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Julianne Pidduck, *La Reine Margot*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005. 112 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendices, bibliography. \$15.00 (pb) \$40.00 (hb). ISBN 0-252-07331-2 (pb), ISBN 0-252-03090-7 (hb).

Review by Sylvie E. Blum-Reid, University of Florida.

Julianne Pidduck constructs her presentation of the film *La Reine Margot* in a three-part study. Directed, co-written by Patrice Chéreau and Danièle Thompson, and produced by Claude Berri (Renn Productions) the film was released in 1994. The long introductory first chapter lays out the rich production contexts of the film and brings together different layers such as the genre of the film, Chéreau's theatrical background, the issue of literary adaptation in the 1990s at the core of the film, notwithstanding present in much of French cinema, earlier adaptations of Dumas' eponymous novel, the French cultural context at the making of the film in 1994, the star persona of Isabelle Adjani, her roles in French cinema, coupled with the myth surrounding the queen Margot and Adjani herself. In what is an extremely well-argued and articulated study, Pidduck makes a case for a comprehensive rereading of the film that has drawn critical reviews and controversy since its first appearance in theatre. Now thanks to the new French film guide series directed by Ginette Vincendeau (U. Illinois Press), she examines film reviews and articles on the film as well as historical studies to situate the extremely complex moment surrounding the "Queen Margot" and the era of the Religious Wars and the events known as the Saint-Barthélémy massacre that took place in August 1572.

Pidduck is first and foremost interested in the cultural values circulated by the epic film, and its iconic references in French popular and classical culture. Extensively referencing the period of the Renaissance, her analysis borrows from film historians' approach to reading a film against the time in which it is produced and observing that the meaning of the film is as much linked to contemporary issues than the historical period it covers:

The predominant approach to historical representation used in this book follows the revisionist position to address how *La Reine Margot* constructs meanings in the present through mythology and intertextuality. In keeping with my own work and the approaches of Raphaël Samuel, François de la Bretèque and Marcia Landy, this perspective explores how popular culture forms (including films) use past settings and stories to engage symbolically with cultural and political issues in the present (p. 13).

In other words, the author sees a resonance between Renaissance France, religious intolerance, its Catholic/Protestant wars and France of the 1990s with its intense social climate, the rise (or revival should I say) of anti-Semitism, National Front sentiments, and racial and ethnic struggles not to mention other instances of violence and ethnic cleansing past and present beyond France's borders.

Her reading underlines the corresponding revival of interest in Alexandre Dumas in the 1990s, along with the Romanticism that lies beneath his novel *La Reine Margot*, which Chéreau in turn heavily borrows from in his remake. Analyzing the figure of Marguerite de Valois, and Adjani, Pidduck ostensibly gives the study a feminist orientation. Ultimately, the predominance of the female character(s) of Margot and Catherine de Medicis is side-lined in Chéreau's film(s) as he tends to celebrate homosocial desire.

According to the study, the film can be seen as a hybrid between historical fiction and costume film (p. 12) yet it fits in the category of the swashbuckling film, a genre that is of particular importance in French literary and filmic adaptations and considered as a marker of a prestigious national cultural heritage according to many French film historians (p. 30). This trend started in early silent cinema “with multiple silent versions of Hugo and Dumas’ works and continued into the sound era” (p. 30). This type of films is highly popular in France and highly exportable abroad. Citing historian Pierre Guibbert, Pidduck notes that the “swashbuckling film is a quintessentially French genre” (p. 30). Pidduck, author of *Contemporary Costume Film*, distinguishes the costume film from historical fiction as more feminine and less praised by critics, especially the makers of the New Wave cinema in their critical essays yet she does not develop this notion here. Numerous key examples of French swashbucklers come to mind with *FanFan la Tulipe*, *Le Bossu*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, etc.

In the second part of the monograph, the author performs a close filmic and narrative analysis that covers the structure of the film as well as the cinematographic style and the tangled story lines that compose the film. She cites the nineteenth-century paintings that Chéreau emulates in his mise-en-scène, lighting and composition (a motif that she introduced in the first part) as well as the Dutch paintings that have influenced the director. The color scheme and the use of close-ups convey a sense of ‘a disturbing visceral proximity’ (p. 63) absent from the 1954 ‘tradition of quality’ adaptation by Jean Dréville starring Jeanne Moreau that relied heavily on long shots and elaborate costume scenes. Through quick editing and close-ups of bodies and faces, Chéreau and his cinematographer (Philippe Rousselot) are able to render immediate (or present) the violence of the past, yet they confuse the spectator as to the actual location and time of the violence. The issue of the spectator’s position is raised more than once, especially when it comes to the spectacle offered by the film and the potential level of identification it raises. Confronted with such ‘tableaux’ of violence, the spectator aligns himself or herself with the dissenters and with the participators in the violence. Such an aestheticizing of violence may be one of the criticisms leveled against the film.

Pidduck observes the violence inflicted on the bodies of male characters and on the female protagonist, Margot. The violence and death imagery play constantly with the eroticisation or sexualization of the male body against the backdrop and gendering of death as woman. In the long run, male homosocial coupling (either sexual or in violent massacre scenes) dominates the film to the detriment of the heterosexual intrigue that achieves a limited amount of screen time. The association of blood runs throughout the film and clearly evokes the AIDS crisis at its height during the release and making of the film in France.

In her last section of the book, the author explores the reception and pre-publicity campaign surrounding the making of the film, its release, as well as its post-production alterations for the American market. This last part combs through the different critical receptions of the film by the popular press and more intellectual trade journals such as *Cahiers du cinéma*, whose acclaim of the film stands out despite its traditional disdain for costume and epic films. However, Patrice Chéreau due to his ‘auteurist’ statute manages to escape the treatment associated with such films made in the 1990s. The international fate of the film, and its different versions due to different possible receptions makes an interesting conclusion. The author insists on the director’s persistent exploration of the male body in most of his films such as the earlier *L’Homme blessé*, and the more recent *Ceux qui m’aiment prendront le train*. I am curious to read further what Pidduck would say of *Intimité*, (Intimacy 2001) a Franco-British production, adapting Hanif Kureishi’s novel tracing the story of a man and a woman’s weekly sexual encounters in South London.

La Reine Margot constitutes the only foray of theatre director, actor and filmmaker Chéreau into the world of historical fiction and costume film. It definitely launched his career as that of a true film *auteur*

on the national and international scene. Pidduck covers the rich layers that such a production entails generating a very interesting and subtle analysis of the period, the film, and its cultural contexts.

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