

THE „LANGUAGE” OF CINEMA: FILM „GRAMMAR” AND VISUAL LITERACY

Daniela TECUCIANU¹

¹PhD Candidate, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania
Corresponding author: daniela.tecucianu@gmail.com

Abstract

Regarded as a “visual esperanto” transcending the barriers of national language, cinema is irrefutably a powerful means of communicating meaning, a language in itself, comparable to mathematics and music in its universality. Nonetheless, this language has its own peculiarities and it functions in a unique way, displaying its own “grammar”. Indeed, film may be said to have a grammar in the sense that there are certain conventions of shooting and editing that are often followed to determine particular emotional responses or to create the illusion of continuous action in time and space. As print-oriented literacy requires recognition of words and the patterns in which they are usually combined, so film literacy requires recognition of cinematic techniques. Our current paper sets out to investigate how the language of cinema works and to prove that, in order to adequately understand this type of language, we have to be both visually and aurally literate.

Keywords: *cinema, film “grammar”, visual literacy.*

Human beings express themselves and communicate with each other in a variety of modes (speech, writing, pictures, actions, etc.). Each of these modes, according to Hodgkinson, may be called “a language”¹. It has been often claimed that film is one of the three universal languages, together with mathematics and music. Moreover, all technological media are commonly referred to as “new languages”², all this in the context of our multi-media culture that tends to replace the print-oriented culture whose domination was indisputable for five hundred years. In other words, “cinema has hardly been immune to the magnetic attraction of the linguistic model”³. Actually, a close look at some of the earliest theories of the cinema reveals that the notion of film language is already present from the very beginning. The metaphor can be found in the 1920s writings of Riccioto Canudo in Italy and Louis Delluc in France, who

paradoxically thought that it was the non-verbal nature of cinema which gave its language-like character, especially because of its status as a “visual esperanto” transcending the barriers of national language. Similarly, Vachel Lindsay spoke of film as “hieroglyphic language”⁴. One must take into account, though, that this view of film as language was explainable at the beginning because of the very nature of film: there was no sound, but cinema could still communicate effectively.

The Russian Formalists were the first to systematically develop the analogy between language and film. It is in *Poetika Kino*, a collection of five essays published in 1927, that the hypothesis of “cinelanguage” is most explicitly formulated. In his “Fundamentals of the Cinema”, Tynianov, for instance, spoke of the cinema’s ability to present the visible world by means of semantic signs, which in turn, are the result of cinematic techniques such as lighting and montage⁵. Likewise, Eikhenbaum saw film in relation to “image translations of linguistic tropes”, and stated that cinema is a “particular system of figurative language”, the stylistics of which would treat filmic “syntax”, the linkage of shots into “phrases” and “sentences”. Furthermore, according to Eikhenbaum, in order to “read” a film, the viewer needs to resort to the internal language that characterizes all thought: “Cinematic perception is a process that goes from the object, from visible movement to its interpretation, to the construction of internal language”⁶.

It was only with the advent of structuralism and semiotics in the 1960s, however, that the film-language analogy was explored in depth by

theorists like Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, and Christian Metz. Barthes considered images to be characterized by polysemy, sharing, therefore, with other signs - including linguistic signs - the property of being open to multiple significations. The accompanying images or written material in a film often function, according to Barthes, as anchorage, i.e., as a device which forces the observer's perception into a preferred "reading" of the image, guiding the viewer among the different possible significations of a visual representation⁷. Christian Metz took the linguistic metaphor both seriously and skeptically, "in order to discern its quantum of truthfulness"⁸. He looked for the equivalent, in film theory, of the conceptual role played by *langue* in the Saussurean model. The question which oriented his early work was whether the cinema was *langue* (language system) or language, reaching the conclusion that the former option was not attainable for a number of reasons. Firstly, he argues, *langue* is a system of signs intended for two-way communication, while cinema allows only for delayed communication⁹. Secondly, Metz argues, cinema lacks the equivalent of the arbitrary linguistic sign; in film, the relation between signifier and signified is not arbitrary, but motivated. Thirdly, Metz claims that cinema does not constitute a language widely available as a code: to speak a language, in other words, "is simply to use it, while to 'speak' cinematic language is always to a certain extent to invent it"¹⁰. Cinema is not *langue*, but it is language. By placing the notion of language in a Hjelmslevian context, Metz argues that any unity defined in terms of its "matter of expression" (Hjelmslev) or in terms of its "typical sign" (Barthes) can be called a language. Whereas literature's matter of expression is writing, cinematic language is "the set of messages whose matter of expression consists of five tracks or channels: moving photographic image, recorded phonetic sound, recorded noises, recorded musical sound, and writing"¹¹.

Having established that film has its own language, we need to decide what the peculiarities of this language are and how it functions. In doing so, it is necessary to depart from the commonsensical observation that there is no "film grammar" in the same sense that is

attributed to grammar by linguistics. Written and spoken languages have both prescriptive and descriptive grammars which analyze and determine the selection and combination of words into sentences. But film has no ordering system that regulates the way shots should be combined to create meaning. And yet, we can indeed speak of a minimal grammar of film, especially when taking into account the relations between shots and how these relations are constructed. Film may be said to have a grammar in the sense that there are certain conventions of shooting and editing that are often followed to determine particular emotional responses or to create the illusion of continuous action in time and space. Even when shooting or editing techniques are not used in a conventional manner, they represent key elements of film language, elements that make up the very specificity of cinema. It is helpful, therefore, to talk of film "grammar" in terms of these constitutive elements of filmmaking, by defining notions such as: long-shot, medium-shot, close-up, extreme close-up, low-angle shot, high-angle shot, zoom in, zoom out, tracking, editing, diegetic/non-diegetic sound, soundtrack, lighting, etc. These notions are only going to be touched upon here, as they will be included in the glossary of cinematic terms at the end of our thesis.

When analyzing film grammar, one immediately understands that, generally speaking, the elements to be considered are connected to either sight or sound. The visual aspect centers around the shot; according to how and if the camera moves, we can speak of fixed shots and motion shots. Fixed shots are determined by both the distance from what is filmed and the angle of the camera. Examples include: long-shots, medium-shots, close-ups, extreme close-ups, low-angle shots and high-angle shots. Motion shots are those that suggest movement to the viewer; thus, the camera can pan, tilt, zoom, dolly, and so on. All of these shots can be taken in slow, normal and fast motion. The concept of size is related to shots. Since it is the camera that directs the viewer's eyes, the filmmaker manipulates the dimensions and proportions of people, places and things for creative purposes. In order to achieve a certain

effect, the director may also resort to a number of optical distortions: objects and persons may seem smaller or bigger than they are in reality or color filters may be employed in order to show that a certain shot is a flashback or a flash-forward; images, although recognisable, may be blurred (soft-focus) or superimposed (by means double or multiple exposure). Lighting is also very important in this equation: it can determine what and the viewer sees in an actual frame and how s/e will perceive what appears on the screen. Film punctuation is highly noteworthy as well: by means of cuts, fades, dissolves, wipes, mixes, turnovers, titles and so on, the filmmaker gets from one episode to another, managing to achieve the effect of continuity and, to a great extent, to manipulate time. Sound and sound effects are equally important in a film. The viewer-listener may deal with diegetic or non-diegetic sound, and this sound may be music, voice-over narration, dialogue, noise, etc. the choice of sound and soundtrack is essential for the different kinds of effects that are needed at each step in the film, whether it is about increasing suspense, emotional involvement on the part of the spectator, suggesting a faster rhythm of the action or enhancing humor.

Apart from these elements, there are also other that might be used in bringing a literary work to the screen. In his *Adaptation Studies: Its Past, Present and Future* (2007), Thomas Leitch writes about adjustment (by means of which the source-text is either compressed or expanded), superimposition (the introduction of new material), colonization (deliberately altering the time and place of a literary text as in *Bride and Prejudice*, 2004), metacommentary (the adapter comments directly on the process of adaptation, like in *Looking for Richard*, 1996), parody and pastiche. Leitch's conclusion is that "there is no normative model for adaptation"¹²; which renders any grammar of adaptation, including the one Leitch himself delineates, futile. Therefore, since there are practically endless options available for the filmmaker, anyone who engages creatively with the literary text should treat grammatical models of film as descriptive rather than prescriptive. In other words, "it is impossible to be ungrammatical in film"¹³. There are countless ways in which the filmmaker can

exercise control over the *mise-en-scène* or soundtrack; moreover, by means of editing, s/he can manipulate what is shown to such an extent that the viewer can no longer tell what is real and what is not. Knowledge of concepts related to "film grammar" is particularly useful for a proper understanding and analysis of any film, be it adaptation or not. However, such knowledge should come with the awareness that there are no norms in what concerns the usage of film techniques and strategies.

In a nutshell, as James Monaco pointed out, "An education in the quasi-language of film opens up greater potential meaning for the observer, so it is useful to use the metaphor of language to describe the phenomenon of film"¹⁴. And, as print-oriented literacy requires recognition of words and the patterns in which they are usually combined, so film literacy requires recognition of cinematic techniques. A literate reader is familiar with the rules of language, as well as with authors, literary movements, genres, narrative strategies, and so on. However, when it comes to film, our familiarity cannot be so easily assessed, since there is no official canon of cinema, no definitive way in which moving pictures can and should be analyzed. Although, by means of "total immersion", the viewer usually possesses some sort of "sensibility for visual storytelling", s/he rarely comprehends the grammar and specific properties of the media. In other words, "the average adult has seen hundreds, if not thousands of films and yet many fundamentals of the cinema remain a mystery to the movie-going public"¹⁵. If we are to adequately understand the language of cinema, we have to be visually and aurally literate.

James Monaco, in his *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, Multimedia*, asks the following rhetorical question: "Is it necessary, really, to learn how to read a film?"¹⁶. His question stems out of the observation that virtually anyone of minimal intelligence can grasp the basic content and meaning of a film without any special training. And yet, the problem is that our apprehension of movies seems to be much easier than our comprehension of them, especially because this medium "so very closely mimics reality"¹⁷. We receive vast amounts of information

by means of the images in front of us, but we tend to accept them without any questioning of how they tell us what they tell. This happens because of a lack of understanding in what concerns technique and, implicitly, the way film operates as a language. Simply put, people who are “cinemate”¹⁸, that is visually literate, see more and hear more than people who are not. The process involves not only our eyes and ears, but also our brain; comprehension is largely dependent on what the brain can do with the information received. When “reading” movies, we deal, that is, with mental experiences that are largely influenced by our previous knowledge and experience. Thus, the answer is, definitely, yes; if we are to overcome the stage of apprehension, learning how to read a film is not only necessary, but also fundamental.

Cinema can sublimely combine the visual, the aural and the kinesthetic, but it is precisely this ability that does not allow for the approximation and allusiveness typical in novels. Film does not normally suggest, it states. In James Monaco’s words, “the great thing about literature is that you can imagine; the great thing about film is that you can’t”¹⁹. Or, as Linda Hutcheon put it, “[t]elling a story in words, either orally or on paper, is never the same as showing it visually and orally in any of the many performance media available”²⁰. Similarly, McFarlane argued that “the novel’s metalanguage (the vehicle of its telling) is replaced, at least in part, by the film’s *mise-en-scène*”²¹. So part of the problem of adapting literary texts to films is connected to the ever-lasting image-word war, as images cannot always render everything that words do, at least not *as* words do. There are, nevertheless, cinematic techniques that cannot be employed or substituted in novels. Herein lie both the challenge and the power of adaptation, as we are going to see in what follows.

One of the major difficulties of film is that of adapting a specific narrative point of view (or even the multiple points of view) employed in the source-text. Cinema has, however, found solutions and there are ways of conveying first-person narration, such as: voice-over, oral narration, soliloquies or close-ups. It is noteworthy, though, that such techniques are rarely maintained throughout a whole film, as it

is often the case with novels. Omniscient narration, on the other hand, is very similar to the cinematic narration of events. The camera is considered to be the equivalent of the omniscient narrator, as both of them are in a position of knowledge as instruments of authorial power. The way the camera focuses on character movements, gestures or details of the setting can be compared to the omniscient narrating voice of the novel. Nevertheless, the correspondence between the two is rather artificial: the camera is not part of the discourse of the film, whereas the narrator always functions inside the novel. Despite the similarities and differences between cinematic and novelistic narration, film can easily express point of view by means of different camera angles, focus and *mise-en-scène*.

Another generally acknowledged limit of movies when compared to novels is the difficulty of conveying the “interior” of the characters. However, character subjectivity can be created by means of slow motion, rapid cutting, lighting or optical distortions. Sound effects, editing, camera movement, flashbacks and flash-forwards can also help convey a character’s inner life. Conversely, the strong point of cinema is that it can effortlessly show “exteriority”, while novelists often encounter difficulties in doing that. Time and again, novels need to resort to lengthy descriptions, but movies only need a frame to render the same thing. This apparent limit of the novel can also be seen as an advantage, though. Whereas a novelist can choose significant details or omit certain visual information for narrative reasons, film does not seem to leave room for imagination. If a director wants to trigger the viewer’s imagination, s/he has to omit images or limit what is shown.

Other major differences between literature and film are represented by the way in which they present space and time. On the one hand, according to McFarlane, the novel is linear and the film is spatial²². Novels provide information gradually, word after word, whereas films function spatially; the smallest units of movies, frames, are visually complex and offer a variety of signifiers at once. As a result, it becomes almost impossible for the filmmaker to control the order in which these signifiers will be perceived, although focusing techniques can be

used to direct the viewer's attention towards specific elements included in the frame. On the other hand, it is very easy to go from present to past or future events through language, since it has an inherent telling ability. On the contrary, the showing mode of the film makes the viewer perceive the actions as always taking place in the present. However, film has developed its own strategies to convey past or future actions: flashbacks and flash-forwards are often accompanied by dissolves, fades, color filters or changes in setting and costumes.

All in all, learning how to read a page is readily available, but this is not valid in what concerns the reception of images; even if we possess the know-how, we are seldom aware of it. The general assumption is that anyone can "read" a film, that knowledge of film language and film grammar need not be prior to the viewing of a film. Nonetheless, it is precisely because film is easy to understand that it is so difficult to explain. So much occurs at the unconscious level that we often take for granted our ability to understand films. But visual literacy involves a great deal more: in order to complete the process of intellection, the viewer must work to interpret the signs s/he perceives. After all, as Monaco argued, "The more work they [the spectators] do, the better the balance between observer and creator in the process; the better the balance, the more vital and resonant the work of art"²³.

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