

Boys Meet Girls, Paris Meets Hollywood: Opportunities Missed in French Films *En Chanté*

Diogenes
2018, Vol. 62(1) 115–127
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0392192117735801
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio



Renaud Lagabrielle

University of Vienna, Austria

Variations on genres and gender

Hollywood musical comedy is still considered to be the form and expression *par excellence* of musical comedy as a film genre and this despite the fact that films with spoken and sung dialogue and dance scenes are found in the film corpus of many other cultures (Creekmur & Mokdad, 2013). A number of films in which the dialogue not only alternates between spoken and sung but in which the sung dialogue forms an integral part of the story have also been made in France, notably since Alain Resnais' *Same Old Song (On connaît la chanson, 1997)*. I suggest the generic term '*en chanté*' for this genre of films. These films do not exactly fit the generic format of the Hollywood musical comedy (Altman, 1987), despite several recurring semantic criteria, in particular the inclusion of a love interest, but, on the contrary, stand out for their eclecticism. Thus the need for a distinct term for this genre. Use of this term gives the benefit of increasing the visibility of a corpus of largely little-known films, notably little discussed by academic critics, and also the benefit of separating them from the Hollywood format with which they share only a few characteristics but against which they are often judged.

This distinct term for French *films en chanté* does not, however, mean that reference to Hollywood can be ignored since these *films en chanté* must be analysed in terms of the whole genre. This is especially true because thinking on film genres in France is 'crushed' by the influence of Hollywood (Moine, 2008: 170–174). The fact that the films which I am going to analyse, *On va s'aimer* (Ivan Calbérac, 2006), *Modern Love* (Stéphane Kazandjian, 2008) and *Toi, moi, les autres* (Audrey Estrougo, 2011), are romantic comedies only adds another dimension to the Hollywood influence on films in this category, romantic comedy being seen as a Hollywood genre *par excellence* (Mortimer, 2010). This is a category in which conventional narrative structures are more often than not paired with traditional representation of sexes, sexuality and gender (McDonald, 2007). The three films named above are part of a noticeable trend in contemporary popular French cinema in which national genre formats are combined with generic formats associated with Hollywood (Moine, 2007). The hybrid culture of film which arises from this serves to increase the inherently hybrid nature of film genres (Altman, 1999: 123–143).

Corresponding author:

Renaud Lagabrielle, University of Vienna, Institut für Romanistik, Zimmer: 3B-O2-42.A, Spitalgasse 2, Hof 8 (Campus), Vienna 1090, Austria.

Email: renaud.lagabrielle@univie.ac.at

With the aim of highlighting the close relationship between film genre and the treatment of sexual gender, I propose to analyse the way in which these three romantic comedies *en chanté* deal with the question of the representation of gender (in the widest sense). As has been shown by several film theorists (Liebrand & Steiner, 2004), cinematic genres not only emphasise the discourse on and the representation of sexual gender but this representation can equally be seen as a convention among other cinematic genres conventions (Blaseio, 2004: 44). The three films discussed here were selected because they follow the generic format. According to Steve Neale's distinction between 'generically modelled' films and 'generically marked' films, these three films are in fact 'generically modelled' romantic comedies, that is to say that the romantic comedy model is just as essential for the making of the films as it is for the audience's reception of it – and this especially where the question of sexual gender is concerned (2000: 28).

I propose to analyse the way in which the direction and narrative of each film, far from portraying a progressive discourse on and representation of gender *as they lead us to believe*, only reaffirms the established socio-sexual model. I will attempt to show that, in these films, the rules of the romantic comedy cinematic genre go hand in hand with the 'rules of gender'.

A film genre which wrongly addresses gender?

Issues of gender representation occur not only in the way men and women are portrayed in these films and in the discourse surrounding them. They are also evident in the way the romantic comedies (*en chanté*) are produced and received. *On va s'aimer*, *Modern Love* and *Toi, moi, les autres* are a small sample of a phenomenon seen in the whole genre of French films *en chanté*. These films are predominantly directed by men, just as are films in the main genre of romantic comedies, especially those made in Hollywood (Mortimer, 2010: 20). Romantic comedy has always been considered a genre aimed at women ('a chick movie', McDonald, 2007: 1), as are films *en chanté* (Guy, 2000: 121). This is echoed in *Modern Love* in the scene after *Éric* (Pierre-François Martin-Laval), a screen writer, has watched the première of his film with his girlfriend of the moment, who 'loved' the film and declares that he writes scripts for 'corny comedies for desperate housewives'. Likewise, the main character, Elsa (Bérénice Bejo), is not only a great lover of romantic comedies but expects her 'ideal man' to love them too, a fact which makes finding him difficult: the only man she meets who likes romantic comedies is gay.

I will discuss this further below. We should note at this stage that the reception of musical comedy is often associated with gay culture (and moreover that this culture seen as homogeneous). Graham Wood, for example, underlines the fact that 'a camp flavour in the visual style and interpretation is so inherent in the genre that to express an interest in musical comedy is almost synonymous with coming out (at least in the American culture)' (2008: 312). Darren Waldron has shown that this association of homosexual viewers with musical comedy is also found in French audiences of French films (2009: 125–185). The fact that romantic comedies (*en chanté*) are not only genre films but also films for woman contributes to the academic disdain in which they are held (Mortimer, 2010: 2).

***On va s'aimer* (2006)**

On va s'aimer, Ivan Calbérac's third film,¹ is a remake of the Spanish comedy *El otro lado de la cama* directed by Emilio Lázaro-Martínez (2002). The Spanish version was a huge success when it was released (Díaz López, 2008). On the other hand, the box-office takings of the French version were mediocre, perhaps explaining why there was no sequel to *On va s'aimer*, unlike for the Spanish version which was followed by *Los dos lados de la cama* (Lagabrielle, 2010). Equally,

it should be noted that the subject of sexual differences (in the widest sense), which is our focus here, is treated in fundamentally different ways in the two films: while it is essential to the narrative fabric of the Spanish version, it has only a very secondary role in the French version.

The question of gender role is yet at the heart of *On va s'aimer*, a film which tells the story of the friendship, love and sexual relationships between two couples of heterosexual friends, Laurent (Julien Boisselier) and Camille (Mélanie Doutey) on the one hand, and François (Gilles Lellouche) and Élodie (Alexandra Lamy) on the other. In a plot that uses vaudeville narrative structures (double switching of partners through a series of symmetrical situations, repetitions and impediments, see Gidel, 1986), in this romantic comedy the initial couples end up sexually involved with the partner of the opposite sex from the other couple. The synopsis of the plot that appeared in *Fiches du Cinéma* (see note 1) describes the multiple comings and goings and sexual encounters of the characters, the forming and breaking up of illicit couples and so on.

Unlike in the other two films we discuss here, the interchange of partners in this film is similar to that in Hollywood sex comedies, one of the sub-genres of romantic comedy (McDonald, 2007: 38–58), in the significance given to the treatment of sexuality and sexual relationships. The opening scene in which Laurent and Camille watch a television program about the sexual life of various couples shows us the young woman's frustrations. There are then three scenes (the last a nightmarish dream of Laurent's) in which we see the sexual antics of Laurent and Élodie. The subject of sexual relationships between men and women is also at the heart of conversations between Laurent, François and their friends, Raphaël (Matthieu Rozé) and Julien (Lucien Jean-Baptiste). The presence of this group of friends in *On va s'aimer* also puts the film in the genre of buddy movies (Vasse, 2008: 33).

There is a lot of dialogue about the sexual activities of each of the characters. This dialogue betrays a rather narrow concept of heterosexual male masculinity which is apparently defined by the number and nature of their sexual exploits. Each of the male characters seems to embody a variation of the 'modern heterosexual man'. François is the virile male, his virility here associated with his sexual capacity and prowess. The same logic applies to the scene in which Laurent and François fight each other, both knowing at this point that they have each slept with the other's partner. Their reactions echo the age-old idea of men 'defending' their women. Élodie reiterates these attributes of normative masculinity when she explains to François why she misses him so much.²

It is not only in matters of sexuality that a traditional view of the world is expressed. We see an example of this in the scene where François finds himself confronted by the husband, a tall black man (Ali Karamoko), of a woman he has chatted up. François is terrified of him, confirming the stereotypical prejudices towards such characters from racial minorities. This is not at all surprising in a plot where a rival is treated as a 'bastard'.

Among the other elements of romantic comedy we should note is the inclusion of a woman who changes her mind about her relationship and goes back to her partner (Élodie to François). Also, the film's portrayal of the concept of a 'one and only' partner, a concept which comes from the romantic comedy narrative model (Hefner & Wilson, 2013: 153) is seen in Camille's reply to Laurent when he comes towards her to ask her to dance ('There are lots of girls and you've asked me to dance').

The wedding, the conventional happy ending for a romantic comedy, highlights a return to the accepted socio-sexual norm which is thus reaffirmed (McDonald, 2007: 85). Quite apart from the fact that, at the time the film was made, marriage was the institution favoured by the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 2005: 66) (and it remains so even though same-sex marriage is now permitted in France), the marriage scene can be seen as a celebration of heterosexuality: to the music and words of Gilbert Montagné's 'On va s'aimer', three heterosexual couples (Raphaël and Valérie

fall into each other's arms) are the centre of attention. This is even more the case since the homosexual character in the plot, Fred (Claire Nebout), disappears from the action and is not present at the wedding. An art teacher, it seems as though her presence in the film only serves to spice up the story. She embodies the stereotypical predatory seductress (she repeatedly attempts to seduce Camille). Her stereotypical character is balanced by that of the male in anguish at the thought of being cuckolded (even if the scene purports to be comic). It is not the only humorous reference to homosexuality or bisexuality: there are others, in similar contexts, which develop in the same superficial vein (assumptions about who Élodie and then Camille could have slept with). Finally, the reaffirmation of the traditional socio-sexual order is sealed by Camille's question to Laurent: 'Have you become monogamous?' Even though Laurent does not reply, the reaction shot showing his face as well as the rest of the scene leads us to think so.

The last sequence in the film indicates the extent to which there is tension in the film between, on the one hand, the desire to represent 'modern' couples in which the women work, talk as equals with their partners etc. and, on the other, actual representations of traditional gender roles and sexual behaviour. For example, before François joins Élodie in the school playground, a meeting which leads directly to their marriage, we see and hear him explain to his young pupils that 'in real life, fairy tale endings don't happen', adding: 'We are far from a fairy tale ending.' Yet, the rest of the scene and the denouement of the film reveal that the director wants to show the opposite.

This apparent contradiction – resolved in the epilogue – between two forms of narrative and two contexts (the fairy tale and real life) is also found in the narrative structure of *Modern Love*.

Modern Love (2008)

Modern Love, Stéphane Kazandjian's³ second feature-length film, for which he also wrote the screenplay, tells the story of Elsa and Éric, she searching for her 'ideal' man, he for his 'ideal' woman. The story is presented in an original way by integrating another film, a musical comedy, into the main plot. The interweaving of a 'film (F2) within a film (F1)' (Schmidt, 2007: 102) has a deliberate goal, as the writer-director says in the press kit:

I wanted to use a musical comedy to show the difference between 'real life' and 'the film within the film'. And what could be more cinematographic, further from reality than a musical comedy? I really liked this distinction between a world in which one finds it hard to express one's feelings and one in which one not only expresses them but even expresses them through song and dance.

From this statement by Stéphane Kazandjian we understand that through the main film he wanted to show that in 'real life' romantic relationships don't happen in the same way as they do in musical comedies in the cinema. Appropriately, unlike in the epilogue of the embedded musical comedy (the loving couple ride off on a horse), in the main film we don't know if Elsa and Éric will fall in love with each other. Similarly, the contrast between the fairy story elements and the open ending perhaps suggest that one of the messages of the film is that 'love' in the 'real world' does not happen as it does in romantic comedies (*en chanté*). Lastly, the numerous echoes between F2 and F1 could be read as a reflection of the way in which romantic comedies are a model for the way in which love is seen by the films' spectators. The influence of such a model is very real as has been shown by Hefner and Wilson's studies (2013) on English audiences. Most notably, these showed that young people view romantic comedies as how-to manuals.⁴

The echoes between F2 and F1, both in their plot and in their *mise en scène*, are too numerous for us not to think that, in spite of the currently held view that 'love' is more complicated in 'real

life' than in films, we should still believe in it just as they do in films, with all that implies about an idealised concept of love as well as gender roles.

At first glance, the differences between the two films (F1 and F2), which share the same title, *Modern Love*, are flagrantly obvious. In F2, the sets and colours are less naturalistic and more artificial and, above all, the characters sing and dance, unlike the characters in F1. Similarly, the plot of the musical comedy matches the classic plot development of fairy stories: a woman (Marianne) and a man (Vincent), with very different characters, she a feminist painter, he an executive of a macho fashion magazine, fall in love after a stormy *meet cute*. They separate, 'destiny intervenes' (title of the fourth song in F2) and in the end Vincent seeks out Marianne, who is about to rush into getting married; they re-declare their love for each other before escaping on a white horse having sung: 'If we were in a film / this would be the last scene / the one when I tell you that I love only you' (Vincent) and 'I will fall into your arms [...] I would say that I love only you' (Marianne). At the same time, this sequence is the culmination of the close relationship established throughout the film between F2 and F1. In fact, during this musical scene, we see Elsa and Éric (who still do not know each other) watching the film in the cinema.

The words 'The End' at the end of the musical, F2, announce the end of F1. This ending is very similar to the beginning of F2, suggesting that Elsa and Éric were also destined to meet and that destiny has finally united them – another trope of romantic comedy which is a fundamental one in the genre, both at plot level and at the level of its audience reception (Hefner & Wilson, 2013: 161).

The main film starts three years earlier at the same time of year, New Year's Eve, a date that occurs very frequently in romantic comedies. The opening scene shows Éric face to face with his girlfriend of the moment, Marie (Clothilde Courau) who is telling him that she is leaving him. In the same bar, Elsa's boyfriend is saying the same thing to her. From the end of this first scene, the plot has the two characters constantly just failing to meet. After they have each left the bar, one to each side, Elsa is seen walking from right to left in front of shops selling wedding dresses and children's clothes (very frequently visible in romantic comedies (McDonald, 2007: 11), then Éric is seen walking from left to right past a pharmacy – his ex, Marie, is a pharmacist. The two characters meet but, following the conventions of the *meet cute*, Elsa ends up insulting Éric. From then on the film presents them together more or less directly, most notably in intercutting scenes. Thus we see Éric attending the première of his film, *Modern Love*, and Elsa at home watching the television coverage of the event. Later, while a man attempts to seduce Elsa by telling her that he loves romantic comedies like *When Harry Met Sally*, Éric's friend and physiotherapist explains to him that he should treat his partner of the moment to a shopping experience à la *Pretty Woman* because all women adore being treated this way. It is while this shopping trip is taking place that Elsa unintentionally bumps into Éric and then finds herself beside him once again while waiting for a lift at a time when both have slept with their respective ex-partner again.

When they finally meet three years later on New Year's Eve, this time it is Éric who is seen in a tracking shot from right to left, Elsa coming in from the left as they both talk to their best friend on the phone and say almost exactly the same thing, the dialogue having an undeniably gender biased tone: Elsa does not want an 'all girls' New Year's Eve and Éric doesn't see himself 'going to the Crazy Horse Saloon'. The two characters end up going to see the same film, *Modern Love*, smiling at the same things on the screen before starting a conversation as they leave the cinema and deciding to go for a drink together. This structure that is both circular and chiasmic leaves no doubt that the two characters were made to meet each other. Éric and Elsa themselves voice this idea of destiny with their toast 'to chance and those who believe in it'. This analysis of the film's theme and also the ways in which the story is shot show us that the two characters believe in this destiny, this hand of fate. The epilogue echoes the deceptive nature of the distinction between the two films

about love: the snowflakes which fall on Elsa and Éric when they leave the cinema refer back to the confetti thrown over the couple in the musical.

This type of iconographic repetition is only one of the numerous ways used in the film to link the two plots, links which enable an idealised representation of reality. Besides the shared title, the two films share a similar narrative and *mise en scène*: the plot and the songs of the musical comedy act as anticipation of or commentary on the plot of the main film. Thus, in F1 Elsa and Éric reprise the first song sung by Marianne ('Young woman searching for the man of her life') and by Vincent ('Young man searching for the woman of his life'). The editing also serves to link the two films by using sound bridges and horizontal or vertical wipe transition shots. We also see or hear the soundtrack from the musical in the form of a CD, as a ring-tone on a phone and when Elsa sings the tune of the fifth song to herself. The song, *Dans un film*, even becomes mood music in F1. Finally the interrelationship between the two films can be seen in the fact that Elsa and Jérôme go to see the 'fictional film' (Schmidt, 2007: 102).

Equally, the profound interaction between the 'idealised' film and the 'realistic' film influences the representation of gender and sexuality as well as the dialogue about these topics. In spite of a progressive veneer, the representation and the dialogue are notably conformist, as is often the case with romantic comedies. With a focus on heterosexual characters in male-female relationships, underlined even in the layout of the actors' and actresses' names in the advertising for the film, the film attempts to counterbalance this in its portrayal of homosexual characters. Following the example of many contemporary romantic comedies, *Modern Love* includes several (of both sexes). The audience sees them for the first time at a party on a decorated barge where everyone is enjoying themselves. This narrative device belongs to a long tradition of homosexuality in film. As Brigitte Rollet has noted on the subject of homosexual characters on television, they 'are often walk-on parts, bringing a type of exoticism to the plot and using conventional stereotypes. Their role ends there and they most often contribute to reinforcing the dominant sexual model' (2007: 281). At this party, Laure (Valérie Karsenti), best friend of Elsa and married, meets Kim (Maï Anh Lê), a young woman with whom we see her twice, before they both disappear from the plot, even if it is suggested that they are still together at the end of the film. During the party on the barge, Elsa meets Jérôme (Stéphane Debac), who until now has had only male partners. However, the plot only takes a brief turn towards an alternative portrayal of sexual relationships before it finally returns to the traditional model, which is therefore reinforced. Even though Jérôme falls in love with Elsa, who for her part is delighted to have met a man who loves romantic comedies and detests PlayStation, in the end this considerate man is too considerate for her. She seems to have completely internalised the traditional norms for gender and considers that it is she, not he, who ought to make a romantic dinner and like going shopping.

The film seems to be telling us that a man with an alternative sexuality cannot make a woman happy. This scene recalls the opposite one in F2 in which the inveterate seducer, Vincent, had succeeded in bringing round Marianne by buying her a ball gown after she had told him she 'looked like a tramp', an example of the underlying 'true' femininity in which Marianne threw away her feminist ideas and Vincent enables her to experience a dream life. Even though these two characters are in the musical comedy, we have already seen the extent to which their portrayal and the discourse surrounding them intermingles with that of the main film. The way in which the sexes and genders complement each other is seen throughout the film within a film. This idea is expressed in the lyrics of the songs (as we will see) as much as in the use of colour. It is also obvious in the image that Elsa holds of her 'ideal man'. In order for a man to please a woman, the film seems to suggest, he must not be too like her, must not be too 'feminine'. Actually Jérôme disappears from the plot once Elsa has left him.

The character of Marianne embodies one of the tropes of romantic comedy already seen in *On va s'aimer*. It also meets the expectations of the traditional socio-sexual model: that is, it is the woman who decides to change radically in the name of her love for a man and not the opposite. Although the male (heterosexual) characters are treated with empathy or self-mockery, the female (heterosexual) characters are shown to be euphoric at the idea of shopping – in fact the suggestion elicits a cry of joy from Anne – and unstable – Marie cannot decide whether to stay with Éric or not and Elsa goes back to the man who hurt her.

Contrary to what the title leads us to expect, *Modern Love* does not represent sexual relationships or gender roles in any new way: couples who separate and sometimes get back together, a woman who throws herself into a relationship with a man who is also attracted to other men, Éric's donation of sperm to Marie and François (David La Haye), even these elements end up reinforcing the discourse on and representation of the traditional socio-sexual order.

Toi, moi, les autres (2011)

The concept of a fairy tale also occurs in *Toi, moi, les autres*, Audrey Estrougo's⁵ second feature-length fictional film, for which she also wrote the script. The fairy tale element imposes itself in the language used (from 'prince charming' to 'magic wand') as well as the basic plot of the film and the story that is spun from it. The director wanted to mix the romantic dimension of fairy stories with social comment, speaking of *Toi, moi, les autres* as a 'social story'. In so doing, she places it in the tradition of *West Side Story* (1960). The storyline, set 50 years later in Paris and with a different ending which is discussed below, is the vehicle for a vigorous examination of gender and sexuality. While the two films already discussed above sit in the French tradition of the comedy of manners and sexual intrigue of boulevardier theatre (Corvin, 1989), *Toi, moi, les autres* is openly inspired by the tradition of Hollywood musical comedy. This reference to Hollywood begins from the initial credits where the lettering of the names of the actors and actresses as well as the production and direction team are in sequins and in a large format. The name of the lead female character appears on the side of a bus, in a reference to *Sex and the City*. However, it is in the fabric of the narrative of *Toi, moi, les autres* that the reference to Hollywood is at its strongest. The film uses the double, mirrored structure that is the basis of all American Hollywood comedy, especially in its two golden ages (Altman, 1987: 15–27). *Toi, moi, les autres* depends on a dual structure at various levels. As Altman explains: 'the American film musical has a dual focus, built around parallel stars of opposite sex and radically divergent values' (1987: 19), adding that 'in any musical' there is 'a secondary but essential opposition alongside the primary sexual division: each sex is identified with a particular attitude, value, desire, location, age [...]. These secondary attributes always begin [as] diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive' (1987: 24). The different backgrounds of the heroine, Leïla (Leïla Bekhti) and the hero, Gabriel (Benjamin Siksou) – who, conforming to the conventions of fairy story musicals identified by Altman, do not know each other at the beginning of the film (1987: 141) – is underlined from the opening credits by the split screens showing Leïla and Gabriel each in their very different living environments: Leïla lives in a small flat in a working class area inhabited by immigrants, Gabriel is shown leaving a luxurious apartment in an equally luxurious suburb. The credits which form the opening sequence of scenes establish the primary aspects of a Manichean portrayal of society. Leïla, the daughter of immigrants, has lost her mother, another narrative convention that occurs frequently in romantic comedies (Mortimer, 2010: 24), and lives in modest circumstances while Gabriel comes from a very privileged background.

This sequence ends with the meeting of the two main characters, the young prince penetrating the world of the young shepherdess. We see Gabriel driving too fast in his convertible through the streets of Paris and venturing into the suburb where Leïla lives and where he knocks down her little

brother. This *meet cute* initiates the meeting of a shepherdess and a prince and of their two worlds in a way that is typically traditional in French cinema: on the one hand, French (and non-French) immigrants, poor but hard-working and cheerful, on the other, the ‘native’ French, rich, carefree and reckless and for the most part portrayed as unpleasant. The repetition of these narrative motifs and the predictability of the outcome fulfil the criteria of the genre (Altman, 1987: 330–334), leaving little doubt about the result of the meeting between two individuals and two social spheres which appear to be so far apart. Moreover the narrative model and the syntax of *Toi, moi, les autres*, starting with the role of the popular songs in the story, recalls Bollywood, another important culture in musical films (Schneider, 2008). The film pays homage to this style of production in a sung and danced scene, through the symbolism of place – notably a bridge – and the use of colour: while Leïla and Gabriel are dressed in purple, Alexandra (Cécile Cassel), the fiancée who Gabriel is due to marry two weeks later, wears only red and black. The sequence is used to show a turning point in the story of Leïla and Gabriel’s love, a turning point that is emphasised by the singing of Joe Dassin’s song *Si tu n’existais pas* by the two lovers.

A second plot line overlays the love story, the story of the illegal immigrants without official papers who are threatened with deportation to their home country, notably Tina (Marie-Sohna Condé) and her daughter Sally (Cheïna Correa Lafaure). While Leïla is working on getting the necessary papers for her friends, we learn that it is the father of Gabriel himself, chief constable of the police, who is responsible for the deportation orders. This is another obstacle to the idyll of the two protagonists. The parallel story of the illegal immigrants also inserts a note of social and political criticism into the film. Few film-makers have committed themselves to an undertaking as hazardous as this attempt to overcome the incompatibility between a genre focussed so entirely on entertainment and the telling of a political story. Apart from the subject itself, the socio-political dimension of the film is revealed through amusing glimpses – in a nightmare, Gabriel sees himself with his future wife and their three children, Nicolas, Carla and Cécilia – and through explicit references: Gabriel’s father (Nicolas Briançon) is called Brice and declares that, ‘When there is just one, it’s ok. It’s when there are lots that there are problems’, referring textually to the views of Brice Hortefeux in 2009 when he was Minister of the Interior (Johannès, 2010). Moreover, in showing a church with banners in support of illegal immigrants and in including archive images of a protest, the director adds her film to contemporary French political criticism. Her position is also shown at the end of the film in the song played during the closing credits, the only song written for the film. Significantly sung by Leïla and Gabriel, the words declare: ‘We all have a right to this blue white red sky.’ However this critical position can’t be stated explicitly and therefore only appears as part of the primary love story. Apart from several minor statements by one or the other, which undermine the impact of the critical statement,⁶ numerous elements remind us that, above all, this is the love story of two young people. Even the layout of the poster for the film, also used on the DVD case, refers directly to the title: Leïla and Gabriel in close up, embracing and to the front, are shown with a crowd of others, in mid- and background. And if the relationship between Leïla and Gabriel seems to be endangered by the question of the illegal immigrants, it is for love that Gabriel, when he finds out about his father’s duplicity, decides to carry out the plan to prevent the deportation of Tina and her daughter by taking over the plane which is supposed to take them back to Senegal. In the staging of this scene the empathetic effect of the music (Chion, 1995: 228–232) reaches its full force for the last time and emphasises the link between the issue of illegal immigrants and the love between Leïla and Gabriel. On the one hand, the Jacques Brel song *Quand on n’a que l’amour* links the two narratives: the first phrases saying ‘my love and I’ before this love expands gradually to include the others, ‘those whose only fight is to find light at the end of the tunnel’. On the other hand, the camera reminds us constantly of the role of love in this affair: the scene opens in a medium close-up shot of the two lovers seated side by side, and then shows

their hands joining before showing them in a medium shot. From then on, Leïla and Gabriel are always framed together, while the other characters appear individually, before a final shot in which everyone is together again.

This is a classic motif of Hollywood musical comedies in which the success of a communal project is tightly bound to the love story of the two main characters, who from this point form a couple (Altman, 1987: 42–51) whose values are no longer shown as opposing (1987: 144). The other factor stipulated by Rick Altman, ‘a basic moment in the fairy tale musical is thus that moment when the financial or governmental plot dissolves into a love plot’ (1987: 156), is also shown. The applause in the plane could be for the rescue of the illegal immigrants just as much as it is for the love story. The significance of the role of the love story is suggested by the epilogue in which the fate of the illegal immigrants whose deportation has been delayed is ignored while in the final scene Leïla and Gabriel are seen coming happily out of the law faculty building. The real happy ending for them, now a couple, is therefore represented by the fact that Leïla has returned to her law training and Gabriel is about to return to his studies. There are two messages typical of the classic romantic comedy in the epilogue: not only do we see that love can help in overcoming obstacles but also that it transforms one of the main characters for the better (according to the dominant cultural values) (Mortimer, 2010: 7 and 66).

The ending of *Toi, moi, les autres* also teaches us something else about the social relationship between the sexes through its plot structure and *mise en scène*. In the end, the heroine, even though she is presented as a ‘strong woman’, fails in her attempt to support the regularisation of the illegal migrants’ papers, despite her putting all her heart and energy into the task. It is the young man who comes up with the plan by which the deportations are prevented in the same way that it was he who re-enrolled Leïla in the competitive law examination when she had decided to give up. The same can be said of his role in the saving of the illegal immigrants: it seems that in this too the myth of the prince, who has the gift of magic powers, has lost none of its force. One cannot help thinking that this is the message the film is intended to deliver. The ambivalence between the contemporary characterisations and the traditional ending, which we have already seen in the two other films, is seen again in this contemporary version of *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet*, one of the great ‘myths’ of heterosexual culture (Tin, 2003: 209).

It should be noted that *Toi, moi, les autres* is the only one of these three films in which the main character – the heroine – is not white or from the French middle classes. In fact it is shocking to note that in the other two films the lack of sexual diversity is matched by the lack of social and ethnic diversity. All of the characters in both *On va s’aimer* and *Modern Love* belong to the white middle class, with the exception of a black character in *On va s’aimer* – whose problematic role and function we have already discussed (Julien, the other black character, played by Lucien Jean-Baptiste, plays an even more secondary role than Raphaël, with whom he is on screen in most of his scenes). The same applies to *Modern Love* in which the only non-white character is Kim, who is of Asian origin, and who serves a largely comedic role. When Elsa shares a toast with her, she says, ‘Chin chin’ with an Asian accent. Even though the people with her have an air of consternation that reveals the inappropriateness of this phrase, the comic element of her toast is still present.

Added value(s)

Whether they are songs from the repertoire of French popular music (*On va s’aimer*, *Toi, moi, les autres*) or songs written specifically for the film (*Modern Love*), all the musical numbers in these films have a strong ‘value-added’ effect on the audience’s reception of the film. Michel Chion, who first discussed this effect, explains that ‘the value added by the element of sound is produced by the spontaneous projection by the viewer (the listener-viewer in fact) of information, emotion and/

or atmosphere in addition to what is seen on the screen as if these were inherently present' (1995: 205). This effect acquires a specific sense when seen from a perspective of gender and sexuality. Analysis of the songs reveals to what extent they contribute, either through the lyrics or their structure, to the construction and transmission of a binary heterosexual discourse. Of the ten songs in *Toi, moi, les autres*, most are not only about love but specifically about love between two people: *Pour un flirt*, *La bonne étoile*, *Et si tu n'existais pas* as well as *J'attendrai* are all constructed around a 'you' and an 'I'. What is more *La bonne étoile*, a song released par -M- in 2004, reinforces the idea of a 'one and only'. In contrast the union of two people is absent from the two songs about the illegal immigrant problem (*Un autre monde* et *Qu'est-ce qui pourrait sauver l'amour*). Two songs show the link between the love between Gabriel and Leïla and the illegal immigrant issue: *Quand on n'a que l'amour* and the song played during the closing credits, *Avec mes armes*, in which this link is explicitly referred to: 'Even if the sun shines only for you / This blue white red sky belongs to us all'.

On va s'aimer also includes songs from the repertoire of French popular music, thus it in its turn plays with the accumulation of associations involved in this technique (Grimbert, 2013; Andrieu, 2011). This film, of which the title recalls the eponymous song by Gilbert Montagné, is peppered from beginning to end with songs about love, from *Coup de soleil* to *J'te l' dis quand même*, passing through *Tout doucement*, *Pour le plaisir* and also the title song that plays at the end of the film. In this film too, the songs for the most part serve to link the two characters who are in love with each other, in a traditional way. This link is sometimes emphasised with a sound bridge or a fade-out. On the other hand, when the songs are sung by the whole cast, they serve to show the feelings about love, the feeling of being in love, of each member of the cast, thereby suggesting that everyone shares in that feeling.

The songs in *Modern Love*, for which the lyrics are in places so ridiculous one wonders if they are deliberately self-mocking (though there is room for doubt), have a double function. As well as anticipating or commenting on the plot of the main film, they also reinforce the concept of the complementarity of the sexes and genders, whether this is through their lyrics or their structure, often based on parallels in structure or the resulting interpretation: the lyrics are symmetrically divided between the male and female. The songs' interpretation adds to the heteronormative and heterocentric discourse, adding no new ideas, when they could have been used experimentally in this area (as Resnais did in *On connaît la chanson*).

All Quiet on the Eastern Front

Notwithstanding their divergences from what could be termed the 'Hollywood model' and the 'French model' of films *en chanté*, the three feature films analysed here adhere to the generic conventions of the romantic comedy. This is as true for the narrative structures as for the representation of and discourse on the sexes, gender and sexuality, which are an integral part of the narrative conventions of the genre. Behind their apparently modern images and discussion of ideas, these films are notable for their conformism and conservatism, confirmed by their respective endings. The treatment of non-normative sexualities (Rubin, 2001: 87–88) is particularly revealing of the films' ideology. In each case the idea of happy, binary, heterosexual love is reaffirmed. These romantic comedies subscribe to the utopian tradition characteristic of the Hollywood musical comedy (Dyer, 2002) which responded to the 'functional' and 'operational' role of the genre: to respond – or rather to give the impression of responding – to the contradictions of society (Altman, 1987: 334 and 345). For its part, the long-lived survival of the conventional narrative structure of the romantic comedy genre reveals to what extent these feature films aim to reinforce the dominant socio-sexual model, even though the model seems to be under constant attack from social change, the divorce

rate, the demands for gender equality and the movement for same-sex marriage. To extend the metaphor, we can therefore say that these fairy tale films endeavour to show and reaffirm the ‘gender fables’ (Butler, 2005: xi).

From this we can consider the three examples discussed here as opportunities missed by French film *en chanté* makers. Yet this genre has produced some films in which the film-maker has succeeded in playing with the parameters of the romantic comedy genre, offering a view of diverse and different gender roles and sexuality – from *Jeanne and the Perfect Guy* (Olivier Ducastel et Jacques Martineau, 1998), through *A Man, a Real One* (Jean-Marie et Arnaud Larrieu, 2003) to *The Queen of Hearts* (Valérie Donzelli, 2010).

Translated from the French by Mandy Hewett

Notes

1. *On va s'aimer* (2006). Laurent, a Parisian journalist with a cushy lifestyle, falls in love with a woman he meets in a bar, Élodie, a vivacious lawyer. However, Élodie turns out to be the new girlfriend of his best friend, François, a committed young teacher. Élodie also falls in love with Laurent and they meet for secret and passionate trysts. While Élodie breaks up with François, Laurent says nothing to his affectionate partner, Camille. François employs a private detective to find out the identity of Élodie’s new lover. Élodie presses Laurent to leave Camille. However, Laurent makes a mess of things and instead ends up asking Camille to marry him. At the same time, to avoid losing Élodie, he takes her away for a weekend. Their romantic escape turns into a fiasco. They return earlier than expected. After drinking plenty of toasts together at an exhibition opening, Camille and François sleep together; they decide it was just a night’s episode. Laurent and François finally find out about each other’s deception and settle their scores violently. It’s now the turn of Camille to break up with Laurent. Seeing the damage he has caused, the journalist tries to put things right. He convinces Élodie to meet with François. At first reluctant, François finally agrees. A few months later, at François and Élodie’s wedding, Laurent meets Camille again and she accepts his invitation to dance... [Original text in French © *Les Fiches du Cinema* 2006].
2. ‘You know, François, all those things that I could not stand when I was living with you, your football boots in the middle of the corridor, your sports magazines in the lounge, your Tarzan cries before you jumped into bed, they are what I miss the most now.’
3. *Modern Love* (2008). Since the breakup of her last relationship, Elsa has been on her own, waiting to find the ideal man. Her friend Laure tries without success to introduce her to single men to whom she explains Elsa’s situation. After a painful break-up initiated by his lover, Marie, Éric is living with Anne, a student. With misgivings, he has just signed a contract to write the screenplay of a musical romantic comedy, *Modern Love*, in which the first meeting of Marianne, a Parisian artist, and Vincent, an ultra-wealthy editor of a fashion magazine, is explosive. Elsa thinks that her new colleague, Jérôme, has all the qualities of the perfect man. By chance Éric meets Marie, with whom he is still in love. Getting to know Jérôme better, Elsa realises that he is gay. When Marie and her sterile husband ask Éric to father a child for them, he does not hesitate. He leaves Anne and starts a relationship with Marie, thinking that he will be able to get her to leave her husband. While Laure begins a relationship with Kim, a female friend of Jérôme, Jérôme gradually falls for Elsa. At first amazed and delighted, Elsa quickly gets bored with this perfect man. She therefore leaves Jérôme while Marie, now pregnant, goes back to her husband. At the end of the film within the film, after many twists and turns, Vincent saves Marianne from an unhappy marriage and declares his love for her. Éric and Elsa are alone in the cinema. They leave to go have a drink together (Original text in French © *Les Fiches du Cinema*, 2008).
4. The subjects of these studies were ‘the’ youth of North America. However, it seems reasonable to apply the results to ‘the’ youth of France.
5. *Toi, moi, les autres* (2011). In Paris, Leïla is in a hurry to finish her law degree. Of Northwest African origin, she lives with her father and her younger brother and spends most of her time with her friends,

including Tina, a close friend, who is an illegal immigrant. Gabriel's life is completely different: having grown up in a wealthy family, he spends his evenings at the casino, where he is amassing debts, and is soon to marry Alexandra, also from an established family. But one day the paths of Leïla and Gabriel cross when Gabriel only just misses running over Leïla's little brother. She is furious, he enchanted with her and wanting to say sorry. Leïla resists his advances but isn't immune to his charms. They end up getting together. Gabriel becomes brutally aware that he doesn't want to marry Alexandra. He rejects her and opts to be with Leïla. This angers his father, Brice, a chief constable in the police. Leïla dare not tell her father than she has failed her exams. Tina is arrested during a police raid in her hairdressing salon and is held in the Conciergerie. To obtain her release, Gabriel gives in to his father's demands that he should stop seeing Leïla and marry Alexandra. But he quickly understands that his father is only duping him and doesn't intend to keep his side of the deal. Gabriel therefore gathers Leïla and her friends to prevent the charter flight forcibly taking Tina back to her home country from taking off. Some time later, Leïla, who has returned to her studies, is still with Gabriel (© *Les Fiches du Cinema* 2011).

6. Gabriel retorts to his father that 'these are not files, these are people', echoing Leïla's statement to an official at the prefecture that she was not talking to him about 'numbers but about human beings'.

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