



Lincoln Film Society

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Friday September 8th 2017

Frantz (Cert 12a)

dir: **François Ozon**

Starring: **Pierre Niney, Paula Beer**

Sponsor: **Precious Pets**

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Synopsis: The small town of Quedlingburg, Germany, 1919. Anna mourns the death of her fiancé, Frantz Hoffmeister, killed on the Marne 2 months before the end of the war. She lives with his grieving parents Magda and Hans, and they regard her as a daughter. Anna learns that the mysterious young man who visits Frantz's symbolic grave is French war veteran Adrien Rivoire. Hans, a doctor, turns Adrien away when the latter calls at his surgery. Finally granted an audience with the Hoffmeisters, Adrien recalls his friendship with Frantz as fellow violin students in pre-war Paris. The parents warm to Franz; Anna fancies herself falling in love, much to the chagrin of Kreutz, the Francophobe bachelor who wants to marry her. Kreutz and grieving fathers among the townsmen refuse to drink with Hans for having accepted a Frenchman into his home. Hans urges them to take responsibility for supporting the war and sending their sons to their deaths. Adrien confesses to Anna that he lied about knowing Frantz: he discovered Franz's identity after shooting him, seconds after they came face to face in a trench. Anna insists that Adrien maintain the lie to protect Frantz's parents, who cherish Adrien's 'memories.' Adrien returns to Paris. Anna tries to drown herself. She travels to France and locates Adrien at his mother's chateau. He is to marry a young woman, Fanny, whose love he doesn't return. Realising that Adrien is still obsessed with Frantz's memory, Anna leaves.

The stories we tell ourselves to shore up our psychological defences, especially when dealing with loss, form a recurrent trope in the films of François Ozon. In *Under the Sand* (2000), the widow played by Charlotte Rampling refuses to accept that her husband of 25 years has drowned. In the metafictional *Swimming Pool* (2003), Rampling's middle-aged novelist reinvents her editor's daughter (Ludivine Sagnier) as a sexually voracious young woman who believes her dead mother is alive; she also contrives a Highsmithian plot in which a virile young man is more attracted to her than to the unstable youngster. In *The New Girlfriend* (2014), Anaïs Demoustier's suburban wife, who had repressed her desire for her childhood friend, a young mother who has died of cancer, finds an available surrogate in the dead woman's cross-dressing widower (Romain Duris). The not-quite-Buñuelian latter film's gender fluidity imbues its world of middle-class conformism with a not-quite oneiric quality.

More classical in style, *Frantz* hinges on a lie embroidered by guilt-racked gay French ex-infantryman Adrien into an imaginary pre-war relationship with the eponymous German soldier he murdered in a Marne trench in 1918. Debonair art students who look like boulevardiers, Adrien and Frantz supposedly swanned around Paris in the dying Belle Époque - Adrien greatly amused at the sight of Frantz dancing with luckless girls. The romance of it thrills Anna, Frantz's bereft fiancée; renders his suspicious father silent; and plants in the viewer's mind images of a genteelly queer fantasy that throws into sharp relief the hopelessness of Anna's



unrequited love for Adrien.

In seeking to make a film about "our need for secrets and lies", Ozon followed up a friend's suggestion that he read Maurice Rostand's 1930 anti-war play *L'homme que j'ai tué* by reworking Ernst Lubitsch's screen adaptation *Broken Lullaby*, released by Paramount in 1932. Lubitsch's protagonist Paul is tormented by the memory of having bayoneted to death a German soldier, Walter. Like Adrien, Lubitsch's Frenchman maintains the beneficent lie for the dead German's parents' sake; unlike Adrien, he is sentimentally integrated into the German family as the girl's future husband.

Both films are allegories of international rapprochement and healing viewed through the prism of a family's post-war forgiveness of its son's killer (Walter's resurrection as Paul bordering on the Christ-like), though in neither case do the parents learn the truth. The townspeople who snub Frantz's father for forgiving a French soldier represent not only the middle classes who were complicit with the Kaiser in his prosecution of the war, but also the German brass who stayed behind the lines.

The pity of war is never an unfit subject for a film, and Frantz succeeds as a mournful pacifist work, its primarily black-and-white cinematography and regretful tone suggesting that it would make a compelling double-bill with Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930). Ozon's decision to tell the story through Anna's eyes enables her to serve as a sympathetic witness to the psychological damage that killing does to a combatant, but also to mirror Adrien's experience as the epicene man who loved Frantz. The wrinkle is that Adrien shot Frantz seconds after falling in love with him, which lends a sexual morbidity to his obsession. Ozon has described it as "necrophiliac."

Much of the film's melancholy beauty resides in Ozon's harnessing of pristine "*Rückenfigur*" (back-toward-the-camera) compositions inspired by the landscape paintings of the German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich, and to a lesser extent the subdued interior paintings of Denmark's Vilhelm Hammershøi. Wim Wenders' (*Wrong Move*) and Béla Tarr (*The Turin Horse*) are among the filmmakers who have deployed this mostly static device, but arguably not since Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger employed it to convey loneliness and foreboding in *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945) and *Black Narcissus* (1947) has it been used as hauntingly as Ozon uses it here. Yet his bleeding of colour into the film's palette at moments of heightened emotion feels less assured

than, say, Powell and Pressburger's and Wenders's cutting between colour and monochrome in *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) and *Wings of Desire* (1987), respectively.

Credits

Anna	Paula Beer
Adrien	Pierre Niney
Doktor Hans Hoffmeister	Ernst Stötzner
Magda Hoffmeister	Marie Gruber
Kreutz	Johann von Bülow
Frantz Hoffmeister	Anton von Lucke
Adrien's mother	Cyrielle Clair
Fanny	Alice du Lencquesaing
Director	François Ozon
Screenplay	François Ozon/Philippe Piazzo (loosely based on Ernst Lubitsch's <i>Broken Lullaby</i> , 1932)
Director of Photography	Pascal Marti
Editor	Laure Gardette
Art Director	Michel Bartélémy
Original Music	Philippe Rombi
Sound Mixer	Martin Boissau
Costume Design	Pascaline Chavanne
	France/Germany/USA 2016
	114 mins

Another View

François Ozon is nothing if not a restless film-maker. Despite his ridiculously prolific rate (he's the Woody Allen of France, churning out one to two films a year), he seems adverse to ever being labelled an auteur. He's tackled everything from a classic Gallic farce (Potiche), to a murder mystery (8 Women), to an erotic thriller (Swimming Pool), all with varying degrees of success. With an Ozon joint, you never quite know what you're going to get.

Yet still his latest comes as a big surprise. A largely black-and-white loose adaptation of the 1932 Ernst Lubitsch drama Broken Lullaby, which was in turn based on a play by French playwright Maurice Rostand, Frantz is also mostly told in German – a first for the director. It lacks the cheeky humour that characterised his three most inspired hits (8 Women, Potiche and Sitcom), instead favouring the mournful tone of his drama Under the Sand. Still, Frantz feels like new territory for Ozon.

He radically shifts from the source material by imagining the entire second half of the story (which fittingly is the best part of the film). Vitally, Ozon has also changed the entire perspective to put a woman at the core of the tale. The original centered on a young Frenchman, who visits the titular German's soldier's grave after the end of the first world war. Frantz instead focuses on the German's fiancée, who strikes up a quasi-romantic relationship with the mysterious stranger after he enters her life.

Ozon is often at his best when working with women, and he has a fabulous talent in Paula Beer to bring his protagonist, Anna, to vivid life. She's stunning in the role.

When we first meet Anna, she's understandably morose and quiet, having recently lost the love of her life to war. Her parents are eager to marry her off to another German suitor, but she's unwilling to entertain the option. She perks up with the surprise arrival of Adrien (Pierre Niney), a lanky

Frenchman with a sexy moustache, who claims to have been close friends with her late partner. Initially, her father wants nothing to do with the man ("Every French man is my son's murderer," he snarls). Adrien proves to be such a charming presence, however, that even Anna's family soon come around to embracing him.

Not long into Frantz, Ozon boldly shifts to full-blown colour for some key sequences. The flashbacks, recounting Adrien's time spent with Frantz in Paris (they tour the Louvre; Adrien teaches Frantz how to play the violin), do away with the gloomy aesthetic, as does a lovely scene that sees Anna and Adrien grow closer over the course of a long hike in the mountains. The colour affords such needed respite from the misery that affects Anna's circumstance, that when Ozon plunges back into darkness, it hurts. The Pleasantville-like approach is undeniably distracting, but its cumulative effect pays off profoundly in a final shot that's too special to spoil. Ozon tends to favour a twisty narrative, and again offers a juicy one here that makes further plot description impossible. Suffice it to say that the film's best stretch involves Anna journeying to Paris and take on a more active role as detective. It's thrilling to watch such a sullen character finally take flight.

Nigel Smith (The Guardian)

Our next film

Paterson (USA 2016. Cert 15. 107 mins)

From USA cult indie director Jim Jarmusch (*Coffee and Cigarettes*, *Down By Law*, *Ghost Dog: Way of the Samurai*) comes this beautifully observed drama that shows the influences of the great Japanese director Yashujirō Ozu in so many ways.

Paterson (Adam Driver) is from Paterson (New Jersey). He drives a bus, writes poetry, owns a dog and is happily married. His life has a routine and a rhythm to it, and the week we spend in their company reveals them to be a couple you would welcome as neighbours and like to get to know.

Jarmusch has said that he wanted to make a film that was an antidote to the violent, abusive, confrontational content of so many films. As the world at the moment is seemingly full of the mad, bad and dangerous to know, with this slice of understated utopia - ("*a balm to watch..*" Sight & Sound) - he has done exactly that. Enjoy!