

***L'effet-clip* : music video effects in 'post-Nouvelle Vague' French cinema**

Classical cinema was based on a naturalistic type of *subtractive* fallacy: 'this is the world, it seemed to say, *minus* a few negligible details, such as the depth of objects in 3-D, smells, tastes, and tactile stimuli.' This fallacy was sustained by transparency, *i.e.* the softening of the audiovisual editing work. On the contrary, Modern cinema is conceived according to an *additive* approach. In order not to risk lying about the nature of the connection between screen data and the real world, the work of editing is exhibited here. A third way is offered by Postmodern cinema, which synaesthetically associates powerful moments in the music with shooting and editing (what the French call « *effet-clip* »). It is not surprising that a postmodern director like Luc Besson should make extensive use of this third way of conceiving the soundtrack, but what about young authors of 'post-Nouvelle Vague' French Cinema (PNVFC)? This paper will explore four different ways they have to combine the Brechtian imperatives of Modern cinema and « *effet-clip* » [music video effect] in *Mauvais sang* (Léos Carax, 1986), *Sombre* (Philippe Grandrieux, 1998), *Love Me* (Lætitia Masson, 2000) and *J'ai toujours rêvé d'être un gangster* (Samuel Benchetrit, 2007). A specific 'music video-like' sequence, based each time on a pre-existing English/American pop/rock/country song, will be analyzed in each of these four films.¹

*

1. Definition of music video effects

A music video effect is a suspension of narration in a sequence in which the soundtrack is reduced to a song or a piece of music. This "musical pause" in the narration originates in the song or dance sequence of Golden Age musicals – and it may even be said to have experimental forerunners in silent Dadaist or Surrealist films. Its first occurrence in non-musical films dates back to 1967, in the sequence of *The Graduate* featuring the hero sharing his life between the swimming pool and Mrs. Robinson's arms, to the sound of two Simon & Garfunkel songs. Nowadays, this type of musical suspension has become very common not only in narrative films, but also and above all on television, where it gave birth to a famous genre, music video, and is recurrently found in TV series (famous examples are the music video effects recurring every seven minutes, to the rhythm of commercial breaks, in *Ally McBeal* or *Grey's Anatomy*, which include helicopter shots of Boston and Seattle respectively).

To be defined as a music video effect, the sequence not only has to break the narration, but also to attempt to "lull" the spectator by offering a synaesthetic combination of pictures and sounds. This combination is one the most obvious characteristics of the post-modern style. The table below summarizes the other characteristics of this style by basically comparing it to both classical and modern styles. Of course these three categories are just convenient labels used nowadays to signify the collective presence of formal figures, the seeds of which were already mostly present in films dating back to the early years of cinema.

¹ Of course, PNVFC is not the only French style to use music video effects including pre-existing American music. See for example the use of Philip Glass' music in *Merci la Vie* (1991) by Bertrand Blier.

	CLASSICAL	MODERN	POST-MODERN
Overall project	Lesson	Criticism	<i>Cool</i> moment
Typical position of spectator	Absorption	Distance	Enrolment
Staging...	... of story	... of story-telling	... of reception
Expected use	Learning & game	Defamiliarisation & reflection	Resonance & vibration
Typical project of hero	Quest	Wandering	Journey
Relation of images to the world	Mirror-images	Images as images	Image-sensation & images of images
Audiovisual project	Subtractivity	Additivity	Concert
Sound/picture competition	Circus-effect	Audiovisual equality	Music video effect
Typical figures of image editing	Shot-reaction shot	Jump cut	Action match cut without continuity
Typical figures of picture editing	Smoothing & L-cutting	Audiovisual cuts without smoothing & double narration	Superimpositions & surrounding

In *Perverse Spectators*, J. Staiger harshly criticizes this type of stylistic classification, which tends to ‘forget’ the spectator or treat him as a robot with Pavlovian reactions. And indeed we know that the spectator’s reactions and interpretations when faced with a specific figure may be highly unreliable. Yet this article is based on stylistic analysis, and the film analyst is not a sociologist, let alone a psychologist – his only task is to highlight figures of style.

The table underlines the fact that the post-modern style is “cool”, namely it models an ironic, narcissistic and hedonistic spectator whom it “enrols”. This is especially true in the case of synaesthetic music video effects, which have a direct influence on the body. The dizziness created is generally two-fold:

- visual dizziness due to large camera moves, generally track-shots using short focal lenses performed with steadycams, loupes or technocranes allowing to do what the human body cannot (like soaring or flying). The editing work is in line with the use of this technique, with action match cut without continuity – a characteristic figure of music video effects: the movement of a figure on shot A will be completed by that of another figure on shot B. Classical cinema mostly refused this type of practice which, by underlining the plastic qualities of the figures on screen, runs the risk of preventing the spectator from seeing them as traces, which would endanger the reality effect so dear to classical cinema;

- sound dizziness based on binary metronome beat music, rich in low frequencies and, if possible, broadcast very loudly. Here the soundtrack has the upper hand on the visuals, imposing its law on picture editing (“to link the cut and the beat”), whereas in classic cinema the very opposite happened – as in circuses where the orchestra has to adapt to what is happening on stage, the music had to conform to the picture.

The hero of postmodern films is most often a compromise between classical and modern heroes. Of course, “the great hero, great dangers, great voyages and the great goal” have

disappeared (Lyotard, *La Condition post-moderne*), but the postmodern hero has something to do – he is not only wandering like his modern counterpart. It is just that the goal of his quest is less interesting than the path followed to reach it, and it is precisely this path which gives birth to music video effects.

In conclusion, the postmodern artist is not opposed to those who came before him. Contrary to his modern counterpart whose duty is to deconstruct the classical model, he can pick elements from the repertoire of past styles whenever and wherever he wants. This is what allows him to further the synaesthetic dizziness of the music video effect with another type of dizziness, namely that of quotations. Sometimes he literally bombards us with them.

To cut it short, the postmodern style aims to generate both the childish pleasure of the first level of reading and the metadiscursive alienation that the Moderns loved so much (“You don’t fool me”). One implication is that PNVFC will likely play both on “cool” dizziness and Brechtian devices.

2. The parody : a Groland sketch, Canal +, 2007

Proof of the almost systematic presence of music video effects in PNVFC films can be found in Groland, a French TV programme broadcast on Canal+. This programme devoted a whole parodic sketch to this type of cinema, presented as narcissistic, boring and ridiculous². The sketch is particularly harsh. It features a young couple arguing over nothing in a kitchen – a way to mock this type of cinema in which the spectator mostly observes people discussing in uninteresting settings. Then, without any particular reason, the girl suddenly starts to run in the street with the music of *Creep* by Radiohead in the background. The two quirks of PNVFC are here being laughed at: showing characters acting without any particularly obvious reason – the explanation being, as Deleuze would say, that they have lost their sensory-motor links to the environment – and featuring songs that do not fit in the overall atmosphere but that the directors obviously love. *Creep* is a spectacular song. It resorts to a wall of guitars reverberating as in a cathedral, and it received international applause – an “aura” which makes the related scene even “smaller” and more desultory. The acuity with which the Groland parodists perceive this point is all the more striking as they carefully chose a song semantically linked with the sequence (“She’s running out again, She’s running out, She runs, runs, runs”).

The sequence directly targeted by this parody is taken from *Mauvais Sang* and was used as a matrix for all the others.

3. The matrix : *Mauvais sang* (Léos Carax, 1986)

Anna is bored. Her friend Alex suggests she should switch on the radio. “I like the radio. You always immediately find what was going through your mind.” But that night all you can hear is interferences. After feverishly changing frequencies (“Hurry up, or melancholia will take the upper hand”), Alex comes across a song by Serge Reggiani, and then *Modern Love*, a David Bowie hit, to the sound of which he starts running along the pavement.

This sequence may be seen as an archetypal piece of postmodern cinema in the sense that it combines the three columns of the table presented earlier in this article. It first refers to the modern style. Anna is bored like her counterpart in *Pierrot le fou*; she and her lover have an almost non-existent sensory-motor response to the environment, to quote Deleuze again. She is lying still on her sofa while he is smoking on the doorstep, listening to a song on the radio; it is the “direct image of time”, the isochrony between the story time and the time of the projection used to show a non-action, typical of the exhaustion of the movement-image. The long static shots accompanying Serge Reggiani’s song also refer to the postmodern style.

² Watch the sequence on *Youtube* : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-1FpiwAojY>

But the characters' contemplative melancholia only lasts for a short while. Hardly have the first bars of *Modern Love* been played that Alex progressively feels like frenetically moving. He leaves the frame of the long static shot on the left and the scene continues with a reverse shot in the street. This shot is still static, but Alex keeps moving on; is he going to leave the frame once more, on the right this time, as in those films of the time-image in which sensory-motor maladjustment contaminates the very relationship between actor and cameraman? But the static shot is soon transformed into a left-right follow track-shot. One may initially think that Alex is going for a simple walk, a wandering process so characteristic of the cinema of the time-image. But nothing of the sort happens. His movements, first incoherent, are gradually transformed into a race, a restless escape, quite shortly followed by a more and more rapid track-shot. This race also unfolds along a fence painted to produce an almost hypnotic plastic effect. The camera soon shoots a twinkling scene on which Denis Lavant's (Alex's) blurred legs stand out, racing along. This moment is one of pure sensation, twenty seconds of visual letting off steam detached from the twists and turns of the story.

As far as the classical style is concerned, it characterizes a moment in the middle of the race, when Denis Lavant is doing a cartwheel. After performing the move, he is almost cut by the left side of the frame... Then the combined efforts of both actor and cameraman save the picture: Lavant is bending forward like a sprinter reaching the finish line while the cameraman "helps" him by slightly panning in the opposite direction of the track-shot. This hand helping to record a physical performance is typical of the classical language of the image-trace.

By "framing" the music video effect of *Modern Love* with references to modernity and classicism, Carax shows that he does not want to yield to the "easy option" of music video or its "formal pyrotechnics."³

4. Discrepancy : *Sombre* (Philippe Grandrieux, 1998)

This provocative film, which was criticized on ethic grounds (in *Positif* and *Trafic*), describes the existence of a psychotic killer unable to adjust to our world and whose difficult relationships with women will end in murders. As far as this article is concerned, it little matters whether the film is a kind of irresponsible neo-Gothic music video or an exploration of the abysses of the sublime⁴. The very last sequence, undoubtedly the most mysterious in the whole film, is worth analyzing. Slow lateral track-shots describe the silent crowd of the Tour de France spectators, scattered all along the road leading up to a pass, and distractedly having a picnic while waiting for the cyclists to pass. The pictures alone are already surprising, first because we've just followed the dark story of a psychopath, and then because we are rather used to seeing the reverse shot of these shots, namely the cyclists. But the worrying strangeness (*inquiétante étrangeté*) of the sequence – an expression Freud used to name the disturbing effect of the unexpected return of the familiar – especially comes from the confrontation between these pictures and a sound-track based on a single song, namely *Amours Perdues*, written by Serge Gainsbourg in 1964 and sung here by Elysian Fields. The English accent of the singer (Jennifer Charles) and the insistent arrangement (the song is taken from a compilation of John Zorn's avant-garde New York label, Tzadik Records) further add to the defamiliarization effect. We are familiar with all these things, but their return surprises us, their combination

³ Denis Lavant will star 12 years later in a "symmetrical" version of this sequence of *Mauvais Sang*: in Unkle's *Rabbit In Your Headlights*, directed by Jonathan Glazer (1998), he plays a man who *refuses* to move, even he is in the middle of a road and causes trouble in the traffic.

⁴ Quoting Adrian Martin in *Senses of Cinema*: 'Holy Terror: Philippe Grandrieux's *Sombre*', <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/1/sombre.html>.

stuns us (Gainsbourg, the Tour de France), and they are no longer exactly as we used to know them.

This three-and-a-half-minute music video effect starts with a jump cut, a modern figure associated here with a dissonant and reverberated punctuation on the electric guitar after the singer's last words ("Les amours perdues/Ne se retrouvent plus").

Through the grace of a piece of music characterized by many melancholy minor chords haloed with this reverberation which "makes sounds sacred" and was already to be found in *Creep*, these most banal images of everyday life take on a tragic dimension. What dark side is also hidden here, deep in the hearts of these placid, slightly underexposed, July holidaymakers (the *Nachtseite* of Romantics)? It is also hard not to feel the sadness of absence when the word "délaissé" ("neglected") coincides with the appearance of empty folding armchairs ("Les amants délaissés/Ne peuvent oublier/Tous les serrements de cœur/Tous les serments d'amour").

An abandoned folding armchair, a poster for the Zavatta circus – everything takes on a strange and worrying dimension to the sound of this tragic music. This is obviously a music video effect, but it is counterbalanced by multiple discrepancies.

5. Third level of reading : *Love Me* (Lætitia Masson, 2000)

This film is framed by two music video sequences. In the first one, the opening credits sequence, the main protagonist played by Sandrine Kiberlain lip-syncs *Heartbreak Hotel*, a song made famous by Elvis Presley in 1956 but which is here interpreted by French singer Johnny Halliday, who plays a character in the film. The Brechtian device is used at full capacity: the actress is looking at the camera, there are very formalist zooms, and the sequence ends on a 180° reverse shot, a figure proscribed in classical cinema.

Then the story unfolds, apparently organized around a classical type of causality (an amnesic young woman followed by a rocker flees to the USA, where she falls in love with a rocker), but only apparently so. Indeed the spectator is never sure of the degree of diegetic reality of the pictures he is watching (do they represent the young woman's thoughts or her real life?); he or she will never get any answer, not even at the end of the film. And it is precisely at the end of the film that the second music video sequence takes place. The heroine miraculously comes across a lover she had briefly met months before, who had only left a vague address at the other end of the world, like Humphrey Bogart at the end of *Dark Passage*. Obviously they are still in love with each other. Then the camera shoots in slow motion, the bodies get closer to each other, and Elvis Presley starts singing *Can't help falling in love with you*, a song of the film *Blue Hawaii* he recorded in 1961.

If the first level of reading implies enjoying the *correspondence* (in the romantic sense of the word) between sound and picture ("enjoy!"), if the second level of reading implies thinking about it ("don't enjoy: be smart!"), the third level of reading implies a compromise between the two ("enjoy, we know you're smart!"). How is this scene to be understood? You cannot stop at the first level of reading, except if you forget you have just watched a film deconstructing the standard of "mainstream" narration. You cannot stop at the second level of reading either as you are presented with the portrait of a sincere love between two characters, played by two very convincing actors. Moreover, it is the original song, sung by Elvis, and not a replay as in the opening scene. Only the third level of reading makes sense. The song's lyrics also invite us to follow this track: "I can't help falling in love", as well as "so it goes" and "some things are meant to be" hint at the necessity of giving up the stance of non-belief in *Great Tales* to lose yourself in the dizziness of true love while not forgetting, of course, that what you are watching is a film deconstructing reality and not an MTV programme.

6. Playing with the *wannabe* complex: *J'ai toujours rêvé d'être un gangster* (Samuel Benchetrit, 2007)

This last example features Kris Kristofferson's song *Casey's Last Ride* (1970). Several forms of Brechtian alienation are here used to frame the broadcasting of the song, first of all a game with what may be called the "wannabe complex" and which is two-fold: on the one hand the hero (here played by TV humorist Edouard Baer) would like to be a real gangster; on the other hand the director would like to make a real gangster film, *i.e.* an American film. Just as his hero takes a gun and puts on a mean look, the director shoots his film in black-and-white and includes a great American song in it. And of course humour emerges from the fact that the failure of this "I wannabe...I wannado" is underlined: on the one hand, the hero is awkward (he forgets his keys, goes unnoticed, is too kind...); on the other hand, the director is too "smart" or too typical of "modern European cinema" (the visual cuts engender tone shifts in the song, which is a very Godardian trick: sometimes it sounds as an extradiegetic piece of music, sometimes as a diegetic piece of music broadcast by a radio set in the bar).

The song has links, as in all the other cases, with the diegetic situation. It tells the story of a solitary man excluded from society who finds some warmth in the company of a woman in a bar. "Standin' in the corner Casey drinks his pint of bitter/ Never glancing in the mirror at the people passing by." This is exactly what is happening here as the hero is eventually going to end with the barmaid. As in all the other extracts, this is neither a modernist deconstruction of classical cinema, nor a celebration of MTV-like music videos.

*

The relationship between PNFVC – or its forerunner – and some features of American "commercial" cinema is characterized by a combination of fascination and repulsion. Yet the advantage PNFVC has over its forerunner is that it diffuses the "cool spirit" in the public space, which allows it to rely on the complicity of a "smart" public supposed both to understand the Brechtian intention and enjoy the perception of these "commercial characteristics". It thus avoids charges of "betrayal" – a commonplace of the "cinema of modernity", which, among others, Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* introduces (making commercial cinema amounts to sleeping with Lady Max Factor, or being a party to the industry of death). By playing on the third level of reading like L. Masson and on the wannabe complex like S. Benchetrit, PNFVC can thus take the liberty of integrating music video effects without giving the impression that it merely reproduces the figures of the audiovisual industry. Of course it remains to be seen whether it is really possible to enjoy the effect, on our spectator's body, of a figure of style when the latter is precisely overtly presented as a figure of style. Let us rather say that we are *invited to think* about this *all the same* pleasant effect.

<p>To quote this essay : L. Jullier, "<i>L'effet-clip</i> : music video effects in 'post-Nouvelle Vague' French cinema", speech given at <i>Screen sounds</i>, Studies in French Cinema annual conference, King's College, London, April 2009.</p>
--