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The House of Yes (review)

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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*.

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## *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



of identity gives the false sense of a unified, constant identity that is supposed to be uniquely our own).

The elements of the home and family, politics, celebrity culture, and sexual transgression lend this film to a queer reading. Queer theory need not focus on homosexuality, but I read *The House of Yes* as purposefully referencing gay culture. Of course, the sexual behavior of Jackie and Marty clearly proves non-normative, but their characters also play with stereotypes of gay identity. Homosexuality is historically thought to be the result of self-obsession and narcissism, symbolically figured here by the fact that Jackie-O and Marty are twins (“It’s like fucking a mirror,” Anthony notes). Jackie-O and Marty easily fit a certain depiction of gay male identity modeled on the upper-class, educated, effete male who lives in the city and lacks traditional morality, and they have a sort of camp sensibility, playing off of each other with witty banter, speaking French, and even playing a sophisticated piano ensemble after Leslie stumbles through “Chopsticks.”

Beyond these surface connections, we see that the house functions like the closet, a space where Marty can “be himself” with Jackie in a way that he cannot in the real world. And one must note that the reference to Jackie Kennedy Onassis is a loaded one, since almost immediately after JFK’s assassination, she became an icon to counter-cultures in America. Andy Warhol produced many paintings based on photos of her, and she was a popular character among female impersonators, notably impersonated by Divine (aka Glen Harris Milstead) in John Water’s 1967 film *Eat Your Makeup*. In music, JFK’s assassination was reenacted in the video “Coma White” by Marilyn Manson, who starred as JFK with Rose McGowan playing Jackie, and she appears in “Jackie’s Strength” by Tori Amos—a song about a girl who purposefully “gets lost” on her wedding day.

The movie reads as exemplary of the idea that identity is itself an imitation. Judith Butler famously theorized gender as a copy with no original—a copy of a copy that constitutes a performance of the self. The struggle for Marty is that he wants normalcy. The struggle for Jackie is that she wants to create an anti-norm, and she insists that the house that they live in becomes the place where the threat of nonconformity is death. The gun that initiates sex also threatens the participants by the mechanism of its violence—what queer theorists might call normative violence. The fetish of the gun and of the costumes, which began as such a transgressive act, become the markers of that transgressive identity—“Jackie O”—which then insists on “fixing” itself in the space of the house. Marty’s death, however, may not be seen as any different by Jackie as the sort of “killing off” of parts of himself in order to take on the normal identity of husband to Leslie.

The movie closes with more 8mm home movie footage. Jackie sits at the top of the steps exhausted, and Marty, behind the camera, approaches her, asking, “do you want me to stop?” “Yes, stop it Marty,” Jackie responds, “stop it . . .” The camera closes in from above on Jackie’s face, and she speaks as though she is worn

out, yet her voice and expression is unmistakably sexual. The camera lingers on the shot of her for several silent seconds before the film ends. Jackie begs Marty to stop the camera, to stop the play, to stop the performance. The artificiality of Jackie’s identity based on a popular and political icon of the twentieth century is more real to her than Marty’s struggle to play the part of a normal man. Death, therefore, is simply the end of the performance, just as we all are sometimes forced to kill off a part of ourselves in order to function within the narrative of a life that, frequently, was written long before we came around.

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## Finding Nemo

Disney has, over the years, received its share of well-deserved criticism. Feminist critics in particular, as well as vigilant parents everywhere, worry about young, animated heroines with tiny waists and ample bosoms—heroines who, more often than not, are loved and granted their happy endings *because* of their beauty. Hand in hand with these beauties come their enemies—strong, powerful characters when they’re male but simply ugly, fat, or old when they are female. Contrast *The Little Mermaid’s* Ursula with *Aladdin’s* Jafar, for instance. Even worse, Disney’s villains are often related to their heroines as “wicked” or “evil” stepmothers (*Snow White* and *Cinderella*). These absent mothers and evil replacement moms might just be part of the classic fairy tales, but Disney has done nothing to downplay or soften them for young viewers. Nor have they altered their fairy tale endings: happily-ever-after means the girl is coupled up and the evil mother/ugly villain is vanquished, frequently violently. Non-traditional families—with stepparents or siblings, with absent parents, even just single people—are either non-existent or unhappy. Critics worry about the effect of these character types on young, uncritical minds, and such worries seem well founded when one considers that Disney movies and marketing are the first, most frequent, best loved taste of culture in the lives of many very young people. Disney influences almost anyone who wants to, say, own a TV, shop at the mall, go outside. It seems not just fair then, but also important, to note progress and offer praise where it is due. Pixar’s most recent animated feature, co-financed, owned, branded, marketed, and distributed in partnership with Disney, avoids these pitfalls, not just incidentally but purposefully and interestingly, offering young viewers, and the rest of us, important messages about alternative families and alternative heroines.

Like many classic Disney movies, *Finding Nemo* wholly and conspicuously lacks mothers. Not only is Nemo’s family

