

FRENCH QUEER CINEMA

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politics – Bo is shown to adopt the masochistic position in her imitation of an idealised womanhood. Such liberal representations of transgender for the mainstream market (Girod explains his liberal motivations for the film in the DVD interview) would seem to suggest that the subject remains a primarily psychological ‘issue’ in the popular consciousness. The more radical vision might gesture to the social development of transgender networks and communities seeking to forge new identities and subjectivities outside this stranglehold of oppressive psychiatry.

A more ambitious approach is to cast transgender actors in transgender roles, a form of social progress in independent film production that is certainly as pressing as debates about positive representations of transgender subjects. In Pierre-Alain Meier’s first long feature, *Thelma* (a Franco-Swiss co-production, 2002), the versatile Pascale Ourbih (at the time a model and psychology consultant, since then an underground actor and political activist) made her acting début as the eponymous heroine. *Thelma* offers a wad of cash to a kind taxi driver she meets by chance, Vincent (Laurent Schilling), to accompany her to Crete to get her revenge on an ex-lover, a married man who cast her aside. *Thelma* then has to reveal to Vincent, with whom she begins to fall in love, that she used to be a man and still has male genitalia. The revelation scene, a frontal view of *Thelma* naked, is dealt with early on as a visual shock to Vincent, but obviously not to the viewer for whom the film is explicitly marketed as transgender fare. But *Thelma* withholds her other Greek secret – her former lover, Fenia (Nathalia Capo d’Istria), who lives there with their daughter, unaware of *Thelma*’s transition. The plot essentially focuses on Vincent’s attempts to push *Thelma* towards reconciliation with her former life. It is Vincent, himself an anguished father, who allows his own heterosexual identification to be undermined by *Thelma* to help her out.

Whilst Meier’s outlook seems globally encouraging with respect to transgender, he does tend to re-inscribe the sexual norm into the action. One such example is reproduced on the publicity flyer: at one point during their long car journey, Vincent asks for some clarifications on *Thelma*’s gender identity – drag queen, drag king, transvestite or transsexual? *Thelma* tells him she is a woman; he slyly replies that she drives well, for a woman. This neat bit of macho irony is slipped in as a punchline to the otherwise carefully crafted explanatory piece on the variations of transgender. Meier’s treatment of the sex scenes is also shaky, again serving the very naturalisation of heterosexuality that the film elsewhere gently unsettles. The film contains two sex scenes: the first between Vincent and *Thelma*, the second between Vincent and Fenia. The first is a rushed fuck – Vincent jumps from an introductory kiss straight to taking *Thelma* from behind (will film directors *ever* bother putting condoms into sex scenes?); the second is a softly lit, sensual scene of missionary love-making. Certainly the insulting question *Thelma*’s ex-lover later throws at Vincent (does he fuck her or make love to her?) is indeed revealing. Either the two scenes are intentionally opposed, to show where Vincent is really getting his pleasure, or

at least should be, or the visual disparity between the clumsy, over-rushed fuck and the cosy, romantic pairing is just a case of directorial nerves.

Thelma is important nonetheless for what it says about transgender and performance. Vincent's wife, for example, misreads the gender signs, casually informing him that *Thelma* is quite obviously a prostitute, thus conflating high, stylised femininity with prostitution. This example bears witness to an apparent confusion over issues of gender and genre, the debate over whether transsexuals are already acting or not, familiar to post-modernity's obsession with identities as fictive regimes. Collapsing performativity – lately, gender has been theoretically presented as the citation of a set of socially sanctioned norms – into performance, as *Ourbih* seems to be suggesting, is risky because it has been the historical reason why trans people have been refused transgender roles on screen – they are thought to be acting already, so cannot approach the role from the outside, as *real* acting. Despite the film's ideological muddle, *Ourbih* is right to feel proud of her work on *Thelma* for her activism as the first transgender actor to play a transgender role in French cinema.

Alain Berliner's film *Ma vie en rose* (1997) – a more mainstream Franco-Belgian production, co-written by Chris van der Stappen – engages with childhood fantasies of crossing the gender line, but has trouble sorting out gender identification from potential same-sex passion. This is the story of a little boy who wants to grow up to be a girl. His understanding is that God messed up the chromosome count, throwing his X into the dustbin. Kate Ince has located the film's deployment of fantasy as 'politically enabling' (Ince 2002: 90). I am less convinced of the possibilities for adequate transgender representation within the confines of an old-fashioned problem movie masquerading as post-modern chic. The first scene locates the numbing conventionality of Ludo's suburban, middle-class world – the peaceful, comfortable part of the Essonne, south of Paris – by drawing attention to items of clothing. Hanna and Pierre (Michèle Laroque and Jean-Philippe Ecoffey) are throwing a house-warming party for the neighbours – an open inspection of house and kin. The camera follows the careful preparation in each household – men zipping women into tight dresses, children spying on their parents' bedrooms, lips being adorned in bright red lipstick. The lips on show are Ludo's, for, as his parents proceed to bring on the four children for community appraisal, calling after daughter Zoé, the young Ludo (Georges Du Fresne) puts in his first cross-dressed appearance in his sister's place. Ludo advances precariously in an outsized pair of mother's shoes, much to the admiration of the crowd (for he has no trouble passing) and to the bemusement of his parents, who brush off the incident as part of the child's farce. His youthful-looking, eccentric granny (Hélène Vincent) finds all this gender-bending quixotic and Mother, at this early stage, is far from anxious, having read a comforting article on identity development in *Marie-Claire*. Indeed Berliner uses the subsequent party scenes, described by one critic as 'a sort of sociology of taste'⁶ ('une sorte de sociologie du goût') to illustrate Ludo's happiness with the two women, the camera filming them in slow