear narrative in a contemporary context and makes good use of “cinematic forms of communication to convey what La Fayette makes available through the written word” (p. 139): photographs, for example, replace portraits and paintings. The classroom as well as the movie theatre are places where languages, art and cultures meet, intermingle and respond to each other in interesting and productive ways: “the classrooms are... the sites where age-old languages and cultures, once profiting by dreams of empire and marriages-of-convenience, intertwine yet set in motion new terrains of power and passion” (p. 137). Gerstner and Nahmias underline one basic tension in the third film of the trilogy, a friction found in the seemingly contradictory ways that the (male) teenagers relate to and position themselves in relation to art and culture: “on the one hand, and as representative French citizens, these young men embody national secularism (laïcité) through their devotion to art and culture. In this way, they resist religiosity in favour of a quest for self through art... Yet, on the other hand, their romantic secularism remains haunted by the religion of priests: Paul’s prayer, Ismaël’s appeal to angels, and Otto’s martyrdom” (p. 156). The intersectional theorization in the introduction is a welcome contribution. However, one can only regret that the authors did not also address film authorship in terms of both ethnicity and social class. Honoré’s three films rely on tropes commonly found in Paris-based cinematic productions. It would be interesting to know in which ways Honoré succeeds (or not) in queering non-Parisian spaces such as the French hinterland and the banlieue (as in *17 fois Cécile Cassart* and *Homme au bain* respectively) as well as white and bourgeois identities?

The narrow focus of the book (three of Honoré’s films out of 10) represents both its strength and its main weakness: although the three chapters show exceptional scholarship and allow for insightful and well-informed analyses, they cannot permit larger conclusions about Honoré’s larger oeuvre, which is made up of both high quality auteur films (such as the Paris trilogy discussed here), average ones (*Ma mère*) and even mediocre ones (*Homme au bain*). The book is thus not quite an introduction to Honoré’s film career, but rather, an introduction to a limited sample of his best productions. Given the two authors’ expertise, their readings of Honoré’s first film (*17 fois Cécile Cassart*), one of Honoré’s explicit AIDS films (*Tout contre Léo*), as well as a reading of the director’s two film adaptations (*La Belle Personne* and *Ma mère*) would have been a more than welcome contribution to a critical understanding of Honoré’s films.

However, these are minor criticisms since Gerstner and Nahmias’s unusual partnership (Gerstner is a film scholar whereas Nahmias is a psychiatrist with a scientific expertise in cinema) produces one of the best and most profound books on French cinema I have read in recent years. Their critical presentation of Honoré’s Paris trilogy opens many avenues and one can only hope that the two authors will continue to explore the filmmaker’s cinematic landscape and provide us with more insight.

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