

Visual Storytelling the Imaginary in Cinema

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Abstract

Based on real-life events—a statement each of us has read in the description of a fiction artwork. Whether it's literature, theatre, or film, humans have always been attracted to a subject that is similar to their real-life experiences. The Impressionist movement in fine arts and the invention of photography made paintings that included high-fidelity representations of the environment become redundant. This was happening because of the advance in technical means.

The used quote supports cinema's will to empower the imaginary. Fiction films can be treated as a dream, as a universe of those who are trying to project things that are untouchable in the real world. The purpose of this paper is not that of differentiating fiction from documentary. We are trying to discover what means directors use to separate different narrative universes described in a single film so that the audience understands it is being transported to a dream, a memory, or simply an imaginary space created as a result of a mental disorder. Therefore, we won't analyse the dream as a function, but as a form. Our purpose is to identify the recipes, if those really exist, through which the visual language can suggest or even amplify the existence of a border between real and surreal.

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Humans and their dreams

Humans' trial to unlock the mysterious meaning of their dreams is still of huge interest today. So, from ancient times until today, countless theories have been developed both by philosophers and scientists. Besides that, almost all social categories have tried to find meaning in their own dreams. The answers varied depending on the social profile of each dreamer. But where does this burning interest in the meaning of dreams come from? For most people, the process of evaluating the message and the intensity of what they have dreamed occurs in the first few seconds after waking up. And although the content of the dream is related to elements from everyone's past, we all suspect that the dream evokes events from the present or even events that will appear in our lives shortly.

In Ancient Egypt, the world of dreams was considered a bridge between the world of the living and the deities, a means of communication with these entities. Most of the time, these oneiric messages were quite simply and concretely conveyed. But not all dreams were so clearly coherent. Some of them had obscure and mysterious meanings. Ancient Egypt is one of the places where the interpretation of dreams first appeared. Professional dream interpreters were sought for their ability to solve complex dream puzzles. This practice affects today's experience in dreams because besides interpretation, archiving these answers also took place. So, this might be the source of the various dream interpretation collections that we can find today in books or online.

To analyze the way dreams are visualized on screen, but also to understand how the audience relates to oneiric sequences, it is necessary to have a deep look at the way dreaming takes place, what dreams are and how they affect us psychologically and beyond. First of all, we should define the dream. In order to succeed in this process, we should have a look at Sigmund Freud's writings. The Austrian neuropsychiatrist answers the question *What are dreams?* in his work *Die Traumdeutung* (1900). He thought that dreams represent the embodiment of the unconscious. Consciousness is the process through which any intention in conflict with moral principles is passed through a censorship filter but dreaming represents the state of mind able to feed these intentions. Actually, the fulfillment of these wills is considered by Freud to be the true purpose of dreams. Following these thoughts, we can understand how important the analysis of all the elements that are being shown in a dream is, as they can become symbols of some ideas in the dreamer's

unconscious. All the objects and characters found in dreams are actually subtle representations of their real-life correspondent. While dreaming, the conscience is becoming more relaxed but keeps itself in a wakeful state. With all these, there are still some elements that appear in our dreams that are hardly recognizable as real or not. Here the unconscious works to alter things we are shown during sleep.

During human history, there have been times when the dream's understandings had different roles depending on context. A dream could have been the reason for an important decision that had been taken for the nation, it could have relieved the truth in a doubted problem, or it could simply become a means of communication with divinity. All these functions of dreaming have become sources of inspiration today. The meaning of dreams has always been a subject of discussion for both philosophers and ordinary people. *Was it just a dream? It was me the protagonist of what I have dreamt? Why did I dream of this exact person or object?* The answers to these questions are different for each person, but precisely the variety of the answers supports the mysticism of this study subject called dreaming. Considered by Freud a strong influence in developing the theory of dream interpretation, Artemidorus (2nd Century B.C.) was one of history's prophets who described the versatility of the answers of dream interpretation by taking into account the personality and social status of the dreamers. In his *Oneirocritica* volumes (1864), he manages to describe most types of dreams humans have been dealing with and splits them into two main categories: *Enhyypnion* and *Oneiros*. The distinction between the two has to deal with their power to predict something. While *Enhyypnion* refers to dreams that foresee events that will happen in the near future, *Oneiros* doesn't have this kind of role. The first category, *Enhyypnion*, is further divided into subcategories like God-sent dreams, dreams powered by a specific object, or dreams as a product of imagination.

Even if all these philosophical thoughts can be so intriguing, we should also take into consideration the scientific findings on this subject. Being a phenomenon that has a strong connection to the human neurological system, dreaming has also a medical explanation. During sleep, our brain encounters two phases: non-REM and REM (*Rapid-Eye-Movement*), each of those being divided into subphases. Dreams appear in the unconscious during the REM phase, when our eyes start moving uncontrollably and our breathing rhythm becomes irregular. A part of our neural activity handles the transfer of impulses to the cortex thus it can craft a narrative that is visually cast to us.

Humans have developed, but their lifestyle is becoming more and more chaotic. Meals are becoming less and less nourishing and our physical form is precarious. These habits lead to very low-quality sleep. This is why we manage to dream quite rarely and even when we do, the complexity and the duration of our dreams are reduced. But the need to experience dreamlike episodes, to be transposed to a universe far away from everyday life remains the same if not amplified by anxieties. Drug use is becoming more and more popular among young people and not only. Although the reason for starting using drugs is diverse and may include instances that are not related to the user's will (e.g. social environment, popularity), for most people the consumption of psychotropic substances is just another way to alter their consciousness. Mankind has a long history of using recreational drugs. Ancient tribes produced their own hallucinogenic plant recipes, some of which are still used today. Although at first these substances were based on natural ingredients, science has contributed to the development of increasingly varied chemical mixtures also. Precisely because of the need to experience hallucinogenic effects in the absence of exciting dreams during sleep, combinations of substances have become very precisely calculated in order to check specific neurological responses. A relevant example could be DMT, or *N, N-Dimethyltryptamine*, used as a recreational drug and prepared in various cultures for ritual purposes. It is assumed that DMT is actually secreted by certain cells in our body before and at the time of death, which makes this substance attractive to consumers. Death is another highly discussed topic by mankind. *What exactly do we feel when we die? What do we see or hear during that moment?* In an attempt to answer this kind of question, the interest in this kind of drug increased. I brought up this topic because it is part of the elements that construct the visual style of *Enter the Void* (2009, directed by Gaspar Noe, photographed by Benoit Debbie). This film will be part of our visual style analysis chapter.

Artists and dreams

In the previous chapter, we established the extent of humanity's interest in oneiric problems. From now on, we can foresee that dreaming and its effect on the human psyche have become subjects that artists have treated in their work. In its beginnings, any art form aimed to expose the surrounding reality through a new unexplored medium. After mastering the means of expression, artists have started

to truly express themselves and modify the impression regarding various aspects of life. Living life according to the rules we all know becomes monotonous, but through different expressive mediums (literature, drama, music, or film) artists succeed in making us ask ourselves more.

Considering the above, it is important to discuss the way dreams appear in various forms of art. As Gabriel Kosuth states in his book:

Firstly, the dream may appear as a motive, a theme, “ornament” of the work. Secondly, as a rhetorical, construction device—in this case, the characteristics of the oneiric universe define the structure of the work. (2016)

In painting, dreams are treated much in the same way as in the other arts. At first, dreams can be seen as the direct subject of the work. Secondly, there is artwork that uses dreams as a source of inspiration for describing an oneiric universe. Given the lack of superior visual language, which includes for example the use of montage, transposing a dream in painting could only take place in the presence of the dreamer.

a. The image of the dream and the dreamer are found in the same environment [...] b. The image of the dream and the dreamer are separated through the internal composition of the painting; c. the dreamer is incorporated in the oneiric environment. Kosuth, 2016)

The order in which these scenarios have been presented is not accidental. These faithfully describe the chronological development of the methods used to visually represent dreams in the history of visual arts. Renaissance artists illustrated dreams as part of biblical scenes in which we could observe both the dreamer and the dream content. Hundreds of years later, Symbolism and then Surrealism took the oneiric environments to a completely different level by integrating the dream content into a setting considered abstract by some.

Perhaps the most famous biblical scene depicting the relationship between the dreamer and his dream is Jacob’s Ladder. The Old Testament evokes the moment when Jacob dreams of a ladder angels climbed to Heaven and God promises to be close to him. This biblical story has been used over time by either Renaissance painters, romantics, or 20th-century film directors (e.g. Adrian Lyne in the film

Jacob's Ladder, 1990). But one of the first works on this theme is considered to be Nicolas Dipre's painting (annex, photo 1). The distinction between reality and dream is not obtained through today's well-known visual methods (i.e. composition, color, lighting). Dipre uses a props element whose own symbolic meaning suggests the transition to a dream. Another element of this kind is used by Michele di Matteo. We are also put in front of a biblical episode, *Dream of the Virgin* (annex, photo 2). Di Matteo uses an almost symmetrical composition obtained by placing the tree in which Jesus is crucified in the center of the frame. This way, he delimits two episodes that do not belong to the same moment. The image of Jesus crucified on a tree whose trunk is coiled by a human-faced snake is by all means oneiric. Regarding the visual means of describing the dream, we cannot overlook the chromatics based on the primary painting colors (Red, Yellow, Blue), while the overall environment is approached at the limit of monochromatic (ochre with subtle green accents).

After Freud's publications became known throughout the world, their effect on artistic works was noticed quite quickly. Since the 20th century, dreams have become the main source of inspiration for surrealists, the most relevant example being Salvador Dali. But Dali was born later than the invention of the seventh art.

The invention of cinema in 1895 marks a defining moment in the way the dream is represented on the screen but also perceived by the audience. Visual language is different from written language. Although most critics bring up the so-called visual language, it is difficult to refer to cinema as a proper language. Visual language is based on perception. Precisely, it starts with a stimulus decoded in the cortex. The image is then translated into other forms (e.g. speaking, writing, music, etc.). This latter translation differs from person to person.

Twenty years before the invention of cinema by the Lumiere brothers, Eadweard Muybridge's photographic experiment aimed for a way different goal than the cinema's. Muybridge was trying to find whether during a horse gallop, at a specific moment, all of the horse's legs are in the air or not. The experiment provided to be a good premise for the early days of cinema. Known as the father of the moving image, the English photographer managed to capture the gallop of the horse by chaining together several pictures obtained by multiple exposing the same photographic negative at short time intervals. This invention fascinated Thomas Edison who invented the Kinetoscope and Kinetograph devices thirteen years later. Both inventions are based on the phase shift that appears between consecutive

exposures. This creates a sense of movement perceived by the audience. The phase shifts and other mechanical camera tricks were used to create various cinematographic illusions by pioneers like Georges Méliès.

As we were reminded at the beginning of this paper, cinema made its debut through a film with a rather documentary style. But this character is evaluated taking into consideration only the content and the intervention of the author through camerawork. It is said that during the film's (i.e. *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*) first screening in Paris, the audience got scared when the train approached the camera. The depth effect and the sense of movement made them think that the locomotive could break the projection screen and hit them. We cannot prove the authenticity of this story but given the visual experience people were used to at the time, we can only imagine the reaction. So even a documentary, a *vue* as the Lumiere brothers liked to call it, could suggest the viewer the sensation of an unimaginable event (i.e. breaking the screen barrier and throwing a locomotive into the theater room).

The act of dreaming and the experience of watching a movie in a theater room have several things in common. In the sixteenth century, Leonardo da Vinci managed to build a *camera obscura* (i.e. darkroom), a device theorized by Ibn al-Haytham (known in Latin as Alhazen) since 1021 in *The Book of Optics* (1572). *Camera obscura* stands for a completely opaque medium in which light passes through a single hole (later to become a convergent lens), thus obtaining the projection of a real but inverted image of the exterior. This medium can be a box-shaped device with a convergent lens or even a room that meets the conditions described above. The construction of today's cameras is still based on this optical experiment. In comparison, dreaming generally occurs during sleep. It is recommended by doctors to avoid exposing our eyes to artificial light before going to bed because of their power to inhibit the secretion of melatonin. So we could say that dreaming is similar to film projection due to the medium's opacity requirement.

Until it started to use dreams as a substance, cinema's form has been compared by many to the act of dreaming. Even after some pioneers used dreams as a motif in their film work—e.g. *La Lune à un Mètre* (1898, Georges Méliès) or *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (1906, Edwin Porter), cinema has continuously made efforts to create an environment in which the audience can experience untouchable events. This was made possible through means like the montage of attraction and

later the star system through which the audience could identify itself with the heroes of that time.

In comparison with other visual arts, it is well known that cinema inherits some of its composition and plastic directions from photography and painting. When it comes to illustrating oneiric sequences, the seventh art benefits from the advantage of montage. This means of expression helped directors to evolve from placing the dreamer and his dream in the same shot to creating stand-alone imaginary worlds. Therefore, the act of dreaming in films evolves from the physiological phenomenon state to oneiric-influenced situations.

Dreams can be identified on screen in two main ways: through the film's narrative and through visual language. These have been the most used means of audience manipulation. The film's narrative regards the way filmed shots are arranged to suggest a cause-effect relationship. We call this montage. Even if part of the 1920's critics dismissed the importance of montage, it has been known as the grammar of visual language to this day.

The birth of the cinema as a means of expression (not of reproduction) dates from the abolition of that defined space; from the time when the cutter thought of dividing his continuity into "planes" (close-up, intermediate, remote, etc.) and of shooting, not a play but a succession of dramatic moments; when the director took to bringing forward the camera (and thus enlarging, when necessary, the figures on the screen) and moving it back; and, above all, to replacing the theatre set by an open field of vision, corresponding to the area of the screen, into which the player enters, from which he goes out, and which the director chooses instead of having it imposed on him. The means of reproduction in the cinema is the moving photograph, but its means of expression is a sequence of planes. (Malraux as cited Langer, 1968, p. 320)

The way directors have been using montage has changed over the years. During the silent film era, montage was seen as a redemption for the immobile style of the camerawork. In the '30s the shortlist's purpose was to better describe a certain action. Today the director directly writes a movie with all these visual means in his head. Before the analytic montage theory, Georges Méliès used the stop-camera technique. He discovered it by accident because of a technical error in

his camera. Together with some basic montage skills, Méliès succeeded in transitioning the story to a dream sequence inside the same shot.

Georges Méliès was a French illusionist, actor, and film director who contributed to the development of many camera tricks in the early days of cinema. The nature of his job as an illusionist helped him imagine different tricks in front of the camera. *Le Cauchemar* (Georges Méliès, 1896), as the title suggests (in English, *The Nightmare*), visually describes several elements that can appear during a nightmare. Considering the fact that cinema was still in its early days at that time, we cannot discuss the existence of a decoupage (i.e. shot list). The film still suffered from the camera's inability to move during the shot but reminds a little of the way dream was visualized in painting. The theme of dreaming is suggested by the presence of the dreamer alongside his dream in the same setting. During the first two seconds of the film, we are introduced to a real environment. Only when he progressively introduces and eliminates characters within the same space, we are getting aware of the fact that Méliès makes a transition to a dreaming sequence. He achieves this effect using some mechanical tricks that we previously discussed. Here the counterpoint is achieved by maintaining during the whole nightmare a reference to some scenographic elements that belong to the real world: the bed, the dreamer, and the background. This trick represents only a fraction of what Méliès later managed to create with the help of lens and camera craft.

The silent film era might be the period with the most examples of transitions between real and surreal, but the visual elements it used were meant to facilitate certain tricks rather than outlining a different visual style for an oneiric sequence. These elements include *stop-camera*, *dissolve*, *superimposing*, or *iris effects*. With the evolution of cinema, the directors' style of editing changed together with the technical capabilities. Today the technical and stylistic possibilities are remarkably more diverse and also easier to access. From the use of complex camera movements to digital manipulation of images, directors and cinematographers today have sufficient means to make the transition to the oneiric as subtle as possible, but at the same time obvious enough. We will analyze some of these stylistic means used by some 21st Century directors in the following chapter.

Dreams in the 21st-Century Cinema

Cinema is not very old compared to the other arts that precede it. Compared to literature, it is difficult to define visual language because it is conditioned to the moving image to function. Starting with the human physiological senses, a nervous stimulus is transformed into a sensation in our brain that will then become an image through the sense of sight. This is the first translation we make based on our experiences. Only after that do we produce words, signs, sounds, etc.

Images manage to trigger different sensations, and these are aroused with the help of visual language elements. Even famous film theorists continue calling cinema a language until other appropriate descriptions might appear. Visual language stands for the total means of expression used throughout visual arts history. Cinema has evolved and thanks to that it has started to influence the arts from which got its inspiration. (e.g. literature, painting, theatre)

The early days of cinema often featured effective, but not stylistic formulas to make the transition to imaginary sequences. Today the audience's ability to perceive changes in visual language is much more evolved. So, we no longer need a *mise-en-scène* that portrays a laid-down character with his eyes closed (as we have seen in Méliès' *Le Cauchemar*) to foresee a dream sequence. Today this distinction can be obtained through sequential atmosphere changes. The atmosphere is manipulated through various elements regarding lighting setup, the use of color, camera movement, or simply the angle of the shot.

In the following, we propose discussing a number of films of the 21st Century that manage to create stand-alone imaginary universes throughout the narrative or are constructed in parallel with objective reality.

Enter the Void

(2009, directed by Gaspar Noe, photographed by Benoit Debie)

As we have mentioned in the previous chapter, *Enter the Void* is a good example for analyzing the way drug effects are visually transferred on screen. The film follows the death aftermath of a young drug addict as seen from his soul's perspective. It violently begins through a visceral opening credits scene, which anticipates Noe's style and lighting in the film. Mainly, suggesting the sensations felt by the protagonist is obtained through the use of alternate points of view. There are three perspectives used throughout the film: the subjective point of view, the objective

point of view, and an omnipresent point of view. The last one describes the journey of Oscar's soul after the separation from his body.

The film's first sequence is the only one that happens before the protagonist's death and the camera uses a subjective point of view. So, in Gaspar Noe's vision, everyday life is captured using an angle we rarely perceive as *normal*. Even though it is a perspective that we are all familiar with due to the optical system of our eyes, the use of subjective points of view in *Enter the Void* has been considered a stylistic choice. But the moment in which the alternate points of view convention is confirmed is when Oscar is murdered in The Void's club bathroom. After the gunshot, a strobe effect covers the entire screen which might be a director's argument for the light we see right before death.

Suddenly, the audience experiences a perspective that belongs to Oscar's soul, flying over the lain body in the club's toilet. Here we notice another type of structure proposed by Gaspar Noe. The narrative seems to have a sinusoidal design so that the audience is put through agony and ecstasy. This effect is achieved through some very long scenes that describe dehumanization (e.g. conversations with various people having the same typology, pleasureless eroticism, etc.) in order to contrast them with visual trauma scenes. After Oscar's death, we notice the transition to his soul's omnipresent point of view, but this perspective will also change according to the chronological moment in the protagonist's life. The first moments described through Oscar's eyes are observational and describe the reaction of his loved ones to the incident. This bird's-eye view endlessly searches through Oscar's universe to discover key moments for his existence and follows a route along lighting situations that constantly change. The moment Linda hears about Oscar's death contains elements that foresee the next point of view change. Backstage at the bar she works at, Linda has sex with a customer. She receives a phone call from Alex announcing her brother's death but ignores it. The way the ambient lights start to behave is to be noticed because their luminous flux becomes intermittent. Getting back to the topic of multiple points of view, it is important to observe the transition through all of the three perspectives during Linda's sex scene. The camera descends from the omniscient angle above the two, sits behind the man in an objective point of view (a perspective that foreshadows the next sequence and much of the film's stylistics), and passes through his head to obtain a subjective angle. To support this stylistic artifice, both color saturation and image grain are amplified. The ambient lighting intermittent flow changes from a post-

production effect to a real effect of the secondary sources of light. This coincides with the moment Linda decides to listen to her phone's voicemail. The frame turns out of focus, and the camera pulls back and rises again to achieve the same bird's-eye view so that it can push forward into the flickering light on the table. By approaching this light source, the audience is put in front of a screen that violently flashes multiple colors. We also encountered this lighting motif during the moment before Oscar's death, which makes us understand that it becomes a transition between different points in time.

The computer-generated stroboscopic insert prepares a jump to the beginning of Oscar's life timeline. We are introduced to the first sequences of Oscar's life reiteration. The montage is structured in reverse chronological order, from his most traumatic moment in childhood to infancy. The color approach is monochromatic. Red color covers the entire screen as an intrusive stylistic choice in order to fade details except for the portrait of crying Linda. Lighting is hard and the luminous flux features the same intermittency artifice previously mentioned. Considering light quality, Oscar's portrait is drawn through a backlit silhouette that appears and disappears in front of a traumatic situation. So, as we previously mentioned, the point of view changes. Up to the moment of his death, Oscar's entire past is seen objectively from right behind his head. The fact that it is a perspective we never encounter during day-to-day life encouraged Gaspar Noé to experiment with the visual approach. This way, Oscar appears to be a non-intervening witness to his own life. The previously described traumatic episode is preceded by fragments from the protagonist's childhood in which the lighting and the chromatic approach are becoming faithful to objective reality. The upward slope of the narrative seems to stabilize, so the montage evokes frames depicting family moments. But this can be considered the calm before the storm because of another structural device, namely the car accident.

Cyclicity is a motif Gaspar Noé frequently uses in *Enter the Void*. Relevant to building this sensation is repetition used as a structural element. In addition to the inevitable repetition of the paths taken by Oscar in his quest to rediscover himself, a cause-effect relationship is suggested through the use of match-cut repeated shots. Examples might include Oscar's parents' sexual intercourse mirrored with Alex and Linda's intercourse, or Oscar's mother breast mirrored with Victor's mother breast. We also find repetition in graphical elements like the LOVE hotel light sign being shown to Oscar and its return in the film's ending, or the

writing on the buildings that turn from *I WANT 2 LIVE* in *I WANT 2 DIE* at the blink of an eye. These are all stylistic elements that describe Oscar's disorientation and degradation.

We return to the moment of the car crash in which the two siblings lost their parents. This is not just a moment conjured up to fill out the timeline, but an indispensable piece in building a character's psychological profile. It is relevant to observe when exactly this repeated shot is inserted throughout the montage. The car crash seems to be a break in the narrative, because it interrupts moments when Oscar is finally at peace with himself. After witnessing moments like Oscar's reunion with her sister or simple family memories, the accident scene reminds us that what someday was a quiet life has now turned into a continuous trauma. As we discussed, each moment that builds Oscar's psychological trauma up is accordingly represented through visual elements like monochromatic color schemes, intermittent lighting, and harsh grain. The car crash scene does not miss using any of these.

Following the aspects discussed above, we can easily tell how *Enter the Void* uses advanced stylistic formulas adapted to new technologies in order to visualize imaginary situations. Camera movement and the use of various points of view are not the only means the director uses to achieve this. The use of color is also a very important element. The saturation level of the colors used in the chromatic composition is adjusted throughout the film's narrative. This is obtained by controlling the spectral quality of lighting, the effect being later amplified in the post-production stage. Speaking of post-production, the visual effects obtained with the help of computer-generated imagery represent a particularly important element in constructing the imaginary scenes of *Enter the Void*. Thus, Gaspar Noe's film has the privilege of using a wide range of visual artifices to break the barrier of existing patterns regarding the visual construction of oneiric scenes.

Melancholia

(2011, directed by Lars von Trier, photographed by Manuel Alberto Claro)

An example in which the oneiric scene is singular and separated from a homogenous narrative is Lars von Trier's 2011 film, *Melancholia*. Along with *Antichrist* (2009, photographed by Anthony Dod Mantle) and *Nymphomaniac* (2013, photographed by Manuel Alberto Claro), it is part of a trilogy that deals with

the theme of depression. The narrative is divided into two chapters. The first chapter follows a single day in the life of a just married couple, more exactly their wedding day. But Justine suffers from depression. This transforms what was supposed to be the happiest day of her life into a series of agonizing events. The awkward speeches of family members or Justine's boss's presence at her table put the event in the control of others. In the second part, the film revolves around the news of *Melancholia*, a planet that is about to destroy Earth. The two chapters share the same camera movement style. The way Manuel Claro uses exclusively handheld movements together with lens zooming during certain characters' reactions supports the tension that the sisters feel. This way, the audience is unable to anticipate what is happening. Von Trier proposes an actual documentary approach to fiction, which is confirmed by himself in various interviews. It is also known that especially regarding dialogue directing, he retains himself in offering many guidelines and sets the actors free to improvise their own lines. This directing decision also affects the used camera movement.

But none of the discussed stylistic choices are used to define an oneiric environment. These are built around the idea of coming in contrast with an actual oneiric scene. It is the opening credits scene that represents an actual imaginary environment. The film's opening is treated in a more expressive stylistic manner. What is shocking for the audience is that the scene is not explained or justified anyway. The audience naturally understands the scene's purpose through the contrast it creates with the entire film. The first eight minutes of *Melancholia* contain camera-movement-free tableaux-vivant resembling some well-known paintings (e.g. Sir John Everett Millais' *Ophelia*, or Peter Bruegel the Elder's *The Hunters in the Snow*). Here the audience is shown a symbolic approach to Justine's depression. What the audience is about to witness in the next two hours is concisely foreseen in the opening credits scene through the use of various fantastic graphic elements (e.g. dead birds falling from the sky, small thunders flashing from Justine's fingers). Frame composition is treated more academically by either following the golden ratio rule or opting for symmetrical structures. The immobility of the camera comes as a reaction to another stylistic decision which is the use of slow-mo shooting on a very high frame rate. Together with von Trier, Manuel Claro decided to shoot the entire scene at a rate of two thousand frames per second. Thus, the incursion in von Trier's oneiric environment is based on time perception manipulation obtained through stylistic devices. Compared to the documentary

style of the remaining two hours of the film, the sense of imponderability suggested by the above-discussed visual elements notifies the audience that it witnesses a surreal scenery. Regarding the paid tribute to history-famous painters, the scene's lighting seems to be influenced by Baroque paintings. The key light direction is not always physically argued so the contrast ratios appear as being painted in the shot's depth.

It is only after the first sequence preceding the credits start that the audience realizes it witnessed a dream. From now on, we can perceive the omnipresent handheld camera movement, the naturalist lighting approach, and the unforeseeable frame composition.

The House that Jack Built

(2018, directed by Lars von Trier, photographed by Manuel Alberto Claro)

Melancholia is not a single example of Lars von Trier and Alberto Claro in which visual language was used for building oneiric sequences. Von Trier's most recent feature film, *The House that Jack Built*, drives the audience on a similar journey to fantasy, but this time inside the ending credits scene. The film is structured into five chapters, named *incidents*, that describe the crimes made by Jack in a twelve years period. The only action that takes place in the narrative present is the dialogue between Jack and Verge because all incidents are reminded to us through the use of flashbacks. Verge's character is one of the references brought by Von Trier to Dante's *Inferno*, but the audience visually meets him only in the ending scene.

Just as in *Melancholia*, the camera's approach is inspired by the documentary filmmaking style. The operator's moves look almost guided by the character's reactions and not by decisions taken in pre-production. He also appears to be surpassing some technical issues like lens flares, but these kinds of decisions are well-assumed to support a certain visual style.

A relevant element for building up the ending scene's symbolic value is the use of color. Red is the director's choice for visually representing the meta-theme of the inferno. Throughout color cinema history, many theories about the psychological value of color have been developed. Almost all of them have their roots in personal experiences. Of course, even in the case of *The House that Jack Built*, we can identify various meanings that the red color might suggest (e.g. Hell, blood, danger). But the director manages to make color relevant in the way he deals

with chromatic composition. Most scenes are stylistically built around a monochromatic approach, based on desaturated analogous colors (e.g. light brown, ocher, green). This effect is obtained exclusively through the color choice of various elements that appear in the shot (e.g. costumes, props, nature, etc.). Even the casting is made with this decision in mind: most of the women killed by Jack are Caucasian blondes to maintain a chromatic specificity of the elements. Starting from this chromatic atmosphere, the director alongside the cinematographer sequentially introduces accents so that each incident (i.e. sequence) can be identified through a specific red object. Jack's red van, the red car jack, the family's red caps in the second incident, or the red phone from the fourth incident all contrast the general atmosphere by evaluating red's saturation in relation to the created chromatic context.

The most relevant scene for color expressivity has to be the ending scene. But this scene is connected to the fifth incident. Jack's last crime does not get to take place. Trying to shoot five people using a single bullet, Jack encounters some technical problems (e.g. the wrong bullet, Jack's inability to focus through the rifle's scope) which offers the police more time to take action. Right before pressing the button, the protagonist hears his name out loud. This is when Verge (i.e. the narrator) makes his reveal in front of the audience. He questions Jack about the house he hasn't finished building and suggests building a *house* with all the bodies left in the cold room. All of a sudden, a pistol penetrates the room through a hole cut by the police and fires two shots when Jack follows Verge through an exit on the floor. We do not see if any of the two shots touch Jack, but the epilogue scene may confirm this. On another level, assuming Jack died, Verge seems to have predicted this and his question may have activated the protagonist's consciousness. By building the *house* (placing body over body), he remembers all the crimes he committed, preparing to be led to Hell.

Finally, we suggest discussing the epilogue scene, called by von Trier *Katabasis* (i.e. Descent to the Underworld). The first minutes of the scene represent the peak of the documentary aesthetics we previously discussed. The camera plays the role of the third character, following Jack and Verge from the back, while the camera operator fits through tight catacombs. Here any composition or stylistic rule is omitted in exchange for obtaining a faithful subjective perspective of the environment (e.g. hard and front lighting as coming from a flashlight, Dutch angles, water droplets on the lens' front element). After some left/right turns, Jack and

Verge escape the catacombs and arrive in an open space. Here happens the transition to the oneiric stylistic approach.

Most visual storytelling elements are radically different. The style proposed by Von Trier and Claro puts the audience in a baroque setting. Just as in *Melancholia*, we observe the use of a high-speed camera shooting both inserts and wide shots. Camera movement is still noticeable, but it's relative to the frame rate, consisting of extremely slow push-in dolly moves. The immobility sensation obtained through high-speed filming together with the lighting direction pay a tribute to the Baroque visual artists. More, we can even observe reinterpretations of paintings such as *Dante's Baroque* (1822, Eugène Delacroix).

Speaking of the chromatic approach, color appears for the first time as an effect of the lighting sources' spectral quality or as a color temperature unbalance. Jack is cast on a background that has the same color as his costume. The further Jack and Verge advance in *Inferno*, the more present the warm color monochrome stylistic becomes. Relevant to this effect is the Champs Elysées environment. Champs Elysées is chromatically visualized in an extreme manner compared to the rest of the approaches. This is achieved both through the earlier discussed color temperature unbalance and digital color correction.

To conclude, *The House that Jack Built* is a clear example that *Melancholia* was not just a single attempt by Lars von Trier. The team made by Von Trier and Manuel Claro proves that it has an affinity for such subjects and manages to outline imaginary environments with the help of visual language, representing a relevant case study for this paper. Perhaps this style of working becomes especially challenging for the cinematographer as well. The fact that more than half of the film is thought out in a totally non-academic style might frustrate some cinematographers. But in these situations, a sequence like the opening of *Melancholia* or the epilogue of *The House that Jack Built* can actually become more relevant from a stylistic point of view.

The Lighthouse

(2019, directed by Robert Eggers, photographed by Jarin Blaschke)

Regarding this paper subject, Robert Eggers' film is different from the titles we previously discussed. This happens because the counterpoint making the transition to fantasy is not clearly defined so the narrative is constantly drifting between real

and surreal. *The Lighthouse* is more about its atmosphere. The only two characters do not take complex actions. It is their constantly developing relationship that represents the audience's point of interest.

The Lighthouse tells the story of a lighthouse keeper and his disciple and follows the way isolation tears their rationality down. We decided to also include a black-and-white film in our discussion because this specific stylistic decision can become a means of visual storytelling. Even after a decade of digital cinematography, negative filmstock represents a go-to choice even for today's cinematographers. Experienced cinematographers and today's newcomers are both attracted to the unique characteristics of filmstock, regardless of the format (e.g. 16mm, 35mm, 65mm, etc.). We do not plan to enter the well-known discussion that compares analog to digital. What we propose is to analyze what are the arguments that sit behind the decision of using such a format and how it supports the oneiric character of the film.

Photographically speaking, Eggers prepared every technical detail together with Blaschke in order to create the intended atmosphere. The format, aspect ratio, lens choice, and lighting are all decided in pre-production and might be considered bravely non-academic. The action takes place in the nineteenth century and the environment is almost claustrophobic. The sensation of claustrophobia is mainly obtained through the chosen aspect ratio. Even though in the early discussions the aspect ratio should have been 1.33:1, the film's aspect ratio is now 1.19:1. During early cinema days, it has been used also by many 1930s films—e.g. *Sunrise* (1927, directed by F.W. Murnau, photographed by Charles Rosher & Karl Struss), so the 1.19:1 ratio is not that uncommon in the seventh art. Starting from this statement, we can discuss how composition is guided by this decision. The composition does not follow any acknowledged academic rules (e.g. the rule of thirds, the golden ratio rule), but focuses on symmetrical shots. Symmetry is obtained by splitting the shot with the use of centered architectural elements. With this decision in mind, in order to maintain compositional harmony the entire set has been built from scratch following the format's characteristics.

Regarding the tonal composition, *The Lighthouse* proposes a dark and gritty mood in which textures are becoming relevant through the use of direct lighting. The lighting schemes vary from location to location and are also related to the time of the action. But before analyzing how Blaschke lights some scenes, we can discuss his contrast ratios. The tonal approach is based on dark shades of grey contrasted

using small bright accents such as practical lighting, reflections, or specular highlights. This dark style is assumed right from the beginning of the film and in order to achieve this, the director of photography used a custom-made cyan filter. The effect on the first half of the visible spectrum also affects the way skintone's texture is perceived. Looking back on the history of photography the aesthetics of orthochromatic filmstock has remained in the popular vision as describing a manly character because of the way it rendered different facial features (e.g. facial expression lines, scars, facial hair, etc.). Other effects of this special cyan filter can be perceived in the way it renders the tonal representation of the sky, transforming it into a backdrop for silhouetting the characters.

Returning to the interior scenes, we have to consider the stock's sensitivity (i.e. ASA 200 on a Double-X 5222 Kodak) in order to state the challenges Jarin Blaschke had when lighting. But the cinematographer remains bold in front of Eggers' story and uses practical lights as single light sources most of the time. The interiors are lit by a single source placed in the frame, an 800-watt bulb inserted in a gas lamp holder. High power is chosen as the cinematographer refrains himself from using any other cinema lighting equipment to support the effect of the practical. This bulb produces harsh shadows on both the characters and the background. In these cases (i.e. the single lighting source environments), the only adjustments are made for the shot/reverse shot situations when the position of the lamp is changed in order to obtain the desired ratio, but its character and intensity remain the same.

When we started discussing *The Lighthouse*, we stated that the film does not feature any counterpoint that might support the transition to a dreamlike environment. However, we can identify some moments that depict imaginary episodes of Thomas Howard, and these are stylistically treated differently. This brings us to the discussion of exterior night scenes since the episodes described above occur exclusively during Thomas' night patrols. These scenes are closely related to exactly two elements: the mermaid figurine and the lighthouse's beacon. The latter represents the main physically argued light source used in these critically underexposed settings. In order to restore a tonal balance, Blaschke makes use of the optical properties of different elements in the shot through specular highlights (e.g. reflections of water droplets on various surfaces like sand, gravel, or rocks). Considering the lack of color, the representation of an oneiric setting in black-and-white has to be obtained by alternating lighting keys. Here the cinematographer

goes from shooting low-key exterior night scenes to high-key interiors (e.g. the beacon's room inside the lighthouse). But the moment Howard dreams of the mermaid happens in the former situation. The sequential contrast is surely being observed by the audience since, compared to the previous sequence in which the blacks level was higher, Howard's dream is treated in a totally different lighting approach. Sure enough, the cinematographer also uses other visual storytelling techniques like high-framerate filming. Even though the rate is not at the level of Von Trier's previously discussed films, the high-speed camera effect remains remarkable and relevant. However, Robert Eggers still felt the need of using a functional shot like the one we mentioned when discussing the early days of oneiric cinema. The audience sees a close-up of Howard waking up, assuming it has all been a dream. Considering the contrast between the oneiric scene and its previous scene, we could consider this choice as being redundant as the visual elements were efficiently used to support this transition.

The same visual style is maintained for the scene when Howard masturbates with the dreamt mermaid in mind. The slow-motion effect remains, and the director also works on the montage's effect. The scene consists of Howard's medium shot from which it cuts to a big number of detail shots featuring surreal images of the mermaid.

If in the previously discussed examples the oneiric scenes are built in radical contrast to the general tone of the film, *The Lighthouse* is an example of a unitary oneiric approach that is maintained throughout the entire film. Even the lenses used were chosen by the cinematographer so that the rendered image would have the desired character. Jarin Blaschke uses a set of vintage lenses made by Panavision, but also an extremely rare Petzval lens, the latter being used only to visually highlight certain moments. Although the resolving power of these lenses is nowhere near comparable to that of the latest generation lenses, the way they render the out-of-focus area, or the lens flares is part of the visual identity that Blaschke builds to support storytelling. Considering all the above, *The Lighthouse* is one of the most relevant examples of building oneiric environments exclusively in black-and-white.

Conclusions

Human interest in discovering the meaning of dreams has always existed due to the mysterious key they often carry. Dreams are considered to be a fascinating source of inspiration for artists. As we mentioned in the chapter describing the human relationship with dreams, dreaming has been used both as a form and as a substance. Arts that succeeded in describing the imaginary worlds are the visual arts as dreaming is a visual experience itself.

Starting as a medium that recreates reality on screen, cinema has evolved into a medium driven by the power of suggestion. Certain senses can be amplified through the use of visual language (e.g. the sense of depth) to suggest to the audience an altered version of reality. Tricks like adjusting the sense of space by using certain focal lengths or alternating various points of view have now become not only functional but also stylistic visual choices.

The purpose of this paper is to identify what are the means directors use to delimit real from imaginary as efficiently for the audience as possible. Going through Renaissance, the silent-film period, and reaching today's films we understand that the audience analysis capacity has evolved with the technology. In the early days of cinema, directors used montage and various mechanical camera tricks in order to portray characters' dreams. Contemporary directors no longer feel the need to use a separate frame to describe dream content (e.g. Méliès' *Le Cauchemar*).

Our recent filmography analysis has made us understand that one of the most important aspects of using visual storytelling is adapting it to the film's norm. We all know that we cannot faithfully evaluate a color's hue, saturation, and luminance without having a white reference. The same goes for the expressive visual approach; it needs a naturalistic reference to be correctly assumed. As we have seen, this counterpoint can be highlighted sequentially or during the same scene/chapter by alternating elements like points of view, color, lighting, etc.

Thanks to technological advances (i.e. media format, lighting, or computer-generated imagery), cinematographers today have access to a significant number of means to alter the audience's sensations. Is this freedom the solution to convince audiences they watch a product of imagination? Yes, but it is not enough. The construction of a dream scene depends on the actual way of manipulating all the available means. It is clear that we cannot put on paper a certain *recipe* to achieve

this effect. Each of the examples that we previously discussed uses its own different ways to stylistically alter an oneiric scene. Therefore, we cannot consider any of those formulas inappropriate since they are functional in the stylistic context of each film.

The use of more or less subtle suggestions also has an effect on the audience's visual experience. Eliminating the functional shots of the character coming back to reality after a dream scene puts the audience in a wakefulness state in which they ask themselves about certain changes they see on screen. So, we can consider the visual language development process as a side effect of the directors' trial to create seamless transitions to the imaginary worlds.

With today's trend of intermediality, the oneiric subject might be getting more potential as various mediums can use their own specificities to break the norm. Access to high-end computer graphics technologies opens up endless opportunities to create perspectives never thought possible before. But it also creates another comparison term. We believe this is important in creating disrupted visual environments. Therefore, the subject of imaginary visions put on screen is definitely not exhausted and it might become more and more creative as mixing medium specificities can bring up expressive combinations.

Annex

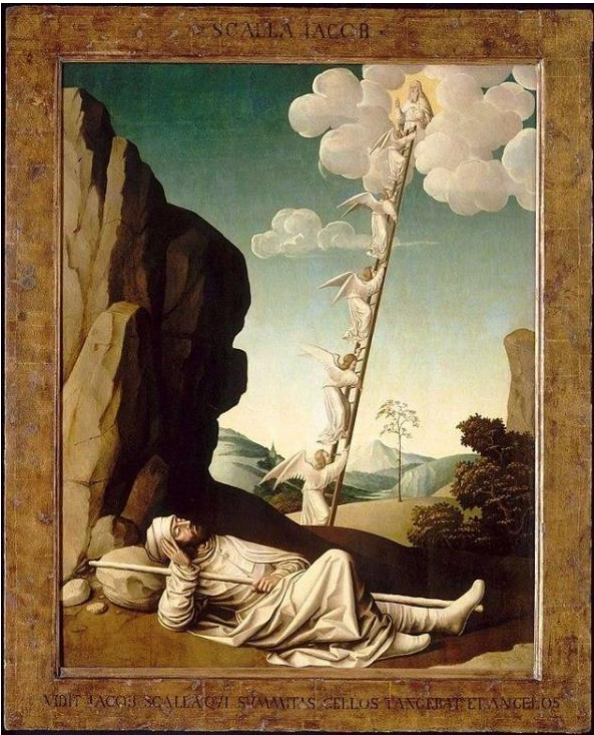


Photo 1

Le Songe de Jacob, Nicolas Dipre, c.1500



Photo 2

Sogno della vergine, Michele di Matteo, c.1435

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