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Representations of Sexuality in the Films of François Ozon

By

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Abstract

This is a study of the shorts and feature films by the young, prolific French film director, François Ozon. The thesis uncovers the impact of Ozon's œuvre on cinematic audiences. The films raise questions about death, desire and sexual relationships in unsettling and surprising ways, through a variety of different genres. This thesis focuses on close textual reading of the films, employing feminist and queer theory to underline and echo the implications of Ozon's representations of sexuality; here it is argued that Ozon's work presents a challenge to heteronormative ideology and culture. In particular, this study suggests that Ozonian cinema encourages the spectator to take up a fluid and non-normative viewing position often denied in mainstream narrative cinema.

This study focuses on analyses of taboo, trauma and loss, as well as generic conventions and gender performances which refer to psychoanalytic, feminist and queer understandings of certain behaviours and situations; quotidian, but intense, experiences in the films emphasize ways in which the human subject struggles with the expression of desire and sexuality. Although not as radical as queer theorists or film critics may wish, Ozon's films often use comedy and irony to illustrate the problems of a restrictive patriarchal society and the way it can harm individuals, thus unsettling the normative assumptions on which the majority of social structures are still based. Ozonian cinema, this thesis argues, thus presents a compassionate and, indeed, political comment on contemporary French and European society.

Introduction

This study was conceived in order to fill a gap in French Film Studies on the work of the young, prolific director François Ozon, whose work had prompted very little academic criticism until 2008. By Spring 2009, a cluster of work on Ozon had been published, culminating in the monograph on the director by Andrew Asibong;¹ thus it could be said that interest in the director, both in the media and in academic circles, is at its height. Ozon's tenth feature film, *Ricky*, was released in February 2009 and its arrival in the UK is eagerly anticipated by fans and critics alike. For this film Ozon has worked with a new producer, Claudie Ossard, partly due to the commercial failure of his 2007 film, *Angel*, and because of his desire to shoot his new film with relatively unknown actors, in particular Alexandra Lamy who is better known for her TV work in *Un gars, une fille*.² Viewers may wonder whether this change of producer will also mark a change in artistic direction for the filmmaker or whether Ozon's new film will continue to raise similar issues about human sexuality and desire to those explored in his work to date. In his œuvre from 1998 to 2008 Ozon investigates the dynamics of non-normative desire and plays with our expectations, choosing odd couplings to suggest that conventional sexual identities no longer have any anchorage. Ozon's films not only question the place of incest, murder, death and desire in our society, but also apparently more innocuous subjects such as food, family and children. Ozon is fascinated with artifice and theatricality; he employs conventional forms such as the 'whodunnit' and melodrama to ask questions about the shifting nature of gender identity and to underline the notion of gender as performance, especially in films such as 8

¹ Andrew Asibong, *François Ozon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

² As Thomas Sotinel says: 'après l'échec commercial d'*Angel*, les désirs du cinéaste et les contraintes l'ont amené à changer d'univers, de producteur, d'actrice'. He goes on to say that Ozon hid his preference for Lamy from his producer, as it was 'une inclination qui a pesé sur sa décision de rompre avec ses anciens producteurs. Ceux-ci auraient préféré qu'Ozon reprenne une actrice avec laquelle il avait déjà travaillé', *Le Monde*, 11 February 2009, p. 21.

Femmes (2001) and *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* (2000).³ Ozon thereby manages, in a characteristic eschewing of categories, to straddle mainstream and arthouse cinema. I shall argue that Ozon, by moving from budget films to mainstream cinema, has brought issues about sexuality and gender roles to the attention of a wider public, constantly provoking his audience to question how what is portrayed on screen relates to our own lived experience.

Born in 1967 in Paris, Ozon has had a thorough grounding in the art of cinematography; he graduated in Film Studies at the University of Paris I (Panthéon-Sorbonne) and then in 1990 went to the prestigious cinema school La Femis to study directing; as Asibong says, Ozon's is 'ultimately a studiedly intellectual project' and for *8 Femmes* he 'delighted in displaying his brilliant knowledge of cinema'.⁴ During his studies Ozon made several short films in various formats, including Super 8, video, and 16 mm. His graduation film was *Victor*, which he made in 1993. His *moyen métrage* *Regarde la mer* brought him critical attention in 1997 and his first feature length film, *Sitcom*, came out in 1998. Ozon receives mixed critical reviews; some accuse him of banality while others, such as Kate Ince, proclaim him as the first French queer mainstream filmmaker.⁵ Guy Austin, on the other hand, states that Ozon 'has resisted definition as a queer filmmaker'.⁶ A handful of critics, Ginette Vincendeau for example, find hints of misogyny in his work, but there are as many writers who defend him against such accusations.⁷ Moreover, although articles on Ozon almost always say that he is 'openly gay', in a recent interview in *The Times*, Ozon denies he has ever talked

³ Henceforth I will refer to *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* as *Gouttes d'eau*.

⁴ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 5.

⁵ Kate Ince, 'François Ozon's Cinema of Desire' in Ince, ed., *Five Directors: Auteurism from Assayas to Ozon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), pp. 112-134.

⁶ Guy Austin, *Contemporary French Cinema: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008; second edition), p. 85.

⁷ See, for example, Ginette Vincendeau, '8 Femmes', *Sight and Sound*, 12, 12 (2002), p. 46.

about his own sexuality, clearly preferring not to be pigeonholed.⁸ The point is that viewers and journalists often assume Ozon to be 'openly gay' because of the recurrent theme of homosexuality in his films. This conclusion, based on the films' content, employs normative assumptions about sexuality, implying that only gay men would be interested in, or make films about, gay subjects. 'True' authorial identity and sexuality is not the question here; what is important is, I argue, that Ozon's comments reveal a queer agenda, where labels such as 'gay' and 'straight' are considered to be limiting as they do not account for the fluidity of human sexual processes. Kevin Maher notes the director's reaction to the 'gay' epithet:

'Actually, I never say that I'm a gay filmmaker,' he corrects. 'In the films there are many things about my sexuality, but I've never declared anything about myself. It's journalists who say it, especially in America, where your sexuality comes first, and after that your work. In France your work is first; they don't really care about your sexuality.' He starts to giggle. 'Or they just pretend not to care, but really they're fascinated, like everyone else.'⁹

Ozon's attitude in interviews can be deceptive; although, in the course of this thesis, I often refer to interviews, both from Ozon's official website and in the press, I am careful not to take comments at face value or as the absolute 'truth'. Ozon's agenda is not always transparent; the director often feigns naïvety about his project and is unwilling to analyse his films beyond technical or narrative choices. This is, perhaps, one reason why the jury is still out regarding Ozon's place in contemporary French filmmaking.

In 1998, when Ozon had already made a number of *courts métrages*, he was grouped together with directors of 'le jeune cinéma français' by Michel Marie;

⁸ Kevin Maher's 'An enfant terrible takes French leave', *The Times*, 21 August 2008, *Times2*, pp. 12-13.

⁹ Maher, 'An enfant terrible takes French leave', pp. 12-13.

he figures alongside names such as Olivier Assayas, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, Gaspar Noé, Mathieu Kassovitz and Cédric Klapisch.¹⁰ These directors continue to work and to be well known in the context of French *auteur* cinema, but there were many other young directors who emerged in the 1990s and were seen to be part of this 'new new wave' who have now disappeared. Aspiring young filmmakers in France receive funding to launch their careers and so it is not unexpected that there should be so many appearing at the same time; what is unusual in the case of François Ozon is that, despite being eight years younger than Assayas, he has produced about the same number of feature films in half the time. The fact that Ozon is so prolific a director perhaps prompts comparison with other European directors. Ozon has made it clear in interviews and through his work that he is a great admirer of German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder, as Asibong and Ince have also noted; the connection between these two directors will be investigated in this thesis in relation to Ozon's film *Gouttes d'eau*, an adaptation of an early play by Fassbinder himself.¹¹ Although Ozon could not be said to have a cult following or cultural influence to match Fassbinder's, the German director's cinematic heritage, bleak aesthetics and portrayal of claustrophobic relationships, have clearly marked much of Ozon's work. I would argue, along with Asibong and Ince, that Ozon also deserves comparison with the Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar, whose work similarly crosses the boundary between arthouse and mainstream cinema. The aesthetics of *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes* seem to have been influenced by Almodóvar's movies,¹² while Ozon's alleged preference for working with women is shared by the Spaniard, as films such as *Women on the Verge of a Nervous*

¹⁰ Michel Marie, ed., *Le jeune cinéma français* (Paris: Nathan, 1998).

¹¹ See Chapter 4.

¹² As Asibong says, 'It is difficult to watch *Sitcom*, for example, without getting the feeling that at any moment the maid is going to prepare an Almodovarian gazpacho spiked with barbiturates', *François Ozon*, p. 5.

Breakdown (1988) and *Volver* (2006) would testify.¹³ Moreover, both Ozon and Almodóvar seem to insist on questioning and subverting conventional gender dynamics, often in a playful and ironic manner. Asibong goes on to compare Ozon's work to that of John Waters and suggests that:

If Ozon's films usually lack the genuine emotional highs and lows often generated by Almodóvar, Fassbinder and Waters, though, this is surely down to the way in which Ozon so confidently repackages their aesthetics within the ironic framework of a devastatingly knowing – and extremely French – cleverness.¹⁴

Although Ozon is well known among international arthouse audiences and has achieved box office success,¹⁵ the French cinematic 'establishment' is uneasy with his chameleonic appearances, if not openly hostile towards his work. As Adam Bingham argues:

To my mind, the central issue in this neglect concerns French cinema's (and French critical magazines like *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Positifs*) perpetual and often over-riding placement of its directors in schools, movements and other such groupings to help define its own sense of national cinema.¹⁶

Indeed, Ozon eschews any such categorisation as many commentators have noted, and the fact that all significant academic work on Ozon to date is in English would imply that Bingham's comments are relevant six years on.¹⁷

¹³ *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1988).

¹⁴ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 5.

¹⁵ See Nick Rees-Roberts in *French Queer Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008): 'Of the contemporary filmmakers covered in *French Queer Cinema*, Ozon is the best known on the international independent film circuit', p. 8. Asibong notes that '*8 Femmes* has made over \$3 million dollars to date at the American box office alone', *François Ozon*, p. 1.

¹⁶ Adam Bingham, 'Identity and love: the not-so discreet charm of François Ozon', in *Kinoeye*, 3, 13, 10 Nov 2003, <http://www.kinoeye.org/03/13/bingham13.php>, accessed 16/04/09.

¹⁷ See Bingham, 'Identity and Love': 'The career of François Ozon has, thus far, almost self-consciously defied easy or definitive categorisation' and Asibong: 'Ozon's films appear sometimes

Nevertheless, although just over five years ago Bingham also lamented the absence of Ozon in anthologies of French cinema, several recent Anglophone publications seem to have redressed the balance: Guy Austin has added a section on Ozon in *Contemporary French Cinema*; the introductory chapter by Michelle Chilcoat in *Queer Cinema in Europe* focuses on *Sitcom*;¹⁸ Rees-Roberts' volume on *Queer French Cinema* lists Ozon alongside other queer filmmakers such as Chéreau, Ducastel and Martineau, Honoré and Téchiné; finally Kate Ince's chapter and Andrew Asibong's book on Ozon have started to bring attention to the director as his work deserves. While my thesis shares Kate Ince's aim to establish Ozon's 'originality as France's first mainstream queer *auteur*'¹⁹ and indeed sets out to question this claim, it is by no means unproblematic to place Ozon beside other allegedly queer and gay-identifying directors. In fact this thesis examines the ambivalence in Ozonian cinema towards sexual norms; the films both flirt and rebell against conventions while at times provoking normative reactions to controversial topics such as the maternal body, menstrual blood, female sexual desire and gay subjectivity. This ambivalence forms part of the fascination with and debate about François Ozon as a director. While Ducastel and Martineau – who are a couple in 'real life' and thus openly advertise their sexuality²⁰ – have made films about 'coming out' in *Ma vraie vie à Rouen* (2002) and *Crustacés et coquillages* (2005), for example, and do not shy away from portraying an HIV positive subject or filming homosexual sex (including the use of condoms) in *Drôle de Félix* (2000), Ozon avoids such explicit references to issues concerning the gay

to lurch wildly between tones and registers', *François Ozon*, p. 3. As Ince says, 'Ozon's films to date have oscillated between the exuberant and satirical send-ups of bourgeois family life [...] and the contrastingly sober [...] – an oscillation that sets Ozon apart from the kind of stylistic unity usually associated with being an *auteur*', *Five Directors*, p. 112.

¹⁸ Michelle Chilcoat, 'Queering the Family in François Ozon's *Sitcom*', in Robin Griffiths, ed., *Queer Cinema in Europe* (Bristol: Intellect, 2008), first published 2005.

¹⁹ Ince, *Five Directors*, p. 113.

²⁰ Their partnership is apparent in the special features of the DVD of *Ma vraie vie à Rouen* (Peccadillo Pictures Ltd. 2004): the Q&A session with the directors from the closing night of the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival 2003 is included.

community, as we shall see in the course of this thesis. While there are queer elements in the films by Ducastel and Martineau, it is not straightforward to identify a shared agenda in Ozonian works. In fact, as Ince argues, 'Ozon's works distinguish themselves clearly from earlier gay male filmic production in France through never having gay communities as their social setting, through their absence of reference to SIDA (AIDS), and through never having overtly politicised narratives'.²¹ It is, on the other hand, arguably more helpful to compare Ozon to Catherine Breillat, as Stéphane Spoiden and Fiona Handyside have done.²² Spoiden reads *Sitcom* alongside Breillat's *Romance* and Desportes and Trinh Thi's *Baise-moi*, considering the impact these films have had on cultural representations of sexuality and gender in French cinema, whereas Handyside investigates the mother/sister/daughter relationships in Ozon's *Swimming Pool* (2003) and Breillat's *A ma sœur* (2001), recognising that 'these are both films that re-imagine the family triangle as a wholly female space'.²³

Although, as Asibong notes, Ozon forms part of a group of filmmakers in France who are 'preoccupied with pushing back the boundaries of sexual representation in mainstream cinema' and that 'Ozon's films often seem to delight in graphic images of unrestrained sexual activity',²⁴ I would argue that Ozon's use of male and female naked bodies does not sit easily with the aesthetics of other queer or gay cinematic representations of sex. Thus I would agree to some extent with Austin's remark that there is a reluctance in Ozon's work to self-identify with gay or queer filmmaking. Using male nudity without hesitation may well automatically have given him this status, but full-frontal male nudity is rarely seen

²¹ Ince, *Five Directors*, p. 113.

²² Stéphane Spoiden, 'No Man's Land: Genres en question dans *Sitcom*, *Romance* et *Baise-moi*', *Esprit Créateur*, 42, 1 (2002), pp. 96-106 and Fiona Handyside, 'Girls on Film: Mothers, Sisters and Daughters in Contemporary French Cinema', in Marie-Claire Barnet and Edward Welch, eds, *Affaires de famille: The Family in Contemporary French Culture and Theory* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 221-237.

²³ Handyside, 'Girls on Film', p. 225.

²⁴ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 10.

in Ozon's films. Asibong notes that there is a shot of an erect penis in *Sitcom*, but interviews with the actor imply that a prosthesis was used; whether true or not, the point is that the shot is staged and artificial, the member in question framed unattached from its male body.²⁵ Films that are shown together with Ozon's work, for instance in the BFI collection *Majorettes in Space*, include more male nudity: indeed a quote on the video jacket advertises the film as 'funny, sexy and rude – erect members and homoeroticism a go-go'.²⁶ This may be true of the majority of these shorts (especially in David Fourier's *Des marjorettes dans l'espace* [1996]), but male genitalia are markedly invisible in Ozon's *Une robe d'été* (1996) and *La Petite Mort* (1995) – although sex and orgasm are principal themes there are no shots of the naked male genitals. Yet, curiously, the director does not shy away from filming Anna's full nakedness in *Gouttes d'eau* – and indeed Ludivine Sagnier's and other female naked bodies elsewhere. One wonders if Ozon is – albeit unwittingly – conforming to cinematic (and mediatic) conventions which consider female nudity, especially naked breasts, as less substantial than its male counterpart. It may be that Ozon's films represent nudity in such a way that heteronormative ideologies are kept in place; this is one indication that Ozon's work is not always as queer or transgressive as it might seem – once again his work resists easy categorisation.

Asibong's in-depth study of Ozon is to date the most illuminating work on the director as it appreciates the contradictions and problems of the Ozonian corpus. The premise of Asibong's book is that Ozonian characters embark on a process of self-realisation, leading to sexual discovery and/or freedom by way of rebelling against the patriarch, usually represented by a silent or absent father in

²⁵ See Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 10. See also the interview with Stéphane Rideau for *Ecran Noir*; the writer notes that Rideau claims: 'aucune scène n'a été éprouvante à tourner. Même celle de la branlette espagnole... C'était une prothèse', www.cannes-fest.com/1998/film/sitcom2.htm, accessed 28/07/2005.

²⁶ *Majorettes in Space: Five Gay Tales from France*, BFI, 1999.

the films. Asibong proposes that a metamorphosis, usually prompted by a fantastical event, takes place which shakes the characters out of their stale and repressive status quo and propels them into a new way of being. His study reads Ozon's early works up to *8 Femmes*, with the exception of *Sous le sable* (2001), as proposing a new kind of community, suggesting new ways of living and relating. Asibong considers Ozon to excel at producing *courts métrages* and suggests that *Regarde la mer* is 'the film that may well prove to be his indisputable masterpiece'.²⁷ The film short Ozon made for television in 2006, *Un lever de rideau* (2006), marks, suggests Asibong: 'a welcome return to what many feel to be Ozon's artistic domain par excellence'.²⁸ Ozon's recent films, released prior to *Un lever de rideau*, including *Le Temps qui reste* (2005) and *Angel* (2006), are criticised by Asibong for lacking the experimentation with alternative communities of the early works. *Angel* is described as 'an utterly alienating cinematic experience' and Asibong considers *Le Temps qui reste* to be 'a film that is, in fact, suffused in a rather complicated and offputting form of solipsism'.²⁹ In the course of this thesis I attempt to counter some of these suggestions, while recognising that these are not, perhaps, cinematographically speaking, Ozon's best works. Asibong claims that the 'films from *Sous le sable* onwards tend to keep characters and spectators alike trapped in an increasingly isolated and immobile dimension of fantasy'.³⁰ Without making Ozon's films an allegory for the impact of right-wing government, Asibong suggests there is a political pessimism on Ozon's part towards the state of French society; indeed I would propose that Ozon's testimony

²⁷ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 52.

²⁸ Asibong goes on to say: 'After the slightly heavy-handed torpor of *Le Temps qui reste*, the piece displays a lightness of touch that recalls the earlier Ozonian three-hander *Une robe d'été*', *François Ozon*, p. 107.

²⁹ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 138, p. 106.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 8.

to the lack of progress in society's understanding of gender relations and alternative sexualities is what lends a queer agenda to some of his films.³¹

While Asibong's study of Ozon will be a continuous reference point and stimulus for debate in the course of this thesis, I propound a different mode of analysis and understanding of the director's work, by employing a methodology drawn from feminist and queer theory which will respond to the accusations of misogyny and banality levelled at Ozon's films. My use of queer theory emphasises that Ozonian cinema creates a fluid viewing experience for spectators; viewers are able to take up positions of desire and undergo identificatory processes which are either unavailable or denied to them in heteronormative cinema.³² Throughout the course of this thesis the terms normative/non-normative, normativity and heteronormativity are used time and again; by the use of these terms I refer to the assumption prevalent in society that biological sex dictates gender roles and sexual desire. Queer theory enables the reader, spectator or critic to see the inconsistencies and problems in a society governed by heterosexual norms and thus my use of queer theory is inextricably linked to the concept of normativity. We can define normativity for the purposes of this thesis as actions and attitudes which are 'invisible' in conventional society, in other words those behaviours which do not stand out, that are not marked as 'different', but rather conform to expectations of society in general. We can see the dominance of heteronormative discourse in cultural productions such as the Hollywood romantic-comedy in which heterosexual couplings, primarily through marriage and children, are portrayed as being 'natural', 'right' and 'happy' endings. Ozonian cinema questions these norms in films such as *5x2* and *Gouttes d'eau* – see especially my discussion of these films in Chapters 4

³¹ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 8. See references to queer negativity and suspicion of 'progress narratives' in relation to McRuer, in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

³² As Alexander Doty states: 'viewers, no matter what their stated gender and sexuality identities, often position themselves "queerly" – that is, position themselves within gender and sexuality spaces other than those with which they publicly identify'. 'Queer Theory', in John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, eds, *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 151.

and 5 of this thesis. Heteronormativity is not restricted solely to sexual practices but extends to many aspects of cultural behaviour including work, the family unit, child-care, leisure activities and artistic expression. Heteronormativity is promoted and protected by cultural and social institutions such as marriage, the Church, and the State, especially in education and healthcare, which privilege the nuclear family and patriarchal values. Non-normative, or queer, subjects question and subvert these cultural ideals, usually provoking unease and rejection by 'normative' members of society, thereby lending these non-normative individuals marginal status.

Several of Ozon's films feature these marginal figures as well as non-normative expressions of sexuality which makes queer theory a useful and interesting standpoint from which to examine Ozonian cinema. While queer theory is notoriously difficult to define or pin down due to its ideals and opposition to categorisation,³³ reading films queerly enables the critic to analyse non-normative expressions of being and desire. For Benshoff and Griffin in *Queer Cinema*, queer theory 'allows us to examine both straight and non-straight sexualities, in order to deconstruct the ways and means that patriarchal hegemony constructs and maintains the idea that only one sexuality (married-straight-white-man-on-top-of-woman-sex-for-procreation-only) is normal and desirable'.³⁴ Queer film, unlike gay and lesbian cinema, it is argued, is not concerned with producing 'positive' role models for homosexuals; on the contrary queer film is often said to be 'politically incorrect' and has even been accused of political irresponsibility, for example because of queer film's lack of interest in promoting the use of condoms and 'safe'

³³ As Annamarie Jagose says: 'to attempt an overview of queer theory and to identify it as a significant school of thought [...] is to risk domesticating it, and fixing it in ways that queer theory resists fixing itself', *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 2.

³⁴ Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, eds, *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 5-6.

sex.³⁵ At the same time, however, there is an ethical charge in the term 'queer' as it refers to political and cultural resistance to heteronormative culture. Due to Ozon's own resistance to categorisation and facile labelling of sexuality, there is a strong case for reading his films through a queer lens, testing whether this methodology will shed light on the implications of Ozon's œuvre. In this thesis the current definition of queer is stretched to include ageing bodies, menopausal and childless women as well as disabled sexualities and camp sensibility. While this may seem an eclectic mix of topics my thesis proposes that Ozonian cinema foregrounds queer figures and modes of being which rebel against heteronormative models. Queer theory has been accused of being predominantly interested in gay, white, male expressions of sexuality and theorists have argued that is in danger of becoming 'normalized'.³⁶ This thesis explores these previously neglected areas and argues that there is still currency in queer theory for understanding non-normative subjectivities in the cinema.

This thesis also draws on feminist theory, largely due to Ozon's continuous fascination with female characters and actors; films such as *Sous le sable*, *8 Femmes* and *Swimming Pool* are women-centred almost to excess. Even films such as *Gouttes d'eau* and *Le Temps qui reste*, in which gay men are the main protagonists, present us with strong female parts, for example Ludivine Sagnier and Anna Thomson in the former and Jeanne Moreau in the latter film. Thus this thesis explores the way in which Ozon's films reveal the tyranny of heteronormative ideologies which trap women in particular into motherhood and marriage, for example in *Regarde la mer* and *5x2* (2004), while at the same time demonising childless and/or post-menopausal women in, say, *Sous le sable* and

³⁵ See Doty on the films of 'New Queer Cinema': 'they presented material that was sexually explicit, unconcerned with "positive images", and more generally "politically incorrect"', 'Queer Theory', p. 148.

³⁶ See, for example, discussions of McRuer in Chapter 2 of this thesis, p. 79, and David Halperin's article 'The Normalization of Queer Theory', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45, 2/3/4 (2003), pp. 339-343.

Swimming Pool. I argue that female spectators of Ozon's films can adopt viewing positions which do not condemn them either to a masochistic or masculinist process as Laura Mulvey's work would suggest;³⁷ instead, the viewer of Ozon's work finds that, in Judith Mayne's words:

Cinematic identification is never masculine or feminine, but rather a movement between the two. From this vantage point, positions may well be defined as masculine or feminine (or both), but they are taken up by spectators *regardless of their gender or sexuality*.³⁸

At the same time my thesis suggests that male spectators are able to identify with female characters in films such as *8 Femmes*,³⁹ while it analyses the way that heteronormative modes of relating to each other impose themselves on non-straight relationships, in, for example, *Gouttes d'eau* and *La Petite Mort*.⁴⁰ While this thesis acknowledges that Ozon's work is not always as radical or transgressive as it might be, it is suggested that the films studied here encourage queer readings and, perhaps, a new filmic community of queer spectators, even when the films themselves do not promise the alternative communities which Asibong describes in Ozon's early career. Furthermore, my reading of Ozon would claim that through the filmmaker's attention to the quotidian, to everyday gestures of housework,

³⁷ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, eds, *Film Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 [first published in *Screen*, 1975]), pp. 746-757. See also Anneke Smelik's account of female spectatorship: 'The difficulties in theorizing the female spectator have led Jackie Stacey (1987) to exclaim that feminist film critics have written the darkest scenario possible for the female look as being male, masochistic, or marginal', 'Gay and lesbian criticism', *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, pp. 135-147 (p. 139).

³⁸ Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 71, my italics.

³⁹ See for example work by Darren Waldron which refers to the queer spectatorship of Ozon's films, particularly the gay fan base. Waldron cites the example of a gay man who identifies with Augustine in *8 Femmes*, 'From Queer Auteur to Star Director: François Ozon and his admiring audience', Research Event, Bristol University, 26 November 2008. To be published as: Darren Waldron, *Queering Contemporary French Popular Cinema: Images and their Reception* (London and New York: Peter Lang, Forthcoming 2009).

⁴⁰ See Chapter 4 of this thesis. See also Sheila Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West* (London: Routledge, 2005), Chapter 3.

motherhood, grief and disease, Ozonian cinema tackles the question of how one lives daily with an awareness of one's sexuality and subjectivity, revealing the problems and suffering that this entails.

Alongside queer and feminist readings I also turn to psychoanalysis for a better understanding of themes which appear in Ozon's films; Freud's work on taboo and melancholia informs my analysis in Chapters 1 and 3 in particular, though I do not carry out Freudian readings of the films; rather I apply Freud's observations of human behaviour to textual analysis in order to reveal the issues at stake. The work of feminist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva on the abject and depression acts as a bridge between these different theories, as Kristeva takes Freud's claims further and adapts them to female subjectivity. Thus the methodology in this thesis returns time and again to psychoanalysis, but through the lenses of film, feminist, and queer theory as developed by Laura Mulvey, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler and Lee Edelman. The aim is to show, thanks to a deeper understanding of human psychology and behaviour, that Ozon, in films such as *Regarde la mer* and *Swimming Pool*, produces a sensitive portrait of lived experience, although critics might accuse these works of a lack of subtlety or of banality.⁴¹

The thesis begins with an analysis of taboo and the abject in Ozon's early film shorts and *Les Amants criminels* (1999), looking in particular at how/why the director likes to shock his audiences. Chapter 2 examines the use of genre in *Sitcom*, *8 Femmes* and *Angel*, with reference to the Hollywood melodrama and the 'women's film'; here Ozon deliberately plays with cinematic genres in order to subvert heteronormative modes of relating. In Chapter 3 I examine Ozon's portrayal of trauma and loss in *Sous le sable*, *Swimming Pool* and *Le Temps qui reste*, especially in relation to melancholia and depression which manifest in the

⁴¹ Tesson, 'Eau plate', *Cahiers du cinéma*, 579 (2003), pp. 48-49. Ince mentions that *Regarde la mer* has been accused of 'crudity, heavy-handedness', *Five Directors*, p. 113.

mourning subject and distort modes of relating. Gender as performance is the focus of Chapter 4, taking *Gouttes d'eau* as its main filmic text; here the concept of queer negativity will be introduced in order to analyse the bleak sexual relations portrayed. Finally, Chapter 5 interrogates Ozon's use of reverse narration in *5x2* and compares it to Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002), asking how backwards chronology manipulates our understanding of relations in the modern couple.

Chapter 1

Taboo and the Abject in Ozon's early films (1988 – 1999)

Beginnings

Murder, parricide, masturbation, prostitution and bulimia nervosa; these are just some themes François Ozon chooses for his film shorts and they make a formidable list when placed side by side so bluntly. They clearly are not themes which allow viewers to feel at ease in their seats. The young Ozon chooses to deal with taboo subjects for several reasons: he cannot fail to provoke a reaction from viewers and he can work with established themes but give them a fresh point of view or twist. Ozon flirts with horror tropes such as the 'zombie' parents in *Victor*, stabbings in *Sitcom* and *Les Amants criminels*, and the haunting music in *Regarde la mer*, but rarely respects generic conventions.¹ The director's investigation into taboo and the connections between sex and death mark his beginnings as a queer director, eager to examine the conscious and unconscious desires which bring about taboo behaviour. It has become commonplace in film studies to discuss horror in terms of psychoanalysis, indeed Kristeva's analysis of horror, disgust and the abject has had a strong influence in the field, and thus provides a context for my study.² Kristeva looks particularly at the position of taboo in relation to society, how the taboo is cast out, ab-ject, and how it provokes horror.³ Central to my analysis of Ozon's early works is the concept of the ambivalent emotional response

¹ See Asibong, *François Ozon*, pp. 113-115 and p. 116: 'Ozon has repeatedly and unashamedly sprinkled his films, shorts and features with some of the trashiest, crudest and most generic elements of "proper" horror cinema'.

² Barbara Creed's work on the monstrous feminine has also made this connection. Barbara Creed, 'Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection' in James Donald, ed., *Fantasy and the Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1989), pp. 63-89.

³ Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

provoked by taboo, identified by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*.⁴ Kristeva also testifies to the double-edged sword of horror, how it provokes fear and fascination and points to its deep-seated origins; fear and reverence of the abject is inextricably tied up with fundamental human experience. Kristeva talks in her study on the horror genre, 'Ellipse sur la frayeur et la séduction spéculaire', of the tension in 'ce nœud frayeur/séduction'.⁵ Similarly, Ozon's films also manage to seduce and shock his audience; here I aim to illustrate how he achieves this.

This chapter looks at just over a decade of Ozon's early work, from 1988 to 1999, as a point of departure from which to examine his entire corpus. Reference will be made to several film shorts, including two silent works *Photo de famille* (1988) and *Les Doigts dans le ventre* (1988); but the particular focus will be on Ozon's *moyen métrage* entitled *Regarde la mer* (1997), which provides rich ground for my investigation on murder and desire and their relation to the female subject. This chapter will then examine how Ozon's work on taboo develops in his second feature film, *Les Amants criminels* (1999), in which two teenagers plot the murder of a schoolfriend and then become prisoners in an isolated forest cabin, kept captive by a fierce-looking 'homme des bois'. The chapter will also uncover the deeper issues of taboo and the abject that are brought to our attention by Ozon's cinematography in his portraits of murder, drawing on examples from Freud and Kristeva and the anthropologist Mary Douglas. Ozon's early shorts were not widely distributed in movie theatres when they were made, although they were screened at festivals such as the one held at Clermont-Ferrand.⁶ However, these *courts métrages* are now of interest retrospectively, since his films *8 Femmes* (2002), *Swimming Pool* (2003), *Le Temps qui reste* (2005), and others, have brought him

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Religion: Totem and Taboo, Moses and Monotheism and Other Works* (London: Penguin, 1990).

⁵ Julia Kristeva, 'Ellipse sur la frayeur et la séduction spéculaire' in *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), pp. 373-382 (p. 380).

⁶ See Stéphane Goudet's article 'A propos des courts-métrages...', <http://www.francois-ozon.com/francais/ozon.entretiens09.html>, accessed 07/01/05.

to international attention. By looking at Ozon's beginnings as a director, we are preparing for an analysis of his feature films by understanding his context and his development in the art of film-making. The difference between the works before and after 1998 is marked; part of this research project is to ask how these very different works fit together and to reveal the links and continuities between them, if they exist.

One thing to bear in mind is that the audience for the very early, silent, shorts must have been very different to the audience of the feature films. Ozon was producing the work as part of his studies in the Faculty of *Arts plastiques et sciences de l'art* where he completed his *maîtrise* in cinema. Therefore his audience was made up of fellow students, friends, family, and teachers; he recalls in one interview that these silent shorts were 'faits en super 8 de manière artisanale en une journée, sans son, une torche dans une main et la caméra dans l'autre, avec pour acteurs des amis et pour public une dizaine de proches'.⁷ Ozon deliberately tries to unsettle his audience while using very basic equipment and rudimentary technique, a challenge to which he takes a ludic approach. One preoccupation we can identify is Ozon's awareness of the cinema as both a public and private space; he plays on this by filming private, intimate scenes to which strangers would not normally be witness. As a student of film studies and as cinephile, Ozon must be aware of how the cinema is a social occasion, one of escapism and public space. Yet at the same time, the dark space of the theatre and dream screen of film studies turn the cinema into a private experience. The spectators are hidden from others by the darkness and are immersed in the action on the screen; the cinema becomes a space where we can live out our fantasies and become voyeurs of other people's lives.

⁷ See article '1990-2000 vu par François Ozon', <http://www.francois-ozon.com/francais/ozon.entretiens09.html>.

Before going on to take a close look at Ozon's early work, it would be useful to define our terms and point out the implications involved by using the language of 'taboo' and 'abject'. The later part of this chapter will examine Ozon's allusion to taboo topics, while here I seek to explain how Ozonian cinematography explores the nature of taboo itself. Freud in fact focuses on the ambivalent meanings to be found in the word 'taboo' and reminds his reader that 'it means, on the one hand, "sacred", "consecrated", and on the other "uncanny", "dangerous", "forbidden", "unclean"'.⁸ Freud ultimately argues that the organising social structure of totemism and taboo was created to compensate for the murder of a dominating father/patriarch and thus reveals the conflicting issues at the centre of taboo. Kristeva chooses to anchor her views on horror to concrete examples of bodily experience and how it is linked to borders and limits. Kristeva builds on Freud's psychoanalytical and Mary Douglas' more pragmatic, anthropological, readings on horror and taboo, to develop a theory that relates to social realities such as motherhood, an area that is closely linked to Ozon's work, more explicitly so in *Regarde la mer*.⁹ Kristeva's study, which relates her questions to literary works, sets up a system of analysis that can also be applied to Ozon's filmic works. She uncovers the symbolic importance hidden in the abject and opens up issues, providing an appropriate method of reading Ozon's cinema.¹⁰ This chapter will draw out the theme of the abject in the films by referring to Kristeva's work before dealing with Ozon's use of the taboo as defined by Freud.

As well as establishing that Ozon's early films are obsessed with taboo subjects, several other questions should be asked. We should investigate why taboo and the abject have such a strong impact on audiences, drawing on Kristeva's and Freud's work to help understand the processes at work. Part of the

⁸ Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', p. 71.

⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁰ See Ince's reading of the abject in Ozon's films, *Five Directors*, pp. 127-130.

reason why viewers are vulnerable to this subject matter may be due to their experience in the movie theatre. As Baudry argues, the cinema 'brings about a state of artificial regression'; spectators are placed in the warmth, in the rest position, away from external stimuli, and so regress to a childlike state, one where 'the separation between one's own body and the exterior world is not well defined'.¹¹ What Baudry calls 'the reality test' has been removed; we are drawn into the action on the screen. Ozon is acutely aware that spectators are suggestible; when talking of audience response to *Regarde la mer* he states:

si le film provoque des réactions violentes, c'est parce que les gens projettent des choses horribles. Certains spectateurs sont par exemple persuadés d'avoir vu le cadavre du bébé dans la tente à la fin...Ce qui m'amuse, c'est que les spectateurs imaginent des choses encore plus monstrueuses que celles que je leur montre.¹²

If the imagination of spectators becomes involved in – and to an extent culpable of – the crimes involved, the question arises of whether a literary, artistic or cinematic work which treats the abject becomes abject itself. Freud's notion of contagion, that 'anyone who violates a taboo by coming into contact with something that is taboo becomes taboo himself', forces us to consider whether Ozon's work itself is 'infected'.¹³ Kristeva expresses this same notion, but in different terms; she is concerned by the implied complicity between the author and the abject: 'comme le sentiment d'abjection est à la fois juge et complice de l'abject, ainsi l'est la littérature qui s'y confronte'.¹⁴ Again Kristeva emphasises the ambiguity involved in analysing the abject; one attempts to look at it from the outside, to take a moral

¹¹ Jean-Louis Baudry, 'The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema' in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, eds, *Film Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 703 & 704.

¹² Interviews on *Regarde la mer*, <http://www.francois-ozon.com/francais/ozon.entretiens06.html>. This comment should not be taken at face value; it may be that Ozon is deflecting his own 'responsibility' for filming horror onto the spectator.

¹³ Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', p. 81.

¹⁴ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, p. 23, my italics.

stand and judge it, but at the same time one is drawn into its system. Towards the end of her essay, Kristeva raises the issue again, but this time in relation to the psychoanalyst: 'Pourra-t-il alors radiographier l'horreur sans en capitaliser le pouvoir? Exhiber l'abject sans se confondre avec lui?'.¹⁵ Kristeva's questions urge us to reflect on Ozon's position towards horror; the director may be exploiting it for sensationalist purposes or may be attempting a more profound analysis of it. By extension, the viewer of Ozon's work is also placed in an ambiguous position; we might be complicit bystanders to the crimes and travesties portrayed in these early shorts, or we might try to distance ourselves from what is portrayed on screen, which could in turn be just as problematic. The optimal distance from the cinematic screen, demanded in narrative Hollywood cinema to allow the viewer to believe in the existence of the action represented on screen while at the same time knowing that it does not actually exist, is denied us in Ozon's films.

The Power of Horror

Kristeva's work on horror reiterates the dichotomy between pure and impure, clean and unclean, moral and immoral that is found in literature of the abject, but insists that it cannot simply be found in the 'negative' qualities of each binary pair: 'ce n'est donc pas l'absence de propreté ou de santé qui rend abject, mais *ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre*. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles'.¹⁶ Kristeva's deconstruction of these pairs identifies the abject within the tension between polarities, rather than seeing dirt itself as abject. Ozon's film shorts forcefully illustrate what happens when we break limits or rules imposed by society. The viewer is made to experience the horror of what happens when the distinction between raw and cooked, clean and unclean, breaks down. This section

¹⁵ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, p. 247.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 12, my italics.

will look specifically at the power that lies in abject matter such as dirt, excrement, menstrual blood, and death (but especially dead bodies), and at the power that is to be found in the margins and boundaries.¹⁷ An appropriate place to start is the abject in food and the crossover between raw and cooked because, as Kristeva puts it, 'le dégoût alimentaire est peut-être la forme la plus élémentaire et la plus archaïque de l'abjection'.¹⁸ Ozon's films *Les Doigts dans le ventre* and *Regarde la mer* convey the revulsion encountered when the limit between raw and cooked food is not respected; this theme will reappear in *Les Amants criminels*, as we shall see.

Ozon's silent, documentary-style short, *Les Doigts dans le ventre* (1988), follows a teenage girl going about her day. In many ways she could be an average adolescent: we see her leaving her *lycée*, she goes to a fast-food restaurant, meets friends, borrows her mother's make-up. However, it becomes clear that the girl has an eating disorder; the short is structured round her search for and consumption of food and ends with the girl sitting down to eat with her family who is unaware of her bulimia. At one point the girl eats straight out of a can; the food clearly needs to be heated before being consumed; it is not a can of peaches, which can be eaten as they are, the contents look more like sausages in baked beans. The viewer is reminded of this short when Tatiana heats up canned food for dinner in *Regarde la mer*; her spartan way of life is contrasted with the familiar domesticity of Sasha's kitchen, where limits seem to be respected. The revulsion we feel in *Les Doigts* drives home just how desperate the girl is.

The spiritual and ritual significance of a communal meal – one need only think of Passover or the Last Supper – has been neglected in *Les Doigts dans le ventre* and it is distorted in *Regarde la mer*. Our culture and religions venerate mealtimes; a communal meal is often the centre of celebrations which mark life

¹⁷ See Ince's reading of the abject in Ozon's films, *Five Directors*, pp. 127-130.

¹⁸ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, p. 10.

changes: births, deaths, marriages, anniversaries. The symbolic role bread and wine play in both Judaism and Christianity serves to remind us to be thankful for these simple nutrients. The importance of food is not limited to Western religions alone; one of the fundamental notions in Sikhism, for example, is partaking of *langar*, temple food, where rich and poor alike, of all castes, genders or religions, sit on the floor and dine together. These cultural traditions are imbued with a sense of food as sacred and special; this is why we are so disturbed when confronted with a distorted attitude to food.

Ozon's *Regarde la mer* (1997) also investigates our relationship with food and the moving between public and private space. The homophone *mer/mère* in the film's title urges us to think about the portrayal of motherhood and to consider both Tatiana's and Sasha's roles as mother and, of course, mothers are associated with feeding too. The characters and the peculiar friendship they strike up underpin those polar opposites mentioned above, such as cooked/uncooked, clean/unclean, life/death. Ozon's cinematography in this film short accentuates our reaction to these characters; we shall see in particular how the use of colour is a useful indicator of the tension between these pairings. The implications of boundaries breaking down and the notion of the margin will be examined in more depth later in this section. As the film unrolls, Ozon investigates what happens when a stranger intrudes on the private family sphere. The women's names are never spoken out loud during the film, which adds to the mystery and makes the viewer wary from the outset.¹⁹ Tatiana is a scruffy backpacker, *une routarde*, who has asked permission to set up her tent on land belonging to Sasha, an English girl staying in her husband's cottage for a holiday on a remote island with her ten-month-old

¹⁹ The characters are named as Tatiana and Sasha on the synopsis and in interviews with the cast and director; here they will also be referred to by name for ease and clarity.

child.²⁰ Sasha and her daughter belong to private space, whereas Tatiana inhabits outside places while trying to inch into Sasha's space. Where Tatiana – who we learn was pregnant but her child did not survive – is linked to death, Sasha and her new-born baby girl, Siofra, seem to connote life. Sasha and Siofra are usually dressed in or surrounded by primary colours, whereas Tatiana is dressed in black and dark green. Sasha and Siofra are seen on the beach or in the garden, in natural spaces, whereas Tatiana goes to supermarkets and cemeteries, where the neon lighting and isolation respectively emphasise these as eerie places. This cinematic language underpins the tension between light and dark that pervades this *moyen métrage*.

Ozon suggests that the division between death and life cannot so easily be made, that Sasha cannot symbolise purely light and life and nor can Tatiana connote only horror and death. In fact, both women betray a fascination with horror; in Tatiana it is manifest but in Sasha it is latent and implied. The first meal that Tatiana and Sasha have together marks a turning point in the movie: when Tatiana enters the house for the first time the fragile membrane between inside and out starts to disintegrate. Sasha invites Tatiana in to eat with her because she feels pity at watching the traveller heating a can of food on her camping stove; Tatiana's table manners are to say the least unconventional: she wolfs her food down as if she is starving and then licks her plate clean when she has finished eating. Even the fact that she refuses Sasha's offer of 'une tisane' and asks for a cup of coffee instead underlines her voracious appetite, that she prefers another stimulant rather than a calming bedtime drink. Sasha looks mildly shocked and surprised, but she does not comment or restrain her companion's behaviour;

²⁰ Tatiana is played by Marina De Van, an actress and director, who reappears as Sophie in *Sitcom* and who has collaborated on several of Ozon's scripts. The other character is played by Sasha Hails – it is perhaps significant that Ozon has not given her a fictional name, as he deliberately plays with Hails' status as real-life mother to Samantha, who plays the baby Siofra.

Sasha's fascination with the abject is feeding on Tatiana's disregard for conventions surrounding meals.

When Tatiana licks her plate, her orality is emphasised and with it the Kristevan tension between mother and child. Tatiana's behaviour is suggestive, hinting at fellatio or cunnilingus. The fact that Tatiana displays her orality as an adult makes the viewer uncomfortable because it hints that her interaction with the world is out of kilter. Normally, any action that hints at orality is kept hidden; this explains table manners that encourage the use of cutlery and frown upon licking one's fingers or plate. Tatiana is at odds with the outside world; she keeps her body-warmer on, even though it is a hot, sunny day, and her cuts and bruises, along with her distressed jeans, imply that she is unable to look after herself: she seems stuck in the Imaginary. The main thrust of Kristeva's argument about the abject is that it brings the Imaginary back to the surface; the Symbolic order will reject or hold in abjection anything that lies outside, or threatens, its own system.²¹

The morning after Sasha and Tatiana have had dinner together, Sasha prepares breakfast for them outside in the garden. Already Sasha is venturing outside the boundaries known to her; nonetheless Sasha is surrounded by the sights and sounds of nature and is bathed in sunlight; there are shots of the grass and trees blowing in the breeze, and when Sasha bottle-feeds Siofra outside, all we hear is the wind and the baby sucking on her bottle. She goes to knock on Tatiana's tent to share breakfast with her, but the girl is not there – she is looking at raw meat in a supermarket. The blood-red meat contrasts with the stark white of the unnatural lighting in the supermarket, which is again at odds with the natural beauty of the island. As the camera follows Tatiana down the aisles, the soundtrack is playing César Franck's *Panis angelicus* – an ironic comment on the food on display. Raw meat is anything but the bread of angels; here Ozon's

²¹ See Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, pp. 88-89.

cinematography knowingly juxtaposes the visual and audio score to increase our disgust at Tatiana's fascination with bloody meat. Tatiana also wanders past rows of nappies, again suggesting her unhealthy obsession with babies. Sasha is back home eating fresh food and bread and caring for her child while Tatiana is spending her morning surrounded by legs and joints of meat; even the most carnivorous viewer must be disturbed.

Ozon's viewer is unsettled not only by Tatiana looking at the raw meat inside a supermarket on a sunny morning; the spectator also feels deeply uncomfortable when the boundary between clean and dirty is confused in *Regarde la mer*. In the morning after the first meal they share, there is another key moment in the film which marks Tatiana's encroaching presence in Sasha's private sphere: Sasha offers the other girl the use of her bathroom. Tatiana's relationship with the world outside her own is so awry that she is unable to respect the usual boundary between clean and unclean. Mary Douglas, whose study *Purity and Danger* greatly influenced Kristeva's own work on the abject, argues that 'there is no thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder'.²² In other words, we are not disgusted because Tatiana is dirty, but because she allows her dirt to contaminate what are usually clean zones, that is, her 'dirt offends order'. The bathroom is where we carry out our daily ablutions; although there are parts of it that are dirty (such as the toilet), they are not in themselves abject or taboo, as long as their place within the system is respected. The viewer will feel the same when confronted with the 'ogre' in *Les Amants*, who cleans himself but not his dwelling or, it seems, his clothes.

Tatiana is a figure who disrupts the distinction between clean and dirty. When Tatiana is sitting on the toilet, we notice how grimy her pants are; when she takes a bath, she still has them on – this may suggest that she is not comfortable

²² Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 2.

with her naked body and another sign that all is not well. Water has purifying properties, both literally and figuratively, but by bringing something unclean into the bath tub, it is as if Tatiana has polluted the water and is washing in her own dirt. Tatiana takes the soap to her crotch, seeming to scrub her underwear, but the gesture is one of masturbation rather than of washing. Again, this seems inappropriate: Tatiana is in another woman's private space and is abusing her host's trust, Sasha having lent her the bathroom for washing, not masturbation. The bathroom scene is so disturbing because it portrays, as Douglas says, 'dirt as matter out of place'.²³ As Kristeva puts it, 'la saleté n'est pas une qualité en soi, mais ne s'applique qu'à ce qui se rapporte à une *limite* et représente, plus particulièrement, l'objet chu de cette limite, son autre côté, une marge'.²⁴ Tatiana has crossed this limit and is on the outside of accepted boundaries between clean and dirty.

Tatiana also smokes while in the bath; at first this might not appear out of place: she is simply relaxing.²⁵ But Ozon's cinematography makes it more disturbing (see Figure 1). Tatiana's pale face is emphasised by her black hair and eyebrows, which in turn are circled by the murky white bath water. The stark contrast of black and white underlines Tatiana's association with death: she sinks her head under the water, as if to drown herself – only her hand holding a cigarette is left out of the water, like a dismembered limb. Once out of the bath, Tatiana should now be clean, but she then shifts back into dirt by taking Sasha's toothbrush and dipping it into the toilet pan with her unflushed faeces. Sasha later brushes her teeth with the sullied brush, quite unsuspecting, though she is disgusted by the dirty toilet. This is, perhaps, the first narrative indication that

²³ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 35.

²⁴ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, p. 84.

²⁵ Asibong notes that this is a leitmotif for Ozonian characters, *François Ozon*, p. 68.

Tatiana is a malicious presence; until now her behaviour has seemed odd but not sinister and now it seems right for Sasha to take sensible precautions.



Figure 1

This act of contagion is so startling because it blurs several different layers of boundaries which would normally be in place. First Tatiana is mixing clean and dirty by infecting a cleaning instrument with excrement. This action also brings together opposite ends of the body and digestive process; our mouths are used for consuming food and the mouth is associated with a specific human skill: speech and communication. In Dantean poetry, for example, the mouth has a sacred value through its use for praying to God and expressing love with a kiss. Excrement, on the other hand, is what our bodies reject and are unable to digest; culturally the anus has more corporeal and animalistic associations, representing the baser side of bodily functions. Finally, Tatiana is confusing what belongs to her, or her bodily limits, with those of Sasha; this represents the first steps to stealing Sasha's identity and tainting her life through an eerie, voodoo-like ritual. The way Ozon frames Sasha when she uses the toilet, with her knickers round her ankles, mirrors the previous scene with Tatiana, and so ensures that his audience is prepared for the disturbing identity theft; Sasha no longer seems to be overreacting, instead now we begin to suspect her of carelessness.

Two aspects of the unclean that are particularly significant, and which Ozon picks up on in his films, are excrement and menstrual blood. Both Douglas and

Kristeva, but particularly the latter, examine why these areas are accorded special status in the scale of dirt. Douglas gives the example of certain tribes which directly link dirt to madness; she says that 'ritual conserves sanity and life: madness brings filth and is a kind of death'.²⁶ In Tatiana's case, the confusion between clean and unclean is a strong hint for the viewer of her mental instability. Douglas reminds us of the link between excrement and madness and the threat to a man of coming into contact with a menstruating woman in various cultures, but Kristeva digs deeper to find reasons why these two specific types of dirt are specially powerful and threatening. Kristeva argues that pollutants – in terms of bodily dirt – are either excremental or menstrual. She notes that sperm and tears are not pollutants although they also are excreted from the body's borders. The reason excrement and menstrual blood are particularly powerful is that they both destabilise identity, but in different ways. Kristeva argues:

l'excrément et ses équivalents (pourriture, infection, maladie, cadavre, etc.) représentent le danger venu de l'extérieur de l'identité: *le moi menacé par du non-moi*, la société menacée par son dehors, la vie par la mort. Le sang menstruel, au contraire, représente le danger venant de l'intérieur de l'identité (sociale ou sexuelle); *il menace le rapport entre les sexes* dans un ensemble social, et, par intériorisation, l'identité de chaque sexe face à la différence sexuelle.²⁷

Menstrual blood represents the feminine, the Other, which threatens the Symbolic order; excrement, by its association with rotting, rejection and death, also upsets the order. Moreover, as Kristeva argues, excrement and menstrual blood are linked to each other by the maternal figure and the Imaginary order. The mother is herself linked to excrement through the processes of nappy training, feeding and cleaning her child, even giving birth. As Tatiana reminds us in *Regarde la mer*, when giving

²⁶ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 176.

²⁷ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, p. 86, my italics.

birth a woman may defaecate and she may tear in such a way that the vagina is joined to the anus.²⁸ Tatiana's morbid fascination with these processes unearths a connection which is usually forgotten or ignored, or disguised in medical terminology. The girl's crude statement that after a failed episiotomy, 'il y a des femmes qui chient par la chatte', reveals her lack of respect for the body; her language renders manifest the unease experienced by this threat to the Symbolic order. The restraint on language which normally functions in society, especially in the form of euphemism, has been displaced by Tatiana's experience of death.

As mentioned above, sperm does not threaten identity; although it comes from bodily margins and may in some way be dirty (it carries STDs, for example), semen also holds great potential for power. Mary Douglas notes that 'religions often sacralise the very unclean things which have been rejected with abhorrence'. Douglas is clear in explaining that not all that is unclean is automatically sacred: she lists two instances in which 'dirt, which is normally destructive, sometimes becomes creative'.²⁹ She mentions the way blood was used in Jewish sacrifice or how the left hand (usually reserved for unclean activities) was privileged in certain tribal rituals. This is the way Ozon portrays sperm which, in his films *Victor* and *La Petite mort* especially, can have creative and enlightening properties. For Paul in *La Petite mort*, the moment of the male orgasm is the pervasive theme in his photography. Here, the orgasmic moment is portrayed as an apotheosis; Paul is obsessed with capturing a special moment and employing it for artistic creativity. Camille, Paul's sister, looks in amazement at the photos displayed in the apartment; when Martial, Paul's partner, reveals the theme to her, she wonders whether they are actually ejaculating or just faking it. Martial replies proudly by pointing out a drop of sperm in his hair as proof that the photographs are authentic.

²⁸ Tatiana asks Sasha: 'ils t'ont cousu?' in a bone-chilling reference to the way in which Tatiana sews up Sasha's dead body and vagina after the murder.

²⁹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 159.

In *Victor* also, ejaculation seems to be equated with a voyage of self-discovery. Ozon's use of colour reinforces the positive energy and power in the male orgasm; Victor lies in the too-perfect, bright green grass in his garden. It is a dreamlike, fairy tale set – despite the presence of Victor's dead parents on the swings nearby – and at ejaculation Victor's sperm is a milky white colour, gently spotting his face and clothes. For Victor, masturbation is a confirmation of his own identity; he is finally able to escape the role imposed on him by his parents. Here, then, sperm symbolises rebellion and freedom, truly a cathartic moment.

In *Regarde la mer*, Ozon is particularly concerned with analysing boundaries and margins and how they relate to the abject. We have already seen how, for Kristeva, 'la souillure est un élément relatif à la limite, à la marge, etc., d'un ordre';³⁰ 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 – as we suppose the 'ogre' is in *Les Amants criminels*. When the viewer first meets her, the camera frames her on the edge of a cliff, a solitary figure silhouetted against the blue sky (see Figure 2).³¹ She seems vulnerable, in a precarious position – one false step would be enough to send her falling down the precipice. When Tatiana asks permission to set up her tent – again a symbol of instability – she camps on the edge of Sasha's land, in the opposite corner of the garden. Ozon thus prepares us for his portrayal of Tatiana as an outsider and misfit. Douglas explains where some of the fascination in marginal figures originates: the outlines of our society 'contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack. There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas'.³² Within the rebellious margins there is a force which can disrupt the usual order of society: this is why they are threatening and powerful.

³⁰ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, p. 81.

³¹ Asibong suggests that Tatiana's backpack is 'cemented to her like a dead baby', *François Ozon*, p. 57.

³² Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 114.

Figure 2



The story of *Regarde la mer* is itself set on a margin: an island. Cut off and isolated from the mainland, an island is more vulnerable to attack and more exposed to the elements. Even part of the plot rests on the fact that it is filmed on an island: Sasha's husband arrives by boat and Tatiana makes her escape on the same ferry, having heard on the telephone exactly what time Paul would arrive. Sasha's murder is planned to fit in with the ferry times. The presence of the sea and beach also mark out a boundary, the one between water and land; Sasha and Siofra spend time on the sand which is itself an ambiguous space.³³ Sand is neither wholly rock or water, and when we see Siofra playing with sand, plunging her hands into the sand castle, it might remind us of Sartre's ideas on stickiness, as set out by Douglas in her chapter on defilement.³⁴ The description also fits sand very well; our experience of sand raises our awareness of boundaries and as Douglas puts it, we realise that 'life does not conform to our most simple categories'.³⁵ Similarly the categories of life and death, good and evil, sanity and insanity, are blurred in Ozon's film. As Siofra takes her first shaky steps down to the water, the viewer is reminded of the transition she is also making from new-born to toddler, from milk to food, from crawling to walking. By Siofra's proximity to

³³ See Ince's discussion of the beach as a significant space in Ozon's films, *Five Directors*, p. 126.

³⁴ Douglas paraphrases Sartre: 'the viscous is a state half-way between solid and liquid. It is like a cross-section in a process of change. It is unstable, but it does not flow. It is soft, yielding and compressible', *Purity and Danger*, p. 38.

³⁵ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 38.

birth, the precariousness of life is recalled, suggesting that Sasha and Siofra are vulnerable subjects, prey to murder and abduction.

There are other significant moments in *Regarde la mer* when physical and moral boundaries are transgressed. Ozon's use of the forest as a sexual space is telling; Sasha has to walk past the forest to get to the beach from her cottage and so the wood is literally both a point of crossover and cut off from other spaces. Trees are obviously suitable cover for the activities going on in the forest and thus an ideal cruising space for gay men, but on a figurative level, a wood is also a dark place where mysterious things happen (Dante's and Tolkien's woods are a case in point). So when Sasha enters the wood and a stranger performs cunnilingus on her, she is also metaphorically crossing a boundary. Sasha leaves behind her role as mother (abandoning Siofra to burn in the sun – see Figure 3) and enters a zone of sexual experimentation, where the distinction between gay and straight sexualities is blurred, and where people are performing a usually private action in a public space. It is also significant that it is Tatiana, not Sasha, who notices what is happening there, as if it is Tatiana who indirectly tempts Sasha into the dark place. This, then, is what makes Sasha's behaviour particularly abject for the viewer: sexual discovery in itself is not condemned, but the blurring between the roles of mother and sexual being is unexpected and taboo, especially as it means that Sasha puts her child in danger – just as she does when she falls asleep on the beach, giving into physical needs. The viewer might ask whether Sasha is 'punished' for enjoying this anonymous sexual encounter, much as some reviewers argue that Marion in *5x2* pays for her infidelity when she is raped by her ex-husband.³⁶ There is, therefore, some ambiguity towards female sexuality in this early film; 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. If

³⁶ I shall be looking at this portrait of marital rape in Chapter 5.

this is the case, critics would be justified in accusing Ozon of misogyny in his early films, especially when juxtaposed with the portrayals of male sexuality in this period, which usually show male subjects on a journey to self-realisation and sexual awakening.

Figure 3



However, Ozon's cinema, as we will see time and again in the course of this thesis, deliberately exploits gender stereotypes both to reveal the hypocrisies of heteronormative discourse and in order to provoke and disconcert his viewer. From the outset of *Regarde la mer*, Sasha is bored, tired and lonely; she is left alone by her husband, who rarely calls her, partly because of cultural assumptions that the mother should be the prime carer for a child. The way that Sasha masturbates against a chair on the evening of Tatiana's arrival suggests her sexual needs have been neglected, that her husband imagines that she has no need of adult (male) company. The way Sasha tries and fails more than once to read her novel also reveals her desperate need both for time on her own and intellectual stimulus. Her vulnerable position is therefore also the responsibility of repression by patriarchal culture. The more Sasha shifts into the margins, where roles are not clearly defined, where there is special energy, the easier it seems for Tatiana to take control and take away the other woman's life and child.

As Douglas says, 'it is unpleasant to poke about in the refuse to try to recover anything, for this revives identity'.³⁷ So, Ozon, too, could be accused of

³⁷ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 160.

poking into a metaphorical rubbish heap by exploring taboo subjects which are not normally discussed, or which are usually censored by convention. Ozon makes deliberately unsettling cinema and in his early works he bombards his audience with a series of taboos. In *Regarde la mer* the viewer experiences the mixed feelings of 'veneration and horror' which characterise, Freud notes, our inherent ambivalence towards taboo.³⁸ The moment in which these feelings crystallise is when Tatiana enters Sasha's bedroom shortly before murdering her. A blue-tinted light illuminates the scene: it is reminiscent of romantic moonlight, but here it is ghostly cold. Tatiana enters the frame and stands by the door, on the threshold, once again straddling the border between life and death. She takes her clothes off as if she wants to make love with Sasha and stands, naked, contemplating the mother/daughter dyad sleeping in the bed. It may be that we imagine this scene to reveal Tatiana's sexual desire for Sasha because of her stereotypical lesbian 'dyke' looks, or because of spectatorial knowledge that lesbian desire is present in later Ozonian works. Tears fall down Tatiana's face; we see tenderness and sadness in her face, but also a kind of fear or anger. Tatiana venerates mother and child as well as being horrified by them; Sasha's status as a new mother reminds Tatiana of her own loss and at the same time Tatiana is repulsed by the dirt associated with childbirth. Freud lists those categories which are considered taboo in certain societies and it includes men at their initiation ceremonies, women during menstruation, women after childbirth, new-born babies, the sick, the dead, and a man's personal possessions.³⁹ We see therefore why the pairing of Sasha and Siofra is such a powerful taboo in *Regarde la mer*.

³⁸ Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', p. 78. Jacques Kermabon, in Michel Marie, ed., *Le Jeune cinéma français*, perhaps unwittingly, uses very similar language, the vocabulary of taboo, about Ozon's work, saying that it is 'une œuvre qui, entre fascination et répulsion, met le spectateur face à des images qui déstabilisent son confort', p. 26.

³⁹ Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', pp. 76-77.

Sasha is taboo in her own right, due both to her status as a new mother and the fact she is still breast-feeding. Sasha's fragile position is physical evidence of the fine line between life and death; but she also becomes taboo by infection, by coming into contact with Tatiana who has lost a baby and therefore has been touched by death. Tatiana's words, 'je l'ai fait avorter', imply that she has had an abortion, but the circumstances are never made clear; in fact Ozon wants to leave this open to interpretation by the spectator. In his letter to Marina de Van (Tatiana), he lists the possibilities of her story: 'un enfant mort-né? Un avortement traumatique? Un viol d'un père ou d'un frère? Je n'ai pas envie de choisir. Car Tatiana doit rester un mystère qui *intrigue, fascine, attire, révulse et terrifie*'.⁴⁰ Tatiana's contagion of Sasha is not only metaphorical because the bathroom scene, in which the *rouarde* infects Sasha's private sphere, makes it reality. Ozon makes us quite certain that the boundaries of life and death have broken down for Tatiana; but there is another taboo which Tatiana commits: stealing someone's property. Not only does Tatiana steal another woman's baby, she also steals Sasha's clothes. When the murderer leaves the island on a ferry, she is wearing Sasha's red dress and cardigan and has cut her hair to emulate her victim. Along with Sasha's clothing, theft of identity is implicit. As Freud notes: 'a man's property which is in his constant use is permanently taboo to all other men: his clothing, for instance, his tools and weapons. Included in a man's most personal property, in Australia, is the new name which he received when he was a boy at his initiation'.⁴¹ The theft of clothes alone would not be as grave as identity theft. This breaking of taboo makes Tatiana doubly uncanny as she becomes Sasha's lookalike.

Very early Ozonian films are, it seems, overridingly obsessed with murder, especially the murder of family members. The films seem to unlock repressed

⁴⁰ See Ozon's letter to Marina de Van, Interviews on *Regarde la mer*, <http://www.francois-ozon.com/francais/ozon.entretiens06.html>, my italics.

⁴¹ Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', pp. 76-77.

appetites and the unconscious enmity which Freud speaks about in *Totem and Taboo*. When speaking of our emotional ambivalence, Freud says that 'in almost every case where there is an intense emotional attachment to a particular person we find that behind the tender love there is a concealed hostility in the unconscious'.⁴² Ozon employs the 'safe zone' of cinema to unleash hostilities which would normally remain in the unconscious. The most blatant example of this is in *Photo de famille* in which a teenage boy murders his entire family, killing off mother, sister and father in turn. He goes about his murderous tasks in a matter-of-fact way, smiling all the while. The film builds up to the finish: a family photo. The boy seems to take pleasure in composing the photo with their dead bodies and uniting the family in this disturbing ending. It is perhaps significant that the boy murders each family member in a different way: poison, stabbing, and suffocation. It is as if his imagination is set free and he can employ all the methods usually used both in 'whodunnits' and Shakespearean tragedies. Ozon uses his own family members for this sketch, making a tribute to them, but also confessing his deep-seated phantasies. This film short illustrates Freud's description of emotional ambivalence: 'the simultaneous existence of love and hate towards the same object',⁴³ this is, perhaps, how Luc feels about his 'rival', Saïd, in *Les Amants criminels*, as we shall see.

The quasi documentary feel of *Photo de famille* means that it is deeply shocking; although it might appear dreamlike and surreal in parts, it is filmed in such a way (perhaps due to the young Ozon's limited resources rather than to choice) that the action seems banal and everyday. This is not the first time that sober mise-en-scène will deceive Ozon's audience into expecting a 'realist' or psychological drama. In *Victor*, Ozon's style is different and the director reminds his viewer of the artifice of the medium by composing his sets in a stage-like

⁴² Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', p. 116.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 219.

manner and placing his characters in a way reminiscent of *tableaux vivants*. Victor also murders his parents in an attempt to escape their oppressive control of him and in order to move out of the eternal child-like state they have imposed on him. He does not seem to have any feelings of remorse; instead Victor is quite content to embark on a journey of self-discovery, signalled at the end by him standing on the platform waiting for the next *métro*, symbolising his transformation, and to borrow Asibong's terms: 'the miraculous formation of new communities'.⁴⁴ Once again, Ozon has turned usual social mores on their head. Freud notes that 'the taboo upon the dead arises [...] from the contrast between conscious pain and *unconscious satisfaction* over the death that has occurred'.⁴⁵

Ozon has brought the 'unconscious satisfaction' to the surface, allowing characters in a film to feel what is usually repressed by conventional society. This is perhaps why the viewer finds these scenes so disturbing and uncanny: our latent hostility comes to the surface and we might feel guilty at the memory of any imagined violence towards loved ones. Ozon uses the cinematic space as a dream-space in which repressed desires can be played out and as a result the spectator is confronted with a taboo. As Freud says, 'we ourselves are subject, more strongly and more often than we suspect, to a temptation to kill someone'.⁴⁶ Ozon delves into this well-hidden secret of the human psyche and allows his filmic characters, to use Freud's words again, 'to take flight from an unsatisfying reality into a more pleasurable world of phantasy'.⁴⁷ The viewer is urged, however, to examine the price of indulging in our fantasies and to consider where it might lead.

⁴⁴ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 8.

⁴⁵ Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', p. 117, my italics.

⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. 126-7.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 131.

Taboo in *Les Amants criminels*

While Ozon's first feature film, *Sitcom* (1998), also alludes to taboos such as incest and parricide, the similarities with the early shorts are more obvious in *Les Amants criminels*, especially in relation to the cinematography and viewing experience. As the title of *Sitcom* suggests, the film plays with film and television genres as well as upsetting gender conventions; it can therefore be read more usefully alongside *8 Femmes* and *Angel*, as we shall see in Chapter 2. Ozon's second feature film, *Les Amants criminels*, draws on many obsessions which pervade the director's early shorts, yet the themes are set in a different context, away from the family and the home; events instead happen at school and in an isolated forest cabin. It could be, out of all Ozonian characters, that Luc best embodies Freud's description of 'the simultaneous existence of love and hate towards the same object', in his reverence and fear of Saïd, his schoolmate and sexual rival. Thus *Les Amants criminels* continues to explore the ambiguous feelings and murderous instincts of human subjects which Ozon first portrayed in *Photo de famille*. In his study of Ozon's work, Asibong recognises that the subject matter of *Les Amants criminels* does not make it an easily watchable film and the issues he lists in the film echo the taboos present in the *courts métrages*. He says of *Les Amants criminels* that: 'its unabashed preoccupation with the ethics and aesthetics of murder, cannibalism and sodomy was doubtless indigestible'.⁴⁸ This, for Asibong, goes some way into explaining the film's poor reception with audiences. One review of the film, however, suggests that Ozon's use of taboo is too pat and not successfully transgressive in the way it was in the film shorts and particularly in *Regarde la mer*. Jérôme Larcher complains that: 'Las, on voit aujourd'hui un film qui énumère les

⁴⁸ Asibong, *François Ozon*, pp. 58-9.

tabous sans jamais les mettre en perspective'.⁴⁹ This chapter argues, though, that in *Les Amants criminels*, Ozon does move on from his portrayal of taboo in the early shorts by making it a more explicitly sexual film, especially by filming a narrative driven by sexual desire rather than by the need to understand or create one's own identity (usually achieved by rebelling against the family and/or killing the patriarch).⁵⁰ Furthermore, Ozon situates the taboos – here notably gang rape and paedophilia – of *Les Amants criminels* in a different social and political context, which would suggest that there is more to the film than one might at first expect, and that Ozon does not simply – as Larcher implies – 'décline à l'infini ses thèmes de prédilection'.⁵¹

There is no doubt that Ozon continues with some of his trademark obsessions, especially in the ambiguities and tensions in this film. There are scenes which recall Ozon's use of the abject in his early shorts, especially in relation to blood and the contamination between the clean/dirty and cooked/raw dialectics. After Luc and Alice kill Saïd in the changing rooms, they have to clear up the blood which has splattered all over the walls and themselves. Luc and Alice stand in the shower as the blood dilutes in the water and runs off their naked bodies; there is an irony that they have polluted themselves with such a horrendous crime and will not become 'clean' merely by washing – just as Lady Macbeth is unable to remove the stains of blood from her hands. Their blood pollutes the water and this place of cleansing, as Tatiana does in Sasha's bathroom in *Regarde la mer*. Similarly, the ogre takes care to wash himself in the hip bath, but his clothes are filthy and we know from Luc's words when they first enter the place that the cabin stinks ('ça pue'). Once again the mixing of clean and dirty seems an implication that something is amiss, just as we saw in *Regarde la*

⁴⁹ Jérôme Larcher, 'Les Amants criminels', *Cahiers du cinéma*, 538 (1999), p. 75.

⁵⁰ See Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 8: 'metamorphosis [...] invariably involves the radical evacuation of spectrally paternal presences', as happens, for example, in *Sitcom*, *La Petite Mort* and *Victor*.

⁵¹ Larcher, 'Les Amants criminels', p. 75.

mer. The ogre is (and so are Luc and Alice by association) surrounded by raw meat: there are dead rabbits hanging from the beams and Saïd's rotting flesh lies below in the cellar. The idea of mixing raw and cooked meat, without a proper place for either, makes the viewer sympathise with Luc's repulsion when presented with the meal cooked for him, saying: 'j'ai pas faim'. Most disturbingly there is a suggestion that the ogre is feeding human flesh to Luc; Alice notices that Saïd's body has a limb missing and Luc is given some meat which he does not recognise. Cannibalism breaks the taboos which were meant, as we saw from Freud's analysis of taboo in primitive cultures, to protect human beings from eating each other and from mating with relatives. The viewer is horrified by the presence of the abject here, by the confusion of boundaries which we expect to regulate our social behaviour. However, in *Les Amants criminels*, Ozon takes his exploration of the abject one step further; in this film not only is taboo implied, but taboo subjects – such as paedophilia, cannibalism, rape and murder – are at the forefront of the narrative drive and suspense. The challenge for the liberal filmmaker here is how to respond to subjects which provoke such strong reactions, without seeming to propose a moralistic and facile judgement of them.

As we shall see in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Ozon is a director fascinated by different cinematic genres; his first feature, *Sitcom*, morphs from one genre to another. Similarly, *Les Amants criminels* is not immune to Ozon's desire to experiment with genre conventions. The film starts out resembling a social realist film, becoming a horror story with elements of a Grimm fairy tale and magic-realism. Ince's account of the film notes that Luc and Alice have resonances with Hansel and Gretel, marking their trail through the wood, while Asibong remarks upon Ozon's allusions to other cinematic fables.⁵² However, the genre which most preoccupies Ozon here is perhaps the film of *le jeune cinéma français* of the

⁵² See Ince, *Five Directors*, p. 131 and Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 62.

1990s, following on from the trend of films such as *La Haine* and *La Vie rêvée des anges*.⁵³ Due to Ozon's age – he is more or less contemporary with directors such as Assayas, Klapisch and Kassovitz – and given the fashion for this mode of filmmaking, the viewer might expect *Les Amants criminels* to display some of the characteristics of the 'new realism' in French cinema.⁵⁴ The genre is concerned with cinematic realism, is socially political and, according to Guy Austin, the films 'present the moral choices and social struggles experienced by its characters without an ironic or critical distance'.⁵⁵ This is not the case, however, in Ozon's *Les Amants criminels*, which denies spectatorial expectation of social realism. Although the subject matter (teenage sexuality, gang rape and murder) might seem to require gravitas, the fairy-tale elements, as well as the eroticisation and dramatisation of the murder through flashback, prevent the viewer from engaging with the film as a portrait of social issues. As we shall see in the course of this thesis, this is not the last time that Ozon will allude to a hotly debated topic only then to fail to engage with the issue in a politically committed, some might say responsible, or 'realist' manner, and here one might cite the refusal to make a film about AIDS in *Le Temps qui reste*, child abuse in *Ricky*, and lesbian desire in *8 Femmes* and *Angel*.

The murder at the centre of *Les Amants criminels*, and Alice's apparent motivation for the murder of Saïd, reflects a social issue which emerged in the Hexagon's *banlieues* in the mid to late 1990s. Josée Stoquart, in her introduction to *Dans l'enfer des tournantes*, Samira Bellil's autobiographical account of sexual violence in immigrant communities, states that gang rapes emerged as a problem

⁵³ *La Haine* (Kassovitz, 1995) and *La Vie rêvée des anges* (Zonka, 1998); Natacha Régnier (Alice in *Les Amants*) starred in the latter in one of the lead roles. See Austin, *Contemporary French Cinema* (2008), pp. 220-241 and Claude-Marie Trémois, *Les Enfants de la liberté: Le jeune cinéma français des années 90* (Paris: Seuil, 1997). See also Phil Powrie, 'Heritage, History and "New Realism": French Cinema in the 1990s', in Phil Powrie, ed., *French Film in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), pp. 1-21 (pp. 10-18).

⁵⁴ In *Le jeune cinéma français*, Marie, ed., Ozon is mentioned alongside directors who are considered to be part of the movement, p. 95.

⁵⁵ Austin, *Contemporary French Cinema* (2008), p. 221.

in the 1980s and that in 1998 alone the police arrested nearly a thousand French minors for the rapes of teenage girls.⁵⁶ There is no doubt, therefore, that this issue was very much in the public eye when *Les Amants criminels* was released and that the film might expect to provoke strong reactions, especially as Ozon refuses to take a realist stance towards the issue. At first Alice's account of the gang rape seems genuine; when Luc asks her why she did not tell anyone or go to the police, she answers that it would not have solved anything or compensated for her trauma. Her reasons for not going to the police resonate with accounts of gang rape by adolescent girls and therefore ring true. Luc seems convinced that by murdering Saïd he will avenge Alice's rape and prove that he loves her. Testimonies collected by the group *Ni putes ni soumises*, and personal stories such as Bellil's, demonstrate that girls are afraid to report their rape to the authorities; Bellil is terrified of her father's reaction when he sees her: 'j' imagine les yeux de mon père injectés de sang, sa mâchoire crispée de colère, ses poings préparés à me démolir'.⁵⁷ Above all, her assailant K. threatens her: 'Si tu ouvres la bouche, je crame toute ta famille!'. There seems no choice for Bellil; if she goes to the police her family's safety will be threatened and if she tells her parents she expects to be punished by her father. We learn later, however, that Alice has been deceiving Luc, that there was no gang rape or garage ('cave') where she claims it happened.⁵⁸ We are, though, suspicious of her account from the outset, largely due to her flirtatious behaviour towards Saïd and her contemptuous attitude with Luc. Therefore the murder has been committed based on a false accusation; Luc is furious when he finds out.

Ozon could be accused of insensitivity in the way he alludes to this social problem; there is a danger that his treatment of the subject appears to belittle the

⁵⁶ Samira Bellil, *Dans l'enfer des tournantes* (Paris: Denoël, 2003), pp. 11-12.

⁵⁷ Bellil, *Dans l'enfer*, p. 39.

⁵⁸ Bellil describes the places where she is raped, often in a 'cave', *Dans l'enfer*, p. 48.

female experience of rape. Firstly, in cases where women report rape to the police there is a slim chance of securing either prosecution or a guilty verdict and women are already afraid of coming forward with their evidence; they are worried that their story will not be believed. Therefore, Alice's exploitation of stories of gang rape and her lies suggest that not all women who report rape are telling the truth; while this is, perhaps, reasonable to imagine, Ozon's portrayal of Alice as a manipulative and deceptive teenager would only reinforce masculinist stereotypes and encourage lawyers and juries to doubt every woman's evidence. These are the very prejudices which campaigners against violence to women are trying to eradicate. There is the suggestion that Alice entertains a sadomasochistic fantasy of being raped by Saïd and his friends, that women might actually desire sexual violence. Furthermore, the fact that Alice's accusation relies on Saïd's ethnicity for authentication is problematic, as we shall see; these gang rapes usually occur in the deprived 'cités', or housing estates, and frequently among immigrant families of Muslim origin. Ozon therefore uses the racially marked body – and name – of Saïd as part of the evidence against him; Luc believes Alice's story because it is true to stereotype. Asibong also notes how Ozon's camera eroticises Saïd's otherness: 'as Saïd, the actor Salim Kechiouche becomes instigated as the film's truly sexual specimen'.⁵⁹ The camera which eroticises Saïd represents Alice's point of view as much as Luc's; the young Arab is an object of desire and fascination for them both. It would appear, therefore, that Ozon's film uses Saïd to refer to this controversial issue without, in fact, examining the cultural and social pressures on young beur men. Saïd is used as an object both by Alice and, perhaps, Ozon himself.

⁵⁹ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 61. He goes on to say that: 'Alice's lengthy and detailed lie [...] encases Saïd into the sexualised fantasy image of young men of Arabic descent propagated by French media headlines and hardcore pornography alike, heavily dependent as both so desperately are on the racialised clichés and stereotypes of the ghetto youth and his depraved nocturnal activities'.

While the refusal to make a politically 'correct', or social realist film about 'l'enfer des tournantes' could be said to be a characteristic of Ozon's queer filmmaking, in which sexualised violence is not judged by normative moral standards, Ozon could instead be criticising much of the media hysteria surrounding this social phenomenon. Some left-wing writers and French feminists are, in fact, concerned that the movement *Ni putes ni soumises* is actually reinforcing racial stereotypes rather than breaking down prejudice. For its critics, it seems that by drawing attention to the specific ethnic and religious identity of the groups involved in gang rape, NPNS reinforces hostility to Islamic culture and immigrant communities. Ozon's *Les Amants criminels*, while arguably not a politically engaged analysis of gang rapes in *banlieue* communities, does show that white teenagers also commit sexual violence and that games of power and control can occur elsewhere, and not exclusively in poor, non-white communities.

In fact, Asibong argues that *Les Amants criminels* 'along with *Regarde la mer* [...] offers the most simultaneously thoughtful, innovative and exciting exploration of the nuances and pitfalls of "power play" Ozon has been able to offer to date'.⁶⁰ Indeed, Luc and Alice's use of sadomasochistic role play is most disturbing and goes some way to explaining their motivations for murdering their schoolfriend while suggesting the uncanny connection between murder and desire. It is as if Luc and Alice are drawn to each other by their sadomasochistic tendencies, as if they recognise that the other will help them to satisfy the urge to experiment. The opening scene of the film, in which Alice – wearing a choker that suggests S/M role play – has blindfolded Luc as she undresses, demonstrates her psychological and physical manipulation of her boyfriend.⁶¹ Although she describes her undressing in an attempt to arouse Luc sexually, she betrays his trust by lying

⁶⁰ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 59.

⁶¹ This is perhaps enhanced by the actors' off-screen ages: Natacha Régnier is nine years older than Jérémie Renier, who was only eighteen when *Les Amants* was made.

about her state of undress and then undresses Luc in order to take a photograph of his naked penis. He is furious: he has not got an erection and will be humiliated if the photograph is circulated; Alice, however, was mentally torturing him as she reveals that the camera has no film in it. This is just the first example of how Alice sadistically enjoys taunting Luc, in turn making him jealous and provoking him sexually only then to reject him when he proves unable to have penetrative sex.

It is, therefore, Luc's desire to prove himself to Alice as well as taking revenge for Saïd's teasing, that spurs him to kill the other boy. It is, also, Alice's desire to control Saïd and his body, as well as her yearning to be desired by Luc (twice in the film she asks him: 'Est-ce que tu m'aimes?') that causes her to fabricate the gang rape story and plot Saïd's murder. She appears ecstatic and proud that desire for her made Luc kill another boy; even though Luc is appalled at what he has done, and for no reason, Alice declares that no-one has ever made such a grand gesture of love to her before. The portrayal of female sexuality as predatory and destructive, as well as Alice's objectification of the exotic other, is disturbing, and as Asibong notes, 'the figure of Alice [...] starts detractors once and for all on the question of Ozon's potential misogyny'.⁶² Alice's lack of remorse and coldness in the light of such a horrific crime might lead audiences to feel she deserves the ogre's punishment, lying in a squalid cellar surrounded by rats and deprived of food and water. She could be said to be punished for her sexual depravity, much as Sasha pays for her curiosity in *Regarde la mer* and as the women in *8 Femmes* discover that their gossip and backstabbing machinations prove too much for their paterfamilias who commits suicide in order to escape them. As we shall see in the course of this thesis, however, the Ozonian portrayal of women is more complex than the terms misogyny or adoration imply; Asibong also notes that 'the films themselves contain a far more complex sexual politics

⁶² Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 63.

than either position actually allows'.⁶³ What is definite is that Ozon adopts a vast number of directorial positions in the filming of women, often in a way which mainstream (heteronormative) narrative cinema would not permit, as we shall see.

Rather than analysing *Les Amants criminels* as a variation on the sadomasochistic workings of desire and murder or experiment in cinematic genre, another reading of the film would suggest that the film works as a queer allegory for a young man's sexual awakening. This would strengthen the argument of reading Ozon through the lens of queer theory, as this point of view reveals issues that are not at first obvious. At the beginning of the film, Luc is portrayed as an awkward teenager, prey to Alice's manipulative games and lacking in sexual confidence. The other boys at school tease him, mocking his lack of sexual experience by calling him 'puceau' as well as making homophobic taunts by questioning his 'manliness', commenting on his delicate looks: 'il est mignon'. When he sees Alice flirting with Saïd, who then kisses her, Luc is hurt and he hides behind a wall as tears run down his cheeks. There is a sense that Luc is unable to have a 'normal' teenage relationship with his girlfriend, that he is different from others. Ozon, however, does not use Luc's character to explore a narrative of 'coming-out'. His cinema refuses to portray a 'realist' or politically engaged story of homosexual awakening; as we shall see in Chapter 2, Ozon also eschews a 'politically correct' exploration of Nicolas' coming out in *Sitcom*.⁶⁴ As I argue elsewhere, this is a characteristic of queer filmmaking which refuses to make 'positive' images of gay sexuality; this mode of examining sexuality prefers to question heteronormative myths by ludic use of them. In *Les Amants criminels*, Ozon plays with controversial stereotypes of homosexual discovery, just as in *Sitcom* the character of Nicolas panders to the cliché of gay men who love

⁶³ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 63.

⁶⁴ One thinks of the British film *Beautiful Thing* (Hettie Macdonald, 1996) which explores teenage homosexuality in a more socially realist context, or *Ma vraie vie à Rouen* (Ducastel & Martineau, 2002) in which a schoolboy is able to come to terms with his sexuality through a video diary.

shopping and working out in the gym. There is no attempt in Ozonian cinema to represent coming-out stories of the kind Denis Provencher has collected in his study *Queer French*.⁶⁵

Instead, Ozon portrays Luc's sexual awakening as an initiation by an older man, drawing on a popular fantasy of gay culture, hinted at again in *Gouttes d'eau* through Franz's dreams of sexual initiation by his stepfather, as we shall see. While Luc is a slim, fair-haired and almost hairless teenager, the 'ogre' of the cabin is his exact opposite: he is dark, hirsute and has a toned, muscular body. Thus his 'deflowering' of Luc hints at paedophilia and incest; the camera emphasises Luc's adolescent body when he sits in the ogre's bath (see Figure 4). Thibaut Shilt also calls the 'homme des bois' of *Les Amants criminels* 'a paedophile ogre', as Ince has noted.⁶⁶ Asibong, on the other hand, notes that 'the erotics of a fantasised father-son union are revelled in with a semi-pornographic candour not seen anywhere else in Ozon's œuvre'.⁶⁷



Figure 4

This is not, therefore, an unproblematic homosexual encounter between two consenting adults and as such, Ozon enters dangerous territory. There seems to be only one stance to take on paedophilia: outright condemnation. As suggested

⁶⁵ Denis M. Provencher, *Queer French: Globalization, Language, and Sexual Citizenship in France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). See especially 'French Images of Disclosure', pp. 107-114.

⁶⁶ Ince, *Five Directors*, p. 117 and Schilt, 'François Ozon', <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/04/ozon.html>, accessed 23/02/09.

⁶⁷ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 63.

by Edelman in his account of reproductive futurism, heteronormative society always protects children; he speaks of 'the Child whose innocence solicits our defense'.⁶⁸ However, while Luc is kept under his control with a sort of dog lead – again the aesthetics of S/M are implied – Luc's experience of sex with the ogre is ambivalent. When Luc is forced to lie on the bed next to the ogre, who begins to masturbate him, his sexual desire and pleasure is evident. The scene is not sexually explicit (again, as mentioned in the Introduction, this maybe due to Ozon's wish to avoid being pigeonholed as a 'gay' director), but from Alice's comments we know that Luc did reach an orgasm – although Luc hesitates to admit it. So too, when the ogre 'rapes' him (one might say 'seduces'), Luc's face testifies to his experience of anal sex of being a mixture of pleasure and pain. As Josh Jones remarks in his review of the movie, the ogre sodomises Luc 'tenderly, which makes it all the more difficult to watch'.⁶⁹ The way the ogre's boot intertwines with Luc's naked foot suggests that there is a kind of affection between them, despite the way Luc has been tied up and coerced into sex. Asibong suggests that the ogre assists Luc's transition into adulthood and his sexual identity: 'the fantasy-horror represented by the ogre is one which, when accepted as such and in an absolutely non-ironic fashion, will come to "unblock" the virginal Luc and precipitate him into a state of action'.⁷⁰ The point is, it seems, as we shall see elsewhere in this thesis, that there is a fine line between coercive and consensual sex. Furthermore, despite the hints of incest and paedophilia, *Les Amants criminels* tells of a sexual awakening and discovery of one's identity, but this time through sexual intercourse

⁶⁸ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 2. For Edelman, society is organised around belief in what is good for children: 'That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention', p. 3. If Dickens' Scrooge is perceived as 'the child-refusing *sinthomosexual* whom the spirit of Christmas Yet to Come exposes as a life-denying black hole', p. 46, simply for refusing to protect Tiny Tim, one can only imagine how much more modern society despises the paedophile.

⁶⁹ Josh Jones, 'Hunting for Rabbits', www.popmatters.com/pm/review/criminal-lovers, accessed 16/02/09.

⁷⁰ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 121.

rather than parricide.⁷¹ As Asibong says: ‘the overwhelming force of the fairy-tale ogre is [...] ultimately experienced by the haunted or terrorised protagonist as a therapeutic force’.⁷²

Conclusion

Les Amants criminels, then, builds on the fantasies of murder (in *Photo de famille*, for example) and its enactment (in *Regarde la mer*) which Ozon films in his early short works; the sexual underpinning of these murders, while hinted at, is not fully developed until *Les Amants criminels*. Although the family ultimately kills the rat/father figure in *Sitcom*, the aesthetics of Ozon’s first feature film have less in common with the *courts métrages* than *Les Amants*. As Asibong says: ‘it was not until his second feature [...] that he returned to that more serious and knowingly overwrought register within which he could explore the vagaries of a violently socialised sadomasochism and a sense of real drama’.⁷³ The way Luc kills Saïd, by stabbing him repeatedly, allows him to enact penetration at one remove and expresses his sexual frustration – and perhaps desire for the other boy. Since *Peeping Tom* and *Psycho* the use of stabbing in the cinema is recognised as displaced penetration and the knife as a metaphor of the phallus in sexually frustrated men.⁷⁴ Ozon plays with this trope in the way Luc conceals Saïd’s stolen knife down his trousers, hinting that he enjoys finally having an instrument of power in his groin; later Luc holds it out for Alice’s admiration, who usually only insults his flaccid member, and she strokes the knife as if it were his penis and says ‘c’est beau’, before lying down on her bed and saying: ‘j’ai envie que tu me baisses’ (see

⁷¹ Ince suggests that homosexuality is Luc’s ‘primary sexual orientation’, *Five Directors*, p. 117, but I prefer Asibong’s reading of Luc’s ‘bi/homosexuality’, *François Ozon*, p. 62; the point is not for Luc to discover his ‘true’ sexual orientation but to realise himself as a sexual being.

⁷² Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 121

⁷³ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 58.

⁷⁴ *Peeping Tom* (Powell, 1960) and *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960).

Figure 5). The links between sex and death will continue to fascinate Ozon in his other feature films, but none will examine the connection quite so explicitly as in *Les Amants*. Rather than focusing on the 'ethics and aesthetics of murder' Ozon's later films explore the nature of desire itself, as we shall see especially in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Figure 5



François Ozon's interest in disturbing boundaries in these early experimental films mirrors, so to speak, his own status as an avant-garde filmmaker operating largely outside the recognised circuits of film production and distribution. As a student Ozon did not belong to an identified school of filmmaking; he was restricted to making budget films, but had the freedom to deal with shocking subject matter. After leaving the film school La Femis in 1994, Ozon had gained 'une carte de visite et une crédibilité non négligeable'.⁷⁵ He was ready to move into the mainstream market and began collaborating with television organisations, such as *Canal+* for *X2000*. My next chapter asks what happens when François Ozon makes this transition from the outside to the centre and begins making films designed for a larger, potentially mainstream audience. The challenge for Ozon will be to maintain his originality and freshness while at the same time catering for a different viewer. In the next chapter we will see how he works inside the recognisable genres of soap opera, 'whodunnit', and melodrama,

⁷⁵ See Interviews 'Divers', <http://www.francois-ozon.com/francais/ozon.entretiens09.html>.

in *Sitcom*, *8 Femmes*, and *Angel* respectively, and yet how he still manages to make provocative representations of sexuality.

Chapter 2

Questions of Genre and Gender in *Sitcom*, *8 Femmes* and *Angel*

Introduction

It cannot be pure chance that on his transition from periphery to centre, Ozon's first feature film chooses to exploit genre – the principal criterion moviegoers apply to aid them in their choice of film. The title itself, *Sitcom* (1998), heralds the director's self-conscious foray into a discourse on genre, by way of a genre which must be one of the most familiar to the television generation. Indeed, as Bordwell and Thompson say in their chapter on film genre:

Audiences expect the genre film to offer something familiar, but they also demand fresh variations on it. The filmmaker may devise something mildly or radically different, but it will still be based on tradition. The interplay of convention and innovation, familiarity and novelty, is central to the genre film.¹

Herein lies Ozon's challenge in making *Sitcom* and indeed *8 Femmes* (2002): how to mix the familiar elements required for a genre film with unfamiliar innovations. There must be enough familiar ingredients to allow the audience to recognise the system at work, while it must be different enough to provide variation on a theme. This particular challenge spurs Ozon to play with his audience, unsettling and even denying what Todorov has described as 'horizons d'attente'.² The very title of Ozon's *Sitcom* promises the familiar, leading spectators to expect the rules of one system to apply, but then other systems are brought into play which disrupt our understanding of the film. This chapter will look at *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes* in this

¹ Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (London: McGraw-Hill, 2004), p. 111.

² Tzvetan Todorov, *Les Genres du discours* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 50.

light, asking both how genre is at work in these films as well as how it is interrogated. It will also analyse them in relation to the genre film, considering especially melodrama and the 'women's film', and in particular how these 'genres' reveal gender issues which are core themes in Ozon's entire œuvre. Ozon's 2006 film, *Angel*, also self-consciously references the genre film; this chapter, therefore, will present a textual reading of *Angel* alongside *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes*, to show how Ozon's application of genre has developed and/or changed over a ten year period. For this I turn to recent genre theory by Richard Dyer, who explores the implications of the use of pastiche in postmodern culture.

Before going on to examine how some theorists understand genre, it is first necessary to point out the double meaning of the word 'genre' in the French language. Writers and directors working in the field of French theory cannot fail to be aware of this *double entendre*. As has been pointed out by translators, linguists, and theorists, 'genre' in French refers both to a system of stylistic categorisation as well as the grammatical 'gender' of nouns. French, furthermore, has no way to distinguish between sex and gender as English speaking theorists tend to, although since Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, one wonders if there is any need to, as 'perhaps this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all'.³ However we understand 'gender' in English, 'genre' to French speakers and theorists always carries extra weight, as if by talking about 'genre as category' one also understands 'genre as sexual identity'. As Wittig has argued in her essay 'The Mark of Gender', the binary of grammatical genre affects cultural ideologies and

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 10-11.

encourages an understanding of biological sex as divided into male and female.⁴ This black and white division between the sexes, and indeed between hetero- and homo- sexualities is a boundary which queer theorists and film-makers seek to blur. It is telling that at the time feminists were questioning the concept of gender in the 1970s, French theorists, especially Tzvetan Todorov and Gérard Genette, were looking at the notion of genre. There are in fact characteristics which are shared by both 'gender' and 'genre'. Genette's work in *Introduction à l'architexte* argues that genre is always an imitation of what has gone before, following the shape of an 'architexte'.⁵ Similarly, feminist writers from De Beauvoir to Butler, have understood the part that imitation and reiteration has to play in the shaping of gender, that is the idea of gender as performance.⁶ Furthermore, Genette and Todorov allude to the evasive nature of genre. This is also how queer theorists refer to gender and sexual desire; Butler, for example, says: 'as a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being' and 'gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time.'⁷ One cannot argue that Ozon is doing anything original or innovatory with genre by challenging the rules in play and introducing elements of one genre into another; Todorov and Genette have shown us that this is inherent to the development of genre and the literary text. What is curious, though, about the three films we are discussing, is how playing with genre conventions echoes Ozon's play with gender identities. This chapter will therefore examine the ways in which Ozon unsettles normative sexual identities through his use of the 'genre' film.

⁴ Monique Wittig, 'The Mark of Gender', in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 76-89.

⁵ Gérard Genette, *Introduction à l'architexte* (Paris: Seuil, 1979).

⁶ In this chapter I refer to the notion of performance, which will be explored in more detail in Chapter 4.

⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 15, p. 22.

Richard Dyer, in his recent study *Pastiche*, proposes a different understanding of 'genre' in the arts, especially when an element of pastiche can be identified.⁸ This chapter argues that Ozon's 'genre' films, that is *Sitcom*, *8 Femmes* and *Angel*, can be read in terms of pastiche as it is understood by Dyer, which will help to understand Ozon's preoccupation with genre. *Pastiche* sets out to rescue the term from its meanings as 'an inferior version' or a 'second-rate imitation', demonstrating that pastiche is not in fact 'intrinsically trivial', but that it can do more than make the reader/viewer laugh.⁹ For Dyer, parody, although sometimes used as a synonym, is different from pastiche in that it implies a negative evaluation of what it is referencing; he states that we should 'make a distinction between works that imitate to make fun, mock, ridicule or satirise (parody) and those that do not (pastiche)'.¹⁰ Dyer's work is especially relevant to this chapter in that it looks at imitation and pastiche in terms of their relation to genre across a wide cultural spectrum (in literature, music and art) and in particular includes a thorough discussion of genre imitation in the cinema. As Dyer explains, pastiche was recognised in France in the 19th Century as a particular mode of writing, having borrowed the Italian term 'pasticcio' which was used to describe music and art which combined different styles. It is perhaps appropriate, then, that it is a French journalist who spots the pastiche in *Angel*, entitling his review 'A la manière de...', a byword for pastiche in early 20th Century French journalism.¹¹ Before presenting a reading of *Angel* however, I will analyse how Ozon approaches genre and pastiche in *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes*.

⁸ Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁹ Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 7, p. 8.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 40.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 52. Dominique Borde, 'A la manière de...', *Le Figaro*, http://www.lefigaro.fr/culture/20070314.FIG000000221_la_maniere_de.html, accessed 18/04/08.

'Doing' Genre

In Chapter 1, 'Pastiche and company', before his discussion of pastiche proper, Dyer lists all of the kinds of imitation that could be said to be pastiche as well as their various characteristics. In the section 'Pasticcio: pastiche as combination' Dyer describes those imitations in which, while combining different elements, the individual elements are still identifiable. As the term 'pasticcio' comes from a certain type of culinary dish, Dyer likens these cultural products to a pie:

A pie mixes things together such that the identities of the different ingredients remain largely intact, albeit modified by their interaction and by being eaten all together. So too artistic pasticcio. The central notion is that the elements that make up a pasticcio are held to be different, by virtue of genre, authorship, period, mode or whatever and that they do not normally or perhaps even readily go together.¹²

I would argue that *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes* fit well with Dyer's idea of pasticcio, mixing, as we shall see, elements of the situation comedy, soap opera and horror film in *Sitcom*, and the detective film, musical and melodrama in *8 Femmes*. The combination seems random and surprising, but Dyer states that pasticci have a specific effect, giving 'vitality and richness' to a work. Dyer goes so far as to say that 'pasticcio is sometimes seen as intrinsically politically progressive'.¹³ This would support the view expressed in this chapter, that is, that Ozon's portrayal of a dysfunctional family in *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes* – through a hotch-potch¹⁴ of genres – breaks down heteronormative ideologies of gender roles. Indeed, as Dyer says: 'The very fact that it breaks the boundaries of medium and genre, and refuses

¹² Dyer, *Pastiche*, pp. 9-10.

¹³ Ibid, p. 20, p. 21.

¹⁴ Dyer notes that gastronomical metaphors are widespread when talking about pastiche, *Pastiche*, pp. 4-5.

decorum and harmony, implies that it challenges received wisdom about what is proper, about the way things are supposed to be done, about what goes with what'.¹⁵ Ozon's two films do indeed question received wisdom, suggesting that one can be disabled and still have sexual desire, that one can express homosexual desire, that women can relate to each other in the absence of a patriarch, that female-to-female (sexual or not) bonds are as important as – if not more so – than female ties to men, and that cross-gender identification can take place.

At first glance *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes*, although both 'genre' films, are quite far apart, both chronologically and aesthetically. The earlier film is a low-budget, still relatively peripheral *long-métrage*, whereas *8 Femmes* has a more glossy surface, as well as a bigger budget, and was the film that propelled Ozon definitively into the public eye. Interestingly, only *8 Femmes*, *Swimming Pool* and *Le Temps qui reste* are screened regularly on UK TV channels, suggesting that these later films are more palatable to the British taste than Ozon's earlier ones. Despite their differences, both *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes* revolve around the family, an area which fascinated Ozon in his early films – as we have seen in the previous chapter. The family is perhaps the most 'un/heimlich' surrounding to any viewer, whatever their own background: it is at once familiar and presupposes a certain dynamic; but then Ozon introduces the unfamiliar, unsettling the spectator's expectations with devices such as horror and incest, as well as gay and lesbian sexualities. Visually, Ozon's later mainstream films are more comfortable and familiar than his early film shorts, but the references to sex are no less subversive. By placing the family centre-stage in *8 Femmes* and *Sitcom* Ozon is restricted to unity of place: the home. Again, although Ozon justifies this in interview by saying he was restricted by budget, the director introduces an element of classical tragedy by respecting one of the unities, thereby mixing high culture with the 'lowly' forms

¹⁵ Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 21.

of 'whodunnit' and sitcom.¹⁶ By taking the house as focus, *8 Femmes* references back to *Sitcom* and ensures that the similarities between the two films, rather than any apparent differences, are foregrounded.

Both films are characterised by self-conscious artifice, from the opening of theatre curtains at the start of *Sitcom* to the use of spotlights for the performances in *8 Femmes*. In this way, the fact that the films are performing, or 'doing' a genre, is prominent. Ozon also betrays a fascination with icons, whether they are Catherine Deneuve or actors from the 1980s US soap operas *Dynasty* and *Dallas*. Queer theory has reappropriated figures such as Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, and Alexis Carrington (Joan Collins) in *Dynasty*, whereas in Europe popular stars like Raffaella Carrà have become gay icons, and Catherine Deneuve herself is considered an inspiration to lesbians.¹⁷ The idea is that these female figures communicate an ambiguous sexuality which cannot always be read 'straight'; the fact that Ozon gives iconic status to his female actresses – by reference to glamorous soap operas and 1950s movies through costumes and mise-en-scène – suggests that we are in queer territory, where cross-gender identification can occur, as we shall see later on in this chapter. Moreover, *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes* introduce aspects of sexuality which are generally considered to be characteristic of queer films: bestiality, bisexuality, politically-incorrect hints of paedophilia as well as the portrayal of disabled and interracial sexualities.¹⁸

It is perhaps unsurprising then, given Ozon's tendency to encourage cross-gender identification, that the 'low art' genres he chooses, such as the soap

¹⁶ See interview with Ozon by Vincent Cyril Thomas for *Ecran noir*, 'Sitcom', <http://www.ecran noir.fr/entrevues/entrevue.php?e=90>, accessed 05/06/09. When Thomas asks Ozon where he got the idea for *Sitcom*, Ozon replies: 'Ça me vient déjà d'un problème économique; nous n'avions pas beaucoup d'argent pour faire le film, donc j'ai décidé de filmer dans un lieu unique, un peu dans les conditions du court-métrage. Et comme je suis dans un lieu unique, autant faire un film sur une famille'.

¹⁷ Ever since Tony Scott's *The Hunger* (1983), in which Catherine Deneuve starred with Susan Sarandon, Deneuve has become a lesbian icon. See the interview in *The Advocate* <http://lucath.tripod.com/advocate.html>.

¹⁸ See Benshoff & Griffin, *Queer Cinema*, p. 5.

opera and the 'women's film', are specifically aimed at women and feature women prominently (which is also, partly, why their status is so low).¹⁹ Ozon himself has commented in interview on why he likes to film women:

There is a big difference between us. I have more an ability to see them as they are because I am so different, and can identify better with them because of that difference. *I love to identify myself as a woman, even though I'm not.* I didn't want to escape from their desires, and it was exciting for me to capture that on film.²⁰

Whatever the reasons for Ozon's statement 'I love to identify myself as a woman' – whether to shock, provoke, or tease – there is without doubt an awareness that identification can take place across gender boundaries, and that difference, not sameness, is an enabler of identification.²¹ Here a male film director is implying that the women in his films are not merely icons but that they are also a locus of identification for a gay male. On the other hand, as we have seen in the Introduction and the previous chapter, Ozon has been accused of misogyny, by Vincendeau amongst others.²² There is a sense that some viewers are uneasy about the role of women in Ozon's films and that the director is treading a fine line between celebrating and condemning the feminine. This chapter, however, argues that Ozon's portrayal of women is more complex than blatant misogyny. There is evidence, as we shall see later, that Ozon is conscious that representing women on film is itself problematic; the challenge for him is how to represent women in a

¹⁹ See discussion in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), especially p. 5 and p. 11 as well as essays by E. Ann Kaplan (pp. 113-137) and Mary Anne Doane (pp. 283-299). Another useful analysis of the soap opera can be found in Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D'Acci, Lynn Spigel, eds, *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader* (Oxford: OUP, 1997).

²⁰ Jeremiah Kipp, 'Dangerous Dames', www.filmmakermagazine.com/archives/online_features/dangerous_dames.php, my italics.

²¹ In interview at the Institut Français at the preview screening of *Angel* (4 July 2008), Ozon reiterated his fascination with women, saying that he prefers to direct female actors rather than men.

²² Vincendeau, '8 Women', p. 46.

medium widely regarded, in theoretical circles at least, to be unable to represent them.

The director acknowledges this dilemma by referencing the very genres which are most associated with this treatment of women. Cinematic techniques such as the glamour shot – in which back-lighting enhances the features of an actress's face – reduce female protagonists to objects-to-be-looked-at, as exposed by Mulvey's seminal essay.²³ Mulvey identified the use of fetishising the female form in cinema as a disavowal of the castration threat posed by women according to Freudian psychoanalysis. Women protagonists in film also symbolise the object of desire, leading Gledhill to remind us that 'female figures in mainstream cinema do not represent women, but the needs of the patriarchal psyche'.²⁴ My suggestion is that Ozon has deliberately chosen genres which are the most 'women friendly', not in order to patronise female experience or to be misogynist, but in order to exploit the feminist and subversive potential identified by certain feminist theorists.

Sitcom

Comédie de situation destinée à la télévision sous forme de série mettant en scène des personnages dans les situations familières de la vie quotidienne. 'Les sitcoms, ces petites comédies légères d'une demi-heure.'

The Robert dictionary definition of 'sitcom' is not enormously helpful when attempting an analysis of Ozon's own *Sitcom*, not least because the subject matter can hardly be defined as 'comédie légère'. Although we might recognise the characters and traditional family setting – the hard working father (Jean), the mother home-maker (Hélène), and the annoying teenage children (Nicolas and Sophie) – the arrival of a family pet into the home, here a rat, rarely leads to the

²³ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'.

²⁴ Gledhill, *Home is Where the Heart is*, p. 10.

son announcing his 'coming out' and the daughter jumping out of a window, thus injuring herself and becoming a paraplegic. This is not one of 'les situations familières de la vie quotidienne'. Ozon's first feature film quickly shifts form, out of the sitcom and into the soap opera, finally descending (in the very last scenes) into a thriller and then a slasher movie, with at times hints of magic-realism. The genre to which Ozon explicitly refers in *Sitcom* has certain characteristics: situation comedies portray everyday life with characters that the viewers can easily relate to; they are shown on prime-time television in the early evening, targeted at a family audience watching together. Usually if a problem comes up it is resolved within that episode, although there may be recurrent themes. The family characters also tend not to age – see, for example, *The Simpsons*, which refers to its own characters who remain immune to the passing of time.

Soap operas, on the other hand, were originally aimed at the 'housewife' who would break up her household tasks, 'rewarding' herself by dipping into these daytime serials; advertisements for soap and detergent were shown during the commercial breaks, hence the name 'soap' opera.²⁵ Soap operas prefer to create 'cliff-hangers' at the end of each episode, creating suspense and ensuring the audience will tune in the next day or the next week. US soaps tend not even to resolve family dilemmas within one season, letting the storyline drag on over years. Plots themselves usually involve dramatic events: blackmail, discovery of true fatherhood, finding lost relatives, even (when the storywriters are desperate) bringing back to life characters who had died. By taking these genre 'conventions' into consideration it becomes possible to track Ozon's shift from one form to the other.

²⁵ For detailed analysis of soap operas, see Brunsdon et al, *Feminist Television Criticism* and Charlotte Brunsdon, *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera* (Oxford: OUP, 2000). Such is the popularity of the genre that British soap operas such as *Eastenders* and *Coronation Street* are now shown on prime-time evening TV. One French example is *Plus belle la vie* which has been shown Monday to Friday on France 3 at 8:20 pm since 2004, whereas *Château Vallon* was a popular soap in the mid 1980s in the style of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*.

Ozon sets up some of the defining characteristics of the French sitcom before proceeding to undo them. First of all, it is worth noting that in France, unlike the UK and US models, there is a tradition of using the medium to 'épater les bourgeois', whereas the Anglosaxon version portrays working or middle-class families that are either easy to relate to or laugh at; there is no overtly subversive political agenda behind these programmes. Therefore, in *Sitcom*, the mother's aerobics classes and sessions with the psychoanalyst serve to ridicule well-off families, or in one critic's words 'un côté bourgeois exaspérant où l'argent est omniprésent alors que personne ne semble travailler'.²⁶ In this *Sitcom* has more in common with American soap operas, both in its setting and subject matter. The large, beautifully kept house, the maid, the dinner parties, and the silver that needs polishing are all markers of a higher social class; here Ozon's film moves more into an escapist fantasy, mirroring Sirkian irony for whom, to use Gledhill's words, 'the object of parody is bourgeois wish-fulfilment, an identification supported by the high production values of 50s family melodrama which focused on upper-middle-class homes crammed with lavish furnishings and consumer goods'.²⁷ Moreover, the *mise-en-scène* suggests an ideal family, and is therefore open to attack. Ozon creates what is often found in Hollywood melodrama: 'the Edenic home and family, centring on the heroine as "angel in the house" and the rural community of an earlier generation, animate images of past psychic and social well-being as "moral touchstones"'.²⁸ By revealing that all is not well in this family, Ozon contrasts the benignly banal and glamorous surface with deeply disturbing underlying issues, as soaps and sitcoms also do to a certain extent by suggesting that all families are dysfunctional, thus reassuring TV audiences that they are not alone in their family

²⁶ 'Sitcom', *Ecran noir*, www.cannes-fest.com/1998/film/sitcom.htm, accessed 28/07/09.

²⁷ Gledhill, *Home is Where the Heart is*, p. 11.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 21.

rows and difficulties. Ozon, however, takes these problems to a different level through his use of queer and surrealist devices.

Ozon has also borrowed from the Latin-American tradition of *telenovelas*, a Spanish-language version of soap operas. *Telenovelas* are to be distinguished from English-language versions by their even more convoluted plots and more racy, exaggerated subject matter. Hispanic *telenovelas* are also not afraid to incorporate magic-realism and frequently use dramatic plot devices such as discovering one's real parentage. Although this is a trope that is found in US and UK soap operas also, it is arguably filmed in a more 'realistic' manner, especially in the UK. Latin-American *telenovelas* (and now some Asian soaps), on the other hand, display exaggerated acting styles, to the extent that the actors seem to be 'hamming' it. *Telenovelas* have a large following in Europe, but not so much in English-speaking countries. In the extra features of the DVD version of *Sitcom*, Spanish born Lucia Sanchez (who plays Maria) says that she was able to relate to her role thanks to her knowledge of *telenovelas*; it is undoubtedly another playful ingredient that Ozon has deliberately included. It is significant that Almodóvar has also taken inspiration from *telenovelas*.²⁹ The way secrets are revealed in *Sitcom*, such as Nicolas's dramatic announcement that he is gay, would not be staged this way in a UK soap. Nicolas stands up and pauses for dramatic effect, letting the silence build before his grand statement; this is a clear example of the over-acting to be found in *telenovelas*.

While a discussion of Ozon's borrowings from different genres confirms the filmmaker's fascination with them, it is in fact the figures of the father and the rat which provoke the curiosity of, and perhaps hold the key for, many viewers. In his article reviewing *Sitcom* for *Cahiers du cinéma*, Jean-Marc Lalanne discusses 'La Place du père et celle du rat', providing one reading of this unusual family

²⁹ *Women on the verge of a nervous breakdown* (1988), whose plot is also centred around women, thus acknowledging the gendered spectatorship of the genre of reference.

dynamic.³⁰ The plot of the film is driven by first the introduction and then the destruction of the rat. Lalanne notes that it is through the father that 'tout se met en branle'. He goes on to point out how the father and rat are closely associated: 'il introduit le rat dans la maison et ce rat est évidemment son double'. Lalanne notes that at the end of the film: 'tous deux finissent par se confondre lors d'un dénouement cauchemardesque'. Although it is only at the end of the film that the rat, in its giant form, becomes physically violent, attacking Hélène, from the outset the rat can be said to display the characteristics of the monster, as illustrated in Cohen's study *Monster Theory*.³¹

The quasi-fantastical change the rat brings to all those who touch it is a device borrowed from magic-realism and indeed from the medieval French 'lai'. Work by Miranda Griffin might suggest that the monster and its characteristics were already present before the transformation from human being into a monster.³² As Cohen points out, the etymology of 'monster' is from the Latin 'monstrum', meaning 'that which reveals/warns'.³³ Thus we might read the rat, when it comes into contact with different members of the family, as unleashing repressed desires and sexual identities that were already there. In this the audience might at first see the rat as having a 'positive' influence on the individuals it touches, revealing in turn Nicolas' homosexuality and Sophie's profound dissatisfaction with normative gender roles, as well as Hélène's loveless and stagnant marriage. Indeed, it is apparent that all is not well between mother and father Hélène and Jean even before they come into contact with the rat; twice, both times when Hélène and Jean

³⁰ Jean-Marc Lalanne, 'La Place du père et celle du rat', in *Cahiers du cinéma*, 524 (1998), pp. 107-108.

³¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Monster Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996).

³² Miranda Griffin, "'Wild? I was livid!' - the beastly and the courtly in medieval tales of transformation", http://www.mml.cam.ac.uk/french/grad_conf/programme.pdf, accessed 05/07/08.

³³ See Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 4.

are in bed, it is made apparent that they no longer have a sexual relationship.³⁴ One cannot help but be pleased for H       when, having touched the rat, she is later able to re-discover her sensuality and sexual pleasure, as foregrounded by Ozon. One senses that H      's sexuality was kept under wraps in daily life due to her role as wife and mother and because of Jean's refusal to see her as a sexual being. There are visual clues early on in the film which hint that another side to her will be revealed. When Maria, the maid, arrives as a guest for dinner, H       blurts out 'Vous   tes belle!', foreshadowing her sexual attraction to Maria. It is as if H      's unconscious is speaking before her conscious mind has recognised her feelings for what they are. Thus H      's spontaneous, apparently off-hand, compliment speaks of a real and deep attraction. As Maria walks away into the sitting room, H       stops in front of the hallway mirror – which in the course of the movie will serve as a leitmotif for each character's self-analysis – and considers her appearance. She ruffles her hair and straightens her jumper, but clearly expresses dissatisfaction at her looks and slight shock, as if she were seeing her image for the first time. The viewer wonders for whose benefit H       is trying to appear more attractive.

It is only after H       has overcome her fear of the rat and touches it that she is suddenly filled with the need for 'dialogue, amour, tendresse'; until this moment she has demonstrated revulsion towards the creature. The rat might be the reason that she decides to seduce her son and make sure he has a heterosexual experience, hopefully 'curing' him of his homosexuality. Perhaps H      's is a misdirected desire, unable at first to realise her attraction to Maria. H      's psychoanalyst might be concerned, but neither H       nor Nicolas seem bothered by their incestuous affair; they seem perfectly able to put it behind them.

³⁴ The first time they are filmed in the bedroom Jean wears an eye mask and snores, while H       wears ear plugs to block out her husband's loud snoring. The second time, Jean obviously avoids kissing his wife on the mouth and kisses her on her forehead instead.

très bien sans moi'. On retreat, the family decide that the rat is at the root of the disintegration of the family unit, thinking that it caused their 'transgressions', and they tell Jean over the telephone to dispose of it. Jean microwaves the rat and eats it for dinner, accompanied by the inevitable glass of red wine. When the family returns home, the rat, in its giant form, attacks Hélène and Sophie kills it to protect her mother.

One hesitates, however, to suggest that the rat's influence is entirely liberating; reviewers of *Sitcom* have commented that the reactions that the rat provokes do not provide the solutions they promise. Lalanne notes that 'malgré l'escalade dans les fantaisies sexuelles, personne n'arrive à jouir', and he lays the blame at the door of the father. Lalanne suggests that the family is able to escape the dominant father through their contact with maternal space, in the guise of the swimming pool: 'les [...] personnages s'agitent et ne trouvent de répit que lorsqu'ils parviennent à reconstruire l'espace féminin, foetal, dans un autre lieu, une piscine où la cellule réduite (mère/fille/fils) se love voluptueusement'.³⁶ While the swimming pool is undoubtedly the locus of change for the family, Lalanne's reading does not, perhaps, explain the film's violent ending. Asibong, in an article published prior to his magnum opus on Ozon, similarly suggests that the rat does not bring about the subversive changes it seems to predict. Asibong argues for a more thorough critical investigation of Ozon's work than has been previously made, claiming that the director's work, particularly through *Sitcom* and *Les Amants criminels*, 'provide[s] a surprisingly ethical commentary on the tightly interwoven cultural processes of social reification and identity fetishization'.³⁷ In *Sitcom*, however, those 'alternative existences' which Ozon investigates are not, for

³⁶ Lalanne, 'La Place du père', p. 107.

³⁷ Andrew Asibong, 'Meat, murder, metamorphosis: the transformational ethics of François Ozon', *French Studies*, 59, 2 (2005), pp. 203-215 (p. 203). Asibong also calls for a revaluation of Ozon's early feature films, saying that 'both the dismissal of Ozon's early work and the banal approach accorded to his recent offerings founder on a fundamental misunderstanding of his cinematic project as a whole', 'Meat, murder, metamorphosis', p. 204.

Asibong, to be found in the first transformations brought about by the rat: 'The rat's initial interaction with Nicolas, Sophie, and Hélène is experienced by each of them as the promise of an excitingly new and "unblocked" experience of radical desire'.³⁸ Nicolas suddenly seems able to declare his homosexuality, Sophie begins to yearn for a different existence, while the mother, Hélène, rediscovers her sexuality. Asibong, however, is highly suspicious of these changes and argues that they will not free the family from their previously banal existence. Indeed he says:

It soon becomes clear that this series of transformations is anything but radical. [...] Initially encountered as a properly uncanny presence, provocative of a quite unprecedented feeling, the animal's deranging impact is always quickly diverted into increasingly tedious, and oddly totalizing, identities, practices and agendas.³⁹

Asibong is uneasy with the way Nicolas appears to fall in with stereotypical gay behaviour, namely an obsession with one's appearance and shopping, as if these cultural markers were an inevitable indication or result of one's sexuality. I would concur with Asibong's questioning of Ozon's use of what might be considered homophobic generalisations. In his review of the film for *Sight and Sound*, Jonathan Romney also suspects that the behaviour in *Sitcom* is far from radical: 'It's hardly that taboo-busting to reveal that under the squeaky-clean appearance everyone's up for a romp with the domestics and a fistful of courgettes'.⁴⁰ (We shall see later that the courgettes, in all their phallic form, do not serve the purpose one might at first assume.)

³⁸ Asibong, 'Meat, murder, metamorphosis', p. 207.

³⁹ Asibong continues: 'Nicolas finds the new feelings he experiences after his fondling of the rat swiftly converted into a compulsion to work out in the gym and hunt for ever more reasonably priced rubber trousers, while Sophie's new, gothic life of cigarettes, whips, chains and bad techno music merely widens an internal chasm of predictable non-fulfilment', 'Meat, murder, metamorphosis', p. 208.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Romney, 'Sitcom', *Sight and Sound*, 9, 1 (1999), pp. 56-57 (p. 57).

Asibong, along with Lalanne, suspects that the father's distant and cold behaviour is the cause of his family's unhappiness. Papa Jean is an absent father in that, in Lalanne's words:

Il reste toujours en retrait, indifférent à la tornade qui se déploie autour de lui. Il est le seul qui ne baise pas, il refuse d'endosser une quelconque responsabilité [...] et est incapable de répondre à la demande de ses enfants ('Papa, est-ce que tu m'aimes?' 'Papa, est-ce que tu me trouves jolie?').⁴¹

However, Asibong argues, following Žižek, that the silent or absent father is in fact more dangerous than the authoritarian father of master discourses identified by Lyotard as structuring ideologies before the prevalence of postmodernity. For Žižek, explains Asibong:

the so-called postmodern age in which we live fools us into thinking we are behaving in a radically free, ironic and post-ideological manner. We have lost our faith in an eternal and incontrovertible law, and accordingly believe ourselves able to build new discourses, freedoms and communities simply on the basis of *an ever more innovative set of social practices and identities*.⁴²

Thus, contrary to the 'progress' narrative in which postmodern society is tempted to believe (see, for example, my discussion of McRuer's suspicion of progress narratives later in this chapter), we cannot be rid so readily of the authority represented by the father figure. The subject, believing s/he is free, instead internalises the father's authority in a deceptive introjection covering up for the actual father's absence. One notes that absent fathers are, ironically, present in many other films by Ozon, particularly, one notes, in *8 Femmes* and *Angel*, which

⁴¹ Lalanne, 'La place du père', p. 107.

⁴² Asibong, 'Meat, murder, metamorphosis', p. 208-209, my italics.

are our intratexts here. Asibong explains how futile our pseudo-rebellion is: 'All the self-empowering, life-enhancing innovations cultivated by the subject in the name of a new freedom are just so many pathetic performances for the satisfaction of a monstrous dictator within, endlessly clamouring for affirmation in any form'.⁴³ Indeed, at each stage of the family's demise and individual revelations, there is a return to the father, to a desire for his acceptance, acknowledgement or rejection; but this is always refused. As their actions become more outrageous, there is a sense that Nicolas, Sophie, and H  l  ne have to resort to extreme measures to claim their visibility as subjects: again, this does not work. In Asibong's words:

They serve up, for his approval or censure, increasingly unacceptable identities (promiscuous gay son, un-dead temptress daughter, incestuous zombified mother), none of which succeed in provoking love, hate, or interaction of any kind, but merely founder on the rocks of frustration.⁴⁴

Moreover, Jean can only respond in clich  s, which is as if he is not there at all. In Asibong's reading, it is only at the rat's destruction that the family are finally able to admit the power the silent father held over them, and thus can begin to live the 'alternative existences' offered to them.

In this chapter I would suggest, however, that it is possible to see hints of queer and alternative subjectivities even before the rat's destruction. I would argue with the statement that all the family's behaviour up to the end of the film illustrates 'tedious, and oddly totalizing, identities, practices and agendas'. First of all, one could argue that Ozon deliberately portrays stereotypical behaviour, playing with audience expectations. Nicolas may follow the path assumed by many to be part of the 'coming out' process, but Ozon is not necessarily interested in making a 'gay'

⁴³ Asibong, 'Meat, murder and metamorphosis', p. 209.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 209.

film which examines more 'authentic' behaviours. Nicolas at first obeys the 'genre' rules of the gay adolescent, but he also upturns spectatorial expectations, as we shall see. As so often in Ozon's films, it is queer desire which intrigues him, especially when expressed in a female body. Ozon deliberately plays on the cliché of a neurotic mother who wants to resolve her children's problems. Although it is an outdated cliché that mothers – and they are not alone in this belief – often believe that homosexuality can be 'cured', few rarely go to such lengths as incest in order to rekindle heterosexual desire.⁴⁵ In fact, Hélène's overblown reaction to her son's news is a play on the fact that 'coming-out' stories are 'old hat', especially in the soaps and *telenovelas* to which Ozon is referring. Rather it is Hélène's homoeroticism which interests Ozon. Finally, Asibong's account of Sophie's paraplegia does not take into consideration all the implications it has for her lived sexuality, as I shall explain later.

Although Nicolas does betray some stereotypical gay traits, such as working out at the gym and going shopping, these serve in part for comic effect.⁴⁶ Ozon is also aware of the fact that one performs one's sexuality, often falling into the trap of stereotypical behaviour, even if one would rather avoid it.⁴⁷ His father, however, is bored by Nicolas's 'practices' and makes it clear that he will not share his son's interest in clothes, even at the cost of the father-son relationship. Nicolas is devastated by his father's reaction and is prompted to ask 'papa, est-ce que tu m'aimes?' and 'est-ce que je t'ai déçu?'. Whether or not the viewer shares Jean's opinion on shopping, it must be obvious that before Nicolas's coming out, he is not a 'normal adolescent' of the sort usually found in TV sitcoms; instead of being rowdy or irritating he reads science magazines and plays the guitar in his room

⁴⁵ See *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002) in which Julianne Moore's character takes her husband, played by Dennis Quaid, to a psychiatrist to be 'cured' of his homosexual desire.

⁴⁶ For an account of why some gay men body build, see Peter Nardi, "'Anything for a Sis, Mary': An Introduction to *Gay Masculinities*" in Nardi, ed., *Gay Masculinities* (London: Sage, 2000), pp. 1-11 (pp. 5-9).

⁴⁷ See Chapter 4 for a discussion of performance and sexual performativity.

before dinner. His appearance spoke of his repressed feelings, hiding behind large glasses and neatly combed hair (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Figure 2



Nicolas's encounter with the rat seems to precipitate the realisation that he is homosexual; after this revelation, Nicolas is happier, more at ease with his body and his sexuality (see Figure 2); for him this means taking care of his appearance. I hesitate to agree with Asibong's implication that shopping is a 'tedious' and 'totalizing' agenda for a gay male; several accounts of the coming out experience emphasize how, for gay men, the search for a new self-image is an inherent part of finding out who they now are.

A change in appearance may well be instrumental in creating this 'different person'; Ken Plummer points out how coming out stories tell of the change that occurs: 'it finds a crisis, a turning point, an epiphany; and then it enters a new world – *a new identity*, born again, metamorphosis, coming out'.⁴⁸ In relation to gay men and popular culture, Gregory Woods testifies to the link between gay men and shopping (going on to criticise the 'compulsory heterosexuality' of many mail order catalogues) and gives us an insight into how 'a new identity' is created. Woods underlines the irony in the Gay Pride march chant 'We're here, we're queer and we're not going shopping!' by pointing out that many of the participants in the

⁴⁸ Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 52, my italics.

march will be carrying shopping bags, and that the march usually takes place in the early afternoon, thus allowing for a morning's shopping.⁴⁹ In the preamble to his main argument, Woods reminds us that marketing and economics experts speak of the 'pink economy' and the 'pink pound', asserting that even during the recession of the early 1990s homosexuals were still spending as much as ever, even if they could not afford to do so. Woods, among others, explains that gay consumerism is propelled, partly, by trying to project a gay identity and lifestyle. Thus, Woods says, for a gay man, a re-working of the Cartesian maxim is appropriate: 'I shop, therefore I am'.⁵⁰ These accounts of gay culture lead us to conclude that stereotypical behaviours such as shopping and concern with one's appearance can be instrumental in an individual's understanding of his gay identity and image. To some extent, the fact that these behaviours are stereotypes provides a sense, even if briefly, to the newly 'out' gay man, of belonging to a community which counters the potential isolation of coming out and declaring one's 'different' desire. Ozon's portrayal of Nicolas and his coming out may not provide a 'positive' model of the gay experience, but this is not on the agenda for queer filmmakers.⁵¹ By illustrating expected moments of a young man's coming out, Ozon provokes laughter as well as driving home the tragic lack of understanding from Nicolas's parents at such a pivotal point in their son's life.⁵² Surely Nicolas must be grateful for the rat's catalytic effect, culminating in his declaration 'je suis homosexuel'.

Nicolas also becomes more sensitive to his sister's disability; he bathes her, washes her hair and carries her from the car to the house; this caring attitude is not typical of a self-absorbed, selfish young man. The scene in which they share a bath is not lacking in shock-factor. Romney sees this as a sign that Ozon's

⁴⁹ Gregory Woods, 'We're here, we're queer and we're not going catalogue shopping', in Paul Burston and Colin Richardson, eds, *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, gay men and popular culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 147-161 (p. 147).

⁵⁰ Woods, 'We're here, we're queer', p. 148.

⁵¹ See Alexander Doty, 'Queer Theory', and the Introduction to this thesis.

⁵² See Lynn Sutcliffe, *There Must Be Fifty Ways To Tell Your Mother: Coming Out Stories* (London: Cassell, 1995), especially p. 7 & p. 21 on parents who worry about not becoming grandparents.

filmmaking is not just about surface; he says of Marina and Adrien de Van: 'they are real-life siblings, which adds an extra *frisson* to their bath scene. It's encouraging to imagine that *Sitcom* isn't all talk, and that Ozon was happy to encourage taboo-breaking on set'.⁵³ Rather than ignoring his sister because of their new identities, Nicolas and Sophie are more able to talk and are comfortable with each other physically, enjoying the playfulness and intimacy of the situation, which borders on incest. Nicolas's behaviour appears callous when he comes home one day – stopping in the hallway mirror to check his appearance, which pleases him – and he finds his sister with a noose round her neck. He asks in an off-hand manner 'Ça va?' to which Sophie replies an inadequate 'Bof', but Nicolas seems oblivious to his sister's predicament and walks up to his room. Here it would be difficult to argue for a rapprochement of brother and sister, but in fact, Nicolas's nonchalance in face of his sister's attention-seeking is effective: Sophie takes the noose away as he leaves the room. Prior to their encounter with the rat, the siblings barely spoke to one another. It seems as if they are beginning to accept the other's subjectivity.

There is another scene which is an example of how the viewer, once Nicolas has come out, expects him to behave. A young gay man is assumed, stereotypically, to be sexually promiscuous, so when a group of odd-balls arrive at the house and enter Nicolas's room one at a time, it looks like an orgy; we imagine that the courgettes one man asks Hélène for can only serve one purpose. We assume that the character of 'le docteur' is role playing some kind of sexual fantasy. However, what we see on the screen is deceptive; the gathering turns out to be a gambling session – with courgettes serving as 'chips' rather than sex-toys. This is not in the least predictable or stereotypical behaviour of a young gay's 'coming-out', especially as it implicates a young boy, who knocks on Nicolas's

⁵³ Romney, '*Sitcom*', p. 57.

door, announcing himself as 'le petit voisin'. In his scout uniform, holding a recorder, he seems an unlikely participant in an orgy, and adds the dangerous whiff of child abuse. However, the boy shows that he can hold his own, storming out of the room saying 'j'en ai marre, vous êtes des tricheurs'. At this point one suspects that our assumption about what was going on in that room is wrong. Thus the audience is proven guilty of totalizing Nicolas's identity, reducing his identity to his sexual orientation alone. Even Sophie assumes that sexual pleasures are to be had in her brother's room and begs to join them, eventually being allowed to play a part in their game. Ozon shows that identity is not reducible to gender, sexual orientation, colour, or (dis)ability.

Sophie, after her encounter with the rat, changes from 'dutiful daughter' to 'a cruel, wheelchair-bound sadist' in Asibong's analysis of this particular transformation.⁵⁴ I would, however, propose a different reading of Sophie, by referring to recent disability theory which reveals the radical potential in disabled subjects. It is true that at the beginning she appears to be a fairly average sitcom teenager, but her disregard for her mother while she is kissing her boyfriend voraciously in the hall could hardly be described as 'dutiful'. Sophie is essentially selfish and uninterested in the people around her; she seems purely concerned with her own pleasure. Even at Nicolas's announcement that he is gay, she says 's'il est pédé, il est pédé', siding more with her father than her mother, happy to state the obvious. Sophie even takes offence that her mother is concerned she might never have grandchildren, thereby drawing attention away from Nicolas back to herself. After Sophie's accident post-rat, Sophie is depressed and is continually attention seeking. Her appearance is different too; she wears black and her hair is styled more severely (compare Figures 3 & 4), while at the same time she continues to provide a source of black comedy in the pseudo-hanging, the techno

⁵⁴ Asibong, 'Meat, murder, metamorphosis', p. 206.

music and tickling Maria's feet with the flame from a lighter, as well as the sado-masochistic scenes with her boyfriend, David.

Figure 3: at dinner, pre-accident



Figure 4: self-harming, post-accident



However, this distant and unfeeling Sophie allows Ozon to explore a taboo which still haunts society in the twenty-first century: disabled sexualities. Recent work with charitable organisations implies that there is still work to be done in order to break the silence on this particular taboo.⁵⁵ More than homosexuality, disabled desire is 'the love that dare not speak its name'. As the title of Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, and Davies' book attests, disabled sexuality usually implies 'untold desires'.⁵⁶ For queer theorists, and now crip theorists too, disabled sexuality constitutes a non-straight sexuality which is often ignored by a heterosexual patriarchy and therefore a viewpoint from which to rethink human sexuality. The theorists in *The Sexual Politics of Disability* also think that there are advantages of disabled sexuality over dominant heterosexual practices. In the chapter on 'Sex and relationships' they state that 'a recognition of the continuum of sexual practices – of which penetrative sex is only a part – and a greater willingness to embrace

⁵⁵ See the advertisements made for Leonard Cheshire (Dis)ability, <http://www.lcdisability.org/>, accessed 23/07/08. The characters testify to this taboo in the Creature Discomforts advert: SHELLEY - Some people think because you have a disability maybe you should be with someone with a disability. And it doesn't work like that. You can't help who you fall in love with. ISOBEL - They think that if you're disabled, you can't have a love life. That's not true, though. I can have sex.

⁵⁶ Tom Shakespeare, Kath Gillespie-Sells and Dominic Davies, eds, *The Sexual Politics of Disability: Untold Desires* (London: Cassell, 1996).

diversity, experimentation and the use of sexual toys and other alternative techniques – would be of value to all sexually active people, not just to those who happen to have impairments’.⁵⁷ Shakespeare et al are against much sexology which is phallogentric and obsessed with male erection, ejaculation, and orgasm. A paraplegic, Sophie expresses her frustration at not being able to climax with David, saying to her mother ‘il est incapable de me faire jouir’, to which Hélène answers that the doctors said she may never regain feeling in her genitals. Sophie is not prepared to accept this, saying ‘j’ai d’autres zones érogènes’. The research in *The Sexual Politics of Disability* indicates that ‘the major problems are the outcomes of prejudice and discrimination, not individual deficit’, implying that it is her mother’s dismissal of Sophie’s sexual needs that hurts more than the physical paralysis.⁵⁸ Sophie takes to whipping David and making him dress up as a dog, but this does not work and they both tire of these scenarios. Sophie’s determination to live with sexual pleasure, though played out in cruel and unusual ways, is perhaps more honorable than her mother’s acceptance of a loveless and sexless marriage. The importance of sexuality for the paraplegic should not be belittled: theories of disabled sexuality declare that because it is treated as taboo, and because disabled people’s sexual needs are often dismissed, ‘these psychosexual consequences of impairment are among the most difficult consequences of traumatic injury or disease’.⁵⁹

Although *Sitcom* does not give a politically correct portrayal of a disability (just as there is no politically correct portrayal of a gay male’s coming out), Ozon is brave to tackle these ‘untold desires’, once more professing an interest in gender performances that challenge dominant heterosexual ideology. Indeed, Robert McRuer, in his study *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, takes

⁵⁷ Shakespeare et al, p. 99.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 87.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 95.

the project of Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells and Davies further by identifying the common ground in much disability and queer theory, naming his ideas 'crip' theory in an effort to reclaim the hitherto pejorative term 'crip', much as queer theorists did with 'queer' ten years earlier. McRuer notes that heteronormative discourse assumes able-bodied status, and argues that if heterosexuality is 'invisible', just as the female sex is the gender 'marked' as different, then 'able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things'.⁶⁰ By including Sophie in his narrative of rebellious desires, Ozon allows the audience to identify with Sophie's disability as a queer place from which to subvert heteronormativity. McRuer, by identifying the common goals in disability and queer theory, also sets out to 'challenge the ongoing consolidation of heterosexual, able-bodied hegemony'.⁶¹ McRuer is particularly concerned about questioning dominant discourse because we are in what he calls a 'normalizing moment' culturally and socially. Indeed, McRuer would agree with Žižek and Asibong in that we must be wary of 'progress' narratives; we cannot assume that society will allow for continually queerer and more plural expressions of subjectivity. In fact, for McRuer: 'some things *don't* keep getting better; visual rhetorics of disability do not *necessarily* improve over time, nor do they posit (or construct, instruct, or assure) a disabled viewer'.⁶² Similarly, one can infer, portrayals of queer sexualities do not keep 'getting better'; Ozon in fact testifies to this with his problematic representation of sexuality.

In his diatribe against this 'normalizing moment that disciplines disability and queerness', McRuer cites the example of 'Queer Eye for the Straight Guy', a US TV show in which five gay men do a 'makeover' of the lifestyle and look of a heterosexual male in 'need' of help. McRuer states that one might not at first

⁶⁰ Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 1.

⁶¹ McRuer, *Crip Theory*, p. 19.

⁶² Ibid, p. 177.

identify 'Queer Eye' as part of the normalizing moment, partly because of its camp pleasures. However, 'Queer Eye' is seen by McRuer to reassure the 'straight guy' in that it affirms the binary of gay versus straight; it is as though as long as gay and straight sexualities are kept separate it is 'safe' for the heterosexual – there is no danger of one 'infecting' the other or any notion of a 'grey' or 'crossover' area. This black and white division between gay and straight goes against notions of a more fluid sexuality which the programme alludes to by its use of 'queer'. McRuer notes, however, that even the term 'queer' has been normalized and questions its use in a cultural product which 'emerges in a normalizing historical period that insistently domesticates camp and other disruptive forces'.⁶³ For McRuer, the 'normalizing period' treats difference and potential threats in two ways, either through commodification or trivialisation; thus, for example, a coming out story in a soap opera becomes commonplace. Furthermore, in 'Queer Eye' the presenters make ableist comments which reinforce their sameness by concentrating on others' difference.⁶⁴ McRuer is suspicious of dominant gay discourse and notes that critical work is developing in response to this normalizing process, quoting Gay Shame counter-festivals that have sprung up in New York and San Francisco. McRuer is also hesitant to condone gay marriage, as it is seen by some as a way to conform to heteronormative culture.⁶⁵ Thus Sophie can arguably be queerer than her brother even though she is not gay. While I do not suggest that Ozon is fully aware of crip theory and discourses of suspicion in the gay movement, his use of stereotype in Nicolas betrays the fact that his interest is in a queerer space: the disabled body. Sophie's body is the site of more problematic desires than her gay brother. Ozon's project is similar to McRuer's notion that 'critical queerness and

⁶³ McRuer, *Crip Theory*, p. 175.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 176.

⁶⁵ As an example of a critically queer subject, McRuer talks about Bob Flanagan and the way in which his assertion of both his sexuality and his disability 'queer' heteronormativity even though he is himself not gay. Flanagan is known for his 'shows' in which he engaged in sado-masochistic practices and in which his disability through Cystic Fybrois was foregrounded.

severe disability are about [...] imagining bodies and desires otherwise'.⁶⁶ The fact that Sophie regains a 'normal' appearance and is recovering movement in her legs by the time she kills the 'monster' may make the viewer uneasy, wondering if, like the character of Melvin in *As Good As It Gets* (1997), according to the reading by McRuer, 'able-bodied status is achieved in direct proportion to his increasing awareness of, and need for, (heterosexual) romance'.⁶⁷

The fact that Sophie's (dis)ability waxes and wanes during the course of the film reflects disability theories that state we all belong to some extent on a spectrum of mental and physical health. From a different sexual viewpoint Sophie has, one hopes, reassessed heteronormative sex and will be better able to communicate with her partner, David. It is also, on reflection, no surprise that Sophie's character is the focus of Ozon's film, particularly as the part is played by Marina de Van who was Ozon's 'muse' and protagonist in *Regarde la mer*, and who continues to collaborate with Ozon in scriptwriting for his other films.⁶⁸ Coming back after family therapy, Sophie's hair has returned to 'normal' and she no longer emanates anger. Despite her limited physical movement, it is she who ultimately brings about the rat's destruction, perhaps in a mirroring of the thriller genre's 'Final Girl', itself a site which encourages cross-gender identification.⁶⁹ To some extent, therefore, it can be said that this is Sophie's story and therefore that the audience are drawn to identify with her more than any other character. From a safe position downstairs, Sophie hears the giant rat's attack on her family and she goes to the rescue, crawling painstakingly upstairs with a kitchen knife as a weapon. She gets there eventually and is the only one able to destroy the rat, raising her arm to stab the rat/father in a gesture reminiscent of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, certainly a cult

⁶⁶ McRuer, *Crip Theory*, p. 32.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 24.

⁶⁸ See Chapter 1 for a discussion of *Regarde la mer*. Marina de Van has written for *8 Femmes*, *Sous le sable* and *Les Amants criminels*.

⁶⁹ For an account of the Final Girl, and the way teenage boys identify with her, see Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1992).

normative. Couples as a family unit can be absorbed into the mainstream ideology due to their binary composition. The rat, however, in true monstrous style (for as mentioned above, Cohen claims that the monster always reappears), returns in its 'innocuous', domestic form, at the scene of Jean's funeral, hinting that the spectre of heteronormativity is lurking even after the rat/father's death. Ozon's film, though, does go some way to upsetting the stability of the heterosexual paradigm, defined by Benshoff and Griffin in *Queer Cinema* as 'procreative monogamy'.⁷² In other films by Ozon, the disbelief in current social ideologies is pervasive, as we shall see especially in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis. The dark, satirical edge perceived in *Sitcom* foreshadows Ozon's bleak portrayal of destructive sexualities in *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* (see Chapter 4). Furthermore, Ozon's 'totalizing' portrayal of gay male sexuality in *Sitcom* becomes a much more realistic, and so more complex, exploration of it in *Gouttes d'eau*. As a queer film, *Sitcom* allows for the enactment of gender identities which are repressed under the present hegemony, a system that 'constructs and maintains the idea that only one sexuality [...] is normal and desirable.'⁷³ As Cohen says, the monster appears 'to ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression'.⁷⁴ Thus Ozon's film, and his monster, the rat, unsettle genre/gender conventions and consider some alternatives to the current status quo.

8 Femmes

In his 2002 film *8 Femmes*, Ozon disrupts family dynamics to similar effect in an apparently different way – the genre and plot seem unrelated to *Sitcom*; but by

⁷² Benshoff & Griffin, *Queer Cinema*, p. 1.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 5.

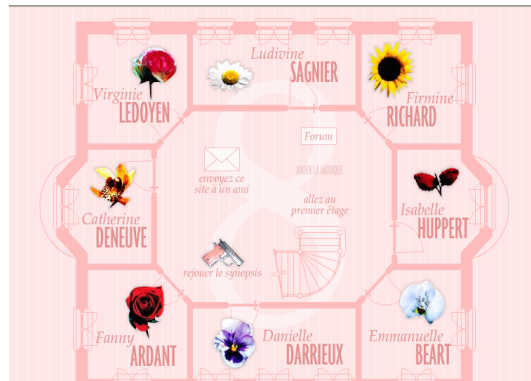
⁷⁴ Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 20.

examining the director's exploitation of genre once again, we will uncover what is at stake here. First of all let us establish that, not only is *8 Femmes* a film about genre, but it also clearly markets itself as a genre film. The cover of the DVD invites the spectator to read the film as a detective story by saying of its female protagonists: 'l'une d'entre elles est coupable. Laquelle?'. The Internet site dedicated to the film also sets the scene for a 'whodunnit': the writing flashes on the words 'assassiné' and 'laquelle?', as if to create the suspense required for a *polar*. After the plot is introduced, the title page flashes up on a black background, echoing the cover design of the *Série Noire* detective novels. Then the site-map appears; it resembles a *Cluedo* board and each room corresponds to one of the eight actresses (see Figure 5).⁷⁵ It is implied that we should play the game according to the rules of a detective novel or crime mystery. However, as much as *8 Femmes* markets itself as a 'whodunnit', it also sets itself up as a women's film: this is evident in Ozon's use of a flower to represent each one of the eight women. The qualities of each flower appear to suggest and/or reflect the personality of the characters in the film: a red rose represents Fanny Ardant and her passionate, femme fatale role, a daisy is Ludivine Sagnier's flower, implying simplicity, youth and innocence, whereas Catherine Deneuve is represented by an exotic lily, echoing her beauty and fascination as well as her costume, in particular her coat with a leopard fur collar. Already our mode of entry into the film prepares us for a genre other than the 'whodunnit'; we begin to read the film text according to a different set of rules. We might not be certain what the rules are, but by the use of flowers and the colour pink, it appears to be a film designed to appeal to women. As Ozon says in his interview with Jeremiah Kipp, he thought that women would be his main audience: 'To my surprise, many different people saw this film. Kids, grandparents, and of course *all the women*. I suspect that the women decide which

⁷⁵ <http://www.marsdistribution.com/site/8femmes/index.htm>

films they will bring their boyfriends and husbands to see, so their men have probably seen the film too'.⁷⁶

Figure 5



Considering Ozon's playful relationship with the press, it is possible that he was not in fact expecting, or hoping, that one gender alone would go to see the film. However earnest (or not) Ozon is about it being a 'women's film', the overriding genre visible from the outset is the detective story, and Ozon introduces the elements and conventions of the 'whodunnit' early on; the first ingredients to appear are suspense and fear. On discovering that the father of the house has been murdered, the women rush to the telephone, only to find that the line has been cut, and when the maid sets off to walk to the village she turns back, declaring that the snow has blocked the road, effectively isolating them from the outside world and preventing them from calling the police. The viewer believes s/he is in the realm of the *polar*. Even the plot conspires in creating a 'huis clos': all the female members of the family have been gathered together because, as the film blurb declares, 'on s'apprête à fêter Noël'. Thus Ozon has created that claustrophobic atmosphere essential to murder mysteries and characteristic of the films of Fassbinder and Sirk. In the 'huis clos', individuals are forced to confront each other and secrets are likely to come out. Some of these women are arch-enemies and hate the sight of each other, as we see especially in the relationships between Gaby (Catherine Deneuve) and her sister Augustine (Isabelle Huppert)

⁷⁶ Jeremiah Kipp, 'Dangerous Dames', my italics.

and between Gaby and her sister-in-law Pierrette (Fanny Ardant). The claustrophobic atmosphere stirs up old grievances and acts as a catalyst for confrontation and finally exposure of the truth. Agatha Christie novels use the same device, such as in *Death on the Nile* where the action is restricted to the boat, *Evil under the Sun* where the characters cannot leave the island, and in *Murder on the Orient Express* where they are all confined to the train. Robert Altman's *Gosford Park* (2001) – another detective film referencing 1930s murder mysteries – also employed this unity of place, as Ozon did in *Sitcom*, too.

Although Ozon denies wanting to fashion his movie on an Agatha Christie classic – describing and rejecting that style as ‘politically correct and mainstream’ (although elsewhere he makes explicit reference to Christie) – the 1950s costumes and setting obviously do encourage that association in the average film viewer.⁷⁷ Other workings of the crime genre include one character who takes on the role of investigator and guides us through the evidence and directs our logical analysis of the event. In *8 Femmes* it is the eldest daughter of Gaby and Marcel, Suzon (Virginie Ledoyen) who takes on the role of detective. She begins ‘interviewing’ each member of the family to find out what they had been doing and when the previous evening, at the time of the murder. Suzon appears to be the outsider, a neutral observer, the one who arrived after the murder happened, and therefore a more reliable figure, fitting in with our concept of the Great Detective.⁷⁸ She also has the characteristics of the detective: she is rational, not too passionate, too young or too old, unlike the other members of her family. Her point of view seems more measured.

However, Catherine (Ludivine Sagnier), her younger sister, soon sets the record straight. Catherine turns the questioning on her sister, mockingly calls her

⁷⁷ See Jeremiah Kipp's ‘Dangerous Dames’.

⁷⁸ See Claire Gorrara, *The Roman Noir in Post-War French Culture: Dark Fictions* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), p. 11.

‘Inspecteur Suzon’, and we begin to doubt her innocence. Catherine’s character makes explicit what was already implicit in the film: both the audience and the director are watching the *polar* self-consciously, applying the rules of the crime genre while being aware of it. Catherine’s outburst and the unreliability of Suzon as investigator/detective fulfil another criterion of the genre: no-one is completely innocent and everyone hides a secret. For a short time, each one of the eight women is the prime suspect and appears to have a convincing motive for murdering Marcel. In turn, as the movements of each character are investigated, their secrets come out. Behind this standard plot device, designed to create suspense, lies Freud’s belief that each person has the desire to murder, to a larger or lesser extent, a concern which Ozon has clearly not put behind him.⁷⁹

The viewer begins to suspect that these genre devices are, for Ozon, a source of pleasure; he enjoys establishing the game to play and then sets about breaking the rules, which is itself one of the inevitable features of genre, as mentioned in this chapter’s introduction. Even as Ozon pays homage to the crime genre, musical and melodrama, he goes about it tongue-in-cheek. The use of the flowers, colours and costumes all add to this playfulness and suspicion that we are being taken on a musical murder mystery weekend. Thus *8 Femmes* is also a ‘pasticcio’ according to Dyer’s reading of pastiche; the film is a pastiche but it could not be mistaken for a ‘straight’ genre production. Moreover, for Dyer, the homage is not ‘pure’ pastiche, unlike *Angel*, as we shall see. The visual levity of *8 Femmes* contrasts with the escalation in gravity of the secrets revealed, to comic effect. First we discover that Augustine, the maiden aunt, reads romance novels. Then we find out that Mamy poisoned her husband. Then it is revealed that Suzon is pregnant by her father (who turns out not to be her biological father though she did not know it at the time). As if that did not suffice, it is revealed that Pierrette and Louise are

⁷⁹ See Chapter 1 on Taboo and the Abject.

bisexual, and that Mme Chanel is in love with Pierrette; these desires cross both social and racial boundaries. The whole crime genre soon begins to unravel and the viewer of *8 Femmes*, like the viewer of *Sitcom*, is left perplexed and frustrated that the film does not obey the most basic conventions. Any attempt to engage with *8 Femmes* as a *polar*, or with *Sitcom* as a familiar situation comedy, will be thwarted. Crucially, in *8 Femmes* we find out that no murder was committed in the first place: this leaves the spectator with no mystery to solve. Ozon has stretched the rules to the limit and the genre-frame has collapsed. The spectator has no chance of guessing what actually happened. Moreover, Ozon rarely seems to respect the rhythms of the crime genre; the musical interludes interrupt both the action and forward-movement of the plot. The songs are not just digressions or red-herrings: they halt the plot and would frustrate the avid crime-fan. Vincendeau's words aptly describe the erratic rhythm of this film narrative: 'for the duration of the film the eight women [...] bitch at each other, only stopping *now and then* to burst into song'.⁸⁰ I suggest that this constitutes a part of the film's 'queerness' as well as providing some of the spectatorial pleasure: the viewers recognise the pattern of the musical interludes as well as some of the songs themselves. Furthermore, rather than racing towards a climatic ending, Ozon respects the more fluctuating rhythm of a feminine narrative as put forward by Irigaray, in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*.⁸¹ The viewer is invited to linger over the narrative and to connect with the emotions expressed in these well-known songs.

Tania Modleski suggests that soap operas provide an alternative to teleological, end-driven male narrative: 'in direct contrast to the male narrative film, in which the climax functions to resolve difficulties, the "mini-climaxes" of soap opera function to introduce difficulties and to complicate rather than simplify

⁸⁰ Vincendeau, '8 Women', my italics.

⁸¹ Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977).

characters' lives'.⁸² Modleski's account of female spectatorial pleasure explains the different narrative energy in *8 Femmes* and it sits well with Irigaray's view of female sexuality which: 'toujours au moins double, est encore plurielle'. Irigaray insists on the fluid and tactile nature of a possible 'écriture féminine'. She suggests that a feminine 'style' would resist definition and fixed models and thus also genres: 'son "style" résiste à, et fait exploser, toute forme, figure, idée, concept, solidement établis'.⁸³ This style would reflect the shifting nature of gender itself. Irigaray goes on to propose that the feminine aesthetic would shun resolution and phallogentric linearity which leads to a male 'climax': 'il convient de faire en sorte que *la lecture linéaire ne soit plus possible*: c'est-à-dire que la rétroaction de la fin du mot, de l'énoncé, de la phrase, sur son début soit prise en compte pour *désamorcer la puissance de son effet téléologique*'.⁸⁴ A feminist aesthetics which challenges patriarchal hegemony shares its aim with queer cultural production; Ozon's film thus demonstrates both a feminine and queer agenda.

The other matrix to apply when watching *8 Femmes* encourages a tactile reading and fascination with the filmic surface, in keeping with a female dynamic which functions in opposition to end-oriented drama. The first frame shows us a shimmering crystal curtain, suggestive of Hollywood glamour and famous musicals of the 1940s and 50s, while at the same time mirroring the curtain coming up on the stage of *Sitcom*. Ozon continues this theme as we are introduced to each character; we are reminded of the iconic status of many of these actresses. Ozon is explicit about references to Ava Gardner and Marilyn Monroe in the choice of costumes and colours. Furthermore, each character has a moment when she is centre-stage and can 'perform' to a captive audience; the spectators will not only recognise the actress but the song as well. Ozon has now set up his film as a

⁸² Tania Modleski, 'The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas: Notes on a Feminine Narrative Form', in Brunsdon et al, *Feminist Television Criticism*, pp. 36-47 (pp. 44-5).

⁸³ Irigaray, *Ce sexe*, p. 27, p. 76.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 77.

musical 'whodunnit', but it does not entirely conform to the usual rules of either the backstage or straight musical. Even in a backstage musical the onlookers to a musical number do not stand by to watch, instead they join in, as in the song 'Good morning' in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), and in *Funny Face* (1957) when Audrey Hepburn dances in a night club. Although Ozon's eight women join in at times, the numbers by Pierrette, Gaby, Augustine, and Louise are most definitely solo acts. Certainly no-one applauds performers in backstage musicals, unlike Chanel who claps after Pierrette's captivating performance. Furthermore, in musicals a song number usually takes its impetus and catchphrase from a spoken line or idea. In *8 Femmes* however this is only noticeable in Catherine's number 'Papa t'es plus dans l'coup' and the distinct break between dialogue and song serves to highlight yet again the theatrical nature of the performance. Ozon's use of self-conscious artifice creates an audience which responds differently to the musical numbers; the spectators' pleasure lies in recognising the songs, rather like in Alain Resnais's *On connaît la chanson* (1997). The references to glitzy Hollywood musicals prepare the audience to enjoy the costumes and extravagant spectacle. Although the musical is a 'genre' in its own right, and sits apart from the subset defined as the woman's picture, it is also associated with a female and gay male spectatorship.⁸⁵

Keeping this in mind, I am hesitant to agree with Vincendeau's belief that 'there is a whiff of vacuity and misogyny about *8 Women*'.⁸⁶ It is, rather, readings of *8 Femmes* which insist on the misogyny of the film. Mark Pegrum dangerously reproduces patriarchal models of femininity in the title of his article on the film: 'Virgins, Vixens, Vamps and Victims'.⁸⁷ This would imply that Ozon understands

⁸⁵ See Richard Dyer's reading of Judy Garland in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 141-194.

⁸⁶ Vincendeau, '8 Women', p. 46.

⁸⁷ Mark Pegrum, 'Virgins, Vixens, Vamps and Victims', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 42, 1 (2005), pp. 76-93.

women according to fixed patriarchal stereotypes, whereas I would argue instead that Ozon's portrayal of women is more ambiguous and complex than this. Firstly, Ozon reworks the referent genre and introduces some surprising variations on it. A women's film would usually track the development of a love story, revolving around the love for a man. On the surface *8 Femmes* does revolve around the Father/Marcel, representing 'the needs of the patriarchal psyche'.⁸⁸ The women do not seem to exist in their own right, but instead are defined solely in relation to the patriarchal figure, Marcel. The male protagonist collects women around him fetishistically, as if to assert his desirability and power, as well as to disavow the threat of sexual difference. Irigaray, in a feminist application of Marxist economics, recognises that women are used as merchandise and that their worth is determined only by their relation to men: 'la femme, la fille, la sœur ne valent que de servir de possibilité et d'enjeu de relations entre hommes'.⁸⁹ 'The power struggles, frailties, and desires of women' as described by Jeremiah Kipp are unable to surface whilst the father still acts as the centripetal force and maintains the status quo.⁹⁰

However, like the father in *Sitcom*, Marcel is more conspicuously absent than present in *8 Femmes* and in that he is therefore perhaps more powerful, as Asibong claims about the silent father in *Sitcom*. The women desire Marcel to take notice of them, as the family yearns for the father's acknowledgement in *Sitcom*. Despite the fact that the women are linked as a community through Marcel, they each want individual relationships with him. Marcel's presence/absence is important, but is gradually undermined by the female-to-female interactions. Indeed, Marcel is fetishised as an object: we see bits of him – the dressing gown,

⁸⁸ Gledhill, *Home is Where the Heart is*, p. 10.

⁸⁹ Irigaray, *Ce sexe*, p. 168.

⁹⁰ Kipp in 'Dangerous Dames'.

the study – instead of his face or his whole body.⁹¹ This is perhaps the way in which the women attempt to control the father figure but in fact the absence of a man on screen allows Ozon to investigate woman-to-woman dynamics. Once again, according to Irigaray, under a patriarchy women are prevented from dealing directly with each other: ‘pas question qu’elles aillent seules au “marché”, qu’elles jouent de leur valeur entre elles, qu’elles se parlent, se désirent, sans le contrôle de sujets-vendeurs-acheteurs-consommateurs’.⁹² In *8 Femmes* we soon realise that Marcel, both literally and figuratively, is out of the picture and thus Ozon allows woman-to-woman communication. Moreover, Ozon, by the very fact of giving cinematic space to women, is challenging the misrepresentation of women in film. It is a well known fact that most actresses find it difficult to get work once they are over forty; Ozon does not deny older women screen time, as he shows especially in his portrayal of Mamy (Danielle Darrieux). Ozon reveals that he is at once fascinated and shocked by women, rather like Marcel off-stage who chooses to observe their pettiness, greed, and quarrels from a safe distance.

8 Femmes instead allows the critic/viewer to situate the eight women on the ‘lesbian continuum’ as described by Adrienne Rich in her critical essay on ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’. With this term, Rich means a ‘woman-identified experience’ rather than a specifically sexual one. Rich goes on to suggest that all women exist on this continuum and that ‘we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not’.⁹³ We can begin to read the dynamics of the eight women on this continuum and whether Ozon is aware of this theory or not, his film demonstrates sensitivity to the female experience and subjectivities. Thus in *8 Femmes*, the women relate to

⁹¹ This fetishism of the male body is a reversal of the usual cinematic paradigm in which the female body – and her castration threat – is denied by fetishistic fragmentation.

⁹² Irigaray, *Ce sexe*, pp. 192-3.

⁹³ Adrienne Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, in Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, eds, *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 130-143 (pp. 135-6).

each other on a horizontal axis, rather than through a vertical, and so hierarchical, patriarchy. Rich's concept of a lesbian continuum is useful to my project, but I will not attempt to plot each woman-to-woman relationship in the film on this continuum, demarcating the lesbian elements which exist to a greater or lesser extent. Rather than performing such a reductive exercise, we will keep an awareness of female dynamics in order to reveal the extent to which Ozon questions dominant ideology.

One aspect of *8 Femmes* which takes us immediately into queer space has been briefly touched on earlier in this chapter: the eight women in the film betray their to-be-looked-at-ness, but because they look at each other. Ozon uses and exploits his actresses' iconic status; had he not used such 'big' names, he might not have received the necessary funding for his project.⁹⁴ Within the diegesis, there is a token male (Marcel) who looks at the women, but his look is placed off-stage and is significantly isolated. Marcel's point of view does not occupy the dominant position. Through Ozon's lens, the eight women/actresses are not only objects-to-be-looked-at, but loci of identification and indeed desire, both for Ozon and by extension the spectator. But as well as provoking, perhaps, a desire to possess them, the women arouse a desire to be them (hence Ozon's comment above on wishing to identify himself as a woman). The audience are thus invited to place themselves on a lesbian continuum in relation to the female characters. Furthermore, these eight women (whose boundary between role and real-life actress is blurred) are more the object of a female than a male gaze both in the diegesis and on screen. The song 'numbers' encourage the women to look at each other and to be their audience.⁹⁵ Therefore Ozon has accorded 'his' women the

⁹⁴ Ozon makes this explicit in his interview with Jeremiah Kipp. Ozon says that '*8 Women* was my easiest film to fund because of the cast'.

⁹⁵ This is particularly noticeable when Pierrette's (Fanny Ardant) number comes up; the lights are dimmed and the spotlight is aimed at her. The other women make themselves comfortable, settling down to watch her, and then applaud her at the end of the 'act'.

right to own and exert the gaze rather than merely being the object of it. The feminist spectator might, therefore, be able to occupy a more comfortable viewing position due to her knowledge that these women on screen can look back, because they, too, are an 'audience' for each other.

Returning to our concept of the lesbian continuum, we might usefully identify two women-to-women relationships that are portrayed in *8 Femmes*, the relations between sisters and between mothers and daughters. The dynamics between Catherine and Suzon, and Augustine and Gaby, remind the viewer of some undercurrents that run in a sisterly relationship; there is jealousy, intimacy and also a desire to be, or to emulate, the elder sister. Catherine is jealous of her sister's sexual awakening and wants to share in the experience, just as Augustine envies Gaby's marital status and physical appearance, while she is also in love with her sister's husband. There are also dark energies underlying mother and daughter relationships, revealing an Electra complex both in Augustine and Catherine. Irigaray reminds us that according to Freud 'la femme ne sortirait jamais vraiment du complexe d'Œdipe. Elle resterait toujours fixée au désir du père, assujettie au père, et à sa loi, par peur de perdre son amour: la seule chose susceptible de lui donner quelque valeur'.⁹⁶ Augustine learns from Mamy that her father was murdered (poisoned) by her mother, a revelation that causes her to start strangling her mother in a moment of anger, screaming 'je vais te tuer'. Catherine, on the other hand, displays an instinct to protect and defend her father from the nastiness of 'his women', preferring to side with her father rather than her mother, despite Marcel's blatant infidelity and indifference. We even discover that Suzon is pregnant and that Marcel is the father - though he turns out not to be her father (a common revelation, as we have said before, to be found in soap opera). Incest is once more on the agenda; Suzon committed what she and Marcel believed was

⁹⁶ Irigaray, *Ce sexe*, p. 86.

incest, and although it turns out that it was not, it is not any less shocking. Once again it cannot be said that Ozon portrays the nobler side of the female experience.

Augustine embodies another desire of female (and human) existence: that of being admired and loved by others, but particularly by other women. She is mocked for her virginity, conceals her addiction to romance novels, and is decidedly matronly in her appearance (tweeds and spectacles make up her armour).⁹⁷ Augustine consults the maid, Louise (Emmanuelle Béart), hoping to gain tips on how to attract the opposite sex, which sparks off Béart's sensual rendition of 'Pile ou face'. This brings about Augustine's transformation into a Rita Hayworth lookalike – aided by putting on one of her sister's gowns and some make-up and removing her glasses. Augustine thus experiences the admiring look of her female companions for the first time; although on the surface she wishes to appeal to men, she in fact yearns for the respect of other women. Here again, a woman performs for her own sex, demanding their attention and admiration, proving that she, too, is worthy of their gaze. The others seem to allow Augustine her moment of glory without envy or rivalry, rather relishing the transformation. There is a sense that this metamorphosis allows the spectator, and Augustine's family, the kind of camp pleasure to which McRuer refers in his analysis of 'Queer Eye'. Ozon is thus hinting at the homosexual pleasures that are available to us, privileging them over more conventional heterosexual dynamics.

Another character whose sexuality is puzzling and arguably 'illegible' – if one reads it according to the dominant paradigm – is Louise, the maid. She plays the part of a passive female who responds to the sexual whims and desires of her

⁹⁷ For an account of women and spectacles in the cinema see Mary Ann Doane in 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator' in Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film, Theory and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 17-32 (pp. 26-28). Doane says, in her discussion of Bette Davis in *Now Voyager*: 'The woman with glasses signifies simultaneously intellectuality and undesirability; but the moment she removes her glasses [...], she is transformed into spectacle, the very picture of desire', p. 27.

master. She accuses Gaby of denying Marcel sexual pleasure (to which she claims he has a right and need) and defends her role as submissive maid and sexual object. However, in the course of the film we learn that Louise is in fact more in love with her mistress than with her master, indeed she was in love with the lady of the house in her last post; we find this out when a photo of her previous 'mistress' drops on the floor. Film critics have spotted that it is a photo of the actress Romy Schneider, whom Ozon will reference again in *Swimming Pool*.⁹⁸ This 'kinky maid' – to use Vincendeau's term – also has sadistic tendencies.

Figure 6



This is delightfully illustrated when Louise who, due to her nursing experience, is called on to give Augustine an injection to tranquillise her. Augustine's bare flesh is exposed and Louise licks her lips before plunging the needle into her patient's buttocks – the maid's pleasure and amusement are palpable (see Figure 6). This time Vincendeau is right to say: 'It's true that men in *8 Women* are redundant rather than the ultimate goal of the female characters', but Ozon goes further by setting up the women as objects of desire for each other. When the constrictive male father figure is definitively taken away (by his own hand), the eight women are able to occupy positions as subject in the absence of men, and finally the women 'se parlent' and 'se désirent'.

⁹⁸ See Chapter 3 of this thesis.

In the end, Ozon's *8 Femmes* could be said to provide exactly the climax of much 'male' narrative: just as Catherine opens the door of Marcel's study, announcing their deception, the father shoots himself in the head. The 'truth' has been revealed; each woman's secrets and character have been unveiled, just as Catherine had hoped and planned. Catherine wished to free her father from his 'ties' to his women, as she declares that he is; just before unlocking the door she cries 'papa, libéré de vous toutes'. However the grand finale dissolves into an anti-climax as Mamy (Darrieux) begins her number 'Il n'y a pas d'amour heureux'. Ozon bravely announces the impossibility of love, but particularly of heterosexual love, here revealing a reluctance to use the trope of the couple. The stylised and tightly choreographed dancing keeps the visual momentum going, diffusing the impact of Marcel's suicide, while at the same time expressing their grief and sense of loss. The pairings and movements of the women hint of the myriad of relationships and connections that links these eight women, also suggesting that life goes on. Catherine is most stunned; she feels horrified that she has brought about this situation, that life has mirrored art. She barely understands how her joke precipitated this tragedy, protesting that 'c'était pour rire'. So, too, Ozon implies that he simply wishes to play with genre and tease his audience, but in fact his film ends up confronting authority, both in the father figure and the conventions of genre/gender.

With his 'pasticcio' Ozon has created a cinematic aesthetic that could be said to be 'feminine' as Irigaray understands the term: 'straight' classical narrative is eschewed and 'masculine' goal-oriented drama is upturned; women are allowed to interact without the intervention of men, which permits the director to subvert Hollywood convention as well as explore alternative, non-normative, expressions of desire. *Sitcom*, on the other hand, through its 'pasticcio' of genres, was concerned with a wider range of queer existence. Both *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes* have fulfilled

their radical potential as 'pasticci' as identified by Dyer, 'break[ing] the boundaries of medium and genre, and refus[ing] decorum and harmony'. As Dyer says of 'pasticcio', it is: 'the objective corollary in art of carnival - inclusive, often unruly, distrusted by authority'.⁹⁹ Now it remains to be examined how Ozon approaches genre in his most obvious pastiche, *Angel*.

L'ange criard: *Angel*

In his 2007 film, *Angel*, Ozon returns to his fascination with genre after a significant detour through different cinematographic styles; since *Sitcom*, Ozon has moved into a more established, 'mainstream' French art cinema and is now a well-known name in Francophone film. Films such as *Sous le sable* and *Le Temps qui reste* have won over critics with their self-assured cinematography and *auteurist* style, while *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*, Ozon's adaptation of a Fassbinder play, and the lively short *Une robe d'été*, have aroused interest at Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals.¹⁰⁰ Following an excursion into narratives of trauma and loss, as well as portraits of the couple (for example in *5x2*), Ozon surprised moviegoers by choosing a very different style for *Angel*, adapted from the novel by Elizabeth Taylor. This time Ozon experiments with overblown melodrama, inspired by Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s. Critics, too, have been puzzled; in his chapter 'Blood, tears and song: genre and the shock of over-stimulation', Asibong calls *Angel* Ozon's 'most excessive film to date' and in his conclusion remarks that it is 'a strangely un-Ozonian film'.¹⁰¹ This chapter will make sense of this surprising choice of film in the context of Ozon's previous forays into pastiche. In a description which captures much of the spirit of the film, Patrice Blouin, writing for

⁹⁹ Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁰ For a list of prizes Ozon's films have been awarded see Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 136, p. 141.

Les Inrockuptibles, refers to Angel, the protagonist of Ozon's eponymously titled 2007 film, as an 'ange criard', and Ozon could be said to have something of the 'ange criard' himself, as the film visibly revels in colour and excess.¹⁰² Whether Blouin is referring to Angel Deverell's shrill voice or her garish costumes and extravagant taste, 'criard' is an apt adjective in either case.

A French-Belgian-UK production, *Angel* has had very mixed reviews; although filmed in English and partly shot in the UK near Bristol with a large budget and professional finish, *Angel* has not yet been successful in this country, more than a year after it was seen in Europe.¹⁰³ *Angel* had a fairly hostile reception both at the Berlin Film Festival (February 2007) and at first in London also, while it had a lukewarm reception in France, explained in part because, perhaps, it is perceived by cinemagoers as being a break away from his other movies. Derek Elley's review for *Variety* concludes that Ozon's latest feature ends up 'feeling strangely empty', whereas Eithne O'Neill, writing for *Positif*, speaks of 'une effusion qui camoufle un vide intérieur'.¹⁰⁴ An accusation of emptiness at the core appears damning. Moviegoers, too, have been nonplussed by Ozon's latest work, advising others not to see the film and declaring it to be disappointing. However, before *Angel*'s general release in August 2008 there was a preview screening at the Institut Français in London where reception of the film was warmer; the version released in the UK is almost fifteen minutes shorter and cuts some scenes out entirely. These

¹⁰² See Patrice Blouin, 'Angel', *Les Inrockuptibles*, 589 (2007),

<http://www.lesinrocks.com/cine/cinema-article/article/angel/>, accessed 10/07/09.

¹⁰³ Although released in the UK at various festivals round the country, at first at the London Film Festival (October 2007) *Angel* had not had much press coverage before its general release on 29th August 2008.

¹⁰⁴ For Derek Elley's review for *Variety* see

<http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=festivals&jump=review&id=2478&reviewid=VE1117932855&cs=1>, accessed 18/04/08. Eithne O'Neill, 'Angel: Une femme à la page', *Positif*, 553 (2007), pp. 19-20 (p. 20).

tactics seem to have worked as the flurry of media attention, just before and after the film came out, would suggest.¹⁰⁵

Some of Ozon's motivation for making *Angel* may be explained by turning to the original novel by Elizabeth Taylor, which is itself concerned with literary genres.¹⁰⁶ Ozon says he was taken with Taylor's fictional story of Angelica Deverell, author of romantic fiction, which tells of the protagonist's rise to fame and fortune and ultimate decline and death. Taylor herself satirises Angelica's style and the style of 19th Century writers such as Marie Corelli, who was allegedly a favourite of such disparate individuals as Queen Victoria, Wilde and Disraeli. Furthermore, as Romola Garai asserts in interview, Corelli lived with a life-long female companion and so there have been questions regarding the writer's sexuality.¹⁰⁷ In the novel Angel's editors become the satirists of her novels and laugh about her style, including her excessive use of 'nay' and highfalutin words like 'coruscating' and 'iridescent'.¹⁰⁸ This parody of romantic fiction, found in Taylor's *Angel*, is what reviewers believe to be lacking in Ozon's version; as Derek Elley says, 'stripped of any irony, let alone wit, the movie ends up as empty and flowery as the literature (and person) it should be satirizing'.¹⁰⁹ Philip Kemp, writing for *Sight and Sound*, agrees:

¹⁰⁵ There was an article in *The Times*, reviews in *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *The Observer* and *Sight and Sound*, as well as an interview with Ozon and Romola Garai for *The Film Programme*, for BBC Radio 4, broadcast on 29 August 2008 from 16:30 to 17:00, http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/filmprogramme/filmprogramme_20080829.shtml, accessed 18/09/08.

¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Taylor, *Angel* (London: Virago, 2007), with an introduction by Hilary Mantel. Taylor (not the movie actress who shares her name), was born in Berkshire in 1912 and wrote her first novel in 1945, becoming known for her portrayals of middle and upper-class English domesticity; *Angel* is classed as being somewhat of an anomaly. Recently there has been a renewed interest in her work, as articles in the press testify. See: Lesley Glaister, 'Angel Delight', for *The Guardian*, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/classics/story/0,6000,1395816,00.html>, accessed 13/04/08. Ruthe Stein, for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/07/25/DDGJ1K2VMQ1.DTL&hw=elizabeth+taylor+ruthe+stein&sn=001&sc=1000>, accessed 13/04/08.

¹⁰⁷ Q&A session at preview screening of *Angel*, hosted by the Institut Français, London, 4/7/08.

¹⁰⁸ Taylor, *Angel*, p. 51.

¹⁰⁹ Elley, for *Variety*, as above.

This kind of sustained ironic take on the protagonist is hard enough to bring off in a novel but even harder in a film. The tendency of the filmic eye is always either to move in close, soliciting audience identification, or to stand much further off and satirise. François Ozon never quite hits the right balance, the tone of his film veering uneasily between the two standpoints.¹¹⁰

Kemp is not alone, as Peter Bradshaw also believes that Ozon's film lacks the subtlety of Taylor's original: 'Catastrophically, Ozon gets the book wrong from the outset. He treats the whole thing like a sendup: a spoof, a hoax [...]. This generic self-awareness is facetious and supercilious, and overlooks the sweetness and depth of Taylor's book.'¹¹¹ I argue, however, that Ozon was not aiming for this kind of irony; *Angel* is not meant to mock the melodrama. Therefore, this section of my chapter intends to show why Ozon's film can more usefully be read as pastiche than parody and thereby reveal what *Angel* contributes to Ozon's discussion of genre and gender politics.

Following the definitions put forward in *Pastiche*, we may safely suggest that Taylor's novel, as parody, intends to satirise the bombastic style of 19th Century female novelists.¹¹² On the other hand, *Angel* celebrates the 1950s melodrama as well as pastiching it, thus laying bare the latent content of gender and sexuality of the 'original'. Mark Pegrum recognises this in his article on *8 Femmes*, saying that 'the primary film genres into which Ozon taps are those of the forties and fifties where complex sexual issues were present beneath the surface, often undermining the superficial coherence of the narratives'.¹¹³ What Ozon does in *Angel* is to bring these issues to the surface. In order to distinguish a pastiche

¹¹⁰ Phillip Kemp, 'Angel', *Sight and Sound*, 18, 9 (2008), p. 50.

¹¹¹ Peter Bradshaw, 'Angel', *Guardian*, 29 August 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2008/aug/29/drama1>, accessed 18/09/08.

¹¹² Dyer, *Pastiche*. See p. 55 of this Chapter.

¹¹³ Pegrum, 'Virgins, Vixens', p. 78.

from straightforward genre production, we can, according to Dyer, identify three characteristics of pastiche, that is 'likeness, deformation and discrepancy' in regard to the work it is imitating. In other words, 'a pastiche is formally close to (its perception of) what it pastiches but not identical to it; very like, but not indistinguishable from'.¹¹⁴ Dominique Borde, in his review for *Le Figaro*, perhaps unwittingly uses vocabulary which suggests that we are in the realm of pastiche; he says that when watching *Angel* 'on se croirait ou presque au pays en Technicolor', pointing out that while being like Sirk's melodramas of the 1950s, it is at the same time at one remove from them.¹¹⁵ Borde recognises that Ozon's film shows some discrepancies with the Hollywood melodrama, though he does not identify them precisely: 'il a su y apporter quelques variantes qui détournent le genre avec une lucidité qui confine au cynisme'. It is not long before, Borde, too, sides with the reviewers who feel *Angel* has to be a parody: 'Ozon a donc trouvé le reflet d'un genre et son contraire, l'apologie et la satire'. It is, however, the discrepancies and deformation of the genre that need to be explored to understand Ozon's choice of the pastiche in his version of *Angel*, and especially in order to reveal the issues of genre/gender that are at stake.

Therefore, Ozon's imitation of Hollywood melodrama in *8 Femmes* is different from his references to Sirk and Minnelli in his less successful – if we are to believe its detractors – *Angel*. *8 Femmes* is a pastiche in the sense that it is an imitation, but as explained above, by combining the elements of more than one genre, it figures more as pasticcio, which, says Dyer: 'combines things that are typically held apart in such a way as to retain their identities'.¹¹⁶ The same cannot be said for *Angel*. Ozon sets his film up as a melodrama in the style of 1940s and 1950s Hollywood through music, mise-en-scène, acting and dialogues. Philippe

¹¹⁴ Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 55.

¹¹⁵ Dominique Borde, 'A la manière de...', *Le Figaro*, 15 October 2007.

¹¹⁶ Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 21.

Rombi's music echoes Frank Skinner's scores for Douglas Sirk's melodramas, elaborate costumes and sets ape *Gone with the Wind*, while cinematography mimics 1950s techniques such as back projection, which are no longer used in today's culture of CGI and special effects. Phillip Kemp mistakes these devices for 'moments of clumsiness, or perhaps carelessness, including some shaky special effects'.¹¹⁷ However, the iconic imagery and cinematography forms, in fact, part of the spectatorial pleasure. The point is that we could almost mistake *Angel* for straightforward genre production; in this it is more properly 'pure' pastiche. In interview, Ozon is horrified when the journalist suggests that *Angel* is 'traditional', anxious that audiences may mistake it for 'straight' melodrama rather than recognising it as pastiche.¹¹⁸ Dyer claims that pastiches express nostalgia for past forms, bemoaning the fact that 'they don't make films like this anymore' and that 'some of the intensity of the emotional response to the film feels like a longing for there to be such films and a gratitude in having given us one now'.¹¹⁹ Along with mourning the disappearance of opulent 1950s melodrama, part of the audience's response may be due to the fact that the latent sexual content of such films is finally being given expression. However, in order for the film to masquerade as its referent, this sexual content cannot be so explicit as to break away from the 1950s melodrama entirely.

Irony may not, in fact, play a great part in *Angel*, just as the critics have said. Ozon himself in interview claims that he wanted to eschew irony, deciding not to use Skinner's original scores as 'pour les spectateurs d'aujourd'hui, elles étaient ressenties de manière ironique et distanciée'.¹²⁰ Ozon borrows back projection techniques that are frequently used in Sirkian melodrama (see the opening seaside scenes in *Imitation of Life*), but in *Angel* they incite laughter, both when Theo takes

¹¹⁷ Kemp, 'Angel', *Sight and Sound*.

¹¹⁸ Kevin Maher, *The Times*, 21 August 2008, *Times* 2, pp. 12-13.

¹¹⁹ Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 177.

¹²⁰ See www.francois-ozon.com/francais/entretiens/angel.html, accessed 13/04/08.

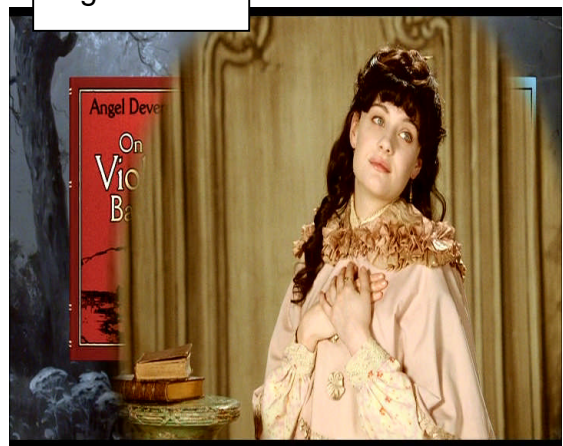
Angel round London – to enhance her sense of wonder and excitement – and on Angel and Esmé’s honeymoon in Venice, Athens and Cairo – to reinforce the protagonist’s vision of romance and distance from ‘reality’. Angel’s costumes throughout the film are extravagant and remind the spectator of costumes worn by Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind* and Judy Garland in *Meet Me in St. Louis*.¹²¹ The budget for costumes alone must have been gargantuan.

Similarly, when Angel’s books are published, Ozon uses dissolves and framing which hark back to movies of the 1950s and 1960s; these techniques are not used ironically, but produce a camp presentation of Angel’s rise to fame, and for the twenty-first century spectator have more in common, anachronistically, with computer generated images than 1950s melodrama. Book title covers swirl into view either side of her face, making the frames look more like a Power Point presentation than a movie (see Figure 7). One frame dissolves into another, ellipses marking the passing of time and Angel’s successful publications.

Figure 7



Figure 8



The use of an iris (see Figure 8), as the image of Angel posing in a toga grows from a small circle to eclipse the previous scene, serves to enhance the romance in her success story. The proliferation of images and mounting excitement at her

¹²¹ In interview Romola Garai gives some idea of scale when describing her wardrobe: ‘J’ai vu les alignements de vêtements et j’ai demandé s’ils étaient tous pour le film. On m’a répondu qu’ils étaient pour moi seule! J’avais une trentaine de robes, des chaussures faites main, des gants’, www.francois-ozon.com/francais/entretiens/angel.html, accessed 13/04/08.

literary success remind us of the way Lora's acting success is portrayed in *Imitation of Life*, as one set of neon lights announcing a new play is replaced by another. The viewer thus knows that this use of cinematography announces Angel's rise to stardom and realisation of her dream to be famous, while at the same time recognising its brashness and overblown style. While reading the cinematography as a 1950s melodrama, the spectator knows that it is not one, that is, while being very like Sirkian melodrama, it is 'not indistinguishable from' it.

The point is that, in line with Dyer's views, pastiche is always historical.¹²² That the 21st Century spectator likens film techniques in *Angel* to Power Point anachronistically belies the fact that films like this are not made anymore. 1950s melodramas belong to the 1950s, not the 2000s. Furthermore, while Ozon apes 1950s techniques, there are moments where the cinematography signals that the film was made in a different era. These are the discrepancies and deformations Dyer mentions. In his reading of Haynes' *Far From Heaven* (2002), Dyer mentions the differences between the later film and its referents: the editing, music, and costumes are slightly out of kilter for an 'original' 1950s movie.¹²³ Similarly in *Angel*, there are two scenes which are shot in near darkness and suggest technology which was not yet available in the 1950s and 1960s. The first is when Angel returns to Paradise House as an adult with Theo; they stop the car to look at the grand house through the gates and the lighting suggests that it is twilight. At first, the scene appears to be shot in black and white, yet there are hints of green ivy and bright white flowers, while the car headlights are distinctly greeny-yellow and on close-ups Sam Neill's face is not white, but flesh-coloured (see Figure 9). This use of colour is similar to the modern photography used in neo-noir films as described by Dyer in reference to the film *Body Heat* and would be out of place in a

¹²² Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 133.

¹²³ Ibid, p. 175.

'true' 1950s movie, because of the technical limitations of that era.¹²⁴ This kind of effect is due to the digital acquisition of images which allows Ozon to film naturally occurring colours in dim light without an artificial light source, because digital acquisition is more sensitive to low-light conditions than traditional celluloid film.



Figure 9

The second scene where the cinematography seems out of place and contemporary to the 2000s is shortly after Angel and Esmé make love on their return from honeymoon. Angel lies in bed in the dark next to her husband, clearly happy and at peace with her newly found married status.



Figure 10

Ozon uses a high-angle camera (see Figure 10), looking down on the couple in bed; it is an unusual camera angle for the film, their faces are captured with digital

¹²⁴ Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 123.

clarity and the lighting is also anachronistic, being almost monochrome but with hues of blue. These discrepancies imply that *Angel* is not a 'straight genre' film but rather deliberately signal its difference.

Another characteristic of *Angel* that chimes with Dyer's ideas of pastiche is that it is Ozon's first English language feature. There are obvious and reasonable justifications for this, among which is the fact that Taylor's novel is written in English and Ozon felt it could not be transposed to a French setting.¹²⁵ Ozon is anxious to clarify that he was offered US funding, but on condition that he used a celebrity actress and gave the film a 'happy ending'. This was not an attractive proposal for him.¹²⁶ To some extent, however, Ozon does seem to attract more UK media attention with his English language features and therefore he may not be unmotivated by marketing and business decisions. However that may be, there might also be an unconscious motivation for filming in English and shooting on location in England. When speaking of Spaghetti Westerns, Dyer notes that filming a pastiche in a language different to its referent automatically gives the copy a heightened sense of performance.¹²⁷ Ozon, filming in a language which is not his own, is performing Englishness in a way that differs from his models, in a similar way to how Sirk – born Detlef Sierck – made the Hollywood melodrama his own. Even if Ozon had filmed in French, or indeed, transposed the story to a French setting, *Angel* could still have been a performance of Hollywood melodrama. As it exists in an English setting the viewer may note the incessant cups of tea, references to claret and the imagery of the First World War that enhance our awareness that we are watching a copy and, more importantly, a filmed performance. Ozon is concerned with the notion of role play and sexual

¹²⁵ See Ozon's interview on his website. Moreover, as a successful and ambitious director, one could argue that Ozon wanted to break into the English-speaking market. This could account for the lack of warmth in the French reception of the film, as filming in English is sometimes seen as a betrayal by the French-speaking public.

¹²⁶ See Chapter 5 on 'happy endings'.

¹²⁷ Indeed Dyer says that 'to do Americanness in an evidently Italian (or at any rate un-American) way is liable to feel like putting it on', *Pastiche*, p.103.

performance, reflecting the ideas of Judith Butler, as we shall see in greater depth in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

It is, however, Ozon's treatment of subject matter and manipulation of Taylor's text which suggest that his pastiche offers the viewer a reflection on the gender issues which dominate Ozon's œuvre. The main differences between the two versions of *Angel*, and the ones that concern us most, are the way in which the main relationships between Angel and Nora, and Angel and Esmé are portrayed. First of all, Ozon professes that he wanted to make Angel more likeable, saying that in the book Taylor describes her as 'étrange et laide'. Indeed Taylor's description of her cannot be described as flattering:

She was vain of her strange appearance, and in fact her colouring, her green eyes, dark hair and white skin, was remarkable and dramatic; but her features were already, at fifteen, forbiddingly aquiline; her teeth were prominent and her astigmatic eyes sometimes unfocused.¹²⁸

From this description Angel is neither an English rose nor a shrinking violet but her appearance demands attention. Ozon picks up on several features, such as the dark hair and pale skin, but chooses an actress in Romola Garai whose face is symmetrical and aesthetically pleasing, although striking because of her height (as Angel at fifteen she is noticeably taller than her mother and her aunt). Although Ozon would not elaborate in interview on his fascination with gender roles and human sexuality, he could not deny, in his words, that Angel displays a 'strange sexuality'.¹²⁹ Angel's relationship with her secretary and companion, Nora, is intense, but even as a teenager Angel writes with a passion that is almost sexual; she breathes quickly, excitedly, as if her writing gives orgasmic pleasure. Even

¹²⁸ Taylor, *Angel*, p. 13.

¹²⁹ Q&A session, Institut Français.

from this point there is a sense that Angel's sexuality is channelled through fantasy and expressed in surprising ways.

In Taylor's version, the only reason Esmé marries her is for her money and fame, whereas in Ozon's *Angel*, Romola Garai makes it more believable that a man might fall for her looks and mean it when he says 'you have beautiful eyes'. By rendering the love interest between Esmé and Angel more visually convincing, their relationship is seemingly more complex, worn down by other issues, not just by Esmé's lack of interest and love for her. *Variety*'s Derek Elley rightly remarks on the lack of 'genuine sexual electricity between [Esmé] and Garai (a recurrent problem in Ozon's portrayal of male-female relationships)', but omits to explain why. Indeed, they seem to fall in love too quickly, it seems rather too sudden; the fact that there is no genuine complicity between the two makes their relationship empty and puzzling. Even Esmé comments on how 'unnatural' the dynamic is between them; when Angel asks him to marry her, he says: 'Isn't that what the man is supposed to ask?'. Although a modern viewer may not agree with Esmé's opinion, his words highlight how awkward and unexpected he finds Angel's proposal. Angel mentions that she will take care of his debts and respect his art in her attempt to woo him. As we shall see in the course of this thesis, Ozon undermines heteronormative ideology as far as relationships are concerned, time and again suggesting that heterosexual couplings do not ensure the rosy ending Hollywood films would have us believe in. It should not be a surprise for the spectator of Ozon's other films to find out that Esmé and Angel's relationship is doomed, or rather, that it is inherently dysfunctional. Ozon's point in the portrayal of the male-female couple is that it is flawed and its promise of happiness transient. This is especially relevant if one remembers that Angel is a writer of romantic fiction, and that in the straight paradigm which she inhabits – and reproduces – heterosexual romance is the only conceivable coupling.

Angel's are not the only looks Ozon tampers with; he also alters Nora's appearance. In Taylor's novel she is unattractive and described as having a moustache and, in later life, gout. Esmé is no less cruel than Taylor in his description of his sister; on their meeting again through Angel, Taylor states that 'he almost dared to say that her greying moustache gave her a military, a more distinguished air'.¹³⁰ There is no doubt, either in the book or the film, that Nora is devoted to and loves Angel intensely. Ozon says he wanted to rid Nora of her ugly duckling and clichéd butch lesbian status: 'j'avais envie de sortir le personnage de son côté frustré [...]. J'avais envie qu'elle ait une part de séduction'.¹³¹ What commentators have failed to remark upon is that Angel, too, in Ozon's version, courts Nora's attention and encourages her devotional love. In a scene missing from the novel, Nora expresses her disapproval with the fact that Angel is meeting Esmé in London; Angel reassures her, saying that she likes Esmé and Nora equally: 'It's true. I do like Esmé. But in the same way I like you'. Then Angel caresses Nora and rests her head on Nora's shoulders. It is curious that the triangle of desire between Angel and the two siblings binds Nora and Esmé to each other; once again Ozon is not afraid to hint at incestuous relationships.¹³²

Figure 11



Although there is no doubt of Nora's desire for Angel in the novel, Ozon has made their friendship more physical, as in the scene where Nora massages Angel's bare

¹³⁰ Taylor, *Angel*, p. 129.

¹³¹ Ozon, 'Entretiens à propos du film *Angel*', www.francois-ozon.com/francais/entretiens/angel.html, accessed 13/04/08.

¹³² See Chapter 4 on triangular desire.

back when she is writing incessantly to pay off Esmé's debts (see Figure 11). Angel is writing in bed, naked; whereas in the novel Nora reproaches her for her nudity, telling her to put some clothes on, in the film Nora (Lucy Russell) is visibly struck by Angel's beauty. Peter Bradshaw is unconvinced by Ozon's take on the relationship: 'his insistence on a bisexual dimension is unsubtle'; yet even in the novel it is made quite clear by Esmé that Nora is in love with Angel.¹³³ I will argue, however, that Nora and Angel's relationship is a source of affective interest; Ozon may in fact be mistaken in not making more of this queer desire. Nonetheless, Ozon's portrayal of the two women's friendship acknowledges that female-to-female interaction takes place on a lesbian continuum, that physical touch can be natural and loving between women, without one woman necessarily being butch and the other femme, in a crude 'pastiche' of heterosexual relationships.

In a further deviation from the original book, Ozon arguably treats women's issues in a way anachronistic to 1950s melodramas. Taylor already hints at the fact that the female sphere was considered unpalatable in Angel's era but Ozon carries this point through more forcibly. In the novel, when Theo suggests that her description of childbirth 'might be toned down', Angel does not protest.¹³⁴ In the film, however, there is a heated exchange about the wording. When Theo (Sam Neill) says: 'I'm not sure the "pints of blood" passage is strictly necessary', Angel retorts: 'Then you clearly know nothing about having babies'. Theo agrees magnanimously, saying: 'No, but I am a father. I can assure you that childbirth is an extremely beautiful thing', at which point Angel annihilates his criticism by stating the obvious: 'that's because you're not the one bleeding'. This phrase, more suited to 1970s feminism than a 'weepie', cuts Theo short; Ozon has made a point: 1950s melodrama rarely dealt with the daily experience of women.

¹³³ Bradshaw, 'Angel'.

¹³⁴ Taylor, *Angel*, p. 56.

Ozon returns to *Gone with the Wind* as a referent in other subject matter. Although, as mentioned above, *Angel* shares aesthetic features with the earlier movie, and though *Angel* may remind us of *Scarlett* (the references to *Scarlett* (Vivien Leigh) are numerous in the reviews of *Angel*) it is Ozon's portrayal of rape and miscarriage that make the spectator in 2008 reflect back to *Gone with the Wind* and consider how these subject matters are treated differently, especially as there is no mention in Taylor's novel either of a rape or a miscarriage. In *Gone with the Wind*, *Scarlett's* second pregnancy is the product of her rape by Rhett (Clark Gable). He is drunk and, the spectator infers, forces *Scarlett* to have sex with him in a desperate attempt to control his stubborn and self-willed wife. The next morning *Scarlett* seems in love with Rhett for the very first time, apparently happy that her husband exercised his physical power on her, as if he has excelled at 'being a man'. Rhett, on the other hand, knew that it was a vain attempt at intimacy with his wife and announces that he is leaving her. It is also Rhett's angry and impulsive behaviour that later causes *Scarlett* to fall down the stairs and thus lose the child she was carrying. *Angel's* depiction of miscarriage and rape is far more explicit and underlines the fact that women's lives were not – maybe still are not – represented cinematically in a way that corresponds to female lived experience. Esmé, too, tries to rape *Angel* when he is drunk, again in an attempt to regain control of his life. Here we see Esmé forcing himself on his wife, prising her legs open, with *Angel* terrified and disgusted by his violence. *Angel's* miscarriage earlier on in the story reveals that real women do not live in the world of 1950s melodrama; she is physically unwell and yearns for her husband, while at the same time not wanting to tell Esmé about the miscarriage in fear that he will not understand this 'failure'. This may explain why *Angel* seems first to avoid and then find intercourse with Esmé painful when he returns injured from the war. Even on her deathbed in Ozon's version, *Angel* asks Nora whether things would have been

different had she given Esmé the son he so desired; Angel is not, however, tormented by these thoughts in the novel. In the film, however, Angel suspects that womanhood and marriage are fulfilled through childbirth, partly due to her living vicariously through heteronormative romance. This is not to say that Taylor had no understanding of these issues, rather that Taylor and Ozon critique very different structures in their works: she satirises a literary style, whereas Ozon pays tribute to, while at the same time revealing, the silence in melodrama on gender issues.

The relationships Angel has serve to highlight her 'misdirected' desire as she worships unsuitable objects of affection (Theo and Esmé) while she mistreats (through deceit and neglect) her closest friend, Nora. There is a meeting with another woman, her 'double', Angelica from Paradise House, towards the end of the film. Ozon has been criticised (by Kemp and Bradshaw) for tying up this plot end which Taylor had left unsaid. However, the origins of Angel's fantasy world and, perhaps, her queer desires, are to be found in her link to the 'original' Angelica, the daughter of the rich family who lived at Paradise House and for whom Angel's Aunt Lottie worked. In the doubling of their names and through the entwining of their fate, Ozon creates a mirroring of the two characters.¹³⁵ From the outset Angelica is set up as a desirable object to emulate, firstly by the fact that the Deverell family name their child in her honour. Thus, as a teenager, Angel lives Angelica's life vicariously, spying on her (in the first scenes of the film) from beyond the estate gates, and telling her class at school that she plays the harp in her free time. Mocked by her classmates for such a blatant lie, we see how Angel's mother and aunt perpetuate the myth for the poorer girl, holding up for admiration the words and deeds of the Paradise House family. So when Aunt Lottie suggests that Angel could work for Angelica as her maid, it is the cruellest insult to Angel's vanity, and makes her more determined to be a successful writer. Angel refuses to

¹³⁵ See Chapter 4 and the mirroring of characters Sarah and Julie in *Swimming Pool*.

enter Paradise House under such conditions and later lives out her dream when she buys the house for herself.

Thus in the film when Angel meets Angelica, she finds herself to be an ersatz version of the original, a mere 'pastiche' of the 'real' Angelica. Angel finds out that Esmé and Angelica were having an affair when she happens upon a letter which Angelica wrote. After forcing Nora to admit that she was aware of the betrayal, and berating Nora for her disloyalty, Angel visits Angelica under the pretence of returning her property to her. The contrast between the two women could not be more marked. Even though Angelica's family had lost their money, she now leads a comfortable life and is married with a child. Angel is living in poverty, childless, a widow who has just discovered that her husband was unfaithful to her. So when it transpires that Angelica was Esmé's mistress, and that her child is perhaps the son that Esmé so wanted, Angel is reminded of her utter failure and the lie she has been living. The costumes and mise-en-scène play their part here in reminding the audience how out of touch Angel is with reality. Angelica's clothes and haircut reflect the passing of time and the modern fashions, whereas Angel looks as if, like Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*, she has taken a pair of old curtains to make a new outfit, unable to buy anything new.

Despite the fact that Angel is the lead character, and that the audience is reminded how destitute and sad she is at the end of her life, she does not elicit an emotional response from the audience. It seems as if spectators expect Angel to carry the affective impact of the film, whereas in fact, in my reading, the figure of Nora provides more emotional interest. Nora is the only character who loves Angel unconditionally, not expecting anything in return, and she gives up her own life and talent for her. Nora's is a story of unrequited love; she has devoted her adult life to working and caring for Angel and at the end she is left with very little. As Theo implies in his question 'What will you do now?', as they stand together at Angel's

tomb, Nora has lost her *raison d'être*. It is telling how few reviews of the film comment on the sexual tension between the two lead female characters, as if it is unworthy of comment, or anodyne enough not to notice (despite Bradshaw's comments about it being 'unsubtle'). Even in interview, Lucy Russell did not refer to Nora's feelings for Angel immediately when asked how she considered Nora felt about playing 'second fiddle'; it was only when prompted by Romola Garai that Russell mentioned Nora's lesbian desire for Angel.¹³⁶ One suspects, therefore, that silence on lesbianism in film is still rife, except for Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals which examine lesbian desires more openly (or explicitly), and perhaps Ozon is guilty of staying on the 'safe' side of the fence as far as the portrayal of queer sex is concerned (I shall discuss this at more length in Chapter 4). This is, perhaps, the reason why some reviewers have perceived an empty core at the heart of *Angel*; though they attribute it to different reasons, they rarely mention the complexities of Angel's relationships, especially that with Nora. Bradshaw is one journalist who does comment on the 'bisexual dimension', but remains unconvinced that Ozon got the balance right. As Bradshaw says, 'Ozon is impersonating not Sirk, but Todd Haynes's homage to Sirk in his *Far from Heaven*, which worked because it was passionate and heartfelt'.¹³⁷ Ultimately, the spectatorial pleasure in *Angel* is marred by the sense that this time, Ozon plays it too safe.

Conclusion

Part of the public's puzzlement over *Angel* might be better understood through Dyer's reading of Haynes' *Far From Heaven*, which as mentioned above can be understood as a pastiche of Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* as well as Fassbinder's *Fear Eats the Soul* and, says Dyer, of Max Ophüls' *The Reckless Moment*

¹³⁶ Q&A session, Institut Français.

¹³⁷ Bradshaw, '*Angel*'.

(1949).¹³⁸ Although Haynes' film met with moderate success, Dyer acknowledges that some viewers did not understand it as pastiche and suggests that 'responses to the film operate mostly somewhere between bafflement at its difference and geekish noting of every Sirkian nuance'.¹³⁹ In a footnote Dyer moots the fact that *Far From Heaven* can be understood in relation to other art cinema *auteurs* such as Fassbinder, Almodóvar and Ozon, the latter being an intertext even before he made *Angel*. One wonders whether *Angel* is a self-conscious reference to Haynes' work, expressing a common desire to revisit and re-evaluate 1950s melodrama through a queer angle. Indeed both directors have produced bonus material for the DVD box set of Sirk's work, a new edition edited by Carlotta Video and advertised on Ozon's website. Ozon has produced a 'film-mix', entitled *Quand la peur dévore l'âme* (the French translation of Fassbinder's original German title), which could be described as a 'collage' according to Dyer's understanding of 'pasticcio'.¹⁴⁰ Ozon intertwines scenes from Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* with Fassbinder's *Angst essen seele auf*, uncannily playing with the similarities in the two films. By using footage from Fassbinder's film, Ozon demonstrates his fascination with issues of race and gender that were lying beneath the surface in Sirk's work. Haynes takes Fassbinder's film further, repeating the German's investigation of inter-racial desire as well as breaking the silence about homosexual desire by his portrayal of Dennis Quaid coming out to his wife. As Dyer reminds us, 'Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s did not tell stories of homosexuality and mutual inter-racial desire',¹⁴¹ thus Haynes, by including these themes, deliberately signals that he is not 'doing' a straightforward genre film either.

In *Pastiche* Dyer also goes some way to explaining why such films are misunderstood in today's climate as well as why pastiche might appeal to some

¹³⁸ See Dyer's discussion of *Far From Heaven*, *Pastiche*, pp. 174-80.

¹³⁹ Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 176.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 12.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 176.

filmmakers more than others. In his fourth chapter, 'Pastiche, genre, history', Dyer emphasises that the idea of performance is prevalent in pastiche, either because the director/actors are 'doing' a genre, or because the actors are performing a perception of a role, usually gender specific. Dyer acknowledges that he uses the terms 'masquerade' and 'performance' consciously, alluding to theories of gender as performance put forward by Butler, among others; he says that such work:

argues that we should learn to see femininity (Rivière) and gender more generally (Butler) against the grain of what we take them to be, not as given and natural behaviours, but as enactments, based on endless reiteration and imitation. Pastiche may be one way in which works can show that this is so, since it is by definition the open presentation of imitation.¹⁴²

As we know from some of Dyer's earlier work, especially in *The Culture of Queers*, and as we shall see in Chapter 4 of this thesis, individuals who live non-normative sexualities, but in particular gay men, are acutely aware of the extent to which performance is part of their identity.¹⁴³ It is perhaps unsurprising that pastiche, as a performance of a genre, as an imitation, is a cultural expression which fascinates those artists who feel sidelined by heteronormative, or by straight white male, ideologies. Dyer claims that pastiche is found in some historical moments more than others, and in his list he includes 'the affinity for pastiche of Jews and gays in the last two centuries'.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, in his concluding remarks to his study, Dyer suggests that pastiche 'seems to have been especially congenial to social groupings or individuals within them who feel marginal to but not entirely excluded from the wider society'.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 116.

¹⁴³ Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁴⁴ Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 132.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 179-80.

Thus we can say that pastiche has more queer potential than parody, since instead of mocking the genre it rather reveals the limitations of the original in regard to the portrayal of sexuality, breaking the silence on different desires which in the past were kept in the 'celluloid closet'. Through their play with genre and pastiche, Ozon's 'genre' films highlight how unfixed both genre and gender/sexuality are. Also, Ozon, like Haynes, courts a queer spectatorship by identifying himself with Sirk and with self-conscious pastiche. Arguably pastiche is more unsettling than parody because audiences are not quite sure what they are watching; this is more true for *Angel* than for *8 Femmes* and *Sitcom*, which through their 'pasticci' did not give the impression that they were 'doing' straightforward genre. *Angel*, on the other hand, could be mistaken for a straight genre film if one misses the 'deformation and discrepancy' enacted. One feels that postmodern audiences are more comfortable with irony, when they know that they are mocking a certain genre and what genre that is. Dyer asserts that pastiche understands that humanity can never be original, that all speech and cultural production is a palimpsest of what has gone before; this, Dyer believes, is not the social climate of the early twenty-first century where originality is privileged. Pastiche, however, 'articulates this sense of living permanently, ruefully but without distress, within the limits and potentialities of the cultural construction of thought and feeling'. Pastiche is not, moreover, an intellectual form, says Dyer: 'pastiche articulates this not through intellectual reflection on it but by conveying it affectively', which reminds us of Haynes' concept of the 'thinking versus feeling dilemma'.¹⁴⁶ I suspect that *Angel* fails to move audiences partly because they expect to experience the kind of emotional response which would be provoked by the 'original' in, for example, *Gone with the Wind* or *Imitation of Life*, but these expectations are disappointed. *Sitcom*, on the other hand, and to some extent *8 Femmes*, do not address the

¹⁴⁶ Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 180.

‘thinking versus feeling dilemma’, rather they deliberately shock and tease viewers, not promising emotional interest, but perhaps providing it unexpectedly – especially at the end of *8 Femmes*. I would suggest that because of the films’ attention to genre and pastiche, they demonstrate, but even more strongly make audiences feel, that non-normative desires are always there. These desires cannot be denied, even in the audience themselves, whether the films’ characters’ sibling rivalry, jealousies, or admiration and love for someone of the same sex are recognised personally or not. Ozon’s representation of non-normative sexualities cannot be claimed as radical in itself, especially as he often employs non-politically correct images, but his cinema can be said to be queer in that his films allow – even encourage – cross-gender identification, as well as non-normative desires, both on screen and in the audience. In the next chapter we shall see how Ozon does not entirely abandon his preoccupation with genre in his portrayal of the female subject in *Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool*, and the gay male in *Le Temps qui reste*, which are examined in particular through narratives of trauma and loss.

Chapter 3

Trauma and Loss in *Sous le sable*, *Swimming Pool* and *Le Temps qui reste*

‘C’est un genre moins codifié [...] mes autres films étaient plus risqués, plus casse-gueule’.

François Ozon on *Sous le sable* in ‘François Ozon: Petits arrangements avec le mort’.¹

A Change in Aesthetics

This chapter takes us into very different Ozon territory, mainly due to the dramatic change of aesthetics in the films we examine here: *Sous le sable*, *Swimming Pool* and *Le Temps qui reste*. *Swimming Pool* also marks a departure from Ozon’s earlier works as it is the first of his films almost entirely in English, with French subtitles for the domestic audience.² The change in Ozon’s cinematography is not an entirely chronological one – *Sous le sable* in fact pre-dates *8 Femmes* – but it does mark a changing tendency: the films analysed in this chapter are visually less outlandish. With *Sous le sable* Ozon moves away from *Sitcom* and its brash theatricality and self-conscious artifice – which will appear again in *8 Femmes* and later, as we have seen, in *Angel* – towards a more sober, almost understated filmmaking, more suited to the themes to be tackled within them as well as employing a deceptively ‘realist’ cinematography. Ozon also uses the long take more, which further distances *Sous le sable* from the camerawork in *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes*. The *mise-en-scène* also changes: in *Sitcom* it was visually busy and the frames crowded; Jonathan Romney even comments on Ozon’s attention to décor in his

¹ Interview with *Chronic’art*, www.chronicart.com/mag/mag_article.php3?id=872, accessed 12/03/06.

² In the French version Rampling and Sagnier dub themselves though Charles Dance is dubbed by a French actor.

use of wallpaper.³ Similarly, in *8 Femmes* and *Angel* the elaborate furnishings and carefully chosen costumes demand the spectator's attention. As we saw in the previous chapter, the use of vibrant colours echoes the arrival of Technicolour in Hollywood movies of the 1950s as well as the opulent, indulgent, New Look which took post-rations fashion by storm. *Sous le sable* could not use colour or costume more differently: although the *mise-en-scène* is by no means less important, the viewer is not so attracted/distracted by the surface. The cinematographer's use of colour might evoke a certain mood or encourage one particular reading, but it does not constitute a fascination in itself.

In this chapter, mindful of the change of aesthetics, I further my enquiry into Ozon's representation of sexuality, and specifically desire, in a depressed, melancholic subject. In *Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool*, two films starring Charlotte Rampling, Ozon's focus is the effect of trauma and loss on desire in a female subject, whereas in *Le Temps qui reste*, described as the director's second portrait of mourning, Ozon presents the viewer with a traumatized gay male protagonist. Later in this chapter I will explain how the terms mourning, melancholia, trauma and loss are related and why they are pertinent states for a study of human desire. As this chapter will show, trauma and loss can affect desire in different ways for the protagonists of Ozon's trilogy of films; we shall see how desire is repressed and distorted in Ozonian female subjects, displaced at times onto surprising objects of desire, whereas for the gay male protagonist, desire is turned inwards towards the self, producing a longing to understand and possess one's identity and point of origin. While the links between trauma, loss and desire, and the ways in which trauma manifests itself through melancholia and repression, will be the main focus of this chapter, the links between trauma, desire and death will also be important. Death is not a new theme in Ozon's film-making, indeed, it

³ Romney, 'Sitcom', pp. 56-7.

haunts much of it and thus also this project.⁴ I will also continue to engage with the debate concerning Ozon's alleged misogyny by analysing his representation of the female subject and female sexuality and by examining Vincendeau's claim that Marie in *Sous le sable* is 'deranged'.⁵ My chapter also seeks to understand, and respond to, criticisms that dismiss Ozon's films as unintellectual and self-absorbed. More than this, the chapter will attempt to read *Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool* as feminist texts. For 'feminist text' I am using the definition put forward by Elizabeth Grosz in her work *Space, Time, and Perversion*. She suggests that 'a feminist text does not, strictly speaking, require a feminist author; but it must, in some way or other, problematize the standard masculinist ways in which the author occupies the position of enunciation'.⁶ Indeed, this chapter will argue, once again, that Ozon occupies a non-normative position behind the camera and will suggest that his films are not misogynist but rather, perhaps, feminist. I will first, therefore, examine what happens to desire in a melancholic female subject before going on to analyse the processes at work in the companion film, *Le Temps qui reste*, and then draw connections between the three.

With *Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool* Ozon apparently leaves the 'genre' film behind, though plot synopses, both on the DVD jacket covers and in the press, hint otherwise. On the jacket cover of *Sous le sable* in the *Fidélité Productions/Film Office Editions* DVD box set, the blurb says: 'Chaque été, Jean et Marie partent en vacances dans les Landes. Mais cette année, alors que Marie dort sur la plage, Jean disparaît. S'est-il noyé? S'est-il enfui? Marie se retrouve seule face à l'énigme de la disparition de l'homme de sa vie...'. This summary sets the film up as a psychological thriller, rather than as a portrait of a woman's grief following the

⁴ See discussions of death and violence in Chapter 1.

⁵ Vincendeau, 'Under the Sand', *Sight and Sound* 11, 4 (2001), <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/2138>, accessed 31/01/05.

⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 23.

literal 'loss' of her husband.⁷ Indeed, the question that hangs over Jean's disappearance – whether it is due to drowning, suicide, or escape – lends a tension to the film and is never adequately resolved. The blurb on the *Pathé Video* jacket of *Swimming Pool* similarly suggests that plot is at the core of this film.⁸ Although the film plays with the murder mystery genre, I would argue that narrative drive is not, in fact, at the heart of either film. Neither film proves to have a strong teleological purpose: the viewer does not avidly follow Marie's quest to learn the 'truth' about her husband's disappearance; the cinematography frustrates any wish on the part of the spectator to read *Sous le sable* as a thriller. In *Swimming Pool*, too, the viewer does not identify Sarah's attempt at writing as the matter at stake, reading the completion of Sarah's next novel as the film's ultimate end (though the two do occur almost simultaneously); instead the tensions between Sarah and Julie become compulsive viewing as the film provides insights into this 'odd couple'.

As suggested above, it is Ozon's use of cinematography which first guides our reading of these two films by employing colour themes and long takes which did not appear in his 'casse-gueule' past. The choice of colour and costume in *Sous le sable* clearly indicates that we are in the realm of personal tragedy and private stories rather than the theatrical family dynamics of *Sitcom* or *8 Femmes*. Ozon achieves this effect in part by eschewing strong, primary colours in favour of sombre greys and browns. The scene at the house in Les Landes in which Jean goes outside to collect firewood is a case in point. The tree-bark is grey, the undergrowth is in subdued greens and browns and as Jean moves out of the frame the camera, tracking Jean's movement, pauses to focus on the tree-bark, revealing

⁷ One wonders if Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960), which begins with a woman disappearing during a trip to an island, is another intertext for Ozon in *Sous le sable*. In this film, too, water is a very prominent element. In Antonioni's film no-one ever discovers what happened to Anna and instead her disappearance becomes the catalyst for interrogation on the part of the other characters.

⁸ 'Sarah Morton, auteur anglais de polars à succès, est déprimée. Son éditeur lui propose de passer quelques jours dans sa propriété du Lubéron pour se reposer et écrire au calme. Mais la quiétude de Sarah est bouleversée par l'arrivée soudaine de Julie, la fille française de son éditeur.'

its coarse and complex texture. Jean is drawn to a log and he upturns it, not, it seems, in order to examine its suitability as firewood, but instead he watches the ants crawling busily beneath it. His fascination with rotting wood and ‘creepy crawlies’ is unsettling and hints at the character’s unhappiness, depression, and status as a melancholic subject, a precursor of Marie’s own depression.⁹ It would be simplistic to suggest that colour is being used as an allegory, but it is nonetheless indicative of the change in Ozon’s cinematography, revealing an interest in more minimalist, introspective filming rather than in large, extrovert gestures. Ozon’s use of colour is also significant in the scene when Jean and Marie go to the beach the morning after their arrival in Les Landes. The frame showing Marie’s red dress and the grassy dunes of the seaside reminds the viewer of some shots from Ozon’s *moyen-métrage* *Regarde la mer* due to the use of colour and framing (see Figure 1). The colour red foreshadows the proximity of danger – it is of course a red flag which warns swimmers against going in the sea – and the intertextual reference in *Sous le sable* to Ozon’s earlier work implies some of the horrors that are to follow.¹⁰

Figure 1



⁹ See Asibong’s interpretation of the significance of the insects, *François Ozon*, p. 90.

¹⁰ See Chapter 1.

Red also appears at key moments of *Swimming Pool*: the red lilo (a leit motif in the film) reappears shortly after Franck's murder and Sarah wears red when seducing Marcel.

Sous le sable thus shifts from parodying (Hollywood) genre obsessively to a more recognisable auteur cinema, especially through Ozon's use of the long take, employed by great directors such as Welles, Renoir, and Hitchcock.¹¹ The long take encourages a more reflective viewing experience than the cinematography in his previous films. Given that the average Hollywood take lasts ten seconds,¹² the viewer of the twenty-first century is used to shorter takes, and due to the influence of television the average attention span is short (television takes can last as little as three seconds). Modern viewers are used to a fast viewing experience, one which relies heavily on editing. The quick succession of short takes used in Hollywood acts almost like (Soviet) Montage and it controls the viewing process closely. Proponents of the long take, Bazin and Ogle, argued that it, along with techniques such as deep-focus and limited use of editing, gave the spectator more freedom and a verisimilar viewing experience.¹³ These techniques give the illusion of realism although they may actually be just as controlling; there is certainly no suggestion here that Ozon makes 'realist' films. The arrival at Jean and Marie's house in Les Landes, already mentioned above, serves to illustrate Ozon's shift in direction. The average length of the first six takes is twenty-five seconds; the viewer is thus transported from the hustle and bustle of Paris to the quiet, almost eerie, tranquillity of the country and at the same time prepared for a different viewing experience, different both from his other films and from what the synopses might suggest. Ozon here employs a more mobile camera which allows us to

¹¹ See Asibong, *François Ozon*, pp. 83-90 for an account of the film and of its reception in France and the UK.

¹² Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art*, p. 285.

¹³ See Pam Cook, ed., *The Cinema Book* (London: British Film Institute, 1999 & 2007), p. 25 & p. 29.

follow the actors' movements more intently. In the scenes in *Sous le sable* mentioned above, the long takes mirror the slow, intimate, almost silent interaction between husband and wife, as well as Jean's world-weariness and fatigue. Similarly long takes are used at times in *Swimming Pool*, either to draw attention to how the characters use their physical bodies or to eroticise the camera's movement (how, exactly, we shall see later).

Rampling is in fact an actor who has made a career from using her body at a time when it was relatively taboo. The long takes Ozon employs emphasise and linger on her body in the gym, swimming pool and on the beach, reminding us of her status. *Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool* are thus brought close together through Ozon's choice of Charlotte Rampling as star, creating a cinematic diptych of trauma and desire. As Ginette Vincendeau's germane article 'Ageing Cool' states, Ozon explicitly refers to Rampling's past films both in *Sous le Sable* and *Swimming Pool*, thus further cementing the link between them.¹⁴ Rampling embodies a certain aesthetic, one which draws attention to the body and the bodily image, and which illustrates how a character's psychology is manifested by the way she uses her body. Ozon enjoys and deliberately exploits Rampling's way of acting; he stresses in interview how important it was for him that she was willing to appear in a swimming costume:

Pour moi c'était vraiment important que l'on voit son corps. Je voulais que le spectateur se raconte des histoires à partir d'indices corporels ou vestimentaires [...] que rien ne soit littéralement expliqué, mais que l'on suive le personnage à travers sa manière d'être, de bouger, de s'habiller, de se coiffer.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ginette Vincendeau, 'Ageing Cool' in *Sight and Sound*, 13, 9 (2003), pp. 26-8.

¹⁵ Ozon website, 'Entretiens à propos de *Sous le sable*', <http://www.francois-ozon.com/fr/entretiens-sous-le-sable>, accessed 12/03/06.

Vincendeau's article reminds us that Rampling's star persona and past career is linked to nudity, 'improper' sexual behaviour and France. As Vincendeau states, the film *The Night Porter* (1974), in which the actor plays a former Nazi victim, 'fixed Rampling's persona as sexually charged, tragic and "depraved"'. Vincendeau stresses how Rampling uses her body – or how it is used by others – to achieve a certain effect; her skinniness and her well-defined cheekbones are particularly notable. Vincendeau also points out that although naturalized French, Rampling is still known for being English: her 'well-mannered appearance and cut-glass accent fit another dominant French stereotype of Britishness – upper-class, conventional and sexually repressed'.¹⁶ Rampling plays on this stereotype and is able to use her body powerfully, particularly in *Swimming Pool*. Ozon is aware of Rampling's skills: 'Charlotte est une actrice qui magnifie les gestes les plus quotidiens'.¹⁷ His choice of actor is apposite; it causes the spectator to reflect on the body, its relationship to desire and sexuality, and how trauma and repression can mark it.

However, critics have often missed this strong link between Ozon and Sarah/Marie; *Swimming Pool* has been accused of being 'predictable and derivative'; Geoff Andrew is one such detractor. He asks 'why do blocked crime writers always fantasise themselves into a scenario which will restore creativity, and when is a swimming pool movie not about the return of the repressed?'.¹⁸ Charles Tesson also attacks *Swimming Pool* for a lack of depth, saying of its highly polished surface 'à ce niveau d'exécution (tout lisse, tout glisse), ce n'est plus du filmage, juste du repassage', concluding that the film is 'calme plat, bien loin d'un quelconque trouble en eau profonde'.¹⁹ What these critics have failed to notice is the 'gender trouble' present in *Swimming Pool*. In an attempt to analyse the

¹⁶ Vincendeau, 'Ageing Cool', p. 27, p. 28.

¹⁷ Ozon website, 'Entretiens à propos du film *Swimming Pool*', <http://www.francois-ozon.com/fr/entretiens-swimming-pool>, accessed 12/03/06.

¹⁸ Geoff Andrew, entry for *Swimming Pool*, *Time Out Film Guide 2004* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 1158-1159 (p. 1158). See also www.timeout.com/film/75760.html, accessed 20/06/06.

¹⁹ Charles Tesson, 'Eau plate', *Cahiers du cinéma*, 579 (2003), pp. 48-49 (p. 49).

creative process, Ozon has projected himself onto a female body, as he testifies in interview: 'j'ai eu l'idée...de me projeter dans un personnage romancière anglaise, plutôt que de parler de moi en tant que cinéaste'.²⁰ This is perhaps simply a transposition of the personal onto fantasy, as if to conceal the story's autobiographical origins, but here it involves a cross-gender identification, more manifest and intense than in Ozon's previous films. Ozon renders queer the process of transferral from self to other, complicating the direction and drive behind the network of looks and desire in the film. Grosz believes that heterosexual norms are inadequate to explain lived experience and identification processes between differently-sexed bodies; she states: 'this is not to say that female and male sexualities must be regarded as two entirely distinct species, sharing nothing in common, each with their own identities and features (the essentialist commitment)', but neither should they 'be understood only in terms of each other, as mutually defined, reciprocally influential'.²¹ The implication here is that patriarchal models of sexuality have created an inexorable distance between differently-gendered bodies, perceiving only a gender binary outside of which nothing can exist and to which no third or fourth terms can be added. Normative ideologies are also unable to allow or account for the fact that cross-gender processes can take place, processes of the kind that Ozon plays with in his work. Carol J. Clover's work equally testifies to the cross-gender identification that can take place, particularly in the privileged space of the cinema, that 'safe' space where movie-goers can position themselves queerly. Clover says, 'what film-makers seem to know better than film critics is that gender is less of a wall than a permeable membrane'.²²

In her essay 'The Straight Mind' Monique Wittig also highlights the inadequacies of heterosexual ideology in expressing the experience of differently-

²⁰ Ozon website, 'Entretiens à propos du film *Swimming Pool*', <http://www.francois-ozon.com/fr/entretiens-swimming-pool>, accessed 12/03/06.

²¹ Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, p. 188.

²² Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, p. 46. See also Doty, 'Queer Theory', p. 151.

sexed individuals. She reiterates Grosz's point that it is not enough to define one sex/gender by the other, stating that 'straight society is based on the necessity of the different/other at every level'.²³ Wittig suggests we do away with the notions of 'man' and 'woman', the quintessential dichotomy of same and different, because they only have currency in a heterosexual society, a society governed by the totalitarian 'straight mind'. Wittig does not go into alternative terms here, but begins with 'lesbians' as a potential subjectivity; what Wittig does abhor is 'the category of sex', reminding us that there are perhaps equally important markers of lived experience, such as economical and political factors.²⁴ Ozon, too, begins to dispense with the idea of defining the self by the other by decreasing the distance between the sexes and, as we have seen, by blurring the boundaries between male and female. Similarly, through his œuvre and the myriad of sexual identities described in it we might infer that there is no same, but only different/other. In order to complicate the tension between his protagonists further Ozon deliberately chooses a queer model on which to base his character Sarah Morton, notably the writers Patricia Cornwell and Patricia Highsmith who have been identified as lesbian and/or bisexual. In one interview he mentions that the costume designer, Pascaline Chavanne, researched the clothes and make-up of these writers specifically.²⁵ Elsewhere Ozon explains what attracts him to crime writers such as these: 'elles ont en commun d'être difficiles avec leur entourage, souvent alcooliques et ... un peu lesbiennes! De plus, il y a un écart terrible entre l'allure très dignes qu'elles ont, et les horreurs parfois très perverses qu'elles décrivent dans leurs ouvrages'.²⁶

²³ Monique Wittig, 'The Straight Mind' in Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, pp. 21-32 (p. 28).

²⁴ See Wittig, 'The Category of Sex', in Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, pp. 1-8 (p. 2):

'Masculine/feminine, male/female are the categories which serve to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political, ideological order'. Here I am using the Beauvoiran term 'l'expérience vécue' and allude to Grosz's own term 'lived body'.

²⁵ Ozon website, 'Entretiens à propos du film *Swimming Pool*', www.francois-ozon.com/francais/entretiens/swimming-pool.html, accessed 12/03/06.

²⁶ Interview with *Media G*, www.media-g.net, accessed 12/03/06.

So, not only does Ozon project himself onto a female subject, but it is also, potentially, a lesbian subject; thus he takes up a non-normative directorial position. He imagines Sarah Morton, a crime writer, as lesbian. This is significant because Ozon, as a gay man, can arguably easily imagine straight female desire for men; in fact much has been made of the 'queer sistership' – so called by Stephen Maddison – between gay men and heterosexual women.²⁷ Ozon, however, does not choose this more comfortable viewing position; instead he projects himself onto a different form of desire, thus adopting a queerer position in *Swimming Pool* than in *Sous le sable*, where Marie is seen to perform heterosexual desires although, arguably, Ozon chooses what may be seen as another queer subject, the menopausal woman. Later in this chapter we will examine desire further. First, however, we must turn to the key thematic concerns of these two films: trauma and loss and their particular impact on the (female) desiring subject.

The Trauma of Loss

Sous le sable, the first of the three films examined in this chapter, is primarily a story of loss, of grief, and of denial. It is no coincidence that the soundtrack is haunted by 'Denied' by Portishead, who, like Marie, are English and may thus also connote sexual repression and denial for a French audience.²⁸ Even without its cultural significance, the music *per se* is eerie and disturbing. Marie relies on denial as a coping strategy and has reached an impasse in the mourning process, partly because she has no body to mourn as her husband Jean has disappeared without leaving proof of his death. The disappearance of Jean appears to be an accident and Marie experiences it as a trauma – as described by trauma theorists to whom I

²⁷ Stephen Maddison, *Fags, Hags and Queer Sisters* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 6-10.

²⁸ The track, on Portishead's 1997 album *Portishead*, is listed as 'Undenied'. In this case the group is not unaware of the irony of double denial.

shall turn shortly for an understanding of the implications that a traumatic event carries with it. As we shall see, trauma brings about a sense of loss; for Marie this is the very literal loss of her husband, her loved object. As Freud explains in his essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', loss of a loved object usually causes mourning which, when unresolved, becomes its pathological partner, melancholia. This is how Freud understands the normal processes of grief:

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. In some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning and we consequently suspect them of a pathological disposition. It is also *well worth notice* that, although mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, *it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition* and to refer it to medical treatment. *We rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time*, and we look upon any interference with it as useless or even harmful.²⁹

The well-known maxim tells the same story: time is a great healer. Melancholia, on the other hand, does not resolve itself naturally over time and manifests itself in the following symptoms according to Freud: low self-esteem, self-reproach, fatigue, and suicidal tendencies. Mourning, although it shares many symptoms with melancholia, does not, however, display such self-hatred and 'disturbance of self-regard'.³⁰ These symptoms are also found in modern-day depression; Kristeva, in her discussions on depression in *Soleil noir*, sees depression as a temporary form of melancholia, although she recognises that the boundary between the two is

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychoanalytical Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 237-258 (pp. 243-244), my italics.

³⁰ Freud, 'Mourning', p. 244.

blurred, 'floue'.³¹ This is also the view of Judith Butler, who argues in her Afterword to *Loss*, a collection looking at the implications of witness, memory, and melancholy, 'it may be that the distinction finally between mourning and melancholia does not hold [...] because they are, inevitably, experienced in a certain configuration of simultaneity and succession'.³² This notion of the ambivalence of the two terms is, perhaps, more suited to postmodern discussions of experience which would hesitate to draw such a clear cut line between two close states. Therefore in this chapter the terms mourning and melancholia may be used interchangeably because, in the case of the characters under discussion, the two states are almost indistinguishable.

It is significant that Marie's husband, Jean, was himself suffering from depression, though it was unnarrated and unacknowledged.³³ It is only later that Marie finds out that Jean was taking antidepressants. When Marie loses her husband she also loses his depression and arguably takes his depression on as her own. Freud states that melancholia occurs when the loss of a loved object does not follow the usual pattern of death, which is certainly the case for Marie: 'the object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love [...]. In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost'.³⁴ In *Sous le sable* Jean has not officially died and so Marie cannot identify what she has lost. Even Marie's lawyer friend explains that she cannot have access to her husband's money until after ten years have passed, or until he is declared dead, which demands finding his corpse. Marie needs a dead body in order to come to

³¹ Julia Kristeva, *Soleil noir: Dépression et Mélancholie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), pp. 18-20.

³² Judith Butler, 'After Loss, What Then?' in David L. Eng, and David Kazanjian, eds, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 467-473 (p. 472).

³³ Alan Bennett also addresses unacknowledged grief and depression in *Untold Stories* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p. 16 & p. 98.

³⁴ Freud, 'Mourning', p. 245.

terms with Jean's death, if indeed he has died; without proof of his death she is held in a state of limbo.

When we meet Marie back in Paris she displays signs both of mourning and melancholia as described by Freud: 'profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity'.³⁵ According to Freud, melancholia causes sleeplessness and has a tendency to change into mania; Marie has episodes of insomnia and eventually ends up sleeping on a sofa rather than a bed, as if it is not permissible to sleep peacefully in the conjugal bed. She also arguably displays mania when she is able to push her grief aside: for example, when she delightedly buys a tie for her dead husband, even though her funds do not allow it (her credit card is rejected in the shop and so Marie makes do just with the tie, rather than two shirts as well). There is one characteristic shared by both mourning and melancholia that explains scenes like these, that is, 'a turning away from reality takes place'. This is because, according to Freud, when the loved object no longer exists, the subject must withdraw its libidinal attachment to the object; this creates tension as 'people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them'.³⁶ Marie is a case in point: she continues to desire her dead husband, unable to abandon her libidinal position towards him, even when Vincent, the substitute, desires her and wishes to build a relationship with her.

There is a further distinction between melancholia and mourning for Freud, perhaps more subtle than the ones already seen: 'melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious'.³⁷ Melancholia, like mourning, is about loss and a desire to fill the

³⁵ Freud, 'Mourning', p. 244.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 244.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 245.

void created by that loss, but in melancholia the subject does not consciously know what has been lost and does not know what to desire that might fill the void. As we shall see, they therefore repress their desires, manifest themselves pathologically or deny them (as with Marie). Marie, as we have seen, is unable to perform mourning successfully and therefore grief becomes melancholia quite early on in the film. Sarah, in *Swimming Pool*, is, on the other hand, simply depressed. She is not mourning the obvious death of a loved object and thus her melancholia is harder to define, but the reasons for her depression unfold as the film progresses. Sarah does not manifest her melancholia in the ways suggested by Freud; her melancholia instead distorts her relationship to food, drink and sex – that is bodily pleasures in general, while Romain in *Le Temps qui reste* is traumatized by his diagnosis of terminal cancer and reacts to his sense of loss in yet another way.

It is here that reference to recent theories in trauma studies might help understand our protagonists' behaviour, as well as the connections between trauma, loss, mourning and melancholia. As E. Ann Kaplan states, in her work *Trauma Culture*, which attempts to capture the consequences and shared trauma of 9/11, the father of modern trauma theory was Freud.³⁸ Although it is significant that Freud began work which has now become useful to understanding our postmodern, post-industrial world, modern trauma theory takes Freud's theories further. What Kaplan is quick to point out is that Freud and his peers did not set out to theorize the notion of trauma itself, whereas modern trauma theory does. Furthermore, whereas psychoanalysis theorizes the 'origin' of ideal loss, trauma studies aim instead to witness the present trauma of traumatized subjects. Works by Cathy Caruth and Anne Whitehead discuss the symptoms and processes of trauma survivors in terms which are more relevant to our current enquiry,

³⁸ E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

especially in relation to our three female protagonists, Marie, Julie, and Sarah; trauma theory will also aid us in reading the protagonist of *Le Temps qui reste*.

While Freud started looking at trauma and 'hysteria' linked to modernity and industrialization, he did also see traumatized soldiers in World War I who were accused of 'malingering' when they were unable to return to battle.³⁹ The area of trauma studies has seen renewed interest since the Vietnam War and more recently because of the Bosnian, Gulf Wars, 9/11 and 7/7; it was, however, only in 1980 that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was added to the diagnostic canon of medical and psychiatric associations.⁴⁰ Holocaust studies have also made use of trauma theory and can help us make sense of narratives which are infused with stories of public and private trauma. Judith Lewis Herman's work, *Trauma and Recovery*, makes the transition from discussions of public to private trauma possible.⁴¹ Her study attempts to address trauma as it is experienced both by victims of domestic and sexual abuse (in the 'female' sphere) as well as by (male) soldiers in war, thus bridging the gap between gendered traumas, which Kaplan feels Freud himself propagated.⁴² Herman allows the theorist to recognise the equal significance 'between rape survivors and combat veterans, between battered women and political prisoners, between the survivors of vast concentration camps created by tyrants who rule nations and the survivors of small, hidden concentration camps created by tyrants who rule their homes'.⁴³ Herman also

³⁹ See Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, pp. 25-28.

⁴⁰ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 4 and Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 3.

⁴¹ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, 2001), pp. 2-3 and p. 5.

⁴² Kaplan: '[The] neglect [of "family" trauma] is partly due to the implicit gendering of trauma studies, such that the traumas of (and perpetrated by) men have been a main focus', *Trauma Culture*, p. 19. Later Kaplan says: 'Freud and Breuer implicitly gender trauma [...]: Males largely have traumatic effects from accidents, women from watching by the bedside of sick parents or children, or (at first only implied) from extreme sexual repression', *Trauma Culture*, p. 26.

⁴³ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p. 3. See also Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995 [first published 1929]) for an account of the relative importance of male and female spheres, p. 80.

testifies to the fact that 'trauma inevitably brings loss'. She goes on to list the types of loss associated with trauma:

Even those who are lucky enough to escape physically unscathed still lose the internal psychological structures of a self securely attached to others. Those who are physically harmed lose in addition their sense of bodily integrity. And those who lose important people in their lives face a new void in their relationships with friends, family, or community.⁴⁴

Herman's contribution to PTSD theories acts as a springboard from which to examine the private instances of traumatic loss presented in *Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool*, and later in *Le Temps qui reste*. For her, losing loved objects also constitutes a trauma in itself; the two are inextricably linked: trauma is loss and loss is traumatic and loss leads to melancholia. It is for this reason that the terms are used interchangeably in this chapter, and I describe Marie, Sarah and Romain as both traumatized and melancholic subjects.

Marie in *Sous le sable* is offered the opportunity to begin her grieving when she receives the phone call from the police announcing that they have found a body fitting Jean's description. However, she continues to avoid going back to Les Landes for several days, only going there after breaking up with Vincent. The scene in the mortuary is vivid; the viewer is shocked and, perhaps, disgusted by Marie's insistence on seeing the dead body of a man – who may or may not be Jean – in the mortuary. The forensic pathologist shows Marie the man's face, but she insists on seeing the whole body, as if she needs to see to believe. The doctor advises against it, but Marie does not give in; the white sheet is rolled down to reveal the whole corpse and the look of horror on Marie's face reflects what a horrific sight this putrefied body must be. Suzie Mackenzie notes how Rampling

⁴⁴ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p. 188.

expresses this horror solely through her eyes;⁴⁵ seeing the dead body is, for Marie, a way of witnessing the original trauma of her husband's death.⁴⁶ Even seeing the corpse is traumatic in itself. However, in the end Marie refuses to believe that this body is her husband's, for when she sees his personal effects, she bursts out laughing, declaring that they are not Jean's things and that is not his body. The spectator would expect Marie to be able to say this on viewing the body, rather than making her decision based on (not) recognising Jean's swimming trunks. Marie's unpredictable behaviour is due to the 'turning away from reality'. On leaving the mortuary Marie revisits the beach where Jean disappeared and begins to cry, we think, for the first time, finally coming to terms with her loss. Then she suddenly sees a figure and begins to run towards it as if she has recognised Jean and has not accepted his death after all.

Despite her attempts to mourn – accepting to go to see the body is the first step – Marie is unable to move on from her sustained mourning and wants to hold on to the past. Caruth states that trauma is not a 'healable event' and that it 'repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will'.⁴⁷ Thus when Marie goes down to the beach looking for closure, all she finds is a repeated experience of the original trauma. As David L. Eng and David Kazanjian describe in their Introduction to *Loss*, 'in melancholia the past remains steadfastly alive in the present'.⁴⁸ Trauma theorists propose an explanation for this refusal to move on, stating that the listener or therapist should not try to take away the 'truth' or the survivor's story. In fact, as Caruth says 'to cure oneself [...] seems to many survivors to imply the giving-up of an important

⁴⁵ Suzie Mackenzie, 'A time for happiness', *Guardian*, 16 August 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2003/aug/16/edinburghfilmfestival2003.edinburghfilmfestival>, accessed 20/06/06. Mackenzie says: 'A protective mask conceals her mouth and nose, and only her eyes are there to convey the horror. The whole story is in those eyes'.

⁴⁶ See Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 123, for an account of this scene and why not showing the viewer the corpse is an example of the film's "'tasteful" aesthetic'.

⁴⁷ Caruth, *Trauma*, p. 4, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, pp. 1-25 (p. 3).

reality, or the dilution of a special truth into the reassuring terms of therapy'.⁴⁹ This is certainly Marie's choice in *Sous le sable* as she obstinately refuses to go to the psychiatrist her friend Amanda suggests she see.⁵⁰ The traumatized or melancholic individual does not want to forget; this is why Romain in *Le Temps qui reste* shuts himself off from others in order to experience his illness and forthcoming death fully, without pressure to be brave or cheerful for those around him.

The subject instead desires to recapture the past and the state of melancholia maintains, according to Eng and Kazanjian, 'an ongoing and open relationship with the past – bringing its ghosts and specters, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present'.⁵¹ This is certainly true for Romain and the images of his childhood which assail him. For Marie in *Sous le sable*, it is not just metaphorical ghosts that haunt her because she continues to see and speak to her husband long after his disappearance. It is perhaps significant that he only appears in their Parisian flat, which is clearly the 'site of memory' where Marie can be in touch with their life together.⁵² Freud also maintains that when the melancholic subject turns away from reality they also perform 'a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis', in other words, they day-dream.⁵³ Marie's melancholia thus provides an explanation for the apparitions of her husband's ghost. The traumatic 'accident' of her husband's disappearance – and Caruth claims that the accident is the 'exemplary scene of trauma par excellence'⁵⁴ – is further explanation for the visions of her husband. As Eng and Kazanjian suggest:

⁴⁹ Caruth, *Trauma*, p. viii.

⁵⁰ One notes that Alexandra Stewart, who plays Marie's best friend Amanda, is an actress who came to prominence in the 1960s and the New Wave, especially in films by Pierre Kast and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, and then later in films by Truffaut (*La Mariée était en noir*, 1968 and *La Nuit américaine*, 1973). As such, she is another example of Ozon's apparent fascination with the ageing faces and bodies of actresses from this generation (see my discussion of Deneuve in *8 Femmes*, Rampling in *Sous le sable* and Moreau in *Le Temps qui reste*).

⁵¹ Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, p. 4.

⁵² See Whitehead on 'sites of memory', *Trauma Fiction*, p. 11.

⁵³ Freud, 'Mourning', p. 244.

⁵⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 6.

‘reliving an era is to bring the past to memory. It is to induce actively a tension between the past and the present, between the dead and the living’.⁵⁵ It is from this tension that ghosts appear in the mind’s eye. Colin Davis’s article, ‘Charlotte Delbo’s Ghosts’, also provides a reason for the appearance of ghosts in trauma fiction; he says ‘in trauma the unconscious is momentarily unlocked; this may provoke the ghost into activity and it may then threaten entirely to overwhelm the self’.⁵⁶ Caruth and Whitehead constantly talk in terms of haunting and possession, reiterating the eerie hold the past has on trauma survivors. As Caruth puts it: ‘to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event’.⁵⁷ The image that haunts Marie is her husband and anything associated with him; his study holds special force as a site of memory and Marie chooses to sleep there on occasions to be closer to her private reality.

Vincendeau, however, does not delve into the workings of mourning and trauma; instead, after questioning Jean’s ‘ghostly presence’ in the flat, she declares ‘slowly it dawns on us that Marie is deranged’.⁵⁸ It is clear that Vincendeau has not taken into account the full force of grief and trauma and in fact belittles the significance of Marie’s behaviour. Asibong, on the other hand, peppers his analysis of the film with terms that allude to the nature of Marie’s experience; he talks of ‘denial’, ‘melancholy’, ‘depression’, ‘unbearable grief’, and ‘madness’, but does not go into the significance of the processes that are specifically at work in the melancholic subject. Asibong’s reading interprets the appearances of Jean as emerging from Marie’s ‘demented insistence that Jean is alive’.⁵⁹ There are a couple of powerful parallel scenes when Marie refuses to make a cup of tea for herself alone, which may lead viewers to conclude that Marie is ‘deranged’. After

⁵⁵ Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, p. 1.

⁵⁶ Colin Davis, ‘Charlotte Delbo’s Ghosts’, *French Studies*, 59, 1 (2005), pp. 9-15 (p. 10). See also Whitehead’s chapter on ghosts, *Trauma Fiction*, pp. 12-29.

⁵⁷ Caruth, *Trauma*, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Vincendeau, ‘*Under the Sand*’, p. 2 of the electronic version.

⁵⁹ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 85.

being interviewed by the police, Marie goes back to their house by the coast and she gets out two mugs for tea (again there is an insistence that Marie/Rampling is English) in her efforts to pretend that nothing is wrong, that nothing has changed. Once more, back home in Paris, Marie is making breakfast and she is about to get two tea-cups out of the cupboard when she stops, clearly upset. But then she turns around and Jean is there, sitting at the kitchen table, and she can take out two cups and butter his toast. It is also when Marie and Vincent sit opposite each other across the breakfast table – framed in exactly the same way as Marie and Jean were – that Marie breaks up with Vincent, telling him that ‘tu veux la vérité, tu ne fais pas le poids’, that he does not stand up to comparison with Jean, a punning reference to her earlier remark in bed about him being lighter than Jean. It is not, however, such a great departure from everyday experience to be jolted by a quotidian gesture that serves as a reminder of bereavement. Vincendeau, a little harshly perhaps – both on Marie and the director – argues that *Sous le sable* is in fact ‘a male fantasy of a morbid and unhinged femininity’.⁶⁰ She suggests that ‘French cinema loves beautiful, tragic women who go crazy’. This may be true, but it is also possible to argue that *Sous le sable* is a poignant portrait of grief and its effects on the female subject. The other difficulty with Vincendeau’s argument is that her criticism depends on *Sous le sable* having a male author; it depends in other words on authorial identity and suggests that being biologically and culturally identified as male precludes any understanding of the workings of grief in a female subject. As we saw earlier, this is not, however, how we understand identification processes to operate.

Sarah Morton in *Swimming Pool* is also not without her private traumas; even without the film synopsis we are able to recognise that she is ‘déprimée’. Sarah’s immediate dilemma is that she is suffering writer’s block and is having

⁶⁰ Vincendeau, ‘*Under the Sand*’, p. 3 of the electronic version.

serious doubts about her writing career. However, it is uncertain whether this is the *primum mobile* of her melancholic state; it could in fact be a depressive reaction to her pre-existing melancholia. Freud indicates that ‘in melancholia, the occasions which give rise to the illness extend for the most part *beyond the clear case of a loss by death*, and include all those situations of being *slighted, neglected or disappointed*’.⁶¹ The protagonist in *Swimming Pool* has indeed been slighted and disappointed both in love and her career; Sarah is afraid of having her position usurped by a younger writer who will at the same time steal the favour of her editor, John (Charles Dance). There are indications that Sarah and John are old flames, whose passion has gone, hence the offer of the house in the Lubéron. Sarah still expects and yearns for attention from him and makes many telephone calls to his office back in London, either demanding his presence or seeking his encouragement for her work.⁶² Sarah therefore lives her writer’s block as a mental trauma and as a loss of creativity; she must write in order to win back John’s attentions. Geoff Andrew may therefore have a valid point when he says that ‘blocked crime writers always fantasise themselves into a scenario which will restore creativity’.⁶³ So Julie arguably has a similar status to Jean in *Sous le sable*, a fantasy born out of Sarah’s ‘turning away from reality’ in an attempt to cope with her melancholia and to find the much-needed inspiration for a new book and murder mystery plot. Indeed, after the screening of *Swimming Pool* at the Cannes festival in 2003 there was much discussion about whether Julie (Ludivine Sagnier) was real or fantasy and whether Julia was in fact the ‘real’ daughter of John Bosload as well as the inspiration for Sarah to ‘invent’ Julie. To reduce the fascination of the film to this debate is, however, a great mistake. Asibong notes

⁶¹ Freud, ‘Mourning’, p. 251, my italics.

⁶² See Asibong’s account of their relationship and of John as another spectral father: ‘Sarah is [...] thoroughly subjugated by her desire for acknowledgement by the distant, insipid, perennially unavailable “father” that is her lover and publisher John’, *François Ozon*, p. 94.

⁶³ Andrew, ‘*Swimming Pool*’, p. 1158.

that 'trying to establish a definitive reading of the film is indeed a thankless task'.⁶⁴ He also draws attention to Ozon's refusal to clarify the meaning of the final scenes of the movie. I would suggest that Ozon was amused by the speculation that the ending of his film prompted, although Asibong quotes a source recording 'Ozon's own rather bewildering mystification at the very idea that anybody might think there was a second, English daughter called Julia'.⁶⁵ The point is that Julie/Julia and Sarah's interaction opens up issues of trauma, loss, and desire that resonate with those of *Sous le sable* and that Sarah arguably lives her trauma as a creative process. Eng and Kazanjian also propose that we stop considering loss and trauma as a negative, solely as what is absent. Instead they argue that 'the politics of mourning might be described as that *creative process* mediating a hopeful or hopeless relationship between loss and history'.⁶⁶

Sarah is also portrayed as menopausal, which constitutes another, graver, traumatic loss: her youth. Sarah's fear of rejection by John as a lover and editor is tied up with her anxieties of growing older. This could have led to her doubts about her writing career and creative abilities. The clues to Sarah's menopausal status are few, but we know that Rampling, and Sarah by implication, was 59 at the time of filming *Swimming Pool*. By knowing Sarah's/Rampling's age, scenes take on further meaning: in the night, shortly before Julie's arrival, Sarah is lying in bed trying to sleep: then she suddenly gets up, throws the windows wide open and fans herself with her hand, as if having a 'hot flush'. The mental and hormonal processes of a menopausal woman may go some way in explaining Sarah's reaction of irritation and jealousy towards the highly-sexed and sexualized Julie. Marie in *Sous le sable* is of a similar age to Sarah (again we know this thanks to Rampling as star) and Marie, too, is aware that she is ageing. At night, before

⁶⁴ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 93.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 93.

⁶⁶ Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, p. 2, my italics.

climbing into bed with her husband, the camera catches Marie looking at her wrinkles in the mirror which cause her to reach out and apply some cream under her eyes. One day while she is lecturing, Marie nearly faints when she reads aloud the phrase 'I have lost my youth', signalling the intrusive nature of her trauma. At the moment she says these words she is also staring at a student who turns out to be one of the lifeguards who was looking for Jean on the beaches at Les Landes. She is displaying here what Caruth describes as symptoms of PTSD: 'repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event [...] and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event'.⁶⁷ The presence of the lifeguard, together with Woolf's words, remind Marie of two traumatic losses: the loss of her husband and the loss of her youth.

Cultural attitudes, although they may be changing slowly, cannot help Marie's and Sarah's sense of loss for they paint a horrifying picture of the menopause. As Anne Fausto-Sterling remarks in her study on menstruation and the menopause:

rather than releasing women from their monthly emotional slavery to the sex hormones, menopause involves them in new horrors. At the individual level one encounters the specter of sexual degeneration, described so vividly by Dr David Reuben: 'The vagina begins to shrivel, the breasts atrophy, sexual desire disappears. ... Increased facial hair, deepening voice, obesity ... coarsened features, enlargement of the clitoris, and gradual baldness complete the tragic picture. *Not really a man but no longer a functional woman*, these individuals live in the world of intersex'.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Caruth, *Trauma*, p. 4.

⁶⁸ Anne Fausto-Sterling, 'Menopause: The Storm before the Calm', in Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Women and Men* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), pp. 110-122 (pp. 110-111), my italics.

Simone De Beauvoir similarly testifies that in menopause: 'la femme est brusquement dépouillée de sa féminité'.⁶⁹ Dr Reuben's words unwittingly reveal the menopausal woman as a queer subject, as an 'intersex', a sexuality functioning in the grey area between the diametrically opposed camps of male and female. Just as queer theorists and film-makers take bisexuality, androgyny, transvestism, transsexuality, and transgenderism as privileged sites of enquiry, so, too, the menopausal woman arguably provides, paradoxically, fertile ground from which to examine transgressions of orthodox sexualities.⁷⁰ Moreover, the menopausal woman provides Ozon with a non-normative subject to inhabit, from which he can represent queer desire, as he does in *Swimming Pool* by identifying with Sarah as a lesbian. Be that as it may, the common perception of 'the change of life' condemns women to a biologically infertile state, one in which their very identity is threatened. As I have argued here, biology is not the sole marker of subjectivity, but a common notion is that, as Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick state in their introduction to *Feminist Theory and the Body*, 'women just are their bodies in a way that men are not'.⁷¹ The cultural perception is that women are governed by their bodies, by puberty, menstruation, childbirth and the menopause, and thus, say Price and Shildrick, 'the female body is intrinsically unpredictable, leaky and disruptive'.⁷² Feminist theorists such as Irigaray even base their concepts on female biology; Irigaray takes the female genitals, the two lips which are, and are not, separate, as a basis on which to form her theory of 'Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un', and which identifies feminine sexuality as multiple and fluid. The menopause is perceived as the final stage of the changing female body.

⁶⁹ Simone De Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe: L'Expérience vécue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 399.

⁷⁰ See my Introduction and Doty, 'Queer Theory', p. 151.

⁷¹ Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, 'Openings on the Body: A Critical Introduction' in Price and Shildrick, eds, *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 1-14. (p. 3).

⁷² Price and Shildrick, 'Openings on the Body', p. 2.

The loss of biological creativity in their lives is reinforced by Marie's and Sarah's childlessness – perhaps also culturally seen as an 'intersex' state. There are parallels drawn between the lack of creativity in their careers and maternal status. Vincent asks her if she has any children the first time they meet and her mother-in-law spitefully reminds Marie: 'tu n'as jamais été capable de fonder une famille'. Marie's mother-in-law serves to reiterate the cultural stigma of being childless, echoed in the notion that being a spinster is tragic. There is a suggestion that the menopause is experienced differently, even more traumatically, if a woman has not given birth, that is, if the biological potential for creativity has not been used, because the menopause signifies the giving up of that potential definitively; so the loss is multiple: youth, femininity, and (biological) motherhood. Furthermore, Marie has abandoned hopes of being creative in her career, concentrating on teaching rather than writing. In this Marie and Sarah are alike: their opportunity to be creative has been thwarted, and both times by a man. Marie tells Vincent that her relationship with Jean demanded all her attention, preventing her writing, whereas Sarah's publisher keeps pressurising her for the next Inspector Dorwell mystery rather than encouraging her to write freely. Sarah also does this to please John as a man, not only as her publisher; as Julie says: 'But what he wants is blood, sex and money. That's what you give to him, isn't it?'. By being forced to follow genre conventions – specifically the very linear, masculine conventions of the detective novel – her inspiration dries up, before being revived by different surroundings in France. Here Ozon is perhaps making a joke at his own expense, commenting on his earlier obsession with genre, especially with the *polar* in *8 Femmes*.⁷³

Julie's mother's creative outlet was also cut off by a man. We learn that she once wrote a book, rejected by John Bosload and subsequently destroyed. It has

⁷³ See Chapter 2.

thus remained an untold, unpublished story, holding special significance for her daughter. Julie tells Sarah that it was a sentimental novel, too feminine for John's taste. But before Julie leaves, she gives Sarah a copy of the book, saying that one copy was saved; in this way, Julie gives Sarah her creativity back, furthermore a feminine creativity with a woman's voice. This is why, back in London, Sarah declares that the book she has produced is her 'best yet', a non-linear, more feminine text (like the film itself), and one which John does not like. Sarah has, through Julie, found a maternal voice and can 'narrate the unnarratable'; she can tell another woman's story, a woman whose voice was taken from her. This catharsis through writing sits well with Kaplan's idea that art mediates and witnesses trauma more successfully than trying to 'heal' it.⁷⁴ So despite the cultural implications of being childless and menopausal, in *Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool* the viewer encounters alternative ways in which (post-) menopausal women live out their lives as sexual beings – Marie and Sarah, unusually for women in their fifties on screen, have sex and sexual desires, and also, in Sarah's case, become more creative – exploring how they cope with the threat of the traumatic loss of youth.

By focusing on Sarah's and Marie's lived bodies we return to issues of desire and sexuality; the menopausal woman as queer subject spurs us to question the nature of desire and how it is lived out in the traumatized subject. Whether Sarah's status as menopausal woman effectively influences her behaviour is debatable, but it might prove to be relevant in understanding the dynamics between Sarah and Julie. However, there are clues that Sarah Morton underwent a greater trauma in her life: we suspect she may have lost, or never known, her mother. From the scenes in London we know that Sarah lives with her elderly – nearing senile – father. There is no sign of her mother or of any other

⁷⁴ Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, p. 19.

close relatives. We find out that Julie's mother is also dead, although Julie often speaks of her in the present, even when on the phone to her father. Is Julie 'deranged' like Marie, or is she simply protecting herself from a reality too painful to confront? Shortly after Sarah discovers that Julie's mother – whom she thought a rival for John Bosload's attentions – is dead, thanks to a curious encounter with Marcel's prematurely-aged daughter,⁷⁵ Sarah returns to the house to find Julie distraught, crying desperately on Sarah's bed. Julie is clearly having a panic attack and seems utterly confused, saying to Sarah 'Merci maman t'es revenue, je croyais que tu m'avais abandonnée'. Julie throws her arms round Sarah, kissing her feverishly; Sarah hugs her back and calms her down, taking on a maternal role. In this embrace the two women connect with their own traumas, which merge into one, expressing grief for the loss of the mother who has died, and for Sarah, for the maternal experience she never had until now.

So Julie joins Marie and Sarah as a melancholic subject, traumatized by the loss of her mother which is displayed in her panic attacks. Although Julie does not appear to be a sad figure initially, psychoanalytic theory may help explain why she is so affected by the death of her mother. In fact, for Kristeva the maternal figure is the ultimate loved object, the one that provides the subject with a sense of plenitude, experienced only in the first few months of life.⁷⁶ After the subject's separation from its mother, following the child's development through the mirror stage (which occurs when the child is six to eighteen months old), the subject may continue to search and grieve for this lost plenitude. Kristeva, in her work *Soleil Noir*, makes explicit the conflation between the lost object of melancholia and the maternal object: she talks of the 'deuil impossible de l'objet maternel', indicating

⁷⁵ Marcel's daughter suffers from progeria or HDPS (premature aging), thus confronting Sarah with her own ageing process; Sarah is 'haunted' by the onset of old age, which to her feels premature, given that she has yet to fulfil her creative and maternal potential.

⁷⁶ See also Butler's discussion of Kristeva, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 106-7.

that for melancholics the mourning of the lost mother remains unresolved.⁷⁷ Julie's love affairs, which pepper her picaresque existence, shadow her desperate quest and desire for impossible plenitude; she tells Sarah she was thirteen when she first had sex and declares 'I haven't stopped since'. For Grosz, too, desire is an attempt to fill the void left by the mother, a concept of desire that Julie constantly performs: 'in seeking to replace an (impossible) plenitude, a lost completion originating (at least in fantasy) in the early mother/child dyad, desire will create a realm of objects substitutable for the primal (lost, forbidden) object'.⁷⁸ Julie is also aware of – and traumatized by – the fact that John abandoned them, refusing to leave his English family for Julie and her mother. She constantly talks of him in sexual terms, saying to Sarah, 'So you're his latest conquest' and 'Daddy's the king of orgies'. She acts out the trauma of her birth and childhood – herself the product of an affair – and is compelled to have sex to keep her trauma at bay. It must also be significant that the photograph of Julie's mother which Julie keeps in her diary is of Romy Schneider, surely a further indication that this loss is of an idealized, not necessarily real mother.⁷⁹ Loss of the mother is part of 'normal' development and subject-formation; only melancholics are in a deadlock, unable to resolve their separation from the maternal object.

So when Sarah and Julie finally express their grief, it is a truly cathartic moment. It is only through Julie's anxiety and sadness that Sarah can get in touch with her own sense of loss, and thus Sarah and Julie are able to identify the lost object and begin mourning it, finally allowing them to be free from inner sadness.

⁷⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Soleil Noir*, p. 19.

⁷⁸ Grosz, 'Refiguring Lesbian Desire', in *Space, Time and Perversion*, p. 176.

⁷⁹ Romy Schneider was an Austrian-born actress, who died of suspected suicide (from an overdose of alcohol and barbiturates) when distraught following the death of her son. She holds a certain mythical status, especially for film-makers. Almodovar's *All About My Mother* is partially dedicated to her. Ozon is also fascinated by her: in *8 Femmes*, when Louise (Emmanuelle Beart) shows a picture of her former employer, it is a picture of Romy Schneider. Schneider starred in Deray's 1968 movie *La piscine* – another intertext for Ozon's *Swimming Pool* – and she is also a foreign actress speaking in French (see Asibong's account of Ozon's fascination with foreign actors, *François Ozon*, pp. 30-31). Thus Julie's mother's death is shrouded in mystery, just as Schneider's.

The last scene, in which Sarah and Julie wave at each other across the swimming pool in the Lubéron, suggests that the two women are finally more at peace with themselves, that through their encounter they find their lost object together. Even Sarah's manner of dressing changes: she wears brighter, more sensual colours when she returns to grey London to promote her book. From this shared moment of uncovered grief, there is a mutual respect and complicity between the women that did not exist before, helped along by the fact that they are now partners in crime. This is not, though, the first scene in which Julie calls Sarah 'mother', suggesting that their relationship has aspects of maternal and filial interaction. When Julie goes out the evening after she brings home a second lover, Sarah asks where she is going and Julie answers back, calling her 'mother', a jibe at Sarah's uncompromisingly old-fashioned and strict behaviour as well as her age. Sarah returns the insult by saying 'I pity your mother', thus thwarting Julie's real need for a mother figure and at the same time covering up her feelings of envy towards her mother – envy of the beautiful house in the Lubéron, her relationship with John and daughter. It is partly through the enactment of the mother/daughter dynamic that tensions begin to rise between Julie and Sarah, and it also provides a convenient launchpad from which to explore the workings of Sarah's repressed desires.

Loss of Appetites/Repressed Desires

Desire is a notoriously difficult subject to tackle and define, both in male and female subjectivities. However, one of the clichés surrounding female sexuality suggests that it is, in Elizabeth Grosz's words, 'enigmatic, invisible, and unknowable'.⁸⁰ Grosz argues that this is a myth construed by models of male sexuality which declare female sexuality as 'other' and mysterious, while

⁸⁰ Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, p. 203.

(heterosexual) male sexuality is imagined as straightforward and uncomplicated.⁸¹ Female desire is accepted with difficulty and is not without its contradictions; judgements are often made of women as sexual beings, and they tend to fall into one of two categories, described by Jackson and Scott as 'the respectable madonna and the rebarbative whore'.⁸² Freud's theories on desire do not help matters; he perceives femininity to be passive and thus active desire is not 'feminine'; in Grosz's words: 'when she loves and desires, she does so not as a woman but as a *man*'.⁸³ Furthermore the female body can be 'uncanny' and provoke fear and revulsion in the male, explained in part by Kristeva's concepts of the abject which we looked at in Chapter 1. Price and Shildrick also identify similar myths surrounding female sexuality; given the female's ability to menstruate and to reproduce, her body contains 'a potentially dangerous volatility'. They sum up some of the contradictions the dominant ideology diffuses: 'in short, women are both dangerous and excluded others, but also, as mothers, an originary presence'.⁸⁴

Despite intending to dispel myths surrounding female sexuality, Grosz herself admits that describing female sexual experience is an unenviable task. In her essay 'Animal Sex: Libido as desire and death' Grosz analyses male perceptions of female sexuality which prove useful for our investigation of female desire in Ozon's films. Grosz claims that anthropomorphic interpretations by biologists of the behaviour of two insects, the black widow spider and the praying mantis, have influenced cultural perceptions of female sexuality. In particular, states Grosz, 'these two species have come to represent an intimate and persistent link between sex and death, between pleasure and punishment, desire

⁸¹ Ibid, pp. 173-185.

⁸² Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, eds, *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 3.

⁸³ Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, p. 178.

⁸⁴ Price and Shildrick, 'Openings on the Body', p. 3, p. 7.

and revenge'.⁸⁵ As it is the female that is the murderer in each case, by extension the human female is seen to be more dangerous, hence theories such as the castration threat have taken hold. We have already seen how death and murder haunt Ozon's œuvre, but in *Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool* there is a closer and more explicit link between women and death: this disturbing relation is the particular focus here. And as I shall demonstrate in my reading of *Le Temps qui reste*, gay male sexuality is also not without its associations with danger and death. We will see that Ozon's representation of Marie, Sarah and Julie sometimes falls into dominant models of female sexuality. Whether this will undermine the non-normative reading offered here, or whether in the end Ozon's protagonists escape these restrictive moulds, remains to be seen.

The first obvious way in which Marie and Sarah are linked to death is through water. In Ozon's *moyen métrage* too, *Regarde la mer*, water was linked to the feminine/maternal and not only through the homonym 'mer/mère'.⁸⁶ Although water is necessary for life, and indeed it is often associated with new life through rituals such as baptism, washing and watering, it is also a powerful, dangerous element which can cause death. The opening credits of both films come up on a background of water, the Seine and the Thames respectively, foreshadowing the importance of water in both *Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool*. Marie is, however, explicitly linked to death by drowning, both through her husband's disappearance on the beach and her lecturing job in which she reads from Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*.⁸⁷ Some readings of *Sous le sable* might even accuse Marie of Jean's death – either because she failed to notice her husband's depression and so the

⁸⁵ Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, p. 188.

⁸⁶ See Chapter 1 of this thesis.

⁸⁷ Woolf is a highly evocative intertext given her bisexuality and suicide by drowning in the River Ouse. Woolf is also often recognised as having suffered from depression or bipolar disorder. See Julia Brigg's *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Allan Lane, 2005); for Brigg's account of her ill-health, see pp. 45-48, of Woolf's suicide pp. 399-402, and of her sexual relationship with Vita Sackville-West pp. 167-168. See also Stephen Fry's documentary film 'The Secret Life of The Manic Depressive' (BBC TV, 2006) which examined bipolar affective disorder.

risk of suicide, or because, as her mother-in-law says, she drove him to it. Vincendeau comments ironically on this suggestion: 'death by boredom, then – a new twist on the femme fatale's destructive ways'.⁸⁸ There are constant reminders of Marie's link to death and water; for example, when we first see her back in Paris after Jean's disappearance, the camera is focused on the black water of the Seine before tilting up to a shot of the apartment where Marie is having dinner with her friends. This theme is developed further when Marie goes to the gym, and significantly, the pool. Swimming here is very different from swimming in the sea: Marie wears a cap and goggles, making for a rather severe figure; nature is not present here, we cannot tell what season it is outside, nor is there the promise of freedom as there was on the beach in Les Landes. This is a scene in which the music by Portishead dominates our viewing experience, adding to the feeling that Marie's visit to the swimming pool is about more than just keeping fit; swimming in such a controlled environment helps to maintain Marie's denial. She hesitates before plunging in, reminding us of the painful associations water must have for her, and which she casts aside (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



By wearing her goggles and cap, Marie is in a sense controlling the elements and the danger promised by water in its natural form, by the sea and the waves. This may seem obvious to Andrew, and it may be that *Sous le sable* is just as much 'a swimming pool movie about the return of the repressed' as *Swimming Pool* itself;

⁸⁸ Vincendeau, 'Under the Sand', p. 3 of the electronic version.

Marie's encounter with water inevitably echoes her husband's uncertain fate. However insightful Andrew's comments are, he fails to examine the telling link between water, death, and the feminine.

Sarah, in *Swimming Pool*, refuses at first to swim in the pool. On the other hand, Julie, the unrepressed 'sex-bomb', dives in at the first opportunity, even without her costume.⁸⁹ The repressed Sarah is unable to see the freedom which Julie finds in the water and declares that 'it's more like a cesspool of living bacteria'. It is only once Marcel has cleaned it and the dead leaves are under control that she goes in, thus creating a parallel with Marie swimming in a quasi-clinical environment. Sarah's repression will only allow her to swim in a clean and safe environment, whereas Julie states she prefers the ocean and its promise of freedom. Thus Andrew's theory seems to be proved right and the swimming pool does indeed remind us of Sarah's repressed feelings. Sarah's first swim also happens at the peak of her sexual 'awakening', which began as soon as she set foot in France, and which the viewer notices by the gradual changes in lighting and costume. We watch Sarah pausing to bathe her face in the sunlight that was so obviously lacking in London, enjoying the sensation of sun warming her skin, both when she steps onto her bedroom balcony on her arrival and when she goes to the local café for the first time. She finds a Chinese-print red silk dressing gown in the wardrobe of the bedroom in the Lubéron and appropriates it for her own use; the London Sarah would never have chosen to wear such a bohemian and sensual garment. There is a suggestion that Sarah is taking on John's French lover's identity and that the dressing gown acts as a catalyst for her desires. Sarah's nightdress, on the night of Julie's arrival, reveals more of her body than her grey London clothes did; Sarah's nipples show through the slightly diaphanous

⁸⁹ Once more 'sex-bomb' is Vincendeau's term. It is worth noting that descriptions of Julie in reviews are often inadequate, failing to stress Julie's youth and her sadness as we have identified above, focusing instead on her sexualized role.

nightgown. Her make-up and hair also change, lightening subtly, removing the oppressive greyness of London and her father's house. The bedspread is also red, bringing colour, passion and sensuality into her bedroom, far removed from the house in London where the dull weather means that electric lights have to be turned on even during the day. These changes have a disturbing effect: Sarah's awakening seems to lead ultimately to her acceptance of Franck's – the waiter's – murder. Sarah's repressed desires begin to resurface: she moves on from just writing about dirty things (Julie's words) to being capable of murder. Her complicity with Julie makes her, too, culpable of the murderous act.

One scene explicitly tells of the link between desire, sex, and death, and Sarah. After Sarah and Julie have buried Franck's body, Marcel drops by to do some work and he notices the newly-dug grave. Sarah, in an attempt to distract him and prevent the discovery of the body, unzips her red dressing gown to bare her breasts to Marcel, from across the pool. Marcel reads this as an invitation and is quick to take up the offer; he finds Sarah waiting naked for him, curiously and deliberately in Julie's bedroom, whose walls are painted dangerously red. Marcel is surprisingly gentle and sensual, certainly more ready to caress and arouse a woman than Vincent in *Sous le sable*, who seems more focused on his own pleasure. Sarah's seduction of Marcel, however, testifies to the lengths she is willing to go to in order to protect Julie and cover up the murder. Sex becomes an accomplice to murder, reminding us that perceptions of sex and death are never very far apart more generally, since sex, in its procreative role, produces life and life inevitably ends in death.⁹⁰ The post-coital moment itself is often referred to as

⁹⁰ As Grosz explains: 'Sexuality introduces death to the world; or, perhaps the converse: death is inevitable, and sexuality may function as a compensation for and supplement to death. Not only is the sexual act *grosso modo* linked to death and through it, to the reproduction of the species, but more significantly, the eroticism of the orgasm [...] is modelled by Freud on the build-up of excitation, the swelling of the sexual organ, the accumulation of energies and fluids, their release, and then the organ's detumescence and state of contentment', *Space, Time and Perversion*, pp. 201-202.

‘a little death’, a metaphor for the sleep-like state sex can induce.⁹¹ In her discussion of the link between the female praying mantis and the femme fatale, Grosz states that ‘woman is thereby cast into the category of the non-human, the non-living, or a living threat of death’.⁹² She goes on to call for an end to the conceptual link between sexual desire and death, in part because of the repercussions it could have, especially in relation to the issue of AIDS. This is arguably even more crucial when discussing gay sexuality, as we shall see in our discussion of *Le Temps qui reste*. Ozon, in his portrayal of Marie, Julie, and Sarah, does not seem to be contributing in the efforts to eliminate some of the more harmful preconceptions about human sexuality. Julie’s act of fellatio immediately precedes her murder of Franck, but it is unclear whether it is because he rejects her, or Sarah. Sarah herself, by having sex with Marcel, is killing Franck for a second time. There is even the threat that Sarah might kill Marcel in order to silence him about the recently dug grave, thus sex is both anticipation and consequence of death. As for Sarah’s choice of boudoir, it is clear that she identifies Julie’s room as an erotic space, where she might be rid of her repressed sexuality and also become the seductress.

An alternative, less normative, reading of Sarah’s seduction of Marcel could be to see it as a displacement of her desire for Julie which has been building up throughout the film. If we read *Swimming Pool* as a thriller it would simply prove the women’s complicity in the crime, whereas if this sex scene is part of Sarah’s subjective fantasy and murder-mystery, it provides the sex of the Bosload recipe for literary success: ‘blood, sex and money’. However, I suggest that this scene – whether ‘real’ or fantasy – reveals that Sarah not only associates Julie with desire, but desires Julie herself. From the outset Sarah has been portrayed as performing straight desire – for John and for Franck – and so the change in her desire is

⁹¹ See François Ozon’s short *La Petite Mort* and Chapter 4 for discussion on ‘a little death’.

⁹² Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, p. 194.

disorientating. Even before Julie arrives on the scene she is not set up to be an object of desire for the older woman; when Sarah first arrives at the house, she looks into Julie's room and all we can see in the frame is a plain mattress on the floor with a teddy bear lying on it. This is hardly the signifier for a 'sex-bomb', but rather for a fragile, defenceless child. If we consider the mother/daughter dynamic and the hints that Julie is not long out of adolescence, the idea that Sarah desires her is somewhat disturbing. Julie's youth is often emphasised, especially when Sarah watches her talking to Marcel through the kitchen window. In this Julie is remarkably like the adolescent Jane Birkin character in *La Piscine*, a film to which Ozon often alludes here. We cannot hear what they are saying, so their gestures have more impact; Julie takes Marcel's hat and places it on her own head, as he might have done to her when she was a little girl. Similarly when Julie finds Sarah's manuscript and sits on the bed to read it, her secrecy, curiosity, sadness and facial expressions are childlike. It is also notable that Julie's alter-ego, the English Julia, is indeed a schoolgirl, as is clear when she walks into her father's office and smiles at Sarah, revealing her orthodontic appliance, a cultural marker of awkward adolescence.

At other moments, however, the camera deliberately eroticises Sarah's way of looking at Julie, particularly in the scene immediately after Julie's first (skinny) dip in the pool. Julie comes to talk to Sarah, who had dropped off to sleep, wearing nothing but a pair of lemon-coloured terry hot-pants, which also look more suited to a schoolgirl than a sexy grown woman. As Sarah and Julie are talking, in a shot/reverse shot sequence, the camera lingers on Julie's full breasts and then on her golden-brown, glistening stomach. The camera follows Sarah's glance behind her sunglasses as her eyes go up and down Julie's body, with a fascination and attraction that is more sexually charged than simple regret. Vincendeau misses these sexually charged glances, claiming that these 'shots of Sarah gazing at Julie

semi-naked at the poolside suggest Rampling contemplating her distant youth'.⁹³ Sarah may be aware of ageing but this sense of loss, or envy at Julie's youth, does not preclude sexual attraction; indeed the camerawork clearly suggests that Sarah's feelings towards Julie are ambiguous. Sarah does not simply regret any past allure she may have had but instead seems to be attracted by Julie's difference. We might not know about Sarah's past, but the insistence on Rampling as star remind us Rampling's body is also on display, not just Sarah's.⁹⁴

Ozon says that he wanted Rampling to appear beautiful: 'je voulais filmer la beauté des rides'.⁹⁵ Although he says this in regard to *Sous le sable*, we can imagine that he also appreciates Rampling's unconventional beauty in *Swimming Pool*. Rampling embodies competing ideas of female beauty: she may have the skinniness so popular on the catwalks, but her age would normally exclude her from traditional canons of beauty. Her heavy eyelids and lack of make-up make her a compelling figure, rather than the embodiment of an iconic French actress, such as Deneuve. Ozon is clearly fascinated with the way Rampling employs her body as an actor but the camera is also witness to his attraction to Sagnier. If Ozon filmed from a normative position, the spectator would recognise the male desire behind the camera and that Sagnier is set up as the object-to-be-looked-at. We do not see Julie/Sagnier as the victim or receiver of dominant male desire, even though within the plot she is an object of desire, because the gaze is mediated through Sarah's eyes. Rather as Josiane Balasko looks queerly at Victoria Abril in *Gazon Maudit* (1995), so too Ozon films a body which is not his usual object of desire. Balasko was both the director of, and an actor in, *Gazon Maudit*; although heterosexual in 'real' life, in the film Balasko plays the part of a butch lesbian who

⁹³ Vincendeau, 'Ageing cool', p. 28.

⁹⁴ We are reminded of Rampling's Englishness when she incongruously orders a cup of tea at the local café. In *Swimming Pool* even Rampling's accent is purposefully English, whereas in *Sous le sable* she speaks in her usual flawless French.

⁹⁵ 'Entretiens à propos de *Sous le sable*', <http://www.francois-ozon.com/fr/entretiens-sous-le-sable>, accessed 12/03/06.

seduces Abril away from her philandering husband; Abril is set up as the object of desire for all. Balasko and Ozon seem to know that both straight and non-straight, male and female audiences can find pleasure in looking at a woman's body. In the 'safe' cinematic space, straight female spectators can experience pleasure in looking at Julie's body, a pleasure denied to them, or that they deny themselves, in their usual gender and sexual identification. This is also a pleasure denied to them in normative, masculine filmmaking, where, as we have already seen, the female spectator has very little choice of viewing positions.⁹⁶

The cinematography slowly sets up the disconcerting connection between Sarah and Julie through the way in which their bodies are filmed, especially in three notable sequences which mirror each other, suggesting the metamorphosis and merging of desires which is gradually taking place. The sequence of these three scenes clearly sets up Sarah's nascent, ambiguous, attraction to Julie. Sarah is seen taking up a voyeuristic position from which to watch Julie swimming or having noisy sex with one of her lovers and Julie on occasions notices that the older woman is there. The frames of Sarah in doors or windows are reminiscent of the quintessential voyeur movie, *Rear Window* (1954), setting her up as a guilty onlooker, yet she is also a reminder of the other, non-normative presence behind the camera. The first sequence is just after Sarah lies on her bed, fully clothed, ready for a post-prandial nap. There are no filmic clues such as a dissolve or fade to indicate whether we are watching a dream or fantasy or reality in the next scene. We see a man's feet – they look like Franck's – cleaning the pool with a net, then the frame cuts to the next take, in which the camera intimately observes Julie, sunning herself in a white swimming costume, observing the curves of her body. The lateral pan lingers on her legs and is sexually 'promising' in its movement to

⁹⁶ See my Introduction and Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 31-32 on the options available for the female spectator.

the crotch, torso and ultimately face.⁹⁷ In one long take lasting 56 seconds, the camera tilts up to reveal Franck's nearly naked body, focusing on his groin and obvious erection. He is standing by Julie, masturbating. At this point we decide that this must be a 'vision' of Sarah's, especially as the sequence is sandwiched in between two scenes of Sarah sleeping. The shot cuts back to a take (18 seconds) of Julie, who starts masturbating in turn. Then the film cuts again, but this time to the middle of the night, and Sarah, who has woken up to the loud sound of Julie having sex with lover number two. She reaches for her earplugs, is about to put them in, but then leaves them on the bedside table. Sarah has obviously begun to take vicarious pleasure in Julie's night-time love-making.

When Sarah eventually goes swimming, the camera connects her body to Julie's – Sarah is wearing a navy blue and white floral costume which reminds the viewer of Julie's white costume and black and white bikini. The camera follows Sarah in the water, lingering over her for 28 seconds. Then Sarah lies by the pool, mirroring Julie's position in the previous fantasy/dream sequence, and the camera undulates as it follows Sarah's silhouette, taking its time to eroticise her body in a long take of 30 seconds, just as it did with Julie, in what could be characterised as a typically fetishizing male gaze. This time it is not Franck who is standing by her head, instead the camera reveals it to be Marcel, who is fully clothed, watching over Sarah's body (see Figure 3). Then Julie suddenly dives in the pool, making a noisy splash which wakes Sarah up, interrupting her day-dreaming. Although both women are, apparently, looked at (from above) by a man, the point of view adopted by the camera (in the initial shot at least) is not that of the man. It is a kind of 'omniscient' shot, but once we realise that both scenes are probably Sarah's dreams/fantasies, the only real point of view we can attach the shots to is Sarah's

⁹⁷ There is a very similar scene in *La Piscine* in which the camera films Romy Schneider's naked, prone, body, again the lateral pan starting from her feet and moving up towards her face. Julie's costumes, and the use of monochrome outfits, is another reference/homage to Schneider's swimming costumes in *La Piscine*.

desiring/admiring gaze at Julie and at her own body. Following the second 'dream' sequence, Julie also lies down by the poolside to rest, her body reflecting in the water as Sarah's did in the same position (see Figure 3).



Figure 3

We see Sarah's feet as she walks towards Julie and stands by her face; she calls Julie's name, waking her up to invite her out for dinner. These mirror scenes further cement the homoerotic desire Sarah experiences for Julie; Sarah wishes for her body to be looked at as Julie's is, but also, as she is watching her own body arouse desire she testifies to the desire Julie arouses in her. The framing of these three sequences culminates in the last scene in which it is implied that Sarah desires Julie.

Julie herself is not unaware of their connection and she too begins to entwine her own desires with Sarah's. Julie even realises that they have things in common, in particular their wish to be alone in the house; over a joint they share after dinner she says 'my mother was terrified to be alone here. Not me. I'm like you'. Julie also knows that Sarah is attracted to the waiter, Franck, and deliberately brings him back to the house one evening to spite her. That morning Julie turned the tables on Sarah, spying on her from the kitchen, then going into her room to find the book Sarah is writing. Julie discovers that Sarah is writing about her and

appears furious, bringing Franck back as a conquest to punish her, reminding Sarah that she is unsuccessful in sex. Yet, curiously, Julie invites Sarah to join in their dancing and makes Franck and Sarah dance together and Julie takes pleasure in watching them. The dynamics of this scene are odd: when Sarah begins to dance to the techno music, whose lyrics 'let's do it' are an ironic undertone to the threesome, her body is stiff and it appears to jump to the music embarrassingly. Asibong talks aptly of the comic effect of Rampling's acting in this film.⁹⁸ Later, when Sarah is in bed, Julie performs oral sex on Franck in the swimming pool; once again we feel this is for Sarah's benefit – either to tease or punish her – rather than because of Julie's desire for the waiter. Julie even confesses to Sarah, when the writer asks her why she murdered Franck: 'I did it for you, for the book'.

There are, however, disturbing implications in the way 'les corps de Sarah et Julie se contaminent', especially as it is represented cinematographically.⁹⁹ We run into a problem in the way that the camera draws parallels between Sarah and Julie, and the way that Ozon plays with the correlation of their desires; Julie's appetite for food catalyses Sarah's need to satisfy hers, while Sarah's interest in Franck incites Julie to seduce him herself. The cinematography sets Sarah and Julie up as mirror doubles, framing their bodies in the same way, dressing them in similar swimming costumes, filming the reflection of their bodies on water. Ozon also uses mirrors as a device to provide unusual framings, but mirrors are known to distort and in filmic terms they hint at fragmented or mirrored identities along with narcissism and homosexuality.¹⁰⁰ Sarah and Julie are also framed together on glass panels: we see Sarah through the glass and Julie's reflection on it; the camera focuses alternately on Sarah and then Julie, enabling us to see both

⁹⁸ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 93.

⁹⁹ Ozon website, 'Entretiens à propos du film *Swimming Pool*'.

¹⁰⁰ See Richard Dyer, *Now you see it: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 79, for an account of mirrors.

women in the same frame. Grosz would advise caution: she eschews the representation of lesbians on 'a model of imaginary, mirror-stage duplicates, narcissistic doubles, self-reflections' as based on dominant models, on male ideas of female desire.¹⁰¹ There is a danger of reading Julie and Sarah as mirror images who fall into the very models of lesbian desire that Grosz warns against. Feminists and queer theorists are wary of understanding lesbian desire in terms of the sameness which mirror doubles imply; the term 'same-sex' desire can in fact be misleading, especially after the impact of Butler's work *Gender Trouble*, where sex and gender are shaky terms. Lesbian desire can be expressed through difference just as much as heterosexual desire. There is as much difference between female subjectivities and bodies as there is between female and male. There is a danger in reading the last scene of the film as merely maternal, as it would simplify Julie's and Sarah's mutual attraction. The fact that the last scene seems maternal can, perhaps, be seen to suggest that Julie and Sarah's mutual attraction is not sexual, and neither does it express lesbian desire, but rather that the two women are linked because one of them has lost her mother and the other has lost her chance to become one. As we have seen, though, Sarah's desire for Julie (and vice versa) is not in fact based on sexual sameness; it is clear that Sarah desires Julie's difference. Although both inhabit a biologically female body, they are entirely different bodies, in age and shape, as we saw earlier.

Marie does not portray successful female desire either; her love-making is ambiguous and never entirely without a sense of guilt. Indeed, Marie is unsuccessful in owning her desire, as she is unable to enact it except when it is mediated through her husband. She tamely accepts Jean's refusal at her attempts to make love, without any sign that she has desires of her own. Even after Jean's disappearance she cannot enjoy sex without the interference of her husband.

¹⁰¹ Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, p. 181.

Asibong reads this as Ozon's lack of belief in the conventional couple; he says that in *Sous le sable* Jean and Marie's relationship underlines 'the mutual ignorance, the fundamental misalignment that inevitably exists within any couple'.¹⁰² This bleak portrayal of intimate human relationships will be examined further in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis. After her first date with Vincent at a Chinese restaurant, Marie lies on her bed in her new red dress and two disembodied pairs of hands begin to caress her. The first pair of hands take one of her shoes off, eroticising her feet (see Figure 4), the second pair of hands join in, copying the action of the first. Tellingly, the second pair of hands is Jean's – the bulkiness of Bruno Cremer is unmistakable even in his hands – so Marie cannot be free of her husband's presence.



Figure 4

The four hands continue to caress her and Marie touches her crotch, beginning to masturbate; the viewer wonders whether she cannot masturbate without imagining her husband to be there. Jean's 'ghost' presence interrupts Vincent and Marie when they have sex for the first time at Vincent's flat: Marie bursts out laughing because Vincent's body is so different from Jean's. Then when Vincent and Marie make love at her house, Jean's ghost appears at the door; Marie smiles at him inanely, implying that she enjoys being watched. It is as if Marie is no longer in touch with her own desire, but can only have sex with the image of her husband

¹⁰² Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 88.

haunting her. Yet again Marie seems to be in denial, only this time, she is denying her own desire and sexuality.

Thus the women's traumas are inextricably linked to their repressed desires and the expression of their sensuality. Marie and Sarah initially cope with their trauma by denying it (denial is, for Freud, a defence mechanism of the ego to cope with unbearable realities).¹⁰³ Even if Sarah appears to meet with more success than Marie in recovering from her melancholia, this is not necessarily the case. The completion of Sarah's book suggests that *Swimming Pool* brings about some kind of resolution to her mourning. Asibong, however, claims that Sarah ultimately fails 'to construct relations with a new subject that is neither self nor spectral father', just as Marie is 'marooned [...] on an infuriatingly human island of her own creation'.¹⁰⁴ Neither female subject seems able to move on from this impasse in the end. Asibong does not see that Julie and Sarah constitute a new model of community: 'it is difficult to speak of genuine interaction between two characters when Julie is so resolutely used as a blank screen for Sarah's neurotic projections and narcissistic fantasies of transgression'.¹⁰⁵ Be that as it may, my discussion above shows that one can argue that *Swimming Pool* does portray lesbian desire, even if it provides no solutions for the melancholic subject. Now I go on to ask whether Ozon provides more sense of resolution in *Le Temps qui reste*, which deals with similar themes of trauma and loss, but within a different body.

The Trauma of Diagnosis in *Le Temps qui reste*

Marketed as his second portrayal of mourning, Ozon brings us another depressed, melancholic subject in *Le Temps qui reste* (2005), but this time one who is

¹⁰³ Freud, 'Repression', pp. 143-158 (p. 147), *Standard Edition*, Volume 14, ed., James Strachey.

¹⁰⁴ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 94, p. 90.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 94.

biologically male. Even though the film stars Jeanne Moreau, an iconic actor of the French New Wave, who thus would be an unsurprising choice of focus given Ozon's fascination with the ageing female body, the director chooses a physically very different subject. Seen by film critics as the 'sequel' to *Sous le sable* and heralded as such by Ozon himself, for our purposes *Le Temps qui reste* can be read as Ozon's third film portraying a subject who experiences trauma and loss.¹⁰⁶ As I have shown in this chapter, *Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool* can be read together, because of their main star, Charlotte Rampling, as well as their status as portraits of melancholia and its effect on desire. *Le Temps qui reste* is usefully read alongside the two earlier movies; it is not connected more to one than the other. In fact the protagonist in *Le Temps qui reste*, Romain (played by Melvil Poupaud), can be seen as an alter-ego for the director, much as Sarah Morton was to some extent in *Swimming Pool*. As Poupaud says in interview, speaking of the connection between Ozon and Romain:

En voyant *Swimming Pool*, je m'étais dit qu'il avait déjà dû se projeter dans le personnage de Charlotte Rampling. Alors là, le fait qu'il s'agisse d'un jeune homme de son âge, qui évolue dans un milieu parisien... J'ai trouvé courageux de sa part de mettre dans le personnage de Romain autant d'éléments intimes.¹⁰⁷

Poupaud's statement implies that Ozon's choice of a protagonist with whom he shares characteristics demands courage, presumably because parallels between Ozon and Romain will inevitably be drawn. Asibong comments on the physical likeness between the director and actor, suggesting that there is something narcissistic (of which more later) in choosing Poupaud 'who looks uncannily like

¹⁰⁶ See Asibong, p. 102 and Ozon in interview, <http://www.francois-ozon.com/francais/entretiens/le-temps-qui-reste.html>, accessed 07/10/08.

¹⁰⁷ Poupaud in interview, <http://www.francois-ozon.com/francais/entretiens/le-temps-qui-reste.html>, accessed 07/10/08.

Ozon himself'.¹⁰⁸ Although Poupaud/Romain and Ozon do have similar characteristics – such as the dark hair and eyes – as well as a shared fascination in capturing images, whether still or cinematic ones, it would be a mistake to identify one with the other merely on the basis of their sex, as my thesis shows: Romain is arguably not so far removed from Marie and Sarah in the earlier films. Indeed there is no reason why Ozon should not identify with a female character as much as a male one, in fact he often claims he does, as we have seen earlier. Furthermore as I have mentioned above, theories about 'queer sistership' suggest that women and gay males are subjectivities that are not so distant from each other. As Ozon has said in interview, when asked how he felt about working with a male actor for *Le Temps qui reste* when his usual preference was for filming women, even identifying with them, he said that directing Melvil Poupaud was not so different because he is an actor in touch with his femininity.¹⁰⁹ It is telling also that Ozon chose to use a female camera operator, Jeanne Lapoirie, in filming; Ozon says: 'j'avais envie d'un regard féminin porté sur Melvil et d'une lumière qui mette en valeur sa beauté'.¹¹⁰ Thus the eroticisation of Poupaud is not directed solely by Ozon and the look behind the camera is queered by the choice of a female gaze.

Le Temps qui reste confronts Ozon with a choice which presents itself to most gay filmmakers: whether or not to make a film about AIDS. Most reviews of the film mention that the viewer, like Romain, expects the illness which afflicts the protagonist to be AIDS. As Emma Wilson states: '*Time to Leave* is novel as a film about illness, with a gay protagonist, that does not make AIDS its overt subject'.¹¹¹ Although Romain asks his doctor whether he has AIDS, and although Ozon says

¹⁰⁸ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 107.

¹⁰⁹ At preview screening of *Angel*, Institut Français, 4th July 2008.

¹¹⁰ 'Entretiens à propos du film *Le Temps qui reste*', <http://www.francois-ozon.com/fr/entretiens-le-temps-qui-reste>, accessed 07/10/08.

¹¹¹ Emma Wilson, 'Time to Leave', *Film Quarterly*, Winter 2006/7, pp. 18-24.

that his film 'est néanmoins empreint des angoisses que le SIDA a pu engendrer pour ma génération qui a découvert la sexualité en parallèle de la maladie et de l'idée de la mort', it is in fact an unsurprising choice for a queer, as opposed to a gay, filmmaker.¹¹² As Kate Ince claims, as a queer director Ozon does not belong to a 'gay' cinema due to the fact that his films 'never hav[e] gay communities as their social setting, through their absence of reference to SIDA (AIDS) and through never having overtly politicised narratives'.¹¹³ Other queer filmmakers, such as Almodóvar in *All About My Mother* and Ozpetek in *Ignorant Fairies*, do in fact show characters infected with, or dying from, AIDS, but it is not the sole aesthetic or diegetic focus of the movie.¹¹⁴ Indeed, the reception of gay and queer communities to films such as *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* was positive in that it expressed relief at not being confronted with a portrayal of AIDS after a period in which there had been so many films on the subject, not least the Oscar winning *Philadelphia*.¹¹⁵ Thus Ozon's reference to the disease, but decision not to make the film about AIDS, acknowledges the issue while avoiding falling into the category of gay films about AIDS, just as *Sitcom* refused to be a 'coming out' movie. As Bradshaw says, while for him *Le Temps qui reste* is not as convincing as earlier films by Ozon, 'making Romain's illness cancer and not AIDS is a shrewd sidestepping of a pigeonhole'.¹¹⁶ This is consistent with the rest of Ozon's œuvre which regularly eschews categorisation, as we have seen.

The diagnosis of terminal cancer is a shock for Romain and as such it constitutes a trauma, simultaneously bringing about a sense of loss, loss of youth

¹¹² 'Entretiens à propos du film *Le Temps qui reste*', <http://www.francois-ozon.com/fr/entretiens-le-temps-qui-reste>, accessed 07/10/08.

¹¹³ Ince, *Five Directors*, p. 113.

¹¹⁴ *Le Fate ignorant* (Ferzan Ozpetek, 2001).

¹¹⁵ *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliott, 1994) begins with a funeral of a gay man whose death was not, surprisingly for audiences, due to AIDS. Tom Hanks won an Oscar for Best Actor in *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993). See also Simon Callow's article about representation of gay males in mainstream cinema, 'Sexual Healing', *Guardian*, 31 October 2008, p. 15.

¹¹⁶ Peter Bradshaw, 'Time to Leave', *Guardian*, 12 May 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2006/may/12/2>, accessed 10/10/08.

and life. *Le Temps qui reste* accompanies Romain, a thirty-year-old fashion photographer, through ill-health and suffering towards his death. Romain struggles to mourn his oncoming death 'healthily', veering towards melancholia as defined by Freud. As the first part of my chapter illustrates, trauma often brings about a sense of loss, and it is loss which provokes mourning of a loved object, mourning which, when chronic, can develop into melancholia, although as Butler claims, mourning and melancholia are perhaps inherently intertwined. Freud notes that death does not have to have occurred to catalyse a process of mourning, that 'the object has not perhaps actually died'. This is true for Romain who begins mourning after his diagnosis of a tumour. The website of Cancer Research lists some of the emotions that cancer patients and their families, might experience: shock, fear, denial, anger, blame and guilt, why me?, leave me alone!, and depression.¹¹⁷ Clearly some of these emotions are also apparent in individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder and Romain experiences many of them. Following Freud's description of melancholia, Romain also displays 'profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity'.¹¹⁸ Indeed, from the moment of diagnosis Romain begins to cut himself off from other human contact, using drugs to escape reality (his cocaine use causes a kind of 'mania' which affects Marie too, as we have seen above), while at the same time failing to tell his family or his lover about his ill-health. The viewer may not sympathise with Romain's rejection of others, failing to understand his inability to inform those close to him of his diagnosis; even before Romain faints at the fashion shoot, audiences do not immediately warm to his character as he seems dismissive and abrupt with colleagues and models. Therefore when Romain acts so cruelly to his lover, Sasha, and sister, it is even harder for the viewer to

¹¹⁷ Cancer Research UK, <http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk/help/default.asp?page=209>, accessed 10/10/08.

¹¹⁸ Freud, 'Mourning', p. 244.

understand his motives. The website Cancer Research, however, explains that this is not an unusual reaction: some patients do not want to talk to their family and friends about their cancer. The charity also explains why people retreat from their partners:

It could also be that you feel sad and frightened and so can't feel any intimacy. When this happens it is very natural to withdraw, and to resist getting close to your partner. You may also worry that being intimate may release very intense, uncontrollable feelings.¹¹⁹

Romain thus demonstrates his 'loss of the capacity to love'. He isolates himself and attempts to come to terms with his illness on his own. Even his photography distances himself from the outside world, allowing him to look at others from behind a lens instead of interacting with them directly. Romain changes from capturing fashion models to making a kind of photographic diary of the time he has left. In interview, Ozon, for the DVD release of the film with Artificial Eye, recognises that this is a characteristic he shares with his protagonist, often preferring to reflect on situations and people from behind the cinematic camera. He explains this further in interview on his website: 'comme la cinéphilie, le rapport à la photographie peut avoir quelque chose d'assez morbide. Faire des images, les développer, les garder, les collectionner, aide à agir contre le temps, à le retenir'. This is how photography functions for the protagonist of Ozon's short *La Petite Mort* also, repairing the damage caused by his father's absence by holding on to the past.

The loved object, as described by Freud, and whose loss Romain is mourning, is his own self; in this he is different from Marie, Sarah and Julie who, as we have seen, initially mourn the deaths of others, even though their depression is linked to a loss of identity or youth and they mourn the loss of their younger selves

¹¹⁹ <http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk/help/default.asp?page=28255#partner>, accessed 10/10/08.

along with the loss of creative potential. As mentioned above, in *Le Temps qui reste* Romain mourns a death which has not yet happened, unlike in *Swimming Pool* and *Sous le sable*. This is a common reaction to cancer diagnoses, especially when they are terminal; relatives and friends begin to mourn even before the patient dies. As Emma Wilson aptly points out, the English title of Ozon's film anticipates Romain's death as it states that it is 'time to leave'; she suggests that this title 'hastens Romain's departure and increases its inevitability, losing the sense that the film charts the uncertain hiatus between diagnosis and death'.¹²⁰ Romain's bereavement is more introverted and self-absorbed than Ozon's other melancholic protagonists. This leads some critics, perhaps, to state that *Le Temps qui reste* is 'absolutely unconvincing' (Bradshaw) and self-obsessed; Asibong concludes his account of the film saying that 'it may feel to some viewers like a cinematic celebration of an almost absurdly defiant egocentrism'.¹²¹ Ozon even confesses that the idea of making a film about receiving a damning diagnosis came to him after having some medical tests and experiencing, even for a brief period, the anxiety of finding out that something was seriously wrong.¹²² Yet the point is that in mourning his own death, Romain simultaneously desires himself, he wants to hold on to the loved object; as Freud states, 'people never willingly abandon a libidinal position'. Thus Romain's desires do not fade away with his diagnosis; instead he continues a search for lost plenitude, which I explained earlier in this chapter as a reaction to the separation of a child from his/her mother and which Romain tries to recapture in his visions of his child self.

To a certain extent this explains Romain's dreams, which he recounts to his doctor, in which he has sex with the doctor, or his parents, or indeed with himself as a child. These fantasies reveal Romain's self-obsession, as the objects he

¹²⁰ Wilson, 'Time to Leave', p. 18.

¹²¹ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 107.

¹²² On the DVD of *Le Temps qui reste* for Artificial Eye (Special Features: Interview with François Ozon).

desires are mere reflections of himself. The doctor is the medium through which Romain learned of his diagnosis and is therefore responsible for creating Romain's present identity as cancer patient and, as Wilson notes, is his father's double, while desiring his parents reveals a classic Oedipal position in desiring pre-Symbolic plenitude, and desiring his child self is an obvious way to connect to his past and to understand his identity, as well as his sexuality. As Ozon says of Romain, 'l'enjeu pour lui n'est pas tant de se réconcilier avec les autres qu'avec lui même'.¹²³ It is possible that Romain's yearning for plenitude is explained by a wish to repair a generational trauma which has been passed onto him through his father. As Holocaust theorists explain, traumas sometimes transfer onto generations which are not directly involved in the original event.¹²⁴

Sympathising with her grandson's refusal to confide in his family, Romain's grandmother, Laura (played by Jeanne Moreau), tells him of a time when she put her needs above anyone else's. In a section of the film which has provoked polarised reactions from critics, Romain visits his grandmother and tells her about his diagnosis. For Philip French, this is 'the most moving sequence' of the film, whereas for Bradshaw, Romain's 'sophisticated intimacy with his grandmother is too pat'.¹²⁵ Romain is close to his grandmother, but it becomes apparent that her relationship with her own son is not easy. Laura's husband died while their son was still young and she explains to Romain why she could not look after his father and that she had to be selfish, choosing to live independently of maternal duties. She and her son were not able to go through their bereavement together; instead Laura cut herself off from those close to her, just as Romain is doing now. Maybe

¹²³ <http://www.francois-ozon.com/fr/entretiens-le-temps-qui-reste>.

¹²⁴ See Davis, 'Charlotte Delbo's ghosts', p. 9. Davis explains that Abraham and Torok, two psychoanalysts, 'describe the operation of unconscious, transgenerational communication, so that the secrets and crimes of past generations can be deposited in the unconscious *without the subject ever having been conscious of them*'.

¹²⁵ Philip French, 'Time to Leave', *Observer*, 14 May 2006, www.guardian.co.uk/film/2006/may/14/philipfrench2, accessed 10/10/08 and Bradshaw, 'Time to Leave'.

Romain's close relationship with his grandmother is motivated by a wish, perhaps subconscious, to repair the rupture between his father and grandmother, by a wish to restore familial relations. At the time of Romain's visit to his grandmother, his relationships with his sister and father are in dire straits: he and his sister do not see eye to eye and have violent confrontations, provoking each other into ever crueller insults, whereas it becomes clear that his father is uneasy in his presence. When in the car together, Romain asks his father 'je te fais peur?'. As we begin to see in Romain's flashbacks/visions, Laura's house reminds him of when he was close to his sister. The viewer asks if Romain, with this visit, can repair the generational trauma by bridging the relationship between his father and grandmother.

Although Bradshaw speaks of the protagonist's 'sophisticated intimacy' with Laura, I would suggest that Romain's behaviour is childlike, that visiting his grandmother constitutes a place where he can rediscover his childhood self and that it is a privileged 'site of memory' as described by Anne Whitehead. After all, it is Laura who holds the family memories in her photograph album, captured images which tell the family story and connect moments in Romain's past. This proximity to his grandmother induces more childhood memories for Romain, as the evening he arrives, he goes for a walk in the woods, and encounters two separate visions of himself as a little boy. It is clear that his grandmother holds a kind of key to his past and that visiting her unlocks memories. First of all he sees himself playing with his sister in their makeshift 'treehouse', recalling perhaps a time when the two were close, playing together easily, and he looked up to her as an elder sister. This fleeting glimpse of happier times is perhaps what prompts Romain to make the reconciliatory phonecall which functions as a 'goodbye' to his sister. Secondly he sees himself walking with his father when they come across a dead rabbit in the middle of the path, yet his father seems distant and dismissive. Laura's house is a

site of family ruptures, both past and present. Later that night, when Romain cannot get to sleep, he climbs into his grandmother's bed for comfort, much as a small child would. The fact that she sleeps naked might ruffle some viewers and seem too intimate (as Ozon once more hints at incestuous relations), but it is not of diegetic importance. This detail is part of Ozon's tribute to the film star, one French icon who was missing in *8 Femmes*, as Wilson points out and as Ozon himself says. Moreau explains in interview that this is how she normally sleeps and Ozon adds this detail as a hint at Moreau's iconic status, just as Ozon does with other female stars such as Rampling and Deneuve.¹²⁶ Although these scenes with Moreau may seem too facile or sketchy for some viewers, I tend to agree with Wilson when she describes them as the 'lovely center [sic]' of the film, as the camera captures 'a loving tribute to her fading beauty'.¹²⁷ Ozon's fascination with actresses of Moreau's generation belies a queer interest in their ageing bodies and celebration of their iconic cinematic status; Wilson and Asibong both refer to recent films which also portray the relationship between a grandmother and a gay grandchild.¹²⁸ Whatever the diegetic purpose of these scenes in *Le Temps qui reste* or their ultimate effectiveness (or lack of it), there is a sense that, as Wilson says, 'Ozon taps into a vein for ageing women in queer culture', as we have already seen.

When Romain meets his child self in the woods, it is not the first time that he or the viewer has seen him. The very first frame of the film, as the opening credits come up, is of a boy on a beach looking out to sea; the boy's curly dark hair

¹²⁶ It is not my intention here to give an in depth account of the importance of the star image. However, the introduction to Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies*, pp. 1-18 and James Donald's analysis of 'The Hollywood Star Machine' in Pam Cook's *The Cinema Book*, pp. 110-113, both suggest how the use of a particular star affects audience response to a film. As Donald says, 'the star image carries powerful cultural connotations that both exceed the fictional codes of character and identification and work to bind us into the fictional world of the film', p. 112.

¹²⁷ Wilson, 'Time to Leave', p. 21.

¹²⁸ Asibong refers to *Drôle de Félix* (pp. 104-105), as does Wilson, who also mentions the film *Cet amour-là* and Hervé Guibert's book *Suzanne et Louise* (p. 21).

and slender frame (as well as Poupaud's name) suggest to us that this is Romain at eight or nine years old (see Figure 5).



Figure 5

This is another scene irrelevant to the diegesis of the film, serving little purpose but for introducing the beach, and thereby the sea and water also, as an important locus for the film. The viewer is by now familiar with this Ozonian trope, as noted by several reviewers, and thus the beach as a place may remind us of the story of grief in *Sous le sable* or of death and sexuality in *Regarde la mer*. The second time Romain sees the child is just after he snorts coke in the bathroom of his parents' house; as he looks up at himself in the mirror, the child looks back at him. His mother reproaches him for having locked the bathroom door, saying that he never used to do so, thus symbolically lamenting the loss of her child. Romain continues to have visions of himself as a child, plotting his journey of reconciliation with himself or his family. This haunting of Romain by his former self is another symptom of PTSD, as if the child's ghost is reminding him of his imminent decline and death. Romain's visions of the child could also constitute what Freud describes as a 'turning away from reality' in the melancholic subject. The fact that the images of the child are so realistic – there are no dissolves, or any use of black and white images to signal the return to the past – means that Romain is accompanied by his child shadow, as Marie is haunted by her husband's presence in *Sous le sable*, or as Julie comes alive in Sarah's fantasy in *Swimming Pool*. Romain prefers the company of his child self more than 'real' people; this may, in part, explain the

falseness of the film perceived by Bradshaw and how some scenes bemuse or fail to convince viewers. Bradshaw also believes that some of Romain's relationships could have been better developed, but as viewers can witness in the DVD 'Deleted Scenes', and as Ozon himself states in interview, the film was much longer and had more dialogues with his father and grandmother, but Ozon deliberately chose to cut them out, electing for a more concise film, with hopefully more impact.¹²⁹

Other visions of Romain's child self include memories of his friendship with another boy, which confront him when he wanders into a church and lights a candle, having just seen his sister and her children in a park. Romain appears to regret the loss of his youth when he seemed to have so much time ahead of him, mourning the fact that now he has so little 'temps qui reste'. It seems no coincidence that these scenes, in which Romain 'discovers' his sexuality, are filmed in a Catholic church; the candles and holy water are cultural markers of this Christian denomination, quite apart from the fact that Catholicism has traditionally been the dominant religion in France. The ambiguity of experiencing homosexual feelings in a church whose dogma condemns the practice of homosexuality cannot be ignored. The implication is that Romain has been brought up in a Catholic environment which would teach him that having homosexual intercourse is 'unnatural' and deserves eternal damnation.¹³⁰ One imagines, therefore, that Romain grew up believing his sexuality to be 'wrong'.

Many organised religions, not just Roman Catholicism, stigmatise and condemn the practice of homosexuality. Furthermore, some discussions of AIDS, from the 1980s onwards, have blamed gay men for the outbreak of the epidemic,

¹²⁹ Ozon talks on the DVD for *Artificial Eye* about how he was reluctant to cut out scenes with Jeanne Moreau. He also says in interview (from website) this about his choice of editing: 'la première version du scénario était assez brute et épurée, mais elle faisait peur à mes producteurs et je me suis rendu compte que pour convaincre les financiers, il fallait étoffer davantage le scénario. [...] Le travail au montage a consisté à se débarrasser de ce que j'avais filmé "en plus", à faire le deuil de ce qui détournait l'attention et donnait moins de force au trajet du personnage'.

¹³⁰ Dante, for example, in *La Divina Commedia* does not spare sodomites hell; he places them in the Seventh Circle (settimo cerchio, secondo girone), Canto XV, for having sinned against nature.

while the extreme Christian right view is that the AIDS virus is God's punishment for the practice of homosexual intercourse. These cultural perceptions of gay sexuality mean that it is constantly tainted with the idea that it leads to disease and death, that is, gay sexuality is pathologised by heteronormative ideologies. Therefore Ozon, in *Le Temps qui reste*, is arguably treading a fine line (and not for the first time) between reproducing and challenging heteronormative discourse, hereby portraying a diseased subject, even though he is not HIV positive. As we have seen in my discussion of female sexuality above, the act of sexual intercourse and death are never far apart in the cultural imaginary, but even more so in regard to women and gay men. Queer theorists such as David Halperin are suspicious of this concept. Halperin, in his study *What do Gay Men Want?*, understands that writing about gay sexuality, just as Grosz does in her writing on female sexuality, is an invidious task. In his opening paragraph Halperin cites examples of the way in which dominant ideologies simplify or malign gay sexuality: 'gay men just want to be held' and 'gay men actually want to be killed'.¹³¹ Halperin demonstrates how normative ideologies have sought to pathologise homosexuality by understanding it as a disease, or psychological defect. The understanding of homosexuality as abnormal psychology has persisted and proved a challenge for Gay Rights Activists. Thus, Halperin states: 'it seemed necessary to close off the entire topic of gay subjectivity to respectable inquiry, so as to prevent gayness from ever again being understood as sickness'.¹³²

For a gay or lesbian individual, therefore, discussions of sexuality are problematic, as is an understanding of their subjectivity (sexuality is, after all, part of one's subjectivity). Halperin claims, therefore, that homosexual communities are readier to express their identity as gay rather than delve into questions of

¹³¹ David Halperin, *What do Gay Men Want?: An essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 1.

¹³² Halperin, *What do Gay Men Want?*, p. 2.

subjectivity. The advent of AIDS has furthered the common perception of gay sexuality as being doomed and as proof that the death drive is more prevalent in gay men. It is arguably, then, courageous of Ozon to investigate what gay subjectivity and desire mean to Romain. Halperin argues against the further pathologizing of the practice of 'barebacking' (or condomless sex), citing sources that demonstrate that it is not ubiquitous in gay communities, that in fact gay men tend to be more cautious than heterosexual couples in sexual intercourse. He quotes examples of risk-taking in wider society:

Only 61 percent of Americans in 1996 consistently reported using seatbelts [...] but that statistic [...] did not raise comparably grave concerns about the mental health of the heterosexual majority. Similarly, the most recent literature review analyzing the causes of risky sexual behaviour among young heterosexual women and men looked exclusively to social factors for explanation, never to psychological ones.¹³³

Thus Halperin calls for a new understanding and exploration of gay subjectivities, giving Michael Warner as an example of a writer who testifies to his experiences of AIDS in a non-normative context without pathologizing his sexuality. Halperin agrees with Warner – who confesses to 'barebacking' – that gay men's approach to AIDS can be affected by a choice to live queerly; one could argue that Romain embodies this difficult choice, cutting himself off from others, because it reflects his subjectivity, because he chooses to live that way, not because he is doomed, as a gay male, to self-destruction. Halperin argues that people do not always do what is 'best' for them, that human beings are not always rational and measured subjects: 'the notion that people, once they truly understand what is in their own best interests, always act rationally in order to maximise them [...] has taken a

¹³³ Halperin, *What do Gay Men Want?*, p. 22.

persistent battering ever since Socrates first proposed it'.¹³⁴ This concept will impact on my discussion of sexuality in the next chapter, revealing the ambiguities involved when individuals enter into or repeat patterns in damaging relationships (see, for example, my reading of Franz and Véra in *Gouttes d'eau*). For Michael Warner, self-destructive behaviour has less to do with fatalism than personal affirmation; he cites Walt Odets, a therapist and prevention activist, asking: 'What do you want to do? How important is it to you? Who are you? What do you want your life to be about?'.¹³⁵

Sexual relations in *Le Temps qui reste* typify the ambivalence of the sex act; there is the sense that sex for Romain both delays death and brings it closer. In his discussion of the film, Asibong correctly points out the dysfunctional relationships that Romain has; he says that 'relations with others in the film seem impossible to channel into anything as "normal" as conventional friendship, love or kinship, mainly because they seem simultaneously over-intimate and alienated, "too close" at the same time as being "not close enough"'.¹³⁶ This is why Romain is unable to find comfort and compassion with people close to him, except for his grandmother, and perhaps explains why he goes to a gay sex club and watches what Wilson calls 'backroom s/m'.¹³⁷ Romain, having broken off his relationship with Sasha, then contacts his former lover to have sex with him 'pour une dernière fois'; this encounter does not bring him the intimacy he is searching for either. Sasha, unaware of how ill Romain is, justifies his refusal by explaining that he would feel as if he were prostituting himself in return for Romain's reference for the job he wanted. The viewer wonders if this rejection of others and self-destruction is inextricably linked to his sexuality, that his identity as a gay male denies him safety and comfort in his relations, as implied in normative discourse and whether, in this

¹³⁴ Halperin, *What do Gay Men Want?*, p. 24.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 167.

¹³⁶ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 105.

¹³⁷ Wilson, 'Time to Leave', p. 18.

way, Ozon is once again in danger of perpetuating heteronormative myths about homosexuality. Romain's search for intimacy is arguably more successful when he agrees to have sex with Jany (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi making a reappearance for Ozon after *5x2*) to help her conceive a child which she wants to have with her husband Bruno who is sterile. Reviewers are puzzled by this chance encounter and by Romain's decision to procreate, especially when his first reaction to Jany's proposal is 'j'aime pas les enfants'. Philip French, though he largely finds the film an apt portrait of dying, finds Romain's meeting with Jany and Bruno 'his oddest encounter', while Bradshaw finds it 'simply absurd'. Asibong also chooses to focus on the failure of the three-way sex; he sees that Romain is separated from the couple both by the use of cinematic framing and by their intimate embrace. Asibong states that Romain is capable only of extremes in his relationships: 'both with an overwhelming promiscuity and within a one-man desert'.¹³⁸ The triangular sex is reminiscent of the Sarah-Julie-Franck triad in *Swimming Pool*, which is also unsatisfactory and ultimately lethal for the waiter, Franck. However, it is a sign of Ozon's interest in triangular desire (which will be examined further in Chapter 4 in relation to *Gouttes d'eau*) as an alternative to the inherently diseased relationship of the conventional couple. In fact, supporting the view that the triangle is a positive alternative to the couple, Emma Wilson makes a good case in claiming that this is 'a remarkably tender and gently orchestrated sex scene'.¹³⁹

Another reading would question the 'reality' of this chance encounter and suggest rather that it is playing out in Romain's mind. The viewer may be doubtful of the wisdom of Ozon's inclusion of this allusion to heteronormative futurity by suggesting that death is less painful if one has offspring to leave behind.¹⁴⁰ The act of procreation, however, is not here a heteronormative one, as Romain proposes

¹³⁸ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 46, p. 106.

¹³⁹ Wilson, 'Time to Leave', p. 22.

¹⁴⁰ For a discussion and explanation of heteronormative futurity, see my discussion of Edelman in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

that Bruno join in the sex act so that it is the trio who conceive the baby. Wilson, in her account of the film, does not find Ozon guilty of heteronormative ideologies either:

Cutting from his rejection by Sasha to his contractual relations with Jany allow Ozon to intimate that Romain's motivation is the search for one final moment of sexual love and intimacy. The film can move away from an arguably heterosexist focus on reproduction and relations to women [...]. Romain's bid for a last sexual encounter determines the way the scene is shot and how it plays; quickly it becomes clear that the scene is about sex and not just fertilization.¹⁴¹

Wilson also suggests that the 'unconvincing' nature of this sex act may be due to the fact that it exists in Romain's fantasy, similar to the way in which the murder takes place in *Swimming Pool* or the way Marie talks to her husband's ghost in *Sous le sable*. The cinematography plays an important part here in that there are no visual clues to signal this 'turning away from reality'. Wilson says that the implausibility of this scene in *Le Temps qui reste*:

May be an indication of how far the emphasis has been shifting subtly from objective realism to subjective fantasy. [...] This realization is the more disconcerting given the acute realist observations of [Ozon's] cinema and the smooth, coherent worlds constructed. [...] We come to discover that Ozon tracks the self-absorption of illness, and its queasy unreality, through unmarked departures from actuality.¹⁴²

Wilson, however, does not intend to criticise Ozon's move to 'unrealistic' filmmaking as other reviews do but is stating why these scenes may jar with the

¹⁴¹ Wilson, 'Time to Leave', p. 21.

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 21.

rest of the film. This reading is more in line with my understanding of the melancholic subject and his/her inability to live with reality as 'healthy' subjects might. Ultimately it may be easier for Romain to find satisfaction in sexual encounters with strangers, sex that does not bring up uncomfortable feelings, finding it also more simple to inform them of his illness rather than implicating his friends and family in his fate. Indeed when Romain meets Jany and Bruno in order to make a will leaving everything to his unborn child, he tells them about his diagnosis, knowledge that he has not even shared with his family. Furthermore, in creating a child Romain has come near to his desire for his own child self, the closest he can manage to recapturing infantile plenitude.

If there is a sense that these sequences are 'staged', the audience should not be surprised. As we have already seen in Chapter 2, Ozon is fascinated with the theatricality of everyday life and with the performance of sexual relationships. If Ozon uses implausible situations in *Le Temps qui reste* it is likely to be a deliberate choice. The encounter with Jany is unlikely in itself, as well as her readiness to make the proposal to Romain without knowing him. Neither is it very probable that one 'attempt' to conceive would succeed. It is also arguably this encounter which makes *Le Temps qui reste* queer; audiences do not expect Romain to reach out to a heterosexual couple for comfort and intimacy. In fact Ozon enjoys playing with audience expectations, as we have seen. Rather than portraying 'normal' or 'expected' patterns of dealing with illness and death, Ozon prefers to show us more contrived situations. This is the queer sensibility the viewer experiences here.

It is towards the end of the film that Ozon insists on the symbolism of his cinematography. This is why Asibong finds it 'the least seductive of all Ozon's essays on a given subject's brutal (self-) imposed non-intimacy with the living world' and leads him to state that 'as a meditation on the imminence of death it is

disappointingly superficial',¹⁴³ reminding us that Ozon is often accused of superficiality, especially in regard to films such as *Angel* (see my previous chapter). While some of the film's imagery such as the sunset in the final scene may appear too obvious as a symbol of encroaching death, others are germane perceptions of the nature of illness and dying. Asibong finds the withered flowers in Romain's flat, given to him by his grandmother as a farewell gesture, too trite. I would prefer to read this shot as an observation of the everyday sadness and fatigue that accompanies terminal illness as well as Freudian melancholia. Romain may not have the energy to remove the dead flowers, already struggling to fulfil the quotidian gestures of shopping and cooking, keeping up the appearance of normality and routine. He may not, either, be ready to dispose of the last token from his grandmother. As Romain travels to the sea on the train, he watches a mother breastfeeding her baby, a scene which is arguably too sentimental, but at the same time it suggests that the baby and Romain are liminal subjects, on the edge of becoming or dying (one is reminded of Kristeva's inclusion of newly born infants and breastfeeding mothers as 'abject' or taboo), that birth and death are closely related, and that, as Wilson observes, 'past and present have come full circle, start and end are merged'.¹⁴⁴ Romain's return to the beach at the end of the film is loaded, too, for as several commentators have noted, the beach for Ozon is a site of transformation or for beginnings and endings.¹⁴⁵ Romain sits on the crowded beach, Ozon unusually choosing to employ a widescreen format to capture the holiday atmosphere of the sunbathing families;¹⁴⁶ his skeletal, pale figure

¹⁴³ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 105.

¹⁴⁴ Wilson, 'Time to Leave', p. 23.

¹⁴⁵ Bradshaw, 'Time to Leave', calls the beach 'a signature location'; Wilson observes that 'water, sand, and sky are recurring points of origin', 'Time to Leave', p. 18, whereas Ince identifies the beach as either 'a place of experimentation and of play', 'a site of loss, even of trauma', or 'a site of transition', *Five Directors*, pp. 126-7.

¹⁴⁶ Ozon talks of the difficulties of filming widescreen both on the DVD for *Artificial Eye* and in interview on his website: 'ça peut paraître étrange d'avoir utilisé le Scope pour un sujet aussi intime mais c'est le cadre idéal pour filmer l'horizon, la position allongée, la mort'.

stands out in comparison to the tanned, 'healthy', bodies of those around him (see Figure 6).

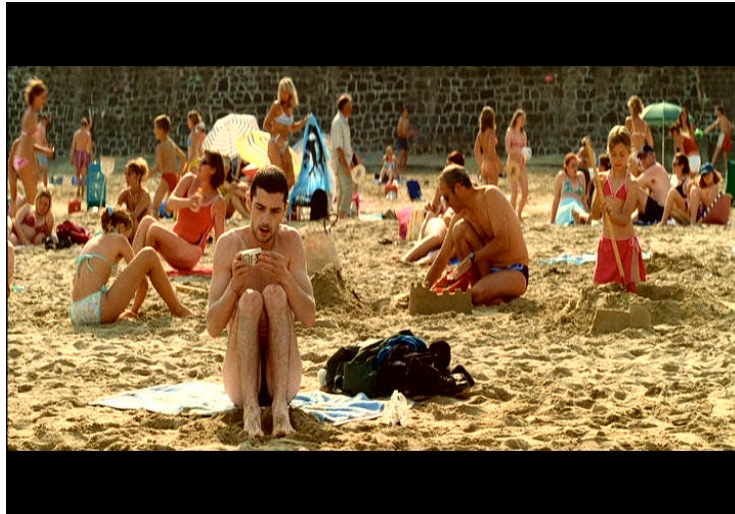


Figure 6

As Romain sits on the beach, observing those around him, his child self runs up to him to retrieve the ball which he was playing with, implying that Romain is finally in touch with the different parts of his identity, that he has found self-reconciliation and that it is definitively 'time to leave'. Romain has gone on a journey of discovery, trying to connect and understand his relationship with his family, having made sense of his sexuality, and apparently (perhaps only in his imagination) having given meaning to his death by leaving his money and possessions to his unborn child. However, just as Marie and Sarah were unable to 'resolve' their melancholia, so Ozon too leaves matters unresolved in *Le Temps qui reste*, despite the cinematic clues of closure and circularity. Romain, although he may be reconciled with himself, is at odds with the outside world; he has thrown away his mobile telephone, ignoring human contact and efforts to reach out to him. One wonders what the aftermath of his death will be like, how his friends and lover will cope with the discovery of his illness and death, no doubt traumatized by the revelation and saddened by the knowledge that Romain was not able to confide in them. It is understandable that audiences might feel that *Le Temps qui reste* is

self-absorbed and selfish, but as this reading of the film has shown, Ozon portrays just one way of reacting to, and mourning, the diagnosis of terminal cancer.

So at the end, Romain lies down, alone, accompanied only by the natural world; the sun sets behind his profile, and the image dissolves to darkness (see Figure 7).

Figure 7



While this use of cinematography and facile symbolism may not impress cinephiles or sit easily beside Ozon's edgier, more surprising use of the cinematic medium, my reading of *Le Temps qui reste* argues that the film is a perceptive and poignant portrait of trauma and loss in the melancholic subject, one who is, by the very nature of his dis-ease, self-absorbed. Furthermore, once again Ozon has surprised audiences and critics with the way he tackles disease and death in *Le Temps qui reste*. The viewer familiar with Francophone film may expect *Le Temps qui reste* to address disease and dying as it is treated in films like *Les Nuits fauves* (1992) in which the protagonist sets out to 'make the most of' his final months of life and in which the camera captures the destruction to the body brought about by the onset of AIDS. Yet as we have seen before, Ozon does not set out to make 'realist' films – even though the cinematography might suggest it – nor politically committed ones.

Conclusion

There is no claim here either that *Swimming Pool* is a 'realist' film, or even a politically engaged one,¹⁴⁷ yet Ozon seems to fall into some of the traps of dominant ideology in reading female sexuality through orality and appetite and gay sexuality as being inextricably linked to death and self-destruction. His films on trauma and loss confront us with the blockages that occur in a subject trying to enact desire and work through melancholia, but they do not provide a solution. Their isolation and depression remain unresolved. Trauma distorts their desire: Marie is disconnected from her desire, whereas for Sarah, her appetites for sex and food are repressed. Julie, the traumatized subject, is condemned to live out her trauma repeatedly, trying to replace the love which she did not receive from her (absent) father and (dead) mother. Romain also yearns for plenitude in order to repair the sense of loss brought about by his diagnosis; he desires to connect all the fragments of his identity together, from childhood and the discovery of his sexuality to mourning the lost relationships with the people he loves, rather than expressing desire for others. This does not mean that Ozon is a misogynist or a completely heteronormative director, but that his portrayals of sexuality are more in line with dominant ideologies than he would like us to think. A lesbian (or gay) film might explicitly engage in an attempt to move beyond dominant models of homosexuality, exploring what sexuality means for women who identify themselves as lesbians, or how a gay male identifies with illness without recourse to associations of homosexuality with danger and death, but rather finding alternative expression as Halperin suggests.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ See my Introduction and Doty, 'Queer Theory', p. 148.

¹⁴⁸ Halperin, *What do Gay Men Want?*, p.6. See also Ellis Hanson, ed., *OutTakes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film* (London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 6.

To some extent, Romain's refusal to have treatment, or to 'get better', uncomfortably for the viewer shunning human contact, does provide a queer angle on illness and death. Ozon does not try to repair trauma but is rather witness to it, in line with how trauma theorists believe patients should be treated; this perhaps explains why audiences are dissatisfied with the portrayal of death in *Le Temps qui reste*: there is no consolation. Ozon accompanies his melancholic subjects through their 'journey' but, unlike in Hollywood films, they find no solution and no end to their mourning. Ozon does not like to tie up loose ends because, although spectators may have come to expect it, there is a sense of disappointment and mistrust at 'happy endings'. We shall see how Ozon disrupts cinematic endings in my discussion of *5x2* in Chapter 5. Ozonian cinema does not necessarily do what is 'best', nor does it try to set things 'right'; these films thus eschew normative concepts of filmmaking, and might share the queer sensitivity expressed by Michael Warner.

This chapter has argued that the spectator of Ozon's films is invited, for the most part, to participate in a queer viewing experience, one which questions the relation between trauma, repression, death, desire, and spectatorial pleasure. This is what queer theory sets out to do; in the words of Ellis Hanson 'I am implicated in the film to whose questioning glance I respond with pleasure. To trace the implications of that erotic implication has become the role of queer film theory'.¹⁴⁹ There is no doubt that we are implicated as spectators in *Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool*: we take pleasure in the surface and images. Ozon's films provide alternative viewing positions for the female (lesbian or straight) spectator, alternative to the normative positions on offer in classic narrative cinema. However, we may conclude that he does not take these viewing positions and pleasures far enough and that his films do not provide enough valid alternatives to dominant

¹⁴⁹ Hanson, *OutTakes*, p. 3.

models of sexuality. What Ozon has captured, rather than claiming he has made a definitive portrait of trauma or of sexuality, is in fact the nature of desire itself. Ozon's films *Sous le sable*, *Swimming Pool* and *Le Temps qui reste* forestall closure and thwart the satisfaction of a definite ending, both in the doubt over Jean's death in the first, in the real/fantasy figure of Julie/Julia in the second, and by denying the viewer an idea of the aftermath which is sure to hit the 'survivors' in the third. Ozon, by preferring an open ending, thus acknowledges that to satisfy desire is to kill it. As Grosz explains Hegel's model of desire in 'Refiguring Lesbian Desire': 'The only object desire can desire is one that will not fill the lack or provide complete satisfaction. To provide desire with its object is to annihilate it. Desire desires to be desired'.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore Ozon has brought sexuality into all parts of life, revealing its connection to the way we try on a dress, go swimming, take photographs or eat our food. This confirms Grosz's idea that 'the bedroom is no more the privileged site of sexuality than any other space; sexuality and desire are part of the intensity and passion of life itself'.¹⁵¹ Indeed, Asibong, too, notes that *Sous le sable* asks the question: 'how to film the occasionally overwhelming loneliness of everyday existence?'.¹⁵² For Ozon sexuality and desire is a quotidian phenomenon, which permeates all our experiences. Grosz also asserts the instability of sexuality, in line with other queer theorists, highlighting its fluid nature; it is this blurring of boundaries and sexual identities that we find in Ozon. As Grosz says, 'it is not a question of being (-animal, -woman, -lesbian), of attaining a definite status as a thing, a permanent fixture, nor of clinging to, having an identity, but of moving, changing, being swept beyond one singular position into a multiplicity of flows'.¹⁵³ In the previous chapter we saw how Ozon investigated the fluidity of sexuality in weird and colourful ways in *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes*, whereas

¹⁵⁰ Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, p. 176.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p. 181.

¹⁵² Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 89.

¹⁵³ Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, p. 184.

here we have examined the nature of desire within the context of trauma and the experience of loss. In the next chapter my investigation looks at gender role playing in a film which is, unusually for Ozon, not an original screenplay, but an adaptation of a play by Fassbinder – one of Ozon's cinematic icons.

Chapter 4

Queer Performances in *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*

Ozon's *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* (1999) represents a bleak view of human sexuality; the film ends with a suicide and throughout it is generally shot in dark, indoor spaces, lending it a claustrophobic feel. The film starts in Léopold's apartment when he has brought back a new acquaintance, Franz, for a drink. The two talk, drink and play board games and then Léo (Bernard Giraudeau) seduces the younger man. Franz (Malik Zidi) moves in, becoming Léo's live-in partner and apparently full-time housekeeper. While Léo is away on a business trip, Franz's ex-girlfriend, Anna (Ludivine Sagnier), shows up, hoping to persuade Franz to get back together and leave Léo. They spend several days in bed together until Léo returns. Then Véra (Anna Thomson), Léo's ex, turns up and the four dance and have sex together. Franz, devastated by Léo's betrayal, commits suicide. Only Véra seems upset that he is dead. From this brief plot synopsis, it is evident that there are no outdoor scenes and only one exterior shot which, as Richard Falcon notes in *Sight and Sound*, is 'repeated throughout the movie' and 'isolates the characters [...] from each other within the apartment's window frames'.¹ Moreover, Franz is never seen to leave the flat from the moment he arrives; he will only leave it feet first. Franz is trapped both in Ozon's film and Léopold's German erotic lair. From film reviews and plot synopses the viewer expects *Gouttes d'eau* to be a 'gay' film, by a 'gay' man, about a 'gay' couple, but in fact we are confronted with a much broader stage of desire. We are invited to ask questions about female and male gender roles, as well as hetero- and homosexual desire. Neither is *Gouttes d'eau* a portrait of the couple; instead, romantic couplings, rather than being the film's focus, are undermined and broken apart by events. This begs the question of

¹ Richard Falcon, 'Water Drops On Burning Rocks', *Sight and Sound*, 10, 11 (2000), www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/574, accessed 04/07/07.

whether the couple as a romantic relationship can survive the conflicting sexual desires of individuals. Here the romantic couple becomes a *ménage à trois*, which in its turn soon becomes a *ménage à quatre*; *Gouttes d'eau* is thus a film which investigates the geometric spectrum of possible sexual relationships: two, then three, then four. The conventional triangle of desire becomes a rhomboid, or, at times a web of desire and intrigue. No group lasts long, however, because jealousies, betrayals, group dynamics, and death all get in the way. Nothing seems to work.

In order to make sense of the film's insistence on the destructive power of relationships, I turn to some contemporary theorists who grapple with the insidious negativity of sexuality which pervades Ozon's *Gouttes d'eau*. For Lee Edelman, as we shall see in his work *No Future*, negativity is a necessary facet of queer desire by which queer subjects can resist heteronormative ideologies. Edelman argues that negativity is potentially radical, in that it can unravel the assumptions on which human society is currently based, by halting futurity and rebelling against social formations such as sexual reproduction and the family unit. Edelman's model of queer resistance would seem to imply that no relationship can survive.² The reader is to be reminded here of my use of the term 'queer', by which I refer to, in the words of Annamarie Jagose: 'those gestures or analytical modes which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire'.³ Edelman's queer theoretical stance, however, leaves no room for an idea of how one *lives* a gay/queer sexuality. Therefore in this chapter I shall look at Judith Butler's and Sheila Jeffreys' work, whose views on non-normative sexualities are arguably more pragmatic than Edelman's queer negativity. These theorists examine the real social pressures on gay people and how these

² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (London: Duke University Press, 2004). See p. 9: he talks of 'negativity opposed to every form of social viability'.

³ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, p. 3.

individuals live out their sexuality; one reaction to such pressures is the use of camp and disguise to conceal one's 'true' identity. Sheila Jeffreys and David Halperin, among others, claim that the negativity associated with gays and lesbians is due in part to the negative social view of homosexuality and the subsequently negative self-image of these individuals. This latter view is perhaps incompatible with Edelman's, in that for one the negativity comes from within, whereas for the other it comes from without. The film theorist must try and place Ozon in relation to these diametrically opposed theories. If one accepts Edelman's queer view, Ozon may fulfil the radical potential this film appears to boast, unlike some other of his films which, as we have seen in previous chapters, promise transgression but can frequently be seen to fall back on normative gender roles and social structures.

In this Chapter I shall also continue with my enquiry into the workings of desire, here informed by theorists such as René Girard and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and their ideas on triangular desire, asking how they might be applied to *Gouttes d'eau*. I shall ask how relationships work in non-normative formations, especially divergences from the conventional romantic couple. Furthermore I shall look at notions of role-playing and gender as performance, developing Butler's theory in *Gender Trouble*, asking whether there is any way out of patriarchal models of sexuality, or whether Ozon's cinematic world of role-playing is effectively 'sans issue'. *Gouttes d'eau* will be my core primary text in this chapter, but it will be analysed alongside a collection of five shorts, which include two of Ozon's *court métrages*: *La Petite mort* and *Une robe d'été*, brought together by the British Film Institute under the title *Majorettes in Space: Five Gay Tales from France*. Finally I shall also be looking at Ozon's camp aesthetics, borrowing notions of camp from Jack Babuscio and Richard Dyer, asking whether, or to what extent, camp is the way out both from a nihilistic (queer) vision of sexuality and heteronormative gender roles, or whether camp is instead a vital part of queer resistance.

No way out?

The film's title is itself indicative of the bleak vision of humanity that dominates it. Although Ozon's source for *Gouttes d'eau* is well-documented, some reviewers have claimed that *Tropfen auf heiße Steine* was an unproduced play before Ozon 'discovered' it.⁴ It seems worth setting the record straight: Thomsen, in fact, records that the play, written by a nineteen-year-old Fassbinder, was 'discovered and premièred after his death'.⁵ Furthermore, Ozon himself states that he saw a version at the theatre. Curiously there have not yet been any perceptive comments on the film's enigmatic title, except from the actress Anna Thomson who points out on the DVD bonus interviews that the English title *Water Drops on Burning Rocks* has the unfortunate sing-song rhythm of a nursery rhyme. The French version of the play, however, translated by Jean-François Poirier, is entitled *Gouttes dans l'océan*.⁶ The title deserves attention, however it is translated, for it gives an idea of Fassbinder's, and Ozon's, hidden agenda. The image that the title conjures up, in German, French, or English, is the transience and instability of water as it falls onto hot stones, that a drop in the ocean is insignificant and invisible, in short, that the drops disappear and dissolve into non-existence (either by becoming vapour or part of a bigger water mass). If one reads the drops as relationships or subjectivities one realises that *Gouttes d'eau* has an acutely nihilistic centre, representing a reality in which all relationships and sexualities are doomed to

⁴ See, for example, A. O. Scott, 'Leopold & Franz & Anna & Vera in Berlin' in the *New York Times*, accessed 25/02/07, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0DE4DB1038F931A25754C0A9669C8B63>.

⁵ Christian Braad Thomsen, *Fassbinder: The Life and Works of a Provocative Genius*, trans. Martin Chalmers (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 46.

⁶ Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Gouttes dans l'océan, Anarchie en Bavière*, translated by Jean-François Poirier (Paris: L'Arche, 1987).

failure; as Richard Falcon points out, borrowing one of Fassbinder's film titles: 'love is colder than death'.⁷

The cinematography employed by Ozon also works to enhance the sense of entrapment and closure which engulfs the audience. Time and again Ozon's cinematic framing portrays the couple out of kilter with each other, using doors, windows, mirrors, and doorjambs to divide the space and to separate the characters, as in *Swimming Pool*. The framing not only isolates the characters physically, as Falcon observes in his review of the film, it also serves to underline their failure to communicate. Ozon alternates between a static and mobile camera; this not only varies the pace but it also allows the director to emphasise the physical and emotional distance between the characters. There are two exchanges between Léo and Franz that demonstrate the effect of a static camera; in each scene one of the two men walks out of the frame and there is no tracking or reverse shot to give their point of view, instead the camera stays with the stationary actor who continues a conversation with the other man off-screen.

Figure 1



This is particularly obvious when Franz is sitting in the armchair reading and Léo paces back and forth, coming briefly into the frame and then leaving it again, while all the time continuing to have a discussion with Franz (see Figure 1).⁸ Ozon

⁷ Falcon, 'Water Drops On Burning Rocks'.

⁸ The book Franz is reading is *Liebe ist stärker als der Tod* (Love is Stronger than Death, 1983) by Heinz Konsalik. It is, perhaps, an ironic reference to Fassbinder's 1969 film *Liebe ist kälter als der Tod* (Love is Colder than Death), which Falcon refers to in his article, a title which is a re-working of Thomas Mann: 'love is stronger than death' (*The Magic Mountain*, 1924).

employs a long take (the first of this scene lasts thirty-four seconds) with a static camera, which further highlights the alienation between the two characters. Then Franz walks up to the glass door of Léo's study to continue their discussion. Once again the camera lingers on Franz while he talks to Léo (whom we do not see), this time the take lasting twenty-two seconds. Léo's little study with its sliding doors signals an off-screen, or separate space, one he retreats to when being especially obnoxious to his live-in partner. When Léo comes out of his room to further their heated argument, the camera does not move for the duration of the take of forty-one seconds, the glass door of the study acting as a frame. Ozon at other times uses unusual camera angles to comment on the action, such as when Léo and Franz lie on the bed together facing in opposite directions; a high camera angle looks down on them from above, making a visually pleasing and well-balanced frame (see Figure 2). Even though Léo and Franz appear in the same frame here, they are lying in opposite directions; thus Ozon underlines their inability to relate to each other.

Figure 2



Mirrors are another device Ozon employs to frame his shots; Franz is filmed twice in front of the three-panelled mirror cabinet in the bathroom, once when he dries his hair, and again when he takes the medicine to kill himself. Here the three-paned mirror serves to destabilize Franz's sexual identity (which is already oscillating) and to emphasise the choice of different roles he is confronted with. The mirror leitmotif reminds us of the Freudian concept that homosexual

desire is a narcissistic relation to the self.⁹ It is particularly significant that Léo's bedroom has a long mirror-covered wardrobe as its focal point. The mirror here appears to be a marker of decadence and sexuality; it comes to a fore when Anna and Franz are sitting in bed together (see Figure 3).

Figure 3



The way they are framed in the mirror, which multiplies the bodies in bed, foreshadows the *ménage à quatre* which is about to form and alludes to the presence of other bodies/characters in the bed with the two young lovers. The romantic idyll of the traditional heterosexual couple is destined to fail. Ozon chooses the three-panelled bathroom mirror as part of the background DVD menu page; Léo, Franz, Anna, and Véra incessantly perform to Tony Holiday's *Tanze Samba Mit Mir* as if they were a stuck record¹⁰. The line-up of four actors is broken and doubled by the projection of their dance onto the three panes of the mirror; the result is kaleidoscopic and overwhelming, while at the same time being enclosed and structured.

Gouttes d'eau reaches its claustrophobic peak, however, in the scenes which frame the outside of the apartment block, with the actors looking out of the windows. Léo and Franz are the first to be framed in this way, followed by Franz and Anna towards the end of Acte III. The four actors are never filmed together as

⁹ See my discussion of *Swimming Pool* in Chapter 3 and of the danger of seeing lesbian desire as a mirror or a desire for sameness.

¹⁰ The German title of the song translates as, invitingly, 'Dance the Samba with me'.

on the front of the DVD cover jacket, though they might well have been during the course of the film, as this quartet of window frames seems to sum up the overriding theme in *Gouttes d'eau*: there is no way out. We watch as outsiders, the characters like fish in a goldfish bowl looking out, trapped and doomed to go round and round in circles until death releases them from this nightmare. At the very end of the film Véra tries to get her coat off Franz's dead body, but then stops and puts it back, more out of pity and remorse than a reluctance to touch a corpse. She then stands up, opens the curtains and tries to open the window, as if to breathe the fresh air to revive herself, or to let air into the room. But Léopold's apartment is a *huis clos* and despite her attempts to push and tug at the window frame, it will not open. (Ozon explains in interview how this was, initially, accidental.)¹¹ So Véra clutches in desperation at the glass, feeling the full horror of Franz's death and her entrapment. The framing of Véra at the window, surrounded by darkness, echoes the opening frame of the film in which the camera looks at the translucent pane of glass in the front door contrasting with the dark corridor around it (see Figure 4).

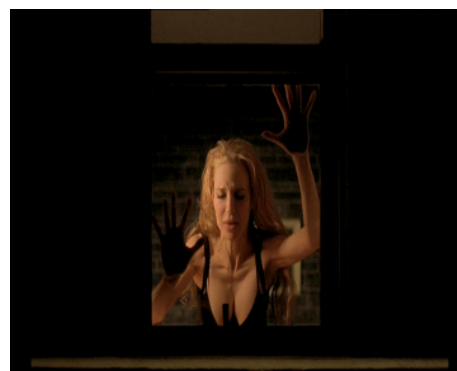


Figure 4

¹¹ Ozon says of this scene: 'J'avais donc prévu qu'elle ouvre la fenêtre, qu'elle aère cette pièce qui sent la mort, et que l'on entende la vie du monde extérieur. Or mon décorateur, pour des raisons financières, n'avait pas prévu que cette fenêtre s'ouvre. Le temps d'installer une fenêtre, il m'est alors venue l'idée que Véra reste enfermée et qu'elle ne réussisse pas à ouvrir cette fenêtre, à jamais prisonnière comme la plupart des héros de Fassbinder. J'ai tourné les deux fins et j'ai gardé finalement la plus noire.' See <http://www.francois-ozon.com/francais/entretiens/gouttes-eau-pierres-brulantes.html>, accessed 04/04/07.

The similarity in the framing of the two scenes in Figure 4 enhances the feeling that it is impossible to escape this apartment, that the characters are trapped by its boundaries, and that tragedy was inevitable. Scott, in the *New York Times*, perhaps unwittingly stumbles across a metaphor for this living nightmare, saying that ‘for the duration of this mordant, mischievous film you have no real desire to leave their fastidiously decorated purgatory. And neither, for all their protestations to the contrary, do they’.¹² However contentious this claim that they do not want to leave their *huis clos* – it is, rather, that they cannot – ‘purgatory’ is not far from describing the experience in *Gouttes d’eau*. The effect of Ozon’s use of framing is, however, twofold: the characters of *Gouttes d’eau* are at once entrapped, cut off from each other, and presented with choices of how to live out their sexuality. Although the frames may block characters in, the mirroring of images is visually kaleidoscopic, reflecting the pattern of desire at work; the viewer is overwhelmed with the multiplication of desiring possibilities. Through the fragmentation of cinematic space, Ozon emphasises the fragmentation of desire and relationships. While (apparently) offering a way out of conventional gender roles, Ozon also makes the walls close in on Franz, Anna, Léo, and Véra. Despite the opportunities presented to the characters during the film, *Gouttes d’eau* ends on the bleakest note possible; thereby Ozon is perhaps brave enough, in this film if not in others, to embrace queer negativity.

One should remember, however, that queer theorists are not the first writers or thinkers to doubt the stability of the couple as a model for relationships. One theorist who may help our understanding of the dynamics of relationships in Ozon’s *Gouttes d’eau* is René Girard and his concept of triangular desire, which he explains in his study: *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. Girard’s idea is that desire is often mediated by a third party; he finds this model recurring in

¹² Scott, ‘Leopold & Franz & Anna & Vera in Berlin’.

Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoevsky. Girard cites examples from these authors: Emma Bovary copies the sentimentalism of romance novels she has read; Don Quixote models himself on the errant knight Amadis de Gaule; the narrator in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* desires vicariously through the writer Bergotte and Swann as well as his other reading. Girard terms these mimetic desires, defining them thus: 'le désir mimétique est copié sur un autre désir. C'est un désir qui en imite un autre'.¹³ Thus we are in the realm of imitation and performance (whose importance in studies of gender I explain later), where desiring subjects 'borrow' the desires of others. As Girard says in his Preface (2001), this 'désir d'emprunt' comes from an insecurity in childhood:

Il y a dans l'homme une 'insuffisance d'être' que chacun ressent obscurément. Dès l'enfance, donc, on désire intensément mais sans certitude de désirer à bon escient. *On s'en remet à l'opinion du grand nombre.* Souvent aussi on imite un individu qu'on admire et auquel on voudrait ressembler.¹⁴

Thus the subject takes on a role, modelling himself on the person Girard calls 'le médiateur'. However, this 'médiateur' soon becomes a rival and the imitating subject has ambiguous feelings towards him; for Girard this is 'le re-sentiment, autrement dit le mélange d'hostilité et de vénération qu'inspire à la plupart des modernes la métamorphose de leurs modèles en obstacles et en rivaux'.¹⁵ Girard recognises that such is the strength of the link between mediator and imitator that the third element, the object of desire, is not stable: 'l'objet change avec chaque aventure mais le triangle demeure'.¹⁶

¹³ René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1961), reprinted with Preface by the author in 2001, p. 11.

¹⁴ Girard, *Mensonge romantique*, p. 15, my italics.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 17.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 24.

The flaw in Girard's understanding of triangular desire is that it fails to take into account the dynamics of power and gender between the three elements. Furthermore, his concept of desire is grounded in heteronormative discourse; he rarely tackles discussions of homosexuality, saying: 'on ne donne rien à voir ni à comprendre en ramenant le désir triangulaire à une homosexualité nécessairement opaque pour l'hétérosexuel. [...] Il faut tenter de *comprendre* certaines formes d'homosexualité à partir du désir triangulaire'. Girard seems more comfortable with discussions of the homosocial, asserting that in Proust, 'l'homosexualité proustienne, par exemple, peut se définir comme un glissement vers le médiateur d'une valeur érotique qui reste encore attachée à l'objet dans le donjuanisme "normal"'.¹⁷ Here again Girard seems to define homosexuality a priori rather than accepting a pre-existing attraction between two male subjects. This is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's main criticism of Girard's text, on which she bases her own discussions of erotic triangles in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*.¹⁸ One of the charges she levels at the earlier text is that: 'Girard's account, which thinks it is describing a dialectic of power abstracted from either the male/female or the sexual/nonsexual dichotomies, is leaving out of consideration categories that in fact preside over the distribution of power in every known society'.¹⁹ She states that it is a problem that 'Girard's reading presents itself as one whose symmetry is undisturbed by such differences as gender'.²⁰

Indeed the first difference one may notice when attempting to understand triangular gay male desire in Ozon is that the figures of mediator and desired object merge into one. Sedgwick rightly notes Girard's insistence that 'the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the

¹⁷ Girard, *Mensonge romantique*, p. 72.

¹⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

¹⁹ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p. 22.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 23.

rivals to the beloved',²¹ but what we find in Ozon's *Gouttes d'eau* and *Une robe d'été* is that the mediator (Léopold and Sébastien respectively) is both the potential rival and the beloved. The third element of the triangle (Lucia in *Une robe d'été* and Anna in *Gouttes d'eau*) usually unsettles – and thus paradoxically strengthens – the bond between the two male lovers, and this third element is often itself a potential object of desire. Similarly to Girard's account, the third element is unstable and shifting, often alternating between one or the other external influences. However, in Ozon's representations of homosexual desire it is harder to distinguish rivals from objects of desire because, contrary to Girard's model, the positions of power and desire are constantly changing and all subjects are potential objects of desire or identification. The triangle itself as a model breaks down; it would indeed be a mistake to erect the triangle as stable ground for sexual relationships because it proves to be just as unstable as the couple.

Figure 5



It is Léo who, in *Gouttes d'eau*, is the mediator through whom Franz enacts his desire. Franz is shown as being of uncertain sexuality, admitting his indifference to heterosexual sex: 'ce n'est pas tellement important. Je n'y prends pas non plus tellement de plaisir' and responding to Léopold's sexual advances with indecisiveness: 'pourquoi pas?' and 'demain j'aurai de nouveau les idées claires', as if this homosexual 'blip' will be over the next morning. Yet Franz is clearly attracted by Léopold's confidence and status as the dominant male, falling

²¹ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p. 21.

into the role of the subjugated and bullied partner. Ozon's cinematography emphasises Franz's youth and delicate features, often filming his pale bare slender legs as Franz moves round the apartment only in his underpants and a red jumper (see Figure 5). Léo also physically fits the bill to enact the fantasy which Franz experienced as a young boy and may be another reason for Franz's attraction to Léo. As Franz recounts his homoerotic fantasy with Handel's *Zadok the Priest* playing in the background building to a quasi-sexual crescendo, he describes the physical attributes of his older male seducer:

LEO: Comment étaient ses jambes?

FRANZ: Musclées. Comme un footballeur.

LEO: Avait-il des poils sur la poitrine ?

FRANZ: Oui, une vraie forêt vierge.

What finally seems to convince Franz that he could indeed sleep with Léo is that he has the same physical features as his fantasy seducer; when Léo replies in the affirmative to Franz's question: 'avez-vous des jambes de footballeur et du poil sur la poitrine?', Franz seems persuaded that Léo will help him fulfil his fantasy. Franz enacts his homosexual desire through a third element, his childhood fantasy. In order to seduce Franz, Léo has to dress in a coat like the man in Franz's dream to recreate the *mise-en-scène* of his desire. Franz also confesses a transgender fantasy, as he describes how the older man penetrates him: 'il est rentré dans moi, comme dans une fille. Il s'est simplement couché sur moi comme si j'étais une fille, et j'en étais sans doute une, en rêve'. So Franz lies on the bed, waiting for Léo's arrival, his hands covering his genitals. It is telling that Franz feels like a girl – one thinks of the cross-gender identification that takes place for the protagonist of *La Vie en rose* – and that Véra actually changes biological sex for Léo. Jeffreys' work on *Beauty and Misogyny* might open up the secret of Franz's childhood fantasy.

She records the phenomenon of autogynephilia, which a US psychologist has identified as male sexual arousal from thinking of himself as a female.²² This might also explain Léo's wish for Véra to undergo a sex change, as vicariously fulfilling what Jeffreys calls 'a form of sexual deviation stemming from the desire for masochistic sexual excitement'.²³ Thus the identification between Véra and Franz when they finally meet is stronger than one might expect; although both born as biological males, their relationship with Léo repeats heterosexual stereotypes of a dominant male and 'passive' female. As we shall see, Butler points out that these gender roles are not easily escaped, not even by gay males. Jeffreys agrees that there is no avoiding heteronormative dynamics of power: 'Within gay culture, as within heterosexual culture, the idea that there is an alternative to either the gender of dominance or the gender of subordination is still not well understood'.²⁴

Not only is Léo physically more imposing than Franz, but he is also in a stronger position of economic power; Léo often refers to his job and the financial stability it gives him. Moreover, his relative wealth means his sexual advances are less likely to be refused; as he says to Franz in Fassbinder's play: 'Regardez, quand on a de l'argent en banque, par exemple, on peut aborder les gens avec beaucoup plus d'assurance'.²⁵ Although Léo says nothing so explicit in Ozon's version, the camerawork establishes Léo as the dominant character. After their game of Ludo, Léo quizzes Franz about his schooling and family background; while he talks, the camera moves in a clockwise circle as Léo circles Franz (who stays still) in an anticlockwise direction, as if trying to calculate the right moment to pounce on his prey. Franz is visibly impressed by Léo's comfortable apartment and he refers to his struggle to find suitable accommodation for himself and Anna; Franz is drawn to Léo as a more powerful consumer in capitalist society. Léo also

²² Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny*, p. 50.

²³ Ibid, p. 51.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 53.

²⁵ Fassbinder, *Gouttes dans l'océan*, p. 13.

undoubtedly has more life experience than the younger Franz; this is why Ozon insists on Léo being so much older than Franz. Twice Léo's sexual prowess and experience are mentioned, firstly by Léo himself when Anna tells him of the passionate love-making she and Franz have had while he was away; Léo thinks he is responsible for their sexual pleasure:

ANNA: Nous avons fait l'amour pendant deux jours presque sans interruption.
Nous y avons pris beaucoup de plaisir.

LEO: C'est normal. J'ai appris tant de choses. C'est à moi que vous devriez être reconnaissants.

ANNA: Mais je vous suis reconnaissante. Et comment que je vous suis reconnaissante, n'est-ce pas, Franz?

Véra similarly testifies to Léo's sexual expertise as she explains his hold over her to Franz in the final act; she states 'il m'a tout appris du sexe', confiding in Franz that it was Léo who enabled her (albeit transsexual) passage into adulthood: 'j'étais un garçon et je suis devenue femme'. Both their sexual awakenings were mediated by Léopold; he appears to be the nonpareil of sexual performance, to be both copied and desired.

As the dominant male at the 'apex' of the triangle, Léo is able to subdue his lovers into servile roles; this is clear when he orders Anna and Véra around, asking them to fetch his slippers and prepare food for him. One can only assume that this is how he treated Franz, and how Franz has slipped into the seemingly heteronormative role of stay-at-home wife. Initially Franz seems to blossom with the discovery, or acceptance, of his 'feminine' side. At the beginning of Acte II he wallows in a long bath and then carries out his toilette: he plucks his eyebrows, cuts his toenails and blowdries his hair in front of the three-pannelled bathroom

mirror.²⁶ We wonder whether Franz takes genuine pleasure in grooming himself or whether he is unconsciously complying with the cultural myth that a wife should take care to please her husband when he comes home from work. Léo certainly believes he deserves special attention when he comes home after a day's work; he snaps at Franz's responses, demands refreshment, and even complains that Franz makes a noise as he walks, saying: 'tu ne peux pas marcher un peu moins bruyamment?'. It is Franz who vacuums, prepares dinner and goes out to buy more cigarettes, thus displaying all the signs of domestic drudgery one might expect to see in a downtrodden wife. At one point Franz even wears an apron, that universal symbol of domesticity. Jeffreys eloquently explains the conflicting forces of desire that Franz may be experiencing; she suggests that: 'Masculinity and femininity, the behaviours of male dominance and female subordination, cannot be imagined without each other. In gay male culture an individual man can enjoy an oscillation between "butch" masculinity and a degrading form of femininity for sexual excitement'.²⁷ It seems for a brief moment that Anna will provide Franz with a way out from this destructive and oppressive relationship, but instead of freeing him from cultural gender roles he turns on Anna, treating her as a lesser being, just as Léo treated him.

In *Gouttes d'eau*, then, Ozon shows how problematic queer desire is; it is the nature of desire to form attachments, but these solidify too readily into conventional models of binary sexuality and ultimately a new desire breaks up these couplings. There seems to be an inherent magnetism of heteronormative models which individuals can drift towards and cling on to, but at the same time in *Gouttes d'eau* there is a sense of queer resistance which attempts to move away from such models and indeed to threaten the very foundations on which they are

²⁶ The poetry Franz recites in the bath is, both in Fassbinder's play and Ozon's film, extracts from Heinrich Heine's *Buch der Lieder* (*Book of Songs*, 1827). This reference once again emphasises Franz's romantic ideas which jars with the reality of his everyday life.

²⁷ Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny*, p. 95.

based, in part by revealing their artificiality. There is, therefore, a waxing and waning of heteronormative patterns in *Gouttes d'eau*, a movement which both emphasises the insidiousness of heteronormativity and at the same time suggests a way to resist it. There is also a suggestion that it is difficult to make 'progress' in terms of understanding and expressing queerer models of behaviour in relationships; as Robert McRuer says (as we saw in Chapter 2), 'some things *don't* keep getting better'.²⁸ The myth of futurity, as understood by Edelman as we shall see, would assume that the future brings progress, whereas, in fact, queer negativity would accept the inevitability of normative social structures while attempting to resist them. Indeed there does not appear to be any way out.

Queer Negativity

The failure of the romantic couple has deeper repercussions when viewed through the lens of queer theory. For Edelman, abandoning the couple as the model for relationships is not merely a recognition of the nature of desire, but an opportunity to show queer resistance. Queer desire, according to Edelman, is the negative of heterosexual desire, which is concerned with the future and reproduction of children; queer subjects, therefore, refuse futurity and recognise instead the destructive nature of desire.²⁹ Edelman, drawing on Freudian and Lacanian understandings of the association between desire and death, rails against the tyranny of what he describes as 'reproductive futurism', that is, the assumption of heteronormativity that the future lies with children, which hence endorses heteronormative ideologies and reproductive sexualities. He asks if there is another 'side' to this world view and calls for queer resistance to it. This resistance results in negativity because queer resistance strives for the end of the social order

²⁸ McRuer, *Crip Theory*, p. 177.

²⁹ See my discussion of Romain becoming a father in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

as we know it; Edelman argues that 'the ups and downs of political fortune may measure the social order's pulse, but *queerness*, by contrast, figures, outside and beyond its political symptoms, the place of the social order's death drive'.³⁰ The paradox, however, lies in the fact that queerness can resist the social structure but cannot be entirely cut off from the same social structure. Edelman does not avoid discussion of such contradictions but he does believe that there is (positive?) value in negativity and suggests that 'rather than rejecting [...] this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it'.³¹ Without entering into discussions, similar to the Cretan liar paradox,³² of whether there can be 'positive' value in negativity, one must recognise that the representation of sexuality in Ozon's *Gouttes d'eau* is bleak and that perhaps Edelman's theory can help explain the tragic overtones with which the film is imbued.

Although Franz's death makes a marked impact at the end of *Gouttes d'eau*, there are references to death throughout the film. In Act II Léo, wracked with guilt, confesses to Franz that he was indirectly responsible for a man's suicide (p. 33) – this foreshadow's Franz's death and endows Léo with deadly powers from the early stages of the film. Franz, in a moment of boredom after finishing his household chores, pulls a gun out of Léo's desk drawer and pretends to shoot himself in the head; later, he imagines killing Léo with, one imagines, the same gun. The violence culminates in Franz's on-set suicide, implying that a non-normative lifestyle can lead to death. In Chapter 3 I discussed the problematic connotations of Ozon's allusion to the heteronormative myth that gay sexuality is associated with death, so I will not go into this here. One wonders, nevertheless, what the viewer is meant to make of Ozon's film which ends in a gay death. One

³⁰ Edelman, *No Future*, p. 3.

³¹ Ibid, p. 4.

³² I here refer to the problem of logic which is known as the 'Cretan liar paradox'.

might better understand the relation between sex and death by turning to theorists Sheila Jeffreys and David Halperin. Instead of inferring that negativity is an inherent (or chosen) characteristic of queer sexuality, Jeffreys puts forward a theory which places the blame elsewhere for the harm gay men cause themselves, suggesting that it is their low social status which drives them to self-harm, a fate they share with women: 'The harms of misogyny, sexual and physical abuse and gayhating, create the ability of those who self-mutilate to disassociate emotionally from their bodies, and to blame their bodies for their distress'.³³ Thus it is heteronormative ideology which fires self-hatred and body dysmorphia in alternatively-gendered subjects. The image of the butcher in Bruno Rolland's *Quelque chose de différent* is another poignant example of a self-harming gay male.³⁴ Throughout the *court métrage* we see him shaving off his facial and body hair (small acts which reveal his unhappiness of living in an adult male body), but one of the final scenes shows him injecting himself in the thigh when in the bathroom. We do not know why or what the man is injecting, but we see this through the eyes of the butcher's young captive, who is watching through the keyhole and who feels so much pity for the butcher that he decides not to execute his escape. The butcher's loneliness and pain or disease are seen as the ineluctable fate of the queer subject.

The despair these subjects experience can lead to extreme solutions, as Jeffreys goes on to explain: 'Adult self-hating gay men sometimes do not consider their bodies worth anything but punishment and this can extend to death'.³⁵ Thus one begins to suspect that Franz's desperation is not a solitary example of a gay suicide and that his unhappiness lies deeper than in mere disappointment at being jilted by his lovers Léo and Anna. One notes that Edelman, despite his discourse of

³³ Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny*, p. 168.

³⁴ Bruno Rolland, 1995 (another short in the BFI collection *Majorettes in Space*).

³⁵ Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny*, p. 168.

negativity and the death drive, does not enter into a sociological debate, preferring to situate his theory in abstract concepts of futurity and its absence. Jeffreys, however, is more convincing than Edelman when she explains the self-destructive instinct of gay males by their exclusion from the dominant patriarchal ideology, saying that 'the importance of sadomasochism in queer culture needs to be understood politically as arising from the loss of dominant masculine status that men suffer through homosexuality'.³⁶ Franz, on the other hand, may view himself more as a romantic hero who commits suicide because of unrequited love, as in the genre of romantic suicides, of which Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) is a prime example. Léopold also believes that this is a show put on for his benefit, dismissing Franz's death as play-acting. It is in the end, though, Franz's frustration and loneliness, brought about by the destructive relationships he enters, that close all his exits bar death.

Edelman explains queer resistance with the metaphor that 'we might rather, figuratively, cast our vote for "none of the above", for the primacy of a constant *no* in response to the law of the Symbolic'.³⁷ Although one wonders how it would work in a democracy if everyone were to vote for 'none of the above', and how queerness which promises 'absolutely nothing' can function, Edelman's distrust of heteronormative ideologies is worth considering. He notes how, in our social order, 'we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child'.³⁸ Citing a novel by P.D. James, *The Children of Men* (now a successful film),³⁹ in which the human race is barren and on the brink of extinction, Edelman identifies the ruling ideology implicit here: no child means no future; indeed the novel steers clear of any queer

³⁶ Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny*, pp. 151-152. Jeffreys is quoting her own work from 2003, *Unpacking Queer Politics*.

³⁷ Edelman, *No Future*, p. 5.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 11.

³⁹ *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006).

resistance, ending with a birth, suggesting hope and redemption. Thus, says Edelman, non-normative and non-reproductive sexualities are stigmatised: 'If, however, there is *no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and inevitably, life itself'.⁴⁰ Ozon's *Gouttes d'eau*, along with Edelman, rejects procreative ideologies, ending instead without the possibility of heteronormative reproduction. It is telling that on learning that Franz is dead, Anna, rather than mourning the loss of her lover, grieves for the loss of the promise of children, saying: 'Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Qui est-ce qui va faire mes enfants maintenant? Ils devaient s'appeler Franz et Léopold!'. Queerness has taken away the possibility of children from Anna. Her distress is perhaps caused by the anxiety that she too will join the ranks of the queer, those who are, according to Edelman, 'stigmatized for failing to comply with heteronormative mandates'.⁴¹ Thus the ending of *Gouttes d'eau* leaves us with death, with no 'hope' for the future, and with no way out.

Queer Heritage

Queer theory is not the only way to understand the negativity present in *Gouttes d'eau*; Ozon's cinematic inheritance also provides a clue to the reason why the director is fascinated with bleak portrayals of human sexuality. With *Gouttes d'eau* Ozon makes explicit reference to Rainer Werner Fassbinder, a German director he admires greatly, by basing his film on a Fassbinder play. The older director could be said to be Ozon's queer cinematic 'godfather' and is alluded to in many of Ozon's films, but his influence is never so present as in *Gouttes d'eau*. In his

⁴⁰ Edelman, *No Future*, p. 13.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 17.

review of the film, Tony Rayns, in *Time Out*, deals a backhanded compliment, saying that 'cynics would argue that this is so much more achieved than Ozon's first two features because there was a real script', though he concludes that 'it manages to be 90 per cent pure Fassbinder and 90 per cent pure Ozon'.⁴² Rayns' remarks may gloss over the differences between the two writers and directors, but the extent of Fassbinder's influence cannot be denied. *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* is therefore Ozon's third feature film and his most explicitly theatrical and 'gay' film to date. Although theatricality is a recurrent theme in his work (as we have seen in *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes*), none is so steeped in theatre as *Gouttes d'eau*, which makes this Ozonian work particularly fruitful for a study of gender performances. Having watched *Tropfen auf heiße Steine* at the theatre, Ozon was inspired to adapt this early Fassbinder theatre play to the cinema screen, and unusually he felt he did not have to write an original screenplay, for as he says in interview: 'j'ai réalisé que je n'avais pas besoin d'un scénario original, puisque cette pièce existait, et qu'elle correspondait à ce que j'avais envie de raconter'.⁴³ So not only is *Gouttes d'eau* a theatrical film, but it also, fundamentally, already has a theatrical source. With *Gouttes d'eau* Ozon enters into areas of influence which his previous features did not tackle head on, specifically, gay and bisexual cinema. By choosing Fassbinder as his intertextual inspiration Ozon deliberately stakes a claim in the homosexual 'canon'.⁴⁴ Fassbinder also served as a precedent for a Franco-German connection with his version of Jean Genet's *Querelle de*

⁴² Tony Rayns,
http://www.timeout.com/film/newyork/reviews/64276/Water_Drops_on_Burning_Rocks.html,
 accessed 7/7/07.

⁴³ See Ozon website, 'Entretiens à propos de *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*',
<http://www.francois-ozon.com/fr/entretiens-gouttes-eau-sur-pierres-brulantes>, Interview with
 Jacques Grant, accessed 25/02/07.

⁴⁴ For questions of the gay 'canon', see the Introduction to Owen Heathcote, Alex Hughes and James S. Williams, eds, *Gay Signatures: Gay and Lesbian Theory, Fiction and Film in France, 1945-1995* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), pp. 1-25.

Brest, Genet himself a touchstone for French gay literature.⁴⁵ *Querelle* (1982) was Fassbinder's last film and was screened posthumously. Fassbinder died young, at 37, having completed an outstanding number of works (33 feature films, 4 video films and 30 stage plays), his average output totalling four films a year.⁴⁶

Fassbinder and Ozon share other common ground, other than being successful film-makers at a relatively early age, no doubt because the older director formed part of Ozon's cultural and cinematic heritage, although Ozon, in characteristic manner, downplays the extent of Fassbinder's influence on him, saying with great understatement: 'j'ai toujours admiré Fassbinder'.⁴⁷ What is more telling of Fassbinder's influence on Ozon is that in *Gouttes d'eau* the French director has changed the name of Léopold's first gay lover from Peter to Werner (Fassbinder's middle name), in a playful nod to the film's origins, by which we might infer that Ozon's feelings towards Fassbinder are less anodyne than pure 'admiration'. By choosing Werner as a name for Léo's lover, there is a hint of sexual attraction in Ozon's fascination with, and respect of, the figure of Fassbinder. In his account of the German director, playwright and actor, Christian Braad Thomsen states that Fassbinder did not believe in successful emotional relationships between individuals, a conviction which he explored in his anti-bourgeois, social criticism against institutions such as marriage. Due to his unusual upbringing, Thomsen argues, Fassbinder was disenchanted with the normative nuclear family as the sole means of understanding kinship. Thus there is a shared core between the two directors, a common attitude towards normative sexualities. The German director also had a conflicting relationship with his father; as Thomsen states: 'Fassbinder's relationship to his father evidently oscillated between oedipal

⁴⁵ See *Gay Signatures*, p. 12 and Christopher Robinson, *Scandal in the ink: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-century French Literature* (London: Cassell, 1995), p. 44: 'The first phase of gay male writing proper, from Proust to Genet via Cocteau' and pp. 57-67.

⁴⁶ For these and other facts about Rainer Werner Fassbinder, see Thomsen, *Fassbinder*.

⁴⁷ 'Entretiens à propos de *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*', Ozon website.

fantasies such as murder [...] and a deep longing to be accepted and loved'.⁴⁸ We can see in this account similarities between Thomsen's description of Fassbinder and Ozon's early shorts in particular *Photo de famille*, in which the protagonist kills his father along with the rest of his family.⁴⁹ However accurate Thomsen's account of Fassbinder, we can see how seeds of influence may have planted themselves into Ozon's culture as a film student and how a vision of the non-normative family may have given rise to films such as *Sitcom* and *8 Femmes*.

Moreover, Ozon, like other gay male film directors, shares with Fassbinder a preference for working with women.⁵⁰ Thomsen quotes Fassbinder during an interview he conducted with the director in 1975: 'with women you can cry and scream, and make them do a lot of things while with men it easily gets boring'.⁵¹ Fassbinder's remarks are provocative for they give the impression he sees female actresses – if not all women – as hysterical individuals, but whatever his 'real' opinion of the female subject, he is clearly fascinated by them, much as Ozon himself is. It is perhaps that Ozon sees women as able to 'perform' emotions in a way in which men are less able. We shall investigate later the relationship between camp and female 'gay icons'.

Although this chapter is not intended to be a comparative study between Fassbinder and Ozon as playwrights/screenwriters and directors, this is a good place to flag up some of the differences that Ozon has worked into Fassbinder's original script. There is no question that Fassbinder's early play contains the germs of what promises to be a microscopic and claustrophobic view of a relationship between two men. Ozon has built on Fassbinder's script and taken it further; notably Ozon has queered the plot and camped up the visual aesthetics, mainly

⁴⁸ Thomsen, *Fassbinder*, p. 7.

⁴⁹ See Chapter 1.

⁵⁰ We have seen Ozon's fascination with women in *8 Femmes*, *Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool* in particular, see Chapters 2 and 3. See the exchange of articles and correspondence on Almodóvar's *Volver* (2006) in *Sight and Sound* between Paul Julian Smith and Peter Matthews in the issues of June 2006, September 2006, and October 2006

⁵¹ Thomsen, *Fassbinder*, p. 30.

through décor and music, while there are several differences in the scripts which should be pointed out here. Ozon, like Fassbinder, does not dwell on the 'honeymoon' period of a new relationship in which 'romance' is alive and well, and unlike classic narrative cinema the film does not end with a romantic clinch. The action soon focuses on the petty disagreements and 'divergences' which arise, as the plot synopsis from the DVD jacket states: 'un jour survient une petite chose sans importance sur laquelle ils ne peuvent pas être d'accord, une divergence. A partir de là, il n'y a plus de "nous commun", mais seulement des divergences'.⁵² In fact it is 'les divergences' which provide the fascination for Ozon; even the choice of vocabulary is telling: 'divergence' implies that Ozon is not just interested in emotional differences, but also in behaviour which is divergent from the norm and which interrupts the normative vision of binary sexuality. The first discrepancy between Fassbinder's and Ozon's scripts is Léopold's age – he is fifty and Franz is nineteen in the DVD synopsis. In Fassbinder's version the age difference between Franz and Léopold is not so great: Franz is twenty, Léopold is thirty-five. Although Léopold guesses that Franz is about nineteen, Franz corrects him, saying: 'J'ai vingt ans. J'ai eu mon anniversaire la semaine dernière'.⁵³ Ozon, on the other hand, insists on Franz's youth (still an adolescent) and Léopold is fifty or above – in plot synopses he is described as 'quinquagénaire'.⁵⁴ This generational gap strengthens the inequality of power between the two men. Fassbinder moreover insists on Léopold's financial security and buyer-power; although this is visible in Ozon's screen version, the dialogue does not choose to emphasize it. Furthermore Léopold's position of power, in both versions, is seen to be dangerous, as we have seen.

⁵² See my discussion of the romantic clinch in Hollywood movies in Chapter 5.

⁵³ Fassbinder, *Gouttes dans l'océan*, p. 9.

⁵⁴ See Jean-Luc Brunet, 'Ozon se fait Fassbinder', http://cinema.aliceadsl.fr/film/avis_redaction/default.aspx?filmid=FI010348, accessed 25/02/07.

Another significant change Ozon makes to Fassbinder's script is to render the character of Véra more ambiguous. Although Thomsen, in his brief summary of *Tropfen auf Heisse Steine*, refers to Véra as Léopold's ex-wife, there is no indication in the original text that they were ever married.⁵⁵ In the French translation Léopold says that he had lived with a woman for seven years and that they subsequently left each other, but there is no mention of a formalised union. Even when Véra enters the action, Léopold does nothing to explain his relationship with her, limiting himself to a very simple introduction, saying to her: 'Chérie, c'est Franz, je t'en ai parlé récemment' and to Franz, 'Elle, c'est Véra. Mais je t'en ai sûrement parlé'.⁵⁶ The only indication of their past intimacy is Léopold's use of 'chérie'. Both Véra and Franz deny that Léopold had mentioned the 'rival', for this would only validate their importance, both to Léopold and to themselves. Whether Léopold and Véra were married or not is clearly not the question here – but had they indeed been married, Fassbinder would be underlining the ill-fated outcome of bourgeois marriage, and the fact that they both succumbed to a heteronormative model. It is, rather, that Véra's identity as a biological female is never questioned. However, Ozon is quick to introduce this queer element, borrowed, as Falcon points out, from Fassbinder's *In a Year with 13 Moons*.⁵⁷ In Ozon's film Léopold ambivalently introduces Véra as 'ma vieille copine... je devrais dire, mon vieil copain'. Anna politely greets her with 'Bonjour Madame', but the irony of this appellation can surely not escape Ozon's viewer. Later on Véra confesses to Franz that she spent all her money on her sex-change operation in order to please Léopold. Léo tells us more crudely that 'il s'est coupé la bite à Casablanca'. What is of particular interest here is that although for the plot Véra is a post-operational

⁵⁵ See Thomsen, *Fassbinder*, pp. 46-47.

⁵⁶ Fassbinder, *Gouttes dans l'océan*, pp. 51-2.

⁵⁷ Falcon, 'Water Drops On Burning Rocks'.

transsexual, the actress Anna Thomson (or Anna Levine as she is sometimes known) is a biological female.

Although it is not uncommon in cinema to find female actresses who play the part of male drag queens, it is more usual to find this trope in comedy in which the main drive and source of gags is the dysphoria of gender playing.⁵⁸ Dressing as the other sex rarely provides the necessary escape or conventional happy ending – see *Nuns on the Run* (1990) and *Some Like It Hot* (1959). Knowing Thomson's biological sex unsettles the viewer's perception of Véra's (and Thomson's own) gender identity for there is a blurring of the line between life and art: a transsexual on the set but a woman in 'real' life who is prepared to see the artifice in her own performance of femininity. Here, a woman playing the part of a male-to-female transsexual is not something to laugh at; this causes the disorientation. Thomson captures something of this paradox in an interview, included in the DVD bonus tracks, saying that: 'dans la vie je suis une femme mais en même temps il y a quelque chose fausse [sic] dans le sens que... on fait plus femme dans les films, on joue plus sexy'. Thomson goes on to say that after four years' acting the part of Marilyn Monroe she began to doubt her own identity as a woman: 'j'ai vraiment pensé que je suis "transsexual" parce que j'ai vu que je ... c'était faux, que j'étais pas Marilyn Monroe, mais j'étais tellement paniquée que j'ai pensé, en fin de journée, que je ne suis même pas une femme'. Thomson's awareness of gender performance may offer an explanation for why she was particularly drawn to playing a transsexual in Ozon's film.

Thomson's former career as a dancer explains her thin, long-limbed, yet lithe, body. Although in interview (on the DVD bonus tracks) she mentions that she did weigh more in the past, in *Gouttes d'eau* her body looks emaciated; her thinness, moreover, contrasts with her full breasts and lips. Whether or not they are

⁵⁸ See *Connie and Carla* (Michael Lembeck, 2004), in which Toni Collette and Nia Vardalos dress up as drag queens.

surgically enhanced, they indeed look as if they are, thus resembling a male-to-female transsexual who has undergone cosmetic surgery to perform conventional 'femininity'. Whether Véra/Thomson is biologically female or not, she enacts a post-operational gender identity and displays a body changed by cosmetic surgery. One suspects Ozon chose this particular actress deliberately because of her ambiguous look on screen, much as he chose Rampling for her slim body and heavy eyelids in *Sous le sable* and *Swimming Pool*, or Jeanne Moreau for her ageing and cosmetically changed body in *Le Temps qui reste*.⁵⁹ There is indeed in Ozon's œuvre a strong sense of the link between gender identity and the specific body that performs it. However, it is not enough to imply that cosmetic surgery has aided our ability to 'bend' gender, or that Ozon's representation of it is unproblematic. Indeed, Ozon's choice of transsexual model is questionable. Here there is not the same sense of freedom suggested by Almodóvar's transgendered protagonists in *Todo sobre mi madre* – such as Agrado and Lola, whose struggle for a body and a sexuality with which they feel comfortable provides part of their fascination. Almodóvar's film implies that transvestism is a ludic and successful transgression of gender. Instead, Ozon's film portrays a transsexual who performs the cultural norms expected of a 'female' body. However, it is not Ozon's project to provide celebratory and liberating models for transgendered individuals; instead *Gouttes d'eau* tells of the oppressive social order and how it is experienced by non-normative subjects. Ozon clearly portrays the pain underlying Véra's transformation and she is thus seen as a victim of heteronormative hegemony. Véra represents for Franz what might happen to him were he to stay with Léo; at the very best, if he stays alive, he would become a subjugated shadow of himself. A staged death is ultimately a more attractive option.

⁵⁹ See discussions in Chapter 3.

Camp Performances

So far this chapter has shown how bleak the portrayal of human sexuality is in *Gouttes d'eau*; the fate of the characters and the roles they inhabit resist heteronormative patterns while at the same time revealing the inevitability of destructive gender roles in relationships. This reading does not, however, take into account the comedy and light-hearted sequences in the film which can be understood broadly as elements of camp, manifested in the music, dances, *mise-en-scène*, costumes and overall theatricality of the movie. This chapter argues that Ozon has rendered his filmic version more camp than Fassbinder's original play. One might ask what is meant exactly by the use of the term 'camp' in this context and how it relates to queer film-making. In order to understand the concept of camp and gay sensibility (for the two are inextricably linked) I turn to works by Jack Babuscio and Richard Dyer. The latter, in his essay 'It's being so camp as keeps us going', offers 'two different interpretations which connect at certain points: camping about, mincing and screaming; and a certain taste in art and entertainment, a certain sensibility'.⁶⁰ For Jack Babuscio, in *Gays and Film*, 'camp is never a thing or person *per se*, but, rather, a relationship between activities, individuals, situations *and* gayness'.⁶¹ Babuscio argues that camp is identified by the looker rather than the looked-at, but goes on to say that there are some common characteristics to be recognised: 'four features are basic to camp: irony, aestheticism, theatricality and humour'. The camp aesthetics in *Gouttes d'eau* demonstrate how, in Babuscio's words: 'camp aims to transform the ordinary into something more spectacular'.⁶² Babuscio cites clothes and décor – themes especially relevant for *Gouttes d'eau* – as 'a means of asserting one's identity'; he

⁶⁰ Dyer, *The Culture of Queers*, p. 49.

⁶¹ Jack Babuscio, 'Camp and the gay sensibility' in Richard Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film* (London: BFI, 1977), pp. 40-57 (pp. 40-41).

⁶² Babuscio, 'Camp and the gay sensibility', p. 41, p. 43.

gives Fassbinder's *Fox and His Friends* as one such example. He emphasises that 'in terms of style, [camp] signifies performance rather than existence'. In particular, camp style goes too far:

Camp is often exaggerated. When the stress on style is 'outrageous' or 'too much' it results in incongruities: the emphasis shifts from what a thing or a person *is* to what it *looks* like; from *what* is being done to *how* it is being done.⁶³

One might indeed argue that some of Ozon's other films, especially *8 Femmes* and *Sitcom*, are 'camp' films, but, unlike *Gouttes d'eau*, they do not take place in a gay setting. It is useful to look at the use of costume and décor in *Gouttes d'eau* as well as in a couple of Ozon's 'gay' shorts in order to determine the place that camp sensibility holds in queer film-making.

In Fassbinder's play, Léopold is clearly in touch with his creative, 'feminine', side; he takes great pride in the interior design of his apartment: 'je me suis donné un mal fou à arranger ce logement avec un certain chic'.⁶⁴ Here it is Léopold who is obsessed by appearance and surface beauty – belying an interest in camp aesthetics. However, for the film, it is Ozon who takes on the role of interior designer and he indulges in details from the 1960s and 1970s, enjoying the fact that 'ces années ont été beaucoup plus flamboyantes pour les Allemands qu'en France'. Scott notes Ozon's use of 'shag carpets, oversize books bound in white leather, a fat rotary-dial telephone'.⁶⁵ These were just everyday items for Fassbinder, whereas for Ozon they hold fascination and are worth reproducing; this makes Ozon's use of similar décor camp in the way that the original play was not. Ozon himself comments, presumably somewhat tongue-in-cheek: 'j'ai essayé d'éviter au maximum l'effet mode actuel de ces années, en atténuant tout le

⁶³ Babuscio, 'Camp and the gay sensibility', p. 44.

⁶⁴ Fassbinder, *Gouttes dans l'océan*, p. 17.

⁶⁵ Scott, 'Leopold & Franz & Anna & Vera in Berlin'.

folklore rétro et les clichés qui en découlent. Avec le décorateur, nous avons voulu garder du mobilier et des ambiances des années 60 et ne pas trop marquer l'époque'.⁶⁶ Furthermore, it is Franz in Ozon's version who enjoys special camp status; at the beginning of the second act, after his bath, Franz appears wearing traditional Bavarian *Lederhosen* (leather trousers) with matching *Hosenträger* (suspenders), as in Figure 6. The sight is comical, as the shortness of the trousers once more emphasises his thin legs and one suspects it was hardly common to wear such traditional costume around the house in the 1970s. *Lederhosen* as a cultural item have somewhat camp associations: they are, after all, made of leather – itself a material with sexual and/or sado-masochistic connotations.⁶⁷ There is no hint of such a costume in the stage directions; Fassbinder merely writes 'il a une culotte courte et une chemise blanche à manches courtes', which seems nondescript, if revealing, attire.⁶⁸



Figure 6

The bleak negativity of *Gouttes d'eau*, illustrated in the first part of this chapter, is mitigated therefore by the camp aesthetics present in Ozon's film, in particular by the use of music and dance; but to what extent camp functions as resistance or buffer to negativity remains to be seen. In fact, it may not be that there is a clear opposition between queer negativity and camp; they might rather

⁶⁶ Ozon website, 'Entretiens à propos de *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*'.

⁶⁷ For an account of leather and its associations, see Dyer, *The Culture of Queers*, p. 67.

⁶⁸ Fassbinder, *Gouttes dans l'océan*, p. 24.

be two sides of the same coin. Richard Dyer, in *The Culture of Queers*, argues just this, that camp can be a medium of queer resistance rather than avoidance of it; he describes one of the positive attributes of camp as putting ‘thorns in the flesh of straight society’.⁶⁹ Camp, believes Dyer, does provide a way out from heteronormativity: ‘camp is a way of being human, witty and vital, without conforming to the drabness and rigidity of the hetero male role’.⁷⁰ However, Dyer’s queer culture has a playfulness that is lacking in Edelman’s view of queer resistance; Dyer claims that the essays collected in *The Culture of Queers* ‘were not written to redress the balance, to put back the negativity in queer’, but rather they attempt to ‘hold together a sense of oppression *and* resistance, negativity *and* play’.⁷¹ This fine balance seems closer to what Ozon tries to achieve in *Gouttes d’eau*; his use of music and choreography are particularly full of a sense of fun.

Before Ozon’s entrée into the cinematic world of the musical with *8 Femmes* he was obviously already drawn to the challenge of incorporating choreography and music into the diegetic action of *Gouttes d’eau*. Fassbinder’s play features some music, mainly when Franz sings alone in the flat at the beginning of Acte II and he listens twice to Handel’s Hallelujah chorus. However, in Ozon’s version, the musical references are multiplied and Franz especially enjoys theatrical moments. During the film Franz conducts an imaginary orchestra to Verdi’s *Dies irae* (see Figure 7), recites poetry in the bath, listens to dramatic music such as Handel’s *Zadok the Priest*, mostly to Léopold’s consternation. The ultimate camp moment is the sequence in which the four characters dance to Holiday’s *Tanze Samba Mit Mir*.⁷² As both Babuscio and Dyer testify, the musical holds a particular fascination for gay sensibility: the stylisation and exaggeration, and the

⁶⁹ Dyer, *The Culture of Queers*, p. 50.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 49.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 7.

⁷² The attraction of this sequence to audiences is recognised by some DVD editions of the film which include a karaoke version of ‘Tanze Samba Mit Mir’.

emphasis on the surface, which all go hand in hand with the Hollywood musical, mean that it is, for Babuscio, 'a film *genre* saturated with camp'.⁷³

Figure 7



Even the stars of musicals have become gay icons, for example Judy Garland, thanks to her intensity of character. Dyer indeed dedicates an entire chapter to Garland in *Heavenly Bodies*;⁷⁴ Babuscio explains a part of this fascination: 'camp as a response to performance springs from the gay sensibility's preference for the *intensities* of character, as opposed to its content'.⁷⁵ Babuscio goes on to say: 'allied to this is the fact that many of us seem to equate our own strongly-felt sense of oppression (past or present) with the suffering/loneliness/misfortunes of the star both on and off the screen'.⁷⁶ The choreography of *Tanze Samba Mit Mir*, in the line-up of the characters and their gestures, reminds the viewer of the musical genre as well as the kind of disco dance one might have performed in the 1970s. Franz does not, however, enjoy dancing when commanded to by his older lover; during the sequence he appears awkward and ill at ease, not enjoying such a controlled expression of musical appreciation. This is, perhaps, because he is aware of the presence of his puppet-master and is beginning to try and escape the role Léopold assigns to him.

⁷³ Babuscio, 'Camp and the gay sensibility', p. 44.

⁷⁴ Dyer, 'Judy Garland and Gay Men' in *Heavenly Bodies*, pp. 141-194.

⁷⁵ Babuscio, 'Camp and the gay sensibility', pp. 46.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 46. See also Chapter 2 for an account of the musical and gay icons.

There is, on the other hand, a sense of freedom and enjoyment that temporarily renders *Gouttes d'eau* less claustrophobic. Léopold declares (more than once): 'je prends tellement peu de plaisir aux choses',⁷⁷ but he dances with enthusiasm and skill, though he tires of it even before the record has finished, turning the stereo off abruptly. Léo appears to be the embodiment of Edelman's negativity and tendency to self-destruction, able to distract himself from his *ennui* and *malaise* only temporarily with sex or music, but who always falls back to displeasure and dissatisfaction. However, for the brief time he is dancing, there is a certain freedom of the body in this expression of non-normative sexuality. Falcon comments insightfully on this brief sequence, saying that 'Ozon uses popular music, not to illustrate bathetically the longings of the characters as Fassbinder might have, but to manipulate audience mood'.⁷⁸ It is the effect on the viewing experience that is germane here, for it lifts the ominous and tense atmosphere. For Anna and Véra also, the dance seems to lift inhibitions and worries, either about their attractiveness (Véra) or their lack of clothes (Anna). We see this bodily pleasure in Ozon's short *Une robe d'été* also, in which one of the main characters dances to a song by Sheila, a French pop icon from the 1960s and 1970s, and whose song 'Bang Bang' was the song for the eponymous film by Serge Piolet.⁷⁹ Once again, Ozon has maximised the camp potential; Sébastien moves sensuously to the music, confidently displaying his lithe and near-naked body, although Luc, his boyfriend, has had enough of the other boy's camp theatricality: 'j'en ai marre de ta musique de folle'. Sébastien, however, emboldened by the music, does not care what the neighbours might think and gives a wonderful performance to Sheila's song.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ See Fassbinder, *Gouttes dans l'océan*, pp. 16 & 27.

⁷⁸ Falcon, 'Water Drops On Burning Rocks', *Sight and Sound*.

⁷⁹ 'Bang Bang' was originally sung by Nancy Sinatra and in another version by Cher; by choosing the French cover version of it Ozon has made the moment even more kitsch.

⁸⁰ The actor Sébastien Charles is also a choreographer for Ozon's film *8 Femmes*.

Figure 8



He performs Vogue-like movements (the singer Madonna is another gay icon), sensuously moving to the music, pointing a gun dramatically at the words 'bang bang'. He coyly turns the stereo on with his toes and then takes up position with his back to the audience, so that they might admire his well-rounded bottom encased in tight white boxer shorts. Ozon films Sébastien's routine on a 180° plane, framing the sequence between a washing line which gives the impression of theatre curtains on a stage (see Figure 8). We, not Luc, are the intended audience. Ozon, along with Sébastien, seems to revel in this display of camp; but there is more to this than mere surface. Sébastien is more comfortable with his sexuality than Luc, who denies he is gay when he has a fling with a girl on the beach. Sébastien, on the other hand, is able to embrace his non-normative sexuality, albeit through role-play and camp. There remains, thus, the suggestion that camp is an inherent factor in gay sensibility and can indeed enact queer resistance to heteronormative models.

These 'staged' performances by characters, in *Gouttes d'eau* and other Ozonian works, highlight the performativity of gender as understood by Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler draws on John L. Austin's and Derrida's notion of performativity in order to expound her understanding of gender.⁸¹ Butler sees that gender is authenticated, in compulsory heterosexuality, by its iterability: 'Gender is

⁸¹ Derrida investigates performativity in 'Signature, événement, contexte', in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972), pp. 365-393.

the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being'.⁸² On the one hand, gender as a performative act potentially releases subjects from heteronormative models of sexuality: 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'.⁸³ On the other hand, Butler's lexical choice indicates that these 'repeated acts' can fix, or 'congeal', the notion of gender – the very opposite of Butler's aim to recognise gender as shifting and fluid. One infers from her work that normative, repeated acts fix one in a specific gender, in a 'rigid' model, but whether we are conscious of it or not, this gender is still not 'real', whereas non-normative, subversive acts can undermine the notion of gender. This task will never prove to be easy, for heteronormative models are too insidious to escape; as an example Butler cites how lesbian sexualities are often seen in the heterosexual binary of 'butch' versus 'femme', or 'male', versus 'female', and in gay sexualities who is the 'giver' and who the 'receiver'. Thus even gay sexualities struggle to escape the role-playing of gender norms. Butler points out the artificiality of these roles: 'the replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy'.⁸⁴ The vocabulary Butler uses here (copy, parody, repetition) moves into the sphere of drama, performance, and theatricality, as we begin to realise that playing a gender is all about artifice and imitation of a non-existent 'original'.

As if to emphasise the performativity of gender, theatricality, one of the features of camp sensibility, is uppermost in *Gouttes d'eau*; Ozon has not tried to

⁸² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 43-44.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 22.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 41.

transpose Fassbinder's play seamlessly to the cinema screen; his cinematography instead reminds his audience of the theatrical origins of this story. At times, in fact, we wonder if we are watching a film or a play, and to what extent the characters are performing in 'real' life. This is done initially by maintaining the theatrical structure of acts, dividing the piece into four acts, closely following Fassbinder's format of the original. In his review of the film, Scott picks up on the double-entendre of 'acte' as the end of the first three acts coincides with an inferred (or seen) sexual act. Scott notes the repetition in the framing of these three scenes: 'each of the first three sections of the film concludes with a different character stretched out naked on the bed in anticipation of the attentions of another'.⁸⁵ In each of these *tableaux vivants* Ozon changes the position of the naked body only very slightly: Franz lies supine, his hands covering his genitals, in a more feminine 'passive' position, as if he is the little girl in his dream-fantasy; Léopold lies prone, exposing his well-rounded, firm, buttocks; Anna lies seductively on her side like Velazquez's Venus.⁸⁶ The mirroring of the bodies, and painterly *mise-en-scène* emphasises the artifice of these scenes, reminding the viewer that no movement or framing is accidental, that we are, in effect, watching a film. The juxtaposition of these three scenes also serves as an ironic comment on the relationships of the two couples involved. Although each couple is convinced of their romantic involvement, their love acts are not original, modelling themselves on a fantasy or desire originating outside of the bedroom. Anna even borrows Léo's striking black and yellow silk dressing gown, a further reminder that (despite appearances) they are not alone in their love nest. Moreover, as the coupling of Franz and Léo has become destructive and impossible, we doubt that Anna and Franz can work as a

⁸⁵ Scott, 'Leopold & Franz & Anna & Vera in Berlin'.

⁸⁶ Velázquez's *Venus* has recently captured the cultural imagination via the eponymous film by Roger Michell: *Venus* (2006), starring Peter O'Toole and Jodie Whittaker.

couple. Ozon's use of these three scenes is a forewarning of the destructive nature of triangular desire.

In his work Jack Babuscio explains why theatricality is such an inherent part of camp and gay sensibility; he says that 'to appreciate camp in things or persons is to perceive the notion of life-as-theatre, being versus role-playing, reality and appearance'.⁸⁷ Babuscio goes on to argue: 'life itself is role and theatre, appearance and impersonation'. Babuscio, along with Dyer, asserts that experiencing life-as-theatre is specific to non-normative sexualities. Dyer claims that gays are also particularly good at assuming roles and acting a part. The reason for this is that:

we've had to be good at it, we've had to be good at disguise, at appearing to be one of the crowd, the same as everyone else. Because we had to hide what we really felt (gayness) for so much of the time, we had to master the façade of whatever social set-up we found ourselves in.⁸⁸

Babuscio talks of the struggles some gays have in 'passing for straight', saying that this leads to 'a heightened awareness and appreciation for disguise, impersonation'.⁸⁹ Perhaps this is why Ozon is happiest when tackling female sexuality, removed from his own gender identity. A love for theatricality and ambiguous sexuality leads us to find that cross-dressing and transvestism are recurrent themes in queer movies.⁹⁰ It is a woman's dress, worn by a man, that signifies desire in Ozon's *Une robe d'été*; when Luc comes back to the chalet wearing a dress, his boyfriend, Sébastien, can hardly wait to take it off. The butcher in Bruno Rolland's *Quelque chose de différent* escapes his mundane

⁸⁷ Babuscio, 'Camp and the gay sensibility', p. 44.

⁸⁸ Dyer, *The Culture of Queers*, p. 59.

⁸⁹ Babuscio, 'Camp and the gay sensibility', p. 45.

⁹⁰ Pedro Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All About My Mother*), 1999 is a case in point. Almodóvar's 2004 film, *La Mala Educación* (*Bad Education*), also features transsexuals.

existence with cross-dressing and visits to a bar where he meets other men in drag. When Franz puts Véra's fur-trimmed coat on at the end of Acte IV in *Gouttes d'eau*, it is a wonderfully camp and incongruous moment. Véra finds Franz lying on the floor, scantily clad except for his underpants and Véra's overtly sexual coat. When Véra asks why he has taken it, Franz merely replies 'j'avais froid'. However, Franz is also aware that he is, in part, becoming Véra, becoming a feminised version of himself – either due to Léopold's oppressive treatment of him or in order to rekindle the older man's interest in him. Both Véra and Franz recognise Léopold's manipulation of their identity, that they have become a Galatea to his Pygmalion, both saying during this last act: 'je suis sa créature'.

Figure 9



Franz escapes the tyranny of Léopold with a final dramatic gesture: his suicide. Shortly after watching the trio of Léo, Anna, and Véra writhing in bed together, Franz stands in front of the bathroom mirror, fantasizing over the possible outcomes; we see him deduce that one or other of them must die. Franz imagines walking into the bedroom and killing Léo with a single gunshot to his head; the two girls turn to him and scream, then the cut takes us back to Franz in the bathroom, contemplating a bottle of pills. The killing of his lover was nothing other than an imaginary act in his head; his own death, however, is more theatrical. Franz uses a quintessentially 'feminine' murder method by taking an overdose (one thinks of Monroe and Garland). The literary intertext that immediately comes to mind is

Emma Bovary, who also commits suicide by taking poison; Emma's own theatricality and melodramatics are renowned in the French cultural imagination. When Franz dies and Véra kneels beside him, distraught at his fate, the lighting transports us onto a theatre stage; Véra is in the spotlight, the light coming from only one direction, while the rest of the frame is in relative darkness (see Figure 9). Léopold, cannot believe the action before him either: he denies Véra's claim that Franz is dead and assumes that his young lover is just being melodramatic, saying 'il est encore en train de faire son cinéma'. Throughout the entire film Franz has been fascinated by art and music, and all things theatrical. In Fassbinder's script, on his first date with Léo, Franz talks of his possible future career: 'j'aimerais devenir comédien, ou quelque chose comme ça. Quelque chose, vous voyez, qui ait un rapport avec l'art'. Later, in Acte IV, on meeting Véra, Franz shouts out his exasperation at the other characters, stunned at their acceptance of the status quo and Léo's dominance, with a phrase directly lifted from the French translation: 'vous êtes tous tellement bizarres, comme des *marionnettes* qui ne peuvent pas se mouvoir d'elles-mêmes, qui, très bizarrement, sont manipulées d'on ne sait où'.⁹¹ The viewer, however, is all too aware of the puppet-master/puppeteer behind the action – be it Fassbinder, Ozon, or heteronormative ideologies. These self-consciously theatrical moments in *Gouttes d'eau* serve perhaps to distance the viewers from the action, reminding us that what we are watching is artifice, but also questioning the automated, or limiting, gender roles we, or others, inhabit in our everyday 'reality'.

⁹¹ Fassbinder, *Gouttes dans l'océan*, p. 12, p. 54, my italics.

Conclusion

Ultimately the relationships in *Gouttes d'eau* constitute a *huis clos* because of the triangular nature of desire as it is represented in the film. As we have seen, erotic triangles are destructive because desire can go in any direction and there is always another desire which appears and then disrupts the relationships already in place. Furthermore, because of the pyramidal structure there are implications for the power games and roles which individual subjects fall into. There is always, as Jeffreys says, a return to the gender of dominance or the gender of subordination. Triangular desire fulfills Edelman's queer manifesto, in that it prevents resolution and indeed refuses the possible futurity of relationships. Not only does Edelman suggest that queer resistance must oppose itself to reproductive sexualities, but it must also desist from adopting any possible social structures: 'the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability'.⁹² Thus the romantic couple, which in the end is at the heart of an erotic triangle, according to Girard – as we have seen by Ozon's insistence on groups of four as well as three in *Gouttes d'eau* – is doomed to failure in Edelman's queer resistance. All futural structures such as couples and family groups are rendered impossible. Given that Edelman equates the death drive, thanatos, with the queer project, no lasting relationships can be constructed. Freud also argues, in his essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', that '*the goal of all life is death*'. Nothing can be constructed on thanatos; as Freud reminds us: 'the pleasure principle seems to be positively subservient to the death drives'.⁹³ Edelman takes the carpet from under the feet of the myth of futurity.

⁹² Edelman, *No Future*, p. 9.

⁹³ For Freud's account of life and death drives see his essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 43-102 (p. 102).

One might, however, accuse Edelman of weakening his position by his insistence on the use of irony. Edelman is not referring to the visual irony of the kind we have seen in *Gouttes d'eau* in which costume, décor and framing are used to undermine relationships or gender identities; he is instead referring to the rhetorical device of irony, especially as defined by Paul de Man.⁹⁴ Edelman mentions the 'corrosive force of irony' which undoes discourse and the logic of narrative and relates De Man's ideas of irony to Lacan's understanding of the death drive in which discourse unravels and meanings disintegrate. Edelman explains it thus: 'queer theory's opposition is precisely to any such logic of opposition, its proper task the ceaseless disappropriation of every propriety'.⁹⁵ No doubt other queer theorists would agree with Edelman's rejection of 'propriety', but what is the queer figure left with if destruction of all identity is the key? Indeed, Edelman insists that 'queerness could never constitute an authentic or substantive identity, but only a structural position determined by the imperative of figuration; for the gap, the noncoincidence, that the order of the signifier installs both informs and inhabits queerness as it inhabits reproductive futurism'. Edelman goes on to say that heteronormative discourses promise the suture of this gap, but that 'queerness undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects'.⁹⁶ This theory may attractively and cleverly capture Edelman's concept of negativity, but it appears to leave the queer rebels and the unintelligible genders robbed of status as subjects, which is the position they are already in under a patriarchal ideology – as we have seen in Butler's ideas on sexual identity. What happens to the individuals who in 'real' life are trying to live out their identities? In the final analysis, this may appear to be Ozon's position, too, on queer subjects. Ozon has proved to be a director incapable of providing a social vision without irony, a

⁹⁴ Edelman, *No Future*, pp. 23-24.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 24.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 2.

'corrosive force' which undermines and destroys relationships, leaving no subjectivity for Franz, Véra, et al, to inhabit.

On the other hand, although the view of relationships and social order is desperately bleak in *Gouttes d'eau*, the viewing experience is not; and I would argue that this is a more useful reading of the film. This is because Ozon relies on the subtleties of camp to soften the blow of queer negativity without cancelling its subversive qualities. The humour in *Gouttes d'eau*, present in the costumes, the choreography and incongruous moments, may in the end strengthen its message, though in a way not always understood by mainstream audiences or criticism. As Babuscio says: 'in order for an incongruous contrast to be ironic it must, in addition to being comic, affect one as "painful" – though not so painful as to neutralise the humour'.⁹⁷ Franz's apron and *Lederhosen*, as well as his exaggerated theatricals, arguably have this 'bitter-wit' of which Babuscio speaks. In this reading of *Gouttes d'eau*, Franz's death (with the comical and theatrical elements) forms part of Ozon's queer resistance, and Franz is seen as the most queerly resistant Ozonian character.

The viewer is horrified by the congealing of gender roles in *Gouttes d'eau*, while at the same time amused by the juxtaposition of these images. Babuscio argues that 'camp can thus be a means of undercutting rage by its derision of concentrated bitterness. Its vision of the world is comic. Laughter, rather than tears, is its chosen means of dealing with the painfully incongruous situation of gays in society'.⁹⁸ He continues to assert that 'camp can be subversive – a means of illustrating those cultural ambiguities and contradictions that oppress us all, gay and straight, and, in particular, women'. French film criticism historically does not sympathise with this use of laughter, belittling the impact of romantic comedies

⁹⁷ Babuscio, 'Camp and the gay sensibility', p. 47.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 48.

such as *Gazon maudit* and not lending much critical space to Ozon either.⁹⁹ As Babuscio argues, 'because camp combines fun and earnestness, it runs the risk of being considered not serious at all'.¹⁰⁰ Butler too, in her concluding chapter to *Gender Trouble*, 'From Parody to Politics', recognises the force in 'subversive laughter'.¹⁰¹ So perhaps, after all, Ozon's camp portrayal of queer performances can shake a few of our notions about human sexuality and provide an example of what it means to resist queerly. In the next chapter we continue to investigate the extent of Ozon's queer resistance by examining his narrative structures and whether they conform to heteronormative ideas of teleology and resolution.

⁹⁹ See Brigitte Rollet's discussion of *Gazon maudit* and comedy: 'Unruly Woman? Josiane Balasko, French Comedy and *Gazon maudit*' in Phil Powrie, ed., *French Cinema in the 1990s* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), pp. 127-136.

¹⁰⁰ Babuscio, 'Camp and the gay sensibility', p. 48.

¹⁰¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 186.

Chapter 5

Life à rebours: Transgressive Narratives in *5x2* and *Irréversible*

This chapter, like the previous one, takes as its focus a film which looks at the state of the modern couple, but here as portrayed by Ozon in *5x2*, which came out in 2004 following on from the success of *Swimming Pool*. Although *5x2* does not come directly after *Gouttes d'eau* in chronological order, it is not inappropriate to take Ozon's films in ana-chronological order as *5x2* is itself told in reverse.¹ *5x2* throws up similar issues to *Gouttes d'eau* about the romantic couple; *5x2* implies, as we have seen in the previous chapter in relation to *Gouttes d'eau* also, that relationships are destructive and that desire is never stable. Ozon himself states in interview that he wanted to revisit this theme: 'J'avais déjà abordé ce thème dans *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* [...]. Avec *5x2*, j'avais envie de revenir sur le couple avec mon expérience d'aujourd'hui, mais sans donner trop d'explications'.² *5x2* does not seem to have moved on from the bleak and hopeless vision of sexual relationships in *Gouttes d'eau*. Indeed, the first scenes of Ozon's film are aesthetically drab and gloomy; in the DVD's bonus features Ozon talks of carefully selecting suitable furniture and colours for an impersonal hotel bedroom that speaks of the failure of the couple's marriage. It is, however, the looks on the actors' faces which speak of defeat and pain more eloquently than any décor; indeed several reviews have commented on the excellent acting: Philip Kemp states that 'the film's saving grace lies in the acting'.³ *5x2* starts from the lowest point of the life of this couple: Marion and Gilles are in a lawyer's office to witness and finalise their divorce and decide on custody of their child. Henceforth, the film

¹ By the term 'ana-chronological' I refer to 'events going backwards in time', based on the etymology from the Greek, 'ana' meaning 'backwards' and 'chronos' meaning 'time'.

² 'Entretiens à propos de *5x2*', www.francois-ozon.com/francais/entretiens/5x2.html, accessed 18/07/07.

³ Philip Kemp, '5x2', *Sight and Sound*, 15, 3 (2005), p. 51.

backtracks from the breakdown of their marriage to the moment they met, showing five significant moments of their life together:⁴ their divorce and ‘farewell’ sex at a hotel; a dinner party with Gilles’ brother and his boyfriend; the birth of their son; their marriage and wedding night; and finally when Gilles and Marion become lovers on holiday in Sardinia.

5x2’s reverse chronology makes Gaspar Noé’s 2002 film, *Irréversible*, an obvious intertext, as both films are told backwards, starting from the ‘end’. Throughout cinematic history there have been few films which narrate the plot in truly reversed order; reviewers mention *Irréversible* alongside Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000), and Jane Campion’s TV drama *Two Friends* (1986), which also distort conventional cinematic chronology.⁵ Ozon’s choice to portray a story backwards, just two years after *Irréversible* attracted attention at Cannes for its controversial take on time and violence, clearly invites comparison with the earlier film. *Irréversible* appears, however, to be a very different film from 5x2, as a radical take on the rape-revenge genre. It has been described as ‘unwatchable’ and as exhibiting ‘ultraviolence’ by *The Guardian*’s film critic Peter Bradshaw, whereas Ozon’s 5x2, says Emmanuel Burdeau, ‘affecte chic et neutralité – surface plate, image pâle’.⁶ As far as the cinematography is concerned, the two films are technically and visually distant. 5x2 cannot said to be aesthetically challenging, whereas *Irréversible* is immediately disturbing, alienating, and apparently groundbreaking. *Irréversible* is, though, like 5x2, motivated by the relationship of a couple, Marcus (Vincent Cassell) and Alex (Monica Bellucci) – who happen to be a ‘real-

⁴ At audition, the actors read extracts from Bergman’s *Scènes de la vie conjugale*, ‘Entretiens à propos de 5x2’.

⁵ See Philip Kemp ‘5x2’. Also Philip French, ‘Flashback to the Future’, *Observer*, 20 March 2005: ‘The most celebrated use of this device is Harold Pinter’s *Betrayal*, staged by Peter Hall at the National Theatre in 1978, and expertly filmed by David Jones five years later’. This is undoubtedly a useful intertext for 5x2, though video copies of the play are not widely available. Sam Mendes in interview mentions his intention to produce Pinter’s *Betrayal* on stage: ‘Kate, cricket, Chekhov and me’, *The Times, Saturday Review*, 6 June 2009, pp. 1-2.

⁶ Peter Bradshaw, ‘5x2’, *Guardian*, 30 October 2004 (and 18 March 2005), accessed 08/06/09, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2004/oct/30/londonfilmfestival2004.londonfilmfestival>. Emmanuel Burdeau, ‘5x2’, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 593 (2004), pp. 38-9.

life' couple – and its destruction. The film opens with a disturbing scene in a prison cell, moving onto a violent and frightening underground nightclub and works backwards over thirteen sequences to the beginning of the evening when Marcus and Alex are at home getting ready to go out. As we watch, we learn that Alex has been violently raped and that Marcus is searching the streets of Paris in order to exact revenge on the perpetrator of the crime. In the penultimate sequence we learn that Alex is pregnant and in the last we see her reading in a park surrounded by children playing. This chapter compares two cinematic examples of backwards narration by two French directors working at about the same time, but who use reverse chronology for different reasons and to different effect. I suggest that although *Irréversible* looks more transgressive than *5x2* and could be said to display aspects of queer negativity, Noé's film in fact is more misogynistic and heteronormative than it appears. While *5x2*, as we shall see, is not so challenging in style or content as *Irréversible*, I argue that it is nonetheless the more transgressive film. This chapter also aims to relate Ozon's portrayal of the heterosexual couple in *5x2* to the rest of his œuvre and to my view of Ozon that has formed in the course of this thesis.

Some reviews of *5x2* were as bleak as Ozon's view of the couple: the director has been criticised for the film's high-gloss finish, as he was for *Swimming Pool*, and consequently for its lack of substance. Nicolas Rapold's description of watching an Ozon film is 'that light art-house feel with none of the calories', and wastes no time in declaring that in *5x2* Ozon 'gussies up hoary middle-class marital anxiety into candy-colored scandal for our delectation – a style epitomized by his infantilizing palette and gloss'.⁷ Rapold is perhaps referring to Ozon's use of primary colours in *Regarde la mer* and *Sous le sable*, as well as the limited colour scheme (black, white and blue) in *Swimming Pool*, or to the way in which Ozon

⁷ Nicolas Rapold, 'Take 2', www.indiewire.com/movies/movies_0506075x2.html, accessed 17/07/07.

uses colour symbolically (for example, red for danger); in previous chapters, however, we have seen how effective this use of colour is. *5x2* received only one cinema award and two nominations: Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi won Best Actress at the Venice Film Festival and Ozon was nominated for the Golden Lion Award at the same festival.⁸ *Irréversible*, on the other hand, received five nominations, one of which was for the Palme d'Or at Cannes, and it won two awards: the Bronze Horse at the Stockholm Film Festival and the SDFCS for Best Foreign Language Film at the San Diego Awards.⁹ Although *Irréversible* received mixed reviews and audience response, it has attracted more media attention and has been more successful at film festivals than Ozon's *5x2*. Indeed *Irréversible* courted controversy and media attention, whereas *5x2* has not been covered in the media as much as the earlier film. Even websites such as the Internet Movie Database testify to the fact that *Irréversible* is a better known and more popular film than *5x2*: out of 24,246 votes, *Irréversible* scores 7.3 out of 10, whereas *5x2* has received just 3,636 votes and scores 6.7 out of 10.¹⁰ However seriously we choose to take these value judgements, these statistics demonstrate that *Irréversible* is a more widely known and discussed film than *5x2*, although we may surmise that the film's deliberate courting of controversy through its more wilfully unpleasant aspects is at least partly to blame for this distinction. This chapter will show that in the final analysis *5x2* is more thought-provoking than some reviewers claim.

This chapter will examine the accusations of superficiality in Ozon's film and will reveal the issues at stake in *5x2* by comparison to Noé's *Irréversible*. I will ask whether *Irréversible* is not in fact more conventional than audiences believe and I will examine what *5x2* reveals about heterosexual relations. With reference to David Bordwell's theory of classical film narratives, I will probe into the connections

⁸ See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0354356/awards>, accessed 21/01/09.

⁹ See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0290673/awards>, accessed 21/01/09.

¹⁰ See results for *Irréversible* <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0290673/ratings> and *5x2* <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0354356/ratings>, accessed 21/01/09.

between alternative chronologies and queer sexualities in order to understand *5x2* in relation to the rest of Ozon's œuvre. Edelman's theory of queer negativity will hopefully once more shed light on the filmic portrayals of the couple, both in *5x2* and *Irréversible*, assisting us in our enquiry into Ozon's queer filmmaking, especially in relation to the place of the Child in these two films. There are several common areas in which the two films promise transgression and which will be looked at in turn: the use of time, the place of children, and the representation of sexual desire and relationships. I will also be questioning the plausibility of the narrative in both films. This chapter aims to demonstrate that *Irréversible* is in fact manipulative in its use of sound and visual effects, misleading its viewer into believing that there is a radical substance under the subversive surface. Ozon's *5x2*, on the other hand, will prove to raise more interesting questions about sexuality and desire.

Transgressions: telling the time

In order to see how *5x2* and *Irréversible* play with audience expectations about storytelling, it is first necessary to understand how classical narration functions within cinema; for this we turn to David Bordwell's extensive, though now somewhat dated, study *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Bordwell analyses classical film narration by taking as an example the structures at work in Hollywood studio filmmaking between 1917 and 1960, but states that classical narration is by no means restricted to that historical period alone. In fact, classical narration is, for Bordwell, the most widespread mode of storytelling, and he suggests that: 'Whether we call it mainstream, dominant, or classical cinema, we intuitively recognize an ordinary, easily comprehensible movie when we see it'.¹¹ Bordwell

¹¹ *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 156.

identifies three salient features of classical narration: such films are usually goal-oriented, they are driven by causality and thus are linear, and they end with heterosexual romance. In order to determine how much – if at all – *5x2* and *Irréversible* distance themselves from classical narrative conventions, we should explain these characteristics further. According to Bordwell, 'the classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals', whereas art-cinema lacks coherent characters or goals. Furthermore, Bordwell states that 'causality is the prime unifying principle' in classical narrative, in which the link between cause and effect is clear and present.¹² We will see in what ways Ozon and Noé disrupt this link and question our understanding of human responsibility and destiny. The classical narrative plot, for Bordwell, is also frequently driven by a deadline, which defines the time by which the protagonist will either have succeeded or failed in attaining his/her goal. Thirdly, Bordwell notes, 60% of a random sample of Hollywood films end with 'a display of the united romantic couple – the cliché happy ending, often with a "clinch" – and many more could be said to end happily'.¹³ The film's resolution depends on heterosexual romance as part of its ending, whether or not the primary 'goal' of the narrative was that specific relationship.

We can already see that *5x2* and *Irréversible* do not readily fall into a clear-cut category. They show aspects of art-cinema according to Bordwell's definition but do not eschew the features of mainstream narrative entirely. In fact, as Bordwell says, 'a film may be analyzed as norm-breaking, norm-affirming, or both'.¹⁴ Firstly, however, it is certain that neither *5x2* nor *Irréversible* are 'easily comprehensible' films, due in part to their backward narration. As spectators, we are likely to be aware that these movies are told backwards, having read reviews

¹² Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 157.

¹³ Ibid, p. 159.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 150.

or synopses, or hearing by word-of-mouth, or if nothing else because the titles themselves do not otherwise have much meaning, but this does not assist us as viewers as a 'way in' to the narrative. Noé's title, *Irréversible*, indicates that we cannot undo events in the past, that there cannot be a 'happy' ending unless we cheat with time. Noé shows events *à rebours* to demonstrate that time can actually only go one way, that we cannot go backwards into the past: Alex's rape cannot be reversed. Time for Noé is linear, ending in violence and destruction, as the film's motto says: 'le temps détruit tout'. In this, then, *Irréversible* fits into Bordwell's understanding of classical narrative. *5x2*, on the other hand, focuses on the couple's experience through five moments from two peoples' lives. Although each sequence is of a different moment in time, in actual fact they are five examples of the same kind of failure on the part of the characters to forge a fulfilling and mutually respectful partnership. Therefore Ozon seems to imply a circular or repetitive pattern of relations between couples; during this chapter I shall investigate the implications of these different representations of time. By using the mathematical symbol for multiplication, *5x2* hints both at the repetition and the possibilities of relationships.¹⁵ In the DVD edition, which also includes the 'version remontée', that is *2x5*, the film can be viewed in a conventional forward-moving narrative. Although this is arguably a pointless technical exercise, the use of the mathematical formula drives home Ozon's point that *5x2* and *2x5* both take us to the same result (10), the failure of the couple.

5x2 is accused by Michael Koresky of a lack of subtlety in the five stages; he asks 'does almost every sequence have to center around integral rite-of-passage moments in their lives? Birth of first child, wedding, first meeting?'.¹⁶

¹⁵ The film viewer might notice an Ozonian fascination with numbers in relation to desire, both in the titles of films (*8 Femmes* and *5x2* are a case in point) and in the visual or physical ways different possible relationships are hinted at (see, for example, my discussion of *Gouttes d'eau* in Chapter 4).

¹⁶ Michael Koresky, 'Take 3', *Indiewire*, www.indiewire.com/movies/movies_0506075x2.html, accessed 17/07/07.

However, despite – or perhaps because of – the banality of these moments, Ozon's spectator identifies the 'universal' story of the couple without knowing any of the specificities of Gilles and Marion's relationship. Asibong also argues that:

It is the essential 'normality' of Marion and Gilles's marital trajectory – its emblematic, 'state-of-the-nation' quality – that becomes of real sociological interest in *5x2*, making the relationship's violent and alienated failure all the more shocking and Ozon's cinematic vision of romantic love all the more bleak.¹⁷

It also appears more obvious by taking such normative tropes for a film that this is a classical narrative which has been deviated from and distorted; deviation, or indeed transgression, only works if we know what the narrative 'norm' is. As we have seen from our discussions of *Sitcom*, *8 Femmes*, and *Angel*, Ozon's work often performs subversion of a genre by alluding to it; breaking, or rather playing with, generic conventions seems to constitute a fascination in itself for the director. In *5x2* then, it is disorienting to be presented with a couple about whom we know very little from the outset; the actors themselves were disconcerted by having to play characters of whom they knew nothing. Stéphane Freiss (Gilles) comments on how he had to adapt to playing a character without a 'past':

Normalement, quand j'attaque un film, je sais d'où vient mon personnage et où il va. Je lis et relis mille fois l'histoire et toutes les scènes me permettent de me construire. [...] Mais, sur *5x2*, il fallait tous les jours oublier cette manière de fonctionner, oublier de me poser la question de mon passé et de mon futur. Il fallait être, au présent, créer le vécu d'un couple, sans pourtant savoir qui était la femme qui était à mes côtés, ni comment je l'avais rencontrée.¹⁸

¹⁷ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 95.

¹⁸ Stéphane Freiss, 'Entretiens à propos du film *5x2*', www.francois-ozon.com/francais/entretiens/5x2.html, accessed 18/07/07. Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi also says that 'c'est vrai qu'on n'avait pas beaucoup de détails sur leur vie et leur passé'.

In a way, Freiss's own experience describes how the spectator approaches the film in the first few scenes; it is not, thus, immediately an 'easily comprehensible' narrative. Crucially, Ozon had not yet written the second half of the movie and thus there was no 'past' for the actors to turn to for clues. Similarly, in *Irréversible* we are met with a disturbing, unrecognizable place and we do not know why we are there. This is different from the viewing experience of a 'flashback' movie which starts in the 'present', then goes to the past in order to show how the 'present' was arrived at, and ends with resolution. This process is undone in *Irréversible* and *5x2*, which negate any resolution and which unsettle viewers from the outset by denying us the usual presentation of the order of events.

By starting the movie with the end, it is difficult for the viewer to recognize a goal and thus neither film can be described as being goal-oriented in the way a classical Hollywood narrative would be. There is no deadline to work towards, for Marion and Gilles's marriage cannot be salvaged, and nor can Alex be rescued from her attacker, for we know that these events have already taken place. However, *5x2* and *Irréversible* could be said to be goal-oriented in the sense that they are working towards the beginning of the story, indeed a 'happy' beginning, or as the interviewer on Ozon's press release terms it, 'le bonheur originel'. This is another way in which the films allude to the linearity of time, to a precise starting point. The reversed chronology moreover denies the viewer any sense of causality as we do not understand why events are taking place. We can only piece together cause and effect retrospectively. This is a central moral dilemma for the spectator, both in *5x2* and *Irréversible*; this theme will be developed in the course of this chapter. Finally, *5x2* and *Irréversible* work to disrupt the classical Hollywood ending of the heterosexual romance; the ending (beginning) of *5x2* divides and separates Marion and Gilles, leaving them with shame and hurt, whereas in *Irréversible* Alex

is severely injured in hospital and Marcus is seen carried out of the club on a stretcher; we do not know if either character of Noé's film will survive the night. While we might now begin to understand how *5x2* and *Irréversible* compare to Bordwell's understanding of classical narrative, a more profound analysis of the narrative structure and events in *5x2* and *Irréversible* is, however, necessary before drawing conclusions about whether they transgress the heteronormative structures, as they claim.

There is no doubt that filmic endings in classical Hollywood narration hold particular significance for the cinemagoer; the end of films such as *Casablanca* and *Gone with the Wind* linger in the cultural memory.¹⁹ The endings/beginnings of *5x2* and *Irréversible* are also important, indeed they are crucial for our understanding of the films themselves. However, when one discusses the endings and beginnings in films with reverse narration, the matter can become somewhat confusing; I therefore employ terms used by Russian Formalists and popularised by Genette in order to distinguish between the two versions of the story. *Fabula* indicates the order in which events occur, whereas the *syuzhet* describes the order in which events are recounted.²⁰ Bordwell's definitions of these two different concepts in cinema are particularly helpful; he says of the *fabula* that it 'embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field', whereas the *syuzhet* is 'the actual arrangement and presentation of the fabula in the film'.²¹ Genette also points out the duality of time in storytelling: there is 'le temps de l'histoire' and 'le temps du récit', that is that the 'histoire' can take place over twenty-four hours or ten years, whereas the 'récit' lasts the length of a book or the screen time of a film.

¹⁹ See David Thomson's article, 'And finally...: David Thomson is entranced by an online collection devoted to the magic of movie end frames', *Guardian*, 12 December 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2008/dec/12/2>, accessed 05/02/09.

²⁰ Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 'Discours du récit: essai de méthode', pp. 67-273.

²¹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 49, p. 50.

Richard Neupert is one film theorist who has written on the importance of movie endings. Neupert says that ‘guessing where a story is heading is one of the key pleasures and anxieties of reading’. He goes on to translate this into cinematic pleasure and how it influences the way spectators watch films: ‘the desire to anticipate just where the story is going shapes our every moment in front of a motion picture’.²² In *5x2* and *Irréversible*, however, we know exactly ‘where the story is going’ because we have already seen it. On the other hand, we do not know *why* or *how* the story got there, or where it came from; whether reverse chronology kills or enhances any narrative suspense is not entirely clear. In *Irréversible* the viewer is invited to guess what motivates Marcus’s actions, the technical effects and violence lending suspense to the experience, whereas in *5x2* the suspense is more psychological in nature, the viewer curious to find out how Marion and Gilles’s relationship went wrong. Ozon himself tries to defend the backward chronology, saying that he wanted to make sure that ‘le spectateur n’ait pas la possibilité de se dire à ce moment-là: “Voilà la raison pour laquelle ils vont se séparer”’, but his critics feel differently.²³ Nick Pinkerton, who does not pull the film apart with quite the same ferocity as his IndieWire colleague (Rapold), says that ‘it’s obvious from the get-go that Gilles and Marion’s marriage will be a wreck’.²⁴ For *5x2*, each step of the *syuzhet* is interpreted by the end point of the *fabula*, that is, that this relationship will end in divorce and tears; each of the five episodes of their relationship is ‘remembered’ in the light of their divorce, as if it were always destined to fail. In this, *5x2* is apparently more teleological, more focused on the end point, than *Irréversible*, because with the latter we have no idea

²² Richard Neupert, *The End: Narration and Closure in the Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), p. 11.

²³ Ozon website, ‘Entretiens à propos du film *5x2*’.

²⁴ Nick Pinkerton, ‘Everything Old Is New Again: François Ozon’s *5x2*’, accessed 17/07/07, http://www.indiewire.com/article/everything_old_is_new_again_franois_ozons_5_x_2/.

how to read the film until we are almost half-way through. Nevertheless we will find that *5x2* is the less linear film of the two, despite its cliché *syuzhet* 'ending'.

The work of one queer theorist questions how we experience time in heteronormative narratives and will aid us in our enquiry into the extent to which Ozon and Noé distance themselves from conventional storytelling. Lee Edelman's study *No Future* is not only useful in explaining the bleak prospects of queer relationships, as we saw in Chapter 4; his work also helps us to understand the linearity of heteronormative narratives. As Edelman says, in heteronormative futurism there is 'the faith that temporal duration will result in the realization of meaning by way of a "final signifier" that will make meaning whole at last'.²⁵ In classical filmic narration the 'final signifier' would be the 'happy' ending which resolves the story and points to an implied future. This is not, however, how Ozon ends his film, as we shall see. In his queer negativity, Edelman rebels against futuristic ideology which 'generates generational succession, temporality, and narrative sequence'.²⁶ Edelman's queer negativity embraces the death drive which would mean, in narrative terms, that it is anti-growth and anti-future. *5x2* and *Irréversible* are transgressive in that they deny their viewer the 'final signifier' by disrupting chronology and classical narrative, but they may conform with heteronormative ideology in their portrayal of sexual relationships. This is what I set out to discern. Bordwell points out that our viewing experience as moviegoers usually takes place in a highly controlled environment which imposes a linear narrative:

In watching a film, the spectator submits to a programmed temporal form. Under normal viewing circumstances, the film absolutely controls the order, frequency and duration of the presentation of events. You cannot skip a dull spot or linger over a

²⁵ Edelman, *No Future*, p. 37.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 60.

rich one, jump back to an earlier passage or start at the end of the film and work your way forward.²⁷

However, Ozon and Noé have both made films in which we can do just that. Furthermore, Bordwell is writing before DVDs came into being; some films are now only available in DVD format, either having failed at the box office, or because certain movies are not made available for general release. With a DVD the viewer can indeed perform all the actions which one could not before, such as skipping forward, rewinding to watch passages again, or even watching the film in rewind or fast-forward.²⁸ The movie director is no longer the dictator of the order in which we watch films and perhaps Ozon and Noé's films recognize the possibilities involved in overturning linear narration and the impact this has on portraits of human sexuality.

The way that the two film directors treat chronological time in their movies may give us an insight into how much they are aware of the hold reproductive futurism has on our cultural matrix. We must ask how much Ozon and Noé are tempted to give credence to a 'final signifier' and temporality. Although *5x2* and *Irréversible* both begin from the end of the *fabula*, the way the narratives are organized is quite different. *5x2* has only five episodes which progress further back in time at unspecified intervals, implying, perhaps, that this is a tale of 'Everyman', that it could happen to any couple in any temporal or spatial moment. *Irréversible*, on the other hand, tells its backwards story in thirteen different time sequences, which are clearly demarcated in the DVD insert as different times of the evening in question. The *fabula* begins at 19:27 and its end is drawing near when the last *fabula* scene starts at 03:59. While this may have been the simplest way for Noé to name his 13 chapters, it gives the impression (even though the times are not

²⁷ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 74.

²⁸ Philip French notes how this has become commonplace in his review of *5x2*, 'Flashback to the Future'.

displayed on screen) that time can be controlled and captured.²⁹ The chapter with the opening (end) credits, rolling backwards with some reversed lettering, is titled --:-- , as if it is outside linear time and the narrative temporality, implying that the rest of the fabula is fixed and easily labelled. Similarly the title of the *syuzhet* ending, consisting of strobe lighting and white noise, flashes between 88:88, 00:00, and --:- , as if time has run out and the story is at an end.

Irréversible does not appear to have any visual way of indicating that the *syuzhet* has jumped back in time; it does not seem to establish any intrinsic norms for the way the movie shifts back in time. In the first few sequences set in the nightclub 'Le Rectum', the camera movement is unsteady and swirls on an unpredictable axis before the *syuzhet* moves onto the 'next' scene. The rotating camera movement mimics a drunken or drug-induced sensation, alienating the viewer at the same time as giving the impression that what it is doing is radical. The motif of the spinning camera, although mirrored at the end of the *syuzhet* with the camera rotating around the water sprinkler, is not a consistent clue to a change in time. *5x2*, on the other hand, establishes a clear-cut break between each episode and keeps to that intrinsic norm; at the end of each sequence the frame fades to black before the next sequence begins. However, there is no voiceover or intertitles – conventional devices which are usually employed to signal the passing of time – and therefore the viewer has no idea how much time has passed between episodes. Philip Kemp peppers his synopsis with 'about two years earlier' and 'sometime earlier' to indicate the time lapses between each segment, but the spectator of Ozon's *5x2* has no such explicit clues.³⁰ In this, *5x2* is less time specific and has more ellipses in its narrative sequence than the more apparently subversive *Irréversible*; it is as if Ozon has left the viewer room for interpretation

²⁹ The viewer may be reminded of *La Haine* (1995), in which each section is introduced by the time shown on a digital clock.

³⁰ Philip Kemp, '5x2'.

which allows us to reflect on the events we witness. *Irréversible* is more controlling than *5x2* in that it leaves no minute of the evening unaccounted for, there are no temporal ellipses here; this enhances the suspense and makes it a breathless and nightmarish viewing experience. In *5x2*, however, where there is an unspecified gap in between each sequence, the spectator is denied any direct connection with one episode and the next. Therefore *5x2* could be said to be further removed from classical narration than *Irréversible* because it is less beholden to 'real', or 'clock' time. The lack of temporal specificity would indicate that these banal everyday moments can happen in all relationships and touch all couples. In his review of the film, Peter Bradshaw identifies these ellipses as a space for the spectator to fill in the gaps, thus creating a more thoughtful and active spectator:

But *5x2* does not, in fact, tell us the whole story of Gilles and Marion: the five scenes are interleaved with four silences, missing chapters whose inferences we must fill in as best we can. It is almost like the disinterment of five discrete archaeological strata, under all of which there is yet more that cannot be discovered.³¹

As mentioned above, *Irréversible* uses its time sequences very differently, even indicating the exact time each episode happens. This gives the sense that we experience time as 'clock' time, as a logical and predictable entity which we control, leading us towards a 'final signifier' which, as we know from Edelman, deceives us into expecting a resolution and a future.

It is not only the camerawork in *Irréversible* which causes a feeling of discomfort in the spectator; the soundtrack, too, is employed effectively. The sounds (which could be diegetic or non-diegetic), characterised by a constant low buzzing, which accompany the second and third chapters of the film are not

³¹ Bradshaw, '5x2'.

interrupted by a change in the timeline. The fact that the noise continues through different time sequences (03:59 and 03:11, as well as the music in 20:01 and 19:27) leads the viewer to imagine that the action is continuous rather than to suspect a jump in time. No   shot the film in Super 16 in order to use a handheld camera; then it was digitally transposed onto Super 35, a technique which gives *Irr  versible* an edgy and gritty feel. Reviewers of the film have argued that the film is a collage of seamless editing, lending it a ‘realist’ flavour; whether or not all spectators have this impression, the effect is surely to enhance the deception of time moving forward in direct contrast to the ana-chronological order of action on the screen.³² No  ’s use of sound is curious; the first thirty minutes of the film are, apparently, underscored by a noise whose frequency is 28 Hz – not easily heard by the human ear, but whose vibration can nonetheless be felt in our rib cage and whose noise can provoke nausea and vertigo. Therefore, part of the spectators’ unease and disorientation can perhaps be explained by this use of sound and the disturbing images and not because of the manipulation of time in No  ’s movie. One imagines that the effect must be far greater on viewers who saw *Irr  versible* in a movie theatre, where digital sound systems and large screens engulf the audience. This use of imperceptible sound and claustrophobic images must justify in some part the large numbers of spectators who left the film before its screening was over.³³

Another notable difference in the manipulation of time in *5x2* and *Irr  versible* is the order in which the story was filmed. *Irr  versible* was shot in *fabula* order, except for the last scene (of the *syuzhet*) where Alex is sitting in a park, which was filmed after all the others. *5x2*, however, was shot in *syuzhet* order; only the first three chapters of the film had been written when Ozon

³² See review by Chris Nelson, <http://www.dreamlogic.net/archives/irreversible-review>, accessed 08/12/07.

³³ See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/film/2008796.stm>, accessed 09/12/07.

approached the cast with his scripts. This suggests that Ozon, more than No  , was aiming to conduct an experiment in the manipulation of time, despite the self-conscious scene in *Irr  versible* in which Alex reads Dunne's *An Experiment With Time*. The actors in *5x2* accepted their roles on the basis of the other films of Ozon they had seen; Freiss says that he would not have accepted the part had Ozon not been in charge of the project. Freiss speaks of how very little of the script had been written before they embarked on filming:

Il y avait quarante pages au maximum; il n'avait   crit que trois   pisodes sur les cinq. On ne savait d'ailleurs pas exactement combien il y en aurait et dans quoi on partait. L'important   tait donc de regarder avec qui je m'embarquais.³⁴

After filming the first three parts there was a five month break in which Ozon wrote the last two sequences in the *syuzhet* and Bruni-Tedeschi and Freiss were able physically to de-age and prepare themselves for the rest of the project. Both actors, however, speak of the difficulty of such a long break and their fears of becoming detached from the project. The fact that the actors filmed the *syuzhet* in the same way as the spectators saw it gives one the sense that they also experienced the storytelling as a journey of discovery, reconstructing the story little by little.³⁵ In *Irr  versible*, on the other hand the actors would have experienced the film as a story of violence and revenge rather than as an everyday story of a relationship.

³⁴ Entretiens Dossier de Presse.

³⁵ Asibong says that this choice to film the sequences in reversed order: 'forc[ed] the actors to share the spectator's experience of a journey from present despair to past hope, transforming what might have been just a post-shoot editing job to a veritable shared transfiguration of lived experience', *Fran  ois Ozon*, p. 96.

Transgressions: reproductive futurity

While *5x2* does portray normalizing moments in Marion's and Gilles's life – the 'rite-of-passage moments' Koresky is so scathing about – if one looks beneath the surface the film undermines and doubts the dominance of reproductive futurity. In fact, this chapter would go so far as to say that Ozon's *5x2*, like *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*, embodies Lee Edelman's concept of queer negativity. New relationships, it seems, simply rework the dynamics of old ones: 'everything old is new again' as the lyrics of the song say.³⁶ Moreover, events in the film break the couple apart and leave the individuals involved emotionally and physically scarred. Bradshaw, in his review of *5x2*, acknowledges the bleak outlook the film projects, which we found to be characteristic of queer negativity in the previous chapter; he says that *5x2* has something of the 'unflinching cynicism of Michel Houellebecq', whose texts can also be read through the lens of futuricide.³⁷ Edelman's queer negativity is the rejection of the symbolic Child, who, for heteronormative discourses, represents the future. In both *5x2* and *Irréversible* the future of the Child is endangered; *5x2* tells the tale of why heterosexual marriage and monogamous relationships cannot work, whereas *Irréversible* shows how sexual violence disrupts and destroys all promise of new life (Alex's unborn child is surely killed in the virulent physical attack and rape). *5x2*, rather than 'killing' the Child, questions the heteronormative myth that we should organise our relationships around the reproduction and nurturing of children; the nuclear family in *5x2* does not work. Thus these two films might be said to display aspects of what Edelman calls

³⁶ Nick Pinkerton entitles his review of *5x2* 'Everything new is old again', citing Hugh Jackman's song of the same title.

³⁷ This is how Douglas Morrey reads the French author in 'Stop the World, or What's Queer about Michel Houellebecq?', in James Day, ed., *Queer Sexualities in French and Francophone Literature and Film* (New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 177-192.

‘sinthomosexuality’ which he defines as ‘a child-aversive, future-negating force’.³⁸

We might, however, discover that *Irréversible* is not as queer as it seems.

There is, in fact, a tension between the presence and absence of children in *Irréversible*, especially towards the end of the *syuzhet*. The possibility of the Child is taken away by the violence of the plot and the rape. Noé emphasises that Marcus lacks the responsibility and sensitivity to be a supportive partner for Alex, that this story was destined to end tragically and that the Child was not to be. As we see in the scene in which the couple are getting ready to go out, Marcus is not, apparently, concerned with the fact that Alex’s period is late; he reacts to her question ‘si j’étais enceinte’ with great understatement by saying ‘ça c’est pas mal’. Alex is trying to make light of the issue, while at the same time trying to infer what Marcus’s reaction would be if she were expecting a baby; her boyfriend’s reply can hardly reassure her of his commitment and sense of duty. Then again, before he leaves the flat to buy some alcohol for their evening out, he asks Alex for some money, indicating either that she has more money or that he is lazy and taking advantage of her. These actions, each taken on their own, might not necessarily lead us to condemn Marcus, but having seen the consequences of Marcus’s disregard for his girlfriend and her feelings, which caused Alex to go home on her own and thus get attacked, the viewer judges him more harshly. Once the trio have arrived at the party, Marcus is prepared to have a ‘wild’ night, taking drugs and flirting heavily with other women, without any hesitation due to Alex’s presence, despite Pierre’s warnings. Alex appears to remain composed, chatting with other friends and determined to enjoy herself; but just two sequences later, earlier on in the fabula (21:22), we see Alex take a pregnancy test which turns out to be positive. She does not tell Marcus the results. In retrospect, we understand the turbulent feelings Alex must be experiencing as she watches the father of her child

³⁸ Edelman, *No Future*, p. 113.

– we assume Marcus is the father – behave in a way which makes a mockery of their relationship and any support she might expect of him. She meets up with a pregnant friend at the party which must make her own pregnancy seem very real, while at the same time making the heteronormative suggestion that this is all a heterosexual female aspires to. The display of another woman's pregnant body reminds the viewer that this is what should happen to Alex. Yet in the course of the evening she loses her unborn baby and to some extent Marcus could be held responsible for the murder of the very child he spawned. Noé seems to be tugging on heteronormative heartstrings by implying that Alex's rape and attack are more tragic because of the loss of her baby, or in other words, the Child. The final *syuzhet* sequence (19:27), in which Alex sits reading a book in an unrealistically green park in the presence of children playing, implies that this is how life should be, how things might have been different. It is almost as if she is in a kind of Eden, before sin and without men.

Although a child is born in *5x2*, the film implies that parenthood does not live up to its heteronormative expectations. Viewers might be misled into thinking that because Ozon portrays a normative model, his film is reproducing heteronormative ideologies; this would be a mistake. In reproductive futurism, or even, more simply in social understandings of parenthood, a child often appears to be the ultimate goal of a heterosexual relationship. Feminists speak of society's suspicion of women who are childless or who, more 'shockingly', decide they do not want to have children.³⁹ There seems to be widespread belief in the fact that the birth of a child is a happy, unifying event.⁴⁰ *5x2* begins to undo some of these

³⁹ One thinks of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1970), in which she suggests that 'there is no reason, except the moral prejudice that women who do not have children are shirking a responsibility, why all women should consider themselves bound to breed', p. 234.

⁴⁰ Again Greer's work describes deceptive cultural myths surrounding the 'nuclear' family: 'Mother duck, father duck and all the little baby ducks. The family, ruled over and provided for by father, suckled and nurtured by mother seems to us inherent in the natural order', *The Female Eunuch*, p. 219.

cultural myths; the birth of Marion's child is placed at the centre of the film; as the third sequence it is the hinge on which the rest of the fabula is organised, yet it is puzzling for the viewer because of Gilles's absence at this pivotal event. Kemp naively asks what is behind Gilles's commitment phobia, claiming that 'it's not made clear why he's so reluctant to show up at the hospital and support Marion through the complications of their son's birth'.⁴¹ Kemp fails to recognise that the birth of a child signifies an emotional and material tie to its mother on behalf of the father, by which Gilles is utterly panicked. A child symbolises a different life, a restriction on Gilles's emotional and physical freedom.

Not only does the birth of their son fail to unite Marion and Gilles, but it also seems to isolate Marion, from her child and her family unit. She is often framed on her own by the camera, as if to enhance her solitude and sadness. Her parents bicker with each other at the hospital, thoughtlessly upsetting Marion when she wakes up from the anaesthetic she had for a Caesarean section. Gilles even struggles to make it into the hospital building; when he finally gets there, he tells Marion's mother – who says they have been waiting for him for three hours – that he was stuck in traffic, but the viewer knows that he has, in fact, been at a restaurant eating steak and drinking wine. Gilles goes to see his son in the Intensive Care Unit, but does not seem ready to face up to fatherhood and asks: 'c'est sûr que c'est celui ça?'. Gilles says he is going out for a cigarette break but he does not come back and fails to visit his wife.⁴² His desertion seems even worse when Marion gets up in the night to visit her child; ghostly white and fragile, she walks with her drip to ICU, but she is only able to see her son through the glass, unable to touch him or begin to realise how her life has changed. Marion and her baby are illuminated by the same eerie blue light coming from the room (see Figure

⁴¹ Kemp, '5x2'.

⁴² Asibong reads this as another example of an Ozonian absent father: 'the episode [...] makes of him a silent, inscrutable, spectral father, perfectly in keeping with the more explicitly horrific Ozonian tradition', *François Ozon*, p. 101.

1); rather than being a cosy, maternal scene, the lighting makes this a clinical and impersonal experience. The cinematography, separating mother and child in this way, underlines the fact that becoming a parent can disappoint; motherhood is not portrayed as being a joyous moment for Marion.

Figure 1



Gilles calls her mobile telephone, lamely saying 'je t'aime' while his actions seem to say the opposite; Marion simply replies by asking him to bring some of her clothes to the hospital and then hangs up. The musical score acts as an ironic comment on the action (not for the first time), as the song 'Mi sono innamorato di te' strikes up as Marion puts the phone down.⁴³ Even in the previous *syuzhet* sequence, when Gilles and Marion entertain Christophe and his boyfriend at their flat, Marion does not seem to be fulfilled or to juggle work and home life easily. Although after Marion returns home from work, they both perform the motions of 'normal' family life, feeding their child, bathing him, and reading him a bedtime story, they seem to have divided their duties in such a way as to avoid each other, not interacting as a family. This is emphasised when they are left alone, after Christophe and Mathieu have left, and Gilles criticises Marion for not rinsing the dishes before putting them in the dishwasher – he seems to be in charge of the

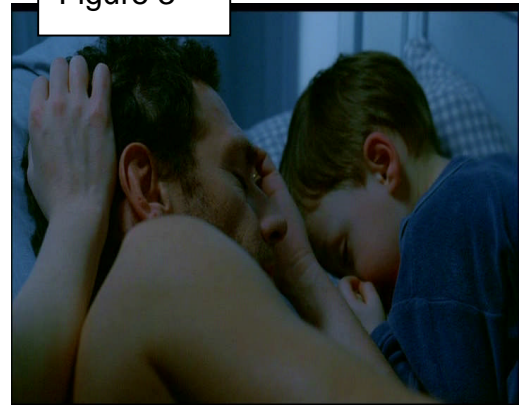
⁴³ The song by Luigi Tenco means 'I've fallen in love with you'. The singer goes on to say, towards the end of the song: 'il giorno mi pento di averti incontrata, la notte ti vengo a cercare', which means 'during the day I regret having met you and at night I go to see you', underlining it seems, the way Gilles is pulled in two directions. Ozon, with his usual irony, says in the CD jacket of the filmscore that he had not chosen the songs for their words, 'ne parlant pas italien', but the lyrics in his chosen songs seem too apt to believe his ignorance of the words.

household and is perhaps a stay-at-home parent; such a banal moment underlines that their relations are strained. It is as if Gilles is deliberately reminding Marion of her inadequacy as home-maker, as when, later that night, he is the one who hears Nicolas crying and goes to comfort him. In fact, when Marion wakes during the night, she finds the bed is empty beside her, and gets up to see where Gilles is; she finds him sleeping in the single bed with their son (see Figure 2). When Marion goes to wake Gilles, she is not framed in the shot with father and son; all we see is her disembodied hand (see Figure 3). The cinematography, with its shot/reverse shot format, cuts Marion off from the father/child dyad, and frames her beside the doorway to emphasise the insurmountable distance which has developed between husband and wife, and once again showing her isolation even in motherhood.

Figure 2



Figure 3



Transgressions: sex, violence and desire

In *5x2*, then, the Child does not bring fulfilment to Gilles and Marion's relationship, nor does it prove to enhance the lives of the individuals, especially for the mother. One could argue that the traditional family unit does not appear to have a promising future in Ozon's film. In *Irréversible*, on the other hand, it is the violent rape which precludes any procreation. It is, paradoxically, Noé's portrayal of Alex's

rape which makes the viewer doubt the film's queer negativity, although it apparently displays aspects of it, in particular the destruction of the Child. One of the reasons *Irréversible* was so controversial at its release was the scene of Alex's rape, which is shot in 'real' time, lasting nearly ten minutes. The sexual violence is brutal and vivid, but what especially disturbs the viewer here is arguably the fact that we are forced to watch this long uncut scene without the possibility of escape, such as in cuts, changes of angle or reduction of time. Here Noé is perhaps deliberately subjectivizing the action, denying us any appropriate cinematic distance in order to implicate the viewer in the crime. As Pam Cook says, film directors do this in order to bring spectators closer to the past, 'to produce a kind of second-hand testimony that includes the audience as witnesses to reconstructed events'.⁴⁴ In *Irréversible* we are not only witnesses but collaborative voyeurs, knowing that Alex will be battered and left for dead. There are, however, other films which show a similarly harrowing, or 'real time' rape, for example *Baise-Moi*, *A ma sœur* and *Kika*, but in *Irréversible* the experience is made even more uncomfortable because the viewer knows what is about to happen and is literally cringing in the cinema seat.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the context is very different for each of these films; in *Baise-Moi* the two women who were raped decide to take revenge on men for the violence they have suffered and the film shows how they begin on a road of self-destruction, while in *A ma sœur* the rape scene is ambiguous in that the 'little' sister of the film arguably saves herself from a worse fate (her mother and sister are both murdered by the stranger), while secretly wishing to have her first sexual experience. When the police find her the next morning, Anaïs insists that she was not raped.⁴⁶ These rape scenes are more nuanced than in

⁴⁴ Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.2.

⁴⁵ *Baise-Moi* (Despentes, 2000), *A ma sœur* (Breillat, 2001), and *Kika* (Almodóvar, 1993).

⁴⁶ Some accounts of *A ma sœur* suggest that the rape scene is a 'fantasy'. See Douglas Keesey, in *Catherine Breillat* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), who says of the rape scene: 'we could switch ontological registers and view the ending of the film not as reality but as a dream',

Irréversible, revealing the psychological effects of sexual abuse. In *Kika*, too, the director deliberately portrays a sexually violent act in a playful way, unsettling the audience. In *Baise-Moi* and *A ma sœur* the female protagonists ultimately have a hand in their own fate, whereas *Irréversible* does not allow Alex to fight back; indeed she is 'destined' to be raped in the logic of the film.

Alex, for all we know, could have been the victim of an unlucky coincidence, walking through a subway at the exact moment that 'le Tenia' had been humiliated by Concha/Guillermo, the prostitute, and thus was needing a scapegoat on whom to take revenge. However, because we have already witnessed the aftermath of Alex's attack (we see her on a stretcher being placed in an ambulance), even banal events give an ominous indication of what is about to happen. First of all, in *syuzhet* order, we see Alex leaving the party wearing a gold dress; she calls for a taxi but when none comes, she starts crossing the road. A prostitute stops her and suggests that she take the underpass because it is 'safer': 'C'est dang'reux par là. Il faut que tu prennes le passage là'. The irony of this cannot escape the viewer: any woman living in a city knows that underpasses are not salubrious places, either by day or night. One wonders if the plot is even at all plausible at this point; Alex appears to be a well-off, intelligent woman and this incongruity on her part is hard to believe. Then, earlier on in the *fabula*, we see Alex and Marcus at the party arguing about his behaviour, Alex saying she wants to go home. Marcus says he will go home with her, but Alex wants nothing to do with him while he is high on cocaine and alcohol. Pierre, their mutual friend, urges Alex not to go home unaccompanied, saying 'ne pars pas toute seule, c'est pas prudent', but with no other obvious options, Alex does just that. She seems bent on breaking all the

and questions whether 'having her virginity taken by a wild-haired madman in the woods is a kind of wish fulfilment of Anaïs' werewolf fantasy', p. 62. This is also Guy Austin's reading in *Contemporary French Cinema* (2008): 'The killing of her mother and sister, and indeed the rape itself, can also be interpreted as literalisations of Anaïs's fantasies as expressed earlier in the film', pp. 95-96.

rules a woman tries to follow when travelling at night on her own. An event even before the party seems to have conspired in Alex's attack: Alex and Marcus are at home in bed when Pierre telephones and leaves a message saying that his car has broken down and that they will have to take a taxi to the party that evening. It seems that an unfortunate sequence of events is what forces Alex to leave the party on her own and therefore leads to her rape and assault, thus taking away responsibility and power from the viewer/individual. The viewer might ask if Pierre and Marcus should have been responsible for her safety as a part of their group, or whether Alex had a choice in how to get home. Had we not already seen the consequences of Alex's brutal attack, we would hardly imagine that these throwaway events could contribute to such a disastrous evening.

Furthermore, by reversing the order of events, Noé changes our perception of the conventional rape and revenge story.⁴⁷ The 'prologue' of *Irréversible* introduces us, in a sordid and nightmarish scene, to two characters in prison, chatting about life and the crimes they committed; one is guilty of incest and yet when his cellmate asks him about the noise emanating from the nightclub nearby, he insults the gay men who frequent it; this is just one indication of the film's latent homophobia which will be examined later in this chapter. The younger man asks: 'c'est quoi le bruit dehors?', and his friend replies: 'ce sont les tarlouzes en bas'. The viewer is struck by the irony of a rapist/paedophile insulting homosexuals, even judging others' behaviour. We wonder what horrific acts are taking place elsewhere. From this disturbing and disorienting introduction the viewer is prepared for the unexpected as the camera shifts, in a nauseating and vertiginous spiral into the nightclub, 'le Rectum'. When we meet Marcus (Cassel) going into the club, we have no idea why he would enter the place and so imagine that he is simply looking for trouble. We wonder whether he is a gay-hater who wants a fight in a

⁴⁷ See *An Eye for an Eye* (1996) and *L'été meurtrier* (1983), in which female protagonists take revenge. *Memento* is a story of a male's revenge for the rape of his girlfriend.

notorious club; Marcus himself is met with homophobic insults when he is carried out of the club on a stretcher. We have no idea, at this time, that Marcus is 'nobly' taking revenge for the rape and vicious attack of his girlfriend, Alex. Marcus almost appears unhinged, taking his friend on a violent and unpredictable Odyssey in the search for a club, 'le Rectum' to find a character called 'Tenia' – whose name, the scientific term for tapeworm, we will conclude, is intended to describe the vile and parasitic nature of this pimp. Had we already been exposed to Alex's badly damaged face and body, we might have understood some of Marcus' anger and impulsive behaviour. We might have concluded that he was a 'rational human being' to take the law into his own hands. As the *syuzhet* tells it, however, the viewer thinks s/he is watching violent picaresque capers, similar to those told in *Trainspotting* (Boyle, 1996) or *La Haine* (Kassovitz, 1995). The fact that Cassel was in the latter film adds to this impression. Marcus in *Irréversible* is not portrayed as a 'free agent', rather he is at the mercy of events which spiral out of his control.

Irréversible is the story of male revenge for a crime: Marcus is seeking to punish the man who raped his girlfriend, spurred on by some underground gang who tell Marcus that the police are no good at catching the man responsible in these cases: 'tu sais très bien qu'ils peuvent rien faire'. The two men who approach Marcus and Pierre after they have been interviewed by the police insist that Marcus should be 'a man' about getting his revenge. When they see his hesitation the first man says: 'c'est une affaire d'hommes là' and 'c'est pas pour les tapettes'. They make it quite clear that the only action for a 'true man' to take is revenge. However, even the firmest believer in the notion that the punishment should fit the crime would see that Marcus' actions will not come to any good; it seems foolhardy, to say the least, to take on the criminal underworld of Paris when he has no idea of what he might be dealing with. Indeed Marcus does not succeed in his mission: after insulting and provoking people at the nightclub, a man turns on him,

breaking his arm; he is about to rape Marcus when Pierre steps in to help. Marcus does not manage to deal out the punishment to the rapist. Ironically it is Pierre, the mild-mannered philosophy lecturer, who as a lover failed to satisfy Alex sexually (while on the métro they joke about Pierre's failure to help Alex reach orgasm during lovemaking), who commits murder. Again, this sudden display of irrational violence is out of character and even implausible. Pierre rushes to rescue Marcus, hitting the assailant on the head with a fire extinguisher; Pierre obliterates the man's face, as if dealing out a Dantean 'pena di contrappasso', or punishment, because this was how le Tenia left Alex's face after the attack: bleeding, distorted and unrecognisable. The violence on screen is explicit and frightening. It is unclear whether Pierre thinks that the man attacking Marcus is, in fact, le Tenia. For the audience it is obvious that they have got the wrong man, for le Tenia is watching from the sidelines, recognisable by his shirt and necklace, looking faintly amused by the events unfolding before him (See Figures 4 & 5). The viewer only understands the significance of Pierre's actions towards the end of the *syuzhet*, when we realise that Pierre satisfies his desire to demonstrate that his love for Alex is greater, and better, than Marcus's can be. Pierre's virility is also restored, by believing that he is meting out the punishment to Alex's attacker.



Figure 4: le Tenia before he rapes Alex in the subway



Figure 5: le Tenia in the nightclub later that evening

In this, Noé's story of rape and revenge could be seen as a 'macho' narrative, in which it is a man's job to protect and avenge any disrespect done to his female partner. *Irréversible* is misogynistic in the way it does not allow Alex to escape her fate: it is already written from the outset of the movie. As Bradshaw says, 'women have nothing to say for themselves in this poisonous nullity. Only men count, a utopia of shaven-headed, righteously angry men'. Bradshaw goes on to say that 'only in hungover, sensation-starved Cannes could this extraordinarily unpleasant, crude, fatuous piece of swaggering macho naivety be considered interesting'.⁴⁸ This is my view of the film too; special effects, technological devices and backwards narration seem to disguise the deep misogyny of this heteronormative 'rape-revenge' movie. Noé almost invites his audience to whisper such misogynistic clichés as 'she was asking for it', by putting Alex (the attractive Bellucci) in a revealing dress. Despite all its claims of being 'gritty' and 'realist', *Irréversible* panders to the myths that surround rape and which are misleading if one looks at research into it. Rapecrisis campaigns to break down these common misperceptions; on their website they state that 'women are never responsible for men's actions. Men are responsible for their actions and the law should make them accountable'.⁴⁹ Noé, however, in his manipulation of cause and effect, implies that Alex's fate was inevitable. It is not, moreover, a 'realist' portrayal of the sort of rape that Rapecrisis and The Fawcett Society report as being so common: that is the rape by someone who is known to the woman.⁵⁰ Both societies' websites contain pages which challenge the myths surrounding rape; the following comes from Rapecrisis:

Myth: Rape only occurs at the hands of strangers in dark alleys, at night, behind bushes, in lonely places.

⁴⁸ Bradshaw, '5x2'.

⁴⁹ See http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk/what_is_rape.html, accessed 16/02/08.

⁵⁰ <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=593>, accessed 16/02/08.

Fact: Research shows that in the majority of cases the rapist is known to the woman. He may be a Friend, a Workmate, Relative or Husband. About 50% of rapes occur in the home of the woman or attacker.⁵¹

Noé, however, conforms to this stereotypical notion of rape; therefore, although *Irréversible* might display queer negativity in its denial of the Child, it proves to follow heteronormative – even misogynistic and in parts homophobic – discourse in its treatment of rape and revenge. The fact that Alex loses her child could be read, as part of a ‘macho’ narrative, as her punishment for careless behaviour and for leaving the party unescorted. It could be both to Noé and Marcus that Alex declares – in the penultimate chapter of the film: ‘je ne suis pas un objet, tu sais’. In the final analysis it may be that Alex’s character has indeed been used as an object, and most crudely into the bargain, in that the rape of a female character is the catalyst for Noé’s experiment of a sexually violent and ‘original’ movie.

The portrayal of sexual violence is arguably more realistic and nuanced in *5x2* than it is in *Irréversible*. Firstly, the fact that Gilles rapes Marion in the hotel bedroom fits in with the statistics from Rapecrisis that the majority of rape occurs between people who know each other, even between husband and wife. Neither does it necessarily happen at night or in insalubrious places. This scene also blurs the lines between consensual and coercive sex, a theme which is repeated throughout the film. It may seem unlikely that Marion and Gilles have decided to rent a hotel room for farewell sex; indeed it seems improbable that they would have planned this to happen. However, it is not unknown for individuals to have sex with their ex-partners; popular psychology informs us that divorce and relationship break-ups create a variety of different emotions, including sadness and regret, which people may mistake for a desire to start afresh and to renew their

⁵¹ <http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk/myths.html>, accessed 16/02/08.

relationship.⁵² Furthermore, it is important that Marion appears to consent to the sex at the beginning of the scene, at least in theory; although her body language speaks of embarrassment – of being naked in front of Gilles – and fear of the consequences, she appears to be consenting by the very fact that she is there (see Figure 6).



Figure 6

This would, it seems, give Gilles the indication that Marion is willing to have sex with him. He asserts his hold over her as soon as she gets into bed, wondering why she has covered herself, and he asks: 't'as grossi?'. This seems cruel because it exploits Marion's trust in him, as well as arrogant in that he feels he is able to comment on her physical appearance. During their lovemaking, however, Marion changes her mind and tells Gilles to stop: 'Arrête! Je veux pas. J'ai pas envie'. He does not listen to her and instead uses his physical strength to overpower her and force her into anal sex; Marion's physical pain and horror is written on her face, but she does not show these emotions to Gilles, crying in the privacy of the bathroom where she attempts to compose herself before leaving.

As Marion leaves, Gilles appears to resent the fact that Marion has custody of their son and says 't'as gagné'; the viewer suspects that raping Marion was

⁵² Suzi Godson, sex therapist, says: 'The end of a marriage is a lonely, painful experience and it is human nature to take whatever comfort you can along the way', in 'Sex advice: Should we be getting divorced?', *The Times: Weekend*, 24 January 2009, p. 16 and http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/relationships/article5568657.ece, accessed 3/2/09. Elsewhere Godson says: 'Sometimes people go back into old relationships because it's an easy way of affirming that they are still attractive. The problem is that it sends mixed messages to your ex and is likely to leave you feeling very confused too', in 'Ten things to know before having sex with an ex', *The Times*, 22 November 2008, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/men/article5204875.ece, accessed 3/2/09.

Gilles's way to regain control of the situation, as if he wants to gain a small victory in the face of their marital breakdown and weaken Marion's upper hand in the divorce settlement. This is not the first time that Gilles deliberately hurts Marion; he deserts her when she gives birth and he humiliates her at a dinner party in front of his brother. There is also a sense that Gilles is too ready to use his physical power during sex and therefore that the hotel scene is not too surprising. In the first sequence of the *fabula*, when Gilles and Valérie are on holiday together and Valérie suggests that Gilles finds Marion attractive, he taunts her, saying that she is sexually aroused by the thought of him having sex with Marion; he caresses her, moving his hand towards her crotch, saying: 'Ça t'exciterait que je me la fasse?'. When Valérie denies this and pushes him away, Gilles replies: 'Tu as raison, c'est avec elle que j'ai envie de baiser ce soir' and physically uses his body to constrain her. As the stage directions imply, Valérie is distant and yet she gives into Gilles, even appearing to enjoy their lovemaking.⁵³ Yet the next morning Valérie goes hiking without Gilles, who takes the opportunity to seduce Marion (we assume this as we only see them walking into the sea together). It seems that this aggressive lovemaking was again farewell sex, seemingly an outlet for Gilles's sexual feelings for Marion rather than confirmation of the relationship he had with Valérie. Gilles appears unable to escape old habits as far as relationships are concerned. The way Gilles coerces his female partners into sex is, perhaps, more troubling for the viewer than the lurid depiction of rape in *Irréversible* as it is more plausible and recognisable in our lived experience.

The way Gilles finds himself repeating behavioural patterns in relationships might resonate with some of Lee Edelman's ideas of queer negativity. 'Child-aversion' is not, in fact, the only characteristic of Edelman's queer negativity; Edelman, with others, emphasises the repetitive nature of heteronormative

⁵³ François Ozon, *5x2: Cinq fois deux* (Paris: L'Arche, 2004). 'Ils font l'amour. Valérie semble ailleurs. Gilles est agressif et directif. Petit à petit, Valérie semble aimer ça', p. 92.

narrative. Edelman states that, for him, futurism does not move 'toward the end of enabling change, but, instead, of perpetuating sameness, of *turning back time* to assure repetition'.⁵⁴ Edelman is here referring to the 'Universal' story of girl-meets-boy, ensuring heterosexual reproduction.⁵⁵ Ozon's *5x2* illustrates the repetitive nature of heterosexual relationships in its portrait of Gilles, who is seen as a serial monogamist and whose relationships with women mirror each other. One might here be reminded of the way Marie in *Sous le sable* repeats patterns in her relationships with men; one thinks of how Ozon reflects this visually. Gilles is also stuck in a cycle of relationships which begin and end in a predictable pattern. This is done partly through the cinematography and partly through the comparison between his relationships with Valérie and Marion. Ozon illustrates this with a banal, everyday gesture which brings both couples, Gilles and Valérie, and Gilles and Marion, together (see Figures 7 & 8). In the final sequence of *5x2*, Gilles and Valérie turn out their bedside lights, one after another, reflecting an earlier moment in the *syuzhet* when Gilles and Marion turn out their bedside lights after the dinner party with Gilles's brother.

Figure 7: Gilles & Valérie



Figure 8: Gilles & Marion



It is as if the everyday familiarity between the couple signals the destruction of their passion and the gradual dwindling away of any love they had for each other.

⁵⁴ Edelman, *No Future*, p. 60, my italics.

⁵⁵ Dennis Allen, writing ten years before Edelman's work on *No Future*, also underlines the repetitive nature of heteronormative narratives. See Dennis W. Allen, 'Homosexuality and Narrative', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 41, 3-4 (1995), pp. 609-634.

Ozon's mirroring of these two scenes implies that no heterosexual coupling can work, for it never moves away from the 'perpetuating sameness'. Edelman instead champions homosexuality as 'reducing the assurance of meaning in fantasy's promise of continuity to the meaningless circulation and repetitions of the drive'.⁵⁶ Although *5x2* portrays the repetitive nature of the heteronormative narrative, there is a sense that we should resist it, or at least acknowledge it, rather than believe its empty promises of future happiness.

In *Irreversible*, on the other hand, audiences are inclined to believe in the romantic relationship between Marcus and Alex. Internet reviews of the film testify to the fact that some viewers are taken in by the promise of happiness. These are just some views that have been expressed on the portrayal of Alex's and Marcus's relationship: 'if you can make it past all the darkness in the first half of the film, you're treated to one of the most beautiful relationships seen on screen in the past few years';⁵⁷ 'a charming portrait of a love affair'.⁵⁸ A third reviewer says of the end:

Eventually there are scenes of tenderness and beauty that constitute, in context, an emotional assault. This is a movie in which a final image of children in springtime, their gambols underscored by the plaintive second movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, is unbearably cruel: You know by this point (if you've seen fit to stick around) that innocence can only be destroyed and the guilty left unpunished. Those children have a hell of a life ahead.⁵⁹

This reviewer has missed the point: there will be no children at all, there is no future for them. The fact is that contemporary cinemagoers expect a 'happy ending', having been trained by Hollywood, and therefore see it even when it is not

⁵⁶ Edelman, *No Future*, p. 39.

⁵⁷ Chris Nelson, 'Don't shield your eyes', <http://www.dreamlogic.net/archives/irreversible-review>, accessed 19/03/08.

⁵⁸ Dolan Cummings, <http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2003-01/irreversible.htm>, accessed 19/03/08.

⁵⁹ David Edelstein, 'Irreversible Errors' <http://www.slate.com/id/2079782/>, accessed 19/03/08.

there, even though Ozon and No   present these ‘endings’ with a great deal of irony attached. If the viewer looked for it, s/he would find it in *5x2* also; it is worth noting, however, that there have been no na  ve comments found on the Internet heralding Gilles and Marion as ‘one of the most beautiful relationships seen on screen’. It might be, then, that Ozon’s irony is more successful and that viewers do not feel they are expected to believe in this romance. Ozon and No   parody the Hollywood romantic ‘clinch’ described by Bordwell in such a way that *5x2* and *Irr  versible* both provide and deny classical narration’s ‘happy ending’. As with hindsight/prolepsis we know that the promise of happiness will not last and is nothing more than deception. The viewer of Ozon’s and No  ’s films cannot forget that these are *fabula* beginnings and not the endings of a classical narrative film.⁶⁰ Burdeau is perhaps right in his hesitation to classify Ozon’s film as one thing or the other, saying: ‘Pas la peine alors de perdre son temps    se demander si, au bout du compte, *5x2* lui-m  me est bourgeois ou anti-, conformiste ou anti-, tendre ou m  chant’.⁶¹

One wonders why individuals repeat destructive patterns in relationships; one would expect subjects not to make the same mistakes twice. But for Freud, in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, in which the analyst questions the theory that all mental processes are governed by the ‘pleasure principle’, our repetition compulsion comes exactly from our experience of painful incidents. The ‘fort-da’ game is understood by Freudian psychoanalysis to be the process by which subjects gain comfort by becoming active in a negative experience. Freud has no doubt that by repeating this event the subject feels the same unpleasure as the first time. There seems no way for the human subject to move on: ‘no lesson has been learnt from the old experience of these activities having led instead only to

⁶⁰ As Asibong says of *5x2*; ‘the entire film is, after all, haunted by the early sequence of Marion’s post-divorce rape by Gilles, a sequence that has occurred just ninety minutes before the blissful Italian sunset’, *Fran  ois Ozon*, p. 99.

⁶¹ Burdeau, ‘*5x2*’, p. 39.

unpleasure'.⁶² Marion is thus ready for an intimate relationship again only shortly after she has broken up with her Italian boyfriend and Gilles is attracted by the prospect of a love affair with Marion, even while he is in the process of deciding that a long-term relationship with Valérie is not for him (he looks horrified when she suggests that they will be having another holiday together). Despite recent negative experiences of relationships, Gilles and Marion believe in their chance of happiness and are ready to try again. This, for Freud, is proof that all mental life cannot be governed by the pleasure principle; he proposes that we are, instead, subject to a conflict between the life and death drives. For Freud, '*an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore to an earlier state of things*', and he goes on to recognise the '*conservative nature of living substance*'.⁶³

Marion and Gilles do not seem able to learn from their past mistakes; instead they continue to hurt each other. In the second chapter, Gilles sets out to hurt Marion deliberately, foreshadowing the way he rapes her at the beginning of the *syuzhet*. During the dinner party, to which Christophe (Gilles's brother) and Mathieu (his lover) are invited, the group embarks on a discussion of in/fidelity and Gilles tells a story – to Marion's dismay – about an orgy he took part in some years before. Gilles seems proud of his bisexual escapade, saying that he now knows what his brother experiences: 'J'ai sucé une ou deux bites et puis je me suis fait enculer pendant que je prenais une fille...'. Marion remains composed during this exchange as she smokes a cigarette, but as she does so her eyes are glistening with tears, her hands shaking, and she appears utterly humiliated. Bradshaw goes so far as to suggest that 'just talking about it looks like revenge for a preceding crazy act of infidelity, which the other has (probably) discovered in a missing scene'. Whatever Gilles's motives for telling the story, it is clear that Marion is not

⁶² Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', p. 21.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 36.

proud of her husband's sexual conquests, nor of the infantile way he boasts about them; she cuts the conversation short: 'Bon, on passe à côté'.

Gilles is not a character whom we warm to, despite Ozon's claim to the contrary.⁶⁴ Freiss is even criticised for hamming his part; Rapold goes so far as to say that his character has the 'psychological depth of a French Ken doll'.⁶⁵ Kemp, too, recognises that 'Stéphane Freiss never engages our sympathy quite so strongly' as Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi's character, but these critics fail to see that this is an effective way of pulling the rug from underneath the institution of heterosexual relationships. Asibong states that the characters are as impenetrable as each other: 'Marion and Gilles [...] remain mysteries or ciphers to us, to themselves and to each other'.⁶⁶ As Nick Pinkerton puts it: 'the straight dude has lost all practical function', referring to Gilles's anecdote about lesbian couples who have children without the intervention of a heterosexual male. Moreover, both in *5x2* and *Irréversible* women are portrayed as being able to express their sexuality without channelling it through a straight man (unlike, say, Marie in *Sous le sable*); after dinner Marion dances sensually with Mathieu to Paolo Conte's ironically fitting 'Sparring Partner' and on holiday revels in the warm breeze on the balcony of the Sardinian hotel shortly after her arrival.⁶⁷ Alex, too, in *Irréversible* dances with other women at the party, apparently comfortable with her sexuality and her body. This kind of bodily awareness and pleasure in one's own body is unknown to the heterosexual males of Ozon's and Noé's films. Neither goes so far as to portray a

⁶⁴ Ozon says, in his introduction to the CD of the music for the film: 'La souffrance étant davantage du côté de l'homme dans le film, j'ai choisi essentiellement des voix d'hommes'.

⁶⁵ Nicolas Rapold, 'Take 2',

http://www.indiewire.com/article/everything_old_is_new_again_franois_ozons_5_x_2/, accessed 17/07/2007. Phil Powrie's article, 'The Haptic Moment: Sparring with Paolo Conte in Ozon's *5x2*', in *Paragraph*, 31, 2 (2008), pp. 206-222, suggests that sympathies are divided and shift between the two protagonists, giving a more nuanced reading of the couple.

⁶⁶ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 101.

⁶⁷ The lyrics of 'Sparring Partner' underline the bellicose and finite nature of relationships. See again Phil Powrie, 'The Haptic Moment', especially the lyrics of the song on p. 214. Powrie suggests that Ozon's francophone audience would probably know Conte's work, if not the exact words of this particular song: 'He is well known as one of Italy's *cantautori* [...] with a large following in Germany and France as well as Italy', p. 208.

world without heterosexual relations, as Houellebecq does, but *5x2* at least can be read as a strong critique of the relationships that heteronormative ideologies have to offer.

It is not just the heterosexual male, though, who feels trapped by heteronormative relations; arguably Marion had not realised the full impact of marriage until her wedding day. Philip French of *The Observer* implies that Marion hopes for a marriage similar to that of her parents:

When Marion sees her parents dancing tenderly at her wedding, she thinks she might have a similarly fortunate long-term relationship. But at this point, we already know what kind of marriage they have. We've been into the future and seen them conducting a bitter row in the maternity hospital after the birth of Marion's child, their grandson.⁶⁸

In fact, it might be that seeing her ageing parents together on the dance floor frightens Marion and drives home the solemn words of the mayor at their wedding on their 'droits et devoirs', rather than raising her hopes of happiness. This may, in part, explain the much maligned scene in which Marion has sex with an American in the woods on her wedding night.⁶⁹ It may be that filmically the scene does not work: the *mise-en-scène* is too artificial, the American accent too false, and with Bruni-Tedeschi reciting awkwardly in English the clichéd exchange seems to serve no purpose. However, it may serve to underline that women, too, are betrayed by the ties of commitment and marriage and that they are also victims of reproductive futurism. After all, it is Marion's wedding night but her husband is too drunk to make love to her; she is excited and so unconsciously is looking for sex elsewhere. This could even be a 'subjective fantasy' which occurs in Marion's mind, similar to

⁶⁸ Philip French, 'Flashback to the Future'.

⁶⁹ The scene is severely critiqued by Kemp, Rapold and Koresky.

the procreational sex scene in *Le Temps qui reste*, as we saw in Chapter 3; whether 'real' or 'fantasy' the scene testifies to the fact that heterosexual marriage fails Marion from the outset.⁷⁰ Rapold claims that Marion is punished for her infidelity throughout the film, and because of this, Ozon has made a 'puritanical' picture whose misogyny is barely veiled by its backwards take on time: 'The reverse chronology obscures that she [...] is ultimately punished, with rape (first episode) and abandonment (third episode)'.⁷¹ Rapold, however, is perhaps too firm a believer in the direct link between cause and effect, believing in a higher power's (Ozon's?) decision to punish Marion, rather than considering that Gilles and Marion's relationship is merely another victim of flawed heteronormative models. I would argue that the scene of Marion's infidelity, although an anomaly cinematographically, portrays the female heterosexual as equally lost as her male counterpart as far as relationships are concerned.

Another reason why viewers might misinterpret some scenes from *5x2* is that the *mise-en-scène* and cinematography are sober compared to the excesses of *Gouttes d'eau*; *5x2* is a realist psychological drama in appearance and audiences expect events to be believable.⁷² As we have seen, however, not all scenes belong to a 'realist' film: the planning of farewell sex in a hotel; the anecdote of Gilles's orgy; Gilles's unexplained failure to turn up at the hospital after his son's birth; Marion's extramarital sex on their wedding night. We have seen also how scenes in *Irréversible* are not plausible, but usually because events are grotesquely overdone and reproduce masculinist/misogynistic myths without questioning them, while paradoxically appearing transgressive. The 'implausible' scenes from *5x2*, on the other hand, critique popular beliefs concerning

⁷⁰ Asibong also notes the ambivalence of this scene, *François Ozon*, p. 100.

⁷¹ Rapold, 'Take 2'.

⁷² *5x2* does not feature in the section which Asibong names 'genre and the shock of over-stimulation', Chapter 4: 'Blood, tears and song: genre and the shock of over-stimulation', *François Ozon*, pp. 112-139.

heterosexual marriage. Although we are able to read these sequences and infer meaning from them, they would nonetheless be implausible in a classical narrative film. But as we saw in Chapter 3, Ozon's sober cinematography in *5x2*, as in *Le Temps qui reste*, deceives the spectator into thinking that the film is about 'real' people, whereas, in fact Ozon continues to be fascinated by myth and allegory as much as he was in his early features and shorts. As Asibong has argued, it would be a mistake to imply that Ozon has 'matured' into a realist filmmaker;⁷³ his obsessions remain constant from his early shorts to his latest film – as Asibong says of *Photo de famille*: '[it is] a macabre little farce about death and its eruption into family life that contains, in seedling, all the themes that would flower in feature films'.⁷⁴ Just as Ozon was inspired by the fairy tale for his second feature, *Les Amants criminels*, so *5x2* draws on aspects of the allegory. Asibong reminds us that:

Often avoiding realism altogether, Ozon's world is usually fantasy-fuelled [...]. These fantasies [...] inhabit a hybrid and sometimes unashamedly tacky space: real life soaked in a heady perfume of bad romantic fiction, musical melodrama and perhaps a little light pornography.⁷⁵

Ozon's film prefers to transgress audience expectations and *5x2* does not, therefore, belong to the genre of francophone psychological dramas but to a more allegorical critique of heteronormative relationships. *5x2* is representative of, as Asibong says, the 'state-of-the-nation' and has problematic connotations, especially in a country where the PaCS is seen as a victory for gay French, but which queer theorists fear is 'normalizing' gay subjectivities. McRuer, among

⁷³ Asibong says: 'The prevailing view would have it that Ozon's ongoing obsession with transgression, only ever superficial and predictable in any case, has fortunately given way to allegedly more mature projects', 'Meat, murder, metamorphosis', p. 203.

⁷⁴ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 2.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 6.

others, as we saw in Chapter 2, is concerned that gay relationships are now forming according to heteronormative models, whereas writers such as Rees-Roberts note the assimilation of gays into dominant society.⁷⁶ Ozon's film surely questions the wisdom of copying faulty heteronormative matrices.

Conclusion

As we have seen in the course of this chapter, *Irréversible* fails to undermine dominant ideology in its portrayal of sexual desire. Indeed, not only does the film attract the charge of misogyny but it could also be accused of promoting homophobia by the enactment of violence against gay men in the film. As mentioned above, homophobic insults are thrown at the people inside the gay club and the very name of the club, 'le Rectum', suggests a place where base instincts are indulged and also identifies the gay community by their preferred sexual orifice in a homophobic metonym – a notion which would offend queer theorists who proclaim that identity is more complexly formed than merely the sex of who one chooses to go to bed with.⁷⁷ The name of the club reduces the gay men in the film to sexual beings alone, suggesting that they are unable to control their desires and that they always have anonymous, promiscuous sex in nightclubs. This is not necessarily how every gay club functions, nor, indeed, can one say that straight clubs do not sometimes offer promiscuous sex as part of their attraction. While one of Ozon's own films also portrays 'backroom' gay sex, in *Le Temps qui reste* it is filmed more ambivalently. The scene shows Romain in search of denial and perhaps oblivion from his illness; the camera also testifies to the proximity of the feelings of pleasure and pain. The looks on the actors' faces render this a more

⁷⁶ See Nick Rees-Roberts, *French Queer Cinema*: 'The years following the PaCS have been marked by the increased institutionalisation of a predominantly white, middle-class gay identity', p. 2.

⁷⁷ There is even a poster of a clenched fist which appears to be on the prison walls – another homophobic allusion to gay practices?

intimate, although uncomfortable, scene than the faceless mob in *le Rectum*. In *Irréversible* the villain of the piece is called *le Tenia*, who also happens to be a gay man; the fact that he is named after a parasite could be read as a heteronormative suggestion that gays are a 'plague' on society. Furthermore, the rape of Alex by *le Tenia* is ludicrously implausible, implying that gay men are often to be found lurking in subways and rape heterosexual females; this is not what societies such as Rapecrisis show in their research. The treatment of gay men, ending in the vicious murder of one of them by Pierre, reproduces a paranoid fantasy of gay men as dangerous and criminal.

5x2, on the other hand, while not a portrait of the homosexual couple, allows a queer reading of the heterosexual couple at the centre of the film. Ozon critiques the difficulties of maintaining a monogamous heterosexual relationship, just as *Gouttes d'eau* illustrates the instability of desire for Franz and Léo. Ozon's most recent *court métrage*, *Un lever de rideau*, also testifies to the problems associated in staying faithful both to one's partner and one's own ideals.⁷⁸ The protagonist of the film, Bruno, while he loves his girlfriend, cannot reconcile his desire for her with his insistence on punctuality; only his male friend, Pierre, remains constant. Jamie Russell, writing for the BBC website, asks of *5x2*: 'is Ozon just thumbing his nose at the straight world's belief in happily ever after?'.⁷⁹ Although Ozon's films may disrupt heteronormative models of relating as well as phallic, linear, narrative, *5x2* does not seem to mock heterosexual relationships or to promote a gay lifestyle as an easier choice. For, while Marion and Gilles are struggling to relate to each other, the film shows that Gilles's brother, Christophe, is also poorly treated by the nature of desire. His younger boyfriend, Mathieu, does not believe in monoandry: 'Moi, je ne crois pas à la fidélité. Ce n'est pas possible et

⁷⁸ *Un lever de rideau* was made for French television. See Asibong's discussion of the short, *François Ozon*, pp. 107-110.

⁷⁹ Jamie Russell, '5x2', www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/02/17/5_x_2_2005_review.shtml, accessed 17/07/08.

puis ça ne sert à rien'. Christophe seems to agree with him: 'Oui, il a raison, pourquoi se forcer à être fidèle alors que c'est contre notre nature profonde'. The older man even justifies his lover's infidelities, stating: 'il est jeune, je ne peux pas l'empêcher, et puis pour l'instant il revient à chaque fois vers moi...'. Christophe attempts to accept his situation, saying: 'le sexe passe après le fait d'être bien ensemble, la tendresse, la complicité...'. It is evident, nevertheless, that Christophe is not indifferent to his lover's behaviour; as Bradshaw says, he 'can only shrug and smile to hide his hurt'. It does not mean the beginning of a 'daisy-chain of anger', as Bradshaw describes the heterosexual couple's destructive relationship, yet this is portrayed as a painful arrangement for Christophe; in fact, Gilles later tells Marion that Christophe had confided in him: 'il m'a dit qu'ils baisaient pas', once again confirming, as Asibong says of several Ozon films, 'il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel'.⁸⁰ Although Asibong is speaking of Marion and Gilles when he talks of 'the impossibility of a smoothly symbolisable, mutually signifying, coherent equation of desire between two human subjects', this statement could be true for any Ozonian partnerships.⁸¹ While Ozon's portrait of human desire and relationships is bleak and queerly negative, it is undoubtedly more nuanced and reflective than Noé's controversial film.

In *Irréversible* we have seen a story of rape and revenge, actions which are both motivated by male phallic violence; both are responses by men, one straight and one gay, to feeling emasculated. Le Tenia has just been refused (whether money or sex we cannot be sure) by the prostitute Concha/Guillermo and expresses his anger by violating Alex, the nearest victim he chances upon. Marcus, on the other hand, is spurred on by two underground criminals who suggest that the only 'manly' thing to do is to seek revenge himself rather than

⁸⁰ This is a theme which runs through Asibong's third chapter: 'Shadow of the spectre: cinema beyond relation?', *François Ozon*, pp. 81-111. Asibong is here quoting Lacan, see *François Ozon*, p. 47 and p. 100.

⁸¹ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 100.

leave the perpetrator's fate to the police and the justice system. All these instances are of sexualized violence, instigated by and carried out by men. By portraying Alex at peace on her own at the *syuzhet* end, the film suggests that it is only male sexuality that brings about destruction, and that once men enter the picture, it is a downwards spiral of destruction. This is a simplistic, and heteronormative, view of female and male sexuality; in this regard, *5x2* explores sexualities in more depth. In Ozon's movie, both Marion and Gilles are responsible for the breakdown of their marriage; rape, moreover, is portrayed as something that happens between a couple and not strangers. Although Alex claims that it is always the woman who decides whether to have sex or not, Noé's film shows the exact opposite. Marion, on the other hand, is a desiring subject, even though her choices may be flawed. For Noé, desire is shown to be masculine, destructive and uncontrollable and ultimately, leads to emptiness. Love is also destructive in *5x2*, but desire continually re-ignites itself and explores new channels of expression.

Conclusion

The recurrent themes central to Ozon's corpus which have been identified and analysed in this study are: the fluidity of gender, the inextricable link between sex and death, the tyranny of heteronormative ideologies, the pervasive influence of our sexuality on all aspects of life, including death, depression and disease, the use of comedy and camp to reinforce and provoke rebellion against patriarchal values and finally the reiteration that human relationships, whether heterosexual or homosexual, are all but impossible to maintain. As Asibong says of *Un Lever de rideau* (2006), 'The film is a perfectly formed, tragic-comic crystallisation of Ozon's increasingly consistent cinematic vision of the radical failure of relation between subjects'.¹ Ozon's films do not simply serve to 'thumb his nose at the straight world's belief in happily ever after',² but also demonstrate the complexities of same-sex relationships; one is not a 'better' or 'safer' alternative to the other.

Despite the themes which unsettle and fragment heteronormative modes of being and relating, this thesis has found that Ozon's films are not as transgressive as they promise to be, nor do they take some ideas far enough. We have commented on the 'silent' lesbianism of *Angel* and the use of gay stereotypes in *Sitcom*, as well as the normative link between gay sexuality and disease or death. Ozon, this thesis suggests, is not a queer director who always breaks boundaries, but one who is fascinated by them, a director whose playful references to normative models imply a wish to balance on a knife-edge between rebellion and conformity. While we have seen that Ozon's films eschew a political engagement with gay or queer social issues, his œuvre can be said to comment politically on society, whether through the suspicion of progress narratives, the adopting of heteronormative models such as marriage in institutions such as the PaCS, the

¹ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 108.

² Jamie Russell, '5x2'.

ostracisation of menopausal and childless women, the denial of disabled sexualities, the misunderstanding of sexual violence and the failure of the modern couple.

It would appear, however, that Ozon's project lost focus and impact with his 2006 film *Angel*; although there is evidence of Ozon's queer agenda, his use of pastiche in the spirit of Todd Haynes did not strike a chord with his critics and viewers. Asibong would agree with this view of the trajectory of the director's work and emphasises that the *court métrage* is seen as 'Ozon's artistic domain par excellence' and that *Regarde la mer* 'may well prove to be his indisputable masterpiece'.³ Ozon's latest works do not seem to have the same force to question social conventions. It seems that Ozon sought a return to his roots with his film-mix *Quand la peur dévore l'âme*, a homage to his cinematic godfathers Sirk and Fassbinder. It would also appear that Ozon now prefers making adaptations from literary texts, for example from Taylor's *Angel*, Montherlant's *Un incompris* for *Un lever de rideau* and Rose Tremain's 'Moth' for *Ricky* (2009). Until 2006 Ozon alternated between writing his own screenplays and adapting theatrical works, and he was the main writer for all the screenplays before *Gouttes d'eau*. It may be that since 2006 Ozon's inspiration for original screenplays has been dwindling; it would be surprising indeed if the director managed to maintain such a frequent output of films. However, the choice of adapting Tremain's 'Moth' also testifies to the fact that Ozon has not left behind some of his earlier preoccupations: Tremain straddles the boundary of British/Anglophone and French culture, an English writer who has lived and worked for many years in France. The fact that Tremain's novel *Sacred Country* tells the story of a little girl who wants to be a boy, would also indicate that the writer's interests and work are closely aligned to Ozon's own

³ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 107, p. 52.

project.⁴ Moreover, as we know from Ozon's collaborations with Charlotte Rampling and his two English language films, the cultural crossover between Great Britain and France, and indeed other multicultural figures such as Sirk and other foreign actors working in French, remain a source of inspiration for the director. Ozon, it appears, is best understood as part of a wider, European 'arthouse' scene; his work does not fit easily under the umbrella of French cinema.

Asibong understands the change in Ozon's work since *Gouttes d'eau* and *8 Femmes* as a reflection of 'the historical context of chronic indifference at the heart of French society at the dawn of the twenty-first century', in particular under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy.⁵ However political or not Ozon proves to be as a director, his work has surely, along with other queer European filmmakers, opened up space for a queer spectatorship, as this thesis has shown. Ozon's œuvre offers audiences the possibility to engage with films queerly and at the same time leads the way for other, 'queer, mainstream, French *auteur[s]*' to continue the investigation into representations of sexuality on screen.⁶ Ozon's contribution to the evolution of French cinema in the 1990s and early 2000s should no longer be doubted, although how his career will develop and contribute to debates on sexuality and its place in society remains to be seen.

⁴ Rose Tremain, *Sacred Country* (London: Vintage, 2002; first published in 1992 by Sinclair-Stevenson).

⁵ Asibong, *François Ozon*, p. 8.

⁶ Ince, *Five Directors*, p. 113.

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Interviews on *courts métrages*, <http://www.francois-ozon.com/francais/ozon.entretiens07.html>

Interviews on *Regarde la mer*, <http://www.francois-ozon.com/francais/ozon.entretiens06.html>

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Filmography

François Ozon

Short films on video and Super 8:

Les Doigts dans le ventre (1988)

Photo de famille (1988)

Mes parents un jour d'été (1990)

Victor (1993) 14 mins, 35 mm, col.

Director: François Ozon

Screenplay: François Ozon, Nicolas Mercier

Cinematographer: Sylvia Calle

Sound: Benoît Hillebrant

Editor: Thierry Bordes

Cast: François Genty, Isabelle Journeau, Jean-Jacques Forbin, Laurent

Labasse, Martine Erhel

Production: Femis

Une rose entre nous (1994) 27 mins, 35 mm, col

Director: François Ozon

Screenplay: François Ozon, Nicolas Mercier

Cinematographer: Sylvia Calle

Sound: Benoît Hillebrant

Editor: Sylvie Ballyot

Cast: Sasha Hails, Rodolphe Lesage, Christophe Hemon, Jacques Disses,

Francis Arnaud, Gilles Frilay

Production: Femis

Action Vérité (1994) 4 mins, 35 mm, col.

Screenplay, editor and director: François Ozon

Cinematographer: Yorick Le Saux

Sound: Benoît Hillebrant

Cast: Fabien Billet, Adrien Pastor, Farida Rahmatoullah, Aylin Argun

Production: Fidélité Productions

La Petite Mort (1995) 26 mins, 35 mm, col.

Director: François Ozon

Screenplay: François Ozon, Didier Blasco

Cinematographer: Yorick Le Saux

Editor: Frédéric Massiot

Cast: François Delaive, Camille Japy, Martial Jacques, Michel Beaujard

Production: Fidélité Productions

Une Robe d'été (1996) 15 mins, 35 mm, col.

Screenplay and director: François Ozon

Cinematographer: Yorick Le Saux

Sound: Benoît Hillebrant

Editor: Jeanne Moutard

Cast: Frédéric Mangenot, Lucia Sanchez, Sébastien Charles

Production: Fidélité Productions

Regarde la mer (1997) 52 mins, 35 mm, col.

Screenplay and director: François Ozon

Cinematographer: Yorick Le Saux

Sound: Daniel Sobrino

Cast: Sasha Hails, Marina De Van

Production: Fidélité Productions

Scènes de lit (1997) 26 mins, 35 mm, col.

Screenplay and director: François Ozon

Cinematographer: Yorick Le Saux, Matthieu Vadepied

Cast: Valérie Druguet, Camille Japy, Lucia Sanchez, François Delaive

Production: Local Films

X2000 (1998) 6 mins, 35 mm, col.

Screenplay and director: François Ozon

Cinematographer: Pierre Stroeber

Sound: Benoît Hillebrant

Editor: Dominique Petrot

Cast: Denise Schropfer-Aron, Bruno Slagmulder, Olivier and Lionel Le

Guevellou, Lucia Sanchez, Flavien Coupeau

Production: Fidélité Productions and Canal Plus

Sitcom (1998) 80 mins, 35 mm, col.

Screenplay and director: François Ozon

Cinematographer: Yorick Le Saux

Sound: Benoît Hillebrant

Editor: Dominique Petrot

Cast: Evelyne Dandry, François Marthouret, Marina and Adrien De Van,
Stéphane Rideau, Lucia Sanchez, Jules-Emmanuel Eyoum Deido

Production: Fidélité Productions

Les Amants criminels (1999) 90 mins, 35 mm, col.

Screenplay and director: François Ozon

Cinematographer: Pierre Stroeber

Sound: François Guillaume

Editor: Dominique Petrot

Cast: Natacha Régnier, Jérémie Renier, Miki Manojlovic, Salim Kechiouche,
Yasmine Belmadi

Production: Fidélité Productions

Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes (2000) 90 mins, 35 mm, col.

Director: François Ozon

Screenplay: François Ozon, from the stage play written by Rainer Werner
Fassbinder *Tröpfen auf Heisse Steine*

Cinematographer: Jeanne Lapoirie

Sound: Eric Devulder

Editor: Laurence Bawedin

Cast: Bernard Giraudeau, Malik Zidi, Anna Thomson, Ludivine Sagnier

Production: Fidélité Productions and Alain Sarde Films

Sous le sable (2001) 95 mins, 35 mm, col..

Director: François Ozon

Screenplay: François Ozon with Emmanuèle Bernheim, Marina De Van and
Marcia Romano

Director of photography: Jeanne Lapoirie, Antoine Heberlé

Sound: Jean-Luc Audy, Benoît Hillebrant, Jean-Pierre Laforce

Editor: Laurence Bawedin

Cast: Charlotte Rampling, Bruno Cremer, Jacques Nolot, Alexandra Stewart, Pierre Vernier, Andrée Tainsy

Production: Olivier Delbosc and Marc Missonier

8 Femmes (2002) 103 mins, 35 mm, col.

Director: François Ozon

Screenplay: François Ozon with the collaboration of Marina De Van, adapted from the play by Robert Thomas

Cinematographer: Jeanne Lapoirie

Sound: Pierre Garnet, Jean-Pierre Laforce

Editor: Laurence Bawedin

Cast: Catherine Deneuve, Isabelle Huppert, Emmanuelle Béart, Fanny Ardant, Virginie Ledoyen, Danielle Darrieux, Ludivine Sagnier, Firmine Richard

Production: Olivier Delbosc and Marc Missonier (Fidélité Productions)

Swimming Pool (2003) 102 mins, 35 mm, col.

Director: François Ozon

Screenplay: François Ozon and Emmanuèle Bernheim

Cinematographer: Yorick Le Saux

Sound: Lucien Balibar

Editor: Monica Coleman

Sound editor: Benoît Hillebrant, Jean-Pierre Laforce

Cast: Charlotte Rampling, Ludivine Sagnier, Charles Dance, Marc Fayolle, Jean-Marie Lamour, Mireille Mossé, Michel Fau, Jean-Claude Lecas, Lauren Farrow

Production: Olivier Delbosc and Marc Missonier (Fidélité)

5x2 (2004) 90 mins, 35 mm, col.

Director: François Ozon

Screenplay: François Ozon with the collaboration of Emmanuèle Bernheim

Cinematographer: Yorick Le Saux

Sound: Jean-Pierre Duret and Brigitte Taillandier

Editor: Monica Coleman

Sound editor: Jean-Pierre Laforce

Cast: Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi, Stéphane Freiss, Françoise Fabian, Michael
Lonsdale, Antoine Chappey, Géraldine Pailhas, Marc Ruchmann
Production: Olivier Delbosc and Marc Missonier (Fidélité)

Le Temps qui reste (2005) 90 mins, 35 mm, col

Director: François Ozon
Screenplay: François Ozon
Cinematographer: Jeanne Lapoirie
Sound: Brigitte Taillandier
Editor: Monica Coleman
Cast: Melvil Poupaud, Jeanne Moreau, Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi, Daniel
Duval, Marie Rivière, Christian Sengewald, Louise-Anne Hippeau
Production: Olivier Delbosc and Marc Missonier (Fidélité)

Un lever de rideau (2006) 30 mins, 35 mm, col.

Director: François Ozon
Screenplay: François Ozon, adapted from 'Un incompris' by Henry de
Montherlant
Cinematographer: Yorick Le Saux
Sound: Laurent Benaim
Editor: Muriel Breton
Sound editor: Benoît Gargonne
Cast: Louis Garrel, Vahina Giocante, Mathieu Amalric
Production: FOZ, Canal Plus+, Centre National de la Cinématographie

Angel (2006) 134 mins, 35 mm, col.

Director: François Ozon
Screenplay: François Ozon with Martin Crimp, adapted from the novel *Angel*
by Elizabeth Taylor
Director of photography: Denis Lenoir
Sound: Pierre Mertens
Editor: Muriel Breton
Sound editor: Benoît Hillebrant
Cast: Romola Garai, Sam Neill, Lucy Russell, Michael Fassbender,
Charlotte Rampling, Jacqueline Tong, Janine Duvitski, Christopher
Benjamin, Simon Woods, Jemma Powell

Production: Olivier Delbosc and Marc Missonier (Fidélité)

Ricky (2009) 90 mins, 35 mm col.

Director: François Ozon

Screenplay: François Ozon with the collaboration of Emmanuèle Bernheim,
adapted from the short story *Moth* by Rose Tremain

Cinematographer: Jeanne Lapoirie

Sound: Brigitte Taillandier

Editor: Muriel Breton

Sound editor: Olivier Goinard

Cast: Alexandra Lamy, Sergi Lopez, Mélusine Mayance, Arthur Peyret

Production: Claudie Ossard and Chris Bolzli (Eurowide Film Production)

Other films mentioned

A ma sœur, France/Italy, Catherine Breillat, 2001

All About My Mother, Original title: *Todo sobre mi madre*, Spain, Pedro
Almodóvar, 1999

All that Heaven Allows, USA, Douglas Sirk, 1955

An American in Paris, USA, Vincente Minnelli, 1951

As Good As It Gets, USA, James L. Brooks, 1997

Avventura, L', Italy, Antonioni, 1960

Baise-moi, France, Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000

Beautiful Thing, UK, Hettie Macdonald, 1996

Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant, *The*, Original title: *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra
von Kant*, Germany, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1972

Casablanca, USA, Michael Curtiz, 1942

Cet amour-là, France, Josée Dayan, 2001

Children of Men, Japan/UK/USA, Alfonso Cuarón, 2006

Chinese Roulette, *Chinesisches Roulette*, Germany/France, Rainer Werner
Fassbinder, 1976

Connie and Carla, USA, Michael Lembeck, 2004

Crustacés et coquillages, France, Oliver Ducastel and Jacques Martineau,
2005

Des majorettes dans l'espace, France, David Fourier, 1996

Drôle de Félix, France, Oliver Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, 2000

Far From Heaven, USA, Todd Haynes, 2002
Fear Eats the Soul, Original title: *Anst essen seele auf* Germany, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1974
Fox and His Friends, Original title: *Faustrecht der Freiheit*, Germany, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1975
Funny Face, USA, Stanley Donen, 1957
Gazon Maudit, France, Josiane Balasko, 1995
Gone with the Wind, USA, Victor Fleming, 1939
Gosford Park, UK/USA/Italy, Robert Altman, 2001
Haine, La, France, Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995
Hours, The, USA/UK, Stephen Daldry, 2002
Hunger, The, UK, Tony Scott, 1983
Ignorant Fairies, Original title: *Le Fate Ignoranti*, Italy/France, Ferzan Ozpetek, 2001
Imitation of Life, USA, Douglas Sirk, 1959
In a Year with 13 Moons, Original title: *In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden*, Germany, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1978
Irréversible, France, Gaspar Noé, 2002
Kika, Spain/France, Pedro Almodóvar, 1993
Ma Vie en rose, France/Belgium/UK, Alain Berliner, 1997
Ma vraie vie à Rouen, France, Oliver Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, 2002 (Peccadillo Pictures Ltd. 2004)
Majorettes in Space: Five Gay Tales from France, BFI, 1999
Meet me in Saint Louis, USA, Vincente Minnelli, 1944
Memento, USA, Christopher Nolan, 2000
Night Porter, The, Original title: *Il portiere di notte*, Italy, Liliana Cavani, 1974
Nuits fauves, Les, UK/Italy/France, Cyril Collard, 1992
Nuns on the Run, UK, Jonathan Lynn, 1990
On connaît la chanson, France, Alain Resnais, 1997
Peeping Tom, UK, Michael Powell, 1960
Philadelphia, USA, Jonathan Demme, 1993
Piscine, La, Italy/France, Jacques Deray, 1969
Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, Australia, Stephan Elliott, 1994
Psycho, USA, Alfred Hitchcock, 1960
Quelque chose de différent, France, Bruno Rolland, 1995
Querelle, Germany/France, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1982

Rear Window, USA, Alfred Hitchcock, 1954
Romance, France, Catherine Breillat, 1999
Singin' in the Rain, USA, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952
Some Like It Hot, USA, Billy Wilder, 1959
Suspicion, USA, Alfred Hitchcock, 1941
Top Hat, USA, Mark Sandrich, 1935
Trainspotting, UK, Danny Boyle, 1996
Vie rêvée des anges, La, Erick Zonka, 1998
Volver, Spain, Pedro Almodóvar, 2006
Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, Original title: *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, Spain, Pedro Almodóvar, 1988