



fresh film festival 2002



Ma Vie En Rose

Study Guide: **Tony Tracy**

Ma Vie En Rose

Cast

Hanna	<i>Michele Laroque</i>
Pierre	<i>Jean Phillippe Echoffey</i>
Elisabeth	<i>Helene Vincent</i>
Ludovic	<i>Georges Du Fresne</i>
Albert	<i>Daniel Hanssens</i>
Lisette	<i>Laurence Bibot</i>
Jerome	<i>Julienne Rivierre</i>
Thierry	<i>Jean Francois Gallotte</i>
Monique	<i>Caroline Baehr</i>
Psychoanalyst	<i>Marie Bunuel</i>
Thom	<i>Gregory Diallo</i>
Jean	<i>Erik Cazals de Fabel</i>
Zoe	<i>Christina Barget</i>
Pam	<i>Delphine Cadet</i>
Raphella Santini	<i>Christine</i>

Crew

Director	<i>Alain Berliner</i>
Screenplay	<i>Chris Vander Stappene & Alain Berliner</i>
Producer	<i>Carole Scotta</i>
Cinematographer	<i>Yves Cape</i>
Costumes	<i>Karen Muller-Serreau</i>

Alain Berliner

Belgian director Alain Berliner made his feature film debut with 'Ma Vie En Rose.' After graduating with honors from the INSAS in Brussels, Alain went to work in various capacities on several public television projects for TF1. Alain's past TF1 projects include: 'Monsieur Victor' (1993), 'La Guerre Des Prives' (1993), 'Extreme Limite' (1992), 'A L'ombre De La Gloire' (1992) and 'Les Galettes De Maimie' (1991). In 1990 Alain's short fiction film titled 'Casino' was selected for the Cannes International Film Festival. Alain continues to be a reader and script analyst for the production house of D'Erwin Provoost, Multimedia in Brussels and teaches a class on scriptwriting at the C.R.R.A.V. in Lille. He is married and has two children.

Selected Filmography

- 'Le Mur' aka 'The Wall' (1998)
- 'Victor' (1997) (TV)
- 'Ma Vie En Rose' (1997)

Introduction

'Ma Vie En Rose' is a film quite unlike any other, so unusual are the characters and the half-real half-fantasy world they inhabit. Unusual too, is the way in which the director visualizes this world – full of vibrant colours, living dolls and plasticine landscapes. And yet, though its' story; of a young boy who believes that he is in fact a girl is probably unique in the history of cinema, the film contains themes and questions which are universal and recognizable. It raises issues felt at one time or other by most of us: issues of conformity and individuality, of the need for acceptance and the pain of exclusion, the importance of the support of our parents, the prejudice and even violence bred by the fear of difference. These issues go to the very heart of the problems of being human; in fact they are unique to being human – zebras don't count each others stripes, elephants don't laugh at another's small ears! 'Ma Vie En Rose' is then, a profoundly human film and despite the uniqueness of it's central story it should stir and involve an audience in South Africa as much as in it's native Belgium, in Limerick as much as Tel Aviv.

This short guide will attempt to engage with some of the issues raised by the film and hopefully stimulate debate and reflection among those who have seen it. We hope it will give some focus for reflection on a deceptively simple story which finds no easy answers for common and complex questions. The artistry and subtlety of Alain Berliner's remarkable debut film is especially welcome in a medium too often dominated by the simplistic morality of 'white hats' and 'black hats' and the easy satisfaction of a happy ending at all costs.

'Ma Vie En Rose'

dir. Alain Berliner/Belgium/1997/89 min



Director Alain Berliner with Georges Du Fresne

The Story

Ludovic, aged 7, lives in an unidentified suburb with his professional father, Pierre, his affectionate mother, Hanna, his big sister and two brothers. He believes profoundly that though he is a boy, in reality he is a girl and will one day grow up to be a woman. At first his parents and neighbours see this as harmless. But when he stages a 'wedding' to Jerome – the son of his father's boss Albert, opinions begin to change and trouble slowly brews in the family and community.

Ludovic is bullied at school; there is pressure for Pierre at work and there is tension for Hanna among the close-knit community of mothers. Despite the intervention of Hanna's more open-minded mother and the efforts of a psychotherapist, conflict also develops between husband and wife, father and son, and eventually, even between Ludovic and his increasingly exasperated mother. A crisis is reached when Pierre loses his job and the family are forced to relocate to a far off region of France.

The family begin to settle in to a new suburban community, although events seem to have a taken a toll on their confidence and the quality of their relationships. Ludovic, now with short, boyish hair, remains removed and passes his time sitting on a street bench looking at a poster for 'Le Monde de Pam.' A climactic confrontation occurs when his new friend, a tomboy named Christine, swaps costumes with him at her party, and his mother fears that the family will be in for a repeat of their former experience. She angrily remonstrates with the boy who runs away in shame and terror. When Hanna comes to her senses, the excess of her response seems to have brought about a catharsis of sorts and she warmly embraces Ludovic. The boy and his parents achieve a reconciliation but a doubt remains as to how long it will last.

First Impressions

The best start to any discussion about a film is your immediate response to it. How did you feel about it right after you watched it? Later you can go back and look at these responses and see if they have changed in the meantime. Very often they do. Use the following questions to get you started.

Did you like/dislike the film? Or perhaps both? Why?

Did you find the film credible/believable? Were there aspects which were unbelievable? How did this issue of credibility/believability affect your response to the film?

What about the characters? Were they believable/unbelievable? In what way?

What did you think of Ludovic? Did you like him? What did the actor bring to the character?

*What about the overall look of the film? How would you describe it?
How does it contribute to the story?*

Was the ending satisfactory? Was it what you were expecting?

Overall, would you recommend this film to someone else? Why?

Context

The notion of identity

Although 'Ma Vie En Rose' is about a very particular and unusual set of circumstances, we might suggest that at its core the film is about a universal theme: identity. This is a vague and at times difficult to understand concept that seems to crop up a lot where the discussion of stories and plays are concerned. This is probably not a coincidence; stories of all kinds generally involve human characters and



one of the central questions for the human condition has always been ‘who am I?’ It has long been a powerful and provocative question for people everywhere. Depending on circumstances and influences it has been answered in many different ways, in different cultures, in different historical eras. For some it is bound up with religious belief: who you are depends on what God you believe in and where you see yourself fitting into his/her plans. Or it might be answered in relation to your country or your race or whether you are rich or poor, powerful or weak, male or female. Numerous factors, many of them beyond our control, affect our sense of identity.

But regardless of these factors we can say one thing with some certainty on the matter: *identity is always formed in relation to others*. This is its inherent contradiction. Although our identity is unique to us alone, it is bound up in very strong ways with the attitudes, beliefs, even the prejudices of others. It is not conceived in isolation.

Another reason why identity may be so popular a theme in films and books is that it is not a fixed concept. It is open to revision and change. This is particularly true in the years of adolescence where we try out different identities but it is true throughout our lives and is dependent, again, on circumstances and influences. So it is a constantly mutating concept which involves reflection, introspection and modification.

Identity then, is about how we see and feel about ourselves. But it is formed and informed by our relationships with others. It is more than an ID card – a set of dates and statistics; but these statistics and dates are central to the process. Try the following questions in forming a more complete ID card of yourself.

ID 2002

First Name:

Home Address:

Age:

Family Name:

School Address:

Gender:

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So far, so normal. We have verifiable, statistical information. But let's look at the information a little more closely. How has each answer helped to form your sense of yourself and others ideas about you? If any question had a different answer to the one you wrote down, would this be different?

Now add more information, for a more complete sense of who you are.

Favourite sport:

Favourite band/singer:

Favourite song:

Favourite book:

Favourite item of clothing:

What do you do in your spare time?

This gives us a fuller picture of you, more subjective than before, based on information relating to your tastes. If you answered these questions five years ago or even five years from now would they be different? In what ways? Why? To complete the ID card however we need something more abstract, less about information than perception. You should answer the following questions confidentially.

How would you describe yourself? How would your friends/peers describe you? Is there a difference between the two?

Have you ever wanted to be different than you are? If so, in what ways and why?

Self and Society

Relationships in 'Ma Vie En Rose'

'Ma Vie En Rose' focuses on the story of Ludovic – a 7 yr old boy who believes he is a girl. Why does he believe this? We don't know. Is it a crazy idea? It seems so to everyone except Ludovic. And his grandmother. What is most striking about the film is that although it is about Ludovic's crisis of identity, he is the only one who doesn't really seem to be having a crisis. He remains more or less calm while his family go gradually berserk.

Significantly, the director very rarely shows us Ludovic alone. We see him at parties, in school, with his family or with his friends. This is very important in conveying to us that Ludovic's 'problem' – if it is a problem – is bound up with his relationships to others. If Ludovic was alone, would there be a 'problem'? Of course the answer to this question is irrelevant because neither Ludovic nor any of us are ever, really alone. So how do each of the main relationships in his life affect and respond to his conviction that he is a girl trapped in a boy's body? What are the central relationships in Ludovic's life?

We might divide the relationships in Ludovic's life into two general categories:

Home:

Private World

Neighbourhood:

Public World

Private World

Ludovic is introduced to us at the beginning of the film not as an isolated individual but as a member of a typical suburban family. In the opening scene his family are hosting some kind of party for the neighbourhood. The neighbours come in their droves – they are obviously a popular family. His father introduces his wife, 'the pretty one', his children, 'the brainy one' and 'the naughty one'. Intercut with this scene is someone at a dressing table, putting on make-up and clothes. The way the camera shoots this person makes it difficult to establish if it is a male or female, although the adult shoes do indicate a child. Then, interrupting the father's introduction of his family, Ludovic emerges from the house, dressed mostly in his mother's clothing. What can he say? How can he explain this apparition? So he simply says, "this is Ludovic, – the joker."

This scene is very important for many reasons and manages, in a very short space of time, to establish many of the central themes as well as the tone of the film. Above all, it introduces one of the central relationships in the story: that between Ludovic and his father.

Father

What kind of person is Ludovic's father? Did you like him?

How does his relationship with Ludovic change over the course of the film?

Ludovic's father Pierre comes across in this opening scene as proud of his family, and unquestionably the one in charge. He is the unchallenged head of the household – a position he has worked for and earned.

The structure of the family and the way it is presented to us is typical of the 'rules' or traditions of western society. In this tradition, the male adult is head of the family unit, while the adult female is charged with keeping the house and raising the children, all of whom are expected to honour and respect their parents and, as far as possible, cause them as little difficulty as possible. Of course, this version of family life, if it ever existed, is increasingly rare today. But it is nonetheless still represented as 'ideal.' The advantage of this ideal for many is also its disadvantage: that it is too conservative, too limiting and too restrictive of individuals. It expects them to behave according to their role rather than their nature. When they can't or don't want to follow the established pattern of behaviour the ideal breaks down. And that causes problems for everyone.

We can see that Ludovic's father believes in this idealised, traditional view of family in the way he introduces his own. Each is put into a box, a category. Thus his wife is 'the pretty one' – that is the extent of her role and one which is in keeping with her gender. A successful man like he



is should have a pretty wife. The children are also described according to their relationship with the expectations of the father. One is 'brainy' another 'naughty.' But Ludovic leaves the father at a loss. How can he be explained? He can't, but the father tries anyway. 'The Joker' is the card that can be left out of the card game but not out of the deck. It is a card without function, but is still there. By calling his son 'the joker', Pierre is admitting that he doesn't understand him, doesn't know what to do with him, because he can't be put into a category. Later this definition will be turned against Pierre, when Ludovic will make the family a joke in the eyes of their neighbours.

This way of defining his family, according to types, 'the... one', displays a central characteristic of Pierre's personality: his desire for control. Western society is often described as *Patriarchal* – that is, ruled according to the controlling desires of the father – and this is certainly the case in the neighbourhood where the film is set. In the early part of the film this control is under threat and Pierre seems unable to deal with it.

But even if he is threatened by Ludovic he is not quite a bully. Think of the father-figures in films like 'Dead Poets Society', 'My Left Foot' or any number of films about fathers and their sons and you can see how different it is here. In a significant scene at the family dinner table Pierre once again tries to correct the behaviour of Ludovic who has decided that he will marry his class mate Jerome when they grow up. 'Jerome's Daddy is Albert and Albert is Daddy's boss', he shouts at him, in an attempt to explain how damaging this abnormal behaviour may become. Storming from the house he is seen doing pull-ups in the garden, reasserting his masculinity and physical strength. Only Ludovic comes after him. In a tender contrast to what has been said, the two walk back into the house hand-in-hand.

This scene tells us much about Pierre's feelings for his son, who he clearly loves. He is torn between that emotion and his place, as a man, in society. He hopes that Ludovic can be cured, that his behavior can be 'corrected' by a psychologist. He persists in this belief because his own identity as a male and as a father is heavily dependent on it. When he is laid off from his job he gradually



goes a little mad, because he can no longer feel secure about what is 'normal' and what is not.

Discuss Pierre's understanding of what it means to be a man.

'It's a man's world'. Do you agree?

Compare 'Ma Vie En Rose' with another film or story from the point of view of the relationship between fathers and sons.

Mother

What kind of woman is Hanna? Did you like her?

In contrast to Pierre, Ludovic's mother seems a good deal more sensitive and accepting of her little boy's penchant for dressing up. She doesn't quite encourage it, but she is not so quick to judge or condemn. Partly this is to do with the fact that she herself displays some of the same personality traits as Ludo. She is pretty and enjoys fashion and looking well. In keeping with traditional, clichéd definitions of femininity she looks after her appearance and displays a *joie de vivre* – a love of life – with her extroverted personality.

But she also shares with her husband a generally conservative nature and view of appropriate behavior. After the opening scene in the garden she affectionately scolds Ludo, telling him that 'young people search for their identity'. This is how she explains his personality – as a phase he will grow out of. When he doesn't, it has an equally traumatic effect on her relationship with her son.

More patient than Pierre, she too subscribes to the view that Ludovic can be 'cured.' When he isn't, she also goes into a state of crisis. She blames him on their shunning by society and even goes as far as sending him to live with his grandmother who seems much less troubled by his conviction. Ludo's refusal to conform seems to affect her sense of herself as much as it does her husband. By the time the family moves to another part of France she is seen smoking constantly and has changed from being glamorous and outgoing to being introverted and bitter.

Grandmother

The only member of Ludovic's family who accepts him completely for what he is, is his Grandmother. Living alone, she hasn't seen her grandson for five years and holds no prejudices or concerns about what other people think. Like Ludovic she has a strong belief in the power of the imagination and also dreams of being different than she is; in her case, young again. Because they share this distance with reality and with the values of others Ludovic and his Grandmother become firm friends. But it is interesting to note that although he eventually moves in with her for a time, she never quite replaces his mother or family in his own mind. Certainly he is close to her and she provides shelter and support to him at an important time, but the film never simply gives up on the hope of Ludovic's acceptance by his parents. When they decide to move away from the neighbourhood to a different part of France his mother offers him the choice of staying behind with his 'Granny'. We sense that she wishes he would, and rid the family of the troubles they have experienced. We don't hear the end of that conversation, but soon afterwards we see him in their new home, still being blamed for their situation.



Public World

Ludovic's experiences in the film are divided between the private world of his family and the public world of the idealised neighbourhood where he lives. These two worlds are separate but become increasingly inter-connected as the film proceeds, with the public world exerting an overwhelming influence on the lives of Ludovic's family – almost threatening to destroy it at one point. By end of the film, however, the two are in a proper relationship again and the nucleus of the family unit is restored to its' central position.

The film, as we have seen, opens with a party – a party which invites the neighbourhood into the domain of Ludovic's family. A large banner over their lawn says as much: 'Welcome to our home.' This gesture of goodwill will have painful and destructive consequences as their neighbours become more and more intrusive on the family and its' view of itself.

The unnamed neighbourhood is presented in a highly stylized and ironic manner. In a scene closely reminiscent of Tim Burton's 'Edward Scissorhands' we see its' inhabitants leave for school/work simultaneously, all leaving their perfect homes with perfect families in harmony with themselves and each other. There is an oppressive atmosphere of conformity and sameness. In this world there are no homeless, no single parents, no immigrants or other races. There are certainly no homosexuals or anyone who challenges the status quo, either explicitly or implicitly. Religion plays only a minor part. Belief has been reduced to behaviour – the emphasis is on the external.

This emphasis on appearance and behavior is effectively underlined in the first scene set in the school Ludovic attends, where the students are engaged in a 'show and tell' activity. The subject of the activity is their toys. The items brought to school follow the predictable traditions of male and female interests; 'not another Gameboy', bemoans the teacher. Ludovic alone differs in his toy – he has brought the Barbie and Ken inspired Pam and Ben. The teacher, deflecting any possibility

of controversy assumes that he wants to be like Ben, because he has a crush on the girl who has also brought the same dolls.

The world of Pam and Ben functions in the film as an alternative public world where Ludovic can behave in a more natural and less restrained manner. It is never really explained why it might be more attractive to him, but that is not really the point. Its importance and significance in the story is that it is a fantasy world; it is where Ludovic escapes in his imagination but it is unattainable. It's defining characteristic is freedom.

Albert

As we have noted, Ludovic's neighbours become an increasingly dominant presence in the private world of the family as the story unfolds. Albert in particular; as Pierre's boss he has tangible power and importance in their future and eventually comes to use that influence in a malicious manner. As the most developed character outside of the family he can be seen to represent the interests and prejudices of the community at large.

As with other characters in the film, the director introduces an element of complexity into our response to Albert. On the one hand he is a bully. He intimidates Pierre and eventually fires him because of Ludovic's relationship with his son Jerome. At the beginning of the film Jerome also showed an interest in dressing up, leading to a friendship between the two boys. Not long afterwards however, this seems to have passed when he requests to be moved to a new seat in school for fear of going to hell; based on advice from his father. He is also revealed as hypocritical – his behaviour hiding darker impulses. In a memorable and slightly confusing scene Hanna walks up to Albert, soon after he has fired her husband, and kisses him passionately. This family man of impeccable morals gladly accepts, only remembering himself when his wife begins to berate him, with accusations of fancying all the women of the neighbourhood. We suspect she may be right. But in a telling comment he warns Pierre to keep Ludovic away from Jerome because he has lost one child – his daughter – and doesn't 'want to lose another one.' In including the detail about the dead child the director gives subtlety to Albert's prejudice by suggesting that it may be inspired by fear and even hurt.

Still, this does not excuse his actions. No more than it excuses the behaviour of the other parents when they sign a petition to remove Ludovic from the school. This is a classic act of 'witchhunting' – the hunting down of an individual by a community because s/he is different in some way and so is seen as a threat to society. It's a theme found in many plays and films; Arthur Miller's 'The Crucible', Chekov's 'Enemy of the People', Tim Burton's film 'Edward Scissorhands', and Fritz Lang's 'Fury' to name but a few. The school Principal gives in to public pressure, not because he agrees with it but because the parents pay the fees of the private school he heads. He is the most unforgivable kind of coward who puts personal survival before issues of right and wrong.

Brave New World

Only one character seems indifferent to the opinions of others – Ludovic. He wishes only for the love and approval of his family. In order to achieve this he withdraws completely from public relationships when they move to their new home. He refuses the friendship of tomboy Christine for fear of repeating his experience with Jerome. It is only when her mother goes to see Hanna and insists on his coming to her party that he begins to re-engage with other children – a development which has initially disastrous consequences when he exchanges his costume for a dress. At first Hanna is enraged, but is calmed when Christine explains that it was her 'fault' – she made Ludo change. His mother realises that she has overreacted, though not through her own judgement but as a result of Christine's mother. Chasing after him she is drawn momentarily into the fantasy world of Pam and Ben, but instead of flying, she sinks.

Significantly, Hanna is the only other person to enter Ludovic's imagined world of Pam and Ben. That she cannot fly reveals a failure of imagination but that she managed to get there at

all is an achievement all the same. The scene reveals an attempt by her to understand Ludovic on his own terms, not hers. This is a major breakthrough. After her 'shock' she tells him that 'you will always be my child', finally acknowledging his uniqueness and closing the private world to the detrimental influence of the public.

Examine the relationship between the public and the private in 'Ma Vie En Rose'. Why, in your opinion, does Hanna kiss Albert after her husband is fired? What does it show us?

What is the purpose of Pam and Ben in the film?

Why are 'Tomboys' like Christine more accepted by society than boys who behave like girls?

Does the importance of public opinion have any bearing on the decisions taken in private in Ireland?

In your opinion do we pay too much attention to the opinions of others?

Imagine the scene between Albert and Pierre during which Ludovic's father gets fired. What kind of conversation takes place?

Thematic Readings

'Ma Vie En Rose' contains a number of inter-related, though distinct themes. Here we outline three of the most important:

Conformity

A study of the theme of conformity in the film is closely related to the theme of the individual in society, which we have explored in the section dealing with relationships. Ludo will not conform, much to the dismay of his parents and the community. His denial of his gender is a very uncomfortable challenge to 'the way things are' – the traditions of the society. What is interesting is the way in which that society responds to such a challenge.

At first it is simply laughed off and seen as a joke or just the innocence and ignorance of a child. Boys should be 'handsome' not 'pretty' explains his mother. His interest in dressing up is an experiment that he will grow out of. When he doesn't grow out of it, his parents move from viewing his belief that he is a girl as a joke, to an illness. If he cannot see 'reason' (their reason), then he must be mentally disturbed in some way. Equally they believe that he can still be cured and brought around to correct behaviour by the insights of psychology. But this too fails. Now they view his actions as belligerence – a deliberate act of defiance, an act of subversion. Ludovic has set out, they believe, to humiliate them.

In response to the consequences of Ludovic's actions for their social status, his parents shun him – sending him to live with his grandmother. When they move, he is explicitly blamed for what has happened to them. In a sense they are right. The community to which they belonged does not want someone as 'different' as Ludovic living amongst it. He is therefore associated with 'hell' and evil.

His parents finally accept Ludovic because their new community does not have the same standards of conformity. Because of this, they finally learn to accept his uniqueness as a positive attribute, not a negative one.

Discuss the theme of conformity as it pertains to 'Ma Vie En Rose'.

Watch 'What's Eating Gilbert Grape' or 'Edward Scissorhands' and write a comparative essay on the way in which these films deal with the theme of conformity.

Write an essay outlining the benefits and drawbacks of conformity for a society.

Gender

Gender is a central issue in the film – what it means to be male or female. Although we can answer this question easily in terms of biology, the reality of the experience of gender is often much more complicated. Despite the fact that we are all ‘gendered’, it is a subject which makes many people very uncomfortable.

Why do you think this is?

List what you consider to be the main characteristics of being male and female under the following headings:

- Appearance (including clothing)
- Behaviour
- Interests
- Occupation

Are the lists similar or different? How many of the differences are real or created/traditional?

In ‘Ma Vie En Rose’ gender differences are very clearly presented. The men work and drive cars and have authority, while the women are located in the domestic world of child raising and looking after the family home. The men are presented as natural while the women like to cut their hair and generally look attractive. Boys play with trucks and football while the girls play with dolls. There is no in-between. Ludovic does not fit into this scheme of behaviour. He believes himself to be cross-gendered, a ‘boygirl’ as he says. But while he seems happy to accept this, no one else is and he is emotionally and physically punished for this blurring of boundaries.

At one point Ludovic tries to conform to expectations in the way he dresses and behaves. This raises the performance aspect of gender – that we learn how to behave as men and



women. This is an important insight in that it complicates the idea that male and female behaviour is simply a 'natural' and spontaneous response to biology. Rather, it suggests, gender is partly a product of society. Albert confirms this view when he suggests to Pierre that the reason why Ludovic behaves the way he does, is because he spends too much time with his mother. In other words, he can learn to behave like a man by spending more time with his father.

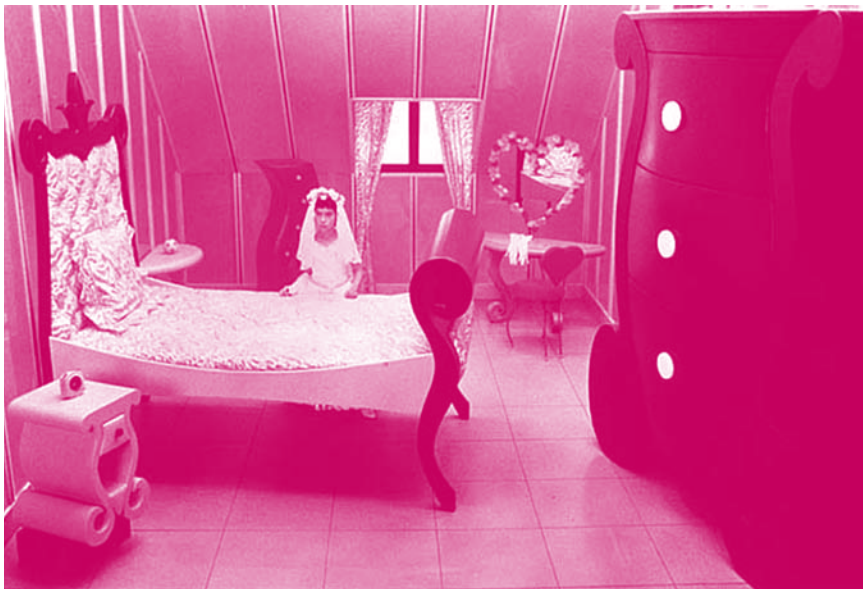
Ludo is called a 'homosexual' by one of the neighbours. This is often used as a label to mock men who do not seem to display the necessary characteristics of manhood. Why should this be seen as an insult? And what does this say about the way our society views men who love men or women in same-sex relationships? What is so threatening about such relationships that people should be ridiculed and even be subject to emotional or physical violence?

Ludovic is not homosexual – not in the strict sense of the word anyway. He is 7 years old and as such is pre-sexual. But it is nonetheless frightening that he does not behave like a typical 7 year-old boy for his classmates and neighbours. And fear can lead to extreme responses. He is seen as an evil influence that must be removed.

Discuss the treatment of the theme of gender in the film.

Do you agree with the idea that 'gender is about performance, not biology'?

What are the gender expectations of the society in which you live?



Fantasy and Reality

Throughout the film, the opposition and conflict between fantasy and reality is a recurring motif. We are introduced to the reality of the world of the film at the very start when, like the community, we are welcomed to the party. Some time later, this world is disrupted by the unannounced imaginings of Ludovic, who takes the audience on a fantasy journey in the world of Pam and Ben. It takes a moment or two to understand what is going on; there is no signal, such as a bell or a wavy screen to indicate that we are entering a 'dream world'. The implication is that, for Ludo, the fantasy world is as real as the one he physically occupies. The reality of this world is confirmed near the end of the film when his mother accidentally enters it when running after him, only to fall out of it again just as quick. On several occasions Pam appears to Ludo as a real person, someone who understands and accepts him for what he really is.

The existence of a fantasy world is not a new idea in fiction. It is a device used in classic children's stories like 'Peter Pan', 'Alice in Wonderland', 'The Wizard of Oz' and 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe'. It can be seen in films like 'The Matrix', 'Toy Soldiers' and 'Stargate.' It allows the storyteller to put characters in extreme and 'unnatural' situations and show us how they react. Often it is used as a way of creating an alternative world which shows up the structures and beliefs of our own, for good or ill. In Ludovic's case the world of Pam and Ben is one where he flies free. It is a simple world without judgment, expectation or consequence. It is, in short, the very opposite to his own.

The director of 'Ma Vie En Rose' complicates this tradition. The reality that Ludovic tries to escape is not so very real at begin with. It is a highly stylized and almost artificial world of perfect families and loud colours and sunflowers in almost every shot. This is no more real than 'Le Monde du Pam' in the billboard poster. It is a world of superficialities. People smile and look friendly on the outside, but inside they are plagued with insecurities and doubts. This 'reality', the darker side of suburban self-satisfaction, begins to seep through the cracks that Ludovic creates in the artifice. So the use of the fantasy/reality device is a clever way of exposing the contradictions of the neighbourhood.

Style

An important and striking aspect of 'Ma Vie En Rose' is the director's use of cinematic style – the way in which he visualizes the story. Even the film's title suggests a film in which colour will play an important part. A film begins with a script and has to be adapted for the screen by a team of technicians and craftspeople working under the guidance of the director. Elements of cinematic style include:

Lighting

Costume

The position and the movement of the camera

The décor and the setting of scenes

The use of colour and special effects

The use of music and sound

The look of the film is a contradictory one. On the one hand there are recognizable cars, houses and costumes which belong to modern, everyday life. On the other, there is a strong sense of artificiality and exaggeration in the way these elements appear on screen. The colour scheme in particular seems excessive and garish. There are very few dark or muted colours. Instead primary and pastel shades predominate, especially yellow and orange. This is especially true in the film's fantasy sequences featuring Pam but colour dominates the real scenes too. The overall effect is of a heightened reality – a reality certainly, but one in which exaggerated behaviour and emotions take place.

The art direction of the film emphasises the importance of appearances in the world

of the film, which as we have seen, is a central theme of the story. By foregrounding appearance and surface, the director gives us an insight into the characters and atmosphere of the neighbourhood they inhabit. It also adds dignity and sympathy to the character of Ludovic who is clearly at ease with beauty and fashion. For the adults appearance is a means of dressing up, of disguising and pretending. But for Ludovic, paradoxically, dressing up is an expression of his true self, the outward manifestation of his inner feelings. His self-conscious externalising of these feelings is scandalous in a community which works hard at separating the two.

The separation of physical appearance from a more complete response to the individual is underlined in the film by the repeated isolation of body parts by the camera. From the film's opening scenes there are close-ups of lips, ears and feet – all separated from a wider portrait of the individual. During the football games we don't see players but rather their feet; their identity reduced to their function in the match. Elsewhere there are many instances where the director only includes part of a person's body in the frame – sometimes in the foreground, other times in the background. Again the effect is only a partial picture of a character, concentrating on one physical aspect to the detriment of a wider appreciation of him or her. By using the camera in this very deliberate and self-conscious manner the director is able to communicate visually one of the story's most important themes.

Take each of the categories of style above and write a brief note on how they are used in the film.

How would you describe the overall visual tone of the story?

What visual inspirations might the film makers have looked at and drawn on for the film?

Compare the visual style of the film with that of another film of your choice.

Last Word

The major issue dealt with in 'Ma Vie En Rose' is the question of identity; of who we are and how our identity is constructed by both our inherent characteristics and by the influences of the society we live in. The film questions the notion of 'self' and what our true nature is and perhaps offers suggestions about how this question can be ultimately answered.