

STUDIES

Love ‘à la Française.’
Eros in the Context of the Films
Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain
and *Simple comme Sylvain*

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ABSTRACT: In a broader context, this study focuses on the expressive dimensions of the “esthétique du sexe” (aesthetics of sex) and on the iconisation of motifs and content relating to “sexe et sexualité” (sex and sexuality) and “érotique et pornographique” (erotic and pornographic) as they appear in contemporary (not exclusively French) art and culture. More narrowly, through a kind of cinematic dramatic arc, shaped on the one hand by the iconic French film *Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain* and, on the other, by the French-Canadian romantic drama *Simple comme Sylvain*, released twenty years later, the text pursues to interpret what, following Marilyn Yalom’s book *How*

the French Invented Love, we might term love “à la française” (in the French style), or even love in the sense of the ancient Greek “eros.” The specific concepts of “amour” (love) are connected in this study to the expressive qualities of eroticism and pornographicity, examined with particular emphasis on the ways in which these qualities manifest themselves, whether explicitly or implicitly, in the films under discussion. Our interpretation applies principles and strategies ascribed to eroticism and pornographicity, thereby gradually uncovering the hidden semantic layers of the films as well as their pragmatic and existential resonances.

KEYWORDS:
love “à la française,” eros, eroticism of expression, pornographicity of expression, implicitness of expression, explicitness of expression

FOREPLAY (INSTEAD OF AN INTRODUCTION)

More than twenty years separate the release of *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* [Amélie] (2001, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet) and *Simple comme Sylvain* [The Nature of Love] (2023, written and directed by Monia Chokri), which are the focus of this study. Nevertheless, a number of significant similarities and connections emerge between them. At the level of genre characteristics, both films constitute romantic, as well as erotic dramas. Their protagonists – Amélie and Sophie – are female figures who come to understand themselves and their sexuality through their (aesthetically framed) relational and sexual experiences. Sex is here represented as psyche (which means soul in Greek and mirror in French),¹ reflecting the heroines' desires and wishes, while a lack of sex constitutes a central thematic element in both films.

In addition to their shared theme, both film projects are united by their distinctly French character. Although *Amélie* is a Franco-German co-production, its fundamental "Frenchness" is unmistakable. The heroine herself embodies what is often stereotypically imagined as "typically French": natural, subtle, unobtrusive, charming, wily, and (aesthetically) perceptive. Her appeal lies in her reservedness, her strict adherence to etiquette, and her appreciation of everyday moments as part of her "joie de vivre" (joy of living).² The narrative unfolds in recognisable Parisian locations, most notably – from the perspective of the present study – Montmartre and the Boulevard de Clichy, a street lined with sex shops near that district.

The Nature of Love is also a co-production, in this case a Canadian-French one, set primarily in francophone Québec. Just like *Amélie*, it bears a strong French imprint in its attitude to life and especially to love which, with reference to the book *How the French Invented Love* (2012) by the French historian Marilyn Yalom, may be termed love "à la française"³ or even love in the sense of the ancient Greek "eros."⁴ Yalom observes that it is hardly coincidental that many of our contemporary expressions of love derive from French (e.g., French kiss, rendezvous, gallantry, love triangle, flirt, etc.).⁵ The modern model of love, she argues, has been profoundly shaped by French art and culture, which it seeks to reflect: "The Bible tells us that King David lusted after Bathsheba, and that Isaac loved his new wife Rebekah. Ancient Greek tragedy gave us Phaedra, who burned with desire for her stepson Hippolytus (...).

1 In French, the feminine noun "psyche" denotes a large revolving mirror; yet the referential field of the term is broader, also linked to the Greek word for the soul and Carl G. Jung's concept of the psyche as the soul, the inner self, the mind, or the inner mental processes. In ancient Greek mythology, Psyche (as a proper name) denotes the female figure with whom the god of love, Eros, fell in love. See Psyché. In *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. [online]. [cit. 7 August 2025]. Available at: <https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A9P4913>.

2 Joie. In *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. [online]. [cit. 7 August 2025]. Available at: <https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A9J0229>.

3 YALOM, M. *How the French Invented Love: Nine Hundred Years of Passion and Romance*. New York – London : HarperCollins, 2012. Quoted from the e-book. Unpaginated.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

Yet something new in the history of love did emerge in France during the 1100s (...). Courtly love was predicated on desire so intense that it could not be bound by the conventional rules of society. Passion took precedence over everything.”⁶ This concept, which Marilyn Yalom refers to as love “à la française,” is understood here as the “French” development of love in terms of the ancient Greek “eros.” The term “amour” (love)⁷ itself derives from Amor, the Roman counterpart of the Greek Eros, the mythical god of love. In mythical archnarratives, this “dieu de l’amour” (god of love)⁸ functioned as an ambivalent figure, causing characters to fall in love with one another (representing love, which can be understood as a reference to the eroticism of expression) and embodying the instinctual needs of gods, demigods, and mortals (representing sex, which can be understood as a reference to the pornographicity of expression). Just as Greek philosophy conceptualises eros as both romantic emotion on the one hand and passion, uncontrollable desire, physical attraction, and carnal pleasure on the other, so too love “à la française” bears the same characteristics.⁹

In light of these considerations, this study focuses on the scope of the expressive qualities of eroticism and pornographicity in the analysed film shots. We initially define eroticism and pornographicity of expression based on the entry in the *Thesaurus of Aesthetic Expressive Qualities* (2011)¹⁰ as the “(...) presentation (expression and experience) of amorous and carnally sexual themes in vital meanings (= eroticism);

⁶ Ibid., pp. 27, 43.

⁷ Amour. In *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. [online]. [cit. 7 July 2025]. Available at: <https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A9A1540>.

⁸ Éros. In *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. [online]. [cit. 7 July 2025]. Available at: <https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A9E2487>. According to the Canadian literary critic Anne Carson, “eros” in Greek denotes not only love but also “want,” “lack,” or “longing for something that is missing;” its meaning is thus ambiguous: “It was Sappho who first called eros ‘bittersweet.’ (...) Eros appears in other genres and poets too, as a paradox of love and hate.” See CARSON, A. *Eros the Bittersweet*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 10, 3, 5. She adds: “There is dilemma within eros that has been thought crucial by thinkers from Sappho to the present day. (...) Sartre sees in erotic relations a system of infinite reflections, a deceiving mirror-game that carries within itself its own frustration. (...) For Simone de Beauvoir the game is torture: ‘The knight departing for new adventure offends his lady yet she has nothing but contempt for him if he remains at her feet. This is the torture of impossible love...’” See *ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

⁹ The concept of love “à la française” may appear overly simplistic or generalising. Yet, in the context of the two films discussed here, both with a French background, we consider it relevant for their interpretation and regard Marilyn Yalom’s argument in its defence sufficiently persuasive. As she demonstrates with erudite insight, French-style love is recognisable even beyond the geographical borders of France. For more see YALOM, M. *How the French Invented Love: Nine Hundred Years of Passion and Romance*. Unpaginated.

¹⁰ This approach draws on the methodology of the Institute of Literary and Artistic Communication (also known as the Nitra School), whose aestheticians contributed to this publication. The Nitra School concentrates on the analysis and interpretation of primordial archnarratives that played a foundational role in individual cultures, as well as on the scholarly interpretation of the latest artistic and (pop) cultural phenomena. At the same time, it keeps developing a critical (re)interpretation of both traditional and current forms of broadly understood contemporary art. Its methodology rests on the understanding of a work of art or other aesthetic expression as a specific form of communication between creator and recipient, resulting in a unique aesthetic experience for the perceiver. It is this effect of aesthetic phenomena on human beings – on their consciousness, subconsciousness, and corporeality – that the Nitra School identifies as a key point of departure for authentic scientific research.

a way of processing their self-serving, obscene display (= pornographicity)."¹¹ The relationship between eroticism and pornographicity is further mediated by the opposition of the implicitness – "(...) indirect expression or depiction,"¹² associated primarily with eroticism – and the explicitness of expression – "(...) direct, explicit, unambiguous expression or depiction,"¹³ symptomatic of pornographicity. Within this framework, we shall consider how erotic and pornographic qualities are manifested (implicitly or explicitly) in the two films. In both, in relation to the pornographic (hyperbolic, concrete, physical, instinctual, and isolated), the erotic (metaphorical, sensual, mental, amorous, and intimate)¹⁴ functions as a prelude to the (cinematic) climax.

EXCITATION (THE PLOT AS THE PROTAGONIST'S EXCITING JOURNEY TO THE CLIMAX)

*Amélie*¹⁵ is regarded as one of the cult films of contemporary French art cinema. It is characterised by a specific dreamlike visual aesthetic, manifested in the colourful stylisation and literal visualisation of the protagonist's inner world. The narrative oscillates between reality and fiction, exposing an enclosed, idyllic world filled with romance and nostalgia, while incorporating moments of magical absurdity. The film mainly depicts themes of relationship, more specifically Amélie's love story,

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- 11 VANĚK, J. Erotickost a pornografickost výrazu [Eroticism and Pornographicity of Expression]. In PLESNÍK, L., et al. *Tezaurus estetických výrazových kvalit* [Thesaurus of Expressive Aesthetic Qualities]. Nitra : Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, 2011, p. 239. According to the *Encyclopedia of Sexuality*, the original Greek meaning of pornography was the description of the lives, habits, and activities of prostitutes (porne = prostitute; graphein = to write). For the Greeks, the description of sexual intercourse was a legitimate part of the poetic art. "The Christian notion that sexual intercourse is excusable only in marriage, and describing sexual intercourse is therefore shameful, would have been incomprehensible to the Greeks." See BORNEMAN, E. *Encyklopedie sexuality*. Prague : Victoria Publishing, 1994, p. 452. The French philosopher Michel Foucault adopted this Greek concept of sex, sexuality, and eroticism in his *History of Sexuality*. The field of porn studies deals with pornography comprehensively. A representative of this discourse, Laura Kipnis, in her book *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* notes that "(...) pornography isn't just an individual predilection: pornography is central to our culture. I'm not simply referring to its immense popularity (although estimates put its sales at over \$11 billion a year). I mean that pornography is reveal, and what it reveals isn't just a lot of naked people sweating on each other. It exposes the culture to itself. Pornography is the royal road to the cultural psyche (as for Freud, dreams were the route to the unconscious)." See KIPNIS, L. *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*. 1st Edition. Durham : Duke University Press, 1998, pp. 161–162. The explicit scenes in the films may also be read in relation to the primarily French cinematic trend of new extremism, known for its uncompromising, self-reflexive address to the viewer and its complex, often contradictory interplay of sex and violence in probing the relationship between film and audience. A hallmark of such film projects – and their creators – is the transgression of boundaries between pornography, art, exploitation, philosophy, and horror. For more on this, see HORECK, T. – KENDALL, T. *New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011, pp. 1–2.
- 12 REŽNÁ, M. – KUBALOVÁ-PARALIČOVÁ, D. Implicitnost výrazu [Implicitness of expression]. In PLESNÍK, L., et al. *Tezaurus estetických výrazových kvalit* [Thesaurus of Expressive Aesthetic Qualities], p. 142.
- 13 REŽNÁ, M. – KUBALOVÁ-PARALIČOVÁ, D. – PLESNÍK, L. Explicitnost výrazu [Explicitness of expression]. In PLESNÍK, L., et al. *estetických výrazových kvalit* [Thesaurus of Expressive Aesthetic Qualities], p. 137.
- 14 Erotic. In *Thesaurus.com*. [online]. [cit. 5 August 2025]. Available at: <https://www.thesaurus.com/browse/erotic>.
- 15 *Amélie de Montmartre* premièred in Paris in April 2001. The film won several prestigious awards, including four Césars (among them Best Picture and Best Director), a BAFTA Award for Best Film Not in the English Language, and five Academy Award nominations.

interwoven with a number of subsidiary plotlines, exploring emotions that accompany loneliness, death, and the complexity of human existence. These themes are treated with relative sophistication, attempting to capture their “Platonic” essence (for example, by penetrating the psychology of the characters). This is already apparent in the opening sequence, which portrays different ways of experiencing female orgasm pornographically (in a few-second sequence that depicts sex from a male perspective¹⁶ and whose dynamics gradually escalate: naked bodies are revealed, and female moans increase in volume). This opening passage suggests that the film, under the guise of love “à la française,” will primarily concern itself with female sexuality and its possible forms.

The film’s narrative begins with a flashback of the childhood of the main protagonist, Amélie (Audrey Tautou), sketching her character: “Amélie doesn’t have a boyfriend. She tried once or twice, but the results were a let-down. Instead, she cultivates a taste for small pleasures. Plunging her hand deep into a sack of grain. Cracking crème brûlée with a teaspoon. And skimming stones on the Canal St Martin.”¹⁷ (...) Amélie still takes refuge in solitude. She amuses herself with silly questions about the world below, such as: “How many couples are having an orgasm now?”¹⁸

When Amélie discovers a hidden tin box in her apartment and returns it to its owner, she dedicates her life to heroic deeds. Intent on filling her existence with the joy of good deeds, she decides to help others. Yet she projects her own, initially happy life as a tragic narrative as she imagines her own funeral: “On a sparkling evening in July, while on the beaches holidaymakers relax in the new-found sun.”¹⁹ (...) Amélie Poulain, godmother of outcasts, Madonna of the unloved, finally succumbs to exhaustion.²⁰ (...) What a strange destiny for one who gave her all, yet took such joy in life’s simple pleasures. Like Don Quixote, she pitted herself against the grinding windmill of life’s miseries. It was a losing battle that claimed her life too soon. At barely 23, Amélie Poulain let her young, tired body merge with the ebb and flow of universal woe...²¹

The verbalised analogy between Don Quixote, the main protagonist of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra’s Spanish novel *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, and Amélie Poulain is not accidental. It highlights the tension between Amélie’s vision of how the world works – which she acquired by looking up to well-known ideals in books (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*) or television (Princess Diana), or simply by her own

¹⁶ The same issues are explored by British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact.” MULVEY, L. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. In BRAUDY, L. – COHEN, M. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 7th Edition. New York : Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 715.

¹⁷ *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet (UGC Fox Distribution, 2001). [Film]. 00:12:09.

¹⁸ *Amélie*. [Film]. 00:13:36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 00:37:01.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 00:37:14.

²¹ *Ibid.* 00:37:42.

imagination through which she poeticises her life – and the realities she confronts. Like the main hero in *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, Amélie aestheticises her life. The Slovak aesthetician Mariana Čechová, in her research on recurrent algorithms of plotline and theme (basic plot schemes) in cultural narratives, points out this intermingling of fiction and reality in Cervantes's novel, which eventually leads the hero to abandon his delusions.²² Amélie also feels abandoned and longs to experience something special. She fills this "absence" with an adventurous (thrilling) quest to do good and with fantasising. However, she ultimately discovers that neither brings fulfilment. Amélie's vision of her own funeral leads to her fateful inner transformation, hence her necessary disillusionment. The motif of venture (in the context of the analysed film, Amélie's journey to the owner of the box, for example) can be regarded as a mental cultivation, an acquisition of knowledge, and a way to develop the heroine's own nature, or true self, which culminates in her transformation.²³

At the same time, Amélie's adventurous mission may be read as an implicit representation of the exploration of her own female sexuality. The ordinary situations she faces during her wanderings become a kind of excitant,²⁴ pointing to the sensations she associates with gratification. An extreme example is the scene in which Amélie runs her index finger and thumb over the surface of lentil grains, letting them flow between her palms, experiencing a physical, "orgasmic" experience (or representation of it, since – as the film states at the beginning – Amélie's first sexual encounter did not meet her expectations, so she seeks pleasure elsewhere). This mise-en-scène may be interpreted through the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's words in his *De la séduction* [Seduction] (1990), where orgasm is described as energy seeking its release.²⁵

The figure of Amélie may also be perceived within the context of French medieval art, particularly the troubadours, trouvères, and German minnesingers, and the cult of "fin'amor" (courtly love). In French courtly culture, love assumed varied forms, but it was most often expressed in narratives of knights demonstrating devotion to a lady. Such representations depicted love as romantic, pure, perfect, idealised, unattainable, unrequited, or platonic – rarely associated with physical desire, but rather grounded in admiration for the beloved's beauty and character. "Fin'amor" concerns desire rather than its fulfilment.²⁶ In *Amélie*, love is staged as such an unrealised ideal, an interpretation reinforced by the earlier parallel with *Don Quixote*. Mariana Čechová characterises Cervantes' protagonist as "a modern hero who, in keeping with Renaissance ideals, represents a literary parody with his passion for

22 ČECHOVÁ, M., et al. *Osnovné tematické algoritmy v slovesnom umení (s intersemiotickými a interdisciplinárnymi presahmi)* [Backstory Thematic Algorithms in Belles-lettres (with Intersemiotic and Interdisciplinary Overlaps)]. Nitra : Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, 2016, p. 116.

23 For the described phenomenon, see *ibid.*, p. 89.

24 Excitant. In *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. [online]. [cit. 7 August 2025]. Available at: <https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A9E3256>.

25 BAUDRILLARD, J. *Seduction*. New York : St. Martin's Press, 1990, p. 18.

26 YALOM, M. *How the French Invented Love: Nine Hundred Years of Passion and Romance*. Unpaginated.

chivalric heroism.”²⁷ Like Don Quixote’s, Amélie’s existence is absurd in relation to reality.

Another example of Amélie’s gradual awakening to her own sexuality occurs in the *mise-en-scène* in which she discovers an old photo album belonging to Nino Quincampoix (Mathieu Kassovitz). She decides to perform another good deed: find the owner of the album and return it to him. During her quest, she becomes intrigued by seeking answer to the question of who this collector of discarded photobooth portraits might be. In line with Jean Baudrillard’s thesis that desire is fuelled by scarcity,²⁸ Amélie’s fascination is sustained precisely by her lack of information about the enigmatic man and his peculiar pastime. Uncovering this secret becomes an exciting adventure for her, and she falls in love with Nino. She begins to seduce him through secret signs and games, which he must interpret and decipher – as Baudrillard notes, seduction itself epitomises the nature of feminine sexuality.²⁹ Amélie thus emerges as a nuanced, multilayered figure of the *femme fatale*:³⁰ through her enigmatic allure, she captivates the male figure and binds him to her through strategies of erotic play, seduction, and subtle manipulation.³¹ Death, too, appears prominently in the film’s narrative fabric, appearing in the suicide of a Québécoise woman, the death of Amélie’s mother, and the self-destructive behaviour of her pet – an aquarium fish. At one point, Amélie’s neighbour attributes demonic powers to her, identifying her as the source of pervasive evil: “A neighbor fools her into thinking her camera causes accidents. Because she’d been taking pictures all afternoon, Amélie is petrified. She stares at the TV, racked by the guilt of causing a huge fire two derailments and a jumbo jet crash.”³²

According to Jean Baudrillard, the typical seductress is never where she should be, allowing male desire itself to act as the lure. Her game of seduction involves cruelty and death – to capture or sacrifice the desire of the other person.³³ In relation to Nino, Amélie thus assumes the role of a mysterious female figure. Beneath the mask of a shy young woman, she “stages” their encounters, making them appear accidental, even fated. Like the *femme fatale* or seductress, she wields superior powers of attraction, fundamentally directing the course of the male protagonist’s destiny. The cryptic messages and “unintentional” traces she leaves for Nino provoke him and ultimately draw him to this seductive female protagonist. As Baudrillard notes in his reflections on seduction: “(...) seduction takes the form of an enigma to be solved. The

27 ČECHOVÁ, M., et al. *Osnovné tematické algoritmy v slovesnom umení (s intersemiotickými a interdisciplinárnymi presahmi)* [Backstory Thematic Algorithms in Belles-lettres (with Intersemiotic and Interdisciplinary Overlaps)], p. 113.

28 BAUDRILLARD, J. *Seduction*, p. 5.

29 Ibid., p. 7.

30 Fatale. In *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. [online]. Available at: <https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A9F0275>.

31 For more on the scholarly interpretation of the archetypal figure of the *femme fatale* in broader contexts, see BOSZORÁD, M. *Od arcitextu k pop-textu (a vice versa)* [From Arch-text to Pop-text (and vice versa)]. Nitra : Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa, 2022.

32 *Amélie*. [Film]. 00:07:21.

33 BAUDRILLARD, J. *Seduction*, pp. 85, 87.

girl is an enigma, and in order to seduce her, one must become an enigma for her. It is an enigmatic duel, one that the seduction solves (...). If the secret were disclosed, sexuality would stand revealed. The story's true meaning (...) would be about sex."³⁴ Amélie's story, in keeping with the above quote, culminates in a happy ending: the sexual union of the protagonists and, both metaphorical and literal, orgasm.

ORGASM (THE CLIMAX OF THE NARRATIVE WITH A HAPPY ENDING)

Amélie's depiction of sex (in its happy ending) is characterised by slowness, playfulness, and poetry – attributes that also define the film as a whole. The tender and spontaneous lovemaking of the protagonists is not directly depicted; instead, it is suggested through a fragment in which Amélie kisses Nino's eyelids. Subtle sounds of breathing and whispering complete the overall erotic atmosphere of this scene. As Jean Baudrillard notes, "(...) seduction's secret lies in this evocation and revocation of the other, with a slowness and suspense that are poetic, like the slow-motion film of a fall or an explosion, because something had the time, prior to its completion, to make its absence felt."³⁵ The representation of lovemaking in the film reflects Amélie's inner world and signifies what ultimately brings her to self-fulfilment: the achievement of an otherwise absent orgasm. Scenes iconising Amélie's "unusual" behaviour (her obsession with uncovering secrets, the slow and gradual immersion of her hand in a bag of lentils, her fascination with pebbles skimming across water) are likewise telling. These images indicate the stimuli that excite and arouse her: mystery, gradual awakening of desire, touching, stroking, etc.³⁶ Yet Amélie's sense of (sexual) fulfilment is inseparable from the emotional dimensions of love, the lack of which is rooted in her childhood: "She was always a lonely child."³⁷ Thus sex is preceded by tender displays of affection, emotional convergence, and the experience of falling in love. These are the ways in which the heroine perceives and experiences her own sexual identity, and which are at the same time (pre-)images of female sexuality. Thus, on the basis of a female figure – Amélie – the external, corporeal, physical (if you will, pornographic) is combined with the mental and emotional (and therefore erotic) into a single whole.

The sequences leading up to the protagonists' lovemaking lend sex a ritualistic character.³⁸ The film's stages follow the progression and rhythm of intercourse:

³⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 84.

³⁶ The French philosopher, writer, and feminist Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*Second Sex*), articulates a similar understanding of female sexuality: "(...) the virgin does not know exactly what she wants. (...) ... sexuality is not an isolated domain... children and adolescents of both sexes like what is smooth, creamy, satiny, soft, elastic; that which yields to pressure without collapsing or decomposing and slips under the gaze or the fingers; like man, woman is charmed by the warm softness of sand dunes, so often compared to breasts, or the light touch of silk, of the fluffy softness of an eiderdown, the velvet feeling of a flower or fruit; and the young girl especially cherishes the pale colors of pastels, froths of tulle and muslin." DE BEAUVOIR, S. *Second Sex*. London : Jonathan Cape, 1953, p. 370.

³⁷ *Amélie*, 00:36:55.

³⁸ The ritual in this context denotes a repetitive procedure governed by rules, referring to the fact that sex is preceded by foreplay; however, it also acquires connotations of the ceremonial, cultic, and sacred, since Amélie's journey, as suggested above, initiates her into her own (female) sexuality.

beginning with psychological stimulation (fantasising, seduction by secrets, provocation, and emotional bonding), progressing through sensory experience (touch, smell, and atmosphere), and culminating in physical union (lovemaking and orgasm). By analogy, the story opens with Amélie's blank expression during mechanical sex with an anonymous man in bed and closes with her satisfied expression in Nino's arms in the same bed. The motif of sex thus frames the film, endowing it with symmetry.

Amélie's experience of (orgasmic) deficiency is defining, even fatal, for her. Marilyn Yalom similarly uses fatefulness when she interprets love "à la française" as fate.³⁹ The unattained orgasm in *Amélie* is a physical deficiency that accentuates the overall unsatisfactory (mental) state of the heroine. Through the motif of orgasm, the film pornographically penetrates the heroine's inner self – her soul. Here again Jean Baudrillard's thought proves illuminating: he conceives of pornographicity in broader terms as a principle that seeks to microscopically explore, magnify the minimal, penetrate beneath the surface, expose bare essence, and reveal the hidden.⁴⁰

In its conclusion, *Amélie* offers a simple message about "love à la française:" the physical dimension – physical pleasure – is indispensable to its existence. Yet the way Amélie expresses her feelings (through small gestures and subtle acts) remains tentative: "Any normal girl would call the number straightaway, meet him at a café to return the album. Then she would know if her dream was viable. It's called a reality check, but it's the last thing Amélie wants."⁴¹ However, Amélie's avoidance of physical contact (reality), her limitation of herself to experiencing love only in her imagination, prevents her from attaining happiness. She is therefore confronted with the necessity of overcoming this obstacle: "So, little Amélie, your bones aren't made of glass. You can take life's knocks. If you let this chance go by, eventually your heart will become as dry and brittle as my skeleton. So... Go and get him, for Pete's sake!"⁴²

THE "LOVE HORMONE" (AND LACK THEREOF) AS THE CORE OF THE CONFLICT

Like *Amélie*, the French-Canadian romantic drama *The Nature of Love*⁴³ corresponds to the characteristics of the art film in its unconventional form, visual and narrative elements, slow pacing, long static shots, and detailed (in this sense "pornographic") exploration of the inner lives of the characters.⁴⁴ Its ambiguous ending – concluding with the solitary protagonist facing a snowy sky – eschews the conventional "happy ending." Yet, unlike *Amélie*, the world of *The Nature of Love* is sober and

39 YALOM, M. *How the French Invented Love: Nine Hundred Years of Passion and Romance*. Unpaginated.

40 BAUDRILLARD, J. *Seduction*, pp. 31–32.

41 *Amélie*. [Film]. 00:57:27.

42 *Ibid.* 01:51:37.

43 Premiered at the 2023 Cannes Film Festival, the film went on to win the César Award for Best Foreign Film in 2024.

44 American film theorist David Bordwell (1947–1924) describes the distinctive nature of art cinema as follows: "What is essential to any such organizational scheme is that it be sufficiently loose in its causation as to permit characters to express and explain their psychological states. Slow to act, these characters tell all. The art cinema is less concerned with action than reaction; it is a cinema of psychological effects in search of their causes. The dissection of feeling is often represented explicitly as therapy and cure..." BORDWELL, D. *Poetics of Cinema*. New York – London : Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2007, p. 153.

multidimensional from the outset. The film addresses multiple themes, including gender role stereotypes and class and social differences, but its underlying theme is also the unfulfilled love life of its female protagonist, the philosophy professor Sophie (Magalie Lépine Blondeau). The opening scene symptomatically portrays Sophie's conversation with her partner Xavier (Francis-William Rhéaume) from separate bedrooms.

Sophie, like Amélie, embodies a *modus deficiens* – a lack of passion and sensual pleasure and an initial condition of abandonment and isolation. Amélie's childhood is depicted as lonely and devoid of (parental) affection: "Amélie is six. Like all little girls, she'd like to be hugged by her daddy. But he never touches her, except for a monthly checkup. The thrill of his rare contact makes her heart beat like a drum. As a result, he thinks she has a heart defect. Declared unfit for school, Amélie is taught by her mother. Deprived of playmates, tossed about between a neurotic and an iceberg, Amélie retreats into her imagination."⁴⁵ In *The Nature of Love*, Xavier repeatedly leaves Sophie behind in the countryside and goes on a business trip, a motif repeated several times in the film. The heroine thus finds herself in a world that seems isolated from civilisation. At the start of their relationship, Sophie compensates for this absence of passion and intimacy by immersing herself in her work – philosophical lectures on love. As with *Amélie*, her poeticisation of life ultimately leads to disillusionment. Sophie asks herself what it actually means to love and withdraws into a world of ideas. Yet, her fantasies about the "right" kind of love do not arise spontaneously; they originate from literary and philosophical texts. Her character recalls the female protagonist of one of the most important French novels, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857). As Mariana Čechová observes, Emma Bovary is "(...) another character of the modern novel who, following the scheme of Don Quixote, succumbed to literature with tragic consequences⁴⁶ (...) like Don Quixote in the thrall of his own unfulfilled desires."⁴⁷ In both *Amélie* and *The Nature of Love*, fantasy and literature (erotically) seduce the female protagonists into viewing the world through the filter of a priori truths. Sophie's desire for an ideal love does not explicitly stem from the object of desire itself, but from its literary and philosophical representations. The French literary critic René Girard, in his essay *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* [The Lie of Romanticism and the Truth of the Novel] (1961), describes this nature of desire through a triangular model, in which the depiction of human desire is mimetic – it imitates the desires of others.⁴⁸ Thus, the value of someone or something (love) lies not in its intrinsic worth but in the desirability conferred upon it by others.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Amélie*. [Film]. 00:04:48.

⁴⁶ ČECHOVÁ, M., et al. *Osnovné tematické algoritmy v slovesnom umení (s intersemiotickými a idterdisciplinárnymi presahmi)* [Backstory Thematic Algorithms in Belles-lettres (with Intersemiotic and Interdisciplinary Overlaps)], p. 116.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴⁸ Based on the Czech translation of René Girard's work. GIRARD, R. *Lež romantizmu a pravda románu* [The Lie of Romanticism and the Truth of the Novel]. Translated by A. Šabatková. Praha: Duphin, 1998, p. 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 27.

Sophie's attachment to Xavier begins to fade after she encounters Sylvain (Pierre-Yves Cardinal), a handyman who awakens in her a strong sexual attraction. Her affair with Sylvain gradually distances her from Xavier, both physically and emotionally. It is this lack of physicality, of embodied passion, that precipitates the gradual dissolution of their relationship. The world in the film is modelled along the lines of two poles, which Marilyn Yalom contrasts in her book: marital (partnerial) affection linked to duty that rules out the spontaneous attraction that pertains to true love,⁵⁰ and lovers' love. This is also why the French word "amour" is interpreted in some contexts as an irrational and destructive force.⁵¹ In this sense, *The Nature of Love* epitomises the quintessential French love story, archetypally rooted in French art. Sophie's amorous and adventurous (the protagonist keeps facing difficulties in her relationships) struggle between marital and lovers' love mirrors her search for a philosophical ideal of love and her discovery of her own sexuality and inner needs. In the film's narrative, Sophie's quest for a deeper essence of love, and for "ideal" love, is a synthesis of passages depicting the heroine's love life and replicas – philosophical theses about love, which she delivers lectures on as a professor.

The journey of the main character can be outlined by the following plotline, where the sections of the story can be regarded as the turning phases of the protagonist's trajectory: (1) the establishment of lack as the initial condition (a passionless relationship with Xavier), (2) the abandonment of that state (separation, break-up with Xavier), (3) the attainment of a state of ideal completeness (a passionate affair with a lover). Sophie's lectures to her students are identical to this outline and progress from Plato's concept of love to that of Schopenhauer: "According to Plato, love is intrinsically linked to the notion of desire. And desire, for Plato, is defined by a lack. So obviously, Platonic love has no form other than frustration. We desire what we do not possess.⁵² (...) Schopenhauer says the will to live drives love. When we see another person as a reproductive force, feelings of romantic love ensue. To reproduce is to leave a trace of life. Love thus allows us to experience immortality.⁵³ (...) Schopenhauer asserts that in love, all is physical. What we see as noble sentiments of heart are actually the expression of our sexual instincts. It's simply our body talking."⁵⁴

The philosophical lectures testify to what unfolds on the screen, articulating the particular concept of love that the protagonist is encountering. The philosophical theses are further enriched in the film by references to other texts and works that shape Sophie's lived experience, allowing her to discover new aspects of herself through their resonance. This game with appearances and the embedding of stories within stories finds a parallel in *Amélie*. There, the heroine's conversations with the so-called "glass man" about the girl with the glass in Auguste Renoir's *Le Déjeuner*

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 35–36.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 27.

⁵² *The Nature of Love (Simple comme Sylvain)*, directed by Monia Chokri (Metafilms, 2023). [Film]. 00:26:24.

⁵³ *The Nature of Love*. [Film]. 00:56:29.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 00:57:07.

des canotiers [The Luncheon of the Boating Party] (1880) gradually lead Amélie to recognise the source of her sadness and discontent: "After all these years, the only person I still can't capture is the girl with the glass of water. She's in the middle, yet she's on the outside. – Maybe she's just different from others. – In what way? – I don't know. – When she was little, she can't have played much with other children. Maybe never."⁵⁵

Sophie's lectures on different philosophical interpretations of love unfold along the main narrative line. In *Amélie*, by contrast, the lives of secondary characters constitute an accompanying storyline. Here, lovers' love is symbolised by the relationship between the air hostess Philomène (Armelle) and her secret lover; tragic love is personified by Madeleine Wallace (Yolande Moreau), who mourns her fiancé, a fallen soldier; possessive, morbid love is embodied in the relationship between the jealous Joseph (Dominique Pinon) and the tender Georgette (Isabelle Nanty); while marital, rational love is represented by Amélie's parents. The heroine herself initially experiences a platonic attachment to Nino, which eventually transforms into a romantic (erotic) love by the film's conclusion. In this way, the film encapsulates multiple forms of love "à la française," or modes by which it is perceived in French culture. As Marilyn Yalom observes, the French concept of love is holistic: it also encompasses infidelity, suffering, disappointment, jealousy, and even violence.⁵⁶ In *The Nature of Love*, Sophie likewise embodies diverse concepts of love, with the philosophical theories she cites pointing towards the origins and influences that have shaped what is termed love "à la française" in this study.

FATIGUE AND RENEWAL (IN THE NARRATIVE CYCLE OF LIFE AND DEATH)

At the heart of *The Nature of Love* lies Sophie's infidelity with Sylvain, who arrives to help her renovate her old cottage. The way this space is filmed (notably the shots from the kitchen), together with the figure of the handyman himself (a muscular and attractive "tough guy" in overalls) and his function (replacing an unskilled and perpetually preoccupied partner), evokes a typical theme present in pornography, which directly leads to a physical climax. Here too, Sophie and Sylvain's acquaintance culminates in passionate sex, with explicit and often vulgar lines accompanying the bold scenes of lovemaking. The motif of repairing the cottage can be seen as a metaphorical (erotic) expression of Sophie's dysfunctional relationship with Xavier. "I'd redo the whole thing."⁵⁷ (...) Look, this hasn't been kept up. It leaks, it's moldy.⁵⁸ (...) Don't ruin our beautiful project."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ibid. 00:29:38.

⁵⁶ YALOM, M. *How the French Invented Love: Nine Hundred Years of Passion and Romance*. Unpaginated.

⁵⁷ *The Nature of Love*. [Film]. 00:09:32.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 00:09:39.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 00:45:37.

As Marilyn Yalom observes, the sources of lovers' love in French art lie in the concept of "fin'amor" expressed in French medieval songs about "la mal mariée:" the love triangle of wife, husband, and lover.⁶⁰ "Second, men and women had to meet certain standards appropriate for lovers. Looks counted, and still count, especially the woman's looks. Falling in love was often occasioned by a lady's sublime beauty. Love entered through the eyes and went directly to the heart. While the French speak of "un coup de foudre" (a stroke of lightning), the English expression is even more visually explicit: love at first sight."⁶¹ By analogy, Sophie and Sylvain's affair is not grounded solely in sexual desire but also acquires romantic dimensions, in the spirit of love "à la française" (or even of the Greek eros). Yet the protagonists of *The Nature of Love* are marked by an inevitable fate: the impossibility of fulfilling their love.

In interpreting the romantic (erotic) drama *The Nature of Love*, we will further concentrate on its differences from *Amélie*. Unlike *Amélie*'s, Sophie's story lacks a happy ending. Sophie undertakes a heroic journey, beginning with symbolic death (of love) and ending in fulfilment (of love) several times – the relationship with her lover is repeatedly "exhausted" and "renewed," or "rehabilitated," only to culminate in wreckage and the heroine's disillusionment. Although Sophie – drawing on Plato's and Schopenhauer's ideas – believes her love of Sylvain to be "true love," the problem of love proves to be much more complex in her everyday life. Whereas *Amélie* followed a linear narrative (from lack to fulfilment), *The Nature of Love* constructs its story circularly, or spirally. The film begins with a shot of Sophie's face at a petrol station beside Xavier, and concludes with an identical shot of the heroine, this time with a different partner. Yet neither the first nor the second love brings her to a happy ending or makes her feel happy.

The narration of the story of *The Nature of Love* as a cycle of recurring phenomena and events is related to the existential overlaps of the film. The stages of the heroine's development (leaving home, undergoing trials, the tragic discovery of the truth, death as a consequence) are also illustrated by passages depicting a particular season or natural environment. The story begins and ends in winter, evoking the atmosphere of night, hopelessness, and chaos. It then shifts to spring (a metaphor for new beginnings), summer (associated with joy and a sense of fulfilment), and autumn (a symbolic representation of the heroine's fall and isolation), before returning to winter. This juxtaposition of the human and the natural world exemplifies the periodic phenomena closely linked to life in the most general sense: the cycle of life and death, rise and fall, activity and passivity, fatigue and renewal. In *The Nature of Love*, the movement along the imaginary axis of "life – death – life" takes place symbolically, through the death of the marital and the lovers' relationship, and of the heroine's idealised notion of love. Here, love is not rewarded with love but faces rejection. The realistically portrayed experience of love deviates from

60 YALOM, M. *How the French Invented Love: Nine Hundred Years of Passion and Romance*. Unpaginated.

61 Ibid.

the female protagonist's ideas, as Sophie is confronted with the finitude of love. In this sense, the film may also be read through the existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of death, which conceives of mortality as the most inherent and inescapable possibility of existence.⁶²

Sophie begins to be sceptical about love and ironizes her relationship with both Sylvain and Xavier, and this appears in her lectures again: "Unlike Plato, Spinoza makes a distinction between desire and love. We can desire something without valuing it, like, for example, wanting to sleep with someone we're not interested in. Sometimes, we can even scorn the object of our desire. We can also love without desire. The value we place on someone determines love, not our desire to excuse of expression... fuck."⁶³ (...) True love, according to Vladimir Jankélévitch, is irrational. We love because we love. Love is the sole source of love. It strikes us like an illness. On the other hand, according to bell hooks, love is an action, not feeling. We don't submit to it. We choose to love."⁶⁴

According to Marilyn Yalom, in the context of French art, a similar examination of love occurs around the turn of the seventeenth century. She illustrates this on the example of Madame de Clèves from Madame de La Fayette's erotic saga *La Princesse de Clèves* [The Princess of Cleves] (1678): "Madame de Clèves knows all this and yet renounces a future with the man she loves. Whether we agree with her decision or not, one thing is clear: henceforth love will have to bear the burden of trenchant psychological scrutiny. Henceforth love will be accompanied by a certain scepticism. Can it last? Is it worth it? Are men congenitally inconstant? (...) La Princesse de Clèves marks a notable shift in the French erotic saga. While romantic love will return in various guises over and over and over again during the next three hundred years, it will never be the same. It will never be as free from suspicion as it was before Madame de La Fayette's masterpiece."⁶⁵ Marilyn Yalom further notes that even in contemporary French culture, the physical dimension of love predominates over the emotional; love goes through a cynical period reminiscent of Gustave Flaubert's anti-romanticism.⁶⁶

EX(C)ITUS AND POSTCOITAL DYSPHORIA (INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION)

The conclusion of *The Nature of Love* is marked by Sophie and Sylvain's break-up – the symbolic death of their relationship. This ending is already foreshadowed. In the film's opening passage, the voiceover states: "But humans destroy to create, build new things. Humans are inherently good. – Our Humanist! Thanks, Jean Jacques Rousseau!"⁶⁷ The affair between the protagonist and Sylvain begins with a reference to the Michel Sardou's chanson *Je vais t'aimer* (1976). "Enough to make any 'Marquis

62 HEIDEGGER, M. *Being and Time*. Oxford : Blackwell Publishers, 1962, pp. 304–305.

63 *The Nature of Love*. [Film]. 01:17:45.

64 Ibid. 01:28:17.

65 YALOM, M. *How the French Invented Love: Nine Hundred Years of Passion and Romance*. Unpaginated.

66 Ibid.

67 *The Nature of Love*. [Film]. 00:01:58

de Sade' turn pale. Enough to make the whores of harbours blush. (...) Enough to make our eyes be circled and close. Enough to make our bodies suffer and die. Enough to make our souls fly to the seventh heaven. Enough to make ourselves believe our own deaths and make love again."⁶⁸

Despite Sophie's repeated attempts to "revive" the relationship, its "death" ultimately appears as the only possible resolution, just like human existence in Martin Heidegger's concept is a movement towards death because it ends in unfulfillment, disintegration, and exhaustion.⁶⁹ For Heidegger, the human being is in constant contact with death, which is contained in every obstacle of life man must withstand.⁷⁰ Being also has, however, a mode of veiled evasion of death, but this already marks a departure from real life.⁷¹ This inauthentic existence represents a loss of individuality and freedom and a turning away from one's self-knowledge and from understanding one's own deep inner essence.

The refusal to face reality and its tragic potential threatens both Sophie and Amélie. In both films, ideal love is "pornographically" exaggerated: an artificial source of satisfaction that numbs the heroines to their lived experience and seduces them into false existence. As we have emphasised throughout this study, their inclination towards illusions and fantasies – i.e. towards inauthentic being – must be overcome. Sophie's return of the wedding ring to Sylvain, followed by her solitary exposure to the snowy night sky at the petrol station, brings her face-to-face with her own finitude and the finitude of all that is mundane. For Martin Heidegger, such acceptance of life's lot – of death as possibility – defines authentic being, even though it entails anxiety and solitude.⁷² The return to authentic and true existence renders the surrounding world distant – a place unfamiliar to man. Sophie's confrontation with "death" thus alters her being: nothing remains as it was. This condition of hers, including the feelings it evokes, can be figuratively equated with postcoital dysphoria. As Czech aesthetician Jiří Vaněk argues, death is fundamentally intertwined with eroticism and pornographicity, realised along the semantic axis of love (sex) and death.⁷³ Here, sex is the principal opposite of death: it stands at the beginning of life, while death is its end.

Both the analysed films illustrate death as a transformative experience for their protagonists: in order for something new to emerge (relationship, self-knowledge), something else must "die" (relationship, fear, and illusions). Jungian psychologist, collector of primordial tales, and researcher of the female psyche Clarissa Pinkola Estés describes the acceptance of death (in whatever form) as the foundation of

⁶⁸ Michel Sardou: *Je vais t'aimer*. Lyrics by Pierre Delanoë, English translation from <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/je-vaais-t039aimer-i-will-love-you.html>, lines 1, 2, pp. 25–28.

⁶⁹ HEIDEGGER, M. *Being and Time*, pp. 219–220.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 253, 301.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 353–354.

⁷³ VANĚK, J. Erotickost a pornografickost výrazu [Eroticism and Pornographicity of Expression]. In PLEŠNÍK, L., et al. *Tezaurus estetických výrazových kvalit* [Thesaurus of Expressive Aesthetic Qualities], p. 240.

enduring love.⁷⁴ This aspect is also evident in *Amélie*, when the main characters first come into physical proximity. Attempting to return the album to Nino, Amélie enters the “house of horrors,” where Nino, disguised as a skeleton, literally breathes down her neck. In both film stories, the aim of “death” is to show how life works and bring the heroines to a life lesson and to a deep reawakening and (self-)knowledge. The essence of their external and internal transformation also lies in their bodily experience (sex), which initiates them into their authentic being and links them with a higher consciousness.

Philosopher Richard Shusterman, in his project of somaesthetics, reasons about the aesthetic bodily experience along the same lines. For him, the body and bodily sensation shape our experience and acquire cultivative meanings.⁷⁵ Aesthetic experience emerges from physiological processes (soma). Shusterman's ideas can be correlated with the figure of Amélie: through her bodily experience – the pounding of her heart when her father touches her during a medical examination – she begins to awaken to certain facts about herself. She understands that by fleetingly touching the grains of lentils she compensates for tenderness and love that have been absent in her life, while the reverse is also true: she also needs emotional stimuli to achieve physical gratification. For Sophie, the lack of physical stimuli in her relationship with Xavier becomes the root of her mental dissatisfaction.

In the works under study, sex also figures as a life-giving force: its absence affects the lives of the female protagonists and their inability to enjoy the present in the sense of the French “*joie de vivre*.” Sex is an experience that allows one to establish contact with another “life,” a merging of bodies, an exchange of bodily fluids, an awareness of all the physical manifestations of being, and an interplay of a multitude of lived physical and mental sensations that result in orgasm. Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics, which he elucidates in his book *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* through the example of erotic (and pornographic) art, turns, like the films in question, to the life of the human being, and has cultivative, healing, and thus pragmatic significance.⁷⁶

At the level of narrative, *Amélie* and *The Nature of Love* are structured upon archetypal story patterns. Clarissa Pinkola Estés considers these primordial stories as medicines that allow us to understand our needs and our instinctive nature, to overcome life's obstacles, and to navigate everyday life, because archetypal, model patterns of human (female) behaviour are present and distinguishable in

⁷⁴ PINKOLA ESTÉS, C. *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. New York : Ballantine Books, 1996, pp. 94–95.

⁷⁵ SHUSTERMAN, R. *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. IX. In his somaesthetics project, Richard Shusterman follows Michel Foucault's concept of the connection between body and soul in sexual pleasure, grounded primarily in the ancient Greek notion of (self-)cultivation, consisting of the techniques, practices, and attitudes by which the individual is formed as a moral subject. In Greco-Roman ethics, as this French philosopher observed, sexual pleasure was considered an integral part of the “art of living” (*techné tou biou*). See FOUCAULT, M. *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 3: *The Care of the Self*. New York : Pantheon Books, 1986, pp. 133, 134, 43.

⁷⁶ SHUSTERMAN, R. *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*, p. 156.

them.⁷⁷ After all, eroticism and pornographicity operate in both films not merely through the iconisation of sex and its implicit (erotic) or explicit (pornographic) representation. The existential infiltration of the central theme of the films and the gradual erotic progression of their plots towards the revelation of the naked, cruel essence of human existence is pornographic strategy par excellence.

The narratives of *Amélie* and *The Nature of Love* graduate from psychological stimulation and sensory experience to the physical union of the characters, just as the titles of the sections of this study move through the phases of the sexual act. Our probe has notionally progressed from foreplay and arousal to orgasm and conditions that can occur in its aftermath – hormonal release, fatigue and renewal of the human body, or postcoital dysphoria. According to Clarissa Pinkola Estés, culture, society, and time have long obscured the traditional “impure,” “perverted,” and “sexual” versions of “primordial stories” about women: “Sexual elements were omitted. Helping creatures and animals were often changed into demons and boogeyers. This is how many women’s teaching tales about sex, love, money, marriage, birthing, death, and transformation were lost. It is how fairy tales and myths that explicate ancient women’s mysteries have been covered over, too.”⁷⁸ On this level, the films analysed here partake of original culture-shaping narratives. Their reception constitutes a notional rite of initiation into female sexuality and being. In Clarissa Pinkola Estés’s words, they may serve as a “map” for those who come after us.⁷⁹ Or, as Marilyn Yalom notes: “In matters of the heart, we are still kin to the storybook inhabitants of medieval France.”⁸⁰

Translated by Monika Dorna

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⁷⁷ PINKOLA ESTÉS, C. *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, p. 18. Estés’s reasoning is complemented by Jungian psychologist Jean Shinoda Bolen, who traces archetypal female behaviours through Greek mythology (Greek goddesses) – see BOLEN, J. S. *Goddesses in Everywoman: Powerful Archetypes in Women’s Life*. HarperOne, 2009, p. 2 – while Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* analyses the formation of female sexuality based on cultural and literary depictions of women. According to de Beauvoir, the archetypes attributed to women (such as virgin or mother) legitimise the status of women as the so-called “second sex.” She argues that patriarchal society is full of images that prevent women from freely forming their own identities while at the same time prescribing their social status. See DE BEAUVOIR, S. *Second Sex*, pp. 315–325. Another French-Belgian co-production, *La Bonne Épouse* [*How to Be a Good Wife*] (2020) revolves around the same idea.

⁷⁸ PINKOLA ESTÉS, C. *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, p. 19.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

⁸⁰ YALOM, M. *How the French Invented Love: Nine Hundred Years of Passion and Romance*. Unpaginated.

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