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Classical Cinema: Transmediating *La Princesse de Clèves*

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Since its first publication in 1678, *La Princesse de Clèves* has inspired an exceptionally rich corpus of criticism, numerous literary variations and, over the last decades, several cinematographic adaptations: Jean Delannoy's historicizing, fairytale-izing *La Princesse de Clèves* (1961); Manoel de Oliveira's *A Carta/La Lettre* (1999), an eminently textualized film, accentuating the plot's religious dimension; Andrzej Żuławski's *La Fidélité* (2000), problematizing also adaptational 'fidelity' between *esprit* and *lettre*; Christophe Honoré's *La Belle Personne* (2008), a 'proposition de lecture' of Lafayette's novel in the context of the notorious Sarkozy affair; finally, Régis Sauder's documentary *Nous, princesses de Clèves* (2011), restaging Lafayette's royal court in northern Marseille's ZEP-*Lycée Diderot* and, thus, raising controversial topics concerning the transmission of a common cultural heritage, the ambivalences of 'high culture' between symbolic violence and emancipatory potential. This article proposes a comparative analysis of these five filmic *Princesses*, with a particular focus on metamedial self-reflexivity, gender/queer as well as postcolonial and intercultural perspectives.

KEYWORDS Lafayette, *La Princesse de Clèves*, cinematographic adaptation, Jean Delannoy, Manoel de Oliveira, Andrzej Żuławski, Christophe Honoré, Régis Sauder

Text and context: a classic across time and media (introduction)

Since its first publication in 1678, *La Princesse de Clèves*, particularly mighty 'macchina per generare interpretazioni' (cf. Eco's [(1983) 1990: 507] definition of the novel), has inspired an exceptionally rich corpus of criticism, numerous literary variations and, over the last decades, several cinematographic adaptations. This paper proposes

a comparative analysis of these five very different filmic *Princesses*: Jean Delannoy's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1961, co-written by Jean Cocteau), Manoel de Oliveira's *A Carta/La Lettre* (1999), Andrzej Żuławski's *La Fidélité* (2000), Christophe Honoré's *La Belle Personne* (2008) and finally, Régis Sauder's artistic documentary *Nous, princesses de Clèves* (released in 2011).¹

Lafayette's 'roman impossible' (cf. Niderst, 1973: 187ff.) undoubtedly presents quite a challenge for any project of adaptation across the media, for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. First of all, there is the historical distance, the text's own double historicity, its patrimonial and also, especially since the first decade of the twenty-first century, highly political status: after Nicolas Sarkozy's (in-)famous remarks,² the *Princesse* became not only (once again) a bestseller, but also an 'outil de combat' (Merlin-Kajman, 2010: 64) — a function that does not exactly favour subtle, in-depth readings. If this new *querelle*³ testifies to the 'vitality' of Lafayette's work (Grande, 2010), the strange duel 'Une princesse contre le Président' (Merlin-Kajman, 2009) has, in some respects, also furthered its reactive sacro-sanctification, challenging us to address the question of its actuality or actualizability in a non-trivial sense.

For the reception of the last two *Princesse* films to date, Honoré's *La Belle Personne* and Sauder's *Nous, princesses de Clèves*, this context inevitably weighs in as a crucial factor. If Honoré considers his film as an artistic 'démenti',⁴ 'une réponse au dénigrement présidentiel' (cf. Moreau, 2010: 9), Sauder assumes as well the additional political dimension of his project, conceived before Sarkozy's *Princesse*-bashing, declaring that his film can also be viewed as 'une réponse au débat sur l'identité nationale, à la ghettoïsation de l'enseignement et à l'éducation à deux vitesses' (qtd. in Fabre, 2011). However, both films may also be somewhat indebted to Sarkozy for their largely laudatory critical reception. Official reviews as well as amateurs' discussions in blogs and forums illustrate the particular dynamics of this context of reception where it seems utterly condemnable not to adore, for instance, *La Belle Personne* (and, thus, *La Princesse de Clèves*) against 'Sarkozy' (and everything this name stands for, cf. Badiou, 2007).⁵

Visibilizing the invisible: incarnating *La Princesse de Clèves*

Lafayette's novel tests the limits of cinematographic 'adaptability' also because of its intrinsic qualities. This text, extremely visual and highly abstract at the same time, poses, to any filmic project, the challenging task of visibilizing the invisible, a whole 'mental theatre'. Honoré's conspicuous use of numerous close-ups on his protagonists' faces — those 'semaphores of the soul' (cf. Balázs, [1924] 2003: 226) — has been interpreted as an attempt at imitating the effects of 'la voix intérieure en littérature' (cf. Honoré, 2008). In order to represent the force of fatality in a Jansenist-inspired context, Delannoy recurs to the personification of destiny: in his film, fate adopts the parodic face of actor Piéral, cast in the role of the malevolent court jester (cf. Delannoy, 1960). For the canonical characters, the question of filmic incarnation is also a very delicate one. In a series of hyperbolic descriptions, Lafayette depicts a court populated by 'tant de belles personnes' (Lafayette, [1678] 2014: 332), one more magnificent than the other; but her text, displaying a paradoxically disincarnated, 'socialized' corporality, 'hors de tout prosaïsme, de tout besoin élémentaire, de toute réalité charnelle clairement dite' (Werlen, [1998] 2012: 64), hardly offers any concrete physical details. How old is the

Prince? While Delannoy confronts a dashing juvenile Duc and a strict-looking quadragenarian Prince (Jean Marais, who, according to Delannoy [1960], would have been his Nemours fifteen years earlier), Honoré, some decades later, opts for the opposite age constellation: Nemours as a sexy adult Italian teacher, Otto (the Prince equivalent) as a tender blond schoolboy. Needless to say that these casting choices profoundly affect the dynamics of cinematographic ‘empathizing’. What does the Princess ‘really’ look like? This seemingly naïve question — a tribute to referential illusion — becomes a crucial one, when confronted with the task of intermedial transfer. In Lafayette’s text (inscribing this piece of information in a sophisticated code of passion), she is blonde; she has white skin and regular features; apart from that, this ‘beauté parfaite’ (Lafayette, [1678] 2014: 337) remains abstract — a little less abstract, nevertheless, than her spouse the Prince and the handsome Duc de Nemours, presented succinctly as ‘un chef-d’œuvre de la nature’ (Ibid.: 333).

Predictably, our corpus has provoked a clash of different images of the novel’s protagonists, varying according to historical and contemporary standards of beauty,⁶ but also idiosyncratic preferences. While an amateur critic judges Delannoy’s casting decidedly erroneous (‘J’ai toujours trouvé que les rôles du Duc de Nemours et du Prince de Clèves auraient dû être inversés’), Delacomptée (2012: 23) rather dislikes Oliveira’s Princess, incarnated by Chiara Mastroianni, ‘too old’, not blonde enough. It is true that Lafayette’s heroine — for once, the reader is given a piece of concrete information — is fifteen, then sixteen years old; but — age being also a sociohistorical category — she is hardly a teenager in our modern sense. Several years after Oliveira, Honoré’s schoolgirl Princess scandalizes other Lafayette readers and cinephiles: ‘Et une Mme de Clèves de 16 ans lycéenne, mais quelle horreur!’⁸

As for Mastroianni’s dark beauty, we are confronted with a rather striking phenomenon. Given that her blond hair is one of the scarce details of the heroine’s appearance Lafayette informs us about, one might be surprised to discover that, after Delannoy, there is not a single blonde Princess in our whole corpus. ‘[...] j’aime mieux les brunes que les blondes’ (Valincour, [1678] 2001: 143): our postmodern filmic gentlemen, all of them preferring brunettes, seem to take Valincour’s strict ‘grammarian’ *à la lettre*, setting a counterpoint to Lafayette’s portrait, but also — or above all — to Delannoy’s Marina Vlady, unsurpassable Princess archetype in the genre blonde beauty.

A Lafayettian fairy tale? Jean Delannoy’s *La Princesse de Clèves*

The *Princesse de Clèves*’s career as a movie star starts, thus, with Delannoy’s homonymous film, co-authored by Jean Cocteau, awarded, in 1961, the *Grand Prix du Cinéma français*.⁹ Delannoy, quite a *bête noire* for the young New Wave critics and directors, reviled in Truffaut’s famous article *Une certaine tendance du cinéma français* (cf. Truffaut, [1954] 2008), creates an (at first glance at least) very faithful — or even ‘too faithful’? (cf. Lecompte, 2009: 312f.) — adaptation, marked by an oneiric and fairy-tale-esque aesthetic (Oster, 2009: 131). This ‘pellicule de faux classicisme’ (Chapiro, 2009: 53) is the first (and to date the last) *Princesse* in historical costumes and decors; a somewhat anachronistic choice even at the moment of the film’s creation: Roger Vailland, co-scenarist for Vadim’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses* 1960 (1959), severely condemns the

historicizing costume drama, reserved to those ‘qui n’ont rien à dire sur leur temps ou qui n’osent pas le dire’ (qtd. in Hagen, 2012: 75).

After Delannoy, there is a large gap in the *Princesse*’s cinematographic history. For nearly four decades, this version will conserve its unique status, a fact that has contributed to the archetypalization of heroine Marina Vlady, the iconic face of the Princess in a French cultural imaginary, embellishing even the cover of a historical work on *La Princesse de Clèves et son château* (cf. Rambaud, 2006).¹⁰ From this point on, the creation of every new filmic *Princesse* will be a multiple adaptational process, the respective scriptwriters and directors facing also their cinematographic pre-history; not coincidentally, all of these later films distinguish themselves by their high degree of metamedial self-reflexivity.

Thus, how to adapt *La Princesse de Clèves* in a postmodern context? Let’s take a small step aside: this question is also reflected in literary discourse.

A Lafayettean nightmare: adaptation as parody

In his novel *Chambres d’hôtes* (1999), Stéphane Denis stages a fictional *Princesse*-adaptation project by a British broadcasting company with the promising name ‘Nightmare Productions’. In a parodical manner, he thematizes all the tricky — aesthetic, ideological, but also commercial — questions brought up by the adaptation of a literary classic, the troubles of (multiple) ‘authority’ across the media as well as, once again, the problem of adequate incarnation: the scenarist is a bit startled upon his first meeting with the ‘Princess’, a glamorous, alcohol-affine diva welcoming him ‘avec le même sourire que les vendeuses d’Agent Provocateur’ (Denis, 1999: 40).

If the production team is constantly quarrelling about everything, there is at least one consensual point: no postmodern *Princesse de Clèves* without sex. Nonchalantly, producer and director dismiss the scriptwriter’s cautious objection (‘Eh bien [...] ce ne sera plus tout à fait *La Princesse de Clèves*’), declaring that ‘il faut parfois savoir dépasser les auteurs’ (1999: 32f.).¹¹ At the same time, they also insist on a certain dose of Hollywoodian sentimentality: to aggravate the adulterous heroine’s moral scruples, a child is needed: hence, the introduction of a new character in Lafayette’s successfully sexed-up plot, namely ‘Le Petit Prince’ (1999: 34). Homosexual film director, Peter d’Assy, strongly favours the idea of queering the Duc de Nemours (1999: 53, 88); but Denis has his characters discuss also the question of postcolonial political correctness or ‘la question des minorités’ (1999: 52). In a metaleptic play throughout the whole novel, the *Princesse*’s plot is also parodically restaged on the level of diegetic reality: the Princess- and Nemours-actors — regularly called, as well as the ‘Prince’, by their role names, even beyond the film set — are, in fact, a couple, well past the euphoric period of mutual infatuation, permanently attacking each other, occasionally using a *Princesse de Clèves*-pocket edition as a non-lethal intertextual weapon (1999: 82).

Retour à Port-Royal: religion and theatricality in Manoel de Oliveira’s La Lettre

In the same year, Manoel de Oliveira presents his adaptation, awarded the *Prix du jury* at the festival of Cannes: *A carta/La Lettre* (the eponymous letter is a red — or

rather paper-white — herring: it is *not* the famous lost gallant letter in Lafayette's text). Oliveira restages his *Princesse* in contemporary Paris, not only but also for financial reasons ('Une reconstitution d'époque aurait été hors de prix', as the director himself declares, cf. Frodon, 1999). The contrast between this modern setting and the protagonists' anachronistic morals, but also their classical language, is one of the film's aesthetic principles. On an ideological level, Oliveira strongly accentuates a religious dimension, tying in with Lafayette's Jansenist context; he introduces the crucial character of a religious confidante, living at 'Port-Royal': heroine Catherine¹² confesses her trials and tribulations under the eyes of a portrait of Angélique Arnauld. Posing once again one of the controversial questions of Lafayette criticism (how much religion is there in *La Princesse de Clèves*?), *La Lettre* illustrates to what extent adaptation is always already an interpretation. However, Oliveira's '*théâtre filmé*' (cf. Brink, 2009: 120), conceived as 'le contraire d'un cinéma commercial américain' (Oliveira in Frodon, 1999), also raises another much-debated issue: how theatrical is Lafayette's novel?¹³ *La Lettre*, an eminently textualized meta-film, demands to be read also in a very concrete sense: the strategically anachronistic use of text inserts obviously refers to the history of early cinema; but, less obviously, Oliveira addresses also the vast tradition of *Princesse*-criticism.¹⁴

A postmodern *Princesse* en abyme: metamediality in Andrzej Żuławski's *La Fidélité*

It would be tempting to read Żuławski's *La Fidélité*, released some months after *La Lettre*, as an 'answer' to Oliveira; alas, filming chronology forbids us to do so (cf. Oster, 2009: 134). Critics nevertheless tended to look out for potential 'petites touches oliveiriennes' (Bonnaud, 1999) in Żuławski's work, produced by the same company (Paulo Branco). While Oliveira's catholic 'filmed theatre' was quasi-unanimously well received, Żuławski's version was met with a considerable dose of scepticism and even hostility. Critical discourse about this film — an instructive example of 'fidelity criticism' (Hutcheon, 2006: 6) — inscribes itself in the framework of patrimonial celebration, the double defence of (literary and cinematographic) 'high art', 'l'immortel roman de Mme de La Fayette' (Guichard, 2000) as well as Oliveira's 'magnificent' masterpiece (Bonnaud, 1999) being played off against Żuławski's 'film d'erreurs et d'éclats' (Guichard, 2000).

Among several adaptations of pronounced metamedial sensibility, *La Fidélité* is also the most self-reflexive one, problematizing adaptational 'fidelity' between *esprit* and *lettre* (as Duffy [2009: 114] points out, *La Fidélité* might also be seen 'as a statement of self-irony', complemented, in 2001, by the publication of Żuławski's novel *Niewierność* [French version: *L'Infidélité*, 2003]). Lafayette's court metamorphoses into a media empire under the reign of trash king 'Lucien MacRoi', a panoptic microcosm of technically enhanced aggressive visuality.¹⁵ Żuławski stages a series of intermedial *mises en abyme*: upon her arrival at MacRoi's 'court', 'Princess' Clélia (Sophie Marceau) is welcomed by a colleague (corresponding to the 'Guise' character), reading a pocket edition of *La Princesse de Clèves*. A little absentmindedly, she flicks through the book's pages, until some illustrations — from Delannoy's adaptation — catch her attention. In this mini-scene, Żuławski creates a whole intermedial *Princesse de Clèves*-palimpsest (novel–film–screenshot–novel–film). He repeatedly plays with various details of Delannoy's cinematographic pretext (for instance, the thread of Nemours's

red velvet scarf — replacing, in Delannoy, the suggestive ‘canne des Indes’ in the nocturnal scene at Coulommiers — is delicately woven into his film). *La Fidélité* ends in an impression of metaleptic vertigo: Clélia watches her own story unfold once again on a TV screen, this time in English and under the title ‘The Princess of Cleve’ [*sic*],¹⁶ directed ‘by Fernand Nemo’ for ‘MacRoi Productions’ (in this sense, *La Fidélité* might, in analogy to Kellman’s [1980] concept of the ‘self-begetting novel’, also be read as a kind of ‘self-begetting film’).

Two princesses and a camera: Christophe Honoré’s *La Belle Personne*

The next adaptation continues in this metamedial vein. ‘Librement inspiré par *La Princesse de Clèves*’: Christophe Honoré, director and co-scenarist (with Gilles Taurand), considers his telefilm *La Belle Personne* — a paradoxical ‘answer’ to Sarkozy, radically depoliticized, ‘à l’inverse [...] du roman de Madame de La Fayette’ (Delavaud, 2011), on the diegetic level — less as an ‘adaptation’ than as ‘une proposition de lecture du roman’ (Honoré, 2008); in the same context, he also recurs to the metaphor of intermedial ‘infusion’. Honoré explicitly devalorizes the ‘forme pauvre’ of the scenario in contrast to ‘real’ literature (cf. Rigoulet & Pomares, 2009), declaring, at the same time, that ‘[l]a question de l’adaptation littéraire m’ennuie, c’est une question vaine, surtout dans le cinéma français où tous les bons cinéastes ont couché avec la littérature’ (Honoré, 2008).

In a film inevitably haunted by the ghosts of precedent Princesses, Honoré exorcises this past by partially restaging it: he confronts his own protagonist (Léa Seydoux) with Oliveira’s Chiara Mastroianni. For a brief moment of transgenerational and transfictional confusion, the two Princesses mirror each other, before Mastroianni leaves the set, relaying her position to Honoré’s adolescent heroine. The latter relives the double ‘passion’ of her Lafayettian ancestor in the setting of a reinterpreted ‘court’, a school *cour* — another panoptic microcosm, closed upon itself.¹⁷ This *lycéenne*-Princess corresponds also to a certain cinematographic trend starting with the 1990s, towards the adaptation of literary classics as teenage or coming-of-age dramas (one might also point to Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* [2000] or Roger Kumble’s *Cruel Intentions* [1999], cf. Hagen, 2012).

Pluralizing the *Princesse*: Régis Sauder’s *Nous, princesses de Clèves*

Honoré’s film is, in its turn, not only a cinematographic hyper- but also a hypotext. The adolescent protagonists of Régis Sauder’s *Nous, princesses de Clèves* watch, among other films, *La Belle Personne*, very well received, according to Sauder, in spite of the enormous social distance (cf. Baecque, 2011). In fact, with Sauder’s documentary — originally entitled *Ma princesse de Clèves*: the transition to the polyphonic *Nous, princesses de Clèves* retraces a whole creative process as ‘une aventure collective’ (Sauder, qtd. in Robert, 2010: 85) — we switch to the other end of contemporary French society, from the Parisian *beaux quartiers* to northern Marseille’s *banlieue sensible*, from the sixteenth arrondissement *Lycée Molière* to ZEP-*Lycée Denis Diderot*: just as Honoré, but in a non-fictional film, Sauder reinterprets Lafayette’s court as a school *cour*. In cooperation with Anne Tesson, teacher of French literature, he accompanies a group of students (all

of them from socioeconomically disadvantaged, in most cases immigrant, families) in their discovery of Lafayette's text.

In this context, *La Princesse de Clèves* is also and above all an 'objet institutionnel' (Robert, 2010: 90); reading Lafayette, for these protagonists — who display a considerable degree of self-reflexivity and 'la lucidité spéciale des dominés' (Bourdieu, 1998: 37) — inevitably leads to a confrontation with Franco-French tradition, with the ambivalences of 'high culture' between symbolic violence and enabling, emancipatory potential. However, in the face of the film's political relevance, one should not overlook its aesthetic qualities: Lafayette's text serves as a narrative matrix for the whole film — in this sense, 'bien plus qu'un documentaire', as Merlin-Kajman (2011) rightly remarks — beginning with a panoramic exploration of the new 'court', ending with the *bac* as the final stage of a very Lafayettean narrative of initiation (and, for some, of renouncement and retreat).

Love in translation: linguistic and narrative transformations

Besides their metamedial self-reflexivity, these films also possess a significant metaliterary and metalinguistic dimension; the play with elements of textuality reflects *en abyme* the process of cinematographic adaptation. Already in Delannoy's version, the rewriting of the fatal gallant letter constitutes a poetological key scene; even more so in Honoré, who stages multiple scenes of reading and (re-)writing: various school lessons involve the extra-filmic 'reader' in a game of intertextual and intermedial references (from Mallarmé to Pasternak, from Donizetti to Alain Barrière).

What becomes, in these adaptations, of Lafayette's classical text, between literal transfer and — partial — modernization? The Delannoy/Cocteau-version displays a high degree of linguistic 'fidelity'; in all subsequent adaptations, the contrast between a contemporary setting and classical discourse becomes an aesthetic device. Oliveira and his French translator Jacques Parsi, striving towards 'une langue actuelle mais dépourvue de tout idiotisme contemporain' (cf. Frodon, 1999), slightly modernize the dialogues of some key scenes, replacing, for instance, Lafayette's courteous 'vous' with 'tu': 'Eh bien, je vais te faire un aveu qu'on n'a jamais fait à son mari' (*La Lettre*, 58:05–07, cf. Lafayette, [1678] 2014: 419). In Żuławski's *La Fidélité*, this small modification is explicitly thematized: confronted with Clève's jealousy, Clélia switches for the first time to a more informal 'tu', explaining that 'c'est la première fois que je ne te respecte pas' (01:56:57–58). Żuławski opens up the discursive range of Lafayette's text, introducing a whole variety of socio- and idiolects, of different accents, even of slang and vulgar speech, but he also repeatedly literally quotes his pretext, above all, via character Jean: 'Il parut alors une beauté à la Cour' (upon Clélia's 'début' at court, 13:36–38, cf. Lafayette, [1678] 2014: 337); 'il avait un nombre infini de maîtresses' (warning her against philandering Nemo/Nemours, 01:12:53–54, cf. Lafayette, [1678] 2014: 364), etc. If Honoré (2008) insists that his film's language 'ne vient pas du roman', it is interesting to note the discrepancy, in this case, between the director's auto-interpretation and the perception of other readers/spectators: Honoré's 'belle et ennuyeuse jeune personne' has also been criticized for the scholastic pedantism of its intertextual transfer.¹⁸

Narrative (macro- and micro-)structures also undergo some significant transformations. A narratological analysis of this corpus challenges, in fact, certain clichés on

adaptational (in-)fidelity — from the respective beginnings, be it Oliveira's metamedial framing of his narration, or Honoré's *ouverture*, quoting at the same time Delannoy and the Lafayettean pretext: with Junie's first day at her new school, Honoré consciously restages the somewhat confusing initial panorama in Lafayette (cf. Honoré, 2008). It is also Honoré who probably makes the most of Lafayette's famous digressions, criticized by Valincour: apart from the Mme de Tournon episode (told in the frame of a filmic flashback), he proceeds to a queer reinterpretation of the Vidame de Chartres plot.

Gender trouble: taming or queering *La Princesse de Clèves*?

This transformation points to gender- and queer-inspired readings of Lafayette's novel, such as Zoberman's (2008: 32) interpretation of the Princess as 'une figure *queer*', in the sense not of homosexuality but of the subversion of a heteronormative order. In this respect, a reflectedly anachronistic theoretical approach permits to unfold, once again, some additional layers of signification in the 'original' text (as well as in the original context of reception: the motif of a certain gender trouble haunts also Valincour's *Lettres*, cf. Zoberman, 2008: 31).

A re-reading of our *Princesses*' different endings in the light of gender theory proves highly enlightening: it is at the very end that Delannoy's 'faithful' adaptation most strikingly deviates from the Lafayettean pretext. From a feminist perspective, *La Princesse de Clèves* has also been interpreted as a narrative of female self-affirmation (cf., for instance, DeJean, 1984; Kuizenga, 1992; Jensen, 1998), the 'autoformation' of a feminine subject (cf., for instance, Coropceanu, 2010). Delannoy's film, with its pronounced tendency towards gender 'normalization', systematically reduces elements of female power, freedom, control, which are, after all, *also* present in Lafayette's text. Mme de Chartres, a key figure in Lafayette, is eliminated outright; visibly, Delannoy has no use for this highly ambivalent character, a paradigmatic representative of female complicity in a patriarchal system, but also of female authority. His Princess is much more a mere *object* of male gaze and desire than in the literary pretext; while Lafayette's heroine, at least partially, also adopts 'an active, observant, and self-conscious role' (Douthwaite, 1998: 115), Delannoy, disrupting, for example, the complex visual economy of the nocturnal pavilion scene at Coulommiers, confines his protagonist to the role of the sleeping beauty. In Lafayette's text, the Princess, after having renounced court life and Nemours's love, is no longer 'visible'. The narrative instance respects her desire for distance and *repos*; far from the court, in the relative socioeconomic liberty of widowhood, she spends the rest of her 'vie [...] assez courte' (Lafayette, [1678] 2014: 478). Delannoy's final scene, revelling in the exhibition of a lavishly dressed, beautiful female dead body under the eyes of Nemours and the Vidame de Chartres (but also the extradiegetic spectator), seems a quasi-caricatural illustration of the patriarchal visual economy of traditional cinema (cf. Mulvey, 1975). In this respect, the twentieth-century film version turns out much more 'conservative' than the seventeenth-century classical pretext (cf. Brink, 2009: 125).¹⁹

After Delannoy, we will see no more dead Princesses. Oliveira mirrors Lafayette's respect for her heroine's withdrawal: his own 'Princess', finally 'dematerialized' (cf. Lalanne, 1999), disappears from the film; in the place of his literature-born character, with a deliberate metonymic gesture (Brink, 2009: 123), he puts a piece of text, the long letter Catherine sends to her confidante. Żuławski chooses another open

non-conclusion.²⁰ Honoré's *La Belle Personne* finishes on a vision of Junie aboard a ship, leaving her former life. This ending may be read as an image of freedom; but the boat trip towards the unknown is, of course, also a well-established metaphor of death; in this sense, Honoré externalizes the subtle ambiguity of Lafayette's text. After Żuławski's *La Fidélité* — by far the most gender-sensitive *Princesse*-adaptation to date²¹ — Honoré returns to a more traditional economy of gender. His female protagonist is, once again, a melancholic object of male gazes — *en abyme*: the spectator assists to the diegetic 'making of' a hyper-aestheticized image of Junie, more 'Snow White' than ever. Thus, the taming of the Princess (whom Honoré considers '*plutôt comme un tyran*',²² as opposed to M. de Clèves, '*la vraie belle personne du roman*', cf. Bourdais, 2008)? Honoré himself comments on his deliberately passive *mise en scène* of actress Léa Seydoux, who, in her turn, seems to have been somewhat unhappy, during the shooting, with this approach. In an ambiguous turn, Honoré declares that just in her 'immense volonté de liberté', Seydoux was able to truly metamorphose into *his* Princess: 'Elle est la Princesse dont je rêvais' (Honoré, 2008).

Questions of ideology: ethics, *francité* and politics

However, gender (trouble) is not the only relevant issue, as far as the various films' ideological approach is concerned. In contrast to Delannoy's aestheticizing complicity in the face of an extremely alienating, even if privileged, microcosm (cf. Oster, 2009: 131), Oliveira takes the *Princesse*'s plot as a starting point for a catholically inspired reflection about contemporary ethics (cf. Ibid.: 133); his heroine questions the legitimacy of her passion not only in terms of marital fidelity, but also in a larger social context. This 'Princess' is well aware of her privileged status — and the necessity of eventually 'un-learning her privilege' (cf. Spivak, 1996: 4f.). Żuławski is even more radical in his ethical actualisation: 'virtue' is no longer about sexual abstinence, etc. '[...] *ma Princesse*, elle couchera. Je ne vous dis que ça', declares Marie Darrieussecq (2009: ix), announcing her novel *Clèves* (2011), parodic '*réécriture à l'envers*' (qtd. in Leyris, 2011) and, as such, another milestone in the *Princesse*'s long history of literary rewritings, from the seventeenth century to the present.²³ *La Fidélité* is the first (and, so far, the only) filmic *Princesse* containing sex (lots of sex), displaying naked female — and male — bodies; camera in hand, this Princess, a professional photographer, penetrates into a male ice hockey team's locker room, taking pictures ('sans les mains, sans les mains', 20:30), finally having spontaneous sex with a young sportsman in the showers. Clélia remains nevertheless a thoroughly 'virtuous' character; at media mogul MacRoi's corrupt 'court', she is no less an incarnation of 'purity' than Lafayette's heroine in her milieu (cf. Oster, 2009: 134f.).

La Belle Personne, 'Teenage movie des quartiers chics' (cf. Lecompte, 2009: 316), is — at least on the diegetic level — oblivious to its social conditionings, thus, it paradoxically reaffirms, as one might argue (cf. Dubois, 2013), '*l'idée qui traînait derrière les mots de Nicolas Sarkozy: que la culture n'est pas pour tout le monde, qu'elle est socialement déterminée*', idea that Honoré (qtd. in Bourdais, 2008) seeks to refute. In contrast, Sauder's non-fictional film is the first to address the ambiguities of adapting the *Princesse* in the context of contemporary multicultural society, the work's status as 'une référence patrimoniale [...] un objet privilégié du discours hégémonique de l'élite

cultivée' (Dubois, 2013), its instrumentalization in the discursive construction of an eminently 'literary' French identity.

After all, the '*Princesse de Clèves*-affaire' (cf. Henri, 2009) was also a debate about *francité*, marked by the inflationary use of trivialised topoi, such as France as 'le pays de la *Princesse de Clèves*'.²⁴ Alain Finkielkraut raises the issue of France's identity as a traditional, now threatened 'nation littéraire' (Desportes & Lacroix, 2011) or 'patrie littéraire' (Finkielkraut, 2013: 150, 167). Declaring that 'Cracher sur la *Princesse de Clèves* c'est cracher sur la France',²⁵ Régis Jauffret affirms, once more, the allegorical status of Lafayette's heroine; Sarah Vajda's male narrator does the same thing in a negative sense, attacking 'ce roman trop vanté' and denouncing its protagonist as an emblematic representative of '[l]a démente française, hystérie serait plus juste' culminating in Vichy (Vajda, 2010: 43). Inevitably, the contemporary films in our corpus participate in this controversy about *La Princesse de Clèves* as a pillar of *francité* discourses, posing 'la question de la transmission culturelle et d'une présupposée identité française' (Robert, 2010: 86).

Lafayette's novel is a markedly 'French', thus, a 'national' classic (cf. Schlanger, [1992] 2008: 102f.) — contrary to, for instance, Shakespeare, the very paradigm of an international classic whose *œuvre* has inspired some remarkable 'exotic' cross-cultural adaptations (suffice it to quote Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* [*Spider Web Castle*, 1957], restaging *Macbeth* in feudal Japan; cf. Schmidt, 2012: 65ff.); no such thing — until now — for Lafayette. With this background in mind, it is even more interesting to take a look at the reception of the cinematographic *Princesses* outside France. In German-speaking countries, for example, where Lafayette's work is not part of the canon, these films are 'read' in a different manner, not necessarily (primarily) as adaptations²⁶ (cf. Hutcheon's [2006: XV, 8, 21] reflections on the crucial role of the audience's awareness for the unfolding of a work's "[p]alimpsestuous" [i]ntertextuality'); even in reviews, the *Princesse*-reference is often treated as a *quantité négligeable*.²⁷

Passion, transgression and alterity: postcolonializing *La Princesse de Clèves*

Cultural difference is, thus, a crucial factor in the reception of *La Princesse de Clèves* as well as of various adaptations. While Lafayette's protagonists belong to a milieu of trans-European high nobility, much more socially than nationally delimited, things present themselves differently in contemporary adaptations. In Oliveira's and Żuławski's versions, the factor of cultural alterity manifests itself already on a diegetic level. In *La Lettre*, the Duc de Nemours metamorphoses into Portuguese pop star Pedro Abrunhosa, cast as 'lui-même', not only a generator of metaleptic trouble, but also a stranger in Parisian high society. Oliveira motivates this reinterpretation by explaining that, anachronistically speaking, Nemours plays, at Lafayette's court, the role of a regular 'rock star' (cf. Frodon, 1999). This transformation corresponds to a distinct trend, in recent — literary as well as cinematographic — variations of the *Princesse*, towards the (social, ethnocultural, generational) 'othering' of the respective Nemours characters, a strategy that ensures a certain transgressive potential of the heroine's passion. In Żuławski's *La Fidélité*, Nemours alias Nemo, with his past as a juvenile delinquent, his decidedly 'plebeian' hobbies, is, once again, a social alien in Clélia's and Clève's sophisticated

world. At the same time, the ‘Princess’ herself, of Canadian origin, is a stranger in Paris (as emphasized upon her very first encounter with Clève); she will remain an outsider at MacRoi’s ‘court’.

In 2008, at the moment of Honoré’s adaptation, the invisible ‘whiteness’ of Lafayette’s world has become very visible. The critical voice of a postcolonially sensibilized reviewer stands out in a chorus of commendatory comments about *La Belle Personne*: Cammas (2008) reprehends Honoré for his (alleged) lack of multicultural consciousness under the telling title ‘La blanche personne’. In Sauder’s documentary, the subject, unavoidably, is very present, the majority of the adolescent protagonists having a migrational background, adhering to an ethics that, in some respects, contradicts the director’s own premises.²⁸

In spite of less-than-favourable sociocultural circumstances, *La Princesse de Clèves*, this paradigm of a Franco-French, ‘white’ canonical work, finally succeeds in this particular context of reception. In a process of ‘transformation mutuelle, du livre par le lecteur et du lecteur par le livre’ (Jourde, 2011), Sauder’s protagonists playfully make the classical text their own, via theatrical recitation, *Princesse de Clèves*-slam, body decoration, etc. However, Sauder refrains from telling us a saccharine story of multicultural harmony and social redemption by means of literature: the film contains also some narratives of failure, of self-degradation, illustrating the dynamics of social determinism.

In a last small intermedial twist, let us finish on another postcolonially inspired variation of the *Princesse*: Marie Darrieussecq’s ‘cinematographic’ novel *Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes* (Prix Médicis 2013), presented as the sequel to *Clèves*. Darrieussecq restages Lafayette’s court as Hollywood, glamorous kingdom under the reign of Nespresso-king George. Protagonist Solange, born in ‘Clèves’ (her imaginary native village in south-western France and the text), lives a tempestuous love story with black actor/film director Kouhouesso (another ‘othered’ Nemours character), obsessed with his project of a cinematographic adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*. In the frame of a filmic structure — from the ‘Générique’ until ‘The End’ and a ‘Bonus’ part — and an equally cinematographic plot, Darrieussecq, ingeniously, proceeds to a cross-reading of Lafayette’s classic and Conrad’s text, a key reference of postcolonial studies (cf. Bhabha, [1994] 2004: 148ff., 303ff.); her heroine reinterprets her own literary genealogy, fully realizing for the first time her own (concrete and metaphorical) ‘whiteness’.

The *Princesse*-palimpsest (to be continued)

Darrieussecq considers *La Princesse de Clèves* as a ‘palimpsestic’ — and eminently modern — text: ‘[...] ce livre hyper contemporain, je l’ai lu et relu, et il reste toujours quelque chose à en dire, quelque chose à en écrire’ (Darrieussecq, 2009: ix). Her own (double) rewriting enriches our perception of Lafayette’s text — just as the five filmic works of our corpus, all of them their ‘own palimpsestic thing’ (cf. Hutcheon, 2006: 9), multilayered artistic ‘originals’ in their own right. This is not about naively projecting contemporary concerns onto a classical text, but rather about unfolding — with the inevitable anachronism of our theoretical approach always in mind — potentially new layers of meaning in the *Princesse*-palimpsest, about rereading Lafayette ‘backwards’, in the sense of Escola’s ‘théorie des textes possibles qui invite à aimer dans les grands

textes littéraires non seulement le passé dont ils viennent mais aussi le futur qu'ils recèlent en puissance' (Escola, 2012).

À suivre: the intertextual and intermedial polylogue around *La Princesse de Clèves* will, undoubtedly, go on; as Calvino ([1981] 1991: 13) reminds us: 'A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say.'

Notes

¹ For a more detailed analysis of the *Princesse de Clèves*'s cinematographic history (as well as its contemporary reception in literature and political discourse), see Stemberger, forthcoming, 2018.

² Sarkozy's first public attack against *La Princesse de Clèves* — disparaged as the epitome of an allegedly elitist and unviable classical culture — dates back to February 2006, when the then-Minister of the Interior declared at a political meeting in Lyon: 'L'autre jour, je m'amusais [...] à regarder le programme du concours d'attaché d'administration. Un sadique ou un imbécile, choisissez, avait mis dans le programme d'interroger les concurrents sur la *Princesse de Clèves*. Je ne sais pas si cela vous est souvent arrivé de demander à la guichetière ce qu'elle pensait de la *Princesse de Clèves*?' (<http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/063000864.html>). In June 2006, at an assembly of new UMP-members, he took the same antiliterary line. In 2008, then-President Sarkozy continued his 'campaign' against the *Princesse*, henceforth 'un lieu commun du discours présidentiel [...] toute allusion à *La Princesse de Clèves* enchérisant sur la précédente dans un geste délibéré d'autocitation et de complicité avec le public' (Marx, 2015: pos. 3448ff.).

³ For a critical discussion of the concept of 'querelle', considered as a multidimensional and complexity-enhancing counterpart to a mere 'scandale' with its 'effet de simplification', as well as a historical contextualization of 'La Querelle de *La Princesse de Clèves* jadis et naguère', see Kullessa, 2013.

⁴ Cf. La Belle Personne. Secrets de tournage. <http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm-133201/secrets-tournage> ('La Princesse de Clèves... et le Petit Nicolas').

⁵ Thus, a forum user ('Camille Mc Avoÿ', 12 September 2008) confesses her disappointment with Honoré's film, despite her very best intentions: 'Je dois dire que je voulais vraiment aimer le film (même si le livre bof bof) parce que j'ai lu qu'il l'avait fait en réaction au discours de notre Président [...]'. <http://the-inn-at-lambton.cultureforum.net/t1217-mme-de-la-fayette-la-princesse-de-cleves>, p. 3.

⁶ '[...] nous nous formons un idéal si différent de la beauté des femmes, que nous ne nous retournerions peut-être pas, dans la boutique d'un joaillier, sur celle pour qui se consuma Nemours', pointedly remarks Raymond Radiguet ([1924] 1986: 108).

⁷ Cf. the discussion on <http://the-inn-at-lambton.cultureforum.net/t1217-mme-de-la-fayette-la-princesse-de-cleves>, p. 1 (qtd. 'ekaterin64. Queen of Nanars', 16 December 2007).

⁸ Cf. the discussion about 'Une belle et ennuyeuse jeune personne'. Blog *Ce que tu lis*, 29 September 2008. <http://cequetulis.wordpress.com/2008/09/29/une-belle-et-ennuyeuse-jeune-personne> (qtd. 'fashion').

⁹ Earlier projects of adaptation, namely by Marcel L'Herbier at the beginning of the 1950s and by Robert Bresson, were never realized (cf. Rambaud, 2006: 19).

¹⁰ Marina Vlady herself reflects her iconic status in different countries: 'Suivant les pays [...] le public garde de moi un souvenir différent. En France, on me parle souvent de la *Princesse de Clèves*. En Italie, c'est L'Ape Regina [...] de Marco Ferreri. En Allemagne, c'est la Sorcière [...]' (cf. Gomez, 2011).

¹¹ This theoretically charged question of 'going beyond (literary) authority' lies at the serious core of Denis's parodic novel. Denis playfully addresses the issue of the respective cultural valorization of literary classics and their adaptations; if his vision of an indeed quite 'nightmarish' *Princesse* may appear, at first glance, as yet another exercise in the ritual denigration of adaptation (cf. Hutcheon, 2006: XIff.), on a deeper level, literary 'authority' is, in fact, constantly challenged in this text. Lafayette's name is never mentioned ('le roman avait été écrit par un ou plusieurs auteurs du XVII^e siècle', Denis, 1999: 80); freshly appointed — and rather dubiously competent — scriptwriter and *Princesse*-expert 'William Fleming', hybrid descendant of Shakespeare and Ian Fleming, is on the defensive against the representatives of postmodern film business — who, in their turn, aggressively deny the traditional privileges of classical literature: 'Shakespeare, aujourd'hui, c'est Spielberg. Vu? Spielberg, William!' (1999: 218).

¹² In contrast to Lafayette's forenameless protagonist, all film directors after Delannoy choose to name their heroine — all of them, in a highly symbolic manner. Oliveira's 'Catherine', besides the connotation of 'purity', also points to the historical context of Lafayette's novel (queen Catherine de' Medici, but also Catherine de Gonzague, duchesse de Clèves, and Catherine de Clèves, duchesse de Guise, cf. Rambaud, 2006: 51ff.). Given that M. de Clèves is in his turn royally renamed 'Louis', *La Lettre* also quotes the complex historicity of Lafayette's text,

superposing the courts of Henri II and Louis XIV. No less significantly, Żulawski opts for 'Clélia'; apart from the obvious intertextual references (Scudéry's *Clélie* as well as Stendhal's *Chartreuse de Parme*), the alliterative affinity between 'Clélia' and 'Clève' (amputated of his final 's'), in the latter's ears, sounds like a deceptively promising presage. Nemours appears as 'Nemo' (another symbolically charged name, between the Latin etymology and the Verne reference). Honoré inscribes his heroine 'Junie de Chartres' in a double classical context; the reference to Racine's *Britannicus* constitutes a rather gloomy omen for a love story that is intertextually doomed from the very beginning.

- ¹³ The argument of a certain 'impropriété générique' repeatedly arises in Valincour's *Lettres* (cf. Valincour, [1678] 2001: note p. 112). In fact, *La Princesse de Clèves* also has a history in French theatre; apart from Boursault (cf. Esmein-Sarrazin, 2014: 1330), cf. also Jules Lemaître's homonymous 'Comédie en trois actes et un épilogue' (Lemaître, [1907/1908] 1908) and Marcel Bozonnet's solo-adaptation (since 1996).
- ¹⁴ For instance, Oliveira does realize some of Valincour's suggestions for 'ameliorations' of Lafayette's text: his protagonist does her jewel shopping not on her own — one of the 'invraisemblances' criticized by Valincour ([1678] 2001: 35f.) — but under her mother's supervision. He also implements a strict narrative economy, eliminating 'tout ce qui concernait la cour et les intrigues annexes, pour me concentrer sur l'histoire principale' (cf. Frodon, 1999).
- ¹⁵ Michael Almereyda, in his *Hamlet*-adaptation (2000), resorts to the same analogy, reinterpreting Shakespeare's royal court as a New York-based media group, named 'Denmark Corporation'.
- ¹⁶ 'The Princess of Cleve' also evokes the title of Nathaniel Lee's theatrical adaptation (1680–82) of Lafayette's novel, met, by the way, 'with near-universal condemnation in English and French criticism' (Collington & Collington, 2002: 196). For an appreciation of Lee's version as 'the first critical reading in English of *La Princesse de Clèves*', see also Campbell, 2005 (qtd. 67).
- ¹⁷ 'À la Cour, comme au lycée, on ne tolère pas d'absence sans motif', as Pingaud (1959: 97) already points out.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Une belle et ennuyeuse jeune personne. Blog *Ce que tu lis*, 29 September 2008. <http://cequetulis.wordpress.com/2008/09/29/une-belle-et-ennuyeuse-jeune-personne>.
- ¹⁹ Delannoy interprets his *Princesse* in the light of the defence of 'traditional values' (cf. Brink, 2009: 125), as 'une très belle histoire d'amour [...] où la fidélité n'est pas ridicule, où le respect ne fait pas sourire', etc.; as a positive role model, Lafayette's chaste heroine is opposed to (all-too) 'liberated' modern femininity, way 'souris couchaillant n'importe où, avec n'importe qui, pour n'importe quoi' (Jean Delannoy, 'C'est le moment de rendre aux jeunes *La Princesse de Clèves*

[interview by Martine Monod], *Les Lettres Françaises*, 30 June 1960, pp. 1 and 8 [p. 1], qtd. in Denis, 1998: 286).

- ²⁰ While Duffy (2009: 113) perceives 'a univocally pessimistic resonance' in this new Princess's story, fatally evolving towards the heroine's 'encroaching death', the film's final scene also hints at a possible reunion between Nemo and Clélia — visibly victim, as Lafayette's protagonist after her retreat, of 'une maladie violente' (cf. Lafayette, [1678] 2014: 476), but eventually released from her vows (and her guilt) by Clève's spirit. Last farewell or return to life? Żulawski's deliberately ambiguous ending remains in suspense.
- ²¹ It might be worth pointing out that Żulawski's protagonist and then-partner Sophie Marceau played an active role in the creation of this adaptation, even considering, at first, writing the script and possibly directing the film herself (cf. *La Fidélité*, bonus material). In fact, there is — strikingly enough, given the voluminous corpus of feminist readings inspired by Lafayette's text — so far not a single female director among the *Princesse*'s cinematographic adaptors.
- ²² In *La Belle Personne*, 'Estouteville' — reinterpreted, in his turn, as a member of this school *cour*'s teaching staff — explicitly characterizes protagonist Junie as 'une tueuse, ça se voit tout de suite' (42:00–01).
- ²³ For an overview of literary rewritings of *La Princesse de Clèves* and a detailed analysis of several twentieth- and twenty-first-century *réécritures*, see Stemberger, forthcoming, 2018.
- ²⁴ Cf. Amélie Nothomb sobre Sarkozy y 'La princesa de Clèves'. *Canal L*. Online: 6 May 2012. www.youtube.com/watch?v=soYQcgSZGT8.
- ²⁵ Cf. 'La princesse de Clèves' vue par M. Darrieussecq, R. Jauffret, F. Beigbeder, A. Nothomb, C. Dantzig. *Buzz littéraire*, 27 March 2009. www.buzz-litteraire.com/200903271355-la-princesse-de-cleves-de-madame-de-la-fayette-vue-par-marie-darrieussecq.
- ²⁶ This is also true for literary variations: Marie Darrieussecq's novel *Clèves* was published in German under the title *Prinzessinnen* (2013) and in English as *All the Way* (2013): the trigger word *Clèves* would probably not have 'worked' in a non-French context.
- ²⁷ Cf., for instance, the reviews of Oliveira's *Lettre* (German version: *Der Brief*) on <http://www.kino.de/kinofilm/der-brief/52794> and www.cinema.de/film/der-brief,1326397.html.
- ²⁸ Sauder recalls, for instance, his surprise upon realizing that Mme de Chartres — in his milieu's and generation's eyes, the very image of 'la mère odieuse, castratrice, traditionnelle' — was quite popular not only with his protagonists' parents, but also with the teenagers themselves, extolling this Lafayettian character as a paradigmatic 'bonne mère, protectrice, gardienne de l'honneur familial' (cf. Baeque, 2011).

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