

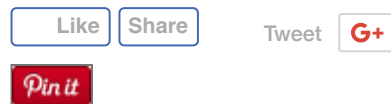


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Film Review: Double Lover

François Ozon's campy, erotically explicit thriller on the subject of twins delivers on style, but reflects retro attitudes toward women.

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Feb 13, 2018



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François Ozon's *Double Lover*, a departure from his restrained World War I-set *Frantz*, is an erotic psychological thriller about a onetime model in therapy who ends up with two lovers—who happen to be twins. *Double Lover's* mix of kink, suspense and technical control initially promises a return to such riveting mind-benders as *Swimming Pool*. Sadly, though, this film, loosely based on a short story by Joyce Carol Oates, also trafficks in exploitative images of women in the guise of art-film license, while a wacko plot based on the notion of twins and doubles—a nod to David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*—quickly loses the viewer in a labyrinth of implausible scenes. Yes, the French regularly take candor about sex and the body to a new level. But with the presence of a manipulative, abusive male character, along with much female nudity—which extends to an investigation of interior anatomy in a clinically detailed gynecological exam—*Double Lover* may play off-key to many at a time when #MeToo is daily exposing predators.

The film's opening is a declaration of mischief: In the midst of a haircut, Chloé (the beautiful but perfectly vapid Marina Vacht) gazes out at us, breaking the fourth wall. Perhaps to make of the viewer a complicit voyeur? Ozon might be referencing Baudelaire's address to the reader as "my hypocritical brother." Next up is an extreme close-up, initially hard to parse, that turns out to be a cervix viewed through a speculum, followed by a matching shot of a weeping eye. Apparently, Chloé

is getting checked out by a doctor for chronic stomach aches. Since they're likely psychosomatic, she consults a therapist—handsome, bespectacled Paul Meyer (Jérémie Renier of the Dardennes Brothers' films, playing against good-boy type).

Before you can say "transference," Paul falls in love with his patient, and they move in together. For all his gentleness, Paul is a man of secrets, as Chloé discovers when she finds mystifying photos while unpacking a carton. Compounding her unease, she glimpses Paul from a bus with another woman in front of a building. When he dismisses her suspicions, she tracks down his doppelganger. He turns out to be a flashier shrink in fancier digs named Louis Delord (also played by Renier), who is Paul's twin.

Despite—or maybe because of—Delord's abrasive approach, Chloé finds his therapy of rousing sex in his back room (to unlock emotional stasis, of course) much to her liking. Especially since sleeping with Paul is kind of a yawn. Just in case we weren't convinced by Chloé's arousal, Ozon offers an anatomical visual of female orgasm. Before you can say countertransference, Chloé's in a triangle with both twins, and fantasizes about Louis piling on while she's shagging Paul. In a salute to sexual equal opportunity, Chloé plays aggressor in a strap-on episode with Paul.

When the action takes a breather from someone's groin, a murky backstory emerges involving the twins' past dual affair with a woman that left her a vegetable tended by her mother (Jacqueline Bisset in a thankless role). In the universe of *Double Lover*, women fail to thrive. Cats add to the creep factor, with Chloé's kitty joining the viewer as fellow voyeur, along with the staring taxidermied felines of the sinister busybody next door. Louis spouts a lot of folderol about the phenom of twins, with one "dominant" and duking it out with and "absorbing" the other, even in utero. Look elsewhere for an endorsement of French shrinks.

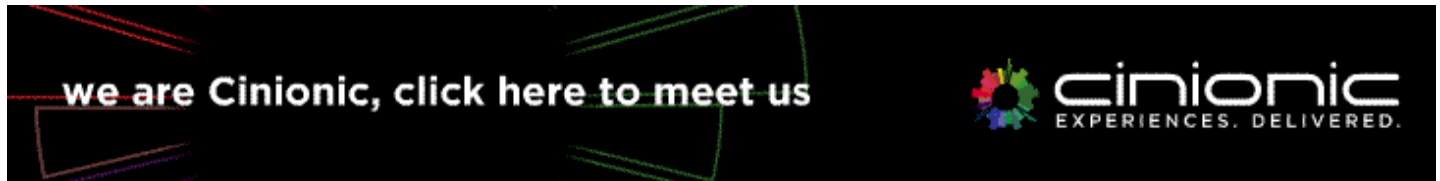
Throughout, the film's technical polish shines, every detail amping up the suspense. Chloé works as a museum guard in the trendy museum Palais de Tokyo, its walls hung with macabre, bloody works that underscore the film's tone of campy thriller, also reflected in the jangly soundtrack. Borrowing liberally from Brian De Palma, images are multiplied through split screens and mirrors. Renier is persuasive in his portrayal of both twins, suggesting that identical bodies can house radically different beings. Even more persuasive is his display of sexual prowess, which erases the line between performance and live show, and secures the film's bona fides as soft-core porn.

The character of Louis certainly runs counter to the hapless man-boy Renier played in the Dardennes' Cannes winner *The Child*. (In one of cinema's indelible moments, when questioned about the whereabouts of his baby, Renier replies, "I sold him.") Now that the gifted actor has flexed his versatility as the best onscreen lay of the young season, the future, with any luck, will offer him roles with more heft. When the credits rolled, the owner of the cervix was nowhere in view.

Click [here \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt6367558/?ref=fn_al_tt_1\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt6367558/?ref=fn_al_tt_1) for cast and crew information.

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