

# A "Girlboy's" Own Story: Non-Masculine Narrativity In *Ma Vie en Rose*

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## I. Anti-Narrative "Girlboys"

**A**lain Berliner's film *Ma Vie en Rose* [*My Life in Pink*] (1997) puts at center screen an aggressively narrative-resistant protagonist: an effeminate, cross-dressing, boy-loving, girl-identified, pre-pubescent male. Seven-year-old Ludovic Fabre (Georges Du Fresne) lives a life that defies plotting.<sup>1</sup> Deflecting the social engagement required of basic storytelling, Ludo's most salient traits court narrative elimination rather than inclusion. His habitual cross-dressing, for example, registers to uncertain snickers and then nearly vanishes behind parental rage and medical intervention. Such markers of effeminacy as his choice of toys, cherished long hair, and emulation of hyper-feminine heroines only inspire tableaux of censorship and peer abuse; they seem never to chart the tale of a boy's evolving sensibility. Ludo's love of Jérôme (Julien Rivière), the

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boy next door and also the son of his father's boss, prompts professions of disbelief, dismissal—and even a full swoon—but it certainly enjoys no narrative space in which to develop its own plotline. Several years shy of sexual maturity, Ludo is presumed by all adult onlookers to be reparably diverted from the path of normative development. If a “girlboy” (Ludo's own term) has any story to tell, it would seem to be that of compulsory integration within recognizable narrative passages of heterosexual love and family.

Literary and film theory, psychological studies, (auto)biographical writing, and film typically elide gay and/or effeminate boys from narrative radar. When portrayed at all, these boys are self-censoring to the point of anti-narrativity, or they become unwitting antagonists in brief, violent warfare that ends either in their defeat or in their expulsion from the *mise-en-scène*. Neither scenario allows for a detailed unpacking of young non-masculine lives. Of necessity, therefore, Ludo's story employs tropes of silence, warfare, and expulsion, yet it also posits sustaining narrative structures little seen in tales of non-masculine childhood.<sup>2</sup> Berliner bases Ludo's characterological tenability on the boy's foregrounded spectatorship: his committed watching and remobilization of “feminine” performance detach even his parents from the prescribed gender rituals that comprise traditional narrative. Seduced into participation within “girlboy” fantasies, Pierre and Hanna belatedly recognize their son's subjective independence beyond correctional discourse. The deliberately hazy—indeed, archly unresolved—end of Berliner's film leaves a viewer with ample opportunity to speculate on the potential narrative flights of “girlboys” who have traditionally found very few unblocked avenues to public representation.

Feminist theorists of prose and cinema have long noted the thwarting of non-heterosexual and non-masculine subjects within Western narrative. Julie Abraham, for instance, details ways in which

[t]he heterosexual plot constructs heterosexuality . . . as the norm . . . by providing a basis for narratives into which the heterosexuality of subjects can disappear. When it is not the focus, heterosexuality remains the precondition for whatever is being addressed, whether that is the intricacies of particular relationships, adolescent angst, or adult ambition. (Abraham 1996, 3)

Without heterosexuality as their bedrock, Abraham implies, conventional narrative treatments of interpersonal relations, self-determination, and labor have no stable ground upon which to build. Non-heterosexual characters must, therefore, speak themselves into existence against the tacit “heterosexual plot” engulfing them. But what of characters who are psychologically or intellectually unprepared to declare any sexual affiliation? In Ken Corbett's cogent observation, “[h]omosexual boyhood as a conceptual category does not exist. . . . There has been virtually no effort to speak of the boyhood experience of homosexuals other than to characterize their youth as a disor-

dered and/or non-conforming realm from which it is hoped they will break free . . ." (1999, 108). Corbett is critiquing the cultural mandate that presumes children to be asexual or, at most specific, latently heterosexual. Boys whose behavior, however broadly, connotes or portends homosexuality have no story until puberty allows them both an active sexuality and a reasonably informed subject position from which to claim their orientation along with whatever traumas and triumphs it occasions.

By these specifications, Ludo's story is untellable. His affect clashes mightily against social narratives that deem tacit heterosexuality—even in children—a functional prerequisite. Yet while no character witnessing Ludo's tastes or activities presumes him to be currently heterosexual, and although Ludo proclaims his love for Jérôme openly, at seven he is not seen as making a definitive statement about his sexuality. This ambiguity constitutes his narrative entrée. Early in the film, trying to explain away Ludo's wish to look "pretty" in drag, Hanna shares her *Marie Claire* certainty that "until the age of 7, we all search for our identity." Too young to declare credibly that he is either homosexual or transsexual, Ludo is presumed innately heterosexual by default <sup>3</sup>—and thus cannot initially rise even to the basic narrative level of conflict.

Film theorist Teresa de Lauretis defines "the movement of narrative discourse" as that force which "specifies and even produces the masculine position as that of the mythical subject and the feminine position as mythical obstacle or, simply, the space in which movement occurs" (1984, 143). Following de Lauretis's theory, the non-masculine subject, be it female or non-masculine male, exists only to the extent it opposes a masculine character position. Unable to act, compelled to react only, it produces with the masculine subject a kind of gendered, sadomasochistic agon that, Laura Mulvey argues in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," informs the very essence of cinematic storytelling: "Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat . . ." (1975, 29).

In Ludo's narrative, the sadistic antagonist is less a masculine subject than a masculinist discourse that exists precisely to annihilate non-masculine boys. To be sure, adult and child sadists, who shear Ludo's hair and threaten his safety, crowd the story, but they don't quite determine the film's narrative thrust: Ludo is too young and too passive to engage in full-scale "battle." The sadism propelling *Ma Vie en Rose* is less literal than taxonomic, the brutal process by which, Pat Califia notes, "differently-gendered" subjects are divested of the voice that makes them subjects: "To be differently gendered is to live within a discourse where other people are always investigating you, describing you, and speaking for you; and putting as much distance as possible between the expert speaker and the deviant and therefore deficient sub-

ject" (1997, 2). The "expert's" words take on particular force when categorizing a boy whose behavior rivets the notice of everyone around him but who, paradoxically, cannot speak for himself. As David Plummer remarks, these children end up viciously spoken for rather than speaking: "[b]oys who don't observe boundaries [of gender codes] run a risk of becoming defined by their 'transgressions' . . ." (1999, 219). An individual "defined by [his] 'transgressions'" has little narrative existence outside the "normalizing gaze" that, Michel Foucault posits, exists "to qualify, to classify, and to punish" deviant subjects passing before its omnipresent stare (1977, 184). How compelling a story can any screenwriter create around the ritual sighting, punishment, or even well-intentioned "reform" of a resolutely deviant boy?

In writing *Ma Vie en Rose*, Berliner and screenwriter Chris Vander Stappen, whom Berliner describes as a lesbian living as a man, deliberately flirted with narrative impossibility. Rather than draw on Vander Stappen's own tomboy experience, the pair wished, in Berliner's account, "to dramatize the stronger taboo of a boy acting like a girl [rather] than vice-versa. A woman wearing trousers is not shocking anymore. But a little boy wearing a dress is" (Sherman 1998, N9). Tomboy Chris, the only child beside Jérôme who ever solicits Ludo's company, passes for a boy until her mother (Marine Jolivet) calls out the full name of "Christine." Comfortably androgynous, Chris can wear whatever she wants—as when she steals the "Three Musketeers" costume that Ludo dons for her birthday party—and play sling-shot games to her heart's content without fear of children's snickers or adult hysteria. Swimming in Chris's outsized princess dress, Ludo faces a wholly different reception.

In numerous films, adult male transvestism serves as both a source of surefire mainstream amusement and a semiotic smokescreen. In such movies as *La Cage aux Folles* (Molinaro, 1978), *Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliott, 1994), *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (Kidron, 1995), *Flawless* (Schumacher, 1999), *Never Again* (Schaeffer, 2002), and *Connie and Carla* (Rambeck 2004) colorful transvestism diverts attention from homosexuality that may be stated, but remains unpracticed, by protagonists. The silver screen is evidently too small to accommodate both size 14 pumps and gay romance. Gay-male romantic relationships have figured centrally in recent cinema—consider *Alive and Kicking* (Meckler, 1997), *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* (O'Haver, 1998), *I Think I Do* (Sloan, 1998), *Trick* (Fall, 1999), *The Broken Hearts Club* (Berlanti, 2000)—and even amorous gay teenagers have received multiplex due in such films as *Beautiful Thing* (Macdonald, 1996) and *Edge of Seventeen* (Moreton, 1998). However, none of these films stacks its narrative deck with the wild cards of transvestite or child protagonists, two groups who, receiving little discursive credibility, would not

strengthen the tenuous reception afforded gay relationships in popular representation. There is, therefore, no narrative precedent for a tiny drag queen who blithely insists that he will marry the unfazed boy next door.<sup>4</sup> Not only does Ludo sexualize clothing that, draped over a filmed male body, typically connotes asexuality; not only does he sexualize an undeveloped body that would not yet communicate, to a Western observer, in any carnal register; but he also receives enthusiastic reciprocation from his male object of desire. Cinema has never before seen the likes of Ludovic.<sup>5</sup>

Nor has gay film scholarship. The work of pioneering historians Parker Tyler, Vito Russo, Boze Hadleigh, Raymond Murray, David Ehrenstein, and William J. Mann<sup>6</sup> has been invaluable for demonstrating the symbiotic rise of cinema and homophobic language, and for illuminating the closets in which gay artists navigated the homophobia of an industry that vilified but deeply depended on their sensibilities. Building on this historical criticism, Steven Cohan, Ellis Hanson, Alexander Doty, Brett Farmer, Matthew Tinkcom, and Richard Dyer<sup>7</sup> have theorized gay lensings and receptions of the adult male body, thereby mapping valences of gay auteurship/spectatorship and widening the fields of gender and cinema studies. Yet Ludo and *Ma Vie en Rose* fall outside the parameters of gay representation proffered by these writers. As the film is the product of an avowedly straight-male director and lesbian screenwriter, Ludo does not come to audiences from closeted circumlocution. Nor does he, at seven, evoke the deliberate homoerotics of filming and watching that have occupied much recent gay scholarship. Not an object of camp, not a sexualized object of the gaze, not a witting contributor to identity politics, Ludo fits no better on the page than he does on the screen.<sup>8</sup>

When first declaring oneself “gay,” a speaker releases accumulated, generally fraught self-knowledge in a revelation of certain social consequence. Ludo is too young to have any such sense of personal disclosure and effect; in fact, far from determining through conscious declaration his own rhetorical status, he learns of it from reactions to his ingenuous expression. Ludo’s relationship to his sexuality, therefore, does not constitute recognizable coming-out narrative. As Chantal Nadeau argues, the film “is not about coming out; on the contrary, it ambiguously plays with the question of coming *in* as a queer child” (2000, 138). Nadeau’s phrase “coming *in*” is felicitous for its implication of the interiority and silence that generally contain youthful homosexual self-awareness, speech acts, and narrative possibility.

The literature on gay youth testifies to children’s early, necessarily silent, sense of their own difference from peers and family. From his wide professional contact with young gay subjects, psychologist Ritch C. Savin-Williams states that “the vast majority of the . . . youths [he] interviewed . . . attributed

to themselves an early sense that in some fundamental way they differed from other boys . . . [that they detected in themselves] how a boy should *not* act, think, and feel" (1998, 23, 27). Comparably, Robert E. Owens, Jr. has found that "[s]eventy percent or more of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents and adults report feeling different at an early age, often as early as four or five . . . Many sexual-minority youths state that before they even knew what the difference was they were convinced of its importance" (1998, 16). Gay boys' sense of self is thus often formed in opposition to, rather than identification with, other boys; any story they might tell or have told about them must generically be a tale of deviance—beginning with the tropes of difference-naming and enforced atonement. Ludo evinces awareness of his difference early in the film. When Hanna gently informs him that at seven he is "too old for [transvestite] dress-up," he grins and happily agrees to wash off his lipstick. Soon after, during Show and Tell, doll-toting Ludo faces classmates' laughter and registers bewilderment when his teacher (Anne Coesens) suggests that Ludo only wishes to "be like Ben," the "Ken" doll of his pair. Imitating Pam is Ludo's favorite pastime, but he quickly sees the impossibility of sharing his hobby when an authority figure dismisses Ludo's identification with Pam before he can speak it. His mere display of dolls in the classroom makes him the target of peer hostility. In no place can Ludo name his tastes, much less act on them.

The reaction of Ludo's peers to his effeminate behavior is typical among children and tends to obliterate young, non-masculine expression and storytelling. Psychologist William Pollack avers that boys who display "feminine" traits "are usually greeted not with empathy but with ridicule, with taunts and threats that shame them for their failure to act and feel in stereotypically 'masculine' ways" (1998, 24). In their shame, psychologists suggest, non-masculine boys typically lapse into silence, withholding substantial pain and self-doubt. Savin-Williams comments that his subjects' "most common responses" to the "almost universal harassment they received from their peers" were "to ignore, withdraw, or cry" (1998, 32, 30)—none of which repeated reactions can generate narrative. In large measure, the boys' silence is a survival technique, one initiated on the fraught understanding that they "cannot let . . . feelings show [or] flinch for fear of ending up humiliated, seriously injured, or dead" (Pollack 2000, 107). Appropriately, psychoanalyst Domenico Di Ceglie posits "breaking the cycle of secrecy" as one of his ten "primary therapeutic aims" for children of atypical gender affect on the theory that this secrecy promotes the devastating equation of a boy's natural expression with shame, crippling child and family alike (1998, 187).

As dramatized in *Ma Vie en Rose*, non-masculine boyhood first manifests narratively through tropes of apocalyptic family crisis. Homophobia, in

Plummer's analysis, has imbued "homosexuality with symbolic significance as the antithesis of . . . family and individual continuity" (1999, 27). To the extent that a non-masculine boy connotes homosexuality and thus dangerous foreignness within the family,<sup>9</sup> the family's own stories become restricted to certain narrative structures: chaos, battle, halting resolution. How can the family maintain historical or narrative "continuity" until the foreign element is either "corrected," expelled, or accepted? Savin-Williams, though arguing that 21st-century parents are more accepting than their predecessors of gay children, excoriates current "popular literature [for] promot[ing] the view that no task is . . . riskier for family relationships than the disclosure of same-sex desires by children to family members," even as he notes in his counseling sessions an ultimately "positive response" from mothers to gay children (2001, 24, 23). These responses, however, are hardly guaranteed.

More typical may be psychologist Kenneth J. Zucker and psychiatrist Susan J. Bradley's definitely worded postulate that ". . . most parents, not surprisingly, prefer that their children do not develop a homosexual orientation . . ." Zucker and Bradley seek to "block" homosexuality (or transsexualism) in young patients on the contention that "a homosexual lifestyle in a basically unaccepting culture simply creates unnecessary social difficulties" (1995, 269). Zucker and Bradley sugarcoat their pathologizing of non-masculine children with the consolation that if a boy's homosexuality is arrested in time, he will be able to participate in social structures that might otherwise reject him and cut off his life-story before it properly begins. This notion of homosexuality as an acquired social affront, rather than as a genetic predisposition, casts the gay or proto-gay child as a willful destroyer of family image and narrative. Describing his own coming-out, teenager Simeon Maraspinì articulates in the film *Gay Youth* the legendary stakes implicit in a gay child's self-disclosure: "With being gay, everything that I wanted to be, everything that my parents wanted me to be, just was shot. It was . . . all over because the foundation was destroyed, the heterosexual family was destroyed, and I didn't think I had anything to look forward to" (1992). What can be the next step in a story whose primal presumptions of procreation, continuity, and normativity have been arrested? On what terms can any of the players move forward?

With family so predominant an element in the narrative of most small children, the story of an effeminate boy must detail first not the subject's own self-awareness, but the reactions he receives. Particularly in the story of a child Ludo's age, family reaction inevitably supplants first-person narrative. Indeed, behaviors typical of Ludo's extreme youth elicit family outrage far more than a teenager's coming out, which, as a single speech act, literally vanishes on utterance and thus may be contained within family walls.

Psychotherapist Peter Wilson argues that whatever the individual distinctions among small children with “gender identity problems,” they share the “strength of their assertions and beliefs about themselves” (1998, 2); comparably, Zucker and Bradley have found that for many of their young patients, “cross-dressing has an obligatory quality (e.g., insistence on cross-dressing outside the home) and is not restricted to play situations” (1995, 15). Ludo’s deviation manifests less in verbal declaration than in insistent wardrobe and behavioral “affectations” inspiring punitive measures that, initially, steal from Ludo the film’s narrative focus.

Even when scolded, children of Ludo’s age and sensibilities may not be able to change behaviors that the most sympathetic parents find trying. Lisen Stromberg, for example, adores her three-year-old “janegirl” (her own riff on “tomboy”), but, following countless caustic comments from family and neighbors, she allows that “sometimes even [she is] a little embarrassed by [her] son’s behavior.” She writes wearily of the near “family feud” her toddler inadvertently caused on announcing his intention to be a ballet dancer, and wonders realistically how she will “protect him from the inevitable taunting that will occur as he ages” (1999, 57). Unlike a self-naming teenager, a younger child such as Ludo presents both mortifying present and uncertain, frightening future. The family’s efforts to contain their embarrassment necessarily usurp the child’s subjectivity and story. For a believable telling of Ludo’s narrative, Berliner and Vander Stappen must begin with the parents who, given their way, would rewrite their son completely.

## II. Situating Ludo within “Girlboy” Narrative

Berliner and Vander Stappen assign Ludo’s effeminate affect dizzyingly high stakes on his initial appearance. Brief expository set-up informs us that the Fabres have moved to Mennecy at the wish of Pierre’s boss and new neighbor, Albert (Daniel Hanssens). In this candy-colored suburb, public vigilance and gender conformity rule. An early overhead tracking shot maps the entire neighborhood on interlocking streets that erase personal space; yet the viewer quickly realizes that Pierre and Hanna should have no trouble with communal scrutiny. The story opens with crosscut tableaux of Pierre and Hanna performing with their neighbors—Albert and Lisette (Laurence Bibot), Thierry (Jean-François Gallotte) and Monique (Caroline Baehr)—an almost identical gender ballet as everyone prepares for the Fabres’ neighborhood barbecue.

Judith Butler famously asserts that “. . . gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self” (1999, 176).



The “imitative” nature of those gender identities bespeaks an implicit conformity that Pierre, Hanna, and their adult neighbors seem to have mastered without consultation these characters, the film suggests, are male and female to the degree that they match their peers’ performances of masculinity and femininity. In the opening montage, all three wives are assisted or watched by their husbands as they zip themselves into dresses and Jungian script, and their children are clearly being prepared to follow gendered suit: Albert enforces masculine dress code by insisting that Jérôme don a bowtie, however constraining, for the Fabres’ party, and Sophie (Morgane Bruna), Thierry and Monique’s daughter, is preparing to play feminine archetype Snow White, to her parents’—and Ludo’s—fascination.

Ludo emerges into this setting an incipient gender disaster, a *sui generis* deviant without mentor or peers. Before we see him in full, Yves Cape’s camera atomizes the child at his toilette as disparate effeminate parts: a Cinderella-slippered foot, a pair of painted lips, an adorned earlobe, and perfectly arched fingers that suggest less a seven-year-old boy than Norma Desmond. Soon to be the object of perpetual observation, he emerges theatrically through patio curtains to the applause of spectators thinking him his older sister Zoé (Cristina Barget), whose fairy princess costume he has ceremonially appropriated for his introduction to the new neighbors. A shocked Pierre, having already categorized his sons Tom (Gregory Diallo) and Jean (Erik Cazals De Fabel) “the brainy one” and “the naughty one,” attempts to denominate Ludo a boyish “joker,” but the Pandoran narratives of effeminacy and homosexuality have already been uncovered. Tiny Ludo instantly connotes alarm to neighbors who talk pointedly of alarm systems. Mentioned by Thierry and approved by Albert, these systems remain unseen and unheard, but they are on constant alert for intrusion. Foucault’s characterization of historic police presence captures the stealthy vigilance surrounding the Fabres: “this power had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes everywhere . . .” (1977, 214). When Pierre, scrambling for community trust, invites his neighbors to “look in anytime,” they instantly and incessantly oblige him.

With Pierre’s job hanging on the continued favor of Albert, who verbally equates sexual deviation with Divine disfavor, Ludo’s transvestism precipitates a family crisis that, in keeping with the coming-out narratives Savin-Williams cites, threatens to pirate Ludo’s own coming-of-age narrative. His behavior will eventually fray his parents’ marriage, test his older brothers’ loyalty to him and to each other, and force the family to abandon their idyllic

neighborhood when Pierre loses his job. Even though Pierre and Hanna do not echo Albert's pseudo-religious bigotry or Thierry's careless contempt for "bent" boys, they immediately recognize the material threat that Ludo represents to their lives. Ludo's "wedding" to Jérôme may not destroy Hanna's love for her son, but his subsequent appearance in backward button-fly briefs convinces her that a gender nightmare is brewing under her roof. Before a third of the film has elapsed, Ludo becomes less a character proper than an object of masculine remediation and psychiatric evaluation.

Pollack delineates the frequency with which boys "feel forced to become extremely watchful, carefully monitoring how other boys act and expending huge amounts of time and energy desperately trying to fit in and pass muster" (2000, 21). Ludo is no exception, and his narrative is quickly skewed by scenarios of macho self-reconstruction. Temporarily believing in his anatomical boyhood, he kicks an array of dolls under his bed and submits to two haircuts designed to make him "neat and trim" like his father and brothers. Goaded by Albert to remove Ludo from Hanna's maternal (hence effeminating) influence, Pierre enrolls his son in soccer lessons that present Ludo at his most awkward. In opposition to the studied grace Ludo displays at his toilette, he emerges on the soccer field a collection of parts on the verge of masculine breakdown. Cinematographer Cape features in close-up a pair of fragile, fluttery legs; a mop of abundant hair flopping from under a too-large baseball cap; a sweaty, confused little face squinting at Papa's shouted directions in between painful falls to the derriere.

Eager to please his parents, Ludo doggedly appends masculine semiotics onto his delicate frame. Staging his own Lacanian sketch, Ludo stares at himself in a full-length mirror, dubiously cups his genitals, and tries to recreate the gunman's pose ("Bang! Bang!") that he has seen in other children's play.<sup>10</sup> As visible in his flaccid face and posture, Ludo has not convinced even himself of his masculinity, yet he abruptly tries to impose his performance, along with an aggressive kiss, on a female peer who only stops giggling long enough to shove him down, barking, "I don't kiss girls!" Ludo's cultivation of John Wayne, like his visit to the soccer field, literally lands him on his behind and sends him skipping back to Jérôme and Pam.<sup>11</sup>

Following Ludo's masculine failure, *Ma Vie en Rose* could very well metastasize into the underplotted, doomed battle between inexplicable child, horrified parents, and intrepid medical intervention. When Hanna admits to Ludo's therapist (Marie Bunel) that she and Pierre had hoped their fourth child would be a girl, the screenplay offers viewers a classic psychoanalytic tease: did Pierre and Hanna "cause" Ludo to identify as female? The therapist implies as much and directs the Fabres not to "expect miracles" in her treatment of Ludo, who is briefly positioned as victim in the narrative.

Therapy ends, however, when Ludo refuses to speak further with the therapist, and *Rose* ceases to be the story of etiology and correction. The blame reverts to Ludo himself.

In her study of aberrant children in film, Kathy Merlock Jackson holds that “[c]hildren who act like monsters are not fully guilty; further exploration reveals that their behavior is not really their fault”; she later substantiates the tendency of film “parents [to] worry about a child’s physical normality but never his or her moral sense” (1986, 137, 141). Jackson implies that narrative cannot accommodate brusque parental expulsion of a deviant child. Parents must unearth the root of the unwanted behavior, thereby advancing the tale via the child’s recuperation within social structures. When Ludo himself thwarts this plotline, the Fabres depart from Jackson’s narrative rubric: they stop attempting to restore Ludo to “physical normality” on the presumption that his “moral sense” is indeed warped. When Pierre loses his job, Hanna informs Ludo that it is his fault, that “everything” the family has suffered—economic ruin along with exile from Mennecy—is his fault. This is not momentary rage; Hanna repeats her blame of Ludo after the family has moved to their smaller, cramped house in Clermont-Ferrand, telling the boy that he “really mess[es] up [the family’s] lives,” and finally, beating him severely, bellows at her small son to give the family “a fucking break” when she finds him once again in drag.

By this point, the Fabres have spent themselves scrutinizing Ludo for any sign, however fleeting, of presumed normalcy. Having invested considerable time and money in trying to make Ludo heterosexual and masculine, Hanna simply gives up. Coldly informing her son that he is “bent,” she saddles him with a hated crew cut and addresses him with unrelenting chilled rage almost to the closing credits. In marked opposition to Hanna, however, critics seem to take Ludo at his earnest word as a little boy who thinks himself a heterosexual girl and dresses and loves accordingly. Brian D. Johnson, for instance, applauds Berliner and Georges Du Fresne for “play[ing] it straight, portraying the confused child with matter-of-fact charm that speaks volumes” (1998, 70). If Ludo seems “confused,” he is so not about himself, but only in response to the furor surrounding his determination to select wardrobe and boyfriend much as he sees his older sister do. When Ludo wails to Granny Elisabeth that his parents “say I refuse to change and only bring them trouble,” he voices bewilderment and sincerity in equal measure. To his mind, he needn’t “change” anything about himself, a conviction validated by Stanley Kaufmann’s assertion that the boy’s behavior “is not perversity . . . it is Ludovic” (1998, 25).

Berliner has indicated audiences’ comparable tendency to colonize Ludo according to their own sexual and/or political agenda. Though he insists that

“[n]obody knows how Ludo is going to end up,” Berliner also wryly notes that “transsexuals see Ludo as a transsexual, gays say that he is gay, and straights say that he is ‘just going through a phase’” (Thomas 1997, 12). Ludo, however, remains his own uncategorizable self, which makes for significant narrative problems and generic crisis. Nadeau characterizes *Rose* as the “hybrid of a fairy tale and a freak show” (2000, 137); yet the former invokes narrative structures in which no non-heterosexual, non-masculine small boy has ever played even a supporting, much less leading, role, and the latter implies shocking spectacle devoid of plot. At no time do Vander Stappen and Berliner objectify Ludo as freakish, and while the term “fairy tale” may apply in cruel pun, Ludo is in far greater control than Cinderella or Snow White of what his audience sees and how his story unfolds. Additionally, Pam—of whom more shortly—disallows fairy-tale narrative simply by being a princess possessed of a prince whom she herself magically summons. Her world contains neither the supernatural villainy nor divine intervention of classic fairy tales, and the uninterrupted through-line of her romantic pursuits is what Ludo most covets. By flatly refusing to acknowledge the dragons and witches of censuring family and community, Ludo divests his tale of fairy-tale trapping and generic categorization altogether.

What plot structure accommodates a child who obeys no sexual, gender, or generic boundary? Were *Rose* a horror film, the abnormal child could turn killer (*Halloween* [Carpenter, 1978]), die at the finale for his sins (*The Bad Seed* [LeRoy, 1956]), be freed from a demon (*The Exorcist* [Friedkin, 1973]), or ultimately emerge as Satan proper and inspire several sequels (*The Omen* [Donner, 1976]). Ludo, however, inhabits not a horror film but a domestic family drama in which no murder committed by or against the young protagonist would fit. And yet Ludo’s tale, defiantly titled with first-person possessive adjective, does not defer so easily to the more conventional family narrative surrounding it. A *nouveau* deviant, Ludo keeps silent control of his own tale by refusing to relinquish interpretive sway over it. Ludo’s therapist, who is more sympathetic to Ludo than the screenplay initially leads us to believe, tells him that “there may be things [his] parents will never understand,” and that he “may have to wait until [he is] older to say them out loud.” Her kindly advice implies that Ludo knows himself best, but it also leaves the film’s protagonist with very little to say or do. How, then, do Berliner and Vander Stappen manage to hang their entire film on a comparatively mute protagonist who seems thwarted at every narrative turn?

## III. A "Girlboy's" Own Narrative Terms

Midway through the film, low on patience and impromptu remedies, Hanna declares to Pierre, "We have no idea what goes on in [Ludovic's] mind." By keeping Ludo inscrutable, Berliner and Vander Stappen make possible the shaping of his story. Ironically, the less his resistance, the wider his narrative options. For instance, the abuse that Ludo faces from peers—an inevitable, potentially murderous motif in the story of any non-masculine boy—seems not to faze him. Faced by laughing children during Show and Tell or while in drag at Sophie's party, Ludovic registers only mild surprise that his peers do not cherish his toys and clothes as much as he does. Even when the laughter turns ugly, Ludo remains unruffled: a classmate's cruel pantomime of him prods Ludo not toward abashed self-monitoring but toward even more elaborate, dismissive application of imaginary make-up. Only when other boys threaten him physically in a locker room does Ludo cry out briefly.

At first glance, Ludo seems preternaturally precocious in his ability to squelch the pain he must feel. It gradually becomes clear, however, that he is less staunch before, than impervious to, the homophobia and effeminaphobia surrounding him. A miniature Walter Mitty, Ludo maintains firm interpretive control over the tropes that would colonize his story. Critic Leonard Maltin identifies as one of *Rose's* chief virtues that "[a]ll points of view are well served" (2002, 891), but ultimately it is Ludo's worldview that informs the film's narrative and aesthetic structures. Competing discourses fall before his considerable appreciation and reconstruction of feminine performance. So powerful are both, in fact, that they ultimately seduce Hanna and Pierre into the only resolution possible for the film: full family acceptance of Ludo, whose final appearance in Christine's princess costume, echoing his entrance in Zoé's gown, neatly brackets the film with the insistent visibility of pre-pubescent queer sensibility.

Berliner paints his suburban *mise-en-scène* as an *Edward Scissorhands* (Burton, 1990) backlot, replete with hot pinks, reds, yellows, and greens. As in the earlier film, *Rose's* make-believe kingdom evokes the question of what may happen to a deviant who treads unbidden this bizarrely cheery landscape. Yet in a community so wary of deviance, Berliner's dollhouse colors also speak an ironic queer shorthand established and filmed long before Ludo's birth.<sup>12</sup> Despite the community's exclusion of Ludo, its aesthetics belong to a little boy who reminds adults of the subversiveness skipping just beyond their alarm systems' jurisdiction. Before panning the neighborhood's color scheme, Berliner starts the film within the scope of Ludo's spectatorship. For the technically remarkable credit sequence filmed within Pam's dollhouse, cinematographer Cape sweeps over the electric burgundy of Pam's

ornate headboard; the brilliant violet of her lamp; the candy-box red of her heart-shaped mirror, dressing table, and Victorian sofa (nicely offsetting pink iron and heart-shaped pink windows). Her vivid house is complemented by yards of plastic daisies, each more geometrically perfect and purely white than anything found in nature. Cape blurs this survey to a pink haze before abruptly cutting to Thierry and Monique's pink-walled bedroom—via a shot banked off the mirror hanging over their bed.

Berliner's opening juxtaposition captures the dueling sensibilities that inform his film's principal conflict. Soon after the Fabres's barbecue, we see Ludo watching *Le Monde de Pam* [*Pam's World*] on television and realize that Pam's house—hence Ludo's aesthetic—has determined our first glimpse of his world. An avatar of postmodern femininity with blond extensions, deeply exposed cleavage, and pastel dreamhouse, Pam provides Ludo with a magical escape from the masculine expectation hampering his every move. Adopting her sinuous choreography, which suggests the union of Madonna's "Vogue" video (1990) and the incantatory repertoire of Agnes Moorehead in *Bewitched* (1964–72), Ludo literally dances away from taunts and the vexing body that has yet to turn female for him. In Pam's hyperfeminine milieu, to be extremely "girlish" is to be rewarded with one's own television show, magical powers, and a handsome, marriage-proposing boyfriend whom one can conjure at will.<sup>13</sup> Yet when Ludo appropriates Pam's over-the-top femininity by arranging florally a bright red napkin in a drinking glass, Monique labels him "a real little housewife"—a gratuitous crack that Elisabeth derides as "not too subtle"—and remarks in his presence that a television program about transsexuals once "made [her] cry."

In her idealized *monde*, Pam need never fear seeming over-the-top; she has no neighbors to deride the chromatic extremity of her home, her scanty orange velvet dress, or her flagrantly stagy movements. Though Ludo's neighborhood appears to have been pelted by Pam's brush, its residents dread any public recreation of her flamboyant colors and self-presentation. In the privacy of the opening montage, Pierre and Hanna allude to their active sexuality, while Thierry and Monique begin to act theirs out beneath the deliberately placed mirror in which we first glimpse them. At the barbecue, however, Monique, knowing that her crowd shuns any behavior or color that draws attention to itself, worriedly asks the Fabres whether everyone must "mind [their] P's & Q's." Thierry has already called his new neighbors "flashy" for throwing a party before they've unpacked; Pierre seems to have anticipated this criticism when he asks Hanna to change her red dress before the party. Even Elisabeth, who arrives at the party in a bright yellow convertible, finds the Fabres' florid pink "Welcome" sign "a bit too much" for the neighborhood.

Though Elisabeth, who dresses wildly and earns her son-in-law's scorn for "pretend[ing] to be young," is in many ways "the sustaining life force of any budding queer boy's lonely hours" (Stuart 1997, 52), she also recognizes the spectacular limitations of the socially unsanctioned body. As she tries to teach Ludo, this body—whether elderly or cross-dressed, raucous or effeminate—requires certain tailoring for social and narrative efficacy. Like her grandson, Elisabeth would emulate a "slim and smooth" young doll (in the music box given to her by a married admirer), but she realizes that to try to do so at her age would make her look "ridiculous." Like Ludo's therapist, Elisabeth advises her transvestite grandson that "we all have to face reality" and confine fantasy selves within private fantasy moments. Neither woman intends to change Ludo; they simply wish to keep his appearance and utterance uninflected until he can present himself publicly without inviting the phobic "next steps" that could put a permanent end to his story. In the private fantasies that Elisabeth prescribes, Ludo need participate in no plotting at all, as when he imagines himself waking one morning a satin-draped girl in Pam's pink and purple bedroom. Lasting only 30 seconds, his vision unfolds very simply; Ludo has already learned that to imagine any "sequel" for his fantasies invariably means trouble.

From what we see of her life, Pam also lives outside plotting. Of only a few minutes' duration, her show seems to involve no more than a survey of her colorful landscape, Ben's proposal, and her swoony acceptance. A figure of children's television, Pam presents only the glamour of femininity and the excitement of courtship itself; there is no call for her to dramatize the heterosexuality or actual marital life that would elude Ludo. She instills in Ludo a taste for triumphant—if transient—tableaux that become for him both escape hatch as well as force of narrative control. Ludo's development of various scenarios, both imagined and literal, come to comprise a great deal of *Rose's* screen time as they dramatically elevate the war between self and society that drives the film's main plot. His invented narratives chiefly detail his transformation into a girl and marriage to Jérôme. Like Pam's scenarios, they end abruptly before competing plotlines can invalidate his self-image. Through his fantasies, Ludo grows adept at brands of audience seduction that require no plotting, only momentary attention. And Ludo is never at a loss for onlookers' attention.

When he mounts Pam-like vignettes for his own audience, they react with total captivation. At the film's start, when he steps through patio-cum-theater curtains to join his parents' barbecue, Ludo realizes that observers can't take their eyes off him. At first wholly convincing as a girl, he receives enthusiastic applause; when revealed as a boy, he only silences the crowd into polite stares. No serious consequence ensues. Playing at Jérôme's house, Ludo

stages a wedding with his willing friend by appropriating the boy's dead sister's clothes and converting her intact bedroom into a chapel. Unaware of the girl's fate, Ludo treats her room and possessions as his well-appointed backstage workshop. Naming a stuffed bear "vicar," he populates the stage, assigns himself and Jérôme the roles of Pam and Ben, and even provides voiceover ("We walk down the aisle. I look gorgeous.") as he and his beloved approach the altar. Lisette, unseen by the boys and rapt by their proceedings, seems to pre-empt the climactic kiss in a faint that demonstrates to Ludo his sway over spectators: what surer sign of a performer's ability to overpower an audience?

The parental scoldings following this episode do not dissolve Ludo's determination to marry Jérôme for the much larger audience attending his school's *Snow White* pageant. Mournfully cast against type as a bearded dwarf, Ludo locks Sophie, the female lead, in a bathroom and takes her supine place onstage beneath Snow White's translucent veil. It's not enough that he has previously "married" Prince Charming in a private ceremony; Ludo now wants the public kiss that will wake him from the curse of boyhood into a feminine symbol revered throughout Western culture. The plan backfires when Jérôme, informed by his parents that association with Ludo means flirtation with hellfire, balks at a homosexual kiss, and when Ludo, unveiled, sits up to face an audience that would expel him from school and remove him permanently from their stage. Yet even this critical reception does not discourage Ludo, who requests—and secures—permission to wear a skirt to Snow White's birthday party ("We're letting him enact his fantasy [in order] to banalize [and banish] it," an exhausted Pierre explains to doubting neighbors).

To be sure, Ludo's scenarios are doomed to derail, as they can only mimic, not effect, the anatomical change and social reintegration he desires. Following the joyful fantasia of attaining sudden girlhood, enlisting Pam to tie up meddlesome mothers, and choreographing a wedding attended by beaming parents and grandmother, Ludo fails to imagine anything of a female's daily life. He has no particular interest in what happens after a bride has won both her groom and her parents' approval. The click of haircutting scissors and the pounding of a For Sale stake in front of his house interrupt Ludo's visions of the perfect girlish bob and of rooftop twirling, before adorning masses, in bridal regalia with Jérôme. Like his real-life dramas, these dreams offer neither gratifying permanence nor a rising story action, but they do signal Ludo's ability to deploy imagination in maintenance of his much contested self-image.

However failed Ludo's scenarios, they teach him that popular narratives—e.g., those of marriage, gender codes, fame—can be manipulated to private ends. Armed with this knowledge, Ludo learns to apply popular and



scientific discourse to his interpretive advantage. Dissatisfied by impatient parental declarations that he is male and will be for life, he undertakes to prove his claim to girlhood via sweet recourse to an essentialism that rivals his parents'. With the aid of Zoé's biology text, Ludo learns about "XX" and "XY" chromosomes and hypothesizes, as Berliner films in much fanciful detail, that God assigned him a double-X but—Divine fumble!—accidentally dropped one "X" into a trashcan rather than down the Fabre chimney. Hence Ludo's development as a "girlboy" who waits patiently for God to restore his missing "X." While his parents insistently (and noisily) hew to the argument that Ludo is a boy simply because he is, Ludo seeks to complicate the matter by "proving" his female status: he can urinate while seated, and he has stomach cramps that feel suspiciously like the complaint that makes Zoé, in the proud maternal blessing on which Ludo eavesdrops, a "real little lady." Naturally, Pierre and Hanna are less than convinced by Ludo's explications of the evidence, but Jérôme, who informs Ludo that the ability to urinate from a seated position does not necessarily a girl make, does not discount the possibility of Ludo's eventual girlhood. Jérôme may not accept the term "girlboy," but he doesn't wholly dismiss the possibility of marrying Ludo—contingent only upon "what kind of girl" Ludo finally becomes.

Ludo and Jérôme's belief in his fantasies keeps Ludo alive and prevents his story from shutting down altogether. If Ludo accepted his parents' insistence on gender-prescribed behavior and clothes, if he allowed his therapist to convince him he is male, if he believed Albert and Lisette's conviction that he is evil, then his narrative could not continue. He would have no choice but to change (which he expressly tells Elisabeth he does not want to do) or to destroy himself, a fate he escapes only by generic necessity.<sup>14</sup> When Ludo climbs into a freezer unit, attempting to halt permanently the body that has brought him and his family such trouble, the audience of *Ma Vie en Rose* finds itself in an almost unbearable spectatorial position. We've already seen the child ridiculed, bullied, beaten, expelled from school, and moved far from Elisabeth, the one sympathetic constant in his life. How much more abuse can the story—or the tiny body at center screen—endure? Charles Dickens earned the preeminent reputation in Victorian letters by chronicling the plight of despised boys, but *Oliver Twist*, *Pip*, *David Copperfield*, and *Bleak House*'s Jo do not have the added burden of reviled gender affect to seal off rescue at every turn. The destruction of a tremendously sympathetic child hero would be excruciating to watch, but it is nigh impossible to imagine any other fate for Ludo or from his family.

Domenico Di Ceglie posits as "an important therapeutic aim" the enabling of "a child/adolescent [of atypical gender identity] to tolerate uncertainty in the area of gender identity development" (1998, 194). It is also

a vital narrative aim. Without some embrace of an unspecified sexual future, the story of a gay or transsexual child cannot reach the nominal resolution expected of family narrative. *Ma Vie en Rose*'s considerable tension abruptly dissipates before the credit crawl when, minutes after beating Ludo about the head and shoulders for appearing in drag, Hanna murmurs to her son, "Whatever happens, you'll always be our child. . . . I've tended to forget it lately." Even Pierre, throughout the film no champion of his fey son, tells Ludo to "[d]o whatever feels best" when the child offers to remove the lacy blue frock that inspired Hanna's rage. The film's finale follows the gowned Ludo back to Chris's birthday party in his new neighborhood, where he happily romps amid a new group of children who, unlike his previous peers, seem wholly unflustered by the junior drag queen in their midst. Cape pulls away from the cavorting children to feature a blue sky—the perfect match for Ludo's dress—across which floats the winking figure of Pam, wafting pixie dust over the throng. Credits.

Understandably, critics have found this coda unsatisfactory. After all, the other children have forced Ludo into Christine's dress, which he is, at the film's close, wearing in the rarefied context of a costume party. How would the children and adults of Clermont react the following Monday morning if Ludo sailed into school so attired? This question remains unanswered, prompting critics, of whom Joe Holleman is a fair representative, to fault *Ma Vie en Rose* for ending too "neatly—and somewhat unrealistically" (1998, E3). Eleanor Ringel argues that the "film's denouement seems less earned than targeted at . . . an American audience" eager to see unambiguous narrative resolution for its protagonist (1998, 11). While Berliner does not seem to have intended Americans as his principal audience, the director has gratefully noted that "Americans and Anglo-Saxons in general . . . seem to get from the film what I'd hoped they'd get from it—they understand what we were aiming at way more than the French do" (Nesselson 1998). Mainstream Hollywood narrative, particularly family narrative, does not endorse lasting divisiveness: in a country where *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994) makes a suitable foster parent, and where only death can sever *American Beauty*'s (Mendes, 1999) Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) from the wife (Annette Bening) he has long detested, little Ludo's ultimate drift from the family hearth would be anathema. At whatever cost of narrative credibility, Ludo must reintegrate within the Fabre milieu in order to secure the kind of U.S. attention that wins Golden Globes (for Best Foreign Film of 1997) and greases worldwide distribution. Still—for those wedded to verisimilitude—the question remains: just how *do* Hanna, Pierre, and a crowd of anonymous children suddenly accept the figure who has grated so violently against spectatorship

throughout the film? How does Ludo suddenly claim territory within a set of social boundaries that could never previously accommodate him?

The answer seems to lie in Pam—or, more specifically, in Ludo's consumption, redeployment, and dissemination of her image. We never see the adults in Ludo's life watching Pam's show with him, yet each of them, through the power of his spectatorship, becomes transfixed by her moves. Elisabeth, who watches her grandson's choreography poised as if to rebuke its effeminate movements, suddenly plays along with Ludo, imitating with him Pam's cross-armed, index-fingers-aloft, torso-twisting variations. Pierre, recently fired and witness to the roadside kiss that Hanna, vengefully seeking to drive her neighbors mad, plants on Albert before Lisette, takes comfort in Pam's repertoire. The camera traces Pierre from feet up as he twirls in the syncopated circle Ludo has modeled, and he uses prop cups to blow Pam's pixie-dust kiss to an imaginary audience. Finishing the routine, Pierre puts down his cups and grins sheepishly, as if embarrassed to be caught performing a routine for which he would certainly attack his youngest son.

Hanna is not shown emulating Pam's motions, but like her mother, husband, and Jérôme, she seems to believe implicitly in the transformative powers of Ludo's scopophilia. When Ludo attempts to escape Hanna's beating of him, Berliner shifts into a surreal sequence that finds Hanna scaling a *Monde de Pam* billboard, hallucinating that Ludo has gotten a ladder, climbed into the artwork, and disappeared with his idol. That Ludo is too small to carry even a stepladder does not seem to occur to Hanna, who, trying to "pursue" Ludo into the picture, "falls" through Pam's shockingly green landscape and awakens on her own sofa, surrounded by concerned friends and family, including Ludo. Finding herself back in familiar surroundings does not convince Hanna of her vision's unreality; she asks Ludo whether he "really [wanted] to go away with that doll?" This is the same woman who earlier forced on her seven-year-old child the decision of whether to stay with his immediate family or to live with his grandmother. It seems that Hanna has divorced herself sufficiently from Ludo to believe that his overwhelming identification with Pam could take him on escapes that realistic storytelling could never realize. Hanna's acceptance of Ludo, much like Pierre's, reflects the sudden, serene credibility she assigns her son's ability to recreate himself and his world through performance and narrative.

### Conclusion

*Ma Vie en Rose* has much to teach us about how we read—and instruct our students to read—stories about boys. By all normative narrative rights, Ludovic Fabre has no story of his own to tell. Injecting both homosexuality and transsexualism into a self-monitoring suburb, Ludo's story seems to fit

very restricted plot structures: absurdist comedy or social warfare to the point of expulsion or death. Add to this mix a grade school protagonist and the narrative options narrow further still: the notion of sexualizing a prepubescent child before a camera invokes horrible images of pedophilia and exploitation,<sup>15</sup> and the notion of naming a homosexual or transsexual child seems almost to baffle language—how can a child be a “sexual” anything before adolescence? At its most sophisticated, it would seem that Ludo’s story traces the family stalemate of parents and siblings vs. distraught child declaring outlaw status well before anyone might expect such affiliation. Yet Ludo shows not even the expected reaction of lamenting his sexual or gender orientation; he asserts himself with complete candor after being informed of his deviance. His cannot, therefore, be a story of internal battle against nature, nor can we see him vacillating between his own viewpoint and that of his parents, nor, given his age, can we see him striking out on his own and creating a free, unquestioned life.

That Berliner and Vander Stappen manage to create a thoroughly compelling story around these daunting limitations demonstrates the breadth of narrative paths—to say nothing of life paths—open to boys who do not follow mainstream gender or sexual expectations. The power of Ludo’s theatrical sense and the inventiveness with which he re-spins canonical genders and tales demonstrate that even a small child can carve narrative space for himself where none has previously existed. Ludovic Fabre points us toward a wealth of boys’ stories that have yet to find their way to page, stage, or screen.

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The story of *Ma Vie en Rose* is easily summarized for those unfamiliar with the film. Pierre and Hanna Fabre (Jean-Philippe Écoffey and Michèle Laroque) have just moved with their four children, of whom Ludovic is the youngest, to the middle-class suburb of Mennecy, approximately 40 km from Paris. The warm welcome the family receives quickly chills as Ludo’s transvestism and determination to marry Jérôme, his young neighbor, disrupt school, community, and finally the Fabre household itself. The unflappable Ludo disregards all escalating prohibitions against dresses and homosocial relationships. He clings to unconventional Granny Elisabeth (Hélène Vincent), Hanna’s flamboyant, pot-smoking mother, and Pam (Delphine Cadet), the televised Barbie knockoff Ludo adores and emulates. Yet the solace offered by Elisabeth and Pam cannot spare Ludo from Jérôme’s abrupt rejection of him, nor can it stem his bewilderment when he finds himself expelled from

school. When Ludo's unwavering transsexual convictions pre-empt his "corrective" therapy and get his father fired, the child finds himself temporarily bundled off to the home of his sympathetic grandmother. The Fabres's economic misfortune soon exiles them to remote Clermont-Ferrand, where Ludo, rejoining the family, discovers that even Hanna has turned against him. Only his eleventh-hour friendship with tomboy Christine (Raphaëlle Santini) and his imaginative flights with Pam seem to provide Ludo the simultaneous social connection and escape that he needs. At the film's conclusion, we are left to wonder about the future of Ludo's family and community relations. Pierre and Hanna have reached a beaten truce with their determined "girlboy," but will the truce last as neighbors continue to discover this small boy in chiffon, poised for his next Prince Charming?

<sup>2</sup> Two outstanding children's books have attempted to incorporate effeminate children—or ducklings—within mainstream narrative. Tomie dePaola's *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* (1979) and Harvey Fierstein's *The Sissy Duckling* (2002) both feature young effeminate protagonists at first reviled, but later embraced, by friends and family for their uniqueness. Remarkable as they are, these books are written for very young children and do not grapple extensively with the devastating discourses that circumscribe "sissy" boys' lives. Fed up with his bullying father, for example, Fierstein's Elmer simply runs away and sets up his own housekeeping, an option unknown to his real-life human counterparts. Both *Oliver Button* and *Sissy Duckling* teach an indispensable lesson of tolerance, but they cannot be considered fully evolved "girl-boy" narratives of material and psychological consequence.

<sup>3</sup> This essay's denotations of Ludo as "gay," "transvestite," "transsexual," or "effeminate" refer exclusively to *how Ludo appears* within the film's normative *mise-en-scène*. An anatomical male in love with another male, thinking himself innately female, enamored of "feminine" trappings and activities, Ludo registers to spectators on and offscreen through various identities that he himself cannot yet articulate. My purpose is not to specify the "truth" of Ludo's identities but to isolate his particular affect within larger narratives that label him, for corrective purposes, an abject boy.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that other prepubescent male film characters have confessed their love to male friends: *This Boy's Life* (Caton-Jones, 1993) and *Billy Elliot* (Daldry, 2000) both find avowedly heterosexual boys responding sympathetically but without interest to amorous pals. This is not a dynamic unique to lensings of English-language boyhood. In *Les roseaux sauvages* (Téchiné, 1994), teenaged François (Gaël Morel) takes as his object of affection heterosexual Serge (Stéphane Rideau), a boy who may indulge in some random wrestling with his friend but then advises him, as far as romance and concomitant narrative go, to "forget it." Conversely, *Ma Vie en Rose* finds Jérôme complicit in Ludo's affection to the point of pursuing and kissing him back, but their romantic play, countenanced by no adult character, receives very little narrative attention—a tradition evident in earlier prose and film treatments of boyhood homosexuality.

Arnie Kantrowitz's memoir, *Under the Rainbow: Growing Up Gay* (1977), Paul Monette's autobiography *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* (1992) and Henry Jaglom's film *Last Summer in the Hamptons* (1995) all acknowledge the existence of active boyhood homosexuality, but only as the catalyst for silent family embarrass-

ment and resentment. Interrupted mid-fellatio with a friend, 12-year-old Kantrowitz found himself branded a family “disgrace” until his mother’s frantically consulted physician declared him “normal” and just “experimenting” (1977, 35). Lingered maternal suspicions were not voiced again for years, thereby banishing the topic of homosexuality from family lore. When nearly caught in sexual play with a male friend, nine-year-old Monette dismissed the incident as “nothing” to his mother, beginning a decades-long silence in which “[h]er closet was as airless as mine” (1992, 28, 30). *Last Summer’s Jake* (Jon Robin Baitz) remembers being discovered at age eleven *en flagrante* with a male playmate by his powerful director-father (Andre Gregory), whose sole curt comment—“Don’t do it again. If his [actor-] father finds out, he’ll never work with me again”—sets off the embittered stalemate that characterizes their relationship into Jake’s adulthood. In none of these memories does a gay boyhood experience lead to further dialogue or substantive repercussion beyond silent impasse. As in *Ma Vie en Rose*, Kantrowitz, Monette, and Jake’s boyhood sexual experiences do not figure in larger plotting.

<sup>5</sup> Ludo’s closest filmed American counterpart might be Bruno Battaglia, the 8-year-old protagonist of *The Dress Code* (MacLaine, 1999). Like Ludo, Bruno (Alex D. Linz), who favors glam-drag à la Diana Ross or Dolly Parton, shuns boys’ attire whenever possible. Unlike Ludo, however, there is no suggestion that Bruno might be gay—in fact, a classmate’s taunting question on this subject prompts the only retaliatory action Bruno takes against children who berate and beat him throughout the film. Moreover, whereas Ludo wears girls’ outfits in order to look “pretty,” Bruno refers to his beloved dresses as “holy vestments,” i.e., garb of the angels whose power he would appropriate. At no point does David Ciminello’s screenplay ascribe to Bruno any particular effeminacy or desire to be female. Ludo in drag is, therefore, a far more destabilizing signifier than Bruno.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Tyler (1972), Russo (1987), Hadleigh (1993), Murray (1996), Ehrenstein (1998), and Mann (2001).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Cohan and Hart (1993), Hanson (1999), Doty (2000), Farmer (2000), Tinkcom (2002), and Dyer (2003).

<sup>8</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick attributes the “eclipse of the effeminate boy from adult gay discourse” to the “marginal or stigmatized position which even adult men who are effeminate have often been relegated in the [gay-rights] movement,” and to the need to effect “relative deemphasis of the links between gay adults and gender-nonconforming children” (1993, 158, 157). Sedgwick references here the gay dislike of effeminacy that runs riot through personal ads seeking, with no awareness of their sad irony, “straight-acting” partners: if “straight”-coded masculinity is only an “act,” what happens when the performer tires and reverts to his “natural,” decidedly *not* sexy effeminacy? She also alludes to panicky post-Stonewall efforts to separate inevitably conflated effeminacy, weakness, and male homosexuality—“rescue” efforts that personals of 30 years later perpetuate quite undaunted. To the extent, then, that gay films and gay film scholarship are informed by contemporaneous gay discourse, the absence of non-masculine boys from both media can only seem culturally consistent.

<sup>9</sup> On its U.S. release, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) assigned *Ma Vie en Rose* an “R” rating for “brief strong language.” This “restricted”

categorization is baffling in that the film displays only momentary violence, and the script's profanity extends to one single use of the word "fuck," a term that appeared, often repeatedly, in earlier American films (e.g., *All the President's Men* [Pakula, 1976], *Mommie Dearest* [Perry, 1981], *Tootsie* [Pollack, 1982], *Terms of Endearment* [Brooks, 1983]) assigned a "PG" rating. By demanding that children under 17 see *Ma Vie en Rose* with a parent or adult guardian, the MPAA endorses the notion that gender and sexual difference are both antithetical to family viewing and must be rigidly monitored by parents to ensure "damage control." (For a passionate argument against *Rose's* MPAA rating, see Phil Weinstein's Website, [www.WhyIsMaVieEnRoseRatedR.com](http://www.WhyIsMaVieEnRoseRatedR.com).) Moreover, marketed in the U.S. principally as an "arthouse" or "gay" product, *Rose* received relatively limited distribution. In New York City, for example, the film played only at Greenwich Village's Quad Cinema and the Upper West Side's Lincoln Plaza Cinemas; both are Manhattan arthouses that do not bring films to mainstream audiences, much less to children. But in Europe, *Ma Vie en Rose* was permitted a much wider audience—albeit with certain caveats. In the U.K., Finland, and France, for instance, the film was only restricted to children under 12. Berliner notes, however, that French "exhibitors had to put a note at the windows of the box office, saying that 'this movie could hurt the sensibilities of teenagers because of its purpose.'" With understandable anger, the director assails the "ambivalent" French distribution that straitjacketed his film as "'an arthouse movie that could make a success'" (2003). Neither mainstream nor arthouse per se, *Ma Vie en Rose* did not quite find its European niche.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, John Colapinto isolates an "angular, gunslinger's stride" as the very factor that gave away the true male gender of "Brenda"/David Reimer, a young boy whose botched circumcision prompted his castration and unwitting tenure as a girl. The innate boyishness of the "gunslinger's" walk that "Brenda" could not hide beneath frilly dresses is the same affect that Ludo cannot muster in his game emulation of masculinity (2000, 146).

<sup>11</sup> It seems no coincidence that John Wayne also turns up in both *La Cage aux Folles* and its American remake, *The Birdcage* (Nichols, 1996), as the masculine archetype to which Albin/Albert (Michel Serrault and Nathan Lane, respectively), like Ludo, cannot begin to aspire.

<sup>12</sup> Of his first visit to Fire Island in 1971, Arnie Kantrowitz relates that he felt "as if [he] were living in a pop-up picture book, a town over 90 percent gay, filled with dollhouses trimmed to the eaves in charming gingerbread, pastel paints . . . gardens profuse with black-eyed Susans, tiger lilies, sunflowers, daisies, petunias, and no-nonsense pansies" (1977, 193). A certain segment of post-Stonewall gay American society clearly relished the dollhouse aesthetic that dominates *Ma Vie en Rose*, much as it does the earlier films *The Detective* (Douglas, 1968), *The Gay Deceivers* (Kessler, 1969), *Norman, Is That You?* (Schlatter, 1976), *The Ritz* (Lester, 1976), and *Torch Song Trilogy* (Bogart, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> To be sure, some critics have taken exception to the portrayal of Ludo's model. Eleanor Ringel, for instance, argues that "Ludo's guileless fantasies about a Belgian [*sic*] Barbie Doll named Pam are spooky in the way they suggest the pressure on 7-year-old girls to grow up to be domestic-goddess sex kittens" (1998, 11).

Ringel, however, misses the point that Ludo is a small boy whose emulation of Pam reveals considerable courage, to say nothing of a rupture in the gender economy that limits children of both sexes to certain stultifying roles.

<sup>14</sup> The theme of suicidal youth has enjoyed decided vogue in popular cinema of the past 35 years. Teenage characters have attempted to kill themselves in such dramas as *Up the Down Staircase* (Mulligan, 1967) and *Ordinary People* (Redford, 1980), as well as in the comedies *Beetlejuice* (Burton, 1988) and *Heathers* (Lehmann, 1989). Successful teen suicides have been featured in such films as *Romeo and Juliet* (Zeffirelli, 1968; Luhrmann, 1996), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Forman, 1975), and *The Virgin Suicides* (Coppola, 2000); successful teen suicides prompted by guilt over male homosexuality comprise central plot threads in *Ode to Billy Joe* (Baer, 1976) and *Six Degrees of Separation* (Schepisi, 1993). *Blue Car* (Moncrieff, 2003) features a suicidal child (the heroine's younger sister), but her death comes early in the narrative and does not become a story unto itself. None of these films, in short, offers a suicidal protagonist younger than 15. The ghastly notion of a prepubescent protagonist's suicide has not yet reached popular cinema—which may be, in part, why Hanna just happens to look in the garage freezer and save her son from suffocation.

<sup>15</sup> Significantly, *Ma Vie en Rose* was released in Belgium and France some six months after the capture of Marc Dutroux, a Belgian pedophile who abducted six girls, four of whom he murdered. In Andrew Osborn's analysis, "no other single event, bar[ring] the Second World War . . . has had such a traumatic and damaging effect to the country's self-image." Such was the Belgian outrage, in fact, that in October 1996, roughly 300,000 protestors—"the largest public march of its kind"—assembled in Brussels to express their shock and grief (2002). The protest kicked off the so-called "white year," during which, Jean-Marie Chauvier notes, Belgians, who previously had been "renowned for their timid protests or just turning their backs on [outrage] . . . had suddenly decided to speak out" (1997). According to Osborn, however, righteous indignation against pedophiles blossomed into "harassment of homosexuals [including Deputy Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo] and other 'deviants.' . . ." How ironic that in this witch-hunting context, Belgians managed to keep *Ma Vie en Rose* in proper perspective as the story of a child discovering, without exploitation of the child or the topic itself, his sexuality. The film's Belgian classification as acceptable for all audiences emerges in even greater relief alongside its U.S. "R" rating. At what point does representation of childhood become too "adult" for children to see?

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