

From the Opening Sequence of *Citizen Kane* to the Final Shot of *The Birds*: A Filmic Microanalysis of Three Painted Scenes

DARIO LANZA VIDAL

Abstract

THIS ARTICLE AIMS TO HIGHLIGHT the importance of matte painting in cinematographic construction and to emphasize the analytical value of these pieces of artwork. To this end, three painted scenes were chosen and subjected to a multifaceted analysis that underlines their contribution as pictorial creations, their role in landscape painting tradition, and their function as an element of filmmaking construction, within a set film model, while providing evidence for the unique ways in which this technique connects film and painting.

Introduction

Filmic microanalysis—that is, the study of certain filmic elements as a means of achieving the compression of a cinematographic piece in its totality—is an extraordinarily useful tool for highlighting the importance of certain aspects that routinely escape analysis in other ways. It proposes to draw attention to certain “small fragments, micro-sequences that can be scrutinised under the analytical microscope in order to observe the condensation of the lines of force that make up the film from which they are extracted” (Zunzunegui, *Closer Look* 9). Taking

the essence of this proposal, this study aims to perform a microanalysis of three scenes, all well-known, and submit them to a “moving away” examination, going from detail to a general view. The examples were chosen for their single common characteristic: they involved, without the viewer’s knowledge, painted scenery. They all provide examples of the manufacture of filmic images through pictures, a mechanism known as matte painting, a typical resource in cinematographic construction but one that has received little analytical attention. Matte painting is both a show of filmmaking trickery and an example of special effects, and it is traditionally linked to other special effects such as pyrotechnics, animatronics, and fluid simulation. However, due to the particular nature of this resource, located somewhere between cinematographic and pictorial, it offers a wealth of interpretation considerably superior to that of the other special effects to which it is often linked. This article aims to investigate in detail whether or not a painted scene has its own analytical value that would enable it to be studied through the prisms of both pictorial representation and cinematographic narration. That is to say, the intent is to discover whether the painted scene has a multifaceted analytical value precisely due to its hybrid nature, a condition of being neither one nor the other, which so far has held it back from specialized research.

The scenes chosen for this in-depth analysis are from the films *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960), and *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963). Of course,

DARIO LANZA VIDAL holds a PhD in information and communication technologies and is an associate professor in the Faculty of Fine Arts in the Complutense University of Madrid, Spain. His main research focuses on techniques for pictorial simulation within the cinematographic medium.

the nature of the study means that any selection of works is necessarily incomplete, and another catalogue could have been chosen that would have been equally valid. However, these films were chosen in an attempt at a sufficiently diverse selection that would allow this article to examine different approaches to this particular phenomenon of painted scenes, essential and omnipresent in the history of film. The author's interest in undertaking this study has its roots precisely in the aforementioned scarcity of analytical research into this unique element of cinematographic construction and in the role—tertiary, rather than secondary—that pictorial representation has traditionally occupied in film studies.

Methodology

The objective of this work, a method for analyzing painted scenes, means that the shots must be observed from a perspective that will inherently be multifaceted. For this, it is particularly pertinent to apply a method based on the positions of Panofsky, who suggested beginning any analysis of a visual work with the description of its formal characteristics—its format, tonal palette, represented motives, and technique—before going on to elevate one's scrutiny to an iconographic level. This involves highlighting the importance of the meanings implicit in representation and interpreting the codes mobilized by the author in his or her communicative act. It is then necessary to move on to an iconological level, in order to relate the work to its narrative, historic, or cultural context.

Using Panofsky's proposal as a vehicle for this study's analysis, going from detail to overview, and taking on each of these painted scenes by looking first at their status as examples of trickery, this article will begin by describing the content of the representation and investigating the technical processes involved in its construction. However, obviously, it would be better not to be limited to a mere instrumental description of these techniques, so the next

step will involve considering the more pictorial dimension of these representations in an attempt to shed light on their value as pictorial texts, their significant function as landscape paintings, and the description of the cinematographic landscape provided by the painting as well as the attitude of the author in the communicative process.

Next, observing from a greater distance away, this article will seek to link the paintings with the filmic texts of which they are part, asserting the value of the paintings' narrative contribution to the cinematographic story and attempting to discover whether or not it is possible to recognize the characteristics of the film model from the painted image. The gradual distancing over the course of these three levels of analysis is essential for avoiding "the hypertrophy of a microscopic study which tends towards self-satisfaction in the partial discovery which it refuses, consciously or unconsciously, to link with the overall dimension of the text" (Zunzunegui, *Landscapes* 94). This should help achieve a more complete view of the scene in context.

Views of the Xanadu Mansion in *Citizen Kane*, by Mario Larrinaga, Chesley Bonestell, and Fitch Fulton

Among all the matte paintings created by Mario Larrinaga, Chesley Bonestell, and Fitch Fulton for *Citizen Kane*, the most memorable are probably those used to produce the opening sequence, which shows the exterior of the decadent mansion of Xanadu through the linking of six situational shots that are actually six matte paintings interwoven with a false tracking shot approaching the window of the bedroom in which Kane is dying. This sequence has been analyzed on numerous occasions and from varying points of view, but the pictorial nature of the scene has always proven elusive, and it is this condition that this essay will use as a basis for its first analysis.

The sequence begins with a vertical tracking shot of the wire fence from the "No

Trespassing” sign before proceeding to a shot showing a faraway view of the Xanadu mansion from the exterior railing. The foreground here shows the “K” of Kane forged high up on the gate, and all that is visible beyond the railing is a painting displaying the mansion on top of a hill in which a window lit from within contrasts with the dark palette of the night. The point of view chosen for this composition is low, meaning the mansion is shown in the upper area of the painting, near the edge. In this image, all the space from the gate in the foreground to the mansion window toward the back, including the murky terrain in between, is in perfect focus. Thus, the deep focus characteristic of the film is apparent from its very opening shot. In fact, the in-depth focus that brought fame to the film’s director of photography, Gregg Toland, often was produced not only through the skillful use of lens and diaphragms but also through shots filmed separately and then composed in the lab using an optical printer. However, with the traditional secretiveness surrounding the use of special effects, Toland never acknowledged that this extreme depth was often “reinforced” using optical printing. This fact was later confirmed by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, and it was a device that would prove fundamental to the construction of the sequence being analyzed here.

This first matte painting merges into a closer view that is almost identical in terms of composition: once the shot goes through the gate, there is a cage of monkeys from Kane’s private zoo, seemingly abandoned, behind which the hill is visible with the mansion at its peak, occupying exactly the same position in the frame as in the previous shot. Next, the scene fades to a shot of two gondolas on a pond, the mansion reflected on the water. Again, the lit window of Kane’s bedroom occupies, in this reflection, exactly the same position in the frame as in the previous shot, confirming the bedroom as a potent center of gravity. The following shots, of identical composition, show successively closer views moving toward the mansion: the jetty, golf course, and stone gate,

all in a ruinous state of neglect. Above all of these spaces, the bedroom window remains lit, constant in the same place in every shot, serving as a magnet for the eye and as the center of the discourse. In this way, the window, its location unchanging as the shot approaches, causes the “rupture of the visual central unit” cited by Mereghetti. This effect would have been difficult to achieve without the precision afforded by the construction of the sequence using matte paintings.

Working as matte painters on the RKO staff, Larrinaga, Bonestell, and Fulton were able to use the optical printer that Linwood Dunn had been perfecting since the 1930s and that would come to be so important to Welles and to this film’s visual design. In fact, the device scarcely found quite the starring role in filmic narration that it did in *Citizen Kane*. Naturally, the film owes its extraordinary visual quality to Toland’s excellent photography and to its innovative deep focus, but also, as mentioned previously, to a great degree to the shots composed “invisibly” by Dunn on his optical printer. Dunn himself remembered that as soon as he had shown Welles the potential of the optical printer, it had become indispensable for the producer: “Telling Orson about the optical printer was the kiss of death. He used it like a paintbrush, which was fine, except that he asked me to do things that I’d never done before. However, he had enough power at the studio to OK the time and money it would take. I learned a lot from it” (qtd. in Rickitt 74).

The main advantage offered by the device was that of turning composition into a much safer and more conservative process than riskier mechanisms based on rétroprojection or multiple exposures. The optical printer allowed for the end of these delicate assembly techniques and separated the processes of capture and composition. Now, this process is operated retrospectively in the safety of the postproduction lab, with no risk to the filmic material. The specific characteristic of working with the optical printer is this total posteriority in terms of shooting, its post-process nature,



Figure 1 (a, b, c, d, e, and f): Construction of the sequence through linked matte paintings made by optical printer.

which made it the first mechanism to establish a total disjunction with regard to filming and instituting a rejection of profilmic manipulation. It is the mechanism that most roundly corresponds to the Metzian category of “tape trucage” (Metz), by situating its manipulation of the film tape via optical-chemical lab procedures. Given that this device allows for the suturing of various film fragments, it is ideal

for composing paintings with shot scenes, allowing the matte painter to produce and film the painting in an independent film and use the optical printer to operate this suturing in a safe manner. In fact, the entire sequence under analysis here was constructed using a single painting: a view of Kane’s opulent residence with the majestic Xanadu mansion’s imposing presence on the top of a hill, a mansion

that becomes a recurring visual motif joining the sequence together. With great attention to detail, particularly in the representation of the overgrown exotic vegetation, this painting was filmed and later composed using the optical printer with the image of the railing, the cage of monkeys from Kane's abandoned zoo, and rest of the props in the sequence.

This greater precision afforded by the use of the optical printer in the composition of footage, in contrast to other contemporary techniques, was essential in maintaining the protagonist's bedroom window in exactly the same location in every frame. Of particular interest is the shot in which the mansion is reflected on the surface of the pond. Using a vertically inverted version of the same painting, the optical printer was fundamental here in incorporating the ripples on the surface of the water and, over both fragments, a haze of condensation that gives the scene a misty sense of unreality. In the next shot, this same painting is shown, now composed with a jetty and filmed from a closer standpoint. This was a reframing operation resolved by the optical printer with particular ease, via the shifting of its projector head. However, in this shot, the widening of the painting used to suggest an approaching motion caused a reduction in the painting's definition, noticeable in a decrease in its contrast and sharpness. This effect is especially noticeable in the following two shots, which are the last two to use this painting and which show it from progressively closer positions, combined with a golf course and a model of a stone gate. Despite this loss of sharpness caused by zooming in on the picture, the sequence is notable for constituting an excellent example of construction through matte paintings and shows extraordinary understanding of the possibilities offered by optical printing. Its discursive articulation, in which it repeatedly utilizes the same painting, achieves important subjective meaning for the scenography, with the window being the clear and indisputable protagonist of the entire sequence.

At this point, now that a detailed description of the formal features and the instrumental

mechanisms involved in the creation of the image has been carried out, it is necessary to move on to an iconographic analysis in order to highlight the attitude of the creators of this landscape. The preceding description will suffice to accentuate the meaningful elements of this painting. The landscape is demonstrative of the attitudes of Larrinaga, Bonestell, and Fulton and their intent to portray a natural space conquered, invaded, dominated, and transformed according to human will. These images are designed to show Kane's ownership of the territory, his altering of its orography, flora, and fauna and construction of a new summit to rival the features found naturally. The luxuriant tropical vegetation—king of the ecosystem in other environments—is reduced to mere ornament, being as it is a tamed, pruned Eden. Nature is domesticated on the golf course, caged at the zoo, imprisoned at the lake. This painting does not contain any allusions to the primitive forces of nature but rather confirms its subjugation. The image seeks to confer a position of domination, albeit decadent, one of domestication and artificial landscaping, of appropriation and conquest, and to represent these ideas, Larrinaga, Bonestell, and Fulton chose a constative and explicit attitude.

From the attitude of these creators that is communicated to the viewer through meaning, it is necessary to move on to an iconological level to try to relate this painting to the narrative of the filmic text in which it is found. Thus, once at the level of the narrative contribution of the painting to the plot, we can certify that these shots are open to myriad interpretations. They convey a mixture of grandiosity and futility, opulence, and decadence, where rather than admiring wealth, the viewer is privy to the memory of faraway splendor that has now been lost. There is fortune without hope, success without happiness, accomplishment but loss. The ambiguous environment, completely symbolic of the reality of the protagonist, means that the matte paintings do not just underpin one single meaning but play with the exploration of multiple interpretations. In these views, the ruins of Xanadu are shown as evidence of



Figure 2: Tragic grandeur, psychological character of the space, and baroque style of *Citizen Kane*. Matte painting by Mario Larrinaga, Chelsey Bonestell, and Fitch Fulton.

Kane's unlimited power, while simultaneously portraying the transient nature of that power. The tragedy that is the brevity and short-lived condition of every human action dominates the painting, showing a path where opulence cannot avoid its drift toward the phantasmagorical. There is ill-fated splendor and the material remains of a bright past where ambiguity displays grandeur alongside darkness and desolation. The space is baroque, metaphorized, and highly amplified and given greater depth, while the deep-focus postulate seen here invites an insight into a hypertrophied space that spans the distance from the entrance gate to the interior of the bedroom.

This sequence shows the viewer that the space was destined to be penetrated and navigated, sucking us into it centripetally. Dramatism in the frames and theatrics in the lighting turn the viewer's gaze into a psychological one. The rupture of the spatial continuity, an undeniable requirement for classical construction, that the immobile omnipresence of the window achieves manages to subjectivize the tracking shot and turn it into a movement more psychological than it is real. In this sequence, the theatrical irreality given off by the painted landscape, the scene's tragic grandeur, and the reiterative nature of the frames and the obsessive

repetition of the unmoving window draw the viewer directly in and display an example of the powerfully psychological condition of the plot, and the role that this space and scene play in *Kane's* baroque writing is emblematic.

And so it is that this painting, an apparent piece of trickery subject to little interpretation beyond its ornamental aim as a background, is able to bear the weight of a study of its meaning in the same conditions and at the same analytical level as any other landscape portrayal and also in terms of cinematographic narration, displaying as it does the same narrative features as the film of which it is part and contributing to the discourse as much as any other element of the film's construction.

View of Rome from the Forum in *Spartacus*, by Peter Ellenshaw

The unexpected richness of the microanalysis of the previously discussed shot, which has enabled us to develop readings of the shot as a piece of filmmaking trickery, as a pictorial artwork, and as a narrative element, could merely be a happy coincidence, so it is now necessary to focus on a different matte painting, radically different if possible. The next painted scene to be analyzed here was created by Peter



Figure 3: Appropriation, conquest, and domestication of the terrain in *Spartacus*. Matte painting by Peter Ellenshaw.

Ellenshaw for Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus*. It consists of a situational shot of central Rome following the sequence portraying the rebellion of the gladiators in Capua. The point of view here is slightly elevated, upon a raised platform for speakers at the Forum, but close enough to ground level for viewers to see the expressions of the figures in the foreground. The platform, the plaza to the left, and the market to the right are fragments from real sets, filmed separately and combined with a painting in which Ellenshaw incorporated the brick houses that delineate the Forum, the structures of the market, and all the monuments and edifices that make up the city's profile.

The architectural design displayed in this painting, with its abundance of low brick constructions, appropriately reflects the city layouts of the republican period in which the narration is set. The only potentially anachronistic element is a dome with an open oculus that is reminiscent of, albeit smaller than, the Pantheon. Near the golden section, Ellenshaw placed a prepossessing column in the foreground, which serves as a potent visual axis on which to distribute the weights on the image. To the column's right and behind the market, there is a small Corinthian-style hexastyle temple evocative of the Maison Carrée of Nîmes. In the center of the painting, Ellenshaw created the representation of the Capitoline Hill and, at its peak, the Temple of Jupiter towers, the indisputable protagonist of the composition, suffusing the urban vistas with grandeur. In the distance, the city structure is extended, blending into itself with progressively looser

brushstrokes, achieving the effect of great depth, accentuated by the atmospheric treatment given to the far distance.

With regard to the painting's pictorial features, undoubtedly the most noteworthy feature is Ellenshaw's unique brushstrokes in this period of maturity. The strokes are loose and atmospheric, particularly notable in the facades around the Forum and the faraway buildings, blurring the contours and obtaining a misty and vivid effect. These soft, airy, hazy brushstrokes, with which Ellenshaw rejected solidity and reinforced the plasticity of the image, help to accomplish an experience closer to real perception than to photography, a more "live" image, as the artist himself asserted:

The trick in matte painting, if you know what you are doing, is you must not make it too highly finished—just give the imagination time to work. Really, this is not like a photograph when you really look at it. It is more alive, I think. It is more like looking at the actual scene. This is a good example of a matte painting done the right way, I think. (*Ellenshaw under Glass*)

The backlighting allows for soft blending in the shaded foreground and facilitates the shaping of the dome, pillar, rooftops, and buildings. It also shows up the high contrast between the foregrounds, which softens going into the distance, merging into the hazy atmosphere that envelops the hills on the horizon. The color palette gradually goes from the brilliant ochres illuminated by the sun to the browns and reds of the brickwork and tiles further back,



Figure 4 (a, b, and c): Hazy, atmospheric brushstrokes, materialized and tangible (details).

before transitioning toward a range of blues and grays on the horizon, in a progressive dechromatization, reproducing the corollaries of atmospheric perspective. This in-depth atmospheric treatment of the space and the loss of sharpness that call to mind Leonardo da Vinci and his *sfumato* link Ellenshaw to other, very

different artists who display a similar inclination for making the atmosphere explicitly present in their scenes, such as Turner or Monet. This atmosphere, dense and tangible, is made significant by Ellenshaw and works here as a Barthian *punctum*, lending a sense of realism that transcends mere visual description of the



Figure 5: The painstaking, detailed brushstrokes of Ellenshaw for *Quo Vadis*. Matte painting by Peter Ellenshaw.

space and evokes for the viewer, more subconsciously than consciously, the sense of experiencing times gone by.

To see the artist's maturity at this point, one need only compare this painting with the way in which this same type of backdrop was used for the views of Rome that Ellenshaw himself created for *Quo Vadis* (Mervyn LeRoy and Anthony Mann, 1951) a decade previously. The naturalist treatment of the lighting and its surprising atmospheric quality make this extraordinary painting one of Ellenshaw's best if not his best.

In terms of the physical production of the matte painting, Ellenshaw's most-used technique was known to be glass shot, but there are indications that in this case he also may have used the optical printer to complete the image's composition later. The fact that the two fragments of live action were shot separately

and then combined with the painting seems to suggest that Ellenshaw would have opted for composing the image using masks instead of his usual glass, which would have made the incorporation of the non-simultaneous filmed elements impossible. The film *Ellenshaw under Glass* shows this painting on its original stand, and it is evident that though the painting was produced in formidable 2.2:1 format for the anamorphic Panavision system, it was created in its natural proportions without the compression that the anamorphic format forced on other matte painters. This suggests that Ellenshaw had an anamorphic lens available to him for the filming of this painting. The optical printer, which separated the filming process from the assembly process, would have allowed Ellenshaw to combine this painting with the two real fragments in the safety of the lab,



Figure 6: Masking and natural proportion of the image showing a possible disjunctive composition using the optical printer. Matte painting by Peter Ellenshaw.

with no risk to the filmed material and no need to intervene during filming. This was a disjunctive strategy that Ellenshaw used very few times, given that he advocated for the visual quality of the first-generation image provided by glass-shot painting, but one that he used on this occasion to great effect.

Leaving aside the formal description and instrumental research and moving on to meaning, it is clear that in the representation of this landscape, Ellenshaw is communicating humanity's conquering of nature. In this painting, civilization considers itself part of the ecosystem and as one more agent of change in the environment, seeing nature as one of its belongings. From this inclusive position, the territory is seen here as an available space for humans to use and own at their will and whose appropriation humankind legitimizes due to the aforementioned sense of ownership. The hills of Rome and the surrounding areas were the first conquest of the Romans, and their dominion, majestic but strict, inflexible but beautiful, serves as a metaphor for their dominant attitude toward other peoples. The Romans are here owners of the territory, the river and the hills, and they have bent nature to their will, using it as they see fit. Ellenshaw conveyed this appropriation, conquest, and domestication with something closer to explicitness than allusion, just as in *Kane's* example.

Moving on to a narrative plane, is it possible to identify any quality of the film narrative model from this painting? Looking at the ways in which the image is connected to the characteristics of the plot allows us to effectively

qualify this matte painting as eminently classical. Promptly following the postulates about scenography in classical cinema, the image's composition, whose busy urban center could have become a muddled view, is instead carefully balanced in order to be easily readable. The commemorative pillar, skillfully situated in the golden section, serves as a powerful visual axis that organizes the distribution of shapes. The fragments of footage with actors are made up symmetrically from left to right, the parallel placement of the buildings helps to geometrize the space, and the pillar establishes a point of interest, with the Temple of Jupiter at the back, helping guide the viewer's eye in deeper. The location of the slightly foreshortened point of view renders the creepage lines diagonal, making the composition more dynamic and underscoring the three-dimensional depiction of the space. This maximizes the image's readability, and this in turn is reinforced by the aerial perspective and the fact that the palette becomes less and less saturated moving toward the back, where Ellenshaw's loose, atmospheric brushstrokes further enhance the sense of depth. This haze, materialized almost to the point of palpability, aside from accentuating the readability, also helps to portray the city as a living entity, one that throbs with activity in its homes and ritual offerings. The atmosphere becomes eloquent, underpinning the depiction of the city as a center of culture and power. This balanced composition, maximized readability, and unique, unambiguous message are all characteristics of classical cinema and are distinctly evident in this painting.



Figure 7: Peter Ellenshaw photographed with the matte painting he produced for *Spartacus*.



Figure 8: The oppressive presence of the painting, imposed on the characters in *The Birds*. Matte painting by Albert Whitlock.

There are four other matte paintings in the film, created by veteran artist Russell Lawson, but they are lesser works, lacking the plastic nature and scenographic presence of Ellenshaw's painting. The extraordinary quality of this painting, its evocative capacity, the vibrant naturalism of its light, the composition of its masses, its depth of space, and above all, the materialization of the atmosphere, which Ellenshaw achieved in a manner much more effective than that of other, less subtle matte painters, serve to make it one of the greatest works in the history of this art form.

Final Shot of *The Birds*, by Albert Whitlock

In search of a definitive confirmation of the initial hypothesis of this article, a third and final microanalysis will now be undertaken of another painted scene, in order to certify the extraordinary analytical richness of matte painting as a resource for cinematographic construction.

For the construction of the coastal village seen in *The Birds*, Hitchcock used locations that were then complemented by sets constructed in a studio and with paintings created by the artist Albert Whitlock. The film contains a total of twelve paintings by Whitlock, including the intriguing final shot in which Mitch, Melanie, and the family drive away through thousands of birds. The composition of this painting is markedly symmetrical around the axis of the road, which, shot head-on, divides the space into two

halves: land to the left and the winding coast to the right. Behind the two rails in the foreground, the tree and barn form a pair of symmetrical shapes that Whitlock used to organize the space. The longitudinal outline of the road, which stretches into the distance, is reinforced by the rail and the electrical cables on either side of it. These were further resources used by Whitlock to prolong the shape of this escape route toward the horizon, and covering the cables with birds produces a rhythmic pattern akin to an iconic punctuation mark, underlining the latent threat accompanying their escape. In this painting, Whitlock uses a predominantly gray, green, and blue palette, with contrasting light, creating large shaded areas next to bright areas bathed in the first light of the morning. The loose, hazy brushstrokes afford the painting a misty quality, not unlike Ellenshaw's work in *Spartacus*.

At an instrumental level, this shot is a complex combination of Whitlock's painting, a fragment of live action, which is the car driving away, and several elements of set, populated with real birds. No fewer than thirty-two distinct elements came into play in a scene Hitchcock himself considered "the most complex shot [he'd] ever filmed" (Counts). Following is a testimony from the director himself, describing the production of this shot:

That took 32 different pieces of film. We had a limited number of gulls allowed. Therefore, the foreground was shot in three panel sections, left to right, up to the birds on the rail.

The few gulls we had were in the first third, we re-shot it for the middle third, and for the right-hand third, using the same gulls. Just above the heads of the crows was a long, slender middle section where the gulls were spread again. Then the car going down the driveway, with the birds on each side of it, was another piece of film. The sky was another piece of film. (Bouzereau)

The last element to which Hitchcock was referring was, effectively, Whitlock's painting. Because of the complex structure of this scene, Whitlock, an artist who tended toward composition through multiple exposures, rejected the sharpness of original image in that technique in favor of the safety and flexibility of non-destructive composition offered by the optical printer. Whitlock had even greater reason than Ellenshaw in *Spartacus* to employ the optical printer: the unpredictable nature of filming animals combined with the sheer number of fragments to assemble made this scene too risky for composition through multiple exposures, which was a procedure that would leave no room for the correction of mistakes, so a transference strategy was then more advisable. However, the greatest problem with this scene was obtaining the necessary masks to perform the composition of all the elements.

Blue screen could have been a risky technique here because it tends to generate an unwanted bluish halo around cut-out subjects when they move quickly, which of course seemed inevitable with the unpredictable movements of the birds and would have revealed the mechanism of the trick shot. To obtain masks of the necessary quality, Whitlock opted for an experimental method consisting of filming the thirty-two elements independently and situating them on a screen lit with a sodium-vapor lamp, which projected a characteristic yellow light onto the screen. Inside the filming camera, two different rolls of film were placed, one sensible to the sodium-vapor light and the other conventional, so that while the conventional film was shooting the action, the vapor-sensitive film was exclusively registering the presence of this background light. This meant that the action itself was being registered at the same time as its high-precision mask, and the aforementioned blue halos that the blue screen would have caused around the birds' sudden movements could be avoided. Thanks to this strategy of extracting masks, somewhere between the blue screen and the process known as Dunning-Pomeroy, the distinct fragments making up this scene could be suitably cropped and assembled with precision by Whitlock using



Figure 9: Photograph of Albert Whitlock's painting for *The Birds*.

the optical printer. As a result, the resolution of this shot—which was hugely complex, technically speaking—its notable artistic quality, and its rich meaning make this matte painting one of the most remarkable in Whitlock’s extensive portfolio.

In terms of meaning in the portrayal of the landscape, Whitlock was alluding with this painting to a reality, a threat, somewhere beyond that which is depicted. Nature, which was believed to be dominated and caged, has shown itself to be rebellious and is demonstrating the reach of its power and the futility of our own. The forces of nature, represented here by the flocks of birds, are dormant now but may wake at any moment, and their waking may prove fatal. This threat suggests to the viewer that we are mere guests in nature and that it may choose to impose its dominion at any moment, an allusion to the creative forces of nature, or more accurately in this case to its destructive forces, with nature portrayed here as a supreme, primordial entity. While part of the danger is represented in the form of the birds present in the image, the true danger resides not in that which is shown but in that which the viewer senses is beyond, something indirectly insinuated by the painting. Here, humans do not own the territory as they believe but are subject to greater forces that cannot be seen or understood, where we are reminded that our conquering of nature is merely partial and temporary. This painting serves as a symbol, a reference, an image whose value lies more in what it implies than what it shows. This is an evocative position from which more is communicated than what is denoted, where the hazy creation of the atmosphere and its dramatic plays of light are used by Whitlock to reinforce this allusive function. This symbolic effect, unlike the landscapes analyzed previously, shows that Whitlock’s approach consisted in prioritizing evocation above connotative depiction, using the painting as a vehicle to communicate a message that goes beyond mere portrayal.

Moving on now from the level concerning the communicative intention and toward the

painting’s narrative contribution, this is a profoundly psychological image immersed in an equally psychological plot. The road down which the characters are driving opens up the space into the distance, highlighting the interminable length of the ground they have yet to cover, a pathway that even in the horizon is still flanked by birds sitting on the electrical cables and separating the characters from their salvation. The creatures’ oppressive presence and the fragility of the calm amplify the threat’s magnitude and play down the protagonists’ strength. Here, the scenario that Whitlock has created imposes itself on the characters, who are submerged in an impenetrable mass of birds and made small by the hypertrophy of space in the distance, represented by the endless road.

The hypertrophic depth of the terrain is accompanied by hypertrophic density dedicated to the atmosphere. In this painting, the hazy light between the parting clouds, bringing a psychological dimension to the flight of the protagonists, is very effectively produced. Unlike Ellenshaw’s painting, which constitutes a visual portrayal of the characteristics of the classical regime, using the atmosphere to unidirectionally underline the meaning of the plot, here the dramatic illumination in chiaroscuro and the sun rays bathing the scene suggest a sort of relief charged with tension, trust but also desolation, the possibility of a future but one that will never be free from threat. Salvation, yes, but also despair. It is these contradictory sentiments that the painting communicates to the viewer. There is ambiguity and psychological tension underpinned by this dramatic illumination, constituting a significant turn in the representation of the atmosphere. The marking of the depth, the scenery towering over the scale of humans, the multiplicity and exploration of non-obvious meanings, and the ambiguous psychological approach of the painting are positions totally aligned with the mannerism and baroque of the Hitchcockian style, enabling this article to affirm that this painting is also capable of exhibiting the narrative features of the film model of which it is part.



Figure 10: Significant atmosphere, psychological tension, and mannerist ambiguity (detail).

Conclusion

This article has attempted to bring to the forefront the phenomenon of matte painting, a mechanism for the construction of cinematographic material through pictorial means, and one that is habitually relegated to a mere technical space in the context of *trucage* and special effects. However, a practice as unique as this one constitutes an interesting topic of analysis, undoubtedly due to its privileged position halfway between filmmaking and painting. In an endeavor to emphasize the uniqueness of the method's contribution, three famous shots created with paintings were chosen for this article, and going further than simply describing the mechanism of their construction, this study attempted to first highlight the value of the matte painting as a painting, as a pictorial text in its own right, and to explore its capacity to bear the weight of analysis with regard to its significance in pictorial representation. For this purpose, its principal role in landscape representation was held up. This position enabled us to situate matte painting within the traditions of landscape painting and photography, which in turn allowed us to investigate the various strategies for showing meaning. In some cases, this involved depiction, and in others, evocation, mobilized around the intent and attitude of the creator in this communicative process, as well as in the construction and description of space within the painting itself.

However, in addition to being a pictorial piece, a perspective from which it is already valuable, a matte painting takes on true worth as an element of set design in films—in short, as a component of the construction of the cinematographic ensemble. It is for this reason that an analysis of this phenomenon must not overlook the matte painting's contribution at a narrative level. From this perspective, this article has attempted to confirm whether or not a link exists between the film narrative model and the characteristics of the painting. If so, it should be possible to differentiate matte paintings developed under different narrative styles, as well as to acknowledge the specific discursive characteristics of a given film model for which the paintings were developed. This article has confirmed how the characteristics of a scene in classic film, characterized by an exquisite composition and maximum readability in support of the plot's unique meaning, are also transmitted through these paintings, as seen in the matte painting created by Peter Ellenshaw for *Spartacus*. On the other hand, baroque cinema, with its abundant and profoundly psychological spaces, excessive in their depth and seeking to explore ambiguous meanings, communicates these same features in its matte paintings. This can be seen in the painted images in *Citizen Kane* and *The Birds*, confirming that it is indeed possible to detect in these paintings all the “lines of force constituting the film from which they are extracted,” as mentioned by Zunzunegui (*Closer Look*).

In light of these deductions, the result of this article is twofold. First, a means was identified of studying matte painting as a cinematographic resource that has so far lacked the analytical attention it warrants. Second—and this is the transcendental point for which this study was aiming—it has been shown that matte painting is much more than a special effect resource; rather, it is an expressive art form particularly rich in meaning, from the prism of pictorial landscape representation through to its narrative contribution to the plot. We can see that matte painting experienced a continuous molding through the varying film narrative models to the degree where the cinematographic context can even be inferred from the painting's observable features.

This particularly fruitful result regarding an element of filmmaking construction that had scarcely the tools necessary for its study evidences the need for this article and provides justification for its being undertaken.

REFERENCES

- Bordwell, D., et al. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. Routledge, 1988.
- Bouzereau, L., director. *All about The Birds*. Documentary film. Universal Studios, 2000.
- Counts, Kyle B. "The Making of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*." *Cinefantastique*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1980, [https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Cinefantastique_\(1980\)-_The_Making_of_Alfred_Hitchcock%27s_The_Birds](https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Cinefantastique_(1980)-_The_Making_of_Alfred_Hitchcock%27s_The_Birds).
- Ellenshaw under Glass*. YouTube, uploaded by 146Yamagata, 3 July 2010, playlist compiled by Eyes on Cinema, 24 Apr. 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLbFbLvJse3moPdatXkHhXJdlr9bNo4YX3>.
- Meregheggi, P. *Orson Welles*. Cahiers du Cinéma, 2007.
- Metz, C. *Essais sur la signification au cinema*. Klincksieck, 2013.
- Panofsky, E. *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. U of Chicago P, 2008.
- Rickitt, R. *Special Effects: The History and Techniques*. Aurum Press, 2006.
- Whitlock, C. *Designs on Film: A Century of Hollywood Art Direction*. Harper Collins, ItBooks, 2010.
- Zunzunegui, S. *The Closer Look*. Shangrila Association, 2016.
- . *Landscapes of the Form*. Catedra Publishing, 1994.

Copyright of Journal of Film & Video is the property of University Film and Video Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.