



The limits of aesthetic experience: colors and narrative cinema*

Limites da experiência estética: cores e cinema narrativo



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Abstract: Narratological studies of audiovisual works often focus their analysis on theoretical abstractions. Sometimes the search for hermeneutical explanation, as Hans Gumbrecht interjects, resembles a semantic exaggeration in which the material basis (images and sounds) is reduced to mere vectors of abstract knowledge, the story. Color appears among the neglected themes, an element customarily foreign to academic analysis. This article proposes that color is *strategically* allocated with the *intention* of fostering some degree of aesthetic experience on the spectators. The very presence of color for viewers, however, will be regulated by their degree of attention and knowledge.

Keywords: experience; cinema; colors; attention; excess.

Resumo: os estudos narratológicos das obras audiovisuais frequentemente concentram suas análises em abstrações teóricas. Às vezes, a busca pela explicação hermenêutica, como reclama Hans Gumbrecht, se assemelha a um exagero semântico no qual a base material (imagens e sons) é reduzida a mero vetor de conhecimento abstrato, a história. Dentre os temas negligenciados surge a cor, elemento costumeiramente estranho às análises acadêmicas. Este artigo propõe a cor como *estrategicamente* alocada com *intenção* de gerir algum grau de experiência estética nos espectadores. Sua presença, entretanto, surtirá diferentemente aos espectadores a depender de seu grau de atenção e conhecimento.

Palavras-chave: experiência; cinema; cores; atenção; excesso.

Introduction

This article searches some indications of how color's *presence*² on classical cinema narratives³ imbues them, at their material matrix, with *clues* that can be or not read and/or experimented by spectators. Every narrative work schematizes an enormous range of elements outlined in a *logical* order for the spectator: "The theories of filmic narration discussed in the last two chapters have little to say about the spectator, except that he or she is relatively passive. [...] A film cues the spectator to execute a definable variety of operations" (BORDWELL, 1985, p. 29). In other words, to watch a film is to *perform an interpretation* over it – a special kind of reading that is accomplished by sensitivity, *a priori*, then it is conformed by informational standards. At the root of the idea of *reading*, we find the problem of hermeneutics as discussed by Gumbrecht, regarding interpretation and meaning. In turn, *experimenting* would occur at a less abstract level, which refers to the sensations/the body itself: "that it is not unusual, for presence cultures (body), to quantify what would not be available for quantification in a meaning culture (interpretation): presence cultures do quantify feelings, for example, or the impressions of closeness and absence, or the degrees of approval and resistance" (GUMBRECHT, 2004, p. 85-6). Therefore, *reading* the meaning of a filmic narrative presupposes the capacity to assemble its elements into a significative whole and extract from them a train of thought that explains something: how did what happen develop? About what is the story? *Experimenting* the material presence is being *willing* for a communion of sensitivities that takes place between the filmic form materials and the body.

Ordinarily, Hollywoodian cinema⁴, along with all others that follow its tendencies, live a actional frenzy that can be verified by the dwindling time relegated to their shots duration. David Bordwell comments of an *intensified continuity* in

²Term employed here in reference to Hans Gumbrecht.

³By classical narrative, we mean the American cinematic codes, that were established by D. W. Griffith, which are extensively used by Hollywood: "In fictional filmmaking, one mode of narration has achieved predominance. Whether we call it mainstream, dominant, or classical cinema, we intuitively recognize an ordinary, easily comprehensible movie when we see it" (BORDWELL, 1985, p. 156).

⁴Here we refer to the cinematic cultures that intend to reach the biggest possible parcel of different audiences in order to recover their millionaire budgets to its investors: "The globalization of Hollywood cinema is fundamentally changing the films we make and even a choice of actors. To achieve all audiences, we need stars of the first greatness, the most universal stories. We've been making entertainment in the past, but now we have to make a global entertainment", explains movie executive Dennis Rice (apud MARTEL, 2012, p. 87). Thus, films are adjusted "to get the story clock going as quickly as possible [...] Once the plot is under way, we are not much disposed to entertain descriptive pauses" (CHATMAN, 1990, p. 51). Or, usually, any kind whatsoever of pause that affects the rush observed by Bordwell.

which “some action sequences are cut so fast (and staged so gracelessly) as to be incomprehensible” (2002, p. 17). Caught in this turbulence and anxious for the purpose – here meaning and/or dramatic resolution –, the spectator slips inattentive or alienated by the material surface that transmits him the story. “Probably no one ever watches *only* these non-diegetic aspects of the image through an entire film. Nevertheless, they are constantly present, a whole ‘film’ existing in some sense alongside the narrative film we tend to think of ourselves as watching (THOMPSON, 1977, p. 56). Kristin Thompson discusses the concept of *excess*, of what would not be in the service of the telling of these plots: anything that has no obvious function to push the story forward, whose path leads to an explosive conclusion – the climax. Excess is, in spite of this, exactly that which transmits the story. There is no cinema without it, it is literally the guiding thread: the images, the colors, the costumes, the reflections, the unrelated noises, the framing, the blurring, the actors, the acting, the makeup, the editing, the music, etc. Site of aesthesia par excellence, the aural and visual surface is an atmosphere under which one plunges and, yet, strolls by mode of inattention through the plots that move in an insane rhythm.

To ramble through the story in that way, the Hollywood way, is to underutilize the potentialities claimed by Deleuze, is to treat the film as a functional product from which an equation must be extracted, whose incumbent logic is to produce simplicity. For this reason, for example, American cinema is so fixated with the *happy ending*. It is the apex of the uncomplicated, of the *sensation* of joy from assimilation. But, it is important to reiterate, assimilation of what? Of an amalgam directed at a single sense, mendicant, devoid of excess – an emptied and pasteurized experience, focused on the delight of congruence: *to look real*. The verisimilar, then, is generated onto the diegesis by a conjunction of elements all organized to match “an organic necessity [which seems obligatory] ... the diegetic universe acquires the consistency of a possible world, in which construction, artifice and arbitrary are erased for the sake of an apparent naturalness⁵” (AUMONT et al, 2009, p. 150).

⁵All translations to English in this paper are provided by the author.

In fact, both processes operate simultaneously⁶, notwithstanding the overvaluation of the interpreting processes⁷. It is possible to draw a parallel between Gumbrecht's and Gérard Genette's theories (1999, p. 28) when the French author distinguishes two possible attitudes towards works of art: the *interested* and the *uninterested*. On the former ones, we would be dealing with practical questions, of functional order, as when we interpret something. Our actions would be guided by an explicit teleology: for Hollywood, its making crystal clear the narrated story. Conversely, in the latter ones, what matters is experiencing, *being involved* by the presence of something, to feel, to dive in the atmosphere presented, to have an aesthetic experience. Considering aesthetic experience presupposes an appreciation step, it could only come to fruition to those who possess some degree of information about the aspect in hand. Without knowledge, its *presence* would go by us unnoticed and incapable of generating affect. For instance, infra-red rays are felt by all humans as heat on our skins, except they are invisible to our perception and endowed of an incomprehensible color to our intellect. The rays increase the sensation of heat but are nonexistent as a sensitive object. Here, we can comment the question of visual literacies, a concept brought forward by professor Donis A. Dondis in her seminal *A primer of visual literacy* (1973). In this regard, Rudolf Arnheim indicates that there is

considerable evidence to indicate that the graspability of shapes and colors varies, depending on the species, the cultural group, *the amount of training of the observer* [emphasis added]. What

⁶This is what the cognitive studies branch call the union of top-down and bottom-up stimuli. Respectively, items that are assimilated by high reasoning, from the order of rational understanding, generating physical reactions, such as fear; elements that fuel the most basic senses, like a phone noise that bothers the ears and thus indicates the presence of the killer - as Hitchcock did in *Dial M for murder* (1954). Thus, "the amplification of attention is crucial because it adds the 'fuel' to the cognitive system, and thus it supports the cognitive preparation for the further exploration of an object. [...] In the main stage the further appraisals are focused on the detection of more complex compositional regularities and the interpretation of more sophisticated narratives and hidden symbolism of the object's structure. The appraisal on this level is self-rewarding, which results in increased attention—that is, a fascination [...] fascination is defined as a state of intensive, extensive, and long-term concentration and vigilance, which continuously 'feeds' and energizes the cognitive system. This contributes to the efficacy and ease of further appraisals, which is particularly important for the processing of multilevel narratives or highly sophisticated artistic compositions" (MARKOVIĆ, 2012, p. 6-7).

⁷Gumbrecht's oeuvre, especially *Production of presence* (2004) and *Atmosphere, mood, stimmung* (2012), make explicit both an excessive valuation of intellectual processes and a (sometimes tacit) disregard of the body and sensations: "any form of communication ... through its material elements, will 'touch' the bodies of the persons who are communicating in specific and varying ways may be a relatively trivial observation – but it is true nevertheless that this fact had been bracketed (if not -progressively- forgotten) by Western theory building ever since the Cartesian cogito made the ontology of human existence depend exclusively on the movements of the human mind" (2004, p. 17).

is rational for one group, will be irrational for another, i.e., it cannot be grasped, understood, compared, or remembered (1997, p. 31).

Thus, the classic cinema's spectator is *accustomed* – albeit by constant practice – to follow a linear story, built with no major incoherences; stories whose pragmatic or interested objective befall over interpretation/meaning. This rationality was conceived as essential in order to *organize* the chaotic and polysemic imagery material, composed of exponentially growing frames that piled up with the increase of projection time in the early twentieth century. In order to resolve this *issue*, a need arose “to find a means of unifying an extensive series of disparate spatial and temporal elements in the plot in such a way that the spectator could grasp the story events” (BORDWELL et al., 2005, p. 266). A means found was, the authors affirm, in *the causal story* – where the rule dictates that for every event (cause) an effect will be given, integrating a sum (chain) that reaches a climax (ending). The question emerges, however, from the fact that a film is no more than “merely patterns of (colored) light and dark on a screen” (BORDWELL; THOMPSON, 2010, p. 229). In other words, it is from sheer materiality that spectators must extract a *logic* that attributes sense to the stimuli.

American Beauty

One family – mother, daughter, and father – dines in their meticulously garnished upper-middle-class house. Both parents have well-paying jobs and their daughter enjoys a great education. After a day of hard work and study, they meet again to relax while they eat. It's the American dream. It would be, perhaps, were not for an insistent element placed in frame: the nuisance. The word *frame* marks that this is not a literary description, but a film sequence, located roughly between the minutes 7:03 e 8:42 of *American beauty* (1999). There is a *sensible* discrepancy between what is seen/heard and what can be understood or read. The prior sequence advances, in silence, along three cuts that exhibit photographs of the *model-family*: in the first, their daughter appears smiling (besides the *insinuating* presence of the red roses); in the second, more of her smiles; the last cut centers in an image of the three, cheerfully hugging each other. Rapidly, we return to the dinner. The air is heavy with nuisance, as discomfort stamps Lester's (Kevin Spacey) and Jane's (Thora Birch) faces. Meanwhile, the mother, Carolyn (Annette Bening), swaggers with her posture of superiority. A melodic tune swoops in the place. The shot of the three slowly closes in them, getting nearer and nearer. In the center of the table, a bouquet of red roses rests under a stark light.



Figure 1: The Burnham family eats their meal.
Source: *American Beauty* (1999)

Jane inquires her mother about the music for she considers it annoying. Carolyn responds both elegantly and harshly. Lester asks his daughter about her day at school and receives an apathetic: “It was ok”. He insists. “No, dad, it was spectacular”, then, responds an infuriated Jane. The camera steadily approaches. Mortal silence. The discussion continues. Lester comments about the imminent danger of being fired from his job, Jane retorts: “You can’t all of a sudden be my best friend just because you had a bad day”. And continues, leaving the scene: “I mean, hello! You’ve barely even spoken to me for months”. Quick cut to a shot that is filled by Carolyn’s figure in the background, with the blur of the red roses in the foreground. She throws a scathing gesture at her husband. On reserve angle, Lester replies, almost inaudibly: “Oh, what? You’re mother of the year? You treat her like an employee”⁸. The scene proceeds for a few seconds until Lester also leaves the room. As for the red roses, figured prominently during most of the film, they remain at the threshold of the spectators’ attentional focus. Our concentration, habitually, fixates itself in the construction of the plot – ‘what is happening?’; ‘how what just happened just now will impact on what happens later?’; in identifying (or not) with certain characters, ‘I love X’ and/or ‘hate Y’; in the hopes and expectations of the outcome or climax, ‘where will the characters end’, etc. Researcher Brian Boyd comments that “in stor(ies), the protagonists’ goals matter and *become* [emphasis in original] our criterion for relevance. From infancy we can identify others’ goals, and we have a default sympathy with their pursuing them – unless they are at odds with ours” (2009, p. 224).

⁸All lines were transcribed directly from the film’s subtitles.

Narratological studies of structuralist origin⁹ divide narrative into two levels: *histoire* and *discours*¹⁰ or story and discourse, respectively. The first level refers to the core of what is transmitted – in *American Beauty*, on a shallow level of interpretation, the story would deal with the alienation of the family and misplaced desires¹¹; the discourse refers to the mode by which such story is told. The mode of narrating, for example, was scrutinized by Vladimir Propp in terms of ordering (plot) and function (character's actions); Gérard Genette (1995) expanded the notions of temporalities and their arrangements, while also enriching the definitions of 'who speaks now?', that is, of the narrators identification; Seymour Chatman (1978) brought all those concepts from their literary origin and applied them to cinema. Soon thereafter, new authors followed. Roman Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco inquired about the role of the readers of these works, with the reception theory, in which they propose that texts predict the existence of specific competencies for its own consumption. Gregory Currie (2008) elaborated on the question of reception by proposing that narrative works might elicit different responses ("understandings") in relation to the receiver's degree of knowledge¹²: "refined" readers would display a congruent interpretation, while others would exhibit a markedly more emotional reaction to materials. Alan Ball, the screenwriter of *American beauty*, made the following comment in an interview:

But I guess the roses and the color red are symbolic of passion and being passionate and being alive. [...] He's (Lester is) experiencing sort of a second blooming, which he foolishly thinks is about becoming an adolescent again but it's really just about rediscovering the passion for living that he had at that time in his life that he had forgotten, and that so many people forget, you know (BALL apud FAHY, 2013, p. 33).

⁹Based on the works of authors such as Vladimir Propp, Gérard Genette, Seymour Chatman etc.

¹⁰The story is "virtual": it comprises the actions in sequence (plot) that can be made actual (i.e., retold) under any form of discourse (such as book, film, sermon, picture, music, poem, theater, dance, etc.).

¹¹From Lester to Angela; from Carolyn to Buddy etc. At a more intricate level of understanding, the story deals with the desire to maintain hollow images that convey the vigorous blare of a glossy emptiness: the character's destruction would come from the weight of preserving appearances for society, whose maintenance requires the crushing of intimate wills. The roses, in this way, stand for a blossoming of what had once been relinquished.

¹²As much of the language of the medium and of the culture in which the narrative work is inserted.

Therefore, for Currie, a congruent response to the author’s intention or prediction will require an interpretation similar to the one given in note eleven. *Logic* is the core of the aforementioned theories – whether in the concatenation of the narrative, or in the proper understanding, or not, of this ordering. Unfortunately, *the strength of materials* and their respective aesthetic effects are often neglected by theories in favor of a rational schematization of entangled senses. Not that *American beauty* has anything to hide. The movie starts with an aerial imaging of the city where the plot unravels, in a take that gradually gets closer to the ground; meanwhile, Lester, the narrator, declares: “My name is Lester Burnham. This is my neighborhood. This is my street. This [with emphasis] is my life. I’m forty-two years old. In less than a year, I’ll be dead”¹³. The announcement that there is *something wrong* is, thus, conveyed to the spectator via “text” in less than two minutes of movie projection. Hence, composing this information throughout the plot will be a task for discourse.

The material and the virtual

In a series of texts on narrative sequence¹⁴, Raphaël Baroni establishes a curious definition to explain the reason why readers would feel repeatedly moved by stories they already know. He declares that every plot allows a certain range of virtualities, ergo, *disnarrated* acts – whose definition could be formulated by “this could have happened, but in the end it never did” (PRINCE apud BARONI; REVAZ, 2016, p. 95). It is important to highlight the proposal’s high degree of intellectualism: the story is a sequence that needs to be reassembled and analyzed in the viewer’s mind; by reflecting on the gaps left by the narrative, or *wishing* that something different had occurred, that we would concatenate other endings (action of the intellect). His final example in the text is the story of the *Passion of Christ*: it has a very profound effect on people, regardless of religious affiliation. Although the book by Baroni and Revaz focuses on the sequencing and ordering of the plot, the idea of materiality remains neglected¹⁵. By being a story, the *Passion* carries a virtual potency of being actualized in any medium: movies, books, preachings, etc. Thus, the commotion caused by it lies not only in the power of

¹³ All lines were transcribed directly from the film’s subtitles.

¹⁴ See Baroni & Revaz (2016).

¹⁵ In defense of Baroni and Revaz, their argument refers to written texts. I leave here my *mea culpa* for transposing their logic to the performing arts.

the understandings “of what might have been”, but also by the fact of “being in presence” again – as Gumbrecht would affirm. Bruno Latour explains that being part of a religious community is more properly a process of communion of people than any hermeneutic act, since “there exists a form of speech that (a) is concerned by the transformation of messengers instead of the transport of information, and (b) is so sensitive to the tone in which it is uttered that it can abruptly shift, through a decisive crisis, from distance to proximity ...” (2005, p. 31). Consequently, a form that generates transforming *effects* over the participants – not for any other reason, Latour cites the love speech¹⁶ as an example.

If the story is virtual, related to the sequencing of acts (here: betrayal, torture, death, doubt, rebirth), then the film *The passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004), with its painful scenes performed by James Caviezel (Jesus Christ); the Bible itself, with its descriptions of the same events; also the preaching of thousands of different priests, each with its method, voice, etc., would only function to reaffirm the story itself? Would the performative elements, the intonations of the priests, the acting, the framing, the soundtracks and the colors of the films serve, then, as no more than mere decorations, expendable complements?

The second concept (by Vittorio Storaro) is more specific. It deals directly with photography. He calls it *psychological colors* [emphasis in original]. He uses the colors to transfer unconscious emotions that he thinks influence the understanding of the story. This is the case of the *Last tango in Paris*. The use of uterine colors in the movie’s apartment is the best, most efficient and most beautiful example of this proposal. In *The last Emperor*, Storaro took his thesis to the nth degree. He made a cinematography palette that follows the order of the luminous spectrum’s colors to narrate the changes of epoch and behavior of the protagonist. The movie starts red. It goes through the oranges and yellows. It ends up in the coldest blue, almost violet. It may be that no one has understood this construction, and Storaro, despite being aware of this, states that, even without understanding, people feel in the image. And he does not say he thinks they feel. He is a believer. He claims that colors communicate emotions as concretely as any text. There are doubts. (MOURA, 2002, p. 254-255)

¹⁶It is well known that the phrase “I am in love with you” generates an emotional carousel in both sender and receiver, for good or evil.

The doubt fostered by Edgar Moura about Storaro's colorful film treatment will remain unanswered as long as the studies of movie narrative insist on disregarding what apparently does not directly relate to the story:

A perception of a film that includes its excess implies an awareness of the structures (including conventions) at work in the film, since excess is precisely those elements that escape unifying impulses. Such an approach to viewing films can allow us to look further into a film, renewing its ability to intrigue us by its strangeness. (THOMPSON apud BORDWELL, 1985, p. 53)

Unifying impulses, argues Kirstin Thompson, are the forces that compose the elements in a story. Her emphasis on the separation between what is considered plot and what is not, reinforces the idea there are *too many* elements on the screen. For her, the intense red of the roses in *American Beauty* would “add nothing” besides redundant information already clarified by the narrator. It would be excess. On the contrary, this paper defends the idea that the impact of *American Beauty* and also that of the *Passion*, and that of all stories, is intensified and pluralized by the accrument of all its discursive aspects¹⁷. They form a sensitive and meaningful amalgam that the researcher must scrutinize.

The aesthetic and poetic compositions of films are very little studied in the theory and aesthetics of cinema. As a consequence, they are applied in the analysis and interpretation of films in a rare and disorderly way. And they're missing. If, on the one hand, the instance of production manipulates the resources and materials of the film to produce the desired effects because it certainly knows and dominates poetic composition as technology and *savoir faire*, on the other, theory and analysis do not know what to do with these materials, so they waste them in their theoretical examination or their analytical approach. Semiotics, as it is applied to cinema, for example, proved efficient as an internal study of the mechanics of films in their strategies of production of sense and meaning. Its goal is perfectly understandable if it were understood as the proposition of models enabled to explain how a film acquires meaning in the act of appreciation or interpretation. It will be out of its specific orbit of competence if you want to examine a film as a sensory or sentimental strategy. (GOMES, 2004, p. 104)

¹⁷ Regarding the level of narrative discourse, that is, its transmission structure. Here, we mean visual and aural means.

The filmic image is composed of signifying strata and, therefore, it is not transparent as Stephen Prince points with his *non grammatical* idea¹⁸. Equating cinema and language (as in the literature) is problematic, in spite of the fact that both forms of expression allow readers/spectators a myriad of interpretive acts. Among the consensuses and dissensions that will form between them, some renditions will be *more congruent*, as Gregory Currie would defend, to the intention of the author. If the aforementioned statements are true, then it will be possible to distinguish degrees of understanding or refining in critiques (professional or amateur) and in academic analyzes. After all, experience and interpretation complement each other and together create both a richer and deeper (mental) interpretation and a more vigorous (bodily) experience. Acting parameters of both instances are given by the brain's own constitution:

By itself, the emotional response can accomplish some useful goals: speedy concealment from a predator, for instance, or display of anger toward a competitor. The process does not stop with the bodily changes that define an emotion, however. The cycle continues, certainly in humans, and its next step is the *feeling of the emotion* [emphasis in original] in connection to the object that excited it, the realization of the nexus between object and emotional body state. (DAMÁSIO, 2012, p. 321-323)

Hence, experience educates and shapes knowledge. That is, perception is guided by the material's experience, but it is not bound by it. We extract sensations from the materials, we also supplement¹⁹ what we deem necessary, and then interpret its meaning. To appreciate, we must be willing to dive into the narrative works, reassess whenever necessary, rethink and experience again. After all, every narrative text "is aimed primarily at a first-level model reader, who wants to know very well how the story ends [...]" But also every text is addressed to a second-level

¹⁸The author defends that cinema is not a language, for its images are comprehensible by all, since "to posit language-based modes of cinematic communication is to implicitly raise the issue of visual literacy by implying that a period of tutoring would be logically necessary in order to gain interpretive mastery of the cinematic vocabulary" (PRINCE, 2009, p. 96). He then finishes his argument invoking studies done with inexperienced viewers: "Quite simply, such a period should not be necessary for inferring narrative relations in standard movies (i.e., movies that do not create deliberate narrative enigmas ...). Empirical research with naïve viewers (in most cases young children and, in one unique study, inexperienced adults) offers evidence that the use of specifically cinematic devices ... such as montage, camera movement, or subjective shots, do not pose substantial interpretational obstacles for naïve viewers" (PRINCE, 2009, 98).

¹⁹"Memory images serve to identify, interpret, and supplement perception. No neat borderline separates a purely perceptual image – if such there is – from one completed by memory or one not directly perceived at all but supplied entirely from memory residues" (ARNHEIM, 1997, p. 84).

model reader [...] who wants to discover precisely how did the model author guide the reader” (ECO, 2009, p. 33). What Umberto Eco means is that we can enter into the specifics of the presentation/ enunciation/discourse mode of the narrative work with a sharp eye in order to find out exactly how and where we were deceived, how did the narrative conduct us to that deep emotion we felt, in what precise moment we came to love or hate certain figures and why. It should be, then, remarkably evident that the materiality of audiovisual works corroborates in an impressive way to the fabrication of these reactions. David Batchelor claims there is an inner hierarchy of visual elements under which color is treated as a minor part. So much that he, a painter, comments that “for twenty years I never really thought about colour [...] it’s just that colour didn’t appear to require any particular consideration from someone like me, who, in one way or another, was probably going to spend most of his adult life involved with art” (2014, p. 7). Thus, the commotions rendered by movies will continue to be credited solely to the sequencing of events and their implications. It is a sort of an endorsement of *logic* above any sensitive quality, which does not seem to take into consideration the fact that cinema makes its *data* available through lights and shadows, colors, acting, noises, music, special and practical effects etc.

Final considerations

As drawn throughout this paper, we can affirm that the analysis of filmic narrative is focused, mostly, to the *intellectual comprehension* of deep meanings – hermeneutics – brought by the narrative work. UFBA’s professor Wilson Gomes offers another method, where the core observation lies in the sensitive inscriptions, the marks of *intentionality* built by the artists.

[the poetic analysis] authored by Wilson Gomes (2004), understands movies as a programming/creation of effects. This type of analysis presupposes the following methodology: a) to enumerate the effects of the filmic experience, that is, to identify the sensations, feelings and senses that a film is able to produce at the moment in which it is viewed; b) arrive at the strategy from the effects, that is, to make the inverse course of the creation of a certain work to account for the way in which this effect was construed. If we consider that a film is composed of a set of materials (visual and aural, for example, depth of field and soundtrack/musical), it is necessary to identify how these materials were strategically composed/organized in order to produce a certain effect. (PENAFRIA, 2009, p. 6)

It is a kind of reverse engineering in which the researcher must *be willing*, from his own sensitivity, to dismantle the material components of the film works, piece by piece, searching the tactic that binds them in a meaning and/or sensation. We call upon, in this way, a “subjective attitude” that surpasses “beyond the dimension of meaning and hermeneutics practices, for things entertain with us a relation of corporal order. This is their secret life, often obscured by the interpretive veils we place before them” (FELINTO, 2016, p. 25).

Just as the plastic artist can produce an installation with transparent straws to produce an effect or sensation of roughness in those who appreciate it (regardless of whether, in addition to making *someone feel*, the installation also *wants to mean* something) [emphasis in original], so do the elements that make up the film work (color, light, montage rhythm, soundtrack, etc.) can be arranged to produce a certain sensation in the movie spectator. (GOMES, 2004, p. 100)

Sensations go beyond hermeneutics, making meaning more potent²⁰. From a scene taken of *Talk to her* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002), Robert Sinnerbrink (2012, p. 159-160) comments how *Stimmung* may establish the *mood* tone in narrative film work. The sequence in question shows Caetano Veloso bursting on the screen to interrupt “the narrative flow with an interlude dedicated to song, performance and aesthetic pleasure” in which the pain woven in the singer’s voice sparks painful memories in the characters Marco (Dario Grandinetti) and Lydia (Rosario Flores). In this way, it is possible to isolate the artist’s intention (Almodóvar) in its practical effect: the lamentation sung by Caetano affects Marco, who leaves the circle of friends. Lydia follows him, they both talk and old afflictions reemerge. The image of Marco’s tears conjoins all the other elements to impart the passage of dramatic tones that both inform and sensitize the viewer to the strength of the relationship between the couple, now turned into pure suffering due to Lydia’s recent accident.

²⁰ For instance, altering the *formation* of memories: “Distinguishing characteristics [the aspects] will also be preserved [on the memory] and exaggerated when they arouse reactions [aesthetic] of awe, wonder, contempt, amusement, admiration, and so forth. Things are remembered as larger, faster, uglier, more painful than they actually were” (ARNHEIM, 1997, 81-83).



Figure 2: The roses as a detail or excess and as a literal explosion of desire.
Source: *American Beauty* (1999)

In *American beauty*, red roses permeate multiple shots during the projection, without ever imposing on our attention (Figure 2, left). Eventually, they erupt on the screen towards the spectator (Figure 2, right), and then cover the whole image when petals fall off the body of main character's loved one. Apart from these two iconic scenes, there are really presented to us *insistently*, as if they wanted to tell us something, warn us or maybe make us submerge in Lester's feelings. As Kristin Thompson states, there are really two films to two separate spectators: teloguided one, or first level one, who will be interested in something specific: *to know what happens*, that is, to find out what the end will be – preferably it should be the most satisfactory, or blatant in its unpretentiousness. The uninterested one, or second-level one, will cling to details, to excess, and from it will absorb maximum intellectual and emotional delight: he will be overwhelmed with the personas, he will be more open to approaching the character's reasons, etc. In short, he will be fully intertwined by the proposed aesthesis and then reflect/appreciate about what has been presented to him.

Moreover, the red roses obstinate iteration escapes the confinement of “spatial configurations (that) are motivated by realism²¹ [where] (a newspaper office must contain desks, typewriters, phones)” (BORDWELL, 1985, p. 157), – usually a rule in the large budgeted actional films mentioned in the introduction – in favor of enhancing the engagement of the viewer's body with the throbbing elements of the narrative: “a film should not be considered merely a ‘spectacle of space’; it must also be considered as a spatial phenomenon in itself, which involves the whole body of the spectators” (GAUDIN, 2015, p. 3). Gaudin's proposal approaches that of Sontag, presented in her article “Against Interpretation”, in which she stipulates that “in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art” (1966, p. 10). Such a statement

²¹A problematic term to cinema studies, when discussed in terms of ontology. Here, it is merely suggested as something that has coherence with itself, with the world proposed by the narrative work.

is consistent with what Gumbrecht argues, since “concentration on atmospheres and moods *does* stand in stark contrast²² to a mode of reading that focuses on the developments of “plot” (2012, p. 74).

Thus, the intentional gesture of insisting on the presence of the roses, even when the framing does not allow it to startle beyond a background element, this insistence – even if it is unsuspected to the intellect of the spectator –, generates a temporary state of physical *affectation*. For the rose’s constant mode of presentation infuses itself as a “nuisance” to the eyes, given they are the only colored element of contrast in the Burnham house, a place of markedly tasteless surrounding.

Sam Mendes equally enriches his narrative work with a mixture of visual strategies (whose intention lies beyond merely *molding* the story, via discourse organization) and an arranged disposition of parts that aggregate the structure of generation of aesthetic effects in the spectators. In the section entitled *American beauty*, for example, there is commentary on two *visual clues* employed by Mendes in his film: in addition to the roses, the director customarily gets the camera set up at a distance, then gets it slowly nearer to the characters, as if he asked us to “look closer”²³. As if he claimed us to pay more attention to that image, as if he invited us to be there, present, experiencing the same emotion as our heroes. Finally, Genette affirms that “aspectual attention is a condition, necessary but not sufficient, of the aesthetic relation, which is established only if another condition is also fulfilled: that of aesthetic judgment—or perhaps, more precisely or more simply, the question of aesthetic judgment” (1999, p. 8). Thus, if the spectator neither sees nor hears what does not serve the narrative, traversing the story in disregard for excess, then how can he perform a judgment about what he experienced in a very precarious way? It would be necessary, then, to extend the concept of aesthetic experience – to eliminate the need for appreciation, for example– by determining that sensations and unknown data can be aesthetic: albeit at a brain level of subliminal and unprocessed mix of information and emotion. The hermeneutical reading of the associated symbologies may result in rich interpretations and complex understandings of metaphors. Nevertheless,

²²What is, once more, reinforced by Sontag’s position: “In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comformable.” (1966, p. 5).

²³The movie’s *tagline*, mentioned on the poster and home media covers is “*look closer*”.

it will fail to grasp this first step, of the immediate contact between the artwork composition and the body. Of the force that the material presence inflicts on the immediate reactions, those that influence and, perhaps even delimit, the moods of our mental states.

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submitted on: 11th Sep. 2018 | approved on: 24th Oct. 2018