

# **Levels of meaning and immersion in French contemporary cinema : the case of Luc Besson**

The main topic of this paper is the “intercrossing” between the concept of postmodernity and contemporary French cinema. Everybody here has a precise idea of what contemporary French cinema is, but as far as postmodernity is concerned, things are not that simple, as the concept is rather vague and its definition may vary from one discipline to another, or even from one country to another – in France, for instance, the concept of ‘postmodern’ cinema is barely used: few students ever choose my course on postmodern cinema because, as they tell me on the first day of class, they don’t know what it will deal with.

So, I first have to define which definition of postmodernity I will refer to. Then I will deal with the French mainstream cinema response to postmodernity, then with the French “Post-New Wave” art cinema to postmodernity.

## **1. A communication situation**

Let me draw a comparison with a very popular sport, both in France and the USA, namely football. Don’t worry if you’re not a football fan – I’m no specialist either. But I know enough about football to present one of its basic situations, which could be summarized in a film title, *The Goalie’s Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* – especially as this film was directed by Wim Wenders, a famous postmodern director.

The situation of the penalty perfectly sums up the playful rapport, full of complicity, between postmodern artists and their audience. Before being a sport situation, it is a communication situation, and this communication can be initiated at several levels. To put it simply, the football player is faced with an alternative – shooting the penalty to the left or to the right – while the goalkeeper is faced with another alternative – diving to the left or to the right. But due to tight time constraints, the goalkeeper has to initiate movement some time before ball contact. He has to anticipate the direction of the penalty kick.

**1<sup>st</sup> level of meaning.** The player faces the goalkeeper. He is about to shoot – his turn has come. What kind of visual clues can help the goalkeeper to decide on which side he has to dive? To put it simply, let’s say he relies on the player’s eyes. What does the player do at this 1<sup>st</sup> level? He quickly glances to one side – to the left, for instance – and he shoots to the left. If the goalkeeper has experienced this

communication situation at the first level, he will dive to the left and save the ball. In his opinion the player has told the truth. He's been genuine and innocent. This situation corresponds to the classical style, which amounts to telling stories at the first level of meaning to an audience which receives them as such and genuinely participates in the game. Examples of such films are *Robin Hood* in the USA or *Les Enfants du Paradis* [*Children of Paradise*] in France.

Let's now turn to the **2<sup>nd</sup> level of meaning**. The player still faces the goalkeeper. He looks to the left but – surprise, surprise – he shoots to the right. If the goalkeeper has still read the situation at the first level of meaning, he will dive in the wrong direction and will not save the ball. If he's aware of the trick, he will save the ball. This situation corresponds to the modern style, which amounts to catching the audience's attention on the situation itself, a Brechtian distancing effect which may include lying and mockery. Examples of such films are Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys* in the USA, or *L'Homme qui ment* in France – a film with a particularly relevant title.

**3<sup>rd</sup> level of meaning**. Again, the player faces the goalkeeper. He looks to the left and shoots to the left, but through clever gestures or facial expressions he has suggested that, if he had wished, he could perfectly have shot to the right. That he has not been as naïve as that, but that he has respected the old codes just for the sake of the game and for the sake of fun – not out of obligation. If the goalkeeper has remained classical (namely if he has missed the modernist revolution), he will still save the ball while if he has remained Brechtian, he will not. This situation, which is one of the objects of this paper, is the first to be essentially postmodern in our little game. A story is told, as in good old times, but it is told subtly suggesting that we are way smarter, that we just intend to have fun as before, as in our childhood dreams and our first movies. The postmodern artist wants to remake *Robin Hood* and *Les Enfants du paradis*, but he wants to produce a better remake, or rather a smarter and cooler remake. Examples of this are *Star Wars* in the USA, or *Le Bon et les Méchants* [*The Good Guy and the Bad Guys*] in France.

**4<sup>th</sup> level of meaning**. Maybe for the last time, the player faces the goalkeeper. He is about to shoot – his turn has come. He looks to the left but shoots to the right. Yet he has implied through clever gestures or facial expressions that, if he had wished, he could perfectly have shot to the left. The difference with the 2<sup>nd</sup> level of meaning is that he did not feel *compelled* to do the opposite of the 1<sup>st</sup> level of meaning, contrary to a real Modernist, who would have felt compelled to deconstruct the situation and take an ironical distance by shooting to the right. This situation, which is also one of the objects of this paper, is another facet of postmodernity – a supremely *smart* one, in which classical patterns (1<sup>st</sup> level of meaning) and modern patterns (2<sup>nd</sup> level of meaning) are equally recycled. Examples of such films are *Simple Men* in the USA or *Love me* in France, an excerpt of which we'll watch later as, in my opinion at least, the 4<sup>th</sup> level of meaning appears to be a contemporary French specialty particularly characteristic of the “grandchildren of the Nouvelle Vague”.

I could go on and find other levels of meaning, but all of them would eventually amount either to the third or the fourth level, and then both player and

goalkeeper would be asking themselves such complex questions that they would no longer be able to play. And whatever the intentions of the players (namely the directors) and the reactions of the goalkeepers (namely the audience), ‘the show must go on’.

Is there a 5<sup>th</sup> level of meaning? Yes indeed, but it is different from the others – it is the third postmodern situation, the most authentically postmodern of all, when nothing makes any difference and nothing has any importance. Both player and goalkeeper shoot and dive in the direction they wish. The major difference with the other four levels of meaning is that it is no longer a communication situation as everybody will play his own game. Everybody is alone in his own sphere. The spectator cannot even be a *Textual Poacher* any longer as the film does not develop a particular discourse: it is all that we want it to be, and as in Harpo Marx’s coat, we can find in it all that we want to find.

Is this the end of the story (and the end of history)?

No. Even extra-smart postmodern movies can still can “say” something to us, or at least “provoke” something in us.

This is done in two ways:

- First, through innumerable references, allusions and quotations – the equivalent in football would be if the player glanced very rapidly to the left and right, a dozen times, before shooting, making the goalkeeper feel dizzy. Examples of such films are *Death Proof* in the USA or *OSS 117* in France.

- Second, through a technique that “says” a minimum of things while “implying” a maximum. Communication is here substituted for by communion – as if the player closed his eyes before shooting. This implies giant screens, THX Sound, tracking shots and dizzy camera moves. Directors like Michael Bay in the USA or Luc Besson in France are generally famous for this.

I suggest we start with this particular way of doing ‘sensation cinema’

## **2. A scene of sensations**

Sensations mean

(1) a bath of sounds : lots of loudspeakers behind the screen (the technical apparatus of a pop/rock performance) and extra around the audience. The sound categories have changed too : the epistemological boundaries between words, music and noise has been replaced by technical-pysiological boundaries between low, medium and high frequencies.

(2) vertigo sensations, caused by numerous track-in shots, made with specially designed machines, which make prowesses a human operator could not make (for instance : the Louma, a French invention !)

Let’s scrutinize some scenes of *Le Grand Bleu* (A) and *Jeanne d’Arc* (B).

When I first saw *Le grand bleu* at Le grand Rex, in Paris, there was a machine spreading iodine in the air. It was supposed to smell like the sea. It was not only a bath

of sounds... If *Le Grand bleu* were analysed in the terms of a classical narrative, we would probably say something like this. This is the slow-developing story of a young man who wastes his youth who dives into water holding onto a cable. He looks like an expressionless top-model, and aspires only to be a dolphin. Because he cannot be a dolphin, he is the curse of those who love him. For over two hours, ethnic, advertising and sexist stereotypes follow one another to a soundtrack composed of easy-listening electronic music, until the hero finally decides to go and live with the dolphins. This is more or less how French critics viewed the film, as Besson himself recalls to us, quoting a range of critical comments in the book he wrote about the film: ‘an abdication of thought’, ‘slow and heavy’, ‘cheap philosophy as a pretext to make images’, ‘we watch but we do not learn anything’, ‘overwhelmed with music’

Contrary to the classical Hollywood cinema – organised in such a way as to restrict overly variable readings - here we have a polysemic artefact. « Young directors tell a story differently than older ones. We prefer flashes and shocks to narrative explanations » (Besson 1993). Flashes and shocks are polysemic, indeed.

[...]

How the « **mise en scène** » is it organized ?

(A) In *Le grand bleu*, even the Gaumont producing company’s trademark shot is a vertiginous track-in

Note how a diegetic mention (Greece 1965) is considered on the same epistemological level than the production mention (Gaumont presents) : same font, same mickemousing.

After that, we got a hypnotic track-in which is a « helicopter point of view ».

And then the film title, which seems to come from the horizon line. Once again there is no strong epistemological boundaries between diegesis-related pixels and production-related pixels.

Neither here, nor when the boy erases the title.

You’ve noticed that the composer’s name is the only one to be framed : this is a way to pay homage to the fact the editing is linked to the music’s tempo.

And to finish with, we have a other type of « sensation shot », not so hypnotic as the opening track-in, but quite effective (even if more classical since it announces too the kid is going to jump into the sea) : a perpendicular tracking.

(B) *Jeanne d’Arc* offers different solutions :

- the typically modernist break oft- the 180° rule
- a track-in which runs right in front of the actress

An other French postmodern director used the track-in shot in the same « hypnotic » or « vertiginous » manner, J-Jacques Beineix. When watching *Roselyne et les lions* on a home-cinema system system you can hear the sound of Roselyne’s whip moving around the room. Others examples are provided by Christophe Gans (*Le pacte des loups* uses computer-generated transitions between the opening track-in shots) or Yann Samuell (*Jeux d’enfants* performs track-in shots in a way close to the video games).

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One can understand there isn't any curse driving right to the trap of the "fifth degree". We saw a French way of avoiding this trap, provided by Luc Besson and his colleagues of "cinéma sensation". It consists in a shift between *game* and *play*. The rules of the football *game* are no longer useful. The cinematic apparatus is used to *play*, and readily used to purvey body pleasures. So there's no such thing as the obligatory end of communication. It is still possible to mean something on a screen. One suspected it.

To quote this essay : L. Jullier, « Levels of meaning and immersion in French contemporary cinema : the case of Luc Besson », excerpts from a speech given at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, October 2009.