***Ma Vie En Rose (My Life in Pink)* (1997)**

**Film Background:** *Ma Vie En Rose* was directed by Alain Berliner. It won Best Foreign Language Film at the 1998 Golden Globe Awards. Berliner is Belgian, and the film was primarily shot in France. The film was given an R rating by the MPAA despite the fact that it has virtually no violent or sexual content; some have argued this rating is due to the transphobia inherent in the MPAA rating system.

**Plot summary:** At the start of the film, the Fabre family--Hanna (Michèle Laroque), Pierre (Jean-Philippe Écoffey), and their four children have just moved to a new house in a suburban neighborhood, where Pierre is starting a new job. The neighborhood is close-knit and some of the neighbors work together. As the film opens, the Fabre family hosts a housewarming party, and their youngest child, Ludovic, (Georges Du Fresne) who was assigned male at birth, appears in a dress. Ludo's parents encourage her to stop dressing in feminine clothing, but her grandmother, Elisabeth (Hélène Vincent), is more understanding. Ludovic escapes from the transphobic pressures at school and home by imagining a fantastical world she shares with her favorite television character (Delphine Cadet), Pam, who is a Barbie-like figure. As pressure mounts from the neighbors, Ludo's parents take her to therapy to try to encourage her to conform to a masculine identity. During a school play, Ludo barricades the girl who is assigned to the role of Snow White in the bathroom and takes the role for herself. This leads the school to expel Ludo, and Pierre loses his job. Faced with mounting pressure, Pierre and Hanna begin to express rage and act violently towards Ludo, resenting her for their family's challenges. Ludo briefly goes to stay with Elisabeth to escape the family's resentment. Eventually, the Fabre family moves to a new neighborhood, where Ludo befriends Chris (Raphaelle Santini), who was assigned female at birth, and who presents as masculine. After a conflict at Chris's party in which Hanna attacks Ludo for switching costumes with Chris, Ludo's parents tell her she can wear what she likes and that she will always be their child; however, the ending is abrupt and therefore somewhat ambiguous.

**Content warnings:** *Ma Vie En Rose* contains physically and emotionally abusive behavior towards a young child, as well as a suicide attempt by a young child (sitting in an icebox).

**Running time:**89 min

**Materials for this week:**

* Lesson plans
* Screening quiz
* Secondary texts:
  + Day 1: Esteban Muñoz, Jose. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* NYU UP, 2009. (Excerpt provided: selection from pp. 172-177)
  + Day 2: Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity.* Seal Press, 2007.
  + Day 3: Schiavi, Michael R. "A 'Girlboy's Own Story: Non-Masculinie Narrativity in *Ma Vie En Rose."* *College Literature* vol. 31, no. 3, 2004, pp. 1-26.

**Notes:**

* **Note:**Day 1 of this week includes a scene analysis alongside another brief excerpt from *Cruising Utopia.* You could assign this excerpt for students to read alongside their screening of *Ma Vie en Rose*, prior to this week's class, or you could have students read it together during the Day 1 class period. Alternatively, you could skip this text excerpt and close-read the scene without it!
* Because of the relative difficulty of Schiavi’s text compared with Serano’s, and because Schiavi’s text presents good opportunities to discuss the end of the film, Day 2 involves queer theory (Serano) and Day 3 involves film criticism (Schiavi).
* Scholarship on *Ma Vie en Rose* uses various pronouns to refer to Ludovic. Throughout these lesson plans, I will use “she/her” pronouns to refer to Ludo, due to Ludo’s explanations throughout the film that she is a girl. Schiavi’s article includes “he/him” pronouns. One could argue it would be more appropriate to use “they/them” pronouns or simply refer to Ludo as “Ludo.” You could discuss with your class the challenges of speaking and writing about a character who is given few opportunities to explain herself.

**Lesson 1 – Close Reading Key Scene – Snow White and Queer Failure:**

1. (7 min) Screening quiz.
2. (10-15 min) Student-led scene close-reading and analysis.
3. (3 min) Begin teacher-led close-reading and analysis. Re-watch today’s clip, of Ludo stealing Sophie’s part in *Snow White*. (46:06-48:46)
4. (10 min) [This prep time is a bit longer since students may need to read or review the short excerpt from Muñoz’s text.] Discussion prep. If time, have students share their responses with a partner before whole class discussion.
   1. What formal elements of this scene stand out to you? How do they underscore the themes present in this moment?

* *Sound: When the curtain rises, the audience eagerly cheers, laughs and applauds. However, their enthusiasm turns to pin-drop silence upon realizing that Ludo, not Sophie, is acting as Snow White. The sound effects of Sophie, Ludo and Jerome’s parents all standing up from their chairs is particularly evident because of the silence in the scene. The silence of the crowd also pervades the scene when the Fabre family steps outside and cuts through the crowd. Somber music emphasizes their new status as social outcasts because of Ludo’s actions.*
* *Editing:* *A series of shots of the various couples in the audience captures their joy and excitement as they prepare to see Jerome kiss Sophie. The parents of these children seem excited by the performance of heteronormativity embodied by this play. Similarly, a series of shots highlight Jerome, Sophie, and Ludo’s parents express surprise and horror when they see that it is Ludo, not Sophie beneath the veil, disrupting the heteronormative script the children were performing.*
* *Color:* *This scene is a critical moment in the film because it is the moment when the color grading of the film changes from one that is filled with warm colors like red and pink to one that is primarily blue and grey, as do many of the costumes. This is a dramatic shift that is intended to be noticeable to the audience and signal that the community sees the Fabre family differently. The stage is filled with pinks and reds – a pink blanket sits atop the horse Jerome rides, Jerome wears a red vest, Ludo’s bed is covered in pink material, and Ludo’s costume includes a red headband and dress. But the moment that the Fabre family steps outside, most people are dressed in cold greys and blues, and the Fabre family wears exclusively these colors.*
* *Framing: The long shot as the Fabre family hurries to their car shows the mass of people, almost appearing as if they will chase them out like an angry mob. As the family approaches the street, most of the shot is taken up by the empty expanse of the lot that separates them from the community.*
  1. Consider Muñoz’s analysis of queer failure on p. 172-177.What elements of this scene speak to Muñoz’s ideas?
* *Ludo’s stealing of Sophie’s role, and her performance of Snow White, can be considered an example of a performance of queer failure: “It is a going off script, and the script in this instance is the mandate that makes queer and other minoritarian cultural perforners work not for themselves but for distorted cultural hierarchy” (177). In this moment, Ludo refuses to play the male, supporting role that she has been cast in by her teacher, and instead demands the lead of feminine princess being awoken by a spell by her prince and carried off on a white horse. She chooses to “work for [herself]” in this performance, perhaps uncaring that there will be consequences for the action of locking Sophie away and stealing her part.*
* *As Muñoz explains, “utopia…is always destined to fail. Despite this seeming negativity, a generative politics can be potentially distilled from the aesthetics of queer failure. Within failure we can locate a kernel of potentiality. I align queer failure with a certain mode of virtuosity that helps the spectator exit from the stale and static lifeworld dominated by the alienation, exploitation and drudgery associated with capitalism or landlordism” (173). This scene is an illustration of a utopia that is destined to fail – Ludo demands to play Snow White, regardless of what may occur after the scene has played out. This moment provides her—and perhaps Jerome—with a “kernel of potentiality” that helps both children “exit from the stale and static lifeworld” of heteronormativity, exemplified by one of the most well-known heteronormative fairytales. When Ludo sits up, everyone seems to awaken to her performance, even though it can only be cast as a failure by this audience.*
* *Muñoz explains: “Within straight time, the queer can only fail; thus, an aesthetic of failure can be productively occupied by the queer artist for the purpose of delineating the bias that underlies straight time’s measure. The politics of failure are about doing something else, that is, doing something else in relation to a something that is missing in straight time’s always already flawed temporal mapping practice” (Muñoz 174). In “straight time’s…temporal mapping practice,” Ludo “can only fail;” she is given a part that does not fit her identity and the role she truly wants is unavailable to her. By locking Sophie in the closet and running this performance off the track of straight time, rendering the entire school play a “failure,” she points out what is “missing” in the “bias that underlies straight time’s measure,” a bias that does not allow her full subjectivity. To render herself visible in a utopian performance, she must actually remove a subject who is more valued than herself—Sophie, whose absence they notice and attend to.*

1. (25 min) Whole class discussion.
   1. What formal elements of this scene stand out to you? How do they underscore the themes present in this moment?
   2. Consider Muñoz’s analysis of queer failure on p. 172-177.What elements of this scene speak to Muñoz’s ideas?
   3. **Extension question:** Have you ever seen an intentional performance of failure as Muñoz describes it, queer or otherwise? What was it? How did this performance illustrate Muñoz’s ideas

**Lesson 2: Examining *Ma Vie En Rose* Alongside *Whipping Girl***

1. (5 min) Consider the three works we’ve examined so far this unit.
   * Why, according to Muñoz (and perhaps many of the filmmakers in this unit) is the “here and now” a “prison house” for LGBTQ people?
   * How do LGBTQ people use the past and the future to create “other ways of being in the world” and “ultimately new worlds?” How do “San Junipero,” *Pose,* and *Ma Vie en Rose* convey that world-making?
2. (7 min) Discuss.
3. (4 min) Re-watch today’s clips: Elisabeth changes the music and dances at the party; Elisabeth teaches Ludo her “trick” (10:01-11:00; 15:01-18:35)
4. (15 min) Study groups. Groups will work on the following questions.
   1. What key points does Serano make? What terms does she use to make her claims?

* *Serano argues that trans women are subject to a variety of intersecting forms of oppression: transphobia, cissexism, misogyny, oppositional sexism, and traditional sexism. These terms are defined on p. 12-14.*
* *Serano argues that these intersecting forms of oppression function collectively as trans-misogyny, which is the specific form of sexism and transphobia that trans women experience most prominently. As Serano argues, “In a male-centered gender hierarchy, where it is assumed that men are better than women and that masculinity is superior to femininity, there is no greater perceived thread than the existence of trans women, who despite being born male and inheriting male privilege ‘choose’ to be female instead. By embracing our own femaleness and femininity, we, in a sense, cast a shadow of doubt over the supposed supremacy of maleness and masculinity” (15)*
* *Serano argues that trans-misogyny takes many forms, including hyperfeminization of depictions of trans women, hypersexualization of depictions of trans women, and objectification of trans women’s bodies (16)*
* *Serano argues that trans activism must be a “feminist movement” that “challenges the idea that femininty is inferior to masculinity” (18)*
* *She argues that femininity must be uplifted; “we must learn to empower femininity itself…we must challenge all who assume that feminine vulnerability is a sign of weakness. For when we do open ourselves up, whether by honestly communicating our thoughts and feelings or expressing our emotions, it is a daring act, one that takes more courage and inner strength than the alpha male façade of silence and stoicism” (18)*
* *Serano also argues that “we must stop pretending that there are essential differences between women and men” and that the two genders are “opposites”; (19) Serano argues that the notion that opposites exist in gender makes it “impossible for us to empower women without either ridiculing men or pulling the rug out from under ourselves” (19)*
* *Serano closes her piece by claiming that “by challenging both oppositional and traditional sexism simultaneously, we can make the world safe for those of us who are queer, those of us who are feminine, and those of us who are female, thus empowering people of all sexualities and genders” (20)*

1. How do these key points relate to the scenes we just watched, or to other scenes in this episode? Reference specific details from the scene and specific lines from the text in your response.
   * *Throughout these scenes, Berliner highlights Elisabeth’s connection to Ludo, and also the ways she too is outcast due to misogyny and ageism. When she begins to dance at the party, she is critiqued for being “as crazy as ever” and “pretending to be young.” Despite Pierre’s judgment, Elisabeth dances, and Ludo runs to her. Hanna joins them, and the trio dance together, ignoring the judgment of the men who stand at the sidelines. All three characters wear orange, suggesting their unity and their enjoyment, especially in contrast to the cool blue tones that are dominant in the second half of the film. Men’s judgment of feminine expression--especially by gender non-conforming characters like Ludo, and women who are older and therefore no longer treated as objects of sexual conquest, like Elizabeth—shapes this scene, but so too do the characters’ rejection of that judgment and celebration of their femininity. This is one rare scene in which Hanna seems to connect to Ludo’s exuberance and expression, embracing her and grinning as they dance. This scene illustrates Serano’s point about the intersections between transphobia and misogyny, as well as her claim about the importance of “empowering femininity itself” (18).*
   * *Elisabeth gives Ludo the box with a feminine figure dancing inside it, perhaps as a symbol of her strategy for feminine expression. While she seems to accept that the world does not want people like herself or Ludo to freely express themselves, she encourages Ludo to live out feminine expression through fantasy. She explains, “At some point you have to face reality. So in order to do all the things I want without seeming ridiculous, I have a trick.” She explains that she closes her eyes and “the world becomes whatever I want.” Ludo closes her eyes and imagines herself in Pam’s world, in a white lacy dress and surrounded by rich pinks and reds.*
   * *Elisabeth and Ludo’s shared joy in feminine expression through fantasy illustrates 1) the film’s critique of patriarchy, in which masculinity is prized and femininity is devalued, and 2) why the film turns towards utopian imagery to provide Ludo with a different vision of “Ma Vie En Rose.” Since the world Ludo lives in is a world of trans-misogyny, she relies on Pam’s World for a staging of utopia that values feminine power and expression.*
2. (20 min) Whole group discussion.
   * 1. What key points does Serano make? What terms does she use to make her claims?
     2. Review p. 12-14. What forms of oppression does Serano address?
     3. On p. 15, Serano defines “trans-misogyny.” How does she explain this term?
     4. According to Serano, what must activists do to combat trans-misogyny?
     5. How do these key points relate to the scenes we just watched, or to other scenes in this episode? Reference specific details from the scene and specific lines from the text in your response.
     6. How does Ludo’s relationship with Elisabeth illustrate the film’s critique of misogyny?
     7. What does Elisabeth share with Ludo about how to challenge misogyny?
     8. How does this help us understand why the film uses fantasy and utopian imagery?
     9. How does the use of color in this scene help us understand the film’s focus on trans-misogyny?
   1. **Extension question:** Did you find Serano’s critique of trans-misogyny compelling? Why or why not?

*Answers may vary. As critiques, students may note that while Serano details intersecting forms of oppression in terms of gender and sexuality, she does not take up how these forms of oppression intersect with race and class, or white feminism’s erasure of Black women’s experiences. Students may also point to transmasculine invisibility in culture (vs. transfemininity’s hypervisibility) It could be interesting to explore whether this divergence supports or challenges Serano’s claims.*

* 1. **Extension question:** What other works that we’ve seen in this course might relate to Serano’s claims?

*Students may bring up Pose, such as when Blanca comments on how Damon puts her down because he’s able to diminish her due to her identity as a transwoman. Students may also refer back to Disclosure or Boy Meets Girl.*

**Lesson 3: Examining *Ma Vie En Rose* Alongside Michael Schiavi’s**

1. (5 min) Personal reflection. Choose one of the following questions to answer:
   1. Did you enjoy watching *Ma Vie en Rose?* Why or why not?
   2. This film was made in 1997. Do you think a gender nonconforming child like Ludo would be treated similarly today in your family, school or community? Why or why not?
2. (7 min) Discuss.
3. (5 min) Re-watch today’s clip – final scene (1:20:19-1:25:55) (Note: This clip includes Ludo’s mother hitting her; you may want to warn students or cut the beginning).
4. (15 min) Study groups. (You may want to preface this discussion with a critique of Schiavi’s description of Ludo as a “girl-identified pre-pubescent male” and his use, without comment, of he/him pronouns.)
   1. What is Schiavi arguing in his article?

* *Non-narrativity: Ludo resists normative narrative structures that demands her “compulsory integration within recognizable narrative passages of heterosexual love and family” (2).* 
  + *Schiavi asks how Ludo can survive her circumstance, given her age and limited power: “How then, do Berliner and Vander Stappen manage to hang their entire film on a comparatively mute protagonist who seems thwarted at every narrative turn?” (12)*
* *Strategies of resistance:* 
  + *Spectatorship: Schiavi argues that Ludo’s "foregrounded spectatorship,” her “committed watching and remobilization of ‘feminine’ performance” (2) is one way the narrative resists forward momentum towards heterosexual adulthood (or straight time).*
  + *Non-speech acts: Ludo often makes claims to her identity through movement or presentation; some of these claims are rejected before they can even be named: Ludo “quickly sees the impossibility of sharing [her] hobby when an authority figure dismisses Ludo’s identification with Pam before [she] can speak it” (6)*
  + *Color: The film’s aesthetics are Ludo’s aesthetics - “It is Ludo’s worldview that informs the film’s narrative and aesthetic structures” (13)…”Despite the community’s exclusion of Ludo, its aesthetics belong to a little boy who reminds adults of the subversiveness skipping just beyond their alarm systems’ jurisdiction” (13).*
  + *Fantasy sequences:**“Ludo and Jerome’s belief in [her] fantasies keeps Ludo alive and prevents his story from shutting down altogether. If Ludo accepted [her] parents insistence on gender-prescribed behavior and clothes, if [she] allowed [her] therapist to convince [her she] is male, if [she] believed Albert and Lisette’s conviction that [she] is evil, then his narrative could not continue” (17).*
* *Atypical plot structure: “The sadistic antagonist is less a masculine subject than a masculinist discourse that exists precisely to annihilate non-masculine boys” but “Ludo is too young and too passive to engage in full-scale ‘battle’” (3). While Ludo’s subjectivity is consistently threatened by parents, classmates, teachers, etc., she does not fully respond to these threats, but rather observes and adjusts her disposition; Schiavi argues that this is “non-masculine narrativity” that defies typical plot structures, which highlights the challenge of a feminine and young subject staking a claim for their subjectivity in film.*
* *Closing scene: Schiavi argues that the “deliberately hazy—indeed, archly unresolved—end” (2) of the film highlights its resistance to narrative resolution*
  + *Schiavi points to the fact that the closing scene is abrupt and perhaps unsatisfactory (18).*
  + *“At whatever cost of narrative credibility, Ludo must reintegrate within the Fabre milieu in order to secure the kind of US attention that wins Golden Globes...still,…the question remains: just how do Hanna, Pierre and a crowd of anonymous children suddenly accept the figure who has grated so violently against spectatorship throughout the film?” (18)*
  + *“The answer seems to lie in Pam—or, more specifically, in Ludo’s consumption, redeployment and dissemination of her image” (19).*
  1. Consider Schiavi’s analysis of Ludo’s characterization. Do you agree or disagree with Schiavi’s claims?
* *Answers may vary. Students might critique Schiavi’s analysis that “Ludo seems preternaturally precocious in [her] ability to squelch the pain [she] must feel” (13). One could argue that Ludo’s suicide attempt suggests that there is much about her experience that we cannot see or understand because of the narrative confines and challenges of sharing the experience of a young gender nonconforming child so young. What is clear is that those in Ludo’s life (and perhaps the film itself) are not attentive to her pain, and it remains mostly invisible.*
  1. Consider the final scene of the film. How do you read this scene? What does Berliner do to convey its message? Do you agree with Schiavi’s analysis? Why or why not?
* *Narrative uncertainty: This scene appears to be initially attempting to resolve itself into the “heterosexual plot,” (2) as Chris and Ludo’s mothers joke that “my daughter really likes your son. I hope things work out,” highlighting how heteronormativity structures even childhood play. Pink and blue candles on Chris’s birthday cake seem to underscore the expectation of binary gender and heteronormativity.*
* *Hanna’s breakdown: However, a happy ending through the “heterosexual plot” becomes untenable when Chris returns in Ludo’s costume. While Chris’s mother laughs and turns to Hanna, expecting a returned laugh, Hanna’s face falls, and sharp synthesizer sounds convey her rage. As she chases Ludo, a shaky camera and follows Ludo as if she is running from a monster in a horror movie. As they run through the neighborhood, pops of red color are interspersed with the cool blues. The sound effects highlight Ludo’s dress being ripped. As she hits Ludo, piano notes emphasize the somber melodrama unfolding. In the space of a minute, the film shifts from comedy to horror to tragic drama.*
* *Resolution:**Ludo frees herself from Hanna, and with three minutes left in the film, one wonders how this grim conclusion could be resolved. Hanna checks the icebox, reminding the audience that the stakes of her abuse. With suicide ruled out as a closing note, the film then seems to shift to Ludo’s aesthetics and narrativity as Ludo successfully and Hanna unsuccessfully attempt to enter “Pam’s World” on a billboard, as Ludo seeks a utopian escape from the unlivable circumstances her family has created. After Ludo runs off with Pam into Pam’s world, and Hanna fails to enter this queer temporality space, Hanna awakens on a couch surrounded by friends and family, in a moment that is reminiscent of The Wizard of Oz. Her black and white checkered shirt precisely matches the pattern on the throw pillow she rests her head on, perhaps suggesting the “black-and-white” nature of her worldview and the limitations of her mindset. A brief conversation between Pierre, Ludo, and Hanna seems to suggest that because of this experience, Ludo is now free to dress as she wants and will always be “their child.” Red and pink colors return the landscape outside their house as Pam flies through the sky above.*
* *Students may find this resolution shockingly rushed and unbelievable.* *They may take issue with a seemingly happy resolution that comes so closely after Hanna’s abuse of Ludo, or they may note that the somber score at the end of the film suggests more ambivalence than the dialogue, and Pam’s appearance, lets on. Perhaps the final image of Ludo looking up to the sky where Pam flies above suggests that, although Ludo’s circumstances will continue to be challenging, her reliance on the utopian space of Pam’s world will continue to be an important survival strategy.*

1. Whole class discussion.
   1. What is Schiavi arguing in his article?
2. Review p 2, where Schiavi outlines some of his claims. What does he bring up in this section?

ii.How does Ludo’s story resist narrative structures?

iii.What strategies does Schiavi argue Ludo uses to communicate her experience and identity throughout the film?

* 1. Consider Schiavi’s analysis of Ludo’s characterization. Do you agree or disagree with Schiavi’s claims?

1. Consider the line on p. 13: “Ludo seems preternaturally precocious in [her] ability to squelch the pain [she] must feel” (13). Would you argue that Ludo is “precocious” in her resistance to her family and peers’ transphobia, or is there another way to read this film? What might Schiavi be missing by focusing on Ludo’s strength throughout this violence?
   1. Consider the final scene of the film. How do you read this scene? What does Berliner do to convey its message? Do you agree with Schiavi’s analysis? Why or why not?
2. Consider the moments before Hanna’s breakdown. What do you notice about Hanna and Chris’s mothers’ interaction? How does this convey their expectation for how they’d like this narrative to end?
3. What formal elements convey meaning through Hanna’s breakdown? After this moment, how do you expect the narrative to end?
4. Why do you think the film returns to Pam’s World right after this moment? What does this moment convey?
5. How did you read the final conversation between Hanna, Pierre and Ludo and the final shot of the film?