



## ‘Union in Partition’: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in *L’Appartement* by Gilles Mimouni (1996)

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- 1 *The Apartment* has a very intricate plot because it tells the same story twice in succession, from two different points of view. Elements which are missing in the first part of the film are revealed in the second and shed a completely new light on the events as they were previously depicted. What starts out as a love story between Max (*Vincent Cassel*) and Lisa (*Monica Bellucci*) soon turns out to be a love triangle when Alice (*Romane Bohringer*) becomes involved in the storytelling. The plot takes on the appearance of a jigsaw puzzle when scenes from the past are inserted in between scenes in the present, in the form of flashbacks.
- 2 References to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* appear at regular intervals throughout *The Apartment* since one of the characters is playing the part of Helena in a production of the play. The complicated love affairs of the main characters follow convoluted trajectories reminiscent of those of the Athenian lovers although the repeated reversals of situation in the film prevent a definitive identification of each protagonist with a specific part. There are obvious echoes between the main plot and the play within. In fact, the Shakespearean subplot is so interwoven in the main plot that it does not simply provide a mirror image but contributes to the unfolding story at four turning points.
- 3 **I. Audition: the double woman**

The first occurrence revolves around the character of Helena and introduces a major motif of the film: that of the double woman. Max is about to be married to his boss’s sister. On the day when he is set to leave for a business trip to Japan, a chance encounter in a restaurant leads him to drop everything and start an improbable pursuit of his long lost love. Through the partition in the men’s room, he hears the voice of a woman speaking on the phone and recognizes the love of his life, Lisa, who disappeared without a word of explanation several years before. He fails to catch up with her when she runs out of the restaurant but, as he inhales her perfume, he is submerged by a wave of recollections. He remembers how he fell in love at first sight and how, obsessed with her, he started stalking her to find out who she was.
- 4 The next scene is a flashback in which Max follows Lisa to a theatre where he sees her get onto the stage and say a few lines in front of a scattered audience. He thus discovers that Lisa is an actress. In this scene, it is not clear whether she is taking part in a drama class, auditioning for the part of Helena or simply rehearsing it.



- 5 The speech is taken from Act I, Scene 1<sup>1</sup> and refers to a triangle of unrequited love: Helena loves Demetrius who loves Hermia and nobody returns anybody's love. This situation actually mirrors that of the protagonists at this point in the chronology of events though the backward and forward movements of the plot will not reveal that fact until much later in the film. When Max first falls in love with Lisa, he has already become the object of Alice's love. However, since the first half of the film tells the story from Max's perspective and he is totally ignorant of the existence of Alice, the love triangle is only revealed in the second half of the film, when Alice's story is presented. Therefore, in this scene, it is the excerpt from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which provides a clue to what is to come. It announces the appearance of a second woman into this new relationship and the transformation she undergoes to resemble Lisa and steal Max from her.
- 6 Helena wants to duplicate Hermia's beauty: "My ear should catch your voice, my eye your eye" (I.1.188). In this speech, however, Helena's words, while calling for sameness, emphasize the differences between Hermia and her, with the repeated opposition of "my" and "your": my ear / your voice; my eye / your eye; my tongue / your tongue. The French translation — which is actually more a rewriting than a translation — highlights only one part of the comparison, erasing Helena's features: "you only are beautiful" ("tu es la seule à être belle"), "your eyes," "your voice," "your beauty," "your own smile." Alice attempts to change herself into Lisa. She adopts her hairdo and her clothes, she becomes an actress, she moves into Lisa's apartment, borrows her car and even calls herself Lisa.
- 7 It would seem that the figure of Helena is more evocative of Alice than Lisa in the film. As it turns out, Lisa is called away and it is Alice who takes up the part of Helena in the production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that is shown later on. Alice replaces Lisa in the way an understudy replaces the actress who is prevented from appearing on stage. Several elements point to her as Lisa's double, but a double in reverse.
- 8 First, there is of course the reversible name: Alice / Lisa. When they first meet, they are as completely different as could be imagined, in their physical appearances, ways of life and personalities: Lisa is a beautiful, sensual woman whereas Alice is a tomboy; Lisa goes out, parties, dances and brings men back to her apartment; Alice is a hermit who only leaves her apartment to visit the nearby library. Even after her transformation, Alice fails to accomplish a perfect resemblance. Max's friend Lucien (*Jean-Philippe Ecoffey*) sums up the situation in these words: "They have the same name, the same shoe size, but they're not the same woman. What does she look like?" Max answers: "Well, honestly, I don't understand how I can have mistaken one for the other." Even though Helena refers to Hermia and herself as "a double cherry: seeming parted, / But yet an union in partition," (III.2.210-11) the rest of the scene denies this assertion by highlighting their physical differences and points of contention. This dichotomy of sameness and difference is central in *The Apartment*. The whole structure of the film is based

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<sup>1</sup> I.1.181-189. All Shakespeare references are from Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, *et al.* (eds). *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Second edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005 [1986].

upon it since it tells the same story in two different ways.

- 9 The initial allusion to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* develops into a full-fledged production as the story progresses. As in Shakespeare's play, the production of the play within is a work in progress which is presented at different stages: after Lisa's possible audition for the part of Helena — which recalls the casting of the parts played by the mechanicals (I.2) — there is the rehearsal, complete with the stage manager's comments upon the acting and finally the performance. The film presents scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the order they appear in the play. These scenes also parallel the evolution of the love affairs in the film's main plot.

## 10 II. Rehearsal

In the rehearsal scene, the subplot connects with the main plot in three different ways: thematically, verbally and visually. As Lucien rushes towards the theatre where Alice is rehearsing, we can hear Demetrius say “Je ne t'aime pas donc ne me poursuis pas.”<sup>2</sup> This situation of pursuing someone without being loved in return corresponds to Alice pursuing Max but also to Lucien pursuing Alice. Although Alice treats him very poorly, Lucien keeps coming back to her. In this passage, Demetrius' words to Helena could almost be addressed to Lucien himself as he keeps chasing Alice while she loves another. At both ends of the excerpt, there are elements of continuity between the rehearsal of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the main story. At the beginning, the two shots are connected by the overlapping dialogue: the voice of the actor playing Demetrius is heard even before Lucien has entered the theatre. At the end, the two shots are connected by the corresponding dialogues. The rehearsal scene ends on the stage manager's angry remark to his actors: “Wake up!” The next scene shows Max talking to his fiancée Muriel over the phone. Max's answer to Muriel could also be a coherent answer to the stage manager's words. In both cases, they speak of an awakening. The stage manager tries to rouse his actors from a languid performance while Max pretends that he is waking up in Japan where he is supposed to be at that time. At the beginning and at the end of the excerpt, the lines of dialogue seem to have several potential recipients and resonate both inside and outside the theatre.

- 11 Visually too, the play within refers to the main plot, through the production's stage design. It represents a forest in autumn or at the beginning of winter — we can see the fallen leaves strewn on the stage and the naked branches of the trees in the background. It recalls two recurrent settings in the film: Lisa's apartment and the little square where Lisa and Max used to meet. Lisa's apartment, which gives its title to the film, obviously plays a very important role. The predominant material in the interior design of the apartment is wood. The partitions of the rooms opening onto the main corridor are made of frosted glass covered with wooden patterns so that the light coming through the glass makes the wooden stems stand out like boughs. The characters walking through the apartment thus seem to be wandering in a stylised forest. In an interview with *Le Figaro*, Gilles Mimouni explained that, for financial reasons, all the film's interiors were shot in a studio in Madrid, which suited him perfectly: it allowed him to “create dreams and nights” where “what's fake is much more beautiful than what's real.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “I love thee not, therefore pursue me not” (II.1.188).

<sup>3</sup> “[...] l'univers du studio correspond bien à ma nature. On y fabrique des rêves et des nuits... Et le faux est bien plus beau que le vrai” (*Le Figaro*, 2 October 1996).



12 Beside these elements, the dialogue of the play within, very loosely translated from Shakespeare, seems to be deliberately more colloquial and made to resemble the dialogues in the film which are not Shakespearean. These elements contribute to make the excerpt from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* blend in, as it were, with the rest of the plot.

13 Parallels can be found between *The Apartment* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* throughout the film. But the excerpts from Shakespeare's play also contribute to the progression of the main plot. In *The Apartment*, suspense is based on the deferral of several revelations about the identity of the mysterious woman that Max is pursuing. First, we discover that she is not the Lisa from Max's past (*Monica Bellucci*) but another woman named Lisa (*Romane Bohringer*). Then we meet Alice, in Helena's guise, in the rehearsal scene. Because her whole face is hidden under make-up, we do not know what she looks like. The revelation of her true identity takes place in two phases which correspond to the two other occurrences of the play within.

### 14 III. Performance

The first of these two occurrences shows us the woman who passes herself off as Lisa (*Romane Bohringer*) sitting at her mirror in a changing room and putting on theatrical make-up to transform herself into Helena. This transformation reveals her to be the same woman we saw during the rehearsal, that is to say Lucien's girlfriend Alice. Interestingly enough, in this scene, the make-up serves as a means to reveal what it used to conceal, that is to say Alice's double identity. Although there is no quotation from Shakespeare's text in this extract, there is a visual allusion to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through the poster of a production of the play — possibly the one they are rehearsing — on the wall, next to the mirror. Alice's double identity is further revealed by Lucien's slip of the tongue when he comes to wish her luck: he calls her Alissa or Alicia, thus combining both names in one. This passage paves the way for the final reference to Shakespeare's play in the film: the performance.



15 In this extract, Alice finds herself in a situation which is somewhat similar to that of the character she impersonates as she is for the first time in the presence of her two lovers at the same time. The scene is Act II, Scene 2. Helena is wooed by both Demetrius and Lysander. Alice is confronted with the presence in the audience of the man she loves (Max) and the man who loves her (Lucien). As soon as Max appears, the dramatic illusion is broken and she is unable to play her part any more. She fears her deception will be revealed if Max recognises her, so she stands on the stage with her back to the audience and covers her face with her hands. She forgets her lines, misses her cues and tries to escape into the wings. When she faints onstage as Hermia evokes the serpent eating her heart away, the curtain falls at the same time on her

pretence and on the performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.



- 16** Alice's reaction in this scene seems a bit extreme. After all, her features are hidden by make-up, which makes it unlikely that Max might recognise her. But Helena's guise has changed functions: it no longer hides, it reveals. In the following scene, the stage manager fires Alice from the company. She decides to stop lying and to leave for Italy. The end of her part as Helena coincides with the end of her manipulations. She dissolves into tears and those tears wash her make-up away.



## **17** IV. Echoes

### **Time**

The echoes of Shakespeare's play in the film's main plot are numerous. The evocation of time is a significant example. At the beginning, the time frame for the events pictured in the film is given by Max's secretary who reminds him to pick up a wedding ring for his fiancée Muriel before going away to Japan for four days. Max reacts by saying that it is a long time to be away from her. This mirrors Theseus' complaint at the beginning of Act I:

Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour  
Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in  
Another moon — but O, methinks how slow  
This old moon wanes! (I.1.1-4)

- 18** During these four days, Max wakes up in a different bed each morning. As he is not supposed to be in Paris, he cannot go back to his apartment. Like the lovers wandering in the forest, he is temporarily homeless. This is also the case for Alice who has lent her flat to Lisa and wakes up in the arms of a different man each morning: once with Max, once with Lucien.
- 19** For both Max and Alice, whose points of view constitute the two parts of the film, sleeping

is associated with a flashback, suggesting that “the dream has its own time frame, freed from the constraints of chronology and coherence.”<sup>4</sup> The structure of the film, which is a jigsaw puzzle of two points of view and two different timelines, repeating the same situations at a different time or seen from a different vantage point, echoes to some extent the problematic timeline of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

## 20 The flower

Another motif which establishes a parallel between *The Apartment* and Shakespeare's play is the flower. Lisa is hiding in Alice's apartment from her current lover, Daniel, because she suspects he has murdered his wife. At the funeral, he lays a single white rose on his wife's coffin before she is cremated. As it is set on fire, the white rose turns red. After the funeral, Daniel stops on his way to Lisa's apartment to buy a single red rose which he leaves on Lisa's doorstep, along with a letter. Max then replaces Daniel's letter by his own. When Alice comes to the apartment, she finds the letter and the rose and believes both come from Max. When Max enters the apartment later on, his eye is drawn to a painting above the bed representing two women. One is asleep on a sofa. The other one stands over her with a red rose in her hand. Finally, when Lisa comes back to the apartment at the very end of the film, she finds a single white rose in a vase. Daniel, who believes she has cheated on him (mistaking Alice for her), lights up a fire which blows up the whole apartment.



21 The recurring flower evokes the magical means used in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to make people fall in and out of love. The white rose symbolises the end of love and also death while the red rose is a symbol of love. The fact that the red rose should end up in the wrong woman's hands (Alice instead of Lisa) who believes it was sent by the wrong man (Max instead of Daniel) seems appropriate in relation to Puck's mistaken use of the juice of the magical flower. The enigmatic painting above the bed may also be a way to evoke Alice's manipulations and deceptions to keep Max and Lisa apart. In this case, she is the one who misuses the powers of the magical flower by interfering in the lovers' relationship. This picture has an eerie resemblance with a 1955 painting by Balthus whose title — “the Dream I”<sup>5</sup> — seems to reinforce the connection with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The composition of both paintings is very similar. However, there are some changes in patterns and colours and a few elements are displaced or removed. In Balthus' painting, the woman holding the rose is a blonde, whereas in the film's painting, both women have dark hair, like Lisa and Alice. This suggests that the painting is both a reference to the original which inspired it and a reinterpretation of it in the context of the film.

22 In *The Apartment*, the presence of the play within highlights echoes between the film and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It also plays a part in the twists and turns of the plot itself. One could argue that the failure of the performance is significant in relation to the ending of the film. The connexions between Shakespeare's play and the film focus on the four Athenian lovers. However, unlike *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Apartment* is not a comedy. There are even tragic elements in the ending. Once again, a parallel can be drawn with Helena's words in Act

<sup>4</sup> Michel Bitot. “Réflexions sur la représentation du temps dans *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.” In Pierre Iselin and Jean-Pierre Moreau (eds). *Le Songe d'une nuit d'été et La Duchesse de Malfi (Texte et Représentation)*. Conference proceedings. Limoges: Université de Limoges, 1989. 29-35.

<sup>5</sup> A photograph of the painting can be seen online at <<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/balthus/the-dream>>.

III, Scene 2: “’Tis partly my own fault, / Which death or absence soon shall remedy” (244-45). Death is Lisa’s fate while absence is Alice’s final choice. It seems that since the performance of the play within was cut short, so were the love affairs of the protagonists of the film. This is an intriguing possibility when we compare *The Apartment* with its American remake, *Wicker Park* (2004), directed by Paul McGuigan.<sup>6</sup> Gilles Mimouni is credited as executive producer for this adaptation but it is hard to say whether he had a significant influence over it or not. In many respects, the second film follows the structure of the first. There are, however, two main changes which are significant: a happy ending and a different play within. In *Wicker Park*, the play within is not *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* but *Twelfth Night*. The rehearsal scene shows Cesario/Viola promising Orsino: “I’ll do my best / To woo your lady — [*aside*] yet a barful strife — / Whoe’er I woo, myself would be his wife” (I.4.40-42). This alludes to the fact that Alex (the American Alice) is supposed to act as a go-between and deliver a letter from Lisa to Matt (the American Max). Being in love with Matt herself, she withholds the letter, thus causing an estrangement between the two lovers. The performance scene shows the wooing of Olivia by Cesario, with Cesario claiming “I am not who I am,” a slight change from the play’s original line which reads “I am not what I am” (III.1.139). The double meaning is obvious as it refers to the double gender of Cesario/Viola as well as to Alex’s double dealings. The striking difference with *The Apartment* is that this performance is very successful and is greeted by a standing ovation from the audience. When Alex’s deception is revealed later on, her words to Matt are a distorted echo of those she pronounced as Cesario earlier on the stage: “You see me for who I am.” Matt eventually goes back to Lisa, the lovers are reunited and no one gets killed in an explosion. In *The Apartment*, after the failure of the performance of Shakespeare’s play, interrupted at the pinnacle of confusion in the lovers’ affairs, the tragic possibilities of the play within seem to be realized in the main plot: death and absence. In *Wicker Park*, the performance is allowed to unfold all the way and reach its happier conclusion, echoed by the happy ending of the film. The comparison between the two films is thus interesting as it seems to show how much potential influence the Shakespearean subplot can have on the main plot.

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<sup>6</sup> About *L’Appartement* and its American remake, see: Burt, Richard. “Digital Film, Asianization, and the Transnational Film Remake: Alluding to Shakespeare in *L’Appartement*, *The King is Alive*, *Wicker Park*, *A Time to Love* and *University of Laughs*.” Yang Lingui and Douglas Brooks, eds. *Shakespeare Yearbook XVII*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2010. 45-78.

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