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Ridicule (review)

Christine Adams

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Film Reviews

Ridicule

During the English Revolution in the 1640s, the gap between “court” and “country” symbolized the profound ideological and religious split in that country. In France a similar rift existed between provincial France—“la France profonde”—and the gay decadence of Paris and the court at Versailles. Provincial France—solid, respectable, and rather dull—has always found it difficult to compete with the cultural richness and the elegant wit of the Babylon on the Seine. During the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, this split between the refined and sometimes cruel life of the court and the tedious and often grueling life in the provinces was intensified. Patrice Leconte plays with this contrast in his sparkling film, *Ridicule*, which received great praise when it opened the Cannes Film Festival of 1996. (Miramax released it on video in 1997).

Any student of French history will appreciate the film’s embeddedness in the milieu of the late Enlightenment in its multiple manifestations. The Enlightenment of the court, with its emphasis on superficial wit, appreciation of the *bon mot*, and growing skepticism about both religion and government, contrasts with the Enlightenment of the *Encyclopédie*, with its appreciation of reason, science and practicality. This contrast provides the backdrop for the story of the young Baron Grégoire Ponceludon de Malavoy (played by Charles Berling), who in 1783 makes the journey from his estates in the Dombes in southwest France to Versailles.

Ponceludon is a man with both a knowledge of engineering and a highly developed sense of noblesse oblige. The unhealthy atmosphere of his estates—mosquito-infested swamplands—is killing his peasants. He has a plan to drain the swamps by building dikes and canals, but lacks the funds to carry out his idea. So, he heads to Versailles to seek assistance from the king, Louis XVI, who he hopes will show an interest in helping his people.

Ponceludon fortuitously finds a friend, the Marquis de Bellgarde (Jean Rochefort). The Marquis is a doctor and scientist, and he has an attractive daughter, Mathilde (Judith Godrèche), who is an amateur scientist as well. Mathilde is raised by her father “in the Age of Rousseau,” with no constraints on her desires and ambitions. (Apparently, the Marquis meant to raise Mathilde as an Emile rather than a Sophie.) The Marquis, recognizing that this provincial gentleman possesses both wit and character, lets his young friend know that if he wants the ear of the king, he will need to gain both a reputation for his wit and a sparkling repartee, the only currency accepted at the court. The opening lines of the

film stress this very theme: “Six years before the French Revolution, Louis XVI still ruled. But wit was king.” The young baron will also need a protector, which Ponceludon finds in the person of the Comtesse de Blayac (Fanny Ardant).

Yet even with his natural gifts—a handsome face, an attractive figure, a clever wit enhanced by a good education (Voltaire is “his bible,” the baron proclaims)—Ponceludon stumbles on the shoals of the court. He provokes the enmity of the Abbé de Vilecourt (Bernard Giraudeau), the stereotype of the hypocritical and worldly cleric, who is also the lover of Madame de Blayac. Only after the Abbé loses his standing at court because of an unwise religious jest in front of the King, does the Comtesse take Ponceludon under her wing (and into her bed) and thereby help to insinuate him into court society. As his star rises at the court, complications ensue for the Baron. His relationship with the Comtesse complicates his budding romance with the earnest Mathilde, who is herself on the verge of marrying a decrepit nobleman to gain financial backing for her scientific experiments. Eventually, the Comtesse’s jealousy of the younger and fresher Mathilde leads her to sabotage Ponceludon at a masked ball. Mortified, he spits at the assembled masked guests, “Children will die tomorrow because you ridicule me today...Who will be the next victim?”

The film is ultimately richer in historical allusion than in historical detail. For the scholar of French history, the references to the religiosity of Louis XVI versus the budding skepticism of the court, the intrigues at Versailles, the frustrations of dealing with the French bureaucracy, the obsession with genealogy among the aristocracy, and the myriad aspects of Enlightenment culture (including the introduction of a deaf character who obtains an education under the sympathetic tutelage of the Abbé de l’Épée) all greatly enrich the viewing experience. However, even though it is only mentioned in an epilogue of sorts to the movie, the coming of the French Revolution looms large over the film. The heedlessness of the king and his careless treatment of the provincial nobility (dramatized in the humiliation and suicide of the Baron de Guéret); the self-centered pleasure-seeking court with its casual cruelty, fueling class conflict on a number of levels; the growing awareness of the possibilities of science and Enlightened thinking to ameliorate the condition of the masses, coupled with the unwillingness of the government to address the problems of the people who live in poverty and squalor beyond the eyesight of those at Versailles—all these factors point to a country ripe for explosion, and give insight to the events of 1789.

Nevertheless, this focus on the neglectful government and out-of-touch court provides only one interpretation, among many, of the causes of the French Revolution. The film ignores, or only



alludes to many others, such as the financial crisis of the regime, the failure of governmental reforms, the growing importance of public opinion, and the changing political culture that fostered dissatisfaction with the absolutist form of government. Still it is an interpretation that resonates powerfully in the context of such a satisfying film as *Ridicule*.

Christine Adams

St. Mary's College of Maryland
cmadams@smcm.edu

The House of Yes

In *The House of Yes* (1997) Parker Posey puts on one of her most glamorous performances as “Jackie-O.” Based on a costume for an Ides of March party that she attended as an adolescent with her twin brother Marty (Josh Hamilton), Jackie-O has adopted her moniker and her style of dress from the former first lady. The opening credits are set to the 8mm home movie footage, shot when Marty and Jackie were 13, of Jackie playfully imitating (and interspersed with actual footage of) the famous tour of the White House given by Jackie Kennedy in 1962 for CBS. The character proves so fascinating because of the significant connection it draws between identity and loss. The fact that Jackie-O remains “in costume” throughout the film troubles the notion that those rights of passage which initiate the adolescent into being an adult represent the solidification of a self and a self-identity—her deferment to a party costume as her identity during her teenage years calls into question any such thing as a “real” or “true” identity (after all, we never know her real name in the film). This is not unfamiliar territory to queer theory or culture, both of which are well aware of how hard mainstream culture must work to reinforce the assumptions of identity that we all are supposed to take for granted. Though it is a term gaining popularity in mainstream culture, for queer theorists the term queer signals a challenge to normative identities and behaviors. *The House of Yes* queers the ritual of home and the family narrative, by suggesting that identity itself is an imitation, and one which often results in violence by closing off possibilities for ways of “being” and behaving—all because one is always expected to live up to that which he or she is already.

The film takes place on the night of Thanksgiving during a severe thunderstorm. Jackie is eager for Marty to arrive, but when he shows up with his fiancée Leslie (Tori Spelling), the house becomes as threatened by a dangerous internal tension as it does by the hurricane that rages outside. The family dynamic grows more complicated when the truth about Marty and Jackie-O comes out: Marty and Jackie were lovers as children, tying their obsession with the JFK assassination into ritualized sex. Their incestuous relationship is a secret of Marty’s past that he wanted to leave behind when he moved away in search of a more normal relationship.

Despite the tension with Leslie, Marty and Jackie are clearly enjoying each other’s company, and using the holiday as a time to

reminisce. They both decide to “come out” to their little brother Anthony (Freddie Prinze Jr.). Appalled, he exits the stage and the conversation turns. Jackie asks if it is true that Leslie is a waitress in a donut shop, and Marty admits that she works for a chain called “Donut King”.

“It’s a chain,” he explains, “There are women like her all over the city.”

“My point exactly.”

“No, my point Jackie! I have chosen to love her. It wasn’t thrust upon me...”

Marty later tells Jackie, in a scene that resonates powerfully with queer culture, that he wants her to love someone that she is allowed to love. Jackie and Marty are at odds with one another over the “normal” itself. Marty refuses a position of marginality in society and vigilantly seeks normalcy in Leslie—even hoping through his engagement to participate in the quintessential ritual of normalized heterosexuality, marriage. Jackie insists that she and Marty are “above” society, not merely at its margins.

Jackie may not win the argument, but Marty cannot resist when Jackie pulls out the pink Chanel suit and stockings. In the unlit living room, while the family sleeps, they begin their performance. “You be him,” Jackie whispers, “and I’ll be her.” “I’m him,” Marty says, almost trancelike, “and I’m her...” Jackie repeats. Marty sits and waves in slow motion while the lightning simulates the flashbulbs of a crowd full of cameras, and Jackie raises the gun at him. She shoots and the blank explodes, masked by the sound of thunder, and when Marty falls back into the sofa, Jackie rushes over and cradles his head until they begin kissing passionately and pulling open each others clothes.

Leslie witnesses their lovemaking that night and confronts Marty about it the next day. Jackie interrupts Marty’s attempted reconciliation with Leslie, by insisting (gun in hand) that they act out their performance of the assassination once more. By the time the gun fires, the viewer is floating above the house, looking down, and we see Leslie run out of the front door in a panic. The voice-over of Jackie-O explains that Leslie “high tailed it back to Pennsylvania,” and that they buried Marty in the back yard.

Marty performs the part of Kennedy when he is with Jackie, but his relationship with Leslie is no less of a performance—the part being that of the straight, normal male. The film is based on a play of the same name, and does not deviate much from a theatrical presentation: it takes place almost entirely inside a house, with scene changes marked by changes from room to room, and the plot is driven mostly through dialogue. It also has a gothic quality, with the storm and lighting punctuating the dialogue and action and chiaroscuro lighting adding an over-the-top touch of drama. These elements play up the “theatricality” of the film because the film is exposing the theatricality and performativity of our identity (or our identities, since my point is that the notion

