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Centrality of Text, and Discourse Strategies in French Political Songs

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This paper starts by establishing briefly the centrality of text and of socio-political discourse in French songs from a historical perspective. It then discusses the usefulness of the concept of 'dialogism', 'voice' and 'intertextuality' in political song analysis drawing from Bakhtin's and Kristeva's theories of discourse. It shows in particular how the song-writers and interpreters of La Marseillaise (three different versions 1792, 1848, 1979) use voice strategies such as parody, appropriation, and adaptation to engage in the political and socio-cultural discourse of their times.

Keywords: Songs; Discourse strategies

1. Introduction

Traditionally, French songwriters have tended to value words (text) over music and they have used different strategies in their songs to comment on the social and political concerns of their times. The analysis of French political songs conceived as a form of discourse can draw from the works of discourse analysts to unveil some of the strategies used by song-writers to convey meaning. Section 2 of the paper establishes briefly the centrality of text and socio-political discourse in French songs from a historical perspective. Section 3 argues for the relevance of the works of Bakhtin (1982) on the notion of dialogism and voice, and of Kristeva (1969, 1986a) on the concept of intertextuality for the analysis of songs. Section 4 applies these notions to an analysis of three versions of *La Marseillaise*, France's national anthem.

2. On the Centrality of Text and of Socio-political Discourse in French Songs

Originally, the word *Chanson* (song) in French had a broader meaning than it has today. It referred to 'all forms of expression which celebrated happy or tragic events of life' (Moulin 2004) recited or sung with or without musical accompaniment.

In the lyric poetry/songs on courtly love sung by the troubadours between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, sung poetry and music mixed as one art form. The troubadours were essentially poets for whom the word mattered more than the music. The majority of them were literate nobles or lords at a time when most people couldn't read or write. Performers such as *jongleurs* interpreted and spread their poetry around the country. Over time the troubadours' 'sung poetry' was gradually perceived as being poetry alone. It was recited or read as poetry rather than sung as songs (in the modern sense of the word) and was shared amongst mainly the small educated elite. Songs, as opposed to poetry, on the other hand came to represent oral expression from and for the illiterate populace, hence made out to be of less value at least by the more privileged literate strata of French society. The historical devaluing of songs because of their intrinsic orality associated with the popular is pertinent to an understanding of the role songs were to play in French society in creating a unique space for socio-political discourse and especially for the least advantaged groups.

What would come to be known later as *La Chanson 'française'* in the literature on French songs refers to a later period starting from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. It refers to songs sung in French rather than in *langues d'oïl* or *d'oc* or regional languages as was the case with songs of earlier times. By the time *La Chanson française* emerged, poetry and songs had clearly split, but the early legacy from the troubadours who had given centrality to the word over music would keep influencing the development of French songs well into modern times.

2.1. French Songs and Socio-political Discourse

The *Mazarinades* are considered to be the most significant corpus of recorded political songs sung in French. They represent a mixed bag of political propaganda written during the civil war known as 'La Fronde' in seventeenth century France. *Les Mazarinades* were sung on popular melodies on the famous 'Pont neuf' of Paris by *chansonniers* (street singers), often without musical accompaniment. For the most part written by anonymous authors who feared reprisal, they aimed at discrediting Cardinal Jules Mazarin, then minister under Anne of Austria's regency government for the child Louis XIV, who was accused of political and financial mismanagement as well as of sexual misconduct. The language of the *Mazarinades* was raw and used explicit sexual references. They set the tone for what songs could achieve in terms of giving space in the public arena to voices, topics and forms of expression which were not heard so easily elsewhere (Merrick 1994).

Post *Mazarinades*, the next event which generated a lot of political songs is the 1789 revolution. *La Marseillaise*, which later became the national anthem, is an early revolutionary song. By then, a clear distinction was made between anonymous authors who tended to write popular humorous songs in an erotic-bucolic register and song-writers who engaged in political commentary and claimed authorship of their work. In the nineteenth century, during two subsequent social uprisings (the 1848 revolution and 1871 Commune) songs also continued to contribute to the

making of history by informing and influencing political opinions. Later, in the 1930s and 1940s, *La Chanson moderne* with its icon Charles Trenet came to symbolize the social changes French people wanted to see during this period.

The poet-song-writers of post-WW2 (e.g. Vian, ens, Ferré and Brel) reaffirmed the predominance of text over music in French songs throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Their messages were serious social or political commentaries. The protest/folk songs movement in France, another genre of socio-political commentary through songs, intermingled with the rock wave in the 1970s and 1980s. It is in the late 1980s through to the 1990s and into current times with the advent of French rap and slam (urban poetry) that the continuing legacy of the troubadours' emphasis on text/poetry over music is most palpable, and that the long tradition of French political songs is most strongly felt and kept alive.

The next section considers some strategies that have been used by writers or interpreters of political songs of all times to put their messages across, namely parody, appropriation and adaptation. These strategies are considered within the context of theories of discourse analysis as proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva.

3. Bakhtin and Kristeva on the Relevance of Dialogism, Voice and Intertextuality Concepts in Song Analysis

Songs are elaborate semiotic systems. That is systems of signs where text, music, interpretation (gestural and facial expression) and potentially also images (video clip and CD illustrations) as well as dance, body painting, decoration and masks together orchestrate meaning. In French political songs, as has been argued, the words, the written text is central. Many writers and interpreters of this genre of song have used parody, adaptation and appropriation, that is they have used the lyrics and the melody of other songs innovatively to create their own new discourse. Briefly, parody in song analysis can be defined as 'imitation' of the original lyrics of a song using the same melody. The adaptation of a song 'modifies' more substantially the intent of the original lyrics, it takes more distance, refers less directly to them than in imitation, still using the same melody. A singer appropriates another's song for instance when he keeps the exact same original lyrics but dedicates them to a different social group giving them a different purpose and meaning in the process. Parody, adaptation and appropriation are different ways for a song-writer and/or interpreter to relate text to context, and to connect the personal to the collective. These strategies, when considered in relation to Bakhtin's theory of *dialogism* and concept of *voice*, acquire a broader significance and permit the use of an extended theoretical framework for song analysis.

Bakhtin's work (1930, 1982) pertains mainly to the domain of literary studies. It was adopted later by linguists and is used in discourse analysis very broadly. French political songs which rely heavily on the written word and are intimately linked to context are particularly suited to an analysis based on Bakhtinian theory which positions texts as dynamic and multifaceted spaces, in dialogue with the multiple

voices and contexts which are represented through them. For Bakhtin, a writer's voice is not merely his or her own but echoes or responds to other voices present in the one text. In this sense, a written text is always 'polyvocal' and all texts are therefore echoing other texts.

This is not to say that there is no creativity in any text but that a text exists only in the context of previously created texts. This process, which Bakhtin calls 'dialogism', cannot conceive of language production outside context and hence cannot exist outside the history and society it seeks to represent.

Kristeva (1969, 1986a, 1986b, 1986c) elaborated on Bakhtin's work and proposed three dimensions of textual space, three coordinates of dialogism. These involve the writing subject (author), the addressee (the ideal reader) and exterior texts. She built her concept of *intertextuality* on the notion that these coordinates intersect at all times along two axes: horizontal and vertical. The horizontal axis is where the writing subject and addressee interact more directly and the vertical axis is where text interacts with context, within literary study this context being the anterior or synchronic literary corpus (other texts). For Kristeva, any text is both 'the absorption and transformation of another' (Kristeva 1986b: 37). Another aspect of Kristeva's intertextuality is the notion that a text interacts with a cultural system and can potentially alter it. Texts are, in this sense, acts, 'text acts' in the way speech acts have been defined by Austin (1962). That is, texts as language productions are not merely expression, they also act through and on subjects (writers, readers and listeners in the case of songs) and on social and political environments.

Another important aspect of Bakhtin and Kristeva's discourse theory is the role they assign to the reader who is not seen as passive but as an active creator of meaning when interpreting text. When listening to a song, the listener creates meaning out of the inner voices that a particular song evokes within him or herself. These voices are themselves largely produced by the historical and socio-cultural system(s) the listener associates with. One can say that the listener almost 'rewrites' the song unconsciously when s/he listens to it, bringing into it her/his personal voice along with other voices, thus recreating the meaning of the song literally on her/his terms.

The next section elaborates on Bakhtin's and Kristeva's thoughts in the context of the analysis of the trajectory of one French political song across time.

4. La Marseillaise

This section illustrates how parody, adaptation and appropriation are used in three versions of La Marseillaise to allow for new dialogues between text and context and for new voices to be heard.

The Marseillaise was originally written as a war song, a military march. It was composed in April 1792 by Rouget de Lisle, a French army officer posted in Strasbourg, when France was at war with the Austrian empire. The Mayor of the city had asked him to compose a song to rally French troops to fight the Prussians

threatening to invade France and to destroy the newly formed republic. It is said that posters circulating as propaganda around the country at the time inspired Rouget de Lisle's famous lyrics. The naming of the song as Marseillaise is accidental. When the republican troops from the city of Marseille entered Paris in July 1792 to join the war they sang the Marseillaise which in a few months had travelled around the country and gained enormous popularity. After this event the song came to be known as 'La Marseillaise'. The very birth of the Marseillaise is polyvocal in a Bakhtinian sense. It echoes the 'voices' of a poster, an individual's response to a superior, and its interpretation by a particular regional group of soldiers. All contributed to the making and naming of the song which became France's national anthem in 1887 after having been censored and reallocated by a succession of governments. There have been many humoristic and political parodies, adaptations and appropriations of the Marseillaise in and outside France since it was first written by Rouget de Lisle. Most recently, in 2006, the French singer Charlelie Couture appropriated the original melody of the song and adapted it to his own new environmentalist lyrics which he entitled: *Ma Marseillaise à moi* (My very own Marseillaise).

The two versions selected for analysis other than the original version are the feminist version *La Marseillaise des cotillons* written by Louise de Chaumont in 1848, and the 1979 reggae version written and interpreted by Serge Gainsbourg which he named *Aux armes et caetera*. Table 1 below shows the first three verses of Rouget de Lisle's Marseillaise (English version taken from the French presidency official website), the first three verses of Chaumont's version translated into English by the author and the full Gainsbourg version (English translation derived from Version 1). The use of only extracts in this paper rather than the complete verses of Version 1 (seven verses in total) and Version 2 (five verses in total), apart from space considerations, was deemed enough to illustrate an argument concerned mainly with the general discourse strategy of the songs rather than a detailed analysis of each verse. The Gainsbourg version is given in full simply because it is a (short) abbreviation of the original Marseillaise.

The three selected versions of the Marseillaise represent voices from three distinct periods of French history. In the original Marseillaise, the voice of the newly installed revolutionary regime expressed through one of its army officers is dictating to soldiers how they are expected to act for the protection of the newly formed republic. This is achieved linguistically through the extensive use of imperatives such as (in French) 'allons', 'aux armes', 'formez' and 'marchons'. Propaganda for the new revolutionary ideology is also conducted through the use of what was, at the time, new terminology such as 'citizens' (citoyens) and 'fatherland' (patrie). Words such as 'glory' (gloire), 'tyranny' (tyrannie), 'howling' (mugissant), 'to cut throats' (égorger) and 'impure blood' (sang impur) are strongly emotionally charged and intended to get soldiers not to think but to be ready to act, in this case ready to kill for a clear purpose. The catchy movement of the original melody makes the Marseillaise nonetheless not only well suited to the marching of soldiers but also easy to remember for any crowd, hence also part of the song's success at stirring

Table 1 Extracts from three versions (English and French) of the Marseillaise: Rouget de Lisle (1792), Chaumont (1848) and Gainsbourg's (1979)

Version 1	Version 2	Version 3
Extract from the original Marseillaise (Rouget de Lisle 1792) <i>English version available at: http://www.elysee.fr/ang/institut/syl1.htm</i>	Extract from 'La Marseillaise des Cotillons' (Chaumont 1848) <i>English translation by author</i>	'Aux armes et caetera'* (Gainsbourg 1979) <i>English translation derived from version one</i>
Arise, children of the Homeland The day of glory has arrived! Against us, tyranny Bloody banner is risen. (repeat) Do you hear in the countryside These ferocious soldiers howling? They are coming into our arms To cut the throats of our sons, our wives!	Tremble tyrants in pants, Women our day has come! Not pity, let us put to music All wrongs of the bearded sex Which have lasted for too long Our patience has ended Upright, Venus, upright! Together let's wash the old insult.	Arise, children of the Homeland The day of glory has arrived Against us, tyranny Bloody banner is risen (repeat)
(Refrain)	(Refrain)	(Refrain)
To arms, citizens! Form your battalions! Let us walk, let us walk! May an impure blood Water our furrows! What does this horde of slaves want, From traitors and conspirating kings? For whom these vile chains These long-prepared irons? (repeat) Frenchmen, for us, ah! What an insult, What fury it must arouse! It is us one dares plan To return to the old slavery!	Freedom on our foreheads, Pour your warm rays, Tremble, tremble jealous husbands, Respect the cotillons The man, this wild despot Care had to proclaim its rights, Let us create rights to our use, With our uses, let us have laws With our uses, let us have laws If the man in year 93 Care had to think only of him, Let us work for us today Let us make a Marseillaise!!	To arms citizens etc...
(Refrain)	(Refrain)	(Refrain)
What! These foreign cohorts! Would make laws in our homes! What! These mercenary phalanxes Would cut down our proud warriors! (repeat) Good Lord! By chained hands Our fronts would yield under the yoke The vile despots would become The masters of our destinies!	Until today in this sad world All was blind or not quite right Everywhere on the round machine Women suffer set-backs Let such a chaos be sorted out It is up to us to hit the drum And it is your turn misters To spin, to spin with a distaff	Do you hear in the countryside These ferocious soldiers howling They are coming into our arms To cut the throats of our sons, our wives! (Refrain) Sacred patriotic love, Lead and support our avenging arms Liberty, cherished liberty Fight back with your defenders (repeat) (Refrain) We shall enter the career When our elders will no longer be there There we shall find their dust And the mark of their virtues (repeat) (Refrain)

Table 1 (Continued)

Version 1 Extract from the original Marseillaise (Rouget de Lisle 1792)	Version 2 Extract from 'La Marseillaise des Cotillons' (Chaumont 1848)	Version 3 'Aux armes et caetera'* (Gainsbourg 1979)
French version	French version	French version
Allons enfant de la patrie Le jour de gloire est arrive Contre nous de la tyrannie L'étendard sanglant est levé Entendez-vous dans les campagnes Mugir ces féroces soldats Ils viennent jusque dans nos bras Egorger nos fils nos compagnes	Tremblez tyrans portant culotte Femmes notre jour est venu Point de pitié mettons en note Tous les torts du sexe barbu (<i>bis</i>) Voilà trop longtemps que ça dure Notre patience est à bout Debout, Vénusienne, debout Et lavons notre vieille injure	Allons enfants de la patrie Le jour de gloire est arrivé? Contre nous de la tyrannie? L'étendard sanglant est levé?
(Refrain)	(Refrain)	(Refrain)
Aux armes citoyens! Formez vos bataillons! Marchez, marchez, Qu'un sang impur Abreuve nos sillons	Liberté sur nos fronts Verse tes chauds rayons Tremblez, tremblez, maris jaloux, Respect aux cotillons ! Tremblez, tremblez maris jaloux Respect aux cotillons ! L'homme ce despote sauvage Eut soin de proclamer ses droits Créons des droits à notre usage A notre usage créons des lois ! (<i>bis</i>) Si l'homme en l'an quatre vingt treize Eut soin de ne songer qu'à lui Travaillons pour nous aujourd'hui Faisons-nous une Marseillaise !	Aux armes et caetera* Entendez-vous dans les campagnes Mugir ces féroces soldats Ils viennent jusque dans nos bras Egorger nos fils nos compagnes
Que veut de cette horde d'esclaves De traîtres, de rois conjurés? Pour qui ces ignobles entraves, Ces fers dès longtemps préparés? (<i>bis</i>) Français! pour nous, ah! quel outrage Quels transports il doit exciter! C'est nous qu'on ose méditer De rendre à l'antique esclavage!		Aux armes et caetera Amour sacré de la patrie Con- duis nos bras vengeurs Liberté liberté chérie Combats avec tes défenseurs
(Refrain)	Jusqu'à ce jour dans ce triste monde Tout était borgne ou de travers Partout sur la machine ronde La femme essayait des revers (<i>bis</i>) Qu'un pareil chaos se débrouille A nous à battre le tambour ! Et vous messieurs à votre tour Filez, filez votre quenouille	Aux armes et caetera Nous entrerons dans la carrière Quand nos aînés n'y seront plus Nous y trouverons leur poussière Et la trace de leurs vertus
Quoi! des cohortes étrangères Feraient la loi dans nos foyers? Quoi, des phalanges mercenaires Terrasseraient nos fiers guerriers? (<i>bis</i>) Grand Dieu!...Par des mains enchaînées, Nos fronts sous le joug ploieraient, De vils despotes deviendraient Les maîtres de nos destinées?		Aux armes et caetera
(Refrain)		

revolutionary ideals in the collective consciousness of people in France and abroad despite modulatory passages in the middle being not so easy to sing (Newman 1915).

By 1848 the Marseillaise had acquired high status as the symbol of French revolutionary ideology. It was censored during Napoleon's empire and the Restoration (1815–1830 brief return to royalty) adding to its popularity and re-emerged in the public arena during the 1830 (second) revolution.

The feminist Louise de Chaumont in *La Marseillaise des cotillons* is using a parody of the song with entirely new and shorter lyrics (five verses instead of seven in Version 1) to achieve two aims: firstly to contest the suitability of the male oriented focus of the original Marseillaise (a military march for soldiers) as a national symbol for revolutionary ideals for both sexes, and secondly to promote a contemporary women's cause such as women's right to vote. In the extract shown in Table 1, Chaumont seeks to rally women for a clear cause as the original version of the Marseillaise also sought to rally (men to go to war). She keeps the propaganda voice, using the tune of the original song, but replacing its lyrics with her own feminist propaganda slogans (e.g. 'Women our day has come, Let us put to music all wrongs of the bearded sex'). This strategy shows the dialogic nature of song creation. Chaumont chose the original version of the Marseillaise for the high symbolic power it represents. She absorbs this symbolic power in her parody in order to contest it and transform it to serve a new purpose for a specific social group in response to a new and particular contextual reality, the rise of feminist political awareness in the period.

It is difficult to know how much impact Chaumont's Marseillaise had at the time it was first published. It appeared in a feminist republican newspaper, *Le Journal des Cotillons*, so it would have been available to at least readers of this journal and presumably members of the many feminist organizations which spread in France at the time such as the 'Vénusiennes' (Venuses) referred to in the first verse of the song. It is a feminist discourse which interrupted male dominated public discourses of that historical period and contributed to giving women's cause representation in the public sphere. Over a century later in 1960, Germaine Montero decided to reintroduce *La Marseillaise des Cotillons*. Her appropriation (she did not change the lyrics) of the song is adding a new voice to the already polyvocal feminist version of the Marseillaise. Two voices other than her own are present when she performs the song, that of the original Marseillaise and the contestation of it in Chaumont's feminist lyrics. Montero's interpretation of Chaumont's Marseillaise for French women in the 1960s is enlivening feminist political memory. Her 'song-act', as it can be named, is symptomatic of the first French feminist wave which saw women fighting for a place in political history, as discussed by Kristeva in her essay on women's time (Kristeva 1986c).

In the two versions of the Marseillaise examined so far, Kristeva's three coordinates of intertextuality are clearly at play (subject, reader and context). Chaumont can only parody Rouget de Lisle (the subject) after having interacted with the original lyrics first as an active reader/listener (horizontal axis of dialogism). As an active listener she would have first listened to Version 1 with her own inner critical voice engaged in

deconstructing its male biased lyrics. Chaumont in turn becomes a writing subject when she writes Version 2, absorbing and transforming Rouget de Lisle's voice relating it to a new context for a different social group (vertical axis of dialogism). Montero's interpretation, a kind of 're-writing' of Version 2 for new historical times, is an example of an extension of both the horizontal and vertical axes of Kristeva's notion of intertextuality. Montero's voice absorbs both Rouget de Lisle and Chaumont's voices and transforms them to serve the socio-political women's issues of her times creating thus a polyvocal rippling effect of the song.

The last version of the Marseillaise examined is Gainsbourg's 1979 reggae version. In the late 1970s and early 1980s a lot of public debate took place in France relating to the suitability of the anti-Germanic and war lyrics of the original Marseillaise as the national anthem of a country member of the European Union historically founded on a spirit of reconciliation between France and Germany. It is in this context and in response to concerns of his times that Gainsbourg produced what turned out to be a very polemical appropriation and adaptation of the original Marseillaise.

This version, perceived by many as an attack on a sacred national symbol, led to virulent responses in the French press and animated radio and television interviews of Gainsbourg. Gainsbourg named his version of the song: 'Aux armes et caetera' ('To arms, etc.') and used this new title as a refrain. His use of 'etc.' is a way of questioning the worthiness and appropriateness of the lyrics (i.e. they are not worthy of being mentioned in full). His retaining of only 16 lines out of the 56 lines of Version 1 is also a way of devaluing the original song. His selection of lines from the original Marseillaise is also part of his discourse strategy, his way to create his own voice. His choice to retain for instance the line which refers to the 'Sacred patriotic love' as well as the lines which refer to elders ('When our elders will no longer be there' etc.) highlight the parts of the song he most contests. Gainsbourg's nonchalant body language and use of some specific gestures (e.g. eyebrow raising at particular points) when performing, as well as his mocking tone when singing the verses he retained, contributed to the outburst of public rage. These non-linguistic devices, which Kristeva (1986b) would refer to as 'genotext', used by Gainsbourg contributed substantially to turning the song into a provocative act and even for some a profanation of a national symbol. Gainsbourg's persona, his reputation as a provoker prior to the writing of 'Aux armes et caetera' is also part of the wider genotext which has been read in the denouncing of the song as provocation (Dillaz 2005; Francfort 2007).

Finally, the use of reggae music, a novelty at the time amongst French song-writers, would have been another stir to conservative French psyches unwilling to enter unknown musical territory. Whereas Chaumont used a parody of the Marseillaise producing a new 'phenotext' (new lyrics) to make a political statement, Gainsbourg used an appropriation and adaptation of Version 1 of the song as well as a complex genotext (e.g. shortening of the lyrics, use of reggae music, intonation) to create what appears to be more an act of cultural provocation than a political statement. In both cases the songwriters have produced an intertextual form of discourse in the sense

that their song production is the result of an interaction with several voices, past and current, their own and others.

5. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that although text in French political songs has always been central to the process of meaning creation, it is also discourse strategies such as parody, adaptation and appropriation together with non-linguistic devices such as body language and voice intonation in performance as well as the choice of music genre which contribute to the making of political and socio-cultural discourse in and through songs. The concepts of dialogism, voice and intertextuality used as an overarching theoretical framework for the argument of the paper also proved to be useful concepts to be explored further in the analysis of the construction of meaning in and through songs.

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