

I

Film Language



Because films embody, communicate, enforce, and suggest meanings, film theorists often suggested that film constitutes a language, a “visual esperanto.” They have spoken of film’s grammar, its vocabulary, and even of its jargon. The poet Vachel Lindsay spoke of film as a kind of “hieroglyphic” language while the theorist Béla Balász thought of it as a new “form-language.” Russian formalists have similarly talked of “semantic signs” and investigated film’s relation to “inner speech.” In what sense, then, is film a language? Is the claim a suggestive metaphorical one or one that can, as the semioticians think, be subjected to systematic, scientific analysis? And, more generally, by what procedures does film generate meaning?

Those who consider film to be a language often rely on the analogy between the word and the shot. But simply stringing words together does not produce intelligible discourse, and most theorists agree that simply stringing separate photographic shots together will not produce intelligible works of visual art.

The great Soviet filmmakers Sergei M. Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin asked what more than mere ability to photograph reality was required to transform the new technical resources into a great new art. Their answer was montage, the art of combining pieces of film or shots into larger units—first, the scene, then the sequence, and, finally the complete film. D. W. Griffith, the great American director of *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*, to whom the Soviet directors acknowledged a great debt, was not important because he took better pictures than anybody else. He was important for having discovered montage, the fluid integration of the camera’s total range of shots, from extreme close-up to distant panorama, so as to produce the most coherent narrative sequence, the most systematic meaning, and the most effective rhythmic pattern. In doing so, Griffith had, they thought, contributed to the development of a cinematic language and invented the distinctive art of the film.

Eisenstein viewed montage as a kind of collision or conflict, especially between a shot and its successor. He sees each shot as having a kind of potential energy that can display itself in purely visual terms: the direction of its movements, the volume of its shapes, the intensity of its light, and so forth. This potential energy becomes kinetic when the first shot collides with the succeeding one. The two shots can produce a conflict in their emotional content (happy versus sad), in their use of illumination (dark versus light), in their rhythms (slow versus fast), in their objects (large versus small), in their directions of movement (right versus left), in their distances (close-up versus far shot), or in any combination thereof. In his films, this conflict produced the tense, violent rhythms that became an Eisenstein trademark. Conflict was also important to Eisenstein because he took it to be an expression, in the realm of images, of the Marxist dialectical principle. Indeed, Eisenstein maintained that just as the meaning of a sentence arises from the interaction of its individual words, cinematic meaning is the result of the dialectical interplay of shots. His emphasis on the conflict of shots, as distinct from a mere linking of shots, distinguishes his concept from that of his colleague, Pudovkin. Pudovkin's view of montage as a method of building, of adding one thing to another, is not merely of theoretical interest. His theory produced more realistic narratives, with their more deliberate, calmer pace.

Eisenstein, like many theorists who emerged in the era of silent films, was uncomfortable with the addition of synchronized dialogue. Because "silent" films had always used asynchronous sound effects and music, Eisenstein believed that the sound film could use these tools with even greater precision and complexity. But he rejected dialogue as being incompatible with the proper use of montage (see Section III). By contrast, André Bazin, while agreeing that dialogue and montage are incompatible, regards synchronized speech as a necessary and proper development. For Bazin, dialogue returns film to the rightful path from which montage and silence diverted it. According to him, the film image ought to reveal reality whole, not cut it into tiny bits. The cinematic method Bazin endorses, which combines composing with the camera and staging an action in front of it, has, like montage, come to be known by a French term, *mise-en-scène*.

In Bazin's view the montage theorists did not in fact speak for all of the silent film. He discerns in the work of Erich von Stroheim, F. W. Murnau, and Robert Flaherty an alternative, *mise-en-scène* tradition, which emphasizes not the ordering, but the content of images. The film's effect and meaning are not the product of a juxtaposition of images, but are inherent in the visual images themselves. For Bazin, the montage theorists' emphasis on the analogy between word and shot is false, and he rejects it along with their reluctance to employ sound as a source of cinematic meaning. Bazin argues that the *mise-en-scène* tradition within silent film actually looked toward the incorporation of synchronous sound as a fulfillment, not as a violation, of the film's destiny.

Bazin considers German expressionism and Russian symbolism to have been superseded in the 1930s and 1940s by a form of editing more appropriate to the dialogue film. This "analytic" editing, which characteristically manifests itself in the dramatic technique of shot/reverse shot, was an important innovation. Still more important, however, was the development of the depth of field shot by Orson Welles and William Wyler in the early 1940s (anticipated in the 1930s by Jean Renoir).

which made even the use of "analytic" montage unnecessary. Entire scenes could now be covered in one take, the camera sometimes remaining motionless. For Bazin, the shot-in-depth, like the use of synchronous sound, constituted a crucial advance toward total cinema and an important stage in the evolution of the language of cinema. It allowed for greater realism and encouraged a more active mental attitude on the part of the viewer, who could now explore more fully the interpretive and moral ambiguity inherent in the film image.

Bazin's composition-in-depth is one kind of long take, but Brian Henderson calls attention to a quite different type developed by Jean-Luc Godard. Godard's long, slow tracking shot avoids depth. Cinema is a two-dimensional art that creates the illusion of a third dimension through its "walk-around" capability. Indeed, both montage and composition-in-depth are techniques that reach for that third dimension, although in different ways: montage through a succession of shots from different angles and at different ranges, composition-in-depth through movements of the camera or of the actors. Bazin's shot can thus be regarded as a long take, in which the camera pauses before a scene rich with interpretive possibilities. In his analysis of the films of Godard, Henderson calls attention to a quite different kind of long take: Godard's slow tracking shot that (perhaps in polemical opposition to the views of Bazin) concertededly avoids and even excludes the impression of depth, to adhere to the single-point perspective of painting.

In Henderson's view, Godard does so for ideological reasons. Composition-in-depth presents an infinitely deep, rich, complex, ambiguous and mysterious bourgeois world. Godard's reversion to one plane demystifies this world and its pretenses. Godard's style of presentation is intimately related to the critical point of view he insists upon. The viewer is presented visually and ideologically with a single flat picture of the bourgeois world not to be unthinkingly accepted as transparent and easy to understand, but to be examined, criticized, and (Godard might conclude) rejected.

Eisenstein and Bazin, for all their differences, were both intrigued by the idea that film was a language, and we might view Godard as adding to the resources of that language. But it is only with the rise of structuralism and semiotics that writers such as Christian Metz and Umberto Eco subjected the topic to more precise analysis. Metz particularly brought this issue to the center of film studies and attempted to put the discussion on a firm scientific basis. He did so by invoking the analysis of language provided by linguists in the semiotic tradition of Ferdinand de Saussure, a tradition that attempted to develop a science of "signs." Saussure distinguished sharply between signs which constitute a *langue* and those that constitute a *langage*. It is Metz's contention that film does not constitute a *langue* in the strict sense of constituting a language system, but that it nevertheless qualifies as a *langage* in the looser sense of being a signifying practice characterized by recognizable ordering procedures ("cinematographic grammar"). Cinema lacks the double articulation characteristic of natural language. The phonemes of natural language are basic, distinctive units of sound which do not themselves signify. It is only when they are articulated at the second level by combining them into monemes (morphemes) or words that they signify. By contrast, the basic unit of cinema, the shot, conveys meaning because of the iconic or isomorphic relation it bears to the world it photographs. The shot is motivated, and is unlike the basic units of language which are arbitrary, conventional and unmotivated.

If Metz rejects the assimilation of film language to natural language, he also rejects the common analogy between shot and word. In Metz's view the shot is equivalent not to the word but to the sentence or statement, and it is the organization of shots in the film chain that invites and supports the claim that film constitutes a language. In the beginning film was purely iconic—it signified exclusively by means of the resemblance of its imagery to objects in the visible world. But reality does not tell stories. It is only when shots are organized according to repeatable, recognizable codes that they become discourse and are capable of telling a story. Cinematic language comprises a number of cinematic codes and sub-codes, but the code which Metz analyses in detail (the code which was more or less established by the time of D. W. Griffith) is the *grande syntagmatique* of the image track. This code, a sub-code of the montage code, permits us to account for the procedures by which cinema denotes such narrative phenomena as succession, priority, temporal breaks, and spatial continuity. As he shows in his analysis of what he calls the alternate syntagma (one of the eight he describes) the order in which signifying images occur may or may not be the same as that in which the realities they signify occur. The student of the language of cinema must therefore account for the processes and mechanisms that make it possible for the viewer to interpret them correctly. For Metz film does not simply reveal reality; it describes it in a language whose features we are only beginning to understand.

Gilbert Harman, in his essay on Metz and Wollen, raises many questions about the entire semiotic approach to film study. He questions Metz's emphasis on plot and on the denotative codes that Metz considers to be primary. Wollen attributes this emphasis to Metz's reliance on the linguistic analogy in developing his version of film semiotics. In Wollen's view the basic linguistic codes are needed for determining literal significance, but the codes of cinema are primarily poetic rather than literal and are best understood through C. S. Pierce's categories of signs. Harman, however, criticizes the basic concept of the code, which Metz and Wollen share. He points out the ambiguous uses to which the concept of code is put and concludes that the proposed science of semiotics has little to contribute to the study of film.

Despite Metz's critique of the claim that film constitutes a *langue*, many theorists in the tradition of Saussure, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Lacan maintain that all cinematic meaning is essentially linguistic and that the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary, conventional, and both culturally determined and culturally relative. The meanings of signifiers are determined by their relation to other signifiers rather than by their reference to any extra-linguistic reality. Films are texts to be "read" and reading them requires our initiation into the specific conventions and ideological biases of cinematic discourse. As Stephen Heath argues, "the match of film and world is a matter of representation, and representation is in turn a matter of discourse. . . . [I]n this sense at least, film is a series of languages, a history of codes."

Against this influential view Stephen Prince argues that cinematic coding is not linguistic but is largely iconic and mimetic, that film images are typically understood because they resemble the realities to which they refer. The capacity to understand these signs has a biological basis (even animals manifest it). Interpreting iconic signs is more a matter of recognizing similarities by transferring real world skills

to the cinematic situation than it is a matter of mastering arbitrary, unmotivated, cultural conventions. Indeed, the capacity to understand iconic signs is shared cross-culturally and this ability helps to explain the intelligibility and global popularity of cinema (recall the early description of it as a verbal Esperanto). Pictorial meaning cannot be explained as a kind of linguistic meaning.

Daniel Dayan views film language from a post-structuralist perspective which goes beyond Metz's earlier, structuralist concept. Using a term drawn from the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan, Dayan describes the system of the suture which negotiates the viewer's access to the film. In Dayan's view this system, which relates to classical narrative cinema as verbal language does to literature, is ideologically charged. Bazin prizes the depth-of-field shot, while Henderson analyzes the meaning of Godard's parallel tracking shot. Essential to Dayan's system is his revaluation of the shot/reverse shot sequence. The viewer's pleasurable possession of the image, his seeing of the image in shot one, is disrupted by his discovery of the frame and his sense of being dispossessed of what he is prevented from seeing. In the first step of reading the film he discovers that he is authorized to see only what happens to be in the axis of the glance of another spectator, called by Jean-Pierre Oudart "the absent-one." The second shot, the reverse shot of the first, represents the fictional owner of the glance corresponding to the first shot. The reverse shot "sutures" the hole opened in the spectator's imaginary relationship with the filmic field by the perception of the absent one.

The absent one stands for that which any shot necessarily lacks if it is to attain meaning—another shot. For, within the system of the suture, the meaning of a shot depends on the next shot and the pair constitute a cinematic statement. The meaning of the shot is given retrospectively and only in the memory of the spectator. Thus, the system encroaches on the spectator's freedom by interpreting, indeed, by remodeling his memory. According to this deconstructive analysis, the system imposes an ideology and the spectator loses his access to the present. The system of the suture is not, however, the only cinematographic system, and Dayan describes how Godard has explored an alternative in his later films.

William Rothman rejects Dayan's assumption of a prior relation in which the viewer "sees" the film image as an unmediated view of reality. He also questions the assumption that classical narrative continuity is illusionistic or necessarily the vehicle of bourgeois ideology. Rothman especially critiques Dayan's contention that the "system of suture" is based on a two-shot (view/viewer) figure: a pair of shots that together constitute a complete cinematographic statement. He argues instead that the point-of-view shot is ordinarily part of a three-shot sequence (viewer/view/viewer), typically initiated when a character visibly attends to something outside the frame. Therefore no ghostly sovereign need be invoked to authorize the point-of-view sequence. It ordinarily manifests the film's power by appropriating a character's gaze, but it does *not* present a figure and then force the viewer to accept that figure as the source of the power. Thus the point-of-view sequence does not lie about its real origin. Indeed, it makes no statement about reality—because it makes no statement at all. The sequence is analogous to a sentence, not a statement, and therefore does not assert whether it is true or false. The film, not the sequence, constitutes the statement—if, indeed, the film makes any statement at all. According to Rothman, we need a critical history of

the way cinematic forms have been used, not an a priori assertion that certain cinematic forms are destined by their nature to serve bourgeois ideology.

Like Rothman, Nick Browne rejects the adequacy of the shot/reverse shot sequence to account for the operation and effects of classic film style. But his more complex rhetorical analysis is meant to contribute to the semiotic study of filmic texts. According to him the system of suture establishes the origin of film imagery by reference to the agency of character (the absent-one) but, surprisingly, does not consider the final agency, the authority of the narrator. The traces of the narrator's action may seem to be effaced by the system as the suture theorists suggest but, in Browne's opinion, such an effect can only be the result of a more general rhetoric. He therefore proposes an account in which the structure of the imagery, whatever its apparent forms of presentation, refers jointly to the action of an implied narrator (who defines his position with respect to the tale by his judgments, including his moral judgments) as well as to the imaginative action occasioned by his placing or being placed by the spectator. The point-of-view of the spectator, in turn, and contrary to the ideas of Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni (see Section VII), is not centered at a single point of view or at the center of any simply optical system. The way in which we, as spectators, are implicated in the action is as much a function of our position with respect to the unfolding of events as it is in their representation from a point in space. In Browne's analysis of Ford's *Stagecoach* he shows that, although we see the action with Lucy's eyes and are invited by a set of structures to experience the force and character of that view, we are put in a position finally of having to reject it as a view either that is right or that we must assent to. Even though we have been sutured into that point of view, we are not thereby committed to the ideology enforced by the system of the suture.