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Todd W. Reeser. *Queer Cinema in Contemporary France: Five Directors*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022. 330 pp. Filmographies and index. £80.00 (U.K.). (hb). ISBN 9-78-1526141064.

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Two points need to be made clear from the outset with regard to Todd W. Reeser's *Queer Cinema in Contemporary France: Five Directors*. The first is that two directors, Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, are a directorial duo and treated as essentially one director. Second, the title refers to directors, not auteurs. For although there are occasional echoes of auteur theory, in the form of thematic commonalities read across the work of individual directors, the emphasis is squarely on the queerness of the chosen directors' works. This has less to do with the sexual identity of the directors than with how queerness manifests itself in the lives of the characters as well as with how these works might be read in relation to various queer theories. This is a strong point of Reeser's book: it offers a panorama of recent queer theoretical approaches, taking into account such considerations as the queering of time, space and narrative.

The directors have been chosen because they have a substantial body of work showing "innovative approaches to queerness" (p. 3), released mainly in the twenty-first century, yet about whom little has been written in English. This explains the exclusion of directors such as François Ozon and Christophe Honoré. Interestingly, chapters have been ordered not in terms of thematic content but according to the age of the directors. Within chapters, works are discussed film by film, though not necessarily in chronological order. The explanation given is that the book "does not assume strict coherence over time in a director's corpus, nor does it assume full incoherence either. Rather, each directorial corpus of films is taken as a kind of intertextual web of disjunctions and connections, and connections between one film and another" (p. 3). In terms of influential existing work in the field, Reeser cites Nick Rees-Roberts's 2008 study *French Queer Cinema*, which was organized by topic, whereas Reeser's book concentrates on specific directors.[1]

In terms of theoretical precursors, Reeser specifies that his book extends the work of Nick Davis in *The Desiring-Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema* (p. 15).[2] His succinct definition of queer is as follows: "queer refers to that which is anti-normative with respect to gender and sexuality, or that which breaks with commonly held, supposedly 'common-sensical' understandings and perceptions of what gender and sexuality are or should be" (p. 4). His acknowledgment of Davis's influence helps elucidate Reeser's specific theoretical approach, as he distances himself from the "anti-relational" strand of queer theory exemplified by the writings of

Leo Bersani and Jack Halberstam, with their emphasis on negativity, opting rather for the more future oriented writings of Paul Preciado, José Esteban Muñoz, and Guy Hocquenghem.[3] In other words, “cinematic queerness ... corresponds to the wing of queer theory that takes queerness as a ‘becoming’ that might be productive or transformational, and that might move towards a utopia beyond the constraints of heteronormativity or gender binarism” (p.8). Importantly, queer goes beyond the exclusively sexual: “In some cases, normative seeming characters have queer elements to them, suggesting that queer film can open up a broader field to new ways for any character to act and desire and can allow for movement-based desires or gender presentations on everyone’s part” (p. 13).

The first directors discussed are Jacques Ducastel and Olivier Martineau. The key idea which underwrites the discussion of their cinema is a reconfiguration of normative structures, in at least three different ways. The first relates to the family, particularly relevant to the road movie *Drôle de Félix* (2000) in which the gay protagonist’s quest for his biological father is ultimately less important than the alternative family he constructs *en route*. Reconfiguring the family is a key theme as well in *Crustacés et Coquillages* (2022), a comedy which follows a father’s “transition to homosexuality” (p. 68). The film queers the second normative structure discussed, the coming-out story, which Reeser argues is an Anglo-American narrative which assumes a simple linearity and is largely unsuited to a French context with its emphasis on universalism. Instead, characters in Ducastel and Martineau’s films come to understand their sexuality through processes other than confessional statements. The third normative framework reworked is the AIDS story. *Jeanne et le garçon formidable* (1998) is a musical comedy about AIDS which refuses to tell the story of the physical decline of the protagonist. Instead, the film focuses on his girlfriend’s political awakening in terms of AIDS activism. By the time *Drôle de Félix* is released two years later, the arrival of effective treatments allows a different story to be told. The walking road movie normalizes HIV through its happy-go-lucky seropositive protagonist, as does *Théo et Hugo dans le même bateau* (2016) which recounts a one-night stand between two young men in which one has unprotected sex, requiring him to seek post-infection medication. Reeser convincingly interprets this film as a radical queer reworking of the story of *Orphée et Eurydice*. What might seem initially as a long though convincing analysis of the intertextual links between the film and the Greek myth is justified since Reeser will revisit the myth in the final chapter on Céline Sciamma.

If the queering of normative narrative structures is a primary concern in the films of Ducastel and Martineau, the queering of space, age, and relationality is the defining element of the chapter on Alain Guiraudie, who describes his own cinema as an “attempt to create possibility, to modify relations among men” (p. 114). Guiraudie queers space through the rural settings for his films, taking viewers away from the queer playgrounds of the city. The first film discussed is *L’Inconnu du lac* (2013) in which the protagonist Franck pursues the uber-masculine Michel at a gay cruising spot near a lake, despite Franck having witnessed Michel drown his boyfriend. Reeser’s discussion focuses on how a film peopled almost exclusively by men who have sex with men can be read as about humanity more broadly. Reeser argues that the film is non-identitarian, since cruising facilitates a non-normative relationality, as does Franck’s friendship with an older divorced man who sits by the lake but does not indulge in any sexual activity. Indeed, in a number of Guiraudie’s films, protagonists have a predilection for much older men, which Reeser argues opens up new relational modes between generations.

Queerness in Guiraudie's films, though, is not necessarily defined by sexual acts. In *Pas de repos pour les braves* (2003), queerness equates to "cross-generational erotic and affective connections" (p.149) whereas in *Voici venu le temps* (2005), queerness concerns "how humans could negotiate identity in new ways" (p.140), with this related to political and economic structures, hinting at the Marxist elements in Guiraudie's cinema. Reeser's reading of *Ce vieux rêve qui bouge* (2001) for its Marxist undertones is particularly persuasive. In this medium-length feature, a young man visits a soon-to-be-closed factory to dismantle a machine. When he arrives, he is attracted to the factory manager while, in turn, the protagonist is the object of attraction for an older worker. Reeser describes the factory as "a special space not defined by work ... but by the reconfiguration of sexualities" (p. 144). The protagonist "seems to be dismantling binarism and to be producing a queer heterosexuality that cannot be labelled" (p. 146). As Reeser explains, Guiraudie's film "reveals how capitalism helps maintain normative erotic relations while the symbolic dismantling of capitalism creates erotic possibilities that might not exist or might not exist as much under traditional capitalism" (p. 142).

Two important points of distinction are apparent in Reeser's discussions of Guiraudie's films and those of Sébastien Lifshitz. The first is the question of intersectionality, largely missing from Guiraudie's work. The second is an emphasis on temporality in Lifshitz as opposed to spatiality in Guiraudie. The common element to all of Lifshitz's films is that the past and present are continually in dialogue. The discussion of Lifshitz is split between his fictional films and documentaries. Reeser begins with his early shorts followed by the medium-length feature *Les Corps ouverts* (1998) and the telefilm *Les Terres froides* (1999), both featuring Yasmine Belmadi, a French-actor of Maghrebi descent. In these, questions of queerness and ethnicity intertwine. In discussion of the former, Reeser introduces the notion of queer time. The story of the adolescent protagonist Rémi subverts the linear coming out narrative, in part through Lifshitz's fragmentary, non-chronological storytelling and his protagonist's flirting with but refusal to declare his sexuality. Reeser argues that the film argues for "new ways to structure ethnic narratives about subjectivity" (p. 190). As with *Les Corps ouverts*, fragmentation plays an important role in queering the storyline of *Wildside* (2004) which recounts the friendship between a transsexual character Stéphanie, a young French-Maghrebi hustler and a Russian immigrant. The narrative which the fragmentation disassembles is that of Stéphanie's transition, which is pointedly not represented as a journey, distinguishing it from mainstream stories of transsexuality. Rather, Stéphanie is presented as always in transit between genders, something relevant also to the documentary *Bambi* (2013), the story of an Algerian-born trans woman, which Reeser describes as an example of how to tell the story about a transwoman "not centered on 'sex change'" (p. 242).

Questions of gender identification and sexual awakening are also key to the films of the final director discussed: Céline Sciamma. Sciamma's films are presented as being about the relationship between visibility and gender, with Reeser's analysis beginning by a detailed discussion of *Naissance des pieuvres* (2007) concerning a teenage girl's first stirrings of sexual attraction for a member of a synchronised swimming team. Reeser argues that key scenes in the film have to do not with coming out, but with questions of sexual representation. He introduces the concept of sideways growth from Kathryn Bond Stockton,^[4] meaning the development of alternative desires for young queer protagonists instead of growing up in a normative heterosexual framework. Reeser's reading of *Tomboy* (2011) concentrates on notions of gender performativity, although Judith Butler's theory is not specifically referenced as one might expect. *Tomboy* recounts the story of a child named Laure who moves house with their family and adopts a

masculine identity, Mickaël, in the new neighbourhood. For Reeser, the film is “about portraiture, how a child in gender movement can be captured or represented in a culture which tries to keep gender stable, binary and unambiguous” (p. 275). The *banlieue* teen protagonist Marième/Vic of *Bande de filles* (2014) also has a dual identity, but this is a film, Reeser argues, whose queerness is only fully evoked in the final section. Reeser declares the protagonist simultaneously bent and straight, linking her to the protagonists of *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) who are also engaged in “negotiating straightness with bending” (p.288). Drawing on the first scene where one of the students of the artist Marianne has brought out of storage one of her paintings, Reeser asserts that the film itself “will, in part, be a proposition to look at history in new ways” (p. 289). He argues that the film “returns to the questions about same-sex love and looking posed in *Naissance des pieuvres*, this time with artistic representation itself the explicit content of the film” (p. 289).

In a final section which looks at intertextuality, Reeser returns to *Orphée et Eurydice* which Sciamma’s film references and reworks. Reeser concludes the book by stating: “Sciamma, too, de-essentializes the category of woman, to be sure, but she also performs the representational work necessary to dismantle a male-dominated narrative around Orpheus by retelling the male-centered story of artistry” (p. 309). For the reader of Reeser’s book, there is perhaps an irony in that the final phrase resonates with the book itself which, given that Sciamma is the only female director included, reads a little like a male-centered story of French cinematic queer artistry. This is not a criticism of the author: rather, it is an acknowledgment that the state of play for directors recounting female queer stories has not improved greatly in the twenty-first century. That being said, Reeser excludes Catherine Corsini because her work is situated substantially in the twentieth century (p.31). One wonders, in the interests of balance, if the constraint might have been modified to have included directors with a substantial corpus in the twenty-first century, even if their work stretches back earlier, as does Corsini’s.

In conclusion, Reeser’s study of a selection of directors prominent in queer French cinema in the twenty-first century will be a valuable asset for students and researchers, both for the intelligent, detailed, and persuasive readings of the films by the directors as well as for the insights it offers concerning queer theory over the last forty years. Indeed, one of the real strengths of the study is that it provides multiple variations on precisely what queerness means for different directors in different films. As a final reflection, the question might be asked if, structurally, the book itself has adopted some of the queerness of its objects of investigation. First, it avoids an auteurist approach, in terms of not looking at evolutionary tendencies in the directors’ works. The linearity of such a traditional approach would no doubt sit oddly with a study of films read as subverting simplistic teleologies. And second, there is no overall conclusion to the book. No doubt the modern reader is unlikely to study Reeser’s book from beginning to end and is more likely to “dip in” to study their director of choice. As such, the fragmentation of the book itself is entirely appropriate in mirroring both the reading habits of students and the strategy of narrative fragmentation used by directors themselves to queer the stories they bring to the screen.

NOTES

[1] Nick Rees-Roberts, *French Queer Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2008, 2014).

[2] Nick Davis, *The Desiring-Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[3] See Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*, trans. Kevin Gerry Dunn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009); Guy Hocquenghem, *Le Désir homosexuel* (Paris: Fayard, 2000).

[4] Kathryn Born Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

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