

“New Wave” Spirits and Romantic Urban Fantasy: *Lovers on the Bridge*

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Keywords: French New Wave, art-house cinema, Leos Carax, Wong Kar-wai, *auteurism*, *cinophilia*, youthful romance, urban fantasy

Abstract. During the 1950s and 1960s, the French New Wave film movement swept the film-dom around the globe and ushered in a trend of iconoclasm and aesthetic experimentation. This paper analyzes the signature art-house film *Lovers on the Bridge* (1999) made by Leos Carax who is credited as the torchbearer for the French New Wave cinema, in relation to another stylistic film *Fallen Angels* (1995) made by Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai. Inspired by *new wave* spirits, both two films create an enchanted, romantic vision of the urban living, through the subject of youthful romance, highly aestheticized and personalized film language.

1. Introduction

Fallen Angels is a 1995 art-house film written and directed by the most renowned Hong Kong auteur Wong Kar-wai. As a sequel of the director's 1994 breakthrough *Chungking Express*, the film expands the former's theme, style and mood in a darker tone with an eye to the urbanites' psychological interiority. It follows the interlacing urban itineraries of five socially isolated individuals in the surreal nightscape of Hong Kong (Lalanne 10). Noted for his cinematic romanticism and poetic style, French director Leos Carax is another prominent auteur in the world cinema. He has been credited as a torchbearer for the French New Wave cinema and a prominent personality in the *Cinéma du Look* movement (Tobias). In this essay, I will analyze Leos Carax's notable art film *Lovers on the Bridge* (1999) as a primary text in relation to *Fallen Angel*. This essay argues that, as torchbearers of “new wave” spirits, both Wong and Carax subvert certain conventions of film-making and provides a highly aestheticized cinematic vision, expressed through a personalized film language. In particular, the urban fantasy in *Lovers* constructs a signature auteur romanticism of Carax. I will first tease out the synopsis of *Lovers on the Bridge*, followed by a theoretical overview of *new wave* aesthetics. The thematic concern, stylized cinematography and soundtracks are analyzed based on three essential sequences, with an emphasis on the visualization of an urban fantasy.

2. Aesthetic Influence of the French New Wave

2.1 Cinephilia

Considered as one of the unique personalities since the French New Wave, Leos Carax consciously follows a *new wave* aesthetic in his film-making, which is characterized by a self-conscious form of *cinophilia*, a young-generational perspective and enchanted visuals of urban space. Defined as an idiosyncratic attraction to movies, *cinophilia* is embodied by certain approaches like toying with genre conventions, mixing high and pop culture and citation of other movies. Arguably, Carax has also established himself as a prominent figure of the *Cinéma du Look*, a significant 1980s movement featuring a similar *cinophile* tendency, a spectacular visual style and a focus on alienated young people who represent the marginalized French youth at that time (Austin 119; Powrie & Reader 41). The thematic concerns of the *cinéma du look* cinema typically involve doomed love affairs, with an eye to the young generation's affiliation with peers and an alternative society in Paris. However, as Powrie & Reader (41) point out, the films in this group are preoccupied with

style at the cost of narrative. Alike, Wong Kar-wai also exhibits a self-conscious adherence to a kind of “new wave” style in the filmmaking of *Fallen Angels*.

2.2 Auteurism

Auteurism is another prominent cinematic theory behind Wong and Carax’s filmmaking. Santa (18) defines an *auteur* as “the most important figure in the art of filmmaking, a creative person equivalent to the author of a novel and play”. The *auteur* cinema is marked by a distinctive artistic vision that deviates from the conventions. Wong Kar-wai’s cinema explores a world of personal themes, such as loneliness and desire, memory and forgetfulness, through highly aestheticized and personalized film language. Comparably, the cinema of Leos Carax explores personal themes of youth romances through distinctive sensibilities, characterized by a particular *auteur* romanticism. As auteurs, both Wong and Carax take sole charge of the screenplay, directing, soundtrack and final cut of the production (Martinez 29). The following sections will discuss the aesthetics behind both films in relation to the legacy of *new wave* style and the cinematic conceptions associated with *cinophilia* and *auteurism*.

3. Thematic Concerns: Youthful Romance and Alienation

Regarding thematic content, both *Lovers on the Bridge* and *Fallen Angels* revolve around youthful romances, which is a recurring theme in the French New Wave and *Cinéma du Look* cinema. *Lovers on the Bridge* reveals a youthful exuberance by portraying an *amour fou*, or a reckless and idiosyncratic romance between young vagrants, while *Fallen Angels* points out the ephemeral nature of love affairs between alienated young urbanites. It’s noteworthy that both films pay attention to the main characters’ alienation from society: Carax portrays the harsh existence of two vagrants who evade from social life; Wong’s characters are always represented as socially isolated creatures with pathological behaviors, e.g., the aphasia of He Zhiwu and the memory loss of the killer (Teo 86). And in both films, the young characters are situated in urban spaces visualized in a certain cinematic fantasy, which will be discussed later in the film language analysis.

3.1 A historical Spectacle

The ahistorical spectacle of *Lovers on the Bridge* further provides a fresh expression of a new generational viewpoint by divorcing contemporary society and the past. As Allmer (10) points out, the historic site of Pont Neuf is used as a shelter for the three main characters, which carries certain historical allegory. In the scene where Alex limps back to the bridge after the car accident (11:30-12:08), we are presented with a dilapidated scene of the historical site: the architecture of the bridge is closed to the public for repairs, with tiles and cobblestones lying on the ground. The maintenance notice, read allegorically, “already warns from history and connotes the process of ‘renovating’ and renewing history”, which alludes to the fragile relationship between history and contemporary society. (Allmer 10). Carax kind of manipulates the historic site to construct an ahistorical spectacle, expressing an iconoclastic attitude to the cultural establishment.

The ahistorical aspect is also embodied by the character’s struggle with an inarticulable personal history: Michele remains secretive about her past and tries to divorce the current relationship from the past (Allmer 11). Comparably, Wong Kar-wai’s cinema shows a thematic concern about personal history, memory and forgetfulness. Characters in *Fallen Angels* either indulge in a lost love affair or completely forget about a past relationship.

4. Film Language: Enchanted Urban Space

Concerning the visuals, the Hong Kong cityscape under Wong Kar-wai’s lens is enchanted and glamorized rather than every-day. As a nocturnal flipside to *Chungking Express*, *Fallen Angels* predominantly features night-time urban scenes and antiquated streetscape unique to Hong Kong. Instead of a realistic depiction of the cityscape, the grungy visuals become part of the fantasy backdrop for the characters. Christopher Doyle’s typical use of hand-held camera, wide-angle

cinematography and daring camera angles further deviate the urban visuals from reality. The hand-held movement conveys a sense of disorientation and jumps out of the every-day reality. Furthermore, the super wide-angle lens throughout *Fallen Angels* invites a visual distortion of space, which emphasizes the psychic distance between characters (Teo 84). For instance, in the sequences where Michele Reis smokes alone in the restaurant with nonchalance to the fight happening behind, her face is extremely close and somewhat distorted, with her sorrowful facial expressions amplified under the lens. The isolated figure in the foreground of the *mise-en-scène* is emphasized, in contrast with the background crowds. In this way, the young urbanites are represented as “physically close to each other but mentally apart” and isolated from the society (Teo 85). Beyond that, when the female agent Reis goes to hitman Lai’s apartment to clean up, we are presented with several Dutch angle shots of the night-time streets. The night view is split into unequal halves by highways and glamorized by the flashing neon lights, which exerts on the viewers an effect of surrealism.

Wong Kar-wai also constructs a fantasy urban space through subjective time, embodied by frequent use of slow-motion or speed-up. For instance, the traffic outside the killer’s apartment moves quickly, exhibiting a dense and fast-paced urban environment; Wong uses stylized step-printing in the black-and-white pub scene, with passengers moving fast in the background and main characters idling about in the foreground. The seemingly different time movement emphasizes the characters’ alienation from the world outside. The urban environment is transformed into a psychological or spiritual world where they immerse into.

4.1 The Opening Scene Analysis

Similarly, the urban space in *Lovers on the Bridge* functions as a fantasy backdrop for the romantic relationship. First and foremost, the entire film is set in the fantasy space of the ancient bridge. As the real Pont Neuf in Paris was not closed when Carax wanted to shoot there, an enormously expensive set re-creating the Pont Neuf was built for the film in the French countryside – that’s where the illusion of movie begins (Jones 4). In the opening scene, the hand-held camera leads us across the night-time Paris streets, followed by a documentary-like sequence portraying the homeless people crowding the asylum and streets, which gives us a glimpse of the alternative society in Paris. The main characters are introduced as two vagrants among the crowd of homeless wanderers. Resembling the urban scenes in *Fallen Angels*, the run-down neighborhood in *Lovers on the Bridge* endues the visuals with a grungy and gritty quality, in sharp contrast with the visual excessiveness of the fireworks scenes. Upon Alex’s return to his shelter, the Pont Neuf, the cinematic space transits from a mundane urban setting to a fantasy space constructed by the ancient bridge. Accordingly, the people are quickly assimilated into the fantasy space associated with the bridge. Rather than depicts the reality, Carax in a way transforms the reality into a fantasy backdrop for the happening of a romantic relationship.

4.2 The Spectacular Set Pieces and Soundtrack Analysis

The three-minute fireworks scene (46:05-49:10) is a typical example to illustrate Carax’s urban expressionist fantasy and cinematic romanticism, where Bastille Day celebration is recreated as a personal ecstatic outburst of passion (Tobias). As the impressive fireworks erupt into the sky throughout Paris, Michele drunkenly dances along the bridge and soon passes the infection onto Alex. As Michele remarks, “City is full of music”, a mixing of various music genres fills the air of the bicentennial celebration night. From classical waltz to Iggy Pop’s rock music to Public Enemy’s hip-hop, music seems piping in “from some magical jukebox in the sky” (Tobias). By playing with the genre of Hollywood musical films, Carax reveals his self-consciousness in the medium of cinema. The characters also act dramatically as if they are in the movies. Beyond that, the following scene where Alex knocks out the keeper brings in comedy elements. In the final scene where the couple snuggles at the bow, Carax pays a more direct homage to Jean Vigo’s masterpiece *L’Atalante*. *Fallen Angels* is more characteristic of a playful, self-conscious form of *cinephilia*: Leon Lai’s gun-killing scene pays attribute to the gangster film or crime film, while the Michele Reis’ middlewoman alludes to the *femme fatale* in the *film noir*. Both Carax and Wong masterfully play around with genre conventions, exhibiting their reflexivity of the medium of film.

The following water-skiing scene further brings fantasy elements and visual extravagance to extremes: the fancy speedboat appears out of nowhere, and there is a surreal beauty to the pyrotechnic display above water. With stylized lighting, fancy fireworks and eclectic use of soundtrack music, the Paris city on the Bastille Day is transformed into an enchanted playground for the characters, which is characteristic of *new wave* and Wong Kar-wai's cinema. The urban fantasy contributes to the resurgence of cinematic romanticism in Carax's film; In comparison, despite the urban environment is as much glamorized in *Fallen Angels*, it presents the city as a dystopia, a map of desire and loneliness where the urbanites have no access to an intimate relationship.

As mentioned in the fireworks scene analysis, the soundscape becomes part of the urban fantasy in *Lovers on the Bridge*. Films of Wong Kar-wai are similarly marked by an eclectic use of different genres of music. The soundscape of *Fallen Angels* includes pop songs, Cantonese opera, western experimental music, Acapella music and Indian-style songs. Wong's use of music "evokes a purely referential, even interior world" and emphasizes the emotional dimension rather than the real context (Matinez 30). The same applies to Leos Carax: the switch between different music genres indicates changes in the characters' emotional intensity. Wong's sound design is more evocative in a sense, with a constant soundscape of radios and televisions playing late into the night. Moreover, their deliberate collage of classic and pop culture shows an iconoclastic attitude towards cinematic conventions and high culture, reminiscent of the *new wave* spirit.

5. Stylized Cinematography

The cinematography of Carax is deeply intertwined with the characters, with camera movements constantly directed by characters' activities and perspectives (Film Walrus). For instance, Carax employs a relatively static camera and long shots to shoot the peaceful moments, when characters are sleeping or deep in thoughts; In Alex's fire-spewing performance sequence (32:38-33:20), the handheld camera pans, cuts and spins frequently to emphasize the visual intensity (Film Walrus). Another typical scene is Michele's rushing out from the subway back to the bridge (40:45-41:20). Having woken up from the gun-killing dream, Michele desperately dashes along the Parisian streets, where a military parade is in progress on the Bastille Day. The violently shaking camera represents Michele's vision, constructed from chaotic images of the Bastille Day's Paris. The camera tilts wildly from the skyscape to the marching tanks, and then pans and spins above the uniformly dressed military parade, exerting a sense of dizziness on the viewers – the subjective feeling of Michele is thus emphasized. Jump cuts to the running Michele and the drinking Alex interlude in between. Accompanied by the soundtrack of dramatic cello classic, the stylized cinematography and jump cuts produce a particular intense rhythm to the scene.

The intellectual montage is key feature shared by Wong and Carax's cinematography, which refers to the combined use of shots eliciting intellectual meaning. In the opening scene of *Fallen Angels*, shots of the middle-woman's trial run and the hit-man's gun-killing are juxtaposed together, tactfully revealing their psychological alienation despite the tacit cooperation. When Alex attempts to uncover fainted Michelle's eyelids, the shot abruptly cuts to a dying fish in an illusionary montage, implying Michele's deteriorating eye disease. In both films, the stylized cinematography adds layers to the narrative and thematic expression.

6. Conclusion

On balance, *The Lovers on the Bridge* is an extravagant art film revolving around the subject of urban youthful romance. Inspired by "new wave" spirits, Leos Carax creates a unique auteur romantic vision through highly aestheticized and personalized film language. As a prominent auteur and cinephile, Carax shares similar cinematic conceptions with his comparable peer Wong Kar-wai, embodied by the self-reflexivity of the medium of cinema, exploration of personal themes and a distinctive, personal cinematic vision. In particular, both *Lovers on the Bridge* and *Fallen Angels* visualize urban spaces as a cinematic fantasy backdrop for the happening of relationships; Wong

and Carax share an eclectic use of music genres, which contributes to the audio extravagance of the urban fantasy. Comparatively, *Fallen Angels* is more gloomy than romantic, with an eye to the loneliness and detachment in a dense urban environment. The two films poetically present an enchanted experience of the urban living, in a one-of-a-kind cinematic vision.

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