

The Use of Songs in Films by Claude Lelouch: A Comprehensive Typology

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Claude Lelouch became part of the history of cinema at the age of twenty-nine, when he won a Palme d'Or and the Academy Award for the best foreign film in 1966 with *UN HOMME ET UNE FEMME*. He directed forty-four movies after that¹. The sincerity, exceptional longevity and abundant production of Claude Lelouch's works have – no offense to some critics – built a unique, although uneven work, where coherence and unity were undeniable. Yves Alion and Jean Olle-Laprune state:

We feel that, even after reviewing his films again and again, we haven't even opened all the doors of possibilities that his work offers. We still haven't gone tired of exploring a world whose richness and complexity are now becoming clearer to us. We are proud to place Claude Lelouch among the greatest of our cinema, along with Jean Renoir, Henri-Georges Clouzot, François Truffaut and Claude Sautet to name only a few. (Alion/Olle-Laprune 2005)

If we look at his filmography, it appears that with the exception of two films, all of Lelouch's movies have at least one song in them. But what strikes us most beyond this constant use of songs, is the variety of his use of songs. I will first describe the musical composition method and then expose a typology which can describe the different aspects of his ability to handle songs in films.

¹ See Rossi 2016 for an overview of songscore evolution in Lelouch's films.

An original method

Songs in Lelouch's cinema sometimes have existed before but they are most often composed specifically for the film. Lelouch's favorite composer is without a doubt Francis Lai, who wrote the music for thirty-four of his films. Since their first collaboration, Lelouch and Lai developed a working method that hasn't changed since.

When I want to make a film, the first two people I'm talking to are my musician Francis Lai, lyricists Pierre Barouh or Boris Bergman. I gather everybody and tell them about my film. And I tell them: «Now, describe my movie with music!» If I gave them my movies to music once filmed, I would have the feeling that the musician is doing a pleonasm. (Lelouch 2005)

Francis Lai himself states:

We have always worked this way, from his first film UN HOMME ET UNE FEMME. He gives me some explanations before shooting his film, what he wants in general. I create my music without any image, just with the clues he gives me. After that he gives me complete freedom. We record the final music before shooting, which he uses afterwards. This is an advantage for the actors who don't play quite the same that way. The music helps them immerse themselves better in their role, creating more authentic emotions. (Lai 2009)

Insertion of songs in movies – a formal approach

In a previous work (Rossi 2010), we established an analytical typology of the insertion of a song into a movie, based on two oppositions:

- between diegetic / non-diegetic oppositions;
- total or partial understanding (intelligibility) of the words.

The understanding of the lyrics – when the song can be heard loudly in the mix – often leads to a slowing down of the story, and sometimes even interrupts it completely. Its effect should be compared to the music video clip. The hiding of the source (the music becomes non-diegetic) creates a feeling of unreality or a step back from events.

This chart gives an overview of different situations, including the presence of song in its purely instrumental form, when there are no words at all. I will explain the names of the modes later.

Song	Diegetic	Non-diegetic
Total intelligibility	Scenic	Parenthetic
Partial intelligibility	Contrapuntal diegetic	Contrapuntal non diegetic
No words = instrumental version	Instrumental diegetic	Instrumental non diegetic

Table 1: Insertion of songs in film

A diagram must be added to this table that considers the song insertion modes from a dynamic point of view with border areas. It should be read like this: from left to right, it becomes less and less diegetic; from top to bottom lyrics are less understandable until there are no lyrics at all in the instrumental mode – this is what we called »relativization of speech«.

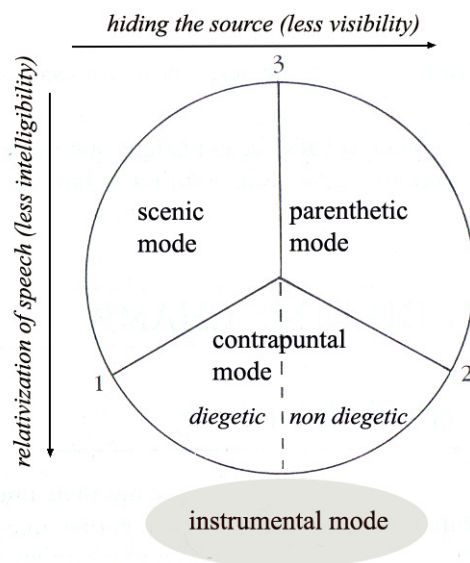


Table 2: Border areas between modes

In addition to these four modes, this diagram shows three border areas (marked 1, 2 and 3) that constitute either swinging moments of alternation, or independent functioning systems. Using these figures, we can now try to analyze the presence of the song in Lelouch's films.

Scenic mode

In the »scenic« mode we see the source of the song (singer, radio, disc) and the words are fully understandable in the movie. There are lots of examples of this mode: we can cite the French singer Johnny Hallyday in *L'AVENTURE C'EST L'AVENTURE* (F 1972, Claude Lelouch) singing his song in a studio and then at the concert (00:34:12). This is an example of the scenic mode because we understand all the lyrics and we see the source of the song (always diegetic).

There can be some subtleties with this mode. In *IL Y A DES JOURS ET DES LUNES* (F 1990, Claude Lelouch), the song in the opening credits is sung by John Auroche and Nicole Croisille. Both actors/singers are located one at each side of a long wedding table, depending on the version of the song – an intimate version and a rock version (symbol of days and moons) are cut alternately without interruptions – while the camera is moving from one side to the other using a long tracking shot.

Beyond an entertainment function, the »scenic mode« song can also work as an antique choir. We can see this in the same film (*IL Y A DES JOURS ET DES LUNES*) with Anita Vallejo's group of actor/singers whom a truck driver (Gerard Lanvin) meets at a gas station (00:58:50). This scene is set up like a musical: we can see the characters singing over music but the orchestra is invisible. It is rather unclear whether the singers sing for the driver, for themselves (like a rehearsal) or for the spectator.

Parenthetical Mode

Contrary to the scenic mode, we have a song seemingly coming from nowhere, not being part of the story world: a non-diegetic song of which we fully understand the words. I call this mode »parenthetical« because it characterizes an interruption of the enunciation. When something is in parenthesis, it does not signify it is not necessary: in a literary sense, parenthesis serves to focus the attention of the reader on something more personal. The same process can be attributed to the communication from the director to the viewer. The singer's voice appears to be like a kind of voice-over; it is something »in parenthesis« compared to the rest of the linear narrative, partly because songs allow for repetition (chorus form, strophic

form). The parenthetical mode usually goes along with a reduction of sounds and dialogues, and a slowing down in the pace of the narrative.

In *UN HOMME ET UNE FEMME*, the director chose not let his characters sing, but to wedge the rhythm of the images on the songs while reducing the noise specifically to the diegesis. The characters only speak in fragments – fragmented speech – and their feelings are expressed through non-diegetic songs (see for example, the song »Aujourd’hui c’est toi« at 01:06:26). This kind of »music video effect« generates a temporal suspension allowing us to access deep emotions of the characters and to share some sensations with them. The predilection of Lelouch to subordinate the images to the musical rhythm can be linked to both directing of scopitones – ancestors of the music video – by the director when he was twenty and his working method consisted of recording the soundtrack before shooting.

The parenthetical mode is also often used by Lelouch to establish complicity with the viewer, as the song can stress special feelings associated with intimate relationships between the song and the listener, or between the viewer and the performer. A good example would be a scene from the *ITINÉRAIRE D’UN ENFANT GÂTÉ* (F 1988, Claude Lelouch; 00:39:37) using a song from Jacques Brel: it accompanies the quest for solitude pursued by Sam Lion (Jean-Paul Belmondo). While Jacques Brel – to whom the film is dedicated – delivers his song, we see Sam Lion, much like Robinson Crusoe, taking possession of the isle and thriving in this wild and preserved nature. The sequence will sound different to the viewer depending on whether he already knows the song or not. For example, knowing the fact that Jacques Brel prematurely ended his life on these islands may cause a feeling of discomfort or sadness.

One last thing: with this visual discontinuity, the song truly appears as the pillar of the film, the foundation of the film. Released from its strict narrative role, the image track then appears subordinate to the soundtrack, which imposes its own rhythm and meaning.

Contrapuntal mode

In scenic or parenthetical modes all lyrics are completely understandable, in contrast to the contrapuntal mode, in which the song is mixed much lower. The contrapuntal use of the song is to be heard, not in the sense of Adorno and Eisler (1969) – complementing the image by non-redundancy –, but in a purely musical sense: the song is a voice embedded in dialogues and sound effects, all resembling a polyphony. It blends in with the conversations and, depending on the mix, gives the lyrics either a position in front or behind the dialogues, and sometimes in between, but we never understand all of it. It can be diegetic or not diegetic, depending on whether the source of the music is shown or not.

In *EDITH AND MARCEL* (F 1983, Claude Lelouch), the young Jacques Barbier (Jacques Villeret) sells linen to the workers (0:16:10). In a diegetic contrapuntal mode, his lines of dialogue are not of much interest, which may explain the simultaneous positioning of a song of which sometimes we can make out some lyrics. This is the song »Bal dans ma rue«, which comes from a record player: its arrangement and its text evoke the friendly and popular atmosphere of neighborhood life. The song is sung by Edith Piaf whose presence will accompany the young man throughout his future love story. Here the soundtrack mixes chatting of a hawker, noise and chatting from the crowd and the song.

We can also find in Lelouch films examples of non diegetic contrapuntal mode. In *UN HOMME ET UNE FEMME*, the song »Plus fort que nous« (01:30:26) plays with snippets of conversation with the butler or between the two lovers. The singers' voices (Nicole Croisille and Pierre Barouh) are thus in a contrapuntal relationship with the voices of the protagonists (Anouk Aimée and Jean-Louis Trintignant) without the source of the song being explicited.

Instrumental mode

In the fourth mode of appearance, the song can appear in an exclusively instrumental form. It is the result of the phenomenon of relativization of the intelligibility of dialogue already inherent in the contrapuntal mode: there are no lyrics at all, but the music still conveys – or anticipates – the message linked to the lyrics.

The films *ROBERT ET ROBERT* (F 1978, Claude Lelouch) and *À NOUS DEUX* (F 1979, Claude Lelouch) both play on the unveiling effects of song lyrics, which can be said to participate in the drama of the film: they create a network of allusions and certain outcomes. *ROBERT ET ROBERT* crosses two songs which lyrics of one (»L'Ami c'est mieux que rien«, 01:02:16) are revealed only two-thirds of the film; in *À NOUS DEUX*, the film is framed by two songs, the second by publicizing his words as the last image (01:41:43) while its melody was played on the cello at all throughout the film.

In the early films of Lelouch, it is not uncommon for the lyrics of the song to be missing from the movie, while the corresponding full song version (with singing) exists in disc version. This is the case with *VIVRE POUR VIVRE* (F 1967, Claude Lelouch), *UN HOMME QUI ME PLAÎT* (F 1969,

Claude Lelouch) and LE BON ET LES MÉCHANTS (F 1975, Claude Lelouch): the theme song is developed throughout the film, but only in its instrumental form. The song acquires a special status : vocally absent from the film, but melodically related to its meaning, it becomes the memory trace, with lyrics that summarize the plot and the characters' psychology.

The dichotomy »song with words« versus »song without words« (instrumental mode) may define a narrative and musical structure. From this point of view SI C'ÉTAIT À REFAIRE (F 1976, Claude Lelouch) is indeed an extreme case: a single song, presented in both vocal and instrumental versions, constitutes the only musical material of the film.

Study of the border areas

It is probably in the transitions from one mode to the other that Lelouch demonstrates his understanding of the singing phenomenon and his ability to handle its appearance: indeed, he uses all possible combinations. The three modes of the song defined above – scenic, parenthetical and contrapuntal – are often constrained to theoretical boundaries only, and it is common to see the song switch quickly from one mode to another – or it can settle into a frontier territory. We will now study these border areas.

1a – Contrapuntal → scenic

There is a fine example of this kind of passage in SI C'ÉTAIT À REFAIRE. A boy comes knocking at the door of the apartment of his father – a father who conceived him while he was in prison and never recognized him. The song

begins (00:52:36) almost imperceptibly during the conversation between father and son and then finally imposes itself through a clip of Françoise Hardy. This passage from the contrapuntal mode to the scenic one highlights the transcendental aspect of the song. It emerges from the diegetic reality, blending into the conversation via television, to suddenly occupy the entire soundtrack (and the entire screen!), sung by the singer, as a manifestation of divine word.

1b – Scenic → contrapuntal

In ROMAN DE GARE (F 2007, Claude Lelouch), Gilbert Becaud's song »Les cerisiers sont blancs« (Cherry blossoms are white) is hummed (00:38:51) by Pierre (Dominique Pinon) and Huguette's daughter. It reverts to its status of a contrapuntal song when Becaud's voice overlaps on the voice of the two characters who disappear from the screen; the song then accompanies the fishing scene between the two characters, adding some tension to it. The lyrics of the song speak of teenage desire: »The cherry blossoms thought that/She knew how to play/To play the little climbing animal/Who climbed, who climbed, who climbed, Mummy!« This kind of lyrics maintains our suspicion towards Pierre, introduced since the beginning of the movie as a possibly pedophile serial killer recently escaped from prison. This sensation is reinforced by the animals' cries we hear from a farm nearby.

2a – Contrapuntal → parenthetical

At the end of ROBERT ET ROBERT, the protagonists are gathered in a ballroom and all hum the *chababada* – a (self-)reference to Lelouch's own

film UN HOMME ET UNE FEMME – while revealing secrets when they chat with other people (from 01:38:32 until the end). A new version of the song, sung by a woman over a jazzy rhythm, follows these images and we discover the success of Robert (Jacques Villeret) on stage at the Olympia, a famous French concert hall; the same song is used in two different versions elapsing the comedian's way to success. The transition from contrapuntal to parenthetical mode extracts us from temporal reality, showing the connection between the ballroom scene and the final success.

2b – Parenthetical → contrapuntal

The transition from parenthetical mode to contrapuntal mode can be quite subtle: a simple vocal intervention can serve as a tipping point and relegate the song to the background. This type of transitive effect causes a sudden return to reality. A good example can be found in ITINÉRAIRE D'UN ENFANT GÂTÉ. In search of solitude, Sam Lion (Jean-Paul Belmondo) has succeeded in organizing his disappearance at sea; while help is on its way, he is now in England and has decided to create a new identity. At 00:30:14, we hear the song »Qui me dira« in parenthetical mode, which is a song about the absence of one's lover. Sam is absorbed in reading a magazine, which devoted a special article to him. We see him lying on his bed; the song still goes on but fades into the background with the entrance of the maid who wishes him good morning in English. This vocal intervention suddenly brings us back to the diegesis.

3a – Parenthetical → scenic

In *TOUTE UNE VIE* (F 1974, Claude Lelouch), Sarah (Marthe Keller) completes her world tour while we hear the song »Galilée« by Gilbert Becaud performed live; less than thirty seconds later (00:55:28), we are transported to the Olympia where the singer performs the song in front of the same Sarah. This modal change brings us back to the diegetic reality mainly because of the words: »Hello, parents/I've been around the Earth/Night and day I'm dangling/From the daily walk/To the race, be happy/I brought back my dreams.«

3b – Scenic → parenthetical

The passage from the scenic mode to the parenthetical mode is central to the construction of *EDITH AND MARCEL* where we see alternating cuts between songs of Edith Piaf (Evelyne Bouix) sung at galas and boxing matches with Marcel Cerdan (Marcel Cerdan Junior). From 00:11:40 to 00:15:50 we see a boxing match with Marcel Cerdan which is thus connected semantically with the concert interpretation of the song »Avant toi« (Before you) – written specifically for the film and performed by Mama Bea in a convincing imitation of Piaf. Images of boxing are not noisy (no sound impacts or movements) and only applause is heard. This device softens the violence of boxing and is a clue of an approximation of the two future lovers: the song seems to carry the fate of the two characters.

In the »Samba Saravah moment« (*UN HOMME ET UNE FEMME*, 00:15:10) which is very close to a music video (a kind of »mini-film in the film«: see Burdeau Emmanuel 2005), the scenic/parenthetical frontier is never really crossed and tends to settle into a real border territory: Pierre Barouh sings in

playback (scenic mode) the song »Samba Saravah« which is a quasi-autonomous sequence (parenthetical mode) outside the linear narration. Note that Lelouch takes one of the characteristics of the musical, that is the invisibility of the musical accompaniment: we must wait until 00:16:27 to see Pierre Barouh with his guitar.

Multiple passages

A particularly interesting case of multiple passages from one mode to another can be found at the end of the film *LES MISÉRABLES* (F 1995, Claude Lelouch). The Jew André Zieman (Michel Boujenah) is imprisoned by the Thenardiers; he comes out of his hiding place, discovers the corpses of his jailers and hears, well after everyone else, the news of the liberation. He then decides to find his wife and his daughter who are working at a restaurant run by Henri Fortin (Jean-Paul Belmondo), a sort of modern Jean Valjean. Fortin, who has recently learned how to read, is then imprisoned for former misdeeds.

In four minutes, the same song crosses over three different places (the Thenardiers' home, the cell, and Fortin's restaurant), performs a wide time ellipsis (the return of Zieman), and is the subject of six different instrumental and vocal versions – all modes are combined here. The moment when Zieman's wife (Alessandra Martinez) sings is particularly magical: almost *a cappella* her voice stresses, by its fragile timbre, an exceptional density to the famous words: »Heaven, I'm in heaven/And my heart beats so hard that I can hardly speak« (a reference to the famous musical *Top Hat*).

Symbolically, this melody that breaks down the walls and seems to suspend the progression of time, functions as the implacable destiny managing to gather two people who thought they would have lost each other forever. From its appearance, the song emphasizes the romantic idea of fate.

The analysis of Claude Lelouch's films in terms of his songscore has allowed me to establish a typology of modes of appearance of the song in cinema by isolating two criteria:

1. visibility of the source;
2. speech intelligibility.

With this approach, we've tried to explain the different effects the modes and the transitions from one mode to another could have on emotional and narrative levels. After this study, what strikes us most is Lelouch's comprehensive exploration of all the possible combinations of handling the songs which in my opinion is quite unique.

Lelouch never wrote a musical comedy but has always followed a certain aesthetic ideal in which the song plays a key role. Being in an almost isolated position in French cinema for more than forty years, Lelouch's films have always reserved a special place for songs in what we can call a »musical film«; critics have often attested him a certain naivety, but this naivety is precisely the characteristic of the musical film, to be able to dream up a world where the power of singing transcends all borders, between past and present, fiction and reality, the private sphere and the public world, the screen and the viewer.

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