MARGINAL PLEASURE AND AUTEURIST CINEMA:  
THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF ROBERT BRESSON, JEAN-LUC GODARD,  
CATHERINE BREILLAT AND FRANÇOIS OZON  

DISSERTATION  

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation considers and evaluates French auteurist cinema in two contexts: first, in terms of the 1950s/1960s, a period during which the politique des auteurs became a salient part of film criticism nationally and internationally, and second, in terms of contemporary cinema in France today, where the concept of auteur, though never completely forsaken since the Nouvelle Vague, has experienced a revival. A large amount of existing critical literature discusses various aspects of Robert Bresson and Jean-Luc Godard’s works, which coincide with the emergence and espousal of the politique, but critics and historians rarely consider the sexual politics of their cinema in much detail. With that in mind, I look closely at a selection of their films, which differ from other auteur works of the period in that they attempt to problematize gender difference and sexuality.

The second part of the study examines the cinema of Catherine Breillat and François Ozon, whose works destabilize notions of gender (masculinity, femininity) and sexuality in an even more daring and explicit fashion. Their films, seldom discussed in the context of the politique des auteurs, will be examined as contemporary examples of auteurist cinema, but also in relation to the auteur cinema of the 1950s/1960s, in an attempt to determine both the continuity of the
cinema of *auteurs* and the radical differences between these two periods of French film history.
To Will
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INTRODUCTION

For the past fifty years, the *auteur* has been of primordial importance in French film criticism. While critics like Alexandre Astruc and André Bazin had already articulated notions of cinematic authorship in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the *politique des auteurs* became a coherent form of criticism after a series of immensely influential articles (most of them published in *Cahiers du cinéma* in the mid to late 1950s), which insisted that the film director, much like a novelist or a painter, should become the ultimate authority over his or her artistic product. Young critic François Truffaut was the forerunner of this trend, but other *Cahiers* critics such as Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette soon followed. Dissatisfied with the (lack of) quality in French films made in the 1950s (a period known as the *Tradition de la qualité*), they decided to put their own theory into practice, and all started making films in the latter part of the decade. Their unique style of filmmaking came to be known nationally and internationally as the *Nouvelle Vague*.

As a result of this critical revolution, 1950s and 1960s auteurist films (that is, works directed by filmmakers with a recognizable personal style) are
particularly consequential, as they happen to coincide with the birth, development and quasi universal espousal of the *politique des auteurs* in France and abroad. The second time period of particular interest is contemporary cinema (the 1990s and 2000s), which has seen, if not a re-birth (auteurism as a critical approach, although challenged, has never completely disappeared since the 1950s), a revival, a re-emergence in French cinema itself, but also in Anglo-American film criticism, as Dudley Andrew exclaimed in 1993: “After . . . years of clandestine whispering we are permitted to mention, even to discuss, the *auteur* again” (Cook 311). Conversely, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault’s post-structuralist questioning of the authority of the author does not seem to have had much influence on contemporary French critics, as one of them recently wrote: “Toute la critique travaille aujourd’hui à partir de la notion d’auteur et ne saurait envisager l’analyse d’un film sans le relier à l’ensemble de la filmographie du cinéaste replacée dans son contexte culturel” (Prédal 129).

In this study, I have chosen to concentrate on four particular *auteurs*, and on a selection of works released during the two time periods mentioned above: Robert Bresson (1901-1999) and Jean-Luc Godard (1930--) for the 1950s/1960s, Catherine Breillat (1948--) and François Ozon (1967--) for the 1990s/2000s. An examination of Bresson and Godard’s films is essential if one wants to have an understanding of what personal (and political) filmmaking means. The large amount of texts written on the body of work of the two filmmakers is enough to show their overwhelming influence on film and film
criticism, both in France and abroad. Emma Wilson calls Godard “the most radical and influential director of the *nouvelle vague*” (1999: 151), while Alan Pavelin argues that “Robert Bresson’s 13 features over 40 years constitute arguably the most original and brilliant body of work over a long career from a film director in the history of cinema” (1).

Breillat and Ozon have been chosen to represent the “return of the *auteur*” trend of recent cinema because, as in the cinema of their two predecessors, their films are marked by a strong personal style, and a bold iconoclasm, particularly in their thematic choices. They are self-proclaimed *auteurs* with a strikingly coherent body of work. Like the independent directors of the French New Wave, their films are both personal and polemical. They write their own scripts and dialogues (alone, or with the occasional help of a screenwriter, in Ozon’s case), and tend to work with the same group of actors and actresses (Roxane Mesquida and Rocco Siffredi in the case of Breillat, Ludivine Sagnier, Charlotte Rampling and Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi in the case of Ozon), which is reminiscent of the recurrence of actors in films by new wave filmmakers (for example, Truffaut repeatedly collaborated with Catherine Deneuve and Jeanne Moreau, Godard with Anna Karina and Jean-Paul Belmondo, Claude Chabrol with Stéphane Audran). Finally, and most importantly, their films, like those of Bresson and Godard, demonstrate a tendency to problematize issues related to gender difference and sexuality.
My study has a dual purpose: I am first interested in examining the ways in which gender and sexuality (both of same-sex and opposite-sex nature) are presented in key films by the four auteurs. Secondly, in addition to closely analyzing examples of Ozon and Breillat’s cinema as contemporary works, I look at them in relation to auteurist cinema of the 1950/1960s, in an attempt to determine both the continuity of the cinema of auteurs and the radical differences between these two periods of French film history.

Jean-Luc Godard’s questioning of gender representations in 1960s French society has often been commented upon, however the position of his films remain ambiguous: critics have called him both an early feminist and a misogynist. In contrast, Robert Bresson’s politics of representation have barely been touched upon, and the articulation of same-sex desire in some of his films has either been denied, or mentioned only in passing. The success of François Ozon and Catherine Breillat’s cinema is fairly new, and although two books recently appeared on the cinema of Breillat (see David Vasse and Claire Clouzot), no critic has written an extensive study of Ozon’s filmmaking. Their gender and sexual politics are occasionally commented upon (especially Breillat’s), but their works are rarely (if ever) seen in relation to an earlier period of film history.

I have also chosen Jean-Luc Godard for his obvious involvement in the articulation of the politique des auteurs, and his direct participation in the New Wave. His cinema is daringly iconoclastic (both thematically and cinematically),
and challenges virtually every rule of classical narrative cinema. Similarly, Bresson’s minimalist style, and the robotic histrionics of his characters, have been both embraced and rejected by critics, and disavowed by an often perplexed public (his last feature film *L’Argent* was fervidly booed when presented at the Cannes Film Festival in the 1980s). The *Cahiers* critics, in contrast, put Bresson on a pedestal, and often cited him as an example of a quintessential *auteur*.

Breillat’s cinema can also be seen as reformative, only for very different reasons. The central preoccupation of her works is the sexuality of women. What considerably differentiates Breillat’s cinema from most other directors’ (independent or otherwise) is that, in her own words, it “take[s] sexuality as a subject, not an object” (Wiegan 1). In contrast to Breillat’s cinema, François Ozon’s films seem to be targeting a larger audience and can be regarded as more “mainstream.” This is all the more interesting because of the fact that the vast majority of his short and feature-length films contain (both male and female) homosexual characters in lead or supporting roles. His cinema is noteworthy in that it problematizes identity as fixed, and can therefore be seen in connection to other films of the 1990s such as Josiane Balasko’s *Gazon Maudit* (1995), or Alain Berliner’s *Ma vie en rose* (1997).

In looking closely at a selection of works by these four directors, I am interested in coupling auteurist criticism with other approaches. The status of the *auteur* in film criticism has evolved tremendously over the years, and while I
believe it still makes sense to use authorship as a critical starting point (especially when discussing French cinema), it needs to be combined with other approaches that will be able to consider, in my case, the construction of gendered and sexual identities in the cinema. What is different between film criticism *then and now* is that, while the *auteur* was considered the sole producer of meaning in the *politique des auteurs* of the 1950s, the influence of 1960s structuralism and 1970s post-structuralism (an American-invented term the French saw as a continuation of “structuralisme”) has made the *auteur one meaning-producing factor among others, and has allowed films to be analyzed in pluralized ways which take into account the linguistic, the textual, the institutional etc., eventually bringing in concepts such as “ideology” (in the Althusserian sense of the term), context, intertextuality and spectatorship to the forefront (Hayward 2000: 23). All in all, the three theoretical approaches which post-structuralism could be said to regroup (psychoanalysis, feminism, Marxism and deconstruction) have had a tremendous influence on film criticism and film theory.

It is with the help of contemporary feminist film theory, along with gay and lesbian (or queer) theory, both of which have strongly impacted film studies by re-evaluating gender and sexual representation in film, that I intend to pursue this study. Feminist film theory has evolved significantly since its “birth” in the early 1970s. It is clearly attached to auteurism, as pioneer feminists from the late 1960s expressed a desire to “crown” or claim their own female *auteurs*, at a time
when authorship was seriously questioned by both literary and film criticism. Feminist theorists also became interested in denouncing gender bias in classical narrative cinema. Two essays have had a groundbreaking effect on the movement, and can be seen as foundational texts: Claire Johnston’s “Woman’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema” (1973), and Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (written in 1973, but published in 1975). While Johnston offers a sustained critique of stereotypes from a semiotic point of view, and shows how classic cinema constructs the ideological image of Woman (Cook 353), Mulvey uses Freudian psychoanalysis to show how classical narrative cinema constructs the way Woman is “to be looked at,” first by the male protagonist, and, by extension, by the male spectator, or, otherwise put, how scopophilia (pleasure in looking) has been split between an active/male and a passive/female dichotomy (Mulvey 1989: 19). Both Johnston and Mulvey call for an alternative feminist (or counter-) cinema that would challenge the dominant ideological concept of mainstream cinema.

In the 1980s, feminist film critics (including Teresa de Laurentis, Judith Mayne, Kaja Silverman and Mary Ann Doane) started to point out the limits of psychoanalytic feminist film theory, which, according to them, created an ideology of gender and ultimately essentialized Woman and Man. It became necessary to “move on from questions of gender and to broaden the debate to include questions of class and power relations between women, of differences among the spectating female subjects, of the film industry as more than just an . .
apparatus of patriarchy that renders women invisible and constructs Woman” (Hayward 2000: 122-123). Moving away from a male/female dichotomy opened up new possibilities, notably a conception of representation outside heterosexualities. Mayne and Julia Lesage, for example, contributed to broadening the horizons of the theory by discussing the homosexual pleasures of the female spectator, largely ignored by 1970s feminist theory (Cook 359). Contemporary feminist studies have now almost completely moved away from essentialist differences between the sexes, and in challenging binary oppositions, they have grown more interested in blurring gender, as well as sexual, boundaries between individuals.

The debt gay (also known as queer, gender, or sexuality) studies owe to feminist studies is undeniable, and queer theory can be seen as a “desire to challenge and push further debates on gender and sexuality put in place by feminist theory and also as a critical response to the numerous discourses surrounding AIDS and homosexuality . . . As a politics, it seeks to confuse binary essentialisms around gender and sexual identity” (Hayward 2000: 308-309). Just as later feminist theorists read classic films “against the grain,” and were interested in the homosocial, if not homosexual, desires between two female characters in films such as Jacques Rivette’s Céline et Julie vont en bateau (1974) or Ridley Scott’s Thelma and Louise (1991), queer theorists turned to classic narrative films as well. Using Mulvey’s theory and Vito Russo’s The Celluloid Closet as points of departure, Lee Edelman’s oblique reading of Otto
Preminger’s *Laura* (1944) seeks to expose the way the heterosexual social order needs to both recognize and disavow the gay male body (two characters, scrawny Waldo and virile Mark, are both believed to be in love with Laura), and concludes: “Like the camera in the economy of classic narrative cinema, Waldo’s homosexuality is the unacknowledged lens, the structurally defining but repressed machinery, that makes possible the representational system of male heterosexuality” (Edelman 240). In looking at classics from Hollywood and elsewhere (“buddy films” are especially interesting), but also at alternative cinema, queer theory manages to open up texts and lead us to read seemingly “straight” texts differently, or view them from a different angle (Hayward 2000: 309).

In the first chapter of this study, I look at the *politique des auteurs* from a different angle, as I examine the sexual politics of the *politique*. There is a curious mélange of Puritanism and erotic fascination in texts written by *Cahiers* critics throughout the 1950s, and into the 1960s. I re-read some of those texts (particularly those written by Godard and Truffaut) with this in mind. Sexuality in the cinema was rarely discussed as a concept in 1950s French film criticism, and an extensive study on the topic (Lo Duca’s *L’Erotisme au cinéma*) deserves to be further investigated, along with a text by André Bazin written in direct response to Duca’s book. In the second half of the chapter, I recount the evolution of the concept of *auteur* in criticism and film, and investigate the explosion of auteurist cinematic trends in contemporary French cinema.
Chapter two concentrates on the cinema of Robert Bresson, with particular attention to three motion pictures. *Pickpocket* (1959), released the same year as François Truffaut’s new wave launcher *Les 400 coups*, is unique in Bresson’s corpus in that it suggests a direct correlation between criminal activity and homosexual desire, which most critics have consistently refused to acknowledge. *Les Dames du bois de Boulogne* (1945), released shortly after the Liberation, and loosely adapted from an episode in Denis Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste*, is a “film de femmes,” a story of vengeance and betrayal. It concerns itself with the difficulties women face in a male-dominated society which attaches much importance to keeping up appearances and fitting into a conservative mold. The film offers an interesting (albeit ambiguous) problematization of gender inequality, and appears to criticize the firmly established rules of patriarchy. This denunciation of male oppression is also articulated in *Une Femme douce* (1969). His first film in color tells the story of a young, unnamed woman who commits suicide as a result of an unhappy, mentally abusive marriage with a taciturn pawnbroker. Much like *Les Dames*, *Une Femme douce* contributes to challenging patriarchal norms, and denouncing women’s limited agency in bourgeois society.

Chapter three looks at Godard’s œuvre (again concentrating on three films) from the 1960s, which, in contrast to Bresson’s, is clearly more explicit in its depiction of sexuality, and in its tackling, from very early on, issues of women’s exploitation. The tongue-in-cheek *Une Femme est une femme* (1961),
both a musical and a parody of it, portrays a young woman who decides one day that she wants a baby, and that she cannot wait one more day to get pregnant. In a humorous fashion, the film underscores fundamental differences between men and women while also questioning the fixity of cinematic genres. The second film on which I chose to concentrate is the much gloomier in tone *Vivre sa vie* (1962), which tackles issues of female exploitation and prostitution, and ends in the death of its main character, Nana. I look closely at the ways in which doors, windows, courtyards and indoor spaces contribute to denouncing Nana’s restricted freedom. In my discussion of *Masculin féminin* (1966), I concentrate on the (both explicit and covert) presence of same-sex desire in the film. I try to make sense of the scene which features two kissing male homosexuals (the only one in Godard’s, if not all new wave, cinema), and argue that traces of the candid lesbian plot in Maupassant’s “La Femme de Paul” (one of the inspirations for the film) clearly remain in Godard’s work.

My fourth chapter jumps several decades, and looks at three films by controversial independent director Catherine Breillat. The story of Lili in *36 fillette* (1988), based on Breillat’s own experiences as a teenager, is a disturbing account of a rebellious young adolescent, who, alienated from her family and the rest of the world, becomes obsessed with losing her virginity. Despite being a very personal and unique piece of cinema, it also articulates itself vis-à-vis François Truffaut’s *Les 400 coups* (1959), notably because of Jean-Pierre Léaud’s cameo appearance. The film articulates fundamental differences
between the sexes, which is also the case in her most (in)famous film to date, *Romance* (1999). The extraordinary controversy surrounding the film is a result, not so much of Breillat’s feminist-inspired message and alleged negative male representation, but of its graphic depiction of marginal sexual practices. If feminist commentators commend Breillat’s works for her bold depiction of female subjectivity, they are often wary and critical of the filmmaker’s essentialist point of view on sexual difference. Finally, I discuss Breillat’s disturbing follow-up to *Romance*, the arguably more controversial *A ma sœur!*, released in 2001. The film tells the unusual tale of two sisters who, while on vacation in the south of France, have their first sexual experience (one literally, the other, vicariously, at least at first). I try to make sense of the noirish ending which certain spectators may find haphazard, shocking and alienating. Throughout the chapter, I also attempt to determine Breillat’s debt to the *politique des auteurs* of the 1950s and 1960s auteurist cinema.

My fifth and last chapter looks at two short films and two feature films by critically acclaimed director François Ozon, in an attempt to show how his cinema, in tackling taboo issues of various kinds, challenges the rules of conventional filmmaking. While Ozon’s award-winning short films *La Petite mort* (1995) and *Une Robe d’été* (1996) triumph with their antihomophobic portrayal of same-sex desire, and their suggestion of both gender and sexual fluidity, his subsequent feature-length film, *Sitcom* (1998), is more problematic. The film has been heavily criticized for its gratuitous intention to shock, and its lack of a clear
message or motivation behind the perversions it portrays. *Sitcom*, however, redeems itself in its empowering portrayal of women. *8 femmes* (2002), inspired by George Cukor’s *The Women* (1939), and adapted from a relatively unknown French *boulevard* play by Robert Thomas, clearly refuses to fit inside the boundaries of a single genre. In this last discussion, I address Ozon’s passionate cinephilia, along with his continuous attempt to “normalize” same-sex desire.

Aside from focusing on the articulation of homo/bisexuality in Ozon’s cinema, this chapter acknowledges the place of the father in his works, an often absent, frequently tyrannical figure. The chapter also ponders Ozon’s potential thematic and cinematic inspirations, from classical Hollywood to European (including French) auteurist cinema.

The consideration of these four independent filmmakers in relation to auteurism and the politics of gender and sexuality allows us to evaluate the evolution of the medium in terms of its construction of gendered and sexual identities. In addition, it enables us to determine the ways in which contemporary art cinema draws upon previous *films d’auteur* in order to situate (and, to some extent, validate) its own filmmaking.
CHAPTER 1

THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF THE *POLITIQUE*: FROM 1950s FRENCH CRITICISM TO CONTEMPORARY AUTEURIST CINEMA

1.1 A Certain Tendency of French Criticism

Ever since its inception in the early to mid-1950s, the *politique des auteurs* has been highly contentious. The detractors of the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics who started this critical trend, but also their allies, saw it as problematic because it implied that the *auteur* (the term referring to the director of a film with a strong personal style) was infallible in the making of quality films (Baecque 1: 161). If one can trace the primordial importance of the *auteur* in film criticism back to André Bazin’s writings and Alexandre Astruc’s *caméra-stylo* (or camera-pen), the idea of a *politique* should only be attributed to François Truffaut and his “followers,” as Antoine de Baecque reminds us: “La politique des auteurs a un père, François Truffaut, une date de naissance, le mois de février 1955, et repose sur un manifeste, l’article défendant le film de Jacques Becker, *Ali Baba et les quarante voleurs*, article portant ce titr explicite: ‘*Ali Baba* et la ‘Politique des Auteurs’”” (1: 147). Truffaut’s fellow-critics at *Cahiers du cinéma* (often
referred to as the “Young Turks” or the “Cahiers group”) were Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol and Jacques Rivette.

While the phrase *politique des auteurs* may have originated in the article on Becker, the foundational text of the movement is widely recognized by critics as being Truffaut’s “Une Certaine tendance du cinéma français,” published a year earlier. In this momentous essay, the iconoclastic young critic vehemently (and oedipally) denounces the *cinéma de papa*, that of established and successful directors and screenwriters of the Tradition of Quality (he is especially ferocious toward Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost and their literary adaptations), and opposes it to a *cinéma d’auteur*, of which he cites Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Jacques Tati, and Jean Renoir, among others, as examples.2

Truffaut’s essay celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2004. This seems to be a perfect opportunity to look back at the controversy surrounding the *politique*, which made both supporters and detractors of auteurist cinema raise eyebrows. Michel Marie reminds us of the main, somewhat biased ideas behind the *politique*:

1. Il n’y a qu’un seul auteur de film et celui-ci est le metteur en scène . . .
2. Cette politique est très sélective, fondée sur des *partis pris* et des *jugements de valeur*. Certains réalisateurs sont des auteurs . . . D’autres ne seront jamais considérés comme tel, même s’ils réussissent un film . . .
3. “Il n’y a pas d’œuvres, il n’y a que des auteurs.” (38-39, my emphasis)

Aside from minimizing the collaborative aspect of cinema, and giving certain directors a cult status, as Marie, and many other critics, have suggested, the *politique des auteurs* rests on a rigid distinction between *auteur* cinema and its
so-called “quality” counterpart. This distinction is not as clear-cut as it appears, and it would indeed be preposterous to believe that there is such a drastic difference between the two, as Truffaut seems to suggest. Two examples will, I hope, prove my point. The first one is the ambiguous status of Henri-Georges Clouzot, who is both praised by Truffaut and whose cinema is clearly contrasted to the works of Yves Allégret and Jean Delannoy (Truffaut 1954: 26), but who is also looked down upon for the implication of “pederastic” relationships between his male characters in *Le Salaire de la peur* (1953) (27; Mayne 2000: 59). The second example is the conflict that exists within the *politique des auteurs* (and also against Bazin) as to who qualifies as an *auteur* and who does not: Bazin, for example, will never recognize Hitchcock as a true *auteur* (Baecque 1: 36), whereas the *Cahiers* group will praise his talents with enthusiasm. Similarly, as Bazin and other senior *Cahiers* critics would often praise René Clément (especially *Jeux interdits* [1952]) and even some of Claude Autant-Lara’s works, the young critics’ Manichean view of the film community grouped these two successful directors with the other styleless hacks of the Tradition of Quality (A. Williams 311; Baecque 1: 108; Wilson 1999: 15).

André Bazin, who, aside from being a very influential film critic of the 1950s, also happened to be Truffaut’s surrogate father and mentor, was ironically among the first (along with *Cahiers*’ most ferocious detractors, the leftist magazine *Positif*) to denounce the excesses of the young critics. In a 1957 *Cahiers* article, he expresses serious reservations about the *politique*, especially
critiquing the danger of the cult of the *auteur*, which results in the minimization of the subject matter. He is also wary of the mythical idea that the creative genius of an *auteur* magically carries over from one film to the next (Caughie 45, Wilson 1999: 17). Besides the danger of the cult of the *auteur*, the formalist aspect of the *politique* is a sizable source of criticism, as Emma Wilson suggests, while also underlining the double meaning of the word:

All too frequently “la politique des auteurs” has been applied as policy but neglected (or reviled) as politics . . . Perhaps the most important criticism against [the *politique*] is that it is politically reactionary; an attempt to remove film from the realm of social and political concern. This criticism is justified, in part, by the fact that “la politique” . . . is expressively formalist. It values a film’s form over its content, looking at the ways in which a director works with the cinematic medium itself, exploring the aesthetic and technical aspects of a particular film. The political message, historical or social import of the subject matter of a particular film is thus, supposedly, seen to be of little concern. To make matters worse, *Cahiers du cinéma* . . . has been seen to move between apoliticism and a right-wing position. (1999: 17)

The formalism of the *politique* has often been commented upon, and is undoubtedly a characteristic of the tendency. However, Truffaut’s pamphlet is far from being exclusively about the stylistic reasons why Renoir qualifies as an *auteur* and Delannoy does not, or why Bresson’s adaptation of a novel by Georges Bernanos is a successful one, whereas Aurenche and Bost’s adaptation of the same novel is judged treasonous.4

Truffaut has an ulterior motive, which is to denounce the immoral character of certain films, and the overtly liberal (leftist) views of certain scenarists. John Hess’s essay on Truffaut’s manifesto unveils those motives, as he affirms: “What most galled and obsessed Truffaut about the films of Aure
and Bost was their anti-establishment tone. He found them anti-bourgeois, anti-militarist, anti-clerical, opposed to all sorts of linguistic and sexual taboos, and full of profane hosts and confessionalss” (Hess 2: 22). He later adds that Truffaut was deeply bothered by the presence of words such as “slut,” “whore,” “prostitute” and “bitchiness” in films from the 1950s, not because of feminist concerns, but because such language failed to be realistic, in his opinion. Hess comically wonders if Truffaut ever left the Cinémathèque (22).

This interpretation allows one to consider the “birth” of the politique des auteurs, and by extension of the later Nouvelle Vague, under a radically different light: that of religious, political and sexual conservatism. Such moral judgments in the midst of what was supposed to be a critique of the cinematic choices of certain scenarists and directors are rather puzzling, and may indicate a desire on Truffaut’s part not only to denounce the lack of technical expertise of those directors (who are considered mere literary adaptors), but to reform a cinema contaminated with problematic and reprehensible sexual (and religious) politics. This tendency is confirmed when, in January 1954, Truffaut defends American censorship against the filmic presence of gay characters, and writes: “C’est à la censure cinématographique américaine que l’on doit que Marlowe ne soit plus pédéraste et que les personnages deviennent les uns aimables, les autres haïssables. Nécessité donc d’une censure moraliste” (quoted in Baecque 2000: 304).
Truffaut’s provocative statements (against homosexuals, but also against certain types of women in American cinema) did not go unnoticed. The flow of complaints that *Arts* — for which Truffaut was a writer at the time — received was such that it forced André Parinaud, the chief editor of the magazine, to write in November 1955 a scathing letter to the young critic, forbidding him to discriminate based on sexual orientation and physical attributes: “Que tu n’aimes ni les femmes maigres, ni les pédérastes, c’est ton droit, mais cela ne doit plus apparaître dans les colonnes” (quoted in Baecque 2000: 304). Truffaut’s inflammatory statements had provoked the wrath, not only of his detractors, but also of people who were originally on his side.

Now that the conservative sexual politics of young François Truffaut have been made explicit, what to make of those of the *politique des auteurs* as a whole? Truffaut’s fellow-critics might not have been as vociferous as he was in affirming their sexual “traditionalism,” however Baecque acknowledges a general espousal of “puritanical” ideas within the *Cahiers* group, if only for provocative purposes: “Aux *Cahiers du cinéma*, on joue effectivement de cette provocation dandy et esthète, voire politique, qui associe l’érotisme à une certaine perversion de la morale, à une perversité dans la morale” (303). Having said that, the young critics wrote an abundance of texts attesting their utter fascination for, and fetishization of, American actresses. Baecque maintains that “erotic fetishism” (306) was part and parcel of 1950s cinephilia, and can be traced not only in the written critiques of the Young Turks, but also in the new wave films they would
subsequently make (307-308). He notices the presence of “a curious mix of erotic fascination and puritanical reaction” (303, my translation) in texts written by the *Cahiers* clan throughout the 1950s.

This conservatism clashes somewhat with other critical movements of the time. One could find, at the other end of the spectrum, an anti-bourgeois, anticlerical, anarchistic critical movement led by critics like Kyrou, Lo Duca and certain writers at *Positif*, and also, a critical tendency called *fraternité cinéphile*, which was much less heterocentric than the *politique*, according to Baecque: “La formation cinéphile passe ici par une manifestation du désir homosexuel qui opère un *transfert* depuis l’amour cinématographique des stars féminines vers celui d’une génération d’acteurs masculins aussi impressionnants qu’aimables, Gary Cooper, James Stewart, Cary Grant…” (304, my emphasis).

By the year 1956, the *Cahiers* group was affected by another kind of transference: their fascination for American actresses turned into a fascination for the ultimate modern woman in the cinema: Brigitte Bardot, who appeared in Roger Vadim’s pivotal *Et Dieu créa… la femme*. After this film, all actresses of the Tradition of Quality, and of 1950s Hollywood cinema alike, were deemed obsolete and unnatural. The *Cahiers* clan embraced the film for its “realism” (a concept dear to Bazin), and turned even more ferociously against the old tradition. The technical aspect of the film was also taken into consideration, as Jean-Luc Godard defended Vadim’s talent, while expressing his disdain for Clouzot:
Reste enfin, pour qui n’est pas encore convaincu du talent de Vadim, ce que j’appellerais la preuve par la photographie. J’ai souvent remarqué que les opérateurs français, au contraire des italiens et des américains, toujours égaux à eux-mêmes, se révélaient brillants avec de bons metteurs en scène et décevants avec les autres . . . Les images de *Et Dieu créa…la femme* et de *Sait-on jamais* sont sans commune mesure avec tous les Clouzot photographiés par le même Thirard. (Narboni 86-87)

Ultimately, though, what most fascinated the young critics, more than Vadim’s cinematic prowess, was Bardot’s “realistic” (read: “naked”) portrayal, and the similar ones that followed. In 1959, the same Godard addressed the old generation of filmmakers, after his own version of “Une Certaine tendance” (very close to Truffaut’s) and wrote: “Nous ne pouvons pas vous pardonner *de n’avoir jamais filmé des filles comme nous les aimons*, des garçons comme nous les croisons tous les jours, des parents comme nous les méprisons et les admirons . . . bref, les choses telles qu’elles sont” (Narboni 248, my emphasis). Vadim was also worshipped by Truffaut for directing his young wife, and making her perform seemingly insignificant actions such as playing with her sandal, and making love in broad daylight, all of which he found profoundly realistic (Baecque 2000: 317). Here, Truffaut does not seem to have a moral problem with Bardot’s oozing sexuality, or the film’s explicit sexual practices, so long as they remain exclusively heterosexual.

The importance of Vadim’s first (and most well-known) feature cannot be underestimated. Aside from confirming Brigitte Bardot’s status as a sex symbol, it marked a radical break from the Tradition of Quality aesthetics that the *Cahiers* group so passionately reviled, and paved the way for a new kind of woman in the
cinema: “La découverte de Bardot a été primordiale dans l’esprit des Jeunes Turcs . . . Ce réalisme des corps et du désir, hautement revendiqué par la Nouvelle Vague, a été préparé par la révélation de Monika et de Et Dieu créa la femme” (Baecque 1: 318). Vadim’s aesthetics were in retrospect associated with later films by Truffaut, Godard and Louis Malle. Vadim’s work was commended despite an uneventful, highly predictable plot, a good dose of sexism and a very conventional dénouement (the rebellious young woman is finally tamed at the end of the story, after a few slaps in the face). The film’s opening clearly establishes Bardot/Juliette Hardy (“hardi[e]” means “fearless” in French) as a sexual object to be looked at. She is lying in the backyard, naked on her stomach, as one of her fervent (and wealthy) admirers walks in on her.

The originality of Bardot’s character lies in her making no apology for her nakedness and sexual exuberance (although she eventually calls her insatiable sexual appetite a “disease”). In the famous first scene, a white sheet is hanging on a clothesline next to Bardot, recalling a cinema screen. The analogy is facile, but quite appropriate, as it is safe to declare that the film marks a turning point in the history of French cinema, for better or worse. From then on, this was what cinema was supposed to look like, according to our young critics:

Although eroticism in the cinema is becoming more explicit than ever before as
the decade reaches its final years, Lo Duca, one of the three co-founders of
Cahiers du cinéma and author of L’Erotisme au cinéma, argues that it has been
present ever since its infancy. He writes in 1957: “Le drap des écrans porte, en
filigrane, depuis un demi-siècle, un motif fondamental: l’érotisme” (5).

I would like to take a look at Duca’s book, as it is a very early study on the
representation of eroticism in the cinema, a topic seldom discussed as a concept
in 1950s criticism.8 Following the release of the book, André Bazin responded to
Duca’s arguments in a Cahiers article in which he gave his own opinion about the
portrayal of sexuality on film. He also opined on the way in which the cinematic
medium is different from theater and literature, especially in regard to eroticism.
Bazin’s essay is another rare account that might shed some light on the attitude
of (Cahiers) critics toward the filmic presence of sexuality.

Duca’s book mostly contains (captioned) pictures that account for the
overwhelming and undisputable cinematic existence of eroticism ever since the
birth of motion pictures. It is preceded by a short introduction in which Duca
claims that sexuality is not only part and parcel of film history, it is the very
(hypocritically concealed) reason why films are made in the first place:
“Furieusement contenu par les uns, hypocritiquement ignoré par les autres,
toléré sous condition de certains dosages, déclenché d’après certaines recettes
de droguiste, l’érotisme occupe le cinéma au point que le film n’en est plus que le
prétèxte plus ou moins avoué” (5, emphasis mine). Accompanying the text, a
close-up shot of two holding hands from Léonce Perret’s 1910 *Léonce au cinématographe* provides the following caption (courtesy of Duca): “Le cinéma savait ce qu’il voulait dès sa naissance.”

Duca’s prose can be hard to decipher, and he often makes affirmations without providing an explanation for them. The study appears to be a serious one, but it is not devoid of sarcasm, which makes it difficult to interpret. What is clear, however, is that he sees film as a unique medium, one that makes eroticism significantly more powerful than other art forms. He contrasts it to theater, not as mysterious and therefore, not as sexually arousing:

Erotisme profond, d’ailleurs, d’une puissance inconcevable dans les autres arts, car dès que l’image occupe l’écran, l’écran disparaît et devient un œil-de-boeuf ouvert sur un univers vivant et à trois dimensions qui vit parallèlement à la vie psychique du spectateur. Au théâtre — où en apparence l’érotisme rencontre la “chaleur” de la représentation — la scène fait partie de l’espace réel où vivent les spectateurs et acteurs, ce qui prive l’érotisme d’une part de son mordant, c’est-à-dire de son mystère. (6-7, emphasis Lo Duca’s)

What is particularly noteworthy in this passage is the term “œil-de-boeuf,” which originally describes a small, round or oval window (especially popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). By extension, and this is my interpretation of Duca’s statement, the phrase refers to a small opening from which to look without being seen (larger than, but comparable to, a keyhole, for example). Besides the evident presence of the “eye” in “œil-de-boeuf,” the idea that the cinema screen is comparable to a small opening that enables the spectator to enter a universe saturated with eroticism is reminiscent of discourses developed some eighteen years later by feminist film critics. In her
pivotal 1975 “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey introduces the idea that the cinema is an apparatus that allows the spectators to fulfill their voyeuristic fantasies. She writes:

[The] mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy. Moreover the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. (Mulvey 1989: 17)

Lo Duca does not explicitly use the word “voyeurism” in the passage quoted above (though he will use “voyeur” later in the book), but I believe the term is implied in his use of “oeil-de-boeuf.” In addition, one might see a connection between Duca’s “univers vivant . . . qui vit parallèlement à la vie psychique du spectateur” and Mulvey’s “hermetically sealed world which . . . [produces for the audience] a sense of separation and [plays] on their voyeuristic fantasy.” But here end the similarities.

In the same article, Mulvey, inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis, shows how classical narrative cinema constructs the way Woman is “to be looked at,” first by the male protagonist, and, by extension, by the male spectator, or, otherwise put, how scopophilia (pleasure in looking) has been split between an active/male and a passive/female dichotomy (19). Duca does not explicitly acknowledge a gender bias in the cinema, despite the fact that the vast majority of the photos he chose to include were of women. His own bias is not gender-specific, but nationality-based, as he sees a difference between the “childish”
excesses of Hollywood, and the so-called “more realistic” representation of women in European cinema: “La femme offre des formes — rebondies jusqu’à l’absurde, contraires aux lois de la pesanteurs à l’usage du spectateur ‘puéril’ d’Amérique, ou nerveuses selon l’expérience plus réaliste des Européens — qui effleurent non pas les limites de la pudeur . . . mais des règlements de police.”

(8) He adds that filmmakers resort to any imaginable ploy to put the human body (both male and female) on display, which is allegedly their ultimate goal. He writes, not without sarcasm:

Tous les prétextes sont bons: le sport — nage, boxe, catch— l’art chorégraphique, le documentaire exotique, la peinture même, depuis que le film peut le sortir de son cadre et de son siècle, le réalisme — noir, gris, rose, rouge — le néo-réalisme . . . Des conventions de cécité servent de tours de passe-passe. La censure américaine n’admettant pas la débauche, les putains y seront vierges jusqu’à leur mariage et les maquereaux purs jusqu’à leur rédemption . . . [T]out acte pré-nuptial du beau bandit ou du jeune héros à la poitrine lisse n’ira jamais au-delà de la langue plongée à la recherche des amygdales de sa partenaire (style Notorious). (8)

In these passages, it is once again Hollywood’s Puritanism Duca denounces, while making no distinction between the sexes: women show their “formes rebondies,” while men display their “poitrines lisses.”

In reality, however, out of the three hundred and fifteen or so pictures in the book, only two of them present men as sexual objects, and both pictures are two-shots of a man in an embrace with a woman. In both photos, eroticism is believed to be conveyed through the exposure of the same actor’s back: Marlon Brando in Elia Kazan’s A Streetcar Named Desire (1951) and Viva Zapata (1952). The rest of the pictures represent heterosexual couples (either in an
embrace, kissing or making love), but mostly and overwhelmingly, women, alone or in groups. Pictures are divided into categories: le sein et le décolleté, la femme-enfant, l’aventure, le nu, l’histoire-prétexte, les bas, le règne du satin etc., which account for the various “excuses” for exposing the female body, and insist upon various fetishistic fantasies in the cinema. Brigitte Bardot is not forgotten, quite the contrary: her picture appears three times in the book, including two scenes from *Et Dieu créa la femme*, under the category “la femme-enfant,” and with the caption: “la femme-enfant actuelle n’a pas froid aux yeux.” In addition, her picture is displayed on the inside of the book cover, both at the beginning and at the end.

Duca does not restrict his analysis to heterosexual desire. He does acknowledge the homoerotic elements in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948) and, like Truffaut before him, Clouzot’s *Le Salaire de la peur*. In the latter film, he calls the relationship between the two male characters “le véritable érotisme du film,” and uses the euphemism “éclectisme” for homosexuality (125). The homosexual undertones of *Rope* are presented alongside other “perversities”: the picture of two of its leading men appears under the category “Symbolisme, fétichisme, sadisme travesti, corsets, voyeurs, narcissisme, nécrophilie.” Six photos account for the cinematic presence of lesbian characters, with whom Duca seems to have less of a problem (he affectionately calls them “quelques menues perversions”): Louise Brooks and Alice Roberte in *Die Büchse der Pandora*, the “garçonnes romantiques” of *Maedchen in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan’s 1931 version), and the
“garçonnes canailles” of Léonie Moguy’s *Prison sans barreaux* (1938). Duca also acknowledges the presence of lesbian desire in *Broadway Melodies, Hoopla, 2000 Women* and *Hands Across the Table*, and comments on its secrecy: “Mais le cinéma ne *dit* jamais: on glisse, et le spectateur comprend (ou ne comprend pas)” (175, emphasis Duca’s).

*L’Erotisme au cinéma* is problematic in that it is ambiguous, and occasionally deceptive. Duca’s prose oscillates between a sarcastic and an academic tone, which can be seen as a sign that he wants it both ways. He recognizes the presence of eroticism, but fails to problematize its articulation. He denounces the intentions of the film industry, but also appears to relish the spectacles it offers. Finally, the pictures he chose to publish are deceiving, as they are a combination of still shots from actual films and extra-filmic glamour shots (taken by professional photographers) and “publicity shots” (taken on movie sets, with actresses looking straight at the camera). No distinction is made between the three types of photographs.

In his response to Duca’s book (“En marge de ‘L’Erotisme au cinéma’”), André Bazin also denounces Lo Duca’s choice of pictures, especially the extra-filmic nude shot of Marilyn Monroe taken before her career as an actress even began. Instead, Bazin would have preferred to see the famous subway vent scene from *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), in which Monroe’s dress reveals a little more than what was appropriate at the time (1985: 252). He sees that scene (whose shot he published in his own article, to rectify Duca’s negligence) as a
brilliant, extraordinarily refined way to fight against the rigorous stupidity of the puritanical code (252). He later writes, about the American film industry: “Le fait est que Hollywood, en dépit et à cause de tous les interdits qui y règnent, demeure la capitale de l’érötisme cinématographique” (252).

Bazin agrees with Duca on a number of points, including the fact that eroticism is and has always been an omnipresent element in the cinema:

Du cinéma donc, et de lui seul, on peut dire que l’érötisme apparaît comme un projet et un contenu fondamental. Non point certes unique, car bien des films et non des moindres ne lui doivent rien, mais majeur, spécifique et peut-être même essentiel. Lo Duca a donc raison de voir dans ce phénomène une constante du cinéma” (250).

Bazin later adds that this phenomenon might be a (culturally-charged) consequence of the capitalist game of supply and demand, and that producers resort to eroticism because that is what spectators want to see. To support this thought, he advances that Russian cinema is the least erotic in the world (250).

Duca would disagree with this idea, as he claims in his introduction that out of fifty thousand films made worldwide (in 1957), only ten of them can claim to be free of eroticism, among them three French (Carl Dreyer’s La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc, Bresson’s Journal d’un curé de campagne and Clément’s Jeux interdits) and two Italian films (6). As a side note, Jeux interdits features several scenes in which the family’s older daughter Berthe Dolle and her lover (the Gouard son) frolic in the hay or in the great outdoors, while the two children spy on them mischievously.
Like Duca, Bazin sees a fundamental difference between the theater and the cinema in that the latter allows the spectator to live vicariously through one of the film’s characters. He does not, however, and unlike Duca, try to make that process gender-neutral. The woman is clearly the only possible object of desire, and the male spectator conquers her via one of the male characters:

Au cinéma, au contraire, la femme, même nue, peut être approchée par un partenaire, expressément désirée et réellement caressée, parce qu’à la différence du théâtre . . . le cinéma se déroule dans un espace imaginaire qui appelle la participation et l’identification. L’acteur triomphant de la femme me comble par procuration. Sa séduction, sa beauté, son audace, n’entrent pas en concurrence avec mes désirs, elle les réalisent. (254)

Of course, Bazin only “accidentally” recognizes a gender bias in the cinema by failing to consider anybody but himself and other men as possible spectators. Nevertheless, his discourse happens to recall the theory of (gender-conscious) Mulvey, who writes (also concentrating on the male spectator): “Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic objects for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (19). And later:

The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. This is made possible through the processes set in motion by structuring the film around the main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. (20)

Evidently, Bazin and Mulvey’s discourses were written within completely different theoretical and historical contexts, but it is interesting to see that the concept of
spectatorship and viewer identification (which became especially popular in 1970s film theory) was already discussed as early as the 1950s by someone so closely associated with the *politique des auteurs*.

Like Truffaut, Bazin is concerned with the moral implications of sexuality in the cinema: "[Le cinéma] demeure encore subordonné à des notions morales plus générales qui posent justement son extension comme un problème" (249). Without explicitly acknowledging the need for moral censorship, he maintains that too much sexuality can be harmful to mainstream (i.e. non-pornographic) cinema:

Il est bien évident . . . que si nous voulons demeurer au niveau de l’art, nous devons nous maintenir dans l’imaginaire. Je dois pouvoir considérer ce qui se passe sur l’écran comme un simple récit, une évocation qui ne passe jamais sur le plan de la réalité, à moins de me faire le complice différé d’un acte ou au moins d’une émotion dont la réalisation exige le secret. (254)

Here Bazin, in the name of art, emits reservations about an uninhibited portrayal of sexuality. He is more tolerant than Truffaut, however, in that he esteems that one should not censor any type of sexual practice, so long as they do not appear explicitly on screen:

Ce qui signifie que le cinéma peut tout dire, mais non point tout montrer. Il n’est pas de situations sexuelles, morales ou non, scandaleuses ou banales, normales ou pathologiques, dont l’expression soit interdite à priori à l’écran, mais à condition de recourir aux possibilités d’abstraction du langage cinématographique de telle sorte que l’image ne puisse jamais prendre valeur documentaire. (255)

Bazin then gives an example of what he means by too much explicit sexuality. Ironically, the film is precisely that which the *Cahiers* critics have revered in their
columns: “C’est pourquoi et décidément, toute réflexion faite, _Et Dieu créa la femme_ me semble, en dépit des qualités que je lui reconnais, un film partiellement détestable” (255).

Bazin, extremely honest with himself and his readership, realizes the limits of his theory. He confesses: “Je ne puis dissimuler que je balaye par exemple ainsi d’un revers de la main une bonne partie du cinéma suédois contemporain” (255). He then tries to justify himself, and contends that certain works seem to transcend such criticism: “On remarquera toutefois que les chefs-d’œuvre de l’érotisme tombent rarement sous le coup de cette critique. Stroheim lui-même me paraît y échapper… Sternberg également” (255). In the end, he reaches an impasse, and is unable to clearly evince his aversion for graphic sexual scenes in the cinema: “Accorder au roman le privilège de tout évoquer et refuser au cinéma, qui en est si proche, de tout montrer, est une contradiction critique que je constate sans la surmonter… Je laisserai au lecteur le soin d’y parvenir” (256).

As a twenty-first century reader of these lines, I contend that Bazin’s “critical contradiction” reveals the shortcomings of 1950s film criticism, which was not yet ready to see cinema as a potentially sexually explicit art form.

1.2 The Evolution of the Concept of _Auteur_ in Criticism and Film

Let us now move beyond the 1950s, and attempt to determine the ways in which film auteurism has evolved over the years. Film historians have commented upon the disintegration of the _politique des auteurs_ as a cohesive
body, partly due to internal conflicts of interest and differences of opinion (notably between Rivette and Rohmer) on how to run Cahiers du cinéma and what to include in its columns. Baecque affirms that the politique started to lose momentum as early as the mid-1960s, and died shortly thereafter: “La ‘politique des auteurs’ héritée de Truffaut et l’éloge de la mise en scène mis en place par Rivette puis Rohmer sont également visés . . . La politique des auteurs est enterrée, puisque cette ligne avait déjà été attaquée et durement touchée dans la dernière année des Cahiers à couverture jaune, en novembre 1965” (2: 145, my emphasis). Insofar as auteur films are concerned, they kept being made throughout the 1970s and 1980s, however some see the death of François Truffaut in 1984 as a genuine blow to auteurism (Powrie 1997: 4).

In addition, critics have commented upon the complication of the concept of auteur, as auteurist cinema was, at its origins (and however problematically, as I hope to have demonstrated), merely contrasted to that of the so-called industry hacks of the Tradition of Quality. It became an international critical topic when American film critic Andrew Sarris picked up the concept and turned it into a full-fledged theory, while British critics (among them Peter Wollen) gave it a structuralist twist (see Caughie’s book, and Hayward 2000: 19-27). After the success of the politique before and during the Nouvelle Vague, it came under the spotlight, arguably becoming the “norm,” until the mid-to-late 1960s. In the next decade, the unity of the Cahiers group was no longer a reality: “Ces premières années soixante-dix sont aussi un temps de reclassement. La Nouvelle Vague
n’est plus qu’un écho, ou un label. Il n’y a plus d’école, plus d’unité entre les cinéastes issus dix ans plus tôt de la rédaction des Cahiers du cinéma” (Jeancolas 84).

The influence of the politique, however, was still very much present, and auteur cinema was still the norm in (art) cinema. This influence can be accounted for in films by Jean Eustache (La Maman et la putain [1973], which can be read as both an homage to and a departure from new wave cinema), Claude Miller (La Meilleure façon de marcher [1976]), Jacques Doillon (Les Doigts dans la tête [1974]) and André Téchiné (Souvenirs d’en France [1974]). A significant number of films directed by women directors/auteurs also began to be made (see works by Chantal Akerman and Marguerite Duras). Agnès Varda, the only visible female filmmaker of the New Wave, began making films in the mid-1950s and continued doing so throughout the 1970s, until today. However, the 1970s also witnessed a return to pre-new wave forms of filmmaking, as Bertrand Tavernier’s L’Horloger de Saint-Paul (1974), although still the work of an auteur, seems to position itself against the politique des auteurs: the young director solicited the help of blacklisted scenarists Aurenche and Bost to write the screenplay of his first feature film.

In the 1980s, auteur cinema still existed, but was no longer a guarantee of excellence. However, and despite the serious questioning of the auteur in post-structuralist literary criticism, by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault especially, French (but also Anglo-American) film critics refused to completely relinquish the
notion of *auteur*, even though they began using it with more critical distance (Wilson 1999: 19). Powrie writes, citing *Cahiers du cinéma* editor and critic Serge Toubiana: “According to Toubiana, the problem is that the auteur as the controlling origin of a particular voice or style associated with a critical view became, in his caustic phrase, ‘a brand-name’ . . . Curiously, though, French commentators are still wedded to the notion of the auteur as a defining characteristic of their cinema” (1997: 4-5). This statement accounts for the remaining influence of the concept of *auteur* on films made after the 1960s, if only for marketing strategies.

The mark left by *auteur* cinema is indelible, and any post-new wave filmmaker has to position her/himself in relation to it, as Jill Forbes explains: “But for the post-1968 film maker to be or not to be an *auteur* is to adopt a position in relation to the industry, to the *nouvelle vague*, to gender, and to the audience” (4). New kinds of *auteurs* emerged in the 1980s, particularly the famous (or infamous) *cinéma du look* of Luc Besson, Léos Carax and Jean-Jacques Beineix, often criticized for its sole concern with the “visual,” and occasionally contrasted to pre-1980s auteurist cinema, more reliable for some as a guarantee of quality (Powrie 1999: 8). It has been argued, however, that the cinema of the BBC (the initials of the three directors’ surnames) consciously endeavors to break away from the “narcissistic aesthetics of 1950s auteurism” (Cook 313).

The early 1990s have witnessed a return *to* as well as *of*, the *auteur* in French cinema, but also in French and Anglo-American film criticism (Cook 312).
The trend continued well into the 1990s, up to the present day. In 2001-2002 alone, at least three books came out in France, re-evaluating the concept of film authorship, and the remaining influence of the *politique des auteurs* (see Prédal, Esquenazi and Bernas). Powrie attributes the return of the *auteur* to a very specific event (a television series on Franco-German channel Arte), and comments on its ambiguous status in contemporary French cinema:

The second [key move of the 1990s] is the attempted return of the *auteur* through the influential 1994 television series *Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge* . . . In terms of the simplistic binarism centre/periphery, *auteur* cinema is complex, since arguably, for historical reasons, it is central to French film production and its sense of cultural worth (a marketing issue), while also being peripheral, since much *auteur* work defines itself in opposition to mainstream cinema (more of a stylistic or narrative specific issue). (1999: 1-2)

Despite the ambivalent position of *auteur*ist cinema vis-à-vis the film industry (as both central and peripheral), its return has nevertheless opened up a space for the arrival of a new generation of filmmakers — among them a significant number of women *auteurs*: Tonie Marshall, Pascale Ferran, Laetitia Masson, Sandrine Veysset, and many others. This “renewal” can be seen as a ripple effect of the *politique des auteurs*, and of the *Nouvelle Vague*, which believed that cinema had to reinvent itself in order to remain a dynamic medium (Marie 113).

Also, if the veteran *auteurs* of the *Nouvelle Vague* (Rivette, Rohmer, Chabrol, Godard) never stopped making films in the three decades following the 1960s, it can be argued that the 1990s and 2000s have witnessed a regained interest for their works, both among spectators and film critics: see for example
Commenting on the presence of Godard and Rivette at the 2001 Cannes film festival, and the “wildly enthusiastic” reception of their films, David Sterritt writes: “Rivette and Godard are two of film’s old masters, but they’ve never seemed more young, fresh and original than they do at the start of cinema’s second century” (2001: 15). Despite the fierce competition of French commercial filmmaking, and Hollywood’s hegemonic cinema, new wave directors, now in their seventies, seem to have resisted the test of time.

If new wave filmmakers are still active, prolific and successful auteurs in the first decade of the twenty-first century, how is auteurism in the 1990s/2000s different from its 1950s/1960s counterpart? The first difference is that there are three generations of filmmakers working concomitantly and successfully. Jean-Pierre Jeancolas identifies the first generation (whom he calls “le premier cercle”) as composed of the veteran auteurs of the Nouvelle Vague (mentioned in the previous paragraph), along with Alain Resnais and Agnès Varda (101-103). The second generation (or “deuxième cercle”) is composed of directors who started their career in the 1970s: Maurice Pialat (who made his last film in 1995), Jacques Doillon, André Téchiné, Benoît Jacquot, Claude Sautet (who died in 2000), Bertrand Tavernier, Bertrand Blier etc. (103-107). The third and last generation is known as the jeune cinéma français, a loose amalgam that includes
young auteurs who started making films in the 1980s/1990s: Patrice Leconte, Christian Vincent, Luc Besson, Eric Rochant, and an impressive number of women auteurs: Tonie Marshall, Agnès Merlet, Pascale Ferran, Claire Denis, Nicole Garcia etc.

Such an eclectic group inevitably lacks the cohesion of the earlier politique, even though, as Marie explains, some of those auteurs also started their career as films critics:

Ce qui est frappant, c'est l'absence de mouvement collectif. Le cas des rédacteurs des Cahiers du cinéma devenus pour un certain nombre d'entre eux réalisateurs et qui ont succédé à la première génération des Truffaut, Godard . . . est d'ailleurs assez éloquent: ainsi successivement Luc Moulet, André Téchiné . . . plus récemment . . . Danièle Duboux, Léos Carax, Olivier Assayas, mais ils ne représentent absolument pas un ensemble aussi cohérent que celui de la génération de 1958. (113)

What remains, however, is a number of successful collaborations between directors and actors, for example, that between André Téchiné and Catherine Deneuve, from Hôtel des Amériques (1981) to Ma saison préférée (1993) and Les Voleurs (1996), to Les Temps qui changent (2004). One can also think of a number of other collaborations, between Maurice Pialat and Sandrine Bonnaire, Claude Sautet and Emmanuelle Béart, Claire Denis and Alex Descas and, of course, Claude Chabrol and Isabelle Huppert.

The return of the auteur in the 1990s was accompanied by a return of the “political” (the vehement protest of sixty-six directors against the regressive Debré immigration law is a striking example) and a return of “realism,” especially in films made by the filmmakers of the jeune cinéma (Powrie 1999: 10/17). This
cinema (composed of various genres) clearly differs from the more commercial, ever-popular nostalgic film genre known as “heritage cinema,” a good example of which would be Claude Berri’s *Germinal*, released in 1993. More and more films by young directors began to move away from the inescapable world of downtown Paris, turning to the French provinces (see Veysset’s *Y aura-t-il de la neige à Noël?* [1996], or Robert Guédiguian’s *Marius et Jeannette* [1997] and *La Ville est tranquille* [2000]) as well as to the Parisian suburbs, notably those inhabited by first or second generation immigrants from France’s old colonies: sub-Saharan Africa, the Antilles and the Maghreb (see Kassovitz’s groundbreaking *La Haine* [1995], or the films of rapidly growing Beur cinema. For instance, Yamina Benguigui’s *Inch’Allah Dimanche* (2001) recounts the perspective of a young Algerian woman living in France, while Karim Dridi’s *Bye Bye* (1995) tells the story of two brothers of Tunisian descent living in Marseille).

These new trends in contemporary cinema can be seen as a consequence of “a new awareness of France’s deep social divisions . . . manifested in debates over the new nationality laws, the strikes of 1995, the protests at the state’s mishandling of the *sans papiers* affair and the struggles for parity and the PACS” (Tarr 133). There was also a revival of feminist-inspired discourses, notably over the campaign for political parity and discussions on the feminization of work titles (7). Such debates about the meaning of citizenship for women and other marginalized groups (homosexuals, immigrants, *beurs* etc.)
opened up a space for cinematic representations of those groups, in films often made by young female/gay/lesbian/immigrant auteurs.

In 2000, Arte celebrated this revived awareness by organizing a television series entitled *Masculin/Féminin* (an homage to Jean-Luc Godard’s film of the same title). In the same fashion as the aforementioned *Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge*, each film from the series was to follow a set of rules. Aside from addressing the theme of gender parity, all ten films (five directed by men, five by women) were to be ninety minutes long, should preferably be shot with a DV camera and had to include a street scene where a man and a woman would meet. Finally, the preferred genre was comedy. The total cost per film was not to exceed three million francs. One of the participants was Catherine Breillat, who released *Brève traversée* as part of the series in 2001.

In addition to the proliferation of “gender-conscious” films, the cinema started to offer a more explicit portrayal of sexuality (see for instance Patrice Chéreau’s *Intimacy* [2000], or Bruno Dumont’s *L’Humanité* [1999]). A trend that has been (reductively) referred to as “shock cinema,” or “cinema of abjection,” pushes the envelope of what can be shown on film, and can be said to contain elements of pornographic cinema. The explicit sex scenes are often coupled with violence and/or human deprecation. Gaspar Noé’s much talked about first two features, *Seul contre tous* (1998) and his particularly disturbing *Irréversible* (2002), can be associated with this trend. So can Michael Haneke’s *La Pianiste* (2001), and avant-garde filmmaker Philippe Grandrieux’s *La Vie nouvelle* (2002).
Interestingly enough, three works by women directors (also clearly part of the trend) offer much less androcentric visions of sexuality: Catherine Breillat’s *Romance* (1999), which I will discuss at length in the fourth chapter of this study, Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi’s controversial *Baise moi* (2000), and Laetitia Masson’s *A vendre* (1998). In addition, Marina de Van’s *Dans ma peau* (2002) is a disturbing film about a woman who engages in self-mutilation after suffering a disfiguring accident.

Another trend, which can be seen alongside contemporary political debates on gay rights, offers less heterocentric visions of the world, and suggests sexual fluidity in new, innovative ways. André Téchiné can be regarded as a precursor of and main participant in this tendency, with film such as *J’embrasse pas* (1991), *Les Roseaux sauvages* (1994) and *Les Voleurs*. Other works include Josiane Balasko’s *Gazon maudit* (1995), Alain Berliner’s *Ma vie en rose* (1997), Benoît Jacquot’s *L’Ecole de la chair* (1998) and Catherine Corsini’s *La Répétition* (2001). The four feature films of co-directors Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau (*Jeanne et le garçon formidable* [1998], *Drôle de Félix* [2000], *Ma vraie vie à Rouen* [2002] and *Crustacés et coquillages* [2005]) all clearly swerve from heterocentrism, and portray homosexual characters who also happen to be positive role models. Many of François Ozon’s short films tackle the theme of homo/bi-sexuality, along with most of his feature-length films, including *Sitcom* (1998), *Les Amants criminels* (1999), *Gouttes d’eau sur pierres brûlantes* (1999) and *8 femmes* (2002). Interestingly enough, sexual fluidity is also present
in *Cahiers* critic-turned-filmmaker Olivier Assayas’ *Irma Vep* (1996): the lesbian subplot is presented as fairly natural, which comes as somewhat of a surprise considering the debt the film seems to owe to the often heterocentric *Nouvelle Vague* (see Wilson 1999: 30-31). The film, however, might also be read as a criticism of 1960s *auteur* cinema, as it seems to denounce its “nombrilistic” (or navel-gazing) tendencies.

The eclectism of contemporary French auteurist cinema (in terms of form, subject matter, but also the origin, gender and sexual orientation of its *auteurs*) is in contrast with the more “consistent” nature of new wave cinema. To finish this chapter, I would like to give one concrete example of this lack of heterogeneity, especially when it comes to sexual preference. In their 1998 interview with Jean Douchet, journalists Christophe Honoré and Thomas Doustaly of gay magazine *Têtu* ponder the absence of homosexual characters in 1960s films, and wonder whether the *Nouvelle Vague* can be seen as the pinnacle of heterocentrism.¹² When asked why homosexual characters were quasi invisible in new wave films, Jean Douchet, an openly gay *Cahiers* critic in the 1950s/1960s turned actor/filmmaker/film professor, affirms that the first reason is the prudishness of new wave *auteurs*: “Principalement à cause de leur pudibonderie. Les réalisateurs de la NV [Nouvelle Vague] ont tous peur du sexe. Par exemple, Truffaut, qui va traiter de sujets sur l’amour, a en horreur de filmer la scène de cul. Ça le rend malade” (2). Douchet insists that the only thing that mattered to
the young filmmakers was their ardent cinephilia. They made films to fulfill this passion, and occasionally, to fulfill their sexual fantasies:

Tout est toujours traité sur l’ordre du fantasme. Souvenez[-vous] de cette scène d’A bout de souffle, quand Belmondo fait arrêter son taxi et court vers un trottoir pour soulever la jupe d’une fille. C’est tellement le signe d’une envie irréalisable dans la vie et qu’on satisfait au cinéma. La fille est censée être obsédante, mais en fait, seul le cinéma compte. La fille n’est qu’un objet ludique nécessaire à une parfaite intégration sociale. (2)

When asked if it was unthinkable at the time to affirm one’s homosexuality (on film or around the Cahiers group), Douchet mentions the malaise that some new wave filmmakers felt toward same-sex relationships:

Il y a eu une homophobie latente dans la NV. Au fond d’eux-mêmes, tout en refusant de le condamner, ils n’acceptaient pas l’idée du lien sexuel entre hommes. Même par rapport à moi, ça les dérangeait un peu. Je ne parle pas de Rohmer, qui s’en foutait royalement, ni de Chabrol, mais Rivette, Truffaut… Une sorte de réticence se manifestait à mon égard. (2)

Douchet goes on to say that the latent homophobia of the *Nouvelle Vague* is made explicit in Godard’s *Masculin féminin* (1966), which I will discuss in the third chapter of this study. Douchet justifies the overall absence of gay-related issues by saying that new wave directors only discussed topics with which they were familiar (2). Ironically, two openly-gay individuals had a very strong impact on new wave filmmakers: Henri Langlois, the founder of the Cinémathèque, and poet and filmmaker Jean Cocteau, especially worshipped by Godard and Truffaut (3).

Douchet affirms that France was not ready for sexually explicit films until the 1970s, and argues that three key films revolutionized the relationship between sex and the cinema: Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò* (1976), Godard’s
Numéro deux (1975) and Nagisa Oshima’s Ai no corrida (In the Realm of the Senses [1976]). He adds that French cinema could only start discussing homosexuality without being censored after May 1968, with one precursor: André Téchiné. Before that, Italy had Pier Paolo Pasolini, Germany had Rainer Werner Fassbinder, but France did not have anyone… except Robert Bresson. Douchet claims that Bresson’s repressed homosexuality might explain the “troubled” character of his work, and the homoerotic subtext in most of his films:

J’ai revu L’Argent dernièrement, et il y a plus de beaux garçons dans L’Argent que dans n’importe quel bar du Marais. C’est le cas dans tous ses films. Même les femmes sont filmées à la garçonne chez lui, dans leur beauté carrée, sculpturale… Il y a une tendance homo très flagrante chez Bresson . . . Maria Casares, dans Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne, c’est une maîtresse femme, une dominatrice. Chez Bresson, la mise en scène est affaire de sadisme. Il faut tout dominer. Le refus de son homosexualité lui a fait construire une œuvre particulièrement trouble. (3)

Even though I do not intend to speculate on the veracity of Bresson’s alleged homosexuality, or on the way in which it impacted his cinema, Douchet’s affirmation provides an ideal transition into the second chapter of this dissertation, which will discuss the cinema of Robert Bresson, with special emphasis on Pickpocket (1959), Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne (1945) and Une Femme douce (1969).

After taking a close look at the evolution of the concept of auteur in film and film criticism, from its “birth” in the early 1950s to the present time, a few conclusions can be reached. The first one is that, as influential as the politique des auteurs was at the time, it seemed to have an agenda that went far beyond
the mere denunciation of untalented scenarists and technically-ignorant directors. There was a clear moral agenda, especially on Truffaut’s part, aimed at bashing certain works judged too indecent, too “deviant” or too obscene. Ironically, one of the only Cahiers critics who attempted to contest the validity of such point of view was Truffaut’s mentor André Bazin, who realized that his pupil had gone too far.

The second conclusion one can come to is that the remaining importance of auteurism in French cinema today cannot be overemphasized. Auteurist film criticism seems to have resisted the blow of post-structuralist theory, and auteurist cinema continues to compete with its mainstream (big-budget) counterpart, as French filmgoers and critics alike still tend to associate the work of an auteur with artful “quality.” Finally, as I have already mentioned, there seems to be a clear distinction between the homogeneity of new wave cinema and the diversity of contemporary cinéma d’auteur, in terms of form, subject matter, shooting locations, but also the gender, race, country of origin, cultural background and sexual orientation of its participants.

1 Throughout this study, Baecque 1 and Baecque 2 will be used to designate the first and second volume of Antoine de Baecque study on Cahiers du Cinéma.

2 Bazin wrote, at the end of his 1951 article on Bresson, that “Après Robert Bresson, Aurenche et Bost ne sont plus que les Viollet Le Duc de l’adaptation cinématographique” (21). It is likely that Truffaut took this remark as a point of departure for his famous article.

3 See Judith Mayne’s article on Les Diaboliques for a lucid explanation of Clouzot’s ambiguous status in Framed: Lesbians, Feminists and Media Culture (41-64).

4 I am referring here to Le Journal d’un curé de campagne. Aurenche and Bost’s scenario was never made into a film, but Bresson directed his own version of Bernanos’ novel in 1951. The film was praised by Bazin in a momentous Cahiers article.

5 Hess 1 and Hess 2 will be used to designate the first and second part of John Hess’ study on the politique des auteurs.
In his recent *Le Cinéma d’auteur, une vieille lune?*, René Prédal defends Truffaut’s manifesto against John Hess’ criticisms (Prédal 56).

I have already mentioned, as have Mayne and Hess, Truffaut’s homophobic denunciation of the pederastic relationships between the male characters in Clouzot’s *Le Salaire de la peur*. Mayne also points out that Truffaut was bothered by the addition of a lesbian character in Aurenche and Bost’s adaptation of Colette’s *Le Blé en herbe* (2000: 59).

Lo Duca mentions in his bibliography that the only other serious study on the topic is a Swedish-language book published in 1950 (220).

For another example of Duca’s sarcastic sense of humor, see what he writes about Jane Russell’s imposing chest in Hughes’ *The Las Vegas Story*: “L’encombrement du sein est tel que, si l’homme fait feu, il en traversera un, qui est dans sa ligne de tir” (48).

See the books by Carrie Tarr & Brigitte Rollet, and by Françoise Audé, along with the article by Geneviève Sellier for more detailed analyses of films made by women.

Tarr discusses “heritage” films made by women in the 1980s (Claire Denis’ *Chocolat* [1988]) and 1990s (Brigitte Roüan’s *Outremer* [1990]), but I believe that they differ from films by Claude Berri, or other filmmakers, in that they are not literary adaptations of French classics, and they often contain a personal subjectivity, usually absent in “typical” heritage films (see also Diane Kurys’ *Coup de foudre* [1983]).

The page numbers following the quotes from Honoré and Doustaly’s article (and all other electronic sources I will quote in this dissertation) may differ from one browser to the next.

Here, Douchet omits two immensely influential films of the period, Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Le Dernier tango à Paris* (1972) and Just Jaeckin’s *Histoire d’O* (1975).
CHAPTER 2

DARK SECRETS, WHITE SCARVES:
THE CINEMA OF ROBERT BRESSON

The four directors on whom I have chosen to concentrate (Bresson, Godard, Breillat and Ozon) all have at least one thing in common: their films do not leave any filmgoer or critic indifferent. Their work is deemed as deeply disturbing, shocking, unrealistic, tedious by some, or utterly fascinating, thought-provoking, original, groundbreaking by others. Their cinema is not likely to be more appreciated by “erudite” critics and more reviled by “naïve” spectators. Rather, they find admirers and detractors on both sides of the fence. Bresson’s cinema, and the reactions it has provoked among film viewers, might be the best example of this dichotomy.

Robert Bresson’s minimalist style, and the robotic histrionics of his amateur actors (whom he calls “models” to differentiate them from professional actors), have been both embraced and rejected by critics, and disavowed by an often perplexed public (his last feature film L’Argent was fervidly booed when presented at the Cannes Film Festival in the 1980s [Gabaston 11]). Kent Jones underscores the various reactions Bresson’s œuvre provokes: “For many
average cinemagoers, his films feel disturbingly unemotional . . . On the other hand, for those cinemagoers who do connect with his work, Bresson is all but infallible” (7). The French film magazines *Positif* and *Cahiers du cinéma* (in the 1950s, the former was seen as more “leftist and liberal,” the latter more “rightist and conservative,” if one wants to oversimplify) have notoriously had contrasting viewpoints on virtually every aspect of film and filmmaking. Bresson is no exception:

Beloved of *Cahiers du cinéma* and thus of the New Wave, his work was much more equivocally received by the amalgam of Marxists and surrealists associated with the other major French film journal *Positif*. Bernard Chardère published three highly appreciative pieces on him in the early days of *Positif*, but the vehement anti-clericalism of that journal was subsequently to lead to extremely cutting and hostile judgements by the likes of Robert Benayoun and Louis Seguin. (Reader 9)

It is no secret that *Cahiers du cinéma*, in contrast to *Positif*, embraced every Bresson film with tremendous enthusiasm, and that André Bazin and the young critics alike put Bresson (the man) on a pedestal, often citing him as an example of a quintessential auteur. Antoine de Baecque highlights the importance of his cinema for *Cahiers* critics: “Les films de Bresson, *Un condamné à mort s’est échappé*, puis *Pickpocket* sont élevés au rang d’événements majeurs des années 1956 et 1960, classés en tête de la grande majorité des listes des dix meilleurs films. Bresson, plus qu’un auteur, est ainsi défini comme un ‘exemple’ pour la revue” (1: 261). Jean-Luc Godard himself cites Bresson as an example to be followed: “Dans le monde d’aujourd’hui, en quelque domaine que ce soit, la France ne peut dorénavant briller que par des œuvres exceptionnelles. Robert
Bresson illustre cette règle quand au cinéma. Il est le cinéma français comme Dostoïevsky le roman russe, comme Mozart la musique allemande” (Narboni 66). If Godard and Bresson’s cinema differ considerably, both on a cinematic and thematic level, the latter quote shows that, according to Godard, the two men work toward the same goal: defining what French cinema should look like. More recently, Alan Pavelin made the argument that “Robert Bresson’s 13 features over 40 years constitute arguably the most original and brilliant body of work over a long career from a film director in the history of cinema” (1), thereby showing that Bresson’s worldwide influence did not die down after the decline of the French New Wave, or even after he stopped making films in the mid-1980s.

In looking at Bresson’s cinema in general, and *Pickpocket* (1959), *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945) and *Une Femme douce* (1969) in particular, I am less interested in highlighting Bresson’s unique and unusual cinematic techniques (which are uncovered at length in works by James Quandt and Michel Estève, among others, and even in Bresson’s own *Notes sur le cinématographe*) or even speculate on whether or how his cinema is formalist, transcendental, Jansenist, spiritual or atheist. I am more interested in discussing the sexual politics of his films, a topic far less talked about by Bresson commentators. I find it crucial to an understanding of his œuvre to recognize the ways in which Bresson’s characters consistently show resistance to the norms of a firmly established order. My first discussion intends to rectify what a number of Bresson critics have consistently overlooked, repressed or violently rejected: the
indisputable presence of a homosexual plot in *Pickpocket*, which allows one to read the film, including its ending, in radically different terms.¹

2.1 The Talented Mr. Michel: Crime and Transgression in *Pickpocket*

*Pickpocket* was released in 1959, a decisive year that marks the official beginning of the New Wave, with films such as François Truffaut’s *Les 400 coups* (which received the *Prix de la mise en scène* at the Cannes Film Festival that year and gave legitimacy to the *Nouvelle Vague*), Jean-Luc Godard’s *A bout de souffle* (shot in Paris around the same time as *Pickpocket*), Claude Chabrol’s *Les Cousins* and Alain Resnais’ *Hiroshima mon amour*. Raymond Durgnat argues that of all of Bresson’s films, *Pickpocket* is the closest to the French New Wave (48). Yet the film is also consistent with other works by Bresson in that it heavily relies on voice-over narration (in the same fashion as his earlier *Journal d’un curé de campagne* [1950] and *Un Condamné à mort s’est échappé* [1956]) and focuses on a single character, as in *Journal*, *Condamné*, but also his later *Le Procès de Jeanne d’Arc* (1962), *Mouchette* (1967) and *L’Argent* (which bears significant similarities with *Pickpocket*, and can arguably be considered part of what Keith Reader calls the “prison cycle,” along with *Condamné*, *Pickpocket* and *Procès*). Although *Pickpocket* has often been compared to Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, it is not, like all his preceding feature films (except *Les Anges du péché* [1943]), an “official” filmic adaptation of a literary work.² Bresson’s earlier and later official adaptations include *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*
(Diderot), Journal and Mouchette (Bernanos), Une Femme douce and Quatre nuits d’un rêveur (Dostoevsky), and L’Argent (Tolstoy).

Commentators on Pickpocket, be they film critics, directors or scholars, often agree that Robert Bresson’s sixth motion picture is a masterpiece. Louis Malle affirmed in 1959 (the year the film was released) that Pickpocket was Bresson’s first film, and added: “Ceux qu’il a faits avant n’étaient que des brouillons” (Arnaud 1997: 35). Some critics make a textual comparison between the film and Crime and Punishment (Estève 1983: 60-61). Many comment on Michel’s (the main character, played by Martin Lasalle) fall from grace and his subsequent salvation (a theme that Bresson tackles in most of his films), or on the numerous cinematic ambiguities (ellipses, negative space etc.) so characteristic of Bresson’s cinema. Interestingly enough, few critics comment on what singles Pickpocket out from any other work by the same director: its homoerotic plot.

While a number of critics flatly refuse to recognize any kind of eroticism, heterocentric or otherwise, in the film, many do acknowledge its existence in the pickpocketing scenes (see Prédal, Kline and Durgnat in Quandt’s anthology; Sebbag in Caméra/Stylo 6; Gabaston 40/47/57; Thompson 2; Arnaud 1986: 28/129; Rhode 193). However, very few acknowledge its homosexual implications, and none of them comment on them in great detail. Joseph Cuneen recently rejected the very presence of sexual tension in the film, arguing that “the combination of danger and tension, followed by a heady sense of success when
a wallet or watch has been taken unobserved, could in itself account for the obvious interior excitement” (80). For Cuneen, the mere fact that Bresson once stated that “there is no latent homosexuality in the main character of *Pickpocket*” (quoted in Cuneen 80) is proof enough for him to refute the theory altogether. Daniel Millar agrees with him: “[Michel’s] violent heart-beats at the act of theft mark not quasi sexual excitement but a key moment of choice and self-discovery, a choice of evil” (83).

P. Adam Sitney, in contrast, does not try to deny the connection that the film appears to make between picking gentlemen’s pockets and same-sex desire:

One evening Michel notices a man pacing back and forth before his door. His manners suggest that of a cruising homosexual. Michel follows him onto a street car and, again in a scene suggesting an erotic liaison, tacitly becomes his partner [in crime or otherwise?] as they enter the café. This suggestion of a pick-up extends the erotic tones of the thefts themselves, which resemble caresses and usually involve reaching into men’s clothes. (Quandt 157)

Brian Price also acknowledges that connection:

[T]hese practising hands, slipping in and out of each others jackets, have an obvious homoerotic import. Michel is, in one sense, undergoing an initiation into a life of pickpocketing . . . But that initiation is as sexual in nature as it is criminal . . . The scene [at the café, where Michel meets his accomplice] is, in other words, as much about a sexual pick-up as it is about crime. And that is precisely the point. Bresson very subtly links pickpocketing with homosexuality. And both identities can be understood in France of the 1950s as criminal acts. (129)

Ken Kelman agrees with Price: “[Michel] is for no apparent reason ‘picked up’ by a man in the street . . . The (homo) sexuality implicit in this situation then climaxes in a little orgy of digital manipulation of wallet and pocket. As Michel has
rejected society, so has he denied sexuality, and his criminal gratification is clearly . . . a substitute for direct sexual activity” (212)

A combination of both cinematic and narrative elements seems to support the theory that Michel's compulsive pickpocketing can be seen as a substitute for his repressed homosexual desire. The very fact that Michel has a quasi orgasmic experience every time he succeeds in robbing his anonymous (mostly male) victims tends to validate the “pickpocketing as displacement” theory. Louis Malle comments on the film’s eroticism in one of the footnotes of his critique of the film: “*Pickpocket* est ‘aussi’ un film érotique, le vol à la tire n’étant évidemment que le symbole, à peine transposé, du péché de chair (exemple: le spasme provoqué chez le héros par le premier vol)” (Arnaud 1997: 37). In this example, Malle safely chooses the hero’s first theft at the Parisian racetrack of Longchamp, one of only two occurrences in the film when Michel robs a woman victim. He overlooks, deliberately or not, that such a thrill is also achieved (maybe with more intensity) when robbing male victims.

From the very beginning of the film, the notion of theft as transgression is made ambiguous, and could arguably be viewed as a sexual transgression (or a substitute for it). After a caption, courtesy of the director, which summarizes the story in a couple of paragraphs (thus revealing Bresson’s refusal to make his film a conventional suspense story), the film opens with a close-up of Michel’s diary. The spectator can choose to read the text, or listen to the voice-over (Michel’s voice, present throughout the film). The text reads: “Je sais que d’habitude *ceux*
qui font ces choses se taisent” (emphasis mine). Right from the start, ambiguity is established, as it is not clear what “ces choses” are, until the shot of Michel’s hand writing in his diary dissolves into a shot of a woman’s hand getting a bill out of her purse. The scene of Michel’s first theft unfolds, thereby enlightening the spectator on his “shameful” activities. “Ces choses” are in fact Michel’s thefts. The first scene has clarified Michel’s ambiguous first statement. Or has it?

The main difference between this first theft and most of the others is that it was performed with Michel standing behind the victim, thereby making eye contact impossible (only a fleeting look is exchanged between Michel and the woman). This detail might not sound particularly noteworthy, except that a significant number of Michel’s “solo” pickpocketing exploits are accompanied by a direct, often prolonged eye contact with a male victim (it can be argued, incidentally, that only fleeting looks are exchanged between Michel and women, including Jeanne (Michel’s mother’s neighbor and caretaker), whereas he tends to look at men more intently, especially his closest friend Jacques and his victims). There is a particularly sophisticated mise-en-scène du regard in the film between Michel and the men from whom he steals. Michel often waits until his victims gaze back at him before looking down, which seems counterproductive to the very act of picking pockets (ideally, one would want to remain unnoticed). Bresson himself is obviously very aware of the power of the gaze, and its sexual implications, as he calls the act of looking (les regards) “la force éjaculatrice de l’œil” (Bresson 24).
Consider the first scene in the métro. Michel is shown on the train in a medium shot. He is clearly gazing at someone (his eyes go up and down a few times), and the reverse shot (the object of his stare) is delayed: a man reading a newspaper. The voice-over wonders: “Pourquoi m’a t-il fallu me trouver en face d’un homme au comportement étrange dont je ne pouvais détacher mes yeux?” Once again, the spectator might be left to wonder why Michel is so fascinated with this man, to the point that he cannot take his eyes off him. Michel seems to have a sixth sense that allows him to recognize people “like him,” because the man turns out to be… a pickpocket, of course! The newspaper is just a prop he uses to steal his victims’ wallets. Michel, after hours of practice, is now ready to try the newspaper trick himself. The homoerotic undercurrent of the film, only alluded to, arguably, in the first métro scene, surfaces even more evidently in the second métro scene.

Another medium shot shows Michel in a crowded train, reading a newspaper. After he chooses his victim, Michel makes a few steps toward the man, who is also standing (the man already appears in the establishing shot, with his back turned to the spectator). There is an abnormally long exchange of looks between the two men, as Michel’s body is practically brushing against the other man’s. This exchange of looks is shown from both men’s perspectives, in a shot reverse-shot in which both men appear in both shots (technically, they are not two-shots because other people can be seen in the frame), as if to suggest a connection (a mutual desire?) between the two characters. The only element that
distinguishes this scene from say, a scene between two homosexual men cruising each other in a public setting is that the final outcome is not a sexual encounter. The rush that Michel gets out of the whole experience, however, seems comparable to an actual intercourse, or at least the anticipation of it. The voice-over reads: “Mon coeur battait à se rompre.”

The homoerotic elements of the film manifest themselves in an even more explicit fashion in the few scenes immediately preceding the first meeting of Michel and his (unnamed) partner in crime. Michel is shown in a medium shot, at a slightly low angle, as he comes down the steps of his apartment building, headed to an evening in the city, presumably. He pauses midway, staring at someone or something that the unprivileged spectator is not yet allowed to see. The reverse shot finally comes: a man is standing on the sidewalk, framed in the doorway. He looks up, around, and finally, directly at Michel. He leaves the frame, and reappears, again staring at Michel. The latter seems taken aback and heads back to his room, disappears from the frame, leaving behind a typically Bressonian negative space. He goes back to his room, sits on his bed, leaving the door open. Seconds later, he hears footsteps, and stands up. Did the man follow him? Jeanne and Jacques appear on the threshold. A conversation ensues between Michel and Jeanne, then between Michel and Jacques, after which Michel asks his friend to leave. Jacques mutters “Tu es drôle” (the English subtitle reads: “You’re queer”) upon his departure. Michel was clearly not
expecting Jacques, or Jeanne to drop by unexpectedly, so why did he leave the door wide open? The interpretation is left to the spectator's own discretion.

Michel goes back outside, and is shown on the sidewalk in a tracking shot. Once again, he is looking at something or someone. He asks: “Que me voulez-vous? Qui êtes-vous?” The counter shot shows the man who was waiting for him minutes earlier. Michel’s questions remain unanswered. The man hops on the bus, and Michel follows him. The voice-over mysteriously says: “Il fallait que je sache” as Michel follows the man into a café, and sits next to him. An elliptic fifteen minutes ("Un quart d'heure plus tard, nous étions amis") is expressed cinematically with a two-shot of them in the café (their backs turned to the camera), which dissolves into a similar shot of them at a different angle (this time their faces can be seen). What attracted these two men to each other? What happened during those unseen fifteen minutes, during which the two men were left alone, without the spectator’s gaze? The logic of the plot seems to suggest that thieves recognize themselves on the street, and bond over a cup of coffee. However, isn’t the logic of the plot subverted by a voice-over narration that cannot be trusted?

Besides Michel’s partners in crime, another character comes to complicate the homosexual plot (or maybe it explicates it): Michel’s close friend Jacques. There is a love triangle in the film, reminiscent in its structure to René Clément’s *Plein soleil* (released a year later, in 1960), the first cinematic adaptation of Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955). In her article entitled “The
Talented Poststructuralist: Heteromasculinity, Gay Artifice and Class Passing,”

Chris Straayer comments on *Plein Soleil*’s homoeroticism, which, according to her, is only hinted at:

> In the film *Purple Noon* [the English title for *Plein Soleil*], homosexuality remains subtextual, coded primarily (but not entirely) through triangles involving two men and a woman. For example, early in the film Tom and Greenleaf are visiting Rome. During a game of pretending to be blind, Greenleaf induces a woman to join them. They take on a buggy ride during which she is positioned between them as they both kiss and fondle her. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick . . . has argued that such triangulation is an instance of “homosocial desire” in which the desire of two (assumed heterosexual) men for each other is exchanged through a woman. (116)

In *Pickpocket*, the triangle involves Michel, Jacques, and Jeanne (who takes care of Michel’s ill mother). The three of them decide to go out one day (after the death of Michel’s mother). Jacques walks up to Michel’s door, while Jeanne waits downstairs. Jacques pushes the door open, Michel is behind it. Michel looks intently at Jacques, and says unexpectedly: “Qu’il est beau, qu’il est joli.” This is the one and only time in the film that Michel comments on someone’s appearance. After a drink at a café, Jeanne and Jacques decide to go on a plane ride (at what we assume to be a fair). Michel says he will wait for them, but his vice pushes him to follow a man in order to steal his watch. He goes home, and sits on his bed, as usual. One hears footsteps. Jacques appears in the doorway. Jacques says: “Tu es là, j’ai eu si peur!” “Peur de quoi?” Michel asks. “Peur,” Jacques repeats. “Explique!” Michel insists. Needless to say, he does not get an answer. Michel then changes the subject and brings up Jeanne: “Tu l’aimes, avoue. Et elle t’aime? Fais-lui des cadeaux.”
Michel’s inability to understand makes Jacques leave without a word. Even though Jacques’ infatuation with Michel is made clear in this scene, what remains unclear is Michel’s understanding of it: does he not understand Jacques’ “peur” because he is unable to read between the lines, or does he know full well what this means and changes the subject on purpose? Later in the film, Jacques will impregnate Jeanne and leave her after the baby (a son) is born, and Michel will volunteer to take care of both Jeanne and the baby. If there was indeed any kind of homosexual desire between the two men, it was only exchanged in the film through a third party, Jeanne.

As I have noted, commentators often choose to neglect the homosexual plot of the film. If they happen to recognize its existence, they usually treat it as a “detail” of the story. Some shrug it off as an unimportant element, something that gets in the way of Bresson’s brilliant cinema. Millar writes:

Michel’s relationship with his mother has been a favourite area for probing, since he refuses to see her until she is seriously ill—in fact, dying—and then expressed affection for her. From here it is a short Freudian step to the inspector as friendly yet rejected father-figure, and then to the gestures of theft as surreptitious caresses, so that Michel’s final declaration of love for Jeanne becomes his renunciation of his repressed homosexuality. (82)

Millar goes on to violently reject this theory: “This sort of over-interpretation ignores not only Bresson’s statement that he dislikes psychology and tries not to use it, but also the clear story-line of the film itself” (82-83). After quoting Millar, Reader gives his own opinion on the matter:

[It is difficult to deny the homoerotic component in many of the pickpocketing scenes . . . Yet to reduce the film to an allegorical voyage
through or “growing out of” homosexuality would be grossly reductive, undermining Bresson’s “cinéma de l’événement” in favour of the cinema of interiority it emphatically is not. (56)

I see no validity in these kinds of statements, which dismiss any sort of symptomatic reading of a film, and wrongly suggest that a work does not exist beyond what the auteur has deliberately included in it. In addition, Reader’s comment erroneously assumes that a homosexual reading is necessarily a reductive one.

So what is one to make of Bresson’s ambiguous character in *Pickpocket*? What is certain is that, however evident Michel’s homosexual tendencies seems to be, these desires are clearly repressed by both the voice-over narration and the narrative, which ends in Michel expressing his love for Jeanne, a woman toward whom he has never shown any sort of interest. Despite the fact that *Pickpocket*’s ending has been described as one of the most powerful declarations of love in the history of cinema (Wagner 50), I find this declaration to be unconvincing.³

Susan Sontag writes about the last few minutes of the film: “[W]hen Michel sums up his two years in London with ‘I lost all my money on gambling and women,’ one simply does not believe it. Nor is it any more convincing that during this time the good Jacques, Michel’s friend, has made Jeanne pregnant and then deserted her and her child” (Quandt 65). Kelman has a similar opinion on the matter: “In England, we are told, Michel dissipated his ill-gotten gains in gambling
and women, and returned to France. Of course, this dissipation, this ‘living it up’ is totally uncharacteristic of the man we have seen” (213).

In a recent discussion of the lesbian plot in Henri-Georges Clouzot’s *Les Diaboliques* (1955), Judith Mayne notes that French cinema of the 1950s tends to be viewed as “a cultural wasteland insofar as sexual marginalities are concerned” (2000: 62), and argues that, despite the presence of same-sex desire throughout the film, the ending abruptly reestablishes the conformity of the heterosexual couple, thus banishing the lesbian plot. Before doing so, however, the narrative needs to make Nicole (one of the main characters) literally “disappear” from a corridor before she can resurface as a “heterosexual” woman. The same argument can be made for the ending of *Pickpocket*, as the main protagonist is also forced to “disappear,” in this case leave the country for two years (summarized in but a few seconds in the film by the voice-over narration), before resurfacing as a heterosexual partner to Jeanne and alternate father to her child.

Viewed in this light, it is interesting that *Pickpocket*’s original title was *Incertitude* (Quandt 10; Gabaston 5). Did the “uncertainty” refer to Michel’s vacillation between same-sex and heterosexual desire? As a conclusion, let us merely ponder one of Bresson’s ambiguous notes on cinematography (taken from a book released in 1975, in which Bresson defines his own perspective on cinema): “Deux hommes qui s’affrontent, les yeux dans les yeux. Deux chats qui s’attirent…” (118, emphasis Bresson’s).
Pickpocket concludes a series of three films, all made in the 1950s, which concentrate on a single male character, and describe their (inner) struggles with faith (Le Journal d’un curé de campagne), imprisonment (Un Condamné à mort s’est échappé) and “vice” (Pickpocket). In contrast, the films Bresson made in the preceding and following decades all feature female characters in the lead roles (with the exception of Au hasard Balthazar, whose main protagonist is a donkey): Les Anges du pêché and Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne in the 1940s, Le Procès de Jeanne d’Arc, Mouchette and Une Femme douce (even though the story is told through the husband’s eyes) in the 1960s.

Les Anges du pêché (1943) and Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne have been described, with good reason, as “films de femmes” (Burch and Sellier 209). Indeed, they are as much about women as Pickpocket is about men. Les Anges, shot and released during the Occupation, describes life within a convent that occupies itself with the rehabilitation of female prisoners, and tries to provide a safe haven for them. Men are virtually non-existent in the film, with the exception of the jail manager and the nuns’ chauffeur (both of whom have very minor roles). The other men who are mentioned are seen only indirectly (by way of shadows and silhouettes), and are viewed as threatening to the well-being of the female (ex-)convicts. Toward the beginning of the film, on their way out of the prison where they retrieved a recently-discharged inmate (Agnès), the nuns are forced to hide in a doorway as a few men (apparently out to “get” her) go by. The
scene’s general atmosphere (a poorly-lit street on a rainy night) is evocative of American *films noirs*, and there is an obvious sense of relief when they get to the car that is waiting for them (Cuneen 27). Later in the film, another convict, Thérèse, will assassinate the man who is responsible for her (unjust) incarceration, and will seek refuge in the convent. The man, who committed the crime for which she was sentenced, remains unseen (but is briefly heard) as Thérèse shoots him on the threshold of his apartment.

The theme of revenge (of a woman over a man) only remains a subplot in the film, which is more about Anne-Marie’s (one of the new, most devoted nuns) struggle to bring about Thérèse’s spiritual transformation, no matter what it costs her. Interestingly enough, Bresson’s next feature, *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, is also about a woman (Hélène) who tries to reform another woman (Agnès) at all costs. Hélène’s intentions, however, are far less honorable than Anne-Marie’s. Here, the theme of revenge (again, of a woman over a man) becomes central to the plot of the film.

I have chosen to discuss *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (and later, *Une Femme douce*), because I feel that both films, in their own way, question the role women have to play (or are forced to forsake) within society. When discussing *Les Dames*, commentators often concentrate on the differences between the episode in Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste* (the inspiration for the film) and Bresson’s work. They tend to overlook, underestimate or show little interest in the fact that the film, unlike its literary counterpart, seems to operate *against* a
(patriarchal) system that is firmly in place, and arguably articulates a feminine, if not feminist, component to the story.

2.2 Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne: Fatal Attraction à la Bresson

Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne was released shortly after the Liberation, and, unlike Les Anges du péché, was poorly received by the public and the press (Powers 40; Truffaut 1975: 208). The film is Bresson’s second and last collaborative work: he wrote the scenario, and Jean Cocteau wrote the dialogues, even though Cocteau himself stated that his work was very much dictated by Bresson (Guth 37). It has been described as “the closest [Bresson] ever came to a Hollywood movie” (Jones May/June 1999: 39). Indeed, Bresson stopped using professional actors after this film, and with every new project swerved further and further away from so-called “classical” cinema.

The shooting of the film started during the Occupation. It was interrupted for financial reasons shortly before the Liberation of Paris, and finally resumed a few months later, in the winter 1944-45, in a free but resolutely weakened France (Siclier 222; also, see Guth for a detailed chronicle of the film’s shooting). The shooting went on under extremely difficult conditions (there was no heat in the studios and, if one looks closely, one will see the actors’ breath in most of the indoor scenes). The film came out in September 1945, and was a huge flop. It is only years later that it was eventually recognized as a classic. André Bazin’s
fateful article on Bresson’s stylistics, published in 1951, and subsequent articles by Truffaut and others, arguably contributed to its tardy success.

The story can be briefly summarized as follows: Hélène (María Casares) decides to seek revenge after she realizes that her lover of two years Jean (Paul Bernard) no longer loves her. She contrives for him to meet and fall in love with a former cabaret dancer, Agnès (Elina Labourdette), a woman who, unbeknownst to Jean, has a reputation as a prostitute. Agnès (in homage to Agnès in Les Anges du pêché?), who lives with her mother, appears disinterested in men, including Jean, but Jean’s persistence pays off, and she finally agrees to marry him. On the day of the wedding, Hélène reveals to Jean the truth about Agnès’ past. Agnès’ health starts to deteriorate when she realizes Hélène’s scheme, but Jean makes his young wife promise to hang on to life, as he loves her, despite her dishonorable past. The film ends ambiguously as Agnès, still in her wedding gown, bed-ridden and weak, utters “Je lutte,” and “Je reste.”

Critics have pointed out the differences between Diderot’s eighteenth-century episode and Bresson’s filmic rendition of it. In addition to the obvious modernization of the story (Bresson chose a contemporary yet war-free setting, which is typical of the period), the film’s narrative is much more developed, with added scenes (notably, the very first one), and plot twists (Agnès’ own letter to Jean where she confesses everything, and which he refuses to read). Jean Sémuloé comments on Bresson’s adaptation: “Ainsi l’adaptation du récit de Diderot par Bresson n’est pas . . . une adaptation ordinaire ; c’est un
accomplissement; non seulement une mise en film, mais encore le passage de
Commentators have also noticed a change in tone. Bresson took a fragmented,
humorous anecdote and turned it into a full-fledged tragedy: “Bresson a conservé
l’argument de Diderot. Mais en le transposant, il lui a apporté une modification
profonde: la peinture de moeurs, qui était essentielle dans l’histoire de Diderot,
s’efface ici derrière le souci apporté à mettre en place une véritable tragédie,
fondée sur la vengeance” (Chevallier 173). Indeed, the tongue-in-cheek
color of Diderot’s episode (the hostess recounts the story of Mme de la
Pommeraye’s vengeance, which is accompanied by witty intrusions by Jacques
and his master) is replaced with a humorless story of deceit and revenge.

But perhaps the most significant modification to Diderot’s story, one which
is especially important for the purpose of this discussion, is the advancement of
the character of Agnès (Mademoiselle d’Aisnon in the original text). While Mlle
d’Aisnon’s role in the anecdote is kept to a bare minimum, Agnès is granted
almost as much screen time in the film as Hélène herself. A number of scenes
seem to have been added for the mere purpose of presenting her own point of
view, which stands in sharp contrast to that of Hélène, and Agnès’ mother (Mme
D.). Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier find the development of Agnès’ character
particularly noteworthy: “[Bresson a fait d’Agnès] une jeune fille révoltée, dont les
aspirations artistiques (la danse classique) sont dévoyées par une mère déchue.
Elle est devenue un vrai personnage alors que dans le récit de Diderot, elle
n’était qu’un instrument” (210). This alteration makes for a much more complicated viewing experience, as the audience is given the chance to identify with both Hélène and Agnès, alternately (in Diderot’s story, Madame de la Pommeraye’s viewpoint remains unique and unchallenged by Mademoiselle d’Aisnon).

It is through the new and improved Agnès that the film best articulates the difficulties women are faced with in an androcentric society that attaches excessive importance to keeping up appearances and fitting into a conservative mold. Critics have occasionally commented on the articulation of gender roles in the film, chiefly concentrating on Hélène’s character. Burch and Sellier consider the film within its historical context, and see it as a precursor of a filmic “gender war” (guerre des sexes) which, according to them, started at the end of the Occupation era and continued well into the 1950s (209/211). They see Agnès’ mother as a defender of patriarchal order (she indeed does everything in her power to facilitate her daughter’s marriage to Jean), while considering both Hélène and Agnès victims of the same order (which they call “l’ordre ancien”), Hélène because she becomes trapped in her desire for vengeance, Agnès because she fails to emancipate herself from societal pressures (211). They do, however, see Hélène’s character as constructed against stereotypes usually associated with her gender. This makes her all the more equipped to fight Jean, who, in contrast, is feminized (212). Reader views the distribution of gender roles in Bresson’s work, including Les Dames, as “often enough reversed to be called
into question,” and sees Hélène’s behavior as resolutely sadistic (a tendency usually associated with the male) (26).

Françoise Ducout regards the three female protagonists as archetypes common in 1940s cinema: Agnès the young ingénue, Casares the femme fatale, Mme D. the mother (cited in Reader 21). François Truffaut sees Agnès as “l’innocente victime d’Hélène” (1975: 209); so does Daniel Millar (34). Reader comments on the ruthlessness of Hélène’s character, while underlying the valid connection between Diderot/Bresson’s story and Laclos’ famous epistolary novel:

Maria Casarès is the only full-blown femme fatale in Bresson’s work, her manipulative sultriness and brooding gaze more than a match for her French and American counterparts (Ginette Leclerc, Viviane Romance, Bette Davis) and contributing as much as the night-time ambiance to the film’s noir affiliation. How magnificent she would have been as Madame de Merteuil in an adaptation of Laclos’s Les Liaisons dangereuses! (24)

Let us now take a closer look at the characters of Hélène, but also and especially Agnès (less often discussed by commentators), in order to determine how well these classical, commonly-used female archetypes (the femme fatale and the ingénue) fit them.

At first glance, Agnès, a young, attractive woman in financial difficulty and Jean, a wealthy businessman in quest for new romantic adventures, seem to be the ideal candidates for a typical “classic” narrative: the man attempts to conquer the heart (and body) of the woman who, after a few (more or less predictable) plot twists, ends up succumbing to his charm and agrees to marriage. In addition, the fact that Agnès happens to be a cabaret dancer would only reinforce the cinematic dichotomy so often described (although recently questioned) by
feminist film theorists between an active male gaze and a passive female object of the gaze. However, the very nature of Hélène’s vengeance prevents one from seeing the couple Agnès/Jean in those terms. Indeed, it is Hélène, not Jean, who chooses Agnès for him; it is also she who is responsible for the initial courting.

Agnès is introduced to the spectator nine minutes into the film, after three introductory scenes. The first one is a brief conversation between Hélène and her close friend Jacques, who suggests to Hélène that Jean has stopped loving her (it is significant that Hélène’s confidant be a man, as female solidarity is virtually absent from the film, in contrast to Les Anges du péché). In the second scene, a conversation between Jean and Hélène, the latter falsely (and manipulatively) accuses herself of a gradual disinterest in their relationship, after which Jean readily confesses that he too has fallen out of love with her, thus confirming Jacques’ allegation and Hélène’s fears. A single tear runs down Hélène’s cheek, immediately undermining her potential status as a ruthless fatal woman. The third scene is much briefer: Hélène notifies her maid that she will not take anyone’s phone call. After vowing that she will be avenged, Agnès’ tap dance is heard while Hélène is still sitting on her bed, petting her dog. This typically Bressonian sound fade is followed by a dissolve shot that shows Hélène (seen from the back, which makes her barely recognizable) sitting down at a table in a cabaret. The camera moves down, without cutting, to a high angle shot of the dance floor where Agnès’s shadow and feet appear. The camera pans up, framing Agnès in
a full shot, tap dancing. This introduction is abrupt yet quite remarkable, as the scene’s high energy level contrasts with the solemnity of the film’s beginning.

The first cut comes a few seconds into Agnès’ performance: it is Hélène, shown in a medium shot looking intently at the dancer, whom she hopes will (unknowingly) become part of her ploy. The fact that Hélène does not take her eyes off Agnès’s body is significant, especially because her gaze in the few minutes before this scene has been elusive, to say the least. During her whole conversation with Jacques, she has kept her eyes down or out the (car) window, not looking at him once, even as they parted. Later, with Jean, only fleeting looks were exchanged between the two, with the exception of the conversation immediately following Jean’s “revelation.” A reverse shot (which is now a point-of-view shot of Hélène looking at Agnès) again pans from Agnès’ feet and (barely covered) legs up to her upper body as she pirouettes her way across the dance floor. After a few more cuts that present Agnès from different vantage points (including a close-up shot of her smiling face), the spectator is again shown Hélène, whose look is all the more intense that she is now framed in medium close-up, smoking a cigarette. The black hooded dress she is wearing is certainly not a good omen for Agnès’ future.

In this typical scene of spectacle, Agnès is fetishized in an atypical fashion: the mediating gaze here is female, which is itself reinforced by the absence of men in the first few shots. When Agnès is first seen, she is framed by two women, and so is Hélène (as it turns out, there are men in the audience, but
they are only shown from a distance). This is quite a contrast from other, both older and later French (but also classic Hollywood) films that include female performance scenes, such as Georges Lacombe’s *Le Dernier des six* (1941), Max Ophüls’ *Divine* (1935) and *Lola Montès* (1955), and even Louis Malle’s *Viva María* (1965), all performances of which are fetishistic in the “traditional,” Mulveyan sense of the term. The second (and last) performance scene of the film will only confirm the minimization, if not quasi absence of man as bearer of the look: Agnès dances one last time, for herself and in front of her mother, in the new apartment that Hélène has found for them. Even after Jean is introduced to Agnès, Hélène will act as a “mediator” throughout the film. Put another way, Jean, until the very end, will only see Agnès through Hélène’s eyes.

This raises a question about Hélène’s status as a “conventional” *femme fatale*. The term was first invented to describe women in American *films noirs*, a genre that started appearing in the 1940s. It has been widely used ever since (usually, critics prefer the French phrase, but occasionally translate it), to describe American films, classical or otherwise, but also more or less recent foreign (including French) works. Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton define the *femme fatale* as an ambiguous character “who is fatal for herself. Frustrated and deviant, half predator, half prey, detached yet ensnared, she falls victims to her own traps” (22). Typically, the woman becomes fatal after an encounter with a male hero whom, under the guise of seduction, she tries (usually unsuccessfullly) to exterminate. In *Les Dames*, the male hero, if once
seduced, has lost interest for Hélène a long time ago. The seduction, however, will occur under slightly different terms: it is another woman’s trust that our predator will attempt to win. As it turns out, Hélène will be more fatal to Agnès than to the man against whom she planned to take revenge.

The elation seen on Agnès’ face during her first dance performance stands in sharp contrast to her attitude in the scene immediately following, as she meets her mother backstage. With an exasperated look on her face, she begins to get changed as her mother urges her to hurry up (men are waiting for her at their apartment). The room is filled with flowers, sent by Agnès’ admirers, as Mme D. explains. Agnès’ disgust is apparent as she exclaims “Je déteste les fleurs, surtout quand c’est un ivrogne qui les envoie” before violently throwing one of the flower pots to the ground. Shortly afterward, in a conversation between Agnès’ mother and Hélène (who followed her and her daughter to their apartment) the spectator will understand that it is Mme D. herself who has pushed Agnès to prostitution after a sudden bankruptcy. Throughout the film, however, Agnès will show too much resistance, as well as agency, to be adequately portrayed as a mere victim of circumstances, or of Hélène’s machination.

The arrangement that Hélène settles with Mme D. (or rather, imposes upon her) consists in moving her and Agnès out of their current apartment, paying off their debts, and having them live in quasi seclusion for a while, until people forget their ill reputation. Hélène also specifically mentions that Agnès will
have to give up dancing. If Mme D. embraces that offer to help with enthusiasm (“Vous êtes un ange,” she tells her with gratitude), her daughter is less pleased with it. She calls their new apartment “une prison,” and realizes that her freedom has been significantly infringed upon: “Est-ce que j’aurai le droit de regarder dehors?” Agnès, unlike Mme D., is immediately wary of Hélène’s intentions. Her suspicion only increases when, after a “calculated” encounter with Jean at the Bois de Boulogne, the man shows up at her doorstep, thus suggesting that Hélène broke the arrangement and revealed their whereabouts. She politely dismisses him, but he persists and sends her flowers. Agnès understands that the oppressive cycle of male admirers will not cease: “Autrefois, derrière chaque fleur, je voyais une tête d’homme… Maintenant, regarde, derrière ces fleurs, c’est encore une tête d’homme qui nous menace. Voilà ce que nous aurons gagné,” she bitterly tells her mother.

In order to free herself from the “threats” of men and societal rules, Agnès takes matters into her own hands. First, she confronts Hélène about revealing their address to Jean. The young woman is reassured when Hélène, to prove to her that she has nothing to do with it, dictates a (fictive) letter that Agnès writes to Hélène, complaining about Jean’s intrusion (later, Hélène shows the letter to Jean, asking him to stop harassing Agnès). Of course, the attempt to shun Jean out of her life will fail, as it will only exacerbate his desire to conquer her. At the second, supposedly impromptu encounter with Jean (again organized by Hélène), Agnès will now fully understand Hélène’s scheme. She tells her mother:
“Promets-moi de ne plus rien accepter d’Hélène, de ne plus la revoir . . . Elle s’amuse de nous. Elle s’amuse des hommes.” Agnès’ second attempt at freedom (she found a job in a store, which will make her and her mother financially secure and independent) also fails, only this time, without Hélène’s assistance: a handful of men, who recognized the former dancer, wait for her at the store’s entrance. Agnès has no other option but to quit.

In light of Agnès’ insightful, deliberate resistance to patriarchal discourse, the outcome of the film comes as somewhat of a surprise: she eventually consents to marrying Jean in a lavish ceremony. As it turns out, in addition to Jean’s persistence (itself a consequence of Hélène’s careful planning), Mme D. has (unbeknownst to Agnès) opened her door to Jean, thus facilitating the pursuit of her daughter’s heart. Yet Agnès’ final decision might be read more as a surrender to patriarchal order rather than a genuine inclination for her (truth be told, not so appealing) future husband.

Consider the last few scenes, often read by reviewers as the triumph of love and Hélène’s failed stratagem (Powers 40). The wedding goes on as planned, but as guests congratulate the couple, Hélène finally reveals the truth to Jean, first in a roundabout way (she confesses that she might have been completely wrong about Agnès, and asks Jean to confront his bride), then on the street, more directly: he married “une grue” (Agnès used that term earlier to talk about herself), a now obsolete word that roughly translates as “tramp.” She also discloses her motivations: “Vous m’avez joué un tour, je vous en ai joué un
autre,” and urges him to go back to Agnès, as many of her ex-lovers are already there (“il y a foule”). In a surprising final scene, the bride (still in her wedding dress) is lying in bed after multiple losses of consciousness, and a failing heart (most likely the result of Hélène’s revelation). Jean enters the room, and Agnès, dying and uncharacteristically submissive, begs for his forgiveness: “Laissez-moi seulement l’espoir… Vous jugerez ma conduite . . . Dites-moi le coin de la maison où vous permettriez que j’habite. J’y resterai sans me plaindre . . . Je vous aimais, c’est ma seule excuse.” After closing her eyes, Jean implores her to hang on to life, and to stay with him. She consents (her “je lutte” made Jean-Luc Godard conclude that Les Dames was the only film of the French Resistance [Reader 23]), but the film ends as she is still lying on the bed with her eyes closed.

Most interpretations of this ambiguous ending lean toward Agnès’ survival and the triumph of love over death and adversity. I suspect that Diderot’s text might have something to do with such a hasty conclusion. In contrast to Bresson’s film, the ending to the tale is much more straightforward. So is Mademoiselle d’Aison’s complete recovery. The marquis forgives his wife, and urges her to get up. The text reads: “Elle se leva brusquement, et se précipita sur le marquis, elle le tenait embrassé, à moitié suffoquée par la douleur et par la joie; puis elle se séparait de lui, se jetait à terre, et lui baisait les pieds” (Diderot 159). The story does not end here: the couple moves to the provinces for three years, until the scandal is forgotten. In Bresson’s rendition of the tale, Agnès
remains dangerously close to death, which has Burch and Sellier wonder if her plea for forgiveness is also her last breath (211).

As is often the case in classical narrative cinema, Agnès ends up giving up the freedom for which she has fought throughout the film. One could make the argument that her resistance to patriarchal discourse is nothing but a narrative ploy, a calculated delay that gives the male protagonist the opportunity to better conquer the female body. One would be right, but only partially. Never does the spectator see Agnès “officially” relinquish her freedom out of love, which makes her final consent particularly contrived. For it is once again Hélène who suggests marriage, and forces Agnès into it. “Je m’y refuse,” Agnès protests. “Vous n’avez plus le choix,” Hélène replies, as if to suggest that once the courtship has started, there is no turning back (it also implies that only the man needs to be in love for a marriage to happen). In the end, Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne remains stubbornly ambiguous, and it is unclear whether the film calls into question the rules of patriarchy more than it fortifies them. What is for certain is that, if Agnès ends up conforming to those rules (while Hélène loses her battle against them) this decision has left her, if not dead, considerably weakened.

2.3 Une Femme douce: Private Female Property, Do Not Enter!

Nearly a quarter of a century after Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne, Bresson’s thematic interests have barely changed: his femme douce (Dominique Sanda), like Agnès before her, struggles (and eventually fails) to find a place
within a society that is shown as oppressive to women. His first film in color tells the story of a young, unnamed woman (in the same fashion as Resnais’ *Hiroshima mon amour*) who commits suicide as a result of an unhappy, mentally abusing marriage with a stifling, taciturn pawnbroker (Guy Frangin). Adapted from a novella by Fyodor Dostoevsky known in English as “A Gentle Creature” or “The Meek One” (as will be his next *Quatre nuits d’un rêveur* [1971], adapted from “White Nights”) the film obviates any kind of suspense by showing the woman’s suicide as soon as the opening credits are finished rolling (in the short story, the reader knows that the wife is dead from the start, but the details of the suicide are only revealed at the very end).

The main question that the pawnbroker (who tells the story of their encounter and marriage in flashbacks), as well as critics and spectators seem to raise is: why did she decide to kill herself? Some reviewers have noticed that “[w]e are not permitted to identify with the wife’s suicide, to see ourselves in her, because Bresson doesn’t indicate any reason for her action, let alone a reason that we might deem acceptable” (Cardullo 172), while others have pointed out the (deliberate) absence of clear evidence for determinations of cause and effect in the film (Hanlon 71). Indeed, in contrast to Bresson’s earlier *Mouchette*, who commits suicide after suffering years of abuse, including sexual molestation, and the death of her mother, the gentle woman’s motives are made significantly more opaque. The obvious explanation is unhappiness in marriage, but her decision to take her life strangely and unexpectedly comes after the couple reconciled,
following months of quasi silence. Whatever the reason(s) for her decision, the woman’s distress seems to have been exacerbated by the couple’s inability to communicate. The film (starting with its title) clearly suggests that this incompatibility is a result of irreconcilable differences, not between two unspecified beings, but between a man and a woman.

Manohla Dargis disagrees with commentators (like Eric Rhode) who merely describe *Une Femme douce* as being about “the failure of love, the difficulty of breaking down the walls that separate people,” and points out the film’s gender dichotomy: “This comfortably apolitical description, one repeated by various critics, does not acknowledge that the film isn’t just about any two people, but specifically a husband and a wife, and that the walls separating them are not merely a function of love (or its failure), but, undeniably, of gender and of class” (43). Reader does the same: “That silence [between the two spouses] distilled a linguistic incompatibility that was also a profoundly gendered one” (101).

Bresson’s decision not to name his heroes (following Dostoevsky), except Anna the housekeeper, reinforces the binary opposition between genders, as one is forced, when discussing the couple, to describe them either as “he” and “she,” “man” and “woman,” or “husband” and “wife.” In addition, the French word *femme* of the title, meaning both “woman” and “wife,” blurs the boundaries between identity and marital status, and makes her linguistically unequal to the man/husband, who is entitled to be unambiguously called both *homme* and *mari*.
(gender inequality is also established in his using “tu” to address his wife, and her using “vous” throughout the film).

*Une Femme douce* is reminiscent of Bresson’s “first-person films” from the 1950s (*Journal, Condamné* and *Pickpocket*) in that it heavily relies on the voice-over narration of its male protagonist. It is unlike the other three films, however, in that the husband recounts the story of both his life and his wife’s, not to an unspecified listener/spectator (as in Dostoevsky’s novella) but to a third character, Anna (who arguably need not be told anything, since she was present, and aware of the status of the couple’s relationship, from the day the woman first entered the pawnshop). Many reviewers have underlined the biased, dubious character of the pawnbroker’s story, which is occasionally contradicted by the images shown on screen:

Bresson’s camera is the “unseen judge” that passes the final verdict. Bresson establishes a dramatic irony, a conflict between the cameras’s visual perspective on the husband and his perspective on himself in his verbal narration . . . The verbal narration seems a subjective, self-interested . . . rendering of the events of their life. The visuals seem an unmediated and objective account of their life, since Bresson’s role as narrator is effectively masked. In both story and film, the husband becomes an “unreliable” or “semi-reliable” narrator. (Hanlon 34)

The story’s structure alternates between the present (the husband and Anna in the same room as *la douce* is lying on a bed after the suicide) and flashbacks (controlled by the husband), which give the spectator the opportunity to see his wife *as if she were still alive* (which is what the pawnbroker wants, when he wishes she would open her eyes). The effect is significantly different from say, Marcel Carné’s *Le Jour se lève* (1939) or Albert Valentin’s *Marie-Martine* (1943),
in that Bresson does not use flashbacks to create suspense, explain the suicide, or produce a sense of the inevitability of destiny (contrary to what Reader claims [100]). Indeed, the flashbacks merely present the husband’s point of view, while pointing out his failure to understand his wife. At the end of the film, after reminiscing on his rapport with his wife until her death, he has learned nothing about her motivations.

The film contrasts from the novella in that it contains no background information about the characters’ pasts, and little psychological details, those precisely that would give more insight on the woman’s emotional baggage, and contribute to a better comprehension of her final act. Despite a few unusual, un-Bressonian establishing shots (notably one of the movie theater’s marquee, and the oddly conventional opening sequence, showing the streets of Paris by night), Bresson’s style is faithful to his previous works (especially starting with Journal) in its minimalism and, as critics often describe it, its asceticism. In spite of its spare dialogues and the matter-of-factness of the unfolding events, the film underscores, from the very start, profound inequalities between the sexes.

The couple’s first meaningful conversation (marriage proposal number one) occurs, ironically but not accidentally, as they are watching monkeys at a zoo. At this point, the spectator is fully aware of the fact that the young (sixteen-year-old) woman is penniless (she has pawned everything she could), exploited by distant relatives (with whom she lives) and desperately looking for a job (she showed the pawnbroker an ad she was about to place in the paper). We also
know that she is avid reader (she pawns her possessions to buy books). The conversation at the zoo will reveal that, unlike other women, she has no intention of getting married. The proposal happens rather unexpectedly (it is the couple’s first outing, and there has been little or no courtship), in a circuitous fashion. The “question” is never asked directly, and connotes the man’s intention to “save” the woman: “Dites oui et je me charge de votre bonheur.” Her answer underscores the discord she feels vis-à-vis the opposite sex: “Tout me paraît impossible . . . Les hommes, un homme…” She admits that she loves no one, and adds “pas encore.” The couple is shown in a two-shot, behind a chain-link fence (from the other side of the monkeys’ cage), suggesting her future imprisonment. The woman voices her concerns on the artificial nature of marriage, which, as in their case, is not necessarily accompanied with love: “Ce n’est pas l’amour que vous désirez, c’est que je vous accepte dans le mariage” and later “le mariage légal m’assomme.” The pawnbroker fails to understand such a concept, and maintains that millions of women want to get married. Her biting response would have scared away any potential suitor: “Peut-être, mais il y a aussi les singes” (incidentally, the colloquial French verb “singer” means “to mimic”).

Despite the woman’s obvious reticence to accept his offer (echoing Les Dames’ Agnès, and other Bresson characters placed in similar positions of choice), our gallant is not about to renounce. The shot immediately following the last shot at the zoo is that of a sens interdit (shown in the center of the frame, over a pale background), a red road sign indicating that a street is one way, and
that motorists should use an alternate route. The next shot shows the two lovers sitting in a car. The man seems to be looking up, in the direction of the “do not enter” sign, while the woman remains silent, on the periphery of the frame. She exits the car, and, framed by the window, signals that she lives on that (one-way) street, but asks him not to accompany her there. After she leaves, he is shown exiting the car, and the bright red sign (now about the same size as his head) reappears in the frame. Against the woman’s wishes, he decides to follow her to her apartment. The determined pawnbroker fails to comprehend what Bresson has clearly presented to the spectator: the sens interdit (which will be shown later in the film, as the husband returns to his wife’s former apartment) seems to suggest that he should give up his plans to pursue the young woman.

In the next scene (in the stairway of her apartment building), she scolds him for following her against her wishes. He asks why she did not want to show him where she lives, and she explains: “Cette maison est sinistre.” Then comes marriage proposal number two, which echoes the first one in its frugality, and its suggestion that he can liberate her from her past: “Dites oui, et vous n’y mettrez plus jamais les pieds.” She fails to answer, which makes him impatient: “Dites oui, dites, dites.” The woman shuts the door in silence. Bresson’s sudden cut to the end of their (civil) wedding ceremony is a surprise, and at first glance clearly contradicts the previous scenes leading up to it. However, if one looks closer, one notices the atypical shot composition of the scene. The mayor (the French equivalent of the Justice of the Peace) declares: “Etant donné vos réponses
affirmatives et au nom de la loi, je vous déclare unis par les liens du mariage”

(significantly, the mayor is first heard while the spectator still sees the door that the woman has just slammed in the pawnbroker’s face). At this point, the attentive spectator realizes that s/he has never heard their “réponses affirmatives,” and also that it is not the bride and groom s/he sees on the screen, it is the bride and Anna. As the camera pans to the left to show the couple signing their marriage certificate, only the lower part of their bodies is seen. The spectator will never be given access to the pawnbroker’s face during the ceremony. Indeed, the gentle woman could have been marrying any man.

The incompatibility between the two spouses, expressed both thematically and cinematically in the scenes preceding their union in marriage is only confirmed in those following it, with one, short-lived exception: the wedding night. After a silent dinner at a restaurant (where he is shown slipping a ring on her finger, while he puts his ring on himself), the bride takes her new husband by the hand, and rushes him up the stairs to their apartment. Clearly taking control of the situation, she has him lie down on the bed before she runs to the bathroom and comes back with a white towel around her upper body. As the woman reaches for the television, something resolutely un-Bressonian happens: the woman is shown naked, as the bath towel nonchalantly falls to the ground (this might be read as an attempt to show the naked body as the ultimate “truth” of sexual difference). In contrast to the visual pleasure this brief exposure might provoke, the consummation of the couple’s marriage is only heard (the
soundtrack plays a bizarre child-like laughter) as the sheets deprive the spectator of any visible evidence. The voice-over reveals that the husband takes responsibility for ending this blissful moment: “J’ai jeté de l’eau froide sur cet ennivrement.”

The husband’s obsession with money, which contrasts with her total lack of interest in material acquisitions (first revealed by her physical appearance [Hanlon 45]), is what constitutes the fundamental difference between the two. It is also what triggers their first argument. She starts working at the pawnshop (alongside her husband and Anna), but he finds her to be too “generous” with the customers (she gives them more money than he would, and even accepts to pawn objects that he has turned down). She is aware of his financial superiority, but refuses that their relationship be based on those terms: “N’essayez pas de me dominer avec l’argent, je ne veux pas.” Everything will go down from here: she starts to leave the conjugal home without telling him where she is, and he will eventually find her in a car with another man on the Boulevard Lannes, by the Bois de Boulogne (in reference to Les Dames, where the two lovers also meet in the Bois?). When he seeks to find out her whereabouts after her first “escape,” he gets no answer from her. His idea of marriage certainly did not include his being denied knowledge of his wife’s activities: “Où étais-tu? Je ne peux pas ne pas le savoir” (reminiscent of Pickpocket and Michel’s “Il fallait que je sache”).

She provides no explanation for her actions, yet the couple continues to work together, and go out on various cultural excursions. In addition to being a
voracious reader, she has a passion for art, and they regularly go to the museum, the theater and the movies. He, on the other hand, seems to have neither interest in nor knowledge of matters of the art. To him, museum sculptures are nothing but naked women: “Les Vénus et les Psychés nues qu’elle admirait au Louvre me faisaient plutôt voir la femme comme un instrument de plaisir.” Despite their differences (and utter lack of communication), they surprisingly seem to have an active, fulfilling sex life, according to him. After a night at the theater (where they saw Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*), the voice-over reads: “Ce soir-là comme chaque soir, nous avons tiré de grands plaisirs l’un de l’autre.” The pawnbroker is honest enough to admit, however, that their lovemaking was more based on lust and power control than anything else: “Mais elle n’a pas changé d’attitude, et moi je ne cherchais que la possession de son corps.”

Commentators have occasionally attempted to define the nature of the couple’s relationship in “typical” (if facile) sadomasochistic terms. After quoting Dempsey, who proffers that the wife’s reasons for marrying the pawnbroker not only are unconvincing (especially for a modern woman, a woman who presumably need not marry), but contain a suggestion of masochism, Dargis reacts: “Which is, of course, precisely a point if not the point of the film, given that marriage has historically functioned as the apotheosis of female masochism, the transcendent instance . . . that comes at the price of a woman’s total, at times annihilating, self-denial” (42). Beverle Houston concurs, extending masochism to
all “trapped female protagonists” from Bresson’s 1960s films (Au Hasard, Balthazar, Mouchette, Une Femme Douce and Le Procès de Jeanne d’Arc):

“[T]hese later films are marked by the abject helplessness of the victims and their masochistic suffering under the cruelty of those around them” (216).

But Bresson’s cinema is seldom devoid of ambiguity, and other critics have argued that the resistance of the oppressed in his films rules out masochism as a satisfactory explanation. On Balthazar and Une Femme douce, Mireille Latil Le Dantec writes: “[T]he humiliated fight back and defend themselves; delight in masochism rarely appears in Bresson. The slap, so constant in Dostoevsky . . . is in Bresson, often returned” (Quandt 327). Phil Hardy recognizes that, if la douce hardly relishes her submissive role (even trying to murder her husband), she ends up losing in the end:

The husband attempts to exercise power over her, to teach her the value of money while she attempts (negatively) to retain her freedom of action and of thought . . . But the pawnbroker is stronger than she is; she cannot pull the trigger of the gun she holds to his face, but he can, metaphorically, starve her into submission. (132)

Hardy’s assumption is obviously reinforced by the wife’s final decision to end her life. Although her suicide can be seen as a liberating act, her ultimate “choice” (Dargis 43), it also reinforces the incongruousness of the couple’s rapport. In addition, at the risk of stating the obvious, it is hardly empowering for spectators of either sex who believe that late 1960s women who need to escape the confines of traditional marriage have alternate choices besides suicide.
The antagonistic differences between men and women that the film unmistakably articulates have been confirmed by a number of critics. From there, it would be easy to see these differences in essentialist terms. Indeed, this is arguably what Jean-Pierre Oudart did when he reviewed the film in *Cahiers du cinéma* at the time of its release. Using Lacanian psychoanalysis, Oudart identifies the husband with desire and the wife with demand:

Ce qui fait problème ici, pour Bresson, c’est le rapport entre un désir (celui du mari) qui s’inscrit dans l’écart de la différence absolue (la femme absolument autre, opaque, silencieuse), et une demande (qui est d’abord celle de la femme) qui n’aspire qu’à la présence permanente de l’autre . . . dans laquelle s’annulerait la différence, la non-identité. (55)

This “absolute difference” vis-à-vis the “other,” which cannot be annulled in Oudart’s description, contradicts recent feminist theory and its claim that the boundaries between genders are fairly unstable (Butler ix), as well as culturally constructed. At first glance, the minimal amount of background information provided on the protagonists’ pasts (in contrast to Dostoevsky’s), as well as the lack of explanation for the final suicide, seems to feed into the assumption that men and women essentially (*in essence*) do not get along, thus making a constructivist reading of gender difference in the film less probable. Yet the *petit bourgeois* husband’s obsession with money and power (the main source of conflict between the two) is arguably more nurtured than innate. Through her study of skeletons and animal behaviors (by way of scientific books she often reads), the gentle woman seems to be asking herself that very question: are humans and animals most influenced by nature or nurture? First when she
remarks, speaking about bones “c’est la même matière première pour tous, mais arrangée différemment,” which would suggest that men and women are alike at first; later, when she reads a book on animal behavior (more particularly bird-singing) which ponders whether the particular chant of a particular bird species is hereditary or learned.

As I watch the lid of the wife’s coffin being screwed into place (a very haunting last image), I find myself trapped in the darkness of the film’s sexual politics. The film, which starts and ends with her suicide, has come full circle and so have I. The discrepancy between the husband’s voice-over narration and the images Bresson actually shows the spectator suggests a possible problematization of contemporary gender relations. Should I, despite the gentle woman’s suicide (echoing Mouchette’s two years before), allow myself to see Une Femme douce, like Manohla Dargis does, as “a very peculiar, peculiarly satisfying film that readily lends itself to a feminist reading” (43)? Perhaps a glimmer of hope is to be found as I watch the woman’s white scarf floating around after her fall, a white flag symbolizing a truce, albeit belated, between the two spouses.

As this chapter comes to a close, I realize that the ambivalence with which Robert Bresson portrays both gender and sexual difference on film is a consistent component of all the directors discussed in this study. Critics have occasionally commented on the cryptic messages offered in his films, especially
with regard to its endings. I have already mentioned *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*’s surprising and equivocal ending, in which Agnès agrees to fight for her life, but fails to completely recover in front of the spectator. Philippe Arnaud confirms the ambiguity of this turnaround:

> C’est pourquoi, moins qu’à une édification, triomphe du bien, on peut . . . rattacher [le retournement du film] à la sinuosité d’un parcours dont l’issue est moins le démenti qu’un accomplissement ambigu, et où la fausse innocence d’Agnès qui prête à ce leurre le visage lumineux d’Elina Labourdette, rencontre celle, paradoxale, de Jean, aveuglé par son désir, et par là rendu manipulable.” (Arnaud 1986: 119)

Similarly, I believe that the ending of *Pickpocket* fails to bring a more satisfactory sense of closure to the spectator, and Michel’s well-known last line (“Oh Jeanne, quel drôle de chemin il m’a fallu prendre pour arriver jusqu’à toi!”) rings as hollow as the empty room in which he and Jeanne sit. Jefferson Kline concurs:

> If Jeanne is illumined [“A glow illuminated her face”], Michel does not seem to be. His beating heart *may* be a sign of love, but it recalls as much his first essay at pickpocketing, when he notes the beating of his heart, as it implies an emotion that has never seemed more unlikely in a fictional character than in this automat. The ending is remarkably ambiguous, and like that of *Crime and Punishment*, it has engendered a fierce debate. (Kline, quoted in Quandt 252)

Interestingly enough, the two endings suggest a “forced” resolution, thus enabling the spectator to question the authenticity of Michel’s and Agnès’ love, and wonder what both characters (and the film text itself) are trying to conceal.

Bresson himself professes that film should not be a limpid art form. In his *Notes sur le cinématographe*, he insists that the spectator be an active participant in the viewing process (much like the films of Godard’s and other new wave directors), and that key elements of the plot ought to remain hidden: “Les
idées, les cacher, mais de manière qu’on les trouve. La plus importante sera la plus cachée” (Bresson 42). He contrasts the “cinéma,” a mimetic (because too theatrical) art he wishes to reform, to the degree zero of his own craft, the “cinématographe,” and underscores the importance of defamiliarization: “Tout montrer voue le CINEMA au cliché, l’oblige à montrer les choses comme tout le monde a l’habitude de les voir. Faute de quoi, elles paraîtraient fausses ou chiquées.” (96) These typically Bressonian ellipses inevitably open the door to alternate interpretations, as I hope to have done in the reading of three of his films.

Robert Bresson’s Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne, Pickpocket and Une Femme douce span three decades of French film history. If all three films bear certain similarities with the movements that have emerged out of those decades (Les Dames can be seen as clearly part of Occupation cinema, Pickpocket as resembling new wave cinema, and Une Femme as in tune with the modernity of the late 1960s and announcing what will be found in 1970s cinema), they are also distinctly Bressonian, despite their literary origins. Like most Bresson films, they cast a pessimistic glance on the human condition, and portray characters who always find themselves confined within literal or symbolic walls, which they attempt to break down more or less successfully. Michel, Agnès and the gentle woman all live on the margins, as they combat a society in which they fail to find a comfortable place. However repressed, ambiguous, obstinately opaque
Bresson’s politics are, his marginal status as a filmmaker suggests that he probably stands on their side of the fence.

1 I have decided to use the term “plot” instead of “subplot” or even “subtext,” because I believe that the latter terms unjustly minimize the strong and consistent presence of homoeroticism in the film.

2 Rick Thompson sees a connection between Pickpocket and Samuel Fuller’s 1953 Pickup on South Street, especially the opening subway sequence. He also speculates on whether or not Bresson had seen the film before making Pickpocket (4).

3 Jean-Luc Godard, in his recent Eloge de l’amour (2001), quoted Michel’s famous last words “Oh Jeanne, pour aller jusqu’à toi, quel drôle de chemin il m’a fallu prendre” and Belgian director Chantal Akerman has used the same phrase in an interview to describe the evolution of her own filmmaking career (see the US DVD of La Captive).

4 On the film poster, the silhouette of a man in a hat is shown in the foreground, as he watches the three women disappear into the night.

5 There are other examples of Agnès’ resistance. When one of her johns blows smoke right in her face, she retaliates by extinguishing her cigarette on his cheek. He slaps her, and, again, she defends herself by violently pushing him away from her. This causes him to fall to the ground, along with a table which was in the way. Another example is when, shortly after Jean enters Hélène’s apartment as the three women are having dinner, Agnès deliberately drops her glass to the ground, creating a diversion which interrupts a conversation during which her mother voices how excited her daughter was to receive Jean’s flowers.

6 Toward the end, Mme D. asks her daughter if she loves Jean; Agnès does not provide an answer, and instead bursts into tears.

7 The title of the film appears on top of a lit sign displaying the name of “Jacques Borel,” a writer who won the Prix Goncourt in 1965 for his first autobiographical novel L’Adoration. This is no accident: Borel’s story describes the relationship between a man and a woman (here, his mother), and is also told in flashbacks.

8 When he finds his wife with another man, the pawnbroker claims that he heard her turn down her lover’s advances, which reassures him. However, the spectator never knows for sure whether or not she committed adultery (in contrast to Dostoevsky’s novella, where the wife’s innocence is clearly proven).
CHAPTER 3

DRÔLE DE GENRE(S):
THE CINEMA OF JEAN-LUC GODARD

When Jean-Luc Godard began making feature-length films in the late 1950s (a trade he saw as an extension of his work as a film critic), he turned out to be as much of a non-conformist as Robert Bresson. The two directors’ distinct filmmaking styles, especially when it comes to mise-en-scène, might explain why the critic-turned filmmaker has shown such reverence for the cinema of his master. Godard’s fascination for the man he called the Mozart of French cinema (Narboni 66) extends to the present, as he quoted *Pickpocket’s* famous last words in his recent *Eloge de l’amour* (2001). Like Bresson before him, Godard’s œuvre is innovative, daringly iconoclastic (both thematically and cinematically), and challenges virtually every rule of classical narrative cinema (Sterritt 1999: 19).

His active involvement in the articulation of the *politique des auteurs*, and his seminal participation in the *Nouvelle Vague* makes it difficult, if not inconceivable, to look at auteurist cinema without mentioning his works. An *auteur* par excellence, he is arguably the most controversial of new wave
directors, as Alistair Whyte notes that “his films have been the object of both extreme adulation and vitriolic abuse” (7). Whyte attributes the violent rejection of Godard’s work to his deliberate, often provocative refusal to abide by the rules of narrative cinema. This consistency (which continues in the films he makes today) contrasts with the cinema of some of his fellow-directors, such as François Truffaut and Claude Chabrol, both of whom ended up making rather conventional films after the New Wave lost its momentum.

Godard’s films are, in contrast to Bresson’s, more explicit in their depiction of sexuality, and in their tackling, from very early on, issues of women’s exploitation. His fascination for, or obsession with, women can be accounted for in the very titles of his films: Une Femme coquette, Une Femme est une femme, Une Femme mariée, Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle, Masculin féminin, Prénom Carmen, Je vous salue Marie, Letter to Jane. But Jean-Luc Godard’s films do more than merely express a quasi obsessive interest in the “opposite sex.” They also ponder the signifying power of Woman in the cinema. Godard’s questioning of gender representations in 1960s France has often been commented upon; yet the position of his films remains ambiguous. Critics have called him both an early feminist and a misogynist, while others have suggested that in their depiction of women, Godard’s films are simultaneously “illuminating” and “obscurantist” (Mulvey 1989: 56).

The very first image of his very first feature film, A bout de souffle (1960), confirms Godard’s preoccupation with women, and could be seen as repeating a
classical model of Woman as sexual object to be looked at. It is an image from a newspaper of a pinup wearing nothing but white lacy underwear and carrying a doll in her hand, half provocative, half childlike. The following shot introduces the film's Bogart-obsessed main protagonist, Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) looking at the picture. Later in the story, a series of questions at a press conference between a man named Parvulesco (played by French director Jean-Pierre Melville) and a number of male and female journalists suggests that the film's idée fixe has more to do with the difference between men and women and the way in which modern life has affected the rapports between the two sexes, rather than with a purely voyeuristic interest in women as sexual beings. Most of the questions asked by journalists are geared toward finding an answer to that query: “Quel est le plus moral, une femme qui trahit ou un homme qui abandonne?” “Est-ce que les femmes sont plus sentimentales que les hommes?” “Combien d’hommes une femme peut-elle aimer dans sa vie? Je veux dire physiquement…” In attempting to provide answers, Parvulesco makes statements such as: “La vie moderne séparera de plus en plus l’homme de la femme” and “Il n’y a aucun rapport entre la femme française et la femme américaine. La femme américaine domine l’homme. La femme française ne le domine pas encore.”

When she finally gets the opportunity to ask a question of her own, A bout de souffle's main female character Patricia Franchini (Jean Seberg), present at this most unusual press conference, asks Parvulesco: “Est-ce que vous croyez
que la femme a un rôle à jouer dans la société moderne?” It is difficult to decide whether the overtly misogynistic answer she receives is complicit with, or critical of, Patricia’s interlocutor: “Oui, si elle est charmante, si elle a une robe avec des rayures et des lunettes fumées.”¹ Feminist critics have attempted to make sense of the film’s ambivalent vision of a gendered society. Laura Mulvey recognizes the originality of Godard’s œuvre, and its active participation in debates on politics and representation: “More than any other single film-maker Godard has shown up the exploitation of woman as an image in consumer society. For Godard this image is the very basis of consumer society, a relation he recaptures in his description of the contemporary world as *la civilisation du cul*” (1989: 50-51). Mulvey is nevertheless dissatisfied with *A bout de souffle*, and claims that the equation between women and sexuality, although questioned in the film, fails to be deconstructed.

Emma Wilson notices an attempt to question gender roles through the characters of Patricia and Michel, but points out the ambivalent rapport that the film seems to establish with sexual difference, which is made “at once theatrical and indifferent” (1999: 74). She concludes that in the end (after Patricia has betrayed Michel by revealing his whereabouts to the police), the film has done little for the advancement of women’s role in the cinema: “However far she escapes her role as sexualised heroine, and passive object of desire at certain points . . . Patricia still falls victim to the coded behaviour of women in *film noir* by the end of the film” (1999: 74). John Kreidl, in an essay on Godard, women and
the metaphor of prostitution, suggests that the film is open to a charge of misogyny, first because it seems to be calling only Woman into question, as opposed to Man or even mankind, second because, in this film and all the ones following, Godard persists in seeing Woman as the Other (186). After reviewing some literature that claims that Godard’s films are misogynistic because they make no attempt to explore the subjective experience of women, Kreidl cannot decide whether he agrees or disagrees with the accusation, and concludes: “[W]e can explain Godard’s lack of subjectivity toward women by his refusal to pretend he knows what that subjective experience is” (187, emphasis Kreidl’s).

The reactions and opinions of Mulvey, Wilson and Kreidl on the politics of Godard’s first film are rather telling, and indicate a vacillation between accolade and weariness that his cinema tends to conjure up. This ambiguity is present in the three films I intend to discuss in this chapter; so is the opportunity to be both illuminated and confounded by Godard’s politics of representation. Une Femme est une femme (1961), Vivre sa vie (1962) and Masculin féminin (1966) feature female characters in the lead roles. In the first two, the main protagonist is played by Godard’s wife, Danish actress Anna Karina. In the later film, a man (Jean-Pierre Léaud) and a woman (Chantal Goya) share the lead. It is significant but not accidental that the films’ three women all happen to be markedly gendered “performers”: Angela is a stripper, Nana a prostitute and Madeleine a pop singer. In their own ways, all three films explore the three distinct meanings of the
French genre: societal perception (bon genre, mauvais genre), film genre (musical, drama, cinéma-vérité) and finally, gender.

3.1 The Blue Angela: Godard’s Version of Female Performance in Une Femme est une femme

Although Une Femme est une femme won two prizes at the prestigious Berlin Film Festival in 1961 (the special prize went to Jean-Luc Godard, and the best actress award to his wife Anna Karina), the film did not come close to matching the success of A bout de souffle. Une Femme est une femme, Godard’s first full-length film in color was also his third, though only the second one to come out in theaters. His earlier Le Petit soldat, shot in the summer of 1960 and also starring Karina, was censored because of its problematic political content (it deals with the Algerian conflict and contains a gruesome torture scene) and released in 1963, after the war had ended. The contrast between the two films cannot be overstated. Le Petit soldat is as dark as Une Femme est une femme is light. The first one is a politically charged spy film about death (in some ways reminiscent of A bout de souffle in its seriousness), the second one a humorous “musical” about life (Angela longs to have a baby). Colin MacCabe writes about the latter: “Une Femme est une femme is the most joyful of Godard’s films, indeed perhaps his only joyful film” (134; also see Milne 1967: 71). Despite the light-hearted nature of the film’s genre and tone, Une Femme est une femme is not free of political implications, quite the contrary. In this discussion, I intend to show that this work is more than a mere homage to the
musical genre, but that it can also be seen as a pregnant commentary on gender difference.

When the film came out in France in 1961 and in the United States three years later, testimony was mixed among critics as to the quality of Godard’s follow-up to *A bout de souffle*. Its unconventional attributes (starting with its indefinable genre) caused much puzzlement. Even Jean Collet, who ended up writing insightful critiques of Godard’s films, was not sure what to make of it: “Ce film farfelu, déroutant, semble ne se soumettre . . . à aucune nécessité. Si c’est une comédie, elle n’est pas drôle, on rit peu. Si c’est une étude de moeurs, une caricature de la femme actuelle, c’est encore plus affligeant” (1961: 34). American critic Stanley Kauffman, though sensitive to French cinema, was just as perplexed: “What we have here is a torpid and clumsy picture whose spirit and lightness do not compare with what some other directors have given us . . . If Philippe de Broca had directed this very same material, he could have made it tolerable” (24). This last remark is not without sarcasm, as Broca did indeed direct this very material a year before Godard, in a film entitled *Les Jeux de l’amour* starring Geneviève Cluny. The actress, before working with Broca, suggested the story to Godard, who wrote a scenario (published in *Cahiers du cinéma* in August 1959) before *A bout de souffle* was even made (Godard himself claimed in the early 1960s that *Une Femme* was really his first film [Narboni 299]).
While Collet and Kauffman were “confused,” John Simon was outright furious. He writes of *Une Femme est une femme*: “It is worth inquiring why such a film is made, how it comes to win international prizes, how the *Times* gets to call it a masterpiece . . . Clearly we have a problem here” (28). One of the “problems” Simon brings up is that he feels Godard is dishonest with his audience. The example he advances is that the director, despite the fact that he “wants the entire audience to masturbate over his beloved Karina” (28), never cares to show Angela’s naked body, a logical move considering her profession as a stripper: “Whereas various other women are shown more or less nude, Karina is, after every kind of suggestive teasing, not allowed to reveal any flesh at all. She does, however, reveal consummate lack of talent, butchery of the French language, sticky narcissism, and a rather trivially pretty face” (28). However dubious Simon’s logic might be, it indicates a revealing disgust, not so much in Godard’s subject matter, but in the cinematic choices he made.

Such scathing commentary contrasts with the eulogy the film received from other critics. Consider the opening statement of John Thomas’ review: “Jean-Luc Godard is probably the most talented natural film maker working today . . . *A Woman is a Woman*, his third film, shows some of the reasons why” (12). Andrew Sarris is just as struck by Godard’s talent: “What impresses me most about *Woman* . . . is not its inventiveness but its intelligence. Too much stress has been placed on Godard’s innovations and not enough on his insights” (1970: 168). André Labarthe recognizes the documentary-like character of the film, and
writes: “Une femme est une femme est l’un des plus beaux documentaires que je connaisse consacrés à une femme (et accessoirement à la porte Saint-Denis)” (55). Despite the occasional praise, the film went mostly unnoticed when it came out on both sides of the Atlantic (in the same fashion as François Truffaut’s own second feature, *Tirez sur le pianiste* [1960]).

Years after its release, a number of commentators have been trying to rehabilitate the film, defending both its merit and its right to be part of the Godard canon. James Monaco attempted to do so in his extended study of the New Wave in the mid-1970s: “Does Godard’s adventure in romance need a defense? I think not. *Une Femme est un femme* is one of the absolutely necessary films in Godard’s canon. It describes lyrically the sentiments which, when later contrasted with method, will yield to politics” (118). More recently, Richard Neupert wrote, after commenting on the film’s poor theatrical success: “Today, however, *A Woman Is a Woman* can be seen to exhibit many of the personal story and style traits audiences have come to expect of Godard” (226). I too believe that the film should not be dismissed as a “minor” Godard. I see it as part of a series of works that are clearly interconnected in their conscious endeavor to reflect upon, and occasionally question, the articulation of gender roles in capitalist societies, from *A bout de souffle* to *Vivre sa vie*, from *Une Femme mariée* (1964) to *Masculin féminin* to *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* (1967), culminating with his feminist-inspired *Numéro deux* (1975), co-written by Anne-Marie Miéville.
Unlike most Godard films, the tongue-in-cheek *Une Femme est une femme* has a defined, albeit minimalist, plot. Both a musical and a parody of it (music and singing are usually out of sync, and the main characters say rather than sing their lines accompanied by a dramatic orchestra), it is a portrait of a young woman who decides one day that she wants a baby, and that she cannot wait one more day to get pregnant. Clearly a *femme-enfant*, Angela also exudes female stereotypes: she is impatient, stubborn, whimsical and sulky. Having said that, the masculine characters, Emile (Jean-Claude Brialy), the boyfriend who refuses to have a baby and Alfred (Jean-Paul Belmondo), the boyfriend’s best friend who eventually agrees to impregnate Angela, are equally childish and stereotypical, as they are shown drinking heavily in bars, talking dirty about women, making ridiculous faces, siding against Angela in a male-bonding episode, laughing idiotically. In a humorous fashion, the film underscores fundamental differences between men and women.

The title of the film can be interpreted as a reverse of the expression “boys will be boys,” which tends to insist on the inevitability of misunderstandings between the sexes. The last two lines of the film seem to suggest that it is because of her gender that Angela acts the way she does. After she had sex with her partner’s best friend, she is afraid to be pregnant by a man she does not love, and urges her boyfriend to make love to her. The idea behind it is that, if she indeed gets pregnant, they will never know that the child is not Emile’s. The man’s reaction to Angela’s statement “Tu es infâme” (you are horrible) is
shrewdly corrected by the woman in an untranslatable pun: “Je ne suis pas infâme, je suis une femme” (I am not horrible, I am a woman).

Much discussion of *Une Femme est une femme* revolves around its ambiguous genre. The film itself engages in this debate when, after Angela sleeps with her lover’s best friend and confesses her infidelity, Emile exclaims: “On ne sait pas si c’est une comédie ou une tragédie, en tous cas c’est un chef-d’œuvre!” This remark provides a clue to the disconcerted spectator, suggesting that genre should not be taken seriously in this particular story. This has not stopped critics from being concerned with the film’s infidelity to the musical genre: “Godard conceived of it as a ‘neorealist musical,’ which he conceded was a deliberate contradiction in terms. Technically it isn't a musical at all. Yet it alludes to musicals at every turn, so it doesn't fit snugly into any ‘nonmusical’ category either” (Rosenbaum 1). Indeed, if the insouciant character of the American musical that the film wishes to evoke is kept intact in *Une Femme*, anybody expecting a “classical” musical comedy is headed for disappointment.

Godard has shared his thoughts on the matter:

Mais le film n’est pas une comédie musicale. C’est l’idée de la comédie musicale. J’ai d’ailleurs hésité longtemps à faire des scènes vraiment musicales. Finalement, j’ai préféré suggérer l’idée que les personnages chantent, grâce à l’utilisation de la musique, tout en les faisant parler normalement. Du reste, la comédie musicale est morte. (Narboni 300-301, emphasis Godard’s)

Just as *A bout de souffle* was the idea of the American thriller, *Une Femme* subverts the musical genre from within, making it both familiar to the audience by keeping extra-diegetic music and performance scenes, and unfamiliar by opting
for spoken rather than sung numbers. Jean-André Fieschi claims that Godard’s homage to the musical is nostalgic, and notes that a number of critics have misunderstood the film precisely because they expected it to be a “real” musical. He points out the differences between the specific characteristics of the genre and Godard’s rendition of it:

Dans *Une femme est une femme*, il n’y a point d’espace onirique possédé, le “musical” est véritablement un rêve, ce vers quoi tendent Godard et ses personnages, sans pouvoir l’atteindre . . . D’ailleurs, toute comédie musicale est évidemment dynamique, et il est à noter qu’après que Karina ait répondu à Belmondo qui lui demandait pourquoi elle était triste “Parce que je voulais être dans une comédie musicale avec Cyd Charisse et Gene Kelly . . .,” les plans de danse sont fixes, figés, et non pas dynamiques. (18)

Fieschi’s description of *Une Femme* as a “static musical” is an insightful one, and his analysis succeeds in recognizing the traits Godard’s work has in common with conventional films of the same genre while embracing its differences.

It is well-known that new wave cinema tends to refuse the oppressive boundaries of a single genre. *Une Femme* is no exception. Reviewers have effectively stated that the film, in addition to being a tribute to the musical, is also and especially an homage to Godard’s brand-new wife (the couple wed in March 1961, and the film came out in September), and that the line between reality and fiction is significantly (and deliberately) blurred throughout the narrative. In this area, critics seem to have reached a consensus: “The film has been justly defined as a documentary on Anna Karina” (Cozarinsky 30); “Documentaire, *Une femme est une femme* l’est de bout en bout. Il l’est d’abord sur la façon dont Godard dirige son interprète . . . Contrairement à tous les usages, [il] ne retient
que les moments faibles de son interprétation” (Labarthe 55); “By using takes where Miss Karina blew her lines or was unaware of the camera, Godard captures her own personality and melds it with the character created by the script” (Thomas 12). Antoine de Baecque, in a perceptive study of erotomania in postwar cinema, recognizes the documentary-like character of Godard’s films, especially when it comes to studying the “truth” of the female body, and extends it to other works of the period:

La première approche de cette vérité est quasi documentaire, au sens où Godard affirme dans un entretien accordé au Monde à la sortie d’A bout de souffle que son film est “un documentaire sur Jean Seberg et Jean-Paul Belmondo.” On peut donc tenter de définir un premier mode d’apparition des “filles” de la Nouvelle Vague: Anna Karina dans Une Femme est une femme, Corinne Marchand dans Cléo de 5 à 7, Jean Seberg dans A bout de souffle . . . illustrent, chacune et toutes réunies, la femme-document du début des années soixante.” (2000: 319)

Godard himself once equated his work, especially his study of Woman in Une Femme mariée, with that of a scientist, more particularly an entomologist: “I said that speaking of The Married Woman. It was because when I was doing the film I felt like I was studying this young woman just like an entomologist [sic] would study a bee or any bird. Just to look at facts and try to dig out some scientific laws” (quoted in Sterritt 98: 24). Godard’s claim that his 1964 film is in fact a scientific study of its heroine is evocative of Baecque’s idea of Woman as “femme-document,” and can equally be applied to the character of Angela/Karina.

The first few minutes of the narrative (a series of short scenes leading up to Angela’s singing number at the cabaret/strip club) contain all the cinematic
elements that make Une Femme est une femme such an unconventional piece of
cinema. The credits roll, and in the background, the spectator hears what seems
to be a band/orchestra getting ready for a concert. The off-screen voice of Karina
announces the beginning of the film’s shooting: lights/camera/action!, as the
three main actors (Brialy, Karina and Belmondo) appear on the screen,
successively. Godard is not dishonest with his public: the film will involve a
ménage-à-trois, some sort of musical arrangements, and, unlike most films
before it, will pay no particular attention to maintaining suspension of disbelief. If
the spectator intends to “go along for the ride,” s/he will not be able to ignore the
self-reflexive nature of Godard’s work. After a second of complete silence
following Karina’s announcement, the extra-diegetic music (the film’s title song:
“Tu te laisses aller” by Charles Aznavour) abruptly commences… with the end of
the ballad. Godard lets the spectator hear the last four lines of the sixty-four-line
song.

Karina enters the screen, framed through the window of the café into
which she is about to walk. She orders a hot beverage, but realizes that she is
late and leaves without drinking it. Upon her departure, she smiles and winks at
the camera; she is aware that she is being watched and seems to be enjoying it.
Angela’s subsequent walk through the streets of Paris is reminiscent of the
casual stroll Agnès Varda’s heroine takes at the beginning of Cléo de 5 à 7
(made the same year and featuring cameo appearances by Karina and Godard).
Yet it is difficult to take any visual pleasure in watching Godard’s heroine (unlike
Varda’s), because of a most disturbing soundtrack, which alternates between complete silence, the noise of the streets of Paris and Aznavour’s song. On her way to the cabaret, Angela will intentionally meet her boyfriend: she goes to the bookstore where he works, flips through the famous pregnancy book *J’attends un enfant* and quickly converses with Emile to the sound of dramatic music. She will also (unintentionally) run into her future one-time lover Alfred: their quick chat turns existential when, after Alfred asks her what she is thinking about, she confesses: “Je pense que j’existe.” As she is entering the “Cabaret Dancing,” Alfred announces to the camera: “Elle s’en va.” Clearly, the film refuses to take itself seriously.

Nine minutes into the film, *Une Femme*’s one and only “official” musical (and music-hall) number follows a succession of scenes inside the cabaret, during which the spectator is introduced to the other (mostly dressed, but occasionally disrobed) dancers. Before the number begins, an unseen male voice announces: “On admire d’habitude la taille de la Tour Eiffel, moi je préfère toujours le tour de taille d’Angel-a.” After Angela starts the tape player, piano music fills the bar, and she appears from behind a curtain in a sailor-inspired outfit (a non-playing piano player is seen in the background). When she eventually starts singing, the music abruptly stops, surprisingly forcing her to sing a cappella. After each verse, the music resumes normally, until the beginning of the next verse and so on. A point-of-view shot of Angela looking at the cabaret’s audience reveals that the room is virtually empty: a handful of men are sitting at
different tables, one absorbed in his newspaper, one smiling at her, one smoking and vaguely watching, one writing in a notebook. Angela appears unaffected by the turbulent soundtrack, and the obvious lack of interest in her performance, for she is in fact performing for the camera. Throughout her number, she will look straight into it. Toward the beginning of the number, Angela is framed mostly in medium shots, with occasional medium close-ups… until she starts taking off her clothes. From then on, Angela will only be framed in tight close-ups.

In this scene, Godard clearly subverts the musical genre by deconstructing its more basic element: the singing or performance number. He also revises the familiar strip-tease number by refusing to show Karina naked, thus playing on the voyeuristic power of the cinema while depriving the spectator of such pleasure… a real tease indeed. In addition, if the customers present in the club are all male, they stand in sharp contrast to, say, the substantial and frantic male crowd that patronizes the club where Lola Lola (Marlene Dietrich) performs in Josef von Sternberg’s 1930 classic The Blue Angel. In Une Femme, the patrons are scarce, and half of them appear mostly disinterested in Angela’s number, even after she takes off her clothes.³ Although present, the male gaze appears considerably diminished in this scene; equally diminished is the male’s function as voyeuristic mediator, since, as I pointed out, the spectator is deprived of the spectacle of Angela’s nude body. In the rest of the film, Angela will never sing again in front of a diegetic audience (there is a reprise of this very song later in the film, but Karina is alone in her apartment).
Another departure from the cinematic norm is Godard’s decision to alternate between shots of Angela’s performance, static shots of customers and two point-of-view shots of her looking into the sparse audience (they are tracking shots that simulate her walking down the runway as she performs). The latter shots, in addition to being unexpected, are unusual in that they give Angela the opportunity to look as much as she is being (however unenthusiastically) looked at. Still, one is left to wonder how empowering those shots really are for the heroine, for as I mentioned earlier, there is clearly nothing for her to see. Perhaps the emptiness of the room precisely calls attention to the fact that Angela’s life rings hollow, and helps in justifying her seemingly preposterous decision to become pregnant in the next twenty-four hours.

Although hinted at earlier at the bookstore (when she flips though the pages of *J’attends un enfant*), and after she leaves the cabaret (she runs into Alfred and brings up the French expression “un heureux événement,” a common euphemism for “pregnancy”), Angela’s desire to have a baby becomes clearer to the spectator after she starts using the “Cycle Day Indicator” that one of her co-workers bought for her. The device, which allegedly allows women to scientifically calculate when they are most fecund, reveals that Angela’s most likely day to become pregnant is November 10, that very day. This triggers Angela’s resolution to have a baby with Emile, and she immediately tries to convince him, unsuccessfully. In the film’s scenario, published in *Cahiers* in 1959, Godard describes the argument of his protagonist (then named “Josette”)
thusly: “Elle prouve à Emile, par un raisonnement idiot mais inattaquable, qu’Emile ne l’aime pas puisqu’il ne veut ni se marier, ni avoir d’enfant. Emile dit que le vie est très bien comme elle est et qu’on verra dans deux ans. Mais Josette dit: pas dans deux ans, tout de suite. Il y a trop de temps que ça dure” (Godard 48).

Godard makes no mention of the Cycle Day Indicator in the scenario, which leads me to believe that the idea was added later on, possibly during the shooting itself (the director is well-known for his last second, on-set decisions). However ludicrous the fertility device is, it helps in justifying to the audience Angela’s aberrant behavior: she has to get pregnant today because she is at the peak of her fecundity. Significantly, she makes no mention of the device to anyone (including Emile and Alfred), so that her sudden decision becomes literally incomprehensible to those around her. This incomprehension creates tensions between Angela and Emile, and triggers a conversation that addresses differences between men and women (echoing the press conference in A bout de souffle): “Pourquoi c’est toujours les femmes qui souffrent?” Angela asks Emile, who answers: “Parce que c’est elles qui font souffrir.” Despite that, Angela relishes gender difference, rejecting societal changes that have caused women to act less womanly: “Moi, je trouve con une femme qui ne pleure pas, les femmes modernes qui veulent imiter les hommes.”

There is a profusion of comparable comments in the film. After Emile and Alfred bond over their common puzzlement at Angela’s conduct (they whisper in
each other’s ears, and eventually end up at a bar with two other women), the conversation again revolves around gender difference: “Les hommes veulent toujours avoir le dernier mot . . . Les femmes se prennent toujours pour des victimes . . . Toutes les femmes au poteau!” Angela, left alone in her apartment, also engages in the debate by quoting Alfred de Musset’s famous line from *On de badine pas avec l’amour* (“Tous les hommes sont menteurs, inconstants, faux, bavards, hypocrites, orgueilleux ou lâches, méprisables et sensuels; toutes les femmes sont perfides, artificieuses, vaniteuses, curieuses et dépravées…”).

The moral of the play is that, despite sharp dissimilarities between the sexes, nothing is more beautiful that the union of these two imperfect beings. This ongoing debate culminates in Angela’s last remark (“Je ne suis pas infâme, je suis *une* femme”), suggesting that she acts the way she does precisely because of her gender. It also confirms Musset’s claim that the differences between men and women are not irreconcilable (the couple eventually makes up and decides to try and have a baby together).

A lighthearted, humorous double tribute to the American musical and the director’s newfound love, *Une Femme est une femme* also clearly engages in a more serious debate on gender difference, especially questioning female behavior as seen through the eyes of its two male protagonists. It is difficult not to see these differences in essentialist terms. The film’s tendency to reduce the female to her biology while associating the male with rationality, although destabilized at times, is all too palpable to be overlooked. Tom Milne sees
Karina’s character as a “*reductio ad absurdum* of femininity in her single-minded desire to have a child” (1967: 71), and Kreidl sees a pattern in the director’s early feature films in the way they attempt to comprehend what Godard calls in his screenplay “*la race des femmes*” (Godard 48):

The use of women in Godard’s first three films is partly playful, partly serious. In *Breathless*, *A Woman Is a Woman*, and *The Little Soldier* there are, however, the beginnings of a subjection of women via the female characters to a rigorous semiotic scrutiny, whereupon hard questions are asked by the male character . . . about the essence of women . . . These questions always seem a bit extrafilmic; they lean out of the film, despite’s Godard’s attempt to connect them with the existential dilemmas faced by the female characters. (180)

Those questions, which permeate Godard’s first three films but also most of his subsequent ones, remain unanswered. Angela, Godard’s *femme-document*, is constructed around stereotypes of femininity, and represents the entire “female race” more than she does a particular stripper or even a mother. In the end, *Une Femme est une femme*’s main female character remains the *idea* of a woman, in the same fashion as the film claimed to be nothing but the *idea* of a musical.

### 3.2 Whose Life to Live? Nana’s Choice in *Vivre sa vie*

The frivolous tone of *Une Femme est une femme* is, as I already pointed out, an anomaly compared to the rest of Godard’s œuvre, usually more satirical, and more grave. *Vivre sa vie* is therefore more in tune with the earlier *A bout de souffle*, *Le Petit soldat* and the later *Alphaville* (1965) and *Pierrot le fou* (1965) in its somberness. The film tackles issues of female exploitation and prostitution, and ends in the death of its main character, Nana (Anna Karina), who gets killed
in a cross fire as her pimp Raoul attempts to exchange her for money. Unlike Angela, Nana already has a child, but chooses not to be part of his upbringing (she decides, after seeing pictures of her son, that he does not even look like her). If the story is told almost exclusively from Nana’s point of view (the name itself echoing Emile Zola’s young prostitute, Jean Renoir’s filmic adaptation of her story, as well as Karina’s own first name, an evident anagram of her character’s name), numerous critics have pointed out that the young woman’s agency is extremely limited, if existent at all. They comment upon Nana’s role as both an object and a commodity, expressed in the film on a thematic level (Nana sells her body for a living), but also in Godard’s mise-en-scène (the spectator is constantly offered the spectacle of Nana’s body).

Jean Douchet notes the main protagonist’s alienation: “Nana s’aliène, se refusant comme sujet pour mieux se vendre comme objet” (1962: 45). Annie Goldmann also regards Nana as alienated in that, despite the fact that she has no control over her life, she still believes that she does. She mentions the famous existential monologue in which Nana responds to her friend Yvette’s claim that she is not responsible for her situation (Yvette’s husband left her with her children, forcing her to take on prostitution to make ends meet), and affirms that every human being is ultimately responsible for her or his actions. Goldmann argues that the film’s ending clearly refutes this theory, and that Nana has no control over (and therefore bears no responsibility in) the fight that ends in her death: “C’est bien Nana qui [est la cause de la bagarre], mais elle n’y joue aucun
rôle actif puiqu’elle n’est qu’un objet; c’est pourquoi la bagarre est incompréhensible (pour elle et pour le spectateur)” (100). James Monaco also sees Nana, as well as all of the director’s early heroines, as objectified:

Like her sisters Patricia, Veronica, and Angéla, she [Nana] is an object (sometimes venerated, sometimes detested). She is compared with Falconetti in Dreyer’s La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc (the sublime) and Elizabeth Taylor (the ridiculous) . . . Nana, however, is not only an object, but a commodity as well. As Raoul drives her to the “marketplace” where she will meet her death, they pass a theater showing [Truffaut’s] Jules et Jim. There are long lines of people waiting to get in. Catherine is free, Nana is emprisoned [sic]: still both meet the same fate. Nana has had her conversation with [French philosopher] Brice Parain about communication and freedom, but she hasn’t broken free soon enough. (Monaco 124)

To Monaco’s list of names, one could add the heroines of Une Femme mariée, whose fascination with various stereotypically feminine objects (brassieres, fashion magazines etc.) makes her a victim of the rising consumer society of the 1960s, and of Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle, a film which, aside from denouncing the gloomy, sterile urban life of the Parisian suburbs, commodifies its main character, a housewife turned prostitute.

Godard revealed in December 1962 that, so far, his cinema had been composed of both “research” and “spectacle,” and that the narrative choices he tended to make reflected this dichotomy:

Il y a au cinéma . . . le côté spectacle, Méliès, et le côté Lumière, qui est la recherche. Si je m’analyse aujourd’hui, je vois que j’ai toujours voulu, au fond, faire un film de recherche sous forme de spectacle. Le côté documentaire, c’est: un homme dans une telle situation . . . Le côté spectacle vient, dans Une femme est une femme, de ce que la femme est comédienne, dans Vivre sa vie, prostituée. (“Jean-Luc Godard” 27)
It is easy to see in Godard’s latter claim the sensationalism that the equation of prostitution with spectacle can implicate. For Steve Cannon, Godard’s treatment of sexuality and his representation of women are indisputably exploitative:

Godard is implicated in the sexist exploitation of women in the cinema. Not because, as Laura Mulvey suggested, “the film offers an exotic perception of a woman selling her sexuality” but rather because Anna Karina, like Nana, is objectified in the film, becomes merely another image to be juxtaposed with others, posed and explored from all angles (like the profile “mugshots” of the credit sequence) and submitted to Godard’s inquiring gaze. (291)

Although I agree with Cannon up to a certain point, I believe that his claim overlooks particularly revealing cinematic elements in Vivre sa vie, which undoubtedly question the film’s participation in, and complicity with, Nana’s exploitation.

In this discussion, I intend to show that, despite a very Brechtian attempt to keep the spectator from sympathizing too much with the heroine (culminating in the abrupt ending), the film’s objectification/commodification of Woman is, if not denounced, at least exposed, problematized.⁴ One can think, as a point of departure, of the scene during which Nana has to find another woman for a client who wants a ménage-à-trois. After the young woman has been brought to the room, the man disposes of Nana, as he (allegedly) finds the other woman more attractive. During the sexual intercourse between Nana’s friend and the john (who suggested to Nana that she need not undress, making it clear that she will not be part of the congress), the camera does not show the couple, but instead zooms in on Nana’s profile, backlit against a window. This cinematic choice,
coupled with the melancholic soundtrack (first heard in the film’s prologue), seem to emphasize, as well as empathize with, Nana’s rejection.

At first glance, the opening credit sequence establishes Nana/Karina as an object to be looked at, in Mulvey’s famous phrase, as it shows her in tight close-up, first in a backlit side view of her left profile, then in a poorly lit straight on, full face shot, and finally in another backlit side view of her right profile (the use of poor light or no light at all is clearly indicative of Godard’s refusal of the classic three-point lighting). The somber music stops and goes, in a fashion reminiscent of Une Femme est une femme’s first scene. What is subversive in this prologue, however, more than its disruptive soundtrack, is that in the second shot, Nana returns the gaze of the spectator by looking directly at the camera, a major “no-no” in classical narrative cinema. This is not an isolated example that one could dismiss as a stylistic flourish or an accident. Later in the film, Nana will look intently, almost disapprovingly at the camera, implicitly questioning the voyeuristic function of the spectator.

Interestingly enough, a number of critics tend to underestimate, if not dismiss, the importance of the framing of the film, both by overlooking the prologue and its relationship to the last scene, and by treating the beginning of the first episode (a conversation at a café between Nana and Paul, the father of her child) as the “first” scene. Siew Hwa Beh writes: “The opening shot immediately alienates us. Paul and Nana have their backs to us” (182). Marilyn Campbell ignores the very existence of the first three shots in the credit
sequence when she writes of the third episode: “The first closeup of Nana is within a specific film context. Nana goes to see Dreyer’s *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (1928) in Episode III, and Godard alternates closeups of Falconetti with closeups of Nana in the audience” (33). The importance of the prologue cannot be overemphasized. First, because those (often backlit) closeup shots of Nana keep repeating themselves throughout the film: at the police station, where she is interrogated for theft, at the movies, watching Jeanne d’Arc as she prepares for death (foreshadowing her own death in the last episode), in the rejection scene I mentioned earlier in the hotel room, in the “Oval Portrait” episode (the last scene before Nana’s death, when her newfound lover reads to her Poe’s famous novella, itself a barely disguised parallel with Godard and Karina/Nana’s own relationship). Second, because the closeup shots of Nana’s face in the opening credit sequence preceding the “official” first scene stand in stark contrast to the absolute absence of closeups (replaced instead only by long shots) in the last scene of the last (twelfth) tableau. Thus the two scenes that “frame” the film are visually antithetic. This cinematic choice cannot be accidental.

Nana’s limited agency is reflected in the very title of the film. The use of the third person singular possessive pronoun “sa” (rather than “ma”) suggests that Nana’s life “is being led” for her. The passivity suggested in the French title has clearly been mistranslated in the American (*My Life to Live*), British (*It’s My Life*) as well as Italian (*Questa è la mia vita*) titles, to name but a few, all of which give Nana more province than I believe the original title connotes. There are
numerous cinematic techniques utilized throughout the film (starting with the extensive use of closeup shots, often mentioned by critics) which confirm Nana’s entrapment. One I find particularly noteworthy is the way in which Nana is shown (or, more accurately, is not shown) entering and exiting the various spaces she occupies. I hope that a close look at a few examples will confirm my claim that the film not only suggests, but also problematizes, Nana’s imprisonment.

Throughout the film, Nana appears in mostly indoor, mainly public or semi-public spaces: numerous cafés, hotel rooms and hallways, a movie theater, a police station, a car, a record store. The mere fact that Nana repeatedly, almost exclusively evolves in those enclosed spaces is enough to suggest both stasis and ensnarement. Jean-André Fieschi notices a connection, as well as a contrast, between the suffocating spaces of Bresson’s films and Vivre sa vie: “Mais si le jeu des portes inlassablement fermées, ouvertes, entrouvertes laissait, dans le Condamné et dans Pickpocket, espérer la vague promesse d’une ‘allégeance,’ l’intuition du décor, dans Vivre sa vie, est celle, irrémédiable, de l’emprisonnement” (24). He notes that Nana’s framing all but reinforces this tendency: “Emprisonnement qui s’exprime déjà, au niveau du découpage, par l’emploi du plan fixe (dans lequel règnent les horizontales et les verticales, évidemment oppressantes) et par la façon de couper Nana des autres personnages (la première scène)” (24). In mentioning the “first scene,” I assume that Fieschi is referring to the opening prologue.
Less often, Nana is shown outside, mostly on sidewalks (especially after she becomes a prostitute). Fieschi finds those instances equally stifling: “Les endroits clos ne sont pas les seuls à emprisonner Nana: les rues aussi sont fermées par ces murs sur lesquels se posent sans cesse la caméra de Godard” (24). One obvious example is the famous shot of Nana leaning against a tall wall in episode ten. She is framed from mid-thigh up, in the center of the screen, against a wall covered with ragged posters. A partial phrase placed right next to her head reads “le zo,” so that her head actually completes the word “zoo.” David Sterritt has seen this shot as a reference to the Greek root meaning “life” (itself referring to the title of the film), but has also made a more obvious connection between Nana and a caged animal (1999: 82).

As in Une Femme est une femme, the film contains occasional point-of-view shots, which allow the spectator to see the world from Nana’s perspective. One can think of episode nine, when she dances seductively around a pool table, shamelessly trying to catch the attention of the man who will become her lover in episode twelve. Oddly enough, the man does not appear in the point-of-view shots. All she and the spectator see are a window, a wall, an empty chair, another window, Raoul and his friend who stare at her in silence, in short, not much of anything. Even more significantly, the film’s very first point-of-view shot occurs in episode six, twenty-six minutes into the film. Nana is first shown slowly walking down the street, in a close shot. She looks down, and then turns her head to the right. The reserve shot is a tracking shot of what she sees: a bare
white wall. Here, even the typically freeing outdoors fails to provide her with any sense of openness.

So how is Nana shown moving from one space to the next? Significantly, she is not, or hardly ever. The quasi absence of spatial movement in the film seems to suggest that Nana is deprived access to the both literal and symbolic thresholds between freedom and imprisonment, between motion and stasis, between action and passivity. Unlike most “typical” filmic and real-life prostitutes who are often seen waiting for potential clients in the doorframe of a hotel, Nana is rarely shown framed in a doorway, in her capacity as streetwalker or otherwise. There is one exception to the rule.

In the first and second tableaux, the spectator learns that Nana is penniless, and has not been able to pay rent. In a desperate attempt to get into her apartment, she decides (in the third tableau) to sneak into her building, and steal the key from the concierge. She has to penetrate through three doors before she can access her room: the door separating the street from the courtyard, the door to the concierge’s office where she can retrieve her key, and finally, the door to the building itself, which can be accessed from the courtyard (a fourth, unseen door leads to her apartment proper). At the end of the previous tableau, one of Nana’s co-workers from the record store reads out loud a text that she finds “drôlement bien écrit.” The excerpt, which is about the end of an affair between a man and a woman, ends thusly: “Oui, vraiment une façon élégante de sortir de cette impasse.” After a slow fade to black (the only
transition chosen by Godard between tableaux, with the exception of the fourth one, which ends with a wipe), an intertitle announces the third chapter: “La concierge - Paul - La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc - Un journaliste.” The following scene indeed suggests an impasse, but, unlike the literary text read by Nana’s friend, no elegant way of escaping it.

The first frame shows the first of the three doors, that which allows tenants to enter the courtyard from the street. The camera is placed inside the courtyard, facing the sidewalk. Approximately ninety percent of the frame is black, so that the open door that Nana will attempt to enter, although off-center, is all the spectator can focus on. Nana appears (again, backlit) in the doorway. But as soon as she passes through the door, something forces her out. She disappears from the frame, then re-enters the door, but is forced out again. A reverse shot shows a woman (the concierge), framed in another doorway, who appears to be looking suspiciously toward the first door. She is sweeping, but disappears from the frame when she sees Nana. There is a cut to the second door, shown in a high angle shot, of the concierge’s office as seen from the courtyard. Nana is shown running toward the door, but as she is about to open it, the concierge, who entered the frame at the same time as Nana, prevents her from doing so. Nana begs the concierge to let her have her key, but the woman refuses. Nana, apparently defeated, leaves the frame, only to reappear a second later. This time, she manages to open the door, and retrieves the key. The concierge yells for help, and as Nana rushes to the third door, she is stopped by the concierge’s
husband. The fourth door will never be seen, as Nana will not have access to it: the concierge’s husband forces her to give the key back, and pushes her out.

This sophisticated, perfectly choreographed scene reveals the extreme difficulty with which Nana moves from one space to another. The access to her apartment is complicated by the presence of symbolic “air-locks” through which she must pass in order to enjoy the security of her home. Unfortunately, the narrative denies her that privilege, and Nana ultimately loses the battle. At the beginning of the scene, Godard revealingly cuts to a shot of the courtyard before the spectator is given the chance to see Nana walk through the first door. This is no accident: throughout the film, the spectator will be continuously either denied or restricted access to the visual evidence of Nana’s spatial passages.6

Consider the crucial scene in the fifth tableau immediately following the point-of-view shot of the blank wall (which is eventually “filled up” with images of prostitutes on duty), as Nana is shown picking up her first client. She is seen in profile in a slow-moving tracking shot (the fact that the camera and Nana travel from right to left as opposed to a more “expected” left to right movement already suggests the young woman’s regression). A man appears in the frame: “Vous m’emmenez?” Nana vaguely acquiesces, and pursues her leftward progression to the hotel. As it turns out, the man is familiar with the place. As they are about to enter the hotel, there is a cut that shows the main entrance door as seen from the hotel’s small lobby. The door is only partially (approximately one-third) shown on the right side of the frame, itself dominated by the glass door leading to the
reception area, numerous (probably unused) mailboxes, and a mirror. The client enters the frame first and opens the door for Nana, who is seen proceeding through the doorway both on the right side of the frame and in the mirror, as if to both insist upon the rarity of the occurrence, and to suggest an ethereal quality to it.7

It is worth noting, at the risk of stating the obvious, that Nana does not cross this threshold alone. She does it with a man. Later in the film, in episode nine, Raoul (Nana’s new pimp) and the young woman are about to enter yet another café. Here, Raoul (less gentlemanly) enters first, but the camera does a precipitated pan to the left to show him reaching the bar, as he engages in a conversation with the bartender. Nana, who was still outside before the camera panned, appears in the frame. As in the concierge episode, the spectator does not see her come in. The suddenness of the camera movement suggests that it has made a deliberate decision not to record Nana’s arrival.8

If Nana’s motions through space are made significantly laborious by the film’s mise-en-scène, and if doors are presented as quasi insurmountable obstacles, windows, in contrast, are overwhelmingly present. In almost every tableau, Nana is framed by a window: in the second shot of the prologue, when playing pinball at the end of the first tableau, at the police station, after she is rejected by one of her johns, in the “Oval Portrait” episode. For Fieschi, this reinforces Nana’s imprisonment: “Surtout chaque lieu où se trouve Nana impose la sensation de la cage. Cages fermées par des vitres, qui laissent à la fois
transparaître le monde, et l’excluent” (24). Indeed, the transparence of window panes suggests a way out, but unlike doors, makes that escape, if not impossible, complicated. Ultimate irony, what looks like a real background of the Champs Elysées in episode seven in front of which Nana is framed turns out to be a *trompe l’oeil*, a static picture of the famous avenue (the “real” Champs Elysées are shown at the very end of the same episode, but Nana, unsurprisingly, is nowhere in sight).

Campbell points out the connection between windows, mirrors (which she calls “illusory windows”) and the “fake window” (*trompe l’oeil*) in the film, and notes: “Windows in *Vivre sa vie* are not openings to the real world; they are full of reflections, illusions of perspective, and false cues to space and movement. Windows are a boundary between the inside and the outside, but we cannot simply look through them – the mediator affects our perceptions” (37). If “we” as spectators are not able to look through windows, neither is Nana. Noticeably, the young woman is not even seen looking out windows, but rather, is often shown with her back to them.

So how does one reconcile the two radically opposed views of critics on *Vivre sa vie*? Some, like Cannon, denounce Godard’s politics as participating in the “sexist exploitation of women in the cinema,” and others, like Beh, claim that Godard’s women function within a social context that controls their lives but which is not simply presented but implicitly criticized. Beh concludes: “*Vivre Sa Vie* is a brilliant and sympathetic study of the woman’s eternal dilemma in a world
defined by men, money, sex without love, and violence” (185). There is no doubt that the heroine is presented as a victim of a patriarchal system that is firmly in place (this provides a contrast with Une Femme est une femme’s dangerously essentialist articulation of gender difference). Yet in pointing out the limits of Nana’s movements, the film seems to avoid the traditional, sexist pleasure procured by the vision of a “woman in chains.” Instead, the spectators are invited to take wistful pleasure in watching a woman whose desires can never really be fulfilled. They are invited to lose themselves, with Nana, in a series of pressurized air-locks, between two thresholds whose access remains irrevocably restricted.

3.3 La Femme de Madeleine: Repressing the Homosexual in Masculin féminin

It seems that Godard’s Masculin féminin fits, like Vivre sa vie, into a more constructivist view of the “gender gap.” Ironically subtitled 15 faits précis (there is scarcely anything precise, let alone factual, in the film), its alternative title (announced in an intertitle toward the end of the film) is Les Enfants de Marx et de Coca-Cola. Godard follows the title with “Comprenne qui voudra.” This seems to be a reference to its main two characters, Paul (Jean-Pierre Léaud), whom Godard associates with Karl Marx because of his vague interest in the communist party and his anti-capitalist, anti-American beliefs, and Madeleine (Chantal Goya), a (real-life) yé-yé pop singer and proud member of the “Pepsi Generation” (incidentally, Goya went on to become one of the most popular
singers for children in France in the 1970s and 1980s). These two trends are represented as markedly gendered, and there is hardly any crossover between the “masculine” preoccupations of Paul and his friend Robert (Michel Debord), and the “feminine” way of life of Madeleine and her two friends and roommates Elizabeth (Marlène Jobert) and Catherine (Catherine-Isabelle Duport).

A loose adaptation of two short stories by Guy de Maupassant (“Le Signe” and “La Femme de Paul”), the film was shot in Paris in the winter of 1965, and came at a particularly prolific period for Godard. Sandwiched between two “Karina movies” (Pierrot le fou and Made in USA; the latter was shot at the same time as Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle and was the cinéaste’s last film with the woman he was about to divorce), Masculin féminin is very much at a crossroads, in both the director’s personal and artistic lives. The film’s 15 faits précis bear noticeable similarities with the fragmented, tableau-like structure of his earlier Vivre sa vie (Film en douze tableaux) and Une Femme mariée (Suite de fragments d’un film tourné en 1964), even though the structure of the faits in Masculin féminin is a lot looser than in the two earlier features (see Haycock 53). However, it still has a semblance of a plot: boy (Paul) falls in love with girl (Madeleine), girl is more preoccupied with herself, her friends and her career, boy struggles to find direction in his life, boy dies of a possible suicide, or an unfortunate accident, girl is pregnant with boy but contemplates (extemporaneous) abortion, the end.
Yet despite the presence of a meager story, the film contains a significant number of moments during which the narration is literally suspended in favor of more documentary-like, semi-improvised, interview-type episodes: the conversation in the bathroom between Paul and Madeleine, Paul’s interview of Elsa (1965’s real-life “Mademoiselle 19 ans,” who was chosen to represent the eponymous magazine for young women), Robert and Catherine’s conversation in the kitchen etc. Those cinéma-vérité instances, coupled with Catherine’s and Paul’s voice-over interventions (reminiscent of the prostitution statistics in Vivre sa vie) and the political preoccupations of Paul and Robert all seem extra-diegetic, and make it impossible to separate the film from its socio-politico-historical context (unlike the more atemporal A bout de souffle, Une Femme est une femme and Le Mépris). Masculin féminin’s anti-Vietnam, in some ways anti-American, engagé concerns are reminiscent of Godard’s earlier “political” films Le Petit soldat and Les Carabiniers (1963). They also announce his later politically charged, quasi narrative-free work, such as La Chinoise and Weekend, both released in 1967, as well as a number of films (co-directed with Jean-Pierre Gorin) from the Dziga Vertov period (see Monaco 187-252).

Masculin féminin engages in a discussion that once again underscores (and ponders) fundamental differences between the sexes. It is done in an even more explicit fashion than the director’s earlier “gender-conscious” work. By way of its two male characters, Godard trifles with the two words of the title: in a conversation with Paul at a Laundromat, Robert remarks that while “masculin”
contains both the words “masque” and “cul,” “féminin” contains nothing. Godard contests this theory at the very end, as he uses it to show that, contrary to what Robert thinks, the word does contain “fin.” Incidentally, none of these qualifiers are particularly flattering for either sex.

Many critics have given their assessment of what the differences between the film’s masculine and feminine worlds entail. They have opined on the way in which those differences are articulated as well as their implications. After mentioning that the men and women in the film “belong so much to their era,” and that all women but one are sexually active (a sign of their time?), Claude Mauriac notes a contrast between the “nervous, worried, unhappy, despondent” Paul (“the image of Godard himself”) and the complex-free girls (71). Jean de Baroncelli confirms Mauriac’s claims, and sees the film as putting “[b]oys on one side, girls on the other”:

The boys, always lagging a bit behind girls their age, awkward, passionate, not managing to make their way out of adolescence, desperately romantic despite their braggadocio, their obscenities, their “killing” jokes, their adult preoccupations. The girls much surer of themselves, having both feet in real life already, more clear-headed, and cruelly indifferent when they are not in love… (quoted in Billard 254).

Tom Milne remarks that the film is “a foray into the age-old Sex War” in which “woman kills husband to save her child . . . Elizabeth makes trouble between Paul and Madeleine; Madeleine destroys Paul, woman preys, man obeys” (45). Pauline Kael qualifies the film as “the dance of the sexes drawing together and remaining separate” (quoted in Billard 287), while James Monaco sees it as “another story of betrayal” (as in Pierrot le fou) where the feminine is “active” and
the masculine “passive” (an interesting departure from the stereotypical equation of men as assuming decision-making roles, while women generally remain acquiescent). He argues that “the active force wins; the man is betrayed and destroyed” (170), but fails to fully articulate the nature of the betrayal.

While it is true that the masculine and the feminine are treated in general terms and contrasted to one another (for example, male characters are politically savvy as well as active, whereas women seem to know nothing about the ongoing war in Vietnam), there is a counterbalancing force in the film that attempts to insist upon the fact that people are individual entities which should not be categorized. The various “opinion poll,” “Q&A” episodes seem to move in that direction; so does the male hero’s final voice-over (before his death). Paul ends up taking a job as a pollster for IFOP (the French equivalent of Gallup) and, after questioning a variety of people on issues such as war, sex, birth control and race relations, concludes that there is no such thing as a “collective opinion.” Before the famous bathroom scene between Paul and Madeleine, Catherine’s first voice-over intervention (before she even appears as a diegetic character) wonders: “À quoi rêvent les jeunes filles?” She concludes (after pointing out the differences between the inspectors at the Simca plant in Nanterre who cannot make love because they are so overworked and the hairdressers and manicurists on the Champs Elysées) that “la Française moyenne n’existe pas.”

In addition, the film insists more vigorously upon the incompatibility of the specific characters of Paul and Madeleine than between the masculine and the
feminine in general. Joel Haycock notes that the film establishes the couple’s incompatibility “at great length” and that “Paul’s inability to communicate . . . with Madeleine is a preoccupation of the narrative” (60). Unlike Paul and Madeleine, Paul and Catherine are shown to be quite compatible. They share a number of scenes together, have common interests, enjoy the same type of (classical) music (which Madeleine judges “barbaric”), and the film does little to hide Catherine’s infatuation for Madeleine’s lover. The film, however, unlike Maupassant’s short story on which it is based, does a lot to hide what really keeps Madeleine and Paul apart: the presence of an intrusive lesbian lover.

As I mentioned earlier, *Masculin féminin* claims to be based on two nineteenth-century novellas. “Le Signe,” the shorter of the two, recounts a risqué, anecdotal episode in the life of the young baronne de Grangerie who, after observing a prostitute who lives across the street from her, notices that the woman lures her clients by slightly tilting her head, a “sign” or “signal” she uses both to let them know of her presence and to invite them in. Intrigued by the subtlety of the gesture, the respectable baronne decides to give it a try, and to her horror, manages to attract a young man into her home just minutes before the return of her husband. She is forced to engage in sex with him, as according to her, “il ne serait pas parti sans ça” (Maupassant 1979: 729). As she recounts the story to the marquise de Rennedon, she is unsure of what to do with the money that her impromptu john left on the mantelpiece. The baronne’s friend
recommends that she buy a small gift for her cuckolded husband, and adds: “ça n’est que justice” (730).

“La Femme de Paul” is much more serious in tone. The story is told in the third person, from the point of view of its main protagonist, Paul. His “femme,” in fact his unwed lover, is named Madeleine. The narrator emphasizes their youthful looks: Paul is described as “imberbe” and lean, while Madeleine is “une petite brune maigre avec des allures de sauterelle” (Maupassant 1974: 291). The whole story takes place right outside of Paris, on and around “la Grenouillère,” a floating café located on the Seine River. Shortly after the couple sits down at one of the café’s tables, the place is disrupted by the arrival of four openly-gay women, nicknamed “Lesbos” by the patrons and well-known in the community. They fit into both stereotypes of the butch and the femme lesbian: the older two are dressed in men’s clothes while their lovers, one a blonde, the other a brunette, are described as “belles filles grandes et minces” (296). While the crowd is busy cheering the cortège (more affectionately than aggressively), Paul, utterly disgusted, remarks that they should be drowned like dogs. An argument ensues between Paul and Madeleine. The young woman tells him to mind his own business and defends their rights to be who they are. Paul forbids Madeleine to go anywhere near the four women, but she reminds him that she is not his wife (contrary to what the title claims) and that she will do as she pleases.

Indeed she does. That same night, she goes back to the café to meet the two lesbian couples. Paul follows her there without her knowledge, but when he
arrives at the establishment, he is informed that Madeleine left with Pauline, one of the four women. Extremely upset, he ventures out to an island adjacent to “la Grenouillère,” and sees, in silhouette, a couple embracing behind a bush. Too afraid to get closer and find his lover with another women, he tries to convince himself that it is not Madeleine, and that she is probably back at the café by now. He goes back, but she is nowhere to be found. Back on the island, he decides to get closer to the couple, only to discover Madeleine and Pauline making love.

The narrator describes Paul’s reaction thusly: “Oh! si c’eût été un homme, l’autre! mais cela! cela! Il se sentait enchaîné par leur infamie même. Et il restait là, anéanti, bouleversé, comme s’il eût découvert tout à coup un cadavre cher et mutilé, un crime contre nature, monstrueux, une immonde profanation” (306). The sight of them is so overwhelming that Paul jumps into the river to his death. When Madeleine finds out about the suicide, she seeks refuge in the arms of her newfound lover (who tells her “nous te guérirons”). The narrative seems to confirm that Madeleine will fully recover from the incident, as the last paragraph of the novella reads: “Madeleine se releva, et pleurant toujours, mais avec des sanglots affaiblis, la tête sur l’épaule de Pauline, comme réfugiée dans une tendresse plus intime et plus sûre, plus familière et plus confiante, elle partit à tout petits pas” (308).

At first glance, *Masculin féminin* seems to have little to owe to Maupassant’s stories, and critics have tended to shrug off the two supposed literary sources to concentrate on the more typically Godardian aspects of the
film. Richard Roud wrote at the time of the film’s release: “Godard has always stressed that these would be free adaptations of Maupassant, but now that the film has come out, we see that there is no trace of Maupassant at all in the film, except, perhaps, for the fact that the hero’s name is Paul and that his girl friend lives with two other girls” (emphases Roud’s; quoted in Billard 264-265). In April 1966, Robert Esmenard of Albin Michel, who granted to Godard’s production company the rights to adapt Maupassant’s novellas to the screen, wrote, in a letter to Anatole Dauman of Argot films: “It is quite true that in this film we are so far from Maupassant that there is reason for considering that our agreements . . . are still valid for future adaptation, and that, naturally, no allusion of Maupassant should be made in the screen credits for Masculine Feminine” (quoted in Billard 221).

More recently, Haycock has reaffirmed that the film has “little relation to [the two Maupassant stories],” and added: “Still, Masculin Féminin owes something to the fictional tradition of which Maupassant is part: namely . . . ‘truth to individual experience,’ le vécu” (65). In other words, not much at all. It is true that the only explicit traces of Maupassant that remain in Godard’s work are the title of the “film within the film” that Paul, Madeleine and her friends see at the movie theater (entitled “Le Signe,” shot in Sweden, but having no relation to the original story) and the names and physical attributes of the two main protagonists. Yet if one looks closer, one realizes that the film, in the same fashion as Maupassant’s baronne de Grangerie, evinces a perceptible
fascination with prostitution. During their mutual interrogatories, both Madeleine and Catherine ask Paul and Robert (respectively), if they have ever gone to see prostitutes, a question the two men answer at length. More importantly, the film owes much more to “La Femme de Paul” than Roud, Esmenard and Haycock have suggested. Godard himself explained that Paul had to die in the end of *Masculin féminin* because “[he] had in a mind a story by Guy de Maupassant” (Sterritt 1998: 39). Besides Paul’s death, the parallel between the two is difficult to draw because in the film Pauline, renamed Elizabeth for the occasion, has been pushed back into the closet.

Although Scott Burton recognizes the interfering character of Elizabeth (who often hovers around the couple), he suspects that Madeleine’s attachment to her “is less a homosexual affair than a fear of being alone” (270). In his 2003 biography of Godard, Colin MacCabe discusses the relationship between *Masculin féminin* and its literary sources, and notes: “[T]he theme of lesbianism is replaced by a more conventional ménage-à-quatre in which Catherine-Isabelle . . . and Elizabeth . . . are the rather irritating best friends sharing Madeleine’s flat when Paul moves into it early on in the film” (172). A closer look at the character of Elizabeth will prove that the theme of lesbianism has not been “replaced,” as MacCabe advances, but rather *repressed* by the narrative.12

A little over twenty minutes into the film, Madeleine’s first voice-over describes, after announcing today’s date (25 November 1965), what she and Elizabeth are wearing that day. The spectator learns that the young woman lives
in Elizabeth’s apartment (overlooking the “métro aérien”). She mentions that Paul kissed her for the first time and adds: “Elizabeth est un peu jalouse. J’men fous.” Significantly, Madeleine says nothing about Catherine (who also lives with them). Still, it would be easy to dismiss this remark, and argue that the bond between the two women leans more heavily toward the homosocial (as defined by Eve Sedgwick) rather than toward the homosexual. But Madeleine’s remark is far from being the only indication that Elizabeth is an obstacle to Paul and Madeleine’s happiness. In a conversation with Robert, Paul displays an unexpected animosity toward the young woman, in the same fashion (but not as explicitly and violently) as his literary counterpart. When Robert mentions that he has lost his room, Paul (who now lives in the same apartment as the three women) suggests that Robert could move in with them (the place has two beds). Paul suddenly realizes that it might not be possible: “Mais il y a cette salope d’Elizabeth.” Robert does not share his friend’s negative feelings, and the thought of getting closer to the young woman entices him (he notes that he loves freckled girls). Paul warns him that Elizabeth will probably not be interested: “Tu as plus de chance avec Catherine.”

Indeed, it is doubtful that Elizabeth will show any interest in Robert, as she is too busy sharing the same bed with Paul and Madeleine (an utterly irrational move, considering that the apartment has two beds and Catherine sleeps alone in the second one). Before the three of them are shown in bed together (with Madeleine, logically, in the middle), Elizabeth suggests (again, surprisingly) that
Paul could sleep in the same bed with Catherine, but Madeleine refuses. After the lights are out, the three of them engage in a discussion in which they brainstorm all the different ways to say “derrière” (butt) in French (an echo of the presence of “cul” in “masculin”). When the camera (which up to this point had shown them in a long three-shot) cuts to a tighter two-shot of the “official” couple, Paul asks Madeleine for permission to caress her. Needless to say, Elizabeth is not happy: “Foutez-moi la paix au moins.”

The film’s mise-en-scène also suggests both Madeleine and Elizabeth’s intimacy and Madeleine and Paul’s incompatibility. The heterosexual couple is rarely seen together in the same frame, and the two-shot of them in bed is an exception. So is the fleeting shot of the two of them immediately preceding their shot counter-shot conversation in the bathroom. The shot composition of this very ephemeral frame reveals their incongruousness. They are seen as negative images of one another: Paul is shown wearing a dark suit against a white wall, while Madeleine, dressed in white, is standing against a black door. As if that were not enough, a coat hangs on the wall between them, creating a visual barrier and negating the possibility of a harmonious entente. Later in the film, the couple decides to sit at a bar after exiting a dance club. Elizabeth, naturally, is there too. The camera is placed behind the bar, and shows the three of them in another three-shot. An imposing pillar separates Paul from the two women who, after a while, decide to leave without him (Madeleine mentions that they have seen enough of him for today).
Despite a number of clues, the film and its characters refuse to explicitly acknowledge the lesbian bond between Madeleine and Elizabeth. Even after Elizabeth warns him that he should terminate his relationship with them ("Pauvre Paul. Nous ne sommes pas des filles pour vous. Vous serez toujours malheureux"), Paul remains in denial about the nature of the two women’s relationship. I would like to argue that the decisive scene at the movie theater contributes to opening his eyes to it. Madeleine, unsurprisingly, is seated in between Paul and Elizabeth, until the unofficial lover insists on sitting between the couple, thereby forcing Paul to sit next to Catherine. In the middle of the screening, Paul leaves to go to the bathroom. Two men are kissing in an open stall. They continue their embrace, despite Paul’s presence, until one of the men asks him to hit the road: “Barre-toi, petit con.” Before leaving the premises, Paul writes on the now closed stall door: “A bas la République des lâches.”

Taken out of context, it is difficult to understand the reason behind the scene as well as Paul’s cryptic reaction to it. Jean Douchet may very well be correct when he claims that this (now explicit) homosexual intrusion is indicative of the latent homophobia of the *Nouvelle Vague*: “Cette réticence face aux homos, Godard la pose dans ‘Masculin féminin.’ Il y a cette scène où Léaud . . . tombe sur deux mecs en train de s’embrasser” (Honoré and Doustaly 2). Yet seen in relation to the repressed lesbianism in the film, the scene can be interpreted as Paul’s forced confrontation with the *non*-heterosexual (which will result in his death, as in Maupassant’s tale). This transient resurgence of the
homosexual is a displaced version of Pauline and Madeleine’s relationship in “La Femme de Paul” (in the novella, the male protagonist also catches the two women in the act). Here, the homosexual manages to resurface from the ashes of Maupassant’s story, only to be contested and shoved back into the closet (which takes the shape of its close cousin, the bathroom stall).

Another example establishes the incontestable relationship between *Masculin féminin* and “La Femme de Paul.” There is a scene in the film, which parallels that in the novella, during which Paul seems to be witnessing Madeleine and Elizabeth in a compromising position. In Maupassant’s story, he finds the two women embracing in the darkness of the night. In *Masculin féminin*, that scene is much subtler, and occurs before the bed scene I mentioned earlier. Madeleine and Elizabeth have just come home but immediately withdraw to another room (Paul and Catherine are listening to classical music together, and Madeleine mentions that she profoundly dislikes this type of music).

After a while, Paul leaves the room and walks into another. He reappears in the doorway, as something seems to have caught his attention. He is seen staring at something off screen. The camera cuts to a shot of the apartment’s partially-open bathroom window, seen from the street. Despite the opaque window panes, it is clear that Elizabeth and Madeleine are naked (only their silhouettes can be seen, in the same fashion as Pauline and Madeleine on the island). They are laughing uncontrollably. The next shot shows Paul in a long shot, still staring at something that the spectator cannot see. Although Paul could
not physically see the two women from that angle (he would have to have been either on the sidewalk or in a building across from theirs), the logic of the montage leads the spectator to believe that he indeed got an eyeful of the two women. However the incident, unlike Maupassant’s, does not seem to stir any particular kind of emotion on Paul’s part… until of course, the film’s conclusion.

There is one last piece of information in the last scene of *Masculin féminin* that confirms the theory that the film’s lesbian intrigue, however buried, may have contributed to the death of its male character. After Paul is found dead on the street outside his apartment building, the spectator attends the police investigation (yet another interrogation). Elizabeth is surprisingly absent from the premises, and only Catherine and Madeleine are questioned (separately) by the authorities. Catherine is the first one to recount the ambiguous circumstances of Paul’s death (he was trying to take a picture and fell out the window). Madeleine does not re-tell the story, but instead merely says that she agrees with what her friend says (her questioning focuses more on her pregnancy and possible abortion). Before Catherine provides details of the accident, she remarks that the couple decided to move into a new apartment together. She adds that Madeleine wanted Elizabeth to move in with them, but when she asked Paul, he categorically refused. He died shortly thereafter. As Godard mentions in one of the film’s intertitles, “Comprenne qui voudra…”

When asked whether homosexuality was the “blind spot” (“l’angle mort”) of the *Nouvelle Vague*, Douchet replied: “Oui, sauf qu’il ne faut pas oublier que les
réalisateurs de la NV avaient pour projet de parler de ce qu’ils connaissaient. De ce qui les concernait. Comme l’homosexualité ne les concernait pas, il ne l’ont pas traitée. Pour eux, cela aurait été un mensonge” (Honoré and Doustaly 2). Douchet goes on to say that the only new wave director who dealt with (female) homosexuality head-on was Claude Chabrol with Les Biches (1968). So what is one to make of the suggestion of both male and female homosexuality in Masculin féminin? Despite his affirmation that “La Femme de Paul” and Godard’s adaptation have little in common, Haycock does acknowledge that “the film hints that [Madeleine] carries some kind of lesbian relationship with one of them (Elizabeth)” (54). Bertrand Philbert also recognizes the presence of what he calls “de très légères traces d’une éventuelle relation entre Marlène Jobert et Chantal Goya,” and suggests that it is precisely because of that relationship that Paul committed suicide (80). These two remarks remain isolated, and contrast to other critics’ claims that the lesbianism in Maupassant’s story (however homophobic it may be) has been eradicated from its filmic adaptation. No matter how painstakingly the film works at repressing the true nature of Madeleine and Elizabeth’s rapport, the homosexual, in return, works twice as hard to make itself known. There is little doubt that the fruit of its labor can be detected throughout the film.

It is well-known that the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard is a particularly fecund source of analysis for anyone interested in gender (especially female)
representation in film. I hope to have shown that a symptomatic reading of three of his early films has both confirmed that assertion and (in the case of *Masculin féminin*) extended the sphere of study beyond sexual difference, into sexual marginality. While many critics have spent much time praising Godard’s œuvre (old and new) for its undisguised problematization of gender inequality, the general consensus (especially among feminist commentators) is that his films are not completely satisfactory because they fail to fully challenge the equation of gender and sexuality with the capitalist system:

The division represented between the male and female worlds has recurred in different forms throughout Godard’s work. He seems to accept the conventional social division which places women on the side of nature, instinct and consumption and men on the side of culture and production (and, by implication, politics). Although he is able to draw attention to the way in which consumer society uses images of women, he does not seem to question radically the social construction of these images. (Cook 307)

After the mid-1960s, and especially after May 1968, Godard will become bolder and more explicitly militant in his condemnation of consumer societies and female oppression. *Numéro deux*, released in 1975, co-written with Anne-Marie Miéville (who remains the cinéaste’s life and professional partner today) and deceptively announced as a remake of *À bout de souffle* by Godard himself, can be seen as the culmination of this condemnation. Although many of *Numéro deux*’s themes can be traced back to Godard’s early new wave films, its outspoken castigation of female oppression (the female character, with whom the film clearly sympathizes, complains to be “double-fucked” by her husband and
capitalism) make this plot-free experimental film a close ally to the socialist-feminist cause.

In addition to the film’s subject matter, Miéville’s collaboration, coupled with a theatrical release in the middle of the feminist-driven 1970s, might explain why Numéro deux has been called an “outspokenly feminist film” (Kreidl 193). Sterritt is more moderate in his claim, and esteems that even though one could make the argument that the film, like most Godard’s films, can be accused of fetishizing women, “the balance is tilted toward the progressive end in Numéro deux by the film’s innovative focus on cultural abjection, which is examined from a commendably wide range of perspectives, most of them centered firmly and sympathetically on challenges faced by women” (1999: 153). Mulvey also appreciates the stance that the film takes against male violence toward women, but in the end, she notices no real progression in terms of Godard’s sexual politics, and sees Numéro deux as repeating a pattern present in his earlier films:

Here again one sees the spatial difference between male and female expectations of life, one tied to the body and the other free to roam to take action. This paradox takes us back to the original point of departure, the difference between the spatial representation of social relations in Une femme mariée and fantasy in Pierrot le fou. (1989: 61)

This brings us back to the original dilemma, that which has critics divided between the assumption that Godard’s cinema sympathizes with the feminist cause and, on the other side of the spectrum, the accusation that his œuvre contains “a deep-seated, but interesting misogyny” (Mulvey 1994: 94).
It seems to me, especially insofar as his films from the 1960s are concerned, that Godard’s politics of representation should be seen as a continuum rather than a clear-cut position. What is certain is that his cinema remains a limitless resource for anyone interested in the exploration of genre, gender and sexuality in film. *Une Femme est une femme*, *Vivre sa vie* and *Masculin féminin* all convey a distinct vision of a gendered society. Angela, Nana and Madeleine may not always find a way to transcend their sexual identity. They do, however, take part in a debate that continuously explores the nature and limits of female subjectivity.

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1 Quoted in translation in Mulvey 1989: 50.

2 I call this number “official” because, however unconventional, it is sung and performed on stage in front of a diegetic audience. “Non-official” performance numbers would refer to less staged, musically orchestrated spoken conversations between the main protagonists, with no diegetic audience.

3 One exception is the man who uses binoculars to observe her, despite the fact that she is standing a few feet away from him. I see it as a mockery of male voyeurism.

4 German playwright Bertolt Brecht’s process is called “alienation” or “distanciation.” It forces the audience to examine and reflect upon the artifice of the spectacle. The self-consciousness of Godard’s cinema is close to Brecht’s distanciation effect. It can be argued that the very matter-of-fact, cinéma vérité-like voice-over narration presenting prostitution, its statistical numbers and its implications keeps the spectator from sympathizing too much with Nana’s situation.

5 Here is Fieschi’s insightful interpretation of the film’s abrupt ending: “Et s’il [Godard] ne s’attarde pas sur la mort de son héroïne, c’est après tout qu’il s’est attardé sur les phases de son agonie” (24). In this discussion, I will use the words “tableau” and “episode” interchangeably.

6 One exception is when Nana enters a café after watching *Jeanne d’Arc*. She ditches her date, and is seen pushing the glass door to an empty bar. But here again, as the camera moves inside the bar to show her walk through the door from a different perspective, a big pillar obstructs the spectator’s view.

7 It also announces the shot of Nana going up the steps to a café (where she will meet Brice Parain), seen in the reflection of a tall mirror.

8 There is an episode in the film when Nana is shown in the vicinity of a succession of doors. As she is looking for a second girl for her client, she is seen roaming the hallways of the *hôtel de*
passe. She opens a few doors, and either stays on the threshold or briefly traverses it to look for a potential girl.

9 The apparent spontaneity (or authenticity) of those interviews is deceptive. When asked whether he used an earphone (in which he would dictate his actors’ answers) in Masculin féminin as he did in Une Femme mariée, Godard replied: “[F]or the interview between Jean-Pierre Léaud and Chantal Goya . . . I took them apart separately and interviewed them myself. I knew they would answer me differently than each other, because of the age difference and other reasons. Then in filming the scene, I had them repeat some of the questions to each other. In editing I spliced in the answers they had given me” (Sterritt 1998: 13-14).

10 Godard’s second short film Une Femme coquette (1955) is the director’s first adaptation of Maupassant’s “Le Signe” (MacCabe 172).

11 See Kreidl 173-194 for an extended analysis of the metaphor of prostitution in Godard’s work.

12 I am using the word “repressed” in this discussion as synonymous to “hidden” or “masked.”

13 In Between Men, Sedgwick defines the term homosocial as “social bonds between persons of the same sex.” She goes on to explain that homosocial bonds can take many forms, and that there is a “continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (1). In Godard, the homosexual relationship between Elizabeth and Madeleine contrasts with the more homosocial rapport between Emile and Alfred in Une Femme est une femme.
In this study, Catherine Breillat and François Ozon have been chosen to represent the “return of the auteur” trend of recent cinema for numerous reasons. As in the cinema of their two predecessors (Robert Bresson and Jean-Luc Godard), their films are marked by a strong personal style and a bold iconoclasm, particularly in their thematic choices. They are self-proclaimed auteurs, and they both started to make an impact as directors in the 1990s, which coincides with the regained presence of auteur cinema in France. In addition, their affinity for certain actors and actresses (Roxane Mesquida and Rocco Siffredi in the case of Breillat, Ludivine Sagnier, Charlotte Rampling and Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi in the case of Ozon) is reminiscent of the recurrence of actors in films by new wave directors (Jean-Pierre Léaud and Truffaut, Anna Karina and Godard, Stéphane Audran and Chabrol). Finally, they have encountered tremendous success in France, but also and especially on the international market. Their works are regularly discussed in the pages of Cahiers du cinéma, Sight and Sound and other influential film magazines. In 2001-2002
alone, Catherine Breillat won four film festival awards for *A ma soeur!*, while François Ozon’s *8 femmes* won the same number in 2002-2003. In the summer of 2004, Breillat and Ozon were both interviewed in a special issue of *Positif* (on sex and eroticism in the cinema) about their distinguished, innovative portrayal of gender and sexuality on screen.

Catherine Breillat seems almost destined to become a film *auteur*. She was born in 1948, the same year as Alexandre Astruc’s seminal article "Naissance d’une nouvelle avant-garde: La Caméra-stylo." She wrote her first novel, *L’Homme facile*, at the age of seventeen, and made her first feature film, *Une Vraie jeune fille* (based on her novel *Le Soupirail*) in 1976 (the film, however, was not released until 2000, following the success of *Romance*). She made a second film in 1979 (*Tapage nocturne*, again an adaptation of her eponymous novel) and worked as a screenwriter throughout the 1980s until she adapted her own *36 fillette* in 1988. It is not until the late 1990s, however, that her career as a filmmaker flourished and, between 1996 and today, she has written and directed six additional feature films, including her much talked about *Romance* in 1999 and *A ma soeur!* in 2001. Her latest film, *Anatomie de l’enfer* (2004) completes what Claire Clouzot calls her “Décalogue” (7). The year 2005 marks a turning point in Breillat’s cinema: for the first time in her career, she is currently working on two adaptations of works she has not written herself (Barbey d’Aurevilly’s *Une Vieille maîtresse* and Honoré de Balzac’s *La Fille aux yeux d’or*).
The impact Breillat’s œuvre has had on the French film industry is such that Jean Douchet (a Cahiers critics and occasional actor in films by the Cahiers group) writes at the end of his Nouvelle Vague: “[Le cinéma de Catherine Breillat] est provocant et dit crûment le désir de la femme et la peur qu’en ont les hommes. Mais avec un talent tendre et curieusement pudique qui fait d’elle l’une des seules authentiques cinéastes femmes du septième art français” (323).1 If Douchet, in his last remark, seems to be ignoring the plethora of talented women directors (most of them auteurs) who have entered the French cinema scene in the last twenty years, his comment nevertheless shows that Breillat is clearly considered a part of the French auteurist tradition.2 Anne Gillain recently confirmed this sentiment by affirming that “Breillat is an author in all the New Wave splendor of the word” (205), and Françoise Audé places her in the category of “Auteures” with an “e” (173).

If they usually embrace their position as auteur, French women filmmakers notoriously object to being identified as “women directors” by the media, for reasons made explicit by Carrie Tarr:

The figure of the auteur/artist, as it has been constructed and valued in the French universalist discourses, is understood to transcend the particularities of gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity, thus obviating debates on the lack of access to representation on the part of women, gays and lesbians, and ethnic minorities. In this context, it is not surprising that French women directors routinely reject the label of “woman director” . . . since claiming a supposedly gender-neutral auteur status is often the best way to gain legitimacy and recognition within the film industry. (10)
When interviewed in *Cinéaste* in 1999 (shortly after the release of *Romance*)

Breillat, in contrast, seemed enthusiastic about the presence of a woman-led *auteur* movement:

> In the past there were a few women directors, but you could not speak of an *auteur* movement per se. Now, there are not only women directors, but they also happen to have a real feminine vision . . . That's why I think we're lucky to be women and to make movies. When you're a woman, you have to say things that have never been said before. (Sklar 24-25)

If Breillat agrees to be associated with other female *cinéastes* with “a real feminine vision,” she is much more uncomfortable with a “feminist” label:

> Si on est humaniste, on n’a pas besoin d’être féministe . . . Je ne supporte pas qu[‘on] . . . parle de moi en tant que “cinéaste féministe engagée”!!! Je suis féministe de conscience . . . [m]ais au cinéma, j’ai le droit de dire des choses qu’en tant que féministe je réprouve, mais en tant qu’artiste j’ai le droit de montrer. (Clouzot 166)

Whether feminist or humanist, Catherine Breillat’s cinema renders female desire in a radically new fashion. By looking closely at three of her films, *36 fillette*, *Romance* and *A ma soeur!*, I will show that Breillat’s œuvre, although part of an auteurist tradition that dates back to the 1950s, distinguishes itself in its problematization of the reductive, “classical” artistic representations of women in the Western World. These representations (cinematic and otherwise) are epitomized by three familiar myths or archetypes: the virgin, the mother and the prostitute.

### 4.1 Les 400 coups de Lili: Revisiting the French New Wave in *36 fillette*

The story of Lili (Delphine Zentout) in *36 fillette* has never been told before, and certainly never from a female point of view. It is a disturbing account
of a rebellious fourteen-year-old adolescent who, alienated from her family and the rest of the world, becomes obsessed with losing her virginity. While on vacation with her parents and her brother at a campground in Biarritz, Lili meets Maurice (Etienne Chicot), a wealthy forty-something womanizer (aware of the age difference, she calls him “vieil amant”). Although the attraction is mutual, Lili cannot bring herself to have sex with him, despite three attempts at three different locations (Maurice’s hotel room, a seaside grotto and a friend’s villa). The situation becomes frustrating for both parties until Lili, in an attempt to liberate herself from the burden of her own virtue, unexpectedly throws herself into the arms of a nerdy, unattractive young man, Bertrand. As soon as the deed is done, the film ends in a freeze frame of a smiling Lili, who is visibly content to have been deflowered by someone other than her love interest.

Breillat’s inspiration for the film is twofold. She admits autobiographical elements: “As a young girl, I found myself in a hotel with a man I was madly chasing, but who horrified me at the same time. More or less the same thing that happens in the film” (Ciment 142). The second inspiration is Elia Kazan’s Baby Doll (1956):

[After seeing Baby Doll], I was transported, determined to write 36 fillette as if the film I had just seen had given me the password . . . The relationship between Baby Doll and 36 fillette . . . was very precise, I remember. The dialectic was the same — with the exception that the film contained memories that I transformed for my own hands, and that the way I used them was pure invention.” (Breillat 1995: 28-29, emphasis Breillat’s)
The account of Lili’s “idyll” with an older man is, in the logic of Breillat’s work but unlike Kazan’s film, anything but romanticized, and insists on confronting the spectator with the harsh realities of (female) teenage life.

The idea that virginity is a ponderous burden or a curse dominates Breillat’s written and cinematic work. Her female characters consistently express, very early on, an eagerness to lose it at all costs. Claire Clouzot sees 36 fillette as part of a “Cycle de la virginité” that also includes Une Vraie jeune fille, A ma soeur! and Brève traversée (in the latter film, a young man loses his virginity to an older Englishwoman): “[Ces films] traitent de la virginité de façon frontale. Directe. Rester vierge est un poids, se faire dépuceler aussi puisqu’on ne peut trouver de partenaire idéal pour la ‘première fois’” (49). The films also insist upon the fact that “the first time” should be purely physical, without the interference of any kind of romantic feelings. In the novel (written shortly prior to the film’s shooting), Lili verbalizes these notions in an interior monologue: “D’ailleurs, ça m’emmerde d’être vierge, je voudrais avoir couché avec mille hommes: je suis sûre que si Maurice était le mille et unième je l’adorerais” (Breillat 1987: 112). A ma soeur!’s Anaïs has a similar opinion: “Si je rencontre le premier homme que j’aime, je voudrais que le train me soit passé dessus. Que surtout ils ne s’imaginent pas que c’est important pour moi parce que c’est la première fois!” (Breillat 2001: 22). The idea that a young adolescent’s first physical encounter can never be enjoyable contrasts to mainstream “coming of age” films from both sides of the Atlantic. Tarr remarks that “Lili’s angry, frustrated quest to lose [her
[virginity] certainly calls into question normative soft focus representations of teenage girls’ first sexual experiences” (39) and Marc Chevrie calls the film “anti-romanesque, anti-sentimental, anti-esthétisant . . . à 100 kilomètres de toute idyllisation nostalgique des amours adolescentes” (12).

In the same fashion as her “sisters” Alice in Une Vraie jeune fille and Anaïs, the youngest of the two siblings in A ma soeur!, Lili is at odds with everyone around her, especially those closest to her (her mother, father and brother Jean-Pierre alias Gi-pé). It is clear to the spectator that she is and feels like an outsider. Her marginal status is evoked thematically, as she uses rude and aggressive language, and reacts extremely violently to just about any situation. She is unable to communicate with her parents: when she wants to go out to a dance club at the beginning of the film, her brother has to do the asking for her (later in the film, the only conversation she has with her family turns into a violent shouting match in which her mother calls her a “putain” and her dad slaps her in the face). She is hardly more comfortable around strangers. After she and Gi-pé get a ride to the city in Maurice’s car, Lili is so ill-at-ease around Maurice and his friends Laetitia and Stéphane that she demands that the car be stopped and asks to be left behind. When Gi-pé comments on her manners by saying “Tu manques vraiment pas d’air” (“You’ve got a lot of nerve,” literally “You really aren’t out of oxygen”) Lili takes the observation to the letter in a cunning riposte that summarizes her overall state of mind: “Si, j’étouffe” (“Yes, I’m suffocating”).3
Lili’s marginality is also expressed cinematically. Unlike most typical “heroines,” she is often shown at the periphery of the frame. The very first shot of her shows her lying on a bed, her face at the right edge of the frame. The next shot frames her more closely, from a different angle. This time, her face is barely lit, and occupies the left side of the frame. The mise-en-scène of this first scene (a casual conversation with her brother in which Lili expresses an aversion for conformity) sets the stage for the rest of the film: the spectator will be forced to look at Lili obliquely. Examples of her “off-centered-ness” abound: at the café before her meeting with musician Boris Golovine (left side of frame); during her shot-counter shot conversation with Golovine in the same café (right side); as she is running (in a tracking shot) toward the night club where she is about to meet Maurice (left); as she sits on the couch in Maurice’s hotel suite (right) — in this long shot, she inhabits a particularly small portion of the frame, indicating her desire to “disappear” — and finally, in the last shot of her smiling after sex with Bertrand (left). If the distance separating Lili/Zentout from the camera varies in all these shots, they are similar in that they refuse to display her at the center of the frame. Lili’s vacillation between the right and the left sides of the frame might be indicative of her own internal vacillation between desire for and fear of the sexual act. It might also connote her desire to step “off-screen,” to escape the reality of a life she despises, in order to step into the unknown. This is a wish she expresses throughout the film both physically (she runs away from her family every chance she gets) and psychologically (she would do anything to “grow up”).
If *36 fillette* is a very personal and unique piece of cinema, it also positions itself vis-à-vis the French New Wave in general, and François Truffaut’s *Les 400 coups* (1959) in particular. Jean-Pierre Léaud’s cameo appearance in the film as pianist Boris Golovine reminds us of Antoine Doinel, a rebellious boy who periodically runs away from a dysfunctional family and longs to see the sea. Boris and Lili’s encounter is unexpected at best. The spectator is introduced to his character within the first few minutes: his picture (announcing a concert in Biarritz) is displayed at the bus stop where Lili and Gi-pé hope to catch a ride to the city. After Lili chooses to go off on her own, leaving Gi-pé, Maurice and his friends behind, she ends up at a café. Boris happens to be there signing autographs after the concert. She observes him from a distance, which catches his attention. He walks up to her, and invites her for a drink. The only bona fide conversation of the film ensues.

David Vasse calls the scene (which occurs fifteen minutes into the film) “la grande séquence . . . de basculement” (148) after which Lili’s life will change for ever:

[C]ette rencontre improbable est fondamentale dans le parcours de Lili dans la mesure où l’artiste l’identifie et la désigne apte à se projeter ailleurs. Golovine est l’homme providentiel, le personnage imaginaire par excellence, qui apparaît pour ne plus reparaître mais dont la présence et le souvenir décident de la valeur du chemin à prendre . . . Golovine reconnaît Lili et la déclare héroïne de son propre destin. C’est par lui en effet que la jeune fille décline son identité, c’est par lui que vient la connaissance. (148-149)

Indeed, this ethereal encounter allows Lili to articulate her malaise and provides the spectator with a detailed account of her family life (an indifferent father, a
pious, self-effaced mother, a conformist brother), her poor relationship with her
teachers, her dull life in the Parisian suburbs, her two failed love affairs, her
suicidal tendencies. Lili shares more information with Boris than with all the other
characters combined. Before they sit down, he asks her what she wants from
him: “Je veux surtout pas d’autographe . . . je veux juste vous parler.” It is as
though she recognizes the therapeutic effects of a conversation with this
stranger.

In many ways, Lili’s interaction with Boris/Léaud quotes Antoine
Doinel/Léaud’s well-known exchange with the psychologist near the end of Les
400 coups. Both youngsters talk about their unhealthy relationship with their
parents, their interactions (sexual or otherwise) with others, their “400 coups.”
Both discourses appear unscripted (as though they were not aware of what they
were going to be asked). Indeed, the ways in which they react to certain
questions (an embarrassed smile on their face) suggests that the boundaries
between Lili and Zentout and between Antoine and Léaud (some thirty years
earlier) are more blurred than in the rest of the narrative — in the novel 36 fillette,
the interaction between the two is described in much less detail, and revolves
around more shallow topics than in the film (whether or not she drinks alcohol,
whether someone is waiting for her, etc.). Chevrie notices a difference from the
rest of the film in Zentout’s acting, and points out a connection with Truffaut’s
masterpiece: “Delphine Zentout ne joue pas avec Léaud, elle est la fille qui
Boris/Léaud asks Lili questions that the psychologist could have very plausibly asked Antoine: “Vous vous ennuyez [à l’école]? . . . Vous ne devez pas être facile à vivre . . . Est-ce que vous êtes en guerre contre la terre entière?” Unlike Antoine, Lili receives advice from her interlocutor: “Il faut toujours se dire qu’il y a un endroit où on peut toujours aller . . . Le monde, c’est un grand matelas à ressort. On saute et on retombe ailleurs.” Lili will follow Boris’ recommendations literally. Antoine ultimately chooses to run to the ocean. Lili will choose to run to Maurice’s spring mattress (or in this case, his couch). She chooses to open herself up to the world, and jumps to a place as far away as possible from her life as a young girl, as Vasse explains: “De par ses paroles envoûtantes, Golovine offre le sésame du monde sur le versant sexuel et amène délicatement Lili sur le territoire des départs universels . . . Ce que Golovine théorise, Lili tente de l’appliquer dans le concret en en faisant le jeu de son désir avec Maurice” (149). Lili soon finds out that Maurice’s bed is not her only option, which will lead to her ultimate decision to sleep with Bertrand.

If Lili’s conversation with the pianist is, as Chevrie suggests, a reverse version of Les 400 coups’s interrogatory, so is the beach episode. After the violent fight between Lili and her parents, the three of them are seen walking to the beach in a tracking shot from right to left (it is clear in the way she drags her feet that a family outing at the beach is not exactly her idea of fun). The shot is
opposite to Antoine Doinel’s eager run to the ocean at the end of the story, in a famous tracking shot from left to right. As soon as they arrive, they settle by another couple (Bertrand’s parents) with whom they have become friends. Both Lili and her mother choose not to take their clothes off. Lili’s mother mentions she will not stay long: she is meeting someone to play gin rummy. Her husband is irritated and remarks that she can play cards all year round. Lili retorts that Monsieur Henri is not there to play cards with her back home, suggesting that her mother is having an extra-marital affair (much like Antoine Doinel’s). Lili does not even bother sitting down, and finds a quick way out when Bertrand’s parents mention that their son stayed at the campground, and that she could go visit him if she wants.

Lili seizes the opportunity, and runs away from the beach with the same enthusiasm as Antoine runs toward it. She knows what the ocean looks like (the campground is situated seconds from the beach) and she clearly does not like it. To her, the ocean is not synonymous with comfort. Viewed in this light, the presence of a barbwire fence in the first three shots of the film (three separate views of the Atlantic) makes more sense: Lili’s life belongs inland, away from the standard romanticizations of the sea as a symbol of life, love, pleasure and freedom. Logically, it is away from any source of water that the film ends in a freeze frame of Lili looking directly at the camera which, in addition to being a final homage to Les 400 coups, is also evocative of the last shot of another “coming of age” film with a young girl in the lead role: the story of thirteen-year-
old Anne in Diane Kurys’ *Diabolo menthe* (1977) (itself a tribute to Truffaut’s film). Gillain comments on the film’s ending: “*Fillette* ends with the complicitous and radiant smile of a girl who while she may have lost her virginity has not lost her soul” (210). Nevertheless, the presence of what looks like a white birdcage on the right side of the last frame suggests that the road ahead of Lili may still be bumpy, and that adulthood, much like adolescence, is not free of restrictions.

*36 Fillette* did not leave French critics indifferent. It was praised by Marc Chevrie in *Cahiers du cinéma* who, after comparing it to Maurice Pialat’s work, writes at the end of his critique: “*Si 36 Fillette* est si fort, c’est . . . parce qu’il résiste de partout: la fille au mec, les scènes à la cinéaste et le film lui-même au spectateur. Sacré pavé dans la mare!” (13). It was reviled, however, by Colette Godard in *Le Monde* for its transgressive implications: “[Le film provoque] la bête vaguement pédophile qui sommeille en tout spectateur adulte” (quoted in Audé 81 and Clouzot 55).

With the exception of Boris Golovine (and to a certain extent, Gi-pé), Breillat’s male characters (Maurice and Lili’s father) are portrayed as despicable individuals. Lili’s father, aside from poorly fulfilling his job as a paternal figure, is not much of a husband either (Lili mentions that his only interest in life is soccer). Maurice is a caricature of a macho man, as he makes ridiculously clichéd, overtly misogynistic comments such as “Une voiture, c’est comme une bonne femme, t’en as vite marre” or, better yet, “T’engages ta quéquette plus de trois fois de suite dans la même bonne femme, t’es cuit.” Feminist critics have a more
equivocal opinion of the film than Chevrie and Colette Godard, and especially comment on its implications of an ongoing “gender war” (reminiscent of 1970s feminism). Tarr recognizes the markedly innovative intentions of the film, but is less enthusiastic about its portrayal of men and women as incongruous beings:

The film challenges the conventions of dominant French cinema by centering on female subjectivity, making everything associated with the sex act awkward and uncomfortable, and constructing men as unworthy, unappealing objects of desire. There is no passionate reciprocal love affair, and Maurice is left to feel self-critical, guilty and responsible, emphasizing the incompatibility between the sexes that Breillat was to develop in her later films. (40)

If the film denies the possibility of a harmonious alliance between the sexes, it provides a challenging revision of female roles in the cinema. *36 fillette*, much like Breillat’s subsequent films, breaks down the virgin/whore binarism that dominates cinematic representations of women. It is by introducing ambiguity, by suggesting that a woman does not have to be either/or, by insisting upon the fact that the female gender is more than a series of neatly defined myths that the film finds its strength. This idea is beautifully summarized by Lili herself when, after Maurice comments that while her head refuses the sexual act, her vagina is yearning with desire, she retorts: “Je peux quand même pas me couper en deux.”

4.2 Belle de nuit: Marie’s Nocturnal, Color-Coded Quest for Sexual Fulfillment in Romance

The deconstruction of binarily opposed stereotypes in *36 fillette* is articulated even more clearly in Breillat’s most talked about film to date, the
ironically titled Romance. Gwendolyn Wells notes that with this film “Breillat is particularly obsessed with the split valence that so often attaches to iconic figures of women, in commonplaces ranging from the twin fairy-tale Snow White and Rose Red to the virgin/whore dichotomy” (53). The story is presented almost exclusively through the subjectivity of Marie (Caroline Ducey), its main character, who, after experiencing both chastity and sexual debasement, eventually settles for motherhood.

Throughout the film, the images are accompanied by Marie’s pervasive voice-over narration (Breillat insisted that the voice-over be recorded immediately after each scene was shot, so that it would be consistent with Ducey/Marie’s current state of mind). The screenplay opens with an explanation of the function of Marie’s abstract yet very articulate interior monologue: “Les mots de Romance sont comme l’âme de Marie, l’image est comme son corps” (Breillat 1999: 23). Marie’s thoughts are in such correspondence with Breillat’s own abstract thinking during interviews that several commentators, including Emma Wilson, have suggested that “the very soundtrack of Romance . . . appears to ventriloquise the director’s thoughts on sex, desire and female sexuality” (2001: 148-149).

Indeed, Romance is so in tune with the rest of Breillat’s work (Parfait amour, A ma soeur!, Anatomie de l’enfer) that it would be next to impossible to separate the work from its creator. In her latest Anatomie de l’enfer, Breillat herself recorded the voice-over in lieu of the film’s two unnamed male and female characters (played by Rocco Siffredi and Amira Casar), thus applying her stamp
as an auteur in a fashion reminiscent of Godard’s vocal interventions in Vivre sa vie’s oval portrait episode and in the opening scene of Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle.

Although Romance’s main preoccupation appears to be the affirmation of female subjectivity, the film surprisingly opens with a close-up shot of Marie’s boyfriend, as he is being made up before a photo shoot inside the famous Roman arena at Arles, in southern France. A reverse shot shows Marie on the edges of the frame, looking at Paul, which immediately positions her as the active bearer of the gaze. Breillat could not be more aware of that fact; the screenplay reads: “[Marie] n’est pas regardée. Elle regarde” (1999: 24). During the shoot itself, Marie continues to be the mediator between Paul (whose profession as a fashion model justifies his “to-be-looked-at-ness”) and the spectator. Gender roles are both reinforced and mocked as the photographer asks Paul to “stand on his toes” and “act like a man” whereas his female partner (real-life model Carla) is asked to “look down, submissive” (Paul is slightly shorter than her). Following the shoot, the spectator is subjected to a painful conversation between Marie and Paul, in which the latter tries to explain why, as their relationship evolves, he is less and less interested in being physical with her (the reason invoked is that he grows tired of sex with the same woman after a while). The conversation, which started at an outdoor café, takes the two lovers to the sea, a favorite setting in Breillat’s work that is often associated with
discord, pain and anxiety (see, in addition to 36 fillette, Parfait amour!, A ma soeur!, Sex Is Comedy and Anatomie de l’enfer).

The rest of the film is set in Paris, and recounts Marie’s attempt to break away from her attachment to Paul, and find her own sexual fulfillment elsewhere (the fact that Paul’s character is played by the real-life son of Jean-François Stévenin, who plays Lili’s father in 36 fillette, suggests a continuum between the two characters, particularly in the indifference with which they each treat their daughter/partner). Marie’s three “victims” are Paolo (Rocco Siffredi), a recently widowed man she meets fortuitously at a bar, Robert (François Berléand), the principal of the school where she is a teacher, and an unnamed stranger (who also happens to be racially other) who picks her up on the street (possibly mistaking her for a prostitute) near Paul’s apartment building. Marie’s sexual escapades, which appear fairly “conventional” at first (Paolo), escalade into sadomasochism (Robert) and rape (the stranger). By a quasi miraculous event she equates with the Immaculate Conception, Marie becomes pregnant with Paul’s child. He decides to marry her. She decides to kill him. Before going to the hospital where she will give birth, she opens the gas burners in Paul’s kitchen (the future father is passed out on the bed after an inebriated night). The birth of Marie’s boy (whom she will name Paul) is concomitant with the blowup of Paul’s apartment that causes his symbolic as well as literal death.

Romance’s extraordinary controversy is a result, not so much of Breillat’s strong feminist-inspired message, but of its graphic depiction of marginal sexual
practices. Although there are undeniable pornographic elements in the film (on which many journalists voraciously concentrated), the mise-en-scène (chiefly composed of extended sequence shots) as well as the interference of Marie’s innermost (scarce erotic) thoughts make it difficult for spectators of either sex to be sexually aroused by the experience. As Kevin Murphy puts it: “[Breillat’s] unabashed depictions of sex are gracefully choreographed but stilted, awkward and discomforting, precluding the fetishistic pleasures traditionally afforded the voyeuristic spectator in conventional sex scenes” (1). Needless to say, the sensationalistic marketing Romance received worldwide (the New York Post called it “The most sexually explicit mainstream movie ever”) gave the wrong impression to adventurous spectators about what they were getting themselves into. As Wells explains: “Given such a build-up, viewers who went to see the movie expecting titillation were understandably disappointed” (52). For Breillat, the film functions on another level, one which is far removed from the purely carnal pleasures of the sexual act. According to her, Marie's sexual pursuit is transcendental.

Before she can free herself from the emprise of men, Marie must undertake a series of sexual experiences Breillat calls “[Marie’s] quest for the Holy Grail”: “It’s a quest for the ideal. But it is a journey which is an inverted journey. To be able to reach the heights of purity you have to have suffered deprivation and humiliations. And what could have been a descent into Hell becomes liberation. [Marie] does conquer” (Brown 3). According to the director,
this liberation (from both men and the Judeo-Christian tradition) can only occur through transgression: “What’s important [for women] is to attain a vision of oneself — including a vision of oneself making love . . . The taboos, prohibitions and shame that surround women’s sexuality . . . have to be transgressed” (Sklar 25). Despite Breillat’s refusal to be associated with what she calls “le féminisme patenté” (Clouzot 90), her films are undeniably rooted in classical 1970s “French” feminist thought. *Romance’s* idea that women have to reclaim their sexuality in order to break free from the masculine parameters that traditionally define it is reminiscent of feminist theorist Luce Irigaray. Clouzot notes the similarities between the philosopher and the cinéaste: “Irigaray s’oppose à Freud, au pouvoir phallique, à l’exploitation sexuée des femmes, à la culture patriarcal, à l’uniformité du discours masculin, à l’autocratie du sexe dit ‘fort.’ Tous éléments qui forment le substrat de l’œuvre de C[atherine] B[reillat]” (90).

In her “Pouvoir du discours, subordination du féminin” (published within her seminal *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*), Irigaray fiercely rejects Freudian psychoanalysis and its vision of female sexuality as a *negative*, a necessary *complement* to male sexuality (68). She believes that women can claim their sexuality and identity by working *within* the dominant patriarchal discourse (unlike Hélène Cixous, who preaches a brand-new feminine discourse that would be independent from the androcentric system). Irigaray writes: “L’important étant de déconcerter le montage de la représentation selon des paramètres *exclusivement* ‘masculins.’ C’est dire selon un ordre phallocratique, qu’il ne s’agit
pas de renverser — cela reviendrait finalement au même — mais de déranger, d’altérer, à partir d’un ‘dehors’ soustrait, pour une part, à sa loi” (67). The idea is for women to infiltrate the masculine discourse in order to introduce what has been repressed, and work from within the system to destabilize it, in a Derridean fashion, that is, as a *bricoleur*.

Commentators have often tried to determine whether the film succeeds at truly destabilizing patriarchal ideology and present Marie as a subject, or whether Marie’s masochistic sexual adventures simply reinforce the economy of male domination. Wilson believes that Breillat has reached her goal: “The film seems to suggest that acting out [Marie’s] masochistic fantasies releases her from her psychological bondage to Paul and lets her discover her own autonomy as female desiring subject, as fertile mother and heroine of a female-scripted drama” (2001: 155). She concludes that “*Romance* frees up the forbidden, for women . . . [T]he experience of sharing [Marie’s] vision, through her sexual metamorphosis, lets sex, cinema and being female feel different” (2001: 157). Wells, on the other hand, is more skeptical. According to her, although the film manages to insist upon “the fundamentally gendered nature of the erotic imaginary . . . [it] does *not* [manage to] bring an exhilarating iconoclastic view of feminine sexuality to the screen” (66). She is ultimately disappointed that unlike Bataille’s literature (often seen in relation to Breillat’s cinema), “[Breillat’s] vision of the erotic is weirdly juiceless, bloodless, disembodied” (66).
John Phillips understands Breillat’s intention to upset the traditional notion of male-centered sexuality: “Romance boldly addresses the representation in film of female pleasure, demythologising the sight of the erect penis on screen” (139). He does not, however, see the film as truly functioning outside male desire: “On the other hand, non-sexist pornography is not just a question of displaying erect penises. Desire must be shown as operating outside a phallicist economy altogether, and Breillat’s film regrettably falls short of this objective” (139).

Georgy Katzarov is the least forgiving of them all. His logic deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

[L]e programme de la jouissance féminine ne peut apparaître que sous les traits de la destruction, de l’avilissement, du déshonneur, de la profanation . . . Son gain est dans la perte . . . Le salut est dans le péché. Ce discours libérateur aux résonances pauliniennes (ou bataillennes) ne laisse nullement s’ouvrir un nouvel horizon du féminin, mais continue de nager exactement dans le même lac judéochrétien d’où il croit sortir, “passer les tabous.” La transgression dont parle Breillat . . . est une simple inversion d’un rapport de forces. Son programme reste parfaitement prisonnier du fantasme masculin quant aux femmes. Et même pire, il semble fait pour le renforcer, en le présentant à la fois sous l’autorité d’une “parole féminine” (personnage et auteur), et dans un régime péremptoire, magistral. (2)

Both Phillips and Katzarov seem bothered by the fact that Breillat’s logic operates within the phallocentric economy from which it ultimately wishes to escape. I believe one can carry out a more fecund reading of the film by asking oneself, not whether or not Romance remains firmly lodged within patriarchy, but how the film destabilizes standard images of women (and men) within the dominant system.
Here again, Irigaray may help us better understand the film and Marie’s journey. In the same essay (“Pouvoir du discours”), Irigaray suggests that women should resort to what she calls “mimétisme” in order to counteract their own subordination: “Il n’est, dans un premier temps, peut-être qu’un seul ‘chemin,’ celui qui est historiquement assigné au féminin: le mimétisme. Il s’agit d’assumer, délibérément, ce rôle. Ce qui est déjà retouner en affirmation une subordination, et, de ce fait, commencer à la déjouer” (73-74). The strategy is for women to deliberately assume a mimetic role. It is through mimesis that women can start appropriating traditional images and definitions of Woman:

Jouer de la mimésis, c’est donc, pour une femme, tenter de retrouver le lieu de son exploitation par le discours, sans s’y laisser simplement réduire. C’est se resoumettre . . . à des “idées,” notamment d’elle, élaborées dans/par une logique masculine, mais pour faire “apparaître,” par un effet de répétition ludique, ce qui devait rester occulté. (74)

Evidently, this process can only be possible if one stays within the dominant patriarchal discourse. I believe that Breillat applies Irigaray’s idea of mimesis to the cinematic discourse of Romance. Throughout the film, Marie “acts out” three specific fictional constructs of Woman: the virgin, the whore and, finally, the mother. As recommended by Irigaray, she deliberately chooses to assume these historically-assigned roles, and exposes them. These roles are color-coded and, although overlapping at times, fairly easy to identify.

The film’s photography (courtesy of Greek cinematographer Yorgos Arvanitis) is stunningly beautiful, and colors are used symbolically to account for changes in Marie’s life. Colors are crucial in Breillat’s work, and she always
chooses them meticulously. In A ma soeur!’s screenplay, she mentions that the swimming pool’s tiles are “bleu turquoise” (Breillat 2001: 14) and that Anaïs’s bath towel will either be “vert Véronèse” or “jaune soufre” (18). In Romance, the use of colors was so carefully planned that the director admits three meanings (“sens”) to the film. The first one came with writing the script, the second one with the use of colors, the third one during editing. The result is a film that is inevitably full of contradictions, much like a baked Alaska: “Je dirais que le film a un côté comme une omelette norvégienne (glacé/brûlant)” (“Les Grandes rencontres” 2). Wells appropriately calls the beginning of the film the “white phase” (55). Paul lives in an “antiseptic white on white” (Sklar 24) apartment and the color palate of his clothes includes white, off white, beige, and tan tones. Marie’s attachment to him is made clear by her dressing exclusively in white dresses, skirts and tops. The screenplay describes the apartment thusly: “La salle de bain est très zen, très blanche et froide, sans un objet qui traîne . . . Marie entre dans la chambre qui est blanche aussi, clinique et immaculée. Et c’est comme si toute cette blancheur refermait sur elle son piège de glace” (Breillat 1999: 29). Here, the color white creates an oppressive atmosphere that insists upon the couple’s lack of sexual intimacy. Paul sleeps in a white T-shirt and boxer shorts made of cotton (a fabric she abhors) and stops Marie in mid-fellatio: “Non! . . . Arrête ou tout est terminé entre nous.”

Despite her extreme frustration, Marie refuses to completely relinquish her relationship with Paul. Although the couple does not “officially” live together
(Marie has her own apartment that the spectator never sees), she still comes home to Paul every night, and continues to (however unhappily) “[inhabit] the ‘virgin’ half of the virgin/whore dichotomy” (Wells 55). She does decide, however, to commence her emancipation, and it is in Paul’s white convertible that Marie drives into the night, into her first sexual encounter with a man she seduces in a bar. As the sun rises, Marie and Paolo kiss and fondle each other in Paul’s car, and decide to meet the next night. Paolo’s name and apparel (he is wearing a white suit) is a sexually active, Mediterranean version of Paul. He allows Marie to escape her forced virginal state, and step into deliberate sexual debasement. As they are having sex the next night in Paolo’s bedroom, Marie’s interior voice underscores her desire to reach purity through lewd anonymous sex: “Ceux qui me baisent, je veux pas les voir, pas les regarder. J’ai envie d’être un trou. Un gouffre. Plus c’est béant, plus c’est obscène, plus ça doit être moi, l’intimité de moi . . . C’est métaphysique: je disparais à proportion de la bite qui prétend me prendre. Je m’évide. C’est ça, ma pureté.” Like Lili before her, Marie can only conceive of her symbolic deflowering (after a long period of chastity) with a stranger she does not love, and at whom she refuses to look.

The amber-colored lighting of Paolo’s room — which Clouzot calls “[la] chambre dorée de l’amour ‘transcendé’” (82) — contrasts with the arctic feeling associated with Paul’s bedroom in the earlier scene, and suggests that Marie has taken her first step into becoming a “whore." But as she leaves Paolo’s house and takes the footbridge to the courtyard (an almost exact replica of the outside
of Paul’s apartment), she realizes that her plan to have loveless sex has failed. She has developed feelings for Paolo, and decides to terminate the relationship, not to go back to her old ways, but to continue her search for sexual domination with someone else. Her own red car (awaiting her in Paolo’s yard) confirms Marie’s resolution.

It is Robert (her school’s principal) whom Marie chooses to fulfill her desire to be sullied. In many ways, he is the ideal candidate. Robert is everything Paul is not: not particularly attractive (as he says himself), but out to please women. According to him, he has “possessed” ten thousand of them. His apartment is as warm as Paul’s is glacial: “Robert est filmé dans un appartement de bois aux dominantes rouges et brun. Le contraire du blanc hygiénique de la chambre de Paul et Marie. Un appartement plein de livres, de sculptures magiques, de miroirs . . . Il est l’incarnation du charnel, de l’esprit” (Clouzot 82). The rest is easy to figure out. Marie goes from wearing a simple white belted dress in the first bondage scene to being clad in a dramatic “flame-red couture gown” (Wells 58), her hair out of a ponytail for the first time, in the second (much more light-hearted) domination scene.

There is no sexual intercourse between the two, and it is Marie’s (not Robert’s) sexual pleasure that is confirmed during their second encounter. Marie is gagged, tied up and her legs are spread apart by a metal bar. The camera records the abundant, syrupy liquid left on Robert’s two fingers after he inserted them, in close-up, into Marie’s vagina; a confirmation of Marie’s arousal and an
innovative female equivalent of the “money shot” (a tight shot of an ejaculating erect penis) in pornographic films that Linda Williams calls “[the] confirming close-up of what is after all only male orgasm” (1989: 101). This unusual scene (replicated exactly in Anatomie de l’enfer) provides palpable evidence of Marie’s ravishment. Her engaged desire to expose her body, including her genitals, makes her an accomplice, rather than a victim, of Robert’s sadomasochistic fantasies.

Wilson sees the film, including the two domination scenes with Robert, as particularly disruptive of the traditional active male gaze/passive female object of the gaze cinematic dichotomy:

Breillat’s film disrupts this economy of vision in various ways. She shows a woman, Marie, actively looking: the subject of her own desire. Yet she also shows her making herself an object of desire, putting her body on display and allowing it to be put on display. This exhibitionist complicity itself works to trouble active and passive roles in viewing relations. (151)

After she comes home from a fulfilling rendezvous with Robert (which culminated in a lavish vodka and caviar dinner at a local Russian restaurant), Marie looks as flamboyant as the red dress she is wearing. She looks like a splash of blood against Paul’s white décor. Not surprisingly, it is as Marie starts to gain independence from Paul that the latter becomes sexually aroused by her (for the first time in the story) and initiates sex: “Caresse-moi.” During their brief intercourse, she reluctantly takes on an active role that goes against her Irigarayan mimetic strategy. She straddles Paul and resents his passive nature:
“[T]u fais rien. Tu prends ma place, t'es la Femme. Moi je suis ton Mec, j'te baise.”

It is difficult not to think of Luis Buñuel’s *Belle de jour* (1967) when discussing *Romance*, and virtually every critic has compared Marie’s character to Séverine (Catherine Deneuve), a bourgeois woman imprisoned in an unconsummated marriage who, taunted by sadomasochistic fantasies, becomes a daytime prostitute. The surrealist, dreamlike sequence at the end of *Romance* (Marie attends Paul’s funeral with her newborn baby in a black dress, her face partially covered by a black veil) is reminiscent of Séverine’s fantasy scene in Camargue (the region where Paul does his photo shoot in the opening of Breillat’s film). Clouzot recognizes *Belle de jour* as Breillat’s model for the film — she has often stated that Buñuel in general and *Viridiana* (1961) in particular gave her the desire to become a filmmaker (Vasse 201) — but underscores the fundamental differences between the two women:

*A priori*, les femmes se ressemblent. Elles ne sont pas caressées par l’homme avec qui elles vivent. Elles sont en manque. Mais leur chemin vers l’amour est à l’opposé. Séverine ne peut accepter l’amour de son mari, car tout désir est refoulé chez elle . . . Marie, en revanche, s’exprime par la parole, dit sa douleur et baise, car elle n’en peux plus de ne pas être baisée . . . Séverine fait “comme si” elle ne s’était pas fait tripoter ou sodomiser, elle remet ses habits de grande bourgeoise et vit dans le déni. Marie agit sa souffrance: elle sort, elle drague, elle baise de son plein gré. (78)

The end result of the two women’s tactic is also opposed. Séverine resorts to prostitution in order to find sexual fulfillment with her husband at the end of the
film, whereas Marie turns into a (symbolic) whore for herself, and ends up alone (or possibly with Robert).

There is one more of Woman’s allotted roles Marie must occupy: that of the mother. Ironically, she becomes pregnant after an abruptly interrupted, orgasm-free intercourse with Paul. In reaction to Marie’s complaint about having to do all the work (“je suis ton Mec, je te baise”), Paul violently pushes her off the bed. Marie’s interior monologue likens her getting pregnant with the Immaculate Conception of the other Marie: “Vous le croyez? C’est comme ça qu’il ma collé enceinte, ce sale con d’égoïste… sans aucune jouissance, même de sa part. Me faire le coup de la Vierge Marie, le goutte à goutte séminal.” After Paul decides to marry her, Marie returns to her old virginal state, as Wells notices: “We see vestimentary evidence of Marie’s purification once she becomes pregnant with Paul’s child, when she reverts to an all-white wardrobe” (59). But her status as “virgin mother” is only temporary. After she realizes that Paul will not change, despite their future child, and the official validation of their union (a particular scene in a nightclub confirms her fears), Marie turns into a castrating mother and kills Paul before he has a chance to meet their son (her wardrobe goes from white to black, the color she wears in the epilogue). Patriarchal discourse has been disrupted, but not eradicated, as a few commentators have suggested. Robert’s presence at the hospital where Marie is about to give birth is clearly there to show the spectator that he has become a necessary and helpful father substitute to her child.
The famous bordello scene, which occurs shortly before the birth of Marie’s child, perfectly epitomizes the mother/whore dichotomy, the separation between mind and body that Lili already articulated in 36 fillette. The scenario describes the setting this way:

La maison est disposée de manière que les corps des pensionnaires soient coupés en deux par un mur. Côté tête, se tiennent les fiancés des demoiselles, des jeunes gens charmants et bien élevés parmi lesquels Paul ne dépare pas . . . Côté sexe, c’est comme un paquebot rouillé dans un Port de l’Angoisse, où un rodeur, un homme qui ressemble à M. le Maudit déambule seul, attiré par ces cons de femmes. (Breillat 1999: 65-66)

The white walls of the hospital (reminiscent of Paul’s apartment) on one side contrast with the warm, fiery colors of the whorehouse (much like Robert’s den) on the other. With two consecutive shots, Breillat breaks down the apparently irreconcilable division between motherhood and sexual activity. A close-up shot of a man, bordello-side, ejaculating on Marie’s belly is replaced by another close-up shot of a gynecologist applying a thick coat of ultrasound gel on Marie’s abdomen (incidentally, the first of the two shots was cut from the British version of the video/DVD, thus invalidating the effect of the juxtaposition).

In February 1999, two months before Romance’s theatrical release in France, Catherine Breillat went to a colloquium on Woman in contemporary cinema in Tehran, Iran, where she gave a speech entitled “De la femme et la morale au cinéma, de l’exploitation de son aspect physique, de sa place dans le cinéma: comme auteur, comme actrice, ou comme sujet.” There, she reiterated
the well-known equation between the cinema and (male) desire. Of the myths of
the “femme fatale” and the “pinup,” she argued:

Cette exploitation-là de l’image de la femme . . . n’est pas la vérité de la
femme, mais elle est la vérité du fantasme . . . Elle n’existe qu’en tant que
tentation. Elle n’est que le regard masculin, regard du désir et de la peur
d’une incommunicabilité inavouée. Peur qui sacralise la vamp . . . [et] la
désigne comme moralement mauvaise.” (Breillat 1999: 13)

She pursues by quoting a film which, in addition to Belle de jour, is essential to
an understanding of Romance: “Eternelle impasse entre La Maman et la Putain,

terme générique qui situe la peur phénoménale de l’homme devant la femme, et
titre de l’inoubliable film de Jean Eustache, plus averti, lui, des non-dits
psychanalytiques” (13). Breillat’s fascination for Eustache’s 1973 new wave-
inspired masterpiece is well-known (she used the film at A ma soeur!’s auditions)
and hardly surprising: La Maman et la putain recounts the dilemma of Alexandre
(Jean-Pierre Léaud), who is torn between his love for Marie the mother figure
(Bernadette Lafond) and Veronika the hedonist (Françoise Lebrun). Like
Romance, the film challenges the credence of the mother and whore myths, and
casts a critical glance on the male character’s inadequacy.

Romance, as well as most of the director’s œuvre, fights with all its might
against binarisms, against an either/or, black and white, good and evil, cold and
hot, mother and whore world Breillat associates with androcentric capitalism and
the Judeo-Christian legacy: “C’est que le vrai monde, c’est la confrontation de
deux choses qui rationnellement ne vous paraissent pas co-exister. Par exemple:
le désir de souillure et le désir de pureté; et au cinéma on peut le montrer ça. On
voit que la réalité du monde ce n’est pas l’un ou l’autre. C’est l’un et l’autre” (“Les Grandes rencontres” 2). Despite most critics’ claims, I am convinced that the experience of watching Marie’s cathartic journey can be both enjoyable and empowering, but only if one is willing, like Marie herself, to celebrate paradoxes and come to terms with life’s contradictions. One has to be prepared to take a generous bite of this baked Alaska, and get over the fear of hurting one’s teeth.

4.3 One Soul, Two Bodies: Sex and Death by Proxy in A ma soeur!

With Anaïs, the heroine of her next feature film, Breillat leaves behind the proverbial cinematic representations of Woman portrayed (and problematized) in Romance. Her arguably most accomplished, most mature work to date A ma soeur! defamiliarizes its audience more than ever in offering an unprecedented portrayal of a prepubescent, overweight adolescent girl. Although fairly well reviewed by critics, and far less sexually explicit than Romance, the film is no stranger to controversy. Fat Girl (the original title chosen by Breillat, which remained the North-American title of the film) was banned by the Ontario Film Review Board on the grounds that it offended "contemporary provincial moral standards" (the ban was eventually lifted in 2003). It was also chided by critics and spectators alike for its allegedly shocking, haphazard and alienating ending.

While it bears striking similarities with her earlier “virgin films,” the story is unique in Breillat’s corpus in that it focuses on the relationship between two teenage sisters, the corpulent thirteen-year-old Anaïs (Anaïs Reboux) and the
slender, conventionally beautiful fifteen-year-old Elena (Roxane Mesquida). Ginette Vincendeau commends the film for the straightforward portrayal of its young character: “[The film engages] with contemporary feminist concerns about body image. Breillat’s filming of the overweight Anaïs is both flatly realistic and sympathetic, demonstrating the director’s sensitivity to the outrageous anxieties provoked by our culture’s idealisation of a particular body image, incarnated here by Elena” (2001: 18). Perhaps the most striking example of the film’s non-exploitative attitude toward Anaïs is the second scene, which takes place at an outdoor café (she is sitting across the table from Elena and her future lover and silently observes the nascent couple), when the camera blamelessly records the young girl as she savors a giant banana split sundae. The absence of judgment from the mise-en-scène stands in contrast to the parents’ persistent comments that she should eat less.

For those familiar with Breillat’s work in general and 36 fillette in particular, A ma soeur!’s fabric is easily recognizable: summertime, a vacation town on the Atlantic coast of France, two siblings, two derelict parents, a male object of desire. The bourgeois family Pingot is staying in a comfortable vacation villa (with a private swimming pool) which replaces the cramped trailer of Lili’s working class parents. It is in the sisters’ common bedroom that Elena has her first sexual experience with twenty-something Italian law student Fernando (Libero De Rienzo), under Anaïs’ watchful eyes. Both Elena, the deflowered victim, and Anaïs, the vicarious observer, will walk out of the experience seriously damaged.
Vincendeau sees the two sisters as a divided version of Breillat’s earlier heroine: “Whereas in her 36 fillette . . . Breillat combined in 14-year-old Lili . . . an adolescent’s awkwardness and burgeoning sex appeal, here these traits are split between A ma soeur!’s two central characters” (2001: 18). In the screenplay, Breillat defines the two sisters as “une âme à deux corps”: “C’est le syndrome des soeurs, qui ont du mal à avoir une identité à elles seules. Ce que fait l’une, l’autre le ressent . . . C’est une relation fusionnelle, et presque confusionnelle: d’ailleurs, dans la réalité, les adultes confondent souvent les prénoms des frères ou des soeurs” (Breillat 2001: 8). The “split” between the two sisters goes far beyond their contrasting physical attributes. Their viewpoints on the sexual act could not be more radically opposed.

Anaïs shares Lili’s sentiments about virginity, and considers it an insufferable burden. In the first scene, a surprisingly matter-of-fact discussion between the two sisters, the youngest one insists that the “first time” should only occur with a total stranger and adds: “De toutes façons, je voudrais qu’il y ait de première fois pour personne. Que pas un mec puisse se vanter de m’avoir eu vierge” (Breillat 2001: 22). As early as the film’s first minute, Anaïs shatters all glamorous myths about the deflowering act as a beautiful, amorous exchange. As she will demonstrate in the unforgettable swimming pool scene in which she goes back and forth between two imaginary lovers (personified by a ladder and a wooden pillar), Anaïs refuses to believe in exclusive and unconditional love. Elena shrugs off her comments, and associates them with Anaïs’ emerging
puberty. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Elena has a more romanticized opinion of what her own first sexual encounter should be like. She will be proven wrong.

There are two sex scenes between Elena and Fernando. The first one lasts for a monumental twenty-five minutes (roughly one-third of the film). Saying that it is unerotic would be an understatement. It is an awkward, prolix, horizontal tête-à-tête that reveals to the spectator Elena’s vacillation between fear of the sexual act and her romantic desire to please the one she “loves.” More importantly, it unmasks the despicable character of Fernando’s “argumentation,” his unremitting persistence to convince Elena that she must concede. Linda Ruth Williams calls his determination “almost a textbook guide for boys on how to get inside a girl’s knickers, with arguments ranging from ‘I’ll stay on the edge’ to ‘sodomy isn’t real sex’” (2001: 40). Frankly, the outrageousness of Fernando’s manipulation would be laughable if placed in another context. Here, it takes on a tragic character, as Elena, who still refuses vaginal sex, finally agrees to being sodomized (“Toutes les filles le font par derrière, ça compte pas . . . elles peuvent dire qu’elles ont jamais couché avec personne . . . C’est une preuve d’amour, si tu m’aimes vraiment comme je t’aime,” Fernando argues).

The scene is played out in “real time,” as most of Breillat’s love scenes since 36 fillette. Composed mainly of a series of sequence shots put back to back, the editing is kept to a bare minimum. Instead, the camera frames the lovers in medium shots, occasionally zooming in to frame them from the waist up.
The absence of closeups of particular body parts avoids the familiar fragmentation of women’s bodies in classical cinema. Prior to the sexual act (one could refer to it as the “courting period”), Elena and Fernando are shown from every angle of the bed thanks to a sophisticated circular tracking shot, a both lulling and dizzying movement that confirms the hypnotic effects of Fernando’s arguments and the inevitability of what is to follow (Breillat used a similar to and fro circular shot in two specific scenes of *Parfait amour!*: the first conversation between Frédérique and Christophe in the garden and the later restaurant scene).

Five minutes into the conversation, the camera completes its first journey around the bed, and reminds the spectator that the two lovers are not alone: Anaïs appears at the top-right corner of the frame. A few minutes later, Fernando finally manages to convince Elena that, unlike his previous conquests, he will continue to respect her even after they make love. Anaïs’ active gaze, which becomes more present in the latter part of the scene, is confirmed by a closeup shot of her watching the couple as they are getting ready to engage in sex. Elena’s corpse-like body is naked from the waist down, and as Fernando enters the frame the spectator catches a glimpse of his oversized erect penis (in fact, a prosthesis, as clarified in *Sex is Comedy* [2002]). The younger sister places her left hand across her face, but cannot help but watch the scene unfold between her fingers (the gesture itself is evocative of Breillat’s own behavior during
shooting, as she consistently places a scarf across her face which hides all but her eyes).

Anaïs’ forced position as both witness and voyeur is perhaps even more unsettling for the spectator than the sex itself (and the mental manipulation that leads up to it). Vincendeau notes:

> The camera is firmly on Anaïs’ face as Fernando penetrates Elena anally. Her gaze makes us uneasy for two reasons. First, she reminds us we are intruding on an intimate scene, and second, we are aware that she is too young to be witnessing this. A recurring motif in the film (including the very first and last images) is Anaïs’ accusing stare at the camera. (2001: 19)

In the second sex scene (much shorter in length), Elena, bedazzled by a sumptuous ring given to her by Fernando as a sign of their commitment to one another, agrees to vaginal sex ("ce soir je vais me donner à lui," she romantically declares to her sister). Given Anaïs’ lucidity when it comes to relationships between the sexes (she advises Elena not to accept the jewel, whose value is disproportionate to the nature of their rapport), her ringside presence at the deflowering of her sister is all the more noteworthy because the scene is presented from her point of view. Whereas Anaïs occupied the periphery of the frame in the first scene, she is now in the foreground, turned toward the camera, while the couple’s lower bodies are visible in the background (they are positioned at the same top-right corner as Anaïs was earlier).

As Williams explains, Anaïs is much more than an involuntary spectator:

> "Though she secretly watches her sister’s deflowering, this is no simple essay on surreptitious voyeurism; instead she functions like a Greek chorus, part witness,
part touchstone, part judge” (2001: 40). In the preceding scene, Anaïs shares her opinion on her sister’s relationship with Fernando. Before reiterating that she would never let someone she loves take her virginity, she opines that anal and oral sex (which Elena performed on her lover at the end of the first scene) are not any different from vaginal penetration: “De toutes façons entre ce que tu as déjà fait avec lui et ça… y’a aucune différence morale à mon avis…”

Yet the mise-en-scène suggests otherwise. While Anaïs was facing the lovers' bed in the first scene, her body is now turned the opposite direction. Instead of watching, she is crying uncontrollably: she is mourning both her and her sister’s loss of innocence. Anaïs and the spectator’s only indication that the deed is done is the sound of Fernando’s (not Elena’s) climax:

“Symptomatiquement, on n’entend que sa jouissance à lui, tandis qu’Elena n’émet aucun son, étant, elle, en deçà du plaisir, portée, grâce à la pierre précieuse, dans les sphères silencieuses du sentiment” (Vasse 44). Given the lack of sexual pleasure on Elena’s part, it is significant that Breillat decided to cut a scene from the original screenplay in which Elena describes to Anaïs the “exquisite and devouring sensation” she felt in Fernando’s arms (Breillat 2001: 70). Instead, the two sisters watch a far less romantic 1960s interview of Laura Betti (Pier Paolo Pasolini’s favorite actress, who plays Fernando’s mother in A ma soeur!) in which she differentiates between “le sexe” and “les problèmes sexuels” (the latter of which should be investigated, according to her) and advises her interlocutor to read Simone de Beauvoir.
The black and white footage foreshadows Laura Betti’s flesh and blood arrival in the very next scene, which will turn Elena’s sexual experience into a sexual issue. After Betti’s character announces to Elena’s mother that Fernando stole the invaluable ring from her, the vacation is abruptly cut short. The mother and two daughters pack up and leave for Paris the same day (the father had to fly back early to resolve supposedly pressing business matters). In the car, Elena’s mother, stunned at her daughter’s possible loss of virginity, warns her that she will be examined by a doctor as soon as they get home. Reality finally hits Elena, who had previously ignored her younger sister’s various warnings. Elena sheds her first tears as the car exits the resort village. Up until now, it was Anaïs who had suffered, by proxy, from her sister’s choices. Evidence of Anaïs’ emotional trauma includes her solitary withdrawal into the pool the morning after Elena’s first night with Fernando (the inertness of her floating body makes her appear lifeless), her morbid singing and suicidal behavior at the beach, and her weeping in the last sex scene. Anaïs’ distress intensifies on their way back to Paris. She asks for the car to be stopped and vomits on the side of the road, while Elena does her best to comfort her (Madame Pingot, on the other hand, does not move a finger).

It is after they get on the road that the three women are propelled into sheer horror. The film’s shocking climax is prefaced by a long, eerie journey on a truck-filled French autoroute, which leads the spectator to believe that the Pingot family will die in a car accident (it has been established earlier that the mother
hates to drive). But the distressing trip Breillat calls "vertige horizontal" (2001: 8) and Clouzot compares to a road safety commercial (101) can hardly prepare us for what follows. Night has fallen, and an exhausted Madame Pingot stops at a rest area to take a nap. A man breaks into their car while she and her older daughter are asleep, brutally kills Elena with an axe and strangles the mother to death, all this in complete silence and under Anaïs' unblinking eyes. Her twice expressed wish for first-time sex without love will be satisfied in the most horrifying way. The man gets her out of the car, leads her to a wooded area and rapes her. At dawn, Anaïs is escorted out of the woods by the police, and vehemently denies the rape. The film ends in a freeze-frame of her defiant face that Vincendeau sees as another reference to Truffaut's Les 400 coups (2001: 20). It may also be a salute to 36 fillette's Lili, another marginal character who manages to lose her virginity to a stranger.

Like the brutal murder in Parfait amour!, A ma soeur! s characters and chilling ending were inspired by a true story; in fact, two true stories Breillat wanted to put together:

J'avais en tête, depuis plusieurs années, un fait divers. Ce qui m'avait frappé était tout autant le fait divers en lui-même que la manière dont il était relaté par la presse. On cherchait visiblement à lui conférer un sens moral, pour le comprendre et l'accepter. Je me suis dit qu'il fallait raconter ces histoires autrement. Puis, un jour, autour d'une piscine dans un hôtel, j'ai assisté à une petite scène: une adolescente boulotte qui, en faisant des va-et-vient dans l'eau, parlait toute seule comme si elle disait des mots d'amour à des garçons imaginaires. Il y avait aussi sa famille, sa soeur ainée. J'ai commencé à imaginer une petite fille comme elle dans ce fait divers. (Lepetit 2001: 4)
Not only does the ending strip the story of all sense of morality or redemption (Anaïs keeps the truth to herself, and the police/law are left powerless), it challenges the very definition of rape as we know it: first, by suggesting that sexual assault may have been the solution to Anaïs’ wish; second, by confronting two possible ways of losing one’s virginity, and forcing the spectator to realize that Elena’s experience is possibly just as traumatizing and devastating as Anaïs’.

The shock value of this ending did not sit well with most critics. Vincendeau does not deny the fact that men exercise violence against women on a daily basis, but argues that “the constant reiteration in Breillat’s cinema of such events . . . threaten[s] to make her films simply grim, repetitive and punitive. It has been argued that female frustration is the subject of Breillat’s films, but the films themselves can provoke frustration in the spectator” (2001: 19-20). Despite an otherwise positive review, Williams’ tone turns cynical when discussing the final scenes: “Perhaps Breillat, reflecting the mismatch between her reputation for shock and A ma soeur!’s hitherto relative sobriety, felt that she needed to do something up to the ante” (2001: 40). Charles Tesson’s reading is perhaps the most critical, and certainly the least insightful: “Le monstre surgit, émasculé de ses pulsions, car il obéit robotiquement aux ordres du scénario . . . Il massacre les deux personnages en première ligne et se ‘contente’ de violer la soeur. La morale est limpide . . . : quand on est donné comme non désirable, un viol est toujours bon à prendre” (82).
Although there is an undeniable genre shift from the rest of the film, I believe it would be erroneous to see the ending as random and arbitrary. The horror inspired by the stranger’s unspeakable acts is deeply rooted in the rest of the film, from Fernando’s psychological rape of Elena to Anaïs’ macabre “crow song” about her rotting heart being eaten away by a flock of famished birds, to the cadaveric postures of both sisters at various stages of the narrative. It is also rooted in another film about a marginalized young rape victim, Robert Bresson’s *Mouchette* (1967).

In an interview with Stéphane Goudet and Claire Vassé (published in translation on the US Criterion DVD leaflet), Breillat confesses that after watching *Mouchette* while shooting *A ma soeur!*, she realized that Anaïs Reboux had a similar look to Bresson’s fourteen-year-old actress (Nadine Nortier). After noticing that in the rape episode, Mouchette was holding the rapist in her arms, she decided to duplicate the gesture in *A ma soeur!* Vasse notices other parallelisms between Breillat and Bresson’s rape scenes besides the embrace:

> Il est intéressant de remarquer que Breillat reprend de cette scène de Bresson le décor des bois noirs . . . Dans *Mouchette* comme dans *A ma soeur!*, le viol . . . introduit un changement brutal de temporalité, une rupture de trame . . . On quitte le jour pour la nuit . . . Dans les deux cas, le viol abordé sous l’angle du magnétisme sexuel propulse les personnages féminins vers une destinée qui les émancipe des quolibets et des sarcasmes dont elle avaient jusqu’ici souffert. (128)

And similarities do not end here. Mouchette’s and Anaïs’ lives are so analogous that traces of their sisterhood can be detected long before *A ma soeur!’s* epilogue: a neglectful father, often away on business, a sibling to whom they are
profoundly attached, a mother who ends up dying. They both suffer the humiliation of being slapped in public by a parent (Mouchette by her father at the village fair, Anaïs by her mother in front of Laura Betti’s character and by her sister in front of Fernando).

More importantly, there is a striking parallel between Mouchette’s final suicide scene and A ma soeur!’s beach episode. Shortly after her mother’s death, Mouchette’s walk through the village is interrupted by an old woman who takes pity on her. She gives her linens to bury her mother in, and a new dress for the young girl to wear. In the next scene, Mouchette walks toward the river where she decides to end her life. She is hugging the dress as she lies down on the ground, and rolls into the water to her death. In A ma soeur!, Anaïs is wearing the new dress she bought in the previous scene with her mother and sister when she walks toward the ocean. After singing her crow song, the camera cuts to a long shot of Anaïs as she lies down on the sand and lets the waves drench her and her dress. The stillness of her body (which Clouzot compares to the more familiar sight of a dying beached whale) coupled with the doom-laden character of the earlier song suggest that, like Mouchette before her, she may have decided to end her life.

There is one more element that profoundly connects the two films: Mouchette and Anaïs both refuse to admit that they have been raped. When the police escort her out of the woods into the parking lot, Anaïs denies what the spectator has just witnessed. “Elle dit qu’elle n’a pas été violée,” one gendarme
says to another. “Si vous ne voulez pas me croire, ne me croyez pas,” Anaïs ripostes. When interrogated by a villager (who suspects the rape) about what happened the night before between her and Arsène her rapist, Mouchette defiantly declares: “Monsieur Arsène est mon amant!” This repudiation allows both teenagers to hold on to what they perceive to be their truth, and to escape the moralizing world of adults and its consequences.

With A ma soeur!, Breillats delivers once again a powerfully corrosive piece of cinema in which she reveals the devastating effects of mendacious male seduction techniques and the various ways in which women respond to them. If critics often concentrate on the joylessness of Breillat’s vision of the sexual act and on the dubious, problematic character of the film’s logic, they rarely find time to appreciate the gratifying effects her cinema can produce. As Vincendeau reminds us: “If Breillat’s women do not know pleasure, her cinema affords plenty. After the naturalistic simplicity and uncluttered interiors of the film’s first two-thirds . . . the motorway drive back to Paris is a model of edge-of-seat anxiety” (2001: 20). The elaborate, carefully-chosen chromatic palette — mainly composed of “raw” colors such as greens, bright yellows and oranges that Clouzot contrasts to the “cooked” colors of Romance (99) — together with the striking photography of Yorgos Arvanatis make for an aesthetically pleasing work. On the narrative side, one should point out the oft-forgotten humoristic touches (notably, Anaïs’ seductive va-et-vient in the swimming pool and Laura Betti’s unexpected visit), biting dialogues and valorous performances of its
actors. It is Anaïs Reboux, however, who stands out from the crowd. The violent intensity of her last frozen gaze is bound to stay with you long after the theater lights have come back on.

From her very first feature, Une Vraie jeune fille, to her latest Anatomie de l'enfer, Catherine Breillat’s films have been consumed with the same obsession: speaking the formerly unutterable language of female desire. It is by following a consistent logic of both aesthetic and narrative transgression of cinematic rules that her cinema has found a unique (albeit solitary) voice. Her reputation as a wanton provocatrice follows her everywhere, and responses to her films have often been violent and indignant, regardless of the sex of the viewer or critic. Testimony is mixed among feminist commentators. Carrie Tarr is wary of Breillat’s vision of sexual difference as a rigid concept. She writes of Romance: “Though Breillat’s aestheticization of perverse heterosexual sex is both thoughtful and disturbing, Marie’s quest for fulfillment is not empowering for spectators of either sex who believe that gender and sexuality are culturally constructed and subject to change” (104-105). In her Beauvoirean reading of the same film, Liz Constable rejects both Tarr’s and Emma Wilson’s visions of Marie’s sexual experiences as “perverse” or “degrading,” and argues: “Breillat’s film suggests that [Marie’s surrender to another], unbecoming as it might first appear, is nevertheless often significant to the transformative process of becoming a sexual
subject for women, and to the articulation of desire without masochism for women” (693).

Among Breillat’s quasi unconditional supporters are French film critics, especially those writing for Cahiers du cinéma. Vincendeau wonders why this (predominantly male) crowd deems her such a praiseworthy filmmaker: “The enthusiasm with which the director is championed by the French male critical establishment (not usually noted for its feminist awareness) would suggest that like surrealism, hers is an art aimed at épater rather than to challenge the established bourgeois order” (2001: 20). I would like to give more credit to both Breillat and the French critical world in suggesting that they recognize in her the picture perfect version of an auteur, as indicated by Jean Douchet’s remark (quoted at the beginning of this chapter) that she is a true (“authentique”) female cinéaste. Anne Gillain recently likened Breillat’s démarche to that of the Cahiers group: “The sharpness of her polemical gift brings to mind the young Turks confronting the old order in the 1960s. Like them, Catherine Breillat bases her work on a personal autobiographical vision; like them, she writes her own scripts and dialogues. This explains the coherence and remarkable continuity of her work” (205).

Through my reading of 36 fillette, Romance and A ma soeur!, I hope to have shown that Breillat’s films, although fiercely individualistic and original, also engage in a dialogue with other auteur films made around the time of the French New Wave: Truffaut’s Les 400 coups (1959), Buñuel’s Belle de jour (1967) and
Bresson’s *Mouchette* (1967). Breillat admits a debt to French auteurist cinema, and once declared that in addition to Buñuel, Kazan and Bergman (the “three masters”), her favorite two French filmmakers are Robert Bresson and Jean-Luc Godard (Clouzot 151-152). In fact, it was Godard she had in mind for the role of Robert, the school principal in *Romance*, but the latter kindly declined the offer (Clouzot 168-169).

The director’s attachment to the French auteurist tradition is also revealed in the texts she chose for *A ma soeur!’s* auditions: an excerpt from Jean Eustache’s *La Maman et la putain* and Eric Rohmer’s *Pauline à la plage* (1983). Yet the boldness with which she portrays desire on screen is rooted outside the new wave tradition, particularly in post-1968 works such as Just Jaeckin’s *Histoire d’O* (1975), Bernardo Bertolucci’s 1972 *Dernier tango à Paris* (in which Breillat and her sister Marie-Hélène have cameos) and, most of all, Nagisa Oshima’s *Ai no corrida* (*In the Realm of the Senses*, 1976). Finally, and despite the director’s refusal to be associated with the feminist tradition, there is no denying that the very fabric of her work, although “colored” by Breillat herself, has been woven by women who have fought to be heard, from Simone de Beauvoir to Luce Irigaray, from Agnès Varda to Chantal Akerman.

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1 Douchet appeared in Truffaut’s *Les 400 coups*, Godard’s *A bout de souffle*, Eustache’s *La Maman et la putain* and Rivette’s *Céline et Julie vont en bateau*. He also directed a segment of *Paris vu par* and appeared in another segment of the same series.

2 See Carrie Tarr’s *Cinema and the Second Sex* and Françoise Audé’s *Cinéma d’elles* for further evidence of the impact of women directors in recent French and Francophone cinema.
The following two lines are also memorable. When her brother comments on her skimpy outfit, Lili replies: “Quand on peut pas ébahir, je te signale qu’il faut quand même s’arranger pour choquer.” When Maurice, desperate to have sex with her, proposes to pay her in exchange for sexual favors, she retorts: “Je ne veux pas coûter, je veux compter.”
As in the work of Catherine Breillat, evidence of François Ozon’s cinematic inspirations can be found throughout his films, some of which are saturated with intertextual references. Yet being an overt cinephile does not mean making films that are nothing but bland homages to a far-removed cinematic past. Occasionally referred to as the enfant terrible of French cinema, Ozon has in just a few years acquired a solid reputation as an original, successful, provocative (and thought-provoking) filmmaker, both in France and abroad. The speed at which he releases his films (at least one a year) is enough to make him noteworthy. If Ozon’s motion pictures all vary in genre, content and form, they continuously challenge the rules of conventional cinema by tackling taboo issues of various kinds, including same-sex desire. Ozon does not confine himself to gay issues, but their recurrence, coupled with the director’s self-proclaimed homosexuality, make his status in French filmmaking fairly unusual, and therefore, worthy of attention.
Born in Paris in 1967 (shortly after the decline of the *Nouvelle Vague*), Ozon studied cinema both at the Université de Paris I, where he obtained a master’s degree in film studies, and at the prestigious Parisian film school FEMIS (previously known as the IDHEC), under the tutelage of legendary director Eric Rohmer and *Cahiers du cinéma* critic/filmmaker/actor Jean Douchet (whom he chose for the part of the psychotherapist in his first full-length film). During this period, and throughout the 1990s, he tested his skills with an impressive number of shorts (a total of fourteen), and a 52-minute *moyen métrage* (*Regarde la mer*, 1997). He experimented with super-8, video, 16mm and 35mm, until *Sitcom*, his first feature film, in 1998. He has not stopped working since then, and has shot an additional two shorts, and six more feature films. His latest feature, *Le Temps qui reste* (starring Jeanne Moreau) opens at the 2005 Cannes Film festival.

The beginning of Ozon’s career coincides with the well-documented revival of the *auteur* in 1990s French cinema. Chris Darke notes that “throughout the 1990s a generation of French film-makers has been stubbornly reassessing the myth of the auteur and revitalising its place within an industry and film culture that alternately supports and looks askance at such film-making” (154). The author cites François Ozon (along with Arnaud Desplechin, Cédric Kahn, Catherine Corsini, Pascale Ferran and Gaël Morel) as examples of a group referred to as the *jeune cinéma français*, a more or less youthful, more or less homogeneous congregation of filmmakers who started directing in the late 1980s/early 1990s, and who often graduated from the FEMIS, which Darke
equates to an institutionalized version of the *auteur* spirit of the original *Nouvelle Vague* (157).

Equally well-documented is an increased on-screen visibility of sexual minorities. Kate Ince remarks that “[c]ommentators on French cinema agree that the 1980s and 1990s saw a new increase in screen representations of lesbian, gay and bisexual characters” (90). She argues that the genre known as “the AIDS film,” anticipated in Leos Carax’s *Mauvais sang* (1986) and fully developed in Paul Vecchiali’s *Encore* (1988) and César award winning Cyril Collard’s *Les Nuits fauves* (1992), contributed to the birth of this tendency. Since then, gay, lesbian, bisexual and sexually ambivalent characters have seeped into mainstream, critically acclaimed cinema, such as Josiane Balasko’s *Gazon maudit* (1995), Gabriel Aghion’s *Pédale douce* (1996), Olivier Assayas' *Irma Vep* (1996), Alain Berliner’s *Ma vie en rose* (1997), Benoît Jacquot’s *L’Ecole de la chair* (1998) and Francis Veber’s *Le Placard* (2001), among others. Examples of other directors whose films consistently avoid the confinements of heterocentrism include, in addition to François Ozon, André Téchiné, Patrice Chéreau, Catherine Corsini, and co-directors Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau.

Ozon’s originality lies in his filmmaking style, which belongs to familiar cinematic traditions, but which he renders unfamiliar by carrying them into queer territory, and by mixing up various recognizable genres within a single film. In doing so, he evinces a reticence to conform or fit inside the neatly delineated boundaries of mainstream cinema. Ozon’s works, from the very start,
problematize identity as fixed, and destabilize notions of gender (masculinity, femininity) and sexuality in a daring and explicit fashion. By looking closely at two of his short films, *La Petite mort* (1995) and *Une Robe d’été* (1996), and two of his feature films, *Sitcom* and *8 femmes* (2002), I will highlight both Ozon’s undisguised cinematic influences and profound originality, especially in the ways in which he portrays sexual marginality on screen.

5.1 From Transgression to Liberation: Putting Homosexuality on the Map in *La Petite mort* and *Une Robe d’été*

Long before François Ozon became a successful feature-length film director, he had already taken the short film festival circuit by storm. As early as 1996 (two years before *Sitcom*), Stéphane Malandrin predicted in *Cahiers du cinéma* that the young FEMIS graduate was well on his way to becoming an eminent filmmaker: “Tout festivalier un peu averti miserait sa mère sur l’avenir cinématographique [d’Ozon]” (12). Ozon’s shorts, although very different in length, subject matter, genre and tone, are remarkable in that they manage to make their characters come alive in but a few minutes. Most of the films deal with sexual issues, and often contain an element of surprise, which is either deeply amusing or, conversely, shockingly jaw-dropping. Four-minute-long *Action vérité* (1994), awarded best short by the French Syndicate of Cinema Critics, starts rather innocently as a truth or dare game between four adolescents. The two girls and two boys sit in a circle and perform various predictable acts (well within the context of the game), including same-sex and opposite-sex kissing and fondling.
The result of the last dare, which I dare not reveal here, brings the jolly party to a halt, and the film ends in uncomfortable and complete silence.¹

Scènes de lits was awarded the Prix Panavision at the 1998 Avignon Film Festival. The twenty-five-minute short contains seven brief bed scenes between a variety of couples, and explores their idiosyncrasies and the changes of heart that can occur during sexual encounters. The camera (often placed at the foot of the bed) hardly moves, and often frames each couple in medium shots, thus making the originality of the film more thematic than cinematic. Most couples have never been in bed together before. Each new vignette is announced by a bell ring and a title, and is radically different in tone. A one-of-a-kind prostitute and her john, an older woman and a young man who is sexually attracted to her, an unsettling soap-allergic man and his turned-off date, a Spanish-speaking woman and a Frenchman, a lesbian and her object of desire, two gay men, and a man who prefers sex in the dark and his frustrated would-be lover make for a colorful parade of characters that all manage to take the spectator by surprise. With humor and provocation, Scènes de lit celebrates diversity, and portrays characters of all ages, backgrounds and sexual orientations with compassion and respect. The film is a sample of what Ozon will develop in his full-length films. In addition to its empathetic treatment of homosexuality, it deals with the sexual urges of a mature woman (as in Sous le sable and Swimming Pool), and exposes the often disturbing behavior of humankind (as in most, if not all, his films).
If *Action vérité* and *Scènes de lits* are impressive pieces of short cinema, they remain anecdotal in that they consist more of a succession of “slices of life” than full-fledged narratives. Such is not the case of what I consider to be Ozon’s best two shorts, *La Petite mort* and *Une Robe d’été*. Despite their evident differences, I have chosen to discuss the two in tandem because, as I will explain later, the second film was made in direct response to the first one. *La Petite mort* manages to capture in twenty-six minutes more feelings and ideas than many full-length feature films. It is a powerful portrayal of a taciturn, emotionally unavailable young gay photographer named Paul (François Delaive) who is forced to interrupt his latest artistic project and confront his painful past. Encouraged by his sister Camille (Camille Japy), who runs the family business, he reluctantly agrees to visit his estranged, dying father at the hospital. When the father fails to recognize him, Paul runs away from the room, and begins a journey of self-discovery that will ultimately improve his relationship with both his sister and his loving partner Martial (Martial Jacques). The father dies before the two can reconcile, but after Camille gives her brother an old picture of him on his dad’s lap, the ending suggests that Paul will finally allow himself to leave his torments behind, and move on with his life.

The film opens with a black and white picture of Paul as an infant. The voice-over of a now grownup Paul recollects: “Le jour de ma naissance, mon père était à l’étranger pour un voyage d’affaires.” After seeing the picture of his newborn son, the father allegedly exclaimed: “Ce monstre ne peut pas être mon
fils, il est beaucoup trop laid.” As an adult, Paul has been trying to (re-)create his own interpretation of photographic beauty. His current project is to take photographs of various men (including himself and his lover) at the exact moment of ejaculation and orgasm, in an attempt to visually capture their ephemeral “little death.” Adam Bingham sees a direct correlation between the baby picture and the young man’s artistic endeavor:

What [Paul] is doing, then, is attempting to erase photographic pain with photographic pleasure, as well as in some sense . . . evading and ultimately trying to control reality — his reality. The central sequence of the film (structurally and thematically) has Paul sneak into the hospital where his dad lies on his deathbed and take pictures of his naked body as he sleeps. (3)

But Paul and the spectator are in for a big surprise. Back in the dark room of his own apartment, he realizes that his father has his eyes wide open in one of the photographs he took at the hospital. He cuts out his father’s eyes and applies the picture against his face, which allows him to catch of glimpse of what he will look like in the future. This scene also makes him realize that he cannot escape his biological origins. It is only after he decides to accept his past that he can look forward to the future. Shortly thereafter, a phone call from Camille announces his father’s death, which will trigger Paul’s reconciliation with his sister, and his ability to accept Martial’s affection: the two of them have passionate sex a few minutes after he hears the news. Paul’s affection toward his lover contrasts with his earlier refusal of the sexual act.

Besides the narrative itself, Ozon’s *mise-en-scène* highlights the stages of Paul’s cathartic voyage into becoming a (self-)loving individual, especially in the
ways in which his spatial movements are represented. When he and his sister go to the hospital at the beginning of the story, the camera is placed on the backseat of Camille’s car, which, in addition to showing Paul’s passivity (he is driven by his sister), does not enable the spectator to see the car moving through space. On his way home from the first hospital visit, Paul’s train ride is abruptly interrupted when the ticket-taker asks him to get off at the next station (he neither has a ticket nor the money to pay for the fine). In the second to last scene, Camille and Paul are having a serious talk at a café. She reveals to him that her childhood and her relationship with her father has not been easy for her either, and gives him a tin box of old pictures his dad wanted him to have. The following scene is in contradistinction to Paul’s earlier stasis (or interrupted movement). As he leaves his sister to catch the métro, Paul is seen riding up an escalator, a both literal upward movement toward the platform and symbolic ascension toward a life free of demons (it is significant that Ozon chose to shoot the scene in an elevated, outdoor portion of the Parisian métro rather than in a more common underground station). It is on this very platform that Paul opens the box full of pictures and discovers, in an envelope labeled “Paul,” the picture of him and his father. The film ends in a close shot of his face, which is eventually obstructed by the arrival of the train (a fast-paced lateral movement again suggesting a progression through space, an evolution to come).
In an attempt to argue against those who affirm that Ozon is nothing but “a young homo spoon-fed on queerness,” Bingham wishes to minimize the importance of same-sex desire in *La Petite mort*:

Of course homosexuality features in this film, and it is presented very straightforwardly and naturally, but it is not really what Ozon is exploring . . . What [the film] investigates . . . is something more universal, something that transcends sexuality . . . Just as Fassbinder wanted . . . *Fox and his Friends* (1975) to be seen as just a love story rather than a love story between two men, so this film can be interpreted without making the homosexual content the central focus. (3)

While I agree that the story would still “make sense” had Martial been a woman, I doubt it would have had the same impact. I feel that part of Paul’s instability seems to be in direct correlation with his sexual orientation, and his difficulty to come to terms with it (although he has a steady partner, he refuses to be touched by him at the beginning of the story). In addition, his estrangement from his father undoubtedly has something to do with his homosexuality. Unlike Bingham, who advances that “one could perhaps argue the case for inferring that Paul’s rupture from his father led to his homosexuality (over-devotion to the mother is a great Freudian cliché of homosexuality),” I believe that Paul was forced out of the (apparently motherless) familial cocoon precisely because he was gay. In fact, Camille indirectly suggests the latter scenario when she reminds Paul (in a desperate attempt to make him come out of his taciturn state) that their dad could not stand homosexuals.

Despite its undeniably dark undertones, the film succeeds in its antihomophobic suggestion that same-sex love can conquer all obstacles.
Martial’s devotion to Paul is evident, and their impassioned love scene in the latter part of the film suggests that their relationship has become, if not blissful, harmonious. If Paul is not yet fully aware of that fact, Camille reminds him that, unlike herself (and, by extension, other heterosexual women), he has found someone who deeply loves him: “Martial . . . il t’aime, moi mes histoires de mecs, ça a toujours été des fiascos.”

Ozon’s short-length film career culminated with his next piece of work, *Une Robe d’été*. In addition to receiving both the Grand Prix at the Brest European Film Awards and the Audience Award at the L.A. Outfest, it was granted the prestigious Leopard of Tomorrow at the Locarno Film Festival, and was nominated for best short film at the 1997 César Awards. The film opens in a close-up shot of a speedo-wearing young man’s crotch, revealing Ozon’s desire to present the male body and male sexuality distinctly and precisely in contemporary French cinema. This fifteen-minute *tour de force* tells the story of a bored eighteen-year-old man (Frédéric Mangenot), on vacation with his boyfriend (Sébastien Charles), who decides to go to the beach alone one afternoon (he is clearly irritated at his boyfriend’s singing and dancing to “Bang Bang,” a song by French gay icon Sheila). He rides his bike to a deserted beach, strips naked, and goes for a swim in the ocean. While he is drying out in the sun, a Spanish woman (Lucia Sanchez) asks him for a light for her cigarette and without further ado suggests that they could go have sex in the woods. He agrees, and afterwards,
he confesses that he had never slept with a woman before. She asks if he is gay, and he replies, “Non, non, c'est just que je suis en vacances avec un copain, et des fois...,” thereby showing that he is unsure of his sexual orientation.

The “robe” of the title becomes pivotal when, back on the beach, he realizes that his clothes have been stolen: he is forced to wear the Spanish woman’s dress home. Upset at first, he gets used to the idea, and even comes to enjoy it. Gender “fluidity” is suggested literally as the fabric of the dress undulates in the wind as he is riding his bicycle back to the bungalow. He relishes the impromptu cross-dressing so much that he does not take off the dress when he gets home, which also happens to arouse his boyfriend sexually. In the end, after he is shown sewing the dress that had ripped in the heat of the action, his one-afternoon stand (who had asked him to meet her the next day) tells him that she does not want the dress back: “Je te l'offre, elle peut te servir.”

*Une Robe d’été* is a one of a kind experience in French cinema, as it suggests both gender *and* sexual fluidity. It portrays characters who are not forced to choose between the inevitable masculine/feminine and gay/straight binarisms, nor are they ever punished for the choices they make. Ozon is aware of the guilt-free character of the film: “C'est un film, comme je le souhaitais, joyeux et coloré sur la période de l’été, qui met en scène l’ambivalence sexuelle de l’adolescence, sans culpabilité” (“Entretiens à propos des courts-métrages”: 1). Thierry Jousse, in *Cahiers du cinéma*, compares Ozon’s cinema to that of other European masters: “[C]e petit bijou d’un quart d’heure égale sans forcer la
perfection du dernier Rohmer, l’effet de surprise en plus. Une robe d’été, c’est plutôt du Rozier (celui d’Adieu Philippine, rien que ça) multiplié par du Almodovar, c’est-à-dire finalement quelque chose de tout à fait neuf” (12).

Ultimately, he praises the film for its uniqueness: “C’est une comédie sexuelle et estivale qui montre la circulation adolescente du désir avec une insolence, une drôlerie, une légèreté, une franchise, une élégance, une poésie rarissimes dans le cinéma français” (12). Malandrin is just as impressed, and commends the director for his maturity: “Ozon est stupéfiant par l’impression qu’il donne d’une maturité cinématographique accomplie, tant au niveau de l’écriture visuelle de son film qu’au niveau de la direction d’acteurs (le point faible des courts en général)” (12).

In addition to being surprisingly mature, the film manages in 1996 to present a vision of sexuality that is free of the burden and guilt inherited from the 1980s/1990s AIDS era. The main character is given a chance to vacillate between anonymous (yet safe) sex with a woman to sex with a more steady male partner, thus presenting an alternative to a more common adulterous scenario: (stereo)typically, married “heterosexual” men seek anonymous sex with same-sex partners rather than the other way around. In fact, the film goes as far as suggesting that the young man’s opposite-sex affair (and subsequent cross-dressing) helps him better accept his (homo/bi)sexuality. The transformation is flagrant: in the first scene, he leaves the bungalow because he dislikes his boyfriend’s musical tastes (which he calls “musique de folle”). He is also afraid of
what the neighbors will think if they see his friend prancing around the backyard. Upon his return from his tryst in the woods, he starts humming the very Sheila song he vilified in the first scene. When his boyfriend asks him if the neighbors saw him wearing the dress, he retorts: “Mais on s’en fout des voisins, non?”

*Une Robe d’été* is as light-hearted as *La Petite mort* is grave. Yet the films both succeed in presenting an anti-homophobic vision of same-sex relations. François Ozon explains the relationship between the two short films thusly: “Débarrassé de la Loi, du Père et des adultes, *[Une Robe d’été]* a été fait contre *La petite mort*. Mais aussi grâce à elle: j’avais besoin de passer par un film entièrement fondé sur la transgression et la culpabilité pour faire ce film de libération” (“Entretiens”: 2). This remark perfectly sums up Ozon’s main cinematic preoccupations, which go well beyond his early career. Virtually all of his feature films investigate the role of the father (or a father figure) within the family structure, as Jean-Marc Lalanne explains: “Jusqu’ici, les films de François Ozon n’ont raconté que deux histoires: l’omnipotence des pères abusifs (l’ogre pédophile des *Amants criminels*, Bernard Giraudeau régnant sur une famille-harem dans *Gouttes d’eau [sur pierres brûlantes]*…), ou au contraire le principe de folie et de chaos qu’entraîne leur disparition (*Sitcom*, *Sous le sable* et . . . *Huit Femmes*)” (2002: 83). Oftentimes, the presence (or absence) of the father in Ozon’s cinema has an impact on the ways in which people around him choose to live their sexuality. In this respect, *Sitcom* returns to the guilt-ridden bourgeois world of *La Petite mort*, the latter of which is more in tune with the somber tone
Ozon was to develop in his feature films than the utopian, sui generis *Une Robe d’été*.

5.2 Of Rats and Men: Destabilizing Patriarchal Order in *Sitcom*

When compared to his earlier shorts, Ozon’s first full-length film is a disappointment. The title is a direct reference to American, but also, and especially, French television situation comedies, which usually take place in a bourgeois setting, and are often laden with conservative family values. The film’s intentions are clearly to subvert and transgress the norms of upper-middle-class *bonne société*, as it explicitly presents or suggests every perversion and taboo in the book: homosexuality, interracial adultery, sadomasochism, incest, pedophilia, group sex, even bestiality. A laboratory rat recently brought to the home by the father turns out to be directly responsible for the chaos (its “negative vibrations” are blamed), and, after the death of the rat, and of the father, order is re-established in the end.

*Sitcom’s* first image is that of a red curtain being drawn (accompanied by the “trois coups de lever de rideau” typical of French theatrical performances). This opening, in addition to being reminiscent of Jean Renoir’s cinematic homages to the theater in general and *La Chienne* (1931) (which also starts with the parting of a curtain) in particular, insists upon the fact that we are about to see a staged drama, a story one should, perhaps, not take too seriously. But this “warning” can hardly prepare us for what follows. In the first scene, a man returns
from work to his bourgeois home where his family eagerly awaits to wish him happy birthday. Their jubilant singing is abruptly interrupted by a round of eight gunshots (only heard by the spectator who is still forced to stare at the house’s splendid façade) prefaced by a female voice asking “Jean, pourquoi?” and followed by hysterical screaming and, eventually, complete silence. The intertitle “Quelque mois plus tôt…” that follows (deceivingly) leads one to believe that the film will be an explanation of the reason(s) behind the paterfamilias’ unexpected murderous act.2

In the first “flashback” scene, the whole family is introduced: the new Spanish maid Maria (Lucia Sanchez, who starred in Une Robe d’été), the sophisticated mother Hélène (Evelyne Dandry), the nerdy son Nicolas, handsome David (Stéphane Rideau), the boyfriend of daughter Sophie (Marina de Van, who starred in Regarde la mer and co-wrote several screenplays with Ozon, and real-life sister of Adrien de Van, who plays the part of Nicolas). Finally, daddy (François Marthouret) comes home… with a gift. The sight of the white laboratory rat enchants the children, but frightens the mother. From here on out, each person who comes in contact with the rodent will act upon previously repressed sexual desires. Needless to say, the unity of this seemingly perfect family will become seriously threatened as a result.

The introduction of an “intruder” that will destabilize the familial nucleus is a well-known narrative strategy (cinematic or otherwise). To stay within possible Renoirian inspirations, one can think of the master’s 1932 Boudu sauvé des
eaux, starring Michel Simon in the main role of a street hobo who comes to live with a Parisian bourgeois couple and ends up seducing the lady of the house.\textsuperscript{3}

But there is something to be said about the replacement of a human version of “Otherness” by an animal (especially a rat, a creature that is often viewed as repulsive). Ozon explains his choice, and mentions another inspiration, a 1968 film by controversial Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini:

[Le rat] est un symbole fort et il sert effectivement de révélateur. Ce qui m’intéressait dans le rat, c’est que c’est un animal d’expérimentations, un cobaye. Là, j’inverse la situation: ce sont les autres qui sont les cobayes de changements provoqués par un animal qui n’est plus en cage. C’est une sorte de Théorème zoophile: l’intrusion du personnage extérieur perturbant un groupe. ("Sitcom: Entretiens avec François Ozon" 4)

After citing, like Ozon, Pasolini’s Theorem as an example of “a recipe for family discord,” Jonathan Romney reminds us that the rat is not the only perturbing element in Sitcom: “But to make matters more complex there are three intruders, each an exaggerated version of Otherness as it might appear to the French bourgeoisie: an African man and a Spanish woman, both of them sexually up for anything, and the laboratory rat, which . . . seems to be the narrative genius experimenting on the humans” (56). The African man Romney mentions is Maria’s husband Abdu (Jules-Emmanuel Eyoum Deido), who is introduced to the family at a dinner party that takes place early in the film. The two of them contribute (certainly more “actively” than the rat) to the dismantlement of the household. After coming in contact with the rodent, Abdu seduces young Nicolas while Maria performs sexual favors on David after Sophie (turned suicidal dominatrix) rejects him. Another consequence of the rat’s presence is the
mother’s decision to seduce her son in order to “cure” him of his recently revealed homosexuality (completely at ease with his new sexuality, Nicolas has started organizing same-sex orgies in his bedroom with young boy scouts and fake doctors, among others, as part of a series of erotic role-playing games).

Critics have not been kind to Sitcom, and most criticism is geared toward the film’s gratuitous intention to shock, and its lack of a clear message or motivation behind the perversions. After stating that transgressive cinema “ain’t what it used to be,” Richard Falcon writes “Sitcom plays every sexual combination it can with its characters,” and asks: “[A]re we meant merely to be congratulating ourselves on recognizing the kitsch-camp sensibility of a European John Waters fan? Or is Ozon, deep down, really expecting us to be shocked?” (10). The film reminds him of cinema from another time period: the late 1950s and early 1960s. He writes, not without sarcasm: “If the shots survive intact we may look back on these films as the pre-millennial equivalent of the European art films of the late 50s and early 60s which drew audiences partly through their introduction of screen nudity and relative sexual candour” (11).

Falcon does not mention directors’ names, or countries, and it is difficult to determine whether he is talking about the French New Wave (which was indeed criticized for showing people “always in bed”) or other national cinemas.

Romney suggests that Ozon’s inspirations are not to be found in Gallic cinema, and sees other influences besides John Waters, such as Luis Buñuel, Joe Orton and Pedro Almodóvar. He recognizes, however, Ozon’s originality in
his tackling of gay themes: “The film belongs in the by now altogether cosy cinematic tradition of épater les bourgeois, although Ozon is perhaps the first to ‘out’ the tradition, taking it to queer territory” (56). In the end, Romney is just as unimpressed as Falcon, as he writes, toward the end of his review: “It’s hard to know quite what Ozon is offering beyond the standard lampooning of repression. It’s hardly that taboo-busting to reveal that under the squeaky-clean appearance everyone’s up for a romp with the domestics and a fistful of courgettes” (56). Frédéric Bonnaud argues that Sitcom pales in comparison to Buñuel’s 1970s Surrealist anti-bourgeois masterpieces: “Far less amusing than most real television sitcoms, the film is nothing but a long sketch, eyeing Buñuel’s The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie and The Phantom of Liberty but never even beginning to approach their devastating power” (54). Like most of his fellow-critics, he accuses the film of being “too systematic”: “[It] quickly descends into shameless caricature, and reduces itself to a succession of events that generate shock value as opposed to real subversiveness” (54).

What is problematic in Sitcom is not so much its intention to shock, but rather that in this plethora of perversions, homosexuality is treated on the same level as pedophilia, group sex and other perversions, thus reinforcing the already firmly established homophobic stereotype that gay men have loose morals and are all sexually turned on by young boys. If, as in Une Robe d’été, sexual fluidity is suggested, I find its implications much more questionable. After Nicolas, the son of the family in Sitcom, comes out to his parents at the dinner table, he
withdraws to his bedroom. Cameroonian-born Abdu (whom the family hardly knows at this point) is summoned to go talk to him, as “he knows how to talk to kids” because of his job as a gym teacher (another stereotype that equates black men with athleticism). After Abdu is bitten by the rat, he comes on to Nicolas, and they kiss and fondle each other.

Later in the film, Abdu loses his job because of allegations of child molestation, and he leaves his wife because he realizes that he is gay (his wife mentions to the mother of the family that he has been gay “for a little while”). In the last scene, Abdu shows up hand in hand with Nicolas at the father’s funeral (when the family realizes that the rat is responsible for the chaos, they ask the father to get rid of it; he chooses to eat it, turns into a giant rat himself and is stabbed to death by his wife and children). Of course, the hand holding suggests that the two men are now in a relationship. If, in the end, the death of the patriarch has made everyone resolutely happier, and able to live their lives more freely, the process used to achieve this goal (i.e. the remaining seventy-eight minutes of the film) has shown homosexuals and black men in a less than satisfying light.4

This dubious portrayal of same-sex desire contrasts with Ozon’s earlier treatment of homosexuality in La Petite mort, Une Robe d’été and Scènes de lits, and I have to disagree with the director when he affirms: “En fait, je considère Sitcom un peu comme la continuité de mes courts” (“Entretiens à propos de Sitcom” 2). If the film disappoints in this regard, it does a better job of presenting

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strong female characters who manage to successfully operate outside patriarchy. As Michelle Chilcoat puts it, “[Sitcom’s originality lies in its] portrayal of proactive women . . . [who] take an active role in the film’s happy, healthy resolution of conflict.” The women in question are Hélène, Sophie but also, and more interestingly, Maria.

Jean-Marc Lalanne’s Cahiers du cinéma critique of Sitcom finds redeeming qualities to Ozon’s first attempt at directing a long métrage. Although in agreement with most critics who argue that the characters’ sudden appetite for transgressive deportments is unjustified, he manages to appreciate the latter part of the film: “Comme ses personnages, [Sitcom] s’agite dans une course folle à la transgression et peine à tenir le rythme. Mais il parvient finalement à convaincre lorsqu’il se libère progressivement du cadre étroit qu’il s’était fixé (le pastiche trash de sitcom” (1998: 107). He compares it Pedro Almodóvar’s early features, but notices a distinction: “[U]ne nuance d’impose: ici, malgré l’escalade dans les fantaisies sexuelles, personne n’arrive à jouir . . . Ce manque profond qui tenaille chaque personnage vient du fait que quelqu’un manque: la figure du père (symptomatiquement le seul personnage absent de l’affiche)” (107). Although the father does not get killed until the very end, and “physically” lives under the same roof as his wife and children, he is absent in that he is utterly indifferent to all the changes that have occurred since the arrival of the rat: Nicolas’ sexual orientation, Sophie’s multiple suicide attempts, his wife’s incestuous tendencies. When the mother’s psychotherapist (played by Jean Douchet) recommends
group therapy, he refuses to participate. In addition, his rare verbal interventions are meaningless, because they are almost exclusively composed of timeworn proverbs and aphorisms.

Consequently, the fatherless family is forced to take charge, and creates a new space that is free of his influence (or lack thereof): “[La place du père] restant vacante, les autres personnages s’agitent et ne trouvent de répit que lorsqu’ils parviennent à reconstruire l’espace féminin, foetal, dans un autre lieu, une piscine où la cellule réduite (mère/fille/fils) se love voluptueusement, moment de suspension et belle trouée poétique” (Lalanne 1998: 107). In her Freudian reading of the film, Chilcoat suggests that the rat can be understood as the fetish signifying the penis, and sees the film as a challenging “restaging of Freud’s Oedipal drama, which turns on the recognition of a multiplicity of sexual desires, as opposed to masculine desire alone, the only one Freud would legitimate in his theories of human sexuality.” She claims that this distinction gives women access to their own sexual urges:

Whereas Freud breaks off treatment when faced with the idea of woman’s desire, Sitcom imagines another scenario: the woman as fetishist (i.e., as one who desires, both sexually and intellectually). Thus, when Sophie touches the rat, her sexual desire is expressed in terms of sadomasochism, specifically where she is a dominatrix (indicated in her announcement to David that she will “talk to him like a dog”).

The mother’s own enactment of the “woman-as-fetishist” lies in her open transgression of the incest taboo (she seduces her son in a desperate effort to turn him straight). Chilcoat justifies the mother’s decision in the following way:

“Hélène’s ‘transgression’ represents . . . as Ozon himself has pointed out, a
‘dedramatization’ of the incest taboo, a deflating and disabling of the Oedipal drama that served to regulate a family order resting primarily on the non-recognition of woman’s desire.” Although Hélène’s attempt to change her son’s sexuality fails miserably, it does indeed ultimately allow her to become more open-minded, and act upon her own (far less problematic) sexual urges. Not only does she end up endorsing Nicolas’ gay relationship with Abdu, the last scene at the cemetery suggests (in accordance with Ozon’s “logic”) that she and Maria have become lesbian lovers.

With Sitcom, Ozon pursues his reevaluation of the phallocentric order, and continues to explore a world that would not be subjected to its power. As indicated by the presence of the theater curtain in the opening scene, what occurs in the film should be seen as a purely imaginary scenario. Ozon confirms this claim: “C’est un film utopique qui reconstruit une nouvelle construction de la société: à la famille bourgeoise se substitue un couple homo, un couple lesbien, un couple SM” (“Sitcom: Entretien avec François Ozon” 4, my emphasis). I believe it is fair to affirm that most spectators, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation, will be pleased to know that this new “construction” will remain just that: Utopian.

Throughout his filmmaking career, François Ozon, like Catherine Breillat, has remained faithful to one obsession: challenging the established order. However, he manages not to alienate his audience by experimenting with
multiple genres. As he puts it: “[C]omme les cinéastes qui explorent toujours le même univers . . . j’ai le sentiment de raconter toujours les mêmes histoire[s], en changeant la forme” (“Sitcom: Entretien” 6). Most of his films, including Sitcom, even refuse to stick to one recognizable genre: “[Il m’est] venue l’idée d’utiliser le concept to sitcom pour le remplir de différents genres cinématographiques que j’aime: le film de famille, d’horreur, le gore, le mélo, la farce” (1). This genre exploration continues in his second and third feature films. Les Amants criminels (1999) combines elements of the crime story and the fairy tale, while Gouttes d’eau sur pierre brûlante is both a psychosexual drama and a musical.

In many ways, Gouttes d’eau draws on aspects of Sitcom and announces 8 femmes. Adapted from an obscure play by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (Tropfen auf heisse Steine), it takes place in 1970s Germany, and recounts an unusual romance between a fifty-year-old businessman (Bernard Giraudeau) and a young (male) student (Malik Zidi). The nature of the relationship is in accordance to most of Ozon’s films, as the boundaries between gay and straight are once again made fluid. The student reunites with his girlfriend (Ludivine Sagnier, who will become Ozon’s muse), and Giraudeau’s ex-lover Vera (Anna Thomson) also shows up at the apartment’s door, turning the relationship into a complicated ménage-à-quatre. The film, which is Ozon’s third feature, is a huis clos, in the same fashion as Sitcom, 8 femmes and, to a certain extent, Les Amants criminels and Swimming Pool (2003). The tone is darker than that of Sitcom, but comic relief is provided thanks to a campy, unexpected, perfectly choreographed
musical sequence, which is a nice prelude to 8 femmes, his more elaborate “pseudo-musical.”

5.3 Post-Modern Cinema: Blurring Genre and Sexual Boundaries in 8 femmes

8 femmes, although released only four years after his debut Sitcom, appears significantly more polished. Loosely adapted from an eponymous 1960s French boulevard play by Robert Thomas, the film clearly refuses to fit inside the boundaries of a single genre: it is a comedy, a melodrama and a whodunit, seasoned with a pinch of the musical. The death of the father, which occurs at the end of the story in Sitcom, is now at the center of the narrative, as he is assassinated (or so we think) at the beginning of the film.

8 femmes is visually stunning, colorful, and shamelessly stars the crème de la crème of French cinema. Each character is given the chance to sing a musical number (often, but not always, relevant to the diegesis) and, if all eight women are shown as spectacles to be looked at (especially during musical performances), all of this occurs without the presence of a mediating male gaze. Shortly before the father is found dead, the first musical number, sung by the youngest sister Catherine (Ludivine Sagnier), clearly establishes the father as an outdated concept: “Papa, t’es plus dans le coup” (originally, a famous 1963 song by singer Sheila), which roughly translates as “Daddy, you ain’t with it any more.” The film’s final twist, however, reveals that the father, alive and well, has been hiding in his room all along, listening to and looking at what went on in and
around the house – one even sees him peeking out the window, into the front yard. However, in agreement with the logic of Ozon’s overall opus, the father has to be eventually eliminated. Disgusted at the behavior of his wife, sister, sister-in-law, older daughter, mother-in-law and maids, he finally commits suicide in front of his younger daughter, who was his accomplice in the fake murder ploy.

Ozon’s original thought was to do a French remake of George Cukor’s *The Women* (1939) (itself already remade into a musical by David Miller under the title *The Opposite Sex* [1956]), but some technicality prevented him from bringing the project to completion: “J’ai revu dernièrement le ‘Women’ de George Cukor, et me suis alors renseigné sur les droits de la pièce dont il s’était inspiré. J’appris très vite que les droits du remake étaient déjà retenus à Hollywood depuis quelques années par Meg Ryan et Julia Roberts. J’ai donc abandonné mon idée d’un ‘Women’ à la française” (“Interview: François Ozon” 1). Yet the opening credits suggest that Ozon still had *The Women* in mind when he made *8 femmes*: in Cukor’s comedy, every actress name is announced by a title and the picture of an animal, each intended to reflect the personality of the characters. The opening of *8 femmes* is almost identical, except that animals have been replaced by flowers, which can also be understood (in retrospect) as a symbolic representation of each protagonist’s temperament (a carnivorous flower for the lady of the house’s bitter maiden sister, a white daisy for the “innocent” young daughter, a red rose for the father’s seductive sister, etc.).
The Women’s tagline is “It’s all about men!” In contrast, 8 femmes is all about women. With so many female characters confined together in this huis clos, it is hard to imagine, knowing Ozon, that he resisted the temptation to introduce some sexual tension, and provide some of them with the opportunity to fulfill their heretofore hidden same-sex desires. Naturally, he did not refrain, and the film contains an “official” lesbian couple, and suggests the possibility of one or two more alliances. The first revealed same-sex relationship has started long before the beginning of the story: the maid Madame Chanel (Firminé Richard) is having an affair with the father’s sister Pierrette (Fanny Ardant), who is hated by the wife and mother of the family Gaby (Catherine Deneuve). As the characters try to establish everybody’s whereabouts the night of the murder, Louise (Emmanuelle Béart’s character, who plays the second maid) reveals that Pierrette was in the house the night before, which forces the two “culprits” to acknowledge their love for one another (it is better to come out of the closet than to be accused of murder).

Lesbianism is portrayed in the film in an ambivalent fashion. After Pierrette and Madame Chanel’s affair is uncovered, Deneuve and her mother (Danielle Darrieux) are appalled at the idea of having an “invertie” in the house and the maid withdraws to the kitchen. Her musical number follows, as she, alone in the room, sings a song entitled “Pour ne pas vivre seul.” The song is about lonely people who would do anything not to be on their own (some get a dog, some worship a cross, some grow flowers etc.). The second verse acknowledges that
same-sex relationships occur for the same reason: “Pour ne pas vivre seul, des filles aiment des filles, et l’on voit des garçons épouser des garçons.” Most of the musical numbers appear to be aimed at revealing the characters’ true inner thoughts. However, it remains unclear whether the film suggests that Madame Chanel herself became a lesbian out of sheer loneliness, or whether the line pokes fun at assumptions about homosexual desire.

The apparently random lesbian kiss between Pierrette and Gaby, which occurs later in the story, is equally difficult to interpret. Although the two women hate each other, they unexpectedly reconcile after a violent fight that has brought them to the floor (the battle is triggered by their realizing that they have the same lover). A lengthy, passionate kiss ensues, and although the narrative has somewhat “prepared” the spectator for other possible lesbian liaisons besides Pierrette and Madame Chanel’s (Louise flirted with Gaby in an earlier scene), the kiss comes as somewhat of a surprise. What is for certain is that it provides both shock value (it is, after all, two immensely popular French actresses kissing) and comic relief (the rest of the women walk in on them, and witness the embrace, flabbergasted).

Lalanne shrugs off the homosexual nature of the embrace, and advances that what we see is not two women kissing, but rather two “images” of François Truffaut’s cinema that come together for an instant.

[L]a scène de baiser profond entre [les deux femmes] a quelque chose d’un peu heurtant, [mais] le trouble tient moins à la nature homosexuelle de l’étreinte, qu’à la façon . . dont cette image en télescope d’autres et les fait muter. Avec ces deux icônes truffaldiennes, extirpées de leur mise en
situation initiale, ce ne sont pas deux femmes qui s’embrassent, mais deux images qui s’accouplent et changent de nature le temps d’un ready-made retors et trans-genre” (2002: 83)

David Ehrenstein, author of Open Secrets: Gay Hollywood 1928-2000, has a similar opinion, and suggests that “that embrace isn’t meant to examine same-sex passion so much as it is to recall plush A-picture romance in all its Hollywood glow” (60). What may prompt Lalanne and Ehrenstein to read the kiss as something that is not fundamentally homosexual is that, to the film’s merit, lesbianism is treated without recourse to weighty stereotyping, thus rendering it as “natural” as heterosexuality. I do believe, however, that one should not take the romp too seriously, and that the answers to 8 femmes’ questions should be found in intertextuality rather than rationality. Viewed in this light, Deneuve and Ardant’s fight merely “cites” La Femme d’à côté (Ardant’s first film with husband Truffaut, 1981), and the kiss that ensues is intended to recall Tony Scott’s The Hunger (1983) and André Téchiné’s Les Voleurs (1996), in which Deneuve plays a lesbian character.

Ozon’s ardent cinephilia is present in most of his films. As previously suggested, Sitcom is very Buñuelian, but it can also be seen as a modern remake of Pasolini’s Teorema, whereas Les Amants criminels shamelessly quotes Charles Laughton’s The Night of the Hunter (1955). The director’s passion for the film medium is most manifest in 8 femmes, in which intertextual references go on almost ad infinitum. As Lalanne notes: “Huit Femmes est autant un film sur qu’un film avec Catherine Deneuve, Fanny Ardant, Isabelle Huppert . .
François Ozon has realized the film the most deliberately *meta* of French cinema” (2002: 82, Lalanne’s emphasis). As the cinephiliac spectator realizes, the whodunit, although supposedly at the center of the narrative, quickly becomes secondary to the interest of the film.

There are two types of intertextuality in the film: the first one pays tribute to 1950s classical Hollywood cinema. The scenario acknowledges these inspirations:

De la pièce *Huit femmes* de Robert Thomas, créée en 1961, François Ozon a retenu la lettre, c’est-à-dire l’intrigue policière et les personnages. Ce qu’il en a adapté, c’est la psychologie, les rapports entre les femmes, leurs secrets de famille ainsi que le contexte. Afin de rendre hommage au cinéma hollywoodien des grands cinéastes européens exilés aux États-Unis, il a transposé l’action dans les années 50; ainsi les personnages évoluent-ils dans des décors et des costumes inspirés des films en Technicolor de cette époque. (Ozon 2002: 5)

There are numerous possibilities, but one can mention as potential influences German-born Douglas Sirk’s 1950s melodramas, such as *There’s Always Tomorrow* (1956) and *Imitation of Life* (1959). *8 femmes* particularly quotes the same director’s *All that Heaven Allows* (1955): in addition to choosing a winter setting and shooting numerous scenes in front of a window, *8 femmes* starts with the lyrical image of a (female) deer while Sirk’s psychological drama ends with the image of an antlered version of the same animal (Todd Haynes’ *Far from Heaven*, released the same year as *8 femmes*, positions itself in relation to *All that Heaven Allows* as well). The atypically bright chromatic palette of Ozon’s film also evokes the primary colored musicals of (non émigré) Vincente Minnelli, such as *The Band Wagon* (1953) and *Brigadoon* (1954). Finally, *8 femmes*’s actresses
and costumes pay tribute to stars of classic Hollywood: Lana Turner and Marilyn Monroe (Deneuve), Agnes Moorehead (Huppert), Kim Novak and Grace Kelly (Béart), Rita Hayworth (Ardant), Audrey Hepburn (Virginie Ledoyen), Leslie Caron (Sagnier), Hattie McDaniel and Juanita Moore (Richard). If the film has the “look” of 1950s Hollywood cinema, it is also deeply rooted in the French cinematic tradition, and the second type of intertextual reference pays homage to French films of all periods. The picture of Romy Schneider that Louise/Béart shows Gaby is a reminder that Béart has replaced Schneider (after her real-life suicide) as director Claude Sautet’s actrice fétiche (Schneider starred in Sautet’s César et Rosalie [1972] and Une Histoire simple [1978], whereas Béart appeared in two later works by the same filmmaker: Un Coeur en hiver [1992] and his last film Nelly et Monsieur Arnaud [1995]).

By casting Darrieux as the family’s matriarch who used poison to kill her husband, 8 femmes indirectly makes reference to three previous films in which she and Deneuve were mother and daughter (including Jacques Demy’s Les Demoiselles de Rochefort [1967] and Téchiné’s Le Lieu du crime [1986]), and two films in which Darrieux was a poisoner (her former husband Henri Decoin’s La Vérité sur Bébé Donge [1952] and L’Affaire des poisons [1955]). Deneuve’s singing number recalls other Demy films (in addition to Les Demoiselles) in which she starred and sang: Les Parapluies de Cherbourg (1964) and Peau d’âne (1970). Similarly, Ledoyen’s sugar-coded “Mon amour, mon ami” is reminiscent of a more recent French musical in which she has the lead role: Olivier Ducastel

I have already mentioned the connection with *La Femme d’à côté*, starring Ardant and recreated in *8 femmes* with Deneuve in the role of Gérard Depardieu. There are other Truffaut references in the film, as *8 femmes* both quotes his films, and makes references to the real-life relationships he has had with two actresses (Catherine Deneuve in the late 1960s, early 1970s, and Fanny Ardant in the 1980s). During a mother-daughter talk between Deneuve and Ledoyen, the mother repeats a line (“ç’est une joie, et une souffrance”) said to her by two men (Jean-Paul Belmondo and Depardieu) in two Truffaut films (*La Sirène du Mississippi* [1969] and *Le Dernier métro* [1980]). As soon as she utters those words, Deneuve seems more affected by the memory of Truffaut (and the films she made with him) than her diegetic conversation with her daughter. Similarly, the abnormally-long (twenty-two second) close-up shot of Ardant (who overheard the line) suggests that it is the memory of her late husband that brings her to tears rather than the fictional context of the film.

The last image of *8 femmes* is particularly rich in significance, and can be interpreted as a last reminder of the film’s trans-genre, intertextual qualities. In the second to last scene, Catherine/Sagnier reveals to her family that the man of the house is not dead, and that she has masterminded the murder scheme to prove to her father that she is the only one worthy of his affection. Unfortunately,
the man shoots himself to death before the rest of the household gets a chance to apologize for their actions. The last musical number (Darrieux’s rendition of Georges Brassens’ “Il n’y a pas d’amour heureux”) follows, which prompts the other characters to engage in a mournful ballet.

After the song, all eight women are shown standing next to one another in a perfect line, inhabiting the same shot for the first and last time. This unorthodox image conjures up another one that is especially familiar to American crime film enthusiasts: a police line-up, which, in addition to being a final homage to Hollywood cinema, reminds the spectator that the women are all guilty of the father’s death. The shot also evokes the world of the theater (for which the story was originally written), and one expects the eight actresses to take a bow in front of the camera, especially after they slowly start holding hands. However, they do not bow, and the spectator is left to contemplate this unique sample of four generations of French actresses. Darrieux, now in her eighties, has enlightened the silver screen since the early 1930s, while Deneuve, Huppert and Béart are arguably three of the most recognizable actresses working in France today. But the image also serves as a suggestion that the next generation (personified by Ledoyen and Sagnier) is well on its way. Symptomatically, it is the oldest and youngest actresses (Darrieux and Sagnier, respectively) who stand in the very center of the line. When the two of them join hands, the matriarch of French cinema offers a symbolic relay baton to the rising star, a hopeful gesture signifying that the future of the medium is now secure.
As Lalanne pointed out, *8 femmes* is as much with Catherine Deneuve, Danielle Darrieux, Emmanuelle Béart, Isabelle Huppert etc., as it is about them. This might explain why, despite significant worldwide marketing strategies, the film failed to attract large audiences outside the Hexagon (in the US, the film grossed a timid three million dollars, compared to a monumental ten million for Ozon’s later *Swimming Pool*). In this visual encyclopedia of French and American cinema, most of the film’s interest lies in the star power of its heroines, and the cinematic baggage they carry along with them. Ozon recognizes that he intended to do more than a film with eight women: “[J]’ai voulu engager une réflexion légère et amusante sur la féminité . . . [e]t dépeindre le portrait d’une famille, et accessoirement réaliser une allégorie sur le monde du cinéma” (“Interview: François Ozon”: 2). Another aspect of the film that might perplex both Gallic and foreign spectators is its refusal to adopt a recognizable genre and stick to it. Even after getting over the “why are they singing, someone just got killed” initial shock of the musical sequences, the film’s constant vacillation between black comedy, melodrama and grotesque farce might be too much to handle for a spectator expecting a classical whodunit (the French poster reads “L’une d’entre elles est coupable, laquelle?” thus falsely leading one to believe that the murder mystery is the crux of the film’s interest). Ironically, it is precisely because of its trans-genre quality that the film stands out.

*8 femmes* is both notable and praiseworthy in that it participates, together with a number of other contemporary mainstream films, in a trend that concerns
itself with the screen representation of gay, lesbian and bisexual characters. In his *L'Homosexualité à l'écran*, Bertrand Philbert distinguishes three phases in the depiction of homosexuality on film: "l'homme, la femme invisibles" (phase one: homosexuality remains buried), "la médicalisation de l'homosexualité" (phase two: gay characters are shown, but still ghettoized and seen as "deviant") and finally, "la prise de verbe autonome" (phase three: homosexuals are shown and have a voice of their own). He describes the third phase as occasionally tending to blur boundaries between same-sex and opposite-sex desires: "Si le cinéma commercial entretient, pour des raisons évidentes, les clichés dans la représentation des gays, il produit également des films soit de bonne conscience humaniste, soit, plus rares, des œuvres dans lesquelles la frontière hétéro/homosexualité tend à disparaître" (15). Philbert pursues his argument, and wishes for a fourth phase: "Il est évidemment utopique d'espérer la réalisation d'une quatrième phase dans laquelle l'attirance sexuelle ne serait plus qu'anecdotique et débaptisée, cette fois-ci pour cause de cadicité morale de toute distinction" (15). By obstinately continuing to expose the mainstream public to the “naturalization” of same-sex desire, by reinforcing the existence of what I would like to call “plurisexuality,” Ozon might end up making Philbert’s wish come true.

Ever since François Ozon began making films at the FEMIS in the early 1990s, he has been obsessed with two things: killing the father, and (as a result)
opening up a space in which sexuality can express itself freely and candidly. I hope that my reading of *La Petite mort*, *Une Robe d’été*, *Sitcom* and *8 femmes* has demonstrated the vividness of these obsessions as well as the striking continuity of his work, despite evident differences in genre and style. In her *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick attempts to replace the traditional essentialist (nature) versus constructivist (nurture) views of homosexuality, which she finds obsolete, with what she considers to be a more fruitful alternative:

> The first is the contradiction between seeing homo/heterosexual definition on the one hand as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority (what I refer to as a minoritizing view), and seeing it on the other hand as an issue of continuing determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities (what I refer to as a universalizing view). (1-2)

Ozon’s ongoing attempt to erase the frontier between gay and straight is evocative of Sedgwick’s second (universalizing) view, that which is based on the assumed fluidity of sexual desire, and the potential bisexuality of all humans. Although not all Ozon films feature openly gay/bisexual characters in the lead roles (*Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool* are mainly about heterosexual desire), some of the characters’ sexuality in these works remains questionable. Ozon once said of *Swimming Pool*’s main character Sarah Morton that, although she is deeply in love with her (male) editor, she may also have lesbian tendencies (“Interview de François Ozon” 2). *5x2*, released in 2004, recounts five stages in the life of a heterosexual couple, but features gay characters in supporting roles, and suggests that the husband may have homosexual inclinations.
Ozon’s démarche is unique in French cinema, which might explain why Adam Bingham classifies him among the unclassifiable:

Ozon is, I think, particularly problematic and to some extent marginal because it is impossible to put any kind of label on him, or to place him with any confidence in any aspect of French filmmaking. He has self-consciously flirted around certain genres and trends . . . but only to compound and provoke, shock and surprise. The only tag that seems anywhere near appropriate for him . . . is, like Buñuel, like . . . Fassbinder, that of François Ozon unto himself. (2)

When asked to name his masters (particularly those who best portray sexual fantasy on screen), Ozon cites Ingmar Bergman and Luis Buñuel as principal inspirations, thus placing himself, like Breillat (who chose the same two directors), within a strongly defined European auteurist tradition (Murat May 2003: 2). Yet the passion with which he consumes films and the numerous (eclectic) references that spring up in his work suggest that he is not much of an elitist when it comes to his cinematic tastes. In fact, his films are a reflection of his all-encompassing love for the cinema.

The year 2003 marks a turning point in his career in terms of his cinema’s intertextual references. Released one year after Ozon’s homage to Hollywood Technicolor, Swimming Pool could not be further apart from the lavishness of 8 femmes. It recounts an episode in the life of a repressed English murder-mystery novelist (Sarah Morton, played by Charlotte Rampling) who travels to the Lubéron in search of inspiration for a new book. The trip is more than fruitful, and she ends up writing what is probably the best book of her career. Ozon slowly eases the spectator into the story, and lets him/her participate in the writing
process as much as Morton herself. Seldom has the spectator entered the mind of a character with such intensity as in *Swimming Pool*. Saying more would be revealing the deliciously clever end to the story.

*Swimming Pool* is possibly Ozon’s most accomplished (and most personal) work. The director willingly admits that he *is* Sarah Morton (just as Flaubert once declared that he *was* Madame Bovary), and that the film is in fact about his own creative method. If one cannot help but compare *Swimming Pool*’s murder scene to Henri-Georges Clouzot’s *Les Diaboliques* (1955) and Jacques Deray’s *La Piscine* (1969), most of Ozon’s inspirations for the film are to be found… in his own cinema:

*Swimming Pool* reflects my personal obsessions about creating, and, since it’s a film about inspiration, contains many references to my other work. [The] caressing shot [in which the camera pans slowly from a character’s feet to face] is also in [*Gouttes d’eau*]. The relationship between Ludivine [Sagnier] and Charlotte [Rampling] refers back to [*8 femmes*]. *Swimming Pool* also resembles [*Sous le sable*], since both those women live in their heads (Abeel 4).

If Ozon continues to surprise and challenge the spectator the way he has in the past ten years, I suspect that emerging *auteurs* will start drawing from his cinema to inspire their own attempt at filmmaking.

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1 The last dare involves a young man reaching into a teenage girl’s panties. When he pulls out his hand from her crotch area, it comes out covered in blood.

2 *Sitcom*’s first scene will turn out to be “only a dream.” In the “real” (final) murder scene, it is the wife and children who kill the father, not the other way around.

3 The film is itself an adaptation of a French *boulevard* play by René Fauchois, and was remade in 2005 under the title *Boudu*, starring Gérard Depardieu and directed by actor/filmmaker Gérard Jugnot.
Ozon’s second feature film Les Amants criminels is not any more satisfying from that standpoint. It tells the story of an older gay hermit who sexually abuses a younger man, again suggesting a correlation between homosexuality and pedophilia.

This article is forthcoming. Although the author gave me permission to quote it, I am not able to provide page numbers.

See the picture book published in 2002 by La Martinière and entitled 8 femmes for additional examples of Ozon’s inspirations.

See Kate Ince and Cristina Johnston’s articles for other example of homo/bisexuality in French cinema.
CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have examined the ways in which gender difference and sexuality (or, more appropriately, sexualités) are represented in key works of French auteurist cinema. The above discussions have suggested that the œuvres of Robert Bresson, Jean-Luc Godard, Catherine Breillat and François Ozon, although part of two distinct periods of French film history, are similar in that, in addition to displaying a strong, recognizable personal style, they all demonstrate a tendency (if not determination) to question basic notions such as gender (in-)equality, masculinity, femininity and sexual norms. The problematization (and possible destabilization) of these concepts, although differing from one set of opuses to the next (and certainly, within each director’s work), occur through classic, identifiable tropes of the filmic text, such as the gaze, doorways, windows, bridges, water and the like, along with more direct narrative developments.

In addition, the last two chapters of this study have argued that, although the cinema of Breillat and Ozon is deeply original and much more explicit than the older generation in its depiction of female oppression/sexuality and “pluralsexuality,” the continuity of the cinema of auteurs, from its critically
established “birth” in the 1950s to the present, cannot be underestimated. Emma Wilson is lucidly accurate in her claim that “[t]he phantom of the auteur still haunts French cinema” (1999: 31), and, although traces of Hollywood and other “mainstream” cinemas can be detected in their work, there is a clear desire on Breillat and Ozon’s parts to engage in a dialogue with the Nouvelle Vague and its environs (much like 1950s/1960s auteurs engaged in dialogues with earlier, often American, films), including works by Bresson, Godard, Luis Buñuel, Jean Eustache and Eric Rohmer, together with other European auteurs such as Bernardo Bertolucci, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Ingmar Bergman. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most Phantasmal figure in both directors’ work is that of François Truffaut, whose cinema is more or less overtly quoted in 36 fillette, A ma soeur! and 8 femmes.

This trend is not unique to those two filmmakers. Many critics have drawn parallels between films by the jeune cinéma français and earlier works by new wave directors, and some have gone as far as (perhaps hastily) calling 1990s auteurist cinema a Nouvelle Nouvelle Vague. For example, it has been argued that Olivier Assayas’ Irma Vep (1996) articulates itself vis-à-vis the Nouvelle Vague in general and Truffaut’s cinema in particular (Truffaut’s cinematic alter-ego Jean-Pierre Léaud plays the director of the film within the film) (Wilson 1999: 29). In her Marginalité, sexualité, contrôle dans le cinéma contemporain, Martine Beugnat convincingly claims that Laetitia Masson’s En avoir (ou pas) (1995) echoes Godard’s 1980 Sauve qui peut (la vie) (192). More generally, it is fairly
easy to agree with Chris Darke when he describes contemporary cinéma d’auteurs as “[a] cinema of ‘youth’ that is consciously continuing an older tradition of film-making inaugurated by the New Wave” (158).

Following the success of the influential 1994 television series Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge, widely recognized as the point of departure that made the “return of the auteur” possible (nine young filmmakers were asked to make a “personal” sixty-minute film, obeying a set of pre-established rules), Franco-German television channel Arte followed up in the early 2000s with a new series entitled Masculin/Féminin. This time, instead of including autobiographical elements, each film was to address the theme of gender parity (the idea for the series came immediately after Lionel Jospin’s Lois sur la parité). The very existence of this series is particularly important to the present study. First, the title of the project unambiguously pays homage to the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard (more specifically, his eponymous Masculin féminin), thus establishing a link between Godard’s 1960s preoccupations (especially in terms of his gender politics) and auteurist cinema of the new millennium. Further, one of the participants to the series was none other than Catherine Breillat, who directed Brève traversée (2001) immediately after her (previously discussed) A ma soeur!.

The film narrates the encounter of a young man and an older British seductress on a cross Channel ferry-boat. After taking the adolescent’s virginity in one of the ship’s cabins, the woman leaves without saying good-bye. At the end of the film, he realizes that she is married with children, and that her
intentions were purely carnal. The film is both like and unlike Breillat’s other works in that, although it centers on the loss of one’s virginity (her favorite topic), the deflowered victim is now a male teenager. *Brève traversée* also echoes Godard’s own *Masculin féminin* by featuring a male character that falls for a woman who fails to reciprocate.

If the Arte series is indicative of an evident continuum between new wave filmmaking and contemporary *jeune cinéma*, it also serves as an example of the incredible diversity of the latter period, which contrasts to the more homogeneous cinema of the *Cahiers* group. The series took the notion of gender parity to the letter in that an equal number of male and female directors/auteurs were to participate (among them Mathieu Almaric, Bernard Stora, Virginie Wagon and Laurence Ferreira Barbosa; the latter filmmaker had already participated in *Tous les garçons et les filles*). In addition, the series refused to limit itself to the Hexagon, or even the Western world: also among the contributors were Belgian director Ursula Meier, Nadia Farès, of Egyptian descent, and Nabil Ayouch, a filmmaker of Moroccan origin who was particularly noticed for his Casablanca-shot realist drama *Ali Zaoua, prince de la rue* (2000).

*Masculin/Féminin* symbolically came about at the dawn of the new millennium, and is very much a *mise en abîme* of what recent auteurist cinema has to offer: a cinema made for and by men and women of various ethnic, social and cultural origins, a cinema which often questions pre-established notions such as masculinity, femininity, gender balance and sexual “normality,” a cinema that
recognizes the influence of the *politique des auteurs*, while simultaneously trying to distance itself from it. The umbilical cord, however, proves to be hard to sever. Symptomatically, both François Ozon and Catherine Breillat have decided to cast legendary new wave actress Jeanne Moreau in their upcoming films (*Le Temps qui reste* and *Une Vieille maîtresse*, respectively). Given Moreau’s quasi ubiquitous participation in the *Nouvelle Vague*, the cinematic presence of the actress in Ozon and Breillat’s works will certainly not fail to recall earlier films by many other *auteurs*, from Jacques Demy to François Truffaut, from Louis Malle to Luis Buñuel.
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