Evolutions of *engagement*: Renaud and *la chanson engagée* in twenty-first century France

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Renaud Pierre Manuel Séchan, or Renaud as he is more commonly known, is a prolific *auteur-compositeur-interprète* (*ACI*) [singer-songwriter] of the *chanson* tradition,[[1]](#endnote-1) who rose to fame in the mid-1970s and who remains popular today. At the time of writing this chapter, Renaud’s most recent studio album was released in 2009, entitled *Molly Malone – Balade irlandaise*; despite a mixed critical reception, the album entered the French album chart in the number one spot and reached double-platinum status in just one month. In 2011, the compilation/cover album *La Bande à Renaud* was released and proved extremely popular, entering at the top of the album chart in its first week of release and selling over 100,000 copies by the end of the second week. A *Volume 2* tribute album was released later that year. And in 2015, two new Renaud compilation collections were released, *Les 50 plus belles chansons* and *Les 100 plus belles chansons 1985-2006*.

Biographers, journalists and popular music critics seek to emphasise Renaud’s place in the *chanson* subgenre, with all the legitimising connotations that this term carries.[[2]](#endnote-2) These connotations, of literariness, authenticity, hard work, poetry, education, and ‘the best’ that French popular music has to offer, are derived from the rhetoric that surrounds *chanson*. This rhetoric conceptualises authenticity within French popular music through the creation of contrasts between genres, such as *chanson* and pop, as well as between singers and performers, fans, techniques, instrumentation, and song content. The resultant binaries of what does and does not constitute authentic music produce a series of hierarchies within popular music, which place that which is constructed by the rhetoric as ‘inauthentic’ firmly at the bottom of scale and that which is perceived as authentic and thus legitimate (i.e. *chanson*) at the top. This is *chanson* in its purest, most idealised form, as most commonly associated in *chanson* discourse with the works of Georges Brassens, Jacques Brel and Léo Ferré, the ‘holy trinity’ of *chanson*,[[3]](#endnote-3) and which is said to signify ‘an art form, a crafted and polished piece of work, which represent[s] the hard labour and skill of its composer’.[[4]](#endnote-4) In addition, David Looseley speaks of *chanson* having ‘a national, para-literacy legitimacy’, and points out that ‘singer-songwriters […] enjoy a special status because they have a double legitimacy within French republican culture: their work is both poetic and popular [ie of the people], aesthetically demanding yet democratic’.[[5]](#endnote-5) It is thanks to the rhetoric which surrounds *chanson* that these are the connotations which the subgenre now evokes and it is into this tradition that Renaud is placed.[[6]](#endnote-6) But his evident popularity, continuing commercial success and star status in twenty-first century France introduce a potential challenge to Renaud’s *ACI* status, since commerciality is constructed as inauthentic within *chanson* discourse.

Moreover, biographers and writers have sought to classify Renaud as ‘un poète moderne qui a su s’imposer dans le panthéon de la chanson française comme un chanteur à la fois sensible et engagé, à l’image d’un Brassens ou d’un Léo Ferré’.[[7]](#endnote-7) According to such writers, Renaud is the first authentic ‘chanteur populaire’ that France has really had,[[8]](#endnote-8) and is given the moniker of ‘poète éternel’,[[9]](#endnote-9) like Brassens before him. The description of Renaud as poet, sensitive and politically engaged singer, authentic and popular singer, and the new Brassens or Ferré, demonstrates the weight of expectation that is attached to the label *chanson*, due to the rhetoric outlined above. It also illustrates the preoccupation with *engagement* that exists in the discourse surrounding Renaud. In order to classify Renaud as an *ACI* of the *chanson* tradition, it must be possible to see him as an authentic poet of the people but also to identify the nature of his *engagement* through his desire to comment on society, thus emulating the greats of the *chanson* genre. In his volume on Brassens, Michel Beaufils explores the nature of *engagement* in *chanson*, in order to contextualise and analyse what he deems to be Brassens’s personal approach to *engagement*. The characteristics of the *chanson engagée* which emerge from this analysis and are pertinent here are informed by the work of such singers as Guy Béart, Boris Vian, Jean Ferrat and Léo Ferré. We learn that the *chanson engagée* may: comment on current affairs; constitute open attacks on the world of politics; defend the individual; perpetuate nonconformism and anticlericalism; and even engage in *non-engagement*. Not all songs will exhibit all these characteristics, according to Beaufils’ analysis. Nevertheless, it is within this tradition that Renaud is placed and these are the characteristics that make it possible to label him *engagé*.[[10]](#endnote-10) Again,? However, we must question how Renaud’s perceived *engagement* squares with his status of commercially successful entertainer and star. This chapter therefore takes as its focus the nature of *engagement* within *chanson* as represented by Renaud. It exploresn the lyrics and music of his songs in order to establish the nature of Renaud’s *engagé* status, and then traces the evolving significance of this label in the increasingly commercialised context of the twenty-first century through a consideration of a range of press articles written by and about Renaud. The chapter thus examines the relationship between *engagement* and *chanson* in contemporary France and, by taking into consideration Renaud’s commercial success and star status, offers a redefinition of what it means to be a *chanteur engagé* in twenty-first century France.

Renaud and *engagement*

As we have seen, not only is Renaud conceptualised as an *ACI*, with all the legitimising connotations that that term evokes in French culture, but he is also regularly labelled as *engagé* by biographers and commentators writing about his career, songwriting, and *œuvre*.[[11]](#endnote-11) This approach in turn generates a set of expectations that we have as listeners as regards the nature of Renaud’s songs, performances and persona. Laurent Berthet, for example, explains that, because Renaud draws inspiration from the society in which he lives, it has been possible to label him as ‘un « chroniqueur », une « lampe-témoin », un « observateur » de la société, nationale et internationale’.[[12]](#endnote-12) Such labels suggest that Renaud adopts a passive stance in his desire to engage with society, and thus chooses to merely observe, highlight and record what he sees, without taking the further step of suggesting or promoting societal change. However, according to Berthet, Renaud does go beyond mere observation and in fact becomes *engagé* by entering the public debate, seeking to influence society through his own ‘personal’ interpretation of the situation upon which he is commenting.[[13]](#endnote-13) This, then, is our expectation of Renaud’s perceived *engagement*: that he seeks to effect change within society in his presentation of the world around him, with? song as his means of entering the debate.

As far content and lyrics are concerned, then, Renaud’s apparent ability to observe the minutiae of everyday life, and to comment on and demonstrate intolerance of ingrained social attitudes and conventions not only places him firmly within the *chanson* tradition but also allows us to perceive him as a *chanteur engagé*, according to Berthet’s definition. In the same vein, Peter Hawkins explains that:

the macro-politics of Renaud’s songs are [...] recognisable [...]: they fit predictably into the marginal, anarchistic tradition of Bruant, Ferré and Brassens. Renaud’s attacks on the institutions of authority are on the whole more direct, probably because recent liberalism has made this possible; but at the same time seasoned with satirical humour in the *chansonnier* style, with the corresponding assumption that all official targets are fair game.[[14]](#endnote-14)

A closer examination of Renaud’s songs (and particularly those from the early part of his career) demonstrates that he does broadly deal with apparently *engagé* subject matter, includingtopics such as urbanisation, segregation, and antimilitarism. His cast of narrators and secondary characters draw on the marginalised of society and include: petty criminals and juvenile offenders (for example ‘C’est mon dernier bal’ (1978); ‘Buffalo débile’ (1978)); down-and-out yobs and street urchins (‘Écoutez-moi, les gavroches’ (1974); ‘La chanson du loubard’ (1977); ‘La java sans joie’ (1974)); rebel youths looking for a fight (‘Marche à l’ombre’ (1980); ‘Baston!’ (1980)); and left-wing anarchists (‘Ravachol’ (1974); ‘Crève salope’ (1982); ‘Société, tu m’auras pas!’ (1974)). Indeed, as far as the character of the narrator is concerned, Renaud’s song lyrics are carefully constructed, both in content and in linguistic references, to establish the character of ‘a working-class Parisian, a revolutionary anarchist who identifies with popular culture, with suburban petty criminals, bikers, punks and drop-outs’.[[15]](#endnote-15) But in the imagination of the listener, this revolutionary, *engagé* anarchist from Paris mergeswith the persona of the singer-songwriter, in part due to the careful management of Renaud’s presentation, particularly on album covers. For example, he is portrayed on the cover of his debut album *Renaud* (also known as *Amoureux de Paname*;1975) as a *paysan* [countryman] of the people, wearing a traditional flat cap and neck tie. For the cover of *Renaud* (also known as *Ma gonzesse*;1979), he is the *loubard* [yobbo] anarchist from the city, wearing black leather and blue denim, who has presumably set fire to what appears to be a Citröen DS, a quintessential ‘myth’ of France,[[16]](#endnote-16) that burns in the background of the photograph. However, this merging is also in part thanks to the recurrent references to the singer-songwriter as the actual narrator of certain songs. The result of this blurring of the fictional narrative voice with the persona of the singer-songwriter is that the perception of Renaud as *chanteur engagé* is reinforced.The use of the narrative ‘je’ underlines this coming together and so, for example, in ‘Société tu m’auras pas!’, the listener believes Renaud the *ACI* to be the narrator, a wandering minstrel, observing and passing comment on French society through the decades. In ‘Où c’est que j’ai mis mon flingue?’ (1980), the singer-songwriter has seemingly become disillusioned with his own persona as he feels *récupéré* [rehabilitated]by the song industry in which he works and is thus apparently rendered incapable of moving his listeners. And in ‘Pourquoi d’abord’ (1980), Renaud the *ACI* is apparently being interviewed about his writing process and takes the opportunity to denounce society and the inherent commercialism of the recording industry, before closing the conversation with a customary punchline that reflects the comment about his song-writing back onto the singer-songwriter, who must respond to the demands of his record label: ‘C’est vrai qu’elle est un peu bâclée | C’est parc’que sur mon disque | Des chansons j’en avais qu’neuf, | Et y m’en fallait dix!’ (ll. 45-48).[[17]](#endnote-17)

Despite the variations of narrative voices across Renaud’s songs, one common feature is the way in which these narrators seek to comment on society and draw the listener’s attention to the shortcomings of those in power through satire and irony. Politicians, the police force, the bourgeoisie and the ‘comfortable’ are all targets for Renaud’s lampooning. In ‘Hexagone’ (1974), for example, we learn that ‘La France est un pays de flics | à tous les coins d’rue y’en a cent | pour faire régner l’ordre public | ils assassinent impunément’ (ll. 13-16),[[18]](#endnote-18) demonstrating the perceived police rule and level of control to which France’s citizens are subjected. Indeed, the whole song is a satire of French consumer-driven society of the 1970s; the relative lack of slang and swear words, which are both so apparent in other songs where they function to create a humorous gap between the subject matter and the narrator thus offering some light relief, in fact reinforces the bitterness of this portrayal. The customary biting humour returns in ‘La bande à Lucien’ (1976), as the narrator meets his old friend, Lucien, a former *soixante-huitard*, only to discover that Lucien has married, had children and has a (good?) job (ll. 42-44). Although Lucien has clearly become comfortable in his abandonment of the ’68 ideals, and thus a target for the narrator’s irony, the joke is also on the narrator, whose zeal for ‘the good old days’ of the ’68 gang, has prevented him from becoming a member of society, unlike Lucien: ‘Eh toi mon vieux, mon pote Lucien, | c’est vrai q’t’habites chez ta belle-doche, | Que t’es marié, que t’as des mioches, | qu’tu travailles pour qu’ils aient du pain? | Tu sais ‘'ai une idée super, | on va former une nouvelle bande, | si tu veux c’est toi qui commandes, | siou-plaît patron, encore une bière...’ (ll. 41-48).[[19]](#endnote-19)

But to what extent is the highlighting through humour and satire of the reality of class divisions, the impact of politics, the control of the state, and the pressure to conform, an example of true *engagement*? Chevandier points out that ‘la contestation culturelle se fit également par l’humour […]. Ce type d’humour destructeur joua un rôle important dans la fin des années 68 et semblait être spécifique à la contestation de gauche’[[20]](#endnote-20) and then concludes that Renaud is very much a part of this tradition. Such an analysis suggests that the use of humour, irony and satire in order to identify the shortcomings of the social status quo is enough to earn one the label of *engagé*. Yet the notion of *contestation culturelle* suggests a change in behaviour or attitude is required, if one is truly to contest the status quo. Indeed, in his analysis of politicized art, Jacques Rancière argues that such work aims at:

disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle. It is the dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations. As a matter of fact, political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an ‘awareness’ of the state of the world. Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification.[[21]](#endnote-21)

It is this ‘sensible or perceptual shock’ that, Rancière argues, produces the undoing of the given systems of meaning within societies, and establishes other ‘networks of the sensible’,[[22]](#endnote-22) or, in other words, other possible reconfigurations of these accepted systems of meaning. In this context, therefore, merely to produce awareness of a situation is not enough to warrant the label *engagé*: a truly ‘political’ (or, in the context of this chapter, *engagé*) piece of art must produce a rupture with what we as an audience expect or feel we know.

In Renaud’s case, the construction of his revolutionary singer-songwriter persona, together with the themes and characters that he presents in his songs, promotes merely an awareness of the cultural, social and political situation in France at the time of his writing. Where Renaud begins to generate ‘rupture’ and thus encourage the reconfiguration of accepted significations associated with French culture, society and politics, is in the way he employs humour to subvert expectation. The customary, unexpected punchlines (for example ‘Je suis une bande de jeunes’ (1977); ‘Ma gonzesse’ (1978)) and self-deprecating and humorous characterisation of the narrator (for example ‘Laisse béton (1975)) rely on the listener’s knowledge of the given systems of meaning within society, in order for the shock of the unexpected outcome, comparison or compliment to challenge that knowledge and allow for the creation of new meanings. In ‘Je suis une bande de jeunes’ (1977), for example, we expect the song to be about a group of *loubards* [yobbos] but then learn that the singer-songwriter in fact is alone. To be part of such a group and thus feel like he conforms to society’s expected role for a young person, the narrator must play all the various characters that would make up a gang. This denouement allows us then to create new meanings of what it means to be young in French society of the 1970s.

Knowledge of the given systems of meaning is also important in regard to Renaud’s use of music. A knowledge of the significance of the *chanson française* leads us to expect that Renaud’s music will adhere to the ‘genre rules’ of *chanson*.[[23]](#endnote-23) According to the critics, this is a genre: in which the text takes precedence over the music; where hard work and artistry is valued over commercial concerns and industry practices; which is an authentic expression of what it means to be French (often in some ineffable way). Traditionally the musical accompaniment is simple, played on acoustic instruments (guitar, double bass, occasionally piano), to showcase lyrics that are complex, cleverly constructed and often said to be forms of contemporary poetry.[[24]](#endnote-24) Yet Renaud is well-known for using a wide range of musical instruments in his songs. He also references a variety of musical styles, including those most obviously associated with *chanson* (incorporating the stereotypical accordion and customary acoustic guitar and double bass), but also Anglophone rock, rhythm ‘n’ blues, American rock ‘n’ roll of the 1950s, country, love ballads, tango, and folk-music. As Hawkins points out, ‘the music of Renaud’s songs is usually fairly simple: a catchy melodic hook and predictable harmonies. The dimension of refinement comes in the extensive use of musical allusion and parody, which interacts with the satirical lyrics: the music is also that of the ironic double take’.[[25]](#endnote-25) This refinement, or what can also be termed musical *métissage*, constitutes a ‘rupture’ in the listener’s expectations and allows a new interpretation of and reaction to the traditional genre of *chanson*: this is another facet of Renaud’s *engagement*.

Renaud and *Charlie Hebdo*

Renaud’s *engagement* is not limited to his songs. During the 1990s, he developed for himself the role of ‘cultural commentator’ through his involvement with the newly re-established satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*. In addition to offering financial support to the newspaper, Renaud wrote a column for the publication in 1992-93 (entitled ‘Renaud bille en tête’), and again in 1995-96 (entitled ‘Envoyé spécial chez moi’). In the context of the discourse outlined previously, which describes Renaud as an *engagé* *ACI* and modern-day poet, this foray into journalism may seem somewhat unexpected. It even arguably constitutes a rupture with how we might expect an *ACI* to behave, given the genre rules for *chanson* suggest that song and song alone be the means of communication for its proponents. However, we must remember that Renaud is also seen as a ‘chroniqueur’, a ‘lampe-témoin’ and an ‘observateur’[[26]](#endnote-26) in his approach to songwriting and, arguably, the move to comment on society from beyond the confines of *chanson* by producing these columns is in line with this conceptualisation of Renaud’s role as *chanteur engagé*. If in a way we might expect this type of journalistic activity from Renaud, it becomes necessary to examine the articles themselves in more depth in order to identify and delineate the *engagement* or ‘rupture’ that these pieces arguably constitute.

If we take as a case study the articles from the column ‘‘Envoyé spécial chez moi’, which were published together as a collection in 1996 and so had a wider potential readership, we discover that the volume asserts that these are ‘des chroniques politiquement incorrectes à consommer sans modération’ in which ‘Renaud nous ouvre les portes de son jardin secret, pour traquer avec humour et tendresse la poésie du quotidien’.[[27]](#endnote-27) The subject matter, then, focuses on events in Renaud’s everyday life: he describes his home life with his wife and daughter, going on tour, his holidays, and meeting his fans in the street. The ‘chronique’ aspect of his writing is clear, and Renaud’s approach in describing the banal events that constitute his everyday life does allow him to sometimes focus on their political consequences. The political is predictably most obvious in the articles which speak both directly and indirectly about France’s political parties, elections and presidents. Yet the trigger for Renaud’s political reflections in these pieces is always something from his personal life. There is the potential for ‘rupture’ here, as the personal enters the political sphere. In ‘Énervé par la colère’ (originally published 26 April 1995), for example, Renaud indirectly describes his frustrations at the election results of 1995 which saw a rise in support for Le Pen and the Far Right, and only a small proportion of the vote go to the Green Party. But the catalyst for his outburst is the fact that ‘je me suis cassé un ongle. […] Celui du doigt du milieu, celui pour Le Pen. Pis pour la plupart des autres candidats aussi’.[[28]](#endnote-28) Renaud’s inability to insult all those candidates with whom he does not agree, humorously due to the fact he has broken his fingernail, becomes a viciously ironic comment on his inability to change the political outlooks and voting preferences of the general public. Significantly, the political comment in this article demonstrates the limitations of Renaud’s *engagement*: the singer-songwriter is unable to effect real change or suggest a different way of behaving and so his only recourse is to insult those who did not vote as he did. But in doing so, a space is created for the reader to begin to re-think the status quo and to reconfigure their personal relationship with political parties. Although Renaud’s *engagement* may appear limited, by creating a space for the reader to re-evaluate the political status quo and their personal response to it, ‘rupture’ is created which in fact empowers the reader to become *engagé* and thus delimits the singer-songwriter’s *engagement*.

Another example of someone else carrying forward Renaud’s *engagement* is seen in a column that recounts a conversation between Renaud and his wife regarding his refusal to perform in towns that have a *Front National* mayor and/or local government. When a specific example of a way to challenge and reconfigure the status quo is identified, it is offered by Renaud’s wife. She points out a possible solution which allows for a performance in a neighbouring location so as to not penalise or exclude the fans,[[29]](#endnote-29) and thus she takes on the role of the *chanteur engagé* who should otherwise be the one to propose new ways of being and behaving. On the one hand, this demonstrates the limitations of Renaud’s *engagement* whilst, simultaneously on the other, illustrating that *engagement* or ‘rupture’ here is derived from the employment of the customary sardonic punchline, the humorous role-reversals, and the satirical approach to story-telling that we saw in Renaud’s songs.

‘Rupture’ also occurs when we think of these articles in the broader context of Renaud as a well-established *ACI* of *chanson*. As we have already seen, the genre’s rhetoric functions to create a series of binaries that constitute the hierarchy underscoring *chanson*’s authenticity. This rhetoric also generates a set of rules and expectations that govern *chanson* production. Despite originating from the initial debate in the 1950s and 1960s, these rules still remain influential today. They focus on: the potential challenge to *chanson’s* artistic status of the commercialised music industry within which *chanson* must function; the poetic and educational functions of the genre; the complexity of the lyrics over the musical accompaniment; and the prominence of the folkloric and the everyday in the genre. These rules function to legitimise *chanson* as the ideal artistic/musical form and thus suggest that writing and performing *chansons* is the best and even the only acceptable way for an *ACI* to express his sentiments, write poetry and provide a cultural commentary, and to avoid such banal concerns as making money and appealing to fans.

Renaud’s star status within contemporary *chanson* from the 1970s onwards is certainly clear from the high sales figures achieved by his albums, and the large audiences at his arena concerts. Yet such popular appeal could be seen to go against what might be expected of a ‘serious’ *ACI*, given the context of the rhetoric which surrounds *chanson*. Moreover, the decision to allow fans a glimpse into the banal and mundane nature of the life of a singer-songwriter (by writing of a column for *Charlie Hebdo*) arguably confounds the expectation of what it means to be a serious *chanson* singer-songwriter who should allow his art to speak for him. Furthermore, the decision to embrace the commercial nature of being a singer-songwriter and music star is something which *chanson* rhetoric suggests should be avoided. Thus the revelation of the nature of being a performer on tour that we receive as readers of the column ‘Chez la mère à Tito’, which recounts Renaud’s tour of Bosnia in 1995,[[30]](#endnote-30) and the frank and intimate details of Renaud’s life at home with his wife and daughter that we are privy to in pieces such as ‘Rita (chanson d’amour)’,[[31]](#endnote-31) ‘Je parle pas aux legumes!’,[[32]](#endnote-32) and ‘Nique ta bonne mère’,[[33]](#endnote-33) constitute instances of rupture with the *chanson* rhetoric that governs how we expect Renaud to behave and what we expect him to say. Thus the presentation of the quotidian, mundane and banal details of Renaud’s life ‘chez moi’ [at home] allows for a possible reconfiguration of the accepted system of meaning associated with *chanson* and with the *ACI*. In this context, then, these articles can be seen as *engagés* as they produce a rupture with what we as an audience expect or feel we know about Renaud, and with the accepted system that defines star status within *chanson*. As we discover these intimate details about Renaud’s life, so we are encouraged to re-think the role of the singer-songwriter in French society and of the music industry in disseminating information, ideals and values. We thus reconsider the extent to which commercial forms of culture can in fact be considered *engagé*.

Renaud post 2000

Significantly, the rupture that facilitates the re-thinking of the ongoing ‘commercial versus *engagé*’ debate, seen so often in *chanson* rhetoric, also continues to be prevalent in the post 2000 period as far as Renaud is concerned. Indeed, as we will see, the extent to which Renaudhas appeared in the national press, and the subject matter of these news articles, continue to demonstrate new ways of re-evaluating the role of the singer-songwriter and, more broadly, of commercial and industrialised cultural forms in contemporary France. If we accept Renaud to be an exemplary *ACI*, then the ways in which the media has reported on him since 2000 illustrate the extent of the pervasiveness and, conversely, the ‘rupture’ of the *chanson* genre rules as they apply to Renaud, and mediate our understanding of the nature of his *engagement*. In the context of *chanson* and its relationship with the print media in France, Lebrun points out that

Significantly, the enduring esteem for Brassens and the anti-pop conceptualisation of *chanson* were most prevalent in the high-brow press. *Libération*, *Le Monde*, *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *Le Point* all cater for a highly educated readership with sophisticated, intellectual credentials […]. As catalysts of, and vehicles for, elite taste, these publications confirmed, in the early 2000s, the symbolic superiority of *chanson* over *variétés*.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Articles about Renaud from these publications in the 2000s therefore constitute my focus here, as we might expect *chanson* conventions to be reinforced in such articles, thus shedding new light on the extent to which Renaud actually challenges and breaks these conventions and thus is truly *engagé*.

These articles appear at key professional or private moments in Renaud’s life, including the release of new albums (*Boucan d’enfer* in 2002, *Rouge Sang* in 2006 and *Molly Malone* in 2009), box-sets, songs and biographies. For example, in *Le Monde* on August 15 2005, the article ‘Manhattan-Kaboul’ was published. This traced the evolution of the eponymous song and, in particular, the search for a partner with whom Renaud could duet on the single. The article simultaneously recounts the long, artistic journey that was required to produce the final song, and highlights the work and careful reflection that were involved in its production, whilst also stressing the moment of inspiration and luck that was required for the recording – these are elements that are usually overlooked in *chanson* discourse, which instead stresses the necessity of hard work and craft in the process of producing a song. Significantly, we also learn about the commercial appeal of the song, as the journalist Claire Guillot tells us that, unlike many other pop stars who produce successful duets in the form of love songs,

Ce n’est pourtant pas avec une chanson d’amour que Renaud Séchan a atteint le Nirvana commercial: ‘Manhattan-Kaboul’, locomotive de l’album Boucan d’enfer, évoque les attentats du 11 septembre 2001 à New York. Les deux personnages ne s’aiment pas; d’ailleurs ils ne se connaissent même pas et meurent à la fin. Ce qui n’a pas empêché le single de s’écouler à plus de 500 000 exemplaires, et l’album de dépasser les 2 millions.[[35]](#endnote-35)

The information presented here functions as a ‘rupture’ with the constitutive discourse of *chanson*. Rather than ignoring the success of this *engagé* single, the journalist places this information at the start of the piece, thus focusing the reader’s attention on the commercial nature of this particular song. The song writing? process is then the focus of the rest of the piece, but the traditional hierarchy at play within *chanson* discourse (that places commerciality firmly at the bottom of all concerns to do with *chanson*) is here inverted. This inversion constitutes a ‘rupture’ in what we expect of a *chanson* singer-songwriter and his song. This allows a possible reconfiguration of the meaning of the genre for the twenty-first century; a meaning which begins to reconcile the inherent commerciality of *chanson* within the discourse. Renaud’s status as an *engagé ACI* post-2000, then, involves this reconciliation and thus *engagement* as it pertains to Renaud today involves a rupture of the genre rules of *chanson*.

This rupture in expectation regarding the role of an *ACI* is again evident in articles that were published around two specific moments in Renaud’s private life: his divorce and subsequent descent into alcoholism in 2011, and the announcement of a forthcoming album, which triggered another public conflict between the *ACI* and his brother, Thierry Séchan, in 2015. Here, the focus is on Renaud’s private life, and the journalists report in detail on his failed marriage, his use of alcohol, his failing health, and his problematic relationship with his brother. We thus become privy to intimate details about the daily life of the singer-songwriter. For example, in an article published by *Le Nouvel Observateur* in November 2011, in which Thierry Séchan is interviewed about his brother, we learn that, when driving home from a restaurant whilst drunk, Renaud was stopped by the police but rather than arrest the *ACI*, the policemen instead ask him to pose for photographs with them. The article points out the irony of this situation by referencing the lyrics of ‘Où c’est qu’j’ai mis mon flingue?’ (1980) in which the same request is made of the narrator singer-songwriter who proceeds to spit in the faces of the officers and refuses to sign their caps. However, ‘c’était avant que la France s’inquiète de sa déprime et mesure son addiction supposée à son médicament préféré, l'apéro anisé’.[[36]](#endnote-36) Renaud’s star status is reaffirmed in this piece, as we learn that he is not punished for his drink-driving in return for posing for photographs and signing autographs – an ironic inversion of Renaud’s supposed attitude towards the police. However, we also learn of the extent of Renaud’s alcoholism and its dangerous impact on his life and health. These are details that we would not expect to learn about an *ACI*, whose songs should speak for him, as we have seen. The knowledge of such personal details, then, again constitutes a rupture in our perception of the *ACI* and of *chanson*, and encourages new reconfigurations of their meaning through the emphasis on the emotional, personal response to Renaud’s condition that is not normally elicited in *chanson* discourse.[[37]](#endnote-37) Renaud therefore becomes a proponent of a new approach to *chanson*, which disrupts the established way of thinking about the genre. His *engagement* in the twenty-first century represents ‘rupture’ (in Rancière’s terms) with the status quo of *chanson* and thus his status as *chanteur engagé* in present-day France has evolved to take on this new significance.

A similar effect is seen in the articles published in 2015 that outline the very public argument between Renaud and his brother regarding the release of a new studio album (still imminent at the time of writing). The news of this new album broke in June 2015, with various newspapers reporting that Renaud had once again returned to song writing? and to the recording studio. *Libération*, for example, reported:

‘J’ai écrit 14 chansons, je veux les enregistrer vite’, assure l’auteur de *Mistral gagnant*, que le quotidien a très brièvement rencontré à L’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, la commune du Vaucluse où il est désormais installé. D’une voix rauque et un peu chevrotante, le chanteur a confirmé à la mi-journée sur RTL s’être ‘remis à écrire’ depuis ‘quinze jours’.[[38]](#endnote-38)

The good news here is tempered by the description of Renaud’s voice, which recalls his previous struggles with alcoholism and depression. Indeed, this focus remains as the article goes on to quote Thierry Séchan, who explains that for the moment, his brother cannot sing as he has smoked too many cigarettes and drunk too much Pernod. Despite assuring fans that Renaud is well, Séchan goes on to explain that his brother is still drinking and that, in order to be able to record the new album, it is vital for him to see an Ear, Nose and Throat Specialist. By quoting Thierry Séchan, the article emphasises Renaud’s potential loss of talent and ability to sing, his continued use of alcohol, and his mental health, and provides details regarding the *ACI*’s personal life to which we would not expect to be privy in the context of the constitutive discourse of *chanson*. This focus on intimate details and private relationships made public continues in the articles published in late 2015 about Renaud’s new album. For example, in an article entitled ‘Renaud contre Thierry, duel de Séchan’, published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in September 2015, the journalist Sophie Delassein details the argument between Renaud and his brother regarding the comments made in June (quoted by *Libération*), and then goes on to trace in detail the various fallings-out that the two brothers have had in recent years.

Such an approach serves to underscore the star status of Renaud in twenty-first century France. Meyers argues that:

the supposedly ‘true’ intimate and behind-the-scenes details of a celebrity’s private life are of the utmost concern […], as they emphasize the notion of a ‘real’ celebrity […]. Thus, while the fan may recognize that the star seen on screen or stage is a highly constructed ﬁgure, the star is brought close and revealed as a regular person through the media coverage of the details of her private life within celebrity media.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Whilst the notion of the singer-songwriter as ordinary person is one of the pervading discursive constructs within *chanson* discourse, this kind of ‘ordinariness’ does not function in this context as a marker of star status (indeed, notions of stardom and commercial success are largely ignored and even refuted by *chanson* discourse). Yet with Renaud, the focus on his private life functions to re-affirm his star status, which in turn creates ‘rupture’ (in Rancière’s terms) with the expected depiction and function of an *ACI*. This rupture allows us as readers of these articles, listeners of Renaud or fans of *chanson* to begin to reconfigure this depiction and function, thus creating new ways of thinking about the role of *chanson* in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this chapter has demonstrated some of the ways in which *engagement* is redefined in the case of the (discourse surrounding the?) singer-songwriter, Renaud. Moving beyond the common acceptance that Renaud’s songs are *engagées* thanks to their subject matter, it has illustrated that his *engagement* is rooted in the use of humour and musical references to subvert the listener’s expectations, thus producing ‘rupture’ (as conceptualised by Rancière) and allowing other possible reconfigurations of the accepted systems of meaning within the context of *chanson*. Beyond his songs, the way in which Renaud behaves as an *auteur-compositeur-interprète* also produces a ‘rupture’. His writing for *Charlie Hebdo* is one example of the possible reconfiguration of the accepted role of the *ACI*. The attention that Renaud gives in these columns to the minutiae of his everyday life, which then become the focus of more recent press articles about the singer-songwriter, also serves to underscore his star status and appears at odds with his *engagement*. In the context of *chanson* rhetoric, which largely ignores the subjects of stardom and commercial success, the reconciliation which takes place in the discourse surrounding Renaud suggests that his *engagé* status also allows for possible reconfigurations of the accepted systems of meaning for *chanson* itself.

In the context of debates regarding culture and its status in contemporary France, the potential of the reconfiguring of *chanson* cannot be underestimated. In his exploration of cultural discourse in modern France, Brian Rigby explains that ‘a universalist, humanist notion of “Culture” with a capital C still survives strongly in French society’.[[40]](#endnote-40) Yet the discourse surrounding culture suggests that this conceptualisation has been threatened and weakened by various events:

The economic progress of post-war? French society is also said to have undermined the premises of a humanist Culture through the growth of materialism, acquisitiveness, consumerism and so forth. Added to this is the crucial development of the mass media (radio, cinema, television) which have often been thought to offer short-term, low-grade satisfaction and mere entertainment in place of the more worthwhile and lasting experiences of Art and Culture.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Although Rigby was writing in 1991, these hierarchies continue to pervade cultural discourse in contemporary France, with consumerism and mass culture still often perceived as threats to (allegedly) more worthwhile cultural experiences and forms. It is in this context that we must read the potential reconfigurations of meaning within *chanson* that are encouraged by the acknowledgement of Renaud’s star status. To acknowledge that Renaud is a *chanson* star is to challenge the specific hierarchy of value within the discourse surrounding *chanson* as a cultural product as well as the broader hierarchies present within cultural discourse in contemporary France. Renaud’s *engagement*, then, as I have defined it here, breaks with the genre rules and expectations of *chanson*, and through the acknowledgement and embracing of stardom and commerciality, encourages the re-evaluation of cultural hierarchies more broadly in twenty-first century France.

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1. In this chapter, I use *chanson* as shorthand for what David Looseley describes as that ‘elite subgenre variously called the text-based song (*chanson à texte*), the author song (*chanson d’auteur*) or the poetic song (*chanson poétique*)’ (David Looseley, *Édith Piaf: A Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), p. 98). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See David Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France: Authenticity, Politics,*

   *Debate* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003),p. 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Adeline Cordier, *Post-war French Popular Music: Cultural Identity and the Brel-Brassens-Ferré Myth* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2014) for an in-depth exploration of this triumvirate of *chanson*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Rachel Haworth, *From the chanson française to the canzone d’autore in the 1960s and 1970s: Authenticity, Authority, Influence* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015), p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Looseley, *Édith Piaf*, p. 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In the first full-length study in English of *chanson*, Peter Hawkins argues for the inclusion of Renaud as one of his exemplars for the subgenre. See Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 178-188. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. ‘A modern poet who knew how to establish himself in the pantheon of *chanson* as a singer who is both sensitive and politically engaged, following in the footsteps of Brassens or Léo Ferré’ (Delphine Gaston, *L’intégrale Renaud: Tout Renaud de A à Z* (Grainville: City Éditions, 2006), back cover). All translations are the author’s own, unless stated. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Popular/Folk singer’ (Claude Duneton, ‘Préface’ in Renaud, *Le temps des noyaux suivi di Mistral gagnant: Chansons et dessins* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1988), p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. ‘Eternal poet’ (Régis Lefèvre, *Renaud, deux vies: Retour gagnant* (Lausanne and Paris: Favre, 2002), p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Michel Beaufils, *Brassens: Poète traditionnel* (Niort: Éditions Imbert-Nicolas, 1976), pp. 79-84. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, Laurent Berthet, *Renaud: Le Spartacus de la chanson* (Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Christian Pirot, 2002), Gaston, *L’intégrale Renaud*, and Lefèvre, *Renaud, deux vies*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. ‘someone who writes chronicles, who shines a light on matters, who observes both French and international society’ (Berthet, *Renaud: Le Spartacus de la chanson*, p. 12). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Berthet, *Renaud*, p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 183. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 178. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. ? [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. ‘It’s true that it’s a bit botched | It’s because on the album | I only had nine songs | but I had to have ten!’. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. ‘France is a country of coppers | There are a hundred of them on every street corner | So as to maintain public order | they assassinate with impunity’. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. ‘So Lucien, my old mate, | is it true that you live with your mother-in-law, | that you’re married and have kids, | that you work so that you can feed them? | You know, I’ve got a brilliant idea: | let’s make a new band, | if you want, you can be the leader, | another beer please, barkeep’…’. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. ‘Cultural contestation is also achieved through humour […]. This kind of destructive humour played an important role at the end of ’68 and seemed to be specific to left-wing contestation’ (Régis Chevandier, *Renaud: Foulard rouge, blouson de cuir, etc.: Construction d’un personnage social 1975-1996* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007) p. 32). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 63. With thanks to Riccardo Orlandi for the introduction to the usefulness of Rancière as a framework for reading *engagement* in popular music through his doctoral work on the Italian singer-songwriter Fabrizio De André, currently being completed at the University of Hull (UK). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*,p. 64 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Franco Fabbri’s term, indicating that genres are ‘set[s] of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules’ (Franco Fabbri, ‘A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications’ in *Popular Music Perspectives* ed. by David Horn and Philip Tagg (Göteborg and Exeter: International Association for the Study of Popular Music, 1982), p. 52). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (2003) and Haworth, *From the chanson française to the canzone d’autore* (2015) for further explanation of the genre rules of *chanson* and the ways in which these rules are in fact the result of the discourse which surrounds the genre and is generated by journalists, critics, fans, industry representatives and even singer-songwriters themselves. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Hawkins, *Chanson*,pp. 184-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Berthet, *Renaud*,p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. ‘Politically incorrect chronicles to be consumed without moderation’ in which ‘Renaud opens to us the doors to his secret garden, in order to track down, with humour and tenderness, the poetry in the everyday’ (Renaud, *Envoyé spécial chez moi* (Paris: Éditions Ramsey, 1996), back cover). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. ‘I broke a nail. […] The one on my middle finger, the one for Le Pen. And for the majority of the other candidates, too’ (Renaud, *Envoyé spécial*,p. 20). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Renaud, *Envoyé spécial*,p. 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Renaud, *Envoyé spécial*,pp. 25-57. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Renaud, *Envoyé spécial*,pp. 7-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Renaud, *Envoyé spécial*,pp. 12-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Renaud, *Envoyé spécial*,pp. 109-113. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Barbara Lebrun, ‘Beyond Brassens: Twenty-First Century Chanson and the New Generation of Singer-Songwriters’, *Modern & Contemporary France*, 22:2 (2014), p. 165. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. ‘It is, however, not with a love song that Renaud Séchan has reached commercial Nirvana: ‘Manhattan-Kaboul, the driving force of the album *Boucan d’enfer*, evokes the September 11th attacks in New York. The two characters do not love one another; in fact, they do not even know one another and die at the end. This has not stopped the single selling more than 500,000 copies and the album more than 2 million’ (Claire Guillot, ‘Manhattan-Kaboul’, *Le Monde*, 25 August 2005. Available from: *http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2005/08/25/manhattan-kaboul\_682510\_3246.html?xtmc=renaud\_sechan&xtcr=7* [Accessed February 2016]). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. ‘This was before France began to worry about his depression and to measure his alleged addiction to his medication of choice, Pernod’ (Jean-Frédéric Tronche, ‘Interview. Thierry Séchan: “Renaud reviendra dans 2 ans”’, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 16 November 2011. Available from: *http://o.nouvelobs.com/people/20111116.OBS4656/interview-thierry-sechan-renaud-reviendra-dans-2-ans.html* [Accessed February 2016]). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. See Barbara Lebrun’s introduction to her edited volume on *chanson* and performance for an in-depth exploration of the tendency to privilege ‘head over heart’, or intellect over emotions, in *chanson* discourse, in Barbara Lebrun (ed.), *Chanson et performance: Mise en scène du corps dans la chanson française et francophone* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. ‘“I’ve written 14 songs and I want to record them quickly” the author of *Mistral gagnant* assures us. Representatives of this newspaper briefly met with the singer in L’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, the small village in the Vaucluse where he now lives. With a husky, slightly quaking voice, the singer confirmed at midday on the radio station Radiotélévision Luxembourg that he has been writing again for the past fortnight’ (n.a., ‘Renaud prépare son retour’, *Libération*, 20 June 2015. Available from: *http://next.liberation.fr/culture/2015/06/20/renaud-prepare-son-retour\_1333826* [Accessed February 2016]). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Erin Meyers, ‘“Can you handle my truth?”: Authenticity and the Celebrity Star Image’, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 42:5 (2009), p. 892. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Brian Rigby, *Popular Culture in Modern France: A Study in Cultural Discourse* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Rigby, *Popular Culture in Modern France*,p. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)