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## Music, Literature and Cinema:

### A Comparative Approach to the Aesthetics of Death in *Tous les Matins du Monde*<sup>1</sup>

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To Gerardo and Gabriel

*Je suis le Ténébreux,—le Veuf,—l’Inconsolé,*

*Le Prince d’Aquitaine à la Tour abolie :*

*Ma seule Étoile est morte,—et mon luth constellé*

*Porte le Soleil noir de la Mélancolie.*

- Gérard de Nerval, “El Desdichado”, in *Les Chimères*.<sup>2</sup>

—*Yo soy, dijo la muerte, tu verdadera madre.*

*La que te trajo al mundo te trajo a mis brazos para siempre.*

*Te hablé y tú me oías, y me llamabas tierra.*

- Jaime Sabines, in “El poeta y la muerte.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Lúcia Nagib for reading an earlier version of this text and providing thoughtful comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> ‘I am the Dark, —the Widowed, —the Unconsoled, / The Prince of Aquitania of the ruined Tower: / My only Star is dead, —and my starred lute / Bears the black Sun of Melancholy. From ‘The Outcast’ in Stanley Burnshaw, ed., *The Poem Itself* (Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>3</sup> ‘I am, said Death, your true mother. / The one who brought you to the world, brought you into my arms for ever. / I talked to you and you heard me, and you called me Earth.’ (‘The Poet and Death’). Jaime Sabines, *Poesía, Nuevo Recuento de Poemas* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1986), 149.

Within the framework of the philosophy of music and from the perspective of a comparative methodology, this paper explores some of the metaphysical features that constitute the specificity of an aesthetics of death in Pascal Quignard's novel *Tous les matins du monde* and the cinematic adaptation of that novel by Alain Corneau. And in doing so, how the narrative discourses in the literary, musical and cinematographic domains merge in both the novel and the film, through music. Quignard's text recreates the historical actuality of Sainte Colombe's life and his relationship with his pupil Marin Marais, in a free interpretation.<sup>4</sup> This enquiry, aesthetical and metaphysical, deals with two essential motifs in Quignard's novel and Corneau's homonymous film: the reunion and the separation of the *amants* in the context of two different narrations. Whereas the former occurs in the context of the return of the dead from the beyond – as, when playing his viol, Sainte Colombe feels the presence of this dead wife - the latter takes place through a suicide - this time Sainte Colombe's daughter who takes her own life as the result of a failed love affair with Marin Marais, her father's pupil.

The idea that the various arts have common properties and that they are susceptible to being analysed by means of a common language has recently gained increasing credence.<sup>5</sup> In *Tous les matins du monde* - a context for a blurring of boundaries between the supposedly separate, artistic realms of literature, cinema and music - three different aesthetical experiences converge; each merging with the other to become one through a creative interaction of mixed

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<sup>4</sup> Written by Pascal Quignard and published in 1991, *Tous les matins du monde* was adapted for the screen by Alain Corneau the same year, scripted by Pascal Quignard. the music being directed and performed by Jordi Savall. Pascal Quignard, *Tous les Matins du Monde* (Barcelona: Gallimard, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Inasmuch as it entails the synthesis of essential cultural values, musical discourse is a philosophical statement, in spite of its inherent resistance to interpretation.

associations.<sup>6</sup> In Quignard's novel, the scenes concerning Madame de Sainte Colombe's return from the beyond and Madeleine's and Marin Marais's separation preceding her suicide take place through a prose of concentrated sobriety and simplicity. Its unusual strength is based too in the nature of both transcendental events that have slowly but inexorably been developed throughout the novel. On the other hand, in Corneau's film, which for the most part follows the novel's structure accurately, the force of contained passions is portrayed in both scenes by means of a very detailed description of the character's faces, the creation of interior spaces, landscapes, silent atmospheres of peace and silence and chiaroscuros - all this against the background of a slowly phrasing viol. Like Sainte Colombe's intimist aesthetics, Alain Corneau's cinema is created on the basis of innermost thoughts and feelings.

In this paper, I first briefly sketch out the context and basic plot of both the film and the novel, and then analyse how the opposition between the two musicians lives, linked by means of death, merge with music to become a single aesthetic experience, partaking of and inseparable from word, image and sound.

## **The Musicians**

Through traditional links between the monarchy and music reinforced by the personal taste of the sovereigns, during the seventeenth century the court of Versailles became one of the main musical centres of Europe. French music from the *Grand Siècle* is the legacy of a long tradition and the fruit of a monopolising will. Royal power, through its dance and music

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<sup>6</sup> This is an idea also put forward in the film itself: for instance, on mentioning how music and painting relate to each other, at some point Sainte Colombe compares the viol's bow with the painter's brush.

academies, exerted an absolute control over musical production and over musicians belonging to the trade, chorus or specialised institutions. According to the canon, a host of musicians should play for the King. Among them was Marin Marais, who played from the age of twenty in Jean-Baptiste Lully's orchestra. But about Monsieur de Sainte Colombe, there is little to say. Other than a few scant details, little is known about him. This may be due to the lack of interest in fame and fortune he always displayed. Be that as it may, enough information is conveyed in both the novel and the film to make sense of his character.

Monsieur de Sainte Colombe is a man who lives absorbed by the "intact memory" of his wife. After her death, upon which he composes the *Tombeau des Regrets*, he renounces mundane satisfactions, social and material affairs, as well as all things he used to love the most on earth, such as - put both in writing and on screen - flowers, pastries, rolled scores, kites, faces, pewter plates and wine. A circumspect, irascible man, but loving of his two daughters Madeleine and Toinette, the musician abandons himself to states of painful consciousness arising from the loss of his wife. Then, he locks himself up in a country cottage for years where he plays for up to fifteen hours a day, absorbed in his music and his compositions, strengthened by amorous devotion to the memories of his beloved wife.

Given his profoundly intimate conception of the musical art; a conception that separates him from the political and the social matters of life, he bluntly and repeatedly refuses to play before the King and his Court. When Monsieur Cagnet, a viol player in the Court, comes to tell Monsieur de Sainte Colombe that the King wishes to listen to his performance, he does not hesitate in expressing his contempt for the world of the Court, and his categorical refusal to join in with the herd of musicians, dazzled by Versailles' splendour, who play to rejoice his Majesty's ear. "Je suis si sauvage, Monsieur, que je pense que je n'appartiens qu'à moi-

même”,<sup>7</sup> he replies in an outburst of fury. The relation between the artist and the Court reaches its worst point when Abbot Mathieu, tries to dissuade the outrageous revolt of this *homme sauvage* who dares to despise the wealth, luxury and glory offered to him by his Majesty. The musician categorically replies to him:

Je préfère la lumière du couchant sur mes mains à l’or qu’elle me propose. Je préfère mes vêtements de drap à vos perruques in-folio. Je préfère mes poules aux violons du roi et mes porcs à vous-mêmes.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, Marin Marais’ relentless ambition to achieve glory and wealth in the Court — since he had been from an early age seduced by the idea of becoming a famous viol player — has the following consequences: firstly, having been rejected by his mentor Sainte Colombe for playing before the King — a fact that will enable him to become a King’s musician later on — Marin Marais is prevented from coming to Bièvre, where Sainte Colombe lives; and secondly, dazzled by the court’s splendour, he will abandon Sainte Colombe’s elder daughter Madeleine, with whom he has been having a relationship. Marin Marais’ ambitions reaffirm his mentor’s project by means of the contrast between his desire to become a famous musician and Sainte Colombe’s indifference to the Court.

## **Music and Death**

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<sup>7</sup> ‘I am such a savage, Sir, that I believe I belong only to myself.’ Quignard, p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> ‘I prefer the twilight on my hands to the gold that he proposes. I prefer my woollen clothes to your wigs in-folio. I prefer my hens to the king’s violins and my pigs to yourselves.’ Quignard, pp. 29-30.

The antagonism between both musicians is transposed onto a purely aesthetic level through two transcendental motifs: resurrection and death. The return from the beyond opposes the voluntary departure for the beyond. Indeed, the essential opposition, death and life, is subverted. While Madelaine commits suicide, late Madame de Sainte Colombe comes back from the beyond. Thus bound up with the theme of death and caused by the strong feelings, emotions and consuming passions, both transcendental events share the same fatal impossibility of the fulfilment of love: a ghost in love coming from the beyond during a piece of music, and an actual suicide in love, departing for the beyond. Indeed, both extreme experiences are transferred to a deeper dimension of internalisation thanks to two moving and ineffable pieces of music: *Les Pleurs* by Sainte Colombe and *La Rêveuse* by Marin Marais, respectively.<sup>9</sup> In Quignard's novel and Corneau's film, music and death are inextricable. While Sainte Colombe selects a *Tombeau* as his preferred musical form - an instrumental structure composed by a musician in memory of a master, mentor or, in this case, a friend - Marin Marais's piece, to the absent beloved woman, has the form of an air.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sainte Colombe, *Les Pleurs* ("The Sorrows"), Jordi Savall, version for viol solo; Marin Marais, *La Rêveuse* ("The Dreaming Girl"), 4th book of "Pièces de viole"; Jordi Savall (bass viol), Pierre Hantaï (clavichord), Rolf Lislevand (theorbo).

<sup>10</sup> The former takes the cadence of a deep and slow dance, very close to an *allemande*; given its instrumental nature. It is different from other genres of *Déplorations*, which are vocal. The *Tombeau des Regrets*, to which the piece *Les Pleurs* belongs, is in D minor, a low tonality that quite fits the narrative discourse of a funerary prayer. As for the *Rêveuse* by Marin Marais, a fragment of the 4<sup>o</sup> book (1717), it has the character of an elegy and it belongs to the "aisées, chantantes et peu chargées d'accords" group of pieces. This work has the structure of an *air*, a structure that enjoyed considerable prestige in France during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries.

Musically, the motifs of reunion and separation resonate with the categories of tonality, tempo and cadence. Tonality being, in musical terms, the dominance of a note which does not lose its function as the fundamental element in the structure despite the modulations that may appear in a given piece; and which is transposed, in literary and cinematographic discourses, into an essential focal point, as if it were the dominant colour in a painting. In *Tous les matins du monde*, in both the novel and the film, this tonality corresponds to the fundamental motif of death, inasmuch as the many meanings flowing from reunion and the separation concern the ontological problem of the idea of death. The tonality on the screen is realised by means of shadows, chiaroscuro and darkness, at the very moment in which the two scenes dealt with here are unfolded. Musically, this motif is constructed by the dominance of the minor mode in the tonality of both pieces. These elements contribute to the creation of an atmosphere of hopelessness, desolation, detachment and loneliness, which is also developed in the novel.

Regarding the *tempi* of these pieces of music, *Les Pleurs* and *La Rêveuse*, it is interesting to note that rather than a musical line developing chronologically over time, we listen to a static musical discourse. This gives the impression that those notes, without being disturbed by the laws of movement, float, as it were, in an empty, timeless space. Again, this still atmosphere determines — and is determined by — the ontological notion of the impermanence of beings. Moreover, it corresponds, in the literary and cinematographic aesthetic realms, to the low voices and the whispers, the glimpses, the sighs and the silences of both scenes, held as they are on the threshold of death. Indeed, the vision of time incorporated into Western music corresponds to the traditional Christian cosmology: time begins with a decisive act of creation and it advances, straightforwardly, towards a final, apocalyptic event.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> On the concept of musical tempo, see Jonathan D. Kramer. “New Temporalities”, in *Critical Inquiry* 7, 1981, pp. 549-552.



In the sense of rise and the fall of the musical narration, cadence also constructs a contained, quiet and peaceful tension during these scenes. Musical narrative *talks*, so to speak, and words falls silent. “La musique est simplement là pour parler de ce dont la parole ne peut parler. En ce sens elle n’est pas tout à fait humaine”, tells the master to his disciple later.<sup>12</sup> During these emotional instants, the silent gestures of characters seen on the screen amalgamate with the strong and subtle pulse of the music; and through this profoundly intimate state, the ineffable is suggested.

## **Death**

The return from the beyond is one of the cornerstones of a literature of the supernatural framed within the aesthetics of death. In a very enigmatic way, the act of facing death turns its witnesses into special, extraordinary beings. Representatives of this transgression such as dreamers, clairvoyants and visionaries are socially excluded; protagonists deeply individualised and differentiated from others. Obsessed with and fascinated by death, they are prone to falling into aberrant states as varied as their inner nature: meditation, detachment, melancholy, nostalgia, hallucinations, strong emotions and perturbations such as delirium tremens and intangible terror. The recurrence, intensity and length of time of these psychic, transitory moments depends on each particular case. Ghostly presences might project a more

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<sup>12</sup> “Music is there simply to speak about that which word cannot express. In this sense, music is not wholly human.” Quignard, p. 113.

transcendental meaning. Paradoxically, a narrative dealing with the representation of death somehow turns into a transcendental reflection on the significance of life.

To Marcel Schneider, the supernatural in literature is an act of transgression against the *status quo*. It also has the function of exorcising our inner fears. He contends that the fantastic:

ne nous décharge pas de notre misère, mais il en émousse les aiguillons en exorcisant nos démons turbulents. Grâce à lui, nous pouvons libérer nos désirs les plus avides, nos rêves les plus tenaces et donner corps à notre espérance.<sup>13</sup>

According to Michel Guiomar's assertions about the aesthetics of death, "Le Fantastique est le lieu où nous affrontons notre propre conception de la Mort pour la dominer."<sup>14</sup> The immediate effects of this rupture are: the deployment of a particular uncanny created by the presence of death and a tendency towards a systematic transgression by bringing about facts that escape comprehension. In *Tous les matins du monde*, the return of the spectre is created through precarious and uncertain moments giving rise to another dimension that makes reality crumble. Here, music and the idea of death merge to construct a deep internalisation dealing with the search for meaning.

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<sup>13</sup> "It does not take the burden of our misery away, but it blunts down its stings exorcising our tempestuous demons. Thanks to it, we can liberate our most avid desires, our most tenacious dreams and materialise our hope." Marcel Schneider, *La littérature fantastique en France* (Paris: Fayard, 1964) p. 409.

<sup>14</sup> "The fantastic is a continuum, an irrepressible protestation against what is, against the created world and the life one leads there." Michel Guiomar, *Principes D'une Esthétique de la Mort* (Paris, Jose Corti, 1967), 371.

## The Scenes

In the novel, in his cottage, through the enigmatic dimension of written word, we can *listen* to the gloomy lament of the *Tombeau des Regrets* which, in a sort of state of grace, makes the impossible possible: the ultimate transgression, that of the return from among the dead:

Tandis que le chant montait, près de la porte une femme très pâle apparut qui lui souriait tout en posant le doigt sur son sourire en signe qu'elle ne parlerait pas et qu'il ne se dérangeât pas de ce qu'il était en train de faire. Elle contourna en silence le pupitre de Monsieur de Sainte Colombe. Elle s'assit sur le coffre à musique qui était dans le coin auprès de la table et du flacon de vin et elle l'écoula.<sup>15</sup>

In the film, during this scene the camera captures the actions that prepare the apparition of the spectre of Madame de Sainte Colombe: the musician's return to the cottage, the wine he drinks, his gesture when he renounces reading music, his subtle movements when performing the piece, his tears. From that moment on, deep meanings in the manner of Baudelaire's "Recueillement" are projected through his gestures and his appearance. The musician's face in the foreground, then that of his beloved wife, become a silent language expressing the deepest emotions of the human condition, brought together in a conjunction in which *Eros* and *Thanatos* eternally consume each other. Needless to say, this is made possible thanks to music.

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<sup>15</sup> 'As the melody rose, near the door a very pale woman appeared, smiling at him and indicating by her finger that she would not speak, so that he would not be disturbed in what he was doing. She walked silently around the music stand of Monsieur de Sainte Colombe. She sat down on the trunk of music which was in the corner near the table and the bottle of wine and she listened.' Quignard, pp. 36-37.

After Marin Marais's last visit to Bièvre, literary and cinematographic narratives and music work together to create an environment of renouncement and detachment, together announcing Madeleine's suicide. While the reunion of the lovers, a coming back from the beyond, is paradoxically the projection of a powerful vital energy, Madeleine's unreciprocated love, leading to her death, is a renunciation of life. In Quignard's novel, acquiescing to Toinette's plea to go and see her sister, given the deterioration of her physical and mental health, Marais has to quit Versailles. During his last visit to the Bièvre he is forced to face the devastation his abandonment has wrought on Mademoiselle de Sainte Colombe. Once again, music plays a key role in the climax of this scene. Upon the sick woman's request, Marin Marais plays *la Rêveuse*, an *air* that synthesises the loneliness and desperation of the woman through its slow and painful phrasing, giving a sensation as if the soul shivered before the weight of the memory of the beloved's body, hopelessly trying to recover from a fatal fall. *La Rêveuse* reflects all of Madeleine's profound misery, as faithfully as a mirror showing her own image: a face distorted by rancour, despair and starvation, and her renouncement of life, which it announces with its mysterious cadence.

In Corneau's film, the camera focuses on the fissures that separate the erstwhile lovers: Marin Marais's magnificent aspect, as well as his self-confident air, contrast with the asphyxiating atmosphere of the ailing woman's room, her skeletal body, her trembling hands, her cadaverous face, her contained rancour. In a soft and harsh voice she urges the musician to play *La Rêveuse*. In the novel, after his final departure preparations for the suicide are made silently, interrupted only by Madeleine sighing: "Elle soufflait comme si les trois quarts du souffle dont elle disposait étaient taris."<sup>16</sup> In the film, Mademoiselle de Sainte Colombe

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<sup>16</sup> She puffed as if she were out of the breath. Quignard, pp. 105-106.

prepares to die on the notes of such a melancholic music. The effect in both circumstances could hardly be more poetic and deeply moving.

Once the suicide has taken place in the film, the spectator sees Madeleine's hanging legs in the foreground, while in the background there is the fading image of the dead woman's viol shape leaning on the room's wall. Here, Marin Marais has not only betrayed love, but also art. According to Sainte Colombe's aesthetical principles, art and passion —“Passion”, that is to say Life—, are forever one and the same thing.

## **Conclusion**

Foucault deals with the problem of modernity on the basis of the definition of Baudelaire, who conceived of modernity as 'the ephemeral, the fleeting and the contingent.' According to this idea, modern man is he who adopts a specific attitude before the discontinuity of time, consisting in “recapturing something that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it.”<sup>17</sup> On this basis, Foucault proposes the relation we ought to have with ourselves should be one of aesthetic creation:

From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art [...]. We

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment', in Rabinow, P. (ed) *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1991) p. 39.

should not have to refer the creative activity of somebody to the kind of relation he has to himself, but should relate the kind of relation one has to oneself to creative activity.<sup>18</sup>

Sainte Colombe's experience overcomes a search for his past in the loneliness of his memories and his melancholy. Indeed, the realisation of Sainte Colombe's aesthetic project, an "ascetic elaboration of the self", as it would be put by Foucault, is only possible by means of a profound individuality. Similarly to Gérard de Nerval's poetical project comprising the whole meaning of life-death, Sainte Colombe's search points to the importance of conceiving passionate existence as a way to access a superior truth, beyond the platitudes of this world.

Within the framework of the aesthetics of death, "this solitary, gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert",<sup>19</sup> invents himself through an adventure that humanises him. This exceptional man is initiated in the truth that "Tous les matins du monde sont sans retour"<sup>20</sup> — and makes of his body, his behaviour, his feelings and passions, of his very existence, a work of art.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Foucault, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> 'Each day dawns but once'.

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, pp. 41-42.