

Film as museum.

Semiotics and The Elastic Film Image

RUTH B. SHAMIR
New York (USA)

Abstract

This presentation explores the relationship and mutual influences integration between the high art (especially paintings) in the popular art territory, in the film «Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain». This film is a hybrid phenomenon, allowing for a new kind of intervisual dialogue between the arts, how these fields interact and how they may expand beyond their existing limits? Film has the ability to engulf and ingest other genres and disciplines together. I would borrow Michael Backtin's term of super-genre. In fact, film is a medium, which seeks to shape its form to different languages, text, and disciplines, constantly changeable, the film as a genre of all genres. The new technology brings new possibilities in film image towards a new kind of a museum. The «new museum» in this sense is not a museum of pictures alone, it is also a museum of objects, shapes, compositions, attitudes, gestures, pictorial fragments, colors, forms, all made existential, real. This collaboration creates a new kind of film closer to the Carnival concept. The focus is on translation, re-vision, interpretation and transformation of the arts into the filmic elastic image, through the use of codes, colors, form, composition, set design, pictorial fragments, camera and other aesthetic elements of film, providing a new semiotic experience. This film manifests the challenge of using masterpieces of the past in the film image, being in constant flux, evolving and change, creating a new kind of a Museum integrating in the multiple visual vision of our time The aim is to show the contribution of this hybrid phenomenon to the field of visual culture and to present new possibilities of expansion for the cinematic dialogue between the disciplines.

This article explores the relationship and mutual influences between paintings and film in the French film *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*.^[1] The focus is on translation, re-vision, interpretation and transformation of paintings into the cinematic vision: how the palette of new technologies opens up art history to new generations of scholars and filmmakers by creating the *film as museum*. The marriage of images from art history in the language of film is not a new phenomenon. Examples of such sophisticated and aesthetic films can be seen in all Peter Greenaway's films and video installations, Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*, Alan Rudolf's *The Moderns*, Julie Tymore's *Frida* and many other films.^[2]

Amélie is a hybrid phenomenon, an *Intervisual phenomenon* allowing for a new kind of interdisciplinary dialogue between the arts.

In this film we do not need to enter into the code system or any close textual reading. We can enjoy this film as is. But if we choose to do so, and make the effort, we might understand what Roland Barthes meant by *Jouissance*,^[3] and feel the joy of explosion of codes, the bliss of the visual text.

Amélie's aesthetic structure is based on many disciplines: advertisement, comics, music clips, posters, T.V. channeling, and computer manipulation among others. It also integrates classical arts: painting, sculpture, theater art and literature. It is also a collection of short personal stories and collectibles Jeunet collected over 25 years. This essay present paintings as the main source of the visual structure of the film.

The aim is to show the contribution of this hybrid phenomenon to the field of visual culture and to present new possibilities of expansion for the cinematic dialogue between the disciplines.

CANVAS INTO FILM TRANSFORMATION

The tradition of *high art* painting is clearly noticeable in this film. It uses masterpieces in the cinematic frame: paintings are essential for the structure of the film (See pls.).

We are accustomed to seeing paintings on museum walls, in albums, slides, film on art, documentaries, etc. *Film as museum* offers paintings in a different way.

Film as museum invites film viewers and filmmakers to contemplate paintings from different and sometimes unexpected points of view: to grasp fragments of the whole painting, to «free» elements from the context of the painting and transplant them into a semiotically different world. This new kind of dynamic contemplation offers infinite and inventive variations to presenting art in films. *Film as museum* utilizes the semiotic structure of different disciplines creating complex images; their «code» creates a semiotic collage in movement. The pictorial correlation brings a new and enriched semiotic experience. In fact, *Film as museum* creates new meaning to art in film, and a new way of seeing paintings.

[1] Known also as *Amélie* directed by Jean Pierre Jeunet, in 2001

[2] Films such as: Akira Kurasawa's «*Dreams*» in «the episode «*Crows*», 1990, Jacques Rivette's «*La Belle Noiseuse*», 1992 and many others.

[3] Roland Barthes, 1975. *The Pleasure of the Text*, Noonday Press, New York.

The aim of the filmmaker is definitely not a study in art criticism or art history. On the contrary, works of art or their code / motif-transformation, are extremely existentialized.

The visual style of *Amélie* combines different genres: *Impressionism*, *Surrealism*, *Cubism* and *Pop art* (see Pls.), from different perspectives and sometime peculiar points of view.

«Every shot should be composed like a painting», said Jeunet. ^[4] Throughout the film we experience a multiplicity of paintings from different genres translated and transformed into the film visual structure, creating a new semiotics experience.

What actually happens when the painting transforms into the cinematic visual language?

Two interesting things usually occur: the semantics of the paintings flows into the cinematic life and behave independently, while these pieces of cinematic life behave as if they derive from the paintings. A picture may be presented through a whole series of fragmentary, partial, fleeting frames or via a succession of visual motifs, and details as color and composition arrangements given as short cuts, or «quotations». At the same time an opposite process occurs: after viewing paintings within the cinematic frame: when one returns to the original (the painting on the museum wall), the painting turns out to be more static.

The filmmaker/artist seemed to have been drawn between the two polar extremes of the aesthetic condition: appreciation and re-creation. In the mode of appreciation he definitely wanted to accentuate the hidden, mysterious qualities of the paintings discovered by the cinematic glance. In doing so, he had to struggle with the dilemma of movement and stasis. In the mode of re-creation, the paintings transform to something else, which starts to exist and function independently of the creation of the painter, free from boundaries of the paintings. The paintings or their fragments in film, get in fact, new life.

Thus, «dynamization of contemplation» at both poles is created: on one hand it adds a dynamic dimension of the painting in the film, and on the other hand, it converts the original painting to a more static mode. This film, along with other films and multimedia installations are a big victory for form, structure and technology—the story, the deep characters all are there, but in a different priority—the long dialogue, and the «realism» are left far behind.

The hidden pictorial codes that reveal themselves through the visual semiotic analysis such as: form, composition, color, frame, light, camera angles, as well as, set and costume design, music, etc, creating a united painting/film visual language (intervisual). The role of this language is highly ambiguous and complex; it combines the effects of estrangement with the effects of «familiarization».

In the case of estrangement, static forms begin to move, and we see them from completely unfamiliar angles. The effect of «familiarization» for the viewer is that it tends to remind him/her of the many actual pictorial works in which these motives usually appear. The structure of *film as museum* depend on its very skilful use of double and multiple frames, creating the powerful effect of infinite meanings and references, whereby what used to be pure semantics becomes abstract code, and elements of code functions as highly meaningful referential structures.

[4] DVD interview

THE ART OF PAINTING IN A NEW TERRITORY

In film and in art historians' laboratories a detail is significantly enhanced. It may well happen that in both cases enhancement will lead to depreciation. In painting technical analysis, the discovery of mismatching traits will lead to doubt of real authorship. In film, the enhancement emphasizes brighter color, deeper shade, special attention to composition, harmonious set design, the blowing up of enlarged details and is always the enhancement of those stylistic and semantic features which somehow are the most prominent in the consciousness of art-lovers.

Thus, ultimately enhancement of pictorial message in film may even lead to the elevation of precisely those features, which facilitate the multiplication of «real originals».

All this poses the question of what cinematic enhancement of pictorial elements does to the original paintings presented in the cinematic language and structure. Some concrete answers will be given in the course of the present analysis, but one general answer should be given at the outset. Enhancement of pictorial-elements almost always has as a consequence: (intended or unintended) clearing the structure of the «language» of painting. Certain traits which when un-enhanced might appear as «natural», or proceeding from the nature of the depicted objects themselves, become features of a more abstract system, almost grammar of a certain school/genre, or approach. Then the use of such features in modern mass culture, as advertisements will appear as a legitimate extension of certain «grammatical» features of pictorial style, rather than objectionable kitsch.

In this film there is one actual painting, *Le Dejeuner des Canotiers* by Auguste Renoir (1881). This painting is presented in the film as a key code and it is a good example of concentration and expansion of meaning of image in the film frame created by *film as museum*.

There is a dialogue between the painter Raymond Dufayel in the film and the painting *Le Dejeuner des Canotiers* and the film. The painter, Dufayel is old suffering from a rare bone disease, his bones tending to break. Bones are the structure of the body – a clear metaphor for the sad situation of the painter of our time. The painter at the 21st century is «ill», his structure is not what it used to be —*high art*. The painter is not strong anymore in the era of the digital tools. He stays inside, he doesn't want to go outside and he doesn't like people; it seems the painter does not fit anymore.

The Impressionists went to paint outside —out from the art studio. They looked for the special light for every hour of the day, every season of the year. They strive to capture the momentary effect of the light. Most of this film was filmed outside just like the Impressionists.

In the film there is a quote as film footage from François Truffaut's film *Jules et Jim* (1962). We immediately make the connection to the French genre the *New Wave*. This film genre also went to film outside, far from the film studio. The aim was to bring more reality to the screen. In *Amélie*, Jeunet also went to film outside, but with the opposite intention, to bring more artificiality and fantastic elements to the screen. He painted the walls and cleaned the streets of Paris, he added colorful objects and posters around town, so, in fact his «*outside*» looks very much like «*inside*» (in the studio).

It looks as if there is a stimulating discourse between the *Impressionism*, the *New Wave*, the painting, and the state of the painter in our time with the cinematic language and structure, as the new art form of representation.

As we go further with our visual analysis we understand peculiarly enough that the painter Dufayel paints the same painting over and over again every year one painting —the same painting *Le Dejeuner des Canotiers*, What does it mean?

It seems that the painting at «*The Age of Mechanical Reproduction*» has difficulty surviving as Walter Benjamin argued.^[5] It can be seen as a metaphor for the state of ‘painting’ at the age of *new media*. Dufayel tries endlessly to capture the right expression in the little girl’s face (in the painting), year after year. The fact is, that painting is basically static and cannot capture movement. But in the film, a gallery of Amélie’s beautiful face is everywhere, a variety of her facial expressions: she is shy, happy, sad, crying, child-like, fearful, mischievous, innocent, hopeful, astonished, witty, drinking and in love.

We understand from the film story that Dufayel knows many details about Amélie’s life and childhood, facts that nobody really told him. One might state that the painter knows her life story because he was the one who created her on canvas. And indeed, he tries to help her along the way for example, in searching for Bretodeau.^[6] But to achieve her future goals, to «move» for Nino, she must «jump out» from the canvas, from the static painting, into the ‘moving picture’ —film. In another word, she can’t stay in a static form, she must move. A dialogue between painting and film, static vs. movement from a different point of view, is created.

«The enhancement of the pictorial message» brings about an understanding of the inter-visual (painting/film) combined phenomenon, creating a kind of a «parcellization of a total experience. The motivation behind this parcellization, is to arrive at some kind of an «impressionistic quality» as a holistic experience.

In this sense *film as museum* constructs a new and enlarged meaning for the painting in the film frame. We might say that this is more of an encyclopedic *Impressionism*, which is, even «more real» or even «hyper-real», because we are in the realm of «image of an image» in film (a total illusion). This parcelization of a total experience creates for the spectator a more real/hyper real environment to see the masterpieces of the past in a new way.

IMPRESSIONISM AND THE STORY OF THE BLIND MAN

By now, we recognize Monet’s influence on the film-form and composition (See, Pls.). In the sequence with the blind man escorted by Amélie, the *Impressionism* was practiced from another point of view.

[5] Benjamin, Walter, 1969, «The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction», in Meenakshi G. Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (eds.), *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, revised edition, pp. 18-40.

[6] Bretodeau is the owner of the box she found, the man now in his forties

In his old age, Monet had cataracts and his sight became weak and blurry, but his most beautiful paintings were painted then. He saw the world in a different way, more from the inside, just like the blind man escorted by Amélie, who leads him through the market place explaining very quickly everything she sees. She describes all little details, fast and in one long sentence without stopping as in a «stream of consciousness»: objects, colors, the cheese collection, the horse who lost his ear, the smells, the chocolates, the flowers, the baby with the dog, short little stories.

This sequence is most interesting from a visual point of view, because it involves a blind man who cannot see. In fact, she explains all images for the spectator too; as it seems to be the new way of seeing pictures, fast, immediate, rapid, brief short impressions. This is the impressionistic way —the fast energetic, colorful way. And indeed, the camera goes fast, just as the impressionistic brush strokes from left to right in a fast sweeping motion shot.

We just experienced a new *cinematic impressionistic* experience. This kind of experience can be created only in the cinematic medium.

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SURREALISM

This *Surrealism*, which is presented in this film, is of a unique nature, and in a peculiar way this «blown up», enhanced, holistic, encyclopedic and somewhat «internetic». *Surrealism*, seems «more real», «more authentic», with the paintings which are «really real», moving. In fact, *Surrealism* manifests itself through the cinematic frame as a multi-frame, multi-meaning: Dali, Magritte, Escher, and even Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein the Pop artists, get a surrealistic touch together with the objects like the electric blue colored lamp, the bizarre collection of characters, the surrealistic dialogues, the visual representation of idioms, Nino's hobbies, the bizarre characters, the fantastic camera angles, the fairy tales, costumes, décor and many more.

In fact with the help of all these «representations of surrealism» — we reach a deeper definition of *surrealism* itself. A richer and more palpable description of what *Surrealism* is emerges from multiple points of view. We perceive a more precise or even a new kind of an elastic form of a *surrealistic realism*, a sort of *surrealismness*.

In an odd way, a new kind of connection to reality is created through »the real illusion« which is the film.

«ONE IDEA PER SHOT» ^[7]

Jeunet's work in the advertising media certainly influenced this film on many levels. He created a cinematic frame, which will look like: «one idea per shot». The form and the content are composed from fragments, distractions, broken narrative, broken time and space, the film as a

[7] Jeunet in the DVD interview

poster, the film as a painting. The broken structure is the narrative, corresponding to the poster concept of the film multi-frame vision: short stories, story within a story — infinite variations of chain reactions: the TV aerial manipulation, the tumbling dominoes, one shot falling into the next, the fingers with strawberries, her parents' love to scatter all and then put it all back in order, Joseph is addicted to popping bubble wrap, and cracks his joints, the photomat pictures, Amélie's skipping stones over the canal, she loves to break her Crème Brulee, Amélie's neighbors: the concierge Madeleine Wallace, the grocer Collingnon, the painter Dufayel, the hypochondriac Georgette, the traveling gnome. The meaning of this kind of structure must be constructed from fragments, which disassemble and connect simultaneously semio-elements (sign and codes) within the cinematic structure. This is what we call a *dynamic contemplation*, which must take place in a confined aesthetic structure — film, or in film related medium, thus, creating serious feedback from the film to the object/painting and vice versa, enhancing the pictorial message.

With this multi-form multi-frame, multi-meaning hybrid phenomenon, we begin to understand the new territory into which this film just stepped. And the possibilities are endless.

THE ELASTIC FILM IMAGE OF OUR TIME

Film as museum is more of an exhibition of multi cinematic visual events and multi-objects working simultaneously to bring new visual pleasures and new meaning to the art world.

This is the cinema of ideas, and film, as world and language appear more meaningful and richer as a result of this marriage with multi-visual frames made possible by advanced technology.

We did not really lose the aura of art,^[8] we just gained a new kind of aura, the aura of the new technology.

As Bakhtin argues in 1941, future *high art* will necessarily be carnivalistic,^[9] connected to popular or folk traditions, linked to mass culture, mass production.

Jeunet succeeded in going beyond film frame boundaries, to break the conventional camera frame and the story frame. By using multi-frame, the director invents a new unfamiliar context for art to continue to live on.

The structure of self-reference, self-commentary and self-interpretation is very significant for the *film as museum*. In fact, one can say that the semiotic importance and impact of this film depends on its very skilful use of double and multiple frames. Creating the powerful effect of infinite meanings and references, whereby what used to be pure semantics, becomes abstract code. And elements of code function as highly meaningful referential structures. *Film as museum* is a new kind of film.

Film has the ability to engulf and ingest other genres and disciplines together. I would borrow Michael Bakhtin's term of *super-genre*.^[10] In fact, film is a medium, which seeks to

[8] Walter Benjamin,

[9] Bakhtin, M. *The Dialogic Imagination*, Four Essays, ed. Holoquist, M, University of Texas Press, Austin 1981. Introduction p. xxix .

[10] Ibid

shape its form to different languages, text, and disciplines, constantly changeable. The film as *a genre of all genres*.^[11]

In this New Cinema, intertextual / intervisual, multi-frame / multi-meaning, the director becomes more of a magician, jongleur. He is an artist, a painter, using the digital brush, the digital camera angles and digital editing composition.

Film as museum in this sense is not a museum of pictures alone, it is also a museum of objects, compositions, shapes, attitudes, gestures, pictorial fragments, colors, forms, all made existential, real. The collaboration between high art painting and the elastic film image and film as the «new museum» creates a new kind of film and new visual possibilities meaning to the art of the past.

We must not forget, that the *film as museum* cannot be a substitute for seeing original paintings on the museum walls and its exquisite design and contemplation.^[12] What it creates, is an «image of an image» with the possibilities for new readings and new meanings to the art of the past. The «new museum» which «houses» these objects, is not a solid structure, but a changing, dynamic «hypertext» which should admit new «exhibits» and «installations» continuously. This is reminiscent of André Malraux's «*The Museum without Walls*.»^[13] And it is this new unfamiliar context, which may be linked to a process of scholarly and critical re-interpretation when new generations of critics invent or discover, new epistemological frameworks for art objects.

To conclude the idea of painting and the elastic film image in the new brave visual territory we just stepped into, I would like to point out Peter Greenaway's cinematic treatment to Paolo Veronese's full-scale replica of *The Wedding at Cana*^[14] in the Venice Biennale 2009. A 50 min video installation of a carnivalistic extravaganza. The replica is a wonder of digital reproduction itself. It covers the great back wall of the Benedictine mess hall on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore. The grand space came alive with images, music, words and animated diagrams, figures, architectural setting, light and special effects from every possible angle of the Veronese's pictorial composition.

We experience a magnificent version of this painting as never imagined before, for it is, the semiotic of the hyper real experience in which the spectator is invited to the wedding and he is actually part of the drama. From a semiotic POV we experience the pure meaning of the painting.

The masterpieces of the past travels through and beyond boundaries continue to produce new visual marvels into the *mise-en-abyme*^[15] of the new brave image world of the 21st century to.

[11] Ibid

[12] Contemplating an original painting is a unique experience and will always be.

[13] André Malraux, 1949, *Museum Without Walls*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert and Francis, Pantheon Books.

[14] This is the third project in a series called «Nine Classical Paintings Revisited.» The first, in 2006, was Rembrandt's «Night Watch» in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The second, in 2008, used a replica of Leonard's «Last Supper» at the church of Santa Maria della Grazie in Milan.

[15] Infiniti



1. CLAUDE MONET, BRIDGE OVER A POND OF WATER LILIES, 1899



2. CLAUDE MONET , HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT, LONDON, SUN BREAKING THROUGH THE FOG, 1904; IN THE FILM, CHANGES OF SEASONS.



3. EDUARD MANET, LE BAR AUX FOLIES-BERGÈRE, , 1882 ; IN THE FILM, THE BAR «LES DEUX MOULINS».



4. AUGUSTE RENOIR, *LE DEJEUNET DES CANOTIÈRS*, 1881, DETAIL OF THE YOUNG GIRL DRINKING AND AMELIE IN THE FILM.

5. CLAUDE PISSARRO *CAROUSEL IN MONTMARTRE*, PROBABLY AROUND 1980-85.



6. CLAUDE MONET , *ARRIVAL OF THE NORMANDY TRAIN, GARE SAINT-LAZARE*, 1877



7. *LE FAUX MIROIR/THE FALSE MIRROR*, RENÉ MAGRITTE, 1928; IN THE FILM, THE CHILD AMÉLIE TAKING PICTURES.
 8. *RELATIVITY*, ESCHER, 1953; IN THE FILM, THE STAIRS.



9. JUAN GRIS, *A PORTRAIT OF PICASSO*, 1912; IN THE FILM, THE PHOTOMAT TECHNICIAN. 10. ANDY WARHOL, *FOUR MARILYN*, 1967; IN THE FILM, FOUR PHOTOMAT PICTURES OF AN ANONYMOUS MAN WITH A HAT, ANIMATED.



11. EDWARD HOPPER, *CHOP SUEY*, 1929; IN THE FILM, THE CAFÉ «LES DEUX MOULINS» SIMILARITY IN COMPOSITION, ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN AND LONELINESS.



12. BIZARRE CAMERA ANGELS.