Vindictive French Rap Songs: the Music behind the Words

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The Fall 2005 riots in French *banlieues* shocked the political community. Within a month of the start of the riots, 202 politicians, lead by deputy François Grosdidier signed a petition, asking the justice minister to sue seven rap groups on behalf of the nation for inciting "anti-white racism" and hatred of France.[1]

This paper analyses a selection of rap songs performed by groups or singers from Grosdidier's black list: Ministère Amer's "Brigitte Femme 2" (1994),[2] Passi's "Les flammes du mal" (1997), Booba's[3] "R.A.P" (2004), Monsieur R's "FranSSe" (2005) and 113's "36 Quai" (2005). While rap tends to privilege text over music more than other song genres, this study will show that the music does not always remain relegated to the background. Repetitions pervade the song and set a mood that illustrates or comments on the lyrics. Even when the music accompanies powerful texts, it adds a rich layer of meaning which alters that of the text alone.

A short history of French rap and a study of its relation to the genre of *Chanson* will set a context for the analysis of the songs.

Rap originated in the United States in the late 1970's.[4] Following the arrival of François Mitterand to power in France in 1981, previously illegal private radio stations

[1] Mustapha Kessous, "Des parlementaires réclament des poursuites contre des rappeurs," *Le Monde*, 25 November 2005, 12.
[2] This is not the much decried "Brigitte Femme de Flic" (1992), but a new song which comments on it.
[3] Member of the now disbanded group, Lunatic. (Olivier Cachin in France Inter's *Là-Bas si j'y suis*, November 24, 2005.)
[4] David Toop, "Rap," *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy, http://www.grovemusic.com (accessed 10 December 2005).

(called "*radio-pirates*") became legalized.[5] From the sprouting of free FM stations ("*radios-libres*") that ensued, local stations emerged playing music geared toward specific ethnic communities.[6] Stations such as Radio Nova contributed to exposing French youth to rap.[7] By 1984, the French television channel TF1 was devoting a show to hip-hop.[8] Sascha Verlan contends, however, that "the block parties organized by DJ Dee Nasty in the so-called *terrains-vagues* near the La Chapelle subway station were much more significant for the [French Hip-Hop] scene."[9]

Members of IAM, a group from Marseilles formed in 1986, traveled regularly to New York City to study US rap.[10] According to Olivier Cachin, French artists immediately saw connections between their experience in the *banlieues* and that of Americans in the inner cities.[11] While the previous generation had slowly and awkwardly integrated rock and roll, trying to transpose American situations that weren't necessarily relevant to the French experience,[12] rappers chose to keep only the genre, the medium,[13]

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[5] David L. Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2003), 131.
[6] Ibid., 50-51.
[7] Anonymous, "L'histoire du hip-hop," (n.d.), http://rapconnexion.free.fr/dossiers.php (accessed 10 December, 2005).
[8] Ibid.
[9] Sascha Verlan, "HipHop in Frankreich," in "Hipstory," (Stuttgart: PONS online, n.d.), http://www.pons.de/speziell/ausbild/hiphop/hipstory/hipstory.htm#frankreich (accessed 13 December, 2005).
[10] Olivier Cachin, "IAM," in *La chanson française et francophone*, eds. Pierre Saka and Yann Plougastel (Paris: Larousse, 1999), 279.
[11] Olivier Cachin in France Inter's *Là-bas si j'y suis*, November 24, 2005.
[12] "… the rapidly established rock myths of back-seat smooching, motorbikes and drive-in movies meant little in real terms to French youths growing up in an economy still recovering from wartime devastation." David L. Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2003), 25. "It was with the triump of *yéyé*, I suggest, that a particularly tenacious Anglo-Saxon representation of French pop was born: vacuous and embarrassignly inauthentic, a colonised music that eternally misses the point." Ibid., 30.
[13] What Olivier Cachin calls "l'outil" ("the tool"). (Olivier Cachin in France Inter's *Là-bas si j'y suis*, November 24, 2005.)

but to express matters pertinent to their situation. They "immediately found a … way of using the existing dialect, i.e. verlan."[14]

In 1988, Radio Nova started playing the music of the young French singer MC Solaar. [15, 16] "The release of the compilation album *Rapattitude* (1990) marked the beginning of French rap's meteoritic rise,"[17] propelling NTM, Assassin, EJM, TonTon David to national attention.[18]

"The deregulated FM stations," however, also "provided the perfect medium for the promotion of Anglo-American music."[19] "From small beginnings, the majority [of radios] formed nationwide commercial networks,"[20] and "it became fashionable to denigrate the provinciality of the indigenous French output."[21] To counteract this American invasion, culture minister Jacques Toubon passed a law through parliament

[14] Ibid. Generally speaking, verlan, is based on reversing the order of syllables in French words. "Là où il y avait des ghettos aux Etats-Unis, [le rap] a parlé des cités, a tout de suite trouvé un langage. Il a tout de suite trouvé un langage, une façon d'utiliser l'argot qu'on avait, c'est à dire le verlan et de transposer, non pas, la situation américaine mais simplement l'outil. C'est une musique qui vient des quartiers, qui est faite pour parler des problèmes qu'il y a dans les ghettos, et nous on va faire pareil en France. Pas comme les Américains le disent, mais comme les Américains le font, c'est à dire juste le modèle, de se dire, voilà, nous aussi on a des choses à dire, nous aussi on a des problème dans nos quartiers et on va en parler de la même façon."

[15] Solaar had just graduated from high school.

[16] Olivier Cachin, "MC Solaar," in *La chanson française et francophone*, eds. Pierre Saka and Yann Plougastel (Paris: Larousse, 1999), 325.

[17] David L. Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2003), 55.

[18] Sascha Verlan, "Hip Hop & Business," (Stuttgart: PONS online, n.d.), http://www.pons.de/speziell/ausbild/hiphop/bkground/business.htm (accessed December 13, 2005).
" 'Rapattitude' bedeutete für viele Gruppen in Frankreich den Durchbruch: Suprême NTM, Assassin, EJM, TonTon David, sie alle bekamen in den Wochen nach der Veröffentlichung einen Major-Deal. Bald darauf folgte IAM, und Frankreich erlebte in den frühen 90er Jahren seinen ersten Rap-Boom." "Rapattitude signalled the breakthrough for many French groups: Suprême NTM, Assassin, EJM, TonTon David, in the weeks following the release they all signed a contract with a major label. IAM followed almost immediately and France experienced in the early 90s its first Rap Boom."

[19] Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: the French singer-songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the present day*. (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 217.

[20] David L. Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2003), 158.

[21] Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: the French singer-songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the present day* (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 217.

(December 1993) imposing a 40% quota of French music, on all radio stations.[22] "A number of stations were able to use French-language rap to make up the percentage."[23] Station Skyrock, in particular, shifted its programming squarely to rap, experiencing a welcome rise in audience levels, and becoming the flagship station for rap.[24]

Politicians and intellectuals were also quick to promote rap. For many, rappers represented the most recent development in the genre of *Chanson*. Peter Hawkins, for instance, devotes the last chapter of his book *Chanson*, to rapper MC Solaar. *Chanson*, as Peter Hawkins notes, "is a tradition that goes back to the Middle Ages, and probably beyond… *Chanson* has always been a kind of barometer of popular taste, a reflection of a period, and this is as true today as it ever was."[25]

In his description, Hawkins also mentions the close link between *Chanson* and poetry.[26] The connection is particularly evident in rap, which arguably straddles both genres (declaiming poetry in a rhythmic fashion closer to music, but eliminating the melodic element).

Rap fit readily into the model of *Chanson*. "The idea of declaiming texts rather than singing them was widely practiced by Léo Ferré and Gainsbourg."[27] Because French rap employed French lyrics, it immediately garnered support from politicians. For them,

> "[…] the popularity of world music and later hip-hop proved especially fortuitous. World music could be promoted as a symbol of multiculturalism and inter-ethnic solidarity, which [culture minister Jack Lang] was keen to represent as contemporary expressions of

[22]David L. Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2003), 56 and Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: the French singer-songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the present day*. (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 217.
[23] David L. Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2003), 56.
[24] Anonymous, "L'histoire du hip-hop," (n.d.), http://rapconnexion.free.fr/dossiers.php (accessed 10 December, 2005).
[25] Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: the French singer-songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the present day*. (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 3-4.
[26] Ibid, 4.
[27] Ibid, 207.

> French republicanism. This was a politically painless response to metropolitan France's ethnic conflicts at a time when the National Front was growing in strength. [Lang described the Gipsy Kings] as the very symbol of French culture. Rap lent itself equally well to such symbolism … Justifying his support in the Assembly, Lang described hip-hop as 'a phenomenon of civilization' which at its best draws unconsciously on the *commedia dell'arte*; while various commentators readily held up some French rap (MC Solaar, IAM) as a form of contemporary, urban poetry. This rap could be represented as being as much a continuation of the French oral tradition as *chanson* and perfectly compatible with a European literary cultural heritage."[28]

Jacques Toubon (Jack Lang's right wing successor) "celebrated [M.C. Solaar] in a speech to the French National Assembly as an exemplary illustration of the vitality of the French language and Francophone culture."[29]

While MC Solaar was "intellectual" and "reassuringly French,"[30] and the members of IAM were seen as "minstrels of Marseilles *métissage*,"[31] groups such as NTM,[32] Ministère AMER[33] and Assassins represented a far more aggressive strand, speaking angrily about life in French suburbs, through songs that attacked the police, the government, and the French state.[34]

Songs such as Ministère AMER's "Brigitte Femme de Flic" (1992), which describes in very graphic terms the sexual experiences of a policeman's wife with the black people her husband spends his day hunting down, the song "Sacrifice de Poulets"[35] ("Cop Sacrifice," 1995, also by Ministère AMER) which calls for the ritualistic slaughter

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[28]David L. Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2003), 144-145.
[29] Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: the French singer-songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the present day*. (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 207.
[30] Ibid., 204.
[31] *Métissage* = mixing of cultures; Pierre Saka and Yann Plougastel, eds. *La chanson française et francophone*, (Paris: Larousse, 1999), 99.
[32] NTM stands for "Nique ta mère" ("screw your mother), (Ibid., 205). "Formed in 1989 in Saint-Denis, Seine-Saint-Denis, by Didier Morville (Joey Starr) and Bruno Lopes (Kool Shen) … diametrically opposed to the poetry of MC Solaar or the stylistic devices of IAM." (Ibid., 352.) "The most militant group" (Olivier Cachin in France Inter's *Là-Bas si j'y suis*, November 24, 2005.)
[33] "Founded in 1989 by Stomy Bugsy, Passi, Doc Gyneco, Hamed Daye, DJ Ghetch, Kenzy" (Pierre Saka and Yann Plougastel, eds. *La chanson française et francophone*, (Paris: Larousse, 1999), 328.)
[34] David L. Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2003), 56.
[35] A song which was used as part of the soundtrack to Matthieu Kassowitz's film *La Haine*.

of policemen, and "Qu'est-ce qu'on attend pour foutre le feu" ("What are we waiting for to set everything ablaze," 1995) by NTM all caused a scandal, and lead to the groups being taken to court. Such works were "banned from the air, "[36] and the policemen who sued were allotted large compensations.[37]

Many French people are proud of the critical and vindictive tradition of *Chanson*. Upon news of Grosdidier's censorship move, Daniel Mermet, the left-leaning director of *Là-bas si j'y suis*, an afternoon program on national radio France Inter, invited rap scholar Oliver Cachin for a special program which he introduced with the following comment:

> Yes! An impure song is drenching our microgrooves.[38] It hasn't escaped you: a group of elected officials, deputies and senators are starting a war against anti-French, anti-white racism, and are not hesitating to wave the scissors of censorship, threatening to sue a number of rap groups for violent and provocative lyrics. This is the next page in the long story of the hammer and the butterfly, of power versus chanson, from Béranger to Eugène Pottier, from Vian to Brassens.[39]

Mermet places rap groups in an illustrious lineage of once controversial but now revered *Chanson* figures. The oldest member in Mermet's list, is the chansonnier Pierre Jean Béranger (1780-1857), whose bawdy and antireligious songs landed him in jail, from which he emerged all the more popular.[40] Like Mermet, Claude Duneton finds

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[36] David L. Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2003), 56.
[37] Olivier Cachin in France Inter's *Là-Bas si j'y suis*, November 24, 2005. (Compensations were large by French standards: 30,000 FF is approximately $6,000.)
[38] Here, Mermet ironically transforms the final line of the refrain from the French national anthem, *La Marseillaise:* which goes "Qu'un sang impur abreuve nos sillons!" ("Let an impure blood soak the grooves in our fields!")
[39] Daniel Mermet, "Par bonheur ils n'en avaient pas," the November 24, 2005 edition of France Inter *"Là Bas si j'y suis.*" "Eh oui ! Vous le savez, un chant impur abreuve nos micro-sillons. Ça ne vous a pas échappé : un groupe d'élus, députés et sénateurs, partent en guerre contre le racisme anti-France, contre le racisme anti-blanc, et n'hésitent pas à brandir les ciseaux des censeurs en menaçant de poursuivre en justice plusieurs groupes de rap pour des paroles violentes et provocantes. Et c'est là la suite de la longue histoire du marteau et du papillon, du pouvoir contre la chanson de Béranger à Eugène Pottier, de Vian à Brassens."
[40] Claude Duneton, *Histoire de la chanson française de 1780 à 1860* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998), 691-753.

similarities between Béranger and George Brassens (1921-1975) noting their "immoderate taste for independence."[41] Brassens also authored bawdy songs, as well as works critical of the police and the church.[42]

Eugène Pottier (1816-1897) wrote, among other revolutionary songs, the lyrics of "L'internationale,"[43] which became the hymn of communism. Boris Vian (1920-1959) is the author of the song "Le déserteur," an open letter to De Gaulle in which he declares his opposition to the war in Algeria, and his intention to dodge the draft.[44]

The incendiary part of all these songs lies unequivocally in the lyrics, and the music plays a secondary role by comparison. Yet, Louis-Jean Calvet suggests that the Italian translation of the lyrics for "L'internationale" were badly suited to the music (which had been composed to set the original French lyrics) and that this might have handicapped the development of communism in Italy![45] A delicate symbiosis between the lyrics and the music must therefore exist in order to ensure a song's effectiveness. Though a large part of the artistry of rap lies in the poetry of the lyrics, the musical aspect deserves a closer look.

Going back to the origins of rap, we discover that the music preceded the words; DJs created music using sampling and scratching techniques. Over time, however,

> "MCs, or rappers as they became known, [were] added by DJs in order to present a more exciting and professional show to volatile audiences. Inevitably, as they developed their art, the rappers became a focal point of events held in school gymnasiums, clubs and parks. Although DJs, dancers and graffiti artists were considered as equal participants within

[41] Ibid., 699.
[42] Pierre Saka and Yann Plougastel, eds. *La chanson française et francophone*, (Paris: Larousse, 1999), 156.
[43] Ibid., 110.
[44] Ibid., 130.
[45] Louis-Jean Calvet, *Chanson et Société* (Paris: Payot, 1981), 128 ff.

> hip hop culture, the release of the first rap records in 1979 shifted the balance in favour of vocalists."[46]

Thus, although rap evolved from a genre that only included music, the lyrics eventually overshadowed it. The music in rap songs goes nevertheless beyond being a simple rhythmic background.

A DJ builds the background of rap songs by looping a musical segment that is introduced at the beginning of the song (a one-bar segment in "R.A.P.", a two-bar segment in "Les flammes du mal", "Brigitte femme 2", and "36 Quai", a four-bar segment in "FranSSe").

Like most songs in recent popular or commercial music, the accompaniments for the songs in this study are in 4/4 meter. The sample also shows uniformity of tempo: between 90 and 100 beats per minute.[47]

Over the rhythmic grid formed by the initial loop, the DJ creates larger groupings by adding events at regular intervals (e.g. in "R.A.P.", an ocarina sample occurs every 8 measures). The first loop in "Les flammes du mal" (synthetic strings) fades in and out throughout the song, replaced by a "counter-loop" (i.e. a loop of the same length, introduced over the original loop, that is in the same key or melodically compatible). Because of this process, pieces remain in the same key throughout. Furthermore, apart from "FranSSe," which is based on a longer loop containing two chords, all of the songs remain on one chord. The constant loops throughout the song, and the ensuing tonal

[46] David Toop, "Rap," *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy, http://www.grovemusic.com (accessed 10 December 2005).
[47] "Les Flammes" and "FranSSe" at 90 beats per minutes (bpm), "36 Quai" and "R.A.P." at 96 bpm, and "Brigitte femme 2" at 98 bpm.

monotony help convey a sense of stasis well suited to express the claustrophobia of the inhabitants of the *cités*.[48]

The songs in our sample are all based on a similar scale: a minor scale with a melodic pedal on the 5th degree.[49] Melodies built on $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{5}$ pervade all the songs (e.g. the siren sound in "36 Quai"). The refrain of "Les flammes du mal," the only song in which the rappers clearly sing pitches, once again uses the same scale degrees: [B minor: on G] "sur le bitume l'engre- [on F#] nage se déroule" / "[on G] les flammes de l'enfer vu qu'le [on F#] paradis n'est pas."[50]

The DJ builds a musical background from approximately six short motives[51] which, due to the looping technique, always display the same timbral, melodic, and rhythmic characteristics. Most of these motives are exposed by the end of the introduction, and all of them are introduced by the end of the first verse. The DJ does not bring in new ideas past that point, and although the fading in and out of these elements achieves textural variety, the most musically interesting part of a song occurs before the end of the first verse. (This makes sense: it is important not to distract listeners from the text.)

In "Les flammes du mal," "FranSSe," and "36 Quai," the DJ withholds the entrance of the drums until the beginning of the first verse of text. This is because all

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[48] *Cités* are immigrant ghettos in the suburbs of French cities.

[49] If we consider this pedal tone to be the tonic, the scale is phrygian. "FranSSe" is in E minor (the flat II chord implies E phrygian). "36 Quai" is in A flat minor (pedal on the 5th degree, E flat), minor being implied by a flattened 6th. Although it never ever goes to an A flat chord, the piece sounds more like it is based on a V chord, than in E flat phrygian. "RAP" is in E flat minor (pedal on 5th degree, B flat). Here again, the minor implied by a flattened 6th (in the ocarina). "Les Flammes" is in B minor (with a pedal on 5th degree, F#). "Brigitte femme 2" is in B flat minor (with, interestingly enough, a pedal on the tonic).

[50] This, incidentally, is reminiscent of the medieval formulas for the recitation of psalms: chants which, like rap, "lie at the border between speech and song."(Donald Jay Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music 5th edition* (New York: Norton, 1996), 44.)

[51] For instance, "Brigitte Femme 2" has the following six components: 1) high piano vamp (left), 2) high piano note (center), 3) percussion, 4) female vocals, 5) lower piano vamp (right), and 6) string bass.

three songs feature a string sound, a timbre that would be overpowered by an excess of percussion. “Brigitte Femme 2” avoids drums altogether, to maintain a relaxed mood. Conversely, “R.A.P.,” which does not have a constant melodic loop, introduces the drums at the onset.

The textural device that consists in dropping the accompaniment completely, creating a temporary vacuum, appears in each of the songs in the sample. This occurs at the end of “FranSSe,” when the soloist raps the odd disclaimer that concludes the piece (“When I talk about France, I don’t mean the French people, but the leaders of the French state.”) unaccompanied.

Accompaniments consist of a combination synthesized sounds, and, following the DJ tradition, samples from pre-existing recordings.[52, 53] “Brigitte femme 2,” with its piano and vocals, along with “36 Quai,” with its brass and string, feature mostly samples of acoustic sounds. On the other side of the spectrum, “FranSSe” predominantly uses synthesized sounds.

Three of the songs in the sample employ recorded “quotes” from movies or the radio. “Brigitte femme 2” features a clip from a radio news broadcast, including the interview of a policeman. “36 Quai” starts with a recorded quote (undetermined source – perhaps from a movie) and concludes with yet another radio news clip. “Les flammes du mal” includes an excerpt (“vas-y baisse les yeux, petite salope,” followed by a broken bottle sound), probably from the movie *Ma 6-T va crack-er*. As in this last example from “Les flammes du mal”, sound effects appear in other songs (e.g. the gun and machine gun sounds near the end of “R.A.P.”).

[52] Ian Peel, “Scratching,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy, http://www.grovemusic.com (accessed 13 December 2005).
[53] It is unlikely, for instance, that the group 113 hired brass musicians for “36 Quai”.

In “FranSSe,” the DJ introduces a number of elements that doesn’t appear to be subjected to the rigidity of the loop (chimes, electronic “triangles” and “bubbles,” sirens, cinematic “unsheathing sound”). Other sounds provide variety through repetition in subtle ways. In “R.A.P,” for instance, a “hospital beep” remains unpredictable (because it doesn’t align well with the rhythmic grid, and thus remains fresh). Careful listening reveals that the two-measure loop In “Brigitte femme 2,” in the high piano part (left), is in fact an eight-measure loop. While these subtle sources of variety operate arguably on a subconscious level, they help maintain freshness in the music.

This music’s medium is the recorded sound; the performance is the playing of a recording through headphones, a boom box, or car speakers. This permits the DJ to manipulate the music electronically. In “36 Quai,” for instance, the brass chord occurring after the word “Benidorm” is truncated (with a sharp attack). Sound filters or frequency modulation create the eeriness in the string sound at the beginning of “Les flammes du mal.”

More common devices such as reverb, echo, and panning effects also appear throughout these songs. In all of the songs in the sample, the solo singer is panned[54] to the center. During refrains, when more than one person is rapping, the panning spreads out (e.g. the refrains in “36 Quai”) and becomes at times radical (e.g. in “Les flammes du mal” and “R.A.P,” where each voice comes out of only one speaker). This provides clarity, but also a sudden sense of space, (and a more powerful texture). The DJ employs wide panning for a number of other, shorter word simultaneities (e.g. in “R.A.P.”: on the

[54] “Audio panning is the movement of various sound elements between multiple speakers.” Mark Long, in “Asia’s Sound Decisions,” http://www.mlesat.com/Articl17.html (accessed 6 April, 2006). A sound panned in the center appears to be coming from a point situated in the middle of the two speakers (or earphones).

word “Bastringue”). The low synthesizer sound in “R.A.P.” also feels more spacious thanks to the use of stereo.

The component motives of the accompaniment always appear panned in the exact same angles throughout the song (e.g. the three piano components in “Brigitte femme 2”). “R.A.P.” features a special stereo effect on the ocarina: every note is panned differently, with a quick right-left-right-left succession. Stereo boosts certain cinematic effects such as the left-to-right “unsheathing of blade” swooshing sound in “R.A.P.” (the same effect appears on the “echo” at the end of each recorded section, in “Brigitte femme 2”).

Reverb gives a sense of distance to a sound. A recorded sound with little reverb, such as the voice of the soloist at the beginning of “R.A.P.,” gives a sense of great proximity, a common stylistic feature of rap. Reverb provides contrast and also plays an ornamental role. Note for instance how the “s” sounds in “Brigitte femme 2” are emphasized using reverb (e.g. on the words “commissaire”, “gangster”, and “vicelar”). The reverb is much less pronounced on the words “soir” and “lascar,” no doubt in order to transition more smoothly to the sound world of the mono, lower-quality, radio sample that comes next. Indeed, when the refrain is sung the second time, it does not precede a radio quote, and the DJ is able to apply strong reverb to the “s” in “lascar.” The “s” sounds are also emphasized in “36 Quai” (“balance”). This idea is developed in “R.A.P.” where a cymbal sound underlines the alliterative series: “dans nos slips / toujours un revolver a proxi / 6 trous de balle / si tu joues tu risques une balle dans le coccyx.” (Or should it be “coke-6”?)

The echo effect only appears prominently in the oldest song of the set, “Brigitte femme 2” (1994), perhaps because more recent taste would perceive it to be cheesy. In

fact, it is likely that the echo effect was already perceived to be cheesy back in 1994, since it is applied to the last words of the policeman (who is being ridiculed in the song).

The rapping itself can be analyzed from a purely musical standpoint, because the words form sound patterns (as we have seen above, with the alliterative passage), and contribute much of the rhythmic and textural interest in a piece.

Over (and probably thanks to) the very strict grid set up by the loop, the rappers deliver the text in a fashion that is rhythmically free, occasionally adopting the natural rhythm of speech.

The relentless delivery of the stanzas counteracts the long interval between each refrain (four stanzas between each refrain in "Les flammes du mal" and six before the first refrain in "36 Quai"). This creates a temporally more balanced form than would initially appear from looking at the text alone.

A number of characteristic textural effects take advantage of the multiple singers:[55] (1) singers trade off different parts of a sentence (e.g. in "36 Quai": "on m'reproche des transits" – "entre l'Espagne et la Hollande"), (2) different sentences overlap slightly (e.g. in "Les Flammes": "2-1" overlaps with "Passi étudie le terrain"; in "FranSSe": the end of "Ne t'étonne pas de perdre ta vie pour un port d'arme" overlaps with the beginning of the refrain), (3) a second singer immediately repeats a word for emphasis (e.g. in "FranSSe": "consistance," "assistance," "radis"; in "R.A.P.": "Baltringue"), (4) a second singer introduces quick comments (e.g. in "Les Flammes": "olé"; in "36 Quai": "uh hunh," "eh, eh," "ouais, ouais," a growling "a"), (5) a second singer doubles the soloist: (a) suddenly, on a given syllable, on the final part of a word (e.g. in "FranSSe": "hospitalité"), (b) on given words (e.g. in "FranSSe": "avorté," "de

[55] Since "Brigitte Femme 2" is a essentially solo song, it will not exhibit any of these effects.

Gaulle"; in "R.A.P.": "pas mal de M.C. à pendre"; these words tend to be at the end of sentences), (c) for sections of sentences and entire sentences (e.g. in "FranSSe": "mal digéré," "menottes à la main"; in "Les flammes du mal": "dans le quartier"), and (d) during refrains (in all songs), (6) simultaneous delivery of two different texts (e.g. at the end of "Les flammes du mal": the refrain repeats ad infinitum, over which new lyrics are declaimed – since the refrain is predictable, it doesn't get in the way of understanding the new lyrics). These textural devices add variety and interest to the song, in the same way as with choral songs.

This overview of the conventions and devices used in the music rap demonstrates that despite the strict limitations of the genre, DJs adopt a large number of tools to maintain variety and contrast throughout their pieces. Yet, the music goes beyond mere decoration. A review of each song in turn will provide insights on what the music might be expressing.

"Brigitte femme 2" (1994) is Ministère AMER's response to the uproar that followed "Brigitte femme de flic" (1992). Both songs tell the same story, but the second one is greatly simplified and entirely purged of the earlier song's obscenities. The sanitized version goes as follows:

> "The wives of police chiefs
> Want to have their gangster,
> An Arab or a Black,
> Vicious in bed.
>
> The wives of police chiefs
> Ask their husbands
> To bring back every night
> A thug in their bed."

The piano and vocal background in "Brigitte Femme 2" paint a relaxed and exotic set. The song starts with a recording of a radio news broadcast, discussing the police's

reaction to "Brigitte femme de flic." The refrain comes in (with its comparatively tame content, translated above), sung by a tenor voice infused with vibrato (reminiscent of the singers of 1980's love ballads). The second verse is the interview of a policeman, reacting to the 1992 song ("…literally a call to anti-cop hatred.")[56]

The voices of the concerned journalist and the outraged policeman are used in place of what would be the rapped verse. Indeed, they fulfill the role of the freer element in the song: the policeman stutters, creating a rap rhythm of its own, a rhythm completed at the end of his sentences by an echo effect on the last word ("équivoque" and "l'état").

The song pits, comically, albeit unfairly, the recorded "over-reaction" to the old song, against the tame summarization of the new one, delivered over the peaceful background. The use of *yaourt*[57] in the vocal part (non-sensical syllables intended to sound like English) in "Brigitte Femme 2" contributes to the song's humorous affect.

The eerie string sound in the introduction of "Les flammes du mal," along with a murky organ in mid-register sets a sickly mood. The looped vocals would alleviate that sense if their repetitive melody didn't give a sense of flippancy, conveying the message that the hellish chaos of the *banlieues* is routine.

Similarly, the immediate onset of the drum in "R.A.P" which set a serious, perhaps even violent mood, is destroyed by the periodical appearance of the playful and simplistic ocarina riff. The low synthesizer sound lends itself to opposing interpretations: while it creates a massive and powerful effect, it is also reminiscent of now out-of-fashion synthesizer music from the 1980's (such as Jean-Michel Jarre's *Révolutions*). The

[56] "…un veritable appel à la haine anti-flic."
[57] Cece Cutler, "Chanter en Yaourt: Pop Music and Language Choice in France," in *Global Pop, Local Language*, eds. Harris M. Berger and Michael Thomas Carrol (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 329.

seriousness of the lyrics leads one to favor a direct interpretation. Unless the synthesizer timbre has returned in favor, the intended audience for this piece must not be sensitive to its rawness. The gunshot samples (with their sleek reverb, and "laser" whistling) sound as though they were excerpted from a video game, and the little "hospital beep" evokes television programs such as *E. R.* The rich sonic landscape of this song betrays a catering to adolescents.

The completely electronic accompaniment of "FranSSe" creates a sense of dryness. The raw synthesized sounds do have some of the same affect as those in "R.A.P.," they are, however, used more consistently here. As in "Les flammes du mal," the song features a simplistic melodic loop, which again illustrates the sense of a nagging tedium. At the same time, because it's a childish melody in the upper register, it doesn't sound entirely depressing.

"FranSSe" is the only song in the set which explores the possibility of varying the refrain upon each iteration (the last one expanding the criticism from France to Europe). At the end of song, when the accompaniment drops out, and the soloist declaims his last verse (which I referred to earlier as his "disclaimer"), one can hear the accompaniment continuing faintly, perhaps as a result of the microphone picking up the accompaniment coming out of the singer's headphones. This subtle flaw may reveal an intentionally home-made approach to producing albums. Such an approach could also explain the choice of having an accompaniment exclusively made up of synthesized sounds.

Brassy chords and a 16^{th} note harpsichord accompaniment which evokes the soundtrack of the early James Bond films punctuate the song "36 Quai". This works on two levels: it successfully creates tension and suspense, but also comes across as a

parody, not only because the style is now dated, but because the music is associated with an unflattering portrait of the French police. The text even suggests twice that the police is inspired by television (indirectly with "ça s'prend pour des super-flics", and directly with "T'es pas dans 'Miama Vice' "). The only melodic motive is a slowly oscillating half-step, which evokes police sirens. The string punctuations also evoke standard Arabic pop music accompaniments.

The music used to accompany the acerbic lyrics, does not, in and of itself, match the text's potency. In today's climate, almost a century after the outrage surrounding the reception of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* it is hard to imagine what purely musical, or non-verbal sound, could elicit much concern.[58] The music in rap songs is no exception to this.

Music sometimes conveys entirely new meanings, or evokes moods and images not directly explicit in the text. In "Brigitte femme 2," in particular, the music takes on an important role in the dialogue between the rapper-turned-lamb, and the policeman. In most of our examples, the light mood of the little melodies finds itself at odds with the anger in the text, and the music becomes ironic.

Most importantly, this investigation reveals that even when music is relegated to a relatively minor position, subjected to strict conventions (loops), DJs employ a myriad of ways to create variety and contrast, and to enhance the text.

Two components require further study for a complete picture of the works at hand. Here, of course, I have purposefully ignored the meaning of the text, the only thing the politicians consider (although they do not even take the time to read the entire text, and prefer to pick and choose sections which will rile up the public). They choose to

[58] As a matter of fact, part of the scandal with *Rite of Spring* was attributed to the choreography and the costumes.

ignore the tension in a song like "FranSSe," where two diametrically opposed messages are juxtaposed: on the one hand "we should clean up our messes,"[59] "you should work with us,"[60] and on the other "to hell with the state."

The other component is the visual and theatrical aspect, as topic so important that Louis-Jean Calvet devotes an entire chapter of his seminal book *Chanson et Société* to the gestures and mannerisms of singers,[61] and another chapter to the "places of chanson" (from the street, to the stage, to the television).[62] In the introduction of his book on *Chanson*, Peter Hawkins immediately notes:

> "There is an added mythical quality to the output of artists such as Piaf, Brassens or Brel… The magical and mysterious charisma of stage presence has a lot to do with this, as does the heady excitement of the live concert performance, which arguably shares many of the features of a religious meeting. Such factors cannot be ignored in any analysis of the genre: one has to take account of the mythical dimension of an artist's persona."[63]

For rap artists, two aspects come to mind. First, that of dance: in his analysis of MC Solaar, Peter Hawkins notes that break dance is "a feature of the genre."[64] And secondly, the visual aspects present in accompanying video clips. These would in turn provide more clues as to how to interpret the music.

[59] "Nettoie la merde qui se trouve devant chez toi."
[60] "Faudrait qu'ils fassent avec nous, faudrait qu'ils construisent avec nous."
[61] Louis-Jean Calvet, *Chanson et Société*, (Paris: Payot, 1981), 47.
[62] Ibid., 63.
[63] Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: the French singer-songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the present day* (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 5.
[64] Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: the French singer-songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the present day* (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 206.

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