

ON HUMAN PRESENCE INSIDE THE REPRESENTATION SPACE OF THE PAINT BRUSH

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SUMMARY

First the museum video and then the cinema have explored human presence immersed in pictorial material. In this article we appraise the narrative ideas of two films based on the new readabilities which have emerged from the synthetic image: episode number 5, *The Crows* from the film *Dreams* by Akira Kurosawa (1990), and *What Dreams May Come* by Vincent Ward (1998).

Both films use the language of fables to structure their transgression against nature and both substantially broaden the viewer's horizons of expectation, so that he sees the particular gaze the artist expressed in the pictorial originals surpassed.

KEY WORDS

Film aesthetics, Comparative film, Language of fables, Artist's gesture, Film and painting

ARTICLE

In the second half of the 1980s, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris conceived a series of audiovisual productions to attract different kinds of audience and to publicise its collection beyond the context of the museum. That meant that they set out to show the audiovisuals not only far from the presence of the works, but also from the official discourse of the museum, which brought greater freedom when it came to finding new approaches to those same works. Sociological and statistical surveys indicated that in those years only 30% of French people went to museums, although it was a golden age in terms of the number of visits to cultural centres. Moreover, the same surveys revealed that regular visits to museums and watching

television were two socially opposed practices. (1) It was therefore necessary to go out and look for the public and the Musée d'Orsay thought that it was a good idea to do so through the medium of television, with the aim of renewing audiovisual writing about the visual arts. That renewal started from the premise of not using the audiovisual support for a discourse of words and, therefore, a demarcation of meaning. Against that background the series "Découverte d'une oeuvre" was born: it was a collection of short films about five minutes in length, with no voiceover, each of them a visual, gestural and emotional approach to a 19th century painting. For the people in charge of productions at the museum, the relation between the visual work filmed and the film was the result of a contamination of a historical and museographic nature, since the moving image had seen the light of day in the same period as the pictorial work.

That fresh encounter between painting and the audiovisual had a tentative beginning, but followed in the historical heritage of the *film sur l'art*, a great French and European tradition. Each audiovisual in the "Découverte d'une oeuvre" series proposed a reading of a picture produced by a team made up of a choreographer, a composer and a director. At a first stage of the overlap of expressive media we find a work like *Les raboteurs*, 1988, by Cyril Collard, from the picture of the same title by Gustave Caillebotte. The film is in fact a choreography about the *raboteurs* –floor scrapers–, their movements and sounds amidst an all-pervasive emptiness. The idea was fully rooted in what we know as video dance: the dancers dance and the camera with them, whilst at different moments details of the painting appear. The evolution of the dialogue between painting and audiovisual moved forward in *Le balcon*, 1986, made by Virginie Roux and Anne Soalhat from the work of the same title by Édouard Manet. *Le balcon* offers a whole choreography of the gesturality of the family group portrayed in the work at the moment before they go out onto the balcony. The dancer-actors, with minimal actions, drink tea and get ready for the social gaze they will be exposing themselves to from the family balcony. The work, indeed, is a kind of countershot, a short period of time ahead of the picture Manet painted. A picture which in the last seconds of the film is shown in full frame. The turning point of this collection was marked by Robert Wilson, in 1989, when he presented *La femme à la cafetière*, based on the work of the same title by Paul Cézanne. The impact of Wilson's idea took the film to the INPUT festival, held in Edmonton, Canada, in 1990. He begins by showing Cézanne's original painting and superimposes the opening credits on it, a warning about the non-existent reverence for aura that guides his work. We could say that from here what we see is a kind of *tableau-vivant* of the picture, which nonetheless does not stage it in reality; it is a pictorial reconstruction with the presence of human movement and a discourse totally alien to the original painting. *La femme à la cafetière* marks the maximum possible route for a museum production series and turns the formulation of the initial idea on its head. Wilson creates an ironic, provocative and iconoclastic auteur film, which contains the seed of human presence inside the representation space of the paint brush.

The audiovisual productions of museums, and particularly French ones, gave a thrust to a new creative nerve which needed the right technology, and most of all freedom without submission, to expand and progress in its ideas. Production centres of that kind, in the name of their responsibility to safeguarding art,

had always tended to respect the integrity of the painting, the original work as conceived by its creator. What happened is that alongside them there were some projects with a more didactic approach, more authorship in terms of the graphics and more commercial which had opened the way to acting directly on the space of pictorial representation, making the inert painting take on life and movement, (2) taken as far as the direct interference of flesh in the material texture of the painting. Two works of fiction roundly imposed the human presence on the space of pictorial representation. Two genuinely transgressive films in terms of the unusual images they offer the viewer, both with titles referring to dreams, confirmation of the unreality of their concepts: episode number 5 from the film *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams* entitled *The Crows*, 1990, directed by Kurosawa, and *What Dreams May Come*, 1998, directed by Vincent Ward.

The Crows is presented as a dreamlike fable which provides a new version of the discourse the 20th century had made of the paradigm of the 19th century Western artist: an intimate narrative woven by a fertile Eastern imagination, at the service of the artistic epic based on the clichés of the Van Gogh legend. The product of a dream, the story is consistent with the dreamlike experience that knows nothing of the perceptive boundary of human vision and the physical image; the author-dreamer and also viewer is set in the image, is the one who sees and can be seen at the same time. Kurosawa turns the drawings and canvases of the painter of the history of art into a backdrop where the young Akira, Kurosawa himself when he was a student, walks. We might think that such a hallucination against nature would involve a fissure of denial or rejection tending to the artificial and the inhuman, but not at all: Kurosawa immerses himself in the spirit of the Eastern popular tale to salvage the delicacy of a cosmic and deeply human gaze. The ethics of this somersault of mutation are founded on the pattern of the language of fables which, as Gaston Bachelard glosses, "demand participation in the fabulous and becoming in body and soul an admiring being to receive the values that are admired". (3) That is exactly what Akira's journey to the interior of the painting proposes: to receive the grace of the talent of the master of the gaze, to receive the gift of the capacity to construct unique, important images like the ones Van Gogh created.

For its part, the love story of *What Dreams May Come* is enveloped in an extreme emotionality, made spectacle with an overwhelming visual excess. The protagonist is dead and his setting the other side. A being who cannot find peace in eternal rest because he is disconcerted by the surprise of a sudden, premature death, and the consequent desertion of a woman he loves. It seems that the film sets out to explore Hamlet's idea of stopping to think about the dreams that may come in that sleep of death, with the premise that what is in the mind is reality, and empirical reality an illusion. Unlike the refined basic idea, and perhaps to counter it, the form of the film deploys a mannerist excess of representation with Baroque ornamentation and the help of mimesis: the references to the iconographic tradition of 19th century German Romanticism are quite clear in the representation of both heaven and hell, as are the grandiosity of the operatic sets and the inspiration of light, the colour and style of Monet and Van Gogh. The experience of the protagonist, Chris, played by Robin Williams, in the space of the painting comes when he finally understands that, if he wants to help his wife, the best thing he can do is renounce his earthly

ties and move forward to a new state. This is an unknown territory, which he will nonetheless end up discovering as his own dream of “paradise”: a pictorial nature, a faithful reflection of a picture painted by his wife.

If *The Crows* is at the head of the discourse of simulation in the representation space of the paint brush, *What Dreams May Come* advances effectively into the simulacrum: it introduces the movement of the pictorial material as matter and object represented and displaces the two-dimensionality of the painting. Neither film could have been made from the analogue images of photography; they need the new readabilities that have emerged from the synthetic image to make the images imagined on the mental screen of their creators visible on the cinema screen. Bellour has said of *The Crows* that it is the *summit* image, the high point of creation of the image, since it structures its past, present and future. (4) In the bare ten minutes the episode lasts, the director expresses the formal and historical evolution of the image in the last century: from pictorial construction to cinematic analogy, until it reaches the last construction of the numerical image. Kurosawa, like Ward, uses those three territories of representation and fuses them in one of a beautiful sun, which does honour to the power of the film image. The two films are extraordinary examples of the viewer's horizons of expectation, and he sees the particular gaze that marked the visual creator in the pictorial originals surpassed. The fundamental contribution of the two film texts is a frank opening of painting to the plethora of discourses of the audiovisual, which few film-makers have attempted with such success. First were Resnais and Hessens in the middle of the last century, with the dramatisation of painting in the classic documentary, and then Kurosawa and Ward, with the superimposition of images on the present canon of cinematic postmodernity.

Let us see what unites and what differentiates Kurosawa's and Ward's protagonists in their immersion in the space of pictorial representation.

Akira and Chris on their journey through the imprint of the gesture

The journey of young Akira to the interior of the painting begins with a preparatory transition, a part of the dream that invites the viewer to glide from the reality of nature to the fantasy of the pictorial construction. It is a short sequence with just three frames, where the colour of the painting and a whole range of greys that swing towards blackness amalgamate. In that triad of images, Akira is imbued with a rite of passage, a disconcerting transit which places him and the viewer's gaze at the gates of a journey of initiation: the young art student's immersion in the universe of pictorial representation. A place where he will certainly appear like the stranger he is, but without being a giant, since his height is to scale with the size of the representation. Van Gogh's strident colour seems to attract the wide range of shades of grey, which Kurosawa uses to penetrate his painting –we might think to clean the eye as well– and has to do with the idea of *tragic architecture* which, for Resnais and Hessens, was revealed by the film black and white in

their documentary *Van Gogh*, from 1948. In Kurosawa the subtraction of colour becomes the darkness of the preliminary journey, a density of penumbra which never loses the glowing guide of the sun to reach the heart of the painting in its fullness. As for *What Dreams May Come*, there is no transition in Chris's leap to the interior of painting; the protagonist enters at once when he ceases to desire like a living man and accepts the space-time of his eternal sleep.

The Eastern imaginary is full of legends where the creator, or the viewer, is absorbed by the beauty of the representation space. The idea that is repeated in these poetic imaginations is that of falling in love with the visual construction of a landscape, to the extent of penetrating it and disappearing into its geography. Following the thread of what is being said, we can also salvage the idea of certain currents of meditation that place the power of concentration at the service of visualising with the mind's eye and which, like legends, are based on the idea of fusing with the object of admiration or desire. So that once the mental representation has been achieved, the idea is to see it increasingly close, to the point that there is no longer any image and the person *looking* has become his own mental projection. The underlying notion of these visualisations, then, is the fusion of the meditator and the object or being visualised. It is its energy he aspires to integrate; the meditator's mind, emotion and body open up to receive and welcome the qualities and virtues visualised. That meditative concept, and the concept of legends, involve the cancellation of the distance between the viewer and the work, i.e. the meeting place with reality where the recognition of forms occurs. A space which Omar Calabrese has called "the geometry of depth in front of the painting". (5) Akira and Chris share their love for a different visual construction and an admiration for the creative energy of the gesture which has left its imprint: the wish for the capacity to create unique, important images in the case of the former and the desire for the loved one in the case of the latter. The metaphor of penetrating the painting is clear. If the master of the gaze, the creator of the pictorial images of *The Crows* lives on the boundaries between reality and imaginary, then the desire of the apprentice of the gaze must be to explore and cross those boundaries, to live literally immersed in the poetry of the pictorial fantasy. In *What Dreams May Come*, the allegory of penetrating the painting is a way of conquering death, now a celebration of life and closeness to the loved one.

With the presence of Akira walking, nine different images of the work follow one another in the journey through the imprint of Van Gogh's gesture, first three drawings, then six paintings: there are whole fixed shots, detail shots, a couple of pans and a backward zoom. The thin and thick marked lines of the original drawings give way to the pictorial material, a density that increases and clearly shows the trace of the brush. In the selection of works arabesque forms, strong, continuous lines, cascading brushstrokes, an excess of material stand out. They are not among Van Gogh's well-known works, though they are very much representative of his style. In the interior of the visual representation space, the student of painting goes through the works and hastens on his way. After a slight initial surprise, he stops and looks, but it is not the painting he is looking at but the road to continue with his search for the artist, now placing his desire for the person of the master above the legacy of the work. The drawings and paintings give him no

enjoyment and do not hold him back, they are simply the material obviousness he is treading on, where he passes without stopping; the journey is not a quiet or contemplative stroll. Once the painting is stripped of the attributes that authenticate it as a cultural value, the expression of Kurosawa's gaze at the pictorial construction tends to the immanent surface, to a broadening of the material imprint of the artist's gesture.

In *What Dreams May Come* the pictorial background has acquired body, depth and movement with an excess of pictorial material and thick brushstrokes which occasionally resemble Van Gogh's. The protagonist's experience when he discovers himself in the painting is first surprise, but he soon gives himself over to the joy and enjoyment of the find: the oil of the picture is fresh and he will be able to change the material imprint. Annie, Annabella Sciorra, Chris's painter wife, unlike Van Gogh, is alive. Her paint is fresh, just deposited on the canvas. Chris, unlike Akira, is dead and gathering the pictorial material his wife deposits on the canvas is his means of contact with life. On the journey of the dead man in love, his imprints will modify the painting, and not only because the soft, changing material of the moment of creation speaks to us of the living gesture of its author, but because Chris also takes part in the creative gesture which is found open, since he in his own dimension is also the *painter*. On the other hand, in the pictorial material of *The Crows* there is no transformation, no life. The paint is dry, motionless, it is the uncorrupted body of the master creator and cannot be violated by an apprentice. The journey through the imprint of Van Gogh's artistic gesture proposed by Kurosawa and the journey through Annie's imprint proposed by Ward come together with Passeron's idea of semiological contribution: "the act of painting is trapped in the interior of the picture and the brushstroke, as the trace of the gesture, is its manifestation". (6)

The use of the pictorial construction as a real space

Akira *lives* the fantasy of Van Gogh's landscape painting as nature itself, inhabits and passes through the landscapes as if they were real spaces. Kurosawa's recognition of the creator Van Gogh will project a symbolisation of the images of the painter that allow the traditional mythical journey of experiencing as a reality the artist's pictorial image and the things represented by him. The treatment of the painting as reality refers us back to Resnais and Hessens' *Van Gogh*. Alain Resnais explains that at the premiere of the documentary a lady said to him "...what a lovely journey you've made!". A comment Resnais was grateful for because it was fully suited to his aim: "to treat the things represented in the painting as real things". (7) Even though in *Van Gogh* the European directors approached the *realistic objectivisation* from the evacuation of the painting –colour, composition– and did so with a spatial fragmentation of the picture and the intention of the montage which produces a single, immense canvas, the Japanese director of *The Crows* has visibly achieved the *lovely journey* one viewer attributed to Resnais. Kurosawa visualises a single picture each time, with a certain respect for the original composition of the canvas, which is less

aggressive with regard to the perceptive gaze at the painting. His *realistic operation* is based on the construction of an imaginary image from the painting which is treated as a real space. The picture is a set, a background for the human figure. Its presence restores the pictorial construction to the pictorial model of nature; with its naturalistic use it returns it to the state of model of inspiration. As Nathalie Heinich points out, "this is the supreme power of a painter whom posterity has never ceased to aggrandise", i.e., of a creator of a fictitious world which will later serve as a model for reality. (8)

The image of Van Gogh's brushstroke is yet another meeting point between Kurosawa's fable and Resnais' and Hessens' documentary. In both works the proximity which confuses the pictorial picture with the cinematic one reveals an X-ray of the lines in the shape of material that contain the tension of the stroke, the line of strength, the nerve of the work. If Kurosawa does so in relation to the human figure and incisively with the journeys around the interior of the canvas, Resnais and Hessens also exploit movement and, most of all, make the strokes visible through its spatial fragmentation. The "psychologisation" of the artist which Aumont (9) sees in this procedure of Resnais' and Hessens' brings us face to face with the Platonic tradition that likens the work to the artist. Kurosawa draws on that same source of Platonic tradition, the visualisation of the stroke is the sediment of the gesture, the imprint of the artist's creativity. The difference between the two ideas lies in the intention of use of the pictorial image. If Resnais and Hessens always proclaim the celebration of the myth, Kurosawa, at the end of the last century, celebrates the artist, the creator behind the artistic myth, although by doing so he also takes part in enlarging that myth.

In *What Dreams May Come* the cinematic space is more than ever one projected and constructed like the pictorial representation itself. From the painting and with the synthetic generation of the image, Chris lives a pictorial fantasy as if it were a physical reality, or rather, we might say, a reality made with paint. The protagonist picks a painted flower, crushes it in his hand and the soft oil begins to trickle, slips on the pictorial material as he hastens through, and around him the grass, the trees and the air are pictorial and also have movement. Now he is the one enjoying the painting and constructing it, with his mind he paints and gives movement. The picture inhabited by Chris is one by an anonymous author for the history of art, which allows the co-author to enlarge the brushstroke and create new representations. Vincent Ward also likens the pictorial work to its author following the thread of Platonic tradition: the picture as the representation of the couple's dream together, not only capable of recalling the other and the shared life but of directly being the loved person in her absence.

The yearning for creators at the heart of their works

In *What Dreams May Come* the contact with the imprint of his wife's artistic gesture offers Chris an illusion of life and at the same time confirms him in his condition as dead man. Indeed, Chris, who yearns, is the

dead man and the painter the one who is still alive. In *The Crows*, on the other hand, the one yearning is alive and the painter who is yearned is dead. Although that difference is not decisive in terms of the yearning for the creators at the heart of their works, it is decisive that Van Gogh belongs to the history of art and Annie's work does not.

In *The Crows* the journey through the material imprint of the painter's gesture is an immersion in the creator's essence; the permanent work that has immobilised his impermanent gesture and the only possible way to approach it when the creator has disappeared. The treatment of the work as a relic is present here; the student of the gaze uses it, is in contact with it, the veneration is implicit and the desire it connotes is the desire for participation in the qualities and virtues of the creator of the images. The appearance of Akira in the body of the painting is a dream of grace, a gift only those who are passionately dedicated to the quest and the practice of art can receive, only those who give themselves ingenuously to the point of madness, if that is the price of the imaginary taking shape.

Van Gogh's work and the unknown Annie's become unusual new stage sets. The reading of the picture as "*mise en scène*" proposed by Schéfer (10) in each new reading is taken to the limit by Kurosawa and Ward when they materialise it with redoubled fantasy thanks to the generative capacity of the numerical image, a new knowledge which can express it as hallucinatory journeys of initiation, in life and in death.

NOTES

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