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## *Remaking Beyond Boundaries: the case of La Femme Nikita and Point of No Return*

### **Abstract**

*The following article frames a particular case-study: the question of the remake in its ontological nature, encompassing all its various forms across media. It will examine the diverse levels (cultural, linguistic and semiotic) at which remaking operates, including translation, transposition, transcreation, and adaptation.*

*Foraging through the dense thicket of Hollywood remakes of French films, we will look at the specific example of Luc Bresson's *La Femme Nikita* (1990) and John Badham's American remake of it, *Point of No Return* (1993). The methodology will take into account the contextual landscape of remakes as linguacultural artefacts and the texts themselves, adopting both a cultural studies approach and the visual strategies of textual analysis from the perspective of film studies. This will entail a close examination of the films under consideration, paying attention to particular cinematic sequences, set in the context of technical possibilities and offset against the creative options presented by the diverse narratives of the two versions. John Badham's remake of *La Femme Nikita* will show how remade films tend to differ on numerous levels from the source films, thus offering what Jonathan Evans calls "an expanded understanding of audiovisual translation" (2014, 300).*

**Keywords:** *adaptation, audiovisual translation, transposition, transcreation, textual analysis, visual strategies.*

### *Introduction*

A new medium that forages throughout the national and the international market for fodder for its insatiable maw, remaking in all its diverse forms - adapting literary texts, spinning off sequels, reworking earlier scripts - domesticating the foreign so as to forge a national cultural identity, driven by commercial imperatives, all amid howls of protests at the “dumbing down” that ensues from mass entertainment. The rapacious Hollywood system? No, the Elizabethan theatre.

The issue of the remake in its specific meaning of a film based on an earlier screenplay has recently exercised film critics and academics greatly, evidenced by the plethora of publications on the subject. However, little attention, amid the ingrained tendency of film studies to indulge in navel gazing, has been paid to the parallels that other mediums, art forms, genres, in particular past literary and dramatic tradition, offer. Michael Harrey does indeed make a passing reference to such an historical perspective, citing Stuart Clown’s comparison of the cinematic borrower to the Elizabethan theatrical producer but the case is understated.<sup>1</sup>

As Tom Stoppard’s character, Septimus, in *Arcadia* reminds us, nothing is new, everything has already been invented: “We shed as we pick up, like travellers who must carry everything in their arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those behind”.<sup>2</sup> Alongside Shakespeare’s *King John*, *King Lear* and

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<sup>1</sup>Harrey, M, 2002, “Economy and Aesthetics in American Remakes of French Films”, in *Dead Ringers. The Remake in Theory and Practice*, ed Forrest J and Koos L, State University of New York Press, p 66.

<sup>2</sup>Stoppard, T, 1993, *Arcadia*, Faber and Faber, London, p 38.

*The Taming of the Shrew*, to cite but a few examples, are three other plays with the same titles and plots but which cannot be simply explained as memorial reconstructions or bad quartos.

Critics are sorely tried in establishing which is the source and which is the remake. French and Italian literature was pillaged and then “Englishfied” both in linguistic and cultural terms as *The Merry Wives of Windsor*’s filching of an Italian novella bears witness to. Such appropriation informed the act of translation itself, which for the Elizabethan translators was a creative form of remaking: “They spoke as much of englishing as translation; and rather than rendering foreign works into their own language, remade them in the familiar terms of the Elizabethan experience”.<sup>3</sup> The Elizabethans themselves seemed to have felt none of the anxiety that underlies contemporary discussion of “decolonization of their foreign originals” by American remakes which efface their otherness.<sup>4</sup> In a context of market forces – Enslowe’s diaries reveal the economic forces driving the intense rivalry between the theatres and their companies – and of ideological pressures – the formation of a national cultural identity fostered by the Elizabethan ruling elite – the appropriation, the domestication of foreign text was a practice taken for granted to belabour a point, up to the period of Romanticism, English literature was based on the neo classical theory of remakes. After all, as late as 1704, Swift, in *The Battle of the Books* was dismissing the originality of the Modern’s in favour of the reworking of the Ancients.

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<sup>3</sup>Winny, J, 1960, “introduction”, in *Elizabethan Prose Translations* ed. Winny J, Cambridge University Press, p 9.

<sup>4</sup>Leitch, T, “Twice-Told Tales: Disavowal and the Rhetoric of the Remake”, in *Dead Ringers. The Remake in Theory and Practice* cit, p 57.

*The concept of the remake*

If in the history of literature the practice of the “remake” and the principle of intertextuality, not to say plagiarism has been accepted as the norm, what is the justification of the outcry of indignation that has greeted the sudden increase in the number of French films remade in Hollywood since the early 1980s?<sup>5</sup> Lucy Mazdon lists thirty-four such remakes in the last two decades of the 20th century, a number that assumes significance if the mere three remakes in the preceding twenty five years are borne in mind.<sup>6</sup> This sudden resurgence of remaking activity, focused primarily on “plundering” French cinema, has been ascribed to various interrelated factors: Hollywood’s quest for production efficiency, as taking over ready-made and proven material cuts production costs, time and risk;<sup>7</sup> “the dearth of original screenplays and changes in industrial and aesthetic structures in Hollywood in this period” (2000, 23).

The overt reasons for the protests voiced by French critics must be sought in resentment at the political and economic power of the United States and the resulting commercial exploitation of the French film industry. The French source film is not only often denied distribution in the United States, but the remake is then recycled in France, disavowing the original and replacing it at the box office.

This economic argument exposing the rampant commercialism of Hollywood and its detrimental effect on the commercial value of French films it has battered onto, cannot really be gainsaid, and French critics and filmmakers such as

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<sup>5</sup>The source of most of the information on the Elizabethan theatre is Bevington (1968, 2016), *Tudor Drama and Politics*, 2016, Pearson

<sup>6</sup>Mazdon, L, 2000, *Encore Hollywood. Remaking French Cinema*, British Film Institute, London, pp 152-156.

<sup>7</sup>Vincendeau, G, “Hijacked”, *Sight and Sound* 23.7 (July 1993), pp 23-25.

P.A. Harté, André Bazin and significantly Luc Besson himself are more than justified in denouncing such economic imperialism. Behind such cogently argued objections, however, lies a more pervasive concern, one shared significantly by American and English critics and which is based on more tenuous grounds and betrays more questionable attitudes. This concern is both cultural and aesthetic: the cultural loss and the aesthetic debasement involved in the transposition of a French film to Hollywood.

These two effects are conjoined yet distinct. To take the formal first: the process of transference across cultural boundaries, whether it concerns a film remake or a literary translation, tends (so the argument runs) to neutralize the otherness of the original. Film critics, indeed, often draw parallels with literary disposal, roughly divided into literal or free<sup>8</sup>. But it might be more pertinent to rephrase this choice in the terms used by the 19th century German theorist Friedrich Schleiermacher who saw the translator as having “to choose between a domesticated method, an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home and a foreignizing method, an ethno-deviant pressure in those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad<sup>9</sup>.”

The American remake inevitably chooses to domesticate the foreignness of the original as retaining that foreignness would only disrupt the cultural codes that prevail in the target culture and language, i.e. the American market. Henrik Gottlieb makes a

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<sup>8</sup>See for instance Jennifer Forrest and Leonard Koos, “Reviewing Remakes”, *Dead Ringers The Remake in Theory and Practice* cit. p 15.

<sup>9</sup>Venuti, L, 1995, *The Translator 's Invisibility*, Routledge, London, p20. See also the first chapter of the same author's more recent publication, *The Scandals of Translation*, 1998, Routledge, London.

similar point when he describes remaking as an isosemiotic, interlingual and inspirational form of translation (2007, 7), one that “transplants the entire film, setting and all, into the target audience” (ibid., 5).

What is the sense then of replicating the original with American voices instead of using subtitles which would allow the original French language to be heard? Undoubtedly, the mere fact of changing words even by paraphrase changes the essence of a text, and translating can radically affect the nature of the entire work at every semiotic level, not just the linguistic.<sup>10</sup>

That a process of domestication or ethnocentricity operates in translation for the American market is attested to by Stephen Sartinelli who has translated Andrea Camilleri’s culturally and linguistically specific Sicilian novels, which often make use of the Sicilian dialect together with standard Italian : “Ma c’e’ pure il fatto che l’America accetti l’altro solo purché esso diventi Americano, innanzitutto *linguisticamente*” [our emphasis]<sup>11</sup>.

### *French remakes in Hollywood*

While one is entitled to mourn the loss this entails at the aesthetic level, especially as regards the formulaic Hollywood reduction of the innovative “cinematic language” and techniques of the French original, Jim McBride’s 1983 remake of Jean-Luc Godard’s *A Bout de Souffle*, a primal example, the process itself seems natural and anyhow irreversible.

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<sup>10</sup>As Benedetto Croce points out (1908: 23): “Ogni espressione è espressione unica”

<sup>11</sup>Sartorelli, Stephen, 2004 “L’ attivita’ linguistica di Camilleri in inglese”, *Il Caso Camilleri*, Sellero, Palenno, p 213.

This reference to *Breathless* invokes the other related area of concern, the aesthetic failure of American remakes of French films in the value judgments of so many critics, too legion to list here. Barry Norman's review of John Badham's remake of Luc Besson's *La Femme Nikita* can perhaps serve as a sample of the debasement perceived in the aesthetic transformation enacted by the remake: "another example of Hollywood's unfortunate tendency to remake fine continental fare and turn it sensationalist pap" (2000, 1). The trajectory from the original to the remake is seen as a vertical one, from the high culture represented by the French art cinema to the commercialism of Hollywood pandering to mass taste and entertainment.

Such highbrow distaste for supposedly low forms of art is not new. After all, if Sir Philip Sidney had had his way, grumbling as he did in his *Defence of Poesy* (1595) at the "mongrel" fare on the Elizabethan stage, there would have been no renaissance in the English theatre. And, as Walter Benjamin argues, the cinema, even more than the theatre, has radically transformed the whole idea of work of art, its concept, status and values, by making it available to the masses rather than a minority elite.<sup>12</sup>

The cinema is, by its very nature in addressing a mass audience, a low form, and as such it seems perverse to adduce aesthetic classifications of the Harold Bloom Canon type from literature. Moreover, it is paradoxical that it is those very same French critics who decry the homogenizing culture of Hollywood which annuls cultural difference who then criticise Besson's best work for its popular aesthetic and youth appeal, as Susan Hayward shows, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of taste<sup>13</sup>. Curiously this popular aesthetic in Besson derives from

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<sup>12</sup>Benjamin W, 1968, "*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*", in Arendt H ed, *Illuminations*, London, pp 219-253.

<sup>13</sup>Hayward, S, 1998, *Luc Besson*, Manchester University Press, pp 67-69.

his very receptiveness to the conventions of Hollywood action cinema in particular and to American culture in general. It is this American influence in Besson that makes the process of transcreation<sup>14</sup> and cross-fertilization or intertextuality, present in some form in every film remake, whether temporally, spatially, linguistically or culturally (2000, 3), so particularly complex and fascinating in the case of Luc Besson's *La Femme Nikita* of 1990 and John Badham's 1993 remake.

*The case of La Femme Nikita*

In its inception, *La Femme Nikita*, was already a hybrid, the domestication or at least the introduction of foreign American cinematic and cultural signs (in a broadly semiotic sense) in an aesthetic French cultural context, a French/American hybrid, which is then transposed to Hollywood which is a source of what it now in turn domesticates. A circular movement of intertextuality rather than a linear trajectory from "original" to copy which allows the critic to focus on "exchange and difference" (2000, 27) rather than on the remake being merely a site of the same in inferior or reductive form. In this way, the remake can be studied as an act of cultural and linguistic negotiation not one of imperialistic rape. Similar strategies are, after all, adopted in other fields: there are parallels with Homi K. Bhabha's approach to the postcolonial, which is positioned on liminality, on the interstices between worlds "reaching between these borderlines of the nation-space"<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> This term is borrowed from marketing and refers to the localized rewriting of texts with the intended (but perhaps optimistic) goal of creating the same impact as the original language message in the target audience, see Iaia 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Bhabha, H, 2004, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, p 145.



Having provided an in-depth background to the aesthetic, cultural and linguistic issues of the film remake, I shall focus on the two films under consideration, Luc Besson's *La Femme Nikita* and Badham's remake, *Point of No Return*. Besson's picture in fact has an interesting textual pedigree. It was remade a year later as the Hong Kong action movie *Black Cat* and immediately followed by the sequel *Black Cat 2*, then remade again in Hollywood in 1993 as *Point of No Return*. Finally it spawned one of the most popular US TV shows of the 90s based on the same character. Significantly, the story told in four versions itself points self-reflexively to the process of remaking, since, as Susan Hayward points out, *La Femme Nikita* is a techno-noir Pygmalion tale about a woman who is "rescued" from her original circumstances and made-over into something "better" (1998, 32).

What I want to do here is to focus on the French original version and the Hollywood remake in order to critically frame those structural relations of indebtedness that render remakes such fascinating case studies. *La Femme Nikita* in fact is an ideal vehicle through which to examine the complexities of the remake and its relations of indebtedness since it cuts across cultures and national identities, and since the origin story in this case is itself so clearly enmeshed in a web of intertextual operations. In addition, by mobilizing my study in relation to the French/American version I will address the previously mentioned historical relation between France and America, since they occupy a particular position regarding the original and copy. Finally, I shall use textual analysis as the tool par excellence to understand the unique value of remakes and the processes of appropriation / deconstruction between the two films.

Before looking more closely to the films themselves, it is necessary to pay attention to the particular industrial and aesthetic contexts from which they emerge. *La Femme Nikita* is Besson's fourth full-length feature. It was preceded by *Le Dernier Combat*, and *Le Grand Bleu*. As his previous films *La Femme Nikita* has been seen by many critics as highly Americanized. The film in fact comes out of a specific cinematic trend within the broader context of French National cinema, that of the "cinema du look", exemplified by three particular directors (Jean-Jacques Beineix, Luc Besson and Leos Carax), that much bears resemblances with Hollywood filmmaking.

The "cinema du look" has been bracketed as a movement because of a perceived similarity of visual style and subject matter (young lovers, alienating surroundings), references to popular culture and pastiche. Because of the apparent absence of political/historical concerns, the "cinema du look" has been much criticised by the French critical establishment for its "superficial" and "populist" agenda. As Lucy Mazdon argues, the films of Besson have earned critical opprobrium or silence as they fail to fit easily the trajectories of French cinema (2000, 109). Their references to advertising, music videos and comic strips distance them from the canons of "high culture" while their apparent lack of realism, and more importantly ideology undermine the political/social concerns which have typically identified so much "serious" French cinema.

It is quintessentially interesting then in the context of remakes and the binaries of high-brow French/European art versus low-brow American product, that Besson's work (*La Femme Nikita* particularly) has been described as too American. The pyrotechnics and spectacular action of *Le Femme Nikita* have been regarded by many as little more than an imitation of

Hollywood production and as such, it undermined the difference so central to the maintenance of a national cinema. Such accounts of *La Femme Nikita* thus beg the question as to why American producers should be bothered to remake the film. If in fact the film is American in style, narrative and so on, why should it be remade as another typical Hollywood product?

Laura Grindstaff advances an interesting interpretation in this respect. Besides financial gain, Hollywood executives and filmmakers were drawn to *La Femme Nikita* by a kind of primary narcissism because it provided them with a flattering image of themselves (Forrest and Koos ed, 2002, 274). An elucidation of *Nikita's* Americanization, would certainly foreground such a point. And it is exactly to the multiple levels of Americanization in *La Femme Nikita* that I shall turn my attention to. Hailed as “an ultraviolent mutation of the James Bond genre (Alleva, 373) or as a “Frenchified version of that notorious American genre, the political paranoia picture (Simon, 56), *La Femme Nikita* was presented as too American since its very inception. The story of a drug addict (Nikita-Anne Parillaud in the original) who, after killing a police officer during a raid on a pharmacy is arrested and sentenced to life prison (in the remake to death), but is then trained as a government assassin by the mysterious figure of Bob, would appear as an archetypal American story.

In its plot structure, Besson's film in fact recalls the emergence of strong-women action narratives such as the *Alien* quadrilogy and the *Terminator* films. Like Sarah Connor of *Terminator 2* and Ripley in *Aliens*, Nikita is a tough woman, a lean, mean fighting machine who moves easily within the traditionally masculine sphere of covert military operations. A central feature of these characters is their visual presentation in

the films world. According to Yvonne Tasker in her study on action heroines in the broader context of action-driven Hollywood blockbusters, the main feature of the action heroine is her androgynous body, which not only minimizes the surface cues of gender difference (thus subverting in Tasker's words the heroine's presumed naturalness), but also poses a challenge to the narrative logic of classic film which is powered largely by the oedipal desire to establish the nature of masculinity and femininity and the difference between the two (1993,133).

In this way, *Nikita* presents the image of a postmodern strong woman character at the centre of what is essentially a classic (Hollywoodized) Pygmalion tale. Besides its narrative structure, *La Femme Nikita* shares with certain American films a particular iconography and visual style. Besson's film is in fact characterized by what Constance Penley calls "tech-noir", in which machines and technology provide the texture and substance of the narrative (1989, 121). Though the term tech-noir is more easily identifiable in such science fiction landmarks such as *The Terminator* or *Blade Runner*, it nonetheless applies to Besson's picture.

According to Susan Hayward in her study on Luc Besson, the director's work is heavily concerned with technology and its relation to the protagonists (1998, 20). In Besson's films in fact technology functions as a two-way system of surveillance and counter-surveillance that often entraps the protagonists. *La Femme Nikita*'s production design bears the signs of this technological flavour. The iconography of the cavernous, subterranean government facility where Nikita receives her training, strongly qualifies as tech-noir, as the elaborate surveillance systems and computerized technology demonstrate.

The point of all this is not to celebrate Nikita's Americanness but to highlight how "the paternity of the remake is difficult to know" and that, as Thomas Leitch argues, all creations involve re-creations and re-presentations (Forrest and Koos ed, 2002, 43). It would appear here, quite ironically, that there is no distinction between Besson's original text and the American copy given the already Hollywoodization of the prototype. However, *La Femme Nikita*, despite critical claims to the contrary, clearly bears (as do all Besson's films) French cinematic origins. It in fact presents strong cultural and linguistic specificities both in its narrative and production background.

The cinematic thriller, despite its American identity, was extremely popular in French film history. Its historical/cinematic development perfectly shows its indebtedness to this Franco-American genre. Following the commercial and critical success of *Bob Le Flambeur* and *Du Rififi Chez Les Hommes*, the genre has continued to be reworked ever since, either through comedy (as in Claude Zidi's *Le Repoux*) or through more explicitly political critique as in the films of Costa-Gravas in the 70s, and of course in the "cinema du look" of the 80s and 90s. As most critics have argued, these films were heavily influenced by American cultural products, both via the pulp fiction translated for the *serie noir* (the French gangster film) and via Hollywood gangster films and film noir.

However, as Mazdon argues, it would be rather misleading to describe the genre in France as a simple reflection of its American counterpart (2000, 12). The reconstitution of generic codes of film noir in *La Femme Nikita* is not of course specifically French per se. However their treatment powerfully reveals the distinctions between Besson's work and the

Hollywood production it appears to emulate. The strong emphasis that *La Femme Nikita*'s narrative bears on the protagonist's fragmented personality, her impotent position in a (rather dystopian) urban environment and her entrapment in the sterile spaces of the government training facilities, all point out to a recurrent wave of motifs and themes within both French cinema (especially in the context of the "cinema du look") and within Besson's filmography (as *Leon*'s and *Subway*'s narratives demonstrate).

Furthermore, Besson's insistence on his personal vision, his desire to express his individual concerns and his tendency to work repeatedly with the same personnel (music composer Eric Serra and director of photography Thierry Arbogast will join him almost through his entire oeuvre), recalls two of the most important moments in French film history, the Nouvelle Vague and the Poetic Realist films of the 1930s. Besson's reworking of particular thematic tropes in *La Femme Nikita* does recall the discourses of auteurism so central to the advent of the films of the Nouvelle Vague and this in turn problematises attempts to see his films as just an imitation of Hollywood production. It would thus seem that *La Femme Nikita* is at once French and not-French, American and not-American. Besson's film definitely qualifies as a liminal work which in many ways invokes both French and American discourse. Like *A Bout de Souffle / Breathless*, *La Femme Nikita* is a highly intertextual artefact. This, evinced by Mazdon, may increase its appeal as the film provides a multitude of cinematic and cultural references available to a number of different audiences, however it also helps to understand the decision to remake which is not as American as many critics have suggested. The very intertextuality suggests an open-endedness, a plurality of

meaning which makes the text suitable for reproduction and adaptation.

### *The Case of Point of No Return*

How can we then qualify Badham's American remake? Rather than discount *Point of No Return* because it is a "bad" translation or even transcreation unable to reproduce the magic of the original or because it appropriates for US commercial profit what properly belongs to France, it seems more productive to ask how the remake can advance and challenge our theorizing of the film remake. *Nikita* and *Point of No Return* are, as already stressed, representative of genre conventions which are at once highly prominent in their respective industries and illustrative of the relations between the two. Like *Nikita*, *Point of No Return* also reworks the conventions of Hollywood (the film can be linked to Badham's previous articulation of the genre such as *War Games*, *Blue Thunder* and *Stakeout*, while evidently borrowing from French sources through its status as remake).

According to Mazdon, what distinguishes both films from other examples of the thriller genre is the central role of women, who are not simply straightforward femme fatales, but also aggressive "women with guns" (2000,113). This is perhaps less surprising in the remake than in the original. Yvonne Tasker's study on the Hollywood action heroines of the 80s and 90s aptly demonstrates how female protagonists have tended to move from positions as subsidiary characters within the narrative to the central roles of action heroines.

The role of Maggie (like that of *La Femme Nikita*) in *Point of No Return* stems from a long tradition of female roles (the *Alien*, *Blue Steel*, *Thelma and Louise*, just to name a few), the role of

*La Femme Nikita* is striking because a similar trajectory cannot be traced in French cinema of the period. Indeed, as Mazdon further argues, there is there no real depiction of women with guns in the films which surround and precede *La Femme Nikita*, roles for women in France have been characterized by an increasing emphasis on youthful beauty and overt femininity (2000,114). Such an account would seem to couple the two films, despite their different national contexts, as almost identical. The vast majority of *Point of No Return* in fact follows *Nikita* faithfully, almost to the shot.

However, as I shall prove here, this claim is far from true. And it is exactly to the differences between the two films that I shall turn my attention to. These are both narrative and visual. Central to the narrative of Besson's film is an exploration of the process of becoming a woman or more generally, becoming human. If one compares the titles of Besson's film in France, Britain and America it is possible to evince an important factor. Whereas the title of the source film suggests an emphasis on the identity of its heroine (*La Femme Nikita*), the British title (*The Assassin*) underlines her role or profession, while the American title (*Point of No Return*) emphasises the narrative. The process of becoming, the transformation that lies at the heart of *Nikita*, becomes rather different in the remake. This is perfectly visible from the very beginnings of the two films.

The opening sequences perfectly highlight the different agendas of the two films, both narrative and visual. I shall use *La Femme Nikita*'s beginning as the starting point. The first shot we get is an extensive tracking shot that frames four punks walking up a street. They are as indistinguishable (only later is the viewer able to recognize a woman amongst them) as their spatial location is unrecognizable. This absence of spatial



location not only adds to the unknowability of the characters but also helps Besson in his construction of an imagined Paris: the architectural decor, a mixture of the postmodern and the baroque, creates throughout the film a powerful sense of instability and alienation.

Moreover the introduction of a dream-like quality musical motif (similar to the Tangerine Dream's musical compositions in Michael Mann's *Miami Vice* and Kathryn Bigelow's *Near Dark*), further adds to the sense of alienation and unstableness. As the camera cuts to a low angle shot of the four characters (one dragging what seems like a dead corpse and providing hints of the famous *bande-dessinée* (the French comic strip), the music switches from the previous dreamlike tonality to a rock tune which aurally encodes the punks.

The sense of menace created by the low angle shot is enriched by the fact that the sequence (and the whole film) are in scope, meaning that the image is very strongly up against the screen in terms of spectator's perception - affording the scene a certain inherent violence of its own. As the punks stop in front of a pharmacy, the camera cuts to a close-up of their faces, revealing the presence of a woman (though both the character's catatonic performance and androgynous quality muddle her gender identity). The only sign of national identity provided for the viewer is the dialogue in French (mostly matter of fact e.g. "*ouvrez la porte*") since the entire sequence is lacking in speech. This absence of dialogue is further emphasized by the subsequent shoot-out, as the police arrive. This, as already stressed, is highly Hollywoodized both in its aestheticized violence and action packed set-pieces. The editing patterns, as in most "high concept" Hollywood products, are extremely enhanced, connoting the shots with a fast-paced rhythm. This

aesthetic of impact assault places the viewer directly within the diegetic events on-screen. Finally, the absence of any musical accompaniment (up to the point where the woman-Nikita is dragged away by the police) helps to focus on the animalistic and feral portrayal of the female character, so that the viewer will surely welcome Nikita's transformation.

What is thus revealed in *La Femme Nikita*'s opening sequence? First of all the total unknowability of the woman central character. She is in fact a drug addict, a killer, victim and child. The name Nikita further de-emphasises the woman's identity, remaining rootless and genderless (the film in fact refuses to provide a backstory to Nikita's character). She is reduced to a series of almost bestial needs or reactions (the desire for drugs, her unexpected violence), yet she is also catatonic (perfectly visible in her bodily posture). Susan Hayward argues, quite rightly, that Nikita represents both an excess of identities and a lack which will appear to be filled as the film progresses (the ending however will disrupt the character's evolution engendered by the narrative) (1998, 76). This instability of identities, our inability to know who or what Nikita has become, not only constructs a continuum with Besson's other works (recalling the multiple identities of the gendered cyborg Leeloo in *The Fifth Element* and the complex / mysterious character of Jean Reno in *Léon* or the weird Fred in *Subway*), but also adds a layer of complexity to the narrative, one which is, as I shall discuss later, absent from the more straightforward American version. In this way, Nikita is from the very beginning of the film something more than a simple onscreen presence, the plurality of her characterizations making any attempt at knowing her highly problematic, and suggesting a

clear distinction between Besson's cinematic vision and the more optimistic outlook of the Hollywood remake.

As the narrative progresses, Nikita not only becomes an assassin but she also learns to become a woman. The sequences where she visits Amade (played by Jeanne Moreau, the archetypal "feminine" French star) and receives lessons in femininity, underline the constructed nature of gender identity. We see her in front of a mirror applying the make-up that will transform her from androgynous being to extremely feminised woman. Interestingly, this whole process of "feminization" whilst quintessential in Besson's text, is absent from the American remake. When Maggie is ready for her lessons in femininity in *Point of No Return*, we see her walking up the stairs to Amanda's office (played by Anne Bancroft) and then, after a quick cut, walking down as a fashionably-dressed young woman in black. The absence of this important moment in the evolution of Maggie's character, clearly suggests the different narrative intentions between the two films.

While Besson's picture strongly focuses on the complex persona of Nikita's character and the plurality of identities that lie beneath (ideally epitomized by the film's constant vacillation between domestic spaces and/or the romance narrative and Nikita's role as killer with the conventions of the action genre), Badham's film instead is more concerned with Maggie's profession as a trainee assassin. Maggie in fact is an almost completely different character. She does not have to learn to become a woman (she is already a beautiful lady). While Nikita had been transformed from androgynous being to ultra-violent feminine killer, Maggie is transformed from a violent woman to sophisticated, elegant assassin.

In this way the instability of identity that lied at the heart of Besson's picture disappears from the remake and is replaced by the typical Hollywoodized Cindarella narrative. This shift is noticeable from the very beginning of the remake. The opening sequence, though following the narrative of *Nikita* almost to the shot, includes specificities of place and person which efface the ambiguity of the source text. The film opens with an aerial pan over a city which we are told is Washington D.C. Though the action and dialogue are almost identical, it is worth noticing certain differences both in the heroine's portrayal and the mise-en-scène. Though no more communicative than *Nikita*, Maggie has none of the robot/animal qualities of her French sister. Her name is clearly recognizable and she definitely bears the traits of a human being. Moreover the whole opening sequence is structured in relation to Maggie's point of view. Unfocused shots reveal Maggie's general chaotic/confusional mental state and allow some degree of identification between protagonist and spectator. These traits of character stability are firmly maintained as the film progresses. We later learn in fact of Maggie's love for the music of Nina Simone, a passion which suggests humanity and a past largely absent from *Nikita*.

Furthermore as Maggie completes her training (which is given considerably less screen time than in the original film), all traces of aggression have disappeared, simplifying those different layers of identity that had made *Nikita* such a problematic character. These differences in characterization are then juxtaposed with a different treatment of action and violence. This is evident in almost all the action sequences of the remake. Though the original *La Femme Nikita* navigated through the spectacular pyrotechnics of the violent action movie (references to *Die Hard* and John Woo are worth noticing), the pumped-up

volume of the shoot-out in the opening sequences and the amount of flying glass are considerably greater in Badham's picture as if he were showing the French imitator of an American genre that the genuine article intensifies its realism through higher levels of kinetic energy and greater intensity of sound.

The absence of music in Besson's picture during the pharmacy hold-up sequence is matched with a heavy rock score in Badham's film which not only disorientates the spectator but also detracts from the realism of the original film, exposing Hollywood's desire for sensationalism and over the top action. Subsequent scenes in the remake demonstrate Badham's reliance on highly intensified action set pieces and special effects, but also on unthinking brutality. Where Nikita, for instance, brought, disguised as a maid, discreet death to a particular hotel room, Maggie blows up the whole floor and turns it into a raging inferno.

This intensification of the action is matched by other kinds of elaborateness in the remake. The building where Maggie is trained is far less alienating than the stark spaces shown in *La Femme Nikita*, certainly a more elaborate set than in the French picture, with elegant places, more high-tech instruments and overall more technologically advanced. However this emphasis on overt and enhanced stylishness of the remake further detracts the spectator's focus from the female protagonist. Thus unlike the original film, where the dynamics of special effects and action spectacle were not allowed to alter or overshadow the protagonist, the remake clearly functions as a classical Hollywood stylized narrative.

Finally, as a conclusion on this compromise between original and copy, I want to briefly take into account the endings of the

two films. Besson's text closes with the disappearance of Nikita. The last shot, a wide angle panorama shot of Nikita's two lovers, her new boyfriend Marco and her sadistic trainer Bob staring at each other, capitalizes on Nikita's mysterious/ambivalent character: as for the two men we are not allowed to know where she is. The U.S ending is less so, perhaps a comment on the assumption that Hollywood producers about the inability of U.S audiences to tolerate ambiguities in their action films. The last shot of Badham's film in fact features a close-up of Bob's character as he watches Maggie disappear in the mist. We can thus assume that Maggie is now free to go away and rebuild a new life.

However, even though the film provides a kind of "happy ending", Maggie's character is still entrapped within a male dominant perspective, as it is Bob's decision to let her go. The different finales also reinforce the films' different negotiations of identity and their representations of their female protagonist, highlighting the fact that the remake translates not just the linguistic elements of the source film but cultural allusions, cinematographic and narrative elements as well. As Carol O'Sullivan points out, "[f]ilm and television are polysemiotic media which signify through combinations of visual, verbal and acoustic elements" (2011, 15).

In light of the above statement, it is possible to appreciate Susan Hayward's examination of the disappearance of Nikita at the end of Besson's film which she sees as a corroboration of the text's problematic gender politics (1998, 79). Nikita, unlike Maggie, never fully embraces either of the identities created for her throughout the film; she is never fully assassin or "woman". As the original film closes ambiguously, Nikita's plurality and unknowability remain.

### *Conclusions*

It would seem here, from the present study of the two films, that *Nikita* and *Point of No Return* are not identical at all. Badham's remake is not what Constantine Verevis calls: "a limited repetition of a classic shot or scene" (2006, 21) or in the words of Steffen Hantke, a "shot by shot remake" such as Michael Haneke's *Funny Games US* (2010).

Both films obviously share a plethora of traits, including narrative structure, genre, dialogue and mise-en-scène. They are, as Besson's other films, representative of the various forms of exchange and interpenetration between different "national" film industries. Their allegiance to the thriller genre positions them within a particular form of Franco-American context which has played, as most scholars argue, an important role in the construction of both those cinemas.

Nevertheless they remain separate artefacts as they negotiate their shared concerns in different ways. In this respect the two films demonstrate how the landscape of the remake-as-translation is not clear-cut, not only because of the concepts of authorship, authenticity and originality being themselves complex cultural constructs, but because the relationship between subject and object, original and copy, is never simply a mirroring; it is also - quite literally in the case of *La Femme Nikita* - a projection.

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