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Cinephile narrators. Reshaping text/image relation in French contemporary fiction (Christine Montalbetti, Tanguy Viel)

Abstract:

Considering Christine Montalbetti's cinematic gaze and Tanguy Viel's exhaustion of the filmic memory, the paper demonstrates how much these contemporary writers' legacy turns out to be that of cinema. Movies complete or even replace their imaginary library. Such an ambition to think cinema in terms of writing questions the very basis of saying and of seeing in the context of media permeability. Inspired by film visual potential, Montalbetti and Viel's novels do not end with the quest for the verbal equivalences of the moving images. The novelistic treatment of cinephilia involves more complex operations that produce effect on the diegetic device in its entirety. Therefore, it would be imprecise to speak of the interaction between the novel and the film in terms of analogy or influence, since the narration is inherent to the filmic image anyway. It is rather an incorporation by the writing of its own narrative patterns, such as they have been updated by cinema.

Keywords: cinephilia, contemporary French novel, intermediality, moving images, narration, visual perception.

Introduction

The analogy between the text and the image that is at the heart of the famous *ut pictura poesis* formula is no longer of the same nature in the dialogue between the contemporary French novel and the cinema. Although the so-called narrative component of the film originates from the written narrative, it gives rise to a distinct mode of expression in which the visual images unfold in their intrinsic movement in a continuous or discontinuous sequence. In the same way, the novelistic writing, by challenging visual potential of the moving images, involves a range of profound changes in its own diegetic device.

This paper will focus on two contemporary writers, Christine Montalbetti and Tanguy Viel, who are both particularly interested in cinema as visual imaginary source and who experiment with its narrative modalities. Furthermore, they call themselves moviegoers and insist on such an approach both in writing and by means of writing. Christine Montalbetti asserts that her imagination is truly visual and her writing is stimulated involuntarily by cinematographic images. Montalbetti prefers to talk about her own style in terms of comparison with certain cinematographic components, rather than to question the possibility of translating them into

writing. (Montalbetti 2012) Tanguy Viel, in turn, considers cinema as a rich procurement source of mental images capable of replacing his spectator-reader memory, while writing only refers to these already existing images. (Cassagnau 2007, 161-162) According to Viel, cinema offers a serious alternative to the scarcity of stories in literature, as a reservoir of forms to be potentially explored by writers.

I suggest examining the phenomenon of cinephile writing more closely as exemplified in a few emblematic novels of these two authors: *Campaign experience* (Montalbetti 2005a) portrays an attentive observer character; *Western* (Montalbetti 2005b) is the title of another novel that clearly refers to a Hollywood genre; the character of *The Black Note* (Viel 1998) lives in a movie theatre and keeps an archive there; lastly, the narrator of *Cinema* (Viel 1999) is speaking only of a movie, a single movie, *Sleuth* (Mankiewicz 1972) and the experience he comes through it. These novels raise immediately a number of important issues such as the hybrid generic nature, the status of the novel in relation to the source film (when there is one) and the methods of transposing visual experiences into writing. However, formulating my questions in these terms would imply to remain in the text/image bipolarity, between the film component and the verbal component, with a prejudice that their relation is necessarily that of derivation or of dependence. Yet, it is the nature of this connection that I would like to give consideration to here, hence the title of my paper: in my view, the text/image interaction in these novels is neither the result of direct influence of one medium on the other, nor the illustration of their possible analogy. This interplay acts rather as an impulse, which opens a way for exploring cinema storytelling techniques by means of writing.

#### Cinephilia, between otherness and everyday

The literary treatment of cinephilia and its textual effects in the novels of Christine Montalbetti and Tanguy Viel permits us to intend both a fetishistic relationship towards cinema and a concrete manifestation of otherness. For one part, both authors have an imaginativeness that could be described as truly visual, which accords with the contemporary excess of visual productions, notably filmic ones, to the extent that films supersede books and replace the writer's library. In this context, all kinds of visual experiences appear as an inescapable writing material. Moreover, one must recognize that their texts elicit such an interpretation because of a strong presence of filmic references. For the other part, Montalbetti and Viel display, as spectators and cinema thinkers, an attitude of differentiation with the filmic image. They refuse to consider cinema as a rival the way it was for writers of previous generations, authors of *cinéromans* (cinema-novels), scripts and other intermedia forms derived from film. Indeed, in

the decades that followed the invention of cinema writing was first conceived as its opponent, for it could not neglect the contribution of the new technique in the way of telling stories. Later, the cinema detour made by writers appeared no longer as a rivalry game but as a step aside in a quest for formal renewal. In his research on American fiction shaped by cinema, Serge Chauvin underlines that writers have used their filmic background to develop a new experience of literature. Thus, a film became as much an object of a story as its narrative model. (Chauvin 1997, 7-8)

For Montalbetti and Viel, films have supplanted books and cinema has become as a privileged interlocutor. As already stated, the novels examined here are characterized by the explicit presence of references to the cinema: names, titles, places, reminiscences from existing or imaginary movies, movie theatres, all of which draw up novelistic sets. For example, *Western*'s characters have their names coming from the American film industry (Ted Lange, Richard Evans), or that could have derived from (Jeff W. Dunson, Will Nordman). This choice is probably part of the same idea as the recurrent use of the English language: to trigger reminiscences of the western genre. The novels also feature moviegoer figures: the character of *The Black Note* literally lives in a movie theatre, "he officiated like a Templar in there" / "il officiait comme un templier là-dedans." (Viel 1998, 34)<sup>1</sup> Through this character, we can recognize a homonymic passage between cinema as a theatre and cinema as a mental pattern: living elsewhere than in these premises would mean for him living "away from images" / "à l'écart des images." (Viel 1998, 34) The connection with the everyday life established by the cinephilia thus includes, on the one hand, a part of an unexplained passion and on the other hand, a part of the ordinary daily routine.

As defined by Jacques Rancière's, cinephilia

is a relation with the cinema that is a matter of passion before being a matter of theory. [...] It maintained that the greatness of cinema did not reside in the metaphysical elevation of its subjects or in the visibility of its plastic effects, but in an imperceptible difference in the way traditional stories and emotions were imaged / c'est un rapport avec le cinéma qui est affaire de passion avant d'être affaire de théorie. [...] Elle affirmait que la grandeur du cinéma ne résidait pas dans l'élévation métaphysique de ses sujets ou la visibilité de ses effets plastiques, mais dans une imperceptible différence dans la manière de mettre en images des histoires et des émotions traditionnelles. (Rancière 2011, 8)

For Rancière, cinema would be a system of irreducible differences between emotion, art and vision of the world. All film theories have been vainly looking for their adequacy. Thus, the

narrator of Tanguy Viel's *Cinema* is feverishly combing through newspapers to find out if the Mankiewicz's *Sleuth* would be shown in the movie theatres, looking to this opportunity would never arise. The *Cinema* narrator flees the "black" of the room, that *black* that Roland Barthes associated with the fascination (Barthes 1975), against a daily fascination by the image projected with his own video recorder and inscribed in the familiar frame of his house. Beyond the fascination, his relation to *Sleuth* is a form of submissiveness: the narrator stubbornly reviews the film and feels compelled to respect "the grandeur of things when they appear on the screen, the greatness especially in their own way" / "la grandeur des choses quand elles viennent sur l'écran, grandes surtout dans leur ordre à elles." (Viel 1999, 26) By dint of seeing the film several times, the narrator has appropriated it completely to the point of being unable to abstract it from his life as a separate entity. This novel is a kind of manifesto to all Viel's works, since they are written as if in front of the movie screen.

The cinephilia thus appears as a fully-fledged experience, which becomes both a punctual fictional motif and a widespread novelistic material. From this point of view, the image thought comes forward less through narrative techniques than by describing the movie experiences of the characters. It is a way to challenge the dominant logocentric approach of the image; insofar the later cannot be reduced to linguistic schemas.

#### Visual perception as storytelling pattern

When cinematographic background comes into play, showing with words does not longer mean to prove their rhetorical or stylistic value but to draw attention to the intermedial feature of writing device. Cinephilia can also arise from valorisation of all kind of visual experiences. A prominent example of such cinematic writing is Robert Coover's *After Lazarus*. This excerpt, explicitly influenced by camera device, transfers its optics in the novel using the film metalanguage as a counterpoint:

The street narrow, the surface worsens, and so does the jolting movement of the camera, until it is almost impossible to keep anything in focus. Stop. Inconsequential view of part of a rooftop. Brief jolting motion. Stop. Inconsequential view of the street, the corner of the house. Jolting motion. Stop. View of the house, like the others, and of the narrow space between it and the next house. In this space, between the houses, but full light (still no shadows), a cord is strung and hanging from it is a small scrap of tattered white cloth. Pan to the house and slow zoom in: clay wall, shuttered windows, closed door. The slow zoom continues, moving in on the door and toward its handle. (Coover 1987, 38)

In Montalbetti and Viel's texts, the cinematographic device is displayed rather as a supposed source of perception changes. Camera device intervenes, for instance, to dissociate characters' attitudes:

He [George] was lacking a camera, you see, to make tracking shots on candles in the wind, and zooms in on our faces, on the iron box, to take it from above when it dipped, when the waves almost killed us. Even your fall on the bridge, in his eyes I saw he wanted to film you, I saw that he regretted, as never before, being completely empty-handed without a camera. / Il lui [à Georges] manquait une caméra, vois-tu, pour faire des travellings sur les bougies au vent, et faire des zooms sur nos visages, sur la boîte en fer, la prendre du dessus quand elle plongeait, quand les vagues ont failli nous tuer. Même ta chute sur le pont, dans son regard j'ai vu qu'il voulait te filmer, j'ai vu qu'il a regretté comme jamais d'être les mains vides sans caméra. (Viel 1998, 96-97)

or to convey a sense of juxtaposition of still images:

Shot: Jack King, his face completely blackened by the backlight, but this is Jack King. Reverse shot: in his last and slow jump, the sky finishes reddening and emits a beam of amber, flavescent light, which illuminates the face of our thirty-year old / Champ: Jack King, le visage entièrement noirci par le contre-jour, mais c'est bien là Jack King. Contrechamp: dans un dernier et lent sursaut, le ciel qui achève de rougeoyer laisse filtrer un faisceau de lumière ambrée, flavescente, qui vient éclairer de face le visage de notre trentenaire. (Montalbetti 2005b, 210)

When the film device is exhibited in this way, it plays a perceptive intermediary role. However, even when the camera is absent, in such a cinephile environment, it becomes impossible to conceive the act of watching without associate it with the filmic device.

The gaze in Montalbetti's fiction is constantly highlighted by accumulation of details, which assimilates it to hypotyposis device. On this point, Umberto Eco expressed some mistrust regarding the very definition of hypotyposis. Conceived as a figure in which visual experiences are represented by verbal means, hypotyposis can nevertheless take various forms. It can be expressed by a denotation, a thorough description, an enumeration, or an accumulation of events or characters. (Eco 2003, 250-254) Unlike ekphrasis, which is associated with the object of art and, above all, with the fixed object, hypotyposis is a moving description. In contrast to the simple description, hypotyposis seeks to make the reader's gaze coincide with that of the character's one or to merge it with the narrator's gaze. It thus constitutes a narrative stake in its own right.

Let's take a look at the courtyard for a moment. Imagine something raw, geometric, struck by simple broad lines as the consequences of primary volumes involved in the case / Prenons le temps de regarder un peu la courrette. Représentez-vous quelque chose de brut, de géométrique, de frappé par de grandes lignes simples, conséquences des volumes primaires engagés dans l'affaire. (Montalbetti 2005b, 45)

This highly measured and geometrical description of the court spreads over a few paragraphs, but it does not have an exclusively descriptive purpose. Rather, it shortens the distance between reader and narrator. The character, meanwhile, seeks to catch objects with his eyes by attributing a “figurative equivalent, and usually a zoomorphic one / équivalent figuratif, et le plus souvent zoomorphe” to them, he “wraps his hammock with a tender eye / enveloppe d'un œil attendri son hamac.” (Montalbetti 2005b, 98-99) In *Western*, the gaze also intervenes as a way to establish a relationship between characters, particularly through the physiological approach of the eye. The gaze takes on a haptic dimension and accomplishes the mediating function between various storytelling instances, that is to say, narrators and characters, and even the reader.

In Viel's fiction, such attention to the sense of sight is performed by an exploration of film image by the spectator-reader and the search for a plasticity of an image, “As soon as there's a gun [...], the eyes of the spectator let themselves be carried inside the image, they drift half-way under threat, and they execute / Dès qu'il y a un revolver [...], les yeux du spectateur se laissent porter à l'intérieur de l'image, ils dérivent à moitié sous la menace, et ils exécutent.” (Viel 1999, 53) Such attempt to exhaust the filmic image by words is a recurring process in *Cinema* and the transfer from a visual material to the written one engenders first a narrative effect. The traditional opposition between a total reading of the filmic plan and a reading that presupposes a spatial progression is presented here as a metaphor for the flow of thought.

On the broader cultural level, this writing phenomenon can be apprehended as a confrontation between the discursive and the iconic, traditionally claimed by Western theological and philosophical thought. In her text “Talking images,” Marie-José Mondzain speculates about a possible match between seeing, talking and being spoken. (Mondzain 2005) Movie image is complex in that sense that it is, by definition, perceived as a talking subject and, at the same time, it calls to be spoken on. The speech intervenes to identify what there is to see, thus it goes beyond the gaze perception; conversely, what we see is unlimited and cannot be completely described by words. The inexhaustible is therefore constantly in play on image side and on speech side. Thereby, *Cinema*'s narrator tends in vain to verbalize visual elements that seem to him obscure in the plot of the film. While words confront the iconic material otherness, it can



be directly associated with cinematographic influence. Accumulating heterogeneous strata, Viel's writing is intermedial since it results from the continuous superposition of different media within the text itself and by verbal means. Word and image dialectic shifts therefore into a different perspective, that of *intersemiotic translation*<sup>2</sup>, as an opening of literary writing to exogenous, filmic, elements.

#### Exploring film temporality through writing

The characters and narrators' figures examined above, sometimes observers, sometimes spectators, have a direct impact on the storytelling mechanisms. The transfer of film logic to a novelistic discourse generates crossings between different diegetic levels. Narrative metalepsis constitutes one of the most representative devices in this matter. Following Gérard Genette's, narrative metalepsis includes any form of intrusion of extradiegetic narrator or narratee into diegetic universe, or vice versa. Narrative metalepsis is therefore inextricably linked to a transgression of diegetic levels. (Genette 1972, 244) To illustrate this definition, Genette remains committed to literary case studies, even if he brings in some examples from theatre and cinema. It might be well to point out that film techniques give rise to particular forms of metalepsis such as copy-pasted quotations from one film to another; cameo appearance of some celebrity within film diegesis; meta-diegetic discourse introduced by a character etc. (Genette 2004) This suggests that cinema would have an exceptional metaleptic capacity to incorporate a recorded extract of the real, considered as a non-fictional equivalent, in the fictional framework of the film. The cinematographic device favours these combinations by virtue of its optico-chemical principle which produces a transfer of the reality of a thing to its own reproduction.

Since several parts of Montalbetti and Viel's novels offer a re-transcription of film diegesis (real or fictive), the film-novel interaction occurs as a differentiation process of diegetic levels within the novel. Worthy of mention is the distinction made by Louis Marin between transparency and opacity: transparency is a quality of representation in which signs designate what is beyond them, whereas the opacity presumes that the representation exhibits its own modalities and its own functioning. (Marin 1994) It may be inferred that in the novel, opacity operates as a narrative reflect, including author's interventions. Thus, narrative modes transformation contributes to a shift of representation mode. In Viel's *Cinema*, for example, characters bear the names of *Sleuth*'s actors. In the following excerpt, diegetic levels are moving between the novel's narrator, the *Sleuth*'s actors who almost become characters of the novel, and finally, the *Sleuth*'s characters.

Most of the things I know I learned from the movie, I noted them owing to the movie, and not from other movies, not from the cinema, no, just thanks to Milo and Andrew, because of the esteem I hold them in, because of respect I have for Lawrence Olivier and Michael Caine, the two actors, but, if I hold them in any respect, it is precisely thanks to this film in particular. [...] But I shouldn't talk about them like that, and I shouldn't confuse them with their characters, it's a matter of ethics, I should let them get on with their own lives behind the movie, I should, yes, but that is impossible, since myself I don't have a life anywhere near the movie, I'm a dead man without *Sleuth*, yes, *Sleuth*, the original title of the film in English, for me it's no longer a name of the movie, in fact it's a friend's name, I say *Sleuth* as I would say *Andrew* / La plupart des choses que je sais, je les ai apprises dans le film, je les ai notées grâce au film, et pas grâce à d'autres films, pas grâce au cinéma, non, uniquement grâce à Milo et Andrew, à l'estime que j'ai pour eux, à l'estime que j'ai, bien sûr, pour Lawrence Olivier et Michael Caine, les deux acteurs, mais, si j'ai de l'estime pour eux, c'est précisément grâce à ce film-ci. [...] Mais je ne devrais pas parler d'eux comme ça, et je ne dois pas les confondre avec leurs personnages, c'est une question de déontologie, laisser à chacun sa vie à côté du film, je devrais, mais c'est impossible, parce que moi-même je n'ai pas de vie à côté du film, je suis un homme mort sans *Sleuth*, oui, *Sleuth*, le titre original du film en anglais, pour moi ce n'est plus un nom de film, c'est un nom d'un ami, je dis *Sleuth*, comme je dirais *Andrew*. (Viel 1999, 95-96)

Consequently, narrative frame is split into two fictional worlds: extradiegetic elements become intrinsic to the novel, while the narrator himself is about to integrate with the diegesis of the film he is talking about. Author's intervention in terms of commentary or critical self-analysis on writing also contributes to such variations in the storytelling mode, inviting the reader to take a step back from the reading process.

Similarly, *Western* is replete with distancing methods such as an intrusion of the extradiegetic reader in the body of the novel, according to Genettian metaleptic logic. (Genette 2004, 94)

[...] you would buy a trinket from Harry and bring it home, you would put it on your fireplace [...] and every time you would sit on your couch it would be there, within your eyeshot, reminding you of the adventures of our thirty-year-old man. [...] and when your friends, who came to visit you, would notice it [...], you would answer them, 'Oh that, it comes from *Western*', and they, carefully laying the object where they had found it, would reply, 'Oh well' (probably they wouldn't have heard of it, and you could [...] undertake to tell them about the adventures of our thirty-year-old man) / vous achèteriez

un bibelot de Harry et vous le rapporteriez chez vous, vous le poseriez sur votre cheminée [...] et chaque fois, que vous iriez prendre place sur votre canapé, il serait là, dans votre champ de vision, vous rappelant les aventures de notre trentenaire. [...] et lorsque vos amis, venus vous rendre visite, le remarqueraient [...] vous leur répondriez Ah ça, ça vient de *Western*, et eux, reposant précautionneusement l'objet où ils l'ont trouvé, vous répondraient Ah bon (probablement ils n'en auraient pas entendu parler, et vous pourriez [...] entreprendre de leur raconter les aventures de notre trentenaire). (Montalbetti 2005b, 114)

By thus mentioning the reader as a character of the novel, soliciting him complicity and calling for immersion, the narrator seeks to capture a cut-off point between the novel diegesis and the act of reading. The frequent use of the indefinite pronoun “on” (that can be translated as “one”, “you” or “we”) in *Cinema* fulfils the same goal: to switch the position of narrative instances. The ambiguous value of “on” between depersonalized speech and universal discourse affects the narrative regime in that way that the narrator's point of view is reduced to the spectator's point of view, “one understands that their meeting is of the utmost importance / on comprend que leur rencontre est de la plus haute importance”. (Viel 1999, 14) Even if the narrator seems attracted by film visual overload, the image here is less associated with its figurative component than with the logic of interruption within the text. This narrative technique, in some way similar to cinema, is amplified by numerous descriptions, which result in syncretic narrative models. Moreover, frequent allusions to partial character of visual perception contributes to narrative temporality fragmentation. When filmic images are translated into words, their temporality is sometimes compressed, other times it is dilated by the narrative device of the novel. Film temporality is condensed when a text constitutes a single paragraph, as in *Cinema*. Such a narrative density raises awareness of time extension within the text of the novel. The *Cinema*'s narrator wonders systematically how to transform film sequences to verbal units? There is no perfect equivalence according to him, as well as to Tanguy Viel, since the author demonstrates this impossibility throughout the novel.

In *Western*, time flow is represented as an unavoidable constraint, like when “the second chapter opens with the description of the progression of light / le deuxième chapitre s'ouvre sur une description du progrès de la lumière.” The narrator points out to the reader that this lighting process cannot be accelerated, that he must adopt a passive attitude and “wait until the scene is fully lit / attendre que la scène soit entièrement éclairée.” (Montalbetti 2005b, 19-20) By refusing to “show” whatever to the reader, the narrator deviates this way from visual aspect of image. Should the reader's passivity be associated with his condition as a spectator? Despite a

relative suspension of the action, the descriptions do not suppress the narration process, but give it another value. The story is based on a metafictional logic rather than an actantial principle. Just like this excerpt taken from *Campaign experience*, with a sentence personification that becomes a subject of the action:

The test of how one sentence is grafted on another, the difficulty of such grafts that do not always work, that may cause rejections [...] It often happens to you to draw in these new forms, from these volumes which are assembled for the first time before you, mysterious syntactic resources, as if it were [...] a question of transcribing a ready-made sentence that was asleep in this valley, surrounded by this bark, lurking in this bush, following the line of a façade, a fortiori, contiguous to the geometric statement that must have presided over the development of such a layout / L'épreuve de la façon dont une phrase se greffe sur une autre, de la difficulté de telles greffes, qui ne prennent pas toujours, qui occasionnent des rejets [...] Souvent vous puisez en ces formes inédites, en ces volumes dont l'assemblage se présente pour la première fois à vos yeux, de mystérieuses ressources syntaxiques, comme s'il s'agissait [...] de transcrire une phrase toute prête qui dormait lovée dans ce vallon, entourait cette écorce, se tapissait dans ce buisson, suivait la ligne d'une façade, a fortiori, contiguë à l'énoncé géométrique qui avait bien dû présider à l'élaboration d'un tel tracé. (Montalbetti 2005a, 26-28)

This statement testifies to a singular treatment of time by Montalbetti: time is nothing short of a consequence of duration, while the descriptions result in a form of slowness close to inertia. As the narrative combines distant temporalities and every narrative instance develops an unstable relationship with diegesis, the novelistic writing appears as a reiterated adjustment between unifying plot and image heterogeneity. The image can thus be defined at once as visual datum, as imaginary figure beyond the text and as mental operation conducted by a reader. This leads to a strong visualization of writing, certainly, but above all, the image invests the novel with a narrative technique similar to film editing. The novel exceeds the limits of literary representation while remaining within the verbal boundaries.

## Conclusion

The analysis of literary treatment of cinephilia has revealed multiple and varied transformations in the intertextual background and in the narrative structure of the novels, going from direct quotation to valorisation of all kind of visual experience. Better still, to face film and writing interaction also means to redefine the very notion of the image. This issue requires to move beyond the duality between narration and perception, between verbal and visual, in order to

consider image as a heterogeneous assemblage. Moreover, it requires to abandon every preestablished hierarchy between word and image in order to reach the common narrative basis of literary and cinematographic media. Therefore, the impact of cinematographic image to literary narrative does not function as an external supplement, but as an impulse to new narrative techniques exploration. We should therefore qualify the cinephilia effects as a revelation of the representative power of writing through the processes borrowed from the cinematograph, putting the novelist in writing on the intersection between the sayable and the visual, the discursiveness and the iconicity, the presence and the representation.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> All quotations that follow are my translation from French.

<sup>2</sup> The definition of the three types of translation, intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic, was formulated by Roman Jakobson in his essay "On linguistic aspects of translation." It is with the third type mentioned, the intersemiotic translation or transmutation, that Jakobson introduces his most innovative thesis, without giving any more than a definition: "Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal systems." (Jakobson 1959, 233) Although the author does not speak of the opposite phenomenon, he questions the mutual translatability of languages and is primarily interested in verbal systems. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this article, it is relevant to take this model to the level of artistic forms in general.

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