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IAED 587 Spatial Practices

**Looking Through “Her” Eyes:  
Productive Look in Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *The Fabulous Destiny of Amelie Poulain***

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May 24, 2004

## **Looking Through “Her” Eyes:**

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#### **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to unravel further what the film *The Fabulous Destiny of Amelie Poulain* (Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amelie Poulain -Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001) is saying about seeing and vision. Presenting a discussion of the film by depending on the concepts of Kaja Silverman, this study focuses on the ways the film problematizes seeing by the way the society and culture demands. Via locating its main concern on the issue about seeing and by displaying examples of *productive look* that Silverman defines, the film challenges the way people see. The usage of photography in the film is seen as the main element to be analyzed in this discussion.

In *The Fabulous Destiny of Amelie Poulain* there are several scenes which can be a considered as an alternative way of seeing and can be regarded as example of *productive look*. In this context the examination of the critiques raised in the film, may be broken down into the following main components. After giving brief information about the narration of the film, the paper will focus on vision and the film’s comment on seeing. In this part three characters will be examined; Amelie, the glass man and the blind man. On the second part the essay will continue on examining the subversive usage of photography in the film. In this section the photo album of Nino, the traveling garden gnome of Mr. Raphael Poulain and Amelie’s camera will be analyzed.

#### **About *The Fabulous Destiny of Amelie Poulain***

*The Fabulous Destiny of Amelie Poulain* is about a young woman who grows up as a lonely child preferring to live in an imaginary world. As a grown up, her powerful imagination does not changed. One day when she finds a hidden box containing the mementos of a man's childhood, her ordinary life alters. She tracks the owner of the box and returns it. When she saw the happiness of the man that gets his treasure box back, she decides to help other people secretly. The film introduces several interesting characters

and narrates how Amelie changed their lives. I think her ability to bring happiness to others life is as a result of her *productive look*.

## 1. VISION

Perceiving the world with a critical eye and not accepting the visions provided by the society without questioning, can be regarded as the idea of *The Fabulous Destiny of Amelie Poulain* which is reflected by the character Amelie. Silverman says that “I know even as I look and even as I see, I am changing what is there” (160). All people have the ability to transform what they see but in order to avoid the coercive ways of seeing implemented by the society Silverman suggest to gain a *productive look*. In the film the character Amelie, the glass man and the blind man can be seen as comments of the film on seeing and not seeing.

### **Amelie Poulain**

What makes Amelie a special character is her ability to see differently than adults do. Unlike the other children who loose such ability when they grow up, Amelie maintains her *productive look*. At the age of 23, she still observes the world through different eyes. She notices minor details and feels sympathy for those who stand apart; like the man working in the grocery shop Lucien, the blind man, the ill painter glass man Dufayel, the hypochondriac tobacconist; Georgette and Nino who makes bizarre collections. All these character can be regarded as outsiders who are not totally accepted in the society.

According to Silverman there is a possibility to stay aside the screen via learning to see productively. Embodied look is always active and have a potential to counter the screen that is to say; the societies visual regime. There is always a resistance in look. *Productive look* entails to realize the otherness in the person. A subject who has the ability to see with a *productive look*, does not assimilate with what s/he sees in the screen or does not reject the other. The one who discovers the other in his/herself or realizes that the other which is rejected is very similar to his/her own subjecthood, lets the other change him/herself. Such an understanding allows opening up the unconscious to the otherness. In this sense, I think Amelie presents a character which is able to accept her own

otherness and able to see without aligning herself to the gaze while the people she feels sympathy and helps are all the ones who are staying at the corners of the society.

At this point I want to give a concrete example from the film which shows how differently she sees. In the film, when Amelie talks about what she likes and dislikes the spectator see her in a cinema saloon. In the saloon everyone is watching a black and white film but Amelie faces the camera talks to the camera. She says that she likes to watch people while they are watching the film in the cinema. At this point it is important to note that Silverman uses gaze and the camera together by defining their likeness. In this sense although the camera/gaze is invisible to the other spectators in the film, Amelie faces the camera and rejects its invisibility and therefore it's power. If we consider this scene metaphorically, and regard the film's screen as the *screen* Silverman defines, the scene becomes more interesting. Because by saying that she likes watching people who are immersed in the film, she stays out of the immersion power of the film and therefore the *screen*. Silverman defines the *screen* as the *repertoire of images*. If we assume that the spectators in the film are watching a conventional film than we can consider the filmic screen as the *screen* of culturally and historically defined images. In brief *productive look* is to look at the *screen* in a different position. Amelie by looking at the people who are watching the screen becomes an eye which is not affected by the *screen*. Then her act can be considered as an act of *productive look*. She continues to face the camera/gaze which is invisible to the audiences and says that she likes to discover the details which does not take the attention of other viewers. Than Jean-Pierre Jeunet shows us a scene in the black and white film which a fly stands in between a kissing couple. The ideal image repertoire provided by the gaze and reflected on the screen is broken by the presence of an insect. Her realization of such details represents that the field of vision is very much different to Amelie than the other spectators.



**Picture 1** Amelie in the cinema facing the camera

### **The blind man and the glass man.**

Including a blind in the film is not an arbitrary move moreover, it can also be read as a comment on seeing and looking. Despite all the visual impact, colors and mention of visuality in the film, the blind man's sight represents the empty black space without any visuality. His presence, reminds the viewer another aspect of seeing; sightlessness. He does not have an access to the field of vision he only exists as a body in the world. Therefore I think that the regime of the vision that is to say; the *screen* works in a different manner in this character. In the film Amelie helps him to cross the street and in a high tempo she describes the unseen scenes of daily life around him. It can be interesting to wonder what he makes out of the sentences he hears. I think the "look" of his mind that is not affected by the *visual regime of the society*, can be considered as *productive look*.

The instance of the "glass man" painter Raymond Dufayel, who never leaves his apartment because of his brittle-bone disease, is also a comment on seeing in a similar way. While, like the blind man he also has limited access to the outer world and the society's visual regime.



**Picture 2** Mr. Dufayel - glass man

The only contact he has with the outer world is his video camera and binoculars. His video camera is trained on a nearby watch as if counting down the time he has in this world and his binocular is trained upon the apartment of Amelie. Through his binoculars he follows the efforts of Amelie to help other people. In order to help the old painter

Dufayel, Amelie records interesting and enjoyable scenes from the TV and sends to him. In this sense his vision is reduced to these three mediums, his camera, his binoculars and the video recording Amelie sends. Dufayel gains information from the outer world with the mediation of these mediums. I think in Dufayel's case, the mediated perception of the world and his being forced to stay at home because of his sickness results him to stay out of the visual forces of the society. In both of these special character's life (glass man and the blind man) Amelie functions as a mediator which transmits moments of daily life. I think their presence in the film as characters representing the lack of seeing, reinforces Amelie's *productive look*.

## 2. PHOTOGRAPHY

I think *The Fabulous Destiny of Amelie Poulain* is a film which not only comments on seeing but also challenges the visual regime of societies by using the medium of photography. The way the photograph is used in the film in several scenes can all be considered as examples of *productive look*.

### **The photo album of Nino**

To trace the effects of society on individuals are very easy in the case of photographs. Because as Silverman says "when a real camera is trained upon us, we feel ourselves subjectively constituted, as if the resulting photograph could somehow determine 'who we are'" (Silverman, 1996: 135). In this sense, camera/gaze is a medium which forces people to act accordingly. The resulting photo is like the evidence to the subject's existence in terms of the society which s/he belongs while photos name and identify people. In this sense photo albums which are full of "best" photos, can be seen as a self formation practice according to the *screen*. I think this idea is clearly visualized in the film Amelie by Nino's photo album. Nino Quicampoix is a character that collects torn ID photographs that he finds underneath coin operating instant -photo booths. He finds such photos reassembles and arranges them in a photo album. I think Nino's collection of anonymous people's unwanted photo booth strips challenges the practice of creating family photo albums and subverts the idea of it. In this context Nino's album's definition

by the narrator as “a real family album” is also an interesting point of the film and can be considered as an ironic comment of the director.



**Picture 3** Pages from Nino’s album

Conventionally photo albums tell the story of its owner, but Nino’s album is full of strangers. Although photo albums are in a very personal domain, the effect of the gaze can be clearly seen, because posing is the moment in which people define themselves according to the gaze. Photo album is like the evidence of its owner’s acceptance by the society. On the contrary the photos in Nino’s album are all unwanted photos which include an error in their owner’s process of posing. Every time it is posed for the camera, the subject recreates his/her ideal image again. Therefore the resulting photo is very crucial to the subject. If the captured moment does not suit the *image repertoire of the screen*, then it is not worthwhile to be preserved in time. Thus it is doomed to be denied and torn into pieces and does not have a chance to have a place in an album or used in an ID card as an identification of the subject. However according to Nino such photos which

stays out of reach of the screen is very valuable and deserves to be included in his photo album. In this sense Nino's photo album challenges all those conventional usages of it and reveals how social gaze in the instance of ID photographs frames the subject. Nino's *productive look* discloses that; photo albums can be seen as a reflection of people's life confirmed by the gaze and through them one can trace the effects of power and discourse.

### **The traveling garden gnome of Mr. Raphael Poulain**

In the film, in order to help her father's schizoid state and to encourage his wish for traveling, Amelie steals her father's beloved garden gnome. She gives the gnome to her flight attendant friend and asks her to snap pictures of the gnome in front of the famous buildings in abroad cities. Then from time to time her father receives letters from Moscow, New York etc. which includes the photos of his gnome posing and enjoying his holiday in touristic landmarks.



**Picture 4** garden gnome holiday photos

I think this event in the film on purpose tries to take the spectators attention on the act of posing and photographs ability to force the subject to with the screen. Travel photos which are mostly taken in front of the monuments are a proof of the ideal image of a holiday for the subject because subjects perceive the city with a reference of an already seen image. By posing in the viewing points the subject guaranties to be in that already seen image of that place and make his/her vacation a real one. In this context Robert Smithson expresses the idea of existing in an image which is seen several times before, in an impressive way in these words;

Noonday sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an overexposed picture. Photographing it with Instamatic 400 was like photographing a

photograph. The sun becomes a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detailed series of “stills” through my Instamatic into my eye. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel, underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank. (Smithson qtd. in Silverman: 1996, 200)

Being exposed to too many images of touristic cities “the world becomes image-like” (Flusser, qtd. in Silverman: 1996, 197) and people tend to be in this image by taking photographs. By representing the tourist as a gnome I think the film pushes the viewers to investigate the idea behind such photographs.

Also the ritual of taking photos in order to make the travel real and ideal is teased in the film by putting a gnome ceramic instead of a real person. Although the gnome does not travel, Amelie’s father assumes his travel as a real one since the gnome has photos which proofs his trip. According to Susan Sontag people “seek to have their photographs taken” because they believe that they are “made real by photographs” (Sontag: 1990). Similarly gnome’s travel is made real for Mr. Poulain by the photographs.

The gnome’s rigid and stable posture as a ceramic sculpture can be read also as another comment of the director about photographs. The gnome as a ceramic sculpture represents the posing subject’s attitude like a non-living statue. When Silverman comments on the mortification aspect of the experience of being photographed, she says that mortification involves “the congealing of the body into a statue like rigidity” (199). By freezing while posing the subjects behave like an image in the picture although ironically everything around him/her moves. Barthes writes,

The photograph represents that very subtle moment when (...) I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death: I am truly becoming a specter. (qtd in Lury: 1997, 86).

I think by putting an object (the gnome) instead of a subject (a tourist) in the photos at the instance they are taken, the film reveals the transformation of the person to a dead image/specter.

### Amelie's camera

When Amelie was a child, she was not totally affected by her society's visual regime. Like the other children she has the ability to see things the adults do not notice. When she gets a camera as a present, she captures details that represent a *productive look*. Kaja Silverman in her book *The Threshold of the Visible* focuses the concepts of gaze, look and screen. She takes camera and gaze together and defines it like a social lens which is always upon the subjects. However, Amelie's camera functions different than the gaze while she is a child and do not watch the world from the screen like the adults do. Since she discovers animal figures in the clouds; a teddy bear and a rabbit when she looks through her camera, the photos she takes expresses her *productive look*.



**Picture 5**

### Conclusion

Through out my paper I tried to analyze some example scenes which I believe that represents the critical attitude of the film. Although there is not a direct verbal comment on photography, vision or seeing in the film, I think the scenes I discussed displays the subversive potential of the film against the visual regime of the society which Silverman names as the *screen*.

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