A Cinema of Infidelity: François Truffaut’s *Antoine Doinel* Cycle and Eric Rohmer’s *Contes moraux*

by

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration of Authorship

I Loreta Barbara Gandolfi hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: ______________________

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Abstract

In this thesis I analyse a selected body of work by the French filmmakers François Truffaut and Eric Rohmer in terms of their portrayals of infidelity. Between the late-1950s and late-1970s Truffaut and Rohmer both made a series of films which took the structure of a cycle: Truffaut made what became known as the *Antoine Doinel cycle* and Rohmer made the *Contes moraux*. This study investigates the emergence and development of the theme of infidelity in these two cycles, a theme which though present in much French cinema of the time and others, remains nevertheless underexplored by film criticism. This theme is examined with reference to writing on film, possible socio-historical preconditions, the French literary heritage and critical theory as I aim to explore what phenomena are revealed in relation to infidelity and the artistic engagement of the two auteurs. Along these lines, this study explores the various facets of infidelity in the chosen films, taking into account ways in which they conform to the influences and traditions that surrounded them, especially politics of gender and feminism. Taking into consideration changes that took place in French intellectual and cultural life that had an enormous impact on the investigation of subjectivity and of male and female identity, it explores the politics of the representation of gender relations through the subject of infidelity as reflected in the relevant films, using close textual analysis as its primary tool. This thesis analyses how the treatment of infidelity in the cinema of Truffaut and Rohmer engages with changes in social mores in post-Second World War France, as well as how infidelity is used to address the changes in social relations and to question the use of power structures in determining the dynamics of male/female relationships. Through the subject of infidelity this thesis seeks to re-evaluate the legacy of Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s films and issues around feminism, gender, sexual behaviour and family.
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Introduction

Amongst the thematic threads through which French filmmakers have expressed themselves, infidelity is recurrent and distinctively so. Whether swiftly yet poignantly discussed over a dinner in Ozon’s 5x2 (2004), or acted out as a supposed performance in Rivette’s Va Savoir (2001), infidelity as a subject for action or reflection is visibly present in modern French cinema. Infidelity in cinema, French and other, is an underdeveloped area of study; it is often represented on screen either in an attractively transgressive guise, or as an occurrence of negligible impact: in this way infidelity remains embedded within a clichéd range of narrative schemes and as a concept is hardly scrutinized beyond them. My thesis offers an analysis of infidelity with specific focus on selected works, the Antoine Doinel cycle and the Contes moraux, from two directors who are in this respect exceptional: François Truffaut and Eric Rohmer.

In this introduction I will provide the methodological framework through which the thesis investigates the theme of infidelity in the films selected. My primary texts are the films and my primary analytical method is close analysis; however, the readings are broadly interdisciplinary in scope. In this respect, the principal tools consist in engagement with, first, the existing scholarship on the Nouvelle vague, Truffaut and Rohmer, and the related cycles; second, auteur theory, in order to trace the development of the theme across the series; third, comparative reading of the two directors’ envisioning of the subject; fourth, on gender relations in the cinema of the two auteurs along with literary, feminist and gender theories that might complement or enrich such readings; fifth, historical-cultural and sociological
perspectives on how the perception of infidelity has been transmitted in the French sociocultural context and is renegotiated in the films. The investigation is thus partly intertextual, examining the influence of key literary and cultural works, such as Balzac and de Beauvoir, on the two directors and the role of literary intertexts in the chosen corpus. With this approach, the thesis argues that the analysis of infidelity in the cinematic body of the Nouvelle Vague enables a reassessment of the filmmakers’ stances in relation to questions of gender relations, marriage, family, divorce and the societal institutions that govern them. The thesis aims to understand to what extent Rohmer and Truffaut critique the standard view (discussed below) of infidelity as ideological determination; to show how their classicism functions as a strategy to expose the flaws of the existing order from within, comparing other contemporary intellectual efforts (notably those of De Beauvoir and Sartre) to renegotiate the paradigms regulating the heterosexual relationship; to propose that the prism of infidelity allows a significant insight into the contradictions of a society that strives for freedom and emphasises the struggles of its agents to pierce through the phantasmagoria of their set roles; and to explore the potential interpretative avenues the theme of infidelity can open up in the reading of cinema.

Eric Rohmer’s 1996 tale of youthful sentimental volatility Conte d’été stands out as a successful symbiosis of popular and auteur cinema: with a narrative driven by the light-hearted trope of a young man’s attraction for three girls simultaneously, the film presents a reflection at the same time on the fundamental principle of all human sexual relationships, the dilemma over questions of fidelity and infidelity. Through their repetition, the youngster’s trips to and away from each girl become the site for the display and simultaneous questioning of the physical and spiritual promiscuity that the protagonist partly hesitates over, partly indulges in; the ensuing
discussion between him and the three girls, whilst on one level conveying the entertaining aspect of this seemingly playful plot, on another level rigorously reveals the potentially fundamental repercussions this sentimental experimentation might provoke and elicits questions about values and morals. Given Rohmer’s association with the *Nouvelle vague* and his status as a film critic and filmmaker from a time in French film history that contributed to the creation of a novel conceptualization of cinema as a practice in both film criticism and film making, the fact that in the mid-1990s a major *auteur* should engage with such a seemingly juvenile subject casts light on the extent to which the topic of relationships was steadily accompanied by the occurrence of infidelity in French cinema. Even confining this observation to Rohmer’s career, it is evident that the topic was present in his cinema from the outset; he began his career at a time of historical momentum that saw the emergence of a generation which challenged the standards of moral codes starting from the conception of the couple. The reinvention of the dynamics of gender relations – the questioning and exploration of which is a continually ongoing process – belongs to a time in history that can be said to have permeated three quarters at least of French cinematic production. Hence, infidelity as a recurring motif in France’s cinematic input constitutes a distinctive and important object of analysis. Going further, French cinema might even be characterised as a *cinema of infidelity*.

Rohmer and Truffaut’s affiliation to the *Nouvelle vague*, the cinematic-intellectual flourishing alongside the other social and intellectual movements of the times, are the crucial figures in my attempt to track the subject of infidelity through French cinema. This thesis is an innovative study that enters the analysis of French cinema through the perspective of the theme of infidelity. The search for the presence of infidelity and the quality of analysis amongst the films of the other
significant *Nouvelle vague* contributors initiated a series of questions such as what were the historical conditions that might have promoted the prevalence of this topic at that point; was it a coincidence that would subside after two or three films by a particular *auteur*; were the *auteurs* formulating precise statements about it; to what degree did its treatment manifest similar and different traits in each of them; was it a topic simply in line with the subjects dear to the youth at that time or was it inscribed and in a dialogue within a bigger historical frame; in sum, would the identification of this topic enable an exploration of the relevant *auteurs* from perspectives that could shed new interpretative light on them?

In synopses of films one often finds descriptions that use terms such as affair, love triangle, family drama; hardly ever do the terms ‘infidelity’ or ‘adultery’ appear. Often stories that centre specifically on infidelity are described in less accurate terms as narratives involved in the eternal troubles of love and commitment: popular stereotypes suggest that love is about Romeo and Juliet seeing nothing beyond their closed world; commitment is about committing to the person one has chosen to be with, and with that person exclusively, through good and bad times. But what a phrase like ‘the troubles of love and commitment’ really stands for is infidelity, the breakage of love and commitment. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir began her controversial public engagement in the inquiry of the minutiae of relationships, with infidelity being a strongly present occurrence – especially in France and especially also in French cinema of the time. The major emphasis the social phenomenon *Nouvelle vague* placed on exploring the meaning of love, the couple and gender relations from perspectives newer than those of the generation just preceding theirs was embraced by the film makers who grew up with this younger generation, and their cinema reflected such concerns. In my thesis, therefore, the cultural
phenomenon of the *Nouvelle vague* must be studied together with the cinematic examples. The different accounts of the cinematic phenomenon that constitutes the ‘*Nouvelle vague*’ provide a sense of the politics of French cinema at the time and the diversity of inputs, aims and interests of the movement’s main exponents through which I have sought to contextualize Truffaut and Rohmer’s portrayal of infidelity during the social and feminist upheavals in France from the mid-1950s; the relevant studies include James Monaco (1976), Roy Armes (1985), Colin Crisp (1993), Antoine de Baecque (1998), Jean Douchet (1998), Michel Marie (2003), Richard Neupert (2007), Naomi Greene (2007), and Ginette Vincendeau (2009). Furthermore, in order to understand how Truffaut and Rohmer’s engagement with infidelity throughout their career differed from the other *Nouvelle vague* filmmakers, the several monographic approaches in both French and English about Malle, Varda, Godard, Resnais, Rivette and Chabrol were important. The early cinema of the *Nouvelle vague* presented instances of infidelity and adultery yet, in Malle, for example, there is no discussion of infidelity; in Varda it receives a minor mention in *La Pointe courte* (1955); and in Godard reflections merely *en passant*. Only in Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s early work already is there a preoccupation voiced as if in the expectation that a theorization of infidelity could lead to a re-theorization of how it could be conceived, thus presenting the basis for the reconceptualisation of the ethics and politics of the basic unit of society, the couple.

Since infidelity involves a clash of gender relations and perspectives entangled in the notion of desire, theories about masculinity and femininity and their representation within a broad spectrum of feminist approaches are key to an understanding of Truffaut and Rohmer’s portrayals of this theme. Further, this thesis also considers another aspect of central significance to both the *auteurs* and the topic
itself: the literary background. Cinema’s engagement with the subject of infidelity mirrors societal preoccupations with it as well as potentially contributing reflections and comments upon them; before cinema, it was literature that was the locus of the treatment of infidelity with which the public had contact. Although this thesis focuses on the analysis of Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s cinematics, it is relevant to consider the portrayal of the notions of adultery, marriage and family in the nineteenth-century French novel, which constitutes a substantial corpus of literature about such subjects: through some major intellectual figures of the nineteenth-century such as Balzac, Flaubert, and Hugo the novel established the parameters for the judgement of infidelity as we encounter them in the twentieth-century creative representations of it. Truffaut and Rohmer were intellectuals; they saw cinema as part of a larger world, and given that their characters’ narratives often explicitly refer to literary works, reference to aspects of the French cultural heritage is indispensable. Several texts about the New Wave emphasise the ambivalent rapport between cinema and literature, notably Dorota Ostrowska’s Reading the French New Wave (2008). The young filmmakers’ rejection of the ‘cinéma de papa’ mirrored the young Nouveau roman writers’ rejection of the French literary heritage, with Balzac and Hugo as the chief representative examples. The perception of infidelity that their male and female characters manifest necessarily recalls the portrayal of infidelity in fiction; Rohmer explained that the characters of his tales act and think like novelistic characters, and Truffaut similarly articulated how his male characters behaved in accordance with how either fictional characters of the past would act or how their writers would make them act. Despite living in the modern era, the characters of the directors’ films are attached to a historical model. For these reasons, attention to one
of the authors still most influential, whether hated or loved, namely Balzac – an author much-read by characters from the Nouvelle vague films – is significant for this study, especially in relation to his representation of infidelity and what it reveals of his epoch’s politics of gender relations, which the characters of Truffaut and Rohmer render as a palpable presence in their daily life in the next century. In French literature, especially of the nineteenth century, infidelity fed the creative imaginary of a substantial number of writers, the analysis of which has attracted considerable scholarly focus: Tony Tanner’s Adultery in the Novel (1979), Judith Armstrong’s The Novel of Adultery (1976), Naomi Segal’s The Adulteress’s Child (1992), Alison Sinclair’s The Deceived Husband: a Kleinian Approach to the Literature of Infidelity (1993), Bill Overton’s The Novel of Female Adultery (1996), Annik Houel’s L’Adultère au féminin et son roman (1999), Nicholas White’s The Family in Crisis in Late Nineteenth-Century French Fiction (1999) approach the complexities of infidelity from various angles, and together provide a key framework for my interdisciplinary investigation of the crossover between literary and cinematic representations of infidelity. Also noteworthy are Sharon Marcus’ and Michael Lucey’s discussions of Balzac, as they shed light on the range of tensions his work exhibits in regard to infidelity and gender relations. Balzac’s Physiologie du mariage (1829), part of the Comédie humaine, sets the guiding themes for the rest of Comédie, namely marriage and adultery. Balzac’s Physiologie, with its male narrator – like Rohmer’s tales and Truffaut’s cycle – and direction towards male readers, portrays adultery, and specifically female adultery, as an inescapable reality, not least due to a husband’s failings: Balzac’s text confirms adultery as a persistent theme and a malaise in French society. Truffaut and Rohmer’s films seemingly reproduce that phenomenon, too, yet concentrate on how male infidelity undoes the
misogynist attitude that was the norm at that point in French society. The cinematic *Nouvelle vague* launched an attack on French cinema on the basis of its literacy: ‘The traditional French filmmakers who precede the *Nouvelle vague* had paid scant attention to the truth or evolution of society, and even less to the changes in physical comportment and behaviour that were taking place in the world around them. They continued to portray an intellectually retrograde bourgeois society, mired in nineteenth-century morality’ (Douchet, 1998: 137). Furthermore, with his 1954 article ‘A Certain Tendency in French cinema’, Truffaut argued that the scriptwriters, who kept adapting from famous French novels, betrayed ‘the spirit of their sources’ and added ‘their own profanity and blasphemy whenever possible’ (in Neupert, 2007: 31). The *Doinel cycle* where Antoine burns Balzac’s altar changes from a *recycled* work of past inheritances to a renewed vision of similar issues. Hence, in this introduction references to the history of representations of infidelity in French thought and the linked notions of heterosexual relationships, marriage and family as culturally determined phenomena serve as an essential basis for the discussion of the directors’ engagement with such topics in their cinema.

Within the time frame covered by this study, a twenty-year span from the late fifties to the late seventies in which major socio-historical and cultural changes occurred in France, Louis Malle’s controversial *Les Amants* (1959) stands out as a key early film that handles this topic, as Chapter One explores. While evidently featuring in several films amongst the prolific production of the *Nouvelle vague*, infidelity does not appear as a subject of deep and consistent concern except in three of that movement’s major representatives, namely Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer and François Truffaut. Of the three, Chabrol stands apart with regard to the treatment of infidelity, since this theme is never the centre of discussion in his films but rather
functions as a narrative obstacle, the discovery and subsequent overcoming of which functions as a pretext for Chabrol’s wider exploration of human brutality: ‘the banality of the real brushes against, breeds, and gives birth to the monstrous. The transition from one to the other occurs in obscurity, through a series of small, barely perceptible shocks. There is no psychological explanation because it is the banality of the world that is monstrous and the monstrous is banal’ (Douchet, 126). In Truffaut and Rohmer infidelity comes first and then from it several other windows of inquiry open onto analysis of related topics. In this thesis, the analysis of the representation of adultery in the selected corpus of films will especially investigate its effect on the representation of the female and male characters and vice-versa. While arguably several filmmakers offer potentially fertile material for a discussion of the representation of gender relations, my search is chiefly guided by an investigation of the representation of infidelity as a prominent and consistently treated theme, for which Rohmer and Truffaut constitute unique case studies. In neither case has criticism of their films stressed infidelity as a theme of major significance. Since nearly all of Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s films contain infidelity or adultery, an organizing principle was not immediately evident. While Truffaut’s Jules et Jim (1961) and La Femme d’à côté (1981), and Rohmer’s La Femme de l’aviateur (1981) and Les Nuits de la pleine lune (1984) could have been obvious choices, central to my approach was the search for a structuring argument about infidelity. In this respect it is important that Truffaut and Rohmer contemporaneously produced a cycle of films between the early sixties and the mid-to-late seventies: the Antoine Doinel cycle (1959–1979) and the Contes moraux (1962–1976) respectively. The seriality within which the narratives of infidelity unfold suggests the directors’ precise intention to undertake an analysis of infidelity
from a twofold perspective within a solid organizational framework: the cyclical return to the subject highlights the recidivism intrinsic to the concept of infidelity in both its physical and spiritual expressions. Discussing the notions of seriality and theme in Rohmer, Derek Schilling notes that

> given the filmmaker’s commitment to photographic realism and to the *in situ* representation of contemporary life [...] each series registers changing trends in material culture [...]. Second, it means that each cycle is vectorised, moving towards an endpoint that may or may not be fixed from the start (Schilling, 2007: 129).

As in the two cycles each film is simultaneously independent from and in dialogue with the others, about Rohmer’s, Schilling (echoing Paini) thus points out that ‘each new film becomes (a commentary, prolongation, and ‘enlargement’ of what was left unresolved in the previous films’ (129). Similarly, about *Les Quatre cents coups* (1959) Truffaut explained: ‘j’entends par là que tout est dit dans un premier film et que, après, on ne fait plus que broder autour’ (in Capdenac, 1967). Within this context ‘seriality forces the viewer to adopt a self-critical attitude and to refuse absorption in favour of active comparison’ (Schilling, 129); the repetition of the theme of infidelity sees it scrutinized in all dimensions through a process of cumulative effects. If by comparison with the other emerging contemporary filmmakers like Varda, Godard, and Resnais, for example, Rohmer and Truffaut can be seen as conservative in aesthetic and thematic choices, Marion Vidal points out that ‘à un néo-classicisme de principe et vidé de toute substance, Rohmer oppose un classicisme éternel, respectueux mais nullement esclave du passé. [...] Toute la substance d’une époque nous est offerte à travers l’apparence et la manière d’être des personnages’ (Vidal, 1977: 17). Just as Rohmer and Truffaut controversially read the classic Hollywood films within the rigid studio system as iconoclastic texts, they tested the capacity of
what for some had become an infertile or even *bourgeois* style of filmmaking and experimented within the so-called canons of classic filmmaking and narrative rules, to which seriality or the cycle belong. Within this framework, the study of infidelity also allows us to evaluate within the cycles’ time span the *auteurs*’ sites of change and evolution in their work and its mind-set, as well as in their representation of the society they were part of and its relation to the past cultural tradition and contemporary intellectual ferment in which the notions of infidelity, love, family and gender relations were the subject of substantial concern.

**What is Infidelity?**

Infidelity is a subject everyone is familiar with, understood by everyone – supposedly. Tony Tanner remarks that ‘adultery as a phenomenon is in evidence in literature from the earliest times, as in Homer’ (Tanner, 1979: 12); it is also, as Roland Barthes’ analysis has shown, a much-desired occurrence. When, in a television interview, ‘the actor J.D. is being questioned, “roasted”, as to his relations with his wife […]”; the interviewer wants the good husband to be unfaithful: this excites him, he demands an ambiguous phrase, the seed of a story’ (in Tanner, 1979: 377). In her sociological study *Adultery* (1988) British sociologist Annette Lawson claims that, before hers, no other work had treated adultery as its main subject. Apparently, a taboo about the term ‘adultery’ impeded studies of it from containing the term in their titles. Lawson’s remarks underline the deep-rooted and widespread mind-set towards infidelity that makes of it an event that consciously goes unnoticed and yet is perpetuated openly. As will be seen in the chapters on Truffaut, the first film of the cycle, *Les Quatre cents coups* (1959), embodies this dynamic, which becomes a point of reference or cornerstone for the remaining cycle. Infidelity is or
exists in its physical manifestation, as an action, but it barely receives consideration as an abstract question. From a psychoanalytical standpoint, Annik Houel confirms that ‘le mouvement psychanalytique français s’intéresse d’ailleurs tout aussi peu à l’adultère, qu’il soit masculin ou féminin, malgré la multiplication récente des ouvrages sur la question de l’amour, comme si le secret de l’adultère devait rester sur les divans’ (Houel, 1999: 122). The paradoxical nature of this phenomenon emerges through the fact that despite their visibility, their knowability, the facts of infidelity remain largely unspoken beyond a standard acknowledgment, such as in the celebrity culture, for instance.

What might be the reason behind the inhibition about an open discussion of infidelity? First of all, a working definition of infidelity and the closely related term adultery underlying this thesis needs to be decided upon. According to Overton, ‘there is no single, universally applicable definition of adultery’ (Overton, 1996: 2) in that the concept ‘varies, in some respects critically, across different cultures and different historical periods’ (2). Whilst according to the Oxford English Dictionary adultery consists of, amongst other things, ‘voluntary sexual intercourse’, according to Lawson’s sociological study of adultery ‘over 40 percent of study participants reported a relationship that they considered adulterous even though they and their partners had “never made love”’ (Lawson, 1988: 37). Beyond its physical manifestation, infidelity should therefore be acknowledged, significantly, in terms of emotional values. My study embraces instances of adultery and infidelity within the conception of infidelity in its abstract form. Infidelity is the term I use to refer to the conceptual and psychological dimension – infidelity of the mind, of the thoughts – that can then (though not necessarily) take shape in a physical act. This distinguishes the term from adultery, which defines either the intention or more usually the act of
infidelity specifically within the legal system of marriage. So, throughout the thesis I will most often use the term infidelity as it embraces both the spiritual and physical realms of the concept.

In his history of divorce in Western countries, Roderick Phillips reports that adultery was traditionally seen ‘as an offence against the nature of marriage […] and it had a victim: the adulterer’s spouse’; accordingly, it was ‘a breach of the contract of sexual exclusivity that marriage entailed’ (Phillips, 1988: 345). In contrast, with fornication ‘there was not necessarily any victim or deception’ (345). On this scheme, adultery constitutes a breach of law, whereas fornication need not involve infidelity in any sense. The failure to meet such expectations can be formally defined and called different names, namely adultery or fornication, but the substance of the problem remains the same and that is infidelity. Truffaut, in particular, inserted his narratives of infidelity into the context of marriage, whilst Rohmer’s *Contes moraux* focused on the issue of infidelity prior to marriage. In either case, the male perception of women as objects of sexual-domestic control concomitantly with the fear of losing such control are emphasised. Since the dawn of Western civilization men’s acts of infidelity have been regarded as different in kind from women’s. In the Bible, the seventh commandment instructs: ‘you shall not commit adultery’. The Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew attends to a more specific direction in the Book of Exodus. Jesus warns, ‘you understood what was said: “Do not commit adultery”; but I tell you: whoever looks at a woman so to desire her, has already committed adultery’ (Exodus 20:2-17; Matthew 5:27-28). From this passage there emerges a recognition of the dual nature of adultery: Jesus’ statement affirms the flawed aspect of adultery at the level of the spiritual, not just the physical; furthermore, the omission of women from this phrase, which appears addressed
exclusively to men, tends to suggest a denial of the existence of female adultery. Likewise, civil law also enforced the gender bias, for instance in Greece, where ‘the repudiation of an unfaithful wife was obligatory, and there were sanctions against adulterous women, though not against her guilty partner’ (Armstrong 1976: 3). Christianity, equally, relegated women to an inferior position: an allowance ‘for a double standard of morality’ was widespread, as indicated by ‘the fact that an adulterous husband had to be received back by his unfaithful wife, while a guilty wife could be repudiated by her husband’ (6). Hence, the lack of any sustained study of infidelity in cinema may count as a form of gender bias in itself because to discuss infidelity would imply a challenge to the institutionalized modes of behaviour and perceived masculinity in Western society and, in this case, the steadily consolidated ideal of French masculinity.

**Infidelity and Gender Biases**

Woman’s exclusion from the phrasing of the commandment warning against it introduces the gender bias that has often accompanied the conception of infidelity. Lynn Hunt explains that ‘the French had a kind of collective political unconscious that was structured by narratives of family relations’ (White, 1999: 3), and Chantal Gleyses remarks that the conceptualization of the family made of the home the ‘référence ultime, unique bastion des convenances et des hiérarchies’ (3). Adultery transgresses its rigidly defined structure, epitomizing the fear of disrupting such an institution. The idea of family disruption through adultery, as Maupassant remarked, ‘n’est pas neuf […]. L’adultère ayant toujours été la grande préoccupation des sociétés, le grand thème des écrivains, le grand joujou de l’esprit des hommes’ (in White, 2). In popular perception this disruption provoked by adultery is, however,
linked to women prevalently as responsible for transgressing and breaking the boundaries within the hierarchy of the family and society. This gender imbalance informs Truffaut and Rohmer’s infidelity- and adultery-filled narratives: the *Antoine Doinel cycle* feeds on and the *Contes moraux* exist by virtue of them. Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s handling of such a subject enters into a dialectical dialogue with its traditional perception, advancing unexpected routes into its deconstruction and the resulting effect this has on the traditional conception of gender relations.

As noted above, the analytical tools that can fruitfully serve my inquiry lie mainly within the fields of feminist, gender and psychoanalytical theories. The two directors’ male characters differ in one aspect in particular. In Rohmer’s films there are intellectual discourses which fill the screen: his characters spend a disproportionate amount of thinking and talking as opposed to acting, and often eventually end up acting in an entirely different way. Engaged in a conflict with their own selves and as such deeply troubled, Truffaut’s characters, following their carefully constructed discussions, opt for action: their emotional turmoil makes instinct prevail over reason. In the naturalness of this, Truffaut’s characters appear more straightforward spirits when compared to Rohmer’s, who resist or try to mask aspects of their nature, hence the utility of psychoanalytic as well as feminist and gender theories in analysing the cycles. For instance, Sigmund Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905–1909) fruitfully served the interpretation of Truffaut’s mother-father-son relationships in infidelity in the *Doinel cycle*, and Rohmer’s male characters’ approach to sexuality. René Girard’s *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1976), which analyses desire in European literature as triangular and as such, dependant on a mediator, never spontaneous, intellectual rather than natural, against the desiring subject’s (un-)awareness of its (in-)authenticity, substantially
informed my reading of Rohmer and Truffaut’s male characters’ instances of desire. Applicable to the shift of power relations that the handling of infidelity in the films highlight, Toril Moi’s Sexual/Textual Politics (1985) elucidates arguments from some of the major French feminist thinkers of the twentieth century, some of which are indeed encrypted within the films’ discourses.

**Society and the Cultural Tradition of Infidelity**

Douchet points out that Truffaut and Rohmer were passionate readers [...]. It was fiction especially that stimulated their imaginations. But the sense of realism that characterized film was, in their eyes, more directly involved with life. This taste for realism can in turn be seen in their literary preferences: at the time of the Cahiers du cinéma of the 1950s, the group’s favourite writer was Honoré de Balzac [...] at the same time the New Wave introduced a Balzacian element of accuracy into film and the desire to create a truthful image of society at the end of the fifties. The result was an unspoken, but frequently applied rule to respect the topography and configuration of place. [...] The real took precedence over fiction, [...] ensured that characters harmonized with their environment (1998: 126).

Throughout my analysis, I posit a close link between the films’ treatment of infidelity and society’s structures and ideologies. In tracing this, the methodologies of Émile Durkheim and Pierre Bourdieu helped outline a clear theoretical framework for a structured discourse on infidelity as a social reality.

In *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) Émile Durkheim explains that ‘social facts are phenomena that “reside in the society itself that produces them” and that are “different from those which occur in consciousnesses in isolation”’ (cited in Lucey, 2003: xvii). Social facts, Durkheim claims, “consist of ways of thinking and acting” (xvii). Rohmer and Truffaut’s series trace the individuals’ psychic processes and their passages into ways of thinking and acting, showing them as inevitably rooted in a specific set of social values and traditions. The close analysis of infidelity
in their series elicits the evaluation of the unconscious, forgotten, unseen or unnoticed processes of negotiation with the inheritance of past French society upon this subject. Here Pierre Bourdieu’s observation about historical production in *The Logic of Practice* (1992) is relevant: ‘the “unconscious” [...] is never anything other than the forgetting of history’ (in Lucey, 2003: xvi); Lucey glosses this as a process by which ‘by the time some historically produced social mechanism has been widely efficaciously instituted in a large number of individual psyches, its historical production is likely to have been forgotten’ (xvi). Rather than being reproduced through unconscious or uncritical mechanisms, those that in cinema and literature have perpetuated the traditionally biased outlook on infidelity, in the directors’ works the conceptual evolution of infidelity is rendered visible from its internalisation within the national cultural psyche to the loss of awareness of its origins; as a result, infidelity undergoes a process of social analysis as a social phenomenon. The following chapters aim to show that Truffaut and Rohmer demonstrate that the notion of infidelity is conceived as, in Durkheimian terms, the predetermined social organization of kinship relationships. For Durkheim, ‘collective ways of acting and thinking possess a reality existing outside individuals, who, at every moment, conform to them’ (in Lucey, 2003 xvii). The idea of acting in naive conformity to a socially-organised behavioural system of codes and rules is a fundamental object of fascination for Truffaut and Rohmer, who both stage in their films tragicomedies of manners: at one point or another, the characters become victims of their own conformity to beliefs which, rather than being spontaneous and individually driven, reflect forms of historically produced mechanisms. A comparable lack of will to try and see beyond social mechanisms and challenge them
is clearly described in Tanner’s comparison between Macbeth and the characters of Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, when he remarks that Macbeth is evil [...] but [...] not idle. But in the bourgeois house of Goethe’s novel, tableaux, pictures, discussions, and experiments are essentially used as distractions to fill up empty time. They are not functionally related to the conditions of the characters’ existence [...]. In this way the property owners become paradoxically owned by the metaphors they play with, or by the redundancy of signs and projections that they make use of during their leisure hours. In so doing, they effectively help create the situations and patterns in which their unused energies will find formal expression (Tanner, 1979: 212-213).

This aptly synthesises what Rohmer puts into play with his male characters, who find the other woman while on a break from the first, placing themselves in intellectual and emotional idleness. This in turn results in thoughts and acts of infidelity they will refuse to recognize as such and take responsibility for. The male infidelity prevalent in the *Doinel cycle* and the *Contes moraux* evinces infidelity as a social fact and a permanent factor that ‘the individual encounters [...] when [...] already completely fashioned’ (Lucey, 2003: xvi). Truffaut and Rohmer’s reconstructions of the perpetuated paradigm of infidelity and the cycle and series framework in which they are inscribed aptly fits with the idea of the dynamics of repetition that Durkheim’s *Méthode* suggested: ‘some of these ways of acting or thinking acquire, by dint of repetition, a sort of consistency [...] they assume a shape, a tangible form peculiar to them and constitute a reality *sui generis* vastly distinct from the individual facts which manifest that reality’ (in Lucey, 2003: 242).

What Durkheim describes in such a passage can be useful for explaining the proliferation of narratives of infidelity on the screen as well as in other types of media. Tanner affirms that ‘it is such an obvious and legible phenomenon that many of those nineteenth-century novels that have been canonized as “great” [...] center on adultery, that, with some exceptions, few have thought it worth trying to take the
matter further’ (Tanner, 1979: 11). In film it can be said that this dynamic is similarly repeated. The application of Dukheimian theory is straightforward. Infidelity and adultery, and the canonized rationale behind them have been perpetuated in social lives so *methodically* that, far from mirroring the personal nature of the actual deed, they have become detached from reflections upon its implications. By contrast, infidelity in Rohmer and Truffaut is instead stripped of its ideologically habitual practice as the inevitable experience of disillusionment its male perpetrators undergo suggests. Such forms, Lucey explains, ‘are institutions, and they evolve, just as do institutions’ (xvii); indeed, as Durkheim states, ‘one may term an institution all the beliefs and modes of behaviour instituted by the collectivity’ (in Lucey, 242). A man-made social phenomenon, infidelity as it emerges in Truffaut and Rohmer recalls Engels’ comment about contemporary France, whereby ‘l’adultère, défendu sous des peines sévères, rigoureusement puni, mais indestructible, devint une institution sociale inéluctable’ (in White, 1999: 19). Infidelity, an institutionalised practice, is exercised within the safe borders of institutions as a result of collectively prescribed behaviour. Rohmer’s and Truffaut’s series inquire into the ways a set of shared practices constituting infidelity ‘become fixed or unfixed, come to seem consequential or inconsequential, come to seem open to revision or written in stone’ (Lucey, 2003: xvii). Infidelity is thus analysed in its form as *habitus*.¹ Their films present a constant battle between the stable and the unstable within the 1960s orthodox representation of men and women’s roles, in relation to each other and to French society at large.

Antoine Doinel illustrates Henry James’s conceptions of ‘how we are placed and built-in for being so’ and ‘how our circumstances press upon us’ (in Lucey, ¹ *Habitus* is a ‘system of structured, structuring dispositions’ (Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*) that ‘produces individual and collective practices’ (in Lucey 2003: 243).
Antoine’s frequent puzzlement throughout his experiences of the workings of societal rules points to the coercive implications and pressure they exert upon men especially in evidently morally compromised circumstances, like those involving the occurrence of infidelity. Balzac defined the ‘arithmetic of bourgeois feeling’, namely that ‘any sympathy, physical or mental, is none the less based upon calculations made by brain or heart or animal interests’ (in Lucey, xxvi). Such a situation in which calculations take precedence over individual spontaneous feelings resonates in the male protagonists of the Contes moraux and yet less so in Antoine Doinel, who at least recognizes the problematic nature of such ‘arithmetic’. Truffaut and Rohmer’s treatment of infidelity appears as a channel ‘to encapsulate a knowledge of social practice, of the ways a habitus functions, especially in moments of social crisis when that habitus no longer necessarily serves its agents well’ (Lucey, 2003: xxvii). Infidelity in Rohmer and Truffaut creates ‘dissonances that can give rise to critical awareness of one’s social positioning’ (Lucey, xxviii); those who escape the socially accepted norms seemingly capture the directors’ empathy.

**Infidelity between Cinema and Literature**

The French cultural heritage may help to explain the great pervasiveness of the theme of infidelity in Truffaut and Rohmer even when it is not the main theme, a pervasiveness that suggests the characters’, and by implication, society’s acclimatization to it. In literature, the often extraordinary proliferation of narratives of adultery in different epochs and socio-historical conditions has been interpreted as a way ‘to contain the surges of the destructive instinct [...] to set passion in a framework within which it could be expressed in symbolical satisfactions’ (de Rougement, 1956: 22-23). When at precise historical times societies experienced...
breakdowns of marriage, then ‘the breakdown made a vigorous reaction imperative’ (de Rougement 22-23). Films of infidelity can be regarded as an embodiment of symbolical satisfaction as well as a reaction to the fear of a deterioration of social and moral order, yet preserving the fantasy of infidelity. According to de Rougement the society which saw the upsurge of the Tristan myth ‘had therefore to be capable of withstanding it by means of a strongly framed structure, so that while obtaining an outlet it nevertheless did not do too much damage’ (de Rougemont, 1983, [1939]: 22). Such archetypal devices are challenged by Rohmer and Truffaut’s cycles. Symbolical satisfaction is constantly enacted by both directors’ male heroes but it is also counteracted by the female characters who resist the men’s attempts at subjugating them in triangular dynamics; by doing so they enforce on the male heroes as well as on the spectators a prise de conscience of the wider spectrum of significance that the concept of infidelity entails. At a time when socio-historical changes had brought new rights to women and previous absolutes about role hierarchies in marriage were undergoing a radical process of revision, it might seem natural that fears of the breakdown of the institution of marriage would intensify. Yet, in Truffaut and Rohmer infidelity does not feature as the form of containment of a destructive force, neither is theirs a cinema where the spectator voyeuristically enjoys the unfolding of extra-conjugal affairs onscreen and experiences the accomplishment of an imaginary desire. Both push the spectator’s assumptions beyond the expectations of what may be defined the genre of infidelity: turning upside down the standard ideology that runs through the Western system of patriarchy in reference to the treatment of infidelity, the common perception of infidelity is shown as an archaic mechanism that should be viewed from uncomfortable perspectives. Rohmer’s critical distance from the narrating ‘I’ of the
tales’ heroes encourages the spectator to adopt a similar attitude towards the unfolding of the events. Truffaut’s gentle yet ironic mode highlights Antoine Doinel’s flaws and invites the spectator to see and reflect on them; Antoine’s attempts and dreams are always doomed to fail.

Reducing the scope to Truffaut and Rohmer, the endings of their films, too, beyond the treatment of infidelity that the following chapters aim to show as unconventional from many perspectives, present a heterogeneity uncharacteristic of the subject. Hence, in some cases adulterous women die as ‘by the book’, as in Truffaut’s *Jules et Jim* and *Tirez sur le pianiste* (1959), but unfaithful men die too, as in *La Peau douce* (1964) and *L’Homme qui aimait les femmes* (1976). In other cases, the lovers and betrayed ones all live happily, perhaps forever, as in *Le Dernier métro* (1980); in others both the lovers involved, men and women, die, as again in *Jules et Jim*, and *La Femme d’à côté*: in such instances infidelity does not reflect a gender discrimination. In Rohmer’s tales of infidelity there are no tragic events that necessarily alter the course of life of its protagonists, yet a sombre mood pervades what may at first appear as comedies of errors. In Rohmer’s and Truffaut’s cycles the male characters’ seeming role as protagonists presents them as flawed heroes rather than possessors of the qualities exhibited in more traditional male-led fiction: for instance, they all betray their partners to whom they are tied by an explicit commitment. They do not need any external factors to mobilise themselves or any antiheroes: as the manufacturers of their own demise they are in fact their own antiheroes, and in Rohmer’s case they never get to fully acknowledge that. Yet, to emphasise only the negative light in which the men in Truffaut and Rohmer appear would be limiting as such a reading would simply shift these characters’ fundamental essentializing of women towards the other gender. Instead the cycles,
film after film, renew the idea of infidelity as an occurrence from which no one is spared as its active agent; their films’ handling of infidelity shed new light on some obscure(d) aspects of the expected and commonly accepted ways of perceiving it and with it, consequently, the heterosexual relationship. This acquires particular significance in light of the exceptional times of socio-historical upheavals of Rohmer’s and Truffaut’s formation: the attempted reinvention of society and cinema with the *Nouvelle vague* through the renovation respectively of moral and social codes and aesthetic and thematic preoccupations.

Concurrently with the *Nouvelle vague*, as Dorota Ostrowska points out, the ‘new novelists […] aimed to reinvent the novel by developing new forms of characterisation, narration and plot-development which would be radically different from the prevailing nineteenth-century novelistic norms associated primarily with the writing of Balzac’ (Ostrowska, 2008: 3). Balzac is not only synonymous with certain novelistic norms, but also with moral and social norms surrounding (among other topics) infidelity. Hence, Balzac’s work constituted a novelistic model to be surpassed because of the values transmitted through his writings. Balzac’s *Physiologie du mariage* (1826 first edition, 1829 second edition) was highly ‘revealing about contemporary attitudes to marriage and adultery’ (Overton, 1996: 15) and offered ‘the analysis by which he intended that female adultery might be glossed’ (16). As Overton notes, ‘Balzac represented adultery in a variety of situations and forms’ (46). Sharon Marcus notices that Balzac’s *Physiologie* was one amongst many ‘contemporary texts to treat marriage as a practical problem, both for husbands and for potential seducers of wives’ (Marcus, 1997: xi). From the titles of handbooks such as *Le Secret de triompher des femmes et de les fixer* (1825), *Grammaire conjugale ou Principes généraux à l’aide desquels on peut dresser la
femme (1827) and L’Art de rendre les femmes fidèles (1828), an assumption of female culpability is evident, which implies male righteousness: such texts ‘promoted a double sexual standard by focusing only on wives’ adultery’ (xi). The proliferation of narratives of infidelity au féminin (that is infidelity perpetrated by women, as opposed to that by men which is au masculin) testified to a mechanism of disavowal of the potential for women’s liberation from patriarchal ideology and a strategy to contain woman’s potential to disrupt the established grounds upon which male subjectivity rested secure.

Hence, how a given cultural attitude towards infidelity is justified in different epochs and places is a relevant question to understanding where Truffaut and Rohmer’s elaboration of the subject becomes a site of interest as a departure from standard representations. In Antony Copley’s study of sexual attitudes in France between 1780 and 1980, it is noted that, following the abolition of divorce after the Revolution, ‘in the age of the double standard the French male had alternative outlets for his sexuality in adultery and prostitution’ (1989: 86), until 1975, the time of abolition of prostitution. Geoffrey Simons’ A Place for Pleasure: the History of the Brothel (1975) is a useful account of the way in which brothels were conceived in the laic and religious spheres of society. Complementing this, Roderick Phillips’ Putting Asunder (1988), a history of trends in doctrines, legislation and policies concerning divorce and its implications for individuals and institutional forces from Roman Law up to the 1980s, greatly helps to clarify the complexity of the conception of divorce in relation to adultery. These especially provide a solid basis for the appreciation of Truffaut’s representation of prostitutes and their relation to infidelity, and his attention to divorce legislation as a result of adultery throughout the Doinel cycle. The idea of male sexual promiscuity linked with prostitution
constitutes an important aspect of the double standard to which Truffaut makes explicit references throughout the *Doinel cycle*. ‘Public space, and thus also the world of prostitution, belonged in this way to husbands. In the most extreme instances it becomes the playground of the wayward husband’ (White, 1999: 9). On the one hand Truffaut’s *Les Quatre cents coups*’ female protagonist, Gilberte Doinel (Claire Maurier), disrupts the exclusivity of male appropriation of public space; on the other, Antoine’s father in law, Mr. Darbonne exemplifies the traditional belief seeing ‘legalized prostitution on the grounds of physical benefit for men and as a safeguard to marriage and wifely purity’ (Overton, 1996: 22). The naturalness of his visits to the brothel confirms Alain Corbin’s definition of ‘the *maison de rendez-vous* […] as a location for prostitution which imitates the cosiness of home life’ (in White, 15). Such interpretations are revealing of the logic that attempts to justify extra-marital sexual escapades through the apology for prostitution and its exploitation.

Within the context of the shifting of scrutiny from female infidelity to male infidelity noticeable in Truffaut and Rohmer’s cycles, gender analysis of the *Nouvelle vague* cinema are of fundamental relevance. Particularly resourceful in her approach, and confirming the viability of my own, was Geneviève Sellier’s *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema* (2008) which notes that, amongst the many texts about the *Nouvelle vague*, none have pursued an analysis from the perspective of cultural history, arguing for a scrutiny of the films within the context of production and reception and an evaluation of the extent to which they took into account the new generation’s aspirations and how the directors expressed their own views on both the social and sexual spheres. With this in mind, Sellier further contextualised her analysis within the theoretical framework of gender studies. In
both attitudes I recognise the approach in my own thesis, although I use different material from hers. Whether in reference to contemporary writing about the films or to the literary heritage of the nineteenth century and contemporary literary currents, all of these have been put to work so as to claim that Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s artistic input presents grounded engagement with the representation of an evolved female characterisation in line with the feminist causes of the times. Ezra’s and Harris’ *France in Focus* (2000) maps out how cinema ‘constructs and disseminates France’s cultural heritage’ (3) and thus alternately contributes to, promotes or goes against the formation of a homogeneous national identity. Alex Hughes’ and James Williams’ *Gender and French Cinema* (2001) and Ginette Vincendeau’s *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* (2000) focus on discussions of gender representation in French cinema: Vincendeau’s discussion in particular, which opens up the multifaceted gender issue as revealed in the director’s use of stars informs my approach.

Geneviève Sellier remarks that the majority of *Nouvelle vague* films accorded ‘a central place to a male protagonist whose point of view is the dominant perspective of the film in which he features’ and argues for a parallelism between the Romantic ‘artist who “ontologically” associates creation and masculinity, and defines woman in terms of contingency, nature, reproduction’ (in Hughes and Williams, 2001: 126). Yet, the variety of attitudes the *Nouvelle vague* displayed offers the opportunity to observe a complexity of operations at work in many of the films, so that notwithstanding that ‘the new topography of modernity is, however, dangerously gendered’, which constitutes ‘the fundamental paradox of New Wave women’, Ginette Vincendeau persuasively argues that ‘even though the characters they embody are fundamentally misogynist projections, the stars of the New Wave define a new femininity in tune with the films: fresh, alluring, different’
The reading of the directors with an emphasis on the historical context they worked in, which is part of my approach in this thesis, finds in Sellier’s socio-cultural perspective and gender perspective an important source of support in that, even if what we conclude from our respective analyses differs, her methodological outlook is perhaps the only one I found amongst the vast literature about the *Nouvelle vague* which matches mine. Her affirmation that Rohmer’s first two tales ‘are constructed from the young men’s point of view and the young women are only their objects of desire, of their will to power, their disgust, and their fear’ (Sellier, 2008: 124) can be regarded as accounting for half of the picture the films convey. With the use of close analysis I aim to show that Truffaut and Rohmer’s films engage with the theme of infidelity to highlight that ‘this generation was confronted with the necessity of redefining gender relations’ (Sellier, 13), and that in Rohmer’s and Truffaut’s cinema this process is less of a prominent adoption of a masculinist approach than is normally assumed.

**Men and Women in Infidelity**

1960s France witnessed the opening of liberating and liberated discussions about sexuality, so that the splitting of sexuality from reproduction began confidently making its way into people’s consciousness, although ‘the possibility of sex for its own sake, without risking pregnancy, could only heighten male fears of female sexuality’ (Overton, 1996: 12); such fear constituted the crucial terrain for the novel of female adultery to flourish as ‘a form stemming from social tensions concerning the role of women in marriage, motherhood, the family […]’ (14). ‘The novel of adultery is specifically a novel of female adultery [...]. No classic novel, let alone any fictional tradition, is based on male adultery’ (vii). Against this trend
repeated in popular cinematic representations of their times, the *Contes moraux* and the *Doinel cycle* present cases of an infidelity prevalently *au masculin*; a specific double standard ‘vested both in law and in social practice’ (Overton, vi). In the films of Truffaut and Rohmer, both marriages and non-legally recognised relationships unfold under the constant threat of infidelity, which, beyond legal and socio-culturally formed preconceptions about it, is scrutinized as a concept affecting the individual at the core. Through different narrative devices, both cycles dedicate attention to people’s emotional engagement with the fear of betrayal, attempts to prevent it and the eventual handling of its occurrence. Rohmer emphasizes flawed perceptions of the concepts of fidelity and infidelity prior to marriage, which eventually crystallize in marriage. Truffaut starts from marriage, the way it is commonly perceived and then returns to differently conceived notions of relationship and commitment beyond legal constraints. Within the context of the cycle’s emphasis of the effects of infidelity on the offspring, Truffaut places Antoine (Jean-Pierre Léaud) at the centre of the discovery of unfaithful conduct. The discovery of his mother and later his father-in-law’s adulteries puts him in utter disarray; as with his mother, he remains the only witness to another important family member’s involvement with infidelity, his closest surrogate father figure: twice he is bound through such an occurrence to a parental figure. Antoine becomes the silent receiver of infidelity – neither his stepfather or his mother-in-law and wife ever witness such secret – through parental direction. Eventually Antoine will fit himself into this *arithmetical* of habitual conduct.

In the cycles, if and when the woman engages in infidelity, there is often a suggestion of a link to factors beyond herself: Antoine’s mother, for instance, had to walk into a repairing marriage after she fell pregnant; the question as to whether
women in the *Contes moraux* are unfaithful appears to remain voluntarily left unseen rather than becoming the object of rigorous scrutiny. ‘Un des plus étonnants cynismes de l’homme consiste à prétendre que la faute de la femme est pire que la sienne […] comme si, entre une maîtresse qui devient enceinte et l’amant qui l’engrosse, il y avait la plus légère différence de responsabilité’ (Paul Bourget, *Physiologie de l’amour moderne*, in White, 1999: 7). Single motherhood and illegitimacy rates appear in Truffaut as the responsibility of both genders, thus challenging the stereotype about female adultery by placing probing attention on the men’s role in it. The trope of ‘the Romantic confession and the narrative of seduction’ (Overton, 1996: 24), which ‘tells how a man obtains illicit sex with a woman’ and ‘the confessional narrative presents the troubles and the ending of an intimate relationship which is illicit or which threatens to become so’ (24) are used by Rohmer and Truffaut to illustrate the male characters’ practice of self-deception through their abidance by archaic beliefs and codes of behaviour. Rohmer’s *Contes moraux* use both narrative strategies of confession and seduction, as they are told from the point of view of the male protagonist: yet Rohmer pokes fun at his heroes, who proudly put themselves in the shoes of the nineteenth-century literary hero but, in the end, fail to accomplish any seductions at all; furthermore, the heroines do not fall for the heroes unless only briefly, whilst the heroes insist in their doomed attempts of seduction eventually thwarted by the heroines’ rejection. If the confessional genre owes a debt to libertine texts, which are preoccupied, above all, ‘by their appeal to a masculinist point of view’ (Nancy K. Miller in Overton, 36) and invite ‘engagement with the seducer’s point of view’ (Overton, 43), the *Contes* discourage such engagement by becoming a parody of the same genre; thus, the use of a male narrator is intended ‘to subvert masculinist assumptions from within’
Rohmer’s heroes look for a woman who can act like a mirror for their own image just as in such classic genres: ‘reducing the heroine to a reflection of himself, the hero makes of her an “intermediary”, as Simone de Beauvoir says, through whom he can realize his desire to return to a mythical union with himself’ (Overton, 120). There is very little of the mythical about the narrators’ eventual reunion with their self in the Contes moraux and the Doinel cycle – in most cases they end up with a partner whom they are actively critical of and distance themselves from. Furthermore, if by convention narratives of adultery centre ‘on the woman’s desire and suffering’ (Overton, 30), the Contes moraux and the Doinel cycle are centred on male desire and its pangs. It is Rohmer’s (and Truffaut’s) heroes, and not their women, who live reality through the fiction of the heroes of the books they read, and so become something like a modern male version of Emma Bovary: through acts of masculinity, namely acts of infidelity which have been fictionalised as women’s sins, they paradoxically undergo feminisation into the most ridiculed female figure of the modern French literary tradition. Rohmer and Truffaut’s heroes’ use of first-person recollections of the events as fantasies of promiscuity highlight the potential of the word’s power to mislead the perception of reality. Part of Emma Bovary’s dilemma is the ‘potentially dangerous and disproportionate power of language over the senses’ and ‘her adultery is imaginary before it is physical’ (Tanner, 1979: 238). This draws attention to the issue of the authenticity of desire and, in particular, of unfaithful desire, which more often than not, and certainly in the majority of the cases regarding the directors’ male protagonists, is mediated by words that have conferred an illusory value upon the object of desire. In the case of the Contes moraux’ heroes it can be claimed that not even the woman is the real object of desire; instead the desire is to maintain at least the fantasy of unfaithful
desire. In times when women’s acquiescence in male promiscuity was no longer a given, the tales’ men and Antoine Doinel are eventually left only with the dream of it. Truffaut and Rohmer emphasise the men’s need to recur to fiction, books or their own dreams and fantasies, as the last residual way to assert their authority as patriarchs and men. The self-narrations that the Contes moraux’ narrators provide have a self-illusory function. In Ma Nuit chez Maud (1967), the narrator’s thoughts and actions are determined by his Catholic identity; however, not only is his supposed freedom of thought questioned, but his already compromised position is complicated by a distorted interpretation of the Christian dicta he claims to practice faithfully. He and the other narrators thus fit merely into a ‘group identity within which they have concealed themselves’ (Tanner, 22). By contrast, the Contes moraux’ and the Doinel cycle’s women act out what René Girard defined as an ‘ontologically healthy desire’ or ‘that passion that moves directly to the object of its desire without any traffic with any kind of mediator’ (in Tanner, 90): according to Girard, the passionate person is ‘distinguished by his emotional autonomy, by the spontaneity of his desires, by his absolute indifference to the opinion of the Others. The passionate person draws the strength of his desire from within himself and not from others’ (in Tanner, 90). In neither Rohmer nor Truffaut are women of this kind ever punished, not even when they are caught in flagrante delicto. Women in infidelity, no matter what side of it they are on, are depicted in the course of a personal fight against subjugation.

Truffaut and Rohmer’s reconfiguration of the treatment of women in infidelity highlights the ambivalent contexts in which women found themselves in at the time of the filmmakers’ cinematic production and show the male characters’ outlook as a patchwork of centuries of culturally defined conceptions about gender
relations. The image of woman as a superior and idealised creature, an essential element in courtly love, emerges as still relevant in the ardent debates of the directors’ male characters. Courtly love’s focus on unrequited, and never fulfilled desire, is particularly significant in Rohmer’s Contes moraux: his portrayal of desire is such that it mostly remains un consummated. Armstrong remarks that courtly love’s real meaning is not that of existing for the sake of the beloved, but instead for its own sake, it is a love which feeds upon the permanent lack of its fulfilment: ‘passionate love […] expresses […] an idealism which denies earthly satisfaction, and ultimately, life itself’ (Armstrong, 1978: 10). Rohmer’s male protagonists do not consummate their desire, as to satisfy desire would eliminate its presence and ultimately the fantasy of infidelity. Oddly, Rohmer’s male protagonists do not show passion or suffering; emotionally sterile beings, their conception of human interaction constitutes a denial of life.

The ideal of the superior woman is relevant in Rohmer: men arbitrarily assign a place of superiority to a given woman and a place of inferiority to the others. It will be seen that the latter are the women who mistakenly are regarded as more sexually available. Similarly, Truffaut’s Antoine Doinel believes in the myth of woman as an utterly superior being. The discussions between the female and male characters in both cycles place centre stage the stark gap between the male perception of women and the ‘reality’. The cycles show that whether regarded as inferior or superior, women are caught in a web of imaginary constructions. The heroines seek to reinstate an image of themselves grounded on the reality their selves embody and live: they are not visionary creatures and they purposefully act so as to reveal the limitations of the stereotypes they are believed to incarnate.
Infidelity and Divorce

The films of Truffaut and Rohmer illustrate the persistence of both the sexual double standard and the profound concern about women’s potential for adopting male sexual conduct. Truffaut, in particular, pays careful attention to the progress of the legislations about marriage throughout the two decades in which the Doinel cycle unfolds. Tanner notices that while in the classic novel divorce is, of course, the main way in which society came to cope with adultery […] in none of the novels I wish to consider does divorce occur, nor is it felt to offer any radical solutions to the problems arisen. It is as if the novelist realized that divorce was a piece of surface temporizing, a forensic palliative to cloak and muffle the profoundly disjunctive reverberations and implications of adultery (1979: 17-18).

Tanner correctly points out that divorce does not constitute a solution to infidelity if its complexity keeps being barely acknowledged, yet his dismissal of divorce as a palliative carries the troubling implication that it might be just another patriarchal device to keep women locked in an acceptance of infidelity. Truffaut emphasises the evolution of the divorce law in France and the final episode of the cycle shows adamant support of the newly-introduced law on consensual divorce; Christine (Claude Jade), Antoine’s wife, files for divorce on the basis of his cyclical infidelity.

Of Rohmer’s Ma Nuit chez Maud, Truffaut stated:

le succès, pas seulement en France mais partout, de Ma Nuit chez Maud est l’événement cinématographique le plus moral qui soit, car si les quatre cinquièmes des films traitent de l’amour, on se rend compte que Ma Nuit chez Maud est l’un des premiers consacrés à l’importance du mariage, à l’importance du choix d’une femme pour la vie; en voyant Ma Nuit chez Maud on s’aperçoit avec stupeur que ce thème tellement essentiel et universel n’avait jamais été traité (in Rabourdin, 1985: 203).

Truffaut’s appraisal of Rohmer’s film underlines the value of commitment in marriage, one based on an authentic sense of respect. Maud’s (Françoise Fabian) divorced status stands in contrast to Jean-Louis’s (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and
Francoise’s (Marie-Christine Barrault) family unit: she has refused to live a marriage compromised by her husband’s adultery; the other couple’s marriage is seemingly perfect, yet stained by untold truths and lies. Ironically, it is not through Jean Louis, who preaches about the importance of the choice of a woman for life that such values emerge, but through Maud, who divorces her husband because of the breakage of the sacral marital vow of fidelity. The contrast between the two scenarios highlights the relevance of integrity in marriage as the necessary requisite for the union to be valid. The women’s initiatives of divorce as a result of their partners’ infidelity in both filmmakers indicates the spiritual value placed by them on fidelity in marriage, their understanding of women as potentially the wounded party and their supportive attitude towards their right to reject the perpetuation of the expected acceptance of such practice.

The relationship between divorce and marital infidelity has a significant history in France. Since ‘blatant and public adultery […] was perceived as a direct affront, perhaps a challenge, to community standards’ (Phillips, 1988: 349), the French divorce law of 1792 which incorporated ‘the principle of scandal […] allowed divorce for “notorious” immorality – including adultery – rather than for simple adultery’ (Phillips, 349). Discreetly accomplished adultery is, thus, allowed by law. Baisers volés parodically highlights the fact that nearly three centuries later a public unveiling of an adulterer, namely the public acknowledgement of the scandal, was a prerequisite for any legal action, as the detective in charge of such a farcical operation explains. This episode in the film stresses how civil and ecclesiastical legislations, which had, throughout the centuries, perpetuated adultery’s ‘status as the foremost crime against marriage’ (Phillips, 347) are simultaneously perpetuated its practice. Furthermore, infidelity contravenes ‘the homosocial bonds upon which
patriarchal structures depend’ (White, 1999: 18), as reflected ‘in a cultural commonplace in which the cuckold is betrayed not only by his wife but, just as significantly, by one of his friends (or at least fellow men)’ (White, 1999: 18). This concern with the preservation of (male) authority (civil or ecclesiastical) in the public sphere makes institutional authority back up men in both domains, and yet it relentlessly abandons and punishes them if they fail to keep private what has been sanctioned to remain strictly within the walls of domesticity. In the character of Antoine Doinel, Truffaut illustrates this tension between supposed institutional care of citizens and its failure.

Phillips rightly asks ‘how are we to explain the apparent incongruence between the consistently punitive approach toward adultery by the law and dominant ideologies of most periods and the evident toleration of adultery within so many marriages?’ (Phillips, 348). According to Marcel Barthe’s description of the typical worker’s wife, ‘when she has children, she endures everything, she puts up with violence, ill-treatment, terrible insults, she even forgives adultery as long as the husband continues to support his family. If divorce were available, it would lead to the dissolution of these families’ (Phillips, 426). Avoidance of the dissolution of the family is here paramount and takes precedence over the family’s most intimate dynamics and the wellbeing of the female constituent. Truffaut and Rohmer’s narratives exit standard morality and its roots in ambiguity and hypocrisy with their divorced women questioning such archaisms and the unveiling of the ‘arithmetic’ of bourgeois interest. Their women advocate the authenticity of commitment and the instances of divorces in their films, resulting from adulteries which are not tolerated, are looked upon sympathetically. With the unusual exploration of infidelity as a concept and also from the viewpoint of the betrayed wife, the cycles question the
manufactured popular perception of infidelity exposing a system, which seemingly
militates against the more truthful features of conjugal fidelity. According to John
Gills, ‘we live in a conjugal age, when the couple has become the standard for all
intimate relationships […]. Children play at it; teenagers practice it’ (in Phillips,
1988: xi). However, ‘of the many paradoxes that the modern Western family
presents us, the most striking is the simultaneous popularity of marriage and divorce’
(Philips, xi). A scene in Truffaut’s L’Amour en fuite (1979) illustrates this
phenomenon: Antoine catches sight of a newlywed couple outside the building
where he and Christine are to sign the divorce documents. The lingering subjective
shots of the newly married couple alternated with close-ups of pensive, just-divorced
Antoine underline an awareness and concern over such an issue. Afterwards Antoine
goes to work and one of his colleagues, seeing him dressed up, asks him if he has
just returned from a wedding. Antoine’s sameness of outfit, appropriate for both
instances, becomes a symbol of the interchangeable perception the two practices
have come to acquire.

Truffaut and Rohmer and Infidelity

Before introducing in more detail Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s explicit relation
to the subject of infidelity as a bridge to the ensuing close-analysis in Parts One and
Two of this thesis, it is important to contextualise further my research on their works
within existing scholarship. Of chief importance are the filmmakers’ own writings
about cinema and reflections about their own works. Research visits to the BiFi
archive in Paris gave me access to a range of texts including interviews, articles and
reviews published in newspapers concurrently with the films’ releases or just after
mostly in France. Emphasising their different personalities whilst simultaneously
acknowledging their similarities, the corpus of material constituted by Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s own comments about the films explained their outlook on the subject of infidelity. The body of interviews that Truffaut delivered show how he always passionately entered into the subject matter of the discussions initiated by his films, and often, even twenty years after a film, he would still examine it vehemently. Infidelity and adultery are recurring subjects of discussion.

The principal collected editions of Truffaut’s own writings are Truffaut’s *Les Films de ma vie* (1975), Jean Narboni’s and Serge Toubiana’s *François Truffaut. Le Plaisir des yeux* (1987), Anne Gillain’s *Le Cinéma selon François Truffaut* (1988) and *François Truffaut: Correspondance 1945-1984* (1988), and Carole Le Berre’s *François Truffaut at Work* (2005). Amongst the works about Truffaut with regard to the *Antoine Doinel cycle* are Le Berre’s study *François Truffaut* (1993) which helps contextualizing my attention on the relevance of the treatment of infidelity through its evaluation of the tone, often neglected, within the cycle: its apparently light appearance and its false happy endings that belie the seriousness of what is being discussed. François Guérif’s study *François Truffaut* (2003) claims that in Truffaut key themes remain open in that he returns to them, adds variations and, at times, even radically modifies his points of view on them. This notion of returning to and refining themes is relevant to my analysis of both cycles’ recurring theme of infidelity. Despite not entering into a debate on the theme of adultery, Guérif’s text is one of the very few in which adultery is properly acknowledged as one of Truffaut’s major preoccupations from the beginning to the end of his career; yet, unlike my reading of them, Guérif dismisses *Domicile conjugal* and *L’Amour en fuite* as merely uninteresting and detached from any social commentary.
The representation of women in Truffaut has elicited various interpretations amongst which those that see it as manifesting an attention close to feminist values. Annette Insdorf’s study *François Truffaut* (1978, 1994) offers an account of the male and female characters’ characterisations in Truffaut’s work that is often close to mine in its emphasis on the positive prominence that the female characters are given. Colin Crisp’s monograph *François Truffaut* (1972) looks at the connections between some of the films I analyse, such as *La Peau douce, Baisers volés* and *Domicile conjugal*, in relation to the subject of eternal (ideal) love and adulterous (contingent) love, framing the characters in a dialogical opposition between the absolute and the everyday. However, for example in his discussion of *Domicile conjugal*, he fails to acknowledge its value in relation to the development that the treatment of infidelity achieves and the way in which gender relations at large are conveyed through it. Broad in its approach and organised around themes which have as their main subjects Truffaut’s sexual politics along with the relevant notions of feminine and masculine identities, Holmes and Ingram’s *François Truffaut* (1998) offers many points of pertinent reflection for my study. Finally, also relevant to my reading of the cycle are: Gillain’s critical analysis of Truffaut’s works, *Le Secret perdu* (1991), which contextualizes the characters’ situations as partly a consequence of social engrenages. Against the trend, she advances ideas about Truffaut’s subtle engagement with the politics of his times, mainly relating to social issues that I share in my contextualization of infidelity in his cinema. Graham Petrie’s *The Cinema of François Truffaut* (1970) claims that at the heart of Truffaut’s artistic worldview there is a tension between an individual’s right to and desire for freedom and the rules of the society he/she inhabits; these rules alter the individual’s choices, often at the expense of her/his spontaneity, freshness and vitality. Petrie’s underlying point
throughout his analysis of Truffaut’s formal and narrative techniques is to clarify the
director’s unique achievement in creating a fictional reality in which viewers can
simultaneously recognise aspects of themselves and recognise the characters’
realities as their own. Truffaut, after all, Petrie explains, was mainly preoccupied
with the staging of everyday situations. As a result, Petrie sees Truffaut as re-
enacting the common man’s range of emotions less as a reaffirmation of the present
ideological status quo than as a way to raise critical awareness of her/his position
within society, in particular those mechanisms which bring about failure but do not
provide a proper emotional shelter for one’s fall. All of these stances shed light on
Truffaut’s personal discussion of infidelity.

Part of Rohmer’s own reflections about cinema can be found in
L’Organisation de l’espace dans le Faust de Murnau (1977) and Le Goût de la
beauté (1984). Although there are many fewer monographs about Rohmer, there is a
wide range of perspectives on him, especially in French-language scholarship, some
of which examines Rohmer’s engagement with questions of gender politics. Of
foremost importance for my thesis is Marion Vidal’s study Les “Contes moraux”
d’Eric Rohmer (1977), an analysis of their characters and the situations they inhabit.
Her analysis addresses Rohmer’s intellectual immersion in philosophy and literature;
defining the precise divisions that the heroes make between women as either ‘l’élue
(celle que le narrateur choisit […] et la séductrice (celle qui détourne) […]’ (14), she
scrutinises the male and female characters, highlighting the nuances of Rohmer’s
approach to them. She assesses the ambiguous terms in which the male characters
are inscribed and shows how the female characters are overall conceived, despite
their objective flaws, as the carriers of a more balanced vision of the circumstances
they share with the tales’ heroes. Similarly, Magny’s Eric Rohmer (1995)
emphasizes an interpretation of the characters’ conducts around the heroes’ unbalanced views of themselves and of the heroines. Using an interdisciplinary approach that takes in philosophy, literature and literary theories, Pascal Bonitzer’s *Eric Rohmer* (1999) builds his approach to Rohmer on the idea of ‘le principe d’incertitude’. Similarly, Maria Tortajada’s *Le Spectateur séduit: le libertinage dans le cinéma d’Eric Rohmer* (1999) is another interdisciplinary study drawing on the eighteenth-century French libertine literary tradition and theories from the history of art and cinema elaborating on how ambiguity, at the heart of Rohmer’s cinema, is not mystification and deceit, but rather places the spectator at the centre of this experience of seduction in his films. Both texts enter into dialogue with my perspectives on Rohmer’s emphasis on the manifestations of infidelity, which, through the tales’ heroes emerge as intentionally ambivalent in the way infidelity is conceived and acted upon. Alain Hertay’s *Eric Rohmer* (1998), focused on the series *Comédies et proverbes*, constantly refers to the characters and situations in the *Contes moraux*, arguing for an evolution of the characters and their delineations in Rohmer’s career that substantiates my perception of the tales as serious evaluations of infidelity and the related issues. Hertay sees such change in a signifiant visible shift of tone: ‘depuis les *Comédies et proverbes* est devenu franchement sarcastique et pessimiste […]’ (70); there is ‘une frivolité qui dissimule mal le désœuvrement existentiel et intellectuel de ces jeunes héros a-moraux’ (93). Michel Serceau’s *Eric Rohmer: Les Jeux de l’amour, du hasard et du discours* (2000), whose approach is the closest to mine in all of the literature on Rohmer given its close attention to infidelity and adultery, seeks the key to interpreting the characters, their conduct and their ideas in dissecting the heterosexual relationship throughout Rohmer’s *œuvre*. Colin Crisp’s *Eric Rohmer: Realist and Moralist* (1988) contextualises the tales
within a Catholic framework, providing a literal interpretation of the characters; despite the value of his observations in places, his interpretation provides an unbalanced and limited review mostly of the female characters, thus denying the nuances of Rohmer’s representation of them. Keith Tester’s *Film as Theology* (2008) in part follows Crisp’s reading, and in part argues for a more progressive view of Rohmer’s portrayal of the male and female characters; Derek Schilling’s study *Eric Rohmer* (2007) uses reviews from the time of the films’ release to gather a sense of the audience’s reception of Rohmer’s films, a particularly valuable and not often discussed element in accounts of Rohmer.

Murnau’s *Sunrise* (1927), an excruciating journey into adultery, repentance and the eventual rejuvenation of authentic love and commitment, was a film cherished by both Truffaut and Rohmer. For Truffaut ‘dans *L’Aurore*, Murnau met en récit la question: “Comment survivre à la tentation?” Son héros est un amant qui hésite entre deux modes d’existence, plutôt qu’entre deux femmes’ (Butterfly, 2004: 60). Truffaut reads the tension within the terms of the choice between one person over another along the universal terms of modes of existence. Rohmer’s tales, Pascal Bonitzer points out, are overshadowed by ‘l’ombre de la trahison’, a factor also explicating that ignorance so peculiar to the narrators (Bonitzer, 1999: 17). In both filmmakers infidelity is synonymous with a life based on the principle of betrayal. Built upon this structure, the *Contes moraux* see the male protagonists lie suspended between one mode of existence and another. The tales’ hero typically fails to ascertain that his existence is divided between morally divergent codes of behaviour: the chapters on the *Contes moraux* will investigate how Rohmer’s heroes manifest a stark division between intention and action. The illusory system upon which their choices rest leaves unacknowledged the repercussions that the intentions of their
only partially accomplished actions entail: where an unethical action is desired but not fully pursued physically, their perception of their own moral standing shines unaltered. This tension is elucidated in Rohmer’s staging of the interactions between his male and female characters over the potential for the occurrence of infidelity; similarly, Truffaut’s narratives of infidelity are the battleground where the exploration of its conception, its occurrence and its multifaceted reality unfolds within the context of the male and female relationship; it will be shown in the relevant chapters how the staging of this encounter between infidelity and the amorous relationship encourages an appreciation of the filmmakers’ cinema of infidelity within a proto-feminist framework, which does not reaffirm the double standard, but refuses complicity with it, detecting and revealing it.

Cautiously bearing in mind the substantial differences in the aesthetics of representation adopted by Rohmer and Truffaut, a comparison of their works is not simply justified by their conjoined effort in first conceiving of and battling for a new perception of cinema through their writings as in Cahiers du cinéma, and eventually the making of the cinema they conceived of. As film critics they often praised the same film directors, often appreciating the same formal qualities and thematic preoccupations; they both devoted a book to the study of Alfred Hitchcock; their artistic sensibilities are closely linked to film theorist André Bazin and to film-directors Jean Renoir and Rossellini; their cinema is characterised by a lack of dogmatic positions and obvious politicization; both engaged with the process of writing, not just as film critics but also as creative writers. Truffaut in particular was a prolific letter-writer, and the encounter between his film criticism and his most intimate sensitivity shed compelling and often unexpected light on the reading of his own films and their reception; the pleasure, perhaps even the necessity, of writing
and narration features in several of his films’ protagonists, as it does also in Rohmer.
The activity of writing is gendered male in Truffaut, and Sellier argues that this is
typical of the *Nouvelle vague auteurs*, so that after all one should see them as writers
of misogyny. The *Contes moraux*’ heroes narrate the evolving of the events, read
other writers, fantasise about life. Through verbal first person narration or recounting
of the events, the *Contes moraux*’s male heroes fictionalise part of the film events. In
the *Doinel cycle* Antoine shows his literary ambitions from his schooldays – alas,
traumatically aborted. In the following two films he becomes an eager writer of
letters and eventually a professional writer in the last two films. Although the
women do not write, however, this does not make them passive objects as they act to
confound the male characters’ attempts to inscribe them in their biased perceptions
of them. The women’s initiatives strengthen their positions as agents. In *Baisers
volés*, Fabienne Tabard (Delphine Seyrig) receives a letter and as a reply she goes to
Antoine and shows him what agency means while he is still stuck in the writing of
his passion. Indeed, men in their writing construct a fiction of their lives, that is only
a partial action and form of agency, rather suspended between life and fantasy.
Women instead are not artists, and not agents as such, but they are human beings in
flesh – as Fabienne explains – and bring tangible action, thus agency. Also with
reference to Rohmer I evaluate from a different perspective Sellier’s proposition
whereby the recurrent use of male first person in the cinema of the *Nouvelle vague*
indicates a fundamentally misogynistic cinema. For instance, the heroes’ voice-overs
in the tales bypass classic literary models and can be seen as marking ‘l’écart entre
point de vue du narrateur et représentation. Il entreprendrait par là une mise en
question du Romanesque, soit de la part d’imaginaire, de rêve, d’illusion que
véhiculent et cristallisent la conduite et les discours des personnages’ (Serceau,
2000: 37). In Rohmer the voice-over illustrates the tension between the divergent pulls the narrators’ thoughts are caught in: abidance by traditional beliefs and supposedly orthodox modes of conduct on the one hand, and their disruption on the other.

Hence, the cinema of both Truffaut and Rohmer is a showcase for many real and fictional writers. In her study of Rohmer’s work through the notions of seduction and ambiguity within the framework of the eighteenth-century libertine literary movement, Maria Tortajada defines his cinema as ‘comfortable’ and yet one where ‘je ne sais quoi vient troubler les certitudes du spectateur’ (Tortajada, 1999: 5). Putting the spectator in a position of instability, Tortajada claims, Rohmer’s cinema is based on ‘ce sentiment complexe qui est fait de deux réactions incompatibles’ (5). A similar tone characterises the seemingly jolly yet perceptibly perturbed atmospheres of the Antoine Doinel adventures, typically straightforward comedies yet infused with a destabilising sense of uncertainty. Both cycles offer pleasant stories, ‘comédies amoureuses qui finissent plutôt bien’ and which ‘séduit le spectateur’, whilst they constitute ‘un cinéma de déséquilibre’ (Tortajada, 5). On the surface the two series respect the literary model but they defy it too by virtue of being comedies where apparently only the narrator enjoys primacy of viewpoint and observation. In either case, the man lives to tell his tale but with him lives also the woman initially supposed to be the object of desire, who, revealing herself as a desiring subject does not comply either with the hero’s expectations or with the spectators’. Hence, the first-person viewpoint and that of the spectator are undermined and their authority weakens. Moving away from the models proposed by the two grand narratives of either ‘représentation “transparente”’, or exposure of ‘les procédés de l’illusion’ (6), Tortajada devises a cinema effect that is neither of
transparency nor deceit: she alternatively proposes a film, ‘ni transparent, ni démystificateur’, which is ‘séducteur’, and, as such, this cinema chooses ambiguity as its tool (6). Here, ambiguity is not intended to be trompeuse, but to offer ‘l’objet d’une enquête’ (6). Infidelity, a principle of instability and concurrently an enticing feature, is the apt subject matter recurring in the two auteurs’ series.

Of all the intellectual contexts for their work, perhaps most crucial for my topic is the intellectual and personal legacy of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Truffaut and Rohmer belonged to that younger generation that witnessed the development of the model of life that Sartre and de Beauvoir incessantly elaborated in their writings as well as their lives and which they deliberately let unfold before the public eye, projecting onto a world screen the minutiae of their fictional and real, personal relationship. The open questioning and analysing of their own relationship stands out as a powerfully influential event in the cultural history of the time; simultaneously there appeared multiple cinematic representations with an existentialist overtone, for instance as in Ingmar Bergman’s and Michelangelo Antonioni’s tortured explorations of the couple and its (dis)contents. Furthermore, Simone de Beauvoir played a central role in shaping modern conceptions of women’s emancipation. The tension which sprang from the way she and Sartre reinvented and (de-)regulated, in fiction and reality, the paradigms of the man/woman relationship, had a fundamental impact in the formation of a new sensitivity around such problematic; infidelity, in their relationship as well as their intellectual and artistic elaborations, constituted a most significant argument of debate, which finds ongoing echoes in the cinema of Truffaut and Rohmer. De Beauvoir’s works of fiction, too, many of which focus on the experience of infidelity from the perspective of female characters – such as L’Invitée (1943) and La Femme
rompue (1968) – offer live illustrations of the application of the creative process of artistic expression of her theories about the man-woman relationship within the context of infidelity which parallels the filmmakers’ experience of infidelity from the reverse gender perspective.

Finally, given the importance that Truffaut’s cycle and Rohmer’s tales place on how their heroines perceive of the infidelity inflicted upon them and their partners’ conduct, Claire Laubier’s The Condition of Women in France: 1945 to the Present: A Documentary Anthology (1990) is significant in recording how new avenues of expression were opened up to women from the Second World War onwards.

**Conclusions**

Truffaut and Rohmer’s sensitivities were indeed nourished by the reading of their contemporaries, as much as of Balzac, Hugo and Proust who ‘se sont efforcés de démontrer les mécanismes sur lesquels fonctionne la vie sociale, les codes de la représentation sociale, d’analyser dans les rapports interindividuels les signes de ce que René Girard appelle une “maladie ontologique”’ (Serceau, 2000: 34). As will be discussed in the following chapters, Rohmer and Truffaut stand between the old and the new within the French cinematic panorama, praising some of their predecessors as well as downplaying others, especially those who pedantically reproduced on screen lifeless adaptations of the great masters of the literary heritage: such cinema lacked analysis of the relevant texts, overlooking their relevance in the present, hence remaining too far from the real world of the spectators. The criticism that Truffaut and the other Cahiers du cinéma directed at such conceptions of literary cinema and the cooperation between the new cinema and nouveau roman shows
what a central role literature nevertheless occupied in the filmmakers’ critical and creative spheres. Truffaut and Rohmer did not break with the past, instead they engaged with its influence on the everyday life of the present day and so holding a critical mirror up to their audiences.

Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s characters find themselves living within and responding to the governing laws of social institutions, whether the family, the educational and religious establishments. In an unusual fashion, the filmmakers’ characters appear isolated: Antoine Doinel and the Contes moraux’s heroes find a genuinely interested and compassionate spiritual communion with other men only sporadically and briefly. This isolation suggests problems with the institutions they inhabit. The history of the traditional narratives of infidelity illustrates how cuckolds remain cuckolds: firstly tricked by their wives, they are even more so as well as derided by their fellow men. In Truffaut this takes shape in the recurrent theme of missing parents and the search for surrogate ones, while Rohmer’s characters appear thoroughly removed from their parental roots, an element which adds a deeply-rooted sense of solitude. My analysis of the ways infidelity is dealt with in the selected series aims to make sense of this feeling of neglect and social void in which the characters find themselves. In different ways from some of their contemporary fellow film directors who were overtly politically (and aesthetically) engagé, Truffaut and Rohmer’s oeuvres demonstrated a deep commitment to everyday history. Expressing his views of justice in society, Truffaut said:

I don’t believe in Justice; […] I don’t believe in the courts […]. I believe in formulae allowing a large amount of give and take, which are more or less true for people in general. But there’ll always exist a disparity between a law and its application […]. What you have to do, then, is survive as best as you can, without letting yourself be drawn into some new group wanting self-interestedly to oppress with new ideas (Crisp, 1972: 33).
Furthermore, his discussion of the matrix idea behind *Jules et Jim*, a controversial narrative of infidelity, clarifies his view of societal laws as often unnaturally oppressive: ‘I wanted people to be aware of the possibility of seeking other ethics, other ways of life, even knowing that all such arrangements would be doomed to failure’ (Crisp, 1972: 62). Here it is possible to see that *Jules et Jim* was intended to speak to the spectators much beyond the attractively scandalous narrative of infidelity it was accounted for. Truffaut does not narrate strikes, workers’ struggles, wars: he instead gives infidelity a central place as a way to awaken the spectators’ conscience and open the way to new perspectives. Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s tight focus on the single individuals in interaction with one another show a microcosm of the genesis of human failings within society’s macro history. Worrying about the potential misinterpretations *Jules et Jim* might have generated, Truffaut not only posed the problem, he also attempted to tackle it through his future artistic endeavours, a fundamental example of which is *La Peau douce*: this film was even more blatant than *Jules et Jim* in its attack on people’s tendency to conform to established morality. ‘Truffaut was intent on destroying the conventional treatment of adultery. Few films had concentrated on presenting faithfully the practical difficulties and the anguish involved in an adulterous affair’ (73); Crisp also points out it was ‘a realistic film, aimed at undermining myths and absolutes which, seductive as they may seem, spread disaster and despair if allowed to guide our actions. The cinema itself is under attack as chief disseminator of these myths, here opposed by an austere realism’ (76). Truffaut affirmed that ‘current moral attitudes are unsatisfactory but I can’t bring myself to believe in any others, for all the examples one sees around one are disastrous. Nothing ever works perfectly, at any level of society, and that’s because of the way people are, not because of social,
religious or political conditions’ (in Crisp, 74). Truffaut’s disappointment is with men and the institutions formed by them: the former do not make enough effort to bypass what is predetermined by institutions and in turn the latter ruthlessly suppress impulses to change and so on endlessly in a vicious circle. Ciryl Neirat stresses how *La Peau douce* was ‘hué par le public imbécile de Cannes, incompris par la critique, qui confond le sujet et son traitement et parle d’embourgeoisement à propos du film le plus intransigeant de son auteur’ (Neyrat, 2007: 41). Ironically, Truffaut was accused of having embraced the bourgeois attitudes he criticised, while the accusations against the film were fed by that same hypocritical ideology that has arguably characterized the treatment of the theme thus far. This was only four years before 1968, a time from which, according to Narboni and Comolli, co-editors in 1968 of *Cahiers du cinéma*, all cinema would have to be seen necessarily as political. In their hugely influential editorial ‘Cinema/Ideology/Criticism’, the editors set out to broadly redefine ‘the purpose of film criticism’ (Braudy and Cohen, 1999: 752). As Comolli and Narboni wrote in their introductory paragraph, the aim of their editorial was to set out the impact of the political upheavals of 1968 on all forms of cinema:

> our objective is not to reflect upon what we ‘want’ (would like) to do, but upon what we are doing and what we can do, and this is impossible without an analysis of the present situation (Comolli and Narboni, 1999: 752).

The *Cahiers* editors then divide films into a series of categories all of which, they argue, are ideologically inflected, because, as they maintain, ‘the classic theory of cinema that the camera is an impartial instrument which grasps, or rather is impregnated by, the world in its “concrete reality” is an eminently reactionary one’ (25). Not all films acknowledge or consciously display their political inclinations but all films, Comolli and Narboni argue, are nevertheless political.
Neither cycle by Truffaut or Rohmer, both of which span the watershed year of 1968, directly reflect upon the events of that year, yet they do convey an underlying connection with it. Across the two decades of the cycles there are developments, for example in Truffaut’s films, in the male protagonist’s opinions, as well as shift in the characterisation of the female characters. In Rohmer’s cycle the male characters do not perceptibly evolve at all, while there is an evident change in the evolution of the female characters, which I have argued is a reflection of the changes in gender politics that were part of the political transformations of the late 1960s. Even a cinema that is not strictly political in their case is to be regarded against the backdrop of feminism, one of the major outcomes of 1968; so, 1968 potentially inflects an understanding of their cinema.

Both directors’ cinema engages in the politics of the romanesque and its unveiling. Significantly their films are devoid of a decisive specific generic framework: if Truffaut’s cycle fluctuates between drama and comedy, Rohmer declared that in his tales ‘there is no clear-cut line of tragedy or comedy’ (Nogueira, 1971: 119). According to Pascal Bonitzer, Rohmer’s role resembles that of Kleist, who, through his cunning humour, brought lucidity to the romanticism of his contemporaries: ‘c’est, malgré peut-être les apparences, sur le romantisme contemporain que Rohmer fait porter son regard. Il montre à travers la trame de la réalité la plus commune la part du rêve, et de quels espoirs, de quels ravages aussi elle est porteuse’ (Bonitzer, 1999: 33). Unlike their characters, who ‘ne peuvent supporter la réalité telle qu’elle est, ils ont besoin d’y injecter du rêve’ (Bonitzer, 33), Rohmer and Truffaut move within that same romantic framework and its myths, highlighting the dangers inherent in them. The literary references in their films are not to be taken at face value but to be treated warily: in Rohmer’s work ‘le roman se
déploie simultanément comme critique de l’illusion Romanesque, à travers l’épopée
d’un héros intoxiqué par les clichés, les fantasmes issus de ses lectures’ (Bonitzer, 36).
Neither Truffaut nor Rohmer eluded the questions that the agitated historical
context was posing; they were themselves intellectual agitators and as such chose to
eviscerate the politics of the everyday: they did so through the theme of infidelity, an
unquestioned narrative’s topos, treating it controversially within the specific instance
of another controversial subject, the politics of the couple.

Infidelity’s entanglement with the concept of the couple calls for a gender-
based study of the practice of infidelity and consequently of the portrayal of male
and female identities through their respective ways of relating to it. The study’s aim
is to explore this overlooked thematic in cinema studies, bringing to the fore its
centrality in a long lineage of cultural thought from Balzac to the France of the 1950
and onwards, emphasising the contrast between the national standard perception of it
and the new perspectives of Truffaut and Rohmer. Even among the cultural rebels,
infidelity was not necessarily interrogated, despite often being used as a narrative
contrivance, and in this Truffaut and Rohmer stand out by emphatic contrast.
1. Chapter One

Before, During and After the New Wave: François Truffaut and Eric Rohmer in Context

This chapter will contextualise Rohmer and Truffaut within the birth and development of the artistic and socio-historical movement of the *Nouvelle Vague*. Specific focus lies on their films’ engagement with the era’s understanding of gender and the latter’s representation in cinema. Underpinning this is the underlying premise that the youth of this new generation was interested in redefining and revisiting issues of gender in their everyday lives, a factor that has a bearing on the topic of infidelity. The *Nouvelle Vague’s* questioning of filmmakers’ relationship with the past national cinematic practices implied a desire for a cinema involved with their and their spectators’ desire to see reproduced on screen reality as they experienced it. Within this scenario, this chapter proposes an overview of the cinematic landscape, preceding the launch of Truffaut and Rohmer’s careers as filmmakers, in relation to the representation of infidelity – with a particular focus on the significant case studies of Roger Vadim’s *Et Dieu créa la femme* (1956) and Louis Malle’s *Les Amants* (1958). These films’ portrayal of infidelity helps evaluate how Truffaut and Rohmer eventually responded to the imperatives of the *Nouvelle Vague* by creating their own perspectives on this central theme: stylistically, narratively and tonally. Finally, this chapter provides essential insights into Truffaut’s understanding of infidelity as analysed in the four subsequent chapters discussing the *Antoine Doinel cycle* by looking at *La Peau douce* (1964), the latter being a film that sets out in particular his exceptionally austere perception and, hence, representation of infidelity.
Cinema was, by this point in France as in other Western countries, an institution: part of everyday fabric of life. The *Nouvelle vague* shaped some of its aspects in total contrast with the French cinematic practice known as *cinéma de papa* or ‘Tradition of Quality’, which Truffaut strongly opposed. In such cinema ‘the focus was always away from actuality, from the present itself, and on to a past which could perhaps be better controlled’ (Armes, 1985: 147); film directors were interested in ‘the meticulous, at times almost maniacal, reconstruction of the surface detail of their period settings’ and not in ‘the relevance of their stories to the contemporary world in which they, and their audiences, lived’ (Armes, 147); hence, ‘the major currents of thought and literature hardly find their reflection in the cinema of the 1950s’ (Armes, 167). My question concerns the extent to which cinema, at the time when the possibility of major changes at all levels of social life were under discussion, stimulated actual changes in regard to this subject. Truffaut and Rohmer’s cycles stand out in the cinema of the *Nouvelle vague* as constituting unique examples of consistent focus on this topic. Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s cinema and the two cycles included are indeed the only example of a cinema that substantially concentrate on the youth’s ‘discours sur l’amour’, where such discourses appear of fundamental value in the development of the self in relation to the others and all the other aspects of living. Even though other filmmakers’ work might also offer fertile ground for an analysis of infidelity in the context of gender representations, in these cases infidelity is peripheral to other concerns and their films do not have that consistency that Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s cinema shows in the incidence of the theme of infidelity and the thorough investigation of its facets. As discussed in the Introduction, the intellectual debates of their times enters in Rohmer
and Truffaut’s films through their characters’ engagement with major literary figures and their ideas. They literally filmed the intellectual fascination the French literary narrative heritage exercised on the contemporary youth; my analysis will show in the following chapters how they staged this fascination by placing emphasis on the discrepancy between the inherited conceptions about infidelity and gender relations of the past and the contemporary times. The *Contes moraux* and *Doinel cycle* bring to the fore the struggle of a moment of transition between two epochs and highlight the anachronism of a past now out of synchrony with the quests expressed in new intellectual arguments put forward by and for the people.

Colin Crisp defines this phase of transition between generations through his description of the classic French cinema moving ‘from what might be broadly described as a social cinema, based on the use of representative character types and a tradition of set design that foregrounded the influence of society and environment, toward a psychological cinema which dismissed those traditions in favour of a focus on individualized characters and the perceiving subject’ (Crisp, 1993: 359). An example of this process of shifts in the cinema of the *Nouvelle vague* is evident in the type of characters created for the screen, reflections of the dominant ideologies of the society they were created by and for: ‘the classic theatre of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had had its recurrent categories of character […] known as *emplois* […]. Clearly the range of such *emplois* and the genres from which they derive correlate closely with the norms and structures of a given society and with its concept of human nature’ (Crisp, 359-360).

Amongst the several factors contributing to the success of the *Nouvelle vague*, there was the range of novel, and not novelistic, characters, as the means of departing from conventional ideas of genres and the fixed rules of theatre, adherence
to which was a staple of the Cinema of Quality: the *Nouvelle vague* aimed at reinventing cinematic characters as reflections of the contemporary everyday man. Together with the other filmmakers of the *Nouvelle vague*, Truffaut and Rohmer not only contributed to the initial creation of ‘non’-character types but also reinvented the relationship character/actor by casting actors, at times non-professional, who, rather than act the everyday, *were* the everyday. This was a logical step in the development of an art whose potential, they claimed, had been misrepresented and used steriley, so that, as Crisp points out, ‘a new range of models was needed, related to a new social structure, new family and generational relationships’ (365).

With regard to gender representation, the masculine type of *emploi* and *monstres sacrés* between 1930-1945 were in the style of men such as Jean Gabin: ‘assurance, authority, whether affirming or subverting, came in the form of bulky or incisive older men’ (Crisp, 365). The *Nouvelle vague*’s characters/actors became carriers of the radical intention to deconstruct the existing models of masculinity and femininity. They were key to the attempt to make cinema the receptacle of the newest currents of thought. Going beyond the often emphasised ambivalence attached to this *men’s club* in relation to the treatment of gender relations in their films, my work undertakes further scrutiny of the films’ strategies of gender representation via the treatment of infidelity, which undermine in a sustained and programmatic way tenets of patriarchy as received knowledge through French cultural, literary and cinematic heritage. As mentioned in the Introduction, and as it will be seen in further detail throughout the thesis, the critical reception to Rohmer and Truffaut is rather mixed with respect to their engagement with the most progressive instances of the socio-cultural changes before, during and after 1968, in particular when compared to the other *Nouvelle vague* exponents such as Godard,
Varda and Resnais, to cite a few. This is especially the case regarding the treatment of gender in their cinema: while Vincendeau (for example) readily acknowledges the portrayal of *Nouvelle vague* heroines as innovative, Sellier nonetheless defines their treatment as fundamentally misogynist. With reference to Truffaut, Insdorf’s criticism of the same subject combines the stances of the two previous scholars, and Ingram and Holmes also put forward precisely these two opposing strands of thought. Similarly, scholars like Serceau strongly underline Rohmer’s attention to female sensibility, while Crisp exalts Rohmer’s *Contes moraux* seeing it as offering an account of its representation of women as either Madonna (a figure that in his view the films exalt) or whore (which the films supposedly condemn). Moving on from the several interpretations of Rohmer and Truffaut in each of these directions, my analysis of the treatment of the subject of infidelity provides an entry into the two directors’ work that poses a challenge to scholarship resting on the basis of their supposed conservativism.

To look at gender representation is of critical significance in detecting the changes this new cinema contributed to, and a precursory sign of this can be found in Roger Vadim’s controversial yet popularly acclaimed representation of femininity in *Et Dieu créa la femme* (1956). According to Crisp the mid-fifties saw the beginning of a radical change with the arrival on the screens of Brigitte Bardot ‘at once voluptuous and naïve, animal and babyish’ (1993: 366). Since Truffaut and Rohmer were depicting women disruptive of the domestic status to which they were assigned, and with a depth the producing apparatus behind Bardot arguably did not intend to convey, this character is a useful point of comparison for my analysis of Truffaut and Rohmer’s engagement with the politics of gender. Vadim’s treatment of the female character and the interest the reactions to it sparked shows the phenomenon of the
"Nouvelle vague" not as relating to cinema only but embracing several aspects of society: cinema and society were conceived, by the "Nouvelle vague" artists, as an indissoluble couple.

Antoine de Baecque described the youth of the "Nouvelle vague" as ‘une génération de Français – qu’on a appelée “nouvelle vague” dans les journaux, les enquêtes et les magazines – s’est rétrouvée à peu près synchrone avec une idée et une pratique du cinéma – qu’on a nommée “Nouvelle Vague” […] une mythologie des temps modernes’ (1998: 17). Naomi Greene points out that the term ‘new wave’ was applied first to describe ‘the generation of young French people who would be portrayed in their films’ rather than the young filmmakers’ cinema; the press launched a process of investigation and debate surrounding ‘everything about this new generation – its cultural tastes, sexual life, religious beliefs and social behaviour’ (Greene, 2007: 11). Starting with an article in the magazine *La Nef* in March 1955 entitled “Jeunesse, qui es-tu?”, journals, magazines, newspapers and books especially between 1957 and 1960 witnessed the interest of university scholars, journalists, writers and sociologists who acknowledged the existence of this youth, thus granting it an identity and status of its own; such works engaged with the youth’s sexual life, their religious beliefs, their dreams and hopes, their cultural taste, their civic sense and their behaviour, especially when asocial or verging on delinquency (de Baecque, 51). Alfred Sauvy, the director of the National Institute of Demographic Studies, and Edgar Morin, researcher at CNRS, distinguished particularly this type of work from their own areas of specialty. Morin, whose work is strongly associated with ethnographic cinema, such as *Chronique d’une été* (Jean Rouch, 1961), tried to understand and describe the French youth’s quotidian behaviours and beliefs, focusing on their leisure and their culture (de Baecque, 51);
most relevantly, de Baecque singles out how Morin put forward ‘le “modèle cinématographique” qui “permet à l’adolescence de se reconnaître et de s’affirmer” and ‘de “trouver toute seule les clés du monde adulte”’ (in de Baecque, 51). If the concepts of youth and cinema and cinema and youth converge into a process of reciprocal reflectivity, then the Nouvelle vague as a cinematic reality can be identified, de Baecque affirms, as

le premier mouvement de cinéma à avoir, au présent, dans l’immédiateté de son histoire, le monde dans lequel vivaient ses contemporains [...]. Elle leur a proposé un univers mis en forme, avec ses rites, ses gestes, ses mots, ses attitudes et ses apparences, et cet univers était celui dans lequel les spectateurs évoluaient au quotidien [...] Ce qui l’a été, c’est la force avec laquelle une génération a voulu s’y voir, souvent s’y reconnaître, parfois s’y opposer (16).

Discussing the enthusiasm and press reaction that the upsurge of the Nouvelle vague elicited, Vincendeau points to the differing assessments by theoretician Noël Burch and historian Eugen Weber in the winter issue of Film Quarterly in 1959, a debate in which ‘the prominence of the films was underpinned by a sense that the movement was significant to French society beyond “mere” cinema’ (2009: 6). Committed to grasping and reflecting upon the issues troubling the youth it was part of, the Nouvelle vague turned itself into a fresh tool of interpretation of alternative routes of scrutiny. As Neupert affirms ‘Nouvelle vague was initially a blanket term for fundamental social changes that defined the entire post-World War II generation, fifteen to thirty-five years old, who saw themselves as culturally distinct from their parents’ generation’ (Neupert, 2007: xxi). As a way to find out what the preoccupations of this youth were, many newspapers like Le Figaro, La Croix, Paris-Jour proposed questionnaires seeking their voices to express themselves about their lives in its many facets, public and intimate: in such questionnaires, love was
always the first aspect on which they were questioned. This emphasis on ‘la jeunesse et l’amour’ helps to clarify the *Nouvelle vague* films’ focus on such theme. Armes indeed stresses how the ‘key contemporary themes – the war in Algeria, the need for social change in metropolitan France – are absent from French cinema after 1958 as they were before’ and the post-1958 feature-film industry ‘remains essentially a Parisian cinema, dealing with middle-class problems in middle-class terms, above all concerned with the ‘eternal’ issues of human emotions and relationships’ (1985: 169-170). In various ways and degrees of engagement, the *Nouvelle vague* filmmakers’ cinema reflects their personal views of such subjects.

My study considers narratives where infidelity emerges as an issue of concern for the characters, the treatment of which manifests also the filmmakers’ concern for the subject. Given that the treatment of infidelity in everyday life is influenced by cultural factors and the beliefs shaping them, a grounding of the conception of infidelity within those of love and the couple in the French cultural heritage is a useful step to highlight in what precise ways the *Nouvelle vague* challenged the status quo in such matters. Vincendeau aptly recalls that the *Nouvelle vague* films ‘provided a snapshot of a country’ in ‘the first phase of its post-war economic boom’ and ‘as it tried to free itself from the shackles of a conservative, Catholic and patriarchal dominant culture’ (2009: 7); the *Nouvelle vague*’s filmmakers’ confidently iconoclastic take on anything past had its roots in their respect for two major figures, Alexandre Astruc, filmmaker and essayist, and essayist André Bazin, who, Vincendeau recalls, ‘propounded romantic notions of the director as artist, the great figures being able to express their world-view within, or against, the “system”’ (4); together with them the *Nouvelle vague* filmmakers gave birth to what became known worldwide as *la politique des auteurs*. 
Film as Art

Auteur theory was generated above all by two key articles by Alexandre Astruc and Truffaut, respectively. Opposing the current conformist cinematic worldview, Astruc’s manifesto ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: The Camera-Stylo’, appeared in L’Écran français, issue 144, on 30 March 1948. It proclaimed that his and his fellows’ ‘sensibilities have been in danger of getting blunted by those everyday films which, year in year out, show their tired and conventional faces to the world’ (Astruc, 2009: 31). Astruc’s solution lay in his novel conception of film as ‘a language which can express any sphere of thought’ (2009: 33); also he conceived the role of the filmmaker afresh, in that ‘the scriptwriter directs his own scripts; or rather, that the scriptwriter ceases to exist, for in this kind of film-making the distinction between author and director loses all meaning. Direction is no longer a means of illustrating or presenting a scene, but a true act of writing’ (35). Michel Marie points out that ‘Astruc here offers the first affirmations of the notion of the film auteur, while refuting the constraints put in place by the popular cinema, which has submitted far too much to mass audience’s demands for entertainment and distraction’ (Marie, 2003: 33).

When discussing the issue of adaptation from literature onto film, Truffaut’s essay of 1954 ‘A Certain Tendency in French Cinema’ explicates Astruc’s conception of the camera as a pen by stating: ‘I cannot conceive of a valid adaptation that was not written by a film-maker’ (2009: 48). Truffaut conceived of the filmmaker’s cinematic vision as the overarching organizing eye that conceptually ‘wrote’ the film one would get to see in its final stage: Truffaut attacked that French cinema which, ignoring the medium’s own powerful expressive language, based its
effects upon a novel or other literary sources, to which film’s unique qualities were subordinated as a result. Vincendeau affirms that ‘Truffaut’s insolent oedipal rebellion against the “cinéma de papa” attacked the hegemonic “well-made films”’ (2009: 3), namely French psychological dramas and costume films. The set of ideas emerging from Astruc’s and Truffaut’s articles constituted ‘a radical rethinking of the place of cinema within culture’ (Vincendeau, 3) and established ‘a new cultural legitimacy for film, promoting it fully to the realm of art’, hence a force engaged in ‘an archetypal search for cultural “distinction”’ (ibid., 5). Astruc and Truffaut conceived of cinema as an instrument of progress rather than as of a tool to recollect the past: for Astruc ‘the cinema of today is getting a new face […] cinema cannot but develop. […] for the future, in the cinema as elsewhere, is the only thing that matters’ (2009: 36).

The filmmakers’ belief in cinema’s pure language was intimately related to their novel thematic approach. As Truffaut specified, ‘the champions of the Tradition of Quality choose only those themes that lend themselves to the misunderstanding on which the whole system is based. Under the cloak of literature – and of course quality – audiences are served up their usual helping of gloom, non-conformism and facile audacity’ (2009: 50). Truffaut advocated a cinema newly attuned to the reality and sensitivities of the current national climate. The past was not to be forgotten, denigrated or cut off, but reinterpreted and revisited; the face-to-face dialogue of the past with the present was a fundamental dynamic from which to source a novel outlook into themes of all sorts, from the smallest to the biggest. The notion that there might be a hierarchy of minor and major themes constitutes another point of polemic as Chabrol’s ‘Little Themes’ (1959) exemplifies. Chabrol claims that directors wishing to make a film upon a certain theme have two possible ways to go
about it: depending ‘on their own aspirations they can describe the French Revolution or a quarrel with the next-door neighbours [...]’. It is a question of personality: the important thing, surely, is that the film should be good, that it should be well directed and well-constructed, that it should be good cinema’ (Chabrol, 2009: 149). Truffaut believed that a film should not necessarily ‘try to be new in every aspect. [...] Some themes permit one to speak from the heart; what one has to say is so simple that no one can fail to understand. [...] Other themes, however, pose problems which need thinking out. Problems of construction, for example. The camera has to shift from one character to another, it moves around, and that’s where craftsmanship comes in. When one is in a particular place, one must be able to recognise it’ (2009: 193-194).

Hence, Truffaut sees cinema as the art of blending harmoniously the conception of film as entertainment and intellectual satisfaction simultaneously: ‘I think we are all intellectuals [...]’. One shouldn’t pretend to be unsophisticated or ingenuous [...]. But as long as one considers the cinema as a popular art – and we all do, as we were brought up on the American cinema – then we can go off on another track: we can discipline our work so that it becomes complex and has more than one layer of meaning’ (2009: 211). Simplicity of approach with complexity of production constituted a main aim of the Nouvelle vague filmmakers. Truffaut’s admiration of Godard’s Une femme est une femme (1961) lay in ‘the originality of the film: it breaks all the rules of its genre. People expected to see a nice little classical story: a girl and two men in Paris. [...] The very storyline, in fact, that one expects to be told in a classical way’ (207). Also, about Resnais’ success with Hiroshima mon amour (1959) Truffaut said ‘at first sight, in Hiroshima, there was everything there should not have been: the combination of adultery and the atomic
bomb, of a general problem and a very particular one, of a social and a political
problem’ (206). What was important was which strategies were used in handling a
theme; as Chabrol declared, ‘in my opinion, there is no such thing as a big theme or
a little theme, because the smaller the theme is, the more one can give it a big
treatment. The truth is, truth is all that matters’ (2009: 154).

In the diverse group of the *Nouvelle vague*, Jean Douchet pointed out, the one
shared trait ‘was based on a postulate: it is necessary for a film to tell the truth about
the world’ (in Greene 2007: 193). Greene observes that ‘this ‘truth’ assumed a
different cast for each director’ and ‘impelled by the need to seize reality, New Wave
films emerged at a time of momentous political, social and cultural change’ (10).
‘Truth’ became a fundamental keyword in the *Nouvelle vague* universe and ‘new’
became the other side of that same coin. Truffaut expressed his unease at cinema’s
portrayals of aspects of reality under false pretences: in the section of the 1954
article ‘Psychological realism, neither nor psychological’, he claimed that ‘the school
of film-making, which aims for realism, always destroys it at the very moment when
it finally captures it, because it is more interested in imprisoning human beings in a
closed world hemmed in by formulas, puns and maxims than in allowing them to
reveal themselves as they are, before our eyes’ (2009: 53); in the same vein, and this
time making explicit reference to a particular subject, he complained that ‘it is hardly
an exaggeration to say that the 100 or so French films made each year tell the same
story: there is always a victim, usually a cuckold. (This cuckold would be the only
attractive character in the film were he not always infinitely grotesque)’ (53).
Truffaut’s comment emphasises the proliferation of infidelity in French cinema, and
also refers to the archaic treatment the subject kept receiving. Not only did he
complain about the lack of complexity around the issue of infidelity and its
protagonists, but he also polemically criticised a dialogue in ‘a populist movie’, as Truffaut describes it, *Les Amants de Bras-Mort* (1952), in which Truffaut states: ‘friends’ wives are there to be slept with […] in a single reel towards the end of the film, within the space of less than ten minutes, we hear the words “whore”, “tart”, “bitch” and “bloody stupid”. Is that realism?’ (52).

Such extracts show Truffaut’s decisive take on one of those occurrences of everyday reality, which had been represented in fiction as a freak show of cuckoldry. ‘A Certain Tendency of French Cinema’ defined the Tradition of Quality’s worldview as ‘false’ – based, he charged, on ‘formulas, word games, maxims’ (Greene, 2007: 27) and ‘left no doubt about the advent of a new generation – one that shared neither the artistic tastes nor moral values of its parents’ (ibid., 28). Instead, the ‘father’ the cinematic *Nouvelle vague* looked to in the search for a different recipe to make life speak through the screen was André Bazin: in ‘The Evolution of Film Language’, he argued that ‘the way Murnau composes his images is not at all pictorial, it adds nothing to reality, it does not deform it; rather it strives to bring out the deeper structure of reality, to reveal the pre-existent relationships which become the constituents of the drama’ (Bazin, 2009: 69). With respect to this symbiotic view of form and content whereby each informs the other Bazin asked, ‘is not neo-realism above all a kind of humanism rather than a style of direction? And is not the essential feature of this style self-effacement before reality?’ (73). Greene recalls how the young filmmakers of the *Nouvelle vague* ‘clearly shared Bazin’s conviction that cinema had a moral (if not spiritual) vocation to embrace the ‘real’ […] Bazin encouraged his disciples to see how deeply every aesthetic or stylistic decision betrays a worldview at once phenomenological, moral and spiritual’ (22-23). First Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s articles and then their films embrace this spiritual
quest. Their use of deep focus, the long shot and mise-en-scène are factors that also strengthen the development of their individual auteuristic visions; for instance, the concluding shot of each of Eric Rohmer’s *Contes moraux* is witness to the use of these three aesthetic categories under the Bazinian terms above highlighted. Either with a cut or a pan onto an open space the static long shot with deep focus that ends the films add a new layer of contemplation onto the reality of the characters’ lives: the opening onto a less enclosed perspective highlights the restricted view of the characters, whilst taking distance from it. The fixed long shot frees itself from the (male) protagonists’ point of view: this view highlights the ambiguity intrinsic in reality according to the Bazinian conception, which, in Rohmer, effectively magnifies the limits of human efforts as drenched in self-delusional beliefs. The unveiling of this type of truth is at the core of Rohmer’s cinema and, in their individual styles and through their specific thematic concerns, so it was for the other *Nouvelle vague* filmmakers, regardless of the labelling they received as ‘right-wing “dandies” or “hussars”’ (Greene, 44) or Left Bank directors. The search for truth and its facets in all of people’s experiences of everyday life was a concern for all of them, Greene states: ‘impelled by a desire to seize the real – be it in the inner life of individuals or the realities of history […] implicitly or explicitly, they posed the phenomenological and existential questions – What is the nature of the image? What is its relationship to reality? How best can film uncover the ‘truth’ of reality? – at the philosophical heart of the New Wave’ (45).

‘Truth’: A Social Phenomenon

In August 1957, the weekly *L’Express* launched a survey and questioned 8 million people between 18-30 who ‘in ten years will have taken France in hand, their
elders taking leave, the younger ones helping move them out’ (Marie, 2003: 5). Within Françoise Giraud’s volume *Le Nouvelle Vague: portraits de la jeunesse*, the ‘portraits touched on all subjects […]’, and amongst which cinema […]. When films are mentioned, they are titles said to parallel this new generation’s values […], representing new moral values, presented with refreshing, never before seen frankness’ (Marie, 6).

What, then, was this sense of novelty compared to? According to Neupert the *Nouvelle vague* can be better comprehended by looking at the social realm of the 1950s (Neupert, 2007: 4). So if from 1944-1946 a left-centre coalition, the Fourth Republic, took shape, a “New Look” during the 1950s subsequently saw fundamental changes as France moved into the Fifth Republic (ibid.). During this decade, intellectual circles became more democratised and less elitist, allowed a more direct connection between the *Nouvelle vague* ’s filmmakers and their audience about the issues they were all engaged with. Hence, in the 1950s ‘the lively and occasionally vicious aesthetic debates in film circles were part of a general rethinking of the connections between various arts, critical models, and political commitments’ (Neupert, 12). The 1950s were a time with “‘changing intellectual landscapes” and “broken academic barriers’” and ‘the popular media were always cited as catalysts of these changes’ (Neupert, 12). Furthermore, Neupert reports, ‘the 1950s saw a definitive breakdown of conventional divisions between high and low cultural products and the ways they were interpreted’, ‘mass circulation weekly magazines such as *Elle* (1945), *Paris-Match* (1949) and *L’Express* (1953)’ became ‘barometers of social and intellectual change’ and *L’Express*, in particular, tried to provide ‘coverage of contemporary lifestyle issues with an academic, or cultural studies stance. Cover stories often focused on “high art” figures […] but one also
featured thirteen-year old Jean-Pierre Léaud’: it was ‘L’Express that launched the term “nouvelle vague”’ (Neupert, 13-14). In the fall of 1957, through the national survey of ‘the generation who will create France’s future’ (three items of data collected amongst the range of 18-30 of people interviewed on 24 questions appear of significant interest: ‘69% thought women should concentrate on home and family’; such a survey ‘reveals how deeply France’s popular press believed that younger people lived and thought differently than previous generations’ (Neupert, 14). L’Express also warned that ‘France’s future lay with a generation that might not respect or follow the established rules and rituals of France’s past’ (Neupert, 15).

The three assessments here reported show an evident contradiction: the younger generation’s rejection of the legacies of the past was detected as a source of both fascination and concern; yet, if 69% of the young generation pictured the house as women’s place, one wonders what kind of change was really underway and to what extent it differed between class A and class B areas of society. Accentuating this doubt was the fact that the survey indicated that this youth would be likely to rebel against French national conventions, despite the data just mentioned. This contradiction highlights a facet of the false progress that characterised French society in its bid for change, and this has crucial implications for the topic of infidelity and the contradictory perceptions of it in literary and cinematic representations. Just as major changes in 1950s society were hoped for (and perhaps also feared) whilst one amongst those hopes was that women remain confined to the realm of domesticity, so the lack of literature about infidelity despite its prevailing presence as a theme on the screen suggests another attempt at keeping unchanged another form of regression in women’s condition.
In 1959 an article by Maurice Bessy argued ‘that there was a “nouvelle vague de spectateurs” that French filmmakers have to comprehend and address immediately: “Understanding their general thoughts, preoccupations, hopes, and fears, upon which the health of the cinema depends, seems essential and URGENT”. Young people were thus granted a cultural importance and power never seen in French society’ (in Neupert, 2007: 16). In several cases, the Nouvelle vague filmmakers were also film critics, thus shared with their audiences not only the experience as witnesses and protagonists of the same socio-historical and cultural everyday, but also as spectators of the same cinema. Godard expressed very neatly in the April 1959 number of Arts how he and his fellow youth felt, objecting against the older cineastes: ‘vos sujets sont mauvais, vos acteurs jouent mal parce que vos dialogues sont nuls […] Nous ne pouvons pas vous pardonner de n’avoir jamais filmé des filles comme nous les aimons, des garçons comme nous les croisons tous les jours, des parents comme nous les méprisons ou les admirons, des enfants comme ils nous étonnent ou nous laissent indifférentes, bref, les choses telles qu’elles sont’ (in de Baecque, 1998: 40).

Amongst the several public inquiries about youth and its concerns throughout the second half of the fifties, Edgar Morin’s assessment is especially relevant: as de Baecque recalls, Morin identified ““une grande tristesse et un immense ennui”’ in this youth, justifiable, he argues, by their living in an age ““après la bataille”, “après l’histoire”, mais contemporaine de la bombe atomique, de la “destruction possible et immédiate du monde”” (in de Baecque, 52). Even a cursory glance at the first few features of many Nouvelle vague filmmakers suggests the accuracy of Morin’s picture: whether in Varda’s La Pointe courte (1955), Resnais’s Hiroshima mon amour, Rohmer’s Le Signe du lion (1959), Chabrol’s Le Beau Serge (1958) and Les
Cousins (1959), Godard’s *A Bout de souffle* (1959) or Truffaut’s *Les Quatre cents coups* (1959), the characters at the centre of each filmmaker’s vision appear in a state of anguish. The issues that all such films broach are echoed in similar assessments to Morin’s, like that of Henri Perruchot, who affirmed

ne sachant à quoi se saccrocher, se sentant plus ou moin perdue dans le chaos moderne, elle a d’abord glissé vers le pessimisme et elle a nié toutes les valeurs, morales ou civiques, de la société des adultes. La génération actuelle, toutes exceptions faites, n’est pas une génération de révoltés. Estimant à tort ou à raison qu’elle n’a à compter que sur elle même, elle aspire à se donner des règles, des valeurs propres, des hiérarchies, des modèles, à réinstaurer un ordre, à créer une société plus fortement cimentée que celle où elle a grandi (in de Baecque, 53).

Both scholars’ conclusions manifest traits that are distinctively recognisable in the protagonists of the *Antoine Doinel cycle* and *Contes moraux*: in the latter the characters’ ages span from early twenties to mid-thirties, so that the whole cycle follows the same generation’s experiences throughout a decade and a half. Under similar circumstances, they, like the youth described above, find themselves engaged in a battle to reinvent themselves and design new modes of existence in the face of a consolidated and arrogant heritage that constantly assaults them with dicta that are seemingly comfortable and yet viciously suffocating in their stagnant, discreet charm. The same struggle to keep refuting and take further distance from aspects of the mentality of the previous generations is epitomized by Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Léaud) by escaping all sort of institutions in the first episode of his personal saga: his family, his school, the juvenile prison. Figuratively, the constant moving from one job, flat, fancy-girl to another, continues the trajectory of critique. According to Françoise Giroud and Henri Lefebvre the new generation also strongly set value on pursuing happiness within a society it aimed to build upon its own image (de Baecque, 59). If in the *Doinel cycle* the dialogue between present and the
past is incarnated by characters in the guise of offspring and parents, in Rohmer’s
tales youth interacts with itself and the past appears as problematic, an object for
argument for and against. De Baecque notes that once Giroud published La Nouvelle
Vague: portrait de la jeunesse the expression ‘Nouvelle Vague’ was ‘forgée pour
designer le vide qui représente la génération à venir pour les adultes de 1957, pour
tenter d’élucider le profil collectif encore énigmatique et lui conférer un caractère
attractif: s’il ne veut pas être submergé, le vieux monde doit s’adapter, s’ouvrir, se
faire plus jeune’ (59). It remains a fact that, in society and onscreen, a battle between
old and new was taking place on troubling and troubled grounds.

**Nouvelle vague and Sexuality**

From that anguish that according to Morin permeated this youth, his analysis
went on to investigate ‘les discours amoureux et les pratiques sexuelles’ (de Baecque
52), which he distinguished in two phases: on the one hand there was
‘l’affaiblissement des tabous sexuels (perte de valeur de la virginité, de la fidélité,
précocité des premiers rapport)’ (52) and on the other ‘le rôle de plus en plus
important de l’amour-passion dans la vie sentimentale’ (in de Baecque, 52). The
narratives of the *Doinel cycle* and the *Contes moraux* mirror Morin’s pronouncement
and my study of infidelity in these particular works finds in their new perspectives
on live sexuality an apt area of comparison between the two. Morin’s observation of
a radical change in the youth’s perception of both sexuality and love relations leads
to significant conclusions: as de Baecque summarizes, ‘la conjonction de
l’affaiblissement des tabous sexuels et de l’accroissement du rôle l’amour a pour
résultat de détruire pratiquement la croyance en l’ “amour-unique-d’une-vie” au
profit d’une multiplication d’amours “uniques” qui se succèdent dans la vie. “Ainsi, ‘c’est par surabondance d’amour que l’amour se transforme en un sentiment passager”’ (52). The notion that a plurality of loves weakens the very idea of love has direct connection with the occurrence of infidelity: on the one hand, a greater sense of freedom in living one’s relationship(s) in monogamous succession might render the very idea of infidelity null and void; yet, on the other hand, the unprecedented freedom to live many loves might simply maintain the practice of infidelity as part of this new game of multiple relationships, thus practicing it tacitly and more agreeably than ever.

In the last episodes of the *Doinel cycle* and the *Contes moraux*, incidentally both set nearly a decade after 1968, the male protagonists openly express respectively the desire for the freedom to love many women simultaneously and to happily abide by polygamy were it part of society’s established structure. Rohmer’s and Truffaut’s characters embody the dichotomy whereby infidelity is acknowledged as a serious rupture in a sentimental commitment and yet perpetrated lightly, thus highlighting the nature of the traditional discourse about infidelity as insidious; infidelity then becomes an even more aggressive type of menace, because under no circumstances it is scrutinized as if an occurrence of relevance.

The ways love and romantic relationships were reconsidered by the new generation suggested that this new generation was concerned also with the elaboration of new ethical and moral approaches towards such subjects. In Rohmer’s *Contes moraux*, women’s attitudes are observed evolving into unexpected directions that are perceived as shock, a challenge as well as a threat to the stability of the male characters, and thus, implicitly, of patriarchy. Here women voice freely and confidently how they conceive of love and relationships; the occurrence of infidelity
in particular appears to be the triggering motor for a discussion that allows them to show their defiance of tradition, a factor that puts the men in the position of confronting not only these women’s moral attitudes but also their own credo and its sources. Women’s open discussion of their views threatens the stability of the social order in that they also act accordingly, undermining the old rules in the concrete enactment of the game of love and relationships. In Truffaut women take charge of voicing this wake-up call onto standard male attitudes which oscillate between a view of women as either whores or ingénues, and a view of them as complex, complete and independent beings. Truffaut’s films stage this tension within the male consciousness. In order to explain how this web of interrelated topics work in Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s cinema and how their work as a result becomes a site of distinctive interest, it is relevant to identify what the French film screens had began showing regarding the evolution of sexual and moral attitudes – both fundamental issues in the study of infidelity – already in the mid-1950s.

Roger Vadim’s *Et Dieu créa la femme* (1956) and Louis Malle’s *Les Amants* (1958): Two Case Studies

Notwithstanding their different approaches, studies devoted to *Nouvelle vague* often consider as necessary to its appreciation ground-breaking instances of 1950s French cinema – including in the representation of sexuality. Vadim’s *Et Dieu crea la femme* and Malle’s *Les Amants* are pivotal films in themselves, but they also are suitable loci of comparison in their treatment of the narrative of marriage and infidelity, in order to clarify the novelty of treatment I identify in Truffaut and Rohmer. Crucially, both films have been discussed in regard to their innovative
portrayal of women; furthermore, I would like to point out, both heroines’ actions are embedded in the experience of infidelity.

To start with I shall concentrate on the Bardot/Juliette case from *Et Dieu créa la femme* which at the launch of the film promoted an overwhelming perception, however blatantly facile, of the idea of woman’s liberation: this perception seemingly shuts out the view of a more radical and complex idea of femininity, the one that Truffaut and Rohmer, I claim, pursued in their works, and that Malle anticipated with *Les Amants*. I would in fact argue that where Malle’s film ended those of Rohmer and Truffaut continued and developed.

De Baecque reports few positive reviews of Vadim’s film from the *Nouvelle vague* film critics, none of which, one sees, show any engagement with the treatment of the narrative of infidelity; similarly, in the literature about the *Nouvelle vague* that includes discussion of *Et Dieu créa la femme* it is only mentioned *en passant*. Hence, the case of Vadim’s film can be better appreciated through other items of testimony. First, the small-time producer Raoul Lèvy ‘took a chance on his (Vadim) idea for a melodramatic story about love, marriage, and betrayal set in Saint-Tropez’ (Neupert, 2007: 75); upon its release the press stated that Vadim’s cinema created “a new image of the young French woman” (Neupert, 76). Neupert notes that ‘it was the audacity of Bardot’s performance and the bits of the frank conversation and nudity that made contemporary reviewers react strongly. For most 1950s audiences, this was a bold new vision of French youth and sexuality. Bardot’s Juliette was not just another beautiful baby-doll; rather, she shattered past norms while establishing new conventions for female sexuality’ (79). It should also be remarked that Vadim attempted to shape critical reactions to the film by stating he was ‘a sort of ethnographer, documenting a new sort of woman with her own desires, gestures, and
beauty’ (Neupert, 80). According to de Baecque Vadim’s character/actress made an ‘irruption dans un monde de Vieux. C’est cette irruption qui choque, car elle est brusque, radicale. La société française ne s’y attendait pas, et son cinéma est loin d’être favorable à la jeunesse’ (de Baecque, 1998: 20); accordingly, what was needed was that ‘sur les écrans, évolue un corps vraiment contemporain des jeunes spectateurs qui les regardent’ (de Baecque, 20).

As mentioned earlier, the French screens of the time were filled with actors who carried established physical and moral expectations, rooted in a traditional canon of fundamentally patriarchal norms. Thus, Bardot/Juliette was a new face on the screen and one which, in her seemingly spontaneous freshness, would be recognised as being the same age as the youngest spectators. At the same time it is evident that Vadim, rather than documenting a new type of woman, staged his woman, one corresponding to his vision of a new woman. Ironically Bardot, Vadim’s wife, was having an affair with Jean-Louis Trintignant, the actor of the film’s male protagonist, at the time of the film’s shooting: her trajectory was rooted in the topos of a narrative of marital infidelity, the resolution of which was far from representing innovations of sorts. That Vadim defined her as ‘le rêve impossible des hommes mariés’ (in de Baecque, 24) elucidates how Bardot’s Juliette was a carefully crafted construction, designed to feed into the construction of male fantasy about the woman as available and taking the initiative. Further, according to Vadim’s words, Juliette is portrayed as being the dream specifically of married men rather than of all men, which shows his careful attention to and exploitation of the marketability of the subject of infidelity; pretending an interest in presenting a new woman, Vadim simply reaffirms the stereotype of woman as adulteress and object in men’s hands, without inciting spectators to re-think the traditional moral codes within which she is
positioned and that the film only superficially appears to disrupt. Instead, just as traditional literature might portray her, she is a focus of chaos and grief, until male force re-establishes the right state of things. As Neupert points out, while ‘Juliette does choose the men in her life, she also submits to Michael’s slap at the end of the film [...]. *And God Created Woman* is troubling in that it finally reinforces the cautioning comments of the older generation, as Juliette [...] needs to be “tamed” [...]. Hence, there is a consistent “taming” motif that undercuts the frank sexual freedom enjoyed by Juliette’ (2007: 82). Vadim’s film ‘establishes contradictory and ambiguous interpretations and visions’; also, the fact that ‘she did not mind being struck by Michel adds an unsettling perversity to her character that seems alternately to satisfy and to defy bourgeois norms’ (Neupert, 83). If there is any novelty it can perhaps be found in Juliette’s manner of expression; these manners constitute, it seems, the kernel of how Vadim and Bardot convey onscreen this body of youth:

comme un corps doté d’une liberté et d’attitudes radicalement nouvelles. Pour cela, il cherche dans ce film à se tenir toujours plus près des gestes, des expressions, des envies et des désirs de son actrice, proposant une sorte de document où la nature (la mer, la plage), les vêtements (amples, transparents, ouverts), l’atmosphère (futile, propice aux danses et aux sorties) se conjuguent pour souligner la beauté différente, inédite, autre, de Brigitte Bardot (de Baecque, 20).

This previously unseen ‘other’ beauty that Bardot/Juliette incarnated is aptly interpreted by Jean Douchet, who states:

*And God created woman* was very much about being comfortable with a physical presence. [...] Here was a woman who was able to portray her desire on screen, free of psychological complications or guilt. [...] Bardot gave rise to a new state of mind, or rather a whole new moral attitude, one of ease with one’s physical self. [...] Her body was hers to do with as she pleased. In this sense she was representative of the needs of her time, and she introduced an era of liberalization that, over a twenty year period (1956-1975) managed to break down every social and cinematic taboo (Douchet, 1998: 145).
Seemingly in line with the new times which began to break with the standardised rules in relation to sexuality and relationships, Bardot’s character acquires poignancy in that she ‘conçoit pourtant sa vie sentimentale et sexuelle suivant une totale liberté’ (de Baecque, 24). Hence, Neupert affirms, Bardot’s Juliette’s ‘daring role, displaying no concern with pregnancy or motherhood […] provided a stunning new perspective on modern sexual autonomy’ (81). The disregard of pregnancy and motherhood altogether constitute a phenomenon that in the 1950s was entering more and more in the discourses of and about women and as will be shown in the following chapters, Rohmer’s *Contes moraux* and Truffaut’s *Doinel cycle* engage actively with such issues as fundamental in the lives of their characters as well as of the spectators. The discourse of infidelity as an act that is dissociated from the role of parenting has often been regarded as ethically acceptable for men – in literature and film it is rare to find cases of husbands who as a result of sexually betraying their wives are regarded as bad fathers. In Truffaut’s cinema, poignantly concerned with the role of parenting, the idea of reassessing the experience of sexual independence and infidelity, in relation to the bearings they have on the experience of parenting for both sexes, and not just women’s, becomes a thematic kernel; infidelity as not an exclusively female experience and as an experience separated from issues of maternity appear to be in line with the idea advanced by feminist discourses that maternity is one of the ways, but not the exclusive one, for a woman to express herself. In the chapter ‘La Mère’ of the second volume of *Le Deuxième sexe* (1949), de Beauvoir remarked that

c’est par la maternité que la femme accomplit intégralement son destin physiologique; c’est là sa vocation “naturelle” puisque tout son organisme est orienté vers la perpétuation de l’espèce. Mais on a dit déjà que la société humaine n’est jamais abandonnée à la nature. Et en particulier depuis environ
un siècle, la fonction réproductrice n’est plus commandée par le seul hazard biologique, elle est contrôlée par des volontés (in Laubier, 1990: 26)

Hence, maternity is not a parameter any longer for the definition of womanhood. Truffaut’s cycle poses, through the adultery of Antoine Doinel’s mother, such questions and attempts to propose alternatives.

Although Vadim’s film did not engage with an analysis along those lines, still his Juliette, at the time, feminist scholar Audé says, ‘served as an ideal model for independent-thinking women’ (in Neupert, 80). Audé’s comment roughly summarizes the general perception of cinemagoers at the time: thus, if Bardot’s character’s was a novelty as a model of free expression of sexual availability, then she was also synonymous with intellectual independence. Whilst it is understood that Juliette’s guilt-free open refusal of any imposed standards of so-called decent behaviour represents a form of rebellion against the hypocrisy of certain societal rules, her character remains conventional. Doesn’t the history of literature (and film) present characters like her already? Is a young lady who disregards rules of marriage and customary morality a novelty? Furthermore, if she gives instinctively free reign to her sexuality, she is nevertheless not capable of articulating the meaning of independence beyond choosing whom to sleep with. Nor does her character, deprived of any apparent complexity, stimulate any reflection about the nature of men and women’s relationship beyond the stereotype of hunter and prey; her command of her sexuality simply leads her to submit to male command in the end.

Greene reports that Bardot, despite her sexual frankness, spontaneity, defiant eroticism and disdain for bourgeois hypocrisies, ‘was still seen (and filmed) as an object of male desire’ (Greene, 2007: 58); according to Vincendeau, ‘her appeal depended on “old” values: on traditional myths of femininity and on the display of
her body, though a body repackaged for the times: nude, more “natural”, on location, in colour and Cinemascope’ (in Greene, 2007: 84). The presentation, rather than the content, one deduces from Vincendeau’s comment, was novel – yet, not even the form appears so novel, in that it merely follows a blueprint of a classic Hollywood melodrama, without the latter’s often highly charged and indeed more progressive treatment of gender relations. The film exploits the success that narratives of infidelity attract; here, the tropes of adultery are glorified and glossified. Vadim’s new woman has nothing to do with the woman Rohmer’s and Truffaut’s films make flourish in all her complexity and simplicity. Truffaut and Rohmer conceive of a fresh outlook on sexual autonomy: sexual autonomy in their films is not glamorised but simply natural. In their films, women’s sexuality is one amongst the several aspects that constitute a conception of a wider female autonomy, so that this theme is treated in a modest manner. It can be argued that intellectual and emotional autonomy is the revolution that the women in their films embody. Truffaut and Rohmer are uninterested in the type of supposedly strong yet actually conventional and ambiguously perverse woman as constructed by Vadim; nor do men in their cinema resort to supposedly virile slap. Like in feminist thought, the reassessment of female identity their films engage in is also about the reassessment of male identity. If the rules of marriage are posed on equal terms for both genders, there exist the codified understanding of how women and men should stand one to another; there are rules then that apply to relationships also outside of the marriage frame. Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s narratives of infidelity unveil the powerful influence of such codified sets of behaviours on people’s consciousness and highlight the dichotomy existing in this regard in the supposedly different ways to conceive of infidelity: Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s cinema affords a critique of such instances.
A challenge to codified behaviour, taking off from totally different premises from Vadim’s, was Malle’s *Les Amants*, another film that sparked a considerable controversy in its representation of a tale of extra-conjugal love. In Malle’s words, it ‘was a phenomenon. All over the world the film was shown and thought scandalous’ (in Neupert, 2007: 108). Even if like *Et Dieu créa la femme* Malle’s film had large audiences beyond national confines and was similarly perceived as scandalous, *Les Amants* stands out in both its aesthetic and narrative features as deeply iconoclastic.

Bazin said that ‘Malle’s moral intentions and audacity were “irreproachable”’ (in Neupert, 109); such comment from the left-wing Catholic critic signalled how Malle’s film was seen to contribute to the reformation of values sought by the several forces at work in the phenomenon *Nouvelle vague*.

Neupert describes the film as ‘a combination of a modern comedy of manners and a daring, even oneiric love story that played with and defied many conventions of the romance genre’ (2007: 109). In Malle, the treatment of ‘l’éternel triangle du romanesque français’ (Neuhoff, 1980: 28) opens the way to a defiance of precisely those expectations about what I previously termed ‘the genre of infidelity’. The choice of the actresses in both cases largely contributed to the success of the films, in that the actresses’ physical qualities as well as roles became carriers of certain values. Despite the small age gap, Bardot’s character and her persona as a star became associated with an unashamed and confident approach to one’s sexuality, the awareness of which was expressed in a straightforward manner. Bardot seemed to want to emphasise her freedom of expression to the point of rendering her character artificial, just made up for another well crafted tale about the (illusory) triumph of the liberated woman she was designed to represent. Like Vincendeau, Greene reports how Jeanne Moreau conveyed ‘an “existential” sexuality which was at once
sensuous, serious and cerebral’ (Greene, 2007: 61). By contrast, Jeanne Moreau’s character strikes the viewer as possessing inner strength, manifesting itself through the simplicity with which she carries the awareness of herself as a sexual being, simultaneously bringing to the fore the struggles that that awareness entails. Moreau’s performance combines to present a prototype of New Wave female character beyond the shallow, pouting little sex kitten offered by Bardot’s Juliette. Rather, Moreau’s characters struggle against patriarchal constraints [...] the sexual independence of Jeanne, couples with Malle’s frank exploration of its effects on her person rather than upon the young man, Bernard, added a new option to the cinematic canon (Neupert, 120).

Moreau’s voice-over confers Jeanne with authority over her own self, but this can only be heard by the spectators who are unable to offer solutions to her anguish; yet, her voice-over and subsequent actions prepare them step by step into a rational and emotional understanding of the refusal of *les règles du jeu* she eventually manifests when leaving for good everything that she has come to despise – her voice eventually finds public release. Up to this moment the spectators are the privileged site of the unleashing of her intimate voice – a site she trusts, unlike the one she is part of, to view her contempt for her world’s self-indulgent morality. She does not even talk her decision through with her husband, lover and friend, she simply acts out her breakthrough, through the breaking of the marital vow. The decisiveness and speed with which she quits the world of contentment embedded in a web of compromises and deceits leaves the audience astounded in the face of a turn of events that, destabilizing all expectations, calls for new analytical tools. The film ends unusually: she does not return to her own steps, as no one dies or gets ill, whether husband, lover, or daughter, as Jeanne’s life begins anew. The film also cuts off the reaction of the people she leaves behind, as if uninterested in the values they
stand for: it seems to seek to communicate only with an audience whose mind-set is genuinely open to self-critique and to new values. Neupert points out how this film, an ‘uncertain journey’, offers a ‘refusal to make specific moral judgements’ (111). In Malle the fact that Jeanne rejects at once ‘all her past, including her husband, her lover, her best friend, Maggy, her daughter, and all the trappings of her elegant life, including her clothes, home, and car’ (112), and also, it should be added, that normalised bourgeois sexual promiscuity in which all the characters engage in, suggests a clear assessment of infidelity as an escape or temporary (and yet simultaneously ongoing) fix to a marriage in a state of permanent crisis. Her voice-over stating ‘she suddenly wanted to be someone else’ shows her rejection of the promiscuity she has been living in (before meeting the man she drives off with, she had another lover); as Neupert points out, Jeanne is ‘restless and disgusted by the behaviour of both her husband and her lover’ (110). Like Juliette, Jeanne breaks the moral codes freely and shamelessly; yet, with her, infidelity takes on a connotation that goes far beyond the predator-prey game that Juliette and the men around her played. By rejecting her husband and lover, Jeanne rejects the occurrence of infidelity with which they are strictly connected: their moral status is compromised and they are not aware of it; Jeanne is no better than them, and she can lucidly see that, as the wish to become another self suggests. Jeanne uses infidelity to convey contempt towards her milieu and especially that section of it that places infidelity on the same level as any other normal diversion from routine, like her and her friends’ time spent at the races, perpetuating an awry system of values, where the positive value attached to family and the commitment entailed in it mixes routinely with their betrayal; as a consequence she also uses her infidelity to convey contempt towards infidelity itself, in that we understand from her narrative that infidelity is merely the
illusion of happiness (though based on a void). Like cinema, it stages what is not. In Jeanne’s life infidelity is just another tool by which a woman is subjugated to patriarchy, as she is shared between men, as Neupert observes ‘wife, and/or mistress. Malle’s mise-en-scène reinforces systematically Jeanne’s objectified status’ (120). In her last instance of infidelity Jeanne unexpectedly reverses its enslaving connotations, as she aims at exiting such traps: the beginning credits show a carte de tendre, an allegory that spatially represents

the desire by women to chart out and in some ways control their own lives […] In her own way, Jeanne is trying to navigate the space of bourgeois France in the 1950s and break away from traditions that have endured for hundreds of years. […] in the end she decides to leave “her country” for a new place, in an uncertain crossing with Bernard, perhaps to the Unknown Land, or Terres inconnues, drawn at the top of the map (Neupert, 121).

What Malle outlined in one film became in Truffaut and Rohmer a thematic concern that both auteurs kept working on in their respective cycles and beyond. In their cycles, their main female characters develop through a path similar to Jeanne’s in their questioning of their status quo as women in their contemporary society and in their attempts at carving out a revision of the roles and stereotypical connotations to them assigned by a tradition prevalently informed by patriarchy. Unlike Jeanne, though, they involve their male counterparts in the revisionist ideals – in Rohmer mainly by means of lengthy discussions: precisely where they fail to find mutual understanding, such women carve out for themselves a parallel space to give practical expression to their otherwise silenced voice; in all such cases infidelity is at the centre of their struggles. Truffaut praised Les Amants and, despite the very different circumstances in which the two narratives of infidelity evolve, Greene aptly notes that Truffaut’s Jules et Jim (1962) ‘echoes aspects of Les Amants’, for example the casting of Jeanne Moreau as once more ‘a liberated, passionate woman who
refuses to make concessions to social norms’ (2007: 62). For Neupert, Malle’s film cannot be seen as a feminist text because ‘Jeanne simply replaces two men with another’ (120); yet, could it not be argued that precisely that lack of ‘narrative certainty about whether this is a good or bad thing (that she and her lover drive off together)’ (Neupert, 116) poses doubts as to whether Bernard (Bernard Dubois-Lambert) functions as Jeanne’s vehicle to cast off her past and construct a new future, rather than being only her new fleeting moment of passion, or just another immersion into male dominion as with her previous lovers? The film’s concluding words ‘Jeanne already doubted her decision. She was afraid but regretted nothing’ add strength and complexity to the significance of her choice. She is afraid because she sets off a new path: looking ahead in the film’s ending shot her expression manifests the coexistence of gravity (the serious courage of her action) and levity (the relief of the freedom she is determined to pursue). On this Malle commented: ‘The very end is something that I like because she leaves with her new lover, they stop to have a morning coffee and there is something really pessimistic there. I think there was something in the voice-over – she says she is not sure it is going to work, but she is going to do it anyway. I think that was good, I liked that. It was pretty much my world. Today, I feel close to that’ (Malle, 1992: 23-24). The choice of the characters’ names, Jeanne and Bernard, matching the actors’ names, Jeanne (Moreau) and Bernard (Dubois-Lambert) appears also to add to Malle’s engagement with his world. Rohmer’s and Truffaut’s films always end on notes of uncertainty and one never knows whether the women’s decisions will lead them to achieve concrete positive results or results of any sort; nonetheless, despite the doubts that women in Rohmer and Truffaut naturally show about the effectiveness of their unconventional decisions, there appears to be no doubt about the purpose of such
decisions, and this purpose counts for more than the end results. The men are thrown into conditions of doubt too as a consequence, but, in Rohmer at least, they seem to eventually choose to remain within the safety of conventional contexts.

In Malle’s film and later on in those of Truffaut and Rohmer emphasis is given to the heroines’ efforts in working towards the creation of viable new models of morality. Neupert rightly states that ‘while the New Wave would, for all intents and purposes, be a “boys’ club”, there was a very real tendency to feature tales about young women as much as young men and to concentrate on just what it meant to be nouvelle vague women in nouvelle vague France’ (2007: 121). If in Renoir’s La Règle du jeu (1939), the wife in the end supports her husband thus re-entering into the rule-bound-role, ‘by the time Malle arrived, women were given more complex character traits and could test more options than wife, mother or mistress. And one of the fascinating themes of the New Wave that develops across the length of this history is the excitement, irony, and ambiguity with which these young male directors construct their fictional young women’ (Neupert, 122).

While in Vadim infidelity remains an overlooked occurrence, although it is through the protagonist’s involvement in it that the film presents a supposedly new woman through her total indifference to any morality, Malle’s film disrupts the expected outcomes of the tale of infidelity. His Jeanne, like Rohmer’s and Truffaut’s women, is not indifferent to morality as a principle: women are not outside the codes of morality, but they find codified morality amoral or immoral and propose, as a result, the re-elaboration together with men of a new working set of moral standards which take into consideration the real and not the constructed needs of both sexes within society. Malle said: ‘Les Amants was terribly sincere. I was sincere in the choice of subject and the way I was attacking my own milieu; I felt strongly about
the theme and the characters’ (Malle, 1992: 21). According to Marie, Malle’s *Les Amants* high returns ‘were undoubtedly fuelled by the bold presentation of the sexual relations between the central characters’ (2003: 20) and similarly this could be argued for Vadim’s *Et Dieu créa la femme*. Yet a main difference appears between the two: the latter takes advantage of the current debates by women over acquiring command of their selves and, falling into pseudo-feminism, uses in a clichéd fashion the exposure of sexual frankness which, sterile as it is revealed to be by the end of the film, ends up undermining any form of progressive thought the handling of this subject could give rise to. The representation of a franker view of sexual relations on screen was certainly of prime interest during the new climate and what Malle’s film did was to make the substance of the topic emerge by combining it with reflections on the issue of marriage and its open rupture through infidelity. Armes commented that ‘while one might find the ending, in which the woman and her lover drive off to begin a new life together, a trifle naïve, the romantic love scene combine a delicate lyricism with (for the period) a great frankness and truth’ (1985: 174). Malle said: ‘I did not intend to make a film that would be considered erotic or scandalous […] But it seemed crucial to understand why this woman decides to change her life completely, how she discovers in this one night something she had no even idea existed: the physical aspect of love, sex. And it happens by accident’ (Malle, 21).

Frankness and truth embrace many aspects of the film, as his explanation of the intentions behind his film suggests: ‘What I had in mind was a denunciation of the hypocrisy of the ruling class and the way women were supposed to be good wives and mothers and stick to that’ (Malle, 21).

The discussion about *Et Dieu créa la femme* and *Les Amants* clarifies the two different strands of approach cinema offered in regard to the subject of infidelity.
Vadim’s film treats and exploits it conventionally, as argued above, and eventually ends up reinforcing the stereotype of woman as either mother or whore; Juliette is reproached as an adulteress until she submits to her husband’s will. Malle’s work initiates a groundbreaking attitude toward this thematic staple of literary and cinematic narratives, opening the way to a serious revision of its meaning before the definition of it according to the pre-determined moral codes society lives by. As previously discussed, the social phenomenon *Nouvelle vague* was determined to discuss widely and openly the revision of the mores about love and sexuality not any longer from the point of view of their *papa* but from their own. About the cinematic outputs from young filmmakers constellating around the main names of the *Nouvelle vague*, amongst them Pierre Kast and Doniol-Valcroze, Marie observes that ‘if they belong equally to the New Wave movement, it is due to their low budgets, their autobiographical inspiration, and their themes tied to contemporary society and embedded in the current climate: the myth of youth, new morality, the autobiographical dimension of cinema, loose narrative, and use of digressions, among other traits’ (2003: 71-72). If earlier I had distinguished Rohmer and Truffaut from the other major names attached to the *Nouvelle vague* because of their treatment of the subject of infidelity, it becomes necessary also to distinguish them from other *Nouvelle vague* films that determinedly tackled the theme of youth and their concerns amidst the revolution of mores in progress. Kast’s *Le Bel Âge* (1960) and Doniol-Valcroze’s *L’Eau à la bouche* (1960) are two examples that condense representations of their contemporary youth – with sports cars, bottles of scotch, short-lived affairs, as in the movement known as Saganism. Marie points out that they ‘have in common the theme of “marivaudage”, the seductive relations between intellectuals and beautiful women’ (101). According to Marie, Kast’s ‘ambition is
huge, since he wants to propose new relations between sexes where women can take
the initiative in seduction just as much as men’ (102); in Doniol-Valcroze’s film ‘the
bourgeois young people and their servants have all the depth of creatures from
photo-romans: they wander through the settings without really existing’ (Marie,
102). Marie’s assessment of this trend of young cinema was already anticipated by
Truffaut who, interviewed by Louis Marcorelles in October 1961, talked about the
Nouvelle vague limitations: ‘the deliberate lightness of these films passes for
frivolity – sometimes wrongly, sometimes rightly. The confusion lies in that qualities
of this new cinema – gracefulness, lightness, a sense of propriety, elegance, a quick
pace – parallel its faults – frivolity, lack of thought, naivete’ (in Marie, 101). Despite
the coincidence of topics regarding love, seduction and promiscuity as issues the
contemporary youth tests itself with, Truffaut and Rohmer move on a different
wavelength of exploration: instead of mimetically reproducing the conventions of
marivaudage, they unmask the terminology of the genre within the literary realm as
well as the real one. Both filmmakers continuously draw attention to the novelistic
nature of their male characters who act like heroes of a traditional narrative,
‘subjected to a development which is typical of novelistic characters’ (Eco, 1972:
15): their characters’ romantic vision of the self entraps them in the old identity they
supposedly are set to renovate rather than perpetuate; they respond formulaically to
the events that confront them. In another aspect, too, Truffaut and Rohmer
distinguished themselves in the treatment of issues around love and sexuality. The
topics could be easy prey to frivolous accounts which could make box office hits; so,
whilst Crisp points out that art-film – validated by the middle class intelligentsia –
was the most widely acclaimed phenomena of the cinema of the sixties, ‘it was by no
means the most significant numerically – the rise of pornography dominates French
production statistics of the sixties’ (1993: 416). Thus, just as had been the case a few years earlier with Vadim, a film like *L’Eau à la bouche* ‘had better success because of its “torrid atmosphere”, opening up somewhat the representation of sexual desire on the movie screen, which was a theme common to many New Wave films and at the heart of their attraction for many student-aged spectators’ (Marie, 102). The torrid is what is often applied to narratives of infidelity, yet Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s films are strikingly devoid of this typical path and rather scrutinize it by excavating right up to its ethical kernel. It is worth mentioning that a film with such qualities as Doniol-Valcroze’s, as Marie explains, might have produced a ‘grave historical injustice’ in reducing ‘the New Wave to the representation of seductive men in sports car […] with no professional concerns. Yet, this is precisely the error committed by the New Wave’s principal French historians, Jacques Siclier (in 1960), Raymond Borde, and later Francis Courtade and Freddy Buache’ (103). It might seem that the same comments could apply to Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s young men and women and their apparently frivolous discussions and sentimental endeavours in narratives of infidelity: hence my focus on their cinema as another effort to clarify their commitment to the fundamental politics of the everyday.

As previously announced, in preparation of Part One about Truffaut’s *Antoine Doinel cycle* this chapter ends with an outlook about a film that significantly relates to his entire *oeuvre* about his perception of the topic of infidelity and remained in constant dialogue with it, *La peau douce* (1964).

**La Peau douce**

Truffaut affirmed that ‘si l’on me condamnait, pour vingt ans de travaux forcés, à refaire *La Peau douce* chaque année, ça me ne déplairait pas’ (in Gillain, 1988: 163). A film which showed ‘une mère de famille (Nelly Benedetti)
abandonnée par son mari (Jean Desailly) lui-même abandonné par sa jeune maîtresse (François Dorleac)’ (Truffaut, 1964a), *La Peau douce* is a tightly focused dissection of adultery, differing from *Jules et Jim*, *Les Deux Anglaises et le Continent* and *La Femme d’à côté* where complicating factors such as friendship, family ties and a past troubled relationship enmesh with the narrative of infidelity. Truffaut remarked ‘il y a peu de films qui prennent l’adultère comme le seul sujet d’un film’ (Truffaut, 1964c). Truffaut wished to treat adultery realistically and avoid, as he said, ‘les scènes que l’on ne montre habituellement pas’ (Truffaut, 1964b). This idea of adultery grounds Truffaut’s perspective on the significance of *La Peau douce* and, given the film’s centrality to Truffaut’s oeuvre, an examination of it is essential.

A failure with the public and only a partial success with the critics, *La Peau douce* avoided the usual hypocrisy characterising cinematic representation of infidelity. Accused of having changed style, Truffaut explained ‘non, j’avais changé de sujet’ (in Rabourdin, 1985: 217). Furthermore, he treated the subject, as Paul Sengissen noted, ‘comme s’il n’avait jamais existé’ (Sengissen, 1964). This was unlike the characters of Jules and Jim, who were, as he explained, ‘bohèmes, romantiques. Ceux de *La Peau douce* sont plus quotidiens, réels, non romantiques’ (in Gillain, 1988: 156). Truffaut’s involvement with this topic went well beyond the realm of the fictitious: the scenes between Pierre and Franca were shot in the apartment in which the Truffauts lived at the time of their divorce. In a letter to Helen Scott, in which he announced his separation from his wife during the shooting, he said ‘j’ai pris en horreur l’hypocrisie conjugale; là-dessus, je suis assez révolté en ce moment’ (Truffaut, 1988: 257). The subject required tonal sensitivity and demanded appropriate cinematic choices: *Jules et Jim*’s smooth panning, for example, could no longer exist in a film that, as Truffaut explained, ‘étant
chirurgical’ would not give the camera ‘le droit de se promener’ (in Rabourdin, 217). The unconventional outlook had to make love acquire, as specified by Truffaut, ‘une image antipoétique, l’inverse en quelque sorte de Jules et Jim, comme une réponse polémique’ (in Rabourdin, 86). Truffaut was disturbed by the commercial treatment of infidelity and wanted to make sure the public became aware of its facets stripped bare. He explained that ‘le film s’agit ici des chose terribles’ and that ‘ce qui compte ici c’est la minutie documentaire de chaque détail et une certaine manière d’aller en profondeur pour rester près de la réalité tout en échappant la convention’ (in Gillain, 1988: 158). The deconstruction of the myth of adulterous love features in the characterization of Pierre and his lover: Truffaut wished to show ‘un personnage du XIXe siècle et qu’est-ce qui est le plus loin d’un personnage du XIXe siècle, c’est une hôtesse de l’air […]. Je me suis inspiré d’un homme plus à son aise avec les morts, les gloires anciennes, qu’avec le monde d’aujourd’hui’ (in Rabourdin, 87). The contrast between Pierre and his lover, who lives very much in modernity (aeroplanes are her home), highlights his novelistic romanticised vision of the affair: Truffaut defined Pierre as ‘a kind of Monsieur Bovary’ (Monaco, 1976: 1). Pierre’s anachronistic outlook and intellectual specialisation in Balzac recall Antoine Doinel: both behave as they think one of Balzac’s heroes would do. Their cultural inheritance, acquired without comprehending the demands of the contemporary era, and the consequent inability to get rid of ‘des conventions hypocrites régies par des lois qui ne tiennent aucun compte de la réalité humaine’ (Lachize, 1964), are shown to be the basis of Pierre’s troubles, as well as Antoine’s. Significantly, Truffaut expressed great interest in ‘le personnage de la femme trompée: on en fait toujours le personnage ingrat, ici elle sera considérée de la façon la plus anticonventionnelle possible’ (in Rabourdin, 87). Guérif sensitively notices that in this instance Truffaut
‘se montre volontiers féministe, en refusant les clichés’ (Guérif, 2003: 32). Annette Insdorf affirms that ‘Truffaut’s females are often portrayed as existing less in, of and for themselves than as realizations of male visions’ (Insdorf, 1994: 115), but as a betrayed wife Franca stands out as an unusually attractive and passionate partner. Her refusal to accept her husband’s infidelity links her to Christine Darbon, the figure of an uncompromising wife that Truffaut was then to develop from Domicile conjugal onwards. La Peau douce, as Samuel Lachize noted, ‘est un film qui plaira aux femmes, si souvent humiliées par le cinéma et qui se sentiront enfin “décolonisées”’ (Lachize, 1964). The men in Truffaut’s universe try to impose their idealised visions of women on them, but often such women will prove them wrong.

In La Peau douce, the wife and lover, despite being binary opposites, are united in their rejection of Pierre and his flawed values. Like the heroes of Rohmer’s Contes moraux, he is capable of wrongdoing towards both the wife and the lover, as Guérif proposes, ‘parce qu’il est inféodé aux conventions sociales’ (Guérif, 32). Pierre destroys himself, and everything he has, his love for both Franca and Nicole, because of intellectual and moral ineptitude. The shot of him standing next to a giant print of Gide illustrates the potential for the followers of such spiritual fathers to be overwhelmed by their idols/ideals. Gillain remarks how Lachenay, by working on the masters of the past, ‘se coupe aussi de la réalité contemporaine pour devenir l’hôte d’un univers défunt’ (Gillain, 1991: 76). Pierre neglects the effects of his adulterous affair on Franca; confined in a culturally acquired social credo, he readily switches from the lover back to this wife or, from the unworthy (whore) to the worthy (mother/wife). The emphasis here is not on judgement of the women’s conduct but on what the situation they are in says about the cultural assumptions that produce and perpetuate it. Pierre’s affair (and life) is doomed because he represents
standard morality. He ‘drague l’hôtesse de l’air’ (Guérif, 2003: 32), to then hide her wherever they go, because he judges her before anybody else does: the beginning of their affair sees him following her into her hotel room, exactly as Antoine follows the prostitutes into theirs. Unable to take responsibility for his actions, he does not risk himself to rescue Nicole from the dragueur, but instead allows her to be treated like a street whore, thus revealing his essential opinion of her. Entering into and forgetting the affair with the same nonchalance with which another man might enter and leave a brothel, Pierre exemplifies the line of connection between infidelity and prostitution: both are deeply rooted in the collective unconscious of a society that simultaneously condemns and enjoys them, whilst expecting them to go unnoticed.

In reply, Nicole ‘a le courage de pas s’engager à la légère dans un mode d’existence qu’elle ne veut pas’ (Guérif, 33) and Franca ‘refuse l’univers des mensonges et de la compromission’ (33). In refusing the lovers the classic moments of bliss and excitement, Truffaut refuses to meet the audience’s expectations; the audience’s rejection of the film testified to the radical comment Truffaut infused the whole film with this novel treatment of infidelity. Likewise with Rohmer’s tales, this was ‘un film de moralistes, au sens le plus noble du terme, la morale n’étant pas justement ce que certains affirment’ (Lachize, 1964). In La Peau douce’s final sequence, Pierre’s outrage when his wife contemptuously throws his lover’s pictures at him betrays the expectation that infidelity be dismissed as a simple and temporary diversion permitted to men. The close-up of Franca’s discreet smile after she has shot her beloved clarifies the intentional avenging of the hypocritical social system that Pierre incarnates. Franca’s reaction turns the violence of that hypocrisy on its perpetrator, embodying ‘a violence positively cathartic for women spectators who have been victims of similar approaches’ (Holmes and Ingram, 1998: 127). Instances of female
resistance to such attitudes recur throughout Truffaut’s heroines, protagonists and secondary characters in all the following films.

At the cost of personal and professional failure, Truffaut, like his female characters, was determined to be uncompromising, despite foreseeing, as he declared, that ‘ce serait un échec’ (in Rabourdin, 1985: 88). Affirming that ‘un film qui “descend” est rarement aimé’ (in Rabourdin, 88), Truffaut distanced himself from Pierre and many of his male characters, who do not have the courage to follow through on their actions, and instead dared to break the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie by presenting them with what he saw as ‘le contraire de l’idée “d’exaltation” qu’on “attend du spectacle”’ (in Rabourdin, 88). Pierre Billard pointed to the uniqueness of the treatment of adultery in that ‘c’est la première fois que l’on voit sur l’écran un mari qui trompe sa femme’ (Billard, 1965). The public found the film not only unpleasant but, paradoxically, also unrealistic, in particular the film’s end. Truffaut calculated the effect, as he explained that ‘dans La Peau douce, les gens ne savent rien au départ et ils ont l’impression, à la fin, que le dénouement est disproportionné avec le reste du récit’ (in Gillain, 1988: 163). The director painstakingly sought and eventually found the ‘right’ ending in Franca’s shooting of Pierre; he declared that ‘le fait qu’elle tire sur son mari, cela n’aurait pas dû surprendre, les gens devraient dire: oui, c’était fatal, logique qu’on arrive là’ (in Gillain, 163). Sadoul remarked that this film ‘prend bien une valeur d’exemple puisqu’un homme y juge sévèrement le comportment des hommes envers les femmes’ (Sadoul, 1964). From Truffaut, who in La Chambre verte acted as Julien Davenne, his œuvre’s rare example of a male character capable of total fidelity, La Peau douce is a manifesto about his perception of infidelity on and off screen. Its blatant stance against the public’s expectations of a narrative of infidelity finds further expression in the productions to follow. In
relation to his body of work Truffaut declared that ‘l’artiste est quelqu’un en dehors de la société, et il s’adresse à la société. Alors, il s’agit d’imposer aux gens sa propre originalité, et non pas d’aller vers leur banalité […] l’entreprise devient un match avec les gens’ (Truffaut, 1964c). This frames precisely the direction Truffaut’s treatment of men, women and infidelity takes in *La Peau douce* and in all his subsequent films.

Within the framework of cinema as offering up, in accordance with the *Nouvelle Vague*’s broad artistic guidelines, the ‘truth about the world’ (Douchet, 1998: 137), this discussion has shown how infidelity arises in Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s cycles as an important subject. In particular, Truffaut and Rohmer’s works mark a distinct break from Vadim’s *Et Dieu créa la femme*’s bold, superficially innovative yet fundamentally regressive representation of femininity and sexual emancipation. Rather, their oeuvres bring forward the more surprising, then-unconventional treatment of femininity in Malle’s *Les Amants*. In *La Peau douce* specifically, values are established around the handling of triangular desire that lay bare the artifice behind its normative cinematic treatment. *La Peau douce* illuminates the nuances of Truffaut’s distinct representation of unfaithful experiences in the *Doinel cycle*, which will be analysed next. Furthermore, *La Peau douce*’s unforgiving outlook of the male protagonist’s behaviour towards both wife and lover prefigures Rohmer’s *Contes moraux*’ sharp irony towards the male protagonists’ understanding of infidelity and the ensuing treatment of their official partners as well as lovers.
Part One: François Truffaut

2. Chapter Two: François Truffaut and the *Antoine Doinel* cycle

This chapter first introduces the incidence, presence and prominence of the subject of infidelity in different genres and narrative forms throughout Truffaut’s opus; then it maps out the particular instances in which the theme of infidelity features in the *Doinel cycle*. It will be seen that the subject of infidelity occupies a place of major relevance in Truffaut’s cinema and constitutes one of his most significant thematic preoccupations. The focus on the *Doinel cycle*’s representation of infidelity inside and outside of the institution of marriage will show Truffaut’s particular attention to the relation between the occurrence of infidelity on the one hand, and its effects on the members of the familial unit on the other, while devoting equal space to the figure of the mother and wife, of the father and husband, and of the son or daughter.

As seen in the previous chapter, François Truffaut stands in opposition to the cinematic tradition of the immediate past, the so called *tradition de qualité*, which had as its primary point of reference the French literary heritage. As Russell King points out, infidelity – or adultery – is ‘the theme par excellence of the nineteenth-century French novel’ (King, 2000b: 174). Truffaut’s attitude towards adultery entered into a polemic against the French literary tradition and, overall, against the conception of male adultery as a matter of no relevance that was then conventional in French culture. Before entering into the specificities of Truffaut’s treatment of infidelity in the *Doinel cycle*, it is important to have a strong grounding in his artistic development and of the core concerns that he addressed within his wider corpus.
François Truffaut was an assiduous cinemagoer from childhood, whose precocious intellectual imagination was shaped by literature and cinema. First engaging with film criticism amateurishly throughout his adolescence, Truffaut began his professional apprenticeship in the late ‘forties under the guidance of André Bazin, quickly gaining a reputation as the enfant terrible of film criticism. He moved behind the camera with a few shorts from the mid-‘fifties, and in 1959 made his first feature, _Les Quatre cents coups_. The _Nouvelle vague_ and the fellow ‘young Turks’ owe to him their core manifesto, from his 1954 article ‘Une certaine tendance du cinéma français’. Rejecting the current national cinema, or ‘cinéma de papa’, as a soulless and formulaic filmed theatre, the manifesto established innovative ways in which its followers could view filmmaking and express themselves through it, as critics and filmmakers. A manifestation of freedom of thought and practice, rather than another constrictive set of rules, Truffaut’s article represented a further step in the articulation of the emerging post-World War II sensitivity, which indiscriminately emphasised the intrinsic value of the individual’s feelings. When declaring ‘les jeunes cinéastes s’exprimeront à la première personne […] cela pourra être l’histoire de leur premier amour […]’, their prise de conscience devant la politique […] et cela plaira presque forcément parce que ce sera vrai et neuf’ (Truffaut, 1975: 33), Truffaut highlighted a desire for a humanised conception of artistic expression; guiding artistic expression through one’s own sensitivity the newly born auteur would simultaneously render justice to her/his concerns while embracing the sensitivity of her/his current fellow interlocutors/spectators. In Truffaut, intellectual and emotional understandings are intertwined, mutually informing each other. The genuine expression of the individual motivated by the desire to enter into an authentic interaction with the other, emotionally and
intellectually, is the act of love at the core of Truffaut’s œuvre as in his 1957 article, ‘Le film de demain sera un acte d'amour’ (Truffaut, 1975: 33).

A second key notion is that Truffaut’s cinema emerges as engaged in a constant search for stability on all levels of human experience. This drive towards stability is, however, constantly undermined by encounters with forces that threaten its achievement. Death is often a manifestation of this failing, as is infidelity. In Les Mistons (1957) the idyllic love between the two young protagonists is abruptly ended by the boyfriend’s accidental death. In Tirez sur le pianiste (1960) the protagonist’s wife pursues adultery to facilitate her husband’s career; the husband’s ensuing rejection of her motivates her suicide. Jules et Jim (1961) presents an experimental triangular relationship between a woman and two friends where she eventually drowns herself and one of them. In La Peau douce (1964) the husband’s affair leads to his wife’s murder of him. La Mariée était en noir (1967) opens with a premature end to an idyllic relationship with the accidental shooting of the heroine’s husband on the steps of the church on their wedding day. Les Deux Anglaises et le Continent (1971) narrates the troubled triangular relationship between a man and two sisters, one of whom eventually marries another man, while the other dies of illness. La Nuit américaine (1973) goes behind the scenes of the shooting of a film about adulterous feelings between a father-in-law and his daughter-in-law, which result in parricide. One of the only two stable relationships is interrupted by the death of one of the partners, and the other is threatened by the psychological fragility of one of the partners. L’Homme qui aimait les femmes (1977) is the apotheosis of uncommitted love, which ends with the protagonist dying while engaged in the lascivious ogling of a nurse’s legs.
Conversely, *La Chambre verte* (1978) is the apotheosis of committed love: the male protagonist remains obsessively faithful to his dead wife until death takes him too. In *Le Dernier métro* (1980) there reappears a love triangle between a woman and two men: the men are again one French, the lover, and one German, the husband, as in *Jules et Jim*; the film ends in a joyous atmosphere of consent amongst them on stage. *La Femme d’à côté* (1981), narrated by a woman who tried to commit suicide for the sake of a man, encapsulates the darkest aspects of love through amour fou, double adultery, murder and suicide. *Vivement dimanche!* (1982) casts the previously proposed cases of lost love, betrayal and death in the framework of rejuvenated love, commitment and birth. Whether through costume dramas or films in contemporary settings, the thread that characterises Truffaut’s opus concerns familial and romantic relationships often pierced by betrayal, a manifestation of his concerns about authentic interpersonal interaction and stability.

The existing criticism of Truffaut’s work provides a wide-ranging analysis of its principal recurring thematic preoccupations, often complemented by details of his private life relevant to his artistic endeavours. Adultery is recognised as one among many themes in Truffaut’s cinema, yet no study has focused on it specifically. In the reviews at the time of the films’ releases the term adultery appeared variably: the specific cases of adultery in the films’ narratives were not always mentioned, and at other times they would be mentioned only to be dismissed as banal occurrences; such attitudes failed to grasp the relevance that this topic has for an understanding of Truffaut’s sensibility. In contrast, reviews that treat infidelity as a matter that concerns everyone tend to acknowledge and praise Truffaut’s novel treatment of it. About *Jules et Jim*, for example, Pierre Billard remarks how,

> si l’adultère est un délit, au terme de la loi bourgeoise qui nous gouverne, et un péché au terme de la morale catholique qui nous opprèse, c’est également
un ressort dramatique fort pratique que ni la loi ni la morale catholique ne s’inquiètent de réprimer lorsque sa représentation à l’écran s’entoure d’une suffisante hypocrisie. Mari trompé, amants malicieux, folles maîtresses obtiennent à la fois l’absolution des censeurs et l’intérêt du public pour peu qu’ils observent la loi du mensonge en vigueur dans la bonne société (1962).

In Truffaut’s cinema the subtle link between infidelity and society’s laic and religious morality is debated, deconstructed and revealed in its complexity. Using infidelity as a guiding leitmotif, this chapter analyses Truffaut’s Antoine Doinel cycle, trying to seize the positions on infidelity and adultery that each film assumes individually as well as over the cycle-in-progress.

In 1959 Les Quatre cents coups initiated a cycle about the fictional figure of Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Léaud), a cycle which also includes Antoine et Colette (1962), Baisers volés (1968), Domicile conjugal (1970) and L’Amour en fuite (1979). The serial structure and time span roughly parallel those of Rohmer’s Contes moraux, and indicates an engagement with this topic contextualised within the radical social changes seen in France between the 1960s and the 1970s.

Although focused on the Doinel cycle, this study will occasionally refer to other Truffaut films since, as Guérif points out, ‘dès Les 400 coups, avec le personnage de la mère adultère, à La Femme d’à côté, on voit combien l’adultère a été une des préoccupations majeures de Truffaut et combien l’image du couple se trouve au centre de son œuvre’ (Guérif, 2003: 36). Notwithstanding the differences in genre, story and settings, Truffaut’s films were in an on-going dialogue with one other. For instance, La Peau douce, through the theme of infidelity, was conceived by Truffaut as a reply to Jules and Jim; similarly, Truffaut envisioned Domicile conjugal as a reply to La Peau douce (in Gillain, 1988: 274).
The Antoine Doinel cycle

According to Gerald Mast, the directors’ spirit of casualness ‘led many critics of both Truffaut and Renoir to dismiss several of the films (particularly the sunniest ones) as “minor” […]]. But these comic works of acceptance, synthesis and sunshine [...] are perhaps as “minor” as The Marriage of Figaro’ (in Insdorf, 1994: 70). Moving beyond any dispute regarding the artistic achievements of the Doinel cycle, this study focuses on the way such films constitute fertile grounds for the scrutiny of the tendencies and attitudes of French society which emerge through them. Based on original scripts set in the present time of their production, each film records a moment in the history of Antoine Doinel; this coincides with the record of a piece of raw history in the life of the rôle’s interpreter, Jean-Pierre Léaud, in the development of Truffaut’s creativity and in the world of actor and director’s fellow citizens, both fictional and real. Talking about some of the actors, Truffaut affirmed ‘Jade, Léaud, sont mes contemporains! […] Je lis beaucoup d’articles concernant les jeunes’ (in Guidez, 1970). The Doinel cycle reveals, as Insdorf points out, ‘the extraordinary qualities of the “ordinary” situations and individuals of Truffaut’s own experience’ (Insdorf, 1994: 71). Truffaut’s main criterion of work was his need to be able to identify with his characters. The input of fiction would always be small because, as he affirmed, he preferred to start from ‘de faits qui sont racontés dans les journaux, ou qui me sont arrivés, ou qui m’ont été racontés par des gens que je connais. J’aime avoir la vérification par la vie’ (in Rabourdin, 1985: 201). In this mise-en-scène of ordinary experience, I look at the cycle as a terrain in which to find relevant material about the perception of ordinary France towards the practice of infidelity, its dynamics and main actors.
Many reviews and critical evaluations of the cycle highlight the treatment of the genders as a locus of censure and often of unconscious inner conflict: discussing *Domicile conjugal*, Henry Chapier remarks that ‘François Truffaut aborde aussi le problème – par excellence délicat – de la fidélité conjugale […] se livre à un petit jeu de massacre sur le thème de l’égoïsme éminemment masculin’ (Chapier, 1970). This framework is applicable to the entire *Doinel cycle*. Odile Grand notes the way that in *L’Amour en fuite* ‘on a un point de vue féminin, une sorte de remise en question de la maladresse masculine, denrée habituellement traitée avec un attendrissement plein de mansuétude par les scénaristes’ (Grand, 1979). In another review of *Domicile conjugal*, Jean-Gabrielle Nordmann writes of Antoine’s Japanese lover that ‘c’est elle qui lui fera commettre son premier “adultère”’ (Nordmann, 1970). The syntax of this sentence is expressive of an ideological stance twisting the significance of infidelity in this instance by freeing Antoine from the guilt of having initiated the deed. This thesis seeks to propose a new balance in this type of assessment by analysing the instances of the occurrence of infidelity, so to view it from a wider perspective than is possible within the ideology in which it is normatively grounded. As the majority of the cycle’s films pose cases of adultery – infidelity within marriage – the analysis of such occurrences embraces the notions of marriage and family and, as such, is inscribed within the context of society at large and its founding institutions.

Jill Forbes notes that ‘in the postwar American, British, German and Italian cinemas the family often functions as a structuring element. The adulterous couple, together with the dynastic family and the conflict of generations motivate the narrative of much postwar western cinema as they do the bourgeois novel’ (Forbes, 1992: 114). She also points out that ‘triangular relationships that represent what
might be called the new geometry of desire’ (Forbes, 122) was a familiar theme to many works of the major filmmakers of the 1970s in France. Rather than the result of the socio-sexual revolution of 1968, ‘the assault on the couple began well before 1968’ (Forbes, 122). According to Forbes, the challenge to the family is traceable in the 1950s; it was intrinsic to the nouvelle vague filmmakers, who ‘flouted the familial organisation of the French film industry’ and ‘changed the narrative content of films and exploited new narrative techniques’ (115-116). It can be argued that the origin of the Doinel cycle is traceable to the question of an adulterated biological family starting with Les Quatre cents coups. This is the first of Tuffaut’s films in which, significantly on both personal and professional levels, he looks at adultery with issues of relationships and family together.

The relevant married couples in the cycle are the Doinels in Les Quatre cents coups, Colette’s parents in Antoine et Colette, another Darbon family and the Tabards in Baisers volés, the Darbons and Antoine and Christine in Domicile conjugal, and Antoine and Christine and the original Doinel nucleus again in L’Amour en fuite. The family of Les Quatre cents coups comprises twelve-year-old Antoine, his mother and his stepfather. In Truffaut, the figure of the stepfather features recurrently: Dominique Fanne remarks ‘qu’Antoine a une mère et un beau-père, que Colette a une mère et un beau-père, et que Christine a une mère et un beau-père’ (Fanne, 1972: 134), and Holmes and Ingram talk about ‘the kindly stepfathers of Colette and Christine’ (Holmes and Ingram, 1998: 148). Despite the inconsistencies in the reports about Christine’s father as a biological father or as a stepfather, the fact that Christine’s family name is, like Colette’s stepfather’s actor, François Darbon, indirectly carries stepfatherhood over from one film to another. These families’ supposed anomaly features as ordinary, highlighting the
phenomenon of illegitimacy and missing fathers as an unexceptional reality in France – just as in the case of Truffaut himself. About *Les Quatre cents coups*, conceived by Truffaut as a stand-alone story, Jean Renoir commented that ‘au fond c’est un portrait de la France d’en ce moment’ (in Gillain, 1988:102). For twenty years the *Doinel cycle* punctually revived the ideas of stepfatherhood and, implicitly, illegitimacy, signalling Truffaut’s ongoing concerns around them.

The idea of stepfatherhood helps establish another concept dear to Truffaut: education – the idea of fathering as a source of education and of education as fulfilling the role of fathering. These mutually interchangeable concepts feature recurrently throughout the cycle. Evidence of this can be seen in the continuous evocation of the past that so many of Truffaut’s male characters embody in their readings of French nineteenth-century writers such as Balzac and Hugo (as in *Les Quatre cents coups*; see Fig. 2:1, below), whose intellectual stature makes them fulfil a permanent father-role for France.

*Les Quatre cents coups* (Fig. 2:1)
The bond between surrogate fathers and education bears connections with the notion of infidelity and its perception. Direct criticism about the consumption of such fathers emerges clearly from Colette’s stepfather, who tells Antoine ‘Victor Hugo a dénoncé le mal, mais il n’a pas indiqué le remède’: here one hears the voice of sons who reclaim a breakthrough.

In *Les Quatre cents coups* adultery becomes apparent only late on, while the cracks in the family are very apparent from the beginning. In *Baisers volés*, the main adultery scene takes place very shortly before the end too, once the compromised status of Mr. and Madame Tabard’s relationship has also been broadly exposed. *Domicile conjugal* features Antoine’s adultery three-quarters of the way through the film; at around the same point in the film another case of adultery, yet different in nature, is introduced through the figure of the protagonist Mr. Darbon, who regularly visits a brothel. The occurrence of infidelity towards the end of each film seems to wrap up these relationships with infidelity as an inevitable incidence within the course of a marriage, and, in some cases, seemingly as a symptom rather than as a cause of marital breakdown. Additionally, there are many other minor cases of adultery which fill the cycle and add to the overall sense of pessimism about the (mal-)functioning of marriage. In this spectacle of adulteries each individual case presents its own rationale from the adulterers’ standpoint as well as different responses from the offended parties.

The next three chapters will focus on the analysis of infidelity *au féminin*, *Les Quatre coups* as a case study, and infidelity *au masculin* respectively. This analytical approach is essential since female and male perpetrators of infidelity are portrayed under starkly different features, which raises a whole sets of issues that need to be appreciated first separately, and then brought together. Also, the case
study of *Les Quatres cents coups* is important since, as the first instalment of the cycle, it establishes the centrality of the family in relation to considerations arising from the subject of infidelity. The scrutiny given to the relation between aspects of infidelity and the family in this film both illuminates the many and diverse facets of gendered representations associated with the narrative of infidelity in subsequent oeuvres, as well as establishing a clear thematic interconnection between the chapters.
3. Chapter Three: Infidelity \textit{au féminin}

Within the overarching structure of the \textit{Doinel Cycle} in which the treatment of infidelity in each film is in constant dialogue with that of other films that pursue related narrative threads, this chapter focuses in particular on the representation of female infidelity. The analysis of infidelity from this angle demonstrates Truffaut’s original engagement with the topic and his particular challenge to conventional gender behaviour’s expectations, which, it will be seen, he seeks to undermine progressively through the films of the cycle. From the first film of the cycle, \textit{Les Quatre cents coups} (1959), the infidelity of the mother posits itself on the one hand, as a weighty question concerning the understanding of infidelity \textit{per se}; on the other, as an occurrence that has negative bearings on the role of woman as a mother. This topic will be further investigated in the following chapter which will form part of a subsequent analysis of a perceptions of female infidelity as an argument linked to women’s quest for freedom from the rigid structures gender roles conceived along patriarchal lines.

Female infidelity is depicted using both humoristic and dramatic tones: in both instances, women’s subjectivity finds expression through infidelity, which as a result acquires implications beyond the simplistic assessment conventionally attached to it. Female infidelity is seen as carrying different meanings and highlighting different issues according to each case. In particular, one character from the first episode, Mrs. Doinel, becomes the site of central interest when her character reappears in the concluding episode of the cycle, which effectively reopens questions about her unfaithful conduct while subjecting it to further consideration from different perspectives. Notwithstanding that fear of female adultery emerges as a
concern for the male characters, the classic portrayal of the gender bias is dismissed and, in its place, emphasis is given to a new approach by way of the theme of infidelity to interpreting female characters in general.

This reinterpretation of femininity and infidelity from new perspectives discussed above allows Truffaut to draw out particular fresh nuances. For instance, his depictions of women’s unfaithfulness ignites issues about their betrayed partners, who are ridiculed and scorned both by their partners and through their portrayal within his films. Also, as the cycle opens with a film in which events are viewed from a child’s perspective, female infidelity is also looked upon from the point of view of its effects on the offspring, a factor that also extends the scrutiny of infidelity onto the relationship between the subject of parenting and infidelity. Thus, the analysis of female infidelity in this instance encompasses questions of impacts and involvement of the child/offspring.

At first, the cycle appears to present a higher number of infidelities and adulteries au féminin. Gender imbalance is initially exposed in the first two films: in Les Quatre cents coups (1959) Antoine’s mother (Claire Maurier) is the sole protagonist of adultery; in Baisers volés (1968) nearly all the women are the subjects of investigations and under suspicion of adultery: the wife (Martine Brochard) in the hotel, Fabienne Tabard (Delphine Seyrig) and the many women Antoine and his colleagues at the detective agency secretly follow. The exceptions are Christine (Claude Jade) and her mother (Claire Duhamel), who stand out against such a background as model mother and daughter. These films appear to offer an anti-feminist perspective: Françoise Audé sees in Truffaut’s work ‘la haine de la mère’ (Audé, 1981:49), and Susan Hayward identifies a ‘suppressed misogyny’ in Truffaut’s films which ‘punish the (m)other for the absence of the father’ (Hayward,
1994: 50, 52). My perspective seeks to reassess such conclusions by re-evaluating the portrayal of the traditional Western vision of male and female infidelity within these films and the cultural and socio-political frameworks within which they were produced. In fact, in the fourth episode, *Domicile conjugal* (1970), the apparent disparity between men and women’s involvement with infidelity is peculiarly structured; the reverse situation is presented, with instances of adultery *au masculin* only – Antoine, his father-in-law and a judge from a novel. Finally, in *L’Amour en fuite* (1979), in which Antoine perseveres as a disloyal partner, both men and women are involved in a reciprocal scrutiny and revision of their own and others’ infidelity. Having replaced his mother as the uncontested protagonist of infidelity in the cycle’s first instalment, Antoine’s infidelities contextualise his mother’s in an ampler and unbiased scenario in which both men and women are presented as committing infidelity.

The series’ cyclical structure makes its last film provide answers to some of the questions posed by the first. The cycle of familial and relational deceptions which initiates with Antoine’s mother in *Les Quatre cents coups* is partially elucidated in *L’Amour en fuite* as a result of Antoine’s remembrance of and elaboration upon their past. This part of the narrative focuses on Antoine’s imagined encounter with his mother through his exchange of reminiscences about her with her devoted lover Lucien (Julien Bertheau). The return of this triangle made of son(-victim), mother(-betrayer) and lover signals the significance of this unusual familial formation, and, although unorthodox, the renewal of this family unit is to a certain extent shown as accomplished. The supposedly fixed categories of judgement about infidelity are thus shown mutable and complex.
The well-established structure within which the French literary tradition had placed emphasis on the act of infidelity as a female domain clashed with the emerging values regarding women’s new place in society from the 1960s. Truffaut’s relationship with the present was curious; he would state ‘je ne traite pas du tout de l’époque moderne. […] Moi, je suis […] totalement tourné vers le passé’ (in Gillain, 1988: 196), but also ‘quand je tourne, je m’arrange toujours pour dormir près d’un aéroport afin d’y trouver Le Monde’ (Ciment, 1988: 10). Bernard Morlino aptly commented, ‘je comprends ce besoin de se rendre quotidiennement au chevet de la planète, de tâter son pouls, bref de relever la température de ses contemporains’ (Ciment, 1988: 10). Truffaut mediated evenly between the two opposite stances reported above by being an acute observer and critic of the intellectual and emotive inclinations of his contemporaries and of their tendency – in which he was himself implicated – to fall prey to the nostalgia for the established and comforting values of the past. Truffaut was also careful to not adopt any credo currently in fashion unless it also corresponded with his own conviction as a result of his experiences. In 1978 Truffaut affirmed he would not shoot _Jules et Jim_ (1961) again because ‘j’aurais l’impression de flatter la mode, de faire un film féministe. […] Disons que le refus d’être à la mode est si profond, chez moi, qu’il arrive à me faire tourner le dos à des thèmes qui, éventuellement, m’intéresseraient’ (in Rabourdin, 1985: 43). Truffaut was counter-cultural in contesting the literary tradition of the biased representation of female infidelity whilst also responding to the emerging trends in contemporary understanding of perceptions of infidelity; not just following fashion, his emphasis on a more gender-balanced view of infidelity was partly just realistic but also a conscious rejection of previous literary portrayals of issues around infidelity. The observation of the quotidian in Truffaut’s cinema often leads to the themes of
infidelity and men’s involvement with it; Truffaut said ‘l’adultère, c’est sinistre […] dans *Domicile conjugal*, sans le faire exprès, je retombe sur ce problème de l’adultère. Évidemment, c’est plus léger, moins sordide […] mais je ne sais pas si ça donne envie de se marier...’ (in Romi, 1970). Not accidentally perhaps, none of the couples in the cycle’s last episode *L’Amour en fuite* are married, in contrast to the fact that up to the final film all are.

Having claimed that there is a balance between the genders of infidelities presented in the cycle as a whole, I am now focusing on the representation of infidelity *au féminin* for the remainder of this chapter and will turn to the portrayals of male adultery later. The major unfaithful women in the cycle are married. In the last episode, the fact that Colette (Marie-France Pisier) is a divorcée, and thus the only woman who is responsible for infidelity rather than adultery, extricates infidelity from the legal and civil context that normally circumscribes it and returns it to its more abstract values. This will prove of critical significance in the final assessment of the problem of infidelity within the cycle.

Between the women in *Baisers volés* there are no apparent significant similarities – the unfaithful wife in the hotel and the several women under investigation by the detective agency appear ordinary – but closer analysis reveals parallels between the cases in spite of their apparent dissimilarity, as the contexts they are in are consistently portrayed in a comic way. The adulterous wife’s reaction to the sight of her husband (Robert Cambourakis) when discovered in the hotel with a lover is not ordinary: unexpectedly shameless, she mocks and humiliates him, as if she had been waiting for that moment to come. The humorous tone of the scene further ridicules the husband’s supposedly virile shouting and smashing of the bedroom. Her sarcastic reaction proclaims a confidence of sorts over two
representatives of the controlling gaze of patriarchy: marriage and the investigative agency. Another ironic sequence is when the woman Antoine, now a detective, has been following denounces him to the traffic warden: beyond the light-hearted tone, this offers another instance of woman’s refusal to be a passive object of men’s distorting perception of her. Initially, the camera captures the woman’s figure from Antoine’s point of view; also watched by another man before her in dark glasses and detective style-coat, she is imprisoned by the two men’s watchful gazes (see Fig. 3:1, below).

![Image](image.png)

*Baisers volés* (Fig. 3:1)

Then the point of view cuts from her fetishised body from behind to a front view of her nervous expression while attempting to distance herself from man’s obsessive persecutory investigation of women. Ironically, Antoine risks being persecuted or investigated himself as she points him out to the traffic warden and runs away in panic. Underscored by a satirised version of thriller music and through Antoine’s clumsy investigation, this sequence indicates an intentional parody of the male...
omnipresent scrutiny, objectifying and assigning guilt to woman (see Fig. 3:2, below): guilty or not, this woman is followed on the suspicion of adultery.

_Baisers volés_ (Fig. 3:2)

Her reaction stands for a universal refusal to be framed as intrinsically duplicitous (see Fig 3:3, below).

_Baisers volés_ (Fig. 3:3)

The two examples discussed here manifest an anti-chauvinist vein running through the series that is further highlighted by the cycle’s two major adulteresses. Madame Doinel and Fabienne Tabard are dissimilar in many respects: whereas the
first is on edge most of the time, the second is calm and in control of the world around her. In their households, one is very assertive and constantly on the verge of verbally attacking her husband and son, while the other is very quiet and seemingly compliant to her husband. At home, one shows symptoms of threatening the domestic nucleus; conversely, the other convincingly acts like the perfect wife. Tall, blonde and sensuous, these two confident women embody the possibility of infidelity; their powerful sensuality breaks through the family unit and, in different ways, they carry out their adulterous plans with no regret or shame, walking over the patriarchal dictum to which they are expected to conform. Infidelity is, for them, the ultimate act of freedom; moving beyond the purely sexual connotations of autonomy, their actions presuppose a lucid, logical choice against convention. Their experiences are, however, conveyed with totally differing tones, indicating an address to the radically diverse significance that such occurrence can imply according to the individual context.

In Les Quatre cent coups’ preparatory notes, Truffaut stated of Antoine that ‘il avait hérité de sa mère son esprit de critique’ (Truffaut 002B1); Truffaut’s admiration, despite everything, for his mother’s courage in rebelling against society was well known (de Baeque and Toubiana, 2001); of Antoine’s mother, her lover Lucien will report ‘elle était une anarchiste’. That her name will only be disclosed in the last episode of the cycle highlights how until then her essence remains suffocated within a male order: she is Mr. Doinel’s wife, Antoine’s mother and a stranger’s lover. The feminist upsurge foreseeing women’s assertion of freedom from the limiting paradigms of patriarchy is evidently at work within the character of Antoine’s mother. The more subtle Fabienne Tabard is even wilder in her adulterous

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2 Archive Truffaut at the BiFi in Paris. This archive contains reviews of Truffaut’s films, his personal letters, the several stages of his scripts.
expeditions, probably numerous and carried out even more scornfully. Her name literally resonates in Antoine’s obsessive repetition at the mirror ‘Fabienne Tabard’ throughout the film, conveying also aurally the self-assurance of her doings and their powerful effect. Unlike the two comic instances previously discussed, where women, in spite of their rebellious reactions, face harassment by an overly controlling male rule, Madame Doinel and Fabienne Tabard escape such narrative. Uncomfortable in marriage, they nonetheless follow a lifestyle considered inappropriate for women and carve their own space within patriarchy.

In this context of flourishing femininity, gender roles are reread through genre conventions. The generic frame in which the women in the hotel, those in the street and Fabienne are inscribed is a mixture of comedy and pseudo-detective film. The act of investigating women is reminiscent of the investigation of the femme fatale in film noir, the generic site of investigation of female betrayals. Film noir, however, is also the site where male flaws and inadequacies are exposed. The treacherous, action-leading qualities of the femme fatale are shown in a different light in Baisers volés in particular, where humour exposes the absurdity of man’s obsessive search for women’s guilt. Men are portrayed as doomed, not by woman’s supposedly treacherous nature but by a defective perception of themselves and womankind. As these betrayed men are shown to have failed to attune with the reality of the female universe, it is man’s culpability in failing to connect with it that comes under scrutiny. This idea had already emerged within the tragic context of Truffaut’s Tirez sur le pianiste. Insdorf notes how here the male characters ‘constitute a spectrum of distorted perceptions of women’ (Insdorf, 1994: 107), whereby they are, according to some, “pure, delicate, fragile, supreme, magical” (108), while for others, “when you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all”(108). Here,
the protagonist’s wife betrays her husband to help him succeed in his career: the husband’s rejection of his wife’s sacrifice results in her suicide. Accordingly, Insdorf also points out, ‘from this perspective, Truffaut seems to be establishing a context of male culpability to which his future heroines will address themselves’ (108). The tragic tone of film noir, which inevitably stages the absolute demise of the woman through punishment, becomes ironic in Baisers volés, as woman’s deceitfulness triumphs and man’s inadequacy experiences punishment.

The camera is in many ways complicit in the woman’s triumphant deceptions, as Antoine’s mother and Fabienne are often glamorised. ‘The camera lingers on the mother’s narcissistic gaze at her own reflection in the mirror’ (Holmes and Ingram, 1998: 117): she is at first introduced by way of a fixed shot of her sensuous legs, followed by a close-up of her face while she enjoys her vivaciousness in the mirror. Throughout the film, close-ups of her legs will recall the extra-conjugal pleasure with which she is associated; the opening sequence with the pin-up poster introduces women’s self-conscious power of seduction as an image which soon finds its living embodiment in her. Fabienne’s visit to Antoine’s room in Baisers volés is rendered through luminosity and smooth, tight close-ups embracing her figure and exalting her beauty, elegance and intelligence; like Madame Doinel, she takes charge of and defines her femininity through her own admiring gaze upon herself at the mirror. Primary beholder of the gaze upon themselves, Gilberte and Fabienne affirm their subjectivity and right to agency in the breaking of the marital law (see Fig. 3:4, in the following page).
In *L’Amour en fuite* the issue of female adultery is recalled when Antoine evokes the memory of his mother: her unexpected return highlights the attempt to resolve the concerns around her untrustworthiness as a mother and wife. Her lover Lucien describes her to Antoine as a frail woman who hated hypocrisy and compromise and who, after all, loved her son. If the last remark appears to contradict what was seen in *Les Quatre cents coups*, the first two recall Truffaut’s script’s notes, where he describes the mother as ‘presque anarchisante, terroriste en chambre, “hors de la société”’ and the father (Albert Rémy), by contrast, as ‘assez bien intégré’ (Truffaut 002B1). These remarks stand in important relation to the perception of infidelity. During a conversation about the unfair treatment of women in the workplace, Mr. Doinel shows awareness of the instances of sexual harassment many women in need of longer shifts may undergo – the price they pay to keep their job and earn a little bit more. Such details encapsulate a wide context of female labour in which adultery is tacitly accepted as a necessity. Yet his apparent sympathy
with such a reality is evidence of that ‘rather good integration’ that Truffaut described: Mr. Doniel accuses his wife of prostituting herself to her boss when she returns late, whilst accepting her contributions to the family funds made possible by her conduct. Truffaut’s last words about him on the script’s notes say ‘c’est un égoïste soucieux de sa seule tranquillité’ (Truffaut 002B1). In L’Amour en fuite the memories about the mother dismantle the purely contemptuous way her actions were framed, as indicated by her first name finally being acknowledged on the gravestone: Gilberte (see Fig. 3:5, below).

L’Amour en fuite (fig. 3:5)

In Les Quatre cents coups Antoine’s recurrent close-ups enhance the viewers’ sympathetic participation in his perspective; in L’Amour en fuite Gilberte’s recurrent close-ups whilst she is remembered grant her a more humane dimension and allow a new relationship to develop between her, Antoine, and the spectator. Gilberte is finally granted a complexity previously denied, as well as permanency through her name engraved on stone. Gilberte’s singular treatment at this point opens the
potential for further understanding of her infidelities through (adult) Antoine’s reflections on them.

The other major case of female adultery in the cycle occurs in *Baisers volés* when Antoine is seduced by the charming Madame Tabard. A prime exponent of female adultery, Fabienne Tabard is introduced by way of an alluring aural and visual technique, rendering her a prominent object of desire. Fabienne’s appearance is immersed in a dreamlike atmosphere: the melodic chant of sirens preceding her entrance accompanies the slow tracking shot leading hesitant Antoine towards the mysterious presence until the shot opens on her full figure in a pose emphasising her elegant outfit and the chic manners which mesmerize him (see *Fig. 3:6*, below).

*Baisers volés* (*Fig. 3:6*)

The following shot of her on a chair emphasises her gracefully entangled legs: unlike when he was with his mother, Antoine this time surrenders to this vision; the camera’s repetitive subjective shots confirm Antoine’s exclusive enjoyment (see *Fig. 3:7-8*, in the following page).
Fabienne asks Antoine to accomplish tasks, but in contrast to his mother she is considerate and thanks and greets him gently. He is the only consumer of this vision, which, at last for him, will not signify punishment, but enjoyment.

In *Les Quatre cents coups* the shot of Gilberte’s legs was interpreted as symbolic of a gaze external to the family unit, and thus emblematic of infidelity; the
shot of Fabienne’s legs, for Antoine’s consumption, refers, too, in the end, to infidelity, as their brief affair proves. Antoine’s perception of her as being ‘above such things’ as deceit and infidelity reveals the world of fiction around the subject of infidelity, and in particular the questions of gender with which the issue is loaded and by which Antoine’s imagination is therefore shaped. In this instance, female middle-class sophistication, elegance, grace and beauty must pair with strict moral codes, but infidelity escapes any novelistic and constructed truths about it, as already Antoine’s experiences as part of a working class family, in which conjugal faithlessness constituted the epicentre of pretence and dishonesty proved. The film’s narrative undermines Antoine’s naïve but popular association between gender, class and codes of behaviour and, to everyone’s dismay and wonder, sees Fabienne betray Antoine’s, her husband’s and the spectators’ expectations.

In the Doinel cycle infidelity lies, thus, within the realm of the quotidian, conveyed mostly in a low-key manner: as an everyday reality of and for the common man and woman, its protagonists intellectually and physically unexceptional, especially in comparison with the classic film stereotypes of infidelity where stardom often informs it with glamour and beauty. As in La Peau douce, but by way of different stylistic choices, Truffaut’s treatment of extramarital affairs demystifies the conventionally constructed aura of magic that surrounds the classic cinematic representation of infidelity. The episode involving Fabienne Tabard and Antoine is again paradigmatic: a woman of outstanding beauty actively pursues an extra-marital affair with a much younger man, who is rather immature and, by conventional cinematic standards, unglamorous. She dismantles Antoine’s romanticized constructs about women and affairs: her perfect appearance, she explains, is not effortless but the result of work and artifice. By extension, infidelity and the stereotypes about it,
which she comes to embody in this instance, are invested with the idea of the fictional. Correcting the ‘myopic nature of his desire’ (Holmes and Ingram, 1998: 128), she re-inscribes the circumstances of this affair with Antoine within the realm of the ordinary and the real, and, Insdorf observes, ‘with infinite grace, she establishes that they are not characters in a nineteenth-century novel but a man and a woman in a bedroom’ (Insdorf, 1994: 116) (see Fig. 3:9, below, where Antoine is passionately engrossed in a novel).

_Baisers volés_ (Fig. 3:9)

Antoine’s notion of exclusivity that separated magic women from infidelity is cast out once and for all: for good or bad, infidelity is no terrain of privilege of any sort. Rather, Fabienne is a serial adulteress and maintains only the façade of a respectable marriage. Truffaut worried that the actress Delphine Seyrig would not understand why Fabienne married someone like Mr. Tabard, but according to Seyrig ‘elle jouerait comme une femme qui est ravie d’avoir épousé cet homme-là’ (Gillain, 1988: 203). Indirectly, both Truffaut’s and Seyrig’s declarations imply a judgement
on Fabienne’s adulterous conduct, as Truffaut’s fear that Seyrig would not like Fabienne’s husband renders explicit Mr. Tabard’s inadequacy. Seyrig’s declaration insinuates a precise person’s typology: she leads a double life, skilfully played by avoiding the disruption of societal dicta, remaining in perfect accordance with them. Her confident position as subject rather than object of adultery is also noticeable when, in her husband’s shop, she speaks on the phone with Dick, a family friend, in English – the fact that her husband’s subsequent joke about his tryst with a married woman also invokes the English language will be discussed below (see Fig. 3:10, below).

Baisers volés (Fig. 3:10)

The tone of her voice, despite the neutral content of the conversation, betrays a degree of intimacy between them. This adds another thread to the web of concealed relationships amongst family friends, work colleagues and acquaintances, which underlies the cycle’s tone of pervading uncertainty.

With the cases outlined so far, the gendering of infidelity remains ambiguously conceived. On the one hand, it shows as second nature man’s supposed
ability to separate love from lust and run parallel relationships smoothly; on the other, the result of an ill-matched relationship which the Law – institutional and of-the-Father, but also directed by common sense – nevertheless prefers to keep together. Truffaut’s handling of infidelity highlights the discrepancies between the standardised outlook on it and more complex subtexts. His films argue against the oversimplification of discourses about infidelity: on the surface they reproduce such oversimplifications about infidelity, demonstrating how such oversimplifications affect gender relations, and reworking them to unveil their inadequacies. Wishing to make of Baisers volés a balanced film, half comedy, half sad, Truffaut realized that ‘en réalité j’arrivais à la fin à 80% de tristesse et 20% de comédie’ (in Gillain, 1988: 196). Despite the irony pervading the representation of some cases of infidelity, in Truffaut’s work infidelity emerges mostly as a troubling reality, as Truffaut affirmed, ‘je m’efforce en même temps de respecter le mouvement de la vie qui va quand même vers la mort. Donc, il y a toujours l’idée de cassure, de déchirure, de brisure…’ (in Gillain, 204-205). The spectators are invited to connect with Truffaut’s approach in line with life’s natural movements rather than with rigid and traditional schema.

This approach is applicable to the cycle’s most demonized and fundamental case of infidelity: Madame Doinel’s. She differs from her colleagues when it comes to infidelity, in that she is unable to smoothly reconcile her domestic role of wife and mother with her extra-marital life, visibly distant from her familial nucleus, both emotionally and physically.

In the only scene, which depicts her without the family in the open air, a high-angle shot over a large busy square in Paris conveys a mood of freedom which contrasts with her crammed claustrophobic apartment (see Fig. 3:11, next page).
Les Quatre cents coups (Fig. 3:11)

Without yet giving away their identity, the shot shows a couple embracing passionately: in the following mid-shot, the woman’s expression of happiness before Antoine, and the spectators, recognise her, is the only moment of suspension of judgement in the entire film.

Infidelity finds expression in spatial terms for her: the open air, the physical space, indeed a public space, where infidelity materializes openly declare Gilberte’s desire for independence and evasion from the confines of unwanted domesticity. Endorsing this is the only other scene which depicts Gilberte as thoroughly satisfied for once on her own in the apartment; right after having returned from the outside, the close-up of her in the mirror, with her reflection seemingly about to explode beyond the frame’s confines, highlights her contentment with the other life she leads outside the familial nucleus, the one she has probably just left before the dutiful return home. The use of the mirrored image reinforces the idea of another self, of another Gilberte besides the spatial captivity of the flat inhabited by the wife and mother she has to be. Insdorf remarks that ‘interiors are seen as enclosures of
loveless authority, conveyed by a relatively static camera’ (Insdorf, 1998: 152). Throughout the cycle each time Antoine is outside too, ‘exterior shots contain panning, tracking and the visual lightness that corresponds to the character’s mobility in the setting’ (Insdorf, 152).

Gilberte’s pursuit of infidelity in Les Quatre cents coups appears limited to one man only. The film’s denial of access to any further details of unfaithful conduct suggests the different nature of Gilberte’s betrayal when compared with Fabienne, Antoine and Mr. Darbon’s cases. Their infidelities are accompanied by the visual rendering of the defined spaces where they consummate their adulterous acts and of their partners, and with dialogues explicative of their actions; furthermore, the scenes with Fabienne, Antoine and Mr. Darbon (Daniel Ceccaldi) are ironically humorous. Gilberte’s unfaithfulness is indirectly informed by her irritable moods, her late returns at night, her Sundays spent with a supposed girl friend. Gilberte’s infidelity strongly emerges as invested with more than a mere narrative of sexual and sentimental diversion and becomes a signifier of a more pervasive anti-establishment standpoint.

In contrast to all the other instances of infidelity which get forgotten, Gilberte’s proves its significance by re-emerging from the grave in L’Amour en fuite. After two decades of repression of his memories of her, Antoine delves into a final intense confrontation with his mother. When Antoine remembers her as a woman with several lovers, the discrepancy between what was shown in Les Quatre cents coups and Antoine’s perception of her now calls for further scrutiny.

This episode in fact enacts the dynamics of the second stage in Freud’s theory about family romance: as a consequence of the infant’s realization of his mother’s and father’s roles in their sexual relations, the child, now entered into the
sexual stage, ‘tends to picture himself in erotic situations and relations, the motive force behind this being the desire to bring his mother (who is the subject of the most intense sexual curiosity) into situations of secret infidelity and into secret love-affairs’ (Freud 1905, 1991: 223). The child, according to Freud, ‘often has no hesitation in attributing to his mother as many fictitious love-affairs as he himself has competitors’ (Freud, 224). As it happens, the pictures Antoine has of Gilberte’s supposed many lovers all show the same man, Lucien (see Fig. 3:12, below).

L’Amour en fuite (Fig. 3:12)

A potential case of family romance displacement, this episode should be considered not only for what it reveals about Antoine, but also for what it tells us about his mother’s trajectory of infidelity: he is wrong to ascribe many lovers to her, as she was in fact faithful in her infidelity. The statement about his mother’s multiple lovers reiterates the impact her conduct had on him; yet the remembrance scene is imbued within an atmosphere of serenity, as Antoine’s face breaks into a smile when the dream-memory eventually fades. In form and substance, her unfaithfulness is neither denied nor excused; at the same time it is not ultimately judged or condemned, and, as Gillain affirms, there is an attempt to ‘restaurer avec (la mère) une situation
d’échange et de compréhension’ (Gillain, 1991: 22). In this last detail one distinct interpretation of Truffaut’s presentation of Gilberte remains: his films create an open space in which the most controversial characters are exposed to scrutiny, but which also allows or encourages an empathetic reaction.

The presentation of female adultery in the cycle also poses questions regarding the husbands of the unfaithful women. Antoine’s stepfather’s role appears as solely institutional: by marrying a single mother he has amended an otherwise socially condemned trajectory; yet, he cannot amend his wife’s extra-marital sexual freedom. Mr Doinel’s metaphoric emasculation is reinforced by three factors: the wife’s neglect of his authority, the lack of his own children and the cowardly acceptance of his wife’s whims. His wife’s scorning of marital duties exemplifies her perception of him as a weak embodiment of society’s imperatives; perceived as a forceful mending of the abject, such marriage vows are merely the premises for the occurrence of infidelity. The stepfather’s final loss of masculinity is allegorized in his agreement to hand Antoine over to the police and, consequently, to abandon him to a reformatory; apparently liberating his marriage from this supposedly destabilising threat, he deprives himself of the only opportunity to establish his value as a man in a way otherwise denied him: through fathering.

The Tabard’s family nucleus does not have offspring, so that Mr. Tabard (Michael Lonsdale), like Antoine’s stepfather, does not have his own children; by coincidence, the lack of biological paternity appears concomitantly with the threat to a man’s masculinity, his partner’s sexual freedom. The idea of traditionally conceived male power is shaken from its foundations: the absence of biological and legitimate paternity weakens the male power structure becoming symbolic of the two men’s spiritual sterility. Not accidentally, it seems, the judge who oversees Antoine
and Christine’s groundbreaking consensual divorce is a woman. A woman is, in this case, invested with an authority with arguably beneficial connotations.

In the cycle the representation of female infidelity paints a portrait of the betrayed husbands, Antoine’s step-father, the husband in the hotel and Mr. Tabard, through different tones: dramatic, scornful and tragicomic. Each tone conveys the significance of the treatment of infidelity in relation to these men. Whilst it would be generally natural to sympathize with the victim of adultery, the setting-up of the hotel episode makes for ambiguity about whom, within the couple, to feel sympathy for. Through an actor whose physical appearance is made ordinary and unappealing, the husband is depicted as a caricature (see Fig. 3:13, below).

_Baisers volés_ (Fig. 3:13)

The way he carries himself shows his inability to handle the situation; he ridicules himself by responding mechanically to the detective’s instructions to shout and vandalize the room so as to prove his virility (see _Fig. 3:14_, in the following page). Such details impart a tragicomic quality to this betrayed man, at whose condition one ends up looking with mere derision.
The depiction of shoe shop owner Mr. Tabard is similarly critical. Oblivious to his wife’s extra-marital lifestyle, he seeks help from a detective agency to find out why everybody hates him. By defining himself as a man who fortunately does not need friends since if he did he would not find any, he provides an insight into his marital relationship: his wife’s adulterous conduct is weighted according to her husband’s odd traits. The irony is carried over into a dynamic of Lacanian mirrors. At breakfast with the Tabards, Antoine listens to Mr. Tabard proudly recounting how he learned English by sleeping with an Australian woman while her husband was at work. As previously noted, infidelity becomes entangled with the learning of a language, conferring on it the status of a language system to be acquired. Prior to this, when Mr. Tabard and Antoine enter the flat, the camera, positioned from the inside of the living-room, frames their individual reflections in the mirror by the entrance (see Fig. 3:15-16, in the following page).
Antoine and Mr. Tabard’s reflections follow one after the other and are briefly both captured together within the mirror’s frame. Like a surrogate father, Tabard unknowingly teaches Antoine the Law-of-the-Father, one that will joyfully fulfil the son’s desire to accomplish the Freudian oedipal trajectory. Antoine, surrogate son,
will obey, for once, the teachings of the authority, and actively enter the language of infidelity with the (m)other Fabienne, Tabard’s own wife. Considering the oedipal family triangle as the site of the original infidelity, Mr. Tabard successfully can claim to have put the Law-of-the-Father in place (see Fig. 3:17-18, below, where Fabienne Tabard seals the agreement to spend a few hours with Antoine and he happily accepts the deal offered).

*Baisers volés* (Fig. 3: 17-18)
The formality and mannerisms between husband and wife, together with the wife’s discreet yet palpable contempt for her husband’s vulgar anecdotes, point to their intellectual and emotional distance. Mr. Tabard’s talk with the head of a detective agency he asks to monitor his wife further elucidates the state of their relationship: he would like them to investigate why people dislike him so much, including his wife, who cannot stand him. Evidence for the failure of a marriage is thoroughly exposed, hence, preparing the terrain for the normality of her adultery(ies).

Fluctuating between tragicomic and humoristic instances, Antoine’s stepfather’s situation is more complex. Formally, he is a responsible husband and father, punctually attending to the family commitments and playing cheerfully with his wife and her son. Apparently servile and reliable, he occasionally loses his temper at his wife’s odd absences from home. Emphasising that he provides for her and Antoine, hence implying that he rescued her from the margins of society as a single parent and from the potentially negative stigma this means for a woman, his demand for her subservience suggests that their relationship is founded upon her gratitude. Furthermore, unquestioningly following her unjust treatment of Antoine, he fails to exert his fatherly commitment. These details put the value of his human qualities into question and bring to light the ambivalent feelings of a man who is confident of his rights as a husband for the wrong reasons. Finding himself in a complicated situation between his wife, a supposedly notorious woman, and Antoine, the notorious fruit of an overly independent sexuality, Mr. Doinel is less a genuinely committed husband and father than he is a shifty officer of the patriarchal order in the guise of anti-conformism.

With the details the scrutiny of infidelity has so far brought to light, each case of female adultery is seen to carry different implications for the individuals involved.
In *Les Quatre cents coups* Gilberte’s uninspiring marriage creates a sequence of effects which incur negative outcomes for the entire family and, instead of making her home life more bearable, her affair makes her detest it even more. Gilberte’s barely-contained resentment at her circumstances questions a system where people can live in deceit as long as it is kept silent; her rebellious attitude functions as a provocation against the hypocrisy of public morals. The posthumous acknowledgement of her twenty-year relationship with Lucien – from being just a stranger Lucien is now granted existence and right to voice his presence in the life of the Doinels – suggests that theirs was not just a trivial adventure. So, even if Gilberte’s dysfunctional marriage allows her to experience glimpses of happiness through secretive outings, this contained freedom reinforces the bitterness of her condition, in decades when divorce is still forbidden. The occasional glimpses of a more desirable condition reinforce the punishment for the infidelity committed once back in the obligatory space of the law.

The *Doinel cycle* traces momentous steps in the development of the divorce law, as it will be seen in *Domicile conjugal* and *L’Amour en fuite*. Already in *Baisers volés* the case of the woman discovered with her lover in the hotel suggests another interpretation of infidelity: her mocking attitude highlights that the husband’s threat to file for divorce is exactly what she wanted in order to be free from him. The film exposes at length the subterfuges to which both members of the couple have recourse in order to obtain rights to a separation. This episode is indeed inscribed within the narrative concerning a detective agency where customers hire detectives so to investigate extra-marital affairs, a fact that highlights the prominence of infidelity, real or suspected, as a common social practice both within and outside the world of the film. Hence, the legal marital system appears as a hypocritical system of
coercion: the theatrical uncovering of the adulteress is a farce in which the police – the sole custodians of the power to report or prosecute the event – also act as the official witness to it, so to enable the hurt party to file for divorce. Grotesque and ignorant of the dignity of the two parties, this process ridicules them through a humiliating public exposure. Nevertheless, this shows a changed historical context where divorce becomes a possibility, even if still a tortuous one, for liberating, rather than complicating, a wrong or unwanted union.

Fabienne Tabard’s unfaithful conduct goes unnoticed by her husband; her infidelities do not fall upon anyone but herself. Her circumstances introduce the issue of the regulation of woman’s moral trustworthiness in relation to man’s conferring of his surname onto his wife’s offspring. Referring to Lacan’s idea of the Name-of-the-Father, Jane Gallop says that

the legal assignation of a Father’s Name to a child is meant to call a halt to uncertainty about the identity of the father. If the mother’s femininity (both her sexuality and her untrustworthiness) were affirmed, the Name-of-the-Father would always be in doubt, always subject to the question of the mother’s morality. Thus the Name-of-the-Father must be arbitrarily and absolutely imposed, thereby instituting the reign of patriarchal law (Gallop, 1982: 39).

Antoine, Colette and Christine are half-adopted children, whose adoptive stepfathers have formally corrected their mothers’ morally uncertain paths. Without offspring, the Tabards will not pass their name onto anyone, and the wife’s sexuality and untrustworthiness have free reign: here not even a child can serve the purpose of signifier for the husband’s authority. The portrayal of her adulteries is imbued with a non-judgemental quality, and the spectators watch the glamorous Fabienne come and go in her adulterous affairs without any urge to seek justification for her actions.

Fabienne’s annihilation of patriarchal authority recalls the figure of the cuckold who ‘is unable to take action in defence of his damaged honour […] this ex
post facto incapacity is at least as important as the original “weakness” which is presumed to have given rise to infidelity’ (Sinclair, 1993:35). Cuckoldry implies not just ‘a mere breach of marital fidelity, but a total reduction in the respectability and self-worth of the man thus deceived’ (Sinclair, 36). The circumstances under which Truffaut’s three betrayed husbands appear hence elicit a critical attitude towards their emotional and intellectual lethargy. While Mr. Tabard’s narrative thread is presented as such that he welcomes one of her lovers, Antoine, into his house, and enjoys outings with another, Dick, thus inscribing the figure of the husband in the most traditional and untroubled tale of blissful cuckoldry, Mr. Doinel’s narrative thread presents deeper connotations. Sinclair remarks that cuckoldry ‘does not signal the end of the marriage’ but rather ‘the man, the father, who allows this position to occur, who tolerates it, and provides for what is not his’ (Sinclair, 36-37). Mr. Doinel looks after the son of someone else’s virile virtuosity on his behalf while waiting for his spouse to return home from suspicious outings: unable to act upon the knowledge of his wife’s betrayal, he embodies the archetypal figure of the perennial cuckold. He significantly remains nameless throughout the cycle and is defined only in relation to his notorious wife, as Gilberte’s husband, and to someone else’s son, as Antoine’s stepfather – as seen earlier, even his wife’s lover eventually acquires the right to a name. A gender role reversal manifests itself in the loss of identity that befalls Mr. Doinel. Amongst many issues, feminist discourse lamented the loss of identity a woman experienced by being defined as either someone’s wife or someone’s daughter; with Mr. Doinel, male subjectivity becomes defined through that same dynamic. The sense of integration that, according to Truffaut, characterised Mr. Doinel, shows in the passive acceptance of his wife’s betrayal, which allows the double standard concerning the ideal of the family to be perpetuated, just like the
society that has produced it wishes it to be: without any disruption either of the family unit, at least on the surface, or of the institutions which are tacitly behind this stance.

In contrast to the vast range of infidelities at play throughout the cycle, Gilberte’s affair with Lucien is shown to have outlived her unsatisfactory marriage and to have lasted until her death. Gilberte’s adulterous relationship may be considered from a different perspective than might be initially assumed. The number of enquiries that keep the investigation agency busy in Baisers volés is indicative of the highly emotional investment that infidelity generates; the exclusively male set of customers at the agency underlines the obsession with female infidelity; the fear of infidelity suggests an awareness of the lack of control over the transience of human sentiments. Truffaut’s use of real-life detective agency material confounds the usual sense of distance between on- and off-screen; the shiftiness of his tone when it comes to the portrayal of infidelity and the extent to which he seems to absolve some of the unfaithful women of blame diminishes the distance between screen and life. The audience’s exclusive partnership in the observation of infidelity with Antoine, who is witness of so many adulteries – as a son, as a hotel night watchman and as a lover – constantly reminds them of a custom universally accepted: they watch adultery unfolding on screen from their position of safety, accepting it as a natural event in the course of marital life on and off the screen. This indolent attitude towards infidelity is what Truffaut was interested in shaking, emotionally and intellectually, as already seen with La Peau douce, also in his later films. The tacit acceptance of infidelity as a practice of social integration justifies the hotel owner’s anger at Antoine in Baisers volés: by facilitating the detective and the betrayed husband’s uncovering of the adulteress’ deed he failed to recognise and be complicit.
with it. Antoine fails to integrate with societal norms: once more, adultery fails him and punishes him as he loses his job. The level of integration that society at large conforms to and that Antoine’s naivety yet does not understand appears in the way adultery is part of society’s professional texture.

Given the wide range of tonal qualities perceptible in the instances of female infidelity, it is clear that as a long-term concern of Truffaut’s, this issue was one that he presented from a range of different angles, as the cycle emerges as an engaged comment on the real texture of real life society while at the same time being the source of genuine amusement and comedy. My chapter has demonstrated that in Truffaut’s cycle women’s infidelity highlights a trajectory of change in respect to the classic gender bias within French film and culture. On the one hand it seemingly maintains a degree of similarity with the conventional literary narrative treatment of it: in the tradition of the classic comedy, it presents the archetypal lighthearted tale of cuckoldry. Furthermore, in the tradition of the dramatic genre of female adultery, it presents the culpability of the betrayer in both roles of wife and mother. However, the degree of similarity is arguably only superficial. Traditionally, female infidelity is granted a weight in relation to the fixed codes of morality as conceived, seen and eventually judged from a male perspective. In Truffaut’s representation of women’s infidelity the emphasis is on their infidelity as acts of rebellion against that very male-tailored perception of common morality that prescribes an a priori idea of womanhood and respectability.

Women emerge less as fixed beings/characters/actresses of a predetermined role than nuanced, rich, affirmations of their différence – from one other and from men. This analysis of infidelity and femininity takes on further facets when contextualised within the family unit. In relation to this, the next chapters will
consider *Les Quatre cents coups*, in generic terms the only film of the cycle framed as a drama, as a case study of infidelity in relation to Truffaut’s key concerns for children and their welfare. Extending the discussion of the character of the adulteress mother, this chapter will also look closely at the character of the father – and thus on the notion of fathering – thereby placing the analysis within the framework of the effects that infidelity has on the family unit as a whole. As Antoine is an illegitimate child, the analysis of infidelity here also opens onto the subject of illegitimacy and the related subject of stepfatherhood.
4. Chapter Four: Les Quatre cents coups and Children

Having discussed in the previous chapter the adulterous conduct of the female heroines, the ensuing chapter takes as its point of analysis Les Quatre cents coups, the cycle’s foundational case study of Truffaut’s scrutiny of infidelity. Adultery in this case occurs in relation to the concept of family, and the impact on the child, Antoine, is a central motif in the film – a motif that poignantly resonates throughout the entire subsequent cycle. By means of close analysis, this chapter will look at how infidelity permeates the everyday environment of the Doinel family and at how a language of infidelity is more broadly coded and integrated within the common cultural assumptions of French society of the time. Whilst often discussions of Antoine Doinel’s mother’s conduct have been predominant in the analysis of Les Quatre cents coups, this chapter aims not only to offer further investigation of her unfaithful behaviour towards the family and Antoine, but also to examine the father’s fundamental importance in the dysfunctional dynamics of the family nucleus, which was informed by and passively feeding into the phenomenon of infidelity.

This emphasis placed on the family in Truffaut’s approach to the theme of infidelity within Les Quatre cents coups has been acknowledged by the filmmaker himself. ‘Un produit banal dont le dosage est original [...] Ce qui me plaît […] dans Les Quatre cents coups, d’avoir donné vraiment la première place aux enfants’ (Truffaut, in Gillain, 1988: 105). Furthermore, his statement places children, in particular, at centre-stage within marriage, thereby inevitably invoking the question of parenting. Les Quatre cents coups plunges us in media res into the intimate milieu of a working class family in the Paris of the late 1950s. The film’s focus on the
child’s perspective is achieved through the main protagonist Antoine Doinel: *Les Quatre cents coups* thereby elicits an analysis of the parents’ infidelity through the perspective of the child. Infidelity’s wider impacts on the offspring within a family is addressed, as the film explores Antoine’s experience of his parents’ infidelity. In this film, as adultery enters the family through the mother, the relationship between her and Antoine is of particular significance; in this context, female infidelity is thus considered in relation to the role of mothering. Furthermore, given that Antoine is an illegitimate child, a further layer of complexity is introduced to the theme of parenting. His stepfather is invested with substantial importance in the handling of his fathering role within the framework of his wife’s infidelity. Adding to these dynamics, the socio-cultural context within which the film was produced must not be ignored since the film’s subject of infidelity bears a direct connection to the project of French divorce legislation. In particular, it relates to the laws, which had effects on all members of the family. This is a matter that would subsequently be reiterated in Truffaut’s later Doinel films, and particularly in *L’Amour en fuite*. However, despite the recurrence of certain themes, this chapter particular focus is on *Les Quatre cents coups* in isolation in order to explore Truffaut’s presentation of the impact of infidelity on children. The consideration of the way that these issues develop over the course of the cycle as a whole will be developed in later chapters.

Soon after the opening sequences in Antoine’s school, the Doinels are at the dinner table; the camera frames the three of them separately, stressing the family’s fragmentation and signalling a level of dysfunction. The ensuing argument between the parents about the wife’s refusal to spend Sunday with her husband and determination instead to stay with a girl friend prompts the stepfather to hint at the inappropriateness of her meetings. At this point, the mother sends Antoine to bed,
but reminding him to empty the rubbish bin, crystallizing the underlying tensions in the husband-and-wife and parents-and-son relationships (see Fig. 4:1, below).

*Les Quatre cents coups* (Fig. 4:1)

The film primarily scrutinizes the complex question of fatherhood and motherhood, identifying where adultery fits into that specific narrative as a complicating factor. According to Holmes and Ingram, Madame Doinel ‘is the archetypal “bad mother” […] only a reading against the grain – one that would explicitly ignore the film’s own signifying mechanism’ could make relevant factors such as ‘the context of poverty, the illegality of contraception and abortion and the stigma of unmarried motherhood in post-war France’ (Holmes and Ingram, 1998: 117). By underlining the absence of the mother and condemning her as a type from the broader gender-biased literature on neglectful mothers, a substantial part of the film’s significance may go unnoticed; thus, further scrutiny of the mother and the relevant conceptions of women and infidelity may help seeing her and such related conceptions from wider perspectives. Guérif remarks, ‘bien qu’il n’ait pas eu envie de faire un film contre la société, Truffaut, en prenant le parti de l’enfant, la remet en question à travers les institutions sacro-saintes de la famille et de l’école’ (Guérif,
The factors Holmes and Ingram mention cannot wholly account for the mother’s lack of maternal feelings; at the same time they are complexly embroiled in the Doinels’ narrative of adultery, which is in its turn entangled with the paternal figure and, as such, with the notions of authority and institutional power.

In a postscript to his reply to an American correspondent in 1979, Truffaut said, ‘can you tell me if Mark Twain is the author of this quotation? – Any Frenchman is lucky who knows who his father is’ (in Le Berre, 2005: 24). Writing about Truffaut’s filmmaking outside of the *Doinel cycle*, David Nicholls pertinently notices Truffaut’s recurrent concern with one’s origins: ‘in *L’Histoire d’Adèle H.* (1975) the heroine murmurs obsessively, ‘I was born of an unknown father’, and in *L’Homme qui aimait les femmes* (1977) [...] the father is absent from the hero’s childhood memories, there is only his mother with her dozens of lovers’ (Nicholls, 1993: 14). *L’Enfant sauvage* (1970) and *L’Argent de poche* (1976) confirm the preoccupation with parenting and children’s welfare. Moreover, in line with the cycle’s trajectory to redress an early imbalance in the gendering of infidelities, Truffaut’s opus observes men/fathers and women/mothers on an even terrain of critique. In *Les Quatre cents coups* two moments at school epitomize this fundamental issue: the English teacher makes the pupils learn English by making them repeat ‘where is the father?’; Antoine justifies his previous day’s absence by lying about his mother when he says ‘…elle est morte!’ (see Fig. 4:2, in the following page).
The explosion of anger mixed with a tone of revenge directed at his teacher (Guy Decomble) conveys the child’s eventually uncontainable disappointment at the cluster of male authority by which he is surrounded. The death of the mother accentuates the responsibility of paternity, calling into question the achievements of the role as father.

Antoine’s mother’s failure to fulfil her role as mother is the film’s central locus of blame, and his stepfather, seemingly a positive and sympathetic figure, is arguably inadequate too: demanding respect in that he is the provider for an illegitimate child, his feelings towards Antoine slowly reveal themselves as ambivalent. Antoine’s false construction of his mother’s death speaks volumes about her failings as a mother; furthermore it is linked to her adulterous conduct: Antoine’s declaration follows his witnessing of her in the arms of a stranger. The order of events suggests that making her adultery a spectacle for Antoine’s eyes is as much a problem in their relationship as the adultery itself. The question ‘where is the
father?’ confronts three issues: the uncertainty over fathers’ identities, the rejection of parental responsibility for the offspring, and the inadequacy in the fathering role. These issues are relevant for Antoine as Mr. Doinel’s paternal incompetence leaves him without a genuinely supportive father figure. Additionally, the absence of the father(s) and the death of the mother performed within the school grounds put the school’s surrogate parenting role also under scrutiny: here none of the male figures prove helpful towards Antoine; later on, the male figures of authority will lock Antoine into a juvenile prison. It is a male cluster with its unremitting application of authority that betrays and condemns this son of illegitimacy; this detail will prove important in the assessment of the cases of adultery in this and the later films.

The physical encounter with his mother’s lover brings to the fore once and for all the realisation that he is not the recipient of her love. In the mother-son love relationship, Antoine violently apprehends the Law-of-the-Father by acquiring consciousness of his status as a betrayed child, not symbolically through the mother’s union with the father, but instead, both literally and unusually, with another man (see Fig. 4:3, below).

*Les Quatre cents coups* (Fig. 4:3)
The *Doinel cycle* occupies a humanist position of independence from pre-established moralities, laic or religious. The mother’s married status raises issues of morality, but in Truffaut one senses that a morality of feelings takes priority over social conventions. The abrupt editing of the encounter between Antoine and his mother with her lover conveys an emotional shock, more because it is experienced by the woman’s son and less because of the breaking of the marital vow. Once Antoine and the mother recognise each other, the camera rapidly cuts twice back and forth, conveying a sense of rupture, of halt in the progress of their actions. The shaken expressions on their faces communicates how Antoine’s and his mother’s happiness are visibly adulterated (see Fig. 4:4, below).

*Les Quatre cents coups* (Fig. 4:4)

The staging of mother and son’s surprise points to two possible reasons which remain ambivalently unarticulated: she fears Antoine will tell her husband or she is upset this encounter might hurt his sensitivity; the son is hurt by having witnessed such sight or he fears her punishment as he has missed school. Furthermore, René
says ‘qu'est-ce que tu vas en prendre ce soir!’ briefly confusing Antoine’s circumstances of guilt: he is surely guilty of missing school, but at this point, René’s comment unknowingly predicts Antoine’s fate. Truffaut’s arrangement of the events and the tone he embeds in them directs the emphasis to the impact that adultery has on offspring. This is emphasised by the either comical or carefree light in which other instances of adultery are shown, such as the hotel and the Tabard episodes in Baisers volés discussed in the preceding chapter, both of which are devoid of children.

In Les Quatre cents coups only Antoine has direct access to the main instances of infidelity: with him the spectators are in this controversially and uncomfortably privileged position of knowledge and set out on a journey to critically observe the significance of these infidelities. Now a spectator of his mother’s adultery, Antoine is forced into a role reversal with his stepfather becoming the bearer of this truth on his behalf. In the next sequence, in which Mr. Doinel cooks with Antoine, Antoine’s performance reveals his mastery over his father in handling the reality of adultery. Although Antoine’s silence over his mother’s lover is partly a consequence of his guilt over his missed school day, his conduct goes beyond mere fear. Cautiously asking ‘où est maman… elle est partie?’, Antoine candidly sees his mother’s absence as a natural outcome of what he saw, hence envisioning separation from both of them as the outcome of infidelity. Antoine’s nervous touching of his head at his step-father’s reassurance that she is at work reveals his embarrassment about his father’s ignorance and his own need at that moment not to reveal the information he is privy to (see Fig. 5:5, in the following page).
Les Quatre cents coups (Fig. 4:5)

The truth about the mother that Antoine has to bear is inscribed in the realm of transgression, just like that of his absence from school. Mother and son misbehave, or, font les quatre cents coups, to quote the film’s title; on an emotional level mother and son become mutually bound through adultery.

As Les Quatre cents coups looks at infidelity principally from the position of the child, the adulterer and the betrayed husband are the objects of scrutiny primarily in relation to their attitude towards Antoine; their attitude epitomizes the angle from which Truffaut directs his, and our, critical eye on infidelity. The film’s early sequences portray the predicament of Antoine’s involvement within the complex web of actions and reactions to infidelity from all the figures of authority around him. Giorgio Tinazzi points out that ‘I quattrocento colpi si apre con la descrizione di una violazione’ 3 (Tinazzi, 2004: 25). The opening shot of the film’s second sequence depicts the furtive passing-around of a postcard with a pin-up model with

3 ‘The 400 Blows opens with the description of a violation’.
long sinuous legs. Antoine, oblivious, de-sexualizes the image by instead concentrating on adding a moustache (see Fig. 4:6-7, below).

Caught by the teacher, he is punished because of the improper postcard. The circulation of the image is, as Tinazzi affirms, ‘la prima di una serie di trasgressioni’(25). Carole Le Berre remarks that ‘Antoine’s crime is linked to femininity, to transgression and to writing’ (Le Berre, 2005: 26). The course of
desire initiated by someone else is interrupted with Antoine, who pays for somebody else’s inappropriate behaviour, just as he does for his mother’s. There is a link between this schoolboy prank and the following sequence, which takes place in the Doinel family’s flat and which reinforces the symbolism attached to the legs – his mother’s this time – as signifiers of transgression and its threatening consequences for Antoine.

Discussing Truffaut’s depiction of the young boys’ sexual awakenings in *Les Mistons* and *Les Quatre cents coups*, Insdorf maintains that Antoine Doinel ‘is fascinated by [his mother’s] legs as she removes her stockings’ (Insdorf, 1998: 15). Yet another reading might also work here: when the mother sits on the sofa the camera faces her from inside the living-room, while Antoine is at the left-hand side corner (see *Fig. 4:8*, below).

*Les Quatre cents coups* (Fig. 4:8)

The camera remains fixed on her, centreframe, while Antoine moves out and in again without looking at her; the camera’s gaze is dissociated from Antoine’s – a detail that significantly returns in a later sequence. The following sequence suggests
an answer when, after having abruptly told off Antoine and sent him to the grocer, an unexpected affirmation of her awakened femininity (see Fig. 4:9, below). The later appearance of her lover clarifies that in the previous shot, the mysterious onlooker’s gaze symbolizes the presence of an intrusion, that of infidelity within the family.

Les Quatre cents coups (Fig. 4:9)

The pin-up’s and the mother’s legs, despite both being ignored by Antoine, are assimilated into the notion of punishment and un-attainability for him, whilst they represent pleasure and attainability for others. Antoine is caught within a web of desire and transgressions for which he is never primarily responsible, becoming the receiver of punishments for others’ transgressive initiatives.

Another sequence to address infidelity by way of the clashes it implies in the relationships within the family occurs when Madame Doinel returns home late on the same day that Antoine saw her with the lover. Antoine is in bed and sees her walking in and stepping over his bed. The camera positioning indicates how infidelity imposes itself on Antoine ceaselessly: when she enters the hall the camera at the height of her legs puts them once more centre stage, while Antoine’s bed is on the
right hand side corner; once more, this positioning opens to not only Antoine’s viewpoint (see Fig. 4:10, below).

Les Quatre cents coups (Fig. 4:10)

Her boss’s car, it will be soon learnt, was heard a few seconds before she entered. With this knowledge the shot’s central gaze, positioned next to Antoine’s, acquires the metaphorical value of an agency outside the familial nucleus that secretly benefits from the spectacle of Madame Doinel positioning Antoine alongside her husband. Such a gaze also coincides with the spectators’ who objectively witness adultery’s primary consequence, as his mother literally walks over Antoine. For the mother, as Truffaut specified in the script’s notes, ‘Antoine n’a pas été “voulu”; il a représenté pratiquement un accident dans sa vie; on peut penser que sans sa venue au monde, elle se serait mieux mariée…’ (Truffaut 002B1), or perhaps never. Antoine, whose body appears suffocated within the frame, is sacrificed in adultery.

In the living room, Mr. Doinel confronts her about her late returns, but only indirectly hinting at the suspicion of infidelity. The cut to Antoine overhearing their
argument from which he learns about the unconventional circumstances of his birth finalizes his belonging to the realm of transgression; the argument's shifting from the mother’s late return onto Antoine bonds them again through the illicit. Antoine’s birth out of wedlock functions figuratively as a reminder of his mother’s potential for promiscuity, and hence for marital infidelity. Antoine personifies the stepfather’s repressed anxieties about his wife’s threatening sexuality, turning him into an ideal receptacle for the parents’ discontent. In *Les Quatre cents coups* no one is happy, yet positive premises are potentially there, as the sequence with mother, father and son at the cinema shows. Truffaut said ‘la scène que j’aime le mieux, c’est celle du retour du Gaumont-Palace parce qu’elle est normale: tout à coup, ils s’entendent bien avec l’enfant’ (in Gillain, 1988: 102). During the return home a long shot depicts Antoine holding hands with his mother and arm in arm with his father outside the cinema suggesting, like Truffaut said, ‘ce sont des gens au fond très normaux’ (in Gillain, 102) (see Fig. 4:11, below).

*Les Quatre cents coups* (Fig. 4:11)
Inside the car the medium shot of the family shows their joy, particularly Antoine’s, so that, for the time being, the ghost of adultery and the scar it has imprinted on him are totally obscured (see Fig. 4:12, below).

Les Quatre cents coups (Fig. 4:12)

The cinema, often hosting theatre of illicit desire through narratives of infidelity, becomes an oasis for the family to experience moments of candour. The following scene on the flat’s staircase sustains the same spirit: jokingly grabbing his wife’s legs, the stepfather offers to share their beauty with the son, who enthusiastically participates in this symbolic union between them through, for once, the mother’s availability to them, rather than to somebody else (see Fig 4:13, in the following page).
The mother’s legs no longer signify transgression, punishment and adultery; instead they are safely contained within the frame of the family nucleus. This shot conveys the exclusivity of this brief moment of legitimate and regained happiness, where the shadow of adultery is momentarily lifted. The scenes which, in different ways, emphasise the mother’s legs – this and the two previously discussed – highlight how they symbolise her relationship with both father-figure and son and thus, the family’s dysfunction through infidelity.

Bearing the consequences of his parents’ adulterated relationship, Antoine is the dustbin into which his parents’ subterfuges, compromises and frustrations are emptied daily, as the repetition of the dustbin duty assigned to him by them suggests. In spite of the undeniable bond between Antoine’s childish escapades or 400 coups, and his mother’s 400 coups, her sexual escapades, adultery signifies the distance between the mother and Antoine. For her, who saw her youth ended by the accidental conception of a child, Antoine represents the downfall in her life. Her rejection of him is nevertheless astonishing, and yet, Guérif points out, ‘elle est la...
personne la plus intéressante du couple, et Antoine songera à elle avec sérénité à la fin de *L'Amour en fuite*, alors qu’il ne fera jamais allusion à son beau-père’ (Guérif, 2003: 29). Eventually, the Doinels abandon their child. Taking on the sins of others, Antoine suffers the consequences of his parents’ inability to handle their individual forms of anguish. Mr. Doinel deludes himself that, freed from Antoine, his wife’s distress will disappear, rendering her a loving wife. Instead, without Antoine, she has more time for herself and her affair. The freeze frame of Antoine’s questioning expression which ends *Les Quatre cents coups*, the child looking straight into the spectators’ consciousness, motives a critical questioning of his personal history within the perpetuation of the relational dynamics of his family nucleus (see *Fig. 4:14*, below).


In *L’Amour en fuite* another freeze frame, this time on Antoine’s mother, pulls the spectators into this question which has left indelible marks on her and her son. Although, as suggested above, the film with which Truffaut’s cycle ends does answer the opening film to a certain extent, showing the mature Antoine able to re-evaluate his mother’s actions, it nonetheless refuses to come to a simplistically
moralizing resolution. The final film in Truffaut’s cycle encourages a discussion of infidelity which prolongs, rather than closes, the scrutiny of the popular beliefs that sustain it.

The issues so far discussed about the relationship between offspring and infidelity return in different forms in the cycle’s other episodes, as in the ensuing parallels between *Les Quatre cents coups* and the following films. Antoine’s constant presence in *Les Quatre cents coups* means that infidelity is regarded through his perception, depriving infidelity’s direct protagonists of the expected centrality in the narration, and thus the film’s audience too is deprived of a focus on the traditional adult experiences – both of enticement and of censure – of infidelity which they might expect. Childhood as marked by infidelity is similarly echoed in the final episode of the *Doinel cycle* through a case of infanticide where a husband, avenging his wife’s infidelity, has killed their son. If, biblically, the scapegoat is eventually set free in the wild – an image that recalls Antoine running away freely on the beach, alive yet completely left to himself, at the end of *Les Quatre cents coups* – in the conclusive film of the cycle Truffaut chooses to remind us again of infidelity’s potentially destructive power: to murder an innocent in its name, making of the child its sacrificial victim. In *L’Amour en fuite* Antoine’s re-elaboration of his past, his unsettled relationship with Sabine and Colette’s tempestuous relationship with Xavier (Daniel Mesguich), are interspersed with fragments of the infanticide case which intermittently disrupts the film’s main narrative threads and the supposedly carefree tone with which they are imbued. Despite having no direct connection with the main storyline, these dramatic occurrences interact with Antoine’s coming to terms with his mother’s adulterous affairs and their effects on him; they also interact with the phantom of infidelity looming over Antoine’s relationship with Sabine;
finally, they interact with Colette’s boyfriend’s jealousy and uncertainty about her past infidelities. The infanticide appears to comment on and counterbalance Antoine’s and Colette’s light-hearted conception of affairs. Antoine has a child; Colette had one who died in an accident. A sense of impending danger concerning children establishes a link with Antoine’s difficult childhood as a consequence of selfish and incompetent parents. Colette rescues a child about to open the train door while on the run; Antoine himself put his child on a train a little earlier and Alphonse strikingly looks like an older version of the rescued boy. The infanticide and attempted suicide consequential to the occurrence of infidelity continue the statement about the relationship between infidelity and offspring which Truffaut initiated in *Les Quatre cents coups*, sustaining a critique regarding the inadequacy of society’s tendency to perceive infidelity simply in terms of individual needs, rather than from a broader perspective. The humorous side of the question of marital infidelity as in *Baisers volés* and to an extent in *Domicile conjugal* is strongly counterbalanced by *Les Quatre cents coups* with the case of adults who fail, through their involvement in infidelity to carry out their duty as parents.

*L’Amour en fuite* also sees the return of adultery’s link to parenthood with a novel outlook, as it opens with Antoine and Christine’s divorce sentence. The reading of the part of the divorce sentence concerning the child’s welfare highlights the value of the priority of parental responsibility again. *Domicile conjugal*, the previous episode, makes explicit how his affairs have relegated his paternal role in the life of their child Alphonse to a minor degree. A new perspective enters the seemingly circular narrative of infidelity with the divorce by mutual consent as enacted by Antoine and Christine, which makes ‘French legal history’ (Allen, 1985: 77); if divorce is commonly seen as weakening a parent and offspring’s relationship,
in *L'Amour en fuite* Antoine and Christine’s personal disagreements and reproaches, mainly a result of his adulterous behaviour, are forbidden to interfere with parental responsibilities, emotionally or materially. A parallel is established between the Doinels’ divorce and another family’s wedding, and their respective relationships towards their offspring, suggesting that it is not upon marriage or divorce that the offspring’s welfare should depend. Whilst listening to the child’s rights and benefits during the divorce sentence, Antoine observes a newly married bride getting happily into a car hand in hand with her daughter – given her age, potentially another child born illegitimately (see *Fig. 4:15*, below).

The *Doinel cycle* ends, therefore, with the relationship between infidelity and parenthood tackled differently from the way it is presented in *Les Quatres cents coups*. In the context of family portraits, there is a contrast between the Doinel adultery case and those in the Darbon and Tabard families: the latter two are not so unhappy. Mr. and Madame Darbon form a united couple; they have raised Christine with healthy principles and expect to see the continuation of such principles in her marriage to Antoine. The children’s pictures speak for this too: in the houses of both
the Darbon families the pictures of their respective daughters, Colette and Christine, are casually noticeable (see Fig. 4:16, below).

![Image](image.png)

*Baisers volés* (Fig. 4:16)

This emphasises the significance of the absence of Antoine’s picture from his parents’ flat. In *L’Amour en fuite* the sequence in (divorced) Antoine’s flat shows a big picture of Alphonse above his bed, a detail that strengthens the idea that the dissociation between the parental role and adultery has eventually been integrated in Antoine’s trajectory. Hence, through Truffaut’s cycle the thread uniting the concept of infidelity with that of offspring within marriage is consistently emphasised.

Overall, Antoine’s family nucleus strongly differs from the others in the families of the following episodes. The stepfathers in *Antoine et Colette* and *Baisers volés* are thoroughly integrated within the family and happily honour their marital and parental status; the mothers are loving towards the offspring. In *Domicile conjugal* Christine’s stepfather discreetly frequents brothels without altering the domestic harmony. The contrast between the different depictions of family nuclei sharing the same structural features as Antoine’s highlights further his parents’ inadequate punishing behaviour towards him. The importance Truffaut assigns to the
family is evident in the fact that families abound in the *Doinel cycle*. Allen points out that in *Domicile conjugal* Antoine’s idea of being in love with a girl is that of ‘being in love not just with her but with her whole family – a kind of package deal which ensures that he will be surrounded by a comfortable protective framework’ (Allen, 1985: 68). Antoine, who was rejected by his family, becomes metaphorically adopted by all the family nuclei with which he comes into contact, thus cleansing him of his illegitimacy (see Fig. 4:17, below).

*Antoine et Colette* (Fig. 4:17)

The evidence of a strong bond between Colette and Christine with their respective parents is often conveyed through mid-shots which frame all the members of the family at the dinner table, also when Antoine is with them (see Fig. 4:18, in the following page).
Antoine and his parents are framed together in the same shot at the dinner table only after the mother has bought Antoine’s silence over her adultery; short-lived, this state of unprecedented domestic harmony at that moment is a mere performance. As the considerations about Les Quatre coups highlighted, the occurrence of infidelity raises questions attending to the responsibility of both men and women in it. Gillain notices that maternal infidelity encapsulates the notion of bâtardise (Gillain, 1991: 30). Birth out of wedlock codifies infidelity in its most threatening and most feared form: female promiscuity. Les Quatre cents coups differs in that Antoine is, for a change, not the fruit of infidelity, or not of his mother’s at least; his case addresses a reading of illegitimacy often silenced: male promiscuity. For every child conceived out of wedlock there must be not only a mother but also a biological father, who may well be married at the time of conception. With this in mind, if Antoine’s bâtardise addresses women’s potential for illegitimate conduct, it equally raises a social critique about male responsibility in illegitimacy and adultery. The way illegitimacy was commonly addressed illustrates the gender bias in assigning responsibility for this social plague; men would be regarded as victims rather than agents of the deeds.
thus diverting attention from their role as lovers and fathers. None of the cases of illegitimacy in the cycle feature as resulting specifically from female adultery but may well result from male adultery instead. The serene atmosphere in which Colette’s and Christine’s families are depicted indicates the dismissal of old-fashioned preoccupations about illegitimacy as an illness of society – after all, these stepfathers have freely married these single mothers and taken responsibility for their offspring – and emphasises a concern with the role of parenting instead. If one considers the homonymy between the two Darbon families as an indication of the potential of another stepfather, Christine’s, Antoine stands out as the only obvious biological father in the cycle; Antoine, the illegitimate child, adjusts the trajectory of male biological paternity conceiving his child within the sacral walls of marriage (see Fig. 4:19, below).

Eventually, he also stands out as the first unfaithful as well as the only divorced man. Emphasizing the continuity of issues between offspring and female infidelity, the analysis of Les Quatre cents coups illustrates how questions of child welfare complicate the picture so far built up of Truffaut’s presentation of female infidelity.
As his mother’s unwanted child, Antoine is cut off from her care, a fact that becomes crystallised for him when he unexpectedly witnesses her adulterous affair. An illegitimate child, Antoine is the embodiment of the outlaw – for society, the school, the police, the reformatory and his stepfather, who too fails to consider his ad his family’s circumstances beyond the institution’s limited and dehumanising perspective. The figure of the stepfather and other figures of authority (all male) are called to answer for their involvement in failed childcare as depicted within the film, and also, subsequently, their involvement with the occurrence of infidelity. The film’s distribution of culpability in terms of failed parenting parallels Truffaut’s attempt to insert into the conventional and traditional narratives of female responsibility only the discussion of male promiscuity. The child Antoine grows up but never grows out of infidelity, becoming instead later involved with it as an unfaithful partner himself, until the last episode where he revisits all the issues discussed above from newer perspectives. The next chapter, about male infidelity, traces the development of Antoine’s trajectory into and out of infidelity. This is achieved through the analysis of other men’s direct involvement in infidelity, which unravels male infidelity in general by considering its impact on aspects of gender relations at large.
Chapter Five: Antoine and Infidelity au masculin

Whether real or imagined, infidelity in *Les Quatre cents coups* and *Baisers volés* is *au féminin* only. As the previous discussion demonstrated, Antoine is an unintentional witness of others’ adulteries and, as a consequence, is imprisoned by infidelity by being the silent observer of his mother’s betrayal. This chapter looks at the ways in which male infidelity is subjected to scrutiny throughout the cycle by focusing on Antoine’s involvement with it as both a witness to and a perpetrator of it. The other instances of male infidelity are also scrutinised in their narrative and formal representations. Particular attention is given to how they inform Truffaut’s ongoing discussion of the concept of infidelity within the *Doinel cycle*, of which observations concerning the characterization of women who are subjected to this infidelity by their partners and of their response to it are especially significant by enriching the cycle’s development of the theme of infidelity and its undermining of the gender bias accompanying it.

From accidentally witnessing his mother’s unfaithfulness, later on, it will be seen how Antoine becomes a *professional* in infidelity – that of others’ and of his own – although he does not escape punishment. With *Domicile conjugal* Antoine becomes the first male perpetrator of infidelity in the cycle, opening the way to the infidelity wholly *au masculin* characterising this episode – a fact that represents a seemingly deliberate attempt on the part of Truffaut to redress the conventional narrative imbalance. Antoine’s stepfather’s infidelity addresses the particular form infidelity assumes through prostitution, and leads to the questioning of what infidelity means from the male perspective, as married men’s consumption of
prostitution emerges as an irrelevant practice with regard to the marital vow. Male fidelity and infidelity are thus unravelled as concepts of negligible impact and significance. Initially conforming to such perceptions, Antoine foregoes experiences that force him to revise it: his wife rejects his promiscuous conduct, a fact that highlights the cycle’s development of the subject of infidelity through generational shifts. In contrast to the betrayed men’s reaction to their wives’ infidelity, which showed them ambivalently accepting of promiscuity, Christine is portrayed as a proud wife who, once betrayed, no longer suffers silently, opting for divorce. Through her character the divorce legislation firmly becomes part of the issues of infidelity and children’s welfare, so that eventual introduction of consensual divorce is greeted as a necessary tool for a woman’s affirmation of her right to manifest agency in her own private sphere, as well as carrying positive outcomes in the wellbeing of the offspring.

Once married, Antoine assumes the role of adulterer, although at first, his cheating on Christine, the longstanding girl of his dreams, is puzzling. Christine’s father, in some ways a role model as a husband and a father, is the other male adulterer of *Domicile conjugal*. When encountering Antoine in the brothel, Mr. Darbon’s reaction – he is neither surprised nor embarrassed – overshadows Antoine’s, who reacts out of fear of having been seen – or of having seen, perhaps. Contrary to expectations, maintaining the appearance of a distinguished and respectable man, Mr. Darbon is comfortably treacherous. Within the framework of this episode, the insertion of another comic episode strengthens the current discourse at work on the male characters involved in infidelity. At Christine and Antoine’s home, after their first separation as a result of Antoine’s affair, Mr. Darbon mentions a novel about a judge who falls for his son’s duck toy; despite its thorough absurdity,
such an anecdote directs attention to the issue of infidelity through an unusual type of *amour fou*, emphasising a side of it where foolishness and irrationality are sovereign (see Fig. 5:1, below).

*Domestic conjugal* (Fig. 5:1)

Through the parallels between a judge and Mr. Darbon, both from the wealthy bourgeoisie, and Antoine, a representative of the working class, all men are unified in infidelity. Regardless of background and social standing, in this picture of adultery *au masculin*, infidelity is no longer a concession to female territory.

A conventionally-ignored figure emerges as relevant in the analysis of the specific factors that contribute to infidelity, namely the prostitute, who for both Antoine and his father-in-law constitutes a category remarkably different from all the others. Prostitutes are present throughout the cycle: in *Les Quatre cents coups* they share temporary imprisonment with Antoine at the police station and in the van which takes them to their respective corrective institutions. In *Baisers volés* they initiate Antoine into so-called adulthood: Antoine’s explanation in *L’Amour en fuite* that once dismissed from the army he wanted to be part of the adults’ world, to
behave like they do, is accompanied by images of him entering a brothel, indicating that this particular context of sexual maturation is a norm for integration into this adult world. Prostitution, though, extends beyond the frame of its most common depiction, as Colette’s encounter with a stranger on a train shows in *L’Amour en fuite*: Colette erupts against the male perspective, which views prostitution as a natural side-line activity for any woman. The train passenger forcefully offers Colette one thousand francs to spend the night with him, the assumption being that ‘woman’ and ‘prostitute’ are customarily interchangeable essences (see *Fig. 5:2*, below).

*L’Amour en fuite* (*Fig. 5:2*)

The recurrent presence of prostitutes in the cycle in many forms, both conceptually and practically, is suggestive of the ambivalent position in which women are held by their male counterparts; instead of the standard binary opposition between the (virtuous) woman and the whore, these notions are seamlessly integrated with one another, and inform the way in which the male characters conceive of women’s infidelity. This has a bearing on the particular aspect of gender relations, which
recurs in Truffaut’s work, exposing an aspect of the patriarchal conceptual imagining about women as troubling. In *Les Quatre cents coups*, when Antoine helps a lady (Jeanne Moreau) to find her missing dog, a passer-by (Jean-Claude Brialy), a *dragueur*, abruptly sends him away, opportunistically assuming that she will let him pick her up. In *La Peau douce* two men harass the lover, Nicole, and the betrayed wife, Franca, in the street. The two women, given their roles, are potentially emblematic of the wife/whore dichotomy, and are equally subjected to the indiscriminating violence of men’s humiliating outlook: in all their discomfort, Nicole, Franca and Colette are only some of the many women in Truffaut’s cinema who pose a resistance to men who are ‘smug, self-assured, indifferent to’ their refusals (Holmes and Ingram, 2004: 127). Nicole, ‘bouleversée par la vulgarité de l’endroit’ (Gillain, 1991: 80), refuses to stay in a hotel for a few hours with Pierre, and Franca throws him out of their flat: Gillain notices that Lachenay treats ‘sa femme en putain’ (Gillain, 80) when he takes advantage, after their separation, of a stop-over at their place to make love to her. In *L’Amour en fuite* Colette’s anger at the train *draguer* and at Antoine, who assumes she will sleep with him that night, is an extension of Franca’s legacy; unlike the extreme cases of women who kill, commit suicide or plunge into madness, the balanced tone of the *Doinel cycle* inscribes women’s battles on realistic grounds, strengthening the face value of their reactions. With the *dragueurs*, Truffaut throws critical attention on a widespread deleterious perception of women and ‘the cultural assumptions’ (Holmes and Ingram, 126) men share of them, hence undermining what Holmes and Ingram describe as ‘the seamlessness of the films’ men-only perspective’ (127).

Within such a framework, aspects of the history of brothels and their institutional meaning in society may provide useful contextual material, as
throughout the *Doinel cycle* prostitution gets entangled with narratives of infidelity; furthermore, the origins of the term brothel have particular bearings for the character of Antoine and his personal trajectory. The Old English *brothen* and *breothan* respectively stood for ‘ruined’ and ‘to go to ruin’; in Middle English brothel was a synonym for ‘worthless person’ (Chambers Dictionary). According to the Shorter Oxford Dictionary, *broþel* equivalent to brothel, meant ‘a worthless abandoned fellow’; etymologically, the brothel assumes a role ‘in comforting the outcast’ (Simons, 1975: 3). By sharing the prison and van spaces with the prostitutes Antoine is, by association, a ruined person; the school’s and the army’s dismissive attitude, and his parents’ final step of handing him over to a juvenile prison, classify him as worthless and abandoned, an outcast. The guitar solo that underscores Antoine’s playful curiosity at his (absent) mother’s beauty mirror (see Fig. 5:3, below) returns once only in *Les Quatre cents coups*.

*Les Quatre cents coups* (Fig. 5:3)
Significantly, this same guitar solo returns when ‘for the first time in the film, the camera identifies with his point of view’ (Trotter, 2010: 167), when Antoine sees the prostitutes in their prison cell (see, Fig. 5:4, below).

Les Quatre cents coups (Fig. 5:4)

The score reinforces the connection between these two moments, suggesting a link between the absent mother and the present prostitutes, hence also establishing a particular connection between them and Antoine. From Baisers volés onwards Antoine’s entries to and exits from brothels are captured through the camera’s focus on Antoine’s expression of anguish, further highlighted by tunes in minor key, which underscore his need for human bonding. Infidelity, through the prostitutes, reveals a distinctive subtext: relying on strongly Freudian concepts, this frequentation serves Antoine’s cyclical yearning to the maternal, and by extension to adultery. For instance, in Domicile conjugal the failed attempts at finding an adequate connection with Christine and with his lover Kyoko (Hiroko Berghauer) result in Antoine’s return to the brothel: in his sense of disconnection and isolation, the return to the
prostitutes is a return to an unspecified, familiar habitat. In these moments of existential isolation the connotation of Antoine’s visits to the brothels goes beyond gratuitous promiscuity. A permanent reminder of Antoine’s abandonment by his family, and hence of his perception of his own unworthiness, the prostitutes represent the closest link to his mother’s conduct as well as her rejection of him. A signifier of Gilberte’s indiscriminate availability to all men except him, the (mother-)prostitute is at his own disposal forced to giving him that attention previously denied. Unlike the mother, initially, she welcomes him, then such an encounter inevitably prompts the experience again of the impossible yet evermore desired connection (see Fig. 5:5, below).

*Les Quatre cents coups* (Fig. 5:5)

Infidelity’s recurrent cinematic representations mostly convey it as the result of an unpredictable experience, a *coup de foudre* or *amour fou*, or as a systematically pursued experience. A unique episode in an individual’s life from which no one is
immune, infidelity as the result of *amour fou* has a less shameful connotation; how the unfaithful partner handles it makes a crucial difference to the offended party. It is a different matter when infidelity is gratuitously habitual; yet, from a critical perspective, in the mechanical perpetuation of infidelity relevant attitudes about it within a specific society at a specific time in history can be detected. Christine’s father appears as a well-integrated and satisfied bourgeois Parisian with a good job, a devoted wife, an upright daughter and a gentle and eccentric son-in-law. The place of prostitutes in this harmonious lifestyle appears a legitimate question. At the time of Simons’ *The History of the Brothel* (1975), contemporaneous with the cycle, the frequentation of brothels was widespread in French society and clearly an approved illegal practice, which the frequent depiction of brothels gives evidence for in the films: ‘the brothels of modern France are unquestionably the most famous in Europe. Now, of course, the French houses are illegal – which does not stop them operating’ (Simons, 1975: 145). The films’ emphasis on Mr. Darbon and Antoine’s use of brothels illustrates the core mentality exposed by Simons, whereby prostitution relates to marriage according to one of two divergent views: that the state’s sanctioning of brothels and prostitution is harmful to marriage and family, or that prostitution serves to safeguard the institution of marriage by making destructive adultery less likely (157); Truffaut’s *Doinel cycle* epitomizes contradictory public perceptions of prostitutes with the tacitly approved form of infidelity their presence generates. Simultaneously a sin as much as a precaution against another, prostitution has an ambivalent quality. When Mr. Darbon pronounces the sanctity of the family nucleus while following a prostitute into her room, he implicitly counters the view about the supposedly destructive nature of infidelity through prostitution. He highlights the duplicitous position towards marriage within the institutions which,
through prostitution – in itself an institution historically grown under the tacit agreement of both the state and Christian Church – metaphorically as well as literally render a form of polygamy viable while keeping intact the social equilibrium, since its fruition, discreetly hidden from the partners, implies carefree sexual leisure excluding emotional involvement on both the client and the prostitute’s side. Darbon’s ease testifies to the integration of infidelity in society through prostitution as a habit, which leaves no trace of itself either in the life of the family – thus by extension in society – nor in the conscience of their perseverant perpetrators who move seamlessly in and out of the promise of conjugal fidelity at their discretion and according to their own perceived needs. Nonetheless, while many people around Antoine affirm the notion of compromise and controlled promiscuity as necessary for integration, his trajectory is, in phases, characterized by elements of resistance. If Mr. Darbon testifies to an infidelity au masculin of the type commonly acknowledged, Antoine is a far more complicated character in that he continues being negatively affected by others’ and his own unfaithful deeds. In spite of the ways Antoine equates his mother’s actions and infidelities with prostitution, his own faithlessness is not of this safe, controlled kind implied in the narrative of Mr. Darbon but – like his mother’s – constitutes an emotional betrayal and incurs an emotional punishment. Through his unfaithful behaviour – far more destructive of the family unit than Mr. Darbon’s, yet seemingly condemned equally – Antoine, falls into a state of chaos through his own infidelity, and eventually he develops an awareness of it that distinguishes him from the other characters (see Fig. 5:6, in the following page).
On the one hand, Antoine’s adultery turns the effect his mother’s had on him upside down: this new Mr. Doinel is not subjected to cuckoldry, and Christine Doinel, the new Madame Doinel, is the betrayed party. Again, a child uncovers a narrative of infidelity: an innocent messenger of Antoine’s unfaithfulness, his tender gesture of bringing the flowers with Kyoko’s love messages for Antoine to Christine, causes the painful discovery of his first extra-marital affair. Another pattern from Les Quatre cents coups which returns in this specific instance is the ‘circulation of desire’ dynamic: before these fleurs du mal reach Christine they are delivered to the office where Antoine works (see Fig. 5:7, in the following page).
Domicile conjugal (Fig. 5:7)

The camera captures the flowers being passed round each member of the office before they reach oblivious Antoine, just like the pin-up poster was passed from one schoolboy to another before it stopped in his hands (see Fig. 5:8, below).

Domicile conjugal (Fig. 5:8)

The circulation of desire, here signifying adultery, again stops at Antoine, who again becomes the recipient of punishment as a result, despite his determination to ignore
them. From being the victim of others’ mischievous acts, Antoine acquiesces in the same conduct he had so far resisted, thus achieving that level of social integration he had up to then only witnessed in sceptical astonishment.

Christine breaks the Doinels’ legacy in these geometries of adultery by choosing to resume her paternal surname, Darbon, and opt for a harmonious dyad with her son. Despite Antoine’s plea on the basis that Kyoko belongs to ‘another world’, adultery – his, this time – throws him out of his family again. Once free to see his lover without subterfuges, he begins an intense experience of such new world, – Antoine is undergoing at his first experience as an unfaithful partner. The continuation of the affair is portrayed through Antoine’s meetings with Kyoko over meals, where time after time their dialogue comically turns increasingly sparse and meaningless. Antoine is, after all, not too comfortable with adultery either (see Fig. 5:9-10, below and in the following page).

*Domicile conjugal* (Fig. 5:9)
Antoine soon wishes to return to Christine. Yet, as Christine recounts in *L’Amour en fuite*, he falls into the same traps: Antoine’s next lover, Liliane (Dani) seems again another world. Different from Kyoko, a seemingly modern geisha, Liliane embodies features of the new woman, freely expressing her independent, emancipated and resolute nature. Set only a few years earlier than Rohmer’s *L’Amour l’après-midi*, this film contains a typology of woman who, like Chloë, the lover in the last episode of Rohmer’s series, is self-assured, and wishes to have a child, but not its father. The two women also share physical similarities, their beauty carrying strong features and conveying a self-assurance verging on qualities traditionally associated with masculinity (see Fig. 5:11, in the following page, where Liliane’s features and outfit – blouse and trousers, and glasses – confer on her a self-assurance and attitude that stands out in comparison with Christine’s more classical type of femininity).
Uninterested in alleviating Antoine’s existential turmoil, Liliane quickly ends the affair. Experiencing the ephemeral nature of those multiple affairs, Antoine eventually comes to terms with the deceptive nature of his self-illusions. He understands and accepts the consequences of his misconduct by agreeing to divorce, as a far better option than a hypocritical connivance in infidelity for all the parties involved. Both Christine and Antoine are depicted as living serenely through their separation. By now a viable legal option, divorce is here the direct outcome of marital infidelity. The idea of divorce is propelled by a woman: the distress caused by a partner’s infidelity, once expected to be passively accepted by women as a normal occurrence in marriage, is now actively channelled in a new direction in line with the newest socio-historical openings concerning women’s awareness of their right and newly gained confidence to express themselves as subjects. As Truffaut affirmed, ‘les femmes […] lui opposent l’assurance de leur autonomie’ (Truffaut, 1979). Adultery punishes Antoine again as he, for the second time, loses his family;
history repeats itself and another Doinel nucleus enters the channel of dysfunction. Antoine, like many years before, is sent away from his familial nucleus, though this time with reasons that will prove constructive for him.

In a way, Antoine seeks integration into the social order from which he was originally distanced. Gillain suggests that in *Baisers volés* Antoine ‘s’intègre à l’ordre social par le mariage’ (Gillain, 1991: 117). At lunch with Christine’s parents, her picture repeatedly glimpsed behind her parents’ shoulders, suggests that the older couple’s achievements, namely their offspring, should be perpetuated by the younger couple. Soon after, Christine and Antoine are a family too with their son Alphonse. At this point the Darbon and Doinel (Junior) families appear as two faultless examples of blissful domesticity, but these ideals are soon shattered: Antoine begins an affair and Mr. Darbon is spotted in a brothel; through adultery Antoine obtains another sort of social integration. Furthermore, infidelity through prostitution raises the question as to whether the Darbon family’s happiness, despite Mr. Darbon’s double life, is any better than the downfall the original Doinel nucleus underwent? Yes is Mr. Darbon’s answer to this question; yet from angles other than his answer this raises further questioning. In the brothel, immediately before following the prostitute into the room, Mr. Darbon tells Antoine that ‘les gens de qualité sont comme les beaux objets, c’est à regret qu’ils quittent les bonnes maisons’; talking of good people, he is referring to Antoine, who has betrayed his daughter, and to himself (see *Fig. 5:12*, in the following page).
Mr. Darbon implies a firm division between categories of judgement: unfaithful people are not bad per se, if they keep familial commitments running smoothly. Oblivious of the concept of fidelity and of the implications of infidelity on the individual, Mr. Darbon frees infidelity of its objective negative connotations at once. His clinical attitude in discussing his own daughter’s received offence emphasises further the ingrained double standard about infidelity; hence, he happily welcomes an adulterous son-in-law. Leaving the family is the real betrayal, then, not the carrying out secretive adulterous affairs. Following Mr. Darbon’s logic, Antoine’s case is apparently a repetition of his mother’s, guilty of having let his extra-marital adventure interrupt the family’s peace, rather than of having had an affair. Yet a substantial difference exists between the two cases. Expressive of the distress about the situation the entire family experiences, Antoine’s mother’s infidelity and her harsh attitudes are indicative of her desire not to be a mother and not to be a wife; although unarticulated, her conduct contains a degree of frankness. Notwithstanding its disconcerting effects, Gilberte Doinel’s infidelity subtends to an outward eruptive
force to break beyond the frames of conservative patriarchal ruling. By contrast, Mr. Darbon’s blasé attitude, which enables him to lead smoothly a double life based on compromise and ambiguity, those qualities that cost the Doinels sorrow, signifies the inward looking vision of the perpetuation of compromised social and moral values within the existing order.

*Domicile conjugal* breaks with the audience’s privileged insight into adultery and alignment with Antoine’s involvement with it once Christine, now the betrayed party, acknowledges Antoine’s affair with a Japanese girl and this continues in *L’Amour en fuite*: she recalls the affair he had with her friend Liliane, thus depriving Antoine of authorial power over it, a fact that highlights the cycle’s concern towards the whole question (see Fig. 5:13, below).

*Fig. 5:13*

Both films signal a shift between generations of the same families which suggests, potentially, a novel perception of infidelity among the younger generation. The audience’s alignment moves towards Christine’s perception, inviting them to revise
their attitude towards the issue as they identify more closely with her. Uncompromising, Christine rejects Antoine once she finds out about his affair; concomitantly, Antoine can nevertheless continue developing his relationship with his son Alphonse, in contrast to his own experience as a child. As the final part of this chapter will go on to explore, Christine is the first betrayed character to be granted thorough expression under such circumstances and the film’s cinematic choices align the audience with her. With Christine’s discovery of Antoine’s affair, the abrupt cut at the moment Antoine enters the flat late at the night and finds her dressed as a Japanese woman emphasises the poignancy of the effect of his infidelity, as the spectators first see his shock (see Fig. 5:14, below).

_Domicile conjugal_ (Fig. 5:14)

Truffaut said to have adopted a special camera-work technique in order to do justice to Christine’s reaction:

lorsque Jean-Pierre Léaud a une aventure avec une Japonaise, sa femme le sait, et lorsqu’il revient à la maison, il ouvre la porte et sa femme est au fond
Christine’s dressing up as a Japanese woman creates a double surprise, doubling the effect of her response to adultery and unambiguously conveying her pain; the silence of her role play is the most troubling aspect of her masquerade as the other woman (see Fig. 5:15, below).

*Domicile conjugal* (Fig. 5:15)

With the camera-work and mise-en-scène suggesting alignment with Christine, the audience is forced to engage face to face with Antoine’s perspective, grounded in guilt: the audience is made to take responsibility with Antoine of the casual or hypocritical approach with which male adultery is often regarded (see *Fig. 5:16*, in the following page, where the close-up of Christine in tears brings the audience
closer to her dignified silent suffering for the betrayal and humiliation inflicted by Antoine).

_Domicile conjugal_ (Fig. 5:16)

From being an experience traditionally kept within the domain of the unspoken, through Christine’s voice infidelity is brought into the open for discussion and confrontation, addressing the individual but also the broader context of society. Against an _ancien régime_ of convenient hypocrisy which allows men to engage freely and without culpability – though always discreetly – in multiple affairs and of which her father Mr. Darbon is the epitome, the voice the audience is invited to align itself with is a female voice, indicating attention towards the concerns infidelity generates in women, rather than men.

By contrast with the other agents of infidelity, as a witness of male and female infidelity and as a perpetrator of it, Antoine’s reactions appear arguably discordant, nevertheless showing a dynamic perceptiveness of the questions infidelity raises. The captive of his romantic ghosts, Antoine indiscriminately switches from the ideals of pure women, like Balzac’s heroine Madame de Mortsauf,
to the pragmatism of tainted ones, whom he treats passionately like the hero of a novel would with his ideal one. Discussing *Baisers volés*, Truffaut explained ‘Jean-Pierre m’intéresse pour son anachronisme et son romantisme, il est un jeune homme du XIXème siècle’ (in Gillain, 1988:198). Allen remarks that in Antoine there coexists a ‘lust/true love dichotomy’ (Allen, 1985: 52); Antoine’s romantic ways are a mix between the love codes of the nineteenth-century romantic era with those from medieval courtly love. Like the enamoured poet who devoted his art to the beloved woman, perpetually out of reach, but having recourse to other women for less noble activities, Antoine writes romantic letters to his idealised Colette, Christine and Fabienne whilst being a regular visitor to the Parisian brothels.

The naturalness of Antoine’s contradictory perceptions epitomizes the cultural assumption about women as fundamentally mere sexual objects (see *Fig. 5:17-18*, below and in the following page).
Through Antoine’s anachronism, Truffaut demonstrates a failure to critically assess the value of cultural-ideological inheritances. Yet, Truffaut specified that Antoine ‘aime les femmes mais il n’est pas un “chasseur”, contrairement à Charles Danner […] ni un collectionneur. Doinel est sentimental’ (in Mizrahi, 1979). In the question of infidelity, Antoine is suspended between one extreme and the other – the absolutist of total fidelity and of fidelity being impossible. Truffaut explained ‘le Romanesque nous dirige souvent, dans la vie’ and Antoine falls ‘amoureux d’une façon indirecte et romanesque’ (in Mizrahi, 1979) (see Fig. 5:19, in the following page, where Fabienne Tabard too develops an interest for Antoine indirectly, thanks to the overheard narration of the sales assistants in the shoe shop about his admiration for her).

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4 All the quotations by Mizrahi are part of the edited collection ‘François Truffaut. Les Années Doinel’, (CICIM, 1983).
With these traits, which mark him out as a character suspended between the past and the present, Antoine outlives all the other films’ male characters between 1959 and 1979; the men of the other films which precede and follow each of the Doinel’s cycle instalments gestate and are reborn modified in his character. Antoine becomes the site where the cultural traits of male national identity and the problematic issues they generate are reflected episode after episode, from one decade to another, as a witness of their development. His distinguished ‘instabilité caractérielle’ (in Baisers volés Antoine is dismissed from the Army due to a supposed emotional instability) becomes a reflection of the effort to negotiate the different directions Antoine’s formation is pulled in amidst the cultural magma he witnesses. Metaphorically the son of many fathers and many mothers, Antoine absorbs some of their traits, rejects some others and moulds a self so to create an identity of his own. Calling his own name, Fabienne’s and Christine’s until exhaustion in Baisers volés reflects the need to find his identity in a labyrinth of many influences, starting with his mother’s, evoked through her absence as before, but this time at his own beauty mirror (see Fig. 5:20, in the following page).
Discussing Truffaut’s personal involvement in the politique des auteurs Emma Wilson observes that by adopting ‘the title auteur […]', rebaptising “his homme de cinema”, Truffaut adds that the auteur will often write his own dialogue and even make up the plots […], the histories of the films’ (Wilson, 2001: 14). Truffaut’s reflection of himself in Antoine sees Antoine as a man designed to take charge of, or write, his own history. In Les Quatre cents coups Antoine piously crafts and worships an altar for Honoré de Balzac: he has learnt by heart some parts of La Recherche de l’absolu so as to score high marks in the French module (see Fig. 5:21, below).
The teacher accuses him of plagiarism but Antoine has genuinely made his the voice of literary authority; yet Antoine’s uncritical reproducing of Balzac brings another severe punishment upon him. The ensuing accidental burning of Balzac’s altar, on one level a simple comedic narrative development, ominously signifies the peril of blind imitation of cultural inheritances (see Fig. 5:22, below).

Les Quatre cents coups (Fig. 5:22)

‘Barthes himself has said that the death of the author allows the birth of the reader’ (Wilson, 18): Balzac’s death, otherwise the death of the author, forecasts the potentially positive birth of a new author, freed from the constraints of predetermined truths and in control of his identity. Antoine, Wilson also aptly points out

seems consciously a copy of Stendhal’s Julien Sorel […] or Balzac’s Lucien de Rubempré […]. Finding literary precedents like this, showing the cult of the author […] Truffaut seems consciously […] to draw attention to the links between literature and cinema which may be generative and productive […] film need not be a pale imitation of literature, but literature’s progeny and revitalisation (Wilson, 23).
Charged with the responsibility of three births – Antoine’s, Jean-Pierre Léaud’s and Truffaut’s – the burning of Balzac’s altar draws a fine line between present and past. In tune with the necessities of the present, the construction of Antoine’s future should result from the delicate balance between the inherited and the present to be moulded anew. In this, infidelity, a central topic in the novels that have formed Antoine’s imaginary, and the questions about gender relations highlighted through it, are key to Antoine’s formative trajectory.

As previously discussed, the cycle’s presentation of the male victims of infidelity shows them sometimes ridiculed, their cuckoldry seen as a judgement on their own lack of masculinity which is, in turn, an affliction on the family, rather than an emasculating experience in itself. Even distress and anguish at times seems farcically performed rather than genuinely felt. The consideration of male adultery prompts questions about the depiction of the women betrayed by their husbands. Madame Darbon and her daughter Christine are the female victims of infidelity. Madame Darbon, like Antoine and Colette’s mothers, had her daughter out of wedlock. Unlike Antoine’s mother, however, Christine’s mother is portrayed as a loving wife and parent; Christine is just the same towards Antoine and their son Alphonse. Both women contribute towards the family’s financial stability and their professional engagements do not clash with the family’s serenity. These positive qualities counterbalance the image of women under promiscuous contexts previously projected; furthermore, they counterbalance the group of betrayed men, who, however, were shown in a negative light. Throughout the three films, Christine grows as a stable and mature woman who, once committed to a cause, will devote herself to it wholeheartedly. In the last two films of the cycle, ‘the highly unflattering portrayal of Antoine at his most childish, fickle and unstable’ is ‘a
canvas against which Christine as the young wife stands out most positively’ (Holmes and Ingram, 1998: 51). It is notable that it is once again the treatment of female legs, previously signifiers of the male possessive gaze, especially in the case of Antoine’s mother, which demarcates the new grounds for the discussion of issues of infidelity: *Domicile conjugal* opens with a lengthy tracking shot of Christine’s legs, a classic shot often associated with ideas about desire and transgression (see Fig. 5:23, below).

![Domicile conjugal (Fig. 5:23)](image)

Her voice twice insists upon her appellation, ‘pas mademoiselle, madame’, firmly placing her legs within a new paradigm: ‘les jambes du désir sont devenues celles de la loi’ (Gillain, 1991: 204); with her, promiscuity is not an option and crucially, she is demanding control over the way her physicality is interpreted by the male gaze. Her purchase of Nureyev’s poster headed REALITES safely contains any form of extra-conjugal desire within the sublimated reality of the dream (see Fig. 5:24, in the following page).
Similarly, the shot of her legs while walking up the stairs from the point of view of the porter’s lustful gaze appears initially just like the many shots of prostitutes walking up the stairs with their customers: yet Christine puts an halt to this image upon entering her flat and kissing her husband (see Fig. 5:25, below).
Upon discovery of Antoine’s adultery, she affirms her own determination to stay away from promiscuity, reproaching Antoine for being complacent of ‘ce qui est flou, vague, équivoque, ambigu’. Christine is ‘one of the first modern and well-adjusted women in Truffaut’s universe’ (Insdorf, 1998: 117); after the disillusionment of her marriage, in *L’Amour en fuite*, Christine serenely stands on her own feet as an independent divorcée and dutiful mother. Nicholls’ remark is pertinent: if Truffaut’s films ‘are feminist, this is because Truffaut’s personal outlook includes a sort of feminism arising from his desire to see “real women” portrayed on screen instead of the usual stereotypes’ (Nicholls, 1993: 89). In stark contrast to the ridicule to which betrayed husbands are subjected in the earlier films, the films’ commitment in the portrayal of Madame Darbon and Christine’s integrity implicitly comments more gravely on their respective adulterous husbands. If on the one hand, the betrayed husbands’ scenario made ridiculous might suggest that the question of female infidelity is such a point of cultural anxiety that it needs to be safely diminished and packed as farce or comedy, by contrast, the presentation of male infidelity, usually conforming to clear tropes and traditions, appears being problematized much more bravely.

After the analysis of the cycle’s films through female infidelity and also through its impact on the offspring, this chapter about male infidelity illustrated the shift in focus in Truffaut’s cycle from conventional to less traditional portrayals of men. It exposed the faithless and promiscuous behaviour of male characters in a way that contrasts with the director’s more light-hearted presentation and absolution of some female infidelity, with the exception that of Gilberte Doinel. My discussion also underscored the hypocrisies potentially contained within a conservative view of marriage. *Maternal* infidelity in the final episode of the cycle, *L’Amour en fuite*,
notwithstanding the emotional pain it inflicts, continues the discourse on the strong interconnectedness of infidelity’s impact on children and their parents’ inability to consider such impact, thus reinforcing the overarching significance of this particular dynamic. *L’Amour en fuite* directly invites a parallel between Antoine’s *fatherly* infidelity and that of his mother. Now, Gilberte Doinel’s infidelity is portrayed as carrying very distinct connotations and as operating within a radically different context from all the other instances of unfaithfulness so far, including Antoine’s example. For the first time in the entire cycle, Antoine recalls his mother’s circumstances through her unfaithfulness and he takes charge of opening rather than closing full circle the writing of his future – history, he at least hopes now, will not repeat itself.
Conclusions

As ‘all villains are not black and all heroes are not white’ (Insdorf, 1998: 58), the analysis of the Doinel cycle provides evidence of how Truffaut’s empathy with his characters and their situations was always complex. While the preceding analysis of infidelity by gender clearly highlights a developing trend in Truffaut’s filmmaking, thereby rendering a discussion of it in those terms valuable, it is important to ultimately compare and contrast those faithless characters with one another, rather than leaving them divided up and their behaviour simplistically gendered. The complexities of Truffaut’s art make such conclusions eventually unsatisfying, and no character is defined solely by their gender. His cinema emphasises profound moral values in the spheres of interpersonal and familial bonds. Truffaut’s interchanging of comedic and dramatic tones prevents the spectators from conforming ‘to any of our assumptions. It unsettles us and forces us to experience it in its own terms. Truffaut leads us to an awareness of how close laughter and suffering can be and how experience is more complex than the terms with which we label it’ (Insdorf, 27). Compared with Malle’s Les Amants, for example, Les Quatre cents coups appears conservative. Between Mr. Doinel and Gilberte there is no obvious scandal: no one leaves anyone. She tells Antoine that ‘contrairement à certaines apparences, nous formons un couple très uni’; marriage, emptied of its sustaining moral principles, is portrayed as a forgery. Infidelity here exposes the paradoxical nature of the institution of marriage, the proscriptive quality of which assures its perpetuation. The focus on Antoine’s fate in such circumstances highlights how Les Quatre cents coups is anything but reactionary.
In the instances of adultery rendered in a humorous vein, like Fabienne Tabard’s and Mr. Darbon’s, Truffaut’s critique is nonetheless explicit. The moral feebleness of their attitudes in betraying the marital vows is emphasised by the brevity of their adulterous deeds, hence, the frailty of people’s commitment is under scrutiny. In *Baisers volés*, the stranger’s (Serge Rousseau) angered look at Antoine’s flat when he is with Fabienne Tabard expresses disapproval of Antoine’s inconsistent sentimental trajectory (see Fig. CT:1, below).  

*Baisers volés* (Fig. CT:1)  

The film ends on a note of ironic ambivalence towards the question of infidelity, as the stranger approaches Christine and Antoine to say ‘je hais le provisoire. […] Je sais que tout le monde trahit tout le monde […] Moi, je suis définitif’. Preaching against a pervading disloyalty and in favour of permanency, his comments fit within the film’s paranoia about infidelity. While Christine’s naivety dismisses this outburst as foolish, Antoine’s troubled look suggests his awareness of its underlying authenticity. The triangular pattern created by the positions of the three characters  

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5 In the Conclusions of this part on Truffaut, I will reference the films’ stills as CT.
marks Antoine and Christine’s fresh vow with the insidious presence of a third party as a signifier of infidelity (see Fig. CT:2, below).

*Baisers volés* (Fig. CT:2)

Truffaut’s perception of the fluidity of women’s and men’s natures frees them from the series of constrictive and definitive paradigms of judgement. Infidelity is an object of reflection which places Truffaut’s efforts beyond the obsolete division man(subject)-woman(object). Discussing his involvement with his male and female protagonists in *Une belle fille comme moi* (1972), he remarked “‘je suis’ les deux personnages […] je m’en moque de quelqu’un qui s’obstine à voir la vie d’une façon romantique […] il doit prendre une bonne leçon de vie, parce qu’il ne voit pas les choses sous un angle assez concret’ (in Rabourdin, 1985: 133). Talking about the heroine, he affirmed, ‘je donne raison à la fille qui est une espèce de voyou, qui a appris à se méfier de tout le monde et à lutter pour survivre […] le film était féministe, mais pas d’une façon servile comme les gens qui voudraient être à la mode ou suivre le MLF’ (in Rabourdin, 133). Truffaut’s woman is an ample being: simultaneously cruel and compassionate, loving and treacherous, strong and fragile, self-sufficient and philanthropic. The woman in Truffaut’s universe lives suspended
between two polarized modes of perception: she is both the passive object of male pleasure and the reason behind man’s downfall or man’s benign touchstone and his essential and only reason of redemption from his own self-destructive drive. For Insdorf ‘Truffaut’s awareness that a multiplicity of selves inhabits even one woman is evident in the “doubling” that is characteristic of his work. There are films that center on a male protagonist, whose own needs lead him to embrace two complementary female figures’ (Insdorf, 1993: 105). A similarity exists with Rohmer’s *Contes moraux* in the doubling of women for each male protagonist; the heroes’ consistent engagements with two women brings to the fore and confirms the underlying practice of infidelity as intrinsically male.

The *Doinel cycle* shows the standardized version of infidelity along the lines of the traditional Western narrative, whereby adulterous men regard adultery as their right to carry out and have it accepted by their partners. Truffaut dismantles the double standard producing the essentialist view of women as ruthless in infidelity and of men as their victims: whether victims or perpetrators of infidelity, men emerge as prone to compromise. The men who are betrayed, depicted as either weak and arid or bigoted and ultimately laughable, accept their situation as a preferable alternative to confronting. By tradition the woman who offends male authority is subjected to punishment, yet Gilberte and Fabienne’s cases are paramount in that they perpetrate infidelity in the certainty that they can freely do so under the terms of a mutually convenient compromise; in so doing, the films show the artifice of the gender bias regarding female infidelity. The recurrent presence of prostitutes further highlights patriarchy’s sustaining vision of such order as beneficial, whilst functioning as an adamant reminder of women’s perseverence in culpability;
concomitantly, men’s duality emerges through their roles of producers and consumers of this phenomenon.

*Domicile conjugal* presents a series of ridiculed male adulteries: Antoine’s failed affair with Kyoko is depicted through a series of comical vignettes highlighting the ultimately transient effects of this apparently exciting affair (see *Fig. CT:4-5*, below).

*Domicile conjugal* (Fig. CT:4)

*Domicile conjugal* (Fig. CT:5)
Commenting on this, Truffaut explained ‘j’ai pu ainsi raconter très vite une histoire amoureuse avec le maximum d’idéalisation et, ensuite, le maximum de désillusions pour les partenaires’ (in Rabourdin, 1985: 119). Truffaut’s humorous portrayal of the disastrous affair with Kyoko works in tandem with the curious story about the judge falling for his son’s duck toy: in both instances, the idea of *amour fou* is taken to the extreme and turns into its own parody, imbued with the myth of adulterous ecstasy.

However, Antoine’s affair acquires a different light of the fact that Antoine’s conjugal betrayal in *Domicile conjugal* takes place during the first months of his child, Alphonse’s life. The discovery of Antoine’s deceit is juxtaposed with the nurturing Christine feeding Alphonse. Antoine’s betrayal unfolding before mother and child suggests the potential implications that his act may have on the child, just as his mother’s adultery had affected him, rather than emphasising its impact on Christine only (see *Fig. CT:6-7*, below and in the following page).
In the cycle men too are punishable – Antoine is rejected and divorced as a result of his affairs, for instance; elsewhere, in their hypocrisy and foolishness, the men’s reputations are exposed. By rejecting and distancing herself from Antoine’s transgressive conduct Christine actuates the very principles the ongoing feminist cause was putting forward. The two women of the Darbon family are betrayed by their husbands, but a generational and socio-historical gap significantly alters the destiny of the otherwise silently accepting wife. Christine breaks the chain of this male-constructed and preferred scenario. Truffaut remarked how ‘si les hommes sont rarement des hommes, les femmes sont souvent de vraies femmes et la sienne [Antoine’s] est plus forte que lui, plus aimante et plus accomplie’ (Truffaut, 1970). In *L’Amour en fuite*, Christine occupies the central position in the frame as the speaking subject when announcing to journalists the first consensual divorce, which she promoted, while Antoine stands next to her, head down and silently pensive (see *Fig. CT:8*, in the following page). Such centrality sustains woman’s right to refuse disrespectful patriarchal impositions in her most inner privacy; self-dignity and self-respect become women’s most cherished values.
Although the men in the cycle are depicted as more generally prone to accepting society’s set roles than challenging them, Antoine, with time, confounds all expectations. In a note preceding the script of *Le Journal D’Alphonse*, one of his unrealised projects, Truffaut reports on an extract from Balzac’s *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de la Révolution française*, which says ‘il est des hommes dont la voie est tracée; du commencement à la fin, leur existence suit une ligne droite: ce qu’ils ont fait hier, ils le font aujourd’hui, ils le feront demain, ils le feront toujours’ (in Butterfly, 2004: 16). Yet, Truffaut’s handwritten note at the margin affirms that ‘Antoine, c’est tout le contraire!’ (in Butterfly, 16); Antoine was conceived as the site of potential change. Throughout the cycle the protagonist is depicted on a journey of (dis-) integration in the changing French society of the 1950s to 1970s. Antoine embodies French male consciousness as shaped by the past of at least one hundred years of cultural-literary history. In his journey à rebours in *L’Amour en fuite* Antoine elucidates aspects of his mistakes, like his romanticized, fictional vision of women. He recalls that it was seeing Christine behind a glass door in the middle of the night that prompted him to take the decision to marry her. This attitude
is echoed in the male protagonist of Rohmer’s *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, who decides to marry his idealised woman when she suddenly appears through his car’s window at night. Theirs is a perception mediated by romantic ideals: such ideals are a barrier, as the glass exemplifies, to the objective perception of the subjectivities on the other side. Kyoko and Liliane, in their roles as lovers, eventually reject Antoine, thus refusing his model of ideal compromise: Antoine proves unable to find happiness in one woman only (see Fig. CT:9-10, in the following page).
Like the male protagonist of Rohmer’s last tale, *L’Amour l’après-midi*, Antoine still fantasises about polygamy as an attractive condition.

*L’Amour en fuite* dispenses with marriage at once, so that this last episode presents only unmarried couples, featuring Antoine and Sabine, Colette and Xavier; finally, Gilberte and Lucien. In both the younger couples, one of the partners is a divorcee and this status carries with it a renewed outlook on the conception of romantic involvement. Antoine and Colette share the experiences of marriage and divorce and are at a turning point in their new relationships. Antoine prefers living on his own and Colette, too, keeps her boyfriend at a certain distance. Initially, both relationships are feeble, under the suspicion of infidelity. Sabine asks Antoine to be faithful to her ‘at least with the mind’; Xavier struggles with Colette’s carefree conduct and reproaches her past infidelities. Hesitation on the part of both Colette and Antoine is perceived by their partners to be an indication of potential infidelity. Sabine and Xavier fight for an unadulterated vision of the couple, rejecting promiscuity and compromise: alongside Christine in the previous episode, they stand out as the only characters who concretely articulate discourses about infidelity. With them, fidelity emerges as a value beyond the contractual/legal connotation institutionally conferred onto it: through Sabine and Xavier fidelity reacquires a conceptual value as a viable life principle. Many of Truffaut’s heroes and heroines represent extreme cases of belief in either the absolute or the provisional. Holmes and Ingram point out that ‘the absolutists demand that love fill their lives and justify their existence’ (Holmes and Ingram, 1998: 188), and that those at the other end of the spectrum, ‘(only male characters come into this category) devote their lives to the search for intense erotic and emotional fulfilment, but do so in an endless series of partners’ (Holmes and Ingram, 188). Truffaut’s extremist characters often are avid
book readers, a fact that establishes a connection between their conduct and their readings. As mentioned earlier, because of his imagination intoxicated by a romanticised reading of the literary masters of the past, Antoine’s actions, as a result, are repeatedly in discrepancy with reality. The shot depicting Antoine in the prison cell in *Baisers volés* reading Balzac’s *Le Lys dans la vallée* finds him indeed imprisoned (see Fig. CT:11, below).

*Baisers volés* (Fig. CT:11)

Insdorf remarks how in *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) characters ‘become *Wuthering Heights* or *Alice in Wonderland*’; ‘the book-people do not in fact talk to each other, they simply recite their lines’ (Insdorf, 1998: 55). Neither Sabine’s nor Xavier’s uncompromising vision of love is determined by blind attachment to the Romantic ideals or forms of artistic expression. Xavier, as the owner of a bookshop, is surrounded by books; Sabine works in a music shop and is surrounded by music; they meet to comfort each other about their problems at the cinema. The previous scene had ended with Colette suspecting that Xavier was married, remarking how such a circumstance would only happen in novels. Truffaut plays a trick about infidelity on the audience as, accustomed and expecting infidelity to occur, such
meeting in the cinema creates the illusion, briefly, that they are illicit lovers (see Fig. CT:12, below).

*Cinema, the place where the arts meet to maximise romantic visions, loses its mystifying power through Sabine and Xavier: brother and sister stand for a mentality which benefits from the charm of the fictional, books, music and cinema, without losing their sober relation with reality. Through them, the cinema setting loses its potentially treacherous connotation, unlike in the opening of La Peau douce in a darkened cinema theatre with a shot of two caressing hands: a man’s, wearing a wedding band and a woman’s without. Instead, Sabine and Xavier meet at the cinema to discuss how to resolve their issues about infidelity, and make cinema acquire a novel unadulterated connotation. They stand out as characters living with authenticity of both intellect and emotion. Truffaut defined Sabine as ‘la nouvelle chance de bonheur qui s’offre à lui mais on sent qu’elle appartient à une génération*
plus avertie, plus précoce et qu’elle ne se laissera pas manger par lui’ (Mizrahi, 1979).

Unlike the Rohmerian heroes, Antoine eventually recognises that his vision is defective, and tries to amend it, as the story about Sabine’s reconstructed picture illustrates. Now a writer and working in the editorial sector, Antoine masters the literary devices his youthful perception was victim of. The birth of his new vision takes place while engaged in the act of writing, thus acting as the author of his own path. The ideas of transgression and punishment were initially associated with women and writing: the pin-up and the consequent punishment of repeatedly writing about his culpability on the class blackboard and in his notebook; the deal with his mother to produce quality writing and the resulting punishment following an accusation of plagiarism. Through Sabine’s straightforward perception of reality and Antoine’s crafting of his own narrative, both writing and female essence are stripped of their negative connotations and take on a cathartic function. Sabine’s reconstructed picture stands for women’s reconstructed picture, symbolizing Antoine’s potential to gain a reformed perception of them (see Fig. CT:13, below).

*L’Amour en fuite* (Fig. CT:13)
The similar sepia photography of Sabine’s close-up in the reconstructed picture and Gilberte’s picture unites the two women. After reconnecting with his mother’s reality Antoine writes to Sabine and the previous image of Gilberte fading away is replaced by Sabine’s image in full focus (see Fig. CT:14-15, below). Sabine stands for commitment, honesty and fidelity. Antoine’s deconstruction of his past results in a reconstruction of his future, where infidelity disappears.

*L’Amour en fuite* (Fig. CT:14-15)
Up to *L’Amour en fuite* infidelity featured as a culturally transmitted practice, emptied of any moral weight. Sabine summarises the core problematic of infidelity when recommending Antoine to be faithful, at least in his mind: infidelity is effectively recognised as a concept to be transformed at the root, in its spiritual and intellectual significance and value (see Fig. CT:16, below).

*L’Amour en fuite* (Fig. CT:16)

Antoine’s recollection of his discussion with Sabine on this subject is underscored by a tune that is strongly reminiscent of *La Peau douce*’s musical leitmotif: this soundtrack, in a minor key, at this point in Antoine’s spiritual journey echoes the unhappiness that the conception of infidelity generated there, warning of what such choices might generate. Infidelity emerges as a way of being which is unacceptable for both men and women in a committed relationship as otherwise separation is devised as the only sensible solution.

In Truffaut’s cinema amorous relationships are constantly veined by an underlying uncertainty: ‘Truffaut is the great filmmaker of “the impossible couple” – sometimes “the impossible trio” […]’. Marriage is no solution, neither is adultery; for
Truffaut’s men and women both are traps’ (Nicholls, 1993: 102). Disenchanted with institutional dicta, Truffaut depicts non-legalised relationships as more stable through Antoine and Colette, who have already experienced the legal status of marriage and the forms of deceit this institution may nevertheless bear. Antoine and Colette walk into their new relationships without unrealistic illusions about their eternal durability. Disregarding a system characterised by promiscuity, they strive for an authentic way of loving and living in reciprocal respect.

Lastly, an unusual couple, Gilberte and Lucien, are presented in a new light. Lucien visits Antoine with the intention to propose a novel view about his dead mother. Lucien reappears as a genuine example of commitment to Gilberte and as a paternal figure for Antoine (see Fig. CT:17, below).

*L’Amour en fuite* (Fig. CT:17)

The revaluation of Gilberte and Lucien’s relationship highlights theirs as a stable and long-lasting union, amongst a long series of relationships marked by treachery throughout the cycle. Following Antoine’s eventual reconnection with his mother, he reassesses aspects of his own character (similar to hers, as Lucien points out) and
sets himself on a new path. Gilberte’s return in the conclusive film of the cycle demarcates a new perspective from which to look at her and her past, as well as at Antoine and his future in relation to the issue of infidelity.

Differently from the previous films, which portrayed infidelity as it occurred, *L’Amour en fuite* is also a film about the memory of infidelity and the ensuing assessment of it. The notion of infidelity is here remembered, thought through and eventually rejected by the characters that have feared, witnessed and experienced it; this process then leaves space for a new conception of sentimental unions. The conclusive positive tones of these two couples’ relationships, Antoine and Sabine, and Colette and Xavier, suggest the irrelevance of the legalisation of the bonds as a guarantor of a good union. Appearing like the legalised locus where adultery was nurtured, the institution of marriage results deprived of a moral centre. In this new light, the sinful kiss between Antoine’s mother and her lover may acquire a more positive connotation. In *L’Amour en fuite*, Serge Daney remarks,

> du coup, l’image du présent modifie celle du passé qui n’est plus définitive. [...] le personnage de l’amant de la mère [...] devient “oncle Lucien”, un personnage à part entière, et entièrement émouvant [...] la mère de Doinel, un des personnages les plus durs de tout le cinéma français d’après-guerre, évoquée par celui qui lui est resté fidèle, prend comme on dit, “de l’épaisseur” (Daney, 1979).

Placing its basis on more honest grounds than those of a forced marriage to meet societal requests or a marriage rooted in promiscuity, Gilberte and Lucien’s commitment suggests the potential for a better union as well as family, as the juxtaposition of Gilberte with Lucien’s holding of Antoine conveys (see Fig. *CT:18*, in the following page).
Also, when Antoine recognises his mother’s old lover through the window of his office, his mouth uttering his name is very noticeable, as noticeable as the number of times he will pronounce ‘Mr. Lucien’ (the same name as the cycle’s other good stepfather, Lucien Tabard) – and many are the pictures of Lucien Antoine preserves in his collection of his mother’s memorabilia. This emphasises the absence of Antoine’s nameless stepfather, whilst suggesting Lucien could have been a better (step)father.

Through the controversial topic of infidelity, Truffaut exposes the dominant embedded beliefs in a society which tends to highlight its enticing facet. Truffaut discussed the happy ending of the cycle with Antoine’s last words: “bien sûr ça ne peut pas durer toute la vie, mais on peut faire comme si, oui c’est ça, faisons comme si”. Il y a ici l’idée de deux personnes qui sont de bonne foi et qui vont essayer de cheminer ensemble’ (in Mizrahi, 1979). Infidelity loses its position of primacy and fades away as a relic into the oblivion of the past.
At the time of the release of *La Peau douce* Jacques Siclier stated ‘Truffaut n’envisage pas l’adultère sous l’angle du péché, mais sous celui de la vie à deux […] en nous montrant comment on peut, à tout moment, et sans être un héros méprisable, gâcher sa vie et celle des autres’ (Siclier, 1964). Charles Avril aptly noticed a quality about *La Peau douce* that does justice to both Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s humanist vision as artists:

> il ne formule pas, mais il montre, ce qui est propre de l’image […]. Pour moi, la dissolution lente, dans les innombrables mensonges qu’entraîne l’infidélité […] attestait suffisamment l’existence d’une loi qui ne se laisse pas transgresser […] “Quiconque regarde une femme pour la désirer a déjà commis, dans son Coeur, l’adultère avec elle” (Avril, 1964).

Truffaut’s personal philosophy informs both his choice of subject matter and his medium, so that his infidelity cycle both tries to support a particular view of the concepts of infidelity, gender relations and commitment, whilst also being an attempt in itself to achieve authenticity in its presentation of characters in relationships. With this in mind, it is time to turn to an analysis of Rohmer’s *Contes moraux*. 
Part Two: Eric Rohmer

6. Chapter Six: Eric Rohmer and the *Contes moraux*

As the analysis of the *Antoine Doinel cycle* has demonstrated, in Truffaut’s films infidelity is presented in its carnal or physical manifestations; the consequences of such manifestations for all the characters involved are the cycle’s primary focus. Conversely, in Rohmer’s films, as this section will show, infidelity is intellectualised: the series’ concerns rest within the realm of the mind, with the cerebral mechanisms that produce the practice of infidelity as it is lived and perceived by the characters. This chapter contextualises the *Contes moraux* within Rohmer’s recurrent thematic and aesthetic preoccupations and introduces his treatment of infidelity in connection with notions of ambiguity and arbitrariness. It will also be seen how Rohmer’s treatment of infidelity suggests both ongoing linkages – as well as simultaneously departures from – the French cultural heritage such as, for example, (to name but one), the treatment of infidelity as elaborated in the writings of literary figures such as Balzac, which mirrored society’s elaborations upon this subject. The reference to French thinkers from the past when discussing Rohmer’s portrayal of infidelity takes on value in light of the prominence given during the period of Rohmer’s filmmaking to the treatment of infidelity within French nineteenth-century literature.

Eric Rohmer’s cultural interests were deeply rooted in the European literary and philosophical heritage. He was a *professeur de lettres* in French, then a film critic, and eventually, between 1956 and 1963, the editor of *Cahiers du cinéma*. For a period of five decades from the 1950s, he produced a series of theme-linked films,
Rohmer defined the first of these, *Contes moraux* (*Six contes moraux*) (1962-1972), parts of which were written as novels in the 1940s, as a cinema of thoughts rather than actions, where the films’ moral aspect has less to do with what people do than with what is going on in their minds while they are doing it. The tales are the shorts, *Le Boulangère de Monceau* (1962) and *La Carrière de Suzanne* (1963), and the feature films: *La Collectionneuse* (1966), *Ma Nuit chez Maud* (1969), *Le Genou de Claire* (1970) and *L’Amour l’après-midi* (1972). Although *La Collectionneuse* was shot before *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, the latter counts as the third tale.

Rohmer’s authorial approach characterises him as a free thinker who analytically observes the workings of human relationships. His cinema explores values, problems and questions that are not only contingent but that also cyclically repeat themselves, to an extent explaining the choice to work through the framework of cycle or series. Describing the tales as films where a particular feeling is analysed and where the characters analyse their feelings and are introspective, Rohmer offers works which dissect aspects of French society from the 1960s until the recent present; in an interview with Petrie, Rohmer said he wanted ‘to show the reality of life in France’ because ‘there is still lot to deal with in France’ (Petrie, 1971: 40). Hence, Rohmer’s artistic endeavours maintain a line of continuity with a well-established heritage of past literary and philosophical inquests into the ever flowing dynamics of human interactions. This line of continuity has partly to do with content and partly with methods of inquiry which Rohmer contextualised in synchrony with the series of radical transformations in France as a result of French socio-historical changes which became more evident from the end of the 1950s.
In literary terms, Rohmer’s approach finds roots in the naturalist model: sharing a fascination with the banal and the everyday, this model, influenced by Balzac amongst the others, dealt most often with a critical description of contemporary society, underlining that the contradictions that determined conflicts were as much psychological as social. Thus, the parallel between Balzac’s *La Comédie humaine*, in particular with its section preoccupied with female adultery, *Physiologie du mariage* (1829), and Rohmer’s tales becomes significant. The purpose of Balzac’s *Physiologie du mariage* was to instruct and entertain the reader about the leading features of current social life and bourgeois thinking about marriage and adultery. Rohmer detaches himself from the essentialised Balzacian vision of infidelity as the sinful realm of the immoral female, which was still widespread in his own society. His cinema supersedes the mere application in cinema of literary models of thought rooted in the French cultural heritage, so that he stands out as a figure of controversy, challenging the authority of the author.

Rohmer’s distinct and original style combines acute powers of observation and a vivid imagination, both of which take his spectators on a journey through the barely perceptible movements of the so-imperfect human heart.

Bonitzer aptly synthesises the essence of Rohmer’s works in three sentences: ‘l’auteur affectionne l’équivoque. […] L’auteur affectionne l’arbitraire. […] L’incertain, l’équivoque, l’hypocrite narrateur’ (Bonitzer, 1999: 14-15). Rohmer’s cinema emphasises the dichotomy between the spoken word and the image, highlighting an experience of deceit; infidelity implies the notion of deceit and the tales’ narrators’ experience of infidelity is inscribed with the mentioned dichotomy. The tales feed on ambiguity and arbitrariness as the narrators offer their version of the events. Rohmer plays on the ambivalent meanings of the images themselves and,
when the film reaches its narrative closure, an unsettling feeling of hesitation prevails. Bonitzer’s summary of the principle of the Rohmerian aesthetic is ‘on est toujours trompé’ (Bonitzer, 25); his cinema is made ‘du chiasme et du conflit entre voir et dire, entre raconter et montrer […]’ (Bonitzer, 27). A parallel between Rohmer’s concept of the cinematic image and the technique of trompe-l’œil is appropriate: the eye marvels at that illusory reality while simultaneously acknowledging its deceitful nature; the effect of this perception is an invitation to step virtually into that illusion and enjoy the spectacle it embodies in both form and content. Le plaisir des yeux – an expression from Truffaut’s edited group of critical writings – and its contentment are central to the understanding of the constructed reality inhabited by Rohmer’s characters. The tales’ protagonists are unknowing servants of the artificial constructs of their minds, and even when their self-deceit becomes evident they persevere in their illusion because it remains a much more, and perhaps the only, agreeable reality for them.

Referring to La Collectionneuse (1966), Bonitzer draws on the idea of dreams, arguing that ‘le rêve, c’est toujours le moi, mais chargé des oripeaux mimétiques qui lui donnent une apparence brillante. Et la conquête de ces oripeaux mène, c’est la logique de la “vérité romanesque” (par opposition au “mensonge romantique”, qui épouse l’autosurestimation du héros) selon René Girard, aux plus cruelles déceptions’ (Bonitzer, 1999:33). The two male protagonists’ inability to endure reality in La Collectionneuse results in their need to embellish it with artificial ornaments which grant it an apparently exciting new look. However, by confusing reality with dreams they imprison themselves in a web of deceptions. The discrepancy between word and image is not solely applicable to Rohmer’s fictional characters, as the spectators should be able to recognise the levels of deceit that the
narratives and the techniques highlight onscreen. In this respect, another parallel, this time from within the realm of philosophy, may be useful: seventeenth-century French thinker Blaise Pascal, whose philosophical ideas constitute the epicentre of *Ma Nuit chez Maud* (1969), used rhetorical techniques to make readers beware of the art of writing and prevent them from becoming naïve victims of the devices of literary fiction.

Despite Rohmer’s self-effacing and naturalistic cinematic style, with camera movements that reproduce the movements of the human eye, natural colours and natural lighting, Flavio Vergerio points out that the images in his films retain a mysterious quality (Vergerio, 1996: 69). Giorgio Tinazzi affirms that ‘the transparency of the narration and the equilibrium on the surface leave an obscure residue, a precipitance that is detectable during a second reading’ (Tinazzi, 1983: 96). There where clarity brings to light the neglected obscurities embedded in the everyday, ‘the gestures and the behaviours recorded by the camera suggest a “second meaning” beyond their immediate function. Rohmer does not disguise reality or transform it, but in it he grasps a “magic” dimension in which his characters’ adventures are immersed’ (Vergerio, 69-70). Within Rohmer’s narrative style which is ‘totally linear, but the attention to the realistic details masks a deep opacity’ (Vergerio, 1996: 71), infidelity is the reality buried under a series of culturally inherited attitudes that the tales bring to attention. Affirming his interest ‘to evoke the invisible starting from the visible, instead of trying to visualise in vain the

6 ‘La trasparenza della narrazione, l’equilibrio esterno, lasciano spesso un residuo oscuro, un precipitato che si coglie in seconda lettura’.

7 ‘I gesti e i comportamenti registrati dalla macchina da presa suggeriscono un “significato secondo” al di là della loro funzione immediata. Rohmer non camuffa la realtà, non la trasforma, ma coglie in essa una dimensione “magica” in cui sono immerse le avventure dei suoi personaggi’.

8 ‘totalmente lineare, ma la cura dei dettagli realistici maschera un’opacità più profonda’.
invisible’ (Mancini, 1982: 9)

Rohmer offers tales where the apparent linearity of the courses of events evokes the spectre of infidelity and makes of it the reality that inhabits and affects the relationships between the characters. The Contes moraux constitute ‘un cinéma qui peint les états d’âmes, les pensées tout autant que les actions’ (Magny, 1995: 43). As Magny pointed out:

ce souci d’exactitude, de précision et d’authenticité se retrouve à tous les niveaux de la réalisation: choix des interprètes, des costumes, des objets, écriture des dialogues qui seront parfois modifiés en collaboration avec les acteurs. Non pour les plier à ceux-ci, mais parce que l’interprète choisi pourra apporter un vocabulaire ou une tonalité plus conforme à un personnage dont le cinéaste est trop éloigné (Magny, 21).

Rohmer’s cinema places his contemporary society face to face with its own mentality as ‘le mode de vie et de pensée de ces classes moyennes est aujourd’hui, en France en particulier, celui qui domine et cristallise les aspirations de la majorité des Français, toutes classes confondues’ (Magny, 51). The fresh outlook that the Contes moraux offer on the topic of infidelity and its entanglement with questions of gender relations is also the result of Rohmer’s relationship with his actors – witnesses of their times – from whom he asked for ideas about the characters they played.

The cultural heritage and social norms by which the characters live are of fundamental relevance for setting up the paradigms needed to understand the phenomenon of infidelity in this context. The dynamics of infidelity are exposed throughout the tales as a modus operandi which is the direct result of the way male subjectivity conceives of female subjectivity. What I define as absent infidelity results from a patriarchal logic which views infidelity as a norm that, like a habit, becomes seemingly invisible.

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9 ‘suscitare l’invisibile partendo dal visibile, piuttosto che tentare invano di visualizzare l’invisibile’.
The *Contes moraux*

Rohmer does not employ the word infidelity when summarising the tales’ plot. He claims that ‘while the narrator is in search of one woman, he meets another, who absorbs his attention until he finds the first one again’ (in Showalter, 1993: 4-5). Nevertheless, he implicitly places infidelity centre frame. The protagonist of each tale is a man divided between two women, one who is seen as the ideal woman and another who is instead regarded as a contingent diversion. In an interview with *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1970, he stated, ‘all I can say is that for me the most important thing is the question of loyalty. To a woman, but also to an idea, to a dogma. […] Loyalty is one of the major themes of my *Moral Tales*, with betrayal as a counterpart’ (Showalter, 119). The lack of focus on this topic in the critical literature about the *Contes moraux* elicits a scrutiny of the hegemonic discourse that in part pervades the critique of Rohmer’s films; within a patriarchal framework, infidelity *au masculin* may be just overlooked. Not only could the pervasiveness of the double standard around this subject be a contributing factor, but also the tales’ barely presented instances of physical involvement between the characters may account for the lack of discussion of infidelity.

The *Contes moraux* highlight infidelity as a cerebral attitude. This cerebral attitude determines the physical manifestation of infidelity, or the performance of it. According to Rohmer, however, ‘mes héros, un peu comme Don Quichotte, se prennent pour des personnages de roman, mais peut-être n’y a-t-il pas de roman’ (Rohmer, 1998: 10). The narrators behave like fictional characters; they stage, rather than live, an instance of infidelity. Cinema’s role is ‘de satisfaire, imaginairement, notre besoin de drame et d’aventure’ (Bonitzer, 1999: 92) and, as Bonitzer claims, ‘le héros rohmérien est, très classiquement, un spectateur de cinéma’ (92). The
illusion of reality inherent in cinema works for both the spectators and the characters, whose imagination projects another dimension that they mistake for reality: that is, the reality of non-infidelity; infidelity is an act simultaneously present and absent. Bonitzer aptly affirms that in the tales ‘l’événement est un non-événement. Ce non-événement devient donc l’événement dont traite le film. La fiction rohmérienne se fonde sur le néant’ (92). This nothingness is at the core of the romantic fiction by which the narrators live. Within such a system of reference, infidelity is that nothingness. The tales’ narrators ‘s’ordonnent autour d’un acte fondamental dont la propriété essentielle est qu’il n’a pas lieu. Un acte manqué […]’ (Bonitzer, 93). Yet, they transform ‘le néant en être’ (96) whilst imagining themselves to be playing safely in the knowledge that ‘les conséquences d’un non-acte sont moins faciles à évaluer’ (Bonitzer, 111). The supposedly missing action frees the narrators’ consciences of guilt, although for the other characters, and arguably the spectators, the body of evidence of their betrayal is blatant. The tales unveil the mechanisms behind such different perceptions of the same facts.

The tales display a range of attitudes about romantic commitments. Traditionally, the sacrality of marriage is based upon reciprocal love, material and spiritual support and fidelity. Fidelity and infidelity are deemed to exist by virtue of romanticism and passion. In the tales there is very little romanticism and passion. By eluding such expectations, the tales place themselves on radical grounds of interpretation: less concerned with the outcome of infidelity than in the process of thought that conceives of it, they raise questions about inherited mind-sets from the past, possibly to be criticised and rejected, and perspectives for a more desirable alternative. The narrators think and talk about infidelity; the initial thought about transgression arises from purely accidental events, so they are not initially
responsible for having sought an extra-dyadic diversion. The phases the narrators go through in their experience of infidelity are firstly the encounter with the possibility of transgression, then the plan of seduction and finally, the desire for reconciliation: they feel compelled to digress from the publicly acknowledged relationship, seek to seduce the second woman, return to the official partner. Unequivocally infidelity is the narrators’ inextricable underlying idea.

Bonitzer outlines the narrators’ initially comfortable grounds: ‘ils ne parlent que d’eux-mêmes, et sans complexes. Adrien […] justifie son parasitisme social par l’’héroïsme’’ que son dandysme exige […]. Jérôme lui aussi […] n’a que le mot d’‘héroïsme’ à la bouche.’ (Bonitzer, 1999: 28). Also, Bonitzer sees Jean-Louis’ ‘sentiment de supériorité’ as made explicit in his own words when he claims: ‘J’ai toujours eu, depuis ma tendre enfance, la certitude d’avoir Dieu avec moi’ (28). However, these positive circumstances are instances of false consciousness and reveal problematic issues within the recognised gender relations of the time.

The following chapters examine the Contes moraux in relation to the ways in which Rohmer treats and develops the theme of infidelity, – and particularly how he does so with reference to the cultural heritage that informs the perceptions and actions of his characters. As the second tale, La Carrière de Suzanne, does not precisely follow the narrative path that the others do since infidelity is not something, which concerns the narrator, only those aspects of the tale that are directly relevant to the discursive analysis of infidelity will be discussed. Chapter Seven focuses on male and female characterisation as a basis for differing attitudes towards the notion and occurrence of infidelity. Chapter Eight focuses on the development of the dynamics of infidelity throughout the tales. Chapter Nine focuses
on the ways in which the tales’ endings portray the male characters’ re-elaboration upon their separation from the second woman and their return to the first.
7. Chapter Seven: Gender Troubles and La Collectionneuse

This chapter offers an analysis of the representation of the male and female characters in the Contes moraux and of the characters’ reciprocal perceptions of one another. In this context, attention is paid to the ways in which ideas about infidelity in the films take shape through the characterisation of male and female, using La Collectionneuse as a case study. Leigh points out that ‘Shafto call[s] it a pre-1968 film, ‘a prophetic film of the period’’ (Leigh, 2012: 24). It is a film, in other words, which anticipates the watershed decade of the 1960s in terms of the dynamics addressed through its perception of infidelity and through its gender perspectives. It will emerge that by way of contrast the films’ perspectives enter in a dialogical interaction with those of the male characters: this highlights the wide gap between the men’s creation of an idea of fidelity ad personam and fidelity’s secular and religious meanings. The chapter also defines the female characters’ features, their relation to concepts of fidelity and infidelity, how they relate to and engage with change the development of the feminist cause being a fundamental trait – in the socio-historical context within which they see themselves as integral parts. The tales are a conflict zone where the male and female figures confront each other about their moral stances and doubts. With the exception of L’Amour l’après-midi, the tales’ titles place a female character at the centre, yet the events are narrated by the male characters, thus the narratives are formally structured around a male perspective; the women function as catalysts for the men’s actions. The six tales are cyclical variations upon the same theme: a man falls for a woman at the very moment he is about to marry another; the latter is believed to be the ideal woman and the other a contingent diversion. Key subjects of scrutiny within such narratives are the men’s
perception of infidelity and this binary definition of women. In the first two tales the narrators are university students; in the remaining ones they are professionals. Similar to the Antoine Doinel cycle, which follows its protagonist’s path from adolescence to adulthood, the tales trace a journey from youth to maturity; conversely, where in Truffaut the cycle starts with marriage and ends with unmarried couples, in Rohmer, up to the fourth tale, the protagonists are unmarried; in the fifth infidelity takes place on the verge of the male protagonist’s wedding and in the sixth within marriage.

Derek Schilling emphasises that ‘the presence of the storyteller on the soundtrack tempers the effects of photographic illusion, preventing the spectator from becoming absorbed in the story-world’ (Schilling, 2007: 138). The narrators’ degree of self-absorption, compromising the quality of their self-criticism, generates incoherent perspectives on the two women encountered and the relationships with them: such perspective results from the narrators’ own imagination rather than from objective qualities. In the first tale’s narrator’s delineation of his journey ‘on retrouve ici le double itinéraire, physique et mental’ (Magny, 1995: 38), applicable to all the narrators’ paths; while ‘sur le plan physique, la rencontre a lieu “par hasard”’, the narrators’ spiritual journey changes from ‘du hasard invoqué à une veritable préméditation’ (Magny, 38). The narrators actively shape the events following the accidental first meeting with the second woman, and the films show ‘la façon dont l’itinéraire mental du narrateur pervertit son itinéraire physique et ce qu’il nous révèle d’un comportement, d’une mentalité’ (Magny, 40). The combination of their presupposed superiority and short-sightedness produces for the narrators the illusion that the levels of infidelity they engage in do not occur.
The features mentioned encourage a link between the tales’ men and the male protagonists of the mid-nineteenth century French literary tradition, confident of the integrity of the patriarchal structure and their position of primacy and infallibility within it; this attitude is strictly tied to the double standard discourse of sexual mores. Like Truffaut’s Antoine Doinel, the tales’ narrators are anachronistic characters who live according to models of behaviour borrowed from the fictional worlds of past centuries; consequently, the narrators’ imagined reality highlights the fragile nature of the morals sustaining it. In his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1976), René Girard discusses the notion of triangular desire with reference to the characters of Don Quixote (Cervantes), Emma Bovary (Flaubert) and M. de Rênal (Stendhal). Girard strips desire and love of any vestiges of romanticism and spontaneity and sees them as the result of the imitation of an admired set of beliefs or, alternatively, of a rival’s conduct. According to Girard, there is no direct link between the (desiring) subject and the object (of desire), rather an external factor intervenes as mediator of desire between the two; Christian existence prescribes the imitation of Christ, chivalric existence encourages the imitation of Amadis (*Don Quixote*). The tales’ men barely act with spontaneity and if they do, they either regret it or justify it as a due response to provocation. The narrators follow the steps of an ideal model of conduct: the imitation of this ideal justifies anything that comes with it, including the object(s) of their desire, hence the model chooses for them, turning them into executors of a pre-established system. They operate so as to assure the continuity of the chosen system in as unadulterated a way as possible. Girard’s description of characters who ‘imitate from the person they have decided to be, all that can be imitated, everything exterior, appearance, gesture, intonation, and dress’ (5) finds an apt application in the tales’ structure, which eventually reveals the male
characters’ degree of pretence. Eventually, the narrators even fail to follow the models they have chosen, and the occurrence of infidelity is what unveils their failings.

Rohmer’s narrators fulfil Girard’s prediction that the characters’ goal is ‘to see themselves as they are not’ (Girard, 6). The tales show the discrepancies between a man’s idealised image of the self and the real one: the masking of their real nature constitutes the narrators’ most salient trait. The narrator (Barbet Schroeder) in La Boulangère de Monceau wishes that Sylvie (Michèle Girardon) could see him as he sees himself. When he says, ‘je ne voulais pas qu’elle me connaisse tel quel je ne suis pas’, he refers to the fact she has so far seen him as a dragueur, which, despite the fact that he has bothered her in the street, he denies being. Conforming to specific principles of education and class, the narrator carefully chooses a woman who can fit into the class values of the bourgeoisie’s values he thinks they both share (see Fig. 7:1, below, where Sylvie appears elegant and refined, with precisely those qualities the narrator aspires to for his future wife).

La Boulangère de Monceau (Fig. 7:1)
The other woman, Jacqueline (Claudine Soubrier), brings out the narrator’s less refined characteristics, exposing a much baser nature than the narrator is willing to acknowledge: a bakery assistant, a mere fast food dispenser, is by extension herself an object of cheap and fast consumption. Her lower socio-professional status makes him feel entitled to disrupt her work, to take liberties with her body – figuratively, an extension of the cakes (‘cheap cakes’, later on Sylvie will define). He holds Jacqueline, and not himself, responsible for the flirtatious connotation their supplier-customer relationship acquires. Having unexpectedly given way to an inferior self, he must restore the image of the man he pretends to be: he gives up Jacqueline, who is the mistake and the pursuit of whom would be an act of perversion, he says, choosing Sylvie, who is the truth. The narrator’s denied appreciation of the common girl uncovers the narrator’s self-deceptive personality. If according to their logic the second woman is not worthy of much attention, eventually the narrators show from the beginning a sense of superiority also towards the chosen woman. Giancarlo Zappoli points out that for the narrator in La Boulangère de Monceau ‘love does not unsettle his perspectives but it has nevertheless to fit in a preordained plan’ (Zappoli, 1998: 30) as, despite his desire to meet Sylvie, he says ‘tout amoureux que j’étais déjà, l’idée de distraire la moindre parcelle de mes heures d’étude à la recherche de Sylvie ne me venait même pas à l’esprit’. The reluctance to give up anything for the admired woman indicates the calculating nature of the narrators’ intentions as well as the distance that they keep also from them; both details, hence, significantly inform their involvement in infidelity.

The battle with one’s self continues in La Collectionneuse with Adrien (Patrick Bauchau), an art dealer. His friend Daniel (Daniel Pommereulle), an artist,
pronounces one crucial truth about the tales’ narrators when he explains that it is more difficult to satisfy one’s own ego than to fight it: to repress the ego and its spontaneous desires is a way out of the far more difficult task of acknowledging and handling them. In the film’s Prologue Two, Daniel’s discussion with an art critic (Alain Jouffoy) about the notion of art and its function in relation to suffering, emptiness, appearance and distance from the masses prompts the critic’s affirmation that one who does not look into him/herself is just a filthy conformist. In order to look into him/herself, he says, one needs the tools with which to withstand hurtful truths. Adrien and Daniel mistake their effort to escape from their selves for an escape from the bourgeois filthy conformism they despise, without realising they are made of that same conformism. Perfect guests in a ‘gentilhommière dans le style provençal de la fin du XVIII siècle’ (Rohmer, 1998: 134), Adrien’s and Daniel’s affectation invokes the aristocrats of the pre-Revolution era. Daniel aims at ‘absolute nothingness’ and Adrien at not thinking: their (in-)activities suggest that neither of them is equipped with the tools the critic describes. Daniel and Adrien’s elevation of themselves above the masses creates emptiness around them; by considering art as a tool to hurt people, Daniel demonstrates his superiority and alienation. Reality, the critic believes, exists in opposition to emptiness. Such emptiness is impossible to grasp, as impossible as to grasp Daniel’s sculpture made of razors: such razors are emptiness, and so is his conduct of life. Conversing with Daniel about the search for emptiness, Adrien insists that what counts is not thinking but participating: an author’s thoughts guide his own thinking, satisfying his wish to be led. This signals Adrien’s ‘lack of moral centre’ (Crisp, 1988: 95). The narrators are characterised by a degree of passivity: similar characteristics can be seen in Jean-Louis (Jean-Louis Trintignant) in Ma Nuit chez Maud through the Catholicism he says he has inherited
from his family; Jerôme (Jean-Claude Brialy) in *Le Genou de Claire* acts according to the novelistic modes of a Don Quixote; Frédéric (Bernard Verley) in *L’Amour l’après-midi* proclaims his monogamy in a monogamous society but were society polygamous, he would be so too. This passivity is double-edged: the narrators do not acknowledge their passivity as such but instead confuse it with personal choice. Simultaneously, they proclaim a certain degree of passivity to justify their actions as mere responses to others’ initiatives; Adrien is the motor behind all actions but denies responsibility. Similarly, the narrator in *La Boulangère de Monceau* accuses the *boulangère* of courting him and Jerôme thinks that to touch Claire’s knee is an act of duty to rescue her.

The narrator in *Le Genou de Claire* also spends his holiday in an eighteenth-century villa during the summer. If, as Joanne Mellen affirms, in ‘Claire’s Knee Rohmer’s settings are visual manifestations of his heroes’ personalities’, then ‘the setting provides a judgment on the empty, idle existence of the haute-bourgeoisie personified by Jerôme’ (Mellen, 1974: 151). Mellen’s argument usefully applies to other tales: in *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, the isolated chalet up in the mountains where Jean-Louis lives conveys his emotional remoteness towards others and reinforces the sense of religious austerity he believes to embody. In *L’Amour l’après-midi* Frédéric is divided between the sense of stasis the banlieue instils in him and the vibrancy of the city. Jerôme’s villa has plenty of murals, some of which are trompe l’oeil. One mural depicts Don Quixote, who, sitting on his horse, imagines himself to be flying: he wears a bandage over his eyes with someone next to him creating the impression of artificial sunshine and winds. This mural symbolises the vacuity of Jerôme’s illusory system of values (see *Fig. 7:2*, in the following page).
The idleness provided by the holiday exacerbates the intrinsic idleness of Jerôme’s soul, neither Don Juan nor Don Quixote, as well as providing the ideal landscape for the expression of his features as an amateur. Vidal summarizes him as ‘l’expérience, le cynisme, le manqué de scrupules, la volonté de dominer par l’esprit ou par les sens des êtres plus jeunes ou moins expérientés, le plaisir comme règle de vie et le désir comme critère moral…’ (Vidal, 1977: 111). Serceau’s analysis of the relationship that the characters have towards modernity and the past through the properties they inhabit highlights the discrepancy between past and present attitudes towards infidelity as embodied by Jerôme. Jerôme’s gentilhommière ‘renvoie au passé, à une situation reléguée dans le passé par le nouveau mode de vie et la nouvelle définition des loisirs’ (Serceau, 2000: 25). By contrast, Serceau sees Mme Walter’s villa as a witness to a synthesis of comfort and improvement of modernity in harmony with the graceful aesthetics of the past, where ‘il n’est pas possible de faire […] ce que se permettait Laura dans la propriété de Jerôme’ (26). A link can be drawn between the attitude towards infidelity which proliferates in the details of the living conditions at
Jerôme’s and those of the women within the villa on the other side of his: the care with which Mme Walter’s premises are kept stands in opposition to the decadence of Jerôme as an effort to promulgate values of a modern model of integrity.

In *L’Amour l’après-midi* Frédéric’s spiritual state is encoded in his journey from the *banlieue*, where he lives, to the centre of Paris, where he works. He prefers books, like Bouganville’s *Voyage autour du monde*, over newspapers whilst commuting because of the power of books to absorb him totally, in contrast with the latter’s inability to prevent him from breaking away from his current life, from the place and time where he lives. As seen in Truffaut’s *Doinel cycle*, writers, novels and fictional characters appear in one form or another throughout the tales here too. The tales constantly expose the power of the fictitious, from *La Boulangère de Monceau*, where the narrator asks Jacqueline ‘*vous êtes romanesque?’*, to *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, where Pascal is referenced throughout, to *La Collectionneuse*, where Rousseau, the German Romantics and Don Quixote are elements of debates amongst the characters, and *Le Genou de Claire*, where the narrator is accompanied by the writer Aurora (Aurora Cornu). Writers, books and their characters function as mediators of the universe to which the tales’ heroes submit, validating Girard’s theory of mimetic desire, and also establishing a direct correlation with Truffaut’s protagonists’ need to frame their experiences within a literary context. Rohmer’s and Truffaut’s films depict as less problematic the love for the past and its fictional products than the uncritical reception of the values they carry, with the failure to update them in accordance with contemporary systems of values. The narrators use the literary models as armatures with which to protect themselves in the face of the destabilising effect of a changing world, which, in this context, has to do with the changes in men’s and women’s roles in society. The anachronistic heralding of the
narrators’ models highlights the discrepancy between the imagined circumstances and their real ones, together with the struggle to find a safe place in which to fit.

Serseau claims that in Rohmer ‘le choix des personnages et du context socioprofessionel serviraient à mettre en évidence une volonté d’être ou de ne pas être de son monde et de son temps’ (Serseau, 2000: 24). Frédéric, married and with offspring, seemingly carries out his private and professional responsibility without difficulty; yet his narrative trajectory exposes the frustrations that his private and professional certainties bring to his life. The banlieue, by which he feels oppressed, is associated with the settled family life where nothing ever changes. Instead, the hustle of Paris feeds his imagination and stimulates his desire for adventure: there, he switches onto a state of daydreaming so as to harmlessly escape from his routine. Expressing to a friend his fear of ‘l’angoisse de l’après-midi’, his surprise at discovering how common that fear is amongst others demonstrates his (and the other narrators’) incapacity for empathy.

Catholicism invests significantly in amorous fidelity and defines the subject of infidelity in very detailed terms. In Ma Nuit chez Maud the altercation between the rigorous dicta of Pascal’s Jansenism and Jean-Louis’s refutation of them takes place through a confrontation with a free thinker, an atheist and a troubled Catholic: infidelity is analysed from a range of intellectual and spiritual standpoints representative of the society the characters inhabit. The snowy winter setting captured in black and white reinforces the severity of the characters’ mindsets: anguish and fear of God, torment over belief in His existence and the strict execution of His word. Jean-Louis, an engineer in his early-thirties, is caught in the middle of such dilemmas: in the first ten minutes of the film he inappropriately devotes his
 attentions to a woman among the praying congregation at Mass and then to studying mathematics in the chalet (see Fig. 7:3-4-5, below and in the following page).

Ma Nuit chez Maud (Fig. 7:3-4)
Ma Nuit chez Maud (Fig. 7:5)

Pascal’s condemnation of women and mathematics as equal forms of distractions from God make of him the anti-hero of Pascalian religious rigour.

On the evening of 21 December, Jean-Louis suddenly decides that the woman from the church, Françoise (Marie-Christine Barrault), will become his wife. The connotation of irrationality that the darkest day of the year, the Winter Solstice, carries, redefines Jean-Louis’ clear-cut logic as instinctual foolishness. Rohmer’s recurrent use of medium shots of Jean-Louis at Mass reiterates his pronounced self-condescension: Jean-Louis personifies Pascal’s loathed Jesuitical pedagogic methods of ‘learning by heart without questioning’ (Hammond, 1998: 236); Jean-Louis seems to have acquired his faith by inertia. The application of Christian attitudes only when they suit his needs testifies to the partiality of his faith: Pascal’s anti-Jesuitical position was indeed the result of the Jesuits’ renowned abuse of rhetoric so to justify causes useful for meeting personal ends. Jean-Louis decisively refutes the rigour of the Pascalian dictum but, when facing circumstances that threaten the stability of his
needs, he temporarily resorts to and rigidly abides by it in a blatantly utilitarian way. The mise-en-scène in the church provides a link to Pascal’s condemnation of naivety in the face of aesthetically grand appearances: the vault within which the priest preaches and the contour of the sacral objects together with the holy phrases he solemnly pronounces contribute to the special rhetoric of the religious ceremony (see *Fig. 7:6*, below)

![My Nuit chez Maud (Fig. 7:6)](image)

Jean-Louis’ stolid expressions testify to a firm but unreceptive conviction about the content of the sermons; the elements of the mise-en-scène take the role of persuasive mediators of the subject matters of the sermons. Jean-Louis’ dogmatism and inflexibility do not result from an honest and heartfelt religious belief, instead religious belief is the tool used to justify his conduct.

Each narrator displays an overall negative conception of women. The search for the superior woman stems from a need to have a female counterpart to accompany the perfection of their own image: such perfect women have to reflect
and double the narrators’ narcissistic egos. These men envisage women fitting into the traditional opposition of either madonnas or whores. As the following discussion will show, the typologies of women in the tales reflect an archaic perception of them together with a more progressive one; the men are caught between these two diametrically opposed ways of seeing. Infidelity becomes a battleground for gender clashes and redefinitions of their terms. Women feature more than twice as often as men and their portrayal raises questions; nevertheless, given that it is the men who perpetrate infidelity, the discussion focused on the women who are involved with them will inevitably and substantially extend the discussion of the male characters.

The narrators’ various ways of relating to the heroines is central to an understanding of how infidelity emerges in the Contes moraux. Tester affirms that ‘many of the heroines of Rohmer’s films can be approached as variations on the theme of Emma Bovary’ (Tester, 2008: 46): this statement does not fit the tales’ heroines as much as it instead applies to the narrators, who are attached to a fictitious model of masculinity. The tales’ contemporary setting offers a portrait of women who live in the modern world, thus a model of and perspective on women projected in that modernity. As Pezzotta and Prandi remark, ‘to a deeply different society will correspond completely different women. These are women who are accomplishing their process of liberation, who do not suffocate any longer in their silence, but who are beginning to shout their word’ (Pezzotta and Prandi, 1996: 86).11 The films’ blatant attachment to modernity is evident in the female characters’ search for a new model of relationships within the input of the changing perception of gender roles;

11 ‘A una società profondamente diversa, corrisponderanno donne completamente diverse. Donne che stanno portando a compimento il loro processo di liberazione, che non soffocano più nel proprio silenzio, ma stanno iniziando a gridare la loro parola’.
by contrast, the male ideals of the heterosexual relationship are regimented within conventional patriarchal ideology.

The women are portrayed in a multifaceted perspective as they are viewed as they are and as the narrators perceive them to be. As understood from Jean-Louis’ definition of *la femme* as opposed to *une femme*, the narrators have two types of women in mind: in French, *la femme* refers to the idea of woman as extraordinary and unique; *une femme* refers to the idea of woman as ordinary, with whom it is apparently appropriate to conduct playful affairs. The question arising concerns whether women inhabiting the men’s spaces, either temporarily or permanently, comply with their expectations. Formally, the first person narration confers supreme authority to the narrator; yet, with time, this device is understood as only a tool for self-delusion. Schilling points out that ‘the use of counterpoint between first-person voiceover and image gives events a double temporality, that of being perceived and remembered at once’ (Schilling, 2007: 17). This double structure enables the spectator to observe the events from a critical perspective. *La Boulangère de Monceau*’s narrator’s conventional perception of woman as ideal versus ordinary establishes a stark difference between the ideal and supposedly permanent woman and the second-class, temporary one. The ideal, Sylvie, who works in an art gallery, is fair-haired, tall and infused with an aura of graceful pre-eminence. The narrator stresses how ‘elle n’était pas fille à se laisser aborder comme ça dans la rue’, in order to highlight his own superior state too, as he explains that ‘accoster comme ça c’était encore moins mon genre’. The conceit of the ideal woman works on the level of the classic romantic *mirage*, but is also subdued to the narrator’s narcissistic desire to confirm, through the woman’s supposed perfection, his own. Jacqueline, who works as a bakery assistant, is a brunette, short and sensuous: appearing in the narrator’s
view as an ordinary, approachable woman, she functions, by contrast and yet again, as a reminder of his superiority. When he is at the bakery buying cakes the close-ups of the money in his hands handed over to her are followed by close-ups of her sensuous face or neck, conveying his vision of himself as the powerful acquirer and of her as the mere object of his purchases. The camera also captures the ravenous way he puts the cakes down his throat and repeatedly shows his brutal gesture of throwing the cakes’ wrapping paper onto the street, a metaphor for the value that he confers on Jacqueline (see Fig. 7:7, below).

*La Boulangère de Monceau* (Fig. 7:7)

From the beginning, whether ideal or ordinary, the women are always positioned in a subservient position to the men.

The Madonna/whore distinction feeds on and perpetuates a well-established tradition. Helpful, here, is Hélène Cixous’ analysis of ‘patriarchal binary thought’ (Moi, 1985: 102). For Cixous, Moi explains, ‘Western philosophy and literary thought are and have always been caught up in this endless series of hierarchical binary oppositions’ (102), and within this context ‘the hidden male/female opposition with its inevitable positive/negative evaluation can always be traced as
the underlying paradigm’ (103). Accordingly for the narrators, ‘either woman is passive or she does not exist’ (Cixous, in Moi, 103). The tales show the perpetual effort to hold on to both the anachronistic fantasy of the submissive Madonna, available for a permanent relationship as well as the woman of sexually indiscriminate customs, available for sporadic mischievous adventures. Simultaneously, in spite of male desires and expectations, the tales also portray ‘women’s movement’\(^\text{12}\) (Moi, 101) away from the essentialising eye of patriarchy. Rohmer affirmed, ‘j’ai toujours vu un aspect leonardesque chez Françoise Fabian […] son sourire énigmatique’ (Laurencin, in Collet, 1996: 92): arguably, this mysterious connotation given to the women in the tales is what contributes to the films’ and their characters’ ‘indécidabilité ontologique’ (Laurencin, in Collet, 92). This sets the tales in a terrain enabling a radically fresher view of women: incidentally, the tales’ women are not the feminists Cixous criticised as being interested in obtaining ‘power in the present patriarchal system’ (Moi, 101); instead, they emerge as women who eschew the dominant masculine/feminine discourse of oppositions, proposing an alternative, more constructive and balanced framework. If, as for Cixous, ‘the ‘feminine’ side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance’ (Moi, 102), it follows that this vision of women inevitably has resonances for the judgement placed on them with reference to the experience of infidelity.

Rohmer’s tales expose obsolete and ideologically distorted representations of gender relations. Like the false/real effect of the trompe-l’oeil technique, the distinction between the two types of female protagonists is sustained throughout the series but in reality begins to disintegrate from as early as the second tale. The unbalanced principle in which gender relations have been normatively inscribed is

\(^{12}\) Moi italicizes movement because Cixous by that means, as she continues, ‘as opposed to the static rigidity of so-called “feminism”’.
inherent in the tales’ texture; for example, the tales’ titles, which, except for the sixth, presuppose a woman’s attribute or name, suggest who the subjective forces of the tales are. So, even if the tales are recounted by a man, the women outnumber their male counterparts by at least two to one, structurally destabilising the narrators’ phallocentric vision: despite her supposed marginal position, the lesser woman instils doubts in the protagonist, but the elect woman also, from her untouchable pedestal (of presupposed passivity), contributes to defying her partner’s certainties. The narrators’ alleged desire on the part of the second women is severely challenged by effect of physical and intellectual rejections: if Jacqueline, Haydée (Haydée Politoff), Maud and Laura (Béatrice Romand) at some point appear to succumb to the narrators’ charms, they in the end refute any desire for this possibility. The partial involvement of these women with the narrators prevents the narrators from fully accomplishing their infidelity. The ideal Sylvie causes turmoil when telling the narrator ‘j’ai tout vu […] je connais tous vos vices’. Neither the male protagonist nor the spectator ever knows the real implication of that affirmation: could she potentially have witnessed the narrator’s advances to the boulangère? Hence, ‘a story that on first viewings seems to show events from one character’s viewpoint, the man’s […], may on a second viewing or in retrospect reveal the viewpoint of another, the woman’s’ (Leigh, 2012: 12). The state of panic his voice-over conveys in the face of these two sentences introduces a degree of uncertainty about the real nature of the apparently subservient spouse, as well as making her affirmations function as a confirmation of his bad conscience.

The women and the narrators also express themselves differently. The narrators put forward strategies for the attainment of their aims through a skilful rhetoric; in a way, they can be said to master what, after Derrida, is known as
phallogocentrism, the conjuncture of logocentrism and phallocentrism (Moi, 1985: 103). Nothing seems more appropriate than this definition in a context where a convoluted male logos is so domineering. Conversely, all the women are straightforward; they do not suffer from the anxiety to justify their beliefs and codes of conduct. Yet, the chosen women are substantially less talkative than the second ones: they say little and what they say remains to a certain degree cryptic. In part, this feeds the narrators’ vision of them as surrounded by a magic aura; in part, it is a symptom of these women’s ability to subtly eschew the status to which they are forcibly relegated. Often, as for instance in Colin Crisp’s analysis, the chosen women have been interpreted as representatives of grace and salvation. This reading risks reducing rather than enhancing the breadth of Rohmer’s work. In Ma Nuit chez Maud, Françoise’s elusiveness conceals the ambivalence of her feelings. In Le Genou de Claire, Lucinde’s (Isabelle Pons) enigmatic aura is embedded and emphasised in the picture of her which is the only proof of her existence (see Fig. 7:8, below).
In *L’Amour l’après-midi*, Hélène’s (Françoise Verley) barely contained cry and utterances of surprise and anxiety during Frédéric’s closing speech raise doubts about the real nature of her worry (see *Fig. 7:9*, below).

![Image](image1.png)

*L’Amour l’après-midi* (Fig. 7:9)

In *La Collectionneuse*, Mijanou’s (Mijanou Bardot) delicate aloofness in face of the summer spent apart from Adrien generates a sense of puzzlement (see *Fig. 9*, below).

![Image](image2.png)

*La Collectionneuse* (Fig. 7:10)
Such depictions indicate the narrators’ partial and limited understanding of their partners, seeing them only as the embodiment of an archaic and fictionalised idea of purity. In contrast, the second women, who speak their thoughts unguardedly, are perceived as a challenge by that male universe where there is space only for a utopian, silent woman.

Rohmer’s tales challenge the classic Madonna/whore dichotomy on other levels too: if it is sustained initially through the cultural perception of blonde women as signifiers of angelic purity and of brunettes as sinful, these starkly different female physical connotations change from tale to tale. They collapse with both wife and temptress being brunette in L’Amour l’après-midi, or with both being blonde, as in Le Genou de Claire. The abolition of this distinction suggests the ephemeral nature of this construction and of the consequential fixing of female identity and subjectivity. Rohmer refuted Hitchcock’s delineation of women:

I like choosing different types of women […]. At first glance they appear completely different people. I cannot even say that I use, like other film-directors, types of women who are opposite to each other, like the blonde and the brunette, as Truffaut often does, for example. This also happened in Balzac (in Vergerio and Zappoli, 1996: 34).

Furthermore, Rohmer affirmed ‘les différentes femmes de Godard… je les trouve toutes semblables les unes aux autres, c’est La Femme… mais elles n’ont pas une personnalité morale ou intellectuelle’ (Revault d’Allonnes, 1992: 74). To this it should be added Rohmer’s choice of unglamorous actresses who escaped the Hollywood and star-like classic stereotype. Pezzotta and Prandi point out that Rohmer’s women are not an ‘expression of a femininity built around models exclusively cinematographic, “divine” replicates already seen in thousands of films,

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13 ‘Io amo scegliere dei tipi femminili diversi […]. Ma a prima vista sono persone completamente diverse. Non posso nemmeno dire di usare, come certi registi, dei tipi femminili opposti, la bionda e la bruna, per esempio, come fa di frequente Truffaut. Si trovava ciò anche in Balzac’.
fatal women who make their own myth relive onscreen [...]. Rohmer’s women are not the fruit of cinema’s “artificial” beauty, rather of the world’s “spontaneous” beauty’ (Pezzotta and Prandi, 1996: 91). The tales thus invite the spectators to see women as human beings first, rather than as categorised, gendered subjectivities. The blondes can be as morally problematic as the brunettes, and the brunettes can be as loyal and faithful as the blondes. Just as the heavenly-blonde Françoise is guilty of infidelity and disloyalty, the earthy-brunette Maud and Laura fight for the attainment of the opposite values. Sylvie, Françoise, Mijanou, Lucinde and Hélène all hide some sort of knowledge from their partner, and this gently suggests a richer interpretation of them than the narrators’ rigid schemes impose. These schemes are obviously broken when, as Vidal notes, with Claire’s arrival in Le Genou de Claire ‘nous assistons pour la première fois à une espèce d’interchangeabilité de la séductrice et de l’élue’ (Vidal, 1977: 125). Not only is there this explicit interchange of roles between the second and the elect woman, but also ‘autre ambiguïté, plus troublante encore: […] Lucinde n’est pas le “type physique” de Jérôme’ (Vidal, 125). If Claire takes on the role of ideal from the original ideal woman, then the pictures of the two women suggest that perhaps they are less different than one might think, ‘comme si l’objectif, au delà des apparenaces, avait mis à nu leur ressemblance profonde’ (Vidal, 125), shedding doubts about the authenticity of Jérôme’s interest for Claire, potentially validating Girard’s interpretation of mimetic desire.

The narrators’ tendency to talk profusely signals the need to dominate the circumstances around them, yet the elect women’s elusiveness and the second

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14 ‘espressione di una femminilità costruita intorno a modelli prettamente cinematografici, “divine” replicanti già viste in mille film, donne fatali che fanno rivivere sullo schermo il proprio mito. […] Le donne di Rohmer non sono il frutto della bellezza “artificiale” del cinema, bensì, della bellezza “spontanea” del mondo.”
women’s uncompromising neglect of the narrators’ judgement challenge their authority. Rohmer’s point of view also intervenes to complicate the assessment of the circumstances and to further undermine the narrators’ certainties.

A brief close reading of the fourth tale, *La Collectionneuse*, will illustrate the central ideas about the connections between infidelity and gender relations in the *Contes moraux*. *La Collectionneuse* functions as a showcase for the multiple perspectives on infidelity which are embodied in the tales. Discussing the narrator’s categories of judgement in *La Boulangère de Monceau*, Crisp states that ‘Jacqueline, the baker’s girl, is plump and sensual by comparison with the more ethereal Sylvie’ (Crisp, 1988: 36), and that ‘Sylvie is reassuring because “classifiable”’, whereas Jacqueline, according to the narrator ““didn’t fit into any of [his] categories”’ (37). The idea of the other woman being associated with amoral sensuousness is manifested in *La Collectionneuse*, when she is introduced in Prologue One: Crisp suggests, ‘the camera inspects her body […]; and her aura of sensual pagan amorality, opaque and somewhat mysterious, will only increase as the film proceeds’ (43). Haydée’s opacity and mystery are not to be intended as shortcomings, but as features that suggest women’s subjectivity as rich, against men’s essentialist vision of them.

The close-ups of bodily parts of some of the second women do not imply a fragmented female subjectivity but instead the parts of that whole which constitute its richness, and which the male subjectivity cannot bear: the narrators can only face these women, if they conceive of them in terms of disunity. Crisp interprets the close-ups of Haydée’s body as Rohmer’s ‘disapproval for all Haydée’s represents’ (43), and the dissection of her body as ‘linked unfavourably with sensuality and animal vitality in the person of Haydée’ (44) (see *Fig. 7:11-12*, in the next page).
Haydée is initially granted a wholeness that, through camera movements repeated later on, indicates that Crisp’s affirmation may be premature and short-sighted. When towards the end of Prologue Three Adrien’s gaze is captivated by the small
statue of a woman’s body, the statue is first framed in its entirety and then the camera movement, simulates the caressing of this body with a rapid zoom and upward tilt (see Fig. 7:13-14, below).

This latter movement beginning from below, mirrors the previous attention to Haydée’s body at the beach, and emphasises the scrutinizing of the statue’s female form. Like the statue, before ending up in Adrien’s hands, Haydée exists in her
integrity. The zoom, which slowly reduces the space in which her essence floats until she is reduced to fragments, stands for Adrien’s desire to take possession of the statue and reduce it to a mere object of trade, exactly what he will try to do to Haydée (see Fig. 7:15, below).

La Collectionneuse (Fig. 7:15)

Two main points follow from here: first, from Adrien’s perspective, Haydée’s value depends on his judgement; second, deprived of her human value, she is associated with the statue as a pleasure object of trade. The tribal resonance of the music accompanying the initial credits creates a link between Haydée as an object of exchange and Lévi-Strauss’ analysis of women’s value in tribal communities. In her essay ‘Woman as Sign’, Elisabeth Cowie engages with aspects of Lévi-Strauss’ The Elementary Structures of Kinships (1969) with regards to ‘the position of women in general, and also with the question of the production of women as a category within a particular signifying system, in his case, kinship’ (Cowie, 2000: 49). According to him, ‘exchange is a principle of culture, […] the rules of kinship are the society’ (51), and in this society ‘it is women, and only women, who are exchanged under the rules of exogamy’ (51). Cowie reports how, ‘in the universe of rules and the system
of exchange in primitive groups’ (51), Lévi-Strauss showed that women are exchanged ‘through the principle of reciprocity whose condition of existence is a hierarchy of ‘valuables’, of exchangeable items […] of which women are the ‘valuables par excellence’’ (52), hence, Adrien’s primitive attempt to sell Haydée’s body to Sam (Seymour Hertzberg). Yet Haydée breaks the vase she is supposed to be exchanged for, and this is an act that is less an expression of an ‘empty-headed’ (Crisp, 1988: 34) youth than the assertive refutation of a system’s sordid attempts to debase women. Therefore, the initial dissection of Haydée’s body has nothing to do with Rohmer’s judgement of her as in Crisp’s arguments: but rather with the reductive male perception of her within the specific socio-cultural male perception the film mirrors. Magny proposes the contempt Haydée receives results from Adrien’s (and Daniel’s) perspective, ‘l’amenant à n’envisager le mariage qu’avec des êtres d’une même noblesse (au moins d’âme) et à considérer les autres relations comme un jeu sans importance autorisant de leur part toute forme de goujaterie, de manipulation, d’humiliation, voire de sadisme’ (Magny, 1995: 55). ‘Against the popular clichés that would paint Rohmer as a mild-mannered fetishist with a thing for teenage girls’ knees (Claire) or posteriors (Pauline), critic Bérénice Reynaud has argued that female characters are not objects of the director’s desire, but abstract figurations of the workings of cinematic desire itself’ (Schilling, 2007: 7); according to Tester, ‘Rohmer’s point is not that Haydée ought to be reduced to her fetishised body, but rather he is forcing the audience to reflect upon how they see a young woman in a bikini’ (Tester, 2008: 93).

Rohmer’s eye functions therefore as a critical mediator of the relationship between his fictional creations and society’s outlook on them. He specified, ‘the idea of woman as temptress does not come out of my personal experience – it is more a
literary idea. My idea was to place that (literary conceit) within the context of modern life and the modern world’ (in Tester, 80): as an observer also alert to dissident voices, Rohmer’s point of view can be found at intersection between the two polarities, about which he has formed a personal perspective. Additionally, Schilling refers to the ‘audio-visual form of the Contes moraux’ as ‘anything but monolithic’, so as to say that the ‘truth of each tale ultimately lies neither in its telling by the protagonist-narrator, nor in the ‘objective’ succession of diachronic events and sounds, but in the dialogic interaction of the two’ (Schilling, 139). Instead of imposing a moral truth, the tales offer ‘a formal […] truth […] which engages spectators’ freedom by inviting them to contrast the observed behaviours and a posteriori interpretations’ (Schilling, 139).

Infidelity and the gender roles mutually inform one other’s dynamics, so that an analysis of the first necessitates attention to the second. Pezzotta and Prandi recall that, being made in 1966, La Collectionneuse is Rohmer’s first ‘important film, showing the influences of an atmosphere which will lead woman’s new circumstances and needs to go beyond intellectual circles, so as to become a patrimony for the people and openly manifest themselves in the cities’ squares, and become the fundamental moment of the movement of 1968’ (in Vergerio and Zappoli, 1996: 89)\(^\text{15}\); also, this film delineates a new image of women, ‘the first woman able to say no’ (89)\(^\text{16}\). About the ideal woman, Crisp says that in the film like Haydée she is a natural being; unlike her […] Mijanou is open, unaffected, and not made up. She could be said to be proposing a different view of nature, free from all suggestion of artifice, vulgarity, or sensuality, a more innocent and spiritual view (Crisp, 1988: 45).

\(^\text{15}\) ‘film importante che mostra le influenze di un’atmosfera che porterà le nuove istanze e le nuove esigenze della donna a uscire dai circoli intellettuali, per diventare patrimonio di massa ed esplodere nelle piazza e divenire, momento fondamentale del movimento del 1968’.

\(^\text{16}\) ‘la prima donna a dire di no’.
Conventional and ungrounded for its bearings on Mijanou and especially Haydée, this interpretation fails to recognise the subtleties that characterise Rohmer’s delineation of the female universe. Mijanou’s minimal delineation suggests two points, one about the narrator’s point of view and one about Rohmer’s. The narrator’s certainties about her essence suggest that there is very little to say or to show about her. However, her connotation of mystery and opacity awaken in the spectators an awareness of her potential for a multi-faceted essence. While the innocence and spirituality of Mijanou’s character are undeniable, nevertheless Crisp’s descriptions, conforming as they do to the narrator’s conservative vision of women, are unsatisfactory. The films invite us to be wary of such regressive attitudes, rather than accept them without question. Similarly, Crisp’s claim that Haydée is artificial and vulgar is feeble, as the notion of sensuality does not necessarily imply that she ought to be vulgar or artificial; Crisp’s idea claims a direct link between sensuality and vulgarity and artificiality, as much as its contrary must then be associated with spirituality. Haydée’s liberated conduct follows her uncompromising idea of how she envisions human relationships to be, the failure of which results in her rejection of all men with whom she becomes involved. A study of infidelity in the tales minus this analytical dimension would fail to take account of Rohmer’s engagement with the workings of the social occurrence of infidelity over and above the standard perception, and what the standard perception says about the society that produces it. Unlike Crisp’s essentialist vision of women, Rohmer’s tales propose a vision of more liberated and complex female subjectivity. Women, and particularly the second ones, appear to either reject or struggle with the idea of compromise. At the end of Ma Nuit chez Maud, Maud turns her back on, and
literally and metaphorically walks away from, the permanent negotiation of half-lies
and half-truths which both Jean-Louis and Françoise have signed-up for; in La
Collectionneuse, Mijanou asks Adrien ‘quelles affaires? Je n’ai jamais vraiment cru
à tes affaires, tu sais’ and leaves him behind by going to London; Laura rejects
Jerôme’s friendly affairs, happily sitting in the car that will take her away from his
corrupted vision of friendship and romance.

The chosen and the second women surprise both the narrators and the
spectators. Mijanou and Haydée take on qualities formerly strictly of the male
domain: Mijanou is a photographer, Haydée is, according to Adrien and Daniel, a
collector of men; in either role, both are beholders of the gaze. In the overtaking of
traditionally exclusively male prerequisites, Minajou and Haydée are symbolically
allies in the denunciation of male objectification of women; similarly, Maud,
Suzanne and the other second women are very explicit beings; they show awareness
of their value as human beings engaged in the process of reconfiguring traditionally
conceived male-female relationships. There follows a discrepancy between the
conservative and anachronistic male characters and modern women in the tales: this
discrepancy constitutes the basis of the ways infidelity exists as a constant presence
throughout the Contes moraux series. Infidelity is the cornerstone of this analysis in
the sense that its perpetration and its rejection embody the debate between
conservative and progressive social-cultural systems, where the former strive to
remain unchanged and the latter strive to generate change. As the dynamic of
infidelity takes shape, the gender roles pull in opposite directions.

This chapter has discussed the theme of the fundamental importance of
conventional gender-specific perceptions of male and female in relation to the
different ways in which men and women understand infidelity, which are embodied
in Erich Rohmer’s *Contes moraux*. By looking at the male characters’ system of beliefs and values, infidelity emerges as a natural act intrinsic to their conduct towards all the women with whom they get involved. Their fundamentally negative outlook on women and their difficulty in assessing more objectively the deceitful nature of their own conduct is highlighted by the female characters’ sharp and lucid view of their own nature, containing both flaws and strengths. In their active questioning of themselves and of their male counterparts through the discussions of the meaning of fidelity and infidelity, they emerge as mutable and progressive characters, rather than static and fixed like, from first to last, their male counterparts. Throughout the cycle, the women consistently counteract the men’s attempts to make them the objects of acts of betrayal. *La Collectionneuse*’s visual and discursive elements illustrate the attempt at objectification of women through infidelity: this attempt, as discussed above, is that of the men, not of the films. Furthermore, that women may be made by the men to appear as the subjects initiating or instigating infidelity, is also undermined from within the film both visually and narratively. In light of such elements, the next chapter will examine the specific dynamics of the male characters’ drive towards thoughts and acts of infidelity.
8. Chapter Eight: The Seductive Power of Infidelity

Chapter Seven discussed the differing perceptions of infidelity embodied in the male and female characters in Rohmer’s *Contes moraux*, thereby revealing the existence of certain paradigmatic patterns of gender politics within this subject. This chapter instead pays specific attention to the dynamics of the male and female characters’ involvement with infidelity, the mechanisms of infidelity denial on the part of the male characters and the female characters’ mechanisms for resisting them. The women admit to the objective nature of infidelity: whether it is of the mind or acted out, and whether they are perpetrators or victims of it. By contrast, the men reconfigure the reality of their own infidelities, of the mind and of the body: they rationalize them denying their existence, hence masking, if not even erasing, any trace of links between the notion of infidelity and the male realm.

Crisp argues that ‘every narrative […] is a re-enactment of desire, and desire is the stuff of any narrative. With this in mind, one might construct an opposition between desire and love, such that the former belonged to the realm of narrative, of the diachronic, the unstable, whereas the latter belonged to the realm of the synchronic, the timeless’ (Crisp, 1988: 66). The tales’ particular instances of infidelity are deeply intertwined with the concept of seduction and the desire for it. At first the heroes’ type of transgression is a fantasy. The narrators’ flirtatious game then moves beyond the platonic stage: this is where their solely cerebral engagement with other women enters the realm of seduction. Creators and designers of seductions, the narrators end up being seduced by their own idea of seduction, blinded not just by desire *per se*, but by the desire to prove their imagined omnipotence to themselves as well as others. Schilling notices that each narrator
‘analyses his position as a desiring and potentially desired individual in a loosely defined game of ‘seduction’” (Schilling, 2007: 131). The frescos of Don Quixote with his eyes covered by a bandage in Jérôme’s villa illustrate the narrators’ self-blinding process in the occurrence of infidelity at the core of their initiative of seduction. The narrators accuse the second women of having provoked their desire; hence, women are accountable for the occurrence of infidelity, which is a mindset that characterised the production of the French literature of infidélité au féminin.

Seduction as a source of platonic pleasure is introduced in La Boulangère de Monceau. The boulangerie takes on a novel connotation when the narrator’s buying of the cakes acquires sexualised overtones: shots of his requests for the cake are alternated with close-ups of the actual cake and of the boulangère’s sinuous breasts, shoulders, neck and cheeks; Jacqueline’s young body becomes the equivalent of the fresh cakes he eats. Upon bumping into Jacqueline in the street he vigorously takes her under an archway. An overtone of conscious debauchery is evident on his part: would he need to hide and act so secretly if he did not acknowledge the unorthodoxy of the situation? His body leans towards her, trapping her in his lascivious caressing of the sinuous curves of her neck and shoulder so as to persuade her to meet up the following evening (see Fig. 8:1, in the following page).
La Boulangère de Monceau (Fig. 8:1)

Convinced of her interest in him, he is surprised by her unease, while simultaneously enticed to pursue her even more eagerly. Finally obtaining her hesitant approval, he suggests they begin communicating through codes and asks: ‘est-ce que tu es romanesque?’. This question, which recalls Girard’s *Vérité romanesque et mensonge romantique*, is significant: by using the jargon of novels, he shows an awareness of his actions’ deceptive connotation, which characterises the novelistic tradition of tales about the exploitation of the young, uncultured girl by the rich, handsome, but ruthless man. Additionally, by framing their meeting with such jargon, he fictionalises it and makes it unreal; after all such a mechanism is a perfect construct to enable his lies and his denial of the implications of his actions to coexist untroubled.

The intention to seduce the young girl implies a betrayal of the search for Sylvie; yet, in a context of denial it becomes irrelevant whether seduction is accomplished or not. The denial of one’s real intentions results in the refutation of one’s betrayal, the consequence of which is that, paradoxically, infidelity is ever-
present and embedded in the very texture of the entire series. Even if the narrator
does not admit that the *boulangerie* means betrayal, his search for Sylvie undergoes
a dynamic of displacement, and becomes a surrogate for the more pervasive drive to
seduce Jacqueline, himself seduced by that very idea. Within the concept of
seduction, consummation would seal its success; here, consummation is sublimated.
Jacqueline’s playful reciprocating of the narrator’s flirting is a source of pleasure;
then, a sublimated consummation occurs when the student and Jacqueline eat cakes
together. Under the exciting threat of the shop owner’s imminent arrival, Jacqueline
lets him buy her a cake and cross the till border, pushing the narrator’s enticement
onto unlawful grounds as well as confirming his invincible charm. The pleasures
deriving from transgressing the norms and the ego boost following its successful
accomplishment are far more important issues than fidelity for the narrator. The
shots lingering on their blissful expressions while eating luscious cakes reveal the
unspoken communication between them (see *Fig. 8:2*, below).

*La Boulangère de Monceau* (Fig. 8:2)
The dominance exerted by the narrator over Jacqueline grants him a cerebral satisfaction by which he is nevertheless controlled: failing to grasp the meaning of this perverse dynamic, he walks away from Jacqueline proud of his honesty. However, suddenly, infidelity as absence pierces the whole narrative set of the tales: while Jacqueline has never let infidelity happen, Sylvie saw what never took place.

*La Collectionneuse* showcases women as commodities through conversations between individuals who engage professionally with the aesthetics of beauty and its consumption, such as an artist, Daniel, an art dealer, Adrien, a photographer, Mijanou, and an art collector, Sam. Mijanou perceives beauty as an intrinsic essence, not necessarily (outwardly) visible – appreciation makes beauty materialize on the surface eventually. Her friend Annik (Annik Morice), instead, values exterior beauty as the factor determining appreciation. The film opens with the presentation of a woman in a bikini walking back and forth along the beach in silence. Unlike the others, who inhabit human-made environments and wear, literally and symbolically, garments that fit within a crafted pre-established order, Haydée is presented as existing harmoniously in nature, devoid of human artifice. Her silence, coupled with close-ups offering a fragmented image, apparently creates the ultimate incarnation of the concept of objectification: a silent woman who is spoken for through the fragmenting of her body, the passive object of someone’s consumption. Yet, Haydée emerges as a captivating embodiment of both those intrinsic and exterior values of beauty discussed by Annik and Mijanou; with her aloof aura, she personifies that ideal of art and beauty that Daniel exposes to the critic, its inaccessibility. Simultaneously, she challenges the faux idéaux of high art and exclusive beauty supposedly guiding Adrien’s lifestyle: her mysterious charisma charged with
primitive valences becomes the object of Adrien’s betrayal of both his principles and Mijanou.

In *La Carrière de Suzanne*, Suzanne is the first example of an active woman, in her attempts to shape her personal and professional life through her own agency. Female agency becomes a staple feature in the second women from now on; *La Collectionneuse* sets new challenges for the male protagonist by displaying that same quality in the chosen woman too. A photographer availing herself of the exclusivity of the gaze, Mijanou first introduces the potential threat of male objectification. Unlike in some of the tales, where the chosen woman is seemingly more static and the male protagonist the one *en fuite*, the situation is reversed: Mijanou’s trip to London confirms this idea of female agency, whereas Adrien remains trapped in his self-imposed reclusion. This tale affirms a manifest deconstruction of the ideal of masculinity in the French cultural heritage.

Mijanou also introduces a novel idea about infidelity. Towards the end of the sequence with Adrien and Annik, a close-up of her looking out of frame pensively but smiling suggests she might have someone in mind embodying the inner beauty she admires. Thus, the last few minutes that see Adrien and Mijanou together are clouded with a sense of impending and unsolved secrecy. However, it is not the potential for female unfaithfulness that is in focus but the narrator’s fallible judgement, for he is unable to think beyond the paradigms of patriarchy. Mijanou’s only hinted-at potential for infidelity will take more tangible attributes through Jean-Louis’ ethereal blonde Françoise, highlighting that, as Schilling purports, ‘the gender politics of the *Contes moraux* are indeed far more subtle and complex than the images of Haydée’s bikini-clad body, fetishistically cut up in the first prologue’ (Schilling, 2007: 133).
The exposition of infidelity does not focus on it as evidence for a negative categorisation of women, instead, leaving behind the preposterous worry about the threat and damage infidelity can inflict on masculinity, it is necessary to deconstruct a precise typology of anthropocentric and chauvinistic perceptions. The narrators think they have total foreknowledge of women, they believe that they understand them. Jean-Louis is a ludicrous example: during the trip to the mountains with Maud he pronounces clichéd words about feeling as if having known her forever; the decision to marry Françoise without knowing her shows again the degree of his arrogance. Eventually, all the narrators are scolded by the women they engage with. Rohmer overturns the focus on the gender bias of infidelity by using male infidelity to reveal the men’s behaviour as un-constructive: in doing so, he questions the tradition about the French ideal of masculinity and the effects this has on the conditions of women.

The Contes moraux also challenge common expectations about the ideal union. Adrien is only tepidly disappointed by Mijanou’s trip. Except for Jean-Louis, perhaps, Adrien and the other narrators are not visibly passionate about their chosen partners. In the first tale the narrator quickly finds solace in someone else while the ideal is out of sight. Throughout the tale, the narrators’ cool treatment of the elect suggests their confidence in their own charm and in their spouses’ reliance on them. Their heliocentric perspective prefigures an a priori female passivity and unconditional acceptance of their partners’ secrecy, including their affairs. As Adrien and Mijanou’s relationship demonstrates, the official relationships are devoid of the archetypal ingredients of passion and jealousy and appear to stand somewhere between apathy and care; the narrators’ unusual attitude towards the chosen women constitutes another form of perversity that characterises them.
Against the notion of tale – a fiction, or a constructed reality – Rohmer’s tales propose a reality of infidelity under a quasi-documentary exposition of the dynamics and perceptions around it. Infidelity appears as a mechanized act, one which men carry out, in Durkheim’s terms, as a ‘social thing’, or ‘social habitus’. Thinking of themselves as fictional characters, the narrators repeat actions and attitudes borrowed from their admired novelistic predecessors; this endows their acts with righteous authority. Infidelity occurs through dynamics of perversity on many levels: the narrators try to seduce the second women, thinking they are asking to be seduced; the narrators feel partly repulsion, partly scepticism towards the second women. In *La Collectionneuse*, the scorn and contempt that Adrien and Daniel have towards Haydée are rooted in her carefree frequentation of different men. In control of her sexuality, Haydée threatens their ideal of male sexual dominance by depriving them of such an exclusive quality. With Haydée, Serceau affirms, Rohmer ‘fait référence […] aux proclamations et conquêtes des femmes dans le domaine de la liberté sexuelle’ (Serceau, 2000: 107). In response, they propose the old-fashioned opposition of Madonna and *putain*, but, even if abruptly, her character shows ‘la quête (d’amour et d’autonomie) de la femme […] plus dans les paroles d’Haydée que dans ses actes et sa conduite’ (Serceau, 107). Trying to deny his attraction, Adrien even throws her into Daniel’s hands: this is his first attempt to trade, so as to watch Haydée being caged within the framework of woman as a passive valuable. This temporarily readjusts the framework she had turned upside down: a men’s *collectionneuse*, Haydée is the subject who has turned men into objects, symbolically depriving them of their position as subjects. As Serceau points out ‘l’autonomie doit se conquérir et s’affirmer contre les préjugés des hommes, contre ce mixte de
misogynie et de séduction qu’incarnent Daniel et Adrien, un mixte qui est la marque
du donjuanisme’ (107) (see Fig. 8:3, below).

La Collectionneuse (Fig. 8:3)

Adrien’s harsh judgement of Haydée as incapable of fidelity resounds as
ironically self-referential, a reminder of the two friends’ casual conception of
fidelity. Her playfulness with men also gives Adrien and Daniel a taste of the effects
such conduct may have on its receivers. Haydée eventually chooses to be with
Daniel although they keep seeing her as an object of exchange between men. When
first in the villa, Adrien’s scrutiny of a statue of a woman’s bust is disturbed by the
background noise of a couple in intimacy: the statue in his hands mirrors Haydée in
the arms of the man in bed with her. Adrien’s quick glance and smile at Haydée
while with another man suggests a twofold idea of interchangeability: if the men can
be interchangeable in their possession of Haydée, they can be interchangeable in
Haydée’s possession of them. Perceptive of the first option only, Adrien tries to use
Haydée as if she was the statue in his hands: when handling a delicate commercial
operation with Sam he sets up an exchange between Haydée and the precious vase he
wishes to sell to him. In this context, Adrien cannot recognise his time with Haydée as infidelity. His hatred for Haydée until the end is ultimately his denied desire. Sitting next to each other in the middle of the countryside, Adrien proclaims his dislike of her, while simultaneously caressing her legs (see Fig. 8:4, below).

La Collectionneuse (Fig. 8:4)

The gender bias towards infidelity is also humorously exposed: Adrien and Daniel judge negatively that Haydée ‘couche à droite et à gauche’ but never question their own behaviour. Dissociating herself from Adrien’s and Daniel’s corrupted vision of relationships, Haydée ‘revendique la pluralité de ses amours comme l’expression d’une quête, comme une sorte d’auto-éducation. Lois de refouler l’affectivité, la liberté sexuelle du personnage féminin va donc de pair avec une aptitude à l’engagement’ (Serceau, 2000: 107).

Another dynamic complicates the assessment of the relationship between Adrien and Haydée: Adrien is culpable of infidelity to a second degree, too. With Daniel, Adrien loses his position of primacy, which he regains by thinking of Haydée’s relationship with Daniel as a way to conquer him. Despite Daniel and Haydée being an odd couple, Adrien’s (failed) attempts to kiss her after the swim at dawn are also treacherous towards his friend. The triangular pattern continues, but to
Adrien’s loss this time, when Sam comes between him and Haydée. After Adrien has set up Haydée to be exchanged for the successful selling of a precious Chinese vase to Sam, Sam challenges Adrien’s certainties by affirming that it is not whether he likes her but whether she likes him. Calling Adrien a parasite nostalgic for ‘l’ancien temps’, Sam states ‘Moi, j’aime le monde moderne’. Sam stands out, in comparison, as a man with a code of honour; freed from the ancient patriarchal models of masculinity and double standards, Sam fakes a getting-together with Haydée so as to mock Adrien’s ruthless self-importance. Barely saying anything throughout the film, Haydée is mainly shot on her own, thus outside of the film’s homosocial dynamics. Like the Chinese vase that falls and breaks into hundreds of pieces, Haydée’s unbending silence speaks for her refusal to be the object of any man’s capricious whim. Schilling aptly notes that the breaking of the vase is a reminder that ‘she is not an empty vessel to be exchanged between men’ (Schilling, 2007:135).

In the final rush to accomplish his plan of seduction, Adrien does not see that Haydée is the subject determining what might now happen: whilst he conceives of her as a week’s affair, everything that has happened so far confirms that she may drop him after only a few hours. Haydée’s personality and what he means to her overshadow Adrien. In Sam’s bathroom, Haydée’s double reflection in the mirror triples her image against Adrien’s: draped by Haydée’s multiples, Adrien is held captive in the very notion of infidelity in his uncontrollable desire for her (see Fig. 8:5, in the following page).
Adrien is a man locked in values that provide him with the foundations to pursue, unnoticed he thinks, candidly and devoid of any blame, a life of ongoing dishonesty.

In *L'Amour l’après-midi*, the women, whether secretaries, shop assistants or, eventually, the second woman Chloé, appear through Frédéric’s eyes as instruments to facilitate business. Dreams and fantasies dominate Frédéric’s imagination: the images in the overcrowded RER compartment, where shots of women he is looking at are inter-cut with shots of him in the safe and calm environment of their home looking at his wife, establish the nature of his evasion from the everyday. The streets, where his daydreaming takes place, acquire a connotation of freedom and excitement that feed his desires. Serceau notes that ‘pour un personnage partageant ainsi sa vie entre travail et vie conjugale, entre deux espaces différents, mais deux cellules également closes, aménagées pour remplir des fonctions précises, c’est l’extérieur, c’est la rue qui est l’espace des sens’ (Serceau, 2000: 78). Frédéric’s openness about his most desired fantasy initially differentiates him from the other narrators: he dreams of possessing a magical medallion that will defeat women’s free will so that they will happily go off with him (see Fig. 8:6, in the next page).
This introduces the dream sequence set in the open air where he meets some of the previous tales’ heroines. Maud, the free thinker, accepts his company as if making a scientific experiment on human conduct. Françoise, the repentant but perpetual Catholic sinner, proposes they go to her place, confident her husband cannot catch them. Haydée, the collector, also married, is immediately ready to add him to her collection. Claire, the doll, acts surprised but, despite already being in the company of another man, gives herself to him in defeat. Aurora, the writer-puppeteer, sets a fee, to then agree to pay Frédéric’s own set fee instead, a much higher one. Lastly, Laura, the uncompromising idealist, defies Frédéric’s incommensurable power: she energetically pronounces her love for somebody else leaving him powerless. Unlike him, Pezzotta and Prandi affirm, ‘the magnificent refusal of Béatrice Romand shows the possibility of resisting everything by virtue of love, of a feeling that is not put under threat by physical attraction towards someone else’ (1996: 88)\(^\text{17}\).

\(^{17}\)‘il grande rifiuto di Béatrice Romand mostra la possibilità di resistere a tutto in virtù dell’amore, di un sentimento, che non viene messo in discussione da un’attrazione fisica verso un’altra persona’.
This dream sequence is significant on many levels in relation to infidelity. It manifests Frédéric’s desire to possess other women while also showing a masculinity in crisis, which resorts to daydreaming and a magical collar as an indispensable tool to abate women’s will; it highlights the underlying expectation that women have no moral guidelines, which is immediately subverted by a type of woman who rejects betrayal and compromise. Hence, Frédéric’s dream, which exists in a continuum with the conventional fantasy of women as the inevitably corruptible and, thus, corrupted race, manifests instances of their rebellion against such biased and mystifying portrait. The dream functions as an emblem of the discourse that underlies the tales’ portrait of the male characters in the face of women’s restless movement towards emancipation from the negative portrayal they have been carrying from the Adam and Eve myth. Despite its humoristic vein, the dream sequence highlights also other points in relation to infidelity. The young man who weakly consents to let his partner go into someone else’s arms embodies the idea of cuckoldry and, with it, the feared defeat of man’s honour. Secondly, the Madonna/whore opposition disappears into a uniform perception of women: like prostitutes, both chosen and second women are there for grabbing at a man’s convenience. Thirdly, masculine identity is further undermined: by charging Aurora for a sexual encounter, Frédéric puts himself in the same position as a commodity like the prostitutes, although a more precious one. Despite his imagined mesmerising virility, Frédéric’s power is suddenly reduced to zero, as the encounter with Laura illustrates. The potential for infidelity, which stands for man’s supreme tool for the affirmation of power over women as well as of admiration from his fellows, is reduced to the status of a mere fantasy. In the tales, male infidelity takes the form of a hope, which is only partially fulfilled. Discussing Le Genou de Claire, Rohmer
affirmed that ‘the object of desire is not necessarily the object of possession. […] it’s a twentieth-century rather than an eighteenth-century preoccupation. […] one wonders whether the ordinary man really would be satisfied if he could possess the women he sees in the magazines. […] his desire feeds on the absence of possession’ (in Nogueira, 1971: 121). Infidelity loses its magnetic power and is revealed in its unsubstantial essence, a chimera that crowds of blinded Don Quixotes have chased purporting an ideologically driven conception of gender roles. Through the narrators’ partially missed accomplishment of infidelity, the tales reject the power value that infidelity has acquired through the standard presentation of it in literature and film. Frédéric experiences infidelity more keenly than any other narrator, with each sequence carrying traces of that desire. Found at his most vulnerable at the end of the dream sequence, Frédéric lets infidelity slip into the realm of the real. No longer holding on to the distinction between élues and réprouées and conferring on all women a previously denied aura of mystery, Frédéric finds all women beautiful (see Fig. 8:7-8-9, below and in the following page, where the three shots of different women from different perspectives highlight Frédéric’s eager wandering eye).
And yet, unable to remember why he chose his wife over other women, he now sees in their beauty an extension of Hélène, so that when embracing her he feels as if he is embracing them all. Serceau interprets Frédéric’s thoughts as follows: ‘les femmes sont moins appréhendées comme personnes que comme multiples incarnations de la femme, comme émanation d’une essence. […] Hélène – épouse et mère avant d’être
pour lui femme – et les secrétaires, Chloé elle-même, ne sont au bout du compte que des accidents’ (Serceau, 2000: 78).

Chloé, with whom he betrays his wife, is admittedly problematic and arguably the only example of a second woman who justly fits what Vidal, and later Crisp, designated ‘a temptress’ – a definition arguably imprecise if applied indiscriminately to all the second women of the tales. Chloé meets Frédéric with a specific plan to disrupt his conjugal commitment. Offering concreteness to his dreams, Chloé is a woman he barely respects; similar to a prostitute, she is an underworld reality that surfaces when needed and is then buried in invisibility again. Chloé’s strategies find him ready to fall into a dangerous game of seduction. Frédéric’s initial reluctance to renew their friendship soon gives into the reverse situation, where he is the object of desire. What Chloé’s conduct signifies is that, Pezzotta and Prandi argue, ‘the object of desire becomes the subject of the action. Women are not any more perfect foils for a game of seduction essentially desired and led by male fantasy, but women full of character’ (1996: 91). When she disappears he feels betrayed, devalued and discarded; his idyllic vision of the heaven of infidelity has vanished. Nevertheless, Chloé awakens Frédéric’s suppressed conscience: unfaithful in his thoughts, he flirts gently with his secretaries, whose legs, for instance, he never fails to pin his admiring gaze upon. Challenged by Chloé about this, he proclaims his innocence in that he and the secretary flirt within rigid boundaries: considering freedom the most cherished good, his idea of freedom contravenes any vow of marital respect. The ignoring of the implications of this logic ad personam determines the breadth of his betrayal, which he refuses to

\[\text{\textsuperscript{18}}\] ‘l’oggetto del desiderio si tramuta allora in soggetto dell’azione. Donne non più come involucri perfetti per un gioco della seduzione essenzialmente voluto e condotto dalla fantasia maschile, ma donne piene di carattere’.
recognise for what it is until he is face to face with it during his last encounter with Chloé.

During a teatime break with his colleagues, Frédéric’s associate Gérard, (Daniel Ceccaldi) states his faithfulness to this wife in practice but also proudly confesses a flirtatious activity with other women as a law of compensation; stripped of its sacred connotation, the vow of fidelity is conveniently split into practical and theoretical aspects. Gérard’s idea that fun and marriage are mutually exclusive implies that infidelity is naturally to be pursued. His disappointment about the commitment of modern girls to their partners accompanies shots of Frédéric’s and his colleague’s gazes lingering on the secretary’s legs, illustrating the obvious separation of body and mind (see Fig 8:10, below).

L’Amour l’après-midi (Fig. 8:10)

This sequence’s comedic tone cross-references Truffaut’s Domicile conjugal, where Ceccaldi stars as the ideal husband and father until Antoine Doinel sees him in a brothel. Ceccaldi acts with the same aplomb, thus, amusing in his naturalness, he denies any discrepancy between his role as a husband, faithful in spirit, and his role
as a brothel customer, unfaithful in practice. Simultaneously, his naturalness conveys discomfort for the very same reasons. Rohmer’s use of Ceccaldi’s performance as a vehicle for the beliefs associated with the character diverts critical attention on to the persistent vision of woman as mistress and the consequent dismissal of her frequentation as irrelevant. Yet Ceccaldi’s character switches from first freely visiting brothels (in Truffaut), to only talking flirtatiously so as to satisfy his extramarital needs (in Rohmer), which can be read, as in Reynaud’s definition, as ‘a function of a post-liberation bitterness felt by the French men for whom overt misogyny is no longer an option’ (Schilling, 2007: 133). By mentioning his and Frédéric’s wives’ professional standing, Gérard implicitly suggests a link between women’s emancipated status and his flirtatiousness, where the latter results from feelings of masculine inadequacy as a consequence of the former (see Fig. 8:11, below, where Frédéric contemplates his wife, a teacher, at work in their home, carrying out duties beyond those normally associated with the domestic space).

![Image](image.jpg)

*L’Amour l’après-midi* (Fig. 8:11)
According to Vidal ‘le mariage, au lieu de renforcer le statut exceptionnel et privilégié de l’élue, semblerait plutôt l’affaiblir. Depuis qu’il est marié, Frédéric est attiré par toutes les femmes’ (Vidal, 1977: 133). Oppressed by the static and secure beauty of his marriage, Frédéric dreams the impossible, namely a life filled with first, yet lasting loves; the multitude of women on show confirms his desire to exceed his vow. The shots of those women in constant movement outside in the streets magnify the vibrancy and self-determination they can now freely express and enjoy, and significantly contrast with Frédéric’s inert position as he sits inside the bistro. Seduction, previously associated with male mobility and active agency, goes through an unwelcome revision. Undermined and paralysed by women’s newly acquired status as subjects, Gérard’s infidelity is reduced to only flirtatious talks, and Frédéric’s inert unfaithfulness is relegated to the realm of the mind. In this context, Gérard’s and Frédéric’s instances of infidelity signify their last resort of mutiny against the challenges posed to their phallocentric stability. The linkage between the traditional notion of masculinity and that of infidelity, so that one is the direct and inevitable outcome of the other, is now scorned.

In the sequence at the boutique, where Frédéric goes to buy a polo neck but then ends up buying a shirt, his susceptibility to the alluring call of seduction is emphasised. The shop assistant (Irène Skobline) subtly performs a flirtatious act of persuasion, summoned by a suggestive frame cramping their two bodies within the foldable multi-mirror in the tiny changing-room: she is all over the shirt, buttoning it tight on his chest and caressing it so as to show how well it fits him (see Fig. 8:12, in the following page).
Reminiscent of the scene where the two protagonists eat cakes together in the bakery, this scene encapsulates Frédéric’s dreams in a sublimated form. Through her reflection she is five times around him, or he appears surrounded by five women. Hélène’s compliments about the shirt prompt Frédéric’s confession that ‘the sale’s girl was very clever, she did not seem to care. I fell in love…’ – and after a pause – ‘…with this shirt’. Confirming Frédéric’s weak moral disposition, this also signals his status as a passive object in the hands of the mirage of infidelity.

Chloé’s strategy of not seeming to care too fuels Frédéric’s desire. His increasing frustration betrays the high value he attaches to her. He begins to smoke, trying to fill her absence through the cigarette, a phallic symbol of power of which she, and not him, was previously the beholder. Power, in this case, is her availability to materialize the constant performance of infidelity, otherwise relegated to daydreaming, but now wishing to exit such confines. Frédéric’s genuineness when at home is in discordance with the growing dishonesty towards his wife, and this marks a significant difference between him and the other narrators, who, from the beginning, are patent tombeurs de femmes. Moreover, the chosen woman is here
portrayed as such an uncompromising and complete woman that Frédéric’s choices generate even more disconcertment.

The amused glances of Frédéric’s secretaries and co-associates and Chloé’s new landlady show that the received opinion is that they are lovers. When Chloé condemns the standard bourgeois conception of marriage as a cluster of debased compromises, whereby cheating is the norm and the wife and lover(s)’ package is an integrated part of the everyday, Frédéric reacts unconcerned. Denying any wrongdoing, Frédéric’s consciousness flourishes, informed by that patriarchal ideology which seeks to maintain, as he mentions in regard to polygamy, ‘l’esclavage de la femme’. The sequence showing shots of Frédéric in the company of Chloé during weekday afternoons, intermitted with shots of him taking pictures of Hélène and their children during weekend afternoons, highlights the insignificant role that the notion of infidelity bears in his consciousness. Instead, it illustrates what a seemingly ideal integration of marriage and infidelity looks like. This emphasises what Vidal defined as the Rohmerian hero’s principal contradiction, ‘liberté qui s’affirme dans l’acte gratuit du mariage […] et voudrait aussi s’exprimer dans l’infidélité et les multiples expériences amoureuses’ (Vidal, 1977: 133).

This tale presents an unprecedented degree of emotional closeness with the revelation of previously unseen characteristics: Frédéric’s increasing desire results in a passionate kiss with Chloé, who soon after declares her love for him and desire for a child from him (see Fig 8:13-14-15, in the following page).
L’Amour l’après-midi (Fig. 8: 13-14-15)
Frédéric’s response, ‘si tu étais amoureuse, je te fuirais: tu voudrais m’avoir à toi seule, me faire quitter ma femme’, unveils the philistine attitude towards marriage for which Chloé had previously expressed contempt. His fear of Chloé’s feelings highlights the ambivalence of his intentions: he wants to keep the affair with Chloé in progress as well as maintaining his wife and family status unchanged. Unlike in the other tales, where the second woman at some point rejects the narrator, Chloé offers herself to Frédéric with no reticence. Roger Vailland’s description of the libertin in Laclos’ Les Liaisons dangereuses (1782) can be helpful in interpreting Frédéric’s fugue from Chloé: ‘la passion entraîne, emporte, subjugue, réduit en esclavage. L’amant passionné ne choisit pas (…) En toute occasion, le libertin agit; le passionné subit, pâtit’ (in Magny, 1995: 59). This sums up the previous quality of the narrators’ desire for the women: a desire deprived of loving passion. Once with Chloé, he would find himself married twice, and thus doubly tied to the routine that he finds oppressive; one wife is enough, one lover is too many. In Chloé’s flat, his reflection in the mirror with half his polo neck over his head recalls the ridiculous sight that entertained his child; this funny look creates a link between the idea of childish desires and sense of fulfilment and Frédéric’s fantasies, which he acknowledged as childish when talking about the magic medallion. Face-to-face with his own childish nature, the mirror reflects his fantasy about infidelity in all its inconsistent and ephemeral nature, thus confronting him with the self(-ish)-indulgency of his desire.

Ma Nuit chez Maud and Le Genou de Claire present the theme of infidelity framed within the systems of reference of Catholicism and libertinage through Jean-Louis, a supposedly impeccable Catholic, and Jérôme, a pseudo-libertine who generously volunteers his attentions to (all) women. Jean-Louis professes ‘Ma
famille était Catholique, je le suis resté’, hence, his Catholicism sounds less a spontaneous choice than an inherited family custom. During the encounters with the elect and second women, Françoise and Maud (Françoise Fabian), and with an old school friend, Vidal (Antoine Vitez), a Marxist, Jean-Louis’s credo undergoes severe scrutiny. Jérôme’s character is halfway between a Don Juanesque libertin and a blinded Don Quixote. The encounters with Aurora, a writer, and two half sisters, Laura and Claire (Laurence de Monaghan), will prove a challenge to the solidity of his logic. Representing the two sides of the same coin, Jean-Louis stands for rigorous morality and Jérôme for unrepentant sinning. Early in the films both announce that their imminent marriages put an end to ‘faire les 400 coups’, their habit of playing around with women.

*Ma Nuit chez Maud*’s initial sequence during Sunday Mass, when the priest invokes God’s mercy and hails His maximum glorification and everlasting presence, sets the film’s tone of moral rigour and self-sacrifice in the name of spiritual salvation. As one of the Ten Commandments’ warnings, infidelity is implicitly subjected to scrutiny as a fundamental issue in the entanglements the tale presents. The principal question the four protagonists try to answer is of what morality should consist. Pascal’s writings about faith frame the notion of morality in direct dialogue with the specific subjects of fidelity and infidelity in human relationships. Maud explains that she is fidèle to the principles of her family of free thinkers: ‘c’est une façon plus libre d’envisager les problèmes. Avec beaucoup de principes, d’ailleurs, souvent même très strictes, mais où il n’entre aucun préjugé’. Her intellectual and moral stance envisages a strictness of conduct free from dogmatism, so as to understand life experiences without prejudices. The narrators also proclaim strict adherence to an intellectual and moral scheme, but what they are primarily faithful to
is their own good: whatever threatens their stability has to be ruthlessly removed and whatever aids it has to be ruthlessly pursued. By contrast, Maud’s ideal of unconditional open-mindedness foresees criticism and self-criticism as cardinal principles.

Maud’s definition of fidelity on specific intellectual grounds can extend to those of conjugal fidelity. A central idea in Catholicism, conjugal fidelity implies sacrifice. Sacrifice is throughout emphasised by the sermons and prayers during Mass and by Pascal’s writings. Jean-Louis is caught between Pascal’s rigour and his own adaptation of Christian rigour; unlike Pascal’s dictum, Jean-Louis does not want to renounce his passions. The loss of control over one’s passions is viewed by Catholicism as one of the commonly flawed human condition but Jean-Louis cannot see himself within that category. By announcing he cannot be a saint, he is not accomplishing an act of humility but justifying the imperfections he does not intend to improve. During the Mass service attended with Françoise, close-ups of him while the priest talks about Christianity as a way of life aimed at sanctity show Jean-Louis confidently and complacently smiling at the certainty that he is on that path. Within the space of forty eight hours he stays first at Maud’s, then at Françoise’s, where he declares his love for Françoise and sanctifies their encounter by going to Mass with her (see Fig. 8:16, in the following page).
Abruptly, in the following sequence, he telephones Maud. Only thirty-six hours earlier, he had insisted that there cannot be a place for another woman if a man is in love. The sudden change from the close-up of *holy* Jean-Louis at Mass to the phone call to another woman creates an irreconcilable gap between his newly proclaimed vow of fidelity to God and Françoise. Rohmer’s statement, ‘what interests me is man in his setting, the human face, the human body, human gestures, human behaviour’ (in Tester, 2007: 11) helps to contextualise the details just described. Sitting at the opposite end of the spectrum from Pascal and the priest’s ideas of sacrifice, Jean-Louis emerges as spiritually greedy and less Christian than he thinks. With Vidal, Jean-Louis explains that what he dislikes about Pascal’s wager: ‘c’est l’idée de donner en échange, d’acheter son billet à la loterie’. Jean-Louis wants to receive without giving. Pascal’s suggestion of overcoming one’s passions and renouncing reason in the name of his/her life implies that one must have the courage to bet. Jean-Louis rejects the moment of choice, or the bet, and does not renounce reason. His reason tells him it is preferable to keep both the women in his web. His
dishonesty, though, pays back: Jean-Louis exults at meeting Françoise twice on the same day, and interprets it as ‘le signe que le Ciel est avec lui et que ses actes, même les plus contestables, sont en quelque sorte sanctifiés’ (Vidal, 1977: 90). He ignores that it is thanks to the presence in town of Maud’s ex-husband, Françoise’s lover that she is so often there. Jean-Louis’s lucky meetings with his chosen woman are drenched in his most despised sin, adultery, emphasising the narrators’ tendency to interpret facts solely upon the premises of their self-pleasing desires.

Unfaithful in principle to both women, Jean-Louis’ perception of his status as a Catholic highlights how he manages to act guilt-free. Upon Maud’s question about whether he is ‘Catholique pratiquant?’ a surprised Jean-Louis states confidently that he certainly is, missing out the reference to a spiritual practice of Catholicism that Maud’s question is directed at. Maud’s question underlies the risk that any faith may be substituted with a code of conduct that only reflects its principles on the surface. Jean-Louis’ answer feeds Maud’s doubts and the rest of their twenty-four hours together will test exactly what the habit of being ‘Catholique pratiquant’ entails; Catholicism lived as a habit can extend to the way one practises its dicta. Pascal often warned his readers of the dangers of rhetoric and appearances. To be present at Mass, to be seen praying in the sight of an entire congregation, to pledge to follow a life of Christian standards may well be such one form of disguise. A false Catholic, as Vidal defines him, Jean-Louis lies throughout: he is like a Jesuit who, according to Pascal, learns by heart the rules of a dogma without necessarily understanding, feeling or applying them. Vidal sums up Jean-Louis’ ‘petits mensonges’ and ‘pieux’ mensonges’ where ‘la moralité perd ce que la religion n’est pas sure de gagner’ (Vidal, 1977: 106). Jean-Louis puts his pride before God, and this is the
obstacle in the pursuit of God’s love; by putting his passions first, he subjects his faith to them and to their satisfaction.

Infidelity and pride are tortuously linked during the night spent with Maud. Jean-Louis finds ways to justify his infidelity on the moral level. The denial of Françoise’s existence in reply to Maud’s and Vidal’s persistent hints allows him to stay at Maud’s guilt-free, despite the blatantly ambiguous circumstances; ‘je suis converti’, he specifies, safeguarding his morally perfect façade. This tale encourages the distinction between the real attempt to overcome and improve one’s condition of weakness and the forgery of it. Vidal and Maud offer Jean-Louis the opportunity to fight his moral lethargy at their own cost. Incapable of that same Christian compassion, Jean-Louis ruthlessly neglects his friend’s feelings for Maud as well as her feelings: disguised as a prude, he stays all night with her to prove the irresistibility of his charm; he does not acknowledge the nature of his actions, gaining Maud’s definition, ‘demi Catholique, demi Don Juan’.

Maud’s involvement with infidelity is nevertheless tangential, while the two characters who form the ideal couple, Jean-Louis and Françoise, are unequivocally at the centre. When, during the first sequence at Mass, Jean-Louis is distracted by the sight of the young woman, close-ups capture his alienation from the celebration he attends. The introduction of Françoise is punctuated by two prayers in which the priest invokes God’s mercy and later the Agnus Dei. Françoise is framed within a context of repentance: during the Agnus Dei the camera moves closer and closer to Françoise, so that her praying voice becomes thoroughly audible as she pronounces ‘I am not worthy’, thus prefiguring Françoise’s fallen status. Later on, she will confess that she has just separated from a married man. Her engagement in an illicit
relationship is the reason behind her turmoil and the constant expression of fearful apprehension accompanies her until the end of the film (See Fig. 8:17, below).

Jean-Louis’ self-assurance stands out in strong contrast: in her college room, her comment, ‘comme ça, vous n’avez pas de problèmes de conscience!’, suggests her engagement in a self-critical analysis, while his placid answer ‘très peu’ emphasizes his confidence. Ironically, he discusses the concept of grace by using an instance of conjugal infidelity. Firstly praising a man’s renunciation of his marriage and offspring for another woman, he then downplays such choice when affirming he would not do the same: the picture of himself involved in a case of infidelity appears even more sordid, given he would not choose between the lover and the wife. Again, Jean-Louis focuses on himself and not on the nature of the problem. Françoise poses the case whereby that woman could have been married with offspring, so that Jean-Louis would have had to make a choice so as to determine the woman’s decision. Françoise uses her experience of infidelity to reassess the meaning of her principles and of her love: her deeper understanding of the complexity of human nature and her
active search for truth challenge Jean-Louis’s certainty about the nature of his principles and unveil his latent cowardice and ambivalence. His refusal to engage with her probing bears witness to the fraudulence of his values and idea of love and fidelity. Her desire to be a true Christian condemns her to be forever marked by infidelity, while Jean-Louis remains forever unable to offer Françoise anything morally elevating on such issue. Fantasising like one of the literary heroes analysed by Girard, Jean-Louis feels protected by God and His grace and, as such, he cannot see his flawed condition.

In the twenty-four hours spent with Maud, Jean-Louis expresses himself thoroughly on the subject of infidelity. Admitting that there is a ‘coexistence plutôt belliqueuse’ between his adventures with women and his Catholicism, he hesitates about staying at hers, this hesitancy, Maud states, signals a worry about his respectability. Suddenly, he comfortably throws himself on Maud’s bed, partly lying on her lower body covered by the duvet and with half his upper body closely facing hers (see Fig. 8:18, below).

Ma Nuit chez Maud (Fig. 8:18)
He stares at her, pausing in silence and talks in a lower and deeper voice with an alluring timbre. Would his future spouse enjoy this sight? For the man of principles he professes to be, the promise he has made to Françoise is real even just in the realm of intentions, but his latest positioning is suggestive of far from rigorous intentions. Jean-Louis’ ambivalence consists of the refusal to risk losing; he does not fight for the Pascalian ‘la chance sur mille’ but instead opts for the path of compromise.

With his increasingly incongruous conduct, he volunteers a discussion about infidelity: ‘s’il y a quelque chose que je ne comprends pas, c’est l’infidélité’, he says, while sitting on Maud’s bed again. The ambivalence of his intentions has humorous overtones, as his body language makes a move on Maud while his words speak of fidelity to Françoise. His disapproval of marital infidelity is a matter of self-respect: once he has made a choice he will not deviate from it. Fidelity is reduced to a mechanic act devoid of human warmth and ethical values. Infidelity per se does not bother him; he does not discuss it according to what Catholicism has defined around the question, hence, he cannot recognise the implications of his conduct in relation to it. Is infidelity in Jean-Louis’ logic a matter of intentions or a matter of facts? Another sequence proposes a resolution to the unresolved question.

At dawn, Maud’s advances force him to choose. By first rejecting her, Jean-Louis makes a clear choice; however, he immediately refutes that choice (see Fig. 8:19, in the following page).
Previously, he spoke about having made ‘un choix à l’avance, un choix global d’une certaine façon de vivre’, which implies a promise of thorough commitment to his chosen woman. His confusion at this moment highlights the fragility of his moral standing, and his tendency to live comfortably on ambiguous grounds.

Later that day, having asked Françoise out, Jean-Louis takes Maud on a mountain trip and stages an iniquitous farcical courtship. He whispers words of tenderness to Maud, kisses her, and finally holds her tight in a passionate embrace. Paradoxically, it is the newly open opportunity with Françoise that makes him feel that his treacherous conduct is legitimate. Infidelity appears here justified by the hero’s closeness with the chosen woman, a dynamic that leaves no place for fidelity (see Fig. 8:20-21, in the following page).
Maud nevertheless questions the coldness of his kisses, which he justifies as follows: ‘ce baiser est purement amical’. Jean-Louis’ duplicitous behaviour is also the result of his passive acceptance of codes of conduct. Vidal taught him about desiring Maud through his desire for her; Maud has taught him to desire her through her desire of him; consequently, his farcical attempt at seducing her highlights the fact that his
‘conduite au cours de cette soirée, puis en présence de Françoise, dessine le portrait d’un individu qui calque sans cesse son attitude sur celle de ses proches, modèles et médiateurs’ (Serceau, 2000: 136). Unaware of such mechanisms, but enjoying their accomplishments, Jean-Louis emerges as a carrier of the potential for infidelity as a common social practice. By the end of the day Jean-Louis will pronounce words of fidelity towards Maud, ‘je suis fidèle, même à vous’, thus also sanctifying his twisted disposition: his affirmation of fidelity to more than one person, Maud and Françoise, and to God and Catholic values at the same time, further unveils his duplicitous sentiments.

Jean-Louis’ handling of the relationships with the two women reiterates the traditional double standard of infidelity. Although he freely switches from one woman to another, he cannot conceive of his partner’s infidelity: as he says ‘je pense que, si elle m’aime, elle ne me trompera pas’. As such, if fidelity goes hand in hand with love, what are the spectators to make of his friendly kisses with Maud? His conduct shows love and fidelity on different planes of judgement according to the circumstances that inform his supposedly Catholic rationale. The sequence where, on the top of a hill in Clermond-Ferrand, he and Françoise have a stormy confrontation provides further evidence of this. Françoise eventually confesses to having a lover: ‘j’ai un amant’, she says, which she then qualifies ‘j’ai eu… Ce n’est pas tellement loin’. Her answer about her present feelings towards that man, ‘je l’aimais’, the use of the imperfect tense at this point makes her feelings poignantly real and alive. Already shaken, Jean-Louis is placed under further pressure when she tells him her lover was married. The heavy breathing while he utters ‘ah, oui’ shows his discomfort but also expresses a judgemental disappointment: having previously stated that he never got his judgements of people wrong, he now finds out that his
practising Catholic ideal woman is not the immaculate blonde angel of which he dreamed (see Fig. 8:22, below).

Ma Nuit chez Maud (Fig. 8:22)

Where is the God who he believed to be by his side? Where is the grace that had so far favoured him? His shallow faith does not allow him to see that God and grace are speaking to him now through the opportunity to practise that compassion and human warmth he ought to have as a person of concrete value, and as a true Christian. He tells her he respects her freedom and, thus, if she wished to call off their relationship, he would understand. Pretending human compassion, he tries to escape from a situation he no longer likes. When she says that he is what she wants, his principles of self-respect trap him and, after a pensive pause, he takes her into his arms. Does he do so out of love or, as he mentioned to Maud, because he would lose respect for himself if he was not consistent in his choices? Ending this conversation, his pride takes over again when he states that he slept with another woman the night before they met, thus adding another layer of hypocrisy to their relationship and entrenching it even further in the texture of infidelity. Oblivious to the meaning of his lie, he
inadvertently recognises concreteness in what happened with Maud; the circumstances he experienced by his own will with Maud bear witness to his infidelity of the mind.

An appropriate counterpart to Jean-Louis’ serious, although half-hearted, commitment in the pursuit of Christian deeds is Jérôme’s accomplishment of ‘une bonne action’ in *Le Genou de Claire*. Here, the bright and capricious summer weather in the landscape of Annecy replaces the austere winter scenery of Pascal’s native town. In the black and white *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, the settings were complicit in conveying the halting spiritual growth of its protagonists in the simplicity of the settings and the semi-darkness of enclosed spaces such as a car, a flat, a hostel room and the church. In *Le Genou de Claire* the colourful and fertile exteriors of the landscape under the summer sky lend themselves to the volatility of its inhabitants: Jérôme’s whimsical testing of his seduction skills at the dawn of his wedding, Laura’s bold desire for continuous novelty, Claire’s stubborn yet fragile perspective on first love. Like Jean-Louis, Jérôme has travelled widely and now thinks it is time to settle down. As soon as he meets his old friend Aurora he emphasises that, because of the marriage, he no longer looks at other women. These words resonated on Jean-Louis’ lips, and will in Frédéric’s, who, with Jérôme, emerges as one of the most self-deluded of characters. As Frédéric, Jérôme now finds women all the same; being with Lucinde (Isabelle Pons), his future spouse, has taught him that they do not interest him any longer. The mural at Jérôme’s villa showing a bellow’s blast of air, which Aurora calls the fruit of the character’s drives and reasoning, frames Jérôme’s next actions.

The concept of *amour propre* remains fundamental in the dynamic of infidelity: Aurora – whose name evokes a most emblematic story of infidelity,
Murnau’s *Aurora* (1927) – brings to Jérôme’s attention Laura’s soft spot for him, touching his Achilles’ heel. He invites Laura to his villa and, on the way there, the sudden cut from the two of them on his boat to his bedroom suggests and frames the potential outcome of their friendship on a different level. At the centre of his gaze, Laura stands right before the sumptuous canopy bed, covered by a brightly intense red duvet (see Fig. 8:23, below).

![Image](image_url)

*Le Genou de Claire* (Fig. 8:23)

The various shades of red that dominate the mise-en-scène impregnate this scene with Gérôme’s unlawful desire: Laura wears a darker shade of red top and on the tables right next to her lie three old books with shiny red leather covers. Lucinde’s jacket is also red. Even if only in abstract terms, Laura’s comments about Lucinde as she holds her picture imply the irregular triangular dynamic of infidelity: in Jérôme’s sphere of affects there is, therefore, transference of roles between Lucinde and Laura, further exacerbated by Laura’s disapproval of her as his partner. Eventually,
he kisses Laura during their walk in the nearby mountains, thus renouncing his principles of fidelity (see Fig. 8:24, below).

*Le Genou de Claire* (Fig. 8:24)

The signs of his weakness are all present in the sequence at Laura’s mother’s (Michèle Montel) home. Before going to bed, Laura stages, amused, a hypothetical amorous encounter between herself and Jérôme. If her mother has a maternally concerned look, her new partner listens to Laura with paternal tenderness but stares at Jérôme inquisitively. Jérôme can barely contain the effects of Laura’s flattery, as the close-up of his facial expression when Laura kisses him goodnight shows. Laura’s confident ascent of the stairs in a comic *femme fatale* fashion sanctions the defeat of the male hero. His close-up brings to light the moment of his fall: he is now in the hands of his uncontrollable drives and, in his thoughts, he has already disrespected his commitment to Lucinde. The mother’s confidence in the strong will and decency expected from anyone about to marry is defied by Jérôme’s answer, emphasising his unreliability in such matters and placing reliance on the girl’s
decency instead: amoral, old values against moral, modern values. His kiss with Laura recalls Jean-Louis’ and Maud’s in exactly the same geographical area. By this point both narrators have faith in the strength of their feelings for their chosen partners and both of them define their light intimacy with the other two women as merely amicable. After the women’s reticence, both narrators insist on playing their friendly game and Jérôme aggravates an already compromised position by asking Laura, ‘on ne peut plus jouer?’.

Laura’s game is very different from Jérôme’s: what he thought was the result of his infallibility as a seducer may instead be the outcome of Laura’s fragile relationship with her mother, as she lives suspended between her divorced parents. Competing with her mother who is about to remarry, Laura re-enacts a hypothetical stealing of the father by using Jérôme as a surrogate father-figure, with which her mother would not like to ‘laisser coucher […] à l’hôtel’. Once she has proved her own charm against her mother’s, she rejects Jérôme’s superficiality in the name of real love. Jérôme fails everybody’s test of moral standards amidst a group of otherwise committed people: Laura is committed to the search for ideal, real love, her mother to Jacques, Aurora to her fiancé, Claire to Gilles (Gérard Falconetti).

Jérôme’s urgent desire to perpetrate infidelity and feed his amour propre finds another victim. Again, the colour red accompanies his mischievous journey, as if tormenting his unfulfilled desire while stimulating its pursuit. All the characters in turn wear red; the garden chairs and the stripes on Jérôme’s boat are also red. Most significantly, the cherries Claire picks from the tree when Jérôme’s gaze is captivated by her bended knee are red: the close-up of her knee captures it as a symbol of desire at its most archetypal. Jérôme’s eating of the ripe red cherries Claire gives him stands for his renewed determination to carry out a plan of
seduction. The knee acquires further significance when Jerôme sees Gilles’ hand caressing it (see Fig. 8:25, below).

\[Image\]

*Le Genou de Claire* (Fig. 8:25)

The knee now signifies possession as well as desire: in a Girardian dynamic of mediated desire, Jérôme’s longing to possess someone else’s possession sees Jérôme in competition with Gilles’ juvenile arrogance. Claire’s knee is the catalyst for Jérôme’s fulfilment of a desire which is not without a ‘but’, as he affirms. Just as Frédéric claims he does not want to interact with other women but only dreams of possessing them, Jérôme repeats several times that he does not want Claire, whilst claiming rights on her. The contradictory nature of the heroes’ statements unveils their failure at emotional fidelity. By affirming rights over Claire, Jérôme positions himself as the dominant male, reiterating a traditional dynamic of unbalanced power relations that the patriarchal treatment of male infidelity holds as normative.

He tells Aurora that Claire’s knee has awakened in him ‘un désir de “rien”’, but the degree of reliability of the narrators’ accounts is always questionable. Dismissing the Laura affair as an unpleasant experiment carried out solely to please
Aurora, he has no reason to feel unfaithful towards Lucinde. Mixing the notions of friendship and love, he states that ‘au fond, l’amour et l’amitié, c’est la même chose’ and that the beauty of friendship is that it implies ‘qu’on respecte la liberté de l’autre. Il n’y a pas d’idée de possession’. Fitting the ambiguous terms of his understanding of fidelity, his respect for Lucinde’s freedom is a pretext in order to justify his licentious freedom. Furthermore, his affirmation about Lucinde’s freedom betrays a double standard: he talks about ‘la certitude qu’elle ne fera pas quelque chose qui me déplairait’; he is free, but similarly to Jean-Louis’ expectations from Françoise, she is not. According to Jérôme, despite having kissed Laura, he has not done anything Lucinde would disapprove of because, as he states, ‘mes sentiments sont purement amicaux’. Conceptually, the open borders that the ideas of friendship and friendliness rest upon are instruments for him to perpetrate his strategies of seduction without feeling accountable for infidelity.

Infidelity follows Jérôme around, as he happens to witness a potential instance of it. Gilles, as far as Jérôme can tell from a distance, walks next to a girl with whom he exchanges gestures of affection. Jérôme’s use of binoculars testifies to the uncertainty of what he witnesses and to the unreliability of his account of those few seconds (see Fig. 8:26, below).
Nevertheless, Jérôme articulates the one and only possible interpretation for his mindset: Gilles is unfaithful to Claire. Ironically, after all his preaching about the beauty of friendship, he suddenly sees infidelity. Telling Claire about Gilles’ amicable encounter with Muriel, his blaming of Gilles further proves the unreliability of his judgements: if Gilles is beyond doubt unfaithful to Claire, why are his amicable manners with other women innocent (see Fig. 8:27, below, which shows Jérôme’s exaggeratedly friendly gestures towards his good old friend Aurora).

![Image](image.jpg)

*Le Genou de Claire* (Fig. 8:27)

Eventually, his abstract desire takes a tangible form when his hand colonises Claire’s knee (see *Fig. 8:28*, in the following page).
The lingering camera zooms in while he caresses it, magnifying the objective reality of Jérôme’s action and the significance of this gesture for him. Captured from his perspective only, the one-minute, forty-second-long caressing reads like an accomplished possession. A cut to the lake and river banks in the stormy weather for a few seconds is then followed by an edit opening onto the ongoing caress. This effectively reinstates the authenticity of the consummation of Jérôme’s desire, as opposed to the semblance of authenticity the spectators are exposed to when seeing Gilles and Muriel from Jérôme’s point of view. The framing of the caressing of the knee avenges Jérôme’s previous mischievous mediations of reality and defines, once and for all, the ordinary quality of what is nothing more than intentions and acts of infidelity.

The retelling of the Claire affair to Aurora closes with the allusive mise-en-scène of his bed, which has opened his journey into the testing of his (in)fidelity. His hands caressing the legs of the canopy bed create a bridge of continuity with his narration of the caressing of Claire’s knee. His explanation, ‘ce geste que je croyais
un geste de désir, elle l’avait pris pour un geste de consolation’, confirms his impure logic: Claire’s interpretation of his gesture as an act of consolation would be the ultimate source of pleasure for Jérôme, who strives to disguise his unfaithful drives masked with innocence. He reassures Aurora that all the ghosts have left his imagination and all he cares about is Lucinde, whose picture ‘n’étant qu’une image, elle s’impose comme signe; elle incarne une idée, justification du pari qu’est le mariage’ (Serseau, 2000: 98). Jérôme rests satisfied with his back on the bed’s leg, a gesture that connotes the dishonesty behind his unknowing spouse’s back.

The men’s actions are characterised by overt explanations and rationalisations of their beliefs; anxious to prove themselves stable, righteous and in charge, they create a realm of fantasy onto which they profusely project a fictional rather than a real self. The fictional dimension emphasizes the flaws they do not want to recognise in themselves, namely their compulsion towards transgressing the boundaries of their official relationship. The contrast between their fantasy world of supposed fidelity and their eventual actions of infidelity undermine their dissimulations. The chapter has shown how the male characters’ romantic trajectories are entrenched in thoughts and acts of infidelity: in this film, the so-called ‘elect’ and ‘second’ women are conflated into one indistinguishable generic persona. All of them end up having to face the men’s belittling attitude. The female characters confront both themselves with the act of infidelity and the men’s expectations of female culpability and/or responsibility for it. At times with silence and elusiveness, at times with well-defined, outspoken elaborations of their convictions, the tales’ women assess themselves as confident in their awareness of themselves and their environment. Those women who have experienced infidelity eventually reject it for good.
The increasing number of acts of infidelity in successive tales shows the male and female characters heavily involved with both the notion and the occurrence of infidelity. The male characters from first to last provide a static perception of masculinity and their role as men in society. Like actors, who literally follow a script, they have internalised the act of infidelity so deeply that, when they take a mistress, they perceive their infidelity as a performance, not as a reality. On the other hand, the tales barely hint at the potential for female infidelity. Instead, they focus attention on women’s reaction to infidelity both as a concept and as a reality. The women in the tales challenge male infidelity by way of probing questions and acts of rejection in response to ambivalent *performances*. What outcomes elicit those different attitudes will be discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter Eight illustrated the close attention which Rohmer’s moral tales pay to the masculine conceptualisation and practice of infidelity as an extra-dyadic desire associated inextricably with the notion of transgression. The narrators’ responsiveness to the desire for transgression is evident both to the second woman and to the spectators; yet the narrators only partially acknowledge the implications of their involvement with the second woman. Transgression and denial are thus fundamental traits in the dynamics of infidelity in the tales. In an attempt to understand the resolutions concerning the issue of infidelity which are elicited, this chapter considers the final sequences of the Contes moraux. The idea of resolution is twofold: it concerns first how the narrator perceives his actions by this point, and second, it concerns the appreciation of events from an external perspective to the male protagonists’. Such events, unlike the narrators’ perception of them, rest to a certain degree, on uncertainty.

This chapter focuses on how and if in the end the experience of infidelity for all the characters has a transformative effect; it proposes to seize through each story’s narrative closure the evolution of the treatment of infidelity. Through those findings the chapter assesses either how such details may shed light on, are implicated in, or are indicative of the tales’ involvement with the politics of the everyday that their spectators, like the fictional characters, faced during the 1960s and 1970s. Ambiguity inevitably emerges as part of the texture of the tales’ narratives and their thematic content: it is expressive of – and intrinsic to – both the nature of the protagonists’ attitudes and the idea of infidelity where all the characters’ paths converge.
The endings encapsulate a verdict about the protagonists’ position within the large-scale scheme of their experiences, although, in the tales, ‘l’action et le récit ne se closent jamais. Ils ne se dénouent pas, ils restent ouverts, ou plutôt suspendus, sur une révélation’ (Serceau, 66). The ending of La Boulangère de Monceau acknowledges infidelity as an absent presence: the penultimate shot from Jacqueline’s old viewpoint frames the narrator and his now-wife Sylvie walking into the bakery. Vidal notices how ‘de très immorale façon, il devra l’amour de sa future épouse moins à sa constance qu’à son infidélité et moins à sa franchise qu’à son silence. [...] les mariages “réussis” débutent ainsi par des demi-mensonges et se poursuivent dans la dissimulation et les faux aveux’ (Vidal, 1977: 40).

Frédéric in L’Amour l’après-midi, once outside his domestic milieu, spends a great deal of his time observing other women, an apparently innocent pastime which for him signifies the ultimate form of transgression and testifies to his overwhelming need to contravene his vow of marital fidelity. Jérôme in Le Genou de Claire glides from one woman to another, playing a neo-puritanical game of ‘amicable manners’ where everything he does is bathed in the pleasure of transgression. About Molière and Mozart’s Don Giovanni, Kierkegaard said “il ne séduit pas, il désire, et ce désir a un effet séducteur” (in Serceau, 2000: 121) (see Fig. 9:1, in the following page, a close-up of Mozart’s opera score Don Juan which emphasises the role of the seducer assumed by the tales’ narrators).
Kierkegaard was referring to the effect the character’s desire had on the women around him; yet it is Jérôme who is seduced by his own desire, enlivened by it rather than by his (missed) accomplishments. Adrien in *La Collectionneuse* and Jean-Louis in *Ma Nuit chez Maud* initially live austerely, away from the bustle of the city, but their rigorous conduct is short-lived. Soon they find themselves overtaken by the uncontrollable desire to be desired, with narcissism and weakness as the driving forces behind their resistance to the pursuit of the ideal of self-perfection. Adrien’s obsessive contempt for Haydée is a displacement of his repressed desire to transgress. Jean-Louis, a professedly practising Catholic, transfers Adrien’s hyperbolic self-esteem onto the Catholic value-system, thus creating fertile soil in which to nurture his ego. The initial scene at Mass is deliberately ambiguous: is he there to serve God and feed his own soul or is he there to indulge his own mortal desires? All the narrators are linked by their inability to resist the desire for and response to the attention of women, whether of *la femme* or *une femme*. 
In *La Carrière de Suzanne* the narrator’s (Philippe Beuzen) final thoughts give surprising credence to the qualities embodied by the second woman, Suzanne (see Fig. 9:2, below).

Admitting his misjudgement of her and his feelings of inferiority towards someone who has simply tried to find a respectful and loving partner, Bertrand observes Suzanne’s sinuous body under the eyes of her attentive boyfriend (see Fig. 9:3, below).
Like Haydée’s, Suzanne’s body appears fragmented, conveying Bertrand’s way of seeing her. The incongruity between how he still looks at her and what he thinks of her highlights the battle between an old-fashioned perception of woman and a renovated one, of which Bertrand could become a carrier if he only managed to leave behind the heritage of the artificial sexual categories to which he passively conforms.

As Vidal points out, this tale is characterised by ‘le parfum légèrement désuet d’une époque de transition entre le rigorisme antérieur et le laxisme à venir’ and ‘les tentatives d’émancipation, féminines en particulier, se font dans le respect de convenances dérivant directement d’une conception traditionnelle des rôles respectifs de l’homme et de la femme’ (Vidal, 1977: 45). Suzanne’s character prefigures Haydée’s in two respects: she looks for what Haydée defines as ‘des rapports possibles et normaux avec les gens’ and she is the active agent of this search.

In the last few images of La Collectionneuse, Adrien appears restless: the ‘act of moral will’, of leaving Haydée, now shows its thinness. When in the car waiting for Haydée, who is planning to go to the Italian resort of San Felice Circeo with other male friends, he suffers from not being at the centre of her attentions. Later on, at the villa, his staring at Haydée’s clothes lying on her empty bed illustrates the void left by the missed opportunity with her. When ready to consummate his affair with the finally available collectionneuse, he confesses his ‘vœux secrets d’aventure absolue’ as well as his previous ‘amours occasionelles jusque-là condamnées à n’être que d’un soir, ou à se perdre dans les sables…’. Adrien admits to his numerous affairs, adding doubts about the integrity of his decision to return to Mijanou: in the absence of any other woman with whom to play out his desires of transgression, she becomes his last resort to regain a comfort zone. Adrien’ maleness is fully dependent
on women. Having previously admitted that ‘si une fille me tombe dans les bras et qu’elle est jolie, je la prends’, Adrien, now alone in a new and frightening territory, is only able to either pursue one-night stands or the vulgar perpetration of his flawed feelings for Mijanou.

_Le Genou de Claire_ ends with the uneasy but successful reconciliation of Claire and Gilles against Jérôme’s will, after he has pursued his unlawful desire for Claire’s knee with the illusion of ‘résultats […] des plus moraux’. Vidal recalls that in Balzac, ‘le goût de la conspiration apparaît souvent comme le dérivatif de désirs sexuels inassouvis’ (Vidal, 1977: 77). Maintaining that ‘la conscience de cette bonne action a été constitutive de mon plaisir’, Jérôme denies the existence of his unfaithful desire. The tale’s closure comments on infidelity in relation to Gilles and Jérôme: ‘sans que rien soit réellement éclairci, le jeune couple un instant séparé renoue le fil de ses relations équivoques. Tout recommence comme avant. Contre l’ordre éthique et eugénique voulu par Jérôme, Aurora est le témoin et le garant d’un ordre “immoral” naturellement restauré’ (Vidal, 1977: 129-130). This last image reflects Jérôme’s situation with Lucinde: Gilles’ potential infidelity mirrors those that the latter will continue inflicting on his future spouse. Jérôme calls Gilles ‘bête’, without realising that his judgement of Gilles’ infidelity also embraces himself by extension; upon his departure, Gilles will maintain the tradition of the same farces (see Fig. 9:4, in the following page, which shows Gilles’ amorous return to Claire… for a few hours, at least).
The captivating contraposition of geographical spaces that characterises the events in *Ma Nuit chez Maud* pervades the final sequence too. Hills are constantly alternated with flat paths. Crucial encounters happen on the hills: there Jean-Louis fakes interest in Maud whilst planning to marry Françoise; Françoise’s secret affair is revealed on a hill; finally, it is on a hill that the confrontation between Maud, Jean-Louis and Françoise takes place. A static shot captures Maud walking up the hill after the short but intense conversation with Jean-Louis; Maud’s unconditional battle for self-improvement no matter the harshness of the journey is conveyed through the upward movement (see *Fig. 9:5*, in the following page).
As Pezzotta and Prandi affirm, ‘women constantly live as they wish to live, without coming down to compromises, and the discovery of the others’ compromises and falsities sends them, rightly, into crisis. Once their own identity is conquered, it becomes right to project this identity outside’ (1996: 96). Maud, along with the majority of the female characters in the tales, projects herself outside of the fantasy world the narrators would like to inscribe them in, and outside of their world of self-complacent compromises. Caught in this dynamic of disentanglement from the archaic perception of gender relations, Maud’s struggle makes her experience ‘life’s ambiguous clarity; it is life with its cruelties, with its pain, with its light and its obscurities’ as Pezzotta and Prandi affirm (1996: 97). Maud’s accidental encounter with Françoise suffuses the end of the tale with the revelation of infidelity, since it was Françoise’s adulterous relationship with Maud’s husband which led to the

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19 ‘le donne vivono costantemente quello che vogliono vivere, senza cedere a compromessi, e la scoperta dei compromessi e delle falsità degli altri le mettono, giustamente, in crisi. Una volta acquistata una propria identità, sarà proprio questa identità che verrà proiettata all’esterno’.

20 ‘la chiarezza ambigua della vita, è la vita con le sue crudeltà, con il suo dolore, con la sua luce con le sue oscurità’.
breakdown of their marriage. Maud has already witnessed the implications of finite gain and infinite loss. Jean-Louis’ sudden awakening to Françoise’s affair with Maud’s now ex-husband sees their relationship go downhill – Jean-Louis and Françoise walk down towards the beach. In their last conversation they stand in separate shots, and close-ups of each of them emphasise their uneasiness. Silence reigns over the newly apprehended truths. Françoise eventually recalls their agreement to never discuss certain issues again; Jean-Louis lies about his night with Maud again. Maud’s integrity, which five years earlier had allowed ‘him to preserve his own’ (Hillier, 1970-71: 19), cannot save him now: his last words affirm exactly what his actions and thoughts had implied but he had always denied – the fact that he has been falsely faithful. With Ma Nuit chez Maud, Zappoli notes, there has been a shift from the youthful attitudes of the previous tales to an adult world with ‘the (apparently) well-defined ideological positions of adults who prefer to reflect on a past (to be rapidly hidden in the “unsaid”) than to face the real risk of a future open to “real” communication’ (Zappoli, 1998: 49).21 Ironically, the relationship between Jean-Louis and Françoise survives through infidelity, both spiritual and actual, on both sides – ‘a mirage created by keeping their own dishonesty secret’ (Leigh, 2012: 41). Finally reunited again in the same frame, and with their son, they merrily run towards the infinity of the sea, which embraces their relationship fed on finite lies (see Fig. 9:6, in the following page).

21 ‘le posizioni ideologiche (apparentemente) ben definite di adulti ormai più pronti a riflettere su un passato (da celare rapidamente nel “non detto”) che ad affrontare il reale rischio di un futuro aperto a una comunicazione “vera”’.
L’Amour l’après-midi’s ending is arguably the most dramatic in the series. In unprecedented fashion, it presents the wife’s reaction to her husband’s half-confession of misconduct. The underlying irony and bitterness of the other tales leaves room for Hélène’s anxiety about the state of their marriage: all dressed up, she gives up an unexplained commitment when Frédéric unusually returns home in the afternoon. Only a few minutes earlier, he was drying Chloé’s nude body (see Fig. 9:7, in the following page).
Nudity, a rare occurrence in Rohmer’s films, appears three times: firstly with Frédéric’s wife, secondly with the English au pair, and thirdly with Chloé. The recurrent female nudity suggests the degree of his desire by equating the desire for his wife to that for other women. Despite the opaque terms of his confession, his apologetic tone clearly begs for understanding, without, though, offering back the understanding she may need in this emotionally charged moment. Not detecting the oddity of her comment about his perfection, what this sudden praising might say about her, he remains unconcerned of the worries she has about herself. The ending does not provide any clarification beyond Frédéric and Hélène’s temporary cure of their reciprocal ‘angoisse de l’après-midi’. Panning in the opposite direction to their bedroom, the camera comes to a standstill and closes on the same scenario it opened with, showing the interiors of this sombre, everyday experience (see Fig. 9:8, in the following page).
This discussion about the tales’ closures leads to a final assessment of infidelity in relation to the ways in which the narrators relate to women. The narrators subject the women to an *orderly random* system of judgement, where the chosen women are at once the narrators’ ultimate goal and recipients of their unfaithfulness, and the second women are mostly desired and mostly despised. Zappoli argues that, ‘active or passive, the protagonist of the Rohmerian tales experiences an unresolved relationship with the woman’ (Zappoli, 1998: 35). Whether on one side of the spectrum or the other, all women constitute a simultaneous reason for anxiety and fascination. This is ironic in light of the distinct distance between the narrators and the chosen partner: the tone of the narrators’ emotions towards them is of respectful coolness. In contrast, their stronger reactions surface with regards to the second women. As if following the guidelines of nineteenth-century French treatises about how to keep one’s relationship safe from a

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22 ‘passivo o attivo che sia, il protagonista dei “Racconti” rohmeriani vive un rapporto irrisolto con la donna’.
spouses’ infidelity, the narrators have carefully chosen women whose whereabouts appear beyond suspicion. The tales, however, direct the spectators towards an understanding of the chosen and second women that is wider than the narrators’ perspective. In the case of Hélène, for example, ‘pour la première fois, l’élue dépasse la séductrice en mystère et en complexité’ (Vidal, 1977: 146), but for Frédéric ‘elle n’existe pas […] mais uniquement à travers ses fonctions domestiques d’épouse et de mère’ (143). As such, this narrator, who has deliberately framed himself in a condition of ignorance, ‘ne cherche à faire avouer personne, peut-être parce qu’il est trop sûr de sa partenaire, parce que son obsession n’est pas de déceler la trahison, mais au contraire de trahir’ (Bonitzer, 1999: 17). Moreover, as Serceau stresses, Frédéric’s nearly final fall after Chloé’s shows ‘sur quelle oblitération du désir s’est édifié le choix de l’élue’ (Serceau, 2000: 137).

Jérôme’s assertions about women, that he ‘n’arrive même plus à les distinguer les unes des autres. Elles sont équivalentes, égales’, and that ‘toutes les femmes se valent’, equals Frédéric’s explanation that ‘depuis que je me suis marié, je trouve toutes les femmes jolies’, and later ‘je rêve que je les possède toutes, effectivement’. The total erasure of female subjectivity with its diversity and complexity justifies the narrators’ playful interaction with other women: infidelity is not after all an extraordinary occurrence. When infidelity is expressive of a woman’s sexually liberated conduct, the narrators point to the ordinariness of infidelity; in such cases, the preservation of their selves as superior misleads them into thinking of themselves as incapable of such ordinariness. The spectators witness infidelity in Rohmer’s tales purely on the level of fantasy or imagination: nevertheless, its reality of intentions cannot be dismissed as mere fantasy. In the narrators’ conduct, fidelity and infidelity on the spiritual and physical levels merge as if only physical
intercourse signified infidelity. Discussing Jerôme’s polarisation of interest in the knee, Vidal affirms that ‘caresser ce genou lui apparaît dès lors comme LA relation sexuelle idéale, parfaite, privilégiée’ (Vidal, 1977: 112). About Jérôme’s caressing, Bonitzer argues, ‘l’occurrence qui sépare un acte effectif d’un geste dénué de suites. Un acte entraîne des conséquences […] Un geste, non, à moins qu’il ne soit interprété par un autre’ (Bonitzer, 1999: 112) (see Fig. 9:9, below).

Le Genou de Claire (Fig. 9:9)

His geste has no consequences in that there is no one to interpret it. Bonitzer claims that Claire is so desperate and lost in her crying that she is not truly present, her thoughts being with Gilles rather than with Jérôme; thus, Jérôme takes advantage ‘de cette “absence”’(Bonitzer, 1999: 112) – and Gilles’ absence might, it has been seen, signify infidelity. Both interpretations support the underlying problem that the narrator is the creator of a strategy of infidelity and of its accomplishment in the guise of nothingness, or absence. Bonitzer summarizes Le Genou de Claire as a simulacrum, where the geste is a simulacrum for an act and the caress for a possession: the narration of all this is the simulacrum for an adventure (113).
imaginary level on which the narrators’ deeds take place frees them, they think, from the deed itself, while at the same time the pleasure derived from the accomplishment of their strategy of nothingness feeds their amour propre. The tales’ narrator ‘semble chercher à obtenir […] le signe que son charme opère’ (Bonitzer, 116): the aim justifies the means – where the means are not even acknowledged as such.

The notion of infidelity becomes a carnival of perversion: the narrators talk about infidelity and make half-steps towards its accomplishment but, in the end, talking about it gets in the way. The narrators remain perpetually unsatisfied, yet on one level, it is perhaps this lack of a definite termination of their desire that prolongs such desire and is thus a source of desire in itself; on another level, the prolonging of such unfulfilled desire is a manifestation of their agonizing over the loss of a time when infidelity was still possible thorough acquiescence. The so-professed satisfaction of the narrators is blatant ‘jouissance […] de l’impuissant’ (Bonitzer, 1999: 117); they are, in reality, revealed to be in a state of impotence, where the vanity of their non-consummation projects the illusion of power as well as extending the game of non-infidelity indefinitely. Living through social changes when a new rationale has emerged, they face an active process of questioning and dismantling of the biased ideology at the root. Women’s active stance of questioning male infidelity, even when embracing it under their personal circumstances, instils in the narrators an irresolvable anguish, an unbearable anxiety, which weakens and renders them metaphorically impotent in the face of what has always been their infallible instrument for asserting their virility.

This chapter has manifested how the tales’ endings reinforce a large divide between the male and female protagonists in relation to the occurrence of infidelity. The cycle’s focus on these subjects sees the two gender poles pulling in opposite
directions across almost two decades, in which the women are depicted as concentrating on moving beyond the established cultural assumptions about their roles within the romantic relation. Conversely, the men remain affirmative of the very same assumptions that, at least in the realm of the imagination, allow the desired perpetration and perpetuation of infidelity, an indelible phantom of the male characters’ mind, as if its logic was naturally and flawlessly part of men’s rights. Emphasizing the male protagonists’ conceptions of their relationships as drenched in betrayal and self-delusion, the concluding shots of the tales assume an increasingly bitter tone. If, under rather severe scrutiny, a pessimistic outlook of the men emerges, a more positive, admiring outlook emerges of the majority of the women who are seen often by themselves rather than in a relationship based on the knowledge of the established gender bias around the concept of fidelity and infidelity. In rejecting this patriarchal view, their future of apparent uncertainty, despite potentially under the constant threat of disappointment, appears brighter and more open than the male counterparts’ future of secure fallaciousness.
Conclusions

In the four chapters about the *Contes moraux* the analysis of the theme of infidelity has highlighted a particular quality to the project: in the narrative evolution and the developments of the characters in each tale merge centuries of national cultural thought with the history of the everyday that appears in the contemporaneity of the stories and their protagonists. Much has been written about Rohmer’s alliance ‘with tradition – in fact, with an archaic tradition; […] seeking always the permanent and universal elements rather than the fashionable and ephemeral’ (Showalter, 1993: 6). Serceau’s interpretation is a second major strand that complements this perspective: Rohmer is an ‘observateur depuis les années 60 de ses contemporains, mais observateur, moins de la révolution des mœurs en elle-même, moins des écarts vis-à-vis de la morale traditionnelle et des normes de la vie amoureuse et sexuelle, que de l’impact des nouveaux discours dans la conduite des individus’ (Serceau, 2000: 143). The validity of both observations, which taken in isolation might be regarded as partial, points to the way that the treatment of infidelity in the *Contes moraux* exemplifies how these films combine the perennial and the universal with the fashionable and the ephemeral equally. They convey scrutiny of the changes in French sexual and romantic mores at the level of society, while also displaying the effect of such changes on individuals. The criticism of Rohmer that focuses on the tales’ neglect of ‘the events of May 1968’ (Tester, 2008: 84), on the idea that in the tales ‘the political, that unavoidable issue in 1960s France, has apparently been removed’ (King, 2000a: 210), and on the claim that they ‘are little more than justifications of bourgeois stolidity’ (Mellen, 1974, in Tester, 2008: 85), downgrades their scope to the mere reproduction and approval of bourgeois principles, detracting
from the iconoclastic relevance of such works. The characters’ through their circumstances enact a performance of politics of mores in which voices of the present clash with voices of the past; 1968 was the result of such contrasting voices. Infidelity as enacted, perceived and discussed in the tales brings to the fore the epoch’s newly forming politics of the everyday within the realm of the heterosexual relationship.

It has been seen how in the handling of the concepts of fidelity and infidelity the narrators propose a merely patriarchal ideology, which roots them in the past, while the tales’ outburst of vitality depicting the novelties of contemporary life is manifested through the female heroines. Infidelity – specifically male infidelity is portrayed in an unglamorous light and the outcomes of the narrators’ adventures with infidelity lay bare the shortcomings of their ‘traditional’ attitudes toward it. In contrast with the modern outlook with which the female heroines are endowed, the irony characterizing the films’ portrayal of the men’s mind-set towards a safer past speaks for the critical position the modern spectator appears invited to assume about that archaic and, most of all, seemingly defective vision.

The Contes moraux expose the obsession with the potential for multiple partnerships – a concern that emerges as blatantly in French cinema as it did in French literature. As seen in the Introduction, in the body of literature concerned with the safe keeping of a wife in the master’s bed there was evidence of masculinity in crisis. More than a hundred years later, the tales offer a critical scrutiny of infidelity as a symptom of the now-faltering patriarchy, but from a new perspective: it is principally male infidelity, and not female infidelity that is under observation. Such observation is firstly preoccupied with the mechanisms and dynamics behind its perpetration on the intellectual and then physical levels, eventually showing its
repercussions on protagonists of the contemporary era. The procedure of Rohmer’s cinema is aptly summarised by Paolo Marocco who points out that his pedagogy ‘does not put the sinner in front of a source of authority, it does not teach a revealed truth but tries to achieve it through procedures of analysis and observation’ (Marocco, 1996: 120). In this process of semi-distant scrutiny Rohmer’s camera allows for the spectators’ individual perspective to form without being forced into a particular position towards his characters, as ‘Rohmer is not interested in establishing and judging whether an occurrence is right or wrong. He positions himself in front of the event, asking “why” it took place and “how”’ (Mario Abati in Marocco, 1996: 153). The reflections this mode of investigation prompts are multiple, as when Rohmer stated, ‘it is a mistake to define feelings too precisely – they are always a little cloudy and ambiguous. When you find an explanation – and you always can – there is always another explanation behind the first one. […] the endings I find all have multiple repercussions. Like an echo’ (in Nogueira, 1971: 122). Highlighting the chaotic nature of infidelity, Rohmer’s tales engage with this issue from many angles, looking at it through the interaction of ideas from philosophers, religious believers, libertines, atheists, free thinkers and allowing all rationales and forms of justification to emerge on their own terms. The encounters among them are brought to life by Rohmer’s present-day male protagonists, whose paucity of new thought about infidelity is apparent.

In Rohmer, ‘l’amour n’est ni le sujet ni l’objet des films […] mais il y est un objet révélateur. Reliant la conduite de ses contemporains à des archetypes et mythes culturels, analysant, à travers l’écart entre les discours et les actes’ (Serseau, 2000:

23 ‘non mette il peccatore davanti a una fonte autorevole, non insegna la verità rivelata, ma cerca di raggiungerla attraverso procedimenti d’analisi e d’osservazione’.
24 ‘a Rohmer non interessa stabilire e giudicare se un evento e giusto o sbagliato. Egli si pone dinanzi all’evento chiedendosi “perché” si è verificato e “come” si è verificato’.
Rohmer’s tales originally look at a modern world where the conjugal bond is under threat from a romanticised idea of infidelity, rather than of love. Romantic love does not really exist in the tales; the male protagonists create a fantasy universe where the legitimate partner is chosen according to the canons of medieval courtly love. The faithful spouse is a Madonna-type to fulfil the man’s sense of security and social respectability, but she is only complementary to other objects of love: ‘c’est l’absence de véritable amour qui justifie au contraire la décision de se marier […] le projet de mariage est fondé sur la certitude qu’il ne peut y avoir entre eux ni séparation ni jalousie ni drame’ (Serseau, 2000: 126). Within these terms the narrators naturally pursue other women. Yet if in courtly love the illegitimate women were often the source of genuine inspiration and love and passion, in the Contes not even the other or ‘second’ women are passionately loved, or in the least respected. The narrators downgrade them to an inferior status, instrumentalizing them to feed their own desired self-ideal of omnipotence; infidelity is the vehicle to satisfy this desire. Girard affirms that one should assign ‘le terme romantique aux œuvres qui reflètent la présence du médiateur sans jamais la révéler et le terme romanesque aux œuvres qui révèlent cette même présence’ (1961: 25). The Contes moraux show their narrators creating and nourishing the romanticised novel in their own lives. The structure of this self-fictionalization clearly reveals the mechanism of which the narrators are proud perpetrators yet simultaneously victims, as they fail to acknowledge as problematic the taint of mediocrity and wrongdoing that attaches to all their relationships with women. Frederic’s magic medallion to seduce one woman after another signifies those men’s incapacity ‘d’avoir avec elle des rapports d’estime réciproque et d’égalité’ (Vidal, 136). The result is a landscape in which love and fidelity are not uniformly valued and where the two genders emerge as
working in completely opposite directions, the men being unaware of the open gap between them.

The concluding chapter in the cycle, *L'Amour l'après-midi*, illustrates the *fabula* of infidelity as a male fantasy through Frédéric’s daydreaming. Similarly, in Truffaut’s last film of the *Antoine Doinel cycle*, filled with Antoine’s dreams and personal recollections, Antoine’s most treasured fantasy is of a life of relationships in their initial phase only. Frédéric, like Antoine, devises as an ideal condition a life made up purely of eternal and first loves. The two share the same conflicting dream, which envisions unrestrained infidelity. This infidelity is based on a contradiction as Serceau stresses when discussing Frédéric’s inability to consummate fully his affair with Chloé: ‘polygame, Frédéric va démontrer par l’issue de son aventure avec Chloé qu’il ne peut l’être. Pas plus qu’il ne peut rester monogame’ (Serceau, 2000: 127); if Don Juan ‘applique une philosophie, Frédéric n’a ni la science ni la conscience de bonheur’ (Serceau, 127). Hence, while on the one hand the narrators’ behaviour and conception of love always contain an element of Donjuanism, on the other their cold nature ‘permet de mettre en évidence le vide existentiel qu’elle comblait. Don Juan est comme saisi à rebours, ramené à son degré zéro d’existence, à son zéro existentiel’ (Serceau, 128). Rohmer’s scrutinizing of the narrators acts out a deconstruction of behavioural patterns coded and unchanged in French society’s apparent evolution throughout the centuries, highlighting ‘des soubassements mythiques dont les évolutions et révolutions des mœurs dissimulent trop souvent la pérennité’ (Serceau, 2000: 130). Unlike the fictional heroes they aspire to be, the narrators have now to face a changing society where women are freer to offer their counterarguments: weakened, the tales’ narrators are, as Frédéric’s magic medallion highlights, ‘loin d’avoir l’envergure des grands séducteurs de la littérature. […]

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Sous-produit de Mandrake et de Superman, Don Juan puéril et mythomane, il se complaît dans de stérile rêveries’ (Vidal, 1977: 136). The tales show the men’s enduring desire for infidelity even in the defeat of this mode of life.

In opposition to the uncritical perpetration of certain cultural norms, Rohmer created his tales to work ‘to some extent against the person concerned. What happens is […] a kind of disillusionment, a conflict […] the conclusion of the film demolishes their system and their illusions collapse’ (Petrie, 1971: 41). Their logic, or ‘the very fact of intellection creates an unbridgeable gulf between protagonist and the world, self and other. Talking about desire replaces the desire. Sexuality, already sublimated and displaced […]’ (Crisp, 1988: 64), is lived on the level of the fictitious through the act of voicing or communicating one’s desire to someone else, for example when Jérôme tells Aurora about his fantasies. Infidelity, in this case, is constantly stressed through his narrations – he even makes up a narrative of infidelity about Claire’s boyfriend. This explains the fictionalised conception of infidelity and its perpetration in real life in such a sublimated form that it ends up being perceived as a non-act by the narrators, for whom ‘il s’est donc passé ce qui ne s’est pas passé’ (Bonitzer, 1999: 121). Yet, it has been seen that the narrators’ acts are not only a matter of sublimation, they are concrete gestures that indicate the nature of their unfaithful intentions, such as kisses, embraces, caresses. Hence their rationale is ‘en ce sens un masque. […] Leur attitude est […] régis par des mythes par lequels ils s’abusent les uns les autres en même temps qu’ils se fuient eux-mêmes’ (Serceau, 2000: 143).

Women, on the other hand, busy living for the future, regardless of the interests of Jean-Louis, Frédéric or any other man, question the ideological heritage and work together towards its redefinition from fresher perspectives. For the
narrators, however, there is no future but one of compromise, promiscuity and betrayal, as ‘le spectre de l’adultère, ne servait à rien d’autre qu’à recharger de désir un lien qui pour être légitime en était jusque-là privé’ (Bonitzer, 1999: 120). Contrary to the narrators’ expectations, infidelity is no longer conveyed as a fashionable game of male self-assertion and female submissiveness; it is not a symbol of power but of weakness. The narrator’s discovery of a sense of engagement with the chosen woman in his non-union with the second one, determines that ‘l’adultère est nécessaire au mariage bourgeois, à condition de ne pas le consommer’ (Bonitzer, 120): yet, neither the legitimate spouse nor the illicit ones accede to such oxymoronic conditions. Women are portrayed in their awareness as subjects and as open-minded, as well as in their weaknesses and frailties. Projected forward, they question and try to understand what it means to be human, regardless of ideology, religion or social background.

As Durgnat argues, ‘one contractual obligation, male sexual fidelity in marriage, is a prime topic in Rohmer’s moral tales’ (Durgnat, 1990: 188). If in their lightest and most humorous aspect the Tales expose a cluster of male desires and aberrations, on another level they manifest a critique of the principle governing the binary opposition fidelity/infidelity. The analysis of the Contes moraux through infidelity has enhanced the interpretation of the cycle as a deconstruction of antiquated myths, of which the male characters are stubborn carriers. In letting the narrators’ deeply ingrained logic emerge in tale after tale, the cycle frames their relentless attempts to resuscitate what in their perception constitutes a healthy image of maleness; however, the events effectively strip such a model, with its ideology about infidelity and gender roles, to its carcase. ‘Le vrai romancier […] ne se contente pas d’exploiter une forme, de représenter son temps, d’exalter un caractère,
une idée ou une valeur. Il trouve une forme propre à déchiffrer, sous les apparences, à travers les aléatoires idées et mœurs du temps, les raisons profondes de la conduite des êtres’ (Serceau, 2000: 146). This principle is the motivating act of scrutiny in these six films, in which infidelity is the central topic and the one with which all the characters enter into dialogical relations. As such, infidelity is looked at as an occurrence at the level of conception or definition and not, as the male protagonists want to see it, in its tangible physical expression only: this latter is a mere consequence of infidelity, not the essence of it.
Final Remarks

Before the final critical assessment of the findings in this study of infidelity and Truffaut’s *Antoine Doinel cycle* and Rohmer’s *Contes moraux*, a brief overview will assist in summarising both the fundamental similarities and the differences in their treatment of it.

In the *Antoine Doinel cycle* the initial encounter with infidelity is through female infidelity. Gilberte Doinel, the mother of the film’s protagonist, the twelve-year-old Antoine, is the only adulterer in *Les Quatre cents coups*: at first sight, the film’s focus is on her maternal infidelity as an extension of her guilt in terms of marital infidelity. Whilst taking into account the concerns just mentioned, my work has focused on the ways in which the infidelity is portrayed and the dynamics through which it appears as embedded in the culture of the society of a particular society. The mother, the son and (an unusual inclusion) the father/stepfather are all protagonists of the narrative of infidelity. In particular, the father is portrayed as a central perpetrator of a socio-cultural mechanism that tacitly encourages women to act unfaithfully: whether for the sake of the family financial welfare, whether as a result of the illegality of abortion, which often led to a marriage, either with or without a child’s biological father, for the sake of social respectability. Through Antoine’s stepfather, Mr. Doinel, a rather ambiguous figure, the film strongly ties the notion of culpability in infidelity to a patriarchal vision that promotes (or protects) the perpetration of infidelity for the sake of male satisfaction whilst labelling it as a female domain of responsibility. Antoine is the only biological father in the five films of the cycle and this brings attention to the figure of the father; his constant need for a father figure highlights the lack of a satisfying fathering role for
himself, but also of a natural father. ‘Where is the father?’ – the sentence the children repeat at school during the English class in *Les Quatre cents coups* – asks who are these natural fathers and why so many of them do not stand by their offspring. Among the several variables, one possibility is that those natural fathers are absent because already committed to other mothers and children: hence, male culpability or male infidelity is called into account as the producer of illegitimate offspring. Men and women are equally questioned by the film in the biased perception of infidelity as specifically female conduct. Furthermore, that the film’s adulteress, or the mother of the unhappy child gets rid of her child and then continues her life as a wife and lover undisturbed, breaks with the classic stereotype of the mother/adulterer who subsequently either dies or sinks into misery. These facts reinforce the questioning of cinema’s common assignation of responsibility to the mother figure only. Infidelity in *Les Quatre cents coups* emerges clearly as a social contract as much as marriage is. The film ends showing the preservation of an ‘unfaithful’ relationship, Antoine in this case being the person discarded by institutional structures. Infidelity hence acquires a substantial significance in the cycle starting from this first film; further, female infidelity, too, acquires a significance that challenges the norms of standard morality around this subject and initiates a quest about it beyond ‘official’ dogmas.

In the third film, *Baisers volés*, female infidelity is treated with a comedic tone: throughout the film, women are again seen enjoying their escapades, totally and freely in charge of their illicit encounters. The family issues raised in *Les Quatre cents coups* are absent here as no children are part of these narratives. Antoine becomes the primary and astonished witness of this common occurrence and the spectators with him watch the contradictions of the French laws and civic
mentalities. *Baisers volés* anyhow reinforces the importance of the theme of infidelity and highlights its status as a profound concern in the politics of the idea of the supposedly modern couple. The following instalments, *Domicile conjugal* and *L’Amour en fuite*, shift focus onto male infidelity through Antoine, firstly, who becomes a problematic partner when he betrays his wife Christine through a series of affairs. Christine’s father, too, appears as guilty when he is discovered to be a regular visitor to brothels and an adamant defender of discreet infidelity. From a different standpoint than the previous female perpetrators of infidelity, Christine emerges as another rebellious wife of the cycle who uncompromisingly rejects male promiscuity and mediocrity. She grows as a co-protagonist in Antoine’s trajectory of infidelity and her choice to divorce him on the ground of his conduct is seen to parallel the changes in the French law – and hence to some extent mentality – with respect to women’s rights. In all cases so far, the treatment of infidelity is such as to establish an intellectual and sympathetic alignment with the cause of women’s rights to choice. In *L’Amour en fuite* infidelity that before was institutionally defined as adultery because occurring within marriage is more clearly defined in terms of its abstract or spiritual value, now that all the couples of the film are unmarried. Eschewing the often arid, practical reasoning of institutional law and conventional morality, the couple is portrayed as monogamous provided that the two individuals agree that it should be so. The occurrence of infidelity is not tolerated, either by women or men; even life as a single mother appears as a much more desirable condition than life as a betrayed wife and mother. The reappearance of Antoine’s mother, Gilberte, through the news of her death, links Christine’s possibility to choose whom to be with her child to Gilberte’s inability to make such a choice. Antoine stands between his mother’s rebellion (through infidelity) against the
symbols of society’s hypocritical state of welfare, and Christine’s rebellion against
the perpetration of another social custom, superficially demonized yet fully
integrated: infidelity. After Antoine has assessed Gilberete’s long-lasting relationship
with her unofficial partner, a faithful relationship as a free union, Antoine starts
reconsidering his own unfaithful behaviour. As a result Antoine is pulled out of
infidelity also thanks to his new partner, Sabine, who supports fidelity by individual
choice. The cycle innovatively offers a very dynamic presentation of the instances of
infidelity and the several connotations it can acquire according to each different set
of circumstances. Whilst letting all the characters propose their own reasoning, the
cycle puts forward a conception of the couple, within or out of marriage, which
respects fidelity, as a fundamental form of respect for the partner – infidelity is at last
evaluated in terms of its spiritual consequences. Whilst superficially appearing
conservative, the novelty of Truffaut’s portrayal of infidelity consists in making a
progressive statement at a cultural moment at which the right to choose a partner was
confused with sexual promiscuity, a confusion that amounted to another, disguised
form of patriarchal domination. Pursuing the theme of infidelity has enabled this
thesis to detect otherwise overlooked details, challenging traditional notions
respecting the conservatism of Truffaut’s stance toward women.

The Contes moraux begin their scrutiny of infidelity quietly with the two
shorts La Boulangère de Monceau and La Carrière de Suzanne. The protagonists are
young professionals and students who apparently engage in carefree relations. Yet,
close analysis reveals a project of investigation of the mentality of the male and
female characters about the idea of couple, with the notion of infidelity being a
central subject of reflection for them all. It is in fact with the male protagonist of La
Boulangère de Monceau that the series establishes an angle from which to look at
infidelity, specifically male infidelity. As the young man is only in the preliminary phase of courtship of the right girl to marry, his flirtatious behaviour towards another girl, from a lower social background than the first one, appears innocuous in his own eyes. His voiceover fills the tales’ events with explanations about the rationale of his actions, hence of his rationale, which more often than not has to do with justifications about his wish, if not even his right, to play around. It is noticeable that the tale inscribes its search for meaning in the understanding of the intellectual and social mechanisms that produce a particular perception of infidelity and make of it a social phenomenon culturally ingrained to the point of letting it become unquestionable, possibly even invisibly. Infidelity, a social fact, is acknowledged as problematic by the tales’ heroines and questioned throughout. La Collectionneuse solidifies the presence of infidelity as a concept nurtured in the male characters as well as their paradoxical refusal to acknowledge their treachery as such; instead, the woman, Haydée, who is not committed to anyone and goes out with different men, is accused of promiscuity, and hence condemned. The traditional patriarchal gender stereotyping of women and infidelity is apparently confirmed in this tale, but against all expectations, the female protagonist is confident of herself and her right to choice: she readily bounces back and walks away from Daniel and Adrien’s contemptuous feelings, leaving them to face their own flawed perception of themselves. This tale also emphasizes the character of the betrayed woman as an independent woman who even before the spectators get to witness the man’s intentions of infidelity leaves behind such a world. The tales propose an image of the betrayed women as elusive and confident rather than the usual stereotype of an upset and distressed person who in the end accepts her partner’s misconduct.
The reaction infidelity elicits in these women shows their alignment to a new vision of women’s possibilities in the face of archaic models of behaviour, whether theirs or others’. *Ma Nuit chez Maud* reinforces the divide between the male and female protagonists with reference to the idea of fidelity and, eventually, the occurrence of infidelity. This film also clearly introduces the romantic and novelistic vision that the male characters have and this becomes a relevant factor in their experience of infidelity. Picturing themselves to be the male heroes of a novel or the obedient servants of a particular system of belief, such as Catholicism, they perceive their actions as good-natured; furthermore, it is evident that for the male characters infidelity becomes such only when sexual intercourse occurs. Through this logic they erase the possibility that their actions are treacherous, a factor that assigns invisibility to their thoughts and acts of unfaithfulness. Infidelity also stains the so far immaculate vision of the first woman, Françoise, while the second woman, Maud (supposedly lascivious) fully rejects it. Labouring under misconceptions about the idea of infidelity, male protagonist finds his world crumbling upon itself, a defeat even further emphasized by the story’s embedment in the sacred context of Catholicism and its Seventh Commandment.

Infidelity in *Le Genou de Claire* is framed within the realm of the fictitious through Aurora’s novel about a man who faces the opportunity to engage with young girls. Jerôme, a spouse to be, jumps at this chance to believe that his unfaithful deeds are only necessary acts to fulfil both Aurora’s writing needs and Claire’s need for comfort. Jerôme’s future marriage will be smoothly entrenched in infidelity, and apparently, he does not ever know that. *L’Amour l’après-midi* finally sets infidelity within marriage; here, infidelity, or adultery, given the couple’s marital status, is shown at its most malicious. Frédéric uses all occasions once out of his family home.
to take himself out of his reality. He invests in a fantasy world constituted by polygamous encounters with other women, until one day an encounter with an old acquaintance, Chloé, starts feeding his fantasy in a tangible way. ‘L’angoisse de l’après-midi’ is the problem he needs to tackle, he states, and also in this instance, the narrator is caught into the trap of his self-delusion; yet, his daily return home, to his wife and children, make him a more aware betrayer than his predecessors, as he begins leading a double life and plainly lies to his wife about his whereabouts when he is with the second woman.

Chloé is portrayed as a strong woman who, like the others, recognizes and belittles the hypocritical conception of the couple as officially settled yet unofficially scornful of the marital promises of fidelity. Unlike the other women, she, aware of his marital status, provokes the promiscuity Frédéric is ready to commit. Also unlike the other women, she gives herself fully to him, only to provoke Frédéric’s sudden flight and return to his wife in a state of panic. His panic, which takes place as the only instance in the series when sexual intercourse is about to take place, reflects on his and the previous narrators’ fantasy narrative and half-lived experiences of infidelity. This plot development sheds further light on the Contes moraux’s design to show the intellectual artifices infidelity has been enwrapped into from a patriarchal society; the reluctance of patriarchal domination to let its grip go on fixed roles, not just for women, but also for men. Infidelity, an occurrence that encompasses the emotional and physical sphere of people’s lives, is shown to be the essence of the differences between the life visions of men and women, the aspect upon which all other aspects of their relationship (or its dissolution) depend.

Love, excitement, passion are all removed from the notion of infidelity in the Contes moraux. The experience of infidelity tale after tale which the characters find
themselves engaged in are such to create the build-up of the negative extremes of the
perception of infidelity from the male perspective, showing it fully in its several
facets. As the final shot in *L’Amour l’après-midi* dramatically illustrates, infidelity is
a mundane, mediocre reality. If in Truffaut’s cycle the spectators find themselves
thrown into a journey where the subject of infidelity is elaborated upon from
constantly changing perspectives, in Rohmer’s tales they watch a fixed perception of
infidelity, male and female, from the first tale to the last.

In my study of infidelity in the cinema of François Truffaut and Eric Rohmer
I started by arguing that the French literary-cultural heritage is a fundamental
element to be taken into account in any assessment of the novelty that their treatment
of the subject presents. French literature of the nineteenth century was important to
both directors, and both also produced a serial study of infidelity through which they,
like their literary antecedents, could undertake a systematic analysis of human
conduct. The directors’ expositions of the occurrences of infidelity are in clear
contrast to the agenda of the established national cultural heritage about it, as also
reflected in the type of current cinema they rejected. There is thus a clear line of
connection between Rohmer’s *Contes moraux* and Truffaut’s *Doinel cycle*. Both
cycles’ narratives scrutinise the several facets of infidelity and the diverse
experiences of it. Through their serial structures they are able to privilege multiple
perspectives and offer a view of the changes (or lack thereof) in contemporary
France as well as establishing their own position with respect to the subject,
including developments in conceptions of heterosexual relationships across two
decades.

Rather than fully rejecting their heritage, both directors looked back in order
to look ahead. If the occurrence of infidelity was perpetuated in fiction as a way to
demonize women and, thus, consolidate a particular patriarchal hierarchy where
woman’s right for a fuller expression of her voice was denied, Truffaut’s and
Rohmer’s cinema testifies to a new perspective to be built up, in combination with
the diverse social and artistic forces of which they were part. The *Nouvelle vague*
was situated within a context of concomitant artistic and social struggles and its
exponents worked through them with a spirit of change that was reflected in the
treatment of these mores in their films. Instead of a relationship resulting from
ideological and institutional constrictions both cycles propose a type of relationship
that subsists in a genuinely free choice of one person by another. As de Beauvoir
expressed it, ‘l’idéal serait au contraire que des être humains se suffisant
parfaitement chacun ne soient enchaînés l’un à l’autre que par le libre consentement
de leur amour’ (in Laubier, 1990: 23). *Le Deuxième sexe* had an impact and
influence on feminism that still remains exceptional in its breadth and freshness.
Subsequently, its influence on men’s discovery of new perspectives from which to
see and gain an experience of the self was immense. Neither Truffaut nor Rohmer
adhere to the conservative patriarchal ideology that, in their films, emerges in the
form of the double standard and gender bias reflecting men’s contempt or, in other
cases, utter astonishment towards those women who eschew the ‘law’. Truffaut was
troubled by the issue of infidelity: his entire *œuvre* offers a reflection upon it. He
eloquently expresses his artistic guiding principle: ‘je me préoccupe beaucoup de
morale, et même mes jugements sur les films sont toujours plus moraux que
cinématographiques…Le réalisateur a une responsabilité vis-à-vis du public, comme
de ses personnages’ (in Fanne, 1972: 21). In acknowledging their responsibility as
artists and human beings, Truffaut and Rohmer can be understood to be spiritual
descendants of André Bazin, who ‘was deeply influenced by existentialism and by
the currents of radical or social Catholicism (that emphasised both a personal or intuitive relation with the divine as well as the need for social ideals)’ (Greene, 2007: 18). Both directors were motivated by the idea of making a cinema that could stimulate in the spectators an awareness of themselves and their place in society. For Rohmer ‘la mission du cinéma n’est plus, je crois, de tresser des guirlandes autour du réel, mais de le découvrir enfin tel qu’il apparaît à l’œil nu’ (in Herpe, 2007: 36); similarly, Truffaut used cinema to expose the unnecessary machinations of the intellect, ‘une hypertrophie de l’activité intellectuelle, qui donne à l’individu l’impression de résoudre ses problèmes, mais ne fait que les aggraver en débouchant sur une impression de vide, de futilité et d’inanité’ (Gillain, 1991: 75).

As mentioned initially, I define infidelity in terms of its spiritual expression, the thought or the intention, and not only or primarily as a physical occurrence. Serceau aptly questions the adultery in Rohmer’s *L’Amour l’après-midi* (1972) and the infidelity between the unmarried Fabien and Léa in *L’Amie de mon amie* (1987) by asking whether ‘cette différence de principe est-elle importante?’ (Serceau, 2000: 55). He points out that the similarity between the two films belonging to different series suggests Rohmer’s intent to establish a homology between couples whether they are within or outside the institution of marriage (55). Additionally, Serceau stresses a theme which is a leading one in Rohmer’s series and, I add, in Truffaut, when he explains that ‘que l’adultère soit ou non consommé importe au demeurant peu. Il vaut et signifie plus comme hypothèse que comme réalité événementielle’ (55). Through the positioning of the understanding of infidelity beyond the realm of the physical, the achievement of both Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s is exceptional by comparison with the other contemporary representations of the same theme. Serceau points out that ‘c’est un renversement du point de vue, un changement de
perspective. L’adultère n’est plus une matrice comique, support d’une catharsis; loin d’être un simple objet, il est devenu, avec le couple représenté, un sujet’ (Serceau, 55-56). The similar comedic tone that the works elicit in these narratives about the game of coupling is very often counteracted by an unsettling ambiguity, which besets what could appear to be a simple and straightforward interpretation. Hence, it is evident how, ‘l’adultère et le couple ne sont pas, comme dans la vaudeville, des prétextes, vidés par le comique et la catharsis de leurs problématiques. Ils constituent le véritable texte, le sujet de films qui les questionnent’ (Serceau, 56).

Rohmer’s work is infused with irony about men’s ability to dwell on the rationalizing of conduct that justifies male infidelity, as observed by Powrie and Reader when commenting on *Ma Nuit chez Maud’s* use of intellectualised irony […] and investment in talk as alternative rather than preliminary to sex’, and the way that *Le Genou de Claire* and *L’Amour l’après-midi* deal with temptations to infidelity or sexual transgression that are resolved through language rather than action. At a time when Lacanian psychoanalysis, with its stress on the inextricable interplay of language and desire, was carrying all before it in French intellectual life […] Rohmer’s films […] were more in tune with their own period than might appear at first (Powrie and Reader, 2002: 30).

Rohmer’s tales are an illustration of the intricate way in which unfaithful desire is powerfully connected to the cerebral imaginary, to the point of annihilating awareness of its own existence. Alain Bergala says that ‘tous les personnages de Rohmer sont des parleurs fous qui n’arrêtent pas de s’auto-analyser’ (in Bergala, Chévrie and Toubiana, 1985: 81), and, as Rohmer himself commented, ‘après tout, ce qu’ils disent, ils y croient’ (ibid., 81). Both cycles shed new light on the understanding of female and male infidelity; while Truffaut’s scrutiny of infidelity starts from the details of its effects, Rohmer’s starts from the rationalizations that concur in the making of infidelity *au masculin* a natural, social fact. From these different directions the two directors ultimately converge upon the topic.
Francis Vanoye described Rohmer’s relationship towards women as ‘amour plutôt contemplatif, pour Rohmer, quant aux corps et aux visages des femmes, offertes à l’admiration et au désir des hommes […]. Mais amour attentif aussi, quant à l’évolution des femmes contemporaines, quant à la quête de leur identité, à leurs contradictions, à leurs failles et à leur courage’ (Vanoye, 2007: 36). Commenting on his films, Truffaut often proudly took the side of the women: ‘Truffaut’s life and work often betray a certain hostility to both male actors and male characters. Two English Girls was made “against” the Claude character, much as The Soft Skin, earlier, had been made “against” the philandering Lachenay character’ (Stam, 2006: 180). Stam’s comment implicitly tracks Truffaut’s increasingly critical attitude towards male infidelity and its unconsidered and consolidated perpetration, as he adds that Truffaut’s approach is ‘more pro-woman, less idealized and utopian’ (Stam, 182). This comment is particularly relevant to my study of infidelity in the Doinel cycle where the same actor, Jean-Pierre Léaud, performs the same type of treachery repeatedly. In La Nuit américaine (1973) Léaud’s role in the film within the film is that of being a victim of adultery. Léaud therefore pursues Truffaut’s pathway into infidelity, from being its innocent victim as a child, to being its mindless perpetrator, and finally becoming a victim of it as a betrayed partner. Finally, with L’Amour en fuite, his role is to re-establish a sense of equilibrium in the conception of the man/woman relationship, freed of culturally or ideologically-motivated artefacts about it. Monaco frames Truffaut’s intentions, as ‘it is not necessary to make an “eternal” commitment to other human beings in order to be honest and moral’ (Monaco, 1974: 3). Fidelity to honesty and a morality of feelings are, particularly where marriage and offspring are concerned, staple principles in both directors’ work. In the Doinel cycle, Christine, when facing her husband’s
infidelity, resembles one of Rohmer’s heroines, Maud, who, like Christine, married with offspring, opts for a lifestyle that rejects compromises. This shift in attention and weight from female to male infidelity witnessed in Rohmer and Truffaut suggests their detachment from that very specific infidelity tout au féminin which is normally part of a patriarchal discourse and, thus, a phantom of male imagination. This shift is suggestive of the reformed vision of gender relations that Truffaut and Rohmer offer, hence of the two directors’ departure from the literary, as well as socio-cultural, heritage. White argues that ‘the recasting of fictional conclusions of death and marriage at the end of the nineteenth-century […] share the desire to re-examine, under the influence of what Hegel calls “the bitter wine of a sense of finitude”, the multiple meanings of that pregnant expression faire une fin’ (1999: 21). Truffaut and Rohmer eschew a neat end to their narratives of infidelity to the extent that, like in the nineteenth-century novels, would imply the ‘end’ of the adulteress; they reshuffle all the previously denied possibilities and open the narratives of fidelity to new beginnings.

Bergala notes that, in Rohmer, ‘la vérité n’a rien à voir avec toutes ces constructions imaginaires […]’ (in Bergala, Chévrie and Toubiana, 1985: 81), and Rohmer, he continues, ‘ne croit pas à l’imaginaire, mais à la vérité […]. On réalise en une seconde qu’on était dans le leurre, dans l’illusion […] et les spectateurs, à la fin d’un film de Rohmer, comprennent que ça dit quelque chose de très important sur eux’ (ibid., 82). Infidelity in the films of both Rohmer and Truffaut functions less to give the spectator enjoyment than to invite them to enter into an interactive critique of its dormant attitude towards the state of things. Like Rohmer’s characters, for whom ‘le mariage n’est plus […], pour la femme aussi bien que pour l’homme, un rite de passage. Il n’est plus […] une norme sociale’ (Serceau, 2000: 54), the
characters populating the *Doinel cycle* move towards a reassessment of the conjugal union outside the boundaries that see it as part of obligatory *raisons sociales*. Through the evaluation of infidelity, the two series place the value of the couple as the result of social obligations under scrutiny. In this sense, the treatments of infidelity by both directors are intellectual and, by extension, political. As James Monaco stated, ‘it is a grave mistake, I think to regard Truffaut’s films as non-political. [...] they take the high political road instead, as Truffaut investigates with fascinating precision the way people live together and the tortuous existential process of “the first principle: Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself”’ (Monaco, 1974: 3).

Infidelity in the tales and the cycle show how the films are witnesses to a ‘certain tendency’ in Truffaut’s and Rohmer’s personal world-views, and that such films reflect a wider tendency as men and women begin to think differently about infidelity. Their cinema plays life not as one dreams of it but as it is. In Rohmer, one appreciates how women, as Vanoye states, ‘retiennent en tous cas, c’est sans doute leur obstination à vouloir être dans une certain fidélité à elles-mêmes’ (Herpe, 2007: 36). The maintaining of this freedom to be faithful to the integrity of the intellect and of the emotions is *lisible* in Truffaut’s last days when, as his friend Claude de Givray reports, ‘c’est encore en lisant Sartre et Beauvoir (*La Cérémonie des adieux*) qu’il essayait de se préparer à mourir, de trouver un sens à la fin de sa vie’ (in Bergala, Chevrie and Toubiana, 1985: 85).

In dialogue with the broad spectrum of interpretations that the works of François Truffaut and Eric Rohmer have elicited, I have sought to open up new avenues of understanding through my focus on infidelity, showing how the directors’ constructions of seemingly *orthodox* situations are paradoxically built on
undermining the sustaining patterns of thought which have shaped Western attitudes, and French ones in particular, in regard to infidelity. Through infidelity, a very pervasive sentiment and a very human predicament, Rohmer and Truffaut brought to the fore the lightness and simultaneously the profundity of the complex, and yet so clear, dramas of everyday life.
Bibliography

*Please note: the newspaper articles are without page as they were provided in microfiche format at the BiFi in Paris. The material taken from the Truffaut Archive at the BiFi classified as 002B1 is acknowledged in the Bibliography as ‘Fonds François Truffaut’.*


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