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Title:
Bamboleho: the Aesthetics and Significance of the Moment

Abstract:
Bamboleho is less concerned with plot resolution than with visual aesthetics and communicating significant moments. More than an exercise in style, *Bamboleho* encourages the spectator's active engagement—aesthetic, poetic, philosophical—with the moment itself, independent of causality and in tension with potentially exclusive social realist readings.

Keywords:
time, image, poetry, narrative, surrealism, social realism

Referring to the work of 'condensation' in dreams, Freud famously wrote: 'If a dream is written out it may perhaps fill half a page. The analysis setting out the dream-thoughts underlying it may occupy six, eight or a dozen times as much space' (Freud 1978: 383). A similar observation could be made about the length of a poem and the interpretations to which it gives rise, and indeed the plot and analyses of a short fiction film, itself associated with poetry because of 'the density of its storytelling' (Raskin 2002: 3). As one critic writes, 'when they work well [short films] have the intense concentration—the internal consistency—of a fine lyric poem' (Le Fanu 2004: 20).

Although it incorporates 'a surrealistic, associative kind of narrative' (Hanning 2004: 27), includes action which, within the logic of the storyline, most likely never happened, and offers symbols (as Freud claimed dreams do) which are ultimately 'images of wish-fulfilment' (like the seagull—a motif of freedom—flying above Migue and Mara as they make love on the rooftop) (Nielsen 2004: 38), *Bamboleho* is neither in its entirety a dream

nor, by any stretch of the imagination, a surrealist film. What it does share with surrealism, however, is an intensely poetic logic that hinges, in great part, on the film's non-linearity and demands of the viewer that he/she become creatively involved.

In veering from the Aristotelian model of plot construction where, as James Magrini (2007) explains, 'each event within the story is explained and develops out of what precedes it', *Bamboleho* recovers some of that 'autonomous creativity' quashed, as far as Surrealists were concerned, by 'the "logic" of construction and explanation' (Magrini 2007). This distinguishes it from films where the realistic portrayal of life serves, consciously or otherwise, as 'a vehicle for the subversive transmission of conformist/capitalist political values' (Magrini 2007). *Bamboleho* is not, of course, completely detached from reality, yet its social commentary, rather than depending on a singularly social realist depiction of the world, is bound up with its rejection of commercial cinematic forms—with its lack of concern for causality and endings. In practice what this means is that the function of images in the film exceeds that of advancing the plot, serving instead to engage the viewer in the contemplation of the moment and thereby unsettling the processes by which conventional cinema works towards satisfactory endings and maintains the status quo.

Responding to a question on the very interplay of images and story in *Bamboleho*, Luis Prieto reminds us that he studied photography before he studied film and that he is, for this reason, 'very much a "visual" person' (Raskin 2004: 17-18). 'A film is told with images', explains the film's director, which is why both story and images have the same importance for him (Raskin 2004: 17). Yet despite the equal importance Prieto gives to both, what is striking in *Bamboleho* is the way in which the viewer is frequently made to dwell on the images within shots. More often than not, they are set within a still frame, focusing attentions on the constituent elements that lie within it.

In shot 1, for example, the deep focus ensures the viewer is aware of everyone and everything within the frame. His/her eye is drawn to the TV set on the extreme right not by any camera movement but by a combination of devices: the seated man's line of sight from the centre out; the line of cirrus clouds; the line of movement of people traversing the frame, emerging from and disappearing behind the TV; the blue and red crates upon which the TV sits, vivid against the faded Persian carpet, dark soil and black plastic sides of the set itself; the washing line, with its white flapping sheets, strung between the shed and ending at a point behind the TV; the aerial on the shed's roof pointing in the TV's direction. In shot 12, the eye is similarly drawn to the red top of a child drooped across a donkey's neck; also leading the viewer to this point are the dilapidated white goods on the left, the matching white bath filled with hay in the centre, the line of the horizon and craggy hills, the movement of black smoke from left to right. In shot 13, the scene is dominated by a man bowing in prayer in the centre of the frame; the camera is still, movement provided instead by the young Migue traversing in the foreground from left to right on his tricycle, just as he did in shot 12, though from the opposite direction.

Then there is the film's predilection for portraiture. The close-ups of young Migue, cut with an image of drifting clouds (shots 27a to 29); the initial close-ups of Migue and Mara, face to face and kissing on the rooftop (shots 30a to 30c), before the camera pans out to reveal that their idyllic backdrop is fake; the medium close-ups of Migue, Mara and Ahmed, during their stoned recital of 'Bamboleho' (from shots 143 to 178).

Also relying on a still frame are the final long and medium shots of young Migue, back and front, walking along the wall, in bold relief against a blue sky. Here, the lack of camera movement concentrates attentions on the young boy's swaying in his precarious act

of balancing, the shapes made by his arms cutting triangles across the frame, matched graphically by the pointed form of the metal framework in shot 216.

By contrast, when the camera does move, it is frequently in moments of panic, when there is a loss of both composure and composition. For example, when young Migue, despite his pleas, is dragged by his father towards the pot of snails which he insists his son must eat (shots 21 to 24a); and, of course, during the chase scenes where, at various points until Migue's first and second jumps, the camera makes brusque or shaky movements (for example, shots 37, 49, 51, 68, 73 and 204). Significantly, the second sequence of Migue's and Mara's intimate moments on the rooftop and Migue's subsequent flight and (eventually fatal) jump (shots 192 to 212) is reprised at almost eight times the pace of the first, lasting just 33 seconds compared to 260 seconds the first time round (shots 30a to 84b). In this sequence there is no time for the viewer to dwell, speed and motion in juxtaposition with the previously contemplative work arising from the visual appreciation of moments. The finality of Migue's chase is, of course, countered by the return to young Migue on the wall and the contemplation that these images of the boy promote. For here, as in the other shots cited, the viewer is less concerned with how things end as with looking at the scene: at the shapes, colours, body, face—the moment. Here and elsewhere, *Bamboleho* offers the moment, the images, as an antidote to the relentless march of time, aided also by the film's doubling back, and to conventions obsessed with plot resolution at the expense of more thoughtful, creative engagement with the subject in which the viewer also participates.

In his interview with Richard Raskin (2004: 16), Prieto expresses his pleasure 'that the film speaks differently to different people', noting that 'its circular (doubly circular) structure is full of open spaces for the viewer to articulate his/her own film'. While admitting that it does not matter, therefore, how he himself understands his scenes, he

does offer his own explanation of Migue's two flights across the rooftops and the film's eventual return to Migue as a young boy. The first jump is seen from Migue's 'stoned […] point of view' and is 'what he and everyone else would of [sic] like to see happening. The other one is what really happened—the raw reality' (Raskin 2004: 16). The return to the young Migue is a framing-device which 'helps to leave a positive image in the film' (Raskin 2004: 16). Yet this is not because it seeks to make the viewer forget Migue's 'tragic ending', but rather because it gives Migue a 'second opportunity' at life inasmuch as we, the viewers, with benefit of hindsight, 'can [now] do something about those things we don't like. We can help those kids if we want to' (Raskin 2004: 17).

What Prieto is articulating here is how, in toying with causal logic and thus displacing the (Aristotelian) tragic plot ending or resolution, the film encourages thought and with it, potentially, action. The 'open spaces' which he cites leave room for the viewer's active engagement in contrast to the passivity engendered by conventionally sequential narratives that are too readily and uncritically consumed. So do the carefully crafted images, like photographs within a frame, drawing the viewer into the moment (much as poems do), into reflecting on it, instead of propelling him/her quickly towards the story's end.

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