

Hypnotic Text, Cinematic Sex

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Films based on literary novels are common currency in the twentieth century. However, literary novels based on films, or novels that find their inspiration in the moving picture, are a relatively new phenomenon. Graphic novels and serial fiction based on television shows or popular movies are widely sold around the world. Additionally, literary novels, which take their inspiration from both the themes and the style of film narratives, are now beginning to appear, particularly in French. Alan Spiegel has made the argument that cinematic tendencies show up in novels as early as the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in the work of Flaubert or Joyce despite cinema itself being as yet rather undeveloped.

In our era, the literary borrowing of a camera's eye allows authors to address paradigms of power and submission. This translation of visual moving images into contemporary novels is not merely stylistic but questions the construction of memories, the power of the gaze, and voyeurism. Novels in direct dialogue with film, and even with film history, offer a new future for the French novel; one that does not revolve obsessively around the text and language, but one that acknowledges and even embraces the visual in an era dominated by visual media. These novels written as though they were films playing in the reader's mind allow a move away from the French literary legacy of texts that are about texts, to new texts, which relate to the world in a different but no less literary manner. Such novels either pay homage to great films or seek filmic, i.e. visual, depictions of contemporary dilemmas. Filmic, as defined by Webster's dictionary, is the quality of "relating to, resembling or having the characteristics of motion pictures" (850). Increasingly, contemporary French novels reveal this quality. These novels' similarity to film appears in the author's style which focuses on the visual as though it were being filmed and through this style of portraying the world the novels also present filmic themes, namely

depictions of sexuality and power.

An appropriate first choice to study in this context is Marie Nimier's funny and subversive book, *L'Hypnotisme à la portée de tous* (1992), translated into English in 1996 by Sophie Hawkes and published as *Hypnotism Made Easy*. As a novel it manages to both be funny and subversive because it is about sex and submission, whereas these two simultaneous qualities often escape films about sex and sexual roles. The novel reads like a screenplay and in 1998 Irène Jouannet made it into a movie, *Dormez, je le veux!* As a filmic novel, Nimier's book exploits themes and stylistic choices similar to those seen in such films as Patrie Leconte's *La fille sur le pont* (1999), Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999), Joseph Lewis's *Gun Crazy* (1949), and Jean-Pierre Améris's *Mauvaises Fréquentations* (1999). However, the films cannot simultaneously be sexy, funny, and subversive. These films and Nimier's novel subtly link seduction and violence as the heroes and heroines explore the sexy thrill of total submission and wayward behavior. Bringing filmic qualities to the novel is not merely a new way of visualizing the world but also offers a forum for re-evaluating relationships of power and violence, particularly for young women.

The plots of the book and these films all involve relatively young people who are seduced in a manner that requires them to submit. These are not conventional tales of masochism like the French classic *Histoire d'O*, but rather new reflections on self-realization through passivity, humiliation, and powerlessness. In order to subvert the paradigms of submission, all of these works rely heavily on very stylized portrayals of encounters, violence, and sexuality. Unlike the *Histoire d'O*, whose heroine appears in a frozen theatrical tableau, these tales place their female characters in scenes, which shift viewpoints as the camera turns, revealing power dynamics that are both complex and unstable. The whirlwind motion of the camera between the dominating character and the supposedly dominated victim confuses the viewer as to who is in power and who is taking pleasure from the acts portrayed. The characters of the films and the book all choose to submit but in ways that challenge the viewer or reader to rethink seduction and submission since these

heroes and heroines retain some agency in situations where they seem dominated by others. This is underscored by the filmic qualities that allow action to take precedence over discourse, that constantly shift or confuse points of view, and that frame and mirror the characters. Nimier's heroine, Cora, is a young girl who is seduced and hypnotized by an older traveling hypnotist. In Leconte's film the heroine, Adèle, played by Vanessa Paradis, willingly follows a rather inept knife thrower (played by Daniel Auteuil) and in Lewis' noir classic a man decides to follow a woman after seeing her show off her sharpshooting skills and the two embark on a life of crime. Love, sex and violence are the themes that drive these primarily visual explorations of obsession and submission.

La Fille sur le pont opens with its heroine speaking alone in an anonymous room to a voice off camera about her bad luck in life and with men. When she then tries to jump off a Paris bridge on a dark and rainy night, the knife thrower appears, tries to save her and convinces her to be the target for his knife-throwing act. He cuts her almost every time and at one point severely wounds another woman target. The two characters exist in a fantasy world peopled by circus performers, Italians in loud suits, dwarves, dancers, and other Felliniesque types. They subsist on love and adventure and drift along. By the end of the film they are destitute in Istanbul. The film's message seems to be that every suffering masochist just needs to find her match in order to be happy.

Nimier's novel shares common themes with this film, a story about a young girl following a charlatan to perform on stage and take risks. The novel is also written in a manner that distinctly calls to mind the presence of a camera. Her style of representation draws heavily on motion picture conventions. Leconte's film is in black and white and Nimier's visual descriptions are primarily in black and white. This emphasis on stark visual contrast is appropriate for a tale about hypnotism, an art whose graphics rely heavily on sharp distinctions. Both the novel and the film, although contemporary, pay homage to the great black and white crime films of the earlier twentieth century. Both tales avoid any

seemingly willing victim of sadistic behavior and pimping since the very young looking heroines embrace their degraded status and show little inclination to refuse continued humiliation. Rather, the heroines focus on the psychological importance of their lack of shame. After a particularly brutal scene, Marie cries out "J'ai pas honte!" and it is evident that she is addressing the viewer more than any other character in the film. Whether or not Breillat's heroines are empowered through their sexual submission is a question that has been widely debated but we know that she herself sees her works as challenging traditional gender roles for women.

In Nimier's novel Cora discovers a guide to hypnotism when she is a child and tries to perfect the art. At the age of 16 she goes to a nightclub in her boring little town to see Katz le Roi de l'hypnose. She is the first victim of the evening and is seduced the same night by Katz. Her first seduction is entirely willing as is her submission to hypnosis. They correspond for two years and then she runs away from home to become his assistant. Accidents and scandals mark their performances and Cora begins to lose her memory and her will as she is increasingly kept under hypnosis. In a manner reminiscent of B movie fantasies about sex and hypnotism, Katz eventually only wants to have sex with her when she is hypnotized. He eventually comes to realize that he risks being hypnotized by her if he doesn't retain control at all times. Cora is thus not merely a victim but also a player in her own drama. She submits to humiliation and manipulation with little resistance. When the hypnotism act returns to her small town her family kidnaps her back with the help of some women wrestlers, an event that is a fine example of Nimier's mastery of the simultaneously hilarious and tragic. As Cora regains control of her life, she begins to write her experiences and in the final scene of the book she is on her way to see a publisher who is thrilled about her manuscript.

More than a generation after Luis Buñuel's film *Belle de Jour*, these stories ask whether women's roles in seduction and submission have changed. Are the female fantasies portrayed in contemporary film and fiction any different? The settings in the stories discussed here do

scem retrograde but the point of view and the depictions have changed. After Laura Mulvey, questions of seeing and being seen remain complicated but are now portrayed in an increasingly self-conscious manner. In *Histoire d'O* the main character is often blindfolded and does not know what is being done to her by whom. She does not see the imaginary film in which she stars. The story is also written in the third person so we have even less interior information from the character. In films about submissive fantasies, it is very difficult to see from within the fantasizing character's mind. Despite the pervasive use of a narrative voice-over, film as a medium relies on the visual rather than on the interior experiences of a character. In *Belle de Jour* much of the eroticism comes from the main character's own vision of herself, her own participation in the *mise-en-scène* of seduction. This kind of autoseopophilia, a certain voyeurism of the self, is difficult to portray in a film without boring the viewer, yet in the novel it can lead to long fascinating textual reveries. If the seeming victim of domination is actually setting the scene in order to see herself, both the political implications of submission and power of the camera, whether real or textually implied, take on another valence. When we watch films we do not see ourselves seeing in the same manner as when we read. Filmmic novels confuse the distinction between what we see, or have seen, via the camera and what we see in our mind's eye, albeit in a manner that resembles the movements of a movie camera. As Nimier's textual images read more like a screenplay than a visual reverie, the reader's own images are controlled and constrained by the imaginary lens. In a way, this is similar to the work of the hypnotist who focuses his subject's gaze, and thus mind, on a very small visual sphere. Nonetheless, depictions of sex or violence in both film and text draw our attention back to our own roles of watching or watching ourselves watching.

Control over the mind and control over the body are difficult to portray in a convincing manner. Hypnotism is different than guns and knives in that it addresses the body through the eyes, thus being a particularly visual type of seduction. Yet, ironically, the act of hypnotism just doesn't seem to make for very interesting films. On screen we

specific temporal or period markers—the characters don't have cell phones or computers and never refer to political events. The atmosphere is distinctly atemporal—we could be in a Paul Morand novel or a Fellini film. Cora could be living in the same small town where Annie Ernaux grew up or she could be living in the 1990s. The men's chosen professions seem completely outdated yet the two young women are willing to give their futures up entirely to these rather feckless con artists. Both men perform inconsistently on-stage and are much less competent than, say, Annie the sharp-shooter in *Gun Crazy*. Despite the failings of these performers, the young women become entirely submissive and will do anything to stay with these unpromising older men.

These three works, Nimier's novel and the two films, draw out the relationship between spectacle and violence. All make their characters perform in public spectacles, retain constant undercurrents of violence, implicit or explicit, and reveal the seduction of violence. All three ask the question: how much power does the seeming victim have in the mise-en-scène of violence? The sexual and psychological submission of these young women may be difficult to accept for an American public but certainly not as difficult as that shown in *Mauvaises Fréquentations* (*Bad Company*) a 1999 film by Jean-Pierre Améris which also depicts a young and passive girl who will do anything for the boy she loves, including giving 200 blow jobs to strangers for money. This film takes place in contemporary Grenoble but also presents a rather unemotional and very young-looking heroine who seems to be a willing accomplice in her submission. Her tale ends not when she frees herself but when her boyfriend abandons her. Stylistically Améris' film is much less interesting and ultimately it is thematically unconvincing in that the young woman remains a victim of circumstance rather than becoming a heroine in her own strange adventure.

Catherine Breillat's film *Romance* is the story of another young woman, Marie, whose handsome boyfriend will no longer have sex with her. She eventually finds fulfillment in a sexual liaison with an older and less attractive man who ties her up, gags her and dominates her. These two films cause the viewer to question the motives of the

are often more impressed by sex scenes, zipping bullets or very sharp knives as a threat than something that deals primarily with the mind. The generally negative reviews of the film based on Nimier's novel, *Dormez, je le veux*, make this quite clear. Most of the reviewers find that the onscreen depiction of hypnosis is rather dull and tiresome for the viewer. A review in the journal *Positif* calls the film monotonous, sad, and lacking entirely in humor. The film obviously does not live up to the novel whose reviews have been overwhelmingly positive, including those of the English translation.¹ What seems to most be lacking from the film is the book's humor. By portraying ridiculous scenes in the novel, Nimier elicits many types of laughter from the reader who may be amused, painfully embarrassed or titillated. The film version, unfortunately, remains relatively sad in its literal portrayal of an absurd world.

Despite the disappointing film version of the book, Nimier's novel remains a very cinematic tale and a great book. Sadomasochism relies heavily on *mise-en-scène* which we see particularly well acted out in Nimier's book where staged figures represent seductive moments for the young heroine. The first encounter between Katz and Cora is preceded by strobe lighting, nostalgic music and the projection of a manic film. The film ends when Katz's hand appears through great clouds of smoke and covers the subject of the film. At this moment Cora says, "Je croisai les jambes, j'avais besoin de me protéger" (116) and cannot breathe because of what she calls the burden of her virginity. This first scene, although literally a sound and light show, is easy to read as a sex scene. The book's seduction scenes in particular are constructed as shows, from the first hypnosis to the first sex scene to the concluding chapter where Cora reads her manuscript aloud as part of a phone sex act. In these elaborately staged seductions, Cora is physically passive, generally submissive and completely willing. Unlike in classic hypnosis films, Katz does not hypnotize Cora so that she will commit a crime but rather, it seems, to prevent her from hypnotizing him. Cora submits to this because she senses that he needs her and she feels a certain fondness for him because of this need.

With Katz, Cora no longer decides what she will wear, where she will go, or even what her role will be or how many risks she will take when on stage with Katz. However, through the book's intense focus on the visual qualities of her experience, it becomes clear that Cora is now imprisoned in a situation where she can see herself and look at herself through the eyes of her seducer and the audience. Cora is putting herself on stage to seduce herself, to be able to watch herself being watched. This shift is apparent from the very first hypnosis when she sees the photo of herself being pierced with needles. The book's filmic tendencies communicate the importance of acting out to lead oneself finally back to oneself, to seduce oneself. Or as the dominator Robert in Breillat's *Romance* proclaims in his own folk etymology, seduction is not to lead astray but rather to lead one back to oneself, *se aduccere*. In her mind's eye, Cora films her own fantasies and puts herself on center stage, albeit in a submissive role. Thus, she is both object and agent of this submission, through the lens of the imaginary camera, which she controls.

John K. Noyes writes that, "Masochism functions as the eroticism of human disappearance within a technology of bodily control" (12). The hypnotized subject does, in a sense, disappear and their body is controlled by the hypnotist. This control over the body by a technology that relies primarily on the eyes makes hypnotism a particularly visual masochism. By controlling the eye, a hypnotist controls a person's vision of themselves and of the world, thus altering their world. By writing an entire book about hypnosis and the effects it has on the psyche, Nimier draws the reader's attention back again and again to the importance of the eyes in our experience of the world. The theme she has chosen is one that has long been associated with films, from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) to the assumed effects of flashing lights in a dark room. Noyes explains that "masochism as a theme has arguably accompanied cinema since its early years" (35). The masochistic and hypnotized female subject in Nimier's book could more easily be a stock character from the world of films than from that of literature.

In addition to this thematic interaction with the world of film,

Nimier's novel also relies on a certain visualization or *mise-en-scène* of the act of reading or seeing. Alan Spiegel writes that, "There can be no observation of any object, no seeing of it, without an initial separation from it, without an initial settlement of the necessary distance, near or far, between the seer and the seen" (45). So when we see sex and submission acted out on screen we step back to observe but when we read about it in a cinematic novel like Nimier's we are reading, not looking, so the distance between seer and seen may actually be less. The space of vision becomes internalized and subjectified although maintaining the illusion of being controlled by a camera.

In the first pages of her novel, the heroine, Cora is reading a book on hypnosis and she describes her own experience of being hypnotized by a text. The novel's first lines pay homage to modernism's metatextual nature but also signal the dangers that lie ahead, "Que n'ai-je refermé ce livre dès la première page, le premier mot?" (11). She realizes the strange visual power of words, in the first person she narrates, "J'eus l'impression désagréable que les mots me regardaient, ils bougeaient même" (12). The reader must then read the words along with Cora and follow the dialogue that seeks to hypnotize the reader from the page. It works; the book hypnotizes Cora although the reader may not be hypnotized. After she awakens from her hypnotic state she remembers "[c]ette impression d'être lue par les mots, de n'exister qu'à travers le regard du livre..." (15). Submission to the text is a necessary part of reading but this willing choice to submit is less clear for the viewer of a film, particularly a film which makes the viewer uncomfortable in its portrayal of sex and violence. In Nimier's novel, style becomes theme or theme becomes style. The act of looking becomes the act of reading and the gaze comes from the words themselves that are watching Cora but also, possibly, watching the reader. The question of who is watching whom becomes quite complicated when words themselves can be reading subjects.

After Cora's first experience of being hypnotized by Katz, she loses her virginity to him in the dressing room. The scene would be very difficult to film but does capture the same nuances of submission

and power dealt with in the films previously mentioned. As the fatal moment approaches, Cora thinks about her hypnosis book, "Les mots se resserraient, les phrases, bientôt ne resta plus au centre de chaque page qu'un trou noir d'une extrême densité" (134), just like the lens of a camera seen from the point of view of the actress. She describes sex simply as, "un pincement, très loin, une douce résistance. J'étais émue, Katz m'aimait" (134). The scene is less than sexy but strangely interesting, challenging the reader to figure out what Cora thinks about all of this and why Katz is such a wooden actor in a moment that should be passionate.

The next sex scene between Cora and Katz is two years later at his house when she has left her hometown. He appears in a memorable outfit: "Le Roi de l'Hypnose s'était déshabillé et ne portait en guise de cache-sexe qu'une chaussette fixée autour de ses hanches par un morceau de fil électrique bleu" (176) and at the moment when Cora is near orgasm Katz gets up with creaking knees. The realism of this sex scene is very funny although Cora reassures the reader that she did not laugh, and eventually she cries but she has succeeded in her goal of leaving home. The sex scenes in this book are cinematic in that they focus on specific visual objects or dialogue rather than on any inner monologue about sexual feelings. The irony is that one would have a very difficult time actually filming these scenes despite their visual nature. How could one depict the bittersweet combination of sex in a dump house with a teenager's first sense of total freedom?

Nimier's novel is cinematic in its themes, in its minimal interest in interiority and psychologizing. It also focuses on the visual, resulting in a cinematic aesthetic. Certain objects such as a sack of buttons, gym shorts, a jar of pink mayonnaise (*sauce aurore*), a loose tassel on a moccasin, dying houseplants, and a stack of pencils serve as visual cues for various characters throughout the novel. The reader uses these visual cues to interpret for themselves the nature of various characters. Although a myriad of details are presented about Katz, it would be quite difficult to find an actor who actually had thick eyebrows, precise movements, a small mouth, bitten fingernails, long feet and a split chin.

In a lecture she gave in Cincinnati in 2004, Nimier explained that she does not “see” her characters. Yet this novel, as text, also hypnotizes and seduces the reader. We “see” in our mind’s eye today in cinematic terms. So we inevitably learn to understand characters by how they see rather than by how they act. When we see what they see, we are reading in a way that is more mutable and subjective than when we see, literally, through the eyes of a character in a film. The necessity of sight to understand the characters is particularly emphasized by the subplot of Cora’s uncle Paul. He suffers from a strange malady that prevents him from seeing anything on his right. This illness, whether real or imagined, limits Paul’s ability to live and to understand those around him.

Once Cora is free of Katz she does not become a hypnotist in her own right but rather changes media. She tells stories and hypnotizes over the phone. The novel moves from an emphasis on the visual to an emphasis on the aural. After having been taken away from Katz she says: “Je me laissais inventer, sans résistance, tordre, manipuler, quelle importance? J’avais perdu foi en la réalité des choses” (251). So she turns to her own text and writes her own story, beginning with her first experience reading the book on hypnosis. If we cannot twist what we see then we must learn to reevaluate the stories we tell about who we are. The films mentioned earlier, while they explore similar themes to the novel, do not cause the viewer to shift their perspective about vision to the same extent. Nimier brilliantly ends this book, which began with the reader reading about reading, with a description of seeing a painted portrait of Cora. The reader can finally see the heroine as she would see herself, and this part of the book is written in the third person. The last sentence describes her eyes in this imaginary painting: “ses yeux étaient grands ouverts, ils voulaient tout voir, tout comprendre—des yeux graves, si lumineux qu’ils vous donnaient envie de prendre la fillette par la main, et de l’enlever” (275). The desire to take or kidnap the young girl with the wide eyes is, finally, through this interpellation, the reader’s own desire. Novels like this one by Nimier can cause the reader to think personally and politically about gender roles, power

relations and their own mutable vision.

Nimier's writing ultimately reveals that in discussing the subtle questions of power through passivity, subversive fantasies, and sexual domination, we must continue to interrogate the novel. By portraying a strange and sexual world through filmic conventions, Nimier presents a style of seeing and representation that is increasingly common today but which is also limited in its psychological interpretations. This style of writing as though filming and reading as though being watched oneself allows Nimier to interrogate seduction, domination, submission, and sex, particularly for very young women. Her portrayal of these themes, however, is funnier and subtler than the film equivalent in that her literary camera fixes on the absurd as often as it does on the sexy. By writing her novel as if Cora were filming her own life, Nimier gives the reader freedom to see submission and creation differently. Exploring a different kind of interiority, that which occurs as a film is created, within the camera and within the viewer, Nimier offers a new and quite accessible model for contemporary French fiction that remains literary in a visual world.

Even as contemporary French literature is itself becoming more and more cinematographic and visually driven, the novel can still offer unique possibilities for discussing and imagining changes in gender politics. The films mentioned here do not do enough because in a way they do too much, they show sex but in a manner that is less hypnotic than the seduction of Nimier's text. The trend for extreme sex and violence has reached nearly numbing proportions in contemporary French film. The films mentioned here pushed the envelope in the 1990s but now work by François Ozon, Gaspar Noé and Bruno Dumont seems to be creating a new bloody niche for French film which James Quandt discusses in detail in his 2004 article. In contemporary French literature we can also find novels that go too far, novels whose cold and graphic depictions of sex are less than hypnotic. Frédéric Beigbeder and Michel Houellebecq's novels would be easy to make into movies because the scenes of seduction are scripted more like porn films than subtle power plays. If filmmakers wish to ask relevant questions about sex, power,

and seduction, how can this be achieved without resorting to the most brutal and literal rape scenes? These questions have been treated in depth in reviews of the potential feminism of the film *Baise-moi*.

Films inspired by novels are now commonplace. Recent works in French literature reveal an inversion of this, novels that are primarily inspired by films rather than by other novels. French literature that relies primarily on the visual, and especially that which seems nostalgic for the France of the 1950s, the era when French film really came into its own, represents a new wave in French literature. As literary scholars we worry that the text will be overtaken by the visual and that the next generation will only see the world in pictures rather than words. If we are to continue to study and value novels, we need to acknowledge the visual powers of recent French novels and also teach them in the context of films rather than exclusively in the context of a long literary history. Nimier's novel reveals that even within the realm of the visual, the novel can portray nuances that escape contemporary film.

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NOTE

¹ Julie Hudson, for example, refers to Nimier's novel as "a word feast that spirals around the desire to succumb to another's personal magnetism" (5).

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