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Department of Film and Television

The Role of the Cinematographer: Navigating the Boundary Between Reality and Illusion in Fantasy Films

By

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dún Laoghaire, in partial fulfilment of the BA (Hons) in Film and Television Production. It is entirely the author's own work, except where noted, and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed: Maiya Rice

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the role of the cinematographer in navigating the differences in visual approach between reality and illusion, with a specific emphasis on fantasy films.

Focusing on two seminal works, Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* (1946) and Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1988), both shot by Henri Alekan over forty years apart, the study delves into how a cinematographer navigates this tightrope between reality and illusion to create captivating visual illusions which still connect with an audience's innate sense of reality. Despite their distinct eras and narrative approaches, both films adeptly blend the inherent magic of their subject matter with a commitment to visual coherence and fidelity to reality, thanks to the realist lens.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks from the writings of Christopher Williams, Maya Deren and Siegfried Krakcauer, this thesis investigates the role of cinematographers in shaping the illusionary worlds of fantasy cinema. Through an analysis of visual techniques, practical effects, and collaborative processes, the study reveals how these films manifest imaginative realities that captivate audiences while maintaining a sense of fidelity with the real world, allowing the audience to suspend their disbelief.

"It's the paradox of film that an abstract idea can only be expressed by means of the most concrete form of representation, namely reality." André Bazin

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis arose from a curiosity about how cinematographers balance reality and illusion when dealing with a fantasy film. I was explicitly drawn to fantasy films, as although they tend to deal with a heightened and fantastical world, strangely, it seemed to me that successful fantasy films must adhere to many visual conventions aligned with our perception of reality.

When I discovered that Henri Alekan shot *Beauty and the Beast* in 1946 and *Wings of Desire* in 1988, these seemed perfect case studies for studying how a cinematographer can balance reality and illusion in fantasy films. Two legendary fantasy films from very different eras, with very different approaches; the former is an adaptation of a classic fairytale, and the latter is a little bit harder to pin down; it is a poetic, dramatic, romantic fantasy which was written day-by-day during production, based around monologues provided by German writer Peter Hanke. Although the films are worlds apart in many ways, they successfully balance the intrinsic magic of their subject matter with an engrossing fidelity to the continuity of reality and a shared visual sensibility between them.

Once I began my research, I quickly realised this is a highly elusive field of study, and due to that, this thesis would be more of an exploration and reflection on the topic than an investigation into certainties. I was searching for film theorists who deal with this tension between reality and illusion in the cinematography of fantasy films. In my search for academic sources discussing the

visual approach to the case studies in this thesis, I have struggled to find many primary or secondary sources by or about Alekan; there is a significant gap in academic research around him and his contribution to cinema.

In the context of this thesis, I will define illusion as camera tricks or techniques used to immerse viewers in fictional worlds where the impossible seems possible. Equally, in the context of this thesis, I will define reality as that which aligns closely with our subjective sense of visual reality, primarily in an optical sense, such as seeing the world in clear detail, with no distortion, and in perfect focus. This form of reality will be referred to as the realist lens. The realist lens tends to also adhere to temporal and spatial continuity.

Section Outline

In Section One, I will delve into the writings of Christopher Williams, Maya Deren, and Siegfried Kracauer; and how they articulate the relationship between reality and illusion in fantasy films. I will consider how their different theories offer insights into the balance between realist and formative approaches to cinematography and the idea of the realist lens, which endeavours to capture the subject as close as possible to the reality perceived by the human eye. I will define the role of the cinematographer as the negotiator between realism and illusion tendencies and introduce the cinematographer of both case studies, Henri Alekan.

In Section Two, I will investigate the cinematographer's role in negotiating reality and illusion in Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*. This chapter deciphers how Alekan masterfully traversed the

border between reality and illusion, demonstrating his unmatched capacity to create fantastical worlds while preserving a sense of visual authenticity and perceptual realism. Through camera techniques such as contrast and continuity, movement and perspective, practical effects and collaboration between Alekan and Cocteau create a creative and technical masterpiece. This section offers insights into the vital role of the cinematographer in navigating the boundary between reality and illusion in fantasy films.

In Section Three, I will use *Wings of Desire* as a case study to explore the role of the cinematographer in balancing reality and illusion while crafting fantasy films. Firstly, I will explore contrast as the essence of the illusion and how Alekans' approach contrasts styles not only through narrative delineation between coloured film stock and black and white but also by creating a surreal atmosphere that simultaneously exhibits documentary realism and a sense of magic. I will look at how Alekan manages these stark contrasts by adhering to strict continuity of the realist lens throughout, as well as a continuity of time and space within scenes. Next, I will examine his role in crafting the film's strikingly poetic and intimate journey through mastery of perspective and movement. Then, it will look at how, through practical effects, Alekan brought the angels to life, underscoring Alekan's role in materialising fantastical camera tricks. Finally, it will look at how, through collaborative storytelling, Alekan and Wenders crafted a magical world, utilising their combined vision to seamlessly blend the reality of the nearly documentary approach to filming the real Berlin of the time and the illusion of the angels.

Section One

Defining Illusion, the Problem of Reality and the Role of the Cinematographer

1.1 Defining Illusion

When thinking about the tension between reality and illusion, there is a broad spectrum of theories regarding their relationship. Albert Einstein famously argued that *"Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one."*[1]. In the hope of unpacking the central idea of this thesis, it is essential to acknowledge the challenge of the topic. As the Merriam-Webster dictionary states, the antonym of reality is illusion[2]. This definition of illusion asserts that reality and illusion are at either end of a highly problematic, contested and illusive spectrum.

In academic discourse, the term 'illusion' encompasses a range of meanings and contexts that elucidate its multifaceted nature. Although there are many ways to define the term, for the sake of this thesis, illusion refers to camera tricks and techniques employed to immerse viewers in fictional worlds where the impossible seems possible. A crucial factor is that the illusory tricks are executed perfectly, thus simulating realism and allowing the audience to suspend disbelief.

In Christopher Williams's book *Realism and the Cinema*, he considers this problem; "Discussion of realism, in film as in other art forms, tends to be tortuous and

[1] Mehera, Jagdish. "Einstein, Physics and Reality." Worldscientific.com, 1999, www.worldscientific.com/worldscibooks/10.1142/4135#t=aboutBook. Accessed 1 Mar. 2024.
[2] "Thesaurus Results for REALITY." Merriam-Webster.com, 2024, www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/reality. Accessed 5 Mar. 2024.

A crucial factor is that the illusory tricks are executed perfectly, thus simulating realism and allowing the audience to suspend disbelief.

From a cinematography perspective, the most obvious example of a cinematographic illusion is magical camera tricks such as apparitions and transformations, any effects manifesting the impossible, creating the illusion that it's real. Less obvious examples include techniques that give the work a sense of magic, such as camera movement and perspective that transcend our notion of what is possible and contrast styles which incorporate a magical atmosphere.

We have defined cinematic illusion in relation to this thesis; it is now essential to try and define the far less apparent nature of reality, specifically reality as it relates to cinema. In academic discourse, "reality" embodies a dense, multifaceted concept encompassing various philosophical, scientific, and perceptual dimensions.

1.2 Defining the Problematic Nature of Reality

Reality denotes the objective existence of entities, events, and phenomena independent of human perception or interpretation. This objective reality forms the basis of empirical inquiry and scientific investigation, wherein observable phenomena are subject to verification and validation through systematic observation and experimentation.

Reality encompasses subjective experiences and perceptions, reflecting individual and collective interpretations of the world. These subjective realities are shaped by cultural, social, and circular. Does the real world exist? Most (though not all) think it does. If it does, on what levels does it

exist? On the level of the senses, perceptions and experiences of the people who live in it?"[3] Williams continues, arguing that the problem of realism arises once we have accepted, even as a hypothesis, that the world exists. If it exists, then what is it? "Whether as an objective fact for people to look at, or as a set of possibilities they construct through their intelligence, or as the product of their imagination, or, most plausibly, all three."[4] Once we accept the notion that there is such a thing as a real world and accept these three, very possibly simultaneous truths that this natural world is made up of objective facts, facts constructed through intelligence and by-products of our imagination, there is then the question of how we can consider cinema as an art form its own ever-changing systems, rules, methods and formats.

These systems create an even more complicated relationship between their natural practices, institutions, and experiences, which sums up the 'real world'. The problem of realism arises when we try to be specific about the forms of these complex relationships and what they mean. Is art 'about' the real world? Does it express it, or, more indirectly, does it at least act as an expression of specific themes and motifs of the real world?

Without dismissing the notion of cinematic realism, it is fair to accept that the real world can never be restored or rendered entirely on screen. So, the search for cinematic realism then becomes philosophical, centred around the opposition between the reality of things as we perceive them in daily life and experiences or the intangible ideal of showing true reality in the form of one essential truth.

The discourse around Cinematography as an art form which operates on a spectrum between reality and illusion embodies a gamut of arguments which interrogate the nature of perception

[3] Williams, Christopher. *Realism and the Cinema*. London ; Henley, Routledge And Kegan Paul ; London, 1980.
[4] Williams, Christopher. Op. Cit.

and representation and can be roughly divided into two prominent schools of thought: the realist figurative approach or the abstract expressionist approach, or what Christopher Williams refers to as realist and anti-realist[5], with the intention of making this extremely elusive idea easy enough to discuss, and hopefully easier to illuminate. At the heart of the former is a commitment to depicting reality with the utmost fidelity, to immerse viewers in an authentic portrayal of the world and, often, the illusion. This realist figurative visual tendency is exemplified in films such as Chloé Zhao's *NOMADLAND* (2021), Ken Loach's *The Old Oak* (2023), and Richard Linklater's *Before* trilogy. Conversely, filmmakers at the opposite end of the continuum embrace cinema's visual capacity for manipulation, employing expressionistic approaches to image-making to construct fantastical worlds that challenge conventional notions of perceptual reality. This visual tendency is exemplified in such films as Kyle Edward Ball's *Skinamirink* (2021), Gaspar Noé's *Enter The Void* (2005), or Yorgos Lanthemos' *Poor Things* (2024).

The realist figurative approach emphasises capturing and representing reality faithfully and accurately through cinematography. Arguments for this school of thought make the point that the primary objective of cinematography is to depict the world as it is perceived by the human senses, aiming for a direct and transparent portrayal of reality. Cinematographers who attach to this approach often employ naturalistic lighting, composition, and framing techniques to produce a feeling of immersion and authenticity for the viewer. The goal is to evoke a visceral and instant response from the audience, bringing them into the world depicted on screen with immediacy and realism.

In contrast, the abstract expressionist approach challenges traditional notions of realism in cinematography by prioritising subjective interpretation and emotional resonance over objective

[5] Williams, Christopher. Op. Cit.

representation. It has its roots in the 1920s and 1930s formative movement with proponents such as Kuloshov, Eisensetien and Pudovkin, who agreed with the Realist school of thought that "Film has the ability to reproduce life-like images of people, places and objects, to record visible, everyday reality"[6] However, they believed that film must go beyond simply reproducing images of the real world; cinematic image is the raw materials whilst cinematic art is based on how the filmmaker manipulates those raw materials.

Advocates of this approach argue that cinema is a medium uniquely suited to exploring the inner world of emotions, ideas, and dreams rather than simply reflecting external reality. Cinematographers who subscribe to this school of thought often employ experimental techniques such as unconventional framing, stylised lighting, and fracturing of spatial and temporal continuity to evoke mood, atmosphere, and psychological response. The emphasis is on conveying the filmmaker's personal vision and emotional truth, often through metaphorical and allegorical means, rather than adhering to strict realism, which follows our innate human experience of space and time.

Ultimately, the discourse surrounding cinematography as a balancing act between reality and illusion reflects a tension between these two approaches, which seem to operate on either end of a vast spectrum, with all works incorporating elements of each school of thought. While the realist approach seeks to capture external reality faithfully, the abstract expressionist approach aims to explore internal reality and subjective experience. Both schools of thought offer insights into the nature of perception and representation in cinema, contributing to a rich and nuanced understanding of cinematography as an art form.

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[6] J. Dudley Andrew. *Concepts in Film Theory*. Oxford University Press, 15 Mar. 1984.

It is worth considering where on this spectrum of realist versus formative tendencies successful cinematographic works of fantasy lie. The notion that the success of cinematographic illusions depends heavily on the cinematographer's adeptness in crafting shots that figuratively mirror our perception of reality assertion can be examined through Maya Deren's perspective on cinematography, where she emphasises the creative utilisation of reality within the film medium. Deren's exploration of the intersection between reality and creative expression in cinema suggests that the cinematographer's ability to effectively capture our subjective experience of reality is essential in conveying illusions convincingly on screen.

1.3 Introducing the Realist Lens

In her writing about the creative use of reality in cinematography, Deren asserts that when the camera is regarded as the artist, employing techniques like distorting lenses and multiple superimpositions to mimic the creative functions of the human eye and memory,

> "Such well-intentioned efforts to use the medium creatively, by forcibly inserting the creative act in the position it traditionally occupies in the visual arts, accomplish, instead, the destruction of the photographic image as reality."[7].

This argument reinforces the notion that if the cinematographer wants to successfully immerse the view in the illusion of a fantasy film, the camera must capture the magic of the action or the mise-en-scene using a realist lens.

This idea of using a realist lens ties in with suspending disbelief. When depicting a fantasy world, the filmmaker is asking the audience to suspend their disbelief, which is much easier for an audience to do if it is depicted with clarity, with the optic functions of the lens to resemble our

[7] Deren, Maya. "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality on JSTOR." *Iadt.ie*, 1960, www-jstor-org.ezproxy.iadt.ie/stable/20026556 Accessed 1 Mar. 2024.

eye as technically possible, and without fragmentation of our spatial and temporal understanding of how ‘reality’ feels. Employing a realist lens on a shot-to-shot basis imbues the image with a sense of truth.

This ‘true’ image produced by the realist lens can simultaneously engage viewers on multiple levels - through its objective portrayal of reality, the personal knowledge and values attached to that reality, the direct impact of its visual appearance, and the manipulated relationship between the mise en scene of the shot and their meaning in a greater sequence. Deren is arguing for the authentic photographic image that serves as the fundamental basis for creatively utilising the medium of film. Although this can apply to a wide range of genres and tones, this idea is particularly poignant when considering how to depict fantasy.

By applying Deren's insight of the realist lens to the thesis, we can evaluate the cinematographer's role as a technical expert and a creative collaborator, shaping the audience's perception of reality. Deren's advocacy for the realist lens underscores the medium's ability to authentically portray reality devoid of overt manipulation on a shot-to-shot basis. The intrinsic essence of film resides in its unparalleled capacity to depict reality through the camera's lens, rendering it a viable substitute for the actual lived experience, leading to the ability of an audience to suspend their disbelief, which is essential for a work of fantasy to be successful.

In his book The Theory of Film, Kracauer summarises the critical assumption underlying his material aesthetics of film: Film is essentially an extension of photography and, therefore, shares a marked affinity with the visible world around us. “Films come into their own when they record

and reveal physical reality."[8] Kracauer conceived film as a medium of representation whose realistic potential is grounded in its photographic technology.

When talking about formative versus realist tendencies, Kracauer asserts:

> "Films that combine two or more dimensions are very frequent; for instance, many movies featuring everyday life incidents include a dream sequence or a documentary passage. Some such combinations may lead to overt clashes between the realistic and formative tendencies. This happens whenever a filmmaker bent on creating an imaginary universe from freely staged material also feels an obligation to draw on camera reality."[9]

The cinematographer's role in a fantasy film can be understood as finding a balance between camera reality and poetic reality; Kraucauer defines this balance as,

> "All these creative efforts are in keeping with the cinematic approach as long as they benefit, in some way or other, the medium's substantive concern with our visible world. As in photography, everything depends on the "right" balance between the realistic tendency and the formative tendency, and the two tendencies are well balanced if the latter does not try to overwhelm the former but eventually follows its lead."[10]

From a cinematography standpoint, the realist lens can be categorised by the ways in which it mimics our subjective experience of reality. It is high in quality, focused, and free from distortion and vignetting. In addition to these optical tendencies, it also follows our subjective sense of continuity of time and space, moving in a linear fashion following how we experience time and space.

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[8] Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film : The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1960.
[9] Kracauer, Op. Cit.
[10] Kracauer, Op. Cit.

1.4 Introducing the Role of the Cinematographer

Up to this point, we have established definitions for reality and illusion within cinematography and begun exploring their intricate relationship. It is also crucial to examine the role of cinematographers and how they play a defining role in negotiating reality and illusion in cinema. The cinematographer is an essential cooperator who interprets the director's vision into visual reality. This partnership becomes particularly critical when the subject matter veers into the abstract or ventures into realms of magic and fantasy. Despite the peculiar nature of such narratives, the success of the illusion rests on the cinematographer's ability to approach each shot in a figurative manner, striving to capture images that resonate with our inherent understanding of reality through the realist lens.

The cinematographer must balance imagination and realism when crafting scenes that delve into abstract concepts or mystical realms. While the subject matter may disobey the limitations of the physical world, the visual language must remain grounded enough to evoke a sense of credibility and resonance with the audience. This requires a keen understanding of visual storytelling techniques and a subtle approach to contrast, composition, lighting, and camera movement.

For example, in portraying a fantastical landscape or a character gifted with supernatural abilities, the cinematographer must carefully consider how to frame the shot, select appropriate lighting to enhance mood and atmosphere, and choreograph camera movements that elicit a sense of awe and enchantment. However, the cinematographer must also closely examine visual continuity to ground the audience in a reality that draws from our lived experience. By grounding these fantastical elements in a visual language that draws from our collective understanding of

reality, the cinematographer imbues the scene with a sense of tangibility, allowing an audience to suspend disbelief and become immersed in the illusion.

In essence, the role of the cinematographer as a primary collaborator in achieving cinematic illusion extends beyond technical proficiency. It involves a thorough understanding of the narrative context, an intuitive grasp of visual storytelling techniques, and a drive to blend elements of reality with the fantastical creatively. Through their figurative approach to crafting individual shots, cinematographers breathe life into abstract concepts and magical worlds, inviting the audience on a journey where imagination and reality merge. Although numerous cinematographers have struck a balance between reality and illusion, this thesis will focus on how Henri Alekan brought magic to the screen by mastering the realist lens.

Fig. 1

1.5 Introducing Henri Alekan

The great French cinematographer Henri Alekan (1909-2001) (Fig 1) was intimately linked with the evolution of European cinematography throughout the second half of the twentieth century, credited as cinematographer on over one hundred films. In a 2001 obituary, Journalist Ronald Bergan illuminated the life of Alekan.[11] After living through WW1 in his early childhood, Alekan and his younger brother became travelling puppeteers in 1925 when Alekan was just sixteen.

During his years on the road, Alekan became very interested in light and photography and returned to Paris to work as a third assistant cameraman at Billancourt studio, one of the leading studios in France throughout the 20th century. After a spell in the military, he returned to Billancourt in 1931 to find the studio transformed by sound technology. In the late 1930s, Alekan worked as a camera operator for Eugen Schüfftan, with whom he worked on two Marcel Carné films, Quai des Brumes and Drle de Drame. Schüfftan, the cameraman on Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), became Alekan's mentor.

It was from Schüfftan that Alekan acquired his extensive knowledge of how to execute practical effects, including what would go on to be coined ‘the Schüfftan process’, a technique used frequently on Metropolis to create the illusion of large-scale or fantastical sets without the need for extensive physical construction. It combines practical effects, mirrors, and matte paintings to integrate live-action footage with miniature or painted elements seamlessly. Alekan would continue to use it throughout his career, including over fifty years later on *Wings of Desire,* to make the angel's wings appear and disappear seamlessly.

[11] Bergan, Ronald. “Henri Alekan.” *The Guardian*, The Guardian, 19 June 2001, www.theguardian.com/news/2001/jun/19/guardianobituaries.film. Accessed 6 Mar. 2024.

Alekan described the many lessons he learned from Shüfftan, "I profited greatly from the magnificent lessons in lighting created by an artist. He would say, 'Look here, I'm not doing naturalist lighting. I'm doing lighting as I feel it. Emotional lighting.'"[12] Alekan's views were similar. "We should break the banality of naturalism, particularly in lighting. We get naturalism in our everyday lives. Artists are made to invent something else." This is interesting from Alekan, as although there is a tendency in his work to embrace emotionally expressionist lighting, he always seems to balance it with a fidelity to the realist lens.

Alekan's professional trajectory was halted by the German occupation of France during WW2. Following his escape from a prisoner-of-war camp in 1940, he, alongside his brother, established a resistance organisation known as July 14, operating in southern France. This group assisted individuals evading German pursuits by offering refuge and counterfeit documentation. Additionally, Alekan covertly documented German coastal fortifications through film.

Despite his dismissal of naturalism, particularly his espousal of the creative use of lighting and shadows - as delineated in his 1979 book, Des Lumières et des Ombres (Of Lights And Shadows) - Alekan's first success as director of photography was René Clément's 1946 documentary *Battle Of The Railway*. Using almost no lighting, he filmed railway workers re-enacting their courageous exploits as résistants during the occupation. This gave him an understanding and appreciation of the realist lens, which he carried forward to all his subsequent projects, always striving for the quality of the image to resemble that of the human eye. In stark contrast to this documentary approach, he filmed Beauty And The Beast the same year.

[12] Interview with Henri Alekan "Alekan La Lumière." *The Criterion Channel*, 2018, www.criterionchannel.com/videos/alekan-la-lumiere. Accessed 4 Oct. 2023.

As mentioned, Alekan went on to shoot over one hundred films, effortlessly moving through eras and their respective film movements. He carried his profound sensibilities to each project and adapted them to serve the film world. His work encompassed diverse genres, from documentary to fantasy, poetic realism to romantic comedy, demonstrating his exceptional versatility and mastery of the craft.

Throughout his career, Alekan always sought to transcend the confines of everyday approaches to cinematography, he was faithful to the realist lens while experimenting with lighting, composition, and practical effects to create evocative and atmospheric imagery.

Section Two:

Beauty and the Beast (1946)

2.1 Contrast and Continuity as Central Elements of Illusion

I will start this chapter by thinking about the essence of illusion in the visual approach to this film, namely contrast and continuity. The foundation of illusion in this film is the contrast between the visual depiction of Belles's 'real' world and the enchanted realm of the Beast. Although these worlds are visually contrasted massively, many techniques carry across them, giving the film a sense of visual cohesion and spatial/temporal continuity.

When looking at the ways in which Alekan and Cocteau use contrasting shooting styles to denote reality and magic, the influence of classical art styles quickly becomes evident. By incorporating stylistic elements inspired by artists such as Vermeer and Rembrandt to depict Belle's tangible reality of Beauty's world, they immediately paint a picture of the real world which audiences (at the time of release and ever since) can connect to and place in time.

As articulated by film historian Arthur Knights, Cocteau's commitment to the look of his film was extraordinary, "Cocteau had decided much in advance of shooting that he wanted the merchant's house and all of his real-world photographs in the style of Vermeer. That master of everyday detail, which becomes almost otherworldly through its tranquillity and luminosity."[13]. By emulating Vahmeer's approach, Cocteau sought to elevate the mundane into the realm of the

[13]"BEAUTY and the BEAST Commentary." *The Criterion Channel*, 1991, www.criterionchannel.com/videos/arthur-knight-commentary. Accessed 22 Feb. 2024.

extraordinary. This also served to set the story in a period approximately one hundred years before Beauty and the Beast was first published in the mid-18th century (Fig. 1, Fig. 2).

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

There is a soft, painterly quality to how the light wraps around the subjects in Belle's world. The strategically framed windows motivate the light to allow pools of soft light to fall on the subjects without filling in the shadows so much that they lose the attractive contrast. This soft, natural light emulates the luminosity of Vermeer. (Fig 5) This tonal contrast invites the eye to move around the image (Fig 1 and 2), and this balance between light and shadow creates incredible depth.

In a 1995 interview promoting the Beauty and the Beast restoration re-release, Alekan describes how the Dutch masters were used constantly as references:

> "Cocteau repeatedly encouraged me to go to museums and study the light of the great masters in order to discover what triggers in the viewer the emotions that these works bring out. I think that was essential in my life as a cinematographer to have gradually picked up the sensibility in visual works of art and how they manage to convey emotions to the visitors in a museum. The viewers are visitors in this magical world."[14]

[14]"Alekan '85." *The Criterion Channel*, 2018, www.criterionchannel.com/videos/alekan-85. Accessed 4 Oct. 2023.

It is clear that the practice of looking to art to find inspiration and guidance as a cinematographer informed Alekans approach to creating magical worlds throughout the rest of his career. Other classical references are also apparent:

In his book Diary of a Film[15], Cocteau likened the grouping of the merchant's guests in the main hall of his manner to Rembrandt's famous 'The Anatomy Lesson'(Fig 4), while later scenes in the tavern recalled for him the simplicity and serenity of the humble peasants in paintings by the 17th-century french artist Louis Le Nain (Fig 6). Using these various classical works to inform the style of 'real' brings a visually striking yet grounded feeling to these sequences, depicting Beauty's world in an 18th-century style audiences can quickly contextualise.

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

In contrast to the style used to depict the 'real' world, Cocteau wanted the visual style of the fantasy sequences in and around the Beast's enchanted castle to echo "the extravagance and flamboyance of Gustav Doré."[16] Doré's artistic style is characterised by meticulous attention to detail, dramatic compositions, and expressionist use of light and shadow. He had a knack for creating highly intricate and densely populated scenes, often filled with intricate architectural elements and figures. Doré's style is marked by delicate linework and intricate textures, creating depth and dimension to his compositions.

[15] Cocteau, Jean. "Beauty and the Beast : Diary of a Film." *Internet Archive*, 1972, archive.org/details/beautybeastdiary0000coct. Accessed 1 Nov. 2023.
[16] Cocteau, Jean. Op. Cit.

In terms of subject matter, Doré was renowned for his depictions of fantastical and otherworldly scenes. His work tends to evoke a sense of grandeur and awe, with an emphasis on capturing the emotional and narrative essence of the subjects he portrayed.

Fig. 7

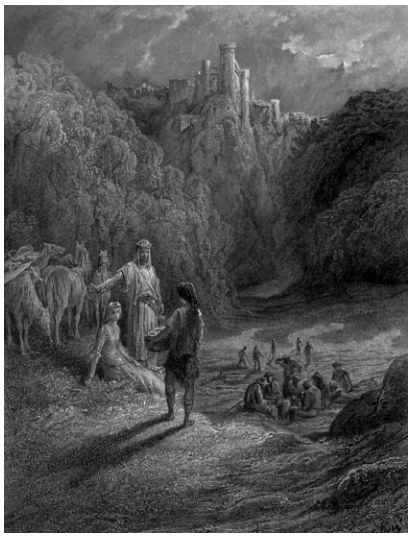

Fig. 8

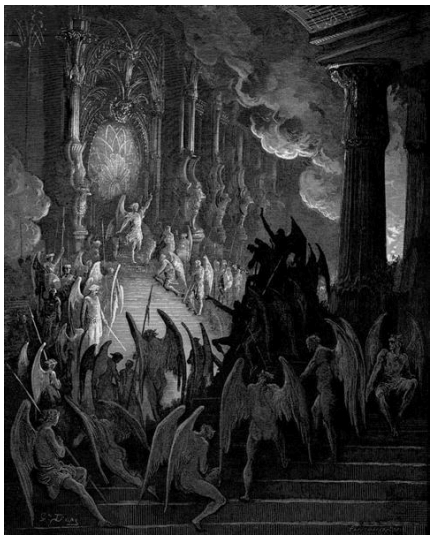

Fig. 9

The chiaroscuro in Doré's work adds a sense of drama and intensity to his compositions, enhancing their emotional impact. The surreal, fantastical elements feel effortlessly woven into the scenes depicted, and the continuity of light falls perfectly from believable sources, creating an uncanny sense of truth in his illustrations.

The deep tonal range within the composition of Doré’s work builds a unique, magical atmosphere in the imagery. The depth of the image comes from contrasting the large areas of shadow around the edges of the frame with the glimmering pockets of highlights to illuminate the subject in an otherworldly manner. Cocteau observed how these pockets of shadows and highlights work together to guide one's eye around the frame and applied them to the visual approach to show the Beast’s realm. The heightened contrast and hard light also add to the sense of mystery in the image.

The magic of the Beast's realm is very easily perceived after experiencing how the ‘real’ world is established in Belle's village. The decision to depict these two opposing worlds in different artistic styles establishes the basis for visually understanding reality versus believing in illusion in this film. In his Diary of a Film, Cocteau wrote, “Nothing seems so dreary to me as the photographic uniformity of a film, which know-alls call 'style.”[17] Cocteau asserted that film must distract the eye with its contrast, with various effects that attempt not to copy those of nature but to find the truth.

This idea of intuitively finding truth can be categorised as an anti-realist tendency, which is essential to some degree when creating a fantasy film. Cocteau exemplified this idea, saying, “I'll light one face more than another, light a room more or less strongly than it would naturally be, or give a candle the power of a lamp."[18] This notion of finding truth through interpreting the sensation of nature is evident in his approach to every scene.

An example of this idea in practice is how Alekan and Cocteau visualised the exteriors of Belle’s world (Fig 10), versus the Beast’s realm (Fig 11). They approached it through a combination of mirroring and inverting the exterior reality. The composition and framing between both realities are nearly identical, creating depth by incorporating a central vanishing point which guides the eye towards the action. In Belle’s world(Fig 9), the frame is filled with white sheets hung out to dry, which tethers it to a very domestic and human reality. This is a high-key approach to the lighting, eliciting a sense of an airy summer day. In the Beast’s realm(Fig 10), the portion of the frame which mirrors the sheets of Belle’s world is falling away into the shadow of the enchanted

[17] Cocteau, Jean. Op Cit.
[18] Cocteau, Jean. Op Cit.

forest. The hazy and mysterious highlights give the frame a sense of timelessness and placelessness.

Fig. 10 (above), Fig. 11 (below)

This is where the role of Alekan comes in, ensuring a sense of continuity throughout by maintaining a realist lens. Regardless of the scope of contrast in the film, whether it be the grand all-encompassing contrast of the styles of depiction, the varying contrast between scenes or the high contrast ratio of the individual shots, Alekan uses contrast as a foundation for magic.

2.2 Visualising Another World Through Camera Movement

Aside from contrast, movement and perspective are other primary devices used for materialising otherworldly realms. In a 2015 essay analysing camera movement, Paul Schrader asserts that camera movement has deep and powerful moral roots, as Godard would maintain - and it's one of the things that makes film an art form.

> "The Lumiéres were probably the first to experiment with affixing the camera to an object in motion, and the resulting shot from a moving train in Liverpool in 1897 helped clarify what set filmmaking apart from the other arts. A moving camera allows for dynamic visual composition over time"[19]

In his diary of a film, Cocteau describes how he grew up watching the early works of cinema from the Lumiéres and Milié in awe. He sought to capture a sense of immersive enchantment through camera movement, aiming to make the camera feel light and free.

Schrader continues, explaining the two types of camera movement: motivated and unmotivated. "Motivated camera movements are direct responses to the action on screen: you move, I follow you. A character moves across the room, and the camera pans, tilts or moves by hand or tracks. The storyteller uses unmotivated camera moves to emphasise one kind or another, be it emotional or supernatural. You stand still, I approach - that's unmotivated." The movement in Beauty and the Beast is predominantly motivated; the camera predominantly sees the world with

[19] Schrader, Paul. "CAMERA MOVEMENT: PART IV on JSTOR." *J-Stor*, 2015, www-jstor-org.ezproxy.iadt.ie/stable/43746067 Accessed 4 Mar. 2024.

an intimate objectivity. The action almost always dictates the camera movement, a realist tendency that helps keep the audience's sense of spatial and temporal continuity intact.

The style of camera movement is contrasted heavily between the mundanity of Belles's world and the enchantment of the Beast’s world. When the Merchant returns from the Beast's castle, the camera movement is tense, fixed in one position, but while tilting and panning aggressively to cover the tense family brawl. But as Belle slips away into the moonlit exterior, stealing away to keep her father's promise to the Beast, the camera becomes calm and focused, with motivated movements to follow Belle.

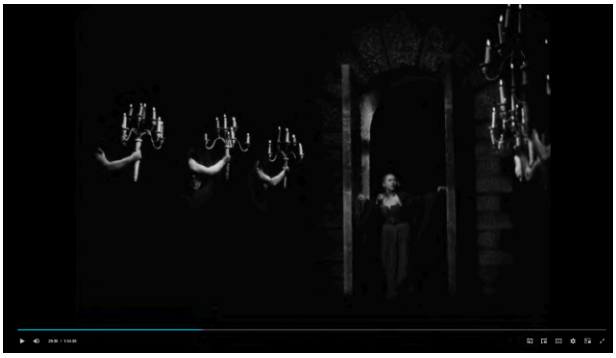

Fig. 12

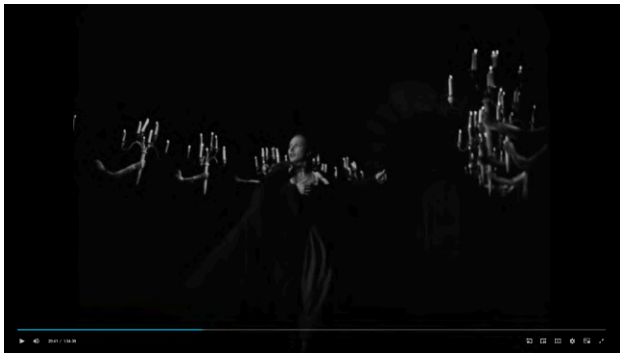

Fig. 13

Belles's arrival at the castle leads us into one of the most spectacular scenes of the film - rendered beautifully in slow-motion - as Belle enters the large gothic doors to the castle(Fig 12), she glides down the long corridor lit by disembodied arms holding enchanted candelabras, the camera remains focused on Belle, tracking backwards while booming down as she moves towards us (Fig. 13).

As well as being a phenomenal technical achievement, this smooth, consistent movement also creates an atmosphere of magic which is a key source of the enchanting atmosphere. To build on this magic, when Belle reaches the next corridor, she enters through another threshold(Fig 14),

Fig. 14

as if passing through yet another porthole into an even more distant and magical world. In this shot, although still running, Beauty doesn't seem to move at all, for the simple reason that Cocteau mounted her on a small wheeled pedestal, not unlike a skateboard, which stagehands steadily pulled toward the camera. Pairing this unearthly movement with the billowing curtains and shafts on glowing moonlight, and rendering it in slow motion still continues to elevate the sense of enchantment to the sequence.

This sequence manages to balance a heightened sense of magic while keeping a tangible air of reality. This is due to approaching it with a realist lens and adherence to spatial and temporal continuity. Alekan’s realist lens captures the sequence with astounding detail, sharp focus, no distortion of the lens, and no camera shake. The combination of these realist tendencies mirrors our human perspective, allowing us to suspend our disbelief of the magical elements.

Overall, Cocteau and Alekan's use of camera movement serves to blur the line between reality and illusion and enhance the enchanted atmosphere. The movement of the film is largely motivated, when a character moves in the 'real' world, the camera pans and tilts to follow the action. In contrast, the camera moves more fluidly in the Beast's realm, dollying and booming to enhance the enchanted atmosphere.

2.3 *Practical Effects as a Tool for Manifest Imaginationary Reality*

In addition to the magical atmosphere created through contrast and movement, perhaps the most astonishing tool used to bring magic to the film is the practical effects created through camera tricks. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines Illusion as "perception of something objectively existing in such a way as to cause misinterpretation of its actual nature"[20], and the illusions in this film fit that description perfectly. Cocteau and Alekan craft countless practical effects to create visual transformations and apparitions throughout the film to bridge the gap between Belle's world and the Beast's realm and to illustrate the overall enchantment of the Beast's realm.

Throughout the film, the impossible is materialised. In his Diary, Cocteau noted, "The wonderful thing about films is this perpetual card trick done in front of an audience without letting them see how it's done."[21] This is evident from the transformation sequences, where the Beast is depicted morphing between human and animal form, Belle appears through the wall of her bedroom, or the enchanted objects and details of the Beast's castle; By seamlessly blending these effects into the storyline, Cocteau blurs the line between reality and illusion, creating a sense of tactile

[20] "Merriam-Webster Dictionary." *Merriam-Webster.com*, 3 Mar. 2024, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/illusion Accessed 8 Mar. 2024.
[21] Cocteau, Jean. Op. Cit

realism that immerses viewers in the film. The practical effects are executed so flawlessly that they invite the audience to suspend their disbelief and embrace the fantastical world of the film as if it were real life.

The apparitions and transformations are executed so successfully throughout the film; including any of the Beast's sudden appearances and disappearances, the transformation of Belle's string of pearls into a smouldering twist of rope, Belle's tears that turn into diamonds as they trickle down her cheeks. These were executed exactly as Méliès would have done almost fifty years earlier, by stopping the camera and making whatever changes he wanted right then and there. In his Diary, Cocteau remarked how simple it is for a film artist to create a complex world that has no existence in reality[22]. One of the most perfectly integrated examples of this is an act of magical transformation, repeated twice in the film for full effect. As the Beast carries Beauty into her room, her simple peasant dress(Fig. 15) becomes a regal gown(Fig. 16). The trick of the camera is complimented by exceptional fidelity to spatial and temporal continuity, as well as Alekan's faithful adherence to a realist lens and composing both to cut together flawlessly.

Fig. 15

Fig. 16

[22] Cocteau, Jean. Op. Cit.

One of the most visually arresting sequences of the film unfolds as the Merchant enters the Beast's castle. He passes through the threshold into darkness and begins to walk down the entrance hall, illuminated by untethered arms that unfurl, holding enchanted candelabra. The candles magically light as the arms reach out (Fig. 17).

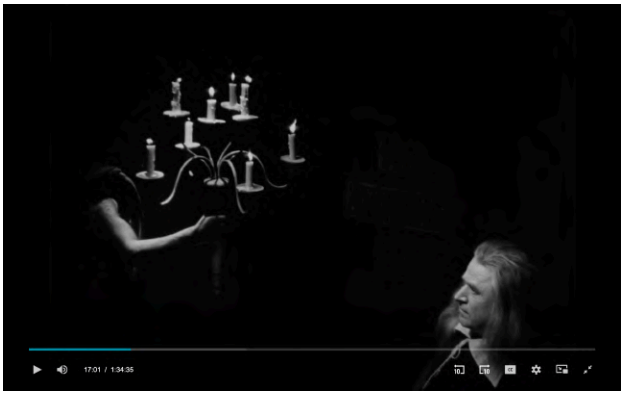

Fig. 17

Fig. 18

Once fully illuminated, the arms let go and point their fingers at the Merchant while the candelabra floats weightlessly(Fig.18). In his Diary, Cocteau explains how, in order to achieve this, they borrowed another device from Méliès: shooting in slow motion and beginning the shot with all the candles ablaze, suspended on invisible threads, and the camera in its final position, they then played the scene in reverse, tracking the camera backwards extinguishing them one by one, and then running the film backwards.

The seamless use of multiple techniques of camera trickery simultaneously results in effects that have truly stood the test of time. This shot at the end of the film, for example, where Belle and her prince charming soar upwards through the heavenly clouds, happily ever after (Fig. 19). In

his Diary[23], Cocteau describes the crafting of this shot, where Alekan and Cocteau had the actors leap from a twelve-foot platform suspended by harnesses.

Fig. 19

It was shot in slow motion and subsequently reversed to create the illusion that they were flying weightlessly upwards. Alekan also employed the Schüfftan process to project the billowing clouds onto mirrors which through mastery of the technique blends seamlessly and sells the illusion, creating an extremely effective final sequence of high contrast. This final sequence encapsulates the achievement of the entire film, boasting crystal clear imagery captured with the realist lens that feels both magical and real.

The visual achievement of the film can be attributed to the collaboration between Cocteau and Alekan. In his diary Cocteau wrote about Alekans sensibilities, stating ‘It's all too

[23]Cocteau, Jean. Op. Cit.

beautiful. I'd like it harsher, with more contrasts.' Especially at the start of their collaboration, Cocteau wrote often about how Alekan's approach was too soft and diffused, and how he needed to bring more drama to the visual world of the film. Throughout their collaboration, Cocteau and Alekan found a way to incorporate both of their sensibilities through the contrasting styles of the real and the magical worlds in the film. Alekan brought his sensibility for soft light on faces and in many scenes in Belles 'real' world, but with Cocteau's persistence in wanting more and more drama, Alekan employed the dramatic high contrast style of his old mentor Schüfftan and the tradition of German Expressionist lighting. In this frame (Fig. 20), as the Beast carries Belle to her room, it is clear Alekan tapped into this stylised emotional lighting style. With the harsh, long shadows, deep contrast ratio and crisp, perfect highlights.

Fig. 20

In a 1985 interview with Alekan, he spoke of the relationship between himself and Cocteau, "it was certainly one of the highlights of my life. As a beginner, I had only made one or two feature

films. The film was very difficult to make, the war was still going on, and the technical challenges were great."[24] The sets of the beast's castle were particularly dark, and filming in darkness was the biggest challenge of the time.

To conclude this section, the collaboration between Cocteau and Alekan in the visualisation of Beauty and the Beast stands as a testament to the power of artistic synergy in cinema. This case study delved into their shared understanding of the power of imagery in storytelling. Their cinematic vision across contrasting styles, continuity of space and time, movement and practical effects were all imbued with a sense of magical realism, showing fantastical elements captured with the profound clarity of the realist lens. The idea of employing practical effects not to try to copy nature, but instead find truth about the feeling of nature is a central philosophy to the visual approach to Beauty and the Beast. Throughout his career, Alekan was constantly pushing technology forward, driven to create spectacular images while finding a truth to the image. With his work, he observed that for the audience to buy into an illusion, it must be presented in a clear way, as close as possible to subjective reality. Although there is much expressionistic lighting in the film and countless camera tricks, the film is photographed through Alekan's realist lens as if an illusion is captured in an impressionistic manner, the illusion has been shattered; it no longer bears resemblance to reality, and thus the illusion has been unsuccessful.

[24]"Alekan '85." *The Criterion Channel*, 2018, www.criterionchannel.com/videos/alekan-85. Accessed 4 Oct. 2023.

Section Three:

Wings of Desire (1988)

To me, Wings of Desire is a beautifully composed masterpiece that experiments with standard conventions of cinematography. Alekan's use of contrast, camera movement, perspective, and practical effects. The combination of his emotionally expressionistic lighting tendencies is grounded by his use of the realist lens, which adheres to our innate subjective reality, allowing the audience to suspend their disbelief.

3.1 Contrast and Continuity as Central Elements of Illusion

An enchanting contrast occurs between the fantastical depiction of the angels and an almost documentary realism achieved by shooting on location; we see real Berliners moving through Berlin's honest landscape, and the camera doesn't shy away from any of the pain or depravity of the people and the place. This contrast creates a uniquely authentic backdrop for a fantasy film. Unlike Beauty and the Beast more than forty years previous, where Cocteau and Alekan were painting a contrast between the fictionalised period setting of Belle's world and the fairytale magic of the Beast's realm, each in the style of classic art (Vermeer and Doré respectively), both of which required an enormous amount of imagination from the creator and the viewer. Alekan and Cocteau had to create these two worlds out of pure imagination and make them feel alive enough that the audience could suspend their disbelief. That was not the case with Wings of Desire; filming in a city with so much texture, hope, and suffering allowed Alekan and Wenders

more freedom to experiment with film form, as the reality of the world they were depicting was so alive.

This contrast enhances the truth of the film massively, grounding the world in an exceptional example of time and place, perfectly observed by Alekan's lens, which, although it employs creative use of film forms such as embracing the angel's point of view through camera angles, camera movement and depicting the angel's experience through black and white - because it is grounded in this real and gritty sense of time and place, it manages to maintain a strong sense of realism throughout. The tangible authenticity and history of the city are depicted to create a sort of magic that does so much heavy lifting and allows the angels to observe Gentilly without the need for constant practical effects. In this sense, it is a very different approach to Beauty and the Beast.

This film's most obvious and visually striking contrast is between the monochrome ethereal world of the angels with the vibrantly colourful human realm. The angel's perspective is depicted in a soft, monochrome, creating a sense of detachment and timelessness. Wenders asserts that from the moment he first conceived the world of *Wings of Desire,* shooting the majority of the film in black and white felt needed,

> "Berlin needed that, and so did the angels: they were unable to touch things, they didn't know the physical world, so it was logical that they had no colours either. Also, black and white is associated with the world of dreams. It was exciting to imagine the world of angels in black and white, with colour appearing at odd moments in the film, as a new experience."[25]

Wenders added, "I feel like you see more of the essence of things in black-and-white photographs. It's like x-raying. Somehow, in black and white portraits, you see a person maybe

[25] Wenders, Wim. On Film. Op. Cit.

not as realistic, but somehow, you see clearer who that is."[26] This idea of stripping away the distractions and attractions of a world with colour and getting to the objective and slightly removed perspective of seeing in black and white is central to the approach of depicting the angels.

The decision to shoot much of the film in monochrome led Wenders to immediately reach out to Aleken, renowned for his skilful rendering of tone in black and white cinematography. Wenders also mentioned that with these angel characters, their invisibility and all the special effects that one could possibly dream of, "I knew there was just one DP on this planet who could really handle it and who should come out of retirement - and that was Henri, as soon as I told him about the angels being invisible and shooting in black and white, his hands were getting wet."[27] Alekan brought fifty years of experience and vast knowledge of manifesting fantasy illusions through in-camera practical effects.

In contrast to this black-and-white angel realm, the human world bursts with warm, vivid colours, capturing the richness and intensity of human experience. This visual dichotomy highlights the angels' longing to experience mortal life's sensory and emotional depth. As the protagonist, Damiel, chooses to become human, the film shifts its visual style to reflect his newfound physicality and sensory experience.

3.2 Visualising Another World through Movement and Perspective

[26] Wenders, Wim. On Film. Op. Cit.
[27] "The Angels Among Us." *The Criterion Channel*, 2018, www.criterionchannel.com/videos/the-angels-among-us. Accessed 28 Feb. 2024.

These shifts in colour reflect a larger shift in visual style as a whole, which is informed by perspective. There is the angel perspective, this perspective is sometimes unmotivated, roaming freely without having a direct point of view, and sometimes motivated by point of view, looking through the eyes of one of the main characters Damiel or Cassiel as they observe the world lovingly - this angel perspective characterised by black and white, untethered camera movement, allowing the camera to move in an enchanted way, floating over the city, through people's homes or through the Berlin wall. The contrasting visual style of colour encapsulates the perspective of humanity, the camera moves but it is governed by gravity, making it feel tethered to a familiar perspective of life. This human perspective is also free of any special effects.

Regardless of the perspective of this film, at any given time whether the film is about people told from an angel or human perspective, at its core this is a film about looking and longing. That idea transcends between perspectives, becoming the defining characteristic of the visual style. In the final sequence of the film, using a human perspective, we see the world through actual human eyes for the first time, as Alekan masterfully matches close-ups between Marrion (Fig.21) and Damiel (Fig.22) as they finally interact, staring right into the lens and creating a profound moment of intimacy, we see the longing in their eyes. The eyelines and compositions are matched perfectly, which paired with the realist lens creates a sense of truth and a feeling of intimacy. There is something inherently emotional about the perspective of these images, something in their eyes feels so fragile and connects to our sense of subjective truth of being.

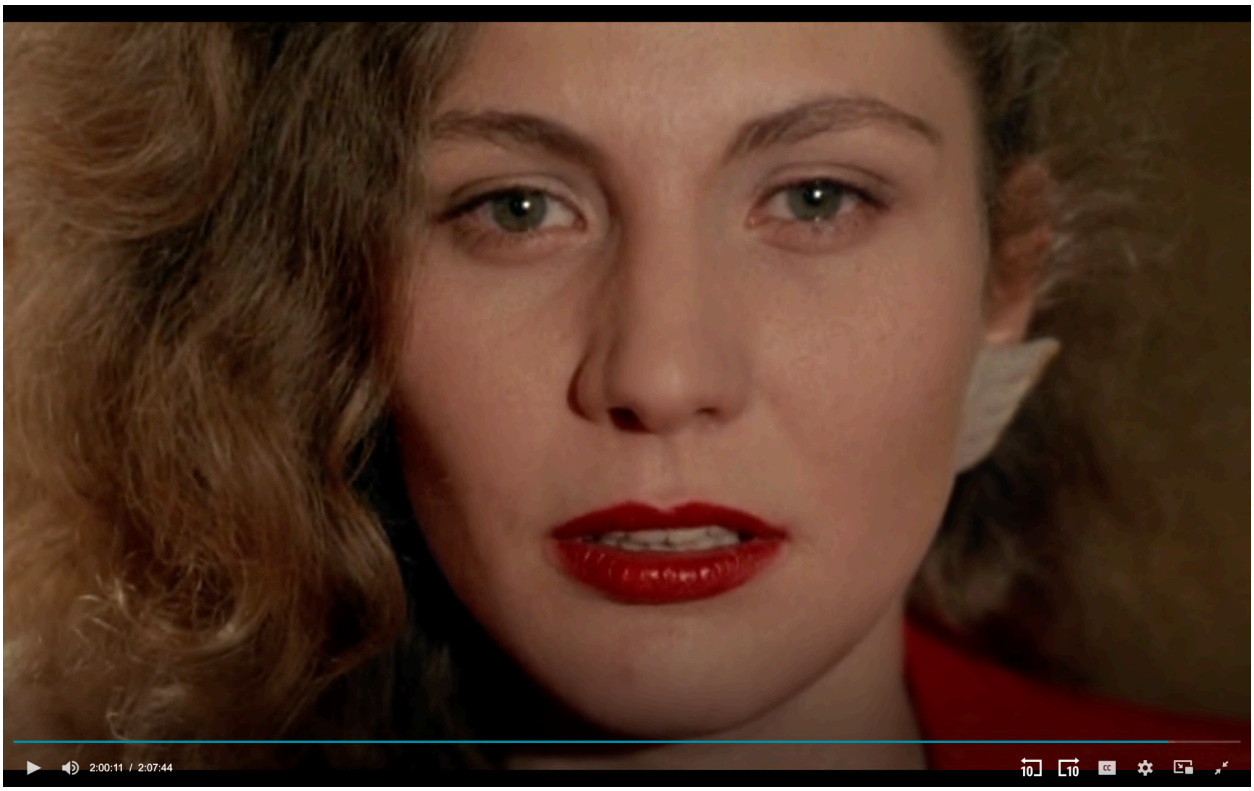

Fig. 21 (above), Fig. 22 (below)

The camera movement in Wings of Desire is one of the key elements which give the film an otherworldly atmosphere. Although the camera movement is smooth and persistent throughout,

Fig. 23 Fig. 24 Fig. 25 Fig. 26

the angel perspective is characterised by an impossible, weightless movement. Near the beginning of the film, we are brought along through the eyes of Damiel as he moves through the city, first moving through the sky (Fig.23), circling a radio tower, not only seeing a snapshot of the city as a whole but also hearing fragmented transmissions of life in Berlin. The camera then begins to descend, all the way down to a block of apartments, where the camera movement transitions through the window (Fig.24-26) and the point of view shot continues, leading into a continuous sequence from Damiel's perspective, moving constantly and smoothly through people's homes. Although much of the camera movement in these angel perspective sequences is motivated through the eyes of Damiel, by Paul Schrader's definition, it is actually unmotivated camera movement because it is not motivated by the action taking place on screen.

Schrader defines the two types of unmotivated camera movement; one being logical, making a gestural movement to emphasise something important. This logical unmotivated movement is used from time to time, mostly when the camera is looking at Damiel (Fig. 25). The camera moves in on Damiel as he looks longingly and lovingly at unaware Berliners, focused on his gentle, still gaze. The camera seems to look lovingly back at him.

Fig. 27

Then, Schrader continues, there is illogical, unmotivated camera movement. “This occurs when the storyteller imposes himself on the story, and so the camera calls attention to itself.”[28] By Schrader's definition, most of the camera movement in Wings of Desire is illogical, unmotivated camera movement. It is not following the action we see on screen, the camera movement is intertwined with the poetic perspective often employed throughout the film. This is the case on a grand scale when the camera is roaming through the city, the library, the bunker, and people's homes at the beginning of the film, the camera floats untethered in a supernatural manner, looking with empathy at people in their vulnerable, private dwellings, before moving on and looking elsewhere, unrelated to the action on screen.

[28] Schrader, Paul. “CAMERA MOVEMENT: PART IV on JSTOR.” *J-Stor*, 2015, www-jstor-org.ezproxy.iadt.ie/stable/43746067 Accessed 4 Mar. 2024.

Tom Gunning writes about the nature of camera movement, arguing for its ability to make us engage with space in a unique way, “Camera movement seems to make us aware of space itself, its continuity and extension. Furthermore, it seems to place us as viewers within space as if we not only observed it but moved within it, discovering its new aspects and dimensions.”[29] This is a problematic claim, since, as cinema spectators, we always literally remain outside the space of the film. But the role of camera movement often seems to make our approach deeper into the world of the film, to merge into it. We become in some sense immersed. This is certainly the case for Wings of Desire. So much of the perspective in this film is through the eyes of the characters, allowing the camera (i.e., the audience) to truly explore the world of the film.

The foundation of this film's visual approach is its perspective, so much of the film is about looking; with much of this film captured as if through the eye of an angel. It was crucial that for this approach it was achieved a lifelike clarity to the image, as close as possible to how we see the world. Alekan used a realist lens to depict both angel and human perspectives of this film, with an adherence to an audience's spatial and temporal sense of reality. This decision to visually amplify the truth of the film.

The idea of perspective is set up immediately in the opening sequence. These angels are an eternal presence, observing Berlin day after day, decade after decade. (Fig.28-31); in the first shot (Fig.28), we see clouds billowing past us as if the camera is up among them. Then we see an eye, looking(Fig. 29)

[29] Gunning, Tom. The Unsettling Nature of Camera Movement from Screen Space on JSTOR.” *Iadt.ie*, 2020, www-jstor-org.ezproxy.iadt.ie/stable/j.ctv12pnt9c.14? Accessed 3 Mar. 2024.

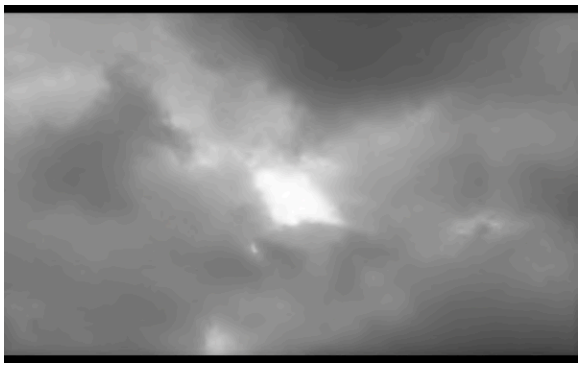

Fig. 28

Fig. 29

Fig. 30

Fig. 31

Then we see a shot from above(Fig.30), a busy pedestrian crossing with people moving obliviously, apart from a child who is still young enough to be able to see angels. Finally, we see the reverse shot of what the child is looking at(Fig.31); Damiel, an angel perched on the top of a cathedral. This opening sequence sets the tone for how central the idea of perspective is to this film.

3.3 Practical Effects as a Tool for Manifesting Imaginationary Reality

The next element of the visual approach to showing magic and illusion we will look at is practical effects. The practical effects in this film are kept to a minimum and used sparingly and to great effect. In stark contrast to Beauty and the Beast, where Cocteau and Alekan missed no

opportunity to incorporate a cinematic illusion employing countless camera tricks the entire way through the film. In Wings of Desire, there is an opposite sensibility. Instead of finding the dominant magic through transformations and apparitions, the magic in Wings of Desire is subtler, uses camera tricks rarely relies heavily on perspective, movement, lighting and atmosphere to build an otherworldly magical poetry. In his book On Film, Wenders writes "I knew that Henri Alekan, who didn't know Berlin, would reveal a new and unfamiliar view of it: he has the ability to create incorporeal shapes with light, as though he himself had access to this fairy universe through the mastery of light"[30] it was true that this subtle form of magic is what did the heavy lifting.

In his book On Film, Wenders speaks about their approach to materialising magic through practical effects "At the beginning, Alekan wanted the angels to be transparent. It was difficult to persuade him that it would make the story impossible to film." Alekans' idea of transparency survived in two shots, where the angel Damiel steals something; the first being a stone, the second a pencil. Wenders explains the objects don't actually move, just their essence. Alekan used timeless in-camera effects to pull off these shots.

Apart from these two instances, the only other practical effects are the appearance and disappearance of the angel's wings(Fig.32, Fig. 33). A practical effect that Alekan describes:

> "one that is actually rather complex - where in a studio, the angels who then were going to wear a large grey overcoat - likely, modern, contemporary - would have wings for a few seconds and then the wings would disappear as if by magic. The trick effect was difficult because it involved a system of mirrors placed before the camera in such a way that the angel actor and his double, dressed the same way and standing in another part of the studio, could each be reflected in the mirror. The double wore wings but not the angel

[30]Wenders, Wim. *On Film: Wim Wenders* - 2001, *Internet Archive*, 2014, archive.org/details/onfilmessaysconv00wend/page/270/mode/1up?q=alekan. Accessed 2 Mar. 2024.

> actor. And by means of lighting, the wings were either illuminated or disappeared in the darkness."[31]

Alekan had used it over forty years earlier on Beauty and the Beast and on other films since, but described how this time around the use of video monitors made it easier to superimpose the two bodies and the wings. But it still took a whole day to get it right, and Wim kept only a few images of the angel with wings, once they disappeared, the film could continue with the angels looking more like real humans.

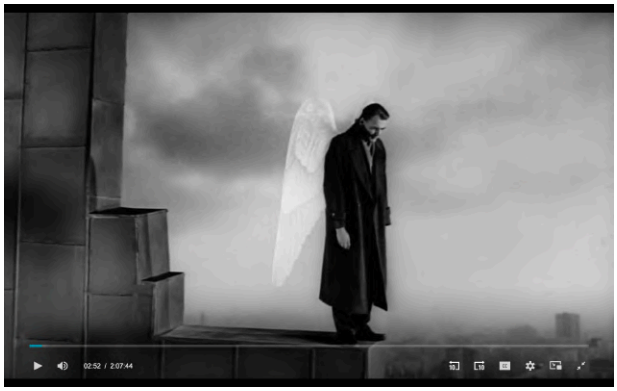

Fig. 32

Fig. 33

These practical effects seem to suit the tone of the film perfectly, not modern or flashy, but grounded, informed by Alekans emotional sensibility,

> "I always prefer tricks that are invented on the set, manual, of the do-it-yourself variety, rather than tricks that are too calculated, too scientific. This all comes down to a difference of sensibility and emotion. I don't think the special effects we see so perfectly executed in American films touch us as deeply as the simpler effects of the kind we saw in the films of Méliès and which we find enchanting. I think the creative artist can communicate more directly with the public by means of tricks done in the studio rather than through special effects of a scientific nature perfectly executed in the laboratory. To me, that is extremely important. That's why I go on, even if it seems a bit old fashioned, using relatively simple tricks, with semi-reflective mirrors, with lights you turn on or off, and which directly transmit to us what the artist feels."[32]

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[31] Raskin, Richard. "An Interview with Henri Alekan." *Imv.au.dk*, 1993, pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_08/section_1/artc2A.html. Accessed 28 Feb. 2024.
[32] Raskin, Richard. "An Interview with Henri Alekan." *Imv.au.dk*, 1993, pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_08/section_1/artc2A.html. Accessed 28 Feb. 2024.

This philosophy is apparent in Alekans approach throughout his career, even in illusion he seeks truth, always looking to get to the essence of transmitting a feeling from the artist to to viewer.

In his book On Film, Wenders articulated his intention for Wings of Desire "I wanted to sum up my thoughts and worries, religious inklings and aesthetic ideas. I was thinking of planning for a time monument, in which the beauty and sadness of equivalence would be celebrated, thinking of trying to make a definitive statement of pure film space and time, a balancing of 'illusion' and 'fact', all about seeing."[33]

This is a film which invites the viewer into a uniquely poetic universe. On one hand, the angels and their world are strictly fantasy, poetic fantasy. On the other hand, there is almost a documentary aspect to the film. Two really opposite languages were brought together by Alekan.

[33] Wenders, Wim. On Film - Op. Cit

CONCLUSION

As we navigate the illusive spectrum between reality and illusion in fantasy films, we are confronted with questions regarding the nature of existence, perception, and the construction of truth. In this thesis, the definition of cinematographic reality becomes a philosophical inquiry, engaging with subjective perception through mirroring our experience of reality using the realist lens.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks from the writings of Christopher Williams and Maya Deren, this thesis investigates the role of cinematographers in shaping the illusionary worlds of fantasy cinema. realist versus formative visual tendencies as a spectrum; in Alekan's case where he employs expressionistic lighting, but he remains to be a predominantly realist approach due to his fidelity to the realist lens.

Through an analysis of visual techniques, practical effects, and collaborative processes, the study reveals how these films manifest imaginative realities that captivate audiences while maintaining a sense of fidelity with the real world, allowing the audience to suspend their disbelief.

Focusing on two seminal works, Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* (1946) and Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1988), both shot by Henri Alekan more than forty years apart, the thesis delved into how a cinematographer navigates this tightrope between reality and illusion to create

captivating visual illusions which still connect with an audience's innate sense of reality by investigating the key elements of their visual approach.

By using the work of Henri Alekan over the span of his beautiful career, I sought to illuminate how he technically and creatively approached the visual treatment of the fantasy film, and how his sensibilities stayed much the same.

There is a lack of academic study concerning Henri Alekan’s life and contributions to the field of cinematography, and more research needs to be done to illuminate his profound impact on the field with a special focus on the nature between reality and illusion.

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Battle of the Railway (1946) - René Clement

Beauty and The Beast (1946) - Dir. Jean Cocteau

Enter the Void (2005) - Dir. Gaspar Noé

Metropolis (1927) - Dir. Fritz Lang

NOMADLAND (2021) - Dir. Chloé Zhao

Poor Things (2024) - Dir. Yorgos Lanthimos

Skinamarink (2022) - Dir. Kyle Edward Ball

The Old Oak (2023) - Dir. Ken Loach

The Before trilogy (1995, 2004, 2013) - Dir. Richard Linklater

Wings of Desire (1988) - Dir. Wim Wenders

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