

[This is a pre-publication version of chapter 2 of *Leos Carax*, by Fergus Daly and Garin Dowd]

## 2

### *Feux d'artifice:*

#### *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* or the spectacle of vagrancy

[D]o not allegory and the uncanny bring into play the same procedures: ambivalence, the double, the organic and non-organic, living/artificial body, fixation on sight and the anxiety of losing it, and above all dread of the fragmented body? (Buci-Glucksmann 1994: 166)<sup>1</sup>

Et n'oublions pas que si Carax donne parfois l'impression de faire un peu trop de cinéma dans ces films, c'est sans doute qu'il doit en faire à la place de tous les réalisateurs de sa génération qui n'en font pas assez. (Sabouraud 1991: 14)<sup>2</sup>

Between the completion of *Mauvais Sang* and the start of his next project Carax appeared in his second screen role, this time in the part of Edgar in Godard's *King Lear* (1987). The circumstances whereby Godard came to sign a contract with the film's Hollywood producers, Golan and Globus of Cannon, have become the stuff of legend, as has the story of how Norman Mailer stormed off the shoot and the part of Woody Allen as the Fool became limited to a few minutes of footage in the final cut. Of the roles taken by well-known non-actors (Mailer) or of actors also associated with other directorial projects (Allen) in the film, and whose names were deemed crucial by the producers, the role of Carax as Edgar is, paradoxically, the most integral. *King Lear* sees Carax playing Edgar to Godard's Professor Pluggy, the Lear role being shared between the latter character and Burgess Meredith as Don Learo as scripted by Norman Mailer. Carax also takes a role that might be considered a younger variant or double of Godard. For, the latter, here as Pluggy-Lear and elsewhere in his roles in his other films of the 1980s often goes the way of fools (the slapstick elements of *Soigne ta droite* and *Prénom Carmen* in particular spring to mind). Indeed Godard and Carax share a fondness (not in the Shakespearean sense) for slapstick, for Chaplin and Keaton. In one particular scene Carax stands in for Godard by occupying a position on screen which for anyone familiar with Godard's *Histoires* project, must immediately call to mind the stance often adopted by Godard himself, in front of or beside or partly obscuring a projected image or sequence of images.

Where Godard's character in *Soigne ta droite* carries the reels of film around, exchanging them in the end for a bauble as he lies face down at the airport, Carax as Edgar, when he fishes one half of a can out of the river, hits himself on the head as a way of attempting to understand it. This, then, is Carax as fool of cinema, but in the same sense as Lear-Godard, 'poor fool' being a typically Shakespearean fond address from parent to child.

But Carax-Edgar is also here a son of fire - presaging the Heraclitean aspects of Alex in *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*. He collects kindling, and is charged with the task

1 In *Les Amants* there is a concern for vision and an anxiety about losing it, as well as a focus on the theme of self-mutilation.

2 'And let us not forget that if Carax sometimes gives the impression of overdoing cinema in his films, it is doubtless that the must do so in place of all the directors who don't do enough of it.'

of carrying the rifle and - crucially - with passing the sparkler advocated by Pluggy to Cordelia (Molly Ringwald). At the entrance to the cinema in this post-Chernobyl era when, according to the film, cinema has had to be 'excavated' and re-built, and where, in the absence of either film to be screened or the entire support structure of the film industry, no films are projected, aside that is from Professor Pluggy's demonstration model comprising a shoe box with two holes and a sparkler (he rejects the lightbulb with which it is initially furnished), Carax now takes the role of usher, while Julie Delpy - from Carax's own *Mauvais Sang* - as Virginie (both as in Woolf and as in Virginia tobacco) sells the cigarettes.

The role is rich in metaphorical suggestion in ways which, among others, the analysis in Chapter 1 is explicitly designed to counteract: Carax as guardian of Godard's heritage, but also as slave to that weighty bequeath. It has been shown that Carax already goes a long way towards destabilising such a reading. However, the Godard appearance does represent a distinct metaphorical *mise-en-abyme* of Carax's career. In the vestiges of cinema sequence, something of the impossibility of what Carax himself would attempt in *Les Amants* is poignantly indicated. In the miniature fireworks with which Godard as Pluggy is here content, his sparklers are apparently all that remains of the projection that was once cinema. Carax himself, as director, would of course attempt to 'resurrect' cinema with a somewhat more expensive arsenal of pyrotechnical weaponry, and within a purged and highly symbolic space - Paris' Pont-Neuf.

Carax's spectacular and notoriously over-budget film of 1990 has tended in many accounts to be read as an allegory of social exclusion, and as part of the 'return to the real' (understood in a loose sense which includes both a higher degree of realism and a focus on reality as opposed to simulacra) which characterises many new French films of the 1990s including films by Zonca and Guegignan, and latterly Dumont and Noë. In such analyses, the 'real' functions as a contrast which enables, for instance, the simultaneously enclosed and excluded characters on the bridge to become a site of critique and contestation, and thereby to embody a rejection of the spectacular communal celebrations of the bicentennial of the revolution; that is they are both there to confront the spectacle with a debilitating and sapping counterflow.<sup>3</sup> When the celebrations are over, the city remains abundantly lit and it is within this 'set' that the central characters perform their own joyous, but nonetheless parodic, celebrations. To a certain extent such a reading is entirely unproblematic; however it would be over-hasty to leap from this to the quite distinct assertion that in this film Carax announces by means of the alleged return to the real, his rejection of the *cinéma du look*, and of all of the qualities conveniently placed under the latter umbrella. It must be remembered, after all, that the latter term was an invention of the press, and, moreover, as Chapter 1 has argued, Carax already had marked his distance from the other directors allegedly identified by this term.

Indeed, as this chapter will propose, it is a combination of the haste with which the film has been categorised and in certain quarters thereby dismissed, allied both to the spectacular budget catastrophe and the myths developed around the on-set events, that have contributed to a widespread misunderstanding of the film, as well as to a certain blindness among critics as to the merits. The tendency to categorise this

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<sup>3</sup> In an analysis which in many respects we endorse, Martine Beugnet (2001) uses the term allegory in this context. However, in her attention to the nuances of the film's interrogation of the frontiers of documentary and fiction, her study is exempt from the criticism which follows.

exorbitant film in part obscures its force and importance. Critical reappraisal, however, is well underway, for example in the recent assessment of the film by Beugnet which extols the film as a crucial moment, as a markedly alternative vision to be contrasted with that of Beineix (and in particular *37° du Matin/Betty Blue*) and Patrice Leconte, and which escapes the tendency of these two directors towards the reification and objectification of (especially) the female body (Beugnet 2000: 175, 180).

However the question of the status of the 'real' remains in some sense the enduring critical node for reflection on the film. What, one has to ask however, is 'the real' as it has peppered debate about the film? If it names a set of codes by means of which a certain set of characteristics and effects is pre-inscribed, programmed, and hence from which and by means of which something called the real is retrievable, then *Les Amants* does not so easily sit in the category to which it is being forced to conform.<sup>4</sup> In one of the commonplace categorisations, the desire to situate the film thus can be traced to two principal causes: its *cinéma vérité* style opening sequence suggests a commitment to verisimilitude and a refusal of artifice on the one hand (i.e. 'realism' because reality - in the shape of real down and outs - is captured on film), while the theme of homelessness gestures towards the traditions of naturalism (see Chapter 3), social and poetic realism on the other. The combination then paves the way for an entirely symbolic reading of the film to emerge, within which it is battened on to the supposed real, becoming its revealer (or, in the view of some, its betrayer, Carax being berated in some quarters for the crime of aestheticising poverty and homelessness). Part of the concern of this chapter is to offer an alternative to straightforwardly symbolic readings of the film by means of situating it within the context of those philosophical and aesthetic debates with which it forms a cinematic continuity. However, before broaching these issues in more detail, it is appropriate to turn to another narrative, that which recounts the troubled production that lies behind the film.

### **The troubled production**

The view of Jean-Michel Frodon is that in order to up the stakes and to keep ahead of the other filmmakers of his generation, Carax needs to call into his service increasingly complex and costly arrangements, symbolised most comprehensively - if falteringly - in his view in the grandeur and folly of *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*. The themes of expenditure and failure have invited much metaphorical reflection among critics. Klawans describes the film as 'an absurd imposture, a priceless gift' (Klawans 1999), whereas Jousse asserts that in being centrally concerned with the logic of *dépense* the film should be championed for managing - unlike many other films - to spend a lot of money without nullifying the film itself (Jousse 1991: 22). 'Il y a quelque chose de somptuaire dans *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*, comme un excès impossible à combler, qui serait le sujet paradoxal du film' (Jousse 1991: 22, a point expanded upon below).<sup>5</sup> For Austin it is the inadvertent relocation of the film from Paris to an artificial set that is one of the contributing factors to its achievement, enhancing as it does the interplay between realism and artifice which runs throughout *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* (Austin

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4 Beugnet displays the distance she would take from the hasty correlation of the film's 'realism' and the so-called return to the real, by insisting that the exclusion of Alex and Michèle is not only to be understood in terms of the separation of the couple from social normativity, but also from the normativity one might associate with cinema conventions (Beugnet 2000: 173).

5 'There is something sumptuary in *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*, like an excess that is impossible to measure, and which would be the paradoxical subject of the film.'

1996: 133). To return to Frodon, it has to be said that he is looking in his study of Post-war French cinema for a narrative thread. The escalating budget, however, is something of a retrospective imposition as the driving force of this particular part of the narrative. In claiming that the vision outstripped resources Frodon is perhaps being over emphatic.

In starting with a budget of 32 million francs, *Les Amants* was expensive (at around double the average for a film in that year - 1988) although hardly excessive. Key to Carax's plan was to be able to film on the Pont-Neuf while the latter was closed for repairs. However having obtained the permission of the municipal authorities to film on the bridge from 18 July (Prédal gives 15 July) to 15 August' Lavant seriously injured his hand and could no longer perform the many acrobatic feats required of him by the script. As Carax filled the time shooting scenes not set on the bridge, nor requiring a fully operational Lavant, work on a replica of the Pont-Neuf continued in a reservoir outside Montpellier. After a period, however, due to increasing risk of the terminal collapse, not only of the set, but of the entire project, the insurance company refused to continue to prop up the imperilled project. At the time of their withdrawal of support just 25 minutes of salvageable footage existed.

The resurrection of the project - which came in June 1989 - was short-lived. The construction work on the replica had deteriorated and had to be started from scratch. The duo who had bailed out the project, the Swiss financier Francis Van Buren along with the producer Philippe Vignet, under the name *Pari-à-deux*, injected 18 million francs into the film (now running at a cost of 80 million francs), and their investment succeeded in taking the total of usable footage to 40 minutes. The latter, however, it was some compensation, at least included the key scenes shot during the bicentennial parade - scenes which it would have been prohibitively expensive to replicate had they not been deemed successful.

In Frodon's account the film polarised those with a vested interest in film in France, and especially divided those who saw Carax as symbol of a maligned *cinéma d'auteur* with its often enlarged sense of importance regarding personal vision, from those who championed the excess with which the project had become inadvertently associated. However, in defiant mode, upon its release Strauss, writing in *Cahiers*, drew attention to the risible accountancy whereby one might judge the quality against the price, via, emblematically for him the question 'Alors, est-ce qu'on voit que c'est un faux Pont-Neuf?' (Strauss 1991: 24). As Chapter 1 has shown, the status of the false in Carax is such that it renders the question irrelevant:

pour moi, que je filme un vrai clochard perdu dans ses pensées ou un couple de faux clochards qui dansent sur un faux pont sous les feux d'artifice, le regard est le même. C'est le sentiment qui change, sentiment de l'irréparable ou sentiment de l'inespéré. (Carax 1991a)<sup>6</sup>

The figure who would later emerge with the further 80 million francs required to salvage the project and complete the film, Christian Fechner, would, it transpired, ultimately alienate Carax by trying to impose an uplifting ending, eliding the suicide for Michèle envisaged by Carax. The reason for this elision is muddled by the many

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<sup>6</sup> 'For me it's the same whether I film a tramp lost in his thoughts or a couple of fake tramps dancing on a false bridge beneath fireworks - the gaze is the same. It is the feeling which changes, a feeling of the irredeemable or a feeling of what you dare not hope for.'

conflicting accounts of the events that led to its final version being included. For Frodon it is a clear case of Carax being held to ransom by his producer (Frodon 1995: 792). However, in interviews, both Carax and Juliette Binoche attribute the powers of persuasion to Binoche rather than to the producer.

As Frodon reads it, in his diagnostic manner, the film self-reflexively withdraws from the realism of the Nanterre sequence into the realm of cinema proper. Cinema is thereby curled up on itself, folded in a implacable and abyssal torture of self-reflection. Paradoxically, this withdrawal - into the margins at the centre - facilitates all the better the filming of the spectacle of the fireworks display. The three types who populate the bridge: a female artist who is going blind (cut off in the future from sight), a carnivalesque fire-eater (emblem of a cinematic past) and a theatre director (Klaus-Michael Grüber - emblem of an alternative and a precursor in theatre perhaps) are for Frodon three symbols of cinema, but of a moribund cinema (Frodon 1995: 792). What takes place on the bridge is complete withdrawal, in Frodon's view, into an autistic universe. All lines of communication are broken aside from those leading to Vigo - even this one is rendered uncertain given the fact that the *Atalante* reference does not accurately reflect its appropriate register in Carax's planned ending. For Frodon, then, the film is symbolic not so much of the real, as it is a symbol of a necessary disaffection; it is a work of mourning and melancholia. Frodon's account, it is here suggested, needs a narrative thread; it requires a certain dramatic dénouement. However, the film should be pulled back from its role as cipher here of a more general - no doubt fully endorsed by Frodon himself - disaffection. In what follows there will be an attempt to unearth and reveal another *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*, one not freighted with this overly-symbolic - albeit interesting - baggage.

### **Synopsis with commentary**

The film opens with two startling sequences: in the first of these Michèle (Binoche) and Alex (Lavant) encounter each other on the street. He staggers drunkenly in the middle of the boulevard de Sébastopol; she walks absently; a car drives over his ankle; she comes to his aid. Then a hand-held camera sequence, with real down and outs on board a real bus, shows Alex transported to a shelter in Nanterre. Of course the popular success of the Dogme 95 manifesto has rekindled debate concerning hand-held camera techniques and the use of natural light, live sound and the dismantling of a certain stratum of cinematic artifice to which such devices contribute. While such techniques are new to the Caraxian filmic world, there is a certain continuity at the outset marking the transition from *Mauvais Sang* to the synechdocal space of the bridge of *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*. *Mauvais Sang* features several dazzling shots in a tunnel under La Défense; one in particular sees Alex turn around on the motorcycle to shoot a pursuing police officer. Of course Alex is heading towards his death at this point, sitting behind Lise as angel and messenger. In his third incarnation Alex is announced by a camera this time descending into a tunnel. The camera follows the route out of the tunnel and then adds a tracking shot that takes us back to the opening sequence of *Boy Meets Girl*. We are decidedly in Carax's world.

Carax announces his two characters not by means of a direct shot, but by their being reflected in the rear-view and side mirrors of the car that swerves to avoid them in two separate manoeuvres, the same car - a taxi, appropriately - which has been both the viewer's and the camera's vehicle into the filmed space. This tentative relation between camera and characters establishes a world at a remove, which one cannot immediately and directly access. When Alex eventually falls in the middle of the

boulevard de Sébastopol he begins to rub his forehead on the tarmac - mutilation and self-mutilation will be a recurrent motif too. A car with two amorous occupants (seen only from behind) approaches at speed. Alex's ankle bears the full force of the car as it speeds over his protruding leg. The moment is registered by Michèle who happens to be passing at the same time in the opposite direction to the trajectory of the car. She approaches the inert Alex and thinks him dead. At this point the bus arrives to round up the homeless. Alex, whose first visit to the shelter at Nanterre it clearly is not - the *bleus* immediately recognise him - is carried on board and thrown in the corner of the packed vehicle.

The remarkable *cinéma vérité* style sequence featuring Lavant amid real homeless people on the bus and in the Nanterre shelter is unflinching in detailing the injured, malnourished, diseased bodies in close up. In the supplement which Carax edited for *Cahiers* in the form of a special number 'hors série' he includes photographs of gangrened limbs of several homeless people accumulated during the research for the film (Carax 1991). Genuine collapses of drunks and violent exchanges are filmed in ambient light and reproduced on screen. Lavant is dragged naked to the shower where he is seen to languish, sprawled on the tiles. The murky light of this sequence is abruptly contrasted with the next sequence in the hospital wherein the first shot of which we see the plaster cast on Alex's ankle being finished off in pristine white. The *mise-en-scène* elaborates this motif of light by showing, in the following shot, Alex being escorted by a white-clad fellow homeless patient (a non-actor whom Carax said showed remarkable professionalism, even doing his own overdubbing) along the corridor of the hospital. The man urges Alex to consider his options, to come with him to the south of France, but above all to reflect well before he acts. But, significantly in this film where one is dealing with a restricted range of choices, and where the characters mostly have to improvise within the confines placed around them by multiple hardships, there is little sense of what these options might be. That Dan is employing the rhetorical structures of reasoned argument, only serves to underline the unbridgeable distance between the world of Alex and that of the society within which choice and full agency do exist.

All that Alex can utter in response to his interlocutor is that he needs to return to the bridge. The film cuts to the bridge. The word 'Danger' appears on screen in a close-up of the fence and barrier closing off the bridge. In a mid-distance aerial shot Alex negotiates his approach; another close-up displays the sign announcing the purpose and duration of the repairs which having begun in 1989 are due to terminate in 1991. Alex swings despite his injury around the fence and hobbles toward another dishevelled figure. This is Hans - another *clochard* who has in his keep a store of downers which he dispenses to Alex in order to enable the latter to sleep. Hans informs Alex, however, that another man has taken his patch. Alex investigates only to discover that the stranger is not a man, but a woman wearing an eye-patch. The viewer recognises this as the woman who the night before had attempted to aid Alex after the accident on the boulevard de Sébastopol. Alex, however, being unconscious at the time, does not recognise her. While she sleeps he looks through her portfolio of sketches. However there is something in her that causes a response on his part. He runs off in order to wash himself and returns (desire switched on by the chance encounter is a recurrent theme in Carax). Clearly there is an attempt on his part to make an impression on the visitor. He returns however to witness Hans expelling the stranger from the bridge. Clearly in fear of the authority represented by Hans, Alex tentatively pursues her. Unobserved by Michèle he unfastens the portfolio so that the

drawings it contains drop to the ground. Alex thus finds a way to motivate his question, based on his research of the night before, is one of these drawings not a portrait of him? He asks to keep the portrait but after initially refusing she offers him the deal: in return for sitting for a new portrait, she will give him the drawing. When Michèle faints and the work in progress falls into the Seine, Alex can find out a little more about the interloper. In her box of paints and artist's materials he finds an envelope addressed to Michèle Stalens. The envelope gives her an address in Saint Cloud, near the Bois de Boulogne

Alex visits the address and breaks in to startle Michèle's sister. Following an acrobatic exit, he returns to the bridge. He steals a fish from the market and he and Michèle eat it raw back on the bridge. He follows Michèle in the metro. She hears a cello in the station and rushes desperately to locate its source, whom she takes to be Julien, a former lover - who at any rate refuses to see Michèle when she attempts to visit him. Alex, who at this point has adopted the guardian/censor role played on the bridge by Hans, threatens the cellist who departs the scene just in time for Michèle to miss him. Michèle and Hans visit the Louvre by night to view a Rembrandt self-portrait by candlelight. They embrace and (it is implied) have sex off-screen. Alex and Michèle drug café habituées with the Alcyon capsules stolen from Hans' supply and steal their wallets. Troubled by the alteration which financial independence may cause in their relationship, Alex intentionally knocks the money gleaned over the side of the bridge. Michèle suggests they go to one of the July 14th *bals*, but Alex insists they will see things better from the bridge. They get drunk together and, while the fireworks go on all around them the two lovers dance across the bridge. Head-butting a dozing police officer Alex paves the way for a thrilling water-skiing escapade, with Michèle on the skis and Alex at the helm. She falls in, while he leaps from the moving boat to help her to shore. They return to the bridge to sleep. Alex uncouples an electrical connection to help her sleep, creating darkness on the bridge and turning off the lights of the Samaritaine building. On the radio that Alex has given to Michèle to give her news of the world beyond the bridge without having to leave it, she hears a missing person announcement concerning her. A poster campaign sees her face adorn every available wall. Alex attempts to destroy the posters; in the process he sets fire to a bill-poster. Michèle returns to her family and becomes involved with her doctor, while Alex goes to prison for three years. In prison he has a hand amputated (he had earlier shot off a finger), while in the outside world Michèle is cured of her disease. On Christmas Eve the two lovers are reunited, in the middle of the traffic, on a snowy and fully operational Pont-Neuf. Michèle informs Alex of the impossibility of their becoming involved again. Alex pushes her over the wall and follows her into the water. They resurface and get on board a barge helmed by an elderly couple. The barge with a cargo of sand is heading for Le Havre.

### **Chance and non-derived images**

In continuity with the cosmic forces animating the first two features, in this film chance is the force whereby the two lovers meet. In part they also meet because of a logic that is only supplied late and which is purely internal to the film. However Carax also retains that aspect of his early characters that keeps them under the threshold of full volitional subjectivity, in so far as the encounter is between two somnambulants who are only barely conscious of the encounter having taken place. This inability to register the sense of what happens is indeed perhaps the central motif of the film - it is complementary to and supplementary of the theme of *amour fou* as such - with

Michelle going blind to begin with and Alex perpetually drugged or inebriated.<sup>7</sup> Carax, then, is interested in chance in two complementary ways: as the engine of the film's narrative, and as sustained by characters incapable of full conscious volition and perception. Of course the lack of a finished script, and the fact that Carax only gave the actors their lines on the day of shooting (in the manner of Godard) is further evidence of the importance of the contingent to his vision of cinema. More generally, however, it also signals a broad commitment to narrative and image forms not constrained by rationality or by a logic of strict causality. When Alex accidentally opens Michèle's paint-box it reveals not only her identity and address but also a loaded pistol. The pistol gives us on the one hand, *and in the same hand*, the girl and the gun, the ingredients of cinema according to Godard, but it is, in the view of Frédéric Strauss, more significant than that. In playing its strange anti-role in the film it points up Carax's resistance toward too obvious scenarios (murder), and yet it does so by being at the centre, but not the *logically causal* generative centre of several scenes. When it does take a generative role in the narrative - in the scene where Michèle shoots Julien through the peep-hole of his apartment door - the moment of causation is revealed to have been a nightmare. It is by having Alex count the bullets in the magazine that Michèle proves to herself that it *was* only a nightmare - or, within the film as a whole, a spectre of another more predictable scenario. Taking up the other strand of Strauss' argument regarding the pistol, it is possible to see in the latter a metaphor for the film's weaknesses. The sights of the pistol are restricted, just as the confines of the bridge seal a reduced space of engagement. If the pistol does not act other than in this void, perhaps Carax's film occupies a similarly restricted space, and Carax remains enfolded in a 'Repli stratégique sur sa propre solitude dans un dialogue de sourds' (Strauss 1991a: 22).<sup>8</sup> Strauss, however, would not deny that behind this criticism - and he has much to say that is affirmative too - lies an assumption about what cinema should attempt to be. However, what Carax is interested in pursuing by means of these strategies is what Maurizio Grande has called '*images non-dérivées*' (Grande 1997: 297).<sup>9</sup> They are not so much embedded in a hermetic space as cast adrift of necessity in a *dérive*, wandering, fugue or flight. This for Deleuze is an essential characteristic of the new type of character required by the cinema of the time-image:

It is because what happens to them does not belong to theme and only half-concerns them, because they know how to extract from the event the part that cannot be reduced to what happens: that part of the inexhaustible possibility that constitutes the unbearable, the intolerable, the visionary's part. (Deleuze 1989: 19-20)

The question of belonging also gives rise to that of attribution. To whom is the image to be attributed? Carax, then, in this film continues to explore the possibility of a resistance specific to the image, as we will now explore by making reference to several key scenes.

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<sup>7</sup> Alex sees the moment at which she saw him on the street (she drew from memory however).

<sup>8</sup> 'Strategic folding up in his own solitude in a dialogue of the deaf.'

<sup>9</sup> 'Non-derived images.'



### Observations on key scenes

*The fire-eating scene: Cahiers du Cinéma* was generally full of praise for Carax's third feature. For Vincent Ostria Carax, in *Les Amant du Pont-Neuf* reveals himself to be 'le meilleur filmeur actuel du cinéma français' (Ostria 1991: 23).<sup>10</sup> This is how another *Cahiers* critic describes the meeting of technique and expression in the fire-eating scene:

Plans flashant des gerbes de feu, fluidité des mouvements de la caméra en miroir des acrobaties d'Alex, chaleurs du visage de Juliette Binoche, le montage d'une rare intensité émotive nous transporte ici au plus près d'un cinéma où l'émotion c'est le mouvement même. (Niney 1991: 25)<sup>11</sup>

What the scene entails is more a question of intensity - an abstract manifestation of intensity - than of a close up in which the actor *expresses* emotion. It is then a question of the bodies of the characters as given in speeds and vectors, rather than as necessarily expressive of emotion or sensation happening to them as subjects, or as representations of subjects. The rapidity of the flames, moreover, is echoed in the rapidity of the editing. In a remarkable piece of montage the flash of flame - from Alex's unofficial 'fireworks' - fills the screen with white light and is segued with a shot of open sky into which three jets - part of the official celebrations - fly dispensing the tricolour in the form of their vapour trails.

*The parade montage sequence:* In a scene that acts as a variation on the fire-eating scene, this time it is Michèle who is in motion. Her movements are more direct than those which Alex must adopt owing to his damaged ankle and need for a crutch (for Beugnet Alex is at times a latter day Quasimodo [Beugnet 2001: 161]). Hence the camera follows her in a tracking shot. Binoche is seen running behind (but in the opposite direction to) an intermittent and mobile wall of bodies participating in the bicentennial parade. The appearance of the actor's body on screen is fragmented by the intervening masses of regimented bodies. But the sequence also features rapid montage which brings Alex into the frame. In the intercut shots, he is on the bridge drinking. As the montage gives us rapidly sequenced shots of parade, Michèle and Alex, the camera gets progressively, in rapid travellings/zooms, closer to Alex. In the last of these shots, Michèle also enters the frame and grabs his wine bottle from him, declaring breathlessly that she is thirsty too. The sequence then is notable for the stress placed on speed, a familiar Carax concern from *Mauvais Sang*. As Ostria puts it, its not a fast-moving film but a 'Film admirablement rythmé. Et superbement monté' (Ostria 1991: 24).<sup>12</sup>

*The passing bateau mouche scene:* In his analysis of the embrace scene on the Square du Vert Gallant, Thierry Oudart notes how the lovers' bodies are illuminated by the lights of the passing *bateaux mouches*. The bodies are then filmed in an overexposed sequence, and are in fact almost elided by the flash of white. As the boat passes the position of the bodies as projected in shadow also changes. For Oudart, Carax here

<sup>10</sup> 'Currently the best shot-maker in French cinema.'

<sup>11</sup> 'Rapid rotational shots of sparks of fire, fluidity of camera movements mirroring Alex's acrobatics, the warmth on the face of Juliette Binoche, montage of a rare emotive intensity where emotion is movement itself'. See also our comments in Chapter 1.

<sup>12</sup> 'An admirably paced and superbly edited film.'

shows an affinity with ‘la pensée moderne selon laquelle toute translation produit une transformation, tout mouvement renvoyant à un changement dans la matière’ (Oudart 1995).<sup>13</sup> The scene confirms, through its synecdochal role, that the eye as metaphor is omnipresent (if not always all seeing) in *Les Amants*, which fact prompts him (and he is not the only critic to do so) to quote Derrida: ‘L’expérience du regard voue à l’aveuglement’.<sup>14</sup> The question of the centrality of vision in *Les Amants* will be taken up again below, but of course, it is worth noting - as did Chapter 1 - the pre-eminent position of the eye in the Baroque. It is in this context that some historical contextualisation of the fireworks in the film is demanded.

### **The Baroque economy of *les feux d’artifice***

Historically speaking, fireworks signalled the splendour of whoever ordered them, usually a ruler. On the one hand they served to display the surplus wealth of those presiding, a surplus which is converted into a transient and literally wasteful display of artifice (*feux d’artifice*). As such the brief but spectacular display becomes a signifier of the distance between the plebeian people and the monarch or court, while also being a transient and evanescent focal point for their attention during the *fête* or *fiesta* (see Maravall 1986: 246-7). For José Maravall there was also a philosophical dimension to fireworks in this historical context: ‘With their illumination, the arts of fire were the answer to the zeal to replace night with day, overcoming the night’s obscurity by means of pure human artifice’ (Maravall 1986: 247). Of course this philosophical element, allied to the spectacle of court power, was also in the end political: ‘This capacity to transform the order of the universe, however fleeting it might have been, showed overwhelmingly the greatness of whoever had so much power over natural and human resources as to achieve such effects’ (Maravall 1986: 247). This is the second but last sentence of Maravall’s book on the Baroque. It ends not with politics but with a description of the *performance* of a *simulacrum* of political power.

Carax’s film is implicated in a series of questions attached to those above, albeit no longer within the period of the historical Baroque. For a start the importance of the fireworks sequence cannot be underestimated. Carax makes it the centrepiece of the film. However it is already the centrepiece of the bicentennial celebrations in Paris (even if Carax ends up having to reproduce the fireworks elsewhere). That is, it was originally Carax’s intention to harness the fireworks that are scheduled and to parasitise them by means of his own filming. The fireworks then do have a link to the display of state power, and they do form the focal point of a collective celebration.<sup>15</sup> The difference is that in 1989 fireworks do not produce wonderment to the same extent as they did in the Baroque era. However, within the film, the display has no intending viewers; indeed it has no viewers whatsoever. No-one looks at the spectacle. Alex and Michèle celebrate but are cut off from the spectacle and do not look at it. Instead they contribute their own fireworks (as Alex has already done in several ways) by shooting

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13 ‘Modern thought according to which all translation produces a transformation, all movement harking back to an alteration in matter.’

14 ‘The experience of the gaze is dedicated to blindness.’ See Derrida (1991).

15 The display of state power is evoked also by the parade. Of course the scene where Michèle runs parallel and in a direction opposite to the mass of bodies, horses and tanks is clearly a reference to Godard’s use of Eisenhower’s visit in *A bout de souffle*. Austin also identifies the intertextual references to Bresson’s *Pickpocket* (1959) in the prison sequence and to Truffaut’s *Les 400 Coups* (1959) (Austin 1996: 134).

the pistol. Theirs is a world from which the still centring force of baroque display has been removed. The grand narratives, one might say, adopting a phrase of Jean-François Lyotard which we have already cited, have given way to micro-narratives: for the display as expression of centrality we get, instead, the display harnessed as accidental backdrop for the performance of mutating and transient subjectivities (in Carax's favoured form, namely dance).

Having placed the opening sequences squarely in the neo-realist tradition, Guy Austin goes on to argue that 'Carax's film also features a nocturnal Parisian fantasy so exaggerated as to at once parody and celebrate the most spectacular offerings of the *cinéma du look*' (Austin 1996: 134). For Austin the hyperactive oscillation between the poles of neo-realism and fantasy is indicative of the breadth of Carax's achievement here:

In this context, the waterskiing sequence is both an ironic exaggeration of the bicentennial fireworks (and of the *cinéma du look*'s reliance on the spectacular) and a desperate escape fantasy on the part of the protagonists, who have already escaped Paris once for the lyrical interlude on the coast. (Austin 1996: 134)

While the first of these assertions is not open to dispute, it is necessary to take issue with the assumption underlying the second, namely that the action needs to be grounded in character motivation in the first place (see the comments on non-derived images above). The sequence begins in a slapstick manner with Binoche letting her weapon (a bottle) fly from her hand as she attempts to knock out a river police officer who appears to have revelled too much. The water-skiing itself can be seen as the apogee of the 'turns' which are so characteristic of Carax's films. There is always an element of the irrational about these turns, which erupt onto the screen and often dissipate in fade outs or superimpositions (as is the case here) in the manner of fireworks themselves. This point is elaborated upon in the discussion of the dance sequence below.

### **Corporeal resistors in the circuitry of desire**

The body in *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* is conceived of as a site of impedance on a trajectory, as is suggested by the fact that Alex is lame and Michèle is losing her sight. Fire on the other hand flows from Alex's mouth, and wine into the mouths of both. The body here is the site of regulation and controlled release - Michèle wants to wait before having sex with Alex. The body is the locus of the coagulation of flows (Chapter 3 will have more to say on the body in this respect). Occasionally these bodies are released from the sumptuary arrangement - as in the coastal idyll where in silhouette Michèle 'pulls' Alex along the shore by his erect penis - but to be released, as far as the logic on the bridge is concerned - is to become quiescent - as had Hans' wife and as Hans does too when he falls - without displaying an effort to save himself - into the Seine to drown.

When Michèle is given a last chance to ameliorate her rare eye condition (and rare diseases and obscure unnamed ailments as we know from *Boy Meets Girl* and *Mauvais Sang* are something of a recurrent interest for Carax) and to be released from the nightmare - as she puts it - of her current predicament, Alex does everything in his power to keep her locked into the restricted circuit on the bridge. The body for Alex with his heavy burden - discussed in Chapter 1 - must remain a restricted/maimed (and metaphorically fragmented) entity, divorced from its totality. But the space beyond the

bridge - space of totality, encompassment - seeps in and contaminates. It transpires that this perhaps has been Hans' fear in respect of Michèle: it is an expression of a wish to keep the frontier with the outside in place. It is also possible that he wishes to keep the bridge pure of sexual desire - she reminds him of his wife, and she later allows him to have sexual contact with her in return for his having helped her see the painting (Rembrandt) by candlelight. An autistic perseverance characterises the sumptuary arrangements operative on the bridge. Too much to drink and there will be no *ampoule* for Alex; she can stay for a few days on condition that Hans does not have to set eyes on her. The vagabond-automaton, it seems, requires stability in order better to swing between the poles of void and plenitude. Of course the fear *of* woman is also, and perhaps more properly, in Hans a fear *for* woman - an acknowledgement of the merciless protocols of sleeping rough, since in this society as in that which engenders (in all senses of that word) it, the sexual politics operative is likely to reproduce the phallographic order.

### **Milieu, centre and totality**

Three distinct zones form the setting for the film: bridge, metro, river. Clearly, given the delineation of this topography, Carax is concerned to reflect upon urban space and in particular, upon the space of Paris.<sup>16</sup> In the metro the characters are normally photographed as they walk towards the camera, whereas the dominant shot of the bridge is either a tracking-shot, or a *plan fixe* from the side, with the lovers moving or stationary parallel to the line of the bridge. As Marc Augé describes them such spaces as metro tunnels are a kind of locus without specificity (Augé 1995). The metro is one of the spaces of the modern city, and it has a long history in French cinema.<sup>17</sup>

Paris is at the centre of a thoroughly centralised country. As Augé points out, there is not a town in France, not even the smallest, which does not have its 'centre ville' ('town centre') 'containing monuments that symbolise religious authority (church or cathedral) and civil authority (town hall, *sous-préfecture* or, in big towns, the *préfecture*' (Augé 1995: 65). The central squares can come alive on certain dates such as market days or feast days, amongst which the most notable is, of course, Bastille day on the fourteenth of July. On especially prominent celebrations such as the latter, civil and military institutions combine to form a two-headed people-state phylum. It is fitting then, that Carax chooses to film his third feature on *l'amour fou* in the centre, and surrounded by the elaborate complex of parades, performance and spectacle which greets the bicentennial celebrations. (Of course the suburb also features as the space to which the *clochards* are rounded up and deposited to the better to enable the display of state pomp and festivity). However this particular part of central Paris is cordoned off and in abeyance *as centre*. Carax does not locate his *amour fou* in the clearly and literally liminal space of say the first half of Beineix's *37°2 du matin*, nor does he wish to locate it in an immediately identifiable periphery such as the Nord pas de Calais which has, in the eyes of some, become the pre-eminent space of exclusion in contemporary French cinema (as filmed in Dumont's *L'Humanité* [2000] for example) If anything the choice of this paradoxically de-centred centre permits Carax's film to stage the dichotomy identified by cultural theorist Michel de Certeau when he speaks

16 In his essay on Carax Jonathan Rosenbaum draws attention to the place occupied by *Les Amants* in a long tradition of French filmmakers who have treated Paris as a playground, amongst them Rivette (*Paris nous appartient* (1959) but also we would add *Pont du nord* (1980) and a film made after Rosenbaum's piece *Haut bas fragile* (1995)). See Rosenbaum 1994.

17 See Berry 2000.

of the dynamic of space of exclusion (or ‘ejection’) versus space of ‘election’ (de Certeau 1984). Indeed the film mimics very closely this dynamic, with Alex first ejected to the shelter and then returning to reformulate the bridge as a site of election.<sup>18</sup>

The loci wherein this reformulation is to be found are variously, fire-eating, begging, theft, breaking and entering, gun-shooting, dance, drunkenness, lovemaking. These are amongst the small-scale counterflows against and within the urban fabric knitted together in the conformity which unites the population in acknowledgement of the bicentennial celebrations. These experiments and radical experiences amount to a creative re-mapping of atrophied urban space. Once remapped, however, not only to social norms need to be remodelled, but dimensions and spatio-temporal co-ordinates warp or do not hold. This, the utopian dimension of the film, is signalled most forcefully by the scene where the two drunk lovers lie in the gutter and pavement respectively of a bridge which has seemed - along with the wine bottles strewn around them - to acquire gargantuan proportions. This, for Taboulay, is a scene which succeeds in combining elements of ‘Lewis Carroll, Jack Arnold et Hergé réunis’ (Taboulay 1991: 17).<sup>19</sup> What is notable about this scene is that if the shift in proportions is associated with the drunkenness of the characters, then it must be the camera that is drunk as much as them. The scene is shot from above without any other point of view shot to anchor the aberrant imagery in the perceptual core of either character. In this respect the film accords with one of the neo-baroque principles identified by Christine Buci-Glucksmann in her *Trafic* article, in positing an *impossible* all-seeing eye to survey the possible world below (Buci-Glucksmann 1993). Keeping the camera at this angle Carax refuses to make the scene subservient to a motivating ground or generative centre - they are drunk, hence their perceptions are faulty - and the eye remains ‘impossible’.

### *Espace quelconque*<sup>20</sup>

Place and location have a special status in Carax’s work. The Pont-Neuf itself appears in each of the four films he has made to date. But, aside from geographically identifiable sites, with co-ordinates, Deleuze’s concept of *espace quelconque*, or the ‘any-space-whatever’ may be helpful in thinking about the nature of the film’s figuration of space. Such a space is one which has left behind ‘its own co-ordinates and its metric relations. It is a tactile space’ (Deleuze 1986: 109). The ‘drunk perception’ scene is a good example of figuration according to the ‘espace quelconque’ model. Such a space is characterised by powers and forces, by intensities; it is not a Euclidean space, and is un-moored from co-ordinates proper; it belongs to the domain of what Deleuze and Guattari call intensive ordinates. ‘Any-space-whatevers’ obey the logic of what they elsewhere call ‘counteractualisation’; an abeyant constituent holds them back from actualisation. *Espaces quelconques* are given-withheld, and oscillate on a threshold of becoming (to remain within a threshold zone of becoming is what ‘to become’ means in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms).

Réda Bensmaïa in a commentary on Deleuze and Guattari takes up a related point:

<sup>18</sup> See Conley 1996 for more on this distinction.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Brought together.’

<sup>20</sup> ‘Any-space whatever.’

Si l'espace quelconque et l'espace effectué sont toujours contemporains et se conjuguent, ils ne peuvent être confondus pour autant, car ils ne participent point du même 'ordre': la virtualité de l'un met toujours l'actualité de l'autre en sursis; mais, en même temps, l'actualité de tel 'espace effectué' - ce terrain vague, ce parking etc. - est toujours grosse de la virtualité qui viendra le transformer en 'espace quelconque'. (Bensmaïa 1997: 148)<sup>21</sup>

In this sense - of an ontological commitment to the potentiality of space - the purpose of cinema in Deleuze's view is not to reproduce the real, but to give us spaces which do not yet belong to this world (Bensmaïa 1997: 149). The concept of the *espace quelconque* is part of Deleuze's strategic adherence to this capacity inherent to cinema for transfiguration and transformation. Thus the *espace quelconque* in Deleuze's hands becomes much more or less than an anthropological habitat, or a phenomenon caused by historical and political agencies; it is a conceptual persona - and Bensmaïa is insistent that the concept demands to be read in this way - which engenders the 'spiritual automaton' capable of giving rise to the 'powers of the false'.

The powers of the false - this central Deleuzian concept as Chapter 1 has observed, finds its hollow echo in the *cinéma du look*, that albeit short-lived category of filmmaker with which Carax was briefly associated. The work of Beneix and Besson of this period is defiantly under the sway of the simulacrum - but in the Baudrillardian sense of that term, rather than the Deleuzian sense. Carax's work, however, negotiates the powers of the false in a much more inventive and less abject fashion.

Thus, while one can see the appeal of the reading given by Hayes when he asserts that the *cinéma du look* is driven to its impasse in the fireworks spectacle presented by Carax in *Les Amants* (Hayes in Powrie 1999: 201), the film has much more to offer than an empty critique. The film once more is partly about establishing the conditions for the sheltering of 'the event', the *inespéré*, and is operative at this abstract level. The spectacle is not just the spectacle of the *cinéma du look*. Carax's neo-baroquism is more profound and paradoxical than the concept of an attention to surface images implies. His work is about the engendering of possible worlds, ones not yet created. For Carax it is decidedly not a question, as it appears to be in Beineix of the 'try another [ready-made] world' of *La Lune dans le caniveau* for example. Instead of a choice between contending possibilities, Carax's characters inhabit a laboratory for their own mutant subjectivities - as Michèle clearly embodies this in her 'becoming-homeless'. These characters occupy a space of disjunction, and of what Deleuze calls inclusive disjunction - a way of being host to alterity and heterogeneity - rather than exclusive disjunction - which serves to banish alterity and heterogeneity. It is this aspect that gives to the film its political force, which Beugnet sums up as follows:

En outre, et crucialment, en alliant l'exploration du potentiel esthétique du médium avec une dimension politique et sociale, *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* devient une expression, à travers l'image et l'espace filmique même, des tensions complexes - attirance, résistance et rejet - que génère l'exclusion. (Beugnet

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21 'If the any-space-whatever and actualised space are always contemporaneous and conjugated, they cannot however be confused, because they do not participate in the same 'order': the virtuality of one always holds the actuality of the other in abeyance, but at the same time, the actuality of an actualised space - this waste ground, this parking lot etc. - is always pregnant with virtuality which will come to transform it into an any-space-whatever.'

2001: 187)<sup>22</sup>

### **France, commodity culture and the bridge as radio dial**

The bridge is importantly ambivalent at every level. Without its parenthetical barriers it would be a place of transit, and exchange. Its part in the economy of the city is signalled very clearly by the looming presence at the top of the frame of the illuminated sign of the Samaritaine department store. In fact we have here the coexistence of several distinct Parisian temporalities, in the manner evoked by Baudelaire in *Tableaux parisiens* - 1789, Baudelaire's own nineteenth century and the 1989 of the lovers. Where Godard in his film commission *Lettre à Freddy Buache*, gives us Lausanne as a spatial archaeology of intersecting and interleaved planes (Cache 1995), Carax gives us Paris as a temporal conundrum, layered behind transient signifiers of other times. The indices of Carax's Paris are evanescent on screen - the fireworks die out, the Samaritaine sign goes on and off, the protagonists are, literally, *transients*, having no fixed abode.

Indeed there are other strands in the film that can be linked to Benjamin's conception of Paris as capital of the nineteenth century. The department store is, after all, a symbol of the commodity culture of that century. Under its shadow Michèle sketches on the hoof, in a manner which indeed strives to capture 'the ephemeral, the transient, the contingent' (Baudelaire). More crucially the film seems to intermingle the two things woven together in the thought of Benjamin: commodity culture and allegory. As Graham Gilloch extrapolates:

The experience of the commodity is that of ruination. The modern city, the site of the smug celebration of progress and the conquest of the natural world, is critically revealed through the allegorical gaze as the space of ruin. (Gilloch 1996: 136)

This is quite literally rendered concrete in and through Carax's film. The Samaritaine building becomes literally empty - just a facade of scaffolding and wood on the bank of a reservoir. Carax's narrative - a narrative partly written by the city of Paris itself, in the shape of its municipal authorities - places a site of ruin within the city in celebration (of progress, of France). But allegory over-spills and threatens to excavate the film's avowed core. Leaving aside however the question of to what extent the allegorical impulse in the film swallows it up, and focusing merely on the film itself, rather than its blighted production history, Carax's set places the ruin and the commodity together, and even sets up a continuum between them via the wiring and connections, exposed by the building works, which Alex can use to turn on and off the lights both on the bridge itself and in the department store. This is what Benjamin says:

tearing things out of the context of their usual interrelations - which is quite normal where commodities are being exhibited - is a procedure very characteristic of Baudelaire. It is related to the destruction of the organic interrelations in the allegorical intention. (Benjamin 1985: 41)

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<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, and crucially, in allying the exploration of the aesthetic potential of the medium to a political and social dimension, *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* becomes, through the image and the filmic space itself, an expression of complex tensions - attraction, resistance and rejection - which generate exclusion.'

For Benjamin the allegorical gaze fragments but rebuilds at the same time. Perhaps this is what Carax intends, perhaps not. If Carax had used the ending he wanted the redemptive aspect which is present in the film as it stands would have been less in evidence. If *Pola X* is Carax's next *tableau parisien*, the emphasis is now entirely on the side of catastrophe - what one reviewer called 'caraxysm' (Hoberman 2000).

### **Margins, centre and locus/co-ordinates**

In being set amid the build up to and celebration of the bicentennial, *Les Amants* has a special relationship with the question of France in modernity, France as forged in the smithy of the Enlightenment, with its enshrining of a sense of the enlightened individual along with a collective (*le peuple*) in which individual freedoms were supported and upheld. The red, white and blue of the celebrations abound but are never spoken of by the protagonists. Parallel and outside - yet curiously invaded in the form of falling fireworks by the celebrations - the two lovers do enact their own celebration. The framing music which will return once the lovers have danced and run back and forth along the bridge is French accordion music. The first piece of music to which the soundtrack switches is of north African origin, the second is a rock track by Iggy Pop ('Strong Girl'), the third a track by Public Enemy and the fourth a waltz (Strauss). In a characteristically inventive inscription of music on soundtrack Carax has the sideways movements of the lovers along the bridge operate as if along a kind of dial. As they move the soundtrack tunes in to the four different 'bands' (or channels) and back again. The four tracks, allied to the accordion music represent together a disjunctive melange of musics, none of which (aside from the 'framing' accordion) is especially evocative of France or of Paris, but, rather, variously, of Vienna, New York, the Berlin of the late 1970s - as inhabited by Iggy Pop and Bowie - and, finally, perhaps most significantly in this film about centres and margins, the former colonies. The bridge becomes in these moments a kind of keyboard in an immense spatiotemporal circuitry as sparks rain down from extinguished fireworks on the dancing automatons on a Pont-Neuf music box.

The bridge, however, because of the repairs, is functionally removed from the centre, and removed from modes of relation; vectors of movement and transfer reach an impasse at the barriers which only the protagonists are able to get through, or, in Alex's favoured acrobatic mode, around. If Certeau's definition of space as 'frequented place' is to be held to, then the bridge reverts to a place when it is cordoned off - since it is no longer frequented. But occupied as it is by Hans (a latter day Père Jules presiding over two young lovers), Alex and Michèle a mode of occupancy is re-established. 'Relations are restored and resumed in it' (Augé 1995: 79).

Just as Deleuze's distinction between *espace quelconque* and actualised space is in no way a mutually exclusive one, neither does Certeau's distinction between place and space subscribe to a logic of reciprocal exclusion. Augé takes up this point: place is never completely erased, while non-place is never totally completed. They are to be thought of, rather, as 'palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly re-written' (Augé 1995: 79). Thus it is entirely appropriate that Hans in this film elects himself as authority over relations and over the economy of the bridge. He is the dispenser of downers needed by Alex to sleep - he has been and remains, then, at many levels a 'caretaker'. In other words, relations are restored, and with them power relations, including patriarchy and the phallogocentric order. Within this space of resumed and restricted relations - but which for all that restriction opens on to



the entire fabric of capitalism, the nation (*la patrie*) and patriarchy - however Carax is careful to allow the unfolding and elaboration of the minuscule economy of relations between Alex and Michèle. Two sets of intensities rather than intentionality-driven individuals, they are individuations ('haecceities') in Deleuze's terms, operating by means of an automatism which again can be traced back to Cocteau or perhaps to Murnau.<sup>23</sup>

If it is said of Alex that he has failed to enter the symbolic - although this study has tended to avoid psychoanalytic categories - then it is at this level. His rejection of identity and intentionality (through alcohol) is allied to his burning of the missing person (everyone in this film is a missing person) poster. All intentionality and identity must pass, from Alex's perspective, through fire, and through *feux d'artifice*. The Heraclitean side of Alex is significant. Fire (standing in for flux generally) is his medium. In addition to his feats of fire-eating, he can ignite space and light up the bridge. His mouth is more eloquent with flame than it is with language (again the lure of the suggestion that Alex can be interpreted as not having yet entered the symbolic is evident). It is for this reason that the poster man dies by being burned: it must be so within the economy of fire over which he presides and through which he moves. Against the mirror image of the poster which Michèle for her part will not be able to see Alex wages war. She cannot see, while he refuses to recognise. The well-off background from which Michèle comes and to which she will return is of course highly significant here. Moreover the military father links her to a state apparatus against which Alex is also seen to struggle.

This composite of resistances may appear a romanticised vision of auto-creation, a nihilistic rebellion that lapses into the black hole of what Deleuze and Guattari call 'deterritorialisation' at too fast a rate. It matters little whether or not Carax has as his primary intention a critique of contemporary bourgeois French society; what does matter is that this film sets up internal circuits of becoming, on an always localised level. It works by means of 'assemblage', with coalescences and movements of great fluidity and affirmation. The set pieces such as the counter-celebration/becoming on the bridge in the form of the dance sequence mentioned above, along with the water-skiing sequence - make the film rank high as one of the most innovative contributions to the iconography, temporality and corporeality of *l'amour fou* since the landmark foray of Rivette into that turbulent domain.

If indeed it is true that at a certain level in *Les Amants* we witness too swift a deterritorialisation at the level of the film as a whole, it is important to stress that the film is averse to the prescriptions of totality and teleology. If every narrative is, as de Certeau insists, a narrative of journey, *Les Amants* manages to insert itself into such a framework, while avoiding teleological finitude and closure, even if it has been bound to the parenthetical space of the closed bridge. What matters is not the signification of the final scenes - is the journey towards the terminus of death or not?<sup>24</sup> - but their

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23 Glossing Artaud Deleuze writes 'Thought has no other reason to function than its own birth, always the repetition of its own birth, secret and profound' (Deleuze 1989: 165). Artaud believed that surrealist approximations to dream imagery (Dulac etc.) only went so far in solving what he called the problem of thought. 'Artaud believes more in an appropriateness between cinema and automatic writing, as long as we understand that automatic writing is not at all an absence of composition, but a higher control which brings together critical and conscious thought and the unconscious in thought: the spiritual automaton (which is very different from the dream, which brings together a censure or repression with an unconscious made up of impulses)' (Deleuze 1989: 165).

24 Le Havre in Vigo's film is a decidedly purgatorial space.

effect of unfurling the characters from the space they have inhabited on the bridge. While the underwater scene recalls Vigo and the barge takes us more directly to the space of *L'Atalante*, the important thing is that it is an unfold, deployed from the fold of the once sealed now open bridge. At that point in his career Carax no doubt envisaged further collaborations with his well-established team. Little did he know that his space of election would prepare him for a long tenure in the space of ejection, and that when he returned it would be without Binoche, without Lavant and without Escoffier. In summarising what for her are the splendours of the film ('Carax vient de nous donner un film lustral et férial': 17), Taboulay declares 'Commençons à attendre le prochain' (Taboulay 1991: 17); little did anyone at that time know that the critic was announcing a full eight years of anticipation.<sup>25</sup>

### Visions, the excessive, 'emergencies'

'Quel sainte image attaque-t-on? Quels coeurs briserai-je? Quel mensonge dois-je tenir? - Dans quel sang marcher?' (Rimbaud [1872] 1966:178)

There has always been something of the visionary in Carax's approach to cinema. The description given by Deleuze, in his own somewhat romantic register in *Critique et clinique*, aids in highlighting the nature of this aspect of Carax's attempt. Carax as a latter-day Rimbaud (*Mauvais Sang* - its title taken from one of the books of Rimbaud's *Une Saison en enfer* - is just one of the many references to the French poet) sees himself as part of a visionary tradition. Rimbaud advocated a 'derangement of the senses', a relocation of the borders by means of which these are differentiated. The task of the poet becomes a 'synaesthetic' one, requiring language to smell, thought to touch, touch to become 'visible'. Carax as seer then is a compelling notion, and Carax as 'synaesthetist' likewise. Like Michèle in *Les Amants* the seer by definition always sees with eyes that have been 'damaged', and that require a prosthesis - touch for example. Camille Taboulay, in her review of the film for *Cahiers*, reminds us of the exhibition curated by Jacques Derrida at the Louvre - the same museum as visited by Michèle to view the Rembrandt self-portrait - 'Mémoires d'aveugle', the presiding concept behind which is the idea that one is wounded by what one sees (Taboulay 1991: 16-17).

### Soundtrack, vision-track

In the metonymic form of his two lovers Carax places the two 'tracks' of cinema together. For, in colliding as they do, Alex and Michèle also show a collision between the audio and the visual. The audio and the visual also collide when Alex and Michèle encounter each other on the street in the opening sequence. Importantly, however, both the audio and the visual as represented by their 'bearers' are impaired: Alex will not speak and Michèle is losing her sight, as we see in the scene in the metro tunnel where to her patch Alex's crutch is now added. Clearly, in this film so concerned with and so linked to a question of excess, there will also be a pronounced interest in the themes of limits and of limitation. Vision confronts its limit in the figure of Michèle: she collapses when sketching Alex, and faints when watching him perform his fire-eating act. She cannot tolerate the pain of observing paintings in their usual lighting and can only bear to observe them by candlelight. Michèle's, then, is an impaired vision but also a transient and mutating vision. This sense of (undesired) attenuation, which

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<sup>25</sup> 'Carax is about to give us a lustrous and celebratory film'; 'We begin to await the next one.'

she suffers as a consequence of her disease, finds its counterpart in Alex's need of downers to enable him to sleep. However the necessarily and by definition impaired nature of the perception sets up the possibility for the arrival of the Caraxian *inespéré*. This notion, which has been invoked several times in these pages, is in *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*, given a very specific formulation by means of this self-reflexive inscription. The audio and the visual (the two tracks of cinema) both embodied in characters and both impaired. Carax's ongoing negotiation of limits takes on a new form - by placing them on/in/around his characters in this film. This is tantamount to an experiment in what Deleuze refers to as the unthought within thought:

on the one hand the presence of an unthinkable in thought, which would be both its source and its barrier; on the other hand the presence to infinity of another thinker in the thinker, who shatters every monologue of a thinking self. (Deleuze 1989: 168)

The ability to testify to emergence, to the 'event' as it might be called in the idiom of Deleuze's *Logique du sens* (or Carax's *inespéré*) is part of the lineage of filmmaking to which Carax lays claim in this film. Deleuze turns to the work of Jean-Louis Schefer to identify the essential question: 'in what respect and how is cinema concerned with a thought whose essential character is not yet to be?' (Deleuze 1989: 168). Clearly such endeavours will not characterise all cinema, and Deleuze is quick to remind us that the type of cinema which Schefer has in mind will be close to that envisaged by Artaud, and whose best exponent will be found in the figure of Philippe Garrel, whose work is discussed in Chapter 1. The work of Carax is partly, not entirely it has to be said, to be located within this lineage. Contrary to Eisenstein who wished, through the dialectics of montage, to reveal thought itself as visible, the cinematographic image, '*as soon as it takes on its aberration of movement*, carries out a suspension of the world or affects the visible with a disturbance' (our emphasis) such that what emerges, within the 'emergency' of this disturbance, is neither strictly speaking visible, nor strictly speaking thinkable: the unseen, the unthought - monstrous visions and perceptions.

Propelled by the cinematographic postulate of a world become image, this amounts to the affirmation of a plane of immanence in which consciousness is no longer consciousness of something; rather, consciousness is something, an eye in things grasped by a camera-consciousness, the eye in matter undergoing universal modulations such that all images vary in relation to one another, a machinic consciousness open unto duration as a whole. (Alliez 2000: 293-4)

This machinic consciousness is open to flux, fluidity, and to the *informe* - all of which rumble beneath a putative threshold of identity and molarity. The 'emergency' brought about by this scopic disturbance gives birth to the 'spiritual automaton' in cinema

This is the description of the ordinary man (sic) in cinema: the spiritual automaton, 'mechanical man', 'experimental dummy', Cartesian diver in us, unknown body which we have only at the back of our heads whose age is neither ours nor that of our childhood, but a little time in the pure state. (Deleuze 1989: 169)

Carax does his apprenticeship at the school of the *nouvelle vague* and incorporates all of their innovations meticulously in the first two features - the *nouvelle vague*, so synonymous in Deleuze's formulations, with the break with sensory motor schemata. 'The sensory motor break makes man a seer who finds himself struck by something intolerable in the world, and confronted by something unthinkable in thought' (Deleuze 1989: 169) - the sentence could well describe the situation from which *Les Amants* departs. It certainly describes its precondition: the *before* so important to Deleuze in setting up an image - it must include the before and the after as in Godard (Deleuze 1989: 155) - Michèle is losing her sight.

Perhaps the clearest sense in which Carax's work - and in particular *Les Amants* and *Pola X* is the extent to which his characters are separate from the world. Godard said of his own film about a trio of misfits in *Bande à part*:

These are people who are real and it's the world that is a breakaway group. It is the world that is making cinema for itself. It is the world that is out of synch; they are right, they are true, they represent life. They live a simple story; it is the world around them which is living a bad script. (Godard, cited Deleuze 1989: 171)

*Les Amants*, seen in retrospect, now clearly signals a shift in Carax's project. Whereas the appellation 'neo-baroque' becomes increasingly apt as one moves from *Boy Meets Girl* to *Mauvais Sang*, *Les Amants* is to be located within a distinct set of aesthetic and philosophical questions - the connivance with simulacra has become more critical and rigorous. The dance sequence (as in *Boy Meets Girl*) or the rapid walk-dance (as in *Mauvais Sang*) however is still, here, to be thought of within the logic of a breakdown in sensory motor schemata. In short what Deleuze says of the dance routines in *Pierrot*, *Bande à part* and *Une femme est une femme* remains true of Carax up to an including *Les Amants* (*Pola X*, while still echoing Alex's fugues, in the form of Pierre's limping lurches, bids farewell to the dance as limit):

whilst dance, in a classical musical comedy, informs all the images, even preparatory or intercalary ones, it arises here, in contrast, as a 'moment' in the behaviour of the heroes, as the limit towards which a sequence of images is moving, a limit which will only be realised by forming another sequence moving towards another limit. (Deleuze 1989: 184)

Thus in Carax the dance diffuses into a sequence leading to the fire-eating acrobatics, which in turn will be linked via another sequence to the metro-station acrobatic performance.

### **The lives, death and afterlife of Alex**

Alex the medium, Alex the ventriloquist and the ventriloquised, Alex the supple individual. Alex in the first three features is more than a character. He is a site of impedance (he impedes normativity) and thoroughfare (he releases flows), an orphan (severed from family) and *Orphée* (conduit of visionary perceptions) of chaos. This is a new type of character for cinema, and the innovation of Carax should not be underestimated. Claire Denis seems to have attentive to this by managing to transport and transform Alex into her own project in *Beau Travail*. One of Alex's possible worlds (he is on the eve of his military service in *Boy Meets Girl*) is thereby given

form. That Alex has had this curious afterlife is testament to the specificity of Lavant himself, as well as to the new type of acting and character he brings to the screen. One of Deleuze's best Anglophone interpreters Brian Massumi has elaborated on a category of character that comes close to evoking something of the specificity of Carax's characterisation in respect of Alex - the supple individual. This character is partly an inheritor of the protagonist of Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener', who says 'I would prefer not to' (Melville [1856] 1990). I bend and I evade: I resist - I ply but am not compliant. The supple individual is especially appropriate to cinema, with its dissipative qualities, its evanescent properties, its fades, superimpositions, zooms, accelerations and decelerations. 'A supple [pliant] individual lies between the molecular and the molar, in time and in mode of composition' (Massumi 1992: 55). Alex is such a persona, both physically supple and metamorphic as he passes from film to film in the trilogy. By investing as heavily as he did in the persona of Alex in his first three films, Carax made of Denis Lavant a screen within the screen, a screen both to be projected upon and a filter. Alex as sieve, as screen, as supple individual lying between a chaotic, turbulent matter and aesthetic assemblage, may have gone in *Pola X*, but as the next chapter will show, Carax's negotiations with chaos are in that film, nonetheless, pushed further still.

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