

# 'Queering the Family? Fantasy and the Performance of Sexuality and Gay Relations in French Cinema 1995-2000

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*Queering the Family: Fantasy and the performance of sexuality and gay relations in French cinema 1995-2000*

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## **Abstract**

This paper looks in detail at the representation of sexuality in the family in three films of the mid to late 1990s, Balasko's *Gazon maudit*, Berliner's *Ma Vie en rose*, and Giusti's *Pourquoi pas moi?* Its double focus is the changing structure of the French family at the end of the twentieth century, considered against key political developments such as the *pacte civil de solidarité* (PaCS) of November 1999, and the cinematic fantasies in which these structural changes are envisioned. Fable, fantasy or anti-realism mark the endings of *Gazon maudit* and *Pourquoi pas moi?*, while sequences of childhood fantasy punctuate the entire length of *Ma Vie en rose*. No particular theoretical approach to fantasy is preferred, but the conclusion of the paper is that cinema may be a privileged cultural vehicle for politically enabling fantasy, and that the three films discussed demonstrate this where the French family is concerned.

## **Biography**

Kate Ince is Senior Lecturer in French Studies at the University of Birmingham. She has worked and published on Marguerite Duras and topics in critical and feminist theory, and co-edited books on women's erotic writing (*French Erotic Fiction*, Berg 1996, with Alex Hughes), Samuel Beckett (*Samuel Beckett*, Pearson 2000, with Jennifer Birkett), and Marguerite Duras (*Duras, Femme du Siècle*, Rodopi 2001, with Stella Harvey). She recently published a book length study of the performance artist Orlan, *Orlan, millennial female* (Berg 2000). She teaches contemporary French cinema, and is now working on a book on Georges Franju for the Manchester University Press 'French Film Directors' series.

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**Queering the Family? fantasy and the performance of sexuality and gay relations in  
French cinema 1995-2000**

Commentators on French cinema agree that the 1980s and 1990s saw a new increase in screen representations of lesbian, gay and bisexual characters. This followed a period of politically affirmative gay cinema in the 1970s led by the GLH-PQ (Groupe de Libération Homosexuelle – Politique et Quotidien) and the collaboration between Lionel Soukaz and Guy Hocquenghem (Marshall 1998: 262-3), after which gay militancy once again diminished. Central to the renaissance of homosexuality in French cinema has been the genre of the AIDS film, anticipated in Carax's *Mauvais Sang/The Night is Young* of 1986 and finding its fullest expression in Vecchiali's *Encore* (1988), Collard's *Les Nuits fauves/Savage Nights* (1992), and other films of the early 1990s (Cairns 2000: 89, Rollet & Williams 1998: 193-208). Vital to any rapid historical sketch of French gay and queer cinematic sexualities such as this must be a recognition of the imbalance in the representation of gays and lesbians. In their introduction to *Gay Signatures: Gay and Lesbian Theory, Fiction and Film 1945-1995*, Heathcote, Hughes and Williams set out how this imbalance is characteristic of French cultural production in general (Heathcote, Hughes and Williams 1998: 15-17), and cinema is no exception: only in Balasko's *Gazon maudit/French Twist* (1995) has lesbianism reached a large cinema audience. In summary, then, although the quantity of French films dealing in representations of non-heterosexual sexualities has come to be considerable, it is still impossible to affirm the existence of a queer French cinema. Bill Marshall's comparison of French to other national cinemas is telling: 'The more positive images to be found in mainstream film were neither a way of placing gay desire dynamically in the forefront of a postmodernist cinema, as with Almodovar's activities in post-Franco Spain, nor were they to

be challenged by a 'New Queer Cinema' in the Anglo-Saxon sense, which would provocatively revel in the abject' (Marshall 1998: 262).

Despite the absence of a current identified by critics and audiences as 'queer French cinema', two of the three films I shall look at here were highly successful, both critically and commercially. *Gazon maudit*, whose international popularity and interest for anglophone film criticism is now well known, was second in the ranking of *entrées* recorded at the French box office in 1995 (Waldron 1995: 65). Despite disappointing audience figures when it opened in France and Belgium in 1997, Berliner's *Ma Vie en rose/My Life in Pink* went on to notch up a huge international success: by the end of March 1998 it had been released in 16 countries and earned more than \$4 million in ticket sales, finding its biggest audiences in Switzerland (500,000 entries) and the UK, the film's third co-producing country after France and Belgium (Anon 1998: 27). Critically speaking, after a positive reception at Cannes in 1997, *Ma Vie en rose* 'became the darling of the 1997 festival circuit and carried off nearly every award there is: Best Film at Karlovy Vary, Seattle, Fort Lauderdale, Kiev; Best European Screenplay and Best Actress for Michèle Laroque at Fort Lauderdale; Audience Award at Sarajevo' (Anon 1998: 27). The film achieved a first for a foreign-language film in the UK by opening the 1997 Edinburgh Festival, and carried off the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Picture, although this coup was unusually not followed up by an Oscar nomination in the same category. The third film I shall consider here, Giusti's *Pourquoi pas moi?/Why not me?* (1999) has not known the same international success as *Gazon maudit* and *Ma Vie en rose*, although it has had an international release in at least four countries outside France, been positively reviewed, and won awards at the Miami and Seattle Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals in 2000.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Miami *Pourquoi pas moi?* won an Audience Award and Jury Award for Best Fiction Feature, and in Seattle Best Lesbian Feature. Stéphane Giusti (b.1964) has directing or writing credits on seven TV movies and co-writing credits on one cinema movie of 1997: since the success of *Pourquoi pas moi?* he has written and directed a further cinema film (*Bella ciao* (2001)) that does not appear to have been as successful (Anon 2002).

My reason for selecting these three films, however, rather than any commercial or critical success they have enjoyed, is that the family and its structure is an important theme in all three of them. By the end of *Gazon maudit*, Laurent and Loli's nuclear family has been transformed and enlarged to include Marijo and her new baby. In *Ma Vie en rose* the Fabre family has not outwardly changed, but its members have gained in wisdom through the division and social exclusion they have undergone, while in *Pourquoi pas moi?* significant changes have occurred to three of the narrative's five families. The family in these films is important because it functions – as in a number of other recent films of which the most notable is probably Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau's *Drôle de Félix* (2000) – as a metaphor for the state of the French nation. It can do this because the French Republican model of the family as institution exactly parallels the 'assimilationist' model of unity and difference often observed at work in the discourse and practices of French national identity (Ezra 2000: 145-53). Differences are tolerated as long as they fit in: the French family, like the French nation, is governed by a restrictive type of universalism that accepts difference only as the individual difference of personhood. This is in contrast to the multi- or pluriculturalism adopted as the model for social policy by most other European states. One strand of my argument here will be based on the frequently made observation that the multiculturalist model of society lacking in France more easily accommodates non-normative differences of sexuality and gender.<sup>2</sup> In the films under scrutiny, however, the universalist conception of the family extends to incorporate gay and queer sexualities, and undergoes telling changes in the process. The other issue I want to introduce and pursue is that of fantasy, which features in the narrative and/or *mise en scène* of all three films. Fantasy, I shall argue, may be playing a role in the transformations that have started to open up new political possibilities for queer and gay sexualities in France in recent years.

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<sup>2</sup> The multiculturalist model is perhaps for this reason more open to a conception of personal identity different

I shall begin with and devote the main part of my analysis to *Ma Vie en rose*, whose narrative runs as follows. The Fabre family throw a party for their neighbours in the bland, comfortable, strikingly untypically French suburb south of Paris in which they have just arrived, where Pierre, the father of the family, has a new job as a draughtsman. At a short mock ceremony at the party in which Pierre presents his 'tribu' to the guests, Ludovic, the youngest child of Pierre and Hanna, appears from upstairs dressed as a 'princesse' (in a pink satin-style dress with puffed sleeves and wearing his mother's earrings). Since Ludovic arrives in response to Pierre's announcement of his eldest and sole daughter Zoe, the guests are temporarily confused, taking Ludo to be a girl, an embarrassment Pierre covers up by saying that the youngest of his three sons is an accomplished practical joker. Actually far from a joke, this piece of cross-dressing is the first of four transvestite performances Ludovic effects in the main part of the film, meaning that *Ma Vie en rose* is structured around a sequence of transvestite acts that admirably bear out the imitative and performative constitution of gender theorized by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Ludovic's second performance is a mock marriage ceremony carried out in play with his schoolfriend Jérôme, the son of Pierre's boss Albert, a coincidence which is to have dire consequences for the Fabres. Unaware of the tragic early death of Jérôme's sister, Ludovic dons one of her dresses to act out the wedding ceremony, causing Jérôme's mother Lisette to faint from the shock caused by this innocent insensitivity and by seeing Jérôme about to 'kiss the bride'. Ludovic's third performance, which takes his adamant and clearly articulated desire to **be** a girl into the realm of fairy tale, involves his usurpation of the role of Snow White in the school play, to which end he locks his rival for Jérôme's affections, Sophie, into the backstage toilet. When Jérôme dismounts from his white steed to kiss the sleeping Snow White, the veil comes away

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from that of Republican individual personhood, but this issue is beyond the scope of this article.

from Ludovic's face, revealing his bold and determined prank to the entire assembled audience, following which the Fabres depart from the school amid hostile stares and silence. This third performance brings conflict between the Fabre parents over Ludovic's transvestism to a head, with Pierre angrily insisting that his behaviour cease forthwith, while Hanna continues to tolerate it and encourage Ludovic during the sessions of psychotherapy she and Pierre have started to attend with their son. Ludovic's fourth and decisive (for the family's fate) act of cross-dressing follows a turbulent episode in which he is bullied for his femininity by other boys at school, leading to a quasi- or acted attempted suicide in which he hides in the domestic freezer. When Pierre offers Ludovic 'anything' in recompense for the lack of sympathy that contributed to this dramatic episode of self-harm, Ludo asks (to his father's renewed anger) to be allowed to wear a skirt to the birthday party of Sophie, the schoolfriend for whom he substituted himself in the school play. At the insistence of Ludovic's unconventional and free-thinking grandmother Elisabeth that Ludo be allowed to act out completely his fantasy of girlhood (her theory of fantasy is that this will 'cure' Ludovic of his transgender desires), Ludo duly goes to Sophie's party wearing a kilt, but despite hypocritical tolerance by others at the party itself, this proves to be the final straw for the Fabres in the neighbourhood, as Pierre's visible failure to impose his paternal authority on his son leads to him being sacked by Albert. After a period of torment for the family in which Hanna cracks and turns on Ludovic, his psychotherapy is terminated as a failure, and homophobic graffiti is scrawled on the family's garage door (the confusion in the film's diegesis between transgenderism and homosexuality is striking and an aspect already noted by other commentators), Ludovic's family finally symbolically punishes him by cutting short his prized girlish hairstyle. Ludovic rebels by going to live with his grandmother, but when Pierre is successful in getting a new job in faraway Clermont Ferrand, Ludovic chooses to go with them rather than stay with Elisabeth.



Fantasy is the motive force of Ludovic's transgender desire, although this is not identifiable as simply either conscious or unconscious (fantasy or *phantasy*, to use the conventional psychoanalytic orthography). Ludovic not only passionately wants to be a girl: he confidently believes that he will become one, one day. (This is best shown by the expression of unadulterated delight on his face when, after gaining a hazy idea from his sister Zoe of the link between femininity and menstruation, he awakes one morning with stomach ache and immediately concludes that his periods have started, and girlhood/womanhood has come upon him in the night.) The script and narrative of *Ma Vie en rose* make for highly convincing emotional drama, but by far the most cinematically inventive episodes of the film are the sequences of Ludovic's fantasy that take place in the televisual funhouse world of dolls Pam and Ben, the French equivalents of Barbie and Ken. The theme tune of Pam and Ben's TV show doubles the song by French *chansonnière* Zazie that plays over the film's intensely pink sequence of credits, graphics that are matched and developed in the interiors and landscapes Ludovic is fantasmatically transported into in the 'Pam and Ben' sequences of the film. Pam and Ben's perfect, romance- and flower-filled technicolour universe is as heterosexually normative a world as can be dreamt, but 'queered' by means of its excessive, coloured and kitschy aesthetic. This queerness is clearly associated with children's imagination in the film: Ludovic's fantasized Pam comes to his rescue in more than one episode of family drama just as a fairy godmother would, and blows fairy dust that (for example) encircles and confines potentially punishing adults. Pam is often shown in flight, seemingly a metaphor for the free-floating power of (unrepressed?) desire associated with children's fantasies.

Berliner's bold and very contemporary thematization of transvestite childhood in *Ma Vie en rose* can be read according to 1980s feminist psychoanalytic theory, according to which unconscious phantasy does not recognize the difference between masculine and feminine, and

allows a mobility of subject positionings across sexual difference. Sue Thornham summarizes arguments originally made by Freud, Mary Ann Doane and Constance Penley, 'Identification in fantasy, then, is shifting, unconfined by boundaries of biological sex, cultural gender or sexual preference'(Thornham 1997: 95). The proponent of the importance of fantasy in *Ma Vie en rose*, as mentioned above, is Ludovic's grandmother Elisabeth, or 'Grany', blonde, dynamic, independent and with a colourful past, as she reveals to her grandson in the scene where she shows him a music box given to her by a previous admirer. Here, Elisabeth effectively teaches Ludovic by example that it is 'OK' to fantasise (when she feels old, she says, she closes her eyes, and makes the world her own). The scene is also a good illustration of the permeability of the boundaries of subjectivity where fantasy is concerned: it is Elisabeth who announces how she gains access to her fantasy world, but what the film's spectators see is the scene in Ludovic's intensely coloured 'Pam and Ben' world, in which he can wear dresses to his heart's content. In this fantasy world of ideal beauty, heterosexual normativity *and yet* possibility for the performance of feminine sexual difference across genders, the boundaries of subjectivity between Ludovic and his grandmother have broken down. Fantasy continues to figure prominently in the plot of *Ma Vie en rose*: as previously mentioned, it is at Elisabeth's insistence that Ludovic is allowed to 'go through with his fantasy' by wearing a skirt to Sophie's birthday party. This has the opposite of the hoped-for effect, because it precipitates the Fabres' definitive exclusion from their community. (Ludovic has already been expelled from school after a petition is sent by neighbourhood parents to the headmaster, and directly after the episode Pierre is sacked by his right-wing, patriarchal and Catholic fundamentalist boss Albert.) The acting out of fantasy is therefore the key point of excess and the transgression of social mores in *Ma Vie en rose*.

Fantasy is also crucial to the conclusion of Berliner's film. More than one reviewer has already declared this ending, in which Ludovic is finally forgiven by his parents for the

disruption his cross-dressing has caused to the family's existence after Hanna comes to understand Ludovic's transgender desire by (in a further surrealistic fantasy sequence) climbing a conveniently positioned ladder up an advertising billboard featuring Pam and Ben and 'falling' into Ludovic's fantasy world, to be unsatisfactorily inconclusive, since the later development of Ludovic's sexuality – whether he will be a transvestite, transsexual or gay adult - is not shown. Ending the film's narrative at this point seems to me, however, to be a wise directorial decision by Berliner (perhaps also by the scriptwriter Chris van der Stappen), since by so doing his film's structure draws attention to the foreclosure of definitively constructed sexual difference that characterizes queer sexuality. Ludovic is only 7, and to show subsequent transgressive behaviour or imaginings would have deprived Berliner's film of its emphasis on the interrelationship of fantasy and childhood dramatized so convincingly by DuFresne's performance and the 'queer' cinematic aesthetic that is its *mise en scène*.

In the very final shot of the film Pam is seen flying over the toytown roofs of suburbia and winking defiantly, as if to announce that despite the film's arrested ending and as in the cinema of David Lynch, fantasy and sexuality still pervade middle class suburban existence, waiting to erupt and disrupt lives in the same way as they have done to the Fabre family and their community. Her flight and wink are for and at the audience, a performance of the power of fantasy cinema can engage and sustain. So although *Ma Vie en rose* links fantasy to childhood, it also suggests – both in the effects on Pierre and Hanna Fabre and with its final hint that Pam-inspired fantasies will not be absent from Ludovic's later life – that fantasy has a place and a role to fulfil in adulthood too.

Stéphane Giusti's *Pourquoi pas moi?* is a very similar production to *Ma Vie en rose* where genre is concerned, a *comédie* that doubles as meaningful social drama and refreshing cinematic entertainment. In the film, a group of lesbian and gay twentysomethings who run a publishing house together in sun-drenched Catalonia decide to come out to their parents at a

weekend house party organised by the mother of one of their number, Camille. Josepha d'Augères, Camille's widowed mother, is up to this point the only parent who knows of and accepts her daughter's homosexuality, including Camille's three-year relationship with Ariane. The other members of the younger generation of characters in the film are Eva (lesbian) and Nico (gay), who have shared a flat for four years, Tina (lesbian), a new recruit to the publishing company, and Lili, the company's secretary and only straight member of the group. Although these five characters dominate the first half of the film's narrative, their decision to declare their homosexuality to their parents turns out to have more far-reaching effects among their parents' generation than they could possibly have imagined. A theme of artistic performance links several of the parent characters: Nico's mother is Sara Manuel, an internationally famous *chanteuse*, and Eva's father the charismatic bullfighter 'El Rubbio' (real name José), played by the ageing rock star Johnny Halliday. The parents of Lili go by the real and performing names of 'Diane et Tony', singer and pianist respectively, but a very different class of performer to Sara Manuel, since they play only at *bals* and *fêtes populaires*. It is revealed early in the weekend house party that Diane and Sara performed together and were lovers at a point in their careers preceding Diane's marriage to the down-to-earth Tony, the formation of their performing duo, and the birth of daughter Lili.

The prominence of performance as a theme of *Pourquoi pas moi?* stands in, even more than in *Ma Vie en rose*, for the performative constitution of gender and identity. It is through the act of singing together again after a separation of so many years that Diane and Sara realise the strength of their attraction to each other, and decide to renew their lesbian affair. Tony is initially heartbroken by being left by his wife, but by the end of the film is already planning a new musical duo with a male singing partner - these newly queered performing relationships suggest that where sexual/gender identity is concerned, life and performance are coterminous. Perhaps even more important to the narrative of the film, however, are the

changes brought about to the five very different families involved. Nico's single mother Sara has started a lesbian relationship; Camille's widowed mother has shared a bed with a married woman (Ariane's mother, who refuses to sleep with her husband when he refuses to comprehend Ariane's lesbianism as anything other than a curable genetic fault); Lili's parents' marriage has broken up, as apparently has that of Ariane's parents, although the permanency of this is less certain. Of the film's heterosexual couples, only Eva's parents José and Malou are still together. A wholesale 'queering' of the family has occurred, which is reinforced by the new relationships forged by Eva (with Tina) and Nico (with Manuel, a new fellow-player in his sports team). There are strong elements of comic farce in the scenes in which all these partner-changes are played out, but seriousness too, particularly in the temporary separation and re-uniting of Camille and Ariane.

The very final scene of *Pourquoi pas moi?* is particularly suggestive as regards the family. In it, Nico exits from the changing room in which he has declared to Manuel that he may be in love with him onto a sports pitch where a spangle-attired cabaret singer atop an illuminated podium draped with semi-naked dancers clad as angels/cherubs performs a love song called 'Crazy'. The scene's décor and atmosphere are remarkably and excessively camp and sentimental. A high camera angle from the podium shows Nico break into a smile of pleasure and happiness (as it turns out, Manuel is indeed going to respond to his declaration of love). However, all the other characters from the turbulent weekend are also standing by, in their newly configured partnerships, swaying to the music – an image of renewed unity it is difficult not to interpret as an image of an expanded, 'queered' family.

I shall now return to the conclusion of *Ma Vie en Rose*, in order to compare it with the endings of *Gazon maudit* and *Pourquoi pas moi?* One reviewer of *Ma Vie en rose* called it 'a terrifying film about the rejection of difference'.<sup>3</sup> The acceptance and forgiveness shown

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<sup>3</sup> *Jeune cinéma* 244 (Summer 1997), p.50, quoted in Cairns 2001:125.

towards Ludovic by his parents at the end of the film cannot palliate the wholesale rejection of him by the middle-class community in Mennecey, dominated as it is by normative nuclear and heterosexual families. Instead, I would suggest (having not been able to consult the original review, I'm not sure if this is what the reviewer was suggesting), Hanna and Pierre's final 'acceptance' of Ludovic is actually a *rejection* dressed up as acceptance of his difference. Hanna has understood the power of fantasy (and children's consumer culture) in producing Ludovic's transgender desire, but what she says to him as she also seeks a confirmation from him that he prefers real family life to the fantasy world of Pam is 'you'll always be my child, whatever happens', to which Pierre adds 'our child'. Ludovic is accepted as a neutral, sexuality-free individual and member of the Fabre family, not as the sexually troubled and troubling child he has been throughout the film. (It is of course true that following the symbolic imposition of masculinity by his family's punishment of him, his transvestite performances have ceased, leaving Ludovic subdued and solitary, if not visibly distressed.) The model of the family this implies is one of neutrality and individualism, in which the response to asserted difference such as Ludovic's transvestism is tolerant recognition (and even love) which cannot, however, bear to view Ludovic's transvestism, and the acting-out of fantasy it implies.

A comparison of the conclusion to *Ma Vie en rose* with the positive, upbeat endings of *Gazon maudit* and *Pourquoi pas moi?* will clarify the reading of the French family I am making. In *Gazon maudit*, butch lesbian Marijo is readmitted to the heterosexual family of Laurent and Loli as she gives birth to the child conceived with Laurent in exchange for ending her lesbian affair with Loli – a chaotic period in the family's life depicted in the main part of the film. In the film's final scene an already improbable three-parents-plus-three-children family structure seems to spin off into the realms of fable when it is suggested that stereotypically philandering French male Laurent may be starting a homosexual affair with

the handsome gay Diego. Instead of being accepted, contained and neutralized, difference proliferates. The sexuality of every member of the family has been 'queered' at some point or for some part of the film, and it is hard to imagine what sexual relations exist in the transformed, extended family as it is presented to the audience, or how they can be reconciled with one another. The domestic situation shown in *Gazon maudit* is not realistically sustainable, and a kind of fantasy inheres in the fable-like conclusion to the film. In *Pourquoi pas moi?* fantasy also takes over the film's final scene, although it is unclear whether the cabaret song on the sports pitch is of Nico's imagining, a kind of collective fantasy of the new queer family of young people and their parents, or a directorial whim. The closing images supplied by Balasko's and Giusti's films both seem to be deliberately ephemeral, fantastic and anti-realist. What I would like to suggest about these problematic endings to *Gazon maudit* and *Pourquoi pas moi?* is that their fantasy may have a politically performative force. Through the metaphor of the family, a change in the French State itself is being imagined and willed. This cinematic performativity can surely be historically related to the fact that the PaCS - the *pacte civil de solidarité* that allows gay (and straight) cohabiting couples to register their union and benefit from rights equal to those of married couples - has been planned and come into force in the interval between the making of the two films (Cairns 2000: 91). Importantly for both cinematically represented and real social French masculinity of this era, a question mark remains over paternal sexuality. In *Gazon maudit* Laurent is very definitely still the *pater familias*, but is shown as not unambiguously heterosexual. In *Pourquoi pas moi?* only one father figure has not had his nuclear family transformed by the revelations and shifts in relationships that occur in the film, and he is a *torero*, symbolically also associated with art, performance and femininity. In the wake of the PaCS, is the assimilationist model of patriarchal familial identity I have identified in *Ma Vie en rose* going to change to something closer to the idealistic, fantastic endings of *Gazon maudit* and

*Pourquoi pas moi?*, and what future families might sexually different French men and women be able to aspire to?

### **Filmography**

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*Pourquoi pas moi?* (Stéphane Giusti, 1999)

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