Anne Fontaine and Contemporary Women's Cinema in France

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Feminist scholars of the 1970s and early 1980s who applied a semiotic-psychoanalytic approach to film analysis argued that dominant cinema is constructed in such a way as to exclude women both as subject in the text and as spectator in the audience, thus preventing them from finding pleasure in the narrative. For example, in her 1983 article "Is the Gaze Male?" E. Ann Kaplan concluded that "to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structures of the unconscious, is to be in the 'masculine' position" (130). Consequently, the crucial question at the time was what could be done to remedy the exclusion of women in cinema. Could a discourse be created that would offer female spectators an alternative to either identifying as a female object of desire or appropriating the position of the male subject?

Although feminist film critics addressed these questions, the suggestions they gave were generally abstract and utopian. For example, in 1973 Claire Johnston called for a "women's cinema" that would provide a viable alternative to the repressive structures of male-dominated cinema. For Johnston, such a counter-cinema would embody the working through of female desire: "In order to counter our objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released" (39). Laura Mulvey issued a similar call to arms in her 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," where she urged feminist filmmakers to create a new language of desire by adopting practices of rupture and reflexivity that would "[free] the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment" (209).

These descriptions of an alternative cinema are so vague because the aesthetics of early feminist film critics were negative rather than positive. Their goal was to attack and destroy the practices of the patriarchal unconscious as expressed in mainstream cinema, not to create a new type of cinema. This task was left to individual filmmakers around the world. In France, for instance, avant-garde filmmakers such as Chantal Ackerman and Marguerite Duras attempted to sweep aside existing forms of filmic discourse, whereas others chose to develop a critical aesthetic while working within mainstream forms. Such is the case of Anne Fontaine, a contemporary filmmaker whose first feature film, *Les histoires d'amour finissent mal…en général*, was released in 1993.

Taken as a whole, the work of Anne Fontaine goes in two very different directions. First, there is a series of comedies featuring Fontaine's brother as Augustin Dos Santos, a benign simpleton whose view of reality makes for off-beat humor: *Augustin* (1995), *Augustin, roi du Kung-fu* (1999), and most recently *Nouvelle chance* (2006). These films are often discounted by critics who tend to focus on the second category of Fontaine's films, psychological dramas such as *Nettoyage à sec* (1997), *Comment j'ai tué mon père* (2001), and *Nathalie* (2003), all of which explore issues of female sexuality and desire.

What makes Fontaine's œuvre unique is the way it combines two trends distinguishable in the work of contemporary French women directors. On the one hand, there are filmmakers such as Josiane Balasko, Danièle Dubroux, and Marion Vernoux who, like Fontaine in her Augustin series, choose a light-hearted approach to their topic and appropriate mainstream genres such as the romantic comedy, the crime film, and the road movie for their own uses. For example, in her 1995 *Gazon maudit* Balasko addresses the question of sexual (un)fulfillment in a hilarious way: the movie chronicles what happens when Loli, a housewife frustrated by her husband's womanizing, invites lesbian Marijo to move in with them. Dubroux's 1996 *Le journal du séducteur* turns the trials and tribulations of a would-be Valentino into a darkly comic *polar*, while Vernoux's engaging road movie *Personne ne m'aime* (1994) follows Françoise and her lusty, beer-loving sister as they track down the former's philandering husband. For Brigitte Rollet, this making/rewriting of popular genres in French cinema is based on multiple forms of transgression, since "Comedy, crime films, and road movies have always been, in one way or another, male genres, both in the crew and the gender of the protagonists as well as with regard to the target audiences" (129).

On the other hand, filmmakers such as Catherine Breillat, Laetitia Masson, and Claire Denis take a more serious, "artsy" approach to their preferred subject, female sexuality. Fontaine is frequently grouped together with these directors because, like them, she portrays women who explore their sexuality without fear of punishment or social sanction. This is true not only of Marie, the protagonist of Breillat's *Romance* (1999), whose search for fulfillment leads through numerous, increasingly risky sexual adventures, but also of France in Masson's *À vendre* (1998) and Laure in Denis' *Vendredi soir* (2002). After leaving her fiancé at the altar, France finances her freedom by selling her body, while Laure, who is uncertain about her decision to move in with her boyfriend, has a one-night stand that forever alters her life.

Of course, women directors in France are not the only ones to create psychodramas focusing on female sexuality. On the contrary, the work of filmmakers such as Breillat and Fontaine must be understood as part of a larger global trend

encompassing women directors from all continents, such as Lizzie Borden from the U.S., Monika Treut from Germany, Sally Potter from Great Britain, Jessica Nilsson from Denmark, Deepa Mehta from India, and Jane Campion from New Zealand. Each of these filmmakers has her own unique style, her own way of portraying the challenges faced by women past and present. Yet as Anne Gillian emphasizes in "L'Imaginaire féminin au cinéma," they are all united by their desire to break with the dominant, phallocentric mode of portraying women: "La contribution majeure des réalisatrices est justement de proposer des alternatives à l'image de la femme au cinéma. En filmant leurs héroïnes à l'intérieur, elles pénètrent de plein pied dans la complexité d'une subjectivité féminine qui échappe aux stereotypes" ["The major contribution of female filmmakers is precisely to offer alternatives to the predominant image of woman in cinema. By taking us inside their heroines, these directors are able to fully reveal a complex female subjectivity that avoids the usual stereotypes"] (261).[1]

An analysis of Fontaine's *Nettoyage à sec* shows how this filmmaker has succeeded in developing a uniquely feminine aesthetic that breaks with dominant ideology both in terms of content—through the presentation of a self-confident, sexually uninhibited heroine—and in terms of form—through the foregrounding of the gaze.

The situation of the two protagonists presented in the movie is, *a priori*, simple. Nicole and Jean-Marie Kunstler are a seemingly happily married couple who run a dry cleaning business in the small French town of Belfort. Their respectable bourgeois existence is based on hard work and family values. All of this changes dramatically, however, after they see a brother-sister drag act performing at a local club. A series of coincidences leads the male half of the duo, Loïc, to come live and work with the Kunstlers, creating a *ménage à trois* that sets tongues to wagging. The gossips of Belfort assume—and rightly so—that the handsome stranger is sleeping with the wife of his boss. But what is really happening behind closed doors surpasses even their wildest imaginings. Not only does Jean-Marie condone his wife's dalliance in the name of sexual fulfillment, but he himself is strangely attracted to his young protégé.

At this point, the film seems to be a plaidoyer for sexual freedom within the bounds of marriage. However, Jean-Marie eventually succumbs to the pressures of social censure and insists that Loïc leave. Nicole, on the other hand, refuses to return to the sterility of bourgeois monogamy, saying that if Loïc goes, so will she. The mounting tension is abruptly resolved in an act of violence that eliminates the outsider and reunites the couple as they work to get rid of the evidence.

Given these plot elements, one can view Fontaine's film as an interesting twist on the theme of the intruder used in a wide range of films from the 1946 classic noir

The Postman Always Rings Twice to the 1996 Italian production *Pizzacata*. In these films, as in *Nettoyage à sec*, an unexpected element invades a stable world, shattering its codes. However, whereas these films affirm existing heterosexual norms by presenting the male intruder as a rival for the sexual favor of the female protagonist, Fontaine's film challenges the status quo by introducing a transgender character who destabilizes the traditional love triangle. The result, as Stephen Holden of *The New York Times* observes, is a "meditation on the power of unleashed sexuality to take over people's lives and dissolve conventional social boundaries and taboos with the force of a tornado."

In a 1997 interview given to Jean Roy of *L'Humanité*, Fontaine explained how the idea for *Nettoyage à sec* came to her:

> J'avais assisté une fois à un petit spectacle de travestis à 4 heures du matin dans une boîte de province avec deux créatures qui pratiquaient une sorte de strip-tease assez beau. Cela m'a donné l'idée de juxtaposition d'un couple diurne et d'un nocturne, avec effet de miroir.
>
> [I once watched a drag show at 4 in the morning in a small-town club featuring two queens who were doing an elegant kind of strip-tease. That gave me the idea of juxtaposing a daytime and a nighttime couple, with a resultant mirror effect.]

The fact that the film is structured around the contrast between day and night provides one explanation for the film's somber ending: the relationship between Loïc and the Kunstlers cannot flourish because it brings together two worlds that cannot co-exist. The transgender drag queen Loïc represents the nighttime side of the psyche, as the name of his act—*Les reines de la nuit* ["The Queens of the Night"]—and the club where he plays—*La nuit des temps* ["The Night of Time"]—make clear. His is the domain of dreams, desires, and sexual freedom. The straight-laced Kunstlers may enter this realm from time to time, but theirs is a daytime world dominated by work, family, and sexual repression.

The incompatibility of these two worlds is never directly expressed in the film. Rather, Fontaine uses transitions between sequences to make this point in a subtle way. Initially, daytime and nighttime worlds are neatly compartmentalized. The Kunstlers make three forays into the vibrant world of the night, only to return each time to the reassuring sameness of their everyday life. This to-and-fro movement is evident when one examines the three nightclub sequences that dominate the first half of the film.

After the couple watches *Les reines de la nuit* for the first time, the camera cuts from the warmly lit nightclub, filled with pulsating music and dancing bodies, to the total silence of the drycleaners, lit by harsh neon lights, where Jean-Marie puts

a load of clothes in to dry before going to bed. The extreme contrast between dark and light, sound and silence functions like a cinematic slap in the face, calling the viewer's attention to the drabness of the Kunstlers' daily life, which consists of the mindless repetition of the same gestures in an environment completely devoid of sensual richness. Clearly, any fantasies aroused by the couple's nighttime adventure cannot survive when exposed to the sterility of their daytime world.

The second time that the Kunstlers watch the drag act, they talk to the artists after the show and eventually end up at their hotel for a potential foursome, an offer which Nicole accepts but Jean-Marie refuses. This sequence is followed immediately by a shot of the Kunstlers watching their seven-year-old son Pierre play musical chairs with guests at his birthday party. The juxtaposition is jarring. Without the transition afforded by a fade or a wipe, the viewer jumps from the hotel scene, with its muted colors and sounds, to the birthday party, which is a riot of colors and joyful squeals. Whereas the first transition emphasizes the Kunstlers' work ethic, this one underscores their role as parents. Yet the message is the same in both instances: sex and desire are not part of the bourgeois daytime world. They are banished to the night, something done in secret and not talked about.

No doubt for this very reason, the Kunstlers become increasingly obsessed with the nighttime side of their psyche, eventually deciding to make a special weekend trip to Basel in order to see *Les reines de la nuit* again. This time, the Kunstlers are able to establish a more personal relationship with Loïc, visiting the trailer where he lives with his sister and learning about his life as an orphan. Yet when the weekend comes to an end, the energy-filled world of the night must once again be left behind. A slow zoom onto a rotating laundry drum acts as a bridge between the nighttime and daytime realms. As before, this transition marks the shift from erotic fantasies to mundane reality, yet it has metaphorical value as well: the colorful clothes swirling in the drum suggest the dizzying emotions now churning inside Nicole and Jean-Marie.

As the preceding examples illustrate, the filmic universe of *Nettoyage à sec* is initially divided into two diametrically opposed spheres. However, when Loïc begins living and working with the Kunstlers, the daytime and nighttime worlds are forced to exist side by side. This shift from compartmentalization to uneasy co-existence is mirrored by a shift in the transitions between scenes. Whereas before the camera jumped between the nightclub and the cleaners, it now jumps between the nighttime and daytime personas of Loïc. For example, after showing Nicole and Loïc having sex in the basement, the camera cuts abruptly to Loïc skating hand-in-hand with Pierre. This cut juxtaposes Loïc's nighttime role as "Latin lover" with his daytime role as affectionate "older brother." A similar juxtaposition is created following the

scene in which Loïc sexually propositions Jean-Marie for the first time. Here, the camera moves in a traveling shot from Loïc reclining sensually on his bed to Loïc behind the counter of the dry cleaners, talking pleasantly to customers. In this way, Loïc's bohemian bisexuality is brought into sharp contrast with his conservative appearance in a bourgeois work environment. Finally, an analogously jarring contrast is created by the transition following the second sexual encounter between Loïc and Nicole as the camera cuts from Nicole straddling Loïc's thrusting body to the two of them playing ball with Pierre at the lakeshore.

When examined as a group, these transitions not only emphasize the collision of two separate worlds, but suggest another reason why the Kunstlers' experiment in free love is doomed to failure. Whereas Loïc can shift effortlessly between copulating and cleaning, Jean-Marie is too inflexible to do so, a fact that is apparent long before Loïc moves in with the couple. During the second nightclub sequence, for example, while Loïc and Nicole enjoy a slow dance together, Loïc's sister Marilyn tries in vain to get Jean-Marie to relax: "Tu es trop coincé comme mec," she tells him with exasperation. The English language subtitle for this phrase is "You're so stiff," but it would be more accurate to translate "coincé" as "inhibited" or "repressed," for Jean-Marie's moral code is as inflexible as his body.

Of course, Jean-Marie's rigidity is a product of the repressive society in which he lives. Judith Butler elaborates on the effects of such repression in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), where she shows how social discourse is responsible for regulating and normalizing the gendered body into appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior and identities. Heterosexual norms constitute the "proper" gendered body, predicated on producing homosexuality and gender inversion as abject. This power of society to regulate sexuality was also emphasized by Fontaine in her interview with Jean Roy:

> Le choix de la province a été déterminant dans l'alchimie du sujet. Il fallait la chape de plomb sur ce destin, le courage romanesque d'affronter le qu'en-dira-t-on.
>
> [The choice of a small town was essential to the chemistry of the project. The leaden weight of morality had to bear down on this couple that would foolishly dare to defy public opinion.]

Fontaine's commentary suggests that the small town of Belfort where the story unfolds can be viewed as a collective antagonist. Once Loïc moves in with the Kunstlers, the tawdry tale of the drycleaners and their live-in lover quickly becomes the daily soap opera that everyone follows. However, the scandalmongers are not content to merely air the Kunstlers' dirty laundry in public; their role is to censure behavior deemed immoral by majority.

This social censure is embodied by Jean-Marie's mother, who berates her son for becoming the laughing stock of Belfort, and by a friend of the Kunstlers, who advises them to silence wagging tongues by sending Loïc away. The way in which husband and wife react to this pressure is revealing. At first, Jean-Marie defies the judgment of his peers, declaring,"Je n'en ai rien à foutre. Je fais ce que je veux!" ["To hell with them. I do what I want!"]. However, in the end, he gives in to social pressure and asks Loïc to leave. Doing so allows Jean-Marie to compartmentalize his life once again, to repress his sexual desires in order to better fulfill his sanctioned roles as father and worker.

Jean-Marie's need to be viewed as beyond reproach clearly outweighs his desire to yield to Loïc, a fact underscored metaphorically by his choice of profession. As a dry cleaner, he spends his days removing stains from other people's laundry, restoring that which was sullied to a pristine state. In this context, the double meaning of the term "la tache" used in the film is significant. In the literal sense, "la tache" means "spot, stain." However, in the figurative sense, "la tache" can mean "sin or moral blemish" (*Le Nouveau Petit Robert* 2552-2553). It is therefore not surprising that many of the stains that Jean-Marie removes are the result of "dirty" behavior on the part of his customers: a wine stain on a dress, semen on sheets. As he explains, it is his job to remove all traces of use and wear, to render his customers' laundry "impeccable," a word which in its modern acceptation means "d'une propreté parfaite" ["flawlessly clean"], but which, like "la tache," can also have religious and moral connotations, namely "irréprochable; incapable de pécher" ["faultless; incapable of sin"] (*Petit Robert* 1317). This second meaning is significant, for Jean-Marie clearly wants his life to be as free from flaw and blemish as the freshly laundered garments he delivers to his clients.

Nicole, on the other hand, resists society's attempts to control her sexuality. Since her marriage, she has played the roles of devoted wife and loving mother without protest. Casual comments made here and there, however, reveal the dissatisfaction simmering beneath the surface. For example, when chatting with Loïc in the nightclub, Nicole laments being trapped in Belfort: "Moi, si j'avais pu, j'aurais passé ma vie à voyager" ["If I had had the choice, I would have spent my life traveling"]. And later, when her husband refuses to take a few days off for a romantic get-away in Prague, Nicole explodes, announcing, "Je suis pas faite pour ce boulot, nettoyer la merde des autres!" ["I'm not cut out for cleaning other people's shit!"].

Given her lust for life, Nicole views Loïc as the best thing that ever happened to her, rather than as a disturbing intruder the way her husband does. As a result, when Jean-Marie tries to re-establish the sanctioned state of heterosexual monogamy, insisting that "La seule chose qui compte, c'est nous deux" ["All that matters is

the two of us"], Nicole refuses categorically. With Loïc, she is able to be whole, to combine her daytime and nighttime personas. However, with him gone, she will only be half a person. So she issues an ultimatum: if Loïc leaves, so will she. She is ready to defy social norms, to sacrifice the security of marriage and motherhood in order to be true to herself.

As we have seen, Nicole and her husband deal differently with their desires: Nicole embraces them, while Jean-Marie represses them. Could Fontaine be implying that this is a common difference between men and women? Naturally, one must be cautious about making such essentializing generalizations. Nonetheless, Fontaine clearly believes that there is a difference between how men and women filmmakers address certain subjects: "I think when women make films, they are less afraid to go all the way with a subject, they're less cowardly. I've noticed in women filmmakers a sort of energy, a lack of fear to explore taboos" ("Sexual Politics"). The attitude attributed here to women filmmakers—less inhibited, not afraid to explore taboos—is exemplified not only by Nicole in *Nettoyage à sec*, but also by female protagonists in Fontaine's other dramas, namely Catherine in *Nathalie* and Isa in *Comment j'ai tué mon père*, suggesting that in Fontaine's view women are indeed more in touch with their sexual desires than men.

In addition to challenging dominant ideology in *Nettoyage à sec* by presenting a self-confident, sexually uninhibited heroine, Fontaine also develops a uniquely feminine aesthetic by foregrounding the act of spectatorship itself. One way she does so is by using what I will call "spectator-characters." The idea of the spectator-character is suggested by Judith Mayne in *Cinema and Spectatorship* when discussing *Rear Window* (1954) and *Coma* (1978), two films that call attention to the act of viewing by presenting protagonists whose chief role is that of spectator (31). In *Rear Window* L.B. Jeffries, a photographer incapacitated by a broken leg, begins to observe strange activities in the apartment facing his, while in *Coma* the action is focalized through Susan Wheeler, a doctor who becomes suspicious about a series of mysterious deaths at the hospital where she works. In *Nettoyage à sec* it is the Kunstlers who function as spectator-characters, witnessing both formal spectacles and random, daily events. Their presence within the film world is significant because, as Mayne emphasizes, it results in "a foregrounding of the cinema itself in its capacity to see, to hear, and to know" (31).

This foregrounding effect is particularly evident in the first nightclub sequence, which can be interpreted as a *mise-en-abyme* of the spectatorial process itself. As the scene opens, we see a stage, framed on either side by spectators in silhouette. On stage, where the lights are still down, we see two female forms outlined against a silver curtain. Although what the Kunstlers experience is a live theatrical

performance, the two-dimensional nature of the silhouettes and the presence of a "silver screen" suggest that Fontaine is calling attention to a special type of viewing experience: the nameless and faceless viewers represent the filmic spectator, regardless of gender, while the silhouetted performers represent the shadowy images that flicker across the movie screen.[2] Once the Queens of the Night begin their act, the stage is bathed in light, and hypnotic music fills the darkened club where the spectators watch with evident fascination. Again, a parallel can be drawn between the nightclub audience and the filmic spectator, since both seem to find pleasure in a state of artificial regression that, according to Baudry, returns them to sensations of infantile wholeness (313).

Later, the camera alternates between the erotic pageant unfolding on stage and the reactions of specific audience members, especially those of Nicole and Jean-Marie. Thus, the emphasis shifts from the act of spectatorship in general to the gendered gaze. As numerous feminist critics have argued, in classical Hollywood cinema active male protagonists gaze upon women displayed for their viewing pleasure. Fontaine breaks with this convention by dividing the power of the gaze between two active protagonists, one male and one female. In *Nettoyage à sec* both Jean-Marie and his wife gaze as the two women on stage provocatively caress each other's body.

Critics such as Mulvey contend that in such a situation, the male spectator experiences pleasure from actively looking at woman as erotic object, while the female spectator is forced into the passive masochism that comes from narcissistic identification. What happens, however, when the object of the gaze is actually a man masquerading as a woman? In the drag act, the male performer Loïc assumes the appearance and gestures of a woman. Does this mean that intradiegetic male spectators such as Jean-Marie project their erotic fantasies onto him as they would onto a real woman?[3] And what about the female spectators in the nightclub audience? How do they feel watching the drag act? Does the erotic *pas de deux* between the two "women" on stage excite lesbian desire?

Finally, what about the extradiegetic spectators who are watching the Kunstlers watching the gender-bending performance of the Queens of the Night? One must not forget that a woman displayed on screen functions on two levels: as erotic object for the characters in the screen story and as erotic object for the spectator viewing the film. According to Mulvey, both male and female spectators identify with the male protagonist on-screen because "the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look…giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (204). *Nettoyage à sec* substantially complicates the identification process by having a male protagonist with repressed homosexual tendencies gaze upon a drag queen. This unusual situation raises the following questions. Will a

heterosexual male spectator still identify with his on-screen counterpart if the latter is more attracted to men than to women? And must women in the viewing audience still identify with the male protagonist if a female protagonist such as Nicole is also given the active power of the erotic look?

These kinds of questions cannot be answered within the theoretical framework proposed by Mulvey, which equates "male" with the active subject and "female" with the passive object. In order to move beyond this impasse of fixed binary oppositions, one must rethink the unconscious processes involved in gendered spectatorship and develop more fluid subject positionings. This is precisely what critics Gaylyn Studlar and Elizabeth Cowie have done. In her 1984 article "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," Studlar uses Deleuze's *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty* (1971) to offer an alternative to Mulvey's model. By suggesting that the oral mother could be the primary figure of identification and power, Deleuze's theory of masochistic desire challenges the notion that male scopic pleasure must center on control rather than identification with or submission to the female. In *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (1997), Cowie also moves beyond the straightjacket of Oedipal identification by arguing that the gender of the character does not necessarily determine the viewer's identification. Instead of a single or dominant look in the cinema (i.e., the male gaze), Cowie posits a continual construction of looks, with a constant production of the spectator-position. Thus, Studlar and Cowie argue that viewing pleasure need not result from the voyeurism of a phallocentric male, a point that Fontaine appears to emphasize in *Nettoyage à sec* by dividing the gaze between a male and a female spectator-character.

As we have just seen, the dynamics of the gaze are problematized in the nightclub sequences, where costuming and make-up transform Loïc into a curvaceous "woman" and his sister into a side-burned "man." In the rest of the film, the Kunstlers' attention is focused exclusively on Loïc, who when not in drag is the embodiment of male virility. Thus, in *Nettoyage à sec*, the male body is presented as an object of desire, inverting the structure of such classical films as *Et Dieu créa la femme* (1956) and *Showgirls* (1995) which fragment and fetishize the female body.

In certain sequences, Loïc's body is the object of Nicole's gaze. Consider, for instance, the sequence that occurs shortly after the young man turns up at the dry-cleaners looking for work. In light of Loïc's neglected appearance and his extreme exhaustion, Jean-Marie offers the young man a shower and a place to sleep. The camera then cuts to an image of Loïc's naked body viewed through the frosted glass of a shower stall. Typically, in this kind of peek-a-boo shot, we find a man gazing at a woman bathing. But here the bearer of the gaze is Nicole, who enters the bathroom with fresh towels. Although clearly attracted to Loïc, Nicole nevertheless seems un-

comfortable in her role as voyeur and quickly averts her eyes when the young man steps out of the shower. And when Loïc moves in to kiss her, she breaks away.

Nicole's behavior in this and subsequent scenes challenges the conclusions drawn by E. Ann Kaplan in "Is the Gaze Male?" where she analyzes a group of films including *Moment by Moment* (1978) and *Urban Cowboy* (1980) in which a male figure assumes the role of object of desire. Kaplan contends that the female protagonists of such films are not given a new, empowering role. Rather, the prevailing patterns of dominance and submission are merely inverted: the woman assumes the dominant position defined as masculine, while the male object of desire steps into the passive position defined as feminine. Furthermore, Kaplan argues that when the woman takes on the masculine role as bearer of the gaze, she nearly always loses her traditionally feminine characteristics—kindness, humaneness, motherliness—and becomes cold, driving, and ambitious. However, this type of "masculinization" of the feminine role does not occur in the relationship between Nicole and Loïc, suggesting that it is possible to envisage a female position of agency that differs qualitatively from the typical male form of dominance.

In this context, it is interesting to note how Fontaine subverts the notion of male dominance by feminizing the role played by Jean-Marie. Rather than exhibiting stereotypical male behavior, Jean-Marie treats Loïc with the tenderness and kindness of a mother, a stance which no doubt results from the sublimation of his sexual desire for the young man. In fact, in order to eliminate any possibility of intimacy, Jean-Marie only gazes upon Loïc when his look cannot be reciprocated.

One such scene occurs when Jean-Marie gets up during the night to go to the bathroom. As the sequence begins, the camera moves in on Jean-Marie's face, thus signaling him as the focalizing character. When Jean-Marie suddenly stops, the camera pans to reveal the object of his gaze: a peacefully sleeping Loïc, whose naked torso emerges from the folds of dark blue sheets. There is a striking similarity between the composition of this shot and that of classical female nudes such as Velázquez's *Venus at Her Mirror* (1644). At first, this similarity might seem surprising, since male nudes are traditionally depicted standing in order to emphasize their strength and virility. However, when one considers Loïc's role as an object of desire, the reclining pose is quite logical, signaling as it does his vulnerability and sexual availability.

Placing Loïc in a pose typical for the female nude also allows Fontaine to once again underscore the voyeurism inherent in dominant (phallocentric) patterns of viewing. For as John Berger notes in *Ways of Seeing*, traditional European oil painting is governed by the same male/female, active/passive dichotomies found in classical Hollywood cinema: "In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he

is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him.… It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity" (54).

The preceding analysis has presented *Nettoyage à sec* as an example of the "women's cinema" called for by early feminist critics such as Johnston and Mulvey. Yet Fontaine herself would reject this classification, as she made clear in her 1998 interview with Eve-Laure Moros: "If people say that 'Nettoyage à sec' is a woman's film, I'm very surprised, I don't know what that means. I think that to be a filmmaker, as far as sexuality, it's something that is really de-sexualizing. That is, you become a bizarre thing, when you're directing a film—during the shooting, you're neither a man nor a woman, you're really something strange and very ambivalent."

It is clear that what Fontaine objects to is not the concept of "women's cinema" itself, but rather the simplistic idea that only women can make "women's films," that men—because of their gender—are incapable of creating works that are highly conscious of the illusionistic viewing strategies and gendered pleasures embedded in dominant cinema. Indeed, as E. Ann Kaplan points out in "Women, Film, Resistance: Changing Paradigms," just because a filmmaker is a woman does not mean that she will create a feminist film text. On the contrary, being "female" or "male" does not signify any necessary social stance vis-à-vis dominant cultural attitudes: "We have learned that biological women are not necessarily more progressive or forward looking than are biological men, and the terms 'male' and 'female' do not automatically link biological sex to masculine or feminine behaviours or to certain film genres" (25). Hence, it is not the gender of the filmmaker that matters, but rather the values/political perspectives that his/her films espouse.

For this reason, in order for Fontaine to accept the label "women's cinema," one would have to define it according to specific textual and enunciative processes rather than the gender of the filmmaker. This is the approach taken by Sandy Flitterman-Lewis in *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*, where she describes a cinema that breaks both in content and form with dominant filmmaking practices. In terms of content, Flitterman-Lewis notes that so-called "women's films" frequently foreground sexual difference, focusing on "the status and nature of the representation of the woman—her desire, her images, her fantasms" (23). In terms of cinematography, she says that a feminist cinema is one that "attempt[s] to restore the marks of cinematic enunciation so carefully elided by the concealing operations of patriarchal cinema" (22-23). Based on this definition, there can be no doubt that *Nettoyage à sec* is an example of "women's cinema," since its plot focuses on the sexual desires of the female protagonist and its structure critically foregrounds the act of spectatorship. The result is a film that realizes the ideals put forward by the feminist theorists of the 1970s, a film that affords female spectators

viewing pleasure without forcing them into the repressive identifications of classical narrative cinema. ❊

Notes

[1]All translations from French into English are mine.

[2]It should be noted that this image of silhouetted spectators is also repeated in the second nightclub sequence.

[3]The terms "intradiegetic" and "extradiegetic" used in this portion of my analysis come from narratologist Gérard Genette's *Figures III* (1972). For Genette, "diegesis" refers to the spatio-temporal universe created by a narrative. A character located within the narrative universe is thus "intradiegetic," while one situated outside it is "extradiegetic."

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