

Vladimir Propp - The Universality of Narrative

It is common knowledge to say that Hollywood/American cinema was built upon the idea of commercially successful feature films. It was and still is an industry which invests and gains many millions of dollars a year. To achieve this success has meant that the film is treated as a product, and a good product is able to sell to its market. In the case of cinema the audience leads the direction of the profit margin. 'A Darwinian model would show this influence working as adjudication at the box-office to determine the viability of mutations generated by the film as they try to repeat and vary the past successes, and to avoid replicating the past failures. Ticket sales have been interpreted as guidance in terms of projects and personnel with sufficient perceived force to give rise to the notion that "you're as good as your last picture.'" This formula in Hollywood created the 'genre' film, and from its inception until present the concept of a type of film, or in present times, multi-genre film represent the mainstream of cinema.

American cinema has pretty much always been an industry which relies on the commercial success of the 35mm feature, for the film to be made. This president has meant that film as a form is seen as a commercial medium, this does not deny that in America there is no use of the form as purely art. A country of its size and economic importance will always be able to have an independently or patron fuelled art culture. Why this is brought up relates to the governmental position towards an artistic use of such a popularist medium. To continue this line of investigation let us jump across the Atlantic to the country of France. The statement about the commercially biased nature of Hollywood cinema can be brought into direct comparison to the nature of French cinema and its involvement in what is known as European cinema.

The French government has been more actively aware of the cultural importance of its cinema and filmmaking. The members of the French New Wave were helped to achieve their importance and success through government aid and schemes. '...the newly installed Gaullist regime, keen to promote a home-grown industry to counter what it saw as the cultural menace of Hollywood and its large slice of box-office revenues, introduced the *vance sur recettes* system. This film subsidy, funded by the levy on ticket sales and repayable by a percentage of the film's takings, enabled many unknowns their first chance to direct.' This activity led to a very different ideology held in France than compared to that of America. 'They linked their commercial industry more closely with experimental and avant-garde film making.' The impact that movements such as the New Wave, had important influences on the commercial film making in France since the 50's. It is a starting point for the interrelationship between Hollywood and the European cinema. The New Wave were firstly critics who raised the importance of American studio system directors, pointing out their distinctive styles within a particular genre. Then as directors they went on to change and enhanced the language and use of film, which fed back to the independent filmmakers in America of the 60's, a la *Easy Rider*.

This essay is attempting to demonstrate a feedback loop which exists between Hollywood/American cinema and European film. To show this and its evolution the investigation will now focus on two films, Luc Besson's *La Femme Nikita* 1990, and John Badham's remake *The Assassin* 1993 (U.K. title).

Luc Besson's original feature involves a narrative about a punk, drug addict 19 year old Nikita who is caught after a gun battle. Sentenced to life imprisonment, the government fake her death and offer her a life as a trained assassin. The narrative runs with her attempting to make a new life, whilst caught in the world of espionage and death.

Luc Besson was known in France as a member of a new wave of directors known as 'cinema du look'. Popular with a young audience rather than critics, the cinema du look took influence from the aesthetics of the music video and the advertisement. It is interesting to note that both the music video and the film/television advert were the forte of American culture. The United States

had proliferated the music video by the infamous cable and satellite channel M.T.V., the country also had the economic companies who would throw serious money at advertising campaigns, such as Nike, McDonalds and Coca-Cola. It could be said that both these forms of promotion come straight out of the American ideology of commercial success, and maybe it is no wonder why the French critics disliked the nature of the cinema du look.

At the time of its release *La Femme Nikita* would have been a commercial release in a strong French market. 'In 1991, for example, France made more feature films (156), had more screens in operation (4,531), and sold more tickets (117.5m) than any other western country except the USA. There are three main, and interrelated, reasons for the French cinema's good health: a state-inspired industrial structure that assists film production at every stage, from project to distribution, through its governing body the Centre National de le Cinematographie (CNC); a large reservoir of talent in every department of film-making; and a large receptive public and a lively film culture.'

This does not mean that Luc Besson's work has no pedigree, the artist at work becomes apparent when you apply some textual analysis. This is heightened when compared to the remake. It is not then to say that *The Assassin* has no artistic precedent, but merely that it is being used in this essay to mirror the original, and represent the feedback loop.

Nikita opens with a tracking shot of a wet road glistening, this pans up to reveal four punks, one dragging a body behind him, walking towards some shop fronts. The type of shots used is reminiscent of French directors such as Godard. There is an incredible use of tracking shots which act in an independently supportive role to the movement within the shot. When Franco enters their (Nikita's and his) apartment the camera pans as he enters the door from the right of the screen, and then tracks into the apartment following him through the room, revealing the spatial organisation of the room. In comparison there are fewer tracking shots within *The Assassin*, and a larger number of shots per scene, much like a more American style of direction, with a conscious use of continuity style editing. The camera shots cut round the characters and settings. In the opening to *The Assassin* the first shot is an image of the dome on the Whitehouse, used to anchor the setting of the film geographically and also to show something of the political tone of the film. Since Watergate the American audience can identify with the espionage that the government is involved in, this image could be seen to evoke this. The single shot of the punks and the following reverse low angle long shot in *Nikita*, is replaced by a sequence of mid and close up shots. The long takes in *Nikita*, which are reminiscent of the work of Godard and 'art cinema', allow the eye to follow the details and action at an individuals pace. Alternatively the same scenes in *The Assassin* are covered by shorter length shots which grab the audience's attention to specific elements of the scene. This style of direction is incredibly straightforward and can be seen as an example of the straightforward approach that exists in popular American films.

Luc Besson has an extreme use of colour, his opening is bathed in blue light, it is as severe as the nude scene of Brigitte Bardot in *Le Mepris*, and like *Le Mepris* it not only adds to the flavour of the film, but also makes the audience aware of the manufacture of the film. The lack of naturalism, which can be found common in both the music video and the advert, is tamed by comparison in Badham's film. This comparison appears to show the stylistic elements which make up the cinema du look, it makes apparent the use of jump cuts in *Nikita*, when she is shopping in the supermarket and when Franco and her are touring Venice in the gondola. Jump cuts were a major triumph of the New Wave, such as at the start of *Breathless*. The scene where Nikita and her fiancé are in the gondola harks back to scenes in *Jules et Jim*, in both the colour and gaiety. Clearly this part of the essay has focused on the stylistic links of *Nikita* and previous French directors, the directors emphasis on style or look and now this leads line of investigation to the content of the film, narrative.

Before one departs the element of style it is interesting to note that in an interview for

Hollywood.com, Luc Besson, when talking about the remaking of his film, modestly compares himself to Picasso. This points towards his vision of being more of an artist rather than a director.

The name *La Femme Nikita*, the film's original title, expresses the film's homage and genre link to Film Noir. In its day Film Noir was Hollywood's version of cinema du look, having a rather extreme visual style. The visual style found in Film Noir can be said to be linked to the style of the German expressionists working within film. An example of the stark use of shadow and light can be seen in films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. This once again fits within the feedback loop of the influence between European and American cinema.

In his style Luc Besson has quite obviously been influenced by the post-modern culture of music videos and adverts, both of which have been linked back to America within this essay. It is not surprising to see that the narrative of the film is based upon a classic Hollywood genre, that of Film Noir. *Nikita* is not a classic Film Noir narrative, instead it seems to be an extension of the genre. The hero within the text is not a tragic male character, as would be expected, instead the film follows the life of another Film Noir character, that of the femme fatale. 'Its (Film Noir) most common narrative element involves a male protagonist's fascination with an alluring dangerous woman, which leads him away from certainty and order into a world of lawlessness and guilt.' This narrative is still present within the film *Nikita*, but it has been twisted, and the focus of the narrative has been shifted. A writer commented on the femme fatale that it was, 'a bad woman trying hard to be a good woman.' If this is the case then *Nikita* is that bad woman, cop killer, who, when given a new chance at life, tries her hardest to be good. In *Nikita*, there is still the character of the man lured away from the straight and narrow, but within the realms of Besson's world he is now split into two parts, that of Bob and boyfriend Franco. Both of these characters can be seen to have fallen under the spell of *Nikita*, Bob breaks from the rules of the agency so that he can give *Nikita* the chance she needs to live again, except this is done under his rules. Franco, her boyfriend only discovers her secret world by the end of the narrative, the world of 'lawlessness and guilt' (interesting to point out that this world is represented by working for the government), which Bob is privy to. This retelling of the basic narrative element of Film Noir is adhered to in the Badham remake, the only difference is the focus of how the narrative is expressed. This difference between the films can point out variations in native audience expectations. In *Nikita* there is an apparent ambiguity in the narrative, not everything is revealed and explained in comparison to *The Assassin*, an example of this is the boyfriend's character in *Nikita* is less active in his curiosity and investigation into his partner's double life. In *The Assassin* the boyfriend is much more apparent in his probing and doubting of her life, it is a more conscious act, both in the character and to the audience. More of an effort to fix the audience's affiliation to the lead female is made in *The Assassin*, through the use of point of view shots. These are also used to express her drugged state of mind. The ambiguity in the telling of the story in the original film invokes an art cinema feel to the story, the emotion in the narrative becomes subconscious, and lends a to a darker more disturbed psychology. *The Assassin* works in a different way, instead it uses more dialogue between characters to explain and drive the narrative, the character of Bob is used to explain more of what is expected of the lead female, and her hopeless position of no way out. This allows the Badham to pick up the pace and increase the amount of screen action. One can only interpret this as designed to suit the American cinema goer's palette.

It is not surprising that the film *La Femme Nikita* was remade in Hollywood as *Point of No Return*, its narrative is an exciting reworking of the classic Film Noir genre. It translates well back across the Atlantic, with the visual style and direction being the only major change. It is a fine example of the swapping back and forth of ideas that occurs between Europe and America.

' I mean people want to remake it, it's good. The problem in America is a remake is something good, because you can have another vision. There is almost, like, two or three stories anyway. You have *Romeo and Juliet*, the *War of Troy*, and *Gone with the Wind*. Whatever you do it is always the same story with another adaptation... I'm just stealing.'

The two films picked for this essay seem to demonstrate that Luc Besson took ideas from Hollywood/America, Film Noir, music videos, advertising, and created his own spin on them, with a touch of European Art Cinema. From this is produced the film *La Femme Nikita*, which is seen in America, the idea is then adapted for an American audience, within the style of Hollywood by John Badham. The result is a constant swapping of ideas from one side of the Atlantic to the other, with cinema evolving not only with specification of one nation, but also as a Western or global phenomenon.

Continuing from the examples presented, Luc Besson has gone on to successfully direct film in Hollywood (*Leon, The Fifth Element*), the story of *La Femme Nikita* has been translated as an American television show, more films by the directors within cinema do look to have had greater distribution and awareness on an international scale. Some of these directors Mathieu Kassovitz (*La Haine*) and Jan Kounen (*Doberman*), have teamed up with Besson to create a new film production company in Hollywood. 'The new production company won't replace any current film deals involving the three directors. Instead 1B2K will cater to filmmakers who want to make movies outside the studio system with creative control.'

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Films

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