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## « Collusion, Not Collision » ? – Proximity and Distance in Olivier Assayas' 'Doubles vies' ('Non-Fiction')



Doubles vies (Olivier Assayas, 2018)

Aging, or more specifically how to cope with aging, seems to have taken center stage in Olivier Assayas' oeuvre. . Both in *Clouds of Sils Maria* (2014) and *Personal Shopper* (2016), the director explores the limits of human life and its impermanence. In *Clouds of Sils Maria*, a middle-aged actress, Maria (played by Juliette Binoche), struggles with her on-stage portrayal of an older woman (Helena) who falls in love with her youthful assistant (Sigrid), mainly because Maria took on Sigrid's part when she was younger. In *Personal Shopper*, Kirsten Stewart is even more hooked to her phone than to her iPad in *Clouds of Sils Maria* [aside: one could read the title as a reference to the virtual cloud] — in which she plays Maria's real life youthful assistant —, haunted by her deceased twin brother through text messages. Now, *Doubles vies* (2018, know internationally as *Non-Fiction*) depicts a group of (almost) middle-aged friends and colleagues that try to handle the challenges of everyday life in a world driven by digitalization.

*Doubles vies* features two couples who are intertwined not only through work and 'friendship' but through an extramarital affair as well. Alain (Guillaume Canet), a literary editor, refuses to publish Léonard's latest novel although he used to publish every single one of his books. Léonard (Vincent Macaigne), the writer, is a *bohémien*, unlike his wife Valérie (stand-up comedian Nora Hamzawi), who doesn't have much interest in her husband's career. Perhaps this is why Léonard maintains an affair with Alain's wife, Selena (Juliette Binoche), a well-known actress who's stuck in her part in instead of weighty plays or features. At the same time, Alain is having a romance himself with his young co-worker, Laure (Christa Théret), who's hired to adapt the publishing house to the digital age. Gradually, it appears as if the couples are connected not only by their love affairs and careers but, more generally, by the digital era they are all captured in.

Léonard, the somewhat strange outcast, seems to correspond fairly well with Assayas himself: both are interested in the way in which reality and fiction are unavoidably interwoven in a piece of art. Like Léonard, who can only write *romans à clef* about his own life and thinly veiled affairs, Assayas challenges the boundaries of the imagination

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1 maart 2019

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by taking up the genre of *autofiction*, not through a documentary approach but by exploring reality through fiction. Assayas already delved into this genre in earlier films. *L'Eau froide* (1994) was his first, major autofictional film – some sort of recreation or re-living of his youth, not unlike *L'Eau froide* contains many hyper personal clues or details that don't add to the story and make sense to Assayas himself but less to the viewer, just like the identity of Léonard's characters is pretty transparent for who knows him or those involved. The only motivation for the presence of the Hungarian nanny in *L'Eau froide*'s opening sequence, for example, is the fact that Assayas himself had one as a child and it was important to him to hear the Hungarian language, which is also the language of his mother, in the beginning of this film. Likewise, the strange, unresolved scene in which Assayas' alter ego, Gilles, buys dynamite is only included because of a private story between the filmmaker and his childhood friend who lived next door.

Léonard is not the only character that bears resemblance to Assayas. One can, in a sense, also recognize aspects of Assayas in the publisher Alain, who mistrusts the far-reaching digitization and tries to find his way in the growing world of e-books, audio books and literary apps. However, as in his other recent films, Assayas attempts to reveal both his concerns about and his fascination for the digital age. On the one hand, he shows how people live their life on screen and pokes fun at the excessive use of mobile devices. On the other hand, Assayas expresses the appeal of those devices, asserting a kind of curiosity we all seem to share. He does so, not through creating a constant feeling of unease, as he did in his supernatural psychological thriller, *Personal Shopper*, but by adopting, for the first time, the light genre of the romantic comedy – just as another high-profile French *auteur*, Claire Denis, did with Juliette Binoche last year in *Un beau soleil intérieur*.

As a sort of satire, *Doubles vies* places itself in a broad but specific history of comedies. One critic [related](http://www.lefigaro.fr/cinema/2019/01/16/03002-20190116ARTFIG00015--doubles-vies-joyeux-vaudeville-avec-guillaume-canet-et-juliette-binoche.php) (http://www.lefigaro.fr/cinema/2019/01/16/03002-20190116ARTFIG00015--doubles-vies-joyeux-vaudeville-avec-guillaume-canet-et-juliette-binoche.php) the film to the tradition of *vaudeville* and stated that the film is part of a lineage that ranges from Georges Feydeau and Sacha Guitry up to Éric Rohmer. Both Feydeau and Guitry are well-known for

their work as influential playwrights in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but Guitry of course made films as well. In the short [documentary](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfET0rIQLlw) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfET0rIQLlw), *Assayas on Guitry* (2017, 16'), that accompanies the Criterion Blu-ray of Guitry's *La poison* (1951), the director of *Doubles vies* talks about his compatriot's "unique sense of entertainment" and his "lightness of touch," achieved by his "use of the aesthetics of silent cinema". *Doubles vies* is a film in which dialogue is omnipresent, but the endless conversations, dinner parties, arguments and chit-chats central to the film just seem to acknowledge their inconclusiveness or meaninglessness. For Assayas, Guitry demonstrates how "movies can be driven by dialogue" and "filmmaking can be inspired by language" although it does not ultimately depend on it. This is why *Doubles vies* illustrates that the chaos we live in can hardly be put into words.



Michel Simon and Sacha Guitry in *La poison* (Sascha Guitry, 1951)

Throughout the movie, Assayas consistently varies between shooting from a certain observing distance and from a closer position, as if the spectator itself is part of the depicted discourse. Taking on a more distanced point of view, Assayas reflects the gaze of the spectator who becomes aware of his position as an outsider. Still, by regularly shifting to the central point of action within the conversation, as if the viewer is present at one of the many dinner parties or chit-chats in the cafés, Assayas exhibits how he conceived *Doubles vies* as “a film of ideas”, openly modelled after Éric Rohmer's *L'Arbre, le maire et la médiathèque* (1993). In this film, also dealing with party politics and media, the source of change or modernization is the impending arrival of a media library to a small village. What a joy to see Pascal Greggory, Rohmer's fetish actor who played the Socialist mayor in the former film, return in *Doubles vies* as Alain's double-dealing CEO. With his *film d'idées*, Assayas wants to open up a debate and stimulate the audience to participate. Apart from Rohmer, one could also think back to Guitry, who's mastery of making the audience part of the game is one of his qualities Assayas explicitly praised in the short documentary mentioned above. For Assayas, this process started with the creation of the film itself, for example by the use of open-ended scenes in which dramaturgical decisions are not determined but negotiated with the actors. Throughout his career, Assayas has always been in search of a feeling of 'immediacy' and bodies that could materialize or concretize the concepts his films are about. By 're-inventing' the scene, together with his crew, Assayas tries to create more lively situations in which not only his text but also the physicality and the sensuality of the actor's body bring life to Assayas' initial, philosophical ideas.

Although his latest films were all shot on 35 mm, for *Doubles vies*, Assayas returned to Super 16 mm, precisely because of this interchange between proximity and distance and the joint creation with the cast and crew. “Je l'ai tourné en Super-16 pour avoir cette souplesse. [...] Il faut que chaque rôle soit une vraie rencontre – entre eux, le personnage et moi,” he explained (<http://www.juliettebinoche.net/assets/doubles-vies-french-presskit.pdf>). (“I shot it in Super-16 to have that flexibility. [...] Every role needs to be a real encounter – between them, the character and me.”) It also makes the film grain more present in this movie about digitization. Assayas (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WaSPsP6uYdl>) “absolutely didn't think this could have been a digital film. [16mm] was also for me a way of going back to movies that I made in the 90s, like *Irma Vep*, *L'Eau froide* or *Fin août, début septembre*,” a film that is recalled in *Doubles vies* because of its love affairs of two friends, an editor and a writer.

The mentioned films all feature a brilliantly staged get-together or dinner scene, as do *Demonlover* (2002) and *L'Heure d'été* (2008). Assayas has always had a liking for these kinds of scenes to put the actors at ease and embed movements and actions. Since dinner parties are an even more present and recurring event in *Doubles vies*, they seem a fitting point of comparison to observe an important change in this last film. While in the past, the styles of Maurice Pialat and John Cassavetes have been instrumental to Assayas in filming conversations, this time it seems as if this Pialat-Cassavetes scheme of ingenuously blocked, offhand looking long takes has made place for a more complex and rhythmic montage in which Assayas doesn't shy away from the shot/reverse shots. Comparisons with Rohmer, as in the Guitry-Rohmer lineage quoted above, also seem to be situated more on a structural level: being a Rohmerian comedy of manners, relying on *marivaudages* and *quid pro quos*, the red/beige/brown color scheme or the delightful attention to costumes with all the fur and Christmas-like sweaters, and mainly the

amount of conversation pieces and table scenes, rather than the way they are filmed. Assayas' use of table scenes in *Doubles vies*, is still remarkably vivid because of the *buffet-style*: the characters do not sit at a table as in a regular dining scene but move along the room, only this time the *decoupage* of these apartment spaces is much more elaborate and fragmented. In an [interview](https://www.villagevoice.com/2018/04/25/we-dont-know-it-yet-but-its-already-the-future-a-chat-with-olivier-assayas/) (<https://www.villagevoice.com/2018/04/25/we-dont-know-it-yet-but-its-already-the-future-a-chat-with-olivier-assayas/>) on the occasion of the restoration of *L'Eau froide*, Assayas talked about the importance of 'distance' in his work: "if you have to sum up exactly what filmmaking is about, it's sculpting space. Every single thing is about structuring a singular, original space, which is defined by how far you are, what kind of lens you are using, how your camera moves, how the different shots and movements interconnect. They define a perimeter that is always something original, and you have to take that into consideration."

When a friend mistakes the title of the TV show in which Selena plays the lead for "Collision" (clash) instead of "Collusion" (conspiracy), she corrects her: "Collusion, not Collision." However, this lapsus or slip of the tongue can be quite logical or revealing, since the film seems as much the result of Assayas' usual creative collusion between him, his team and the actors as it is made up of colliding shot/reverse shots.



*Doubles vies* (Olivier Assayas, 2018)

If Binoche's character, later on in the same conversation, declares about her work as an actress: "J'aime bien. On peut jouer avec son corps" ("It's nice to act with your body"), one can question if this is an ironic remark and still the case in this film compared to the previous ones, since it cuts more regularly within the scenes to medium close-ups. That's why when the combative shot/reverse shots make room for a scene in which two bodies collide and cling on to each other in one long shot, it is such a special and central moment in the film.

It should be noted that Assayas has worked very loyally with the same crew for his latest films (*Doubles vies*, *Personal Shopper*, *Clouds of Sils Maria*, *Boarding Gate*, ...). Not only does he take his cameraman, Yorick Le Saux, with him from project to project, but also his set, sound and costume designers. For *Doubles vies*, however, the editor of his last two films and some earlier ones, Marion Monnier, was replaced by someone he never worked with before, Simon Jacquet. Strangely enough, he's the editor of Raymond Depardon's documentaries, but also romcoms by Sylvian Chomet or a comedy blockbuster, such as Gilles Lellouche's *Le Grand Bain* (2018) and therefore also much more experienced in this kind of editing style. This form partly corresponds with the game of betrayal and distance between the characters but also with the fast and witty style of Guitry, that Assayas [referred](http://www.juliettebinoche.net/assets/doubles-vies-french-presskit.pdf) (<http://www.juliettebinoche.net/assets/doubles-vies-french-presskit.pdf>) to as a game of ping-pong "in which the dialogue generates the fiction and the dramaturgy". Which is very much what one also gets in *Doubles vies*. This earlier vision on Guitry's style ties in to how he [reflects](http://www.juliettebinoche.net/assets/doubles-vies-french-presskit.pdf) (<http://www.juliettebinoche.net/assets/doubles-vies-french-presskit.pdf>) on his latest film: "Parfois il faut avoir l'humilité d'accepter qu'un champ-contrechamp suffit, même si cela ne flatte pas toujours le narcissisme du cinéaste. Il faut être humble par rapport au jeu, à la dynamique du jeu, à ce que le film veut." ("Sometimes you need the humility to

accept that a shot-reverse shot suffices, even if it doesn't always flatter the filmmaker's narcissism. You have to be humble with regards to acting, to the dynamics of acting, to what the film wants.”)

Referring one last time to the cinema of Sacha Guitry, Assayas seems to have reached the point of a late-career reflection on his way of engaging with the audience. When Guitry, who played the leading part in nearly all of his own films, started to cast other actors as personifications of his own world view near the end of his career, he discovered new possibilities to tell stories. Assayas already integrated his personal life by the use of other people from the beginning of his career, but in his latest films, he appears to create concrete personifications of himself and the way he sets eyes on a changing world. This isn't a new tendency, but the decision to reflect upon his career by creating contemporary fictional Doppelgangers of himself, which can also be recognizable for the audience, is telling in the light of the virtual world and juncture he wants to explore. Dealing with serious matter in comic disguise is something only great artists can succeed at. Once again, it is a question of distancing.

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