

# Ladies and Arms

## Quasi-Objects in Luc Besson's Cinema

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### 1. Ferrets, Parasites and Wandering Buttons: Metaphors for the Encounter between Human Subjects and Material Objects

In his book *The Parasite* (Serres 1982), the French philosopher Michel Serres deals with objects that are used by several players during games. This can be the ball in soccer, the joker in card games, or what is known in French as the *foret*, or *ferret* in English. This metaphor refers to a button that moves from one hand to the other in the game *Button, button, who's got the button*: »This quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject« (Serres 1982: 225). French sociologist Bruno Latour has adopted the metaphor of the ferret and has repeatedly claimed that the quasi-object, through its circulation, creates a network between players in which there is no longer a difference between human and non-human actors (Latour). Players and toys have the same ontological status. The ferret also refers to the soldier who holds a weapon in his hand and becomes one with it. The network of weapon and soldier forms a new actor who can expand his network. Latour calls his theory »Actor-Network-Theory«, or »ANT«, and uses the animal metaphor of the ant to suggest that networks are actively and industriously expanding their agency.

Can the connection between a human and a non-human being that can be observed in reality be compared to its staging in a film? And does it matter that a woman represents the human part? My contribution examines these questions in Luc Besson's cinema, specifically in the films that belong to the blue period of so-called *cinéma du look* with an aesthetic and with characters that I read as ›cool. To analyse the ›cool look I discuss contrasting examples from contemporary cinema by other authors. I specifically examine if the female protagonists in some of Luc Besson's films form a network when they hold a gun in their hands, or if they are the playthings of the other (mostly male) protagonists. My thesis is that Besson's

heroines are initially a toy or a weapon in the hands of some players – but they emancipate themselves by forming a common network with the players.

## 2. Besson's Anna and Leeloo Save the World

The opening credits and the poster of Besson's film *ANNA* (2019) already show that the director plays with the name of the main character by turning the second letter N (И) around. In this way, the palindrome becomes perfect not only phonetically, but also graphically, forming a bridge between the players. In the film, Anna is first hired by the KGB, then by the CIA. She is thus a double agent and in this way the plaything of the two Cold War superpowers. Neither party is aware that Anna forms a network between them, being the weapon that threatens and protects each player at the same time. Anna has an erotic relationship with an agent from the KGB and the CIA at the same time. However, both men are professionals and hunt Anna when she is exposed. In the end, Anna has secret information that she can use to blackmail both superpowers and therefore protect her from further persecution. Finally, the *triangle érotique* meets in Monceau Park in Paris. Anna declares that she loves both men, but that she is now free because of the secret intelligence she gathered. Anna's emancipation is only possible in this relationship of tension, and she knows that she will be in danger again when the secret information becomes obsolete and the network disintegrates.

In this scenario, the double agent Anna herself becomes the weapon. This also becomes clear in Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997), in which male scientists reconstruct the »perfect woman«, as she is literally called, from the remains of an alien creature. The iconography is familiar from film history: Like the actress Brigitte Held in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927), Milla Jovovich is naked at the beginning and later only scantily clad, resembling a wolf child like all female protagonists in Besson's films. She is wise because she represents cosmological peace, yet she has to learn human language and love, for she will be romantically united with the cab driver Fred, played by Bruce Willis in a reference to his iconic cop-savior character John McClane from the *Die Hard*-action movie series. Leeloo's love education takes place in the metal tube in which she has been constructed. According to tradition, the wolf child called »Leeloo« is the only weapon against the onslaught of a fatal fireball that will destroy all life on earth. In *The Fifth Element*, the male accomplices must create a network by placing four stones representing fire, water, earth and air. Leeloo, the fifth element, must be placed in the center of the square so that she can direct her destructive beam of light against evil. The four stones representing the elements are previously in the body of the opera diva Plava Laguna and are »recovered« by Fred from the diva's corpse. Thus, two female bodies are joined together with Fred's help. The actress who impersonates the opera diva, the model Maiwenn le Besco, herself

a well-known director, was married to Besson at the time, making the director indirectly additionally present as benefactor in the plot of the film. He is not only the creator of the work and its characters, but also sends an actress into the arena who is his lover. In this respect, Leeloo's emancipation remains limited because the director provides, as it were, from the extra-filmic space, through the body of his lover, the tools that Leeloo needs to be the saving weapon against evil.

*The Fifth Element* is no exception when it comes to the private relationships between the director and the actresses in Besson's films. Anne Parillaud, Milla Jovovich, Maïwenn le Besco and Virginie Silla were all married to him. In film history, it is sometimes part of marketing that between the lovers in a film, the private relationship of their actors is made public or claimed in order to increase the appeal of a film. In the case of Besson and his wives, the relationship between director and actresses provided the gossip and his films got additional publicity in this way.

### 3. Terminology: Role, Actress and Person

A central question remains as to what actually constitutes a woman when it comes to cinematographic representation. Brian Epps writes in his introduction to a book on female Spanish and Latin American filmmakers:

The human beings grouped by the sign »woman« are permeated by a multiplicity of other signs, among which the ethnic and the socio-economic ones stand out, marking other groupings and only partially coinciding with the gender-sexual groupings. [...] For the female identity of a director or protagonist is »a media effect«, »a projection«, »a fantasy«, »a mask«. (Epps 2014: 10, 18; my translation)

However, a few factors can be gathered that are responsible for the depiction of a female film character (Wulff 2006: 52; my translation and adaptation):

1. [person:] the actress is the actress herself
2. [body:] the actress-body is at the same time the character-body
3. [role:] the actress illuminates a character, playing a role
4. [diegesis:] the character stands in the context of the work, cannot be isolated from the context
5. [moral:] the character has an intentional content in the context of the statement of the play or scene, it is the product of a statement activity and serves, for example, to illustrate a stated ›moral‹ (such as the drunkard who illustrates the devastating effects of alcoholism)
6. [type:] the character is grounded in the semiotic context of ›typepage‹ and therefore can be seen as a representative of a class, caste or group.

The networks in *ANNA* and *The Fifth Element* concern the immanent context of the film. But what is the relationship between the other aspects? To answer this question, I would like to start from the dilemma of the framework in which the various protagonists find themselves: In cinema, it is doubly tragic that a robot must become an attractive woman to justify its existence and that the actress has to become a robot to justify her role. Taking into account the Actor-Network-Theory it is of course not a tragedy, because there is no difference between non-human and human actors. But if you are a humanist and believe in human agency, you will regret the loss of the human in a network.

Conversely, in reviewing Besson's films, my thesis is that the protagonists represent the source of life through their uniqueness. True, in the diegesis, they are one actor among others in a network, but they are represented as unique, as literally one of a kind: In *Subway* (1985), Héléna (Isabelle Adjani) is the unique beauty, in whose arms her lover Fred (Christopher Lambert) dies after he forms the music band of his life and the music finally resounds. She is the survivor of a hopeless love story because her lover is hunted down by a gunshot for his crimes. She has previously separated from her husband and is now alone due to Fred's death, but free to live her own life. In *Nikita* (1990), the eponymous heroine (Anne Parillaud), like Anna (Sasha Luss), is a killer who eludes her employers and regains her freedom. Joan of Arc (Milla Jovovich) becomes Queen of France, yet dies for her beliefs and a better world (*The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc*, 1999). In *Angel-A* (2005), whose title orthography recalls the letter play of *ANNA*, the heroine Angela (Rie Rasmussen) functions as a lonely guardian angel, who fights against misfortunes with miraculous powers. Leeloo (Milla Jovovich) is the only weapon against evil in *The Fifth Element*, and in *Lucy* (2014) the protagonist (Scarlett Johansson) is a descendant of the prehistoric woman Lucy. At the beginning, a monkey can be seen at a river, which is presumably supposed to be Lucy, the famous female specimen of a precursor of Homo Sapiens.

#### 4. Cyborgs and Transhuman Beings: Metamorphoses of the Paranoid Body

Luc Besson's films offer a new take on the science fiction genre through their unique female protagonists. In *Lucy*, the protagonist's voice opens the drama off-screen: »Life is given to us a billion years ago. What have we done with it?« (0:01:47). At the end she says: »Life was given to us a billion years ago. Now you know what to do with it« (1:22:22). Like Leeloo in *The Fifth Element*, Lucy encounters a world that needs saving. To this end, the heroines use their weapons. Anna prevents a nuclear war by shooting the head of the KGB, helping her immediate superior to become the first woman director of the KGB. Lucy turns into a computer at the end and leaves the

message, »I am everywhere«. But the film begins with the division of amoebae or cells, with the emergence of life. Uniqueness and multiplicity are put into a positive context here.

Hence Besson's approach differs from many other science fiction filmmakers. One of the most interesting directors of cyberpunk films (a dystopian subgenre of science fiction film that often depicts city dwellers in slums under constant surveillance) at the moment is Alex Garland, known for his movie *Ex Machina* (2015), or for his Netflix production *Annihilation* (2018), in which a group of military-trained women, including a molecular biologist (played by Nathalie Portman), search for the cause of a shimmer that has settled over a coastal landscape. The special thing about the enclosed area is that the cells of plants, animals and ultimately humans unite to form new living beings, i.e., a perfect entropy of genetic material. Two deer appear, with flowers growing from their antlers. The motif is similar to the mosaic by Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí created for the entrance to the Cathedral of Palma de Mallorca, in which two deer drink from the source of life. In the biblical Psalm 42, the deer's thirst for water is also read as a metaphor for Christians' desire for salvation from the threats of life through baptism. In *Annihilation*, Garland turns the source of life into an autophagic cell division, unity into a pathological multiplication, whereby the cells between humans and animals mix and one creature dwells in the other, which is usually shown through the eyes. This double identity can be portrayed positively, as in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's film *Resurrection* (1997), where Sigourney Weaver plays a hermaphrodite of human and alien and, as in Besson's *Fifth Element*, saves the earth through the use of weapons. The evil version of the venerable horror and the perverted body can be found in David Cronenberg's film *Rabid* (1977), where the female character uses a penis-like dagger under her armpit to kill her victims, who then turn into zombies. Brian de Palma's film *Carrie* (1976) is referenced there. Carrie has telekinetic abilities and takes revenge on her schoolmates making fun of her when she menstruates in the shower after playing sports. Telekinesis as a weapon can also be found in Besson's *Lucy*. Milla Jovovich, who plays Leeloo and Joan of Arc, also has telekinetic abilities in Paul W.S. Anderson's *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007) and *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (2010).

Androids or humanoids symbolize the two most important ingredients of entertainment cinema: sex and crime. Robots, clones and cyborgs are used as weapons, but they can also be their creators' prostitutes. Morphing plays a special role here, because it is about the transformation of a machine body into a human body. Men create their dream women in *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes 1975; Frank Oz 2004) or the »female« robot Arisa (Paulina Andreeva) in the Russian-Chinese television series *Better Than Us* (since 2018). From the era of silent film to the present, similar scenes present the act of creation, as seen in *Metropolis* and *The Fifth Element*, when male scientific genius creates a female body according to his ideas. These creatures always appear as attractive young women of reproductive age. They are sterile or,

as in Besson's *Léon: The Professional* (1994), too young to have children. Therefore, an incestuous relationship between ›father and daughter‹ or creator and creature is impossible. The women can or must emancipate themselves from their maker, because they have no family commitments. More recent films not only show female desire for male robots as in *Ich bin dein Mensch* (*I'm Your Man*, Maria Schrader 2021), but female beings are even humanoids who fall in love with cars and change their gender (*Titanic*, Julia Ducourneau 2021). Socially critical films that tell coming-out stories also belong here, such as Lucía Puenzo's film *XXY* (2007) about a transgender person with female and male characteristics.

In order to stage the fragile identities of AI robots and their female incarnations, actresses of color and multiracial backgrounds are cast in recent films, such as Sonoya Mizuno in *Ex Machina* (2015), Yvonne Strahovski in the television series *Dexter* (2006–2021), Noomi Rapace in *Prometheus* (Ridley Scott 2012) or Maggie Q in *Divergent* (Neil Burger 2017), or Milla Jovovich and Sasha Luss in Besson movies. The robots develop a strong artificial intelligence because they do exactly what the men expect of them in order to strike at the right moment and eliminate their tormentors. In *Ex Machina*, the robot that escapes to freedom is a Caucasian woman in camouflage: Ava, embodied by the Swedish actress Alicia Vikander, uses the skin of an Asian woman as a kind of biological appropriation that is nonetheless racist because it ensures white supremacy: ›Asian skin secures Ava's ›secret‹ robotic form and allows for the next evolutionary step in a Western future, covering up Ava's android frame in order to protect the longevity of white personhood into the posthuman age [...]‹ (Wong 2017: 48). The pleasure in horror and excitement that such an ›incarnation of a paranoid body‹ (Wulff 2006: 47; my translation) evokes can nevertheless be interpreted as the frightening and exciting search of the artificial ›female‹ protagonists for freedom. The robots, whose existence in female appearance as weapon and sexual object depended on their male creators, paradoxically free themselves from their owners by means of the connection of human exterior and machine interior. So they repeat the network of weapon and shooter by embodying it themselves.

## 5. Replicas as Cinematic Self-reference

The protagonists' construction takes place in form of a repetition and a series of similar images and motifs. That is why this kind of scene is also about cinema itself as an ›(in)visible object‹ (Nardelli). The moment when an AI realizes that it is an independent species is often shown in an allusion to the beginnings of cinematography. The praxinoscope, the phenakisticope, the kinoscope, the zoetrope and finally the photograms on a strip of celluloid show the movement of the motif in front of a camera by a sequence of images of the same motif. A similar setting can also be found in *Ex Machina* and *Archive* (Gavin Rothery 2020), where the image of the robots is re-

peated in several mirrors or in several monitors in the form of a series of images. These repetitions resemble photograms on a celluloid strip that are invisible during projection and give the impression of a moving body.

This statement fits well with a basic feature of the cinematic medium. Former critic of the famous French film magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*, Alain Bergala, states: »Many great films that have inspired the love of cinema have taken as their subject the act of teaching, of passing down an inheritance (and the encounter with evil, the initial exposure to evil)« (Bergala 2016: 50–51). This fits the moment when Besson's Anna has had enough of the insults of the photographer at the photo shoot and attacks him with his own camera to symbolically kill him. After that, she stops working as a model. In this way, Anna prevents further photographic reproductions of her body. Similarly, in *Resident Evil* and its five sequels (2002–2016), Alice (Milla Jovovich, who can be seen in Besson's *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* and *The Fifth Element*) is on a quest to find the beginning, herself, and must fight numerous Xenobots, i.e. genetically cloned robots of her original self. Her task is to prove herself to be the original from which the copies originated.

## 6. Uniqueness, Independence, and Commitment of Besson's Heroines

Even though the female heroines in Besson's films seem to be related to the dystopian cyborgs of other films, there is a difference: they do not multiply, nor are they produced by men in a series. They are unique in their narrative world because, as Thomas Hobbes explains in his text *Leviathan* (1651), they have the power because the others exercise the power. This is in line with the Actor-Network Theory, according to which an initial actor is absorbed into a network and thereby gains expanded agency. The weapons here are admittedly only an actor in temporary situations and resemble the button mentioned at the beginning in the game *Button, Button, Who's Got the Button*. As described above, however, the ferret is the symbol of a weapon that is not only wielded by human hands, but that acts itself and thus possesses some of the power of its masters. It is interesting to see that in a film that shows how the permanence of weapons is not respected by their owners, the plot ends in a catastrophe for both. In Spanish cinema, the symbol of the ferret has even found its concrete expression. In Carlos Saura's film *La caza* (*The Hunt* 1966) the ferret is used to hunt rabbits. The ferret crawls down the rabbit hole and drives the rabbits to the surface, where they are shot when they escape into the open. Frustrated by the small prey, the hunters shoot first the ferret and then each other. There are similar images of the rabbit hunt in the film with the revealing title *La règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, Jean Renoir 1939), where frustration leads to murder because the power of weapons is not respected, thus anticipating the catastrophe of the Second World War.

In this context, much could be said about the music in Besson's films, which often forms an ironic relation with the plot or creates a melancholy mood. The music thus has a character of its own and is not simply a mood score, i.e. merely the image's ›weapon‹, so to speak, to better assert itself. In these cases, image and sound form an ensemble of equal components. In this way, the liberation of the female protagonists as weapons in the hands of their clients is additionally expressed. In contrast, in films like *Kate* (Cedric Nicolas-Troyan 2021) or *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller 2015) it is often intradiegetic hard rock music, intended to give additional acoustic expression to the brutality of the fight scenes. Moreover, an electric guitar held in the hand resembles a rifle in both films. Here is also the difference with the women who ultimately remain alone, but free, as in the action film *Angnyeo (The Villainess)*, Jung Byung-gil 2017) which is about a female killer who remains a loner. The film has been compared by some critics to Luc Besson's neo film noir *Nikita*. This is because *Nikita* also remains alone and fights only for her personal freedom.

*Nikita* is an exception in this respect, meanwhile some other main female characters like Anna, Lucy and Leeloo fight in Besson's films not only for their personal happiness, but for the preservation of life and the salvation of the world. Joan of Arc dies for her ideals at the stake and she too remains alone. And every *cineaste* recalls the small slight brave woman at the end of Stanley Kubrick's film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), an *invisible* Vietcong sniper who nearly kills an entire platoon of well-trained, muscular, and loud-mouthed US soldiers. Kubrick shows her only at the very end of his film, a surprising apparition who kills so many men before she herself dies for her ideals. She also acts alone. It is perhaps no coincidence that Kubrick made this film in the 1980s, when Besson was also beginning his career.

## 7. The Beautiful Heroine: Just a ›Gender-Bomb‹?

A poster in Jeunet's film *Resurrection* (1997) shows Rita Hayworth ›traveling‹ to Hiroshima ›riding‹ an atomic bomb, Joan of Arc travels to Orleans, Lucy travels to Taiwan, Laureline (Cara Delevingne) travels in Luc Besson's *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (2017) to Alpha, Anna travels to Paris, and *Nikita* is already there. On their journeys, the female actors find themselves by taking a diversion: They multiply in a different way than cyborgs, they equip themselves with weapons and they make a pact with the devil. In this respect, a pin up girl on the atomic bomb establishes despite her really devastating effect a similar imaginary connection with the weapon as a female model appearing as a film actress, but with a different result. Luc Besson chose both models and actresses for the leading roles in his films. They shoot and fight in many cases and form a partnership with their weapons and their roles.

Bruno Latour (under the pen name »Jim Johnson«) turns to the example of the soldier and his gun and calls this network of human and non-human a »quasi-ob-

ject« (Johnson 1988: 301, Latour 1991: 142). But the weapon dictates to the human what is to be done. A military instructor pronounces the ›silent commands‹ of the weapon and relays them to the shooter: »The military are especially good at shouting them out through the mouthpiece of human instructors who delegate back to themselves the task of explaining, in the rifle's name, the characteristics of the rifle's ideal user« (Johnson 1988: 301).

The question is whether Besson's female protagonists are not merely caught in the actor-network of a ›gender bomb‹ like Rita Hayworth shown in *Resurrection* or whether the models play the leading role as actresses, insofar as the gun and the shooter merge in their bodies. They are not a male fantasy of a *femme fatale*, but seek in this way to free themselves from a forced situation. It seems as if the instructors are men who give the female shooters instructions on how to handle the weapon, but that the armed ladies take their cue from the initial autonomy of the weapon and confidently return the command to the instructor reformulated in new cosy togetherness with the weapon. Anna and Nikita are typical representatives of this development. In contrast, Leeloo is the weapon herself, who breaks away from her clients. Joan of Arc is the henchman of her Christian faith, but she chooses it as her ideal because in her childhood she had to watch her sister being raped in the war. Thus a personal motive becomes a social mission. Finally, the director does not seem to be exclusively concerned with the gender of his protagonists: his film *DogMan* (2023) shows a man who, as a result of the abuse his father committed against him as a child, develops a strange love for dogs, because they trust in man, as he states, and he also uses them ultimately as weapons.

Besson's cinema is about who initiates a network. His heroines often fight to escape these networks or to make use of them. They want to find themselves and no longer be strangers to themselves. In the end, this is how they find their way back to their origin, which was the trigger for their adventures: personal freedom, love for humanity or faith in God, in other words, the purpose they lost in between.

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