H-France Review Vol. 25 (May 2025), No. 43

Sabrina Bouarour, *"It's so queer!": Les masculinités dans les films de Vincente Minnelli et de Jacques Demy*. Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2023. xii + 341 pp. Bibliography and index. $75.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-80079-285-2; $75.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-80079-286-9.

Review by Alistair Fox, University of Otago.

This new book by Sabrina Bouarour, lecturer in French Studies at the University of London, is a welcome addition to scholarship on two filmmakers of the twentieth century whose work has only begun to receive the serious attention it deserves. It comprises a comparative study of the films of Vincente Minnelli (1903-1986) and Jacques Demy (1931-1990) to demonstrate the parallels in their style and thematic preoccupations despite their differences in terms of nationality and the gap between their generations. By selecting a number of key movies by each cinéaste, Bouarour explores a series of parallels that reveal an affinity between them: a striking use of colors that are made to serve a dramatic role; a sharp sense of tensions between dream and reality; a shared cinematic universe with both filmmakers draw upon a common set of topoi and references; and, most importantly, a camp aesthetic that projects a queer sensibility. Bouarour argues that in addition to their desire to create entertainment through their visual style, both filmmakers were engaged in a political project consisting of resistance and contestation aimed at questioning the prevailing norms that governed individual and collective identities during their respective eras.

In terms of substance, none of this is new. Virtually all of the points the author makes about Demy had already been previously argued by Anne Duggan in *Queer Enchantments: Gender, Sexuality, and Class in the Fairy-Tale Cinema of Jacques Demy* (2013), who identified Demy's interest in non-normative relations and demonstrated how he deployed camp strategies to challenge heterosexual norms, aligning a desire for sexual liberation with an awareness of the oppressive effects of class difference.[1] Similarly, David Gerstner had already linked Minnelli's decorative and colorist tendencies to a queer modernist aesthetic in which camp is used to transgress the normative masculinist representations of the Hollywood film in order to expose the cultural anxiety that surfaced after World War II.[2]

There is nevertheless value in bringing the two filmmakers together in a single comparative study. It allows Bouarour to underline the importance of French cinema to both Minnelli and Demy by pointing to the influence of Cocteau, in particular--his creation of an oneiric cinema, the presence of camp, and allusions to homosexuality, all of which both of the later filmmakers imitate. She is also able to demonstrate the direct influence of Minnelli on Demy, for example, in

Les Demoiselles de Rochefort (1967), in which Demy casts the same dancing star, Gene Kelly, that Minnelli had used in his musical *An American in Paris* (1951), thus identifying a process of transatlantic exchanges, reflected in the choice of actors and actresses, as well as the inclusion of iconic references.

Bouarour's strategy of exploring in detail a key film by each author in each chapter also illuminates how Demy systematically "Frenchified" the generic elements he found in Minnelli's Hollywood films, which results in a tonal transformation. The world of *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964), for example, becomes more mundane, sadder, and more somber as a result of the way Demy re-semanticizes the codes of Hollywood by darkening the atmosphere of melodrama to reflect the starker contemporary conditions in Europe and by placing greater emphasis on class tensions. In effect, Bouarour is able to demonstrate how Demy achieves a tonal hybridity that modifies Minnelli's emphasis on entertainment by introducing a greater degree of melancholic seriousness.

In terms of method, Bouarour anchors her study in what she calls a cultural studies approach (p.6), drawing upon genre theory, gender theory, the theory of intersectionality, and queer theory. Consequently, she devotes a lot of attention to placing the films in their context of production, while aiming to expose the interrelationship in these films of such issues as sexuality, race, class, and age as they relate to power and domination. The purpose of this approach is to show how queer elements convert the films into subversive representations that counter heteronormative structures so as to open up a space of resignification.

Her argument rests on an assumption that the melodramatic style mediatizes social relations in an intimate space by drawing out the links between the individual and the collective, the private and the public (p. 237). Emotions, in this schema, become revelatory political indications of the relation between vulnerability and resistance, with the camp aesthetic being used to convey the semiotic codes of a queer subculture. As a result, Bouarour argues, the polysemy of the films' mise-en-scène transgresses normative injunctions to the degree that spectators are able to decode the images.

She sees Demy and Minnelli as becoming increasingly political as their careers advanced, using the devices of melodrama to plead for a new order comprising a reconciled community (p. 237). Their later films, such as Minnelli's *Home from the Hill* (1960) and Demy's *Une Chambre en ville* (1982), show the normative model of masculinity to be toxic for men and the community at large, while Minnelli's *The Sandpiper* (1965) and Demy's *Model Shop* (1969) share the inscription of a contestatory culture. Both filmmakers substitute alternative models of masculinity for the normative conception of masculinity--masculinities that are softened, empathetic, and sometimes fragilized (p. 313). In Bouarour's view, both Demy and Minnelli imagine and dream of a community built on empathy and solidarity--values that are at odds with the traditional virile order. The impossibility of finding one's place in the actual world and an inability to conform to social dictates, however, gives rise to a "queer melancholy" that imbues these films (p. 312).

The strengths and weaknesses of this book arise from the frame of reference the author has chosen, which necessarily leads to the films being viewed from an external viewpoint out of a

need to identify patterns and trends that derive from their political and cultural contexts. The strengths of this book are obvious: it is very thoroughly researched, as its extensive bibliography attests, and it provides useful contextual information, such as the evolution of perspectives on gender and sexuality as they developed in the United States and France, respectively, and the emergence of alternative masculinities in both countries.

Bouarour's analyses of select sequences from the films she has chosen to discuss are also detailed and insightful. For example, her argument that in *Lady Oscar* (1979) Demy establishes the possibility of a feminine virility through a queer body that destabilizes categories of gender is very convincing, as is her excellent discussion of Demy's *Une Chambre en ville*, in which she proposes that Demy constructs a violent bourgeois space in which melodramatic excesses lay the foundation for a socio-political critique in which the bourgeois class is depicted as being aggressive, yet impotent when confronted by sincerity of emotions.

The optic chosen, however, also brings with it inherent limitations. Because the basic assumption is that the main purpose of the films is to engage in a contestation of prevailing norms, specific scenes tend to be analyzed as symptoms that illustrate the larger generalizations being made, which means that the film and the discussion are fragmented, preventing a coherent impression of each film as a whole. The paradigm also tends to construe masculinities in terms of binaries that are presented through images versus counter-images, which results in characters being construed as stereotypes in relation to the degree to which they exemplify or challenge the norm. This concern with the presence or absence of qualities defined in terms of binary categories leads to an underemphasis on the actual interior emotional life of the male characters as it is depicted in each film, which in turn means that the affective conditions they experience lose some of their specificity. In this respect, it is very unfortunate that Bouarour omits a detailed discussion of one of Demy's final feature films, *Parking* (1985), which revolves around a protagonist who cannot choose between his male or his female lover, likening his dilemma to the impossibility of choosing between the sun and the moon. The inclusion of such an analysis could potentially have led to the identification of a more complicated set of dynamics than the norm/contestation model that Bouarour repeatedly invokes.

It is also a pity that the author's definition of melodrama as a genre is narrowly confined to the more substantivized version produced in Hollywood. This does not take into account the arthouse neorealist melodramas that were beginning to proliferate in Europe by the time Demy was becoming active as a filmmaker. The existence of this other type of melodrama is significant, because it involves the depiction of masculine experience that falls outside the paradigm that informs Bouarour's approach. The melancholy she identifies in the films of Demy and Minnelli, for example, was not just a "queer" phenomenon; it is found, for example, in any number of the films of François Truffaut, such *Jules et Jim* or *La Peau douce*, suggesting that the melancholy arises from causes that are personal and psychological as much as they are political or cultural. Although Bouarour does acknowledge from time to time the presence of a personal element in the films under discussion (e.g., p. 75), the absence of a more detailed consideration of the links between the personal circumstances of the auteur and each film is unfortunate, as it could have revealed a more complex motivation of their choice of melodrama than a desire to engage in contestation alone.

Bouarour's conclusion that the films she has discussed present the heteronormative structures and the bourgeois order as impeding individual and collective self-realization and fulfilment (p. 311), while true enough in itself, is not the whole story. There is a need for further work to be done before the missing dimension involving the intimate relationship between the auteur and the subjective emotional experience that he depicts in his characters can be fully appreciated. In the meantime, Bouarour's book is an invaluable resource for use in the classroom and for those approaching the films of Minnelli and Demy for the first time.

NOTES

[1] Anne E. Duggan, *Queer Enchantments: Gender, Sexuality, and Class in the Fairy-Tale Cinema of Jacques Demy* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2013).

[2] See David Anthony Gerstner, "Queer Modernism: Vincente Minnelli, American Creativity, American Masculinity," PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1997 and David Gerstner, "The Production and Display of the Closet: Making Minnelli's *Tea and Sympathy*," *Film Quarterly* 50 (1997): 13-26.

Alistair Fox
University of Otago
alistair.fox@otago.ac.nz

Copyright © 2025 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172