

*NATHALIE...:***AN ALTERNATIVE ENUNCIATIVE POSITION IN POPULAR FRENCH CINEMA**

In Anne Fontaine's latest film, *Nathalie...* (2003), François Truffaut's mythic couple from *La Femme d'à côté* (1981) (*The Woman Next Door*), formed by Gérard Depardieu and Fanny Ardant, are reunited in a narrative of – lost – passion. Fontaine started her career as a filmmaker in the early 1990s with films such as *Les Histoires d'Amour finissent mal en général* (1993) (*Love Stories usually end badly*), *Augustin* (1995), *Nettoyage à Sec* (1997) (*Dry Cleaning*), *Augustin Roi du Kung Fu* (1999) and *Comment j'ai tué mon père* (2001) (*How I Killed my Father*). Fontaine's main interest seems to lie in relationships between the sexes. In *Cinema and the Second Sex*, couples, according to Brigitte Rollet and Carrie Tarr, are among the recurrent themes contemplated by many French male and female directors over the years.<sup>1</sup> Fontaine's approach to the issue of the modern couple is, however, distinctive from that of other filmmakers, in the sense that she offers a contemporary insight on the subject that is defined by transgression. In her previous works, this transgressive aspect can be detected in her exploration of interracial relationships and, in a film like *Nettoyage à Sec*, it is apparent in a concern with sexual relationships.

*Nathalie...* focuses on a middle-class, middle-aged couple and a disruption to their conventional existence. The whole film centres on the changes in the woman's life after she is made aware of her husband's infidelity. Although the film starts by introducing the couple formed by Catherine (Fanny Ardant) and Bernard (Gérard Depardieu), it then centres on another couple formed by Catherine and Marlène (Emmanuelle Béart). The entire film turns to, and looks at, the development of a complicit and intimate relationship between Catherine and Marlène. Their relationship begins with Catherine hiring Marlène to seduce her husband and report every detail back to her. These repeated meetings, in which Marlène verbally informs Catherine of her progress in the seduction of the latter's husband, form the narrative motif of the entire film-text and, hence, disclose its concern with the enunciative process and, more specifically, female enunciation. The question of enunciation that the film raises will provide the focus for the present discussion. The article will argue that *Nathalie...* attempts to challenge the masculine logic inherent in mainstream cinema which constructs women as

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<sup>1</sup> See Brigitte Rollet and Carrie Tarr, *Cinema and the Second Sex: Women's Filmmaking in France in the 1980s and 1990s* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001).

sexual objects of male desire. My aim is to show that the film's enunciative system does not function according to a masculine, but to a different, logic of desire. I will argue that the way the film challenges conventional cinematic texts aims to restore the place of cinematic enunciation as a position devoid of any gender and sexual distinctions. The subject of enunciation will no longer coincide with masculinity, but will have to be understood as a fluid position.

The film starts with two parallel scenes introducing Bernard and Catherine. The way these scenes are constructed is interesting as they create an impression of contradiction. They seem to be linked to, and at the same time separated from, each other. The first two scenes act as a presage of the idea of ambivalence that the cinematic structure creates and that will be present in the film as a whole. The smoothness of the editing between these two sequences helps to create a flow of images, but it also replicates the pervasive structure of the look, in dominant cinema, as being based on sexual difference. The film's first sequence opens with an image of Bernard seen from behind. The camera follows him as he gets ready in what seems to be a hotel room. As he looks out of the window, the next sequence is constructed as if it is a reflection of his look. Positioned outside, the camera shows Catherine pacing back and forth inside a room by a window. As the frame of the window is made visible, it acts as a mediating surface between the viewer and the object of vision. In other words, the window-pane forms a frame within a wider frame, acting as a film within a film. This film within a film produces the effect of recreating the structure of the look in relation to the representation of women in mainstream cinema and hence confirms Raymond Bellour and Laura Mulvey's views that the enunciative apparatus articulated through the look is, to borrow an expression from Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, 'marked by the insistent inscription of sexual difference'.<sup>2</sup> For the parallel scenes shifting from Bernard, looking outside from a window, to Catherine, seen inside her home from outside a window, seem to reproduce the seen/being seen dyadic framework. The first sequence hence corresponds to the split between active-looking and passive-looked-at, structured according to the male unconscious desire. Moreover, the window frame, acting as a metaphor of the cinema screen, positions Bernard as the source of enunciation with whom the spectator can identify. Bernard seems to control the narrative, while Catherine stands as an image emanating from the male/Bernard's psyche; she hence

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond Bellour, 'Alternation, Segmentation, Hypnosis: Interview with Janet Bergstrom', *Camera Obscura*, 3-4 (1979), 71-103; and Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in Penley, C. (ed.), *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York Routledge, 1988), pp.198-209.

signifies male desire here. The red colour of Catherine's blouse and her flirting behaviour with her male guests reinforce her position as object of the male gaze, as defined by Mulvey. The binary opposition prevalent in the dynamic process of desire that circulates between the film-text and the spectator is undoubtedly re-instated here. Moreover, the symbolic meaning of the window as a filmic screen evokes a separation between Catherine and Bernard which adheres to, and reinforces, binary oppositions as constitutive of classical cinema. The opposition between Catherine and Bernard corresponds to the division between man and woman underpinning the enunciative structure in mainstream cinema. The first section of the film confirms the dichotomous positions of woman as object and man as subject. Filmic techniques thus conform to the dominant enunciative apparatus in which man usually occupies the enunciating subject position and woman is the object of his desire. Not only does the structure of the gaze in the introductory scenes reiterate the binary framework of the enunciative apparatus, but the different geographical locations and the camera work also reinforce this idea of separation and thus sexual division. For while Bernard is in a hotel room and hence away from home, Catherine is at home entertaining friends and waiting for her husband's arrival. The presentation of, and distinction between, home and hotel conform to the division between inside and outside, female and male. Moreover, this distinction between man and woman can also be identified by the position of the camera which shows Bernard and Catherine together, sitting next to each other, but never facing each other. They are seen looking at each other in a mirror, emphasizing the lack of physical contact between them. Bernard is also persistently seen standing, in the background, behind Catherine, or vice versa. These different cinematic means reflect and accentuate Bernard's comments that Catherine no longer talks about herself; they have drifted apart. The idea of separation as a background against which the film evolves and tries to demarcate itself is formulated here and hence accentuated.

The ambivalences conveyed by these first two scenes reinforce, but also presage, a challenge to the dominant enunciative structure in mainstream cinema. For diverse textual devices – as, for example, the film within a film structure – instantly disrupt the homogeneity of the narration. The homogeneity of the narrative, operating with the concealment of the marks of cinema as an apparatus is the key aspect of enunciation as claimed by Flitterman-Lewis: 'Metz maintains that one of the primary operations of the classical narrative film [...] is this effacement of the enunciative indicators. The work of cinematic production is thus concealed in a variety of operations which disguised the discourse [...] so that the film might present itself as *history* [*story*] (in which the source of enunciation – that absent term, either

camera or author, which controls the discourse and organizes the narrative logic – is suppressed)’ (p.14). In *Nathalie...*, the credits, as well as the off-screen music appearing during the sequence when Catherine is introduced, emphasize the idea of viewing a film and thus highlight the construction of Bernard’s position as enunciator from where desire emanates. Other technical devices, such as the appearance of the film’s credits within the narrative, create a distance between the images and the spectator and thus eradicate the unconscious relation of spectator to screen. Moreover, as the camera follows Catherine, black images fill the screen, suggesting a complete absence of representation. This obliteration of representation enhances the artificiality of films. In *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*, Flitterman-Lewis shows that mainstream cinema functions via a concealment of its marks of enunciation, creating the sensation that images on the screen appear as if they emanate directly from the spectator’s desire. In mainstream cinema, the screen, as mediation between the author/filmmaker and the spectator, conveys the sensation of realism. A reciprocal relationship emerges which enables the viewer to occupy the position of filmic enunciation or, in other words, of producer and controller of what can be seen on the screen. As the effect of realism produced by the enunciative apparatus is broken down in *Nathalie...*, the spectator-text reciprocal relationship is undermined. The alignment of black screens with images of Catherine question the author and spectator’s desiring relation to what is represented on the screen. Furthermore, other moments in the film – as well as the film’s broad structure which relies on the idea of performance – point to the constructed nature of the cinematic world. Marlène’s performance as a prostitute and as Nathalie is reinforced throughout the film. Marlène asserts and shows that her job is to perform or, as she puts it, ‘to fake it’<sup>3</sup>. At recurrent moments in the film, Marlène reflects on her character’s acts: ‘I thought Nathalie would probably stay’<sup>4</sup>, and seeks Catherine’s approval, her reassurance that ‘she would like that’<sup>5</sup>. The narrative seems to emanate from Catherine and Marlène’s own imagination, which emphasizes the cultural construction of the film. Bernard and Marlène/Nathalie’s acts of lying echo the idea of performance which, in turn, calls into question the authenticity and reliability of their representations. The revelation that what is shown on the screen is not real exposes the ideology, inherent in mainstream cinema, which reduces women to mere objects. The functioning of the enunciative apparatus, based on the

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<sup>3</sup> ‘De faire semblant’.

<sup>4</sup> Je me suis dit qu’une fille comme Nathalie, elle serait restée, non?

<sup>5</sup> ‘Je pensais que ça vous plairait.’

construction of the figure of the woman as object of the male unconscious desire, is undoubtedly underpinned. Subsequent scenes support this view, as the position of women as images, which is central to the operation of the enunciative apparatus in dominant cinema, is further questioned.

When Catherine becomes aware of her husband's infidelity, she decides to go to a nightclub to hire a prostitute, Marlène. This scene marks the beginning of a new narrative with a new *mise en scène* and accentuates the sense of ambiguity assigned to the filmic text. The ideas of performance and of the disruption of the narrative's homogeneity and continuity are further explored. Furthermore, this new narrative evolves after Catherine and Marlène's daily meetings, challenging the cause-effect relationship inherent in dominant cinema. Catherine creates a fantasmatic scenario where Marlène could be called Nathalie and could play the role of a woman who would appeal to Bernard. For this fantasmatic scenario, Marlène and Catherine agree on Marlène's new identity and situation as a normal girl called Nathalie. Nathalie's situation and identity are fathomed from a female point of view. Catherine imagines and initiates the scenario where Marlène will meet Bernard in the bar he goes to every morning before work. In voice-over, Catherine introduces the new narrative, 'his name's Bernard. He often sits near the bar and has a coffee before work....'<sup>6</sup> It is apparent that the film narrative becomes concerned with female agency and subjectivity, and thus further challenges the dominant enunciative process whereby women are represented as the object of male desire. The logic of masculine desire around which dominant narrative films centre is questioned. The central enunciative process of the film is structured around a different logic. By contrast to her initial representation as an object of the male gaze, Catherine is here presented as the subject of enunciation. This transition or transgression of position is supported by camera work which posits another vision. When she goes to the nightclub, the camera shows her from behind and adopts her position in turn. The images on the screen appear to come from Catherine's vision. The point of view adopted in these sequences oscillates between that of the camera and that of Catherine, highlighting their correlative positions. She becomes the subject of the look and the spectator is invited to follow Catherine's vision. A reversed situation from the first scenes occurs as, this time, the images on the screen are presented as a representation of Catherine's subjectivity and desire; hence they posit another position of looking. Contrary to the gaze structure in dominant

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<sup>6</sup> 'Il s'appelle Bernard. Il est souvent à une table à côté du comptoir; il prend un café avant d'aller à son travail...'

cinema, as reported by Mulvey, it does not correspond to the masculine subject position, but is here an integral part of feminine subjectivity. As a result, Catherine's active viewing is not associated with the idea of control and appropriation. On the contrary, when the camera/Catherine looks at the women in the club laughing or talking, the camera transmits a sense of desire for identification, for fusion.

The film is structured around two parallel narratives which, because of their apparent reflection on cinematic techniques, seem to be constructed as films within a film. The double narrative offers a different enunciative position which reveals the non-fixity of the enunciative structure. While in the first narrative, the dominant enunciative structure in mainstream cinema is reinstated, in the second narrative, the structural and symbolic role of women as objects of male desire is challenged. The male, as both viewer of the woman-spectacle and as controller of the narrative events, is displaced. Bernard is even relegated to the position of a (mute) image perceived from Catherine's and later Marlène/Nathalie's point of view. This narrative brings to the fore the female presence and voice, thus destabilizing the structures of mainstream cinema whereby the look and the vocal discourse belong to the male domain. The central enunciative structure is transformed according to a different logic. It emanates from another source of feminine desire, characterized, in the first instance, by Catherine. Moreover, by contrast to mainstream cinema, the enunciative subject position is not suppressed, but is physically present. Not only does the mark of enunciation emanate from a female point of view, but it is also physically restored. The presence of the enunciator undermines the illusion of reality that its absence creates in films. In *Nathalie...* the enunciator's presence exposes the view that films are cultural constructions. The artificiality of a prevalent enunciative apparatus is reinforced, but, more importantly, an alternative to the conventional enunciation process is suggested by the depiction of a female perspective. However, the film does not propose a mere reversal of subject position from man to woman. The ambiguity is generated by the fact that the enunciating subject position alternates between Catherine and her husband. It oscillates between a masculine and a feminine position. The parallel between both narratives creates an oscillation between man and woman and suggests a challenge to the binary gender position of masculinity and femininity.

As soon as she enters the nightclub, Catherine stands in sharp contrast to the women working there. This unfamiliar situation, which she desires to access and to transgress, is rendered through the unsettled camera work. The camera shifts from one shot to the other, assuming Catherine's examining, and hence external, position. Moreover, because of her presence in this club and because her physical appearance reveals her social position,

Catherine shares a rather similar position to the men in the nightclub. Her passage into this exclusive masculine place can be described as a subversion of gender boundaries. This passage, or this transcendence of her gendered situation and position, is expressed by visual techniques. When Catherine arrives at the club, the camera focuses on the moment when Catherine opens the door of the club and rests on a shot of Catherine seen from behind, facing an oval-shaped door. This scene can be explained by considering Judith Mayne's study of *The Woman at the Keyhole*. Mayne examines the representations of the screen in their literal sense as film screen as well as in their figurative sense as surfaces, such as mirrors and windows.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, her study aims to show the significant impact of the film screen on the representation of female desire and the female point of view. She notes that: 'The figure of the screen emerges as the embodiment of ambivalence, as the site at which cinema both resists and gives support to the representation of female agency and female desire' (p. 51). In other words, the figure of the screen functions as surface and passageway, mirror and obstacle, which resists the patriarchal cinematic structure founded on the hierarchy of male subject and female object. It evokes ambivalence between, rather than polarity of, subject and object. The screen surface in its ambivalent function works as an alternative to patriarchal cinematic conventions and hence marks the possibility of crossing boundaries. In *Nathalie...*, the idea of passage is characterized by the door of the club standing as a separation between two worlds, the inside and the outside. More specifically, the door becomes here a passage to the other world, a crossing of boundaries for Catherine. This crossing of boundaries stands for Catherine's desire to know what happens between Bernard and these other women, to know about female sexuality. She wishes Bernard would tell her what happens with these women, what turns him on. Catherine desires to understand and reach the other, and she fulfils her desire by accessing a world where women represent the sexual transgression of norms. Marlène/Nathalie's defiant, transgressive sexuality is expressed through her occupation as a prostitute, but also through her revealing clothes and her loud make-up. Hence, the encounter between Catherine and Marlène is marked by the transgression of boundaries.

It is also a crossing of boundaries in the sense that Catherine enters a place reserved for men. Her transgressive behaviour is brought to the fore by the club owner's and Marlène's remarks. The owner asks Catherine if she can help her and stresses that this is a private club. Marlène also asks her if she is fine and if she is not too disoriented, mentioning that in the club they rarely get women like Catherine. These remarks highlight Catherine's social

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<sup>7</sup> See Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole* (Bloomington and Indianapolis : Indiana University Press, 1990).

difference from the women in the club and depict her ambivalent behaviour. Catherine's ambiguous behaviour is confirmed when she adopts a masculine position to talk to Marlène. Not only does Catherine assume the position of a man by, for example, simply entering the club and paying Marlène to work for her but, more importantly, by speaking in the name of her husband. Catherine takes up her husband's position as she imagines what kind of women would appeal to him: 'It's not for me. I think you'd... you'd appeal to my husband.'<sup>8</sup> The film brings to the fore the issue of gender and sexual identities and their constructions in western societies. It supports the idea that gender as well as sexual identities are not fixed, but are fluid and thus interchangeable. As gender and sexual differences are transgressed, identities based on these divisions in dominant societies are challenged. This is a view confirmed in subsequent scenes where Marlène/Nathalie narrates her stories to Catherine and, in this process, adopts different roles. Marlène/Nathalie shares the position as enunciator and listener in the narrative with Catherine, alternating between an active and a passive position. Their identity as listener and enunciator is not fixed, but is mobile and interchangeable. They are both active and passive, subject and object of the narrative. Within this narrative, they also both occupy different gender and sexual positions. The ambivalence of Marlène/Nathalie's position is marked by her use of diverse personal pronouns. As Marlène/Nathalie sets up a story between Nathalie and Bernard, the use of the subject pronouns 'I', 'he' and 'she' is interchangeable and hence ambiguous; the same person utters them all. These pronouns do not refer to any specific person, but rather to *any* person. She no longer has a proper or individual gender and sexual identity but encompasses them all. None of these positions is separated; rather, all can alternate with, and reciprocate, each other. Hence, Catherine and Marlène/Nathalie share a similar position; they both represent an ambivalence of gender and sexual identities. They both contain and disrupt differences between man and woman, masculinity and femininity. A similarity of position between Catherine and Marlène/Nathalie starts to be established. Any apparent division between the two women is transgressed, but gender and sexual divisions also become blurred. The polarity between masculinity and femininity, man and woman, subject and object, is challenged, and, as a result, the enunciative apparatus of mainstream cinema is destabilized.

*Nathalie...* suggests an overcoming of the divisions and oppositions which underpin dominant cinematic enunciation as defined by a masculine logic and as expressed in the first scenes of the film. The film's main focus on the relationship between Catherine and

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<sup>8</sup> 'Non, mais ce n'est pas pour moi. Il me semble que ... vous pourriez plaire à mon mari.'

Marlène/Nathalie reinforces the blurring of positions, for it is a bond which comes to be characterized by a sharing of positions that brings them close to each other. Hence, whereas in the first scenes, filmic techniques emphasize the separation between Catherine and Bernard, in subsequent scenes when Catherine and Marlène/Nathalie meet, the film emphasizes their desire for fusion. The camera offers an almost still image of the two of them, sitting close to each other and exchanging looks. This is a technique which is reiterated in subsequent scenes where the camera's insistence on their physical proximity, but also on the exchange of looks, activates the narrative's progression towards female closeness and fusion. Technical devices, such as shot-reverse-shot or Catherine and Marlène/Nathalie shot in a single frame, establish this exchange. By contrast to conventional cinema, where the function of shot-reverse-shot is usually to mark a separation between the subject and the object of the gaze, in this instance it is used to evoke an oscillation of the subject and object position, as Catherine and Marlène/Nathalie are both subject and object of each other's gaze. They thus progressively become mirror images of each other. The film's reliance on mirror images between Catherine's and Marlène/Nathalie's desire reinforces the ideas of sameness and fusion. The similarities between both women are explicitly expressed when Catherine wears the same face cream as Marlène/Nathalie and drinks the same wine, the first time in the same glass. The idea of closeness is expressed above all when Catherine invites Marlène/Nathalie to stay at her mother's house and offers to give her her old bedroom for the night. Complete fusion is, however, achieved when Catherine seduces a young man at a party. This scene can definitely be read as Catherine's identification with Marlène/Nathalie's liberated behaviour. The reiterated use of the figure of the mirror symbolizing Catherine and Marlène/Nathalie's relationship highlights also their mutual desire to reach towards the other. In the nightclub, they are usually shown facing each other below an oval mirror. Following Mayne's position, in this particular instance, the mirror reflects an image of another who is different from, but also similar to, the self. The mutual identification between the two characters is, moreover, reinforced here by the oval shaped mirror. The circle symbolizes women; it stands for equality and symmetry between women.

Indeed, the figure of the mirror reinforcing the idea of similarity and fusion between Catherine and Marlène/Nathalie, as well as the film's concentration on the female bond, evoke a sense of homoeroticism. The film highlights the non-fixity of sexual categorizations of women and men, as any notion of difference between the characters has been questioned. The distinction between man and woman, subject and object, in dominant representations is thus contested. This is a relationship which foregrounds reflexivity instead of separation and

division. The idea of reflexivity, conveyed by the image of the mirror, challenges not only heterosexual but also homosexual desire. For reciprocity between women – as well as between men and women and masculinity and femininity as expressed through the film – results in the questioning of these dominant binary and oppositional categories. As they do not belong to a sexual category, they suggest changeable sexual relationships which are no longer fixed. Different forms of sexual relationships are thus possible. This idea is confirmed by the absence of images in the film that correspond to Marlène/Nathalie's narration. This lack of representation on the screen creates the idea that the film concentrates on the women's inner selves. As Nathalie is a fictional character, both women create their own mental images of her. The camera's focus on both women, as Marlène speaks, creates a proximity between the mental images of both women. Both images are creations of the other emanating from the self. To borrow an observation made by Renate Günther in relation to Marguerite Duras's films, both women's identities merge into one, for the distinction between subject and object disappears.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Fontaine's film, *Nathalie...*, does not refer to an I-other dialectic relationship, but suggests rather the figure of reciprocity between identical beings. The Other cannot be different from the One, for they are both understood as humans. The idea of reversibility between the One and the Other emphasizes the questioning of a metaphysical duality to return to a phenomenological concept of being<sup>10</sup>. As any categories founded on a dominant hierarchical framework of binary oppositions are contested, individual subjects can be free of any oppressive social conventions. The film invites the reading of an individuality which is beyond any gender and sexual categories. In 'Paradigmes', Monique Wittig defines her political position to disrupt any binary categories which inevitably lead to a society, where 'there are instead as many sexes as there are individuals'.<sup>11</sup> The person's identity no longer corresponds to its gender or sex, but to an individual creation. It is this idea of an individual creation devoid of any sexual or gender categorizations which is referred to in the film. As the notion of difference is erased, the dominant dynamic process of desire generated by the film is contested. The fixity of this process is replaced by a more fluid structure expressed by the concept of being. Indeed, the concept of being reaches an absolute level of abstraction by supplanting the binary reasoning of the dominant enunciative apparatus. The concept of

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<sup>9</sup> Renate Günther, *Marguerite Duras* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.131.

<sup>10</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'Invisible* (Paris : Gallimard, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> Monique Wittig, 'Paradigmes', in *La Pensée Straight* (Paris : Balland, 2001), pp. 107-8 (my translation).

plurality or diversity is supported by the insistent use of the mirror image. The metaphor of the mirror is used instead of the dialectic. The mirror image therefore suggests here the figure of reciprocity between individuals no longer confined by any binary system. Catherine and Marlène reflect themselves in another person, Nathalie, who is their fellow being. In this context, they see themselves not in the way they are socially created, but the way they could create themselves. The image of the mirror thus refers to the idea of the formation of a being. As stated earlier, Catherine creates a new situation and identity for Marlène. Marlène becomes, in Catherine's words, a normal girl, Nathalie, who is studying to be an interpreter. The non-fixity of Nathalie's identity is highlighted by the fact that it develops and can therefore change as the narration progresses. The identity of Marlène as Nathalie is fluid, but Marlène's identity is also characterized as ambiguous. It is not clear if Marlène is her real name or if it is also a pseudonym used in her work. To Catherine's question: 'Is Marlène your real name?'<sup>12</sup>, Marlène remains silent. This ambiguity is also reflected in her appearance and her occupations. Marlène has two occupations: she is a prostitute and a beauty therapist. As a prostitute, she wears revealing clothes and heavy make-up while, as a beauty therapist, she changes to a conventional way of dressing and with no make-up. Marlène/Nathalie's personality counters any deterministic definition of identity and thus signifies plurality, diversity.

The reciprocal process of the dominant enunciative apparatus is expressed through the filmmaker's desire which is made to coincide with the spectator's own desire. *Nathalie...* subverts this reciprocal masculine position and articulates an alternative to the pervasive logic of masculine desire where new spectator-text relationships are generated. The film's concentration on the desiring relationship between two women challenges the female representation of woman as image in dominant male cinema. Moreover, the exchange of looks between two women challenges the classic masculine gaze in which the viewer is made to identify with the main male protagonist looking at women and which thus conditions the enunciative process. Instead, it focuses on the desiring relationship between two women. Because of *Nathalie...*'s focus on the relationship between two women, the viewer is made to identify with them rather than to look at them. The film's concern is thus focused on the desire to transcend distances or boundaries; this is fully expressed in the scenes where Marlène/Nathalie narrates an imaginary scenario to Catherine. During Marlène/Nathalie's narration, images are missing. Instead of seeing a representation of Nathalie and Bernard's

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<sup>12</sup> 'Est-ce que Marlène est votre vrai prénom?'

repeated encounters, the audience is faced with images of Marlène/Nathalie telling 'her-story' to the listening Catherine. Whereas in dominant cinema the primacy is accorded to the image and the gaze, in *Nathalie...* the primacy is given to the voice and to a visualization in both female protagonists's minds. A representation of Nathalie never appears on the screen. The film's reliance on the voice instead of the vision has the effect of questioning the hierarchical oppositions that underpin dominant cinema. The auditory experience in *Nathalie...* contrasts with the visual experience in conventional cinema, and serves to accentuate the sense of fusion between the protagonists and the audience. Because of Fontaine's non-imposition of images on her audience, the audience is able, in a similar way to the female protagonists on the screen, to project its own stories, thoughts and fantasies on the bare outline offered. The absence of images corresponding to the story being told thus facilitates the engagement of the spectator's imagination. Different visual techniques, such as the difference between the filmic image and the voice as it tells another story, as well as the use of the voice-over, show the artificial nature of cinema, but more importantly, create a feeling of dislocation within the spectator's identity. Contrary to the dominant enunciative apparatus which creates a sense of unification between the film-text and the viewer, this unification is shattered in *Nathalie...* A split between image and voice marks the spectator's relation to the film-text. The unity and cohesion of the spectator's identity is thus dislocated. Disunity is explicitly represented in the scene where Catherine and Marlène/Nathalie are in a bar and Catherine starts describing her husband. There is a desynchronization between Catherine's voice-over talking about her husband and an image of Marlène/Nathalie walking in the street towards the bar where Bernard is waiting.

This fragmentation of identity is enhanced by a recurrent visual technique: the mechanism of the mirror. At the beginning of the film, Fontaine relies on the image of the mirror to highlight a physical distance between Bernard and Catherine, persistently showing a reflection of their mirror images. This double image of each protagonist on the screen and of their reflection on the mirror screen creates a similar division within the spectator's own identity. The coherent self is dislocated in favour of the embodiment of a diversity of identities. The destruction of the self-contained individual in the film signifies a disruption of the principle of dichotomy between the self and the other, the subject and the object. As the conventional positions assigned to men and women in mainstream cinema are subverted, the viewers of this film are left without any marked position. Instead, they are supposed to share Catherine and Marlène/Nathalie's ambiguous position as neither women nor feminine, as neither men nor masculine. By emptying her characters of their individual identities, Fontaine

enables her audience to engage with the film's protagonists and to allow their own thoughts, stories, and fantasies to take shape. These two individual beings invite any audience to take an introspective position in order to achieve the creation of their own being and to conceive their own relationship to the film. Just as the film suggests the breakdown of any social categories or boundaries, the audience addressed is unspecified. For the notion of individual subject entails a diversity of identities and a plurality of sexual relationships.

*Nathalie...*'s exploration of infidelity in couples is a familiar topic in mainstream cinema, but it is also a theme that Fontaine tackles with a quite different approach. Moreover, this article has attempted to show that the subject-matter of this film serves only as a background against which the cinematic apparatus itself is challenged. The relationships between couples are not Fontaine's main concern; rather, the film's main interest lies in the restoration of the marks of cinematic enunciation eluded in popular mainstream cinema. Fontaine foregrounds sexual difference in the enunciative relay as she focuses on Marlène/Nathalie's sexual fantasies initiated by Catherine. The disjointed narrative structure, as well as the film's reliance on the female voice and hence subjectivity, highlight Fontaine's interest in the deconstruction of the functioning of mainstream cinema and her desire to contravene feminist concerns expressed, among other, by Rollet and Tarr: 'French cinema is certainly dominated by scenarios which privilege the male as agent of the narrative and the gaze (and thus address a male-identified spectator)' (p. 82). By concentrating on female desire, the film challenges the representation of women as displayed for the combined gaze of the male protagonist in the narrative and the male spectator in the audience. However, Fontaine decides not to redefine cinematic norms from a female perspective, but implies, rather, a reference to the enunciator in terms of an individual subject's desire.

*Nathalie...* is also a notable film in the sense that it not only challenges and dismantles the hierarchical oppositions and divisions underpinning the enunciative apparatus in mainstream cinema, but it also does so in the context of a mainstream film. Fontaine's textual concern with crossing social and sexual boundaries can be interpreted in a broader context and seen also as a cinematic concern. It thus recognises the changing social, cultural and sexual identities of individuals. For until recently, challenging the mechanisms of mainstream cinema has been possible only within avant-garde films. Fontaine is one of the few contemporary French women directors who follow, and carry on, the work of earlier avant-garde women filmmakers such as Germaine Dulac. Like her earlier counterparts, she reveals and challenges the conventional enunciative apparatus but distinguishes herself by subverting it in a mainstream context. She thus succeeds in crossing cinematic boundaries. This echoes a

contemporary cinematic interest in overcoming differences between avant-garde and mainstream films. Moreover, by reaching a wider audience, this film could have a more powerful impact; it could also encourage the making of films which undermine and thus offer alternatives to the pervasive masculine logic.

Fontaine's cinematic style highlights a different approach to undermining cinema's reliance on a depiction of sexual difference in which a woman's presence constantly signifies male fantasy/desire. Fontaine's latest film, *Nathalie...*, has thus proven the validity of Mayne's remark that one of the key questions that women filmmakers should address in their films is the division between subject and object: 'Given the extent to which contemporary film theory has defined "the subject" as fully component with patriarchal male authority, an obvious task for feminist theorists of the cinema has been to rearticulate absolute division of subject and object.' (p. 19). Fontaine leads the way among women filmmakers to show that, by tackling the subject-object dichotomy, the logic of masculine desire that is central to classical cinema can be destabilized, thus opening up the way towards an alternative structure.

I will conclude by highlighting the wave of radicalism that can be seen in contemporary women filmmakers in France, initiated by Catherine Breillat in the late 1990s with her film *Romance* (1999). Breillat's interest in explicit images of sex has crossed the boundaries between art and pornographic films. In the same way, Fontaine's radicalism emerges in her decision to look at the sexuality of a conventional middle-aged woman, at the relationship between two women of different age and social background, and to transgress cinematic style in a mainstream context. Fontaine expresses her radicalism in a different way to her counterpart, Breillat. She expresses her radical position, not in explicit and crude sex scenes, but rather in the total absence of this kind of representation. However, visual or aural representations of sexual acts can be seen as forming part of a broader cinematographic move specific to contemporary French women filmmakers. In a recent article, 'Contemporary French Women Filmmakers', Emma Wilson highlights the 'strong position' of women directors within contemporary French cinema and urges scholars to take stock of women directors' strategic specificity in the film industry. Drawing on the latest studies of authors such as René Prédal and Françoise Audé, Wilson identifies these specificities regarding the subject matter women tackle as well as the 'changes women have effected' in cinema;<sup>13</sup> citing

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<sup>13</sup> Emma Wilson, 'Etat Présent. Contemporary French Women Filmmakers', in *French Studies*, Vol.LIX, N°2 (2005), 217-223, p. 219. See also René Prédal, *Les Enfants de la liberté : le jeune cinéma des années 90* (Paris: Seuil, 1997).

Audé, ‘elles ont déplacé et élargi les limites’.<sup>14</sup> Tackling divisions or boundaries, as recognized by Mayne, and as found in visual and aural representations of sexual acts in Breillat’s films and Fontaine’s *Nathalie...*, is thus specific to women’s filmmaking. However, Wilson warns against an essentialist reading of these specificities in the work of women directors and stresses that they are not to be accounted for on the grounds of inherent gender differences, but should be seen as strategies to alternative modes of representation or structure: ‘To say that there is a specificity to women’s filmmaking in France may be to say that women have known a different relation to the industry and that they have produced that specificity strategically, lucidly, creatively, in a bid to make the industry begin to differ internally.’ (p. 223).

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#### **FILMOGRAPHY**

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<sup>14</sup> Françoise Audé, *Cinéma d’elles: 1981-2001* (Lausanne, L’Age d’Homme, 2002), p.10 (‘They have shifted and pushed back the boundaries’).