

## **Water Drops on Burning Rocks (*Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes*, 2000)**

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Cornelia Ruhe and Thomas Wortmann

*dir.* François Ozon; *prod.* Olivier Delbosc, Marc Missonnier, Christine Gozlan, Alain Sarde, Kenzô Horikoshi; *screenplay* François Ozon; *photography* Jeanne Lapoirie. 35mm, color, 90 mins. *Fidélité Productions, Les Films Alain Sarde, Euro Space, Studio Images 6, distrib.* Haut et Court.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

*Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* is a Chinese box version of the melodrama. By intermedially referring to the genre classic *Angst essen Seele auf* (1974) by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, which itself refers to Douglas Sirk's → *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), François Ozon's third feature film is a melodrama in its own right while at the same time providing metafictional commentary on the genre as a whole. It can thus be read as a postmodern and inter-sectional critique of melodramatic conventions.

The film is based on a play Fassbinder wrote in 1964 (Levergois). Ozon adapted it but kept the structure of four acts. In act one, Leopold (played by Bernard Giraudeau), an attractive man in his fifties, brings home and seduces twenty-year-old Franz (Malik Zidi). In act two, Franz has moved in with Leopold. Their relationship is based on an asymmetrical distribution of power, with the authoritative Leopold bossing Franz around and constantly criticizing him. In act three, Leopold is on a business trip when Franz's ex-fiancée, Anna (Ludivine Sagnier), shows up and Franz seduces her akin to his first meeting with Leopold. At the beginning of act four, Anna and Franz want to leave the apartment to start a new life together, when Leopold unexpectedly returns and inveigles Anna. Vera (Anna Thomson), Leopold's former partner, who underwent sex change surgery to become the woman she thought Leopold wanted, also drops by. Leopold initiates a foursome, but Franz is unwilling to join, and Vera soon realizes that it is not she whom her former lover is interested in. Franz, who has taken poison to escape the toxic relationship with Leopold, dies after a long conversation with Vera who admits she never managed to forget Leopold.

Fassbinder always owned his indebtedness to Sirk's classic (*Fassbinder*; see also *Handyside*), a film in which Cary, an elderly suburban widow, falls in love with Ron, her much younger gardener, causing turmoil both within her family and her larger social circle. While the chain of transmission is clear, the model has undergone significant variations along the way: Cary and Ron's alliance is socially unacceptable in Sirk's film, due to the age difference and the fact that he does not fit the conventions of her upper class surroundings. In *Angst essen Seele auf*, Ali and Emmi, Fassbinder's version of an unlikely couple, differ not only in age—she being the older one—but also concerning their ethnic background: He is a migrant worker from Morocco, she is a German cleaning lady. According to standards of the 21st century, Ozon's couple would be considerably less surprising. Nevertheless, in the 1970s, when the film is set, the union between two men would already be problematic enough, while the considerable age difference further adds to this. Taking Sirk's film as the original, the situation thus shifts from a bias concerning age and class (Sirk), to age and race (Fassbinder), and ends with age and sexual orientation. Focusing on a homosexual couple, Ozon's film explicitly brings to the surface what was only implicitly alluded to in Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* and Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf* through the two leading actors: Rock Hudson's homosexuality was an open secret in Hollywood and El Hedi ben Salem was Fassbinder's romantic partner at the time of filming. While Fassbinder's use of nude scenes already goes as far as to elevate the male body into the realm of »pure [visual] spectacle« (Neale 12), he does not transcend the limits of heteronormativity. It is only with Ozon's film that male homosexuality comes out of the closet and takes center stage. The category of race is also still obliquely present in Ozon's film, which makes the character of Franz legible as a person of color by choosing an actor with Algerian origin to embody him. On the one hand, this could be seen as a broadening of perspective towards a more intersectional approach to individual as well as structural discrimination.

On the other hand, it would be short-sighted to see only the films' younger characters as subjected to discrimination. In Sirk's film, Cary's gender and the restrictions of the 1950s hold her in much tighter bonds than the independent Ron; in *Angst essen Seele auf*, as a cleaner, Emmi suffers from class prejudice and feels unseen as an older woman. In both cases, the family is the place where these restrictions are articulated. It is significant that this institution has lost its impact in Ozon's film, although it does remain the framework of Anna's idea of a future for her and Franz. Even more so, Ozon's Leopold has interiorized the heteronormative rules to the point of having forced a former partner to undergo a sex change surgery (Ozon explains having borrowed this part from a text Fassbinder wrote for *In a Year of 13 Moons* [1978]; Levergois 122).

All three films are thus variations on the power relations among couples, be they hetero- or homosexual. Franz, who, in their first encounter, had confessed to a recurring erotic dream in which he was »like a woman, I probably was a woman in that dream,« has taken the feminine part in what seems like the reenactment of a typical 1950s heterosexual pair (Parent and Xanthos). And while Franz only dreams of being a woman (and acts like the parody of a 1950 housewife after a while: cooking, cleaning the house and getting dressed up for Leopold), Leopold's ex-partner Vera has already become a woman surgically. Through this, she embodies the radicalization of Franz's gender performance as a »housewife.«

However, instead of showing Leopold as self-hating and repressed, Ozon endows him with a »sexual mobility« that Andrew Asibong deems characteristic of the film-

maker (Asibong 64; Levergois 123). The film is a homage to Fassbinder and Sirk, as Ozon varies his predecessors' works, especially Fassbinder's, on various levels: from the 1970s interior of Leopold's apartment and the integration of a German Schlager song, to the signature 360-dolly of Fassbinder's favorite director of photography, Michael Ballhaus. At the same time, and not least through the grimly cheerful overacting of Bernard Giraudeau in the role of Leopold, it is also a pastiche of Fassbinder's and Sirk's films, highlighting and mocking their determination to maintain a serious and melodramatic tone throughout their films. As a meta-melodrama, Ozon's film renegotiates the stereotypes and conventions underlying the genre.

While in Sirk's film it is clear that Cary and Ron's marriage is prevented by the suffocating atmosphere society imposes on them, and that Cary suffers from it much more than Ron does, in Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf*, Emmi has already interiorized some of their environment's hostile behavior. She degrades Ali just as much as her colleagues: Instead of suffering with him, she ignores his pain, occasionally even adding to it. Ozon's Leopold is an authoritarian and dominant figure with sadistic inclinations. He does not need the support of the town's upper class society in the country club in *All that Heaven Allows*, nor that of Emmi's colleagues in Fassbinder's film, to make others suffer. He alone can provide the contempt necessary to manipulate and crush the other characters.

While it would be interesting to explore the light that this interpretation retrospectively sheds on *All that Heaven Allows*, and especially on the character of Cary, this exacerbation of a crucial aspect already latent in earlier melodramas is in Ozon's film, mostly, a function of its structure: Unlike its predecessors, and due to its origin as a dramatic text, the film is a chamber play. There are no friends or colleagues, there is no country club acting as a sounding board, amplifying the characters' fears of rejection. The moment Leopold's apartment door is closed behind Franz (and later the other protagonists), the trap snaps shut, and they are never to leave again, at least not physically. Franz's only self-determined act is his suicide, the only way to escape Leopold's grasp.

*Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* reduces the melodrama to its essence, stripping it of all auxiliary characters. The extrapolation of social convention provided for in the films Ozon refers to, can now be done without, as—in a Foucauldian sense—the characters have incorporated the mechanisms of social control. Melodrama as Ozon shows it is a *huis clos*, an unescapable trap where the struggle for (social) control knows no winners and allows for no escape, except for the audience: The intersectional dilation as well as the exacerbation of the prototypical elements of the genre, allows us to see them for what they are.

## References

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