A mirage, not an oasis

Swimming Pool, directed by François Ozon

Emanuele Saccarelli
27 August 2003

Swimming Pool, directed by François Ozon, written by Ozon and Emanuèle Bernheim

The maxim "write about what you know" is fundamentally a valuable piece of advice for writers. Properly understood, it could serve as a useful antidote against superficiality, impressionistic shoddiness and all the flippant fripperies of dilettantism. It could serve as an exhortation to fully immerse oneself in worthy subjects, to learn and allow others to learn. But this maxim can also be taken as a license to wallow in the narrow confines of the artist's own existence, to insist in illuminating every dusty corner, every trivial dead-end of his personal life.

One of the things writers presumably know about is the peculiar psychology of their creative process, with all its pitfalls and rewards. The dread of staring at a blank page, the mental artifices used to rekindle the dying fire of inspiration, all this certainly can make for interesting material. When done badly, however, such works turn out to be especially disastrous. A writer might fail in an attempt to examine war, love, or a particular historical epoch, and we might forgive him. But, as recently illustrated by Jonze and Kaufman's *Adaptation*, there is something singularly unredeemable about a bad work written by a writer about writing. The vain and insubstantial French film *Swimming Pool* has recently joined the ranks of this sort of work.

The film follows Sarah (Charlotte Rampling), a middle-aged writer of mystery novels. A reasonably successful writer, Sarah begins to sense a diminishing enthusiasm for her books, and finds herself unable to complete the next one. Trying to help her work through her writer's block, John—her publisher—offers Sarah the use of his villa in France. Once there, Sarah, who demands peace and quite for her writing, is unpleasantly surprised by the arrival of John's daughter, Julie (Ludivine Sagnier). Sarah is an uptight and cantankerous Brit, while Julie is half-French, thus sexually adventurous and with a zest for life that exceeds Sarah's by a good fifty percent. Friction develops between the two. Sarah wants to write in peace, while Julie wants to have sex very often.

Slowly, Sarah's hostility turns into fascination for some aspect of Julie's personality that the viewer will try his best to guess. She reads Julie's diary, then competes with her for the romantic attention of Franck, the village restaurateur. Ultimately, in what appears to be a fit of adolescent jealously, Julie kills Franck. Naturally, this only strengthens the bond between the two women. Sarah quickly taps into her knowledge of murder-mysteries, seduces an octogenarian potential witness by laying naked and perfectly still, and helps Julie get away with the crime.

During the first thirty minutes of the film, very little happens. One cringes as the film ponderously poses as difficult art, or perhaps as self-consciously "French." There is no substance beneath its mannerism. The camera lingers for minutes on Sarah as she situates her laptop computer on a desk. Then connects the plug. Then switches it on. There are several scenes of this constipated sort. They convey nothing of significance.

We would be prepared to welcome as courageous the choice to be slow, patient in a film aimed at the American market (*Swimming Pool* is Ozon's first English-language script). *The House of Mirth* and *The Thin Red Line* are two recent successful examples of this approach. But in this film Ozon seems to be more casual and lazy than patient.

Asked about the significance of the swimming pool, Ozon replied that it "stands for whatever anyone wants to see in it." Indeed Ozon's method seems to drop "intriguing" elements (a mysterious midget, Sarah's conversation with her father, John's alleged wild libertinism, the swimming pool itself), then trust his audience to connect the dots. This is striving to produce art on the cheap, with a minimum of conscious effort, as illustrated in this instructive exchange between Ozon and an interviewer:

Interviewer: When John phones Julie in the country, and Julie hands the phone to Sarah, he's not on the other end. So what piece of that was real?

Ozon: What did you think?

Interviewer: I didn't know what to think.

Ozon: Me neither. I wanted you to wonder: was it really

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John? Is Julie for real? Is she lying? Is John avoiding Sarah out of guilt?

How clever. In the light of this attitude, Ozon's reputation for the speed with which he creates and completes his movies shouldn't remain a flattering one. At any rate, meaning is supposed to magically arise from this guessing game. In order to work—that is, for a film as empty as this to pass as significant, or even enjoyable—this process requires the complicity of an audience that is unable or unwilling to call Ozon's bluff. And indeed *Swimming Pool* has proven to be quite popular, at least in certain circles.

The film has been well received by most critics, even some of the serious ones. This is rather astonishing and difficult to explain. *Swimming Pool* no doubt appeals to that layer of urbane, beautiful souls who crave accents of European sophistication in their lives. They will readily see wonders beneath the flat surface of this uninteresting film. They will like *Swimming Pool* for the same reasons they liked *The Hours*: because the upper middle class, at least for a couple of hours, gets to convince itself that that its heart-wrenching problems, its cosmopolitan outlook, its complex interiority defines the human condition.

Incidentally, this kind of narcissism is not alien to Ozon, who has recently expressed the following complaint in an interview:

"Well, *8 Women* [one of Ozon's previous works] was really boring, because everyone asked about the actresses. Ask me about myself; I prefer it. Especially since *Swimming Pool* is a self-portrait ... I'm actually talking about myself, my own creative method. I wanted to show how I work—since journalists always ask me, 'Where does your inspiration come from, that you can make a film every year?' I wanted to show that I have no trouble coming up with ideas—my head is full of stories. The issue for me is desire."

There is little mystery to Ozon's conceit. But why is *Swimming Pool* being so widely praised? Perhaps the desert of contemporary American cinema sets us all up for a knee-jerk enthusiastic reaction to anything that sells itself as difficult and complex—thus, for example, the belief that there exists a healthy "independent" American film industry.

Visual minimalism is immediately anointed as a positive good in reaction to special effects and computer animation. But there is nothing stylistically distinctive or meaningful about the series of images that compose *Swimming Pool*. One might indelicately say, and this would surely be the death blow to Ozon's sensibility, that visually as otherwise, the film is simply boring.

Sexuality, in many ways still quasi-taboo in American cinema, is deemed interesting just for being addressed. In this regard, Sagnier's performance, widely hailed as effective and intriguing, is especially weak and unable to sustain the sexual tension the film tries to project. Julie's pre-pubescent, irritating personality rapidly offsets her physical gifts in spite of the frequency with which the latter tend to appear onscreen. We readily grant the oft-noted proposition that Charlotte Rampling is more attractive than most women in their fifties, but continue to wait for an explanation of why we should care.

All in all, the fact that *Swimming Pool* is considered a successful film might suggest that, alongside the prevailing, *prima facie* vulgar productions, stands a complementary niche market of "difficult" choices, peddled by professional opportunists to easily satisfied connoisseurs. We expect a desert to produce its mirage.

The film's ending deserves a special mention, since several critics were delighted by it. This is supposed to introduce a remarkable "twist." The superficial Roger Ebert acclaims its "diabolical surprises," while the more respectable A. O. Scott in the *New York Times* finds it "delicious." In this ending we learn that everything we saw, pointless and mundane as it was, was actually itself a work of fiction. Sarah made up the whole story (Julie's promiscuity, the murder of Franck, and so on) and now proudly presents it all to John, in the pages of her new book, already published by a rival company. John's daughter, you see, doesn't at all look like what we saw before, as we find out when she comes into the office and does not even recognize Sarah.

Thus the narrowness and incestuous pursuits of the film spiral even more inward toward a vanishing point. What seemed before to be uninteresting, self-centered characters, are instead revealed to be the figments of an uninteresting imagination (Sarah's). But of course all the characters were, from the beginning, the product of Ozon's imagination. And here many critics have found their umpteenth great epiphany about the blurring of reality and fiction. We let them spin that tale and end on a final note.

In what will be regarded as yet another audacious twist, Ozon, describing the plot, declared ironically that, "Sooner or later, artists have to come to terms with reality." We wish that this would finally happen to Ozon. As soon as possible, and certainly before this phrase turns into a fitting aesthetic epitaph.

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