



An Analysis of the Surrealist Style in “Amelie from Montmartre”

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Abstract. “Amelie from Montmartre” was on release in the year of 2002, and has been popular since then. The reason of its popularity is its strong surrealist style. Through analyzing its shooting techniques, music and sound effect, and narrative mode in three phases of childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, we find how surrealism is expressed in details and in all respects. These findings promote in-depth and diversified development of academic research on surrealism and deepen the understanding of the theory. In practice, it establishes a good example for the peers all over the world and inspire them to explore surrealist expression in their work.

Keywords: Surrealism, New Wave, “Amelie from Montmartre”

1 Introduction

1.1 Synopsis of the Story

“Amelie from Montmartre” (hereinafter referred to as “Amelie”) is a French romantic comedy directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet. It tells the story of a girl, Amelie, who was misdiagnosed as a heart disease at an early age and was deprived of the opportunity to go to school and grew up in a lonely environment. By virtue of her goodness, warms up her life with her courage in the cold world and overcomes her own cowardice to improve her personality and finally gain happiness.

“Amelie” has received numerous awards and nominations due to its unique artistic style. Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, European Film Awards, César Awards Golden Globe Award, National Board of Review Awards, and others. These accolades reflect the outstanding achievements of “Amelie” in terms of artistry, directing, screenwriting, and overall production. The popularity and influence of the film continue to this day, and it has become a classic in the history of contemporary cinema.^[1]

1.2 Surrealism Theory

Surrealism, a modern art school, developed from the Romanticism of the late 18th and early 19th centuries in European literature and painting, and was prevalent in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. It aims to revolutionize human experience by exploring the irrational and the subconscious. It believes that human nature was suppressed by reason and logic, which should be abandoned in art in order to explore the subconsciousness of human extracting every aspect of material from reality and utilizing the methods of exaggeration, distortion, and fictionalization to build an imaginary reality that truly reflects the human psyche. According to Gombrich, “This reality is closer to the artist’s heart, expressing his deepest feeling in a more realistic and even transcendental way, achieving an artistic effect that transcends reality.”^[2] The main characteristics of surrealist style include subjectivity, expressive and illusory.

The surrealist style is most widely used in the fields of fine arts, films and other visual arts. In films, unlike realist ones that realistically restore a complete slice of life, surrealist style films have few plot layouts and no intense plot conflicts, focusing on the expression of characters’ hearts and emotions.

1.3 Literature Review

In recent years, the research on surrealist style in China is mainly divided into macro research and micro research. Macro studies such as Wei Songyun (2022) studied surrealist style from the philosophical and aesthetic perspectives of “id” and “superego”, and Yu Yi (2022) explored the significance of surrealist style in films; Some researchers studied the surrealist style of a film from a micro perspective, such as Zhang Rui (2020) studied the photography and editing of surrealist style films; Bi Gan (2021) researched the temporal and spatial interlacing surrealist style films; Wei Songyun (2023) studies the dreamy dances surrealist style films.

These studies on surrealist films achieved profound understanding of surrealism, but there is still a lack of comprehensive study of how the characteristics of surrealism are presented in a film. “Amelie” is known for its magical surrealistic elements, which are evident in various aspects of its production. With its strong subjective style, passionate and unrestrained emotional power, unrestrained spirit of fantasy, and mysterious artistic color, this film brings surrealism to the extreme. Analyzing its shooting techniques, sound and music, narrative mode will discover how surrealist style is fully expressed in this film.

2 The Surrealist Shooting Style

The production of “Amelie” were deeply influenced by the New Wave movement. In the 1960s, a group of ordinary French young people who love film initiated the craze of writing and directing their own films, focusing on social reality and life-oriented themes, and emphasizing the shooting of films with the director’s personal style.^[3] It is the creative individual emotional expression, which highlights the essence of surrealism, i.e., subjectivity, and puts the emotion and imagination in the first place to record

the true nature of life and tries to search for the ultimate answer in the trivial aspects of life.

“Amelie” frequently employs montage to depict Amelie’s thoughts and actions in a playful and non-linear manner. Its visual aesthetic is characterized by vibrant colors, creative camera angles, and imaginative shot compositions that contribute to its dream-like quality by projecting the rich and fragmented imaginative world onto the screen. [4] The contrasting colors of the clothes, the newsstands spreading popular and vulgar news, the splashy oil canvases of old painters, the old apartments, the narrow corridors, the trams passing by on the streets... These scenes are all filled with the atmosphere of worldly life, like the city of Paris, which is not only the world’s center of art and fashion, but also a city where people can step on dog poop when walking on the streets. The romance of “Amelie” is in the sunlight filtering through the trees, in the puddles on the street after a rain, in the fruit and vegetable stalls patronized by housewives, and in the dough on the kitchen counter. “Earthy” or “stylish”, whatever you define it, all comes from the love for nature and life.

3 Music of the Surrealist Style

The soundtrack features whimsical and melodic tunes that complements the surreal atmosphere in “Amelie”.

3.1 The Surrealist Music

The soundtracks are simple. With one or two instruments played together and a quiet tone, no rush, no kitsch, either esoteric, mysterious, hesitant, or joyful, each section is a light dance of the soul. It breaks the traditional restrictions in all aspects. First, The choice of instruments is nontraditional. In addition to bass, drums, violin and other traditional instruments, toy piano, and even typewriter were introduced to the music to create the naive and dreamy feeling. The use of the martinet adds a few mysterious and spooky colors. Second, unlike the traditional way of arranging, the composer first played one instrument alone, and finally synthesized several solos into an ensemble of several instruments. Finally, from the aspect of listening experience, each piece has its own characteristic. “Comptine d’un autre été: L’après-midi” interprets the enchantment of the left bank and Amelie’s loneliness. “Amelie’s Waltz” is dynamic and cheerful, like Amelie dancing in the morning mist of the Seine River, while “Les Jours Triste” reflects the sadness. The theme music “La Valse D’Amelie” is filled with a rich French style, echoing throughout the film, giving people a beautiful and melodious feeling.

Together, these soundtracks adds a strong artistic atmosphere and emotional hues to the film. They are the result of the composer’s freehand, highly consistent with the surrealist style of the film. The instrumental choices, arrangements, and aural experience emphasize the fantasy of scenes and enhance its visual effects.

3.2 The Surrealist Sounds

Another kind of music in “Amelie” strengthens the surreal style. These are more delicate sounds. They have no beat, no rhythm, no melody, and are not even played by musical instruments.

They are the sound of shoes on the wooden floor, the creaking of the door shaft, the wind blowing through the door curtains, the collision of beads, and the sound of stones in Amelie’s jacket pocket. These are the most common sounds that can be heard everywhere but often ignored. These sounds are from the particularly beautiful natural materials like wood, stone, etc. to remind audience of the ordinary beauty in life. It is the music of nature and life. These sounds are deliberately enlarged in the background of silence, complementing the slow low tone played by the simple instruments, creating the atmosphere of silence, loneliness, and simplicity, portraying the psyche of the protagonist, and even taking part in the narrative, completing the overlap between the imagination and the reality.

4 Whimsical Narrative

Narratives characterized by realism tend to arrange the sequence of events in a storytelling manner. The storyline of “Amelie”, however, is filled with eccentric characters and fantastical events that defy the norms of reality.^[5] It pursues the creation of subjective emotions by abandoning the authenticity of things. Amelie’s adventures in helping others and finding love are presented in a way that is charmingly surreal. Amelie’s growth and change went through three phases.

4.1 Phase 1: Lonely Childhood and Adolescence

This part of plot serves the emotion, with a touch of humor and exaggeration that was surreal.

The characters in “Amelie” were quirky, from Amelie herself, who had an extraordinary imagination and a unique approach to life, to the people she interacted with, each with their own peculiarities. Amelie’s parents were unusual parents. They suffered mysophobia and nervousness, seldom hugging her. Poor Amelie was misdiagnosed by her father as having a heart disease because she was so excited by a his hug. What’s worse, her father exaggerated her “illness” and deprived her of schooling. Strangely, her mother was struck dead by a falling object from a high building. Amelie spent her whole childhood lonely. She invented many fancy games and tricks on her own. These experiences paved a way for how Amelie gradually developed a simple, imaginative, timid and avoiding character in her growing-up.

4.2 Phase 2: Amelie Discovers That the Stationery Box and Start Her a Journey of Chivalry

Surrealism emphasizes that the spirit is the most important substance in the universe. It highlights individual power, anti-materialism, and personal heroism. Characters in the surrealist film combat against all odds in life, having qualities of perseverance and tenacity.

In “Amelie”, facing the lonely difficult life, Amelie did not therefore become indifferent. Amelie’s journey started with a very simple question. When discovered the stationery box, she asked herself a question, and presupposed two answers: if the owner of the stationery box was touched by the discovery of the treasures of childhood, she would be a chivalrous angel on earth to help others to complement life; if the owner of the stationery box was indifferent, she would continue her numb and thoughtless life. The answer was the former. So Amelie imagined herself as Zorro to save the world. Amelie helped Bretodeau, the owner of the stationery box, repaired his father-daughter relationship. She took the blind man's hand to cross the street, and described the what the world looked like that day to him. She revenged Collignon, the grocer for he had been harsh to his employee, the simple-minded Lucien. She created an opportunity for the neurotic cigarette seller Georgette to start a romance. She forged letters to for Madeleine, the concierge of Amelie’s building who was betrayed by her late husband and was obsessed with re-reading old love letters. She helped her to regain trust and love for her husband. Because of Amelie, the turnaround and unlimited possibilities appeared in their hopeless life. Kind-hearted Amelie helped people regain family, love and friendship. Their lives were as complete as possible.

4.3 Phase 3: The Stage of Maturity in Which Amelie Overcomes Her Self-Absorption and Cowardice and Triumphs Over Herself

In the second half of “Amelie”, when Nino, a young man, appeared in the station hall, Amelie had another arrhythmia. At this point she was no one else’s savior; she was evasive, helpless, and torn.

The meeting between Amelie and Nino is a real twist and turn, which is the most designed and intriguing part where the surrealist style is shown to its fullest. To return the album, Amelie designed a complex signpost system to avoid the tension of the meeting Nino. She left clues for him to find her at the coffee shop. When Nino came to look for her, however, she hid behind him, pretending to be writing the menu. Luckily she was found, but again she denied that she was the girl Nino looking for. Nino left, her heart broken all over the floor. She found Nino where he worked, the ghost house. Under the mask of the ghost, Amelie had the opportunity to be close to Nino. Amelie and Nino always waited, missed, met and missed again at different times and in different spaces. Thanks to the old painter Dufayel downstairs, who was dubbed “Glass Man” due to his brittle bone disease, he noticed that Amelie seemed to be in love, he urged Amelie to be brave in a videotape: “Amelie, you are not a glass doll, you can embrace life with all your might. If you still let the opportunity slip away, your heart will become dry and brittle, just like my bones.”

Amelie’s fantasies are a significant part of the surrealist style. Her daydreams and the way they blends with reality blur the lines between what is real and what is imagined.^[6] Amelie fantasized about the future: Nino goes to the street corner to buy baking powder for her. Her cat walked in and touched the beads of the curtain. The beads clashed in the silent afternoon. This sound corresponded to the sound in her imaginary world where Nino bought back baking powder and walked in. The cat clinking the beads pulled Amelie from fantasy to reality. Amelie cried. In the reality, Nino was outside the door. Now, the imaginary world and the real world overlapped. Thus, the surrealistic narrative structure interveins time and space. It transcends reality, creating another reality closer to the subjective feelings of the characters.

“Amelie” does not adhere to the traditional narrative structures which try to tell the beginning, development and ending of a story. It is devoid of plotting and intense conflicts. It pays attention to the inner world of the characters and the expression of their emotions. Through the splicing of some life fragments, an imaginary world paralleling to the real world is created. It weaves together a series of vignettes that are surreal and disconnected, yet they collectively create a cohesive world.

Also it pursues the creation of subjective emotions by abandoning the authenticity of things. For example, young Amelie was misdiagnosed with heart disease just because a hug from her father. She climbed to the rooftop to accurately calculate the time to retaliate against her football-fan neighbor. Amelie developed many quirks after she grew up. The paranoid man in a cafe who took a recorder every day to record evidence of his ex-girlfriend’s infidelity. The design of these irrational characters and episodes is a characteristic of surrealist style.

5 Conclusion

“Amelie” is a masterpiece and a representative work of the surrealism in the world. Its shooting, sound, music and narrative mode celebrates distinctive subjective perspective, passionate emotional power, unrestrained fantasy, and mysterious color. Studying these characteristics promotes in-depth and diversified development of academic research on surrealism and deepen the understanding of the theory.

Particularly, the irrational and dreamlike techniques of surrealist films have provided Chinese film makers with a new form of artistic expression, encouraging them to explore richer and more diverse means of expression. In fact, after “Amelie”, many Chinese films like “The Sun Also Rises”, “White Deer Plain” and “Hello, Mr. Tree” borrowed techniques from these surrealist films and possessed a distinctive surrealist style to explore deep-rooted issues of human nature, social problems, and cultural themes.

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