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Imagination and Perception

Imagination is an intrinsic part of the human experience. It has the power to mold reality by defining the limits of possibility and affecting perception. Both Alan White and Irving Singer examine aspects of this power in their respective works The Language of Imagination and Feeling and Imagination. White delineates how imagination is a necessary precursor to possibility (White 179) while Singer primarily illustrates imagination's effect on human relationships, such as love (Singer 29-48). Despite their different focuses, White and Singer demonstrate the impact that imagination has on human perceptions of reality. Jean-Pierre Jeunet's film Amelie explores this facet of imagination: the film provides a poignant depiction of imagination's influence as the title character Amelie exacts changes in her life and in the lives of others with her boundless imagination.

In the chapter entitled "The Imaginable and the Possible," Alan White argues that imagination is the key factor in testing the "*acceptability* of something as possible" (White 183). In seeking to answer the questions whether what is possible is imaginable and whether what is imaginable is possible, White examines a variety of seemingly impossible ideas, such as the three-dimensional triangle. From these examples, he

concludes that the possible must be conceivable by the imagination but that the imagination's capacity to visualize extends beyond the mere possible (White 179-183).

Amelie addresses this dichotomy between the limitations of the possible and the unfettered possibilities of the imagination in a less didactic manner. Instead of intangible ideas, the film illustrates the link between imagination and possibility through the characters themselves. Amelie stands unmatched in regards to sheer imaginative ability. As a result, Amelie's use of her imagination throughout the film allows her to solve problems in ways the other characters simply failed to see.

Between pursuits of her love interest, Amelie takes it upon herself to help the other characters in the film. Through her interactions with the other characters, A great contrast can be seen between the title character and the supporting cast. Whereas Amelie seems to bend the rules of reality with her imagination, many of the other character are locked down by their inability to imagine other possibilities. In helping these characters, Amelie's imagination also expands their imaginations and beliefs.

Shortly after the opening sequences, the film introduces the landlady of Amelie's apartment, Madeleine Wallace. The maudlin woman mourns the loss of her lover Adrien but cannot resolve her feelings for him since he died while in the midst of an affair with his secretary. For Madeleine, the realm of possibility is confined by these facts; likewise, she is confined to the depths of despair. To allow Madeleine to move on, Amelie injects a new possibility into her mind by forging a letter from Madeleine's lover that apologizes for his indiscretions. Without such physical evidence, Madeleine would have remained tied down by her knowledge of her lover's affair and unable to imagine the possibility that Adrien had hoped to return to her. Amelie returns this notion from the realm of the

inconceivable to the imaginable; in turn, Madeleine takes the possibility and uses it to reshape her reality.

The film re-emphasizes this concept with the interplay between Amelie and her father. Like Madeleine, Amelie's father cannot escape from the past. His obsession with completing a shrine to mark his wife's grave prevents him from pursuing his own interests. Again, a character cannot imagine other courses of action, which places limitations on his actions. Amelie cleverly extricates her father from his condition with imagination: she takes the garden gnome, from its place atop her mother's grave and has it taken around the world. Amelie's father initial response to seeing the pictures of the gnome next to various international landmarks is utter confusion. With his limited imagination, Amelie's father cannot comprehend the outlandish images. In this regard, as White suggests, Amelie's father cannot accept these pictures as a view of something possible. However, Amelie's repeated assaults on her father's lackluster imagination eventually take their toll. The pictures broaden the scope of his imagination, and by the end of the film he embarks to discover other ways to make his life fulfilling. Again, the film conveys how imagination can set boundaries on an individual's sense of the possible. Through Amelie's intervention, her father manages to transcend these self-imposed limitations and stretch the realm of possibility.

Irving Singer expounds on the importance of bestowal in relationships in his chapter "Imagination." He explains how bestowal supplements appraisal in order to give meaning to relationships such as love. Singer suggests that a lover's imagination allows him to find value in his loved one and create meaning in the relationship (Singer 32-47). Imagination's role in bestowal is also reflected in the relationship between the café

regulars, Joseph and Georgette. At the start of the movie, Joseph is preoccupied with stalking his previous girlfriend while Georgette is too preoccupied with her hypochondria to pay him any heed. However, their relationship changes rapidly after Amelie sparks each of their imaginations by altering their interpretations of each others actions. For instance Amelie suggests to Joseph that Georgette's hypochondria is simply a way to catch his attention while leading Georgette to believe Joseph sits in his corner everyday in order to observe her. With these new perceptions in place, the pair is able to bestow value into each other's once meaningless actions: Georgette's constant head cold becomes a desperate cry for her beloved's attention, and Joseph's furtive glances lose their taint of jealousy and gain the hunger of unrequited love. The relationship that develops between Georgette and Joseph comically points out the important role imagination plays in love. Their mutual attraction did not stem from any intrinsic value in the interactions between the two characters; in fact, prior to Amelie's imaginative encouragement, they seemed quite oblivious to each other. However, once Georgette and Joseph were shown an alternative possibility, their imaginations seize the idea and create value where none existed.

The relationship between Amelie and Nino also supports the importance of bestowal in love. Throughout the movie, as Amelie lures Nino to her with her stratagems, the two characters rarely interact with each other. Were love based solely on appraisal, the two central characters would have been hard pressed to sustain their feelings for each other for they would have had next to nothing to base these appraisals on. Bestowal provides a mean for their love to develop through the film's progression. Amelie is able to give value to the glimpses of Nino's persona that she gains with each encounter:

something as odd as a scrapbook full of discarded photobooth pictures becomes meaningful enough to draw Amelie from her shell of introversion. Similarly, Nino pursues Amelie through her tortuous games with little knowledge of the “prize.” With bestowal, each of the characters manage to find something that is worth risking their individual feelings, giving them an opportunity to build a relationship together.

Amelie stands as a testament to the power of imagination. This power lies in its ability to alter the perception of human beings. Through perception, humans establish the wall between the possible and the impossible, and more often than not, these walls become the boundaries of reality. Both White and Singer express that the freedom of possibility are frequently confined by the extent of human imagination. White highlights that the range of the possible lies within the imaginable (White 179). Singer illustrates the concept through his contrast of the colonel and tailor characters in the film *Me and the Colonel* (Singer 33). This theme drives *Amelie* as well. The film is replete with characters that have encountered roadblocks in their lives because the possibilities they can imagine have been whittled down to a narrow path. In her unique way, Amelie frees each of these characters by infusing them with more imagination and widening the scope of their perception. With this new outlook, the characters are able to change their outlook on reality. The film reiterates the effect imagination has on perception by applying the idea to love as well. The characters in the film are able to find love by applying their imagination to bestow value to each other, much in the manner Singer describes. In terms of inherent worth, neither the relationship between Georgette and Joseph or Amelie and Nino seem to have any tangible basis. However, when revisiting these interactions with the idea of bestowal in mind, it is understandable why the characters are willing to

“appraise” each other so highly. Thus, through the interaction of the characters, the film *Amelie* demonstrates how the imagination governs the daily existence of human beings with the power to either help or hinder an individual by defining the realm of possibility.

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