"If I were a girl—and I am not": Cross-dressing in Alain Berliner's "Ma vie en rose" and Jean Renoir's "La Grande Illusion"

Author(s): Keith Reader

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"If I were a girl—and I am ~~not~~": Cross-dressing in Alain Berliner's *Ma vie en rose* and Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*

Keith Reader

"Between the sexes, in the no man's land between straightforward homosexual or heterosexual preference, is the theatre of mobile desire."[1]

CRITICAL ATTENTION has recently been much focused on the gender and wider societal implications of cross-dressing. For Marjorie Garber in *Vested Interests* this perhaps frivolous-seeming activity is a touchstone for all manner of cultural insecurities and anxieties, calling into question as it does the binary forms in which notions of identity have habitually been couched. That questioning is of course a leitmotif of deconstructive thought and queer theory, one which Jacques Derrida's interrogation of the supposed primacy of speech over writing and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's exploration of "the instability of the supposed oppositions that structure an experience of the 'self'"[2] in their very different ways go to exemplify. It is in this context that we may understand Garber's assertion that the theme of cross-dressing represents "an undertheorized recognition of the necessary critique of binary thinking."[3] She describes the transvestite as the "uncanny supplement that marks the place of desire" (Garber 28)—a conjugation of terms drawn from Sigmund Freud, Derrida and Jacques Lacan, which in different ways call into question the binary, "either-or" view of identity dominant in Western culture. Cross-dressing for Garber does not theorize this questioning so much as in a quite literal sense act it out, in which respect it is perhaps the supreme example of the notion of gender as performance so influential in current thinking, largely thanks to the work of Judith Butler. It also harks back—as Butler implicitly does—to the concept of the carnival articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, "[a]ll the images of carnival are dualistic,"[4] but this dualism is subject to continual inversion and reversal, and the ambivalent laughter it induces "embraces both poles of change, . . . deals with the very process of change, with *crisis* itself" (Bakhtin 127).

If the laughter provoked by cross-dressing manifests a crisis of identity, its affinities with the Bakhtinian carnival are plain. The term "crisis of identity" is to be understood in a twofold sense—a crisis surrounding the gendered identity of the cross-dressed individual and a crisis that calls into question the

notion of identity itself. That notion is likewise called into question by Butler, for whom "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."[5] Bakhtin and Butler further have in common that their work is often subject to a widespread, and strikingly similar, misunderstanding—what I might call the voluntarist fallacy. This consists in implying that gendered identities (for Butler) and socially defined identities of virtually any kind (for Bakhtin) can be put on and discarded—like, precisely, garments—at will. A close reading of their texts will reveal the erroneousness, however comforting, of such a view. Alex Hughes emphasizes that for Butler "[g]ender performances . . . are expressive of constraint"[6]—a constraint underpinned by a normalizing, heteropolarized system. This is not to say, however, that drag merely goes to reinforce the polarity it appears to challenge, for at the same time as being "a practice that somehow idealizes dominant heterosexuality and its norms" (Hughes 145) it also challenges and subverts those norms from within, performing "neither an efficacious insurrection nor a painful resubordination, but an unstable coexistence of both."[7] That instability is surely what determines the uneasy laughter with which drag performances are generally greeted—a laughter which Garber's otherwise comprehensive and sophisticated study, curiously, all but ignores. The systemic constraints of the Bakhtinian carnival are plainer still to see, for in all its manifestations it is necessarily, if not precisely, limited in time. Any slave who had sought to prolong the role-reversal of the Roman saturnalia into the following day would have found out the hard way that that was not a viable strategy. The carnival in this respect might indeed be seen as an early example of what Herbert Marcuse was to call "repressive tolerance,"[8] working to contain the subversive potential of the energies it unleashed.

Drag, like the carnival, like any performance of gender for Butler, thus simultaneously asserts and denies the dominance of bipolar gendered categories. According to Garber, the male transvestite's "erotic pleasure comes from the 'reassurance' of being a phallic woman, of having a penis and dressing in women's clothes" (Garber 3)—the classic case of having one's cock and eating it. That "reassurance" takes, however, very different forms depending on the context and situation in which this or that act of cross-dressing takes place, and I want now to interrogate two French films, separated by precisely 60 years, in which males don female clothing in very different circumstances and for very different reasons, obtaining very different types of reassurance in the process. Alain Berliner's *Ma vie en rose* (1997) is, along with Bertrand Blier's *Tenue de soirée* (1986), the best-known film in French to

have addressed the theme of cross-dressing, clearly assimilated by Berliner to transsexuality.

Men also dress as women in one powerful and memorable sequence from Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* (1937)—a hypercanonical French film if ever there were, and voluminously written about in consequence, yet with only very infrequent analysis of the significance of its cross-dressing sequence. It may be worth pausing to look at the reasons for this relative critical silence, since these are themselves, I believe, symptomatic of the wider cultural unease that cross-dressing at once addresses and arouses.

The carnival has become a key trope of the post-modern because it enacts the undoing of binary oppositions—most importantly perhaps that between high and low, represented in the carnival by master and servant and in the post-modern by high ("respectable") and popular culture. Recent theoretical attention to cross-dressing fairly obviously stems from developments in gender and queer theory, but can equally well be understood as part of a wider focus on popular culture and its manifestations. Annette Kuhn had opined, a few years before Garber, that "cross-dressing films have not been considered worthy of serious critical attention precisely because of their popularity and their particular appeal to a despised section of the population."[9] This is obviously less true now than it was, but the critical focus has overwhelmingly been on popular rather than canonical works, exemplified by Garber's analyses of Sydney Pollack's *Tootsie* (1982) and Barbra Streisand's *Yentl* (1983). Recent work on the gender ambiguities of Marcel Carné's films, following on Edward Baron Turk's *Child of Paradise*,[10] constitutes one major exception, particularly in reference to Arletty/Dominique's sexual ambiguity—hence, possible cross-dressing—in *Les Visiteurs du soir* (1942).[11] Yet the extraordinarily powerful sequence in *La Grande Illusion* in which the imprisoned French officers dress up as women for the—in every sense—camp concert party has tended to be treated simply as an exemplar of Renoir's fascination with the theatrical, receiving, as I have said, little specifically gendered analysis. The major exceptions to this are to be found in the work of Celia Britton and Martin O'Shaughnessy.[12] The film's perceived humanist stance and lauding of the universal as against the specific—notably of fraternity against nationalism—would seem to have contributed to an under-recognition of this sequence, which imbues the camera's gaze with an ambiguous intensity of desire. Perhaps part of what I am doing here is to begin an overdue queering of Renoir's work, which certainly affords ample scope for it.

The different deployment of cross-dressing in *Ma vie en rose* and *La Grande Illusion* is well suggested by prominent Judith Butler scholar and part-

time Hollywood actor Jack Lemmon in his *Some Like It Hot* (1959) role for Billy Wilder as Gerry passing for Daphne, when s/he counsels Marilyn Monroe's Sugar Kane: "If I were a girl—and I am—I'd watch my step." The gender pirouette of the first two clauses distils almost perfectly, though—as we know from the film's ending—nobody's perfect, the simultaneous recognition and disavowal of sexual difference that often quite literally underpins the transvestite project (watching his/her step, of course, is also what the male-to-female transvestite who wishes to pass has above all else to do). Schematically, it is possible to say that *Ma vie en rose*'s Ludovic, generally known as Ludo (played by Georges du Fresne), spends the film saying "If I were a girl—and I am," whereas the cross-dressing captives in *La Grande Illusion* are saying during their brief sojourn in drag "If we were girls—and we are not." *Ma vie en rose* is, as Lucille Cairns has said, "a film about gender, about the transgression of a quasi-sacred equation of biological sex—male or female—with one, and only one, of the two culturally-sanctioned gender identities: masculinity and femininity."[13] More specifically, it interrogates trans-gender—"[t]he feeling that one's sexual genitalia and socially-assigned gender do not correspond to one's inner sense of gender" (Cairns 126). Ludo's dressing as and desire later to become a girl is what used to be called an existential statement, something that could not be further from the concerns of the pseudo-gynaeceum into which the frustrated heterosexual world of *La Grande Illusion* is temporarily turned. The contrast between the two films illustrates what Garber calls the "complex interplay, slippage, and parodic recontextualization of gender markers and gender boundaries" (Garber 134) which renders any unitary reading of transvestism and what it acts out problematic.

Dorothy Sayers had her fictional detective Lord Peter Wimsey say, almost 70 years before *Ma vie en rose*:

> [. . .] in France, every male child is brought up to use masculine adjectives about himself. He says: Que je suis beau! But a little girl has it rammed home to her that she is female. She must say: Que je suis belle! It must make it beastly hard to be a female impersonator.[14]

How hard, Ludo's vicissitudes and those of his family in *Ma vie en rose* are to make all too clear. The nuclear Fabre family—mother, father and four children—live in a spick-and-span suburb (a far cry from the latterly more familiar type of *banlieue* exemplified by Mathieu Kassovitz's 1995 *La Haine*), whose smug norms are thrown into confusion by Ludo's appearance dressed as a girl at the family's house-warming party. Ludo's grandmother—something of a *soixante-huitarde*, less bound by convention than the rest of his family—echoes Lord Peter Wimsey by taking her grandson to task for

saying that he wanted to look "belle," pointing out that "beau" is the appropriate adjective. Ludo has, however, achieved the supposed goal of all transvestites by passing at (so far as we know) his first attempt—except of course for his own family, who neutralize that passing by passing it off for public consumption as a joke before their scandalized confrontation with Ludo in private. Ludo is determined to marry his friend Jérôme, son of his father's boss, "quand je ne serai plus un garçon"—at once an indication of his belief in gender mutability and a somewhat sanguine cleaving to the "voluntarist fallacy" I evoked earlier in discussing Bakhtin and Butler. The happy couple's mock marriage ceremony causes further scandal when Ludo innocently borrows a dress that had belonged to Jérôme's sister, who died tragically young. Jérôme's mother faints with shock at this—not surprisingly, given that what she has stumbled upon is an uncanny (in the Freudian sense) resurrection of her dead daughter in a clearly incestuous context. Ludo's transvestism is stirring up cultural anxieties—of family and, through his father's work relation to Jérôme's, class—at an unnerving rate.

Ludo insists on urinating seated, explaining: "Je suis un garçon-fille," before asking his elder sister Zoe whether like her he will menstruate one day. Later he is to sit up in bed, clutching an aching stomach, and cry triumphantly: "J'ai les règles!"—more would-be voluntarism in action. I am aware of no theoretical treatment of, and precious few allusions to, a possible male envy of menstruation, which is emphatically not to say that no such phenomenon exists. Michel Houellebecq—scarcely an aficionado of cross-dressing, but a writer who knows all too well what male self-abjection is about—has the unnamed hero ("Notre héros") of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, during a nervous breakdown, hurl a can of peas into his bathroom mirror, and reflect as he picks up the shards: "... je commence à saigner. Ça me fait bien plaisir. C'est exactement ce que je voulais."[15] Horror at the sight of blood, especially one's own, is a common male emotion, which may suggest that the *jouissance* at the actual or possible loss of blood articulated in very different ways by Houellebecq and Berliner evokes—explicitly for Ludo, implicitly for "Notre héros"—a desire to be rid of one's own maleness.

Ludo's third appearance in feminine guise occurs in the one space where cross-dressing has traditionally been socially sanctioned—on the stage. Even here he has to steal his "own" femininity, through locking Sophie in the toilet and usurping her role as Snow White opposite Jérôme in the school play. He is then permitted, thanks to his grandmother's intervention, to appear "as a girl"—in point of fact wearing a kilt—at a birthday party, but this provokes the ire of his father's boss and leads directly to his father's dismissal. Homo-

phobic graffiti are written on the family's garage door—an equation of transsexuality with homosexuality that, as Cairns points out, has no basis in reality and serves to indicate the benightedness of the suburban community. His locks are shorn as if he were a collaborator, and an unhappy if not tragic denouement is averted only when the family move to Clermont-Ferrand—ironically close to Vichy, as if to reinforce the collaborationist parallel. Here Ludo encounters not one, but two figures who between them provide the space for a happy ending—Christine alias "Chris," whose desire is to be a boy, and in the very final shot his recurrent fantasy ideal Pam, half of the French equivalent (Pam and Ben) of Barbie and Ken. Pam is frequently seen in flight, like Peter Pan who for Garber is a major icon of the cross-dressing world, and thus may seem to encapsulate the "voluntarist fallacy" of gender, with its comforting but dubious implication that it is possible to soar free from the trappings of biology and society. Yet this is counterbalanced by what Kate Ince calls "the very excessive character of Pam's femininity"[16]—never more than in the final shot where she winks broadly at the audience. This evokes Joan Riviere's view of womanliness as a masquerade, in an early (1929) but still immensely influential article.[17] Stephen Heath distils the paradox in Riviere's analysis in asserting that "[d]isguising herself as a castrated woman, the woman represents man's desire and finds her identity as, precisely, woman—genuine womanliness and the masquerade are the same thing."[18] This has clear affinities with Garber's already quoted view of the transvestite's erotic pleasure as residing in "the 'reassurance' of being a phallic woman, of having a penis and dressing in women's clothes." If genuine womanliness and the masquerade are the same thing, then so too are "fake" womanliness and the masquerade, so that all dressing is in a sense cross-dressing and the carnival can never truly be said to be over. Pam's concluding wink of connivance thus suggests that, however cruel Ludo's disillusionment with the voluntarist fallacy may have been, it has given him an understanding of the liability and ultimate arbitrariness of gender which may—with "Chris" and who knows who else?—stand him in good stead, perhaps allaying Olivier Séguret's anxieties about his future as a social subject ("sera-t-il homo planqué, hétéro-folle, gay dans le vent, travesti, transsexuel, ou 'guéri'?!")[19] by absolving him of the necessity to make a once-for-all choice.

Once-for-all choices, for the prisoners in *La Grande Illusion*, belong in a world of which they can only dream. They inhabit what might be described as a dystopian version of the carnival—a universe in which the normal boundaries of social class and convention (at least among themselves) are perforce waived, however much the captives might wish to return to them. Within that

universe the concert party represents an enclave of carnival in its more positive sense; the prisoners set the agenda, giving a performance of their choosing for their guards, in a manner which might evoke Bakhtin's concept of the "joyful hell" with its "carnivalistic logic of 'a world upside down'"(Bakhtin 133). That carnivalistic logic, already limited in time to the duration of the concert party, is further cut short by the announcement that the French have recaptured the fort of Douaumont. As the prisoners remove their wigs and sing the Marseillaise, they move briefly into a liminal realm between that of carnival and the "real world" outside—prisoners still but still in command, now in a sense off-stage as well as on, until the hierarchy of the camp reasserts itself through the interruption of their celebrations and Lieutenant Maréchal's banishment to solitary confinement.

The Bakhtinian carnival is of course not an explicitly gendered phenomenon, though the "grotesque body" which forms such an important part of it is arguably "grotesque" at least in part because of its implied challenge to gendered norms of the handsome and the beautiful. These norms are challenged too when we see the prisoners in their women's outfits—most of them less than convincing, though Maisonneuve, as Celia Britton points out, "looks disturbingly like a woman" (Britton 41). As his fellow-captives look at him in his woman's outfit, the screenplay evokes: "Que de souvenirs réveillés! Que d'espoirs ranimés!"[20] While homosociality in the film is most marked in the relationship between the aristocrats Captain von Rauffenstein and Captain de Boieldieu (who would appear to have had at least one mistress in common), homoeroticism is more likely to be found, as the previous quotation suggests, in some of the preparations for the concert party. When L'acteur hears that women are now wearing their hair short, he roguishly opines that "[o]n doit se figurer qu'on couche avec un garçon!" (Renoir 45)—the theatricality of gender given jocular, but by no means facetious, expression, as in the music-halls that are his professional habitat in "civvy street." Von Rauffenstein, interviewing Maréchal after the prisoners have been transferred to another camp, reads out a number of escape attempts from his record, disguised successively as a chimney-sweep, a German soldier and a woman. The "great illusion" of the film's title is generally taken to refer to the view that national loyalties, as classically in wartime, are more important than those of class; but gender as much as class or nation is what Benedict Anderson would call an "imagined community,"[21] never more so in this film than in the shared and recognized illusoriness of the concert party. Britton recognizes this in saying that "[t]he drag show is the most obvious visual correlate to the theme of illusion" (Britton 41). Maréchal's consecutive attempts to pass as a member of a

different social class (in civilian life he is an engineer), a different nationality and a different gender reinforce the isomorphy of these categories and the necessary illusion(s)—necessary in the sense in which ideology is necessary for Louis Althusser—on which they are all grounded.

The illusion of national solidarity usurps that of gender when the recapture of Douaumont is announced. It might indeed be more appropriate to speak of trans-national solidarity, for the singing of the Marseillaise is led by five English prisoners ("Les 'girls' anglaises, enlevant leur perruque, sont les premiers à chanter avec leur accent très particulier"—Renoir 56). To this trans-nationality corresponds a vision of trans-genderedness, in the shape of unequivocally male heads atop bodies dressed in women's clothing. Martin O'Shaughnessy's assertion that "[i]t is as if the film cannot find a middle path between complete unmanning and a bellicose masculinity"[22] is, however fleetingly, called into question, or at least placed in suspense, in this moment of transition between genders. To quote O'Shaughnessy:

> Le travestisme qui avait produit un silence angoissé quand il s'était avéré qu'un homme sans uniforme, vêtu comme une femme, pouvait inspirer du désir chez ses camarades est récupéré par un geste viril et nationaliste de défi quand les hommes se mettent à chanter La Marseillaise sous les yeux des Allemands lorsqu'ils apprennent que Douaumont a été capturé par les Français.[23]

What Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms "the extremely varied kinds of importance of national questions in sexual politics" (147) finds a striking articulation here, in a text not generally thought of until recently as calling gender polarities into question. It might be more appropriate, given the greater importance of nationality in the film's overall diegesis, to speak of "the extremely varied kinds of importance of sexual questions in national politics"—most obviously towards the end of the film, when having made his escape with Lieutenant Rosenthal, Maréchal meets and falls in love with the German war widow Else, but most complexly and ambiguously at work in the concert party scene, for the reasons I have suggested.

That ambiguity extends even to what I have implied is the scene's preemptive reformulation of Lemmon and Billy Wilder: "If I were a girl—and I am not." Who is the "I" here? Can all the cross-dressed males be deemed to be speaking with one voice? What, in this context, does "speaking" mean? If it includes body language—and Lemmon/Wilder's warning "I'd watch my step" clearly implies that it does—then what is said becomes a good deal less simple. When "the camera tracks slowly back to pin the eroticised male in the centre of the room and highlight the ambivalence of the gaze cast upon him" (O'Shaughnessy 2000: 131), it is difficult not to suspect that that gaze is

"saying," or at least hinting, "If you were a girl—and for us at this moment you are." The pinning of the eroticized male to which O'Shaughnessy refers can thus be seen as his (her?) temporary, and conceivably forcible, attribution to a gender role which he has assumed in jest, but which, as befits carnival, goes beyond the merely flippant.

Forcible attribution to the "wrong" gender role recurs in the scene already alluded to when von Rauffenstein is reading out the litany of Maréchal's escape attempts. He finds Maréchal's disguising himself as a woman highly amusing, to which Maréchal responds: "... ce qui est beaucoup moins drôle, mon Commandant, c'est qu'un sous-officier m'a réellement pris pour une femme ... et je n'aime pas du tout ça!" (Renoir 68). This remark draws much force from the fact that Maréchal is played by Jean Gabin, the supreme incarnation of working-class virility in the French cinema of the 1930s. That virility is, as Ginette Vincendeau has admirably shown, by no means unequivocal ("son mythe continue d'incorporer le masculin et le féminin")[24]—something perhaps suggested *a contrario* by the vehemence of Maréchal's protestation to von Rauffenstein. Gabin's implied utterance "If I were a girl—and you'd better have a good dentist if you think I am" serves here perhaps to counterbalance, though emphatically not to eliminate, the gender ambiguities of the concert party scene, thereby preparing the way for the heterosexual couple that provides, tentatively, one of the film's narrative resolutions.

Between a young boy's voluntaristic clarity about his gender identity in the middle-class suburbs of the late 1990s and the "joyful hell" of a First World War prison camp, the ambivalent messages emitted by male-to-female cross-dressing become plain. For both Berliner and Renoir, gender and performance interact and define each other in complex and manifold ways, in the process calling upon but at the same time calling into question the ontological foundations of sexed identity.[25] The battle—literally in *La Grande Illusion*, metaphorically in *Ma vie en rose*—goes on, by turns stimulating, frustrating and entertaining participants and audiences alike.

Glasgow University

Notes

1. Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), 183-84.
2. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 12.
3. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 10-11.
4. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), 126.

5. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 25.
6. Alex Hughes, *Heterographies: Sexual Difference in French Autobiography* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 137.
7. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 137.
8. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
9. Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1985), 49.
10. Edward Baron Turk, *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989).
11. See Keith Reader, "'Mon cul est intersexuel?' Arletty's Performance of Gender," in *Gender in French Cinema*, eds. Alex Hughes and James Williams (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 63-76.
12. See Celia Britton, "Semantic Structure in Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*," in *Film Form* 1.1 (1976), 35-51, and Martin O'Shaughnessy, "Nation, History and Gender in the Films of Jean Renoir," in *France in Focus: Film and National Identity*, eds. Elizabeth Ezra and Sue Harris (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 127-41.
13. Lucille Cairns, "Gender Trouble in *Ma vie en rose*," in *France on Film: Reflections on Popular French Cinema*, ed. Lucy Mazdon (London: Wallflower Press, 2001), 121.
14. Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Entertaining Episode of the Article in Question," in *Lord Peter Views The Body* (New York: Avon Books, 1969/1928), 34.
15. Michel Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Paris: J'ai Lu, 1994), 128.
16. Kate Ince, "Fantasy and the French Family: Queer Childhood, Transvestism and the Family as Institution in Alain Berliner's *Ma vie en rose* and Josiane Balasko's *Gazon maudit*," unpublished conference paper.
17. Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," in *Formations of Fantasy*, eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), 35-44.
18. Stephen Heath, "Joan Riviere and the Masquerade," in *Formations of Fantasy*, eds. Burgin et al. 45-61: 52.
19. Olivier Séguret, "Ludovic, sept ans et toutes ses robes," in *Libération* 22 (May 1997): http://www.liberation.fr/cannes97/crireal0512a.html.
20. Jean Renoir, *La Grande Illusion* (Paris: Seuil/Avant-Scène, 1971), 47.
21. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).
22. Martin O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000), 131.
23. Martin O'Shaughnessy, "De la Révolution aux trente années glorieuses, ou comment raconter l'histoire de la France au masculin," *Iris* 28 (1998): 41.
24. Ginette Vincendeau, "Un homme," in Claude Gauteur and Ginette Vincendeau, *Jean Gabin: anatomie d'un mythe* (Paris: Nathan, 1993), 196.
25. Sexual preference, as already suggested, is a different matter altogether.