

Loving Vincent: Challenging Genre Conventions in the Digital Age

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Introduction

In a letter to his sister Wilhelmina “Wil” van Gogh, Vincent wonders, “Is it true, as I think in moments when I’m in a good mood, that what is alive in art, and eternally alive, is first the painter and then the painting?” (van Gogh, 1888). Considering his mental health struggle, which may be diagnosed as ‘bipolar disorder’ today (Blumer 2002), those “moments” were few. However, time would prove that, in fact, the painter could remain eternally alive first, even before the painting. More than a century after his death, the Dutch painter still has a huge appeal to the modern audience. It is not only through his art, however, that he remains eternally alive, but also through his identity as expressed in a large repertoire of collected letters he sent and received throughout his lifetime. Deeply self-reflective, the letters reveal van Gogh as a passionate, lonely and deeply misunderstood human being who is often self-deprecating. Moreover, historical documents such as the Arles Petition of March 1889, in which residents formally ask the city’s mayor for “the so-called Vood [to] be sent back to his family” (The Arles Petition) emphasize people’s view of him as a “lunatic,” as per the report that ensued from the same petition.

The scientific debate about the link between *eccentricity* and *creative genius* may be fierce, but that did not stop the ‘eccentric artist’ from being a literary trope that borders on the ‘cliché’. This is justified, given the long history of this concept. In ancient Greek writings like Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates ponders the nature of so-called ‘madness,’ noting that “some of our greatest blessings come from madness, when it is granted to us as a divine gift” (249a-52). The Romantics also philosophized the concept as in some of their seminal critical texts such as Edward Young’s *Conjectures on Original Composition*, first published in 1759 and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Psychologists and psychiatrists in the modern period also approached the controversy (Ludwig, 1995; Jamison, 1996; Lerner *et al.*, 2017). The artist as an isolated, tormented genius is certainly a fascinating trope, perhaps even more so

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to a modern audience. Vincent van Gogh has embodied the trope of the eccentric artist in the popular imagination for long. Griselda Pollock argues that this view of van Gogh is rather ‘produced’, postulating that “[a]ll aspects of VG's life story and the stylistic features of the work culminating in VG's self-mutilation and suicide has provided material to be reworked into a complex but familiar image of the madness of the artist – ‘sensitive, tormented, yet incredibly brilliant’” (1980, 64). Writers of fiction strive to make their often-imaginary characters intriguing, but when a real person of flesh and blood is known to have been such a fascinating figure with a tumultuous life, it is justified why he would hold a special place in the popular imagination. Furthermore, the ‘darkness’ associated with the tormented genius makes them a rich protagonist in a film that borrows features from film noir, as is the case in *Loving Vincent*.

The life and work of Vincent van Gogh were particularly inspiring to filmmakers throughout cinema’s relatively brief history. Nine films were made about him, from Alain Resnais’ short documentary *Van Gogh* in 1948 to Julian Schnabel’s drama *At Eternity’s Gate* in 2018. These nine films do not include several other small-scale media representations in popular TV shows and the like. One of those nine films was even rather iconic: *Lust for Life* (1956) starring legendary actors like Kirk Douglas (b. 1916) and Anthony Quinn (1915-2001), and earning the actors a Golden Globe and an Academy Award, respectively. These films, in different genres, paid homage to Vincent van Gogh, the ‘tortured genius’ successfully and some of them are landmarks in the history of Western cinema. One breakthrough, however, happened with the release of the Polish-UK picture *Loving Vincent* (2017), directed by Dorota Kobiela and Hugh Welchman. The film is different because it blurs the lines between the medium of visual art and film on one level and between film genres on another level. On the one hand, it is a simple detective story or murder mystery in feature film form. On the other hand, however, it is an animation but one that substitutes computer-generated imagery (CGI) with actual oil paintings drawn in van Gogh’s unique thick impasto brushstrokes and bold colors. It also utilizes several paintings by the artist, either by using them as backdrops for the action, that is, building a fictional world/setting based on them, or by employing models of van Gogh’s portraits as characters in the film with their own back stories.

In addition, to further complicate the genre of the film, it borrows elements from *film noir*, which is a contradiction in and of itself, as ‘noir’ is *ipso facto* ‘black’ and/or ‘dark’, whereas the film is an explosive color canvas. Blending the two genres of film noir and animation is not particularly popular in the history of cinema. However, the inspiration drawn from film noir is apt, since the film

focuses on van Gogh's final years and probes the controversy surrounding his untimely death. The film, then, pays tribute to the artist differently: through simulating his art (integrating the classical visual art of painting and the relatively modern art of 'digital' filmmaking and production) on one level and telling his story in a noirish style (on another), perhaps finally answering van Gogh question cited in the beginning of the paper on whether the painting or the artist remain alive first. It is both, as van Gogh's story is told for the first time in cinematic history primarily *through* his art, but in such a refreshing way that it challenges the demarcations between the genre of film and forms of art. Because genre and its categories are especially significant in *Loving Vincent*, this paper shall use Steve Neale's genre theory to unpack how relatively modern digital technologies, like rotoscoping, live action filmmaking and chroma key compositing are combined with rather traditional art forms like oil painting to challenge genre and reinterpret the artist's canonical works. The paper shall problematize some issues of genre and proceed to examine how the film both succumbs to genre conventions and subverts them at the same time.

On Genre and the Making of *Loving Vincent*

Genre, simply defined, is French for 'type'. However, it is problematic, especially when applied to film. Genre in literature typically refers to *form*, as in 'poetry', 'novel' or 'drama', whereas in film, it rather describes *content*, as in 'comedy', 'Western' and 'gangster' (Ryall, 1975; A. Williams, 1984). Steve Neale, though, suggests that genres are not purely taxonomic, but "consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema, and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process" (Neale 1990, 46). Meaning, genres lie outside the motion picture at least to a certain extent. Furthermore, genres, to Neale, are "instances of repetition and difference" (Neale 1980, 48), since difference is essential to the economy of the genre, without which the content ceases to attract an audience (Neale 1980, 50). Films thus need to strike a balance between conforming to genre conventions and subverting them. As Tzvetan Todorov suggests, as well, each new addition to a genre's corpus constitutes an adjustment to it (qtd in Gledhill 2000, 223). Therefore, shifting audience expectations is integral to the filmmaking process and genre is *made* rather than received.

Loving Vincent is an example that illustrates the delicate balance between conforming to genre conventions and subverting them. On a basic level, it is a drama/biography with noir elements and remains loyal to the genre conventions

of both the biopic and film noir to a great extent. The *biopic* is described as “a genuine, dynamic genre and an important one. It also “narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world” (Bingham 2010, 10). *Loving Vincent* is an empathetic biopic, which celebrates van Gogh’s life on one level, but also raises questions about his death through noir elements. Events in the film take place one year after his death (unusual in the biopic genre) but justified given how the film draws inspiration primarily from Vincent’s death. To combine a traditional biopic with the animation medium is one feat, but to further stretch the genre by creating an animation using oil paintings is the most important way the film subverts genre conventions. To that end, filmmakers undertook an immensely ambitious project, where the digital and the traditional blend. The making of the film amalgamates digital and traditional storytelling. According to the film’s official website, the making process involved live action shooting in sets designed to mimic van Gogh’s style or against green screens (“The Movie”). Then, the motion picture is turned into black outlines which are then projected onto boards to be used by the artists as references and once each frame is painted, it is photographed with a camera and these photographs are edited to create a moving sequence (Wimperis 2016).

The following sections shall examine the instances of “repetition” and “difference”, to quote Steve Neale, in the film, with special emphasis on the combination between digital and traditional art forms.

Repetition and Difference: An Analysis

Film noir is ‘black film’ as previously indicated and it is traditionally *black* both visually and thematically. The genre is notoriously difficult to define but is generally associated with some generic traits and filmic features. There are

noir characters and stories (drifters attracted to beautiful women, private eyes hired by femmes fatales, criminal gangs attempting to pull off heists); noir plot structures (flashbacks, subjective narration); noir sets (urban diners, shabby offices, swank nightclubs); noir decorations (venetian blinds, neon lights, “modern” art); noir costumes (snap-brim hats, trenchcoats, shoulder pads); and noir accessories (cigarettes, cocktails, snub-nosed revolvers). (Naremore 2008, 1)

Loving Vincent borrows from many of these generic conventions while subverting them at the same time. This analysis will focus on noir locations, noir

characters and noir plot lines, with the aim of understanding how the digital medium brings the canonical van Gogh works into new literary trajectories by reinterpreting his works and employing these new reinterpretations in the film.

Instances of Noir Locations

Reinterpretation of “The Night Café” and “The Starry Night” through Chroma Key Compositing with Live Action Footage. The film opens with a hand-painted newspaper excerpt announcing Vincent van Gogh’s death in Auvers-sur-Oise by suicide, a premise the film will revolve around questioning in a noirish style until its final resolution.



Figure 1 - Actors Douglas Booth as Armand Roulin (left) and Robin Hodges (middle) as Lieutenant Milliet (middle) in a set that consists of green screens



Figure 2 - Artist's Rendering of the Night Cafe, after removal of green screens and compositing the digital live action footage with the artists' paintings, with recourse to the footage as a reference. Snapshot from the film.



Figure 3 - Vincent van Gogh's Original "The Night Cafe" (1888)

The story then begins inside “The Starry Night”, van Gogh’s most instantly recognizable painting. The camera slowly pans down inside the now-animated 3D model of the painting to just outside another remarkable painting-come-to-life in 3D by van Gogh, that is, “The Night Café” (1888). This way, the audience

is literally placed inside two separate artistic worlds/locations constructed by van Gogh's paintings. The tragic contrast here is that "The Starry Night" is often associated with positive connotations, as it "reveal[s] the unique and overwhelming vision of a mystic, a man in ecstatic communion with heavenly forces" (B. 1941, 3), whereas "The Night Café" is the complete opposite, being not only "banal" and "dispiriting" but also "terrible" (Harris 1999, 167-168). In the film, however, "The Starry Night" is portrayed as a merciless and dark location, inside which "The Night Café" exists, which is far from the historical truth, as "The Night Café" was completed in Arles, whereas "The Starry Night" was done in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence while Vincent was in the asylum. This is the role played by digital mediums employed in the film. Paintings, which held long-standing associations in the popular imagination for decades are reinterpreted and placed into new trajectories within a new story. Chroma key compositing, a technique that goes back to motion pictures as early as the 1920s, helps filmmakers create imaginary worlds by combining live action and visual effects, something which they always strove for (Foster 2010, 3). This is the technique used by the *Loving Vincent* filmmakers in these lively new reinterpretations of the paintings. The live action footage featuring the actors and the props are the reference used by the painters. The frame-by-frame oil paintings are then inserted into the picture through the chroma key compositing technique, as per Figures 1, 2 and 3 making for the visual effect of live action shot inside van Gogh's world.

Reimagining "Railway Bridge over Avenue Montmajour" (1888).

Vincent van Gogh's "Railway Bridge over Avenue Montmajour" (Figure 4) was reimagined in the film with a different color palette to accentuate the darkness of the mood in the first few scenes (Figure 5).

Originally, the painting portrays the bright morning over Avenue Montmajour,



Figure 4 - *Railway Bridge over Avenue Montmajour* by Vincent van Gogh, 1888



Figure 5 - Artist's Rendering of the same painting, with different special effects and enhancements. Snapshot from the film.

featuring a predominantly white, snowy foreground with calm and cool shades of baby blue. The reimagined painting, however, portrays a cold, dark night, with sooty streets and a menacing train. The lamp beneath the bridge casts a dim light over the dark street. The location is then transformed into a traditional noir location, which is the instance of “repetition” here, but the instance of “difference” is evident on two basic levels. First, the mysterious walking figure inserted into the animated painting is Joseph Roulin, Armand’s father, on his way to see his son at the now reimagined “Night Café”. He, too, sat for one of Vincent’s portraits. Joseph Roulin is not a traditional literary trope in film noir, but he is one of the many sources of information on Vincent in the film, and his flashbacks about Vincent are plot devices, some of which shall be discussed in the section on noir plot lines. Second, the animation of Vincent’s reimagined world is another way the film toys with the noir genre. The street is dark, but the animation of each brushstroke in the scene as the father walks down the bridge is extremely intricate, thanks to layering the paintings over live action footage. This creates a dream-like swirly effect, which is consistent with van Gogh’s style generally and with “The Starry Night” in particular, since, as previously indicated, the first few scenes take place inside “The Starry Night.”

Noir locales in *Loving Vincent*, are therefore dynamic. The reimagined and animated paintings do not act as mere backgrounds, but like the traditional city in noir, they “define the action, comment on the characters ... and supply mood and tension” (Silva 2011, 174). The previously cited instances of the paintings-come-noir-locales act exactly like that. They are dark and menacing and thus set the mood for the detective story and the journey. Armand Roulin is first seen right outside “The Night Café”, drunk and angry, which sheds light on his cynical, difficult character and anticipates his lack of willingness to succumb to his father’s will. Finally, and most importantly, their employment demonstrates the dynamism and fluidity of genres, thanks in part to the combination of different digital media: film, animation and oil painting.

Instances of Noir Characters

Armand Roulin. Armand Roulin of the Roulin family is the protagonist of the film. He is, however, not a fictional character. He is the son of Joseph Roulin, the postman, whose family of five volunteered to sit for van Gogh’s portraits, a project he executed in Arles between 1888 and 1889. The family is real, and so are the paintings, but the events in the film are all fictional. Armand Roulin (as seen in Figures 1 and 2 and portrayed by Douglas Booth) is struggling on different levels. He is obliged to go on a trip to fulfill his father’s will, a trip he

is generally unenthusiastic about. In addition, he is unable to regulate his anger, which is rather typical of film noir protagonists. Armand Roulin is a cynic, constantly portrayed as either drinking or smoking. In the film's first scene, he is even caught up in a drunken brawl with another animated Vincent van Gogh model (The Zouave, completed in 1888, as seen in Figure 6). The filmmakers exploit his attire in the original painting, that is, Portrait of Armand Roulin (1888), where he is dressed in a snap-brim hat and a yellow trench coat, an attire that is typical of film noir protagonists as per Naremore's previously cited quotation. Armand Roulin then functions as the 'hard-boiled detective' filmic trope in noir. Hard-boiled detectives are "often morally-ambiguous figures themselves although usually possessed of a redeeming and distinctly sardonic personality" (Silva 2011, 182). Unlike traditional noir detectives, however, Roulin experiences what may be considered a 'coming-of-age'. When Roulin learns that Theo van Gogh is dead, after meeting another animated van Gogh model (Portrait of Père Tanguy, completed in 1887), he gradually becomes obsessed with solving the mystery of Vincent's death. As he embarks on a journey to deliver the letter to Dr. Gachet in Auvers-sur-Oise, he collects evidence through interviewing different characters, who are mostly portraits painted by van Gogh, animated and made to play a role in the story. His feelings about Vincent develop, as looking for the murderer becomes a moral, personal issue that goes beyond the mere delivery of the letter. The protagonist's character here, then, is shown to have a humane and vulnerable side and a tendency to change, which the hardboiled detective trope does not necessarily possess.

Young Man with a Cornflower (1890). Vincent van Gogh's painting "Youngman with a Cornflower" (Figure 6) was used as the reference for the 'simple boy' character in the film. Armand meets the boy in the middle of his journey collecting evidence and the boy is initially hostile to him for no apparent reason. Armand chases him through corn fields, until the boy reaches his house and hides inside, thwarting Armand's attempts to speak to him.



Figure 6 – Young Man with a Cornflower, Portrait by Vincent van Gogh, 1890

Armand then encounters the boy's old uncle outside the house and interviews him about Vincent's death. Since noir themes are typically adult themes of

mystery, murder and desire, children are rarely pictured in the genre. The filmmakers, though, make use of the portrait by reimagining the type of character the boy is and giving his own role to play. Though he is not a traditional noir trope, he functions as a lead to the main character, Armand, on his quest to find answers. The portrait comes to life through animation as a character that is curious, playful and unpredictable, which is faithful to the character painted by Vincent, with his unruly hair painted in dark and bright orange and the cornflower hanging from his mouth. He is one instance of a noir character that is not 'dark,' provides the main character with leads and is the source of some mild comic relief in an otherwise tense drama about death. The character thus conforms to the noir genre character in its air of mystery and disorder but subverts it at the same time since it is not a typical trope in noir (as is the noir detective for instance or the *femme fatale*).

Instances of Noir Plot Devices

The film also makes extensive use of flashbacks as well as subjective narration within these flashbacks. Perhaps this is the only instance in the film where it is typically *noir*, for the flashbacks are in black and white. Jennifer E. Langdon makes the case for the centrality of flashbacks in film noir, stating that many critics foregrounded that "flashbacks are a key narrative strategy in film noir, contributing to the genre's existential exploration of truth and falsehood" (2008, 86). Each character Armand meets gives their personal and subjective account of their encounters with Vincent and their accounts range from immensely empathetic to utterly detached. Telotte argues that in such instances of multiplicity of accounts lies "a nightmare of potential that always haunts the noir world - the potential of ambiguity, of multiple, indeterminate meanings, and of a self that is subject to unseen, unsensed forces" (1989, 86). This is true of many flashbacks in the film, particularly ones involving Dr. Gachet, as Adeline Ravoux comes forward to Armand with her doubts that he had a role to play in Vincent's death. It is also applicable to the flashback of the old man Armand meets and who is revealed to be the simple boy's uncle. He is considered an eyewitness to the shooting and his account is therefore one of the most significant ones in the plot. However, this traditional noir function is not the only function served by flashbacks in the film. In addition to serving this function of keeping the tension at the maximum level possible, they are employed to fill in dramatic gaps in the plot that would otherwise be inaccessible to the filmmakers. Hugh Welchman, one of the film directors, clarifies this function in stating that,

Inevitably, there were parts of Vincent's life that we needed to show in the film, which he never painted. Dorota then came up with the idea of having flashbacks in the film, which would be done in a black-and-white painter style, based on photographs from the era. This freed us up to show many dramatic situations from his life, without taking upon ourselves to imagine whole series of paintings that never existed. (Denner 2016).

Using photographs from the era as the basis for some scenes in the flashbacks further highlights the fresh perspective adopted by the filmmakers toward this traditional noir plot device. Vincent's unhappy childhood, confused adolescence and difficult relationships as an adult are all portrayed in flashbacks and all lead to his tragic end. Therefore, they do not only give the protagonist clues, but build both the protagonist and the audience's empathy towards Vincent, which is not typical in the noir genre flashbacks, where the central goal is rather to perplex the audience and keep the suspense going.

Flashbacks were also shot initially as live action scenes, which were then used by artists who would paint over them and animate them. They only differ from the rest of the film scenes because they are not based on Vincent's paintings, which, as per Welchman's quotation cited above, did not exist at certain points in his life as a child and an adolescent. Kobiela and Welchman, then, intelligently and creatively use the same digital media they employed throughout the film, that is, paintings layered over live action footage and rotoscoping in the flashbacks, but they additionally rely on photographs. These photographs were analog, but their employment as the basis for the flashback paintings brings them into the trajectory of the digital and inserts them into the reimagined world of Vincent van Gogh, as in the images below.



Figure 7 - Photographs of Theo van Gogh, aged 13 (left) and 32 (right) (Samuel 2018)



Figure 8 - Artists' Rendering of Theo van Gogh, mourning his brother's death. Still from the film.

Conclusion

Loving Vincent was an immensely ambitious project that was first conceived in 2008, only to be released almost a decade later, which reveals the level of difficulty and the kind of challenges that faced its cast and crew. To add to its visual complexity, the film toyed with a range of noir constituents, as argued, which in turn produced such multi-genre artistic endeavor. While this film certainly benefits from digital tools of film production (specifically with the use of chroma key compositing and rotoscoping), it achieves a delicate balance between them and more traditional art forms. Through this balance, it succeeds at reimagining the artist's life by simulating his art on one level and with recourse to other cultural artefacts attributed to him or his life, like his letters and photographs of his brother to make for a comprehensive motion picture about his life, art and death. The film further redefines the animation genre by borrowing elements from film noir, but while giving them 'color' in some respects, through creating noir locations, characters and using noir plot devices. The film was a commercial and critical success. It was nominated for Best Animated Feature in the 90th Academy Award and won several other accolades. Commercially, it grossed an impressive \$42,187,665 worldwide. Thanks to the film directors' fearless blending of genres, the film did not fail to attract an audience and was also a critical success. It broke away from the shackles of the Hollywood genre, while not shying from conforming to them, which helped the film's reception with the audience familiar with elements of traditional genres, as it simultaneously expanded the limits of their expectations. The artistic endeavor successfully realized in this film demonstrates the aptness of Stephen Neale's theory of genre in Hollywood. It is this new vision of genre that contributed to the film's success and made it such a landmark in the history of animated filmmaking, since it was pioneering in that regard. It is also an unprecedented tribute to the artist, which will likely remain one of the most critically intriguing ones in the future.

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