
The purpose of this text is to examine some of the problems and difficulties confronting the person who wants to begin undertaking, in the field of “cinematographic language,” de Saussure’s project of a general semiotics: to study the ordering and functionings of the main signifying units used in the filmic message. Semiotics, as de Saussure conceived it, is still in its childhood, but any work bearing on one of the nonverbal “languages,” provided that it assumes a resolutely semiological relevance and does not remain satisfied with vague considerations of “substance,” brings its contribution, whether modest or important, to that great enterprise, the general study of significations.

The very term “cinematographic language” already poses the whole problem of the semiotics of film. It would require a long justification, and strictly speaking it should be used only after the in depth study of the semiological mechanisms at work in the filmic message had been fairly well advanced. Convenience, however, makes us retain, right from the start, that frozen syntagma—“language”—which has gradually assumed a place in the special vocabulary of film theoreticians and aestheticians. Even from a strictly semiological point of view, one can perhaps at this time give a preliminary justification for the expression “cinematographic language” (not to be confused with “cinematographic langue” (language system), which does not seem to me acceptable)—a justification that, in the present state of semiological investigations, can only be very general. I hope to outline it in this essay... 

**CINEMA AND NARRATIVITY**

A first choice confronts the “film semiologist”: Is the corpus to be made up of feature films (*narrative films*) or, on the contrary, of short films, documentaries, technological, pedagogical, or advertising films, etc.? It could be answered that it
depends simply on what one wants to study—that the cinema possesses various "dia-
lects," and that each one of these "dialects" can become the subject of a specific
analysis. This is undoubtedly true. Nevertheless, there is a hierarchy of concerns
(or, better yet, a methodological urgency) that favors—in the beginning at least—
the study of the narrative film. We know that, in the few years immediately before
and after the Lumiére brothers' invention in 1895, critics, journalists, and the pio-
near cinematographers disagreed considerably among themselves as to the social
function that they attributed to, or predicted for, the new machine: whether it was
a means of preservation or of making archives, whether it was an auxiliary technol-
ogy for research and teaching in sciences like botany or surgery, whether it was
a new form of journalism, or an instrument of sentimental devotion, either private
or public, which could perpetuate the living image of the dear departed one, and so on.
That, over all these possibilities, the cinema could evolve into a machine for
telling stories had never been really considered. From the very beginnings of the
 cinematograph there were various indications and statements that suggested such an
evolution, but they had no common measure with the magnitude that the narrative
phenomenon was to assume. The merging of the cinema and of narrativity was a
great fact, which was by no means predestined—nor was it strictly fortuitous. It was
a historical and social fact, a fact of civilization (to use a formula dear to the soci-
ologist Marcel Mauss), a fact that in turn conditioned the later evolution of the film
as a semiological reality, somewhat in the same way—in indirect and general, though
effective—that "external" linguistic events (conquests, colonizations, transforma-
tions of language) influence the "internal" functioning of idioms. In the realm of
the cinema, all nonnarrative genres—the documentary, the technical film, etc.—
have become marginal provinces, border regions so to speak, while the feature-
length film of novelistic fiction, which is simply called a "film"—the usage is sig-
nificant—has traced more and more clearly the king's highway of filmic expression.

This purely numerical and social superiority is not the only fact concerned. Added
to it is a more "internal" consideration: Nonnarrative films for the most part are dis-
tinguished from "real" films by their social purpose and by their content much more
than by their "language processes." The basic figures of the semiotics of the cin-
ema—montage, camera movements, scale of the shots, relationships between the
image and speech, sequences, and other large syntagmatic units—are on the whole
the same in "small" films and in "big" films. It is by no means certain that an in-
dependent semiotics of the various nonnarrative genres is possible other than in the
form of a series of discontinuous remarks on the points of difference between these
films and "ordinary" films. To examine fiction films is to proceed more directly and
more rapidly to the heart of the problem.

There is, moreover, an encouraging diachronic consideration. We know, since the
observations of Béla Balázs, André Malraux, Edgar Morin, Jean Mitry, and many
others, that the cinema was not a specific "language" from its inception. Before be-
coming the means of expression familiar to us, it was a simple means of mecha-

cological recording, preserving, and reproducing moving visual spectacles—whether of
life, of the theater, or even of small mises-en-scène, which were specially prepared
and which, in the final analysis, remained theatrical—in short, a "means of repro-
duction," to use André Malraux's term. Now, it was precisely to the extent that the
cinema confronted the problems of narration that, in the course of successive groupings, it came to produce a body of specific signifying procedures. Historians of the cinema generally agree in dating the beginning of the “cinema” as we know it in the period 1910–15. Films like Enoch Arden, Life for the Czar, Quo Vadis?, Fantômas, Cabiria, The Golem, The Battle of Gettysburg, and above all Birth of a Nation were among the first films, in the acceptance we now give this word when we use it without a determinant: Narration of a certain magnitude based on procedures that are supposed to be specifically cinematographic. It so happens that these procedures were perfected in the wake of the narrative endeavor. The pioneers of “cinematographic language”—Méliès, Porter, Griffith—couldn’t care less about “formal” research conducted for its own sake; what is more (except for occasional naïve and confused attempts), they cared little about the symbolic, philosophical or human “message” of their films. Men of denotation rather than of connotation, they wanted above all to tell a story; they were not content unless they could subject the continuous, analogical material of photographic duplication to the articulations—however rudimentary—of a narrative discourse. Georges Sadoul has indeed shown how Méliès, in his story-teller’s naïveté, was led to invent double exposure, the device of multiple exposures with a mask and a dark backdrop, the dissolve and the fade-in, and the pan shot. Jean Mitry, who has written a very precise synthesis of these problems, examines the first occurrences of a certain number of procedures of filmic language—the close-up, the pan shot, the tracking shot, parallel montage, and interlaced, or alternative, montage—among the film primitives. I will summarize the conclusions he reaches: The principal “inventions” are credited to the Frenchmen Méliès and Promio, to the Englishmen G. A. Smith and J. Williamson, and to the American E. S. Porter; it was Griffith’s role to define and to stabilize—we would say, to codify—the function of these different procedures in relation to the filmic narrative, and thereby unify them up to a certain point in a coherent “syntax” (note that it would be better to use the term syntagmatic category; Jean Mitry himself avoids the word syntax). Between 1911 and 1915, Griffith made a whole series of films having, more or less consciously, the value of experimental problings, and Birth of a Nation, released in 1915, appears as the crowning work, the sum and the public demonstration of investigations that, however naïve they may have been, were nonetheless systematic and fundamental. Thus, it was in a single motion that the cinema became narrative and took over some of the attributes of a language.

Today, still, the so-called filmic procedures are in fact filmic-narrative. This, to my mind, justifies the priority of the narrative film in the filmosemiological enterprise—a priority that must not of course become an exclusivity.

STUDIES OF DENOTATION AND STUDIES OF CONNOTATION IN THE SEMIOTICS OF THE CINEMA

The facts I have just reviewed lead to another consequence. The semiotics of the cinema can be conceived of either as a semiotics of connotation or as a semiotics of denotation. Both directions are interesting, and it is obvious that on the day when the semiological study of film makes some progress and begins to form a body of
knowledge, it will have considered connotative and denotative significations together. The study of connotation brings us closer to the notion of the cinema as an art (the “seventh art”). As I have indicated elsewhere in more detail, the art of film is located on the same semiological “plane” as literary art: The properly aesthetic orderings and constraints—versification, composition, and tropes in the first case; framing, camera movements, and light “effects” in the second—serve as the connoted instance, which is superimposed over the denoted meaning. In literature, the latter appears as the purely linguistic singification, which is linked, in the employed idiom, to the units used by the author. In the cinema, it is represented by the literal (that is, perceptual) meaning of the spectacle reproduced in the image, or of the sounds duplicated by the soundtrack. As for connotation, which plays a major role in all aesthetic languages,* its significate is the literary or cinematographic “style,” “genre” (the epic, the western, etc.), “symbol” (philosophical, humanitarian, ideological, and so on), or “poetic atmosphere”—and its signifier is the whole denoted semiological material, whether signified or signifying. In American gangster movies, where, for example, the slick pavement of the waterfront distills an impression of anxiety and hardness (significat of the connotation), the scene represented (dimmly lit, deserted wharves, with stacks of crates and overhead cranes, the significat of denotation), and the technique of the shooting, which is dependent on the effects of lighting in order to produce a certain picture of the docks (signifier of denotation), converge to form the significat of connotation. The same scene filmed in a different light would produce a different impression; and so would the same technique used on a different subject (for example, a child’s smiling face). Film aesthetician have often remarked that filmic effects must not be “gratuitous,” but must remain “subordinate to the plot.” This is another way of saying that the significant of connotation can establish itself only when the corresponding significat brings into play both the signifier and the significat of denotation.

The study of the cinema as an art—the study of cinematographic expressiveness—can therefore be conducted according to methods derived from linguistics. For instance, there is no doubt that films are amenable to analyses comparable (mutatis mutandis) to those Thomas A. Sebeok has applied to Cheremis songs, or to those Samuel R. Levin has proposed. But there is another task that requires the careful attention of the film semiologist. For also, and even first of all, through its procedures of denotation, the cinema is a specific language. The concept of diegesis is as important for the film semiologist as the idea of art. The word is derived from the Greek διηγησίς, “narration” and was used particularly to designate one of the obligatory parts of judicial discourse, the recital of facts. The term was introduced into the framework of the cinema by Étienne Souriau. It designates the film’s represented instance (which Mikel Dufrenne contrasts to the expressed, properly aesthetic, instance)—that is to say, the sum of a film’s denotation: the narration itself, but also the fictional space and time dimensions implied in and by the narrative, and consequently the characters, the landscapes, the events, and other narrative el-

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*Aesthetic language practices a kind of promotion of connotation, but connotation occurs as well in various phenomena of expressiveness proper to ordinary language, like those studied by Charles Bally (Le Langage et la vie, Geneva, Payot, 1925).
ments, in so far as they are considered in their denoted aspect. How does the cinema indicate successivity, precession, temporal breaks, causality, adversative relationships, consequence, spatial proximity, or distance, etc.? These are central questions to the semiotics of the cinema.

One must not indeed forget that, from the semiological point of view, the cinema is very different from still photography whence its technique is derived. In photography, as Roland Barthes has clearly shown, the denoted meaning is secured entirely through the automatic process of photochemical reproduction; denotation is a visual transfer,¹ which is not codified and has no inherent organization. Human intervention, which carries some elements of a proper semiotics, affects only the level of connotation (lighting, camera angle, "photographic effects," and so on). And, in point of fact, there is no specifically photographic procedure for designating the significant "house" in its denoted aspect, unless it is by showing a house. In the cinema, on the other hand, a whole semiotics of denotation is possible and necessary, for a film is composed of many photographs (the concept of montage, with its myriad consequences)—photographs that give us mostly only partial views of the diegetic referent. In film a "house" would be shot of a staircase, a shot of one of the walls taken from the outside, a close-up of a window, a brief establishing shot of the building,² etc. Thus a kind of filmic articulation appears, which has no equivalent in photography: It is the denotation itself that is being constructed, organized, and to a certain extent codified (codified, not necessarily encoded). Lacking absolute laws, filmic intelligibility nevertheless depends on a certain number of dominant habits: A film put together haphazardly would not be understood.

I return to my initial observations: "Cinematographic language" is first of all the literalness of a plot. Artistic effects, even when they are substantially inseparable from the semic act by which the film tells us its story, nevertheless constitute another level of signification, which from the methodological point of view must come "later."

PARADIGMATIC AND SYntagmatic CATEGORIES

... In the cinema, where the number of images is indefinite. Several times indefinite, one should say. For the "pro-filmic" spectacles² are themselves unlimited

¹I am speaking here as a semiologist and not as a psychologist. Comparative studies of visual perception, both in "real" and in filmic conditions, have indeed isolated all the optical distortions that differentiate between the photograph and the object. But these transformations, which obey the laws of optical physics, of the chemistry of emulsions and of retinal physiology, do not constitute a signifying system.

²Even if this over-all view is the only one shown us in the film, it is still the result of a choice. We know that the modern cinema has partially abandoned the practices of visual fragmentation and excessive montage in favor of the continuous shot (cf. the famous "shot-sequence" controversy). This condition modifies to the same extent the semiotics of filmic denotation, but it in no way diminishes it. Simply, cinematographic language, like other languages, has a diachronic side. A single "shot" itself contains several elements (example: switching from one view to another through a camera movement, and without montage).

³As defined by Étienne Souriau. The "pro-filmic" spectacle is whatever is placed in front of the camera, or whatever one places the camera in front of, in order to "shoot" it.
in number; the exact nature of lighting can be varied infinitely and by quantities
that are nondiscrete; the same applies to the axial distance between the subject and
the camera (in variations which are said to be scalar— that is, scale of the shot), to
the camera angle, to the properties of the film and the focal length of the lens, and
to the exact trajectory of the camera movements (including the stationary shot, which
represents zero degree in this case). It suffices to vary one of these elements by a
perceptible quantity to obtain another image. The shot is therefore not comparable
to the word in a lexicon; rather it resembles a complete statement (of one or more
sentences), in that it is already the result of an essentially free combination, a
“speech” arrangement . . . The image is almost always assertive—and assertion is
one of the great “modalities” of actualization, of the semic act. It appears therefore
that the paradigmatic category in film is condemned to remain partial and frag-
mentary, at least as long as one tries to isolate it on the level of the image. This is
naturally derived from the fact that creation plays a larger role in cinematographic
language than it does in the handling of idioms: To “speak” a language is to use it,
but to “speak” cinematographic language is to a certain extent to invent it. The
speakers of ordinary language consitute a group of users; film-makers are a group
of creators. On the other hand, movie spectators in turn constitute a group of users.
That is why the semiotics of the cinema must frequently consider things from the
point of view of spectator rather than of the film-maker. Étienne Souriau’s distinc-
tion between the filmic point of view and the “cinéastique,” or filmmaking, point
of view is a very useful concept; film semiotics is mainly a filmic study. The situa-
tion has a rough equivalent in linguistics: Some linguists connect the speaker with
the message, while the listener in some way “represents” the code, since he requires
it to understand what is being said to him, while the speaker is presumed to know
beforehand what he wants to say.

But, more than paradigmatic studies, it is the syntagmatic considerations that are
at the center of the problems of filmic denotation. Although each image is a free
creation, the arrangement of these images into an intelligible sequence—cutting and
montage—brings us to the heart of the semiological dimension of film. It is a rather
paradoxical situation: Those proliferating (and not very discrete!) units—the im-
ages—when it is a matter of composing a film, suddenly accept with reasonably
good grace the constraint of a few large syntagmatic structures. While no image
ever entirely resembles another image, the great majority of narrative films resemble
each other in their principal syntagmatic figures. Filmic narrativity—since it has
again crossed our path—by becoming stable through convention and repetition over
innumerable films, has gradually shaped itself into forms that are more or less fixed,
but certainly not immutable. These forms represent a synchronic “state” (that of the
present cinema), but if they were to change, it could only be through a complete
positive evolution, liable to be challenged—like those that, in spoken languages,
produce diachronic transformations in the distribution of aspects and tenses. Ap-
plying de Saussure’s thought to the cinema, one could say that the large syntag-
matic category of the narrative film can change, but that no single person can make
it change over night. A failure of intellelction among the viewers would be the au-
tomatic sanctioning of a purely individual innovation, which the system would refuse
to confirm. The originality of creative artists consists, here as elsewhere, in trick-
ing the code, or at least in using it ingeniously, rather than in attacking it directly or in violating it—and still less in ignoring it. . . .

OTHER PROBLEMS

These very brief remarks provided an example of what the syntagmatic study of filmic denotation could be. There are important differences between the semiotics of the cinema and linguistics itself. Without repeating those mentioned elsewhere, let me recall some of the main points: Film contains nothing corresponding to the purely distinctive units of the second articulation; all of its units—even the simplest, like the dissolve and the wipe—are directly significant (and moreover, as I have already pointed out, they only occur in the actualized state). The commutations and other manipulations by which the semiotics of the cinema proceeds therefore affect the large significatory units. The "laws" of cinematographic language call for statements within a narrative, and not monemes within a statement, or still less phonemes within a moneme.

Contrary to what many of the theoreticians of the silent film declared or suggested ("Ciné langue," "visual Esperanto," etc.), the cinema is certainly not a language system (langue). It can, however, be considered as a language, to the extent that it orders signifying elements within ordered arrangements different from those of spoken idioms—and to the extent that these elements are not traced on the perceptual configurations of reality itself (which does not tell stories). Filmic manipulation transforms what might have been a mere visual transfer of reality into discourse. Derived from a kind of signification that is purely analogical and continuous—animated photography, cinematography—the cinema gradually shaped, in the course of its diachronic maturation, some elements of a proper semiotics, which remain scattered and fragmentary within the open field of simple visual duplication.

The "shot"—an already complex unit, which must be studied—remains an indispensable reference for the time being, in somewhat the same way that the "word" was during a period of linguistic research. It might be somewhat adventurous to compare the shot to the texeme, in Louis Hjelmslev's sense, but one can consider that it constitutes the largest minimum segment (the expression is borrowed from André Martinet), since at least one shot is required to make a film, or part of a film—in the same way, a linguistic statement must be made up of at least one phoneme. To isolate several shots from a sequence is still, perhaps, to analyze the sequence; to remove several frames from a shot is to destroy the shot. If the shot is not the smallest unit of filmic signification (for a single shot may convey several informational elements), it is at least the smallest unit of the filmic chain.

One cannot conclude, however, that every minimum filmic segment is a shot. Besides shots, there are other minimum segments, optical devices—various dissolves, wipes, and so on—that can be defined as visual but not photographic elements. Whereas images have the objects of reality as referents, optical procedures, which do not represent anything, have images as referents (those contiguous in the syntax). The relationship of these procedures to the actual shooting of the film is somewhat like that of morphemes to lexemes; depending on the context, they have
two main functions: as "trick" devices (in this instance, they are sorts of semiological exponents influencing contiguous images), or as "punctuation." The expression "filmic punctuation," which use has ratified, must not make us forget that optical procedures separate large, complex statements and thus correspond to the articulations of the literary narrative (with its pages and paragraphs, for example), whereas actual punctuation—that is to say, typographical punctuation—separates sentences (period, exclamation mark, question mark, semicolon), and clauses (comma, semicolon, dash), possibly even "verbal bases," with or without characteristics (apostrophe, or dash, between two "words," and so on).

IN CONCLUSION

The concepts of linguistics can be applied to the semiotics of the cinema only with the greatest caution. On the other hand, the methods of linguistics—commutation, analytical breakdown, strict distinction between the significate and the signifier, between substance and form, between the relevant and the irrelevant, etc.—provide the semiotics of the cinema with a constant and precious aid in establishing units that, though they are still very approximate, are liable over time (and, one hopes, through the work of many scholars) to become progressively refined.