

# **Blurred Boundaries and Fluid Selves : Identity in Contemporary Francophone Cinema**



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## **Abstract**

The probing of identity is an established concern of French and Francophone film. Different waves of cinema have brought us through an exploration of the self from a range of extensively discussed perspectives: for example, feminist, queer, existential and migrant theory. Building on theoretical developments such as these, I analyse the treatment of identity in contemporary French-language cinema. My analysis is not bound together by one particular aspect of identity, but rather by instances of blurring and fluidity in relation to the notion of identity. The type of hybrid self that emerges from analysis informed by blurring and fluidity is a clear reflection of the shifting nature of global society where boundaries no longer hold fast and we must rethink our relationship with the self, the other, time and space.

It is against this framework that I examine the work of three radical francophone filmmakers: Xavier Dolan, François Ozon and Céline Sciamma. All three consistently treat questions of nationality, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity from multiple angles and with crossover between the categories. The ‘blurred boundaries and fluid selves’ of the title evokes the way that the protagonists of the films experience multiple embodiments and an ambivalent relationship with the space that they inhabit. These ‘fluid selves’ engage the spectator in a series of reflections relating to how we perceive our place in the world and, indeed, our interconnectedness. The ‘blurred boundaries’ of the characters question the ways in which normative cultural values continue to weigh heavily on our sense of self and must be interrogated. This project will trace out an aesthetics of identity in contemporary Francophone cinema.

This thesis has been prepared in accordance with the PhD regulations of Maynooth University and is subject to copyright. For more information see PhD Regulations (December 2022).

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Introduction

French-language cinema has long been concerned with the probing of identity on screen. The manner in which identity has been treated in the cinema of the French-speaking world has become more heterogenous in recent years. For example, Alistair Fox et. al note how the thematic trends in contemporary French-language cinema regularly address ‘issues of sexual identity, constructions of the gendered subject, and restrictive practices that limit the scope of possibilities for struggling, marginalized, or non-normative groups’ (Fox et. al 2015, 7). Recent developments in the studies of French-language cinema have brought us through an exploration of the self from a range of perspectives: for example, queer (Rees-Roberts 2008), spatial (Marshall 2012) and feminist (Brey 2020). Nick Rees-Roberts highlights the development of a contemporary queer cinema in France, where he makes ‘an attempt to translate the Anglo-American mode of political and academic critique to a contemporary French Cultural setting’ (2008, 4). Bill Marshall highlights the importance of approaching French-language cinema from a global perspective to incorporate all of the cinema of the French-speaking world. He states that: ‘Francophone cinema is both part of a naturalised capital flow within globalisation and not part of it, emphasising artistic and personal connections. It is not determined by nation-building, in France, Quebec, or elsewhere, although it is in tension with it’ (2012, 51). Iris Brey defines the ‘regard féminin’ as an approach to filmmaking that shows female characters to have an active sense of agency in narrative cinema (Brey 2020, 63). With theoretical developments such as these in mind, I analyse the treatment of identity in contemporary French-language cinema. My analysis is not bound together by one particular aspect of identity, but rather by instances of blurring and fluidity in relation to the notion of identity.

This thesis seeks to reflect the treatment of identity in contemporary French-language film, and I chose to group my analysis of these films in terms of blurring and fluidity of traditionally stable identities. By ‘traditional’, I allude to essentialist understandings of different facets (gender, sexuality, ethnicity etc.) that are thought to govern and define identity. Harriet Zilliacus et al. point out that ‘In an essentialist view, identity consists of an inner core, which emerges at birth or childhood and unfolds during the course of life, but basically remains the same’ (Zilliacus et al. 2016, 168). These essentialist identities are often based on social binarisms whereby a dominant centre exists in opposition to a marginal periphery; for example man/woman, white/racial other, heterosexual/queer. In this scenario,

categories such as ‘white’, ‘male’, and ‘heterosexual’ are perceived as ‘normal’ in opposition to the peripheral other. Yet, these essentialist understanding identities have been questioned by certain developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries in the French-speaking world, such as various flows of migration, processes of decolonisation, the continued questioning of patriarchal social structures, and increased visibility of queerness, amongst others. I will discuss some of these developments in the section that follows.

Writing in 1997, Nicolas Rombes (1997) stated that ‘our culture has become so fragmented (ideologically and otherwise) so as not to allow for consensus about individual or community notions of identity’ (Rombes et al. 1997) then the notion of a defined or stable self does not reflect the complex nature of modernity. As a result, a contemporary understanding of identity is better understood in terms of undefined states marked by blurring and fluidity. This blurring and fluidity may take place on both material or abstract levels. The theoretical framework of this study, which I will elaborate and define in this section, has clear links to previous theories of identity, but places particular emphasis on the hybridization of the subject. This study aims to draw a multitude of identity forming factors together, ranging from the concrete to the more abstract, and considers how these both cut across one another and are constantly in a state of flux. Approaching identity in terms of ‘blurred boundaries and fluid selves’ mounts a challenge to the traditional way of thinking about the self, space and time as coherent. Instead, this approach proposes a rhizomatic figuration of identity that is much more reflective of the instabilities of the current epoch.

It is against this framework that I examine the work of Xavier Dolan, François Ozon and Céline Sciamma, three contemporary Francophone directors. Their films consistently treat questions of nationality, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity from multiple angles and with crossover between the categories. The ‘blurred boundaries and fluid selves’ of the title evoke the way that the protagonists of the films experience multiple embodiments and an ambivalent relationship with the space that they inhabit. These ‘fluid selves’ that emerge from their narratives engage the spectator in a series of reflections relating to how we perceive our place in the world and, indeed, our interconnectedness. The ‘blurred boundaries’ of the characters question the ways in which normative cultural values (such as the essentialist understandings of identity discussed above) continue to weigh heavily on our sense of self and must be interrogated. This project will trace out the aesthetics of identity in the work of three contemporary Francophone filmmakers and demonstrate the potential of this aesthetic for a new representation of the self.

In this introduction, I will discuss the historical, social and cultural factors that inform the films that I will analyse in detail throughout this thesis. Then, I will introduce and discuss the overall theoretical framework of this study. As part of this, I will engage with the key theorists who have been identified as having a particularly noteworthy influence on the core theoretical foundations of this study, namely Judith Butler and Gilles Deleuze. I will then identify other prominent theories that further constitute a substantial part of my theoretical framework. Finally, I will briefly introduce the filmmakers who constitute my primary corpus, review the existing academic literature of their films, and indicate the methodological approach of this thesis.

## **1.2. Identity in France and Quebec**

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the societies of the France and Quebec went through a series of changes that would inform the notions of identity that I will discuss throughout this thesis. I have chosen to highlight these particular factors as they inform the particular period which I address throughout this thesis; I study ‘contemporary’ French-language cinema, and the specific period which I study is determined the films which I discuss in detail, namely 1997-2019.

In France, the period following World War II was marked by the process of decolonisation over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, most notably in the Algerian War from 1954 to 1962. This period of decolonisation was coupled with waves of immigration that intensified during this period. Kathryn Kleppinger and Laura Reeck point out that ‘migration in the post-Second World War era brought significant numbers of workers from North Africa as France was rebuilt during the during the *Trente Glorieuses*’, referring to the period of post-war economic growth from 1945 to 1975 (Kleppinger and Reeck 2018, 2). This period was also marked by the increased questioning of patriarchal social structures, influenced by the work of feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir (whose work I will discuss later in this introduction). For example, the implementation of the *Loi Veil*, which legalised abortion, took place in 1975. Marriage equality would arrive much later, in 2013. Further to this, in an increasingly globalised international context, France was impacted by a series of factors beyond its own immediate borders. Blatt and Welch state during this period that from 1980s onwards ‘the broader trends and consequences of globalisation, neoliberalism and decolonisation had intersected with France’s specific historical, social and demographic circumstances to produce a distinctive set of problems and outcomes’ (Blatt and Welch 2019,



4). With all of these factors combined, it is evident that the changes had taken place within French society which had dramatically accelerated over a relatively short period of time.

It is important to note the specificity of considering debates surrounding identity in the French context, particularly in relation to my chosen corpus here. The notion of French universalism in particular is a key consideration in this regard. Universalism is thought to underpin the French Republican model of human rights, according to which, the state considers human rights to be universal irrespective of different factors that inform identity, such as ethnicity, origins, social class, gender. Joan Wallach Scott explains:

According to its defenders, French universalism has been, since the Revolution of 1789, the guarantee of equality before the law. It rests on a notion of politics that takes the abstract individual to be the representative not only of citizens but also of the nation. And it rests, as well, on the assumption that all citizens, whatever their origins, must assimilate to a singular standard in order to be fully French. (Wallach Scott 2005, 1).

On one hand, proponents for such an approach advocate that it prevents a person's identity from being taken into account when having their rights considered. On the other hand, critics argue that it ignores the lived experience of those who suffer discrimination. For example, we can consider the French Republican tradition of 'colour blindness' in relation to human rights, ethnicity and identity. Robert C. Lieberman explains that this approach 'does not recognize racial or ethnic groups either as legitimate social or political categories as targets for policy' (Lieberman 2001, 32). It is therefore possible to perceive a certain tension between French Republican universalism and approaches of identity that seek to embrace and understand difference, such as intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw 1985), where identity is approached by simultaneously understanding experiences of gender, class and ethnicity (I will return to intersectionality later in this introduction). Given that here, this thesis is heavily informed by theories that seek to embrace and understand difference, we can see the tensions at the core of debates around French universalism and the very approach of this study.

In Quebec, a series of important changes took place over the course of the period of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. A former colony of France and then Britain, Quebec holds a great deal of cultural uniqueness. It is the only Francophone region on the mostly anglophone North American continent. Yet, the cultural specificity of Quebec also ensured various forms of tension through history within the nation of Canada, which peaked with independence

movements in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Over the course of the 1960s-70s, the period known as *la révolution tranquille* denoted the increasing economic, social and cultural advances that were taking place in Quebec. As a result, the notion of a *Québécois* identity became more commonly asserted from this period onwards. This *Québécois* identity often designated a White, Francophone, identity, gaining increasing freedom from the influence of the Catholic Church, in opposition to the Anglophone majority of Canada; separate from its immediate neighbours on the North American Continent, yet also culturally distinct from the Francophone Europe. As Gérard Bouchard notes ‘not only did the nation radically redefine its identity by freeing itself from religion, it also redefined its relationship with France, the mother country, by asserting itself as a North American francophonie, out from under the cultural authority of France’ (Bouchard 2007, x). The increasing insertion of the *Québécois* identity grew the political momentum that would result in two independence referenda (in 1980 and 1995, respectively). Although both would ultimately fail, the notion of a *Québécois* identity had, by this stage, been the subject of debate for decades in Canada. More recently, many have noted a waning interest in sovereignty among Quebec’s younger generation (see Baillargeon 2014). It is also important to note that successive waves of immigration have also taken place in Quzbec. A combination of the country’s economic development over the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and its location on the North American continent, in addition to its linguistic and cultural proximity to the rest of the Francophone world have created a very particular set of outcomes in relation to the demographic composition of contemporary Quebec. Xavier Dolan is one such example, as a Francophone whose family origins are Irish (on the side of his mother, Geneviève Dolan) and Egyptian (his father is Manuel Tadros, who plays a minor role in several of his films). All of these factors have combined to generate Quebec’s particular identity debates that inform the approach my corpus here.

Many of these debates surrounding the development of French and Quebec identities are reflected in their respective cinemas. As noted, from the post-War period onwards, French society went through a series of changes that would result in its composition changing dramatically. However, these changes were not often reflected by the country’s film culture. For example, Ginette Vincendeau has noted how in relation to the historical treatment of ethnicity in French cinema that ‘whiteness dominates. The colour blindness of French cinema, and the concomitant marginalization of non-whites, have long been noticed and rightly deplored’ (Vincendeau 2015, 548). This is evident when we consider much of what is considered the established ‘canon’ movements of French Cinema, such as, for example, *la nouvelle vague* period of the 1960s. Although often innovative in form, the movement was

ethnically homogenous and most often featured all white casts. The movement was also notoriously normative in terms of other areas of identity. Geneviève Sellier notes how the cinephile journalists of the 1950s who would become the *nouvelle vague* filmmakers of the next decade ‘posit as an unquestioned a priori that the cinephilic gaze is necessarily male, heterosexual, and directed toward icons, fetishes, and female sexual objects’ (Sellier 2008, 29). The movement would give birth to what we understand to be *auteur* cinema, which all three of the filmmakers in this corpus are widely identified as auteurs. Given the cultural evolution of *auteur* as a term since its original inception, I will discuss it in more detail later in this introduction.

In many respects, the treatment of identity in Quebec film has followed a very different path to that of France. Bill Marshall identifies the ‘competing discourses of *Québécoisité* and *Américanité*’ through Quebec cinema (Marshall 2000, 12). These competing discourses reflect the broader singularity of Quebec cinema, compared to other national or regional cinemas. On one hand, there is Quebec cinema’s *Québécoisité*; which is to say a film’s *Quebecness*, most often expressed by the region’s unique cultural markers, such as the Québécois dialect of French, for example. On the other hand, discourses of *Américanité* often manifest through the external presence of the dominant Anglophone culture of Canada and indeed elsewhere in North America. Marshall makes these remarks in *Quebec National Cinema* (2000), which itself reflects a self-contained tension within the idea of a Quebec *national* cinema, when the province does not hold the status of a nation. More recently, Quebec film scholars have noted the trend of transnational discourse into the existing identity debates in relation to the region’s ‘national’ cinema. Mercédès Baillargeon and Karine Bertrand note that since the period that Marshall was writing in, ‘la redéfinition de l’identité nationale se voit “contaminée” par le transnational, lui-même se reconfigurant au gré des échanges et migrations politiques, économiques et culturelles’ (Baillargeon and Bertrand 2019, 137). The previous waves of immigration that I previously made reference to have therefore been identified as having an impact in the films being made in Quebec. We can therefore see that period where Xavier Dolan starts making films (from 2009 onwards), is a time period particularly impacted by this particular change.

In this section, I have outlined the and historical changes that inform the films that I study throughout this thesis. In the following section, I will identify the specific strands of critical theory that inform my approach to these films.

### 1.3. Identity, Gender and Queerness

Simone de Beauvoir is a foundational theorist of gender. Her influence on subsequent theories of gender and identity are profound, and offer a foundation to much of this section of the theoretical framework of this study. Beauvoir's theorisation of 'woman' in terms of a socio-discursive construct is a key finding in this regard. On the notion of 'woman', Beauvoir states: 'Elle se détermine et se différencie par rapport à l'homme et non celui-ci par rapport à elle ; elle est l'inessentiel en face de l'essentiel. Il est le Sujet, il est l'Absolu : elle est l'Autre' (Beauvoir 1949, 16). She states that the idea of woman is an oppositional construct that is used primarily as 'other' to the male subject. Her understanding of the gendered subject in relation to social hierarchies informed by patriarchal discourse places 'man' as the essential subject category and 'woman' as object and 'other'. Furthermore, her description of the oppositional division in identities has the effect of positing 'man' as essential, or 'relatable', 'normal' and a dominant centre, in relation to woman as the peripheral other. Beauvoir famously points to the difference of ideas of being and becoming in correspondence to one's gender: 'On ne naît pas femme : on le devient' (Beauvoir 1949, 285). She argues that the idea of 'woman' as the gendered subject that is lived by females is not an identity that one 'is', but rather a socio-discursive category that ones 'becomes' by living in patriarchal social structures. Beauvoir's distinction between being and becoming is a crucial reflection in relation to this study, as it provides a model of identity as a discursive construct. Furthermore, Beauvoir's distinction in relation to identity also provides notable influence on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which I will discuss in detail later in this section.

The writings of Judith Butler provide an integral part of the theoretical framework of this thesis. Butler is most commonly associated with the development of queer theory from the 1990's. Her second book, *Gender Trouble* (1999 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., originally published in 1990) is often considered her most influential and impactful work for her discussion of sex and gender as performance. She continued to focus on these areas in the early part of her career in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). In the following section I will identify the core theories we associate with Butler that will enrich and complement my theoretical framework here.

Butler's theory of performativity is a central theoretical reference throughout this study. Understood as the notion of a sequence of socially accepted behavioural acts that lead to a somewhat constructed perception of gender, performativity is a key concept associated with Butler. She states: 'In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts' (Butler 1988, 519) Butler established

her theory of performativity by understanding gender in terms of the performance of acts, rather than a repetition that gives the impression of an original model. This line of thinking has been widely applied to and beyond gender since Butler first wrote the above cited lines. Butler is therefore deeply influenced by Beauvoir in identifying a difference between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ a socio-discursive construct, such as an identity. As Butler states: ‘When Simone de Beauvoir claims, "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" she is appropriating and reinterpreting this doctrine of constituting acts from the phenomenological tradition’ (1988, 519). Thinking of identity in terms of this repetition of acts rather than a pre-conceived fact, we can move towards considering it as something that we do rather than something that we are. Building on the notion of identity as performance, Butler states that the repetition brings about the possibility of subversion:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (Butler 1988, 520)

Butler explores the notion of identity subversion in *Gender Trouble*. The most broadly referenced example of the ‘different sort of repeating’ that she refers to above is the notion of drag performance in relation to gendered expressions of identity (Butler 1999, 174). She notes how repetition brings about the possibility of subversion:

If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible. (Butler 1999, 185)

Given that drag performs gender in an intentionally exaggerated style, it points to the performed nature of identity. Furthermore, by engaging in a performance of gender in a style that is voluntarily parodic, drag highlights the possibility of disrupting the fixed codes of identity through performance. Although Butler’s argument is based on expressions of gendered identity, the broadness of the vocabulary that she uses makes it possible for her argumentation to be applied well beyond the immediate concerns she makes specific reference to here. Indeed, this study aims to analyse the manner in which the films under

discussion contest the rigid codes of hierarchal binarisms in relation to other facets of identity, such as sexuality, space and class. Butler makes the argument that the discursive limits that govern identity are inescapable. Yet, this does not necessarily govern how they are interacted with, and to do so on one's own terms has the potential to be an affirming expression of agency. In other words, if we understand the performance of identity as the 'stylized repetition' of a group of acts, we perhaps have a set group of acts to choose from, but Butler suggests the existence of the possibility to choose which ones to perform and how they are performed. This opens up the potential for subversion, to be aware of discursive limits but to act within them and highlight the extent to which they are constructed.

Therefore, informed by the writing of Beauvoir and Butler, we can view identity as a socio-discursive construct, rather than being essentially natural. Butler refers to 'culturally intelligible subjects' (Butler 1999, 184) as those who achieve meaning, identification and affirmation through and by the socio-discursive constructs that are used to denote such normative identities. In the hierarchical social constructions that Butler is referring to here, what is 'intelligible', which is to say what can be expressed through the socially accepted uses of language, is deemed natural, viable, and real in opposition to what is not said, identified or brought into discourse by such practices of cultural intelligibility. Here, in terms of identity, we can of course link this to examples existing outside the overly simplistic oppositional dualisms that commonly shape how identity is articulated in the cultural sphere. In this way, much of Butler's thinking lays the foundation for the critical stance of queer theory. Starting with the questioning of rigid configurations of identity in terms of gender and sexuality, queer is also extended as a discursive stance to interrogate the notion of hierarchal dualisms that govern various other facets of life, such as man/woman, white/black, rich/poor, 'straight'/queer. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler tells us that performing the constructed nature of identity in a knowing way brings about the possibility of subversion (Butler 1990, 185). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to the potential in queer theory to address hierarchal binarisms in terms of deconstruction. In the highly influential *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), she states: 'These deconstructive contestations can occur, moreover, only in the context of an entire cultural network of normative definitions, definitions themselves equally unstable but responding to different sets of contiguities and often at a different rate' (1990, 11). Thinking in these terms allows us to question oppositional modes of thought that place a 'normal' centre in relation to an 'othered' periphery in several areas. As a result, the use of queer theory here is to question the idea of fixed, stable and defined identities, and highlight the manner in which the films being studied articulate other ways of being that resist normative

definitions of identity. The very resistance to definition is key to queerness as a theoretical framework, as Annamarie Jagose states: 'For part of queer's semantic clout, part of its political efficacy, depends on its resistance to definition' (1996, 1).

Butler's theories are particularly useful in relation to this study due to their flexibility. There are several examples of them being used well beyond the particular facets of identity that she was originally referring to in *Gender Trouble*. For example, in Christa Albrecht-Crane's analysis of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992), she describes the treatment of race in *Jazz* as being at times 'performative' (Albrecht-Crane 2003, 59). She describes the different ways in which ethnicity, particularly 'blackness' as opposed to 'whiteness', is 'performed' through the novel and the manner in which this draws out a complex, intersectional portrayal of identity. The fluid, intersectional approach to Butler's theories forms a key theoretical strand of this study.

Gendered perspectives in Film Studies are also an important theoretical consideration here. Laura Mulvey discusses the notion of the gendered gaze in film in her seminal article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975). In it, she describes how much of the default subjectivity of classical narrative cinema is male and heterosexual, referring to this base sense of perspective as the male gaze:

The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (1975, 11)

Mulvey argues that the male gaze largely creates an oppositional binarism of active/male and passive/female. She concludes that in order to articulate forms of subjectivity that go beyond the male gaze, filmmakers must break with normative formal convention (1975, 18). Gaze theory has also evolved and diversified since its inception. Contemporary scholars have expanded the concept of gaze to include a broader range of perspectives, challenging the traditional male-centric gaze and embracing alternative forms of looking and representation. For example, bell hooks refers to the gaze that acknowledges both gender and class as an 'oppositional gaze' (hooks 1992, 122). hooks analysis provides an intersectional approach, incorporating the experiences of marginalized communities and examining the ways in which gaze operates within a matrix of power relations. Maria Pramaggiore (1996) discusses Mulvey's theory in terms of bisexual spectatorship. Pramaggiore states that with gaze theory

in mind provides ‘heightened awareness of the ideological implications of conventional narrative structures’ (Pramaggiore 1996, 280). Although she points out the limits of Mulvey’s theory in terms of the assumption of ‘passive spectatorship’ (1996, 280), Pramaggiore illustrates the far-reaching influence of gaze theory. In France, as mentioned previously, Brey discusses the possibility of a ‘regard féminin’ in film and media. In *Le regard féminin* (2020), Brey argues that a film constitutes an example of a ‘female gaze’ by showing female characters to have an active subjective perspective and allowing female characters a pronounced sense of agency (Brey 2020, 63). Brey also states that the ‘regard féminin’, entails a treatment of perspective that interrogates a patriarchal social order and invites the spectator into feeling a sense of the feminine experience (Brey 2020, 77). She argues that a film narratively implies a ‘regard féminin’ when ‘1/ le personnage principal s’identifie en tant que femme ; 2/ l’histoire soit racontée de son point de vue ; 3/ son histoire remet en question l’ordre patriarcal’ (Brey 2020, 77). With all of these theoretical perspectives in mind, I will analyse the sense of subjectivity expressed in the corpus of films here.

In this section, I have outlined the areas of gender studies and queer theory that form an integral part of the theoretical framework of this study. In the following section, I will carry out similar work on Gilles Deleuze.

#### **1.4. Gilles Deleuze and Identity**

The writings of Gilles Deleuze offer an abstract approach to the notion of identity. In *Difference and Repetition* (1994), Deleuze states:

When the identity of things dissolves, being escapes to attain univocity, and begins to revolve around the different. That which is or returns has no prior constituted identity: things are reduced to the difference which fragments them, and to all the differences which are implicated in it and through which they pass. (Deleuze 1994, 67)

Deleuze explains that the notion of difference in relation to the individual is key in order to understand the fragmented nature of identity. Deleuze and interpretations of his theories are a suitable foundation for a study of the treatment of identity in film because they often do not concern themselves with one particular aspect of identity, but, rather, several at once, and the non-unitary state that the self takes on as a consequence. His work alongside Guattari functions as a common thread that weaves through many of the different areas in which we find references to fluidity, blurring and the disruption of definition in relation to identity. In



this section, I will discuss the strands of Deleuze's theories that are particularly influential throughout this thesis.

A central concept throughout Deleuze's work, the notion of the rhizome can lend itself quite clearly to this intersectional, fluid take on the subject. With the rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari propose alternatives to hierarchical and oppositional models of thinking. They state: 'Subtract the unique from the multiplicity to be constituted; write at  $n - 1$  dimensions. A system of this kind could be called a rhizome. A rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 6). A rhizome is a type of plant that has stems which grow horizontally below the surface. Ginger, for example, has rhizomatic roots, which is to say, it sends out roots and shoots from nodes, below the surface. Deleuze and Guattari propose rhizomatic approaches of thinking in order to decenter the existing hierarchies that have shaped modernity: 'Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7). When mapped on to notions of politics, the possibilities for the rhizome in relation to identity become clear. As Claire Colebrook explains: 'A rhizomatic method, therefore, does not begin from a distinction or hierarchy between ground and consequent, cause and effect, subject and expression; any point can form a beginning or point of connection for any other' (Colebrook 2007, xxvii-xxviii). We can therefore see that the rhizome offers possibilities that may allow us to articulate blurred or fluid configurations of identity. Rather than perceive identity in terms of an order-based system that can largely be broken down into the 'omnipresent binary identity definitions of modernity' (Plana 2015, 11), a rhizomatic perception of identity would allow us to formulate a more fluid, intersectional image of what the contemporary subject can be. Indeed, the rhizome does not provide a direct solution to a traditional, 'arborescent' identity perception, but would allow us to think beyond the binary system that characterizes such ideas.

If a rhizomatic or an arborescent are different systems, Deleuze and Guattari propose methods of interacting with such systems in terms of territorialization. They explain: 'Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 9). Territorialization refers to practices of maintaining what already is, 'normalizing' practices of the status quo. Deterritorialization is then breaking away in favour of something else. Reterritorialization is where what has broken away is once again subsumed into a normative order. For example, Christa Albrecht-Crane

(2011) analyses the concept of ‘territorialization’ in relation to language. She explains Deleuze’s territorialized perception of language as an ‘assemblage’ composed of two axes, one normative ‘territorializing’ axe, and another ‘deterritorializing’ axe, concerned with rupture and breaking away. In relation to identity, the ‘territorializing’ axe exists linguistically by allowing categories for individuals to operate on a social level in terms of race, class, gender, ethnicity etc. Such linguistic norms are taught to be ‘essential’ or natural from the moment we learn to describe people in such a manner (i.e. as Albrecht-Crane describes, during childhood, in educational institutions etc.), with whatever may not cohere to such categories as being ‘other’, unnatural and undesirable. The ‘territorializing’ axe corresponds to rigid social stratification. On the other hand, the ‘deterritorializing’ axe is what offers a break-away from social stratification. Therefore, although it could be understood as a ‘destructive’ negative force, for Deleuze, deterritorialization is an ‘active, productive and affirmative’ force in relation to social stratification (Albrecht-Crane 2011, 146).

Territorialization has the effect of subsuming into a normative order. Deleuze and Guattari argue that a ‘line of flight’ is a particular point of escape beyond broader forces of normativity. If we can understand life as being characterized by fixed points, rigid ideas or univocal notions, a line of flight may be formed by some means of liberating break-away. They write:

In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 3)

Although it is important not to think of them in terms of simple oppositions, we can see their language here largely evokes two groups of ideas that behave in radically different ways, as Deleuze and Guattari refer to them as ‘comparative rates of flow’. While the example is applied to a book here, the notional thinking is abstract and can be applied across any field. ‘Lines articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories’ are responsible for ‘phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity’ – the language here is evocative of fixed notions, rigid concepts, linear perception and straight lines. On the other hand, there are ‘also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification’ which cause ‘acceleration and

rupture'. Here we are thinking much more in terms of breaking away from the fixed points and straight lines previously evoked in favour of more fluid, rhizomatic and porous configurations of meaning. Much more than a simple dichotomy or dualism, these are two notional 'flows' that radically impact the terrain where there at play in different ways. One is concerned with repetition, the other breaking away, with the possibility for making new connections in previously unthought-of ways: 'Multiplicities are defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 9). The notional flexibility of such a concept means that we can find several examples of its application elsewhere. For example, Rosi Braidotti refers to it in terms of her concept of nomadic subjectivity. Braidotti writes that 'nomadic subjectivity' is a line of flight that allows us to consider the experiences of othered social groups (Braidotti 2011a, 7). I will come back to Braidotti's theory of nomadic subjectivity' in more detail later in this chapter.

In his books on film theory, *Cinema 1* (1986) and *Cinema 2* (1989) Deleuze distinguishes between the movement-image and time-image. For Deleuze, the time-image is primarily associated with a specific moment in film history, namely post-World War II cinema. He describes the time-image as films that express a layered and heterogenous understanding of time:

In any case, what we call temporal structure, or direct time-image, clearly goes beyond the purely empirical succession of time-past-present-future. It is, for example, a coexistence of distinct durations, or of levels of duration; a single event can belong to several levels: the sheets of past coexist in a non-chronological order. (Deleuze 1989, xii)

Felicity Colman notes that the time-image is particularly impacted by the influence of Henri Bergson's theories of time, whereby the distinction between an actual present and virtual past are key (Colman 2011, 135). The crystal-image is a type of time-image that gathers heterogenous expressions of time in terms of subjectivity. On the notion of the crystal-image, Deleuze explains:

We gave the name opsign (and sonsign) to the actual image cut off from its motor extension: it then formed large circuits, and entered into communication with what could appear as recollection-images, dream-images and world-images. But here we see that the opsign finds its true genetic element when the actual optical image

crystallizes with its own virtual image, on the small internal circuit. This is a crystal-image, which gives us the key, or rather the ‘heart’, of opsigns and their compositions. (Deleuze 1989, 69)

The crystal-image refers to a certain type of cinema that simultaneously presents images distinguished by two different poles within the films’ diegesis, one actual and the other virtual. These actual and virtual images then coalesce to a point of indiscernibility and cannot be distinguished from each other. One imagines a crystal as an object through which light is refracted at different shapes and angles, yet the crystal never loses its shape, and instead remains as one. The actual refers to that which physically exists within the diegesis. In cinema, these elements include characters, décor, places, objects: all that can be objectively perceived. The virtual is used to describe that which is less physically tangible, yet just as real as the actual. These include thoughts, feelings, time, interiority. The virtual exists more within the domain of subjectivity. These two types of images then coalesce to the point that one cannot be distinguished from the other and the crystal is formed.

It is important to note that the films which make up my corpus are far removed from the historical context to which Deleuze’s examples of the time-image belonged. With this in mind, it may seem counterproductive to use a theory such as the crystal-image in this thesis, where the corpus is exclusively made from contemporary films. However, Deleuze’s film theory has been applied to filmmakers in this way elsewhere. For example, David Martin-Jones expands the geographical limits of Deleuze’s writing about film to consider ‘world cinemas’ through the lens of Deleuzian film theory. Martin-Jones notes that ‘by both exploring the advantages and rethinking the limitations of Deleuze’s work through productive assemblages with these Othered cinemas, we can reinvigorate his ideas and broaden their scope for future usage in the field’ (Martin-Jones 2011, 7). Similarly, I use Deleuzian film theory, and most specifically the crystal-image, to analyse *Sous le sable* (Ozon, 2000) and *Naissance des pieuvres* (Sciamma, 2007). In these sections, I demonstrate how the theory of crystal-image encourages an understanding of expressions of identity that display a penchant for fluidity and blurring. For *Sous le sable*, I use the crystal-image to consider how the film blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality, which draws several parallels with Deleuze’s distinction between the actual and virtual. In the case of *Naissance des pieuvres*, I use it as a theoretical lens in order to understand the expressive aesthetic of the film, which features both actual (the film’s simple narrative surface) and virtual (the ephemeral nature of queer teenage desire) elements.

In the theoretical framework of this thesis, I have opted to use Deleuze and Butler in conjunction with one another. For example, we can relate Butler's ideas of performance and subversion to our earlier discussion concerning territorialization. As stated before, Deleuze and Guattari's perception of language can be divided into axes of territorialization and deterritorialization. On the one hand, the former represents the words we learn from childhood that function as labels in relation to identity, whether it be ethnicity, class or sexuality. These are reminiscent of both ends of the binary values that Butler talks about disrupting when she is referring to subversion and 'trouble' in relation to identity. On the other hand, the latter is representing the 'otherness' of what is left undefined or not represented by language. In this way, we could argue that the concept of deterritorialization could embellish our process of identifying the subversive moments relating to identity in the corpus of films that are going to be studied. If thematic, aesthetic and/or technical ambiguity are 'troubling' in the Butlerian sense, it is reminiscent of the Deleuzian concept of deterritorialization, where 'unbound points, points of creativity, change and resistance' (Albrecht-Crane 2011, 145) allow us to think beyond the limits imposed by a stable, unitary understanding of the subject. In all cases, these analytical tools will allow us to go about articulating the disintegration of essentialist notions of identity and the manner in which they can be represented through the arts, pointing towards evidence of a more fluid state of subject formation.

Thinking in these terms in relation to broader questions of identity, we will proceed to ask questions such as, for example: what are the representative 'lines of flight' of identity in our filmography? In what way do they disrupt a stable notion of identity? In what way do they justify going beyond one facet of being and expressing modern identity as a fluid notion? Do they share territorial common ground with Butler's concept of 'troubling' portrayals of identity? In this way, using theories by both Deleuze and Butler will allow us to adapt a concise approach throughout this study. If certain ideas theorized by Gilles Deleuze provide some of the analytical foundation of this study, intertwining them with aspects of Judith Butler's work relating to gender and sexuality will make for a stronger, more refined approach.

### **1.5. Auteur theory and Identity**

Auteur theory is a key consideration in relation to French-language film studies. Initially developed as part of the culture of cinephilia that developed in 1950s France, most notably on the pages of film journals such as *Cahiers du cinéma*, auteur theory would become known in

practice through the notable filmmakers of *la nouvelle vague* such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut. Auteur theory sought to highlight the films that bore the artistic signature of their filmmaker, and these consistent signatures would be recognisable through their body of work. As a theoretical and practical approach to film, this became known as *la politique des auteurs*. André Bazin explained that ‘La « politique des auteurs » consiste, en somme, à élire dans la création artistique le facteur personnel comme critère de référence, puis à postuler sa permanence et même progrès d’une œuvre à la suivante’ (Bazin 1957, 10). The theory sought to impose the director as the singular author of the work, and was therefore initially conceived to identify a distinction between film as artistic production and film as a mass-produced studio product, such as with the Hollywood studio era that peaked in the 1930’s, although the theory notably praised filmmakers that managed to work within the conditions of a such a system, such as Howard Hawks. The theory therefore identifies distinction between film as artistic expression and profitable economic endeavour. James Monaco explains that according to *la politique des auteurs*: ‘Movies must no longer be alienated products which are consumed by mass audiences; they are now intimate conversations between the people behind the camera and the people in front of the screen’ (Monaco 1976, 9). In all cases, the theory sought to assert one author at the centre of the work.

The theory would be reflected in the films of *la nouvelle vague*, yet auteur theory’s impact stretches far beyond that movement and the culture of cinephilia that informed it. Indeed, the term’s importance in studies of film is reflected in its prevalence in the anglophone world, where it is often synonymous with ‘art’ cinema. For example, in *Legacy of the French New Wave* (2020), Douglas Morrey writes about the legacy of the French new wave in subsequent movements in French cinema. From a stylistic perspective, Douglas Morrey identifies the auteur traits of a film as being ‘a marked tendency towards explicit authorial intervention into the film in terms of self-conscious stylistic effects’ and consistent tropes in terms of *mise-en-scène* (Morrey 2020, 5-6). A clear artistic signature is often considered as a marker of the auteur. He also states that ‘French’ cinema is largely synonymous with auteur cinema on the world stage. He explains: ‘Despite various recent developments [...] ‘French cinema’ as a national body of production and as a critical concept no doubt remains most associated, in the minds of global film enthusiasts, with auteur cinema’ (Morrey 2020, 185). It therefore remains notionally linked to its roots in the conditions, time period and place that gave birth to it, even, as Morrey states, within broader frameworks of global film.

It is important to note that the notion of auteur cinema has since been critiqued in different contexts. Parallel to many of the emerging identity debates that I have identified in this introduction, the figure of the auteur has been criticised for being historically aligned with straight, white and male subjectivity. This has most notably been voiced by feminist film scholars, such as Geneviève Sellier. In *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema* (2008), Sellier argues that the concept of auteur cinema is historically male-dominated. Sellier points out that the development of a culture of cinephilia in France in the 1950's, which gave birth to auteurism, was 'androcentric' (Sellier 2008, 29). She also finds that the gender politics of the films that were produced by the filmmakers of the new wave were often patriarchal, and the default sense of subjectivity was often masculine, explaining that the central perspective in the best-known films of the nouvelle vague were often subject to a 'male gaze' (Sellier 2008, 149). Furthermore, traditional auteur centred approaches also exclude the work of others who contribute to the film. Sellier states that the auteur ideology is 'often in contradiction with the reality of the collective production of so-called auteur films' (Sellier 2008, 222). The auteur-centric approach to film therefore often led to overlooking the creative input of others, such as cinematographers, soundtrack composers, and production designers, for example.

Auteur theory is a key theoretical contribution to this thesis for several reasons. In many respects, the methodical approach of my study is informed by auteur theory, where each chapter is dedicated to the work of one filmmaker. I also consider their respective styles and artistic signatures in depth when discussing their films. Yet, Sellier's observation that the auteur understanding of film tends to ignore the creative input of a group of people is a key consideration. Firstly, throughout my discussion of each film, I pay close formal attention to colour, framing and music, actively attributing increased agency to the cinematographers, sound editors, composers who worked on the respective films. Secondly, Sellier's observation allows us to point out that a film is subject to multiple creative subjectivities, which in turn creates a fluid sense of subjectivity that corresponds to the configurations of identity that form this thesis. Finally, all three filmmakers that I will analyse in detail are commonly referred to as auteurs, yet most notably, they are considered as different forms of contemporary auteurs. For example, François Ozon has been described as French cinema's first 'mainstream queer auteur' (Ince 2008, 113). While auteur cinema is most commonly thought to be 'art' cinema, his films also allow us to consider the tension between 'high' and 'mainstream' forms. Given that we have seen how auteur historically aligns with dominant positions of power, his work allows us to consider the implications of being understood as a

‘queer auteur’. Indeed, all three filmmakers identify as queer, so this consideration can be applied to each of them. Céline Sciamma has been referred to as ‘une représentante d’un nouveau cinéma d’auteur exigeant et pop’ (Dryef 2019). Again, the description draws out a tension between the artistic registers of ‘intellectual’ and ‘popular’ art. Further to this, studying her alongside Ozon and Dolan allows us to consider the traditional alignment of being an auteur with male subjectivity. With the work of feminist film scholars such as Sellier in mind, her films also offer us the opportunity to consider auteur theory through a feminist lens. Xavier Dolan has been called a ‘millennial auteur’ (Lafontaine 2019, 24). In my discussion of his work, I will mark out a specific generational dimension to his work, such as with the impact of digital media. Furthermore, through my analysis of his films, we will see the extent to which the perception of him as an auteur may change due to the fact that he is from a country other than France.

## **1.6. Other Identities**

In the following section, I will identify other key concepts that feed into the overarching theoretical framework of this study. While Gilles Deleuze and Judith Butler both give context to the notional foundation of post-identity theory, the theories that I discuss in this section will help to refine my theoretical framework even further. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate how these notions complement each other and work cohesively.

- **Intersectionality**

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the now widely-used term in her 1989 article ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’. In it, she criticizes ‘single-axis’ uses of anti-discrimination theory that do not take experiences relating to ethnicity or gender into account: ‘With Black women as the starting point, it becomes more apparent how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis’ (Crenshaw 1989, 140). She concludes that:

If any real efforts are to be made to free Black people of the constraints and conditions that characterize racial subordination, then theories and strategies purporting to reflect the Black community's needs must include an analysis of sexism and patriarchy. Similarly, feminism must include an analysis of race if it hopes to express the aspirations of non-white women. Neither Black liberationist politics nor



feminist theory can ignore the intersectional experiences of those whom the movements claim as their respective constituents. (Crenshaw 1989, 166)

Given that Crenshaw's primary concern is to address identity at the intersection of critiques of racism, sexism and class, her reflection provides a key example to the overall approach of this thesis. I am particularly interested in the potential between intersectionality as consideration of difference in relation to identity, and comparing this to the French Republican universalism, which denies difference in order to understand all identities equally as the same. Many of the tensions between these different understandings of identity are played out between Céline Sciamma's *Bande de filles* (2014) and much of the critical reaction to it. I will discuss consider the film and the reaction to it in detail in chapter 3 of this thesis.

- **Post-Identity**

Post-identity is a relatively recent development in studies of the self. The term's existence begins with the inception of *Post-Identity*, an academic journal based at the University of Michigan. Post-identity theory shares several parallels with the identity debates that I have highlighted so far in this introduction. From 1997-2007, *Post-Identity* published collections of articles grouped around 'exploring implications of what might be termed a post-identity culture' (Rombes et al. 1997). In the introduction to the first edition, the raison d'être of the journal was set out: 'We began thinking about whether there ever was a time when "cohesive" identity formations existed or whether all such claims were thoroughly constructed' (Rombes et al. 1997). The journal set out to highlight the fragmentation of traditional, 'cohesive' notions of identity, which addressed one facet (gendered, racial, ethnic, sexual, national, etc.) as if it defined the subject formation in question. The journal's articles would frequently contradict this idea to consciously posit contemporary identity as an increasingly fluid notion. Judith Butler and Gilles Deleuze, for example, have both been identified post-identity thinkers (McQueen 2016, McNay 2010, Roof 2003).

Post-identity differentiates itself from other theoretical perspectives in that it does not address one particular facet of identity and the school of thought commonly associated with it such as gender/ gender studies, sexuality/queer theory, ethnicity/postcolonial studies for example. Post-identity is concerned with several of these aspects of identity and schools of thought simultaneously, showing particular interest in cases where they cross over and interconnect. Judith Roof states that 'Post-identity looks both at the ways identity categories

are deployed to sustain the status quo and at the ways alternative notions of identity already exist that defy, deconstruct, or perversely alter power asymmetries' (Roof 2003, 3). For example, post-identity shares similar notional ground to Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, as it states that experiences relating to identity are always multi-faceted. Yet, post-identity goes further in terms of constantly shifting focus between the aforementioned facets of identity, whereas Crenshaw's initial focus is in terms of the intersection between experiences of gender, ethnicity and class.

The scope of post-identity is by no means limited to the aspects of identity addressed in these examples, as Roof states: 'The idea [...] is to avoid the structuralist, binary thinking that can only reproduce itself-and the sets of empowerments, oppositional epistemologies, categorical generalizations, and economies that inhere' (Roof 2003, 3). In all cases we can see a desire to approach contemporary identity from a socio-political angle that simultaneously considers multiple factors, critiquing the continuity of essentialist understandings of identity and identifying examples where it must be viewed as multi-faceted concept to be understood.

- **Queer Aesthetics**

Building on the understanding of queer that is described in the previous section, much of the film analysis throughout this study will be informed by the notion of queer aesthetics. Muriel Plana describes culture that pertains to queer aesthetics as artistic creation which highlights the oppositional normative structures which condition our everyday thinking, not just in terms of art and culture, but also in the manner in which our lives are led (Plana 2015, 10-11). Categorical evasiveness then manifests in the formal structure of the work. We can view the concerns of queerness as being the notional blurring of distinctions, definitions or identities previously broadly thought to be 'permanent', 'essential' or 'true'. This blurring of distinctions, disrupting of definitions extends to formal studies of art we identify as 'queer'. Plana explains: 'Nous avons constaté que les œuvres [...] traversées par le queer [...] sont la plupart du temps formellement troublées' (Plana 2015, 11). She explains that queer aesthetics 'trouble' the notion of classifications, in general:

Concept clé issu des pensées queer, le « trouble » peut sans doute se substituer idéalement au terme anglais en français et permettre l'élargissement de son sens aux questions formelles et esthétiques sans obliger le chercheur à partir des pensées du genre ou des théories queer – [...] le concept de trouble relie très bien, me semble-t-il,

la question de l'identité formelle (esthétique) de l'œuvre à la question de l'identité des corps, des genres, des sexes de l'auteur, du récepteur, du narrateur, des personnages, etc. (Plana 2015, 11)

Here she pays particular attention to this notion of form and genre; how we might go about 'classifying' queer art in terms of form. On this point, there can appear to be an internal contradiction as much of what makes such art queer is escaping classification or a specific genre. Yet, the resistance to definition is key to queerness as a theoretical framework.

Plana's work is particularly apt here as it is primarily concerned with reading the arts through a politico-aesthetic theoretical lens. For example, she draws on Butler's understanding of subversion to group the omnipresent questions of indecision and ambiguity relating to identity, whether they are pertaining to thematic, aesthetic or technical dimension of a particular work (Plana 2015, 11). She uses this notion as an analytical tool to question the omnipresent binary identity definitions of modernity: feminine/masculine, homo/hetero, alive/dead, healthy/sick, black/white, physical/spiritual, natural/mechanical (Plana 2015, 11) because all of these represent a clearly defined, absolute value. As a result, her understanding of queer aesthetics allows us to use the idea not just as the theorization of queer identities and sexualities, but also the critiquing of normative structures at large. In the Francophone context, these include the disruption of 'national' identity that we see in Ozon and Dolan's film, as well the stylistic penchant for ambiguity that we see in Sciamma's work. Thinking in this way, by analysing particular works, it can be demonstrated that other notions outside of these binary values are possible then the monopoly that these binary notions exercise over identity is brought in to question. In the context of this study, we can think of queer aesthetics as an analytical tool to help us theorize the disruption of these stable notions of identity.

- **New Queer Cinema**

'New Queer Cinema' is a term coined by B. Ruby Rich in a 1992 article for film magazine *Sight & Sound*. She used the term to describe what she identified as a recent trend in queer film, paying attention particular the work of filmmakers such as Derek Jarman, Gregg Araki, and Todd Haynes. Rich describes the 'New Queer Cinema' that was emerging around the early 1990's as not having a unique aesthetic or referencing specific themes, but rather, by being united in terms of stylistic traits: 'Of course, the new queer films and videos aren't all the same, and don't share a single aesthetic vocabulary or strategy or concern. Yet they are nonetheless united by a common style' (2013, 16). Rich's writing provides a perspective to

contextualise the films being considered in this thesis in terms of broader context of queer film. Similar to the stylistic disruption that Plana refers to in relation to queer aesthetics, formal rupture with the fixed codes of narrative cinema constitutes a core aspect of queer aesthetics in film. New Queer Cinema's treatment of form and linearity corresponds to this sense of queerness. Michele Aaron (2004) considers these to be core aspects of queer aesthetics in film. She describes how queer films 'frequently defy cinematic convention in terms of form, content and genre' and speaks of them in terms of a 'lack of respect for the governing codes of form or content, linearity or coherence' (Aaron 2004, 4). We can therefore see that this penchant for disruption through style is a common trait through queer film that I will identify and discuss in the films of Ozon, Sciamma and Dolan. Although the generation of filmmakers that Rich was writing about were mostly British or American, the inclusion of her work in this thesis will demonstrate the extent to which filmmakers such as Ozon, Sciamma and Dolan belong to global networks of queer cinema that transcend borders. Therefore, it is necessary to consider them within the groupings related to French-language cinema to which they belong, yet also consider the parallels between their work and broader queer movements in film, such as New Queer Cinema.

- **Thrillers**

Throughout this thesis, I am interested in the role genre within each filmmaker's body of work, but I pay particular attention to François Ozon and Xavier Dolan's treatment of the thriller. Both filmmakers make use of the genre in their films *Regarde la mer* (1997) and *Tom à la ferme* (2014), respectively. Both films make use of the form to create an narrative atmosphere of queer ambiguity, treat the violence of homophobia and use the genre with a certain ironic distance. Martin Rubin does not consider the 'thriller' a genre strictly speaking, but rather refers to it as a 'metagenre' that comes as prefix to other more rigid generic codes:

The concept of "thriller" falls somewhere between a genre proper and a descriptive quality that is attached to other, more clearly defined genres – such as spy thriller, detective thriller, horror thriller. There is possibly no such thing as a pure, freestanding "thriller thriller". The thriller can be conceptualized as a "metagenre" that gathers several other genres under its umbrella, and as a band in the spectrum that colours each of those particular genres. (Rubin 1999, 4)

In identifying films that may interest us when discussing the thriller as a form, Rubin makes arguments that the film seeks a specific emotional response from the viewer, namely one of suspense (Rubin 1999, 5). In all cases, we can see that the thriller's *raison d'être* is drawing the viewer into an atmosphere of suspense. It does this by selectively revealing information at regular intervals to create further tension around a core sense of narrative ambiguity. The air of ambiguity is a key feature of both *Regarde la mer* and *Tom à la ferme*, and in my discussion of both films I will demonstrate how it constitutes a core element of Ozon and Dolan's queer filmmaking style. Although it may not seem apparent at first appearance, there is much notional common ground between the thriller genre and queer forms of art.

- **Nomadic Subjectivity**

Rosi Braidotti's nomadic theory offers a lens to analyse the representations of identity, hybridity, and cultural encounters in French-language cinema. Braidotti's work on nomad theory and nomadism constitutes a valuable contribution to contemporary debates surrounding the notion of identity, and, interestingly, she has also been referred to as a post-identity theorist (McQueen 2016). We can understand nomadic theory in the following terms:

Nomadic theory argues, if a sociocultural mutation is taking place in the direction of a multi-ethnic, multimedia society, that the transformation cannot affect only the pole of the "the others". It must equally dislocate the position and the prerogative of the "the same", the former centre. (Braidotti 2011b, 245)

We can already see here that it is not solely physical, material or geographical movement that is in question, but also movement, or perhaps fluctuations, in abstract, theoretical and immaterial terms. If we think back to our initial desire to identify trends of blurring and fluidity in identities, then these ideas of movement, fluctuation and change in relation to ways in which subject formation can be thought of can allow us to better articulate and respond to the identity questions being raised throughout this section. This understanding of nomadic theory reminds us that we need to simultaneously consider the 'syntax' and the 'symbolic representation' of social relations.

Braidotti's theory of nomadic subjectivity offers us a new configuration of human experience that rejects the essentialist or universal representations of the human conscious in favour of fluid, non-unitary subjectivity. As Braidotti states: 'Nomadic subjectivity moves beyond the mere critique of both the identitarian category of a sovereign self and dominant

subject position, on the one hand, and the image of thought that equates subjectivity with rational consciousness on the other' (Braidotti 2011b, 211). Nomadic subjectivity therefore offers us a new configuration of human experience that rejects the essentialist or universal representations of the human conscious in favour of an 'alternative vision of the thinking subject'. What interests us most here in the context of this study is nomadic subjectivity's emphasis on the idea of 'moving beyond mere critique' in favour of trying to provide an 'alternative vision', as I will argue that these films do. Thinking in terms of the 'fluid selves' of this project's title can be a worthwhile angle for approaching nomadic subjectivity. A certain fluidity in terms of subjectivity is certainly closely related to Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity as elaborated above and thinking in these terms allows us to move away from the 'linear', clearly defined, unitary, 'rational' view of the subject and subjectivity. A 'fluid self' is perhaps one that can simultaneously occupy multiple subject positions, or at least consider thinking from multiple points of view, and nomadic subjectivity supports a fluid understanding of subjectivity. Rosi Braidotti's theory of nomadic subjectivity offers a profound perspective on the relationship between subjectivity and identity. Through the lens of nomadic subjectivity, identity is not seen as a static entity but rather as a process of becoming, shaped by multiple intersecting factors such as gender, race, class, and culture. As a result, Braidotti's theory provides a key source of critical reflection throughout this thesis. Indeed, a certain sense of nomadic subjectivity is used throughout the films of Ozon, Sciamma and Dolan. Nomadic subjectivity, in Braidotti's view, encourages individuals to navigate and embrace the complexities of their identities, enabling them to constantly transform and reinvent themselves in response to changing circumstances and experiences. It invites a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of identity that transcends traditional boundaries and fosters a sense of interconnectedness with diverse others.

- **Cinéma-monde**

By choosing filmmakers from both France and Quebec, this thesis considers French-language cinema from a perspective that forgoes a singular framework of 'national' identity. 'Cinéma-monde' is a term coined by Bill Marshall in his 2012 article 'Cinéma-monde? Towards a concept of Francophone cinema'. Marshall interrogates the possibility of decentring hitherto existing views and studies of French-language cinema as well as ongoing centre/periphery dichotomies between hexagonal France and the rest of the Francophone world, in order to view such questions from an alternative perspective. Marshall asserts that the goal is to borrow certain aspects of the line of thought developed with publication of the 2007

littérature-monde manifesto and apply it to film. Marshall wrote that with *Pour une "littérature-monde" en français* 'a centre-periphery hierarchy would be overcome in favour of 'la formation d'une constellation', with 'world literature in French' replacing that binary-infected term of 'Francophone' (Marshall 2012, 35). The idea was then expanded with the collection *Cinéma-monde: Decentred Perspectives on Global Filmmaking in French* (2018) where the notion was used to analyse French-language cinema from multiple angles.

By referring to terms such as 'French' or 'Francophone' – cinema or literature as being 'binary-infected', Marshall suggests they imply a centre-periphery hierarchical relationship dynamic between metropolitan France and the Francophone world<sup>1</sup>. Michael Gott and Thibault Schilt give further context in their introduction to the previously mentioned collection:

This collection is the first to examine contemporary cinema within a wilfully broad 'French language' category and aims to explore the opportunities and limitations of adopting the label of 'cinéma-monde' (as opposed to francophone, transnational, or world cinema) as a critical framework or optic through which to approach a flexible corpus of films that are linked to the francophone world by some combination of linguistic or cultural affinities, geographic contacts, production connections, or reception networks. (Gott and Schilt 2018b, 2)

In short, the notion of cinéma-monde allows us to articulate and navigate the limitations of terms such as the ones cited above and possibly study films in French from a decentered perspective. Cinéma-monde raises pertinent questions in relation to the films of our corpus and allow us to view all of them from a worlded perspective. It also allows us to view them and the issues that they raise in a cohesive manner that eschews problematic notions such as a stable, unitary, fixed, rigid perception of the self.

Similarly to cinéma-monde, transnational cinema is a key consideration in relation to this thesis. Indeed, both are theoretical frameworks that look beyond singular notions of 'nationality' in relation to film, instead favouring critical reflections that emphasize more fluid models of identity. Writing in 2007, Carrie Tarr points out that 'Recent shifts in the

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<sup>1</sup> At the same time, we could say that a term such as 'World Cinema' is similarly problematic. We could argue that the usage of 'World Cinema' is essentially used to designate all cinema that is not in the English language, and largely reinforces the narrative that all English-language (but especially American) cinema is relatable and everything else is cast out to otherness. This phenomenon is indicted by Academy Awards' claims of being the 'championship' of cinema, despite the fact most prize-winners come from the English-speaking world and everything else competes for one, 'Best Foreign Language Film' prize. This gives English a sort of plenitude in opposition to everything else which is foreign.

funding, production, forms, distribution, exhibition and audiences of films within an increasingly interconnected, globalised film industry have confirmed the blurring of 'national' borders' (Tarr 2007, 3-4). Her statement is all the more true today, as the film's globalised nature is increasingly accelerated through advances in these networks. Throughout this thesis, I will discuss how these shifts result in the blurring of national borders in the films of Ozon, Sciamma and Dolan.

### **1.7. Francophone Film**

A further aim of this thesis investigate whether there is an emerging group within contemporary French and Francophone film whose films benefit from being examined alongside each other via the lens of blurred and fluid identities. No study has yet been conducted to identify a particular group of French and Francophone filmmakers in this way and this is what I hope to initiate in this thesis. Dolan, Ozon and Sciamma all regularly treat questions of national identity, ethnicity, sexuality, gender and class in their work and raise thought-provoking and pertinent questions about how we view ourselves. There are significant studies of the treatment of sexuality in their films; this project aims to build on this approach, by interrogating the notion of identity at large in their work, rather than one aspect. While both Ozon and Sciamma are both French, the inclusion of Dolan, a Quebecois director, adds a 'worlded' slant to the study. I therefore use the term 'Francophone' to describe the geographical terrain being covered by this study. Yet, terms such as this one are themselves fluid, and subject to change. As Marshall points out, 'Francophone' is a 'binary-infected' term that suggests a hierarchal relationship between hexagonal France and the rest of the French-speaking world (Marshall 2012, 35). This study will endeavour to examine this and similar claims. In any case, by choosing a Quebecois director as part of my corpus, the geographical boundaries of this corpus are not dependant on one geographical location and are therefore themselves blurred.

As a result, this study will contribute significantly to the already existing study of these three filmmakers, as this particular comparative critical perspective has not yet been taken in relation to their work. Furthermore, the use of these theories together are uncommon in French and Francophone Studies at large, and thus there is scope to introduce the notion to this broader field via the study of Francophone film. Each filmmaker in my corpus will take up a chapter in the body of this thesis. At the beginning of each chapter, I will introduce each filmmaker and give a critical review of the existing literature on their films.



The films which are analysed in this thesis deal with fluid blurred identities in different ways and not all of them deal with all aspects of it. François Ozon's films often display characters who grapple with fluid and shifting notions of self. Ozon explores the complexities of identity by challenging societal norms and presenting characters who play with categorization. Céline Sciamma's films tackle the exploration of fluid identities, particularly through the lens of female desire and sexuality. Sciamma portrays characters who navigate their own sexual awakening and challenge societal expectations, ultimately finding agency and self-discovery. Xavier Dolan's films often depict characters who struggle with complex and ever-evolving identities. Dolan explores the tensions between societal expectations, family dynamics, and personal desires, capturing the fluidity of identity through characters who resist easy categorization and wrestle with their own internal conflicts. While each filmmaker has their own distinct style and thematic focus, all three directors engage with the concept of fluid and blurred identities in their works, delving into various aspects of self-discovery. Their films provide thought-provoking explorations of identity, challenging societal norms and inviting viewers to contemplate the multifaceted nature of human existence.

It is important to acknowledge that these filmmakers, while contributing significantly to the Francophone cinematic landscape, come from a white perspective. This acknowledgement invites a critical lens through which we can analyse the ways in which race intersects with identity in their works; this point is developed in particular during my discussion of Sciamma's *Bande de filles*. While the focus of this thesis is on the exploration of fluid identities, it is crucial to remain cognizant of the limitations and potential biases that may arise from the perspectives of these white filmmakers. By doing so, we can engage in a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of identity within the context of Francophone cinema.

Furthermore, it is also important to consider the generational perspectives that shape the works of Ozon, Sciamma, and Dolan. Each filmmaker belongs to a different generation, influencing their storytelling styles, thematic choices, and approaches to identity representation. François Ozon (born in 1967) emerged in the late 1990s as part of the 'New French Extremity' movement, characterized by its provocative and transgressive narratives. Céline Sciamma (born in 1978) represents a younger generation of filmmakers who have risen to prominence in the 2010s, focusing on intimate character studies and exploring marginalized voices. Meanwhile, Xavier Dolan (born in 1989), although relatively young, has already established himself as a key figure in contemporary cinema, often infusing his works

with autobiographical elements. It is important to note that both Ozon and Sciamma studied filmmaking for years before making their feature-length debuts and graduated from la FEMIS (the national filmmaking school in Paris). As a result, their films display a consciousness of the history and theory of film. Dolan, on the other hand, was a child actor who bypassed film school in order to start making films as soon as he was an adult. By acknowledging these generational differences, we can examine how the changing sociocultural landscapes and cinematic trends have shaped the perspectives and narratives of these filmmakers, further enriching our understanding of identity representation in Francophone cinema.

Moreover, it is noteworthy to recognise that François Ozon, Céline Sciamma, and Xavier Dolan all identify as queer, a facet of their personal identities that has undoubtedly influenced their approach to film. The intersection of their queer identities with their filmmaking practices presents an opportunity to examine how a director's personal and political worldview may or may not be expressed within their films. It is essential to acknowledge that a filmmaker's perspectives, experiences, and beliefs can inform their artistic choices, resulting in nuanced portrayals of queer characters, relationships, and identities. However, it is equally important to exercise caution in assuming a direct correlation between a director's personal life and the narratives they create. Filmmakers possess the creative capacity to transcend their own experiences and empathetically delve into diverse characters and narratives that extend beyond their personal realms; I will explore this assertion in particular in relation to Sciamma's *Bande de filles* and Dolan's *Laurence Anyways*. Therefore, within the scope of this thesis, I aim to critically analyse the representation of queer identities in the works of Ozon, Sciamma, and Dolan, exploring the intricate ways in which personal and political worldviews may intertwine with their artistic endeavours, while also considering the potential for their films to transcend individual perspectives and resonate with broader audiences.

### **1.8. Methodology**

Douglas Sirk famously said in relation to his approach to filmmaking: 'The angles are the director's thoughts. The lighting is his philosophy' (Halliday 1997, 40). His statement shares several parallels with the methodological approach of this study. In terms of methodology, this thesis relies primarily on an aesthetic approach to analysing film, studying the relationship between form and meaning (Dalton 2018). This method involves studying scenes from the films in detail and discussing how they depict a certain idea relating to the theoretical framework. As a result, I pay particular attention to lighting, framing, colour,

sound, music, and camera angles when discussing a film in detail. French and Francophone art cinema is traditionally informed by methods of filmmaking where meaning is often produced by sound and image, as opposed to other means, such as dialogue. For example, many important French-language film movements, such as the *le réalisme poétique*, *la nouvelle vague*, or *le cinéma du look*, are known primarily for their visual style as opposed to their treatment of specific narrative themes. The aesthetic method is therefore well placed to analyse films such as the ones that make up my corpus.

## 1.9. Literature Review

- **François Ozon**

Ozon's films have been the subject of three book-length volumes (see Andrew Asibong 2008, Thibaut Schilt 2011 and Loïc Bourdeau 2021), and numerous academic articles. Despite beginning his career as a filmmaker over almost 30 years ago, Bourdeau points out in the introduction to *ReFocus: The Films of François Ozon* (2021), Ozon's work continues to be the subject of rich and varied scholarship to this day (Bourdeau 2021, 6). Many of the themes that Ozon has addressed throughout his career were already present from the very beginning of his career. On the most basic level, these include crime, sex, death, gender and familial relations. More complex issues are also present, such as transgression of normative social values, fluid notions of identity, and an omnipresent sense of ambivalence. Perhaps owing to a short duration of 52 minutes, *Regarde la mer* (1997) did not have a commercial release. Furthermore, it has received very little critical attention in academic circles since, with just one article being available that studies the film in any detail (Enroljas 2007). Schilt and Asibong do discuss it in their respective books.

Ozon's first feature-length film, *Sitcom*, was released in 1998. Ozon's early films are all largely consistent in terms of style and content; they all tell stories of initially mundane, middle-class lives, profoundly changed by the introduction of some notion of 'otherness', told in a highly 'camp' or ironic style. Fiona Handyside (2007) positions *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* as a queer take on Douglas Sirk-style melodrama, via the work from which it was adapted, a text by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. In her analysis of the film, Amy Bertram (2021) identifies the particular references to Fassbinder's oeuvre, placing it in context with Ozon's overall (queer) style of filmmaking. *Sous le sable* (2000), was a marked shift to a more sober style, and it was the first of Ozon's film to be widely well-received, both

commercially and by critics. Bert Cardullo commented on the evocative use of silence in the film, which he argues displays ‘a desire to reveal the fragility and vulnerability that underlie seemingly secure or solid bourgeois appearances’ (2002, 473). Handyside comments in detail on *Sous le sable* as being indicative of Ozon’s widespread use of the beach, a key trope to understanding his work: ‘His beaches assert queer disruptions of time and space as part of modernity, not other to it’ (2013, 674). Nicolas Ealy discusses the film’s imagery of loss and mourning, where he identifies ‘the different ways in which Jean’s image, situated as (non-) existent, upsets traditional binary notions of time (past/present), reality (truth/fiction) and memory (remembrance/forgetfulness)’ (2017, 218). Asibong also identifies the profound sense of ambiguity and ambivalence throughout the film, commenting on several key moments where the border between truth/fiction of reality/imagination is left indistinct (2008, 85).

Ozon returned to stylistic excess for his next feature, *Huit femmes* (2002), his most commercially successful film to date. The film, Ozon’s take on the musical genre, featured a notably star-studded cast, with Catherine Deneuve, Isabelle Huppert and Fanny Ardant, amongst others, and established Ozon’s reputation on a wider scale. It has also received considerable critical attention in academic circles, with many highlighting the film’s depth despite what may appear to be an initially light-hearted surface. Many scholars (Asibong 2008, Waldron 2010) have written about the various cultural references that the film makes. For example, Schilt highlights the deeply referential, reflexive and at times meta nature of the film:

Undeniably, a large part of *8 femmes*’ interest and enjoyment lies in the spectator’s ability to engage in a cinephilic Clue game of sorts that consists in identifying the various filmic citations, including some from Ozon’s own filmography, that the director playfully inserted throughout the story. (2011, 72)

Schilt’s analysis takes in the original adaptation material, the visual aesthetic deeply indebted to 1950’s Hollywood melodrama, and the film’s multiple nods to the previous films of the cast. In terms of the broader studies of Ozon’s body of work, many have noted that his cinephilia is key to understanding his work and it is extremely prominent here.

Despite achieving modest notoriety by the director’s own standards, *Le temps qui reste* (2005) has received notable critical attention in terms of academic writing, and provides key examples in the scholarship of his films. Fiona Handyside (2008) pays attention once

again to the detailed intertextuality of the film, which goes as far as referring to as a process of adaptation. She describes this process as twofold; both in relation to the film's casting, with references to the previous films of Melvil Poupaud, Jeanne Moreau and Marie Rivière, and echoing of the work of Eric Rohmer, with multiple specific nods to *Conte d'été* (1996). Emma Wilson (2014a) analyses the film as being indicative of a wider European tradition of pathos:

Ozon's art identifies itself with a high art tradition across Europe, thus defining a queer aesthetic markedly in contrast to Anglo-American queer representations. Permeability across sexual and national (artistic) boundaries carries particular force in Ozon's films, making them queer in a political as well as sexual sense. (2014, 151)

She places Ozon's approach to sexuality within the context of his overall approach to the notion of identity throughout his work. *Le temps qui reste* provides key examples of the scholarship of Ozon's cinema as it has relied heavily on intertextuality, cultural referencing and queer theory to analyse his work. Handyside, Schilt, and Wilson's analysis of *Le temps qui reste* demonstrate the extent to which intertextuality is a key component of Ozon's films. Similarly, in my analysis of *Frantz* (2016), I will provide detailed interpretation of the film's intertextuality and cultural referencing.

There are clear trends when we consider the entirety of the academic Ozon's body of work. Motherhood is a recurring theme in Ozon's films. For example, *Ricky* recounts the challenges faced by a mother whose new-born baby grows a pair of wings. In *Le refuge* (2009) the mother-protagonist Mousse (played by Isabelle Carré), finds out she is pregnant after her partner has died. In *Regarde la mer*, Sasha (Sasha Hails) is clearly struggling with the social expectations of motherhood. The film points to a heterogeneous account of what motherhood can be, with references to unfair division of parenting roles, neglectful parenting, and the potential difficulties of childbirth abortion. By highlighting these particular aspects, Ozon gives an account of motherhood that subverts normative discourses of maternity, which are often at odds with the lived reality. In *Le refuge*, Thibaut Schilt points out that the film 'resists dominant discourses around both womanhood and motherhood' (Schilt 2021, 133). In my discussion of *Regarde la mer*, we will see how the film's island setting takes on a similar non-normative dimension in relation to dominant patriarchal discourses, and the holiday provides the main character with the opportunity to consider possibilities beyond the social expectations of motherhood. However, the results in *Regarde la mer* are quite different from

*Le refuge*. *Le refuge* points to different possible configurations of what the family could become. In *Regarde le mer*, the non-normative potential of Sasha's holidays comes to a brutal end when Tatiana kills her and takes her baby.

Many scholars have used queer theory to study his work. This has clearly been a substantial component of the approach to *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*, *Le temps qui reste* and *Une nouvelle amie*, for example (see Handyside 2007, Ince 2008 and Reis 2020). There is a consistent desire to use contemporary theories of sexuality to understand Ozon. Other scholars have studied his films in terms of their treatment of form or genre. This reflects the approach taken to *Sitcom*, *Huit femmes*, *Swimming Pool* and *Ricky*, for example (see Waldron 2010, Schilt 2011 and Hartford 2016). Ozon is frequently referred to as someone who consistently wears his disparate formal influences on his sleeve, with Chabrol, Fassbinder, and Sirk being some of the most frequently cited examples. Many have noted the deep intertextuality of Ozon's work, in terms of both adaptation and the wider history of cinema on films such as *Les amants criminels* and *5x2*, where Rohmer, Hitchcock, 1950's Hollywood and the filmography of his own actors are referred to (see Hain 2007, Powrie 2008 and Schilt 2011). It is interesting to note that within these 'waves' of reactions to Ozon's work, there are several moments of crossover between the groups, such as the theoretical mobilization of queer theory to study adaptation in *Angel* or intertextuality in *Le temps qui reste*. Handyside (2007, 2008, 2011, 2012) and Wilson (2014a) are key scholars in this regard. As a result, we can see that the varied nature of Ozon's oeuvre has inspired a body of scholarship that is itself diverse and changing through time.

- **Céline Sciamma**

The existing scholarship of Sciamma's films reflects the varied nature of her work. Frances Smith recently wrote: 'Sciamma has been able to forge a career with work that is characterized by liminality, gender fluidity, and feminine embodiment' (2020, 15). Much of the critical analysis of *Naissance des pieuvres* has paid close attention to the film's aesthetic form, identifying the manner in which it heavily invests in the audio-visual aesthetics for production of meaning. *Naissance des pieuvres* is a French coming-of-age drama, exploring the complexities of female adolescence through the intertwined stories of three teenage girls as they navigate friendship, sexuality, and the search for identity. Sophie Belot (2012) discusses the significance of the swimming pool as space in the film. She describes it as an inherently 'fluid' space, simultaneously operating as an 'at once public/private and rigid/fluid

space' (2012, 172). The 'public' surface of the choreographed swimming routines exists in close proximity to the depth that is not visible to the outside world. Interpreting water as a presence of transition and change throughout the film, she says that 'Sciamma's film foregrounds adolescent girls' specificity in terms of their inner lives, and therefore distances itself from a superficial and static representation that focuses on young girls' 'exteriority' (2012, 181). M. Catherin Jonet (2017) also pays particular attention to the space of the pool, referring to it as a 'sustained examination of surface and depth', navigating the 'liminal waters of girlhood' (2017, 1134). Just as Jonet discusses the visual style in detail, Fiona Handyside (2016) pays particular attention to the use of music in the film. She describes music as a 'vector of meaning' that adds depth and emotion to the many unspoken aspects of the narrative (2016, 121). She identifies music as way of navigating this private/public sphere in *Naissance des pieuvres*, adding depth to what appears initially simple on emotional level: she says that music 'becomes the vehicle of unspoken female emotion' (2016, 122).

Sciamma's third film, *Bande de filles*, has also attracted considerable critical attention. Frances Smith (2020) has written a book-length study of the film. Most notably, she contextualises the film in relation to Sciamma's other films in terms of a series of coming-of-age texts (2020, 15) and considers the intersection of the film's use of extradiegetic music and spatial identity (2020, 61). She says that 'Sciamma's film is alert to the complexities of representation and portraying girls on screen, particularly when they are engaging in spectacular kinaesthetic activity, like dancing' (2020, 2). Fiona Handyside (2019) analyses the film, alongside *17 filles* (Delphine and Muriel Coulin, 2011), in terms of the stylistic treatment of girlhood, paying particular attention to the relationship between light and space in the films (Handyside 2019, 115). Handyside describes how the films:

show us how the girls use their bodies as a weapon to challenge how they are expected to conform to neoliberal ideas of suitable paths for girls of their race, class, and nationality, repurposing the shimmering luminosity of the successful agentic feminine selfhood (2019, 135).

Many scholars have viewed the film in the context of *cinéma de banlieue*, a term used to group films often based in the Parisian suburbs, with the most frequently cited and best-known example being *La haine* (Kassovitz, 1995). Laura Reeck (2018) notes how Sciamma's film adds much to this form, such as an all-female group being the film's protagonists and moments of identity fluidity in the goal of 'creating a more inclusive visual culture in France'

(2018, 86). Karine Chevalier (2016) comments further on *Bande de filles* as a new development in *cinéma de banlieue*. For example, she says that the heavily poetic, aestheticized depiction of the *banlieue* in the is a far cry from manner in which we are used to seeing many films in this type of space, which largely echo media images of *la banlieue*: ‘*Bande de filles* propose selon nous une alternative thématique et esthétique tout à fait originale pour analyser l’évolution de la violence au cinéma. Ce film s’appuie, pour mieux le renverser, sur l’horizon d’attente d’un public habitué aux films de banlieue et à leur violence sociale et raciale’ (2016, 419). Claire Mouflard (2016) says that the film represents an attempt at ‘decolonizing the banlieue girl identity as it continues to be (mis)represented in the media for the general public’ (2016, 118). Mouflard largely focuses on the portrayal of gender in the film with particular interest in how this can be linked to capital and social power throughout the film. Mouflard describes Marieme’s performance of gender within the context of the ‘girl gang’ she joins, as simultaneously being a performance of capital: ‘This performance of capital (adopting brand-name clothing and accessories as a gateway to moving away from the banlieue’s oppressive surveillance system) is, in Marieme’s case, intimately linked to a gender performance’ (2016, 121). Citing Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, she says that Marieme initially ‘performs’ her membership of the girl gang with expensive clothes, weaved hair and a new phone, to achieve membership of the gang (Mouflard 2016, 121).

Some recent studies of *Bande de filles* have been critical about certain aspects of the film. The trajectory of Emma Wilson’s (2017, 2021) writing about the films are an example of this trend. Wilson initially praised the film on a stylistic level: ‘There is here a commitment to a filmic synaesthesia, a sort of sensory overload that surpasses aestheticism to carry intense feeling, to channel rapture, sensation, hurt’ (Wilson 2017, 12). She also praised the depth of the film’s treatment of the subject matter for showing that ‘economic and social specificity of her family context in a still far from egalitarian postcolonial France’ (Wilson 2017, 19). However, in a more recent book-length study of Sciamma’s oeuvre, she says the film was somewhat limited in offering an account of the experiences of ethnic minorities in France, writing that ‘The film remains a vision of Black experience, from another part of the banlieue. And, like me, the majority of its viewers and critics are white’ (Wilson 2021, 64). Will Higbee is critical of the film for being overly reliant on stereotypes in treating ethnicity in the working-class suburbs of Paris. He says that ‘*Bande de filles*’ conception of blackness is constantly at risk of reinforcing certain spectators’ facile stereotypes and one-dimensional perceptions of the girls as delinquent, marginal, and immigrant others; even if evidence



within the narrative itself might suggest the contrary' (Higbee 2018a, 179). Mame Fatou Niang is critical of the film for lacking material socio-political depth:

*Bande de filles* échoue dans sa mission à cause de la manière dont Céline Sciamma approche les personnages et parcours qu'elle expose à l'écran. L'extériorité dont elle n'arrive pas à se dégager, ainsi que le flou entretenu sur l'environnement moral et humain des personnages, leurs histoires, leurs intentions et motivations, produit l'effet contraire à celui recherché (Niang 2019, 217).

Similarly to Higbee, she is also critical of the film for relying on certain tropes and stereotypes regarding socially disadvantaged estates on the outskirts of Paris (Niang 2019, 225).

Sciamma's fourth film is *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019). Given that the film has had a relatively recent release, there are few existing academic studies of it at the time of writing. Emma Wilson analyses the film's treatment of feminine subjectivity through the prism of art history and creativity. She writes that she:

draws energy from this instance of a female artist existing independently, through her passion for art and talent, and her transmission of her artistic legacy to female pupils. And Sciamma pursues this feminist line as she demonstrates the relation between the work of women in the visual arts and cinema in France (Wilson 2021, 88).

In *Le regard féminin*, Iris Brey (2020) states that the film constitutes an example of a 'female gaze' by showing female characters to have an active subjective perspective and allowing female characters a pronounced sense of agency (63). Benjamin Eldon Stevens discusses the film in terms of the reception of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, stating that the film makes use of the myth in order to comment on the relationship between looking, desire and memory: 'The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is the archetype for *Portrait's* depiction of lived experience as leading inevitably to memory of lost love' (Stevens 2020, 46). Some longer form press reviews focus on the film's treatment of art history (Spies Gans 2020) and others discuss the film in terms of its treatment of female subjectivity (Kaminsky 2019). Sciamma's most recent film *Petite Maman* (2021) has been released too soon to be considered in detail here.

We can see throughout these articles that there are certain trends in the reactions to Sciamma's body of work. Broadly, as pointed out by Smith (2020), all of her films concern narratives of youth. The treatment of gender is a constant in her work, yet it is treated

alongside other facets of identity in different films: *Naissance des pieuvres* treats developing sexuality (see Belot 2012, Jonet 2017), *Tomboy* addresses gender fluidity (Waldron 2013, Duschinsky 2018), while *Bande de filles* addresses the intersection of gender, agency and ethnicity in the *banlieue* (Reeck 2018, Mouflard 2016, Higbee 2018a). *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* treats feminine subjectivity through the prism of art history (Wilson 2021). Other studies have paid more attention to more technical aspects of her work. This has been especially true of *Naissance des pieuvres* (Handyside 2016) and *Bande de filles* (McNeill 2017, Edney 2020, Pember 2020), who have all paid particular attention to the use of music in her films.

- **Xavier Dolan**

Loïc Bourdeau (2018) comparatively examines the figure of the mother in Dolan's early work. Bourdeau focuses on the maternal figure in *J'ai tué ma mère* (2009), as well as *Les amours imaginaires* (2010) and *Laurence Anyways* (2012). He looks at motherhood using Judith Butler's theory of performativity, studying Chantal (Anne Dorval) in *J'ai tué ma mère* as a 'post-mother' balancing her maternal role with individuality (Bourdeau 2018, 363). He goes on to describe the prominent mothers in Dolan's films as 'unmothering' in the traditional sense, whereby 'women can demonstrate their own sensibility as individuals whose lives are not define solely by procreation and raising children. 'Unmothering' also implies the refusal of guilt and shame for one's offsprings' wrongdoings or deviance' (Bourdeau 2018, 365). Fulvia Massimi (2016) also studies the recurrent mothers in Dolan's work, from *J'ai tué ma mère* to *Mommy*. She uses queer and feminist theory to analyse Dolan's films. She states that the recurrent absent father figure in Dolan's films points towards possible failure of patriarchal social model in favour for alternative models throughout his work: 'The trope of absent fatherhood and the inability of adult males to provide effective substitutes for the missing father are indeed touched upon once again by Dolan, who imagines the future of Québec as a heavily feminine scenario' (Massimi 2016, 27).

Mercédès Baillargeon (2014) examines the manner in which the notion of national identity is treated in *Les amours imaginaires*. She identifies the waning interest in Quebec sovereignty in the younger generation in the film. She states that identity is established through opposition and projection in the film, where 'one could argue that both individual and collective identities are produced as part of a feedback loop in which the ideal Self,

through narcissistic projection, comes into being by identification with and opposition to the Other' (Ballargeon 2014, 186). Gabriel Laverdière (2015) analyses the use of music in Dolan *Les amours imaginaires*, alongside *J'ai tué ma mère* and *Laurence Anyways*. Laverdière relates the question of music and aesthetic to identity. He compares Dolan's musical choices Dolan in terms of 'Indie' or 'marginal' music in order to convey ideas relating to a portrayal of marginal identity : 'La diversité musicale, à laquelle se greffent les sonorités électroniques actuelles (Moderat, The Knife, Fever Ray...), plus clairement apparentées à une identité déterritorialisée, ponctue ce parcours narratif et contribue au déploiement d'une esthétique rock queer' (Laverdière 2015).

Considerable interest has been taken in Dolan's next film, *Laurence Anyways*. Many scholars have analysed the treatment of gender and sexuality in the film. It is of note that despite it being a film whose main character is transgender, many have approached the film not so much about trans- issues as such, but more about difference in general (Thomas J. D. Ambrecht 2013, Corey Kai Nelson Schulz 2018). Ambrecht (2013) analyses the presence of water in film, noting how it serves to reflect the instability, fluidity, transitions of identity that take place. He says that: 'La fluidité du devenir trans- est représentée de façon très littérale : il s'agit de l'élément liquide, l'eau, souvent torrentielle et omniprésente dans le film' (Ambrecht 2013, 40). Schultz (2018) argues that film creates a sense of empathy in the viewer by exposing the viewer to the main character's subjective experience with the use of point of view framing. He places particular emphasis on the treatment of the gazes that Laurence is subjected to during the film. He says 'these cinematic gazes replicate the narrative's affective moments for the viewer, and have the potential to produce viewer empathy for Laurence and her subjectivity' (Schulz 2018, 18). Jim Leach (2013) discusses the 'in-between states' of *Laurence Anyways*. He identifies these in-between states questioning the categories between which they exist in terms of gender, sexuality and national identity, the latter being noteworthy when we consider that the casting of French actors (Melvil Poupaud, Nathalie Baye) who play their characters in their own accents without relying on the film's plot for an explanation: 'The in-between state that Laurence assumes by deciding to change genders may or may not involve a bodily transformation, but it is also a matter of language and culture' (Leach 2013, 101).

Bill Marshall (2016) analyses the notion of space in *Tom à la ferme* (2013) (alongside *Laurence Anyways*). Marshall is often cited as key figure in the study of cinema from Quebec so his study of Dolan's work is particularly significant. He notes, as others have, that Dolan's

work reflects an evolving Quebec. He proposes a study of the relationship between identity and space in *Tom à la ferme*, which he describes as being much more complex than an urban/rural dichotomy, reflecting instead ‘multiple horizons of belonging’ (2016, 207). Steven Urquhart (2018) also addresses the question of space, analysing Dolan’s *Tom à la ferme* alongside *Mommy* and *Juste la fin du monde*. He notes the deconstructive vagueness of space, that is often marked by ambiguity in the film. He also remarks that movement within this space is often marked by circular and back and forth movements rather than linear advancing that evokes the positions of the characters of these films: ‘Partial to decentering trips to the countryside, bends in the road, stop and go movements, looping configurations [...], Xavier Dolan organizes his films in terms of deconstructive displacements, both real and symbolic’ (Urquhart 2018, 143).

Many studies of *Mommy* have focused on the use of language in the film (D’Aoust 2017, Simon 2015). Jason R. D’Aoust (2017) paid particular attention to the ‘queer materiality’ of the voice in this film, approaching language and the voice in the film from several angles – accents, slang, cursing, speaking and singing. He describes the relationship between identity, swearing and musicality in the film that subverts the traditional association of this use of language as an exclusively masculine trope, explaining the widely negative reaction to this aspect of the film in Quebec, which was not the case elsewhere in the francophone world: ‘the queer voices in *Mommy* invest intimate spaces of Québécois culture in order to subvert them and therefore be better heard by the population at large (D’Aoust 2017, 14). Sherry Simon (2015) also studies the language of *Mommy*, with emphasis on the importance of language as identity, describing the ‘untranslatability’ of certain aspects of Quebec French for the rest of the francophone world. She points out that Dolan acted as translator himself for the English subtitles of the film (Simon 2015, 508). Mercédès Baillargeon (2019) studies the film’s treatment of socio-economic class, where a style marked by ‘camp aesthetics’ is a key component in drawing the viewer into relating the characters in the film: ‘The film’s camp aesthetics, its soundtrack filled with turn-of-the-millennium hits, its timeless, “normcore” costumes, and the use of joul all serve to clearly mark these characters’ social belonging, as well as their belonging to a time foregone’ (Baillargeon 2019, 188).

*Juste la fin du monde* has so far attracted little critical attention in academic publications, perhaps due to it being a relatively recent film at the time of writing. Nick Rees-Roberts (2019) studies *Juste la fin du monde* alongside other films in Dolan’s œuvre,

focusing on their approach to style and fashion as an essential vector of meaning. He says of *Juste la fin du monde*: ‘The script therefore acknowledges the contribution of style to the film’s operative mode—its melodramatic sensibility—by integrating costume and decor as features of the dramatic performances as much as the production designs’ (Rees-Roberts 2019, 222). Marie Pascal (2019) discusses *Juste la fin du monde* in terms of adaptation, alongside *Tom à la ferme*, as the screenplays for both films were originally adapted from theatrical dramas. Pascal describes how Dolan carefully alters certain aspects of the original texts that make them fit seamlessly into his broader body of work, which are usually original screen plays where he is the primary author (Pascal 2019, 152). Dolan’s most recent films, *The Life and Death of John F. Donovan* (2018) and *Mathias et Maxime* (2019) have not been subject to any detailed academic studies at the time of writing.

Trends can be identified to allow us to group the ideas on Dolan’s work so far. Many scholars have analysed the manner in which he addresses sexuality and gender, often identifying his treatment of these themes as transgressive, subversive and performative (see Bourdeau 2018, D’Aoust 2017, Schulz 2018). Many have cited Judith Butler in order to discuss these aspects of his films. Much has also been written about the question of ‘national’ identity in relation to Dolan’s films, and related spatial tensions such as regional/national, local/global, self/other (Baillargeon 2014, Marshall 2016, Simon 2015). Language has often been the approach taken for studying these questions. The presence of Quebecois French spoken in a variety of accents and treatments of linguistic register alongside other dialects and even languages, such as metropolitan French and English, makes for a complex portrayal of the idea of national identity. Some have indicated that these films are perhaps reflecting the waning interest in Quebec’s sovereign nationhood (Baillargeon 2014, Massimi 2016). Finally, several critics have shown interest in the aesthetic style of Dolan’s films (Armbrecht 2013, Lavardière 2015, Rees-Roberts 2019). They often discuss the films’ use of the soundtrack, visual framing and colour palettes, suggesting what may seem initially superficial in Dolan’s films is often the site of primary meaning production.

### **1.10. Summary**

In this section, I have introduced the subject matter and theoretical framework of this thesis. First, I discussed the development of the theoretical framework that will be used throughout this study. I identified the theoretical roots of the study as notions of blurring and fluidity in relation to identity. Then, in order to solidify the foundations of the theoretical framework

that I will use, I presented the theorists who correspond particularly well to this set of ideas. In doing so, I explained the impact that Gilles Deleuze and Judith Butler have had on theories of identity, and the aspects of their work that will be useful throughout this study. Then, I briefly indicated a range of other pertinent and interconnected theories in order to further refine my use of this particular theoretical framework. I discussed these theories in order to strengthen my overall theoretical framework and to illustrate the extent to which it is a flexible set of ideas that will work together. Finally, I completed a literature review of the existing reactions to each filmmaker that I will study in detail throughout this thesis.

## 2. Ambiguous Genres of Perception: Identity in the Films of François Ozon

### 2.1. Introduction

François Ozon is a prolific filmmaker who has experimented with different cinematic forms since his first film, *Sitcom* (1998). As of 2022, he has a vast body of work that stands at over 20 feature-length films. His films have received various international accolades, regularly feature well-known actors, and some have been box-office successes (*8 Femmes* (2001) and *Potiche* (2010), most notably). As a result, he is a major figure in the field of contemporary French and Francophone cinema. From the psychological thriller/drama of *L'amant double* (2017) to the period adaptation of *Angel* (2007), or the contemplative mourning narrative of *Le temps qui reste* (2005), Ozon constantly innovates while maintaining a clear signature. We can place his work into two broad groups. On the one hand, the high camp style, verging on burlesque, simultaneously light-hearted and dark, abundant in stylistic irony, such as *Potiche* (2010), *Huit femmes* (2002), *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* (2000). On the other hand, the more sober in style, apparently serious and more introspective and contemplative, such as *Frantz* (2016), *5x2* (2004), and *Le refuge* (2009). There are, of course, films that cross over to varying degrees between the two, such as *Ricky* (2009), *Une nouvelle amie* (2014) or *Une robe d'été* (1996). Despite this broad range of style, it is important to note that there are evident consistencies underpinning his work as a whole. Ozon's narratives are often structured around characters who are confronted by the unexpected arrival of someone else, and this meeting produces a dramatic change. There are manifestations of this throughout Ozon's filmography, with examples including, Julie in *Swimming Pool*, the title-character of *Ricky*, and Claude in *Dans la maison*. As Douglas Morrey points out, it is precisely Ozon's ability to move across different genres while maintaining a recognisable artistic signature that constitutes a major part of his filmmaking identity and, and this facilitates 'his consideration as an auteur' (Morrey 2020, 194). Ozon consistently deals with the topics of death and mourning, fluidity in relation to sexuality and gender, reconfiguration of the traditional nuclear family unit, and the transgression of normality.

The primary focus of my discussion of Ozon's films is to analyse the treatment of identity in his work. Firstly, I will study *Regarde la mer* as an example of a 'queer thriller'. My proposed approach here is to study the film as one of Ozon's many contributions to a specific genre in filmmaking, namely a psychological thriller, and then analyse the film's

generic coding with a theoretical framework informed by queer theory. The film corresponds to many of the initial questions from this wider project, such as the questioning of stable modes of identity. In my second section, I will study the ambiguity in relation to diegetic reality/fiction in *Sous le sable*. My approach to this question will be largely informed by Gilles Deleuze's theory of the crystal-image, and queer theory. I use the crystal-image, which concerns the ambiguity in relation to subjectivity and objectivity in film. I will also use queer theory to articulate this question of narrative ambiguity and diegetic ambivalence in *Sous le sable*. In my third section on Ozon, I will study the transnational nature of his work, with particular emphasis on *Frantz* (2016). The film contains several transnational elements; an international cast, multiple languages, Pan-European cultural references and geographic and spatial fluidity. The film problematizes the idea of oppositional spatial identities.

Throughout my discussion of Ozon's films, I demonstrate the extent to which he addresses multiple aspects of identity throughout his films. For example, gender, sexuality and national identity are all treated to varying degrees in all of the films. The most noteworthy aspect to his approach is his penchant for the blurring of values which are commonly thought as being distinct from each other. *Regarde la mer* uses a sense of tension in order to play on the socio-discursive constructs of sexuality. On a more abstract plane, Ozon treats certain social categories and aspects of human existence in fluid terms. In *Sous le sable*, the distinctions between life/death, presence/absence and reality/fiction, are expressed in undefined terms. *Frantz* makes use of intertextuality, adaptation and cultural referencing in order to interrogate the notion of rigid national identities. The films treat a certain surface-level normality and inject them with a sense of subversion. In *Regarde la mer*, the narrative plays on the experiences of the social expectations of what it is to be a mother, which is often at-odds with personal or individual desires. There is an omnipresent sense of state-changing in his films, that is often expressed visually through the presence of recurring bodies of water at key moments.

I aim to address aspects of Ozon's work that build on the existing scholarship of his films. In the existing studies of his work, *Regarde la mer* rarely features alongside his better-known work. For example, it is not examined in detail in the most recent book-length study of his work: *ReFocus: The Films of François Ozon* (2021). However, I argue that *Regarde la mer* is a significant entry to his filmography and amongst his most important films. In my study of *Sous le sable*, I argue that narrative ambiguity is key to understanding the film, and indeed Ozon's body of work. Ambiguity is not treated in detail in the existing studies of the



film (Asibong 2008, Ealy 2017, Schilt 2011). Finally, I focus on the transnational aspects of *Frantz*. His films often feature a point of contact with a foreign culture, but it does not feature often in the existing studies of his films, apart from some isolated examples (see Wilson 2014a, Bourdeau 2021). In doing so, I aim to demonstrate that the transnational is another key aspect of his work, especially when discussing the treatment of identity in his films.

## 2. 2. Queering the Thriller in *Regarde la mer* (1997)

### 2.2.1. Introduction

An extended short of sorts at 52 minutes, François Ozon made *Regarde la mer* just before he started directing features. At this point, he was celebrated for his shorts on the festival circuit, yet still somewhat off the breakthrough that would arrive with *Sous le sable*. These elements explain perhaps the reaction to the film – it was too brief for any type of stand-alone release, and by a director who was relatively unknown beyond a niche, festival audience at the time. Despite a subsequent release on DVD alongside some of Ozon's better-known shorts, critical reaction to the film has remained relatively sparse. Yet, Asibong notes that *Regarde la mer* is '...the film that may well prove to be his indisputable masterpiece' (2008, 52).

The film has many of the thematic and stylistic traits that we recognise through his best known work; mundane, bourgeois existence going through sudden and profound change, a juxtaposition of banal and shocking elements, and an exploration of the self, framed through an idyllic beachscape. Indeed, the film is one of Ozon's very deliberate forays into a specific genre, namely the psychological thriller. It does not contain as many 'thrilling' traits as better known examples, or indeed Ozon's other films that draw heavily on the form (these include *Swimming Pool* and *L'amant double*) but it certainly does rely enough on the central features of the form to identify it in this way. A poster at the time of the film's release referred to it as 'Rohmer meets Hitchcock', which does much to summarise the film's stylistic appeal – a sober, straightforward narrative based around a summery seaside that draws the viewer in by creating an air of suspense and ambiguity, increasingly suggesting the possibility of violence throughout.

The film feeds off the generic codes of a thriller in order to portray identities as being fractured and, ultimately, in a state of flux. I consider the film with an approach informed by two specific theoretical frameworks. Firstly, the fractured and evolving nature of gender and sexuality in the film means that it can be better understood by thinking of it in terms of queer theory. Secondly, we can study the film specifically as an exercise in genre. The ambiguous and fractured identities at the core of the film are simultaneously central to the film's functioning as a thriller and to its queer appeal. By bringing these ideas together, I will argue that it is possible to consider consider *Regarde la mer* as a 'queer thriller'.

*Regarde la mer* tells the story of Sasha (Sasha Hails), a middle-class English woman living in France, alone on holiday with her daughter, Siofra, on the isolated Île d'Yeu. She is frustrated by the absence of her husband, who is due to join them but away for work. One day, a vagabond hitch-hiker, Tatiana (Marina de Van) knocks on her door to ask if she can set up her tent in their garden for a few days. Sasha initially refuses but when Tatiana insists, she reluctantly agrees. Following this, perhaps out of sheer loneliness or boredom, Sasha becomes increasingly friendly towards Tatiana, inviting her in to her home to eat, despite Tatiana's coldness. Their relationship becomes increasingly incomprehensible as they seem to become closer despite Tatiana's disregard for social cues. A change seems to be taking place in Sasha as her behaviour seems to suggest she is somewhat 'seduced' by Tatiana. This relational ambiguity between the two characters fuels the film's narrative dynamic, which culminates in the husband arriving finally to the house to find Sasha murdered, her body left in Tatiana's tent. The final sequence shows us that Tatiana has kidnapped Siofra and is fleeing on the ferry back to the French mainland.

### **2.2.2. Queerness & Suspense**

On the thriller as a narrative form in film, we saw in the introduction to this thesis how Martin Rubin refers to it as a 'metagenre' that comes as prefix to other more rigid generic codes (Rubin 1999, 4). Similarly, Leger Grindon refers to the thriller as a 'mode' that may 'appear across genres and cover wide-ranging, almost ubiquitous, elements in popular entertainment' (Grindon 2012, 43). Thomas Sobchack states that the pre-existing familiarity with the thriller as a form, is key to its functioning as a genre, so we recognise it as such 'because we have seen other films that strongly resemble the particular film at hand' (Sobchack 1975, 198). To this end, Rubin highlights the presence of a certain set of emotions and a specific response from the spectator:

Important to the concept of thriller is not just an excess of feelings but the question of *which* feelings are emphasized. The thriller works primarily to evoke such feelings as suspense, fright, mystery, exhilaration, excitement, speed, movement. In other words, it emphasizes visceral, gut-level feelings rather than more sensitive, cerebral, or emotionally heavy feelings, such as tragedy, pathos, pity, love, nostalgia. (Rubin 1999, 5)

In all cases, the thriller's *raison d'être* is drawing the viewer into an atmosphere of suspense. It does this by selectively revealing information at regular intervals to create further tension and eventually build towards a narrative denouement where the pay-off is the revelation of the central mystery. The air of ambiguity is a key feature of the *Regarde la mer*'s function and meaning production. We can approach this aspect of the film on two levels; first, in terms of the film's sparse treatment of dialogue and then, the level of meaning that is communicated visually, which I argue is the film's primary vector of 'sense' communication.

The film's dialogue is largely characterised by a pronounced sense of the 'unsaid'. This failure of verbal communication is present from the film's outset. Sasha, only has her infant child Siofra to talk to, but she of course cannot talk back. She tries to contact her husband who is due to join them on holiday but is continuously frustrated to find him unreachable, only capable of getting through to his secretary to learn that he is too busy to contact her. As a result, the dialogue of the film's first ten minutes is minimal. This changes slightly from the first meeting of Tatiana and Sasha, yet remains minimal for the majority of the film. Tatiana rarely participates in conversation, despite Sasha's friendliness, and when she does speak, she is direct and abrupt to the point of being forceful, such as when she first asks if she can pitch a tent in Sasha's garden. Their two main moments of exchange are at the dinner table. These scenes do not convey the true meaning of the words being articulated, but rather serve to refer to what is not being said. For example, when Sasha asks Tatiana 'Tu n'as pas peur de te faire agresser?', the response is simply 'Non, de toute façon c'est plutôt moi qui agresse'. Being aware of the film's violent ending, what initially seems like a banal exchange in fact foreshadows the narrative climax. The sparse dialogue is a key facet of the film's functioning in relation to the generic codes identified above as the lack of clear development of characters means that the story develops psychologically within the spectator, as we imagine various possibilities in the absence of a concise explanation on the part of the film.

The lack of true verbal exchange for the majority of the film leaves space for other types of meaning production and this is taken up by the prominence of ambiguity. This is perhaps most evident in the relationship between Sasha and Tatiana, where multiple moments of the film's narrative suggest that there may be a type of unsaid ambivalence in their relationship. Sasha is at times inexplicably friendly to Tatiana, which forces us to wonder what her motivation to get to know Tatiana might be. In typical Ozonian fashion, the nature of their rapport is never 'explained' in the narrative, but rather it is explored and clues are

given in an uncertain fashion. For example, several moments of ambiguity seem to ambivalently suggest the possibility of a sexual encounter between the pair, or at least suggest Sasha may desire such an encounter. On the first night Tatiana camps in Sasha's garden, Sasha discretely looks out at Tatiana's tent from her bedroom, before turning back inside. She then seems to use the edge of a chair's back to pleasure herself by pushing it in between her legs. The camera never lingers on one specific part of Sasha's clothed body, but pans and focuses briefly on the rocking chair. Rather than relying on a scopophilic male gaze, the sequence suggests that in the absence of her husband, Sasha is desiring possibilities outside of her unrewarding, patriarchal marriage.

Later in the film, we have a similar impression when Tatiana is rubbing moisturiser into Sasha's back; she seems to intensely enjoy Tatiana vigorously rubbing her shoulders and neck. Finally, towards the film's end, Sasha invites Tatiana to sleep inside for the first time. During the night, Tatiana goes downstairs silently enters in to Sasha's room. In the blue hue of the moonlight, she looks on at Sasha sleeping naked with her daughter. Tatiana seems to be moved or upset by what she sees, she looks at them and sheds a tear. Finally, she undresses and moves across the static camera's field of vision and the sequence ends. At this point in the narrative we have the impression that she may finally reciprocate this ambiguous desire suggested by Sasha's behaviour. Furthermore, Ozon states in the DVD commentary that he did not reveal the full plot to all of the actors in advance, and Sasha Hails (the actress playing Sasha) thought the climax of the narrative was going to be a sexual encounter with Tatiana (Asibong 2008, 56)

Ozon's own comments on his approach to the film's suspenseful ambiguities are particularly revealing, making clear the influence of Hitchcockian suspense on his work:

It's the Hitchcockian lesson of cinema: put a bomb under the table and then show banal shots, so we imagine horrible things. Only I don't show the climax, because normally there is a resolution: the bomb explodes. I cut before the bomb explodes, so we don't know what happened and finally reality returns to the way it was before, but we don't really know. (Quoted in Enroljas 2007, 54)

In his comments, we can see that Ozon intentionally provokes suspense through queer sexual tension but does not intend offering a resolution to it. Rubin addresses this notion of ambiguity in relation to the thriller and the emotive response it may trigger: 'These doubled emotional responses also involve ambivalence. [...] A thriller works to undermine our emotional stability [...]. It creates an off-balance effect' (Rubin 1999, 6). These ideas of

ambivalence and ‘undermining’ of stability are clearly evocative of the notions of queerness drawn on elsewhere in this study, where undefined ideas which disrupt fixed notions of identity are so important. It is important to note that while in the thriller genre, suspense is built around the possibility of an unknown threat, queerness is not represented as a threat in the film. In *Regarde la mer*, Sasha’s seemingly queer desire offers her new forms of kinship beyond her unfulfilling traditional family unit. The absence of dialogue is therefore a key component of the film’s ambivalent queer atmosphere. Furthermore, in the absence of a clear sense of meaning being expressed by the film’s dialogue, space is created for the visual to take on more of a central role in terms of meaning production. If many of the film’s intricate subtleties are absent in the dialogue, we can see them being expressed to a much more tangible degree in the use of colour, framing and lighting throughout. This is all the more powerful as these expressive uses of the visual field are all in keeping with the film’s composed yet realist aesthetic and dry, minimalist narrative tone. To this end, there are three recurrent visual motifs that are evident at different moments – blocks of colour within the visual field, frames within the camera’s frame and stark contrasts in terms of lighting.

Initially, the most evident of these visual motifs are the colour blocks that occupy a large portion of the frame. These occur throughout the film, with the film’s opening shot showing us a close-up of sand on the beach being passed over by the incoming tide and the closing being an almost monochrome frame of the sea and sky. When we group the most prominent colour blocks from other parts of the narrative we can see that many of them are shots of Tatiana. For example, during the opening scene, Tatiana looks down at Sasha and Siofra, unaware of her presence, on the beach (fig.1). In this large shot, the camera captures Tatiana from a sharply raised angle below with the cloudless sky occupying the vast majority of the frame. The bleak indifference of the sky above seems to show disinterest for what is about to unfold in the film. The background is clearly idyllic and visually pleasing enough to draw the viewer in, but as with other parts of the film, the menacing threat remains. The heat and lack of cover from the sun evokes the sense of hostility from the surrounding environment and the isolated vulnerability of Sasha in her exposed position, unaware of the approaching threat. Furthermore, the beach is a key space in Ozon’s films. As Fiona Handyside points out, ‘Ozon’s predilection for the ocean, and the beach that it so ceaselessly laps, clearly has a metaphorical function as a site of liquidity, fluidity and change’ (2012b, 55). With this in mind, the beach as a location for this sequence featuring the two characters together is key. It is by the water, that fluid process of change is triggered. On one hand,

Tatiana will entice and draw Sasha in to her own ends. On the other hand, Sasha sees in Tatiana the possibility to experience a bond outside of normative structures. Later, we will also see the beach is an important site in *Sous le sable*.



Figure 1.

Furthermore, we associate this use of colour with Tatiana when she pitches her tent in Sasha's garden, the red colour providing stark contrast with the light, breezy green of the agreeably overgrown garden (fig.2). The plastic red and the contrast it provides with the garden surroundings seem to reflect Tatiana's invasive presence beside Sasha's holiday home. This use of red is later compounded when we see Sasha choosing a red dress to go outside and invite Tatiana to have breakfast with her in the morning. The red of the tent later occupies the whole visual frame as the camera's field of vision enters the tent and the whole frame is seen through the unnatural, red hue. There are also scenes further associating red with violence, as Sasha finds a notebook with erratic scrawling in the tent. Finally, the husband later finds her viciously murdered body and the colour of the tent occupies a large section of the visual frame. The red fabrics of the tent and dress therefore carry significant symbolic importance throughout the film. Schilt points to symbolic value of fabric in another one of Ozon's early films, *Une robe d'été* (1996), where a dress symbolises the impromptu sexual encounter between the film's protagonist, Luc, and Lucia, a stranger he meets at the beach. Schilt writes:

Fabrics in movement, like that undulating dress, occupy Ozon's cinema nearly as much as characters themselves, fluttering in a light summer breeze, twirling to the sound of music, or brushing against luxurious marble floors. The concept of fluidity,

of which the dynamic movement of clothing in general and the airy summer dress in particular are powerful representations, is at the core of Ozon's cinema, from his early career as a short film director some twenty years ago to the present. (Schilt 2011, 2)

In *Regarde la mer*, the red fabric symbolises the link between the two characters on multiple levels. On one hand, the colour red recalls Tatiana's presence by the tent, but red also suggests threatening danger, and alludes to bloodshed and the threat of violence that eventually takes place at the film's end. On the other hand, by wearing the colour red, there is a mirroring of Sasha's desire to become closer to Tatiana and it therefore suggests the potential link between the two characters. Similarly to Schilt's analysis of *Une robe d'été*, the red fabric also suggests the fluid potential of Sasha's encounter with Tatiana, which she seems to hope could possibly be a sexual one.



Figure 2.

Later on, Tatiana is once again surrounded in a single colour during the first dinner table sequence (Fig. 3). She eats and listens on in a totally disinterested manner as Sasha recounts an anecdote from a holiday regarding a suspenseful encounter with a stranger. Yet, Tatiana reacts indifferently to Sasha's story. From the viewer's perspective, she is totally enveloped in darkness, the unlit room behind her forming a pure black background. The use of lighting to surround Tatiana in a layer of blackness evokes the boundary of impenetrable mystery that she represents in the story – where did she come from and how do we explain who she is? These questions remain unanswered by the narrative. The darkness is further accentuated by her hair and black polo-neck jumper, that seem to dissolve into the



surrounding blackness, and the extreme contrast between the background and her pale white skin. In these frames she seems like an otherworldly, dark figure, totally surrounded in unexplained blackness and mystery, indifferent to the friendly advances of Sasha and her picturesque family life, indifferent to the suffering she is capable of inflicting on others.



Figure 3.

Similarly, the shots showing Tatiana in the bath surround her in one colour, albeit with slight nuances in terms of shade this time (Fig. 4). The water, her skin, the bath and her underwear (that she keeps on) are all varying shades of white, with only her facial fixtures and hair breaking up the colourful monotony of these close-up frames. Once again, she seems to represent an almost alien, otherworldly, monstrous figure as she lies in the bath, hardly distinguishable from the used bathwater. She mechanically slides below the surface to test her capacity to hold her breath, with a cigarette in her hand. This shot suggests further that Tatiana is a truly dark and mysterious character.



Figure 4.

In all of these examples, the uses of colour indicate meaning that is not necessarily expressed by the film's dialogue. These very prominent blocks of colour draw our attention to the visual as a vector of meaning in the film, indicating that in the absence of coherent language and dialogue, the image takes on a particularly significant role in terms of the film's means of expression. The visual 'language' of the films expresses all that lies beyond the false-starts and dead-ends of dialogue. Beyond Ozon's use of colour, another visual trope is evident at various points throughout the film, namely when the frame of a shot becomes divisible into smaller frames within the shot (eg. Fig. 5-7). The first moment where this occurs, Sasha is secretly watching Tatiana pitch her tent outside (Fig. 5). Bill Marshall (2016) identifies the visual trope of framing in Xavier Dolan's films as 'the *emboîtement* of frames within frames' which 'hints at relays of interconnectedness with what is out-of-field' (195). In a similar fashion, the frames within the frame in *Regarde la mer* allude to what is out of field, often linking back to the ambivalent tension that underpins the duration of the film. For example, when we see Sasha watch Tatiana's tent from her dark room, the out of field element of the frame makes reference to Sasha's hitherto unexpressed attraction to Tatiana and her possible indifference to her family life. The contrast between the dark interior of the unlit room and sunny exterior is striking; we do not 'see' Sasha or as such, but her darkened silhouette is traced out by the light entering from outside. The camera accompanies Sasha's voyeuristic gaze. The interior division of the shot sets up a real sense of opposition between the elements marked out on either side of the opposition. Tatiana's red, plastic tent stands out amongst the natural greenery of the garden. Yet, all of this is enveloped in the darkness of Sasha's vantage point. Aside from the clear physical sense of her being so, she is also

figuratively ‘in the dark’ in relation to this mysterious figure who has arrived in her home. Who is she and more importantly, what will happen while she is here? What must Sasha be thinking as she secretly watches from her window? With Tatiana, does Sasha sense the opportunity to live out previously dormant or unacted upon desires? The frame seems to set out a sense of opposition between these elements that have now been brought together.



Figure 5.

Later on another frame within the shot catches the spectator’s eye just after the final dinner scene (Fig. 6). At this point, tension is mounting and begins to build towards a moment of narrative climax. Sasha has left the table to speak with her husband on the phone. On learning the husband will return the next day, she calmly states ‘Je partirai avant qu’il arrive’, ignoring Sasha’s reassurances that he won’t mind her being there. Tatiana’s tone is eerily chilling in retrospect. Knowing how the film ends, she is not worried about overstaying her welcome, but rather concerned by the husband spoiling her plans to murder Sasha and kidnap her baby. Knowing this forms a significant counterpoint to this frame, where she is bathed in agreeably dim lighting and the pink background forms a perfect frame around her, bordered by the dark blue edge of the kitchen’s wall. The sense of composition is further enhanced by her perfect positioning in the frame and layout of the other elements that offer the impression of depth (the wine bottle, her cigarette, the darkness of her hair, the plates on the table, the lamp...). The firm tone of her words is dramatically offset by this heavily aestheticized image of her, which we are seeing from Sasha’s perspective as Tatiana is simultaneously looking at her and us, the viewer. Tatiana takes on almost classical aspect of her own beauty, a ‘girl looking over her shoulder’-type motif. This is the moment of

‘seduction’ where Sasha, possibly drawn in by this agreeable image of Tatiana, invites her into the house to sleep that night. Again, the frame within the frame within the image refers to what is out of the visual field: Sasha’s attraction to Tatiana growing to the point of seduction. It is important to note that the potential of a queer encounter is not framed as a threat in the film, as Sasha seems to view her attraction to Tatiana the possibility of pleasure beyond the humdrum nature of her lonely married life. The threat, rather, is Tatiana’s willingness to take advantage of Sasha’s attraction to her in order to kill her and take her baby.



Figure 6.

Another clear division of the shot by interior frame occurs on Sasha’s husband’s arrival to the holiday home. The sequence walks us slowly through his arrival. A sense of tension builds as the previous scene left us with Tatiana moving ominously towards Sasha and Siofra sleeping in bed. The camera remains static as he moves through the house from one room to another, observing him from the same position and he moves (Fig. 7). Again, we are reminded of Ozon’s penchant for frames within the frame throughout the film. In this instance, the angle remains a few seconds while the husband stops to observe something. Tension builds as we wonder what he might find; the ambiguity of the previous scene and the film in general up to this point has left us with several unanswered questions. Tension is momentarily released as the subsequent shot reveals the object of his perspective to be Siofra’s empty cot. However, it is important to note the extent to which the initial establishing shot of the house’s interior valorises his passage, moving linearly from one room to another marked out by the repeating shape of the wooden door frames. During this shot, we have the impression that he, and the film’s narrative, are moving towards a point of no

return, whereby everything is going to be radically different to before this point. Here we have the impression that his passage is reflecting the idea of going beyond what initially appears mundane; this point is going to pierce the surface and go beyond boundaries which have shaped the film so far.



Figure 7.

Finally, there is a repeated use of lighting within the frame that forms a visual motif in *Regarde la mer*. Different moments of the film show frames marked out by distinctly varied shades of light. These will often be formed by large portions of the frame marked out by darkness, juxtaposed alongside brighter elements. For example, we also see this juxtaposition of light and darkness when Sasha ventures into the woods beside the beach, leaving her baby daughter on her own, after learning from Tatiana that it is a cruising site (Fig. 8). Once again, the beach as a location is key. Handyside explains ‘while Ozon’s characters often enjoy non-normative sexual encounters on or near beaches, these are a *result*, not a cause, of its queer identity’ (2012b, 55). The visual style of this sequence expresses the presence of boundaries that exist between characters that may be left intact or may be crossed at different points. These ‘boundaries’ are fluid in nature and meaning, pointing to the ambivalent, fluid nature of sexuality in the film. The co-existing presence of darkness and light seem to parallel the public (heterosexual, living as a traditional family) and private (possibly curious about her own sexuality) aspects of Sasha’s character. In Tatiana, she sees the opportunity to possibly live out previously unsaid aspects of her personal desires or ambiguous aspects of her own identity. This remains ‘unsaid’ and ambiguous throughout the film.



Figure 8.

The establishing shot once shows us a deeply expressive use of lighting to go beyond mere words and communicate ideas about the situation at play (Fig. 8). This shot expresses Sasha's desire to achieve some sort of transgression in relation to her hitherto lived existence. Tatiana has triggered this process. Alice Stanley states that 'when Tatiana enters the house for the first time the fragile membrane between inside and out starts to disintegrate' (Stanley 2010, 25). Throughout the course of the film, Tatiana's presence blurs the normative boundaries that have shaped Sasha's existence up to this point. Sasha's desire to 'cross over' from the banality of her everyday life where she is generally frustrated by her husband's absence, in order to experience something other than the surface-level pleasures of her own life. Inspired by or perhaps in the hope of impressing Tatiana, she 'crosses over' into the unknown, to otherness, to the unsaid ambiguity of what may constantly be there but can never be acted upon in normative everyday life, but only during the temporal frame of the holiday. In this regard, the film's time period takes up a significant temporal connotation, with the holiday acting as a break from normative social structures. As a result, the film's treatment of time has a particularly queer effect. Jack Halberstam describes queer time as being at odds with normative time, specifically as the forms of 'temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance' (Halberstam 2005, 6). We can therefore see that the film's narrative constitutes a form of queer time. The holiday is a break in time where the chronological order of normativity is temporarily disrupted. It is not the normative time of the traditional family unit, informed by patriarchal social structures, but rather the queer time of Sasha entertaining the possibility of acting on what she might want beyond the confines of being a wife and/or mother.

During the passage in the woods by the beach, the lighting again expresses the possibility of the queer time existing at odds with normative time. The shot remaining within the dry, quasi-realist style of Ozon's narrative perhaps suggests the potential omnipresence of such different values, existing side by side in the most banal contexts; the surface level beauty of the beach, and the humdrum existence that Sasha leads there, and the depth of the unknown that may be found beyond this, on the other side of the quotidian, when her familial instincts are momentarily abandoned and her curiosity is acted upon. Here and elsewhere in *Regarde la mer*, this dual presence of darkness and light express these boundaries and borders that exist. They draw our attention to different depths of meaning that may be extracted when we go beyond the shallow surface of the dialogue to see that varying degrees of otherness and transgression that can be acted upon when these boundaries are highlighted and curiosity is acted upon to go and see them. Their being expressed by the image and words means that they retain an ephemeral, fleeting quality rather than plainly being drawn out into the open, they remain intangible, simultaneously present and absent.

### **2.2.3. Queer Modes of Meaning**

As we have seen, much of the meaning expressed in *Regarde la mer* passes by the image and not by words. This is particularly interesting in terms of a theoretical perspective informed by queer theory. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler discusses the problematic socio-discursive constructs of language and identifies their restrictive function in relation to identity formation: 'Indeed, to understand identity as a practice, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life' (Butler 1999, 184). Therefore, if we view identity as something that we *do*, rather than something that simply *is*, we can begin to see the manner that it is shaped by language. Butler refers to 'culturally intelligible subjects' as those who achieve meaning, identification and affirmation through and by the socio-discursive constructs that are used to denote such normative identities. The dialogue and images of *Regarde la mer* can be analysed through the lens of Butler's ideas on language, intelligibility and identity. If 'culture and discourse mires the subject' (Butler 1999, 182), the film corresponds to this idea, whereby the uses of language are sparse, and instead the image produces other types of meaning. As we have seen, the language and dialogue throughout the film are limited; only two characters speak and their exchanges are mostly brief. When they do speak, the conversations are commonly one-sided and are often characterised by rebuffed pleasantries and court responses. Yet

despite this, we are left with the impression that what is said here is merely the shallow surface covering to a much more profound depth of meaning. Having seen the extent to which the film communicates via a deeply expressive visual field and how this can be better understood in terms of queer theory, we can consider some of the more thematic expressions of notions key to queer theory; which is to say the point to which *Regarde la mer* treats matters of identity in a transgressive and/or subversive manner and how this can be understood via the generic codes of the thriller as a filmic form. To do this, I will discuss how the film treats ideas of performance and marginality via the suspense that allows it to function as a genre.

Judith Butler makes the argument in *Gender Trouble* that the discursive limits that govern identity are inescapable. Yet, this does not necessarily govern *how* they are interacted with, and to do so on one's own terms has the potential to be an affirming experience. In other words, if we understand the performance of identity as the 'stylized repetition' of a group of acts (Butler 1988, 519), we perhaps have a set group of acts to choose from, but can at least choose which ones to perform and how they are performed. This opens up the possibility for subversion, to be aware of discursive limits but to act within them and highlight the extent to which they are constructed. Therefore, if we understand subversion as being 'within the practices of the repetitive', we can consider how *Regarde la mer* draws out certain discursive limits and perhaps ask if they can be understood as instances of subversion or transgression. Butler refers to these as 'discursive routes', and such one example she gives is to 'be a good mother' (Butler 1999, 185). With this in mind, the limits of motherhood as a 'discursive route' are treated extensively in *Regarde la mer*. The film's first sequences lay out Sasha's marginality, at having to look after her infant child herself in her husband's absence. This indicates an unfair division of parenting roles. Yet, we later see her leave Siofra on her own at the beach to go and look at a cruising spot nearby. In this regard, the queer temporal frame of the holiday plays a key role in Sasha's deviation from the fixed discursive route of 'good mother'. At odds with the patriarchal stereotypes regarding self-fulfilment through maternal instincts, during the queer timeframe of the holiday, Sasha transgresses what is expected of her role as 'mother'.

Tatiana and Sasha can be also compared through differing notions of motherhood and being childfree. Lisa Downing states that: 'The childless or childfree woman is othered as abnormal while the obediently reproductive woman, whose role is to provide infinite love, will be endlessly monitored, critiqued, and policed' (Downing 2019, 101). Ozon plays on such social distinctions in *Regarde la mer*. On the one hand, Sasha is obediently expected to



care for her daughter alone. On the other hand, Tatiana's childlessness is one of the many factors that denote her otherness in the film. Tatiana brings about othered perspectives of motherhood, most notably when we learn late in the film that she previously had an abortion. Although she initially seems carefree, the idea of motherhood seems to haunt her. Indeed, she is herself ghostlike, with her pale monochrome complexion accentuated in certain frames (such as the ones analysed in the previous section). She visits a cemetery alone and we hear the sounds of a baby crying on the extradiegetic soundtrack. Later, during the second dinner sequence, we perhaps learn about this child when Sasha asks her if she has had a child she reveals 'J'en ai déjà eu un...Il est mort...Je me suis fait avorter'. Her mixture of tones in revealing this, switching quickly between aggression and apparent light heartedness is upsetting for Sasha and destabilising for the viewer. Just before this, she wishes to discuss the potential difficulties of childbirth, wilfully ignoring the most obvious social cues at Sasha's clear discomfort and speaking about the subject in vulgar terms. Later, Tatiana kills Sasha and takes her baby, and the film's closing shots show that she has mirrored Sasha's physical appearance by stealing her distinctive red dress.

Ozon's treatment of motherhood is deeply linked to the stylistic and generic codes that he wishes to draw on here. There is a juxtaposition of the banal and the shocking, which serves to subvert normative discourses of motherhood. This is due to Ozon, as he so often does, adopting a specific set of generic codes and moulding them around his own thematic concerns to say new things in a familiar voice. If we understand the thriller as being the genre of evoking specific feelings, such as suspense, ambivalence and the unsettling of the spectator, Ozon's treatment of motherhood is a central aspect of his treatment of these ideas.

#### **2.2.4. Marginalities**

As we can see, motherhood is framed as a form of marginality in *Regarde la mer*. Sasha's isolation and vulnerability as a mother is also reflected by the film's setting. The choice of the Île d'Yeu as the plot's location is particularly interesting in this regard. It represents a marginal space, away from the French mainland. It is difficult to get to, with the only possible access being provided by occasional ferries. Yet this also provides the opportunity for transgression, as Sasha seems to seize the chance to break away from normative values by entertaining the possibility of experimenting with certain aspects of her own identity. In this way, the island offers a queer alternative to the normative mainland. Halberstam describes 'queer space' as 'place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of

queer counterpublics' (Halberstam 2005, 6). Engaging with the island as a queer space, Sasha takes the opportunity to look beyond the normative social practices of patriarchal social structures, selfless mothering and heterosexuality, all of which she associates with the mainland. This is evident throughout the film, for example, when the isolated nature of the island offers Sasha the opportunity to visit a cruising spot by the beach, safe in the knowledge that no one else can see her.

Asibong (2008, 58) notes that the film sets up the two protagonists as representing seemingly opposed values. These are instantly apparent as soon as we see them together. For example, Sasha's feminine appearance is opposed to Tatiana, the former opting for light, brightly coloured summer dresses whereas Tatiana is constantly in jeans, a hoodie and waistcoat, despite the heat. This creates an opposition of cleanliness/dirtiness, as Tatiana constantly wears the same clothes and seems uncomfortable bathing. Sasha is cosmopolitan, a bilingual middle-class Anglophone living in France, while Tatiana leads a humdrum vagabond existence. It also extends further to the colour palettes associated with them, wherein Tatiana's drab and, at times, sombre tones are juxtaposed against Sasha's brightness. We also see this in terms of their behaviour, where Sasha is polite, friendly and civil, while Tatiana is abrupt, often responding in monosyllabic answers, and paying no attention to the what would be viewed as 'civil' social cues; this is perhaps best encapsulated when she licks her dinner plate clean at the table, during the first dinner sequence. For Stanley, 'Tatiana is, of course, the figure that personifies the margin. She is literally abject, an outcast of society, forced to live on the edge of a community' (Stanley 2010, 32). Stanley uses Kristeva's theory of abjection to analyse Tatiana's presence in the film. In *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection* (1980), Kristeva's theory of the abject suggests that there are aspects of existence, such as bodily fluids, decay, and the border between self and other, that provoke a sense of discomfort and repulsion, challenging the boundaries of the self and society. For Stanley, Tatiana embodies Kristeva's theory of the abject through her unsettling presence, her liminal status as an outsider, and her ability to disrupt the conventional boundaries of identity, causing discomfort and unease in the viewer.

The sense of opposition between the two characters ultimately has two important functions in the context of viewing *Regarde la mer* as a queer thriller. First, it serves to articulate a sense of suspenseful opposition between Tatiana and Sasha. Secondly, this sense of otherness, often built around perceptions of socially acceptable 'normality', ultimately sets up the points of transgression that are the core of the film's narrative dynamic. As we have seen, it is possible to view Tatiana as 'other' in several senses; vagabond, itinerant, carnal,

vulgar, rude, unsociable, aggressive. These forms of otherness are what allow her to function as the ‘changing agent character’ that has been consistently identified throughout Ozon’s work (Asibong 2008, 58). As part of this Ozon narrative trope, Tatiana’s otherness seems, although initially framed as undesirable, to increasingly create a sense of curiosity in Sasha who is progressively aware of the banal repetitions and uneventfulness of her normal, middle-class existence. It is this sense of frustration in Sasha that produces the transgression in the narrative. Tatiana causes Sasha to question her own ‘normal’ existence. On the first night Tatiana arrives, we see her pleasure herself on a chair after looking out at Tatiana’s tent. Later, the sense of transgression develops further when Tatiana identifies a cruising spot on the beach. She points it out and leaves, as if to plant the seed of curiosity in Sasha, before leaving her alone to act on any desire, free from any sense of what she may perceive to be public judgement. This growing sense of transgression develops in parallel to the ambiguity that is implied between Tatiana and Sasha, possibly (mis)leading the viewer into expecting some sort of sexual encounter between the pair. In all, their interactions can be read as a transgressive account of sexual identity. Indeed, the sense of transgression from the narrative is expressed beyond the themes of the narrative by embodying a visual motif in the film. Shots are consistently marked out by boundaries, frames and limits that divide the visual field. These are often established with window shots, door frames, colour blocks backgrounds, and frames within frames (fig. 8). These shots seem to express opposing values as being side by side in the most banal situations, borders being there to be crossed, and tangible division existing within the quotidian, being constantly altered to take on a new form.

Taking a step back for broader context, we can understand the common interests of the thriller and queerness by comparing two of their key components –the manner in which we consider suspense as being central to the thriller, similar to the notion of disrupting oppositional dualisms in relation to queer theory. Compare, for example, the manner in which they are described in two of our theoretical references here. Rubin explains the functioning of suspense through the idea of suspension:

Suspense centrally involves the idea of suspension. We are suspended between question and answer, between anticipation and resolution, between alternative answers to the question posed, and sometimes between ambivalent emotions and sympathies that are aroused by a suspenseful situation. There is a close relationship between the concept of suspense and the term *entertainment*, which literally means

“to hold between.” This aspect also relates to the sense of being captured or enthralled that so central to the thriller and the way it entertains us. (Rubin 1999, 35)

This sense of constant treatment of apparently antagonistic, opposed values is reminiscent of how Plana describes the destabilisation of binary dualisms as being a core concern in relation to the notion of a ‘queer aesthetic’ across cultural forms, she states that what is queer ‘critiques and destabilizes’ what has hitherto been seen as exclusively at one end of these oppositional notions (Plana 2015, 10). This is perhaps why a sense of queerness is a particularly apt narrative atmosphere within the context of a thriller; just as a thriller will leave the viewer ‘suspended’ between antagonistic values and outcomes in order to build a sense of suspense and do what it must do most – draw the spectator in as much as possible, the queer thriller moulds this narrative mechanism around oppositional dualisms, relating often to gender and sexuality but also expanding beyond these areas to other areas of culture or our being, in order to highlight, as queer forms do, the constructed nature of such rigid dualisms, and also to present other ideas to make ways of being intelligible. A queer thriller such as *Regarde la mer*, highlights the constructed nature of the identities in the film, By building an air of suspense in relation to and presenting as totally ambiguous, for example, the potentially fluid nature of the sexual identities of our two protagonists here, the viewer is forced to ask what may constitute for them the make-up of such identities, or rather, whether such questions are truly productive in relation to a film, or even beyond the film, to our own being, at large. Therefore, we can see that this relationship between suspense and dualisms can tease out many of the common concerns of the thriller and queerness, and why we are considering them in tandem here.

### **2.2.5. Summary**

Queer theory is a particularly apt theoretical framework for studying a thriller due to its mutual concerns regarding ambivalence and disruption. Throughout the (psychological) thriller, the film leaves the spectator asking themselves how the narrative may play out rather than guiding them through a set of explanations. This is clearly reminiscent of queer theory’s concern with undefined, ambiguous identities. This way of thinking in queer theory, which seeks to disrupt, go beyond and subvert such detrimentally fixed notions of identity, can, in turn, be treated in an interesting way in a thriller, as a thriller seeks above all to disrupt what the audience may desire when watching the film by presenting them with the possibility that what they want to happen may not happen, or constantly putting their desire from the film at

risk. A ‘queer thriller’ is one that plays on the potentially fluid nature of identities to draw in the spectator and force them to ask themselves questions in relation to the film that they are seeing. It highlights the constructed nature of rigid sexualities by constantly building its own suspense upon the ambiguous nature of these identities in the context of the film. This is particularly suitable when these questions are linked to ambivalent identities and disrupting rigid ideas relating to such notions, as in *Regarde la mer*.

Later in this thesis, I will use a similar theoretical framework to discuss Xavier Dolan’s *Tom à la ferme* (2013). Dolan’s film shares several traits with *Regarde la mer*, namely an atmosphere of suspense built around undefined notions of sexuality. Yet, as we will see, the comparison between the two films will also reveal many of the differences between the two filmmakers’ respective styles. While Ozon makes use of generic codes to discuss familiar narrative concerns, Dolan pastiches genre in a conscious fashion in order to disrupt questions of artistic register. My discussion of *Tom à la ferme* features in the third chapter of this thesis.

## 2.3. The Crystal-Image and Queer Ambiguity in *Sous le sable* (2000).

### 2.3.1. Introduction

*Sous le sable* was Francois Ozon's fourth feature-length film and, in retrospect, proved to be a turning-point in his career in many respects. With *Sous le sable* he experimented with what have since become typical characteristics of his work – unpredictable aesthetic, narrative and production choices – to make the first widely acclaimed film of his career. The film's synopsis is deceptively simple. Marie (Charlotte Rampling) and Jean (Bruno Cremer) leave their Parisian home to go on holiday to the Landes region, in the Southwest of France. While there, they go to the beach. Jean goes swimming as Marie sunbathes, but he never comes back. After a police search, Marie is obliged to go back to Paris without him. Months pass and her life continues. She seems to be living her life by going about her usual routine, forgetting what occurred with Jean. She speaks of him as if he is still alive and thinks she is being visited by him (or his ghost?) in their home. Her friends attempt to gently make her aware of what has happened and encourage her to face reality. At times she seems to be on the verge of dealing with Jean's disappearance while simultaneously upholding the fantasy of his on-going existence. It is not so much the events of the film's narrative that draw the spectator in, but rather the subtle treatment of the distinction between fantasy and reality, and how Ozon blurs the boundary between them. He chose well-known but unfashionable actors to play the lead roles as the film proved difficult to finance and, after an initial hiatus, could only recommence after receiving more financial backing. These all proved, however, to be risks worth taking as it is often credited as the film that established Ozon both in France and abroad. On a thematic level, Ginette Vincendeau (2001) remarks of *Sous le sable*: 'François Ozon suffuses the everyday life of the Parisian middle classes (those classic clothes, those elegant apartments) with a sense of dread' (59). As with many of his films, Ozon treats the humdrum nature of French upper-middle class existence going through tumultuous change.

The importance of *Sous le sable* in Ozon's filmography is reflected in the reactions to the film by some of his most prominent scholars. Thibaut Schilt (2011) addresses the recurring notion of mourning in the film, alongside *Swimming Pool* (2003) and *Le temps qui reste* (2005). He pays particular attention to the film's nuanced treatment of Marie's subjective experience of losing Jean: 'It is a work where fantasy merges with actuality; a work deeply anchored in social reality that nonetheless manages, in a virtually seamless

fashion, to flirt with the fantastic' (82). Fiona Handyside (2013) comments in detail on the film as being indicative of Ozon's widespread usage of the beach, a key trope in his work. Andrew Asibong (2008) also identifies the profound sense of ambiguity and ambivalence throughout the film, commenting on several key moments where the border between the truth/fiction of reality/imagination is left indistinct (85). Similarly, I am interested in the film's singular treatment of subjectivity, the blurring of the distinction between diegetic reality and fiction, and the sense of ambiguity that pervades the narrative. It is this omnipresence of ambiguity, especially in relation to subjectivity, in *Sous le sable* that will serve as the focal point of my analysis. I aim to add to existing studies of *Sous le sable* by considering these core aspects of the narrative through the combination of the film theory of Gilles Deleuze with queer theory discourse on ambiguity. With my analysis, I aim to demonstrate the extent to which the combination of Deleuzian film theory, particularly the theory of the crystal-image, and Queer theory can be used together to study a film such as *Sous le sable*.

Several critics highlighted the film's ambiguities at the time of release. In *Les Inrocks*, Frédéric Bonnaud (2000) wrote: '*Sous le sable* est tout entier placé sous ce type de fascinantes ambiguïtés'. Broadly speaking, this sense of not knowing how to distinguish between what is objectively 'real' from what isn't within the diegesis of is present in several Ozon films. In *Swimming Pool*, *Ricky*, *Dans la maison* and *Une nouvelle amie* there are several ambiguities left open by the films' narratives. In relation to Ozon's approach to filmmaking in general, Douglas Morrey describes these ambiguities in terms of the blending of reality and fantasy, leaving questions unanswered: 'In a live-action film made with real human actors and recognizable spaces, everything reality, memory, dream, fantasy – has the same ontological status' (Morrey 2020, 202). In *Sous le sable*, the unanswered questions are limitless. Rather than being a feature of the narrative, as in the previously mentioned examples, *Sous le sable* 'vibrates with ambiguity' (Schwarzbaum, 2001). Is Jean actually dead? Is he appearing to Marie as a ghost or is his 'presence' her imagination? Did he intentionally disappear? Did he commit suicide? Does Marie actually not believe that he is gone and is still in contact with him or is she just having trouble coping with the circumstances of his death? These questions are echoed by critic's reactions to the film at the time of release (see Bonnaud, Brion, Ebert, Mandelbaum, Scott). Indeed, the soberness of the film's style allows the many ambiguities present to be treated without being subject to any sort of fixed response, as the narrative events flow and remain open-ended. This, in turn,

allows us to consider the film's mode of meaning production to be subtly undefined, avoiding overarching, fixed interpretations, and instead placing an emphasis on evolving notions of self and identity. In a similar fashion to *Regarde le mer*, throughout my discussion of the film we will see how Ozon portrays identities in a wholly undefined manner. In *Regarde la mer*, Ozon primarily treated sexuality and motherhood in ambivalent terms. In *Sous le sable*, Ozon's ambiguity extends to the boundary between fantasy and reality.

### 2.3.2. *Sous le sable* and The Crystal-Image

In *Cinema 2* (1989), Gilles Deleuze defines the crystal-image as: 'the uniting of an actual image and a virtual image to the point where they can no longer be distinguished' (334). Deleuze identifies a crystal-image as one that brings together the 'actual', which is to say 'the real' or what is tangible within the diegesis of the film, and the 'virtual', which may be 'non-real' and includes elements such as subjectivity, dreams or imagination within the same narrative world. Furthermore, the crystal-image fuses these two inherently opposing notions in such a way that one cannot be distinguished from the other. This corresponds to the way that ambiguity functions in *Sous le sable* and allows us to reconsider the 'reality' of Jean's ontological status, the factual circumstances leading to his death and the extent to which Marie comprehends these events. What makes these types of actual and virtual images particularly interesting in the case of *Sous le sable* is the effort to remove distinguishing features that would usually separate them. Although the film is stylistically sober and realistic, it wilfully blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality. Ozon commented on this aspect of the film:

il y a toujours ce mélange du fantasme et de la réalité [...]. Dans *Sous le Sable*, j'accompagne vraiment Marie, hormis dans la première partie, où il y a plus un souci d'objectivité dans la présentation de la vie de ce couple. J'avais vraiment envie d'être avec elle, dans un état proche de la compassion.<sup>2</sup>

The film's perspective closely aligns with Marie's subjective experience, as she deals with the disappearance of Jean. Yet, much more than being a simple treatment of subjectivity, what emerges from the film is the idea that the apparent distinction between one's own

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<sup>2</sup> Interview available at < <http://www.francois-ozon.com/fr/entretiens-sous-lesable> > (last accessed 15 August 2019).



perspective and objective reality can be distorted via this ‘mélange du fantasme et de la réalité’.

After the disappearance of Jean, Marie is forced to return to Paris without him. In the next sequence, we see Marie at a dinner party, speaking light-heartedly about Jean in the present tense, seemingly unaware of the mildly alarmed reactions this is causing in her friends. On returning to her apartment, Jean is there to welcome her as if he has never left. For the viewer, there is an unsettling inconsistency between what we think to be true and the images the film presents us with at this point. Marie speaks about her husband in the present tense and is greeted by him in the most banal fashion, yet up until this point, we have been led to believe that he has disappeared and died. In a truly Ozonian paradox, it is the sheer banality of Jean’s ‘return’ that surprises us most about this sequence; they speak about the night Marie had, Jean reads before bed lying on his side as before and in the morning they eat breakfast together before Marie leaves. We ask ourselves – has Jean really disappeared? If he has, is this him returning as a ghost? Or is this merely the subjective projection of a woman dealing with grief?

Yet, such questions are unanswered as Marie goes about her daily routine. On the one hand, Jean’s return does appear triggered by Marie’s outward projection – a close-up shot of her in brief reflection seems to trigger Jean’s entry into the scene, with a first shot in particular casting his imposing spectral silhouette from the next room’s light (fig. 1). The extradiegetic music suggests the entrance of a dissonant tone of tension. Yet, it remains that the sheer banality of her ignoring his disappearance leaves us with the impression that it may not even have taken place. All the subsequent sequences with Jean take place in their apartment. The ambivalence of Jean’s spectral figure raises several questions concerning the objective reality of his presence. Ozon balances both the real and the imaginary, distorting the line between them in order to offer us what he refers to as a ‘mélange du fantasme et de la réalité’. In *Le monde*, Jacques Mendalbaum (2001) referred to it as ‘un mixte troublant entre présence réelle et vue de l'esprit’. As Mendalbaum writes, on this level the film is troubling, offering the spectator little sense of the distinction between seemingly antithetical images. Imaginary projection is extended to the spectator’s point of view without any prior explanation in order to construct a fluid configuration of perspective. As the film progresses, our understanding of Jean’s presence does feel more assured, which is to say we increasingly have the impression that Marie imaginings function as a coping mechanism, yet this does not prevent us from considering the figurations in terms of ambiguous indiscernibility. At first,

the images force us to ask, is this real or not? It is real in the sense that Marie seems to believe that Jean is still alive, yet Marie's entourage seems to understand what has *really* happened. Perhaps the more suitable question is whether or not these images are physical or mental? It is entirely possible that the figure of Jean is purely mental, a subjective projection of Marie's desire to avoid certain aspects of reality, but everything that we see is portrayed to be objectively true. The images are in part subjective to the degree that the viewer does not believe that Jean is actually there, yet the images also contain several objectively *true* elements such as the message that Vincent leaves Marie before the second time she 'imagines' Jean, or Vincent's presence in the apartment the last time. There is of course no singular answer to the questions, but rather a teasing out of a complex account of perspective.



Figure 1.

Deleuze describes the relationship between the actual and virtual aspects of the crystal-image in terms of 'indiscernibility':

Distinct, but indiscernible, such are the actual and the virtual which are in continual exchange. When the virtual image becomes actual, it is then visible and limpid, as in the mirror or the solidity of finished crystal. But the actual image becomes virtual in its turn, referred elsewhere, invisible, opaque and shadowy, like a crystal barely dislodged from the earth. (1989, 70)

He explains this in terms of the multi-faceted image that has both 'limpid' and 'opaque' sides that are characterized by degrees of exchange between the two. This can be related to *Sous le*

*sable* in terms of the crystal-image on two counts; it can be understood in terms of the thematic situation represented in the narrative, and in relation to visual expressions of opacity. At times the viewer has the impression that they can grasp the reality of the situation being presented, only for this to be undercut by a tangible sense of misunderstanding in a subsequent scene. There are constant shades of clearness and ambiguity, reflecting what Deleuze describes as the limpid and opaque side of the crystal-image, at play. Visually, Marie is often seen through or in front of different types of surfaces that present varying degrees of transparency. This is done in an understated fashion that retains the film's dry aesthetic tone, expressing the constantly fluctuating sense of knowing and being unaware. Early in the film Marie passes in front of the opaque window of a service station bathroom as she travels to *les Landes*, totally unaware of her husband's personal struggles and that these are the last days that she will spend with him. Later, we see Marie and her new love-interest, Vincent, through a glass fish-tank as they eat together in a restaurant, as she is apparently enjoying the freedom of being a single woman while thinking that her husband is at home waiting for her. Afterwards, we see her through the window of a pharmacy looking through a phonebook as she is starting to learn more about her husband's life, with the window reflecting the indifferent Parisian street-life that is passing her by. We see her through a car window that heavily reflects the trees outside as she attempts to find out more information about what has happened (fig. 2). Finally, we see her in front of the opaque window of the morgue waiting room as she is about to deny the all-but conclusive evidence that they have found Jean's body. Britt-Marie Schiller (2005) comments on Ozon's choice to repeatedly film Marie/Rambling in this way: 'It is as if objective and external time continues to flow, but her internal experienced sense of time has stopped' (222). Schiller's description conveys the layered sense of meaning present in these images, a visual tension between the objective/external and the subjective/internal. In this sense, multiple images are contained in one image, and there are competing levels of meaning to be taken into account. Marie's subjectivity is expressed as a gauze-like film that shrouds her perspective and separates her from the world that surrounds her.



Figure 2.

The film's sense of opacity culminates at the very last shot, when Marie goes off into the distance, running towards a distant figure on the beach. Handyside (2012b) has commented on this image, and the figure that Marie runs towards, in detail:

His ambiguity profoundly affects how we read the end of the film: is this figure another ghostly hallucination of Jean, born of desperation to deny his death; or is it a different man, who attracts Marie precisely because he is not Jean but rather offers hope of a new relationship? (64)

She demonstrates in detail how the liminality of the beach as a physical space reflects the liminality of this distant figure seen there, who could either be objectively real or subjective projection. The notion of liminality here is closely linked to what I describe as the film's opacity. Just as the beach is a liminal space between land and sea, our understanding of the film's ending resides in-between possible interpretations<sup>3</sup>. This is the film's ultimate ambiguity and most opaque moment; has Marie accepted what has happened or is her fantasy continuing? For the purpose of this analysis, I am not interested in the answer to such a question but rather how the question functions in relation to the film's meaning. The question allows the film to avoid any singular sense of interpretation and opens up possibilities of terms of how the viewer may identify with the narrative. The viewer might be unsure how to interpret due to a lack of clarity, as Marie moves away from our perspective and the film

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<sup>3</sup> For differing interpretations, see Vincendeau (2001) and Handyside's (2012b) commentary on Vincendeau's view.

ends. Yet, there is no defined sense of interpretation. Throughout, there are these constant shades of clearness and ambiguity, different situations and different images move through multiple levels of possible meaning.

According to Deleuze, this indiscernibility of the actual and the virtual is often concisely captured in film via the ‘mirror-image’:

The most familiar case is the mirror. [...] This circuit itself is an exchange: the mirror-image is virtual in relation to the actual character that the mirror catches, but it is actual in the mirror which now leaves the character with only a virtuality and pushes him back out-of-field. (1989, 70).

The mirror-image is an extremely prominent stylistic feature that is linked to the omnipresent sense of ambiguity throughout Ozon’s work. Characters are often shown alongside their own reflection or contemplating their own image in a reflective surface. For example, we can find numerous examples throughout *Gouttes d’eau sur pierres brûlantes*, *Le temps qui reste*, *Frantz* and *L’amant double*. There is a sustained interest in how the subject may relate to its own reflection, with the possible dissonance that may exist between subjective perceptions of the self and how they may be seen by others in reality. *Sous le sable* presents us with a variety of mirror-images. For example, Ozon often uses a mirror to avoid resorting to a shot-counter-shot to film a conversation. The principal subject is established in the foreground, with the opposite angle provided alongside it in a mirror in the background. Rather than a thorough sense of what is happening, embellished by multiple camera angles in the space being filmed, we have one frame containing multiple frames. This mirror-image holds multiple viewpoints, containing multiple acts of looking. This represents the fractured sense of perspective that Ozon is addressing in the film; one’s own experience is just one way of seeing and subject to being contradicted by another. Just as we have seen how there are several levels of meaning, which are expressed in one frame when we see Marie/Rampling through naturally occurring visual reflections, there are competing perspectives in the film’s mirror-images. Ultimately this serves to open up the film’s treatment of subjectivity beyond a univocal account of perspective. There are competing levels of meaning amongst multiple ways of seeing.

The most common mirror-image is Marie looking at her reflection in a mirror<sup>4</sup>. She is presented as a character that has a pronounced interest in physical appearance. She is often shown applying make-up or simply checking her appearance. She is also seen eating pasta with no sauce for dinner and when Jean says that he isn't hungry, she responds 'C'est bien, comme ça tu maigriras un peu'. In addition to this, she regularly goes to the gym and wishes Jean would do the same. All of this displays a marked concern with appearance that is frequently evoked visually with the recurring mirror-image of Marie. Thinking of this in terms of the Deleuzian mirror-image, we are reminded of the simultaneous presence of the actual and the virtual, what is most directly 'real' and what may not be (1989, 70). The mirror shows us what ought to be considered objectively 'true' – a reflected image of what is being looked at in the mirror. Yet, when we consider that the mirror's reflection is also seen subjectively through one's own experience, we realise that the reflection is just as open to perception as everything else. Following up on this line of thought, we can see that the mirrors and reflections of *Sous le sable* are just as much an exchange between the real and the non-real, the objective and the subjective, as any of the other images that Marie is seen to be perceiving throughout the film. Marie projects what she wants to see, and this is what she sees reflected, but is this really what is there? Ozon states in an interview:

Le film commence à prendre un autre envol ensuite, en hiver. Tout est alors très mental, les faits sont moins certains: on est dans la tête de Marie, dont le parcours est ambigu, moins déterminé, plus flou, plus fragile, c'est un terrain de sables mouvants.<sup>5</sup>

Marie clearly wishes to be seen in a certain way, but even what would appear to be the most incorruptibly 'true' is embedded with a sense of indiscernibility that destabilises both individual perspective and an infallible collective 'truth'.

### 2.3.3. Indiscernibility, Ambiguity and Queerness

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that some critics have found Marie to be an example of Ozon's poor treatment of female characters. Critics have argued that Marie's interest in physical appearance and social status, alongside the criticism she is subjected to from Jean's mother in being unable to 'provide' Jean with a child, are all examples of areas in which Ozon's treatment of gender could be viewed as traditional and rigid (see Vincendeau 2001). Indeed, Ozon has been criticized for his treatment of female characters in general, especially during the early phase of his filmmaking career. I will return to these claims in the conclusion of this thesis, to compare them to the treatment of female characters in the films of Xavier Dolan and Céline Sciamma.

<sup>5</sup> Interview available at < <http://www.francois-ozon.com/fr/entretiens-sous-lesable> > (last accessed 15 August 2019).

By establishing the extent to which these notions of indiscernibility and ambiguity are omnipresent in *Sous le sable*, we understand that they are key ideas in the film. Rather than build towards a specific narrative goal in a linear fashion, the film is more of an exploration of the ambivalent nature of subjectivity. In the following section, I will demonstrate how the film forges a link between the crystal-image and a sense of queerness through the ambivalent nature of identities and ambiguous notions of perception and meaning that it portrays. As Thibaut Schilt notes, *Sous le sable* is the Ozon's first feature that does not treat homosexuality, yet 'there is something queer about *Sous le sable*' and 'Ozon's queer sensibilities surface in indirect ways' (2011, 88). I agree, as does Fiona Handyside, who, in reference to *Sous le sable*, states; 'His films offer a way of envisaging a queer cinema that is not predicated on individual bodies performing discrete acts but which aims to create a framework for constantly reconfiguring what queer forms and practices might be' (2012b, 55). Handyside identifies the various aspects of *Sous le sable* that challenge and disrupt fixed notions of time, space and, identity. If we develop the line of thought established here and consider Ozon's work in terms of, to use Handyside's wording, a framework for considering what queerness might entail, we can address the narrative ambiguity that is prominent in the film. I aim to demonstrate further ways in which Ozon's 'queer sensibilities' surface by analysing the ambiguity of the narrative's overall sense of meaning production, and the film's penchant for fluid, porous imagery.

My analysis of *Sous le sable* in this section will be further informed by considering the film in terms of a queer aesthetic. With specific regard to this, Plana (2015) observes:

Le queer critique et fait vaciller une distinction qui parait à chacun d'entre nous, du moins au premier abord, aussi essentielle qu'évidente parce qu'au fondement même de notre démarche scientifique, et il le fait à l'image d'un ensemble d'autres binarités traditionnelles prégnantes, considérées comme tout aussi « naturelles » mais qui sont en réalité – nous disent justement les théories queer – historiquement construites et politiquement orientés, des binarités touchant aux genres, aux orientations sexuelles, mais aussi aux valeurs esthétiques, aux formes artistiques, aux cultures, aux classes sociales, voire aux espèces de la nature et aux ordres de la réalité. (10-11)

Plana therefore argues that what unites work that corresponds to a queer aesthetic is critiquing, disrupting, or subverting the oppositions considered natural and going beyond the dualisms that condition normative ways of thinking. *Sous le sable* addresses similar

normative constructs. Handyside (2012b) commented on the way the film disrupts certain oppositional constructs characterised as dualisms such as past/present, alive/dead, mental/physical as a 'queering of mourning'. She uses the figure that Marie sees on the beach at the film's conclusion as a queer example, noting how it radically undermines both 'temporal categories (he is a figure from the past, the present and the future) and ontological states (he is a physical presence, a psychotic hallucination and a libidinal fantasy)' (2012b, 65). Drawing on Handyside's remarks and focus on the last sequence, I propose exploring the film's apparent categorical evasiveness in relation to the distinction between explicitness and ambiguity. Ambiguity in relation to truth and meaning is a prevailing theme throughout Ozon's work; for example, we can think of the 'false' flashbacks of *Sitcom* and *Frantz*, the alibies and counter-alibies of *Huit femmes* and the ambivalent identities, sexual or otherwise, of *5x2*, *Le temps qui reste*, and *Le refuge*. In *Sous le sable*, there is a constant switching movement between explicitness and ambiguity; it can be read at a surface level as the story of a woman who loses her husband to a suicide and her struggle to deal with this loss and build a new life for herself, but such an interpretation would ignore all of the stylistic devices used by Ozon to imbue the story with ambiguity. In either case, it is not so much the juxtaposition of explicitness and ambiguity that is of interest, but rather how the film seemingly operates at both ends of such oppositions in a simultaneous fashion. The film's minimal aesthetic is key in relation to this point. Mendelbaum (2001) touches on this in his review of the film:

La mise en scène, extraordinairement économe et subtile, ne permet pas vraiment de trancher entre l'hypothèse réaliste (il est vivant mais sa femme ne peut, pour une raison inconnue, révéler sa disparition) et la variation métaphysique (le film est le flux de conscience d'une femme qui ne peut se résoudre à faire le deuil de l'être aimé).

The film's dry and sober style creates a surface-level sense of explicitness. Few visual or technical effects are used, the majority of the camera work is minimalist, and there is very little extradiegetic music. Yet within this explicitly clear outline, an air of ambiguity is maintained. Marie is constantly filmed in front of and behind visual screens and reflections that are varying degrees of clearness. Jean's ghost is introduced into the story alongside diegetically real elements with no direct narrative explanation. The film's ending, as we have seen, denies a conclusive narrative ending. This I argue is another way Ozon's queer sensibilities manifest in the film; with these two types of images being combined with no distinction between them, the narrative is simultaneously explicit and ambiguous, troubling and disrupting any singular interpretation of the film. Just as the distinction between



explicitness and ambiguity is challenged, so too is boundary between subjectivity/objectivity, reality/imagination, truth/fiction, and, the actual/virtual.

The film's treatment of form and linearity also corresponds to this sense of queerness. Michele Aaron (2004) considers these to be core aspects of queer aesthetics in film. In *New Queer Cinema* she describes how queer films 'frequently defy cinematic convention in terms of form, content and genre' and speaks of them in terms of a 'lack of respect for the governing codes of form or content, linearity or coherence' (4). Rather than a specific genre or set of themes, she identifies queer cinema in terms of both style and attitude of filmmaking. This reflection informs my analysis of the form, content and treatment of linearity in *Sous le sable*. In one sense, the film is wholly linear with no flashbacks or dream sequences and all of the events are presented in their natural order, unlike the majority of Ozon's cinematic oeuvre. Yet within this apparently natural notion of time, there lies the subjective experience of the film's protagonist that is marked by various loops and replications that deny any sort of straight passage from one situation to another. There are various points of repetition marked out by frame compositions and shot angles. These occur when Marie goes to the beach for the first and last time and when she has breakfast with Jean and Vincent. In the analogous frames, the fluid nature of time in the film is visible. There are very clear elements of duplication; we see Marie arrive at the same beach, from the same point of view that we did the last time (fig. 3-4). She enters a static frame and camera angle and we see her from behind as she walks towards the sea. Similarly, when she has breakfast with Jean and then with Vincent, we see the same table from the same angle. The table is laid out in the same way and Jean and Vincent wear the same colour. Marie butters *tartines* and places them on Vincent's plate as she did with Jean before. Yet within these points of repetition, there is also a certain sense of the mundane passage of one thing to another. On the beach, the clear, vivid sky has given way to ominous winter clouds and most of the grass has died away, leaving shrubs. Marie wears a grey overcoat instead of her red summer dress. Similarly, in the breakfast scenes, she wears a grey dressing-gown instead of the bright blue pyjamas of before. The wall in the background is the same colour but seems to be presented in a more decaying light. In both cases the intense, vivid palette of the first frame has given way to more pallid, blander tones. In these examples, we can therefore see time being presented as a fluid notion. In relation to linear time, the film breaks rigid perception of meaning into multiple possibilities. Within the diegesis, we have both the sense of things happening and non-events, situations repeating themselves and profound change occurring.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

A sense of fluidity pervades the *Sous le sable*. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Anthony Lane (2001) remarked that ‘the film is wonderfully liquid’, with the character of Marie being marked by a series of flows: ‘she herself flows back and forth between youthfulness and the riptide of age, between what she dreams of and what she knows to be true’. At the University where she teaches, Marie reads a section of Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* to her class that compares the notion of time to the fluid evasiveness of water; “And time,” said Bernard, “lets fall its drop. The drop that has formed on the roof of the soul falls. On the roof of my mind time, forming, lets fall its drop...” (184). Clearly overcome by the lines, Marie is obliged to end her lecture early. Schiller comments on the deep resonance that the lines take on in the film: ‘As she reads this, Marie seems to become aware of the void that the merely habitual nature of her actions covers, aware of the empty place in her life, and of her loss’

(2005, 220). Later, at dinner Marie and Vincent are filmed briefly through the water of a fish tank and she cites a line from Woolf's suicide note to him. Woolf drowned herself by filling her pockets with stones and walking into the River Ouse. Like Jean, her body would not be found for an extended period of time after the drowning took place.

Water is also visually omnipresent in the film. This is most marked at the different moments of the film where water occupies all of, or the vast majority of, the visual field. The very beginning shows us the Seine with *Notre Dame de Paris* in the background. The camera takes a broad movement across the river, allowing it to fill the screen while moving, displaying the film's title before arriving to a stream of traffic along the quays where we will meet the two main characters. The Seine seems static and unmoving, indifferent to all happening around it. Next we see the Atlantic Ocean from Jean's perspective from the beach. The waves crash in against the sand. With the benefit of retrospect, we are aware of the toll that the merciless ocean will take on Jean as he disappears. At another point, we are immersed in the swimming pool where Marie exercises, the morning after we see her imagine Jean in their apartment for the first time.

The film's imagery of fluidity evokes the sense of categorical evasiveness, and indeed queerness, that I have described throughout this section. All that is evasive about fixed categories and identities calls into question the extent to which such categories and identities are natural at all. The film flows between objective reality and subjective projection; events, people, and places take on another form, possibly looking similar on a surface level, but becoming radically different in their nature. These differing depths of change mean that perception is destabilised, and one is left wondering what is there. This is also expressed through ideas of permeability and porousness, as with the film's very title. Underneath the sand at the beach where Jean disappears, what is really there? Broken down matter, disintegrated over time, regardless of what once was. On certain levels the answer is obvious, but in a close-up shot Marie grasps out reaching for what is there but everything slips through her fingers as the porous nature of change cannot be stopped regardless of context. The image evokes her helplessness, trying to cope with the disappearance of her husband with no one really there to help. Sand slips through her fingers just as time advances, nothing can be done to change what has already passed. As we have seen, Ozon refers to the film's nature, and the configuration of Marie's perspective as 'un terrain de sables mouvants'. What may seem monotonous is also constantly changing by its very nature. The ontological status of what is happening can be so hard to grasp or 'define' because it is composed of small, complex parts.

The image brings us back to the Woolf citation, comparing water to time. Water, like sand, is indifferent to the things to which we attach importance, endlessly reforming and regenerating, all the more evasive the harder we try to grasp. Whether it is by means of fluidity or porousness, the film's production of meaning is characterised by ambivalent flows. Despite surface level appearances that may seem marked by a continuous sense of repetition, change and regeneration are constantly taking place, whether positive or negative. What once may have seemed fixed and defined, such as Marie's married life, a perception of the reality, disintegrates like sand, flows away like water in *The River Seine* or *The Atlantic Ocean*. This sense of constant flux and undefined states rings true of the disintegration of various identities and categories that are at play throughout the film.

#### **2.3.4. Summary**

Through close analysis of *Sous le sable*, this section has established a link between the Deleuzian crystal-image and notional uses of queer theory, by connecting them via indiscernibility and ambiguity. First, for Deleuze and the application of the crystal image, this refers to the indiscernibility of the actual and the virtual and manner in which it plays out thematically and visually in the film. This is particularly apt for *Sous le sable*, and Ozon's work in general, because there is so often a sense of the distinction between physical and mental elements being intentionally blurred to the point of not being able to differentiate between the two. This section has also considered this same indiscernibility through the lens of queer theory, beyond the depiction of sexuality and instead focusing on how the film destabilises certain fixed and traditional modes of perception, with this being a key component of the narrative's function.

By simultaneously drawing on these two rich theoretical perspectives, the omnipresence of ambiguity in Ozon's work in general and the need to probe it further come to the fore. Across all of the genres and forms with which Ozon has experimented, going right back to the shorts, ambiguity has proven one of his most consistent tropes. He once referred to this as 'a game with the audience' (Ozon 2017) but I argue that it is key to better understanding his work. As we have seen in this chapter, an appreciation of Ozon's treatment and various uses of ambiguity, ambivalence, indiscernibility are crucial to deciphering his films. Such concepts allow for space, time and identities to be opened up, rather than be closed off. New possibilities are created via the proliferation of multiple meanings and

interpretations that come with films such as *Sous le sable* that place the onus on the spectator to find their meaning. Throughout the film, notions of objectivity and subjective experience are constantly engaged in the process of change, despite surface level continuity. For all the apparent simplicity of the film's narrative and stripped-back style, there lies underneath a depth of flux and unending dynamic movement that has now become an established characteristic of Ozon's cinematic art.

## 2.4. Crossing Borders, Transcending Boundaries: Cinéma-monde in *Frantz* (2016)

### 2.4.1. Introduction

*Frantz* is François Ozon's sixteenth film. Like many of his recent films it received a noteworthy premiere at one of the large European festivals (this time in Venice). The film tells the story of Anna (Paula Beer), living in the provincial German town of Quedlinburg, just after World War One. Having lost her fiancé in the war, the title character, she now lives with his parents (played by Ernst Stötzner and Marie Gruber). They are visited by Adrien (Pierre Niney), coming from France, who claims to have been a friend of Frantz from before the war and who is visiting them out of respect for his passing. We soon learn that this is not the real reason for his visit, but that he is in fact the soldier who killed Frantz. *Frantz* is a loose adaptation of Ernst Lubitsch's *Broken Lullaby* (1932). Ozon's film is inspired by the the same play that Lubitsch's film is adapted from, *L'homme que j'ai tué* (Maurice Rostand, 1930), but it changes several areas of the narrative. *Frantz* takes additional resonance when we consider the period of the film's release, in 2016, with the rise of populist, nationalistic expressions of national identity and the apparent weakening of institutions based on cooperation such as the European Union. The film is thematically consistent with the vast majority of his work and yet also presents many stylistic departures for him as a filmmaker. It is his first film mainly in black and white and his first wherein a large portion of the script is in German. It is one of his two period dramas, alongside *Angel*, yet the two films treat their respective historical contexts in wholly different styles.

*Frantz* is one of several Ozon films that approaches the transnational question from a fluid perspective. To varying degrees, it has been an omnipresent question throughout Ozon's career stretching back to his first short films. He has shown a penchant for creating non-native francophone characters throughout his career (*Une rose entre nous* (1994), *Le temps qui reste*, *Ricky*), 'foreign' films based outside France (*Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*), films in other languages (*Angel*) and films adapted from different cultures in terms of language sources (*Une nouvelle amie*, *8 femmes*). To this end, a broad sense of otherness through nationality, language and culture, has been one of the most consistently present aspects of his work. *Frantz* simultaneously brings together many of these aspects of his work – by featuring a Franco-German cast, both languages, a weave of transnational cultural

references and a narrative built around the notion of boundary crossing, both figurative and literal.

Given the film's relatively recent release, there are few existing scholarly reactions to it. Helena Duffy discusses the film's treatment of the relationship between heteronormative masculinity and war, and analyses the presence of Manet's *Le suicidé* in this regard (Duffy 2021, 52). Other have discussed the transnational question to some degree in Ozon's oeuvre. For example, Emma Wilson analyses *Le temps qui reste* in terms of what she considers a pan-European context of queer sociality and pathos. She identifies Ozon's border-crossing intertextuality to suggest that his films require a nuanced understanding in relation to any 'national' identity. Wilson comments, 'The diversity of Ozon's debts and tributes suggests that he claims a place with relation to European and international cinema culture more broadly' (Wilson 2014a, 150). We can therefore see that Ozon's treatment of transnational cinema makes it necessary to consider his work from a perspective that blurs essentialist understandings of 'national' identity.

I aim to add to existing studies of *Frantz*, and Ozon's body of work, by analysing the treatment of the transnationalism in the film. Carrie Tarr states that 'a transnational perspective (which does not mean 'non-national') provides a necessary framework for analysing how films are produced, circulated and received in the era of globalisation' (2007, 4). In order to consider this perspective in relation to Ozon's film in particular, I will discuss the film in terms of a theoretical framework informed by the notion of cinéma-monde. Bill Marshall (2012) asks whether it would be possible to decentre hitherto existing approaches to French-language cinema, and the ongoing centre/periphery dichotomies therein, in order to view such questions from a decentred perspective (Marshall 2012, 35). With this in mind, I will discuss the film's treatment of border crossing (both literal and figurative), the overcoming of univocal notions of nationalism and as a point of contact for cultural exchange. As with my discussion of *Regarde la mer* and *Sous le sable*, the overall discussion will relate to Ozon's treatment of identity in the film. In *Regarde la mer* the main facets of identity being addressed were sexuality and motherhood, With *Sous le sable*, Ozon addressed more abstract notions, such as the distinction between reality and imagination, or life and death. In *Frantz*, we will see how Ozon critiques oppositional forms of national identity, instead favouring border-crossing and cultural exchange. To this end, I will pay attention to three particular areas of *Frantz*. First, I will analyse the film through Marshall's theorization of cinéma-monde. Then, I will discuss the film's transnationalism in terms of intertextuality

and cultural referencing, which draws on culture and media from a multitude of sources. Finally, I will analyse the film's overall treatment of cultural exchange of a broader politico-aesthetic discourse of cooperation between different cultures, and specifically relate it to the turbulent present in which was conceived and released, namely in the context of the rise of nationalism and populism in the last decade.

#### **2.4.2. Cinéma-monde & *Frantz***

The prominent presence of two languages in *Frantz* is crucial to our understanding of the diverse issues concerning the film's treatment of the relationship between people and place and, by extension, the related notions of identity. Cinéma-monde draws our attention to several elements outside of the film's diegesis, such as production and casting, and how such films transcend borders and places in their conception. *Frantz*'s script required the two main characters to be played by actors who could speak both languages. Paula Beer (who plays Anna) could already speak French sufficiently to play her role. Pierre Niney (Adrien), on the other hand, could not speak any German prior to the role and had to learn his dialogue by listening to recordings spoken by a native speaker. Ozon also revealed in an interview that this mixing of languages proved to be an obstacle for financing the film. When pitching the film, French production companies feared that this would make the film less marketable and a financial risk, yet in Germany they were more open to the idea, especially given the film's fluid approach to the issues surrounding the period it is set in. After the film was made, the bilingual script proved a problem for language dubbing. For example, in Italy the French was dubbed in Italian, but not the German, a situation that frustrated the director. This perhaps reflect the manner in which the treatment of language and dubbing is different across Europe. The film was in the end a Franco-German production. Ozon's difficulties financing the film reflects the film industry's view of transnational cinema, that audiences might be reluctant to watch a bilingual film and that it is therefore a financial risk. If we consider other films in his body of work, we can see that the desire to venture outside of a linguistic comfort is a consistent feature of Ozon's career<sup>6</sup>. However, *Frantz* goes even further to use a bilingual script where both languages are present throughout the film.

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<sup>6</sup> Similar to *Frantz*, *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* takes place in Germany but, curiously, the script is in French and features an all-French cast. *Angel* is a period-drama that takes place in Victorian England but there is no sense of direct contact between languages as all of the dialogue is in English. *Swimming Pool* does have a bilingual script, in French and English, but it leans heavily in favour of the latter and French is mostly a second



In relation to transnational cinema, Tarr states that the globalised nature of the film industry ‘blurs’ national borders to the extent that ‘the ‘national’ is bypassed, decentred or hybridised’ (2007, 4). On the notion of borders, Marshall writes: ‘Borders are crossed and boundaries called into question. They make us attend to spatial arrangements in their physicality (oceans, islands), performativity and politics (frontiers), and metaphors (archipelagos)’ (2012, 42). As previously identified, just as language in *Frantz* underlines the problematic nature of a unified identity relating to space, so too does the film’s treatment of the notion of borders. From the very beginning of the film, it is border-crossing that sets the diegesis in motion. The spaces in question of course are easily identifiable – Germany and then France, with the film’s plot being divided almost equally between the two. On a surface level, there is a clear sense of contrast between the two places. The small, provincial modesty of the film’s German section is clearly juxtaposed against the urban grandeur of Paris. Yet, beyond these surface oppositions, there are profound similarities shared by these places that call into question the notion of any boundary dividing them.

Let us consider, for example, the public renditions of the national anthems in France and then in Germany, two key sequences in the film. Although different songs are being sung in different places, we can see that the reasoning behind each is identical: they are intended on the part of those involved as a public identification with their nationality and a homage to those lost in the war. They are just small ‘snap-shots’ of the wider narrative of place at play here that calls into question the notion of an opposition between the two places. Beneath the surface opposition, there lies a depth of similarity and repetition. This idea of ‘rendition’ or ‘performance’ in relation to the national anthems here reminds us of Marshall’s description of borders as ‘performative’, and this is deeply evocative of how they are treated in *Frantz*. If we think of performance in the Butlerian sense as ‘the stylized repetition of acts’ (Butler 1988, 520) and relate it to the borders of *Frantz*, we can quickly identify this series of acts that constitute the performance here. The performativity in question expresses a sense of post-war nationalism and ‘othering’ of the apparent enemy. It is noteworthy that the acts in question are repeated on both sides of the Franco-German border. The roles are interchangeable in both cases, with the attachment to the place and ‘enemy’ in question being determined simply by the side of the border behind which one is born. These renditions of the respective national anthems symbolise the performative nature of this border and highlight

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language. In short, we can see that bilingualism is prevalent throughout much of Ozon’s extensive body of work.

nationalism as a type of performance itself. Furthermore, the sense of spatial repetition blurs the internal boundaries of dualisms marked out by such borders, such as self/other and all of the ensuing oppositions that we can imagine. The utility of a reinforced sense of opposition between two places is called into question when they are shown to have such underlying behavioural similarities. Indeed, we could even argue that the film's evocation of borders, and the resultant sense of nationalism that is evoked here, is somewhat paradoxical when there is a border separating two things which are inherently similar.

Tarr writes how the 'national' is challenged 'by the intensification of the movement across borders of capital, goods, information and labour', thus creating the need for to consider film through a transnational lens (Tarr 2007, 3). This draws our attention to the third element of *cinéma-monde* as identified by Marshall, that of movement, which is evidently a central trope in *Frantz*. For Marshall:

The 'parts' (particles), rather than 'wholes', conjured by this description enter into movement, and combination, as borders are crossed. Francophone cinema is in this way a tracking of movements: of cinema personnel, of protagonists in a diegesis, of films themselves as they are engaged with and decoded by different audiences in different contexts. (Marshall 2012, 42)

As previously mentioned, the film is a Franco-German production between Ozon's frequent producers, Mandarin Production and X Filme Creative Pool, a German company, accentuating the film's transnational character. Within the diegesis of the film, movement is a key feature of the *mise-en-scène*. This is arguably best captured by the film's most prominent 'movement' sequence, when Anna takes the train from Germany to France. This brief sequence conveys the length of the journey as it would have been in 1919. Aesthetically, it is striking how this sequence communicates the toll that the war had taken on France at the time. Up to this point during the film's German section, we can sense the impact of war by mostly emotive means: the grief of Frantz's parents of losing their son, or the general public anger at having lost the war. The cost of the war evoked here is clearly very tangible, yet we are not necessarily 'shown' the physical consequences of what has happened, as many of the major battles of World War One took place elsewhere. The perspective changes slightly during this sequence on the train. One shot uses the reflection of a window from Anna's carriage to superimpose the image of what she is seeing onto the spectator's perspective (fig. 1). Anna (and the viewer) finally sees the physical impact of the war. Society's lived

experience of warfare is subsequently evoked in a shot where Anna sees the scarred face of a man sitting across from her in their carriage. Within this brief sequence, we are quickly given a sense of the impact that the war has had on the ‘other’ side of the border, offering a rounded perspective from the supposed ‘winners’ of the war.



Figure 1.

This combination of movement and border-crossing of the two main characters allows for a certain fluidity of perspective and subjectivity in the film and, subsequently, leads to both being ‘othered’ as an outsider in the foreign space. The movement in relation the border in question is a key element here as it allows the narrative to take on a polycentric nature. The sense of polycentrism allows the film to avoid dualist spatial oppositions and opens the door to what Marshall refers to as a ‘multiplication of perspectives’ (2012, 46). Thibaut Schilt and Michael Gott specifically address the notion approaching film from a polycentric perspective. Commenting on the work of theorists who critique the dualist opposition between American and ‘World’ Cinema, they note:

In order to avoid the trap of this duality, they engage with a ‘polycentric’ approach to cinema. As we have already stated, one of the primary aims of taking a cinéma-monde approach is the desire to avoid similar dichotomies, in this case between the French industry and films made at least partly outside of that production and funding apparatus. (Gott and Schilt 2018b, 10)

The polycentric approach, used in order to ‘avoid similar dichotomies’, is largely parallel to the approach that we can identify in Ozon’s film. There is a clear desire to avoid presenting

the issues at hand from a univocal perspective. Indeed, we can see the recurrence of a larger trope of Ozon's work, namely his refusal to engage in overly simplified Manichean oppositions in his films. Ozon's films often have an ambivalent moral centre where the distinction between what is right and wrong, or even objectively true and false, is unclear. In *Frantz*, Ozon makes use of a polycentric approach to space. As a result, the viewer experiences the notion of the self from the perspective of the other, initially with Adrien in Germany and then with Anna in France. This negates any sense of hierarchical oppositions as different subjectivities are explored. The notion of movement then is one of the film's central paradoxes as it largely serves to highlight potential connections rather than separation.

The 'multiplication of perspectives', the simultaneous 'othering' of the two main characters is perhaps best understood in terms of lateral connections. If polycentrism is essentially an alternative to thinking impacted by a centre/periphery dualism, then it offers a credible solution to the implied hierarchies that would be the result of such a dualism. The desire to avoid linear approaches, characterised by overtly binary oppositions, in favour of striving to address the diverse multitudes at hand. On this point, Will Higbee (2018b) characterises such connections as being 'minor-to-minor' that cinéma-monde is best conceptualised as 'a subset of transnational cinema, due to its concerns with border crossing, 'contact zones', cross-national, regional and diasporic narratives and the desire to make lateral connections' (2018, 346). This is certainly evocative of *Frantz*. If we think of lateral connections as being 'side to side' instead of 'top to bottom' or vertical, then we can start to visualise such cultural hierarchies. We can understand 'minor-to-minor' connections here in terms of an effort to overcome problematic oppositions: Adrien and Anna form this sort of connection by their respective positions as being the 'othered' minority in relation to a majority. Similarly, on this notion of detrimental oppositions, Bill Marshall suggests thinking of a solution in terms of the realisation of 'an erasure of the self/other binary in favour of a recognition of mutual entanglements' (2018, 324). Similarly, Tarr refers to this as the 'decentring' of the singular 'national' perspective (2007, 6) Although the film is exploring the very notion of oppositional hierarchies, there is a realisation of mutual entanglements by doing so from more than one perspective. The othering of different characters within a stark self/other binary highlights the detrimental, constructed and performative nature of such dualisms. This is what allows the film to engage in a sense of political discourse: the overcoming of toxic '-isms' (such as populism, nationalism, fascism, for example) via the

realisation of mutual entanglements that can be forged through relationships, culture, or education.

### 2.4.3. Transnational Intertextuality

Upon highlighting the diverse cultural references in the film, we realise they contribute to the transnational aspect of the film. Referring to the fluid nature of cinéma-monde, Gott and Schilt write:

in a wider cinéma-monde context we would prefer a kaleidoscope over a mosaic as a metaphor. The layers of a kaleidoscope are not fixed but shift, and various images become clear or are seen under different light as the instrument is turned and light refracted. Cinéma-monde is also kaleidoscopic because it involves looking at the world through a particular yet variable and adjustable optic. (2018b, 9)

Although in this section of the text they are focussing on the broader nature of cinéma-monde, the line of thinking developed here provides a helpful perspective from which to consider Ozon's film. The cultural intertextuality of *Frantz* can be thought of as kaleidoscopic as the film simultaneously draws on different artistic forms from diverse periods and places to present complex forms of adaptation, intertextuality and interpretation. The kaleidoscope metaphor is particularly apt when considering how the fluid references shift and interchange – for example, at different moments there is music by Chopin, painting by Manet and poetry by Verlaine, all seen through the wider (very loosely) adapted lens of the original film, *Broken Lullaby* (Lubistch, 1932). These direct artistic references, alongside further influences, reveal the depth of film's cosmopolitan transnationalism and how the film links human cultures through artistic culture.

The process of adaptation and intertextuality has rightly been identified as a central aspect of Ozon's work. Handyside (2012a), Schilt (2011) and Wilson (2014a) have paid particular attention to this aspect, identifying in detail the cultural references, intertextuality and levels of adaptation in films such as *8 femmes* and *Le temps qui reste*. In *8 femmes* for example, Schilt identifies how Ozon builds on the original text, a French play, by echoing many of the stylistic traits of 1950's Hollywood technicolour melodrama and openly referring to the filmographies of his (all French) cast. Handyside reads Ozon's adaptations in terms of queer theory, recalling the 'assertion that all repetition carries within it the possibility of subversion' (Handyside 2012a, 56) and how our familiarity with a fixed form or text invites

the opportunity to reveal the fixed, contingent nature of such relationships. Referring to *5x2*, she observes that ‘Ozon’s film problematizes, then, the notion that there is one key source from which he is borrowing. Rather, he stresses the magpie nature of his creative inspirations’ (Handyside 2012a, 59). She also identifies the cinephilic intertextuality of a film like *Le temps qui reste*, and delineates the many clear references in the film to Eric Rohmer, in terms of casting Melvil Poupaud and Marie Rivière and sharing a precise location with *Conte d’été* (Rohmer, 1996) so as to suggest a type of continuation of some of Rohmer’s work. Schilt referred to it as Ozon’s ‘passion for adaptation—or, more accurately, reinterpretation’ (Schilt 2011, ix) and this captures the often loose manner in which he approaches the original text, none more so than in *Frantz*.

Emma Wilson identifies the cultural references and intertextuality in *Les temps qui reste* as an expression of pan-European identity (Wilson 2014a, 148) She states that there is a heterogeneous sense of nationality in Ozon’s films that can be extended to the notion of identity at large in his work: ‘the blurring of the contours of desire, and the crossing of ever-permeable boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality, are aligned with an aesthetic that looks beyond the boundaries of national cinemas and cultures’ (Wilson 2014a, 151). *Le temps qui reste* is indeed indicative of Ozon’s treatment of many of these frequent themes – it tells the story of Romain (Melvil Poupaud), a young photographer who learns that he is going to die soon from a terminal illness. Reflecting Ozon’s international tendencies, Romain has a German boyfriend and has to speak English to clients in his work. These traits, combined with the references identified by Handyside in the same film, illustrate the complex treatment of intertextuality in Ozon’s work which is carried over to *Frantz*.

As previously stated, the most constant layer of the kaleidoscopic referentiality that we see in *Frantz* is Lubitsch’s *Broken Lullaby*, and reinterpretation is certainly a more accurate term than adaptation to describe the relationship between these two films. The end credits state that *Frantz* was ‘librement inspiré’ by *Broken Lullaby*. However, Ozon revealed in interviews that he came to *Broken Lullaby* by way of that film’s own adapted text, *L’homme que j’ai tué* (1930), a play by Maurice Rostand. He knew Rostand’s play and wanted to adapt it before he realised that it had already been made into a film by Lubitsch. This is key, as Ozon’s desire to make *his* film anyway reminds us that *Frantz* should not be considered a remake, but instead that Lubitsch’s film and Rostand’s play are simply sources of inspiration for his own narrative. The narrative of *Broken Lullaby* is similar to the ‘German section’ of *Frantz* – in 1919 a French soldier visits the home of a German soldier that he

killed during the war in order to seek some sort of forgiveness, but the film ends with him being taken in by the family and marrying the dead soldier's fiancée.

The process of adaptation that takes place between these three texts in itself leads us on a historical border-crossing trajectory. Despite the narrative remaining spatially consistent in all three texts, they are all 'from' different places and contexts in terms of their conception and production. Maurice Rostand was of course French and his text retains this largely French perspective. Ernst Lubitsch was born and raised in Germany but spent the best-known and most successful part of his career in Hollywood, a period spanning three decades. His film retains the victor's perspective from *L'homme que j'ai tué*, but anglicises it both linguistically and culturally. Ozon, as we know, is French, but purposefully chose this text in order to make a culturally heterogeneous film by filming in both languages with a cast from both countries and inserting several transnational cultural references. Beyond these similarities, they are two radically different films. For example, Anna's entire trip to France, almost half the film, is entirely Ozon's invention. Ozon's film is also much closer to Anna's subjectivity; in the beginning we are 'with' her, we do not meet Adrien until she does and we go with her to France. *Broken Lullaby* follows the opposite trajectory – we start with Paul (the Adrien of Lubitsch's film, Ozon gave his characters different names) in France and we follow him to Germany. This inversion of the film's treatment of subjectivity allows Frantz to take on a different character. This is explained by Ozon's desire to make a film on this period from a fresh historical perspective – he said that in France they are so used to viewing WWI films from *their* perspective, as is naturally so often the case in relation to war films, that he wanted to make a film from the perspective of those who had lost the war, Germany (Ozon 2017). This is demonstrated by his commitment to anchoring the film's perspective in Anna, basing the majority his film in Germany and taking on the troublesome task of writing and directing a film partly through a foreign language, alongside many other obstacles.

Although these challenges were all no doubt surmountable, the changes reflect the film's desire to view one's own culture and history through the eyes of the 'other', and contributes significantly to the film's relevance in terms of cinéma-monde here. Totally reinterpreting the 'adapted' texts, Ozon clearly wanted to impose his own sense of identity in order to critique ideas such as the notion of a unified 'national' identity that is central to the thinking of nationalism. In this way, we can see that Ozon applies a displaced sense of national identity to the film by intentionally approaching the narrative from the 'other' side. Again, this sense of exploring identity through spatial displacement is a consistent feature

throughout Ozon's work. For example, we saw how Ozon made use of an island setting, Île d'Yeu, in *Regarde la mer* to frame it as a queer space, at odds with the normative mainland. He has also done this elsewhere in his body of work, in *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*, where the source text and film are set in Germany but all of the script is in French.

Lubitsch's film and Rostand's play both avoid the major linguistic problem in their narratives by privileging one language, the former being in English and the latter in French. This is noteworthy when we consider that Lubitsch's film, which is of course set in France and Germany, yet took place through English and had an Anglophone cast. This has been common in Hollywood, with films such as such as with *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1995) or *Valkyrie* (Singer, 2008). This desire to go elsewhere and tell a 'foreign' story through English, with a largely Anglophone cast is typical of the Hollywood approach to view the other's history through Anglo-American subjectivity. This sort of approach also contributes significantly to the typically accepted opposition in relation to of 'Hollywood'/'World' cinema, whereby there is a typical adoption of the other culture through the lens of one's own cultural biases. The point of cinéma-monde is of course to highlight and deconstruct such dichotomies and films like *Frantz* allow us to work towards doing this. Ozon was committed from the start to making his film through two languages in the pursuit of authenticity so as to avoid a sense of simplistic national identity.

Beyond adaptation, a further noteworthy influence on *Frantz* is *The White Ribbon* (Haneke, 2009), which Ozon referred to in many interviews and asked his actors to watch before starting filming. The influence of Michael Haneke is particularly interesting because just as Ozon is a noted Germanophile, Haneke is an Austrian director who has made several successful 'French' films, such as *Caché* (2005) and *Amour* (2012), which were based in France and with a francophone cast. Indeed, border-crossing has been a constant throughout Haneke's career and he is often positioned as a key figure in theories of cinéma-monde (Marshall 2012, 43). If we were to compare Haneke and Ozon through the lens of cinéma-monde, we could say that they show similar tendencies treated in dramatically different styles. *The White Ribbon* is particularly interesting as a point of comparison with *Frantz* because the two films complement each other in certain senses. Haneke's film tells the story of a series of mysterious events in a small German town in the period leading up to WW1, but particular attention to the brutal nature of interpersonal social relations. The two films therefore bookend each other in terms of historical context - Haneke's film is very much a film *d'avant-guerre*, just as Ozon's is one *d'après-guerre*. In this way, they are also both



films made with a knowing retrospective hindsight in relation to history. *The White Ribbon* captures small-town Germany society in the period just before WW1, with a large emphasis on the treatment and behaviour of children at the time that leaves us wondering, and perhaps explains, what these children would become as adults, when they reach adulthood in the 1930's. *Frantz* is broader in terms of spatial scope, yet identifies the mutual entanglements of both countries, highlighting the folly of nationalism on either side of the Franco-German border, that would go on of course to mount until the outbreak of WW2.

Although there are no blatant references to *The White Ribbon* as such, *Frantz* borrows heavily in tone from Haneke's film, especially in the 'German' section. There is also one particular type of shot shared by both, filming characters at medium distance from behind (fig. 2-3). They both film their subject from a similar distance, in a static frame. Moreover, the choice of black-and-white colouring, the setting in provincial Germany, a desire to represent interpersonal relations in a modest style are all tropes shared by both films. Most notably, both films touch on the idea of explaining one part of history by showing us what came before. Although *The White Ribbon* may not be an intertext as such, it is a clear influence on Ozon's film. Furthermore, the idea of Haneke's film being a point of reference further highlights the fluid transnationalism that Ozon undertook with *Frantz*. Felicity Chaplin points out that Ozon's films often occupy an 'interstitial space between French specificity and globalisation' (2021, 87). *Frantz* reflects this trend in his work, yet in the particular example of this film, it not simply French specificity that is in question, but rather a broader sense of local specificity, depending on the moment in the film's narrative. Through the film's border-crossing trajectory and intertextuality, the film negates singular understandings of national identities. As a result, the film reflects this ambivalent position in relation to what local and global, as it contains elements of both. Indeed, this is a further link to *Regarde le mer* and *Sous le sable*, which both take place in France and have scripts almost totally in French, yet at the same time, the main characters are British and have moved to France. We can therefore see tension between the local/global, and self/other, that is drawn out through nationality in Ozon's films.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

#### 2.4.4. Points of Contact, Lines of Flight

In addition to the films discussed in the previous section, *Frantz* features several other important cultural references. As mentioned previously, a key sequence in the film is Anna's in-full recitation of a Verlaine poem, *Chanson d'automne*, while visiting Frantz's grave with Adrien. The poem seems to take on a particularly important role in the sequence as we can relate the text closely to the moment it appears in the narrative and the wider transnational intertextuality of the film. The poem addresses deep nostalgia as Anna recites it, looking at the grave of her deceased fiancé. Furthermore, the poem clearly addresses the sadness of living in past tragedy, moving in unending loops of regret 'pareil à la feuille morte'. The line is linked to the diegetic present of the scene in terms of sound, as the end of the sequence is marked heavily by the noise of leaves rustling in the wind. Yet, these are not the dead leaves of autumn but the new ones of spring. Adrien and Anna both remark on this and view them as

welcome sign of the spring to come, symbolizing the potential for change after the harrowing past of the war. The poem also points to the possible ‘blossoming’ of a new romance between them, as the film plays heavily on the ambiguity of their relationship. Anna seems to find a sense of cathartic solace through the poem’s text and her relationship to it – she reveals in a subsequent scene that when they first met, it was in a bookshop, she was looking for a German poetry book and Frantz was looking for a French one. Her favourite poet was Rilke, while his was Verlaine. She learned the poem and the language through Frantz who was a Francophile. She refers to French as ‘notre langage secret’ from when Frantz was alive. This idea of intercultural connections forged through curiosity beyond one’s own horizons and their potential to be deeply rewarding is an idea that is built on from here.

Another central cultural reference in the film occurs in a subsequent sequence when Adrien plays the violin for Frantz’s family. Upon learning that Adrien was a musician in the *Orchestre de Paris*, they imagine that this must have been an important part of his friendship with him, as Frantz played the violin also. This is shown to us in a flashback sequence, which of course could not possibly have been ‘true’, as Frantz and Adrien did not actually know each other. Although Adrien claims to be unable to play music since the war, Frantz’s parents ask him to try to play for them. He agrees and the piece he plays is a section of *Nocturne in C Sharp Minor (No. 20)* by Frédéric Chopin, in a version arranged for violin. After an opening passage Anna accompanies Adrien on the piano. The Hoffmeisters are clearly deeply touched by the performance, as is Adrien who eventually is overcome and faints. The choice of music composed by Chopin, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Franco-Polish composer, adds further to the film’s border-crossing intertextuality. Furthermore, when discussing the film’s original sound track (composed by frequent collaborator, Phillippe Rombi), Ozon revealed in interviews that he wanted the original music composed to be inspired by Mahler, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century Austrian composer. On a technical level, the most striking visual feature of this sequence occurs as Adrien begins playing, when the frame changes from black and white to colour. This happens at key moments in the film’s narrative, often when the characters manage to temporarily forget the sadness of recent events and recall happier times. To this end, the false flashbacks of Adrien and Frantz together in Paris are also in colour. It is noteworthy that these brief passages from black and white to colour are most often triggered by some sort of art form as characters experience some form of catharsis through their presence. In many respects, Adrien’s visit to the Hoffmeisters reaches a moment of emotional climax during this sequence. Thinking in the broader terms of the film’s relation to Ozon’s wider body of work,

the idea of being visited by death resurfaces often in his films. In *Frantz*, we can see that Adrien's visit makes the Hoffmeisters engage fully with the death of their son. In *Sous le sable*, Marie is literally visited by her dead husband, through the presence of his 'ghost' throughout the film. In *Regarde la mer*, we learn towards the end of the film that Tatiana harbours conflicted emotions in relation to the abortion that she had, and eventually murders Sasha and steals her baby.

Beyond poetry and music, other intertexts are established through visual art. Ozon approached the film with two specific visual references in mind, namely David Caspar Friedrich and Édouard Manet. Friedrich was a 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic-era painter from Germany, best-known for landscape work. His paintings often portrayed a figure from behind while they contemplate nature (fig. 4). This character is referred to as a *rückenfigur*, or 'a figure seen from behind'. With this in mind, we can see this is a common frame and angle combination throughout *Frantz*, as Ozon stated in an interview that Friedrich was a specific visual reference when filming the German countryside. When we compare certain frames in *Frantz* (fig. 5) to some of Friedrich's work (fig. 4), we can see there are clear references to his painting style in the film.



Figure 4. Friedrich, David Caspar. *Moonrise Over the Sea*. 1822, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin



Figure 5.

The most specific reference to a painting in the film is to Manet's *Le suicidé* (fig. 6), which forms a central narrative device in the film. Helena Duffy describes it as having a key thematic role in the film, stating that 'the painting foretells Adrien and Anna's attempted suicides, and more broadly, helps to thematise war-induced psychological injury' (Duffy 2021, 56). Adrien makes specific reference to the painting, without naming it, while inventing an anecdote about a visit with Frantz to the Louvre museum in Paris. Later, in Paris and unable to find Adrien or any information on his whereabouts, Anna goes to the museum to find the painting he had told them of. Upon finding it in the museum, she is disturbed by the painting's violently macabre nature and title, as she leaves with the impression that Adrien may have committed suicide himself. Finally, having found Adrien, and leaving disappointed after realising that their relationship will not go beyond friendship, she returns to Paris and we learn that she has informed the Hoffmeisters she will be staying in France, under the false pretence that it is to stay with Adrien. In the film's final sequence we see her return to the Louvre to visit the painting again, and being conscious of the painting's title, we are given the impression that Anna may be staying in Paris to succeed in dying by suicide, after an earlier failed attempt. She sits down in front of the painting to contemplate it beside another visitor to the museum and the sequence's slow pacing leaves the spectator with ample time to speculate as to how Anna must be suffering, having gone through so many difficult circumstances and disappointments. The person beside her asks 'Vous aimez aussi ce tableau?', and after a moment's pause where the camera zooms in on her blank expression, Anna responds 'Oui, il me donne envie de vivre'. The foreboding strings of the soundtrack have now given way to the Chopin motif Adrien played for the Hoffmeisters earlier in the

film and the frame has once again passed from black and white to colour. A zooming counter-shot shows the painting in colour for the first time (fig.6) and the film ends. The film ends on an uplifting note, giving the viewer the impression that Anna accepts her circumstances and is ready to move on to a new life.



Figure 6.

Anna clearly finds a sense of comfort through Manet's painting. This may seem somewhat paradoxical, given the grim nature of the painting, but Anna finds a cathartic sense of understanding through it that allows her to feel better about her life. Whether this is through the memories that may be associated with it or a sense of emotional saturation, the idea of a certain release of emotional tension via arts and culture occurs at several points of the film in the examples discussed in this section – initially with Verlaine, then Chopin and finally Manet. This is signalled clearly with the brief passage from black and white to colour, as if to indicate the temporary lifting of the emotional difficulties of the present in order to feel release through remembering better times or a feeling of understanding from art.

The notion of breaking from the monotony of everyday existence is reminiscent of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari evoke in terms of lines of flight in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). As we saw in the introduction to this thesis, if we can understand life as being characterised by fixed points, rigid ideas or univocal notions, a line of flight may be formed by some means of liberating break away, (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 3). In *Frantz*, lines of flight are established through the prisms of culture and time. These moments are

often marked by passages from black and white to colour. They form moments of rupture from the emotional turmoil of the present in question, Europe after WW1. This idea is expressed throughout the narrative as often taking place through the prism of culture – Adrien plays Chopin’s *Nocturne in C Sharp Minor (No. 20)* for the Hoffmeisters and Anna and they all experience a brief ‘line of flight’, a point of rupture with the monotony of their real-world existence. For Adrien, this is implied to be his existence before having gone through the turmoil of war, the guilt of having killed and the further guilt of lying to the family of the person that he has killed. For Anna and Hoffmeisters this is the thought of when Frantz was still alive, the interests he had and the time he spent in France before the war. This is only brief as real life and all its existential baggage returns but already the emotional saturation that may take place has been evoked by this passage from black and white to colour. Later, we come across the same phenomenon the second time that Anna visits the Louvre to look at Manet’s *Le suicidé*. Having experienced the initial loss of her fiancé, and further deep emotional upheaval of temporarily losing then finding Adrien only to be disappointed on learning the limits of their platonic relationship, the evidence that we have would suggest she is in despair. Yet, as she says to her fellow museum visitor, it is *Le suicidé* that ‘makes her want to live’. Despite the painting’s macabre nature, she experiences a sense of life affirming understanding from such an aesthetically poignant portrayal of deep sadness. As Duffy states, Anna’s reaction to the painting at the end of the film ‘transforms the canvas from a signifier of a self-destructive revolt against the rigidity of socially defined identities into one of liberation from such crippling constructs’ (Duffy 2021, 56). Given that Anna previously attempted suicide herself, the painting forms a point of departure for her, a ‘line of flight’ that helps her gain a sense of understanding in relation to her own situation. It is of note that this particular line of flight is not formed by reminiscing in a past perception of time, but is brought about by emotional saturation of seizing of one’s own situation in the present. For this, there is no lapse back in to the dominant monochrome colour palette as Anna finally seems to have some sort of closure with her past by managing to live in the present.

Furthermore, these lines of flight take place within the varying degrees of border-crossing intertextuality and referentiality that has been taking place throughout the film and this discussion, thinking of it here in terms of cinéma-monde. With *Frantz*, Ozon produces a complex form of intertextuality whereby Rostand, Lubitsch, Haneke, Verlaine, Freidrich and Manet are referred to or cited in different measures throughout to create a web of border-crossing interconnections that transcend any form of singular national identity. Lateral

connections forged as ‘mutual entanglements’ are realised, and although the film’s very nature is not wholly uplifting, all the more so with the knowing historical perspective of what would happen in Europe in the decades that follow, we can start to see the establishment of a template for opposition to simplified binary thinking. The film’s transnational intertextuality is at the core of the political discourse that it produces; opposing the detrimental oppositional thinking by realising further connections by art, education and understanding perspectives beyond one’s own. Although such notions are timeless, it is important to note that the film was released in a context of the increased success of populism in Europe and North America, such as the continued popularity of the extreme right-wing *Front national* party in France, Britain’s decision to leave the European Union and Donald Trump’s victory in the American presidential election, for example. With the viewer’s benefit of knowing what would happen in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, *Frantz* serves as a timely reminder of the errors of oppositional notions of identity in the film’s own contemporaneity while indicating potential lines of flight beyond such behaviours.

#### **2.4.5. Summary**

In this section, the primary aim was to discuss François Ozon’s innovative take on transnational cinema, and the manner in which it posits understandings of identity relating to space in a fluid manner. His treatment of issues surrounding identities of place are a constant thread that weaves through much of his large body of work, and is particularly noteworthy in *Frantz*. I chose cinéma-monde as a theoretical framework to structure my analysis of the film as it is a recent development at the forefront of studying of French-language cinema from a spatially decentered perspective. Firstly, I discussed the manner in which *Frantz* deals with the transnational on a narrative level, and found that a sense of border crossing pervades the narrative, on both literal and figurative levels. In this section, I also found that the film makes use of bilingualism and transnational production to draw out a complex account of identity relating to space. Secondly, I discussed the transnational aspect of the film’s in terms of adaptation and intertextuality. In this section we saw how the genesis of the film spans multiple filmic cultures and periods, building on existing studies of Ozon’s innovative treatment of intertextuality through his body of work. Finally, I discussed the film’s use of art and culture as a means of connecting places that are divided by borders, and as a result borders are not only crossed but transcended. This aspect of the film is all the more powerful



when we consider the film in relation to the historical and political in which the narrative took place, but also in relation to the period in which it was conceived. *Frantz* therefore acts as a reminder of the ills of the modes of thinking that would mark the period which followed the narrative. The film also reminds of the possibility of their return, and points to possible lines of flight beyond them moving forward.

## 2.5. Ambiguous Genres of Perception: Identity in the Films of François Ozon - Conclusion

In spite of the vastness of his body of work, Ozon's films retain a great deal of thematic and stylistic continuity. We have seen in this chapter how his films display a penchant for fluidity with water regularly featuring at key moments of his films. We have already seen how this is a recurrent visual trope in *Sous le sable*, but it is also present in *Regarde la mer* (the film takes place on an island, and there are several sequences filmed at the beach) and to a lesser extent, in *Frantz*. Water often serves as a visual metaphor for a sense of fluidity in identities and, in a more abstract sense, definitions and categories. For example, in *Sous le sable* there is a sense of fluidity between subjectivity/objectivity, but also life/death and past/present. Similarly, in *Regarde la mer* the distinctions between queer/hetero, sex/violence, and self/other, are frequently blurred or intertwined. In *Frantz*, the film's border-crossing narrative produces a fluid account of 'national' identity, where oppositional modes of thought are thoroughly critiqued.

We have also seen the extent to which narrative ambiguity plays a key role in his films. His films often tease out extended questions but do not provide clear answers. For example, in *Frantz*, what was the nature of Adrien's relationship to Frantz? In *Regarde la mer*, is Sasha drawn to Tatiana out of physical attraction? Who is the figure that Marie runs towards at the end of *Sous le sable*? These unanswered questions produce a sense of ambiguity that has a profound impact on the relationship between the film and the spectator. It draws the spectator into an active viewing space where they question what is happening in the film, and as we have seen, many of these questions relate to different facets of identity. For example, we are unsure if the tension between Sasha and Tatiana in *Regarde la mer* is physical with the threat of violence or in fact a physical attraction. Ambiguity therefore plays a key role in relation to the films' interrogation of fixed identities.

As has been highlighted in this chapter, Ozon's films often treat 'normal' middle-class existence going through a moment of profound change. To do this, the films establish an initial sense of surface-level normality that is then subverted over the course of the film. For example, in *Regarde la mer*, the sense of subversion takes place in relation to the traditional role of 'mother'. Isolated from her husband who works too much, and forced to mother alone, Sasha temporarily abandons her young child on the beach to visit a cruising spot nearby. In

*Sous le sable*, when Marie's imagination becomes a feature of the film's narrative, the sense of diegetic 'reality' in the film is subverted. As a result, the film becomes a heterogenous account of the manner in which the distinction between subjectivity/objectivity can be unclear.

We have discussed the extent to which Ozon's films treat national, and indeed, transnational identity. Although this question may not seem like a central concern of many of Ozon's best known films, it is nonetheless present to a certain degree in the vast majority of his films. We have already seen in detail how *Frantz* makes use of a border-crossing narrative and a sense of transnational intertextuality to express a sense of spatial identity that goes beyond singular nationality. In *Regarde le mer*, Sasha is Franco-British, as is Marie in *Sous le sable*. Both characters were chosen to be played by British actresses who could speak French. The transnational characters in the films are another site of category blurring for Ozon. Just as we have seen how sexuality and gender are constantly in a process of change in these films, notions of fixed national identity are fluid. As a result, we can see that identity as a whole in Ozon's oeuvre is unfixed and in a fluid state on several fronts.

In addition to these similarities, it is important to note that there are certain key differences between the films that have been discussed in detail in this chapter. Ozon's body of work is varied in nature. For example, in the films studied here, there is a significant contrast in tone when we compare the violent tension of *Regarde la mer* and stylised intertextuality of *Frantz*. This variety produces films that appear very different on a surface level. At times, Ozon shows a preference for generic orthodoxy. As we have seen, *Regarde le mer* and *Frantz* both adhere to certain genre codes (a psychological thriller and period drama, respectively). *Sous le sable*, on a surface level, is a conventional drama. Yet, through these genres, he returns to the same core thematic and narrative concerns. His penchant for these key tropes gives us a body of work that is simultaneously heterogenous and cohesive in nature. As a result, Ozon's very style is well suited to articulating modes of identity that are similarly varied and changeable in nature.

As we saw in the introduction to this thesis, Kate Ince has referred to Ozon as France's 'first mainstream queer *auteur*' (2008, 113). If we understand queerness as the questioning of normative values or definitions, it is important to ask how a director can be simultaneously queer *and* mainstream. Yet, this remains a useful formulation for understanding Ozon's position as a filmmaker. He can be considered somewhat mainstream, given his consistent success spanning three decades, and an *auteur* for his recognizable style

and penchant for consistent themes throughout his career. He is often identified as a key queer filmmaker for the manner in which his work addresses sexuality, as outlined above. It is worth considering Ozon's own reaction to being identified as a 'queer' filmmaker. Like Dolan and Sciamma, he has been quoted as saying that he finds such labelling objectionable, and a largely Anglo-American construct that he did not come across until he started doing media outside of France (Feinstein 2000, 55). Others, such as Thibaut Schilt (2011, 37) and Loïc Bourdeau (2021, 5) have commented on Ince's description of Ozon. Bourdeau points out that 'refusing identitary labels, is, in fact quite queer' (2021, 6). Rather than viewing queer in reductionist terms that limit the filmmaker to his sexual identity, it helps us understand that his body of work contains many of the stylistic signatures that we associate with queer cinema, such as the subversion of themes, genres and identities. His films resist fixed definitions on several fronts. Many of these start with the most recognizable terrain of queer cinema, such as stable models of gender and sexuality, but soon extend to other facets of identity, such as nationality. Upon studying his films in detail, we soon realise that this subversion permeates other more abstract areas of human life, including time (past/present) and the manner in which we relate to existence (reality/fiction, objectivity /subjectivity). Ozon's overall resistance to definition serves as a key point of reference in this study of his work, as it feeds into the fluidity and blurring that weave through the analysis of all the films that are being studied here. Through narrative ambiguity, subversion of genre, and complex cultural referencing, the identities, categories and definitions in his films are inherently fluid, and the boundaries between opposing values are blurred.

## 2. Sounds of Emotive Girlhood: Identity in the Films of Céline Sciamma

### 3.1. Introduction

Will Higbee has described Céline Sciamma ‘as one of the most important and compelling directors working in French cinema today’ (2018a, 166). Her body of work currently stands at five feature-length films, as well writing credits on other projects. Her first film was *Naissance des pieuvres* (2007). Like François Ozon, Sciamma attended the national filmmaking school in Paris, La FÉMIS. Since then, her profile has risen steadily in both France and abroad. Her second and third films, *Tomboy* (2011) and *Bande de filles* (2014) premiered in major international film festivals, received widespread critical praise and garnered modest box-office success in France. Her next film, *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) proved to be a milestone in Sciamma’s career on several fronts. It premiered in the main competition at Cannes, where it won the script-writing prize. It has also contributed significantly to Sciamma’s international profile, as the film received widespread significant praise and found an international audience thanks in part to a global distribution deal with streaming service Mubi. The impact of Sciamma’s work has been reflected in the commercial and critical success of her films. Emma Wilson has described Sciamma as a key contemporary filmmaker in terms of both French and Queer cinema: ‘Céline Sciamma is the most visible and important feminist, and lesbian, director in international filmmaking at this moment’ (2021, 3). Given that her films now generate widespread media attention in both Anglophone and Francophone societies, she is very much an internationally established filmmaker. Furthermore, her work shines light on topics that are uncommonly treated in mainstream culture and media, namely queer sexuality, girlhood and fluid identities.

Sciamma is often considered a major auteur of contemporary French cinema. Sciamma’s films bear several of the key auteur traits, such as a consistent return to similar subject-matter (narratives of feminine youth), retaining the same creative team through several films (such as actress Adèle Haenel and composer Para One) and an identifiable visual style (consistent colour palettes, owing in part to cinematographers Crystel Fournier and Claire Mathon). Yet, her work also subverts the traditional figure of the auteur. We have already seen how Auteur approaches are historically connoted for being often male-dominated. Sciamma clearly transgresses the notion of a male-centered culture of filmmaking, and she is widely considered to be a feminist filmmaker whose films can be identified as

being an example of a ‘regard féminin’ (Brey 2020, 77). Furthermore, traditional auteur-centred approaches also exclude the work of others who contribute to the film. Throughout this chapter, we will see how Sciamma’s approach to filmmaking departs from this such a singular approach, instead encouraging us to analyse the film in terms of the work of multiple creative subjectivities. Much of the promotional material from the film, as seen above, supports this perspective. Therefore, we can see that while Sciamma may be identified as an auteur, we can see that she subverts the traditional figure of the auteur and adds a modern feminist angle to it.

In my analysis of Sciamma’s films, I explore the extent to which Sciamma approaches liminality, fluidity and ambivalence on multiple fronts, with particular emphasis on the close aesthetic reading of her films. In my discussion of *Naissance des pieuvres*, I analyse the expressions of emotional surface and depth in the film, which are often linked to notions of feminine subjectivity and queer desire. My analysis includes detailed discussion of the film’s use of music and colour. In the second section, my focus shifts to *Bande de filles*. I discuss the treatment of identity in the film, which make detailed use of Butler’s theory of performativity to understand the expressions of agency. These two strands of my analysis inform my discussion of the film’s use of music, which I argue constitutes a commentary on the politics of representation in contemporary France. Finally, in my third section, I analyse the treatment of subjectivity in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, where I use existing theories of gendered gazes to inform my analysis. In doing so, I analyse the film’s treatment of queer desire, which is expressed through expressive *mise-en-scène*, diegetic music and use of visual art.

Through my discussion of her films, I aim to demonstrate how Sciamma makes use of blurring and fluidity in relation to identity throughout her work. Sciamma’s detailed exploration of her protagonists’ subjectivities blurs the distinction between a self/other in terms of perspective, drawing the audience in a heightened empathetical viewing space. Her films suggest that spatial and temporal boundaries can be played with in order to reflect the flowing nature of the self. She often makes use of narrative ambiguity in her work, especially at the ending points of her films. Her films often suggest that the selves she is depicting are fluid. Many scholars have noted that Sciamma pays particular attention to narratives of youth, coming of age, and girlhood (Handyside 2019, Smith 2020) Indeed, Sciamma often focuses on these processes of coming of age, with particular emphasis on the female protagonists living through some degree of identity fluidity. At times, Sciamma highlights the performed nature of such identities, such as in *Naissance des pieuvres* and *Bande de filles*. At other

times, her treatment of queer desire subverts a singular sense of subjectivity into a more heterogeneous notion. In all cases, we will see the extent to which the evolution of identity as a process of ambivalent flow is at the core of Sciamma's filmmaking project.

I decided to focus more on the films discussed in detail here instead of *Tomboy* (2011). It is true to say that *Tomboy* raises questions that are highly pertinent to the central research questions of this project. Similar to the films that will be discussed in detail in this chapter, *Tomboy* treats gender in terms of liminality, fluidity and porousness. Emma Wilson says that, through the film, Sciamma champions 'the fluid identifications and gender performances of childhood (2021, 47). Indeed, other scholars have highlighted the performative nature of gender in the film. Darren Waldron states that the film 'the film reveals the conditionality of all gendering by highlighting the performative strategies undertaken by boys to comply with compulsory masculinity' (2013, 60). Given that the performative nature of identity is one of the primary interests of Sciamma's body of work, it is clear that the film shares several similarities with the films I have decided to prioritise here. However, I think the methodological approach of this study is best suited to the films that are the focus of this chapter. *Tomboy* is the most aesthetically toned-down film that Sciamma has directed to date. It features far less music than any of Sciamma's other films, and is more simple in terms of *mise-en-scène*. The film's thematic meaning is also more heavily invested in the script. Given that the main focus of my study is the aesthetic reading of film, the films that I have chosen to prioritise here correspond better to the overall research project. *Naissance des pieuvres*, *Bande de filles* and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* are all characterised by expressive use of music, a high degree of visual composition, and understated dialogue.

## 3.2. Interiority, Emotion and the Crystal-image in *Naissance des pieuvres* (2007)

### 3.2.1. Introduction

*Naissance des pieuvres* is Céline Sciamma's first film. She wrote the film script as her final project while a student. The presiding jury who graded it, led by filmmaker Xavier Beauvois, encouraged her to develop the script into a feature-length film at the end of her studies. She succeeded, and the film went on to premiere at the Cannes Film Festival, in the *Un certain regard* section. *Naissance des pieuvres* was well-received by critics. In *Le monde*, Jean-Luc Douin wrote: 'Optant pour l'intemporalité et la stylisation, [...] elle (Sciamma) parle de malentendus, de rétention, de la difficulté de vivre une pulsion homosexuelle à 15 ans' (2012, 15).

The film recounts the story of Marie (Pauline Acquart), a 15-year-old living in the Parisian suburb of Cergy-Pontoise. During the summer holidays, she attends a synchronised swimming event in which her friend Anne (Louise Blanchère) is participating. While there, she first lays eyes upon Floriane (Adèle Haenel), whose team are competing in the event. Marie goes out of her way to befriend Floriane, initially under the pretence of interest in synchronised swimming, but we soon realise that Marie is physically attracted to Floriane. Their friendship blossoms, and at times we are given the impression that Floriane might reciprocate feelings for Marie. The meaning of the film is largely produced by visual metaphor, understated dialogue and a very prominent soundtrack. Water holds a deep symbolic meaning throughout the film, with multiple key sequences featuring synchronised swimming performances. Given that the film captures the realisation of queer desire and affirmation of sexuality, water is often used as a visual metaphor for identity fluidity. We can therefore see that fluidity in identity is a central component to her films from the beginning of her career. As with the vast majority of her work to date, Sciamma focuses on younger characters. Para One (Jean-Baptiste de Laubier) composed all of the original music, and he has composed music for all of Sciamma's films since. With all of these factors in mind, *Naissance des pieuvres* firmly establishes Sciamma's style as a filmmaker.

Although the film was not a commercial success when it was released<sup>7</sup>, it has gained considerable attention in terms of academic writing. Catherine Jonet refers to the film as a

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<sup>7</sup> According to film statistics website *Box Office Mojo*, the film did not make a profit on an initial budget of €1.6 million euros - [https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0869977/?ref\\_=bo\\_tt\\_ti](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0869977/?ref_=bo_tt_ti)



‘sustained examination of surface and depth’, with the film navigating the liminal waters of girlhood (Jonet 2017, 1134). Sophie Belot (2012) and Emma Wilson (2014b) both discuss the significance of the swimming pool as space in the film. Belot describes it as an inherently ‘fluid’ space beyond literal terms, simultaneously operating as public/private and rigid/fluid space (2012, 172). Wilson discusses the extended visual motif of the swimming pool, describing the film one which ‘uses the intersensory immersion offered by textured moving image art to explore a first intimation of desire, a first aspiration for a shared narrative, for sexual intimacy’ (2014b, 213) Fiona Handyside (2016) has also written about Sciamma’s first film, with particular attention paid to the use of music in the film. She describes music as a ‘vector of meaning’ that adds depth and emotion to the many unspoken aspects of the narrative (Handyside 2016, 121). In this chapter, I aim to build on existing scholarship by discussing the film in terms of Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the crystal-image. As we have seen during my analysis of Ozon’s *Sous le sable*, Deleuze uses the crystal-image to understand film in terms of layered images that present elements pertaining to both the actual and the virtual. The crystal-image will allow us to understand the nuanced mode of expression in *Naissance des pieuvres*, where an apparently sterile, stylized surface resides above a depth of unspoken human emotion throughout the film. After establishing the aspects of Deleuze’s theory that are of interest here, I will identify four areas in the film that I consider to be key modes of expression; the visual metaphor of the swimming pool, the use of music to express unspoken emotion, the function of the film’s lighting to generate atmosphere, and, finally, the film’s final sequence as the simultaneous culmination of all of these stylistic devices. As a result, my analysis creates points of comparison with other films where the crystal-image has been used, such my own discussion of Ozon’s *Sous le sable* in chapter two of this thesis. My discussion of the film’s music as an important factor of the crystal-image also contributes to existing scholarship on Deleuzian film theory, as film music is often overlooked as an element of the crystal-image. Finally, my analysis also contributes further to existing studies of the film’s aesthetic form (Handyside 2016, Edney 2020), by using previously unused theory in order to understand them.

### **3.2.2. The Crystal-Image**

In what follows, I will discuss why *Naissance des pieuvres* can be understood in terms of Deleuze’s theory of the crystal-image. I use it as a theoretical lens in order to understand the expressive aesthetic of the film, which features both actual (the film’s simple narrative

surface) and virtual (the ephemeral nature of queer teenage desire) elements. I use it as a theoretical lens in order to understand the expressive aesthetic of the film, which features both actual (the film's simple narrative surface) and virtual (the ephemeral nature of queer teenage desire) elements.

A very brief section of Deleuze's *Cinéma 2* has inspired my approach in this section. He uses the example of J.M.W. Turner's maritime paintings as a metaphor to explain how this style of image is formed:

To such a varied list we should add the ship. It too is a track, a circuit. It is as if, as in Turner's paintings, splitting in two is not an accident, but a power which is part of the ship. It is Herman Melville who, in his novels, fixed this structure for all time. Seed impregnating the sea, the ship is caught between its two crystalline faces: a limpid face which is the ship from above, where everything should be visible, according to order; an opaque face which is the ship from below, and which occurs underwater, the black face of the engine-room stokers. (Deleuze 1989, 73.)

The separation of the image in 'two crystalline faces' serves as an example of the occurrence of the crystal-image in cinema. We can use Turner's *Fisherman at Sea* (fig. 1) as a point of reference in relation to the above citation. On one hand, the 'limpid' face described by Deleuze corresponds to the actual side of the crystal-image; the boat and fishermen as we see them, the surrounding water, the moonlight breaking through the clouds and the shoreline. On the other hand, Deleuze describes the 'opaque face' as 'the ship from below', which corresponds to the virtual side of the crystal-image. This side corresponds to what is inferred, rather than what is specifically visually represented in the painting. On this level, we think of the limitless depth of the sweeping sea and the fragile position of the fishermen's boat, floating on top of it. This aspect of the painting is rendered all the more dramatic by Turner's use of lighting, with the moon breaking through the cloud only enough for us to see the boat. Thinking of the image in terms of crystal-image, we can see a nuanced sense of tension between the surface and depth of the image and how this then carries over into the painting's sense of meaning which exceeds what is literally depicted on the canvas itself.



Figure 1 - Turner, J. M. W. *Fishermen at Sea*. 1796, Tate Gallery, London.

Several parallels can be drawn between the crystal-image and *Naissance des pieuvres*. The film essentially plays on the tension between a stoic surface and emotional interior. Sophie Belot has described the swimming pool as a point of access, beyond the exterior surface of the film's protagonists: 'The swimming pool, as an enclosed and confining space, is no longer defined by its rigid/fluid and depth/surface separation, but by the movements breaking the surface of the water and by the notion of immersion' (Belot 2012, 177). When viewed through the theoretical lens of the crystal-image, the sense of surface and depth in Sciamma's swimming pool shares many parallels with Turner's sea. Similar to Turner, Sciamma makes use of a body of water to address surface and depth. In *Naissance des pieuvres*, the swimming pool acts as a visual metaphor for the tension between the emotional exterior and interior of the female protagonists' lives. The surface is a performed exterior, aimed largely at satisfying public standards of physical appearance and behaviour. Below the surface lies a depth of interior emotion, which is often unspoken and instead expressed in the film via *mise-en-scène* and music.

### 3.2.3. Synchronised Swimming, Surface and Depth

The film's synchronized swimming sequences establish the surface/depth opposition that is carried throughout *Naissance des pieuvres*. The pool carries a deeply symbolic presence in the film, clearly evoking a tension between exterior and interior. Deleuze comments on the traditional symbolic value of water in French cinema, and specifically Jean Renoir's use of it:

This is why, although he fully shares the general taste of the French school for water, Renoir makes such a special use of it. There are, according to him, two states of water, the frozen water of the glass pane, the flat mirror, or the deep crystal, and the fast, flowing water. (Deleuze 1989, 87)

*Naissance des pieuvres* is reminiscent of what Deleuze describes as 'the deep crystal'. The swimming pool suggests depth, and the realization of what has already existed, rather than the oncoming change of 'fast flowing water'. Sciamma has commented on her symbolic use of the pool in the film: 'C'est un espace qui apporte sa part de stéréotypes mais qu'on peut investir de façon très différente. [...] Pour moi, c'est le lieu de la naissance du désir, du dévoilement, de la moiteur' (Jousse 2006). Sciamma's statement on the pool's function in the film as being the birthplace of desire, as well as the film's title, points to a reference to the waters of birth, which is to say amniotic fluid. However, any reference to traditional associations between women and water, such as amniotic fluid, are played on in a conscious manner in order to be subverted. As Sciamma states in the above quote, in place of the traditional feminine waters of maternity, in *Naissance des pieuvres* the primary ideas that water points to are sensory immersion, depth of feeling and the realization of feminine desire.

Synchronized swimming increases the metaphorical value of the pool. On synchronized swimming, Sciamma said: 'C'est un sport qui est exclusivement féminin et, par conséquent, qui produit un discours sur la féminité' (Jousse 2006). In this way, we can view these sequences as a commentary on femininity. Chevalier and Belot have both commented on the surface and synchronized swimming in terms of performance. Chevalier states that: 'On the surface we see the swimmers' performance of femininity but the underwater scenes reveal a monstrous, allegorical body' (Chevalier 2018, 69). Belot considers that: 'Synchronized swimming, like femininity, is a performance, which for Baudrillard is associated with the notion of seduction. Seduction is of the order of artifice in the sense that the feminine identity is not real, but rather socially constructed through rituals' (Belot 2012, 174). The surface of the swimming pool represents the actual side of the crystal-image. The

surface portrays a highly composed exterior that receives praise for adhering to pre-conceived modes of behaviour. In the water below the surface, hidden away from the eyes of the public, we are given a sense of the effort that must be undertaken in order to produce the surface image. If we consider the trope of synchronized swimming in terms of Butlerian performativity we can contextualize these sequences in terms of the performativity not just of gender, but, rather, the performed nature of identity in general. In *Naissance des pieuvres*, the swimming pool traces out the idea of a performed exterior at odds with a concealed interior. We can take the film's synchronised swimming sequences as an example. Butler considers the performance of identity as being constituted through the 'stylized repetition of acts' (Butler 1988, 520) and synchronized swimming can be described in similar terms: as a heavily choreographed sport where contestants are judged on their synchronised set of movements, we can see how the sport constitutes a stylized repetition of acts. Furthermore, contestants are obliged to conform to pre-conceived standards of feminine beauty in order to participate. In *Naissance des pieuvres*, a brief sequence where a trainer checks her team's physical appearance before performing confirms this. The exaggerated standards of beauty that the female characters must adhere to share certain parallels with Butler's discussion of drag and parody of gendered identity, when she suggests that drag 'effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity' (1999, 174). In *Naissance des pieuvres* there is no clear sense of gendered fluidity akin to drag. Yet, just as drag provides a hyperbolic account of gendered performance, an exaggerated performance of femininity is clearly taking place during the synchronised swimming sequences. Furthermore, drag parodies the idea of an essential gender identity, and during these sequences the film satirizes the heightened standards of feminine beauty that these young women are expected to adhere to.

When Floriane's team address the crowd after performing, their corporeal movements are highly rigid and composed and their smiles appear involuntary, both of which suggest they have been forcibly acquired, as opposed to being freely exhibited. The discourse on femininity that Sciamma refers to is clear from this perspective – standards of physical beauty are set by exterior social discourse and the young girls must work tirelessly in order to meet these standards. The performance analogy extends beyond the swimming pool into other aspects of these young girls' lives. Floriane, for example, performs a public persona as a highly self-confident, sexually mature woman. Intimate scenes with Marie imply that elements of this are a façade, such as when they speak alone, sitting in front of *l'Axe majeur*

in Cergy and Floriane reveals that she finds the physical advances of her older swimming trainer repugnant. This tension between a performed exterior, at odds with a more authentic inner-self shares parallels with the layered nature of the crystal-image. Despite the apparently superficial nature of the actual surface, the film constantly suggests there are deeper modes of meaning below the surface.

The synchronised swimming sequences of *Naissance des pieuvres* also establish an omnipresent sense of opposition between exteriors and interiors, and this extends well beyond the water of the pool itself. For example, we encounter this trope in the film's opening sequence. The swimmers are getting ready to perform in the changing room, putting on their costumes and practising their choreographed movements. They then walk out in front of the crowd to perform, at which point the opposition between the interior and exterior is established. The visual metaphor between the interior, symbolised by the changing room, and the inner-self, is apparent: the interior is used as a space to prepare for what one must do on the outside. The subsequent sequences develop this notion away from the pool. At a party Marie attends with Anne, she has her first interaction with Floriane in the bathroom. The bathroom represents an inner-space separate from the rest of the party and as an interior space, it reveals new depth about the characters. When Marie enters, she can overhear Floriane making herself sick. This indicates a potential fragility to the girl she had thought looked perfect while performing in the pool. Following a request for a chewing gum, Floriane asks Marie how her breath smells, coming right up close to her face. For a brief moment, we are given the impression that Floriane might kiss her. This is the first suggestion that Floriane's public persona as a girl who has multiple male partners may indeed just be a cover-up and she is actually more interested in Marie. Yet the moment is fleeting and lasts only as long as they are in the bathroom. Once outside, the 'normality' of her public self returns. In a subsequent scene another point of tension between an exterior/interior is evoked. Marie wants to gain entry to the pool. The boundary between the outside world and the interior one of the pool is highlighted when Marie tries to join the club as a beginner, but is told that she will have to wait until September. Later, she pleads with Floriane to bring her in so she can watch them practice. In the sequence that follows, she gains access to the inner-world of the pool. In this sense, the pool also symbolizes a border that Marie wants to transcend. The pool can be understood as a symbol of the boundary that Marie, fuelled by her blossoming queer desire, wishes to transcend in order to better know Floriane.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

It is particularly noteworthy that it is during this sequence that Marie literally dives below the surface in order to watch the swimmers from beneath (fig. 3). From this point, we are aware of a progression in the way the synchronized swimming team is filmed and how this progression draws out different senses of exterior/interior and surface/depth in the film. During the first swimming sequence we had only seen the performance, which is a choreographed and heavily stylized exterior. We see their routine through the prism of Marie's enchanted gaze. During the second swimming sequence, Marie is able to watch them rehearse, thanks to Floriane (fig.2). Later, during a third swimming sequence, the camera

concentrates solely on the physical effort of the swimmers (Fig. 4). The third swimming sequence is also much less stylistically poetic than the others, marking a particularly stark contrast from the first time we see them. There is no music, no audience and the shots are much closer to the swimmers' physical actions. From up close, the viewer is much more aware of the physical work they have to engage in in order to perform. In the absence of music, we can hear their meticulous counting in order to remain synchronised. Once out of the pool, the camera concentrates on the team while they listen to their score from the judges. This view beyond the surface of synchronised swimming, which seemed so glamorous when we first saw it through the prism of Marie's desiring gaze during the film's first sequence, displays the high tension between a public exterior and a previously unseen interior.



Figure 4.

Sciamma herself has referred to the expression of the relationship between a human interior and exterior as a central motivation for making the film: 'Il y a des choses souterraines qui agissent sur les événements du quotidien. Je trouvais cette situation à la fois complètement anecdotique et en même temps, très forte pour illustrer cet âge-là' (Jousse 2006). Belot discusses the surface/depth in terms of visualizing intangible aspects of human interactions, such as emotions, desire and interiority: 'Depth is here understood as what makes the invisible visible' (Belot 2012, 180). The crystal-image allows us to analyse this ephemeral quality of *Naissance des pieuvres*. It is a feature of all of Sciamma's work, which mixes visual registers that are stylistically sober and highly poetic. In a review for *Ciné-*



*Bulles*, Jean-François Hamel referred to this aspect of her work as ‘un exemple de rigueur dans la mise en scène, qui mêle objectivité et subjectivité, observation froide et poésie lyrique’ (Hamel 2009, 60). In an interview, Sciamma revealed that it was a conscious decision as a filmmaker : ‘Le travail autour de l’image a aussi beaucoup structuré le mélange de naturalisme et de stylisation’ (Jousse 2006). In *Naissance des pieuvres*, the swimming pool reveals depth about the sport of synchronised swimming but this depth soon extends well beyond the pool and develops into a metaphor that reveals depth about the swimmers’ lives. It is a metaphor that resonates in several areas of the film. Belot describes the depth as a reference to Marie’s emotional experience throughout the film: ‘The film’s significance lies in the development, or the exposures, of Marie’s deep emotional experience; Marie immerses herself in the deep water of sensual be-coming’ (Belot 2012, 180). Emma Wilson goes further, describing it as being ‘a film which uses the intersensory immersion offered by textured moving image art to explore a first intimation of desire’ (Wilson 2014b, 213).

The film’s treatment of depth produces a sense of immersion in raw emotion. Marie dives into the water in order to see what the synchronised swimmers look like below, and this in turn leads to her pursuing her own emotional awakening. The subjective shots, framed as Marie’s gaze (fig. 3) are key in this regard. From this point in the film, the notion of depth is embedded in expressions of subjectivity. Diving below the surface gives the viewer a glimpse of Marie’s perspective and her immersion below the water reflects the enveloping quality of her experience, feeling intense romantic desire for the first time. Deleuze reminds us of the manner in which the crystal-image relates to subjectivity:

The actual is always objective, but the virtual is subjective: it was initially the affect, that which we experience in time; then time itself, pure virtuality which divides itself in two as affector and affected, the affection of self by self definition of time. (Deleuze 1989, 83)

In this way, thinking of *Naissance des pieuvres* in terms of the crystal-image allows us to understand the emotional weight that underpins the visual surface that the film presents. As Deleuze indicates, the crystal-image brings together these two elements, actual and virtual. The actual side of the crystal in Sciamma’s film is largely comprised of a story of teenage desire and synchronised swimming. Yet, rather than being primarily concerned with narrative, the film’s strength lies in how it makes the viewer feel through atmosphere and style. From the moment we dive below the surface with Marie, a sense of immersive feeling remains throughout, adding a deep emotional resonance to a stylized surface. With these images,

Sciamma articulates the ephemeral nature of teenage desire. Although we may never be told explicitly what the characters are thinking, we are constantly encouraged to try and understand what they might be feeling. As I have demonstrated here, the layered-image, which has since become a characteristic trope of Sciamma's oeuvre, is embodied in this film by the manner in which she manipulates the imagery of the swimming pool to evoke different senses of surface and depth.

### **3.2.4. Music and Unspoken Emotion**

Adding to the sense of emotive immersion described above and created by the visual metaphors of the pool and synchronized swimming is the innovative way in which music is incorporated in *Naissance des pieuvres*. The film's soundtrack was composed by Jean-Baptiste de Laubier, a French musician who releases music under the moniker Para One. He has contributed music to all of Sciamma's films, including all of the original music for *Bande de filles* (2014), alongside *Naissance des pieuvres*. In both films, the music holds a key function in relation to the communication of meaning. We have already seen how Sciamma uses the metaphor of the swimming pool to indicate that there is a depth of emotion below an apparently still surface. The film's dialogue is relatively sparse and rarely articulates feeling in a profound manner. Often in the film, in the absence of dialogue, music adds emotional depth by suggesting that there are other layers of meaning below the surface of the image. The music in Sciamma's films functions as a virtual side of the crystal-image by conveying deep emotion where other more direct elements, such as dialogue, do not. We have already seen how the notion of depth is used in *Naissance des pieuvres* to suggest that Marie's experience of emotion is far more profound than her often mute exterior. The music develops this sense of expression even further by constantly inferring emotion and feeling that underpins the image.

In the overall mode of expression in *Naissance des pieuvres*, minimal dialogue plays a key role in opening space for the music to take on higher significance. Sciamma has explained the film's dialogue as a stylistic choice: 'C'est plutôt le moment de la rétention. [...] J'ai trouvé intéressant de travailler en souterrain' (Jousse 2006). Through her minimal use of dialogue, Sciamma is, to an extent, restraining words so that different aspects of the film can express meaning in a more nuanced fashion. Deleuze reminds us that 'The crystal is expression' (Deleuze 1989, 74). It is above all a theory of how cinema communicates.

Furthermore, on the relationship between the crystal-image music, he tells us that ‘The crystal-image is as much a matter of sound as it is optical and Félix Guattari was right to define the crystal of time as being a ‘ritornello’ par excellence’ (Deleuze 1989, 92). The ritornello in film music, for Deleuze, indicates music’s capacity to form a recognizable sound or melody that can make reference to elements other than the ones on screen (Colman 2011, 174). For example, the association that the spectator can make between a musical theme and a certain character. Deleuze uses Jean Grémillion (b. 1901) as an example:

In Gremillon, one of the cinema’s most musician-like authors, the gallop of the farandoles returns us back to the repeat of the ritornellos, the two separated or brought together (Roland-Manuel). It is these tendencies that achieve perfect expression when the cinematographic image becomes crystal-image. (Deleuze 1989, 93)

The relationship between the crystal-image and music becomes more complex when we consider the manner in which music can infer virtual elements of the film’s diegesis, such as feeling, thoughts and subjectivity. Music assumes the expressive function of positioning the spectator beyond the diegetic present of the sequence’s present, by being associated with other elements of the narrative. The soundtrack of *Naissance des pieuvres* takes on a similar role, whereby it infers emotion, desire and feeling, when other elements of the narrative do not.

The key role of the film’s soundtrack begins with the first sequence. The credits and titles interchange with shots of the swimming pool changing room. In terms of sound, we first hear the background noise of the girls’ voices, and this is soon accompanied by the first piece of music by Para One that we hear. It is entirely composed on keyboard synthesizers; no percussion is used. The music is slow and pensive, one could describe it as being contemplative rather than sad. It builds slowly on repetitions and disappears without achieving any sense of climax. The music immediately adds a sense of emotional weight to the sequence. It accompanies the images of the girls busily rehearsing their dance moves, in preparation for their appearance in front of a crowd. We also see Marie for the first time, awkwardly stepping through the crowd, trying to find a place to sit before the show starts. We then see Anne with her team, awkwardly standing out from her peers. We can hear her teammates’ laugh when she blesses herself before they get into the water. From the opening moments of the film, music is specifically employed to signal feminine interiority. Beyond merely watching Marie and Anne in this sequence, the soundtrack’s pensive nature invites the viewer into a heightened emotional space when we watch them. Sciamma’s overall style, with

minimal dialogue, and framing that concentrates on the facial expressions of the actors, combined with the contemplative melancholy of the music, all draw the spectator into wondering how Marie and Anne must be feeling.

Throughout the film, music is used to imply subjectivity and interiority. These moments often occur in short, linking sequences in the film. For example, when Marie and Anne share a bike on the way home from the swimming pool, the music produces a less melancholic effect than elsewhere. We have the impression of being offered a glimpse of a relatively carefree moment of their existence, on their way home and enjoying each other's company during the school holidays. Gemma Edney has said of the soundtrack: 'the music occupies a liminal space between the world of the spectator and the on-screen girl-world, and consequently promotes and provides avenues for identification between spectator and character' (Edney 2020, 295). Her description of the music as having a liminal function can be applied in several ways. The music also plays a linking role in the short sequences where it is most often used, expressing a sense of emotional development where the images alone do not. Spatially, the music is also undeniably linked to the liminal space of the swimming pool changing room. Many of the sequences accompanied by the soundtrack take place here. Throughout the film, the changing room acts as a link between the private/public sphere. As we have already seen, it is where part of the film's opening sequence takes place. Later, the pensive music returns when Marie has gained access to the swimming pool for the first time, thanks to Floriane. We hear the music begin as they enter while the camera focuses on Marie, who timidly watches as the other girls around her change. She appears self-conscious and shy, especially in contrast to Floriane who goes about changing her clothes unabashedly. Once again, the music implies a melancholic emotional undercurrent to the image. Later, the music returns to the changing room for a third time. At this point in the film, Marie and Floriane's relationship has advanced considerably: they have just spent a full evening and night together and briefly held hands while lying on Floriane's bed. This time, it is Floriane who watches Marie while she gets changed. She gets up to approach her and the camera remains fixed on Marie and her reaction. When Floriane touches Marie to straighten her shoulder straps, the music starts playing. The emotional depth that the music draws out of the image invites the spectator to wonder what she might be feeling, in such close proximity to Floriane. The music continues to the next shot as Marie watches Floriane under the shower with François (her boyfriend), and the sense of melancholy is driven further.

In all of these sequences, we can see that the music is intrinsically linked to Marie's

emotional experience. It is most often used during moments that feature no dialogue, accompanying images where Marie looks at something in a pensive fashion. The object of her gaze is most often Floriane. Belot describes how the film uses ‘the idea of immersion underpinned by audio, visual, lyrical and sensory details’ (Belot 2012, 175). In the sequences where Para One’s score accompanies the image, music and image combine to constitute a sense of audio-visual immersion in Marie’s emotional experience. The style of the music produces a particularly innovative effect in this regard. The manner in which electronic music conveys meaning differs from popular music in that it does not depend on words to communicate. As with all conventional forms, it does depend on notes, chords and key signature to produce a certain tonality that the listener often understands as the mood of the music. Where electronic music stands alone, however, is that it depends on little harmonic progression, by being based on frequently repeated musical phrases, and instead relying on the timbre (i.e., harmonic make-up) of electronic musical atmosphere to generate feeling. In the absence of words and traditional musical progression, sustained mood and atmosphere are the projected goals of ambient electronic music. Handyside has commented on how the music in *Naissance des pieuvres* ‘expresses the liquid, shifting, precarious universe in the girls operate’ (Handyside 2016, 122). In the absence of words, lyrics and even dialogue in the script, the music manages to avoid a fixed meaning and instead conveys the range of feelings that underpin the image.

Handyside has also commented on how the music acts as a link between surface and depth in *Naissance des pieuvres*: ‘The extra-diegetic music navigates between the worlds both below and above water, suggesting a continuity of the hostile, strange, aseptic, but secretive and fascinating world of the pool beyond its confines’ (Handyside 2016, 129). Her reflection provides a salient perspective from which we can consider Sciamma’s film in relation to the crystal-image. We have already seen how the notion of surface and depth is initially evoked by the pool, and it is a visual metaphor that soon extends to an omnipresent sense of tension between exterior and interior forms of expression. This in turn, has been analysed in terms of a crystal-image, whereby a stylistically stoic exterior, that corresponds to the actual side of the crystal, is underpinned by a deeply emotional virtual undercurrent. The music acts a specific point of expression for this virtual side of the crystal by communicating Marie’s emotional perspective throughout the film. By being both unspoken yet emotive, music conveys a crystal-image that is both indiscernible and affective, bringing an ephemeral quality of expression to the film’s emotional discourse.

### 3.2.5. Crystal-Melodrama, Colour and Meaning

Handyside compares the music in *Naissance des pieuvres* to the function of music in melodrama:

In the feminine mode of melodrama, music, alongside other non-representational elements (light, colour, rhythm, and so on), becomes the vehicle of unspoken female emotion, and thus a way to navigate the punishing contradictions of patriarchal culture, which demands women bear total responsibility for the home but lack agency and full subjectivity. (Handyside 2016, 122)

Handyside identifies music as one of several elements in *Naissance des pieuvres* that are used to convey emotion, yet Sciamma also makes as much use of a nuanced colour palette in a similar fashion. In many respects, Sciamma's use of colour shares stylistic parallels with melodrama. Filmmakers such as Douglas Sirk famously made use of such non-representational elements (colour, décor, sound) to articulate emotion where more conventional elements (dialogue, performance, narrative) would not suffice. Quoted by Thomas Elsaesser, Sirk said of his approach to colour in *Written on the Wind* (1956): 'Almost throughout the picture I used deep-focus lenses which have the effect of giving a harshness to the objects and a kind of enamelled, hard surface to the colours. I wanted this to bring out the inner violence, the energy of the characters which is all inside them and can't break through' (Elsaesser 1987, 43). Sirk's use of colour to highlight a tension between the outer and inner selves shares several points of comparison with *Naissance des pieuvres*. In the previous section, we saw how music constitutes a core component of the manner in which the film communicates unspoken emotion. In the next section, I will expand my analysis beyond music to address the film's use of colour.

Handyside's reference to 'non-representational elements' provides a further point of comparison to Deleuze if we consider that the virtual is by its very nature 'non-representational'. In this section, I will demonstrate how the use of colour in *Naissance des pieuvres* provides one of these links between the virtual and the actual. Thinking of colour in terms of a 'non-representational element' is helpful in this regard. Colour exists on an actual surface that is plainly framed within the image, but throughout the film it is used for a symbolic value that infers virtual depth. If we consider that the actual and virtual of the crystal-image are inherently interlinked, Sciamma's use of colour provides one of these interlinking points. Colour acts as one of several actual surfaces that Sciamma imbues with

virtual meaning, such as thoughts, feeling, subjectivity and interiority.

The first striking use of a colour-block in the film is the choice of purple in an early sequence. Marie is in the bath and, from the camera's perspective, we see her through a plastic pink-purple, semi-transparent shower curtain. She sits in the water, pensively looking into the distance. She kicks her legs in the air, as if pretending to be one of the synchronized swimmers that she has just seen, and then stands up to get out (fig. 5). The sequence is brief, but when placed in context alongside Sciamma's stylistic approach, we can interpret the expressive use of colour here. The sequence occurs just after Marie has seen Floriane for the first time. Although there has been little or no dialogue up to this point, we are led to believe that her first time seeing Floriane is very much on her mind, given her pensive demeanour and playful practicing of synchronized swimming moves. The presence of colour corresponds to an expression of Marie's experience at this moment. Given what follows in the film, we are aware that at this point of the film she has just experienced intense desire and longing for the first time in her young life. From this point forward, her emotional reaction to this desire is what informs all of her actions throughout the film. The spectator sees Marie through the curtain, yet from the other side, Marie is looking through the curtain. The pink hue of the colour block chosen here carries a stereotypically feminine connotation, which we associate with Marie's personal realisation about her own sexuality. The use of colour therefore represents Marie's blossoming desire, which figuratively shrouds her perspective throughout the film. Watching this sequence with the benefit of hindsight, we are aware of the lengths she goes to in order to know Floriane and how she experiences a deeply emotional experience as a result of this. On the actual level, the minimal actions suggests that she is thinking about what she has just seen. On the virtual plane, the creative use of colour infers the process of emotional awakening that she is experiencing.



Figure 5.

Another expressive use of colour occurs later in the film's nightclub sequence, where the scene is saturated with red lighting. Floriane goes to the nightclub in the hope of finding a man to have sex with as she no longer wants to be a virgin. She brings Marie to accompany her. The entire sequence features very little dialogue and every shot is bathed in the nightclub's red lighting. While the action of the sequence develops, the symbolic value of red as a colour evolves. At the beginning of the sequence, Floriane and Marie sit separately (fig. 6), as Floriane is there in the hope of meeting a stranger. At this point, the red suggests the nightclub has the potential to be dangerous for them, highlighting their vulnerability as teenagers in the adult space of the nightclub. The sense of the club being a threatening space is accentuated by Marie anxiously looking towards Floriane. The lack of diegetic sound and the contemplative nature of the music provide a counterpoint to the image, lessening the festive atmosphere of the situation being represented and suggesting that, much like elsewhere in the film, there is an emotional undercurrent to the images. When Floriane brings Marie to join her on the dancefloor, the effect produced by the colour changes, and it is once again embellished by the sound. The ambient introduction of the song has given way to high-tempo techno drums. The diegetic sounds of the nightclub have been introduced, marking a mood change from the beginning of the sequence. Floriane dances with Marie, who awkwardly stands close to her. Floriane edges in closer, the frame closes in on their faces, and we are given the impression that they might finally kiss. A percussive snare-roll in the music suggests tension arriving to a point of climax. After all of her intense longing, Marie has the impression that Floriane might reciprocate her feelings and indulge her desire. At this point, the red lighting expresses the intensity of the desire that we see onscreen as Marie closes her



eyes in anticipation, but a kiss does not arrive and, when she opens her eyes again, she sees that Marie is dancing with a man in front of her. Finally, the scene cuts to Marie sitting alone, abandoned by Floriane. She has been crying and is clearly upset at having come so close to Floriane only to realize she was being used. The red lighting reflects the sheer anger and disappointment that she must be feeling at that point in the film. In all of these examples, the use of colour aligns closely with Marie's perspective. The use of red initially reflected her vulnerability in the adult world of the nightclub. Then, the lighting suggested the intensity of her emotional experience, being close to Floriane on the dancefloor. Finally, it suggests Marie's resentment towards Floriane, having left her for a stranger.



Figure 6.

The colour that has the most prominent symbolic value in Sciamma's film, however, is blue. The colour blue is foregrounded from the outset of the film where it is associated with the swimming pool and its surrounding areas, for example, the blue hue of the changing room light. In the opening sequence, as the swimmers walk along the poolside and get into the water, the frame is covered in varying shades of blue. The symbolic value of the pool and the color blue are therefore inherently linked from this point onwards. To this end, the use of blue recalls the tropes of performance, surface and depth that we have already established as being associated with the pool. Later, the film's party sequences are entirely illuminated with blue light. If we associate the use of blue here to previous sequences in the swimming pool, we are drawn to reconsider the significance of the parties in the film's narrative. Much like the pool, the party is a space of superficial performance, where the female protagonists are acutely aware of how they are being perceived. During the first party sequence, Anne dances to get

the attention of the boys in attendance, and Marie goes out of her way to approach Floriane for the first time. During the second party sequence, Marie is rejected by Floriane, who then dances alone (fig.7). Much like the nightclub sequence, the lighting suggests that the scene being represented is not a festive one, but rather a space that triggers deep introspection. In this context, the blue lighting frames the party as an emotionally raw space, one that raises the possibility of connection but also cruel rejection and the potentially harsh nature of teenage desire.

Finally, we also associate the colour blue with Floriane, who is often seen wearing blue. As a result, Floriane is linked all the more closely with the surface-level performance of the pool. She wears blue clothes at particular moments of the narrative. These initially occur early in the film, such as when Marie sees her first at the party, and later when Marie pleads with her to bring her along to a synchronized swimming rehearsal at the pool. At these moments, the colour blue acts as a visual signifier of the new experience that Marie has discovered at the pool, symbolizing the exciting new depths of emotional awakening that she is going through. Through the middle part of the film, we do not see Floriane in blue again, but it does return later in the film, during a scene in Floriane's bedroom. She rejects Marie, having just convinced her to awkwardly sleep with her for the first time. A brief counter shot of the room reveals a blue wall that acts a background to Floriane as she lets go of Marie's hand, rejecting her. Here, the use of blue recalls the surface level performance that Floriane uses as a barrier between her and Marie. In the film's final sequence, we see her in blue again. Here, she encourages Marie to kiss her before rejecting her a final time. This sequence therefore confirms the association of the colour blue with Floriane's instances of rejection of Marie. Her surface-level performance, which begins with the pool and then extends to other areas of her experience, acts as a barrier between her and Marie. Yet, this is not to say that the use of blue is totally negative in this regard, as it also recalls the emotional depth that resides beneath the shallow surface, which was the initial catalyst for Marie's desire.



Figure 7.

### 3.2.6. The New Real

In the final section of my analysis of *Naissance des pieuvres*, I will discuss the final sequence of the film, which presents not only a point of climax for the narrative, but also incorporates all of the aspects of Sciamma's style that I have analysed so far. Marie goes to a party in the hope of seeing Floriane. When they are alone, they kiss briefly before Floriane indifferently rejects her. At the same time, Anne considers accepting the advances of François for the second time, but instead decides to reject him by spitting in his mouth. The film ends with Marie and Anne both jumping into the pool and floating on the water together. The sequence provides a succinct statement on the notion of surface and depth that has been explored throughout the film. The images, as we have seen, are imbued in melancholic blue light, in keeping with Sciamma's use of colour up to this point. The music, which has acted as an instrument of emotion throughout the film, suggests that the process of emotional development that the film has interrogated is finally arriving at a moment of peak intensity.

The sequence also presents a crucial moment of development in relation to the interpretation of the film through the lens of the crystal-image. What has belonged to the virtual plane up until this point, namely Marie's unspoken desire, is actualized through her kiss with Floriane. The moment, however, is extremely fleeting and, as Marie is rejected, the order of unspoken emotion seems to be restored. Yet, the ending of the film suggests that a new process of emotional becoming has arrived. This intricate game between the virtual and actual is reminiscent of how Deleuze relates the crystal-image to 'the real'. For example, in relation to *La règle du jeu* (Jean Renoir, 1939), Deleuze states:

This complete idea is that the crystal or the scene is not restricted to putting into circuit the actual image and the virtual image, and absorbing the real into a generalized theatre. Without recourse to violence, and through the development of an experimentation, something will come out of the crystal, a new Real will come out beyond the actual and virtual. (Deleuze 1989, 86)

Deleuze's comments on the relationship between the virtual and the actual recall what occurs during this sequence. Marie's desire has acted as the dynamic at the centre of the film's narrative and style, providing emotional depth under a stoic surface. What we have understood as the virtual throughout the film briefly breaks through to the actual plane in the form of the kiss that takes place. The moment's fleeting, ephemeral quality is heightened by the minimal dialogue in this sequence. Marie never actually says what she is thinking, or how she is feeling, simply stating; 'Je voudrais te demander un truc...' before Floriane tells her to come closer and they kiss. The rest of the film, however, does not suggest a return to the frustrated emotional understatement of before. With the virtual having broken through the actual, things do not simply return to how they were. As Deleuze states above, 'a new Real will come out beyond the actual and virtual'.

A close-up frame of Marie shows that she is deeply hurt by having come so close to Floriane only to be denied. Given the emotional gravity of the situation, the image in itself is understated. We hear deeply introspective music starting to accompany the image, conveying the depth of emotion that Marie is experiencing. The sound of Floriane closing the door triggers the entrance of the music to the sequence, giving the impression that we have intimate access to what Marie must be feeling. Here, the music begins in a similarly understated vein to other parts of the film, before building to greater development. It is used alongside images of Marie in the changing room, another girl crying at the party, the boys childishly jumping around, and Floriane dancing on her own. These images give the impression of offering all the teenagers a certain expression of their interiority, despite the surface performances that they enact. Marie goes to the edge of the pool and dives in. The camera accompanies her below the surface. All the while, the music has been based on the same loop that was initially introduced, but building in intensity at the same time. When Marie rises to the surface of the water and sees that Anne is there, a totally new element arrives in the music. A new sense of development is expressed by a rising, arpeggio phrase that is played on a string instrument. As the arpeggio loops and becomes more prominent and expressive, Anne jumps into the water alongside Marie. After shots that show Floriane dancing on her own, we see that Marie

and Anne are happily floating together on top of the water. The expanding, cyclical development of the music suggests growth and change, rather than a return to the previous order. With the music being so closely tied to the expression of unspoken emotion throughout the film, the sequence therefore takes on a new sense of emotional progression that was not present in other sequences.

Marie's act of diving into the water is a core component of the 'new real' that is being fabricated in this sequence. The surface/depth pool metaphor serves throughout the film to infer feeling below an exterior that does not yet know how to articulate such emotion. By diving into the water, Marie is embracing the emotional depth that the pool represents. When read in this fashion, the film's final sequence proves an uplifting statement. Rather than dwelling on the rejection by her first love, Marie willingly seeks out the sensory immersion of acknowledging her own identity and is willing to move forward into the future with this in mind.

The film's penultimate frame provides a statement on the nature of the identity being embraced during this sequence (fig. 8). The manner in which Marie and Anne are lying on the water recalls the film's title for the Anglophone market: *Water Lillies*. Like a waterlily, they float on the surface. Sciamma has commented on the waterlily symbol for the film as a whole: 'One can say that the three characters are like waterlilies, beautiful flowers on the surface but hiding deep roots' (Silverstein 2008). The film features several references to flowers. Floriane's name recalls '*fleur*'. During the first sequence, her synchronized swimming team stands in the formation of a flower. The idea that Floriane should be linked specifically to a water lily in particular is noteworthy in multiple senses. Firstly, water lilies evoke a tension between exterior/interior. Water lilies typically open and close depending on time and exposure to sunlight, displaying different surface level appearance and behaviour in relation to outside conditions. Similarly, throughout the film, Floriane displays a tendency to be either open or closed off to Marie, often depending on the social setting in which they find themselves. The open/closed water lily metaphor can be also understood in terms of Butlerian performativity. Closed-off from Marie, Floriane's outward performance of heterosexuality is informed by a desire to satisfy a socio-discursive construct in relation to identity, evoking the notion of compulsory heterosexuality. When Floriane is open to being close to Marie, we witness the beginning of a process of emotional flourishing. Understanding Floriane's floral performance as a water lily therefore evokes the tension the public/private and outer/inner selves. Belot has commented on the frame's floral connotation: 'The fact that

a flower's roots are hidden but continually touch underneath is an indication that within the sensuous or affective space of the swimming pool/screen, the girls' own potential to flower is made possible' (Belot 2012, 181). Despite their interaction not going in the direction that Marie had wanted, it is still their encounter that facilitates the sense of emotional development that takes place in the film's final image, and the floral metaphor blossoms fully during this frame. Understood in these terms, we can see the entire film as a process of emotional blossoming. Like the eponymous flower, Anne and Marie can float separately but remain linked by the roots of the shared experience of their sentimental development. The soundtrack continually adds greater emotive weight to the sequence.

A water lily has rhizomatic roots, which is to say, it sends out roots and shoots from nodes, below the surface. As we saw in the introduction to this thesis, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari propose rhizomatic approaches of thinking in order to decentre the existing hierarchies that characterise modernity. Thinking in this way, the surface/depth metaphor takes on a different form in the film's final sequences. *Naissance des pieuvres* suggests a rhizomatic configuration of the self in the final frames. Chevalier has commented on these frames, stating that 'Multiple identities are floating identifications' (Chevalier 2018, 73). Despite existing separately with their own subjectivities and processes of emotional becoming, Marie and Anne find solace in the shared roots of a platonic bond. The tension between a public exterior and private interior has dissipated and given way to the affirmation of desire through embracing their own emotions. They happily float above, aware of what is below, yet remaining forward facing into the future.

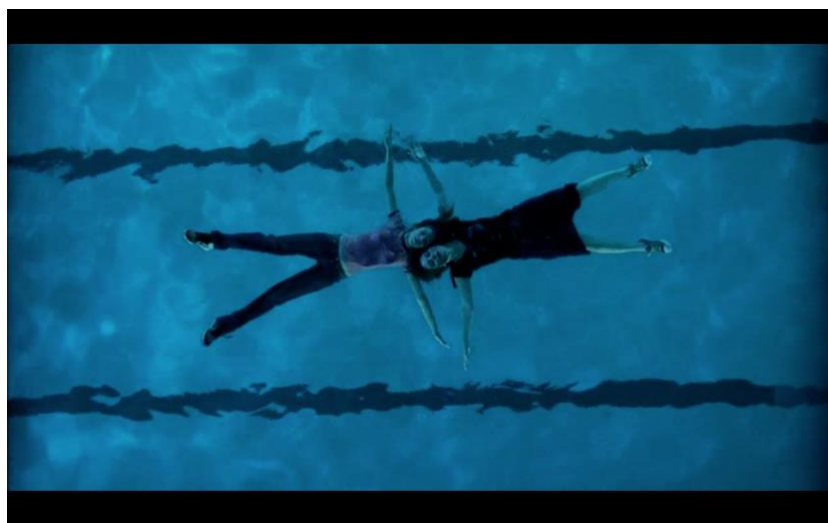


Figure 8.

### 3.2.7. Summary

In my analysis of *Naissance des pieuvres*, I have demonstrated the extent to which we can understand the film in terms of Deleuze's crystal-image. Deleuze's theory exists on the basis that certain films present us with deep, meaningful images that can be understood in terms of actual and virtual elements. The crystal-image has been an especially effective tool for discussing Sciamma's film given that she creates a narrative where there is constant friction between the world of surface appearances and inner emotion. I have discussed this tension from four different angles. First, I have highlighted the way in which the tension is initially established through the visual motif of the pool. Secondly, I have noted the relationship between unspoken emotion and the film's original score. Thirdly, I have considered the film's use of colour and lighting as a means of generating atmosphere and expressing the character's interiority. Lastly, I have discussed the final sequence of the film as a culmination of all of these stylistic devices and an eventual resolution of what was a tension between outward appearances and inner emotion into a sense of coexistence between hitherto opposing elements.

The film ends on a frame of Marie looking in a determined fashion past the camera. As the screen turns to black and the credits appear, the music continues to develop. Considering that the music continues to symbolize the notion of emotional development, it does not end with the final image, suggesting that the film is the beginning of a process that continues past the diegetic time we have seen, rather a than closed-ended narrative. In this way, the film suggests that the identity that Marie embraces at the end, and indeed identities in general, are not subject to being fixed and defined, or even addressed in precise terms, but rather, are subject to a continuous process of becoming and ambivalent flows. The focus of my analysis will now shift to Sciamma's third film, *Bande de filles*.

### 3.3. Identity, Performance and Transnational Pop in *Bande de filles* (2014)

#### 3.3.1. Introduction

*Bande de filles* is Céline Sciamma's third feature-length film. As with her first two films (*Naissance des pieuvres* and *Tomboy*), Jean Baptiste de Laubier (also known by his DJ moniker, Para One) composed the film's original music and Crystel Fournier was the film's cinematographer, while Sciamma wrote the film's screenplay herself. It is both stylistically and thematically consistent with her overall oeuvre: it retains the deeply expressive audio-visual aesthetic of *Naissance des pieuvres*, a characteristic feature of her filmmaking that becomes even more pronounced in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. Like all of Sciamma's films, *Bande de filles* concentrates on young female characters, with particular emphasis on their place in society in terms of their emerging identity and sexuality. Sciamma has referred to this particular film as the culmination of a girlhood trilogy. *Bande de filles* tells the story of Marieme (Karidja Touré), a teenager living in a Paris working-class suburb, who regularly encounters obstacles in her life trajectory due to her social class, gender and ethnicity. She makes a new group of friends, a 'girl gang' that gives her an affirming new sense of self. Yet, this does not free her of many of the realities she is forced to deal with as a disenfranchised social subject in an area bereft of opportunity.

Critically the film was largely well-received, both internationally and in France. Writing in *The Guardian*, Mark Kermode called the film 'honest, empowering and electrifying' (Kermode 2015). In *Le monde*, Isabelle Regnier wrote that Sciamma 'offre à ces quatre jeunes filles noires, représentées à rebours des clichés dans lesquels leurs semblables sont généralement enfermées, un statut d'icônes générationnelles' (Regnier 2014). The academic reaction to the film has been particularly striking. Laura Reeck (2018) notes how Sciamma's film is an example of *cinéma de banlieue*, bringing new features to the form, such as an all-female group being the film's protagonists, an avoidance of a drab realist aesthetic and moments of identity fluidity. Karine Chevalier (2016) argues that the film goes beyond simple oppositional dichotomy in order to give a more nuanced account of the characters and space it addresses. Some scholars have been critical of the film. Mame Fatou Niang (2019) takes issue with Sciamma's treatment of black French experience in the banlieue, writing that '*Bande de filles* échoue dans sa mission à cause de la manière dont Céline Sciamma approche les personnages et parcours qu'elle expose à l'écran' (Niang 2019, 217). Will Higbee (2018a)



states that the film's 'conception of blackness is constantly at risk of reinforcing certain spectators' facile stereotypes and one-dimensional perceptions of the girls as delinquent, marginal, and immigrant others' (179).

In what follows, I will analyse Sciamma's film using Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1989) as an initial theoretical departure point in order to engage with some of the criticism of the film. Crenshaw's text essentially establishes the degree to which studies of discrimination need to consider identity as being at the intersection of multiple facets, such as gender, ethnicity, class, and much of the criticism of the film is linked to these areas. With this in mind, I will consider the criticism of the film's treatment of discrimination in the Parisian *banlieue*. Then, I will consider the expressions of agency in the film in relation to Judith Butler's theory of performativity. The female protagonists on the film may well find certain forms of expression, but these are only within the confines of certain 'performances', which are most often linked to gender or capital. Lastly, I will discuss how some of these performances are framed as being distinctly Anglo-American pop-cultural forms. I analyse the film's sense of transnational pop in terms of 'cinéma-monde' (Marshall 2012, 35), in other words a 'decentered' view of French-language film, in order to identify how it produces a nuanced socio-cultural commentary on the politics of identity and representation in contemporary French cinema.

### **3.3.2. Intersectionality or 'Colour-Blind' Universalism?**

Crenshaw's argues that identity is the meeting point of numerous factors. In the initial sequences of *Bande de filles*, we see how the main protagonist experiences forms of oppression due to discrimination based on racial, ethnic and socio-economic grounds. Indeed, Isabelle McNeill refers to the film's narrative as a process of drawing out 'lines of stasis structuring the girls' lives' (McNeill 2017, 11). Firstly, the social structure in which Marieme finds herself is strictly regimented in terms of gender. At home, she is largely left to look after her younger sisters and carry out household chores as their mother must work long hours as a cleaner to earn a living. In the absence of a father figure, her older brother assumes the role of the household patriarch, which is maintained via physical intimidation and violence. For example, he violently assaults Marieme when he learns that she has had sexual relations with Ismaël. Beyond the home, Marieme's relationship with Ismaël is grounded in similarly rigid gender roles. Although it does initially afford her a limited amount of agency, that she

expresses through her choice to sleep with him and through her initiation of the act, Marieme soon realises that he envisages a life for them together that clearly corresponds to traditional gender roles, for example, marriage and motherhood.

From a socio-economic standpoint, *Bande de filles* also traces out lines of oppression. Early on, Marieme learns in a meeting in school with a guidance counsellor that her grades have been too low for her to continue studying for the *baccalauréat* and so she is being forced into a more vocation-orientated qualification, thus limiting her professional prospects at a very early stage. Given her difficult homelife, we can perhaps understand why she has not been in a position to succeed academically. We can see therefore that this sequence constitutes a critique of the French education system, as here the school is reproducing inequality by denying Marieme the opportunity to progress in her studies. This particular moment in the classroom is also a poignant sequence in terms of *mise-en-scène*. The camera focuses solely on Marieme and her meek reactions and counter arguments, asking to remain in a mainstream class at school. The inhumane nature of the education system is reflected by the camera never showing the school advisor with whom she is speaking. We only hear her words, but we see their impact on Marieme (fig. 1). Later, Marieme obtains a position as a part-time cleaner but finds the prospect of the work too monotonous to continue. Consequently, we see that following this sequence of limited options in terms of socio-economic opportunity, Marieme turns to other options, such as stealing and drug-dealing.

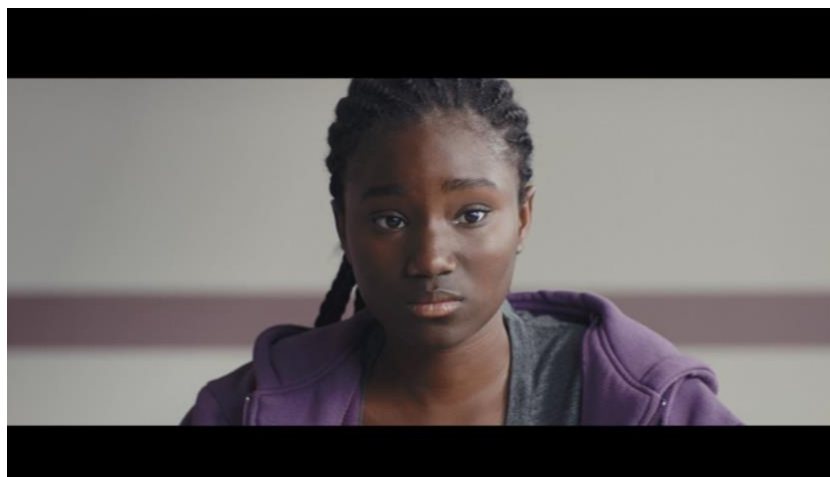


Figure 1.

The aspects of identity that allow us to understand the film's narrative in terms of intersectionality are more difficult to clearly articulate in terms of ethnicity. On a surface level, this may initially seem paradoxical, as there is a clear desire on the part of the director, Céline Sciamma (who is white) to tell a story that is specifically about the lives of Black teenagers in Paris. The girl gang's ethnicity is never specifically mentioned in the film. It is also noteworthy that there are no white characters in the film. Karine Chevalier views this as way of unifying the film's heroes, rather than dividing them into fractured identity sub-groups (2016, 419). Will Higbee describes the girl gang as 'post-migratory in the sense that they are informed but not defined by their immigrant origins' (Higbee 2018a, 173). We can think of the issue of ethnicity and the forms of oppression linked to it through this very idea of not explicitly mentioning it at all. In the film's accompanying press material, Sciamma describes her motivation for making the film:

C'est une part essentielle du projet que de regarder ces visages et ces corps qu'on ne voit jamais. Ou alors dans une dynamique de diversité, qui ne fait pas la part belle aux personnages, mais qui met en scène le geste de les représenter. Le film n'est pas dans la diversité, mais dans l'exclusivité. Il est exclusivement interprété par des garçons et des filles noirs. (Guerrar 2014)

Films with a majority Black cast are extremely rare in France, and many of those that do exist seem to be about ethnicity, thereby limiting their agency to this one facet of their being. Sciamma suggests in the quotation above that she wants to avoid a clichéd account of ethnicity, instead allowing the scope of the characters to be about the other aspects of their lives. Sciamma's reasoning in the above quote reveals her intention for the film's relationship to ethnicity, as she wanted make a film that addresses questions of race without directly mentioning them within the actual narrative. Sciamma's intention, therefore, corresponds to what Higbee refers to as 'lateral or 'minor-to-minor' connections' (Higbee 2018b, 355), which is to say connections forged through mutual experience and the empathy that this triggers, rather than any sense of token diversity. Although the film does not address ethnicity specifically in the narrative, it does portray identity to be at the intersection of a multitude of factors.

It is important to note that recent scholarship has been critical of the film's this particular aspect of the film, namely, the portrayal of working-class youths of colour from the Parisian *banlieue*. Mame Fatou Niang takes issue in particular with Sciamma's claim of the film's protagonist having 'universalist' qualities (Niang 2019, 210). In the film's press

dossier, Sciamma refers to Marieme as ‘une page blanche; un objet d’identification et de toutes les projections’ (Guerrar 2014). In response to this, Niang writes: ‘En partant de cette déclaration, nous proposons de révéler les tensions inhérentes au projet universaliste de Sciamma. Il s’agira de mettre en évidence la difficulté à « neutraliser » et à universaliser l’expérience noire à l’écran’ (Niang 2019, 210). Sciamma’s declaration on her universal approach to the film, as well Niang’s response to it, are reminiscent of debates surrounding the French Republican tradition of ‘colour blindness’ in relation to human rights, ethnicity and identity. Sciamma wanted to approach the film from a ‘neutral’ perspective, out of empathy for those who are marginalised. For Niang, this is repetition of the same colour blindness that the French state is guilty of in failing to consider difference in relation to human rights. Indeed, it is the difference between these opinions that informs my view of the film. I view *Bande de filles* in context alongside Sciamma’s other films, which call for understanding of those who find themselves in a socially peripheral position. However, much of Niang’s criticism of the film is pertinent, especially in relation to the film’s stereotyping of the *banlieue*.

In support of Sciamma’s comments concerning a neutral perspective in *Bande de filles*, we can see in interviews throughout her career, she has often expressed a desire to universalise experiences of girlhood through her films. For example, she said in an interview for *Naissance des pieuvres* that ‘I wanted to portray universal feelings and sensations rather than doing a generational movie’ (Wood 2008, 8). The naming of her characters is a key in this regard. The protagonists from the three films discussed in detail here share three similar names: Marie, Marieme and Marianne (the protagonist of *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, which will be discussed in full in the next section). All three, but most clearly Marianne, share a similar name to the personification of French Republican values – Marianne. As a result, through her films, there is a desire on Sciamma’s part to offer a feminist, and queer view of universalism, as alternative to patriarchal heteronormativity. By taking the sequence of the three characters’ names, we can see that there is a progression that builds towards from Marie, to Marieme, to Marianne. Furthermore, comparing the three characters, we can see that there is a progression in age from childhood to adolescence to young adulthood.

However, for Niang, the filmmaker’s desire to universalise a narrative of black French girlhood is misplaced. Niang makes it clear that she is not critical Sciamma’s film because she is a white middle-class filmmaker, but rather she finds the film simply fails in having any sense of universalism, and lacks sociological depth (Niang 2019, 2011). She writes:

*Bande de filles* échoue dans sa mission à cause de la manière dont Céline Sciamma approche les personnages et parcours qu'elle expose à l'écran. L'extériorité dont elle n'arrive pas à se dégager, ainsi que le flou entretenu sur l'environnement moral et humain des personnages, leurs histoires, leurs intentions et motivations, produit l'effet contraire à celui recherché. (Niang 2019, 217)

Niang's criticism of the Sciamma's colour-blind universalism is convincing, given that the film chooses to tell the story of French teenagers of colour without dealing with their own experiences of ethnicity within the film's narrative. As a result, Niang's criticism of the film show it to be somewhat shallow in terms of these claims in relation to universalism. Niang's criticisms of the stereotypes in the film are also noteworthy. Although the film does portray the social issues that those living in the *banlieue* experience, it features certain generic tropes that are present in several examples of *cinéma de banlieue*, which Niang describes as 'que les filles soient nécessairement brimées, que les frères soient forcément de violents délinquants, que les mères soient seules et muettes, et que, comme une évidence, les pères soient absents' (Niang 2019, 225). Other scholars who are critical of the film, such as Will Higbee, also take issue with the film's stereotypical portrayal of the *banlieue*, which he says are 'reinforcing rather than breaking the mould' (Higbee 2018a, 177).

However, Niang's criticism overlooks certain aspects of the film. Firstly, Niang refers to the film being unclear regarding the moral and human environment of the characters, and lacking social depth. Being familiar with Sciamma's body of work, sociological depth is often not in the narrative foreground of her films. The sociological elements of the film serve as context for greater thematic depth that is primarily expressed by style and aesthetic, and less so by dialogue or story-telling. Secondly, when Niang states that the exteriority of Sciamma's characters is a weak point of the film, knowing Sciamma's other films, one can argue that it is a conscious stylistic decision on the part of the filmmaker. As we have already seen in *Naissance des pieuvres*, Sciamma often opts for understated dialogue in her films in order to use other modes of expression, such as music, colour palettes and *mise-en-scène*. The tension between a stoic exterior and emotional interior is a primary point of interest in *Naissance des pieuvres*, *Bande de filles* and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. I will discuss demonstrate these aspects of the film in relation to two primary areas of *Bande de filles*. Firstly, I will discuss how the film offers a performative account of identity, where the characters find expressive forms of agency by interacting with identity in a malleable fashion, and how this often expressed by costume design and corporeal gesture in the film. Secondly, I will discuss how

the film frames some of these performances as being non-French and, specifically, emanating from Anglo-American pop-culture, in order to produce a subtle commentary on the politics of representation in the contemporary French Cinema.

### 3.3.3. The Performances of *Bande de filles*

Butler grounds her theory of performativity on an understanding of gender as a style of acts. By thinking of gender in terms of the repetition of acts rather than a pre-conceived fact, we can expand outwards and conceive more broadly of identity, including but not limited to gender, as social construction. With this conception of identity as performance as our foundation, we can then begin to interrogate the identities in *Bande de filles*, and analyse the ‘repetition of that style’ in the film. Indeed, the performative nature of the identity portrayal in *Bande de filles* has been noted by Claire Mouflard (2016) as taking place through the intersection of gender and capital:

Once she has been taken in by the *bande de filles*, Marieme quickly adopts fashionable feminine clothing, a more assertive tone and assured composure, all components of “a stylized repetition of acts” forming her new social identity as part of the *bande*. It is through the repetitive acts of dressing and behaving differently that she is able to perform an identity of assured femininity that is made available to her through the acquisition of goods (her clothes, her smartphone, etc....) and allows her to be mobile in the urban space. (Mouflard 2016, 122)

Further to the pronounced expressions of femininity in the film that Mouflard identifies, Mehammed Amadeus Mack (2017) describes the moments in the film where the Marieme exhibits traits of virility. Identifying commonalities with *La squalle* (Genestal, 2000), he writes:

Both films feature strong, black female protagonists who belong to banlieue girl gangs and have gained significant respect in their communities. In both films, they pass through cycles of butchness and effeminacy, and, although initially portrayed as heterosexual, express affection for other women, especially after they have achieved female virility. Moreover, both protagonists feature in love scenes where they dominate men and force them into vulnerable positions. And both films exploit the

virile beauty of women's musculature, women in combat, and women sporting leather jackets, hoodies, and short hair. (Mack 2017, 37)

As we can see with these two descriptions, the film contains a multitude of gendered expressions of identity. As Mouflard infers, phones, clothes and general consumerism are all key components of Marieme's participation in the girl gang. There is a consistent treatment of identity traits being extended out to inanimate objects, such as plastic hair extensions and even a blonde wig. Indeed, Marieme's identity performances are reflected by her hair at various points throughout the film. At the beginning of the film, her braids seem to reflect her adolescent modesty (fig. 1). As Mack states, it is one of several moments where Marieme portrays masculine 'tomboyish' features (2017, 38). Then, after being accepted to the gang, she wears a black weave to celebrate her newly embraced femininity and sense of sorority (fig. 2). Her new 'identity' is accompanied by a name-change, with her friends calling her 'Vic' (short for 'Victoire', or 'victory' in English). By shortening her new name to 'Vic', her new name constitutes a gender-neutral or even masculine connotation: 'Vic' is most common as a shortened version of 'Victor'. Finally, when working as a drug runner for the upper-middle-class market, Marieme/Vic displays the most polarized embodiment of gender fluidity in the film. She wears a chic blonde wig to blend into the bourgeois background and establish a disguise of sorts when delivering drugs to a party (fig. 3). However, when at home she wears baggy jogging pants and uses tape to flatten her chest. There is no doubt, therefore, that the fluid, performed nature of identity that characterises *Bande de filles* evolves throughout the film.

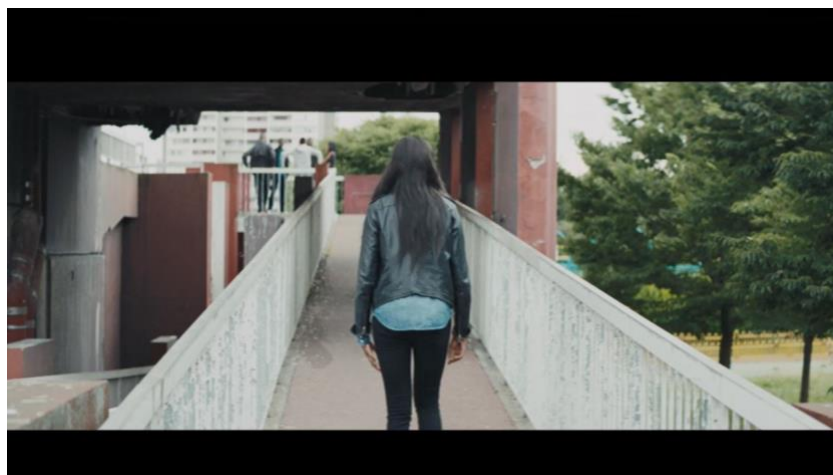


Figure 2.



Figure 3.

Two sequences in *Bande de filles* embrace a music video formal aesthetic, and both of these scenes are linked to the notion of performativity in the film. The music-video style of the sequences is established in scenes where the distinction between the diegetic and extra-diegetic sound becomes blurred and the image seems to serve foremost to accompany the sound. This first occurs in the film's opening sequence, which shows us a group of young girls playing American Football accompanied by Light Asylum's *Dark Allies* (fig. 4), and one of these is subsequently revealed to be Marieme. Later on in the film, we see the girl gang sing and dance along to Rihanna's *Diamonds* (fig. 5). The register changes in these sequences within the context of the entire film hence signalling their importance to the viewer. In terms of style, the majority of the film is marked by a straightforward filming style, yet here we have dynamic traveling shots, heavily coloured lighting, characters directly addressing the camera and popular music occupying all of the audio field. The Butlerian performativity of these sequences is clear: the characters engage in stylized repetition of acts in order to take part in a type of social practice. Early on, Marieme plays sports perhaps to achieve some sort of social acceptance through common interest. Later, the girl gang sing along to *Diamonds* to celebrate their newfound capacity to practice a certain level of agency through their common bonds and very short-lived independence of staying in a hotel for the night, away from the patriarchal structures of their home lives.





Figure 4.

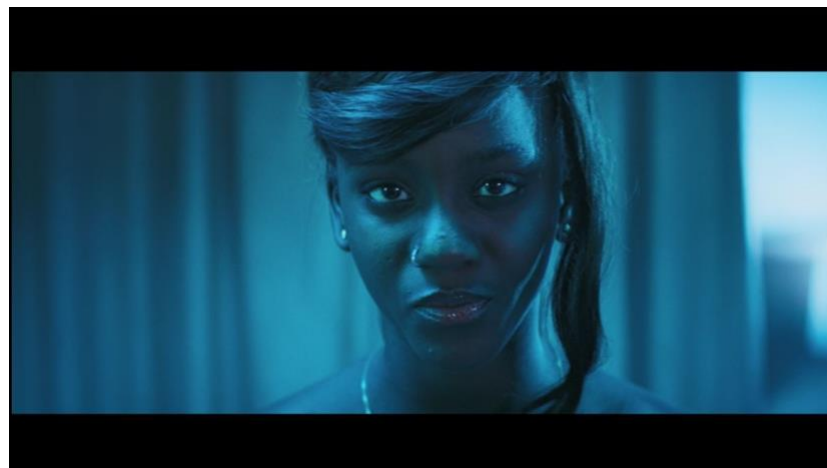


Figure 5.

The performances of *Bande de filles* highlight the constructed nature of identity in the film. New identities seem to constantly be embodied throughout the film and this is most apparent in the character of Marieme as she repeatedly evolves. However, it is important to interrogate whether or not these performances offer the characters an affirmative expression of agency. Do they, or the film itself, provide a voice? We could possibly say that a new voice is not necessarily created, but that this film is more the articulation of an already existing, but largely suppressed, one. There is clearly a sense of affirmation that the Marieme and the girl gang find in each other's presence and Sciamma is successful, to a degree, in what she set out to do; representing Black French teens at a time when very few others engage in this type of representation. The possibility of identity fluidity is an affirmative expression of agency for Marieme, but we must remember that this representation remains anchored within a certain sense of realism. It all takes place within the confines of what Butler would refer to a fixed 'discursive route' (Butler 1999, 185); a fixed, pre-existing role, rather a form of individual

autonomy. Yet Butler also reminds us that the repetition of such codes brings about the possibility of subversion, once, as they are here, performed in a way where the subject displays consciousness of their existence, making subversion possible. Although the characters and the film do permit a certain type of expression to the characters, it is by no means a utopian liberation, but more of a hopeful nod of recognition towards the future.

### 3.3.4. Music, Transnational Pop and Identity

As with all of Sciamma's films, music plays a key role in articulating the core narrative concerns in *Bande de filles*. This takes place in two primary areas of the film. Firstly, the extradiegetic music composed for the soundtrack adds emotional depth to the film. Secondly, the use of American pop music is used to frame the young girls' cultural interests in a fluid transnational manner. Criticism of the film tends to overlook the importance of music in *Bande de filles*. For example Niang, who argues that the characters lack depth, writes:

En s'obstinant à conserver un équilibre précaire entre un film engagé mettant en scène des corps peu vus à l'écran et un projet à visée universaliste, Sciamma accouche d'une oeuvre « politiquement dépolitisée » et hantée par des personnages sans épaisseur. La réalisatrice refuse délibérément d'ancrer son histoire dans un contexte sociologique et humain défini, créant des personnages creux dont les comportements erratiques valident une longue liste de stéréotypes. (Niang 2019, 227)

In *Bande de filles*, much of the depth is expressed by the use of music (both diegetic and extradiegetic) and the fluid process of identity change that the protagonist goes through. The film's extradiegetic soundtrack was composed for the film by Sciamma's frequent collaborator Para One. As with many of Sciamma's films, the original music is 'a vehicle for unspoken feminine emotion' (Handyside 2016, 122). To this end, the music in these sequences plays a similar role to the music composed for *Naissance des pieuvres*. The music is particularly central during the film's transition sequences, which occur at five moments during the film. After each of these moments, we realise that Marieme has gone through an important step in her own sense of emotional becoming, often due to her growing sense of experience in relation to herself. Each time, the screen briefly cuts to black and music plays as a link between the passage of two scenes. When the music plays, we recognise that it does not have a clear atmosphere in terms of emotion, and it initially provokes an ambivalent response from the spectator. However, given the transitory nature of these moments in the film, we

come to associate it with Marieme's growth as a character. As Marieme progresses, so too does the music and with each repetition of the transition, the melodies are increasingly embellished, symbolising Marieme's development, and carrying greater emotional depth in the film. The music reaches peak emotional intensity at the film's ending. Marieme's sense of growth is often inspired by her increasing independence from her patriarchal home environment, the sense of sorority she gains from the eponymous *bande* and the sense of agency she realises through the various identity guises she takes up during the film. With this in mind, one could therefore take issue with the claim that the characters lack depth. Although much of the criticism of the film is pertinent to the discussion here, certain elements of it overlook these key areas of the film. In this section, we will see in detail how the film makes use of pop music to frame the characters transnational cultural interests.

In this section, I return to Marshall's theory of *cinéma-monde* (2012), as he proposes an approach to French-language cinema that provides a salient perspective on several aspects of Sciamma's film. Marshall suggests a nuanced approach to all French-language cinema in order to avoid hierarchal binaries, such as one between Hexagonal France and the rest of French-speaking world (Marshall 2012, 35). The central argument that Marshall initially develops is not directly linked to *Bande de filles* because Sciamma's film is clearly a film rooted in France. However, Michael Gott and Thibaut Schilt explain that *cinéma-monde* 'is not a concept coterminous with the boundaries of French-speaking nations or zones, nor is it exclusively extra-hexagonal' (2018b, 2). *Cinéma-monde* is a useful optic through which we can consider Sciamma's film because *Bande de filles* features key moments that display points of contact with culture that is specifically not French. These moments occur primarily through points of contact with American pop music in English, decentring the film's fixed singular sense of 'Frenchness'.

Marshall considers existing studies of French-language cinema as being subject to an oppositional dualism between a dominant centre and a marginal periphery. Although in *Bande de filles* there is no distinct reference to the French-speaking world outside of France, the notion of an oppositional dualism between a centre and periphery is key to understanding Sciamma's film. This sense of opposition is most clearly visible in the film's setting, in the peripheral space of a disadvantaged suburb. There are occasional excursions to the 'centre', which is to say Paris, yet these are often marked by confrontations, such as when the girls are followed by a sales assistant in a clothes shop and profiled as shoplifters. Indeed, we have also seen the many ways in which Marieme leads a peripheral existence, whereby she finds

herself 'othered' in terms of gender and socio-economic class throughout the film. Michael Gott and Thibaut Schilt use cinéma-monde to propose polycentric approaches to spatial thought in film (Gott and Schilt 2018b, 10). A polycentric configuration of space provides a tool to critique hierarchal models of thought such as a centre/periphery oppositional dualism. The notion of polycentrism resonates with *Bande de filles* on several levels. The ending of the film displays a preference for multiple possibilities instead of adopting any fixed forms of meaning. In this way, characterizing the ending of the film as an ambivalent, open-ended flow is key. At this point, Marieme rejects simply being an ongoing member of the girl-gang, a runner for a drug dealer or a future wife to Ismaël. Indeed, the film points to possible polycentric configurations of the self by displaying a penchant for ambivalent flows instead of fixed models of identity. This sense of polycentrism also manifests itself through the film's framing of Anglo-American pop culture, giving it an unexpected transnational resonance in which pop culture can lead to senses of perspective broadened beyond the immediate social context the film represents. I will discuss these pop references in greater detail as this section develops, with further reference and comparison to the notion of cinéma-monde.

Marshall addresses the importance of language to the notion of cinema-monde: 'Language is historically and textually affected by these particles and movements' (Marshall 2012, 43.) Although the diegetic world in Sciamma's film is homogeneously French, the film shows several moments of contact with the English language. All of these moments take place via the film's soundtrack. This occurs most memorably in the hotel-room sequence. Furthermore, several sequences feature J. Dash's *Wop*, such as when Marieme learns to dance along to this song in the metro. Instead of the lyrics of the songs as text, the significance of these moments lies in the depth of meaning that the characters find through contact with American pop-music. Although the cultural references that Sciamma presents may be initially dismissed as simple context for the lives of teenagers, it is crucial to consider these sequences as moments of catharsis for the young girls. Through shared interests, such as pop music with the dances and style that accompany them, bonds are forged and the girl gang is formed. Indeed, the film's moments of contact with Anglo-American culture give the film a distinctly pop-intercultural resonance. Although the film takes place uniquely in France, these moments display the extent to which the girls find a sense of meaning through culture that is specifically not French. Marshall states that in relation to cinéma-monde, 'the Francophone cultural and linguistic world is interesting only when all its accents, contexts, and mixings are made audible' (2012, 45). By considering *Bande de filles* in terms of cinéma-monde, we can

see that Marieme's ambivalent relationship to her own sense of 'national' identity is 'made audible' through points of contact with American pop-culture.

The intercultural elements of *Bande de filles* become more consequential when we consider them in relation to what Marshall says about notions of space, and most importantly, borders being performed in film: 'Borders – of nations but also of the self – are fundamentally performative, in the sense that Judith Butler draws on to talk about gender identity [...]' (Marshall 2012, 47). In *Bande de filles* there are several moments in the film where Marieme/Victoire is engaged in varying degrees of identity fluidity that we have analysed in terms of Butlerian performativity. We can therefore build on what we have already deduced about the fluidity of performance in Sciamma's film by considering it in relation to what Marshall says about the performativity of borders, and the impact that this notion may have on the manner in which the film's protagonist relates to space. We can take, for example, the moments of contact with Anglo-American culture that we have already seen, and also the opening sequence of the film where a group of girls play American football. From a European perspective, American Football is the American Sport *par excellence*. The very name in use in Anglophone Europe, as well the French equivalent (*le football américain*), suggests that is a social-cultural practice that Europeans view as specifically American. It is possible that it can be played in the diegetic reality of *Bande de filles*, but Sciamma is not using it to frame the girls' personal interests. She uses it rather to signal how the manner in which these young girls interact with their socio-cultural interests is nuanced and, furthermore, stretches beyond their immediate surroundings. In the *Diamonds* sequence, the girls perform a mimed version of the Rihanna song and it is filmed with the stylistic flourishes of a music-video. As Marshall states, 'borders are crossed and boundaries are called into question' (Marshall 2012, 42). Butler states that identity performance is composed of the 'stylized repetition of acts' (Butler 1988, 520). These sequences display different sets of stylized acts that we can relate to specific ideas of place. The characters may find themselves within rigidly hierarchal social surroundings, but they find ways of belonging within global networks of culture that extend beyond a fixed sense of place.

Highlighting behaviour being based on the performance of stylized repetition of acts invokes the idea of assuming an already existing model of identity. In these sequences, the characters interact with modes of behaviour that are identifiably impacted by American pop culture. The sequences highlight the significance held by the aforementioned cultural forms for these young girls. Both sequences are moments where the characters are free of the

patriarchal surveillance to which they are otherwise subjected in almost facets of their existence. The diegetic universe of the narrative is clearly France. The film's semi-realist style for the majority of the sequences mean that it is largely grounded in the recognizable social context of the *cité* outside Paris. Yet, the choice of culture that is easily identifiable as American adds an unexpected transnational aspect to the film. The characters' engagement with these cultural forms implies that they go beyond superficial interest and that, in fact, they hold significant meaning for them. Frances Smith (2020) states that the scenes 'suggest a transnational form of girlhood that [...] transcends boundaries through the manipulation of mass-media' (64). In these sequences, the characters embody the transnational nature of popular culture as they experience it. These scenes clearly imply that such moments offer a true sense of catharsis to the young girls. All these scenes are given an elevated sense of importance in the film through their highly embellished aesthetic style. Furthermore, the camera often lingers on the girls' mutual joy found through these moments.

The line of argument being developed here relates to Sciamma's initial desire when making the film and indeed more broadly her own cinematic style. The choice of culture that is 'foreign' in relation to the immediate social surroundings signifies the extent to which they do not feel represented by popular socio-cultural practices closer to home. In the film's narrative, the characters clearly feel a sense of alienation in relation to the hierarchal social setting in which they find themselves. The manner in which they embody these transnational cultural references also provides further significance when we consider Sciamma's initial desire to make the film. She said in several interviews that she wanted to make a film with and about Black French teenagers because she felt that people like that are typically underrepresented in French cinema (Guerrar 2014). In an interview with *The Guardian*, Karidja Touré spoke of the lack of representation for Black French people, and therefore the challenges faced by French actors who are Black:

"I just couldn't relate to French films," says Touré. "I didn't feel they concerned me. When I was little and I wanted to be an actress, I never thought it would be in France – I always thought, 'Better practise my English so I can be a star in the States.'" (Romney 2015)

Beyond surface-level pop references, the sequences examined above constitute a complex socio-political commentary on identity, culture and representation. Therefore, in these sequences, Sciamma clearly implies that Anglo-American culture is understandably more important to these girls than Franco-French equivalents when they feel unrepresented by the

latter. Critics of the film argue that Sciamma's desire in the making the film itself is not enough. Higbee states: 'The simple fact of casting black female actors in *Bande de filles* is not, therefore, sufficient in and of itself to indicate a wider breakthrough for black actors on the French screen' (Higbee 2018a, 176). Given that we have seen here how the film has a nuanced relationship to transnational culture and representation in France, one could argue that Sciamma does more than just casting actors for their ethnicity. A nuanced game of national identity is at play throughout the film. For example, during one brief moment in the film Marieme feels widely accepted, having pleased her friends and her brother by defending her honour in a fight with another girl. Symbolically, she is delighted at being given the chance to play a *Fifa* football video game with her brother and a close-up shot shows her delight at picking France, reflecting her acceptance at that moment by her immediate surroundings. Yet, this acceptance is fleeting and she is soon obliged to look elsewhere again. In the absence of the opportunity to be represented in the Franco-French context, these girls are forced to look elsewhere in order to find any sort of voice and they manage to do this, albeit perhaps quite briefly, through a certain sense of affirmation in the hotel room or the by playing American Football. To this end, the film clearly posits the relationship between national identity and cultural interests as an inherently fluid notion. Spaces are marked out by rigid borders and boundaries, and this is acknowledged throughout *Bande de filles*. Yet, these girls' lived reality is not simply contained within the confines of a fixed sense of place. The fluid nature of the transnational manifests itself through pop culture, and the eponymous girl gang display multi-layered and polycentric senses of belonging, rather than one sense of a fixed self. It is also worth noting that these sequences constitute a core aspect of Sciamma's overall aesthetic choices here and in her wider body of work. She places highly stylised sequences with several stylistic flourishes alongside ones filmed in the understated approach that she often uses to film everyday interpersonal relations. Her approach produces a style that is at times deeply expressive and poetic yet also grounded in a tangible diegetic reality. Although the cultural references in these sequences may initially seem to be surface-level exercises in style, Sciamma adeptly uses them to highlight their significance in these young girls' lives.

### **3.3.5. Summary**

The starting point of my analysis of *Bande de filles* was the discussion of the film's treatment of the social context of the *banlieue*, particularly with recent criticism of it in mind. In my discussion of the film, I have shown that Marieme finds forms of agency in the film, but these

are within the confines of certain fixed discursive routes. The film traces out the various forms of oppression to which Marieme is subjected at the hands of the state (in school), patriarchal social structures (at home) and socio-economic means (through lack of opportunity). But, she can go beyond these obstacles somewhat by realizing and engaging with the fluid nature of her own identity, thus achieving a certain degree of self-affirmation. This is executed through the performance of certain social roles, which are often symbolized by Marieme/Vic's fluid changes throughout the film. In this sense, she realises potential ways to engage with her own sense of self through identity fluidity. This embodiment of identity fluidity is heightened in certain moments of contact with Anglo-American culture, and the performative nature of these moments highlights the degree to which borders and boundaries can be blurred in the film. Yet, it is imperative to remember that this is within the confines of a fixed 'discursive route' (Butler 1999, 185) that is grounded in reality, as opposed to any form of break away. At the end of the film, we see the beginning of Marieme/Vic working towards engaging with identity in a knowing way and while she may not reach a moment of utopian liberation, she does, nonetheless, achieve a certain sense of affirmative agency. Although the film may not be universal, as Sciamma described it herself, *Bande de filles* can be viewed in a line with Sciamma's other narratives of coming of age and girlhood.

The ending shot of the film is open and possibly suggests some form of break away, and in doing so refuses any singular fixed sense of meaning. Marieme, having decided to leave a limiting relationship and the patriarchal environment of the *cit * and her family, steps hopefully towards the future. Marshall points out the distinction between a plenitude and plateau: 'But then any identity is ultimately a hypothesis. Instead of a plenitude, we here see plateaus intersecting at multiple angles' (2012, 51). The same can be said to describe the ending of *Bande de filles*. Rather than attaching a defined sense of meaning to the concluding scene, the ambivalent note on which the film ends suggests different plateaus of possibility. The film avoids a singular fixed sense of meaning by ending on a note that is ambiguous, yet also hopeful. A plenitude in this case could possibly correspond to a more defined finish to the narrative. Instead, Sciamma consciously chooses positive ambivalence on several fronts. Marieme finds a sense of agency by exploring different plateaus of identity evolution. She refuses the plenitude of an already existing identity model in the patriarchal social environment in which she finds herself. Given that we have seen the extent to which the film posits identity as being the product of different intersecting plateaus, we can see how it



suggests there are different avenues of affirmation that Marieme may indeed realise beyond the end of the film's narrative.

Beyond the narrative of the film itself, it is important to note the film's position within contemporary French cinema. Given the quantity of academic writing the film has inspired, it is one of the most widely written about films contemporary French cinema. For example, at the time of writing, Isabelle McNeill's 2017 article for *French Screen Studies* about the film has long been amongst the most read articles in the journal<sup>8</sup>. It has also been the subject to numerous articles, chapters and one monograph study. Although some of the most recent examples have been more critical of the film, many of the academic reactions to the film have been positive. Furthermore, the film also commonly features amongst university curricula. Niang states that the film has been problematically 'canonised' as a narrative of back female youthhood in contemporary France (Niang 2019, 234). Given that within the notion of a canon, certain works are being either included and excluded, *Bande de filles* may well be receiving attention in place of and to the detriment of other filmmakers who have treated similar themes and ideas, such as Mati Diop, Ladj Ly and Houda Benyamina – this research project is one such example. Therefore, the criticisms of the film are crucial to bear in mind during discussions of the film. In my view, the film and the reaction to it provide an example of debates surrounding identity and ethnicity in France, especially in terms of tradition of universalism in relation to human rights.

My focus will now shift to Sciamma's fourth film, *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. Once again, my analysis will show both several similarities and differences between this film and the others in Sciamma's body of work. Similarly to *Naissance des pieuvres* and *Bande de filles*, Sciamma displays a heightened interest issues of gender and identity, especially in different phases of a coming-of-age narrative. Again, she makes use of the soundtrack as a tool to express the female protagonists' subjectivity. However, she covers new stylistic territory by moving away from the contemporary setting of her previous work in favour a period drama, set in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. She also shows particular interest in treating the notion of a female gaze in film, often relating expressions of a gendered gaze to creativity and processes of collaboration.

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<sup>8</sup> The journal statistics are available here-

<https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showMostReadArticles?journalCode=rsfc21>

### 3.4. Desire, Gaze and Subjectivities in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019)

#### 3.4.1. Introduction

*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*<sup>9</sup> (2019) is Céline Sciamma's fourth film and in many respects it has been a breakout film for her. It was her first film in the main competition at the Cannes Film Festival, where it won the prize for best screenwriting and the Queer Palm. The film was also a relative commercial success, earning around €10 million at the global box office. The box office return is all the more notable when we take into account the fact that the worldwide theatrical release of the film was interrupted by Covid-19. However, it was very quickly made available on online streaming platforms, such as Mubi, at a time when cinemas were closed. The film also received a lot of media attention. In *The Guardian*, Mark Kermode wrote that the film is 'as mesmerizingly magical as anything I can recall seeing on screen' (Kermode 2020). Similarly, in *Sight and Sound*, Catherine Wheatley stated 'There are some films so exquisite that any attempt to put them into words feels like an act of violence. Céline Sciamma's *Portrait* [...] is just such a film' (Wheatley 2020). It was also widely discussed on the news when one of the film's main actors, Adèle Haenel, walked out of the César Award ceremony in protest at Roman Polanski receiving the prize for best director<sup>10</sup>. All of these factors combined have resulted in the film having a large audience.

*Portrait* tells the story of Marianne (Noémie Merlant), a painter in late 18<sup>th</sup>-century France. The main portion of the narrative is a flashback. In it, Marianne recalls travelling to an island off the coast of Brittany because she has been commissioned to paint the portrait of a young woman of the gentry Héloïse (Adèle Haenel). The portrait will be sent to a Milanese nobleman so he can decide if he wishes to marry her. However, as Héloïse does not wish to pose for a portrait, she has been misled and told that Marianne is there to be her walking companion. Over the course of their short period of time together, they get to know and appreciate each other while Marianne works clandestinely on her portrait of Héloïse. When Marianne eventually reveals why she is there to Héloïse, the latter is understandably angry about what has occurred but eventually agrees to pose for her portrait. Through their consensual cooperation on the portrait, Marianne and Héloïse become closer and eventually

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<sup>9</sup> From this point, the film will be referred to as *Portrait*.

<sup>10</sup> This story was particularly polemical in the context of the Me Too movement, given that Polanski has long been wanted for questioning for a rape that took place in America. In 2019 Adèle Haenel had spoken out about sexual abuse she had been subject as an adolescent on a film set for the first time.

have a brief relationship, fully aware that their time together will be short. Mere days later, when the portrait has been completed and deemed a success, Marianne must leave. The narrative, however, is only of surface-level interest because what really draws the viewer to *Portrait* is the uniqueness of Sciamma's approach. The film displays a nuanced treatment of a feminine perspective and interrogates the notion of a gendered gaze, the treatment of female characters in film, and the revisionist potential of feminist art history.

Given that the film has had a relatively recent release, there are few academic studies of it to date. In *Le regard féminin*, Iris Brey (2020) argues that the film constitutes an example of a 'female gaze' by showing female characters to have an active subjective perspective and allowing female characters a pronounced sense of agency (63). Benjamin Eldon Stevens discusses the film in terms of the reception of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, stating the film makes use of the myth in order to comment on the relationship between looking, desire and memory: 'The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is the archetype for *Portrait*'s depiction of lived experience as leading inevitably to memory of lost love' (Stevens 2020, 46). Some longer form press reviews focus on the film's treatment of art history (Spies Gans 2020) and others discuss the film in terms of its treatment of female subjectivity (Kaminsky 2019). I aim to contribute to existing discussion of the film in the following ways: First of all, I will analyse how the film expresses a heterogeneous sense of subjectivity. Secondly, I will discuss the film's treatment of the notion of a muse and creativity in relation to subjectivity. Lastly, I will discuss how the film creates a fluid sense of intersubjectivity, through expressive *mise-en-scène*, diegetic music and use of visual art.

### **3.4.2. Subjectivity & The Gaze**

The question of feminine subjectivity is treated in many of Sciamma's films. In both *Naissance des pieuvres* and *Bande de filles*, the perspective of the film closely aligns with the perspective of the protagonist. In *Portrait*, it takes an even more central position in the film. Sciamma frequently made reference to the notion of a gendered gaze in promotional interviews for the film. In one interview, she went as far as to proclaim that the film functions as 'a manifesto on the female gaze' (Van Der Werff 2020) and several relatively mainstream articles referenced the film's unique treatment of 'the gaze' (see Kaminsky 2019, 43; Pickard 2020). Laura Mulvey coined the term 'male gaze' in her famous article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. In it, she argues that the default perspective in mainstream cinema is male

and heterosexual, with female characters having little or no agency and largely being reduced to object status (Mulvey 1975, 11). From the first sequences in *Portrait*, we can clearly see that the film displays a preoccupation with gazes and subjectivity, specifically in relation to female characters. The film has almost no male characters, and those that do feature are only in the film very briefly <sup>11</sup>.

The opening scene is particularly noteworthy in all of Sciamma's films<sup>12</sup>. The preoccupation with subjectivity in *Portrait* is apparent from the opening sequence. The first frames feature different blank canvases being used for sketches. The subsequent frames reveal the artists to be students learning the art of portrait painting in a class taught by Marianne. A series of close-ups of the art students is accompanied by Marianne's voiceover, instructing them on how to begin their portraits correctly. Each shot shows one of the characters looking out of frame, presumably towards the object of their portraits and the source of the voiceover. A reverse shot shows us the first frame featuring Marianne, who is posing for them while instructing. Much of the film's subject matter is announced in this short sequence. First of all, the scene engages an active feminine perspective. The artists are revealed to be young women and it highlights the object of their gaze (another woman), giving us the impression that we are in territory far removed from a default male gaze. Furthermore, although the object of their gaze is a woman, she is not the inactive object that we often see. She actively guides what they are seeing and tells them how they should paint her. This is in stark contrast to the male gaze where, as Mulvey tells us, the object is always female and frequently passive (Mulvey 1975, 11).

By directing her students, Marianne effects an active role in how she is perceived. The active female perspective constitutes a key component of the film corresponding to the notion of a 'female gaze'. Brey tells us that for a film to express a 'female gaze', the main character needs to identify as a woman, and the narrative must be told from her point of view (Brey 2020, 77). Furthermore, Brey tells us that on a technical level, the film must make the spectator 'feel' the feminine perspective (Brey 2020, 77). In the opening scene of *Portrait*, the active feminine perspective is expressed via the mix of point-of-view framing at the beginning of the sequence and the subsequent shots which show the young art students

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<sup>11</sup> This is a narrative feature present in much of Sciamma's work. *Naissance des pieuvres* features almost no adults. The same can be said of *Tomboy*. All of the actors in *Bande de filles* are of colour.

<sup>12</sup> In *Naissances des pieuvres*, the opening scene features the soundtrack by Para One, an extended synchronised swimming routine and Marie's first glimpse of Floriane. The opening scene of *Bande de filles* features a game of American Football and an extremely prominent extra-diegetic soundtrack, filmed with all of the stylistic flourishes of a music video.

working. These ideas of perspective, creativity and agency are expanded upon throughout the film. At the end of the sequence, Marianne notices that a student has mistakenly taken one of her paintings out of storage and reveals it be the film's eponymous work. The narrative's main section then starts in the form of a flashback.

Another early scene in the film further highlights the questions of perspective and subjectivity. Soon after arriving to the island, Marianne sees Héloïse for the first time. With a subjective shot, the camera assumes Marianne's perspective, and so the viewer discovers Héloïse in the same way as Marianne. Héloïse walks ahead of Marianne wearing a hooded cape. The sense of looking in these frames is particularly pronounced, as all of the frames are at shoulder height, following Héloïse at a tangible walking distance. Return shots remind the viewer that the source of the gaze continues to be Marianne. The camera's forward movement also matches the pace of Marianne walking. When Héloïse runs towards the cliff-edge, the subjective shot catches up with her at the same time as Marianne does. The moment's importance in the narrative resonates on several fronts: the viewer meets one of the film's main characters, and Marianne meets her future love interest for the first time. As Héloïse runs towards the sea cliffs, we have just learned that her sister has died by suicide, and we ask ourselves if she is planning to do the same. The sound of wind and waves reaches a point of climax that matches Héloïse running right to the edge before turning. Héloïse turns around and looks back at Marianne, just past the perspective of what has, up until this point, been a subjective shot. We soon realise that the true climactic event that is being constructed is Héloïse and Marianne looking at each other. As a result, we see the extent to which subjectivity and feminine perspective are being expressed. When they return home, the subjective shots resume and the viewer's perspective once again aligns with Marianne's. This time, the subjective frames are accompanied by a voiceover by Marianne. While she (and the viewer) closely watches Héloïse mount the stairs, we hear her commenting on the right techniques for correctly painting her ear. In this way, the sequence intermingles notions of feminine perspective and artistic creation, which will serve as a base that will be built on throughout the film. The visual style immerses the viewer's perspective in Marianne's subjectivity and asserts her gaze as an active one through her role as thinking subject and artist. It also highlights the importance of Héloïse's looking back and reciprocating the gaze. In doing so, we see that Héloïse is not simply reduced to a passive object being subjected to an exterior gaze. Later, we will see how both characters' agency is asserted through their respective active roles in the process of collaboration, painting Héloïse's portrait.

The next time they walk together, there are no subjective shots which immerse us in the perspective of Marianne. Instead, during this sequence, the camera focuses closely on both characters as they furtively glance towards each other. The wardrobe design plays a key role in highlighting their acts of looking in this sequence. Sophie, the house maid, informs Marianne that she will have to wear a scarf due to the wind. Their scarves cover their faces from the nose down, thus encouraging us to focus on their eyes even further. A single shot is used to show Marianne initially and then turns towards Héloïse, closely following her facial expression. In a change from their first walk, this section is more aligned with Héloïse's gaze, without fully showing it with a subjective shot, as happened with Marianne before. As they walk, Héloïse watches over her shoulder and her eyes are directed to look straight into the camera (Fig.1). Although it is a brief moment, it has the effect of according a great deal of emphasis to her act of looking. This sequence gives us the impression that narrative is not simply an account of Marianne's singular perspective, but also acknowledges the existence of Héloïse's gaze. In this way, the film does not aim to present a univocal sense of subjectivity, but rather opens it up, making it fluid. Later, we will see how this serves as a foundation when the process of creative collaboration becomes intersubjective between the characters. In order to analyse the possibility of an intersubjective space between the two characters, we will first discuss the film's treatment of art as collaboration.



Figure 1.

### 3.4.3. Active Muse and Collaboration

Creativity is one of the central concerns of *Portrait*. There are multiple facets of creativity that the film addresses. Firstly, it pays particular attention to the source of inspiration in the act of creation. In interviews, Sciamma revealed that she wanted to address the idea of a muse as a point of inspiration in a precise way: ‘It’s about co-creation, not this fetishized, silent woman standing there beautiful and mute’ (Mumford). Therefore, rather than having the character of Héloïse acting as a passive ‘muse’-like point of inspiration for Marianne, Sciamma wants to abandon this idea in favour of Héloïse having the capacity to play an engaged role in how she is portrayed thereby positing the process of creation as an act of active collaboration.

Secondly, we can think of the Sciamma’s own process of creation in a similar fashion. Jackie Stacey writes that Sciamma avoids hierarchical power structures, describing her film as one of ‘horizontality’ (Stacey 2022, 281). Stacey argues that in doing so, Sciamma critiques ‘the normativities of scriptwriting and filmmaking that have relied on inequality for erotic narrativization’ (Stacey 2022, 296). This extends to several areas of her approach to the film. Sciamma’s approach to filmmaking avoids vertical power structures, instead preferring decentred forms of creation in the hope of achieving a creative atmosphere of equality. Furthermore, Sciamma revealed in several interviews that the role of Héloïse was written with Adèle Haenel in mind, with the character being directly inspired by the actress herself (Guerrar 2019). Indeed, there are certain parallels with Marianne/Héloïse, and Sciamma/Haenel that are worth noting. Like the characters of *Portrait*, Sciamma and Haenel also met through creative collaboration when Haenel starred in Sciamma’s first film, *Naissance des pieuvres*. Furthermore, Sciamma and Haenel later had a romantic relationship that ended before *Portrait*. Many interviews reveal the extent to which Haenel had an active role in the development of her character, where both she and Sciamma speak at length about their own personal collaborative process of creation and the theoretical approach to their work (see Goodman 2020)<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, as Sciamma remarks in one particular in interview:

La collaboration est au cœur du film, qui fait un sort au concept de « muse » pour chroniquer différemment le rapport de création entre celui qui regarde et celui qui est

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<sup>13</sup> Beyond this film, Haenel remains an engaged artist. Recently, she revealed in an interview that she was retiring as a film actress and would no longer be interested in working in the film industry, due to it being a ‘racist and patriarchal’ working environment (Zilko 2022). Moving forward, she will work only in theatre.

regardé. Dans notre atelier il n'y a pas de muse, il n'y a que des collaboratrices, qui s'inspirent mutuellement. (Guerrar 2019)

It is noteworthy that Sciamma refers to the process of working on the film as 'un atelier'. Although the project was initially envisioned by Sciamma, the notion of producing the film via the format of a workshop suggests that it was an environment where multiple perspectives were taken into account. In this way, we can see how Sciamma deals with this idea of creation as an active process of collaboration in an extremely hands-on manner in her own work, moving away from the notion of a silent muse/object as point of inspiration.

The process by which Marianne and Héloïse arrive at the portrait reflects many of Sciamma's thoughts on these ideas of collaboration in relation to creativity. It is notable that during the sections of the film where Héloïse risks resembling the 'silent muse' that Sciamma rejects in the above interview quotation, all of the attempts at creativity are unsuccessful. Moreover, the artist who preceded Marianne could not work at all due to Héloïse refusing to participate and pose. Marianne arrives to find the unsuccessful portrait by the previous artist defaced in her room. When Marianne tries to paint her from memory, her attempt is unsuccessful. The film spends a large duration of time on this aspect of the creative process. However, the first attempt goes unused as a result of Héloïse's negative reaction to it. At first she doesn't recognise herself and her main critique of the painting is that it is gloomy. Marianne defends it by claiming that, conventionally speaking, it is a decent portrait but then angrily defaces it. Héloïse's critique and Marianne's defence of her portrait are telling. Marianne forgoes knowing Héloïse or trying to understand her in order to capture her portrait. Marianne relies on artistic convention, which we can understand to be informed by the dominant patriarchal social order of the film's historical setting in late 18<sup>th</sup> century France<sup>14</sup>. In doing so, at this point Marianne adopts a conventional gaze that is not her own one, which is to say, the sort of 'default' subjectivity that Mulvey addresses. Mulvey describes the passive role that female characters are relegated to when subjected to the male gaze: 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female' (Mulvey 1975, 11). Héloïse initially has the passive female position thrust upon her, playing no part in the reasons for her portrait being painted (in order to be married off to a stranger in a foreign country). The very goal of the portrait commission is the

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<sup>14</sup> In late 18<sup>th</sup>-century France, a patriarchal social order prevailed, where men held dominant roles in political, economic, and social spheres, while women faced limited rights and opportunities, and were largely confined to traditional domestic roles.



‘traditional exhibitionist role’ that connotes ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’, in the sense that it is a portrait that will hopefully please her proposed future husband enough that he will accept marrying her. The ‘determining male gaze’ that Mulvey describes is reminiscent of the ‘conventions’ that Marianne uses to defend her first attempt at painting Héloïse. Up until this point, Héloïse has been the ‘silent muse’ that Sciamma is trying to move away from with her film.

Subsequently, the painting process starts afresh and new conditions are established. From this point, there are four portrait painting scenes. At the beginning, Marianne directs Héloïse, telling her how to pose and starting the portrait in the form of a sketch. When their gazes meet, Marianne is clearly moved. This moment reminds us of earlier sequences that placed notable emphasis on them looking at each other, but it also marks a sense of contrast. Here, their gazes meet simultaneously and Héloïse consents to being looked at in order to be painted. This sense of equality and trust between artist and subject will serve as a base for the future collaborative progress in the film. Subsequent painting sequences appear progressively productive. In the second one, they discuss the difficulties that Marianne encounters as a female artist. Rather than having Héloïse silently pose for the portrait, as before, she is no longer reduced to a silent object. Their relationship develops quickly in the intermittent scenes and the sense of collaboration grows further. By the time the third scene arrives, they have acted on their attraction to each other. Looking once again plays a vital role. Instead of needing to speak, they can knowingly make eye contact with each other. In the fourth and final one of these scenes, they are actively working together. Brey comments on Héloïse’s role during these sequences, stating that ‘La femme qui est peinte n’est pas un objet beau et inanimé, mais une personne qui a la capacité d’agir’ (2020, 62). Héloïse helps to mix the paint that Marianne uses (another example of collaboration), and they agree that the second portrait is superior to the first one. Before finishing it, Marianne asks Héloïse to stand beside her as she adds the ending touches.

Héloïse’s position beside Marianne at the end of this scene symbolises her gradual move towards playing an active role in her own portrayal, leaving behind the passivity that she incarnated at the start of their process. In an interview with *France Today*, Haenel commented on this aspect of the film:

What interested me was to blend into Noémie’s [Marianne] gaze and give the impression that my character was changing form through the way she was looking at me [...]. It’s a look that goes right through to the spirit. And it was important that we

didn't position ourselves in relationship to men: that we were not under the scrutiny of the male gaze. (Goodman 2020)

On a narrative level, we have seen how Héloïse becomes an active agent in relation to her own portrait. In addition to this, we have signposted Haenel's own involvement in her role on screen. Rather than having an *auteur* at the centre of the film's conception, *Portrait* is the product of the process of collaboration between those involved. Indeed, the film suggests the importance of egalitarian cooperation in relation to art and creation. The symbolic value of the portrait shares notable points of comparison with Sciamma's other films. As in *Naissance des pieuvres* and *Bande de filles*, identities are not in a defined state, but in a fluid state of motion. The portrait, as an act of creation which is so closely linked to the person that it represents, serves as an expression of the identity of its subject. As is often the case with Sciamma's work, the film evokes a tension between the surface and depth. In *Naissance des pieuvres*, this tension was expressed by the synchronised swimming performances as an exterior at odds with the young girls' inner feelings. The act of creation serves as a parallel metaphor in *Portrait*. The portrait also serves as an exterior surface, with the process of collective creation serving as the depth of meaning that allow it to be produced. The fixed pose negates creativity, and without input from the subject being represented, a true portrait cannot be achieved.

Aside from the final portrait there are other moments when the characters collaborate in some way in relation to self-expression. There is a marked sense of collaboration during the sequence where Héloïse reads the myth of Orpheus to Marianne and Sophie. As Héloïse reads, all three characters present actively interpret the story they are listening to. All three have different reactions to it, yet they seem to acknowledge the possibility of multiple interpretations for the actions of Orpheus. Later, the three main characters create a painting together when they return home after Sophie has had an abortion. Once they realise that none of them can sleep, they collaborate on a scene that Marianne paints. Interestingly, this scene is fuelled by Héloïse's motivation, as she says 'Prenez votre matériel, on va peindre'. As a result, this short sequence blurs the distinction between subject and object. Although Héloïse is one of the characters being painted, she has a fully active role in the decision to paint in the first place, and afterwards, in how she is being painted. She collaborates with Marianne and Sophie on the elements of *mise-en-scène*. As they pose, Marianne guides them. The decision to paint takes on even greater significance when we consider the subject matter being painted. The historical context is of course far removed from the possibility of safe and legal abortions

and this is made clear by the clandestine nature of the procedure that Sophie has to endure. In this scene, we are witnessing creation motivated by an entirely different source than the portrait that we have seen earlier. It is a creation that serves as testimony to what Sophie had to suffer as a young woman. Here, the style that Marianne paints in (almost reminiscent of impressionism, and on a wooden surface) is much less realist than what we have seen of her work elsewhere. In the knowledge that such a work could never be seen publicly, she is much less impacted by the conventions to which she is forced to adhere in her portrait paintings.

Off camera, the realisation of the painting sequences is another moment of collaboration by the film's creative team. H el ene Delmaire is the artist who painted all the artworks presented as Marianne's in the film. It is also her hands that we see in the close-ups of Marianne working, and it is therefore her artistic style that we witness during these sequences. Sciamma describes the approach during these sequences as a group effort, alongside Delmaire and Claire Mathon, the cinematographer for the film (Guerrar 2019). There is also evidence of other areas of collaboration in terms of costume design. The costume designer for the film, Doroth e Guiraud, describes the film's sartorial direction as being a process of collaboration between herself and Sciamma (see Devaney). This may seem obvious, but it is noteworthy that there are multiple examples of press and promotional interview which reference the creative team behind the film (Goodman 2020). As a result, analysis of the film naturally veers away from the traditional auteur-centred approach which is more common in the field of Film Studies (particularly where French and Francophone film is concerned). Hence, it becomes apparent that while Sciamma is recognized as an auteur, she defies the conventional image of an auteur by infusing it with a contemporary feminist perspective.

#### **3.4.4. Desire as Intersubjectivity**

Certain elements of Sciamma's own personal life as well as her pluralistic approach to making *Portrait* all provide information that is crucial to analysing the treatment of creation and collaboration in the film. Further to this, I will now analyse the film's treatment of art and creativity in tandem with the manner in which it expresses ideas related to subjectivity, perspective and the gaze in order to demonstrate how, through art and culture, the film constructs an intersubjective space between Marianne and H elo ise. In addition to the biographical elements of Sciamma's own life, I want to add one more point of reference

which is relevant for my analysis of the film's treatment of artistic creation. In *Nomadic Theory* (2011b) Rosi Braidotti writes about the relationship between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, with particular interest in the influence that it had on the former's creative process (2011b, 156-157). Braidotti's analysis provides a salient theoretical perspective from which we can consider *Portrait*. Braidotti pays particular attention to expressions of subjectivity and desire in the pieces of writing that she analyses<sup>15</sup>. She describes Woolf's configuration of subjectivity as 'nomadic', and quotes Woolf in writing 'I am rooted, but I flow' (Braidotti 2011b, 153). It is crucial to consider the treatment of subjectivity in *Portrait* as both fluid and nomadic. As we have seen, although the film is initially embedded in Marianne's own perspective, it soon opens itself up to Héloïse's as well. This is initially achieved through the camera's nuanced acknowledgement of Héloïse's subjectivity, before repeatedly showing the two characters in the same frame during much of the film.

With the realisation of their mutual desire, their respective subjectivities flow to the degree that the boundary between them becomes increasingly indistinct and, eventually, constitutes an intersubjective space. In this way, the notion of intersubjectivity in *Portrait* resembles the close bonds at the core of Sciamma's other films. In *Naissance des pieuvres*, the narrative initially leads us to believe that it might take place between Marie and Floriane, but with the film's final image, we realise that it exists between the mutual platonic bond between Marie and Anne. In *Bande de filles*, we can see how it takes place through the characters' sorority and the sense of emotional development that this triggers. On intersubjectivity, Braidotti writes:

It is crucial, in fact, to see to what extent processes of becoming are collective, intersubjective, and not individual or isolated: it is always a matter of blocks of becoming. "Others" are the integral element of one's successive becomings. A Deleuzian approach favours the destitution of the liberal notion of the sovereign subject altogether and consequently overcomes the dualism Self/Other, Sameness/Difference intrinsic to that vision of the subject. (Braidotti 2011b, 153)

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<sup>15</sup> Braidotti's description of their connection and how it impacted on their respective creative impulses shares several parallels with what we already know about Marianne/Héloïse and Sciamma/Haenel. Similar to Marianne and Héloïse, Woolf and Sackville-West lived in historical contexts where same-sex couples were publicly unacceptable and were thus obliged to act on their desires in secret. Like Sciamma and Haenel, they were sources of inspiration for each other, even when they were no longer actively in a romantic relationship. Just as Sackville-West inspired Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), *Portrait* was written with Adèle Haenel in mind for the role of Héloïse.

In *Portrait*, the development of a sense of intersubjectivity can be identified through the progression of Marianne and Héloïse's interpersonal relationship, which develops in tandem to their creative collaboration. Braidotti describes the epistolary writing of Woolf as 'interactive exchanges that construct an intersubjective space with her (privileged) interlocutor' (Braidotti 2011b, 159). We can examine the treatment of art and culture in *Portrait* as a similarly intersubjective space.

When we first see Marianne and Héloïse, they are in the same space, but they are never in the same frame. For example, we can reconsider the techniques used to film their first interactions, such as their first walks together towards cliffs that we have already discussed in detail. Their interactions are filmed using angled counter shots that give the impression that they are totally separated from each other. One close-up is particularly expressive in this regard. It shows a close-up of Marianne from the side. When she turns to look to her right, we can see that Héloïse is beside her, but when she turns back, Héloïse disappears from the viewer's perspective again. As their relationship develops, the reverse angled shots are used less often. They are replaced by static shots showing both of them in the same frame. The first example occurs when they have an intimate conversation about Héloïse's sister's death. The camera does not move for almost two minutes as the two main characters talk, marking a change in the filming technique which signals the onset of an interpersonal connection. Another striking example occurs when Marianne plays music for Héloïse for the first time. We can see that there is the spark of an interpersonal relationship that escapes words during this sequence. When Héloïse asks Marianne to tell her what listening to an orchestra is like, Marianne responds 'C'est n'est pas facile de raconter la musique'. She then plays 'The Four Seasons' by Vivaldi for Héloïse. The frame in question shows them sitting together as they listen and Marianne comments on the music for Héloïse (Fig. 2). With a connection being established, we see it grow and the framing technique is used consistently as their relationship blooms, and there are examples of frames like this in almost every sequence from this point in the film. During the most productive portrait painting sessions, one of them transcends the barrier between artist/subject and we see them together. When they argue, the visual separation briefly resumes and we see a momentary return of the counter shot and reverse angle technique. It occurs when Marianne reveals to Héloïse that she is a painter, or they argue over Héloïse's departure for Milan.



Figure 2.

Iris Brey interprets the framing techniques in the film as an expression of equality between the two characters:

Elles sont à l'égalité de regard, et leur désir va émerger de ce rapport. D'ailleurs, la réalisatrice limite l'utilisation du traditionnel champ-contrechamp et choisit souvent de placer les deux visages dans le même cadre ou de ne rester que sur un seul. (Brey 2020, 62)

I agree with her analysis, but I want to extend it to argue that these frames constitute a core component of the film's expression of intersubjectivity that permeates several areas of the film. One such area is the film's treatment of art and culture. As we have seen, the painting sequences become an area of active collaboration between the two main characters. As a product of the collaboration that blurs the boundary between artist and subject, their creativity in these sequences constitutes an intersubjective space where the distinction between a self/other oppositional dualism is blurred. The treatment of their respective gazes from this point in the film is particularly revelatory. We have already seen how they were framed as being resolutely distinct from each other. With the development of their interpersonal relationship, there are several sequences where we see them communicate by simply looking at each other. If the film's perspective aligns most often with Marianne, during these moments it merges with Héloïse. In many respects, the successful portrait is in and of itself an example of the intersubjective connection in *Portrait* because it emerges from Héloïse's sharp criticism of the initial effort. The new portrait constitutes, therefore, an important building block of intersubjective space in their relationship.

At certain moments of the film, elements of the *mise-en-scène* reflect the expressive intersubjective mode of the film. *Portrait* bears several resemblances to a melodrama from a stylistic point of view. Hollywood melodramas of the 1930s-50s were regarded as artistically insignificant in their own contemporaneity, but revisionist Feminist Film scholars have since argued for their significance in terms of raising the question of feminine experience. For example, Tania Modleski considers melodrama as particularly relevant in relation to expression of feminine experience:

If women are hysterics in patriarchal culture because, according to the feminist argument, their voice has been silenced or repressed, and if melodrama deals with the return of the repressed through a kind of conversion hysteria, perhaps women have been attached to the genre because it provides an outlet for the repressed feminine voice. (Modleski 1984, 21)

The idea of a repressive patriarchal culture is made clear in *Portrait*. Héloïse and Marianne could never have more time together because they are obliged to lead lives that are in harmony with societal expectations of them and they are both aware of this from the beginning. Yet, we undeniably see an outlet for the repressed feminine voice in certain aspects of the film, most acutely in relation to their interpersonal connection. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith states that in melodrama, what is repressed in terms of dialogue, is expressed by *mise-en-scène*: ‘The undischarged emotion which cannot be accommodated within the action, subordinated as it is to the demands of family/ lineage/inheritance, is traditionally expressed in the music and, in the case of film, in certain elements of the *mise-en-scène*’ (Nowell-Smith 1977, 118). The same can be said of *Portrait*. The film’s dialogue is often understated, in keeping with the sense of realistic depiction of a female character from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Repressive patriarchy prevents women from expressing themselves, yet certain recurring visual tropes communicate female interiority to the viewer.

For example, we see a close-up frame of a bunch of flowers just after we learn that they both harbour feelings for each other. The flowers express the blossoming of their relationship. Flowers also recall the floral metaphor for the development of desire in *Naissance des pieuvres*. Later in *Portrait*, we see the flowers again, and they are presented in the exact same fashion, but this time they are badly wilted. This time, the frame occurs when we know their time together will be fleeting and is soon coming to an end. There are also sequences filmed by the Atlantic Ocean that take on a heightened emotional resonance in the film. Water is another recurring visual metaphor in Sciamma’s films, often symbolising fluid

emotional development. In *Naissance des pieuvres*, we associate water with the space of the swimming pool and the significance of the synchronised swimming sequences that take place there. These moments, and therefore water, symbolise the tension between an exterior performed surface and hidden interiority, and the subsequent identity fluidity that takes place. In *Tomboy* there are also ‘pool’ scenes of sorts, in the bathroom, where it is during a scene in the bath that we initially learn the young protagonist is transgender. It is also here Laure/Mikaël copies the physical behaviour traits of his male peers in front of the mirror. In this way, we associate the water with identity fluidity again. In *Portrait*, we associate the imagery of water with the development of the central relationship, as it is by the ocean that they can be away from the attention of others. It is also there that they have their first kiss, in a secluded space by the water. When they argue, Marianne finds Héloïse standing in front of the water (Fig. 3). It is an image that is simultaneously idyllic and deeply affecting. The seascape is beautiful but the crashing waves reflect the turbulent nature of what they are experiencing. They have argued, but Marianne goes to find Héloïse as she is aware that she will soon never have the chance to be alone with her again. The waves act as a background as they reconcile. The visual recurrence of the water reaches peak emotional intensity as a vehicle of expression for their intersubjective experience.



Figure 3.

Similar to the waves, fire is a recurring visual trope in the film that expresses the characters’ interiority. Fire accompanies several sequences as it is generally an implied source



of light. A fire is very often burning in the background when we see Héloïse and Marianne. In the absence of extradiegetic music, we can hear the crackling of a fire in the background of scenes filmed inside. As we have already seen, Marianne burns the defaced portrait of Héloïse that she finds. The most striking use of fire as a visual metaphor is during the bonfire scene. In relation to the narrative, this sequence occurs when Marianne, Héloïse and Sophie go visit a local woman whom they have heard would be willing to carry out an illegal abortion. They go to an evening bonfire attended by a group of other women. As is often the case in *Portrait*, a flame is framed as the sole source of light in the scene. It is not, however, the fire that we are most interested in when considering the film's overall expression of intersubjectivity. When they gather around the fire, the women start singing 'Fugere non possum'<sup>16</sup> in a canon-style chant. Héloïse and Marianne are filmed in a shot and reverse angle counter shot and we see them make eye contact. As Marianne looks at Héloïse, embers from the fire cross the screen. The intensity of their mutually returned gaze grows and is echoed in tension by the arrival of the music towards a climactic point. Héloïse moves away from the bonfire, but we can see that the hem of her dress is on fire (Fig. 4).



Figure 4.

The resulting image draws on several aspects of the expressive intersubjective *mise-en-scène* of *Portrait*. There is a marked atmosphere of sorority during the sequence. Sophie is there in order to arrange an abortion for an unplanned pregnancy. The singers, all women,

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<sup>16</sup> Which translates from Latin to 'I cannot escape'.

chant in a form where structured collaboration is crucial. Iris Brey comments on this aspect of the sequence: ‘Le féminin ne peut plus être réduit à une seule voix, il ne possède pas un seul visage. Le portrait de femme se conjugue au pluriel’ (Brey 2020, 87). Away from their daily routine, in an atmosphere of sorority, Marianne and Héloïse can look at each other in whatever way they wish. Their reciprocal gaze reaches peak intensity when Héloïse’s dress is on fire. If we consider the feminine mode of melodrama, what is repressed on the level of physical expression (Marianne and Héloïse’s mutual desire) manifests itself in certain elements of *mise-en-scène* (fire and the accompanying metaphorical value that it carries). As a result, fire takes on an expressive symbolic value, namely of passion and desire. The literal catching fire of Héloïse’s dress seems to occur at the same moment as the kindling of their desire. The image of Héloïse looking back at Marianne is of immense importance within the overall narrative. It later inspires Marianne to paint the scene. The resulting painting has already been referred to during the film’s first sequence, when one of the students in Marianne’s class admires it. The act of looking at the painting triggers the flashback that forms the overall narrative. The image is echoed further by the film’s title, as it directly refers to this scene and not the portrait that Marianne and Héloïse work on during the majority of the film’s narrative.

The action of the bonfire sequence continues into the next scene. It is attached to the previous one by continuity of action. A close-up of Marianne pulling Héloïse up from the ground is continued by Héloïse now pulling Marianne towards her, but a spatial and temporal change has occurred. It is daytime and they are moving towards a secluded area of the beach. There is also continuity in terms of sound, as the music from the previous scene continues. They lower their scarves and kiss for the first time. Overall, the sequence has a surrealist and dream-like quality. Héloïse does not react to her dress being on fire and instead continues to calmly return Marianne’s gaze. There also an unexpected spatial and temporal change that we do not see elsewhere in the film. The nature of the music that accompanies the image creates a particularly atmospheric moment, with the vocal chant giving way to more soothing harmonies. The very nature of the sound during the sequence is another reason for the dream-like atmosphere of the scene. The sound here blurs the distinction between extradiegetic and diegetic. Similar to a music video, the sound has clearly been recorded in a studio, but it is implied that it is being performed by the characters on-screen. Visually, it also stands out from other scenes. The camera movement is more fluid, as a horizontal tracking shot films the singers. Overall, the highly composed audio-visual aesthetic during this sequence makes it

stand out from the rest of the film, further suggesting that the image of Héloïse looking back with her dress on fire is an extremely central one in terms of the film's narrative.

### 3.4.5. Art and Nomadic Memory

Music is so rare in *Portrait* that its presence in the bonfire sequence makes it stand out in the context of the overall narrative. With the music choices being so selective, it has the effect of greatly elevating the scenes where it does feature. There is no extradiegetic music in the film, so all of the music incorporated is either being performed or actively listened to by a character in the film. The canon singing at the bonfire accompanies Héloïse and Marianne's unspoken kindling of desire. Marianne plays a short section of 'The Four seasons' for Héloïse in order to demonstrate the potential joys of music. Years later, when Héloïse hears the Vivaldi piece again, it clearly triggers deeply impactful memories. As Carol Flinn (1986) remarks in an article written for *Screen*, 'The 'Problem' of Femininity in Theories of Film Music': 'In the usual feminine melodramatic mode, extradiegetic music is the vehicle of feminine emotion because under a patriarchal social order, they must repress what they feel' (61), similarly to how we have seen in *Naissance des pieuvres*, as remarked by Handyside (2016). Yet here, in the absence of extradiegetic sound, diegetic music is the vehicle of feminine emotion. This has the effect of giving the characters a more fulfilled sense of agency, as they have the capacity to interact with and express their own emotions, rather than have emotions attached to them by a filmmaker on the extradiegetic level.

Overall, the moments that depict the relationship in terms of artistic expression are the most definitive moments of intersubjectivity. Braidotti identifies the central relationship between art, memory and interpersonal connection: 'The point of convergence is the quest for creativity in the form of experimenting with the immersion of one's sensibility in the field of forces—formatted as by music, colour, sound, light, speed, temperature, intensity' (Braidotti 2011b, 153). Braidotti's analysis resonates on multiple levels during the film's coda sequences which occur years after the main section of the narrative. A voice-off from Marianne announces the two short sequences to be the two moments in her life where she saw Héloïse again, years after their initial time together. The first is at an art salon where Marianne has brought her work. One of her canvases is revealed to be the scene of Orpheus losing Eurydice, recalling the earlier scene where they read the scene to each other. As she stands beside the painting, it is evident that the cloak that she is wearing is the same colour as

Orpheus in the painting. The audience therefore has the impression that Marianne, like Orpheus, has forever lost their love Eurydice/Héloïse and must live with the regret. Later when Marianne is viewing other paintings in the salon, she is shocked to find a portrait of Héloïse, painted by another artist. She is clearly deeply affected by what she sees. The portrait shows Héloïse and a young child, suggesting she is years removed from their connection. However, a tracking shot examining the finer details of the painting show Héloïse to be pointing to page 28 of the book she is holding, which of course is a reference to the self-portrait that Marianne did for Héloïse before they separated<sup>17</sup>. Suddenly, Marianne can remember Héloïse in a positive light, knowing that that she still thinks of her affectionately. The sequence suggests that memory, desire and creativity are interlinked, offering affirmative possibilities beyond a mundane present. The scene also suggests that there are ways to communicate and remember from a feminine queer perspective, even within the historical context of rigid patriarchy. Marianne's Orpheus painting can also be reconsidered in a similar regard. Although it may seem to have a normative surface appearance, we know the intimate point of inspiration for her work is her queer desire. Her work takes on a fluid relationship to context and interpretation, as she is casting herself as Orpheus, and the painting is clearly informed by her feminine queer gaze. Furthermore, the portrait of Héloïse contains a hidden reference to her own queer desire. Lauren Kaminsky comments on the paintings' function in the sequence:

By giving us an artist who paints classical themes, who happens to be a woman who fell in love with a woman, the film seems to cut through some of our cultural static about the male gaze by asking us to be less sure that our collective stories have one meaning – less sure that our images were produced from a single perspective.

(Kaminsky 2019, 44)

The paintings indicate that there are always a multitude of possible sources for and interpretations of the images which we see every day. As such, no single reading, interpretation or indeed history is fixed, but instead open-ended and fluid. For example, the film's eponymous portrait is the manner in which Marianne remembers her time with Héloïse. As Paris A. Spies-Gans states 'This painting, we gradually come to understand, is how Marianne has chosen to remember two weeks she once spent in Brittany' (Spies-Gans 2020).

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<sup>17</sup>On the eve of Marianne's departure, she draws a self-portrait in Héloïse's on page 28 of her copy of *Orpheus*. The image will therefore serve as Marianne's preserved image of Marianne and the time that they spent together.

In the second coda, music returns to play a key role. It is only the third time that it occurs in the film. In a voiceover, Marianne tells us that it was the last time she saw Héloïse. She attends a concert alone and notices Héloïse across the auditorium. All of the techniques used to film their interactions from the start of the film return here. Every shot is framed by what Marianne sees. A reverse angle counter shot highlights the extent to which they are separated from each other. The distance from which Héloïse is filmed underlines this distance further. The voiceover makes it clear that Héloïse did not see her. As with the first section of the film, we have the impression that the film's subjectivity once again aligns only with Marianne. However, the arrival of the music changes everything. The music in question is again 'The Four Seasons'. As it begins, we see Marianne continue to look across at Héloïse. The following shot is the final frame of the film. It is very long, lasting for two and a half minutes. It begins far from Héloïse, but slowly zooms in until it arrives to a close-up. What follows is essentially Héloïse's reaction to the music, and she goes through a range of emotions while listening. She is clearly deeply impacted by what she hears, thinking about the time she had with Marianne. Initially, she breathes heavily and closes her eyes as memories flood back. Overcome, she then starts crying. However, eventually she stops and seems to laugh through the tears, clearly remembering in a more positive fashion. Her expression changes to a more neutral one and the film ends. As a result, it ends on a bittersweet note. Although they cannot be together and never can be, they have the memory of spending time together and nothing can erase that. It is particularly noteworthy that this interconnection is being framed by the music being played. Instrumental music, as a non-representational artistic form, resides within a fluid realm of meaning and signification. It can thus understandably be an interior frame of reference for Marianne and Héloïse's secret bond. Carol Flinn celebrates this fluidity as an area of feminine expression that can exist despite patriarchal social order: 'feminist writers reclaim and celebrate music's untraditional representational power as a potentially subversive force' (Flinn 1986, 61-62). Marianne and Héloïse therefore retain the knowledge that the music can and will retain deep affective meaning for them. They can embrace the ambiguity of music's relationship to meaning, safe in the knowledge that it can escape uses beyond their control.

The final sequence evokes a non-linear, dual sense of time and relation that it shares with art and memory. Braidotti would refer to this as memory 'in the nomadic mode' (Braidotti 2011b, 153-154). The scene unfolds in an actual present, where the concert is taking place and the two main characters are listening to the music. It also makes reference to

the virtual time that exists outside the present. Firstly, we see Héloïse intensely experience the memory of her past love that she can never see again, and this is triggered by hearing the music that she associates with her. We can also consider this sequence's own function in relation to the time of the overall film. The sequence is a flashback, where Marianne remembers the last time she saw Héloïse. Therefore, even though we know the two characters never see each other again, we also know that this affirmative intersubjective space of memory between them remains and that it can be interacted with via the act of remembering. Braidotti describes such interpersonal connection as a non-unitary vision of the subject and argues that 'the disappearance of firm boundaries between self and other, in the love encounter, in intense friendship, in the spiritual experience [...] is the necessary premise to the enlargement of one's fields of perception and capacity to experience' (2011, 167).

In *Portrait* we have seen how there is a gradual dissolution of the sense of self and other between Marianne and Héloïse. Indeed, the film is a narrative of enlarged perception. In the beginning we very much have a singular sense of perception. The story is itself framed as Marianne's flashback and is therefore very much embedded in her perspective. However, after she meets Héloïse there is a gradual flow towards a sense of mutual appreciation for one another. This reaches an unexpected climax in the final sequence. Although it is initially framed as the final time Marianne would ever see Héloïse, we soon realise that through the act of accessing the memories that they will always retain, their affective connection remains intact. This sentiment recalls an earlier passage of dialogue when Marianne, trying to console her with her oncoming departure being made imminent, tells Héloïse 'Ne regrettez pas, souvenez-vous'.

### **3.4.6. Summary**

Throughout my analysis of *Portrait*, my primary area of interest has been the film's treatment of perspective, and particularly, how the film works towards a broadening of subjectivities. Initially, I identified the film's treatment of Marianne's gaze, which is the starting point from which the narrative begins. The film's treatment of her gaze is very much an active one, that invites us to see from her perspective. Yet, it quickly recognises Héloïse's gaze also. It is initially referred to in shots that frontally acknowledge her act of looking, and then gradually built up through the two characters getting to know one another. The merging of their two perspectives seems to occur through their mutual experiences of desire, art and eventually,

collaboration. As their perspectives seem to blend, the film enters a new realm of intersubjectivity, where the distinction between self/other is blurred. Finally, we saw how experiences of culture play a key role in expressions of this intersubjectivity, especially in relation to the time that is referred to beyond the core narrative, in their act of remembering one another. Through their experiences of desire, culture and memory, they can retain an affirmative experience of their own desire, even when the dominant patriarchal social order prevents them from being together.

Lastly, the film invites us to think about our own perspective in relation to the subject matter that it deals with. Jean-Christophe Ferrari comments on the heterogeneous nature of the film's subject: 'Quel est donc le *sujet* du *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* ? Il est multiple : c'est Héloïse, c'est Marianne, ce sont les femmes, c'est vous, c'est moi, c'est le *sujet*' (Ferrari 2019, 43). The broadening of perception that Marianne and Héloïse experience is somewhat mirrored in the audience's relationship to the film. When asked what she hoped the last shot would leave the audience with, Sciamma simply responded 'Themselves' (Handler, 2020). Her short answer captures the manner in which the final shot calls on the audience to take on an active role in relation to the film. The shot's duration and stasis invite the audience to think about what they are seeing and the way in which they are seeing it. Brey has commented on the active role that the film demands of the spectator: 'Nous ne sommes pas des êtres passifs devant une œuvre déroulée sous nos yeux. Comme celui d'Héloïse, notre regard est actif, nous sommes convoqué.e.s par le cinéma' (Brey 2020, 63). The film encourages us to play an active role in thinking about different perspectives, how others see, and how they feel seen by others. It invites us to consider perspectives not only beyond our own, but also, the perspectives that we are not used to being shown in the regime of images that surrounds our everyday experience. It therefore invites the spectator into an empathetical frame of viewing reference in relation to perspectives beyond his or her own.

### 3. 5. Sounds of Emotive Girlhood : Identity in the Films of in Céline Sciamma - Conclusion

Given the amount of critical acclaim and attention that her films now generate, Sciamma is very much a major contemporary queer and feminist *auteure* of French Cinema. As seen with her most recent film (at the time of writing), *Petite Maman*, her films consistently generate a great deal of media hype, in both the Francophone and Anglophone media. There is a great deal of thematic cohesion in Céline Sciamma's body of work as a filmmaker. We have seen that she repeatedly returns to narratives of girlhood. She often places emphasis on different processes of coming of age. She also often expresses a sense of feminine interiority, where the film explores the tension between the public and private selves. All of her films discussed in this chapter posit agency in relation to sexuality as having an affirmative potential for the female protagonists of films.

Sciamma's films also display stylistic continuity on several fronts. Music in her films often plays a key role. Her continuing collaboration with composer Para One is now one her most recognisable traits of the films discussed here. The original music composed for her films is often a tool for expressing the protagonists' inner feelings. Her films also often feature one key central sequence where there is a marked shift in the audio-visual register of the film, featuring little or no dialogue, and the action takes on a deep symbolic meaning in relation to the broader ideas of the film. This takes place in *Bande de filles*, during the hotel room sequence when the girl gang listen and mime along to *Diamonds*, and in *Portrait*, during the bonfire sequence where the three main characters see a group of women sing a Latin Canon, gathered around a fire. In *Bande de filles*, the sequence shows Marieme that another type of life is possible beyond the immediate confines of the *cité* where she has grown up. In *Portrait*, the sequence symbolises the figurative igniting of mutual desire between Marianne and Héloïse.

It is also important to note that the films that are discussed in detail here diverge in certain key senses. Although all of the films can broadly be summarised as feminine coming of age narratives, each film addresses a different phase of development. *Naissance des pieuvres* treats the realisation of sexuality through the prism of the passage from childhood to adolescence. In *Bande de filles*, we see the beginning of young adulthood and the potential assertion of agency that this brings about. In *Portrait*, the female protagonists are adults, but



the film shows us the initial confirmation of their sexuality. With each film, Sciamma provides a new treatment of recurring themes. A new angle is often provided by drawing on different generic codes in each film. On a surface level, *Naissance des pieuvres* appears similar to the sub-genre of a ‘teen film’. Chris Tinkham writes: ‘The archetypes of a typical teen movie are in place in *Water Lilies*: there’s the scrawny wallflower (Marie), the chubby extrovert (Anne), the buxom beauty with a reputation (Floriane) and the girl-magnet jock (François)’ (Tinkham 2008). On the other hand, *Bande de filles* bears several of the stylistic traits of the *film de banlieue*, by drawing heavily on the experiences of those living in the socially disadvantaged *cit  *. *Portrait* is, in many respects, a period drama romance. In these brief summaries alone, we can see the extent to which there is contrast in Sciamma’s body of work.

The analysis of Sciamma’s films contributes several key findings in relation to the overall aims of this study. The goal of this study is to discuss the treatment of identity in these films. The primary point of access to Sciamma’s treatment of identity is clearly gender, yet she consistently treats it in dialogue with broader social structures that touch on several facets of identity. All of the films are female coming of age narratives, but they relate the coming of age to the broader normative social structures of life. *Naissance des pieuvres* tells a female coming of age story, but it does so by focussing on developing queer sexuality. *Bande de filles* shows us the process of female adolescence in the *cit  *, but also comments on ethnicity and socio-economic opportunity, while relating these aspects of identity to the politics of representation in modern France. *Portrait* recounts a queer feminine experience in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, placing the lives of the female protagonists in terms of broader patriarchal structures that they encounter. In doing so, the film takes provides a queer revisionist view of history, that invites us to question the stability of the dominant heteronormative forms of history that we know.

Sciamma’s treatment of subjectivity is key to understanding her films. The narrative centre of her films often aligns closely with a feminine queer perspective that questions existing normative gazes of dominant cultural forms. There have been multiple examples of this aspect of her work throughout the films discussed in detail here. In broader terms, her treatment of subjectivity can be thought of as being what Rosi Braidotti would consider ‘nomadic’ in that it invites us to consider subjectivities in terms of perspectives that are commonly othered in dominant cultural forms (Braidotti 2011b, 245). The sense of subjectivity in Sciamma’s films is fluid, questioning fixed configurations of perspective

throughout her body of work. Furthermore, given that the sense of subjectivity is often from the perspective of a peripheral social position, her films also the continued dominance of normative oppositional modes of thought, such as patriarchy, heteronormativity and capitalism. From a formal perspective, Sciamma's films posit existence as an ambivalent flow. Each of her films end on an ambiguous note, with one of the protagonists looking beyond the frame in a determined fashion before the film concludes. In doing so, the films do not arrive at any fixed point of narrative climax. The films therefore avoid any defined sense of broad statement on the nature of identity, avoid hierarchal ways of being, and affirm identities outside the discursive bounds of normativity.

## 4. Aesthetics of Youth in Modern Quebec: Identity in the films of in Xavier Dolan

### 4.1. Introduction

Much of the early phase of Xavier Dolan's filmmaking career was surrounded in notable media hype. He was extremely young (making his first film at 19 years old), featured in starring roles in his own work, was extremely prolific, premiered his films at the Cannes Film Festival, divided critical opinion, and was known for being difficult in interviews. Andrée Lafontaine describes the media discourse surrounding Dolan at the time as often being based around 'his supposed narcissism (he made biographical films in which he starred), arrogance (he credited his success to his hard work and determination), and emotionality' (2019, 2). However, the trajectory of his career changed with *Mommy* (2014). The film received the jury prize in Cannes, was broadly critically praised and was a box-office success in the French-speaking world, selling over 1 million tickets in France. Bill Marshall (2016), author of the foundational *Quebec National Cinema* (2000), described Dolan's career as 'one of the most striking developments in Québec cinema over the past decade' (189). Since then, his career has featured considerable milestones. His fame grew with the release of *Juste la fin du monde* (2016), which featured several extremely well-known French actors and again won a prize in the main competition of Cannes. He made a brief, but now infamous, foray into Hollywood with *The Life and Death of John F. Donovan* (2018). Again, the film featured several extremely well-known actors and was eagerly anticipated but, it had a complicated release; it was famously delayed over a year and had to be significantly edited down from an original 3 hour version. His more recent projects, such of *Mathias et Maxime* (2019) mark a turn in a direction that is more stylistically stripped back, yet he remains a household name in French-language cinema. Today, he is simultaneously an established international *auteur*, and very much viewed as a Quebec filmmaker. As Andrée Lafontaine notes, 'his "very Québécois" profile, combined with the wide circulation of his films in foreign markets, continues to enhance the relevance of Québec's cultural specificity in wider frameworks of film reception' (2019, 24).

In the following chapter, my focus turns to the treatment of identity in three films by Xavier Dolan. My analysis covers several aspects of Dolan's work. In the first section, I will discuss the intertextuality and cultural referencing in Dolan's second film, *Les amours*

*imaginaires* in terms of digital intertextuality or digitextuality (Anne Everett, 2003). The film contains a multitude of cultural references which are presented in a style that shares several parallels with digital media. In my second section, I will concentrate on Dolan's third film, *Laurence Anyways*. I analyse the film in terms of 'queer aesthetics', which I understand as art that formally questions the normative socio-discursive constructs that govern modernity. I aim to consider the extent to which *Laurence Anyways* is an aesthetically queer film which playfully interacts with the normative formal codes of film. Lastly, in my final section on Dolan, I will discuss *Tom à la ferme* as a queer exercise in genre, namely the Hitchcockian thriller. The film makes use of the genre's suspense to create an air of ambiguity that draws the viewer into perceiving and questioning a series of socio-discursive constructions that inform how identity.

Identity is treated from several angles in Dolan's films. His films approach (queer) sexuality, gender and the cultural specificity of Quebec. Further to this, identity is communicated in a highly expressive, 'camp' aesthetic in his films (Sontag 1969, 277). Dolan's films correspond to the central aims of this research project in many ways. The films blur boundaries on several fronts. They often convey identity in highly ambivalent terms, with regard to oppositional dualisms such as hetero/queer and the local/global, for example. Dolan's work also blurs the distinctions between different media, by remaining narrative films in form, but by consistently drawing on a series of cultural references within the films. The notion of 'fluid selves' resonates on several levels of Dolan's films. The films show the potential fluidity of Quebecois as an identity, as the region holds an evasive position in relation to fixed provincial, national and cultural identities. Dolan's films are inherently fluid texts, as he openly cites the work of other artists, via forms of intertextuality, reference and pastiche.

The study of Dolan's films reveals several parallels to the work of François Ozon and Céline Sciamma. Like Sciamma, he often returns to narratives of youth, paying particular attention to issues of developing sexuality and gender in young adulthood. Indeed, youth is often a primary in his films for a multitude of reasons. Dolan made and starred in *J'ai tué ma mère* when he was 18 years old, so youth is inherent in the narrative. He also acted as a child. Andrée LaFontaine has referred to him as a 'millennial auteur' (2019, 24). The importance of the soundtrack in Dolan's films is another point of comparison with Sciamma, where the music takes on a deeply expressive role. Similar to Ozon, intertextuality is at times key to understanding the films of Dolan. Dolan also makes use of a sense of narrative uncertainty to

draw out questions relating to the ambivalent potential of identity, which we have seen is a key trope in Ozon's films. Yet, as we will see throughout this chapter, there are also several aspects in which Dolan's work diverges from the other filmmakers. His approaches to genre and form are less conventional than both Sciamma and Ozon. His use of popular music in the soundtrack is also much more pronounced than either of the other two. Unlike Sciamma and Ozon, his work regularly forgoes narrative depth, instead depending more heavily on aesthetic style to communicate ideas.

I have decided to focus on these three films amongst Dolan's body of work. Firstly, I find that the early phase of his career corresponds particularly well to the methodology of my approach here, which depends heavily on the interpretation of the films' audio-visual aesthetic. All we will see in the following chapter, throughout these films, Dolan often prioritised a deeply expressive style in place of traditional narrative depth achieved through dialogue. Although this phase of his career is often described in terms of 'style, surface, and superficiality' (Lafontaine 2019, 10), I aim to reconsider his aesthetic approach as being key to understanding his body of work. His later films, such as *Mommy* and *Juste la fin du monde*, are key films and have contributed hugely to his international profile, but the films studied here correspond better to the methodological approach of this study. I also aim to fill certain gaps in the existing scholarship of Dolan's films, as there are few existing studies dedicated solely to *Les amours imaginaires* or *Tom à la ferme*, when compared to some of his other films.

## 4. 2. Digital Intertextuality in *Les amours imaginaires* (2010)

### 4.2.1. Introduction

*Les amours imaginaires* is Xavier Dolan's second film after *J'ai tué ma mère*. Initially, Dolan had planned on making the film that eventually went on to become *Laurence Anyways*, but the ambitious nature of the project meant that financing it would prove difficult. Instead, he decided to make something more streamlined and simplified that would allow him to start working almost immediately and which, in turn, would result in a quick turnaround only one year after making his debut. At this point in his career, Dolan's success and notoriety were still far more modest than they would become following the arrival of *Mommy*, *Juste la fin du monde* and *The Life and Death of John F. Donovan*. Nonetheless, *Les amours imaginaires* built on much of the hype that surrounded his first film, once again premiering at Cannes, this time in the *Un certain regard* section, and even proving to be a modest commercial success in France.

The film tells the story of Marie (Monia Chokri) and Francis (Dolan), two twenty-something Montreal hipsters, falling for Nicolas (Niels Schnieder), a mysterious stranger they meet through a mutual acquaintance. They befriend him, initially drawn in by his ambivalent behaviour towards both of them. The more they get to know each other, the more they (and the viewer) are unsure of Nicolas' true feelings towards them. Tension grows as they compete for his recognition, eventually culminating in the temporary fracture of their friendship. They separately admit their feelings to Nicolas, only to learn that he was never actually interested in either of them. Marie and Francis reconcile soon after, but it is not long before we see them pursuing another new mysterious stranger at a party (played by Louis Garrel) as the film ends. The simple narrative in the film serves as base for Dolan's expressive aesthetic, intertwining frequent literary, filmic and artistic references, alongside stylish manipulations of slow-motion and a very prominent soundtrack. As with the rest of his oeuvre, Dolan very much operated as the film's *auteur*, serving as director, screenwriter, editor, actor, and head of wardrobe.

Upon release, critical reactions were somewhat mixed. In the major French publications, reviews were almost unanimously positive. In *Les inrockuptibles*, Jean-Marc Lalanne referred to it as a 'comédie sophistiquée et charmarrée' (2010). Reviews in *Le monde* and *Cahiers du cinéma* were similarly positive. However, in *The Guardian* Peter Bradshaw

wrote that ‘there is something rather flimsy about *Heartbeats*’ (2010). Whether positive or negative, almost all critics referred to the film’s intertextual references, which most often included Wong Kar-wai, Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, and Pedro Almodóvar. Some found it be a touching exercise in style, others pretentiously superficial. As Lafontaine observes in relation to the media reaction to the film, ‘critics were either irritated by this exercise in style, or they were willing to accept it and enjoy the ride’ (2019, 10).

Existing studies on *Les amours imaginaires* tend to hone in on three key issues: the film’s treatment of national identity (Baillargeon 2014 and Mandia 2014); the recurring figure of the mother in Dolan’s work (Bourdeau 2018 and Massimi 2016); and the filmmaker’s cinematic style (Laverdière 2015 and Rees-Roberts 2019). I aim to expand on the current body of scholarship on the film by considering the film’s frequent cultural references as a form of intertextuality that has a distinctly digital resonance. Despite the film’s ostensibly ‘vintage’ tone, the extent to which it references and cites a multitude of different cultural sources reveals much about its relationship to the time in which it was made and, more specifically, to digital technology. It is important to note that the film’s apparent superficiality is a conscious stylistic choice. Dolan remarked in an interview with *Cahiers du cinéma* that ‘C’est un film stylisé plus que substantiel. Je ne me suis pas dit, je vais faire un film superficiel, par contre, j’ai choisi de rester en surface, en espérant qu’y affleure quelque chose de profond’ (Delorme and Tessé, 74). It is therefore important to note that the film’s apparent surface-level depth is a conscious stylistic choice it therefore merits serious consideration. For example, Bill Marshall describes Dolan’s approach as ‘the eschewal of depth models in favour of a proliferation of surfaces’ (2016, 194). This seeming superficiality, with scant regard for core narrative substance, is the central subject of this discussion of *Les amours imaginaires*.

In this chapter, I analyse *Les amours imaginaires* in terms of digital intertextuality, or ‘digitextuality’. Anne Everett coined the term to describe how traditional screen media have become increasingly impacted by the influence of digital technology. She says that ‘Among other concerns, this concept focuses on the intersection of established media modes, codes, and payloads, and those emerging within the frameworks of new media’ (2003, 5). I will examine Dolan’s film as an example of this intersection of a traditional media format that has been influenced and impacted by digital media. My approach here is inspired by Isabel McNeill’s analysis (2017) of Céline Sciamma’s *Bande de filles* (2014). Like *Les amours imaginaires*, Sciamma’s film incorporates varied cultural references and citations that borrow

from different artistic forms. These include sequences that draw heavily on the music video format and choreographed social media videos. Furthermore, McNeill describes how Sciamma's film is formally influenced by new digital media, whereby digital intertextuality 'erupts from and into the linear, diegetic flow of the film, generating ambivalent, competing meanings and emotions' (2017, 2). In *Les amours imaginaires*, Dolan adopts an innovative approach that corresponds to this idea of the 'linear diegetic flow' of the film being interrupted, with cultural citations frequently flowing in and out of the film's narrative. I will now move on to a more detailed discussion of the specific areas in which digital technology becomes manifest in *Les amours imaginaires* by identifying the key cultural references present and analysing them through the prism of Everett's digitextuality. In addition to this, I will examine the precise function of the film's cultural references in relation to narrative before analysing them as a broader trope of the film's relationship to digital media.

#### 4.2.2. Digitextuality and Multimedia Citation

Rees-Roberts refers to Dolan as being part of 'a post digital mindset' (2019, 219). Born in 1989, he was 21 when he made *Les amours imaginaires*. In his review of the film, Eric Fourlanty (2010) says that:

Dolan n'est pas seulement un enfant de *Musique Plus*<sup>18</sup> et du web, il est le fruit d'un siècle d'images qui, de Man Ray à Gus Van Sant, en passant par Audrey Hepburn, James Dean et Cocteau, trouve ici une expression aussi tendance qu'assumée.

This position, therefore, of exhibiting 'a post-digital mindset', and coming from a 'century of images' must be considered as having a deep impact on Dolan's work. Everett reminds us that the impact of digital media and technology is such that we it can manifest itself in endless formations:

In fact, Vivian Sobchack, following Martin Heidegger, makes the important observation that technology is never merely 'used,' never merely instrumental. It is always also 'incorporated' and 'lived' by the human beings who engage it within a structure of meanings and metaphors in which subject-object relations are cooperative, co-constitutive, dynamic, and reversible. (2003, 21)

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<sup>18</sup> A Canadian music channel, popular in the 1990's



If ‘technology is never merely used but, rather, incorporated’, this perhaps explains how technology impacts the diegetic world of the film without being specifically treated by the narrative. In *Les amours imaginaires* we never see the characters interact with or even mention social media and they are very rarely shown to be using a mobile phone. Marie, Francis and Nicolas write to each other by letter and call each other on landline telephones. On one hand, the use of older forms of communication technology constitutes a key component of the film’s camp aesthetic. Susan Sontag points out that ‘so many of the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned, out-of-date, démodé’ (1969, 286). The use of these older forms of technology in a film that is set in 2010 produce a camp stylistic effect where stylistic effect is clearly prioritised over realism. Rees-Roberts considers the décor and wardrobe choices as a key component of meaning in Dolan’s film. For example, he describes the aesthetic queerness of *Les amours imaginaires* as ‘purposefully off, consciously designed to be so awful, it’s good’ (Rees-Roberts 2019, 211).

Yet, the film bears the influence of newer forms of communication technology in other areas. Everett identifies how the impact of digital media can be felt in cinema by considering technological advances in relation to artistic intertextuality: ‘earlier practices of bricolage, collage, and other modernist and postmodern hybrid representational strategies and literary gestures of intertextual referentiality have been expanded for the new demands and technological wizardry of the digital age’ (2003, 7). If access to works of art and culture has been extensively expanded with the advent of digital media, then so too has the potential for intertextuality between these works. In *Les amours imaginaires* these intertexts range from passing, playful ‘nods’ to more consequential forms of citation<sup>19</sup>.

At the film’s release, critics often discussed the citations, references and influences of *Les amours imaginaires*. In *The New York Times*, Stephen Holden (2011) referred to Dolan as being ‘nakedly in thrall to idols like Wong Kar-wai, Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Bernardo Bertolucci and Pedro Almodóvar’. The film’s sense of intertextuality is established from the first shot, which is a quotation from Alfred de Musset’s play *Il ne faut jurer rien* (1836): ‘Il n’y a de vrai au monde que de déraisonner d’amour’. The line immediately announces some of the film’s most prominent themes, such as young love that makes those involved suffer and the notion of ‘truth’. It also contributes towards the establishment of the

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<sup>19</sup> Marshall (2019) has commented on the global concerns of Quebec cinema and this is certainly reflected through the cosmopolitan intertextuality of *Les amours imaginaires* with citations of 1960’s nouvelle vague cinema from France, a pop-music video from Sweden and American indie film, among others.

film's intermedial feel. By featuring a quotation in 'Times New Roman' font on a plain, black background, the opening is reminiscent of the first page of a novel. Dolan also uses a literary quote to open *J'ai tué ma mère*. We can therefore see it is a frequently used technique from this phase in his career. By doing this, the film influences the viewer's reception of this film. Using a quote from 19<sup>th</sup> century literature to open the film, there is a desire to interact with culture that is perceived to be of 'high' artistic value from the beginning of the film. Yet, the technique also echoes certain practices of quotation from social media, where a literary quote can be rapidly passed around via memes on Twitter or Instagram.

Later, the film introduces in a further textual citation, this time when the three main characters are browsing in a book shop. Nicolas shares a line he enjoys: 'Quand dans l'amour, je demande un regard, ce qu'il y a de foncièrement insatisfaisant et de toujours *raté*<sup>20</sup>, c'est que jamais tu ne me regardes là d'où je te vois'. The source of the quotation is Jacques Lacan's 1973 text, *Le Séminaire, livre XI, Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*. Once again, the citation's relation to the film's narrative is clear - Nicolas, quoting Lacan, reads in the first person addressing himself to the reader/listener(s) (Marie and Francis). At this point in the narrative, the nature of their relational triangle remains unclear, as Nicolas remains an ambiguous figure. The quotation speaks of the desire and suffering that one experiences in unrequited love. Reading this, Nicolas gives the impression that he may be experiencing similar emotions, and that these feelings could be directed at either Marie or Francis. It is evident in these moments of textual citation in the film that the selected text is deliberately inserted to emphasise the narrative action.

Later, when Marie and Francis meet for tea having both been rejected by Nicolas, Marie shows Francis a picture of a chair that she admires in terms of design. The chair in question is the 'Wassily Chair', designed by Marcel Bruer while he was affiliated with the Bauhaus school in Dehaus, Germany. The end of the sequence highlights the cover of the text that Marie had been browsing, as Francis tries to balance the book on the window-ledge and it fits in to the centre of the frame. The shot composition exudes a great deal of visual harmony; the position of the book in the frame draws our attention to it and subsequently we can see that the colours match other objects in the frame; red with the curtains, blue with Francis' clothes and yellow with the edges of the furniture (Fig. 1). The frame assumes a deeper meaning at this particular moment of the story, where the film's narrative seems

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<sup>20</sup> In the original text this reads as *manqué*.

somewhat resolved. Having overcome their differences, the two friends are reunited. The viewer has the impression that the disorder created by the quest for Nicolas is over and everything is back in its place, like in this frame. In this way, the image is evocative of many of the cultural references in the film which, while they may seem at times banal or playful, are carefully woven into finer details of the film. Furthermore, the image's symmetry alludes to a broader visual trope in the film, namely that of mirrors and reflections. The mirrored images evoke the doubling of the two protagonists, and the extent that they mimic each other by pursuing the same love interest, as they so often are framed together on two sides of the same image. The colours of their outfits also complement each other, to create a further sense of visual harmony. In this scene, they wear pink (Marie) and blue (Francis), colours stereotypically associated with femininity and masculinity, respectively. In this sense, the use of visual symmetry, mirroring and colour in this scene displays the duality of these two characters. It is of further note that Dolan uses this duality to explore different experiences of desire throughout the film, namely male queer and heterosexual female.



Figure 1.

The film's party sequence displays several layers of referencing. The scene occurs around the half-way point of the film, where Marie and Francis attend a party in Nicolas' home and jealously watch him dance with his mother, played by Anne Dorval. Analysing the figure of the mother in the film, Bourdeau writes that Anne Dorval's character 'is a different

mother who rejects the “routine,” and rejects the idea that she should only be a reproductive machine’ (2018, 353). The extradiegetic soundtrack plays *Pass This On*, a song by Swedish duo ‘The Knife’. The song’s music video (dir. Johan Renck) is, in fact, a major point of reference here<sup>21</sup>. Dolan’s sequence draws heavily on the video clip in terms of theme and shot choice. The video features a drag-artist (Rickard Engfors) lip-syncing along to the song before a small, indifferent audience in what appears to be a function-room of sorts. The camera pays particular attention to two members of the audience (played by the two members of ‘The Knife’, Karin and Olof Dreijer) as they observe the performance. Several close-up shots show them to be watching the performance closely. The male character approaches the performer to start dancing with them and is eventually joined by the rest of the audience, except for the female character who remains an onlooker. Dolan was influenced by Renck’s music video in terms of the close-up shot / counter-shot structure. The close-ups of Marie and Francis watching Nicolas dance mirror those of Karin and Olof in the video. Nicolas’ mother’s blue wig and robotic dance movement reflect the performed nature of their actions, which in turn heightens the music video feel of the sequence.

There are also deep similarities in their act of looking in the sequence and those that we find The Knife’s music video. In both cases, their expressions seem blank and indifferent. Yet, the object of their gaze holds their attention to such an extent that the possibility of a sense of unspoken desire is also alluded to. We know this to be the case in Dolan’s film, as we are already ready aware of how Marie and Francis feel about Nicolas. One could reasonably assume this to be the case in the video, as Olof breaks social convention to go and dance with the performer. There is also a sense of similarity between the sequences in terms of their representation of the object of gaze. In both examples, the object of the gaze is engaged in a degree of identity fluidity. The drag performer clearly participates in a performance that blurs the distinction between masculine and feminine. Nicolas is also subject to an undefined identity at this point of *Les amours imaginaires*, as he intentionally leaves his sexual orientation unclear, before later revealing that he does not identify as queer.

The most direct cultural references in the sequence are the works of visual art that are shown while Marie and Francis are looking at Nicolas, the first of which occurs with Marie.

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<sup>21</sup> Available here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKhjaGRhIYU>. Dir. Renck, Johan. “The Knife – Pass This On”. Youtube. 2003. Accessed July 31, 2020.

Different formal references in this sequence are used as a method of framing the gazes that take place during this sequence. Indeed, the gaze is a preoccupation throughout the film, as Baillargeon notes ‘it is literally the character’s subjective gaze that drives the story forward’ (Baillargeon 2014, 177). Photos of Michelangelo’s *David* are inserted into the shot / counter-shot of Marie watching Nicolas dance (Fig. 2). Next, we see Francis’ perspective framed in a similar way, this time with drawings by Jean Cocteau as a visual accompaniment for *Le livre blanc* (1928) (Fig. 3). Rather than refer to them through stylistic influence, as with the video for *Pass This On*, in these examples the works are visually cited within the sequence. On the one hand, there is a clear desire on the part of the filmmaker to frame Marie’s desire in relation to a classical view of masculinity. The selected renaissance sculptures reveal a physically imposing masculine form, idealized to the point of perfection. Dolan’s editing pays particular attention to *David*’s most masculine features. On the other hand, the Cocteau sketches frame Francis’ desire in a more modernist lens. While *David* represents a type of perfected realism, these sketches are more abstract, showing their masculine subjects to be frail and at times multiplying and repeating singular features. *David* represents a normative perception of masculinity, in terms of the desiring subjectivity of Marie. Yet, Dolan subverts the normative gender images here. By being two-dimensional pieces of art, the Cocteau sketches are essentially contours that lack depth. The surface/depth visual connotation echoes several other areas of the film. Although Marie and Francis desperately want to believe Nicolas is a deep-thinking cultivated person, they eventually realise that he is not. Furthermore, on realising this, they quickly learn that their own desire for him itself was shallow, as they were merely attracted to him for his physical beauty.

In both cases, there is a distinct desire on the part of the filmmaker to use the artworks to communicate certain ideas relating to the acts of looking and what is being seen; we think of Marie looking at Nicolas in terms of *David* just as we do with Francis and the Cocteau sketches. The film invites the viewer to frame the characters’ desire, sexuality, gender and personal culture in terms of these works of art. The different visual styles invite the viewer to consider links between artistic approach and sexual preference: parallel connections are drawn between heterosexuality and conventional artistic beauty, on one hand, and queerness and abstract expression, on the other. The sequence also exemplifies Dolan’s camp aesthetics. Sontag states that ‘Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a “lamp”’; not a woman, but a “woman”’ (1967, 281). During this sequence, rather than being simply seen, Nicolas is being thought of and framed through the multifaceted prisms of gender,

desire and cultural connotation. Furthermore, the sequence draws the viewer into considering the overall visual style of the film, and the manner in which it is framing desire and identity: which is to say, heterogenous, and as a product of the different artistic references that have come before. In a subsequent section of this chapter, we will see how Dolan furthers his camp aesthetic style in *Laurence Anyways*.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

#### 4.2.3. Filmic Quotes, References, and Intertexts

In other areas of the film, there are specific references to other films. These are both referred to within the film's dialogue and cited via the film's style. For example, after Nicolas claims to be a huge Audrey Hepburn fan, Francis buys him a poster of her and, later, Marie quotes a line of Hepburn's dialogue in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Edwards, 1961). The sequence where Francis imagines Nicolas under raining marshmallows is similar to a section of Gregg Araki's *Mysterious Skin* (2004). In *The New York Times*, Stephen Holden (2011) claimed that '*Heartbeats* is a kind of post-adolescent *Jules and Jim*'. Indeed, Dolan's film shares many similarities with Truffaut's film, in terms of theme (a love triangle, young desire) and tone (a seemingly light-hearted take on existential angst). Similar comparisons are made between Dolan and the cinema of Pedro Almodóvar (see Holden 2011). Once again, there are clear points of comparison in terms of theme (the mother-son relationship, queer desire, an emphasis on female characters) and style (highly composed imagery in terms of colour, camp wardrobe choices). Although these are important references in the film and indeed to Dolan's style as a filmmaker, in the following section, I will discuss two definitive acts of reference in the film, namely Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000) or Jean-Luc Godard's *Le mépris* (1963). Both films are explicitly quoted at different moments of the film, and thus are particularly important to analyse in detail. Given that my primary focus in the film is on specific acts of citation, rather than stylistic comparison, I have decided to prioritise these two specific examples.

The use of Dalida's version of *Bang Bang* in the soundtrack is a nod to François Ozon's short film *Une robe d'été* (1996). Ozon's film opens with the French-language version by the singer Sheila, yet the musical accompaniment and instrumentation are similar to Dalida's Italian version, both being covers of the original, performed by Cher. There are further similarities between the two films in terms of theme. On a base level, they both have the same subject matter at the core of their interest; a love triangle that operates off the 'shared interest' at the centre and which engages in a degree of fluidity in terms of sexuality. The similar ages of the characters in both films allows them to comment on the frivolous nature of young love and desire. Dalida is also one of many important queer French cultural references in the film, such as Ozon himself and Jean Cocteau.

Elsewhere, the colour filters used during the bedroom scenes are a reference to Jean-Luc Godard's *Le mépris* (1963). The famous scene takes place at the beginning of Godard's film, where Camille (Brigitte Bardot) seeks reassurances about her physical appearance from her husband Paul (Michel Piccoli). Camille lies naked in bed as she asks 'Tu vois mes

pieds dans la glace... tu les trouves jolis?', going on to list similar questions about several of her body parts. The room is bathed in different colours to produce monochrome colour blocks; first red, then yellow, and finally blue. Georges Delarue's extradiegetic soundtrack heightens the emotive, dramatic resonance of the scene. In Dolan's film, monochrome light is used in similar sequences. Four of these occur at different points of the film, the colour changing each time; first red, then green, yellow, and finally blue. All four feature one of the main characters in bed with a different person, two each for both Francis and Marie. Similar to Godard's film, the characters talk candidly about themselves and their love lives. Dolan's scenes are almost satirical in relation to Godard's. Whereas in *Le mépris* Camille's need for reassurances in relation to her physical appearance serve as an ironic, wide-reaching, commentary on the notion of stardom and the ultra-visibility it demands, Dolan's characters are much more self-involved on a personal level. All of Dolan's sequences depict casual relationships. The characters seem detached from their immediate surroundings and the conversations lead nowhere. Furthermore, the characters willingly forgo any sort of emotional connection with the person with whom they share a bed; one of Marie's acquaintances asks her if she ever imagines herself with a 'star' when in bed and Francis describes Nicolas when asked to imagine his ideal man. Later, when things sour with Nicolas, the mask of aloofness slips somewhat; Marie rants about how cigarettes are the only thing that maintain her will to stay alive and Francis cries on the shoulder of the man he is sharing a bed with. Although these sequences display the potentially carefree experience of casual relationships, they also indicate their shallow emptiness.

The most frequent filmic reference in *Les amours imaginaires* is to Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*. Bettinson (2014) identifies many of these from the perspective of someone studying the latter film. In relation to Dolan's film, he remarks:

A string-led rendition of 1960s tune "Bang Bang" comprises an overt leitmotif, accompanying decelerated imagery of photogenic players—an irresistible evocation of the Nat King Cole ballads in Wong's film; back-to-camera framings, shots of midsections, and slow motion sequences accentuate the female protagonist's pinned-back hair and form fitting dress, recalling the sensual figure of Maggie Cheung; cigarettes and smoking come forward as prevalent motifs and, as in Wong's film, ironically underscore the protagonists' sexual frustration; and the protagonists' every gesture and movement is romanticized by close-ups and languid tracking shots. (2014, 133)



The most concise reference to *In the Mood for Love* is the sequence that depicts Marie and Francis going to meet Nicolas in a café. A short build-up sequence shows them preparing themselves and then walking to the café. We see the characters in slow-motion. On the extradiegetic soundtrack, we hear Dalida's version of *Bang Bang*. This section draws on many ideas from Kar-wai's film, where several short sequences depict characters in slow motion, of which the corridor sequence is a key example. The recurring extradiegetic music of *Yumeji's Theme*, by Shigeru Umebayashi is played. Kar-wai's decision to highlight the apparently banal action of walking down a flight of stairs by showing it in slow-motion has clearly inspired Dolan in the sequence where Marie and Francis go to meet Nicolas. In both cases, the choice of slow-motion serves to suggest that the moment literally merits being accorded more attention in the narrative; an exchanged glance between the two main characters of *In the Mood for Love*, Marie and Francis hopefully going to meet their new love-interest in *Les amours imaginaires*. During these sequences we can also see that Kar-wai's film has influenced the wardrobe choices of Dolan's film. *In the Mood for Love* is set in 1960's Hong-Kong. As the slow-motion images give us more time to absorb visual detail, Kar-wai's sequence highlights the dress worn by the female lead, Su Li-zhen (played by Maggie Cheung). The dress worn by Marie is similar in style and cut to the 1960's aesthetic. Dolan manages to conceivably dress his character in 1960's attire by relying heavily on 'vintage' wardrobe choices throughout his film. Indeed, many of the stylistic choices influenced by *In the Mood for Love* that can be identified in this sequence are maintained throughout *Les amours imaginaires*. The colour filter sequences are another clear example of interfilmic borrowing. In the same way that Kar-wai frequently uses slow-motion visuals, repetitive close-up shots and a recurring classical music theme, Dolan also employs a repeated use of color-filter visuals in slow-motion, close-up shots showing characters in embrace and the persistent theme of Bach's *Cello suite No.1 Prelude in G – Major*.

The 'vintage' wardrobe choices, that can be viewed as a link to *In the Mood for Love* in the case of the slow-motion sequences identified above, are a prominent stylistic feature throughout the *Les amours imaginaires*. Rees-Roberts (2019) views the clothes worn by Dolan's characters as constituting one of the many visual 'surfaces' that the filmmaker imbues with meaning. He describes it as an 'idiosyncratic blend of narrative, music, and styling within a film that explores the formal tension between surface brilliance (fashion and the look) and thematic depth (identity and the body)' (221). In an interview with *Les inrockuptibles*, Dolan asserted that the wardrobe choices evoke the film's fluid treatment of

time: 'Pour moi, le vintage sert à montrer la pluralité temporelle du film. Le problème d'amour dont il traite est intemporel, on gambade allègrement des années 1990 aux années 1960, des années 1950 aux années 2000' (Serratia, 2010). Several clothing styles refer back to other times and give the film a tangibly kitsch feel. One sequence depicts Francis and Marie browsing through a vintage clothes shop. Aside from the 60's dress in the slow-motion sequence, Marie is often shown to be wearing sequined cardigans that hark back to the 1980s or styling her hair in a flicked-out bob that would have been common in the 1970s. Francis wears oversized sweatshirts that would not have been out of place in the 1990s, gaudily coloured hats and asks the hairdresser to cut his hair like James Dean. If we understand 'vintage' clothes, style and aesthetics in terms of old, recognized, and enduring interest, importance, or quality, then we can see how the vintage trope functions as a key example of the film's many forms of citation. Through these wardrobe choices, the film refers to other times and the stylistic registers that they evoke; Marie and Francis dressing as they do adds to the sense of the film reaching beyond the time in which it was made. With this in mind, the 'vintage' trope perhaps feeds into the idea of the film striving for a familiarly 'classic' feel while trying to maintain a realist audio-visual aesthetic; characters dress like they come from another time and hardly ever use digital technology, yet they feasibly talk and act like people who exist in their own present. Therefore, through different wardrobe styles and audio-visual styles, and the film deconstructs linear time in several senses. Firstly, through the film's audiovisual style, which openly refers to the aesthetic of *Le mépris*, very much a film associated with the 1960s, and *In the Mood for Love*, a film set in the same period. Secondly, the vintage wardrobe choices throughout the film playfully transpose the 60s reference to a contemporary time period. This omnipresent sense of 'vintage' is specifically referred to in the dialogue of the party sequence, in an ironic, self-deprecating manner. When Marie angrily reminds Francis that her dress is 'vintage', he responds: 'Je sais mais c'est pas parce que c'est vintage que c'est beau'.

#### **4.2.4. Dolan and Digital Media**

Although it may seem obvious, it is important to note that digital media makes access to information and, therefore, culture, faster and more frictionless than ever before. This surely has an impact on the relationship that we establish with the material that is being accessed via such means. If, as McLuhan states, 'the medium is the message' (1964, 7), here we have a

message that is communicated in a very particular style. So far in this chapter, I have analysed the style in order to come to a supposition about the medium. This medium, I argue, is deeply reminiscent of information and culture accessed via digital media and technology. Everett describes the potential for 'digital media' to impact more traditional forms via the notion of click theory:

I imagine click theory as a useful heuristic engagement with what Lyotard terms a "meta-function." For Lyotard a meta-function is a "faculty of being able to change levels of referentiality" almost instantaneously. Clearly, this idea of changing levels of referentiality corresponds to the operations of the Internet and web-based environments with their celebrated hypertext structures and linking functions, and even the channel surfing between television programs. (2003, 15)

I wish to extend the link with a more traditional audiovisual format (namely, 'the channel surfing between television programs') to cinema, through the piecing together of different cultural references in *Les amours imaginaires*. Everett describes clicking a hypertext link in an internet browser as changing levels of referentiality almost instantaneously. This terminology is evocative of the montage technique used during the party sequence where we see the different works by Michelangelo and Jean Cocteau. Different cultural references, covering different forms and artistic registers, are smoothly linked together like clicking through hypertext links in an internet browser. Thus, we can imagine the presentation of open internet-browser tabs with images by Cocteau and Michael-Angelo while listening to the 'The Knife', for example, or watching a Godard film in an absent-minded manner while scrolling through social media and an Audrey Hepburn photo comes into the feed. What I suggest here is that while we may not *see* much technology in the film, we nonetheless *feel* the impact that it has through the manner in which the film presents a diverse range of citations.

Although digital media advances at an increasingly accelerated pace and, moreover, has changed much since Everett first wrote her article in 2003, her theory remains pertinent today as she focuses much of her analysis on the ways in which we interact with this digital media, rather than precise examples of technology. What constituted 'digital media' at her time of writing— 'websites, CD-ROMs, DVD and computer games' (2003, 16) - has since evolved, but the actions of clicking and scrolling remain intact. If, as Everett claims, technology is 'incorporated' and 'lived' by the human beings who engage it' (2003, 21), then

we can witness this process of incorporation in the film's party sequence. Marie views Nicolas through her imagined image of Michelangelo's *David* while Francis sees Nicolas through his imagined version of the Cocteau sketches. These cultural references produce a digital impact on the film on a multitude of levels. As we have seen, they are presented in a scattered nature throughout the film. When we think of when this film was made (2010) we can hypothesize about how the cultural references here were accessed by the author. The diverse nature of cultural references throughout the film is analogous to the relationship we share with the material we access via the internet. We tend to share a throwaway, aloof relationship with what we can access for free, and in an unlimited manner, and this is reflected here. This is not to say that Dolan does not value the works he refers to but, rather, that the act of citation in *Les amours imaginaires* is somewhat relaxed and spontaneous. For example, extracts from Lacan and Bauhaus are nonchalantly referred to in passing without being contextualized on a broader plane in relation to the artistic registers we identify with them. This, I believe, displays a form of personal culture unique to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, millennial culture more specifically.

It is significant to note that Dolan is known for creating 'look books' for all of his films. He has spoken about this aspect of his approach to filmmaking in interviews for several of his films:

Once I've written the script, I prepare by researching imagery in photography or painting books, or even magazines. Powerful imagery is everywhere and that's mostly how I prepare for a film. I make a "Look Book". I gather all these images that really inspire me [...]. Then I divide the images into categories, whether it's for characters, locations, or costumes. I get pleasure in doing the editing of this little book and making it myself. I love making these books. I make copies for everyone on the film, maybe twenty copies in all. (Benjamin 2015)

This confirms the interdisciplinary nature of Dolan's approach, as he absorbs visual references from several art forms. One can easily imagine a look book for *Les amours imaginaires*, a film that so readily wears its cultural references on its sleeve. In a certain sense, the film constitutes a certain look book by itself, openly displaying different inspirations from one sequence to the next. This part of Dolan's approach is evocative of the digital resonance that is evident in *Les amours imaginaires*. One could readily compare them to a *Pinterest* page or an *Instagram* profile, collating hitherto unrelated images in a carefully

crafted selection. Although the look book is a physical document that Dolan produces, this idea of one centralized document which brings together a multitude of cultural references, spanning an array of artistic forms, registers, and milieux, curated by (at the time) a 21-year-old filmmaker, is surely reflective of the position of culture in the 21st century, one that is evidently irrecoverably impacted by the advent of the internet and digital technology. On this point, we must also consider Dolan as a person when he was making *Les amours imaginaires*, as he is very much the film's *auteur*. It is of note that he was just 19/20 when he achieved all of this, and it was only his second film. It is of course possible that these sources could have been accessed through more 'traditional' means, but it is altogether much more likely that it was done through digital media; such as the internet, curated blog websites, YouTube and online streaming, and this is reflected through the film's style.

Everett describes the presentation of information in digital media as being 'a rhizoplane structure of links' (2003, 16). Once again, her phrasing helps the viewer to navigate the presentation of cultural references in *Les amours imaginaires*. As we have seen, Godard, Lacan, de Musset, Wong-kar Wai, Araki, Ozon (amongst many others) are either referred to in passing or sometimes wholly cited in the film. Their 'rhizoplane' presentation in the film does not reflect a constructed linear logic but, rather, integrates them and clicks through them in a free-flowing, immediate manner that once again is reminiscent of the functions of digital media. The changing levels of referentiality referred to by Everett are less linear than traditional forms - there is the absence of a sequential 'logic' as such. They are more 'rhizoplane', as in digital media; references are jumped between in a fluid manner. The rhizoplane presentation of cultural references in *Les amours imaginaires* is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's proposition of rhizomatic thought. A rhizome is suggested as a model to avoid hierarchal binaries and the types of othering that such models infer. Throughout this thesis, rhizomatic modes of thinking have informed the understanding of identity, whereby identity can be understood as being inherently heterogenous, and not rigid, but in a state of change. The rhizomatic presentation of the cultural references in *Les amours imaginaires* therefore reflects the heterogenous nature of identity that is being articulated throughout the film. For example, during the majority of the narrative while we are unsure of Nicolas' sexual identity, the film expresses a multitude of desiring perspectives and often uses a range of cultural references to frame them. The treatment of sexuality in the film is therefore rhizomatic in nature in that does not express a hierarchal normative centre, but is complex, making links in a creative flowing manner.

Furthermore, the rhizoplane structure of links in which these references are structured also alludes to the transnational nature of Dolan's digitextuality. This reflects a broader trend in recent Quebec cinema, in relation to which Mercédès Baillargeon et Karine Bertrand note:

le cinéma et les (nouveaux) médias québécois semblent s'être transformés, particulièrement au niveau de la manière dont ils articulent les questions d'identité nationale et de souveraineté, en s'ouvrant davantage au monde qui existe par-delà ses frontières de plus en plus perméables, tout en demeurant fortement ancrés dans la tradition cinématographique, la politique et la culture québécoise. (Baillargeon and Bertrand 2019, 138)

Marshall discusses this trend in a similar vein, noting that in contemporary Quebec cinema the expression of global trends of multiculturalism do not supersede more local expressions of traditional identity, 'rather they intensify the lived relations between self and other, and potentially create dissident, laterally connected spaces in which new insights can be produced' (Marshall 2019, 265). These trends are reflected the cultural references of *Les amours imaginaires*. The film features several hyperlocal elements. Much of the dialogue, particularly during the mockumentary interview sequences, is delivered in a highly Québécois dialect of French. The film also features several examples of the global as being an integral part of what is local. For example, the film makes use of transnational cultural references as we have seen throughout this section, such as literary references from France and Quebec, design from Germany, music from Sweden and Hong-Kong cinema. We can therefore see the extent to which the film draws on both cosmopolitan multiculturalism and *Québécoisité* on a stylistic level in order to express the idea of Quebec's own cultural specificity in terms of a cohabitation of the hyperlocal and the global. The rhizoplane configuration of cultural references is used to express the rhizomatic nature of identity in *Les amours imaginaires*.

#### **4.2.5. Summary**

As a final point, I would like to consider the reception of *Les amours imaginaires* within Dolan's body of work. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the critical reception was mixed at the time of release and the overriding impression is that *Les amours imaginaires* continues to be perceived as one of Dolan's weaker films. For example, a recent edited collection on all of his work, *Refocus: The Films of Xavier Dolan* (2019) featured no chapter

whatsoever dedicated to *Les amours imaginaires*. The film was of course analysed alongside his other work, yet received less attention than films such as *Mommy* and *Juste la fin du monde*, for example. It is true to say that *Les amours imaginaires* is superficial in certain senses. Yet, the superficiality of the film is a conscious stylistic choice on Dolan's part and many have pointed to the heavily stylized surfaces of Dolan's film pointing to further thematic depth (Rees-Roberts 2019, Marshall 2016). It is unsurprising then to learn that *Les amours imaginaires* is the work of a relatively inexperienced filmmaker who wanted to conceive, produce and release a film quickly. It is the truism of Dolan's early work to point out how young he was at this point of his career, but it is crucial to bear in mind when analysing the relationship between digital media and his films. *Les amours imaginaires* is the work of a 20 year-old director, brimming with confidence after the positive reception of his first film. Having never attended film school, he was much less affected by the formal conventions of cinema than the average filmmaker. Yet, he arrived at this point in his career also with his own cultural references that he was extremely eager to express. These cultural references had been acquired like anyone else who was born in 1989; largely thanks to various forms of digital media, and this, I argue, is evident in the film's style.

### 4.3. Queer Aesthetics in *Laurence Anyways* (2012)

#### 4.3.1. Introduction

*Laurence Anyways* is Xavier Dolan's third film. It arrived during the much-hyped early phase of his career when he had made three films in as many years and was barely 22 years old. Like *Les amours imaginaires*, it debuted at the Cannes Film Festival in the *Un certain regard* section but with Dolan admitting to being disappointed that it wasn't selected for the main competition<sup>22</sup> (Dunlevy 2012). Despite some modest success in France, the film was, for the most part, a box-office disappointment in Quebec and Canada (Dolbec 2012). The film tells the story of Laurence (Melvil Poupaud), a literature teacher who comes out as transgender to his partner, Fred (Suzanne Clément), and their struggle to stay together. Spanning a period from 1989 to 2000, the film is extremely ambitious in style and scope, even by Dolan's own demanding standards.

As with all of Dolan's work at this point in his career, *Laurence Anyways* bears stylistic resemblances to well-known arthouse directors such as Wong Kar-wai and Pedro Almodóvar, and the filmmaker's influences have been robustly discussed in several reviews of the film (Rouyer 2012, 139). Furthermore, the film features many of the stylistic techniques that were already associated with Dolan, such as slow-motion frames, visual artistic references, and a prominent soundtrack. In terms of narrative, the film displays Dolan's recurrent penchant for themes relating to queer identities and mother-son relationship. It is also worth noting that the *Laurence Anyways* marked Dolan's first opportunity to work with a raised budget of 10 million dollars. Initially, it was the second script he had written, but he decided to delay its production until he had access to what he judged the necessary means to match the film's ambition. As ever, his own credits for the film are numerous, as he played a role in several aspects of the filmmaking process.

The media response to the film was somewhat mixed. In *Séquences*, Pierre-Alexandre Fradet wrote that 'c'est de la surface qu'émerge toute la profondeur de l'oeuvre de Dolan, qui se rive au niveau des apparences pour aller au-delà' (2012). Positive reviews also appeared in *Positif*, *Le Monde* and *Les inrockuptibles*. Yet, some of the more negative reviews were particularly acerbic. Peter Bradshaw wrote in *The Guardian*: 'The movie showcases an

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<sup>22</sup> An honor he would later achieve with the release of *Mommy* (2014).



unrewarding pop-video aesthetic, and a persistent narcissism and trance-like self-absorption' (Bradshaw 2012). In spite of the mixed response and harsh criticisms, the film has inspired considerable academic interest. Scholars have treated the most apparent identity questions in the film, those relating to gender and sexuality. It is of note that, despite it being a film whose main character is transgender, many academics have approached the film not so much through the lens of trans- issues as such, but more in relation to difference in general (see Armbrecht 2013, Brassard et al 2016, for example). Thomas J. D. Armbrecht analyses the presence of water in film, noting how it serves to reflect the instability, fluidity and transitions of identity that take place (Armbrecht 2013, 3). Corey Kai Nelson Schultz argues that the film creates a sense of empathy in the viewer, demonstrating how the act of looking and being looked at contributes to the creation of affect in the spectator (Schulz 2018, 2). Nick Rees-Roberts examines the film primarily in terms of sartorial style, and how it constitutes one of many surfaces that Dolan imbues with meaning (Rees-Roberts 2019, 220).

I will contribute to the existing studies of *Laurence Anyways* by discussing the film in terms of queer aesthetics. Muriel Plana describes culture that pertains to queer aesthetics as artistic creation which highlights the oppositional normative structures which condition our everyday thinking, not just in terms of art and culture, but also the manner in which our lives are led (Plana 2015, 10-11). This categorical evasiveness then manifests in the formal structure of the work. I will demonstrate how Dolan's film references to some degree other art forms (music, literature and design, for example). Having analysed the cultural references of *Les amours imaginaires*, it is evidently a central feature of his filmmaking style. *Laurence Anyways* remains a feature-length film, of course, but we can see a disruptive relationship to form and genre that will feed into this notion of how we establish the relationship between queer theory and cinematic aesthetic. Dolan famously refused the Queer Palm at the Cannes Film Festival for the film because he found that the idea of awarding films on the basis of their treatment of a particular facet of identity amounts to 'ghettoizing' (Marques 2012, 12). However, in spite of Dolan's rejection of the label, I will demonstrate here why a theoretical perspective informed by queer theory is fruitful in terms of analysing the film's aesthetic mode of expression.

To this end, there are three main areas that I focus on. Firstly, I will outline the formal queerness of *Laurence Anyways* by identifying the manner in which the film irreverently plays with the codes of cinema, and the way in which it approaches time and space through different stylistic markers. Secondly, I will analyse the specific sections of the film that

present many of the features of a music video. In doing so, we will see how Dolan's work is ambivalent in relation to notions of 'mainstream' and 'high' art. Finally, I will discuss how the film subverts broader notions of identity, so that it is not so much a story of queer sexuality, but rather a reflection on difference on a wider social plane.

#### **4.3.2. Formal Breaks, Style as Time**

At this point of Dolan's career, there was a palpable tension between critics' views of the filmmaker's work and Dolan's own view of his films. On one hand, critics (often justifiably) compared his work to Wong Kar-wai, Pedro Almodóvar, and the French New Wave. On the other, Dolan often claimed to have much more 'mainstream' influences, stating that if there was a main point of reference for the film, it was James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) (Lalanne 2012). Jim Leach commented on this tension between the filmmaker's defence of his work and the critics reaction to it by stating: 'His film certainly has an epic dimension, but its blending of melodrama in the context of queer sexuality [...] suggests a sensibility closer to directors such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Pedro Almodóvar' (Leach 2013, 94). I will take account of all of these disparate views while analysing *Laurence Anyways*. In this section I have two principal goals. Firstly, I will discuss the aesthetically queer aspects of the film, which will place it in stylistically similar terrain to the filmmakers mentioned by Leach. To achieve this, I will examine the film's playfulness in regard to the formal structure of film followed by a consideration of the film's queering of temporal and spatial linearity. Secondly, however, I will demonstrate the extent to which the film does appear to draw on more 'mainstream' cultural forms in order to queer the boundaries between artistic registers, such as high or low brow, or mainstream/peripheral.

Formal rupture with the fixed codes of narrative cinema constitutes a core aspect of queer aesthetics in film. B. Ruby Rich described the New Queer Cinema movement that emerged at the end of 1980s as 'Definitively breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive' (Rich 2004, 16). Much of what Rich writes could be applied to Dolan's body of work, as it rejects the labelling of identity politics in favour of style. Fulvia Massimi has referred to the breaks with filmic form in Dolan's early films as 'a staple feature in Dolan's work' (Massimi 2019, 44). Muriel Plana describes art that corresponds to a queer aesthetic as being 'formally troubled' and 'escaping traditional

classification in terms of genre', resulting in the work becoming 'formally mixed, or hybrid' (Plana 2015, 15). This can certainly be said of passages of Dolan's film, where there are several moments in which the film is in dialogue with other artistic forms. Firstly, there are moments in the film that correspond to a music-video aesthetic, where the music takes over from diegetic sound and seems to punctuate the rhythm of the sequence, often lasting for almost the full duration of the song. Examples include the party scene accompanied by 'Fade to Gray' by Visage and the use of 'A New Error' by Moderat at the beginning of the sequence in the Île au noir. Secondly, there are moments when Dolan draws on other visual art forms. After Laurence gets into a fight in a bar, we see her walking down the street with cuts and a bloody face. She moves towards the camera in a slow-motion tracking shot that is interspersed with images of leering faces from 'Christ Carrying the Cross' by Hieronymus Bosch. These images appear to reflect Laurence's own personal vulnerability, bloodied on the street and a social outcast, but they also broaden the temporal space of her plight. This is achieved by the painting's visual style (circa 16<sup>th</sup> century), giving the impression that those who marginalize and reject Laurence hold extremely antiquated views and, furthermore, highlighting the fact that such a restrictive mindset has been entrenched in culture and society for centuries.

There are also moments where the visual action of the film briefly breaks with the realist codes to which the majority of the film otherwise pertains. When Fred informs Laurence that she wants to leave her, we see a shot where a butterfly escapes from Laurence's mouth. Later, when Fred reads a copy of Laurence's book, having not heard from her in several years, she is moved to the point of tears. The book's title is *D'Elles*, which we can assume to be a reference to Fred and Laurence's time together. Fred's rising emotion while reading is reflected by the soundtrack, as we hear the sound of waves being slowly mixed in. It then culminates with a shot of Fred literally being immersed by water falling into her living room, in order to express the depth of emotional saturation that she must be feeling at that moment. Later, when Fred and Laurence find each other again and escape to the Île au noir, we see clothes fall in slow motion from the sky. In all of these cases, we can see that the *mise-en-scène* breaks with realist representational codes in order to take on an expressive role in relation to the characters' experience. Although *Laurence Anyways* is a linear narrative film, these brief moments that break with standard film structure constitute a core component of the film's aesthetic queerness and have the effect of subverting traditional film form. While Dolan's film has a standard narrative, it relies on techniques that go beyond a

normative film style. Instead, a queer form is used to express queer concerns. In the next section we will see how the film's formal queerness extends to its treatment of time and space.

Plana describes how queer aesthetics often subvert the distinction between certain binary dualisms, often accepted as natural and normal, yet maintained at the othering of a periphery in opposition to a centre (Plana 2015, 10-11). One such distinction that is subverted through the style of Dolan's film is the treatment of linear time. Let us consider, for example the structure of the film's narrative. The 'present' of the narrative is established through the opening sequences in the year 2000, as Laurence is being interviewed for the release of a recent book. The body of the narrative is framed as a flashback to 1989 and up until the year 2000. Jack Halberstam describes queer time as 'a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance' (Halberstam 2005, 6). With this mind, we can see how in *Laurence Anyways*, the film is not concerned with normative temporal frames that Halberstam alludes to here, but rather Laurence's own processes of identity. Fulvia Massimi analyses the queer time of Dolan's films as an attempt to 'carve out a parallel dimension for subjects whose impulses and desires, as both individuals and parts of unconventional family/pseudo-family units, cannot be normalized and integrated within the same rationale of heteronormative thinking and practices' (Massimi 2019, 42). I agree with this observation, but I want to expand on Massimi's arguments so as to consider the aesthetic values of the film, particularly where expressions of time, style and identity are all deeply interlinked.

The primary vector of temporal expression in the film is the overall aesthetic direction. For example, music is often employed to this end. Songs and artists that were popular in the 1980's, such as 'Bette Davis Eyes' by Kim Carnes and 'The Funeral Party' by The Cure, are used in a very prominent fashion in the '1989' section of the film. Dolan referred to these as important 'spatio-temporal markers' (Lord-Tremblay, 2012). Yet, he also used songs that are audibly more contemporary. These include 'If I Had a Heart' by Fever Ray and 'A New Error' by Moderat. The more modern examples have the effect of breaking the linear relationship between style and time, producing unexpected aesthetic movements between past and present.

Dolan admitted in several interviews that his main method of researching the historical period in which the film is set was through reading fashion magazines and therefore expressing the temporal period through style: ‘J’ai consulté essentiellement des magazines de mode. J’ai alterné des scènes où je jouais de façon outrée la carte du kitsch de l’époque avec une débauche d’épaulettes, de paillettes, et des scènes plus réalistes où on a du mal à dater les vêtements’ (Lalanne 2012). His research is evident throughout and, as with all of his films, Dolan himself oversees the choice of clothes for all of his characters. Nick Rees-Roberts (2019) considers the relationship between fashion and time in *Laurence Anyways* as an example of ‘vintage’ cinema: ‘By focusing more on design than history, unlike the period or costume drama, vintage is essentially an aesthetic space rather than a temporal marker; it implies reading history through the lens of style, through attention to mood and sensibility as much as to costume or dress’ (218). By expressing time through style, Dolan highlights the importance of wardrobe choices in his film. He invites us to reconsider the importance of fashion as a means of expression. In Laurence’s transformation, clothes are clearly of the utmost importance, as they allow her to express her true gendered identity rather than the one assigned to her biologically. The film’s wardrobe choices are therefore a central feature of the queer mode of expression, underlining the crucial links between style, time and identity. In *Laurence Anyways*, the typography choice serves as another important temporal marker taken from the world of fashion, where Dolan often shows a preference for Times New Roman. Given that the film is a series of flashbacks, text appears on the screen in order to temporally situate the viewer and this text is often provided in Times New Roman. Further to this, the spatial markers are also given in the same font, such as when they narrative shifts to Trois-Rivières or the fictional Île-au-noir. The font’s style and colour is reminiscent of the typography choices of 80 and 90’s fashion magazine. For example, the elongated times new roman is reminiscent of the logo of both *Elle* and *Vogue* magazines. The colours also echo fashion magazines where there is often a striking juxtaposition between the text (often in deep blue, pink or white) and the colour palette of the rest of the frame, further highlighting the fashion magazine influence on his film.

Another binary dualism in *Laurence Anyways* that is noteworthy in relation to the film’s queer aesthetics is the distinction between reality and fiction, especially in relation to space. By playing on the distinction between real and non-real spaces, the spatial dimension of the film produces a queer resonance. For the most part, space is identifiably real and tangible. The narrative unfolds in Montreal in the 1980’s and 90’s, with a brief section in

Trois-Rivières. However, a significant portion of the narrative occurs on the Île au noir, a space that does not exist in reality. It is a place that is alluded to at several points during the film, as Laurence and Fred seem to have a long-term project of going on holiday there, and a picture of the Île hangs in their apartment. Having found each other after years apart, Fred and Laurence briefly escape their everyday lives by going to the Île au noir. Initially overcome with joy at having found each other again, they meet a transgender couple that Laurence knows while they are there. Their joy, however, is short-lived as they fight and Fred soon longs for the normality of her home life.

Creating the Île au noir as a fictional space is particularly noteworthy in relation to the film's queer mode of aesthetics. Halberstam describes 'queer space' as 'place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics' (Halberstam 2005, 6). The Île au noir is a queer space that blurs the distinction between real and fictional. Furthermore, as place where the queer couple can live a peaceful life, it corresponds to the place-making practices that Halberstam refers to above. The Île au noir is a space where Laurence's life as a woman seems possible. By intermingling the real (Montreal) and fictional (Île au noir), the film attaches opposing values to these spaces. On one hand, although Laurence is able to live her life as the woman she wishes to be in the real space of Montreal, it is also the place where her initial steps towards womanhood will impact on her employment and personal stability. On the other hand, the Île au noir is a space where Laurence can exist as a transgender woman while being exposed to fewer social risks than in Montreal. Dolan shows us, therefore, what a queer space might look and feel like, and he does so in the most banal manner, so as to demonstrate that it does not need to be different. Instead, it is the attitude of those who inhabit the space that changes. By positing the fictional-queer space as one that is more accepting of Laurence, Dolan points to the progress that needs to be made by the 'real' space (which is to say the one inhabited by the audience) in relation to tolerance of those on the margins.



Figure 1.

Certain spaces in the film are demarcated as aesthetically queer by the manner in which they are visually presented, creating an intersection between space, design and identity. This is often the case in sequences with The 5 Roses – a group of highly camp, retired performers who are accepting of Laurence’s transition. When Baby Rose takes in Laurence after she was in a fight, we see the interior of where he is living (Fig. 1). His apartment has a highly kitsch interior. Laurence makes a phone call on a dial-up landline. A subsequent frame of the entire room shows several vintage lamps, furniture, and general décor. Further to this, Baby Rose wears a vintage fur jacket and eyeliner. Later, when Laurence meets the rest of The 5 Roses, we see several more vintage décor and kitsch wardrobe choices (Fig. 2). The 5 Roses’ home appears to be the interior of what was once a church, pointing to Quebec’s religious past. The décor and wardrobe choices have the effect of marking these spaces as queer and on the margins in relation to the other more central spaces in the film. Further to this, the spaces where we meet The 5 Roses are reminiscent of what Halberstam describes as a queer space, where they correspond to queer place-making practices and act as a shelter for Laurence from the rejection she experienced on the outside world.

Once again, when Laurence meets The 5 Roses, expressions of time, identity and style are interlinked. Halberstam describes the ‘temporality production’ of queer subcultures as important for granting their ‘participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death’ (Halberstam 2005, 2). The association between

kitsch, vintage style and queer identity is undeniable in these sequences. It shows a certain dissociation between the queer interior space and the outside normative world. The vintage interiors are literally out of sync with the temporal present of the narrative, and in a parallel sense, the queer spaces are out of sync from the normative structures of the outside world. It is in these space that Laurence discovers that other forms on kinship and family are possible outside of heteronormative social structures. Yet, it is important to note that these queer spaces are not framed in a negative manner, but rather styled in a particularly camp vein in order to depict them as voluntarily embracing a stylistic otherness, and indeed, a certain aesthetic campness. Sontag describes the ‘essence’ of camp as a ‘love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration’ (1969, 277). This stylistic exaggeration can be seen throughout the lavish interior of The 5 Roses’ home (Fig. 2). Furthermore, Sontag describes the relationship between campness and the aesthetics of time: ‘Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility’ (1969, 286). We can therefore see that aesthetically these sequences, and indeed many of the stylistic choices in the film, are not simply vintage (an appreciation of a relatively recent previous era) but rather camp because they play with time and use it for stylistic expressive means.



Figure 2.

#### 4.3.3. Pop Style, Queer Identities

A number of scholars (Baillargeon 2014, Rees-Roberts 2019) have commented on Dolan’s work in terms of the blurring of a distinction between a high and low culture oppositional



dualism<sup>23</sup>. In relation to cinema, this distinction is best understood as traditional classifications of *auteur* and mainstream forms. Plana states that art which corresponds to a queer aesthetic often blurs the distinction between what is pop and intellectual (Plana 2015, 16). For example, commenting on the New Queer Cinema movement, Michele Aaron described this body of films as work that could ‘be both radical and popular, stylish and economically viable’ (Aaron 2004, 3). This distinction is particularly noteworthy in relation to Dolan as a filmmaker. Julianne Pidduck refers to Dolan and his films as projecting ‘idiosyncratic taste’ (Pidduck 2019, 58). Many aspects of his career, particularly at the early stage, led to him being viewed in terms of a high art filmmaker. He was associated with the Cannes Film Festival from his very first film, an event that carries a significant amount of perceived cultural prestige. He is very much an *auteur*, as he participates in almost every step of the filmmaking process. Further to this, his interest in marginal themes that are often overlooked by mainstream popular culture, such as non-normative sexuality and queer identities, also position Dolan as a maker of highbrow cinema. However, there are several pop traits to Dolan’s work as well that cannot be overlooked. Dolan routinely rebuffs comparisons between his work and other *auteurs*, often pleading ignorance, and claiming for example, that his main point of inspiration was *Titanic*. Given his penchant for clearly referencing other films, I believe he is saying this in order to distance himself from his art cinema influences in filmmaking. Further to this, he has displayed a penchant for extremely well-known popular music, using songs by Céline Dion in multiple films, such as ‘Pour que tu m’aimes encore’ in *Laurence Anyways*. Nick Rees-Roberts interprets this as a central feature of Dolan’s stylistic approach, referring to it as an ‘investment in the codes of popular genres (romance and melodrama) and subcultural forms (camp and drag) more than in the (straight) art-house tradition of social realism’ (Rees-Roberts 2019, 219). As a result, Dolan’s queer code switching between pop and high art means that his work does not sit easily in either category. In *Laurence Anyways*, I want to consider Dolan’s treatment of a high/low cultural distinction in terms of the sequences that draw heavily on the formal aesthetics of a music-video.

Several sequences can be said to pertain to a music-video aesthetic in *Laurence Anyways*. These are the moments when there is often no diegetic sound and the music dominates the audio field. During these sequences, the music goes further than merely

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<sup>23</sup> Similar comments have been made about François Ozon’s body of work (see Asibong 2008, Bourdeau 2021)

accompanying the image, often punctuating the rhythm and dictating the mood of the scene. The music-video aesthetic is a particularly pertinent technique in relation to the question of high and low cultural form. While the music video has obvious pop connotation in terms of being a ‘minor’ audio-visual form, Dolan’s innovative use of this particular artistic product maintains all of his subcultural references, producing stylistic flourishes that are central to the aesthetic queerness of his films. For example, during the film’s opening sequence we hear ‘If I Had a Heart’ by Fever Ray. The initial titles are accompanied by dialogue emanating from Laurence and the journalist interviewing her. The end of Laurence’s answer is punctuated by the beginning of the music and the title appearing on the screen. The sequence shows Laurence leaving an apartment and walking down the street. She is constantly filmed from behind. The majority of the sequence however is made up of subjective shots that match the perspective of Laurence as she is stared at by people passing her on the street. During this sequence, the film reveals a preoccupation with acts of looking and being seen. Halberstam discusses the possibility of a transgender gaze or look in relation to film. He says that such films involve ‘embedding several ways of looking into one’ and they make sure of ‘certain formal techniques to give the viewer access to the transgender gaze in order to allow us to look with the transgender character instead of at him’ (Halberstam 2005, 78). During this sequence, the perspective of the viewer aligns with Laurence in order to give us an impression of what her daily experience is like. We can see, therefore, how the transgender gaze of the sequence corresponds to what Halberstam refers to as looking with the transgender character instead of at her.

The choice of song here is key to the sequence’s queer aesthetic. Much of the music in *Laurence Anyways* is a stylistic-temporal marker to underpin the 80’s audio-visual aesthetic throughout the film. Here, however, the music is audibly much more contemporary. The song choices therefore produce an effect of stylistic temporal fluidity and, indeed queerness, where contemporary and older popular styles of music are juxtaposed. The musical genre is another point whereby Dolan blurs the distinction between pop and high-brow cultural styles. Although Dolan is drawing on a ‘popular’ format, in terms of filming a sequence that is reminiscent of a music video, the style of music is considerably different to other moments in the film. It is far less ‘pop’ than other examples such as Céline Dion. The music is also ambiguous in terms of tone, which matches the ambiguous fashion in which Laurence is filmed during this sequence, as the audience only sees her from behind. Fever Ray, whose real name is Karin Dreijer, is a significant choice as an artist in terms of the

sequence's queer aesthetic. Dolan integrates several songs that use her vocals into *Laurence Anyways* and *Les amours imaginaires*. Dreijer is also known to be a politically engaged activist and her music has an aesthetically queer resonance. The song's vocal can also be thought of in terms of a queer performance. Dreijer often uses a pitch shifting effect on her voice to make it sound like it could be a man or woman singing, creating an identity which is at times ambiguous for her as a vocalist. Significantly lowering of her voice creates a masculine effect, which can be heard throughout this sequence. Furthermore, the action on screen relates to the lyrics. The song is sung from the perspective of a monstrous figure: 'If I had a heart I could love you, if I had a voice I would sing'. At the same, Laurence is being stared at, like a monster, simply for walking down the street.

Other music-video moments occur throughout the film. During a later scene in a nightclub, we see another stylistic break in form. There is no diegetic sound, but on the soundtrack we hear 'The Funeral Party' by The Cure. The short scene is highly composed from a visual standpoint and the visual effects, in turn, enhance the impact of the music, as they dance, the frames of both Laurence and Fred are lit entirely from behind using coloured neon lights. The effect of the lighting is considerably heightened by the frames per second rate (fps) being dramatically slowed down. The film's cinematographer, Yves Bélanger, revealed the effect to be a specific reference to music-videos from the 1980's. When asked about the sequence in an interview, he responded: 'That was a homage to the music videos of the 1980s and '90s; we shot it at 4 fps' (Witmer 2013). As a visual effect, slowing down the fps was a very popular visual effect during the 1980's, and as a result, it does impart a temporal resonance to this part of the film. The short sequence also has the effect of furthering the film's queer aesthetics by playfully stretching the formal limits of narrative film through the borrowing of an audio-visual technique from the music-video genre. As a result, the music-video aesthetic also contributes to the film's blurring with the distinction between high and low cultural registers, by drawing on a mainstream 'pop' form within the structure of a film.

The extradiegetic music takes over again when Laurence goes to work dressed in a woman's clothes for the first time. As Laurence enters the classroom and walks down the hallway, we hear 'Moisture (Headman Club Version)' by Headman. As with many of the music-video passages of *Laurence Anyways*, the sequence shows a preoccupation with different acts of looking. The structure of a subjective-shot of Laurence's walk to a counter-shot of passers-by looking at Laurence is reminiscent of the opening sequence. Once again,

the sequence creates an impression of the transgender gaze. The subjective frames here are particularly significant as they give the audience access to Laurence's experience. Corey Kai Nelson Schulz comments on the treatment of gazes during these sequences: 'These gazes make us, the viewers, self-conscious because they return our looks and affect us personally' (Schulz 2018, 13). Therefore, these sequences, which initially seem like exercises in pop music video style, are in fact a key component to the film's socio-political discourse, which is to say the tolerance of difference. Indeed, different acts of looking are a recurrent feature throughout the film. Yet, the point-of-view shots are not simply an exploration of Laurence's transgender subjectivity. The film, as transgender gaze, shows the viewer how Laurence is being stared at by the students in her workplace, or people passing her by on the street.

The treatment of the different acts of looking in the film alters slightly during another one of the film's music sequences. Fred attends a ball when her relationship with Laurence is starting to falter. The extra-diegetic music is 'Fade to Grey' by Visage. Similar to the previous examples with Laurence, the sequence intersperses subjective tracking shots where we see the manner in which other people are seeing Fred. Here, given that the sense of subjectivity in the sequence aligns most closely with Fred, we can see that the sequence changes from the transgender gaze of previous scenes. There is, however, more of a sense of female gaze or what Iris Brey would call a 'regard féminin' due to the sequence serving to give us an impression of her own desires beyond her relationship with Laurence (Brey 2020, 77). During this sequence, there is a clear desire on Fred's part to embrace being looked at. Indeed, it could be said that Fred imbues a degree of what Laura Mulvey would describe as 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey 1975, 11), but she is doing so in an entirely voluntary fashion. The gazes of the other party-goers are framed in a welcome light as Fred enjoys the freedom of being away from Laurence, and, indeed, during the scene she later meets the man for whom she will leave Laurence. On one hand, it is noteworthy that it is heterosexual female gaze that is being framed here. On the other, the scene suggests that normative heterosexual desire can be openly embraced, while public expressions of queer identity (such as Laurence living as a transgender woman) risk public scrutiny.

The 'Fade to Grey' sequence is also another stylistic break in the film, marked by multiple technical changes that differ from other scenes. In an interview, Yves Bélanger said the scene was intended as a 'homage to 80's and 90's rock videos' (Witmer 2013). Rees-Roberts identifies points of comparison with the video for 'Bette Davis Eyes' by Kim Carnes, a song which featured earlier in the narrative (Rees-Roberts 2019, 221). The scene shows a

high degree of visual composition, with certain frames being symmetrically composed. It also contains several sweeping tracking shots that show the other party goers, with an air-blowing effect that we associate with fashion shoots or live music. The wardrobe choices here also recall a fashion shoot, with many dressed in haute couture and Fred's entrance being reminiscent of a cat-walk scene. The sequence also features several technical flourishes that mark a break with the semi-realist narrative style of the majority of the film, further developing the music-video feel. Fred floats and spins through the crowd as she enters (Fig. 3). The use of special effects and narrative lead us to interpret these aspects of the sequence as subjective projection, heightening the impression of being subject to Fred's female gaze. It would seem, therefore, that the sequence is a reflection of how Fred is enjoying being seen when presented with the opportunity to embrace a normative identity (in terms of gender and sexuality) and that she is celebrating her new-found independence from Laurence.



Figure 3.

Although the sequence may seem like an exercise in style, it animates the relationship between form and depth in Dolan's film. Rees-Roberts summarises the role that the sequence plays in the narrative: 'the ball sequence encapsulates Dolan's idiosyncratic blend of narrative, music, and styling within a film that explores the formal tension between surface brilliance (fashion and the look) and thematic depth (identity and the body)' (Rees-Roberts 2019, 221). In this way, the 'Fade to Grey' sequence is key to the queer aesthetics of *Laurence Anyways*. It blurs the boundary between lived reality and subjective projection. It also places the film in ambiguous territory in relation to the high/low cultural register, by simultaneously relying on audio-visual techniques borrowed from pop-music videos, but also

having a core narrative message based around Fred's desire to embrace a normative heterosexual identity at this point in the narrative. What may initially seem to be stylistically indulgent is often of most thematic interest in Dolan's work.

The final extended musical break occurs in the *Île au noir* sequence, when we hear 'A New Error' by Moderat. Large sweeping tracking shots of the frozen Quebec countryside announce the spatial shift in the narrative. Once again, this music-video feel of the sequence is expressed by a change in audio-visual style. 'Île au noir, 1996' appears on the screen. The frame displays a high degree of visual composition, as the black and white colour of the font match the icy countryside. As Laurence and Fred walk down the street, a series of slow-motion shots display their joy at being together. A rain of multi-coloured clothes falls from the sky (Fig. 4). The image of the clothes falling from the sky in slow motion is another stylistic break from the rest of the film, representing another moment where Dolan abruptly deviates from the codes of representational cinema. Fulvia Massimi has described this sequence as an 'imaginary space [...] in which several layers of subjective times and personal geographies collide and superimpose on one another' (Massimi 2019, 45). It serves as a subjective projection of Laurence and Fred's joy at having found each other again. It also creates an ambivalent space in terms of reality and fiction in the film, as it contains both real (Laurence and Fred) and imagined (the clothes) elements.



Figure 4.

The blurring of the boundary between reality and fiction is heightened by the fluidity of the space that they are in. As has already been stated, the *Île au noir* differs from the rest of

the film because unlike Montreal or Trois-Rivières, it does not exist outside of the film. The ambivalent nature of the sequence in relation to objective reality and subjective projection produces an aesthetic queer dimension to sequence. The image of the falling clothes is key in this regard. Katrina Sark comments on the image of the clothes here as a ‘liberation from the social, familial, and personal restraints they live under, and their unrestrained joy at being able to express their true selves and share this liberation and acceptance with each other’ (Brassard et al. 2016, 132). The use of clothes here points to the clothes’ importance in terms of gender performance and identity. Butler makes reference to the role played by clothes as a signifier of gender and identity, stating that ‘we derive that knowledge from the clothes that the person wears, or how the clothes are worn’ (Butler 1999, xxii). This statement clearly resonates throughout Dolan’s film, but during this sequence the couple clearly bear a certain insouciance the clothes falling around them. The choice of colourful clothes to serve as a symbol of the couple’s carefree joy is particularly noteworthy, as it is Laurence’s initial desire to dress as a woman that marks her first steps towards expressing her femininity. Yet it also her desire to be, and therefore dress as, a woman that will stymie her employment, familial ties and a peaceful life. During the brief idyllic moment shared by Laurence and Fred, the clothes can be irreverently tossed through the air as they are together and do not need to concern themselves with the obstacles that everyday life will soon present. Once again, Dolan’s queer aesthetics expresses a tension between a heavily stylised surface (dance music, sweeping tracking shots of the glacial Quebec exterior, slow motion, multi-coloured clothes raining from the sky) and significant thematic depth. The only opportunity for the queer couple to co-exist necessitates freedom from interference from the outside world, but it is ultimately fleeting in nature.

The music is another stylistic shift within the context of the film. It is far removed in style from the earlier examples by artists such as Visage or The Cure that generated a stylistic-temporal effect reminiscent of the fictional present of the film’s narrative. In this sequence, the music has a more contemporary feel, contributing to the film’s fluid treatment of style and time. The genre is also worth commenting on here. The upbeat ‘dance’ feel of the electronic music reflects Fred and Laurence’s joy at having found each other after an extended period apart. Instrumental dance music is also ambiguous in terms of theme. By not having any defined sense of meaning attached to it by words, it avoids any fixed interpretation. The stylistic ambiguity of the music, therefore, is matched by the sequence’s action on several fronts. When asked about the moments dominated by music in the film,

Dolan responded : ‘Ce sont les appartés visuels du film, des petites bulles qui opèrent des transitions entre deux scènes très dialoguées. On est projeté dans un moment plus onirique, un peu déconnecté de l’histoire. On est dans un espace de perception très sensible des choses’ (Lalanne 2012). While Dolan appears to diminish the significance of the sequences in terms of the film’s narrative, as I have demonstrated here, they are a key component of the film’s politico-aesthetic sensibility. Describing them as ‘un espace de perception très sensible des choses’ captures the appeal of these sequences, as a heavily stylized surface is often used to point to a greater sense of thematic depth. They draw the spectator in with changes in technique that often break with the codes of narrative cinema, producing an incredibly captivating effect at these particular moments. Yet, as we have seen, Dolan’s use of surfaces goes much further than mere visual appeal.

Dolan’s musical choices of songs by both The Cure and Visage are worth examining. We have seen how songs by both artists are given an elevated significance in the narrative, particularly in the case of Visage’s ‘Fade to Grey’, which is an extended stylistic break in the film. Both artists are commonly identified as being influenced by the *New Romantic* movement, a genre of heavily stylised pop-music associated with the 1980’s United Kingdom. Duran Duran, another *New Romantic* group, also feature briefly on the soundtrack during the film. The *New Romantic* movement was often associated with a certain fluidity in relation to identity, where the public image of the artists was ambivalent in terms of gender. This identity fluidity is certainly true of Robert Smith and Steve Strange, the most famous members of The Cure and Visage, respectively. Indeed, the *New Romantic* movement was emblematic of this aesthetic in 1980s pop and visual culture that heavily influences the visual style of *Laurence Anyways* . Furthermore, this period is often regarded as the apex of the music video, especially after the advent of MTV at this time. As a result, music videos were seen worldwide and had significant cultural impact. The stylistic influence of the music video genre is evident throughout *Laurence Anyways*. Finally, the fact that this was a movement particularly associated with the United Kingdom movement displays one of many transnational cultural references that are important in the film. I will return to the film’s transnational cultural referencing later.

The musical passages constitute a key component of the film’s queer aesthetics on several fronts. Firstly, they bear the influence of other art forms, producing a cultural hybridity that places the film in similar aesthetic categories to other practices of queer bricolage and formal hybridity. Secondly, they constantly point to the experience of marginal



figures and draw the spectator into an empathetic space with their experience. Finally, by integrating cultural forms that borrow from both ‘low’ and ‘high’ cultural registers, the film occupies an ambivalent position in relation to notions of cultural classification. The film frequently switches stylistic codes between popular and more stylistically refined music. Furthermore, it shifts between different norms of audio-visual expression that include those usually identified as ‘auteur’ (or intellectual, high-brow, ‘art’ etc.) with more mainstream formats, such as the music-video. *Laurence Anyways* therefore intertwines concerns that we traditionally associate with the ‘art’ cinema tradition (such the exploration of gender, sexuality and issues of marginality) with more directly mainstream cultural forms. Subsequently, the film draws parallels between the notions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, with those of the centre/periphery and perceived notions of normality/margins, and implicitly critiques the process of dividing and attributing material into different cultural forms of opposing status. The film therefore highlights, through its style, the heavily constructed nature of cultural distinctions.

#### **4.3.4. *Laurence Anyways* as an Aesthetics of Difference**

The concerns of queer aesthetics can reach far beyond those limited to issues of sexuality and gender, instead extending into normative cultural and societal structures at large. Although the primary vector of difference treated in *Laurence Anyways* is the notion of gender, it has been widely noted that multiple marginalities enter into dialogue with each other in the film. For example, Armbrecht states that Dolan plays on the instability of fixed identities in general: ‘L’exemple le plus évident est bien sûr la dichotomie homme/femme, mais Dolan questionne aussi des concepts plus larges, comme les relations entre les langues et cultures québécoise, française, et américaine’ (Armbrecht 2013, 3). In the following section, I will discuss the manner in which the film goes beyond issues of difference solely related to gender, instead engaging in a more expansive discussion of difference more generally. In addition, I will demonstrate how this discussion infiltrates the film’s style, producing what could be termed a Dolanian aesthetics of difference.

In interviews at the time of the release of the film, Dolan often displays an ambivalent relationship towards a fixed sense of nationality. In one interview, he states that he is Canadian, but as a filmmaker he feels ‘Québécois’ because his films are ‘steeped’ in the culture of Quebec (Stroumboulopoulos 2013). In another interview, he speaks of his

frustration at being always being positioned within the canon of Quebec Cinema (Mesley 2014). In both cases, we can see that Dolan has an ambivalent relationship to any fixed sense of identity. Bill Marshall draws a parallel between the notion of national identities and the atmosphere of queerness in *Laurence Anyways*. He notes that: ‘The lack of resolution in queerness [...] becomes a touchstone for these wider uncertainties of the national’ (Marshall 2016, 193). Indeed, the film has a vibrant transnational dimension on several fronts. For example, we can discuss the casting decisions that were taken by the filmmaker. Dolan stated in several interviews leading up to the film that he wanted Laurence to be played by a French actor. Louis Garrel was initially cast for the role, but when he dropped out at the last minute, they persisted with their desire to cast a French actor by offering the role to Melvil Poupaud at very short notice. Further to this, Natalie Baye was cast as Laurence’s mother. Both actors play their characters using their own metropolitan French accents, giving the impression the characters are French. The manner in which Laurence speaks, therefore, is a further indication of her otherness. Her Hexagonal French accent broadens the immediacy of the film beyond local concerns, creating a transnational, global-francophone tone. Yet, as Marshall notes, the film is not a ‘post-national’ narrative (Marshall 2016, 190). There are several other accents to be considered in *Laurence Anyways*. For example, the difference of Laurence’s accent is heightened during her scenes with Fred, because Suzanne Clément plays her in a strong Quebec accent and often uses French-Canadian colloquialisms. The same can be said for many other secondary characters who also have a strong local accent, such as Fred’s sister Stef (Monia Chokri), and the ‘5 Roses’ group.

Jim Leach writes how ‘the mixture of a French accent and Québécois colloquialisms, suggests that Laurence’s in-between state mirrors Quebec’s cultural situation’ (Leach 2013, 101). Certain spatial and cultural nuances of Quebec are expressed in the film. We can take the film’s expression of the specificity of Quebec, as the only French-speaking region in North America as an example. A sense of linguistic mixing is amplified by the presence of English throughout the script. The film’s title, for example, remained in English for both the francophone and anglophone markets. Furthermore, the journalist interviewing Laurence throughout the film has a strong anglophone accent when she speaks French, and often switches between the two languages. Fred also uses several words in English, most commonly to swear. There are several other examples of characters using English in passing throughout the film. During the sequence on the Île au noir, the two couples have a bilingual conversation, where Alexandre (Jacob Tierney) only speaks English. As we have already

seen, the Île au noir is a queer space in the film that blurs the boundary between reality/fiction. English and French are also intermingled on the film's soundtrack. The majority of the singing on the soundtrack is in English, such as for Fever Ray, The Cure and Headman. Yet, there are also notable examples in French through the incorporation of Céline Dion, and the song by Visage features both languages. Mandia notes how the mixing of accents and languages creates an atmosphere of 'hybridity' (2014, 111). Dolan stated in an interview that wanted to take advantage of Montreal's singularity in the film's narrative : 'C'est une ville unique, parfois terne dans son allure, mais toute énergisée par son gentilé curieux, caractériel, polyglotte, à la fois québécois dans sa jeunesse, son humilité, mais mondial dans sa soif de vie, de croissance' (Lord-Tremblay 2012). The manner in which the script is written is therefore a central aspect of the film's queer aesthetics. The mixing of accents, alongside the presence of English, in the film, subverts a fixed sense of the local/global. On the one hand, it is a 'local' narrative in an easily identifiable place and it is played as such, but on the other hand, the film also points to the cosmopolitan nature of a metropolitan city such as Montreal. As a result, the city of Montreal facilitates the hybridity of languages, accents and dialects in the film. Although the sense of location is clearly defined, this hybrid treatment of language is a key factor in the fluid expression of identity in *Laurence Anyways* as a whole. This fluidity resonates on several fronts beyond language, as we have already seen with gender and sexuality.

During the film, Laurence is, in many ways, caught in a prolonged transitory period, in terms of the narrative being the story of her movement towards womanhood. Critics have noted that while the film tells a story that touches on transgender issues, it does not necessarily deal with the real-world specificity of transgender experience. Nick Rees-Roberts refers to the film's treatment of transgender issues as 'bordering on drag' (Rees-Roberts 2019, 220) but his reaction to the film as a whole is positive. Bruno Dequen (2012) and Peter Bradshaw (2012) are critical of the film in general, and include Dolan's portrait of transgender issues amongst many problems they have with the film. Dolan's own comments on his motivation for making the film did little to satisfy those who were unhappy with this particular aspect of the film. He openly admitted in interviews that he carried out no actual research that would allow him to accurately portray the lived transgender experience (Coates 2013). However, at the same time, Dolan attempts to justify his methodology by stating: 'Transsexualism seemed like the most promising and rich metaphor to talk about difference amongst society and amongst a couple, and when I'm saying "difference," I can also say the

search for authenticity or lack of authenticity' (Coates 2013). There are scholarly readings of the film that support Dolan's claim. Thomas Armbrecht notes how the film places an emphasis on the 'trans-' prefix in transgender, and proposes an exploration of difference rather than one particular facet of identity: 'Les radicaux auxquels le préfixe trans- s'attache sont d'une importance secondaire, car leur fonction primaire est métaphorique' (Armbrecht 2013, 32) <sup>24</sup>. Others, such as Dominique Héту, support this claim : 'Si la transidentité apparaît comme un sujet central dans les deux films, elle est aussi une métaphore de la différence vécue par des individus marginaux qui s'intègrent difficilement dans une société normée' (Héту 2016, 2). In my view, this line of defence in relation to the film does not really respond to the trans community's criticism of the film, as they point out that transgender identity is not a metaphor that can be used by a cisgender filmmaker to discuss difference without doing any research. It is true to say that the film would benefit from more care in relation to trans issues: Melvil Poupaud does not alter his voice in order to feminise it and the wardrobe choices for her as a woman do 'border on drag', while for other female characters they do not. However, I do think that Dolan treats transgender identity with empathy by placing it within a broader context of difference. Despite the film's faults, Dolan is trying to articulate the experience of a peripheral other. Indeed, this acknowledgment of difference and rejection of essentialist identity labels are a mainstay throughout his body of work. I will contextualise the treatment of transgender identity in a context of difference in the film to conclude this section.

Dolan's approach to transgender as a broader treatment of difference is reflected in many of his thoughts on his own work. In several interviews, Dolan speaks of an ambivalent relationship to fixed understandings of identities. His reasons for refusing to accept the Queer Palm that was awarded to *Laurence Anyways* during the Cannes Film Festival are especially revealing in this regard. Dolan announced that he would never accept it because such prizes were responsible for 'ghettoizing' and the very idea of fragmenting awards based on identities 'divisive' (Marques 2014). We have already seen that Dolan is himself uneasy with a fixed identity in terms of nationality and this evasiveness in relation to categories is clearly manifest in *Laurence Anyways* on several fronts. Laurence and Fred both have names that are interchangeable in terms of gender. Pierre Lanquentin points out that Laurence is a name 'between' multiple languages and cultures as well (Lanquentin 2018). Sections of the film are

in-between different art forms, as they draw on the music video but also contain references to other visual arts. As we have already seen, the film cites a Bosch painting, but also draws heavily on the visual codes of fashion magazines. Thomas Armbrecht points out how there are several references to fluidity in the film: ‘Dolan utilise le nom Laurence pour lier son personnage au grand fleuve montréalais, et ainsi crée une analogie entre le mouvement perpétuel de l’eau et le devenir constant du personnage’ (Armbrecht 2013, 39). The ‘transitory’ nature of several moments of the film is expressed by characters passing through visually liminal spaces, such as a hallway or a window (Fig.5).

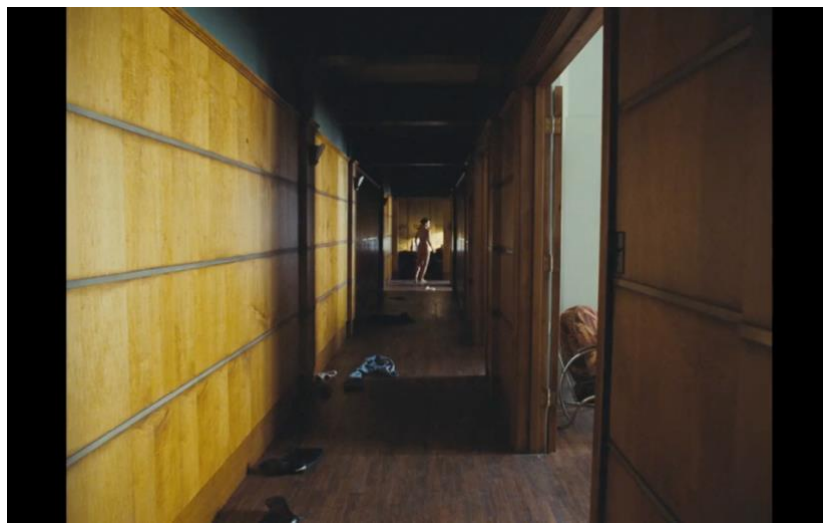


Figure 5.

All of these stylistic techniques in *Laurence Anyways* can be said to constitute an aesthetics of difference throughout the film. Indeed, Laurence embodies this difference at several moments of the film based on what she is not. Laurence is not a man, nor a Quebecker, nor Canadian, nor French, nor gay, but just Laurence, despite everything, Laurence anyways. Much of the film’s intent is announced during the opening credits. Before the film’s opening sequence, we see the credits on screen and hear the journalist speaking to Laurence in *voix-off*. When the journalist asks her what she is looking for, Laurence responds:

Écoutez, je cherche quelqu’un qui comprenne ma langue, et qui la parle, même. Une personne qui, sans être un paria, ne s’interroge pas simplement sur les droits et l’utilité des marginaux, mais les droits et l’utilité de ceux qui se targuent d’être normaux.

Laurence's answer acts a precursor to the sequence and indeed to the entire film. Laurence's desire in the film goes beyond issues of gender or sexuality, but rather her desire to be accepted in spite of the normative social structures that she is confronted by. In many ways, this is how the film embodies the use of queer theory not just as a critical framework relating to issues surrounding LGBTQ issues, but rather the very notion of normative structures at large and the negative impact they have on the lives of those they exclude.

#### **4.3.5. Summary**

In this discussion of *Laurence Anyways*, I have analysed the film in terms of a theory of queer aesthetics. Although Dolan as a filmmaker seems to reject queer readings of his work, I have demonstrated how understanding the film's aesthetics as queer broadens the film's socio-political nuances rather than limiting them to any one section of society. I have used queer theory as a means of critiquing normative structures at large, rather than simply limiting the discussion to LGBTQI+ identities, and I have demonstrated the various ways the film, through its aesthetics, challenges such structures. In the first instance, I focused on the formal queerness of *Laurence Anyways* by identifying the manner in which the film irreverently plays with the formal codes of cinema, as well as its fluid approach to concepts of time and space through different stylistic markers. Secondly, I paid close attention to the sections of the film that carry many of the formal structures of a music-video. In doing so, we saw how Dolan's work occupies an ambivalent position in relation to a high/low brow cultural dualism. We also noted how these sequences often act as a point of culmination for the filmmaker's approach, suggesting a tension between a heavily stylized surface and adjacent notions of thematic depth. Finally, I highlighted the extent to which the film subverts broadened notions of identity, so that it transcends the boundaries of the queer sexuality narrative, and instead interrogates difference on a wider social plane. As a result, it has become evident that through the film's plea for tolerance, which is manifested in the filmmaker's stylistic approach on several counts, it is possible to trace out what I have entitled an aesthetics of difference. In brief, this section demonstrates that *Laurence Anyways* is a film that communicates a refined socio-political message through style.

#### 4.4. Space, Isolation and Signs: The Queer Thrills of *Tom à la ferme* (2013)

##### 4.4.1. Introduction

*Tom à la ferme*<sup>25</sup> holds a singular place in Xavier Dolan's overall body of work. It is his fourth film, succeeding *Laurence Anyways* and arriving just before the breakout success of *Mommy*. To date, it is his only film in French that did not premiere at the Cannes Film Festival. With *Tom*, Dolan abandoned many of his best-known stylistic traits, such as varied colour palettes, overt references to other art forms and the music video aesthetic, in order to make a suspenseful psychological thriller in the Quebec countryside. In contrast to other projects where Dolan traditionally begins working on a film by starting with the script, in this instance it was attending a production of Michel Marc Bouchard's 2011 play (of the same title) that drew him towards adapting it into a psychological thriller on screen. The film's quick conception meant that financial means and the production timeframe were notably more modest than is the case with the majority of Dolan's oeuvre. At the time of the film's release, Dolan commented, 'je voulais écrire pour tourner, et non pour attendre. Il me fallait un scénario-éclair pour un tournage en vitesse' (Donati 2013) As a result, the aesthetic maximalism, a defining characteristic feature of his other films, is considerably toned down in *Tom*.

The film recounts the story of Tom (played by Dolan himself), who arrives at the family home of his recently deceased partner, Guillaume, in order to attend his funeral. He quickly realizes that Guillaume's mother, Agathe (Lise Roy), is totally unaware of his existence and, indeed, her son's sexual orientation. We soon learn, however, that Guillaume's brother Francis (Pierre-Yves Cardinal) has been expecting Tom's arrival. Initially, he makes it known to Tom, in an aggressive manner, that he wants Guillaume's sexuality to remain a secret, yet his intimidation soon extends to preventing Tom from leaving the farm. From this point, what at first appeared to be physical tension due to Francis' apparent homophobia progressively morphs into a sense of sexual tension, with Tom increasingly displaying traits of Stockholm syndrome towards his ostensible captor. It is worth noting that, whereas most of Dolan's films are characterized by an abundance of dialogue, in *Tom* exchanges are

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<sup>25</sup> Going forward, the film will be referred to as *Tom*.

markedly briefer and replete with silence which, in turn, results in an air of unspoken ambiguity and tension.

There are few existing studies of the *Tom*, thus positioning it as one of Dolan's least examined works in terms of academic scholarship. Bill Marshall's study of the film is key (2016), as it situates *Tom* within the context of his oft referred to *Quebec National Cinema* (2000). Discussing the film alongside *Laurence Anyways*, Marshall proposes a study of the relationship between identity and space in *Tom*, which he describes as being substantially more complex than a simple urban/rural dichotomy (Marshall 2016, 207). Steven Urquhart (2018) also addresses the question of space, analyzing the film alongside *Mommy* and *Juste la fin du monde*. He notes the deconstructive vagueness of space that is often marked by ambiguity (Urquhart 2018, 125). Florian Grandena and Pascal Gagné consider the film in terms of 'backwards cinema' (2018, 82) by focusing on the portrayal of lack and negative experience, with particular emphasis on the notion of 'metronormative' space in the film. As we can see, several of these studies specifically acknowledge the layered treatment of space in the film. In this section, I intend to build on these existing studies of the film by considering *Tom* as an exercise in genre. Many reviews of the film refer to it as a classic example of the psychological thriller 'with touches of Hitchcock' (Bradshaw 2014). Similar to my analysis of François Ozon's *Regarde le mer*, I will analyse the extent to which the film can be understood as a queer thriller. In the case of *Tom*, I will identify the extent to which the film can be thought of as a specific exercise in genre, and then place the film in the broader cultural context of queer pastiche. By knowingly performing and adhering to a fixed form, Dolan appropriates a major voice to enunciate minor concerns. I will then return to the spatial dimension of the film and its meticulous construction using a series of recurring images and symbols that intricately woven into the film's narrative. With the emphasis predominantly on suspense throughout the film, often at the expense of dialogue, the main thrust of the meaning in *Tom* is both produced by and dependent on these recurring visual motifs. Lastly, I will consider the connections between the different modes of meaning production in the film, namely the sense of queer pastiche and the significance of these spatial symbols, to understand them within the broader context of Dolan's filmic project which prioritizes the 'proliferation of surfaces' (Dyer et al. 2016, 112).

In *Tom*, the primary surface in question is the manner in which the film interacts with a familiar genre of film. The film's style differs from Dolan's other films that we have studied here because the generic codes that he is interacting with in *Tom* are so different to



*Les amours imaginaires* and *Laurence Anyways*. Yet much like these other two films, Dolan makes use of a stylised surface to draw attention to issues of serious thematic importance, such as the performed nature of identity, the potential for subversion when drawing on fixed cultural forms, and the cultural specificity of Quebec. Similarly to Ozon and Sciamma, Dolan make use of fluidity and blurring to interrogate the rigid nature of existing dominant models of identity, in order to articulate and make intelligible other ways of being.

#### **4.4.2. A Queer Thriller**

Rubin identifies the archetypal thriller protagonist as being subject to a significant degree of passivity: ‘These heroes are often acted upon more than they act: they are swept up in a rush of events over which they have little control’ (Rubin 1999, 7). This certainly reflects the position of the protagonist Tom in Dolan’s film. As previously stated, the latter travels to a farm at the beginning of the film for the clear reason of attending of the funeral of his deceased partner. Afterwards, he remains at the farm for no apparent reason. Beyond this point, he is incapable of seizing control and becomes an increasingly passive figure. This is perhaps most neatly portrayed in the mildly surreal situation when Francis easily intimidates him into taking cocaine with him and dancing a tango with him in the inner barn. At first, we have the impression that Tom’s passivity is a survival mechanism when threatened by the violent Francis, yet he forgoes the opportunity to leave, and later lies to a doctor about the cause of his injuries after being beaten by Francis. At this point, Tom seems to have developed a true sense of Stockholm syndrome towards Francis and the farm. He even assists the brother in the charade of his deceased partner’s heterosexuality by convincing a friend, Sarah, to come and pretend to have been Guillaume’s girlfriend. When Tom refuses to leave with her, he uses thinly veiled threats to convince her to stay, echoing Francis’ earlier description of the farm’s surrounding corn fields; ‘En octobre, un champ de maïs c’est comme un champ de couteau’. Indeed, Tom’s final realization of his vulnerability will be what forces him out of this state of passivity.

This passivity on the part of the ‘hero’ of course demands a great degree of manipulative control from the villain, and Francis duly provides this. He appears to have an almost monstrous capacity to inflict control and intimidation on all of the characters with whom he interacts throughout the film, except for his mother, Agathe. His intimidation is subtly shown to extend well beyond Tom, such as when he prevents certain people from

attending his brother's funeral. In this way, the character of Francis is steeped in mysterious intrigue, an intrigue that is established right from the first scenes in which he features and where he is introduced to the spectator without revealing his face. In the first sequence where we encounter Francis, he aggressively interrupts Tom's sleep to warn him not to tell anyone that his brother is gay. The extreme close-up camera angle and absence of light prevent the spectator from being accessing a clear view of the action. In the next scene, Francis is once again presented without his face being visible: an initial establishing shot with Tom in the centre is held at the same angle through which Francis enters the frame, thus obstructing the view of the latter's face (Fig. 1). Francis leans over Tom as he speaks, reinforcing his demand that Tom deliver a eulogy at the funeral. Furthermore, with the shot only showing his torso, he has a brutish, overtly masculine presence in the frame.



Figure 1.

There is no doubt that *Tom* is fraught with the type of questions and ambiguities that are intrinsic to the thriller functioning as a filmic form. Rubin notes the importance of the central narrative question-answer model in terms of the generic codes of the thriller; 'The narrative poses questions. The posing of these questions arouses in the audience an intense desire to know the answers. This creates suspense' (1999, 32). In the case of *Tom*, we will see that the questions are linked to a fractured notion of identity and the blurred nature of seemingly opposed dualisms. For example, why does Tom stay at the farm when he has the opportunity to leave? Why doesn't he seek help? What is the nature of Tom's relationship to

Francis? Is Francis hoping to keep Tom at the farm to live out his own unexpressed desire while publicly remaining an aggressive homophobe? To what extent is Agathe aware of her son's (or even sons') queer sexuality? Was Guillaume actually bisexual and Tom oblivious to this? The narrative makes use of these questions in order to create a dense air of tension.

Rubin identifies the thriller in terms of certain feelings and emotions that are most often grouped around an atmosphere of suspense (1999, 5). The initial sense of suspense and physical tension in *Tom* mutates into sexual tension as the film progresses and Francis and Tom's bizarre relationship gradually becomes the focus of the narrative. The tango dancing sequence is an example of the fluid slippage between tensions in the film. During this section of the sequence, there is an ambiguous distinction between physical and sexual tension. Francis has totally engineered this situation of the two being alone, dancing together. Furthermore, his dialogue marks a dramatic change from the violent aggression of before, as he reflects on an alternative future for himself beyond the farm. He explains how he is weary of farm life, but feels unable to leave before his mother dies, and secretly wishes that she would just die quickly so he can escape. Tom, for his part, seems increasingly seduced by Francis during this scene. A slow-motion frame of him being dipped while he inhales deeply and gazes longingly at Francis captures the intensity of his experience. At this point, physical tension has morphed into sexual tension. The taut atmosphere is heightened further by the entrance of Agathe to the scene, unbeknownst to the dancing pair. Her static, unmoving presence is truly eerie as she silently observes Francis and Tom. The loud volume of the music makes both the couple (Francis and Tom) and the spectator unaware whether or not Agathe can hear what Francis is saying about her. The disjointed dialogue that follows further suggests a degree of unspoken tension in their relationship.

During the tango sequence, the evolution of corporeal movements is highly significant. At first their movements are rigidly performed. Yet soon, Tom appears to progressively lose himself in the moment, suggesting he is genuinely drawn into Francis. Francis' movements, by contrast, remain rigid throughout. Even though he does not reciprocate Tom's increasingly emotive manner of dancing, his inviting Tom to dance does seem to suggest a hitherto unexpressed ambiguity in the interpersonal dynamic. The tango, as has been identified elsewhere (Uruqhart 2018, 133), has somewhat queer roots, as it was initially practiced and prepared amongst predominantly male dancing groups in Argentina at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The tango segment between Tom and Francis perfectly encapsulates the porous boundaries between physical and sexual tension that traverse the

film, as the viewer witnesses their relationship quickly reverting to violence at the end of the sequence. Secondly, the sequence reflects a desire to engage with a very fixed formal structure (the Tango as a dancing form), that is well known and accepted to the point of cliché. This desire is evocative of Dolan's overarching approach to the film as a whole, whereby he engages with a very specific set of generic codes and uses them to voice ideas and identities that are not usually associated with the stereotypical examples of the genre. As we will see, this constitutes the core of the film's queer angle, by taking widely known and generic structures and subverting their normative forms.

Rubin identifies suspense as the ambiguity between opposing values. He says: 'Suspense centrally involves the idea of suspension. We are suspended between question and answer, between anticipation and resolution, between alternative answers to the question posed, and sometimes between ambivalent emotions and sympathies that are aroused by a suspenseful situation' (1999, 35). Suspense is the key component of the generic codes of the thriller. The spectator not knowing what is going to happen creates tension, thus ambiguity triggers suspense. Rubin's description is reminiscent of the queer theory critiques of binary dualisms. Muriel Plana describes art that corresponds to a queer aesthetic as highlighting the historically and politically constructed nature of such dualist oppositions. She states that these can pertain to what are identified as the immediate concerns of queer studies, such as essentialist dualisms of masculine/feminine, but also to aesthetic values, artistic forms and social classes, among many more binary oppositions (2015, 10-11). In *Tom*, much of the suspense relates back to issues of sexuality and identity.

The ambivalent distinction between physical and sexual tension, previously outlined in relation to the film's tango sequence, is pushed even further during a scene where Tom invites Francis to choke him. Francis has bought beer so they can go and get drunk somewhere. The scene jumps forward and we see the duo in front of an abandoned hanger, having consumed the aforementioned beer. Francis approaches Tom, teasing him by saying 'Il sert à rien ton sperme'. When Tom notices that Francis is wearing aftershave, Francis starts choking him. Tom invites him to keep choking harder. He then tells Francis that he smells the same as his younger brother and has the same voice as well. Tension mounts, their faces move closer together and we have the impression that they might kiss, but Francis stops and the scene ends. The sequence's *mise-en-scène* is steeped in ambiguity. The techniques used are highly reminiscent of an earlier sequence in the film where Francis intimidates Tom in the bedroom. The nocturnal setting and the absence of lighting that this brings, prevents

the viewer from being able to see what is really happening. The close-up camera angle on the faces of Tom and Francis means that the frame does not show a significant portion of the field (Fig. 2). Given what we have already witnessed in terms of the direction in which their relationship appears to be headed, the viewer wonders if the physicality of their encounter will finally boil over into a sexual one. Out of frame, there is the possibility that Tom is touching Francis. As a result, the camera's framing plays a key role in establishing the ambiguity during this scene.



Figure 2.

The distinction between pleasure and pain here in this scene is undoubtedly blurred. It is unclear whether Francis is choking Tom aggressively or if he is just seeking an excuse to be physically close to him. Dolan leaves the question unanswered; Francis stops and the scene cuts. Rubin describes the blurred distinction between pleasure and pain as being integral to the thriller's functioning as a form: 'Control-vulnerability is a central dialectic of the thriller, closely related to sadism-masochism. The thriller is a form with strong sadomasochistic appeal: we derive pleasure from watching characters suffer [...] but we also suffer by virtue of identifying with those characters' (1999, 7). Rubin is describing here the sadomasochist relationship that the viewer shares with the film and his description has a particular resonance for this sequence on two levels. Firstly, there is the sense of the spectator being drawn into the film via Tom's suffering. The narrative's subjectivity very much aligns with the title character, therefore we understand his fear and suffering. Yet, as

Rubin states, this is central to the genre's entertaining appeal; without the hero being put at risk, the film does not thrill. Secondly, as we have already seen, there is a sense of sadomasochism in relation to the scene's function as an allegorical moment for Francis and Tom's entire relationship. Francis exerts a level of suffering on Tom which, on an exterior level, stems from his hatred of gay men. And yet, we can also see in these intimate moments that his homophobic exterior may indeed be no more than that, and that the purpose of his violence towards Tom could be the concealment of his own true desire. This, in turn, reveals the extent to which Francis inflicts suffering on himself, by maintaining a deeply self-flagellating relationship to his own sexuality. Tom, on the other hand, willingly allows Francis to exert suffering on him, possibly out of attraction for him or in the hope of replacing his deceased ex-partner. His Stockholm syndrome may also be rooted in a broader inclination towards self-harm, as he forgoes the opportunity to leave the farm when he initially has the chance. In what follows, I will build on the film's queer themes and aesthetics by considering the film's engagement with a very fixed set of generic codes in terms of queer thought. To do this, I will use queer theory discourse on notions of pastiche and performance to consider the film as an exercise of genre. I will demonstrate how the performance of normative structures in a conscious fashion opens up the possibility for the identification of the fabricated nature of such structures.

#### **4.4.3. Queerness, Pastiche, Performance**

The musical score for *Tom* constitutes a core element of the film's engagement with the generic codes of the thriller and is the source of frequent comparisons with the films of Hitchcock and their soundtracks as highlighted in a number of reviews of the film. For example, in *24 Images*, André Roy wrote that 'La musique lyrique de Gabriel Yared y est aussi pour quelque chose dans cette référence à Hitchcock, car sa partition rappelle les créations obsédantes de Bernard Herrmann' (2014, 61). Listening to the scores for *North by Northwest*, *Psycho* or *Vertigo*, one can understand the comparisons made in this regard. Although Yared's score does not make specific references to any composition by Herrmann (Hitchcock's musical collaborator), one could easily imagine that the previously mentioned films were a point of inspiration. In the cases of *Tom* and the aforementioned Hitchcock films, the music provides a sense of orchestral depth, relying heavily on string led compositions. They also contribute significantly to their films' sense of tension building:

often repeating short, minor-key motifs that suggest imminent peril. Indeed, in an interview with *L'express* (Baurez 2014), Dolan admits that these films were sources of inspiration when he started to look for someone to compose music for the film. He said that after writing and shooting the film, his initial idea of having a film with no music was disappointing. He then started looking for a composer to work on a score for the film 'plutôt du genre hollywoodien' (Baurez 2014). In the meantime, he saw some Hitchcock films, according to him, for the first time. Of Hermann's scores, Dolan remarked: 'Les musiques de Bernard Hermann font partie intégrante de la mise en scène. Je me suis mis à la recherche d'un compositeur de cet acabit et le nom de Gabriel Yared s'est vite imposé' (Baurez 2014).

As a result, it is possible to argue that the film's score constitutes a key component of the film's queer mode of expression. If we accept that the film's music is at the core of the film's engagement with the thriller as a genre, then the music is part of the film's broader sense of generic pastiche. There was clearly a desire on Dolan's part for the music to sound like a conventional thriller. All of this compliance with the formal audiovisual appearance of a thriller serves as a base for the expression of a narrative with queer concerns: homophobia, sexuality and further ambivalent identities. In the section that follows, we will see how the notion of genre and pastiche positions *Tom* in the broader territory of queer modes of expression. Richard Dyer refers to pastiche 'a kind of aesthetic imitation' (2007, 1). With this in mind, Dolan's decision to dye his hair blonde is an additional act of citation in relation to well-known psychological thrillers. Many of the female protagonists in Alfred Hitchcock's most famous films had blonde hair, such as Kim Novak in *Vertigo* (1958). Furthermore, Dolan's decision to change the gender roles of the figure of the Hitchcock blonde in this case reflects a broader desire to play with and subvert the traditional codes of the classic psychological thriller.

B. Ruby Rich describes the 'New Queer Cinema' that was emerging around the early 1990's as not having a unique aesthetic or referencing specific themes, but rather, by being united in terms of stylistic traits: 'Call it 'Homo Pomo': there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind' (2013, 16). Writing originally in 1992, Rich references a specific generation of queer filmmakers whose work is characteristic of certain developments in LGBTQI+ cinema at that time, but the above citation also provides a key critical perspective with which to consider Dolan's more contemporary film. Although Dolan's work arrives a couple of decades after the films she is referring to, there is much to connect *Tom*

with New Queer Cinema lineage and broader forms of queer culture. The notion of aesthetic discontinuity reflects the position of *Tom* in Dolan's overall body of work. Up until this point, all of Dolan's films were recognized for their playful cultural references, highly composed visual aesthetic and scenes built around the presence of pop music. *Tom*, on the other hand, denotes a departure from some of these stylistic traits. Dolan stated that his initial desire to adapt Bouchard's play was to turn it into a thriller (Donati 2013). The dramatic changes in style that Rich refers to are also evocative of Dolan's entire body of work and the position of *Tom* position within it. Although it would be erroneous to describe *Tom* as an aesthetically minimal film, it is substantially pared down when compared with the majority of Dolan's work, especially the three films prior to *Tom*. The expressive colour palettes and highly emotive outpourings are replaced here with a certain stylistic refinement. Beyond stark differences in terms of genre, what binds *Tom* to Dolan's body of work is what Rich refers to as 'Homo Pomo'. The sense of 'appropriation and pastiche' that Rich identifies to is abundant in *Tom*. As we have seen, Dolan's film corresponds to the formal structure of a classic thriller on several fronts by having a narrative constructed around suspense, mystery and tension.

Dolan, however, was coy about the extent to which his film references any particular work, claiming not to have seen any Hitchcock films before making *Tom*:

Je ne connaissais pas Hitchcock non plus avant de faire *Tom à la ferme*. Mais tu crois que je n'ai pas vu à la télé des thrillers psychologiques inspirés d'Hitchcock? Il a laissé une empreinte dans l'imaginaire collectif et je n'ai pas pu y échapper. C'est juste le principe du téléphone arabe, le principe de la pop. (Blondeau 2014)

Examining *Tom* as a specific exercise in genre becomes all the more interesting when we consider Dolan's thoughts. Whereas in other films he sought to playfully cite specific works, here he was seeking to interact with fixed generic codes. Furthermore, he did this by acting on the ones broadly present in the wider public consciousness, rather than any particular individual work. In this sense, Dolan's film is very intentionally generic. Yet, this is not in the usual derogatory fashion, as ultimately his use of the genre allows him to explore the more familiar Dolanian notion of ambivalent identities that contributes significantly to the film's interest.

Dolan stated in many interviews that the main point of inspiration was *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991). Yet, on viewing *Tom*, there are no easily identifiable references



to Demme's film other than very broad comparisons in terms of tone and elements of genre. By contrast, the comparisons with Hitchcock are much easier to establish. The image of a subjective tracking shot towards a shower curtain is reminiscent of *Psycho* (1960). The image of a chase through cornfields reminds us of *North by Northwest* (1959), when the protagonist is chased through a similar field. The music, as we have seen, is extremely similar in style to the scores for many Hitchcock films. Those familiar with Dolan know that his work at this point in his career was constantly compared to what critics identified as influences, so it is even possible that he simply denied having seen any Hitchcock in order to avoid talking about his influences. Dolan's view on the film's perceived influences reminds us of Rich's description of the filmmakers of New Queer Cinema as being united by a sense of irreverence. In *Tom*, Dolan's engagement with fixed generic codes in such an open way could indeed be described as irreverent. As with his other films, he seems to reference and cite other films and genres in an unashamed and, at times, light-hearted manner. In any case, deciding whether Dolan was specifically referencing any films or filmmakers is not the goal of this study. The central interest is his engagement with a fixed stylistic approach that Dolan explains as emanating from 'l'imaginaire collectif'. Although it is possible that he is simply being coy in interviews by saying this, it remains entirely conceivable that one could be familiar with the shower scene in *Psycho*, for example, without having seen the film.

Dolan clearly wants to use this collective imagination as a means to develop a sense of pop culture pastiche. The collective imagination is most effectively mobilized by pop culture. From this sense of pastiche, the structure of a thriller is simply used a formal framework to voice queer concerns in what is perhaps an unfamiliar generic voice. Dyer states that 'sets in play our relationship to the past' (2007, 178). For example, in a discussion of François Ozon's 2007 English-language period drama *Angel, Handside* (2021) writes that Ozon makes use of genre pastiche in order to use a familiar form to articulate concerns it does not habitually raise in its most familiar guises. She says: 'Ozon's film reminds its viewers of women's relative lack of control compared to men as they are much more likely to be victims of sexual violence, an issue that the 1950s melodramas he pastiches can only tackle obliquely' (191). Similarly, Dolan's film places homophobic violence and sexual ambiguity at the centre of the film's narrative in a manner which the films that are subject to the pastiche could have never done.

The sense of filmic pastiche in *Tom* is reminiscent of the notion of performance that Judith Butler refers to in the conclusion of *Gender Trouble*, where Butler notes how

repetition brings about the possibility of subversion (1999, 185). Although Butler's argument is based on expressions of gendered identity, the broadness of the vocabulary that she uses makes it possible for her argumentation to be applied well beyond the immediate and specific concerns referenced here. The set of rules that dictate the performance of gender that Butler describes are reminiscent of the rigid generic codes that structure a film. Yet, much more than asserting specific narrative tropes with which the spectator is already familiar where the thriller is concerned, Dolan uses *Tom*, to voice what Butler would describe as 'alternative domains of cultural intelligibility' (Butler 1999, 185). These alternative domains correspond, for example, to the experience of homophobia lived by Tom and the contestation of overly simplistic oppositional dualisms, such as the internal identity contradictions being lived out by Francis. Although Dolan's film is by no means radical, the apparent lack of formal fluidity constitutes a queer perspective in this way. By effectuating these acts of generic repetition, identity subversion becomes possible. This assertion is very much in line with the type of appropriation (Rich 2004), or reappropriation (Aaron 2004), that is referred to in terms of New Queer Cinema, which is to say, irreverently adopting the heteronormative forms and genres of mainstream culture and manipulating them to serve queer ends.

*Tom* is the first film by Dolan that received unanimous acclaim, from journalists and festival judges alike. At this point, it was also his most conventional in terms of structure and form, which he admitted was a conscious decision made at the time of the film's conception (Donati 2013). Although remaining within the domain of *auteur* cinema, *Tom* is less formally ambitious and fluid than his previous work. It is possible that by expressing himself via more normative structures, that the film speaks more to wider audience about such structures than work that deviates from them. This echoes what Butler says later in *Gender Trouble*: 'Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself' (1999, 186). What is presented as 'normal', 'natural' or 'essential' is indeed itself a historically structured and politically performative construct, often maintained to the detriment of alternative ways of being and identities. By taking a normative form and using it to voice perspectives usually excluded from such normative structures, *Tom* is very much part of this queer lineage that highlights the performative nature of 'the natural' itself.

#### 4.4.4. Queering The Urban/Rural Divide

The depiction of the farm and the surrounding space in *Tom* has already garnered interest in many existing academic studies of Dolan's film. Marshall comments on how 'the film is dominated by the space that the household and Francis demand, namely the closet, that is a massive re-calculation of where it is safe to be 'out' or not' (2016, 205-206). Indeed, the farm as closet metaphor emerges in other analyses of the film. In his review for *Postitif*, Nicolas Bauche says that '*Tom à la ferme* est le contraire d'un *outing*. C'est une mise au placard, un retour « *in the closet* »' (2014, 42). Uruquart (2018) refers to the farm as a space of deconstructive displacement: 'Rather than allowing Tom to come to grips with his partner's death, the farm unsettles him further and ultimately deconstructs the notions of family and brotherhood' (143). Pierre Lanquetin considers the imagery of the farm and the space that surrounds it in terms of the fairy-tale genre: 'Hors-temps, hors-lieu, multiplication des antagonisms assume, la séquence initiale n'est pas sans évoquer un conte de fées ou plutôt un *contre* de fées' (2018, 36). Lanquetin's observation certainly provides a rich perspective for the interpretation of the farm as an othered space, with an almost supernatural disconnection to the outside, subject to different values, where the sense of the outside world has been distorted beyond recognition.

I will build on these analyses of space in *Tom* by focusing on key images that create spatial symbols and highlight the importance of the farm in the film. This is established right from the film's first scene. The opening sequence is a close-up shot of Tom's hurried handwriting, making notes for a funeral speech on what appears to be kitchen paper. The frame fades to black and some titles appear. These shots serve as an extreme contrast for what follows, as we have a notably large tracking shot that sweeps across the Quebec countryside. It is initially occupied by water before arriving on land, following a road until it finds the car driven by Tom (Fig. 3).



Figure 3.

Further spatial signifiers and symbols are subtly placed elsewhere on the farm. The Longchamp home address number features in several frames. The number 69 resembles a loop, repeating and producing the same value when it is flipped or turned upside down. It is also reminiscent of the infinity symbol, '∞'. This further demarcates the farm as a space that is separate from everywhere else, a place where time is stagnant and nothing changes. Marshall comments on the recurring trope of loops and repetitions in the film: 'Psychological ambiguities are translated spatially in the film not through lines, binaries and boundaries but through loops, spirals, departures and returns, as in the opening song' (2016, 206). The imagery of animals also has a deep significance for the farm. We see the cows watch as Tom searches for the farm's tenants upon his arrival. The cows add to the eerie atmosphere that is already emerging from the sequence. The cows also heighten the hostility of the farm as a space, as they return the camera's gaze in an indifferent manner. Furthermore, these shots add to the atmosphere of entrapment that surrounds the farm: stuck in their enclosure, the cows are clearly incapable of escape. Their fate looms in the near future. They will either be milked until they no longer can be or be slaughtered for meat. This is confirmed a couple of sequences later, when we see a close-up of a dead cow being dragged across the ground by Francis. The cow's limp body is dragged across the ground to be disposed of. Another memorable animal image occurs when Tom discovers a dead calf lying in the hay and he carries it outside (Fig. 4). Once again, seeing the cow's body laying across Tom's arms seems to confirm the farm's hostility to both animal and human life. The animal imagery of indicates something truly bovine about the farm as a space. The farm, the cows and the pallid

mist that surrounds it are totally indifferent to the plight of human struggle that takes place on the farm.



Figure 4.

The symbolism of the cornfield is closely related to the images of Tom's hair, as they constitute a high degree of colour continuity, especially during the aforementioned scenes in the fields (Fig. 5). Dolan's choice to dye his hair blonde for the role highlights his penchant for yellow and golden hued colour palettes in *Tom*. There are many examples of this throughout the film; the colour of the fields and the countryside during Tom's initial voyage to the farm, the painted walls of the Longchamp house's interior, and the font of the film's title and credits, for example. Dolan revealed that photographer Nan Goldin was a principal visual influence on the film (Baurez 2014). Goldin's influence is apparent in *Tom* in terms of natural lighting and the preference for these gold-tinged frames, yet also for the interest in marginalised sexualities, which Goldin is known for treating in her work. Such colour palettes inevitably serve to remind us of Tom and his blonde hair. Tom's hair symbolizes the blurred boundary between standing out and blending in experienced by the protagonist of the film. At the beginning of the film, the colour of his hair symbolizes the extent to which he stands out at the farm. His long blonde hair, fashionably styled and dyed, contrasts dramatically from his surroundings. This contrast is amplified by Dolan's wardrobe choices in the first scene, when he wears a perfect leather jacket. Francis, on the other hand, represents a more stereotypical image of masculinity in terms of physical appearance. His hair is styled in a much more basic manner than Tom's. Yet, the way in which the colour of

Tom's hair is echoed in several frames also suggests that he has a place there. As he begins to demonstrate a desire to stay at the farm and be accepted by the Longchamp family, his hair evokes the imagery of the cornfields. Tom, as we have seen, uses a reference to the corn's sharpness in his dialogue. During the infamous Tango scene, the frame is imbued with warm golden light that enters by the raised windows. When Tom learns of the truth of Francis' violent homophobic past, a neon light spelling out 'les vraies affaires' illuminates the scene. To this end, the colour yellow is a visual signal related to Tom and his individual journey through the spaces of the farm.



Figure 5

Many of the references to space in *Tom* can be conceptualised in terms of an urban/rural divide and how the two sides of this spatial dualism relate to each other. The majority of the film occurs in rural spaces and, as we have seen, the film is carefully embedded in this sense of space from the very first sequence. Yet, in many respects *Tom* deals with an urban perspective, with the film's subjectivity being very much aligned with the titular character's experience. His trips from and back to the city mark the beginning and end of the film. Guillaume had hidden his life in the city from his family, which fuels the ambiguity at the heart of the film's narrative. Sarah arrives directly from the city, pleading with Tom to leave, but has to return alone.

Tom Waugh describes the urban-rural divide as a nuanced trope in the history of Canadian queer cinema. He says, on one hand: 'the demographic and economic determinants of Canadian queer cinemas have reflected the social history of the city as queer refuge,

diaspora, mecca, ghetto, garrison, and utopia' (2006, 98). Yet, he also notes that 'Non-metropolitan spaces have indeed functioned in a crucial way as heterotopias for our audiovisual corpus of Canadian queer cultures' (Waugh 2006, 98). He describes the urban-rural divide in Canadian queer cinema as going far beyond the simplified dualism of urban as metropolitan and rural as traditional. Gradena and Gagné describe the depiction of space in *Tom* as 'metronormative' by positing the rural space as one of traditional configurations of sexuality, and the urban as inherently more cosmopolitan and free, where the queer subject is forced to go 'out of the closet and into the city' in order to survive (2019, 86). Marshall, on the other hand, considers that the film's treatment of space as going 'well beyond a simple urban/rural dichotomy' (2016, 205) and I uphold the latter view. Despite appearing, on a surface level, to be a film that depicts the rural domain as hostile and city as being more open, certain key sequences problematize this simplified notion of space in *Tom*.

There are consistent references to the notion of authenticity in the film, especially in relation to the farm. In the bedroom where Tom sleeps, a poster over the bed shows a photo of a race car above the slogan 'Feel Real'. When Sarah appeals to Tom to leave the farm and come back with her to Montreal, he says: 'Regarde autour de toi, c'est du vrai ici. C'est vrai'. Sarah points out to him the irony of his use of the word 'vrai', when he seems to be wilfully engaging in the existential charades of the Longchamp farm. Immediately, Tom's dialogue and the poster associate the notion of truth, realness and authenticity with the farm. Yet, what truth is this referring to? Whose truth? The truth that Tom speaks of is course an imposed one, that he seems to be speaking of due to his growing sense of Stockholm syndrome for Francis and the farm. The 'realness' being referred to here is strictly surface-level, covering over the depth of the Longchamp farm's secrets.

The symbolic presence of truth returns later, when Francis asks Tom to leave him and Sarah alone in his truck. Tom walks into a nearby bar. While there, he engages in conversation with the barman (played by Dolan's father, Manual Tadros), who, on learning that Tom is staying at the Longchamp farm, reluctantly informs him that, years previously, Francis violently attacked a young man with whom his brother had been dancing in the bar. Both in terms of narrative and style, this is a key sequence in the film. The scene marks a turning point for Tom as a character. Up until this point, he seems fully prepared to stay at the farm, so that Francis will not be left to manage the farm alone. However, from this point onwards, he understands the danger he is putting himself in by being close to Francis, and knows must leave the farm.

In certain respects, we see a culmination of the use of yellow infused colour palettes. The room is bathed in the yellow light of the bar's name – '*Les vraies affaires*'. There are also some key tonal changes in register during this sequence. Visually, it is the most highly composed scene in the film. A tracking shot follows Tom into the bar and settles upon his point of arrival, sitting at the centre of the bar, in front of the bar's name in neon lighting (Fig. 6). Although the sequence is very much in keeping with the rest of the film in terms of the choice of colour palette, the neon light marks a stark contrast from the sequences at the farm, where lighting sources were often implied to be natural. The choice of lighting is perhaps an indication of a more urban space, yet the scene's dialogue reminds us that Tom is still very much in the countryside. On hearing his accent, the barman mistakes Tom for being French. The return of the symbolic use of the word '*vrai*' allows us to compare this one to the previously mentioned scenes. By virtue of the prominence of the sign's symbolic value here, the sequence is where Tom realizes what is actually real, the supposed authenticity of the farm as a way of life is only a surface that hides a depth of unacknowledged truths. Furthermore, there is a symbolic correlation between the centrality of the lighting source in the sequence, and the sequence's function as a moment of enlightenment for Tom.



Figure 6.

In this way, the sequence nuances the sense of dichotomy between rural and urban spaces in the film. In the brief conversation that takes place, Tom admits to someone that he is gay for the first time by revealing that he is visiting the area for the funeral of his partner.



His 'coming out' is totally banal, when the talkative barman merely offers his condolences, showing none of the hostility Tom was perhaps expecting having spent his time on the farm. Writing in 2005, Halberstam addresses the urban/rural divide in relation to queer cultural productions. He writes that 'in some recent work, the rural/urban binary reverberates in really productive ways with other defining binaries like traditional/modern, Western/non-Western, natural/cultural, and modern/postmodern' (Halberstam 2005, 36). Halberstam's statement corresponds to the approach to space in Dolan's film, which does not break down easily into a sense of urban as being exclusively modern (in attitude) and the rural being more 'traditional'. We can, therefore, see that not all of the spaces in the film are strictly 'metronormative', with the rural functioning as a closet in relation to the open city. Halberstam explains that metronormativity 'reveals the conflation of "urban" and "visible" in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities' (Halberstam 2005, 36). He also points out that such narratives do not correspond to live reality of many (Halberstam 2005, 37). The closet metaphor is perhaps more apt only for the farm, a totally othered space where no characters are capable of accepting truth. By the end of the film, it is clear that depictions of some of the rural spaces are somewhat nuanced, with the rural by no means being synonymous for homophobia, and such a simplistic summary only being applicable to the Longchamp farm. The sense of spatial nuance is refined further when we take into account the film's portrait of the city. When Sarah arrives from Montreal, she is not framed in a positive manner. She bluntly reveals to Tom that she, and many others, had slept with Guillaume while he was still Tom's partner. At the time, this seems to reinforce Tom's desire to remain at the farm.

Finally, the 'vraies affaires' sequence is particularly noteworthy for an innovative treatment of violence. The constant threat of violence is central to the film's suspense. Francis initially intimidates and threatens Tom, and threats eventually become beatings. Yet the violence is often adjacent to sexual ambiguity, and the boundary between physical and sexual tension is often indistinct. Francis dominates through physical intimidation and the threat of violence is never far away. Although it contains no violent images, the 'vraies affaires' sequence is the film's most violent moment. In the story told by the barman, when Francis attacked the young man in the bar, he describes how Francis put his hands in his mouth and tore his face from one side to another. The treatment of violence in this sequence is particularly noteworthy because it is not shown through images but instead recounted through testimony. The sequence's dialogue has a significant impact on several levels. In

terms of the film's narrative, we can see that this is the moment that frightens Tom into leaving the farm. The sheer violence of their exchange draws in the viewer without showing, but by explaining, the gory details in question. After several scenes of unspoken ambiguity and suspense, it is the most direct passage of dialogue in the entire film. As a result, the sequence acts as a true moment of counterpoint to the rest of the film. Up until here the film's atmosphere has been constructed through narrative ambiguities, the suggested possibility of violence and characters deceiving each other. Here the truth arrives through the simple act of testimony.

Gradena and Gagné address this notion of testimony in relation to the queer subject of *Tom*: 'Because the queer protagonists leave no trace behind but unauthorized memories of their own otherness, there are no official versions, no testimonies of their stories, only a trail of bruises that both acknowledges and represses their queer existence' (2019, 95). Given that it is the barman who recounts the story here, this sequence seems to confirm their point. The original play from which the film was adapted contained the line 'Avant d'apprendre à aimer, les homosexuels apprennent à mentir'. Dolan chose not to include this in his adaptation in the film because he found that it would not fit the style of dialogue in the film, yet he still found that it expressed much of the film's purpose (Donati 2013). Indeed, lies are at the core of the film's narrative, creating ambiguity, which in turn creates suspense. Placing this idea, and this scene, into the context of my argument here, we can see how it relates to the carefully constructed sense of symbolism throughout the film. As we have seen, the film's dialogue is largely sparse, littered with lies and deception. In the absence of true meaning to be taken from words, symbols take on a much more important role. This sequence's impact is heightened by the presence of both sites of meaning coming together, hence the change in tonal register and style, whereby symbolic *mise-en-scène* and meaningful dialogue are combined.

A final symbol related to space occurs in one of the film's final sequences, when Tom has finally left the farm. Francis attempts to prevent his escape, desperately chasing him into a roadside forest, but Tom manages to leave by taking Francis' car and driving back to Montreal. During this sequence, Francis wears a leather 'USA' jacket, decorated with an American flag. Although this may initially appear as a banal costume choice, the reference to America is echoed during the film's ending credit sequence, which shows Tom's return to Montreal. Tracking shots show the city at night and we hear 'Coming to the Town', a song by Rufus Wainwright. Wainwright repeats the refrain 'I'm so tired of you America'. Written in

2007, the song describes Wainwright's resentment of growth of conservatism in America. Thematically it relates to *Tom* on several levels; movement between urban and rural spaces, being directly confronted with homophobia and, the hope of leaving behind societal ills.

As is typical of his filmic style, Dolan builds the sequence around the song, with both ending at the same time. The sequence's simplicity places greater emphasis on the music. Urquhart (2018) says of these sequences: 'As a symbol of both unity and individual freedom, the U.S. flag on the back of Francis's jacket is paradoxical since he wants Tom to stay, but only on his terms' (140). When asked this part of the film, Dolan said in an interview: 'Il y a une violence américaine. L'Amérique insuffle la haine, elle la cultive et la partage avec le reste du monde à travers sa culture, notamment le hip-hop, et la haine des homosexuels et de la femme' (Castro 2014). These symbolic references to America are nuanced. As Dolan states in the interview, it is not so much America as a country that is being addressed. What he calls 'une violence américaine' here refers to practices and ideologies that one might associate with America, as the most established world superpower, and the consequential forms of cultural and political dominance that this entails. The symbolic references to America reflect a desire to the film's position beyond any singular sense of national identity. This is very much in keeping with the previously identified uses of signs and symbols that are used throughout the film. Dolan is not taking aim at America, or any other specific place, but rather dominant forms of cultural hegemony that exist, regardless of any unique space, that are held and maintained in opposition to vulnerable minorities. With this in mind, the film ultimately ends as a statement of anti-homophobia, and more broadly, anti-discrimination of marginalised groups.

#### **4.4.5. Summary**

This analysis of *Tom* in this section centred around two main approaches. First, I considered the film in terms of a specific exercise in genre. Upon identifying it very much in the tradition of the thriller as a filmic form, I examined it as a very conscious style of performed genre, and placed this a broader context of queer forms of pastiche. Butler (1999) reminds us that through repetition, subversion becomes tangible. For this reason, what initially seems to be a generically normative film, compared to Dolan's other work, is in fact a noteworthy example of subversive pastiche. The film's embrace of fixed generic codes situate it alongside contemporary forms of queer cinema and, more broadly, queer cultural forms. As we have

seen, the comparisons to the films of Alfred Hitchcock were justified, and the references in *Tom* to Hitchcock are at the core of the film's interest in terms of this study. In Dolan's film, the appropriation of a normative generic framework is used to articulate queer concerns. Furthermore, I used the film's generic orthodoxy as a base to consider more broad aesthetic aspects of the film, namely the spatial symbolism that is used to subtly portray a refined account of space. What initially seems to be a simple rural/urban dichotomy is in fact nuanced, with neither being summarized as being pure in relation to the other. In the absence of sincere dialogue for the vast majority of the film, signs and symbols hold a far more significant position in terms of the film's central meaning. As with all of Dolan's work, surface-level appearances are sites of significant consequence in the film. As Marshall (in Dyer et al 2016) remarks '[Dolan] sidesteps deep models of national or class grand narratives, and favours a proliferation of surfaces whose playfulness, plurality and expressiveness challenge imposed categories of 'normality''. Subsequently, Dolan's intense concentration on such appearances is by no means superficial, but rather opens up the possibility for greater depths of meaning and form.

As I argued in their respective chapters in this thesis, Dolan's *Tom à la ferme* and Ozon's *Regarde la mer* have several noteworthy points of comparison. Both films build a thick air of suspense around notions of sexuality and identity. They draw heavily on the familiar genre codes of the thriller that we have identified here and use them as a base to disrupt rigid notions of identity and portray it as an inherently fluid idea. Both films can be referred to as a 'queer thriller'. The 'queer thriller' is a recent development in francophone cinema that has not yet been addressed as one group of work<sup>26</sup>. In the 'queer thriller' suspense, ambiguity and sexuality are all deeply connected. Both films place an enormous emphasis on the question on the ambiguous nature of interpersonal relationships transgression of normative social values. In both films, the suspense constantly plays on the boundary between possibility of violence and a sexual encounter. However, there are also important differences between the approaches of the two filmmakers. *Regarde la mer* is more stripped-back film than *Tom*. For example, Ozon's film features little or no extradiegetic music, which is an extremely significant aspect of the thriller style of *Tom*. Furthermore, the music in *Tom* plays a very significant role in Dolan's pastiche of genre, where he knowingly uses the codes of the Hitchcockian thriller to produce a blatantly anti-homophobic statement

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<sup>26</sup> Further to the two films discussed in this thesis, one can add Alain Guiraudie's *L'inconnu du lac* (2013), which is a murder mystery thriller based around a popular rural cruising location in the South of France.

that we never see in Hitchcock's films. Although Ozon went on to pastiche many styles of filmmaking (see Handyside 2021), *Regarde la mer* is not such an example, as it draws on the codes of the thriller, without performing them in as self-aware a fashion as Dolan in *Tom*.

#### 4.5. Aesthetics of Youth in Modern Quebec: Identity in the Films of in Xavier Dolan - Conclusion

Throughout this discussion of the films of Xavier Dolan, we have encountered the multi-faceted way in which identity is portrayed in his films. Across his oeuvre, Dolan consistently displays a penchant for addressing sexuality and gender. In *Les amours imaginaires*, the narrative makes use of an ambivalent love triangle to tease out questions of perspectives on desire, from masculine, feminine, hetero and queer perspectives. In *Laurence Anyways*, the film depicts different facets of sexuality, some going through a sense of profound change, others remaining the same, all in tandem with broader questions of gender. *Tom à la ferme* draws out a normative social space that acts as a closet, and where sexuality is taboo.

It is important to recall that his films often build on their treatment of (queer) sexuality to address other aspects of identity. The different perspectives on desire that we witness in *Les amours imaginaires* are framed by a plethora of cultural references. We saw how these references have a distinctly digital resonance that reveal a relationship between the style of the film and contemporary digital media. In *Laurence Anyways*, the sense of flux and change in character's sense of sexuality and gender soon become synonymous with a broader sense of difference. The film also highlights the porousness of other categories of identity, such as those relating to space. With *Tom à la ferme*, Dolan addresses sexuality through the prism of familiar generic codes, namely those of a psychological thriller. In doing so, he uses these narrative codes of the thriller to produce an omnipresent sense of ambiguity, where the sense of a threat to the vulnerable protagonist is expressed through wider forms of social hegemony and intolerance.

We have seen how Dolan treats identity through an easily recognisable filmmaking style. The films all displayed a recurring preference for highly composed visual framing, carefully chosen colour palettes and frequent use of slow-motion. Understanding the visual style of his films is a key feature of their nuanced treatment of identity. For example, the visual style of *Laurence Anyways*, which often draws on the audio-visual style of the music video, produces an aesthetically queer style where the central identity questions being treated on screen resonate through the film's style. Music is a central feature of his filmmaking style. In *Les amours imaginaires*, his cosmopolitan use of music in a variety of languages often give the film an ambivalent position in relation to spatial identities, placing his films in direct

points of dialogue recent transnational developments in Quebec cinema (Baillargeon and Bertrand 2019, 138). *Tom à la ferme*, on the other hand, features an extradiegetic score composed in the style of a Hitchcock film, playing a key role in the film's queer pastiche of genre.

The link between the audio-visual aesthetic of Dolan's films and their expression of identity is at the heart of the analysis in this chapter. One of my core arguments relates to the way in which the commentary on the nature of identity embedded in Dolan's films is closely intertwined with the expressive audio-visual aesthetic. Dolan employs various forms of cultural referencing (including audio-visual media, intertextuality, visual art references, the codes of other film genres, amongst others) to express ideas relating to sexuality, gender, 'nationhood', and other more abstract ideas relating to identity, such as difference and queerness. For example, in *Les amours imaginaires*, different visual art references are used to frame sexuality in terms of certain historical artistic movements. The surfaces of his films are the primary sites for expression. In *Laurence Anyways*, Dolan plays with the normative aesthetic codes of what film can be in order to voice the concerns of difference, expressing the experience of a marginalised other in relation to a dominant centre.

Dolan is considered a key figure in the trajectory of contemporary Quebec cinema (Marshall 2016, 189). This is due to both his consistent effort to make his films in this region as well as the extent to which the media attention surrounding his career has brought considerable attention to the filmmaking of Quebec. Indeed, in many areas, we have seen how the films' style often express the cultural specificity of Quebec. These specificities manifest themselves in terms of tensions on several fronts, for example: Quebec's position as the only non-Anglophone region in North America, being part of the nation of Canada while also having a singular place within it, the impact of different waves of immigration and ties (historical, linguistic and cultural) with hexagonal France. Many of these tensions are reflected in *Tom à la ferme*. On one hand, the film draws heavily on the tradition of American cinema, by resembling a classic Hollywood Thriller. Yet, on the other hand, it has a style indebted to the what is often identified alongside the Franco-European tradition (expressive of non-representational elements such as colour and lighting, conscious pastiche of genre). Furthermore, the film consciously makes use of Quebec as a specific place, depicting its geographical vastness, different linguistic registers of Quebec French and the urban/rural divide as it pertains to that region.

Dolan's films share a penchant for liminality in identities. An in-betweenness is reflected in the manner in which the films communicate the aforementioned cultural specificity of Quebec, as a location that is literally 'in-between' different geographical, cultural and political tensions. This spatial liminality shares parallels the queer ambiguity that we find in other areas of Dolan's films. In all of Dolan's work discussed here, there is a certain reluctance to 'define' the sexuality and/or gender of certain characters (such as Nicolas in *Les amours imaginaires*, Laurence in *Laurence Anyways*, Francis in *Tom à la ferme*). It is important to remember the queer interrogation of the very notion of stable identities that can be achieved through such ambiguity, as Jagose states: 'For part of queer's semantic clout, part of its political efficacy, depends on its resistance to definition' (Jagose 1996, 1). By considering all of the factors together, I argue that there is common ground shared by the sense of blurring, fluidity, liminality and ambiguity in Dolan's films. By featuring characters in that are evoked in such unfixed terms, the films draw the spectator into an active viewing space of considering the socio-discursive constructs that inform how identity in the broader sense is perceived.



## 5. Thesis Conclusion

### 5.1. Approaches to Fluid and Blurred Identity

The overarching aim of this thesis has been to analyse the portrayal of fluid and blurred manifestations of identity in contemporary Francophone Cinema. In order to do so, I chose to focus on the work of three innovative filmmakers for whom fluidity and blurring can be said to underpin their filmic approaches to identity. Rather than attempting to engage with the entirety of their oeuvre, for the purpose of this thesis I carefully selected specific films from each director's filmic output where I felt that instances of fluid and blurred identity were not only most prominent but also most innovative. Through my close analysis of these films, it has become clear that there are a number of recurring key concepts in relation to fluid and blurred identity that concern all three directors and which can be summarised as follows.

Firstly, all three filmmakers display a penchant for deeply expressive *mise-en-scène*, and as a result, my discussion of their films often prioritises close technical reading, an aspect that I consider to be a particular strength of this thesis. Secondly, all three filmmakers treat identity from diverse angles, and the discussion of their films here spans sexuality, gender, nationality and ethnicity, among other facets of identity. Thirdly, all three directors rarely portray identity to arrive at a fixed moment of definition, instead opting for open-ended narratives that depict the self to be in a state of flux. During many of the films that constitute the corpus of this study, identity categories are treated with a high degree of fluidity. The films selected for analysis for this thesis regularly interrogate and critique essentialist notions of identity based on traditional and fixed understandings of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality. Instead, the sense of identity that emerges from these films included in this study is one that is marked by plurality, hybridity and the fluidity of the discursive boundaries that infuse definitions of being. Gaston Bachelard's observations on the fluid possibilities of existence are worth noting here. He writes, 'On ne se baigne pas deux fois dans un même fleuve, parce que, déjà, dans sa profondeur, l'être humain a le destin de l'eau qui coule. L'eau est vraiment l'élément transitoire' (1942, 17). Thinking in these terms, it is difficult to arrive at a fixed point of response when discussing the fluid blurring in identities. As a consequence, there is no single configuration of identity that is forthcoming at the end of this thesis. Rather, this study turns away from defined and static answers relating to the self, instead embracing heterogeneous possibilities in relation to what an identity can become.

Having discussed in depth every film in the corpus of this thesis, it is clear that there are several areas where the oeuvre of each filmmaker overlaps and complements each other.

Ozon, Sciamma and Dolan all display a preoccupation with sexuality in their films which they examine, for the most part, through the lens of queer desire. For example, *Les amours imaginaires* is based on a love triangle where the point of desire assumes an ambiguous sexual identity. The film relies on a multitude of cultural references to express different desiring gazes, both from a feminine heterosexual and queer male perspective. In *Naissance des pieuvres*, Sciamma recounts the experience of young queer desire, making use of music and visual metaphor for deeply expressive means. Indeed, gendered perspectives are key to understanding the corpus of this thesis. On one hand, gender is approached from a fluid perspective in Dolan's *Laurence Anyways*, where the filmmaker makes use of a highly queer formal aesthetic to blur the boundary between masculine/feminine, but also more abstract categories, such as popular/'high' art, past/present and self/other. On the other hand, femininity is treated in a wholly transgressive manner in François Ozon's *Regarde la mer*. Here, Ozon manipulates the thriller as a generic form to play with social feminine social 'roles' such as 'wife' or 'mother' in order to portray traditional femininity in a state of flux, and ultimately, deeply fractured.

Throughout this study, the films examined have displayed a proximity between an atmosphere of queerness and narrative ambiguity. For example, Dolan's *Tom à la ferme* is wilfully constructed around a series of ambiguities in order to create an air of suspense relating to undefined sexualities. Ozon makes use of a certain degree of ambiguity throughout all of his films, but none more than *Sous le sable*, a film where the core narrative intrigue is built around the blurred distinction between reality/fantasy, subjectivity/objectivity and life/death. Questions of 'national' identity are approached with a similar degree of ambivalence throughout the filmographies of Dolan, Ozon, and Sciamma. During my analysis of *Bande de filles*, we saw how the film and the reaction to it draw out the conflict between the 'colour-blind' tradition of French Republicanism and more contemporary approaches to identity informed by intersectionality. We also saw how there is a certain sense of fluid transnationalism in several of François Ozon's films, with *Frantz* being a particularly noteworthy example. The film relies on a border-crossing narrative and a series of international cultural references to forgo any fixed sense of identity relating to a particular nationality, and in doing so, critiques existing oppositional approaches to national identity (such as nationalism). In many respects, Xavier Dolan's films reflect ongoing debates relating to national identity in Quebec and Canada. On one hand, his films display the waning popular support for sovereignty among Quebec's younger modern generation. Yet, on the other hand, his films also exemplify the cultural specificity of Quebec as a place, such as: the uniqueness

of the dialect of French spoken there; Montreal as a bilingual city; and the competing influences of *Auteur* and Hollywood Cinema on his work.

On a more technical level, throughout this thesis it has become evident how important it is to pay attention to the different approaches to music employed by the directors and, moreover, how certain musical interventions intersect with the politics of fluid and blurred identity. As noted in this thesis, Dolan and Sciamma in particular place a great deal of emphasis on the music in their films, yet they have contrasting methods. Sciamma relies primarily on extradiegetic music composed specifically for her films, and she has collaborated extensively with the composer Para One. The music in her films is consistently used as a means to express the inner emotional development of her young female protagonists, instead of relying more heavily on traditional means of doing this, such as through dialogue or narrative. Xavier Dolan's approach to music is more hybrid in nature. In *Les amours imaginaires* and *Laurence Anyways*, the soundtracks display a preference for popular music. Songs are often used to contribute to the film's vintage, camp and queer aesthetic styles, as his music choices span different time periods, artistic registers and musical cultures. In *Tom à la ferme*, the music is a key component of the film's genre pastiche. Dolan called on Gabriel Yared to compose a score inspired by the soundtrack for films of Alfred Hitchcock, and we saw in turn how the music plays a central role in the film's conscious use of generic codes, namely a psychological thriller in the style of Hitchcock.

Indeed, all three filmmakers make noteworthy use of genre in their respective approaches to filmmaking. As many scholars have pointed out (see Smith 2020, Wilson 2021), Sciamma consistently returns to coming-of-age narratives of girlhood throughout her oeuvre. Although there are certain stylistic shifts between films, such as the period drama influence of *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, her body of work displays a high degree of cohesion in terms of genre. Sciamma consistently makes use of these coming-of-age narratives to portray issues relating to feminine interiority, queer desire and patriarchal social structures. François Ozon's approach in this area provides a stark contrast to that of Sciamma and Dolan. Ozon has shown a preference for constantly working through different genres during his entire career. In the films studied here, we can compare, for example, the tense psychological thriller of *Regarde la mer* to the historical post-war drama of *Frantz*<sup>27</sup>. In all cases, he moulds the given generic form around familiar thematic concerns, most often

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<sup>27</sup> Even more dramatic differences are evident in his wider filmography, such as *8 femmes* (a murder mystery musical filmed in the style of 1950s Hollywood Technicolor) and *Grâce à dieu* (a contemporary fact-based drama about Catholic Church abuse scandals).

mundane bourgeois existence undergoing a process of sudden change, the blending of fantasy and reality, and processes of mourning. These issues often combine to trigger a boarder sense of identity flux in Ozon's characters. In terms of Dolan's relationship to genre, this has evolved throughout his career. Many of his films are dramas, and can broadly be identified as being centred on family relationships (*J'ai tué ma mère*, *Juste la fin du monde*), youth and desire (*Les amours imaginaires*, *Mathias et Maxime*), and figures who are socially marginalised (*Laurence Anyways*, *Mommy*). There is also a great deal of cross contamination between these thematic clusters in individual films. *Tom à la ferme* is a marked exception, as it is a very conscious exercise in one particular narrative form. In this respect, his approach shares several parallels with that of François Ozon. In *Tom à la ferme* and *Regarde la mer*, both filmmakers engage with the thriller as a generic form and its familiar narrative structure constructed around suspense, in order to draw out a tense queer atmosphere where sexualities are left undefined. Furthermore, both filmmakers use intertextual references in their films. For example, in both *Frantz* and *Les amours imaginaires*, a series of references to visual art, other films and literature are present. In both cases, they are used to frame the complex nature of the contemporary self, and indeed to express the heterogenous nature of identity embedded within each film. Differing significantly from the approach of Sciamma, both Dolan and Ozon incorporate a certain stylistic campness and pastiche into their work<sup>28</sup>. They knowingly employ intertextual reference and cultural citation in their films, so as to present a familiar form in a manner that we are not used to seeing. For example, Michaelangelo's *David* is used to frame heterosexual female desire in *Les amours imaginaires*, just as references to Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* are used to denounce nationalism in *Frantz*.

## 5.2. Points of comparison

It is striking how all three filmmakers make highly symbolic use of islands in their respective bodies of work, most notably in three films which have been discussed in detail here: Ozon's *Regarde la mer*, Sciamma's *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* and Dolan's *Laurence Anyways*. All of *Regarde la mer* plays out on the Île d'Yeu, where Sasha encounters Tatiana. Away from her husband and alone with her child, Sasha seemingly entertains the possibility of a sexual encounter with the vagabond, Tatiana. Yet Tatiana shockingly murders Sasha, kidnaps her infant child and returns to the mainland. Similar to Ozon's film, the majority of the

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<sup>28</sup> Although it is not as present in the Ozon films selected for my corpus, it is a consistent feature of his filmmaking style (see Handyside 2021, Schilt 2011).

narrative in *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* plays out on an island off the coast of Brittany. Marianne arrives to paint Héloïse's portrait, but in doing so they begin a brief affair. Given that the film's narrative takes place within the patriarchal social context of late 18<sup>th</sup> century France, the characters are aware their romance will be short-lived and they will soon have to leave each other. In *Laurence Anyways*, only a couple of sequences take place on the Île au noir. Laurence asks Fred to accompany her there to visit a transgender couple that she knows, in the hope that they might help Fred realise that a life for them together is possible. While on the island, Fred finds their isolated way of life monotonous and quickly leaves.

In all three films, the islands are framed as being a peripheral space in opposition to the normative mainland. In many respects, they constitute what Halberstam would term a 'queer space' (Halberstam 2005, 5). In each film, the island is a space where the characters feel capable of engaging with different forms of identity fluidity. The islands are also marked by a sense of 'queer time', at odds with the future-oriented logic of constant 'progress', on the islands time adheres to a circular or disjointed logic. Therefore, operating as places out of space and time, the islands enable heightened renegotiations of relationships throughout these films. In *Regarde la mer*, frustrated with the monotonous patriarchy of the mainland, Sasha deviates from what is expected of her in terms of the unfair burdening of motherhood. Her newfound sense of freedom on the island is most remarkable when she leaves her infant child on the beach to have a casual sexual encounter at a nearby cruising spot. In *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*, Marianne and Héloïse make use of the isolation to have their brief affair, but they also use this time to discuss decentred processes of artmaking and the intricate relationship between memory and creation. With this in mind, further to the framing of the film's narrative section on the island as an intensely emotive flashback itself triggered by the eponymous portrait at the beginning of the film, the film points to the queer possibilities of feminist art history. In *Laurence Anyways*, the island is a recurring symbol throughout the film, a place where Laurence seems to dream of a life where she can live as a woman. It is noteworthy that the location is heavily stylised, with Dolan marking their arrival to the island with an aestheticized music-led sequence and "Île au noir" in large text. Furthermore, the Île au noir is a fictional place invented within a real-world location, pointing to the tragic impossibility of the life Laurence wishes to live.

Music video aesthetics are significant in the films of both Céline Sciamma and Xavier Dolan. Sciamma's films often feature a sequence that is moulded around a specific piece of music, for example, during the bonfire sequence of *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* or the *Diamonds* sequence of *Bande de filles*. In each case, the border between diegetic and

extradiegetic sound is blurred. In both films, the sequence takes elevated importance in relation to the narrative of the film (it is the symbolic confirmation of Marieme's role within the *bande* ; and the realisation of mutual desire between Marianne and Héloïse in *Portrait*). Similarly, music plays a central role throughout Dolan's filmography. There are several scenes that pertain to a music video aesthetic in both *Les amours imaginaires* and *Laurence Anyways*, such as the strobe party sequence in the former and the opening of the latter. In both films, music plays a key role in the filmmaker's queer aesthetic style. The use of popular songs give his films an ambiguous position in relation to artistic register, as he often plays with the codes of both 'art' cinema and 'mainstream' video art through his use of music-video sequences. The music video sequence is indeed a popular, simplified form, but Dolan uses it frequently in his work, which often draw on the codes of 'art' cinema. It is noteworthy that in the cases of both Sciamma and Dolan, far from being shallow exercises in style, their respective uses of the music video format often contain the most prominent socio-political statements of their films. For example, in *Bande de filles*, we saw how Sciamma makes use of American pop music to contextualise her characters' sense of belonging in relation to fluid global networks of girlhood, rather than their own immediate surroundings in terms of 'Frenchness'. In the opening of *Laurence Anyways*, we saw how Dolan makes use of music by Fever Ray to accompany Laurence's experience of being stared at while walking down the street. The pitched down, altered vocals by Fever Ray echo the feelings of otherness that Laurence is made to feel for simply existing. The music video sequence is therefore a key moment in the films of both Sciamma and Dolan.

Throughout my analysis of Dolan's *Les amours imaginaires*, I discussed the film's cultural referencing in terms of digitextuality – with the film's omnipresent cultural referencing bearing resemblances to digital media in several areas. As previously stated, my approach to the film is inspired by Isabel McNeil's (2018) analysis of *Bande de filles*, which uses the same theory to discuss Sciamma's film. In both cases, the theory is used to identify the influence of digital media in the films of Sciamma and Dolan. In an era marked by the social omnipresence of screens, the borders between these screens are becoming increasingly fluid, and these include televisions, smart phones, personal computers and cinema screens. Therefore, the influence of the music video in the oeuvres of Sciamma and Dolan owes much to digital media. Indeed, it can be argued that other forms of fluidity between spaces, genres and form owe something too to the rise of digital technology. Culture and media in different forms and coming from different places are more easily available than ever before. The impact of digitextuality in Dolan's film creates fluid references to different media spanning

eras, countries and genres. In the case of Dolan, this corresponds to his use of Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*, *la nouvelle vague* films, and Cocteau sketches. In Sciamma, on the other hand, it is Rihanna's *Diamonds*, or the streaming of J. Dash's *Wop* and the accompanying dances that go with the song. Both filmmakers combine these different references, pointing to a fluidity between different forms that owes much to the impact of digital media.

When discussing Dolan's *Laurence Anyways*, we saw how language and accents were a key marker of difference in the film, sharing parallels with what Baillergeon and Bertrand would contextualise alongside a recent transnational turn in Québec cinema (2019, 138). Dolan consciously cast actors from Hexagonal France in order to create a hybrid sense of *francophonie* within the film. Laurence's fluid otherness, marked out by the Hexagonal French accent that she speaks with during the film, shares parallels with her fluid process of gendered identity. Furthermore, in both *Laurence Anyways* and *Les amours imaginaires*, Dolan makes use of a multilingual soundtrack to place different languages alongside each other. The multilingual soundtrack of *Les amours imaginaires* features different dialects of French, as well as Italian and English. Language and accent are also important in Ozon's films. All of his films discussed here feature non-native French speakers as their main performers (Sasha Hails in *Regarde la mer*, Charlotte Rampling in *Sous la sable*, Paula Beer in *Frantz*). Much like in Dolan's films, in each case language and accent are inextricably linked to the expression of otherness in Ozon's work. In *Regarde la mer*, Sasha has a certain elevated social status as a bilingual middle-class foreigner, which is used to juxtapose her idealised life in opposition to that of the vagabond Tatiana. Similarly, in *Sous le sable*, the fact that Charlotte Rampling is also a bilingual middle-class foreigner accentuates the profound sense of identity deviation that she goes through during the film. Ozon's approach to language goes much further in *Frantz*. Ozon consciously scripted a large portion of the film in German and cast many of his characters with relatively unknown German actors, despite the difficulties it posed in terms of ensuring the film's finances. In the cases of both Dolan and Ozon, we can therefore see that language is a key vehicle for articulating a fluid sense of identity. In this area, they both to produce a blurred sense of 'national' identity, where a transnational sense of cultural belonging is favoured over any oppositional sense of nationalism.

There are several noteworthy points of comparison in each filmmaker's treatment of heterosexual femininity. In the *Île au noir* section of *Laurence Anyways*, when Laurence brings Fred to visit a transgender couple in the hope of showing her an example of the life

they could possibly lead together, Mandia notes Laurence refers to the island as an ‘exemple de bonheur’ while for Fred it is a ‘*shak à marde*’. In this regard, heterosexual femininity is a category that is more resistant to fluidity in *Laurence Anyways*. The visit to the couple on the Île au noir is ultimately the moment that triggers their separation – Fred returns to her normative suburban life. Similarly in *Les amours imaginaires*, we saw how Dolan uses images of Michaelangelo’s *David* to frame Marie’s heterosexual female gaze upon Nicolas. His choice of image has the effect of contextualising her desire in classical terms, in opposition to the abstract modernness of the Cocteau sketches he uses frame to Nicolas’s queer desire. In the Ozon films that I have discussed in detail here, female heterosexuality is also depicted as being reluctant to fluidity. At certain points of his career, Ozon has been accused of portraying female characters in a negative fashion. For example, Vincendeau comments on his treatment of the female lead in *Sous le sable*, stating that the film ‘is ostensibly the portrait of a woman who fantasises about her dead husband, but it actually presents us with a male fantasy of a morbid and unhinged femininity. [...] French cinema loves beautiful, tragic women who go crazy’ (2001, 59). In *Sous le sable*, we have seen how the film disrupts normative logic through narrative ambiguity and visual fluidity. However, it is true to say that the film’s treatment of sexuality is not subject to such fluidity. The ambiguity of the film’s ending could also lead us to believe that the main character is ultimately punished for her deviation; she is alone, on the beach where her husband disappeared, running towards an unknown figure. In many respects, *Regarde la mer* goes further in displaying of heterosexual femininity as being resistant to fluid and blurred spaces. In *Regarde la mer*, Sasha deviates from what is expected of her in terms of normative motherhood, for example, when she leaves her infant child alone to visit a cruising site close to the beach. Stanley states in relation to the film’s conclusion, ‘one wonders if Sasha is murdered because of her flirtation with danger and sex outside marriage, as if she is punished for being a bad wife and mother’ (Stanley 2010, 34). The film teases Sasha’s ambiguous queer desire for Tatiana, and we saw how Ozon had led the actress playing the role into thinking a sexual encounter between the pair would be the film’s narrative climax. However, she is ultimately punished for allowing Tatiana to enter her home, as she is murdered and her infant child is taken away.

The questions being discussed throughout this thesis are a product of the broader global context in which they find themselves, namely one of globalisation and digital capitalism. In many respects, fluidity is a key component of globalisation. Although I have argued throughout this thesis that the blurring of essentialist notions of identity has the potential to



positively articulate peripheral forms of human experience, it necessary to point out that the increasingly omnipresent nature of digital capitalism itself profits from its own form of ‘fluidity’ that reenforces the existing hierarchal status quo. For example, political institutions such as the European Union allow for increased fluidity between the borders for the citizens of economically affluent countries, yet impose increasingly strict controls to all of those who wish to enter from the outside. Digital capitalism privileges flexibility as resilience, yet this is often to the benefit of those already in advantageous power positions and the detriment of the peripheral other. Many workers in neoliberal economies of countries such as France work longer hours for a larger portion of their lives, in exchange for a wage that is lower in relation to the cost of living. One could also argue that the increased forms of intertextuality that we saw through this thesis are facilitated by the prevalence of algorithmic exchanges in digital media. We saw how in Dolan’s films, there is a form of digitaltextuality where cultural references are presented in a flowing manner that is reminiscent of digital forms of technology. With advances in technology, the fluid exchange between culture and digital media is increasingly blurred. I am convinced that the blurring of rigid forms of identity has the progressive capacity to undermine oppressive social norms, yet it is necessary to note that the fluid nature of digital capitalism also consolidates existing hierarchal power structures.

### **5.3. Scholarly Interventions**

This thesis makes several innovative contributions to the both the fields of French and Francophone Studies and Film Studies. Firstly, I intentionally chose a group of filmmakers where more than one gender and nationality was concerned. In a domain where critical perspectives on gender are crucial, it was of course crucial to include a corpus with films directed by a female filmmaker. As a result, in studying the films of Sciamma alongside Dolan and Ozon, we have seen a rich range of perspectives on gender. Furthermore, Quebec Studies are typically underrepresented in the overall domain of Francophone Studies. In a study where the blurring of boundaries is central, it was important to have differing attitudes to nationality and nationhood throughout the corpus. By engaging in recent approaches to Francophone cinema, such as *cinéma-monde*, I have to highlight the decentring the traditional boundaries of French cinema as relating to the Hexagonal France. By including a Quebec filmmaker, this study engages with current attempts to consider Francophone cinema from a global standpoint.

Secondly, despite the numerous similarities between their work, this is the only existing study to group these three filmmakers together and compare their oeuvre in detail. As shown by the respective literature reviews of the academic literature on their films, all three of them are major contemporary French-language filmmakers, and the studies of their respective oeuvres show no sign of slowing down; for example, book-length studies of all of three directors have been separately published since 2019. Yet, given the fact that there are no existing comparative studies of their films, this thesis is particularly timely and contributes to the on-going discussions of their films. Studying the work of the three filmmakers alongside each other has proven fruitful in terms of comparing and contrasting their respective oeuvres, as I have indicated at the outset of this conclusion.

Thirdly, the manner in which this thesis groups their work is also noteworthy. Throughout my discussion of their films, I used instances of blurring and fluidity in relation to identity to structure my analysis. Although many existing studies engage with the treatment of identity in these films, they often concentrate on a particular facet of identity. This thesis instead prioritises blurring and fluidity across a multitude of factors that inform identities. With this being case, the overall approach of thesis employs an innovative theoretical framework that is informed by a plurality of different existing theories. For example, Judith Butler and Gilles Deleuze proved to the theoretical outline of this thesis because I was able to group the aspects of their work where they question the stability of existing models of thought concerning identity, rather than their theories having immediate apparent similarities. As a result, I could also add to my initial framework with other theories that complemented Butler and Deleuze, such as *cinéma-monde* (Marshall 2011), the male gaze (Mulvey 1975), *le regard féminin* (Brey 2020), *l'esthétique queer* (Plana 2015), and nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti 2011a).

Finally, the approach of this thesis also proved innovative in terms of methodology. Throughout my discussion of the corpus, I paid particularly close attention to the filmmaking visual style and use of sound in the case of each filmmaker, rather than other more traditional representational elements, such as dialogue and narrative. It is also important to note that studies of sound and music are relatively unexploited in studies of contemporary French and Francophone Cinema. For example, in recent book-length studies of Dolan (*ReFocus: The Films of Xavier Dolan*, (LaFontaine ed., 2019)) and Sciamma (*Portraits, Céline Sciamma* (Wilson, 2021)) feature few sections dedicated to the filmmaker's respective uses of music. The study of sound and music proved particularly fruitful in this regard, particularly in the cases of Sciamma and Dolan. In the case of Sciamma, we saw how music composed for the

film is a key tool for expressing unspoken queer desire. In relation to Dolan, we saw how his song choices for the extradiegetic soundtrack often play a crucial role in the film's relationship to cultural register, expressions of time, and camp and/or queer aesthetic style.

#### 5.4. Future Considerations

Reflecting back on the thesis having now reached the concluding phase after several years of close engagement with these three directors, it has become apparent that there is the potential to further probe the question of fluid and blurred identity from a range of alternative perspectives and which could, in turn, enhance the findings of this study. Firstly, the majority of the films that I chose for my corpus do not explore ethnicity. With Dolan and Ozon, for example, their wider oeuvre does not really treat ethnicity. We did observe that they both treat similar questions, such as providing a certain sense of transnational cinema and expressing a heterogeneous notions of 'national' identity, however, neither filmmaker has made a film where one of the main characters is of colour. With Sciamma, the treatment of ethnicity in her oeuvre is a little more complex. In *Bande de filles*, she did make a film where the entire cast was of colour, however, as I indicated in my discussion of this film, several scholars consider that particular film's treatment of ethnicity to be shallow (see Niang 2019, Wilson 2021). With these limitations of my corpus in mind, there are other filmmakers whose work could greatly complement this study. For example, the work of Mati Diop is interesting in this regard. Although she has produced only one feature-length film thus far, *Atlantique* (2019), her work could add much depth to this research project. Diop is a Franco-Senegalese filmmaker, and the narrative of *Atlantique* plays out in Dakar. The film recounts the story of Ada and Souleiman and their struggles in contemporary Dakar, due to issues such as migration and economic opportunity. Her work would therefore add much in terms of comparison to Ozon, or Sciamma, as she deals directly with issues linked directly to ethnicity. Moreover, much like the films studied within this thesis, the meaning of the film is heavily invested in sound and image<sup>29</sup>. Although the script of the film is mostly in Wolof, it could easily be integrated into a study such as this one, given that recent theoretical developments such *cinéma-monde* highlight the immense benefits of considering Francophone Cinema from a global standpoint that is not limited to one language (Gott and Schilt 2018, 1).

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<sup>29</sup> The film's cinematographer is frequent Sciamma collaborator Claire Mathon.

Monia Chokri is another contemporary filmmaker whose work merits consideration. Originally an actor, her career began alongside Xavier Dolan in *Les amours imaginaires*. She directed her first feature-length film in 2019, *La femme de mon frère*. A comedy/drama, the film tells the story of Sophia, a 30-something Montrealer and recent PhD graduate who is struggling to know what to do next in life in the face of a hostile economic environment and gendered societal expectations. Comparisons of her work with that of Xavier Dolan (Carron-Ottavi 2019) have already been established, which is understandable given their personal connection. But, her work also raises several interesting questions that are not fully addressed by the corpus of this thesis and could, therefore, add another layer to the discussion of fluid and blurred identity. For example, *La femme de mon frère* directly addresses economic precarity, with particular emphasis on the realities faced by unemployed women. The film also has a significant multicultural slant, and many of the characters are first or second generation immigrants to Quebec. Her work also deals extensively with stereotypes surrounding gender.

There are also aspects of films of Dolan, Sciamma and Ozon that could be explored further in future studies. As outlined in my discussion on *Sous le sable*, narrative ambiguity is a consistent feature throughout Ozon's films that does not receive adequate attention in existing scholarship relating to his work. A certain sense of narrative ambiguity is present in many of his films, with *Swimming Pool*, *Dans la maison* and *Une nouvelle amie* being particularly strong examples. Given that I have demonstrated how this ambiguity can be studied via well-established theories, such as those of Gilles Deleuze and Judith Butler, this particular area of his work can be explored much further. Where Dolan and Sciamma are concerned, as examined in detail in this thesis, both directors embed music in a highly significant way into their films. Indeed, music is such a prominent feature of their oeuvre that it could in and of itself be the exclusive focus of an analysis of their films. As we have seen, for Sciamma, music is a key component for expressing feminine subjectivity emotion in her films, while in Dolan's, it has an important impact on the queer and camp aesthetics of his work. It is evident that these are two broadly contrasting approaches that merit further analysis. For example, there are several musical passages of Sciamma's films that are not fully explored in this thesis that could be analysed. The use of music in *Petite Maman* is a continuation in many respects of Sciamma's use of the soundtrack in *Naissance des pieuvres* and *Bande de filles*. Similarly in Dolan's later films, such as *Mommy* and *Mathias et Maxime*, he makes use of the soundtrack in a manner which pushes his use of music in further directions to the films explored here. One could consider, for example, the scene in *Mommy*

that uses Oasis' 'Wonderwall', and consider the songs impact on the film's relationship to kitsch aesthetics.

Furthermore, there are other contemporary Francophone filmmakers that make similar use of music in their films. Julia Ducournau and Léonor Serraille are particularly noteworthy examples. Both filmmakers address issues that share several pertinent parallels with the corpus here. Ducournau's *Titane* (2021) could loosely be classified as a horror film that explores gender and the body through highly expressive aesthetic form whereby, like Dolan, the choice of popular songs plays a central role. Serraille's *Jeune femme* (2017) is a drama comedy that explores precarity alongside the harsh social realities of being a woman in contemporary France. Similar to Sciamma, the extradiegetic music composed for the film plays a key role in expression questions of subjectivity and identity.

Finally, to conclude this project, I would like to reflect on the potential impact of this current and future projects on a more personal level. The common goal of all of these projects is to explore the capacity of cinema to learn about perspectives and subjectivities that are outside of one's own. Rosi Braidotti writes on the notion of nomadic subjectivity, that 'the point is to neither dismiss nor glorify the status of marginal, alien others, but to find a more accurate, complex location for a transformation of the terms of this political interaction' (Braidotti 2011b, 247). Thinking in terms of nomadic subjectivity draws us into a thinking space where we move away from the essentialist view of unitary subjectivity, towards a more complex, yet empathetic, perspective where we consider other forms of subjectivity, and more broadly, ways of being. Although she is not directly addressing it, Braidotti's writing is particularly evocative of a visual medium such as cinema which can give us as an impression of seeing from another point of view. A particularly strong example is the opening scene of *Laurence Anyways*, where the point of view camera assumes the perspective of Laurence walking down the street, and we (the viewer) are directly made aware of the staring she is being subjected to. It is no coincidence that Dolan's film was one of the first that I saw that would go on to be included my thesis, and the first of my corpus that I saw in a cinema, on a big screen (in Louvain-la-neuve, in Belgium). The impact of the sequence explains much the reasoning of this project, which is to say, to understand the possibility of different identities and the manner in which they are expressed in film. Given the nature of this project, primarily concerned with blurring and fluidity, it is difficult to come to a definitive conclusion. I think rather, drawing a parallel with many great Francophone art films that do not come to a precise ending, it is important to not think of an arrival as a fixed point of

conclusion, but instead highlight the possibility of an ambivalent flow that can continue in other directions.

## Filmography

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- Angel*. 2007. dir. by François Ozon (Fidélité Productions / Scope Pictures)
- Bande de filles*. 2014. dir. by Céline Sciamma (Pyramide Distribution)
- Dans la maison*. 2012. dir. by François Ozon (Mandarin Films / Mars Films)
- Été 85*. 2020. dir. by François Ozon (Mandarin Cinéma)
- Frantz*. 2016. dir. by François Ozon (Mars Films Distribution)
- Gouttes d'eau Sur Pierres Brûlantes*. 2000. dir. by François Ozon (Les Films Alain Sarde / Eurospace Inc)
- Grâce à Dieu*. 2018. dir. by François Ozon
- Huit Femmes*. 2002. dir. by François Ozon (Fidélité Productions / Mars Films)
- J'ai tué ma mère*. 2009. dir. by Xavier Dolan (K-Films Amérique)
- Jeune et jolie*. 2013. dir. by François Ozon (Mandarin Cinéma)
- Juste la fin du monde*. 2016. dir. by Xavier Dolan (Entertainment One / Les Films Séville / Diaphana Films)
- L'Amant double*. 2017. dir. by François Ozon (Mandarin Cinéma / Scope Pictures)
- Laurence Anyways*. 2012. dir. by Xavier Dolan (Alliance VivaFilm)
- Le refuge*. 2010. dir. by François Ozon (Eurowide Film / Production FOZ)
- Le Temps qui reste*. 2005. dir. by François Ozon (Fidélité Productions / StudioCanal)
- Les Amants criminels*. 1999. dir. by François Ozon (Fidélité Productions)
- Les amours imaginaires*. 2010. dir. by Xavier Dolan (Remstar Distribution)
- Matthais & Maxime*. 2019. dir. by Xavier Dolan (Les Films Séville)
- Mommy*. 2014. dir. by Xavier Dolan (Les Films Séville)
- Naissance des pieuvres*. 2007. dir. by Céline Sciamma (Haut et Court)
- Peter von Kant*. 2022. dir. by François Ozon (Foz / Diaphana)
- Petite Maman*. 2021. dir. by Céline Sciamma (Pyramide Distribution)
- Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. 2019. dir. by Céline Sciamma (Pyramide Films)
- Potiche*. 2010. dir. by François Ozon (Mandarin Production)
- Regarde la mer*. 1997. dir. by François Ozon (Mars Distribution)
- Ricky*. 2009. dir. by François Ozon (Fidélité Films)
- Sitcom*. 1998. dir. by François Ozon (Fidélité Productions)
- Sous le sable*. 2000. dir. by François Ozon (Haut et Court)
- Swimming Pool*. 2003. dir. by François Ozon (Fidélité Productions)

*The Death & Life of John F. Donovan*. 2018. dir. by Xavier Dolan (Les Films Séville)  
*Tom à la ferme*. 2014. dir. by Xavier Dolan (MK2 / Entertainment One)  
*Tomboy*. 2011. dir. by Céline Sciamma (Pyramide Distribution)  
*Tout s'est bien passé*. 2021. dir. by François Ozon (Mandarin Production)  
*Une nouvelle amie*. 2013. dir. by François Ozon (Mandarin Cinéma)  
*Une robe d'été*. 1996. dir. by François Ozon (Fidélité Films)

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